Summary

Some people think concepts like fate and destiny are romantic, but for Harry Potter, fate has always meant one thing: a swift kick in the arse. Why else would he cross an ocean to New York and enroll in Muggle university only to find Draco Malfoy living two doors down the hall? The universe and its twisted sense of humor can fuck right off.

A story in which two broken boys try to repair themselves halfway across the world. Too bad trauma doesn't care how far you run.
never a straight line, and sometimes you're not ready for the things that you wish you were. Sometimes things take time, and that's all right. We all go at our pace, and there's no failure in that. There's triumph and beauty in it. <3

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Harry stepped off the subway platform and ascended the stairs to street level, blinking like a mole emerging above ground after months in the darkness. There was something disorienting about hurtling through tunnels underneath a city, strangers packed in a wobbling car like sardines in a tin, speeding along the metal rails with nothing to grasp except a square inch of shiny pole. It wasn’t that the feeling was unfamiliar. Harry had ridden the tube loads of times in London. In fact, it could be said that he had developed a mild fascination with that particular mode of transportation. He supposed that Muggles, were they allowed to experience such things, would argue that Apparition or the use of a floo were much more terrifying and bewildering ways to travel, but Harry begged to differ.

The thing about Apparition was that it was over in an instant. The weightless, contorting feeling was jarring, but you barely had time to ponder what was happening before you reached your destination. On the other hand, aeroplanes and trains required a blind trust that bordered on madness. Strangers boarding a subway car and putting their faith in an unseen driver, enduring one another’s company in close quarters for an indeterminate amount of time, had a sort of endearing quality about it. To Harry, it exemplified what was great about humanity, although perhaps he was seeing lofty romanticism where there was none. After all, people were just doing what they had to do to get by, and public transit had more than its fair share of nuisances. Nevertheless, Harry had always found an incongruous comfort in it. During the summer when the war began to brew like a vortex of storm clouds, before he learned what a Horcrux was, Harry had taken to riding the tube up and down London at all hours. It was a worthy distraction, a hypnotic momentum that worked at the time.

Harry bristled and stepped to the side as a couple of shoulders butted against his. No, it wasn’t really the ride that had been disorienting. Harry suspected the culprit was the fact that he was in an entirely new city starting a new life chock full of uncertainties.

The station was just down the road from Washington Square Park. He chose to walk through the park rather than around it. While it was teeming with people, it was less chaotic than the street. The greenery and people leisurely enjoying the waning days of summer soothed Harry and put a smile on his face, his worries taking a backseat for now. He strolled past a huge fountain, children running along the wide edge where many people sat reading, basking in the sun, or taking pictures with each other in front of the gushing streams.

It was a relaxing scene Harry tried to preserve in his mind’s eye, but the peaceful image dissipated as he approached the edge of the park. The intimidating façade of the NYU campus loomed ahead, purple banners that bore the name of the university hanging from the stone sides of several buildings. He had reached his destination. Harry took a deep breath, clenching and unclenching his fists where they hung at his sides, and stepped back into the fray.
of Third Avenue North left something to be desired. Not that Harry needed much space. Merlin knew he had dealt with much worse in his young life, and he had learned enough from Hermione’s exhaustive research to know that having this suite all to himself was a rare privilege for a freshman in college. Being a wizard had its benefits, and NYU had an arrangement with the Wizarding-Muggle relations branch of MACUSA that allowed for cooperation with a few universities in the states. Young members of the wizarding community who wished to attend Muggle university following their graduation could apply to this new program. Harry supposed its existence was evidence that the post-war effort to improve Wizarding-Muggle relations had found its way across the pond.

Harry knew it was because of this that he was able to skip some of the more common hardships of college life, specifically the part where one had to learn to live with roommates selected by a random lottery that, as he understood it, often resulted in cruelly mismatched pairings. While Harry’s Hogwarts days had given him fond memories of rooming with friends, he didn’t feel equipped to do that with an unsuspecting batch of people who knew nothing of his traumas. It was a constant tug of war inside him: the need to be close, to find solace in the companionship of others, and the need for isolation. Finding the balance after the war was a difficulty he hadn’t anticipated. Harry never expected to be so… changed.

He glanced around the room; the space was so clinical. No personality on the bare walls and plain white blinds covering the windows. Harry had never been much for decorating (probably a side-effect of living as an unwelcome guest in his own home for so long), but these rooms clearly needed it.

It was an extension of the theme of the day. Despite already having registered for classes, there were a million other tasks to complete before the semester began. Getting his school ID, his books, and everything else he needed had been so perfunctory. It had more in common with a factory assembly line than the thrill of rushing into the shops on Diagon Alley or boarding the Hogwarts Express. Every building he entered was lit by harsh fluorescent bulbs instead of the muted glimmer of floating candles and wall sconces. Harry didn’t realize how much he’d forgotten about the atmosphere of non-magical schools.

Normal is what you wanted, Harry had chided himself as he queued for his ID. A dark-skinned girl with amethyst-colored hair that faded into lilac had smiled at him, and he weakly returned it. Everyone was eager to talk and connect, but all Harry wanted to do was fade into the wallpaper. Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea after all. He could practically see Hermione’s discerning look from across the ocean.

Harry sprang up from the mattress. Moping in his room on the first night wouldn’t do. There was a whole glittering city at his disposal, waiting to be discovered. Not to mention thousands of new people to meet, people his age who were also alone and floundering and looking for friends. Harry walked to the front of his suite and opened the door, allowing the laughter and muddied snippets of conversations from other rooms to filter in. He glanced down the hallway. Many of the doors were open, students congregating in little clusters here and there. Everyone looked so happy and carefree, the exact opposite of the stinging tightness Harry felt creeping over his chest. In a room diagonal from his, he saw the girl with the purple hair from earlier, her head leaning against the open door as she nodded at something someone was saying, her boot-clad foot propped on the edge of the doorframe. She looked up and caught Harry’s eye. She waved to him, and Harry froze.

Wave back say hello do literally ANYTHING, you berk.

Harry felt cold sweat beading on the back of his neck, his heart racing as he gripped the doorframe, the force of it sending shooting pains through his fingers. He quickly retreated into his room,
inadvertently slamming the door behind him. He sucked in a long breath, gasping for air like he’d just emerged from under the Black Lake. As he closed his eyes, he timed his breaths. In for three, out for three.

Great.

Wonderful first day.

He’d already alienated the only person to extend a hand in anything resembling friendship. He probably seemed like a basket case. Rationally, Harry knew there were thousands of freshmen on campus and countless more students in the university as a whole. That was part of the appeal. Disappear in the crowd. Go somewhere no one knew the name Harry Potter, where the moniker wasn’t a title of immense weight like a millstone around his neck, a name that should be his but no longer felt like it belonged to him. It wasn’t even a name anymore. It was a concept, an ideal people ascribed their own perception and significance to, something for strangers to pin their hopes and aspirations on that baffled Harry and made him want to shrink into himself, dissolve until there was nothing left.

Here was his chance to do that, to become something entirely separate from what the wizarding world had assigned him without his consent. So why couldn’t he just open the door and do that?

Harry sighed heavily and curled into a fetal position on the carpeted floor. He didn’t even have the energy to seek out the bed and drape it in sheets. His things had been delivered before his arrival, but unpacking boxes sounded like a Herculean task. Besides, he wasn’t sure how much of a comfort the bed would be, unfamiliar and stiff as it was. Harry cast a cushioning charm and drifted off, lulled to sleep by the muffled chatter of joyous voices just beyond his door, voices that were comforting from a distance but paralyzing up close.

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When Harry woke, he was groggy. He’d migrated to the bed at some point in the night, not bothering to lay anything over the mattress other than a pillow he’d wrenched from a box marked “bedroom.” His body felt heavy, that aftermath of anxiety-laced sleep he was accustomed to by now. It always felt like he’d been running marathons during the night, pounding the proverbial pavement of everything that plagued him in his waking hours instead of getting the respite most people did overnight. He lay still for a moment, contemplating staying in bed for another few hours.

“Not today. You’re not fucking doing this,” Harry announced to the empty room, rising to a sitting position before sliding off the bed. He busied himself with his usual morning routine in hopes that the grounding rituals of getting ready and the invigorating power of the hot shower spray might shake him from his funk. It worked well enough. The vestiges of yesterday’s mood distressed the edges like clouds threatening to eclipse the sun, but Harry swatted them away, pushing down every misgiving that bubbled up.

Harry gave himself one final look in the mirror, finger-combing his unruly hair before rolling his eyes. Why he even bothered was a mystery. His hair was practically sentient. It would do what it wanted to do, immune to any attempt to tame it. Grabbing his keys and wallet, Harry left the suite, determined to set off in search of breakfast.
However, as soon as he closed the door, he heard the sound of a key turning in a lock a couple of doors down.

_All right, time to make up for yesterday. You can do this, Harry._

Harry lifted his head, his lips upturning in a smile as he prepared to greet his neighbor. That smile quickly turned into a look of pure terror.

_There is no way in bloody hell I am awake right now._

Harry opened his door and walked right back in, flattening himself against the painted wood after he shut it. He blinked hard. Day two, and already the disasters seemed to be in endless supply. What in the ever-loving fuck was Malfoy doing here? Surely he wasn’t –

Harry’s breath hitched as he heard a knock on the door.

_No._

The knock sounded again, more insistent this time and accompanied by a very familiar posh accent.

“Potter, obviously I know you’re in there. Don’t ignore me like an imbecile.”

“Sod off, Malfoy. I’m not opening this bloody door for you,” Harry spat, turning towards it as though he could see Malfoy’s characteristic sneer on the other side. There was a beleaguered sigh from the hallway, and a sound Harry thought might be the dragging of Malfoy’s fingers down the door.

“What are you going to do? Stay in there for the rest of term?” There was a bite to Malfoy’s words, but he also sounded tired in a way Harry recognized.

“Maybe,” Harry replied defiantly.

_It’s what I’ve been doing so far. Might as well keep it up._

“You’re going to have to come out eventually, Potter. I imagine you didn’t come here to immediately fail out of university. Believe me, I’m not exactly thrilled about this turn of events either, but let’s not act like we’re fourth years.”

Harry frowned. It wasn’t like Malfoy to sound so… reasonable.

“For the love of Merl — _please_ open this bloody door before someone walks by and sees me talking to it. I would rather not be branded as mentally unstable this early on, thank you very much.” Malfoy sounded impatient, his words clipped and harsh. While the thought of people walking by to see Malfoy ranting at a closed door made Harry smile, he also felt very silly trying to win this stalemate. With Malfoy living so close by, it would be impossible for them to totally avoid each other. Perhaps it was best to get it over with, even if this was the last way Harry wanted to start his day. If he was being honest, there was something oddly reassuring about seeing a recognizable face right now. Even if it had to be Malfoy’s smug, pointy one.

Harry took a deep breath and opened the door, stepping aside and grudgingly waving him in. Harry took this opportunity to really look at Malfoy. When he’d caught that first glimpse in the hall, Harry had ducked back into his rooms so fast, he didn’t have time to absorb what he saw. He looked Malfoy up and down now, his jaw growing slack at the sight. Malfoy was dressed Muggle. Very Muggle. He was wearing a slouchy black and white Galaxie 500 t-shirt under a lightweight cardigan and distressed black jeans with… were those Doc Martens?!
“What are you gawping at, Potter?” Malfoy asked with disdain, crossing his arms defensively.

“You! Y-you look — you look — ” Harry gestured at the length of his body helplessly.

“Nice to see you haven’t grown any more articulate over the last year. Trading in English for fluency in Neanderthal, are we?” Malfoy smirked, one pale eyebrow arching upward.

“Oh, fuck off! How do you expect me to react to — all of this!” Harry frantically motioned to Malfoy’s body again, unsure of how else to communicate how gobsmacked he was.

“Well, I couldn’t very well show up to NYU in full wizard regalia, now could I? What did you expect? Dress robes?” Malfoy rolled his eyes and leaned against the outer wall, crossing his legs at the ankle.

“I didn’t expect any of this! I didn’t expect you to be here at all!” Harry’s face reddened. How dare Malfoy ruin this for him! This was supposed to be his chance to escape, to reinvent himself, to take charge of his life. He wasn’t supposed to be beholden to his past here and certainly not to one of the thorniest parts of it.

“Look, as I said, I’m none too excited about the universe’s unforgiving sense of irony either. In fact, I’d like to reach across the ocean and strangle Pansy with my bare hands right about now because I’m certain the bloody bint knew — ”

“Parkinson? What does she have to do with this?” Malfoy rolled his eyes again as though Harry were the biggest moron on the planet.

“She’s the one who told me about the — ” Malfoy cast a wary glance at the open door before shutting it, lowering his voice all the same. “ — program here and helped me apply.”

Harry huffed.

“I knew someone had to have helped you get in. Aren’t there only a couple spots at each school?” Harry glowered at him, and Malfoy’s eyes lit up with pure fire.

“Isn’t that rich? The bloody Golden Boy lecturing me about special favors. How, pray tell, did you get in?”

Harry’s hands twitched with the urge to punch that self-satisfied look right off the slimy git’s face. Who the hell was Malfoy of all people to question Harry’s right to be here? The arsehole was partly responsible for everything that had happened during the war, all the events that had contributed to his need to get the hell away from England as soon as possible.

“I’m not a fucking war criminal, am I? I’m not the one who has anything to answer for.” Malfoy looked like he’d been slapped. He swiftly closed the gap between them, his scowling face inches from Harry’s.

“I deserve a chance to start over just as much as anyone. Yes, the Malfoy name is disgraced forever, but some of us actually showed academic aptitude during our time at Hogwarts. Some of us didn’t coast by on our charm or use our stupid fucking fame to pass potions. I assure you that I earned this spot, and nothing you say or do can take that away from me. Just — ” Malfoy paused as though considering his words and then backed away from Harry, his hand braced on the doorframe. “Just stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours.”
“No bloody problem!” Harry called out as Malfoy walked away. After he heard Malfoy’s door slam shut, Harry left his suite. For the first time since his arrival, he wasn’t overcome with apprehension about being here. For better or worse, unexpectedly dealing with Malfoy had caused a curtain of rage to filter over top of everything else Harry was feeling. Perhaps that wasn’t the healthiest way to work through his issues, but Harry couldn’t be bothered to question it right now. Fueled by resentment and the hunger he’d been ignoring since last night’s debacle, Harry marched off to the nearest dining hall.

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As he entered the crowded Third North Courtyard Café, Harry quelled the panic that rose like stinging bile in his throat. Ignoring the voice inside him that screamed go back, Harry instead focused on the persistent grumbling of his stomach. It was so loud, he was convinced people could hear it over the noise of the cafeteria. He strode up to the breakfast buffet, grabbing a plate and loading it with pancakes, eggs, and bacon. He then filled a cup with water, foregoing coffee altogether. Caffeine was like a flame to the gunpowder of his anxiety, and he didn’t need to make things worse.

He quickly scanned the brimming tables for a spot and found the girl with the purple hair sitting at the end of one long booth. Across from her was a dark-haired boy in a denim jacket. They were deep in conversation, but the rest of the booth was empty. He could handle two people, right? Besides, three sightings of that girl in two days must have been a sign from the universe.

After taking a few steadying breaths, Harry strode over, stopping in front of the booth. Both of them looked up at him, and Harry was relieved to see they didn’t seem annoyed, only curious.

“Hey… is it okay if I sit here?”

“Yeah!” they said in unison, scooting over to make room. Harry sat down next to the girl.

“Feeling better than yesterday?” she said with a knowing smile, tearing off a corner of pancake with her fingers and popping it into her mouth.

“Oh…” Harry looked down at his breakfast and suddenly didn’t feel hungry anymore.

“Goddamn, Gisele. Give the man five minutes before you chase him away!” the boy across from him said. Harry looked up to see a smiling face with bright blue eyes. He was handsome, his hair effortlessly wavy and styled in the way Harry wished his unruly mop would behave, his v-neck t-shirt framing his arms the way Harry wished clothes would complement his own body. He leaned back, an arm casually draped over the back of the booth.

“Sooorrryyy.” Gisele wrapped an arm around Harry and gave him a friendly squeeze. Harry relaxed into it. It was a surprise albeit a welcome one. She was wearing a rainbow patterned dress, large zigzag stripes in every color running across it. “My bluntness is both a blessing and a curse.”

“All I was trying to say,” Gisele put a piece of pancake on her spoon and flicked it at the boy, who laughed and dodged it, “is that we’re fuckin’ awkward weirdos here too, so like — ”

“You just called him awkward and a weirdo. You have known him for like two minutes.” The boy slapped his hand on the table and grinned at Gisele.
“That shit is affectionate! You know this!” Gisele clapped her hands for emphasis and threw her head back in laughter.

“Yes, my dear, but he does not know this. Try to ease a boy into our weirdness before you chase him away. That’s all I’m saying. I need friends, and you are sabotaging me right now.”

“Once he gets to know you, you’ll do that all on your own. I’m just giving you a head start. It’s a favor from me to you. Putting that honesty on the table.” Gisele put a hand on her chest and looked toward the ceiling in mock reverence.

“Oh my god, stop it. We don’t even know his name. I’m sorry we just put you in the middle of our ridiculous shit.” The boy turned to Harry and extended his hand. Harry accepted it and shook. “I’m Sebastian. Somehow, my parents named me this and had the audacity to be surprised when I turned out to be gay. In their defense, I do have a very deep voice and played way too many sports in high school. In Ohio, that passes for straight. You can call me Seb. This hurricane of insanity is Gisele.”

“Why are you shaking hands? I swear, you are such a dad.”

Seb put up a hand as though to block her from view and gave Harry a conspiratorial smile.

“I’m Harry. Much more boring name than yours.” Harry laughed, partly from nerves and partly because they couldn’t know everything his name evoked in the wizarding world.

“Aww, I think it’s cute. That might be the whole British thing though. It gives me major blinders. Everything that would make me vomit if an American boy said it is suddenly cute in that accent. I know it’s cliché as fuck, but I can’t help it.” Seb shrugged, and Harry laughed. It was sincere this time, no nerves to be found. The longer they bantered around him, the more Harry felt at ease. Their rapport was like a snug blanket.

“Let’s be real though, that’s because you’re a slut.” Gisele winked at Seb as she ate a forkful of eggs.

“Excuse you.” Seb playfully narrowed his eyes before turning back to Harry. “But while we’re on the subject…”

Gisele shook her head as Seb leaned forward, elbows resting on the table as he gave Harry a mischievous smile.

“Predictable.”

He ignored her and pressed on.

“Is my gaydar betraying me or are you one of us?”

“Er…” Harry blushed and ate a large bite of pancake to avoid answering that. It was denser than a pancake had any right to be. So far, dining hall food had little in common with Hogwarts fare.

“Okay, now who’s chasing away who?”


Harry’s heart felt like it was beating in his throat. This was one of the benefits of being here, right? He could tell people if he wanted to. They wouldn’t care. No one here had preconceived notions of who Harry Potter was supposed to be. Besides, wasn’t it almost easier to tell a total stranger? The
stakes were so much lower.

“You’re only half right,” Harry said quickly before he could lose courage. They took a break in
their teasing of one another.

“Ahhh, the dreaded bisexual?” Although he was confused by what she meant, there was no malice
in the question so Harry chose to latch on to that opening.

“Er, yeah, but… why are we ‘dreaded’ exactly?”

“Because no one’s safe! We can fuck basically everyone. Ultimate power move. We’re at the top
of the sex pyramid, in my humble opinion.”

Seb rolled his eyes.

“And this is why you have no right to call

me

a slut.”

“Hey, I never said it was a bad thing! It’s just a fact.” Gisele shrugged and tossed her purple waves
over her shoulder. “Speaking of that, here comes that blond you’re horny as fuck for.”

Harry looked up, wincing when he saw that it was Malfoy. He was cruising through the buffet
quickly, cringing at nearly every item he saw before hesitantly selecting some eggs and an orange.
As he picked up his tray and began to walk in their direction, he nodded curtly to Harry. Harry
resisted the urge to roll his eyes and simply nodded back. Malfoy took a seat with several good-
looking boys who greeted him enthusiastically. It both surprised Harry and made him envious that
Malfoy already had a table full of friends at NYU. He supposed that, just as no one here could
possibly know Harry’s legacy, no one could know Malfoy’s faults and past mistakes either. Still,
the thought of him effortlessly charming strangers into friendship was a baffling concept.

“Wait, you know each other? I was going to ask, but I didn’t want to be that idiot assuming the two
hot British guys know each other just because they’re… well, hot and British,” Seb confessed with
an apologetic shrug.

Harry blushed at the compliment, running a hand through his hair. How could he succinctly
explain Malfoy without getting into a whole host of subjects he didn’t want to deal with?

“Yeah, we — er — we went to the same boarding school. He was an entitled prick, especially to
me.” There. Short and sweet. Hopefully that was enough.

“Wow, imagine that. A pretty, skinny, rich white boy turns out to be a dick,” Gisele said
sarcastically. Harry smiled. He liked her already.

“How did you know he was rich?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I have an excellently honed rich asshole detector, mostly because my dad is one of them.
Everything I’ve heard come out of that dude’s mouth, even the way he walks,” Gisele gestured to
Malfoy with her water cup, “is condescending as fuck. He looks like he’s judging everyone every
second of every day.”

“That is spot fucking on,” Harry agreed with a laugh.

“Well, I don’t care if he's a dick. I only care about sucking his dick. Jesus Christ, he is the most
perfect twink I have ever seen. And of course, he’s already made friends with the Calvin Klein
model gays. They’re all so damn pretty. God, I hate feeling inadequate before noon,” Seb lamented
with a frustrated whine.
“Fuck them. We’re gorgeous. They’d be lucky to know us.” Gisele winked and raised her water
cup. Seb and Harry tapped theirs against it in a toast of solidarity.

“Okay, please don’t make fun of me, but… what’s a twink?” Harry shrank a little in his seat
although he had a feeling they’d be charitable about his ignorance.

“Oh man, I never even thought about differences across the pond. I guess I just assumed Brits have
the same bullshit objectifying hierarchy of gay categories. A twink is like… a young, skinny,
mostly hairless, super pretty gay boy,” Seb explained, leaning forward. “And blondie over there is
like — the ultimate example. Gorgeous as hell and obviously knows it.”

Harry cast his eyes toward Malfoy, squinting a bit to examine him with an intensity he hadn’t
employed since sixth year. Was he gorgeous? Harry wouldn’t have gone that far. Nevertheless,
while he hated to admit it, Malfoy did look somewhat good. Sort of. In that objective way one
knows a painting is worth the commanding gallery price tag even if it isn’t exactly suited to their
tastes. His clothes fit his body like they were made for it, hugging every slender line of his form.
His hair was artfully tousled into loose waves parted to one side, the kind of style touted as
“effortlessly messy” by glitzy starlets in magazines who probably actually spent two hours in a
chair with a professional to get that “natural” look. His once sickly pallor was now a flawless
alabaster with a bit of color restored to his cheeks. Who knows? Were he anyone else, maybe
Harry would have been attracted to him. But Merlin knew that was impossible now. There was no
way to forget Malfoy was Malfoy. Harry shuddered involuntarily at the thought.

“I don’t really know about British terms honestly. My best mates back home are painfully straight.
I love them, but I can’t really talk to them about this stuff. I mean, they’re supportive and
everything, but…”

Gisele and Seb nodded sagely.

“Totally understand,” Seb assured him. “We’ve all dealt with the Clueless Heterosexuals.”

“I’m sort of — new to it myself, if I’m being honest.”

His two new acquaintances shared a knowing smile across the table.

“Oh god, is it that obvious?”

“Well… yeeeaaahhh,” Gisele admitted with an apologetic smile.

“Your fellow queers can always recognize that wide-eyed ‘new gayby in the big city who just
figured it out’ look,” Seb chimed in sympathetically.

“But don’t worry. We’ve all been there. Like I said, Seb and I are both totally awkward queerdos.
You’re safe here.” Gisele patted him on the back, and for the first time since arriving, Harry felt
like maybe it was safe here. Or, at the very least, it would be eventually.

“Gayby? Queerdo? I feel like I need a crash course in all this before I make a total arse out of
myself.” Harry let out a slow breath. He was out of his element. Although he’d come to terms with
his orientation over the past year, he still clearly had a lot to learn.

Seb and Gisele broke out into amiable laughter.

"Oh god..." Harry's head snapped up as he realized something he'd completely glossed over. "Wait
so... if he's..."
Harry turned around, gazing none too subtly at Malfoy's table. Seb was right. Everyone seated there looked like a Neutrogena ad combined with a men's underwear billboard combined with a Vanity Fair photoshoot. Harry was certain his retinas would burn out if he stared too long.

"Fuck... I never thought Malfoy was gay." Even as he said it, Harry began to understand that it wasn't quite so unfathomable. After all, Malfoy had never dated anyone at Hogwarts. The closest he'd ever come was canoodling with an eager Pansy, but thinking back on it, Harry realized Malfoy had never returned her affection. He merely tolerated it like... oh Merlin... like it was a necessary, convenient deflection. Had Draco Malfoy been closeted their entire time at Hogwarts? God, if he never noticed something as earth shattering as that, despite a year of dedicated stalking, Hermione was all too right about how unobservant he could be.

"Oh yeah, he's a bonafide, painfully beautiful queer. Maybe that's why he was such a dick to you in school." Seb winked, and Harry frowned, not quite picking up on his meaning.

"You suffer from a bit of mental delay, don't you, Harry?" Even though they'd just met, Harry could tell from Gisele's smile that it was a good-natured ribbing. It put Harry at ease, making him feel like he was already inducted into their world of inside jokes.

"You have no idea. I hope you have some seriously saintly levels of patience."

“Don’t worry. We’ve got you covered.” Gisele ruffled his hair, and Harry believed her. He ate the rest of his breakfast, a gleeful mood gradually replacing the fraught concerns of earlier. He even forgot about Malfoy’s presence looming behind him.

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Chapter End Notes

This will be updating on Mondays and Thursdays. Kudos and comments give me life, especially since this was a vulnerable work for me to create for several reasons so I will cherish every thought you lovely people give!

I'm dracoismytrashson on Tumblr if you'd like to say hello!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'll just say what I said on my queued Tumblr post: I hope you like a lot of Drarry tension of all kinds because that's basically all this chapter is. :) Also, I just wanted to assure all readers that this fic is done! I'm always continuing to edit because that stage feels like it never truly ends until you just decide to stop, but it is very much complete, so you won't be left hanging. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although Harry had moved into his dorm a whole week before classes, apparently students had the option of arriving a week prior to that. Suddenly, it made sense that Gisele and Seb were already tightly bonded, and Malfoy had been inducted into whatever rich bloke circle he seemed to hang out with. Fending off the notion of being severely behind, Harry tried not to let it bother him. His new friends assured him it wasn’t that common. Mostly kids who lived in the city or nearby opted for early arrival, taking advantage of getting settled in before the campus was completely flooded with bodies.

The week was whizzing by in a blur. Harry didn’t venture too far away, not quite ready to tackle the sprawling metropolis surrounding him. He went out with Seb and Gisele if they were headed to Washington Square Park (which was quickly becoming a favorite spot of Harry’s) or nearby places in Greenwich Village (which Harry was learning to simply call “the Village” if he wanted to avoid sounding like an out-of-towner), but mostly he spent his time exploring the school.

Harry might have been decently familiar with London, but it wasn’t like he’d had much leisure time once he was finally old enough to explore it. Being in constant mortal danger didn’t allow for a lot of relaxation. In many ways, being in NYC felt like Harry’s first proper city experience, no harbingers of doom overshadowing the moment. It was equal parts exhilarating and overwhelming.

Honestly, people watching at NYU was stimulating enough that he was content to stay within its borders for a while. He’d never known clothing could be so expressive. Although plenty of people dressed casually, other portions of the student body were clad in eye-catching patterns and unconventional styles. One girl sported a hat made from recycled tin cans she had somehow reshaped and fashioned together seamlessly, and the top layer of her dress bore a series of plastic labels from soda bottles. Harry felt a little plain against the avant-garde backdrop.

Some people were all too happy to talk about the genesis of their odd creations. Others were more aloof and acted as if mere conversation was an imposition, looking him up and down derisively. With Seb and Gisele’s help, Harry got more adept at spotting these types. They tended to wear a bored, above-it-all expression that he learned to recognize after a couple mortifying encounters that left him feeling extremely uncool. Approaching anyone new was still hard for him, so he was happy to have a little guidance on who would be receptive to it.

“Trust me, you don’t want the approval of some Tisch kid who’s gonna do a pretentious performance art piece that will last the entire four years of undergrad. Fuck ‘em,” Gisele had said with an eye roll and a big gulp of some neon-colored concoction she’d ladled from a full rubbish bin. Harry had avoided it at all costs despite being told it was disgusting but worth it because it
“gets the fucking job done.” It looked radioactive to him.

Halfway through the week, Harry had found himself at a party in a building a few blocks from his dorm. Gisele knew some sophomore who lived there and had dragged Seb and a reluctant Harry along for the ride. As soon as he’d entered, the sea of people separated him from his friends, and Gisele’s purple hair disappeared into the waves of strangers. Winding his way through the crowded flat in search of beer or whatever he could find (he was learning you couldn’t be picky at a uni party), he eventually made it to the kitchen.

Harry froze as he walked past the doorway to find Malfoy perched on the kitchen counter, an open can of PBR in one hand, long legs crossed neatly, one lean thigh draped over the other. He desperately wished he had a camera to capture this unlikely sight for posterity. Harry had successfully avoided thinking about Malfoy over the past few days. Well… almost. Most of the time, Harry was too preoccupied with everything else to give the snobby git a passing thought. But there was always the background knowledge of his presence, like sensing a shadow in your peripheral vision.

Malfoy had always been like that. Try as he might, Harry couldn’t help but be attuned to his frequency, some invisible antennae always alerting him to Malfoy’s existence anytime he cropped up. It was spooky, really, and Harry had no reasonable explanation for it. He pictured Luna uttering some mystical justification about it, proclaiming that their auras recognized one another or some such nonsense. It made Harry smile and miss home a little bit, regardless of how un-home-like it had felt over the last year.

Right now, Malfoy was wearing an expression that was remarkably similar to those standoffish art students Harry had recently met. Some attractive, tanned boy with bright blue eyes and chestnut hair was chatting him up, but Malfoy couldn’t have been less interested. This fact totally escaped the enamored boy, and Harry fought a grin as he said “excuse me” and maneuvered around the bloke to get to the fridge.

“I mean, the Village is dead. We’d have to go back at least a decade to really experience it. Williamsburg is so gentrified now, it might as well be too. Next is Bushwick, it’s just like… why even live in New York anymore? It means nothing.”

“So then why are you here?” The boy completely missed the scorn dripping from Malfoy’s tone, the implication being less why are you in New York and more why the fuck are you still standing in front of me?

Harry grabbed a beer, cracking open the can with a satisfying hiss of carbonation, and shut the fridge. He took a step back and grinned at Malfoy over the bloke’s shoulder. As he met Harry’s gaze, Malfoy’s eyes flickered with — was that amusement?! Were they actually sharing a silent joke at this oblivious boy’s expense? Once again, the bloke in question noticed absolutely nothing.

“Well,” he chuckled, “I mean, what the fuck else am I going to do? Go to college in a Midwestern wasteland? It might be a dead city, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Let me save you the trouble. He’s really, really not interested.” Harry clapped a hand on the boy’s shoulder, and he whirled around to spear Harry with angry eyes.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Someone who knows me very well. Or at least well enough to recognize when I’m trapped by an insipid conversation with a person I’m beginning to develop the utmost contempt for,” Malfoy drawled smoothly, taking a slow sip of beer as he stared back unwaveringly at the bloke vying for
his attention. Malfoy had always been skilled at delivering a chilling verbal takedown without so much as a blink. Harry had to admit it was a bit exciting to watch when you weren’t the recipient of it. The boy jerked back and scrunched up his nose.

