The Curious Case of the Disappearing Stockings
by Thealmostrhetoricalquestion

Summary

It's Harry's Eighth Year, he's surrounded by Slytherins, and Christmas Stockings are going missing all over Hogwarts. At the risk of being mocked ruthlessly, Harry won't verbally declare that Malfoy probably has something to do with it, but... well, Malfoy definitely has something to do with it.

"Not a fan of brussel sprouts, Malfoy?"

"Nobody alive is a fan of brussel sprouts, Potter," Malfoy said waspishly.
"Especially not when they’ve been inflated to the size of bollocks and printed all over cheap fabric."

Notes

1) Thank you for setting up the fest, lovely mods! This is set in December 1999, a year and a bit after the war ended.

2) Two characters I did things I'm unsure of with here: Theo is Jewish, but as someone who isn't religious, and lives in a society that is largely Christian, I may have gotten something wrong, in which case please, please correct me. I did lots of research, and I tried to work it around the circumstances, but I would much rather you just let me know so I can learn and fix it! Also, Millie is non-binary and goes by they/them pronouns here, which I know a little more about, but still encourage you to say if I did something wrong! Thank you!

3) Only warnings are for swearing and sexual references, plus some really ugly joggers.
Exactly six students attended Hogwarts for their Eighth Year.

Nobody wanted to come back, not to this place. There was the clean-up, of course, and the repairs and reworkings of the castle they once called home, but to go back? To sit in classes and roam the peaceful halls, to converse with ghosts, traverse secret passageways and play Gobstones in the courtyard? After only a year or so had passed? That was too painful, for most.

Harry went back. He knew that he would always go back to Hogwarts, no matter the time or the year or the way the stars sat in the sky. If he got old and grey and had to dodder from here to there, he would still dodder all the way to Hogwarts for some tartan biscuits and a trip to the old, peaceful Owleri, his knobby knees brittle and quaking. Hogwarts was peace and home, no matter the pain he had felt there.

Ron had gone straight into the Aurors, working to keep Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes afloat between training: Harry thought he was also considering helping Mrs Weasley, who had started a Meals on Brooms business to help those affected by the war. Hogwarts, for Ron, didn’t mean sweets, spells, quiet evenings and glorious Quidditch games. It wasn’t the first time he’d ever felt full, or the only place that felt safe. Hogwarts was where Fred had died, and for the moment, that was all there was to it.

Hermione had utilised her enormous, ruthless brain to take correspondence courses whilst she put the world back together. Most of Harry’s friends had taken the offered correspondence courses, but Hermione took it to the extreme. Large owls clutching sealed brown packages were often seen flopping onto various desks in the Ministry, or Gringotts, or Flourish and Blotts, where she had set up shop - wherever she happened to be, there were essays and owls. She had a more practical view of Hogwarts: a place for education, a place to learn, a place with secrets and answers to her endless questions. She could get that from outside the walls, and so she did.

But Harry went back. Hogwarts was his home, even though Hogwarts had been where he’d been hurt and lied to, where he’d grieved and died. It had also been where the war stopped, where he ended things, and he wanted it to be where they began again.

“You seem confused, Potter,” Blaise said, crossing one ankle daintily over the other. He took up most of the room beside Harry on the sofa, a book floating near his ear and a half-eaten pear in his hand. “Granted, that’s not an unusual state for you, but still. The fireplace doesn’t seem to have done much to warrant such a look, if you ask me.”

“Do you ever talk normally?” Harry said, somewhat desperately, from within the depths of his hoodie. “Any of you? It took you three sentences just to ask me what I was looking at. Do me a favour and just say ‘bollocks’ once. Christ, it’s like being stuck in Buckingham Palace.”

Blaise lifted one eyebrow. “Frequent the Queen’s living room often, do you?”

“Don’t be silly.” Pansy marched towards them carrying an armful of bags, each one bulging with expensive, luxury scarves, inkwells and oddments. “Potter’s never seen the inside of anything more dignified than a public toilet.”
Pansy was one of the few that had returned to Hogwarts. She hadn’t apologised for demanding Harry be gift-wrapped and handed over to Voldemort to stifle his murderous tendencies, but Harry hadn’t really expected her to. What he also hadn’t expected was that she’d take one look at him, sitting alone on the Hogwarts Express with a sandwich, drily profess that he was in dire need of help, and then refuse to stop insulting him for the rest of the year.

“We’re sitting inside a castle right now,” Harry pointed out, hunching down onto the sofa. There was enough room for the three of them if Blaise moved his feet, and there were more seats scattered around the tiny, cramped Eighth Year’s tower, but Pansy liked to teach him ‘decorum.’ Part of that apparently involved Harry getting up if she wanted to sit where he was sitting, and he’d found that it was easier just to move rather than try to ignore her scowl.

“Irrelevant,” Pansy said. “What are you doing?”

Pansy abandoned her bags - the result of a last-minute shopping excursion to parts unknown, accompanied by Millicent Bulstrode, who looked extremely pissed off in the corner - and dropped into the nearest armchair. Harry offered Millie a small wave, and their pissed-off expression didn't falter, but they did wave back somewhat grudgingly. Millie was the only sane one in the room, sometimes, and Harry didn't know why he hadn’t found them in First Year and begged them to let him stick around.

“I’m improving my mind,” Blaise said, gesturing at his book with his pear, which was dripping juice all down his wrist. “Potter is squinting.”

“Why are you squinting?”

“I’m not squinting,” Harry protested, reaching up to shuffle his glasses back into the centre of his nose. “I was just wondering where the decorations had gone.”

Pansy’s expressive stare around the heavily decorated Common Room, coupled with Blaise’s pointed lifting of the festive robin-shaped cushion on his lap, made Harry scowl. The House Elves in charge of making the Eighth Year Common Room a bit more homely and welcoming had definitely gone overboard now that Christmas was on the doorstep. Holly, mistletoe, garlands, bells, whistles, angels and stars all hung from corners and crooks. Tinsel wreathed every portrait. There was an unfamiliar candlestick on the windowsill too, one that Theo had been lighting every night since the third of December, two nights ago, and a wreath had been glued to the mirror, and nobody could get it off.

But there was still something missing.

“The decorations on the fireplace,” Harry said, enunciating carefully. “There were stockings hung up there this morning, but they’re not there anymore.”

Blaise stopped paging at his book, craning his neck to peer thoughtfully at the fireplace. The fire crackled in the hearth, warming the room, and there was a string of Christmas cards above the mantle, but no stockings. The garland was still there, dotted with red flowers and bushels of holly. But no stockings.

Pansy shrugged. “Maybe the House Elves took them away to give them a clean. Who cares?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Harry said. He wasn’t sure that he believed it, but he didn't think he wanted to explore it after - well, after his life, basically. Plus, Hermione had very explicitly asked him not to get involved in anything mysterious or possibly dangerous, and considering there were no other Gryffindors present for the Eighth Year, Harry felt more inclined to listen to her.
“Or perhaps,” Blaise said, in his most ominous tone, “Malfoy is up to something.”

Harry wriggled his feet free from where he’d tucked one leg under the other, and kicked Blaise in the thigh. Blaise had found out - quite impossibly, which pointed to Legilimency, unless someone close to Harry had betrayed him - that Harry spent a lot of time suspecting Malfoy of things. And following him, to find out if his suspicions were true. And watching his name move around the Marauders Map. And many other overly involved actions.

