Things Worth Knowing

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Summary

After the Battle, Harry thinks he's left Hogwarts for good, but Minerva insists that all students return for an Eighth Year if they wish to sit for NEWTs in the spring, and Harry needs those NEWTs to go into the Aurors. Draco's just grateful not to be in Azkaban. Or the Manor. He's hoping he can steer clear of Potter this year and grapple with his own problems. Unfortunately for him, Potter appears to be one of those problems. And that's not even addressing the fact that Potter's got serious issues of his own, which Draco realises as he's forced to share an Eighth Year dormitory room and several classes with the Gryffindor Git. If only they can make it through the year without killing each other, it should be all right, shouldn't it?

Notes
We are incredibly grateful to our amazing betas, Sassy_cissa, Chibaken, and Bixgirl. You are all treasures, and your encouragement, speed, precision, dedication, and irreverent humour has meant the world to us. Shifty, we couldn't have asked for a more amazing giftee--it was an honour to write for you, and we're sorry it's so LONG (that's what Draco said...) Seriously, though, we have tried to tailor to your exact wants and prompt ideas, and we sincerely hope you enjoy the result! All mistakes are our own, and no magical creatures or their habitats were harmed in the making of this fic. Also the HD Erised mods are paragons of justice, proofreading, and wit, and we are beyond grateful for the extra time to complete this monster fic of monsters. Title is from The Hogwarts Song.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Just a young gun with a quick fuse.
I was uptight,
Wanna let loose.
I was dreaming of bigger things,
And wanna leave my own life behind.

--*Thunder*, Imagine Dragons

Harry's not so certain coming to Diagon was a good idea. He's stayed away from the wizarding world the past few months, other than the funerals and memorials he's had to attend and the Wizengamot hearings he's been called to speak at, and there've been far too many of both since May, if Harry's honest.

It feels strange to have people on the street looking at him, whispering as he passes. At least Ron and Hermione are here, flanking him, keeping the handful of people at bay who actually try to speak to Harry, to come up and shake his head, to press themselves into his space until Harry's breath catches, his chest tightening, that familiar buzzing rush filling his head so that he staggers against Hermione, and Ron starts shouting, telling them all to fuck off, to leave them be.

The panic attacks started in late June. Harry doesn't know why. The nightmares came first, those shuddering, horrifying dreams of the dead that had pulled him shouting from his sleep. He'd been able to hide them for a while; by that time he'd left the Burrow for Grimmauld Place. It'd been easier to be alone than to feel as if he were drowning in the Weasleys' grief. Ginny had been angry with him at first, but she'd understood in the end. Harry had his own things to work through, and they weren't things he felt he could lay on her shoulders.

Not after Fred.

"Steady," Hermione says quietly, her bushy brown curls brushing his cheek. Her hand settles on Harry's elbow. They walk past the still boarded up facade of Fortescue's. The scars of the war are still visible even here. "Just breathe."

Harry tries to, but the looks he's getting now, puzzled and uncertain as the faces around him slide away, giving him the space Ron's demanded, only make him feel more of a fool. The Healers have tried to tell Harry this is normal, that he's not gone half-mad, but it doesn't help. Not really. It doesn't take much now to get his heart racing, his body trembling, and Harry hates when it happens like this in public.

And then Ron's pulling him into the cool shadows of a shop, and Harry inhales the spicy-sweetness of herbs and roots, the acrid bite of dragon's blood. Slug and Jiggers, his mind supplies, and Harry breathes out, his eyes adjusting to the dim gloom of the apothecary. Two walls are filled floor to ceiling with drawers, faded yellow cards tucked into their handles with spidery handwriting labelling the contents of each one. Another wall holds jar upon murky jar of things Harry'd rather not look too closely at, the great majority of them sloshing about in a foul-smelling preservative solution that makes Harry think of Snape, dying right there in front of him, Harry watching the light in his eyes go out, and then the constriction in his chest is back.

"I still say this is rubbish." Ron pokes at a basket of dried newt eyes on the counter in front of the grimy paned window, frowning. He turns, glances over at Hermione. She's rubbing one hand over her bare arm, her bright red sleeveless shirt standing out in the dim shop. "Kingsley offered us places in Auror training without our NEWTs if McGonagall agreed. We brought down a sodding Dark
Lord, for Merlin's sake--"

"Harry brought him down," Hermione says, looking a bit cross, "and McGonagall must have her reasons for saying no. Frankly I think it's a good idea for us all to be going back to Hogwarts. There's nothing wrong with more education, Ron. It's not like you want to be a complete Neanderthal, do you?"

"Reckon they were smarter than you think." Ron scowls at her, and Hermione rolls her eyes.

It's an argument they've been having since McGonagall's owls had arrived three weeks ago, informing them that she wasn't going to waive the NEWTs requirement, whatever Kingsley Shacklebolt might think, and that should they like to sit them again, she'd be more than happy to welcome them--Harry included--into a specialised eighth year course she was putting together. Harry had thought Ron might explode; he's still furious with the Headmistress as only a Weasley can be.

"Look," Harry says, trying to deflect the coming fight as best he can. "As long as we're here, let's just get what we need for class and go." The quiet of the shop's calming him. He can ignore people here, he thinks. He ought to have just let Hermione pick his things up for him. Or taken Ron's advice and worn a glamour, but Harry'd had to go to Gringotts first for money, and the goblins take a hard line against those sorts of spells, particularly after the three of them had managed to break into Bellatrix Lestrange's vault a few months back. There's even a Polyjuice detector spell on the main lobby now. To be honest, Harry can't really blame them. Gringotts had been the one place in Diagon today he hadn't been feted and cheered--the goblins had watched him suspiciously the entire time. It'd almost been a relief to be frowned at, Harry thinks.

Hermione sighs and pulls out her supply list. She studies it for a moment "I've still my copper cauldron," she says.

"Me too." Ron looks over from a jar of boomslang skin he's sifting through. He closes the lid. "Harry?"

Harry just shrugs. "I don't know." It's not in his school trunk, which means he'd either left it at Hogwarts or in his bedroom at the Dursleys', and Harry doesn't want to go back into Number Four Privet Drive. Not anytime soon, at least.

"Oh." Hermione just watches Harry, seeing far too much for Harry's comfort; he looks away. "Then I suppose we might as well get one for you here."

"All right." Harry follows Hermione over to the cauldron display, the heavy Flourish and Blotts bag in his left hand banging up against his knee with each step. He wishes Gin were here with him, but she's gone off to Dublin for the weekend with Luna and Eloise Midgen. It's probably better though. Things haven't been great between the two of them lately, and Harry knows it's his fault. He's been distant and quiet, and Ginny doesn't really know what to do with Harry when he's like this. Harry doesn't know how to explain to her that he feels adrift now, without purpose, and isn't that bloody pathetic? But Voldemort's been part of Harry's life--fuck, part of Harry himself--for seven years, and that silence, that sudden emptiness of nothing to oppose, nothing to fight against, feels strange and unsettling to Harry.

He studies the copper cauldrons in front of him blankly. He can't remember which one he has. He doesn't want to take potions anyway. He'll be shit at it again, he's certain, especially without Snape's book. Slughorn'll be disappointed in him, and Harry's chest tightens again at that thought, which is ridiculous because he really doesn't give a damn what Horace Slughorn thinks of him. Still, he can feel the panic rising again as his gaze slides over the rows of cauldrons. He can't pick one. His fingers clenched around the handle of the Flourish and Blotts bag.
"This one, I think," Hermione says, and she takes a cauldron from the shelf. It's small and shiny, and she doesn't look at Harry. "Don't you?"

"Yeah." Harry's voice is a rasp. "That looks good." He takes it from her, carries it over to the till where Slug or Jiggers, one of them, Harry doesn't know which, takes it from him with a sideways glance at Harry.

"Four Galleons, Mr Potter," the apothecarist says, and he takes the coins Harry hands over before pulling out a sheet of newprint--a *Daily Prophet* from a few weeks past, Harry realises when he sees a photo of himself blinking out at him. It'd been an article about the last time Harry'd spoken in front of the Wizengamot. Harry watches as the apothecarist wraps it around the cauldron, folding it neatly with long, potion-stained fingers until Harry's photographic face is half-hidden from view.

"Thank you," Harry says when he's handed the bag. It has a charm on it to make it lighter, he realises.

Harry doesn't want to go back to Hogwarts in a few days, doesn't want to have to walk through its halls again. He hasn't been to the castle since the battle. Merlin only knows what it'll be like when he walks in again. The Ministry's had teams rebuilding it, repairing the spell damage that had nearly demolished the courtyard and Great Hall, not to mention half the classroom wing. He supposes he understands why McGonagall wants him and Ron and Hermione back. She'd tried to explain in her owl, telling each of them that she felt they'd be best served by returning to complete their studies, particularly if they were hell-bent on becoming Aurors. It's not that she doesn't have a point, Harry thinks. He doesn't feel adequately prepared to take on Auror training right now. But he's not certain being at Hogwarts is going to be any better. Harry's anxiety spikes just thinking about taking the train back up to Scotland.

Still, there's a part of him that's relieved to have Auror training pushed off another year, not that he'll admit it to Ron. So he grouses as well, nodding when Ron whinges about how unfair McGonagall's being, murmuring his own sour complaints that he doesn't quite feel. At least he'll have another year with Ginny, Harry thinks, and he's glad of that. Maybe being at Hogwarts together will help them overcome this odd gulf that's developed between them this summer. Maybe it'll all feel like it used to.

The sunlight's bright when they step out of the shop, and it nearly blinds Harry. He blinks for a moment, the world a swirl of blurred colours around him before it falls back into focus. He can feel Ron behind him, tense and careful, ready to snap at anyone who comes their way. Harry half-wishes he'd brought his Invisibility Cloak. It's hanging in the back of his wardrobe at Grimmauld Place, even though Hermione frets about a Hallow being shoved between Harry's winter cloak and his dress robes. It's not secure, she says, but Harry thinks no one in their right mind would expect something that valuable to be hidden away in such a common place. Still, he reminds himself to pack it in his school trunk later. Better to have it with him at Hogwarts then just sitting there in Grimmauld Place.

"Where to next?" Hermione says as the door clangs shut behind her. She still has their supply list in her hand. "We've our books and Harry's cauldron." She looks over at Harry and Ron, her mouth tugging down at the corners. "Harry, you'll have to replace your school robes, if you're not going back for your trunk."

Harry shifts from foot to foot. "I'll order them from Madam Malkin's by owl," he says. "Have them sent to Grimmauld Place."

"You know she'll want to measure you." Ron gives him a sideways look. "She doesn't like--"

"She'll do it for me," Harry says, his voice quiet, and Ron falls silent. Harry feels a right shit. He
doesn't like invoking his Saviour of the Wizarding World status, but he can't bear walking all the way down the street to the clothing shop. It'd been bad enough in Flourish and Blotts, and Harry's bloody glad Hermione'd suggested coming to Diagon early in the week, before all the families flooded the street on Saturday, looking to outfit their children for another year at school. His fingers tighten around the handles of his bags. "I'm ready to go home."

He tries to ignore the worried looks Ron and Hermione exchange. Harry knows they haven't liked him shutting himself away like he has this summer. He can't really explain to them why he's needed to, how he feels so numb still after that night in the woods. He hasn't talked about it much; Ron's asked questions, but Hermione's warned him not to push. Harry still has nightmares about the flash of green light that had slammed into him, bleeding his life away. Hermione'd tried to tell him it'd just been a near-death experience, that she'd read about them and how traumatic they could be for the brain. Harry knows better though. He'd died that night. He can still remember how cold he'd felt, how empty, standing in the middle of a whited-out King's Cross. He could have left them all right then. Sometimes he really wishes he had, but he doesn't tell Ron and Hermione that. They'd think him mental, and maybe he is. The Healers would have him wrapped up and tossed into the Thickey Ward if they knew, too, so Harry hides those thoughts away, as deeply as he can. Now they only come out in dreams, mostly.

And standing on the kerb in Diagon, it seems.

Harry starts walking. He knows Ron and Hermione will follow, and they do, hurrying to flank him on either side again. They're all silent as they make their way back towards the Leaky.

Ron nudges Harry's shoulder after a moment. "All right there, mate?" he asks easily, and Harry gives him a half-smile.

"Yeah." They both know he isn't, and Harry feels awful that he hasn't been there for Ron this summer, not the way he ought to have been. He knows Ron's grieving Fred in his own quietly stoic way. Harry doesn't know what to say to him about that; he knows he's not the only one to have lost people in the war. There'd still been a few skirmishes this summer, a few pockets of Death Eaters who'd escaped capture and who'd lashed out in Hogsmeade and a few of the smaller mixed Muggle-and-wizard towns. The Aurors have been out in force recently; Harry's used to seeing Dawlish and Kingsley's grim faces on the front page of the *Prophet*. Harry'd thought it would all end once Voldemort was dead, but he'd been wrong. Sometimes he thinks it's worse now; the hearings had been vicious, filled with angry accusations and hatred on both sides.

Harry stops in front of the window of Eeylops Owl Emporium, his attention caught by the flutter of wings. He misses Hedwig terribly, but he's not certain he's ready to replace her yet. Still, he can't help but watch a lovely grey owl on its perch in the left corner. It looks at him with unblinking golden eyes, then ruffles its feathers with a small shake of its whole body. Harry puts a finger up to the glass and the owl tilts its head ever so slightly, watching him, then it takes a hop on its perch, then another, moving closer to Harry. Harry smiles at it.

"Pretty thing," he murmurs, and the owl leans forward, taps its beak against the glass right where Harry's finger is before pulling back. It blinks slowly, then hops back once on its perch, just watching Harry through the glass.

The door to the shop opens, and Harry glances over. He stills when he sees a flash of pale skin and bright blonde hair through the glass panes.

"He's a beauty, Draco," Blaise Zabini's saying as he holds the door open.

"Isn't he?" Malfoy's holding a cage with a small brown owl in it, one that's barely past being an
owlet, Harry thinks. Zabini's right, though; the owl's markings are gorgeous already. Malfoy strokes a finger along one of the owl's wings. His face is soft and open; his hair falls loose over one cheek, the ends brushing against his chin.

And then he looks over to where Harry and his friends are standing, and Harry can see the moment Malfoy's expression chills, his shoulders tensing. "Potter." His voice is tight, almost angry, which is rich, isn't it, coming from that fucking prat. Something hot and uncomfortable twists deep inside of Harry, and it surprises him. He's so used to feeling hardly anything at all these days.

"Malfoy," Harry says in return. He can feel Ron start to step forward next to him, but Harry puts a hand on Ron's arm, holding him back. He doesn't want a scene. Not here. Not now.

The bells on the door jangle again, and Pansy Parkinson steps out. "Honestly, Draco," she says, tucking a small package into her bag, "you might have bloody waited--" She breaks off when she looks up. "Oh."

It feels strange, Harry thinks, to be standing here like this, facing off with Malfoy and his lot again. He wonders where Goyle is, and then Harry's stomach flips, remembering the heat of the Fiendfyre and Crabbe's screams as it consumed him, the smell memory of burnt flesh and hair still lingering in his nose. He looks away.

Silence stretches out for a long moment, and then Hermione says, a bit tightly, "Buying Hogwarts supplies, are you?"

Zabini shifts a Flourish and Blotts bag from one hand to the other. "What's it to you?"

"She's just trying to be polite, you wanker," Ron snaps, and Harry looks back to see Malfoy draw himself up, long and lean and lankier than Harry remembers him being. They've only seen each other once since the battle, when Harry spoke at Narcissa Malfoy's hearing, telling the Wizengamot what she'd done to keep him alive. Well. After she'd let him die once, that is.

"If I were the walking equivalent of a ginger nut," Malfoy says, his voice sharp enough to make the owl flutter uneasily in his cage, "which thank Circe I had the great fortune not to be, I'd watch my tone in front of Blaise."

"Oh, fuck off, Malfoy," Harry says, and a curious thrill goes through him at the vicious look Malfoy throws his way. Harry almost feels alive again. He can't stop himself from pushing a bit more. "And maybe you're--" He casts a scathing look towards Zabini and Parkinson. "--not the sort we want at Hogwarts any more."

Ron thumps Harry's back. "Right you are, Harry." They both ignore the disapproving frown Hermione gives them.

Malfoy's eyes narrow. "Oh, do believe we wouldn't step foot in that bloody hellhole again if we weren't being forced, Potter." His mouthtwists. "Only that bint McGonagall won't let us sit our NEWTs without suffering through another year of Gryffindor bollocks, it seems."

Harry knows what he's not saying. Without NEWTs, there are fewer job prospects, proper ones at least, and in the current postwar climate people like Malfoy and his mates are going to have a hell of a time even getting a foot into the door. The Prophet's already suggested that Slytherin House be disbanded, that those students be sent down from Hogwarts. Let them work the menial jobs, Tiberius Ogden, a Member of the Wizengamot spearheading the movement, had told the Prophet, and there'd been plenty of letters to the editor agreeing.
Hermione touches Harry's elbow. "Let's go," she says quietly. "People are starting to watch."

"Run away with your little friends, Potter." Malfoy's smile is fiercely mocking. "Granger always has had you on a short leash--"

"Shut it," Harry says, and it comes out louder than he intends. He leans forward, not caring about the heads that are turning their way. Malfoy just watches him with cold eyes, his lips curved ever so faintly and in such a way that Harry wants to punch him, to bloody his stupid mouth. He can feel the roil of his magic deep inside, but Malfoy's not looking away, not flinching, not anything. "You're a right prick, Malfoy," Harry says, his voice rough and angry. "You ought to be rotting away in Azkaban next to your fucking father."

There's a flicker of something in Malfoy's eyes, but it disappears, forced down by that tight, scornful smile. Harry starts to turn away, and then Malfoy's fingers are firm and warm around Harry's wrist, holding him still. "If you expect me," Malfoy says, his voice low, his gaze fixed on Harry's face, "to kiss the sodding ground you walk on just because you spoke for my mother, you're barking, Potter. I want that perfectly clear, you self-righteous sod. I'll piss on it first." His eyes narrow; his grip tightens. "Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." Harry pulls away. He can still feel the heat of Malfoy's hand on his skin. They glare at each other; Malfoy's face is flushed, his eyes bright. Harry's whole body sparks and tingles, and he bounces on the balls of his feet, wanting nothing more than to slam the back of Malfoy's head against the brick of the Emporium's facade. His jaw tightens, his body tenses. It'd be so easy, he thinks. No one would stop him; Malfoy's a pariah now in wizarding society. The only thing that kept him out of Azkaban had been Narcissa Malfoy turning witness for the Ministry, and she'd only done that once Kingsley had promised immunity for her son. Not for herself. But for this giant prat of a tosser now glaring at Harry. Merlin, but Harry doesn't understand why.

"Harry," Hermione says from behind him. "They're not worth it."

Malfoy's gaze flicks towards Hermione. His mouth tightens as he looks her up and down. "Because a Mu--"

"Don't," Harry says, and even he can hear the steely hardness in his voice. Malfoy stills, his eyes shifting towards Harry. "Don't even think about calling her that."

"I was going to say Muggleborn, you twat," Malfoy snaps, but Harry doesn't believe him. Malfoy's vicious gaze swings back to Hermione. "And I find it rather hysterical that a Muggleborn would know our worth--"

Parkinson puts a hand on Malfoy's arm. "Draco," she says quietly, and Malfoy turns back to her. "Don't start anything here. Not with Potter." She doesn't look at Harry, only at Malfoy, her red-tipped fingers rubbing small circles over Malfoy's white sleeve, like she's soothing a skittish Hippogriff. "Besides, I'm fancying a nice pot of Lady Grey and a slice of Victoria sponge. Share with me?"

Malfoy tucks a lock of hair behind his ear, and he steps back, letting Parkinson draw him away. Zabini glances back at Harry, and his eyes are cold. Calculating.

"Got something to say, Zabini?" Ron snaps, a bit too loudly, Harry thinks. He tries not to flinch, tries not to notice the looks they're starting to get. Christ, Harry hopes this doesn't end up in the Prophet, but it probably will. Anything that involves him tends to land somewhere in the paper's pages these days.
Zabini’s smile is thin and sharp, his teeth a bright flash in his brown face. "Oh, so many things, Weasel, but for now I think silence is the better part of valour." His gaze drifts towards the handful of witches and wizards watching across the street, and then Zabini dips with a flourish into a quick, elegant bow. "Until later, arseholes," he says, and then he bounces back up, and turns on his heel, following Malfoy and Parkinson down the street.

"What a sodding wanker," Ron says beneath his breath. "The whole bloody lot of them, really, and what's McGonagall thinking, letting those bastards back in Hogwarts?"

Hermione turns towards the Leaky, picking her way across the cobblestoned street in her black flats. "It's not as if McGonagall had much choice if she's making them retake NEWTs as well," she says. "Besides, the Board of Governors won't let her reschedule the exams until next June, so I expect her hands are tied."

"That's bollocks," Ron says, and Harry doesn't really disagree. "They're just trying to fuck us all over."

"I hardly think that's the case," Hermione says with a frown. "Honestly, Ron--"

Harry tunes them out. He's heard this all summer. Instead he finds himself looking back down the street, his gaze almost immediately catching the gleam of silver-gilt hair before it disappears around a corner.

Oddly, Harry's glad Malfoy will be back at school. It'd feel too strange not to have the bastard there, skulking about in corridors and scheming to make Harry's life miserable. Though he'll never admit it to Ron or Hermione, Harry feels a bit better about that, a bit less as if the world's off the rails, even if it still is. He turns back to his friends.

Maybe the year won't be a complete waste, he thinks, and he doesn't wonder why that thought makes him strangely, slightly content.

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Draco chooses the train compartment nearest to the engine, as far down Platform Nine and Three-Quarters as he can get from Potter and his sodding crew of Gryffindors and Gryffindor hangers-on.

"Get out," he says to a group of third-year Hufflepuffs, and for a moment, he thinks they're going to defy him and stay in their faded brown seats.

"Don't listen to him," one girl says. Lilah, Draco thinks her name is, and he frowns at her. She settles back in her seat. "He's only a Malfoy." She spits the name out as if it's foul against her tongue, and Draco's already reaching for his wand to hex the stupid cow when Millicent pushes past him, cracking her knuckles.

"Well, I'm a Bulstrode," Mills says, "and I'm fairly certain my little brother Matty's already terrorised the lot of you, so if you don't want me to put him on you again, you'll move your scrawny little arses to another bloody compartment, yeah?"

Lilah's face blanches, and Draco wonders exactly what Matty Bulstrode's been doing to his fellow third-years. He's a spoilt little shit, and even Millicent loathes the bastard. Still, Draco's not going to complain, not when it sends the whole lot of Hufflepuffs scampering out of the compartment, their tiny faces quivering like rabbits racing away from predators.

Pansy throws herself into one of the vacant seats. "I don't like this part of the train, Draco," she says, as Blaise sits beside her. Pansy cards her fingers through her dark brown hair, holding the limp,
straight ends up and frowning at them. They've grown longer, nearly brushing her shoulders now. "Look at what the engine does to my curls."

"What curls?" Mills asks from across the table, her own black ringlets twisted up into a messy topknot.

"Precisely my point." Pansy lets her hair fall back against her purple dress, the deeply cut neckline gaping just enough to give a slight glimpse of a black lace bra. "The curling charm always fails in this humidity. I'll look a fright when we get to school."

Draco pulls the compartment door closed behind him. "I wasn't about to spend half the bloody day anywhere near Potter and those ginger idiots." He drops into the seat beside Millicent. It feels odd to be here without Greg and Theo, he thinks, but Greg's never cared about NEWTs, and Theo's parents had insisted he finish his exams at Durmstrang this year. Draco doesn't want to think of Vince, or the way Mrs Crabbe had walked up to him after the funeral and slapped him in the face. Draco hadn't flinched. He'd deserved it, and he knows that. He could have done something to save his friend, and he hadn't. He'd let Potter fly away, Draco clinging to the back of his broom, like a bloody coward.

But isn't that what Draco's always been? Weak. Impotent. Cowardly.

He looks out the window, watches as the train starts to pull away from the station, the parents waving, looking a bit anxious. It's the first year neither his mother nor his father have seen him off. Not possible, really, what with Lucius in Azkaban and his mother refusing to go out in public unless absolutely necessary. Draco hadn't wanted to put her through it this year. It's bollocks that they have to go back, of course, but there'd been no arguing with McGonagall. Draco's heard rumours that the Board of Governors hadn't wanted the Slytherins to return anyway, but she'd fought them on that. Honestly, Draco thinks that's a load of rubbish, but his mother had heard it from Vanessa Greengrass, who swore it was what she'd been told by someone in the Ministry. Then again, everyone knows Vanessa likes to tipple a bit too much, so fuck only knows if she's telling the truth.

"Did you see the Weaselette hanging over him?" Draco asks after a moment. He wrinkles his nose, looks back at his friends. "How nauseating."

Blaise slouches in his seat. "Circe, not this again," he says, half under his breath. Draco narrows his eyes at him, and Blaise just flips two fingers Draco's way. He looks tired already. "I can't bear another year of Potter this and Potter that, old man. Let's just nip it in the bud now."

"He has a point," Millicent says. She shifts, settles back in the corner of her seat, one shoulder pressed against the window. Her eyeliner is thick and black against her pale skin, making her blue eyes look brilliantly bright. "I realise there were extenuating circumstances and all previously, but now this rivalry or whatever it is between the two of you is just pathetic."

Draco glares at Pansy. "You could defend me."

"I could." Pansy scratches at the sharp angle of her jaw with dark plum fingernails. "But I don't entirely disagree with them. Can we just have some sort of moratorium on the Potter hate? It's not going to go over well in the current political climate." She sighs and crosses her arms over her chest, pulling the neckline of her dress lower. Draco catches the glance Blaise flicks her way, his gaze sliding down to the swell of her tits. Merlin, Draco hopes that's not going to go anywhere. The last thing he wants is his friends at each other's throats once their hearts are broken. "I mean, really, darling, even Mummy told me to be polite to the twat--"

"Given you tried to hand him over to the Dark Lord last term," Millie murmurs, "it's probably not a horrible idea."
Pansy shoots her an irritated frown. "At least I'm not Draco. Potter hates him more."

Blaise and Millie both look over at Draco. "Valid point," Millie says thoughtfully.

Draco leans his elbows on his knees. "You're all terrible friends, you realise." All three of them just look at him, and Draco slumps back into his seat with a furious huff. "Wankers."

He doesn't want to be angry with them, but he is. None of them understand, he thinks. It's different for them, for their families, and how they're trying to reposition themselves after the war. It'd just been Vince and Greg and Theo who'd had families who'd been Death Eaters, even if they weren't in the inner circle, and none of them were here now with him, were they? Draco's fingertips brush against his left forearm, where the Mark still stains his skin. What's it going to be like, he wonders, walking back into the castle with the remnants of the Dark Lord still burnt into his flesh? He can't hide it, not entirely. There'll be showers to consider, other moments when his sleeve might not cover the twist of the serpent, the curve of the skull, those thick black strokes across his pale arm, reminders of how foolish he'd been, how desperate to please his shit of a father.

Azkaban is a cold and terrifying place. Draco'd barely managed twenty minutes in late July, waiting in the visitor's room for a moment with Lucius. And then his father had refused to see him. Told the guards he wasn't interested in speaking to his son. Draco hasn't bothered to go back. His friends think him terrible, he knows. Pansy's already scolded him, told him he can't turn his back on his father. She doesn't seem to understand that Lucius Malfoy turned his back on Draco long before, that he'd fallen into a bottle of whisky whilst a madman took over his house, terrified his wife, tormented his son. Draco's not certain he can forgive his father. Not entirely.

Potter's words from a few days past still linger in his mind. You ought to be rotting away in Azkaban next to your fucking father. Pansy's told him Potter's an utter shit for saying that, and Draco wants to agree, but there's part of him that thinks Potter's right, part of him that's certain every bloody student in that damned castle will think the same. His father's destroyed any credibility Draco might have had, made him lesser, despised. Draco's gaze slips to his friends, to Blaise, who's pulled out a well-worn copy of de Troyes' Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier à la charrette to practise his French, to Pansy and Millicent who're bent across the window, the grim landscape of outer London's streets and terrace houses sliding by as they gossip about Daphne Greengrass's little sister Astoria, who seems to fancy an utterly inappropriate Ravenclaw boy. Draco wonders how long they'll stay by his side, wonders if his loss of power and status will cause them to drift away. He's felt it already from others in Slytherin House. Graham Pritchard and Malcolm Baddock had turned away from him on the train platform, refusing to meet his eyes. Draco's not a fool. He knows he's a pariah now, knows that there are families desperate to distance themselves from him. Pansy's already let it slip that her father's told her to give him a wide berth. Draco's just grateful that Pansy's rebellious enough to do as she pleases, whatever Richard Parkinson might say.

He leans back in his seat, silent, his stomach tightening, twisting with each clack of the train wheels along the track, with each mile of landscape that slips past the window, bringing them that much closer to the Scottish Highlands. Perhaps, Draco thinks, he ought to have done what Theo did and hie himself away to the wilds of Scandinavia, but Draco's never liked the idea of Durmstrang, if he's honest. It's far too militaristic for him, and he's never looked good in dark brown wool. Besides, Hogwarts is in his blood; a Malfoy's been attending since the Normans first stepped onto English soil, and Draco'll be damned if he'll let these bastards scare him away.

That doesn't mean he's looking forward to spending the next ten months in a school that's demonising him whilst raising Potter of all bloody people to demigod status. Draco only hopes he can keep his tongue civil enough; he doesn't trust Potter's ginger horde not to hex him into oblivion if he doesn't.
Merlin only knows how he'll manage, though. The very sight of Potter makes Draco's blood boil, makes him want to slam his fist into that smug bastard's face, over and over and over again until the red-tinged rage twisting up inside of him fades. Draco closes his eyes, breathes out.

Slowly, the hours slip away, timed only by the steady clack of train wheels against the track and the ever-changing landscape through the window as they skirt around cities and villages and hamlets and long stretches of nothing at all. Draco sleeps a little, curled up against Millicent's warm side, her hand settled on his shoulder. The sun sets in a glorious burst of rosy orange. The countryside changes as they move further north, rolling hills replaced by empty, wild moorland, then mountains, stark and black against the evening twilight. Finally the train slows; the wooden and stone buildings of Hogsmeade roll past, lit by flickering lamps along the High Street.

The train stops with a rumble and creak of wheels and brakes, a burst of steam that swirls past the window, coating it for a moment. Draco can hear the shouts down the corridor, the slam of compartment doors being opened, the thump of trunks being pulled from luggage racks. He sits up, looks at his friends. They're all as nervous as he feels, he realises. Coming back seems strange; they were meant to be starting their lives now, taking the next steps past their schooling, finding apprenticeships and further training, ways in which they could begin to make their marks on society.

"We should go," Blaise says after a moment. The voices outside their compartment are fading.

Pansy nods, seemingly calm, but Draco can see the flutter of her pulse in her throat. She doesn't make a move to stand. "They'll be waiting."

Still, none of them stir. They look at each other, their uncertainty written across their faces, all of them turned towards Draco, as if waiting for him to break their silence. He doesn't want to, doesn't need the responsibility that comes with being their leader. Perhaps a year or two ago he might have been thrilled, but now Draco just feels a coldness in the pit of his stomach, a flutter of fear. It's safe here in this compartment, just the four of them tucked away together. In a moment, all that'll change. They'll step into the unknown, into a school that despises them. Perhaps they've earned that loathing in a way, Draco thinks, but in other ways they haven't. It's the name that frightens people the most, he thinks. Slytherin House. The vipers who'll poison you, who'll destroy everything you hold dear. He's read the columns in the *Prophet*, thought them nothing but inflammatory rubbish, but he's also heard the whispers on the platform as they passed, felt the angry glances, seen the way parents drew their children out of Draco's path.

It'll only be worse when they step off the train.

Draco stands, reaches for his trunk. "We have to," he says, and it's as if he's broken whatever's holding his friends fast. They collect their luggage and bags, carry them down the silent corridor, take the steps out of the warmth of the train into the crisp chill of the night air. Heads turn as they move down the platform towards the throng of older students. Draco can see Potter in the midst of them, taller than he'd once been, his dark hair messy and unkempt. And then Potter's head turns, his gaze falls on Draco. His mouth tightens, but he doesn't look away, and Draco raises his chin, refusing to let Potter make him cower.

"Careful," Blaise murmurs at Draco's left shoulder, and then Granger leans in, says something to Potter. He turns away from Draco, and Draco only just stops himself from sighing in relief. He won't give Potter the satisfaction, whether or not the bastard would realise it.

Hagrid leads the first years away, towards the lake and the row of boats waiting for them. The older students move past the train station, lining up for the Thestral-drawn carriages. The near-skeletal creatures are visible to almost all of them now, Draco realises as the murmurs of surprise ripple through the press of students, save for the few who'd disappeared well before the battle started. He
can feel Pansy tense beside him, and Millie as well. He's forgotten they hadn't been able to see the Thestrals last year, and he knows how disconcerting that first glimpse can be. It'd terrified him, even though he'd been expecting it. Draco had seen so much death the summer before. He'd no idea the last time he stood here how much more he'd be faced with in the coming months. Draco still has nightmares about it all, about the casual way the Dark Lord had cast the Killing Curse for the slightest offence, the soft thud of the bodies hitting the Manor floor, the glassy-eyed stare of the dead. Draco wonders sometimes what death feels like, what crossing that boundary brings, whether it's the heaven or hell the vicar sometimes speaks of or a simple, quiet nothingness.

If Draco's honest, he hopes for the latter.

The carriages creak as they roll down the path, the steady clip-clop of the Thestrals' hooves soft against the damp earth. It's rained recently, Draco realises. Perhaps an hour or two before, and cool droplets fall from the leaves of the trees above, splashing lightly against his heated skin. They feel good, and he turns his head up to the purple evening sky and the stars just beginning to show, breathes in the clean scent of dirt and wet grass.

The lights of the castle shine through the edges of the forest. Draco can hear the splash of the boats across the lake, the laughter of the first years as they pass them by, the murmur of his fellow students from the other carriages. Pansy's fingers curl around his, warm and soft, and he looks over at her. She gives him a faint smile.

"It's odd to be back," she says, and he looks up at the stone turrets as they pass beneath them. He remembers them that day, burning with curse flames, remembers the way bodies fell from their ramparts in bursts of green light. His heart thuds unevenly; it's hard to breathe, and Draco clenches Pansy's hand tighter, a shudder going through him. She lets him hold on to her, and he thinks she's remembering the fear herself, the terror that had pulled her away from the castle with so many other Slytherins, refusing to fight against their families or their friends, unwilling to throw themselves into a battle that wasn't theirs.

They'd been children, for Circe's sake, Draco thinks. Stupid fools caught in an adult's war, too blind to see their own paths through it. He wonders if he might have made different decisions, had he been older. Wiser.

Probably not. Draco'd been so caught up with his father, with making Lucius proud of him. He'd failed spectacularly, but Draco doesn't think he cares any longer. Or at least he tells himself that for now. He's not certain he believes it.

The carriages rumble through the gates, pulling to a stop in the courtyard. The last time Draco had seen it, it was filled with rubble, with broken stones and bits of castle towers brought down by battle curses. Bodies had been sprawled across its cobblestones; if Draco closes his eyes, he can almost see where the dead had fallen, can almost remember the bent legs, the bloodied faces, the blank eyes, the acrid stench of Unforgivables filling the air.

"Merlin," Millicent breathes out, and Draco knows she remembers it too.

Now the courtyard's pristine, the towers around it restored, only the faintest lines in the stonework showing where they've been repaired. Draco steps out of the carriage, looking around him, and he can see the others doing so as well, all of them remembering the way the castle had been in the aftermath of that long night. His gaze finds Potter again, and he takes in the pallor beneath Potter's golden skin, the unsteadiness of Potter's gait as Potter walks towards the Weaselette, puts his arm around her waist. The Gryffindors close rank around Potter, nearly hiding him from view, but Draco catches the glint of the torchlight on Potter's glasses before Potter turns away.
"Welcome, students." McGonagall's standing on the steps in a brown robe, a green and brown tartan wrapped around her shoulders. They all look towards her, the lot of them, as her voice rings out across the courtyard. "It's good to see your faces back here once more." A small smile quirks her thin lips to one side. "All of you." She looks towards the huddle of Slytherins on the edges of the throng.

Draco's not so certain she means that. He exchanges a glance with Blaise, who shrugs his shoulders. "Gryffindor hyperbole," Blaise murmurs.

"I'll ask you all to take your appropriate house tables in the Great Hall," McGonagall's saying. "With the exception of those of you who've returned for an eighth year of schooling." She hesitates. "I'd like to speak to that group separately, if the remainder of you don't mind, so…" She claps her hands sharply. "Quickly into the castle, if you please."

There's a swirl of movement as the other students do as she says, with only cursory curious glances at the ones staying put in the courtyard. Slowly they slip away through the wide, arched doorway, warm light spilling from it across the shadows of the courtyard, pushing them back towards the ones standing still, the sound of the younger students' voices disappearing into the depths of the castle.

Only a small group remains, twenty or so in total. Draco and his friends, Potter and Granger and Weasley and Longbottom. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Wayne Hopkins and Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones. A larger knot of Ravenclaws standing together: Tony Goldstein and Michael Corner, Sue Li and Mandy Brocklehurst, Isobel Macdougal and Padma Patil, then off on the side, Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot, the two of them standing shoulder to shoulder, their hands clasped together, heads bent towards one another.

The absences are more noticeable. Vince and Greg and Theo and Daphne and Tracey. Finnigan and Thomas and Pavarti Patil and Faye Dunbar. Lavender Brown, still lying in St Mungo's, recovering from Greyback's attack. Ernie Mcmillan and Megan Jones and Oliver Rivers. All gone, for one reason or another. It feels odd to be standing here without them, Draco thinks, and his gaze slides back to Potter and the way his lanky, lean body slouches beside Granger.

McGonagall's silent for a moment, and the face she turns towards them is troubled. "I realise," she says finally, "that some of you are unhappy to be back here."

Understatement of the bloody century, Draco thinks. He takes in the stubborn, fixed expressions around him, the way bodies are held, tense and taut, arms folded across chests.

"The Department of Educational Regulation," McGonagall says, "as you are aware, will not allow NEWTs to be given again before the second week of June. It is my opinion as an educator that, given the events of the past year, you will be best served by attending classes until then." A quiet ripple of protest goes through the small group. Draco thinks it stupid of them all; they're already standing at the sodding castle. The time to object was a month ago when the Ministry accepted McGonagall's idiotic plan. She gives them a stern look over the rims of her spectacles. "Some of your fellow students have chosen other paths, either choosing to take similar exams outside of the Ministry's purview or making arrangements with other schools to finish their coursework. For those of you who have chosen to return, you are always welcome at Hogwarts." Her gaze sweeps across them, stopping for the briefest moment on Draco. "As I said earlier, that includes all of you."

Draco feels his cheeks warm as the others glance towards him. He lifts his chin defiantly, daring them to question his presence here with them. They look away, all except Potter, whose face is still, silent, expressionless. Draco tucks a lock of hair behind one ear, refusing to turn away first, and then Granger touches Potter's arm and he bends his head towards hers. Draco wants to sigh in relief. He won't let himself.
McGonagall glances back at the half-open door, gestures towards someone inside. "Professor Kohli, if you will?"

A man steps out, not much older than the students themselves, tall and brown, his thick, black hair swept back from a high forehead, his neatly trimmed beard and moustache split by a quick smile. His black robe is open over a grey jumper and a pair of faded jeans tucked into worn black combat boots.

Draco can't help but notice how ridiculously attractive he is. That's not something he wants to dwell on. Thoughts like these have been hitting Draco more and more frequently, lingering in his mind, making him look at men and boys in a new, dangerously different way. Draco knows his duty, knows what's required of him to carry on the family line. His mother's even been hinting that perhaps he might consider courting Daphne's younger sister, Astoria, this year whilst he's back at Hogwarts. She's a proper girl from a proper family. Perfect marriage material. Draco knows this. He understands it. And when the time comes, he'll do what's expected of him. But in the dark of the night, when he's alone, hidden away in the shadows of his bedroom, the coverlet pulled up over his thin body, his hand moving slowly, tightly along the hot swell of his prick, Draco thinks of men with broad shoulders and wide hands, pulling him closer, kissing him until he's breathless and aching.

It's a bloody perilous fantasy. Draco's fully aware of that.

"Ravi, please, Headmistress," the man says, in a distinctly London accent, and he looks across the group of students. "I'd like to be on a first-name basis with my House."

Draco stills, but it's Granger who says what Draco's certain they're all thinking. "But we're not all the same House, Professor."

McGonagall answers in her Scottish lilt. "You are now, Miss Granger. As of this term, you are no longer Gryffindors, Slytherins, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs. You are Eighth Years, and Professor Kohli--Ravi--" Her mouth twitches down on the professor's given name. "--will be your Head, as well as serving as our new Potions professor."

"But Professor Slughorn," Lisa Turpin starts to say and McGonagall holds up her hand, silencing them all.

"Professor Slughorn chose to return to retirement," McGonagall says, her voice echoing in the quiet of the courtyard. "Ravi has taken his place. I'm sure you'll find him quite proficient in both sets of duties; he comes to us highly recommended from a recent stint in Ilvermorny. Your dormitories will be located on the third floor of the classroom wing, each room fully renovated. I'm quite certain you'll find them comfortable."

"Has she lost her bloody mind?" Pansy says from Draco's side. Her voice rises. "I'm not sharing a dormitory with Granger."

The Gryffindors turn, looking at Pansy. "As if I'd want you sleeping near me either, Parkinson," Granger snaps, her cheeks flushed. She looks back at McGonagall. "Headmistress, you can't imagine this will go well--"

McGonagall holds up a hand, stopping the angry murmurs. "At first, no. But given you're all the eldest students of this school, I do expect you to model appropriate behaviour for the younger years. Part of doing so is learning to live with each other in a civilised manner." Her eyes narrow; Draco's certain she glances between him and Potter. "Doing otherwise will result in disciplinary action. Do I make myself clear?"

There's an angry silence that falls over the courtyard. Draco's all too aware of how the other students
have drawn away from him and Blaise and Pansy and Millie, their faces twisted in disgust. McGonagall watches them all for a long moment, then she says, "Good. Leave your trunks and bags here. They'll be delivered to your rooms by the end of the Great Feast. You'll sit together at the furthest row of tables, right behind Gryffindor House."

"Wankers," Blaise says beneath his breath, but McGonagall turns towards him, one eyebrow raised.

"An objection, Mr Zabini?" she asks.

"More of a comment, really." Blaise folds his arms across his chest, and meets her gaze evenly.

Draco thinks McGonagall's going to lose her temper, but Kohli steps forward instead and says, "Best be finding your seats before the first-years come in." He claps his hands, and the lot of them start to move forward, winding their way up the steps past McGonagall and their new Head of House. Draco catches a glimpse of Potter's messy hair, lit by the torchlight before he disappears into the castle, and when he turns his head to say something to Blaise, he sees Kohli watching him, a thoughtful expression on his face, before McGonagall touches his arm, draws him away.

This is going to be an odd year, Draco thinks, as he passes through the half-open doors, their heavy wood still scorched by hex marks. Hell if he knows how--or if--he'll make it through.

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It's the first day of classes, and Harry's still shocked by the newness of everything, the sense that everything, yet nothing, has changed. At breakfast, he sits at the Eighth-Year table, pressed against Ginny who's said to hell with it and left the Gryffindor benches behind her to eat with Harry. He's grateful for the solidity of her; everything else feels misplaced. This table shouldn't be here, and neither should they--it's all wrong. This isn't the Hogwarts he remembers. Harry's body suddenly feels too large for these familiar benches in unfamiliar places; he tugs at his tie, knotted too tightly at his collar.

They'd all found new uniforms hanging in their wardrobes this morning, the whole of the Eighth-Year dormitories. Or, rather, their old uniforms given a new shine. Instead of the familiar red and gold of Gryffindor, Harry's tie is now a deep purple, with a dark grey striping on the bias. The colours have changed for all of the Eighth Years, whether Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, or Slytherin. They've lost their old House affiliations, and there's not one of them pleased by that, Harry thinks. He supposes they oughtn't be surprised. Professor Kohli--Ravi, Harry reminds himself--had mentioned last night after the Feast something like that would happen. Still, it's one thing to hear it, another thing completely to wake up to a new bloody identity. Harry's not certain what to think of it, but he'd knotted his tie, then pulled his jumper over it--the gold and red edging gone there as well in favour of purple and grey--and come down for breakfast before half his roommates had woken up.

And there's another thing Harry doesn't want to think of: the lanky thinness of Malfoy across the room from him last night, silently climbing into bed still dressed and pulling the hangings closed around him, ignoring the rest of them as they swapped travelling clothes for pyjamas. Harry doesn't understand why McGonagall would have put them together, him and Malfoy, with Terry and Justin and Tony filling out the room. The rest of them had sat on Justin's mattress for the hour before the sconces fell dark, whispering and glancing over at Malfoy's quiet bed.

"Poor bloke," Terry had murmured. "I almost feel badly for him."

Fuck that, Harry thinks. Malfoy deserved to be ostracised. Once a prat, always a bloody prat, and when the others had fallen asleep, Harry'd padded out to the common room to curl up on the sofa in front of the fireplace, not certain he wanted to share a sleeping space with Malfoy. The bastard'd
probably try to smother Harry in his sleep. It'd taken hours before Harry'd finally nodded off, his cheek pressed into a brocade cushion. When he'd dreamt, it'd been of fire and heat, of screams and curses exploding around him, of Malfoy's sharp, pale face looking up at him as Harry swooped past on a broom, reaching for him, Harry's fingers slipping through Malfoy's as the flames crackled around them.

When Harry'd woken up, his heart pounding, a quiet, strangled cry pulled from his throat, the soft grey light of dawn had been seeping through the windows. He'd sat there for a long while, a thin wool throw wrapped around his shoulders, staring into the flickering embers of the fireplace, trying to gather himself before slipping back into the silence of his dormitory, broken only by Terry's soft snores. Harry'd only just laid down when he'd heard Malfoy stir, the hangings of his bed scratching softly along the rail as Malfoy drew them back, slid out of bed. He'd gathered his clothes, and then he was gone, the door closing behind him with a barely perceptible thud.

Harry'd almost followed him, that sick certainty that Malfoy was up to no good still so very hard to shake, but he'd forced himself to lie back down, to close his eyes. He'd lain there for another hour, half-asleep but not. Malfoy still hadn't come back. Harry'd given up finally and rolled out of bed, going to his wardrobe for his clothes, only to find this new, oddly uncomfortable tie.

Now Harry can barely choke down some spoonfuls of porridge and a fried sausage. Next to him, Ron's eagerly inhaling piles of eggs and toast that would make a trencherman blush. Ron's also talking to Neville with his mouth full, a fact that keeps Hermione frowning at him across the table for the entire meal.

Ginny's warmth at Harry's side is comforting at least. She runs a hand along his forearm lightly as he stabs at his porridge with his spoon. "Careful there," she says. "The porridge can't fight back, you know." She stops and considers. "At least, I don't think it can."

The note of doubt in her voice is prudent, as this is a sentient castle, and in Harry's experience, everything can fight back at some point or another. It just has to be pushed far enough. He stabs again, wondering if the porridge wants to be eaten or if it has no choice, just like he has no choice but to be here, in these familiar walls, hearing the voices of friends, remembering the people who died here. Including himself.

"Ron, Harry, we're going to be late!" Hermione's voice stirs Harry out of his bitter reverie. He lets the spoon drop into the bowl, glad to be able to give up finally. "Ginny, haven't you got Potions with us as well? I wonder what we're going to do for the first lesson."

Harry's already tired as he gets up with Ginny and Ron and follows Hermione's eager form out of the hall. As they're finding their bags in the corridor, Harry gives Ginny a quick kiss, and then she's turning away, shifting her satchel on her hip expertly and catching up with Luna. They'd agreed already that they wouldn't walk to joint classes, that it would be too awkward and obvious to appear in the classroom side by side. So even though some of the seventh and Eighth Years NEWTs students have Potions together this morning, Harry's following Ron and Hermione down the sunlit corridor to the serpentine dungeon stairs and then down to the potions classroom, his heart sinking with every step that echoes against the stone walls.

"Remind me why we fought a war again," Ron mutters under his breath as they near the classroom. "I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have fought quite so hard if I'd known double Potions was at the end."

Privately, Harry agrees. It doesn't seem right, Harry thinks, that they should have won the war with Voldemort and that they should still have to go back to the same classroom and submit themselves to further education, even if Professor Kohli--Ravi, Harry reminds himself, with an odd, guilty twinge at calling a professor by his first name--seems a decent sort. Harry's already been promised a spot in
the Aurors, after all, and Kingsley's suggested that his marks on the NEWTs don't matter, just the fact that he has them. But he can't have them without being here.

As Harry steps inside the familiar, low-ceilinged classroom, he's surprised with how different it looks. The space is warmer, almost cosily in a way, a fire burning brightly on the hearth. There's still the faint stench of potions ingredients preserved in alcohol lingering in the air, but it's lessened by a cleaner scent, something bright and citrusy that cuts through the usual sour smell of the potions classroom. Ravi's standing off to the side as the students file in, his brow furrowed as he chats with the new Defence Against Dark Arts teacher, Grace Omolade. She's tall in a fitted black robe edged with emerald green—not surprising, given she's also the new Head of Slytherin House--her dark hair tightly plaits and her deep brown skin warmed by the soft light from the iron chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The classroom is almost the same as Harry remembers, although Ravi's evidently cast a charm on the lights to make them stronger. The effect is cheering, but not overly so. Ravi's not that try-hard, it seems. Harry's beginning to trust Ravi a bit, carefully, admiring his easy banter and general aura of annoyed competence. He'd been decent enough last night, Harry thinks, after the Sorting Ceremony, leading them to their new common room and making certain they'd all settled in. Even if he had flatly refused Malfoy's request to switch rooms, which is the one sensible thing the pointy-faced git's done since they boarded the bloody train yesterday. Ravi'll learn soon enough what Malfoy's like, Harry's certain, and once their new Head of House realises how everyone except the Slytherin pack loathes Malfoy, he'll reconsider that request. Maybe even switch Malfoy with Ron, which would be bloody brill in Harry's opinion. Even on the sofa, he'd missed Ron's snores last night; he's grown used to them. It's going to be bloody weird not sharing a room together, the two of them.

"See you after class, love," Ron says to Hermione, and he lingers at the closest workbench to the front, kissing Hermione on the cheek to gagging noises from his sister who's at the next bench. Harry tightens his fingers around his satchel and tries not to smile too widely at Ginny when she winks at him.

Ron just snorts and flips two fingers towards Gin. "Cow," he says easily, and Ginny's laugh echoes through the classroom as Harry trails Ron down the long row of benches scarred by years of Potions use to an unobtrusive spot in the back--their usual place to take cover from the watchful gaze of Snape and Slughorn both. Malfoy's over two benches and up one, his blond head bent, his hair falling forward, hiding his face. Zabini's perched languidly on the stool next to him. Harry remembers when Malfoy used to sit in the front during every Potions class. He supposes Malfoy's trying to be discreet, or perhaps he's not certain of his talent now that his sodding father's influence over the Board of Governors has been broken. No more pulling favours, Harry thinks nastily. Malfoy'll have to get by on his own merit, whatever that might be. There's no Lucius Malfoy to sweep in and rescue his son. It serves Malfoy right, in Harry's opinion.

"Reckon we can still hide back here." Ron grins at Harry as he dumps his satchel on the workbench, digging through it for his Potions text. "We should be all right unless we're brewing something explosive." Ron gives Harry an ominous look; Harry winces. Despite Harry's performance in sixth year Potions, neither he nor Ron have ever been true Potions talents, not like Hermione or Malfoy even. Harry hasn't touched so much as a stirring rod since sixth year. Or wanted to, for that matter. Honestly, he doesn't know why he needs a Potions NEWT for the Auror force. It's not like he's going to be bloody brewing potions in the field, or even identifying ones. He doesn't want to be one of the lab Aurors, after all. Merlin, how bloody boring would that be? With a sigh, Harry lays his equipment out on the bench, following the example of Mandy Brocklehurst, who's at the workbench beside him.

At the front of the room, Ravi says something that makes Professor Omolade laugh, and she presses her full lips together to contain her amusement. With a quick comment to Ravi that makes him smile,
she heads out of the classroom, her dark eyes pausing on Harry for a moment before she goes. After she leaves, Ravi's still got a wry twist to his mouth as he turns to the class, who're bustling and chatting at their benches. Harry's trying not to wonder at the new, young teachers and their easy, casual way of interacting. He couldn't imagine Snape and McGonagall, say, laughing with each other before class. It's one of the clearest reminders that Hogwarts has changed, but, unlike the other changes, it's one he actually welcomes.

"Right, you lot, settle down." Ravi says, clapping his hands. "We've work to do."

"How do you know Professor Omolade?" someone asks from the back -- Harry doesn't recognize the voice.

"Are you dating each other?" Another voice chimes in.

Ravi rolls his eyes, a look of annoyance flashing across his handsome features. "Not bloody likely," he says, a bit tartly. "For one, Grace and I were here at Hogwarts together. She was two years ahead of me, and she's absolutely brilliant and absolutely terrifying. Be forewarned."

"And the other reason?" Malfoy's drawl sets Harry's nerves on edge, even from across the room. It's bad enough to share a dormitory room with him--now he has to endure Malfoy up close in classes as well. Harry wonders how many classrooms they'll be in together--he prays that Malfoy isn't taking more than one or two of his subjects.

"Grace and I don't play Quidditch for the same team. Or do you need me to spell it out?" Ravi gives Malfoy a quirky little smile, and Malfoy blushes and looks away, letting his hair fall over his cheek again. Weird, Harry thinks. Parkinson glares at Harry when he glances over, a protective scowl on her face, and he looks away quickly so she doesn't hex him later. Harry doesn't trust Parkinson, not when it comes to Malfoy. Besides, he hasn't really forgiven her for trying to sell him out to the Dark Lord last May, the bloody cow.

"What does Quidditch have to do with anything?" Ron asks under his breath.

Harry just shrugs. Hell if he knows "Professors, mate. They're all a bit mental."

Ravi waves away the shouts and attempts to distract the lesson further. "Enough with all that. You'll meet Grace later this week. We're going to brew Volubilis potion today. Does anyone know what that does?"

Hermione's hand is up in an instant. To her evident annoyance, Ravi calls on the other person in the room who has her hand raised, a seventh-year Ravenclaw.

"Who's that?" Harry whispers, loudly enough for Mandy to turn and look at him in disgust.

"Mila Orlov," Mandy says, her voice low. "Your girlfriend's been mates with her for years, you idiot."

Harry looks over at Ron and he nods, almost apologetically. "She came to the Burrow for Easter hols two years ago, remember?"

To be honest, Harry doesn't. At all.

"Volubilis changes your voice," Mila's saying to Ravi, and he nods.

"And what else?" Ravi looks around.
Hermione's hand is still up, not waving but present. When Ravi calls on her, Harry breathes a sigh of relief. He won't have to spend the rest of the day listening to her whinge. Hermione's shoulders straighten. "It can restore your voice from a Silencing Charm."

"Correct." Ravi flicks his wand and bright pink slips of parchment fly to each bench. It's a pretty flash move, Harry thinks, but he enjoys it. Ron catches theirs, holding it over for Harry to read the brewing instructions

"You'll have to heat the potion," Ravi says, "and watch carefully for the indicated colour changes. They need to come in the right order--if you get them off even by one, your potion might become volatile, and none of us want that, yeah?"

The whole room, Hermione and Ginny included, turns to look at Ron and Harry.

"Oi," Ron says, indignant. "The whole lot of you can sod right off, can't you?"

"You might want to let the infirmary know Potter's brewing, sir," Michael Corner calls out from across the room, and a ripple of laughter goes through the benches. To Harry's surprise, Malfoy doesn't join in. He just sits silently at his workbench, studying the pink parchment with a frown.

Ravi gives Harry a sympathetic look. "I'm certain Mr Potter can handle this brew. If any of you have questions, raise your hand, and I'll come by to help. You should have honeywater, mint, and stewed mandrake ready. The finishing phase is syrup of hellebore, and you've won if you get sparks at the end. Two hours, my friends. You'd best get to work. " He turns, his open black robe swirling around his boots.

Harry bends his head towards Ron. "Reckon we can do this?"

"Christ, I hope so." Ron's chewing his lip. "So we start with an alkaline base, yeah?"

"In a pewter cauldron." Harry slides off his stool and starts towards the supply cupboard. "Half-inch thickness?"

Ron nods. "You get that, and I'll start the heating charm."

The classroom's a flurry of movement as they all collect their remaining supplies. Harry manages not to get one of the dented cauldrons, and when he brings it back to the workbench, Ron already has a bright blue flame going. Harry has a good feeling about this potion; he picks up the pink parchment and glances through the instructions again. It doesn't seem so bad, he thinks.

Slowly the class settles into quiet, the only noises the murmur of voices as workbench partners work together, the soft scritch of quills against parchment as they all take notes for their potions reports, the bubble and pop of the bases heating.

Ron chops up the stewed mandrake haphazardly. "Pour the honeywater in," he says.

"That's supposed to be diced," Harry says, looking at the dubious pile of mushed root. He dumps the phial of honeywater into the cauldron. It's supposed to turn pink, and Harry supposes that's what it does. It's bright, though, and when he glances around at other cauldrons, most everyone else has a paler potion.

"It'll be fine." Ron leans against the workbench, his knife still in his hand. He taps the tip of it against the tabletop, leaving behind faint divots in the wood. "How was last night?"

Harry shrugs, glances over at Malfoy. He's pulled his hair back with a hair tie, catching it at the nape
of his long neck. His skin is flushed as he leans over the steaming cauldron; he turns to say something to Zabini, who nods and dumps in a handful of mint. "It was fine," Harry says after a moment. "Bit weird, though, not to have you in the dormitory."

"Yeah." Ron sighs and drops the knife. "I mean, it's great having Neville in with me, yeah? But I don't know who's more irritating, Zabini or Corner."

"That's a tough call," Harry says, and Ron gives him a rueful smile.

"Tell me about it." Ron hesitates, his gaze flicking towards Malfoy and Zabini. He lowers his voice; Parkinson and Bulstrode are within hearing distance. "Malfoy being a tit?"

Harry hesitates. He wants to say yes, wants to give Ron the answer he knows Ron expects. He sighs. "Not really."

Ron's eyebrow goes up. "Yeah?"

"He went to bed," Harry says. "Didn't really say much."

"Oh." Ron picks up a stem of mint, starts shredding the leaves from it. "How many do we need?"

Harry glances at the instructions. "Three stems." He takes one of his own and strips the leaves off, ripping them into smaller pieces. "It's going to be rubbish, though, us being in separate rooms."

Ron scowls and hands Harry his mint. "You'd think after everything we went through last year, they'd give us something, at least. It's like McGonagall's bound and determined to make us suffer."

"We're supposed to be examples." Harry tosses the mint into the cauldron and gives it a stir. He stills.

"Was that orange yet?"

"Peach-ish." Ron peers into the cauldron. "That's close enough, yeah?"

Harry turns the heat up a notch. "I guess. It needs to go green now."

Ravi's walking through the aisles, eyeing each workbench, his hands behind his back. He stops every so often to peer into a cauldron, or to ask a question. When he pauses beside Harry, he frowns.

"You went orange before you added the mint?" Ravi asks, and Harry nods. Ravi frowns into the cauldron. "You're certain?"

"It was orange," Ron says, a bit defiantly.

Ravi quirks an eyebrow at him and humms. Harry flinches; he knows that's the one thing guaranteed to irk the hell out of Ron. Ravi turns to Harry. "Your potion should be shifting to blue soon. If it doesn't, turn the heat up two more degrees. We'll see if Mr Weasley's right about the colour, I suppose."

He starts to turn away, and Ron mutters, "It's like he wants to be Snape, yeah?"

And then Ravi's looking back at them, and his mouth tightens, just a bit. "Severus Snape was bloody brilliant," he says, and his voice rings out through the classroom, turning heads. "Just so we're clear. You may not have cared for him as a professor, but he was a damned fine potioneer. One of the best in the whole bloody country. You'd be lucky to be half as good as he was." Ravi's face softens.

"And he was my Head of House when I was in your shoes."

The class falls silent, save for the hiss and pop of bubbling potions.
"You were in Slytherin?" Sue Li asks, her soft voice oddly loud. "With Professor Omolade?"

"I was." Ravi looks around the room, his lips pressed tightly together. He folds his arms across his chest. "And I sincerely hope none of you object to that, whatever idiotic propaganda you might have been exposed to over the hols. There were four Founders for a bloody reason."

And then Parkinson's clapping, her chin lifted. "Well said, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson," Ravi says dryly. "Now get the hell back to work." He glances at the clock on the wall. "You've an hour left to bottle your potion and leave it on my desk."

Harry glances over at Malfoy. His thin mouth is quirked, his lips slightly parted, his eyes bright. A shiver runs down Harry's spine, hot and unpleasant, and Harry thinks he must be angry, that he definitely wants to punch Malfoy, that's got to be why it makes him so uncomfortable to see Malfoy look at their new Head of House that way. Malfoy catches Harry watching, and his eyes narrow, his face twisting into a grimace before he turns back to his cauldron. Harry looks away, a sudden tightness constricting his chest.

Ron shifts on his stool. "Merlin, it'd be nice not to be taught by fucking Slytherins, wouldn't it?" He pitches his voice low, to keep anyone else from hearing.

"I guess." Harry's gaze flicks back to Malfoy. Ravi's stopped by his and Zabini's workbench and is asking a few technical questions to make sure they've the theory of the brew. Malfoy's answering easily, and the smile Malfoy turns on Ravi when he praises the work Malfoy and Zabini have done is almost blindingly brilliant.

The rest of the hour is a bloody disaster. The potion never shifts to blue, and when they add the stewed mandrake, a horrible stench starts to seep from their cauldron, badly enough to make Mandy purse her mouth and eye them both suspiciously.

"It's the potion, not me," Ron says to her, and she just wrinkles her nose and turns away. "I swear!" He looks over at Harry. "I didn't--"

Harry waves his composition book over the cauldron, trying to disperse the smell. "I know." To be honest, Harry's just struggling to avoid the gluey bubbles that are popping in their cauldron. The grey glop stings something wicked when it lands on his arm.

Ron gives him a baleful look. "We're fucked, Harry. Not even you can get us out of this one."

With a sigh, Harry gives the mess another quick stir. "It's not going to get any better," he says glumly, looking around as everyone else bottles their perfect Volubilis, pale yellow and lightly sparkling. "Fuck it." He pulls out two phials and hands one to Ron. "Might as well give up."

They turn their phials in last, shuffling up to the front of the room, and Ravi has a grim, humorless look on his face as he holds the phials up to the light. There's no sparkling yellow fluid in them, just a grey sludge that slops up the sides of the phials when Ravi turns them back and forth. He sighs and looks at Harry and Ron. "I think I need you to try again. This isn't even really worth a fourth year effort. When did you stop going to classes?"

"We missed last year," Harry says, as Ron flushes next to him. "You know, what with being chased around the country by Death Eaters and a Dark Lord who wanted to kill me."

Ravi just looks at him, then he reaches for another phial and holds it up. The potion's sparkling and shining through the glass. "Miss Granger was with you, I've been told, but her potion's perfect."
"That's Hermione, though, isn't it?" Ron rubs the back of his neck. "She's just better at it all."

"Hmm." Ravi eyes them for a moment, then says, "You should come tonight and try to rebrew. I'll
be here after dinner. We're really going to have to work on your fundamentals if you're going to
make any headway." He waves them away. "Go on. I'm sure your next class is waiting."

Ginny and Hermione are waiting in the hallway when they come out.

"All right?" Hermione asks, a bit too kindly, and Ron wraps an arm around her waist, leaning his
head on her shoulder.

"Fucking Slytherins," Ron says morosely, and Hermione rolls her eyes at him.

"I told you both we should practice potions this summer," she says as they start down the hall. "But
neither of you wanted to."

Ginny curls her fingers around Harry's as her brother protests to his girlfriend. "It's just one potion,"
she says to Harry, and Harry knows she's right. But he also knows he did a terrible job in there, and
his stomach sinks. This is worse than he remembers. He can save the fucking Wizarding World, but
he can't brew a bloody potion to save his life.

It's not the best start to the school year, he thinks. Merlin only fucking knows how much worse it's
going to get from here.

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Draco stays away from his dormitory as long as he can. It's not entirely a conscious choice, not at
first. His first day of classes is brutal -- Ancient Runes after that bloody Potions class, followed by
double Alchemy in the afternoon. He barely has time to grab lunch in the Great Hall before he has to
run back up Ravenclaw Tower to the classroom.

At least he's space from Gryffindors there; he and Mills have been put in an advanced-track NEWTs
Alchemy based on their spellwork from last year. They settle into the back row of seats, and
Professor Skeat only barely glances their way before he starts in on the theory of Quintessence and
life force, a lesson Draco half remembers from the start of last year. This time, at least, he takes notes,
his quill scratching lightly across his composition book, leaving behind a neat black ink trail.

Dinner is nearly as quick as lunch; Draco doesn't want to linger over his roast and potatoes with
Potter and his lot just down the table from him, Potter straddling the bench with the Weaselette sitting
on his thigh, his hand cupping her hip, his fingertips just barely sliding into the waistband of her skirt.
Draco looks away from them, something angry and tight roiling through him. He tells himself it's the
tackiness of it all, the way Potter leans in and kisses Ginny quickly, the way she laughs when he
does, as if he's some sort of bloody Adonis. Draco's stomach flips, and he pushes his plate away,
mumbling something about needing to read an assignment for tomorrow's Herbology class, which he
knows is ridiculous, given it's the first of the year. Millie just shrugs, but Pansy gives him a sharp
look, and Blaise swings his legs over the bench.

"I'll come with you, yeah?" Blaise says, far too easily for Draco's comfort, but Draco doesn't protest.
He rather likes Blaise's company as they settle in the library with their books, taking their favourite
corner around the edge of the stacks and away from Pince's curious gaze. The armchairs there are
overstuffed and cosy, the sconce beneath the arched, leaded windows glowing a warm gold. They sit
for hours, and Draco loses himself in the familiar, comfortable rhythm of school work. He's missed
this, if he's honest, and there's part of him that's glad to be here again, to have this chance to work
quietly beside Blaise, even if he has to put up with Blaise eyeing him every so often, his brows
drawn together in a frown.

Draco finally closes his Ancient Runes textbook with a sigh. "What?"

"Nothing." Blaise turns a page, frowns down at an Arithmancy problem, his quill scratching across a scrap of parchment.

For a moment, Draco thinks about throwing *Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms* at him, but he's afraid the heft of it might actually dent Blaise's skull. "Don't start with me. I can practically hear you thinking from here."

Blaise's quill hesitates, hovers above the parchment, then Blaise looks up at Draco again. "I can't help it if I worry."

"Well, it makes you an imbecile," Draco says, and he sets his book on the arm of his chair. He'd taken his jumper off twenty minutes ago, balling it up and shoving it next to his hip. "I'm fine."

Silence stretches out between them, then Blaise shrugs. "If you say so." Before Draco can protest, Blaise adds, "It's not easy for any of us, Draco. We all knew that coming back, but Pans and Mills and I..." He trails off, and his gaze flicks towards Draco's forearm.

"Don't have a particularly nasty tattoo?" Draco tries to keep his voice light. He doesn't quite, and he hates the faint tremble in his words. He looks away. .

Blaise doesn't. "We're not all hidden away in Slytherin House," he says after a moment. "And don't think I didn't notice you shying away from the loo last night. That's not like you. I've shared a dormitory with you long enough to be rather aware of those long, steamy showers you enjoy."

He has a point, even if Draco'd rather not admit it. "I was just tired from travelling. " It sounds like bollocks to Draco as well, and he can't quite meet Blaise's gaze. He worries his bottom lip between his teeth, looking out the window onto the grounds. The sun has long set, and the forest is now just a dark blur against a spangled night sky. Draco catches a glimpse of moonlight on the lake, a ripple of waves as a tentacle appears, droplets shining as they fall from the squid's slick skin. Water splashes up as the tentacle disappears into the lake again.

Draco's fingertips rub over the sleeve of his shirt, across the faint burn of the Mark. He wonders if that slight pain will ever go away or if it'll stay beneath his skin, reminding him always of how bloody stupid he'd been at sixteen. He doesn't tell Blaise that he'd woken up early for the shower, knowing that he had to take one before the others stumbled in, still bleary from sleep. It feels strange not to be sharing a room with Blaise this term, to be on his own the way he is, with Potter sleeping only feet from him. He wonders if Potter thinks about hexing him or smothering Draco in his sleep. Draco'd gone to McGonagall before class, asked politely to be moved to Blaise's room. He'd made the case that Weasley would surely be happier tucked away with Potter, or Longbottom would, at least, but McGonagall had just looked at him, a little wearily, and told him he was with Potter to make a point to the others about inter-house cooperation, and she expected them both to come to terms with that fact.

Frankly, Draco thinks McGonagall's gone a bit dotty, her old age catching up with her, particularly if she thinks he and Potter can exist in the same space without hexing each other into oblivion. Still, he's certain it'll only take one or two trips to the infirmary for them before she gives in and lets him switch into Blaise's room. He only hopes there won't be any more nasty, permanent scars. His hand flattens against his chest for the briefest of moments.

"I am fine," Draco says to Blaise for now, and he gives him a faint smile. "Boot's not a horrible
roommate, if I'm honest. He snores less than Greg does."

"Small mercies." Blaise closes up his Arithmancy homework. They can hear Pince moving about at the circulation desk. She'll be shooing them out soon enough. "At least you haven't Weasley to deal with." He makes a face, his mouth twisting to one side. "He does half like to hear himself bluster."

And maybe, Draco thinks, it's a blessing he's with Potter and not the Weasel. "Maybe Longbottom will distract him."

"Or Corner," Blaise says. "Although there seems to be a bit of bad blood between the two of them over Weasley's sister." He drums his long, brown fingers against the bright blue cover of Karuzos' *A New Theory of Numerology*. "To be honest, I'm not certain which of them is worse. They're both sodding pricks in my book."

"Library's closing," Pince calls from the desk. Draco's heart sinks a bit. He doesn't want to go back to his room. He wants to sit here with Blaise in the warm glow of the lamplight.

"Come on then," Blaise says, his voice gentle. Draco thinks perhaps Blaise understands his reluctance. Still, Blaise has never been one to coddle Draco. He hasn't the patience for it the way Pansy does.

They gather their satchels, tucking away books and quills. Draco pushes his hair back from his cheek, drapes his rumpled jumper over one arm; he glances over at Blaise as they walk through the warren of tables and study carrels. Draco thinks he gets a glimpse of Granger in the corner, her bushy hair peeking out behind the thick cover of her Arithmancy text. "Tell me," Draco says quietly, "that this is all worth it. That I shouldn't have joined Theo in Durmstrang--"

"You wouldn't last a week there," Blaise says, a bit too bluntly for Draco's liking, but Draco knows he's right. The library door closes behind them with a quiet thunk. "Theo probably won't either, to be honest."

And that's probably right as well. Their footsteps echo in the empty corridor. Most of the other students should be tucked away in their houses right now; only seventh years--and now them, Draco supposes--are allowed out at this hour. Neither Draco or Blaise says anything as they take one of the staircases up to the next floor; a comfortable tiredness seeps into Draco's bones. This is why he came back, to immerse himself back into his studies so that he can get an apprenticeship on the Continent. To do that he needs advanced exams, and whilst Draco thinks he could have taken the Beauxbatons leaving exams, or the Ilvermorny ones in the States, he'd wanted to come back here to Hogwarts. Even after all that's happened here, even after all the ways in which he's betrayed this school of his, it still feels like home. Perhaps that's foolish of him, Draco thinks, and there are so many painful memories twisted up in these walls for him, but Hogwarts will always be part of him, will always be the place that comforted him, terrified him, made him feel like a king, made him feel like an outcast. He envies Theo and Daphne and Greg their ability to walk away from these corridors, to leave Hogwarts behind.

Draco's not certain he ever could.

They stop at the doorway to the Eighth Year dormitory. Sir Cadogan's half asleep in his portrait on the wall; Blaise rouses him with a sharp rap of his knuckles on Cadogan's frame.

"Wake up, you old idiot," Blaise says, but there's a tinge of fondness in his voice. It's hard to dislike the knight, even at his most inept.

Cadogan yawns, then blinks at them. "Password?" he asks through another yawn.
"Stargazy pie." Draco thinks perhaps choosing a password after dinner had been a bit ridiculous, but the others had rather liked Weasley's suggestion. Draco feels a damned fool saying it, but the door swings open and Cadogan waves them into the common room.

Pansy's sat on the sofa with Millie beside her, chewing on the tip of her quill. She looks up as they come in. "All right then?" Pansy asks, her gaze fixed on Draco, and he shrugs.

"Tired a bit." He wants to go over, wants to curl up beside her, his head on her shoulder, but Li and Brocklehurst are watching him, and Draco's no wish to make them think him weak. Instead, he gives her a small wave that makes her narrow her eyes at him, and he hurries towards his room, alone, Blaise taking the space on the sofa that Draco longed to claim as his own.

It's a stupid decision, Draco realises, when he walks in the room and Potter's there, sprawled on his bed with Weasley at his side, their books spread across the coverlet. Finch-Fletchley's sat across the room on the floor beneath the window, his back propped against one of the thick, heavy carved posts of his bed. His small fluffy Kneazle is curled up against his thigh, sleeping and kneading at his trousers.

"Hullo, Malfoy," Finch-Fletchley says, a bit too faux pleasantly for Draco's liking, but Draco nods at him before going over to his own bed, dropping his satchel beside it, along with his scrunched-up jumper. Weasley's watching him, sat up now, his eyes narrowed.

Draco doesn't care for the way he's looking at him. "See something you like, Weasel?" He pulls his hair back, fastens it at the nape of his neck with a hair tie. His gaze flicks towards Weasley. "I wasn't aware Granger let you off your leash."

"Ignore him," Potter says. He flips a page in his book. "You know he's just trying to get a rise out of you, Ron."

"He's a prat is what he is." Weasley's eyes follow Draco as he reaches for his pyjamas. "You know that, right, Malfoy?"

Draco doesn't answer at first. He's all too aware of Finch-Fletchley--Hogwarts' worst gossip--listening from the corner. Instead he toes off his boots and sets them aside at the foot of his bed, next to his flat leather trunk, the one that's accompanied him back and forth to Hogwarts since he was eleven. He pulls his shirttails out of his trousers, his stockinged foot slipping just a bit against the worn, polished wood floor. It's different, being up here in a tower instead of the dungeon. He's used to the chill of stone, taken away by warming charms, and squat, obsidian black hearths in each of the rooms. Draco'd only shared with Greg and Vince for the past few years; he's not certain he likes this large, bright room with its panelled wood walls and long, diamond-paned windows looking out over the Quidditch pitch, with its plush, circular rug in the middle of six wide beds, each one alternating deep purple hangings with dusky grey. There's a part of him that wonders if the others feel as out of place as he does, surrounded by these new colours, their Houses stripped away from them. Draco misses the Slytherin common room, the dark leather sofas and chairs where he'd held court among his peers, even the older students fawning over him for no other reason than he was a Malfoy.

And now they flinch and look away when his name's said, the way Finch-Fletchley's just done, the way most of his fellow students had done when he'd spoken in class today. They all hate him, Draco knows. Even the Slytherins are careful around him, looking about to see who's watching before they'll even say hello. Draco doesn't blame them. Not entirely.

"Malfoy," Weasley says sharply. "Stop ignoring me."

Draco tucks his pyjamas beneath his arm. "With hair that colour, it's nearly impossible." He knows
it's stupid of him to antagonise Weasley. It'll only push Potter further, and the rest of the castle will follow Potter's lead. After all, if Potter hates Draco publicly, then why can't everyone else? Still the two of them together, sprawled so easily across Potter's bed, knowing they rule the whole bloody school now, well, it makes Draco's skin prickle hot and angry, and he wants to hex them, to slash his wand through the air, watching blood bloom across the front of their shirts the way Potter had in sixth year when his Sectumsempra had struck Draco in the chest. Draco wonders what Potter would say now, if Draco unbuttoned his shirt, showed him the thick, ropy scars that twist across his pale skin, still pink and puckered nearly two years later.

And Weasley's standing now, his eyes sparking. He wants a fight, Draco realises, watching the way Weasley clenches his fists, bounces on the balls of his bare feet. He thinks about it, thinks about how satisfying it would feel to have his fist strike Weasley's jaw, to send him staggering backwards against Potter's bed, thinks about the return strike from Weasley, the thrill of Weasley's knuckles slamming into Draco's flesh, the sheer physical pain taking away the deep ache inside of him. Draco wants it, in a way, and he knows how bloody fucked up that is.

So Draco pulls himself back, folds that angry, vicious side of him as small as he can, then tucks it away with an exhale. He looks at Weasley. "What do you want me to say?"

"That you're a fucking prat," Weasley snaps. "And you shouldn't be here. Not after what you've done." His voice cracks on the last word. His shoulders are tight; he swallows, and his eyes are bright. Draco wonders if Weasley's thinking of his brother, whichever one of the twins had died. He doesn't remember; he'd never been able to tell them apart, if he's honest.

Draco just watches Weasley, silently.

"Say it," Weasley says, his voice rising. "You don't fucking deserve to be back here, you bastard. We all know it--"

"Ron," Potter says, and he's on his feet now, reaching for his friend.

"He's a sodding murderer, Harry," Weasley shouts, just as the door to their room opens. Boot and Goldstein are standing there, their arms filled with books, their eyes a bit wide. Weasley's still watching Draco. "If it wasn't for this fucker, Dumbledore wouldn't have died, the school wouldn't have gone down, we wouldn't have been on the bloody run all last year--" He draws in a ragged breath, and his eyes narrow at Draco. "My brother's dead because of you."

Draco looks away, his throat tight. He doesn't know how to answer that. He hadn't cast the curse that had killed the ginger twin, but Weasley's not wrong. He'd set the course of play into motion, hadn't he, the whole of his sixth year, then that night when the cabinet had finally worked and his aunt had come through with Greyback and the other Death Eaters on her heels. Draco still has nightmares about Dumbledore falling, about Severus standing at the edge of the tower, the wand in his hand still trembling. But that's a mild one, really. There are others that wake him up screaming, the memories of what the Dark Lord had done to Muggles and those Death Eaters that displeased him still twisting through Draco's sleep.

It's only then Draco realises he's twisting his pyjamas in his hands, coiling them tightly around his fingers. Potter's watching him, a furrow between his thick, dark eyebrows so very different from Draco's pale arches.

"Go," Potter says, his voice low. His hand's on Weasley's shoulder, and Draco knows he's holding Weasley back.

Draco swallows, then nods, and without a backwards glance he brushes past Boot and Goldstein in
the doorway. He hears Boot ask quietly, "What the hell was that?" Draco can't catch Potter's murmured reply.

The bath is empty when he goes in. Draco stands at the sinks, fists pressed against the cool porcelain counter, looking at himself in the framed mirror. His face is pale, but a bit splotchy across his cheeks. He breathes out, and the mirror clucks softly at him.

"Looking a bit peaked, aren't we, love?" it asks in a light voice, falling silent when Draco glares into it. The fierceness of his gaze makes him feel a bit better, a little more like himself. He hates this weakness, the way he has to roll over for Potter of all people. He doesn't know if he can keep doing it, keep lowering his eyes, turning away. He'd promised his mother he wouldn't get in trouble, that he wouldn't cock up this second chance he's been given. Draco knows how much she's done to keep him safe and out of Azkaban, to let him go back to Hogwarts this term.

Draco splashes cool water onto his face, dries it off with his sleeve. The roil in his stomach settles, but only a bit. It's enough to calm him down, to help his breathing settle. He hesitates, then watches himself in the mirror as he pulls off his tie, unbuttons his shirt. The scars across his chest stand out in the bright light of the bath. He thinks about taking a moment to stand beneath the showers, letting the hot water pound down against his pale skin until it's pink from the warmth. It's too early though. He doesn't want to risk one of the others walking in, catching sight of his Mark. At least in Slytherin he hadn't needed to hide it; it'd been a sign of power, of favour among the others. Draco had never flaunted it--he'd never been that unself-conscious about it--but he'd never thought about keeping it hidden. He slides his shirt off, takes a moment to look at his body, long and lanky and far too thin, to hear his mother tell it. His hipbones jut out above the waist of his trousers; his rib cage is pronounced. Draco hasn't eaten much over the summer. He hasn't been able to, not really, not with his worry about his parents' hearings and the possibility of his own. It hasn't done much for the dislike Draco has for his body, if he's honest. He envies Blaise and Potter and Weasley their solid chests and muscular arms. Draco feels odd and uncertain in his own skin, the proverbial ugly duckling, but Draco doesn't think he'll ever end up a swan.

His gaze drifts down to the Mark, a black stain across his forearm. He hates it now, hates the way it defines him, not only in the eyes of others, but his own as well. He wishes he could slice it from his skin, Diffindo it away or something like that. It wouldn't work. Draco knows enough about magical theory to realise that.

Quickly, he draws on his dark grey Falmouth Falcons t-shirt, then the long-sleeved, thin hoodie he only wears to cover his forearm. He swaps his trousers for pyjama bottoms, the flannel soft and warm against his skin, and he stands silently for a moment, the faint drip of the faucet into the sink and the quiet rasp of his breath echoing against the white and black tiled walls. For a moment, Draco wonders if he might sleep in here, curled in the corner of the showers, but that's ridiculous and he knows it. He glances back at himself in the mirror, takes in his shadowed eyes and angular cheeks. He's tired. It's been a long day. Draco pushes his pale blond hair back off his face, then lets it fall again, strands drifting down to brush his cheeks, his jaw. He closes his eyes, breathes out.

"Pull yourself together, you twat," Draco murmurs. He thinks about going out to the common room, throwing himself down beside Blaise and Pansy. They'd comfort him, he knows, but Draco doesn't want them to see how rattled he is. Not yet at least.

So Draco squares his shoulders and gathers up his clothes, wrapping his tie around his fist. When he walks back into the dormitory, it's silent. Potter and Weasley are gone--probably across the hall to Weasley's room, and the others are carefully ignoring Draco as he pads over to his bed, crawls in beneath the covers. He pulls the hangings closed around him, dimming out the lights flickering in the wall sconces; the comfort of darkness settles over him as he curls himself around a pillow. He can
hear the others moving about, hears their quiet murmurs when Potter comes back in, the door shut ting behind him with a soft thud. He wonders what they've said about him. What they're saying now. He presses his face against the pillow, tells himself he doesn't care.

He knows full well that's a fucking lie.

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It's after dinner on a Thursday evening, and Ginny's curled warmly against Harry's side in the Gryffindor common room, the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 7 spread across her lap. Harry wraps a lock of her hair around his finger, marvelling at the silkiness of it, before letting it slide loose. The fire's crackling in the hearth; it's starting to get colder at night, enough so that it's comfortable now to sit in front of the fire, on this familiar, overstuffed sofa with its worn red brocade upholstery.

Harry's been spending more time here the past fortnight than he has in his own common room, much less his dormitory. It seems more sensible, all things considered, and if he times it right, by the time he makes his way to his dormitory, Malfoy's already in bed, his hangings drawn shut around him. Harry doesn't like the awkwardness of sharing space with the git, but when he'd brought the idea of a room swap up to Ravi again, he'd just snorted in Harry's face and told him to get over himself. McGonagall hadn't been any better, if Harry's honest. She'd peered at him over the rims of her glasses and told him tartly that she had been the one to make the dormitory arrangements for the Eighth Years, and she expected him to be an example to the younger students of inter-house unity. Harry's no problem with inter-house unity, just with Malfoy as a sodding wanker, but when he'd pointed that out, McGonagall had just pursed her mouth at him, like she'd just sucked on one of Dumbledore's sherbet lemons, so Harry'd given up. And now he's here in the cosiness of Gryffindor Tower, feeling rather put out about the whole bloody thing.

Ginny flips a page in her book, frowning down at it. "I don't know how Flitwick expects us to read this much in one night," she says with a sigh. "I already know how to cast Aguamenti; we learnt it last term. Who cares about breaking down the theory behind it?"

"It's all rubbish." Harry pulls the book from her lap and closes it, tossing it down to the other end of the sofa. He leans in and kisses her, his hand settling on the warmth of her thigh, his fingers rubbing small circles across the soft cotton of her joggers. When he pulls back, Ginny's smiling up at him a bit.

"Nice one, Potter," she murmurs, and she fiddles with the folds of his worn t-shirt. "Good thing my brother's not in here."

Harry snorts. "He's probably off with Hermione, trying to convince her to shag in the choir classroom." Ginny quirks an eyebrow at him, and Harry adds, "He likes the rug in there. Says it's better for his knees."

Ginny wrinkles her nose. "Merlin, Harry. There are mental images I really don't need about Ron."

"And ones he'd probably rather not have about you," Harry says. He drags his fingertips up her thigh, over the curve of her hip, dipping one into the waistband of her joggers. "I wouldn't mind testing out the Charms classroom tonight, if you're up for it." He leans in again, nuzzles the side of her throat.

"I've work to do." Ginny pulls away, and Harry frowns as she sits up, tugs the hem of her Holyhead Harpies t-shirt back down. She's not looking at him, not really. "Besides, I'm not feeling it, soz. I'm due for my period."
She's not; Harry knows that. Ginny'd had it just before they'd left for Hogwarts a fortnight ago; Harry'd spent the whole train ride up rubbing her lower back as she'd curled up against him, the potion she'd taken for her period pain making her a bit drowsy. "Oh," he says. He knows better than to argue, but he can't help saying, "It's just you haven't really wanted to…" He hesitates. "You know."

"Shag," Ginny says bluntly, and Harry thinks this isn't going to go well, but he shrugs.

"It's been--"

"Four days." Ginny's voice is soft but sharp. "Sunday night, Harry, or have you forgotten?" She's not looking at him; she reaches for her Charms text. "And you've pushed for sex every bloody night this week."

Harry doesn't think that's true. "Gin, I haven't--"

The look she turns on him is heated, angry, but there's a bit of dampness at the corners of her eyes, a rising flush on her cheeks. "You have, Harry." She draws in a deep breath. "All you want to do right now is shag because it means you don't have to think about being back here. I'm not an idiot, but you know, maybe I have my own problems with being here this term--" Her voice cracks a bit, and she looks away. She swallows, and when she bends her head, her hair falls over her cheek, hiding her face from Harry. He doesn't like not being able to see her; it makes him anxious about the two of them, and Harry can't deal with the way his chest tightens, his breath catches in the back of his throat, raw and hot.

"It's not like that," Harry says quietly, but he thinks maybe it is. He doesn't want to admit it though. Doesn't want to say that he has moments, walking down the corridors that still show curse burns and spell damage in their stone walls and wooden floors, when he wants to run away, the panic welling up inside of him again. Hermione's had to catch his hand, help him count off his breaths until the fear dissipates. He tries to keep those moments from Ginny; he's told Ron he can't say anything to her about them. She's dealing with so much herself. She'd loved Fred madly; he'd been her favourite brother, the one who could always cheer her when she was feeling glum, who listened to her when no one else in her family would. Losing Fred's been hard for Ginny. Harry knows that. He reaches for her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull away.

"We don't really talk." Ginny lets Harry turn her palm over, trace a fingertip along the creases there. "I mean, we never have, have we? Not about the important stuff, but I reckon you have Ron and Hermione for that. Not me." She looks up at him. "I like shagging you, Harry, but…"

There's so much contained in the silence that stretches out between them. Harry's chest clenches, tightens again. "Don't," Harry says after a moment, and he can barely get the word out. He tries to breathe. It's hard. "Don't break up with me." His voice rasps against his throat. His fingers close around Ginny's, wide and tanned against the freckled paleness of hers.

Ginny's quiet for a long moment. She exhales, then rubs her thumb over his. "I'm not, Harry," she says, but he can hear the waver of self-doubt behind the words. "But I don't want to be the person you go to when you don't want to think." She glances over at him, and something in her face shifts, hardens a bit. "I'm better than that."

"I know," Harry says. He looks down at their entwined fingers. He doesn't know what he'd do if he lost Ginny. Not after everyone else who's left him. His parents. Sirius. Remus. The thought of her walking away, leaving him alone with those memories threatening to swallow him, sends tendrils of dread curling through his belly. He can't go through that. "I'm sorry," he says, and when he glances back up at Ginny, her face softens.
"Oh, Harry, you idiot." Ginny reaches out, brushes his hair back from his forehead. "You drive me mental sometimes, but I do care about you."

She doesn't say she loves him. She never has, even when Harry's said it to her. Harry pretends it doesn't matter, but it does, a bit, especially when he sees how easily Hermione and Ron say it. Harry wants that, wants someone to look at him the way they look at each other, and he'd thought that person would be Ginny. It'd seemed so easy in May when they'd fallen back together, both of them shagging furtively in Ginny's bedroom, late at night, their bodies shuddering together as they'd tried to keep from waking anyone. Afterwards, they'd lain together on her narrow bed, curled around each other, not speaking, just breathing, just feeling each other's presence, solid and safe and warm, until Harry'd had to creep back down the hall to Ron's bedroom before dawn. He thinks Ron had known where he was, but they'd never talked about it. And then Harry had moved back to Grimmauld Place, and Ginny had come by from time to time, telling her mum she was going to Luna's for the night.

Harry knows Ginny's right. They don't talk; they just fuck, and Harry'd thought that was what she wanted as well, to let their bodies say what they need to. Harry doesn't want to talk about what they've been through; he just wants to not feel anything any longer. It'd been bad enough with the Mind Healers in St Mungo's this past July, all of them so concerned, wanting to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling when the panic overtook him. Harry thinks they're all bloody stupid, but he'd told them just enough to get the calming potions he needs.

Not that he takes them the way he should.

They sit there for a long moment, looking at each other, and then Ginny sighs. "Look," she says gently. "I have to finish my essay for History of Magic tonight." She pulls her hand away. "And I don't want to have a row right now, so I'm going to go upstairs, yeah?"

Harry wants to protest, but it won't do any good. He's dated Ginny long enough to recognise that stubborn set of her jaw. So he just shrugs, letting her lean in to press a quick, soft kiss against his lips. She stands, and Harry watches the way her joggers slide down her narrow hips. Ginny's muscular and athletic, and she's a better Quidditch player than he'll ever be. Harry has no doubt the scouts will be sniffing around her matches this term, the way they had during Oliver Wood's seventh year. He's proud of Gin, wants her to do well, to be happy. He's just not sure that wish for her future includes him any longer.

"Write your essay," Harry says, a bit gruffly, and Ginny touches his cheek, gives him a faint smile. "You'll survive on your own for a night," she says. Harry's not so sure.

He sinks into the sofa as she leaves, his eyes following the slight swing of her arse as she walks towards the staircase going up to the girls' dormitories. Harry knows he can stay here as long as he wants. The other Gryffindors won't mind; he's still one of theirs, whatever McGonagall might say.

Aamir Loonat takes the armchair nearest to the hearth, setting a stack of books on the floor. He picks the first one up, then glances over at Harry. "Rough day, Harr?" he asks easily, and Harry exhales, stretching his legs out along the sofa.

"Something like that," Harry says. He ought to be working himself. He has ten inches due to Ravi tomorrow on the uses of fire seed in potionbrewing. Harry doesn't care. He'd rather be here, curled up in the comfort of Gryffindor Tower. He feels safe in the circle of this common room, with its faded red curtains, pulled back on one side, and its tapestries and battered bookcases, and its soft, squishy armchairs scattered around thick red rugs. This was his home for six years, and he misses it. Gryffindor was what he wanted to come back for, not the uneasy silence of the Eighth Year common
room, none of them quite certain how to interact with each other, all of them still clinging to the tatters of their House identities. Harry thinks McGonagall's mad, really, trying to push them all together. He doesn't have anything in common with Terry and Tony, or Justin for that matter. And then there's Malfoy.

And that's not something Harry wants to think about, Malfoy and the way he hides himself away, as if he's wary of them all. Even Parkinson and Zabini and Bulstrode are more social; they sit together in the common room in the evenings, but Malfoy's seldom with them. Harry'd be suspicious, but he knows where Malfoy squirrels himself away, deep in the stacks of the library or behind the hangings on his bed. He doesn't know what Malfoy was thinking, coming back to Hogwarts like this. He ought to have known he'd be despised, so it's his own damned fault, really.

Except Harry feels a little sorry for the git, and he doesn't like that. Not one bloody bit.

Harry pulls the thick, gold crocheted blanket from the back of the sofa and wraps himself in it. Sod Malfoy. If he wants to skulk around, feeling sorry for himself, Harry doesn't give a fuck. He really doesn't.

The fire crackles and pops in the hearth, and Aamir's quill scratches softly against his parchment as he takes notes on his reading. Harry tells himself this is good, that everything's going to be fine, that he and Gin are going to make it through whatever this is between them, that this year will go well. It's just he's not certain any of that's true, is he?

The panic starts to well up again, seeping through Harry's body, tensing his muscles. He closes his eyes, breathes, tries to fight it off, to push it away. Pull it together, Potter, he thinks.

"Harry?" Aamir says, and when Harry opens his eyes again, Aamir's there, a worried frown between his brows. "Are you all right?"

It takes Harry a moment, but he nods. The panic's starting to fade, at least a little. He gives Aamir a small smile as he pushes himself up, off the sofa. "I'm fine," he says, but his legs are a little wobbly, and Aamir's frown deepens. "Really," Harry adds. "Just tired." It's the excuse he's been giving all summer, the one Molly and Arthur never really believed but let him use. "I think I need a nap, yeah?"

"Yeah," Aamir says, but the look he gives Harry is unconvinced.

Harry walks towards the door, somehow managing to keep his limbs working properly, and when he steps through, the Fat Lady eyes him. "Looking a bit rough there, love," she says. The roses in her hair tremble a bit. "Anything I should be worried about?"

"Not a thing," Harry says, and he meets her gaze evenly. "I'm brill."

As the door swings shut behind him, Harry catches a glimpse of Aamir, still watching him from the hearth.

"I'm brill," Harry says again, letting his voice rise a bit, and the Fat Lady clucks softly at him.

"Of course you are, ducky," she says, but the look on her face is the same as Aamir's, as if Harry's an Erumpent about to blow. It infuriates him. Frightens him. Makes him want to punch his fist right through the canvas of her portrait.

Instead Harry turns on his heel and strides away.
He's fine, he tells himself. He bloody well has to be.

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Draco's tired. He hasn't really slept well for the past few days. He's not certain why, but he feels as if the bloody sword of Damocles is dangling over his head, certain to fall at any moment. There's no rationale for that, of course. He's being neurotic, as Pansy points out on a regular basis. She's walking beside him now, nattering on about something Draco's not bothering to pay attention to, when Iain Claverdon, one of the sixth--no--seventh-year Gryffindors, tall and brawny and bloody well thicker than Vince on his worst days, slams into Draco, knocking him into the wall just outside the Defence of Dark Arts classroom.

"Wanker," Claverdon says, with a sneer on his stupid face. Draco pushes himself up only to have Claverdon shove him again, sending Draco's satchel flying to the floor in a flurry of spilt books and papers. Draco's inkwell shatters against the wall in an arc of broken glass and black ink that spatters against the white sleeve of Draco's shirt and makes Pansy shriek, more in irritation than anything, Draco thinks.

Draco straightens himself. His shoulder's aching, just at the joint where it struck the wall. "Fuck off, you halfwit twat." He's tired of this, tired of being pushed around by imbecilic bastards like Claverdon and his pack of feral Gryffindors. Not even Potter and his lot are as vicious as this bunch.

"What'd you call me?" Claverdon turns back; his sandy blond hair's falling over his forehead, his mouth's twisted down into a frown.

Draco's about to answer, despite the violent look on Claverdon's face and his obvious willingness to knock Draco about. He's not good at holding his tongue, all things considered. He'd rather have the bruises than fawn and scrape like his father had the past year. Pansy's at his side, murmuring a low Draco. Pans is nothing if not a survivor, Draco knows, but he also knows she'll save herself first. It's one of the things he loves best about her.

"You've done enough, Claverdon." Potter's voice behind Draco is quiet but commanding, sending a shiver of discomfort through Draco. Claverdon looks up, resembling nothing so much as a puppy that's been called to heel. The bloody Golden Trio, as the Prophet's taken to calling them over the summer, much to Draco's disgust, are standing in the corridor with their satchels over their chests, Potter slouching, his hands in his pockets, Weasley sneering at his side with what Draco's fairly certain is a love bite on his neck, Granger prim as ever, although clearly she's the biter. Draco's a bit bitterly amused at that last thought, the realisation that the wizarding world's saviours are human as well, no matter how they've been lionised in the press.

Claverdon steps close to Draco, suddenly violating his space, and Draco doesn't flinch. Much. Claverdon snaps his teeth Draco's way, but he leaves, walking into the Defence classroom without striking or shoving Draco, and, frankly, Draco counts that as a win. Potter and his minions go into the room next, Potter's eyes passing over him for a moment. He looks perhaps less disgusted than usual, but Draco can't be sure. Unlike the rest of the school, Draco's not exactly trying to get the attention of the Saviour. He's never had trouble with that before, and it's not all it's cracked up to be, thanks ever so.

"Draco, you've got to be more careful." Pansy's voice is terse, annoyed. "They could make a lot of trouble for you, and it's not like you're invulnerable."

Draco favours her with a slow, sharp smile. "Who's to say I don't like getting beaten up by brawny idiots?"
Pansy swings her satchel, smacking him in the arse. "Pervert."

He shrugs, acknowledging her point, and she suppresses a laugh, trying to frown at him but failing. Draco's done with tyranny and living under fear. He's promised himself that this year he'll bend his knee to no one, that he'll live true to his own principles. It's a bit exciting, and the freedom makes his stomach drop if he's honest.

When they go inside the classroom, Pansy and Draco are the last to arrive. They drop their satchels and join the fringes of the group bunched loosely around a central warded duelling area in the middle of the room. There are several such areas marked out with floor charms and some sort of protective spell tracery, as well as targets set up against the far wall. There are no desks to be seen today, which surprises Draco. Omolade's been lecturing during class for the past few weeks. The room has been recently scoured and is almost spotless--the warding spells also appear freshly cast and intricate. A window is open at the back of the tall room, and the cool autumn air is bracing.

"Mr Malfoy and Miss Parkinson." Professor Omolade's voice is mocking, but not unkind. "Please do try to be punctual--I'm sure you hate detention as much as I hate supervising it."

Pansy ducks her head, and Draco says, "Sorry, Professor." He's surprised to find he genuinely means it.

"We're going to continue working on basics today, albeit in a far less theoretical manner than we have been, as I know the Defence training at Hogwarts has not been consistent in recent years." Professor Omolade pauses, purses her lips. "We'll be more disciplined in the future about technique, but today I'd like to take it out of the realm of theory and see what you're already able to put into practise."

She pairs them up, watching a few pairs at a time and then switching out partners. Draco's been given a seventh year Hufflepuff--Garitt Threston, as he introduces himself--as his duelling partner. Draco tries to be decent about it, but he easily blocks Threston's first attack and drops him with a body bind. Luckily the floor is well-cushioned, but it can't be pleasant.