“Wow… okay, fuck both of you. You can have him,” he spat at Harry before rushing out of the kitchen.

“Did you hear that, Potter? It’s your lucky night. According to him, you’re entitled to an evening with the most attractive man at the party.” Malfoy smirked and took another sip of his beer. Harry took note of the subtle wince Malfoy tried to hide as the taste hit his palate.

“Anyone who thinks that would make the night lucky hasn’t spent more than five minutes with you. Sod off, Malfoy.” Harry glared and took a sip from his can.

“He certainly spent more than five minutes, and I think he’d argue otherwise.”

“Yes, right before he bored you to death. You’re welcome for the rescue, by the way.”

Malfoy snorted.

Harry leaned an elbow against the counter, inserting himself into the space between the fridge and Malfoy.

“Oh yes, thank you ever so much, gallant Saviour. I’d be a helpless damsel in distress were it not for your valiant efforts. Chivalry is indeed not dead,” Malfoy said sardonically, placing his beer on the counter and leaning back on his hands. The black Smiths t-shirt he wore under his leather jacket rode up to reveal a creamy ribbon of skin, and Harry dutifully ignored the way his eyes were automatically drawn to it. It couldn’t be helped. The awakening of his sexuality had amounted to the sluice of a dam being lifted, all of this pent-up sexual energy he didn’t know he’d been storing, compartmentalizing in a locked room of his mind, set free in a gush of overactive desire. He found that he gawked at men’s bodies about 300% more than he had before the war.

He liked looking at men of all shapes and sizes, not drawn to any particular type so far. If pressed to describe it, for lack of a better term, he might say that he simply loved everything about their maleness. The musky scent of them, the broadness of their shoulders, the shade of their stubble after a couple days’ lapse in shaving, the square-ness of their jaws, the strength of their fingers clasped around the neck of a bottle making him wish he could be every object they held, could feel the calluses of their broad palms swiping across his skin, their beards scratching his chin in a passionate kiss, the unfamiliar flatness of their chests pressed up against his. He hadn’t experienced any of that yet, and every glance from an attractive man, every glimpse of strong thighs carrying their bodies with confidence, made Harry's blood surge with a yearning so pervasive, his skin positively tingled with it.

“Seemed to me like you needed it. Why did you need my help, anyway? Not like you to suffer through anyone who annoys you. Not even for a minute.”

“I’m trying this new thing where I don’t immediately snap at everyone who displeases me.” Malfoy let out a long sigh as though the very concept of it pained him.

“And how is that working for you?” Harry took a hearty gulp of his drink and smiled. To his surprise, Malfoy smiled back.

“I’d venture to say you already know the answer to that, Potter. You changed your glasses,” Malfoy observed, a curious softening in his expression that Harry didn’t know what to do with.
Must have been a trick of the fluorescent light.

“Er… yeah. Good of you to notice, I guess?” Harry laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his perspiring neck. One lesson he’d learned this week was that hundreds of young bodies crammed into small flats with no air-conditioning in the dead heat of New York summer was barely worth suffering through just for a beer buzz and stilted conversation. Still, Harry craved company lest he be left alone to his own racing thoughts and mounting anxieties. After that first night, he’d figured out that he fared much better when he spent some time outside of his room, as long as he kept the crowds to a minimum. He never stayed at these parties more than a couple of hours. That was about all he could handle before the walls began to feel like they were closing in.

“Better than those terribly outdated specs you used to wear. Those always made you look like a simpering librarian from the early 1900s.”

“Wow, that was almost a compliment, Malfoy. Better be careful attempting those. You might hurt yourself.” Harry self-consciously adjusted his glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose. The woman at the optometry place had referred to them as “retro clubmaster style” and assured him they were a very "classic look" that would always be “in.” Harry couldn’t have given less of a shit about that. He just liked that they made him look different, shedding the signature round glasses that only served to exacerbate how easily recognizable he was in the wizarding world.

“It’s not my bloody fault you make it impossible! I’m… trying, alright?” Malfoy gritted out the word “trying” as if it were a foreign concept he was struggling to grasp.

“I don’t understand why though. I mean, obviously you’re not trying to be my friend.” The possibility was too bizarre to even consider.

“Merl — god, no,” Malfoy corrected himself, looking around to see if anyone was paying attention to them. Everyone was entrenched in their own loud conversations. Most were in the living room just off the kitchen, and no one seemed to be glancing in their direction. “I just… look, I didn’t travel across an ocean to be the old Malfoy. That would be pointless. I simply thought that perhaps we could be… more cordial than we’ve been in the past. If you’re okay with that.”

Harry was about to make a biting remark about how all they’d have to do to improve on the past was not actively try to kill each other. But the sincerity in Malfoy’s eyes and the tight line of his jaw made Harry hesitate. Even if he didn’t exactly have sympathy for Malfoy's attempts to be amiable (after all, it wasn’t that impressive; the rest of the world did it all the time without having to force it), he did understand that this was difficult for him. Being on the receiving end of a moment like this was rare, and the reality of it stunned Harry. He had mixed feelings about someone from his old life being here, but there was still that twinge of comfort in it, a small thing that made him feel less unmoored.

Okay. Sure. That would be… nice.” Harry exhaled heavily. This was so uncharacteristic for both of them. He wasn’t sure how to process it or where to go from here.

“Good.” Malfoy spared him a weak smile, and it struck Harry how rarely he’d seen a genuine smile from him. “I really do like your glasses, you know. That wasn’t some unwieldy attempt at a bullshit compliment. It’s not as though you don’t still look like Harry Potter, but it’s a change. I imagine I’m not the only one who wanted some changes after… everything. I can see why you did it. Little things make a difference sometimes.”

“Oh… thanks, Malfoy,” Harry replied honestly, frowning at the unlikelihood of all this. The party, university, the city, his life, Malfoy. Everything. “Fuck, that was weird, wasn’t it?”
“The most astounding moment of my life, and that’s really saying something.” They both laughed before falling into a strained silence, the din of the party suddenly a screeching volume Harry couldn’t stand. The humidity was no longer the only thing responsible for the sweat covering his forehead and the nape of his neck. Harry’s heartbeat quickened, and he took a measured breath, recognizing the signs of an impending panic attack.

“Hey, do you want to get out of here?” Harry asked without thinking. “Crowds… after a while, I can’t —”

“Say no more.” Malfoy hopped down off the counter, motioning for Harry to follow. It was strange that he so readily agreed, but Harry didn’t have the brain space to ponder it at the moment. Harry abandoned his beer and obeyed, fencing off the urge to grab Malfoy’s jacket as an anchor through the stifling mass of people. He fought the erratic breaths rising in his lungs, trying to maintain a steady, calming rhythm as his vision blurred around the edges, the overwhelming colors and sounds of people swirling together like a crushing force around him. Fortunately, they reached the front door of the flat before Harry’s anxiety could escalate to full-blown panic.

“Have you ever been to the Waverly?” Malfoy called over his shoulder as they walked down the hallway. Harry counted his breaths, trying to time the inhales and exhalates to counts of three. He couldn’t remember where he’d read about that, but it was supposed to help.

“Uh… no, I haven’t.” Harry’s voice sounded warped and muffled to his own ears. He hoped he could get a grip before Malfoy noticed.

“It’s a diner I’ve been going to basically every night. Not far off campus. The food leaves something to be desired, but I’m told that’s standard diner fare. I mainly like the bottomless coffee and the fact that I can chain smoke.” Malfoy’s voice echoed in the strange acoustics of the stairwell as they made their way down to the first floor. Finally, Malfoy pushed the door open, and Harry eagerly gulped lungfuls of air. As he tilted his head back and closed his eyes, trying to ease back into normalcy, he realized Malfoy hadn’t said anything for a minute. Harry opened his eyes and looked at him. Malfoy’s eyes were slanted in concern. Harry was certain Malfoy had never, ever looked at him like that.

“Are you alright, Potter?” he asked in a voice altogether too quiet and gentle for Draco Malfoy.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s just — you know — a hundred people or whatever in a tiny flat when it’s a million degrees out. Glad to be outside, is all.”

Malfoy looked like he didn’t quite believe him, but he nodded and started down the street. Harry hovered near him, dodging people in his path. It was after eleven, but the nightlife of the city was just beginning; the brimming potential of the evening radiated off the gregarious clumps of people. The city’s energy was infectious like that. It was weird how the massive amounts of bodies on the street always felt different from the same thing within a confined space. Something about the forward motion of the street traffic was soothing. New York was a contradiction at every turn.

A couple of blocks later, they were in front of a restaurant on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Waverly Place. A green and red neon sign bearing the name “Waverly Diner” hung above the windows on one side of the building. The bright yellow lights hanging above the tables spilled through the windows to give off a welcoming glow. It looked like a brilliant place to have a greasy late night meal, but it very much did not look like a place for Malfoy. And did Harry’s ears deceive him or did Malfoy say he smoked?!

As Harry pondered all of this, trying to picture Malfoy hunched over a plate of hashbrowns, frowning into a cup of black coffee, a lit cigarette in one hand, Malfoy opened the door, holding it
open for Harry to grab behind him, and stepped inside. There was a sign on a metal platform that said “seat yourself” so Harry followed him to a vinyl brown booth.

“Aren’t you dying with that on?” Harry gestured to Malfoy’s jacket. The wanker looked unacceptably perspiration-free while Harry was sure he looked a right sweaty mess. Malfoy picked up a laminated menu and shrugged.

“For reasons I shouldn’t have to explain to you, I’m not keen on short sleeves.”

“Oh… yeah, makes sense.” Harry felt stupid; he hadn’t thought about that at all. Of course Malfoy wouldn’t want to explain the Dark Mark to every Muggle who thought they were innocuously inquiring about a tattoo.

“Don’t tell me you forgot about it. Even for someone as dense as you, that’s quite an accomplishment.” Malfoy smirked and raised his eyebrows. Just as Harry was about to protest, his lips twitching with potential insults, the waitress showed up. She was a middle-aged woman with skin grown leathery from too much tanning and stark black hair Harry guessed she probably dyed. She looked old enough for at least the beginnings of grey to have set in. There was a kind twinkle to her hazel eyes as she smiled at them, pulling out a pad and pencil to take their order.

“Hey there, blondie. Nice to see you again.”

“And you as well, Carla.” Malfoy smiled sweetly and canted his head in her direction.

“Know what you want, boys?” She turned to Harry expectantly, but before he could respond, Malfoy interjected.

“It’s his first time so I think he needs a minute.”

Harry spared Malfoy a fleeting glare. He didn’t need a spokesperson.

Carla glanced amusedly between them but didn’t comment on it.


“You want some too, babe?”

“No, thanks. Water’s fine.” Carla left and Harry opened the menu, glancing up at Malfoy over the top of the laminated page.

“You drink coffee this late?”

“Are you my mother, Potter? What’s it to you?” Malfoy pulled a lighter and a pack of cigarettes from a pocket on the inside of his jacket. Harry read the label and squinted at the curious name: Parliament. Harry wondered if he’d chosen them to be cheeky, a British boy in America smoking Parliaments. He watched as Malfoy opened the pack and flipped the filter of a cigarette between his lips. He flicked the lighter with a slender thumb and held it to the tip until it glowed orangish-red.

“Just cataloguing all the facets of the new Malfoy. He smokes, he drinks coffee at midnight, he wears a leather jacket… he probably saw Rebel Without a Cause too many times over the summer,” Harry joked, busying himself with perusing the menu when Malfoy glowered at him.

“By the way, you just said ‘Merlin.’”

“Yes — well — you always were good at cataloguing my habits, weren’t you? Your stalking had all the subtlety of a stampede of… rhinoceroses.” Malfoy took a long drag of his cigarette and avoided Harry’s eyes.
“You were about to say ‘Erumpents,’ weren’t you?” Harry couldn’t help the laughter that escaped his mouth. This was too hilarious and unexpected of a situation. The thought of Malfoy bumbling through even a whole day here, let alone an entire school year, trying to blend in and not turn skeptical heads with wizarding phrases, was just the mood-lifter Harry needed. He vowed to conjure images of a stuttering Malfoy accidentally asking for Fizzling Whizzbees at the counter of a Duane Reade anytime he felt worried about adapting to NYC life.

“It’s bloody hard, alright!” Malfoy hissed as he leaned forward, still wearing a scowl. “I spent the better part of nineteen years with a family who made sure I was never exposed to anything Muggle, unless of course it was to tell me what a scourge they are on this Earth. You’ve been living among them your whole life!”

“Yeah, sometimes I rather wish I hadn’t,” Harry lamented, his thoughts darkening as he thought about the Dursleys. Despite all the post-war hardships, at least he was free of them.

Malfoy looked at him quizzically as he took another puff of his cigarette, but Carla reappeared before he could try to make Harry explain.

They ordered: challah French toast and sausage for Harry, and a fried egg, hashbrowns, toast, and bacon for Malfoy.

“Well, language mishaps aside, it looks like you’re doing well. I mean… you blend in.” Harry waved a hand in Malfoy’s general direction. Malfoy really did look like any other hipster you might see in the city. His appearance didn’t give him away.

“Thanks, Potter. Likewise, I see you’ve finally found clothes that fit you.”

“Yeah well… it’s a lot easier to do when you can buy your own. The Dursleys didn’t want to waste a penny on me so I only ever got my cousin’s hand-me-downs. To say he was larger than me is the understatement of the century.”

“You’re saying they didn’t dote on dear Perfect Potter all the time? Color me surprised.” Malfoy cocked a dubious eyebrow, and Harry felt the heat of anger creeping into his cheeks.

“Fancy that, you have some gross misconceptions about my life. Who would’ve thought?” Harry let out an exasperated huff and crossed his arms.

“Back at you, Potter,” Malfoy challenged with a sneer, flicking a curl of blackened cinders into the thick plastic ashtray in the middle of the table. Harry wondered why he’d agreed to come here in the first place. Of course it would take them less than ten minutes to devolve into old patterns.

“What made you decide to come to New York? Are you sure you didn’t know I would be here?”

There was a voice in the back of Harry’s mind that told him this wasn’t any less combative of a subject, but he was distrustful of Malfoy’s motives. The two of them being here at the same time couldn’t be coincidental.

Malfoy laughed mirthlessly and took another drag, exhaling through his nostrils like a dragon.

“Contrary to what you and those vultures at The Prophet might believe, not everyone is interested in keeping tabs on the Golden Boy. Trust me, you don’t even rank on my list of priorities. Forgive me for being too busy repairing my own broken life to give Harry bloody Potter a fleeting thought.” Malfoy’s words packed a punch. Harry hated how easily he could get under his skin. It was an inescapable chemical reaction, like the inevitable foaming eruption of baking soda dumped in vinegar, the makeshift volcano of a child’s primary school science project, spitting with untamed
They fell into a tense silence, the clink of silverware against plates, patron conversations, and orders hitting the kitchen window filling the cold hush between them. Harry looked cautiously at Malfoy and wondered if he regretted inviting him here. Harry was surprised by how that stung. What did it matter if Malfoy wanted his company? They’d certainly never sought out companionship from each other before. Why start now? Maybe antagonism was the only dynamic that worked for them.

Carla appeared a few moments later, setting their plates down along with a glass syrup dispenser and some pats of butter. She glanced between them curiously, frowning at their obvious discomfort.

“What’s wrong with you two? Someone die or what?” she asked with her hands on her hips, sharp, red manicured nails on display.

To Harry’s surprise, Malfoy started to laugh. It wasn’t a mocking, aloof sound this time. It was sincere and contagious, causing Harry to break out into tentative chuckles before bursting into full-blown giggling hysteria.

“I’ll leave you boys to it then!” Carla smiled and threw her hands up.

“Fuck…” Malfoy wiped tears from the corners of his eyes as he caught his breath, stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray. “I don’t know what came over me — just — her choosing to say that of all things… considering what we’ve been through the last few years…”

“Yeah, I had the same thought.” Harry smiled reservedly, his lips widening when Malfoy returned it. Something seemed to pass between them as they exchanged looks across the table, a tacit agreement to forget the spat of a few minutes ago and move on. They both dug into their late night breakfasts.

“How can you eat that? Bread in America is sweet enough as it is, and then they have to batter it, dump powdered sugar on top, and drench it in syrup too? Why not just abandon all pretense and eat cake for breakfast?” Malfoy wrinkled his nose as he watched Harry devouring his food.

Harry noticed that, despite Malfoy making a point of complaining about the food’s quality, he tucked into his own plate with gusto. He considered teasing him about it, but decided to leave Malfoy’s secret passion for greasy diner food alone for now.

“Maybe I will. I live on my own now. No one to stop me from having cake whenever I fancy. Besides, it’s not breakfast time.”

“You always were partial to desserts, descending on the treacle tart like a starving crup.”

“Hmm, looks like I’m not the only one who’s been cataloguing habits.”

Malfoy didn’t take the bait, but Harry could have sworn he saw him flinch a little.

“So… it seems like you’ve made a couple friends?” Malfoy asked, taking a sip of coffee and letting out an appreciative hum.

“Yeah, I sort of fell in with them right away. I dunno. Just felt right.”
“Same old Potter.” Malfoy sighed, but Harry thought it almost sounded — dare he say it, fond?!

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Meets a boy and a girl on the first day, and the trio becomes immediately inseparable. Sound familiar?”

“Not that it matters, but it was the *second* day. And for what it’s worth, Seb and Gisele couldn’t be further from Ron and Hermione,” Harry responded defensively, eating a couple bites of French toast.

“Dear god, his name is Seb?!” Malfoy looked both incredulous and judgmental.

“You’re one to talk. Your name is ridiculous! Besides, Seb is short for Sebastian.”

“Oh yes, that makes it loads better. For your information, Draco is an incredibly regal name.” Malfoy dove back into his eggs, but Harry’s answering guffaw earned him an especially scorching glare. “It is!”

“Whatever you say, Draco.” Harry blushed as Malfoy’s eyebrows rose in shock, his hand freezing in midair, a piece of bacon hovering a couple inches from his mouth. Harry hadn’t thought about it until he said it, but now that it was out there, hanging heavily in the air, he realized he couldn’t recall a time when he had addressed Draco by his first name. The usage of surnames had always been an essential facet of their derisive routine, the choice loudly broadcasting a desire to keep it as impersonal and unfriendly as possible. “Um, sorry. I didn’t…”

“It’s okay,” Malfoy quickly replied, seemingly eager to change the subject.

“So, er… you seem to have fallen in with a few blokes too. How did you meet them?”

Malfoy made a face and lit another cigarette.

“I detest them. They’re insufferably shallow. If you think that bloke at the party was dull, trust me, you don’t want to meet this lot.”

“Aren’t you insufferably shallow too? You ought to fit right in.” Harry cringed right after he said it. While Malfoy had made his share of unkind comments tonight, Harry had to concede that he was doing his part in failing to break out of old habits too.

“Not anymore.” Malfoy said it so quietly, a mournful lilt to his tone that made Harry completely unsure how to respond. He’d expected more of the same acerbic comebacks.

“Well… er… I’m sure you’ll meet plenty of people you like. NYU is huge, and of course, there’s a whole gigantic city around it.” Harry tried for a reassuring smile, but Malfoy looked back uncertainly.

“Probably.”

They finished their meals and headed out, Harry trying hard not to laugh as Malfoy struggled to count his Muggle money correctly. The walk back to the dorm was strangely loaded, both of them speaking very little as Harry tried not to let his thoughts run wild. There was so much to think about, and most of it led to catastrophizing trains of thought that Harry would rather leave behind. He wanted to collapse into bed and actually wake up feeling refreshed and relaxed for once. As they walked down the hall to their respective rooms, Malfoy spoke up, startling Harry out of his musings.
“You know, you can call me Draco… if you want. I mean, it might look odd if we’re walking around referring to each other by our last names all the time. You don’t have to, but… you can.”

As they stopped in front of Harry’s door, Malfoy looked more awkward than Harry was used to seeing him, his normally squared shoulders slumping a bit and his silver eyes darting around instead of fixing on Harry’s.

“Okay. Likewise, you can call me Harry… if it isn’t too weird,” Harry offered, leaning his back against the door.

“It’s absolutely too fucking weird, but then so is this,” Malfoy — *Draco*, Merlin that was going to take some getting used to — motioned to everything around them.

“Yeah, it’s totally surreal. I keep feeling like maybe I’m not really here, you know?”

Malfoy nodded.

“Well… see you round then?”

“See you round.”

Malfoy turned on his heel and walked the two doors down to his rooms. Harry met his gaze as he turned the key in the lock, both boys disappearing behind closed doors, into their separate solitudes.

Chapter End Notes

See you again on Monday, friends! Let me know your thoughts so that I may devour them and let them sustain me through the weekend. <3 <3 <3
Chapter 3

Harry hated Logic. He had not expected philosophy to be like *math*. He pictured classes being filled with lofty discussion and abstract papers about abstract things that he could easily fudge his way through. This couldn’t have been further from the case. Every class, he left more confused than the previous one. This was the one class that he shared with Malfoy — *Draco* — who, much to Harry’s chagrin, seemed to be doing swimmingly well while Harry was sinking like a heavy boulder chucked into a lake. Anytime his eyes scanned the rows of the lecture hall to find that long neck, a thatch of white-blond hair covering the top of it, he found that Malfoy was always engrossed in the subject, pencil flying furiously across the pages of his composition notebook. He never seemed to fall victim to the listless, lethargic spell that overtook Harry every time the professor opened his mouth.

It occurred to him that perhaps he could ask Malf — *Draco* — for help, but the thought was a bit mortifying. Although they’d talked in passing since classes began a couple weeks ago, they hadn’t become friends exactly. At least, not in the sense of voluntarily hanging out the way they had that night at the diner, however fraught with tension that encounter had been. It wasn’t as though the tendency to insult and be contentious had dissolved altogether. Harry doubted it ever would. It was an itch both of them had to scratch. He just knew his entreaty for help would be greeted with a self-satisfied smirk. He could hear it now: “The great Harry Potter needs a Malfoy’s help? How interesting.” Draco would surely bask in the opportunity to point out Harry’s weakness.

Yet here he was, huddled at a table on the first floor of the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, the fog in his brain seeming to spread to every part of his body until his limbs felt paralyzed by his total ineptitude. His temples were throbbing, a stress headache threatening to take hold. He looked around the room at all the students who seemed to have a laser-sharp focus, and dropped his pen in the crease of his textbook with a defeated clack.

Harry loved this building and the strange, modern architecture of it. It was all severe angles and hard-edged geometric patterns in gold and silver that were nothing like the moody, Gothic interior of Hogwarts. Sometimes he wished he had more time to simply sit and admire it, but he was usually in the midst of a minor academic stress frenzy when he chose to go there.

With a groan, he packed up his things, zipped up his backpack, and headed back to Third Avenue North. As he approached his rooms, he hesitated, glancing down at Malfoy’s plain white door. Many students had decorated theirs with dry erase message boards. The more artistic ones had plastered every inch of their doors with collage materials. Someone on Harry’s floor seemed to change the theme of their décor on a weekly basis, a rotation of lush swatches of color.

Draco hadn’t done a thing to his, and while Harry had decorated the inside of his rooms, he hadn’t felt the need to clutter his door either. Gisele had insisted that, at the very least, he needed to hang up one of those whiteboards so she could write him messages she declared to be of vital
importance. So far, that included “Harry needs to get laid. Cute, curious people of all genders leave your number here” and some Clash lyrics, which, while entertaining, didn’t seem very vital to Harry.

Harry walked to Draco’s suite and stood in front of the door, dumbly blinking at it as though it would magically open. Just as he got the courage to finally entertain the idea of knocking, the door swung open, causing Harry to take an involuntary step back. Draco lifted his head and gave Harry a puzzled look.

“How long have you been lurking there? I thought your skulking about days were over. You do realize you’re not wearing the invisibility cloak right now?” Draco admonished, crossing his arms as he waited for Harry to give an explanation.

“No! Blimey, I’ve been here all of ten seconds. I just… oh, forget it!” Harry turned away, marching back to his own door.

“Harry! Wait a minute.” At the unexpected address, Harry turned around. Despite Draco being the one to bring it up, he had only used Harry’s given name once before, and it was laden with so much sarcasm that it hadn’t felt like a significant change. “I was on my way out. What did you want?”

“Oh… um, I was wondering if you maybe wanted to study together? I was going through all the Logic stuff at the library, and I feel like my head is about to burst. But if you’re on your way out…”

“No, that’s where I was headed actually. Same purpose, so I suppose we might as well. Do you prefer there or…” Draco gestured hesitantly toward the interior of his rooms, and Harry’s eyes widened. He’d never been inside, and he was struck with an undeniable curiosity about what he would find in there. Besides, this might be an invitation Draco would never extend again.

“I just came from the library so your rooms would be good, actually. If you don’t mind,” Harry added in a rush.

“The Great Harry Potter asking me for help as he dithers in his classes? I absolutely do not mind. In fact, I relish the opportunity.” Draco leaned against the doorframe, his lithe form stretched to its full height, haughty eyebrows arching upward.

“Now how did I know you’d say that? You’re an intolerable prat, you know that?” Draco’s smirk intensified, and he shrugged casually.

“Perhaps, but I’m an intolerable prat whose help you need. Your choice.”

Harry chewed on his bottom lip. Was it worth swallowing his pride and walking into the lion’s den? Or the snake pit as it were…

“All right, let’s do it.” Harry strode back to Draco, who stepped aside and waved Harry in.

“There, that’s the Gryffindor spirit.”

Harry’s eyes roved over the living room. It was surprisingly colorful. Draco’s wardrobe, while stylish, tended to stick to more monochromatic color schemes, but his rooms were anything but. Band posters (The Cure, Cocteau Twins, The Smiths, and a few Harry wasn’t familiar with) covered the living room walls, and the couch was a Slytherin green velvet instead of the stained, drab brown of Harry’s. As far as he could tell, everyone’s dorm had come with one of those, a
“property of NYU” stamp on the underside of the cushions. Harry shuddered to think how many bodies had been on his couch doing Merlin knew what. The bedroom door was shut so Harry couldn’t catch a glimpse of what that was like. He scolded himself for wondering. Why the hell should he be curious about Draco’s bedroom?

“How did you get this couch? Thought we were all stuck with the standard ugly ones.”

“Transfigured it. I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit on ancient, used furniture. It’s under concealment charms for Muggle eyes though. Technically, we’re not supposed to get rid of the university issued furniture.” Draco sat down, unzipping his backpack and extracting his Logic book.

“I hadn’t thought to try that.”

“Of course you didn’t. You’re shit at Transfigurations.”

“Hey! I’m… all right, fine, I’m not the best,” Harry agreed with an eye roll. “So when did you get into all this Muggle music? Or are these posters just for show?”

“Are you here for studying or relentless interrogation about my life? Some of us actually care about how well we do here, Pott — Harry.” Draco gave him a very stern look, and Harry nodded, taking out his study materials without another word.

“I do like them… the bands, I mean. Music was the first Muggle pop culture thing I grabbed onto. I’ve been devouring it like a madman ever since, honestly. Making up for lost time, I suppose,” Draco said dryly, not looking up from his textbook as he flipped to the problem set they’d been assigned that week.

“Well, what do you know? We may have something in common just yet, Draco.” Harry beamed at him. Draco shook his head, but Harry could see the corners of his mouth fighting a smile.

“It’ll be a happy day in Azkaban before that happens. Open your stupid book.”

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“Aaaarrggghh, I just don’t get it! It’s a blur of horseshoes and omegas and arrows that makes not one bit of sense!” Harry threw his head against the back of the couch and pulled on a chunk of his hair. He rubbed his tired eyes. His vision felt unfocused, his brain dizzy.

“That’s because you have all the patience of a… whatever Muggle animal is easily distracted.”

"Squirrel."

"Squirrel, fine. The point is, you coasted on Hermione’s help and the advantage your fame bought you at Hogwarts. There’s no one here to make sure you pass Potions because you slayed a Basilisk. You’re going to have to buckle down and do some work for a change.”

“Fuck you!” How dare Draco say anything like that! He was the last person who needed to lecture Harry on privilege. “I could say the same for daddy’s money, couldn’t I? Having trouble making friends now that you can’t buy them?”
“You complete fucking bastard.” Draco slammed his textbook shut, his grey eyes blazing. “You came here for help, and I let you in — ”

“You didn’t have to, Malfoy! No one forced you!” They were both fatigued and stretched thin from an hour of poring over the same pages. A small voice inside Harry knew this was probably the source of his petulance, but he couldn’t seem to stop.

“You’re right, no one did.” Malfoy’s voice dipped into a low, calm pitch that was somehow more ominous than his yelling. “Clearly, I need better impulse control because my instincts are shit. I should have known you would see me the same as you always did.”

“What else am I supposed to be seeing, exactly? So you dress differently, you like some Muggle music now? What the fuck does that have to do with anything? I have no idea what you think about anything that happened during the war. It’s not like we’ve ever talked about it.” Harry was panting now, anger beating through him, his blood running hot.

“Forgive me for not groveling at your feet the moment I saw you! God, Harry, did you think about whether or not I was ready to see you? No, of course not. You wouldn’t deign to think about what might be going through my head. Well, I’ll tell you. I am sorry. For more things than I can count, but I’m still going through so much. Y-you — ” Draco stood up, pacing about the room as he ranted, “have no fucking idea how unstable and full of regret and fucked up I feel all the time. I’m just trying to get by, and you’re not helping by being a constant reminder of every fucking mistake I’ve ever made!”

“Right, because you’re so considerate of my feelings all the time! It’s always Perfect Potter and the Golden Boy this and the Saviour that. Let me ask you this, Draco: do you think all this supposed privilege I have was worth actually dying for? Because in case you’ve forgotten, that’s what I did. Marched to my death at seventeen like a lamb bred for slaughter while my parents and Sirius — ” Harry stopped, horrified that he had almost told Draco Malfoy about what happened in the moments before he faced Voldemort. It was a very intimate detail he hadn’t shared with anyone except Hermione and Ron.

“Do you think my privilege was worth being brainwashed into believing a bunch of heinous things that started a war? Was it worth my father being in Azkaban for life? My mother and I barely able to have the smallest conversation without lapsing into a screaming match about how I’ll never produce an heir? Do you think it was easy for me to break out from under the weight of all that and come here?! Do you think it was worth this?!” Draco shrugged off his jacket, letting it fall to the floor, and thrust his left forearm in Harry’s face. The Dark Mark stood there, the black outline of a skull atop a snake’s winding body faded now, the ink less vivid, the design no longer pulsing with life. It was just a flat remnant of the past whose horrible implications were hidden from those who didn't know the tattoo’s true meaning.

"You didn't seem too broken up about all of this when you let Death Eaters loose in Hogwarts." Harry instantly regretted saying it. He knew Draco was trapped at that point. He remembered his tearful face as he told Dumbledore he had no choice, but being around Draco drove Harry to some sort of possessed state, anger-fueled word vomit spewing from his mouth before he could think better of it.

"Out!" Draco pointed toward the door, the muscles in his jaw flexing as he gritted out the word.

Harry didn't bother arguing. He got up and left, wincing as Draco slammed the door behind him. So much for reconciliation.
"Can I ask your advice on something?"

"Of course. Shoot!" Gisele didn't look up from the stack of records she was sifting through.

Harry absently flipped through the column next to her. Bleecker Street Records was a funky looking place with lime green walls and vibrant LP covers everywhere he turned. There was an amazing selection. All the Bowie and Tom Waits and The Damned he could want, but he was pretty distracted right now. He looked around at the other customers. Some were around his age and others were older, more minted collectors.

"It's about that bloke I went to school with."