It had become a sort of catchphrase among the few that had returned to Hogwarts, particularly the Slytherins, and Harry was looking forward to the day that absolutely none of them could talk anymore because he had finally snapped and cursed them within an inch of their lives.

Blaise snickered into his pear, batting Harry’s foot away easily. Harry didn’t know when he’d gotten comfortable enough to touch Slytherins, but he figured that as long as it was just because he was trying to hurt them, it was fine.

“Where is Draco?” Pansy asked, peering behind her as though he was scheduled to loom out of the shadows at any moment. “He was supposed to help me with a last-minute Charms essay, but I haven’t seen him all day.”

Harry hadn’t seen him either, but he’d made a point of not looking. Malfoy was usually to be found in the Library, or down in the dungeons, perfecting his potions. Which Harry knew because he hadn’t been looking, and people had told him, that was all. He still sneered and snapped at anyone who came too close, so nobody got too close, barring Pansy. Harry was of the opinion that things were better that way.

“I imagine he’s still in the Library,” Blaise offered, sounding disinterested. He munched on the last of his pear and licked the juice off his wrist, making eye-contact with Harry. Harry rolled his eyes, blushing faintly, and looked away.

It was a mistake, because then he caught Pansy’s eye. She tapped her foot impatiently, clearly waiting for his response.

“I haven’t seen him,” Harry said, shrugging. He didn’t want to see Malfoy. Pansy narrowed her eyes at him, as though she could sense which direction his thoughts had taken, but they had an unspoken rule between them not to do things that would require an apology, so as not to make it awkward when neither of them apologised. So Harry wouldn’t say anything, and neither would she.

Harry got on with most of the Slytherins now. Millie was quiet and didn't mind if you wanted to be quiet with them, and they could outdrink anyone in a twenty-mile radius, Harry had discovered with awe. Theo played music whenever Harry's head got too loud, seemingly by accident, and often had spare socks in his pockets. Pansy was shrill, unapologetic, and nosy, with a penchant for bossing people around and handing people bits of cake when they least expected it. Blaise was dry, usually bored enough to spark into an interesting mood, surprisingly touchy-feely, and liked to read aloud in the evenings from complicated books to showcase his superior intellect.

Harry needed all of that. He liked the Slytherins, and he needed them, even if he’d rather button himself inside one of the pockets of Hagrid’s unwashed overcoats (where danger undoubtedly lurked) than admit it.

But Draco Malfoy wasn’t something that Harry had any intention of needing.

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Harry was buying pygmy puff stationary when he saw the sign pinned to the noticeboard. Hogsmeade was bustling with the usual crowd of people: war couldn’t keep people down for long, it seemed, especially not people intent on doing their Christmas shopping. Most of the leaflets were to do with markets and sales, but there was one that caught his eye as he sidled up to pay.

“For your girlfriend?” said the far too cheery clerk behind the counter, nodding at Harry’s products.

Harry looked down at the pygmy puff stationary. It consisted of: note-paper - thinner parchment, basically, and not as yellow - stamped with a pink pygmy puff in the corner, a pink feather quill, and a bottle of purple ink. Harry must have missed the giant *I wish to worship thee sweetly under the moonlight with my tongue* written on the packaging that obviously only the clerk could read.

What, exactly, about pygmy puff notepaper, said ‘a romantic gift for my girlfriend?’

“Er, no,” Harry said, because it *was* a Christmas present for Ginny, but saying anything else would be a lie. His girlfriend wasn’t his girlfriend at all, which was, for the record, a confusing thing to say to any and all Mrs Weasley-shaped people. His girlfriend, Ginny Weasley, who actually wasn’t his girlfriend anymore, was off in some tropical forest with Luna, wearing a backpack and a bandana and probably being extraordinarily in love.

Harry was surprisingly fine with it. It had been six months since he’d last felt anything sour or painful when he thought of Ginny, which he thought he’d illustrated clearly with the pygmy puff stationary.

“For my ex-girlfriend, actually,” Harry said, pushing the stationary further across the counter, as though that might convince the woman to speed up a little. If anything, though, it slowed her down. Her smile pulled wider, her eyelashes fluttering slightly. She moved her hands as though she wanted Harry to look at them, and he did, but only because he was wondering if she had a knuckle fracture, and that was why she was moving so slowly.

“What’s the sign for?” he asked, when the silence got too expectant.

The woman paused in her wrapping - the opposite of the goal - and glanced behind her. “Um, the missing stocking sign?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, because it was the sign on top of all the other signs, with big red letters, and he couldn’t see the others, as she was probably aware.

She winked at him, leaning forward a little over the counter. Her voice dropped until it was husky, like smoke. “Are you always this good at making conversation, or do you improve with some firewhiskey in you?”

“I just really want to know about the sign.” Harry brought out his most intense ‘I defeated Lord Voldemort’ expression. His eye twitched with the effort. Pansy said it made him look like he had bowel trouble, but sometimes the prospect of a little bowel trouble was exactly what you needed to get people to speak quickly.

“Our stockings went missing,” the woman said, leaning back swiftly. She waved her wand to get Harry’s belongings packaged up. “We had a display in the window, with stockings hung up and quills and ink coming out the top. I woke up the other morning and they were gone. They left the products, but took the stockings. Here’s your change!”

“Thanks,” Harry said absently, thinking of the empty Common Room fireplace. “Keep it.”
Someone coughed behind him, and he startled back to life. He bundled everything up into his arms, remembering to keep his vaguely troubled expression in place. He’d forgotten a bag again, even though Pansy kept putting an ugly green reusable bag in his pocket when he wasn’t looking, which meant he was probably going to drop the parcels.

“Think positive,” Harry muttered to himself, borrowing Hermione’s incredibly irritating most recent mantras, and promptly collided with someone as he turned around, dropping the parcels on the floor. He managed to hold onto the ink bottle, by some miracle, but the rest cascaded to the ground, bouncing off his trainers.

The cougher that he’d collided with made a sound of displeasure.

“Potter,” Draco Malfoy said, grimacing. He was gripping a peacock feather quill in his hand and eyeing Harry as though dropping things was a disease, now, and he might be catching.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, pulling his wand out to sweep all his parcels up into his pockets. He pretended not to see the way Malfoy flinched when he caught sight of the wand. The clerk made a sound, and Harry couldn’t tell what it was, too caught up in the dark circles under Malfoy’s eyes, the way his hair had been cut severely and still looked flat and limp.

“Do you need help,” Malfoy gritted out. Harry shrunk the last three parcels a little over-eagerly, and stuffed them in his pockets, where he doubted he’d ever find them again, small as they were.

“No,” Harry said, before forcing out a strained, “Thanks, though.”

Malfoy nodded sharply, and they did a strange little dance as they both struggled to get around each other without touching or communicating.

*I’ve seen birds do this in the wild*, Harry thought, hopping on one foot. He righted himself before he could hit the shelves and skirted round the edge of Malfoy’s shadow.

The door chimed as he left, and he was outside in the cold before Malfoy even reached the counter.

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The hymns that the Suit of Armour in the corner kept slurring out in bursts couldn’t cover the sound of Pansy’s utter disdain, not could it obscure the sound of Harry’s patience shredding itself to pieces.

“This is disgusting,” Pansy commented idly, flicking Harry’s parcel away from her. Harry shifted it to a safer part of the rug, where they were both sat opposite each other, and returned to his small, gift-oriented war. “You wrap presents as though you want to personally insult your intended recipient.”