Omolade nods. "All right, Malfoy. You leave an enormous hole on your left and your casting could be swifter. You're lucky Mr Threston is just warming up."

She undoes the bind on Threston and helps him up, and then encourages them to rejoin. They duel twice, Draco keeping the upper hand both times. After Threston nearly burns off a lock of his hair, Draco sends him down to the floor with a Leg-Locker curse.

Omolade nods. "Mr Threston, good momentum. I think you should work on your offensive spells for a bit." She points him over to the far side of the room where students are attempting to strike a duelling target with a precise cast of the Fyre jinx, taking turns sending small, flaming spell charges across a ten-metre distance.

"Mr Malfoy, over here." Professor Omolade moves surprisingly swiftly, and already seems to be at least halfway across the room. "You're not half-bad at defensive work, but you really need to work on your follow-through."

Draco's stomach sinks when he realises she's pairing him up with Potter. Potter runs his hands through his hair, setting his loose curls awry. Draco really doesn't want to go through this, but he has no choice, he supposes. He sizes up his opponent, the jeans slung low on Potter's hips, the rumpled green jumper that make his eyes look like bottle glass, the shoulders broader than Draco remembers. He swallows, his mouth suddenly dry.
"Time to engage, Mr Malfoy." Professor Omolade's voice is cool.

Draco steps into the ring, then nods. "Potter."

"Malfoy." Potter's facial expression is blank, his weight balanced on the balls of his feet. His overall appearance is unconcerned, but there's something jittery about his body language to Draco's eye. He's weaving little circles with his wand, waiting for the beginning of the duel with impatience.

Sending a plea to the ghost of Snape--wherever he may be--that this not be hideously embarrassing, Draco takes a duelling stance as Omolade calls start.

Potter's quick, jets of color flying from his wand in thick bursts. He sends a Jelly Legs and a Langlock in short succession and puts Draco on the defensive immediately. Draco gets his Protegos in place in time, but he's moving oddly out of synch, like he's underwater observing himself and reacting a second too late. Somewhere it's surreal to be here, back at school, as if nothing had happened, to be duelling Potter for play. Draco also thinks it's odd to be under a teacher's eyes again and trying not to bring deadly force after what they've weathered, although if he's honest he's mostly trying not to get hurt as usual. As the force of Potter's magic buffets him in waves, spells landing perilously close, the scars on Draco's chest hurt sympathetically as if recalling the last time they'd faced each other with wands drawn. Draco's body remembers the bleeding and Severus' desperation, as much as his mind would rather forget.

On the next exchange, Draco barely wards off an Arresto Momentum and manages to fire off a piss-poor Stupefy that goes wide and fizzles somewhere to Potter's left.

"Focus, Mr Malfoy," Omolade's voice is distant, sharp. She's a tall, brooding presence at the corner of his eye, and he can feel the power in her stance from here. Severus must have liked her, he thinks, and his eyes are strangely wet at the idea.

To recover, Draco fires a jet of sparks from a Relashio, both to surprise Potter and also to give himself time to think. Then he manages to catch Potter with the edge of a Knock-Back Jinx. Neither of them are expecting the spell to make contact, and whilst Draco's enjoying watching Potter stagger and imagining how great it would be to hit him with something harder, Potter miraculously recovers his footing. He effects a counterspell, and then fires off a Petrificus at Draco that hits him dead center in the chest. Draco barely has time to curse as his body freezes up and then tips backwards to the floor.

"Mobilicorpus." Potter's quick reaction keeps Draco from hitting the ground. Draco slides sideways, stomach lurching, and then Omolade settles him down lightly, freeing him from the effect of the spell. Draco lies on the ground for a moment, gathering his bearings and quelling his nausea.

Once she's established Draco's fine, Omolade turns to Potter, who's biting his lip and looking at Draco on the floor. "Well done, Mr Potter. You're going to need to work on the precision and the modulation of your magic, but there's nothing wrong with your speed or the intensity of your cast."

Draco stands up, rubbing his twitching thigh muscle. He hates Petrificus spells. They always leave him sore and furious, and the Mobilicorpus made him motion sick. Potter can't know how much Draco hates the powerlessness of the spell, but it's just like the speccy git to cast the worst thing possible. He's a knack for that, after all, Draco thinks bitterly, even if it's out of pure idiocy.

"Are you okay for another round?" Omolade asks, sizing Draco up. "We haven't too much time left if you'd prefer to work on a technical."

"No, I can do it." Draco's refusing to work with the others out of pride, more than anything else.
Omolade waves a hand, and he steps back into the ring with Potter. She goes off to check on Weasley who's setting something on fire with Threston that doesn't look like part of the lesson plan.

"You don't have to," Potter says, a frown across his face, recalling Draco's attention to the ring. "I hit you pretty hard."

Draco's temper flares and he snaps. "For Merlin's sake, Potter. You've done far worse to me in the past." When Potter's face is blank, Draco is even more furious. "Or don't you recall what a Sectumsempra looks like up close? Because I've never been able to forget."

The grimace of pain and ashen, haunted look on Potter's face is more satisfying to Draco at the moment than breaking Potter's nose, although he really wants to do that again too.

"I don't need you to fight off Claverdon, either." Draco pauses, weighing his words carefully. "I know where your sympathies lie. It's fine."

"You know nothing about me," Potter spits out in return, and the vehemence of his tone surprises Draco.

In the corner, Omolade is chastising Ron and Threston is trying to patch together the sparring dummy they'd managed to singe pretty well. Over near the door, Claverdon and his thuggish friends are taking advantage of the distraction, using Mobilicorpus behind Omolade's back to hit people with random satchels. Draco sees his own go flying across the room, coming close to striking Pansy but dropping at the last moment.

"Detention, Mr Claverdon," Omolade says, turning around. "I hear Mr Filch is having trouble with the dungeon's plumbing. I know he'll appreciate the help." Claverdon has a mutinous look on his face, and Omolade actually smiles at him, winning Draco's undying admiration. The Gryffindor mutters something about Slytherins under his breath as he skulks off meatiy with his cronies, and Professor Omolade pretends not to hear.

Draco looks back at Potter, a satisfy quiver of hope in his heart. "And that's where you're wrong, Potter." As Omolade calls time for everyone, he says, "I know everything about you."

Stalking off, Draco has a glorious sense of self-righteousness, followed by a crippling sense of self-doubt. Had he really won that exchange with Potter? He's not entirely sure.

Sunk in thought, he rejoins Pansy, retrieving his satchel. Maybe there'll be a good pudding for lunch that'll help him stop worrying about Potter. One thing's for certain--he needs to get better at duelling. And watch his back for Claverdon and his ilk.
Chapter 2

*Look, I don't mean to frustrate,*
*But I always make the same mistakes.*
*Yeah, I always make the same mistakes,*
*'Cause I'm bad at love.*
---*Bad At Love, Halsey*

By mid-October, Harry's fallen into the familiar rhythm of school again. It's not entirely comfortable, and it feels a bit off, like wearing a t-shirt that's just a little too tight across the shoulders. Still, there's a steadiness to the flow of classes and homework that Harry finds both stressful and soothing.

The only class he's struggling in is Potions, and, really, that's to be expected, Harry thinks. It'll click back in soon enough; Harry's been spending extra time with Hermione going over his potions readings, trying to understand the theory again. He half-wishes he had Snape's old textbook back, but he's fairly certain it was destroyed when the Fiendfyre burnt through the Room of Requirement. Sometimes he thinks about going back to find the Room, but when he walks past the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy on the seventh floor, the wall where the door once appeared stays blank. Empty. Wherever the Room's gone to, it doesn't want to be found. Not yet at least.

So Harry tries to make his way through *Moste Potente Potions*, with Hermione's help, and he manages to not explode his potions in class, but Ravi still gives him a disappointed look each time Harry turns in a phial at the end of double Potions. Harry doesn't really know what else he can do. He's never been a spectacular student, not like Hermione, but he does his best. Mostly.

Luna comes up to him just before dinner on Sunday, when Harry's sat out alone on the lawn beneath one of the oak trees, his Potions book on his lap, bright orange leaves drifting down from the branches and settling on the page before Harry brushes them away. It's crisp and cool, and Harry has a blue scarf knitted by Molly Weasley wrapped around his throat, an old, too-large-but-cosy brown cardigan that he'd nicked from Ron half-hanging off one shoulder, showing the neck of his white t-shirt, the stretched-out sleeves of the cardigan coming down nearly to his knuckles. His jeans are worn and frayed and comfortable, a hole just starting to form over his knee, and his trainers are unlaced high-tops, the same faded navy as the scarf.

"Hullo, Harry," Luna says as she drops down next to him, her Charms book clutched tight in her hands. She's wearing a pale pink jumper that reaches down to her knees and thick black woolen tights tucked into her black boots. "May I read with you?"

"Sure." Harry just shrugs. He doesn't mind Luna sitting with him; he finds her oddly calming. Besides, Ron and Hermione are off in the Herbology greenhouses, doing Merlin only knows what. Harry hopes Neville's not in there being traumatised whilst trying to get actual work done. "Have you seen Gin around?" he asks. They'd had an argument after lunch, the two of them, and Harry doesn't even know what it was about any longer. Something he'd done that hadn't been enough, he supposes. That's what it's been off and on for the past month. Harry can't seem to do anything right, and it's irking him.

"She needs some time," Luna says, opening her book. She flips through the pages, her blonde curls falling over her cheek. "You know Ginny. She doesn't mean half of what she says. She's grieving."

And that makes Harry wonder what Ginny's told Luna. He knows better than to ask; Luna doesn't share her friends' confidences. Besides, Harry doesn't want to put her in the middle of him and Gin. So he just settles back against the tree trunk again and sighs, *Moste Potente Potions* propped up
against his knees. "I know," is all Harry says. He just wonders how long he and Ginny are going to have these endless arguments. He knows it's his fault, mostly, knows that he's the one who's pushing everyone away. It's hard not to, though, being back here at Hogwarts. It sneaks up on him, his own grief, catches him unawares, at the moment he least expects it.

It had today. Harry doesn't know why. He and Gin had been walking around the lake, hand in hand, and then Harry had glanced over towards the forest, and the thick darkness of it all had taken his breath away, made him think of that night, of how alone and lost he'd felt, of how he'd taken on the weight of the world in those moments, knowing he was walking to his death.

Ginny doesn't understand that. She can't, and it frustrates her. Harry doesn't know how to explain it. The words get twisted up inside of him, frustrating them both until Harry doesn't want to talk, doesn't want to think. Ginny hates that. Harry can't entirely blame her.

They're quiet for a long moment, Luna and Harry, until Luna looks up from her book, frowning across the lawn at Malfoy, who's stretched out across the dying grass, a book in front of him, Parkinson sitting primly beside him. Harry doesn't know why he's so aware of Malfoy; he supposes it's second nature now to be wary of where the git is at all times. And, really, Harry needs to keep an eye on him, to keep idiots like Claverdon away because Malfoy's too bloody stupid to do that himself. Harry doesn't know what's got into Malfoy this term, but the bastard doesn't seem to give a damn any more, about anything, really.

Harry hates that he worries a bit about that. Fucking Malfoy. He glances back down at his Potions text, the words swimming in front of him. He wants to throw the book aside. His head aches; his shoulders feel tight and tense.

"Draco's odd, isn't he?" Luna asks, her voice light. She chews on her bottom lip. "I ought to be angry at him, I think, but I'm not." She's silent for a moment, and then she looks over at Harry. "He was kind in his own way when I was trapped in his dungeons. He couldn't let me out, but he brought me food, talked to me some." Luna glances back at Malfoy. "I don't think it's just because we're cousins."

And that surprises Harry. "You and Malfoy?"

Luna shrugs. "His grandfather's sister was my father's mother. So I suppose it's our fathers who are cousins, really." She gives Harry a curious look. "The old wizarding families tend to be interrelated. Perhaps a bit too much at times." Her gaze slides back across the lawn. "But I don't think Draco's quite the horrible person people'd like him to be. Do you?"

"He's no angel, Luna," Harry says. He knows the things Malfoy's done, and he's not ready to forgive him for any of it, even if Luna gives him that slightly disappointed look of hers. Besides, Harry's had to suffer through having the bastard in four of his five classes the past few weeks. Only Charms is safe; Malfoy's taking Alchemy and Ancient Runes instead. And then there's the issue of sharing a dormitory. Harry can't be free of Malfoy, or at least the shadow of him, not unless Harry's hidden himself away in Gryffindor Tower, and that's starting to irritate Ginny. It's almost as if she doesn't want to spend time with him, Harry thinks.

Harry doesn't want to think about Malfoy right now; it's a relief when Malfoy gets up, brushes his jeans off, and heads back up to the castle. Harry's gaze follows him, caught by the bright shine of Malfoy's hair in the sunlight, the way Malfoy's black jumper clings to his shoulders, the long stretch of Malfoy's legs in faded denim--and when did Malfoy start wearing Muggle clothes like that, Harry wonders. He thinks the jeans must be Zabini's; Harry knows he's seen Zabini in ones like them, but Harry's half-envious of how they hang on Malfoy's hips, of how a group of sixth-year Hufflepuffs turn to watch Malfoy walk past, their eyes wide and appreciative.
With a sigh, Harry goes back to his Potions reading. It takes him twenty minutes to get through one
paragraph, and he slams the book closed. "I'm going back in," he tells Luna, and she blinks up at
him, a bit owlishly, as she nods. She doesn't bother to come with him, and Harry's glad. He needs a
bit of time alone, he thinks. The dormitory will be empty; Terry'll be off with Lisa, Justin spends
most of Sunday afternoons in the Hufflepuff common room, and Tony'll be in the library. Malfoy's
never in the room, so Harry might actually have a chance for a wank and a nap, perhaps, which
would be bloody brill.

Sure enough, when he makes it to the common room it's mostly abandoned. Only Zabini's slouched
on a sofa, dozing beneath a spread of Transfiguration notes, and Sue Li and Isobel Macdougal have
their heads together in the corner, both of them working on an Arithmancy problem. None of them
pay any attention to Harry as he slips upstairs to his room. No one's there. Harry throws his satchel
on his bed, then shrugs out of his cardigan, draping it over the edge of his trunk. He runs his hands
through his hair, stretches a bit. Late afternoon sun's filtering through the diamond-paned windows,
dust mites gleaming rosy-gold in the air as the shadows stretch across the floor. Harry glances at the
clock. It's only half-four. Dinner's not for another forty-five minutes at the earliest.

Harry heads to the toilets for a quick slash. When he pushes the door open, he hears the faint hiss of
water from the shower, and he frowns. This might put a crimp in his plans for a quick tug, he thinks,
and that irritates him. It's hard enough to get privacy when you're sharing space with four other
blokes, one of whom you despise.

Still, Harry draws up short when he turns the corner and catches sight of a long, pale back beneath a
fall of water, the slick curve of an arsecheek, the wet slide of long fingers through shoulder-length
hair.

It's not that he hasn't ever seen a naked bloke before. Harry's lived in a dormitory long enough to be
used to the easy nudity that comes with cohabitation. But there's a difference between seeing Ron's
freckled arse in the shower and the alabaster perfection of Malfoy's body, long and lean and lanky.
There's a precise elegance in the way Malfoy moves beneath the spray of the shower, lifting his face
into it, his eyes closed, his body stretched. And then Malfoy shifts, turning just a bit to the side to
rinse his hair, and Harry gets a glimpse of Malfoy's prick, slightly swollen and pink, the long curve
of it nestled against darker blond curls, and Harry takes a step back, his breath catching, warmth
suffusing his cheeks.

Still, Harry can't look away, not yet. Not even when Malfoy reaches down, his fingers running
lightly over his cock, smoothing back the bit of foreskin until the very tip of his head pokes through.
Water drips from it, rolls over the plush pinkness, across the slit that Malfoy teases open with a
fingertip. He sighs softly, rolls his shoulders back, strokes his fingers down along his shaft, his
foreskin sliding back further.

Harry's never seen anyone else wank. He's heard it sometimes; you can't share a room with other
blokes and not catch the soft sighs and quiet huffs from behind closed hangings. But Malfoy looks
brilliant like this, the way his arse shifts as he pulls at his prick, almost languorous in his movements,
the way the muscles of his back tighten as he rocks forward into his own touch. Harry knows he
should look away, knows he should walk out, knows that if Malfoy turns to face him, Harry has
nowhere to hide. He feels uncertain, uncomfortable, but he can't stop watching as Malfoy's fingers
move a bit faster, coaxing his cock to curve into his palm, fattening up with each steady stroke.

It's all Harry can do not to press his own hand against the flies of his jeans. He remembers Dudley
and his friends, the summer before all hell had broken loose, talking about porn they'd seen, the way
it'd made them hard. Harry hadn't quite understood back then, but standing here, with Malfoy
wanking himself in front of Harry, he thinks he does now. His body's reacting to Malfoy's pleasure,
to the way Malfoy's head falls back a bit, his throat long and pale beneath the steady rush of hot water, steam curling around Malfoy's skin, pinkening it.

Malfoy's bloody beautiful, Harry thinks, and that realisation feels strange, disturbing, more than a bit awkward. Harry tries to look away, his throat dry, his body taut. He shouldn't be watching this, he knows that. Malfoy would kill him, with good cause. But Harry feels as if he's on fire, his breath coming in uneven huffs, and his whole body's buzzing, sharp and fast and almost overwhelming in the burn of it all.

And then Malfoy shifts again, just enough for Harry to catch a glimpse of curving black ink against the pale skin of his forearm, and a ropy pink scar that crosses one shoulder, disappearing down over Malfoy's chest. Harry stills, his gaze going to the Mark on Malfoy's left arm. He can barely see it, but he knows it's there, and Harry stumbles back, hitting the wall behind him, a door to a toilet stall slamming open.

Malfoy stills. Looks up. Harry's glad that he's hidden from view. He doesn't breathe, doesn't move.

"Who's there?" Malfoy calls out, and Harry doesn't wait for the shower to shut off, for Malfoy to fumble for his towel. He slides out of the toilets, as quietly as possible, and he can hear Malfoy behind him, the rattle of the shower, the slap of Malfoy's bare feet against tile. Harry wishes he had his Invisibility Cloak with him, wishes it weren't tucked in the depths of his trunk, wishes he could wrap himself in it and disappear. Instead, he hurries through the common room, the others still ignoring him, Zabini still sleeping on the sofa. Harry's hands are shaking as he pushes open the door, steps out into the cool, shadowed corridor. He doesn't think; he just walks until he finds himself on the steps of the Astronomy Tower.

Halfway up, Harry stops, sits. He closes his eyes and exhales, his mind spinning about, his body aching, almost shuddering, his stomach twisting with it all. This isn't like him, he thinks. There's something wrong. For a wild moment, he wonders if Malfoy's done something to him, put him under some sort of spell, but that's madness, he realises. Malfoy's no reason to do that. Not even to humiliate Harry.

His skin feels hot and prickly. Harry wants to pull open his flies, to take his prick out and jerk until he's spattering spunk across the stone wall. He tells himself it's because Gin's been putting him off and he's too bloody randy, but deep down inside Harry knows that's not all of it. If he closes his eyes, he can still see water running down that slick swathe of Malfoy's pale skin, the knobby bumps of Malfoy's spine, the faint curve of Malfoy's arse. Harry's never wished more that the boys had the same showers as the girls, individual and hidden away behind a curtain instead of the long, tiled wall with the line of shower heads.

And then Harry thinks of the stain of the Dark Mark across Malfoy's forearm. He wasn't meant to see that, he knows, and the swell of his prick against the denim of his jeans goes down a bit. It's not as if Harry didn't know it was there; Narcissa Malfoy had admitted her son had taken the Mark. Against his will, she'd said to the Wizengamot prosecutors when she was angling to keep Malfoy out of the hearings. No one had believed her, but they hadn't been able to move forward on some of the other cases against known Death Eaters without her testimony. So Malfoy'd been left out of the official record of Death Eaters.

No wonder he showers when he thinks everyone else is out of the dormitory. Harry runs a hand through his hair, curling in on himself, his knees nearly at his chest. The pounding of his heart is starting to slow; his cock's starting to wilt. He breathes out, a slow, soft sigh that's only a bit wobbly. It was just unexpected, he tells himself, seeing Malfoy like that. A natural reaction of the body to watching someone wank. He remembers the times he's touched himself in the middle of the night,
quietly, listening to Ron coming in the bed beside his. It's normal to get turned on by things like that. He's bloody eighteen, for Merlin's sake. A good stiff wind makes him want to thrust his hips forward.

This doesn't mean anything.

Harry's shoulders relax. Besides, he only watched Malfoy wank. It's not as if he did it with him. That's not weird, and it doesn't make him...you know. Bent, his mind whispers, and Harry shoves the thought away, frowning. That's the sort of thing Dudders had shouted at his friends, laughing when they sputtered and came after Dudley, fists swinging. No one wanted to be that, and Harry isn't. He likes fucking Ginny. Even if it's a bit awkward and sloppy--they're teenagers. It's supposed to be, yeah? A quick fumble and fuck, Harry holding himself over Ginny, moving between her thighs, his teeth nipping at Ginny's throat as his prick sinks into the soft warmth of her cunt. Ginny'd never complained, not really, and if Harry didn't get her off whilst he was thrusting into her, well, he'd finger her afterwards until she was writhing against him, her folds slick and wet and hot against his hand.

They're good together, him and Gin. Solid. Happy. Doesn't matter if they argue some; that's part of dating a Weasley, Harry thinks. Dealing with the temper, yeah? The roiling in Harry's stomach settles a bit, and Harry shifts, the cold of the stone steps beneath his arse starting to seep through the denim of his jeans. He pushes himself up, exhales again. Laughs a bit ruefully. Merlin, but he's a tit, isn't he?

In the distance he can hear the bells ringing, quick and bright, calling everyone to the Great Hall for dinner. Harry starts down the steps, his fingers trailing along the curve of the wall beside him. He'll find Gin at the Gryffindor table and sit with her, he thinks. Ron and Hermione won't mind; Hermione's been telling him anyway he needs to spend time with Ginny, talk to her more. Harry thinks he's been good about it--Gin has her own friends, after all, and she likes hanging about with them as well--but tonight he wants to drape himself over her at dinner, kiss the curve of her jaw in front of the whole bloody world, let them all know she's his.

Especially Malfoy. That'll irk him, Harry thinks, with more than a little satisfaction. Serves the prat right. Harry has the girl, and Malfoy's got what? A dad in prison and no bloody social standing to speak of at school. Oh, how the mighty have fallen, Hermione'd said only a week ago when they'd watched Malfoy skulk away from another encounter with Claverdon and his lot. There aren't any more Potter Stinks badges, no Malfoy stirring the pot with the other Houses against Harry. No one other than Parkinson, Bulstrode and Zabini'll give the arsehole the time of day, and that's how it should be. Malfoy doesn't deserve any better. Not after what he'd done. As he turns the curve in the staircase, Harry's gaze drifts back up the steps. He remembers that night. It'd been one of his last here at Hogwarts before coming back almost a year later, a battle raging around him. Harry still has nightmares about Dumbledore falling, about Snape standing at the parapet, his robes billowing around him, his wand out, his hair ruffled by the breeze, about the sharp, dark look in his eyes when he'd whirled about, reaching for Malfoy whose pointed face was pale and horrified.

It's Malfoy's fault Dumbledore died. Harry pauses on the steps, a rush of grief rolling through him. He misses Dumbledore, misses the twinkle in his blue eyes, the small smile Dumbledore would give him when Harry sat in front of his desk. Malfoy took him away, even if he didn't cast the Killing Curse himself. If it hadn't been for what the bastard was doing--Harry breathes in sharply, a spike of pain jolting his heart. He leans against the cool stone wall. It's almost as if he can feel his own grief in the stones of the castle itself.

Harry hates Malfoy for that. For letting Greyback and his aunt and the others into the castle, for starting off the chain of events that lead to the war itself. Harry's lost nearly every adult he cared for
because of Malfoy—and then he thinks of Fred, and Colin Creevey, and all the other students whose lives were snuffed out far too bloody early.

And that's the problem, isn't it? Harry doesn't know that he can ever forgive Malfoy for any of that, whatever Luna might think.

He draws in a ragged breath, closing his eyes for the briefest of moments, before he walks down the staircase, and Harry wonders if that deep, empty ache inside of him will ever go away, if he'll carry it with him for the rest of his life. It's different than the loss of his parents. He never really knew them, did he? Only bits and pieces of memories remain, tiny fragments that sometimes drift to the surface. The sound of his mother's voice, singing. His father's laugh. He misses them, but they'd never really been a part of his life. Not like the others. Harry remembers Sirius. He remembers Remus. He remembers Tonks, and Dumbledore, and Fred, and Colin, and Cedric, and Florean Fortescue, and Charity Burbage, and Rufus Scrimgeour, and Alastor Moody, and Hedwig, and Dobby, and bloody hell, even Snape.

The swell of grief's almost overwhelming in its intensity. Harry stops at the foot of the stairs, his hand on the door. He can hear voices in the hallway outside, and he can't bear to walk out, to be seen by people, to deal with the curious looks and worried glances he'll get in the Great Hall. Not even the promise of Ginny beside him can ease the tightness in his chest, the twist of panic that's starting to well up again. Harry waits until the voices pass, the laughter fades, until the only sound he can hear is the quiet rasp of his own breath. He opens the door, slips out into the silent hallway.

He doesn't know where he's going; he just knows he needs to be alone.

It's better this way, Harry thinks, and as he wanders through the empty castle corridors, he lets the shadows of Hogwarts wrap around him, a cold, quiet comfort of sorts.

Hogwarts, as broken and battered as it might be, has always been his home.

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On Tuesday night, Draco's working on a special project to brew a shrinking solution in different titrations, based partly on a discussion with Ravi one afternoon whilst sitting in the Potions professor's office, drinking tea, and partly on a technical essay he wrote for his Alchemy class on medieval botanical magic. Draco has a theory—not entirely thought through, he'll freely admit—that using Shrivelfigs harvested under different lunar phases will affect preparations of a shrinking solution, but only when the potioneer applies some of the principles of alchemy to the distillation. He plans to test potions brewed with a new moon, a first-quarter moon, and a full moon harvest, as well as one combining all three to see if the effects differ across the various potions. Honestly, Ravi thinks it's not going to work, and Professor Skeat doesn't really care one way or the other, but Draco finds it interesting to try to and harness the knowledge of one subject for the practical application of the other. If he does manage to get a usable result out of it, he'll be pleased. If not, at least he'll have learned something more about alchemical methods of handling botanical ingredients.

Greenhouse Number Three is shadowed in the dark of the new moon, but Draco hasn't bothered to cast a Lumos. He's trying not to introduce too much light into the harvest, more out of superstition than anything else. He doesn't think a magical light would affect the Shrivelfigs, but he hasn't controlled for it in the experiment, so he thinks it best to keep to the shadows, though he's opened a window to let in as much of the dim starlight as he can. He snips the Shrivelfigs off their vines with a silver knife whilst singing an ancient lunar song in medieval French and mostly under his breath.

Well, at least, Draco thinks it's medieval French. It might also be really odd Latin in parts. Sometimes it's hard to tell. In any case, the song was written for use in Paris at the wizarding alchemical
greenhouses sometime in the fourteenth century, and it's the best incantation Draco's found thus far for new moon work with plants. He sings the verse again, his soft tenor rising in volume as he takes the ripe Shrivelfigs, setting them gently into the small burlap sack he's prepared for this purpose. Professor Sprout has been kind enough to help induce fruiting for him in a set of plants near the back. Draco's always liked singing. It's been a while, however, since he's had any reason to.

He's distracted by raised voices that sound quite close. That surprises him a little. Most everyone else is tucked away in their common rooms by now, save for the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, who've out been practicing on the pitch since dinner. Draco misses Quidditch, if he lets himself think about it. He doesn't think it's fair that McGonagall's refused the Eighth Years a team of their own. There's only twenty of them, sure, but Draco's fairly certain they could still field a team out of that. Even if it would mean he'd have to be on it with Potter and Weasley. That'd be horrible, of course, but Draco would have a chance to fly, at least, so he thinks he could force himself to stomach it. But it doesn't matter. McGonagall's put her foot down; they're not even allowed to join their old House teams, which Draco thinks is bloody unfair as well. He's watched the new Slytherin team scrimmage, and they're utter shit. He doesn't even want to think about how inept their new Seeker is. It'll make him want to cry.

Draco harvests his last fig, stopping to clean off the silver knife and settle it back in its proper sheath, hanging from a nail alongside the watering pitchers and trimming shears. He pulls his cloak more tightly around him. The temperature is still mostly bearable outside but it's getting chillier as the evening goes on, and Draco's starting to feel the crisp October air through the open window. There hasn't been a decent ground frost yet, but it's also only eleven days left until November, so Draco expects he'll wake up to one soon enough. He wonders how that will affect the Shrivelfigs as he tugs the window closed, then picks up his small burlap bag. He'll dry them out in the Potions storeroom for the next day or two before he brews the first potion; he just needs to make certain he marks them off-limits so the first and second years don't think they're meant for ingredients.

When Draco steps out of the greenhouse, he hears the voices still, coming this time from the direction of Hagrid's stone hut, on the path to the castle. For a moment Draco thinks about taking the long way around to the front gates, but it's an extra five minutes to walk and he can already see the white huff of his breath in the cold air. Draco shivers a bit, draws his cloak closer. He's too cold to care if he runs into someone on the path; his best bet is to just walk quickly and hope they don't notice him. He tries to breathe softly so as not to create a visible cloud; he's fairly certain from the tone and cadence of the voices that they're students. Draco'd spent most of last year whenever he was home at the Manor trying to listen to the whispers and shouts outside of his room, trying his best to figure out to whom they belonged so he'd know whether or not it was safe to come out. It's a skill he'd never anticipated having, not before the Dark Lord had invaded the Manor, bringing his thugs and sycophants with him.

Then again, Draco thinks, most people would probably consider him one of the latter. The thought almost makes him want to laugh. If only they knew.

As Draco draws closer, peering in between the giant pumpkins of Hagrid's patch, he can distinguish two forms facing each other. Despite his suspicions, he's still surprised to see other students out in this area—he'd had to get special permission for his lunar research from McGonagall and Ravi. Draco's even more surprised when he realises it's Potter and the Weaselette. Then again, maybe he's not. Potter's always thought rules were beneath him, hasn't he?

"I mean it, Harry," Ginny's saying, and the spike of anger in her voice makes Draco stop, still hidden in the shadows along the path. He pulls the hood of his cloak up, hiding his hair. He doesn't want to walk past, not right now. Not when Potter has that mulish scowl on his face, and Ginny Weasley's practically vibrating with fury. So he draws back, moves closer to Hagrid's hut, away from the other
two. Ginny pulls her thick cardigan tighter, folds her arms across her chest. "You've no bloody idea how it makes me feel. I can't meet all of your needs and I'm tired of trying." She hesitates, and then she says, the rage seeping from the words until she just sounds tired, "You need more help than I can give."

Potter's voice is moody and angry. "Jesus, Gin. I don't need help. I just don't know what to think. I thought everything would be better, coming back here, but it's bloody horrible, isn't it? All of this. You and me--" Potter looks away, and for a moment Draco thinks Potter must have seen him, but then Potter shakes his head. Presses his mouth into a thin line. "I can't ever do anything right for you now."

Draco's not sure he wants to know this much about Potter, or about the Weaselette, but he can't stop himself from continuing to listen. He tells himself it's schadenfreude, but deep inside, he knows it's not at all. He feels almost sorry for Potter, for the way Potter sounds so broken and battered. Draco knows what that's like. All too well.

"Don't," Ginny says. Draco thinks she might be crying now. "Just don't, Harry."

Potter's silent for a long moment, and then he reaches out for her, pulls her close. "I'm trying."

"I know," Ginny says into Potter's shoulder. Neither of them say anything; Draco's skin prickles in embarrassment. He doesn't want to be watching this, doesn't want to see Potter's fingers sliding through the Weaselette's hair, doesn't want to see the kiss Potter places on her temple.

"What can I do?" Potter asks quietly, and she shakes her head. Draws in a deep, ragged breath.

"Really, I'm not certain there's anything." Ginny pulls away. Her voice is soft, almost fragile, and Draco's never heard Ginny Weasley sound like this. She wipes a thumb beneath her eyes and exhales.

"Gin," Potter says, and she shakes her head.

"This isn't working," Ginny says after a moment. "And I just can't do it any more."

Draco stills. He can see the moment the realisation hits Potter, when he knows what the Weaselette's saying. Draco looks away. He can't bear the twist of pain that goes across Potter's face. Draco's not a complete sadist. As much as he hates Potter, he wouldn't wish this on him. Not entirely.

"So that's it then?" Potter asks, so very quietly that Draco can only just hear him. "You want to quit us." He laughs, and it's sharp and bitter, and he runs his hand through his hair. Draco can see the way his fingers tremble in the light from Hagrid's window. "You're the one bloody thing that's going right in my life." He folds his arms across his chest, and he looks young, Draco thinks. Uncertain. "Or you were, at least," Potter says, and he turns away, looking off towards the castle and the towers that rise up above them all, lights shining from their windows.

Ginny pulls the cuffs of her jumper over her fingertips. "I'm sorry Harry. Truly." The words sound as if they're being pulled from her, as if they're causing her pain just to choke them out. "You'll always be important to me, but this isn't what I want." She reaches out, touches Potter's arm. "I think it's time for you to be on your own for a change."

As Draco watches, utterly mortified but terribly curious nonetheless, the Weaselette takes a heavy ring off of a chain and hands it back to Potter. "I--" She breaks off, her voice thick, and then she closes Potter's fingers over the ring, her hand pale and freckled against his tanned skin. "I do love you, even if I haven't said it," she whispers, not looking at Potter who closes his eyes, face twisted as
if he's in pain. "I just can't carry you right now too." She swallows, blinks hard. "I'm sor--"

"Don't," Potter says dully. "You don't have to say it again."

Ginny looks up at Potter, and Draco wants to shake her, wants to ask her if she's bloody mad. There are a hundred girls who'd gladly take her place at Potter's side. He can't believe she's being so idiotically foolish as to walk away from him. Weren't they supposed to be true love, anyway? The Prophet'd bloody rhapsodised about them all summer. Bloody cow, he thinks. You wouldn't have wanted for anything with Potter.

And then Ginny's dashing up the path, visibly too emotional and upset to be watching anything except the way back to the castle. Potter sinks to the frigid ground, despite the fact that it's wet and dark, his head between his hands. For the briefest of moments, Draco has a mad urge to walk over, to sit beside Potter and tell him the Weaselette's a damned fool, that he'll find better.

He doesn't. He wouldn't.

They're silent, the both of them, Potter sitting between the bloody pumpkins, Draco still hidden in the shadows of the hut. Just when Draco hears the soft catch in Potter's breath, the uneven inhale that Draco recognises as the first waver of sob, the door to Hagrid's hut opens, warm light spilling out over the shadowed grass.

"Come on, Fluffers," Hagrid calls out, and then he's stepping out, that bloody enormous three-headed dog he'd somehow rediscovered in Greece over the summer hols bounding out after him, almost getting stuck in the wide door. "You too, Fang. Time to do your business, lads." Another dog trots out from the hut, rolling its shoulders and yawning.

And then Hagrid catches sight of Potter. "Harry," he says, and as Fluffy runs towards the lake, all three heads barking madly, Fang right on his heels, Hagrid squats beside Potter, resting a wide hand against his back. "What's wrong?"

Potter just shakes his head, light from the hut glinting off his glasses. "I need to get back to the castle," he says after a moment, but even Draco can tell that's a wretched idea. "Curfew's coming."

"Come in for a cuppa," Hagrid says, his voice gentle. "I reckon Ravi'll understand if you're with me, yeah?"

Draco thinks Potter's going to say no, but Hagrid holds out his hand, and after hesitating, Potter takes it, lets Hagrid lead him back into the hut, the door still open behind them.

Honestly, Draco's amazed. He's just watched Potter and the Weaselette break up; he's had a front seat to the most delicious gossip of the entire year. He should be gloating, and to some degree he is, but if he's honest, he's concerned about Potter. He doesn't know why. It's just the way Potter'd looked when Ginny broke it off. Draco can't help but pity the prat. He stands in the cold for a moment longer, listening to Hagrid clank about in his kitchen, putting a kettle on the hob. He wonders if he looks in the window whether he'd see Potter, silent, his face drawn. He thinks about it, but it'd be foolish, so he pulls his cloak closer, and, with a backwards glance at the lake and Fluffy and Fang splashing about its edges, barking at the Squid as it slaps a tentacle across the water, he takes the path back up to the castle, oddly shaken by the emotions of what he's just witnessed.

Feeling sorry for Potter's a new emotion. Draco's not entirely certain he's comfortable with it.

***

"Oh, Harry," Hermione says at breakfast, and her face is pinched with worry. "Are you certain it's
Harry can feel the ring in his pocket, the one that'd once belonged to Sirius and which he'd found in a drawer in his godfather's old bedroom at Grimmauld. He'd given it to Gin only a few months ago, not long after the battle, really, and it'd been something that he'd thought would bring them together. Make a promise for later. He crumbles a bit of toast across his plate. "Pretty sure she did," he says, and he's trying not to look over at the Gryffindor table where Ginny's sitting between Eloise Midgen and Vicky Frobisher, both of whom are giving Harry scathing glares, as if he's the one who'd broken Gin's heart instead of bloody vice-versa.

Still, he hates that Gin's eyes are red and shadowed, and she looks as if she hasn't slept any more than he has. Hagrid had poured tea into him, and if it'd been laced with a splash or two of firewhisky, well, that's not something McGonagall needs to give a damn about, the way Harry sees it. He's old enough to drink, after all, old enough even to buy his own bottle at an off-license, at least according to British Muggle law, even if Hogwarts frowns upon it.

Ron hasn't made it down to the Great Hall yet. Harry's a bit relieved about that. He doesn't know how he's going to tell his best mate that his sister's broken up with him. Harry flicks a few crumbs off his fingertips. He's not hungry this morning, and he has Potions to get through first thing. It's going to be awkward, he thinks, as he reaches for his pumpkin juice. It tastes a bit flat and bland today, but then again, everything does, doesn't it?

Hermione touches Harry's arm. "What can I do?" she asks softly, bending her head towards Harry. It's not as if she hasn't been here before. But the last time it was Harry breaking things off with Ginny to protect her, not because he couldn't bear sitting beside her, listening to her, helping her come to terms with her own grief in whatever way she could--Harry's stomach twists in anger, and the betrayal of it all feels sharp and fresh.

"The shit of it is I tried," he says, and he glances over at Hermione. His throat hurts; his eyes still sting a bit from last night. He blinks it away as best he can. "I know I'm not easy, but I bloody well tried--"

"Okay." Hermione's voice is soft. Careful. "But we're all a bit fragile right now, aren't we?"

Harry looks down at his plate, at the crumbled bread sopping up the broken yolk of his egg that's seeping across the white earthenware. "You and Ron are solid."

"We haven't always been," Hermione points out. "It takes a lot of work."

Harry's gaze drifts back to Ginny. Her head's bowed over her bowl of porridge, her hair pulled back in a ponytail that falls over her shoulders. He misses the way her hair feels through his fingers, the light, floral scent of her perfume as she leans up against him. He swallows, trying to tamp down the rush of anger and hurt that wells up. "I guess we weren't worth it to her." He can't keep the bitterness from his voice.

For a long moment, Hermione's silent, watching Harry, and then she puts down her fork and leans in. "Were the two of you worth it to you, Harry? You say you tried, but did you? Or has it all been about you? She's been trying to tell you for weeks..." Hermione sighs and she sits back, shifting on the bench. "Forget it."

"What?" Harry's starting to get angry. "You're my friend. Why are you taking her side--"

"Because you're falling apart," Hermione says in a tight whisper. "We all know it. I saw you all summer--or at least when you'd let me. You holed yourself up in Grimmauld, Harry. You could
barely walk through Diagon with us, and here…” She bites her lip, exhales in a sharp rush. "You haven't exactly been yourself."

Harry just looks at Hermione. He feels cold and empty inside, but that's becoming par for the course, isn't it? "I'm fine."

"Are you?" Hermione picks her fork back up again, twists it between her fingers. "You don't really talk to any of us. Not like you used to. Gin says you just wanted to shag." She glances over at Harry, her hair falling into her face. She pushes it back, tucks the unruly curls behind one ear. "Ron's worried too."

"Ron and I talk." Harry knows he sounds petulant.

Hermione's quiet, then she says, "About the Cannons, sure. Or classes. But the moment he pushes you about the battle--"

"Don't." The word comes out harshly, perhaps more so than Harry meant. The tightness is back across his chest, a solid band that compresses painfully, so much so that it's hard for Harry to draw in a breath. "Please."

"Harry." Hermione's hand settles against his back. Her fingers are warm. Comforting. Harry pulls away.

"I really can't," Harry says, and he swings his legs over the bench, standing. His voice quavers. "Not right now, yeah?"

He knows Hermione's trying her best, knows that she's genuinely worried. But he can't do this right now, not here in the middle of the Great Hall. If he closes his eyes he can see the bodies laid out on the floor. Long rows of them, slack-faced, blank-eyed, waiting for families to come collect them. He can see Remus, Tonks, Fred, and far too many others. Sometimes, when he's not paying attention, he can almost hear the whispers of their ghosts, voices coming from the stones of the walls, the floors, calling out for their loved ones, wanting to be heard once more.

No one else seems to notice. No one else seems to hear.

"I'll see you in class," Harry says, grabbing his satchel and swinging it over his head, but he doesn't look down at Hermione. He can't.

He starts towards the set of open, carved doors leading into the corridor; he's just reached them when he slams into someone coming around the corner.

"Watch it," a familiar, sharp voice says, and Harry turns back, sees Malfoy there, looking tired and grim, rubbing at his shoulder. Zabini's with Malfoy, his hands in his pockets, slightly slouched in a ridiculously attractive way. He doesn't even bother to glance at Harry; to be honest, Harry's never been certain Zabini considers him worth his attention.

"Sorry," Harry says without thinking.

Malfoy's eyes narrow for a moment, but all he says is, "You look like shite, Potter."

"Like you're much better." It sounds stupid the moment it's out of Harry's mouth, and he regrets it, particularly when Malfoy's eyebrow goes up, his mouth twisting to one side in faintly mocking amusement.

"How terribly wounding," Malfoy says, and when he turns back towards Zabini all Harry can think
about is seeing Malfoy in the shower, water running across his pale, pinkened skin, his fingers cupped around the swell of his prick. Harry's shoulders tense, and he wants to lash out at Malfoy, to shove him up against the doors and shout at him until Malfoy loses his own temper and comes after Harry, angry and vicious the way only Malfoy can be.

But then Harry catches a glimpse of Ravi coming down the staircase, Professor Flitwick beside him, both of them laughing at something Harry can't catch. The rage seeps out of him slowly, and he steps back.

"Whatever," Harry says, and he thinks he sees a glint of disappointment in Malfoy's gaze. Harry tells himself he doesn't give a shit.

He turns on his heel and walks away, certain he feels Malfoy's curious gaze on him the entire bloody way.

***

"What the hell is up with you?" Blaise asks halfway through Potions the second time Draco nearly dumps the Neem oil into their cauldron at the wrong time. "Was it nightmares again?"

Draco sets the oil back down on the workbench. "No," he says, and he doesn't care if he sounds short-tempered or not. Blaise'll just shrug it off. He always does.

"No," Draco picks up a small steel knife. "And if you call me that one more time, I'll stab you."

Pansy turns around from in front of them, swivelling on her stool. Her skirt's ridden halfway up her thigh, revealing a smooth swathe of creamy skin between the hem and the sock stretched up over her knee. "He's been in a snit since breakfast."

"He's been in a snit since birth," Millicent says from beside Pansy, not even looking up. She scrapes a neatly diced pile of motherwort into their cauldron; a perfect puff of purple smoke curls up from the bubbling brew.

"I'm not in a bloody snit," Draco says, a bit too loudly. Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin look over at him from their workbench. Draco flips two fingers at them before his better self can stop him. Mandy looks offended, but Lisa just snorts and laughs, going back to cutting up her own motherwort.

All three of Draco's friends just look at him. He sighs. "I'm tired," he says. "And I have to share a bloody dormitory with Potter, so I'm just…" He waves his knife around in a circle before Pansy reaches over and gently takes it from his hand. Draco sits on his stool, his shoulders slumped. He doesn't know what to tell them. The nightmares are getting worse. Sometimes they wake him up. Sometimes they don't. He doesn't want to think about them during the day. Or at all, if he's honest. He doesn't like reliving his mother's screams, his own begging, the Dark Lord's laughter as Draco's father looks away.

A shudder goes through Draco, one he can't suppress.

He looks over at Potter, hunched on his stool beside Weasley. The arsehole looks miserable, and Draco's glad of that. What little sympathy he might have had for Potter last night had dried up this morning when Michael Corner had mocked him in the loo, asking Draco why he didn't strip off and shower with the rest of them. Draco'd stood there silent in front of the sinks, his thin hoodie wrapped around him, hiding his arm, whilst Corner and Wayne Hopkins had pressed up against him, pushing
him into the edge of the sink, their towels sliding low on their hips, suggesting that maybe Draco liked pricks a little too much to see them out in the wild.

And then Potter'd walked in, shirtless and sleep-tousled, his shoulders broad, his nipples brown and hard in the chilly early morning air, his towel thrown over one arm, soap in the other hand, and Draco'd had to look away, a brief terror rippling through him at the idea of his treacherous body proving Corner and Hopkins right. Thank Circe it hadn't, that years of disdain for Potter had kept his cock in line. Mostly. Enough that no one had noticed, at least.

Potter'd watched the three of them for a long moment, watched as Corner'd thrust his hips towards Draco with a laugh, watched as Corner'd fingered the edge of his towel, then rolled his hips forward again as Draco tried to turn away, tried to hide the panic that was welling up, keeping him silent whilst Hopkins told Corner they ought to just throw him beneath the showers, keep him from hiding out in the loo watching them like a little Slytherin pervert, yeah?

At that Potter'd finally intervened, his gaze fixed on Draco's reflection in the mirror. "Leave Malfoy alone, lads," he'd said. "His only problem is his willy's too small. That's what he doesn't want any of us to know."

Corner and Hopkins had howled at that, their laughter ringing out against the tiled walls, and they'd backed off, following Potter back into the shower room, leaving Draco shaking and unhappy. He supposes he ought to feel grateful to Potter for rescuing him, but he can't. He won't let himself.

And he can't shake the feeling that Potter knows more than he's saying about Draco's reasons for avoiding the showers with the rest of them. Draco's fingers brush across his forearm. Potter can't have seen that. Draco's been so bloody careful since he's been back.

"Draco," Pansy says, and he looks over at her, a bit blankly. Her eyes are narrowed; her gaze flicks between him and Potter. "Blaise is right," she says after a moment. "You're not yourself."

"Turn around, you cow," Draco says, but he lets affection colour his tone. "I'm just tired."

Pansy exchanges a long look with Blaise. Draco knows they don't believe him, and that just irritates him more. Your roommates are shits, he wants to say to Blaise, but he knows Blaise will just shrug and agree. He doesn't care for any of them. Except perhaps Longbottom, who, surprisingly, is intelligent enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Leave him be," Millie says, nudging Pansy with her elbow. "You know he'll just dig his heels in."

And then Ravi's beside their benches in a sweep of black robes that's almost worthy of Severus, Draco thinks. "Is there a problem?" he asks, looking between them all. Draco shakes his head, as do Pans and Blaise. Millicent just shrugs.

"Putting our heads together," Millie says. "That's all."

Ravi doesn't look convinced. "Partner work only for this potion," he says. "No interbench cooperation."

"Don't let McGonagall hear you say that," Blaise murmurs, a bit cheekily, and Ravi snorts. The Headmistress has been banging the drum for inter-house cooperation since the Sorting Ceremony. As far as Draco can tell, it's falling on deaf ears. The Slytherins are being shot on by the other houses; he's seen three first-years burst into tears already this week, and they've no bloody thing to do with the war. They were children for Circe's sake.

They all were.
"Let's not try being funny, Mr Zabini," Ravi says. He points to their cauldron. "If you don't get your motherwort in there soon, you're going to be dealing with a minor implosion."

"Shit," Blaise says, and he reaches for the knife.

Ravi studies Draco for a moment, then he quirks one finger towards him. "A moment, please?"

Draco follows Ravi up to the front of the classroom, all too aware of Potter's gaze on him when Draco passes his workbench. They stop at the lecture podium; Ravi sits on his stool, twisting his knees towards Draco. "What's wrong?" he asks quietly.

"Nothing." Draco doesn't look at him; he just twists his fingers in the cuffs of his jumper. The rest of the class is watching; he knows that. His gaze flicks towards Granger and the Weaselette in the first row. They're pretending not to pay attention, and Draco doesn't think they can hear them. Still, it makes him uncomfortable, and he shifts, turning so that they can't see his face. Besides, he doesn't want to be looking at Ginny Weasley right now. Not after last night. It feels odd. Weirdly intimate, having seen that glimpse of her and Potter. He doesn't want to feel sorry for either of them. Particularly not Potter.

Ravi studies Draco. "Look," he says, and his voice is barely above a murmur. "I've heard something happened in the showers today."

Draco's face heats. "Nothing happened."

His Head of House doesn't look convinced. He strokes his neatly trimmed beard, still watching Draco. "I can make a report to McGonagall."

"No." The word comes out a bit more forcefully than Draco intends. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Granger look up. "Nothing happened. I don't know who you heard anything from--" He frowns as Ravi's gaze flicks towards the back of the room. Towards the side Potter's sitting on. Draco wants to swear, wants to grab his wand from his pocket and turn on Potter, hex him until his skin turns inside out. He doesn't need Potter's help, doesn't want it. He grits his teeth, tries to settle himself, but the irritation is twisting beneath his skin. He breathes out. "Thank you," he says. "But everything's fine."

Ravi sighs. "Draco, this sort of thing might have been ignored under other Headmasters--"

"You can't do anything if I don't corroborate your secondhand information, can you?" Draco folds his arms across his chest. His shoulders feel tight, hunched.

"No," Ravi says after a long moment. "But I won't forget it."

Jaw tight, Draco doesn't look away. "Nothing happened," he says again, his voice quiet and even. "Everything's fine."

Ravi heaves an unhappy sigh. "Whatever you say." He stands up again. "Now I suggest you help Mr Zabini with your potion before it wreaks havoc in my classroom." He turns on his heel and walks off, towards the other corner of the room where Goldstein and Boot are bent over their smoking cauldron. "Gentlemen," he says sharply. "I'd move back before the contents of your cauldron end up scalding your faces."

Draco makes his way back to his workbench, passing Potter's on the way. "Fuck off, you wanker,"
he says under his breath, letting his elbow bump Potter's as he's stirring his potion. "I don't need your help."

"Who says you have it?" Potter retorts, and he glares as Draco flips two fingers his way. Weasley scowls at Draco in return, his ginger hair falling into his eyes.

Blaise just looks between them as Draco takes his seat again. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," Draco says, and he reaches for his potions book. "How long until we add the cowbane?"

For a moment, he thinks Blaise is going to object, but then Blaise sighs, shakes his head. "Five minutes after the Neem oil, which should go in just about now."

Draco reaches for the phial and uncaps it, pouring the golden oil into the cauldron. The liquid bubbles and froths as the oil seeps into it. Draco pretends he doesn't see the look Blaise gives Pansy across his bent head. It's better they think he doesn't know. They'll just annoy the hell out of him otherwise.

When Draco glances up, Potter's watching him, his face closed off, his mouth tight. The familiarity of that glare settles Draco. Makes him feel as if his world isn't spinning entirely off course.

He takes a deep breath and turns the page in his Potions text.

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Harry wakes up in the middle of Friday night. He doesn't know what startles him awake at first, but he sits up in his bed, his heart pounding. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light of the dormitory, to make out the blurry shapes of the tall, four-poster beds around him, the wardrobes along one wall, the arched windows that look out over the dark grounds. Harry reaches for his glasses, slips them on, and the room shifts into focus. The moon's just past new tonight, and its faint light breaks through the clouds, filtering through the window panes and casting weak, diamond-shaped shadows across the thick, circular rug in the centre of the dormitory.

The sound comes again, just over the soft snuffle of Tony's snores, and Harry stills. It's almost a cry, quiet and muffled, and then a mattress shifts as if someone's tossing, turning.

And then Harry hears Malfoy's voice, low and raw. "No," he says. "No, I won't--" The words are bitten off by a sharper breath, and Malfoy sounds so young, so lost when he says, "Please. Please don't hurt her--" Another soft breath, the quiet thump of a hand hitting against the coverlet. "I'll do it. I will..." The soft cry comes again, frightened, mournful.

"Harry," Justin whispers from his bed. Tony snuffles, then snores again; Harry can hear Terry's quiet, even breaths next to him. "Harry."

"Malfoy's having a nightmare," Harry says. "That's all."

Justin doesn't say anything for a moment. He sighs, and Harry sees him sit up in his bed, the dim moonlight catching his sandy blond hair. "What do we do?"

"Go back to sleep," Harry says. "He'll be fine. It's not like we don't all have them sometimes."

They've all woken up from them some nights. It's just part of being in Hogwarts again, Harry thinks. Every one of them is carrying around his own particular set of ghosts. Harry's just never considered which ones Malfoy might be dragging along.

Justin settles back against his pillows, falling silent. Harry stays still, listening. He doesn't know why.
He doesn't care whether or not Malfoy's caught in a bad dream. Except Harry knows what it's like, knows how those dreams can catch you, twist you about, leave you shaking and rattled.

He waits until Malfoy's breathing calms, until the quiet whimpers fade away. He doesn't want Malfoy to know he heard him. He doesn't think Malfoy would take it well. Harry can't blame him; he's hated the nights when he's woken up, Terry or Tony or Justin looking down at him, their brows furrowed in worry. It's embarrassing, Harry thinks, and at least Malfoy's never done that with him, never studied him whilst he was sleeping fitfully

As far as Harry knows.

Harry lies back down, curls up on his side. The room falls silent again. Harry closes his eyes, hoping for sleep. It doesn't come.

Instead his mind is crowded with thoughts of Malfoy, of pale skin and bright angry eyes, and how bloody stubborn the arsehole is. Harry doesn't know why he's so frustrated by Malfoy, by how arrogant and irritating the prick is. How fucking ungrateful, too. Harry'd tried to help the other day. Tried to keep Corner and Hopkins off Malfoy, tried to give Ravi a heads up before class that there was a problem. And Malfoy's been a berk about it ever since, acting as if Harry's the one at fault, not the others. Harry'd even caught the fucking snake talking with Zabini and Corner in the common room tonight. Just a bit, and rather awkwardly at that, but still. Harry'd done the right thing, and Malfoy acts as if he wants to put a fist in Harry's face whilst he's cosying up to Corner, nodding at Corner's stupid jokes that aren't even amusing. Everyone knows that.

Even Gin thinks Corner's a prat, and she dated him, so Harry thinks she ought to know.

Jesus. He ought to be lying here thinking of Ginny. Missing her. Trying to figure out how he can win her back, but it's been three days now since she'd dumped him in the midst of Hagrid's pumpkins, and Harry's angry hurt has settled down into an odd, unhappy relief. He doesn't even care that everyone's looking at him with pity when he walks alone into the Great Hall now. Doesn't care that Ron and Hermione are being slightly awkward with him, Ron clapping him on the back every so often, telling him Gin will come to her senses and Hermione giving him that concerned look of hers, as if she thinks he's going to fall apart any minute.

But Harry won't. He thought he might, on Wednesday night when he'd sat alone in the common room until four in the morning, refusing to talk to anyone about it, even Ron. Then he'd fallen asleep on the sofa and missed breakfast and half of Charms, and when Harry'd woken up Thursday morning he'd felt...to be honest, he doesn't know how to explain it. Sad, he supposes, but there'd been something else mixed in. Not happiness, not at all. But as if he'd been granted a reprieve in a way. Harry doesn't understand it. He loves Ginny. He can't imagine not having her next to him, can't imagine not kissing her, not spending nights wrapped around her.

Except he can. And he feels like a wretch, like there must be something deeply wrong with him.

None of it makes any sense. Harry stares up into the shadows of the hangings around his bed, studying the way the velvet folds in on itself. Everything seems so overwhelming now, so empty, in a way. Harry thinks he's mad, thinks that there must be something wrong with him. He sighs, rolls over, stares at Terry's bed. He barely knows his roommates, he realises. He wishes he were in Ron's room, with him and Nev, the way it'd once been. He misses Seamus. Dean.

Fuck it, Harry thinks, and he sits up, slips out of his bed. He can't bear to stay in here, not right now, and he pads out of the room in his bare feet, going across the hall to the room Ron shares with Neville and Zabini and Michael Corner and Wayne Hopkins.
Their room is silent, dark. Harry finds Ron's bed, next to the window, and he touches Ron's shoulder carefully, shushing Ron when he sits up, blinking sleepily at Harry. "What?" Ron asks, his voice thick and raspy. "Is everything all right?"

Harry just nods. "I…" He doesn't know what to say, how to admit this twist of feelings to his best mate. But Ron seems to understand, almost immediately.

"Downstairs," Ron says, and he's sliding out of his bed, reaching for a stretched-out Cannons t-shirt to pull over his head, hiding his freckled chest. He follows Harry out into the hall, then down the short staircase to their bookcase-lined common room with the wide, cushy sofas and oversized armchairs. The hearth's still warm, faint embers glowing orange in the shadows, as Ron yawns and drops onto the long, brown leather chesterfield in front of it. Harry settles at the other end, reaching for one of the purple knitted afghans to wrap around his shoulders.

Neither of them speak for a bit. Ron blinks a few times, yawns again. Harry tries to breathe out. An ember pops, sending a bright spark flying against the firescreen. Ron just waits for Harry, like he's done for months now, giving Harry the space to talk when he's ready.

Harry sighs, scrubs his palm against his forehead, pushing his tangled fringe back from the rims of his glasses. "I miss Gin," he says finally.

"Of course you do." Ron looks over at him, and Harry can see the awkwardness shift and fall between them. He hates that. "She'll change her mind."

But Harry doesn't think she will. He picks at a loose thread in the afghan's pattern. "What if I don't want her to?"

And that takes Ron by surprise. Harry too, if he's honest. He can't look at Ron; he just rubs his finger over the bit of yarn that's come undone, wriggles his fingertip through the tiny hole he's made. It widens, stretches out a bit. Harry sighs, chews on his bottom lip.

"Oh," Ron says finally. He falls silent again. Harry feels like a shit. He knows that Ron's been thrilled that he's dating Gin. Ron keeps talking about Harry maybe being an actual Weasley one day, if he marries in. About being brothers. Harry doesn't want to give that up. Doesn't want to give Ginny up.

Except maybe he does.

"I don't know," Harry says after a moment. "It's just…” He hesitates, bites his cheek. He doesn't look at Ron. "It's complicated."

Ron exhales. He pulls a small, fringed cushion out from beneath his arse and holds it against his chest, his fingers smoothing along the loose twists of yarn at the cushion's edges. "Does she know this?"

Harry shrugs. "We haven't really talked since she threw me over." It feels like longer than three days. He hasn't been avoiding Gin, not entirely, but he hasn't been putting himself in her way, either, if he's honest. Then again, she's been doing the same. They say hello in the halls, or in class, but it feels strange and uneasy. Like there's something broken between them and neither one of them wants to put it back together again. He looks over at Ron. "I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to do anything," Ron says, and there's a gentleness in his eyes that Harry doesn't quite expect. He nudes Harry's thighs with his bare foot. "Look, maybe it'll work out. Maybe it won't. Just give yourself some time. Gin too. When Hermione and I have problems, sometimes it's
just that we need a little space from each other, yeah? We're driving each other mad, and maybe that's you and Ginny right now." He glances away, towards the warm crackle of the embers in the hearth. His jaw works a bit; he leans forward, his arms wrapped around the fringed cushion. "It's just that it's hard, you know? Us losing Fred. Ginny's having the worst time of it, I think, because of how close they were. I mean, there's George, yeah? It's awful for him, but Gin…” Ron trails off.

"I know," Harry says, and he does. "But it's bad for you too, Ron."

Ron twists a bit of fringe around his knuckle. "Maybe a bit," he says quietly.

Harry thinks about Malfoy, lying upstairs, and those soft, uneasy noises he'd made. There are things he'd lost too, Harry knows. They all have. The echoes of the war still linger here, in the castle, in them even. "It'll get easier," he says, but he's not certain he believes it. He doesn't know how it can.

Still, the small smile Ron gives him is worth it. "Yeah."

And maybe that's the crux of it, that little bit of hope that each one of them is clinging to, that belief that maybe everything will be all right in the end, that maybe the raw wound that's still seeping through the entirety of the wizarding world will heal eventually, that things might go back to normal.

It's why they're all back here at Hogwarts, Harry thinks. Malfoy and his lot included. Maybe they had to be, maybe their hands were forced, but they all could have made other decisions, gone other places.

Hogwarts means something to everyone in this dormitory. And that, Harry thinks, might be all that really matters.

"So," Harry says after a moment. "What about those Cannons?"

Ron's smile widens; he settles back against the arm of the chesterfield. "Pretty shit, yeah? Fuck only knows why I support them."

Harry curls up beneath the afghan. "You're mental," he says, and Ron laughs.

The fire's warm, the chesterfield's comfortable, the worries Harry's been carrying with him start to slip away.

And this, Harry thinks, his fingers twisting in thick purple wool, feels more like home than anything he's ever known.

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Draco shifts a sausage around his plate, the tines of his fork scraping the solid, everyday pottery. It's Saturday morning, he's sat at the near-empty Eighth Year table, and the ceiling of the Great Hall is grey with the occasional ray of sun peaking in amongst the clouds. Most of the students have already left to get ready for the day's trip into Hogsmeade—the first of the year—and really, Draco's been up since just past six, hiding out in the library, so this feels more like a lunch than a breakfast. Everyone else is excited to go into Hogsmeade, but Draco couldn't care less. He hadn't slept well last night. He's not certain why, but he'd woken up at least once with an uneasy feeling, the remnants of unpleasant dreams slipping away the moment his eyes fluttered open. When he'd slipped out of the dormitory, Potter and Weasley had been asleep on the chesterfield in the common room, Potter's face pressed into the arm, Weasley on the other side, snoring like a bloody Hippogriff.

The Halloween Feast is coming up next weekend, and the whole school's buzzing with plans to buy Wheezes and dresses, charms and cosmetics. McGonagall's promised a dance, complete with fancy
dress; even the professors are contemplating what they might wear. Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott had spent most of Defence class trying to get Professor Omolade to tell them what she plans to wear. Omolade'd just laughed at them, told them she wasn't even certain she was going to show up, particularly if McGonagall didn't require her to chaperone. Draco doesn't blame her. He's not certain he'd be thrilled at having to spend a night separating couples who were determined to shag, and the thought of that makes him remember Severus sweeping through the courtyards, shooting spells at bushes to turf out the worst of the offenders. Slytherins at least knew to find the most hidden-away classrooms. Gryffindors were stupid enough to think shagging beneath a rosebush was romantic. Idiots.

To be honest, Draco doesn't really plan to make an effort to disguise himself as anything, although Pansy's trying to pressure him to dress up with her as Nyx and Erebus, or Triton and Amphitrite. She's been reading the classics again--or rather her mother's been forcing her to. Idgie Parkinson's a firm believer in the benefits of a proper education in Latin and Greek. Still, Draco's staying neutral, on the disagreement between mother and daughter as well as the choice of fancy dress. If anything, he'd like to go as a young Paracelsus, or perhaps as Egyptian Hermes. His current heroes are alchemical geniuses from the past, ones that let him daydream about the potentialities of his future, whether or not they're rational or even possible. Honestly, Draco's in favour of anything that keeps him from thinking about the horror that's Hogwarts' Eighth Year.

Every time Draco sees the younger students getting ready for Quidditch, a weird twinge goes through his heart. He wants to be carefree, to be able to play. But instead, he's stuck here with a school full of people like Corner and Claverdon who loathe him and wish him harm, Potter the bloody hero sleeping in his actual room, and no Slytherin identifying marks. Except for, well, the one Mark that he has to hide at all costs, the remnants of his preposterous boyhood allegiance to a murderous madman. That's a mistake Draco'll be paying for for the rest of his life. But in the meantime, he's trying to get used to the weird purple and grey stripes on his school clothes; he finds doesn't really have any connection to them. He misses his green and silver, the soft, friendly hiss his House made when one of theirs walked past, the way they piled on one another in their common room, even the younger students being drawn into the orbit of the older ones. They'd been a House, not a conglomeration of misfits shoved into a dormitory together the way the Eighth Year rooms feel. And they'd had a real Head of House. Severus had protected them, had defended them to the best of his ability, even when they'd made ridiculously stupid mistakes. Draco likes Ravi, but he feels more like an older student at times than a Head.

To be honest, Draco just wants to go back down to the dungeons, to settle himself back in his old dormitory, to claim his rightful space in the common room along with Blaise and Pans and Millie. But now the Slytherins don't hiss when he walks past. Instead they look at him out of the corners of their eyes, uncertain as to whether or not to even greet him. They're afraid of him, Draco realises, and perhaps at one point he would have been chuffed by it all. Now it just makes him tired. Sad. So very bloody lonely.

Draco's also overheard Ravi and Professor Omolade talking about the fate of Slytherin House overall. There are rumours swirling about that the Board of Governors don't like the old House structure and are thinking about changing it--perhaps even removing one of the Houses entirely.

"I'd wager you can guess which one," Omolade'd said to Ravi quietly, and they'd both looked grim. Unhappy.

Now, Draco glances without thinking over to the Slytherin table, where there are vast open spaces at the benches, even during full meals in the hall. The House had perilously few new students Sorted into it at the Great Feast, and he wonders what that's going to be like in another year or two. He knows enough about the Sorting Hat to know that it'll take one's preferences into account, and Draco
can't help but worry that more and more of the younger scions of Slytherin families are going to beg it to put them anywhere else. Or perhaps, he thinks, even be told by their families to do so. Astoria Greengrass' little brother was Sorted Ravenclaw this year, and she's freely said her mother had begged him not to ask the hat for Slytherin.

"A Sickle for your thoughts," Pansy says, sitting down next to Draco and rousing him from his reverie.

"McGonagall would look amazing if she dyed her hair to match her tartans." Draco doesn't think he can talk to Pansy about what he's really thinking—it's too close to what they're all struggling with, the evaporation of their lives, their school experiences into nothing but a red-gold coloured void, or at least, a neutrally purple and grey striped one.

"So you're not just checking out Potter's whereabouts." Pansy's brusque, and Draco's actually surprised. Potter's sat over at the end of the Eighth Year table, a grim look on his face as he eats his beans on toast, Longbottom still next to him, his face buried in a book on planetary herbology. The Weaselette had left the Great Hall earlier, surrounded by her friends, and Draco had seen Weasley and Granger talking to Potter shortly before the two of them headed out as well.

"Absolutely not." Draco glances over to the end of the table to make sure Potter's not paying attention. He's not. Draco's cheeks grow warm. "Whyever would I do that?"

"I don't know, Draco." The look on Pansy's face is fierce, unnervingly so. She scrapes butter across her toast, then a thick layer of raspberry jam, her gaze still fixed on Draco as she sets her knife down. "Whyever have you been doing that?"

Draco blinks, taken aback a bit by her tone. "I really don't know what you mean." His face is definitely heated now, even with the chill air. He eyes Potter again, just to make sure he's not paying attention, but he looks sunk in his own world. It's not Draco's fault he knows where Potter is at all times. He has to be aware of things like that.

"Why do I doubt that's true?" Pansy's voice could cut glass, it's so sharp. But then she sighs, shrugs, and shakes her head before taking a bite of her toast. "Oh Draco, darling, you don't really know yourself, do you?" Her gaze slides towards Potter. "I'd hoped something might have changed, but…" She trails off, licks a bit of jam from her thumb. "Things are what they are, I suppose."

Draco has no idea what Pansy's on about, but he's beginning to think there's something wrong that only he can't see. He thinks about pressing the point, but he doesn't dare. Not here. He's not certain he wants to hear what she has to say.

"We could go somewhere else if you'd like to explain." Draco keeps a tight but pleasant smile on his face, calculated to distract anyone who might be watching them, although there's almost no one left in the Great Hall except the Professors. Ravi looks a bit worse for the wear, Draco thinks, possibly hungover given the scruffiness of his beard, and the way he keeps wincing every time Vector leans over to speak to him. Then again, the Arithmancy professor does have a rather loud way of expressing herself, at least in Draco's opinion.

"I rather think not." Pansy takes another bite of her toast, brushing away the crumbs from the ruffled front of her black blouse. Her lipstick's a bright, brazen red that doesn't come off on her toast to Draco's surprise. She must have set it with a charm.

He frowns at her, more than a bit irked. "Why?"

"Because," Pansy says calmly, "I'm going to go have fun with Blaise and Mills in Hogsmeade, and
you're going to stay here and sulk over your books and Potter like a dull swot." Pansy shoots him a pitying look, but he knows she's mocking him too.

Draco's frown deepens. "Unfair, Pans."

"Probably." Pansy takes a last bite of her toast, then drops the remnants on his plate. "Maybe we can talk tonight, if you're not swamped with a full schedule of glowering at Potter from behind your schoolbooks." She stands up, then kisses the top of his head. "Poor fool. Enjoy those stupid alchemists."

Honestly, Draco plans to. The dead make so much more sense than the living right now. "Bring me sweets from Hogsmeade!" he calls after Pansy, and Potter looks up then.

Their eyes meet, quickly--Potter's glasses are smudged but his gaze is bright and so brilliantly green, even from half a table's length away--and then Draco looks away, dropping his fork in a bit of a fluster. It clatters against his plate, too loud in the quiet of the Great Hall, and even the teachers look his way. Draco ducks his head, lets his hair fall forward, curtaining his face. He can feel Potter's gaze on him, and it makes him nervous. Still, he doesn't want to run away. Not yet at least.

So Draco forces himself to sit, to sip the dregs of his milky Darjeeling, to breathe as calmly as he can, even when Potter pushes his plate away and stands, his muscular legs swinging over the edge of the bench. He walks past, his hands in his pockets, and Draco thinks he's just about free when Potter hesitates, then turns back.

"Going to Hogsmeade, Malfoy?" Potter asks.

Draco takes one last swallow of tepid tea. "Why?" he asks after a moment. "Planning to have Claverdon jump me on the way back?"

Potter's face clouds. "Not funny."

"I wasn't trying to be." Draco wipes his hands on his napkin, then folds it, tucking it beneath the rim of his plate. "But I fail to see why you care where I am or what I'm doing today."

"Jesus." Potter's starting to sound annoyed, and that cheers Draco immensely. "I'm just trying to be polite."

That makes Draco look up at him, one eyebrow quirked. "Well, you're not. Your manners are atrocious, and we're not friends, so you've no right to know what my plans are for the day." He's bristling now, and he doesn't care. The last thing he'll put up with is being reprimanded about his behaviour by Potter of all fucking people. "So sod off."

Potter throws his hands up. "Whatever, Malfoy. Merlin, but you're a prick, aren't you?"

Draco doesn't bother answering; he sets his fork and knife on his plate, and they disappear, his napkin going along with them. Potter swears and turns on his heel, striding away.

When Draco stands, waiting until Potter disappears through the double doors at the end of the hall, Ravi's walking towards him, moving slowly, a mug of steaming tea clutched between his hands. He's in jeans and a jumper, without his professor's robe on. "Making friends, I see," Ravi says, and he shakes his head at Draco's protest, then winces. "Quiet. I've got a bloody wretched headache."

"Too much firewhisky, sir?" Draco asks, in as bright a tone as he can manage, because why not infuriate his Head of House whilst he's at it.
Ravi just snorts and walks alongside him. "Tequila, actually, but don't tell McGonagall I said that. I need a fucking hangover potion, but I'm out and Grace hasn't woken up yet for me to nick hers, the cow." He glances over at Draco. "So you and Potter. Schoolboy rivals, from what I've been told."

"He's a sodding prat," Draco says crossly, and Ravi looks over at him. "What?"

"Most people around here would be kissing his arse," Ravi says. "Seems a bit foolish to swing the opposite direction."

Draco just shrugs, shoves his hands in his pockets, then pulls them out again when he thinks of Potter doing the same. He folds his arms across his chest instead, feeling a bit idiotic. "I don't need anything from him."

Ravi's silent, and then he sighs. "You might think that." He glances at Draco. "Look, I realise I was lucky. Being over in the States for the past few years kept me away from all the…" He hesitates. "The unpleasantness here. Probably good for me; my Gran was Muggleborn, so I reckon that would have put me right out with your dad's circle of friends."

"My father's an arsehole." Draco's fingers dig into his elbows. It feels odd to say the words out loud, the ones he's thought to himself but never had the courage to say even to his friends. "And a bit of a shit judge of character."

That makes Ravi smile, a quick flash of white teeth in his dark brown beard. "Ah, the rebellious son."

"Not rebellious enough," Draco admits. "And not soon enough, I suppose." His jumper's soft beneath his fingertips; he tightens his arms against his chest. "Hence the dislike from my fellow students. It's not unearned, I suppose."

"Mr Potter doesn't seem to dislike you," Ravi says, and Draco wants to laugh in his face. Instead he settles for an incredulous snort. Ravi shrugs, following Draco out into the corridor. "He came to me about Corner and Hopkins."

Draco stiffens, his stomach twisting. "That wasn't anything."

"I rather think that's not true." Ravi stops, turns towards Draco. His eyes are kind, careful. "I'm not unaware of the cruelties of teenagers, Draco. Particularly when it comes to ones who might be not entirely…" He trails off, his gaze fixed on Draco's face. Draco feels his cheeks warm, then Ravi looks away. "It's your choice," Ravi says after a moment. "But if there's anything you'd like to talk to me about, I hope you know you can. I'm not unsympathetic." He runs a hand through his unkempt hair. "In many ways."

"I'm fine," Draco says, and his throat aches from the lie. He tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. "But thank you."

Ravi nods. "All right." He takes a sip of his tea. "Care to come down to my office and fill me in on your potions research? I'm rather curious about how this lunar harvesting theory of yours is going."

Draco's shoulders relax. "Perhaps shortly, if you'll still be around. I need to check on my stock in the greenhouse."

"You can find me there until mid-afternoon," Ravi says, and he starts for the staircase that leads to the dungeons. "Whenever you'd like."

Draco nods, his heart lightening a bit. "Thank you, sir."
He heads for the grounds, strangely more cheerful than he'd been a quarter-hour ago. He's Shrivelfigs to check on after all.

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Harry's regretting his outfit now that the tables have been cleared and he's lurking on the edge of the large dance floor at the centre of the Great Hall. He and Ron hadn't planned on wearing fancy dress at all, not until everyone in the Eighth Year Tower started getting dressed themselves after classes.

"I told you," Hermione'd said in exasperation, standing on the staircase to the girl's dormitories in her simple white shift dress, running horses embroidered along the hem, her hair braided and twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. She'd pulled her brown woollen scarf over her shoulders, and scowled at them. "We're all dressing up. Even Bulstrode."

"What the hell are you?" Ron had asked, a bit belligerently, in Harry's opinion, but then it'd been Ron's idea not to put anything together because who would be mental enough to want to do that, after all?

Hermione'd just rolled her eyes. "Epona, obviously." At the blank looks she'd got from both of them, she'd added, her growing irritation evident, "The Celtic horse goddess, you twits. Honestly, sometimes I think you're both illiterate idiots."

Still, she'd helped them put together togas, of a sort, transfigured out of their bedsheets and draped over nothing but bare chests and their pants because Ron, damn him, wanted to at least be historical. Harry thinks it's more that Ron thought it great fun to walk around Hogwarts flashing his freckled pectorals, but his objections had been drowned out by both Ron and Hermione, surprisingly enough--Harry suspects she just wanted to see her boyfriend prance about half-naked in front of the professors--so now Harry's stuck with a toga that's hard to keep shut, particularly in a terribly draughty castle. They'd cinched the folds of their togas at the waist with cord and decided to go barefoot--also a bloody tactical mistake.

So now Harry's stood alone, shivering and awkward, against the cold stone wall of the castle whilst Ron and Hermione dance to the latest Lorcan d'Eath single that's been all over the WWN since July. And if Harry's seen Gin out there as well, dancing with Michael Corner whilst her brother glares at her a few feet away, what's that to him? She can do whatever she wants now. Harry has nothing to say about it. Not here, at least.

He rubs his arms, trying to scrub away the gooseflesh on his skin. There are grates on the opposite side of the room, and Harry thinks about crossing closer to the fire, even if it means having to push his way through the throng of dancing students. The ghosts are set up there at an honorary table, with plates of food and cups of mead. They can't eat or drink them, but they can toast each other and pantomime being among the living again, and Harry thinks that's at least a small modicum of pleasure for them all, even if the Bloody Baron's looking a bit grim. Then again, that could be his anticipation of Nearly Headless Nick's annual Deathday party.

The teachers are spread out around the edges of the room watching them all, Ravi and Professor Omolade in one corner, their heads bent together as they laugh, McGonagall and Flitwick in another, sharp gazes sweeping over the room, Sprout and Sinistra edging across the dance floor and nudging couples apart when they're dancing too close together. Not all of the staff are here--most had escaped the Great Hall the moment the Feast itself ended--and Harry assumes the ones who are would rather be anywhere else.

Harry tugs on his toga, trying to get the folds to lie properly, instead of sliding to the side and giving the whole school a good glimpse of his y-fronts. The thing about the costume is, Harry's also worried
he might get an erection—hence his refusal to go anywhere near the dance floor, particularly when
the music slows—and it'd be bloody impossible to hide anything like that in this get-up, although the
cold should help, Harry hopes. Although he doesn't really think anything could keep him from
popping wood with how randy he's been these past days, especially if he brushed up against one of
the Eighth Year girls. Parkinson, say, with those spectacular tits of hers on display, or Susan Bones,
tall and elegant with her red-gold hair plaited around her head, sprigs of purple aconite woven
through it. Not that Harry'll admit it, but they've both featured in his fantasies since Ginny threw him
over. More than once, to his shame. Harry now spends most of his time fuming or wanking, or
thinking about wanking, and trying not to throw a strop. Talking to Ron helps, but he doesn't really
think there's much to say. Hermione's dead useless, with her theory about his avoiding his emotions.
She's wrong that everyone can solve anything by talking, Harry thinks, rubbing his arms again in a
vain attempt to stay warm.

"All right there, Harry?" Luna asks. She's dressed as a radish with a lovely green headdress that
looks like a radish top and a red dress that shades into white with long filaments hanging off it at the
bottom. She's also barefoot, but she doesn't look at all cold.

"Yeah." Harry smiles over at her, his teeth clattering a bit. "Hogwarts is just bloody colder than I
remember."

Luna pulls her wand, and Harry flinches. He doesn't know what happens, but suddenly, he's almost
dizzy. The world tilts sideways, memories of shouts and clatters and sharp explosions swirling
around him. He can smell the acrid stench of curse smoke, feel the heat of the fires burning around
him, hear his name being screamed. Look out, Harry! He reaches out blindly, ducks against the wall,
his heart pounding, his throat tight.

And then it's gone, and Harry's stood there, clenching Luna's wand arm tightly at the wrist, pointing
her wand over his shoulder, away from his face, his breath ragged and uneven, his heart still a jagged
thud against his chest. Harry's suddenly embarrassed, certain he's overreacted somehow, but he
doesn't know why. He can't think straight; everything feels muddled and out-of-place in his mind.
Suddenly he's worried that people might've seen, might be watching him even now, murmuring
about how Harry Potter's gone round the bloody twist.

Then Luna smiles at him, soft and gentle, and Harry relaxes, his fingers slipping from her arm.
"Harry," Luna says lightly, and her gaze never leaves his face. "It's me. Luna. I wanted to cast a
warming charm for you because you're cold."

Harry nods, steps back a bit until the wall's solid again against his shoulders. There's a red mark on
Luna's wrist. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice sticking in his throat. He looks past her, towards the
dance floor. No one seems to be staring at them. No one seems to have even bloody noticed.

"Don't worry." Luna's face is so kind, but she's not asking anything of Harry, not wanting him to be
different, to be okay. He loves the fact that he can be who he is with her, even if that's three degrees
north of normal. "I startled you. I'm sorry, too."

"Not your fault." Harry slows his breath, the chill in the air brushing across his bare skin again. He
can barely feel his feet, his fingers. "I'd love the charm. I think I'm getting colder." It happens
sometimes with the panic.

"You're sure?" Luna asks

Harry nods, takes a deep breath, tries to trust Luna, even though she's going to point a wand at him
again. He could cast the charm himself, but they never hold long enough. Harry doesn't know why.
Even the one Hermione'd set on him when they'd come down for the Feast wore off a good twenty
minutes past.

"All right." In clear sight and with a lot of warning, Luna flicks her wand very slowly Harry's way. "Calor minimus."

Harry's skin is suffused with warmth, and he can think again. He rolls his shoulders, exhales. "Thanks, that's so much better. Being cold almost reminded me of being dead." He doesn't know what makes him add that last bit. He stills, feeling somewhat awkward. That night isn't something he talks about, those moments of being gone, of standing in the middle of a whited-out King's Cross, making the decision about whether to go on or come back to his body.

To be honest, Harry's still not certain he made the right choice.

Luna takes a quick breath. "Is it a sad memory?" There's something soft in her eyes, something almost wistful in her expression. Harry wonders if she's thinking about her mum.

Harry thinks for a moment, feeling somehow as if he owes her a real answer, not his usual flippant brush-off. He remembers how real he felt, standing beside Dumbledore. Realer than he feels now in his body. He'd been Harry, the deepest essence of himself distilled into that one moment, and Harry doesn't really know how to express that, to tell anyone else how that felt, how easy it would have been to leave, how much he wanted to, how he'd felt so fully himself for the first time in his life, so in control of who he was and what he could do. In a way, he misses that. But no one really understands. Harry thinks it frightens them, thinking about the fact that Harry could have walked away from them all. Ron'd told him this summer over a bottle of firewhisky they'd shared in the back garden of the Burrow that he wouldn't have forgiven Harry if he hadn't come back.

Now Harry feels guilty for wishing he'd stayed.

Harry looks over at Luna, at her pointed, curious face that reminds him a bit of Malfoy's. When Malfoy's not being a giant bastard, which is practically never. He shrugs, runs a hand through his messy curls. "Not really," he says finally, and he wonders how much of that is a lie. "It's just odd." He nods to the wide stone fireplace, barely visible through the wispy bodies of the Baron and Nick and the Fat Friar. "Who knows, maybe I would have been up there with the other ghosts."

And wouldn't that have been strange? Harry wonders what it'd be like to haunt Hogwarts, to have stayed seventeen forever, like Myrtle had, watching the generations come after you, envying them their chance to leave, to go out in the world again and have a life.

For a moment he thinks Luna's going to protest his morbidity, but she just glances over at the ghosts' table, and smiles faintly. "It wouldn't have been too terrible, I think. They're all lovely, even the Baron if you know how to take him." She turns back to Harry. "I was going to get some of the punch. I think there's hot chocolate if you'd like."

Harry shakes his head. He needs to get out of here, at least for a little bit. The Great Hall's starting to feel oddly small, oddly crowded, and that constriction's back in his chest again, a tight band that's making it hard to breathe. "I think I'm going to go out into the corridor, get a little more air."

"Okay." Luna touches his arm, and Harry finds the brush of her fingers grounding. "Stay warm, Harry. And come find me if you do need another charm."

"Thanks. I will." Watching her slight, curious figure pass through the crowd gracefully, Harry marvels again at the wonder that's Luna. She's so completely on another level than everyone else, for better or worse, so tuned out at one moment, so present the next. Harry shakes his head, a smile quirking his mouth. He can't imagine his life without her in it, if he's honest. Luna's steadying,
"Eyeing your next romantic victim, Potter?" A sharp, vicious drawl comes from quite close by. "It's just I'm not sure my cousin is buying what you're selling."

Harry turns, almost stunned. "Pardon."

It's Malfoy. He dressed in a filmy Grecian-style tunic with small wings that furl and unfurl at his shoulders, shifting with every movement he makes. A crown of poppies is crooked on his blond hair, and he looks for all the world like a debauched angel. Opaque sleeves cover his arms, the white fabric bound to Malfoy's skin by long golden serpents that coil around his biceps, stopping at his elbows whilst the sleeves continue, narrowing the closer they get to his wrists, but the length of Malfoy's long legs is on display, well-turned calves ending in a pair of strappy gilt sandals that Harry thinks belong to Parkinson based on the way Malfoy's toes poke out over the end. The look on Malfoy's face is scathing.

"I was wondering if you're thinking of getting a leg over Lovegood," Malfoy says, and his voice is bitterly harsh. "Odd creature that she is, I suspect she's still smart enough to turn you down, but I'm sure you could have your pick of anyone else. Every girl in Hogwarts seems to be panting after you. Pans and Millie excluded, of course, because they've taste, after all." Malfoy's lips twist in a sneer as he gestures towards the clusters of students on the dance floor. Harry's also bloody certain Malfoy's been drinking. The seventh year Slytherins supposedly smuggled a cache of spirits back into the castle after the Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry eyes Malfoy's flushed cheeks and glassy-eyes speculatively.

"Are you ratted, Malfoy?" Harry's angry, but he's trying to keep it in check. It wouldn't do to start a fistfight at a school feast. The professors don't seem to be paying attention, but they will if anything happens. "Or just a sodding prat?"

Malfoy rolls his eyes and leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed. "Possibly both, Potter." The admission surprises Harry. Malfoy gives him a disdainful look, his gaze sweeping Harry from head to toe. "But what the fuck is it to you?"

The multiple layers of Malfoy's tunic are sheer enough that Harry can see the pink bumps of his nipples through the fabric. The sleek, gauzy material clings to the bones of his narrow hips, drapes across the slight curve of his arse, the cotton of his pants, and Harry suddenly remembers how Malfoy looks naked, his skin wet from the shower. He blushes, attempts to shrug that image off, but he feels his cock start to stir. Fuck. What the bloody hell is wrong with him? This is Malfoy, for Christ's sake, and he's a boy. Harry doesn't understand this, doesn't know what it means. He's still not half-certain Malfoy didn't put a hex on him, didn't make Harry react to his body just for the bloody humiliation of it all. Fucking bastard, Harry thinks, and he adjusts the belt of his toga, praying that he stays only half-hard.

"Nothing," Harry says finally. "I was just wondering what the hell you were supposed to be."

"Hypnos, god of sleep," Malfoy attempts a bow, but nearly tips over when he does. Definitely pissed, Harry thinks. McGonagall will have bloody kittens if she finds out. Malfoy steadies himself, then gives Harry another scathing once-over. "And you're a house elf, I presume."

"It's a fucking toga, you twat." Harry tugs at his tunic again, praying that it stays tied and doesn't shift weirdly, that the ridiculous folds of the bedsheet--heavy white cotton printed with small rosy-brown flowers--will keep the slight swell of his prick in check. He feels oddly exposed under Malfoy's sharp gaze, not to mention the strange effect Malfoy's outfit is having on him. "Why are you dressed like a ponce? Isn't it bad enough that you're being bullied in normal clothing?" He regrets the
comment the moment he's said it, but it's true, he thinks, and he hates that he's worried even the slightest bit about Malfoy of all bloody people.

Malfoy's face hardens; he lifts his chin. "I am as I am, Potter. Ponce and all, or whatever the hell your lot's saying about me now. It doesn't matter how I dress. This is me." Then he eyes Harry up and down again. "Fuck me, but don't you look a right horror. Put a pair of floppy ears on you and you'd make the perfect elf, wouldn't you? Except even Dobby in Hogwarts hand-me-downs looked better than whatever the fuck that is you're wearing." Malfoy waves his hand dismissively. "I'd throw a sock at you just to make you get out of my sight."

Maybe it's the mention of Dobby, maybe it's the fear of Malfoy seeing his erection or the anger that's been brewing in Harry's chest all week, the weird quiver in Harry's stomach at Malfoy's declaration about who he is, but he suddenly wants nothing more than to smash Malfoy's face in. His fists ball at his sides. "Don't. Fucking. Say. Anything. About. Dobby. You. Giant. Git." He's shaking, the words spitting out in a furious, staccato rush.

To Harry's surprise, Malfoy laughs. "Or what, Potty?" He moves closer; Harry can smell the firewhisky on his breath now. "You going to rough me up, play pin the tail on the Death Eater with the rest of the Gryffindors? Go ahead." Malfoy spreads his arms. "It's not like anyone will stop you. Maybe Ravi eventually, because he's a decent enough sort, but no one will back him. Not McGonagall. Not anyone. You can pound me into the floor if you choose." His mouth twists, and he shifts closer, his eyes bright and hot. "I bet Corner and Claverdon will help you, if you like. Give me a good going-over--"

To his everlasting shame, Harry tackles Malfoy, dragging him to the floor, and starts punching him, his fists landing painfully on Malfoy's sternum, then his jaw. Malfoy squirms beneath Harry, scratching and biting as they wrestle each other in a tangle of arms and thighs.

Malfoy scrapes his nails along Harry's arm, clouts him on the ear. The pain is only goading Harry on. He doesn't really want to hurt Malfoy--most of his awkward attempts to hit him aren't landing--but he also doesn't want to stop. He feels alive right now. Gloriously, viciously alive, all his anger at the world coming out to settle on Malfoy. They tussle, rolling across the floor. Malfoy is surprisingly strong and quick--Harry gets a bony elbow in his ribs, as he tries to pin Malfoy, and the breath goes out of Harry for a moment.

The blast of magical energy that hits them both is so intense, it blows Harry backwards several feet. Malfoy just lies there, his tunic shredded, his crown in a pile of blood red petals on the floor. Harry's right ear hurts and there's a scratch on his face that stings. His toga's askew, his tanned thigh exposed between the folds of the white sheet. Malfoy has a bruise on his cheekbone and his bottom lip is swollen and bleeding a bit; a pang of guilt wrenches in Harry's chest.

"Malfoy. Potter. Come with me immediately." Ravi's furious face is one of the more frightening things Harry's ever seen. Harry pushes himself to his feet without a word as Ravi helps Malfoy up. Malfoy's left sleeve is ripped, and the Mark is almost visible. He's holding the sides together desperately, but the students who've left the dance floor to gather around them are whispering. What about, Harry's not certain, but Harry puts himself between them and Malfoy, blocking the git as best he can from their curious stares. Harry sees Hermione's worried face in their midst, and he turns away to follow Ravi out, adjusting his bedsheets and hoping that the entire school hasn't just seen his pants.

This certainly isn't one of his finer moments. Even the ghosts are scowling at him, but Harry doesn't care. It felt good to wrestle with Malfoy, to let loose some of that fury inside of him. He's breathing hard, his face is heated, and for the first time in weeks, Harry feels brill as he walks beside a sullen
"Did I hurt you?" Harry asks as they go down the dungeon steps, to Ravi's office, Harry assumes. Malfoy just gives him a baleful look. "Fuck off, Potter."

Harry falls silent, an angry weight settling back on his shoulders. Christ, but Malfoy's a complete shit sometimes, Harry thinks, and he wants to slam Malfoy up against the wall again. He's not that stupid, though. Not with Ravi a pace or two in front of them.

Ravi stops at his office door, slamming it open. "Get in," he says tightly, his body practically quaking with suppressed fury. Malfoy looks chagrined, and he slinks in. Harry keeps his head up, meeting Ravi's eye as he walks in after Malfoy.

The door slams shut behind the three of them, and Ravi stalks past them, shucking off his robe and throwing it towards a hook on the wall. It must be charmed because the robe falls perfectly on it. Ravi pushes up the sleeves of his black jumper, loosens the collar of his white shirt beneath it, then drops into the padded leather chair behind his desk. He looks up at them, scowling, his thick brows drawn together.

"You're both fucking arseholes," Ravi says, and his bluntness takes Harry aback. "Sit." He flicks his wand at two straight-backed wooden chairs pushed up against the wall; they come sliding out, nearly knocking both Harry and Malfoy over as they skitter up behind them. Harry sits; so does Malfoy. Ravi glares at them both. "What the hell was that little display out there?"

"Potter's obviously a menace to the school," Malfoy says hotly, a hand on his side. Harry doesn't know if he's really hurt or just faking it to get Harry in worse trouble. He suspects the latter, and he rolls his eyes.

"Malfoy's no respect for the dead," Harry counters, and a twist of anger ripples through him again at the thought of Dobby. His fists clench in his lap. He can feel the weight of Dobby's lifeless body in his arms, and if it weren't for fucking Malfoy in the first place and his stupid fucking family, Dobby wouldn't be buried at Shell Cottage. Harry's throat closes up; hot tears prickle at the corners of his eyes, and he looks away, trying to keep himself under control.

"It was a bloody house elf," Malfoy protests, and then Harry's on his feet, reaching for Malfoy. "Enough!" There's a blue burst of light, and Harry's chair zips to one side of the office, Harry's bum back in it as Malfoy's chair slides to the other. Harry tries to stand up; he only gets an inch or two off the uncomfortable wooden seat before he's pulled against it again. Ravi's breathing hard, his face twisted in a vicious grimace as he turns an icy gaze on both of them. "Malfoy, you're obviously being a prick." Harry gives Malfoy a self-satisfied scowl, but before he can say anything, Ravi adds, "And Potter, you're not any better. Worse even, I'd say, because you're making all this idiocy physical." He runs a hand through his thick, black hair. "Merlin, the two of you. The inability to be bloody self-aware is ridiculously high for you both, isn't it?"

Malfoy's mouth thins a bit. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ravi gives him an even look. "Perhaps you'll figure it out before the year ends." He points a finger at Malfoy. "You're pissed."

It's Malfoy's turn to look away. "I'm not."

"You smell like a fucking vat of Ogden's," Harry says; that earns him a savage scowl from the git.
"Not helping, Potter." Ravi eyes Harry. "Don't make me put a gag spell on you as well."

"Please do." Malfoy shifts in his chair, still trying to hold the torn edges of his sleeve together. He's doing a good job, Harry thinks. If he hadn't already seen the Mark, he wouldn't know it was there. "A gagged Potter is the best Potter."

Ravi buries his face in his hands with what sounds like a weary snort. "So very not self-aware," he mumbles into them. "Fucking bloody hell, how am I going to survive the two of you?"

Both Malfoy and Harry give him a blank look. Frankly, Harry doesn't know what the fuck Ravi's on about. He's not certain he wants to. He looks around the office that once had been occupied by Snape, then by Slughorn. It feels different in here. The furniture's still the same, the heavy walnut desk stained dark, the leather chair, the small sofa to the side, the bookcases stretched from floor to ceiling. But the sofa has an orange and pink knitted afghan draped over the arm, and instead of the bookcases being filled with dusty tomes and jars of creepy potions ingredients like newt skins and dragon eyes, there are books with brightly coloured jackets, some of which seem to be Muggle in origin, as well as framed pictures of people Harry doesn't recognise but assumes are Ravi's family. They smile out of the frames, one of them even waving Harry's way. A few are perfectly still, including one of a stately older woman with short silver hair, dressed in a deep blue sari, and it takes Harry a moment to realise those are Muggle photographs.

"I'm sure we've no idea what you mean," Malfoy starts to say, and then the door to Ravi's office swings open, and an irate McGonagall sweeps in, slamming it behind her. Ravi lowers his hands.

"Minerva," Ravi says, but even he hesitates when she turns that tart scowl of hers on him.

"I trust you've punished the boys," McGonagall says, and there's a sharp, unhappy glint in her eyes. Her mouth thins as she looks between Harry and Malfoy. "Severely."

Ravi leans forward, his elbows on his desk. "We hadn't quite come to that part yet, but I've an idea, if you'll approve it."

"Potter's marks in Potions are abysmal," Ravi says, and he snaps his fingers twice at Harry, then Malfoy when Harry starts to protest and Malfoy laughs. "Don't start with me, either of you," he says with a frown before looking back at McGonagall. "And since they appear to utterly loathe each other, I can't think of any better punishment than to make them endure each other's company until they reach a few inner truths about the…" He hesitates, then says, his eyes fixed on McGonagall's face, one eyebrow going up. "Adversarial, shall we say, nature of their interactions?"

McGonagall snorts, and Harry almost thinks she's amused. "It's a very Slytherin way of dealing with the situation," she says to Ravi, ignoring both Harry and Malfoy. "But effective."

"You can't be serious," Malfoy bursts out. "I already have to share a dormitory--"

"And you'll be tutoring Potter in Potions now," McGonagall says, and Harry shakes his head violently.

"No." Harry looks up at the Headmistress. "Please, ma'am, I'll kill him."

McGonagall's eyebrow goes up even higher. "I rather think you won't, Mr Potter." Her gaze flicks towards Ravi. "You'll keep me abreast of developments then?"

"I'll be certain to," Ravi says, and his mouth twitches to one side. "Malfoy's top of his class; I can't
imagine Potter's marks won't improve."

"Of course," McGonagall says drily, then she glances at Harry. "You'll start after this weekend. I know the both of you well enough to give you tomorrow to sulk."

And that's not really fair, is it, Harry thinks with a scowl. None of it is. He doesn't want to be bloody tutored by Malfoy; if Hermione can't help Harry's Potions marks, then Malfoy's certainly not going to be able to. And Harry'll have to put up with the pretentious twat. He groans and slumps in his chair, his legs spread, his back curved. It hurts, but Harry doesn't care. This year is complete bollocks. His only consolation is that Malfoy looks as miserable as Harry feels.

"Well, then," Ravi says. "Twice a week tutoring, and Malfoy, I'll expect reports on your progress." He looks at Harry. "And you'll expect to actually brew a decent potion for once."

"I'm starting to miss Snape," Harry mutters, almost beneath his breath, but Ravi just gives him a small, tight smile.

"You'll thank me later," Ravi says. "But for now, get the bloody hell out of my office."

They've nearly made it to the door when McGonagall adds, "And Mr Malfoy, I'm certain you'll be pleased to know that Professor Omolade's located the Slytherin stash of firewhisky you seem to have enjoyed. Appropriate punishments will be meted out for that as well."

Malfoy huffs out a quiet fuck, his hand on the doorknob. He looks back at her. "I'll take them all. It's my fault--"

"No," McGonagall says, almost gently. "It's not. I'll require a night of detention for your drinking on school grounds, though. You know better. You may be of age, but others are not, and you know the rules." Her gaze slides over to Harry. "I expect all of the Eighth Years to be above reproach. The younger students look up to you, so I would encourage you to use this tutoring time to come to terms with the issues that remain between the both of you." A quiet sadness slides over her face, and she sighs. "Perhaps if they can see you put your differences aside, they might follow."

Shame settles deep in Harry, an unpleasant curl that he'd rather ignore, but he can't. He ducks his head, looks away.

And then Malfoy's pulling the door open, and Harry follows him through, not bothering to look back at Ravi and McGonagall. If he lets the door slam shut behind him, well, it's not his fault if the bloody thing's heavy, is it?

Malfoy turns on him, the moment the door closes. "This is all your fault, Potter," he snaps, and the bruise on his cheek is darker than it was at first. He takes a step towards Harry. "You bloody wanker--"

Harry catches both of Malfoy's wrists before Malfoy shoves him, and they stand there together for a moment, leaning into one another, almost as if they're about to embrace, Malfoy's skin warm and soft beneath Harry's fingers. Harry's heart thuds erratically; he can feel the quickening of Malfoy's pulse against his thumb, see the delicate flutter of Malfoy's lashes as Malfoy pulls himself away.