Gisele paused in her search and gave Harry a keen look.

"Okay, I have to ask. What is the deal with you two? It doesn't seem like it's as simple as 'he was kind of a dick to me.'"

Harry sighed. If he and Draco were ever going to be friends, they were going to have to get their fake backstory straight.

"Basically, he was a huge bully. His family was conservative and bigoted, and they... well, they sort of influenced him into doing some things he didn't want to do in the name of their... cause. I didn't realize until later how much he maybe wished things had been different." Harry tried to stay calm. Gisele was proving to be pretty perceptive so he didn't want to betray the fact that he wasn't telling the whole truth. Granted, she was also respectful about not pushing when it was obvious that Harry wasn't ready. They'd already run into that situation a few times.

"What kind of things did he do?" she cautiously asked, watching Harry out of the corner of her eye as she resumed flipping through records.

"I'd rather not say. It sort of feels like his story to tell, not mine. The point is... those things were bad enough that I can't totally forget them, yeah? But I can tell he's really trying to start over, and I definitely relate to that. I mean, I'm here for the same reason, really."

"You wanna bury the hatchet but aren't sure if it's worth it?"

"Thank you for being way better at talking than I am." Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Gisele had a tendency to save him from too much incoherent rambling. He supposed some people might be irked by having their mind practically read, but Harry preferred someone helping him out.

"You're not half as bad as you think you are!" Gisele gave his bicep a squeeze. "So, does he seem like he's receptive to making up?"

"Well, that's part of the problem. He was into the idea, but I sort of cocked it up. We both did. When we get together, it's like... this explosive thing that's always been there between us, this friction, makes us both snap. I wish we could forget the past and start over. I think it means something that he offered first, you know? I don't know why, but I just get this feeling I'll regret not taking him up on that."

"But you don't know how to stop giving into the urge that makes you wanna fight the fucker every time you see him?"
"YES. God, exactly. Oooohhh, *Lust for Life*. That's it, I'm buying a record player and everything in this store. Oh, er — sorry. I tend to get a bit distracted." Harry smiled, feeling a bit sheepish, and Gisele shook her head, slinging an arm around his shoulders.

"Dude, your ADD stuff, the way it takes you awhile to catch on to what's right in front of your face? These are things that make you *you*. Honestly, the people who think it's annoying instead of endearing are assholes who don't get you. So stop apologizing for it."

"Thanks." Harry beamed at her. He'd really gotten lucky when he sat down at that table in the dining hall.

"Anytime. Now, this is a tricky ass problem, but I have a few ideas. First off, as much as both of you don't want to talk about whatever happened, it's just going to eat a hole in your friendship before it's even started. Trust me, I'm a pro at saying 'this is a problem for future me. I'll deal with it later,' but like... that's also why I know that doesn't work. Feel me?" Gisele pinned him with a serious look, and Harry nodded. "Good. So talk about it sometime. Doesn't have to be everything at once, but don't ignore it until you both blow up again. And when you *do* talk, listen to each other. Don't be sitting around waiting for your turn to talk."

"That's brilliant advice." Harry thought back to his fights with Draco. Gisele was pretty on the money. Neither of them tended to listen to the other. It always escalated to a shouting match in about five seconds flat.

"What can I say? Manhattanite kids are in therapy before we hit puberty. Now, the thing about this is that you have to be able to realize when he's a lost cause. He doesn't want to listen? Just wants to do the same shit he always has? Fuck him. He's not worth it. Don't waste your time."

"Right." Harry nodded, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to divine that. His judgment had a history of being extremely clouded around Draco. If that weren't the case, he wouldn't have needed guidance in the first place.

"Okay, so the second part of my advice is this: get him at the right time. What does he like?" Harry followed Gisele to a new stack at the rear of the store, and they both picked a pile to peruse.

"Um... he likes good music? He'd probably be thrilled if I showed him this place."

"Great! Bring him sometime. Sort through the stacks, take your finds somewhere comfortable, and talk over some coffee. When he's all happy and nerding out over the records, ease into it."

"Can I say something really cheesy?"

"Lay the cheese on me, dude."

"It's really cool to be talking about this. With my friends back home... I adore them, don't get me wrong, but I couldn't have talked to them about Draco."

"I take it he wasn't a ball of sunshine to them either?"

"Yeah, that's putting it mildly..."

"Look, the only way I'm gonna judge you is if he *keeps* being a dick and you keep going back to him after that. But people deserve second chances so why not see what happens?"

"Do you feel that way about your father?" Harry quietly asked. She had been cagey about her issues with her dad so far, but Harry could tell it was a splinter in her side.
"You've been talking to Seb, haven't you?" Gisele narrowed her eyes, but she was suppressing a grin.

"Maybe a little." Harry shrugged apologetically.

"Eh, he's... a work in progress. If I start talking about that, we'll be here all night. Oh!" Gisele turned to him, her exclamation so loud that a couple people looked their way. "Forget this place! I know exactly where you should go on your friend date!"

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Draco and Harry stood awkwardly in the back of Luna Lounge, waiting for the show to begin. The bar was dark, with thirty or so people peppered throughout the place, drinks in hand as they talked. Seb and Gisele were there along with Naomi, a girl from Gisele's women's studies class who she was severely crushing on at the moment. The two girls seemed pretty enthralled with each other, whispering close, heads bent together, even though the music hadn't started yet.

They’d arrived late, skipping the opening band on Gisele’s recommendation (“Trust me, it’s some horrendous art school shit you don’t want to sit through. Probably a girl screeching while she writhes on the floor covered in red paint meant to simulate menstrual blood.”) The place was twenty-one and over, but Gisele knew the doorman and got them in with no problem. She seemed to know nearly everybody. The whole reason they were here was because her friend knew some guy — Albert — from NYU, who was in a new band called The Strokes. Gisele's friend swore up and down that they were going to be the next big thing in New York, but Gisele was skeptical.

"Listen, if I had a dollar for every time some dude told me about his band or his friend's band or his cousin's sister's little brother's band that was gonna Make It Big, I could disown my dad and pay for NYU myself," she'd said with a roll of her eyes. "They seem cool though. From what you've told me, I think your friend — or almost friend — will dig them."

Convincing Draco to come had been a little difficult. When he'd opened his door, everything about his demeanor made Harry want to turn around and leave with his tail tucked between his legs. But he'd persisted anyway, apologizing for their last encounter and offering the show as a way to atone for it.

"I don't see how spending an evening with the person who pissed me off in the first place is a way to make up for it," Draco had said, arms crossed.

Harry had swallowed the urge to spar with him and smiled as invitingly as he could, assuring Draco that several people would be there and he could ditch them all and meet someone infinitely cooler if he wanted. Harry couldn’t rationalize why he was even bothering, but when he noticed Draco’s annoyance at his friendliness, it clicked into place. There was an immense satisfaction to be derived from killing the prickly bastard with kindness. Sometimes, it was an even sweeter victory than matching him verbal blow for verbal blow. Let Draco look like the bad-tempered arsehole while Harry came out looking patient and thoughtful.

"Shouldn't be too hard to accomplish that. In any given room in this city, a cooler person than you is only a stone's throw away."

Knowing that comment was designed to bait him, Harry took a deep breath and asked, "So, are you
Draco nodded with a noncommittal, "I'll think about it."

Draco being Draco, he made Harry sweat about it for a few days before accepting the invite with a blasé, "Well, it appears I'm free tonight so I suppose I'll join you."

The trouble was, the conversation had been stagnant at best. Harry's efforts to keep to lighter subjects backfired, causing a total lack of anything interesting to build on. Every topic died before it even began.

Harry's eyes roamed around the dimly lit room. He was grateful for the smaller crowd. Although it wasn't too far from campus, it was still the furthest he'd been, traveling on the F train into the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

At least Draco was a little more relaxed than he'd been on the way there. Even when Gisele and Seb tried to engage him in conversation on the train, he'd mostly been brief and shifty-eyed. At first, Harry thought he was being antisocial, vestiges of the old Malfoy manifesting as an unfounded fear of Muggle interaction. Then he noticed Draco's hands tightening on his thighs anytime the train lurched on the rails, his angular features stiffening.

Harry wasn't sure how to ease Draco's worries. It wasn't like the rest of the group could understand why Muggle public transit might set Draco on edge. He had to be sly about it. Finally, the other three seated across from Harry and Draco were absorbed enough in conversation to give him an opening.

"It's okay. I know it's a little rickety, but I promise it's safe. No danger of getting splinched in this, yeah?" Harry tried for a conciliatory smile and clamped his hand on Draco's shoulder. Draco looked down at it with such astonishment that Harry retracted it swiftly, hoping he wouldn't mention it. Why had he done that? Harry couldn't remember a single time he'd willingly touched Draco, let alone in an attempt to comfort him.

Tha't's not true.

Harry told his inner voice to fuck off. The last thing he needed to think about tonight was a flooded bathroom floor, streams of blood merging with the water, flowing with impossible speed that only seemed to grow with every critical second.

Gisele tapped Harry on the shoulder, shaking him from his morose reverie. She appeared in front of the two boys, two clear, fizzy drinks with lime slices around the rim in either hand. She thrust one toward Harry and one toward Draco.

"Alcohol bridges gaps, my dudes," she cheerfully declared. "Drink up and stop looking like you're at a goddamn funeral."

She clapped them both on the shoulder and went back to Seb and Naomi, casting one parting glance of sympathy at Harry.

Harry and Draco exchanged a look before each taking a sip. Draco rolled his eyes and licked moisture from his lips.

"That bint thinks we're a couple of walking British clichés."

"Gin and tonic?" Harry grinned as he pointed at his drink, and Draco laughed with a nod. "Knowing her, she probably thought it was funny. To be honest, I kind of am a cliché. I love tea
...separately, of course."

"Why am I not surprised?" Draco took a long drink and shuffled a bit closer to Harry. "So, on a scale of one to ten, how much are you regretting inviting me tonight?"

"What? No... no, I'm not," Harry said sincerely, taken aback by the candor of the question. He took a sip, letting the gin warm his belly and the bubbles in the tonic tickle the back of his throat.

"Oh, come on, you could be over there with your friends, but instead you're here having a supremely uneasy time with the headcase who can't cope with train rides and is terrified of making slip-ups when he talks to — " In lieu of finishing his sentence, Draco downed the rest of his drink.

"Draco, if anyone here understands anxiety about all that, it's me. I realize I have more experience with it, but I can imagine what's going on in your head. And..." Harry braced a hand on Draco's arm, "I really do feel bad for going off on you the other day."

Draco was wearing that look again, the one that said *why the fuck is Potter touching me?* Harry retracted his hand.

"Sorry. I guess I'm a touchier guy than I ever noticed. Um... how about we get spectacularly smashed and see this band and just fucking forget about everything tonight? We're nineteen. We're in New York City. We should be having fun, you know?"

"Us having fun together... perish the thought." Draco sounded downtrodden, but the corners of his mouth were quirking up ever so slightly.

"What an enthusiastic endorsement." Harry plucked Draco's empty glass from his hand and went off to the bar to get refills. When Harry handed Draco his drink, the band started to walk out. As they picked up their instruments and gave a short introduction, Harry noted that they looked barely older than him, shaggy-haired and clad in distressed jeans and t-shirts like many blokes he saw on campus. They launched into their first song, and the noise of the small crowd diminished.

*Can't you see I'm trying?*

*I don't even like it*

*I just lied to*

*Get to your apartment*

Harry watched Draco, the red lights of the bar highlighting that striking bone structure of his, so severe and unique, like he'd been chiseled and carved rather than simply born like everyone else. It used to be rather off-putting, serving only to enhance the air of superiority that Harry had always hated about him. During sixth year, it became significant in a very different way, his already slender frame whittled down to an alarming gauntness.

Now, Draco looked better, his slimness restored to a healthier level instead of something concerning. Harry watched him relax as the music played, the hunch of his shoulders abating and the corners of his mouth slackening. He tried to imagine Draco was just a bloke he was out with at a show, a friend who liked the same music. It was easier to do under these dark lights, with Draco in clothes much less formal than robes and fitted suits, a cocktail in his hand.

Draco turned towards him, frowning and mouthing "what". Harry just smiled and shook his head, turning back to watch the band.
I say, oh, he's gonna let you down

He's gonna let you down, he's gonna let you down

And gonna break your back for a chance

And gonna steal your friends, if he can

He's gonna win someday

With three drinks in and the band in full swing, Harry and Draco were more at ease, dancing a bit as the songs grew more energetic. There was a raw, gritty tone to the singer's voice that reminded Harry of all his favorite Velvet Underground songs, an unpolished yet controlled noise of gravelly guitars and driving drums that he loved. They had a distorted, 70s garage rock sound that was dirty, muddy, and precise all at the same time; anthems of partying in the city and trusting where the night will take you when you're young and ready for it. It made Harry feel like he wanted to conquer the city too, and go on meandering misadventures where he didn't worry about the destination, just trusted the journey and the mood of the night to steer him. The set was pretty short, and Harry was disappointed when it came to an end; he could have easily listened to them for another hour. When he met Draco's gaze, he could tell he was experiencing the same wave of musical euphoria.

"They were bloody brilliant! Like... Velvet Underground and the best Iggy Pop records and The Replacements had a fucking baby, and I am seriously in love." Harry had never seen Draco breathless with excitement like that. The sparkle in his normally cold silver eyes was disarming.

“Right?! I was not expecting this.” Harry was energized, any trepidation about how this night would go receding into the distance. He definitely wasn’t ready to head back to NYU. He wanted to walk around, maybe wander into somewhere completely new, just… experience something and make the most of it.

“Are you hungry?” Draco unexpectedly echoed Harry’s sentiment. What an odd evening this was shaping up to be.

“Yeah! Have you been around this area at all?”

Draco shook his head.

“Gisele’s lived in the city her whole life. She’ll know what’s good.” Harry walked the few paces over to his friends. Gisele immediately threw her arm around him and gave him a hello squeeze.

“What’s a good late night diner here?”

“Oh, I know exactly the place.”

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“Listen, if you’re gonna be New Yorkers, you have to get used to walking. That was not that far! It was like ten blocks, tops!” Gisele rolled her eyes as they sat down at their table. Naomi had headed back to campus after the show (although not before giving Gisele a filthy kiss that had Seb clapping and shouting until they both made dagger-eyes at him) so it was only the four of them now.
“Summer is disgusting! I’d rather have vehicles move *me* instead of doing the actual moving myself.”

“Well, at least you’re honest about your laziness. Might I suggest some short fucking sleeves though?” Gisele laughed, and Draco blushed, focusing on the menu instead.

“So what’s good here?” Harry deflected.

“Yes, guide me, NYC sensei.” Seb bowed his head.

“Okay, have you guys ever had any Ukrainian food?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Russian? Polish? Anything adjacent?”

Again, everyone confirmed that they had zero experience.

Gisele sighed, putting a dramatic hand to her chest.

“Lord, what am I gonna do with these poor lost children?” she spoke to the ceiling. “Okay, we’re getting a crazy amount of pierogi, stuffed cabbage…”

She ran her finger down the Veselka menu, squinting in concentration as she considered the options.

“Oh fuck… we need borscht and goulash too. But ggasahhh blintzes! Latkes! Where are the plates? That’s our best bet. Get it all at once.”

“Take it away, queen,” Seb declared with a wave of his hand.

***

When the food arrived, it was a veritable buffet of unfamiliar sights and smells that made Harry’s mouth water. They all tucked in eagerly, sampling from everything. Draco wrinkled his nose at the description of some of the dishes, but Harry was almost proud to see him fearlessly digging in anyway. It was a far cry from how the old Draco would have behaved. Each time he was visibly surprised by the pleasant taste, Harry would raise a self-satisfied eyebrow that earned him a glower.

“Okay so since I’m me, I have to ask. English boarding school… boys rooming together… are some stereotypes true?” Seb winked at Harry and Draco, his usual low rumble taking on an even more suggestive tone that made Harry’s mouth go dry.

“Uhhhh, well… I can’t speak for Draco, but for me, it was terribly dull in that respect. All I did in my room was sleep and worry about the million other things going on.”

*If only you knew how much little time I had for wanking by myself, let alone with anyone else. I thought I’d die a virgin.*

Harry’s face fell as he realized how much truth there was to that thought. He brushed it off. Tonight wasn’t the time for dwelling on all that.
“I have no idea what you lot are on about,” Draco mumbled, taking a small, careful bite of a truffle mushroom pierogi.

“Well, there’s a certain... conception people have about the boarding school environment making even the straightest of boys get curious. You know... hormones, close quarters. I guess you had a co-ed school though so maybe guys weren’t quite so hungry for cock,” Seb informed Draco with glee. Harry snort-laughed as Draco coughed, choking on the sip of water he’d just washed the pierogi down with.

“Merl — god, you don’t particularly fancy beating around the bush about anything, do you?” Draco’s blush intensified, and although he knew it was a bit sadistic, Harry was really enjoying a flustered Draco being quizzed about his sexual exploits.

“God, I love everything you say. Can I hire you as my tutor? And by tutor, I mean you’ll just read my textbooks out loud to me in that accent all day, every day.” Seb rested his chin in his palm, fixing Draco with a dreamy look. Gisele slapped him on the arm.

“So fucking shameless all the time! Give the dude a minute to recover from your interrogation about his sex life.” She ate a big spoonful of goulash and closed her eyes in bliss.

“Well...” Draco said after a moment, recovering with a dignified straightening of his shoulders and a hand through his white-blond locks, “I’m not surprised to hear that Harry’s experience was dreadfully boring, but the Slytherin dorms, were, on occasion, known to be more eventful.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to choke on his water. Well, not so much choke as spit it back into the glass in the messiest, least graceful fashion ever. Draco flashed Harry a wicked grin.

“Hold up a sec. Slytherin?! What kind of British nonsense is that?” Gisele asked.

“Oh... well...”

“They were like... fraternities are here... in a way. Only far more eccentric and English,” Harry swooped in to save Draco. “Lots of odd traditions and stuff. We were divided into four different ones. I was a Gryffindor, and Draco here was a Slytherin. Known to be the most disreputable of the houses, I might add.”

Draco gave Harry a disapproving look, but Harry only grinned back.

“Oh, so it really comes back to that, does it? After all this time? You haven’t changed a sodding bit.”

“It’s called a joke, Malfoy. I’m well aware the houses were rubbish, but let’s get back to the more important business of who was giving you handjobs in the dorms. My money’s on Zabini.”

“Well, aren’t you bold?” Draco gave him a cheeky smile. He almost looked impressed. “All right, fine. It was Theo Nott. Blaise, while extremely attractive, is unfortunately also extremely straight. I got him to snog me once, but it was awful. It was quite obvious he wasn’t into it. Sort of ruined the whole thing.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. Since his facial muscles refused to cooperate and close his gaping mouth, Harry clamped a hand over it.

“Nott?! He’s so... mousy.”

“He was,” Draco agreed with a reluctant sigh. “But I don’t know... he just seemed... safe at the
time.”

The table went silent as Harry processed this information, and Seb and Gisele exchanged inscrutable glances. Harry would’ve given quite a few galleons to know what they were thinking.

“And what about you, Potter? I don’t suppose the Weaslette was a prize in the bedroom.”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Harry’s voice rose, and his friends’ wary looks made his ears grow hot.

“Hey, guys, let’s change the — ”

“I’ll take that to mean you never got to it, then,” Draco said with a smirk, and Harry snapped. “And why, I wonder, was that?”

“Why are you such a prick, Malfoy?! All I’ve done since you’ve gotten here is try to be nice to you, and you — ”

“Oh, come off it! No one asked you to befriend poor Malfoy, alone and out of his element,” Draco drawled sarcastically. “I suppose you find that terribly self-congratulatory, but I’m not your charity. I don’t need saving. Keep your Saviour act for someone who wants it.”

Harry took a deep breath. Every hair on his body felt like it was standing at attention, and his skin was vibrating with fury. But this was no place to have it out with Malfoy.

“Then why did you come?” Harry asked as calmly as he could, meeting Malfoy’s steely eyes and refusing to look away.

“Excellent point, Potter. A bad decision in a long line of even worse ones.” Malfoy pulled his wallet from his jeans pocket and laid some bills on the table for his share of the meal. “Nice meeting both of you. Sorry to have rudely disrupted your dinner. Potter and I are… whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

All the fight was drained from Malfoy’s voice as he apologized. It sounded genuine, which made the whole situation even more surreal. Seb and Gisele only nodded with cautious, tight smiles as Malfoy got up and left the restaurant. Harry put his head down with a groan, running his fingers through his messy black hair.

“Well… shit got real. Who is the Weaslette and why did that piss you off so much?” Gisele’s voice was a pacifying influence, slowly pulling Harry out of the fog of having just fought with Malfoy in full view of his new friends. He was terribly embarrassed and didn’t know how to even begin to answer that. Harry’s head felt heavy as he lifted it and assessed their concerned faces.

“My best friend Ron’s little sister. We dated for a while. Malfoy constantly made fun of Ron and his family for being poor. It just hits a fucking nerve anytime he talks about them. Honestly, I guess he’s said much worse things, but…” Harry’s voice sounded weary to his own ears. How had this night turned so bad so quickly?

“What kinds of things?” Gisele narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair. “You said his family was bigoted. I didn’t push, but for obvious reasons, I kind of want to know if the kind of piece of shit he was is a racist piece of shit.”

Gisele swept her hand over her face, indicating her dark complexion to illustrate her point.

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyelids, his glasses bumping off the bridge of his nose. Why was it so
hard to tell them this? Why did he feel some nagging notion that it was the wrong thing to do? After all, this was Malfoy, who had treated him terribly more times than he could count. Not to mention that he wasn’t particularly doing any better on that front. Tonight was proof of that.

Perhaps it was because Seb and Gisele couldn’t ever really know the whole story. They couldn’t know about Malfoy tossing Harry his wand. Malfoy lying to Bellatrix at the Manor. Malfoy refusing to even look at his father during the trial, a new disgust Harry had never seen written on his face. Malfoy’s picture in the pages of *The Prophet* as he toiled through his community service, working among Muggles and looking happier than Harry had ever seen him. He still remembered that photo in the garden of the rehab center, Malfoy laughing as he helped a lanky teenage girl plant a small tree. At first, Harry had scoffed at the moving image. Clearly this was being printed as a step in a series of others designed to rebuild the prestige of the Malfoy name. It was an empty act; he was only there because he had to be.

Yet Harry had kept the paper, his eyes drawn to it every time he caught a flicker of movement in his periphery, strolling through the living room of Grimmauld Place on his way to the kitchen, the paper laid neatly on the coffee table where he had left it. Eventually, he gave into the insatiable need, strange and inexplicable though it was, and watched the picture on loop, transfixed by the twinkle in those grey eyes, the crinkle at the edge of them when he laughed. Harry was so accustomed to Malfoy wearing a sneer, a smirk, a grimace, or a cold laugh at someone else’s expense. But this was pure merriment, an unadulterated joy Harry hadn’t known Malfoy possessed. He looked better that way. Softer, sweeter. Handsome, even.

“No, it wasn’t that exactly… It was more like… Well…” Harry plunged his fingers into his hair, scratching at his scalp as he scrambled for a plausible explanation that wouldn’t lead to questions he couldn’t answer. What he wouldn’t give for Hermione to come to his aid right now…

“Let me guess, classic gay stereotype? Deeply closeted homophobe who pushes guys like you around?” Seb queried with a look of intense empathy. Harry could tell Seb knew the type very well.

“Yes!” Harry agreed a little too excitedly.

*Fuck, now Malfoy is really and truly going to kill me.*

“A pretty twink bully… never seen that before, but I guess crazier things have happened. How did no one beat his ass? He’s not exactly ripped,” Gisele asked, going back to nibbling on all the delicious food.

Harry chuckled a bit. It was a good question. Malfoy had always been a rather ineffective bully. For the most part, he was all talk and tended to cower anytime Ron raised his fists.

“Well, he had two goon bodyguards who were a lot bigger than him, and I dunno… his family was powerful. Old money and all that.”

“You said he was the worst to you out of everyone, right?” Seb grinned, and Gisele smiled into her napkin.

“Yeah, definitely. He fucking *hated* me for no reason at all.”

“Harry, you know what they say about guys like that, right?” Gisele canted her head. Harry was coming to understand that this gesture meant *I know you don’t really know so I’m about to tell you.*
Harry waved his hand to indicate that she should continue.

“He probably had a huge crush on you and resented it, hence all the lashing out. Classic closeted homophobic shit.”

Seb nodded enthusiastically, taking a bite of stuffed cabbage.

“You’re both absolutely barmy. There’s no way in hell that Malfoy currently has or has ever, ever had feelings for me like that. Trust me, the only thing he ever felt for me was hatred.” Harry was adamant about this. They had to believe him. What they were suggesting was so laughably implausible.

They both shrugged.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m just saying, it’s a common thing. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he shook his head emphatically. Gisele was generally bang on, but this was one case where she was tremendously, hopelessly mistaken.

The rest of their meal at Veselka was spent commiserating over queer unrequited love. Gisele told them about the first girl she fell for and how the girl pretended like their relationship never happened after she came back from church camp one summer, brainwashed and preaching gospel like an automaton.

“It was like someone Stepford Wife-d her ass. It was awful. Felt like the end of the whole world.”

Seb told them all about chasing after straight guys who never reciprocated.

“I hate how many one-sided blowjobs it took me to realize they weren’t worth it. Fifteen-year-old me was a moron with about two whole ounces of self-esteem.”

It was eye-opening for Harry. Having such open queer discourse was unlike anything he’d ever experienced. He felt like a dry sponge ready to soak up every drop of knowledge they imparted. It was nice to not be afraid of asking bumbling questions or expressing frustration and confusion. It was the sort of thing he didn’t know he was missing in his life until he was finally blessed with its presence. Now that he had it, he didn’t know how he’d ever lived without it.

Harry hadn’t previously given much thought to his repressed desires. He was so used to being deprived of normal teenage milestones, sexual or otherwise, that he had resigned himself to it. Normal wasn’t something Harry Potter got to have. He often had to forcibly remind himself that this wasn’t the case anymore. He was in charge of his own life and had been since he first set foot on American soil. Moving here had plucked him from the influence of everyone who had controlled his life back in England, and while he sometimes felt guilty about how strongly he desired that separation, he was grateful to be here. Maybe Gisele’s silly whiteboard messages were right. Perhaps it was time he stopped squandering that potential. The very thought had him quaking with fear, but he knew Gisele and Seb would help him in any way they could.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not saying that the possibility of Draco and Harry being around to witness The Strokes becoming the "It" band of the moment was one of the many things that
sparked my desire to set this in New York, but I'm not saying it wasn't one of those things either. Next up: midterm stress! Angst! Turning points I'll try not to spoil! I'm also not saying that Harry's difficulty grasping the weird geometry related logic of Logic is inspired by my own failure to be invested in that class many moons ago...
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hello again, friends. How are you feeling about this chapter pace? Nice gaps so you can get caught up if real life rears its ugly head? Or are you feeling tortured? Or is it a delightful torture? :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weeks passed, September shifting into the autumnal shades of October, the leaves in Washington Square Park turning into brilliant hues that looked unreal, like they had been lifted from a skillful landscape on an artist’s canvas, broad strokes of bright yellows and dazzling reds. The city was gorgeous, a picturesque postcard come to life that Harry was overjoyed to be living in.

His new resolve to actually explore his sexuality with someone instead of restricting it to the confines of his own tortured thoughts had fallen by the wayside. As midterms approached, Harry found himself no closer to having a solid grasp of Logic. Comparative Politics was going all right (partly due to the apathetic professor, who didn’t seem to fancy grading two hundred papers of a large lecture class with very tight scrutiny) as was his Expository Writing class. Given his propensity for procrastinating on his parchment scrolls at Hogwarts, he’d thought the latter would be grueling, but his professor gave them interesting topics to explore and was incredibly kind and available to those who desired help. He reminded Harry of Remus a bit, right down to his sandy brown hair and gentle smile. The immersion style of French had been intimidating at first, but Harry found that he loved the elegant flow of the romance language. His accent had been atrocious to start with, but he was getting better every week.

At this point, all paper and exam deadlines were approaching simultaneously, hurtling towards him like an impending tornado stuffed to the gills with every conceivable obstacle. It was overwhelming and hearkened back to how much he had hated exam time at Hogwarts, the stress always compounded tenfold by Voldemort and every other sinister element in Harry’s life that conspired to bring about his downfall. He realized Draco was right. Harry had relied on Hermione heavily, but Merlin’s fucking tits, he’d had to dodge death at every turn! Who had the time to worry about OWLs?

Still, Draco’s comments rang persistently in Harry’s head, a relentless bell of annoyance every time he found himself growing indolent and ready to give up. Another motivating factor was the possibility of immediately failing out and having to pack up to return to England, facing concerned looks from friends and strangers alike. Whispers on the street and rumours flying off the pages of The Prophet: The once promising Boy Wizard, previously thought to be bound for Auror glory, has now failed outstandingly in a most curiously common endeavor to attend Muggle university. Has the Golden Boy’s glow been snuffed out forever? What ill-fated journey of self-discovery shall he embark upon next? It made Harry feel queasy and drove him to try harder.

The panic attacks that he thought had faded for good, overshadowed by the excitement of friends, the city, and exploring his newfound freedom, were returning with a vengeance. Harry never knew when they would strike. He could be in a lecture hall, the library, in his bedroom, out with Gisele and Seb, when abruptly the telltale signs would begin. The dizziness, the shortness of breath, the
hot flush that could infiltrate even the iciest of rooms, would flood his system until he knew his only choice was to surrender to it and let it run its course until he could come back down to reality, until he could *breathe* again.

Every attack was worse than the last. Harry had successfully avoided it happening in front of his friends, always finding a convenient excuse to duck out if he felt it beginning. However, at the rate they were occurring, he knew it was only a matter time before he was confronted with the problem of fielding concerned questions. Of course, the constant stress over when it would happen again and if they would be present for it this time, only made everything worse. Now, even when he wasn’t in the grips of panic, he was edgy and full of unwelcome anticipation, his thoughts wandering to worst case scenarios. He never felt at ease anymore, coasting on waves of anxiety, the peaks and valleys getting further and further apart.

His sleep, which had always been erratic at best, was sparse and fitful, his eyelids permanently heavy. The sandpaper grit that coated his green eyes was now a perpetual sensation. He began to take long, meandering walks around the Village when he couldn't sleep, popping a CD into his Discman to play on repeat, headphones clamped over his ears as he strolled through the streets until his limbs grew tired enough for another fruitless attempt at sleep.

One bonus of these exhausted ambles was that he got to see the city in the wee hours of the morning, the blue-black predawn bustle that was so different from the rush of life after the sun rose. He saw men rolling gargantuan sacks of flour and cardboard boxes full of produce down metal ramps they braced on the back edge of their trucks, secreting them away beneath the metal panels on the sidewalk and delivering the products to the city’s restaurants. Watching those compartments open up to receive their culinary provisions was like seeing initiates of a secret society whisper an exclusive password. It almost felt like a private ritual he shouldn't be witnessing.

The streets were emptiest at this time, that odd limbo when the nightlife crowd, even those with ceaseless stamina, had finally packed it in and the morning crowd hadn't yet risen. The workers unloading the goods and the restaurant staff receiving them were nearly the only people out besides Harry. Sometimes dusty clouds of flour would leak out of the bags as they were heaved down the ramps, a burst of powdery white floating across the dark sky. Even in his insomnia-riddled state, the sight made Harry smile. It was often dawn when he returned, laying his head down for a minuscule couple of hours before he had to attend class.

He felt like the walking dead as he trudged to his classes, a state of awake that seemed to match the moniker in name only. Everything about how he felt was too tenuous to make him believe he was truly alert, a hazy in-between state from which there seemed to be no release. Harry began to wonder if he’d ever feel normal again. Or if he’d ever known what normal felt like to begin with.