“Why,” Harry said, as he battled with sticky tape, “do you all say more words than you need to? Couldn’t you just say, look, Harry, your wrapping is crap?”

“Harry,” Theo said, not looking up from his chessboard, “I’m no expert, but your wrapping is shit.”

“Close enough, I guess.”

Blaise snorted, moving a piece across the board and instantly sighing when Theo directed one of his bishops forward. There was a clatter as the chess pieces started beating the ever-loving balls out of each other, before Blaise made a mutinous noise and sat back in his chair, sulking as his piece was dragged away. Theo looked incredibly smug; he didn’t partake in anything Christmas-
related, and as such had been trouncing them all thoroughly at chess and Gobstones every evening. Harry’s game had lasted approximately three minutes.

“That’s what you get for not bothering to think more than one step ahead,” Theo said.

“I live in the here and now, Theodore.”

“And you get this for being a pretentious cock,” Theo told him, poking a knight into place. Blaise groaned, wiping his brow theatrically.

“Couldn’t you humiliate someone else? Surely this is boring for you by now.”

“Honestly, Potter,” Pansy muttered, waving her wand to straighten out the creases in his wrapping paper. Harry flipped her off.

“Malfoy’s the only other person I’d want to play against, and he’s not here,” Theo said. His eyebrows creased suddenly. “Wait, where is he, by the way? He said he’d give me a game later on, but it’s later on, and I haven’t seen him since lunch.”

“He’s been disappearing more and more often recently,” Pansy said. “I never know where to find him.”

“Are we worried?” Blaise waved a hand blithely, but Harry had a feeling that it was a genuine question, disguised as a scoff.

“The last time he did this…”

Pansy trailed off, her gaze flicking over to Harry, as though she’d just remembered he was there. There were a lot of things Harry could say to that. The last time Draco Malfoy had done this, he was a Death Eater. That was at the top of the list. The air felt a bit tense as Blaise pretended not to pay attention and Pansy picked at her nails and Theo hunched over, stabbing a Knight a bit too viciously to get it to move.

“The last time he did this, he needed help,” Harry said, as he peeled a bit of sticky tape off his finger. The common room fell silent, only the faint crackle of flames from the fire filling the air. The suit of armour hiccuped. Harry didn't think he'd said anything that controversial, really, but the Slytherins were all looking at each with meaning.

Harry didn't like Malfoy. That was no secret. He didn't particularly want anything to do with him. It was awkward and tense between them, and he imagined it would stay that way for the foreseeable future. He certainly hadn’t forgiven Malfoy for all the things he’d done during the war, and he doubted Malfoy would forgive Harry for retaliating, for not having the same opinions, or for whatever it was that he’d unknowingly done in the beginning that sparked this.

But whether he liked Malfoy or not, it was the truth. The last time Malfoy had done this - disappearing, sneaking off without telling people, acting suspiciously - he was hiding the fact that he was a Death Eater, and trying to find a way to murder Dumbledore. He had been trying to fix the Vanishing Cabinet, to bring other Death Eaters into the school. The last time Malfoy had done this, he had needed help, and even though Dumbledore had apparently known the whole time, there hadn’t been anybody willing to do anything when it counted.

“You’re all acting like he just said something really profound and smart,” Millie intoned, face-down on the sofa, surrounded by wrappers and textbooks. They cracked one eye open and aimed a bleary glare that landed mostly on Pansy. “Like he’s never opened his mouth before except to belch the alphabet. It’s kind of insulting, and I’m not even the one you’re talking about.”
Harry snorted, grinning at Millie. They winked back, or possibly they were just falling asleep.
“S’alright, I don’t mind. I know I - look, he’s probably not around as much because I’m here more, right? And it’s weird, because none of us were friends before, and we actively hated each other, and we were on different sides. Most of you were neutral, I know, but he and I… weren’t. And now I’m around, and he isn’t. So there’s a connection there.”

Pansy sighed as she brushed off her skirt, letting her shoulders thunk back against the coffee table behind her. “I expect that has something to do with it. But there’s something else, too.”

“Maybe Malfoy’s up to something,” Theo said, checking Blaise’s King with a small smirk. A round of laughter weaved through the room, and Harry lovingly pictured that day, in the near future, when nobody could talk anymore.

“This is why I asked the Sorting Hat to put me in Gryffindor instead of Slytherin.” Harry got up, tape still wound around one finger, and ignored the stunned spluttering that followed his statement. “I’m going to go and post these. You figure out what to do about Malfoy.”

He left with his ugly green bag full of parcels and a bundle of Christmas Cards. The walk through Hogwarts was quiet, disturbed only by the jingle of bells around various corners as Peeves bobbed along, taunting portraits with his own rude versions of festive songs. Harry tucked his hands into his pockets and ran his eyes along the walls as he walked, searching for cracks and splinters in the stone.

The clean-up crew had done a good job. Harry had only been part of it for the latter part, too exhausted to do much more than simple Levitating and Vanishing spells. Nothing really looked like it had been broken or blown apart, like the floor had split open and the stairs had crumbled, but there was still a soft feeling in the air. A soft, tender feeling, like the castle was a healing wound and the edges hadn’t quite closed.

The Owlery steps felt familiar under his feet. Harry didn’t like to go up there, not now that Hedwig wasn’t there to visit, to nip at his fingers. But it had been a while now. And he needed to post the letters, so he jogged up the last few steps and went inside.

“Oh,” Harry said, pausing with one hand pressed against the door. There was a figure perched on the windowsill, bathed in white winter light.

Malfoy looked up from his letter, one hand darting to his wand. He narrowed his eyes, his hold on the parchment growing quite tight. For a moment, Harry thought he was going to have to duel him, right there and then, and he braced himself, his hand twitching.

Malfoy’s hand dropped away from his pocket.

“It’s a public space, Potter,” Malfoy muttered, and went back to his letter. “I can be here if I want to be here. Don’t just stand there like a gargoyle.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Harry said, stepping inside purposefully. The floorboards creaked, stirring up the smell of feathers and droppings, straw and ink. He glanced at the perch that Hedwig had always favoured, and his chest ached a little. Malfoy paid him no attention as he pushed on, clucking his tongue until a Barn Owl flew down from the rafters, rustling its feathers and hooting softly. It stuck out its leg, and Harry groaned, looking down at the bag of gifts.

“Bugger,” Harry said with feeling. Malfoy still didn't look up, and Harry steeled himself. “You haven’t got any string, have you, Malfoy?”
Malfoy’s hand slipped on his quill, but there was no spilled ink. He just sighed, a little frustrated, and threw an impatient look at Harry.

“I might have,” Malfoy said. “Why should I give it to you?”

“Christ, never mind then.” Harry turned back to the Barn Owl, irritation fading as quickly as it had come. The owl gave him a droll look, one leg still firmly in mid-air. Harry wrangled his ugly green bag up onto the table and peered inside.

“I s’pose I could shrink it all down, make it lighter,” he said quietly. “It’s all for the Burrow anyway. What do you think, hey?”

He scratched the owl lightly under its head, lips quirking when it blinked massively at him, shaking out its feathers. He hadn’t wanted another owl, not after Hedwig, but he missed this. The Dursley’s had never let him have a pet, and he wasn’t too fond of cats, not after Mrs Figg’s endless stream of photographs and Hermione’s beast. Dogs reminded him too much of Sirius to even consider: the very thought of a dog that wasn’t Padfoot made him fold in on himself.