"You're an arsehole," Malfoy says, but his voice has a raw, broken roughness to it now, and he turns away from Harry. "Just leave me be." And he's moving down the hallway, quickly, the soles of Parkinson's gilt sandals clacking against the stone floor, the tattered side of Malfoy's tunic fluttering open just enough for Harry to get a glimpse of a pale thigh, of white pants.

Harry feels wrung out. Tired. He doesn't want to go back upstairs, doesn't want to face down the
curious looks he's going to get from the others, the stream of worried questions Hermione will throw at him, the glee Ron'll have at Harry pounding the bollocks out of Malfoy at last. Harry runs his hands over his face, pushing his glasses up, then letting them fall back against the bridge of his nose. Merlin, but he's an idiot, he thinks, and he watches Malfoy disappear around the corner, feeling oddly bereft.

Air, Harry thinks. He needs air, and a cuppa with maybe a splash or two of firewhisky of his own. Hagrid'll have his door open. Harry knows that. And Hagrid's always willing for company, expected or not.

Somehow Harry walks, his bare feet shuffling down the hallway. He doesn't even feel the cold any longer. He doesn't really care. Everything feels as if it's crashing down around him, pulling him under. Ginny. Malfoy. The anger and grief and… Harry stops himself. There are things he's not certain he wants to look at. Not too closely.

Right now he wants the warmth of Hagrid's fire, the comfort of his conversation. Hagrid will understand, Harry thinks, as he heads for the opposite end of the corridor and the staircase. Hagrid won't be disappointed in him.

Well. Not terribly, at least.

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Soft skin, the brush of silken hair. Long pale fingers smoothing over Harry's jaw.

He shifts, his prick responding. She smells like citrus and something warm. Musky, even, and Harry's already half-hard. Somewhere the back of his mind knows this isn't real, that he's dreaming, that the firewhisky-laced tea Hagrid gave him is responsible for this, but he doesn't mind. His body feels as if it's on fire; the dream lets it arch up, press against long thighs and muscular arms.

The girl's hair drags over Harry's cheek as she leans in, her teeth nipping at Harry's throat. She straddles his hips, presses her arse down against him, letting his prick slide up between her cheeks, and Harry groans in his sleep, wanting nothing more than to push himself inside of her, to roll her over and slam her into the mattress, to bite at her lips, kiss her until she's breathless as he tells her what a cocktease she is.

She laughs in his ear, warm and husky. Her hands catch Harry's, pulling his arms up over his head. You want this, she whispers in a low, oddly familiar voice, and all Harry can do is nod. He wants her, wants to run his hands down her back, over her narrow hips, her flat chest, wants to rock up against her, to feel her wetness against him.

All right, she says, and her fingers drift down his forearms, her teeth scrape the soft skin beneath his jaw. You can have me.

Harry reaches for her, rolls her over beneath him, surprisingly deft and not awkward in his dream in a way he'd never been in reality with Gin, and she turns her face, her hair falling over her cheek. He wants to see her, wants to watch her as he ruts up against her, and he pulls her leg up, around his waist.

And then he stills.

She's hard against him, and then she turns her head, and it's not a girl, it never has been a girl. It's Malfoy, with that silver-gilt hair of his spread across Harry's pillow, his long and lanky body beneath Harry, one leg hooked behind Harry's arse. Potter, he says, and the way he looks up at Harry makes
Harry's prick twitch, and then Malfoy's moving his hips up, his cock sliding slickly over Harry's, and the sensation makes Harry moan, just as Malfoy's fingers tangle in Harry's hair, pulling him down into a maddeningly slow kiss.

*You want this,* Malfoy says again, this time against Harry's lips, and fuck, but Harry does. He can't stop the press of his hips forward, the way his body moves against Malfoy's, with Malfoy's, and God it feels good, and Harry can't stop himself, not when Malfoy's legs are wrapped around his hips, his hands in Harry's hair, and his prick is hot and thick against Harry's prick.

"Please," Harry chokes out, and then Malfoy's fingernails are on his shoulders, scraping down his skin, and Malfoy's breathing hard, shuddering against Harry, his gasps coming in ragged bursts, his skin flushed, sweaty. Harry pushes himself up, just enough to look down at Malfoy, to watch him as he arches up against Harry, his face twisted in pleasure, his soft cry filling Harry's ears.

Harry can't help himself. One last push of his hips, and he's crying out as well, his whole body shaking with the intensity of his release, his toes pressed into the mattress. He breathes out, raspy and rough, and he feels the sheet pressed against his face, the twist of it around his hips as he wakes up, the remnants of the dream only just starting to fade, his spunk sticking his pyjama pants to his thighs. He lies there for a long moment, breathing hard, coming down from the sex dream.

It's never been like this before. At least not since the first time he'd had one, back when he was fifteen and thinking about Cho's tits. He's never made this much of a mess, never been this bloody turned on, never wanted to reach down and pull his prick again, certain that he could spill all over his hand in less than a heartbeat.

Harry rolls off the wet spot, flops over onto his back. There are still small shudders going through his body, and it's all he can do to keep his hands off himself. He stares up at the hangings of his bed, hoping that no one heard him. There's no sound other than the faint snores of his roommates. Please, he thinks, let them have all been asleep.

He closes his eyes. Exhales.

"Jesus," Harry murmurs, and then his eyes fly open again as the realisation hits. He just had a sex dream about Draco sodding Malfoy.

And he's not even bent.

"Fuck." Harry sits up, sticky and sweaty and suddenly sure he's lost his bloody mind. He stares across the room at the silent, closed hangings on Malfoy's bed. Harry doesn't even know if Malfoy's lying there, listening to him. He hasn't seen him since Malfoy left Ravi's office. He hasn't seen much of anyone, really. Harry'd come back from Hagrid's a bit soused from Hagrid's heavy hand with the tipple and crawled into bed in an already darkened room. He hadn't even stirred when the others came in.

Harry's hands are shaking. It doesn't mean anything, he tells himself. It was just a dream. That's all. A fucked-up way of his brain replaying his tussle with Malfoy. And Malfoy's loose hair and long legs on display tonight hadn't helped, Harry's certain. None of that means Harry's bent. None of it means Harry wants Malfoy beneath him like that.

Except his prick swells a bit at the thought, if Harry's honest.

He falls back against his pillows with a soft groan. *Fuck me,* he thinks.

It's finally bloody happened. Harry James Potter's gone mental.
The Hogwarts library is much as Harry remembers it from sixth year, although he doesn't recognise many of the faces at the tables now. Also, he wonders if maybe it's just his memory playing tricks on him, but everyone seems so young. The first and second years are tiny and rumpled, laughing in the corners, despite the frowns Madam Pince is giving them. Even the older students feel like children to Harry, little ones growing into gangly limbs and spotted faces. He doesn't feel as if he fits in with any of them, if he's honest, but then again he never really has. As much as Harry loves Hogwarts, as much as it feels like home to him, there's always been a bit of distance between him and many of the other students. Some of it's his fault, he thinks. Harry knows he's never been incredibly good with other people, with what they expect him to be. Harry's quieter than they'd like, more introverted in a way. When people think of the Saviour of the Wizarding World, they want Harry to be a bombastic figure, an arrogant yet friendly prat. That's never been Harry. He'd learnt at an early age to lie low, to keep his head down, to take care of himself.

But shy Saviours perplex people, make them uncomfortable. Harry's discovered that much in recent months.

He makes his way through the rows of tables. The reading lights cast a warm, soft glow over the books, parchments, and intent faces bent over homework assignments. Although it's just past seven, the sky beyond the mullioned windows is pitch black and has been for several hours. November in the Highlands isn't a forgiving month.

When Harry approaches the desk, Madam Pince fixes him with a keen look. Her tortoiseshell reading glasses are perched on her long, thin nose, and her soft black velvet hat is worn at the edges, but immaculately clean. She's sorting through a stack of dog-eared paper slips, and her slim-fingered hands pause as she gives him her attention.

"Mr Potter. I haven't seen Ms Granger or Mr Weasley all evening." The look on her face suggests surprise at seeing Harry here, and to be honest, Harry thinks that's fair. He hasn't asked for materials or settled down to work at a library table at all this term, preferring to have Hermione bring him any necessary books as she's usually camped out at the chairs in the far corner under the windows with the central stained glass rose. And last year, well. That's a laugh, yeah? It hadn't really been a year for much more than fighting Death Eaters and avoiding death. And sleeping for months in a tent in the forest, eating tinned beans and burnt toast over a campfire, which Harry now recalls with loathing. It's bloody brill to have indoor plumbing and decent food, not to mention a warm bed again, even if he has to share a room with other boys. And Malfoy.

"Hullo, Madam Pince." Harry ducks his head towards the older witch with salt and pepper hair pulled back into a soft twist at the nape of her neck. She has a prim mouth that turns down at the corners, but the laugh lines around her eyes keep her from appearing truly severe. Harry shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot, his fingers tight around the strap of his satchel. He's nervous about this, he realises. Especially in light of that bloody dream over the weekend. He draws in an unsteady breath, and says, "I'm supposed to be meeting someone else in a group room."

Pince's head tilts curiously, her eyebrows drawing together. "I see." She glances down at the notebook on her desk filled with sign-ins for the small group rooms in the back of the library, then
Her gaze flicks back up to Harry. "With Mr Malfoy?" She sounds a bit incredulous, and her mouth purses slightly when Harry nods. "Well." She hesitates, then adds, "I sincerely hope the two of you recognise this space is meant for revision, not duelling."

Her voice carries a bit in the silence of the library, and Harry feels his face heat as heads turn his way. "Yes'm," he says, and he chews on his lip. He's hoping Malfoy won't be a prick tonight, but it's probably a lost cause already.

The looks she gives him is already exasperated. Harry knows he's not one of Pince's favourites as it is. Still, she just sighs and says, "Mr Malfoy signed into group room number two a little while ago. If you'd like to join him, walk down the stacks here and cross over at Tudor Magic. It's back there at the end, past the reference portrait of Samuel Johnson."

"Thank you." Harry can feel the librarian's eyes boring into his back as he walks away. He glances up to the large wooden clock with the Roman numerals and chipped enamelled face hanging above the tall wooden shelves. It's only eight minutes past seven.

When he reaches the open door of the small room with a metal 2 hanging above it, Harry catches a glimpse of Malfoy's long, pale hair, falling like light across his face. Harry pauses for a moment, watching Malfoy fiddle with a green feathered quill. He's got several books spread out in front of him, and he's biting his bottom lip, frowning down at one of them. The sconces in the room are bright and welcoming, casting a golden glow across the table, across Malfoy's porcelain skin. Harry's mouth is suddenly dry; he thinks of the way Malfoy had moved against him in his dream and swallows. He knows he has to go in. Shifting his satchel, he crosses the remaining distance to the door.

Malfoy looks up, a soft, open look on his face that shifts to a scowl as he identifies Harry. "You're late, you pillock."

"Sorry." Harry tosses his satchel to the floor, throwing himself into the heavy wooden chair opposite Malfoy. "Have you been waiting long?"

At that, Malfoy just shrugs, his face bland and bored. He's tapping the quill against the table, though, so Harry assumes he's irked. "Not more than twenty minutes."

To be honest, Harry doesn't care. He rubs the back of his neck, uncertain as to what to say next. The door's open behind him; Harry wonders if he should close it. On the one hand, if Malfoy does try to hex him, someone would likely see it, but on the other, anyone who walks past can also see Harry sat in here with Malfoy. That has issues of its own.

"Are you going to pull out any parchment?" Malfoy asks, his voice sharp and a bit too loud for Harry's nerves.

Harry shrugs, reaching into his satchel. He has a new quill that helps him with his atrocious handwriting issues--Hermione'd helped him pick it out at Scrivenshaft's in Hogsmeade the other weekend--and the parchment is self-indexing, which would be great, Harry reckons, if he ever took proper notes.

Malfoy reaches for the thin book at the top of the stack, stroking its spine lightly before opening it to the second chapter. "This is the book Ravi's asked us to read on derivative effects in potions. Are you okay on Singh's theory of likeness and opposition?"

Harry has no idea what Malfoy's on about. "I suppose." He doesn't really want to admit to any deficiencies, although he supposes the very fact that he's here with Malfoy tutoring him speaks to his
inability to understand the slightest iota of magical theory when it comes to potionbrewing.

"You're a shit liar, Potter." Malfoy takes a deep breath, pinches the bridge of his nose. "I assume I'll have to start at the beginning."

It turns out that the beginning is much further back than Malfoy, or Harry even, expects. Since Harry'd been using Snape's book in sixth year and had really been average or so the other years--if one's being generous, Harry thinks--it's been a long time since Harry actually worked on the proper analysis of Potions theory. Forty-five minutes after they'd started, Harry's sat blankly in his chair, feeling as tired as if he'd played an entire Quidditch match. His brain hurts; he's fairly certain Malfoy's tried to cram too fucking much into it.

"Honestly, Potter, I can't bloody believe you passed an O.W.L. in this subject," Malfoy mutters, a splotch of black ink on his lip from where he's brushed it with the nib of his quill. The page in front of him is full of lists and arrows. "Bloody Gryffindor favouritism."

"Oi, that's unfair." Harry's worn out enough to feel stroppy again. "Snape favoured you lot above everyone else."

Malfoy shrugs. "He was our Head of House. And we were the only people who didn't hate him."

They both pause for a moment. The room's silent as their eyes meet.

"Ironic, yeah?" Harry manages, oddly caught by the look of grief on Malfoy's face. "When you think about who's side he was working for in the end." Not yours, he wants to add, but he doesn't need to.

Malfoy jerks, his shoulders hunching in, and Harry almost feels sorry for him. Malfoy looks away, his fingers twisting his quill, almost as if he's oblivious to the black ink staining his skin. "Severus was always there for me," Malfoy says after a moment, his voice quiet, "whatever side we were on. I miss him."

Harry looks down at his own hands, remembers the fear, the surprise, the end. The way Snape's eyes had gone dull, vacant, that angry, biting spark slipping away. Harry's chest constricts, more images of that deadly, dark night last May beginning to swell in his mind. He can't afford to let them in, can't afford to get sucked under. He's afraid of drowning in the past, of never coming back out to the surface. He draws in a ragged breath, clenches his fingers on the edge of the table, so tightly they hurt. "I watched him die," Harry whispers, and he's not certain Malfoy hears him at first. "It's my fault--"

"Potter, he would mock you for being an imbecile right now, you know that." Malfoy's sharp voice brings Harry back to the present, but there's something awkwardly understanding about the quick look Malfoy gives Harry before he turns back to the notes he's been making. "Both of us, likely. So let's try to work on your troll-like grasp of Potions before Ravi feeds us both to the Squid."

"He wouldn't." Actually, Harry's not sure of that at all. Not after this weekend. He watches Malfoy tuck a lock of blond hair back behind one ear, a fluid easy move that makes Harry shiver with something deep and primal, something that Harry's not comfortable putting a name to. He looks away.

"You never know," Malfoy says, and he pushes the page of notes towards Harry. "He's new and Merlin only knows what kind of bollocks the Americans got up to at Ilvermorny. He's not been beaten down by the ways of Hogwarts schoolchildren."

Harry snorts. "As if either of us are children." There's a noise in the hallway; Harry glances around
to see two third-year Ravenclaws looking in on them, their books clutched to their chests.

"When will you be done?" one of the girls--the taller one, with plaited brown hair--says. "Only we've a Transfiguration essay to work on."

"An essay that isn't due until Friday, Charlotte," Malfoy says with a scowl, and Harry wonders why Malfoy's keeping up with the younger students' assignments. "So bugger off and find someplace else to work." Charlotte flips two fingers Malfoy's way, and he rolls his eyes. "Blame Potter's ignorance," Malfoy calls out after them as they stomp off. "If he weren't so bloody thick, we'd have been done by now."

Harry just gives Malfoy a baleful glare; Malfoy shrugs. "Wanker," Harry says.

"You're wretched at this," Malfoy says. He points to a section of the notes. "Let's go back to metallic correspondences and the calendar year. If you can't conquer this, you're well hopeless."

The rest of the time passes swiftly. Malfoy's a surprisingly good teacher, when he's talking about Potions, and Malfoy's obviously passionate about the subject. There's even a point where he stops insulting Harry's intelligence, and his eyes start shining as he gestures the more excited he gets about the theoretical skeleton of potionbrewing. Harry has to admit that sometimes, he's watching Malfoy more than he's paying attention to what he's saying, but he supposes it's the surprise of working with his former enemy. Or the curiosity Harry has about how Malfoy would feel against him, what he'd do if Harry reached over and ran a finger over the curve of his mouth. Harry feels his face heat; he looks away. Malfoy doesn't seem to notice in the least. Harry's glad, he tells himself. It doesn't bother him at all.

Malfoy's just started explaining elemental likeness when Madam Pince raps her knuckles on the door. "Time to leave, boys. I'm closing the doors in two minutes." Her eyebrow goes up. "I'm certain the two of you wouldn't care to be locked in the library alone together all night."

"Fuck, no," Malfoy says, ignoring Pince's frown at his language, and Harry can't be offended really, since it's the last thing he wants as well.

They both push themselves out of their chairs, packing their things hastily. Harry brushes shoulders with Malfoy as they both try to get through the door at the same time. They pause, suddenly both awkward, and then Harry steps back, letting Malfoy through first. And if he looks at the long, elegant curve of Malfoy's back as they make their way through the empty library, well, Harry supposes it's because they've both grown so much taller. That must be why his eyes are lingering. Right?

The heavy library doors slam shut on them just as they've made it out to the hallway. A puff of wind ruffles Malfoy's fine hair.

"She's not half-eager to be rid of us," Harry says, fiddling with the strap of his satchel. Now that they're standing back in the stone hall, whatever spell bound them in the group room is broken.

Malfoy shrugs. "I can't say I blame her." There's a weird, uneasy silence between the two of them for a moment, then Malfoy sighs and says, "I'm going to walk the other way." He turns, and Harry feels a curious, distant sense of loss. There's some part of him, Harry realises, that had been hoping they'd walk together to the Eighth Year dormitory, even if there wasn't anything for them to say.

When Malfoy is a few strides down the hall, Harry calls after him. "Malfoy." Malfoy hesitates, his step faltering, and Harry says, "Thank you."
It's enough to make Malfoy turn back for a moment and give Harry a startled, uneasy frown before disappearing around the bend to the Astronomy Wing stairs.

Harry watches him, his cheeks heated, his fists clenching. Fuck, but Malfoy drives him bloody mental. Why does the prat have to be a complete idiot? It'd been decent enough with Malfoy tonight, and then Harry'd gone and made it super awkward. Thanking him even. Merlin. Harry slumps against the wall. What a tit he'd been. Maybe he should quit school now and become a professional broom waxer. Surely that would be better than facing Malfoy again.

With a sigh, Harry pushes himself off the wall and takes the other way round, through the Middle Tower. He needs some time to recover from his own awkwardness.

And Malfoy's nearness, if he's perfectly truthful. And fuck but, Harry doesn't think he can actually afford to be honest with anyone about that, can he?

Perhaps not even with himself.

His footsteps echo softly in the silence of the corridor.

***

"About time," Blaise says as Draco comes out of the Alchemy classroom on Friday afternoon. He's slouched against the wall, his satchel at his feet. "The rest of your class left five minutes ago."

Draco's frowning down at a page in his notebook, underlining a few key bits as he walks. "Sorry," he says, a bit distracted. "I was just going over my calculations with Professor Skeat for the shrinking solutions I'm working on. I think I need to wait another day or two to harvest the next batch of Shrivelfigs." He closes his notebook and glances up. "I'm free for the rest of the afternoon, but I'm holing myself up in the library after dinner." He grimaces, thinking about Potter, and their purportedly twice-weekly tutoring sessions, of which they've only had one so far. He supposes he'll have to make time for another this weekend, since it doesn't look like Potter's going to bring it up, the sodding coward. "I haven't even started Omolade's essay on effective shielding charms."

"You're a bloody swot, old man," Blaise says, picking up his satchel, but the look he gives Draco is fond.

"I thought I told you not to call me that." Draco smiles over at Blaise, who just snorts and slides the strap of his satchel over his chest. They walk down the hall together, and Draco lets his shoulder bump Blaise's. His friends have been his rock lately, the one thing that's keeping him steady. Since his fight last weekend with Potter, the whole school's giving him a wide berth; hardly anyone's speaking to him except Pans, Millie and Blaise. Well, and Potter, Draco supposes, but that's only in tutoring, isn't it? Potter's still silent when they're in their room, and Draco's glad of that. He wants to be left alone, really. It's awkward when Finch-Fletchley decides he has to ask Draco how his day's gone or some such bollocks. Or worse yet, Goldstein or Boot. Draco doesn't need any of their pity.

The one good thing is that Claverdon and his lot seem to have backed down. Corner and Hopkins, too. Draco supposes it's something to do with Potter leaving him bruised and battered on Saturday. The alpha had gone after Draco, in a way. It must have put the others on their back foot. Perhaps Draco ought to thank Potter for that; he wonders idly what sort of thick look would cross the dullard's face if he did.

Later, Draco will ask himself if he jinxed it all, if somehow that thought opened the door for what happened. He knows it's mad, that it couldn't have, but still, perhaps it tempted fate in some ridiculous way.
The first curse strikes just over Draco's shoulder, nearly shattering the ear off a statue of Alberta Toothill in the alcove behind him. It startles Draco, but instead of running, he freezes, his pulse racing, his breath catching in the back of his throat. He catches a glimpse of Claverdon's face, twisted in fury, and behind him Michael Corner, who looks pale, almost terrified.

"Iain, don't," Corner's saying, but Claverdon's raised his wand again. "You said it was just a bit of silly buggers--a Jelly-Legs Jinx--"

"He ought to be in Azkaban," Claverdon snaps, pushing Corner off him; Corner staggers backward, into one of the burly Gryffindors that hang about with Claverdon. "Or dead." He's looking at Draco then, his eyes bright and furious. "My brother's not coming back ever, neither's your dad, but this fucking shit--" His wand sweeps broadly. "Diffindo!"

And then Draco's on the floor, his satchel spilling everywhere, and there's blood on his hand, and the sound of trainers running down the corridor, Corner shouting at Claverdon on the way.

There's no pain, Draco thinks blankly, and then he hears a soft, ragged gasp, and he turns his head. Blaise is sprawled across the corridor. His hand is pressed to his stomach, and there's blood on his fingers, seeping through his grey wool jumper. His gaze meets Draco's; his eyes are wide and stunned.

Draco scrabbles over to Blaise, pushes himself to his knees. "Blaise," he says, and he presses his hand over Blaise's sticky, reddened fingers. Blood's starting to fall onto the floor, thick, crimson droplets that roll across the scuffed wood. "Shit." Draco looks up and down the corridor. No one's there. "Help," he shouts. "Professor!" His voice rises, his panic setting in. "Help, please!"

And Skeat's coming out of his classroom, frowning at first, his greying dark hair flopping into his eyes, and then when he sees what's happened, he's running, his robe fluttering out behind him. He doesn't stop to ask questions; he scoops Blaise up in strong arms and wide shoulders. "Get McGonagall," he says, and he's moving already, Blaise making quiet, unhappy noises as his body jolts against Skeat's chest. Drops of blood spatter across the floor behind them, falling with each step Skeat takes.

All Draco can do is run for the Headmistress's office, hoping beyond hope that Claverdon's not lurking along the way.

***

"They've sent Iain home." Ron sits on the bench next to Hermione, across from Harry.

"For good?" Hermione asks, a faint dent appearing between her brows.

Ron shakes his head. "Sinistra says it's only for a fortnight for now." And the new Head of Gryffindor House ought to know, Harry thinks. He still thinks it odd that Sinistra holds that position; he'd never thought of her as anything other than the Astronomy professor. Harry'd never even realised she'd Sorted Gryffindor. Ron reaches over Hermione's arm and snags one of the Ice Mice she'd bought in Hogsmeade the weekend before last. He pops it in his mouth and chews. "Seems the Board of Governors has to vote to send him down permanently, and they're due to meet in November."

They're in the Great Hall, supposedly revising, but all anyone's been able to talk about is Claverdon's attack on Zabini. Some of Claverdon's lot are being arseholes about it all, saying he did nothing wrong, going after a Death Eater, except Zabini wasn't one, was he? Whether or not Claverdon
meant to get Malfoy, he managed to slice up Zabini instead, and Slytherin House are viciously furious. Harry's half-glad he's here at the Eighth Year table instead of with the Gryffindors; Professor Flitwick's already had to intervene twice in the past hour. Supper's going to be a bloody nightmare soon.

Harry's gaze drifts down the table, to where Malfoy and his gang usually sit. Their spots are empty right now; he's heard the other three of them are hovering around the infirmary until Madam Pomfrey tells them they can go in to see Zabini. Harry's been in that position more than once over the years; he knows how it feels to be the one pacing the corridor, waiting. He wonders what Malfoy's thinking right now, whether he feels guilty that Zabini was the one hit.

Really, whatever the Gryffindors are trying to say, Harry knows damned well that Malfoy was Claverdon's target--they all do--and the thought fills him with inexplicable rage. Malfoy's his enemy, dammit. Harry thinks for a second, before the realisation pulls him up short. He means Malfoy's his enemy doesn't he? Or does he? Because now Malfoy's his tutor as well. And, it's not like the dreams about Malfoy have exactly gone away, if Harry's honest with himself. Not at all, really. Oftener than not, when he's wanked this week, in the silence of the night, starting with thoughts of a beautiful pair of breasts or the curve of a thigh, he finishes himself off on hazy images of a sarcastic scowl across thin lips, silvered blond hair, and a pale, flat chest, nipples visible through sheer fabric. It's becoming a bit of a problem. Harry won't let himself admit it, won't let himself give in to the full visualisation, but he's aware that he's perilously close in his fantasies to coming to thoughts of Malfoy, as hard as he tries not to.

"Corner says he tried to stop him," Ron's saying, and Harry looks over at him, his eyes narrowing. "That Iain told him it was just going to be a hex or something. Not…" Ron's frown deepens. Harry knows he's a bit disturbed by what happened; Zabini's in his room after all, and Ron doesn't hate him. Not the way he hates Malfoy. Ron pushes his hair back out of his face. "Not that," he says finally. "Michael's not that sort, yeah?"

Harry's not so certain about that. He thinks of Corner and Hopkins a few weeks back, harassing Malfoy in the toilets. When Harry'd confronted him afterwards, Corner'd just laughed it off, told Harry to stop fretting about a bent wanker like Malfoy, that he deserves what he gets. Harry'd wondered what would have happened if he hadn't walked in, if Corner and Hopkins would have pushed it further, if they would have done something if not worse than what Claverdon did, then just as bad. He looks down at his Herbology text, the words blurring a bit. He wonders what they would think now, if they knew the dreams Harry's been having. It's fucked-up of him, he knows. He thinks of the words that Dudley and his friends used to throw around at each other. Poorer, bum bandit, pillow-biter. They'd laughed every time, mocking the poor bastard who was being roasted. Harry knows it's shit of him, but he doesn't want anyone to turn on him like that, to look at him in disgust, the way he's certain everyone would if they knew. Even Ron and Hermione. He's heard the things Ron says with his brothers, the way they tease each other, call each other nancy boy whilst roughhousing.

When Harry glances up, Hermione's watching him, a curious look on her face. "All right there, Harry?" she asks, and he just nods, rubs his palms against his trousers.

"Just…" Harry hesitates, then shrugs. "Just Claverdon's a shit, you know? He was back when we were sixth-years. Fucking wanker idolised Cormac McLaggen, for Christ's sake."

Ron looks disgusted. "And there's another one to give Gryffindor a bad name."

Hermione's still studying Harry in a way that makes him a bit nervous, as if she can see past what he's saying. He hates it when she does that. But then she sighs and closes her Arithmancy book. "I
need to go for a walk," she says, shoving it in her bag. "Do either of you want to come with me?"
She looks around the Great Hall, taking in the whispers and bent heads. "It's just I can't stand being
in here any longer. Not with all of this..." She trails off, then waves her hand towards the knots of
Gryffindors and Slytherins scowling at each other. She looks tired, worn out. "I'm just not sure we
went through all of what we did for this, you know?"

Harry does. His gaze flicks towards Ron, who's looking grim himself, and Harry wonders if maybe
the three of them are different from the others, if they're just sodding tired of fighting the same bloody
battles, whether with Unforgivables or words.

"Yeah," Ron says. "I need some air myself."

And Harry's grateful for the both of them. They're not perfect, him and Ron and Hermione. And
Harry knows he's angry with Malfoy in a way that he's not comfortable with. And maybe he thinks
that the Slytherins shouldn't have come back, that they shouldn't have expected to be treated any
other way. But still, he thinks, that doesn't mean going after any of them, not the way Claverdon has.

There's already been too much blood spilt in these corridors. Fuck if Harry'll let there be more.

He throws his books in his satchel and stands up. All he wants right now is to stand by the lake, to
breathe in the cool, crisp early November air. And when Ron drapes his arm around Harry's
shoulder, tugging him close, Harry doesn't object. He needs his friends now.

They help keep the ghosts at bay.

***

Draco turns when the door to the infirmary opens. Madam Pomfrey's stood there, and she gestures
towards the three of them. "You can see him for a few minutes, if you like."

Pansy's the first one to move, then Millie's after her, touching Draco's arm as she passes him. "Come
on," Mills says, only a little bit roughly, as if she knows that Draco's terrified to walk into that room.
It ought to have been him, he thinks. Not Blaise, and if the bloody idiot hadn't shoved Draco out of
the way, it would have been. Draco doesn't know what to think about that. He's never had anyone
other than his mother, and perhaps Severus, who's ever been that bloody self-sacrificial. He wouldn't
have ever expected it from Blaise.

He finally manages to make himself follow Pansy and Millie. Blaise is propped up on a plethora of
pristinely white pillows, looking a bit worn out and greyish around the edges, but he gives Draco a
faint smile.

"What are you?" Draco demands, his emotion hidden behind a sharp tone. "A bloody Gryffindor or
something?"

Blaise's smile widens a little. "You're welcome," he says, and he winces when he reaches a hand out
towards Draco.

Draco takes it carefully, then glares at Pomfrey. "He's still in pain."

"And he will be for the next twenty-four hours at least," Pomfrey says, a bit tartly in return, but her
gaze softens when she looks over at Draco. "Never fear, Mr Malfoy. Mr Zabini will be fine." She
settles a hand on Blaise's shoulder. "The wounds are stitching up quite nicely; they're just in a spot
that's a bit difficult."

Draco knows this. He'd seen the blood on Blaise's belly. It's gone now, hidden away beneath
swathes of bandages and a hospital gown. Still, his eyes are drawn to empty potions bottles that Pomfrey's disposing off, not to mention the blood-splattered linens she thinks she's whisking away discreetly. He waits until she's gone off in the other room before he looks at Blaise and says, "Are you certain you shouldn't be in St Mungo's?"

Blaise makes a face. "With Mother swanning about, ordering the Healers around? Thanks, but no." He rests a brown hand over the pale blue blanket covering his abdomen. "Besides, Pomfrey consulted with them over the Floo, and they all decided it wasn't bad enough for that. It's practically a scratch."

It's not, and they all know it.

Pansy sits on the edge of the infirmary bed. Her red lipstick is all chewed off, except for the bits right at the corners of her mouth. "You worried us, you bastard," she says. "I ought to slap that gorgeous face of yours."

"I'd rather you not," Blaise says, but his lips quirk up on one side. "Unless you're feeling a bit kinky."

"You're an arsehole," Pansy says, but she laughs, and she lets her fingers brush against the bump beneath the covers where Blaise's knee must be.

Blaise looks over at Millie. "Want to shout at me as well?"

Mills just looks at him for a long moment, and then she says, "I'm glad you pushed this one out of the way. He's too bloody thick to be taking care of himself, it seems."

Their gazes all shift towards Draco, and he feels his face heat up. "Like any of you would have seen that coming."

"I did," Blaise says, his voice calm, if a bit raspy. "I thought Claverdon might try something at some point." He's watching Draco closely. "Haven't you wondered why Pans, Mills and I have been walking you to and from classes this week? The way Potter went after you on Saturday…" Blaise's mouth twitches down, and he sighs. "Merlin, Draco, it's like he bloody waved a sign at all of those bastards saying Malfoy's fair game."

Draco looks between them all, surprised. He hadn't realised. Hadn't noticed. "You all…" He trails off. "Oh."

"Told you he wouldn't figure it out," Millie says, and she sits in one of the uncomfortable chairs next to the bed. "It's either Potions or Potter with this one."

"Shut up, Mills." Draco doesn't want to argue, but that stings a bit. He doesn't give a shit about Potter; he thought that much was bloody clear.

The door opens again, and they all turn. Ravi steps in, peering around the door jamb. "Ah," he says. "There you lot are." He steps in, closes the door behind him. "Blaise, you look like shit."

"Blame Claverdon," Blaise says, with a little half-laugh that makes his brow furrow in pain. He winces, his fingers flexing over the blanket. "Fuck."

"Yes," Ravi says, moving to the foot of the bed. "Mr Claverdon's taking some time away for the nonce."

"McGonagall ought to have bloody sent him down." Millie sits forward in her chair, looking fierce.
"That bastard--"

"And that's for the Board of Governors to decide in a fortnight," Ravi says, but he doesn't look happy. "Although, yes, I rather agree."

They're all silent for a moment. Draco wants to hurt someone, to lash out at Claverdon and his fucking idiots, at Corner for being a fool, at Potter for... well. For being fucking Potter, Draco thinks. Somehow he's to blame for this. Maybe not directly, but Draco's sure Claverdon just wants Potter's attention, the way they all do when they're going after Draco. To be honest, Draco's not so certain it's about him any longer. It's about making an impression, going after the school pariah to prove you're just as good, just as brave as the fucking Saviour of the Wizarding World.

And that makes Draco's stomach twist. Tighten in fury.

"Fuck Claverdon," Draco says. He looks at Ravi. "And Corner too. He was just as responsible--"

"He tried to stop him." Blaise's fingers curl around Draco's, squeezing lightly. "Corner's a fucking prat, but he wouldn't have done that."

Draco hasn't told Blaise about Corner and Hopkins, about the things they say to him every time they catch him in the loo alone. They're more careful now. Quieter. And maybe Hopkins is the worst, but Draco sees the way Corner looks at him in disgust, knows that Corner's figured him out, knows what Draco is, what Draco wants. Draco remembers standing in front of Potter last Saturday. Claiming the slur. Ponce. It'd felt good to throw it at Potter, to see the way he flinched at the word. Perhaps next time Draco will try out some of Corner's others. Poofter, perhaps. Bender. The always lovely arselicker.

As if Draco's ever had a chance to get anywhere near an arse, much less lick it.

Still, Draco won't tell his friends about any of that. Not with Corner living in the same dormitory as Blaise. He'd kill him, Draco thinks, or at least pound him into a bloody pulp, and Mills would probably help whilst Pans cheered them both on. And that's how Draco protects the three of them. By not giving them a chance to turn into Iain Claverdon in their own ways. They're Slytherin, after all, despite the Eighth Year purple and grey, and right now, the four of them have to be above reproach.

Despite that understanding, Draco looks over at Blaise and says, "I'll gut Claverdon when I see him next." He can't help the angry tremor in his voice.

"You won't." Blaise settles back into the plush pillows. "You're not that bloody thick."

"No one's gutting anyone," Ravi says. "Not without Minerva's permission." He opens up his satchel and digs inside, pulling out a handful of papers. "This ought to make the lot of you feel better, though." He hands them to Draco. "The younger Slytherins sent get-well notes."

Draco stares down at the folded scraps of paper, torn from notebooks and essay parchments. Most have serpents drawn on them, some barely more than a coiled scrawl, some detailed down to the shaded scales, sinewy curves undulating across the bottom of the page.

He starts reading them out to Blaise. Some of them are curt get wells, with just a name scribbled underneath, others are rather brilliantly amusing screeds to why Gryffindors are utter rubbish, and still others are heartfelt professions of undying admiration which send Pans and Mills into shrieks of laughter. Even Ravi and Blaise are smiling by the end.

And then there's the last one. Draco unfolds it, his eyes scanning the neatly printed words. "Oh," he
says, and when Blaise gives him a curious look, Draco takes a breath and reads it. "Please don't let them hurt you," the girl's written. "You have every right to be here with us--and I wish you all were still here in our common room. I know things have changed, and we've all done things that maybe we wish we--or our families--hadn't, but seeing you and Malfoy and Parkinson and Bulstrode come back gives me hope. Hope that the rest of this school won't beat me down, won't make me pay for some choice my family made, not me. Thank you for that. And know that we're all here, secretly hissing for the lot of you, even if we can't do it in public. Heal quickly, Elle Bainbridge, fifth year."

Draco looks up, the parchment clenched tight in his fingers.

"Hiss, hiss," Pansy says softly, and she looks away, blinking hard. Millicent reaches out, her fingers catching Pansy's.

Ravi's hand settles on Draco's shoulder. "And this is why they need you here," he says. "Whatever anyone might say or do to you all." He looks over at Blaise. "You're still theirs."

They're all quiet for a moment, then Millie says, "Never let them see our heads bowed?"

"Something like that." Ravi sighs. "I wish I could tell you this will be easy, but it won't. There are people who don't think we have the right to be here, who think Slytherin's evil." He looks around at each of them. "Fuck that. Those little serpents need to see all of us now. To know we can take whatever they're going to throw our way."

"Our?" Draco gives him an even look. "You're a professor."

"And Grace and I are Slytherin at heart," Ravi says. "We'll have your backs. The same way Snape did."

Draco looks between his friends. They all nod, then Draco does as well. Slowly. He holds a hand out to Ravi. "Thank you, sir," he says, and he realises he means it as Ravi's warm fingers wrap around his.

Ravi hisses, a soft, sibilant sound that echoes in the room.

And for the first time since he's returned to Hogwarts, Draco feels like he's home.

***

It's Monday before Draco corners Potter, insists that they continue their tutoring. And really, that's only because Ravi'd called Draco aside after breakfast that morning and asked how Potter was doing. Draco'd sputtered some sort of bollocks, but Ravi'd just raised one eyebrow and Draco'd huffed, admitting they'd only met once.

"Twice weekly, Draco," Ravi had said with a sigh. "Don't make me go to McGonagall about this."

So now Draco's being forced to spend this evening in the bloody library instead of hanging out with Pans and Millie and Blaise, celebrating Blaise's triumphant return from the infirmary just after the last class of the day earlier in the afternoon. It's unfair, Draco thinks, as he unpacks his satchel. When he'd left the common room, Blaise had been ensconced in the comfiest chair, still wincing from time to time when he moved oddly, whilst Pansy and Millicent were fussing over him, making certain his tea was just right and the blanket over his legs was warm enough. Millie'd also started glaring at any of the other Eighth Years who dared to come close, even to tell Blaise they were glad to see him back. Really, that in and of itself would be entertaining enough to tempt Draco away from the library. And he'd far rather spend his evening with them than Potter.
It's nearly half-seven when Potter slouches into the group room, his hair in his face, looking bloody sullen as he drops into the seat across from Draco.

"Neither one of us wants to be here, Potter," Draco snaps, inexplicably irate. "But it'd be polite at least to show up on time."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Potter rubs at his jaw, and then he sighs, pulling his notebook from his satchel. "Look, let's just get this over with, yeah?" He won't look at Draco; he just taps his quill against the side of the table.

Draco presses his lips together. Tells himself that Potter's always been rude. He exhales, calming himself, then flips in his tutoring notebook to where they'd left off last week. "Have you studied elemental likenesses?"

Potter's silent; Draco looks up. "Not really," Potter admits, and his gaze slides away from Draco's. "I've been busy."

"Doing what?" Draco's shoulders are tense. He's starting to feel the beginnings of a headache; he rubs at his temples. "You're not shagging the Weaselette any more---"

"Fuck off," Potter says, and his tone's angrier than usual. Good, Draco thinks. Serves the tosser right. "Isn't that what she said to you?" Draco flips a page in his notebook. "Or wait, wasn't it because you wanted to fuck too much?"

He only realises what he's said when Potter falls silent. Draco looks up at him again, and Potter's mouth is tight, his eyes narrowed.

"What did you say?" Potter's voice is icy cold.

Draco doesn't look away. He's learnt it's better not to; doing so shows fear, and people attack when they think you're weaker than them. "Just repeating what I've heard," he says, his heart thudding a bit at the lie.

The look Potter gives him is vicious. "You leave Ginny out of this, you prick. I don't care what you think you've heard; you haven't the slightest idea about either of us or why we broke up." His face is flushed, and Draco wants to say he knows exactly why Ginny Weasley walked away from Potter, but he's certain that if Potter knew Draco'd been listening that night, he'd pound Draco into the floor right here. Madam Pince be damned.

So Draco just shrugs. "Fine. It's not as if I give a fuck about your romantic life." Except he does, a little, and Draco doesn't want to admit that even to himself, not really. But he can practically hear Pansy's laugh in his head, her drawled since fifth year at least, darling. And what does it matter really? Potter's bloody fit. It's not Draco's fault he's noticed; the whole sodding school has, judging from the way the sixth and seventh year girls are following him around. Not that Potter seems to have paid attention to that, though. Besides, Draco'd have to be fucking blind not to have looked at Potter's mostly bare chest in that ridiculous outfit of his at the Halloween Feast last week, all golden skin and hard muscle. Or the way the sheet clung to his hips, stopping halfway down his solid thighs. And if Draco's woken up a bit breathless in the middle of the night, dreaming about how that body would feel pressed against his, well, he's bloody eighteen, isn't he? He doesn't have to like Potter to think about shagging him.

And that thought sends heat flooding his cheeks. Draco looks away, swallows. He twists his quill between his fingertips, the soft feather dragging across his skin. "Shag who you want to shag, Potter.
I really don't give a damn.” He does, but he'll never admit that to Potter. "It's not as if you haven't an entire harem of girls willing to go for a tumble with the Saviour of the Wizarding World." And if his voice sounds bitter, Draco doesn't care. Potter always comes out on top, doesn't he? Even in his supposed heartbreak.

Potter scowls at him. "What the fuck are you on about?"

And there's the oblivious Potter Draco knows so well. He looks over at the prat, not bothering to hide his incredulity. "Really? You haven't noticed all the girls in our classes?" And thank Circe for Ancient Runes and Alchemy as he's at least Potter-free in them. "Not to mention the corridors? They're practically throwing themselves at you, you twat. Chatting you up, walking along with you--"

"They're just being friendly." Potter's eyes narrow. "Some of them were mates with both me and Ginny."

"Yes," Draco says dryly. "Because Vicky Frobisher wouldn't hex your ex-girlfriend in the back if she thought it meant she had a chance with you. Merlin only knows why." Draco drops his quill onto his book, nostrils flaring in disgust. Frobisher's attractive enough if you like that sort of thing. A bit vapid, which had always surprised Draco, given that Ginny Weasley's much sharper than that. The Weaslette has a bit of bite, and Draco's always wondered why she'd choose to be friendly with Frobisher of all people. Then again, perhaps it's the old keep your enemies closer adage. Sometimes Draco thinks he sees a spark of Slytherin in Ginny. For being a Weasley, she's not the worst.

Potter frowns at him. "You're mental."

"Am I?" Draco just leans back in his chair. He doesn't know why he's prodding and poking at Potter like this. It's stupid of him, but then again, Potter's always incited Draco do be a bloody idiot, hasn't he? He tucks a stray lock of hair back behind his ear. "Surely you've noticed how friendly--" He crooks his fingers in the air around the word. "--Bones and Li have been. Anyone with eyes has known since fourth year that Bones fancies you."

"Fuck off," Potter says. "She doesn't." He looks uncomfortable.

Draco wonders why he's doing this, why he's tormenting himself and Potter this way. He can't stop himself though. "I'm sure she'd be thrilled to have the chance to drop her knickers for you. All you'd have to do is ask." He feels a bit guilty at saying that; Draco doesn't dislike Susan at all, and he doesn't think she'd make it that easy for Potter. Still, needling Potter's always made him feel better.

Except perhaps this time. The thought of Potter looming over Susan Bones, her legs wrapped around his waist, makes Draco nauseous. He tries to tell himself it's because no one, much less Draco, wants to think of Potter shagging about, but he knows that's a fucking lie.

Potter sinks back into his chair, the fight starting to seep from him. He looks away, his stupid dark curls falling over the rims of his glasses. Draco hates how attractive the bastard is.

"Whatever, Malfoy," Potter says. He sounds tired. "Just go over elemental likenesses again. I think I remember some of them."

Draco flips through his notebook until he finds the right page, then shoves it across the table towards Potter. "Start there," he snaps, and he stands up, shoving his chair back. "I need a bloody slash."

He doesn't bother to look back as he strides out of the group room, letting the door slam behind him.
Harry's gaze keeps drifting over to Susan Bones at dinner on Tuesday. He doesn't know why he can't get Malfoy's voice out of his head from last night. Malfoy'd come back from the toilets subdued, and there'd been no more talk of Harry's sex life—or lack thereof. They'd both settled down and focused on Potions, Malfoy barely speaking to Harry except when he had to. It'd been weird, and more than a bit awkward, but Harry thinks he's a better foundation for potions theory than he had a week ago. Fuck only knows how it'll go in Potions tomorrow, but Harry thinks he won't implode anything. They've moved to individual brews now instead of pairing up, and Ron's a bit ahead of Harry. Then again, he has Hermione to tutor him, doesn't he? Harry's just stuck with Malfoy.

"Are you paying attention, Harry?" Hermione asks from across the table. She's finished eating and is leaning up against Ron, who has one arm around her whilst he's finishing his pudding. Hermione watches Harry through her loose, curly hair, her fingers stroking along the splay of Ron's just beneath her breasts.

"Yeah, sorry." Harry's gaze flicks back to Hermione. He can hear Susan laughing a few seats away, a light, airy sound that Harry likes. She's always been a decent sort, Sus has, and if Harry's now aware of the way she looks over at him for the briefest of moments, before leaning her elbows on the table, perfectly framing her cleavage, well, he's single now, so it's not wrong to just glance over, is it? Harry clears his throat, rubs the back of his neck. "Lost in thought, I reckon."

"Lost in something, sure," Ron says through a mouthful of treacle tart. He licks the back of his spoon. "You've been bloody distracted all day."

Harry shifts on the bench. "I haven't."

"Ron's right, mate," Neville says from next to Harry, gingernut crumbs spraying across the table. Hannah scolds him, but her smile's affectionate, and Neville shrugs, wiping a thumb at the corner of his mouth. And when did that happen, Harry wonders, suddenly realising that Hannah's pressed to Nev's side just as closely as Hermione is to Ron's.

To be honest, Harry feels the odd man out now, and his gaze flicks down the table towards Malfoy, who's sat beside Zabini, Parkinson and Bulstrode across from them. They're deep in conversation, the four of them, heads bent together, but Malfoy somehow seems to know that Harry's looking at him. His head comes up, his eyes meet Harry's. Harry looks away, odd prickles going across his skin. The Slytherins have closed ranks the past few days, all of them gathering in around Zabini. Even the younger Slytherins are being protective of them all now, making certain they walk the Eighth Year group through the hallways. It's starting to make the Gryffindors get defensive, Harry thinks, and, knowing his house, that's never a good thing.

"It's just my Charms essay," Harry says, and he catches the way Hermione's eyes narrow at him. He dips his head. "I'm trying to finish it up."

Hermione frowns at him. "I thought you'd written the last bit on Sunday."

Shit, Harry thinks, and he reaches for his napkin, rubbing it across a bit of treacle stuck on his thumb. "Changed a few things," he lies, and that seems to mollify her. Hermione's a big fan of multiple drafts; she's spent years trying to get Harry to edit his essays.

"Leave him alone, love." Ron kisses Hermione's cheek and she wrinkles her nose, batting him away, but half-heartedly. He nuzzles her ear; she squeaks and laughs. The intimacy of it makes Harry's heart ache. He and Gin had never been like that, not even on their best days. Harry realises he's lonely, and his gaze goes back towards Susan, across the table from Hannah. He wonders if Malfoy's right, if she does fancy him.
"Oi, Sus," Harry says before he can stop himself. His heart's thudding lightly, and he can practically feel Malfoy watching him.

Susan glances over. "Yeah?" She tucks a red-gold curl behind her ear and smiles at him.

"Hogsmeade this weekend," Harry says. He leans over the table. "Can I buy you a Butterbeer at the Broomsticks?"

She doesn't say anything for a moment, but her eyes are bright, her smile a bit wider. "All right," she says finally, her cheeks pink, and Harry leans back, oddly satisfied. There, he thinks. He's done something about the rubbish way he feels. Sus is a good girl, and maybe if Harry plays his cards right he'll get a snog. Maybe even something to wank to later. It feels good, especially when Susan gives him another small smile before she turns back to Hannah.

Neville just looks at Harry, eyebrow raised, but he doesn't say anything.

And then Malfoy's shoving his plate away and standing up as if he's in some sort of snit. Harry frowns down at the Slytherins, wondering what they've said, but Zabini's already on his feet going after Malfoy, if a bit less fleet of foot than he might normally be, and Parkinson's giving Harry a vicious glare whilst Bulstrode finishes her treacle tart calmly.

"Harry," Hermione says, and Harry drags his gaze away from that end of the table and back to his friends. She's giving him a worried look. "Are you sure..." She trails off, her voice soft.

"Yeah." Harry glances over to the Gryffindor table. Michael Corner's leaning over from the Eighth Year table to say something to Ginny; she laughs, not even looking over at Harry. Fuck it, Harry thinks. He looks back over at Hermione. "I think it's time to get back on the horse, yeah?"

Ron's watching his sister, unhappily. "I wish you wouldn't," he murmurs.

"I have to." And Harry knows that's true. It's been nearly a month now. He can't keep moping over Gin. She's not moping over him. Harry knows he needs to move on. Malfoy's bloody right about that.

Susan glances at Harry; she smiles again.

And Harry smiles back. Malfoy has a point. He could have anyone he wants. Why not start at the top?

***

"Do you want to talk?" Blaise asks when he finds Draco sat in an alcove on the fifth floor, in between a portrait of Aldabert Waffling and a statue of Boris the Bewildered. It's Draco's favourite place to hide out, in a set of armchairs beside a window that looks out over the Quidditch pitch. Blaise winces as he takes the empty chair, and Draco feels a small twinge of guilt.

"You didn't have to come after me." Draco's stocking feet are pulled up beneath him; he'd shucked his shoes off next to the chair. He pulls his hair up, twists a hair tie he's nicked from Pans through it, knotting his long locks at the back of his head. He stares out the window, watching Ravenclaw practice on the pitch, their royal blue robes fluttering in the breeze.

Blaise doesn't say anything for a long moment, then he sighs. "Is it Potter?"

And it's the resigned gentleness in his voice that's nearly Draco's undoing.
"No." Draco leans against the arm of the chair, the worn brocade catching the sleeve of his shirt. He's tired, perhaps in ways Blaise can never understand. It's hard being Draco Malfoy, he thinks, and he knows how pitiful and pathetic that might sound if he said it aloud. Poor little rich boy, whinging about how difficult he has it. But it is hard, Draco thinks. He'll never outrun the notoriety of his surname, will he? He'll always be Lucius Malfoy's shit son, the one who couldn't manage to please either bloody side. He wraps his arms around himself, breathing out. A strand of his hair slides from the hair tie, brushes against his cheek.

Blaise watches him, his brown eyes almost kind. "You can say it is, Draco. I won't tell." He leans forward with a soft, pained huff. "I won't even tell Pans and Mills."

Draco pleats his sleeve between a finger and his thumb. He doesn't want to admit to anything. Not even to Blaise. If he does, then it makes whatever this is inside of him more real. So he sits silently, doing his best not to make eye contact with his best friend.

The silence stretches out between them until it's almost painful, then Blaise says quietly, "All right." He hesitates. "It's just from the way I saw it, you got irked about Potter and Bones--"

"I didn't." The words almost catch in Draco's throat. He coughs, shifts in the chair. The ancient springs creak beneath his arse. He knows Blaise is just looking at him now, and his face heats. He doesn't like any of this; he'd been an idiot to leave the way he had. "It's just..." He trails off, then shrugs, trying to act as if he doesn't care. "Potter always lands on his feet."

"That's nothing new." Blaise settles back against the cushions.

"You're hurting," Draco says, and another wave of guilt rolls through him. It ought to have been him in pain, not Blaise. "Did you take your pain potion?"

Blaise gives him a wry smile. "I took both of them. I'm fine." He sits still for a moment, then he exhales slowly, and says, "So you're not jealous of Potter."

"Circe, no." Draco knows he doesn't sound convincing. He tries to look Blaise's way, to curve his lips in at least a slightly mocking way, but it's more of a grimace, Draco thinks.

"You know," Blaise says, almost before the words are out of Draco's mouth, "it's not as if I don't know you're bent."

And Draco does look at Blaise then, stilling. He wants to deny it, wants to snarl at Blaise and tell him he's lost his bloody mind. But instead he finds himself saying, "It won't do me any good."

He thinks he can't bear it if Blaise doesn't understand. Draco has a duty to his family, and he'll fulfil it. His father will make certain of that. Even from bloody Azkaban.

"I know," Blaise says finally, and he reaches a hand out, lets his fingertips brush Draco's knuckles. "That's the shit of it, isn't it? You can't be yourself."

Something cracks deep inside of Draco, and sadness wells up through him, almost overwhelming in its first rush. He looks away again. Rubs his thumb against the back of his other hand. There's a smudge of ink there; Draco has no idea how. He breathes out, a bit more raggedly than he'd like, and then Blaise's fingers are warm around his. Draco bends his head, and the tears seep out, hot and wet against his lashes as he blinks them away.

"I'm fine," he says. He's not, and they both know it, but Draco pulls his hand back from Blaise's grip, and his jaw is tight, his throat aching. Part of him wants to give in, to rage at the injustice of it all, to shout that he won't do what's expected of him, that he can't. But Draco knows he hasn't a choice.
He's a Slytherin, after all, and his family comes first, above anything he might wish for himself. It's a lesson his father spent all of Draco's childhood drilling into him, regardless of whether Lucius modelled it himself.

Draco draws in a shallow breath, wipes away the remnants of wetness from the corners of his eyes. He feels like a damned fool, and it's all Potter's fault, somehow. "We won't talk about this again," he says, not looking at Blaise.

"All right," Blaise says, his voice quiet. "But if you change your mind…"

"I won't." Draco stares out the window, something unhappy but solid settling inside of him again. This is his life. It's all he knows. He thinks of his father, confined in a small cell on a rock in the midst of the North Sea. At least he's not there, at least he has his freedom. Of sorts. Cold comfort that might be.

They sit together in silence until darkness falls outside of the window.

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When Harry comes in from the hallway on Thursday afternoon, he notices that the Defence room is set up differently than it has been for the past few classes. Individual duelling mats with spaces between them are arrayed around the central podium. They're clearly working on partner exercises today, Harry thinks, and his mind goes immediately to Malfoy. Harry wonders if Professor Omolade knows how dangerous it could be for Malfoy to work with someone else, even though he's certain the staff have all been warned. Harry feels oddly protective of the sodding prat, prickly though he might be lately.

"This is wicked!" Ron says, looking around. "I wonder if we're going to learn new techniques today."

They drop their satchels and head to the centre of the room to the raised podium that Omolade uses to monitor the entire room. Lessons often start here and then they split into different group sizes based on task. Harry wonders what they'll be doing this time, and if he'll be bored like usual. Half of what they've been learning as a class Harry was teaching the DA back in sixth year, but he doesn't want to tell Omolade that. Also, he suspects she knows. He watches her as she sweeps into the room, her robes a deep, jewel green today. Harry thinks it can't be any accident after the recent attack on a Slytherin, or, at least, former Slytherin. Omolade's towering and stern as she mounts the podium, looking around the classroom with a frown.

Harry straightens his shoulders, settling into a posture of respectful attention. He can tell from the way students around him turn, conversations falling silent when Omolade taps her wand against the lecture podium, that he's not the only one who wants to show her respect. Omolade's strict, but she's fair, and she's a fucking amazing Defence teacher. Half of their year already have pashes on her. Even Harry, who likes to think he's not easily impressed, has been bloody well stunned both by her speed and her knowledge of defensive techniques. She doesn't just want to teach them theory the way past professors have; she wants them to be able to deflect Dark magic and defend themselves without having to go on the offensive until absolutely necessary. Harry only hopes he can learn to be as good as she is, but he doesn't dare ask her for help yet. She's been hinting at extra work for Harry, and maybe he'll ask her how she got that good eventually. But not now. He's still too in awe of her for that.

"Attacks on unarmed wizards or witches are the highest form of cowardice." Professor Omolade's chill tones echo through the silent, spare, sunlit classroom. Her gaze sweeps across the clumps of students standing in front of her. "Unless it is a matter of gravest danger, and even then, it's often the
better course of valour to concede a match or escape from a situation and then fight honourably
another day."

Someone in the back mutters, "What honour is there among Slytherin?" Except their voice isn't low
enough, and the silence is thunderous as everyone realises Omolade's heard. Heads turn, and the
other students look between Omolade, whose scowl deepens, and Zabini and Malfoy, standing on
the edge of the group, their faces grim and unhappy, Parkinson and Bulstrode by their sides.

Omolade's words in reply to the heckler--Harry thinks it was Michael Corner, but he can't be sure--
are sharp enough to cut glass. "There is every honour in Slytherin House, just as there can be every
dishonour in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff. As Albus Dumbledore was fond of saying, we
are the choices we make. We make the choices to act honourably or dishonourably every moment of
the day, and we must be constantly vigilant against the dishonourable and hateful sides of our nature.
Mr Claverdon lost this fight recently." Her gaze settles on Corner who flushes and looks away. "I
hope you will all do better."

A shiver runs down Harry's spine; his eyes flick over to Malfoy who is standing alert between Zabini
and Parkinson. His shoulders are braced, and there's a desperate set to his jaw. He's so bloody
beautiful that it almost physically hurts Harry to look at him. Harry supposes it's because he's been
having these odd dreams lately, and he shifts on the balls of his feet, suddenly uncomfortable. Malfoy
catches Harry watching him, and he frowns, a furrow deepening between his brows.

"Fuck off, Potter," he mouths at Harry, and Harry looks away.

"All right?" Ron asks, and Harry shrugs. He doesn't really know what to say. Susan's watching him
across the room, and she waves almost imperceptibly, but, out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees
Malfoy glare at her. Susan's smile falters a bit; she turns away.

Professor Omolade announces the pairs and, to Harry's great surprise and dismay, he and Malfoy are
paired off together for the first time in weeks. They end up in the far corner under the window, in the
further row of mats that Omolade directs them to. Harry's stomach drops a bit as they square off.
Malfoy's got a pinched look on his face, and Harry doesn't know what to say. It's a bit odd to be
facing Malfoy like this whilst they wait for instructions. After a brief thaw at the beginning, their
tutoring sessions have been chilly recently. Also, it's hard for Harry to reconcile his dream-Malfoy
with the real Malfoy.

"Worried?" Malfoy shifts his wand from one hand to the other. A muscle jumps in his jaw.

Harry rolls his shoulders, trying to loosen them up. A calm settles over him, like it always does when
he's in duelling posture. He's really only calm when he's fucking or fighting, and there hasn't been
much of the former these days, so fighting it is. "You wish."

Malfoy's gaze shifts to Susan, a few mats over from them, facing down Bulstrode. "I see you took
my advice with Bones. Looking forward to Saturday, are we?"

"It's something to do." Harry's curious about the flash of anger that crosses Malfoy's face before he
shutters it quickly. To be honest, Harry would almost think he'd imagined it, if he didn't know
Malfoy so bloody well.

Omolade claps her hands; they all look her way. "Today, I'd like each of you to trade off working on
defence, given this is supposed to be a defence class, after all." She pauses. "Offence, you'll throw a
simple, harmless spell. Defence, you'll try to counter it. We'll start with those on the far side of the
mats defending."

Harry sighs. That means Malfoy will be on offence. Brilliant.
"Is that all, Professor?" The bored drawl is Parkinson's, but Harry's thinking it as well. This is baby stuff, not even second or third level, if you're actually working from a practical sequence.

"Oh, I forgot one detail." Professor Omolade's smile is sharp, keen. "You're to defend yourself wandlessly. It may be cowardice to attack someone unarmed, but it's important to be able to protect yourself if you're attacked."

The groans that start up in the classroom are unusually loud, but quickly quelled when Professor Omolade shoots them all an unsympathetic look. "Offence, you can use a wand for better control, but defence, you should lay your wands to the side. And I want nothing more severe than a tickling spell, do I make myself understood?"

"Yes, Professor." It's a chorus of voices across the room.

Malfoy actually looks alarmed when Harry turns towards him. "I can't see how this will help," he mutters, and Harry can see the uneasy shift in his eyes.

"Well," Harry says, "it's easy to be caught without your wand. It's important to be able to do wandless counters. The Aurors would want us to know this on day one."

"I don't intend to be an Auror." Malfoy's eyes narrow at him. "Besides, that's easy for you to say, Scarhead. You've been doing this since you were a baby. Too bad your parents weren't as skilled, yeah?"

Rage rushes through Harry, and he's shocked by the fury that Malfoy's words raise up in him. He takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. "Scared again, Malfoy? Poor ickle thing. Daddy's not around any more for you to hide behind his robes, is he?" He knows he's being cruel, and he sees the flinty look in Malfoy's grey eyes that tells him the barb landed.

"Don't you wish now, Potter," comes the terse answer. Malfoy looks a bit too pale, however, and Harry almost takes pity on him as he's setting his wand aside.

Until Malfoy suddenly throws a stinging hex at Harry while he's returning to standing that hits awfully close to his balls. Harry sinks down to the mat with his eyes watering, a sharp pain shooting through his leg.

"Algesco," Professor Omolade's voice is clear, and Harry sees the hem of her robes appear as he rolls against the mat, trying to breathe through the pain. He flops onto his side, next to the toes of a beautifully pointed pair of black dragonhide shoes which seem to have red soles. The burning on Harry's skin cools somewhat. Omolade frowns down at him before glancing over at Malfoy. "Mr Malfoy, a stinging hex is a bit more than a tickling spell, and it's better form to wait for your target to stand up."

Malfoy's expression is bloody smug, Harry thinks, as Malfoy bends his head deferentially and lets his hair fall into his face. "Sorry, ma'am. I was trying to be realistic. And I said the first offensive spell that came to mind."

"I see." Omolade doesn't sound convinced. "Keep it a bit more gentle, if you would." She looks down at Harry again. "All right there, Mr Potter?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry says, even though he's furious. At least the pain's subsided. "I'll try to counter better next time." He stands up again, and waits until she's walked away, before whirling to confront Malfoy. "Malf-"

"Alarte Ascendare!" Malfoy's wand is quick, but Harry manages to get a counter in place to stop the
worst of the impact. He shoots up in the air about four feet, then lands heavily on his knees.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy. Would you please stop firing spells at me?" Harry's getting angry now, his vision starting to narrow. He starts to clamber to his feet.

"But it's so much fun." Malfoy smirks at him before languidly flicking his wand towards Harry once more. "Anteoculatia."

A few things happen in the blink of an eye. Malfoy's spell lands on Harry's skin just as Harry sends the nonverbal Protego Maxima at the prat. Harry feels the antlers suddenly grow out of his forehead, and the jolt of pain it sends into his skin feels bizarre. It's an odd mimicry of his Patronus, and distinctly uncomfortable, but not for the first time, Harry wonders what it would be like to have an Animagus form. He's never dared try it, but perhaps this year will give him a chance to find out.

Unfortunately, Malfoy's not expecting the counter, and the force of it causes him to slam against the opposite wall. Harry didn't even know a Protego could do that, even with the force of a Maxima. Malfoy sinks to the floor in a heap as Professor Omolade descends on them both, the whole class stopping to watch her, mouths open.

"What the blazes are you both thinking?" Omolade's dark brown eyes flash with fury. "Potter, Malfoy, you're both castled for the weekend. No Hogsmeade, and double detention with Ravi. I'd take pleasure in torturing you myself, but I've a wedding to attend."

"But," Harry starts to say, and Omolade cuts him off with a snap of her fingers, and he falls silent. Malfoy's on the ground still, and Parkinson's left her mat to throw herself on him. Bulstrode's not far behind, and Harry can feel Zabini's cold stare as he limps over to Omolade.

"He's hurt," Parkinson says, and the look she shoots Harry is scathing.

Omolade sighs. "Malfoy, Parkinson will take you to Madam Pomfrey." Malfoy gets up, holding his side in a way that Harry thinks isn't fake this time. He would feel a bit guilty, but he's facing his professor with antlers growing painfully from his skull. He watches as Parkinson helps Malfoy steady himself, then walks him to the door. Bulstrode and Zabini follow, not bothering to wait for Omolade's permission. Omolade studies them for a moment, but doesn't call them back. Instead she turns back to the class and claps her hands. "Back to work, the rest of you. Abbott, Chaddesley, and Entwhistle, work together for now." Omolade turns back to Harry. "Potter, I don't recommend this as a fashion choice." She swishes her wand and Harry's head feels its normal size again. He still has a bloody pounding ache in it though. "We need to work on your control. Was that really a wandless, nonverbal Protego?"

"I might have cast a Protego Maxima, Professor." Harry's beginning to be sorry that he hurt Malfoy. "I'm not certain why it reacted like that though."

Professor Omolade drums her fingertips against her elbows. "You're seeing me before class next week. We need to go over your magic and make sure you're not suffering any ill effects." Harry's silent, a bit taken aback by the severe look on her face. Then her eyebrow goes up. "No worries. You probably just wanted to pin Malfoy to the wall." With a little smile, she leaves to call the class to end and give homework.

Harry's left blinking, a bit confused by her amusement. Is there some bloody joke that everyone else is in on that he doesn't know? He shakes his head. Whatever. He's more worried about whether or not Malfoy will be a prick after this latest round of fighting, although, to be fair, it was Malfoy's fault for getting the jump on him and using stronger spells. Still, Harry knows that won't matter, not if Malfoy has his knickers in a twist. He sighs. He's no bloody idea what to do.
When Harry goes to get his satchel, Ron's already there. He nudges Harry's shoulder. "Don't be so grim, Harry. I'm sure the Ferret deserved it."

The trouble is, Harry doesn't think Malfoy did.

***

Draco lies curled up in his bed, the hanging shut around him. He feels safe in here, cocooned and protected by wards and spells he's set up over the weeks he's been at Hogwarts, including one that lets him see through the thick velvet when he wants to, just to make certain his roommates aren't planning anything untoward.

And one, not that he'll admit it, that also lets him catch glimpses, on the regular, of a shirtless Potter sprawled across his bed, with those broad tanned shoulders and that muscular chest only just slightly fuzzed with dark hair. It's only here, hidden away, that Draco can indulge his ridiculous attraction to Potter, the one that Blaise wants him to confess, the one that Draco's deeply ashamed of.

He rubs his hand over his scarred chest. It's sore still, from Potter's shielding charm. Madam Pomfrey had clucked at him when he'd stumbled into the infirmary on Pansy's arm, and for a moment Draco had hoped Potter might be in Claverdon-level trouble as well, but Millie hadn't let any of them cast Potter in that light.

"It was just a class accident," she'd told Pomfrey, with a frown at the others, and when Pomfrey had gone into the back for a potion, Millie had looked sharply at Draco and said, "Don't even think about putting the finger on him, you pillock. It'll just backfire on all of us."

Draco knows she's right. Still, lying here in the shadows of the night, he half-wishes it'd gone differently, that McGonagall had swept into the infirmary to tell him Potter'd been sent down as well, at least for a fortnight. It would have been a bloody relief, really. Draco's tired of all these feelings twisting about inside of him when it comes to Potter, most of them ones he'd rather not examine too closely.

He hears a sound from the room, and he tenses. Draco's on high alert now, the way he'd been when he'd gone home during hols last year. Hogwarts had been his escape, with Potter gone and Severus at the helm. Despite the bloody Carrows trying to fuck him over, he'd been protected here, as much as Severus could; it'd been the Manor that had terrified him, made him set up the same wards on his room as he's imbued his bed with this term. Draco can't help resenting the loss of that comfort and safety here.

The sound comes again, followed by a soft sigh, one that Draco would recognise anywhere. Potter. The others are sleeping; Draco can hear soft snores and even breathing from the other beds. But Potter shifts, and his mattress rustles.

He hears a sound from the room, and he tenses. Draco's on high alert now, the way he'd been when he'd gone home during hols last year. Hogwarts had been his escape, with Potter gone and Severus at the helm. Despite the bloody Carrows trying to fuck him over, he'd been protected here, as much as Severus could; it'd been the Manor that had terrified him, made him set up the same wards on his room as he's imbued his bed with this term. Draco can't help resenting the loss of that comfort and safety here.

The sound comes again, followed by a soft sigh, one that Draco would recognise anywhere. Potter. The others are sleeping; Draco can hear soft snores and even breathing from the other beds. But Potter shifts, and his mattress rustles.

Draco stills when he hears Potter's breath again, a little higher, a little more ragged. Fuck, Draco thinks. Ten weeks he's been in this room, and this is the first time he's heard Potter wanking. He presses his face into his pillow, squeezes his eyes shut. Does the fool not know to cast a Muffliato? It'd been considered only polite in the Slytherin dormitories when one needed to relieve oneself. But no, Potter's evidently certain the rest of the room's sound asleep at two in the morning.

Potter huffs out a soft groan. Draco thinks about looking through the hangings, but he knows he wouldn't see a thing; the room's shadowed, and they're in the last quarter of the moon now, so there's barely any external light from the window. And then Draco realises he's seriously considering watching Potter wank, and that horrifies him.
Except it doesn't. Not entirely. Not when Draco can hear the soft slap of Potter's hand on his prick now, picking up speed as Potter breathes out. Draco wonders what Potter's thinking of, what's making him hard as he touches himself.

Draco’s fingers brush along the swell of his own cock, teasing it through the thin flannel of his pyjama bottoms. He shivers, thinking about Potter only feet from him, doing the same. It only takes a moment for Draco to push his pyjamas down his hips, to take his prick in his hand, to feel it harden against his palm. He thinks about casting a Muffliato, but he wants to hear Potter wanking, not just think about it, and Draco's had plenty of experience in coming without a sound, he thinks as he strokes a thumb along the curve of his cock.

Fuck, but he's randy. Potter might have been getting off all term with the Weaselette, but Draco hasn't been touched by someone else in ages, not since sixth year, really, when he and Pansy were fooling around, and she'd been willing to wank him off if he fingered her in return. It's the closest either of them had come to fucking. Everyone thinks Slytherin were the wild ones, with bloody orgies in their common room every weekend. That makes Draco want to laugh. They'd all been fucking terrified of sex; it'd been held over their heads as a weapon since childhood, parents warning them to keep themselves pure, to be careful what sorts of alliances they made, to not put themselves in a position to have a child outside of wedlock. Family is everything to Slytherin, and the reproductive dance is bound by traditions and expectations that Draco doesn't think anyone outside of that particular, mostly pureblood circle would understand. It was Gryffindor who was out shagging about, and Hufflepuff too. Maybe a few Ravenclaws, if they could tear themselves from their books, but Pansy and Draco had been furtive in their experimentation, both of them terribly guilty afterwards.

Draco strokes his palm along his prick. He can hear Potter's breath picking up, can hear the soft steady slap of Potter's hand on his cock. Draco imagines Potter lying across from him, pushing his foreskin back, the swollen head of his prick wet and hot against his fingertips. Merlin, but that's a brilliant image, and Draco squeezes his shaft, pushing his pyjamas lower so he can heft his bollocks in his other hand. He closes his eyes, and he knows he won't last long. Draco strokes himself, trying to match Potter's rhythm, and his heels dig into the mattress, his teeth catch his bottom lip, biting it hard. He pushes a fingertip into his slick slit, and he hisses at the way his hips buck up at the sensation.

And then he hears Potter's soft fuck that slides into a groan, and Draco's tugging at himself, fast and furious, imagining Potter's hand covered in spunk, and just as his body's shuddering, as he's pushing his hips up, his muscles taut and tense, his prick hot and hard and heavy in his hand, Potter says, "Merlin," in a lazy, languid whisper, and Draco's coming silently to the sound of Potter's voice, thin, ropey spurts splattering through his fingers, dripping onto his still trembling belly.

Draco's gasping, falling back against his pillows, and he wipes his sticky hand on the coverlet, dragging it over his sweaty, spunk-covered skin. He lies there, feeling stunned, half-hating himself as he lifts his hand to his face, smells the musky remnants of himself on his fingers.

He doesn't quite know what just happened. He feels a bit dirty, a bit foul. It was just a wank, he tries to tell himself, just like every other one he's had since he discovered the joys of pulling himself off at twelve. But this feels different. It feels more intimate, more unsettling. He wonders what Potter's doing, if he's sprawled across the bed, sated. Draco wants to climb out of his own bed, to go over to Potter, to suck the last traces of spunk from the head of his prick, lapping at his hot skin until Potter's swollen again, pushing his cock up into Draco's face.

Draco breathes out, tries to settle the pounding of blood in his veins. His prick twitches, and he wants to touch himself again, to drag his fingertips slowly along the underside of his shaft, feeling the heat
of the vein, the way he stiffens at the touch.

Instead, Draco casts a cleaning charm, then pulls his pyjama bottoms back up. He curls on his side, his shoulders hunched, his fingers twisting in the edge of his pillowcase. He listens to the evening of Potter's breath, certain he knows the moment Potter slips into sleep.

Draco, however, is awake for a long time, lying in the shadows, staring blankly at the hangings of his bed, the enormity of all of this settling over him.

He wants to shag Potter. Desperately.

He turns his face into the pillow.

Fuck.

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"No," Ravi says, and he gives Draco a stern look as he gathers together the essay scrolls the fifth-years have dropped on his desk as they filed out of the room, the whole lot of them looking glum. "I'm not releasing you from detention, Draco. Grace thinks you and Harry both deserve it, and in my opinion, she's not wrong."

Draco wants to stomp his feet, to slam his satchel against the nearest workbench. "I'm not even asking to be uncastled. I'll serve detention. I just don't want to do it with Potter." Not after last night. Not after all these strange thoughts that are tumbling about inside of him, twisting his stomach, making him feel more than a bit ill. He's desperate enough to add, "Please."

Ravi's face softens. "Do you want to talk about this?"

"No." Draco twists the strap of his satchel around his fingers, dips his head so his hair falls forward, brushing his cheek. "I just don't think it's a good idea. Potter and I loathe each other."

"Whilst I'm sympathetic," Ravi says, tucking the scrolls into his bag, "I also think you and Harry need to deal with whatever this is between you." He sits on the corner of his desk, his arms folded over his chest. He studies Draco for a long moment. "I've been told in the staff room that this enmity goes back since first year."

Draco's mouth drags down at the corners. He doesn't particularly like the idea of the professors talking about him and Potter. "He's a fucking prat."

"Is he?" Ravi strokes his beard, then scratches his jaw. "And what does he say about you?"

Probably that I'm a murderous scum, Draco wants to say. Instead he just shrugs. "You'd have to ask him."

Ravi sighs. "Look. I like you, Draco, so I'm going to tell you this for your own good. Come to some kind of common ground with Harry, and do it soon. If not for yourself, then for Slytherin. The poor bastards are being bullied by the bloody Hufflepuffs now, and if you and Potter manage to put aside your differences, the whole school's going to notice."

Draco looks away, swallows. "I'm not certain that's possible."

"Then," Ravi says, pointing a finger at Draco, "make it possible." He stands up. "So detention tomorrow. I expect you and Harry both to be here at half-ten. I need an inventory done of the storeroom, so I'd recommend wearing something you don't mind getting dirty in." He waves Draco
away. "Off with you before you decide to ask me for something else I'll have to say no to."

With a scowl, Draco gives in, stalking out of the Potions classroom. Pans is leaning against the wall, waiting for him. She looks up when he comes out.

"How'd it go?" Pansy falls into step with Draco, brushing her dark hair back behind her ears. Her satchel hits her hip as she hurries to match Draco's long strides.

Draco glances over at her, taking in the dip between her perfectly groomed dark brows, the worried twist of her bright pink lips. Sometimes he wonders if he and Pans could still work, what she'd do if he leaned in right now and kissed her. He could try to lose himself in her, he thinks. They'd make a good team; he could see Pansy at the Manor, taking over as mistress from his mother. "Do you ever think about us?" he asks.

Pansy stops in the middle of the hall, her face shifting from worry to perplexed confusion. "What?"

Fuck, Draco thinks. He shakes his head. "Nothing. It's just…" He runs a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead. It falls loosely from his fingers, dropping back against his cheeks. "We were good together, back in sixth year." For a little while at least.

"I suppose." Pansy touches his arm. "And then we weren't. What's brought all this on?"


"So, Potter," Pansy says quietly, and Draco doesn't have it in him to deny it. She gives him a half-smile. "That's why we never really worked, Draco." Pansy moves closer, reaches up to brush Draco's hair back, to trail her fingers along his jaw. "If it wasn't the Dark Lord that year, it was Potter, and I saw the way you looked at him when you thought no one would notice. I did, and it made me so bloody angry."

"Why?" Draco can barely get the word out.

Pansy drops her hand. Turns away. Draco knows he hurt her that year. It'd taken months for them to get past it last term. That'd been when he'd grown closer to Blaise and Millie. "You wanted him more," Pansy says after a moment. "I don't even think you knew it." She looks over at him, and her face is sad. "I'm not certain you do now."

"I…" Draco closes his eyes, breathes out. He can feel that familiar rising twist of panic going through him. He feels Pansy's hand take his, her fingers warm and soft. He inhales, opens his eyes. "I do," he says, and the admission is almost overwhelming. He looks away. He can't bear to see the pity in Pansy's gaze. "And I have detention with him tomorrow morning still."

"Oh, Draco." Pansy's fingers tighten around his. She leans her head against his shoulder. She doesn't need to tell him what a horrible idea it is, him and Potter. They both know. All too well. She sighs. "Bad luck."

Yeah, Draco thinks, as they walk down the hall hand in hand. Bloody bad luck indeed.

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"How many bottles are we supposed to have of ashwinder eggs?" Malfoy's voice comes from the depths of the Potions storeroom.

Harry takes a moment to consult the long parchment list Ravi's left for them. They've been working
for three hours now, and he's getting bored out of his mind. "It says seventeen here." He wonders what's going on in Hogsmeade, if Susan's found someone else to buy her a Butterbeer. She'd been disappointed when he'd told her Ravi was insisting he and Malfoy stay castled for the weekend, and he couldn't meet her at the Three Broomsticks.

"It's your own fault," Susan had said, with a wry smile. "But maybe we could have breakfast together before the rest of us leave you to Malfoy, you poor thing."

So they had, and it'd been nice enough, Harry thinks. Sus is smart and funny, and Harry likes her, even if she doesn't send flutters through his belly the way Ginny had.

Or Malfoy, a small, quiet voice whispers in the depths of his mind. Harry tells it to shut the fuck up. He sighs. "Malfoy, did you hear me?" He raises his voice. "The list says seventeen."

There's a cough and then a low curse. "I count five," Malfoy says.

Harry writes the actual number next to the expected inventory. He drags a finger along the list. "That makes forty or so items here so far with only one of them close to the actual count." It seems no one wants to use stinkbeetle dung. Hard to know why, really, Harry thinks with a wry smile. They'd had to evacuate for half an hour when Malfoy'd opened a phial to check it; Harry'd used the time to run down to the Great Hall to grab a bite of lunch with the younger students. He doesn't know where the hell Malfoy had gone to, though.

"Are a lot of inches left?" Malfoy pokes his head out of the cupboard. His blond hair is charmingly ruffled. If Harry liked that sort of thing. Which he doesn't. He's actually surprised that he and Malfoy haven't started a brawl yet, that they're getting along, at least well enough to make it this far through this ridiculous list Ravi's left them. To be honest, Harry doesn't think they'll finish before anyone gets back from Hogsmeade this evening. "Potter!" Malfoy snaps his fingers. "Merlin, I told you not to sniff that Gillyweed. You haven't the brain cells to lose."

"Fuck off," Harry says easily, and he eyes the clipboard in his hand. "I think we've still about twenty or so items left on this one."

Ravi's not letting them count the restricted materials, more's the pity. He'd muttered something about them likely brewing a bloody Liquid Copulation potion or Malefiore's Forbidden Enhancer whilst he's off roaming the castle to oust the snogging couples hidden away in the classrooms. To be honest, Harry's not sure what either of those potions are, but he's determined to ask Hermione when he has a chance.

"Let's go to the greenhouses to pick up the crates from Professor Sprout. I don't want to have to go out later in the evening." Malfoy's in front of Harry now, in a faded dark blue jumper and an ivory long sleeved top, the cuffs of the sleeves peeking out beneath his jumper, a creamy blue scarf around his neck that makes his eyes look a bit like a stormy ocean, his jeans slung low enough on his narrow hips that Harry'd seen a flash of y-fronts waistband and the sharp jut of a hipbone when Malfoy'd raised his arms above his head to lift a jar off the top shelf of the storeroom. His feet are shoved in worn brown laced boots that rumple the hem of his jeans. He looks amazing in old clothes, Harry thinks, and he turns away before Malfoy catches him looking.

They pull on their coats--a heavy dark blue wool jacket for Harry that he'd bought from a shop on Oxford Street and a long charcoal overcoat for Malfoy that looks bespoke--and take the dungeon stairs to the exit for the greenhouses. The castle is quiet and the shadows are gathering in the corners; it's just past noon, but the day is grey and heavily overcast with either rain or snow to come soon, it looks like. Harry braces himself against the cold, following Malfoy closely down the worn path to the familiar glass houses. The warming charms they'd cast back in the chill of the potions classroom.
are still clearly working well--when they enter the antechamber, they each have to shuck off layers until Harry's down to the Oasis t-shirt Bill'd given him last Yule and Malfoy's down to the long-sleeved ivory top he's been wearing under his jumper. It clings to his narrow shoulders, to the curve of his biceps, the hem hanging loose around his hips. If he looks closely, Harry can almost discern the shadow of the Mark through the fabric on his left forearm. Harry tries not to stare as they pile their discarded things onto the hooks and press into the main growing areas. He doesn't want to think about Malfoy on Halloween, about the way he'd looked in that ridiculous outfit.

Malfoy seems to know where he's going so Harry follows him. He stops at a set of Shrivelfig plants. "These are coming on well," Malfoy says, mostly to himself. "Only a few more days now."

"What are you on about?" Harry's hoping Malfoy'll tell him, but he knows that Malfoy doesn't really want to talk to him. They've barely had a conversation today that didn't somehow revolve around potions ingredients.

"I have to harvest another new moon batch for the Potions-slash-Alchemy project I'm working on with Ravi and Skeat." Malfoy leans over the workbench the plant pots are resting on, his eyes bright. His hair is curling at the ends, brushing against his angled jaw. His mouth is soft and pink, and Harry wonders what it'd be like to lean in and kiss him. He shakes the thought off, looks away as Malfoy says, "The last one was a spectacular failure." He turns away, gently lifting the leaves aside to check the roots.

Harry suddenly recalls Snape ordering him to peel Shrivelfigs for Malfoy in third year Potions class when Malfoy was claiming a wounded arm. For a moment Harry glances at the window, wondering if he looked, would he see Buckbeak out in the pen, imagine Sirius back at Grimmauld Place, find Remus in the DADA position and remember Malfoy as the spoilt little king of Slytherin? Was it simpler then, before the war came, before it took away Sirius, Remus, even Snape? To be honest, Harry can't tell. He wishes they hadn't lost so much, but the boy in front of him is breathtakingly real, another survivor, just like Harry, trapped in the place where so many people died, and, just like Harry, doomed to live on and remember.

When Malfoy catches him looking, Harry glances away, his hands shoved in his pockets. He bites his lip. "So, where are the crates?" He's afraid to engage too much with Malfoy right now, both for his own safety when he gets too close and for the ferocity of Malfoy's anger right now. Also Harry's memories are closer to the surface when the castle and grounds are relatively empty, the circuits in time that lead through the greenhouse reminding him of all the times they've been here before in the past. He really needs to get out and get some air, clear his head maybe.

"Ravi said they'd be here in the back." Malfoy's voice is muffled as he goes to the other side of the greenhouse, pushing through a row of potted sea ficuses, their deep green-blue leaves sending off bubbles as he passes through.

Harry follows Malfoy, but not too closely. He doesn't see any crates; in fact, he thinks they might be in the wrong greenhouse. "Any chance it's next door somewhere?"

Malfoy steps back through the trees, a green-blue ficus leaf caught in his hair. Harry wants to reach out, to pluck it free, but Malfoy's shaking his head, and the leaf falls, drifting down to settle beside Harry's shoe. "No chance. Ravi specifically said this one."

Harry walks back to the middle row of workbenches, tries to see if there's something under the tables. "Did we miss it in the entrance?"

"Maybe." Malfoy sounds unconvinced. "I wonder if it's in that section in the corner."
There are heavy curtains hanging to wall off a section in the back of the greenhouse with a sign scrawled in thick black ink strokes. *Keep Out. This Means You.*

Harry and Malføy look at each other. "Would he put them there?" Harry wonders.

Malføy shrugs. "I don't know where else they could be."

They both inch closer to the curtains. Malføy gives Harry a little side glance. "Well, now I'm breaking the rules with the Chosen One." He sighs. "At least we won't be punished."

"Shut it, Malfoy." Harry acts irritated, but the command lacks sting. "With my luck, it'll be a fucking Basilisk in there."

Malføy stops for a moment, his eyes wide. Harry laughs. "Joking. You should see your face."

With a twist of his mouth, Malføy opens the curtains and steps through. "Arsehole."

Harry steps close behind him, craning to look over his shoulder. "Is it in there?" Harry steps on Malføy's heel and Malføy goes forward, Harry on top of him. To Harry, it feels like an instant, and then he's lying on top of a warm, protesting body.

Malføy's perfectly still, his face just inches away from a large, fleshy red blossom. "Potter, for the love of Merlin, move very carefully." His voice is even, but there's a slight, panicked undercurrent that Harry picks up on instantly. "That's a Venus Trap."

Harry shifts, his body suddenly responding to Malføy's nearness. Fuck, he thinks. "Don't you mean a Venus Fly-Trap?" His hands are over Malføy's on the edge of the growing platform; Malføy's fingers are soft and warm beneath his. It'd take so little for Harry to twine their hands together. He fights off the urge.

"No," Malføy inhales shallowly, trying to turn his head away from the flower; with the breath, Harry can feel the swell of Malføy's back beneath his. "This one catches people, in a way. Not insects. The pollen it releases is brilliant for healing potions, but it's difficult to collect without side effects. You have to be suited up properly to even come near it. I can't believe Sprout has one out here."

Before Harry can ask what side effects, Malføy shifts, and Harry loses his footing, pressing Malføy's face further down into a petal of the blossom and raising a small purple cloud from the center of the large plant.

"Shit," Malføy says, coughing. "Potter, get off me." His panic isn't an undercurrent any longer. He twists beneath Harry, pushing his arse back against Harry's hips.

"Jesus, Malfoy--" Harry inhales the purple dust, sputtering as some it catches in the back of his throat. Malføy writhes again, shoving Harry back until he rolls off Malføy. Harry's prick is suddenly standing at attention, and all he can think is that Malføy can't know how hard he is. But then Malføy crawls away from him, still coughing. He falls against the edge of the growing platform, shaking, and Harry's eyes stray to Malføy's crotch where his cock is clearly outlined against the denim of his jeans.

When Malføy realises what Harry's looking at, he shifts, turning away. "You're an idiot, Potter," he says, and he sounds so bloody weary.

All Harry can think of is how his bloody prick could pound nails right now and how much he wants to be rubbing it against Malføy's. "What," Harry starts to say, but his jeans feel like a fucking chastity belt right now, and he has to close his eyes and breathe out. When he opens them again, Malføy's
looking at him, his own breaths short and ragged. "What the hell was that?"

"The side effect," Malfoy manages to get out. He licks his bottom lip, and fuck, but Harry wants to kiss him, so damned badly. "Perhaps I should have mentioned that in greater quantities it forms the basis of most lust potions?"

Harry groans. He tries not to press his palm against the swell in his jeans, and he utterly fails. Malfoy’s gaze drops down, watching him with those bright grey eyes of his, and something about how he's looking at Harry makes Harry harder than ever.

"We should go," Harry says, and Malfoy just nods, pushing himself carefully to his feet. It takes all Harry has to stand up as well, particularly when Malfoy's swollen prick is just inches away from his face. Fuck, Harry thinks. What the hell is wrong with him? He tells himself it's just the pollen, but Harry knows it's more, knows it's tied to those dreams he's been having, the ones in which Harry's pressed against Malfoy, prick to prick, their bodies moving together.

The brush of the curtain on Harry's skin is too much, his body strung tight. He wants to be rubbing against Malfoy again, over, under him, whatever. It's like his dreams and his reality have fused, and he doesn't know what the fuck he's going to do.

"Is that plant lethal?" Harry belatedly worries about his exposure to an unknown botanical substance.

"Only if you can die of a stiffy," Malfoy says. "We've probably got to deal with this before we go back." His hand is on his hip, and Harry's staring.

"Yeah." Harry's own hand strays towards his prick again, and he adjusts it with the back of his hand, feeling the pressure immediately. "Oh, God, I think I'm going to die if I don't come."

Malfoy won't look at him. "Just wank yourself, Potter," he manages to get out. "I'll stay here; you go into the next room."

"Right," Harry says, and he starts to walk away, and then something makes him stop, makes him turn around. Later he'll tell himself it was the pollen, but if he's honest with himself, it isn't. This is possibly the only chance he'll have to experience those dreams of his in the flesh. "You know, it would probably feel better if we wanked each other."

And at that, Malfoy stills. He glances over at Harry; his face is shuttered, his shoulders hunched. "What?"

Harry doesn't look away. "I could…" He makes a motion with his fist. "You know." His mouth is dry. He's obviously lost his mind, if he wants to do this with Malfoy of all people. He bites his lip, and Malfoy's gaze flicks towards it, the tip of his tongue darting out to sweep across his own lower lip. "I mean," Harry says, "I'm not bent, but a hand's a hand, yeah? And I always liked…" He trails off again, swallows. "Gin was good--"

"I don't need to know that." Malfoy's voice is sharp, high. He makes a small step towards Harry, then stops. "Merlin. This is mad."

"Probably." Harry's prick aches. He rubs a hand over his stomach, up his chest. He wants to be touched, and he can't stop himself from scratching his fingernails over one nipple, shivers spreading through his whole body.

"Don't," Malfoy says. His eyes are wide; he presses his palms against his face, covering it. His hair spills over his fingers, silky and silvered, and Harry wonders what it'd feel like against his skin. "Potter, you've no idea what you're asking."
Harry wants to say he does, wants Malfoy to know how much he's wanted this, how he's been thinking of it since the first time he'd seen Malfoy in the showers. Maybe if Malfoy touches him, gets Harry off, maybe then Harry'll stop dreaming about Malfoy beneath him, all long legs and breathy gasps. But for now he just watches Malfoy, waits.

And Malfoy turns away, his hands falling to his sides. Harry can still see the swell of Malfoy's cock against his flies, the way it leans to the right.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want," Harry says finally. "If you want to wank alone, I'm good with that." He takes a step away, and then Malfoy's beside him, his fingers on Harry's wrist. That light touch alone is nearly enough to make Harry shudder, his hips bucking slightly.

"No," Malfoy says, and Harry looks over at him, takes in Malfoy's flushed cheeks, his mouth pink and scraped by his sharp, white teeth. Malfoy lifts his chin. "Are you certain?" he asks. "Because I'm not going to do this if you're planning on having some sort of existential crisis about wanking another bloke."

Harry knows this is his chance to refuse, to stop all of this before it goes too far. He thinks about it.

"Have you done this before?"

For a moment, he thinks Malfoy's going to refuse to answer, and then Malfoy draws in an uneven breath and says, "No. But I've thought about it."

And at that, Harry's brain shorts out a bit. He thinks about Malfoy lying in bed, touching himself whilst he thinks about long, lean bodies and narrow hips, flat chests. Swollen pricks. "Oh," he says. He hesitates, then adds, "Me too. The thinking about it." He doesn't dare tell Malfoy he's thought of him. He shifts from one foot to the other, and the rub of his jeans across his aching prick makes him shiver. "So do you want to?"

Malfoy's eyebrow goes up. "Are you asking me to me to experiment with you, Potter?"

"Yeah," Harry says, a bit slowly. "Although I suppose I'm asking in particular if I can pull your prick for you." And God, he wants to. So fucking badly. He wants to feel the weight of Malfoy in his palm, to smooth his thumb along Malfoy's foreskin. He can smell the citrusy-musky scent of Malfoy, and he wants to taste him, to feel Malfoy's soft lips against his. Malfoy's an itch Harry desperately needs to scratch, and the bloody universe has just given him the perfect excuse.

"Well," Malfoy says finally, and Harry can see the moment Malfoy makes his decision, the way Malfoy's face slips from uncertainty to an almost bold flirtation. He smiles faintly, tosses his hair.

"Since you've asked so nicely, how can I refuse?"

Fuck, yes, Harry thinks, and when Malfoy turns towards him, his fingers fumbling with the buttons on his flies, Harry can barely breathe. Malfoy takes Harry's hand and guides it under the waistband of his y-fronts to his long, smooth prick. His skin is preternaturally soft, deliciously warm. Malfoy groans.

Malfoy leans even closer, unbuttoning Harry's jeans and then reaching into Harry's pants, and fuck, his hand is on Harry's cock. Harry's body jolts with the sensation—the cool roughness of Malfoy's hand, its surprising strength. Then Malfoy's leaning into him, against his right shoulder, breathing heavily and pulling his prick in long strokes that are so good Harry wants this to go on forever, and Malfoy's prick is so hard in Harry's hand and he's trying to adjust his wrist to get the angle right, and Malfoy's eyes are closed and his mouth is open, and it's just like Harry's dreams, but it's so much better.
"Harder," Malfoy says, and his breath is a warm huff against Harry's cheek. Harry wants to turn his head, to kiss Malfoy, but that's not what they've agreed to, and Harry's hesitant to break this odd, fragile trust between them. He twists his palm over the ruddy head of Malfoy's prick, feeling the slickness against his skin as he drags his fingers down Malfoy's shaft, pulling back Malfoy's foreskin. Harry can't help but look down, watching the way their hands move, the slide of their cocks, the way they bump together on vigorous strokes, sending frissons of pleasure twisting through Harry's body.

The greenhouse is silent, humid with growing things and silent with the echoes of their bitten off gasps and moans. Harry would feel awkward, but this feels so good, so much better than wanking alone would be, and fuck, but Harry never knew how amazing it could feel, having his prick stroked whilst he did the same to someone else. Malfoy's hand grips Harry's cock firmly, stripping it efficiently, his fingers pulling Harry's foreskin over the head, twisting it just enough for Harry's breath to catch. Ginny'd never done that before; she'd been far too careful when she was touching Harry, as if she might hurt him. Malfoy doesn't give a fuck about that; he seems to instinctively know that Harry wants it hard and rough, his other hand gripping Harry's shoulder, holding himself up as Harry pulls his prick. Harry only hopes he's giving as good as he gets. Malfoy feels amazing and Harry smells musk and earth and sex, and he doesn't dare look at Malfoy now, but the pressure's building in his body, and he knows he can't last much longer.

"Fuck, Potter, I'm going to--" Malfoy breaks off in a groan. Harry pulls harder, his own prick throbbing in Malfoy's tight grasp. Malfoy's body shudders, and he cries out, burying his face into Harry's shoulder, coming all over Harry's hand stickily.

And then, with one quick twist of Malfoy's fingers, Harry's own climax hits him without warning, an explosion at the base of his spine that spreads through his entire body, leaving him shuddering and twitching, his body limp with release and his prick dripping with spunk. He thinks he's splattered across Malfoy's belly, staining his shirt, and that's a strangely exciting and also terrifying thought, the idea that Malfoy could be marked by Harry that way.

They stand together, their breaths ragged and raw, their bodies leaning against one another. Harry lets his hips rock forward, once, then twice, and the feel of Malfoy's cock brushing against his makes Harry shiver again with want. After a moment, Malfoy steps back and performs a quick cleaning spell on the both of them. Harry's still dumbstruck.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Malfoy says, but the look on his face is softer than Harry expects. Still, Malfoy pulls his flies back together, half-turning away, and there's a flush on his face from his throat to his cheeks. "We're agreed, yes, that this was a horrible idea and won't ever be spoken of again?"

Harry drags his tongue across his bottom lip. It tastes salty-sweet, and he nods as he tucks himself back into his pants. Fuck. He's just got off with bloody Malfoy of all people, and he's fairly certain his prick would be all right with doing it another time or two or three. But still, he says, "Never again," with a nod. His voice is a raw croak. His skin feels prickly, like tiny sparks are going off across it. He's also calm for the first time in weeks, the way he'd always been when he'd shagged Ginny. The constant anxiety's receded, he feels as if he can breathe again.

Malfoy's not looking at him. "Right," he says, and Harry thinks he hears a faint tremble in Malfoy's voice. "The crates. We need the bloody crates."

"Yeah." Harry nods. "Okay."

In a sort of daze, he and Malfoy find the crates, which were in the entryway all along, and they lug them back to the castle. They're both quiet whilst they finish the rest of Ravi's list, checking things off as quickly as they can. By the time they've finished, Harry can feel his body starting to respond again.
Fuck but he wants Malfoy. This isn't just an itch to be scratched. This is bloody real.

"That's the last of it," Malfoy says from the storeroom, and when he comes out, he's not looking at Harry. He's back in his jumper and scarf, that brilliant, lanky body of his completely hidden from Harry's gaze. "You'll leave the list for Ravi?"

Harry nods. "I'll drop it by his rooms."

Malfoy reaches for his coat. "I need to meet Pans and the others for dinner," he says, and he still doesn't look Harry's way. His hair's in his face again; Harry's learnt already that it's Malfoy's way of shutting himself off from people, of hiding himself away. Harry wants to lean over and brush it back, but he doesn't dare. He knows he needs to leave Malfoy this defence right now, if nothing else.

Still, Harry stops him before he gets to the door "Malfoy," he says, and Malfoy glances back, his face hesitant, wary. "We'll keep today to ourselves, yeah?"

"Who the fuck am I going to tell, Potter?" Malfoy asks, his mouth twisting to one side. "The last thing I want my friends to know is what happened in that greenhouse."

"All right," Harry says, feeling oddly unhappy at Malfoy's sharp tone, and then Malfoy's gone, leaving Harry alone in the doorway of the potions storeroom, the empty classroom at his back.

Harry does wonder if one can die from wanting someone the way he wants Malfoy. It's so much, he doesn't know what to do with it. He wants to finish up here, to drop the finalised list by Ravi's rooms, so he can wank himself raw in his bed. Fuck dinner; he'll go by the kitchens later and beg something off the elves.

And then he remembers he shares with Malfoy. How is he going to wank about Malfoy in a shared dormitory? A treacherous voice in his mind says that he's been doing it for weeks, so why should this be any different?

But it is. And it's very different, Harry thinks. He's had his hand on Malfoy's prick. He knows how it feels, how long and elegant Malfoy's cock is, how it curves up at Harry's touch, how Malfoy groans when his foreskin slides back. He knows what makes Malfoy gasp, what makes Malfoy's body tense in the most delicious way, what makes Malfoy shudder against Harry, his breath hot against Harry's ear. And Malfoy had his hand on Harry's prick, every stroke responding to Harry's reaction, pushing Harry higher and higher until he shattered. Even if he won't look at Harry now, it happened.