***

The night it happened began like any other night. Harry had gone to bed, a coiled ball of stress, every muscle in his body strung so tightly he could swear he heard the twitch of his tendons. Despite all the distress he’d been feeling, his nightmares hadn’t returned until now. When sleep actually came, it was like skimming the surface of an ocean, tendrils of slumber splashing at the edge of his consciousness but never submerging him in that deep, restorative state where dreamscapes came to roost.
He was back in that graveyard where it had all begun, the night he knew he would never again be blessed with carefree days untainted by a jittery need to peer over his shoulder, identifying the phantoms that lurked at every corner. Voldemort and the Death Eaters were nowhere to be found. Neither was Cedric. Instead, Harry was sinking slowly into the moist earth, the dirty maw enveloping him like quicksand. He tried to scream, but every sound was swallowed by soil, great hunks of mealy, bitter dirt infiltrating his mouth until he could no longer breathe. It pulled him down, down, down into the cold, lifeless depths, an impenetrable darkness that felt so empty.

Suddenly, blinding flashes of light skid across his strange, underground prison, like lightning in a fierce thunderstorm. Harry twisted violently, trying to shake free from the grasp of the earth, but it only pressed against him tighter, like a sinister casing molded to fit his form, its slimy, icy embrace choking every last remnant of life from his lungs. He was fading, his will to thrash and survive giving way to a whimpering surrender.

Harry was dying. He felt sure of it, and this time, he feared he wouldn’t be welcomed by an old friend in a room filled with warm, celestial light. He wouldn’t be sent back to continue his young life, undetermined paths and triumphs waiting for him on the other side. No friends, no family, no creature comforts were waiting for him at the end of this tunnel. Harry heard someone sobbing, shuddering cries of naked, raw terror that resembled a wild animal caught in a hunter’s trap. It was a howl of desperation and pain distilled down to its purest, most foreboding form.

“Harry!”

Someone was calling for him, but it was muffled by the unrelenting squeeze of Harry’s grave. It was familiar, but he didn’t possess the strength to identify it. His resolve to find a way out of this awful fate had crumbled to dust carried on the wind. What did it matter? How many more times could he resist the beckoning call of death? How many more times could a person evade peril in the span of one lifetime? It was inconceivable that he had lasted this long.

“Harry, I’m coming in! I’m sorry to do this, but I can’t — ”

The voice was cut off by a gasp, and the tightness of the soil was replaced by firm fingers on his arms.

Harry blinked rapidly as he woke. It felt like hours before he knew where he was, knew he had left the nightmare behind and that the moonlit darkness around him wasn’t a graveyard, but a bedroom. His bedroom. Harry lifted his head, the sensation of hands around his biceps grounding him a little. He frowned in confusion as he met silver eyes framed by ivory skin. The other boy’s pale complexion was almost ghostly in this light.

“M-Malfoy? W-why are you — ” He tried to speak, tried to finish his question, but the words dissolved into hot tears. The torrential sobbing in his dream had apparently been his own.

One by one, Harry’s senses began to awaken, the sting of warm moisture running down his cheeks. His vision was blurred by the tears. Although he knew his room was real and the dream wasn’t, that immense depression, the weighty atmosphere of despair from the nightmare, refused to leave. It was as tangible as it had been while Harry was unconscious, penetrating every corner of his mind until all he could think about was how nothing would ever change. He was certain he would never feel any semblance of cheer ever again.

Somewhere in the back of his head, rationality was fighting to get through, but the veil of sadness was still very opaque. He cried harder, his whole body trembling with the force of it. It felt like the room was quaking, no solid ground for him to gain purchase. A light flashed brightly in the room a few times in quick succession, and Harry’s eyes flitted about, the sudden illumination overloading
his senses.

“Harry! Look at me. Focus on me.” Malfoy placed a firm palm on either side of Harry’s face, bowing his head until they were at eye level. “You see me? You know it’s me? What’s my name?”

“D-Draco Malfoy. How did you…? Everything is so — ” Harry broke down again, the brief break in his cries over all too soon. Draco responded in a way that stole the air from Harry’s lungs.

Only this time, it wasn’t a panicked breathlessness. It was an intense shock that made him doubt the reality of his surroundings all over again. Draco held him close, resting his chin on Harry’s shoulder. His arms wrapped tightly around Harry’s back, but it wasn’t a crushing hug like the grave had been. It was a reassuring, comforting weight that marginally settled Harry’s thoughts.

“I want you to match my breaths, okay? When I breathe in, you breathe in. When I breathe out, you breathe out.” Draco began to take deep, measured breaths. Harry tried to obey his instructions, but the cadence was disrupted as Harry hiccupped for air, sobbing once again.

“I-I can’t,” Harry whispered, the agonizing burn in his chest beginning to spread down his arms.

“Shhhhh, yes you can. Keep trying. Can you identify some things around the room for me? Name three things you can see right now, but take your time. Go as slowly as you need to.” Draco’s voice was gentle, an even tone that Harry was grateful for, even if he still couldn’t see an end to this torment.

“M-my desk.” Harry took a couple more breaths, trying to focus on the rise and fall of Draco’s chest pushing against his. He peered over Draco’s shoulder, channeling all his energy into identifying the objects in the room. “The telly.”

“Good, good. Can you name one more?”

“Books. On the desk.” Harry flexed his fingers and realized he was clutching onto Draco’s shoulders. When had that happened?

“Perfect. Now, can you tell me three things you can touch right now?”

“Um… your shirt.” Harry’s fingers curled in the soft fabric of Draco’s hoodie. A lingering part of him knew he should be embarrassed, but the gravity of his emotional state was too heavy right now. There wasn’t room to feel much else. Harry removed one hand from Draco’s shoulder, the movement fluid and slow, like dripping honey. It took an unbelievable amount of energy to complete this simple motion, but he did it. His hand descended to graze the floor beneath them. Harry didn’t remember being on the floor. He’d assumed he was in bed. “The carpet. I c-can’t think of anything else.”

“That’s okay. Two is good. Very good. How about we stick with that? Are there two sounds you can describe to me? Two things you hear right now?” Draco stroked Harry’s hair, petting him the way one might sweep their palm down the arched back of a cat. It made some of the tension leave Harry’s muscles, his body sagging against Draco’s, the pace of his breathing continuing to approach a more manageable rhythm.

“That’s okay. Two is good. Very good. How about we stick with that? Are there two sounds you can describe to me? Two things you hear right now?” Draco stroked Harry’s hair, petting him the way one might sweep their palm down the arched back of a cat. It made some of the tension leave Harry’s muscles, his body sagging against Draco’s, the pace of his breathing continuing to approach a more manageable rhythm.

“Your voice and…” Harry closed his eyes and listened intently for a moment. “The wind outside. People in the hall. What are they doing? What time is it?”

Harry started to twist in Draco’s grasp. Draco let him move around, but kept hold of him, the circle of his arms loosening but remaining steadfast.
“Don’t worry about that. Focus on the room for now. You don’t have to worry about anything else.” Harry finally met Draco’s eyes. He hadn’t looked at him directly since those first puzzling moments upon waking, Draco’s fingers warm on his cheeks as he gazed into Harry’s terror-blown pupils. Harry had come down from the pendulous black clouds of the nightmare enough to really see him now.

How strange it was, ethereal grey meeting green and no derision or judgment written there. Draco was looking at Harry with nothing but genuine concern, and the answering thump of Harry’s heart wasn’t something he was ready to process yet. Harry’s eyes roamed the room sluggishly. He had a vague notion that he wanted to get up, but his body felt heavy. He felt thoroughly drained, both physically and mentally, yet the idea of attempting sleep seemed unthinkable. He would either lie awake, staring at the ceiling in a stupor or, worse, fall back to sleep and tumble back into the nightmare.

With a weak grunt, Harry pushed off the ground with the heels of his hands, shakily rising to stand. Draco moved forward, as though to reach out, and Harry finally gained enough clarity to wonder what the hell had just happened. Why was Draco being so considerate? He had seemed… prepared, trained, calm, in control. Like he knew exactly what was haunting Harry and how to chase it away. Like he wanted to help chase it away.

“Do you want a glass of water? Tea maybe? I don’t know what you have here…” Draco slipped his hands into the pockets of his pajama bottoms. For the first time that night, he looked unsure of himself.

“Er… yeah, there should be a kettle on the stove.” Harry’s voice sounded hoarse to his own ears, like he’d been screaming until his throat was raw. “Tea on the counter… I think.”

Draco nodded and walked out of the room, disappearing around the corner. Harry hauled his body onto the bed, flopping down with a groan. His head was throbbing, and he felt ice-cold and feverish all at once. Instead of sliding underneath the blanket, he gathered it into a messy ball and piled it in his lap, gradually draping it over his limbs until only his head was visible, his back leaning against the wall. Time was passing in a fluid way, stretching and shortening in indeterminable lengths that were disorienting. It could have been hours or minutes in between the time Draco left and that first whistle of the kettle sounded, shaking Harry back to reality once again.

Draco came back into the bedroom wearing a tentative smile and holding a steaming mug. He handed it to Harry, who accepted it eagerly, wrapping his hands around the warm cup.

“I didn’t know if you liked anything in it or not.”

“No, plain is good. I like to taste it.” Harry smiled faintly and noticed Draco looking peculiarly at the bed. “You can sit, if you want.”

Draco nodded and walked out of the room, disappearing around the corner. Harry hauled his body onto the bed, flopping down with a groan. His head was throbbing, and he felt ice-cold and feverish all at once. Instead of sliding underneath the blanket, he gathered it into a messy ball and piled it in his lap, gradually draping it over his limbs until only his head was visible, his back leaning against the wall. Time was passing in a fluid way, stretching and shortening in indeterminable lengths that were disorienting. It could have been hours or minutes in between the time Draco left and that first whistle of the kettle sounded, shaking Harry back to reality once again.

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Draco nodded and sat down gingerly, scooting closer to Harry but still maintaining a foot of distance between them. The hush over the room should have been awkward, but while questions about this encounter were gathering like mysterious clues in his mind, he was still half-catatonic. The business of actually vocalizing them seemed insurmountable. Harry sipped his tea, letting the warmth coat his throat as he inhaled the comforting aroma until he was ready to speak.

“Why are you still here?” Harry hoped it didn’t come out accusatory. He hadn’t meant it that way. He simply wanted to know.

“Why are you letting me stay?” It was a reasonable thing to ask. Considering how quickly Harry and Draco had turned on each other in the past couple months, the slightest shift in tone causing
the other’s hackles to raise, crouching into defensive stances like stray animals fighting over meat in a rubbish bin, it could have just as easily happened tonight. Why had Harry melted into Draco’s arms instead of shunning them? Delirium? Weakness? He couldn’t say.

“What time is it?” Harry asked after a moment, glancing at the window to see the first rays of morning light appearing on the horizon.

Draco grabbed his wand from where it lay on the floor and cast a quick *Tempus*.

“Just after 6:30.”

“You don’t have to stay. If you want to get back to bed, I-I’ll be alright.”

*Wow, that wasn’t the least bit convincing.*

“Harry, I’m certain you hate to be coddled nearly as much as I do — maybe even more so — but you are definitely not all right. Besides, I can’t risk it happening again. If they find you out, I may just as well strap myself to the cross too.”

Harry gave Draco a befuddled look.

“You have no idea what happened, do you?” Draco sighed, and it was a sympathetic sound. There was something akin to pity in his eyes, and it made Harry squirm.

“I had a nightmare. I woke up screaming. I guess you must have heard me and *Alohomora-ed* your way in.” Harry shrugged. What else could there be to it?

“Accidental magic flare, Harry. The electricity on the whole floor was flickering, a lightbulb in the hallway burst. It didn’t look suspicious, just like a bad storm had passed through, that sort of thing. I doubt you’ll be hearing from MACUSA. You were in here the whole time, and I cast a *Muffliato* fairly quickly when I heard you. No one will put two and two together. I’m noticing Muggles are blissfully ignorant of what isn’t right under their noses.” Draco chuckled quietly.

Harry thought of the lightning flashes in his dream. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all. He didn’t want to unpack the devastating consequences, so for the time being, he tried to convince himself that this was a one-time thing.

“It’s been known to happen under… excessive psychological duress. I’d say being at the center of a war qualifies as that. You should probably see what Mind Healers are avail — ”

“Can we please not talk about this right now?” Draco advising him on how to fix his mental health issues was too mortifying for words. Harry had had enough trauma for one night.

“Of course. Would like you some music or something? Distractions help when you’re still trying to shake the after-effects.”

Harry turned to look at him, and he envied the composed exterior he found there. When had Draco gotten so grown up? Harry didn’t have the first inkling of how to clean up the mess that was his life and brain. He felt like a carton of milk upturned on the breakfast table, dripping through the slats in the wood and off the edges, pooling on the floor.

“Yeah, sure. It’s over there.” Harry motioned to the stereo and CDs piled on the right side of the desk. Draco hopped off the bed and started to sift through the stack. He snorted when he got to the third one.
“You would be an Oasis fan.”

“Don’t tell me Draco Malfoy is a fucking Blur fan.” Harry groaned, his head falling against the wall.

“We are not getting into an absurd Brit pop feud right now. Unless you want to drool over Jarvis Cocker. I’m always up for that.” Draco flashed Harry a sly smile over his shoulder.

“Oh god, yes. Legs for days. The only man who looks better in a suit is David Bowie.”

“We are in complete agreement there.” Draco popped open the disc tray, and Harry wondered when he’d learned to work a Muggle stereo. He supposed it made sense; Draco had to have used something like that during his recent musical awakening. It made Harry insatiably curious about the finer points of how that had come to pass. He still knew very little about how Draco had spent the last year.

The dreamy piano line of Cocteau Twins’ “Sea Swallow Me” filled the room, and Harry let out a relieved breath. It was a perfect choice. Harry was fairly certain no living human being on planet Earth knew what the hell Elizabeth Fraser was saying in any given Cocteau Twins song, but it didn’t really matter. Her ethereal vocals washed over him, carrying him on their soprano waves to a secret place high above the fluffy clouds.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were gay?” Harry blurted it out and then covered his mouth with the blanket in an effort to stop any more idiotic words from tumbling out. Draco whipped his head around, but to Harry’s surprise, he didn’t look angry, only stunned.

“And when would I have done that? During all the wholesome heart to hearts we’ve had over the years?” He walked back to the bed and sat on the edge. Harry opened his mouth to protest but shut it when he realized he couldn’t provide any reasonable evidence to the contrary.

“Fair enough. When did you know?”

“Is there a reason you’re finding my sexual orientation of such enormous interest this morning?” Draco’s facial muscles grew taut, and Harry figured he was about to lose his patience. He chose his next words carefully.

“Every time I learn something new about you, it reminds me how much we don’t really know about each other.”

“Ah, so you’re just incurably nosy?” Draco cracked a smile, and Harry took the opening.

“That’s the long and short of it, yeah.”

“Okay, so we’re doing this. Fuck…” Draco slid back on the bed until he was flush against the wall. Once again, he was close to Harry but careful not to crowd him. “When did I first realize it or when did I admit it to myself?”

Harry bit his lip and thought it over.

“Both.”

“Fourth year for the former. Sixth for the latter, but by then…” Draco trailed off, and Harry nodded.

“Nothing like a war to stunt all our growth, eh?”
“Oh, Harry… nothing like a war to do a lot of things. The list is miles long, and I don’t think I’ll ever stop adding to it.” Draco closed his eyes, his head tilted toward the ceiling. He looked so young, his skin dewy in the early morning light. He was too young to be here with Harry, stewing in the aftermath of his dreams, the product of horrors that never should have entered their worlds. Harry’s name on his tongue was so genuine and easy. It ached to hear it, an echo of what perhaps could have been had things turned out very differently.

“Why do you keep saying my name like that?” Harry whispered it like he was afraid of the words.

“Like what?” Draco whispered back, opening his eyes and slowly rotating his head toward Harry.

“Like you mean it…” Harry felt the pricking of tears gathering at the edge of his eyelids. This night was too much to process on more levels than he could count. Draco was still here, being patient and sweet to him. He wasn’t sure why, but it made him want to breakdown all over again. What did it mean?

“Um… can I?” Draco glanced at Harry nervously as he moved closer and indicated he wanted to put his arm around Harry. Fat droplets began to roll down Harry’s cheeks, and he nodded. What a fucking disaster he was. He couldn’t fathom why anyone, let alone Draco, would tolerate him.

“Sometimes I want to sit you down and just tell you… so, so very much. And other times, I wish you’d disappear so I never have to,” Draco confessed quietly, his hand curled protectively around Harry’s arm. Harry forced himself to look into Draco’s eyes. The sincerity in those grey irises made Harry’s whole body warm. He was still balanced precariously on the edge of an emotional cliff, but he felt himself take a couple steps back when he looked at Draco. Harry knew exactly what he meant because he felt the same about his complicated relationship with Draco, a contradictory push and pull of desires that had always been hard to navigate, but had only grown more fraught with problems now that they were thrown together once again.

“Thanks for staying with me. I don’t think I could be alone right now.” Harry hated admitting it, but it was easier to say than it had been moments ago. However oppositional this night was to everything Harry thought he knew about Draco, he knew this wasn’t a lie. Everything about Draco’s behavior made one thing clear to Harry: Draco had nightmares too. Harry didn’t press him about how he had learned all those techniques he’d walked Harry through during the worst throes of his episode, but he was thankful for them.

“I know. Sorry it has to be me,” Draco whispered with a shrug.

“I’m not.” The words surprised them both, Harry most of all, but he found that their truth was undeniable.

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“Okay, at the risk of ruining this really nice thing that’s happening between us, I have to tell you something.” Harry put down his fork and gave Draco a very somber look. After Harry had equalized and was freely chatting with Draco, no more signs of impending doom, Draco had suggested some fresh air and a meal. Harry had been reluctant about venturing outside, but then again, his room didn’t feel like the safest haven either. In the end, he had reluctantly agreed to follow Draco to his trusty spot, the Waverly Diner. They had ordered a breakfast feast of gluttonous proportions, the table littered with more plates than it had been at Veselka.
Draco cocked a suspicious eyebrow but nodded.

“Seb and Gisele kind of prodded me about what the deal was with your bullying at school. I panicked. I didn’t want Gisele to think you were racist even though I guess that’s closer to the truth, but… it’s not as though I could explain the details, right?” Harry could hear his speech approaching manic levels, and he beseeched his tongue to slow down. Draco abandoned his meal and leaned back in the booth.

“What did you say, Potter? Out with it.”

“Er, well, I sort of told them you were like… one of those closet cases who acts homophobic. You know, cover the truth about yourself and all. I don’t know — Seb threw it out there and it seemed like the easiest thing to say at the time — I couldn’t think of anything else, I’m so, so sorry, but I just — ”

Draco held up a hand, mercifully putting a stop to Harry’s run-on sentence that was approaching no end, and gave him an unexpected smile.

“Okay, it’s weird enough that you helped me out back at the dorms, but why aren’t you screaming at me right now?”

“Because I know how fucking exhausting it is.”

Harry shook his head.

“Coming up with new fairy tales to spin,” Draco clarified. “Would I rather you not tell them anything about me? Of course, but thanks to them seeing our little rivalry dance that night, I know it wasn’t exactly avoidable. I’ve run into about a million problems with the same damn thing. It’s enough to make me want to write a ridiculous backstory on notecards and carry them with me everywhere.”

“Somehow I doubt being the barmy bloke pulling out notecards would make fitting in any easier.”

They both laughed and tucked back into their food.

“Yeah, it’s harder than I thought it would be. Hermione tried to tell me that, but as usual, I wouldn’t listen,” Harry lamented, breaking off a piece of bacon with his fingers.

“What did she think of you coming here?” Draco popped a bit of buttered toast into his mouth.

“She wasn’t thrilled. She helped me get everything in order but scolded me all through it. Thought it was too soon. Thought I was running away. Thought I should stick around and get myself sorted before fleeing the country.” Harry had been doing his best not to think about that. Despite all her help, they hadn’t left things on the best terms before Harry came to New York, and with the exception of a couple brief letters, they hadn’t spoken since he moved. He told himself it was because he was too busy adjusting to school and life in the city, but deep down, he knew he was avoiding confrontation at all costs.


“Well, yeah I guess, but — ”

“You don’t have to justify anything to the person who is literally doing the exact same thing. That’s not why I asked. Personally, I think you’ve earned the right to run if you damn well want to.
Run for the rest of your fucking life. Fuck the Ministry and *The Prophet* and the whole lot of meddlesome buggers who think they’re owed a piece of your life like you’re a damned object going to the highest bidder instead of an actual human being. Getting out of there was the smartest thing you ever did.”

“Draco, that’s… thanks for actually getting it.” It was beyond odd to think that Draco was the only one who understood Harry’s motivation to leave England, but he supposed it made an unlikely bit of sense. After all, Draco’s life was in shambles every bit as much as Harry’s was after the war.

Most people didn’t see it that way. They didn’t understand why Harry would fall apart after achieving what they considered to be a historic victory. It was as though everyone collectively blocked out all memory of the strife that had led up to that battle, the incredible toll Harry had paid with his very soul. It disgusted him to think that he couldn’t control the narrative of his own life.

After the war, it was as if his story belonged to the entire wizarding world. It was a tall tale to be passed on for generations by complete strangers who knew nothing of the cost of it, the bloodshed and the indelible scars that the battles had left, lacerations across his heart that ensured it would never beat in quite the same way it once had. There was nothing he could do about it. At first, he had tried to stop it, naively under the impression that giving interviews might allow him to rein in the spiraling chatter that distorted the truth. But it was the same as it had always been. Talking to the papers only warped things even faster, until the words written barely resembled anything he could claim as his own. It was like trying to clean an oceanic oil spill with the corner of one tiny, useless rag, a futile effort that only made Harry want to start screaming and never stop.

“I’m not sure anyone else does, really.”

“Fuck them. We came here to leave that behind, right?” Draco leaned forward, cigarette between his fingers, wisps of blond hair that hadn’t yet been tamed into the perfect wave falling in his eyes. Harry was beginning to like this version of Draco. He was still an enigma, but Harry finally felt like he might be on the cusp of unraveling that someday.

“Yeah… yeah, I guess we did.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that bit of hurt/comfort there. It's my birthday tomorrow so the weekend is a bit full, but I will be faithfully back with more of this fic on Monday. <3
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday! Thank you all for your lovely comments on the last chapter. I hope you had some relaxation time this weekend, and that your Monday isn't too hellish. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Draco really started to talk, the floodgates opened. Harry suspected he might be starved for someone he could be frank with about his past and the components of his life that he wasn’t allowed to share with Muggles. Despite both of their efforts to escape the magical side of their lives, it was a part of their identities that couldn’t be denied or locked away. Harry wasn’t regretting the decision to take a temporary recess from that world, but it was nice to have an outlet for discussing it when he wanted to.

They still fought, old wounds not quite scabbed over, taking the form of both petty squabbles and darker arguments whose solemn mood lingered in the air for hours afterward. There was simply too much to wade through so they made a pact. Whenever they found the resentment swelling, whenever they knew a storm was brewing that would bubble over into a torrent of vitriol, they would deal with it as it came. They knew they would need space afterward. They wouldn’t always be able to apologize and move forward right away. But if they accepted that it was an inevitability instead of trying to pretend it wouldn’t happen, maybe they had a fighting chance of being real friends. Flawed, extremely untraditional friends, but their own twisted version of friendship nonetheless. Besides, something about the atypical nature of it pleased Harry. It felt true to who they were.

Over the next couple weeks, they caught up on the events of the past year. Draco told him that working with Muggles in his community service had sparked interests he hadn’t known lay dormant within him. Draco admitted he had been stubborn and resistant at first, regurgitating all the beliefs about the Muggle world that had been drilled into him. It wasn’t even that he necessarily believed them at that point, but their world was so foreign to him that it was impossible not to fall back on old fears. In the end, it was the people he’d met that won him over. The way they welcomed him without question was alarming and completed opposed to what he’d been taught to expect. He was enticed by their kindness and the pull of a world where people didn’t know his name and didn’t greet him with dubious looks. Muggles shook his hand without any hint of distaste. The chance to be someone completely new, to be given a clean slate, was irresistible.

About six months into his probation, he knew he didn’t want to return to the wizarding world. It was stifling and devoid of possibilities, a barren wasteland that held no conceivable future for him. His very name was tainted, a stain of disrepute on every syllable that followed him no matter where he went. Being shunned from the place he’d grown up in and loved so dearly was a blow to his ego, but in the end, Draco decided that if they didn’t want him, he didn’t want them either. The Muggle world held a wondrous charm and the promise of a new life. It was also where he’d learned to be more at peace with his sexuality. One of the places where Draco had completed his service hours was a center in London for LGBT runaways, mostly teens, who had fled unsupportive families.

“I met this person, Shea, and they were just so fucking brave. Tough and poised but also like a
parent to all the kids there. They were only sixteen so it wasn’t even like they were much older
than some of the kids who looked up to them, but you could see why they did. One day, we were
smoking outside, and I asked what had happened, how they ended up there. Once they started
talking, it was like… Harry, you can’t imagine how much they’d been through. Passed through the
foster care system from one abhorrent family to the next, this young person, this child, who these
families were supposed to take care of, to protect against everything, and all they did was use them
for a tax break, abuse them, and spit them back out again. I never understood just how fucking
little I knew about that world until I met Shea, you know? Forget the fact that I didn’t know what it
meant to be transgender, I didn’t even know it was an option. I didn’t know about pronouns. I
didn’t know how trapped it must feel to be born into the wrong body, a skin that doesn’t fit you, it
just suffocates you instead, making you want to claw yourself from the inside out until you match.
Then on top of all that, they had to deal with tyrant foster fathers who gave them third degree burns
with the side of a fucking steel kettle full of boiling water.

“This will probably make you want to pummel me, but it was the first time I realized that what
happened to me wasn’t the worst thing to ever happen to someone. So my father was in Azkaban
for life, so I’d lived with a fucking genocidal psychopath ruling over my house, who fucking cares?
Before that, my life was peaches and bloody cream. I had everything I could ever want. Maybe my
parents were misguided. Maybe they didn’t support me when I came out. Maybe my father… I don’t
know sometimes… but he never would have hurt me the way all of those sick fucks hurt Shea. That’s not to say I’m not full of rage about everything that happened to me. I absolutely am. The list of regrets is several miles long. Sometimes I feel it so deeply it’s like a fire
scorching my whole body, but that was the day I realized I could get through it. If Shea could get
through everything life had dealt them and still end up this compassionate person who cared about
all the other runaways, who worried about them first before thinking about what was going to
happen to themselves, than I could survive this.

“After that, I went into research mode. Made Pansy bring me everything she could find. I spent all
the free time I had on the internet and — don’t look at me like that, Potter. There will be no
hilarious anecdotes about the first time I navigated my way around a computer — Anyway, I was
always on there or with my nose in a book, learning about Muggle pop culture, gender identity,
American history, everything I could get my hands on. I wanted to discover everything I’d been
deprived of all these years. My stomach just twisted into knots when I realized how bloody
sheltered I’d been. All of this happening right under my nose, and I was none the wiser. The more
immersed I got, the more my mother and I drifted apart. Her only son, the heir to the Malfoy
fortune and name, dissenting and leaving the wizarding world to live among Muggles? That about
made her heart stop beating altogether.

“At first, she tried to ignore it. She’d change the subject every time we met, but I couldn’t take it
anymore. I didn’t want this stupid tacit agreement that we ignore what was happening to me, how
much I was changing. I was proud of it. I wanted her to see it and accept it, and part of me thought
she would. I knew about the Unbreakable Vow. I knew she didn’t agree with father toward the end,
when things got — I just knew there was a big part of her that was riddled with regret, even if she
didn’t say it. I could see it in her eyes. I knew her. We’d always been close. Even when everything
went to shit, we were close.

“But in the past year… anytime I tried to crack open that wall she’d put up, she’d just brick it up
all over again, making a tighter fortress each time. By the end of that year, it was like we didn’t
know each other at all. We were completely different people. She was more closed off every time,
all the warmth I’d grown up with just evaporated… I feel like she never recovered from the war. I
mean, we’re all going to be recovering for a long fucking time, but she… I don’t know. It was like
someone had taken a knife and carved a big hole in the center of her. Not that she’d admit that.
Malfoys are too proud for therapy. Too proud to admit when we’re damaged and broken. Thank Merlin for my mandated Mind Healer sessions or I’d probably be the same way right now.”

Harry just let him talk. Draco sharing anything with him felt like a gift, and he didn’t want to spoil it by asking questions Draco didn’t want to answer. So he sat attentively and found that he didn’t have to feign interest because Draco was fascinating to listen to. He was much more well-spoken and poised than Harry. It was a trait Harry coveted.

In return, Draco did the same. There was an understanding growing between them, a realization that sometimes they both needed someone to listen to them, and neither of them minded being the one to offer that. It was a mutual desire no one else could fulfill. Harry still preferred the listener role. He wasn’t ready to spill many of the issues that were festering inside him, holding onto an unfounded hope that they would just go away.

Draco told Harry how he’d learned the therapeutic grounding techniques from his Mind Healer. He told Harry about the branch of Mind Healers who used a mixture of Muggle and wizarding techniques and how Pansy had held him many a night in the same way Draco had held Harry.

He moved in with Pansy almost immediately after the trial, a flat in Muggle London that was near the center where Draco volunteered. She was on rocky ground with her family too, the cracks in her relationship with her parents mirroring Draco’s as she abandoned the old pure-blood ideology. As they spent nights crying over the wreckage of their family lives and what it would mean to start over, their bond reached a strength it never had in school.

The Manor was no longer home. Not after Voldemort had taken it over. Every inch of the place reverberated menacing flashbacks. Poison had seeped into its veins, oozing from the cracks in the walls like a living, breathing creature crouching in the shadows, ready to pounce when Draco was at his most vulnerable. Harry’s heart ached for Draco when he described the way his childhood home had become a prison, every happy memory eradicated to leave behind something alien and cold. Harry knew a thing or two about one’s own home feeling like a cage. Slowly and with shaking hands, it was on that day that Harry began to tell Draco the truth about the Dursleys.

No one really knew the full extent of it. Harry didn’t like to burden people with his pain. He internalized mountains of agony, a problem he was beginning to be more acutely aware of than he wanted to be. Hermione and Ron were the two he had confided in the most, although he suspected Molly picked up on more of it than either of them. She had the sharpest maternal instincts of anyone he’d ever met. Keeping a secret from her was nearly impossible. Harry could tell from the way she sneaked seconds onto his plate and piled his bed with extra blankets when he stayed at the Burrow, that she knew how truly awful his home life was. She never directly questioned him about it, only hinted at it, couching her words in support and love. “Are you hungry, Harry? It’s been a long journey. How long has it been since you’ve eaten?” Molly always knew how to handle him with care, and Harry was eternally indebted to Arthur and her for taking on the roles of surrogate parents.

“I can’t fucking believe this!” After intently listening to Harry’s speech, only interrupting a couple times to make sure he understood a detail here and there, Draco had gotten up from Harry’s bed and paced around the room, marching like he could stamp the agitation out of his feet and into the carpet.