But Hedwig had been his first friend. There was nothing about Hedwig that hurt, barring the fact that she was gone. Maybe one day, then. He stroked the downy feathers, smiling softly when the Barn Owl hopped closer, eager for contact. It hooted again, and Harry grinned.

“Handsome, aren’t you? Think you can carry all of this? Come on, let’s try this.”

A ball of string hit Harry in the chest.

He didn't stumble, but the Barn Owl let out an indignant sound and fluttered off. It didn't go back to the rafters: it settled a few feet away and glared at Malfoy, beady eyes calculating every weak, blond spot. His head was ducked, his pointy chin touching his chest, but Harry thought he saw a hint of pink on Malfoy’s cheeks.

“Uh,” Harry said, picking up the string. “Thanks?”

Malfoy scoffed, rolling his eyes as he whistled for his own owl. “Just stop talking to the owl and get on with it.”

Harry didn't have much time to say anything, nor any idea what to say if he had. Malfoy attached the letter to his owls leg, fed her a bit of crust from the empty plate that Harry hadn’t noticed, and then strode past him before his owl had even cleared the windowsill.

“Don’t you want this back?” Harry called, waving the string about.

Malfoy slammed the door on his way out. Thousands of feathers rustled above them, but the Owlerly felt oddly empty now.

“Y’know,” Harry said, when the Barn Owl flew close enough again, “that was almost nice of him.”

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Dear Harry,

*Happy Christmas! How are you? How are things at school? I finished most of my courses a few weeks early, so I’ve been doing some reading ahead for January, and it’s going to be tough. Not to mention all the work that the Ministry’s been piling on. We’re still trying to disband the*
Registration, but we have to track down everyone on it first, to make sure they weren’t hurt, and it’s a lot of complicated spellwork, so it’s taking longer than I’d like. It really is fascinating, though.

I hope you’re okay in the castle. Is it odd, being by yourself? I know Hogwarts is nice during the holidays, and you always seemed to enjoy yourself, but it must feel different now. I wish we could be there, I feel so bad that we’re not going to spend it with you. Ron’s going to The Burrow for Christmas - he seemed upset that you wouldn’t be coming, but he said he understands. I have to go and see mum and dad in Australia. I still can’t believe they don’t want to move back, but at least they remember me now, and a few visits a year isn’t too much to ask for, I suppose, even if it does get in the way of work. It would be so much easier if they’d just move home though.

Sorry, Harry. I’ve been meaning to write for ages, and things just sort of piled up. I miss talking to you. I can only talk to Ron about so much before we both start to get a headache. We both want to help, I think, but neither of us are sure how. Not that you asked!

Have you heard from Ginny? She sent me a postcard of her and Luna on a mountain, feeding a goat, so I think they’ve left the rainforest behind. Probably because it didn't have whatever Luna was looking for living there, which is no surprise.

I think there are more Christmas cards and presents to come, but George asked me to add his parcel to mine. Apparently you have to open it before Christmas, so you can get a lot of use out of them. I checked it, and it’s nothing dangerous.

We all miss you! I hope you have a nice Christmas.

Love, Hermione.

Harry put the Christmas Card - which was crammed full of writing, and was more suited to the label of Christmas Letter - up on his bedside table. Blaise was brushing his teeth in the adjoining bathroom, an act that took up a lot of careful attention; he and Harry shared the room at the top of the Eighth Year Tower, which meant that Harry had to learn to put the cap back on the toothpaste if he didn’t want to be Hexed in the middle of the night, and Blaise had to learn that Harry didn’t much care for personal grooming beyond being clean.

Cautiously, and aware that he was alone should anything jump out at him, Harry prodded the parcel on his bed.

George’s present was a large box that grew even larger when Harry undid the Shrinking Charms. He snorted with laughter when he opened it, revealing piles of bright, soft fabric, and a note that said, Ginny said you were having trouble repelling all your gentlewomanly admirers. I thought these might help. Happy Christmas, mate. Cheers, George.

There were a large selection of joggers inside the box, each one more hideously decorated than the last. Harry set a mental reminder to send a note back: George, thanks for the joggers. I think these’l repel every living thing on the planet, regardless of species or gender. Happy Christmas! From, Harry.

“I would like to thank not only Merlin, but Morgana too,” Blaise said, peering over Harry’s shoulder, “for allowing me to bear witness to this moment.”

Harry plucked a pair of red joggers out of the box, embroidered with cartoon pigs in blankets, and offered them to Blaise. “Want a pair? These ones should be about your size.”
“Every moment I spend with you just reinforces the fact that we really don't know each other very well,” Blaise said. He took the joggers, caught somewhere between glee and horror, and held them up to his eyes. “Are these chipolatas wrapped in bacon?”

“Pigs in blankets,” Harry said, wondering how rich people survived on nothing but imported eggs and stilton.

“How uncouth. You do realise that these say Hot Dog on the back?”

“Huh,” Harry said, turning the fabric to take in the glittery lettering. “They look similar, I guess, but Hot Dogs have bread, so that doesn’t make any sense. George must have made them himself.”

“A gifted man,” Blaise said, lip curling. He couldn’t seem to settle on an emotion, but he made up his mind quickly when Harry withdrew another pair of joggers, choking back laughter.

“Potter, if you wear those in public, I won’t be held responsible when your face ends up on the front page of the Daily Prophet. Or your arse.”

Harry considered it. And then he shrugged. His face (and occasionally his arse) was already usually on the front page of the Daily Prophet: it was about time that he actually enjoyed the reason why.

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Harry had been so determined to forget about the mystery of the missing stockings, mindful of Hermione’s pleas and Ron’s wary questions, that he forgot to avoid places where there might once have been stockings to go missing.

“We is not understanding, Master Harry!” squeaked one weepy elf. Her name was Droopy, but Harry couldn’t get much else out of her, or any of the other elves. “They is just going away! Without our say-so!”

“Er, it’s alright,” Harry said, clutching his mug of hot chocolate like a lifeline. Kreacher came to Hogwarts in the evenings to make Harry’s hot chocolate the way he liked it and accept Harry’s offering of books. He didn’t want clothes, or treasures: just stories from the Hogwarts library, things to read in the morning. Harry couldn’t take the books, but Millie taught him a spell to copy the selected text onto a separate piece of parchment, so he’d been doing it page by page, one an evening.

“It’s dead useful,” Millie had said, as they brandished another bit of parchment at him. “You don’t get taught it in Hogwarts because students would probably cheat, but most Purebloods get told where to look for the right spells. This one’s from the Restricted Section, but it’s not illegal, so don’t go getting your knickers in a twist.”

Harry’s knickers had remained untwisted, and now Kreacher greedily reaped the rewards.

“Why don’t you try telling me what’s wrong?” Harry suggested. “Slower, this time. And with less crying, if you can.”

Droopy nodded frantically, wiping her nose. The other elves were all in a hubbub behind her, their tremulous squeaks shaking the walls of the kitchen.

“We is hanging up the stockings for the teachers, you see,” Droopy said, her wide eyes fixed on Harry. “They come down in the mornings on Christmas to open presents, and we House Elves is putting them in the stockings for fun every year!”
Harry looked up sharply to where the House Elves had converged into one sobbing mass beside the fireplace.

“The stockings disappeared?” he asked. “And it wasn’t you?”

Droopy shook her head, more tears falling down her face.