And fuck, but Harry wants it to happen again.
Chapter 4

"My heart is hoping,
You'll walk right in tonight
And tell me there are things that you regret.
--Too Much to Ask, Niall Horan

"Now remember, the Spatterworts will try to escape." Professor Sprout's voice quavers a bit, and Draco wonders if she's all right. She hasn't seemed as robust as she did last year, but then, they're all a bit off this term, aren't they? Professor Sprout looks older then he remembers, and frailer somehow. Draco hopes she's not ill, even though he hadn't realised he had any sympathetic feelings for his Herbology teacher before now.

"Neville, why don't you come to the front and show everyone." Professor Sprout motions with a gloved hand to Longbottom, who awkwardly shuffles to the front of the bench. Several eyes follow him. Draco can't believe that Longbottom's grown up so nicely--he's no idea when that happened, but suddenly Longbottom's tall and muscular and broad-shouldered, nothing like the weak, stammering boy he'd once been. Hannah Abbott's a lucky girl, Draco thinks with a bit of envy if he's honest.

Longbottom's still awkward, though, and Draco's perversely glad something's remained the same. He's not happy with the way his world is shifting around him. He'd had another owl from his mother this morning, wanting to know if he'll go with her to Azkaban in a week or two to visit his father. Draco doesn't know how long it'll take her to realise that neither he nor his father want to see each other. He realises she wants it to be different, that she wants things to go back to the way they were. So does he, but he knows there's no chance of that. Draco sighs. He'll have to send an owl back to her later today. He dreads writing the note, but at least he'll have a chance to go by the owlery and see Quercus again. The little owlet's grown by leaps and bounds since Draco'd purchased him in August, and that thought makes him think of Potter and their encounter in Diagon that day.

Involuntarily, Draco's eyes stray over to Potter, who's standing at the back with Weasley. A shiver goes through Draco when he sees the prat. It's only been a day and a half since they'd wanked each other off in the greenhouse next to this one, and really, the whole world has drifted around them, hasn't it, reconstructing itself into something Draco barely recognises. If Draco was constantly mindful of where Potter was before, now he can't help but be aware of his every move. If Draco had a bit of a schoolboy pash on Potter before, he's now desperately in lust with him.

Whilst Draco's watching, Potter catches him looking. Their eyes lock, and suddenly Draco wants Potter again, wants his prick in Potter's hand, or his mouth--Merlin, his mouth! The thought of that sends a shudder of want through Draco. He wonders if Potter would do it, what it would be like to see Potter on his knees, looking up at Draco, the head of Draco's cock pressed against the inside of Potter's cheek. Fuck. Draco swallows, and then Potter looks away, hiding a cough behind his wrist. Weasley gives Potter a curious glance, and then Potter says something, and Weasley shrugs and turns back towards Sprout.

Draco breathes out. Potter hasn't said anything to Weasley about them. He'd thought Potter hadn't; Draco's fairly certain Weasley would never have been able to keep it secret, and since he shares a dormitory with Blaise, Draco would have heard immediately. Still it's a relief to know that their secret is still secret. And bloody hell, what a secret it is. Draco's wanked three times since their encounter, but it's not been enough. He's worried that the pollen hasn't worn off yet, even though all the literature he's seen says it doesn't last longer than thirty-six hours at most, and if an orgasm's
achieved within the first fifteen minutes, the pollen's far more likely to be expelled by the body at a quicker rate. Still, he's a bit concerned, and he's thinking of asking Ravi if he knows of any studies that might indicate the contrary.

The scuffle of shoes and shift of bodies pulls Draco's attention back to class. Sprout has finished the demonstration, and Longbottom's put the pot with the Spatterwort fern in the top corner. There are lines beginning to form at the supplies benches.

"So what are we doing?" Draco looks over to Blaise, who's eyeing him a bit balefully, a bit curiously. Draco frowns at him. "What?"

Blaise smiles, far too feral for Draco's comfort. "Oh, we're just planting werewolf teeth beneath the Spatterworts. You did bring your silver knife, didn't you? Oraconite? Only Sprout's mentioned they're dangerous still, and we've got to be alert whilst planting them so we don't get turned. I believe the risk is comparatively minor."

"The fuck I did," Draco is suddenly anxious, irate even. Part of him thinks Blaise is full of shite, but one never knows at this bloody school. It's not as if student safety's a high priority for most of the sodding staff. "Why the hell are they letting--"

And then he realises Blaise's holding on to the edge of the workbench and laughing, the filthy tale-teller. "Sorry. I was waiting to see if you'd stop me." Blaise straightens up whilst Draco sulks. Everyone's gone forward, and they're the only ones left in the area.

"You're a fucking shit, you know," Draco says, furiously. He grabs his shears and stabs them towards Blaise, barely missing his arm.

Blaise bats Draco's hand away, knocking the shears from his fingers. "Why are you watching Potter like he's a new Firebolt model?" Blaise turns a frown on Draco. "I mean, sure, half the school wants to ride him, but you're practically drooling."

Draco's silent, embarrassed. He doesn't know what to say. And he does want to ride Potter like a broom. That much is true. He doesn't look at Blaise; he just picks up the shears and sets them back into the deep groove on the side of the table.

"Oh fuck." Blaise turns, leans against the table's edge. Millie's watching them from the front of the greenhouse, her brow furrowed, whilst Pansy collects their Spatterworts. Draco looks away from both of them, rubbing his thumb across a deep gash in the wood of the table. Blaise's hand suddenly covers his, and Draco glances up. Blaise's face is lined with worry. "You haven't done anything rash, have you?"

Draco is saved by Professor Sprout, who shouts from the front. "Malfoy. Zabini. Come get your supplies. We want to make sure everyone has two Spatterwort rhizomes planted before the end of class."

They queue up, Blaise behind Draco behind Susan bloody Bones. Potter and Weasley brush past them, and Draco's eyes voluntarily follow the slouch of Potter's easy gait, the curve of his lips as he tells a joke to Weasley, then smiles at Bones, his eyes sliding over Draco, barely registering his presence.

"Dinner tonight, Harry?" Bones asks, and Potter turns, next to Draco, looking back at her.

"Always for you," Potter says, and Bones laughs, her cheeks pinking a bit when Potter winks at her. It's all Draco can do not to roll his eyes. He also wants to strangle Bones with the stupidly knitted..."
pink and yellow scarf she's wearing, but he settles for telling himself that it at least clashes horribly
with her hair. Still, he can't help watching Potter walk away, loose-hipped. His head bends towards
Weasley as Weasley glances back towards them. He catches Draco looking and flips two fingers
Draco's way; Draco returns the favour. Fucking ginger bastard.

"You've so much more to lose than Potter. You can't let anyone see you even glance his way, you
idiot." And when Draco glares back at him, Blaise's face softens. "I'm sorry."

Draco wants to bite back something fierce, wants to challenge Blaise on his assumptions. It wouldn't
be so easy for Potter--the wizarding world's golden boy, hero of heroes, their joy and light and
saviour, to hear the Prophet tell it--to get away with having a one off with a suspected Death Eater
like Draco, now would it? But of course, Blaise is right in his own way. Draco doesn't think he has
all that much here in this godforsaken Scottish purgatory, but if he's honest with himself, he's fully
aware he still has so much more to lose. So does his family. He can only imagine the stories that
might come out if his fellow students start gossiping about him. It's not as if Draco hadn't planted a
few himself back during the Triwizard Tournament. All it would take would be one quick firecall to
Rita Skeeter. She'd been more than happy to rip apart the Malfoy name during his father's trial. He's
certain she'd like to drag that acid quill of hers a bit further through his heart.

But for now, Draco just scowls at his best friend and says, "Sod off, you wanker," and when Susan
Bones glances back at the both of them, Draco snaps, "The same to you, Bones."

She raises her eyebrow. "Feeling tetchy, are we, Malfoy?"

"It's his default mood," Blaise says from behind Draco, and Susan laughs. Draco wonders if anyone
would question a tragic shears accident involving the two of them, but he's fairly certain Pansy
would never forgive him for that.

When Draco's filled his pots with soil and dragon dung and taken his little cage of wiggling rhizomes
for planting, he heads back to the benches, trying to find a spot where he and Blaise can work.

"No Slytherins here," Michael Corner says when he tries to take a vacant space at the end of the
bench Potter's at. Draco doesn't want to get into a fight with him, but there aren't many spaces left.

Weasley looks at Draco's rhizomes, one of which has already escaped and is wriggling across the
floor. "Best scrabble after that, Ferret," he says, and the whole table laughs, save for Potter, who isn't
meeting Draco's gaze. Potter turns away, bending over his own cage of rhizomes.

Draco's suddenly irritated. He wants Potter to call the idiot hounds to heel, but knows that'll only
make things worse. Still, he stares at Potter's broad back, willing him to fight for him. Potter's silent,
refusing to look Draco's way. Fucking bastard, Draco thinks, and he bends down to catch his
rhizome before it makes its way beneath the nearest workbench.

"There's space over here," Blaise calls. He's managed to sandwich himself in next to Sue Li and
Isobel Macdougal. "Leave the loser bench."

And Draco slams his rhizome back in the cage, perhaps a bit harder than he ought to, but the damned
knot of fern roots is already trying to undo the latch again. He brushes past Potter, knocking his
shoulder against his.

"Oi," Weasley snaps. "Watch yourself, Malfoy."

"It's fine, Ron." Potter's voice is quiet. Draco doesn't bother to look back. Why should he, after all?
He knows Blaise is watching him as he sets his cage down at the crowded workbench. Sue Li gives him a small smile, scooting her cage out of the way.

"Thanks," Draco says, and then he looks over at Blaise. "Not a word," he says quietly, and Blaise just nods.

"Not one," Blaise agrees, but his eyes narrow a bit when he looks towards the table where Corner and Weasley are laughing, throwing their rhizomes at each other and catching them. "Wankers," Blaise says.

Isobel Macdougal sniffs. "Terribly," she says, and Draco glances at her. She shrugs, her short dark curls a halo around her brown face. "Michael's always been a prat," she says, "and I've never been overly fond of Weasley and Potter. Honestly, I've no idea what Hermione sees in Ron." She brushes a bit of dung off her work gloves, then pats the soil more firmly around the Spatterwort's roots.

Draco thinks he likes her, rather a lot more than he realised.

Potter's head is bent over his pot, but he looks up surreptitiously, almost as if he's heard Macdougal, but when he glances their way, it's Draco's gaze he meets. Draco can see Potter swallow, see the way his jaw tightens, then releases, and something deep in Draco unfurls, hot and trembly until Potter turns back to his Spatterworts, fighting with the tiny ferns to pot them.

The rest of the lesson passes quickly. Both of Corner's rhizomes escape, and if Draco squashes one surreptitiously under his boot and kicks it under the bench, well, no one need know.

It's only when they're putting on their coats for the cold trek back to the castle that Draco thinks again of Saturday, and the awkwardness between him and Potter, the dreamy feeling of being caught in a fantasy, the reality of their skin touching and the soft, breathy gasps Potter made whilst Draco was tugging him off.

He stands aside, watches Potter slide his coat back on, acutely aware of the curve of Potter's neck, the breadth of his shoulders, the narrow flare of his hips in jeans that actually almost fit now. Potter's grown up, Draco realises. They all have, the Eighth Years. They don't really fit at Hogwarts any longer--it's not meant for them, and it's a matter of scale as much as anything else.

Pain blossoms on Draco's ankle, sharp and bright. He swears and turns, furious at whoever kicked him, only to meet Blaise's seething glare.

"You fucking pillock," Blaise whispers as they file out of the greenhouse, and he really does look angry. Blaise is so rarely anything but mild-mannered that it throws Draco off a bit. "Just put a button on your coat saying you want to shag him."

And then Pansy comes up behind them, Millie at her heels. "What's going on, darlings?" she asks, looking between them, and Draco can tell she sees more than he'd like her to. "Are we having a spat?"

For a moment Draco thinks Blaise's going to say something, but he just sighs and shrugs, then drapes his arm around Pansy's shoulders. "Draco's furious about the latest Gladrag's line, aren't you, old man? Says the colours are terrible for his complexion, but really, I think they'll be brilliant on me, wouldn't you say?"

"Indubitably." The coil of anxiety in Draco settles a bit. Both Blaise's concern and their taking the piss out of each other is familiar, soothing even, as is the way Pansy laughs, mocking them both as they make their way back up the path to the castle. Still, Millie's giving Draco a curious look, but she
just smiles faintly when he raises an eyebrow.

Draco sighs and turns away, his boots slipping just a bit on the wet grass. He can see Potter ahead of them, Weasley and Longbottom flanking him. Granger's a few feet in front of them, chatting with Lovegood. She turns to say something to Potter, and her gaze catches Draco's. She trails off, watching him, and when she stumbles, Lovegood catches her arm.

Pansy laughs, then glances back at Draco. Her smile fades into a frown. Draco doesn't care. He's watching the way Potter's body moves beneath that dark blue wool coat, remembering how solid it'd felt against him on Saturday. Fuck, he thinks. This isn't how he wanted to start off his week.

Really, the less Draco thinks about Potter, the better. Surely his memories of the way Potter's prick had felt in his hand will fade. Won't they?

He wraps his arms around himself, fending off the chill of the air as he trudges back up the castle path.

***

Harry meets Professor Omolade at her request in her office after dinner on Tuesday evening; Susan walks him up to the Defence rooms when they've finished eating. Harry feels a bit odd about it, if he's honest, even though he doesn't balk when she slips her hand in his. He idly wonders what it'd be like to kiss her, whether he'd feel that rush he'd felt with Malfoy if he pulled her into one of the shadowed alcoves and pressed her against the wall, whether she'd even let him, to be honest. There's part of him that knows he's using Sus, that he likes the frown Ginny gives him when they're sat side-by-side at the Eighth Years' table in the Great Hall, that he also likes the way Malfoy watches them through narrowed eyes, then turns away when Harry looks over at him.

But then he and Malfoy had barely been able to make eye contact at breakfast when Harry'd cancelled their potions tutoring session for tonight.

"Coward," is all Malfoy'd said, with an arrogant curl of his lip, but Harry'd also caught a look of relief on Malfoy's face as he'd turned away, and Harry himself had felt a weight lift from the pit of his stomach.

Susan leaves him at Omolade's door, squeezing Harry's fingers. "Thanks for dinner again," she says, and Harry leans in and brushes his lips across her cheek. She smells like roses, he thinks, or some sort of flower, and she laughs softly as she steps back, her blue eyes bright. "Go on with you," she says, and her hand slips from his.

Harry wishes he felt something as she walks away. But there'd been nothing, not even the faintest twitch of his prick at the feel of her soft skin. He's an idiot, he thinks. If he had any damned sense at all he'd be wrapped around Sus right now. She's perfect for him, maybe even better than Gin, if he's honest, but all he can think of is pale blond hair and the swell of a hot prick against his body, and Harry doesn't understand himself. He really doesn't. He's not bent. He like girls, likes the way they smell and how they feel, and he really likes the weight of a breast in his hand, the softness of a girl, her heat tight around his prick. He doesn't know where this obsession with Malfoy's coming from. He ought to be trying to get in Susan's knickers now, not thinking about how Malfoy felt pressed against him.

Fuck but he's a sodding arsehole, Harry thinks. He's fairly certain Ginny would agree. He stops before knocking on Omolade's door. He misses Ginny, he realises, but not in a romantic way. He misses talking to her, misses hearing her laugh, misses her mocking him as she leans her head against his shoulder. She's been one of his best friends for years, and now she's gone, with this huge gulf
between them, and Harry doesn't know what to do any more. What to say.

A wave of sadness washes over Harry. He lets himself feel it for a moment, lets it weigh down his shoulders. And then he takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, then knocks on the door in front of him.

"Come in."

The door swings open, and then Harry's facing Professor Omolade across a neat desk. He steps in, feeling strangely awkward; Omolade doesn't look up from the essay she's marking, leaving behind trails of bright red ink in her wake.

"You may sit, Mr Potter." Omolade waves a hand, and Harry sits down gingerly in the hard wooden chair across from her. He's been in enough professor's offices at Hogwarts that he knows to be quiet. Snape trained him well, Harry thinks, and that's a small pang deep inside of him. The man was an arsehole, Harry thinks, but he wouldn't be sat here today without him. Snape kept Harry alive, in his own awful way, and Harry's glad of that. Still, there are people who want to call him a Death Eater, who want to sweep aside what he'd done for the Order, who've refused him a portrait amongst the rest of the heads of Hogwarts. Harry doesn't like that, but he doesn't know what to do, either. And he can't help but think of Malfoy as well, and the way he's been ostracised. That's another thing Harry's not certain how to handle. He knows Malfoy's angry with him about Monday, about how Harry treated him in Herbology. But if Harry'd said anything that would have raised more questions, and Harry's certain Malfoy doesn't want anyone to know what they did.

So he'd looked away, let the others say what they wanted to. And Harry regrets that, but he's not sure he could have done anything else. Malfoy'll just have to accept that.

Whilst he waits for Omolade to finish, Harry looks around the office. There's not much on the walls--a framed copy of her Hogwarts NEWTs certification and a plethora of certificates in Defence and Curse-Breaking, including ones from Nigeria and Japan, as well as some sort of rather impressive medal with a maple leaf engraved on it that Harry's fairly certain is Canadian in origin. Evidently Professor Omolade is highly credentialed and well-travelled, despite her apparent youth. The variety and number of books on the shelves are imposing in Harry's opinion, although he thinks Hermione would be thrilled if she saw them, and Omolade has a special, locked cabinet of even more books in the corner. Harry sees a shimmer of spells around them, and thinks perhaps they're on the order of the Restricted Section.

Omolade puts down her quill. "Mr Potter, thank you for coming." When she sees what he's looking at, the Canadian medal, she smiles elusively. "Don't ask. I'm not allowed to talk about it."

Harry shifts, a bit nervous all of a sudden. He's not quite sure why he's here, and he has the odd sense that he's done something wrong. He rubs at his ear. "Is there something you wanted of me, Professor?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Omolade leans back in her chair, steepling her fingers. "Can you tell me a bit about your experience here this year?"

"In Defence, you mean, or all of it?" Harry's at a loss, if he's honest. He gives her a blank look, not certain what she's asking about. He rubs his palms over the curve of the chair arms, hoping madly that she's not referring in any way to Malfoy. Harry's been terrified that some sort of monitoring spell on the Venus Trap would have caught them. To be honest, he'd expected Sprout to call them both out about it after Herbology yesterday.

Omolade just shrugs. "Either. I'm most interested in your Defence work, of course, but you can tell me anything you think is relevant. Coursework or extracurricular."
Relief seeps through Harry. "It's pretty easy for me now. Defence, I mean." He glances up at her, a bit sheepishly. "I mean, I think I'm okay in it."

To his surprise, Omolade laughs. "Please spare me the obvious. I'm sure the class is about as difficult for you as tying your shoe. Which, by the way, you probably should."

Harry's face grows warm. He leans down and ties the laces of his left trainer, then settles back in his chair. "What should I say, Professor?"

Omolade frowns, her head tilting to one side. Her plaits are twisted up today, in a tight, high bun, showing off the graceful brown curve of her neck. "Tell me about your magical control since the Battle of Hogwarts?"

At that question, Harry almost jumps in his chair. The Healers had checked him out, of course, but after the first few days, no one had really asked him about his magic since the Battle. Harry supposes it's not surprising. Everyone else had been focusing on the endless funerals afterwards, then on the celebrations, and Harry hadn't really wanted to worry Ron or Hermione about it. Still, Harry's felt something off about his casting since at least June, something like static or a stone in his shoe. It hasn't been quite right, although it's not awful, but he doesn't know what it is. He's off-balance, he's convinced himself. And probably just bloody tired.

"Spells come out wrong sometimes." Harry's surprised to hear the words come out of his mouth. "I mean, not so as you'd notice that much, but they feel wrong whilst they're coming out."

Omolade nods. "I suspected as much, particularly given last week's episode in class. No one's Protego should come out that strongly, even a Maxima." She presses a knuckle against her mouth, thinking for a long moment, before she asks, "Are you having trouble with the brightness of your Lumos?"

Harry sits upright, an uncanny shiver going through him. "How did you know?" He's been making other people cast it, if it's necessary. His either comes out blindingly white or erratic, like flickering flame.

"It's fairly diagnostic of the condition I think we're talking about." Omolade eyes him. She doesn't look incredibly happy. "What are the effects? Erratic?"

"Sometimes," Harry says. "Or too bright."

Omolade nods slowly, thoughtful. "That's probably better, then."

"I'm sorry, Professor." Harry's worried now. "But can you please tell me what's wrong?" He hasn't been this unsettled in ages, had been telling himself that everything's okay, that he's normal. But now, Professor Omolade has seen the truth, and he just hopes it's not fatal.

Or some bloody remnant of Voldemort raising its ugly head again. Harry still has nightmares about that mangled baby beneath the bench in King's Cross, terrified that when he wakes up, that deformed bit of the Dark Lord will still be inside of him, harsh and overwhelming.

"You're fine." Omolade favours Harry with a quick, kind look. "I'm sorry to be cryptic; I just wanted to see if my hypothesis would hold." She leans her elbows on her desk, her hands clasped on the stack of parchment in front of her. "You have a form of magical strain that's hitting your control. I think you're probably overcasting, and most likely have been since before the battle here, which would make sense, given all that you went through at the end of the war."

"Which means?" Harry asks, with a bit of trepidation.
Omolade smiles faintly. "That you're draining your magical supply more than you need to be. There's something off about the modulation of energy for your power." She sits back in her chair, her shoulders relaxing, and Harry realises she was rather worried before. That doesn't make him feel better, to be honest. "You're also having some emotional interference, which is normal for your age, but perhaps it's a bit more than one might expect. Then again, most people also haven't faced Dark Wizards before they were eighteen." She eyes him. "You don't need to panic, Mr Potter."

Perhaps she should have told him that to start with, Harry thinks, as the tightness settles around his chest once more. He breathes in, trying to take air into his lungs, then exhales. It helps the constriction a little bit. "Sorry," he manages to say. "I've just been feeling off." He tries to fight away the roil of discomfort, the way he knows his brain's about to spin out. Pull it together, Potter, he tells himself. You can't do this in front of your professor.

"I can imagine." Omolade's studying him; it's not helping his panic. Harry hates being stared at, particularly when he's just trying to breathe. He tightens his fingers on the arms of the chair, his fingernails digging into the wood. Omolade sighs. "How much of Voldemort's power do you think was locked in your magic?"

Harry blinks, both at the question and at the Head of Slytherin House using Voldemort's name so bluntly instead of calling him the Dark Lord. The twist in his gut settles a bit, but Harry still has to ask, "How do I know I can trust you?"

"Well," Omolade says, and then she nods her head towards the corner of her office. Harry catches a glint in the shadows, and then he's on his feet, almost not believing his eyes.

"Fawkes!" Harry strides over to the elderly Phoenix, perched gingerly in a cage on the edge of a low bookcase. Fawkes tilts his head, looking at Harry, and then, obviously recognising Harry, sings a few, rough notes to him.

Omolade comes up behind Harry. "He's at the edge of a moult," she says, and she reaches a finger between the bars of the cage. Fawkes leans towards it, letting her stroke his feathers. One slips out, drifting to the cage's floor. "I offered him a place indoors."

Harry shakes his head, a tear coming into his eye that he brushes away. He feels ridiculous, and he hopes Omolade doesn't notice. "I haven't seen him since…" He trails off, the memory of that night welling up in him again. Malfoy standing there, unable to move as Dumbledore fell from the parapet, the green burst of Snape's Killing Curse lighting up his calm face. Harry folds his arms across his chest, feeling a bit ill. He still hasn't forgiven Malfoy that, not really. Shame rolls through Harry, at the thought of what he's done with Malfoy, what he still wants to do. Harry doesn't know if it's worse that Malfoy's a bloke or that Malfoy's Malfoy. He thinks of the Mark, hidden beneath Malfoy's sleeve, and he wonders how much Malfoy's changed. If he has.

"Since Dumbledore died?" Omolade shifts over to the cage, testing the temperature on the wall, and then casting a quick warming spell again. Fawkes squawks softly at her. "He's been living in the Forest. He'd never leave Hogwarts. It's his home too." When she looks up from the cage, she has a fond look on her face.

"Did you know Professor Dumbledore?" Harry doesn't know why he's asking, but he assumes she must have. Fawkes wouldn't have come to someone who hadn't, Harry's certain of that.

Professor Omolade nods. "Albus let me stay at Hogwarts during the hols and found a place in the village for me to live during the summers. I used to take care of Fawkes for him." Something shifts in her face, a quiet sadness that Harry recognises. "I hadn't anywhere else to go."
Harry doesn't want to pry, but he's dead curious now. "He did the same for me during Christmas and Easter hols," he says, and he glances up at her, wondering why Dumbledore had taken her in as well.

Omolade sits back down at her desk. "He always was good about adopting orphans. Sometimes it worked out well, too."

Harry's awed. He takes his chair again, trying to be polite, even though he'd rather stay near Fawkes. He realises that Professor Omolade has told him a lot about herself. He decides to return her trust.

"Voldemort had made me into a sort of Horcrux. I don't know how it worked, really, but I had to die, you see." He looks to see if she's reacting to his words, but her posture is calm and her look encouraging. "I died," he says a bit more emphatically, and just saying it aloud makes it feel more real than it has since May. A shudder goes through him at the memory. "Right before the last battle. And whatever it was in me that was from Voldemort died too." He glances up at her. "Then I came back." He shifts in his chair, a bit uncomfortably. "I suppose that makes me the Boy Who Lived Twice." Harry hates that bloody stupid moniker. He always has.

"I see." Omolade's silent for a long moment, watching him, and then she says, "I can imagine that must've been a strange experience. Have you felt different afterwards?"

Harry doesn't know quite how to answer that. He looks down at his hands. "I mean, yes, of course, but also, well." He stops, his chest tight. "I don't think I'm doing a really good job of getting over things. Other people died, too, and I still miss them." His throat is thick, and he doesn't want to cry.

"And you feel guilty for being the one who came back." Omolade's voice is gentle. Careful. "When the others couldn't."

"Maybe." Harry swallows, scratches a fingernail over the back of his hand, hard to keep the tears at bay. He's never had anyone understand that part of it before. It's not fair that it'd been him to come back. He was ready to go, ready to lay himself down beside his mum and dad, beside Sirius and Hedwig and Dobby. The others hadn't been. They still had lives they ought to have lived. Harry draws in an unsteady breath. "But I'll be fine." He knows he sounds wobbly; he glares down at his thick fingers, at the hangnail on his left thumb. "I always am."

Silence stretches out between them. Harry can hear the faint flutter of Fawkes' wings against the bars of the cage.

"Right. Well." Professor Omolade's voice is brisk, almost no-nonsense, and Harry's so bloody grateful that she doesn't press him further. He's not certain he could bear it. "We'll start working on your casting next week. For right now, I'd like you to rest and try to undercast everything you're called to perform. Try to use less than half of the magic you think you need. You need to develop a more advanced technique before you draw on your stores again in any serious way. I realise you've had to show a lot of power, and your strength is impressive, but without developing control, you risk draining your magical supplies and developing a lasting block or a quaver." She stops and looks at him, her gaze even. "Or hurting someone else. What happened with Malfoy on Friday can't again. Understood?"

"Yeah." Harry takes a deep breath. It sounds reasonable, and oddly, it's calming to have someone tell him something is wrong, that he's not invulnerable. "Thank you, Professor. May I go now?"

When she nods, he gets up and heads for the door.

"Potter," Omolade says, and Harry looks back at her. She gives him a faint, wry smile. "I'm afraid as part of this process, you'll need to curb your emotions as best you can. Remember, they'll only be
uncontrollable if you choose not to face them." Her face is thoughtful as she regards him. "Be brave. It's supposed to be the strong point of your House."

"My former House, you mean," Harry says, and Omolade's smile widens.

"I'm afraid you're still very much the Gryffindor, Mr Potter," she says. "Whatever the colour of your school tie might be at the moment." She reaches for her quill and another essay. "Off with you before Ravi scolds me for keeping you from your studies."

Harry escapes into the corridor, flush-faced and ashamed, his heart tugging painfully in his chest. He's never felt quite as exposed by anyone, and yet he's surprisingly thankful to Professor Omolade as well for her tact. It could have been a lot worse, he thinks.

Still, he takes the long way back to the Eighth Year dormitories, the scuff of his trainers against the wooden floors echoing in the silence of the empty corridors.

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"Milk in your tea or black?" Ravi asks from the small kitchen in his quarters just off the Eighth Year hallway. His door's half-open, and the tiny black Crup sat on the sofa beside Draco keeps eyeing the crack. Frankly Draco thinks if he stops scratching behind Libatius' ear, the little bastard'll dash for freedom.

"I prefer it milky," Draco says, "but tea first, please." Libatius turns his head, licks Draco's knuckles. Draco's cross-legged on the sofa in a pair of flannel plaid pyjama bottoms and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Both halves of Libatius' split tail are beating his thigh. Outside, it's raining, droplets tapping softly at the darkened window panes. A fire's crackling in the hearth, warming the room, a row of thick beeswax candles burning bright on the chimneypiece, and Draco feels comfortable here. Safe, even.

Ravi snorts. "You heathen. Everyone knows the milk goes first." Draco can hear him clinking about for a moment, and then he's back in the sitting room with two steaming mugs in his hands. He passes one to Draco, then drops in the wide, worn armchair next to the hearth. "So, how's tutoring Potter going?"

"He cancelled last night," Draco says, taking a sip of the hot tea. It's perfect, he thinks. Slightly sweet and slightly milky. "He said Omolade wanted to meet with him." He shifts, repositioning himself, and Libatius stands up, looking hopefully towards the door.

"Sit," Ravi says sharply, and Libatius's bum drops back onto the sofa. He gives Ravi a reproachful look, but Ravi just rolls his eyes. "As if you'd get far, you idiot Crup. There's a bloody charm on the door to keep you inside." He looks over at Draco. "Are you going to reschedule?"

Draco hesitates, then shrugs. "If he wants. It's useless, though. Potter's thicker than Gilderoy Lockhart when it comes to brewing."

"I wouldn't be so certain." Ravi cups his mug between his hands. It's odd to see him so casual, Draco thinks, in his bare feet and his joggers and a faded red hoodie emblazoned with the Fitchburg Finches logo. Draco wonders what Ilvermorny's like, whether or not Ravi enjoyed being there, why he decided to come back to the wilds of Scotland. Was it because Ravi's bent like Draco thinks he is? Draco's heard the American wizards aren't terrible fond of their sort, but that's just hearsay, if he's honest. And it's not as if the British wizarding world's thrilled about its poofs, after all. Ravi shifts in his chair. "The potion Potter brewed today was rather decent, all things considered. I'd say he's improving."
"Barely." Draco runs a thumb over the rim of his mug. It's warm, steam still rising from the tea. Libatius looks up at him and barks. Draco settles a hand on his back, and Libatius curls up against Draco's flannel-covered leg. Really, Draco doesn't want to talk about Potter. It makes him uncomfortable, like his skin's a bit too tight, a bit too raw. He rubs the edge of Libatius' ear and is rewarded with a happy snuffle.

Ravi just watches him. "Something's bothering you," he says after a moment, and Draco shrugs, takes another sip of his tea. Ravi raises an eyebrow. "We can just sit here if you want."

Draco'd rather, if he's honest. "It's nicer here than in my dormitory. They all hate me."

"They don't." Ravi sets his tea aside, letting the mug Levitate beside his chair. He pulls his long, narrow feet up, tucking one knee against his chest, his arms wrapped around it. "You're exaggerating again."

Maybe he is, Draco thinks. He huffs a sigh, his gaze going towards the open door. The last thing he needs is one of his fellow Eighth Years passing by, overhearing him whinge. "Finch-Fletchley's all right, I suppose. Goldstein too."

"And Boot and Potter?" Ravi asks, a faint smile curving his lips. He's trimmed his beard today, Draco thinks. It's looking a bit less scraggly.

Draco considers. "Boot's obsessed with Turpin, to be honest. I don't even exist in his world, I think. Potter's…" Draco doesn't know how to describe him. "Potter, I suppose." That sounds ridiculous, even to him, but it's the best he can manage. "He's always loathed me."

Ravi rolls his eyes. "And you him, yes, I know. I still say he's not that wretched to you."

"Perhaps not." Draco thinks about Saturday again, and his skin prickles pleasantly. He's been wanking every night to thoughts of Potter, trying so hard to listen to see if Potter's doing the same. He hasn't heard anything, though, and Draco supposes whatever itch Potter wanted to scratch with him, he's done so. Draco thinks he ought to be relieved. Instead, he's just bloody annoyed.

He falls silent for a moment, then he tucks his mug of tea between his thighs and looks up at Ravi. "Do you know anything about a Venus Trap?" he asks, trying to keep his voice nonchalant.

Ravi's eyebrow goes up. "A bit. Why?"

Draco pulls the hair tie from his hair, and lets it fall forward before running his fingers through it and twisting it back into a half-knot at the nape of his neck that he secures again with the hair tie. He licks his bottom lip. "Just curious. I've been reading about it." He doesn't look over at Ravi. Instead he plays with Libatius' ear again. The Crup's paw scrabbles against the cushion happily. "It's just, I was curious how long the pollen's effect would last if it was activated during the harvest cycle."

"Ah," Ravi says. "The lurid curiosity of youth." He reaches for his tea again, plucking the mug from mid-air. "Should anyone be stupid enough to gather pollen without proper protection," he says after taking a sip of tea, "the effects should wear off within a day or so. No more than forty-eight hours at the longest, I believe, judging from the studies I've seen."

"Right." Draco chews his lip. "And has it ever been known to cause any sort of delusion of lust between two people?"

The look Ravi gives him is long and even, and Draco's almost certain Ravi must see past his subterfuge. He glances back down at Libatius.
"See, the thing is," Ravi says finally, "if two people are involved, then what's likely is that each person will see an increase in their libido. It's not a situation that requires sexual activity with the other person; that's only a side effect if there's some level of physical attraction already in play."

Draco looks up at that. "Oh." His stomach flips. "So if there was a need to…" He trails off, not certain of how to phrase it.

"Shag like rabbits in spring?" Ravi says, a bit dryly, and Draco feels his cheeks warm.

"Something like that." Draco thinks of Potter, and the look in his eyes when the pollen had hit him. He'd wanted Draco, not just a quick tug. Draco knows that. "That would increase the side effects on two subjects?"

Ravi nods, lifting his mug to his mouth again. "It's rather likely, yes. Why?"

"Just curious." Draco doesn't know what to do with this, doesn't know what to think. "But the effects would still wear off, even if there was a physical attraction between the individuals, right?"

It takes Ravi a moment to answer, and when he does, Draco's almost certain Ravi's laughing at him, which makes no bloody sense at all. "It should, yes. There's never been any sign of long-term effect on anyone who's been exposed to Venus Trap pollen. These are rather detailed questions, Draco."

Draco narrows his eyes at Ravi. "Let's just say I'm intellectually curious."

"Of course." Ravi's mouth quirks to one side. "Not planning on using any pollen any time soon, are we?"

And that light-hearted question makes Draco look away. "I wouldn't know how to get any," he lies. There's no sense in telling Ravi it's already happened. Draco's no intention of admitting to a professor that he broke into a restricted part of the greenhouse, or that he wants to shag Potter senseless. It's none of Ravi's business, anyway.

There's a knock on the door, and Sue Li is standing there, an apologetic look on her face. "Sorry, Ravi," she says through the wide crack. "It's just there's a slight issue with the girls' loo. Myrtle's decided to settle in the u-bend again because Bulstrode narked her off, and none of the plumbing's working now."

"Bloody fucking hell," Ravi says, and he sets his mug Levitating again before he pushes himself out of the chair. "How many times have I shouted at her this term?"

"At least four," Li says, and she waves at Draco through the door. "Hi, Malfoy. Sorry to interrupt."

Draco's actually grateful. "It's fine," he says. "I should be going anyway."

Ravi shoos him back onto the sofa. "Stay with Libatius," he says, as the Crup whines. "And finish your tea. I'd love to say I'll be back in a tick, but the last time this happened it took me forty minutes to coax Myrtle back to her toilets, so…" He shrugs, sliding his feet into his slippers. "Hell if I know how long this one will go."

And then he's hurrying off, following Li down the hallway. Draco sinks back against the sofa cushions and glances down at Libatius. "I suppose it's just you and me, boy," he murmurs, his hand settling into the warm folds of Libatius' belly.

Draco closes his eyes, thinking about the curve of Potter's throat, the feel of Potter's prick. If this isn't just the aftereffects of the Venus pollen, Draco doesn't know what he'll do. He'd been holding out
hope that it was, that these thoughts were lingering because of some ridiculous accident. Except it
doesn't seem like it's that, does it? He looks over at Libatius. "Merlin, I'm buggered, aren't I?"

Libatius just rolls up against him with a soft bark.


He drops his head back against the sofa cushions with a groan.

Definitely buggered, Draco thinks. And not in a pleasant way.

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It's late, most likely past midnight, but Harry's still awake even though the others have been asleep
for an hour or more. Or three of them have, at least. Malfoy's hangings are parted, just a bit, and
when Harry tries to peer into the shadowed depths of Malfoy's bed from across the room, he realises
that Malfoy's nowhere to be seen.

Harry rolls over onto his side. He knows Malfoy sneaks out to the showers when he thinks everyone
else is asleep. Sometimes Harry thinks he has some sort of monitoring spell to make certain, but he
supposes that's a bit mad. And impossible, given that Harry's been awake. Still, Harry can't pinpoint
the moment Malfoy slid out of bed, so perhaps he's been a bit more dozy than he expects. But
Malfoy's basket of bath things is definitely gone, as are his slippers and the thick green Slytherin-
green wool robe that always hangs on the hook beside his bed. It must have been bespoke, instead of
bought from Madam Malkin's, as it wasn't changed to purple and grey with the spell at the beginning
of the year.

Fuck it, Harry thinks, and he slides out of bed, hissing when his bare feet touch the cold wood of the
floor. He finds his trainers, kicked halfway beneath his bed, and pulls a hoodie over his pyjamas to
fight off the late November chill. He doesn't know what he's going to do, maybe confront Malfoy
about sneaking around, maybe ask him why he's being such a secretive little prick, maybe just watch
him in the shower. Harry's knees grow a little weak, remembering the time he'd seen Malfoy beneath
the warm spray of water and the way he'd looked, slick and silent and soaped-up. Shit, but Harry's
prick has a memory of its own, and it responds to the mental images of sodden pale hair and frothy
soap sliding down the curve of Malfoy's admittedly rather delicious arse. And now Harry knows
what Malfoy's prick looks like, what the long curve of it feels like, so hard and hot in his hand. He
quickens his step.

As he's almost down the corridor to the toilets, however, Harry's surprised to meet Malfoy coming
the other way. He's holding his bath things in one hand, and his wool robe is belted around his waist.
He's towelled off his hair and combed it, but it's hanging loose around his face, the damp strands a
slightly darker gold than usual. He looks fantastic, but also furious.

"Potter, are you following me, you berk?" Malfoy's pale face is pinched and defensive. He keeps his
voice low, glancing up the hallway to their room, then down to the one Ron shares with Neville,
Zabini and the others.

Harry smiles, a bit lazily, just because he knows somehow deep inside it'll only nark Malfoy off
more. "Nah. I thought I'd come see if a giant spider had eaten you in the shower." He takes a step
closer to Malfoy, who backs up against the wall, looking like he's ready to swing his bath things at
Harry and clout him about the ears.

Worth it. Taunting Malfoy is incredibly satisfying, and the pink on Malfoy's cheeks and the clenched
of his pointed jaw only make it more appealing. Merlin, but it's amazing to get a rise out of Malfoy.
Harry feels almost normal again, watching Malfoy glare at him as if he's a half-witted idiot.

"That's the stupidest fucking excuse I've ever heard." Malfoy snaps, under his breath. "Merlin, couldn't you have borrowed a brain cell from your swot friend Granger and come up with something better?" Malfoy turns his long face aside angrily as Harry takes another step towards him. But he doesn't hit Harry, like Harry expects. Rather, he lets the basket of soap and shampoo and other bottles Harry doesn't quite recognise--although he suspects they're more cleansing potions of some sort--slide out of his hand along the wall to the floor, looking away. "It's not like the loo isn't with the showers. You might have just said you needed a slash."

When Harry leans in, Malfoy smells like lemons, something citrusy and clean. It's a smell Harry remembers instantly from this past weekend, a light and sharp scent that will always be mixed in with a loamy earthiness, the muskiness of spunk. God, but it's like a bloody aphrodisiac, Harry thinks, one that goes straight to Harry's prick. He wants to lick the beads of water collecting on the curve Malfoy's neck, tiny droplets sliding down that perfect pale skin from the wetness of Malfoy's hair. Instead, he nuzzles Malfoy's jaw with his nose, whispers against the shell of his ear, "What have you got on underneath your robe?"

Malfoy shivers, but manages to say, "None of your fucking business, Potter." Harry belatedly realises he's almost pinning Malfoy to the wall in his eagerness to taunt him, bracketing Malfoy's tall, lean form, his hands pressed against the wall on either side of Malfoy's shoulders. Harry wants to rut against Malfoy, to feel the heat of Malfoy's prick against his body, more intimately this time, to see if it feels like the dreams that wake him breathless and so close to coming, but Harry also knows damned well he's pushing an edge here for both of them and he's mindful of it. Malfoy's voice is quiet but furious, a warm huff against Harry's cheek that makes him shudder, makes him want to press forward against those sharp hipbones of Malfoy's. "You know, anyone could see us. It's not safe here."

And he's right. Fuck. Harry leans back, dropping his arms to his sides, suddenly feeling a bit ashamed. "Sorry, Malfoy. I--"

"Circe, you're such a sodding self-righteous arsehole." And to Harry's surprise, Malfoy grabs the bunched cotton of the hoodie just over Harry's hip and pulls Harry back towards him. Harry's arms go out to brace on the wall, catching himself before he slams into Malfoy. Malfoy's hands are on Harry's waist, his narrow hips pressing up into Harry. He's looking up at Harry, and his eyes are bright and angry and… Fuck, Harry thinks. Malfoy wants him. The thought sends a thrill up Harry's spine. "No sorries, Potter," Malfoy says, a bit roughly. "If this is what you wanted, well, take it."

Still, Harry can't exploit his advantage, even though their hips are aligned and Harry can feel the long press of Malfoy's cock against his belly. "I..." He bites his lip, watches Malfoy's gaze flick down to it. "I'm sorry, Malfoy. I shouldn't have followed you." He wants to move, wants so much to feel Malfoy writhe against him, but Harry doesn't dare break whatever this understanding is between them before he knows exactly what it is that Malfoy's asking from him.

Malfoy's watching Harry's mouth still, his lashes still damp, his grey eyes darker than normal. "You pillock," he murmurs. "You really don't know what you want, do you?"

His voice is almost fond, the look in his eyes seems almost soft, but that's all impossible, Harry thinks.

"I do," Harry protests, finding it a bit harder to think than he'd like as Malfoy shifts his hips against Harry's. His robe gapes a bit over his chest. Harry sees the edge of a latticework of pink and white scars, some thin, some ropey. He did that to Malfoy, Harry thinks, and despite the twist of guilt in his stomach, his breath is still ragged and uneven. He licks his bottom lip, and Malfoy swallows, glances...
away. God, Harry wants to kiss him, wants to feel those thin lips opening beneath his, wants to taste the wet heat of Malfoy's mouth. Instead he says, his voice cracking only slightly, "As a matter of fact, I do know. What I want, I mean."

Malfoy turns his gaze down to where their bodies are touching, just resting against each other now. Harry can feel the warm swell of Malfoy's prick against his hip; he wonders if Malfoy's feeling his. Malfoy's cheeks are flushed, and Harry doesn't think it's from the bath. "Perhaps you could show me, then," Malfoy says in the barest whisper. His chest rises and falls against Harry's. "If you'd like. I wouldn't mind."

Still, Harry restrains himself, a faint warning bell ringing in his head at Malfoy's choice of words. "You wouldn't mind, or you'd like to?" Harry doesn't want to do this without Malfoy wholly involved, without Malfoy just as eager to rub up against Harry as Harry is.

Malfoy licks his lips and looks at Harry through the few strands of still-damp blond hair that have fallen across his face. "If it involves you and me and getting off, then I'd rather like to." He glances down the hallway again, a nervous look on his face. "Even if this is utterly foolish."

Harry hesitates, and then he draws Malfoy further away from the light coming from the toilets, deeper into the shadows of the hallway. They're still not completely hidden, and if anyone comes out they're certain to be seen at some point, but that's part of it all, isn't it, Harry thinks.

"Better?" he asks, and Malfoy nods, letting Harry press him back up against the wall again. Harry can't believe he's doing this, can't believe that he's about to get off with Malfoy again, to come right here in the hallway outside of their dormitory, the rest of the Eighth Years asleep around them. The thrill of it's almost intoxicating, this forbidden want that's almost overwhelming to Harry.

"Wait," Malfoy says, and he looks at Harry, his cheeks flushed in the dim light, his fingers digging into Harry's waist through the thick folds of Harry's hoodie. "Can you cast wandless?"

Harry shrugs. "I reckon."

"Then put up a bloody Muffliato," Malfoy says. He worries his bottom lip between his teeth. "I'm not entirely certain I can be completely silent when…" He glances away, his embarrassment obvious. "You know."

Oh, fuck, but Harry does. He remembers the soft sounds Malfoy made as Harry stroked him, the gasps that grew louder until he was practically keening, his head pressed against Harry's shoulder, his body bent into Harry's touch. Harry casts the charm, a shimmer of magic settling across them, a cool brush over their skin as the nighttime creaks and groans of the castle fade into the background. Malfoy's prick jumps against Harry's hip, his breath catches.

"Magic turns you on?" Harry rubs his prick experimentally against Malfoy's taut, wool-covered belly, his pyjamas bunching as their bodies meet.

"Fuck," Malfoy gasps.

"I'll take that as a yes." Harry grinds his cock harder against Malfoy, feels Malfoy's prick respond. God, Harry thinks, this is such a bloody rush. He doesn't want to think about what this might mean about him, doesn't want to consider how this might change everything. He just wants to feel, to lose himself in the pleasure of his body moving with Malfoy's, to let himself come with someone else, rather than just his own hand.

Malfoy tips his head back against the stone wall. "Merlin, Potter, you're such a fucking bastard." But
he doesn't pull away, doesn't loosen his grip on Harry's hips. He lets Harry rut against him, and he groans softly, rolls his hips forward to meet Harry's.

"Is this okay?" Harry stops for a moment before going any further, trying to keep himself under control. He searches Malfoy's face for a clue, or any sign of emotion.

"Goddamn it, Potter." Malfoy's body presses up against Harry's. "Less talking, more moving." The hard length of his prick against Harry's belly makes Harry bite his lip. Fuck, this all feels bloody amazing. Still there's something not quite right. Malfoy has an inch or two on Harry and longer legs to boot, and it's just enough to keep their pricks from aligning the way Harry wants.

"Here, put your hands around my neck," Harry says, pulling one of Malfoy's hands from his hip and sliding it up. Malfoy moves the other one, his eyes widening just a bit when Harry grabs his arse, his hands at the curve just above Malfoy's thighs. "Careful." Harry feels Malfoy's fingers flexing against his shoulders; he knows Malfoy's nervous, but Harry also knows this will make it easier. He's done this before with Ginny, more than once at the Burrow and then in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, and it'd been bloody brilliant for the both of them. Rutting up against a bloke can't be harder than with a girl, Harry thinks. The bits are easier to get to, after all. "I'm going to lift you up," Harry says, watching Malfoy's face. "Think you can wrap your legs around my hips?"

Malfoy breathes out in a ragged little gasp that's half a laugh. "Yeah. I'm fairly certain I can manage that."

"Right then," Harry murmurs, and he pulls Malfoy's arse up, using the wall to leverage him. Malfoy's long legs come up around Harry, and it's only then that Harry's overwhelmed brain realises that Malfoy's naked beneath his robe. "Fuck," Harry says blankly, and his hands shift, slip beneath the soft wool of Malfoy's robe to touch the warmth of Malfoy's skin, to slide up to grip Malfoy's arse. "You're..."

"I'd planned on putting my pyjamas on in the warmth of my own bed," Malfoy says, and he grinds his hips up against Harry's prick. He turns his head, his breath warm against the curve of Harry's throat. "I didn't expect you to be awake." His fingers dig into Harry's shoulders, his heels strike against the back of Harry's thighs. "Or randy."

Harry shifts his hips, lines his cock up against Malfoy's. "Are you whinging at me?" He presses his hips forward, their pricks sliding along each other, only a scrap of wool and a bit of flannel separating them.

Malfoy's head falls back against the wall again. "Circe, no," he murmurs.

And Harry starts rocking against Malfoy, coaxing a sharp hiss from Malfoy. That seems to feel particularly good, and he can tell that Malfoy's enjoying it too--when Harry stops, Malfoy makes a small whine of complaint, his thighs tightening around Harry's hips as he pushes his prick against Harry's. God, Harry thinks, this is even better in some ways than what he'd done with Ginny. He just wishes he could sink into Malfoy, could fuck him the way he had Ginny, just pulling her knickers aside, burying himself in her wetness. Harry doesn't know how that works with blokes, doesn't even know if two men can fuck. Maybe this is all it is, all it can be, but Harry doesn't care because it feels amazing to have Malfoy wrapped around him like this, to feel the hard press of Malfoy's prick against his prick.

"Don't stop." Malfoy moans, and he's practically writhing against Harry. He reaches between them, pulls at the knot tying his robe together. "Fuck," Malfoy says. "I need to feel..." He breaks off as the knot loosens, then his robe falls open, and the long stretch of him's there against Harry, scarred skin and pink nipples, and then Malfoy's hands are back on Harry's neck, fingers sliding beneath the
warmth of Harry's hoodie, that lanky body pressed against Harry's chest. It's almost too much for Harry.

"Let me kiss you?" Harry's not sure why he asks, his voice breathy and raw, just that it feels odd to be rubbing against Malfoy without kissing him too. He wants to know if Malfoy's lips are soft or chapped, if they're dry and warm, if they feel different than Ginny's had. The thought of kissing a boy--of kissing Malfoy, for Christ's sake--makes Harry's stomach flutter. He's lost his mind, he thinks, but, for some bloody Gryffindor reason, he needs to know what it's like.

Malfoy licks his lips nervously, and Harry can barely control himself. His hips keep pressing forward, their bodies moving together. "If you'd like." Malfoy hesitates, then looks at Harry, lifting his chin. "I mean, I'd like that."

Harry raises a hand to Malfoy's jaw, his other still tight on Malfoy's arse, then he brushes his lips against Malfoy's, a featherlight touch that sends a shudder through Harry. Malfoy's mouth is soft and supple, only slightly chapped from the cold of the November air, and Harry closes his eyes, exhales. It takes a couple of tries to get the angle right, Harry's glasses bumping against Malfoy's cheek. Malfoy lets Harry take the lead, following as Harry kisses him, rutting himself against Harry's belly, then crying out as they grind together.

The warmth, the quiet, the knowledge that anyone could find them here at any moment bring Harry to the edge faster than he expects. "Are you close?" he asks, hoping that this is as good for Malfoy as it is for him. They're both panting, their mouths working against each other in small, desperate kisses, teeth pulling at lips then letting them pop free. Malfoy's robe hangs fully open. If anyone walks out of the rooms, it'll be impossible to hide what they're doing; Harry knows that, and the thrill of it makes his heavy prick ache. They've found an erratic, fast rhythm that works, and Harry's pressing Malfoy into the wall whilst trying to be gentle. It's so hard when his blood is singing for release and the undone look on Malfoy's face makes Harry feel like he's caught a thousand Snitches.

"Yes. Fuck. Keep...." Malfoy groans. "Keep going, you twat." Malfoy's letting Harry lean into him to kiss him against the wall, their bodies nearly fused together, and his long fingers are digging into the muscle near the nape of Harry's neck now. Harry can feel the heat of Malfoy's skin as there's only a thin layer of flannel pajamas between them now. God, but he wants to do this on a bed, to be able to pull back and see Malfoy's naked body fully, instead of small glimpses of pale skin as Malfoy writhes against him. Still, Harry's bloody hard, his bollocks high and tight in his pajamas, his prick so close to popping, and yet he's trying to keep an ear out for anyone coming, trying to make sure they're not making too much noise, even through the Muffliato.

Malfoy groans softly into Harry's ear, then bites down on his neck, and that's the moment that sends Harry higher. Harry thrusts his hips forward, his body consumed with hunger for release, for Malfoy. He goes up, up, up like flying, only to hang at the high point when he knows there's no turning back. His body shudders and then his prick is shooting in his pajamas, sticky and hot and perfect against Malfoy's squirming, writhing form.

"Yes." Malfoy presses against him, biting again, his fingers clutching the fabric of Harry's pajamas, his heels drumming against Harry's arse as his body jerks. "Fuck, yes. Potter--" And then he's shivering and Harry feels Malfoy come against him, feels the warmth of Malfoy's body spilling against Harry's hip. The broken off cry that Malfoy makes is etched into Harry's consciousness, a moment that changes him in a way he doesn't understand, unlocks something deep inside his chest.

They slump together against the wall, their breaths coming in short, sharp gasps. "Fuck," Harry manages to say, and Malfoy turns his face against Harry's neck, muffling a strangled laugh.

"Eloquent," Malfoy says, and Harry doesn't want to point out that Malfoy hasn't been quite his usual
articulate self either. He's still for a moment, and then his palm smacks Harry's back. "Let me down."

Harry reluctantly does, missing the feel of Malfoy's legs around his hips, hating the way Malfoy draws his robe together again. They're both a bit flushed and awkward. Still, Harry feels bloody incredible, and he doesn't care who knows.

"You might want to change your pyjamas." Malfoy's looking over Harry's shoulder, down the hall, not meeting Harry's eyes. Malfoy looks bloody wrecked, Harry thinks, and suddenly he longs to wreck him again, to pull them into their dormitory and shove Malfoy into his bed, drawing the hangings closed around them, spend hours rubbing against Malfoy's skin.

Instead, Harry does a wandless cleaning spell. Belatedly, he remembers Omolade's warning about his magic and tamps it back a bit. The weaker charm may leave residue, but it does the trick. "Do you want one?" he asks. He lets the Muffliato drop from around them.

Malfoy's tying the tie of his robe in a precise knot, his head bent. "I'll take care of it myself, thanks," Malfoy says, again not meeting Harry's gaze but stepping back down the hall to gather his basket of bath things. He glances back over his shoulder, but only briefly. "Goodnight, Potter."

Bemused, Harry watches Malfoy pad barefoot down the hallway back to their dormitory. He doesn't understand, not really. They've just cracked themselves open, down to some sort of truth, and Malfoy's just walking away from it.

Harry can't go back in there, can't pretend that nothing happened, knowing that Malfoy's curled up in a bed across from his. He rubs his hands over his face, pushing his glasses up; he can still smell Malfoy on his skin, on the cotton of his pyjamas. The cleaning spell helped, but not entirely. Malfoy's right. Harry needs to change, but he doesn't want to.

"Christ," Harry mutters, and then he drops his hands, lets his glasses slide back down the bridge of his nose. He leans against the wall, exhales. The dormitories are silent around him, and Harry wants to laugh. His entire world's been upturned. This wasn't because of some ridiculous pollen accident. He did this with Malfoy because he wanted to. Because he needed to know how Malfoy felt against him. Because he wanted to see once more what Malfoy looked like when he was coming against Harry.

Harry's starting to think something's wrong with him. He wraps his arms around himself, suddenly cold. He doesn't want to be bent. He's seen the way blokes like that are treated, and all Harry's ever wanted to be is normal. Weeks ago, he'd been with Ginny, certain that they'd get a flat together after leaving Hogwarts, maybe get married in a few years, have kids that they'd name after people they loved, people they missed. He'd thought he'd known how his life would go.

Now Harry's not so certain he does. That's a fucking terrifying thought.

He doesn't want this, he thinks, but even now his body's betraying him, his prick swelling slightly at the memory of Malfoy pressed hotly against Harry. And Harry doesn't know what to do. He hunches into himself, his stomach souring, that tight band across his chest forming again as his mind starts to spiral out.

There's a noise from inside his dormitory, and Harry stills. He can't stay here, can't let anyone find him in the hallway. He doesn't stop to think, just heads for the staircase and the comfort of the empty common room.

Harry pulls an afghan from the back of the chesterfield in front of the hearth and drops down onto it, curling up in the corner. He closes his eyes, breathes out. Everything will be all right, he tells himself.
It bloody well has to be.

Slowly, the constriction in Harry's chest eases, and then a deep calm settles over him for the first time in days.

And Harry falls asleep.
Chapter 5

My hands are tired, but not tired enough,
You're the high that I can't give up.
--Lonely Together, AVICII ft. Rita Ora

Friday at breakfast, Draco's feeling unusually chipper. He's been busy ragging Pansy for her evening escapades with Tony Goldstein; he'd seen them sneak into the Charms classroom last night on his way back from the library, and now he's cheerfully tormenting Pans with insinuations and requests for details as Millie eggs him on. They all know Pansy's fancied Tony since childhood--their mothers had once been best friends, although they'd had some sort of falling out at shul just before their children had come to Hogwarts. Still, Draco thinks Idgie would be secretly thrilled; Tony's tribe, after all, and most definitely not a Malfoy.

Draco's just warming up to the subject, and Pansy is shooting him an irate, if sulky, look over her porridge which Draco knows full well means he's on the right track with her and Goldstein, when suddenly her posture changes. Pansy inhales swiftly, sits bolt upright. Draco turns towards where she's looking, over by the entrance to the Great Hall, only to see the sodding blighter who tried to hit him with a Diffindo and caught his best friend with it instead.

Iain fucking Claverdon swaggers into the Great Hall to scattered applause and welcoming shouts from half of Gryffindor--not to mention some cheerful hellos from their own Eighth Year table.

Draco turns back quickly to his rashers of bacon lest he be caught watching. He's pokes at them; he's not really hungry any longer. It's not as if he didn't know Claverdon would be back soon. His suspension was only for a fortnight, after all, but Draco'd hoped the Board of Governors might see reason and forbid him to return. If his father had still be on it, Draco thinks, there's no bloody way Claverdon would have walked through those doors again. But Lucius isn't, is he? He's tucked away from proper society now, hidden off in a tiny Azkaban cell. At least the Dementors are gone now. Shackleton's seen to that. They'd given his father the worst nightmares after he'd come back to the Manor the summer after Draco's sixth year, Aunt Bella at his side. Sometimes Draco wonders what form his boggart would take now. He's half-convinced it'd look like his mad aunt. The only decent thing she'd ever done for him was teach him Occlumency at Severus' suggestion, and Draco's fairly certain that was to cover her own arse, just in case the Dark Lord took offence at one of Draco's thoughts. Most likely about how bloody necessary noses are.

"I don't know why they let that prick come back," Pansy says, leaning her elbows on the table, looking at Draco. "He should have been sent down."

"The Board of Governors certainly didn't think so," Mills remarks dryly, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "I wonder who they are these days."

"Nobody we know." Blaise's mopping up egg yolk with his toast soldiers, acting completely unconcerned, as if he weren't the one Claverdon had ultimately sent to the hospital wing for a whole sodding weekend. He still has a wicked puffy, purpled scar from the attack, and Madam Pomfrey doesn't think she'll be able to make it go away, although she has Pomona Sprout brewing extra-strength dittany salve in an impressive effort to try and fade the raised, jagged crescent on Blaise's side.

A ball of anger swells in Draco's chest, and he tries to fight it back down. He's been calmer in the last twenty-four hours or so, ever since Potter ambushed him on the way back from the shower Wednesday night and had his way with him. Honestly, Potter'd been surprisingly considerate, not to
mention passionate, and Draco hadn't dared tell Potter that'd been his first real kiss with a bloke. Pansy doesn't really count; they'd both agreed on that after they'd broken up sixth year. Still, it'd been deliciously strange, rutting up against Potter like that, their mouths moving together, catching the same breathless rhythm as their bodies, and Draco's a bit annoyed he'd thought this all was just due to the pollen they'd inhaled.

And on that front, Draco worries he's given Ravi too much information with his detailed questions about the Venus Trap, but really, what the hell was he supposed to do? The effects were definitely not going away, although Draco knows now that whatever this is can't possibly be due to the pollen's effect any longer. If it ever was. He doesn't want to admit that he's wanted Potter, but now he has to, he supposes. Bloody hell. It would have been easier if he could blame the pollen.

Still, Potter can't possibly be interested in Draco, can he? For one, he's the Saviour, Draco thinks, and he could have anyone he bloody well chose. So why would he get caught up in Draco? He doesn't like the thought that he must just have been easy. Or in the way. Or something like that. A deeper part of himself knows that's not entirely true, but Draco presses it back down. It won't do to get his hopes up, especially not with Claverdon back in play, the fucker. Draco's barely held together as it is this term. And now it's like Potter's peeled back layers of Draco's physical experience of himself, making him feel, and sense, and want. Draco was almost happier before he'd found out how Potter tasted, what he smelled like, how his prick felt, what his face looked like when he came.

The clatter of breakfast continues around Draco. He looks over to the end of the table, where Claverdon has joined the fray near Potter and his lot, looming over them all as his loud laugh echoes across the hall.

"What a wanker," Millie says from Draco's elbow. She's watching them too. "He's a bloody seventh-year Gryffindor. What the hell are they doing letting him at our table?"

"Making a point, I'd say." Draco watches Corner as he claps Claverdon on the back whilst shooting a sideways look at Draco and his group. Corner looks away quickly, his face flushing when he realises Draco's watching him.

Draco nudges Blaise's foot beneath the table. "What's it like," he asks, "with Corner in your dormitory?"

Blaise swirls a bit of toast in egg yolk, then pops it into his mouth, chewing slowly. "He's mostly all right when he's by himself," he says finally. "Apologised for Claverdon and all after it happened." His gaze sweeps down the table towards Corner. "Honestly, I think he's just a bit lonely, and he wants Claverdon's attention." He shrugs. "Besides I think he's trying to impress Ginny Weasley again, even if it seems to be backfiring on him." Blaise snorts and shakes his head, reaching for another piece of toast. "Never try to get back with your ex. It never goes well."

And that's interesting, Draco thinks. He glances over at the Gryffindor table where the Weaselette's sat, her back to the Eighth Year table, Vicky Frobisher across from her, leaning over to whisper something across the plates of toast and beans and half-eaten eggs. He'd forgotten that Corner and Ginny had dated. Draco wonders what Potter thinks of that.

His gaze drifts back down the table. Granger's got a wry twist to her mouth, and she doesn't exactly look pleased when Corner tells her to budge over so Claverdon can join them. Weasley's not quite as scowly--he nods as Claverdon sits down, then passes him a plate piled high with eggy bread, although he doesn't seem thrilled to have Claverdon sat at their table. Potter's not welcoming, but he's also absorbed in his breakfast. He's eating, his head bent over his plate, and he raises it every so often to say something to Granger and Weasley, his mouth full nearly every time. When Potter looks over at Draco, Draco looks away. Honestly, he should refuse to have anything more to do with Potter
merely on the basis of table manners alone. Draco wishes it were that simple.

"Don't pay that twat any attention," Pansy says, and really, Draco does wonder if she means Claverdon or Potter. Pansy's quite quick on the uptake and her vagueness sometimes makes it hard to guess what she's thinking, a tactic he knows full well she exploits. "He's not worth it."

"So, Pans tell us more about Goldstein and those beautiful brown eyes of his." Blaise smirks at Pansy, popping the last bit of toast into his mouth and chewing deliberately. "Did he manage to charm his way into your knickers?"

He almost coughs it out, though, when Pansy says waspishly, "Only if you tell us why you're sniffing about Susan Bones and her fabulous knockers, despite her fascination with Potter and not you. Turnabout's fair play and all."

Millie frowns thoughtfully, then turns to peer down at Bones, who's sitting across from Potter, trying to engage him in conversation. Millie's eyebrow goes up. "Huh. I guess they are rather brill tits, if you think about it."

Draco's gives her a sharp look, then shifts his gaze over to Blaise. "Really? Bones?"

"Pans is being a bint," Blaise's tone is light, but he's not looking at Draco. "Sus and I are just working together on our Arithmancy project."

"Keep telling yourself that, Zabini," Pansy says, and she blows on a spoonful of porridge. "You'll end up being like Draco with his obsession with…" She trails off, but the glance she throws Potter's way says it all.

"Fuck off, woman." Draco flips two fingers towards Pansy then shakes his head. "You and your romantic intrigues. Must be nice. I'm in love with my Alchemy textbook at the moment."

"What?" Draco asks, giving her an innocent look.

"You're a lecherous wretch," Mills says, and she reaches over and takes a rasher of bacon from his plate whilst Blaise rolls his eyes.

Millie laughs. "Maybe in his daydreams." If only she knew, Draco thinks.

"Whatever you lot say." Draco just shrugs, as if he's no idea what they're on about. He has no idea how much they know about Potter--they can't actually know what he's done with the speccy git, Draco keeps telling himself, willing himself to stay calm--and he plans to keep them in the dark as long as humanly possible. They'll all murder him in his sleep when they find out; Draco's bloody certain of that.

Then Mills looks up from her plate, another rasher of Draco's bacon in her hand somehow. Draco steals it back with a frown, and she wipes her fingers on the cuff of his jumper, the bint. "Did everyone finish the Potions homework?" Millie asks. "That last problem on correspondence and bases was fiendish. I think Ravi hates us all."

They finish breakfast over a quick comparison of answers. Draco's a bit pleased with himself that he's gone further in answering the complicated question and remembered several steps the rest of
them hadn't. Then again, he has been paying a bit more attention to potions theory lately than they have, thanks to Potter. Even if the arsehole skipped out on him the entirety of this week. Whatever. Draco'll let Ravi shout at Potter if he must. It's not his fault he can't pin the bastard down.

Draco's self-satisfaction evaporates however as he's heading for the door, Pansy by his side, his satchel banging lightly against his hip. They're caught in a press of other students waiting to exit the double doors, and Draco sighs in irritation. Honestly, he's not sure why there aren't other exits out of the bloody Great Hall. If there's ever a fire during a meal, half the school would be burnt to death, and Draco's fairly certain that has to violate some sort of building code. Not that it matters, he supposes, when one's place of education has been cobbled together over a millennium.

And then Claverdon catches sight of Draco and stops, turning. Brilliant, Draco thinks, as he resettles the strap of his satchel over his shoulder. Just what he needs; a morning confrontation with a gormless muppet like Claverdon. He raises an eyebrow, knowing he's just adding fuel to the fire, but unable to stop himself.

"Malfoy." Claverdon snaps his teeth together aggressively, looking for all the world like Ravi's crup trying to be fierce. His goons, Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper, stand at his back in a posture of menace. Draco wonders if Vince and Greg had looked that moronic skulking about behind him. Probably, and that makes Draco feel a bit like a fool.

Still, Draco refuses to be cowed. He knows from his own experience that it's better to act as if he doesn't give a shit. "Claverdon. You look well-rested."

Pansy tenses next to him, her hand on his arm. "Don't," she murmurs under her breath, but Draco doesn't bother to listen. This is between him and Claverdon, and Draco's damned well not going to let Claverdon prance about, crowing about how he'd bested Malfoy.

"Oh, I am." The smile Claverdon gives Draco is vicious, nasty. Draco recognises it; he's given the same one. Some part of him wonders if this is his penance for being a sodding prat for most of his Hogwarts years. Severus had always warned him he'd regret being a complete tosser one day. "I'm better than ever, in fact. The Board seems to think I did nothing wrong." He cracks his thick knuckles, rolls his shoulders. "Which I'd say they're right about."

A quiver of fury shoots through Draco. He looks over to Potter, who's only a few paces away from Claverdon, Granger at his side. Potter's eyes meet his, then slide away.

"Well, I suppose that's what happens when the Board's filled with wankers of your sort," Draco says, his temper getting the better of him. Claverdon lunges forward, almost as if he's going after Draco, and when Draco flinches, he laughs, Kirke and Sloper joining in. Heads turn around them, students start whispering. Staring.

And then Granger surprises Draco, stepping in between him and Claverdon. "How convenient that your uncle is on the Board now," she says primly. "It must be so nice to have family looking out for you." Her look is pointed. Weasley is frowning behind her.

"Hermione," Weasley says, and she whirls on him.

"Don't even start with me, Ron." Her mouth's a thin line. "This isn't the sort of thing--"

And then Potter's pulling them both away, towards the door where the blockage has started to loosen. He doesn't look back at Draco.

"Fucking shirt-lifter," Claverdon mutters and pushes his shoulder, knocking him into Pansy. "No one
wants your sort here, do we, lads?" Sloper shakes his head, and Kirke snaps his teeth at Draco.

"Fly away, fairy boy," Kirke says with a scowl, and he flicks his fingers Draco's way. "Poof."

The press at the door thins just in time. Trembling with fury, Draco lets Pansy drag him out of the Hall. He doesn't know what's worse, Claverdon insulting him for being a Malfoy or Claverdon somehow figuring out Draco prefers blokes. And Potter was right there, and he did nothing the whole time. Just looked bloody away. Merlin, Draco's never been so angry in his life.

Not to mention, with Claverdon at Hogwarts again, he has to watch his back even more.

"Come on, Draco. We're going to be late." Pansy's face is tight-lipped, the way it's been since Claverdon first turned on them, and only now does Draco realise what that look is. Fear.

Draco steels himself. And here's the full nastiness of Hogwarts, really, the way things can only be when students turn on each other. The past fortnight's just been a bloody fantasy, and clearly Draco's only been kidding himself. He means nothing to Potter, and Potter won't lift a finger to help him. It shouldn't surprise Draco the way it does. Potter's always been that way when it comes to Draco, and why shouldn't he be? Draco knows he hasn't exactly built up goodwill with Potter over the years. A brill orgasm or two can't change that, and it's obvious that Draco's nothing to Potter other than someone to get off with, someone only slightly better than his own fucking hand. Draco shifts his satchel on his shoulder, pulling his arm away from Pansy. He wants to run far away, but he can't.

Fine. It's time for him to fight his own battles then. That, at least, is familiar. He's used to that, after last year. Potter'll be surprised; Draco's learnt how to take care of himself. He doesn't need anyone else. Doesn't want them. He's fine on his bloody own.

Anything else is just a romantic pipe dream. And anyone with the surname Malfoy can't afford those at the moment.

He starts for the staircase, not even bothering to see if Pansy's following behind.

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The Eighth Year common room is quiet on a Sunday afternoon--most everyone's gone out to the Quidditch pitch to watch Gryffindor take on Hufflepuff. A few students are likely in the library already, staking out prime tables, or possible meeting in secret assignations around the castle. Harry wishes he were having that much fun. Right now, he's sat at the table in the corner away from the windows, trying to work on Potions. He's got a set of notes from Malfoy--reluctantly shared and only when Harry'd asked twice--but they didn't meet this week for tutoring, so he needs to catch up before next week's practical. Ravi'd pulled him aside today and given him his parchment back for revising. When he'd asked about Malfoy, Harry'd tried to be vague, mentioning that he'd met with Professor Omolade at her request. This seemed to pacify Ravi somewhat, but he'd still asked Harry to fill out his answers more completely.

To be honest, Harry'd looked for Malfoy this weekend, but failed to run across him for the most part. The two times they've crossed paths in the dormitory--always late at night, just before bed--Malfoy's refused to speak to him. Harry doesn't know what he's done, or if Malfoy's just in a mood, but he hopes things settle down soon. It's been a week of highs and lows, but he wouldn't mind getting off with Malfoy again. Or having his help with Potions, for that matter. Right now, that's almost as appealing as anything physical between them.

"Mind if I sit here?" Hermione's standing on the opposite side of the table, a stack of schoolbooks in her arms.
"Sure." Harry gives her a half-hearted smile. "But only if you help me figure this out." He looks down at the Potions worksheet in front of him. "I'm completely bloody lost on this question."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione shakes her head as she sits down. "I'll look at it when you're done, but you've got to learn to solve these for yourself."

Harry nods, sighs, even though his heart sinks. It feels so hopeless sometimes. He wishes he were better at learning from books, but often it eludes him. He really didn't have that much to read when he was younger, or anyone to read to him. He read through all of Dudley's comics, but his aunt and uncle's house hadn't been big on meaningful content or even literacy. Harry's never told anyone, not even Hermione, but he'd struggled with learning how to read in school. It's part of why they'd put him in with the slow group; reading hadn't even started to click for him until Year Three, and the take-home books they'd started him and Dudley with in Reception had just ended up in the bin a week or two later. His aunt did occasionally take him to the town library--mostly after his Year Four teacher raised a snit about his reading marks--but he wasn't allowed to bring books home. Still, Harry did manage to get by. He watched a lot of Muggle telly, curled away behind Uncle Vernon's big armchair, and he learnt about cooking and practical things. By the year or two before he came to Hogwarts, he'd even managed to tuck away a small library of his own in the back of his cupboard from the books the younger kids at school didn't want any longer. Sometimes, he wishes he could be a gardener or a chef, do something meaningful with his hands. He's always been better with doing things than writing or reading about them. Words sometimes look wrong to him, when they're written out, and it'd only been this year, when he'd been whinging about it in Hogsmeade, that Hermione'd told him he could buy a quill from Scrivenshaft's that might help with his spelling, not to mention his messy penmanship. It's still awful, he knows, but it could be so much worse.

With a frown, Harry turns back to his notes. He's not sure what the part about correspondence means, or mineral buffering--he's only just got to a wobbly understanding with Malfoy of elemental likeness, and he doesn't get the whole picture yet. His quill hovers over the page, and a drop of ink falls from the nib, spattering across the parchment. He swears, and when he glances up, Hermione's watching him, a gentle look on her face.

"Here," she says."I'll help." Hermione leans over the table, showing him the pieces of the question and how they fit into the explanations in the book. Once she shows him, it seems easy, the same way some of the theory does when Malfoy takes it apart bit by bit so Harry can see how it comes together in the end. But Harry knows he never could have got there on his own. "You can use the same method to solve the next one, and I'll check it over, if you like."

"Thanks." Harry's grateful that she helps him, although he wishes she didn't have to. Sometimes he wonders if he really is thick, the way Dudley's mates had taunted him back in primary school.

They work for awhile in silence, then stop to take a break as the light dims. Harry lets Hermione cast the Lumos to light the sconces above them. The fire is warm, and the sounds in the castle suggest that people might be coming back from the Quidditch pitch.

"Is everything going all right for you, Harry?" Hermione is bent over a long parchment, adding inches at the bottom--Harry thinks it's possibly for Arithmancy. Hermione's one of the few Eighth Years taking six subjects for her NEWTs. Malfoy's one of the others. Harry doesn't know how either of them manages the workload. He can barely keep up with the five he needs for the Aurors.

"Sure," Harry says, eyeing the pile of work he has left to complete. "It's fine."

"And everything with Malfoy?" Hermione looks up, her sharp gaze catching his surprise. "The tutoring. How's that going?"
"Okay," Harry lies. "Malfoy's a great tutor, I guess, even if Ravi's making him do it." And that's true, at least.

"Well, he seems like he could use a friend," Hermione says carefully, dipping her quill into more ink. "More than anything else."

"He already has tons. He has Parkinson and Zabini and Bulstrode." Harry thinks that Malfoy has never wanted for friends--he's got his closest ones here with him. His stomach swoops a bit with guilt. He hasn't thought of what Malfoy thinks of not having Goyle with him. Or Crabbe, and that has to be difficult for him, being back here, knowing what happened in the Room of Requirement that night.

"Yes, but they aren't very well liked, are they?" Hermione scrawls a note on a slip of paper and tucks it into the book she's been reading. She looks up at him. "Or well protected."

Harry tries to think about what she means. It takes a moment for the Knut to drop. "Oh, do you mean Iain?" Harry shakes his head. "He was punished for hurting Zabini. I think it's going to be fine now." Even as Harry says the words, they sound empty, false. He hasn't really given it much thought, but his gut sense is that Iain Claverdon is still a danger to Malfoy and the others. Perhaps he should be paying more attention. He was grateful to Hermione for pulling Claverdon off Malfoy, but he didn't dare draw attention himself. It would have only made things worse, Harry thinks. People see him too quickly; he's always being watched, and if he'd gone after Claverdon, well. He suspects it'd still be Malfoy taking the brunt of the backlash.

"Really, I wouldn't be so sure." Hermione opens another heavy tome, gently placing it on book blocks and flipping through the pages until she's found the section she wants. "I've a bad feeling about all of it." She looks over the edge of the book, her brow furrowed. "Iain's a terrible bully, Harry. He's not to be trusted, and his family have a lot of power now."

"I guess the shoe is on the other foot." Harry tries to make light of it. "What with Malfoy and his father on the Board. Or not." He knows he sounds a bit bitter, but he's never forgiven Lucius Malfoy for trying to go after Buckbeak. Amongst many other of his failings.

Hermione's quill flies across the page. "Things change quickly, you know. And it doesn't matter which foot the shoe is on if you're the one being kicked."

"Fine," Harry says, a bit exasperated. "I'll try to watch out for the stupid git." He's annoyed that Hermione's admonishing him without saying exactly what he's doing wrong. He hates it when she does that. "Where's Ron? You're not having a row, are you?"

"Off with Ginny to see the match." Hermione doesn't quite look up at him, and Harry thinks they must be having some sort of spat. Brilliant. At least he's not being put in the middle of this one. "He'd hoped you'd come along with them. Remember, he asked you this morning."

Oh, right. Harry vaguely remembers that conversation. He'd been watching Malfoy down the table though.

"You could have gone," Hermione's saying, and Harry looks up at her. "Ginny wouldn't have minded."

"Not bloody likely." Harry's not angry with Ginny, not at all. He's just trying to carve out some space. It's a big castle, but it seems terribly small sometimes. He hesitates, fiddling with his quill. Ink smudges along his fingers, and he wipes it off on the edge of his parchment. "I heard she's flirting with someone." The whispers always stop when he comes past, but Harry's not entirely deaf. Or
blurred.

Hermione shrugs. "You know Gin. Everyone thinks she's flirting when she's just being nice." She looks over at her book, scrawling a quick notation, then turning back to her parchment. She's clearly a bit uncomfortable—Harry's learnt to read her body language over the years.

Sometimes he wonders what it would have been like if he and Hermione’d had a chance to meet each other without Ron in between them, if they would have ended up dating at some point, but she's so in love with his best friend, there's no real room for speculation. Besides, Harry's happiest with Hermione as his friend—she'd never stop telling him what to do if they dated, and that would have driven him bloody mental. Even imagining it seems ridiculous right now.

And Harry's certain Ginny's seeing Michael Corner again or at least toying with the idea, from everyone's silences and obvious discomfort when he's around, but no one's saying anything out of some misplaced consideration for him. Harry wishes they'd get over that, and he wishes he could walk up to Gin and tell her she could do bloody better than Corner. Finch-Fletchley, for example. Justin and Ginny would be brill together, Harry thinks. He just doesn't know how he could set that up.

He sighs. "Well, Ginny and I aren't getting back together. I really hate to break Ron's heart, but sometimes it's better to let go." The words are surprisingly easy for Harry to say, and he realises his outlook's changed in the month or so since the breakup. He can appreciate what he and Gin were to each other, and he's glad they don't have to keep making their relationship what it was before. It hasn't been the same since Bill and Fleur's wedding last year, longer than that if he's honest.

"I couldn't agree more," Hermione sighs, takes out another piece of parchment, keeps writing. "As long as you're happy, Harry. That's really what matters."

Harry thinks that his happiness has to do with a certain former Slytherin right now, a person he finds maddeningly elusive and also ridiculously attractive. Harry's not sure what the pollen did—if anything, his desire for Malfoy has been growing stronger, not weaker since the first time in the greenhouses. It's definitely not wearing off. He just has to look at Draco and he can feel his prick swell. It's all he can think about now when he wanks.

"I get the picture." Hermione's mouth twitches to one side. "Why were you lot discussing this?"

Harry shrugs, runs a hand through his hair. "Just blokes being blokes." Hermione doesn't look convinced, so Harry adds, "I thought you might know. You know everything."

At that, Hermione snorts, but she leans over the table and says, "Yes, Harry, blokes can have sex together. Anally."

Later, he'll wonder what brings him to ask, but he blurts out, "Do you know anything about blokes having sex? With each other, not with girls." When Hermione blinks at him across the table, Harry feels his cheeks warm. He rubs the back of his neck. "It's just....there was a discussion about it in the dormitory..." Fuck, he hopes she doesn't ask around. "And no one knew if they could, you know." Harry lowers his voice. "Fuck. Like.." He makes a circle with two fingers, then thrusts another finger into it repeatedly.

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Harry narrows his eyes. "In the bum?" He supposes that makes sense. A hole's a hole, after all. Still, he's a bit sceptical. He thinks about the girth of his prick. "Wouldn't that...you know?" He lowers his voice. "Hurt?"

"You and Ginny never..." Hermione trails off, and Harry knows she's watching his face shift from
"No," Harry says, a bit sharply. He and Ginny hadn't been as sexually adventurous as Ron and Hermione; Harry knows that. Ginny liked what she liked, and Harry'd never cared to do anything else. He'd liked getting off with her, and the wildest thing they'd ever done was the time Ginny had ridden him in the middle of the day, her tits out of her bra, her knickers pulled aside, up in her room at the Burrow whilst her mum thought they were outside playing Quidditch with the others.

"Oh, Harry." Hermione presses her lips together, then glances around at the empty common room. Ron hasn't burst in yet post-match, wanting to celebrate, so Harry suspects Hufflepuff might have won. Hermione's cheeks are a bit pink. "If you do it correctly, it doesn't hurt much, and it feels rather nice." The flush starts to spread down her throat. "It just requires a lot of lubrication--there are spells for that--and a bit of preparation."

Harry frowns at her. "Preparation? For…" He thrusts his finger through his circled fingers again, and Hermione rolls her eyes.

"Yes, you tit." Hermione gets that school-marmish look on her face. "It's best if you get the sphincter muscles to relax. There's all sorts of ways to do it, but unless you've a self-lubricating bum, which not a witch or wizard in existence has as far as I know, you have to slick it up before you can get that--" She pokes at the finger Harry's using to thrust. "Anywhere up in there."

"This doesn't sound sexy," Harry says.

"Well, you'd be wrong on that score." Hermione's face is a bright pink, and she ducks her head, letting her curls fall over her face "I like it."

"You and Ron…" Harry doesn't like thinking about his best mates' sex life. He'd heard enough about it from Ron that he'd put a moratorium on Ron telling him anything else unless he wanted to hear about Harry shagging his sister. That'd kept Ron shut up for a while. He's fairly certain talking about shagging Malfoy might keep Ron from speaking to him, but, well, Malfoy doesn't want anything to do with him right now, so there's little chance of that being an issue.

Hermione tucks her hair behind one ear. Her face has settled a little bit; it's now down to a fainter flush, and she says, rather primly, "Along with proper contraceptive spells and a condom as well, it's mostly foolproof for avoiding an unwanted pregnancy." She looks over at Harry. "And you know how fertile the Weasleys are."

"Right." Harry grimaces a bit. He looks away. "Didn't need to consider that."

"You're the one who asked about blokes having sex," Hermione says. She hesitates, and he can feel her gaze on him. "So this was just a random discussion you all were having then?"

Harry studies the worksheet in front of him. The words don't make any bloody sense. "Yeah." He sketches a fleur-de-lis in the margin, just below question one. It makes him think of Malfoy for some reason.

Hermione just hmmms, and they fall silent, both of them turning back to their schoolwork. Her quill scratches across the parchment again, as Harry stares blankly at his Potions work, lost in thoughts of Malfoy.

And then Hermione glances up at Harry. "So were you very upset about Susan on Friday?"

Hermione shoots Harry a curious look, then dips the nib of her quill again.

"Huh?" Harry's thinking about the hollow of Malfoy's collarbone, the firmness of his grip, how soft
and inviting his lips are. He wonders if he'll have a chance to explore more of that slim, muscular body, if this is still normal. It has to be, doesn't it? He's still into girls; he's just fascinated by Malfoy right now. It's got to wear off soon. It just has to do with Harry bloody needing physical contact and with that weird plant. He looks over at Hermione. "Why would I be upset about Sus? Especially on Friday?" He feels as if he's missed something important here.

"Only she ate dinner with Zabini then, and I thought you and she were getting close." Hermione's watching his face carefully. "I was sure you'd be upset. You know I'm always here if you need me."

Hermione's tone is kind, but Harry actually doesn't know what to feel. If he's honest, he doesn't feel much of anything at the news. He should say something; he can tell that much from the concerned look on Hermione's face. But all he can think is, well, Malfoy came along and I'm busy with him right now. Even saying it in his head sounds weird.

"I guess she was disappointed that I missed our Hogsmeade date," Harry says instead. "And we've just been sitting together in the Great Hall sometimes." He doesn't want to think of the way Susan had walked him to Omolade's office, almost as if that were something more than friends would do. He feels a bit guilty; he hasn't really been paying that much attention to her since. He chews his lip, glances up at Hermione. "Really, Zabini isn't doing anything wrong." When Hermione looks puzzled, he adds, "Besides, I'm still at troll level on Potions, so I don't have a lot of time to spend with someone new right now."

Hermione frowns, regarding him quizzically. "Harry, if I didn't know better, I'd think Malfoy's made an impression on you."

Harry blushes, looks away, his face hot, his throat dry. If only Hermione knew. Malfoy's made more than a bloody impression on him--Malfoy's come on Harry twice already. The little gasps he makes when Harry's pressed against him have had Harry wanking for days, and truth be told, Harry gets hard just seeing Malfoy walking into a room. He's beginning to think he's got it bad for Malfoy, and Harry hasn't the faintest clue how any of this is all going to work out. He's at sea on this one with no sight of land.

Although, thanks to Hermione, he's definitely considering the pros and cons of getting Malfoy to bend over for him now. Harry's still a bit uncertain about how that all works, but he's curious. That's for bloody certain. And Merlin, but the thought of Malfoy's lovely arse up in the air for Harry nearly takes Harry's breath away.

When he looks up again, Hermione's just watching him, as if she knows.

"Malfoy's a good tutor," Harry's voice sounds thin and false to his own ears. He stops, catches his breath. "But you're better." He pushes his worksheet towards her. "Can you help me with this part of the third problem? I'm not sure I've got the classifications right."

He knows the moment Hermione gives in. Whatever she might be thinking, she's not going to push it. Not yet at least, thank Christ. Harry couldn't bear that particular conversation right now. Together, they bend their heads over the Potions material. It's not as exciting as working with Malfoy, Harry thinks, but right now, it's perfect. He just wants his friend and some time to think. Everything else can wait for later. Right now, it's better to attack problems that have a solution.

Unlike Malfoy, who's a riddle all his own, dangerous and only half-known, but so, so real to Harry, more real, Harry thinks, than anything else in his life.

***
"You're late." Draco doesn't even bother to look up as Potter steps into the study room on Tuesday night. "Again." He has a headache already; a group of third-year Hufflepuffs have taken the study room next to them to revise for a Charms exam, and he can hear their raucous laughter through the walls already. He's contemplating a hex to stitch their lips together, but he thinks even Pince wouldn't forgive him that one.

"Only by three minutes," Potter says.

Potter drops his satchel onto the table; the thud of it makes Draco's inkwell shake. Draco glowers up at the prat. "Mind yourself."

"You're in a mood." Potter slides into the seat across from Draco.

Draco just gives him an even look. "Don't start with me, Potter." He's still furious with the bastard. If he could have thought of a reason to cancel tonight, he would have, but he and Potter'd missed both tutoring sessions last week, and Draco's fairly certain that if they missed any more Ravi would draw and quarter them in front of the entire Potions class. Draco'd rather forego that lovely experience, thanks ever so. Draco shoves a set of notes he's made over the weekend towards Potter. "Here's what we'll be going over this week. Ravi said your last potion wasn't a complete disaster, so this seems to be helping somewhat."

"More than I expected, really." Potter takes the sheaf of parchment and flips through it. "So we're moving on to transfigurative properties in potions?"

That surprises Draco. "You've been doing your reading."

"Some," Potter admits. "Hermione helped over the weekend."

Of course she did. Draco would be exasperated, but Granger's a decent enough brewer, if not on Draco's level. He doesn't think her tutelage would have done too much damage to Potter's understanding of how the potions come together. He shrugs. "Whatever. Look, Ravi's going to be wanting us to do a practical this week on a variation of Polyjuice Potion. You know what that's for, yeah?"

"I'm not a complete idiot, Malfoy," Potter says, looking a bit annoyed.

"One does wonder sometimes." Draco scowls at him. "So the theory behind transfigurative potions suggests that there are certain combinations of ingredients that when put together with genetic material can create a process much the same as transfiguration, but using a different magical power source--"

"Whatever," Potter says. "I've used Polyjuice before; I know how it works."

That draws Draco up short. "You have?" He's a bit jealous, he has to admit. He's never had the chance to try it out; they weren't allowed to brew Polyjuice last year in Slughorn's class. Draco thinks the Carrows had forced Severus' hand on that; no one wanted students walking about looking like people they weren't. Not in the middle of a bloody war.

Potter shrugs. "Yeah." He bites his lip, then says, "Look, Malfoy, about Friday--"

And that's something Draco doesn't want to talk about. "Forget it." He reaches for Advanced Potion-Making. "Even if you've used Polyjuice, you'll still need to know about the theory behind brewing it."

He breaks off when Potter's hand settles over his. Draco stills, barely able to breathe, to think; he just stares down at Potter's golden fingers, the thickness of them, the hangnails around Potter's thumb.
"I'm sorry," Potter's saying. "I should have told Claverdon to fuck off, and I didn't." He's looking at Draco with those earnest green eyes behind smudged glasses. Draco doesn't know what to say, not when Potter licks his lip, breathes out, his shoulders slumping a bit. "I'm a wanker, you can tell me that."

"You're a wanker," Draco says, almost vaguely. His hand feels as if it's on fire beneath Potter's hand. He hates the way this makes him feel, but he also never wants Potter to move.

Potter's laugh is a bit rueful. "Yeah." His thumb strokes across the thin skin of Draco's wrist, and Merlin, Draco thinks he might just die from it. His whole body wants Potter. Right here. Right now. For the first time this evening he's grateful for the Hufflepuff girls next door. He won't do anything foolish with them there. "The thing is," Potter says, "that I wasn't certain interfering would help. I didn't want to make it worse."

As if it could have been, Draco wants to say, but he knows there's a grain of truth in Potter's words. Draco doesn't entirely believe him. Potter has a need to be liked, Draco thinks, and he actually cares what people think of him. Even tossers like Claverdon. He looks up at Potter.

"Forget it," Draco says, his voice thick. He tucks his hair behind his ears. It's growing longer; it's past his chin now, almost brushing against his collarbones. Draco hasn't bothered to trim it in months. He takes a deep breath. "Let's just work on Potions, yeah?"

"Right." Potter sounds a bit disappointed, but he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger, bends his head over the notes Draco's written out in his tidy script. Draco's noticed Potter's are abominable, utterly unorganised, his handwriting barely decipherable unless he's using the grey correction quill he saves for essays.

Draco studies the curve of Potter's cheek, the way his dark curls tumble forward. He wants to reach over, to push them back, out of Potter's eyes. He only just stops himself. He clears his throat. "Okay. Let's go over Golpalott's First Law again."

"Every potion," Potter says, "has a base, a catalyst and a magical source whose power is activated through the catalytic material."

"Not bad," Draco says. "Now tell me how that Law could be spun out to encompass a transfigurative potion such as Polyjuice."

As Potter stumbles through his explanation, Draco can't look away from Potter's mouth, from the way Potter's fingers scratch across his stubbled jaw when he's thinking of what to say.

Fuck, Draco realises. He's bloody well gone on Potter, and whatever this is between them can only end in tears. Most likely Draco's.

He's utterly doomed.

***

Ron's talking about the Cannons and Harry's only half paying attention as they walk along the third floor corridor. Harry's relieved that it's Friday--just a few more hours, and he's out of classes. He looks around for Malfoy, as he always seems to be doing these days. Harry catches his breath as he spots him ahead of them in the classroom, his pale fall of hair brushing his cheek as he leans in to say something to Parkinson. There's a jostle of satchels and bodies in between him and Harry--it's been impossible to get near Malfoy this week except for tutoring, and it's bloody well driving Harry round the twist--people have always been around when he's wanted to talk to Malfoy and today's no
exception. Surely he can find a way to see Malfoy tonight, to even just talk to him. That would be better than nothing.

"I am not letting you out of Hogsmeade this weekend," Ron's voice is almost plaintive, pulling Harry's attention back to their conversation. "You haven't been all year. Just don't do anything stupid, mate, and we'll be away from this sodding castle tomorrow."

Harry takes a moment to think about what he's said. "Doesn't Hermione want to go to Puddifoot's with you?"

The frown on Ron's face speaks volumes. "Hardly. She's drawn up her exam schedule for the end of term and she's already divvying up weeks for pre-studying NEWTs. Months in advance, mind. I might see her some this weekend, but her revising calendar is wicked." He leans in, whispering with astonishment. "It's timed in fifteen minute increments. All weekend."

"Bad luck, mate," Harry says, and he's privately amazed at Hermione's efficiency. He wishes some of it would rub off on him. "We'll have to do something to distract you."

What Harry doesn't want to admit to his best friend is that he's hoping to find Malfoy this weekend, to ask him for more help. Maybe get more than that, if Malfoy's willing. Harry's randy as fuck, and Malfoy's the only thing he can think about. Harry just wants to get close to him, to let the fire of Malfoy lick his body with its flames. Merlin, if he thinks about that any more, he's going to have a bloody stiffy and that just won't be easy to duel around.

During their tutoring session this week, Harry'd spent the hour trying to focus on the scribbles in front of him, trying not to be distracted by the accidental brush of their hands, the sarcastic huff when Malfoy'd laughed at him which had got his pulse racing with something that had definitely not been anger. Harry'd wanted to press Malfoy against the wall, to rut up against the long length of his body, to wrap those legs of Malfoy's around his hips again, but there hadn't been even an opportunity to talk about what they'd done together. It's like Malfoy's been making sure they didn't cross paths.

"Some of the blokes from our year are going to meet up at the Broomsticks, wander around together." Ron nods in the direction of Corner, who's standing talking with Claverdon. "We don't have to join them, but Michael said we could if we wanted."

Ron sounds like he wants to, and Harry knows his friend just likes to be social. It must be something about growing up with so many brothers. Ron's comfort comes in groups, his attitude is always the more, the merrier. Harry's a little more cautious, a little more introverted, and he doesn't want to spend time with Corner, if he's quite honest. Not that he can explain why to Ron. Now that Corner's sniffing around Vicky Frobisher instead of Gin, Ron thinks Harry should be perfectly fine with Michael. Harry hasn't the slightest idea how to explain that his dislike has more to do with Malfoy than anything. But he knows in the end he'll do what his best friend wants--Ron's right, they haven't seen each other in too long. It won't do to get too wrapped up in Malfoy and forget his friends. They keep him grounded like nothing else.

"Sure," Harry says finally, feeling like he's betraying Malfoy for some idiotic reason. "If that's what you'd like."

Ron throws him a smile, and Harry knows he's said the right thing. It makes him realise he needs to spend more time with Ron, too. He's been negligent these past weeks, assuming Ron's been wrapped up in Hermione.

They drop their things on the pile of satchels and move towards the group at the centre of the classroom. Professor Omolade favours Ron and Harry with a small smile as they join the cluster of
students gathered around the podium.

"We're working on jinxes and hexes today, and live counters," Omolade says. "I would like you to keep the intensity level low--again, nothing that'll do damage if it actually hits. The point is to spar, not to actually connect. If you hurt someone, you've lost." The press of her lips makes it clear that she's not brooking any nonsense in this hour. "Stay focused, stay on your toes, and give your partner time to react. I'll be walking around to check your form and I have a monitoring spell on the room."

That last bit is new, and takes Harry off guard. He thinks their teacher doesn't trust them, and honestly, she's not wrong entirely. Harry can see Malfoy off to his right, and he hopes they'll be partnered. He tries to catch Malfoy's eye, but the one time he manages, Malfoy glances away quickly, shaking his head. Harry scowls, a flare of irritation twisting through him. He doesn't know why Malfoy ignoring him like that affects him, but it does. It's as if Malfoy matters more than ever now that he's distancing himself, if that's what he's doing. It certainly feels like that to Harry. He tries to shake his annoyance off, but he does wonder what he's done for Malfoy to avoid him so completely.

"Why's she monitoring us?" Ron's perplexed. "It's not like we're going to try anything in front of her."

Harry's not so sure. With a new teacher, everyone thinks they can get away with more. Ravi's had to confiscate more than one illegal piece of equipment in Potions already this term, and he'd given out several detentions; Omolade's clearly taking no chances. Harry wonders if she's not right, if she can see things he doesn't about them all. He looks around, noting the aggressive stances of Claverdon and his lot, the bored looks of most of the other students, the wary expressions on Malfoy, Zabini, and Parkinson's faces, the solid scowl on Bulstrode's.

Omolade reads out the partner lists. Harry's disappointed when Omolade pairs Malfoy with Andrew Kirke, and Harry with Sue Li. He'd hoped to have a chance at least to interact with Malfoy, although Sue's interesting enough as a duelling partner. She has a wicked side-cast that he'll have to watch out for, and her Stinging Hex is legendary for its power.

Malfoy's with Kirke on the opposite side of the room, next to the windows like Harry and Sue. Harry tries not to get distracted as he and Sue face each other on the mats. He doesn't want to give her a good hole in his defences to attack him, and he's no idea what sort of match this is going to be. It would be worse to have to pull his hexes, and he's mindful of Omolade's encouragement to underdo his casting.

When they start attacking and defending, Harry's pleasantly surprised at what a good opponent Sue is--he remembers training with her in the DA, and she shows a lot of thinking on her feet. Harry doesn't want to patronise Sue, but he does have some thoughts about her fighting style and where she could strengthen it. Still, Sue puts Harry on the run often enough that it's a challenging and engaging match. They have a good, if measured, back-and-forth sparring exchange, and Omolade is complimentary when she stops by and watches them for a while.

Harry's just defended against a strong Bedazzling hex and is getting ready to throw an Impedimenta, when a shout goes up from the far side of the room. He stops and raises a hand to Sue to indicate a pause, then his eyes flit over to Malfoy. He's just in time to see Malfoy suspended in the air, being struck over and again by a Meleofors jinx gone awry. If Harry squints, he thinks he can see there's something wrong with the spell. He's pretty bloody sure Kirke used some kind of spell-aid or magical interference to make it stronger, and that makes Harry's blood boil.

Without thinking about it, Harry strides across the room, slamming Kirke into the wall and pinning him there, one hand on Kirke's chest. He's not even using his wand, he's so furious. The phial of jinx
enhancer falls out of Kirke hand and he sort of gurgles against the stone, trapped by the force of Harry's magic. Harry doesn't care. It's as if his anger is sprouting from the roots of his hair, from his innermost being.

Malfour's on the floor now, after the several bad blows from Kirke's jinx. He's still moving and doesn't look gravely wounded, but he's on all fours, coughing, and there's a bruise rising up already across his cheekbone.