“Sorry? I don’t — ”

“You let me ramble on about Shea, and you said nothing! Jesus fucking Christ, Harry! They made you their servant! The way they treated you was — it was — inhumane! God, I wish I could raise Dumbledore from the dead just to scream in his stupid bearded face for letting this happen.”
“Hey, look! You used two Muggle expressions in a row! Correctly!” Harry beamed at him, but Draco continued to scowl. He was so cute like this. Harry knew Draco thought he was intimidating, but it was actually adorable. The crease in his forehead just above his nose, his perfectly shaped eyebrows slanted inwards, his lips that were probably supposed to be pursed but just looked pouty and kiss —

Harry’s heart skipped a beat. He filed that thought away, plunging it deep into the hidden recesses of his mind. His previously grudging acknowledgement of Draco’s beauty had flourished into a more open appreciation over the past couple weeks. Seeing Draco soft and exposed made him all the more attractive. But despite that, Harry had no intention of developing romantic feelings for Draco. They were friends and barely even that. Their relationship was in its infancy, and the last thing Harry needed was to throw a wrench into it.

He pacified himself by remembering that this wasn’t the first time he’d admired the beautiful face of a friend. It didn’t necessarily follow that it would turn into a crush. Merlin knew Harry had given Oliver Wood’s arse many a longing look during Quidditch season, but he never would have gone for it.

“Don’t distract me when I’m ranting! My probation has been over since July, you know. If you need me to hunt them down and give them the hexing of a lifetime, I will gladly offer my services.” Draco crossed his arms and adopted a comically serious expression.

“Not necessary, but thank you. When exactly did you crossover from being annoyed by my existence into risking the wrath of the DMLE for me?” Harry leaned back on his elbows and Draco stopped pacing, perching on the edge of the bed.

“You flatter yourself. I simply enjoy a good takedown of those who deserve my ire.”

“Mmmm, you like me. You, Draco Malfoy, like Harry Potter.”

“Fuck off, you are such a child.” Draco acted exasperated, but Harry sensed the amusement lurking underneath. He was beginning to understand that there was a heavy amount of “the gentleman doth protest too much” when it came to Draco’s behavior.

“Say it.”

“What?! Are you twelve?”

“Saayyy iiittt. Here, I’ll start. I, Harry Potter, quite like Draco Malfoy even though he can be a downright wanker when he wants to be.”

“Fine. I, Draco Malfoy, quite enjoy the company of one Harry James Potter despite the fact he hasn’t combed his hair in five years and is still clinging to the abysmal fashions of the mid-nineties.”

“You give the most generous compliments, Draco.”

“What can I say? It’s a natural gift. Can’t be taught.”

Harry finally got to see the inside of Draco’s bedroom. He’d expected something proper and sparse: expensive, curated pieces of furniture in a minimal, coordinated color scheme that was far too fancy for a dorm. Instead, he was greeted by more band posters and half a wall of Polaroids on which Draco had been obsessively documenting his New York experience, one snapshot at a time. He excitedly took Harry through them, pointing out that each photo had a description and date scrawled across the white border on the bottom. They were in date order from left to right, neat,
evenly spaced rows of six across descending a foot or so from the ceiling. He was hoping to fill it up by next semester, starting a new installment of the collection on the other side of the wall.

"At first, I couldn’t understand the appeal. Who would want a still photo when you could have a moving one? But obviously, I couldn’t have moving pictures all around my room. I mean, I could spell them to hide that, but if I have to do that, I figured why not just lean into the Muggle way? I started taking them whenever I saw anything I liked, a building, an animal running up a tree, street musicians, just anything at all, and I get it now. It’s not that they aren’t special because they don’t move. They are special because they don’t move.

"You can’t choose a duration to take it. You just click the button and you’re given that exact second and nothing else. If you’re taking a picture of a person, and they jerk out of the way or they’re blinking or they make a face, you’re stuck with the result. That’s frustrating as hell but it’s also... strangely beautiful? It captures this second in time, this precise second and nothing else. It tells the story of what happened in that brief moment, when you decided to take the picture. Even though it doesn’t move, it has a life of its own."

Harry’s smile stretched so far across his face as he watched Draco’s eyes sparkle with life. Draco blushed, coughing and changing the subject when he saw how Harry was beaming at him.

"Stop looking all moon-eyed, Potter. It’s just a bunch of pictures.” Draco’s embarrassment over his impromptu confessional moments was always endearing to Harry. It was a shade of Draco he’d never seen before, and it only made him long to uncover more layers.

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They were studying in Harry’s room when he realized Draco was staring at him, a pen clamped between his teeth.

"What?"

"You asked me why I didn't tell you I was gay, but you never told me you were bisexual."

"Oh..." Harry closed his Logic book and set it on the table. "I don't really like making a big announcement, you know? It's easy enough to figure out for the people who spend a lot of time with me. Obviously you did."

Harry had reached his capacity for announcements in the previous year. It had all gone well with the people who mattered (Hermione, Ron, Ron's family), but beyond that circle, he felt protective of his identity. He didn't need to give the court of public opinion more fuel for the fire. Sometimes it felt like lying by omission, and other times it felt like his private life should belong to him and him alone. Ever since he'd arrived in New York, he'd been playing it by ear, talking about it on a case-by-case basis whenever it suited him. He supposed that gave him no right to inquire about Draco's sexuality without offering up his own experience, but as always, his curiosity about Draco outweighed any sense of tact.

"True. Gisele's messages on your whiteboard aren't exactly subtle."

"Tell me about it. If I don't have sex soon, they'll probably get even more humiliating." Harry groaned and slumped in his seat on the couch as he thought about Gisele's latest scrawl: "Green-eyed British hottie seeks tall, dark, and handsome man attached to v stiff cock. Must love
Radiohead and long walks in Washington Square Park." Harry had furiously erased it with his sleeve, hoping no one had seen it yet.

"Why haven't you?" Draco slung his legs over one arm of the chair he was sitting in, resting his neck on the curve of the opposite side.

"Because I'm scared, busy, tired all the time? Can barely keep up with classes let alone figure out how to flirt with a bloke?"

"Didn't keep busy in the past year? I'd wager plenty of wizards wanted to take the Saviour for a spin." Draco waggled his eyebrows, and Harry felt his cheeks and neck go splotchy.

"I wouldn't know. I was too busy sitting in Grimmauld Place trying to forget the world outside existed." An image flashed across Harry's memory: him surrounded by takeaway containers, disheveled and unwashed, Hermione's tears of anger and worry as he fought to explain the anvil that was always bearing down on his chest. Strangely, it was Ron who had told him about the program at NYU. Arthur had heard about it from a friend within the Muggle-Wizarding Relations Department and passed the information onto Ron, assuming Hermione might be interested. When she found out Ron had suggested it to Harry, she was livid.

"He won't even see a Mind Healer here! Now you want to send him halfway across the world and see what happens?!"

Seeing them argue about him like that had brought to mind several unpleasant conflicts from the past and made him want to disappear even more. He didn't want to drive a wedge between them; he would never recover from the guilt. Hanging around and continuing to occupy Hermione's time and thoughts, as though he needed to be taken care of by her and Ron... it was a burden that Harry didn't want to inflict on his friends. It was his responsibility to figure out what he needed, not theirs.

"Where did you go just now?" Draco's soft question jolted Harry back to the present.

"Somewhere I don't want to. Let's go back to talking about boys and their arses."

"Excellent plan." Draco laughed. "You know... I've been told Halloween is sort of like gay Christmas. And we're in New York, which is maybe the best place to experience it. Let's get you that good stiff cock, Harry Potter."

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Midterms finished up that week. Draco gave Harry a little phial of Dreamless Sleep to reset his circadian rhythms, and it seemed to work for the time being. Harry had no idea how well or abysmally he'd done on his papers and exams, but he resolutely decided to cross that bridge when he got to it. He was determined to have fun with his friends (and maybe a gorgeous guy, provided he could quell his awkwardness long enough to properly flirt) on Halloween weekend.

"I can't believe you two. We should banish you from the gay community." Gisele shook her head reproachfully as she examined Harry and Draco. "No costumes?!"

"I'm one half of the cover of Sonic Youth's Goo. That is a costume, and a perfect one at that because I am cold, lazy, and don't want anything marring my beautiful face." Draco gestured to his
all black outfit, complete with dark shades and a long-sleeved jumper. "Now, Harry here has no excuses other than the fact he's been clueless about how to dress since the day I met him."

"I love you, Harry, but I gotta agree with blondie on this." Seb nodded sadly, and Harry huffed.

"Are we going out or are we going to stand here making fun of my outfit all night?"

"Dude, you cannot go to a gay club looking like that. You're hot, but no one is going to notice it if you're covered in that. Is it fair? No, but the queer world is cruel and judgmental, my friend. You gotta play ball if you want to get fucked tonight." Gisele smiled ruefully at him.

Harry looked down at his worn jeans, Pavement t-shirt, and red and black plaid button-down. Maybe she was right. He was comfortable. He felt like himself in these clothes, but they didn't exactly scream take me home and help me lose my gay virginity.

"Come on, let's go to my room. You can borrow something from my closet, Harry."

Harry nodded, and they all followed Seb.

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"By the way, what are you supposed to be?" Gisele had one of her normal, loud-patterned dresses on, but she'd safety pinned a bunch of felt creations onto it: a bulldozer knocking down a building, some luxury high-rise apartments sitting on top of a park, crushing the trees underneath it, a corner bodega being shoved aside to make way for a Starbucks.

"I'm gentrification!" She proudly held out her arms and twirled around Seb's bedroom.

"And how is that any better than what I'm wearing?" Harry laughed.

"One, I'm not trying to get laid tonight. Two, lesbians are snarky bitches who love to lecture you about bell hooks in the dark corner of a bar so it's a whole different system than what you're walking into. Three, this is funny as shit, and I worked hard on these felt patches."

Draco's forehead wrinkled, and Harry wondered if he had any idea what gentrification meant. Harry himself didn't have that great a grasp of it, to be honest.

"She's right." Seb handed Harry a sapphire short-sleeved button-down and dark rinse jeans that looked tighter than anything Harry had ever worn. Seb himself was dressed as Danny Zuko from Grease, a tight white t-shirt with a deep v-neck that showcased his pectorals layered underneath a black leather jacket. Black jeans hugged his arse quiet nicely, and his thick hair was gelled into a perfectly formed pompadour. Compared to Harry, he was aces at this. "There's a different kind of nonsense going on in the lesbian community."

"Tell me about it. After seeing Naomi's hookup conspiracy wall, I was outta there. I need a break from girls."

Harry walked into the bathroom, leaving the door open a crack as he changed so he could still talk.

"What is a hookup conspiracy wall?" he called to Gisele as he shrugged off his jeans.

"Oh, it's this thing lesbians do where they chart who has hooked up with who in their city and put it
on a big board or whatever, drawing lines between it so you can see how ridiculously incestuous
we are. I swear to god, Naomi had her lines connected with red fucking yarn, hence the conspiracy
part."

Harry heard Seb and Draco laughing.

"That's the creepiest thing I've ever heard," Draco said, still laughing.

"Right? I fucking hate it."

Harry shucked off the rest of his clothes and slipped into Seb's jeans. He immediately felt self-
conscious. These trousers left nothing to the imagination. When he finished buttoning the shirt, he
realized it didn't either. The neckline was more plunging than any of Harry's crew neck t-shirts, a
small patch of his chest hair peeking out the top. He had to admit his arms looked nice. It
accentuated what he had rather than highlighting what he didn't. He felt less scrawny and more
pleasingly lean in the shirt, but he walked back out of the bathroom with a self-effacing slouch all
the same.

His cheeks heated as all three of his friends whistled their approval.

"You look hot as fuck, Harry," Seb appraised him. Harry's blush intensified when Draco and Gisele
nodded emphatically. "Now let's see if we can do something about that hair."

"You might want to relent before you start, Seb. The Potter hair has bested many an adversary in its
time." Draco gave Harry a mischievous smile, folding one lithe leg over the other and leaning back
on his elbows on Seb's bed. An outfit that would probably look unremarkable on Harry seemed to
only make Draco even more alluring, every line of fabric clinging to his tall, slim figure. Draco
wore all black far too well. He looked like an arty billboard fashion ad, a black and white photo of
a beautiful man with a smoldering gaze designed to lock eyes with the viewer and make him wild
with desire. Gisele's eyes wandered over to Harry's, following his line of sight to Draco. She tilted
her head, and Harry averted his eyes.

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Seb miraculously shaped Harry's unruly hair into loose, chunky ringlets that framed his face like
they were held in place with charms. Harry was nervous about going into another bar underage, but
Gisele assured him it would be clogged with unchecked masses of people.

"Halloween at a gay bar this popular is too chaotic, and all you boys are too pretty for anyone to
give a fuck. I wish we could go to Limelight instead. The Roxy is so... Chelsea boy, but oh well.
I'm not setting foot into Limelight after the whole Michael Alig thing. Just gives me the creeps."

Harry gave her a puzzled frown, but she waved him off.

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

As usual, she was right. They slipped in undetected among the hordes of people, mostly men, that
were flowing in and out of The Roxy, rivers of sweaty bodies, many of them scantily clad. Harry
was overwhelmed. He'd never seen so much naked (both literally and figuratively) masculinity on
display in one place. It was heavenly, but it terrified him at the same time. He felt painfully
average in this crowd of Adonic men. Everywhere he turned, he was greeted by sculpted muscles
and bare torsos glistening with sweat under the pulsing lights. Some were dressed as sailors or bare-chested angels with fluffy white wings or sported leather harnesses he didn't know what to make of. Some were clad in elaborate costumes that resembled the painstaking level of handiwork he'd seen on the Tisch students. He was relieved to see some weren't dressed up at all and wore more low-key ensembles like what he had on. Maybe he wasn't completely out of place.

He'd never seen men dancing together in public and certainly not like this. Couples were making out against walls, grinding against one another, and it filled Harry with desire and anticipation. It was loud and crowded, the thump of dance music swallowing most attempts at conversation.

“See! Chelsea boys everywhere! Can’t even tell them apart!” Gisele shouted.

Draco leaned in to speak in Harry's ear.

"If it gets to be too much, come find me, and we'll go outside, okay?"

Harry smiled and nodded. Crazy what a difference a couple weeks made. Having someone around who understood how and why crowds bothered him made Harry feel more at ease. So far, he was too distracted by all the tantalizing sights before him to care. Arousal coiled within him as he watched a man bite another man's neck. Merlin, he really was beginning to get tired of celibacy. Coming from someone else's hand instead of his own sounded like the most divine release of tension to cap off this week.

Harry watched Draco's Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed, his elegantly long neck stretching as he took in the scope of the room.

_Don't even go there, Harry James Potter. You're just thinking about him because you haven't met anyone else. Don't lust after your friends._

Gisele motioned like she was drinking from an invisible glass and waved her hand toward the bar. They all nodded and followed her. They lingered around the bar for a bit, gulping their first drinks for liquid courage and then getting another round, Gisele buying everyone a shot of vodka too.

"Happy Halloween, bitches!"

They all clinked their shot glasses together and downed them. Harry and Draco grimaced at each other, the burn of the alcohol singeing Harry's nose and throat.

"Dance with me?" Draco bent his head to ask, his breath tickling Harry's ear. Harry shook his head vehemently.

"I am not drunk enough for that."

"Doesn't matter! You're going out there!" Seb grabbed one of Harry's arms, and Draco grabbed the other. Harry cringed as they hauled him out onto the dance floor. His three friends trapped him, shimmying and bouncing around him in a circle, flashing goofy smiles until he finally gave in and hesitantly started to move around.

"Wooo!" Gisele raised her arms above her head in triumph, and Draco and Seb mimicked the gesture, shouting their approval.

After a while, Harry stopped caring about what he looked like. He was with three brilliant friends who adored him, and he was enveloped by a sea of incredibly sexy men gyrating all around him. Who cared if he couldn't dance for shit and didn't know the first thing about talking to men?
It didn't hurt that Draco was irresistible to watch too. He was so loose and free like this, tossing his blond hair back as he danced, far more naturally confident than Harry. It made Harry feel more comfortable letting go too.

After dancing for a while, Harry headed back to the bar for another drink and to cool off a bit. The October chill certainly didn't leak past the doors of The Roxy. It was humid with the relentless press of bodies and strobe lights.

As he sipped his gin and tonic, he scanned the room. His friends had dispersed. Gisele was dancing with a small group of men and women, and Seb was flush against a very handsome, shirtless blond man. As for Draco — oh — Draco had apparently found himself a dance partner too. Harry watched as a skinny, purple-haired boy nibbled on Draco's neck. He had Draco pinned to a wall, and Draco's head was tilted back, his eyes closed as he clutched at the bloke's shoulders. Harry's mouth went dry, cold enveloping his warm skin. He took a hearty drink from his glass, tearing his eyes away from the pair. Harry shook his head. Why should it bother him to see Draco with another man? After all, wasn't that sort of why they were here?

"If he doesn't see it, that's his loss." Harry's head shot up to meet the source of the voice next to him. His gaze met hazel eyes in a handsome face with a jawline that could cut glass, lush waves of thick, dark auburn hair falling just below his ears. The man looked to be only a few years older than Harry. He had a come-hither smile that made Harry's blood pump thickly between his legs.

"W-what do you mean?" he eventually croaked out. He could feel himself blinking stupidly. He probably looked every bit as young and clueless as he felt.

"Your blond friend over there." The man indicated Draco with a swift, discreet wave of his hand.

"Oh, no! I don't — he's not — " Harry fumbled to articulate that he was not interested in Draco but only succeeded in making himself look even clumsier.

"Babe, you're in a gay bar. If you can't admit it here, where can you?" The man picked up his own drink and took a sip, never taking his hungry eyes off Harry.

"It's not that it's... it's just complicated with him. We're friends. I don't see him like that." Harry fiddled with the cocktail napkin beneath his glass, the thin paper ripping from the condensation pooled below it. He was rapidly succumbing to the realization that a man was flirting with him, and he had no idea what to do with that information.

"Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me. Dangerous to fall for a guy who looks like that though. They're allways trouble." He scooted closer to Harry until their forearms touched, and searing heat ripped through every inch of Harry's skin.

"You have no bloody idea, Harry thought. But at the same time, the problem of that surprising spark he'd felt for Draco was taking a backseat in his mind's priorities. There was a flesh and blood man in front of him right now. A very good-looking man who made Harry's blood sing and was looking at him like he wanted to see what else he could do to him, given the chance.

"You're gorgeous enough to have anyone you want tonight, and there are plenty of someones to have here. His loss if he doesn't realize that."

"I-I really, severely doubt that's true." Harry chuckled nervously and smiled into his drink, taking a steadying sip.
“Oh you adorable baby gay, they’re gonna eat you alive out here. How’d you even end up at The Roxy tonight? You don’t seem ready for all this." The man gestured toward the masses of bodies writhing on the dance floor.

"I'm not, but my friends... I go to NYU, midterms are over, I've been really stressed. They thought it would be good for me to relax."

"I go to Columbia. Grad school. Pretentious philosophy student. I spend my days writing overwrought academic garbage so I can be destitute and hang that framed degree on the cardboard box that's waiting for me after graduation."

Harry laughed and nodded.

"I do hear it's not the best major for finding a job. I don't understand the appeal. Logic makes me want to gouge my eyes out."

"Ooohhh, you don't want to do that. Drop the class, save those perfect eyes." He stroked across Harry's cheek, his thumb a mere inch from the corner of Harry's mouth. Harry had an overpowering urge to dart his tongue out and lick it. "What's your name, shy boy from NYU?"

"Harry."

"I'm Luke. Want to dance? Maybe make that blond guy you most certainly don't like at all jealous?"

"Okay, but I have to warn you, I'm a terrible dancer."

"I promise you I don't care about that one bit, Harry." Luke stepped away from the bar and extended a hand. Feeling like he was under a hypnotic trance and drawn to the promises this bloke's magnetic smile held, Harry folded his hand in Luke's. His palm was warm, strong, and bigger than Harry's own. He guided him onto the floor, positioning them so Harry's back was to Draco. There was a fair amount of distance between them and Draco, but Harry knew Draco would be in full view if he decided to turn around.

Harry didn't know where to put his hands. He'd never danced with a man, and even when he'd danced with girls, it had been that tightly choreographed, antiquated dancing of the Yule Ball. Luke gave him a sympathetic smile and gently placed Harry's arms around his shoulders. Luke's own arms wrapped around Harry's waist, one of his hands flat against the small of Harry's back. The heat of it made him feel secure, anchored and held so safely. He wondered if this was how girls felt when they danced with boys, adolescent hands snaking around their blossoming waists. Luke slowly pressed closer until their hips were flush, and Harry gasped.

"Is this okay?" Luke asked, leaning in close to Harry's ear, his smoky drawl making Harry's knees weak.

"Yes." Harry nodded jerkily. It was more than okay. It was absolutely sublime. He mirrored Luke's movements as his hips began to sway. They rocked into one another, with one another, merging into a singular rhythm. Their pace was slower than the music, but Harry barely noticed.

In fact, the music seemed to fade into the background altogether. Everything was quieter, more languid, the crowds around them just a blur. He was too focused on finally learning all the sensations of a man's body against his, the strength, the heat, the contours of muscle underneath his fingertips. Harry instinctively pulled him closer, his arms wrapping tighter around Luke's upper back. Luke was a few inches taller than him; Harry's chin reached the height of his shoulder. He
rested it there, nosing into Luke's neck. His scent was intoxicating, cologne that smelled like sandalwood and something sweet that he couldn't quite name mingled with a sweaty musk that was so very male, so antithetical to anything he'd ever smelled on Ginny or Cho. Harry sank his fingers into Luke's hair, and the man sighed happily, tightening his grip on Harry's waist.

"God, you feel so good." Harry hadn't intended to let that slip out, but Luke didn't seem to mind. He kissed Harry's ear and ran his hands up and down his back.

"So do you, Harry." His name sounded so sensual on Luke's tongue, and a surge of arousal ran through his chest straight down to his cock. Harry suddenly became aware of how hard he was. Normally he would have been embarrassed by it, but the way Luke was sliding against him, careful but insistent... he doubted he minded. "Oh, your aloof twinkie's paying attention now."

Harry started to pull away, but Luke held fast.

"No no, don't turn your head. You don't want to let him know that you know. Not yet. It's a dance. You have to follow the right steps if you want it to work."

Harry didn't think he really wanted Draco to notice. Having a fleeting thought of attraction was one thing. The thought of acting on it was another thing entirely. As rash as Harry could be, even he knew it sounded like the worst, most careless idea. Hooking up with a friend was a quick way to guarantee a disastrous fallout. It wasn't remotely worth the risk just for one night of sex.

"I don't care if he notices. We really are just friends."

"Good." Luke swept his tongue along the edge of his ear, and Harry shivered under the contact, a soft moan escaping his lips. Harry pulled back to find Luke's eyes half-lidded and lustful. Seeing a man look at him like that awakened something primal within him. He imagined what their bodies would look like naked, limbs winding together as he bent Harry over a bed and fucked him. He wondered what his cock looked like, how it would feel in his hand, if it was heavy, if it was thicker than his own. As Luke licked his lips, Harry wondered if his eyes betrayed every dirty thought running through his mind right now.

He leaned forward and Luke met him in the middle, their lips crashing together. It was soft and forceful all at once, Luke's tongue wasting no time in parting Harry's lips. The moment their tongues connected was electric. Harry was lost in the kiss, drowning in the sensation of a flat chest against his own, large hands cradling his body, the barest scratch of stubble across his chin. The kiss deepened into something ravenous, and the Gryffindor in Harry roared out of dormancy as he slid his hands down Luke's back and into his pockets. When Luke bucked his hips, Harry squeezed his arse and oh dear god what a fucking earthquake worth waiting nineteen years for. The way it felt in his hands, the friction of their clothed erections rubbing together, it only made him regret that he couldn't Apparate them to his bedroom straight away. He broke the kiss and relished the ragged breath Luke released, the way his hazel eyes pierced Harry so intently.

God, it felt good to be wanted.

"Take me home."

"Are you sure?" Luke's eyes narrowed, evaluating his sincerity, a hand carding through Harry's hair.

"Oh, I'm absolutely fucking sure. Just — " Harry craned his neck and spotted Gisele and Seb, both dancing with different people now. "Let me tell my friends I'm leaving and we'll go?"
"Okay. Meet you outside, babe." Luke smiled and gave Harry a soft kiss before heading to the club's exit. Harry looked at the spot on the wall where Draco had been, but it was empty now. He jogged over to his friends, but before he could get a word out, they started clapping.

"Get it, boy! I told you this would be the night!" Gisele wrapped Harry in a loving hug, and as she released him, Seb beckoned Harry closer.

"Okay, so I just realized I have no idea what you know about being safe so CONDOMS, HARRY. ALWAYS CONDOMS! I mean, I'm guessing you're not gonna jump right into anal, but STILL. I would be a bad dad-friend if I didn't say that." Seb gave him a very serious look, and Harry nodded.

"You're the best, Seb." Harry hugged him and fought his way through the swarms and back out onto the pavement.

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Luke hailed them a cab, catching one just as it was dropping a drunken group a block down from The Roxy.

"Halloween in New York is a clusterfuck. This is fate right here. The transportation gods have smiled upon us," Luke said as they slid into the backseat. They were quiet for a few moments as they drove through the crowded streets. It was a busy night, drunken revelry spilling onto the streets at every turn.

"Can I confess something?"

"In that British accent, you can confess anything you want."

"American blokes really do love it, don't they? You're so easy like that," Harry said with a laugh.

"Mmm, only when they look like you." Luke moved closer, bracing his arm around the back of the seat, his hand dipping down to caress Harry's shoulder.

"I've never done this before," Harry whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" Luke asked in a jocular tone, his grin widening. Merlin, he had a beautiful smile. Harry was dying to feel those plush lips again.

"I don't know. I guess it feels less embarrassing if I whisper it. I just... I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. Do I talk? Do I not talk? I don't know the hookup rules."

"We can do or not do whatever you want. I'm flexible. Just because we're not going to be boyfriends after this doesn't mean we can't talk."

Harry paused for a beat and considered this.

"I don't really fancy talking tonight." He surged forward and claimed Luke's mouth, not breaking the kiss until the irate driver tapped on the glass to let them know they'd arrived.

Chapter End Notes
I *almost* posted two chapters this morning, but I guess I'm just enjoying keeping you in suspense a little too much? :P Also, reminder that this fic is 130k+ so don't necessarily lose faith if you see an issue/plot point crop up that hasn't been revisited just yet. I mean, the kind of "aaaahhhh I'm freaking out wondering if X is going to happen?!!?" flailing is of course ALWAYS welcome. I don't want to discourage that at all! I'm more just saying this as reassurance for y'all hehe. :D *zips lips*
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I wish you all a lovely Thursday, friends, and I hope you'll come to scream at me (in a good way) about this chapter. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you want a drink?"
"No, I'm good."

Luke smiled and shook his head as he closed the distance between them.

"You are so fucking cute. I'm glad I didn't stay home tonight."

Harry bit his lip as Luke ran his hands along Harry's sides. His apartment was gorgeous. Were Harry in the mood to ask questions, he might have asked how a grad student afforded a place with marble countertops in the kitchen, but he didn't feel up to small talk.

When they first walked in, Harry had paused to wonder if he was being too hasty. Perhaps he shouldn't rush this. It wasn't like him to get picked up at a bar, but then he had remembered Ginny’s poignant eyes as he moved above her, averting his gaze and stricken with guilt over how uncomfortable he was, how it didn’t mean for him what it meant for her. Suddenly, emotions felt like a sticky, messy spider web he wanted no part of. Tonight, Harry just wanted skin on skin, and he determinedly gave himself permission to crave that and have it without shame. It was about time he wandered out of his own head for a few hours.

"Me too," Harry breathed, his words cut off by an ardent kiss that tested his ability to stand once again.

"Come on," Luke whispered, taking Harry's hand and heading through the high-ceilinged living room and down a hallway.

Fuck. He was in a bedroom. A man's bedroom. A strange man's bedroom. Yet try as he might to muster some notion of self-reproach or flight instinct, the only thing coursing within him was a deep yearning that sizzled like a live wire. Luke captured his lips again and backed him toward the bed, Harry’s thighs meeting the edge of the mattress. Momentum carried him backward until he was lying on the comforter, the length of Luke's body covering his. Pinpricks of pleasure shot up and down his skin, every point of contact alight with a forceful energy that made Harry feverish.

Luke sat up, straddling Harry's hips, and lifted his t-shirt over his head before starting on the buttons of Harry’s shirt.

Harry let himself be undressed, content to have someone taking his clothes off, someone who was grinding against him and watching him with an intensity that made his desire unmistakable. Harry often felt like he'd never grown out of his underfed, ill-fitting form. He knew he'd filled out since the war, but he was still a bit lanky and knobbly-kneed, wiry in a way that was awkward instead of willowy like Draco. But under Luke's heated gaze, his palms skating across Harry's chest, his breath turning to pants and sighs of longing as he explored his skin, Harry felt sexy and so very
Luke’s chest was broader than Harry’s own. He absently wondered if he was broader everywhere else too, and before he could second-guess himself, Harry began working at Luke's flies. Luke returned the favor, unfastening Harry’s jeans and pulling them down like he couldn't wait another second. Harry placed his glasses on the nightstand and lifted up enough to shrug off his button-down, tossing it to the floor. He took off his shoes and shimmied out of the rest of his clothes.

When he turned back around, Luke was naked, his thick cock hanging heavy between his legs. The only illumination was the yellow light spilling in from the hallway through the open door, but it was enough for Harry to take in the enticing sight. His cock was straight and red at the tip, hard and full and waiting for Harry. Dark hair covered his sturdy thighs, and Harry wanted to bury his face in-between them, nuzzle in the crease where Luke’s thigh met that soft area next to his cock, inhale his scent and feel the coarse hair mingling with delicate skin. His pubic hair was shorn close to the skin, and Harry involuntarily covered his own wild, untamed nest of dark curls. Grooming wasn't something he'd ever given much thought. He made a mental note to ask Seb about it the next time they had a talk about the ins and outs of queer culture. He'd been instrumental in informing Harry about gay etiquette, patiently answering all of his questions and always laughing with, never at, him.

If Luke noticed Harry's total lack of grooming, he didn't mention it. He only crawled back to him, pressing their naked bodies together. Harry moaned, struggling to memorize every single nuance of what he was feeling. He didn't want to forget any of it. The friction of their cocks sliding together was wonderful, and if Luke's clothed chest against his had made Harry's eyes roll back in his head, well... he wasn't sure he could describe how much better it felt without barriers. Luke's lips trailed down Harry's jaw and neck, and Harry arched off the bed, baring his neck for the taking, cascading his hands down Luke’s arms, his back, his arse, everything he could reach. When Luke sucked on a pebbly nipple, Harry writhed beneath him, the warm, wet swipe of his tongue teasing Harry until he thought would come just from that.

"What do you want?" Luke's throaty whisper shot another thread of arousal through Harry's core. Merlin, he'd never been this turned on in his entire fucking life.

"Mmm, your hands, your mouth, anything," Harry panted. There was a small voice inside him that knew agreeing to "anything" wasn't the wisest, but forming a coherent thought was impossible.

"My choice? God, where the fuck did you come from?" Luke gave him a wolfish grin and continued his path down Harry's torso, teasing lips and tongue leaving sparks of pleasure that made Harry's moans grow louder and more desperate. "I want your cock in my mouth."

Harry didn't have any time to think about that possibility before Luke was licking along the underside. Harry sank his fingers into his hair. It was silkier than he thought it would be. He tugged on it, overcome with the need to grasp onto something because Luke had just taken the head in his mouth, sucking and moaning around his mouthful in a way that made Harry's brain short-circuit.