“It’s alright, Droopy,” Harry said kindly, stooping awkwardly to talk to her. “It’s not just you, and you haven’t done anything wrong. Stockings have been going missing all over Hogwarts, and Hogsmeade too, I think.”

This didn't have the desired calming effect.

Droopy burst into fresh tears, and the other House Elves swarmed. It took twenty minutes to calm them down, and by then, Harry had gone through fourteen conjured hankies, been trodden on more times than he could count, re-heated his hot chocolate twice and still not had a single sip.

“Bloody hell,” Harry muttered, as he escaped into the corridor. The House Elves were quieter now, but still just as desolate despite Harry’s reassurances. He was going to have to find the stockings now, and if Hermione complained when he inevitably ended up in the Hospital Wing, he would just have to blame it on all her SPEW campaigning.

She would probably be quite pleased.

The thought kept him company as he made his way up to the Common Room. Night had fallen while Harry had been out, and it was dark inside, the fire empty in the grate. The window let in bright moonlight, and there was someone over there, taking in the starry sky.

Theo lifted one hand in a wave when Harry shuffled closer. He had dragged an armchair closer to the window, next to the candlestick. The candles weren’t glowing, but Harry thought that they might have been recently.

“Alright?” Harry asked, voice low. He didn’t know Theo all that well - perhaps the least of the group that he’d somehow fallen in with - so he felt odd speaking to him without a good reason. Theo didn’t seem to mind him interrupting though.

“Is that tea?” Theo asked, pointing at the mug.

“Hot chocolate. Want some?”

He transferred the mug over without spilling it, and then leaned against the wall and looked at the candles while Theo sipped the hot chocolate. He wondered what they looked like when they were lit. Surely not the same as the other candles in the Common Room: these ones felt important.

Snow fell silently past the window outside.

“I’m not getting in the way of something, am I?” Harry asked suddenly, gesturing at the windowsills. “Seems kind of important.”

“It is, to me, but you’re fine,” Theo said softly, holding the mug carefully. “If you’d come earlier, then yeah, but I already said what I needed to say, so now I’m just thinking. And it’s not as private as other parts of me. We’re supposed to be proud of this.”

Harry stayed quiet.
“It’s usually more private than this, though,” Theo admitted. “We always did it at home, together. Me and my family. People found it strange, didn’t understand it. Some Wizards and Witches don’t believe in things beyond the power they can wield, but this has been the only way I’ve ever known how to be. There’s nothing strange about it.”

Harry wouldn’t pretend to know what Theo was talking about, but he could make a bit of a guess.

“They’re gone though, my family,” Theo said, after a moment. “So it’s just me, and I can’t - I can’t keep it private. I was going to light it in my room, but we’re right in the middle of the tower, and there’s no window. Not to mention that it isn’t just my room, and I can’t ask Millie to stay out. This window isn’t even ideal - too high up.”

He took another sip of hot chocolate, his mouth tight.

“It’s a Hanukkah candle, isn’t it?” Harry asked, remembering the word. “I think I learned about them in school, before I came here.”

Theo nodded. He didn't offer anything more, and Harry didn't ask.

“None of this is right,” Theo said softly. “It’s not the way it’s supposed to be. I’ve dealt with it for all the years I’ve been at Hogwarts, but I’ve always gone home at this time of year before. I don’t celebrate Christmas, but my house isn’t even accessible, not until Gringotts gets it act together.”

“Where’ve you been living then?” Harry asked sharply.

“With Blaise.” Theo shrugged. “We’ve known each other a long time, and he offered. But he stayed here for Christmas, and I couldn’t go back to his house without him.” He sighed, scrubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. “Sorry. It’s not as bad as I’m making it out to be.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harry said, quiet. It had never occurred to him before, that Hogwarts wasn’t as accommodating to some students, simply because nobody thought to offer help. He knew it didn't feel like home for everyone else, the way it did for him. But he’d always thought it was comfortable, at the very least.

“It’s important, you said.” Harry shrugged. “I don't know much about anything, really. But I can tell it’s important. So it’s exactly as bad as you feel it is. Maybe we can get you a different room, or a private area? Try talking to McGonagall. She’s pretty reasonable.”

Theo’s eyes were very dark as he looked up at Harry, swirling the last of his hot chocolate around the mug. “Even when it comes to Slytherins?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but not many of the rest of us came back to Hogwarts, and she’s still been pretty fair so far, hasn’t she?”

“I suppose she has.” Theo nodded. “I’ll talk to her.”

He stood gracefully, and Harry stifled a grin when he spotted the joggers. They were the least vibrant of the ones that George had sent, and Harry hadn’t actually thought that Theo would wear them when he shoved them into his arms the other morning, but he was. Little snowflakes danced around his knees.

Theo rolled his eyes, draining the last of the drink before pushing the empty mug into Harry’s hands. He patted Harry on the shoulder before ducking around him, making for the stairs. Harry watched him pause in the archway.
“Harry? You said that not many other people came back to Hogwarts,” Theo said, one hand on the banister, a curious look on his face. “Of the ones that did, none of them were your friends, not properly. Most of the Gryffindors stayed away, at least. Why did you come back?”

Harry thought of House Elves, midnight hot chocolates, and a Christmas that felt like a thousand years ago, with his first presents and a warm shout from his best friend.

“You said you used to go home this time of year, didn't you? For the important stuff?” Harry gestured a bit helplessly. “It’s not the same, but this is me going home.”

Theo’s eyes softened, and he graced Harry with a rare smile before disappearing up the stairs.

***

Harry found himself in the Owlery again. It was becoming a theme, and he wasn’t sure that he liked the theme, but he was also unable of stopping the theme from becoming a theme.

It was a whole themed thing.

“I’m afraid that the Owlery has a strict policy on allowing shameful behaviour in past the door,” Malfoy said. He shifted back on the windowsill, not to make room, but to get away from the garish green print on Harry’s joggers.

“Not a fan of brussel sprouts, Malfoy?”

“Nobody alive is a fan of brussel sprouts, Potter,” Malfoy said waspishly. “Especially not when they’ve been inflated to the size of bollocks and printed all over cheap fabric.”

Harry snorted. “They’re not that bad. You’ve got a pair too.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said ‘you’ve got a pair too,’ not ‘here, hold this Blast-Ended Skrewt for me,’” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Nobody else is wearing them, though, so you don’t have to either.”

Harry moved to sit down on the windowsill, shoving Malfoy’s leg down when he tried to put it up in the empty space. He stretched his own legs, the printed brussel sprouts bulging unpleasantly. They really were the ugliest things he’d ever worn, and he’d worn Dudley’s clothes for most of his childhood. The sight of them made a First Year laugh on the way up the stairs earlier: he loved them.

“What are you doing, Potter?” Malfoy said, his hands twitching as he tried to hide his letter under his thigh. “Why aren’t you sending a letter and pissing off back to the Common Room?”

“I don't have a letter to send. Pansy said I had to come and find you because she’s about to drink a gallon of firewhiskey and she wants you to take all responsibility for her actions.” Harry shrugged, fiddling with the ear of his glasses. Malfoy watched him, his face curiously blank. “If it helps, I didn't actually agree. I told her to bugger off and then I ended up here.”

Malfoy smirked, but it was small and lacking its usual flair. “ Couldn’t resist my company, could you?”

“Yeah, because I’m so used to you hanging around,” Harry said drily. “It’s like I can’t get rid of you these days.”
“Some of us have important things to do that don't involve dressing like a Christmas dinner.”