"Mr Potter, please let Mr Kirke down," Omolade comes up behind him, and there's steel in her voice. Harry's forgotten he's still holding Kirke up. He's been preoccupied with making sure Malfour's okay.

Harry complies with the command, even sets Kirke down gently. But he Summons the coward's phial of potion and hands it to Omolade. "Here you are, Professor. Sorry about that."

She inhales, then pinches the bridge of her nose. "Mr Zabini, please take Mr Malfour to the Infirmary. Mr Kirke, you're headed to the Headmistress' office. Mr Potter, please resume work with Ms Li at once, and I'll speak with you after class."

"All of you, get back to your sparring positions."

Professor Omolade's face is tight with anger, and Harry is a bit cowed by the quelling look she sends his way. The whispers and glances of the other students don't help, nor does the perplexed look Ron gives Harry as he's walking back to work with Sue.

"Sorry about that, Sue," Harry says. "Where were we?"

Sue shrugs. "I think you were going to throw an Impedimenta, and I was going to hope it didn't break through my shield."

"Fair enough." Harry's magic is coursing through his body. He wills it to settle, tries to separate what's just happened from the humdrum of daily life. He's still racing with adrenaline and wants to beat Kirke's face in personally. He's also worried about Malfour.

He's no bloody idea what just went on here, but he'll be damned if he'll let it happen again.

***

Draco gets the note Potter drops off at the infirmary for him just before Pomfrey lets him leave. It comes through Ravi, who hands it to Draco with a raised eyebrow, as Pomfrey's puttering around behind Draco, making certain the Meleofors hasn't caused any undiscovered damage.

"So Kirke'll be in detention for the rest of the term," Ravi says, sitting on the edge of the chair beside the bed. Draco's barely listening; he unfolds Potter's note. All it says on it is Tutoring tonight? Same time? Draco's a bit disappointed, but he doesn't know what he expected. Some sort of romantic gesture, carried in by their Head of House? Draco thinks not.

He looks up at Ravi. "Only detention?" he asks, and Ravi shrugs.

"The most Minerva can get him on is an illegal spell-enhancer. Sinistra's bloody furious; she's going to give the whole of Gryffindor House a dressing-down tonight." Ravi's watching Draco. "All you all right?"

Draco shrugs. It hurts when he does, but then again, his back and chest are bruised. Pomfrey'd even made him take off his shirt for part of the examination so she could look at them; Draco'd been surprised when she didn't even flinch at the sight of the fading Mark.
"I will be," he says after a moment. His shirt is mostly buttoned now. "I just want a nap, honestly."

Ravi sighs. "Well, I'm insisting on it, if Pomfrey will release you."

Pomfrey clucks from behind Draco. "I'd say Mr Malfoy should stay in the infirmary to rest, but I've enough experience with young men in this school to know he'd balk at that suggestion."

And Draco definitely would. He gives her a faint smile. "Sorry, Madam."

With a roll of her eyes, Pomfrey waves him off the bed. "As long as your Head of House walks you back."

"You know I will." Ravi stands as Draco slides off the bed, pulling his jumper over his shirt. He doesn't bother to tuck it into his trousers. He grabs his satchel. Blaise has already gone back to class; he's worried about an Arithmancy exam coming up, and Draco hadn't needed him hovering, swearing that he'll make Kirke pay. That only makes Draco more anxious, and he's already a bit shaky from the attack itself. He doesn't really want to nap; sleep will just bring nightmares about the Dark Lord's torments, and that's far too close to what Draco experienced today. He wants to just curl up on his bed, away from everyone until his heart stops pounding, his chest loosens, the clammy feel of his palms goes away.

They walk down the corridor together, Draco and Ravi, both of them silent until Ravi hands over a potions phial. Draco takes it, frowning down at the small glass bottle. "What's this?"

"A calming potion," Ravi says, not looking at Draco. He's shoved his hands back in his pockets. "I thought it might help."

Draco wants to protest that he doesn't need it, but his fingers curl around the smooth glass. "Why?" he asks after a moment.

Ravi shrugs, looks over at Draco. His dark brown eyes are kind. "I think you're having panic attacks," he says after a moment. "Based on what Blaise has told me. It's not surprising, given everything you lot have been through in the past year."

That bastard, Draco thinks, but the anger fades as quickly as it comes. He sighs, runs a thumb over the wax seal of the phial. "Maybe." Definitely, he wants to say, but he can't.

"A sip when you need it should help," Ravi says. "For Merlin's sake, don't drink the entire thing. You'll be stoned for days."

"Sounds brill," Draco says, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Ravi snorts. "Until you have to deal with the constipation that comes along with it. Not to mention the hallucinations." He eyes Draco. "One small sip, and only when required."

Draco rolls the phial between his fingers, then tucks it in his pocket. "All right," he says. He looks over at his Head of House, and says, "You're almost as good as Snape."

That makes Ravi smile. "I'll take that as a compliment." He claps Draco on the back, pulling him close for a moment, then letting him go. "If you need to talk about anything, though, Libatius and I are willing to listen."

And Draco just nods. He's not certain he's ready to. Not right now at least. "Thanks," he says, and he means it. He thinks Ravi understands.
Ravi leaves him at the door to his dormitory. It's empty, and Draco's relieved. He couldn't bear seeing any of the others. Not right now. They've settled into a quiet truce; he ignores them, they ignore him for the most part. It's best that way. But Draco's finding it harder and harder to ignore Potter. He's not certain he really wants to anymore.

He breathes out, rolls his aching shoulders. He pulls the phial from his pocket and studies it for a moment. The potion's a pale gold; it sparkles in the sunlight from the window. Fuck it, Draco thinks, and he breaks the wax seal, uncorks the phial. He takes a deep breath, then lifts the phial to his lips, letting a tiny amount roll onto his tongue. It tastes sweet and delicate, almost grassy in a way. He swallows, capping the phial again, then setting it aside, and almost immediately he feels settled, calm. His body relaxes, and he crawls up onto his bed, stretching out. Oh, that feels lovely, he thinks, and he doesn't mean to doze off, but it's warm in the sunlight, and he feels so loose, so lax, almost.

When Draco wakes up it's dark. He sits up, blinking in the shadows, rubbing at his eyes. He checks his watch; it's nearly quarter past seven, and all Draco can think is that Potter's waiting for him, and he's already late.

He doesn't bother straightening himself up; he just grabs his satchel and hurries out of the dormitory, feeling oddly scattered and discombobulated. He almost runs down the corridor leading to the library, throwing the doors open when he gets there. Pince looks up from her desk with a frown. "Really, Mr Malfoy," she says sharply, but Draco's not listening. He heads back towards the stacks, towards the group room.

When he gets there it's empty.

"Oh." Draco sets his satchel on the desk, pulls out one of the chairs and sits. Disappointment roils through him. He pulls his hair back from his face in frustration before letting it fall loose again. "Fuck."

And then there's a cough from the doorway. "Looking for me?" Potter asks, and he steps into the group room, his books under one arm. He gives Draco a half-smile as he closes the door behind him. "I figured you weren't coming so I moved out to one of the tables until I saw you flying past Pince like you had an Acromantula on your arse."

"Ha ha," Draco says, but he's relieved to see Potter. He moves his satchel out of the way. "I got your note, eloquent as it was."

Potter doesn't take the seat opposite Draco like he usually does. He sits beside him, and his knee bumps Draco's when he pulls the chair closer to the table. He looks over at Draco and says, "Hey."

Draco feels his face heat. "Don't be a prat, Potter." Then he adds, "Although I suppose I should thank you for slamming Kirke into the wall."

"He deserved it." Potter's watching Draco, a curious look on his face. "The thing is, you know, that you're utter pants at Defence."

"I know." Draco hates the admission, but he also can't deny the truth of it. Not to Potter. Not right now. "It's never been my best subject." Potter's just studying him again, and Draco feels as if he might die of embarrassment. He wants to snap at Potter, but instead he just looks down at his satchel, reaches in to pull out his potions notes. "Should we--"

"Let me tutor you in Defence," Potter says, and Draco's gaze flies up to Potter's face. Potter gives him a small smile. "I'm good at it. I can help."
Draco wants to refuse. He can't spend more time than this with Potter. Not with the way his body's already responding to Potter's presence. "That's ridiculous," he manages to get out. Potter just raises an ungroomed eyebrow.

"Is it?" Potter knocks his knuckles against the notebook Draco's just set on the table. "You do all this to help me--"

"Because Ravi's making us," Draco says hotly, but Potter just looks at him. Draco swallows, glances away. He knows that's not entirely true now. "I just think it's a terrible idea."

Potter shifts closer in his chair. "Really? Because as I see it, there'd be two brilliant things about it. One." He hold up a finger. "If Claverdon and his idiots try anything else on you, you'll be prepared to protect yourself. Maybe even knock them about in return. And two?" He reaches out, drags his finger along the angle of Draco's cheek, over to the curve of Draco's mouth. "There'd be more chance for us to do this afterwards." He leans in, his lips only millimetres from Draco's. "God, I really want to kiss you right now."

Draco's eyes flutter closed. "And this is the part, Potter," he murmurs, "where this is a terrible idea."

"Maybe." And then Potter's knuckle is beneath Draco's chin, lifting it ever so slightly. "But say you'll let me."

"Tutor me or kiss me?" Draco can't open his eyes yet, can't see Potter so close to him like this. Potter's breath is warm against Draco's lips, and Draco shivers. "Both."

"All right." Draco can't help himself. He needs Potter to kiss him, needs to feel the pressure of Potter's lips. And when Potter's mouth brushes featherlight across Draco's, Draco can't help the soft moan that escapes.

And then Potter's hands are pulling Draco closer, his fingers tangling in Draco's hair as they kiss, soft and careful at first, and then Draco's mouth opens to Potter's and he feels the sweep of Potter's tongue across his, the warmth of Potter, the taste of him, and Draco lets Potter drag him up, over the corner of the table, which catches painfully on his hip, until he's half-draped over Potter's lap, trapped between Potter's chest and the table's edge, his hands gripping Potter's biceps as he gives in to the overwhelming rush of Potter kissing him.

Potter tastes delicious, earthy and minty and sweet like treacle tart, and Draco loves the feel of Potter's fingers smoothing beneath the hem of his untucked shirt, sliding warm and soft along the waistband of his trousers, dipping beneath the edge.

"God," Potter says finally, his lips barely pulling away from Draco's swollen mouth. "Kissing you's bloody amazing, you know."

Draco just laughs, almost stunned that this is happening. "Fuck," he says, and then he starts to feel the ache in his back from being manhandled this way. He struggles to sit up; he misses the warmth of Potter's body.

Potter catches Draco's hand. "Don't leave," he says. He looks almost debauched, his mouth pink and wet from Draco's kisses, his hair rumpled, his t-shirt askew at the neck.

"I'm not, you idiot," Draco says, but he can't hide the softness in his voice. "Budge up a bit."

The chair scrapes loudly across the floor as Potter slides it backwards. He looks up at Draco, and Draco can see the swell of Potter's prick against his jeans. It amazes him that Potter wants him like
this. He'll come to his senses soon enough, Draco thinks, but for now, Draco's determined to enjoy what he can take, what Potter will give.

Draco moves closer, watching Potter's face. He lets his fingertips graze Potter's cheek lightly, shivering at the scrape of stubble across his skin. He wonders if that's going to rough up his own face tomorrow, if his pale skin will show the burn from Potter's kisses. Draco doesn't care because right now Potter's looking up at him with those bloody gorgeous eyes, and Draco reaches over and plucks his glasses off, sets them on the table behind him.

"Oh," Potter says when Draco straddles his thighs, settling himself once more between Potter and the table. Potter's hands go to Draco's hips; Draco drapes his arms over Potter's shoulders.

"The better to kiss you," Draco murmurs, and then he's leaning forward again, capturing Potter's mouth with his.

This kiss is different. Slower, more careful. Potter's hands slide up Draco's back, pull him closer, and Draco swears he can feel the soft, steady thud of Potter's heart against his chest. It's mad of him, he knows, but for that one moment he feels almost connected to Potter in a way that's both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

Potter's hands slip higher, up to Draco's shoulder blades, across Draco's bruises, but Draco doesn't care--the pain only intensifies the pleasure of kissing Potter like this, and then he's holding Draco gently in place as he rocks his hips up, a slow, steady press of his prick against Draco's that nearly takes Draco's breath away.

"Oh," Draco breathes out against Potter's lips. "I--" The word's swallowed by a soft moan.

Potter's laugh is soft. "Yeah," he says, and Draco thinks Potter's brilliant at this for a straight boy, but then again, Potter's really not able to call himself that any more, is he? No one who only wanted girls would be able to make Draco feel this way, would be able to set Draco's skin on fire the way Potter can just by doing this.

And then Potter lifts Draco, stands up with him, lays him out across the table as he bends forward, his body curved over Draco's. "Do you want to get off with me?" Potter asks, and Draco feels as if he's on display like this, spread out beneath Potter like this, his hair catching on the grain of the tabletop.

"Yes," Draco says, and he pushes his jumper and shirt up just enough for Potter to fumble with the buckle of Draco's belt, the fastenings on Draco's trousers. He's so bloody hard already, the wool of his school trousers tented out, so bloody obvious with his legs dangling over the edge of the table. He reaches for Potter, pulls him down into a rough kiss. "Muffliato first, though, remember?" He can feel the shudder that goes through Potter's shoulders.

"Right." It only takes Potter a moment to cast the silencing spell, and then it's just the two of them together, alone in this room, Draco and Potter, and Potter's fingers are tugging at Draco's flies, pulling Draco's heavy prick from his y-fronts.

Draco groans and twists his hips, stretching his arms out above his head so his jumper and shirt ride up above his hipbones. He grasps the other side of the table with his fingers, holding on tight as Potter works Draco's cock, Potter's gaze caught by the sight of Draco's foreskin sliding back along his shaft.

"Play with it," Draco says breathlessly, and when Potter looks up at him, his eyes slightly glazed over, Draco licks his bottom lip. "My foreskin, Potter. I want you pull it back over the head, roll it
between your fingers." When Potter does as he asks, Draco groans, pushing his hips up a bit. "Don't be careful," he manages to choke out. "I'm not a delicate doll, for Circe's sake."

"Fuck." Potter's voice is thick, and he's leaning over Draco, holding himself up with one hand. "The way you look--"

Draco moans louder when Potter twists his foreskin closed, almost wrenching it over his prick. He can smell himself in the closeness of the room, that raw muskiness of arousal. His fingers dig into the edge of the table; his bruises ache along his shoulder blades. "I like a," he starts to say, and then Potter's fingers are sliding back down his shaft, Potter's thumb pressing into his vein, and Draco just gasps. Draco pulls one leg up; his boot catches on the table, and Draco rolls his hips into Potter's tight fist.

"I like a fingertip," Draco says again, "over my slit." He can't believe he's saying these things, can't believe he's telling Potter how to get him off like this, but fuck if Potter isn't doing exactly what Draco wants, and Draco's hips jump when the tip of Potter's smallest finger rubs over the slit of his cock, pushing it wider as Potter watches, mesmerised. Draco bites his lip, his pulse raw and rough through his whole body. He widens his thighs, drags one leg around Potter's hips, pulling him up against the table's edge.

And when Potter's fingertip wiggles into Draco's slit, pressing deeper, the narrow squareness of it slipping inside Draco for the briefest of moments, Draco thinks he might come just from that. "Fuck, Potter," he says, and Potter looks up at him, then with a small, slow smile, he does it again.

"Is this what you do to yourself when you wank?" Potter asks, and all Draco can do is nod. Potter's teeth catch his lip, and he twists his finger ever so slightly, pressing Draco's slit wider, watching as Draco arches his back, pulls at the other edge of the table. "One day," Potter says, his voice soft, thick and honeyed, "I want to watch you do that for me, if you will."

The thought of wanking for Potter, of seeing Potter's face whilst he strokes himself off, makes Draco writhe. He presses the heel of his boot against Potter's back. "Maybe," Draco says, and he's breathing hard already. "But right now, I think you should get your prick out, Potter. I'm gagging to feel it on mine." He looks up at Potter through half-lidded eyes, and Circe, he can't believe himself right now, can't believe how wanton he feels with Potter's hands on him, can't believe the things he's saying, can't believe the way they make Potter's breath catch. Draco takes a deep breath and says, "Without your pyjamas in the way this time."

"Shit, Malfoy," Potter chokes out, and then he's leaning back, pulling at his flies until he has his swollen cock out in his hand and Draco lets go of the table, feeling the burning ache in his arms, and he's up on his elbows, watching Potter stroke himself, his breath stuttering when he sees the slick ruddy head of Potter's prick sliding through Potter's fingers, through the folds of Potter's foreskin.

And this, Draco thinks, this is why he's bent, why those few months of fingering Pansy had done bloody nothing to him really. Draco knows now, with no uncertainty that he loves cocks, loves the look of them, the feel of them, the way they curve in a man's hand. There's no question in his mind any more that he wants to fuck men, that he was never meant to bury himself in a woman. He doesn't know what he'll do about his familial duty, doesn't know how he'll handle it, but right here, all he can think of is how badly he wants to feel the solid heat of Potter's prick on his.

"Potter," Draco says, and he's reaching for Potter, both his legs wrapping around Potter's hips, needing to have Potter over him.

His mouth catches Potter's again, and then they're kissing, Draco's hands tangling in the snarled mess that is Potter's hair, and Potter pushes him back against the table, nipping at Draco's jaw, sucking tiny
bruises into the curve of Draco's neck. Draco knows he'll have to hide them later, but for now he lifts his chin, lets Potter's teeth scrape along his skin, and when Potter's prick finally slides along Draco's, Draco can't help the soft cry that's ripped from his throat at the heated touch.

Potter finds a quick rhythm, one that rocks the table, sending the legs dragging across the floor, and he reaches between them, his fingers curling around both their pricks, holding them together as he ruts up against Draco. "Jesus," Potter gasps into Draco's ear. "I can't--"

Neither can Draco. His whole body is tense, taut as a bowstring ready to be released. "Please," he chokes out. "Just..." He doesn't know what he wants, what he needs. He's shaking against Potter, his hips jerking with each roll of Potter's body against his, the pressure of Potter's fingers against his cock nearly too much.

To Draco's surprise, Potter comes first, his head thrown back, with a sharp cry that echoes in the room. He shudders against Draco, and the warmth of his spunk hitting Draco's belly, slick and sticky over Draco's cock, pushes Draco over the edge. "Jesus," Potter gasps into Draco's ear. "I can't--"

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The two of them collapse together against the table, Potter's face buried in the curve of Draco's throat. Draco's entire body hurts, his bruises wide pulsating aches deep within his muscles. He's still gasping, his lungs burning, desperate for air.

And then Potter laughs against Draco's skin. "Fuck," he says for what must be the thousandth time, Draco thinks, but all Draco can do is drag his fingers through Potter's thick curls, letting them trail along the nape of Potter's neck, the width of his shoulders. Draco feels languid. Relaxed. Even better than Ravi's brilliant calming potion, if he's honest.

"Better?" Draco asks, and Potter nods before pushing himself up to his elbows. He looks down at Draco's face, studying it.

"Can this be a regular part of our tutoring sessions?" Potter asks finally, and he brushes a stray lock of hair off Draco's cheek.

Draco thinks that's a brilliant idea, really. "Maybe," he says. Potter'll get tired of this soon enough. Tired of him. There'll be a girl who catches his eye, turns his head, and he'll be off after her. Draco's sure of that. But for now...well. Draco's not a fool. He wants this, now that he's discovered the brilliance of getting himself off with a fit bloke. And Potter is definitely fit, and definitely a bloke. "I suppose I could see my way to being tutored in Defence as well."

Potter's smile is almost breathtaking in its brightness. "Brill," he says, and he pushes himself off Draco completely. He glances down at the smooth expanse of Draco's belly, smeared now with spunk from both of them. "Bit messy, though."

"Cast a bloody cleansing charm, you twit." Draco wrinkles his nose. "On the air too. It reeks in here."

"Not entirely my fault, you know," Potter says mildly, and then he has his wand out, and he's sweeping it across Draco, across himself, before flicking it through the air. The scent of roses drifts through the room.

"And now it smells like a girls' dormitory before the Yule Ball," Draco whinges, but he lets Potter pull him up, his prick limp and sated against the white cotton of his y-fronts.
Potter's already buttoning his jeans up. "Better than before," he points out, and Draco can't entirely argue with that.

Draco tucks himself back into his pants, then does up his trousers again. He brushes his hair back from his face, but he knows it must look a fright. He doesn't want to make the trek back up to their dormitory right now, but he doesn't know what else to do. He slides off the table, reaches for his satchel.

"Where do you think you're going?" Potter asks, and he settles back in his chair, reaches for his glasses as Draco looks at him in surprise. Potter blinks up at him. "Don't we have some tutoring to do?"

For a moment, Draco thinks Potter's lost his bloody mind, but he sinks back into his seat as Potter pulls Draco's notebook back from the end of the table it'd been shoved to. "You're serious." Draco knows he sounds incredulous; he can't help himself.

"I like learning from you," Potter says quietly. "Maybe it's weird, but when you show me how potions work, I get it. Even more than when Hermione helps me, so…” Potter shrugs. "I'd like more than a brilliant rut, if you don't mind." He gives Draco a hesitant look, Draco's notebook in his hand, and Draco feels something warm and solid shift inside of him. He studies Potter for a long moment, then takes his notebook from Potter and flips it open.

"So," Draco says, trying to keep his voice from wobbling as Potter lets the Muffliato fall around them. "How'd you do with the Polyjuice Potion on Wednesday?"

And when Potter smiles at him, Draco can't look away. This will be a disaster, the two of them, he's certain of that. But Draco's nowhere near ready to step away.

More fool him, he thinks.
"You're getting better at parrying," Harry says to Malfoy, and he's only a little bit breathless when he bends over, his hands on his knees, his wand gripped firmly between his fingers. His hair falls forward, over his glasses. It's grown ridiculously since the beginning of the term, and he ought to go to the barber just off the Hogsmeade high street. Except, if he's honest, Harry's starting to like the way Malfoy's fingers feel tangled in the coarse curls when Harry leans in to kiss the prat.

It's just gone mid-December, and Harry's been fooling about with Malfoy off and on for the past three or so weeks during their tutoring sessions. It's nothing much more than eager kisses and rutting together for the most part. The occasional wanking each other off when they've privacy for it. Still, Harry's felt calmer as of late, the edge of his anxiety worn smooth by Malfoy's touch. He hasn't had a panic attack in a fortnight, and even Ron's noticed that Harry's tension when surrounded by a large group's faded some.

And then there's the added benefit of Harry's Potions marks decidedly getting better. Ravi'd been practically beaming when Harry'd handed in his Potions practicum this afternoon. It'd been nearly bloody perfect, if Harry does say so himself.

Malfoy drops down to the padded mat Harry's set up in the Defence room and groans. "I need a break," he says, and Harry knows Malfoy's tired by the way his hand shakes when he lets his wand fall from his grasp. It bounces off the mat, rolling a half-foot away before it's stopped by a ridge in the mat itself. Harry's fascinated by how simple and elegant Malfoy's wand is, the hawthorn wood stained dark, the hilt sleek and black. It's the perfect wand for Malfoy, Harry thinks. Malfoy slumps a bit, his head dipping forward in exhaustion. His hair's pulled up tonight, twisted high in a knot on the top of his head, almost like Gin sometimes wears hers, Harry thinks. Tiny wisps have slid out, sticking wetly to his sweaty cheeks. "I think you're trying to murder me," Malfoy says, glancing up at Harry. He rubs his hands over his face. "Fuck, this is harder than Potions."

Harry just laughs and sits next to him. "It's definitely more physical. I wouldn't say harder. Once you've the hang of defensive manoeuvres, they're not that difficult."

That earns him a baleful glare. "For you, maybe, Scarhead."

But there's no bite to the insult, Harry thinks. He nudges Malfoy's shoulder with his, the kind of comfortable gesture that he would never have thought he'd do with Malfoy when they'd first disembarked from the Hogwarts Express at the start of term. And now they've only a few days left before everyone boards again, just before Yule. It's been an odd start to the school year, Harry thinks. He wonders what it's going to be like when they're all back again. It's odd to think he's going to miss Malfoy for those few weeks of hols. Harry's been so caught up in Malfoy lately. Sure, there'd been that evening he'd gone up to the Astronomy Tower with Sus, just to see. But her kisses hadn't set his nerves jangling the way Malfoy's do, her touch hadn't made his skin burn, her body pressed against his hadn't sent him over the edge, desperate to rut himself against her.

Malfoy looks over at Harry. "What?" he asks, a bit suspiciously, but when Harry bends towards him, his mouth curves up in a small smile. "You're insatiable, Potter," he says as Harry's lips brush his. The kiss is careful at first; Harry's learnt he needs to feel Malfoy out before he presses too hard.
Malfy's like a skittish animal sometimes, quick to take offence if Harry doesn't approach him the right way.

But when Harry cups Malfy's face with one hand, lets his thumb stroke along Malfy's cheek, Malfy doesn't pull away. He opens himself up to Harry, lets Harry's tongue flick against his teeth, explore the wet heat of his mouth. Kissing Malfy's an incredible experience, utterly unlike kissing Cho all those years ago—or even Ginny, if Harry's honest with himself. There's an edge of danger to kissing Malfy that makes Harry's heart race, a sharp fear beneath the want of someone stumbling upon them together like this. Harry doesn't know what would be worse—being caught kissing a bloke or the fact that said bloke is Malfy.

Still, he can't stop himself, and when he gently, carefully pushes Malfy to the mat, Malfy doesn't resist. He just slides his arms around Harry's neck, his fingers twisting in Harry's hair, his breath catching when Harry's body rolls half over his, one thigh going between the long vee of Malfy's legs, the weight of Harry's chest keeping Malfy pressed against the ground. Their kisses are still slow, but the caution's wearing off. Harry's teeth nip at Malfy's lip; Malfy arches against Harry, his mouth opening once more to Harry's.

Laughter in the hallway pulls them apart, Harry twisting off Malfy in a flash as he springs to his feet. Malfy's slower, a bit more uncertain, blinking up at Harry before realisation hits. He scrambles for his wand, only managing to crouch above it before the door swings open and a few fifth-year Hufflepuff boys traipse in, cheerfully taking the piss out of each other, pushing each other into the walls in raucous bursts of mocking cackles. They don't notice Harry and Malfy at first, not until Malfy rises to his feet, a bit wobbly, a lock of his hair sliding free from the knot. They fall into silence, looking between the two of them until the ringleader—Harry thinks his name's Mickey, but he's not entirely sure—says "Oi, Potter, this one causing you any trouble?"

Harry wants to snort, to say if you only knew, but instead he tucks his wand in the deep pocket of his jeans and says, "It's all right. We're just practising for NEWTs." He glances over at Malfy, who's looking distinctly uncomfortable, his gaze turned away from them all. "Omolade'll be pleased with how you're doing." Harry means that. Malfy's come a long way since they first started sparring together on Wednesday nights. He wonders if Malfy's told his friends that they've been meeting for this as well. Harry hasn't brought it up to Ron and Hermione, but then, they're busy with each other, aren't they?

"Thanks," Malfy says, and he puts his wand away as well. He shifts from foot to foot, his boots leaving faint impressions on the mat that fade almost instantaneously.

"You need the room?" Harry asks the Hufflepuffs, and Mickey nods, his wiry hair a dark cloud around his brown face, his eyes wide. Harry knows that look—it's the I'm speaking with Harry bloody Potter expression that people who don't know him well get from time to time. It always makes Harry uncomfortable, but he supposes it's not Mickey's fault. Harry sighs, runs a hand through his hair, a bit frustrated. He ought to have warded the door; if he had, he might be pulling Malfy off right now. He glances toward Malfy, then says, "Right, well, we were about done, I suppose."

"We can find someplace else to work," Mickey says, but he sounds doubtful. The other Hufflepuffs frown and whisper behind Mickey's back.

Harry shakes his head, already reaching for his Puddlemere hoodie. "It's fine. Malfy?"

"Whatever." Malfy brushes past the Hufflepuffs, heading for the door; they all shrink away. Harry tries not to roll his eyes as he follows Malfy out into the hallway. He catches Malfy's elbow when the door closes behind them.
"Hey," Harry says, and Malfoy turns towards him, his face sullen. "We don't have to go back to the dormitory, you know."

There's a flicker of something in Malfoy's eyes before he looks away. "Don't patronise me, Potter," he says, and Harry wants to push him up against the wall, wants to kiss him again until Malfoy's gasping into his mouth.

Instead, Harry just reaches for Malfoy's wrist. "Come on." He tugs Malfoy down the hall after him, only letting his fingers slip away from Malfoy's warm skin when he's certain Malfoy's following him. Harry glances over at Malfoy. "What's the one thing you miss most about the way school used to be for us?" he asks, hoping that it's the same answer Harry's thinking. "You can't say your old common room." He stops, considering, then adds, "Or being a prick to me and Ron and Hermione."

Malfoy scowls at him. "That's rubbish then." Still, he considers for a moment, then sighs, his mouth twisting a bit wryly. "It's probably stupid of me, but flying."

Harry relaxes. "Me too." They clatter down a set of circular stone steps that Harry knows will take them out to the grounds. "So fuck it, let's go."

"It's almost curfew," Malfoy protests. "If any of the professors find us out on the pitch--"

"Scared, Malfoy?" Harry can't help his grin. The thought of being on a broom again's making his heart lighter. He doesn't know why he hasn't thought of this earlier, except, really it would have been nearly impossible to get a broom up over the pitch during the fall Quidditch season. But now? It's a brilliant idea.

Malfoy gives Harry a disparaging look. "Don't be a prick." Still, he doesn't object when they reach the door that opens out of the castle, although he does say, "If that door's alarmed, Potter, I'll leave your sorry arse in the dust, I promise."

"Duly noted." Harry knows the charm to disarm it, though. Hagrid's given it to him so he can sneak out to see him if he needs to. Harry taps his wand in a circular pattern around the handle, then murmurs the incantation, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear. The door swings open, almost silently, and Harry grins at Malfoy. "Easy."

"For you." Malfoy steps out after Harry; the door closes behind them. The air's cold and crisp, and Malfoy shivers a bit in his dark grey jumper, thick and wooly though it is. "I ought to have brought a cloak."

Harry casts warming charms on both of them. "They'll wear off soon enough," he says, "but it should do us for a quick flight."

They walk over the hard, frozen ground towards the Quidditch pitch, their footsteps loud in the quiet. The castle looms over them, towers shrouded in gloomy shadows sprinkled with bright lights from common room and dormitory windows. Harry loves Hogwarts at night; it feels more like home when it's half-hidden in the dark, he thinks.

Malfoy's arms are folded over his chest; his hands tucked beneath the cuffs of his jumper. His cheeks are pink from the cold, despite the warming charms, and Harry thinks he looks bloody charming with his hair pulled up the way it is, even with some strands slipping loose. He glances over at Harry. "So where are you going for hols?" he asks. "I'm assuming the Weasel's family rescinded any invitation they gave you, all things considered with his sister."

"They didn't," Harry says, and he stops beside the broomshed, pulling the door open. Ron's actually
been trying to talk Harry into coming to the Burrow for Christmas, and Molly'd sent an owl letting Harry know he'd be more than welcome. Still, it feels odd to think about going, and even though Ron says Ginny doesn't care, she's still not really speaking to Harry at the moment. He steps into the broomshed, reaching for two of the better Nimbuses hanging from the hooks near the ceiling. He glances back at Malfoy standing shadowed in the doorway. "But I thought it better not to go, and I don't want to loaf around London by myself. McGonagall's letting me stay here instead." He hands one of the brooms to Malfoy as he sidles past him, deliberately letting his body brush against Malfoy's. "What about you?"

"Home to the Manor." Malfoy frowns at Harry, but he trails after him out onto the pitch. "Mother'll be a wreck, I suppose, without Father there."

And that surprises Harry. Malfoy never talks about his father. Not with Harry. "Are you going to see him?" Harry can't help but ask.

Malfoy shrugs as he straddles the broom. "Not if I can help it." He kicks off, shooting into the air, his body bent over the broomstick.

Harry follows. The air feels sparkling sharp against his face as he takes that first quick rush into it, the ground slipping away beneath him. Harry loops over once, then twice, his fingers tight around the throat of the broomstick. Merlin, but he's fucking missed this. Judging from the look on Malfoy's face when Harry uprights himself, Malfoy has too.

"Race you to the goalposts," Malfoy says, and before Harry can answer, he's off, with Harry right behind him. It feels good to be flying, Harry thinks, and he bends closer to the broomstick, his trainers catching on the footholds, his thighs pressed against the Cushioning Charm. Still, he can't quite catch up to Malfoy, who zips through one of the hoops, crowing in joy. He slows, turning his broom towards Harry. "Still slower than me, it seems."

"Because you're a fucking cheater," Harry says, but he's laughing. He can't be annoyed with Malfoy, not up here in the air, the grounds of Hogwarts spread beneath them.

Malfoy just flips two fingers Harry's way, and he smiles, weaving his broom in and out of the hoops. "Rematch?"

"You're on," Harry says, and this time he barely edges Malfoy out at the opposite end of the pitch. They swoop low to the ground, and Harry lets his fingers brush against the cold tips of the grass before pulling back up again. He doesn't know how long they fly together, running old practice drills, taunting each other to do stupid things like stand on their brooms whilst twenty feet in the air. Harry's surprised by how much fun he's having, how natural it feels to be out here with Malfoy, their laughter echoing across the silent pitch.

They finally end up drifting above the stands, beside the drooping flags. The sky above is dark and clouded, only a few stars shining through the misty, inky gloom. Harry looks over at Malfoy, at his wind-rumpled hair, wisps coming down from the knot, at his pink cheeks and pale skin. Malfoy looks happy, Harry realises, relaxed even, and Harry doesn't think he's ever quite seen Malfoy like this.

And then Malfoy turns his head, and catches Harry watching him. His eyebrow goes up. "What, Potter?" he drawls, but it's more amused than anything, and something warm settles inside of Harry, spreading tendrils outwards.

"You look good," Harry says after a moment, and he means it.
Malfoy doesn't look away; that makes Harry ridiculously happy. Instead, Malfoy's face softens, just a little, and then he says, "Do you ever wonder what it would have been like if things had been different between us back when we were younger?"

Harry considers for a long moment. "How so?" he asks finally, and Malfoy shrugs, a tiny shift of his shoulders beneath his jumper.

"I don't know." Malfoy lets his broom slide away from Harry's. He looks out over the pitch. "If I hadn't been such a twit, and you hadn't been such a prig."

That makes Harry smile a little. "Maybe." He studies the wistful sadness on Malfoy's profile. "Would you have wanted them to be?"

"Sometimes," Malfoy admits, and Harry's a little surprised by his candour. His broomstick bobs in a small updraft; without even thinking, Malfoy shifts to keep his balance, graceful and elegant even in mid-air. "Maybe things would have been easier in the end for me if I'd hadn't set myself against the Chosen One." There's a slight bitterness tingeing his voice, but he doesn't look over at Harry. "Stupid of me, really, to have backed the wrong bloody horse."

Harry doesn't quite know what to say. He runs a hand along the polished ridge of the broomstick, his fingers finding the subtle grooves beneath meant to help a rider keep purchase on the slick wood in the middle of a drop or a roll. "It wasn't entirely your fault," he says after a moment. "Your dad had something to do with that too."

Malfoy grimaces. "Unfortunately." He's silent, then he swoops down, rolling his broom beneath Harry's, then coming back up on Harry's other side. His head's bent as he rubs a hand over his nape, his fingers dipping beneath the neck of his jumper. "He's a prat, you know." He looks up at Harry. "My father."

"Yeah?" Harry thinks Malfoy needs to say this, out here where no one but the faint breeze and Harry will hear.

"He wanted power," Malfoy says quietly. "And I was so bloody proud of him. I wanted to be him, you know." And Harry does. He remembers Malfoy beside his father, looking for all the world like a miniature Lucius-in-training. Malfoy's mouth turns down at the corners. "And then I didn't."

"Because of Voldemort?" Harry asks, and he can see the shudder that goes through Malfoy, the way Malfoy's fingers clench around the broomstick.

"The Dark Lord, yes." Malfoy glances over at Harry then. "It wasn't easy living in such close quarters with that bastard, you know. The things he did…" Malfoy turns away. Swallows.

Harry can imagine. "You still have nightmares about them."

Malfoy looks a bit surprised. "Sometimes."

"I've heard them," Harry says, a bit hesitantly. He doesn't glance over at Malfoy. He's half-afraid to, if he's honest. The chill of the night air is starting to settle on his skin, pushing through the warming charm. They won't be able to stay out here much longer, he thinks.

"Oh," Malfoy says softly. "The wards on my bed ought to have caught those." He looks embarrassed. "Perhaps I didn't renew them soon enough." He frowns, his mouth pursing a bit. "Or the castle wards interfered."

Harry shrugs. "It was only a few times. Late at night." He chews on his lip for a moment, the adds,
"I have them too, you know. The nightmares." He can feel Malfoy's gaze flick to him; he doesn't know how. He draws in an uneven breath. "Mostly about me dying." He looks back towards the castle. "Or people dying around me."

"I'm sorry," Malfoy says, and Harry thinks he actually means it. He looks over at Malfoy then, and Malfoy raises one shoulder, a wry smile on his face. "I am. Those sorts of dreams are rubbish. Even an arrogant prat like you doesn't deserve them."

And there's the Malfoy Harry's familiar with. "Poncy git," Harry says without thinking, and Malfoy stills beside him. For a moment, Harry doesn't know why and then it hits him, and his face heats. "It's not--" he sputters, then he adds, "I didn't mean--"

"If anyone's a poncy git, it's you," Malfoy says with a snort. "It's not as if you haven't had your hand on my prick a multitude of times this past month."

Really, that's not something Harry can argue with, he supposes. Still, it's odd to think of himself as that. Uncomfortable even. Harry Potter is a ponce, he thinks. A poof, a nancy boy. He shifts on his broom, frowning a little, then he sighs. "You do make a valid point."

"Of course I do," Malfoy says, sounding rather self-satisfied.

They sit together for a long moment, their brooms bobbing in the air, the quiet breeze ruffling the flags at the top of the stands.

"It's all right, you know," Malfoy says, breaking the silence, and Harry glances over at him. He's watching Harry, his face inscrutable. "Wanting..." He gestures between them. "This."

Harry looks away. He thinks of Ginny, of Cho, of Susan, and he feels so bloody conflicted. He hears Dudley's scornful laughter all those years ago, the last time he was having nightmares like this. Don't kill Cedric! Who's Cedric--your boyfriend? Maybe Dudley hadn't been all that wrong about him, Harry thinks. He exhales, coughs a bit. "It's..." Harry doesn't know how to explain it. He pulls the cuffs of his hoodie further down, almost to his fingertips. "Different." He has the urge to fly away, to send his broom soaring across the pitch. He doesn't.

Malfoy's quiet again; Harry almost thinks Malfoy's angry with him until Malfoy heaves a long breath. "I'll have to marry someone someday," he says finally. "I know that. Maybe it would be different if I'd had an older brother. Someone else to carry on the Malfoy name." His mouth twists to one side. "Not that anyone thinks it should go on these days, but still." He looks away, towards the dark outline of the Forbidden Forest. "I can't be the one to let it die off."

Harry doesn't know what to say. He's the last Potter; he's never considered what it would mean if he didn't have kids. Fuck, he's eighteen; Harry hasn't even thought that far in advance; he doesn't even know if he wants kids. He can't imagine what it must be like for Malfoy to be worried about that already.

"You have time," Harry says, feeling ridiculous.

"Perhaps." Malfoy glances back at Harry. He looks beautiful in the moonlight. Harry wonders if Malfoy knows that. "But I guess what I mean is I don't want to. I thought once with Pansy..."

Malfoy trails off, bites his lip. "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

Because you need to, Harry wants to say. Because up here, on our brooms, away from the world below, nothing else matters. Instead he waits.

"I prefer prick to fanny," Malfoy says finally. "I suppose that's obvious."
Harry gives him a small smile. "I don't know. I just thought it was my cock you were gagging for."

Malfoy snorts, but there's a flush to his cheeks when he glances over at Harry. "It's not the worst."

To be honest, Harry doesn't know why he asks, but he can't help himself. "Have you ever…" He clears his throat. "You know. With anyone else?" And that just sounds bloody weird, doesn't it, so Harry has to make it even more awkward by adding. "I mean, a bloke."

And he feels a right prat when that amused quirk curves Malfoy's mouth. Except not entirely because Harry likes it when Malfoy smiles, even if he's making fun of Harry at the time. "You mean, have I got off with, I don't know…" He thinks for a moment. "Blaise?" Harry must give Malfoy a horrified look because Malfoy laughs outright, then says, "No, Potter. I haven't." He catches his lip between his teeth and looks away. "Just you."

"Oh," Harry says, and there's a warmth that blossoms through him, that makes him feel almost shy and uncertain. "That's…" Harry doesn't quite know what it is. Unexpected. Thrilling. He's never been anyone's first. Gin had shagged Dean before Harry, not that Harry'd cared, really. It wasn't the sort of thing he was hung up about. But having this experience with Malfoy, neither of them entirely knowing what they're doing, both of them complete novices...well. Harry reaches a hand out, catches Malfoy's arm, draws him closer, Malfoy's broom bobbing between them.

Malfoy's watching him with those sharp grey eyes, and he doesn't pull away when Harry's fingers brush his cheek.

"I'm glad," Harry says softly. He swallows. "I mean, that we get to do this together."

And then Malfoy's fingers are twisted in Harry's hoodie, and he's leaning in, and Harry can smell the very Malfoyness of him, bright and crisp and so bloody intoxicating. "You're probably a terrible mistake, Potter," Malfoy murmurs, and his lips brush against Harry's, sending prickles across Harry's skin.

"Probably." Harry's fingers curl around the nape of Malfoy's neck, pulling him closer. "Is that a problem?"

Malfoy's eyes are half-closed, his lips soft, pink. "No," he whispers, and the soft huff of Malfoy's breath against his lips goes straight to Harry's prick.

And Harry's kissing him, then, and Malfoy tastes salty-sweet against his tongue. Harry doesn't care what any of this means, whether it makes him bent or not, whether this thing between him and Malfoy is one of the stupidest, most disastrous decisions he's made of late. Malfoy makes him feel alive, Harry realises, whether they're shouting at each other or sitting up in the night sky, bodies pressed together, brooms bumping against one another with each small move they make.

When Malfoy pulls back, his eyes are shining. He reaches out, runs a hand through Harry's hair. "You're an idiot, Potter," he says, but he's smiling at Harry, and Harry's heart is a staccato thud. He could sit here with Malfoy for hours, he thinks, if it weren't for the chill starting to settle in his toes and fingers.

Malfoy drops his hand, shivers. The warming charms are wearing off. "One more race around the goal posts?" Malfoy asks, and he doesn't wait for Harry to answer.

"You tosser," Harry shouts after him, but he's laughing when he kicks his broom into gear, shooting forward, the breeze in his hair.

And when Malfoy whoops as he takes the first curve, skimming past the stands, Harry realises he's
actually happy.

It feels bloody brilliant.

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The night before the Hogwarts Express is due to head back to London with a school's worth of exhausted students on board, the Eighth Year common room is festooned with fairy lights and pine garlands, silvered baubles and mistletoe. A Yule log burns in the fireplace, the scent of burnt wood wrapped in bramble and thistle, and the sofas have been pulled together in a cosy, if haphazard, round. Ravi and McGonagall had given the Eighth Years leeway to make their common space more home-like this week, so of course they'd gone too bloody far in their decorating frenzy, at least in Draco's opinion, moving from pleasantly charming to ridiculously common and rather obscene.

Pansy, of course, had sent it all careening into true vulgarity on Wednesday night with a series of penis ornaments she'd charmed across the large Yule tree on a dare from Goldstein. Then Corner and Hopkins responded with cushions on all of the chairs, shaped like tits—or what Corner assumed tits would look like, given that Granger had complained that nothing natural was that perfectly round. Boot had made things worse by trying to charm holly sprig pasties over the nipples, but he'd only made it halfway through before Hopkins started charming them back, so now some of the nipples are a terrible shade of green.

Things had gone worse when Lovegood stopped by with a box of doxies for a fairy house she was building with Patil, but Longbottom had knocked them over, nearly stepping on half the little bastards. The biting fairies had scattered and hid under the cushions, so the sofas were rigged and only the brave dared sit on them, and often not for long. It's taken days to rout the arseholes from the springs; there's still a small nest of them in one.

And then, to Draco's surprise, Granger'd put a fake spiders dressed in Father Christmas beards in the corner to frighten Weasley. The shrieks when he'd discovered them had been memorable, and Weasley had retaliated with old S.P.E.W. banners across the chimneypiece. Draco'd snuck in after the chaos had died down a bit to hang a few old socks across in a parody of stockings, and if he'd stuck a Potter Stinks badge on one, well, that was his own little joke. He'd also tucked a piece of coal in that one for Potter to find.

It's not all over the top, though. Some of the decorations are less worrisome and a bit more reverent. In addition to the Yule log and mistletoe, Pansy'd added a silver menorah on the chimneypiece that her mother had sent her. Both she and Goldstein had lit the candles together for the past five nights; tonight six burn brightly along with the centre candle. Li had contributed a ficus tree with jewels and coloured lights for Bodhi day, Ravi had hung up an image of the sun god Surya, and there were several images of Hindu saints charmed to the wall. Omolade had given them a small creche that's now sat on one of the side tables, and McGonagall had added a portrait of Robbie Burns to the mix, who's sat to the left of the menorah where he can see, keeping a running, suggestive commentary on the proceedings whilst loudly declaiming verses to whichever house ghosts drift through, curious about the decorations. The Bloody Baron's been speaking with a Scottish lilt for a week and complaining loudly about being draughty.

Tonight, though, the Eighth Years as a lot are gathered around on the sofas and chairs, drinking mulled wine and trying to avoid the sofa with the most remaining doxies. They've McGonagall's permission for the wine, as long as they don't share it with the younger students. The problem, of course, is the vodka Boots managed to sneak in to supplement it, along with the several flasks of firewhisky being passed around.

Draco's in the corner away from the others, sat cross-legged in an overstuffed chair that has a slightly
tipsy Pansy draped over its arm, her long crimson-tipped fingers fiddling with his hair. She's pissed enough to not even bother hiding the cow eyes she's making at Tony Goldstein, who's sprawled across one of the sofas near them, his gaze drifting back to the way Pansy's tits are on display in her low-cut t-shirt. Draco's pretending not to notice her flirting, or the fact that she's shucked off her bra and her nipples are already poking through the thin fabric. He's also trying not to glance too often at Potter over by the hearth, a mug of firewhisky-laced tea cupped between his hands. Potter, on the other hand, seems to not give a damn, his green eyes fixed on Draco, making Draco's skin burn with want.

Lovegood and Millie are sat on the floor nearby, an ottoman in front of them, playing Exploding Snap with Patil and Macdougal. Most known and some suspected couples are nowhere to be seen--Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot are probably in the Charms classroom if it's not taken, and Potter's let it out that Granger and Weasley are stargazing--said with a dubious tone in Potter's voice--up on the Astronomy Tower. Longbottom and Abbott are almost certainly in the greenhouses, as Sprout has given him the charms. Draco ran across the couple last week whilst harvesting Shrivelfigs during the last quarter. Susan Bones is suspiciously absent, as is Blaise, who Draco thought he'd last seen somewhere near the airing cupboard down the hall. And Hopkins is pontificating off in the corner, waving a flask about and sulking that Corner's off somewhere, probably with his hand up Vicky Frobisher's blouse in overcompensation, Draco thinks.

Pansy rubs circles with her fingers across Draco's temple, and Draco grunts in contentment, his eyes closing. "That's lovely," he says, and Pansy laughs.

"You're worse than Millie's Kneazle," she says, but she doesn't pull her hand away. She's silent for a moment, then she sighs. "I'm dreading being home alone with Mummy and Daddy. They've barely been speaking since the whole unpleasantness last spring."

And Draco wants to laugh at that way of phrasing it. Unpleasantness indeed. Still, Pansy's father had stayed on the fringes of it all, smart enough not to throw his lot in with the Dark Lord, whilst being cautious enough to let his friends in the Dark Lord's circle think he might, the latter a move that hadn't been sanctioned by Pansy's mother. Draco wonders what it might have been like for his family if his own mother had stood up even the slightest to his father, if perhaps they might be in the position of the Parkinsons, only moderately ostracised--and that mostly for generations of Slytherin breeding--rather than pilloried at large in public opinion.

Draco looks over at Pansy. "Your mother's still angry at him then?"

"Terribly." Pansy curls a lock of his hair around her fingertip. "It'll all be horribly awkward, and Grandmother will without a doubt put her foot in it and make some awful comment at New Year's, there'll be the worst row, and I'll still have a week left to suffer through the icy glares across the breakfast table."

"At least you won't have to put up with my mother moping about." Draco frowns. He hasn't seen his mother since September, and although her owls have been mostly cheerful--or attempting too hard to be, at least--he's still picked up on a thread of misery woven deeply within them. She's lonely, he knows, by herself in the Manor with most of her friends unwilling to speak with her--or in Azkaban themselves--and Draco feels guilty about that. There's nothing he can do though. He's here, and she's there, and it's his father's bloody fault they're all in this mess to begin with.

Pansy leans in and presses her forehead to his. "It'll be all right, darling. And if it's not, you'll firecall me and we'll escape to London, yes?"

Draco reaches up and clasps her hand. He can feel Goldstein glowering at them from the sofa. "Frankly," he says with a faint smile, "we ought to just schedule that in anyway."
"I'm free on Boxing Day," Pansy says lightly.

"Hey, Parks." Goldstein pushes himself up from the sofa, long and lanky and broad-shouldered. He's terribly fit, Draco thinks. Pansy could do worse, really.

Pansy glances up at Goldstein. Her face is cool, but Draco can feel the tremble in her fingers as she smoothes his hair back. "What?"

"Let's go for a walk?" Goldstein shoves his hands in his trouser pockets, possibly, Draco thinks, to hide the slight swell of his prick that's starting to tent them.

Draco, however, is rather certain Pansy's already noticed. She looks at him. "You wouldn't mind?"

To be honest, Draco would. He's shivery and relaxed and also just a bit tipsy himself. Not to mention jealous. He wishes it were easy for him to go up to Potter, to ask Potter to go on a walk. Still, Draco knows Pansy wants to go with Goldstein, and who is he to judge, really? He gives her his best, languid smile. "Keep it decent, young lady." He eyes Goldstein. "You too, you arsehole." Goldstein just rolls his eyes, and Pansy slaps the back of Draco's head lightly.

"Try not to be a twat for once," she says, but she leans in and kisses Draco's cheek. "Sleep well if I don't see you before you go up," she murmurs, and Draco's fairly bloody certain she's no intention of being back in her dormitory any time soon. He watches as she takes Goldstein's hand and lets him lead her away, her hips swaying just a bit in her low-slung plaid pyjama bottoms, the ones that cling to her hips. Really, Draco thinks, if there was even the slightest possibility of him being turned on by a girl, that ought to have done it.

Nothing.

He sighs and takes another sip of the tea he's been nursing for the past half-hour to counteract the vodka he'd drunk earlier. The common room's quiet and warm, and Draco's just considering going upstairs to curl up in bed when Potter gets up and brushes off his jeans, then weaves through the laughing Exploding Snap players to come Draco's way. Draco has the opportunity to watch his approach. Potter's thighs are muscled and his jeans hang off his hips beautifully. He has the natural balance of a Seeker, and, really, Draco loves watching him move. His prick stirs, and yeah, it's completely different how turned on he gets by Potter.

When Potter's drawn level with Draco's chair, he smiles and lifts his shirt a bit. Draco's eyebrows rise. There's a silver flask tucked in Potter's waistband, and Potter pulls it out, offering it to Draco. "Here, Malfoy. The firewhisky's not bad."

Draco takes the still skin-warm flask and, after opening it, takes a long swallow, his eyes fluttering closed. The liquid burns down his throat and tastes bloody brilliant. Potter's watching him when he opens his eyes again. "Delicious." Draco lets his tongue drag along his lower lip, sucking away the last drops of the firewhisky from the corner of his mouth. Potter's gaze follows; Draco wants to hook his heel behind Potter's knee, pull him down on top of him. The only thing holding him back is the sound of Millie's laughter in the background.

Circe, Draco's never wanted anyone the way he wants Potter.

"Yeah?" Potter asks, his voice a bit husky. He takes back the flask Draco hands him. Their fingers brush for the slightest touch, and Potter's inhale is sharp and quick. Draco's skin tingles from the contact. "Wasn't really certain, the way you downed it."

And at that, Draco's mouth quirks up to one side. He sits forward, his face almost level with Potter's
crotch. Draco looks up at Potter, through a tumble of hair that he pushes back behind one ear. He wets his lips again. "I can think of other things I'd like to swallow, most of which are not for polite company." They haven't tried blow jobs yet, but Draco's been thinking about what it'd feel like to have Potter's prick pressing into his mouth. And, really, Draco's keen on the idea and just bladdered enough to tease Potter. He bites his lip, lets it slide from between his teeth, all whilst gazing up at Potter. Draco knows Potter wants him, knows Potter's feeling as frisky and frustrated as he is.
"Besides, you owe me, remember?"

Earlier this afternoon Draco'd been deep in the library stacks, lost in the list of alchemical books Professor Skeat had suggested he take home with him for the holidays. And then Potter'd been there, pressed against Draco's back, his mouth on the corner of Draco's jaw, teeth nipping softly at his skin. Anyone could have seen them, anyone could have turned the corner; Draco'd even heard Granger's voice not far away, saying something to the Weasel.

But Potter hadn't cared. He'd just slid his hands around Draco's hips, over his jumper, his fingers flattening against Draco's stomach. "Merlin," Potter had said as he pressed his nose against Draco's hair, breathing in. "You smell bloody edible."

Draco'd just melted back against the width of Potter's chest, his fingers gripping the edge of the shelf in front of him. "We'll get caught," he'd murmured, but Potter'd just pushed his hips against Draco's arse.

"Not back here," Potter'd said, and when Draco'd turned his head towards him, Potter'd leaned in and kissed him, slow and careful, his hand sliding down to cup the swell of Draco's prick through his trousers. "I could wank you right here. Get your spunk all over these books."

"Pince would murder you." But Draco had rolled his hips forward, rutting himself against Potter's hand. Fuck, but it wouldn't have taken more than a stroke or three to get him off. Draco'd been half-willing, but then Granger had called for Potter, and Potter'd sworn softly, stepping away, leaving Draco hard as fuck, his fingers still clenched on the shelf's edge.

And now, Draco's eyeing Potter, who's flushed and taut, his jeans already starting to strain at the flies. "You're awful," Potter says, but he gives Draco a tiny half-smile.

"You haven't objected yet." Draco looks around, casually, but no one seems to be paying attention. Ravi's door is cracked, but he's been out walking Libatius for a good hour and a half at least--Draco suspects their path's led them to Omolade's quarters, given the bottle of wine Ravi had tucked under his arm when he left--so the room's unsupervised, and most of the other students are off on private assignations or involved in the game.

"So," Potter says, his voice low, "was that an offer?" He lets a knuckle graze Draco's cheek, his body blocking Draco from view.

This is bloody mad, Draco knows, but he's not going to see Potter again for weeks. Not like this. Not when he can feel Potter against him, can let Potter get him off. It'll be him and his hand alone in the Manor, and whilst Draco's certain fantasies about Potter will fuel his imagination, he still wants one last moment together before Potter comes to his senses over hols and tosses Draco to the bloody kerb. "I think we should." Draco licks his lips, still tasting whisky. His gaze flicks up to Potter's face. "I mean, why should everyone else have all the fun, right?"

"What do you suggest?" Potter's green eyes are intent behind his glasses, fixed on Draco's face. Draco can definitely see the bulge of his erection now, and he knows he has an interested audience. The intensity of Potter's attention gives him courage.
"I'm going to go to the dormitory, and you're going to sit back down." Draco brushes his hair back from his face, tries to give Potter a sultry look. He feels a right fool, but it doesn't seem to put Potter off, judging by Potter's soft breath. "Then, in a few minutes, you're going to come find me if you want. Tell everyone you need a slash."

Potter runs a hand through his hair, then he nods. "Right."

"Good." Draco gives Potter a quick, heated glance. "If all goes well, I'll see you in a few." He raises his voice just enough to carry across the common room. "So sod off, Potter. Honestly, you're such a Gryffindor arsehole." He pushes a stockinged foot against Potter's calf, enjoying the solidity of it against his toes. "Merlin."

"See if I try to wish you a happy Christmas again, you tosser," Potter says, and his mouth quirks up at the corner. The room falls silent, the others watching them from the corners of their eyes. Potter walks away and yeah, Draco looks at his arse for a bit whilst pretending to glower at him. He waits a beat, then pushes himself out of the armchair in a mock huff that he's fairly certain even Millie will believe. Other than a couple of glances up as he storms past the Exploding Snap game, no one really seems to care if he leaves, as usual, and he makes his way easily down the corridor to their room.

Draco goes to the loo quickly, takes a quick piss, then washes his hands and splashes water on his face before returning to their dormitory. He leaves the room dark and climbs into bed, pulling the hangings shut but not spelling them closed. He strips off his jumper and his jeans, then folds them and sets them on the far side of his bed. It's quiet, and Draco wonders what's going to happen if Potter leaves him here. He'll feel like an idiot, he thinks. Still, Potter'd been randy and hard, so Draco thinks he must have a chance at least. He waves his wand and casts a quick, low Lumos, creating a soft orb that hangs over his bed, then tucks the wand back under his pillow. He unbuttons the collar of his shirt and removes his tie, letting it slither to the floor in a coil from his hand.

The dormitory door opens; Draco stills, barely breathing.

"Malfoy?" Potter's voice is quiet, close, and Draco exhales in relief. "Are you in there?"

Before he can answer, Potter's head appears between his hangings, glasses glinting with the faint light of the orb. "Fuck." Potter blinks at Draco, who stretches out beneath the appreciative gaze in nothing but his pants and his half-buttoned shirt. Draco doesn't know why Potter's desire for him makes him so bold, but it does.

"Are you coming in, Potter?" Draco asks, stretching and shifting beneath Potter's astonished look.

To his surprise, Potter disappears for a moment. Draco sits up, about to call after him, but then Potter reappears with his jeans shucked off, bare legged in his y-fronts, and only a t-shirt covering his wiry chest. "As if I'd rather be anywhere else," Potter says. There's an almost reverent note in Potter's voice.

"Cast a Muffliato," Draco says as Potter crawls over him, his prick bulging in the soft white fabric, his body warm on Draco's. Potter does, wandlessly of course, and the nighttime stillness grows closer, warmer, more intimate as the spell cocoons them and the hangings of the bed protect them from view.

Potter kisses Draco, then bites his lower lip, making Draco squirm beneath him. He loves the feel of Potter lying over him, heavy and solid, his knee between Draco's thighs. Draco rubs his own, aching prick up into Potter's body, and then Potter slides a hand beneath the gaping placket of Draco's shirt, playing with Draco's nipples, making Draco bite his lips and groan. Fuck, it's so good, and Potter's such a bloody tease. Draco can feel his prick tighten, his bollocks rise in his y-fronts, pressing against
After a long, breathless, soul-emptying kiss, Draco pulls back. He draws in a ragged breath. "I really do want to suck you." The idea's been going round his head for weeks, every time he has Potter's cock in his hand, and Draco knows he wants to do this with Potter first, wants Potter to be the first time he feels the weight of a prick in between his lips.

In response, Potter rises up over him, his lips swollen from their kisses. "Fuck. Malfoy. You're serious." He's eyeing Draco hungrily, his prick heavy against Draco's thigh, the white cotton of his pants already wet, and Draco pushes his hips up, They rub a bit together, just enough to make Potter's eyes roll back in his head.

"Entirely, you idiot." Draco loves the unironic, total focus Potter has when they're together, like the world outside is gone and it's just the two of them wrapped together. It's intoxicating to have his full attention, and Draco craves more, wants to watch Potter lose his mind, wants to suck it out of him. He's read up on this, of course. He's got books that he sent away for a fortnight ago, ones that arrived in plain brown paper wrapping and that he'd had to lie to Blaise about, telling him they were reprints of old alchemical tomes. Now he keeps the books spelled to look like chocolate frog cards and hidden away in his trunk, only taking them out to flip through when he's certain he's going to be alone, studying the pictures, eyeing the suggestions. He's no idea what fellatio is going to be like it in person, though. What Potter will taste and smell like. How it will feel. There's a tight nervousness in the pit of his stomach, but it's only making him more excited, if he's honest. He's about to suck a boy off for the first time, and it's going to be Potter of all people.

Potter shuffles to the pillows that Draco props against the headboard and leans back against them. When Potter shucks his y-fronts, kicking them off his foot, his thick prick sticks almost straight along his belly from the thatch of curly black hair. Circe, he look gorgeous, Draco thinks, spread out across Draco's bed with his t-shirt ruched up over his muscular stomach. Draco knows this is a difficult angle, but it's not possible to get Potter on the side of the bed without being at risk of someone seeing if they wander into the dormitory. Draco approaches a bit from the side, hoping that he's got this, that the instructions in his books--all written anonymously, of course, and published in France--aren't completely off the mark.

When Draco grips Potter's already dripping prick at the base, Potter's hips thrust up, startling Draco as he angles it up and starts to lower himself over it.

"Careful, Potter," Draco says sharply. He looks up at Potter. "You don't want to choke me or poke my eye out."

Potter stiffens, looking a bit alarmed by that. "I'll try to be careful."

Draco swats the edge of Potter's hip. "You can move, just don't move a lot. Haven't you done this before with the Weaseltte?" Draco doesn't wait for Potter to answer; he doesn't really want to know. "I've got to figure this out." He bends forward, his half-open shirt sliding off one shoulder; he licks experimentally at the swollen head of Potter's prick, drags his tongue along the thick ridge underneath, enjoying the soft gasp from Potter, the way his thighs tremble as he tries not to jerk beneath Draco. Potter's legs are splayed wide, one of Draco's knees between them, his shoulders hunched over Potter's hips. Potter plays with Draco's hair, running a hand through it to cup Draco's head, and bloody hell, his fingers feel better than Pansy's.

"Fuck, you look amazing, Malfoy." Potter's voice is thick in his throat, and Draco wants to make him lose the ability to speak entirely.

Draco covers his teeth with his lips, realising it's harder than it sounded in his books, and then sucks
the tip of Potter's prick into his mouth. It feels bloody enormous, and tastes salty and musky. It's not entirely unpleasant, Draco thinks, and he lets his tongue swirl around the soft ridge of Potter's slit. Potter's hand grips tightly in Draco's hair as he does, pulling it a little, but Draco doesn't mind. Potter's almost incoherent, making rough grunts, obviously doing everything he can not to thrust his prick all the way into Draco's mouth. Draco experiments with swallowing more of Potter, his eyes watering the first time Potter strikes the back of his throat in an unfortunate way, but he manages to back off a little and continue the stroke.

It's not the easiest or the best blow job, Draco's certain of that, but the noises Potter's making more than make up for it. Draco slides his fist up from the base of Potter's hard prick, pulling Potter's foreskin along the length and making Potter even harder as his lips come down to meet his fist. He repeats this, trying not to grip too hard, and also trying not to choke himself in the process. The books had never mentioned how hard it would be not to dislocate his jaw, he thinks, or perhaps it's just how bloody wide Potter's prick is. Draco tries to relax around Potter's girth, but Potter's pushing a little with his hips, and it's almost too much. Draco's saliva is running along the seam of his mouth, and he tries not to find it disgusting. He knows sex is supposed to be a bit undignified, and he decides not to worry about how he looks right now.

Still, when Draco gets into the rhythm of it, it all gets amazing. Potter's face is red and he's so close--Draco can feel it. On a last, awkward descent, Potter says, "Oh. Fuck. Malfoy. I'm--"

And there's no time at all for Draco to react before a bitter fluid is shooting down his throat. He coughs, sputtering, almost gagging on the prick in his mouth, swallowing some of Potter's spunk, the rest of it sliding out from between his lips along the length of Potter's prick. Potter's hand is gripping and it hurts now in his hair. But it's worth it when he comes up and Potter looks at him like Draco's bloody Merlin himself.

"Jesus fuck, Malfoy. That was fucking amazing," Potter's fallen back against the pillows, his breath coming in gasping pants.

Draco smiles, his mouth feeling a bit sore. He wipes the back of his hand across his lips, smearing the remnants of Potter's spunk across his cheek. "Don't worry, Potter. It's just a blow job."

"Says you." Potter pulls Draco close, then kisses him as he rolls over, pressing Draco into the mattress as his tongue plumbs the depth of Draco's mouth, finding his own taste there. "Wow," Potter says, grimacing as he pulls back. "That's strong."

"It's not that bad," Draco says. He's oddly self-satisfied, even though he hasn't come yet himself. He feels like he's accomplished something. He wishes they had a NEWT in cocksucking now. Draco'd be happy to revise for that one.

Potter reaches down, wraps a hand around Draco's prick. It jumps against his touch, and Draco rolls his hips upward into the touch. "Do you want me to suck you, too?" Potter's almost hesitant in the way he asks, as if he's not certain he wants to.

"Later," Draco says, taking pity on Potter, and he sees the look of relief cross Potter's face. He thinks he ought to be irked, but really, it's not as if Draco doesn't understand that the idea of it's something that one has to work up to. Still he's desperate to get off. "Just wank me. Your hand feels amazing, and I'm so fucking close."

Potter swipes his hand roughly over Draco's prick, the way Draco has shown him he likes it in past encounters--Potter's actually a quick learner when he wants to be--and he bites Draco's neck, then licks across it, soothing Draco's skin. "Like this?" he asks, and Draco groans, twisting beneath Potter. He loves the heat of Potter's hand around him, the way Potter sweeps his thumb across
Draco's slick slit.

"Yes, fuck," Draco manages to get out, and he grabs Potter's shoulder with one hand, splaying the other on the headboard above him. "Just like that."

And Potter laughs, low and throaty, and it's all Draco can do not to spill right then, but he wants this to last at least a little bit longer because this is all of Potter he's going to have until hols are over. Potter leans over him, brushes his mouth across Draco's, and Draco can feel him shiver as Potter drags his fingertips up Draco's shaft, bringing his foreskin along with them. "Merlin," Potter says. "I can still taste myself on you."

Draco opens his mouth to Potter, lets him ravage him with his tongue, his hips bucking up into Potter's featherlight touch.

"Such an amazing cocksucker," Potter whispers against Draco's lips. "Aren't you? So bloody good at sucking my prick, at taking it all in. God, Malfoy, the way you looked, mouth full of my cock--" Potter groans, and his fingers tighten on Draco's prick. He buries his face in the curve of Draco's neck. "Jesus, I'm going to be wanking over that for days. Weeks, even."

"Yes." Draco digs his toes into the mattress, pushing up into Potter's fist. His fingernails scrabble against Potter's back. "Please--"

And then Potter's pressing against him, his teeth scraping over the soft flesh of Draco's throat. "Next time," Potter whispers, and his breath is a warm, ragged huff against Draco's ear. "Next time, I'm going to fuck your face, watch my prick push against your cheek." His strokes grow quicker. "God, I just want to make you feel good, yeah? Come on, Malfoy. Let me make you feel good. I want your spunk on my hands, want you coming all over me, want to smell you on my skin all night…" He's breathing hard, his fist pulling at Draco hard and fast, and it feels so goddamned brilliant that Draco thinks he's going to explode with the thrill of it all. "Want to lie there and wank tonight, knowing you're over here, knowing that you came all over my hand, yeah?"

Draco's body's practically bowed beneath Potter's, and he's making soft, keening sounds, his fingernails digging into Potter's shoulders, his other hand pressing into the pillows, trying as best as he can to find purchase, anything he can do to press his body closer to Potter's, his shirt half-twisted on him, the buttons that are still closed straining against the buttonholes.

When Potter leans in, presses his lips to the Sectumsempra scars on Draco's chest, drags his mouth over them, stopping only to suck at Draco's hard, pebbled nipple, Draco can't hold off any longer. He comes with a loud cry, one he's not certain doesn't break through the Muffliato, as he shudders in Potter's grip, Potter leading him through the height of the orgasm, his fist covered in Draco's spunk. Draco floats back to earth, barely aware of Potter's kisses, of Potter's arms wrapped around him, pulling him close, of Potter's soft whispers in his ear, telling him how good he is, how brilliant that was, how Potter's going to think of Draco all of hols, miss him, want to be with him just like this.

They lie there entwined for a few moments, the world quiet and warm and the air smelling of musk. Draco takes a deep breath finally, shifting to get his wand. Potter's almost asleep, the giant prat, but Draco can't help but lean in, brush his lips against Potter's forehead.

"You're incredible," Potter says, his voice soft and lazy.

"I think we both know that." Draco says the cleaning spells that get them back to presentable, as much as he'd rather not, as much as he'd rather lie here with Potter, letting the stickiness of his come sink into Potter's skin, leaving him marked by Draco.
"Humble too." Potter shifts and kisses Draco again before he yawns. He raises himself up on one elbow, his fingers still tracing tiny circles across Draco's hip. "I wish we could stay here all night." The look on Potter's face takes Draco's breath away, makes his prick stir again and his blood sing.

"Well, we can't." Draco frowns, unhappily. "We've got to get back into the common room." He sizes up Potter, who reaches out, brushes Draco's hair back from his forehead. "Listen, I'll go first, and then you come after me in a few minutes. Ten, perhaps." He frowns. "Maybe seven. An odd number seems a bit less like we're timing it."

Potter nods. "Okay, Malfoy. But I think I still owe you."

Draco shoots him a stern look, one that's undermined by the soft twist of his lips upwards. "Never worry. I'll collect on it when you're ready." He leans in, kisses Potter, a quick press of his lips against the corner of Potter's mouth. "Think about it over hols."

Pleased and aching and somewhat embarrassed, Draco slides out of his bed, clothes in hand. He dresses quickly, stopping by the loo to check his appearance. There's a love bite to hide with the proper charm, but that's it. He smooths his hair down, then heads back towards the staircase.

He's no bloody idea how he's going to make it through Christmas. The very idea of being away from Potter for a day or two, much less nearly twenty, makes Draco's heart sink.

This is ridiculous, he tells himself as he steps into the warmth of the common room. He's managed to survive this long without Potter. He can last just over a fortnight.

Millie looks up at him thoughtfully as he brushes past the Exploding Snap players, headed back for his chair. "Feeling all right, Draco?"

"Brilliant," Draco says, and he drops into his seat, reaching for an afghan to wrap around him. He's surprised to find it's the truth.

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Slipping down the empty, shadowed corridor, Harry can hear what sounds like Ravi's voice raised in the common room. It's not quite been seven minutes since Malfoy'd left their dormitory, but Harry thinks maybe he can use the distraction to make it down the stairs unnoticed by the rest of the Eighth Years. The steps barely squeak beneath his bare feet as he takes them cautiously, trying not to thump down them like he usually does.

Ravi's voice becomes more distinct as Harry nears the common room. "For fuck's sake, whatever you idiots are doing together, I never want to see you doing it without protection. Honestly, have you lost your bloody minds? It's like your hormones have overruled that part of your brain that makes rational decisions, and I understand that, I really do, but Merlin's saggy tits, do you realise how stupid you're being?"

Harry stills against the wall. Could Ravi be talking to Malfoy? Is this about them? Fuck. Maybe it was foolish to slip away together. Maybe some'd heard them in the bed, despite the Muffliato. Harry takes a long breath, squares his shoulders. If Ravi is giving Malfoy a right bollocking, Harry'll just have to walk in and take it as well. He can't leave Malfoy alone in there, not when it was both of them together in Malfoy's bed. Anyway, maybe there's a chance this hasn't anything to do with either of them, and at that point, Harry'll just blend in and see what's going on.

When Harry comes around the corner, he nearly runs into Millicent Bulstrode, who's leaning against the wall, her arms crossed over her ample chest, her dark curls pulled back into a high ponytail. Her
brown eyes flick towards him, then slide back away, almost as if she's utterly disinterested in him or where he's been. That only makes Harry more worried, if he's honest. Luna's on Bulstrode's other side, and when she sees Harry, her face lights up.

"What's going on?" Harry whispers to Luna. The Eighth Year common room is packed with almost all of the twenty students who live there, plus a few other friends who Harry belatedly realises are probably the romantic interests of the people in the room.

"Improper conduct." Bulstrode answers before Luna can. "Ravi caught Goldstein with his hand up Pans' shirt in an alcove, not to mention Frobisher straddling Corner's lap whilst he was marching Pans and Goldstein back here, so now we're all suffering through the bloody lecture on sex." She looks a bit annoyed, Harry thinks. Luna just wrinkles her nose and pats Bulstrode's arm. The small smile Bulstrode turns on her surprises Harry.

Harry catches a glimpse of Malfoy perched stiffly on the arm of his usual chair with Parkinson sitting primly in it, the neckline of her t-shirt pulled a hell of a lot higher than he remembers it being half an hour or so ago. She still hasn't put a bra on yet, Harry thinks, and yeah, Malfoy's definitely not looking at Harry on purpose. Tony Goldstein's stood next to Draco with a studious look on his face, arms folded over his chest, although his cheeks look a little flushed to Harry and his shirt's untucked. And Michael Corner's sitting on the sofa behind Ravi with Vicky Frobisher a good foot away from him at the other end of it, and they're both sitting up straight. So Ginny's not back together with Corner, Harry thinks, feeling oddly relieved. Harry slouches beside Bulstrode, trying to be inconspicuous whilst he looks around to see if anyone's realised that he and Malfoy were out at the same time.

"You do all know your protective spells, yeah?" Ravi's really angry, Harry realises, his brown, bearded face animated with fury.

There's silence in the room. Harry's pretty sure that three-quarters of the room have no idea what he's talking about, although Parkinson has a little smirk on her face, and Malfoy just sighs, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"I can't believe--" Ravi bites off a curse, shaking his head. He runs his hands through his hair. "You're bloody eighteen, some of you nineteen, and you've no bloody idea what a goddamned protective spell is. What the hell have your past Heads of House been doing? You ought to have learnt this by sixth year--"

"To be fair, sir," Justin says from his seat near the hearth, "there was a war going on." He looks apologetic. "Perhaps there wasn't time?"

Ravi glares at him, a bit fiercely, and Justin flinches, sinking back into his chair. "It's not bloody difficult. Even Ilvermorny required sexual education by the age of seventeen, and everyone knows the Yanks are the worst bloody prudes about this kind of thing." His scowl deepens as he looks around the room. "We've still people missing."

Harry's already realised Ron and Hermione aren't here. Neither are a handful of other people.

"I think I know where some of them are, sir," Luna pipes up from Bulstrode's other side. "Should Millie and I go get them?"

"Yes." Ravi's face is thunderous. "We're going to do this now. It's high time you lot received practical instruction. You're clearly able to get yourselves into trouble without it, running bloody wild like you all are."
Luna and Bulstrode slip out of the room, leaving Harry behind. He takes stock of the room. No one's talking, and now Ravi's not really saying anything either, just pacing back and forth in front of the hearth, Robbie Burns muttering to him from the corner of his portrait frame. Zabini and Susan look the most out of place: he has his hands in his pockets and is staring off into space; her arms are folded across her chest and she's wearing a contrary frown that Harry knows full well. Sus' hair is a mess, strands slipping free from the plait around her head, and there's definitely a love bite just below her jaw.

Padma Patil catches Harry's look. "Ravi found them in the airing cupboard when he came in, and it was the last straw," she says, giving Harry a sympathetic glance. "Bad luck, Harry. Sorry, but you know how Zabini is." She seems a bit glum, and the glare she shoots Zabini and Sus is vicious. There's a story there, but Harry doesn't quite care at the moment.

"It's fine," Harry says. Fuck, but he's glad Zabini went down for the slaughter and not Draco and him. He wonders what would have happened if Zabini and Susan hadn't been in the hallway, wonders if Ravi would have come up into all the dormitories, checking them for unsupervised assignations. Probably. A shiver goes through Harry at how close they must have been to discovery. Susan looks up, her eyes meet Harry's, and she frowns a little. Harry knows he's been a shit to her lately, leading her on and then dropping her. But he's been so busy with Malfoy, so caught up in him, that he hadn't really bothered to even end things with Sus. He'd just...stopped talking, he supposes. Maybe Ginny's right about him. Maybe he's wretched boyfriend material.

Harry's face flushes, and he glances involuntarily over to Malfoy, whose nostrils are flaring in what Harry knows is irritation. Parkinson has her hand on his thigh, evidently calming him. A rush of something hot and protective surges through Harry, followed by a twinge of embarrassment. He can't go over to Malfoy like he wishes he could, can't lay his arm across Malfoy's shoulders or wrap his body around Malfoy's the way he wants to. And Merlin, Harry does. He wants to touch Malfoy, to take him far away from whatever this is. But they can't be known by anyone to be involved, not without risking everything, and instead it's up to Parkinson to comfort Malfoy, to lean her head towards him and say something quietly that makes Malfoy give her a small snort of amusement, his face softening just enough, his posture relaxing.

With an odd well of disappointment rising up in him, Harry leans his shoulder blades against the wall, the ends of his hair catching on the rough stone. He calms his breathing, lets his limbs hang loose, a pleasant warmth still washing over his body at the memory of Malfoy bent over his prick only a quarter-hour ago. Merlin, what just happened there with Malfoy in their dormitory was bloody game-changing, wasn't it? He had no idea being blown could feel like that, so raw and so brilliantly rough. Harry'd always enjoyed it when Ginny gave him a bit of oral attention, but, to be honest, she never liked doing it for long. Not the way Malfoy had, drawing out the way he'd taken Harry into his mouth, the way his tongue had curled around Harry's prick, the way his cheeks had hollowed out as he'd sucked.

And then he'd swallowed. Bloody goddamned hell, that still sends a shudder of want through Harry's whole body.

Harry'd once come across Ginny's face, and she'd told him she found Harry's spunk unpleasant. Disgusting, even. Then tonight, well. Malfoy hadn't really seemed like he found it unpleasant. In fact, he'd been so open and enthusiastic about having his mouth around Harry's cock that Harry'd nearly come from the look on Malfoy's face as he sucked Harry off. And his hair had been so soft in Harry's fingers--Harry can still feel it. And if Harry tries, he can still picture Malfoy bobbing over his prick, feel the soft, wet heat of his mouth closing around his head, pushing down along his shaft, his teeth only just scraping across the pucker of his foreskin. It's nearly enough to make Harry half-hard again in his jeans, and yeah, he's not finding this gathering discouraging at all--if anything, it's
making him sodding randier to stand here, watching Malfoy in public whilst thinking about what they'd just done.

Harry's not entirely certain that's what Ravi had planned on.

Bulstrode comes back in with Ron and Hermione, who look a bit chagrined as they skulk in behind her. "Hey," Hermione says to Harry as they both settle against the wall next to him.

"Have fun?" Harry asks, and Hermione's face flushes a bit more. Ron, however, winks at Harry, and presses his tongue against his cheek, making the skin press outward. "Too much information, Ron," Harry says with a sigh, although he does wonder what Ron would think if Harry told him he'd come in someone's mouth too.

"Ignore him." Hermione pinches Ron's arm, sharp enough to make him yelp. Ravi looks over at them, his eyes narrowing.

"Don't even start with me, Weasley," Ravi says with a scowl, just as Luna steps through the doorway with Neville and Hannah Abbott in tow.

Luna's face is gentle, and she looks as though she's just collected friends for a regular class. "We're here for your talk, sir."

Ravi takes a breath. He looks a bit calmer, although his expression is still fierce. "Thank you, Lovegood. Granger, Weasley, Longbottom, Abbott, how nice to see you here." The sarcasm in his voice is actually an improvement over the fury, Harry thinks.

Harry tries not to laugh at how uncomfortable Ron looks, and he empathises with his best friend--Harry'd be equally clumsy and red-faced if the roles were reversed. Hermione's a bit dishevelled, her hair rumpled, most likely from Ron's hands, Harry thinks, and his gaze flicks back to Malfoy. His hair's been smoothed down at least, and Harry's both relieved and a little disappointed. He'd like Malfoy to look as if he's been at least a little debauched. Neville has leaves in his hair, and Hannah's skirt has a long smudge of dirt. Greenhouses for sure, Harry thinks. It would be funny if Ravi weren't so bloody narked off.

Ravi swishes his wand through the air, Summoning a rather large piece of paper, which he sticks to the wall beside the hearth. On it, Ravi draws a large stick figure that Harry recognises as basically human, although the proportions are definitely a bit wonky, and it looks like a four-year-old on a Gillyweed bender drew it. "Right, so." Ravi claps his hands. "Let's start from the very beginning."

"A very good place to start," Justin half-sings, and the whole room looks at him. He shifts a bit uncomfortably in his chair. "It's a Muggle thing," he mutters, and Harry glances over at the Slytherins with a bit of trepidation, but none of them blink an eye.

"Anyway," Ravi says, "it's a good idea to cast an Impervius Corporis to avoid fluid exchanges. You want the full version, not the sort of thing you use to keep your glasses dry in the rain." Ravi draws a circle around the entire figure and writes the spell name with his wand. "Please remember to take it off before you bathe - and you don't want to do this for longer than a few hours at a time. You're not an umbrella."

"So no ten-hour sex marathons," Corner quips from the sofa.

Ravi turns a steely eye on him. "You're teenagers, Michael," he says with a snort. "I rather doubt any of you have it in you to engage in that long of a sexual encounter, much less to find the time in your busy schedules or the space in a castle this crowded with younger students. Whom, by the way, you
Corner sinks back into the sofa cushions, looking a bit sulky, Harry thinks. Ravi doesn't seem to give a damn. He draws a circle around the figure's crotch area. "So. Oral sex. Here you should be using a blocked barrier spell for the one receiving any form of oral contact. I know you all know those from fourth year potions." His gaze sweeps across the room, and Harry's heart stutters for a moment when Ravi's eyes stop on him before moving on. "Use them. For the person giving, an Os Augens spell will protect you. If you're intending to engage in a sexual act that involves hand contact--" Here Ravi waves his fingers in the air. "Keep in mind that most forms of hand protection are not watertight. You'll want an Impervius here for sure, in addition to basic hygiene of handwashing before and after."

Harry thinks he might actually die here and now. He's just let Malfoy suck him off--not to mention all of the other things they'd been doing--and they hadn't used anything to protect themselves. Also, if he's honest, he always let Ginny deal with the contraceptive potions and didn't worry about anything else. The comprehensiveness with which Ravi is outlining risks and ways to diminish them is eye-opening. He glances at Malfoy, who's leaning forward, a knuckle pressed to his mouth, his gaze fixed on Ravi.

A hand shoots up. Ravi scowls. "Yes, Brocklehurst."

"How exactly can you wash your hands if you've just done an Impervius, sir?" The look on Mandy Brocklehurst's face is a bit snide, Harry thinks privately, as if she's certain she's caught Ravi out on a point, but the question's a good one. He hadn't thought that through yet.

Ravi rolls his eyes. "Common sense, Mandy. Handwashing first. Then the spell. Then handwashing after you do the counterspell." He pauses, scrawling this on a new sheet of paper and sticking it next to the stick-figure diagram. "Any--" He turns back to them, a serious look on his face. "And I do mean any form of penetration--vaginal or anal--requires a condom and a proper Impervius charm. If you find yourself in possession of a penis, permanently or temporarily, it's your job to do these spells."

Harry desperately wants to ask how one can temporarily have a penis, but he doesn't dare. The last thing he wants to do is draw attention to himself. So instead he looks over at Hermione and mouths, Temporarily?

She gives him an annoyed frown. "There are charms that will let girls have a penis if they want it, Harry," she whispers back, and Harry knows he must look confused because she sighs and adds, "I'll get you a book, oh my God."

That's not really the answer Harry wanted.

"Aren't contraceptive potions enough?" Harry doesn't see who asks the question, but he thinks it's Wayne Hopkins' voice, the tosser. Harry's never really disliked a Hufflepuff before, but he bloody well despises Hopkins. Even more so than Corner sometimes, he thinks.

"Totally unrelated." Ravi jabs his wand at the diagram. "Not to mention a stupid question that assumes everyone's engaging in heterosexual sex that could lead to pregnancy. Witches with witches and wizards with wizards don't usually have to worry about an unexpected baby nine months down the line. With condoms, you're also trying to prevent a sexually transmitted infection, Muggle or magical in origin, especially for those of you who don't confine your experimentation to the wizarding world, or whose partners don't--which is something you should probably discuss, mind, before engaging in sex." He eyes them all. "The best way to protect yourselves is with the correct spellwork as well as Muggle backup in the form of latex barriers."
After labelling the circled presumable genital and arse area on the stick figure with the proper spells, Ravi's gaze drifts over to Harry before sliding across the room towards Malfoy, almost as if he's taking in the whole of the room between them, but Harry's not entirely certain of that. It feels a bit pointed, and Harry doesn't quite like that. "As I mentioned, this is true even if conception is unlikely for age, health, or sexuality reasons. So if two wizards are having contact, or two witches, it doesn't matter—you still need barrier protection to diminish infection risk." He smiles. "Besides, none of you can conceive in your arseholes, but statistics say you're rather likely to have some sort of contact with them."

"That's disgusting," Brocklehurst says, a bit too loudly, and Harry wants to deck her when Malfoy glances her way, his face cold and vicious.

Corner raises his hand, and Ravi nods at him. "So if you know all of this, sir, then have you ever had an infection?" Harry's shocked at the impertinence of Corner's question. Judging from Corner's smug face, Harry's fairly certain it's meant rather disrespectfully, but Ravi gives Corner a thoughtful look. "Er." Ravi rubs the back of his head, then sighs. "What the hell. Yeah, actually," he admits. "Infections can happen to anyone who's having physical contact, and they can range in severity from mildly irritating to dangerous to your health and magic. You should get them checked out immediately." He turns back to the paper on the wall, scrawling a note over the figure. "This is the Floo address for Hexuality. They provide anonymous wizarding care services. You can also go to the infirmary or your Healer at home."

"We're young, though, sir," Brocklehurst protests. "How likely is it that something will happen?"

Ravi shakes his head. "That's no guarantee. It just has to happen once, and everyone's got it." He appears lost in thought for a moment, then underlines the Floo information. "It's also possible to have an infection and not know it, so if you're sexually active, you really need to see a trained healing professional for regular check-ins even if you're doing everything you can to diminish the risk of acquiring something through contact with another person's fluids and their magical field."

Harry notices that they've all grown calmer, as has Ravi, as the details have grown more specific. There are still a lot of flushed faces in the room—Malfoy's included, Harry notes, and he thinks he's got some things to talk with him about—but it's better to have the information out and on the common room wall.

Ravi glances back at the paper on the wall. "I'm going to leave this up for the remainder of the school year. Please don't deface it with anything stupid." He scrawls a few more suggestions on the figure, then places a fixing spell on the sheet. "Try to think of it as a practical diagram for any form of contact. Don't let your presuppositions get in the way--just look at the chart and say the spells."

"How do we get Muggle condoms though, sir?" The look on Vicky Frobisher's face is intent. Corner's gaze flicks over towards her. He looks a bit terrified, Harry thinks. To be honest, Harry's not certain he blames him. Vicky's always been a bit overwhelming at times.

Ravi nods slowly. "Good question. I'm going to make sure they're up here in the Eighth Year common room and I'll have a talk with McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey about making them available at the infirmary. Any other questions?" Ravi passes a hand over his tired-looking face. "Otherwise, I'm going to go to bed and so are you. Separately."

At that moment the door charm is said from the outside, and Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin, still somewhat entwined, come through the doorway. They jump apart like scalded cats at the look on Ravi's face, and everyone laughs.
"Right," Ravi says, more than a bit wearily. He points with his wand to the diagram on the wall. "Perhaps someone else can explain it to these two. I haven't it in me to deal with yet another round of teenage hormones."

When no one volunteers, Hermione stands up and repeats verbatim what Ravi had been lecturing them on for the past half-hour. Boot's face is incredulous, and Turpin's hiding behind his shoulder, but the mood in the room is still mostly friendly, if mocking.

Harry wonders what it would be like if he and Malfoy'd walked through that door instead. He strongly doubts it would be as positive, would it? He'd seen the looks on the others faces when Ravi brought up the idea of two blokes together. Isobel Macdougal had grimaced outright, and even Justin had looked a bit taken aback. Harry hadn't had the courage to glance over at Ron and Hermione. He doesn't think he could bear it, knowing how revolted they'd be by him.

The best case scenario would be that they'd think him loathsome for wanting to get off with Malfoy. The worst is that they'd hate him for wanting to get off with another bloke. That's not something Harry's ready to broach with either of them. Not yet at least.

"Awkward," Ron mutters as the group of Eighth Years starts to break apart, people drifting upstairs to their dormitories. Luna's next to the staircase, saying goodnight to Bulstrode.

"I think it was interesting." Hermione'd been taking notes, Harry realises when she tucks her tiny notebook back into the pocket of her jeans. "I mean, really, we ought to have been taught this ages ago."

"Hasn't affected our shagging, has it?" Ron stretches his arms up above his head and yawns, completely oblivious to the swathe of flat belly exposed when his jumper rides up. He groans and lets his arms fall back down. "Right, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry says, but his attention's caught by Malfoy standing up, long and lean and oh so bloody gorgeous. Harry wishes he could crawl back into Malfoy's bed, curl up around him and sleep with him. Maybe after they got off again, Harry thinks. He knows they can't risk it, but he doesn't care in a way. Malfoy'll be gone tomorrow and Harry will be here alone. That feels so much more lonely now, Harry thinks.

No touching Malfoy. No kissing him. No anything, for more than a fortnight. And when Malfoy walks past him, not even looking, heading for the stairs, and Harry can smell the crisp scent of Malfoy with the faint undercurrents of spunk still from their fooling about before, Harry can hardly bear it. He wants to follow Malfoy, to leave his friends standing here, staring after them.

Merlin, Harry thinks, he'll never be able to make it. Not when he wants Malfoy so badly even now. "Harry."

And Harry looks back over at Hermione, blinking. "Yeah?"

She's watching him, curiously, and he thinks her gaze slips back to Malfoy, but Harry can't tell. "You're certain you'll be fine here by yourself for Christmas?" She sounds more than a bit dubious.

"Of course I will." Harry tries to sound bright and cheerful, but given the way Ron and Hermione share a concerned look, he's certain he fails. "I will," Harry says again, and Hermione sighs.

The thing is, though, that Harry thinks he might be lying. Even to himself.

He lets Hermione pull him into a hug. "You know she won't care if you come back with us," she
says. "Gin's not that sort."

"I know." And he does. But still, he thinks it's best to stay here. Maybe his head'll get cleared of Malfoy, maybe this constant burning twist in his belly will settle.

Or maybe it'll cause his entire world to crumble.

Harry tries to tell himself he's prepared for anything. He bloody well knows he's not.

***

Potter's lips drag across his, almost unbearably, tantalisingly slow, and Draco's certain his jaw is scratched from Potter's light stubble. He doesn't care. "Fuck," Draco murmurs when Potter pulls away, and Potter's low laugh rumbles against Draco's chest.

They're pressed up against each other in the girls' loo above the Great Hall, the one that no one uses because of Myrtle, who, thank Merlin seems to have absented herself for the moment, the one that Potter had once attacked Draco in, scarring him for life with a well-placed Sectumsempra. Draco thinks he ought to be more offended by Potter dragging him in here of all places, but Potter's kisses are bloody distracting, and they're already ten minutes overdue to walk down to the train. Well. Draco is, at least. Potter's staying here at the castle for the hols, and, looking at Potter's mouth, at the familiar glint of his glasses, Draco wishes for a fleeting moment, his fingers tightly curled through Potter's belt-loops, that he'd asked to stay too. It's terribly disloyal, of course, to his mother, Draco thinks, and a wave of guilt crashes over him. Still, he'd stay here with Potter, if he thought it were possible, he's beyond certain of that. The thought is sobering in its intensity, but Draco doesn't quite know what it means.

"I won't write, of course," Draco says after Potter gives him another long, hard kiss that leaves him breathless. Aching. Draco hooks his thumbs into the waistband of Potter's jeans, reluctant to let him go. Potter's skin is warm against his, familiar and soft. Draco does his best to give Potter a bland look, although he doesn't want to stop kissing him. It's all he can do to not get swept away by the prat, and that unsettles him a bit. "I'm sure you don't want anyone to see you get post from a Malfoy."

Potter tilts his head, frowning as if in thought. "I'll check the Owerly myself. Besides, there's almost no one here until well after Boxing Day." He leans in, pushing Draco back up against the tiled wall. The loo's gloomy and grey, the manky tile cold against Draco's shoulders, even through his jumper. Draco doesn't mind, not as long as Potter's warming him this way. He remembers what it was like in sixth year, how he'd hidden himself away here with just Myrtle for company, how he'd cried and ranted about what the Dark Lord had demanded of him, how Potter had walked in that one afternoon, and Draco had been so humiliated that he'd angrily thrown a Cruciatus Potter's way. And now he's the one wearing the scars of that encounter, not Potter.

How times have changed, Draco thinks as his lips meet Potter's, and he opens up for another slow, delicious kiss before he reluctantly extricates himself, pushing back against Potter's chest with his hands. "I've really got to go, Potter. The damned train will leave without me." Draco's case is already loaded in with the freight for the journey, and he'd sent Quercus ahead. Still, he needs to get there immediately or he could actually miss his journey home. And as much as he wants that, he also can't afford to be so open about his desires.

A bell sounds, ringing deep within the castle, and Draco leaps to the door, flying through and stopping to look back. Potter's standing bemused, watching him, his fingers pressed against his lips. "See you later, Scarhead," Draco says with a faint smile at Potter as he stops to scoop up the cloak he'd dropped outside when Potter'd first pulled him into the loo, his wide hands already beneath the
hem of Draco's jumper. "Happy Christmas."

The next few minutes pass in a blur--Draco thinks he may beat his record time down to the Thestral carriages if he's counting. He's never, ever been this late before, and he's sure to get a ragging from Pansy and Millie and Blaise. If he doesn't miss the damn carriage, of course.

His boots make thudding sounds, first on wood, then stone, as he churns down the corridors and out into the courtyard, his grey cloak billowing behind him. He has to be careful not to turn an ankle or fall and put himself off his time. He runs without thinking, his lungs burning, his cheeks stinging from the cold. He can see the last Thestral-drawn carriage moving up ahead, and then, amazingly, it stops, and Draco swings up into it, breathing hard, colliding with Millicent's sturdy shoulder.

"That was a near thing, Draco." Millie grabs onto him, pulling him further into the carriage as it takes off at a rapid pace. He settles into the seat opposite her, next to her brother Matty who's studiously ignoring them all, his spectacled face mostly hidden behind a tattered copy of Ivanhoe. "We've been holding this one for you for at least five minutes." Mills eyes Draco as he gasps, the cold air like a knife to his chest with each ragged inhale. He coughs, and she pounds him on the back. "Catch your breath, man. You've made it."

"Hooray," Matty Bulstrode says blandly, turning another page. "So happy you did."

Draco gives him a baleful look. "Don't make me hex you, Matthew." He can barely get the words out.

Matty snorts, but he settles back against his seat.

When Draco looks around, he can't even see the other carriages--he wonders if everyone's already on the train. Draco collapses against the back of the carriage, his lungs still on fire. He's already berating himself for being so obvious, for risking something of this magnitude. The problem is, deep down, he knows he'd do it again, just for one last kiss from Potter.

Merlin, what the bloody hell is wrong with him?

"I'm so glad you're here now," Lovegood's saying from beside Mills, and if Draco weren't seeing stars, he'd think that his daft cousin and Millie are surreptitiously holding hands in front of him and Matty. Draco glances over at the younger Bulstrode, but Matty doesn't seem to be paying attention. "Blaise and Pansy have promised to make Hagrid hold the train, if need be." Draco's eyes narrow at her a bit. Since when did Lovegood start calling his best mates by their first names? It's not done, he thinks. Not at bloody all, and he starts to say so, but Millie's glowering at him from across the carriage, so his mouth snaps shut.

Right. The whole bloody world's gone tits up, really.

True to expectation, when they reach the small platform, it's empty save for the giant form of Hagrid and the Hogwarts Express. The train is already puffing with steam, and Draco thinks he'll be immensely grateful to his friends once he can breathe properly again.

"C'mon now, Malfoy, Lovegood, Bulstrodes." Hagrid's frowning at them. "Nearly thought I was going to have to send Fang out to find you, didn't I?" The enormous dog beside him barks, and Draco's fairly certain Fang's eyeing him in particular. Praco almost wants to reach out and scratch behind Fang's ears the way he does with his mother's Crups back home, but he's not entirely certain he'd come back with his hand intact. "On with you," Hagrid says as they swing out of the carriage, and with Millie and Luna at his back, Matty trailing along after them, his book still in his hand, Draco races to the last car. Hagrid almost physically pushes him into the train, stuffing Millie and
Matty in after him, and lifting Lovegood in at the last minute. The door shuts almost on Lovegood's scarf--she pulls it out of the way at the last minute, and then the train takes off, steaming through the valley.

Draco stands up using the rail, helping Millie stand up as well. Lovegood's already sprung, cat-like, to her feet. "Thank you both," Draco says, and he means it. They walk down the narrow train corridor together. Matty's wandered off in the opposite direction, either to find his friends or to torment more of the third-year girls, Draco suspects.

"This is me, I suppose." Lovegood gives Millie a shy look before claiming a seat in a mostly Gryffindor compartment--Draco can see Longbottom leaning against Hannah Abbott's shoulder, as well as Weasley and Granger across from them, Weasley trying to kiss a laughing Granger as she bats him away. Susan Bones's looking out the window, a book on her lap. Draco can see a line of love bites just beneath her jaw which he assumes are from Blaise last night, although he supposes he's not one to talk--his are just hidden by his collar. Granger's giant Kneazle is draped across her lap, well out of train regulations but for once Draco's not going to say a bloody thing. Particularly since the Kneazle seems to be trying to scratch Weasley's face each time he leans in for a kiss. Draco belatedly wonders where Quercus is.

Pansy steps out of the next to last compartment in the car, hands on her hips. "Over here, Millie. Draco." Her tone brooks no argument, and Draco exchanges a glance with Millie as they both sink into the compartment, Blaise and Tony Goldstein swivelling to look at them.

Honestly, Draco's surprised that Goldstein's in the compartment with them. Pansy shoots him a look that immediately tells him not to say a word.

"My compliments of the season," Draco says drily. He still sounds a bit breathless to his own ears. He collapses into the soft velveteen seat next to Blaise, who's gone back to his book, and Pansy takes her spot at the window, almost knee to knee with Goldstein, Millie dropping into the seat beside her. There's another seat open across from Draco, and Draco thinks about putting his feet up, although he doesn't really want to unlace his boots. He hears a soft hoot, and looking up, he realises Quercus is riding in a cage at the top, flapping his wings against the bars and biting them in irritation. He really doesn't like being trapped, not that Draco can blame him. He feels the same way, and he's half-certain he'll be walking into a gilded cage of his own once he steps back into the Manor.