He's sucking your cock he's sucking your cock oh fucking Godric, Merlin, and Jesus Christ he's — oh —

Harry whined and dug his nails into Luke's back as he swallowed him down to the root and pulled back up again, tonguing at the slit as he reached down to gently massage Harry's balls. It'd been so long since anyone had gone down on him, and frankly, rife with complications and twisted dilemmas as it was, he didn't want to think about those circumstances. He was thankful to replace all of that distorted wistfulness with this.
Harry opened his eyes, unaware that he'd squeezed them shut, and fixed his gaze on Luke's head bobbing up and down, Harry's cock disappearing inside that velvet heat only to emerge again a second later, dripping with saliva and precome. Fuck, Harry wanted to come. He wanted to come so fucking badly, wanted to feel his cock pulsing inside the tight seal of Luke's mouth as he shot down his throat. At the same time, he didn't want it to be over, wanted to make it last and last until he was tortured by his own longing and wrung dry of every speck of lust, spent and used.

Fuck, that word made an impact as it skidded across Harry's mind. Used.

He really wanted to make Luke come too. What would it feel like to hold his erection in hand, stroke him faster and harder until he was clawing at Harry's shoulders, whimpering his name, and splashing his release all over Harry's hand? Oh my god — that image in Harry's head, he needed to see it, he needed to —

Harry's stomach muscles grew taut, his arse clenching as he felt his orgasm about to crest, the wave coming over him before he had time to really register that it was happening.

"Oh — ah — I'm gonna — fuck I'm gonna come — " Luke didn't pull back, didn't wank Harry off to finish him. Instead, he only sucked harder, Harry's cock sliding in and out of his mouth at a pace that had Harry moaning so loudly, he was sure he woke the whole apartment complex as he started to come, his hands fisting the sheets to keep from holding onto Luke too hard. Luke kept Harry in his mouth, suckling softly as Harry came down, stimulating his over-sensitive cock in a way that straddled the line of too much and just right.

When he finally pulled off, he kissed his way up Harry's stomach and chest, meeting his mouth eagerly. Harry tasted remnants of himself, and was surprised to find it only turned him on and made his thoughts drift back to Luke's neglected cock. He wanted to touch him so badly, but he felt like he was floating out to sea without a life jacket. Harry hoped Luke would guide him patiently. What if he was immediately frustrated by how green Harry was? Hopefully enthusiasm counted for something.

"What do you want?" Harry tried to keep the quaver out of his voice, willing the question to come out sensual and demanding.

"I want to come while I rim you. Sit on my face."

Wow. That was... Harry didn't even know what to do with that.

"Um, how do you... can you kind of just put me where you want me?"

"You sure? If you're not up for it — "

"No, I just... I've never done it like that." Harry had never been rimmed at all. He'd thought about it. Oh, but he'd thought about it, wanking furiously in his bed or in the shower, slipping a finger inside himself and wondering what a tongue could do to him, what it would feel like laving against the most private part of him. Harry knew there was no way in hell that his false confidence was believable; he was certain his inexperience was obvious, but Luke didn't call him out on it. He only smiled a flirtatious, appreciative smile and moved to lie on his back.

"Come up here. Legs around my chest. Face away from me." Luke patted his pecs, and Harry took a deep breath. He did as he was told, relieved that Luke wouldn't see the nerves written on his face. What the fuck had he gotten himself into? Harry nestled his knees around either side of Luke. His feet ended up around Luke's shoulders, and his face reddened as it dawned on him what a vulnerable position this was. Nevertheless, Harry didn't want to turn down this opportunity. Thank
Merlin for the dim lights. Firm hands wrapped around his thighs, gradually lowering him until — oh fuck — the sound that erupted from Harry's throat when Luke's tongue met his entrance was needy and raw, and he was endlessly glad no one else was around to hear it.

Harry felt more than heard the pleased hum Luke made in response, and a dizzying carnal surge ripped through him as Luke started licking at the furled skin in earnest, lapping at Harry like he was something delicious to be savored. Harry collapsed forward, bracing himself on his forearms as they landed on either side of Luke's waist. It was only then that Harry remembered he was being a selfish partner. It wasn't that he didn't retain his interest in making Luke feel good, in learning how to draw out glorious moans from a man, coaxing him with the power of his hands and mouth. Harry was just awash in the pleasure of everything that was happening. It was hard to think about anything other than Luke's tongue opening him up, Luke's hands prying apart his cheeks as he licked, applying more pressure every time.

Luke's cock was only inches from Harry's face now, and he rose on the bed, planting one palm down and wrapping the other around his erection. It looked perfect, swollen and weeping in his hand, a subtle throb running through it, a reminder of the blood pumping inside this very real man beneath him. He started to stroke up and down, a careful but tight grip as he built up a pace, starting slow, the way he liked to touch himself, teasing and sliding his thumb over the slit. Luke let out a guttural groan behind him, his hips lifting up marginally, fucking the air in barely noticeable thrusts. Luke's tongue breached him, and Harry cried out, the sensation unlike anything he'd ever known. He wanked Luke faster, and more beads of pearly fluid leaked out of his cock. Harry was scared but curious. Cautiously, he bent down and licked across the head. The fluid was salty, and Harry added that taste to the growing list of proclivities he never knew he had.

Luke moaned and kept laving across Harry's entrance with a fervor that made Harry glad he was already on his knees. Harry kept stroking the shaft, and started working the head of Luke's cock with his lips and tongue, sliding it into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it over and over again. He had no idea if he was doing it right, but dear god, he loved the way it felt. The flesh was so smooth, and the head kept dripping more precome that Harry readily lapped up. He was mindful of his teeth, afraid to ruin everything with an accidental scrape. Harry lifted his other hand off the bed and ran it down Luke's muscled thigh, tracing the dips and curves of his leg. Luke pulled away from Harry's entrance and moaned, the sound uncoiling a deep-seated lust within Harry, motivating him to suck harder and take him deeper, still working the rest of his cock with his hand. Luke peppered kisses along Harry's arse and the backs of his thighs and started whispering encouragement.

"Yes, fuck that's good. Make me come."

Yes yes, I want to. I want to see it. Please, Harry thought, redoubling his efforts, his hand and mouth furious blurs on Luke's cock, his lips aching from the stretch of taking him down as far as he could manage. It wasn't long before Luke's body went tight as a bow string beneath him.

"I'm about to come," Luke confessed in a rush of syllables before sealing his mouth over Harry's entrance again, truly fucking him with his tongue now. Harry pulled off his cock with a string of curses, the spine-tingling pleasure making him want to grind back on Luke's face. He kept stroking his cock but didn't bring his mouth back down. He wasn't sure if he was ready for that. He hoped Luke wouldn't mind coming in Harry's hand instead. Harry, for his part, was dying to see it.

Luke came in thick ropes, come running down Harry's fingers, some of it hitting Harry’s chest, Luke’s tongue still pressed inside him the entire time.

Harry raised the fingers of his free hand and then froze, shaking his head and setting aside the
impulse to wandlessly clean them both.

*You are a fucking disaster sometimes, Harry. You almost ended your first hookup with a MACUSA citation.*

Harry rolled off Luke, careful not to end up putting a foot in his face although he wasn't sure how much that mattered when someone had already had their tongue up your arse. He held his hand away from his body, not wanting to burst the afterglow by bringing attention to the mess but also not wanting to sit in bed with come all over him.

"Er..." Harry looked around the room.

"Bathroom's just down the hall on your right," Luke answered before Harry could form the question.

Harry got up and padded down the hall, fumbling for the light-switch as he entered the room. After the dark of the bedroom, the bright bathroom lights were jarring. Harry squinted as his eyes adjusted, turning on the lavatory and rinsing his hands in the large porcelain basin. He wiped the small trail of white off his chest with some toilet tissue, filling a cupped hand with a scoop of water and washing away any sticky residue.

He looked at his reflection and smiled at the lovely, sex-mussed sight he made. His cheeks were rosy, his lips reddened from use, all traces of the meticulous styling Seb had bestowed upon his hair gone in favor of an exaggerated version of his usual disarray.

As he strode back to the bedroom, apprehension set in. This part was somehow scarier than fucking a man he didn't know. At least when they were locked in passion, they both knew it was a mutual want. But what happened now? Did Harry stay the night? Did he leave without so much as a word?

"My turn." Luke smiled, brushing a hand over Harry's shoulder as he came in, and walked past him toward the bathroom. Harry grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and fiddled with them but didn't put them on, sitting down on the edge of the bed, his heart racing for different reasons than it had been only minutes ago.

As Luke entered the room, Harry realized yet another worrying truth: he was still naked and somehow hard again. Luke noticed immediately and smirked, licking his lips lasciviously.

"When did that happen?"

"Oh... somewhere around the time you rimmed me within an inch of my life." Harry laughed, pleased with himself for actually being able to banter. Apparently, his orgasm hadn't totally fried his brain.

"My absolute pleasure. Lie back and let me take care of that." Luke got onto the bed, and the way he crawled toward Harry like a slinky panther was an image Harry hoped to keep in his head for a long time.

"Oh, you don't — you don't have to if you — " Harry was silenced by Luke's lips on his. His hands skimmed Luke's chest and flat stomach, touching everything he hadn't taken his time with during the zealous rush of round one. Seb always talked about gay men like they were voracious beasts ready to devour, brimming with endless reserves of sexual energy. Gisele always argued against him, citing it as a tired stereotype that was really just restricted to a very specific type of young gay man and perpetuating it did no one any favors. Harry didn't know which was true — Harry didn't know much of anything — but he silently thanked all the deities of every religion for the chance to
Luke kissed Harry as he wanked him off, covering his collarbone and chest with tender lips. Harry's hands were running over every part of him, squeezing every last drop out of this night. Who knew when he'd get the chance again? Harry didn't fancy going to bars looking for a new man every weekend. Then again, maybe this night would awaken him the way admitting his bisexuality had. Maybe he would need to take, take, take as though he couldn't get enough. He wasn't very well acquainted with that part of himself. He'd never been allowed to be. For now, he wanted to absorb every facet of every minute, filing it away for the next time he found himself alone in bed, reaching for his cock and tugging himself to a quick release, biting his lip and groaning at the memory.

After his second trip to the bathroom, Harry decided to just take the gamble. After all, Luke knew he was a novice. Harry had blatantly told him as much, and while he hadn't asked him to clarify, Harry was sure he knew what he'd meant.

"Do you want me to go? Like I said, I'm not really up on the protocol."

"I don't know what to make of you, Harry." Luke chuckled and pushed a hand through Harry's mop of black hair.

"I don't know what to make of me either." Harry flashed what he hoped was a charming smile.

"It's late. Stay. I'll call you a cab in the morning, okay?"

"Okay."

It wasn't until they were under the covers, Luke's breathing settling into the rhythm of deep slumber beside him, that Harry began to worry about what nightmares might befall him in a stranger's bed.
hopelessly new in town, but do you know what's the best way —”

"The promise of the cab wasn't an empty one. Sit. Have some coffee. I'll call."

***

Thankfully, Sunday morning didn't seem to be the busiest transit time so Harry only had to wait half an hour for the cab. Most of it was spent nodding along mindlessly as Luke talked to him about Heidegger, the complicated German philosopher who wrote the book he was reading at the moment. Why on Earth he thought Harry, after a night of great sex, would want to converse about tedious academic areas that held no interest for anyone but those crazy enough to devote their lives to studying them, was a mystery.

Harry politely held his tongue, biding his time until he had to go downstairs to wait for the cab. Luke was nice enough, and the cab was a thoughtful gesture. They just didn’t have too terribly much in common.

When Harry returned to his dorm, it was around one o'clock. He wondered if Draco was home and up for swapping stories. Harry had never had anyone to gossip about sex with until now. The fact that he'd been successful last night took the sting out of seeing Draco necking with a beautiful boy, and that reinforced Harry's notion that his jealousy hadn't really been about Draco. He simply wanted someone too, and dear god, had he gotten that.

Bypassing his own rooms, Harry walked down and knocked on Draco's door. He heard a dramatic groan of protest from within and some surly muttering. All he could make out was "Sunday," "day of bloody rest," and "wanker."

Draco opened the door, and Harry laughed at how enchantingly disheveled he looked. There was something disarming and special about being allowed to see Draco with his hair out of place, Draco spooning Fruit Loops into his mouth in the dining hall, or, Harry's personal favorite, Draco wearing absolutely ridiculous pajamas that were probably a far cry from whatever bespoke, rich fabric absurdities he'd grown up with. Today's pajama bottoms bore a bevy of penguins in winter hats, scarves and little jumpers. Some of the penguins were ice-skating and some held steaming mugs of hot cocoa. When Harry had called him out on this unlikely penchant, Draco had simply said, "Shove it up your arse, Potter. I like being comfortable."

"Potter, why are you bothering me on a Sunday morning? You know I hate —"

"It's not morning, anymore. Have a late night?" It was true; Draco detested being disturbed on Sundays. It was his day to keep to himself and spend it however he liked. He generally didn't venture out with Harry or anyone else, preferring to while away the hours in solitude. Draco claimed it was a necessary reset button he had to push, and Harry didn't question it. However, he figured today would be an exception considering the exciting news he had to share.

"Wait..." Draco looked him up and down, his irascible facial expression morphing into a sly grin. "Last night’s clothes? Magpie’s nest hair in even more deplorable condition than usual? You got fucked last night."

Harry beamed and shrugged coyly.

"Harry Potter, you little minx."
"Did you seriously just call me a little minx?! Are you ninety years old?"

"Because you hit such a special milestone last night, I'm not going to dignify that insult with a comeback. Meet me in the hall in ten minutes. Let’s get Seb and Gisele. We're having a victory meal at the Waverly. I'll buy."

"Oh, thank Merlin's tits. That man wanted to feed me an egg white omelet and tomatoes."

Draco wrinkled his nose and stuck out the tip of his tongue.

"Safe to say there won't be a repeat performance?"

"Probably not, but the first performance was well worth it."

"Can you believe we're about to chat about your first time in a man's bed? Rita Skeeter would chew her left arm off to be a fly on the wall for this."

"Alert The Prophet, and I truly will find a way to send you to Azkaban, Draco."

***

"Harry had gay sex last night!" Harry shrank into himself, trying to make his posture as diminutive as possible when Draco shouted the words outside of Seb's dorm room. Someone down the hall responded with a wolf whistle and a hearty "Woooo!" while someone else yelled, "Fuck yeah, Harry! Get it!" Harry thudded his forehead against the wall, praying for literally anyone to come and Apparate him away.

"Say it a little louder, why don’t you?" Harry hissed. "I don’t think the entire student body heard you."

"Damn, I am so proud of you, Harry." Seb pretended to wipe a sentimental tear from his cheek.

"Our little boy is all grown up," Draco intoned in possibly the worst New York accent attempted by anyone in the history of time. He pinched Harry's cheek.

"Ow! Christ, Draco, I think this version of you is way scarier than Bully Draco ever was."

"Quit being so dour. Did we switch personalities overnight?" Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to Seb. "I'm taking our boy who has now become a man out for a victory breakfast. Complete with juicy details, of course. You in? Should we get Gisele?"

"I am 100% in, but Gisele has lunch with her dad. So it looks like it’s just the boys who like boys."

"Don't. I swear to god if you start — "

With the most evil smile, Draco launched into a terrible, off-key version of the Blur song, "Girls and Boys."

Harry turned to Seb, trying to communicate his exasperation.

Please put me out of my misery right this second.
"I get the feeling that if I don't join this breakfast, it's gonna end in bloodshed."

Harry looked at Draco, who was now launching into his fifth round of *Girls who are boys/Who like boys to be girls/Who do boys like they're girls/Who do girls like they're boys.*

"Seb, I haven't the foggiest idea why you'd think that..."

***

"So... has anyone ever used their tongue on um..." Harry blushed and stopped talking as the waiter set down their plates. They all thanked him, and then Draco interjected.

"I know your experience is next to none, but surely you knew about blowjobs before last night, Potter." Although they were comfortable calling each other by their first names now, Harry noticed they both still used surnames from time to time. It wasn’t biting anymore. It had taken on the playful quality of friends who liked to take the piss every now and then, imbued with a fondness that Harry rather liked.

"Of course! I’m not a total moron. No, I meant like on your... your arsehole?" Harry went completely scarlet at that and dropped his head on the table.

"Oooohhh! Damn, you were productive as fuck last night, Harry!" Seb ruffled his hair, and Harry reticently raised his eyes.

"Don’t be embarrassed about it. It’s called rimming, and it’s bloody brilliant." Draco's pupils dilated, his eyes going dreamy and his cheeks coloring pink as he presumably reminisced about past encounters Harry wasn’t aware of. Merlin, his life was surreal these days.

"Maybe we need to put you on a steady diet of gay porn. Get you informed and ready for next time." Seb winked and tucked into his waffles.

"No, thank you," Harry scoffed, dousing his eggs with salt and pepper. He’d dabbled but ultimately wasn’t fond of most porn. Maybe it was boring to rely on your imagination, but in Harry’s opinion, you could make literally anything happen in your head so why not do that? “And I knew about rimming, I just... I don’t know... I guess I didn’t expect it.”

"Oh don’t be such a prude, Harry. Everyone watches it," Draco said matter-of-factly, taking a sip of coffee.

"They absolutely do not!"

"They do. Whether or not you like it, it's the truth." Harry shifted his gaze from Draco to Seb, who nodded his agreement.

"Even Granger and Weasley. Hell, they're probably watching it together right now. Maybe it's how they keep the spice in their relationship."

Harry spat out a mouthful of water, spraying his plate of pancakes and eggs with a fine mist. Draco laughed so hard, he started wheezing, and then Harry relented, chuckling as he elbowed Draco in the ribs. He was sure he would need to bleach his brain to expel that unsavory image, but a spirited Draco was so much better than the brusque Draco of yore. Now, when he was a git (which he most
"I guess it’s not really a good idea to learn from that though. Porn sex is the least realistic sex," Seb lamented, taking another bite of waffle saturated in syrup.

"True. If I got railed like some of those twinks, I’d be torn clean in half — "

"Oh god, stop before I vomit these eggs up! What is wrong with you two?"

Seb and Draco shared a laugh before calming down long enough to resume grilling Harry for all the salacious specifics of his night.

"All right all right, back on track. So he rimmed you? Did you like it?"

"Yeah, he went down on me first, and I came and..." Harry looked around to make sure no one was listening. Everyone seemed too involved in their own conversations to notice, but he was reserved about having this talk in public. Harry lowered his voice and continued. "And I asked him what he wanted — "

"That's good. There's nothing worse than fucking a guy who doesn't give a shit if you get off. I should know." Seb raised his eyebrows, and Harry thought back to his admission about chasing straight men.

"Or when they want to do something really specific and boring that only pertains to their weird preferences." Draco groaned and lit a cigarette.

"Oh my gooood, yes! If you want someone to lick your nipples while you jerk off, call a fucking hooker. I don't have time for that. I don't want any part of it." Harry let out a slow breath. For the umpteenth time, he felt like he was lagging behind everyone else in this department. "Anyway, back to Harry."

"Yes! You asked him what he wanted, and..."

"He said he wanted to come while he rimmed me, and then he..." Harry's eyes darted around the restaurant before he leaned in and continued, "said he wanted me to sit on his face, but to be honest, I didn’t exactly know what he meant so I just said yes and then I... well I did it."

"Holy fuck! That is some bold shit for a first time, Harry. This breakfast is well earned."

"Seriously. I've never done that. I'm too — I don't know — I can't stop thinking about what I look like from that angle. I guess I'm too vain or something." Draco took a drag of his cigarette and smiled at Harry with admiration.

"Draco Malfoy too vain? Alert the media."

"Fuck off, Potter. I’m trying to say that I respect your courage here."

"Thanks. To be honest, I thought about that too, but I just... didn't care in the moment. And I sort of sucked him off at the same time."

"Bloody hell! I’m thoroughly impressed. My first time, I was fumbling around like a fish flopping on a dock. Looking at a cock like I’d never seen one even though I bloody well have one."

"Right? You're goddamn fearless!" Seb praised.

"He is the most Gryffindor who ever lived."
"Whoever thought you'd say that and actually mean it as a compliment?" Harry laughed and ate a huge bite of pancake.

"Stranger things have happened." Draco inhaled another thoughtful lungful of smoke and exhaled through his nose.

"You know, I'm really happy you two made up. Not sure how it happened, but it's cool." Seb nodded with a smile.

"Well... the thing is, we've come to an agreement." Harry turned to Draco, who took the cue to chime in.

"We know we're going to yell at each other again. Something will set one of us off and then it'll be 'duck for cover, the kettle's about to blow,' et cetera."

"So, we've just decided, fuck it. Let it happen."

"We'll muck it up, apologize, rinse, repeat." Draco shrugged and took a hearty drink of his coffee.

"That's very... adult of you. What could go wrong?" Seb's expression didn't match his words. He was looking at them both like he thought they were a couple of lost, naïve sods. It was eerily similar to a look Hermione would give him, but Harry shrugged it off.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY. So this chapter and the last chapter is how this fic earned that "Brief Harry/OC" tag. I know it's a risk to do... but it felt completely right for this story. Everyone that pre-read this fic was too distracted by Harry sitting on a guy's face to mind too much haha so I'm hoping and praying it's that way for all of you too?
Can I just be cheesy for a minute and say that I really love how it’s kind of the same group of you all showing up with each new chapter? It’s like we all meet up to hang out for a bit on Mondays and Thursdays, and I love it. <3

There is a mention of past child abuse from the Dursleys in this chapter. I realized I hadn’t tagged that so I went ahead and added it. Other than that, I hope you’re ready for some pppiiinnniinnng (I hope you hear that like "are you ready to rumble" in your head :P).

Harry’s nightmares continued, albeit to a lesser degree. Regardless, he tirelessly set up wards to protect his room and contain any magic should another flare occur. He knew Draco was right. He knew he needed to see a Mind Healer, but every time he pictured walking into the office of a stranger, confiding in someone who, in all likelihood, already knew all about him, he wanted to retch.

Besides, Harry had gotten through many terrible ordeals without one. There had been no therapists, no friends, no family to swiftly come to his aid during all of those years with the Dursleys. Once, a teacher had suspected their mistreatment of Harry and tried to alert the school, resulting in a home visit that had only worsened Harry’s circumstances. Of course, the Dursleys assumed he had told his teacher about their misdeeds. Never mind that he hadn’t done anything of the sort; it didn’t matter, and Harry’s pleas for them to believe him fell on deaf ears. He didn’t eat for days after that. Harry recalled the pangs of hunger assaulting his stomach, the stab of starvation he grew to know like an unwelcome old friend.

Likewise, Harry had managed to keep afloat at Hogwarts during the trials and tribulations of Voldemort’s growing efforts to kill him, year after year. Harry was made of hardy stock. Harry was a survivor. Harry depended on the people who loved him, yes, but he’d also lost more of those people than he could count, their bodies solid and warm one instant and cold, empty vessels the next. Death never waited for you to process what was happening. It was cruel like that. Callous and abrupt and waiting to strike you at your most vulnerable moment.

So Harry channeled his magic into crafting the most unbreakable wards he could, reinforcing his suite’s walls with the steel of spells intertwined, laced atop each other like the thick viney undergrowth of the Forbidden Forest, shatterproof and airtight. He cast until his arms were sore and his head throbbed, his vision wavering under the stress of intense focus. He tried not to think about what might happen if a flare wormed its way through his body and crashed into these rooms, battering the walls as it tried to break free.

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Classes continued, and Harry did okay enough. He mostly hovered in the C range, but passing was
good enough for him at the moment. He didn’t get picked up at any more bars, but he did end up
pressed against a few walls and couches in some very satisfactory makeouts at parties. A dark-
skinned film student named Shawn with smoky eyes that made Harry's stomach do backflips took
him back to his dorm and taught him the joys of being finger-fucked while in the thrall of heavenly
suction on his cock. Then there was Sophie, the punky girl with the fire engine red hair whose
thighs had clamped around Harry’s head, her hands moving him exactly where she wanted as he
lapped at her clit, basking in every moan he drew from her lovely throat.

After Luke, Harry had wondered if he would be disappointed in having sex with women, if his
titillation would evaporate and droop now that he knew what a cock felt like in his hand, in his
mouth, and rutting against his own. But after Sophie, Harry knew more than ever that he was
incredibly bisexual. Men and women’s bodies were fascinating wonderlands he couldn’t get
enough of, and their contrast was what made it impossible to choose. He loved the stiff, heavy
weight of a cock in his hand, but he also adored the delicate, wet folds between a girl’s legs,
tracing them with his tongue, coaxing them open as he listened to find what motion made them
pant and grip his hair.

However, there was another problem Harry was working overtime to compartmentalize. While he
enjoyed every passionate night he shared with someone else, while he considered himself to be an
attentive lover, there was always a point where his mind would wander away from his partner and
start to picture a head of silky, white-blond hair, a skinny, elegant frame beneath him, calling his
name and asking for more. He repressed it to the best of his ability, smothering those dangerous
delusions with fingers intent on making his lovers come, his lips smashing against collarbones and
breasts, filling up his senses with their bodies until Draco’s face no longer appeared in his mind.

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“Harry, come in here for a minute. I need your opinion.”

“My opinion? I thought I was stuck in the mid-nineties.” Harry laughed as he sorted through a rack
of jackets. The Family Jewels was a riot of colour with racks of vintage clothes everywhere, red
and yellow tasseled Chinese lanterns and ropes of overhead lights lending the place a cheery glow.
Mannequins were dressed in outfits of different eras, and glass cases of funky old jewelry were
scattered throughout the place. It was homey and inviting, like you’d stepped into a friend’s giant
closet to play a round of dress-up, but Harry had no idea where to begin. So many quirky styles
surrounded him, and he didn’t know the first thing about what looked good on him.

“Your lack of skill at choosing your own wardrobe has no bearing on whether or not you recognize
what looks good on other people. You’re like someone who appreciates really good food but can’t
cook. Get in here.”

Harry had been a bit surprised that Draco was game for rifling through musty stacks of used
clothing. Draco had shrugged and said, “I’m always up for new things these days. Besides, I relish
the opportunity to get something unique and one of a kind. There’s something satisfying about
being asked where you got something and telling them they can’t get one too.”

Harry blushed as he looked around to see if anyone was watching. Was it strange to get in a fitting
room with someone? Would people think they were doing… something else in there? Harry
supposed he had dressed and undressed in front of male friends countless times throughout school,
but this was different. They were in public, and well… this was Draco. The fitting “rooms” were really just loosely curtained-off, recessed portions in the wall so he supposed it wasn’t too weird.

“But why do I need to go in there when you could come out here?” Harry tried to reason with him.

“Potter, I’m not parading around out there looking terrible. Someone could see me. It’s your job to come in here and see that I look presentable before I go out there. What kind of a friend are you?! Honestly, I’m not asking for much. Get — ”

“All right! God, I’m coming!”

Muttering “bossy prat” under his breath, Harry slipped through the curtain. He gulped as he looked Draco up and down. Draco was wearing a tightly fitted dark purple and green paisley button-down underneath a brown leather jacket. The jacket stopped right above his hip, giving Harry a nice view of Draco’s arse in his signature black jeans.

“Well? Thoughts?” Draco asked with a note of impatience.

“It’s… er…”

You look so fucking good, and I can’t stop thinking about undoing those buttons, sliding your shirt off your shoulders while you ride me and —

“Well, that lacklustre reaction settles it. I knew it was too much. It looks like the gay ’70s threw up on me.”

Before Harry could argue that no, he looked great, just different, Draco shrugged the jacket off, turned his back to Harry, and started to unbutton his shirt.

“What are you doing?! I’m still in here!” Harry turned around quickly. Of course, he was dying to watch Draco unveil his bare shoulders and back, but he didn’t want Draco to figure it out. What if he got hard? What if Draco noticed?

“Calm down, Potter. If this is how you react to a man’s bare back, it’s a wonder you end up in anyone’s bed. What did you do at Hogwarts? Leave the room every time anyone had to change? There, I’m decent now, you British granny.”

Harry turned around to find Draco back in his black t-shirt, the brown leather jacket on top.

“I’ll hold off on attempting garish patterns again, but I do like this jacket. Thoughts? And preferably a less monosyllabic response this time?” Draco winked at Harry as he adjusted the cuffs of the jacket. He actually winked. Did he have any bloody idea what he was doing to Harry right now? Harry instinctively wanted to clamp his hand over his crotch, bidding his cock to stay flaccid until this frustrating shopping trip was over. He resisted the urge, aware the gesture would just look suspicious.

“You look amazing. You… generally do,” Harry’s cheeks heated as he busied his hands in his untamed curls, “but this is a nice change. Different enough from the black one you already have, but not so different that it doesn’t feel like… you. You know?”

Draco smiled, and Harry silently sent another stern warning to his cock to behave.

“See? You’re not half bad at this, Potter. You only need to apply it to yourself sometimes. Maybe we should put you in the paisley.” It sounded like a joke, but then Draco’s eyes widened and he grinned in a way that spelled trouble for Harry. “Take your jumper off.”
“What?! No! I’m not wearing that! If you hated it, what makes you think it would look good on me?”

“You’re not me, Harry. You have different coloring. Darker skin, darker hair. I think the purple might work. And the green will complement your eyes. Come on. Off with it!” Draco waved his hand at Harry’s chest and resolutely narrowed his eyes. Harry pulled his jumper off, not bothering to argue lest it result in another round of mockery about his unnecessary modesty. Draco handed him the shirt, and Harry began to put it on, careful not to make eye contact with him. Harry looked at his reflection in the small mirror hanging off the wall.

“I cannot pull this off.”

“Not like that, you can’t. These seams are here for a reason. Line them up with your shoulders.” Draco’s hands fell onto Harry’s shoulders, and he rearranged the shirt on Harry’s frame. Harry wanted to protest. Merlin, Draco was dressing him right now. It was infantilizing, but it was also wonderful. Heat pooled in Harry’s stomach from the light touch of Draco’s fingertips. He thought about what those fingers would look like splayed across his naked chest. “You need something over it too.”

Draco reached behind him and pulled a black blazer off a hook hanging on the wall.

“Try this.”

Harry grabbed the blazer and put it on, considering himself in the mirror again.

“I look like a child pretending to be an adult.” Harry sighed. The blazer didn’t quite fit, too baggy in some spots, too tight in others.

“Well, that’s the problem with buying vintage. A good tailor is essential for this kind of thing, but you look better than you think you do.”

“We didn’t all grow up with tailors at our disposal, posh boy.”

“Yes, I’m aware. I’m here, aren’t I? Anyway, you look nice. Not something you’d want to wear every day, but it’s good to switch it up. Just trying to help you see that there’s more to life than t-shirts and jeans, and you can have different clothes for different purposes.”

Draco put his hands on Harry’s shoulders again, and Harry could feel the warm press of each of his fingers. He looked at their reflection in the mirror and let himself imagine what they would look like as a couple, out in a restaurant in these clothes, seated across the table from one another, unable to look anywhere but each other’s eyes.

Harry felt certain that he was in an inordinate amount of trouble.

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Gisele had all but disappeared after Halloween, cagey with Harry whenever he expressed that he missed her. She always smiled mournfully, a sad upturning of lips that made Harry know there was something she wasn’t saying, but he was the last person to coerce anyone into talking about their problems if they didn’t want to. He accepted her excuses of being busy and focused on her schoolwork, settling for letting her know periodically that he still cared and always would.
Then, without warning, she showed up at Harry’s door, her smile genuine this time, the expression he’d known and loved from her returning to her features.

“It’s almost Thanksgiving, Harry! And while it’s the most odious of holidays for obvious reasons, you and Draco have never experienced it. I’m not going home for break, and neither are Draco and Seb. It’s Friendsgiving time, bitch.”

“I can’t bloody wait.” Harry grinned so hard, he thought his face might split in two.

***

Since Draco and Seb’s eyes had glazed over when asked, Harry had excitedly agreed to be the one to accompany Gisele on the hunt for ingredients, stopping at various early morning produce markets and then to the Morton Williams near campus. He loved the cheery hubbub of everyone shopping for the upcoming holiday. It was a disorder that felt convivial instead of unsettling, calling to mind all the smells and tastes the people around him would be filling their kitchens with soon, feeding hungry relatives and friends. It made him miss the Burrow, and he tamped down all thoughts of how neglectful he’d been in his correspondence with Ron and Hermione.