“Some of us aren’t complete prats,” Harry pointed out. “So we notice that you’re just doing that thing where you tell everyone to piss off when you actually want them to stay.”

“I do not want you to stay,” Malfoy snarled.

“Well what about your actual friends then? People you don’t hate?” Harry leaned forward, fixing Malfoy with an intense stare. “The last time you did this, a lot of people got hurt.” He cut Malfoy off before he could spit something vile Harry’s way. “Including you.”

Malfoy froze. His face went tight, and he leaned stiffly back against the windowsill. It was chilly up in the Owlery, especially with the open windows and the cool, snow-filled air outside, but Harry put his hands in the roomy pockets of his joggers and waited Malfoy out. If he had to turn to ice before Malfoy spoke - well, he’d just tie him up and drag him back to the Common Room before that happened.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Malfoy said softly. It was startling, to hear him use a soft voice that wasn’t silky with smug superiority. But not as startling as it should have been.

Harry made a noise that said exactly what he thought of Malfoy’s lie.

Malfoy glared at him. “I liked it better when you didn't give a shit about Slytherins. There’s nothing wrong, Potter. I come up here because I write to my mother most days. She’s living at the Manor alone, and I know she hates it.”

Harry blinked, surprised. It wasn’t the answer he’d been expecting, but he guessed it made sense. Narcissa Malfoy had spent over a year as a prisoner in her own home, under the watchful, sinister eye of Voldemort, with her insane sister and her frightened son. Lucius was in prison - there had been no sentence for Draco, although it was strongly encouraged that he finish school and live the rest of his life quietly, out of sight.

Harry had been there for the hearing. Luckily, he hadn’t needed to speak on behalf of Draco, and he hadn’t offered to speak on behalf of Lucius.

It had been a very long day regardless.

“How is she?” Harry asked. It came out awkwardly, but he meant it as genuinely as he could. Malfoy seemed to sense this because he just rolled his eyes.

“She’s ripping down portraits and blowing up walls to rid her home of Dark Magic, so I’d say she’s doing swell,” Malfoy said, voice dry.

“And you write to her every day?”

Malfoy twitched. “Yes.”

“Right.” Harry tipped his head to the side slightly. “Who else do you write to?”

Malfoy flinched, this time.

“I’m not asking questions to piss you off, Malfoy,” Harry said, shifting on the hard stone. “Just - if you need to talk.”

“Talk to you?” Malfoy aimed an incredulous look at him, and Harry couldn’t blame him.
“That, or one of the people that you can actually stand to talk to,” Harry said. “Like Blaise, or Theo, or Millie. Or Pansy, who may or may not have fallen down some stairs by now.”

A smile flickered across Malfoy’s face, and Harry felt an unexpected surge of triumph at the sight. He coughed a bit, standing up.

“If you want there to be alcohol left, you might want to come back soon,” Harry said. He made it mostly out of the door before he heard Malfoy speak.

"I'll meet you there. I refuse to be seen with you in the halls, not when you're wearing those tragedies."

***

Harry was reading cards from his friends when McGonagall swooped into the Common Room. Being as there were only six students in the Eighth Year tower at any given time, it was easy to find them all in one place.

She fixed her beady eyes on Harry and nodded sharply, before sweeping her gaze over the room.

“I don’t wish to interrupt your studies, not at such an important stage in your education.”

The game of exploding snap on the rug trembled, waiting.

“I simply wish to inform you that the magical signatures in the castle are stronger than ever,” McGonagall said. “When we repaired Hogwarts, we made it so that only students and teachers, and people with permission, could use magic without it being traced back to them.”

“Professor?” Harry asked, suddenly alert as he sat up in his chair. “What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing serious, but stockings are mysteriously disappearing across the school,” McGonagall said, watching them all like a hawk. “Since there is no trace, I can presume it was someone within the grounds, a student. And since the first disappearance started here, as far as we can gather, that puts you all in the spotlight.”

Across the room, in the armchair in the corner, Malfoy stiffened.

“It is not a serious offence, but we do not tolerate bullying or stealing of other people's property on Hogwarts grounds,” McGonagall said, looking exasperated. “I expect it was a prank. I expect it had nothing to do with any of you. I also expect anyone to come forward if they know something, understood?”

None of the Slytherins seemed inclined to answer, but Harry thought that was more to do with who was asking than because they knew something. McGonagall narrowed her gaze regardless. Malfoy grew more and more rigid in his chair.

“Understood, Professor,” Harry said quickly.

She sighed again, shaking her head, and left the room just as the game of cards exploded. Pansy screeched, cursing, and Blaise started muttering spells in a frantic manner as his pointed his wand at his singed eyebrows. Theo, who had leaned back well ahead of time, looked like he was trying not to grin.

“You alright, Draco?” Harry heard Millie say.
Malfy didn't reply. Harry watched him stand and scuttle out of the room, a little gaunt.

Millie was watching him when Harry looked at them. He raised an eyebrow, and Millie shrugged back, pointing at the door.

It was a good enough invitation for Harry, who got to his feet and slipped through the portrait just as Theo aimed a stream of freezing water at Blaise's slightly smoking face.

***

Harry found Malfoy in the Girls Bathroom. He hated this place, hated the cold in the air and the faint drip of water in the distance. The floor would always look red now, no matter the colour of light that struck the tiles.

“Did you really steal stockings, Malfoy?” Harry demanded, taking a step closer across the bathroom. He'd had the whole way there to think about it, to get more and more worked up. It was stupid, and ridiculous, and - if true - vaguely disappointing. Malfoy was white-faced, leaning back against the sink, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“Potter,” Malfoy said, voice clipped. “Do you honestly think I have a nefarious purpose for Christmas stockings, of all things? What could I possibly do with stockings?”

“You managed to do a lot with a necklace,” Harry said coldly. “Not to mention a bottle of mead and a cabinet.”

The blood drained out of Malfoy’s face, and the room went still and quiet. Even the water stopped dripping, as though it couldn’t bring itself to fall and break the silence.

“You didn't deny it,” Harry said, reaching for his wand. “What the hell were you planning?”

“Nothing.”

“I don't believe you,” Harry said, even though his heart beat out an unsure rhythm in his chest. “Why did you take them?”

“It was an accident,” Malfoy snapped, his voice rising as he flushed red. “It’s not my fault that you stole my fucking wand and now nothing works the way I want it to!”

Harry stopped short, lowering his wand. “What?”

“My wand, Potter,” Malfoy said, yanking it out of his pocket. “Does it look familiar?”

Harry stepped closer again, his footsteps echoing off the wet walls. He examined the wand, the long black wood, the notches at the side. “No. Should it?”

“It should if it were my wand, idiot,” Malfoy said, but he sounded more embarrassed than anything. “You used it, remember? Or did you forget about your battle with the darkest wizard known to our world?”

“Trust me, I wish I could,” Harry said absently, putting his wand back into his pocket. “You’re saying that’s not your wand, because I still have your wand, and that somehow made you steal a bunch of stockings?”

“It doesn’t respond to me correctly,” Malfoy said, following suit and stuffing the offending wand out of sight. “My magic overreacted.”
He definitely sounded embarrassed. But Harry rather thought he should be the one feeling ridiculous, considering he’d barged after Malfoy and accused him of using Christmas stockings in his plans for world domination.

“You want to elaborate on that?”