Fuck it. Draco takes off his boots and steps up on the seat, balancing himself carefully with the luggage rail as he sways with the motion of the train. He comes up to almost the height of the cage, and his little owl hoots in his face, nipping at his finger affectionately when he sticks it between the bars. Draco pats his sides and finds a few owl treats in a forgotten pocket of his cloak. They're a bit stale, but Quercus falls on them greedily. "It's all right, boy," Draco murmurs. "You'll be out soon enough, and you can fly around my room all you wish. I won't let Mother tuck you away out in the owlery with that cow Antigone again. I promise."

Quercus looks at him, hooting softly. Draco rubs his finger over Quercus' small, feathered head. Quercus catches it in his beak, pinching it just enough for Draco to smile at him before he dives back to the owl treats.

When Draco sits back down, he stretches his legs out. His calf muscle is twitching and it feels brilliant to have his feet up. Pansy coughs, most significantly, and he looks over at her with a sigh. Of course he wasn't going to get away with being late like this, was he? "What?" he asks, letting his annoyance show. It doesn't faze Pansy in the slightest. Her dark, perfectly arched eyebrow just goes up, and her crimson lips curl up in a rather terrifying smile.

"Tony, darling," Pans says calmly, waving her wand to close the compartment curtains and cast a
quick Muffliato. "It truly does pain me to threaten them, but I'm going to hex your bits off if you repeat anything that gets said after this. Understood?"

"Shame." Goldstein smirks at her, spreading his knees just a bit wider, and really, sometimes Draco despairs of other boys. "I thought you rather liked my bits."

"Far too much information," Blaise says, sounding bored. He turns another page.

"Hear, hear," Millie chimes in.

Pansy holds up a hand for silence, and Draco knows he's done for. She turns that sharp gaze of hers onto him. "Draco Lucius Malfoy, where were you just now, and why does your neck look like it's been attacked by doxies?"

"Common room sofa?" Draco says, adjusting his gaping collar and retying his Slytherin scarf. Damn that last dash for the train. He hopes the lie passes even though it's rather inadequate as untruths go. "I fell asleep."

Blaise shakes his head, closing his book, his finger marking his spot. "I'm sorry, old man. We were all in the common room until it was time to go. So you're going to have to work harder than that."

Draco shrugs and settles back in his seat, determined to take the stubborn route. With any luck they'll give up soon enough. His gaze flicks towards Goldstein, who's watching curiously. Poor bastard. Well, at least he'll have a glimpse of what he's in for if he keeps on with Pans. "I don't know what to say." He actually doesn't, but he'll be damned if he's giving up Potter. Draco suspects they might already know—or have guessed, at least—but he's bloody well going to make them work for any information.

"You've been seeing a lot of Potter, haven't you?" Pansy's smile is sweet, but her voice is laced with acid. "Perhaps it's given you the chance to grow close."

"Please," Draco says scornfully. "As if I would touch that with someone else's." Privately, he'd fucking kill Potter right now if Potter touched someone else's with anything, but no one needs to know that.

Still, Goldstein gives Draco a long, measured look, one that Draco isn't certain he likes. They've shared a dormitory together for the past nearly four months; Draco doesn't mind Goldstein terribly, he has to admit, but he also suspects Goldstein sees more than he admits to, a trait he shares with Pansy, Draco's afraid."

Pansy frowns at him. "Draco."

And, for some reason, that irks Draco. "We've been tutoring, for fuck's sake. The Gryffindor git is ridiculous at potionbrewing. You've all seen the evidence in class." Draco flaps his hands and acts mortally offended at the suggestion he'd go anywhere near Potter and that brilliant prick of his. He hopes it will keep them from pressing him. He scowls at Pansy. "I can't believe you'd think that of me. Honestly."

It seems to work, but only because they don't want him to throw a strop this close to the start of the journey home. If he's honest, Draco's rather proud that his strops are legendary.

"Draco shouldn't have to say, if he's not comfortable," Millie says. She settles into her seat. Draco could bloody lean over and kiss her, if he didn't think she'd deck him for it. Instead he settles for giving her a small smile. Millie just eyes him, but then she winks, almost too quickly for him to catch it.
Pansy looks over at Millie, her mouth pursed. "Anything you'd like to tell us about you and Lovegood, and your attempts at inter-house cooperation?" She sounds a bit annoyed.

"No. Not at the moment," Millie counters, her voice level. She meets Pansy's curious stare, and Draco envies her courage. "I'm afraid you and Goldstein are our representatives right now." Her gaze flicks over to Blaise, who's reading again. "And maybe Blaise and--"

"Stop." Blaise doesn't even look up from his book; he just raises a finger. "We're not going there right now. It was a fumble in the airing cupboard--" Draco snorts at sheer audacity of calling Bones' love bites that, and Blaise gives him a sharp glare over the top of his book. "Should we go back to your sudden interest in tutoring Gryffindor arseholes, Draco?"

Draco sinks back into his seat, waves his hand at them all. "Carry on. I'm tired."

"I'm certain you are," Pansy says, a bit tartly from her corner, but she falls silent when Goldstein presses his knee against hers. Interesting, Draco thinks. Perhaps Goldstein's useful after all.

Draco fakes falling asleep to avoid further questions. To his surprise, it works rather better than he planned. He really is tired from last night, he realises, and he starts to doze off. As he's coasting between waking and sleeping, the train rocking him gently from side to side and Blaise warm and familiar next to him, Draco thinks about Potter and the castle and how mad everything is. He hopes Potter's not too lonely, and he envies him. He'd take Hogwarts over Malfoy Manor any day, particularly now that the Ministry have invaded, taking inventory even now of the potential Dark items his father tucked away, and his mother's ghosting about like the proverbial madwoman in the attic.

He'll deal with that when he has to, Draco thinks. He has a few precious moments to rest before then, and his friends are watching over him. A pang goes through him at the realisation that it'll be more than a fortnight before he sees Potter again.

Fuck, I'm going to bloody miss the prat, is his last conscious thought.

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Christmas dinner's a quiet affair at Hogwarts. It's mostly just Harry and McGonagall and a few other staff. Flitwick's down at the end of the shortened high table, along with Professor Skeat, talking about some paper of Skeat's that's just been accepted for publication. It's so bloody boring that Harry can barely stand to hear them drone on about it, although he's certain that Malfoy'd be thrilled and have a million questions. Some days Harry thinks he's swottier than Hermione.

Hagrid nudges Harry's arm. "Eat up, lad, or don't you like your roast goose?"

To be honest, Harry's never been a fan, even after all the years he's had to eat it here alone. He misses the Burrow, misses the smell of Molly's cooking, the warmth of the fire, the laughter of all the Weasleys piled in together.

Although there might not be a lot of that this year. Not with it being the first Christmas without Fred. Harry'd sent an owl from the Hogwarts owlery this morning with a small bag of gifts he'd ordered for them all, including one for Gin. It felt weird not to include her, he thinks. They've been friends for so long, that it doesn't matter if they've broken up. Not in his mind at least. It'll probably mean that he'll have to put up with Ron being hopeful they'll get back together, but Harry still loves Ginny in his own way, still misses having her around, gently teasing him, and the last thing he wants is her to feel as if he wants to cut her out of his life, forget they were ever together.
He'd thought about sending an owl to Malfoy, but held back. For now at least. He doesn't want to seem desperate or anything, and it's only been a few days he's been here on his own. Harry's bored and lonely already, by himself in the Eighth Year dormitory. When he's not wanking, he's wandering the grounds with Fluffy and Fang at his heels, Hagrid bellowing at the three of them to be careful near the frozen lake.

"I'm not that hungry," Harry says to Hagrid now. He's eaten most of his plate, and now he's just dragging the tines of his fork through the remnants, wondering how long it'll be before it's seemly for him to dash off, away from the rest of the table. It's strange to be here again with his professors; it hadn't bothered him that much when he was younger, mainly because he hadn't known anything else, really.

And then his attention's caught by a tiny brown owl that swoops through the doors of the Great Hall, its small wings beating rapidly to hold it up with a package nearly as big as it tied to its leg.

"That's Malfoy's Quercus, yeah?" Hagrid says loudly, just as the owl lands in front of Harry with a thud and a soft skitter of wings and claws against the table. The poor thing's huffing and panting, feathers ruffling as Harry strokes a finger across Quercus' head.

Harry feels as if the whole table's watching him as he unties the package, letting Quercus flop over against his water glass. "Good job, boy," Harry says, and Quercus hoots at him, sounding rather bloody pleased with himself, Harry thinks. A house-elf appears out of nowhere, owl treats in one hand and a bowl of water in the other. He sets them down in front of Quercus, who hops over, dipping half his face in the bowl at once before grabbing an owl treat and scarfing it down.

The package is small but solid, and when Harry shakes it, there's a soft rattle of sorts from deep inside. He wonders if he should unwrap it here, the way the others are watching him.

"A present from Mr Malfoy?" McGonagall asks, one of her thin grey eyebrows going up over the wire rims of her oval spectacles. "Your tutoring sessions must be going well."


"Open it up and let's see." Hagrid claps Harry on the back with one large hand. Harry doesn't want to, but the rest of the table's watching him expectantly, with far more interest than Harry thinks a package from Malfoy warrants. He narrows his eyes at them; at least Flitwick has the grace to look away.

Harry sighs. "Fine," he mumbles, and he hopes to Circe that Malfoy's not put anything incriminating in the package. He unwraps the brown paper carefully, slowly, breathing out when he sees a tin of chocolates and a worn, scuffed children's book. He flips it over, smoothing out the cover. Hesper Starkey's First Book of Potions for Inquisitive Young Minds, he reads out, frowning down at it.

"Oh, how lovely," Skeat says from his end of the table. "Such a brilliant introduction to potioneering for youngsters."

Harry thinks it best not to point out he's not a bloody youngster any longer. Instead, he pulls a small envelope from the flap of the book jacket where it's sticking out, bright blue against the faded red of the book. He opens it up, unfolds the parchment inside.

Potter,
I know I said I wouldn't write, but I think we both know that I'm a terrible liar. Things are difficult here, but I suppose they could be worse, so I might as well write and see how dull things are at Hogwarts now. I'm hoping I've timed this so it'll reach you alone; however, Quercus is still an owl-in-training, so I've no bloody clue if he'll actually manage it. If not, scold him for me—or don't, actually, because he's a lovely boy who's trying so very hard, and really, we all know those are your weakness, don't we?

Really, Harry has to snort a laugh at that. He misses Malfoy's tart tongue right now. In more than one way.

The sweets are traditional at this time of year, I suppose. Mother always tucks a tin or two in my stocking, but I managed to coax one out of the house elves early this year so I could send it to you. They're Belgian, and far higher quality than that rubbish you like to buy from Honeydukes. The book, well, that's a different matter. I suspect you'll think I'm mocking you, and perhaps I am, in a way, but it was my first potions book, given to me by Severus on my seventh Christmas, and it's what made me learn to love the art of potionbrewing. I'm hoping perhaps some of that love can be passed along to you.

Happy Christmas, Potter. Do know I'm thinking of you.

DM

P.S. Don't eat all the chocolates at once—you'll end up with a wretched stomachache. Just a bit of wisdom from my thirteen-year-old self to you.

Harry looks up to see the others watching him. His smile fades away; he folds the note up and tucks it into the pocket of his jeans. He thinks Skeat almost looks disappointed for some odd reason.

McGonagall reaches for her nearly empty wine glass. "I hope Mr Malfoy's doing well," she says, and Harry thinks she sees far more than he'd like her to.

"Brilliantly," Harry says, and he slides his chair back from the table. "I should probably make certain Quercus has a nap in the owlery before he heads back home." He holds his hand out to the owl; Quercus hesitates, then hops onto it, his small talons gripping Harry's fingers more painfully than Harry expected. He winces, and Quercus just hoots, tilting his head.

"Do send Malfoy our best," Skeat calls out, and Harry's shoulders hunch a bit, a rush of embarrassment going through him. He wonders for a moment how much the professors know, but then he looks at Hagrid, sat calmly eating the last of his Christmas pudding, and Harry thinks he's being bloody mental. If Hagrid even suspected Harry was fooling around with Malfoy, he'd have Harry pulled into his hut in a heartbeat, lecturing him.

Harry picks up the chocolates and the book, tucking them under his free arm. "Happy Christmas," he says to the table at large, and he escapes as best he can, with McGonagall still watching him thoughtfully.

They're all bloody odd, Harry thinks as his boots echo in the silence of the entrance hall. It's this bloody castle, he thinks. It does it to you. He shivers, looks around. He still isn't entirely settled here, still has moments when he sees curse burns on the wall, bits of stonework that's yet to be repaired, and he thinks of that night, of the battle raging around him. It's better now than it was in September, he supposes, but part of that, he thinks, is that Malfoy's been a distraction, taking him away from all those memories.

It's been harder to fight them away the past few days. There'd been a moment in the third floor
corridor yesterday when Harry'd been half-certain he'd seen Tonks running towards him, and then he'd blinked and she was gone. It'd left him uneasy and unsettled, and there's part of him that wonders if maybe he'd have been better in Grimmauld Place for the fortnight.

But at least here he's not entirely alone. He has Hagrid and the other staff to talk to, and the house elves never mind if he goes down to the kitchen to sit with them for a while in its warmth, eating whatever they put in front of him. And the ghosts have been checking in on him, even the Bloody Baron, although he's a tendency to show up right when Harry's stepping out of the shower for some reason. Half of Harry thinks he's a bloody pervert, the other half thinks that the Baron just likes giving him a fucking fright.

Quercus hoots softly from Harry's hand, and Harry glances down at him. "I wish you could tell him I miss him," Harry says, and for a moment he almost thinks Quercus understands. And then the owl ruffles his wings, turning his head to preen beneath the feathers, and Harry wants to laugh, a bit ruefully, at how foolish he's being, talking to an owl about Malfoy.

And what does it say about him, Harry wonders, that his first thought isn't of Ron or Hermione or any of his friends, but of Malfoy, wishing the prat were here with him right now?

"Maybe I'll write him a note," Harry says to Quercus. "It's only polite, isn't it?"

The air is cold and crisp and snowy when Harry pushes open the castle door and steps out onto the Hogwarts grounds. Still, each step that takes him closer to the owlery lightens his heart, makes him feel warmer deep inside, oddly happier.

He doesn't really want to think about what that might mean.
Chapter 7

We've been meteoric, even before this,
Burns half as long when it's twice as bright.
So if it's beyond us, then it's beyond us,
Let's see and decide.
--Stargazing, Kygo

Harry's back is bloody frigid from waiting in the corner of the entrance hall, near the door. He's lurking in the shadows, trying not to rustle the suit of armour. He used to fit more easily here when he was younger; it'd been one of his favourite hiding places back when he was a second-year, and, ironically enough, Malfoy and his lot were trying to torment him. Now, his shoulders are broad enough that it's a tighter squeeze into the narrow stone niche channel, and he's not exactly hiding from Malfoy any longer, is he? Harry shifts, rolls his stiff shoulders forward. Perhaps this was a shit idea, he thinks, but he's been feeling antsy and anxious for the past few days, and he's ready to see Malfoy, to press his body up against his, to let that slow easiness that always comes after an encounter with Malfoy seep through him, settling him.

The Hogwarts Express ought to have arrived twenty minutes ago according to Hagrid, which means the rush of students up from Hogsmeade should be here at any moment. There's a nervousness in the pit of his stomach that has nothing to do with other students coming back--to be honest, it'd been a bit nice in a way to have the quiet the past weeks, to have the chance to make a bit of peace with the castle whilst he was alone, and when the walls around him had started to feel too close, when the memories had scratched a bit too deep into the shadows of Harry's mind, Harry'd gone out flying in the cold above the snowy Quidditch pitch. It'd cleared his head a bit, calmed him down almost as well as Malfoy's body pressed against his does.

Still, Harry's looking forward to seeing Malfoy's fall of pale hair, that twist of a smirk, the jut of a pointy chin, the long stretch of a narrow waist. There's a part of Harry that's terrified something will have changed, that Malfoy won't want him anymore, that Harry will have dreamed all of this amazing, wonderful, maddening tension between them.

That they'll go back to the way they were before, angry and bitter and filled with hate.

Harry doesn't know what he'd do if that happened. Malfoy's taken over his thoughts--fuck, his life lately, if Harry's honest with himself. This past fortnight he's missed sitting with the bastard in the group room in the library, pouring over Potions notes, or sparring with him in the Defence classroom, watching Malfoy's ability to counter Harry's offensive spells grow stronger. He missed kissing Malfoy, feeling Malfoy's body curve into his, the flat plane of Malfoy's chest firm against Harry's own.

It feels strange at times to realise he's into blokes. For a while Harry'd been certain he was just into Malfoy, but he's starting to notice other men around him, the way their bodies move, the way their muscles shift beneath their clothes. Even portraits and drawings in books are catching Harry's attention in ways they never had before. Harry doesn't quite know what to do with this new knowledge. It unsettles him, makes his shoulders tense a bit, so he tucks it away as much as he can. He still wants to be normal, still wants a family, kids. He can't see how this part of him fits into that, how it ever could really, but he's trying to just let it be. For now at least. And what he and Malfoy have--well. It's just messing about, yeah? Two blokes getting off with each other and enjoying each other's pricks. There doesn't have to be anything else to it, not like the expectations of dating a girl. Of dating Gin, his mind whispers, because Harry knows it'd been different with her than it had been
with Cho or Sus. Everyone had thought he and Ginny would be together forever.

Shows how wrong they'd all been, really.

Harry checks his watch reflexively, the one Molly'd given him last year. Any time now, they should start walking through the door. If he's unlucky, Peeves could find him here, he supposes. Or perhaps Mrs Norris, although she's been ailing of late, and Filch's been bringing her to Hagrid for strength potions whilst carrying her around on a moth-eaten velvet pillow, cooing over her whenever her tail twitches. Harry rubs his palms on his jeans, bounces a little on the balls of his feet. He breathes out. It's just Malfoy, he thinks. He's no bloody reason to have this many fluttery feelings twisting around in his stomach.

And then, with a slam that makes Harry jump in his hiding place, the doors open and the students start pouring through, a chaotic stream of noise and energy and light. Suddenly there are voices echoing off the just-silent stone walls, feet pounding across the floors, shouts and laughter that fill the air. It's a familiar chaos that immediately makes Harry forget the castle was ever empty. He sees some Eighth Years among the streaming crowds, Neville and Hannah first, arm in arm, then Ron and Hermione following them, Ginny on Hermione's other side, laughing at something she's just said. Harry wants to go to them. He'd firecalled a lot with Ron over hols, sitting cross-legged on the hearth in the Eighth Year common room, and it'd been good to play chess by Floo, even though Harry always lost. But it'd been worth it just to see Ron, to talk to him, to know everything was okay, even if it was hard at Christmas with Fred's chair empty. Sometimes Harry wonders if he ought to have gone to the Burrow, but Ron'd said it'd been all right, that maybe it'd been best for Harry not to be there. For Gin's sake at least.

Harry knows he hurt her, knows that things aren't ever going to be quite the same between them. But maybe he doesn't want them to be either, he thinks, as Justin Finch-Fletchley calls Ginny's name, and she turns around, her face lighting up as he catches up with her, bumping her shoulder with his the way Harry used to do.

But that's only a slight sting, Harry realises. He's glad for them, really. Gin's brilliant, and she deserves someone who's going to be there the way she needs him to. Harry's not certain he could have ever been that bloke. There's too much inside of him, things he can't really let go of yet. Maybe he will. Someday.

Harry's heart leaps when he sees Parkinson and Zabini, and then, yes. There he is, trailing after them, a few steps behind. His hair is longer and he's even more beautiful than Harry remembered, ethereal even. Malfoy's messing about with the latches on his satchel and stops almost even with the alcove as his friends go on, not even noticing in the crush of students that he's no longer on their heels. Harry really didn't have a plan past this point, so he figures this is the best chance he'll get.

"Oi, Malfoy," Harry says, trying to keep his voice low but still intelligible. Malfoy's head pops up, following the sound, a bit alarmed as he looks about.

When Malfoy sees Harry, he immediately glances back over his shoulder, apparently looking for his friends, then back at Harry with a frown. "Are you stuck?"

"No." Harry's practically giddy with happiness, his limbs loose and his blood singing. "Meet me at the second floor alcove?" There's another suit of armour with a deeper niche beside it up near the library. He and Malfoy'd met there more than once before everyone'd gone home for hols, and it's just the right size for both of them to squeeze into. And it heats up well with a warming charm, but they often hadn't needed one, pressed against each other the way they like to be.

"Now?" Malfoy's talking out of the corner of his mouth, bent over his satchel and trying not to look
"Possibly." Harry bites back what springs to mind, which is barmy for you, perhaps. He doesn't think they're ready for that particular admission yet. Harry's not even come to terms with any of it himself.

Malfoy tosses his head in annoyance, his blond hair swinging out of his face. "Fine. Five minutes."

He strides off, his cloak swirling around him, and Harry watches him go, a shivery warmth coursing through his hips. It's finally time. They're back. It's okay. Harry's going to be touching Malfoy in a few, short minutes, and he can hardly wait. The seconds seem like forever, as he watches Malfoy disappear down the hall. Harry slips out of the alcove, and goes up the opposite way. He's trying not to run, hoping he doesn't encounter anyone.

Which, of course, he does.

Just after Harry's cleared the second staircase up to the library level, Omolade turns the corner, her arms laden down with books and a travelling satchel. "Mr Potter," she says, rather cheerfully, and Harry can't just stride past, as much as he wants to. "You're in a hurry."

"Professor," Harry says, slowing enough to let her catch up to him. Merlin but he hopes they're not going the same way.

Fuck, but they are.

Omolade glances over at him. "Did you have a good hols?" Her plaits are twisted up high on her head tonight; a few of them have caught snow in them.

Harry nods, then shrugs, his hands shoved in his pockets. "It was quiet around here, but it wasn't awful. You?"

"Trapped in my mum's London townhouse with my two sisters and their families," Omolade says with a grimace. "I managed through Boxing Day and then Ravi rescued me and took me to Ibiza. I loathe it in the summer when the masses are about, but it's lovely off-season, when you're sat on the beach in a jumper with a rummy drink in hand." She looks over at Harry. "Not that you ever heard me say that."

Harry laughs. "I'll forget it immediately."

"Good lad." Omolade shifts her books to one hip. When Harry offers to help, she shakes her head. "I'm fine. I ought to have gone to my quarters in the dungeons first, but I wanted to drop these off in my office before I forgot." She looks over at Harry. "Have you been practicing those exercises I gave you before we left?"

"Every day." Well, mostly, Harry thinks. He's forgotten from time to time, but that's not the worst thing, is it? They're boring exercises, in his opinion, mostly structured breathing to help him learn to keep calm, and slow, careful movements of his body to simulate spellcasting whilst he does his best to focus his magic on a fixed object. Still, he supposes they've helped somewhat. Harry does feel a bit more settled after he's done them, but then flying and rutting up against Malfoy have basically the same effect.

Omolade's eyeing him a bit suspiciously. "Really."

Harry rubs the back of his neck. "Almost every day?"
"More like it." Omolade's mouth quirks up at the corners. "You're a teenage boy, Mr Potter, and those exercises are hard enough for me to do, and I'm trained in them. As long as you're practising fairly consistently, then I'm happy. Understood?"

"Completely." Harry wraps his arms around his chest. They're close to the alcove Malfoy's supposed to be meeting him in. The last thing he wants is Professor Omolade catching sight of him in the shadows.

He breathes a sigh of relief when Omolade stops beside another staircase on the other side of the library doors. "Come by and see me tomorrow," she says. "I'd like to discuss where you are with this issue with your spellcasting, all right?"

"I've time after lunch," Harry says, "but nothing else until the end of day."

Omolade frowns. "Best make it after school then. I'll be in my office."

Harry nods, and she takes the staircase up to the Defence classroom. Harry waits until she turns on the landing, her steps echoing in the stone stairwell, and then he hurries on down the hallway as quickly as he can.

When he reaches the armour, Malfoy's there already, looking bored. "You're late," Malfoy says, sounding a bit put out.

"Caught by Omolade." Harry slips in beside him immediately. "Reckoned you wouldn't want me to bring her down here with me, yeah?" He presses Malfoy against the blind angle of the little stone alcove, crowding him into the wall, breathing in the familiar, delicious scent of Malfoy along the curve of his neck, then sliding in for a kiss.

"You're incorrigible," Malfoy says, then he wraps his arms around Harry's shoulders, sinks his teeth into Harry's lower lip.

Harry kisses him harder, their bodies slotting together, Malfoy just a little taller than Harry, leaning back into the wall, his hips canted forward just enough to press into Harry's. Harry slides one hand down to Malfoy's lower back; with the other he cups Malfoy's jaw. And oh, it's perfect, isn't it? That faint anxious buzzing in the back of his head settles the moment Harry touches Malfoy. This feels right somehow, and Harry doesn't want to question it. Here, with Malfoy, all Harry's worries slip away. It's just the two of them, and whatever tension Harry's carrying with him fades away, like shadows hiding from warm sunlight.

"Merlin, Potter," Malfoy says against Harry's lips, and he opens his mouth, making that soft, little gasp that always goes straight to Harry's prick, and Harry shifts a little, leaning into the kiss, his tongue gently sliding between Malfoy's lips. Malfoy rocks his hips against Harry, the hard lengths of their pricks meeting through fabric.

"Fuck, I've missed how you taste," Harry says into Malfoy's hair. "How you smell." He pulls back a bit, looks at Malfoy's swollen lips. "I wanked myself bloody raw thinking about you, you do realise, yeah?"

Malfoy strokes Harry's cheek with long, warm fingers. "Flattery will get you everywhere," he says with a faint smile that fades as Harry studies him. "I didn't have the easiest fucking hols."

"Your mum?" Harry knows Malfoy'd been worried about her, being alone in the Manor by herself for so long.

"It was difficult not having Father there," Malfoy admits after a moment. "Mother misses him; the
only other time they've ever been separated this long was after fifth year."

The last time Malfoy's dad had been in Azkaban, Harry thinks, but he knows better than to say it out loud. He feels a bit uncomfortable, if he's honest. Lucius Malfoy deserved Azkaban. Probably more, really, given how involved he'd been in Voldemort's plans. But he's Malfoy's dad still, and Harry doesn't want to point any of that out. Not with how warm and trembly being pressed against Malfoy feels right now. So instead, he leans his forehead against Malfoy's and says, "I'm sorry."

"You're not," Malfoy says with a snort. "You loathe my father."

Harry shrugs. "Your mum kept me alive."

Malfoy's silent for a moment, then he says, "But only because of me. If I hadn't still been in the castle..." He trails off, his lip caught between his teeth, and Harry realises how complicated things are between him and Malfoy, how much history stretches across the gulf of their lives. Then Malfoy sighs and looks over at Harry. "You were one of the only bright spots over Christmas. Your owls, I mean."

"Well, someone had to keep you informed about all the exciting Hogwarts news, like the spiderwebs expanding in Justin's bed." Harry gives Malfoy a wry smile.

"Pity it wasn't Weasley's," Malfoy says, a regretful tone in his voice. "I'd rather have liked to hear about that tonight. Blaise would have been quite poetic in sharing the tale."

"Git." Harry's hands settle on Draco's hips, then he says, feeling oddly shy, "I'm so glad you're back. Quercus is great, but he's no replacement for you."

Malfoy eyes Harry. "I think you're taking the piss. What else did you do beside wank and harass my owl?" Malfoy's smile makes Harry's stomach swoop like a Wronski Feint.

"Well," Harry says thoughtfully, "there were some Shrivelfigs someone insisted I had to harvest." He grins. "But I forgot, of course because I'm a--what did your owl call me? 'A sodding thick prat who'd better write these instructions on his hand so he doesn't bloody well forget to do them properly'."

At Malfoy's wide-eyed scowl, Harry can't help but laugh. "Stop worrying," Harry says. "They're all taken care of. Even I can manage to snip them from the vine and dry them. I left them in the potions storeroom for you."

"Arsehole." Malfoy pretends to shove Harry off, which only makes Harry lean into him more, and they end up wrestling a bit, until Harry pins Malfoy's wrists above his head, and Malfoy rubs against him in retaliation. Harry drops Malfoy's wrists and pulls him close, kissing him, his hands sliding around to flatten against Malfoy's back.

"Fuck, you feel amazing." Harry's not really able to form words when he's touching Malfoy. He slides a hand under Malfoy's waistband and Malfoy's skin is so soft. Harry's intoxicated by everything about being with him. "I wish it were bedtime already. I'd crawl up in there with you--"

"We're going to miss dinner, you prat." Malfoy's mouth's still moving against Harry's after he speaks, his breath coming in little pants along with the soft kisses. "Someone will notice we're not there."

"Don't care." Harry pulls Malfoy closer, not wanting to let him go. "Tell me more about what you did at home. Did you read all of the alchemy books you ordered?"

"Yes." Malfoy's hips shift up against Harry's. "No hands in my trousers, Potter. Merlin, is it me or
are you terribly randy tonight?" He shivers up against Harry.

"It's just you." Harry lets his mouth drift down Malfoy's neck in a series of softly sucking kisses. "Did you find anything else useful for your shrinking solutions?" He turns his head, catches Malfoy's lips with his.

Malfoy doesn't answer, but Harry supposes it's a bit hard with Harry's tongue in his mouth. And then Malfoy's pulling away, much to Harry's protests. "Quiet," Malfoy says, a finger against Harry's lips. Harry nips at the tip, and Malfoy frowns. "Careful, Potter, or you'll convince me not to do this."

"What," Harry starts to say, and then Malfoy's sliding down to his knees, and his hands are fumbling with the zip of Harry's jeans, and Harry sweats beneath his breath as Malfoy pulls his prick out. Malfoy smiles at him, tongue flicking across the underside of Harry's swelling shaft, his fingers pulling back Harry's soft foreskin.

Malfoy runs his hand along his own throat, and he murmurs the barrier spells Ravi had taught them at end of term, the ones that protect against disease, and fuck, but Harry's never seen anything so fucking hot before.

At least until Malfoy sucks the head of Harry's cock into his mouth. Harry slams a hand against the wall behind him, scrabbling for purchase as he watches Malfoy take him deeper into his mouth, grey eyes looking up at Harry, pale blond hair falling over one cheek.

"Fuck," Harry whispers, and he slides his other hand along the back of Malfoy's head, holding Malfoy still as he pushes his hips forward, the head of his prick pressing into Malfoy's cheek. Malfoy's hair is soft, tangled around Harry's fingers, and he opens his mouth wider, his eyes fixed on Harry's face. Harry rocks his hips towards Malfoy once more, and Malfoy groans around Harry's cock, his fingers sliding into Harry's y-fronts, curling around Harry's bollocks.

God, but Harry's been thinking of this all hols, of the way Malfoy's mouth looked stretched around Harry's prick, and now it's all Harry can do not to shove forward, to knock Malfoy's head against the suit of armour behind him, to fuck his thick cock into Malfoy's face, making him swallow Harry deeper, fuller--fuck.

Harry's gasping now, and he can't stop himself from moving, from pushing past Malfoy's lips. Malfoy looks so fucking gorgeous like this, on his knees for Harry, and Harry knows he can't last much longer, knows that he needs to spill into Malfoy's mouth, down his throat, to see his spunk seeping out from between Malfoy's lips, hot and slick, and goddamn, Harry's whole body feels as if it's on fire and he needs Malfoy, wants Malfoy, and he's shaking, his fingers tight in Malfoy's hair, his stomach flexing, trembling, and then Harry's coming with a sharp cry, his body bent over Malfoy's head, his hand sliding down to grip Malfoy's shoulder as hard as he can.

Afterwards, the only sound in the alcove is Harry's ragged breath, then the soft suck of Harry's prick sliding out from between Malfoy's lips. Harry reaches for Malfoy, pulls him up, presses him against the wall, kissing him. Harry can taste himself on Malfoy's lips, and it's bitter and sharp and just a bit sour.

"Bloody hell," Harry says against Malfoy's mouth, and Malfoy just laughs, sounding pleased with himself as he drags Harry's hand to the swell in his trousers.

"My turn," Malfoy says, and Harry's pressing his palm against Malfoy's prick, feeling it hard and hot and perfect through the thin wool of Malfoy's trousers. Harry wants to laugh, wants to throw his head back, to kiss Malfoy bloody senseless as he pulls him off.
In the Three Broomsticks, Draco's intentionally facing away from Potter, who's somewhere behind him, against the wall, second table from the door, drinking Butterbeer with Granger, Weasley, and Lovegood. Draco and Potter had originally planned to spend some time in the castle whilst everyone was away in Hogsmeade this afternoon, but then Pansy'd asked Draco to go with her and Blaise and Millie to Hogsmeade, and when he'd been reluctant, she'd made a few pointed comments about his flagging house loyalties and whether he didn't see Potter far more frequently for tutoring than he spent time with them. And really, yeah, she's not wrong, although tutoring's obviously not always what he and Potter are doing. Still, Draco can't lie well to Pansy; he never could. She's always able to see past his bollocks. It's one of the firm foundations of their friendship, and probably the one thing that helped them get past the awkwardness of fooling around together in fifth and sixth years. However, in Draco's current situation, it's more of a liability. So Draco'd agreed to go with them, and now here he's sat, trying avoid looking at Potter but failing more often than he'd like. Potter looks bloody brilliant, slouched in his chair, shoulders against the wall, laughing at something idiotic Weasley's said, and Draco wishes he could drag him into the corner for a quick kiss.

Instead Draco turns back to his friends. He's watching Pans and Mills talk, smiling over his Butterbeer when it seems appropriate. And it's his father's bloody smile on his face, he thinks, the charming, social one. The reality of that unsettles Draco, makes him viciously uneasy. He knows he came very close to becoming his father. If he's honest, he's not sure what went wrong--he certainly did his best to succeed, to be the son in Lucius Malfoy's image that his father so desperately wanted. But first there was Potter and the War, and now there's Potter and the aftermath, and, well, Draco's doesn't really know who he is any longer. Not entirely. When Draco looks up, Blaise is watching him, a faint frown on his face. Blaise looks away, shakes his head and quaffs the last of his butterbeer when Draco quirks an eyebrow at him.

"They're actually talking about keeping this purple and grey shite?" Millie stretches out the cuff of her Eighth Year jumper for emphasis, scowling down at the thin stripes near the edge. "I'm certain they're not going to force new colours on all the houses."

Pansy nods, leans her elbows on the table. She's been a little heavy-handed with the black eyeliner today, but it oddly looks good on her, Draco thinks, even if Idgie Parkinson would be horrified. "There've been some rumours about starting with Slytherin. Mother said that her old Hogwarts friend, Agatha Whipple--you know, Mira's mother from a few years back? Aggie's a Ravenclaw and quite well connected through her family to the new Hogwarts board. She says they're talking about changing the house identity, trying to break the connection between Slytherin and the families involved in…" Her gaze slides over to Draco and she clears her throat. "Well, you know. Mother thinks it's rubbish, but Agatha does know things."

"Astoria says her mother's been hearing the same." Millie shakes her head, looking disgusted. "Matty told me over hols that the little ones are terrified about it. Honestly, they can take away our silver and green, but we're not going to stop being Slytherin."

"Hiss, hiss," they all mouth in unison, quiet now here, in public. They've learned to be more careful over this school year, but care is what Slytherins do best, after all.

"Well, I imagine there will be quite a market in unspellable silver and green if they try." Blaise sets his butterbeer down, runs a hand over his close-cropped hair. "Perhaps we should start a trend in
Eighth Year. Is there something we could do to show Slytherin pride? Cravats perhaps?"

"Blaise, everyone but you would look ridiculous in a cravat." Draco rolls his eyes. Blaise is always better dressed than any of them, and he knows it, too. Still, it's not an awful idea. "Badges, perhaps," he says thoughtfully.

Pansy licks a froth of butterbeer from the corner of her mouth. "I don't know. I think Millie would look quite striking in a cravat."

Blaise tilts his head, pondering Millie from across the table. "Agreed. She's got the bone structure for it."

Millie frowns back at him, unmoved. "Fuck you both," she says easily. She finishes the last of her butterbeer, setting the heavy glass down on the cardboard beer mat on the worn wooden surface. The dragon from Guinever Gwyll's Enchanted Cider leers up at them. "I've an announcement, by the way. When you're finished with fashion."

They all eye her speculatively. Millie's usually the quiet one of them all. Announcements aren't her forte. Draco props his chin on his fist. "How exciting," he says, eyebrows going up. "Do share."

"Wanker," Millie says with a small smile that Draco returns. She takes a deep breath, regards them levelly. "I'm dating Luna Lovegood now, and I'm tired of being secretive about it."

Oh, Draco thinks. That's not what he'd been expecting.

Blaise looks over at her. "Has Matty figured it out then?"

"Weeks ago." Millie wipes her palms across her trousers. Her dark curls tumble into her face as she glances down at the empty butterbeer glass in front of her. "He likes Luna, and she's the only person I've met who's been able to settle him down when he's being a giant tosser, so I suppose that's good."

They all exchange a look. That's practically a miracle, Draco thinks.

Millie clears her throat. "Although I'd be grateful if you'd not tell anyone who might tell my mother. Just until I figure things out a bit." Millie picks at the edge of the cardboard mat. "She was a right terror over hols, going on and on about suitable marriage choices in our year. Even Matty thought she was over the top, and you know what a bastard he can be when Mummy's going after me." She looks up at them. "We're barely eighteen, most of us. It's far too soon for that."

Draco'd thought there was something between Mills and Lovegood, but he couldn't be sure. Also, he's not sure how Millie's identifying these days, and if this changes that. Most of all, though, he admires her courage. He tries not to let his eyes flick over to Potter, and if he can't help it and he catches Potter looking back, well, Draco coughs and tries to focus on his friends. Luckily, Lovegood's sitting right next to Potter, so it almost looks like he was looking at her. Almost.

"Does this change what you said about considering yourself asexual?" Pansy treads carefully, as they all do when trying to understand Millie's self-identification. She'd first shared this last year, tucked away in the corner of the Slytherin common room just before the Battle of Hogwarts as secrets were coming out when they weren't sure what was going to happen. Or if they'd survive it. They'd got it all wrong at first and spent quite a bit of time apologising. Draco still thinks he cocked up from time to time, but he loves Millie, and he wants her to be happy.

Millie shakes her head. "Not at all." Her cheeks pinken a bit; she shifts in her chair. "I just have romantic feelings for her, not the other sort that you lot seem to obsess over." She raises her chin almost defiantly, as if they're going to object. "Luna's good with all that."
“Brilliant,” Blaise says, reaching over to squeeze Millie's hand. "Lovegood's a decent sort."

At that, Millie's shoulders relax, and she smiles at him. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going over to sit with her at the table." Millie brushes off her trousers and stands up. "I'm taking her to Puddifoot's this afternoon with Granger and Weasley." She grimaces a bit. "Her choice, not mine, and I'm certain Matty's going to mock me mercilessly when he finds out." Still, when she looks back over at Lovegood, her face softens, almost sweetens in a way.

Draco's blood runs cold with envy and a sort of misplaced fury, but he forces himself to echo good wishes with the rest of the table. Vicious, nasty thoughts are swirling in his heart, spitting at him about how he'll never be accepted like that, how it's one thing for Millie and Luna, but it's another for him. He has the Dark Mark after all, the mark of his ignorance, his hatred, and his stupidity. He can't be rehabilitated. He can't possibly ever be open about his crossing over with a certain larger than life Gryffindor.

Millie sets off, crossing the busy pub and a rather large social divide in the process. The Gryffindors appear to be welcoming: Weasley even gets up and gets Millie a chair, whilst Potter budges up to make room, his gaze sliding over to Draco as he does before flicking away just as quickly. The older Hogsmeade patrons don't even notice what's happened, although Rosmerta gives the group a quick going-over, then seems to decide all is well and turns back to the bustling bar.

Draco fumes a bit, tries to quiet the howling storm in his heart.

"I'm going to get another. Maybe Rosmerta will give me some firewhisky too." Blaise taps Draco lightly on the shoulder. "Want another, old man?"

"Absolutely," Draco says, then watches Blaise head over to attempt to charm Rosmerta out of a tipple. Hogwarts students aren't supposed to be served anything stronger than butterbeer, although the Eighth Years are easily old enough to be served legally. But custom is stronger than the law in wizarding circles, Draco thinks bitterly. He takes another deep breath. He feels a bit less raw now, less fury-ridden. He can almost pretend to be normal again.

If he doesn't look over at Potter's table.

"So how's the tutoring going?" Pansy's checking her nails, eyeing a chip in the blood red polish with a wrinkled brow. "Any improvement in your defence. Or perhaps offence?" Her gaze flicks over towards Potter, then back at Draco, and there's something deep within it that makes Draco think she knows.

Draco's heart just crumples in his chest. "Fuck, Pans." And then he just needs to say it, needs someone to help him hold the burden of what's in his heart, of this bloody attraction that keeps pulling him back into Potter's orbit, over and over and over again. He looks around before he leans forward, trying to seem casual. Inside him, stormwinds of disappointment and anger strip layers off of his soul. He bites his lip, not certain he's not being a complete fool. But this is Pansy, and she's kept so many of his secrets for years now. She'll lock away this one as well. Draco knows that.

"Just tell me," Pansy says, her voice gentle.

So Draco draws in a slow breath, and says, as carefully as he can, "You know how you've been seeing-not-seeing Goldstein?"

Pansy nods, her eyes fixed on Draco's face. "We're not telling anyone, possibly ever. Our mothers would never forgive us for ruining their enmity." And she's probably right on that score. "It's practically what keeps the shul rumour mill running."
Draco twists the cuff of his jumper over his fingertips. "I've been doing the same. I mean the seeing-not-seeing part." He licks his lip, then adds, "With Potter." The heavy weight of the words drops from Draco's heart. He's not sure if he feels any better. In truth, he feels a bit as if he might sick up here at the table, and his ears are ringing from near-panic.

At first, the expression on Pansy's face is utterly bland, then she puts her hand over his. She throws back her head and trills that same social laugh that Draco has heard Pansy's mother give. "Oh, you're so amusing, Draco." But her eyes are serious, fixed on his, and he can see the worry in them. "Whatever will the neighbours think?" Her fingers squeeze his, gently, and he knows it's a promise, knows that she'll keep his secret, that she'll have his back.

So he smiles in return, letting his fingers lace through hers. "By the way," he says, keeping his tone light, "Thank you for shagging Goldstein. He's been a wonderful help in the dormitory."

Pansy's mouth twists to the side a bit. "I did tell him to keep watch over you." She pulls her fingers from his. "And I've known." She taps the back of his hand lightly. "About you and…" She glances towards Potter. "Him. For ages. Or suspected, I suppose, really. But it's different to have your say."

"Don't look," Draco says. He sees Granger and Weasley get up, then Millie and Luna. Potter's scratching the back of his stupid neck and looking ridiculously hot and also completely unavailable, and Draco wants nothing more than to go to him or have him come over to this table, to pull out a chair and sit down with that lazy, ridiculous smile of his. Instead, Potter doesn't even look Draco's way, loping over to a table with Neville and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Hannah Abbott is nowhere to be seen.

"I guess you won't be joining the ceremonial tea at Puddifoot's, then." Pansy eyes Draco sympathetically. "Although good for Millie. Cheers on her for actually being able to go on a bloody date, unlike the two of us, skulking about in the shadows."

"Pathetic of us, really," Draco slouches in his chair, feeling like a twit. "Perhaps we ought to have kept dating, you and I."

The look Pansy gives him is horrified. "Oh, Circe, no. You were genuinely awful at getting me off. I ought to have known then you were bent as they come."

To Draco's surprise, they both break out in peals of laughter, not about Millie and Lovegood, but about the ludicrous nature of their own situation. They stop, but Pansy has the hiccoughs. Draco wipes a tear from his eye, and his side hurts. It's all so stupid and funny but bitterly earnest as well.

Blaise sets their butterbeers down on the table. "What the hell are you two on about?"

Pansy's lips curve up, and Draco's heart feels a bit lighter. "Oh, nothing much," Pansy says. "Just a bit of a joke about interhouse bonding in Eighth Year." She reaches for a glass of butterbeer. "I see Rosmerta didn't give you the firewhisky, then."

Blaise looks put out. "Bloody cow said students can't have whisky." He drops down in his chair with a scowl back towards the bar.

"I suppose we can't all have what we want," Pansy says, and her gaze slides back to Draco, her expression rueful.

Truer words, thinks Draco, reaching for a butterbeer. This time he doesn't look at Potter.

Not at all.
Draco's trapped in the old wing of the Manor in a darkened room. The door's locked; he's spelled it twice to make sure. His heart's pounding in his ears and he's having a hard time taking a breath; his chest's so tight. He's run very far to get here, the memory of his feet pounding down the shadowed corridors just fading, and there's something outside that door. Looking around, he thinks he's in his grandmother's sitting room. He barely remembers her now, but if he squints, he can see her ghost-like presence still draped across the heavy green velvet chaise longue in the corner, wraith-like and smelling of powder and musty floral scent. The brocade curtains are heavy and close, obscuring his sight of what's going on outside. He can hear spells being cast from the gardens if he tries, and he hopes nothing bounces up this high. An eerie blue light glows from the panes behind the curtains, then a green light. There's a dangerous fight going on outside, and Draco knows he's supposed to remember something.

But now there's a scrabbling at the door, and the handle begins to turn. Draco draws his wand, but it's not there. He searches his body and then the room frantically for the wand. He must have given the wand to Potter--Potter!

Potter's fighting for his life, and Draco has to save him.

Only now Draco doesn't have a wand, and something is coming for him. The handle keeps turning, and Draco wants to shout out, but his voice won't come out of his throat. A skeletal hand curls around the open edge of the door. The room grows terribly cold. Draco doesn't dare make a sound, but a scrape at the window makes him whirl around as the curtains blow open, and the Dementor's hovering outside, breath freezing frost on the windowpanes, freezing Draco's eyelashes. And then those skeletal hands reach up and start to lower that ragged, gaping hood--

Draco cries out.

A strong hand grips his shoulder, and Draco startles. "Malfoy." The voice comes from outside the room. "You're having a bad dream. Malfoy." And the walls around Draco start to fade into darkness around him. Draco's fighting back, grappling with the thing that's holding him down. His hands meet muscle, sinew, solid bone, not the skeletal robes of a Dementor.

"Malfoy, can you hear me? You're at Hogwarts and you're having a bad dream. It's okay."

Draco's shaking and cold, but now he can smell, can feel that it's Potter. He clings to him, feeling confused and addled, his heart still pounding. "Potter, why are you here? I was supposed to save you," he babbles. "It's going to get us both."

Potter's hand presses against Draco's solar plexus, and suddenly Draco's a bit warmer. "It's okay, Malfoy. We're here. You're okay." Potter's lips press against Draco's temple, his strong arms wrapping around Draco. "I've got you. It's okay."

Draco can see the hangings now, of his own bed, the shadows and the rays of moonlight from the window. He lets Potter hold him--Potter's so warm.

"You're freezing. I think you kicked off your covers." Potter pulls the blankets up from the end of the bed, lies down with Draco. Draco squeezes his eyes shut, still trembling. Potter shifts, pulling Draco against him under the covers. He's as warm as a common room fire, Draco thinks, relaxing against Potter's solid chest.

"Potter," Draco's voice is sleep-slurred. He nestles a bit further into Potter's arms. "Why are you in my bed?"

"You were having a nightmare," Potter's lips tickle the short hairs of Draco's neck. "I came over and cast a Muffliato, then tried to help."
"You should go back before anyone finds you." Draco protests, but weakly. He doesn't really want Potter to leave him. Not right now. Not with the memory of that awful dream still lingering. "You don't want to have to explain."

"We'll be all right." Potter pulls Draco closer, his arm draped over Draco's waist, and Draco enjoys the warmth. If he had more energy he'd shift around, kiss him, but he's too bloody tired right now. He's also too grateful to kick Potter out of his bed. It's nice to lie here with him, their bodies wrapped around each other, to pretend that this could be their reality. The dormitory is quiet and really, Draco's much more comfortable here than he used to be. Goldstein's made certain of that in recent weeks, and Boot and Finch-Fletchley are decent sorts. Justin's even been asking Draco for help with his Potions homework, the both of them sat with their backs against Justin's bed, the Kneazle curled between them as they bend over Libatius Borage's book. It's nice, Draco thinks sleepily, not to be completely despised. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco thinks he sees something pooling and silver hanging from the corner of his headboard. Then he falls asleep.

The second time Draco wakes up, he's relaxed and calm. His body's warm and Potter's still there. Draco wakes languidly, shifting his hips. It must be early yet from the faint grey light filtering through the small gap in his hangings, and he should probably kick Potter out of his bed before the rest of the dormitory wakes.

Except Potter's erection is pressing against Draco now, and it's rubbing between his arsecheeks. It feels amazing, and Draco can feel his own morning wood stir in return. Fuck, he thinks. He really has to get Potter back into his own bed.

"Potter," Draco whispers. "Are you awake?"

A low chuckle, and Potter's pulling Draco a bit more firmly against him. Draco shifts again, and Potter pushes back. He groans a little as his prick slides over Draco's arse. "Yeah. I'm definitely awake," Potter murmurs.

Draco's about to throw him out. Really, he is. But then Potter kisses Draco's neck, then bites where the kiss had been, and that's not fighting fair. Potter knows that Draco's weakness is the back of his neck. Draco's whole body shivers at the feeling of Potter's breath against his skin, and his prick surges. Potter rolls him forward a little, under his own weight. "God," Potter says against the back of Draco's ear. "I really want to get off with you here."

Oh, and that's a terrible idea, Draco knows it is, but his skin feels as if it's on fire, and Potter's so hard and solid behind him. "Merlin," Draco breathes out, and he shifts his hips, pushes back against Potter's prick.

"Is that a yes?" Potter nips at Draco's earlobe. His fingers dip beneath the waistband of Draco's pyjama bottoms, brushing along Draco's hipbone.

Draco swallows, licks his dry lips. "It's not a no." His voice sounds a bit raw and rough, and he presses his face into the pillow, feeling suddenly awkward.

Potter's hand flattens on Draco's belly. Draco can feel him draw in a ragged breath before he says, "Can I pull down your trousers?"

"Fuck. Yes, you may." Draco's voice may be a bit prim, but it ends on an almost squeal as Potter pushes down the thin fabric of Draco's pyjama bottoms, over the flat curve of Draco's arse and down his thighs a bit, Draco's cock popping free, slapping against the mattress with a soft thud. Potter wraps his hand around Draco's prick, and Draco inhales sharply at the feel of Potter's thick fingers around his shaft. As often as it's happened this year, Draco thinks he'll never entirely get used to the
They rock back and forth a bit, experimenting. Potter's grip is rough around Draco's prick, and Draco doesn't care. He moans a little, shifting his hips, feeling the heat of Potter's cock pressing into his arsecheek.

"Here, let me try something," Potter says. He murmurs a few words into Draco's shoulder, and suddenly his palm is sliding slick around Draco's hard length.

Draco is so surprised that he forgets to be quiet. "What the fuck was that?"

"Shhh," Potter says, belatedly casting a Muffliato. "It's a wandless lube spell. I've been practicing."

"Priorities, Potter," Draco snarks, oddly pleased despite his chiding words. "Your potions grades haven't improved much, but you have time for practicing a lube spell?"

"I thought you'd like it." Potter spreads some of the slick between Draco's thighs. It's cold and uncomfortable; still, Draco shifts, letting Potter smooth his fingers over his taint. "Besides, Ravi said my last potion was almost good enough for a sixth year."

"Well, that's an improvement." Draco knows that Potter is actually improving. In fact, he's seen Potter with the elementary potions book he'd given him at Christmas more than once, reading out loud to himself and studying the formulas. It'd been quite affecting to see the great Harry Potter working through a simple text, even if it's a bit more slowly than Draco expected, and it'd made Draco realise with a pang of not-quite guilt, not-quite sorrow that his parents would have likely read this book to him if they'd not been killed. And yeah, Draco doesn't like to think too much about that, and his family's role in Potter's loss.

"I can think of some other things that could improve." Potter slides his mouth against Draco's neck again, and Draco loses the capacity for rational thought. Draco's prick is aching and heavy. He's not quite ready to beg for release, but he's close. And then Potter pulls back and says, "Can I-- Would you mind if I slid my prick between your legs?"

"I'd assumed that's why you were wiping the extra slick on them, and yes, Potter." Draco thinks the request through when Potter starts to pull away. "I mean, no, I wouldn't mind." He reaches back, grabs Potter's hip to hold him still. "In fact, I think I'd quite enjoy it."

Potter shifts away for a moment, murmuring a soft fuck and Draco's about to chide him again, but then Potter's thick prick slides between Draco's thighs, and Potter grunts into Draco's ear, raising gooseflesh on Draco's arms. Potter's hand comes back around Draco's prick, and oh, the angle and the pressure are perfect. Potter's weight is on Draco and he finds he quite likes it, especially as Potter is making breathy little moans as he thrusts more quickly, back and forth, between Draco's closed thighs. The conjured lube is just enough to let Potter's prick slide smoothly, and Draco shifts just a bit to give Potter a better angle.

"You feel fucking amazing," Potter says, through a gasp. "It's almost like being inside you. You feel so good."

And yeah, that mental image of being spread beneath Potter, impaled on his prick does it for Draco. With a soft cry he lets go on the next swipe of Potter's hand along his prick, shooting spunk into the coverlet. He's shaking, shivering, his arse bucking back into Potter's body. He wants more, wants Potter to have him, to take him. Draco's nipples are so hard, and Draco can't stop himself from pinching them, from rolling them between his fingers as the aftershocks of his orgasm fade.
"Shit, Malfoy." Potter's breathing goes ragged as he grabs Draco's hips with both hands, his bollocks slapping against the back of Draco's thighs with each thrust, and, oh, Draco can imagine Potter inside of him, stretching his hole wide with that brilliant prick of his. He's not sure about this new intimacy, but his body is ready for Potter. He wants him so much, he feels like he'd let him do anything right now.

Potter is unusually quiet as he comes, arching over Draco's back, pushing Draco into the mattress, his teeth biting into the curve of Draco's shoulder, his whole body shuddering. Draco's thighs are now wet with Potter's spunk, and the great pants of breath that Potter's taking make it sound like he just ran several miles.

"All right there, Potter?" Draco asks, shifting and sticky but still drowsy with release and with the intimacy of having Potter's spent prick still caught between his thighs.

"Glorious," Potter says sleepily, his arm coming over Draco. "I think you might be a magical creature."

"I think you might be an arse who's about to get us both caught out by the others," Draco fires back. Still, he snuggles against Potter for a moment, before spelling away the wet spot in front of them.

"Okay, time to go." Draco thinks that it's not much later than six or so, but it's hard to be sure with the light. He can't see the face of his charmed clock from this angle.

There's a noise of bedsprings and feet from outside, and Draco freezes, as does Potter. They're both still for a long moment while the feet pad into the bathroom.

"Go," Draco whispers, turning to push against Potter's chest. "Before he's back."

Potter grabs a wisp of material and his wand from under the pillow. Draco realises now that it's a bloody invisibility cloak as Potter slides it over his body and disappears from view. Draco's hangings part just a bit, a flash of silver going through them like wind, and then he's alone again.

It smells like spunk and cleaning charms. Draco needs to say another one to clean himself up, although he's also going to have to wash later before school. He hopes there will be time when the others go down for breakfast. Still, he's quite pleased, if a bit sleep deprived from all of the activity. He dozes for a few moments, sprawled across his pillows, until he can't hear any more noises from the room and his bladder's bloody insistent on relieving itself. Draco sits up, pulling his pyjama trousers back up around his hips before sliding out of the bed. He belts his robe around him, heading outside to the loo to wash his hands and take a slash.

It's a relief to piss. Draco shakes his prick off, then flushes the urinal, moving over to the sinks to wash his hands. He can still feel Potter's stickiness between his thighs, can still smell the lingering scent of spunk around him. He looks at himself in the mirror, at his flushed face and his rumpled hair and his bright eyes. There's a love bite on the curve of his neck that he'll need to cover up, but Draco looks--and feels--deliciously debauched.

There's a flush from a stall behind him, and Draco stills. The door opens, and Tony Goldstein comes out, stopping to look at him for a moment. "Malfoy," he says, and then he's walking over to the sink next to Draco. Their eyes meet in the mirror. Goldstein looks a bit embarrassed, Draco realises. He clears his throat as he turns on the tap. "Harry's Muffliato needs work."

Draco's white-knuckled with anxiety, his hands wrapping in the tails of his bathrobe belt. He's left his wand back in his bed--stupidly, he thinks now.
"Don't worry." Goldstein shakes his head, watching Draco in the mirror. "I won't say anything. Even to Pansy, if you ask."

"She knows," Draco says, his voice croaking. Since when was the world this complicated, this confusing? He doesn't know what to do, doesn't know how to stop Goldstein from saying anything if he wants to. The whole bloody castle could be gossiping about him and Potter by lunch. If Draco had a wand, perhaps he could Obliviate him, but even that gives him pause. Should he mangle the charm, Pansy would never forgive him.

Goldstein nods, and he turns off the water, shaking droplets from his fingertips. "Well, that's easier. I still won't say anything to her unless she brings it up, yeah?"

"Thanks," is all Draco can manage to get out. He knows Pansy won't. She'd never tell anyone, not even Goldstein, whatever he might think.

"All right." Goldstein stops, looks over at Draco. "You know this is a pretty big secret to keep."

*What does one say to that?* Draco thinks wildly. *Of course it's a giant bloody secret. A Malfoy is shagging Harry Potter at Hogwarts. Or being shagged by him.* Except there's not really been any shagging exactly, has there? Just a lot of getting off together. Although Draco supposes they'd come close this morning. He draws in a ragged breath. "I know."

Goldstein's silent for a moment, just looking at Draco, and then he nods. "Be careful, Draco," he says after a moment. "This could blow up in your face, and I wouldn't want that." He hesitates, then adds, "I like you more than Harry, if I can be honest. And I like Pans more than the both of you, and you know if this goes tits up, she's going to go after him. I wouldn't want her hurt either."

"Neither would I," Draco says quietly, and Goldstein nods again.

"Good," Goldstein says, and he reaches out, touches Draco's arm. It's quick, but oddly comforting. "I'm going back to bed for a bit then. Sorry to have…" He trails off, his face a bit pink. "Well. You know."

As Draco watches Goldstein turn and walk back towards their room, he thinks this thing between him and Potter might have a life of its own. Draco has very little control over anything now, if he ever did, and he has no idea how it's all going to end--and it will, he knows--but he can't imagine when it does end, that it'll end well for him. After all, it rarely does, he thinks grimly.

He turns back to the sink, splashes cold water on his face. The mirror clucks softly at him. "Looking a bit worse for the wear, aren't you, love?"

Draco wrenches the tap off. "Sod off, you tarted up piece of glass," he snaps. His brilliant mood's gone now, and he can't tell anyone why. Not even Potter. The idiot would do something bloody stupid, like confront Goldstein and make it all worse.

The mirror huffs, offended. "Well, I never--"

Draco strides out of the loo, letting the door fall shut behind him.

He feels a damned fool.

***

Harry's alone in the common room on Tuesday afternoon, glaring down at tomorrow's Potions reading assignment. He doesn't know what Ravi wants from them here, really, although Malfoy'd
told him in tutoring last night that it wasn't that difficult to figure out. To be honest, Harry's a little
miffed at the prat for not helping him, but Malfoy says that Harry has to try to do some of the work
himself. He knows Malfoy has a point, but he's tired, and the words on the page are just floating
around in his brain right now, making no bloody sense at all.

Outside, the snow is falling, and half the school's out in it on brooms, indulging in a midair snowball
fight. Harry can hear the whoops and shouting from in here, and he half-wishes he could go join
them. But it's always weird when Harry does. Everyone just looks at him, as if it's strange that the
bloody Saviour of the fucking Wizarding World would want to throw a sodding snowball once or
twice.

So Harry's sat here by himself on the chesterfield in front of the fire, glaring down at Advanced
Potion-Making and cursing Libatius Borage for being a fucking wanker for writing it. Hesper
Starkey's much clearer in Harry's opinion, especially since there are pictures that move.

He hears someone coming down the staircase from the girl's dormitories. He hopes it's not Susan;
things have been a bit awkward between the two of them since they've been back at school. Harry
knows Zabini's sniffing about Sus, and he doesn't know what to think about it. He just doesn't want
her to be hurt, but what business is it of his? Things were already awkward on Sunday last when he
came down to go to lunch late and found Gin on the sofa curled up against Justin. They'd both jumped,
as if Harry were going to hex them or something, and then Ginny'd just said, "Hi," in a soft, uncertain voice, and when Harry'd said "Hi" back, she'd smiled at him, her shoulders
relaxing. Harry'd told Justin later he was glad for him, and it'd all been fine. Civilised really, in a way
that Harry hadn't quite expected.

And now Ginny's started teasing him in the hallway again, mocking his messy hair with that bright
laugh of hers, and when she'd leant over from the Gryffindor table today at lunch to put her arms
around Justin's shoulders, Ron'd glanced Harry's way, his brow furrowed, and Harry'd just balled up
a bit of bread and thrown it at Gin's head. It'd landed in Ginny's hair, and, laughing, she'd flipped
two fingers at him before digging it out and throwing it back at him.

"Get a room," Harry'd said with a laugh of his own, and Gin had just pressed a kiss to Justin's
terribly pink cheek and told him to ignore Harry, that he was nothing but a prat.

All Harry had cared about was the way Malfoy'd watched the interaction from down the Eighth Year
table, his face shuttered and careful. And then when Harry'd glanced at him, Malfoy's mouth had
twisted up on one side, quickly, before he'd bent his head back to his plate, his hair falling forward,
hideing his face.

Harry sinks down into the leather corner of the chesterfield, his feet propped up on the trunk in front
of it that serves as a makeshift coffee table. Someone's stuck a drawing of Ravi over the mantel--it's a
good one, really, even if he's throwing his hands up over and over in exasperation. Even Ravi'd
laughed at it when it'd appeared overnight, saying it was basically his daily experience of the lot of
them. His one critique was that it was missing a few expletives.

Idly, Harry wonders where Malfoy is. Probably off with Parkinson or Zabini somewhere, Harry
thinks. Bulstrode's outside with Luna, walking through the snow, and that's an odd friendship, isn't
it? Harry'd tried not to be offended when he hadn't been invited to Puddifoot's with them and Ron
and Hermione last weekend, but Hermione'd just told him they'd catch up with him later. It was fine
in the end, Harry thinks. He'd had a bit more time alone to watch Malfoy across the Broomsticks
when the prat wasn't looking at him.Honestly, Harry'd like to be walking around with Malfoy right
now, hand in hand, watching Malfoy's cheeks turn pink from the cold. Fuck, but Harry hates that he
can't, that they have to be careful. He doesn't even know if there's anyone else in the school that's
bent like them.

_Bent like them._

Harry thinks about that for a while. He's gradually coming to the awareness that this whatever-it-is between Malfoy and him is not just about Malfoy. Harry's at least somewhat bent too if he enjoys it this much. Merlin, Malfoy's all Harry can think about these days. Just hearing him laugh in the hall or at the other end of the table makes Harry want to drag him into the alcove and rut up against him. Harry's never felt quite like this, not even in the heyday of his relationship with Ginny. Or if he did feel this way, he doesn't remember it now.

"Mind if I read next to you?" Hermione's face is careful when he looks up at her, not shuttered exactly but not as animated as it usually is. She's carrying a heavy satchel, as per usual, and she seems a bit off in Harry's opinion. "Only the library was full, and I've got a headache."

Harry moves over, letting Hermione curl her feet under her on the sofa. She opens the thick leather flap of her satchel, stops for a moment to peer at its contents. Harry is looking at the explanation for Hovering Potion and wonders what windseed is--he doesn't remember it from the Potions inventory. He tries to find a mention or a picture of it, but the Advanced Potion-Making book doesn't have very many diagrams. Fucking Borage, Harry thinks, sulkily. He flips a page.

"You're rather engrossed in work," Hermione is holding a scroll for note taking and a thick book of Runes. She seems to be decoding a document, pausing to write notes to herself on the thick, brown-hued paper. "Would have thought you'd be out on the pitch, throwing snowballs."

If only, Harry thinks. He drops his book down on his lap. "Malfoy's refused to help me with Potions reading, and I don't know half of these ingredients."

Harry's frustration must show on his face, as Hermione sets her work aside. "Is it awful for you then, having to work with Malfoy?"

Her expression is curiously bland, and Harry's stomach tightens. She knows something, he's sure of it. Or suspects, at least. He looks around the empty common room, noticing that the lights have come on, so it must be heading on dinnertime. Although, really there's so little daylight at this time of year, it's hard to mark the time by the sky.

"He's actually all right as a tutor," Harry says finally. "I'm just not the best student."

"And is he good at anything else?" Hermione presses a bit. She turns towards him, her knees brushing Harry's thigh. Harry thinks of Malfoy pressing back against him the other morning, of how it had felt coming between Malfoy's thighs. Yeah. Malfoy's bloody good at plenty of things, Harry thinks.

Hermione twists a lock of her hair around her finger, just watching him. "Are you becoming friendly with Malfoy? You two do seem to spend a lot of time together."

Harry doesn't know what to say to her. It's not like either of them to not just come out and say what they mean. But, he supposes the scars of the past year and the challenges--not to mention the losses--have made both him and Hermione a fair bit more cautious than they were as children. "Well, I'm tutoring him a bit in Defence, if you must know."

Harry runs his hand through his hair, scratching at his scalp. "He's pants at it, and I keep worrying that Claverdon will attack him again."

Hermione gives a little huff. "The Board were absolutely wrong on that one. Claverdon's attack was unprovoked and too dangerous not to punish."
"Yeah, but it's hard to reason with people, isn't it?" Harry shrugs. "Everyone will settle down eventually. It's just that Voldemort's only been dead again since last May, and well...Slytherin."
Harry shrugs a little. "They don't always do the best job at assuaging people's worries."

"Maybe not." Hermione's brow furrows. "It's just there's talk going on, you know, about the Board doing something about Slytherin. Taking away their colors, or making it an entirely new house." She chews on her bottom lip. "I mean, I'm not objecting to progress, and perhaps it's not an awful idea, all things considered, but I can't imagine how I'd feel if I were them."

Harry frowns. "They wouldn't." He thinks of what Hagrid had told him years ago. There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin. But that's not exactly true, is it? Peter Pettigrew, for one. And Harry's never been entirely certain about Cormac McLaggen, if he's honest. "There'd be a bloody outrage if they tried."

"But would there be?" Hermione glances over at him. "The Death Eaters took a lot from us all, Harry. Maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to stop Sorting Slytherin. They could be incorporated by other Houses. Maybe not having them all together would prevent another Voldemort." She pleats the cuff of her jumper between her fingers. "Or Death Eaters."

Really, Harry's not so certain about that. "Seems to me if someone wants to be a Voldemort, they'll be one," he says. "And if people want to be Death Eaters, they'll find one another, you know?"

Hermione sighs. "Perhaps you're right."

Harry knows he is. His scar itches, and when he scratches it, Hermione looks alarmed for a moment. Harry rolls his eyes. "It's really just dry skin, Hermione. It's bloody winter, after all."

They smile at each other, and the tension eases a little. Hermione goes to pick up her note-taking scroll, then puts it back down. She looks over at Harry, her discomfort obvious. "I bought something for you. Over hols. And I've been too nervous to give it to you."

An uneasiness settles in the pit of Harry's stomach as he blinks at her. "You can always talk to me, you know. And you've already given me a Christmas present." Harry loves the custom wand holster she'd owled him, the match of one she'd had made for Ron, with their monograms embossed in the leather.

Hermione shakes her head. She hesitates, then says, "This is different. I didn't want to send it to the castle." She takes out a parcel from her satchel and hands it to him. When he opens the plastic bag with the Waterstones label on it, he realises quickly that it's a large, paperback Muggle book. The title is The New Joy of Gay Sex.

Harry holds the book it for a moment, not even daring to breathe. His first thought is that he hates reading, but he's riveted by the topic. His second thought is that Hermione understands him utterly and is speaking to him in her language: books.

He places the book gently back in the Waterstones bag, and looks down at the wrinkled plastic. "How long have you known?" He doesn't dare look at her.

"I was fairly certain before the Yule party and then, well, Malfoy's face. And you kept watching him. Also, you had a love bite on your neck." Hermione sounds almost tearful. "I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have presumed."

"No." Harry looks up then. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I should have told you. And I'm sorry it's-- Well, I know he's been horrid to you, and if you're angry with me, I understand."
Hermione gives him a funny little smile, then shakes her head. "You know, I was angry when we all first came back this year. I couldn't stand to see his face for the first few weeks. But it's different now. We've all changed."

Harry nods slowly, his mind an empty clatter of thoughts and possibilities. "Yeah. I guess we have." He chews on his lip. He looks over at her. "It's weird though. Me and Malfoy being the only bent ones at Hogwarts."

At that Hermione laughs. "You're not." At Harry's incredulous look, she frowns. "Harry. You do know Millicent and Luna are dating, right?"

"They're just friends," Harry protests.

Hermione flicks his head with her thumb and forefinger. "You're thick sometimes, you do realise that, right? They've been dating since before hols. Why do you think Ron and I went to Puddifoot's with them?"

"Oh." Well, Harry feels like a complete tit now. "I didn't…" He runs his hands over his face, pushing his glasses up. "Fucking hell. No wonder Luna gave me that odd look when I tried to invite myself along."

"It wasn't one of your more observant moments." Hermione nudges him with her foot. "But it's all right. Ron still hasn't picked up on you and Malfoy, so…" She shrugs. "You're not the most oblivious person in the castle."

Harry's face falls. "I can't tell him. He's still hoping Gin and I--"

"I think that ship has sailed." Hermione's face is gentle. "You know she and Justin have been seeing each other."

"Yeah." Harry settles back against the chesterfield. "I'm glad. He's a good bloke." He looks over at Hermione. His hand settles on the book again, the plastic of the bag it's in rustling beneath his fingers. "The weird thing is that I'm fairly certain I'm bent, but I still think girls are interesting too."

He frowns at her. "That's impossible, isn't it?"

Hermione sighs. "Oh, Harry. You've so much to learn. You can like both, you know. It's called bisexuality."

Harry gives her a blank look. "I can?"

"Yes. Just read the book." Hermione reaches over and taps it. "I know you don't have the easiest time reading things, but there's pictures and diagrams to help you out. And I think it might help you understand who you are a bit better too."

To be honest, Harry's a bit sceptical about that. "Okay." He hesitates, then says, "I'm not really certain I know who I am, though."

"You're still Harry." Hermione leans in and gives him a quick hug. "I promise that. Now show me your Potions book. I've done the reading, so maybe I can help a little."

Although he feels terribly lost, Harry is also safe next to Hermione. As she begins to lay out the explanations for Hovering potion, the tendrils of terror loosen their hold on Harry's mind.

For a moment, he can breathe. For a moment, it's okay to be possibly bent. Bisexual, his mind supplies, and Harry feels the heavy comfort of the book on his thigh. For a moment, everything's all
right.

And a moment is all Harry needs.
Chapter 8

So this is where we are,
It's not where we had wanted to be.
If half the world's gone mad,
The other half just don't care, you see.
--World Gone Mad, Bastille

By the end of February school has settled into a steady rhythm of classes, one Draco finds oddly soothing. He and Potter have been more careful in the dormitory; Draco hasn't been able to tell Potter Goldstein knows about them, not because he's worried Potter will go after the prat, but more because he's not entirely certain Potter will keep on with him if he thought anyone else knew, and Draco's grown accustomed to his tutoring sessions with Potter going off in a very erotic direction. Goldstein's kept his word, though, and hasn't even said anything to Pansy about whatever this is going on between Draco and Potter.

Draco's Defence marks are going up too, thanks to Potter's help. He'd never been bad with the theory of the spells, but now his practicum scores are steadily climbing, and just the other day, Omolade put her hand on his shoulder after he'd sent Mills tumbling across the sparring mat and told him she was pleased with his progress, that whatever he'd been doing, he should keep at it. Draco had practically felt Potter's self-satisfied smirk from across the room.

He shifts in his seat during a Friday afternoon Runes class, trying his best to pay attention to Professor Babbling droning on about the differences between Orkhon and Elder Futhark writing systems and the benefits--or not--of using each one in runic spellwork. He's doodled along the side of his notebook, black ink swirls and patterns that have somehow morphed into a sketched out face at the bottom of the page with messy hair and ridiculously round glasses. Draco stares at it blankly for a moment, warmth suffusing his cheeks, before he scratches his quill across it, obliterating the lines of Potter's features. What the bloody hell is wrong with him? He might as well be writing Draco Malfoy-Potter across all his notes like a sodding fifth-year girl with an idiotic pash.

Granger's watching him from across the room again, the way she has for the past few weeks. Draco doesn't like it; he feels a bit odd having her study him like he's some sort of curious specimen. He scowls at her as fiercely as he can manage without drawing Babbling's attention, and Granger rolls her eyes, turns back to her own notes. Draco supposes he should be nicer to Potter's friends, but honestly, tolerating them should be enough, he thinks. If he were friendly, then that would be even more suspicious. It's not as if he and Potter are walking hand-in-hand through the corridors, after all.

Draco hunches his aching shoulders, then lets them relax again. His back's bloody killing him from his Defence session last night with Potter. The bastard had put him through the wringer for an hour, making him cast shielding charm after shielding charm until he could whip one up a second or two after Potter's hex had left his wand. Frankly, Draco's rather proud of himself, and Potter had been as well. They'd snuck out of the castle beneath Potter's Invisibility Cloak, heading across the crusty, crunchy snow to the Quidditch pitch for a bit of flying, the way they've taken to doing after most of their Defence tutoring. It felt good to be up in the cold air after the warm closeness of the sparring room, particularly on a night when the moon was full and the clouds were covering the stars. It'd been just him and Potter there in the darkness together, no one from the castle watching them zip through the goal posts, one after the other.

And if, whilst they were putting their brooms away, Potter might have pushed Draco forward against the broom racks, his hands on Draco's hips, his mouth moving, wet and warm, across the curve of
Draco's throat, well, who was there to see? It'd been delicious, really, Potter's heat against Draco's back, the soft sound of Potter's breath in Draco's ear, the shadows of the Quidditch shed, lit only by one dim, flickering sconce high overhead, the scrape of Potter's teeth against Draco's jaw as Potter'd told Draco to reach up and grasp the edge of the broomcase above his head. And when Potter'd slid his hands around to unfasten Draco's trousers, then push them down to Draco's knees along with his pants, Draco's prick had nearly pulsed right there and then.

Draco can still feel the tightness of Potter's fist around his cock, the press of Potter's own prick against Draco's bare arse. And Potter had held him still, Draco stretched in front of him, fingers clenched around the top of the broomcase, whilst Potter rutted against him, the head of his cock slipping wet and hot over Draco's arse, between Draco's cheeks. It'd been nearly too much for both of them when Potter'd slid over the soft pucker of Draco's arsehole, and Draco'd arched himself, his cry echoing in the silence of the shed.

"Fuck," Potter'd said, and his fingers had been so deliciously clenched around Draco's shaft, pulling Draco's foreskin down, his thumb sliding over the slick smoothness of Draco's slit, wiggling just enough inside of it, the way he knows Draco likes. It hadn't taken long before Potter was spurting stickily across Draco's arse cheeks, swearing into Draco's ear in a way that made Draco want to press back against him, made Draco want to beg Potter to take him right there, right then, lubricant be damned.

But they're not at that place, are they? Potter won't even suck Draco off in return, and whilst Draco doesn't want to push him, at the same time, Draco's starting to feel a bit irked by Potter's recalcitrance around the issue. It feels one-sided now, all of this, and whilst Draco'd come like the bloody Hogwarts Express over Potter's hand last night, he sometimes still wonders if he's getting as much from this dalliance with Potter as Potter is.

Draco taps his quill against his notebook, looking up when Blaise nudges him. The whole class is silent, turned around and looking at him for some inexplicable reason. Draco stills, a faint panic starting to rise up in him.

And then McGonagall says, "Mr Malfoy," from the doorway, her voice gentle. "If you could come with me, please?"

Something dark and terrified uncoils itself deep inside of Draco. "Why?" he asks before he can stop himself. He feels his face heat.

McGonagall doesn't frown at him, and that only raises Draco's fear. "Bring your books," she says, once again ever so gently, and Draco knows something's gone wrong. It can't be Potter, he thinks, as he gathers his quill and notebook and shoves them in his satchel. He stands, slinging it over his shoulder.

"All right?" Blaise murmurs, his worried gaze turned on Draco, and all Draco can do is nod and give him a faint, thin smile.

Draco makes his way through the rows of desks, all too aware of his classmates watching him. He wishes Potter were in here, that Draco could look over at him and feel, at least for a moment, as if everything would be all right, but Runes is one of two classes he doesn't share with Potter. Still, he glances at Granger. She's watching him, worrying her lip between her teeth as he passes by. Draco draws in a deep breath, settles his satchel more firmly on his shoulder, then strides past McGonagall into the hallway.

He waits until she thanks Professor Babbling for allowing her to disturb her class and she draws the door shut before he turns to her, his voice only slightly quavery when he asks, "What's this all about,
"Follow me, Mr Malfoy," McGonagall says. "I've someone for you in my office."

That does nothing to ease Draco's worry. Still, he trails McGonagall through the corridors, his robe sweeping out behind him.

McGonagall doesn't say anything else, not until they stop at the top of the stone steps just outside her office door. She glances over at him. "Whatever you need, Mr Malfoy, we'll make certain you have it."

And that sounds so careful, so considerate that Draco's knees nearly go out from underneath him. Perhaps he's known from the first moment McGonagall came for him. Perhaps it's something that's just dawned on him. Draco doesn't really know, but his voice is ragged when he says, "My father--"

"Come inside," McGonagall says, her hand on his shoulder, and then she's guiding him into her office, and his mother turns in the chair in front of McGonagall's desk, then stands, and her face is terrible, and Draco knows.

"No." Draco tries to pull away from McGonagall's touch, tries to turn back to the door. "No, no, no."

And then his mother is there, her hands catching his, pulling him up against her, and he can smell the scent of her musky floral perfume, the one his father gives her every year for Christmas, the one that comes from Paris in the shimmering cut-glass bottle, a magically preserved rose twined around the slender neck. "Shh," Narcissa's saying, and her smooth, pale hands are stroking his hair, her head bends over his. "My love." Her voice cracks. "It's not--" She draws in a ragged breath, one that Draco can feel shudder through her thin body.

Draco's throat aches. He shakes his head. "He can't be--"

"He's not," Narcissa says, and she pulls away, just enough to look at Draco. "It's not like that." Her eyes are reddened, though, and Draco knows she's been crying. Perhaps not here in front of McGonagall, but somewhere. She smoothes Draco's hair back from his forehead. "He's in the infirmary at Azkaban." Her mouth twists on the word, and she looks away. "There was an attack by someone. A guard, perhaps, or another inmate. I don't know all the details yet. I do know that his injury is…" His mother hesitates, bites her lip. "It's serious."

Draco feels numb. Shaken. "All right," he says after a moment. "But he'll be fine--"

Narcissa's already shaking her head. "Your father was hit in the head with a sharp, heavy object." She sounds detached now, Draco thinks, as if she's reciting something she's been told. "The Azkaban Healers believe it's caused a significant amount of damage to his right frontal cortex." She draws Draco deeper into McGonagall's office, towards the chairs in front of McGonagall's heavy oak desk. She sits in one. Draco doesn't take the other. He stands behind it, gripping the back of the chair with both hands. He's barely aware of McGonagall standing to the side, her face sober, her gaze fixed on him.

"What are you trying to say, Mother?" Draco manages to ask. He can feel the uneven thud of his heart, the tightening of his chest.

His mother glances down at her clasped hands. "They're going to release him to St Mungo's," she says after a moment. "The Minister's commuting his sentence."

For a moment, a thrill goes through Draco. "He's free?" And then his mother looks back up at him, and Draco knows. His fingers grip the hard brocade back of the chair. "Oh, God," he breathes out.
The room swims around him; he can hear a distant ringing in his ears. He has to get out. "I--"

And then McGonagall's there, her wrinkled hands catching his elbows, holding him upright. "Breathe, Mr Malfoy," she murmurs, and Draco draws in an uneven breath. It hurts his chest; he feels a tremble go through him, but the Headmistress is still beside him, smelling like peppermint and bergamot.

"They think he's not a danger any more," Draco says, his voice a rough, ragged scrape across his throat. "That's it, isn't it? He's not..." Not my father any longer, his mind whispers. Not the Lucius Malfoy Draco grew up with. He can tell by the way his mother's face falls, the way she glances away, blinking back tears, that he's right.

Narcissa exhales, twists her hands together. "It is unlikely that he'll be able to perform magic again," she says quietly, and then she looks up at Draco. Her face is stricken. "Or, perhaps, even recognise us."

Draco closes his eyes. He thinks of his father, so strong, so arrogant, so certain of himself and what he believed was right. Lucius Malfoy hadn't wanted for anything in his life. He had wealth, status, the admiration of others. But it'd never been enough, had it? His father had still wanted power, enough so that he'd throw his lot in with a bloody madman who terrorised his wife and threatened his son with death for being an utter failure. Lucius had, rather literally, thrown them both to the wolves for no reason at all, really, other than to back a losing cause. And Draco's full aware of his father's hypocrisy when it comes to the Muggleborn amongst the wizarding world. His own great-great-grandmother Bettina had been a half-blood, a fact his father and grandfather had tried very hard to make people forget.

And yet. Draco exhales; his eyes flutter open. Lucius Malfoy is still his father. Whatever complexities that might bring to Draco's life.

"What are you going to do?" Draco asks his mother finally. He pulls away from McGonagall's grasp; the Headmistress murmurs something softly, her hand brushing his back, then she steps away.

Narcissa's silent for a moment. She sighs. "I'll be going to St Mungo's to meet with Lucius' Healers. I thought you might come with me to see him--"

Draco's already shaking his head. He can't. There's too much between him and his father, too many things Draco hasn't come to terms with. He can't see Lucius like this, not unprepared. "Please, no. Draco knows his voice is too high, too wavery. "I need time, Mother, I can't--"

"It's all right." Narcissa sounds tired, but she stands, reaching her hands out towards Draco. Her fingers curl around his, she pulls him close. "It's all right, my love." She holds him tight, the way she had when he was a child and had hurt himself, and he knows his mother loves him whatever may come. She hums softly in his ear, the old lullaby that she used to sing to Draco at bedtime, the one that calms and stills him. Draco clings to his mother, and his breathing evens.

Narcissa kisses Draco's temple, smoothes his hair back. He's almost taller than her now, almost as tall as his father, and oh, how that hurts. She pulls back, looks at him, and the lines around her eyes are deeper than they once were; he can see the shimmer of silver in her blonde hair. "You needn't go tonight," she says quietly, and she cups his face in her hands. "But at some point, you have to see him, Draco."

Draco knows she's right. "I just can't," he whispers, and his mother nods. "Not yet."

"Then later," she says, and she presses her lips to his forehead, before stepping back and glancing at
McGonagall. "Thank you, Headmistress," she says, pulling back together the scraps of her dignity, Draco knows.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs Malfoy," McGonagall says, and when Draco looks at her, she's watching them both with a sober face. He actually believes she means her condolences, and the thought fills him with a bit of warmth.

Narcissa nods, and she touches Draco's face. "I'll firecall you when I know more, my love." She raises her chin, her shoulders going back as she turns to the Headmistress. "If I might use your Floo again?"

McGonagall nods. "Stay a moment, Mr Malfoy, if you will."

Draco thinks of objecting, of just walking out, but he knows it won't do him any good. He sits in one of the chairs in front of the Headmistress' desk, the portraits frowning down at him from above, save for Dumbledore, who's eyeing him curiously from his perch above McGonagall's chair.

"Chin up, my lad," Dumbledore says as McGonagall leads Draco's mother to the Floo in the next room. "It won't be easy, any of this, but I'm certain you have it in you to pull yourself through the thick of it." He looks over his spectacles at Draco. "I always saw that spark of strength in you, you know."

Frankly, Draco wants to flip two fingers Dumbledore's way, but that would be bad form, wouldn't it? Particularly given he was responsible for the man's death in a way. So he nods and twists his hands together as he sits silently in the chair, waiting for McGonagall to return.

It feels like forever before she does, but then she's sweeping past him in a rustle of wool and tartan, taking the seat behind her desk. She folds her hands over her tidy desk blotter and watches him for a moment before she sighs. "Is there anything you need of me, Draco?" she asks, and oddly, it's her use of his first name that's nearly his undoing. His throat tightens, and he looks away, blinking back hot tears.

"No," he says finally. He's tired. Unhappy. Overwhelmed by grief and guilt, and there's part of him that thinks he ought to have gone with his mother, that he owes it to her to be by her side. But he also knows he couldn't have done it; he couldn't have sat in St Mungo's waiting to see his father for a few minutes, couldn't have borne seeing Lucius nor having his father not recognise him. His hands tremble, and he clenches them, pressing his knuckles into his knees, willing himself to keep things together, to not fall apart here in front of McGonagall. It's not safe, he thinks. Nowhere is, except perhaps with Potter.

And that thought brings him up short.

He wants Potter with him right now. No one else. Not even Pansy and Blaise and Millie. He wants to lose himself in Potter's touch, in Potter's scent. He wants Potter to help him not think, to quiet his mind.

The Headmistress can never give him that, not even with dreamless sleep.

Draco looks up at her. "I'd like to go, if I may."

McGonagall doesn't look happy, but she sighs and nods. "I'll be bringing this to Professor Kohli. As your Head of House he should know in case there's any way he can be of assistance to you at this time."

It's odd, Draco thinks, how everyone's acting as if his father's died. He hasn't yet. Lucius'll cling to
this world like a bloody cockroach, Draco thinks, and he doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Instead, he stands and starts for the door, only looking back when the Headmistress says his name.

She's watching him, her face weary and drawn. "If you change your mind about going to St Mungo's, please let me know. I'm more than willing to make certain you have access to your father--tonight and on any other occasion you and your mother might require it."

Draco nods. "Thank you," he says, and then he's out the door, his boots clattering on the spiralling stone staircase. When he comes out of the lower door, the wooden planks thudding resoundingly against the stone wall as he throws the door open, he draws up short.

Blaise is waiting for him, as is Granger, her satchel of books at her feet. And between them is Potter, slumped against the wall and chewing on his thumbnail the way he only does when he's nervous or frustrated.

"Potter," Draco says, a bit stupidly, but he can't take his eyes off him.

"Are you all right?" Potter pushes himself off the wall, and he's reaching for Draco, pulling Draco against him. When Draco resists, Potter says, "Hermione already knows. She guessed weeks ago."

Blaise clears his throat. "And I'm not completely blind, Draco." To be honest, Draco doesn't even have it in him to object. He feels numb. Oddly empty. He lets his body mould to Potter's, his hands gripping Potter's jumper.

Potter smooths Draco's hair back from his forehead. "They both came to get me when you were pulled out of Runes--"

"Professor Babbling probably never even missed us," Granger says. She's looking at Draco with sharp, curious eyes that Draco's certain see far more than he'd like her to. "You're not in trouble, are you? If that Claverdon did anything--" Her mouth tightens. "Bloody hell, I'll shove that wand of his up his arse and hex him into oblivion."

Even Blaise looks impressed at that. "Kinky," he says. "But probably effective."

"It's my father," Draco says, and they all still, looking at him. "There was an accident of some sort..." Draco's voice catches. He grips Potter's jumper in his hands, holding it tightly. "He's not dead," Draco manages to get out. Not yet at least. "But his magic's gone, maybe his memory." For Lucius Malfoy, he might as well be dead, Draco thinks. His father won't be able to survive like that. Neither will his mother, he thinks.

"Oh, bloody hell, old man," Blaise says, and then he's reaching for Draco, not even seeming to care that Potter's arms are already wrapped around Draco. Blaise presses his face against the back of Draco's shoulder, the three of them caught in an odd, curious embrace. Potter tenses, but he doesn't pull away. "I'm sorry," Blaise whispers into Draco's ear, and Draco just nods, the hot prickles starting again in the back of his eyes. Blaise understands what all of this means, and somehow that makes it feel more real, less like a mad nightmare Draco might possibly wake up from. He starts to shake, the weight of it all settling across him like a cold, heavy chill. It's all too much, he thinks, and he's having trouble breathing.

"Hey," Potter says, and Draco looks up at him blankly. Potter's face is creased with worry. "Breathe."

Draco tries, but he can't. It catches in his throat; he makes a soft strangled sound. He closes his eyes...
for a moment, opens his mouth a bit, exhales.

"Better," Potter murmurs in Draco's ear. Draco just nods, breathes in through his mouth. It helps, but not much. The anxiety's twisting through him again, and he presses himself against Potter, buries his face in the curve of Potter's throat. He wishes he had the calming potion Ravi had given him, but it's next to his bed, and the phial's nearly empty anyway. Potter helps somewhat, Draco thinks; the feel and the smell of him seems to ease the tightness in Draco's chest at least a little.

And then Blaise's stepping back, his hand still on Draco's back, and he says tersely to Potter, "You need to take him somewhere away from here tonight."

Draco tries to protest, but even Granger's nodding at Potter. "I think Zabini's right, Harry," she says, and she gives Draco a worried glance. Draco wonders what he must look like to make Granger act as if she cares, and then he's trembling again, his body freezing, his chest tight and close. It's hard to draw in a breath, but he tries, and the world swirls around him a bit.

"We'll cover for you," Blaise is saying, and it sounds as if he's far away. Draco clings to Potter, tries to push himself closer, needs to feel Potter's warmth against his skin. Potter's arms are tight around him; Draco can feel the steady thud of Potter's heart. Potter's saying something back, but it's just a cascade of words to Draco.

All he can think of is his father, all he can see is his mother's face when he'd told her he couldn't go with her. He closes his eyes, tries to breathe again, but it catches in the back of his throat once more, almost choking him.

"Shell Cottage," he hears Granger say, and Potter's voice rumbles deep within his chest.

And then Potter's scooping Draco up, holding him close whilst he carries Draco through the back corridors of the school, away from the classrooms, through hallways Draco's never known about, down steps until he feels the warmth of the kitchens, hears the clatter of pots and pans.

Draco closes his eyes, presses his face against the solidity of Potter's chest.

Here, with Potter's arms around him, Draco feels oddly, strangely safe, wherever the hell Potter might be taking him.

All Draco wants is to be with him. The rest of the world be damned.

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Waves roll into the sandy Cornish beach, the surf crashing across grey granite rocks. The sun's already gone down beneath the horizon hours ago, before they'd even left Hogwarts, actually, and now the water's lit by a full moon that hangs low above the waves, its light shining over the cresting whitecaps.

Draco's sat in a chair beside a bonfire contained in a small stone pit, a thick afghan around his shoulders, another draped over his lap, watching from the small cliff above the cove. The cottage is to his back, with its whitewashed walls embedded with shells. Potter's said the house belongs to the eldest Weasley and his wife, but he's in Budapest at the moment, breaking a curse for Gringotts, and she's in France visiting family. No one will disturb them tonight, and Draco's glad of that.

Now that he's calmer, he wonders what excuse their friends are going to give for their absence, how they could possibly hide two students missing from the school. Even with Potter involved, they're likely to get in trouble when they return. If McGonagall doesn't come after them tonight, that is. But if she were going to, Draco thinks she would've by now.
The door opens behind him. Draco doesn't turn around. He can hear the soft tread of Potter's trainers across the dry, dead grass of the back garden. It must be beautiful out here when it's warm, Draco thinks; the flower beds are well tended, all of them put away for the winter, and the climbing roses across the fence are lying dormant, the vines a pale, dusty grey against the white paint.

"Drink this," Potter says, and he hands Draco a mug filled with tea. Draco can smell the sharp, warm bite of firewhisky in it as well. He half-smiles. Potter's comfort drink of choice. He takes a sip of it as Potter drops into the chair beside him. Potter's wrapped himself in a thick scarf over his woollen jumper, but his cheeks are pink. It's cold out here, though not nearly as terrible as Hogwarts would be at this hour. Still, the breeze off the water is brisk and chilly, and Draco's grateful for both the fire and the afghans. He thinks about offering Potter one, but he's not certain that sort of self-sacrifice is his forte.

Potter looks over at him. "You all right?"

Draco just shrugs, cupping his hands around the warm mug. Potter's been careful with him this evening, not pressing him to talk. They've eaten the sandwiches Potter'd had the elves pack for them, along with pumpkin juice and crisps. Draco hadn't wanted food, but Potter had insisted, and in the end, Potter'd been right. Draco feels a bit more himself with something in his stomach. He looks over at Potter. "This isn't how I'd thought I'd spend my Friday night."

"Yeah." Potter stretches his legs out, props his trainers on the edge of the stone pit, far too close to the fire for Draco's comfort, particularly with Potter's trailing shoelaces. He wants to smack Potter's feet down, but he's certain Potter would just put them back up again. "Hermione just firecalled. She said no one's asked where we are yet. At least it's a weekend. You know Ravi's awful with the nightly checks on Friday and Saturday."

This is true. No one even bothers any more with weekend curfew in the Eighth Year dormitories. Ravi's usually off drinking in Omolade's quarters anyway. Rumour has it sometimes Flitwick and Sinistra join them, maybe even Sprout if the Hufflepuffs were running wild that week. Draco glances over at Potter. "Thanks," he says. He's feeling a little less wobbly than he'd been before, but there's still a huge, gaping hole inside of him.

Potter just reaches over and brushes his knuckles across Draco's wrist. He doesn't answer for a long moment; he just stares out over the water, the moonlight reflecting on his glasses.

"I'm sorry," Potter says finally. Draco knows he means he's sorry Draco has to go through this, not that he's sorry about Lucius. Still, Draco will take what he can get. He twists his mug between his hands, watches the tea slosh up the sides. The firewhisky's warmed him a bit, made him feel a little more loose, a little more relaxed.

"The thing is," Draco says, "I know my father's an enormous twat. I've lived with him for eighteen years. But for someone to have done this…" He trails off, his throat tightening. He looks out over the water, takes another sip of tea, exhales. "He didn't deserve it. Whatever he might have done, he didn't deserve someone hurting him."

Potter's silent.

Draco closes his eyes, breathes out. Pain twists through his heart, leaving behind a residue of unhappiness. "He's my father." With all the shit and bollocks that brings with it. Draco's angry at Lucius, furious with him for what he's done to Draco, to his mother. But it doesn't change the fact that Draco's his son, that he's terrified of what's going to happen to his father, if Lucius will even recognise him when he sees Draco next. Draco inhales, and the cold of it makes his lungs hurt. "My father," he says again. "And I love him, the sodding bastard." His voice cracks. For all that he hates
Lucius, his father's embedded in Draco's very existence, in his very body, in Draco's pale blond hair and grey eyes, in the way Draco was brought up to think himself better than anyone, in the prejudices Draco's only just learning to fight away.

"I know." Potter's voice is soft, and when Draco finally looks at him, his face is gentle. "Do you want to go to St Mungo's tonight? I'd go with you."

For a moment Draco considers it. He thinks about how different it would be to face his father with Potter at his side. It's tempting, very much so, but he shakes his head. "No." The word sticks in his throat. "I'd rather stay here." Next to you, he doesn't say.

They fall silent, both of them looking out over the surf again. The fire pops and crackles in front of them, and Draco lifts his tea to his mouth. He likes being here with Potter, likes the simple comfort of sitting beside him. He glances over; Potter's head is back against the cushion of the chair, his eyes closed. He's beautiful, Draco thinks, all rumpled dark hair and golden skin. Draco loves the slope of Potter's nose, the sweep of Potter's thick lashes across his cheek. He wants to lean over, to brush his mouth against Potter's, to taste the warmth of him on his tongue.

"You're watching me," Potter says, a small smile playing across his lips. He turns his head, his eyes fluttering open, and he looks so stunning in the moonlight that it nearly takes Draco's breath away.

"Potter," Draco says, almost without thinking, and something shifts on Potter's face. He sits up, frowning; the chair squeaks beneath his thighs.

"What's wrong?" Potter asks.

Draco shakes his head. He can't tell Potter what the sight of him does to Draco, can't admit these feelings that are twisting up inside of him. He's falling for Potter, he realises, and that's bloody fucking stupid of him. Draco knows that full well, but the enormity of it is nearly enough to bend him over, to make his body tremble. And then Potter's there beside him, kneeling next to Draco, his face crumpled in worry.

"Malfoy," Potter says gently, and Draco looks at him, a swell of emotion that he can barely contain welling up.

And so he does the only thing he can think of doing. He kisses Potter, and his mug of tea falls from his hands, shatters against the ground as Draco catches Potter's cheeks, cupping Potter's face between his palms. Potter tastes like tea and firewhisky himself, and the faintest hint of something sour. Draco shudders with want, and he drags his teeth across Potter's bottom lip.

"Will you fuck me?" Draco asks, and he wants this so badly, wants Potter to take him inside, to spread him across the bed, to take him wildly, to bury himself deep inside of Draco. He pulls back, looking at the stunned expression on Potter's face. "Please," Draco says. "I can't bear to feel anything else right now."

"You're not in the right mindset," Potter protests, and Draco just looks at him. He reaches over, places his palm around the swell of Potter's cock in his jeans. Potter breathes in, sharp and quick. "I don't want to take advantage of your--"

"Potter, shut it." Draco presses harder, his fingers smoothing across the rough denim of Potter's jeans, Potter's cock surging against his hand. "I've been thinking about this for weeks, and now we finally have some fucking privacy." He can tell the moment Potter gives in by the way Potter's breath quickens, by the faint flush that spreads across Potter's throat, by the almost imperceptible widening of Potter's eyes. "Please," Draco says, and he doesn't even care that there's a pleading note in his voice.
He doesn't want to think about his father, doesn't want to think about the war, doesn't want to remember the nightmares that still haunt him sometimes. He wonders if he'll ever be rid of them, if there'll ever be a time when something doesn't remind him of that annus horribilis, doesn't make him flinch thinking that he's heard the sweep of the Dark Lord's robe, the rustle of Nagini's slither across the Manor floors. Just thinking of it makes him tense, sends a shudder through him.

There's a part of him that's bloody terrified of snakes now. Pathetic for a Slytherin, he thinks.

"Okay," Potter says after a long moment. "I assume you want to go inside?"

Draco just looks at Potter, certain that arousal must make Potter even more of an idiot than usual. "Given that it's January, yes. I'd rather not freeze my bollocks off here, delightful though this fire might be."

Potter's flush spreads up to his cheeks. "Well, yeah," he says eloquently, and Draco realises he might have to pull his hand away before Potter can think in a proper fashion. He does so a bit reluctantly, letting his thumb stroke along the swell of Potter's prick. Potter bites his lip, watching Draco, and Draco can't help but lean over the arm of his chair, just enough to brush his mouth along Potter's jaw. Potter breathes out, a little unevenly, and he huffs a soft laugh. "Merlin. You're sure of this?"

"Very much so." Draco's bloody terrified, if he's honest. But he wants Potter, and he wants to do this with Potter, to take this final step. It feels as if this is where they've been heading since that first day in the greenhouses, perhaps even earlier, if Draco admits to himself how far back his sexual interest in Potter goes. He glances up at Potter, suddenly feeling awkward. "Unless you'd rather not--"

"No," Potter says quickly. "I mean yes, I want to." He looks over at Draco, and Draco can see his uncertainty. "It's just...I've never done this." He chews on his lip, "I mean, with a bloke." And then his face floods with colour again. "Well. The arse bit. I've never done that with anyone. I might be terrible at it."