Ron had sent him a care package on Molly’s behalf, joking in his letter about what possible disasters might have awaited him had she taken a trip to the local Muggle post office. The box was stuffed to the gills with cookies and magical Christmas décor.

*Mum says it’s never too early to decorate for Christmas. I personally think she’s barking mad, and obviously you’re going to have to be careful with these around the Muggles… Blimey, is it illegal to be sending these?! Hopefully, the DMLE doesn’t cart me off for contraband Christmas ornaments. If I have to go down, I’d rather go down in a much bigger blaze of glory. Think how disappointed George would be!*

A set of enchanted twinkle lights emitted sparks of silver and gold that swirled into the air to make the shape of stars, reindeer, and Christmas trees, and a charmed snow globe held an animated scene of a forest covered in a blanket of white, a unicorn frolicking in the snow drifts as bursts of red and green shooting stars dashed across the sky.

It sent threads of glee through him to be thought of so warmly, and the scatter-brained letter from Ron made Harry miss him very dearly. Remorseful over his lapsed relationships, Harry had sent back three heartfelt letters, one to Ron, Hermione, and Molly as well (with extra notes to each Weasley in the postscript). Before he could rethink it, he had quickly scribbled down a note about Draco at the end of his letter to Ron.

*Draco Malfoy is one of the few who was accepted into this new program too. I haven’t sussed out if there are any others. Feels like it would defeat the purpose of being here in the first place. Draco and I… well, we’ve become rather close friends over the semester. He can still be a git, but he’s changed a lot.*

Harry had stuffed the letter into the envelope so fast, he nearly ended up with a paper cut.

By the time they finished shopping, they were so burdened with grocery bags that Gisele offered to foot the bill for a cab back to the dorms. She let out a long, relieved breath when Harry offered to do the bulk of the cooking.
“Thank god because I fucking suck. I would burn everything, and then Friendsgiving would just be
us outside in the cold waiting for the fire department to show up.”

“Get some recipes, and I’ll do it. May need people to help me chop and stuff, but I’ll do the rest.”
Harry was bursting with delight over the chance to cook for people he actually liked. With the
Dursleys, it had always been a duty, a chore that signified his pitiful status as house servant. This
time, it would be a celebration.

***

“Oh my god, put the knife down!”

“What? I’ve got this! I just need to change my approach.”

Harry cringed as Draco stabbed more than sliced the center of a potato.

“Draco! I don’t have time to take you to hospital because you decided to slice your bloody finger
off! Get out of my kitchen!”

“I was just trying to help! Trust you to be extremely ungrateful.” Draco crossed his arms and
pouted. “I’m… I never had the chance to do any of this, you know? It would help if you didn’t
keep acting like I’m going to ruin your perfect dinner at every little misstep.”

Harry’s heart thumped in his chest as he saw the immense disappointment written in Draco’s
patrician features.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to get hurt. It’s really easy to slice right into yourself if you don’t
use a knife properly. It happened to me a fair amount. Hazard of being a tiny kid trying to wield a
knife way too big for me. Not that the Dursleys cared to notice.”

Draco opened his mouth to speak, his eyes softening, but Harry held up a hand, shaking his head.
Not now. Forget I said that. Please. Let’s make today about us instead.

“Here.” Harry picked up Draco’s hand and wrapped it around the handle of the knife. He was
standing behind Draco, so close he could feel his body heat. Harry flushed from the contact,
Draco’s skin smooth and supple beneath his fingers. “Um… so with these, since they’re large and
you’re quartering them, you’re going to want to brace your other hand on top of the blade and press
down as you’re bringing the handle down too.”

Harry took Draco’s other hand and placed it on the top edge of the knife’s blade, applying the right
amount of pressure to make a clean cut. As he did so, his chest met Draco’s back. The impact sent
another whisper of satisfaction sailing through him. Draco’s body was warm and enticing. Harry
wanted to curl into him like a cat lounging in a sunspot.

“See? And then you want to do it again to both halves.”

Harry was overcome with the urge to wrap his arms around Draco’s waist and whisper
encouragements in his ear as he continued to chop the potatoes, but instead he withdrew his hands
and left Draco to his own devices. He didn’t know why he fantasized about him. It was absurd
really, but the closer they got, the more inexorable the daydreams became.
You know why. Look at him. He’s beautiful and funny and clever, and he challenges you like no one else ever has.

Harry stepped back and watched Draco carefully quartering the potatoes, his tongue darting out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. He was so intent on doing a good job for Harry, taking care to be as helpful as he could, and Harry’s insides melted into a puddle of boundless affection. He shook it off. There was too much to do, too many dishes to assemble in the very ungenerous space of his kitchenette.

“Do you need any help? Keep in mind I’m only asking as a courtesy because I plan on drinking boxed wine all night and not lifting a finger.” Draco and Harry laughed at Seb’s comment.

“Honestly, there’s only room for two in here anyway! Don’t worry about it!” Harry called out into the living room.

“Good?” Draco waved to the finished pile of potatoes, and the nervous request for approval, the insecure tilt of his eyebrows, made Harry want to scoop him up and kiss him.

“Perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

***

“Right? Despite what the PSAs tell you, literally no one who smokes is going to be like ‘You’re not cool unless you do it, man. Take a hit!’” Gisele’s voice dropped into an imitation of a stoner guy, her hands holding the lit joint out like an amoral, menacing temptation instead of the mild drug it was. “That said, my appetite needs to expand if I’m going to eat as much as I totally intend to so I’m smoking. If you want some, there’s plenty where this came from, boys.”

“Yes, please!” Seb’s hand shot up, and Gisele took a puff before handing it to him.

Harry looked over to Draco and noticed his legs had succumbed to the rapid jiggling that Harry had come to recognize as a sign of anxiety.

“Have you ever smoked weed before?” Harry whispered, hoping Gisele and Seb would continue to talk over them. He didn’t want to embarrass Draco.

“No. Kids at the center in London did, but… Have you?” Harry wondered what Draco’s hopeful tone meant. Did he want Harry to say yes? Or would he be more comforted to find he wasn’t the only one in the room who hadn’t smoked?

“Yeah, I — ”

“Harry! Want some?” Seb offered Harry the joint, and he accepted it, taking a slow drag and holding it in a few seconds before exhaling. Oddly enough, it was Dudley who had introduced Harry to it, inviting him into his room one rainy summer day right before sixth year, his thick-necked cronies huddled in a circle on his bed as they passed the joint around. It was a rare moment of communal adolescent rite of passage, an unspoken pact between them to share that surreptitious afternoon and never speak of it again. After the war, Harry had occasionally indulged. The drug was an easy, quick way to quell the buzzing under his skin so he could get some sleep. He turned to Draco, who was looking even more frightened than he had a moment ago. Gisele, always the most observant of the four, noticed and spoke up.
“Seriously Draco, don’t do it if you don’t want to. I know it’s not everyone’s thing. There’s plenty of shitty wine, courtesy of this lazy fucker.” Gisele winked at Draco and hooked a thumb in Seb’s direction.

“Hey! Wine is a valuable contribution. What did you do that’s so special?” Seb stuck his tongue out, and Gisele slapped his arm.

“Excuse you! I went shopping with Harry, I brought chocolate babka, and this glorious ganj of which you just partook so credit where credit is due, dude.”

“Fiiiiinneee you are queen, as always.” Seb stood and did an exaggerated bow.

“And that’s all I ask! That my subjects bow down when appropriate.” They both burst into laughter, and Harry held out the joint to Draco.

“You really don’t have to, but it can be relaxing. If it ends up making you feel weird or anything, we’re all here for you. It doesn’t last too long either.” Harry smiled and leaned closer, the brush of their thighs sending sparks through his groin. He could already feel the first hit heightening his senses, that odd dichotomy of slower and faster, sharper and fuzzier, that marijuana always had. He prayed he wouldn’t get too high and end up saying something stupid to Draco.

“Okay, give it.” Not one to back down from a challenge, Draco’s expression transformed from hesitant to determined. He took the proffered joint and inhaled far too large a puff for a first timer.

“Whoa whoa, easy there, D,” Gisele warned, but it was too late. Draco doubled over, launching into a coughing fit. Harry patted his back and handed him a glass of water. Draco gulped it greedily and sputtered a little more before taking a deep breath.

“God, what is that revolting taste?! Why do people like this again?”

“Just wait. You’ll see,” Gisele assured him. “Let’s eat!”

Since the coffee table wasn’t very big, most of the dishes were still on the kitchen counters. They all ambled in, piling their plates with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, green bean casserole (Draco eyed this particular one dubiously, but Seb was adamant that he couldn’t truly say he’d experienced Thanksgiving if he didn’t try it), rolls, and gravy.

Draco and Harry sat on the small couch. Seb took the armchair, and Gisele insisted on taking the floor.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m high as fuck. I like being down here.”

“How are you doing?” Harry whispered, canting his head toward Draco.

“I feel like…” Draco paused, swirling his fork through a pile of mashed potatoes drowned in gravy, a glaze forming over his eyes, “Everything is clicking by in snapshots. Gradual but then… fast too? Fragments or something. Does that make any sense? My body feels… light but heavy? Anchored but floaty.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Harry grinned, his skin tingly from happiness and the potency of the drug. “Feel worried about anything?”

“Not a goddamn thing, Harry James Potter. I feel invincible.” Draco’s lips spread out into a goofy, stoned grin, spidery red lines spreading over the whites of his eyes now, and Harry thought it was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. “You are so amazing, you know that? You did all this for
us. You’re generous and kind, and I am so fucking glad you’re here.”

“Draco, I — I know that’s probably the weed talking, but — ”

Draco put down his plate and turned toward Harry, clasping his hand, his face suddenly very somber. Harry’s cheeks went up in flames from the pressure of Draco’s hand atop his own.

“No, no, it’s not. I mean, your aunt and uncle… and yet you still decided to do this for us. It’s so, so nice. Thank you.” Draco’s eyes were extremely sincere. Everything else in the room faded away.

“Oh, it’s not really — I like doing it, honestly. It makes me feel… better to do it for people I care about, you know? Like I’m taking it back or something.”

Draco nodded enthusiastically.

“I understand.”

“What’s this tender moment I just missed?” Gisele ate a bite of turkey and pointed her fork at Draco and Harry.

“I was just telling Harry how fucking amazing he is for making this. He does so much for people, you know? And he rarely ever even takes credit for it.” Harry didn’t know what he’d expected a stoned Draco Malfoy to be like, but a sentimental sweetheart who couldn’t stop praising Harry was decidedly not it.

Seb and Gisele loudly declared their assent.

“He’s right. This is seriously amazing, Harry. Best Thanksgiving ever.” Seb raised his plate in Harry’s direction before diving back into the food.

Harry took a big bite of turkey, which was just the right amount of salty and juicy, and moaned his approval. His first Thanksgiving was a success, and he intended to enjoy every last bite of it.

***

“I really like your fucking eyes, Potter.”

“Is that a compliment or a threat?!” The way he’d said it, forcefully but in that indolent cadence of the smashingly stoned, was the funniest thing Harry had ever heard. It was so… Malfoy. There was also the small matter of Draco’s continued mission to compliment Harry, but he tried not to read too much into that.

“He’s right though. They’re sooooo bright green. Fucking emeralds! Actual goddamn jewels!” Seb exclaimed. They were all slumped around the living room in a food and weed coma, pleasantly buzzed and full.

“Did you steal them from a fairy’s cave and just,” Gisele made a motion like she was throwing something in her eye, “Pop them in?”

They all laughed that blissful, “not a care in the world” high laughter.
“What about his? Who has silver eyes?!” Harry was incredulous as he pointed at Draco. He wasn’t sure when it had happened, but Draco was reclining on the sofa with his socked feet (dark purple with yellow stars and silver tinsel patterns across them) in Harry’s lap. Harry was currently doing everything in his power to fight the urge to rub them.

“That’s the Malfoy lineage, my friends. We are but mystical creatures forged from stardust. That’s why my name is Draco; I sparkle!” Draco dramatically threw his arms in the air.

“That checks out. You definitely act like you’re from outer space.” Gisele nodded sagely.

Draco glared and hopped up, marching toward Harry’s bedroom.

“What are you doing?” Harry leaned forward slightly, too lethargic to follow him.

“Music!”

A second later, Harry heard a needle dropping onto the outer edge of a vinyl record (he’d purchased a turntable about a week after that first eye-opening trip to Bleecker Street Records), and the sounds of “The King of Carrot Flowers, Pt. One,” the first track from Neutral Milk Hotel’s *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, bled into the room. Jeff Mangum’s earnest, reedy voice began to sing along with the jaunty guitar. Harry was in awe of the poetic, bizarre imagery of Mangum’s lyrics.

*And this is the room*

*One afternoon I knew I could love you*

*And from above you how I sank into your soul*

*Into that secret place where no one dares to go*

“Yeeeesss! Perfect choice, Draco.” Gisele and Draco started to sing along, and Harry tentatively joined in. He’d always been shy about singing in front of people, but Draco’s audacious tendency to burst into song no matter how terrible he sounded always made Harry less afraid.

“You hipsters! Always leaving me out.” Seb sighed and stretched out on the floor.

“Not my fault you have terrible taste.” Seb nudged Gisele’s shoulder with his foot, and she slapped it away.

“Are we going up and over?” Gisele called to them as Part Two swelled into the frenetic energy of Part Three. The three of them broke out into song again, exchanging smiles as they reveled in their shared love of the record. It was a flawless day: the meal, the company, bonding over music that had carried each of them through their separate dark moments before they all landed here together. Harry felt like he’d found a real family in the depths of this complicated city of bedlam.

*Up and over*

*We go through the wave and undertow*

*I will float until I learn how to swim*

*Inside my mother in a garbage bin*

*Until I find myself again, again*
The needle skidded across a speck of dust in the record, creating that pop and crackle that was now a familiar soothing sound to Harry, and the title track, Harry’s personal favorite, began. The strumming guitar was melodic and peaceful, and the words were heartbreakingly lovely.

What a beautiful face
I have found in this place
That is circling all round the sun
What a beautiful dream
That could flash on the screen
In a blink of an eye and be gone from me
Soft and sweet
Let me hold it close and keep it here with me

“I’ve been obsessed with this record for the last year,” Draco spoke in a reverent hush. “When I found out it was about Anne Frank, I read her diary, and it was like I experienced every note of these songs all over again.”

“You didn’t read it in school? It’s pretty mandatory here.” Seb lifted up on his elbows from his place on the floor.

“No, our school was…”

“Nontraditional,” Harry finished for him.

“Yes, that’s one way to put it.” Draco flashed him an appreciative smile. Harry was the only one in the room who could understand how significant it was for Draco to find out about the Holocaust. He precipitously wished Seb and Gisele would vanish so Harry could ask Draco about it. How had he felt, poring over that diary and undoubtedly thinking about Voldemort? Thinking about what wreckage could have desecrated the wizarding world if Voldemort had lived, all the people whose lives would have been extinguished in the blink of an eye were he allowed to reign? Harry took his knowledge of that era of Muggle history for granted. Seb was right; it was a curriculum essential, taught early and often. But not for Draco. Draco must have had to learn about it on his own instead of in a classroom surrounded by other kids experiencing it for the first time. Harry thought that Draco was one of the bravest people he knew.

“I swear, your boarding school must be in an underground bunker.”

“You’re not far off, Gisele.” Draco and Harry shared a private smile, and Draco stretched out on the couch, draping his legs across Harry’s lap once again. Still high and feeling audacious, Harry let his arms fall on top of them, one hand tentatively massaging Draco’s knee.

“Can’t believe how strange it is to be anything at all’ is the best goddamn line anyone has ever committed to song. I want to crawl inside it and live there,” Draco sighed pensively, fixing Harry with radiant pewter eyes and a lazy smile. Butterflies bandied about in Harry’s stomach. Abruptly, Harry realized just how incredibly, irrevocably fucked he was. At that moment, he would have done anything to make sure Draco looked at him like that every damn day for the rest of their lives.
“Seb, let’s go back to our rooms. Harry doesn’t want us crashing on his floor.”

Harry barely heard her. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from Draco, and unless he was sorely mistaken, Draco was suffering from the same affliction.

“Ugh, I’m too tired to move.”

“Seb.” Gisele speared him with a look that wasn’t negotiable and subtly tilted her head toward Draco and Harry.

Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Surely she wasn’t implying… was he that obvious?!

“Oh, um… yeah, I need a nap. Tryptophan and all that.” Seb bit his lip, suppressing a burgeoning grin, and stood up.

“I’d hug you both goodbye, but I don’t think I’ve ever been this relaxed in my whole life. I’m stuck in this position.” Draco laughed softly and folded his hands over his stomach.

“See? Understand why people like weed now?” Gisele walked over and gave his hair an affectionate ruffle before heading to the door.

“Completely. I’d propose to it if I could.”

“Thanks for all this, Harry. See you tomorrow?”

“Definitely, Seb. Thanks, guys.” Harry smiled and waved as they opened the door.

“I’m leaving you one of these.” Gisele winked at Harry and laid a joint on one corner of the coffee table. Their friends left, and the music stopped, the needle skipping on the empty outer loop. Harry and Draco were alone.

“I hope you know I’m not leaving any time soon. I’m far too comfortable so deal with it, Potter.” Draco shifted on the couch, his calves rubbing across the tops of Harry’s thighs as he moved them dangerously close to his cock.

Please don’t get hard, Harry pled, looking down to find that Draco’s legs were only a couple inches away.

“Nice of you to force your bony feet on someone and trap him there. Am I just furniture to you?” Harry feigned annoyance, but all he wanted was for Draco to keep him trapped there all night.

“Yes, really handsome furniture.” Draco’s face froze in mid-laugh as it presumably dawned on him that he’d said something that perhaps he shouldn’t have. “Uhhh, I didn’t — I only meant — ”

“It’s okay! You’re really — er, what I mean to say is that you’re also — ” Harry began to sweat, hands running through his hair as he riddled out how to possibly rectify this situation.

“Okay Potter, I know eloquence has never been your strong suit, but I am stoned out of my fucking gourd right now. If you don’t finish that sentence soon, I’m going to irrationally envision all the reasons you now hate me because I’ve made it completely weird.” Draco took a deep breath, recovering from his rambling, and shot Harry a wild-eyed look. Obviously, he’d just tripped over his words. He didn’t mean it. He was high. Things happened. After all, Harry himself had been worried about spouting all manner of under-the-influence nonsense. If everyone held people accountable for every single thing they said while intoxicated, the world would be a very frightening place.
“I think you’re really attractive too. I don’t mean that I like — ugh, I think people can notice someone’s attractive without it meaning anything necessarily so I’m fine with you having told me that. You didn’t make it weird. I promise.” Harry’s pulse was racing now, speeding along like he’d just bungee jumped off a bridge.

That did nothing to help anything, Harry. What the fuck is wrong with you?! What the hell was that?!

“Okay, good. Glad you understand.” Draco smiled and took a deep inhale. The worry left his features, replaced by the spark of revelation. “You think I’m good-looking? That’s information to file away for later leverage.”

“You say that about yourself all the time,” Harry deflected, not meeting Draco’s eyes.

“Yes, but I didn’t know you agreed.”

“Well, now you know! Let’s go outside. You want some air? I think some air would be good.”

Harry threw Draco’s legs off his lap and shot to a standing position, his head woozy with wine and pot.

“Air would definitely be good,” Draco agreed with a vigorous nod. “By the way, do you still have that invisibility cloak?”

***

Draco and Harry were sitting against the wall of Third Avenue North huddled under the invisibility cloak, giggling as they passed a joint back and forth, when Harry realized that weed probably negated the head-clearing effects of getting fresh air. He guessed being shoulder to shoulder with Draco wasn’t helping either. His blond strands were poking out from under the brim of his black knit beanie, one hand shoved into the pocket of his long black winter coat. When they left Harry’s rooms, it seemed like there was an agreement to ignore the loaded exchange about finding each other attractive, dismissing it as a casual observation best discarded, but Draco’s decision to sit here, pressed together under a blanket, made Harry wonder if Draco didn’t want to ignore it.

“I love boys, Harry. Have I told you that?” Draco’s lips broke out into a crooked, silly grin.

“You might’ve mentioned it once or twice.” Harry giggled as he took a puff off the joint.

“I dooooo. They’re so lovely and strong. I like their lips and their jaws and their legs and their cocks. I need to get shagged. I’ve been far too busy actually being a good student. It’s appalling.”

Draco pinched the rolled paper, crackling as it continued to burn, between thumb and forefinger, and took a drag. The frigid air made the smoke billow out in small white clouds as he exhaled.

Don’t ask him don’t ask him you don’t want to know —

“You know, you always make me spill the sordid details of my sex life, but I don’t know what you’ve been up to. Did you go home with that purple-haired bloke on Halloween?”

“No, he sucked me off in the bathroom,” Draco said matter-of-factly. Harry inhaled a lungful of smoke and promptly fell into a fierce round of coughing. Draco laughed, his head thudding against the wall. “Sorry, I forgot I was with Potter the Prude.”
“I’m not a prude. I just… blimey, I didn’t think you’d do something like that.”

Draco shrugged and took a drag. Harry tried to forcibly eject any thoughts of Draco pushed up against the wall of a bathroom stall, his cock down Harry’s throat as he peered up at Draco, anxiously awaiting approval.

“I try not to go home with anyone from a bar that often. Don’t fancy a night of casual sex ending with me turned into a corpse, chopped into bits and dumped in a stew.”

“Wow, I’m really glad you said absolutely nothing to me when I went home with Luke! I could have been murdered too!” Harry felt his eyes go wide as he accosted Draco.

“You had your wand. You’re Harry bloody Potter. You bested the Dark Lord. I think you can handle a dangerous Muggle. Sorry I didn’t mother you like Granger would.” Draco rolled his eyes and took another deep pull off the joint.

“No, I didn’t!”

“You didn’t bring your wand?! Are you mad?” Draco exclaimed. He looked utterly aghast at Harry’s idiocy, an expression he wore quite often.

“I didn’t see a reason to have it! I definitely didn’t know I was risking my life!”

“Harry, people are terrible. You should always be prepared for the worst. God, every time I think you’re starting to get the plot, you prove to be just as inept as ever.”

“Thanks for your concern. You’re a great friend.” Harry rolled his eyes and plucked the joint from Draco’s outstretched hand. Why did he like this aggravating prat so much?

“I’m just saying, for someone who knows better than most how demented people can be, you have a tendency to trust blindly. It’s commendable, but it’s also quite perilous, depending on the context. I’d rather you not die, okay? Be careful. I like having you here.”

Harry blushed, the cold wind of November bouncing off his skin in the presence of Draco’s tenderness. He couldn’t resist prodding him. Were Draco’s cheeks chapped from the whirling winter wind or was he blushing?

“You like having me here, eh? Tell me more about that.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Potter. Back to the subject at hand, whose bed are you in these days? Same mold? More muscly brunettes like Luke? Is that what makes your Gryffindor heart go pitter-patter?” Draco sounded so casual. He wasn’t even looking at Harry, just listlessly gazing into the courtyard. Harry wished he sounded jealous, wished he could detect hints of inescapable longing in Draco’s voice.

“I suppose you’d prefer I fancy blonds?” Harry aimed to sound off-hand, even though it killed him. Christ, what had happened tonight? How did a simple holiday meal turn into something that sent jagged shockwaves down his resolve to ignore whatever was happening every time he looked at Draco? A switch had been flipped, and Harry was hampered by the wish that he could rewind to yesterday, when things were less complicated.

“Well, you know what the Muggles say, Harry. Blonds do have more fun.” Draco smirked and finished the joint, stubbing out the lit end on the concrete. Harry did his best to play along, laughing like it didn’t hurt that Draco hadn’t said “Yes, I want you to fancy me instead.” He pretended Draco’s shoulder against his didn’t scorch him like Fiendfyre, the simple, accidental
touch holding more significance and intensity than any of the sex Harry'd had over the past month. “Come on, let’s head back in. We never made it to the pumpkin pie.”

***

Finals cast a pall over the entire university, everyone shuffling about like the undead, the fresh-faced glow of youth replaced by drooping eyelids and dark circles. He knew it was going to happen again. All the signs were there: the sleep-deprivation, the haggard stretch of his features every time he looked in the mirror, the jittery itch that consumed him, like ants skittering underneath his skin. When it came to pass, he barely recalled the images that had haunted his unconscious mind. It was a foggy collage of past horrors that swept around Harry like a cyclone, spinning around him too quickly to process.

He supposed it hardly mattered. The only thing that did matter was the detritus he woke up to, his bedroom in shambles. There were cracks running down the length of the walls, chunks of plaster and small dustings of powder littering the floor. Records were broken, as was his turntable, and a book had smashed against his bicep before clattering to the floor. Harry rubbed the spot as he cried, certain a bruise would form there in a few hours, ruptured blood vessels painting his skin purple and red.

He wanted to go to Draco, but he barely had the energy to crawl back into bed let alone down the hall. Besides, he knew Draco would be furious with him for not getting help, for wrapping himself in unwieldy wards inside the volatile stage of his nightmares, nothing to protective him. Harry wiped away his tears and picked up his wand to begin repairing the damage inside his room. He only wished he knew how to repair the damage inside himself too.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to @lettersbyelise for suggesting the Drarry shopping scene when I was writing this section. It upped the stakes for the pining, and I mean... it's just fun as hell to see Harry pining for Draco while they're in various states of undress in a fitting room, right?
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

TWO CHAPTERS TODAY BECAUSE

1) I love you all.

2) These chapters go together, and while I love leaving you all in suspense, I wanted to be merciful for this particular part.

3) I just felt like it.

"What are you doing for winter hols?"

"Oh... I don't know. I've been avoiding making plans."

"Harry, it's two weeks away." Draco closed his textbook and gave Harry a reproachful look.

"I know! I just... don't know how I'm going to face everyone."

"Same," Draco whispered, and the naked pain in his eyes made Harry want to hug him. "My mother wants me to come home."

Draco opened his messenger bag and pulled out a piece of yellow parchment, a broken red wax seal near the bottom of the page. He thrust it at Harry, who glanced back at him, seeking permission before he unfolded it.

"Go on. Read it," Draco instructed quietly.

Dearest Draco,

I believe you will be in agreement when I say that this dalliance with the Muggle world has gone on long enough. I understand that a boy needs his space, his room to rebel and explore forbidden territory in an effort to gain a greater understanding of what is important to him. Though it has caused me great pain, I have respectfully refrained from applying pressure when you have withdrawn. Your pointed attempts to keep our contact brief and impersonal over the past few months have not escaped me, but now is the time for this to come to an end.

You have a duty to this family and to the Malfoy name. You are the heir to an honorable legacy, and the time has come for you to return home to uphold these responsibilities. I have made arrangements with MACUSA's Department for International Magical Travel. A portkey to Wiltshire awaits you at their office. I expect you to be at the Manor by Christmas Eve. We can of course wait until after the holiday to confer about your plans for the future. I very much wish to celebrate Christmas with my only son, but I am afraid I cannot permit any further delay of the discussion of pertinent subjects. I have allowed this sabbatical from the magical world because I understand the great duress you were under after the war. I accept my role in the unfortunate circumstances of that portion of your young life, but now you must return to the life that is rightfully yours. After Christmas, we begin the process of rebuilding your name as the Malfoy heir, both in society and within our home.
"I don't know what to say, Draco. It's so..."

"Formal? Cold? Condescending? Dismissive? 'Dalliance with the Muggle world.' 'I have allowed this.' 'You have a duty.' Every fucking sentence, every turn of phrase drips with manipulation and every — everything that I don't want to have to deal with anymore! Every swish of her goddamn quill is a reminder of why I left. I d-don't want to go back, Harry. Not to that house, not to her, not to some moronic notion of saving face and rebranding the Malfoy name — god, what is that?! Is she really that locked in her head, that enraptured with the memory of the life she used to have — toast of the wizarding elite, pulling everyone by the purse strings, I can't — I can't — " Draco drew his knees up to his chest, curling into a ball on Harry's bed, burying his face in the tops of his thighs. He started to tremble, and Harry heard the wretched sound of sobbing. It was alarming. Draco had been open with Harry about his post-war troubles, but it was always behind a veneer of composure. He'd never broken down in front of Harry quite the way Harry had in front of him. He scooted closer and wrapped his arms around Draco's thin frame, running his palm up and down his arm. "I'm sorry. We're supposed to be studying. This isn't your problem. I shouldn't — "

"Draco, are you kidding me? You held me when I had my first nightmare here, calmed me down until I could see straight, and we weren't even friends yet. You can come to me. Anytime you need it, okay? I'm here for you."

"Thank you. You're a good friend, Harry. I meant it when I said I'm glad you're here. I wasn't just stoned, you know?" Draco lifted his head, a faint smile on his lips even though tears were streaking down his pale cheeks. "By the way, I haven't asked you about those in a while. Are they still happening? I'm a shit friend. I should have asked."

"Oh, they're... still happening, but it's manageable. We'll talk about it some other time. Right now, let's talk about you. You know, you don't have to go back if you don't want to."

"Oh, I don't? How fortunate that I have the Chosen One to give me permission, otherwise the option might not have occured to me." Draco snorted, but then shook his head. "I'm sorry. You don't deserve that. I'm always... at my hardest when I'm..."

"I know. It's okay." Harry smiled and rubbed circles into Draco's upper back. "Honestly, I'm surprised she's holding onto all this. I figured she'd just be grateful you're alive at this point."

Harry reflected on Narcissa's frantic face when she had asked him if Draco was still alive. Harry knew she loved Draco very much, no matter how poorly she may be expressing it at the moment.

"She is. It's complicated. We'll get to a point where it seems like she's willing to let go of everything. We'll have a pleasant conversation without any 'when are you visiting your father, when are coming back to England to marry a nice pure-blood girl,' the whole bit, and then... she says something that makes me want to scream and never stop. It's a vicious cycle. I think it gets better with time, but... maybe I'm just convincing myself of that because having to write off two parents is too ugly a thought. This letter makes it clear she's just been holding her tongue in hopes that I'll see the light, leave the Muggle world, and come crawling back. I feel like an orphan sometimes."

"You're not an orphan," Harry muttered darkly. "You still have your parents. It might not be like it
was, but they're not lying in a grave somewhere."

"Have you been to Azkaban? The resemblance isn't that far off. It may as well be a cemetery. No one's alive in there. Not really."

Harry stiffened, his hand ceasing its mollifying motion on Draco's arm. Draco sucked in a ragged breath and shook his head.

"That was a terrible thing to say in front of you. Harry, I didn't mean — "

"I know. You're not wrong about Azkaban. I-I don't know what to say, Draco." Harry never broached the topic of Lucius, and Draco seemed content to pretend he didn't exist as well. It was a Pandora's box neither of them seemed to want to open.

"You don't have to say anything. He doesn't deserve our consideration anyway," Draco spat bitterly.

Harry looked at Draco's steely eyes and wanted to restore their warmth at all costs. Either the worst or best idea he'd ever had popped into his head.

"What if we team up in mutual avoidance?"

Draco cocked a skeptical eyebrow.

"Look, I don't want to go back, and neither do you. Since this is the one holiday break where the dorms close down, maybe we could... go somewhere else instead?"

"You mean like... the two of us on holiday together?" Draco's jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Yeah, why not?" Harry shrugged and tried to sound as casual as possible instead of like someone who had just asked his crush to embark on a two-week holiday with him.

"What you just — tell Granger and Weasley you're skipping out on Christmas with them to gallivant to Merlin knows where with Draco Malfoy? And by some miracle of Circe, they don't Apparate across the ocean to throttle us both?" Draco laughed, and Harry joined in. He did pose an excellent point.