Malfoy stayed stiff-lipped. The water started dripping again, and Harry sighed, feeling abruptly cold. He tucked his hands in his pockets, looking at Malfoy’s pursed features and the way he wouldn’t look at him, and made a decision.

“C’mon,” he said. “Just, come with me, yeah?”

If Malfoy had any protests, he kept them to quiet mutters, which Harry found easy enough to ignore. They were quiet all the way up to the Owlery, until the familiar sounds of rustling owls and creaking floorboards filled the air.

“Why did you bring me here?” Malfoy asked, his voice pitched to be heard over the welcoming chorus of soft hoots.

Harry crossed to the windowsill and sat down, leaving a space open. “I think we’ve had enough moments in bathrooms, don’t you?”

“Oh, so we’re going to have a moment, are we?” Malfoy crossed to join him reluctantly, standing near the window like an unimpressed gargoyle. “Lovely. I’m thrilled that’s still on the agenda.”

“A nicer moment, hopefully,” Harry said, ignoring Malfoy’s glare. “One where I apologise for jumping to the wrong conclusions and you tell me how you accidentally stole a bunch of stockings.”

“Apologise?”

Harry snorted, watching Malfoy lower himself onto the windowsill, as though the shock were enough to make his knees buckle.

“Yeah, it’s where you say sorry for things you’ve done wrong. I know you’re not familiar with it, but you might want to try it sometime. It might be a good start, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said, in his surprising soft voice again, startling Harry quiet. “Yes, I did a lot of things that I regret, that I’m sorry for. I’ve - I’ve been trying to make up for it, but I know I may not ever be forgiven. And that’s fine.”

“It is?” Harry said, stunned.

“Yes,” Malfoy said, straightening up and shooting a sharp look at Harry. “I wasn’t just writing to mother. The other letters are to people I’ve hurt. If they want to speak further, I’ve offered, but a piece of parchment is a start. You don’t have to look so shocked, Potter.”

Harry shut his mouth. “I’m impressed, Malfoy.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “You don’t have to be so fucking patronising, Potter.”

“Oh, look, the moment’s ruined,” Harry said. “I think that’s it on the floor, right there, all crushed and broken.”

Malfoy’s mouth twitched. “Shut up.”
“So was I on the list?” Harry asked, leaning forward until he was in Malfoy’s space. “The list of people you needed to apologise to? Am I going to get a letter any day now?”

“You caused the most trouble out of everyone I need to apologise to, which I should have expected, considering it’s you, Potter,” Malfoy said, watching Harry with that same blankly curious expression. “I started with you. That’s how the stockings went missing.”

Harry frowned, tilting his head. “You lost me.”

“Easily done, if I’m not mistaken,” Malfoy said, lip curling. It didn't have the same mocking tone as it would have a few years ago, but Harry still felt the urge to wipe the smirk off his face. Just a bit more gently this time. Maybe.

“If that’s the kind of thing you put in your apology, I’m not sure I would have accepted it even if you hadn’t fucked it all up.”

Malfoy scowled at him, his cheeks turning bright red. “I didn't fuck anything up, and I’ll have you know that it was a very moving apology. My owl cried.”

Harry laughed, and the sound made Malfoy stiffen in surprise. Harry was pretty surprised too, but he’d gotten through most encounters with Malfoy so far by just barreling through the awkwardness, so he decided to run with that.

“So what happened?” Harry asked. “With the apology?”

“I wrote a letter, and I was going to put it in your stocking,” Malfoy said. He stared very purposefully out the window. “I didn't want to give it to you in person in case you Hexed me or set fire to it. I couldn’t put it in your stocking in case people thought I’d put something nasty in there, so I summoned your stocking to the owlery.”

Harry’s eyes flicked down to Malfoy’s pocket, where his new wand was. “I take it something went wrong.”

“It summoned every stocking within five miles,” Malfoy said succinctly, his glare growing darker. “Yours arrived first, and then the others from the Common Room. Some from Hogsmeade next, and then some from the other Common Rooms, and the kitchens. There’s no order to when they arrive, but they’ve been doing it gradually over the past few days, from all over the place.”

Harry stifled a sound. Apparently he didn't stifle it well enough, because Malfoy turned the glare on him, and Harry thought his lungs might burst. He cleared his throat.

“And, uh, where are they? The stockings?”

“In the owl hutches,” Malfoy admitted, looking like he might dive out of the window at any moment. “I didn't know where else to put them.”

Harry cracked. He tried very hard - although not as hard as he could’ve - but the image of a shifty, guilty Draco Malfoy confessing to stuffing Professor McGonagall’s stocking inside an owl hutch was too much to cope with.

“This isn’t funny, Potter,” Malfoy hissed. “I tried putting one back and it turned up again the next day. I never should have fucking told you.”

“I always took you for a Grinch, but I didn't think you’d go this far,” Harry coughed out between laughs, leaning away when Malfoy moved to shove him. “Alright! Malfoy, it’s alright!”
Malfoy probably didn't even understand the Grinch reference, but he continued to mutter, incensed, as Harry pulled himself together. He couldn’t help but feel lighter than he had in a long time, though.

“Look, it’ll be fine, yeah? We’ll get your old wand, and maybe the spell will cancel out, or stop. Who’s is that, by the way?”

“My mother had a spare,” Malfoy said absently, staring at Harry as though he’d gone insane. “You’re going to give it back? My wand?”

There was a desperate, disbelieving edge to Malfoy’s voice that sobered Harry slightly. He kept grinning though, and stood up abruptly, reaching out to pull Malfoy up by his sleeve.

“It’s your wand, Malfoy,” Harry said. “I remember not having mine, how it felt when it broke. Using someone else’s wand wasn’t right, and being without one at all is worse. It’s not my wand, it’s yours. I’d have given it back sooner if I’d thought about it.”

“I could have asked,” Malfoy admitted grudgingly, but Harry knew that in Malfoy’s mind, there had always been the risk that he’d say no.

“It’s in my trunk,” Harry said, tugging Malfoy out of the Owlery. He was surprisingly complacent, although he did mutter about not needing a leash under his breath.

“And the stockings?”

Harry peered into one slot in the wall as he reached the door to the stairs, and saw a tuft of red nestled in the darkness. He had to stifle another round of laughter.

“I’ve got an idea about that,” Harry said, grinning. “And an idea about how you can make up for that apology, if you like.”

“I should have just send you a fruit basket,” Malfoy snapped, sulking as Harry led him from the room. He gave a dramatic sigh as the door swung shut behind them, tugging his sleeve out of Harry’s hand.

“At least the owls will get a good haul this year.”

He smiled sharply as Harry stumbled on his way down the stairs.

***

Pansy wolf-whistled from the sofa, waving a little conjured flag. Blaise giggled, thoroughly tipsy, collapsed on the sofa next to her.

“I will fucking end you,” Malfoy promised, but despite the rage in his voice, his eyes were soft and glinting with happiness.

“Do a twirl,” Theo called, deadpan. He was grinning too much for it to come off as flat or uninterested though.

The Menorah was no longer on the windowsill, and Millie had mentioned earlier than he had his own room now. Harry thought he looked a little lighter, a little happier, as Blaise tipped his head back over the arm of the sofa to grin at him.

“Yes, Draco, darling.” Pansy added, leering. “Give us a show.”
Harry grinned into the collar of his hoodie when Malfoy flipped the room off.

Malfoy looked resplendent in Harry’s brussel sprouts joggers. He also looked like he was on the brink of a murderous rampage.