As if Draco would know. He snorts, and Potter looks a bit offended. Draco twists the afghan around his hand, watching as his knuckles press through the open holes in the weave. It takes him a moment, and then he says quietly, "I haven't either, you know."

Potter swallows. "Yeah." He rubs the back of his neck, not looking at Draco. "So this would be a first for both of us."

"Yes." The awkwardness is back, worse than before. Draco's half-afraid he might die here of sheer embarrassment. "But I've read books about how to do it," he says.

"Me too." Potter clears his throat. "I mean, they had pictures so I think I've the gist of it." He stops, his face wrinkling up. "Unless you want to...you know. To me." The look on his face is distinctly uncomfortable. Still, he squares his shoulders. "I would. If you want."

Draco wants to roll his eyes, but there's something charming about Potter's willingness to push himself that far. Particularly when he hasn't even yet sucked Draco off. "Later," Draco says, and he reaches over, trails his fingertips along Potter's throat. "Right now, I want to know what it feels like to have you inside of me." He feels his face heat up. Merlin, but it's difficult to talk about sex, he thinks. He feels a right idiot. But he wants Potter, so he admits, "I've tried before, with my own fingers." He bites his lip. "Just to see how it feels."

Potter's eyes are bright in the light from the bonfire. "Whilst wanking?" he asks, and his voice is almost a croak.
"Yes." Draco can't look at him. "It's harder than you might think. The angle and all." He wishes he'd had more firewhisky for this conversation. "My arms aren't quite long enough." Well. To do what Draco would like them to, at least.

"Oh." Potter falls silent for a long moment, his breath faint and ragged against the rumble of the surf and the crackle of the fire. "Could I…" He inhales, slow and loud. "Fuck, but I'd really like to do that to you."

Draco doesn't answer. Instead, he swishes his wand to fix the broken mug with a Reparo, drapes the afghan over his arm, and stands. "Put out the fire, Potter, and come inside." He lets his hand trail across Potter's shoulders; it only shakes a little bit. "I'll show you what I'll let you do." He walks away, into the kitchen, his heart hammering. He can't believe they're about to do this. He's wanted it for so long. Longer than he's probably willing to admit, even to himself.

Taking a deep breath, Draco sets the mug on the table as Potter's dousing the fire outside. He drapes the afghan across the back of a chair. He can see Potter moving through the rippled glass of the window, and he closes his eyes, tries to calm himself. And then Draco realises he can't fuck Potter fully clothed. His hand goes to his left forearm, and he wonders wildly if he could cast a glamour over it. But it won't work. He knows; he's tried before. The Mark always shows through somehow.

Well. Potter will have to live with it, Draco thinks. If his Mark's a dealbreaker, best to find out now.

Slowly, Draco draws off his jumper then unbuttons his shirt, draping both over another chair back. He continues almost methodically, taking off his boots and socks, stripping off his trousers, finally sliding out of his pants. He's stood in the middle of Bill and Fleur Weasley's kitchen, utterly starkers when Potter comes in. Potter stops, and his mouth hangs open in astonishment.

Draco tries not to flinch. "This is me, Potter." Draco spreads his arms, almost defiantly, lets Potter see everything, his narrow, scarred chest, his jutting hipbones, the swell of his half-hard prick, even his Mark. "If you want me, you'll have to take me as I am."

He's shocked when Potter shakes his head, bemused, and strides over to Draco, not even hesitating to embrace him, to kiss him with surprising gentleness. The press of his body against Draco's sends a shiver down Draco's spine. He loves the way Potter's jumper scrapes across his chest, the way Potter's jeans feel against his prick. "I'll take all of you," Potter says against Draco's lips. "I like how you are."

At that, Draco pulls his mouth free. "Potter, have you looked at the Mark? Are you sure?" He doesn't know why this is important, when he's about to give Potter access to his body, but it is.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Malfoy, I've seen your Mark before." Potter stops for a moment, his cheeks a deepening pink. He takes a step back, but his hand stays on Draco's bare hip, warm and solid. "I might have followed you to the showers once," he says quickly. "Don't hate me."

To be bluntly honest, Draco's more gobsmacked than angry. "What did you see?" Draco scrutinises Potter's face, the blush that rises further telling him what he needs to know. A laugh bubbles up, taking Draco by surprise. "Potter, you awfully pervert. Did you watch me wank?"

"Not entirely." Potter's hand ghosts over Draco's side, following the curve of Draco's lower back. The light touch sends gooseflesh rising across Draco's bare skin. "I mean, you'd started. But I didn't stay." Potter licks his bottom lip, and Draco wants to press himself against Potter, to rut against him. "If it helps," Potter says, "it was the hottest thing I'd ever seen to that point."

"Because that makes it so much better." Draco shakes his head. "When was this?" Draco doesn't
know why he demands to know, but his interest is piqued.

"October." Potter's hanging his head, examining the neatly swept wooden floor with an embarrassed grimace.

This changes everything, Draco thinks. "How early in October?" He eyes Potter curiously.

"Maybe the second week?" Potter glances up at Draco from under his shaggy mess of hair. He looks like a frightened puppy, Draco thinks, and his heart skips a beat.

Still, Draco shakes his head slowly. "And here I've been so worried. That you might find out. That you might push me aside for this. And you've known since bloody October?" He's a bit irked now, he thinks. Potter might have said; it certainly would have made some of their earlier encounters less troubled for Draco.

"I didn't want to make you uncomfortable," Potter says after a moment. "You seemed so set on hiding it away." His hand slides down Draco's forearm, his fingers brushing against the Mark almost hesitantly.

"For bloody good reason." Draco fidgets as Potter wraps his arms around Draco's waist. He pulls away a little as Potter kisses his neck. He's so angry, and yet, so terribly relieved. It's okay. Potter knows. He's known the whole time, and he's still chosen to be with Draco.

And that, Draco thinks, is the crux of it all, isn't it? Potter's not afraid of Draco, not like the others are. Slowly, Draco's ire starts to seep away. Potter's thumb traces the sinuous curve of the Mark, his gaze fixed on it. "This doesn't define you," Potter says quietly. "Not anymore."

How Draco wants to believe him. And yet he can't. Not entirely. "Are you certain?" he asks, and Draco can't keep the mocking tone from his voice.

Potter pulls back, looks at him so intently that Draco has to turn his head away. "No," Potter says after a moment. "But I really want to be."

Draco closes his eyes, sways towards Potter. "You're still a tosser," he whispers, and his eyes flutter open. Potter's smiling a little.

"Am I?"

"So very much," Draco says. He swallows, tosses his head, his hair swinging back. Potter's eyes gleam behind his glasses, and Draco catches Potter's wrist, pulls Potter's palm up to kiss. "But I believe there was something said about fucking me. Preferably senseless, if you can."

Potter stills against Draco. "Are you sure? We don't have to."

Draco wraps his arms around Potter's neck, kisses him fiercely, pushing Potter back against the kitchen counter. He rolls his naked hips against Potter's denim-clad ones, their mouths meeting and pulling apart, their bodies pressed together, Potter's hands gripping Draco's bare arse, his fingers digging into Draco's skin. Draco pulls back enough to speak. "I'm sure. And we don't have to, but I hope we will."

"God, I want to," Potter says, almost fervently, and Draco steps away, letting Potter's bold gaze slide down his body. He catches Potter's hand, pulls him towards the narrow staircase.

The ladder-like stairs are too steep for more than one of them at a time. Draco goes up first, naked and only holding his wand, body light and shivering, Potter's hand trailing on his arse. Potter comes
up behind him, crowding him to the bed. They fall across the simple, worn quilt, the waves crashing outside.

"Do you want light?" Potter asks, and when Draco nods, Potter opens a lantern on the side table, casting a Lumos on the wick, then closing the glass. The night is dark and the little room is snug against the wind. Draco stretches out along the bed, pulling Potter down onto him, lets Potter kiss him, lets Potter's hands wander between his legs, across his heavy bollocks, Potter's thumb petting the soft dip of his arse.

Draco gasps, and his body shivers with desire. "I need to say some spells," he says breathlessly.

"I could help," Potter suggests. He sits up on the bed, still fully clothed, much to Draco's dismay. Draco reaches over, starts to pull at Potter's jumper.

"You've too many bloody clothes on," Draco says, a bit petulantly, he supposes, but Merlin, he wants to see the whole of Potter's body, to feel Potter's nakedness against him.

Potter just laughs, and helps Draco tug his jumper up over his head. His t-shirt follows, and then Potter stands, undoing his jeans and letting them slide off his narrow hips. He's standing in front of Draco in nothing but his y-fronts, the sharp cut of his hipbones and long stretch of his abdomen muscles rising up over the waistband. The white cotton's jutting forward, taut across his swelling prick, and his chest is wide and solid, fuzzed ever so lightly with dark hair, his nipples hard and brown. He looks glorious, Draco thinks, his breath catching in the back of his throat as he takes in Harry bloody Potter standing like this in front of him.

And then Draco exhales and says, a bit roughly, "All of it, Potter."

"Yeah?" Potter sounds a bit breathless himself. He hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his y-fronts, pulling them down until Draco can see the edge of the crisp dark curls there. "Certain about that?"

Draco's cock feels like it might explode at any moment. He wants to touch himself, but he's afraid to. He wants this to last, to be incredible. He looks up at Potter and just nods, settling back on his elbows, his hips canted open, his thighs spread wide. Potter's watching him, his gaze fixed on Draco's prick, and Potter draws in a shuddering sigh.

"Merlin," Potter murmurs, and he pushes at his y-fronts, wincing a little as his cock springs free, hard and ruddy and bobbing in front of him. Draco can't stop staring at him, can't look away from the sight of Potter naked, his prick weeping for Draco. "All right?" Potter asks, his voice soft and rumblly.

"A bit, yeah." Draco reaches out, lets his fingers brush against Potter's flat belly, down to the base of his cock. It jumps when he runs a thumb along the seam of the underside, and Potter hisses. Draco looks up at him. "You want me."

Potter frowns. "Well, yeah. Obviously."

The thought of Potter sliding inside him sends a shudder up Draco's spine. This doesn't feel real. Not entirely. He worries that he's making a fool of himself, that he ought to be focussed on his father, and not Potter, standing naked beside this bed. And yet, he needs Potter, needs not to think, not to feel anything except this curling warmth deep inside of him. He lets his hand fall away, looks up at Potter. "Spells," he murmurs, trying to remind himself what he's read, what Ravi had told them. "I'm not the one with the wand, after all."

Potter laughs and moves closer to the edge of the bed. He squats slightly, just enough to grab his
"So you weren't expecting this, but you have condoms?" Draco shakes his head, almost appalled. "What'd you do, nick them from the common room when no one was looking?"

Potter clears his throat, looking a bit sheepish.

"My God," Draco says, sitting up a bit. "You did."

"Everyone was nicking them, Malfoy." Potter pulls the little foil packets out of the pocket of his jeans. He tosses them on the bed. "Besides, I was hoping this might happen eventually, so I thought I should have some ready." He grins. "I've been practising how to get them on; Hermione showed me with a banana."

Draco frowns at him. "I'm not that bloody easy, you bastard." Except he is, evidently, judging from his current position. Still, there's a certain propriety to attempt to maintain, he thinks, that little white lie that keeps him from feeling a complete slag.

"Never said you were." Potter has his wand out as well.

And for some inexplicable reason that irks Draco as well. He knows he's being contrary and it's probably just that he's nervous about what they're about to do. Pansy's lectured him more than once about how virginity is a bloody social construct, but it doesn't change the fact for Draco at least that he's about to give a certain aspect of his sexual awakening up to Potter of all people, and he's bloody terrified about it. So his scowl deepens, and he snaps, "Maybe you took them to use with Bones."

"As if Zabini would let me near her now," Potter says with a laugh. He reaches down, lets his fingers trail across Draco's chest, following the ropy lines of the Sectumsempra scars. His face shifts, sobered. "I did this, didn't I?"

Draco looks away, a bit overcome. He shivers at Potter's touch. "Yes," he says quietly. "Severus couldn't get dittany on them fast enough."

Potter's watching his fingertip slide over the thickest scar, right above Draco's heart. "I'm sorry."

"You were a prat." Draco leans back on his elbows, looking up at Potter. "But so was I."

"I suppose." Potter's lost in tracing the scars now, his finger sliding up over Draco's shoulder.


"Right." Potter blinks a bit, then lets his hand fall away. He draws a slightly ragged breath, then casts the preparatory Impervius for protection Ravi had taught them, then he surprises Draco with an emptying spell for cleanliness and a mild numbing spell--"just in case," Potter says, and that makes Draco's arse clench just a bit. Draco shifts on the bed as each spell goes through him, feeling oddly strange, Potter's magic sparking over his skin, as well as deep inside of his body. He's not entirely certain he likes it, but his stomach still flutters in anticipation.

"Roll over," Potter says, and Draco does, wincing as his prick presses between his belly and the mattress. It's all he can do not to rut his hips against the coverlet; the pressure feels bloody brilliant against the head of his cock. Potter finishes off with the lubrication spell he's managed to perfect, and he spreads the slick across Draco's arse, smoothing it through his crease. Draco's turned just a bit, watching over his shoulder. Potter's hand shakes a bit against Draco's arsecheek; he looks up at Draco, then swallows. "Is it all right if I use my fingers?" Potter licks his lip. "It's just I've been
reading up on this a bit, you know? And they say this is…” He clears his throat, his face a bit flushed. "If you're stretched a bit, you know, properly, it helps later."

Oh, and the thought of Potter's fingers up inside of him, rather than his own, makes Draco's breath catch. "All right," Draco says after a long moment, and he stretches out on his belly, the cool, wet feeling on his arse, in his hole, unfamiliar and exciting.

The first finger is startling, making Draco tense, and then, as he relaxes, it's surprisingly easy. More so than when he's tried to do this to himself, Draco has to admit. He'd contorted himself in ways he'd rather not try again, barely managing to get the tip of a finger into himself. Potter twists, and his knuckle slides into Draco's hole.

"How's that?" Potter's being cautious, perhaps overly so.

Draco wiggles his hips a little. He can only just feel Potter's finger inside of him, this slightly strange pressure that's a bit disturbing, a bit brilliant. He's almost afraid he'll need the loo, but then Potter presses further in, the tip of his finger brushing against something, and Draco's body jerks. "Oh." Draco exhales. He lets himself adjust to the shivery feeling, flattening himself out along the mattress, and then he says, perhaps a bit breathlessly, "You can put in another."

Potter slides in a second finger, ever so carefully, and Draco can feel his body open to accept the new thickness. However, the third finger burns a bit, and he winces, pressing his face against the coverlet. "Ow."

"Sorry," Potter says, and he starts to pull his hand back.

"I swear to Merlin I will kill you if you take your fingers out of me, you bastard," Draco snaps, and Potter stills. "Give me a moment." Draco pushes back against Potter's hand, willing his body to loosen, and then Potter's fingers go deeper, and Draco's stomach twinges. But it's not bad, just unfamiliar. Draco can feel his bollocks tighten, and he shifts against the mattress again, his prick dragging wetly over the folds of the coverlet. Fuck, but Draco wants Potter so much. He can tell that he'll get lost in this, in Potter joined to his body this way, and he needs that right now. He spreads his thighs wider.

"All right?" Potter asks, and Draco nods.

"I think you can try to fuck me now." Draco's body's still tight around Potter's knuckles, and he thinks perhaps they should go slow, but he wants to go faster, wants to implode in a million shattering fragments, wants to feel the shudder and jerk of Potter's body inside his. In his body, oh Merlin. He feels so full already, so stretched around Potter's hand. He rolls his hips back, his knees pressing into the mattress, his arse pushing up. He wants more than this; he wants Potter's prick impaling him.

"Hold on." Potter slides his fingers in and then out carefully, making Draco groan softly as they rub over the ring of muscle at his entrance. "Let me try just a little more."

Draco can feel the stretch of three fingers in his arse, twisting deeper into him. "Potter. That's a lot already." He's gasping, but then his body is opening again, and he groans, canting his hips a bit more. "Fuck."

A hand massages his lower back as Potter works three fingers and the tip of a fourth into him, and Draco clenches, his body shaking. "That's good, Malfoy. You're doing so well." Potter's voice sounds a bit reedy, a bit thin. "Merlin, if you could see yourself."
Draco rises up, pushing his arse back and impaling himself on Potter's hand. "Potter. I want this to be your prick."

"It will be, you git. Just give yourself a moment to adjust." Potter's gritting the words out between clenched teeth. And then Potter's fingers are sliding out again, and Draco wants to object. He feels stretched out, empty without Potter inside of him.

And then Potter says the lube charm again, and slickness runs through Draco's crease, pooling around his hole. Another moment and Draco can hear the spell to open the condom packet, hear the rip of the foil, hear the soft sound of the latex being rolled down Potter's prick.

"Don't forget your own Impervius," Draco says.

Potter casts the spell, albeit a bit impatiently, then his fingers are petting Draco's quivering arsehole. "Are you ready for me to try this?"

"Yes," Draco looks back over his shoulder. Potter's face is flushed pink, and his prick is latex-clad and enormous, bobbing between his legs. Potter looks wrecked and they haven't started. Draco licks his lip. "And do try to last, Potter." He yelps as Potter's hand smacks against the curve of Draco's arse.

The first slide of Potter's prick lodges the head deep inside Draco. Draco tenses, and Potter stops. "All right there?" He strokes Draco's side carefully.

Draco's eyes are watering. It hurts, more than Potter's fingers had. "Yes. But hold on." The first stroke was a bit more than he was expecting, and his body is shivering and he feels a bit ill. He tries to relax around the swollen head of Potter's cock, telling himself it'll be better in a moment. They both breathe deeply, connected together. Draco hears the surf, and wills himself to be quiet, to accept this. He wants this. Badly.

"I could pull out," Potter says quietly.

"Don't you fucking dare." Draco shifts a little, winces as Potter moves inside of him. He spreads his legs a bit wider, pushes his arse back just a little. "Okay, Potter," Draco says after a moment. "Please move now."

Potter slicks some more lube on his protruding shaft, wiping it also on Draco's stretched arse. "Tell me if it hurts."

His voice is pained. Draco knows this must be costing him effort.

Potter grasps Draco's hips, holding him still, and he shifts, pulling out just a little, then pushing. Draco sinks his head to his hands, pushing his arse back, spreading his knees as wide as he can. Potter's fingers press into the soft flesh of Draco's hips, and Draco focuses on the burn of Potter's nails digging into his skin. It helps him focus.

"More, Potter," Draco chokes out.

Potter slides home, and Draco's body is a wash of shivers and a stubborn, irreducible pride. Draco has taken Potter's cock, all the thick bluntness of it. Up his arse. And here he is, letting him fuck him.

On the next stroke in and out, Draco shudders, begging Potter to stop.

"Should I pull out now?" Potter sounds genuinely concerned. For a moment, Draco considers it. But he's come too far and he knows from his reading that it can be like this, especially when both parties
are new to it.

"No," Draco says, a bit breathlessly, "but remember, be less vigorous. It's not like shagging a girl. This is much more sensitive." Draco doesn't want to think about Potter fucking the Weaslette. He wants to focus on this being his first fuck, their first time together.

Potter places his hands over Draco's hands and moves gently with him. It's featherlight and careful, and Draco begins to enjoy the stroke. He's awash with contradictions—the hardness of Potter entering his body, the softness of their skin together, the loud crash of the waves, the silence of the room save for their laboured breathing.

Somewhere in the middle, they go through a change. Something shifts. The pain settles, deepens, and suddenly the press of Potter's prick into him is so bloody good, Draco never wants it to stop. His body is on fire with Potter, singing with energy. Potter's lips are on his shoulders, his nape, his teeth scraping across Draco's sweaty skin.

"Fuck," Draco groans, and he gives himself into this feeling, the weight of Potter bent over him, the press of their bodies together, the slick slide of Potter's prick into him, the slap of Potter's bollocks against the back of Draco's thighs.

And Potter's whispering in his ear now. "You're amazing. You feel so good." Draco's barely balanced on his elbows, his knees pressed into the mattress, his head buried against his hands. Nothing's ever been like this; Draco can feel his cock swinging with each of Potter's thrusts, the head of it catching against the coverlet. It's amazing, he thinks, and he loves the way he feels stretched wide, so open for Potter, pleasure sparking across his skin.

The bed starts to creak, and as they rock together, Potter's prick hardens further. "Fuck. Malfoy." Potter's gasping, and he's gripping Draco's hip with one tight hand, his body bent over Draco's, the heat of him against Draco's skin. Potter groans, grinding his hips against Draco's arse. "I'm going to--" He breaks off into a gasp, his body shuddering.

"Come on," Draco chokes out. "Bloody hell, Potter, I want your spunk in me--" Draco tightens around Potter. He wants this, wants to feel Potter come apart over him, wants to know that he's done this to Potter. And as Potter thrusts harder, deep inside Draco's body, Draco wraps a hand around his prick, pulling as best he can, his shoulders slamming into the mattress, his cheek pressed painfully against the coverlet. "Fuck me, Potter," Draco says. "Harder, you tosser," and Potter's hips are slamming into Draco's arse, nearly lifting Draco's knees off the bed. "Fuck me!" Draco's practically keening now, the words a mantra that he's chanting, gasping, his whole body feeling as if it's on bloody fire.

"Shit," Potter cries out, his prick pulsing deep inside Draco, his body bent over Draco's back, one hand barely holding him up as his hips jerk forward, trying to bury his cock as far as he can into Draco's body. "Malfoy--" It's a shuddering gasp against the slick skin of Draco's shoulder blade.

And Draco's jerking at his own aching prick, his fingers sliding slickly over his foreskin, pulling it tight over his ruddy, slick head, Potter still lodged deep inside him. One stroke. Two strokes, a third one, his fist so fucking tight around him, and then Draco's coming in sudden spurts that spatter across the coverlet, his body clenching so hard he can't breathe.

They collapse on the bed, gasping, lying together, still connected.

"Fuck," Draco mumbles into the coverlet, and Potter starts laughing, his chest shaking against Draco's back. It feels delightful, Draco thinks, his body limp and languid.
"Merlin," Potter breathes out against the curve of Draco's neck. "That was bloody amazing."

All Draco can do is groan softly, feeling the burn of Potter's prick still buried inside of him. He loves it; he never wants Potter to move.

And then Potter does, and Draco protests, snarling his displeasure as Potter rolls onto his back, his prick sliding out of Draco's battered arse. Potter holds the base of the Muggle condom, then rolls further, to the side of the bed, and takes it off, vanishing it.

"Brilliant," Potter manages to say.

The room smells like sweat and sex and salt air, Draco thinks, as Potter pulls him close. He feels the soft tingle of a cleaning spell, then the Impervius slipping away. Potter whispers a Nox, and the lights fade, shadows falling around them, the only light coming from the small, lace-covered window.

"Wet spot," Draco murmurs, and Potter shifts towards the wall, tugging Draco with him as he wrangles the coverlet, tucking them both beneath it. Draco's body is beginning to ache, but he feels so full, so raw, so different now. And most of all, he feels so close to Potter.

Stretched out on Potter's bare chest, Potter's arm over him, their skin warm against each other, Draco mumbles, "Thank you."

Potter just cards his fingers through Draco's hair. "Back at you, Malfoy," he whispers, and then Potter's lips brush against Draco's temple. Draco's body is beginning to ache, but he feels so full, so raw, so different now. And most of all, he feels so close to Potter.

This is what it feels like to be alive. To be calm. To bloody be.

He exhales slowly, feeling oddly safe here with Potter, hearing the steady thump of Potter's heartbeat echoing in his chest, the soft, even huff of Potter's breath. They're silent for a long moment, and Draco's lost in his thoughts about Potter.

And Draco's almost dozing, his body sated, his mind settled, when Potter shifts beneath him just a bit, and whispers, "Malfoy."

Draco looks up, his chin on Potter's chest, Potter's arm warm around him. "Yeah?"

Potter's quiet, and then he says, "This tutoring we're doing. Do you really think it's helping me?"

And that's not a question Draco was expecting. Not here, not now. He studies Potter through the dimness of the bedroom, the way Potter's not quite looking at him, the way Potter's body tenses a bit beneath him, and Draco somehow knows that this is important to Potter.

"I think it is," Draco says finally. "Your marks are improving, aren't they?"

Potter hesitates, and then he says, his voice low. "I reckon." His fingers brush across Draco's back, feather-light.

Perhaps it's the darkness around them, perhaps it's the intimacy of what they've just done, but Draco feels as if Potter's confessing something to him, telling him something that Draco needs to listen to. Draco half-sits, his elbow propping him up as he looks down at Potter's face, half-hidden in the shadows of the eaves. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing." And then Potter looks up at Draco, a slight furrow between his brows.

"Potter," Draco says softly. He reaches out, runs a finger across Potter's forehead, pressing Potter's brow smooth. "Tell me."

At that, Potter's jaw works a bit. He looks away. "I'm not a swot," he says after a moment. "I never will be. Not like you or Hermione." He catches his lip between his teeth, lets it slide free. "Hell, even Ron's better at school than me."

Draco's surprised. "You're the most powerful wizard in Britain," he says. "You just brought down the Dark Lord before you were eighteen, and you're worried about bloody schoolwork? Are you mad?" He doesn't understand it. Potter has the most raw magical power Draco's ever seen; he's practically the walking poster boy defying Draco's father's expectations of half-blood wizards. Draco's never met anyone in the wizarding world with Muggle blood who's like Potter. Draco takes a deep breath, and says, "I've been taught all my life that someone like you wasn't possible. That no one who was a half-blood could be this powerful." He lays his hand on Potter's chest, feels the thrum of magic that seeps from Potter's bare skin. "And then you came around and dispatched that bloody madman in May—with a bloody Expelliarmus, might I add, you twit—" And Potter just smiles faintly at that. Draco runs his fingers over Potter's chest, circling them lightly around Potter's left nipple, watching the way it puckers, hardens at his touch. "And everything I thought to be true fell apart around me."

"I was just bloody lucky," Potter says, his voice soft.

Draco shakes his head. He can't believe Potter can't see his own power. "You're you, Potter. You don't need to be head of our class." He looks up at Potter, meets his gaze. "You're bloody head of us all."

Potter reaches up, touches Draco's cheek. "But it's still hard for me." He smoothes Draco's hair back, his fingers slipping through the strands, down to Draco's shoulder. "I can do the practical work, but all the reading…" He trails off.

"Oh," And then Draco understands. He thinks. "Is it…" He stops. "When did you learn how to read, Potter?"

"Years too late, I think."

Draco can see the faint flush on Potter's cheeks through the shadows. He wonders what it must have been like, going to Muggle schools the way Potter had. Draco'd been taught at an early age by tutors shared between certain families. Greg's and Millie's and Theo's mostly. It's how they'd known each other before Hogwarts; they'd all been taught together for years, circling through the small schoolrooms in one another's houses. Draco knows there are wizarding primary schools here and there, but those are meant mostly for people like the Weasleys or his cousin Luna. Draco'd learnt how to read when he was three, his tutor carefully helping him sound out the words in the wizarding books. He frowns at Potter. "How old?" he asks.

"They started us off in Reception," Potter says, and Draco has no idea what that means, but he tries not to be impatient. "Only it didn't really take for me. The letters didn't really make sense to me, and when I'd go home with my work for my aunt and uncle to help me out, they never did." Potter falls silent for a moment. "I was seven, maybe, before it even started to fall in place, and that's because I was trying so hard on my own. My teachers just thought I was thick."

And Draco feels a swell of anger rise up in him that anyone could think that of Potter. "You're not," he snaps, ignoring all the times he'd said just that to Potter, sneered at him for being slow in class.
Potter gives him a half-smile. "You've changed your mind, then?"

Draco's cheeks warm. "I never said I wasn't a tosser, Potter." He searches Potter's face. "Is that why
you take so long to read things, then? Even now?" He's noticed it in their tutoring, in the way Potter's
eyes track slowly across the page--sometimes frustratingly so--and in the way Potter occasionally
mouths the words to himself, a furrow between his brow. At the time, Draco'd just thought Potter
was being a wanker, deliberately trying to lag behind when Draco wanted to jump ahead, his mind
already skipping to the next paragraph.

"Yeah," Potter says, and his face creases into a frown. "Sometimes the letters get tangled up in my
head." He touches his temple, gives Draco a wry look. "So you're not wrong when you call me
thick. No one has been."

"Rubbish." Draco glares down at him. "I've just tried to get a rise out of you, you prat." He stops,
then adds, a bit self-defensively, "It's not easy being in class with someone of your magical ability. In
fact, it's bloody annoying. It takes me ages sometimes to perfect a charm or a spell, and you can just
snap your sodding fingers, and you've got it." He huffs in irritation. "So no, you utter wanker, you're
not thick." Draco settles back against the pillows, Potter's arm beneath his neck. "All this means is
that we'll need to come up with other ways to help you in tutoring." He looks over at Potter. "You
might have told me this earlier. It changes everything."

Potter's just looking at him, his eyes wide and green without his glasses. "I thought you'd mock me."

And Draco probably would have a few months back. Still his frown deepens. "Honestly, I should
have realised it myself. You always did better when I broke it down for you, without the readings.
It's not that you don't understand it, Potter. Your brain just works a bit differently. You're far more
hands-on, aren't you?"

"I reckon." Potter seems a little more relaxed, a little less unhappy. "I think it's why I like Defence.
There's something about it that just clicks for me."

Draco considers. "Honestly, Potions shouldn't be that difficult." He feels a bit excited now, his mind
shifting into gear as he thinks of ways he could tailor Potter's experience in potionbrewing. "Perhaps
we should see if Ravi would let us borrow the classroom for tutoring next week. I wonder if perhaps
you might do even better if I take you through the process of brewing step-by-step, and show you
how the theory works in practice."

Potter's just looking at him, a bit bemused. "All right. If you think."

"I do." Draco's thoughts are whirling about, a plan settling into focus. "I think we should go back to
the Volubilis we started last term with. It's a good fundamental, if advanced, potion, which is why
Ravi began with it anyway. If we can break down the theory of that one for you, I think the rest of it
will start to fall into place--"

"Malfoy." Potter cups Draco's cheek with his fingertips, turning Draco to face him. "Breathe."

And Draco realises that he's been caught up in his excitement. He looks at Potter, at the way Potter's
smiling at him, and, oh, Draco thinks, his heart stuttering in his chest. This feels new, this twist of
raw emotion that goes through him, the way Potter can take away Draco's breath with just a gentle
gesture like this.

They're silent for a moment, and then Draco says, his voice a bit raw, "Your aunt and uncle were
utter shits for making you think you were thick."
Potter's mouth quirks up a bit further on one side. "They were shits for a lot of reasons," he says. "Starting with keeping me in the cupboard beneath the stairs for most of my life."

Draco frowns at that. "What?" Sometimes he thinks Potter doesn't make a lot of sense. "Why would anyone do that?" he demands, and then he narrows his eyes at Potter. "Are you taking the piss?"

"I wish I were." Potter's fingertips slide down Draco's throat, trailing through the web of scars on Draco's chest. Potter frowns a little, his face shuttering. "And I wish I hadn't done this to you."

"Well, that's two of us," Draco says, a bit distractedly. "But back to this cupboard, Potter. Are you telling me the people you lived with kept you like a bloody house elf?" He stops and considers. "Less than, really. I mean, our elves have proper rooms at the Manor, each to themselves. No one's in a sodding cupboard." The more he thinks about it the angrier he gets. "How old were you?"

Potter shrugs. "Started when I was a baby until just before I came to Hogwarts. Uncle Vernon moved me into the smallest bedroom when my Hogwarts letters arrived. I think he hoped the owls wouldn't find me there."

There's so bloody much to parse in that statement, Draco thinks. Multiple Hogwarts letters, to begin with, and multiple owls. But he starts with the most obvious. "There was a bedroom you could have been put in before?"

"It was my cousin's second room," Potter says, and Draco's eyes narrow.

"His second room." Draco rolls onto his side, looking down at Potter. "Whilst you were living in the bloody cupboard under the stairs?"

Potter doesn't say anything for a long moment, then he sighs. "The cupboard was cosy in its own way."

"It was a bloody cupboard, Potter," Draco snaps, and Merlin but he wants to find those Muggles who did this to Potter, who shoved him away like some piece of rubbish to be stored beneath a sodding staircase. "How dare they--you're the Saviour of the fucking Wizarding World--"

And then Potter shuts him up with a kiss. It's slow at first, but it takes Draco's breath away as Potter presses him back into the pillows, shifting so that he's lying across Draco, one hand clenched around Draco's hip.

"Oh," Draco says softly as Potter pulls away, looking down at Draco.

"You're getting angry," Potter says with a smile. His hair's falling over his forehead, a tangle of dark curls that shadows his eyes. He looks bloody gorgeous, Draco thinks, and he reaches out to trace the angle of Potter's jaw.

"I'm merely outraged," Draco points out, "at the treatment of a wizard such as yourself." He scowls. "They sound as if they're bloody wankers."

Potter's knuckles brush across Draco's cheek. " Aren't most family?"

Draco thinks of his own, of his father and his grandparents. Even his mother has her moments, he supposes. "You have a point."

And Potter laughs at that, a deep, throaty chuckle that makes Draco's toes curl into the mattress. He pulls Draco closer, presses his lips into the curve of Draco's shoulder. "I don't mind you being a bit protective, though."
"That's not what I was doing," Draco protests, but they both know he's lying. He shifts against Potter again, his back to Potter's chest, Potter's arm draped over him. It feels nice. They fall silent, both of them, Potter's face pressed against Draco's shoulder blade. Draco thinks he could stay like this forever, wrapped in Potter's warmth.

A deep exhaustion settles over him in the silence, one that goes all the way into his bones. His mind slows; he hears the soft evening of Potter's breath behind him, and then Potter murmurs, a bit drowsily, "Thanks, Malfoy."

Draco's fingers curl around Potter's. He squeezes lightly. "You're not a complete twat." Potter laughs; Draco hides his own smile in the soft cotton of the pillowcase.

He slips into sleep.

Beautiful, dreamless sleep.

***

The ebb and crash of the waves is soothing to Harry's soul, and the snug kitchen with its bright blue cooker are much as he remembers them from the time he'd spent here at Shell Cottage last year. He'd hastily persuaded the elves to pack up some food for them last night--he's eggs to cook for now and sandwiches for later. There's also a bottle of milk, a creamy yellow parcel of butter, and Bill has porridge oats in the dry goods jars he and Fleur keep. Harry unpacks the Hogwarts food from his satchel, then sets another charm against the winds to warm the room. He takes down a well-worn black pan from the hook on the chimney and sets to making breakfast.

He finds the kettle for tea and brews a pot of Fleur's beloved Mariage Frères Wizard Breakfast tea. She'd explained to him once that it's a bit spicier and the tea's rarer than the Muggle variant, but that both are better than English tea. Bill had been rolling his eyes behind Fleur's back, so Harry supposes this is a frequent topic of contention in their household. Frankly, he doesn't care. He just wants a good cuppa right now. He needs it this morning.

When the black pan is hot, Harry moderates the spell underneath, then melts a pat of butter and scrambles six eggs into it. He's no idea how hungry Malfoy is, but he's bloody ravenous. They'd fucked twice last night, the first time when they'd gone upstairs, then once again in the wee hours of the morning when Malfoy had woken him up just before dawn, his hands stroking along Harry's prick. It'd been bloody brilliant, really, slow and careful, Malfoy rising up over Harry, rubbing their cocks together until Harry'd grabbed Malfoy and rolled him over, saying the protective spells and somehow managing to get another condom on.

Sex with Malfoy is fucking amazing, Harry thinks. Better than it'd ever been with Ginny, and he and Gin had been good together. But Malfoy? There's something about the way Malfoy moves beneath Harry, the way he'd wrapped himself around Harry's hips, telling Harry exactly how he wanted to be fucked, his chest flushed, his eyes bright, his fingers twisting his own nipples. Harry could have fucked him all night, really; he could lose himself in Malfoy's long, lithe body, those lanky legs, that sharp tongue. And Malfoy's arse is so bloody tight. Harry's never felt anything like it, warm around his prick, clenching with every thrust.

Harry'd come even harder the second time around.

It's bloody brill. It really is, Harry thinks as he checks the porridge on the back of the hob, stirring it to make sure nothing is sticking.

"Why does it smell amazing and what are you doing?" Malfoy's drawl comes from the door, soft and
sleep-muffled. He's wearing a jumper and flannel pyjama trousers they'd found in Bill's drawers. Harry hopes Bill won't mind--he's also wearing a set.

"I'm cooking." Harry sets the eggs on the counter with a warming charm, then takes out a mug for Malfoy. "Tea?"

"How unusual. I thought only house elves could cook." For a moment, Harry thinks Malfoy's taking the piss, and then he realises that Malfoy's probably never had anyone cook for him who isn't a house elf.

Harry pours tea from the pot. "You do realise that not everyone has a kitchen filled with elves, yeah?"

"Poor bastards." Malfoy wanders over and investigates the tea, his eyebrows shooting up when he sees the tin. "William definitely married up," he comments as he takes the mug of tea with milk from Harry's hand, blowing on it. "Who knew a Weasley could have taste?"

Harry shakes his head at Malfoy's snobbishness. He supposes it's ingrained, like a habit, and he doesn't even know how arrogant it sounds, especially about a man whose porridge they're about to eat. "You look like you slept well."

Malfoy takes a sip of the tea. "Oh, this is amazing!" He smiles at Harry, and his cheeks flush. "And yeah, I did. Although I'm a little sore, too."

Harry turns back to the hob, his face warm from the memory of what they'd done, what Malfoy'd let him do last night. The sensation of being inside Malfoy--there really isn't anything in his experience to compare. Harry'd felt like he could feel all of Malfoy, like their bodies and minds were joined, like they were breathing one breath. It had been terribly intense and frightening and arousing all at once, and his stomach is still wobbly just thinking about it.

"Are you hungry?" Harry asks, and Malfoy nods. Harry hands him bowls and plates. "Set the table, and I'll serve."

They eat porridge and eggs at the kitchen table, not talking but listening to the gentle noise of the waves. They quickly drink out the tea, and Harry brews a second pot, thinking about what it would be like to have Malfoy like this, always. To share a bed and wake up with him, the two of them alone, together in a space like this. He can almost imagine it, and this shocks and excites him in ways he can't explain. It's oddly comfortable here like this, in their pyjamas, the cottage quiet around them. Harry doesn't want to think about having to go back to school, even though he knows they need to. They can't hide out here for long, and when they go back, there'll be hell to pay. They both know that.

But for now, it's him and Malfoy, and he can pretend the world outside doesn't exist. Harry thinks it's a bit pathetic how that makes him brilliantly happy.

After breakfast, Harry clears away the plates and bowls. When he finishing the dishwashing spell, he turns, catching Malfoy looking out of the window, wiping the corner of his eyes. He looks away when he realises Harry's watching him.

"Bugger off, Potter," Malfoy says, but there's no real heat in the words. He stares out at the surf, falling silent.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Harry asks, worrying that he's not doing the right thing for Malfoy. Maybe Malfoy needs to talk about this. Harry doesn't know what to say, not really. Lucius
Malfoy's a giant fucking wanker, but he's still Malfoy's dad. It's awkward though, Harry thinks, rubbing the back of his neck.

Malfoy shrugs and sighs. "There's nothing really to say." He doesn't look at Harry. "I don't really want to think about it either, thanks."

That seems fair to Harry. He wishes he could bridge this chasm between them, but if Malfoy needs his space, Harry gets it. He's felt the same way in recent months. Still, he wipes his hands on the tea towel hanging from one of the drawer pulls and looks over at Malfoy. "Can I do anything to distract you?" He's not ready to go back to Hogwarts, and he doesn't think Malfoy is either.

Malfoy's quiet for a moment, and then he says, "I'm already a bit sore from last night's distraction." Malfoy's lip quirks, and he shifts in his chair.

Harry bites his lip, a sharp warmth twisting through his belly. He did that to Malfoy, he thinks, and he feels a swell of pride. His gaze drops down to Malfoy's crotch, to the line of Malfoy's prick through the flannel of his pyjama bottoms. He hesitates. "I could blow you," Harry says after a moment. He's been thinking about this for a while, and he wants to try it. "I mean, if you like." He feels oddly shy.

Malfoy's mouth is open; he looks astonished. Harry worries that he's offended him.

"I mean, I don't have to," Harry says, and he can feel the warmth suffuse his face again. "But I've been curious, and I could try. It might be rubbish, but I'd stop when you told me to." Harry's tongue is tying itself in knots and he has a nervous flutter in the pit of his stomach.

"Potter, are you asking my permission to suck my prick?" Malfoy's frowning at him, almost as if he's angry, and it takes Harry back a bit.

Harry shifts on the balls of his feet. "Yes?" At the flare of heat in Malfoy's eyes, Harry adds, feeling a bit more certain of himself, "Yes I am."

A sharp, quick smile makes Malfoy's pointy face almost feral. "Well then. Have at. You have my express and delighted permission." Malfoy stops for a moment. "Although you'd better make it good." His fingers brush Harry's jaw. "I bloody well want to remember Harry Potter on his knees for me."

Harry snorts. "I bet you do."

Malfoy's smile just widens, but his eyes are soft, a bit nervous, Harry thinks. Malfoy casts a cushioning charm on the floor and turns in his chair, towards Harry. "Best take your glasses off," Malfoy says. "They'll only get in the way."

"Right." Harry sets his glasses on the table and kneels between Malfoy's spread thighs, a nervous excitement shivering through him. He has no idea if he can pull this off, but, well, he's read enough about it in the book Hermione gave him, and Malfoy's done it to him several times, and, really, Harry thinks he has to try.

With only slightly trembling hands, Harry pulls Malfoy's trousers down to his ankles, and helps him step one leg out of the flannel pyjamas. He's not wearing pants; that gives Harry a slight thrill. Malfoy's legs are long and pale in the daylight, and his prick is heavy and pink at the tip. Harry strokes him for a moment, watching Malfoy slouch lower in the chair, throw his head back. He looks edible, doesn't he? Harry guesses he's about to find out.

"Hold on," Malfoy puts a hand on his shoulder, then strokes a hand along Harry's neck with a
whisper. The charm tingles across the inside of Harry's throat. "Don't forget your spellwork."

"Thanks," Harry looks up at Malfoy for a moment, into the depth of his grey eyes, taking in the hungry expression on Malfoy's face when he looks at Harry. And then, taking a deep breath, Harry dives in.

The first taste is a surprise, musky and sharp but not unpleasant. Harry licks experimentally at Malfoy's slit and is rewarded with a sharp intake of breath and Malfoy's fingers threading through his hair. "Oh," Malfoy says, and he licks his lower lip.

"All right?" Harry asks.

Malfoy nods. "More than." He spreads his legs wider. "Keep on."

Harry positions his mouth, grips the base with his hand, and he brings his lips around the wet head of Malfoy's prick. Honestly, it's a bit challenging, especially as Malfoy pushes forward with his hips immediately. Harry is preoccupied with all of the things that have to happen at once, and he's trying to find a rhythm that he can maintain that works for both of them.

Malfoy's got both hands in his hair now, and is pulling Harry down on his prick. "That's right Potter," Malfoy says, a bit breathily. "Yeah. Suck my cock." A thrill goes through Harry at the words. He likes it when Malfoy's a bit demanding; something about it makes Harry's prick swell as well. He goes with it, trying to stroke with his hand to meet his lips the way the books said. Malfoy thrusts a little too hard, and Harry gags. Hard. He pulls off, choking a bit.

"Sorry, Potter," Malfoy says, sounding genuinely chagrined. "Are you all right?"

Harry regains the power of speech after a few more coughs. "Yeah. Sorry. It's okay."

He tries again, swirling his tongue around the tip of Malfoy's prick, bracing a little with his forearm so Malfoy doesn't thrust too hard. Malfoy reaches up, grasps the back of the chair behind him, his hips tilting up a bit towards Harry. "Fuck," Malfoy says, and Harry closes his mouth around the head of Malfoy's cock, tugging Malfoy's foreskin back with his fingertips. He likes the way Malfoy tastes, he realises, that salty bitterness of him. He hollows out his cheeks, letting the suction pull Malfoy's prick a bit deeper into his mouth. Malfoy's hand settles on the back of Harry's head, his fingers flexing lightly.

"Circe, yes. Potter." Malfoy's gasping again. "Make me come. Suck me off." Malfoy's voice is needy, punctuated with gasps as Harry grows more confident and takes more of him into his mouth, setting up a rhythm of his mouth and his hand together. Malfoy makes little pushes with his hips, and his hands are stroking through Harry's hair.

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It's bloody incredible, Harry thinks, awed that he has another bloke's prick in his mouth. He wants to suck Malfoy harder, to make him writhe beneath Harry's hands, beneath Harry's tongue. He drags his mouth along the underside of Malfoy's prick, feeling Malfoy shudder against him, and fuck, but that's bloody hot, isn't it? He sucks on Malfoy's foreskin, tugging at it lightly with his teeth before taking Malfoy back into his mouth, going down as far as he can without gagging. It's nothing like what Malfoy can do to Harry now, but Harry wants more, wants to be able to bury his nose in the crisp curls over Malfoy's bollocks, to breathe in the musky smell of Malfoy, to make Malfoy groan just like that.

Harry thinks he's just getting into it when Malfoy smacks his shoulder. "Potter. I'm going to-- You've got to pull off."
Harry's not sure whether he wants to swallow or not, and he dithers about it. So, when he does pull off, it's a bit late, and Malfoy's already screwing up his face, his body starting to shudder as he bends over Harry, gripping at Harry's shoulder. When his prick pops, Harry's face is literally covered with spunk, warm and sticky and bitter. Harry inhales a bit of it, which starts him coughing again, and his eyes are stinging. If he'd been wearing his glasses, he might have been better protected. Still, Harry can't help but think it's hot, particularly when Malfoy looks down at him with wide eyes, one finger dragging through the come on Harry's face. Malfoy lifts it to his mouth and sucks it clean, and Harry's whole body tenses with pure bloody lust.

"Jesus, Malfoy," Harry chokes out, and then he stumbles to the sink to wash off his face. When he returns and puts his glasses on, Malfoy is slumped in the chair, trousers still around his ankle, spent prick limp against his thigh.

"Fuck, Potter." Malfoy looks up at him, his face soft and warm. "That was bloody marvellous." He laughs. "I should have pressured you for oral earlier."

Harry blinks at him, frowning. "You didn't pressure me. I offered."

"Yeah." Malfoy gives him a lazy smile. "But I should have."

"Prat." Harry leans down, kisses him, slow and sweet. He can still taste Malfoy in his mouth, and it's a bloody turn-on. Harry's prick is rubbing in his own pyjama trousers, and he wants to get off. Desperately.

"Wank for me," Malfoy says, against Harry's mouth, his trousers still around his ankles. Harry lets his fingers trail along Malfoy's thigh, knuckles brushing over Malfoy's limp prick. Malfoy shivers. "I want to watch you pull yourself off. Give me a show." He pulls back, looking up at Harry. "On your knees, Potter."

Harry does as Malfoy asks. He drops to his knees, just out of Malfoy's reach, pulling his pyjamas down so his cock springs free. "Like this?" Harry lets his prick slide thick through his fist, his body aching for release.

"Fuck," Malfoy breathes out, and his eyes are fixed on Harry. He bites his lip. "Play with your nipples."

Harry does, pushing his t-shirt up with his other hand, his thumb smoothing across one hardened nipple, scraping his fingernails over it He rubs his foreskin too, up over the head of his prick, then back toward the base. Merlin, but he's so turned on. He never knew he'd like being on display like this, for Malfoy of all people. "That good?"

"Pinch your nipple." Malfoy's watching him hungrily, following the motion of his hand. He exhales when Harry twists his nipple between two fingers. "That's it, Potter. Circe, you look so good like this." His tongue darts out, sweeps between his lips. "Wank yourself harder."

And Harry's fist tightens around his shaft, and he starts pulling more quickly, finding a rhythm that makes Malfoy's breath quicken. Harry knows he's driving Malfoy mad, can see the way Malfoy's prick swells a bit, the way Malfoy reaches down and runs his fingers along his own length, his eyes fixed on Harry. "Good?" Harry can barely get the word out.

Malfoy's hand is curled around his own prick now, and he's stroking himself to hardness again. He nods, unable to speak, and Harry's almost overcome by the soft slap of their hands against their cocks, and he remembers their first time together, back in the greenhouse in November, that afternoon that had changed everything.
All Harry can do is balance and stroke, and yeah, just when he thinks he can’t stop, Malfoy says, "Come."

To his surprise, Malfoy's command tips him over the edge. Harry shoots all over the floor, thick spurts of come striking the smooth, worn surface. And then Malfoy's crying out, his fist tight around his own cock, and Harry watches as spunk spills from Malfoy's fingers, falling between his thighs, landing near Harry's own streaks of come.

Harry sinks back on his heels, breathing hard, Malfoy's gasps echoing in the silence of the kitchen.

"You're such an exhibitionist," Malfoy says after a moment, and yeah, Harry's embarrassed.

But he's also terribly chuffed. He leans forward, catches Malfoy's mouth with his. "I'm not the only one," he murmurs, and Malfoy laughs.

"I suppose not," he murmurs. "But you're the one cleaning up the floor."

After a leisurely exchange of kisses, they manage to get to their feet, pulling their pyjama trousers back up. Harry cleans the floor, then follows Malfoy back up the creaky stairs to get dressed. Malfoy takes charge of the rest of the cleaning spells—he tells Harry his domestic charms need work, which Harry can't fault him for—and he folds the flannel trousers back into Bill's wardrobe. Harry watches him effortlessly restore order in the small room with the quilt as well. When Malfoy goes back down the stairs, Harry musses it up a bit so it looks normal. It was too neat after Malfoy’d finished, even for Fleur and Bill's meticulous housekeeping.

They walk out in the wintry dunes. The wind is high, but their cloaks keep them warm, and Harry reaches for Malfoy's hand, holding it lightly as they climb out onto the sandy beach. After Scotland, it's not horribly cold. Still, it's too breezy to talk, so Harry looks at the waves, the rippling sand. The knowledge that they have to go back is heavy in his mind, and he worries about Malfoy. From what little Malfoy’d said last night, his father is spell-damaged—and permanently brain-injured from a medical standpoint. Malfoy doesn't know how long his father will be in St Mungo's, and Harry supposes it's going to be a while. He wonders if Malfoy's father's condition is anything like Alice and Frank Longbottom's, whether he will be permanently kept on the Janus Thickey Ward and Malfoy and his mother will join Neville and his grandmother in the family visiting hours.

Harry doesn't know quite what to say, though, to Malfoy. When Harry thinks about Lucius, he feels numb. He thinks about Remus, about Tonks, about Fred, all the people who've died and the complicity of Malfoy's father--and Malfoy himself--in these deaths. But Harry's also sorry that Malfoy is in pain and he can see the intensity of his grief. Harry supposes that grief is grief, whether or not the person who is hurt deserves pity, whether or not they've done terrible things as Lucius has. A father is a father, Harry thinks someone said, and he feels the loss of his own parents keenly in this moment as well.

Without meaning to, they end up at the grave Harry remembers digging less than a year before. He kneels and wipes the sand out of the headstone. *Here lies Dobby, a free elf.*

"This is our house elf's grave?" Malfoy's face is perplexed, a bit shuttered. "Why is Dobby buried here?"

"Former house elf. He was free when he died." Tears are forming in Harry's eyes. He blinks them away. "He saved me, you know. From your house. During the war. He brought me here, and died for it."

Malfoy chews at his lip, looks into the wind. "Easter hols. When you were at the Manor."
"And you lied to save me," Harry says. He glances at Malfoy. "Didn't you?"

It takes Malfoy a moment to answer, and then he says, "You couldn't die there. I couldn't have borne it, whatever my family might have wanted." He doesn't look at Harry. "I knew it was you, and I couldn't tell them." He swallows, kneels next to Harry. "Not even to save my family from the Dark Lord."

Harry's fingers twine through Malfoy's. "I owe you that."

"No," Malfoy whispers. "You don't." He's silent, his shoulders hunched, and Harry wonders what he's thinking of, what he's reliving. And then Malfoy looks over at Harry. "Was it my aunt? With Dobby?"

"She threw a knife at him," Harry says dully. A stabbing pain goes through his lungs, and he finds it difficult to breathe. "I buried him here myself."

"I'm sorry," Malfoy says. "I genuinely am." He strokes a thumb over Harry's knuckles, then murmurs, "Dobby was always kind to me when I was younger. He didn't deserve…" Malfoy trails off, his voice catching, breaking a bit before he falls silent.

They're quiet, Malfoy's hand over Harry's, Harry's chest tight with tears he can't shed. It's comforting to be here, to not be alone. It's odd under the circumstances, Harry supposes, but he feels so close to Malfoy now, knows that despite their former animosity, their threads have somehow been woven together on the looms of fate.

Harry wipes a hand over his face, collects himself. "We have to get back, you know." A shadow of fear crosses Malfoy's face as Harry pulls him close, wraps his arms around him. "I'd stay here if we could," Harry says. "I'd do anything to protect you."

Malfoy's breath is warm against Harry's neck. "Ever the Saviour, Potter."

Harry just shakes his head, and holds Malfoy tighter. He has never been able to save the people he cares about--and that realisation nearly takes his breath away.

Fuck. He cares about Malfoy.

And Harry stands in the dunes beside Dobby's grave, the wind whipping around him, utterly uncertain about what that means.

He buries his face against the curve of Malfoy's neck and just breathes.

***

The Scottish air is frigid and Hogwarts Castle enormous and forbidding as they make their way back up the road to the school. Their boots crunch loudly on the frozen path and Draco wonders if it's loud enough to wake Hagrid's dogs. Or Mrs Norris. He doesn't really want to face the reality of the castle again, if he's honest. Escaping with Potter, being at the seashore, finding time outside of the castle and of school had made him feel at least alive again. Now, he has to swallow his grief and play the role of Draco bloody Malfoy in front of his fellow students and the professors. It's almost too much to bear.

Potter'd had them Floo into the Three Broomsticks after hours, only to find themselves confronted by Rosmerta in nightdress holding a claymore. It's not something Draco can unsee. Her breasts were enormous and the sword even bigger. Potter'd gaped and Draco'd squawked, whilst also smacking the bastard for the impertinence of fixating on Rosmerta's bosom right in front of Draco. Bloody
rude, is what it was, particularly since it's not a preoccupation Draco shares.

Rosmerta'd been surprisingly welcoming however, once she'd recognised them, drawing them each a butterbeer and making them cheese toasties in the pub's tiny kitchen, even though they'd tried to say they weren't hungry. Draco will bless her in perpetuity for that gesture of kindness. Now they've finished up, and it's time to try and sneak back into the castle.

Potter, in his infinite wisdom, has decided they should use the far entrance, near the greenhouses, whilst being careful of getting too close to Hagrid's hut. Together they walk up the drive, sticking to the opposite side, and skirting the edge of the pumpkin patch--eerily frost-covered and fallow--before entering the warmth of the greenhouse for a moment to thaw off.

Draco doesn't resist when Potter presses him up against the growing bench, and kisses him. "You're ridiculous, and your lips are freezing," Draco says, but he returns the kiss, enjoying the softness of Potter's lips against his.

"I'm huddling for warmth, Malfoy." Potter's glasses fog with Draco's breath, and he pauses to wipe them on his cloak. Draco just rolls his eyes, hiding his smile.

"Well, we need to get into the castle. Do you have a plan?" Draco's not spending the night out here in these temperatures. He wants to make it safely back in the castle and into his bed soon. He's tired, more so than he expected, to be honest.

"We should walk in?" Harry smiles at Draco, and Draco thinks about smothering him with potting soil. "It's far too late for Filch to be prowling. He's usually asleep by midnight."

Draco shakes his head. "How you know this I really do not want to know." Still, he follows Potter out of the greenhouse and up towards the castle, their boots quiet against the crisp frozen ground. Draco pulls his cloak tighter around himself, hurrying to catch up with Potter. The castle looms over them, dark and silent and sleepy, and they slip through the shadows, stepping through the same door they often use to escape to the Quidditch pitch.

This time, however, they turn the corner and their Head of House is standing in the hall with a furious glare on his face. Draco startles, and Potter takes a quick duelling stance, before realising who it is.

"Oh," Potter says, his wand still in his hand.

"Stand down, Mr Potter." Ravi's voice is icy, and Potter sheaths his wand with a sideways glance at Draco. This isn't good. Draco wants to swear. "Both of you, follow me."

There's nothing to be done but trample obediently behind Ravi, up the stairs to the Headmistress’ office. Draco can tell by the hunched nature of Ravi's shoulders and his refusal to speak to them that they're in rather a lot of trouble. He's nervous, of course, but also a bit dispassionate. If they want to send him down from school now, well, he'd miss his friends--and Potter, possibly--but he might not miss Hogwarts quite so much. Even smelling the halls as they'd come back in had made Draco's soul feel caged.

Ravi leads them to the base of the tower. "Sherbet Fountain," he says, and the stairs are revealed.

Draco goes up behind Potter, resisting the urge to flee. He knows he's done nothing wrong. Well, he's actually done everything wrong, but he knows that it won't matter. McGonagall will judge him just for being a Malfoy, and possibly for corrupting Potter, despite it being the other way around. Not that anyone will care, of course. Potter can do no bloody wrong. Still, there's a part of Draco that
hopes he doesn't actually get sent down; he's not sure that his mother could deal with that as well. Not right now, at least.

"Mr Potter," McGonagall's tones are crisp as she stands up from behind her desk, walking around the corner of it to face them. She's in a tartan dressing gown. "Mr Malfoy. Have you any idea what time it is?"

"Just after midnight, I think, Headmistress." Potter's reply is halting, deferential even.

McGonagall usually calls Potter "Harry," so this formality is worrisome, Draco thinks. She huffs an annoyed sigh, her glasses perched on the edge of her nose. "Far past your bedtime. For the second night in a row." The look in McGonagall's eyes is measured. "Fortunately, Rosmerta firecalled the moment you left the Broomsticks." She glances over at Ravi, who looks like he's going to pitch a fit. "Still, Professor Kohli has been terribly worried, as have I, and you both know full well students are not generally let off of ground without a family reason."

"Utterly irresponsible of both of you," Ravi starts to say, but McGonagall raises a hand, and he stops, his mouth a thin line.

McGonagall gives Ravi a chilly smile, that she then turns on Draco and then Potter. "In light of your family's recent tragedy, Mr Malfoy, I am going to be as lenient as I can. You will both be castled through Easter hols, and you will serve double detentions with Professor Kohli. Should you need to go any place with your mother, Mr Malfoy, of course I will allow you."

"That's it?" The squawk of outrage comes from Ravi at her side, not from either Draco or Potter. Potter's still standing meekly. Draco's only occasionally been to the Headmaster's or Headmistress' office, so he's terrified. Potter looks right at home. "They bloody disappeared for nearly thirty hours!"

McGonagall gives Ravi a chilly smile, that she then turns on Draco and then Potter. "Unfortunately, I can't take house point from Eighth Year, as you are not in the tally for the Cup. Were I to take them from your former houses, there would be outrage, although I'm sure Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw would be pleased." She turns back to Ravi, her height evident in her ramrod-stiff bearing. "So yes, Professor Kohli, that is the sum total of punishment at this time. Would you escort them back to the Eight Year dormitory and ensure they remain there?"

"I'm sorry, Headmistress." Potter shifts on his feet, looking apologetic "It wasn't Malfoy's fault, any of this. It was mine."

"I'm certain it was," McGonagall says a bit tartly. "I'd like to think Mr Malfoy had a bit more common sense than this would indicate." Her face softens a bit as she looks between them. "Whilst I realise there may have been extenuating circumstances, according to what I've managed to pull from Ms Granger and Mr Zabini, the fact of the matter remains that you both broke school rules. I rather think I'm being quite kind in your punishment."

"But Malfoy shouldn't have any," Potter starts to say.

McGonagall quells him with a look. "Unless you're about to tell me that you trussed Mr Malfoy up and forced him to go with you, then I rather think he did have a say in the matter, yes?"

Draco glances over at Potter, who looks a bit mulish. "I went under my own choice, Headmistress," Draco says, and when Potter frowns at him, Draco shakes his head. "I'll take the castling as well."

"Indeed you will." McGonagall sits back down at her desk with a sigh. "Now off to bed with both of you." She waves them away. "Professor Kohli, you as well."
Ravi leads them down the stairs. He looks to be in a right snit, Draco thinks. He's not even pausing to make sure they're following. With a familiar aura of suppressed fury and with his robes billowing impressively behind him, he resembles a somewhat shorter Snape. Even though he's in the middle of being punished, and in utter disgrace, that cheers Draco no little.

It's only when they reach the entrance to the Eighth Year hallway that Ravi whirls on them, scowling. "I know what you've been doing."

Both Draco and Potter give him an uncertain look. "Sir?" Draco says. He doesn't like Ravi being angry with him, he has to admit.

Ravi's mouth thins. "You might think me a bloody idiot," he says sharply, "but I'm fully aware the two of you have been sniffing around each other for the past few months." Draco feels his cheeks flame. He can't look at Potter. Ravi points a finger between the two of them. "And no one your age disappears for as long as you did unless you're fooling about. Which, by the way, breaks the very poorly enforced intimacy rules at this school." His frowns deepens, and he holds up his hand when Potter starts to protest. "Don't even, Harry. I am not a fool."

Potter falls silent, looking at Draco out of the corner of his eye. Draco stares down at his boots. The left one's laces are loosened. He folds his arms across his chest, trying not to feel utterly humiliated.

"You're incredibly lucky not to have been punished more severely," Ravi says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "At least tell me you used protection."

"Yes, sir." Potter says, and Draco turns an appalled look on him. Doesn't the idiot know you never confess? Potter glances over at Draco, then back at Ravi. "We did."

"All right then." Ravi's face is glum. "Carry on and no more sneaking out of the castle. Because I will bloody come after you next time, and drag your sorry arses back here. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly," Potter says, and he meets Ravi's gaze evenly. Draco finds he can't say a thing, but he at least manages a nod when Ravi glares at him. His face is flaming as he walks to their room, still radiating irritation. This, Draco thinks, is not how he wanted this year to go.

Then again, he's just got his first taste of Gryffindor favouritism. Even though McGonagall'd said it was due to Draco's father, he's fairly certain that he'd have been punished differently if he hadn't been off with Harry Potter.

He glares at Potter's back.

"Stop it," Potter says quietly, and he turns and looks at Draco.

"What?" Draco's feeling bloody out of sorts, not to mention embarrassed. He'd known they'd get in trouble, but he hadn't quite realised anyone would put two and two together about him and Potter.

Potter stops just outside of their dormitory. The hall is quiet. Potter sighs, runs a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry I got us into trouble," he says after a moment, "but I'm not sorry I took you away." He reaches out, takes Draco's hand. "Everything we did today. Last night. It was worth it."

Warmth spreads through Draco; he looks away, a tightness in his throat. "All right," he says, and then he glances back at Potter. "I didn't hate it."

"I know." Potter's smile is quick and bright, and then he's right next to Draco, smoothing Draco's hair back from his cheek. "I'd like to do it again." He stops, then laughs softly. "Well, I guess not
outside the castle." His gaze settles on Draco's mouth. "But maybe around here somewhere. If you want."

Draco can feel the thrum of his pulse. "All right," he says, knowing what Potter's asking. It's madness, really, but he doesn't care. His body still feels the burn of Potter inside of him, and he wants to do it again.

Soon.

He lets Potter draw him closer. Draco thinks he could lose himself in Potter. It's a terrifying thought. And then Potter's mouth brushes his, and a tremor goes through Draco, making his toes curl in his boots. He doesn't want to give this up, Draco realises. Not right now at least. Potter makes him calm, makes him not feel things. At least things he doesn't want to feel. Draco needs that right now.

Draco draws in a careful, tight breath, then exhales, leaning in to kiss Potter again. "Thank you," he murmurs, and then he steps back, knowing that Potter wants more right now. And Draco has no intention of giving it to him. Not at the moment, at least.

The door of Blaise's dormitory opens, and Weasley's there, stepping out into the hallway, closing the door behind him, his shoulders tight, his blue t-shirt stretched taut across their broad width as he folds his arms across his chest. He leans against the wall, looks between them, his face set. "I thought I heard you, Harry," he says. "You've been gone for a while."

"Ron." Potter tenses next to Draco. He shoves his hands in his pockets, his own shoulders hunching, almost as if he's afraid of Weasley. Draco wants to shout at him, to tell him to stand up for himself, not to let Weasley walk all over him like he does sometimes. Draco doesn't think Weasley means to, not entirely, but Potter's too careful with the Weasel in ways Draco doesn't quite understand. It's not the Slytherin way to be overcautious with your best friends.

Weasley's gaze flicks towards Draco, and Draco knows he's taking in Draco's rumpled state, the fact that he's still wearing the same clothes as yesterday. "Hermione said you'd gone to Bill's."

"She suggested it." Potter's hand settles on the small of Draco's back, a gesture that Weasley notices immediately. Draco steps away, not wanting to incite Weasley any further. "Malfoy needed some time away."

"I'm sure he did." Weasley's studying Draco, his face impassive, then he glances at Potter, his mouth turning down in the corners. "What the hell were you thinking, Harry? The whole bloody House is gossiping. Hermione and Zabini have been trying to play it all down, but no one's buying it--"

"Then fuck them," Potter says, and his chin goes up. "What I do, or what Malfoy does is none of anyone's damned business." He clenches his fists at his sides.

"Keep your voice down," Draco says quietly. He looks at Weasley. "You too."

Weasley glares at him. "Don't tell me what to do, Ferret."

"If you don't want the whole of Eighth Year out here," Draco says, "then you'll bloody lower your voice."

At that, Weasley falls silent, his jaw tight. Draco glances over at Potter. He can't stay out here with them, he knows that. All he's going to do is incite them to blows, and that's the last thing Draco wants right now. Even if he wouldn't mind Potter taking a swing at Weasley all that much--Weasley seems to be spoiling for a fight after all. Still, Draco's tired, and he'd known they'd walk into
something like this at some point. Their time away had been brilliant, but now there's the piper to pay, isn't there?

Draco sighs. "Good night, Potter," he murmurs, and then he's walking past him, into the shadowed silence of their dormitory.

As he's waiting to let his eyes adjust to the dark, he hears a rustle of bedsheets, and then Goldstein says sleepily, "Malfoy?"

"I'm fine," Draco says, his voice quiet.

Goldstein settles back in his bed. "I was certain you would be."

At least someone was, Draco thinks, and he toes off his boots, climbing into his bed.

"You were with Harry, after all," Goldstein mumbles, half-asleep, and Draco stills, his hand on the hangings of his bed. The door opens, and Potter's there, silhouetted in the light from the hallway. They look at each other, Draco and Potter, and then Potter walks over to his own bed and climbs in.

With shaking hands, Draco pulls the hangings of his bed closed, sinking back against his pillows. He lies there for a long moment, listening to Boot's soft snores echoing through the silence of their dormitory. He presses his palms to his eyes, trying to breathe out. Trying not to panic.

Everything's changed now, hasn't it? Everything's different.

And Draco has no bloody idea what's going to happen next.
Chapter 9

I'm never gonna let you close to me,
Even though you mean the most to me,
'Cause every time I open up, it hurts.
--Too Good at Goodbyes, Sam Smith

Spring comes slowly to the Highlands, but by the end of March most of the snow cover's melted off, and green grass is starting to spurt up in patches. Draco's glad of it; he hates the Scottish winters. He and Potter have been castled until Easter, but it's not that terrible, really. They've been learning each other's bodies in their tutoring sessions, and now that their friends know that they're fooling around with one another, it's not that difficult to meet up, as much as Weasley glowers at Draco from across the common room. They're still keeping their secrets from the rest of the school, though. Somehow. The Eighth Years have closed ranks around them; even Corner and Hopkins aren't saying anything, although Draco suspects that has something to do with Blaise and Weasley sharing a dormitory with them. Blaise won't say for certain, but Draco thinks it's been explained to Corner and Hopkins and most of the others that Potter took Draco to see his mother, a fiction that everyone else seems to be willing to accept. Or at least not question. No one seems to think they're shagging, and really, Draco doesn't even tell Pansy or Blaise or Mills that he'd let Potter fuck him. That feels too intimate to share, and even if they suspect, they don't say anything outright to Draco.

This silence about their relationship has never been anything they've talked about, him and Potter. But their private lives are private; neither one of them want to proclaim it through the school corridors, much less find it reported in the Prophet. So they ignore each other in classes and the common room and the corridors, staying as far away from each other in public as they can. At times, Draco thinks their friends even forget, until he or Potter look at each other from across the room, only to be elbowed sharply in the ribs by whoever's next to them at the time.

When they're alone, however, it's different. He and Potter are more careful in the dormitory; Potter's been practicing his Muffliato so it doesn't slip at an inopportune moment, the way it had before, and they time Potter's invisibility-cloaked visits to Draco's bed carefully for when the others are fast asleep. Their awkward fumbles have settled into slow, gasping fucks, Potter rising over Draco, buried bollocks deep in Draco's arse, Draco's hands clenched around Potter's shoulders, his knees spread wide around Potter's hips. He likes it better like this, being able to watch Potter's face as he rolls his hips into Draco, his prick sliding deeper into Draco's body, seeing the way Potter's face clenches when Draco shifts around him, pushes up into Potter's slow thrust. Sometimes Draco wants to keep the hangings drawn forever, wants to shut out the rest of the world, keep them all at bay so this is just him and Potter, no one else.

Draco loves fucking Potter. Or being fucked by him, really, he supposes. Draco hasn't had the chance to slide into Potter's body. He thinks Potter's nervous about it, to be honest, nervous about taking that last step, and Draco doesn't want to push Potter too quickly. Hell, he's barely used to being fucked himself. Sometimes it still hurts, even with Potter preparing him slowly, even with the oceans of lube they slather across Draco's hole, slicking him deeply. But Draco doesn't mind the burn, doesn't mind the aching stretch of his body to accommodate Potter's prick. It feels phenomenal, Draco thinks, especially when his hands are braced against the back of his bed whilst Potter's pounding into him, his body arched over Draco's, his hair sticking to his sweaty cheeks.

Besides, Potter's become a champion cocksucker over the past few weeks, and Draco still can't quite get over the sight of Harry bloody Potter on his knees in front of Draco, eagerly taking Draco's prick down his throat, his pretty mouth stretched wide around it. Once, whilst Potter was blowing him in
the Defence classroom, after a bit of sparring, Draco'd looked down at his fingers twisted in Potter's hair, holding Potter still as his hips jerk forward, his prick fucking Potter's face, Potter's eyes closed in bliss, his hands clenching at Draco's waist, and he'd thought, *If only the Dark Lord could have seen Potter like this for me.* He'd felt guilty immediately afterward, but it's still a rush, knowing that, in those moments at least, Potter's kneeling for him, a Malfoy, Marked and all.

He wonders if Lucius would be proud, but that's a laugh, isn't it? The only way Draco can have any power over Potter is by being a bloody poof, and his father would rather die than let that be known.

To be honest, Draco has yet to see his father. He knows it's horrid of him, but he can't bring himself to go. Instead he firecalls his mother more than he's ever done before, sends Quercus soaring back to Wiltshire with thick letters for her to read each week. Perhaps it's overcompensation, Draco thinks, but he doesn't know what else to do.

The *Prophet*'s only just reported the attack, weeks after it happened. It'd been a guard in the end, someone who'd lost family to the Death Eaters. And his father had been there at the wrong moment--probably saying something utterly stupidly provocative, Draco's certain, knowing him--and the guard had lashed out, slamming Lucius into one of the stone walls of Azkaban, over and over again until his father's skull was cracked open, fragments of it buried into his brain, damaging it beyond repair. The guard won't be charged, they say. It seems there were extenuating circumstances.

No one gives a fuck about the fate of a Death Eater, after all.

His mother goes to see his father twice a week, sometimes thrice, and she tells Draco whenever he's ready, she'll be there with him. But Draco's not ready. He knows he has to get over himself at some point, has to go to St Mungo's, has to face down whatever he finds there. His father's rarely awake, his mother says, and when he is, he's confused by potions and by the wounds to his brain itself. He hasn't recognised her yet, and Draco's not certain he can bear that.

His friends have stood beside him, each one of them offering comfort in their own way. When the feelings are a bit too crushing and Potter's not nearby to distract him with sex, Draco curls up beside Pansy on the chesterfield in the common room, his head in her lap as she cards fingers through his hair. It's an old comfort, one she's given him since they were first-years, finding their way in this huge, overwhelming castle. Blaise entertains him with castle gossip--Draco quickly discovers Susan Bones has the same talent, and a sharp sense of humour besides, which would have been utterly lost on Potter, in Draco's opinion--whilst Millie distracts Draco with discussions of Quidditch and heated arguments over whether his beloved Puddlemere are even capable of taking on her Harpies.

Even Granger's started to sit next to him at times, asking to go over their Runes material together. He knows she's just trying to help as well, given that her marks in Runes are just as good as his--if not higher. And even though Weasley's still giving Draco uneasy glares from his chair across the room, the ginger prat's not being outright hostile. No one is, really, at least in the Eighth Year dormitories. Draco thinks it's because since he and Potter disappeared that night, their whatever-this-is-between-them isn't quite as hidden. No one's accusing them of shagging, but everyone knows that Draco means *something* to Potter, enough that he'd risk Ravi and McGonagall's wrath to take him away.

It's an odd, unsettling détente that Draco doesn't quite know what to do with. Even Corner and Hopkins are careful now, although sometimes Hopkins will bump into Draco in the hallway outside their dormitories, knocking him painfully into the wall, then mumbling a *sorry, didn't see you there.* Or Corner will brush past Draco in class, and when Draco scowls at him, Corner will just raise his eyebrows and say, "I thought I'd give a poof a little thrill." Draco wants to hex him, wants to put his fist right into that fucking smug face of his, but his friends always catch him, always shake their heads and murmur, "Not worth it."
But sometimes Draco thinks it would be.

He doesn't tell Potter. There's no sense in that; Potter has even less self-control than Draco does, and wouldn't that be a lovely headline for the Prophet: Saviour of the Wizarding World Fights War Victim's Son for Queer Death Eater's Honour. Yeah. Thanks ever so much, but no. Absolutely, utterly no.

It'll pass soon enough, and really, Draco thinks it's just that tensions are so much higher because of the upcoming anniversary of the battle. That's only a few weeks away, and people are already feeling tense and angry. And it's not just things being directed at Draco. Slytherins across the board have been targeted. The staff have already had to break up two fights this week in corridors between classes, and Draco's certain there are other smaller, perhaps more passive-aggressive interactions they've missed. Draco's caught a few himself, doing what he can to intervene, to take the anger on himself. He'd sent a group of fifth-year boys running who were taunting Elle Bainbridge, but not before one of them spit on Draco first. He knows Omolade and Ravi have been raising bloody hell over it all, but the other staff have questioned whether or not the Slytherins are exaggerating the extent of it all.

Fucking tossers.

And the latest reports from the Prophet haven't helped. It's official now: the Board will be voting in their mid-April meeting, just before Easter hols start, on whether or not to abolish Slytherin House as of next school year, reSorting the students into other Houses. The idea's gaining traction not only in Hogwarts itself but in public opinion as a whole; for some bloody reason a rather large amount of soddingly stupid adults seem to think the best way to punish the Death Eaters is through bullying and terrifying their children. It infuriates Draco, especially when he sees the way Slytherin House have been beaten down, the way they keep their heads bent now, their shoulders hunched, the way their table's almost always silent during meals, as if they want the entirety of the Great Hall to forget them.

Draco knows it's not a fight that'll affect him. He'll be gone after NEWTs in late May; he's only a few more weeks to go. And he'll always be a Slytherin, no matter what the fucking Board decide. But, it's the younger students, isn't it? They shouldn't have to pay for other people's mistakes.

For Draco's cock-ups and wretched decisions. And he feels responsible for that, to be honest, as much as Pansy tells him he's not the catalyst for all of this. Perhaps if Slytherin had stayed to fight in the battle, she points out, but Draco thinks that's missing the point. Draco's the one who opened up the castle for the Death Eaters, the one who let Greyback and his aunt and their merry band of murderous bastards in, the one who'd set in motion the death of Albus Dumbledore, even if he hadn't said the curse himself. He'd started the war, and he wishes he could find a Time-turner, could go back to that night and tell himself not to be a shit, that what his father had taught him was bollocks, that Potter wasn't the bastard he thought him to be.

Potter. The one bright spot in all of this has been the brilliant prat, really, and fuck only knows how long that'll last. Well, that and the fact that Skeat just pulled Draco aside a day or so ago to let him know that his project with the Shrivelfigs has had some interest from potioneers on the Continent. It seems Skeat had shared Draco's write-up on the shrinking solutions produced with the alchemically harvested Shrivelfigs with friends of his, and now Draco's being put forward for the entrance exam to Sciences Magique in Paris, the elite French wizarding institution. Their curriculum in potions is particularly renowned; Draco knows it's a great honour to be asked to apply. If he does very well, he might get a junior fellow's admission into the Société de Paracelsus, which would give him a bursary and a place to live. The exam's scheduled during Easter hols, so he's been revising like mad whenever he gets a chance. Potter's tutoring in Potions has been an unexpected boon in that regard; it helps Draco review the basic magical theory behind potionbrewing.
And now Draco's sat here at the Eighth Year table at Saturday breakfast, his Alchemy book spread in front of him as he picks at his beans on toast. It's comfort food for him, the kind his elf nanny Baummy used to make for him when he was ill, or just feeling out of sorts. The noise of the Great Hall swirls around him, the clatter of plates and cutlery, the laughter and conversations of other students rising and falling as they come and go. Pansy and Blaise have already left--Slytherin has a match against Ravenclaw later this morning, and they'd promised Matty Bulstrode and Elle Bainbridge that they'd help them charm the younger students' hair green. Mills is still sat beside Draco, but Lovegood's perched on the table next to her, her booted feet on the bench as she leans down to laugh at something Millie's said.

Draco's well aware of Potter down the table from him, across from Granger and Weasley, Longbottom and Boot on either side of him. Draco can't see either of their girlfriends lurking anywhere about, which is unusual, but perhaps Turpin and Abbott have come to their senses, realised they could do better, really. And on that thought, Draco slams his Alchemy book closed in frustration, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He's in a foul temper, and he knows it; he's been revising too much for the SciencesMag exam coming up in a few weeks, to the point he'd even told Potter to shove off last night. And that'd been bloody stupid of him, he thinks, letting his gaze slide back down to Potter, who's leaning forward, saying something to Weasley, his elbows on the table, his long-sleeved t-shirt stretched across his wide shoulders.

"You look to be in a temper." Goldstein sits down next to Draco, and a fresh plate appears in front of him. He reaches for the platter of eggs, scooping out a rather large pile before setting it back down again.

"Too much revision," Draco says, rolling his shoulders back. They ache something fierce.

Goldstein eyes him. "And not enough..." He tilts his head towards Potter, and Draco frowns at him. Goldstein just takes a mouthful of eggs, chews them, then swallows. "Look, you're much more relaxed when the two of you are schtupping on a regular basis."

"You've been around Pansy too much," Draco says, with a twist of his mouth, and Goldstein just laughs.

They settle into a comfortable silence. Draco's grown to like Goldstein rather a lot lately; he thinks Goldstein's oddly good for Pansy, calms her in a way no one else ever has. She's happy with him, at least for now, and he seems arse over tit for her, so Draco's nothing to complain about. Goldstein hadn't even blinked an eye when Draco, Blaise and Mills had confronted him en masse, letting him know in no uncertain terms what they'd do to him if he hurt Pans. Frankly, Draco respects that about him. Particularly since Millie can be a bit intimidating on the best of days.

And then Iain Claverdon swaggers up, Kirke at his side, and Draco's day goes to utter shit.

"So, Malfoy," Claverdon drawls as he stops between the Gryffindor and Eighth Year tables, "how's it feel knowing Hogwarts won't be letting your sort around any longer?" He lets his gaze drift down Draco. "Slytherin, I mean, not poof. Once we get rid of you, there won't be any other bum in the air, ankle-holding prats around."

Draco stays silent, his lips pressed together. He won't give Claverdon the thrill of an acknowledgement, although he does wonder what Claverdon would say if he knew his hero Harry bloody Potter had been bollocks-deep in Draco's arse a few nights past. He looks over at Goldstein and says, "Can you pass the brown sauce, and maybe the sausages too?"

Goldstein does, giving Draco a sideways look.
"I'm talking to you," Claverdon snarls, and he goes for his wand, but Draco's faster. He puts up the Protego Maxima Potter's been working on with him for months, just before Claverdon's Diffindo slams into it. There's a shout from the Gryffindor table, and everyone around them ducks as Claverdon's spell dissipates with a sulphurous bang, just over their eggs and toast. And then a moment later Sinistra's there, wide sleeves flapping as she grabs Claverdon by the ear.

"Enough, Iain," Sinistra snaps with a particularly savage jerk. "You're going to the Headmistress now."

The look Claverdon shoots at Draco is vicious, but Draco doesn't give a bloody fuck. He lets the shield charm down once Claverdon's dragged away, Sinistra still scolding him the entire way out of the Great Hall. The Gryffindors are staring at them, their mouths open, before turning sullen gazes Draco's way. All except Ginny Weasley, who's giving him a half-smile, but then she turns away, Eloise Midgen saying something to her, Midgen's face pinched and unhappy as she glances Draco's way.

Whatever, Draco thinks, as he scoops up another forkful of beans and toast. Fuck them all, bloody Gryffindors and their prattish behaviour.

"Well done," Millie says, and Draco looks up to see the whole Eighth Year table watching him. His cousin's beaming at him over Millie's head, even Potter's smiling faintly, and Granger nods at him. Weasley's still eyeing him uncertainly, but with a bit more respect than usual, and Draco'd rather have that, if he's honest.

A warm feeling goes through Draco. He's proud of himself as Goldstein pounds Draco's back and says, "Good one, man."

And then Michael Corner pipes up from Weasley's other side, spoiling it all. "Except Iain's not exactly wrong, is he?" He rubs at his cheek, his gaze darting around the table. "I won't be sad to see Slytherin go."

"Fuck you, Corner," Draco says before he thinks, and he can see the shift on Corner's face, the way Corner's eyes narrow, his mouth tightens.

"Maybe it's you who ought to shut the fuck up, Malfoy," Corner says hotly, leaning past Weasley. "It's not as if your family wasn't right in the thick of it last year. You think we've all forgotten how Snape favoured you? How you were the only one the Carrows weren't allowed to touch?"

Draco clenches his fists, presses them against his thighs. He knows he can't answer that, knows he can't throw out at them that Severus was trying to protect him for fuck's sake because Draco would have been the first one the Carrows came after, that the Dark Lord had been punishing him for his failures, punishing his father and his mother because Draco hadn't been able to do what that fucking snake-faced bastard had wanted of him. Draco'd been weak, and the Carrows could smell weakness, went after it, tried their best to destroy it just for the fucking hell of it all.

But no one at this table would understand that. Not even Mills.

Last year had been hell for Draco. At home. At school. There'd been no place to hide from the Dark Lord's displeasure. And the one man who’d tried to protect Draco from it all is dead now. Dead and still despised, no matter what he'd done for their sodding side. All they'll remember him for is the way they thought he hated them, never once considering how Severus protected his own, how he stood up for them, how he fought the other staff when they tried to write Slytherin off.

And now no one's left to protect Slytherin any longer.
"You're a hypocritical wanker, Corner," Draco says, his voice cold. He lets his gaze sweep across the table. "The whole lot of you are. Sitting here, judging us because of choices our families made, choices we made, which perhaps we all regret, have you ever stopped to think of that? You scream at us for being prejudiced, and you're just as bad yourself, turning on those poor kids sat over there at the Slytherin table, who didn't bloody do anything to any of you." His voice rises. "You're bullying first-years, for fuck's sake, over something that happened when they weren't bloody here."

Potter's watching him, and his smile's faded. Something twists deep inside of Draco, ugly and angry. He wants to lash out, wants to strike at Gryffindor, to show them they've no right for their smug self-righteousness. Instead, Draco looks away, his whole body shaking with fury. He thought they were past this all. He'd thought things were better, at least in their year.

Draco's starting to realise he was wrong.

And Corner's on his feet now. "Don't act as you're some sort of innocent lamb being led to slaughter, Malfoy. My father died because of your family, and so did two of my cousins." He's trembling, and he pulls away from Weasley's touch.

"Michael," the Weasel says, but Corner's too far gone, his eyes wide and his mouth twisted to one side.

Corner stops between Draco and Goldstein. Draco won't turn around. He can't. Not even when Corner's spittle hits the back of his neck as Corner snaps out, "My family died, and nothing you can do is going to bring them back. So fuck you, and fuck your father. I wish he'd been killed by that attack. If I'd have been there, I would have made bloody well sure he was, you fucking, sodding, bent bastard."

Draco's shoulders are tight, that solid lump in his stomach churns. He turns then, half-rising from the bench, and Corner stumbles back a step. "Say that one more time, Corner."

And Corner, the fool that he is, lifts his chin, and says, "Your fucking father should have died."

Goldstein catches Draco's arm. "Malfoy, man." And Draco glances down at him. Goldstein's giving him a sympathetic look. "It won't go well."

Draco glares around the table. "You all feel that way. His gaze stops on Potter, wanting him to stand up for him. Potter knows what his father's injury has cost Draco. Potter's the one who's held Draco, who'd taken him to bloody Cornwall, for Circe's sake. "You all think my father should have died. It'd make it bloody easier for you to write him off, wouldn't it?"

*To write me off,* he wants to say.

He feels the soft press of Lovegood's hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Draco," she says gently.

But it's not his cousin he wants to speak up.

Potter just looks away. Draco sinks back onto the bench, feeling as if something's broken inside of him. "Fuck you," Draco whispers. He knows Potter won't hear. His throat's tight, his eyes are burning hot and prickly. He blinks the wetness away.

And then Longbottom says quietly, "My mum and dad are in St Mungo's because of your family. I never got to know them." He looks at Draco, his face set, cold. "Don't expect me to have any bloody sympathy for you or your sodding father." He glances back at the Slytherin table. "Or for some of
that lot over there either. They could have stayed and fought like the rest of us, but they ran." His mouth tightens. "Even your fucking friends ran, so yeah, Slytherin can go to hell for all I care."

Goldstein tenses beside Draco. "That's not fair--"

"It bloody well is, Tony," Mandy Brocklehurst says from down the table. "I lost my granddad in the battle. I still have a curse scar on my side. And your girlfriend ran away, the bitch."

"Don't call her that," Millie says, and the look she sends Brocklehurst is scathing. "I didn't exactly hear about you being out in the thick of it all, did I? When'd you get that scar, Mandy? When you were running away yourself?"

Brocklehurst scowls at Millie, but she doesn't answer. And that's the thing, isn't it? They're all quick to lash out at Slytherin for not fighting, but they weren't all out there in the battle themselves. Draco knows that for a fucking fact. He'd seen Brocklehurst cowering in a corner, Li and Turpin with her. And he sure as hell doesn't remember Corner fighting his way through the Death Eaters. They're hypocrites, most of them, clinging to this myth that they'd been so bloody brave that day.

"We were fucking children," Draco snaps.

"Some of us fought, though," Weasley says, his voice tight. "Because it was the right thing to do."

Draco just gives him an even look. "Maybe," he says. "But it doesn't change the fact that you're angry at bloody children for not throwing themselves into the fray, for not wanting to get killed--"

"Some people died," Longbottom says sharply. "Like Colin. He was a bloody hero, not a coward."

"Because dying is bloody heroic?" Millie's on her feet, glaring at Longbottom. "When you're sixteen? Have you lost your sodding mind, all of you? Draco's right. We were babies, all of us, and the adults who ought to have been protecting us were letting these bastards on both sides rampage through our school! She's breathing hard, her face tight. "No, I didn't fight. I was too busy trying to get my brother and the younger students in my House out of here before a stray curse hit them, because, I'm sorry, you fucking Gryffindor bastards, but I don't think that's a bloody honourable way to die!"

Whispers are swirling around them; heads are starting to turn across the Great Hall as other Houses notice the spat.

But Potter's still silent.

"This is ridiculous," Granger snaps. "What happened that night happened. We're all a bit fucked up by it, on both sides. Turning on Slytherin--or Malfoy, for that matter--isn't going to do a damned thing--"

"He's Marked, you know." It's Hopkins this time, looking up from his porridge. He looks at Draco. "Malfoy. I've seen it on his arm in the shower."

The whole table falls silent. Draco stares at Hopkins, and then he says, his voice quavering with anger, "You've been lurking in the showers, watching me, you pervert? Whilst ragging on me for being bent?"

Hopkins' face flushes bright red. Still, he doesn't look away from Draco. "There's a Mark on his left arm. You can check if you want. I'm not lying."

And Corner's reaching for Draco's arm before anyone can stop him. Draco tries to push him away,
tries to shout, but Corner's stronger than he looks, and he has the sleeve of Draco's jumper pushed up in a moment, the whole of Draco's forearm on display. Draco can hear the quick gasps, the quiet whispers. He pulls away, his face hot, his hands shaking as he tugs his sleeve down.

When he looks up, the rest of them are staring at Draco, all except for Potter, who's looking at the remnants of his porridge. Draco wants him to say something, to speak up for Draco, to tell them all it doesn't fucking matter that Draco's forearm is marred the way it is, that he doesn't care if it's smeared with the faded black remnants of Draco's mistakes, a constant reminder of how foolish he'd been, how bloody stupid.

And when Potter stays quiet, the fragments of Draco's heart shatter. "Fine," he says, his voice bitter, and Potter looks up at him then. "Fuck you, Potter," Draco says to him, and he knows they'll all know what he means. He picks up his Alchemy book, steps over the bench without looking back, turns on his heel and strides away.

Draco can hear Granger say, "Harry, go after him," but he hopes Potter doesn't. Draco doesn't want to have to say what he knows he'll say.

He's almost to the potions classroom when Potter catches up with him.

"Malfoy." Potter grabs at Draco's elbow.

Draco jerks away, whirling to face Potter. "Don't you fucking touch me, you cowardly arsehole."

Potter's standing there, looking surprised. Why, Draco hasn't the fucking foggiest, except perhaps Potter's the thickest idiot of them all. "I'm sorry." Potter runs a hand through his hair. "I should have said something--"

"You think?" Draco's practically incandescent with fury. "You let them say those things, whilst you were sat there, looking as if I were bloody mad, knowing you've had your prick up my arse, that your fucking mouth has been on that Mark--"

"Jesus," Potter says, and he pulls Draco out of the empty hallway and into an alcove. "Don't shout like that."

That only makes Draco angrier. "What? You don't want anyone knowing you've been shagging me? Pity for that, Potter. I think they've all rather figured it out by now, but at least you've a modicum of plausible deniability, is that it? It's fine for them to call me a poof, a nancy, to mock me for being bent as long as you don't have to talk about your bloody part in the buggering process--"

Potter catches Draco's wrists just before Draco shoves Potter backwards. "You need to calm the fuck down."

Draco draws in a ragged breath. He feels numb; his whole body tingles. He pulls away from Potter's grasp, turns away. His eyes burn; he wraps his arms around himself, utterly miserable. "And you really do think my father ought to have died, don't you?"

That's not true." Potter frowns at him. "But you know your father was instrumental in the death of all of my friends. I mean, for fuck's sake, Malfoy, he tried to kill me. More than bloody once."

Draco looks away, knows he can't protest. His father had hoped Potter would meet with an unfortunate accident, had even laughed over the dinner table about slipping the Dark Lord's diary into Ginny Weasley's books. Draco supposes that's another thing he ought to apologise to her for. That and possibly shagging her ex-boyfriend. If he's still doing that, after all this. He presses his lips together, tries to breathe. He doesn't like this roil of panic through him; it's been ages since he's felt it
whilst standing next to Potter.

Potter sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Look. No one deserves to be killed, but your father's an arsehole, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. That guard shouldn't have hurt him, but it's not as if I can't understand why he might have. He lost people too. It makes you a bit mad, that sort of grief. You want to lash out sometimes."

"Enough so you'd destroy someone's life over it?" Draco's fingernails bite into the soft flesh of his palms his hands are clenched so tight. "Take their bloody magic from them?" But he knows Potter's right too, in a way. Still, he doesn't bloody care. "This my father, Potter. The man who raised me, and he's lying in a St Mungo's ward that he'll probably never come home from." Draco's voice catches painfully in the back of his throat, and for the first time, he truly feels the loss of his father, the fact that whomever Lucius Malfoy once was is gone now, a broken, fragile husk of a man left in his place. "My father," Draco whispers. "You've no idea..." He trails off, presses his knuckles to his mouth.

Potter's face shutters for a moment; then he says, "At least you know what it's like to have parents. Your father helped kill mine when I was a baby."

And the unfairness of that hurts. Badly. Lucius Malfoy'd had nothing to do with that, Draco knows full well. If he had, he would have used it to his advantage when the Dark Lord's favour had drifted away.

"Fuck you, Potter." Draco hates that he's close to crying. He feels humiliated, broken, used, particularly when Potter's expression shifts from anger to pity mixed with a good dose of regret. That's the last bloody thing Draco wants from him. "All that taking care of me the past few weeks, making certain I'm all right--that had nothing to do with me. It was all about what you wanted, what your prick could get from me--"

"Malfoy." And then Potter's using that gentle voice, the one that he thinks calms Draco. "Come on. You know I don't want just sex--"

Draco bursts into laughter. "Really? Because I seem to recall Ginny Weasley breaking up with you for just that reason." Potter takes a step back, and Draco goes in for the kill. "I was there, Potter. I heard exactly what she said when she kicked your sorry arse into the rubbish bin, and really, I ought to have known better. I ought to have realised what you were like."

"Shut it," Potter says, his voice rising, his cheeks flushed. "You've no bloody clue what I'm like."

"I know exactly what you're like, Potter." Draco's breathing hard. "You're the Chosen One, Dumbledore's Golden Boy, Our Saviour." He watches the way Potter flinches with each title Draco throws his way. "The whole of wizarding society follows your cues now. If you wanted, you could walk back in there and tell the lot of them to fuck off." Draco hates the way his words shudder with unspoken hurt. "If you gave enough of a damn about me."

Potter looks down, shoves his hands in his pockets. He bites his lip, but stays silent. Draco closes his eyes, the last few shards of his broken heart falling around him.

"Right then," Draco says quietly. They stand opposite each other, the alcove stretching out between them, and it feels like a thousand miles, a gulf so wide Draco isn't certain they can bridge it any longer. "I suppose that's my answer then."

And then Potter looks up at him and says, "It's just--"
"No. I can't do this," Draco says, cutting Potter off, and his voice cracks. "I've the Sciences Mag exam revisions to do. I can't..." He waves a hand towards Potter, then exhales, so very exhausted by this all. "We're done."

"Malföy." Potter says, a bit brokenly, and Draco closes his eyes. He feels shattered, empty.

"I can't," Draco says again, and he takes a step backwards, his eyes opening, his gaze settling on Potter's agonised face. "I'm sorry. I just..." He trails off, swallows. There's nothing more to say, is there? Not between him and Potter. Whatever this was, it's over. The way it was meant to be.

He turns and walks away, leaving Potter standing in the alcove, watching.

Draco can't bear to look back at him. With every step he takes, he feels as if he's grinding his heart beneath the heel of his boot. He turns the corner, and his shoulders start to shake, his cheeks grow wet.

He's lost everything, Draco thinks as he stumbles down a staircase--he doesn't even know which one. Everything's gone in one fell swoop. He tries to breathe; he can't. Draco sinks down to a step, pulls his knees to his chest, and lets himself cry.

Fuck. What's he meant to do now?

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"Potter, you've got to have a finer hand with the ingredients. You're mangling the murtlap. It needs to be chopped, not obliterated." Ravi's voice is terse, annoyed.

Harry stops for a moment, his knife in hand. It'd felt good to let out his aggressions on the plant material. Honestly, he hasn't been able to focus at all this evening. He's supposed to be revising for NEWTs with Ravi, especially for the practicum, now that Malfoy's not speaking to him, but it's bloody useless. He's horrible at this, and if anything, he's actually got worse over the past fortnight. Since Malfoy.

And oh, how that hurts still. Deep and almost overwhelming, with an ache so profound that it almost equals Harry's grief at losing his godfather.

Over Draco bloody Malfoy, for Merlin's sake.

"Here, let me clear this out of your way." Ravi takes a small metal bowl, and scrapes down the bench efficiently with a flat wooden paddle, removing the evidence of the murtlap massacre. "Now try it with a new batch." He sets the leaves and stems in front of Harry. "Separate the leaves gently but quickly, like taking a plaster off. Then chop the stems and shred the leaves. You need two separate batches for the Euphoria Elixir; they'll go in at different points in the brewing process."

For a moment, Harry thinks Ravi's going to add something, but then his professor falls silent. The Potions classroom is quiet, the only noise coming from the fire which Ravi lit earlier against the still-cool early April air. Despite the snow melting off, it's been windy and cold for most of the week now, and the Quidditch teams have gone back to practicing in their frost-proof uniforms. Harry wishes he was up there right now, flying for Gryffindor, rather than down here at the bottom of the castle, trying not to earn a Troll on his NEWTs.

"Is this all right, Professor?" Harry tries to think of the Muggle cookery shows he watched as a child, and how they showed proper knife techniques. He's not sure he's got the hang of murtlap, but he's getting closer. He doesn't really care, but he also doesn't want to disappoint Ravi, who's been taking
lots of time outside of class with Harry since Malfoy stopped tutoring him. Ravi's theory is that if
Harry works harder on his foundations, the rest will follow. So far, only more disasters have
followed. Harry's lost his focus--and his will to brew, if he's honest. Just being here makes him think
of Malfoy, which sets that dull ache inside of him throbbing again.

"Not horrible." Ravi watches him for a moment. "Try to lift the back of the knife a bit--there, that's
better."

The stems are no longer ground into pulpy bits, but segmented into neat, small rounds. Harry tries the
same technique with the leaves, but it's not the same effect.

"Here," Ravi takes the knife for a moment. "Watch this." He spells the knife edge sharp, then drags
it, almost effortlessly turning the leaves into fine shreds. "The trick is not to raise the blade fully and
rub away at the end. It's a bit different."

Harry watches a few more times, then tries. He can mimic Ravi's movements, but he's not quite
getting the same effect. He thinks of the way Malfoy had looked at the bench across the room during
class today, of the way he handled his knife so gracefully, his head bent over his work, his gilt hair
catched back with a hair tie, so that the sharp angles of his jaw were lit by the lamp above, the flash of
silver as his knife shredded the murtlap perfectly.

And then Harry manages to slice into his finger.

"Fuck," Harry says, bloody droplets spattering across the wooden surface.

"Episkey." Ravi waves his wand. "Sanguis deletrius." Harry's finger seals shut, and the blood
disappears from the bench. Ravi casts a few more charms on the surface, then uses a liquid scouring
spell.

"Blood is really not what you want in potions. Too reactive." Ravi frowns at him. "It seems like you
lost focus at the end there. Is that how it felt to you?"

"I suppose." Harry sighs, resisting the urge to throw the knife on the bench in frustration. Instead, he
sets it down gently. "I'm sorry I'm pants at this, sir."

"You're not pants at it." Ravi crosses his arms, leaning against the bench, taking in Harry's distress.
"You're distracted, and you don't seem to want to focus on this."