“Does the apology dictate a twirl, Harry?” Blaise asked, nearly sloshing his butterbeer all over Pansy’s lap as he struggled to sit up. How he could say ‘dictate’ and yet not be able to use his limbs properly was a mystery.

Malfoy had been the one to explain everything - very reluctantly, with a lot of cursing and glaring thrown in - when he was swarmed the moment Harry entered the Common Room with him.

“You know, I think it might,” Harry said, pretending to think about it for a moment. “But I guess that depends on how sorry he is.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes at Harry. His old wand was tucked safely up his sleeve, but considering he was actually wearing the joggers in front of people and nothing was on fire, Harry felt confident enough to assume he was safe.

“I’m very sorry,” Malfoy gritted out, “that I ever believed there was anything noble or chivalrous about you.”

Harry winked, feeling brave.

Blaise hooted. “Twirl, Malfoy!”

Pansy turned a finger in the air, a sly smile on her face.

Malfoy let out a long sigh, and turned. It was a slow, sensual turn that showed off every curve of jogger-clad arse and obliterated all of Harry’s higher brain function in one fell swoop. Even the brussel sprouts - or inflated bollocks, depending on which description you favoured - couldn’t dull the sudden heat of attraction that flared in Harry’s belly.

“Potter, your bottom lip is touching the floor,” Theo informed him. There was another hoot, and Harry moved his wand a little too hard, making string he was levitating wobble.

“Merlin has a lot to answer for,” Millie muttered, stringing up the last stocking on the fireplace. “If he hadn’t gotten horny and passed down all his precious magical blood to a bunch of descendants, I wouldn’t have had to be here to witness this.”

Malfoy reached the end of his twirl and put his hands on his hips. He still looked pissed, but there was a glint in his eyes as he smirked at Harry that said he knew exactly what had just happened. Harry’s mouth went dry.

“Done,” Millie said, a bit louder than necessary. They shoved Harry back a bit and pinned the string up, so that the stockings hung in a gently drooping line across the mantle.

“Everybody come and look before I have to roll Potter’s tongue back into his mouth,” Millie said flatly. Harry had grown quite used to all the snickering that accompanied a crowd of Slytherins, but that didn't mean he couldn’t Jinx them in the night.

Pansy popped up from her seat and nudged Millie when she reached them, going completely still when she took in the fireplace.

“I’ll just stay here, but I want you all to take note of my admirable sewing attempts, please,” Blaise
said, flapping one hand pathetically when moving proved too dangerous for him. Theo snorted, vaulting over the back of the sofa and landing on his legs. There was a lot of shrieking and shuffling as cushions got involved, but the rest of them were too busy admiring their creation to pay attention to the foreplay happening behind them.

“It’s beautiful,” Pansy said, biting her lip against a laugh.

“May I just say that I’m extremely pissed about you being Jewish, Theo?” Malfoy called. “If you weren’t, you could have had a stocking, and I wouldn’t have had to wear these.”

There was a thump and a suspiciously muffled groan from the sofa. Harry couldn’t tell if it was pained or not.

“The rest of us are very grateful that you’re Jewish, Theo,” Millie said drily. “Potter in particular.”

Harry decided to let her have that one.

The stockings swung gently on their string. All of the disgustingly vibrant joggers in Harry’s box from George had been sewed at the ankles, to close off the ends. Holes had been poked in the hems, and string threaded through them to hang them up above the fireplace.

“We can’t really call them stockings now, can we?” Pansy said, peering at the pattern of Christmas Crackers covered in googly eyes. “Or joggers, since we don’t want to ever undo Blaise’s beautiful needlework.”

“Joggings,” Millie said, reaching out to poke the one covered in cursing turkeys. “They’re joggings.”

“You’ve all been around Potter for far too long.” Malfoy said, clucking his tongue distastefully. He stood close to Harry, their hands touching, both of them warm from the fire and a touch of elf-made brandy.

“You’ll have to do some work to catch up,” Pansy said. She patted Harry on the shoulder when he strangled a sound in his throat, and then hooked an arm through Millie’s to drag them away. “Keep me company while everything else with a pulse flirts.”

“We’re not flirting,” Theo said, as he resurfaced from the mound of cushions that had accumulated over Blaise’s prone form. He was a bit red and out of breath, and currently standing on absolutely no legs.

“Theo was just suffocating me, that’s all,” Blaise gasped, barely visible but clearly enjoying himself.

“He shouldn’t use so much tongue, then,” Millie said. Pansy burst into giggles while Theo flushed heavily.

“Don’t be stupid, Zabini obviously likes it.” Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Just remember your safewords.”

More laughter seeped into the room. Harry wanted to lean into Malfoy, but Malfoy turned before he could get up the courage, and eyed Harry. The brussel sprouts turned a bit orange in the firelight.

“Is this enough of an apology, Potter?” Malfoy murmured.
“What would you do if I said no?”

Malfoy sighed. “Suffer, I suppose.”

That was a good enough answer. Harry grinned, and Malfoy’s blank expression returned as he stared at Harry’s mouth, but Harry thought he knew what that blankness was now.

“Then I guess it’s enough,” Harry said, shrugging one shoulder. “I’ll even come with you tomorrow to drop off the other stockings after we cancel the spell, since I’m sure you want to apologise in person for accidentally stealing them.”

Malfoy murmured a soft curse, rolling his eyes again. “Fine. It’s a date, then.”

Harry told himself that the pink in their cheeks was the fire, and the brandy.

“Do I have to wear these disgusting things tomorrow as well?” Malfoy asked, plucking at one of the sprouts. “Or will you allow me to retain a little of my dignity?”

“I’ll allow it. We’re keeping them off the jogging line, though, since Theo doesn’t need one, and you might do something stupid again in the future.”

Malfoy looked Harry up and down pointedly, from head to toe. “Oh, I have a feeling that I’ll be doing something very stupid in the very near future.”

Harry sucked in a breath, stunned. Malfoy stunned, and with one last burning look, turned to stride up the stairs. He stood there for a little while until a pistachio gently pinged off his forehead.

He blinked owlishly at Millie, who was holding a bowl of nuts and gesturing at the stairs.

“That was an invitation,” they mouthed.

Harry sent them a stupefied thumbs-up, and righted his glasses before following in Malfoy’s footsteps.

“Potter,” Pansy called, her sweetly knowing voice stopping him in his tracks. “Where are you going?”

Four sets of eyes fixed on him, waiting.

Harry opened his mouth. From a few floors up, he thought he could hear the sound of a pair of brussel sprouts joggers hitting the floor. He jerked his thumb behind him, and gave in, shrugging.

“Malfoy’s up to something, and I want to join in this time.”

Harry took the stairs two at a time, grinning, as laughter broke out in the Common Room. He had barely shut the door to Malfoy's room before he found himself pressed against it, Malfoy's hands in his hair and his mouth on his. He kissed back fiercely, ignoring the little voice in his head reminding him that Malfoy had probably taken off his joggers by now.

"Want me to do another twirl?" Malfoy asked, murmuring the words right up against Harry's lips, sending a shudder down his spine.

Harry tugged on his hair, reveling in the way Malfoy gasped and swore. "No, but I wouldn't say no to the show that Pansy asked for earlier."

Malfoy grinned, kissing him again, and Harry found himself very, very glad that he’d come back to
Hogwarts.

End Notes

Please let me know what you think! Thank you! <3

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