"I do, sir," Harry protests. "I don't want you to be wasting your time with me." And he doesn't.
Ravi's the first Potions professor Harry's had who's willing to work with him, to show him exactly
what he's doing wrong. Harry almost thinks Malfoy spoke to Ravi at some point, about his reading
difficulties, because Ravi's no longer focussing on the text with Harry, but rather on the more
practical aspects of potionbrewing. And it's helping. It really is.

As long as Harry doesn't get distracted, moping about Malfoy like a bloody fool.

The corridor outside echoes as several younger Slytherins race past. "Last one there has to try to jinx
Peeves," one of them calls.

Ravi holds up a finger. "One moment." He steps outside, into the corridor, and calls after the
students. "Langford. Patel. McKenna. Do not antagonise the poltergeist in any fashion. I will take
house points if I hear anything further happened. And I will hear about it."

A chorus of "sorry, sir"s follows him as he walks back into the room. "Now," Ravi says, looking at
Harry, who's chopping aimlessly with a knife on the empty bench surface. "Potter, stop moaning
Harry looks up, startled. He sets the knife back down again.

"You're obviously sulking about Malfoy, and it's not going to work." Ravi frowns again, sizing Harry up.

"Beg pardon?" Harry can't quite believe Ravi's addressing the Hippogriff in the room. No one's dared broach it openly with him, beyond a few attempts from Hermione that he's managed to avoid. Ron's relieved, Harry thinks, and doesn't really want to bring Malfoy up. Although Corner won't meet his eyes in the common room any longer, but Harry's not quite sure why, particularly since he's avoiding Ron as well. Hermione'd just sniffed when Harry’d pointed it out, and told him Michael Corner could go to fucking hell for all she cared. That had surprised Harry, if he's honest. Then again, Hermione can hold a grudge when she wants to.

And then there's the awkwardness of sharing a dormitory with Malfoy. McGonagall had refused to make a room swap, although Ravi'd asked her to, on Malfoy's behalf, so Malfoy's been spending every night in Zabini's bed. It's driving Harry sick with jealousy and also self-recrimination. Malfoy'd rather be in a room with bloody Corner and Hopkins than with Harry, even if Ron says all Malfoy does each night is stalk in at the last minute, hair wet, with Zabini by his side. And even if Harry wanted to approach Malfoy, there's no way he can. The Slytherins have surrounded him, one of them by Malfoy's side everywhere he goes now, and if Harry even looks Malfoy's way, they bare their teeth at him, making it perfectly clear that Harry hasn't the slightest chance to come near Malfoy. Not after what he's done.

They're probably right. Harry knows he's fucked this up, and after the first week, he realised that it's really over between them. Malfoy's not going to forgive him, and honestly, why should he? Harry should have stood up for him, should have made the others back down.

Harry's still conflicted about Malfoy's dad. He hates Lucius Malfoy with a passion, but he doesn't think he deserved to be permanently damaged or beaten by a prison guard. Had Harry fantasised about killing him? Many a time, if he's honest, but he knows that Malfoy senior isn't the worst of the Death Eaters. Malfoy's Aunt Bellatrix and the Lestrange brothers had been far worse. The Carrows had terrorised Hogwarts. Even the Snatchers had been more brutally terrifying than Malfoy's dad, as awful as he was. Harry doesn't pardon Lucius Malfoy his crimes, but it's different now that he's been sentenced and supposed to serve a prison term. He wasn't meant to be harmed in the process.

He just wishes he'd had the nerve to say all of that to Malfoy when it mattered.

Ravi's still looking at Harry. "I'm waiting for you to admit it, you realise."

"I'm not sulking." Harry knows full well he's sulking. "And I don't think there's anything that will work. I'm awful at Potions. I always have been."

"Grace says your Defence marks have been slipping as well." Ravi's face is impassive. "She says you're casting at fourth-year level at the moment, which is ridiculous given where you started the school year. Someone who faced down the Dark Lord--"

"With a bloody Expelliarmus," Harry mutters.

Ravi just snorts. "If you think you're not a strong Defence student, Harry, you're off your bloody nut." He eyes Harry, then sighs. "Grace thinks you're good enough to become a Defence professor, if you ever wished to be."
"I'm meant to be an Auror." Harry knows he sounds sullen.

"Perhaps." Ravi drums his fingers against his elbows. "But you're worrying Grace now, and that's making my life difficult, so I rather think it's better to just face what's obviously going on with you, wouldn't you say?"

Harry kicks at the legs of the workbench with his trainer. "Professor Omolade's just mad at me for messing up my Patronus cast. I've been able to do that for a long time. I'm just not focussed."

"It's unbecoming," Ravi says finally. "And, you do realise, don't you, that if you faff about any more openly, you could actually hurt Draco."

This draws Harry up short. "What? I don't want to hurt him. I just want him to stop hating me."

"Simple Gryffindor." Ravi shakes his head. "It's not about you. Or, it is, but rather it's more about people's perceptions of you. People were protecting Malfoy because of you. Perhaps it was unconscious--although I'm sure for some, it was conscious. If they had bloody eyes in their head."

"I still don't understand," Harry says, although he thinks he's beginning to.

Ravi sighs, pushing himself off the workbench. He reaches over, gives the simmering solution in Harry's cauldron a stir. "Add the first batch of murtlap," Ravi says, and Harry scrapes together a ragged handful, tossing it into the mix. Ravi hands him the stirring rod. "Go widdershins," he says. He watches Harry for a long moment before he adds, "Draco's in a lot of danger here at school, whether or not any of you idiots realise it. It's definitely been something we've been worrying about in the staff room."

Harry frowns. "But--"

"Draco's in several targeted groups, and he's been outed to the whole school as Marked, Harry." Ravi looks over Harry's shoulder, towards the half-open door. He lowers his voice as he says, "And if you don't stop being so bloody stupidly obvious that Draco's broken your heart--"

"That's not--" Harry tries to protest, but Ravi's having none of it.

Ravi scowls at him, barely stopping for a breath. "Someone might think it safe to attack him. Also, if it gets out that the Saviour is poorly because of a Death Eater. Well, you can imagine the response."

"I thought McGonagall had protected the school from news and gossip with a magical injunction." Harry thinks about what they'd been told, when their owls had first arrived, that there would be no news about any of the Eighth Year students. "How could that get out?"

"Harry, don't be daft." Ravi gives him a disappointed frown. "There are numerous fan owls for you turned aside each day, and it's only a matter of time before someone figures out how to weaken or break the injunction. Skeeter's been trying for months." Ravi taps his wand thoughtfully against his palm. "Safety and privacy come at a price for the school's magical resources, and anything that's too extraordinary might break the spell's web. There's only so much it can contain."

"So you're saying it could endanger Malfoy, if anything about--" Harry stops for a moment, swallows despite the lump in his throat. "About our past involvement became known."

"Yes," Ravi's face is serious, and Harry believes him. He's learned to trust his Head of House. Despite his quick temper, Ravi has a good heart. At least, Harry thinks he has a heart.

Harry hesitates, then says, "It doesn't surprise you then. Malfoy and me." He rubs the back of his
"I mean, us being blokes and all."

Ravi laughs, sharp and quick, and then when he looks at Harry, his face sobers. "Oh. You're serious. Minerva has been saying you were a bit oblivious to social cues from the start of the year, but I'd hoped…" At Harry's frown, Ravi falls silent, a small smile playing across his lips. "You really don't know?" he asks after a moment.

"What?" Harry's confused and a bit embarrassed.

"I'm bent myself," Ravi says, and Harry stares at him in surprise. Ravi snorts, shakes his head. "Potter, I haven't passed for straight in years. Of course I saw what was going on with you and Malfoy almost immediately; I've been there myself." He gives Harry a wry look. "Of course in my case it was with a very straight, very thick Quidditch player for Hufflepuff who thought I was just extremely into Snitches, I'm afraid. I was well out of Hogwarts before I had my first actual connection with another gay man."

Harry's world shimmies, then rights itself. "Wow. That's amazing." He's struck with a sudden surprise. "Are there more of us here?" And the words are out of his mouth before he realises what he's admitted. He dips his head, suddenly embarrassed, but it doesn't seem to faze Ravi.

Ravi turns the flame down under the potion. "Probably more than you know." He tests the cauldron's contents critically. "Or, perhaps even, they know. Not everyone realises early on that they're a bit bent. You're actually one of the fortunate ones. Okay, this looks good. Another fifteen minutes or so and we'll add the second batch of murtlap. Give it a good stir again."

Harry bends over the cauldron, something like calm coming over him. He doesn't have to pretend in front of Ravi. He hadn't know it was taking so much effort. The potion is clear and a deep blue against the pewter cauldron, an almost magical result from an unpromising beginning. He looks up at Ravi. "Did you really mean that my behaviour could hurt Malfoy?"

"Yes." Ravi dips a test flask into the potion, taking out a small sample. He raises the flask, eyeing it critically, then nods, setting it back on the bench and wiping his hands on a cloth. "Make that ten minutes until the rest of the murtlap." He looks back at Harry. "As for Draco, if you keep moping about like a lovesick mooncow, someone's going to notice." Ravi frowns. "Probably Claverdon or Corner, to be honest, and Merlin only knows what will happen then. Hopkins as well, although I doubt he has the bollocks to do anything too harmful." He sighs. "Well. Any more than he already has, I'm afraid. Still, Wayne's more the type to try to hurt Malfoy emotionally, rather than physically. He's made that perfectly clear."

"So are you suggesting I try to see someone else?" The very thought makes Harry anxious, upset. Harry can't even think of anyone other than Malfoy right now, although he knows there's been an uptick in girls trying to chat him up since he ended things with Gin in the fall. But he doesn't really care. There's only one wizard in the school Harry wants to pay any attention to, and thanks to Harry's own bullheadedness, Malfoy's definitely not speaking to him at the moment.

"Heavens, no." The look of horror on Ravi's face is impressive. "Let's be honest; Draco would probably hex you both into oblivion if you did."

And that piques Harry's interest. "Really?"

"Really," Ravi says firmly. Harry's a bit pleased by that, he has to admit. He'd want Malfoy to be jealous. Ravi rolls his eyes. "And you needn't seem so thrilled about that. I'd rather not have to scrape you and your erstwhile love interest off the floor, ta ever so. I'm just suggesting that you not make it quite so obvious what the source of your suffering is. Ask Hermione--she's shrewd for a Gryffindor.
I'd suggest one of the Slytherins as well might offer assistance, but none of them are speaking to you, are they?"

Harry shakes his head. Parkinson and Zabini cut him dead in the hallways now. Bulstrode gives him stern looks, but doesn't turn away, not entirely, and Harry thinks he has Luna to thank for that. Goldstein's made it clear he's non-partisan at the moment, but Harry knows he's in love with Parkinson, knows it can't last if he wants to keep seeing her.

Ravi gives Harry a sympathetic look. "Draco's still sleeping in Blaise's room?"

"Yeah." Harry's shoulders slump. He wonders how much his Head of House has seen, really. Probably far more than Harry's comfortable with. He looks over at Ravi. "I'm worried about him being in there with Corner and Hopkins."

"Don't." Ravi's face is a bit grim, though. "I've spoken with both of them, made it clear that they're not to touch Draco, or speak with him in any way. I've set a charm on their dormitory that will let me know if anything untoward happens."

And that's a relief, Harry thinks. He's glad Ravi's looking after Malfoy, if he can't. "Thanks," he says.

"It's not for your peace of mind, Harry." Ravi gives him an even look. "I won't have anyone else going after Draco. He's my responsibility, and if those little bastards think I won't take them down if they go after him, they're sorely mistaken."

"Still," Harry says, and he meets Ravi's gaze. "Thank you."

Ravi nods. "Keep an eye on the timer for the murtlap." Ravi waves his wand and vanishes the test flask, cleaning up the bench. "Chin up, Potter. Soon you'll be out of here. Possibly even with a decent Potions NEWT."

As good as that sounds, leaving Hogwarts os exactly what Harry's afraid of. He has to make this right somehow before he and Malfoy go their separate ways forever.

He just has no bloody idea how.

***

St Mungo's is quiet in the evenings, it seems.

Draco sits in the silence of the hallway. It's his second time here; on his first visit he'd only made it this far. Tonight he's determined to go through the ward doors, to face what's behind them. But first he needs a moment to ground himself. He draws in a deep breath, lets it out. He stares down at his clasped hands, at the way his fingers twist together. He's not certain how long he's been sat here. Long enough, he supposes. The ward witches have stopped looking over at him when they come in and out, their pale blue robes fluttering around their calves. He can hear the soft, quiet click of monitoring spells through the half-open door, the quiet murmur of voices from the ward visitors. His mother's in there, he knows, curled up beside his father's bed as she does every Wednesday and Saturday now.

He's terrified to walk through those doors, terrified of what he might find there. And he's bloody tired. The SciencesMag exam is coming up in another week and a half, and he's been revising like mad. And then there's the Board vote before he leaves for Paris. Draco hasn't been letting himself consider that, even though it's all any of the Slytherins have been able to think about. Draco can't. He gets close to hyperventilating when he does. His knee starts to bob up and down, his tension
building, his anxiety rising so quickly he can barely keep his body in check. He clenches his fingers tighter, willing his leg to stop. It doesn't seem to work, not really.

The sharp click of heels against tile echoes through the corridor. Draco looks up; Pansy's walking his way, two paper cups of tea from the hospital tea room clenched in her hands. She'd insisted on coming with him tonight; not even McGonagall had been able to dissuade her. She stops beside him, then pivots on one heel, lowering herself into the seat beside him before she hands over one of the cups. Draco takes it gratefully.

"Thanks," he says, and she gives him a faint smile.

"It's shit tea." Pansy curls her hands around her own cup. Steam rises up from it. "But it'll do for now." She's quiet for a moment, then she says, "Your mother's still in there?"

Draco nods. Takes a sip of the tea. He grimaces; Pansy's right. It's truly terrible. But it's warm, and it's tea of a sort, and another sip helps to calm his jangled nerves. Pansy sits silently beside him, drinking her own tea. She's in tight jeans and a cosy grey jumper that's a bit too big for her, one that Draco's fairly certain belongs to Goldstein. It looks good on her, though, and Draco realises that they're not children any longer. Pansy'll be nineteen just after Easter hols; he'll turn the same in June. Blaise and Millie already are. They're sat here on the cusp of adulthood, and Draco's utterly frightened about what the rest of his life will bring, what they'll face. Part of him wonders if there'll be a moment when someone turns a wand on him, and he ends up in hospital, just like his father. Claverdon's already tried, after all.

There'd been a time once when he wanted to emulate Lucius in everything. Now Draco just wants to be his own man, make his own way, shed the terrible baggage that comes with the Malfoy name. A heavy sadness settles across him, hunching his shoulders, bending his head over his tea. He wishes he'd never taken on the Mark, never made that stupid choice.

He'd tried not to, in his own pathetic way, but he'd failed even at that.

"A Knut for your thoughts," Pansy says, nudging his knee with hers.

Draco lifts his tea to his lips, swallows another weak mouthful. "Just reflecting on how shit of a Death Eater I was."

Pansy flinches beside him, looks around. "Don't admit that," she says sharply. "Not in public."

"The whole bloody school knows." Draco frowns over at her. "It'll come out soon enough. Just wait until hols--there's no sodding injunction on people's houses, Pans."

"I know." Pansy glances over at him, unhappy. "What are you going to do?"

"Does it matter?" Draco feels grim. Hopeless. Like he has for the past fortnight, ever since Potter threw him to the wolves. His heart aches; he hates the fact that he still misses the bastard, still finds his gaze drawn to Potter in classes, in the Great Hall. He can't bear to even sleep in the same room with Potter; Draco's too afraid he'll do something horribly stupid like crawl into Potter's bed. He's taken to sleeping in Blaise's, his best friend curled against Draco's back, his hand on Draco's hip. Corner had objected at first, as had Longbottom, but Blaise had told them both to shut it, that it wasn't their fucking beds Draco was sleeping in. Weasley hadn't said much at all, nor had Hopkins really, to Draco's surprise.

And if Draco lies in bed, awake for hours, wetness seeping from the corners of his eyes, well, no one needs to know that except Blaise, who never brings it up in the light of day.
He looks over at Pansy, who's watching him as she twists her cup of tea between her hands. She feels guilty, he knows, that she wasn't there that day in the Great Hall, that she hadn't been able to come to his defence, to lash out at the others on his behalf. She's cut them all now, except Goldstein, who's being ostracised by some of the others now anyway, because of his association with Pansy. Goldstein doesn't seem to care about that. He still sits with Draco at meals, talks to him in class. He's a good sort, Draco thinks, and it's obvious he's arse over tit for Pans. Draco can see it in the way Goldstein's eyes follow her when she's in the room, the way his mouth quirks up in a smile when she sits down next to him.

Draco'd secretly wanted that with Potter, he realises that now. Perhaps that was his downfall. It'd just been sex between the two of them. Nothing more. And then Draco'd gone and let himself fall for the arsehole, hadn't he? Circe, he'd been a fool. More than, really, and he hates himself for that weakness, for letting Potter see him so vulnerable. They never would have worked. Draco knows that. He always had. Potter is Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World, and Draco is a sodding Malfoy, a pathetic, wretched, piece of shit Death Eater. Never the twain shall meet.

But now he's sat here with Pans, and she's looking at him with that pinched, worried face. He exhales, closes his eyes for a moment. He's tired; he wants to sleep for ages, and he knows he can't. His eyes flutter open; the reality of the hospital comes rushing back. "Look," Draco says, and he's trying to sound a bit more cheerful. Judging from the way Pansy's brows draw together, he doesn't think he manages it. "If I do well on this exam, I'm set, yes? I'll be a fellow in Paris, and the French won't give a fucking damn if I'm a Malfoy or care what the Mark might mean." It'll be a relief, Draco thinks, to be on the Continent, away from this small, insular world he's been trapped in all his life.

Pansy bites her crimson-painted lip. Her dark hair swings forward as she glances down at the cup in her hands. "But until then?" She runs her thumb over the cup's rim. "The whole Potter debacle--"

"Don't, Pans," Draco says, shaking his head. He can't go there right now.

She falls silent, then she sighs. "When are they ever going to stop hating us?" she asks quietly. "The whole of our school years they've treated us like shit--the students, the professors. And maybe we were awful in our own way, but so were the others. We were bloody children, for Circe's sake. We were stupid and scared--" She breaks off, drains the last of her tea. Draco can see the tears in her eyes; she brushes them away with the back of her hand, looking down the hallway towards the ward witches' desk. When she speaks her voice is barely a whisper. "Snape was the only one who kept us safe, and look what happened to him." She looks back at Draco, and a single tear slips down her pale cheek. "They're going to wipe us away now. The Board vote's almost certain to go that way. If I ever have kids, they won't even have the chance to be Slytherin."

Draco sets his tea aside, reaches for Pansy. She lets him pull her against him; she huffs a ragged sigh. "Then we'll teach them what it means to be Slytherin ourselves," he says against her hair. "There'll always be a place for shrewd and cunning ones like us. And they always seem to forget Merlin was a Slytherin, the idiots. Every time they bloody swear, they're invoking one of us."

Pansy laughs, soft and low. "I'd like to think Circe would have been one too."

"Obviously." Draco presses his lips to her temple, his arm around her shoulders. "What with the whole turning sailors into pigs thing she had going on. Frankly, I suspect she was related to Mills somehow." He pulls back and looks down at her, his mouth quirking up. "Sounds like something Our Millie would be likely to do."

"Without a doubt." Pansy leans into his side. He can feel the faint tremble of her back beneath his arm. Draco wonders what it would have been like if they'd worked out, if he hadn't been so bent--and so obsessed with Potter, as much as he hates to admit it, if Pans wasn't as in love with Tony
Goldstein as she is, her mother be damned. They could have been a good couple, Draco thinks. Pansy's always been one of the handful of people who understood him. Not even Blaise does as well as she does; only Greg comes closer.

And he misses Greg. He knows why Greg didn't come back to school, knows that it would have been ridiculous for him to even try. But it's been odd to be back at Hogwarts this year without Greg at his side. Stranger still that he and Greg have barely owled. But maybe that's for the best. Maybe sometimes you have to have a bit of space apart, Draco thinks.

Especially after they'd lost Vince.

That's the rub of it, really. They've all lost people, on both sides. No one ever stops to think about that. Because the wrong side, Draco's side, needs to be punished. It doesn't matter that there are grieving families there as well, that the wands of the Light had also killed those on the Dark. Draco hates war now. Hates his part in all of it. If he could go back, if he could make a different choice, he would.

Not that anyone would give a damn.

He doesn't want to think of Potter, but he can't help himself. Things might have been different between them if Draco hadn't taken the Mark. Perhaps it'd have been Potter sitting here beside him, rather than Pansy.

Draco breathes in, a bit unevenly. He looks towards the ward doors. "I have to do this," he says finally, more to himself than to Pans.

She sits up, her hand settling on his thigh. "You do." She hesitates, then says. "Do you want me to come in with you?"

For a moment, he thinks of saying yes. He doesn't want to do this alone. Instead, Draco shakes his head, stands up. "I'll be fine."

Pansy doesn't say anything. She just reaches for his hand, squeezes it lightly before letting her fingers slip away. Draco squares his shoulders, rubs his palms across the rough denim of his jeans. The Muggle clothes are a bit of a fuck-you to his father. He knows that. Still, they make him feel more himself, more his own man. Less son-of-Lucius.

And then his feet are moving, carrying him towards the ward doors. The ward witch glances over at him as he passes, then nods, her face a bit sympathetic, Draco thinks. That's surprising. He'd expected the St Mungo's staff to be as gleeful as the others at his father's illness.

The door swings open at Draco's touch, and he slips into the ward. It's quiet, a bit shadowed due to the hour. Spells hum and beep as he passes, small balls of light hovering above the beds, shifting colours against the white curtains hanging between each patient. His father's bed is down by the windows; the city sparkles wetly through the rain-streaked diamond panes.

"Draco," Narcissa says, rising from the chair next to his father's bed. Draco lets her take his hand, draw him closer. "You came in." Her lips brush his cheek. "I'm so glad," she whispers, and her voice trembles just a bit. Draco realises how difficult this must be for her, and he pulls her close, holding her tight, breathing in the roses of her perfume.

"How is he?" Draco asks, stepping back. He can't bring himself to look towards the bed. Not yet. Small steps, he thinks. One at a time. He keeps his gaze fixed on his mother's face.

Narcissa glances down at her husband, her face lined and pale. She looks as if she's aged a decade in
the past year or so, Draco thinks. "Sleeping for now." She steps back to the side of the bed, motions for Draco to come with her. Right. Draco takes a deep breath, moves towards his father. And when Draco glances down at Lucius, so still and so pale beneath the thin coverlet, his knees buckle a bit. He grabs the side of the bed; his mother Levitates the chair closer, pushing him into it, her hand on his shoulder.

"He looks better now," she says quietly.

Draco stares at his father, so thin he's nearly skeletal, his once long hair shorn completely off. His now visible skull has still-healing scars twisting across it, the skin stretched taut across the fractured bones. But his cheekbones are sunken, the dark circles beneath his eyes more pronounced, and Draco has a horrible feeling that he's looking at his father's corpse.

And then Lucius' chest expands with a breath, and his mouth opens. Draco, he whispers, and the soft cadence of his name makes Draco flinch.

"He's dreaming." Narcissa's fingers smooth across Draco's hair. "He calls for me sometimes. For you, others."

"Is he awake often?" Draco asks, unable to look away.

"No." And his mother's touch stills, her hand settling back on Draco's shoulders. "And when he is, he's rarely lucid. It's the pain, the Healers say. The potions they've had to give him to block it even partially make him sleep mostly, and when he wakes, he's…" She trails off. "Well. He has difficulty."

Draco can't tear his gaze away from his father's wounded head, from the thick scars that wind their way over his forehead, down to his temples. Lucius wouldn't want to be seen like this, Draco thinks. Not this undignified. "He's not coming home, is he?" When he says the words, they feel real, each one striking his gut like a Hippogriff's kick.

His mother doesn't answer for a moment. But Draco knows. It's clear, he thinks. "No," Narcissa says finally. "They're already talking about putting him in the Janus Thickey Ward." She hesitates, then adds, "If he makes it. He was having issues already in Azkaban. His drinking…" She trails off.

Draco thinks he understands. His father had started indulging in firewhisky when the Dark Lord took over the Manor. By the time the battle came, Lucius had been going through at least half a bottle a night, if not more. He hadn't even bothered to sober up for his hearing; Draco'd found him at the bottom of a bottle the night before. "He went off the firewhisky."

"Too quickly," Narcissa says. She looks away, back towards his father. Her face softens, wobbles a bit before she pulls herself back together, chin going back up. "The Healers here think that caused part of the trauma. The alcohol was already eating at those neuromagical centres in his brain, and the Azkaban Healers ought to have eased him off it with potions instead of cutting him off entirely."

Unspoken between them is the knowledge that the Healers at Azkaban hadn't given a damn. What was one more mad prisoner? They were probably hoping the Dementors would get Lucius first.

His mother draws in a deep breath, looks back at Draco. "They don't want to charge the guard who attacked him, you know. He's claiming it was self-defence. That your father went after him."

"Did he?" Draco asks quietly. He's seen his father lose his temper; he's felt the lash of his father's tongue, the back of his father's hand. It wouldn't surprise him if his father had been provocative.

"I don't know," Narcissa says after a moment. "All I know is that my husband no longer has the
functional skills to do magic or to remember who I am." She wipes a thumb across the corner of her eyes. "So I don't particularly care if your father provoked the attack. Lucius has tried to push my temper more than once, and I've never slammed him up against a stone wall hard enough to send shards of his skull into his brain." She raises a shoulder eloquently. "But I'm only a Death Eater's wife, so what does it matter what I think?" Her voice is cold and bitter.

And Draco thinks what a terrible son he is, letting his mother suffer through this by herself, all because he can't forgive his father for his own selfishness, for the destruction he brought on their family. He turns and looks up at her. "I'm sorry," he says, and Narcissa touches his cheek. "I haven't meant to leave you alone--"

"I haven't been," his mother says, and she gives Draco a faint, careful smile. It doesn't ease his guilt. "The one good thing out of all of this? My sister's been by to see me. And brought her grandson." Narcissa glances back at Lucius, lying so pale and still in the bed. "Dromeda knows what it's like to lose your husband. She's still grieving her own." She turns back to Draco. "At least I still have my child."

Draco swallows hard. His throat feels so tight. He doesn't know what to do. What to say. The anger he's been keeping towards his father bubbles up, and he wants to shriek, to shout at him for causing them all this pain. And then he looks back at Lucius, sees the broken man lying in front of him, and that fury seeps away, replaced by a deeply aching sadness. He wonders if he and his father would have ever made their peace. If that might have ever been a possibility. What would his father have said if Draco had looked at him, told him who he really was?

His mother's hand settles back on his shoulder, and Draco realises he can still tell her. He hasn't lost the whole of his family. Not yet at least.

And so he looks away, gathers the last tatters of courage he still has within him, and says, "I'm bent, you know." He bites his lip, unable to look at his mother, unable to see the dismay on her face. "I need you to understand that, Mother. I need you to know me."

There's an unsteady silence between them, broken only by the soft beeps of the monitoring charms. And then Narcissa draws in a ragged breath that's half a laugh, half a cry, and she whispers, "Oh, my love. I've always known."

Draco turns to her, surprise twisting through his stomach, and his mother's looking at him with tears in her eyes. She's not happy, he can see that, but she's not angry either, and she pulls him to her side, her arms wrapping around him as she crouches beside his chair.

"You were five," she whispers into his ear, "when you informed me you were going to marry Severus," and Draco remembers that day vaguely, a soft summer afternoon after Severus had come by to visit, to sit stiffly on the grass with him in the back gardens of the Manor, Draco sprawled next to him, listening to Severus read to him, his mother sat on one of the nearby benches, laughing at them both.

Narcissa pulls back, her eyes searching Draco's face. "And then there was the way you looked at Blaise one term when you were fourteen, and I knew my suspicions were correct. I never told your father, not even when he groused about hearing you whinge over Potter for the thousandth time over summer hols."

And Draco can't help but flinch at Potter's name, and his mother's eyes narrow, then widen. "It's not like that," he says, but he knows he hasn't convinced her. She's been reading his gestures for years, after all.
"Oh, Draco," she murmurs, and her face twists in worry. "Please be very, very careful."

Draco leans against her shoulder. He doesn't say anything, and his mother strokes along his back, her touch ever so gentle. "I'm sorry," Draco says finally. "I know Father'd hate me--"

"Your father would come to terms with it," his mother says, a sudden fierceness in her tone that makes Draco pull away, looking at her in surprise. She presses her lips together, almost as if she's holding back a sob, and then she exhales, her eyes fluttering closed for the briefest of moments. "You're my son," Narcissa says after a moment, and she's looking at him, a softness in her eyes, her brows furrowed with worry. "You're all I have left, and I'm not fool enough to push you away for something like this. Whatever I might think."

And Draco nods, his voice catching as he says, "I love you."

Narcissa stands up, letting her fingers smooth across Draco's hair. "And I you." She looks down at her husband. "As does he, you know. You have always been his boy, Draco. Even when he was angry."

"I miss him." Draco reaches out, lays his hand over his father's, feels the papery softness of Lucius's skin. And when Lucius' fingers curl around his, a sob wells up in Draco's chest. He's losing his father, he realises. The man whom he'd idolised as a child, whom he'd hated these past months. However it happens, whether by death or by brain trauma, the father Draco had known is slipping away.

And so he sits quietly, caught between his mother and his father, the way he's been for the entirety of his life, and he wonders if it will always be like this, his life dictated by his parents' choices, by their dramas.

Draco breathes out, watching his father sleep, wondering how long it will be before Lucius Malfoy slips away from him.

It surprises him when the tears come, slow and steady, wetting his cheeks.

His mother wraps her arms around him, pulling him close, and Draco lets himself grieve.

For his father. For Potter. For himself.

***

Harry's sat in the common room, his Potions books spread in front of him. It's mid-April and Easter hols start in a few days. All the professors have been laying extra work on them, determined to make certain they squeeze every bit of learning out of the end of the week. Tempers are flaring out of sheer stress, not to mention the fact that the Board of Governors arrived at the castle this morning for the first of two days filled with meetings. They're even visiting classes this time, something Harry's never seen them do, which has made the professors bloody mental as well. Harry'd had a small knot visiting his Defence class this afternoon. Thank Merlin it was a short one and not a double block. Harry's rather certain Omolade would have throttled them. As it was the Governors had nodded and murmured in the back of the room, and Harry'd caught them looking at Malfoy more than once as he blocked Bulstrode's jinxes easily.

Omolade had asked Harry to stay back at the end of class, and he'd done so, wiping the sweaty back of his neck with the flannel he keeps in his satchel on Defence days. She'd looked at him for a long moment, then said, "Your magic has seemed more stable in recent months than it was last term."

"I've been keeping up with your exercises," Harry'd said, but he thinks it's more than that. Malfoy
had calmed him, had settled that wild roil inside of him. The past fortnight, though, had been
different. Despite his talk with Ravi, Harry's been uneasy. Unhappy. Miserable, if he's honest. And
that tension's back again; he can feel it in his spellcasting. It's not as fluid, as natural as it'd been
before. When Malfoy was helping take the edge off Harry, and maybe that's the problem. Maybe
Malfoy was right, that Harry was just using him to get off with, that all that mattered was the way
Harry's body fit with Malfoy's.

But the thing is, Harry doesn't want sex right now. He could probably walk down the streets of
Hogsmeade and have any number of girls--maybe a boy or two as well, if he tried--throw themselves
at him. And yet none of them are Malfoy, and Malfoy's the one Harry wants to be tangled up with.
Literally and figuratively, he thinks. No one else interests him. No one else is worth the effort.

Omolade had just looked at Harry, her dark eyes searching his face. "And yet, I feel as if you've
slipped back the past fortnight or so. You struggled in class today; I could tell even if the others
couldn't."

"I didn't cause any problems," Harry'd said, perhaps a bit too irritatedly.

"No," Omolade had sighed. "But you might have, and that's what worries me." She'd studied him.
"Are you having nightmares again?"

Harry hadn't wanted to answer. He has been, since Malfoy stopped speaking to him. They'd started
slowly, but they've crept back into his mind now to the point he's almost afraid to sleep. Nights are
restless, uneasy, and he's exhausted all the time. Still, he'd just shrugged and said, "I'm fine."

And Omolade had nodded, but she'd looked worried, unhappy even. "I can't force you to deal with
what happened to you in the war, Mr Potter, but I strongly suggest you talk to someone. Your
friends, perhaps. You're dealing with a great amount of trauma and grief still, and the longer you
push it away, the more difficult it will be for you in the end."

She'd let Harry flee, and now here he is, curled up in a chair in the corner of the common room,
watching Susan and Zabini on the chesterfield, their heads bent together, Zabini reaching out to tuck
a strand of Susan's hair back behind her ear. Harry's glad for them; he really is, but he's jealous too.
Not because of Sus, but because they can be open like this. There's no secrecy to their relationship.

Harry wonders what it might have been like if he and Malfoy had been able to sit together in the
common room. If they hadn't had to hide themselves away. Maybe that had been part of what had
gone wrong.

Then again, maybe it had been him. Maybe Harry'd just been into Malfoy for the sex. Except it
doesn't feel like that to Harry. But what does he know? Ginny'd always told him what a shit
boyfriend he'd been. Maybe he's always been like this. Maybe he doesn't have it in him to be
anything else.

He looks up, glumly, as the door to the common room opens. Ron comes in, laughing, with Ginny
beside him, and Hermione trailing them both, an open book in her hands.

"Oi, Harry," Ron says, and he throws a wadded up piece of parchment Harry's way. Harry catches it
easily, one eyebrow raised. Ron turns back to Ginny. "See, Gin. He's still got Seeker's reflexxes."

"Mine are still better." Gin gives Harry a wry grin, and Harry shrugs. She has a point. Gin is the one,
after all, who's scored a tryout with the Harpies during Easter hols. She walks over and perches on
the arm of Harry's chair; Harry's oddly aware of Zabini watching them from the chesterfield.
"What're you working on?"
Harry leans back, looks up at her familiar, freckled face, her long ginger hair plaited down her back. She's still in her Quidditch jodhpurs and a thin red jumper, the sleeves pushed up. "Potions," he says, as Ron and Hermione take the small sofa opposite them.

"And how's that going?" Hermione asks, closing her Runes text. She has an essay due tomorrow, Harry knows, and she's been editing it for the past two days now.

"Fine," Harry says, but it's a lie and they're all entirely aware of that fact. He sighs, then admits, his voice low, "Malfoy was a better tutor than Ravi."

Ron gives him a sympathetic look. "At least you haven't blown anything up the past fortnight."

True, Harry thinks. He scrubs his hands across his face, pushing his glasses up before settling them back on the bridge of his nose. Since that first night he and Malfoy had come back from Shell Cottage, Ron hasn't said much about what went down between the two of them, and Harry hasn't really wanted to talk about it. He doesn't even know if Ron's aware they were actually shagging, to be honest. Harry's never explicitly told anyone they had. Not even Hermione. He assumes they think he might have, but they've never asked, and that part of it all feels private. Like something he wants to keep to himself. Not because he's ashamed of it, but because it's something he only wants to share with Malfoy. Not anyone else. He looks over at Gin. "What are you here for?"

"Justin," Ginny says easily. She swings a leg out, the toes of her boot grazing the ottoman Harry has his feet propped up on. "He wants to go for a walk around the lake."

It's odd, Harry thinks. He's not even jealous any longer, not even when he thinks about his own lakeside walks with Gin back at the end of sixth year, stopping to sit along the shore, kissing beneath the bright blue spring sky. He smiles up at her. "Sounds like fun."

Gin reaches over, rumples his hair. "I think so."

The common room door swings open again. This time it's Parkinson, and Malfoy trailing behind her, looking exhausted, the shadows beneath his eyes pronounced. He stills when he catches sight of Harry, his face blanching a little. Malfoy's gone out of his way not to be near Harry the past few weeks, putting himself as far as he can from Harry in classes. It's always awkward when they run into each other in the corridors. Or the toilets. That's the worst, Harry thinks. Malfoy always looks as if Harry's going to hex him there, his fists clenched, his shoulders tight. It makes Harry feel like a complete bastard, and he usually just turns around and walks out.

And then Malfoy's gaze settles on Ginny's hand, resting lightly on Harry's shoulder. His face tightens; his eyes flick back to Harry's face. "Am I to offer congratulations then?" he drawls, and there's a viciousness to his tone that makes Harry's skin prickle. "Or condolences to Finch-Fletchley?"

"Fuck off," Harry says, and it almost physically hurts to say it. He can't look away from Malfoy's pointy, pale face, thinking of the way it felt between his hands, what it was like to stop that sharp tongue of his with a kiss. Harry's heart aches. He misses Malfoy, but he'll be damned if he'll let Malfoy know that.

Malfoy scowls at him; Parkinson looks weary as he snaps, "Ah, yes, Harry Potter's favourite refrain. Pity he doesn't take it to heart himself, but I suppose that giant ego--"

"Enough, Malfoy," Ron says, unfolding himself and standing. His face is set. "And whatever your problem is with Harry, you can stop taking it out on my sister, thanks."
Parkinson catches Malfoy's arm. "Come on, Draco. Let's work in the library." She looks over at Zabini. "Blaise?"

Zabini clears his throat. "Yeah. All right with you, Susan?"

The look Susan shoots Harry is disappointed. Irked, even. "I think it's for the best." She stands up, Zabini helping her off the chesterfield, and they walk over to Parkinson and Malfoy. Harry's surprised to see Susan slide her arm under Malfoy's elbow. "I could use your help with my Alchemy essay, Draco. If you don't mind."

Harry's starting to think the whole bloody world's turned upside on its head when the lot of them leave, the common room door slamming shut behind them. "What the bloody fuck," he says, frowning.

"Susan's turned into a right wanker," Ron says, dropping back down into the sofa. It creaks and protests under his lanky frame. "Wouldn't have expected that of her."

"I don't know." Ginny looks thoughtful. She exchanges a glance with Hermione, who nods at her. Ginny sighs, turns back to Harry. "You know," she says slowly. "I think Malfoy's awfully unhappy."

Harry just shrugs, tries to pretend as if he doesn't care. "So?" He thinks she's right, though. Malfoy's been angry and prickly since they called things off between them. Harry doesn't think it's just that, though.

Ginny gives him an exasperated look. "Don't be thick, Harry. It's not exactly a secret that the two of you were shagging around."

"We weren't, not really," Harry protests, and his gaze darts to Ron and Hermione across from him. Hermione just raises an eyebrow, her arms folded across her chest. She knows he's lying. And even Ron frowns at him, scratches the back of his head.

"You don't have to hide it from me," Ron says quietly. "I'm not that brainless, mate. I knew it when you came back from Shell Cottage, even if you wouldn't really admit it. It was rather obvious at times you two were..." He waves his hand in the air. "Whatever." He looks a bit uncomfortable. "You know." Ron's hair falls into his eyes; his cheeks flush.

Harry's own face feels as if it's on fire. "I..." He doesn't know what to say, so he slumps in his chair, letting his unhappiness seep through him.

"It's all right." Ron leans forward, his elbows on his knees. He rubs his thumb across the back of his freckled knuckles. "I figured you'd tell me when you were ready." Ron looks up at Gin. "Except Gin thinks that might be never."

"I know Harry," Ginny says, and her fingers brush the nape of Harry's neck. "He avoids things until they blow up in his face, don't you, love?"

Harry wants to protest, but he can't. Not really. So he shrugs, a bit petulantly, and looks over to Hermione for help. She just gives him a half-smile, but keeps her tongue. For once.

"You miss him." Ginny touches Harry's cheek, turns his face up to look at her. Her eyes are warm and gentle, and Harry's throat thickens, aches deep in the back. "Don't you?"

There's a long silence as Harry looks away, his eyes prickling hotly. He blinks, draws in an uneven breath. And then Harry says, his voice barely a whisper, "Maybe." He keeps his shoulders stiff as
Ginny leans down, wrapping her arms around him. He doesn't want to fall apart, and he's afraid he's going to, especially when she presses a kiss to his cheek. Still, he looks at her, says, "I wish things could have worked out between you and me. It would have been less complicated."

"Complicated things are worth it," Ginny whispers into his ear. She smooths his hair back, sits up. "And I reckon what you need to decide is whether or not a wanker like Malfoy's worth fighting for."

Yes, Harry wants to say. Instead, he looks over at Ron and Hermione. "He's not like he was," Harry says after a moment. "Malfoy, I mean. He's trying to change."

"I know," Hermione says, her voice soft. She's watching him carefully. "But Ginny's right, you realise. You can't keep sitting around here, moping, Harry. You either move on, or you go after him. Convince him he's made a mistake. One or the other."

Harry's heart pounds in his chest; his stomach flips. He nods, but he doesn't look away from Ron. "What do you think?" he asks, and he knows this is his decision, but it affects all of them, in a way. Ron especially. He's been Harry's best mate since the beginning, since Harry first discovered the wizarding world.

Ron's silent, twisting his hands between his knees. Harry feels a bit ill, a bit anxious. And then Ron says, "The thing is, mate, you were better with him around. It's not that I like it." He looks up at Harry. "I mean, we're talking about the Ferret, for Merlin's sake. But you were calmer. Less…" He trails off, then shrugs. "You know. Wonky."

And Harry does know. "Malfoy settles me," he says, and Ron nods.

"Something like that." Ron sighs, then runs his fingers through his hair. "I'm not going to say it's not weird, you being bent--"

"Bisexual," Hermione corrects, and Ron rolls his eyes.

"Whatever."

"You like birds, and you like blokes. I mean, I don't get it, not really. But I don't care, either." His face softens; he reaches out a hand, curls his fingers around Harry's. They're warm and dry and a bit rough. Not like Malfoy's at all. "But you're my best mate, and if anyone says anything about you being bent or bisexual or whatever the hell you want to say you are, I'll fucking deck 'em, yeah?"

Harry laughs, but it's raw and rough and quiet. "Thanks."

"Yeah, well." Ron scowls and pulls his hand back. "I've already told Michael to fuck the hell off when he tried to whinge at me about you."

And that's something Harry didn't know. "Oh." He shifts in his chair uneasily. "I didn't realise--"

"Michael Corner's a tosser," Ginny says, her voice fierce. "He hates bent people because his granddad was a hateful tosser who threw his dad's brother out of the house when he caught him with a bloke. Said it was unnatural and an act against God." She snorts. "Whatever, given the old man cheated around on his wife for decades, and they all knew it." At the shocked looks she gets, Ginny just shrugs. "I dated him for half a year. I found things out. Anyway, I have my suspicions about Michael and Wayne Hopkins."

"Because that's not a closeted friendship," Hermione says with a roll of her eyes.

Ron looks confused. "What the hell are you both on about?" he demands. "They're roommates, not…" He gestures towards Harry.
"Thanks, Ron," Harry says dryly.

"You know what I mean." Ron throws his hands up in the air and sinks back into the corner of the sofa. "Besides, we're talking about Harry and Malfoy, not Michael and Wayne." He wrinkles his nose.

Harry thinks it's going to take Ron a little bit to get used to the idea of bent blokes being around him, but that's all right. It's taken Harry a while to come to terms with it himself. He rubs a thumbnail across the slightly pilled upholstery on the arm of his chair. "It's a moot point, anyway. Me and Malfoy. It's over, and I fucked it up."

"Yeah," Ginny says. "You did."

That's always been one thing that Harry'd loved about Ginny: her bluntness and her unsentimentality about certain things. He nods, and a deep unhappiness settles across him. "I wish I hadn't," he says. "I'd do anything to fix it. I think…" He stops, licking his bottom lip, then he draws in a slow breath. "I need him. I've never needed anyone like that." He glances over at Gin apologetically. "It was different between you and me."

"I know." Ginny settles her hand over his. She gives him a small smile. "It's all right."

And then Ron leans forward again. "Look, Harry," he says, and he stops, scowls, presses his steepled fingers to his mouth. "Fuck it. If Malfoy's who you want--and fuck if I understand why you'd be attracted to a pointy-faced git like him when you had someone like Gin--"

"That's a bit sweet," Ginny says, and her brother flaps a hand at her, then turns back to Harry.

"But whatever." Ron heaves a sigh. "If Malfoy's the one for you, then you need to get your bloody head out from up your arse, mate. You've been a prick to him. We all have, I reckon, but it's you that matters the most, right?" When Harry nods, Ron sits back. "So. You want to be with Malfoy, then that means you stand by him. You don't throw him to the rest of us because you don't like his sodding father."

"Honestly," Hermione says, "I get the impression Malfoy doesn't care that much for his father himself."

"But he's still his dad, yeah?" Ginny drapes her legs over Harry's lap, her arse still perched on the arm of the chair. "So maybe when Michael and Nev and everyone went off about him, you could have stopped it somehow."

Harry's quiet, a hard knot of unhappiness settling in the pit of his stomach. "That's what he said."

"Then make it up to him," Ginny says, her voice careful. She's studying Harry. "Remember how I told you I hated that you never did anything special for us? Make a grand gesture, Harry. Prove to him that you want to be with him. That it wasn't just shagging around." She touches his face. "Because it wasn't, was it?"

That knot loosens a bit. Harry shakes his head, his throat tight. "It wasn't."

Ginny smiles down at him. "Then show him."

"I don't know how," Harry says, and he can barely get the words out.

Hermione reaches over, her fingers brushing his knee. "You will at the right moment. I'm positive of that."
They all sit silently for a moment, and then Ron snorts a laugh. "Never thought I'd be sat here trying
to give Harry advice on how to win the bloody Ferret over, of all people."

"It is a bit surreal," Hermione says, but the smile she gives Harry is warm.

Frankly, Harry thinks, it's all a bit mad. He sinks back into his chair, feeling like a damned fool. "It
won't work."

"Don't make me slap you, Harry James." Ginny pokes the back of his neck. "You're the worst at
sabotaging yourself, you prick."

"Yeah," Ron says, "but he has to try." He looks over at Harry. "You'll regret it if you don't."

Harry reckons he's right.

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The Great Hall is remarkably clean when Harry walks in for dinner. It's formal table, so everyone is
in full cloak and hat with house ties. The Slytherin table is a muted field of solemn black and green.
The other houses are wearing more house scarves and pins and whatnot.

"I hate having Eighth Year colours," Ron says, examining the purple lining of his cloak and the
purple-grey stripe of his tie in disgust. "I feel like a prat without red and gold."

This is the first time they've worn formal hats since Yule--they're pointy and high and hard to eat in.
Harry never gets tired of seeing Hogwarts like this, turned out and charmed up. It always makes him
feels like he's been transported back to first year, when everything was new and exciting and magic,
and the lines between the houses seemed so clearly drawn but not yet by tragedy. Now he's not
certain what the differences are, looking around at his Eighth Year classmates. They’ve all been
changed by what they've undergone, too mature and not really suited any longer for the usual school
rituals. The children at the other tables chatter around them, but when Harry looks at his fellow
Eighth Years, how solemn they all are, he can see how much they've grown since their earlier selves
first sat in this hall almost eight years ago.

The Great Hall ceiling is full of candles and the tables are garlanded with flowers in house colours.
The Eighth Year table has a long garland of purple flowers with grey roses interspersed. The ones
for Slytherin, however, look a bit wan, in Harry's opinion--they're more muted, heavy green and
leafy rather than brightly coloured like the others. Almost as if the table itself is mourning what's set
to happen in the next twenty-four hours.

Minerva McGonagall is dressed in full formal dress with all of her medals and ribbons. She's wearing
a fancy velvet hat and her black brocade robe is trimmed in lace. The podium with the gilded owl
spreading its wings has been set up, so Harry assumes she's going to address the gathering shortly.
All of the board members are sat at the Head Table amongst the professors. Ravi and Grace
Omolade look more polished than Harry's ever seen them. They also look distinctly uncomfortable.
Hagrid's drinking sherry and talking animatedly to an athletic-looking witch Harry doesn't recognise,
who must be one of the new Governors.

"Harry, sit down," Hermione tugs at his sleeve. Harry sits, awkward in his robes with his Order of
Merlin, First Class, pinned a bit haphazardly to the front. He's never got the hang of putting it on
right, the golden medal hanging from its bright green ribbon. Hermione had told him the colour for
the first-class ribbons was supposedly in honour of Merlin himself, a Slytherin, and Harry thinks that
feels appropriate for tonight.
He shifts on the bench, feeling out of place in general. He also hasn't seen Malfoy yet, and he's beginning to get worried. He'd heard from eavesdropping on Parkinson and Malfoy in the library that the SciencesMag exam is coming up next week in Paris. Malfoy's brilliant, in Harry's opinion, and sure to get admitted, if not become a fellow. NEWTs are also around the corner, less than a month out from their return to school after hols, and Harry's no idea if he can pass anything, although he's giving it his very best efforts and he has a lot of help, if not a lot of motivation. Deep inside, he thinks maybe he doesn't want to be an Auror any longer. He's not sure what his future holds, doesn't even know what he wants, but he's starting to be sure it's not the DMLE, not now. Maybe not ever.

Malfoy comes racing in, with Parkinson matching his stride, his soft, flaxen hair a foil to her smooth black bob. A little frisson of longing cuts through Harry, as it always does these days when he sees Malfoy. It's not that he's healed the wound at all, it's just that he's got used to the hurt. And if Harry watches whilst Malfoy takes his seat between Zabini and Bulstrode, Parkinson sliding in next to Goldstein, well, that's his own pain to bear, isn't it?

McGonagall stands up at the podium, tall and imposing. She cuts a more severe figure than Dumbledore ever had, with her black velvet and stern demeanour, and the room falls silent almost immediately. Even the Board of Governors sits up straighter, each and every one of them.

The Headmistress clears her throat. "Dear students of Hogwarts, members of the Board of Governors, professors, staff, ghosts, and elves, I bid you all welcome to this festive spring table. It is wonderful to be gathered here with all of you, and I look forward to the coming meeting in which the Board will make so many important decisions about our future." She pauses, surveying the Hall. "The Board have indicated that they are interested in student perspectives on harmony between the houses, so I'm sure they'd love to hear anything you care to share with them whilst they are among us."

She's about to start into her speech, when Harry's suddenly struck with inspiration. He realises this is the moment Hermione told him he'd recognise. It seems a bit silly, and he doesn't know how he knows, but he's sure it's now or never. Before he really thinks about it, Harry shoves the end of the bench he's sat at back a little, the legs scraping loudly across the stone floor.

McGonagall looks up with a frown as Harry clambers up onto the table, finding a space for his boots between the flower garland and the little salt and pepper pots. "Mr Potter," she says, a little icily. When she says his name, all of the Board members pay much closer attention, and Harry can see them sit up and look at him. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Soft titters go through the Hall, mostly from the younger students.

Harry feels a right fool stood up here like this, his boots straddling the Eighth Year garland, Hermione hissing at him to sit his idiot arse down. "Headmistress," Harry says, and his voice cracks a little. More laughter, but not from the Slytherin table. They're all frowning up at him like he's lost his bloody mind. Maybe he has, Harry thinks. He can't look over at Malfoy, even though he knows the prat's watching him. "I have something I'd like to share."

All eyes are on Harry now, and the entire room falls silent, with rustling as students crane to get a better view. Harry focuses on the High Table at the front of the Hall instead of looking down at his fellow students' faces. He can't think too much about the impact of what he's going to do. He just needs to do it. Up Gryffindor and all, he tells himself, taking a deep breath.

"Yes?" McGonagall's face is composed, but her mouth is pursued in a moue of disapproval. Merlin but Harry's glad the Eighth Years aren't in the running for the House Cup. He'd have bolloked it up for all of them right now, he knows.
Harry swallows, realising that he is standing up on the table in the middle of a formal event, and the bottom drops out of his stomach. A bolt of nervousness shoots through him, and he can't feel his legs. Still, he presses on. He's come too far to lose his nerve now. "I know—we all bloody well know since it's the worst kept secret since Voldemort's return a few years back--" And at that there's a sharp intake of breath that Harry would still dare say the name. Harry tries not to roll his eyes. "Anyway. We all know that the Board are here to vote to eliminate Slytherin house and reSort its members."

The voices in the Hall start whispering. Harry looks over at Ravi and Grace Omolade, who have their eyebrows raised at him. Omolade is clutching what Harry assumes is a goblet of wine, and Ravi has a grim look on his face. He raises his glass to Harry subtly, then takes a sip whilst watching him impassively.

"At least," Harry says, "that's what we've all heard is going to happen, and I, for one, think that would be a bloody disastrous mistake." Harry swallows again, trying not to look at Malfoy. Parkinson leans over and whispers something into Malfoy's ear. Harry continues. "Slytherin are part of this school. Every single one of us owes something to Slytherin House, whether or not we want to admit it. When I first came here, I was told there wasn't a witch or wizard who went bad who didn't come from Slytherin House." He looks across the High Table, sees the Governors who are nodding along with that statement, finds Hagrid's gaze. He gives him a small smile. "But as much as I love and respect the man who told me that, I think he was wrong." He lets his gaze sweep through the other tables, across his fellow students. "There's not a single one of us who doesn't have it in ourselves to go bad. Myself included."

It's silent in the Hall now. Everyone's looking at Harry, and he hates it. He can feel the panic start to swell deep inside of him, that familiar roil of his stomach that makes him think he might sick up, that makes him want to run away from all the eyes staring at him. His palms are sweating; Harry rubs them as discreetly as he can on the sides of his robe, twisting his fingers in the thick fabric.

And then he looks over at Slytherin, at the way the younger students are staring up at him, their eyes wide, at the way the older students are looking between each other, uncertain as to what to do. And Harry knows this is why he has to finish this off, fight the panic down.

He takes an uneven breath, gestures towards the Slytherin table. "Hogwarts is our home, and it's their home too. I have as much reason as any of you to hate the followers of Lord Voldemort. I have lost many, many people I loved in the first and second war."

Harry's throat closes up; he has tears in his eyes. If he blinks, Harry can see the bodies lined up in the Great Hall, the wreckage and the devastation whose traces have been almost erased physically, but are still so mentally present for all of them, Harry included.

"I do blame individual Slytherins for their actions," Harry says, "just as I blame each and everyone of us for our actions towards them." He glances around the room, and when he looks at the Gryffindor table, Ginny's beaming up at him. "But I don't blame the House at Hogwarts or Salazar Slytherin, the Founder. Slytherins were not the only witches and wizards who committed crimes in the name of Lord Voldemort. Let's not forget that."

There's a visceral shudder that goes through the room again at the name. It's empty, though, and if the candles seem to flicker for a moment, they come on twice as strong afterwards.

Harry lifts his chin. "And they're not the only people who took advantage of or profited from the situation. My own parents were killed because their best friend, a Gryffindor, betrayed them."

McGonagall's stood at the podium, and there's a small smile on her face as she looks at Harry. She
nods, ever so slightly, giving Harry the encouragement to go on.

"We cannot contain hatred by erasing house identity." Harry holds up his Eighth Year robe hem, displaying the purple side. "It's been interesting to have a common colour with the other Eighth Years. We are all still Gryffindors, Slytherins, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs, deep down inside, with all that means, but we're also something else together this year, something more. Our house colours are who we are at Hogwarts, and we all wouldn't be the same without each other. The school needs all of us because it's going to take everyone to fix things. We've lost so much. We can't lose Hogwarts too."

When Harry glances down at the table around him, Ron and Hermione are looking up at him, their faces gleaming in the candlelight. Hermione beams at him and Ron gives him a little nod. With his friends' support, Harry knows he can do what he needs to. And this, Harry thinks, is the crux of that grand gesture Ginny had told him about. He sends a desperate plea to whatever deity is listening that Malfoy won't hex the bloody bollocks off him when he says this in front of the whole bloody school.

"I'd also like to make an announcement." Harry's throat is suddenly dry. "The fact of the matter is, well, I've been seeing someone this year who used to be in Slytherin, and he's--" There's a sharp gasp that ripples around the room at the pronoun. Harry squares his shoulders, ignoring the whispers even as he feels his face warm. "He's been really important to me. I've done a lot to pretend my feelings for him weren't as strong as they are, and I've been a coward in public about it. I need to stand up and be honest with myself and everyone."

"He's been really important to me. I've done a lot to pretend my feelings for him weren't as strong as they are, and I've been a coward in public about it. I need to stand up and be honest with myself and everyone." Harry draws in a deep breath, looks straight at Ravi, who's quirking a smile at him. "I'm a bisexual wizard, and I think I'm arse over tit in love with Draco Malfoy. He's not speaking to me right now, but that's more my fault than his. Also his dad was hurt very badly in prison, and that's not okay."

Harry turns towards Malfoy whose face is thunderstruck. His mouth is open in soundless surprise as Harry looks down at him.

"So if you want to insult him or attack him, for being bent, for being a former Slytherin, or for anything else hateful," Harry says the words looking straight into Draco's face, "you'll have to go through me. The same goes for trying to take away his House and his House colours."

Harry hears a clatter, and then Susan Bones stands up on the Eighth Year table as well. "I'm Susan Bones, Eighth Year, and I used to be in Hufflepuff. My family lost a lot in the war, and my aunt Amelia Bones, a member of the Wizengamot, was killed." She stops, lets the words settle. "I'm also in love with a former member of Slytherin. Blaise Zabini means the world to me, and if you want to disband Slytherin House, you'll have go through me too. It's not the students' fault my aunt died. They didn't kill her. Death Eaters did." She looks down at Zabini. "I think my aunt wouldn't have wanted us to hate each other like this. Not at Hogwarts."

Luna climbs up delicately on the Ravenclaw table, arranging her robes, her radish earrings swinging and her long blond hair trailing behind her. "I'm Luna Lovegood, Seventh Year Ravenclaw. During the war, my father was threatened by Death Eaters and he made a few bad choices that he thought would protect me. I was in the dungeons at my cousin's house at the time, and they were very uncomfortable." She stops, her melodic voice ringing through the hall; her gaze drifts towards Malfoy, and she smiles at him. "But I know that the problem was the evil of Lord Voldemort. And the fear of his followers. And possibly wrackspurts." She muses for a moment. "No, definitely wrackspurts. What I'd like to say is that I'm seeing Millicent Bulstrode who was in Slytherin last year, and she's been nothing but good and kind and true to me. I would hate for her to lose her House colours over something that was never a problem at Hogwarts. In fact, it would make more sense to take away the Ministry since they covered up the billiwig conspiracy, and allowed Umbridge to torture us all. She was a very, very mean person and knew nothing about merpeople or
squid or centaurs or children."

As Harry stays standing, jaw clenched, trying to breathe and balance on the balls of his feet, more and more students stand up on tables to support Slytherin vocally. He can see them standing at the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor tables. His heart leaps with every person who stands up. He knows they’re going to be punished, but right now he doesn’t care. The sole exception is the Slytherin table—there, the students are huddled together in small groups, watching everyone very carefully.

Then Ginny stands up. "I'm Ginny Weasley. I'm dating a former Hufflepuff, not a Slytherin. I still hate everyone who supported the nose-less bastard, especially the people who killed my brother Fred." The room falls silent, and she wipes away an angry tear. "But I know that taking away House colours and ruining the fabric of Hogwarts is not going to bring my brother back. I think the only thing that can prevent violence is being very careful not to spread hate or make it okay to kill people." She pauses. "And also possibly beating Slytherin at Quidditch. That's bloody well allowed, I say." She and the Slytherin team captain, Vespasia Haynes, stick their tongues out at each other, and there are titters through the Hall.

"Thank you all," McGonagall's voice is quavery, and Harry can see that she's moved. She dabs at her eye with a frilly white handkerchief, then continues. "Would anyone else like to speak?"

Four first years—a Gryffindor, a Ravenclaw and two Hufflepuffs—walk over to the Slytherin table. They're so small, they have to be helped up onto the table by the students around them. Harry can't believe he or anyone at the Eighth Year table were ever so tiny, although he knows they must have been once. Still, looking at the shining faces of the little group, he marvels at what a long distance he and Malfoy and Ron and Hermione and everyone in their year have crossed from then to now.

"I'm Kira," the leader says, squaring her shoulders. "This is Nick and Aisha and Soo-yeon. We're first years. We just got here, and we don't know the school very well yet." She looks over at her friends, and they nod at each other, then face the Board again. "Our friend Elspeth is here in Slytherin, and we really like her." Kira looks down at the small brown girl with neatly plaited hair they're all standing in front of and grins. "She's brave and she's clever and she always figures out the Transfiguration homework before we do and shares the answers. We don't want her in our Houses—she can be in Slytherin and still be our friend. We like her the way she is."

Harry sees McGonagall's face open with a restrained smile. He knows these must be students of hers for Transfiguration, and he suddenly wonders what it's like for her to see this entire Hall of students and former students. He realises that she might even have taught some of the people on the board, or the parents of the children in the room, and that gives him pause.

The Ravenclaw boy, Nick, leans in, fixing his glare on the Board. "Hogwarts is Hogwarts and it has four houses. Elspeth doesn't have to lose her colours because some boring older people had problems ages ago."

The entire Hall breaks into howls of laughter at that, even the ghosts. The leader of the Board—the athletic witch Hagrid was speaking to—stands up and approaches the podium with the owl wings spread. She murmurs something to McGonagall, who nods and steps away, letting the other witch take her place. She stands there for a moment, looking out at the students still stood on the tables. "I'm Verity Hopkins-Hunter," she says after a moment, "and I've heard what you said. I am so glad you support your friends, and I believe I speak for the Board when I say that you have influenced our thinking." She looks at Harry, then at the other adults at the High Table. "I give you my word that we will not continue with the Slytherin vote at this meeting. I will try to have it tabled, if not thrown out."
The tables erupt with shouts. Everyone stands, hats are thrown in the air, some of the garlands hit the floor, and Flitwick moves quickly to save the decorations and restore them as more and more people crowd the tables or hold people on the tables up. Some people hang about on the sidelines, disgruntled, but the people around them jostle them, getting them engaged in the uproar. Michael Corner's face is mutinous, but Harry gives him a quelling look. He'll have a much harder time picking on Malfoy now, even without Ravi's monitoring spells.

It takes about twenty minutes to restore order. The elves come in with trays of food, everyone pipes down, the tables are hastily cleaned by spells, and what was a very formal affair becomes a rather riotous meal. Rather surprisingly, some of the Board members venture out to sit amongst the students, and the Heads of House come down to sit with their tables. Sinistra goes to Gryffindor and Flitwick to Ravenclaw. Pomona Sprout whispers something to McGonagall, then goes to join the Hufflepuff table. The Head Table thins out further as Ravi goes to sit with the Eighth Year and Omolade with Slytherin. Harry notes that Ravi's still clutching a rather large goblet of wine as he sits down.

Malfoy's eyes are dark and his face is red whenever he looks at Harry. They keep sneaking furtive looks at each other. Harry has no idea whether they have any chance, whether Malfoy will even talk to him, but he feels calmer now that he's done the right thing, maybe even made some amends.

Ron elbows him. "Be a bit more of a besotted wanker," he says, taking the piss.

"Shut it, Ronald." Hermione glares at Ron, then turns to give Harry an encouraging smile. "I thought it was very well done. You had to be very brave to come out to everyone."

Ron puts an arm around her, even though she makes a show of not leaning against him at first. "So did I. It's just up to us to keep him honest. Look how big his head is getting." He makes gestures with his hands in front of her that mimic Harry's head blowing up, and Hermione laughs. "He'll run for Minister of Magic yet."

Harry and Ron both laugh in delight at the horrified look on Hermione's face. "I was thinking Care of Magical Creatures, myself," Harry says. "Or possibly Wizengamot."

Hermione just shakes her head.

When Harry tucks into his food, he finds that he's ravenous.

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Draco hasn't seen Potter since that ridiculous, fully Gryffindor gesture he made at dinner. The resulting uproar had led to the most formally incorrect formal table ever, an engaging and opinionated talk with Ravi about the merits of French versus English education, and a final speech by McGonagall on house bonding and house cooperation. Draco can't remember having ever enjoyed a Hogwarts formal event so much, and watching Potter beg for Slytherin's safety from the Board had only been the beginning of the enjoyment. Draco wonders if it will hit any of the newspapers or the wireless, and his cheeks colour as he thinks about Potter's declaration and the cloying sincerity of it.

Is Draco chuffed? Naturally. Most of the Slytherins have stopped by to congratulate him for, as Blaise put it, "spreading his legs for the House's survival." The teasing is all in good fun, Draco knows, and the gratitude is real. Everyone knows how close they came to losing the green and silver forever. Still, Draco wishes his role in the situation were less obvious, that his prior sexual escapades with Potter were less publicly known across the school. He and Potter'd thought they'd been being discreet, but it turns out that many, many people'd been aware of their liaisons. A few had even
alluded to catching a glimpse of them, in the library and in the second floor hallway.

Draco's proud, but a bit appalled by it all. He's never wished to be a famous Death Eater slag, as Pansy has teased him, to toughen him up, but, well, he'll play the role if it's demanded of him.

He'd thought he'd have a chance to speak to Potter after dinner, but the Board of Governors had whisked the prat away, sending the rest of them back to their dormitories. Potter had just given Draco an apologetic look as Hopkins-Hunter took his arm, leaning forward to ask him how he'd enjoyed his Eighth Year so far, and Draco had been pulled away by his friends back to the Eighth Year common room.

An hour later, after Draco'd endured even more teasing whilst Weasley winced in his armchair, demanding amongst rounds of laughter that no one ever use the words Potter, Malfoy and shagging in a sentence to him for the next fortnight at least, and Corner stomped off to his dormitory, Hopkins in tow, Millie had brought out her entire stash of whisky, and they'd all drunk themselves silly in the girls dormitory. Granger had figured out how to lift the charm keeping the boys out--which Millie had said didn't work anyway, as half the time she didn't think of herself as a girl. Now Draco's back in his own dormitory, having left the others to their revelry, sprawled in his bed in his pants, horny and wishing Potter were here. He hasn't been too indulgent--he's just tipsy enough to miss the rumple-headed prat.

Of course, when the hangings on his bed do actually rustle, Draco jumps a mile and tries to put a cushion over his crotch. Potter's dark head appears, and Draco squawks at him. "Merlin, Potter. A wizard does need his privacy."

Potter ignores his harsh cry. "Mind if I come in?"

Draco shivers, his body treacherously suggesting that Potter should come all the way in. "Sure," he says awkwardly, not really looking at Potter's face but at the wrinkled edge of Potter's shirt collar, the golden skin of his neck. Draco still remembers how he smells; he's seized with longing to nuzzle Potter's neck again, see if it's still as intoxicating as he remembers.

Potter lies down next to him in the small amount of room Draco leaves at the edge of the narrow bed. He's still in formal robes, and his purple and grey Eighth Year tie is askew. "Hi," he says, leaning against the bedpost and watching Draco beneath heavy lidded eyes. His breath smells like wine in the close air of the bed hangings. Draco'd rather drink with Millie than the Board, ta ever so--the Bulstrodes are famous for their cellars, and the whisky'd been perfect for a proper celebration.

"Hello, Potter," Draco says. He's trying to resist Potter's stupid, bespectacled, scruffy charm and it's not working, at least not on his body which wants to wrap itself around Potter. He frowns. "What brings you to my bed?"

As he waits for Potter's answer Draco leans back, trying to seem blasé, but misjudges the space he has. His elbow meets air over the edge of the bed, and he very nearly falls off. Potter lunges forward to grab him at the last minute and hauls him back onto the mattress.

They end up entangled, Draco's hand on Potter's shoulder and Potter's hand on his waist. Potter, the loon, smiles at him, his mouth wet. "This is nice," he observes.

Draco puts another hand on Potter's chest, the better to push him off with. Of course, he has to want to resist the kiss that Potter plants on his lips. He doesn't want to resist at all, and so, their lips meet, their bodies shift, and Draco ends up draped on top of Potter, straddling his hips, and sucking on his tongue, nothing but his pants separating him from Potter's formal clothing, the soft cotton of Potter's shirt scratching Draco's bare chest. He feels wanton, and he likes it.
Potter's hands drop down to Draco's arse, gently curving around his cotton-covered arsecheeks and kneading them. "Fuck, how you feel," Potter says, fingers pressing into Draco's flesh. "I've wanted you so much the past few weeks."

Draco can feel the length of Potter's erection under him, insistent and rock-hard. He grinds his hips, and Potter's eyelashes flutter. "Did you really mean what you said, you prat?" Draco has to know. He doesn't entirely trust Potter to tell him the truth, but, well, maybe he doesn't need the truth, just an elegant lie. "About me."

Potter's eyes are green behind his smudged glasses. "I didn't tell the whole truth," he admits. "I omitted the part about how I want to be inside you every breath of my waking life and most nights when I'm asleep. You're all I dream about."

Draco smacks Potter's shoulder. "Suck up. I hope you're talking about your nightmares."

But he's pleased. Potter wants him. And frankly, Draco wants him more and more as the minutes tick past, their kisses growing more and more heated. Smelling Potter, tasting his mouth, feeling the insistence of his desire for Draco--it's all like catnip, and Draco is randy and has been far past ready for hours. It's only his pride, after all, that's been keeping him apart from Potter, and Potter'd gone and done the stupidest, most obvious thing possible, like the awful Gryffindor that he is, and now Draco's heart feels as tender as a newly hatched snakelet. He's aching with the familiarity of Potter, the urge to throw himself headlong into desire, to never look back from this disaster.

Still, he has to be careful. After a furious, bruising kiss, Draco pulls back, panting. "It's not going to be that easy, Potter. You just think you can walk back in here and earn my heart."

Potter frowns at him. "Yeah." He clears his throat, blinking up at Draco. "I mean, I'd hoped."

"You've got to show me that you mean it, that you're sincere about this." Draco's not playing hard to get as much as he's determined not to let Potter take advantage of him again. He won't let himself be hurt like this again. Not by Potter. Not by anyone.

"What do you want?" Potter's voice is breathy.

Draco thinks for a moment. "I want to fuck you."

The shy smile Potter gives him makes Draco's stomach flutter. "Okay. I think I want that too."

Draco sends Potter off to the loo to get ready, whilst he lies on his stomach, playing leisurely with his prick and wondering what it's going to be like to fuck Harry Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World. He doesn't know why he asked--after all, he loves having Potter fuck him and it's not as though Potter hasn't opened himself entirely this evening in front of the entire Board of Governors and every single student and staff member of Hogwarts. Which probably means Rita Skeeter will have it by the weekend, thus utterly destroying Draco's life. Still, Draco wants this to be final, to serve as some sort of tangible proof that Potter is as all-in as he is. Shagging Potter feels like the equalising factor, the incontrovertible proof that Potter's as bent as Draco is, as fucking mad for whatever this is between them. Draco needs assurances--he can't afford to stake his feelings on a lie any longer.

Potter comes back, face freshly scrubbed, hair ridiculously tousled. He's in a bathrobe and not much else. He pulls condoms and lube from the pocket of the towelling bathrobe, and tosses them on the pillow next to Draco. "Here."

Draco laughs then. "Were you planning on this?"

Potter's face is shuttered, careful. "I'd hoped." He fiddles with the knot in his belt. "By the way," he
says carefully, "I may have suggested to the other lads that they avoid the room for a bit." He meets
Draco's gaze. "I'd rather not bother with a Muffliato."

"Oh," Draco says, and he's suddenly embarrassed. "You're a wanker," he says.

"And they were pissed already." Harry shucks his robe, letting it fall from his shoulders to Draco's
coverlet, and Draco's mouth is hanging slightly open, his annoyance at Potter's indiscretion fading.
Potter's so fucking beautiful, Draco can't stand it. His golden skin is smooth in the lamplight, he's
muscular but not overly so, his shoulders broad and the vee of his hips defined. Draco's eyes follow
the thick trail of dark hair on Potter's muscled belly leading down to the thatch of black hair and
Potter's erect prick. Potter stays still, letting Draco admire him.

Draco licks his dry lips. "How do you want to do this?"

"What do you recommend?" Potter's holding his gaze.

Suddenly Draco finds it difficult to swallow. This is actually happening, he thinks.

"Maybe on your knees," he says, throat tight with longing. It'd been easier for him that way, at first.

Potter shakes his head, his hair tumbling over his forehead. "No. I want to see you."

"Okay," Draco shifts, lies back propped on his pillows. "Then you should probably be on top."

Potter puts his knees on either side of Draco's hips, bracing himself on the headboard for a moment
before sinking back on his haunches over Draco's thighs, and oh, Draco's not prepared for the little
frown of concentration as Potter rolls the condom onto Draco's prick or the wrinkle between Potter's
thick brows as he slicks him with lube. When Potter lifts up on his knees again, the sight of him
lining up with Draco's dripping prick beneath him is almost too much. Draco casts an Impervius on
them both. His stomach is jittering with anticipation.

Just as Potter's about to sink onto him, Draco says, "You might want to get ready." He knows he's
not as big as Potter, but it's still Potter's first time. And Draco's not that small, either.

Potter just laughs, his face smug. "Oh, I did a little prep work in the loo. Why do you think it took
me so long?"

Draco barely breathes as Potter looms over him. He holds his prick still at the base, willing himself to
be calm as Potter lets his arse slide over the tip, then shifts his hips forward, putting his hand behind
him to shift the tip of Draco's prick between his arsecheeks.

With a sigh, Potter sinks down. As Draco watches, half alarmed, stiff as a rod, his face frozen, Potter
takes several inches of his prick into his body. Potter's biting his lip and his eyes are closed. His thigh
muscles are straining, quivering, holding him above Draco. The tension in his body is delicious.

Draco takes a ragged breath, understanding now why Potter looks the way he does when he presses
into Draco each time. It feels amazing, being inside Potter, knowing his body is connected to Potter's
like this.

"Oh," Potter says, eyes opening, panting. "That's a lot." He shifts up a little, then down again.

Draco's hands rest lightly on Potter's hips, holding him steady. Potter works himself down another
inch on Draco's prick, a frown of concentration on his face. Draco resists the urge to thrust upward,
to bury himself in Potter. The tight heat of Potter's arse is incredible--Draco's felt this from the other
side, and oddly, he feels so possessive on this side of it, so proud of Potter, so determined to fuck him
into the mattress.
It takes Potter another few tries to encompass all of Draco, and Draco waits, counting, reciting Potions formulas in his head, thinking of Shrivelfigs and Runes and anything that will keep him from popping too early. He wants this to last as long as it possibly can. Merlin, he's glad he barely indulged in Millie's firewhisky.

"Careful," Draco murmurs as Potter slides lower onto Draco's prick. His fingers are digging into Potter's hips, and he's trying so hard to stay as still as he can, his cock throbbing deep within Potter's arse.

"Well, it's not the most comfortable broom I've ever ridden," Potter says finally, circling his hips just a bit and wincing, stopping, then starting to move again. His prick bobs in the air between them, hardening again. "But I could get used to it."

He sinks up and down on his knees, his movements growing more sure, more emphatic with each slow press downwards. Draco arches his shoulders back into the pillows, his body writhing beneath Potter's, his heels digging into the mattress. He thrusts up to meet Potter, arse coming off the coverlet, and is rewarded with a groan.

"Oh, that's good," Potter tilts his hips, tips his head back, finds an angle that clearly works for him. He looks like a bloody Adonis spread out over Draco, his knees wide, his hands back behind him, holding him up as he rolls his body down, taking Draco deeper into him. "Fuck," Potter says, and he looks at Draco. "Is this what it's like for you?"

Draco's hands slide down Potter's muscular thighs, pushing them wider so he can see his prick going into Potter. "Yes." It's almost a moan. "I love having your prick in me." But this is brilliant too, Draco thinks, watching Potter fuck himself on Draco's cock. Potter's chest is flushed, his nipples hard, and Draco can't help but sit up just enough to wrap his arms around Potter, leaning in and drag his tongue across those delectable nipples, scraping his teeth over one. Potter gasps, and his hand tangles in Draco's hair, holding Draco against him as he slides all the way down Draco's prick.

"Fuck," Draco says against Potter's skin. This is what he missed, this is what he wants. From now until... Well. Forever.

But that's a dangerous thought, and Draco pushes it away.

Potter leans forward, laying Draco back against the pillows. "Merlin, Malfoy," Potter says, and he's breathless already. "The way you feel in me...." He breaks off into a sharp gasp as Draco rocks his hips up, as Draco's prick presses deeper.

And then Potter's shifting again, leaning back, his hips moving against Draco's, his cock hard and ruddy, slapping against his stomach with each press of his hips. Draco tries to keep up, finding the movements that give him the most tight, hot pressure, that seem to pleasure Potter the most. His fingers slip across Potter's slick skin; their breathing is laboured, tight and shallow. Potter groans when Draco thrusts next, and Draco does it again, and again.

The tension is building between them--Potter has a blissed out look on his face, sunk in an almost trance-like state. Draco's sex-drunk and shaking from holding himself back, from wanting it to last. And then Potter arches himself back, bracing his hands on Draco's legs and bowing his hips forward. Draco reaches out to stroke Potter's cock and when his fingers curl around the swollen heat of Potter's shaft, Potter's whole body clenches from the inside.

"Merlin," Draco cries out, seeing stars. "Potter, I'm so close." He grits his teeth as the core of his body melts, threatening to explode at any moment.
"Yeah, I'm almost there too." Potter's voice is rough, raspy. "Just do that a little more."

Whilst Potter rides him slowly, sinking up and then down, Draco palms at Potter's cock, pulling his foreskin around the wet head, rubbing his palm over it, then stroking back down. He sinks into the rhythm of it himself, his only experiences the movement of his hand, the tight, incredible heat of Potter swallowing him, beating through his veins.

"Oh- oh- fuck, yes. Fuck me, Malfoy. Please. I need your prick inside of me. Oh, God--" Potter's cries are staccato, sharp and ringing in the still air. Potter's whole body shakes, as Draco tries to keep him steady, and then Potter comes undone around Draco, his prick jerking, his body clenching. Spunk splatters across Draco's chest, hot and slick. He collapses on Draco, breathing hard, his shoulders trembling still, his eyes wide and blown, Draco's sticky fingers stroking down Potter's back, his hips still pressing up, his cock moving inside of Potter, slowly, carefully.

"It's all right," Draco murmurs into Potter's ear, and Potter's still shuddering against him, his breath hot against Draco's shoulder. Draco shifts, pulling out of Potter, rolling Potter to the side in a heap as Draco removes the condom and drops it on the floor beside the bed. He'll deal with it later. Right now he needs to come, preferably against Potter. Draco shifts onto his side, curled against Potter's body. "All right?" he asks, and Potter nods, still coming down from the high of his orgasm.

And then Draco's hand curls around his own prick, immediately ready, and it only takes a few strokes, with Potter whispering drowsily in his ear, telling him how amazing this is, how beautiful Potter thinks him to be, before Draco's coming too, his body exploding in a burst of light and colour that presses his heels into the mattress, arches his body against Potter's. He comes against Potter's hip, and Draco loves the realisation that he's marking Potter with his spunk, claiming Potter as his. A wave of intense satisfaction crests over Draco, followed by a heaviness as the tension he's been carrying begins to seep out of him.

After the cleaning spells, Potter pulls Draco down to the mattress and they lie twined around each other, sated and limp, both nearly unconscious with bliss and release. They kiss languidly, their bodies warm. Potter brushes Draco's hair out of his face, looking at him unfocussedly without his glasses. Draco can see the faded lightning scar from this distance.

"That was amazing," Potter says, his lips brushing Draco's. "I may have to make you do all the work in the future."

Draco pauses, a shiver of anxiety passing through him. "You act as though we have a future, Potter."

And that makes Potter rise up slightly, looking down at Draco with a frown. "Oh, we do have a future, Malfoy," Potter says. "We used to have a past, and now we have this. Do try to keep up."

"Do we then?" Draco's voice is almost hesitant.

Potter's watching him, carefully. He drags his knuckles along Draco's jaw. "The thing is, Malfoy, I meant what I said up there on that bloody table tonight. All of it. I started off this year, feeling..." He hesitates, frowns. "It was as if I had nothing any more. No purpose, no meaning. Nothing. Once Voldemort--" And Draco flinches a bit at the name. Potter's face softens; he smooths Draco's hair back from his face. "Once he was gone," Potter says, almost gently, "I didn't know who I was any more. Since I was eleven--earlier, I reckon, but I didn't know--it's felt as if it were him and me. Two halves of a coin, you know? And then he was gone, and I was still here, and I didn't understand. I didn't have anything to fight, anything to push back against, and I felt...." He trails off.

"Empty?" Draco asks quietly. He knows what Potter means.
And Potter nods, a faint smile curving his mouth. "Yeah. Fucked up, I know."

"Not really." Draco slides his thigh between Potter's. It feels warm and intimate, the two of them tangled up together.

"It's just," Potter says, "there wasn't anything else any more. I thought I could push it away with sex, but that only worked so much. At least with Gin."

Draco's looking at him, hardly able to breathe. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Potter's palm cups Draco's cheek. "And then this maddening, brilliant prat came along, and I started realising that maybe I wasn't as straight as I thought I might be."

"What a terrible arsehole," Draco says with a smile.

"Complete wanker," Potter agrees. His thumb smoothes along the curve of Draco's lower lip. "But along the way, I think I fell in love with him."

And Draco stills, barely able to breathe. "So you told the whole school," he says after a moment, and he can't keep the tremble out of his voice, can he? As much as he might like to. His heart's pounding; he can't look away from Potter's face. He searches it, trying to find the lie.

"I meant it," Potter says. He's looking at Draco, and Draco feels so bloody exposed. "I realised it when we weren't speaking." He bites his lip, and it's then Draco can see the uncertainty in Potter. "I love you, Malfoy," Potter says, and then he stops with a faint laugh. "No." And Draco's heart clenches for a moment, until Potter says, "I love you, Draco."

"Oh," Draco breathes out, and it's his name that's his undoing. He touches Potter's face. "Potter." He laughs softly. "Harry."

And Harry's watching him, hope in his eyes, and Draco's heart is overflowing with joy.

"I love you too, Harry," Draco whispers, and it's not the fireworks Draco expected the first time he said those words to anyone. Instead it's a quiet, comfortable warmth that settles deep inside of his stomach, unfurling until the very normalcy of it takes Draco's breath away.

Draco smiles, and he lets Harry kiss him, lets him curl up against Draco warmly, seduce Draco into sleep. He's ready for this strange, tenuous, uncertain happiness, after the bitter certainty of despair that shackled his life for the past years.

A future like this might be nice, he thinks.
Chapter 10

I never knew you were the someone waiting for me,
’Cause we were just kids when we fell in love
Not knowing what it was.
I will not give you up this time,
But darling, just kiss me slow, your heart is all I own
And in your eyes you’re holding mine.

--Perfect, Ed Sheeran

The warmth of June sunlight spills over the crowded Hogsmeade train station platform. All of the students are chattering to each other, some already holding owls and other familiars they’d just collected from the holding area, the Muggleborns standing off to the side checking their mobiles or ringing their parents. A group of first-year boys, Slytherins, Gryffindors and the odd Hufflepuff or two are climbing up the side of the station, daring one another to jump onto the tracks, just to have the protection charm on them bounce the little bastards back, howling with laughter. Harry catches a glimpse of Sinistra, sweeping their way, a steely glint in her eyes, and he almost feels sorry for the prats.

Harry checks his watch. The Express is due any moment, and Draco's at the far side of the platform with a group of their friends: Bulstrode and Luna, Parkinson and Goldstein, Zabini and Susan. Harry can see Draco's pale hair shining in the sun, his face animated as he shares a joke with Zabini, who snorts in amusement. Parkinson scowls at the both of them, her eyes hidden behind enormous, dark sunglasses, so Harry suspects it has something to do with her, all things considered. Goldstein leans over to kiss her on the cheek, but Parkinson just crosses her arms, pursing her lips at Draco, who doesn’t seem to be perturbed at all. To be honest, Harry’s just as happy to be fighting his way through the masses of younger students to reach the group than to be in the middle of even a polite Slytherin face-off.

Hagrid’s wrestling the freight up to the loading platform, and Harry narrowly squeaks past the magically levitated pallets filled with trunks and other student baggage. Draco’d insisted on taking Quercus in the compartment, and so Harry’s carrying him, Quercus fluttering unhappily in his cage. He's been in there too long already, or so he'd have one think by his annoyed squawks when Harry jostles him, trying to slide past a group of Ravenclaw girls, all of whom chorus, “Hello, Harry,” as he passes. Harry just waves, Quercus' brass cage clutched in his other hand. Harry'd had to wait for the luggage to come up from Hogwarts to fetch Quercus from the mass of cages brought down from the Owlery. Now Quercus is clicking at Harry in disappointment as he fights through the packed platform, and Harry knows the little owl wants to see Draco.

"Just a little bit longer," Harry says, a wheedling tone in his voice. If Quercus throws a tantrum, it could get loud. For such a small owl, Quercus can make a frightful noise when he wants to. "Draco's right up ahead. Honestly, you're almost as impatient as he is."

Harry reaches the group and smiles, his eyes meeting Draco's. "Sorry we're late. The trunks came down before the owls."

"That's all right." Draco turns a tart little curve of his lips Harry's way. "Contrary to what you might be telling my poor owl, I'm not that bloody impatient today." He gives Harry a pointed look, and Harry just snorts. He's used to Draco's occasional fits of temper now. In fact, he rather likes them, if he's honest. They're Draco to him, and Harry's utterly mad about his boyfriend, so he doesn't mind. He hands Quercus' cage over, and Draco starts clucking softly at his owl, who's fluttering against the
side of the cage, hooting softly, trying to nip at the strands of Draco's hair that fall through the bars. Honestly, Harry thinks, sometimes he's a bit jealous of the way Draco looks at that bloody owl.

"Don't mind him, Potter," Parkinson says, and her arms are still crossed, rumpling the line of her thin grey cashmere jumper. "Draco's just being a prat today."

At that, Draco looks up from Quercus, slides an arm around her waist. "You know I love you, Pans. Desperately."

Quercus flaps his wings against the cage, trying to get Draco's attention again.

She shoves him away. "Tell that to your boyfriend, you tosser." But she's smiling now, and Harry knows that whatever's narked her off, she's not really angry about any longer.

The train puffs in sight, and the assembled students cheer as one. The noise of the train approaching the platform, combined with Hagrid bellowing for everyone to mind the bloody gap and step back from the train make it convenient for Harry not to answer. When the train hisses and comes to a full stop, their group surges onto the train.

It's a bit comical to have everyone crowded into one car. Draco takes the window with Harry beside him. Draco stands on the seat, tucks Quercus up above them, a handful of owl treats in the cage. Quercus hoots unhappily, but settles onto his perch.

"You spoil that owl," Harry says.

Draco just sniffs as he steps down. "He's a brilliantly beautiful boy. Of course he deserves to be spoiled, don't you?"

Quercus clicks his beak, nudging his head against the bars of his cage so Draco can stroke his feathers.

"You are not letting that owl fly around the compartment," Parkinson says firmly, coming in from the hallway, Goldstein trailing behind her. "When you did it at Christmas hols, he shat on my favourite coat. The elves never did get the stink out."

"If you hadn't tried to bat him away, he'd have been fine." Draco drops into the seat beside Harry, his shoulder up against the window. Outside the rest of the school's still pushing to get on the train, steam from the engine curling around them.

"Are you arguing about Quercus again?" Zabini asks. He lifts a satchel onto the luggage rack beside the owl's cage.

"No one appreciates the brilliance of my owl," Draco says, a bit sulkily, and Harry pats his thigh. Draco eyes him. "Are you patronising me?"

Harry shrugs. "Feeling you up is more like it." Draco gives him a half-smile, letting his shoulder bump against Harry's. Harry can't help himself; he leans in and kisses Draco, slow and sweet. They'd spent all of last night in Draco's bed, naked and wrapped around each other, talking about what it was going to be like to finally leave Hogwarts.

It'd been rather bittersweet, Harry thinks as he pulls back. Draco's mouth is pink and wet now, and he looks softer, less nervous.

"Get another compartment if you're going to do that," Susan says as she steps in from the hall. "This one's awfully small." She looks around, wrinkling her nose. She casts a quick expansion spell, and
there are suddenly ten seats instead of eight. She sits down next to Blaise, who's on Goldstein's left.

"That's handy," Goldstein says. "Why did we need the space?"

"I saw Ron and Hermione at the end of the carriage, and I think they're heading for us." Susan tosses her hair, then lays her head on Zabini's shoulder. He puts his arms around her and plants a kiss in her hair.

"Ever the clever one, Bones," Zabini teases, but Harry thinks he hears real warmth in the mockery.

Susan smiles. "One does one's best."

Bulstrode and Luna take the far seats, the ones nearest the aisle. Luna has some sort of device that she's waving around, taking some sort of measurements--Harry knows better than to ask why and what she's tracking--and Bulstrode's reading today's Daily Prophet. Harry's grateful that they've finally finished their series on Gay Wizards Among Us--after the Easter Board meeting and his public demonstration had finally hit the papers, famous figures in the wizarding world had rushed to come out. It seemed like there'd been a press conference every day in the Prophet for a while, and Harry found himself back in the paper at least twice a week, much to his annoyance and McGonagall's distress. Still, there's only so much an injunction can do, at least for Harry Potter, it seems.

True to form, Rita Skeeter's taken every opportunity she can to malign Draco and suggest that Harry had been bewitched or possibly affected by Imperius or a Dark Artifact. All of which is wildly hysterical to Draco, who's taken to asking Harry every few days if he can Imperio him again. Nothing Harry's been able to say has made the rumours go away, so he's just given up, and held his tongue publicly each time Skeeter's latest acidic story has come out. That hadn't kept the majority of Eighth Year from dramatic readings of the horrid articles, followed by a ceremonial burning of them in the common room fire. By the end of term they were so awful Neville and Bulstrode had come up with a drinking game involving cinnamon firewhisky mixed with butterbeer and a drink every time Skeeter used the adjectives "nefarious," "ill-intentioned," "wicked," or "scheming." Ravi'd had to distribute sobering potions after her last two-page spread on the Evil Inheritance of Malfoy Manor.

But then Harry thinks he and Draco have had the last laugh really. They'd spent all of Easter hols together in the castle, revising for their NEWTs and shagging in the emptiness of their dormitory. Draco'd changed his plans at the last moment, owling his mother to tell her he wouldn't be coming home for hols, that he'd be staying with Harry instead. Narcissa hadn't been happy, but she hadn't objected either, and neither had McGonagall in the end, even if it'd been a bit of an unorthodox arrangement. Harry'd gone with Draco to Paris for the SciencesMag exam, meeting Narcissa Malfoy at the hotel. She'd terrified him at first, and they'd spent an awkward weekend together whilst Draco was testing. Harry's not certain Draco's mother will ever like him, but she's come to accept that Harry's going to be a part of her son's life. Hopefully for a long time, Harry thinks. He'd decided whilst standing in the middle of the Jardin des Tuileries, holding Draco's hand, that he wanted to spend the next year in Paris with Draco, whatever happened, wandering the streets of Saint Germain.

Draco'd just received the results of the exam, a week after his birthday, letting him know that he'd passed with flying colours and was being accepted into the potionbrewing division with a full bursary and housing subsidy from the Société de Paracelsus. Harry wonders what Paris will be like in the fall.

"Oi, did you save us seats?" Ron bustles into the compartment, a giant bag from Gladrags under one arm and a suspiciously large Honeydukes parcel under the other. He reaches up, his t-shirt sliding high enough to expose a swathe of freckled hip, and finds room for the parcels in the already full train racks above the seats. "Good thing the charms on the compartments are sturdy."
"I made you seats," Susan says, smiling over at them as Hermione drops into the seat beside her.

"Thanks, Sus." Hermione takes a letter out of her bag and consults. "By the way, I have good news on our flat."

Zabini perks up. "Yes?" And Harry still thinks it's a bit odd that Zabini and Susan are sharing a flat in Diagon with Ron and Hermione for the next year. There's a small part of him that's a bit jealous, he has to admit. It ought to be him with them, but he'll be in Paris with Draco, won't he? Draco's fingers slip through Harry's, and Harry smiles over at him.

The train whistle blows, and Harry looks outside. The platform's clear, save for Hagrid, who's waving as the train jerks to life, starting to pull away from the station.

"It's free a week earlier. We can move next Tuesday." Hermione's look is thoughtful. "I think I can get my parents' car for the IKEA trip for the weekend."

They've just opened a wizarding IKEA near Diagon, and Hermione was determined to source what they could from there and from Oxfam. She'd spent most of her spare time during revision looking at their catalogue, determining what would fit. Ron had just encouraged everyone to nod and smile whenever she talked about strange woods or finishes.

"The Aurors want me by the first of July," Ron settles in his seat, next to Harry. Harry and Draco share a quick look. "I reckon I can have most of the furniture spelled together by then."

Harry'd had a bit of trouble at first telling Ron he wasn't going into the Auror training with him, and privately he thinks Ron is still sore about it, but they've been closer than ever as the summer approaches. Ron and Hermione've even promised to come visit Draco and Harry in Paris before Yule.

"When does your work with Hopkins-Hunter start?" Sus looks over at Hermione, who's checking things off of a long parchment list with a graphite pencil. She prefers not to travel with quills as they always leak, Harry knows.

"Oh, not until August." Hermione's smile is bright. "I'm going to read up on Wizengamot papers and help Molly with some projects at the Burrow."

"They want me on the first of July at Gringotts as well," Blaise says. "Sus, you've got until the fifteenth at St Mungo's, haven't you?"

"If I take the Artefact Accidents offer," Susan purses her lips. "I'm still thinking about whether to hold out for something in Magical Bugs and Diseases, even if it's more difficult."

Harry puts his arm around Draco, holding him close. Draco lays his head against Harry's shoulder, looking out the window, watching the Scottish countryside pass by. Lucius Malfoy's still in St Mungo's, permanently transferred now to the Janus Thickey Ward. He still hasn't recognised Draco or Narcissa any time they visit, and he's only the basic magical function of a toddler now. The guard who attacked him paid a fine to a charity and is back at Azkaban. Harry knows Draco's still angry about that.

There's a long silence for a moment, then Zabini glances at Goldstein. "Is your mother meeting you two at the station?"

"Yes," Parkinson says glumly, and she glances at Goldstein. She's pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head. "It was nice knowing you all. Please do remember us fondly."
Goldstein laughs. "It's not going to be that bad, Pans. And if it is, maybe Susan can make a room in their flat too."

"When do you tell them?" Susan's look is kind.

"Tomorrow," Goldstein says, as Pansy says, "Tonight." They both stop, looking at each other. Pansy says, "I thought we agreed on tonight because it's better to get it over with."

"But my mother goes to sleep so early," Goldstein protests.

"She won't sleep after you tell her we're engaged." Pansy stretches out her hand. The old-fashioned goblin platinum and diamond ring that Goldstein'd surprised her with last week at the end of NEWTs gleams brightly from her fourth finger.

"That's precisely my point," Goldstein says. "Clearly, a good night of sleep beforehand is better. Also my grandmother is helping us." He looks at the rest of them. "She, out of all my family, doesn't think Idgie Parkinson is a harpy."

"Well, she's wrong. Mother most certainly is." Parkinson frowns. "To be honest, I'm not sure I want my mother to have the advantage of rest before she accuses me of utter betrayal by marrying you. But maybe it will be nice to be the beloved daughter for another night." She looks over at Goldstein, her forehead wrinkled. "Are you certain we can't just elope?"

Goldstein eyes her. "You want to deal with the parental guilt on that one?"

Parkinson sinks back against the seat, her hands over her face. Her diamond sparkles brightly in the sunlight from the window. "HaShem help us all." Goldstein just sighs and pulls her against him, kissing her forehead.

Frankly, Harry thinks that the parents are going to find their way, and even if they don't, they'll have to for the sake of their children, who have no intention of letting an old feud between their mothers separate them.

"Well, make sure you send us a card when you set a date. I have no idea what the French exam schedule is going to be like in the first year. They're remarkably close-lipped about their timeframes." Draco shifts his thigh, presses it against Harry's, warm and comforting. Harry strokes a thumb over their entwined fingers, rubbing it lightly across Draco's knuckle.

Harry can't believe that they're going to be in Paris in a week. Draco's advisor had found connections for a flat for them--evidently the Société de Paracelsus bursary would help with a joint room for students who wish to share housing, or with significant others. Once they'd figured out Draco would be sharing with the famous Harry Potter, well, Draco and Harry'd received a very nice flat, small but with views of the Seine and functioning Floos, in one of the Société's older houses. Harry'd wanted to protest the special treatment, but Draco'd told him to shut it, especially in this matter. Harry's not sure what he's going to do in Paris when Draco's courses begin, since he hasn't a job yet, but he's leaving that worry for the future. He's been doing Omolade's exercises and his technique and overall magical control have improved immensely.

And he's thinking about what Ravi said about Harry teaching Defence. It's not the worst idea in the world, he thinks, but he hasn't brought it up with Draco yet. He's still mulling it over; Harry thinks he has some time to make that sort of decision. Right now, he just wants to be himself, living his life in Paris with his boyfriend.

That's still a word that sends a shiver of joy through Harry. He likes having a boyfriend, particularly
one as brilliant as Draco Malfoy. Ginny'd stopped him in the hallway last week, told him she was happy he was going to Paris, gave him a hug. It's good between them now, Harry thinks. Ginny'll always be his first love and one of his dearest friends. He'll be cheering her on from the stands when she takes her first match with the Harpies this summer. Justin's already made certain they all have tickets.

"When do you leave for Iceland?" Harry looks over to Luna, who's now examining the plimpy activity of the compartment with the device that looks like a garden gnome's umbrella.

"Wednesday," Millie says from behind the Quidditch fixtures pages of the Prophet. "My mother is going to pitch a fit, and it'll probably take me that long to pacify her, but I need to start at the hostel immediately because of the post-Solstice rush."

Harry knows that Luna and Millie are going to live in Iceland for the year. Luna's studying Elvish habitats and Millie has a job lined up at a wizarding hostel. They'll be based near Reykjavik but travelling around to different parts of the island using the Floo system and flying the sturdy local brooms. Wizarding travel is much easier in Iceland that in England, Luna'd told Harry, in part because of the different population density and the geothermal energy. Harry'd not been sure if both of those were reasons for flying brooms in public, but he'd been glad that his friend was looking forward to her research.

As the train chugs along, several of their number doze off. It's been a challenging set of days since NEWTs concluded last week, and none of them have slept terribly well for weeks. Harry thinks he's done well enough on the exams, with Draco's help, but he doesn't care as much as he once did, he realises. He's happy here, with the sunlight warm on his knees, Draco cosy along his side. He sinks into a quiet reverie, hearing the steam of the engine and the regular clack of the wheels.

"When do you think we'll arrive?" Parkinson asks Draco, who picks up Harry's watch to check the time.

"Second star to the right," Harry says as he jostles against Draco's shoulder. "And straight on till morning."

"It's a Muggle thing," he hears Hermione tell Pansy. "But it's difficult to explain."

"So weird, Potter," Draco says, his breath ruffling Harry's hair. "As always." He kisses Harry's cheek, curls himself around Harry's side. Harry's lips curve in a smile. There's plenty of time to explain later.

Outside, Scotland rolls past, the train taking them on to the rest of their lives.

And all was well.

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*First thing, we make you feel better,*
*Next stop, we pull it all together.*
*I'll keep you warm like a sweater,*
*Take my hand, hold on forever.*
*Just fall apart if you need to*
*I'm here and I won't leave you now.*
*Don't look down—*
*Hold on forever.*

---*Hold On Forever, Rob Thomas*
Thank you so much for reading! You can show your appreciation for the author in a comment here or on livejournal. ♥

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