"I know they won't be thrilled, but fuck, Draco... you're the one always reminding me that we came here to do what we want and be what we want. Part of me feels unshakably guilty for wanting to skip out on hols with them. I haven't seen them in months, but... the other part of me feels like there's no reason to feel guilty. I never get to be selfish, you know?" Harry didn't realize the extent of that truth until he vocalized it, but Draco nodded sympathetically.

"You're right. Maybe I'm biased since I'm looking for validation on the same principle here, but... you know what? Fuck them. The whole lot of them. Let's make whatever plans we want. We're filthy rich. We can go anywhere." Draco wiped away his tears with the back of his hand and beamed at him. It made Harry's entire body thrum with excitement. Draco shook his head. "You are just so..."

"What?" Harry heard how breathy his voice was and prayed that his eyes weren't communicating how much he wanted to kiss Draco.

"You'd really do this for me, wouldn't you? Piss off every last person you love just to be a good friend and keep me out of the Manor?" Draco's eyes were unbearably tender. Harry tried not to assign more to the twinkle within them than was really there.
"Well, it's an excuse for me to avoid my problems too so it's not really all that noble. Striving to be as selfish as possible, remember?"

Draco threw his head back and laughed. Merlin, how was he pretty even when he'd just been crying? It was extremely unfair. Draco's very existence was going to make Harry spontaneously combust one day. He was certain of it.

"Right, I forgot. Sometimes I think you would have made a half decent Slytherin, Harry."

"Funny you should say that. The Sorting Hat had the same thought."

"You're taking the piss..." Draco eyed him dubiously, and Harry shook his head.

"Not in the slightest."

"You are a bottomless well of shocking secrets, Harry Potter."

***

Harry couldn't believe his eyes. He knew Gisele's father was wealthy. He worked on Wall Street doing something that made no sense to Harry; Harry’s own capacity for understanding math and all figures-related occupations was next to nil.

She hadn't made her father’s status a secret, but this lavish penthouse apartment was still a lot to take in. The Upper East Side building had a doorman. The awning baring the number of the 66th street building, maroon fabric stretched taut and impossibly spotless above the pavement, was a New York feature Harry had noticed all over the neighbourhood as they made their way there.

The light streaming in from the floor length windows lining the living room gave the apartment a remarkable illumination, bright but soft. Harry wondered what the nighttime skyline looked like from this vantage point, the glittering city lights dotting the landscape, the metropolitan equivalent of stars. Gisele seemed supremely uncomfortable with Harry being there. So much so that he wasn't sure why she'd agreed to let him accompany her in the first place. As she opened the temperature-controlled wine cellar, he asked that very question.

"It's not that I don't like you being here. It's that I don't like being here, and I don't want you to see this place and think that this is me."

"I know someone's family isn't always who they are. Draco and I are both perfect examples of that." Having grown up with his neglectful aunt and uncle, the bond of blood was a societal marker Harry discredited with a scoff. The concept that blood bought loyalty or was accompanied by a built-in capacity for nurturing and loving someone was laughable. Harry had seen quite enough to know that.

Gisele picked up an expensive looking bottle of white wine and speared Harry with unwavering eyes. He knew she was about to say something incisive, seeing right through Harry and stripping his soul of all secrets, as she often did. Well, perhaps not all secrets...

"Harry, I have to ask. How much have you thought about this trip? Don't be pissed at me for saying this, but you don't really... make the most careful decisions." Gisele smiled and walked over to the half-moon shaped bar that lined the right wall of the living room. "Being here always makes me
need a fucking drink. Let's chill for a while. We'll raid the liquor cabinet for your trip before we leave."

Harry flopped onto the light blue sectional sofa. The fabric was the softest thing he'd ever felt, like velveteen but somehow matte and of unidentifiable origin. He wondered if Draco would know what it was made of.

"Draco needs a friend right now. That's about as far as I thought about it."

"That's a very Harry answer." Gisele pulled two wine glasses from the rack hanging behind her, the glasses upside down, their smooth bases anchoring them in place between shiny lengths of metal. She poured wine to the halfway point of both glasses and came to sit beside him, handing one to Harry.

"I suppose it is." Harry rotated the stem of the glass between his fingers and took a drink. "And you asking about me after I asked about you is a very Gisele answer."

"Look at Mr. Astute. When the fuck did he get here and where's the real Harry? Stuffed in a closet somewhere, bound and gagged?"

"I have my moments." Harry chuckled, imagining Draco sitting with them and making some witty remark about how Harry's moments of lucidity came around about as frequently as the rarest celestial events.

"Okay, let's make a deal. I ask one thing I know you don't want to answer, and you do the same to me. We can't give brief, one sentence responses. Only real ass explanations. No cheating." Gisele leaned forward, raising her glass in a toast. Harry nodded and clinked his against it, the crystal making a pretty musical ring in the empty room.

"Cheers."

"Fuck, I shouldn't have said 'one question.' It's not enough."

"Maybe I'll answer more if I get drunk." Harry smiled and raised his glass, taking a small sip.

"Okay... how much of the reason you asked Draco on this trip is because you look at him like he's a goddamn feast, and you haven't had a meal in years?"

Harry choked on his wine, alcohol burning his throat as he tipped forward and coughed.

"Damn Harry, I know you're a fan of 'deny until you die,' but I didn't know admitting this would actually kill you." Gisele laughed as she patted him on the back.

"I don't look at him like that!" Harry felt the heat flooding his cheeks. "I don't... do I?"

Gisele canted her head with a knowing smile.

"Fuck." Harry put his glass down on the kidney bean shaped coffee table, and thrust his fingers into his hair. "It's not why I asked him. He just looked so... I don't know, Gisele. I'm a weak mess when he's upset like that. He got this terrible letter from his mum, and his parents are just — they don't understand him. The house he grew up in isn't a home anymore. It’s a prison. He can't go back there. I wanted to make him smile. I wanted to... I like seeing him happy. I just want to make everything in this world that hurt him go away."

"Oh Harry... you are in so fucking deep." Gisele whistled and shook her head, grabbing the bottle
from the table and refilling his glass.

Harry gladly accepted the wine. He could hear how his confession sounded. It didn't sound like Harry was under the spell of a simple crush. This was no fleeting infatuation that would pass when satisfied by a few innocent kisses or the disillusionment that comes with truly getting to know someone you've fantasized about. Harry already knew Draco, knew him so much better than he had any right to, but he did. In some strange way, Draco had begun to gradually feel like home to Harry, an essential pillar at the base of his New York life that he could no longer imagine being without.

"Your turn," Harry said quickly, keen to remove the focus from the cumbersome truths he was unearthing about his feelings. "Why don't you ever want to talk about your dad? What happened between you two? Draco and I both have our fair share of fucked up family history. It's not like we wouldn't be there for you. You seem to trust Seb with it."

"It's not about trust, Harry." Gisele leaned back, her head falling against the edge of the couch. "I can't just answer it without opening the door on about a hundred things I don't want to unpack. I have a white mother and a black father. I'm a liberal, queer kid with conservative parents who grew up so much poorer than this."

Gisele waved her hand to indicate the opulent apartment.

"Then they sent me to the best Upper East Side schools. It's like... I'm not black enough, but I'm not white enough. I'm rich but fucking hate everything about it, and it's not where I come from. It's not what I want for myself or how I define myself, but how can you say that when your parents are just trying to give you what they didn't have? How do you stand up and scream about privilege when you're sitting in the pit of its expensive belly? Sure, I'm half black, but what the fuck do I sound like yelling about this shit to a kid in the projects? A condescending Upper East Side trust fund kid they don't want to open her mouth, that's what. So I don't belong anywhere. I just fucking float between everything. It's A LOT, Harry. You get it? I mean, fuck... I might as well bill you for therapy now."

"Jesus..." Harry inhaled sharply and took another drink.

"Yeah well... you asked. And honestly, it's not like anyone who isn't..." Gisele paused and took a breath as though thinking through her next words. "It's not like you can really understand all this. I'm not saying that to be a dick, but you're — "

"White," Harry finished for her. He hoped his smile let her know that he understood she had every right to feel that way.

"Yep, and a man, and I just — "

"So make me understand. You can tell me when I'm being a clueless berk. I mean, Draco doesn't hesitate to do that every chance he gets so you have to know I don't mind." They both laughed, the tension in the atmosphere dispelling a little.

"He really does. I didn't like that about him at first. I'm protective of you. You're like my little brother even though you're a year older than me, you know?"

"I know. It means a lot to me. I don't know if I could have made it through this semester without you." Harry sincerely meant it. He could barely recall that isolated feeling from late August. He was surrounded by love now, even if it didn't always penetrate the darkness within him, those specters he couldn't chase away.
"Same." She smiled and took a drink. "Anyway, after watching you two together for a while, it was obvious it was less 'I need to be a critical fucker all the time' and more 'this is foreplay for us.'"

Harry was glad he didn't have a mouthful of wine because he would have done another graceless spit-take.

"No no, he's not... Yeah, it's joking now... It's different than it used to be, but he doesn't... He could never think of me like that."

Gisele narrowed her eyes.

"Harry, the dude was practically on top of you at Thanksgiving, putting his feet in your lap, going on about how amazing you were, looking into your damn eyes like he was about to confess his undying love. Yeah, he was high as fuck, but that's how he always looks at you. He's usually just more subtle about it. Weed was like truth serum to him that night. Why do you think I grabbed Seb and peaced the fuck out?! I was expecting you to call me the next day to say you'd finally fucked him."

"I don't know — "

"Oh. My. God. Harry!" Gisele snapped her fingers and laughed, a sound that was half exasperation and half amusement. "He agreed to go on a goddamn cabin vacation with you! The two of you. Alone. In a cabin. By the fucking fireplace. He wants that d, and he wants it bad."

"Gisele, I can't — oh fuck, what do I do?!" Harry ran a hand down his face. The possibility of really propositioning Draco and getting rejected was more than paralyzing.

"We're gonna need more wine."

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Gisele and Harry had a wonderful night drinking and talking. She promised to come to him more when she was feeling overwhelmed by her family. Harry didn't want to pressure her, of course, but she'd been there for him about every possible thing. He didn't want her to think of him as a friend reserved only for concerts and late night diner visits (although he dearly loved those moments as well). He wanted to return the favor and be a source of stability for her in any way she needed. By the end of Harry confessing this, they were both crying and locked in a tight embrace, vowing to never avoid each other when things got rough.

Finals were grueling, but Harry made it through relatively unscathed, exhausted but persevering, the nightmares and magic flares subdued for the time being. Harry tried as hard as he could to ignore the nagging voice that told him they would be back.

Wanking in the shower to images of everything he wanted to do to Draco on their upcoming trip was a fitting distraction.

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"This place better have running water, Potter. And I am not chopping a log or shoveling a footpath or anything of the sort. Going on holiday shouldn't include manual labor."

"Merlin, Draco, I didn't travel back in time and book us a cabin in the Middle Ages. You'll like it. I promise." Harry really hoped he would. Draco had been too stressed by finals to argue with Harry when he said he wanted to be in charge of the accommodations. He'd taken care to find a picturesque place in upstate New York. Harry sought one he could see Draco spending time in, stretching his legs by the fire with a glass of wine as he smiled at Harry and watched the snow tumbling down in fat flakes outside the window.

He was desperate to please Draco and didn’t want to end up in some subpar hotel that would make him, and by extension, Harry, miserable. Draco had grown up with the best of everything. He’d traveled the world while Harry had only been allowed to see the inside of a cupboard. While he knew Draco had left that world behind, Harry was still plagued by the need to show him something he hadn’t seen, to offer a trip that would bring light and wonder to Draco’s life and make him forget his mother’s letter.

After his talk with Gisele, the trip planning had gone from "stress free fun" to "I have to pick the perfect romantic getaway because I like Draco and he might like me and I cannot screw this up." It was a difficult task considering that Harry had no perspective when it came to these things. He’d grown up poor, accustomed to living like that for so long that his concept of what was appropriate and what was too excessive was skewed.

The location he’d chosen was a secluded area called Dry Island, situated near the top of Upper Saranac Lake, and the pictures were awe-inspiring. Harry couldn't wait to see it in person. It had taken a few ungainly conversations over the phone to wrangle the reservation. Harry had anticipated it being full, but it turned out they’d had a cancellation for most of the stretch of time Harry needed it. Still, the island only had space for a small amount of people, and the main lodge was nearly at capacity. By some miracle, the secluded log cabin Harry preferred was available instead.

Getting to the island required a plane ride with weather permitting. It made Harry wish they were going on a wizarding holiday instead; a Portkey would have solved this problem easily. In the end, it hadn’t been as much of a problem as Harry thought. The exclusivity of the resort meant that they were willing to bend over backward to accommodate their guests so a private plane was secured at no extra charge. Harry felt a little queasy accepting it. It was a lush extravagance that didn’t suit him. Although Harry had upper class money, he rarely ever put it to upper class use. His preferences were decidedly un-posh.

Of course, Harry failed to take into account that Draco wasn’t exactly a veteran when it came to Muggle methods of travel. He had spent the short plane ride squeezing Harry’s hand, his pale face turning ashen as he presumably tried not to vomit. This accounted for his grumpy mood as they sat in the backseat of the car that would take them the remaining few miles to the cabin.

“There’s a full staff here, even a chef on hand at all times. I know it looks like the middle of nowhere — ”

“It is the middle of nowhere, Potter. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you with the arrangements. Me, asking a bloody Gryffindor, to plan. I must have lost my mind.”

“Just wait until you see it, okay? If you still hate it, you can have a go at me with every creative, long-winded insult in your head.”

Draco fixed Harry with stern eyes that said you bet your arse I will. When they pulled up to the
cabin, Draco’s expression evened out a bit, but there was still a lingering doubt on his face. He
didn’t seem ready to cave and praise Harry’s choices just yet.

On the other hand, Harry was already in love with the property. Everything was covered in a
blanket of pure, white snow, untainted by the mire of dirt and slush that normally put a one-day
expiration date on the attractiveness of winter in the city. The cabin was surrounded by pine and fir
trees, their branches bearing mounds of powdery snow. The scenery looked like a quaint painting
come to life, an immaculate winter wonderland. There were lights on inside the building, emitting a
warm yellow glow that beckoned Harry closer, filling his head with idyllic images of basking in the
heat of a well-stoked fire with Draco by his side.

The driver helped carry their bags in, and when Draco entered, shaking the snow off his boots on
the porch steps, Harry saw his face change instantaneously.

“Oh, Harry…” Draco spun around to take in the view, the immense stone fireplace, high vaulted
ceilings, and the gorgeous hardwood floors. The light from the lamps in the living room danced
across his grey eyes. “I’m a brat, and you have every right to make me atone for it however you see
fit.”

“I’ll remember you said that.” As Harry tipped him, the driver smiled at him with raised eyebrows.
Harry shrugged bashfully and shut the door behind him.

“Seriously, I’m a terrible, spoiled prat. I guess you can take the boy out of the Manor, but you can’t
take the Manor out of the boy.” Draco smiled apologetically, and Harry shook his head.

“It’s okay, really. I should have known that plane ride would shake you up a bit. It’s really the only
way to get here. I wanted somewhere off the beaten path, but again, I promise this is far from a
manky old shack in the woods.”

“I can see that. Again, I’m sorry for being a curmudgeon.”

“You wouldn’t be Malfoy if you weren’t a curmudgeon from time to time.” Compelled and
somehow powerless to stop it, Harry walked closer and outstretched his arms as though meaning to
wrap Draco in a hug. Draco eyed him curiously, and Harry retracted, his mouth agape as he silently
cursed his body for moving without his permission.

“What? We can only hug if one of us is in the clutches of an emotional breakdown? I can start
crying if it’ll make you feel more at ease, Harry.” Draco smirked, slipping his gloved hands into
his coat pockets and leaning against the back of the large couch in front of the fireplace. Even in all
those layers, he looked stylish and enticing.

“Oh… no, I… er.” Harry scratched the back of his head and averted his eyes.

“What? We can only hug if one of us is in the clutches of an emotional breakdown? I can start
crying if it’ll make you feel more at ease, Harry.” Draco smiled, slipping his gloved hands into
his coat pockets and leaning against the back of the large couch in front of the fireplace. Even in all
those layers, he looked stylish and enticing.

“Let’s not be like those hetero men who panic about male affection and leave a seat between them
at the movie theater. It would be nice if you… you know, didn’t always wait for me to be breaking
into pieces.” Harry looked up, and this time it was Draco’s turn to have trouble meeting Harry’s
eyes. He cleared his throat and didn’t wait for Harry’s response, choosing instead to begin
exploring the cabin, traveling from the living room to the kitchen. The kitchen wasn’t large, but,
like the rest of the cabin, it was constructed from the finest materials, multi-colored granite tiles
behind the stove and above the varnished butcher block countertop.

“I gave them a list of things to stock the fridge and pantry with so I could cook, but we can also eat
at the main lodge or have the chef come down here to cook for us, if you like. Whatever you
want.” Harry looked at Draco expectantly. It wounded Harry: how suppliant he was, waiting with
bated breath for Draco to praise him again, to give his seal of approval.

“Harry… why did you do all this? Don’t misunderstand me. It’s everything I could want, but… why go to all this trouble?”

_Because I’m mad about you. Because I think I’d do almost anything to make you smile._

“It’s your first Christmas away from your family after the war. It feels like an important one. I just wanted it to be nice… for both of us,” Harry quickly added. “I figure we can’t think about the rest of the world and its problems when we’re surrounded by all this.”

Harry motioned to the cabin and the landscape outside the windows. The answering gaze from Draco was full of heat and affection. Harry wanted to moan and drop to his knees right there.

_Merlin, you are not going to survive this if you don’t get a grip, Harry._

“I think… that this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me, Harry. Can I have that hug now?” Draco haughtily lifted his chin as if to let Harry know this was a staunch command and not a question.

“Sure.” Harry closed the distance between them and folded his arms around Draco, his chin resting on the scratchy wool of Draco’s coat. Draco’s arms encircled Harry’s waist, and he let out a contented sigh. He squeezed Harry, and… oh god, was he nuzzling in Harry’s neck? Harry felt a warm puff of air on his skin, and the hair on the back of his neck stood at attention, goosebumps erupting up and down his arms. Draco’s lips were so close. Another inch or two, and they’d be pressing against Harry’s skin. They’d probably be a little dry and rough from the cold, but Draco would make it warm as he kissed him, moistening his lips with his tongue, and maybe —

Draco released him, stepping away before Harry’s imagination (and his cock) could indulge in any more flights of fancy. Cold air seemed to rush into the room as Draco stepped away, and Harry was embarrassed at his unadulterated need for Draco’s touch. How had it gotten this bad? He could have sworn he had a handle on it before that conversation with Gisele, but admitting it aloud, speaking the words instead of quarantining them in a hidden pocket of his mind, seemed to make them undeniably real.

It had gotten steadily worse in the days leading up to their departure. Harry had wanked in the shower every day, wandering into the communal bathroom late at night to avoid any awkward encounters, his shoulder pressed against the tile, scalding spray beating down his back as he stifled his moans. He envisioned Draco coming up behind him, his hard cock pressed against the curve of Harry’s arse, mothing at his wet shoulder, long fingers sliding across his stomach and hips, reaching around to replace Harry’s hand with his own, one arm protectively encasing Harry’s waist as he stroked his cock, biting and licking across Harry’s neck. Merlin, he wanted it so much, wanted Draco to whisper how much he wanted Harry as he wanked him off, how beautiful he thought Harry was, how good he looked arching against Draco and begging for more.

“Thank you for this. We’re going to have the best two weeks ever.”

Harry nodded but didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure what kind of two weeks it was going to be, but he did feel certain that, no matter what happened, it would be interesting.

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The first couple of days passed easily, the two of them leisurely drinking and eating, listening to
music and reading. They both enjoyed soaking up the bucolic atmosphere, staying inside and cozy
under blankets. Harry’s persistent libido had calmed down somewhat. He really had a good time
with Draco no matter what the circumstances were, and being by his side, the firelight dancing off
the contours of his perfect face, was a blessing he intended to savor.

The third day was Christmas Day, and Harry had arranged for the chef to cook a traditional
English holiday dinner (with a few twists). He was more than happy to cook for Draco for most of
their stay, but he wasn’t sure if he was up for constructing another holiday meal so soon after
Thanksgiving. Besides, he wanted to ensure that it would be impeccable. Thankfully, the epic,
multi-course meal did not disappoint.

To start, they were given a course of foie gras, fig chutney, and an array of cheeses paired with
crostini and homemade rosemary and thyme crackers. After that came the chestnut, bacon, and
parsnip soup followed by the main course of pancetta and roast shallot stuffed turkey. It was paired
with brussel sprouts roasted with chestnuts and sage, and cranberry sauce simmered with port and
juniper berries. By the time they made it to the Christmas pudding, they were stuffed to the gills
and a little tipsy. Each course had come with a new cocktail pairing, the brandy soaked dessert
served with goblets of mulled wine emitting the most heavenly aroma of cinnamon and cloves. The
whole cabin smelled like Christmas.

It made Harry’s heart full, but nothing was as delicious as watching Draco’s excitement. He
received each new plate of food and fancy cocktail with gusto, his cheeks pleasantly pink from
alcohol and his eyes gleaming with tenderness every time he looked at Harry.

“The Christmas feast at Hogwarts and Christmas dinner at the Manor were always my favorite
meals of the year,” Draco mused, leaning his head in his hand and gazing across the table at Harry
with wistful eyes.

“How does this compare?” Harry nervously asked, taking a sip of mulled wine.

“It’s better,” Draco said quietly, a sweet smile spreading across his mouth. His lips were red from
the wine, and Harry wanted to lick them clean.

“Stop it.” Harry laughed softly and looked away, gazing out the window. A smattering of
snowflakes were tumbling lazily to the ground. There was no fierce wind, just a gentle snowstorm.

“It’s true. I can’t believe you arranged all this. I have a sneaking suspicion that the figure you gave
me when I asked to chip in was a severe underestimate. You forget I’m a Malfoy. I know what
something of this sort costs.” Draco raised an eyebrow and leaned forward, steepling his fingers.

“Consider it a Christmas gift.” Harry shrugged and took a drink. Draco was watching him so
closely, it was almost unnerving. Harry wasn’t sure if his alcohol-tinged eyesight was playing
tricks on him, but he nearly looked hungy, the kind of hunger Harry knew all too well considering
that he’d been severely afflicted with it the last few weeks.

“You continue to astound me, Harry. I used to think you were rather predictable, but you really
aren’t, are you?” Draco’s voice was soft.

“Depends on who you ask. In the spirit of that, I have one more surprise for you tonight.”

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“Good evening, gentlemen. I hope you enjoyed your dinner.”

“Oh yes, thank you. It was brilliant.” Harry waved the driver off with a smile as he tried to help him into the carriage, but Draco accepted his hand, hoisting himself up and sitting next to Harry. The driver draped a fur blanket over their laps and returned to the front compartment of the horse-drawn sleigh. With one quick, measured snap of the reins, they were off.

The island looked like the inside of a snow globe, everything dipped in fresh white that was so perfectly dispersed, it didn’t quite seem real. The moonlight glittered off the snow, the slopes shining like diamonds. The curtain of stars peppering the sky was so vivid. That was one thing the city lacked, and Harry was grateful to be able to see it now. It was a chilly night, but the tame wind and the blanket covering them kept it on the right side of brisk.

An owl perched on the branch of a snow-sprinkled pine tree let out a muted hoot as they passed, its agile head swiveling toward them.

“I’m sorry about Hedwig. She always seemed… like more than just a messenger for you.”

Harry swiftly turned back to Draco, his voice a surprise in the hush of the night.

“Thanks. She was. I don’t imagine I’ll ever get another owl. Don’t think I could stomach it.” Sometimes it felt strange to miss his owl in the grand scheme of things, but she was the first pet he’d ever had. The Dursleys certainly never would have gotten him an animal companion. Hedwig was the first animal he’d ever shared a lasting bond with, and she’d been the most faithful and loving of pets.

Harry had lost so much during the war. He knew some people might assign a bigger value to the loss of human life, but it was all the same to him. Everyone and everything he’d lost was valuable. Every loss was equally senseless. Harry lifted his hand from under the blanket and laid it over his lap.

Draco covered Harry’s hand with his own and gave it a firm squeeze. Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and he wished there weren’t gloves between them right now.

“We all lost so much in so many different ways. But maybe… is it flippant to say we’ve also gained things and… people that perhaps we wouldn’t have otherwise?” Draco peered at Harry from under his lashes, so shy and delicate in the moonlight.

“Not at all. If we couldn’t find the silver linings, we’d go mad. I can’t always see that when things are rough, but… I see it right now.”

_I see it with you. Dear god, do I see it with you._

They smiled at one another, and every part of Harry turned to mush. They didn’t break eye contact as the sleigh pulled back up to the cabin. Draco only looked away when the driver opened the door to the sleigh and began to help him back to the ground.

“Have a lovely evening, sirs,” the man said with a short bow before heading off into the night.

“The staff around here are like stealthy ghosts. They’re here one minute and disappear when you turn your head. House elves are a quarter that size and not as inconspicuous.”

“Right? The information about this place kept stressing the ‘discreet and respectful staff’ because
‘Dry Island jealously guards the privacy of their guests,’” Harry opened the front door and stepped aside for Draco to enter, “I thought it was really weird. Made me wonder what goes on here, you know?”

Draco slanted his eyes, appraising Harry in an inscrutable way before quickly changing the subject.

“While I fully realize that anything I give you is going to pale in comparison to this place, and the dinner, and the sleigh ride, I do have a couple Christmas presents for you.” Draco’s eyes twinkled as he strode toward the stairs, hurriedly jogging up them. Harry unzipped the duffel bag he had left next to the couch and retrieved two small, square packages wrapped in shiny green paper. As Draco descended the stairs, he frowned. “Are you kidding me? I thought this holiday was my present. You shouldn’t have gotten me anything else.”

Harry shrugged sheepishly.

“I got this before I planned our trip.”

Draco gave him a sharp look that said he wasn’t buying a word of that, but he took the packages from Harry anyway, handing off two of his own gifts in exchange. They were wrapped in silly paper that reminded Harry of Draco’s penchant for quirky pajama bottoms. A smattering of gingerbread men were partying heartily, drinking glasses of wine and mugs of what looked like eggnog. Some of the gingerbread men were drunkenly caroling around a piano while one of their brethren played the keys, notes coming out of speech bubbles near their mouths. Others were dancing or kissing, and one was vomiting onto a Christmas ham while his gingerbread friend rubbed his back.

“Where in the bloody hell did you find this paper?!” Harry asked with a laugh.

“Gisele. She knows this eccentric girl who designs all sorts of fucked up, offbeat holiday products. ‘Merry Shitmas and Happy Smutdays’ is the name of her business.”

“No!”

“I swear on my life! She went to school for graphic design, and that is how she chose to apply her passion. I’ll have to introduce you sometime. You’d love her shop.”

They exchanged hesitant glances before unwrapping the presents. The first of Draco’s gifts was a set of Polaroids of the two of them, all taken on nights Harry could immediately recall just by looking at the photos. There was one of Draco on Harry’s back. Harry was laughing, his arms hooked around Draco’s thighs as Draco pointed in the distance like a general commanding his army. Draco had been spectacularly inebriated that night and demanded Harry carry him back from the party.

They’d been at this crazy installation art party held by a couple of Tisch students. The idea was that every room was an installation that was constantly evolving. Each room had different materials to work with: cans of paint, glitter, lightbulbs, magazine clippings, rope lights, etc. The hosts of the party encouraged people to pick up whatever caught their eye and decorate. There had also been something about “uncovering the intent of each impromptu artist and the impetus for their creation in a freeform discussion in a safe space.” All that went out the window after everyone, including the hosts, had been drinking for a couple hours. Draco had relished the opportunity, his face lighting up like a child on his first visit to Honeydukes as he stuck his hand in an open can of red paint and defiantly smacked it against a blank space on the wall.

“College is fucking barmy, Potter, and I am HERE for it!” He’d shouted joyously, smearing
another arc of red just below the handprint.

Harry remembered Draco babbling about how it was Harry’s duty as the Chosen One to protect Draco and carry him in his “big, manly Saviour arms.” Thankfully, Seb and Gisele had been far too wasted to do anything but point and guffaw at Draco’s apparent incoherency while Harry frantically tried to shush him. One of them must have taken this picture, but he didn’t remember it happening.

“I’ll be quiet if you give me a piggyback ride.” Draco had batted his eyelashes, and Harry had relented with a laugh, bending down so Draco could clumsily hop on. “Go forth, noble steed! To the dorms!”

Even now, Harry could feel the weight of Draco folded over his back, his skinny thighs pressed against Harry’s forearms. At the time, he chalked it up to Draco being drunk and ridiculous, but maybe Gisele was right. Maybe Draco had been returning Harry’s stolen glances, and Harry just hadn’t noticed. As Draco himself would most likely be quick to point out, it wouldn’t be the first time something had escaped Harry’s notice despite dangling right in front of his face.

The frame was large, containing four strategically placed Polaroids against a precisely cut black mat. The frame itself was decorated with strips from *Rolling Stone* and *NME*: reviews, articles, and pictures of many of the bands Harry and Draco loved.

“Draco, this is great. Thank you so much. I absolutely love it.” Harry couldn’t have restrained his wide grin if he’d tried.

“Yeah? Not too saccharine?”

“Not at all. You haven’t opened yours yet,” Harry pointed out.

“And you haven’t finished with yours,” Draco retorted. They both turned their attention back to their gifts. Harry unwrapped the second one to find two Nico records, *Chelsea Girl* and *The Marble Index*. Harry loved Nico’s work with The Velvet Underground but hadn’t made his way to her solo records yet. There was always so much music and so little time. He couldn’t wait to give these a spin. “Those are both brilliant. *Chelsea Girl* is amazing, but I think I like *The Marble Index* best because she wrote all the songs herself. I’ve met a few pretentious boys at that school of ours who only think she was good enough to sing other people’s songs. That’s a load of sexist bollocks. It has a completely different sound than *Chelsea Girl*, but that’s what makes it so remarkable. I think you’ll like it.”

“I know I will. Thank you again, Draco. You know me pretty well, don’t you?”

“Likewise. Thank you, Harry. For everything though, not just these.” Draco held up the two presents.

“Oh, let me tell you about those. So, apparently there is this whole huge world of bootlegs for indie music, like a vast catalog I had no idea about. One of the guys at Bleecker Street tipped me off, and Neutral Milk Hotel has a few of them that people are really into, especially this Jittery Joe’s one. It’s a live show Jeff Mangum played at a coffee shop, and it’s so gorgeous, Draco. I hope you don’t mind, but I listened to it a couple times. He does this cover of a Phil Spector song that… well, it’s just really, really good.” The truth was that it had made Harry curl into a fetal position and cry hysterically, Mangum’s sincere vocals and the genuine words of the love song too much for his heart to take. But he wasn’t about to tell Draco that. “And this single only has two songs, but it’s kind of rare and trust me, it’s worth it just for ‘Engine.’ That song is every bit as good as anything from *Aeroplane.*”
“This is absolutely perfect. I… I hardly know what to say. I was dreading Christmas this year, and you turned everything around.” Draco set the record and CD down on the couch. He gently plucked his gifts from Harry’s hand and set them aside as well before enveloping Harry in a tight hug.

“You did all this… for me. For us. At first, I thought ‘this is Harry being Harry. Charging in with no plan. He probably didn’t think about any of this or what it might mean. He just ran on instinct like always.’ But that isn’t completely true, is it?” Draco whispered, and this time there was no doubt about how intentionally close his lips were. They brushed against Harry’s ear with every syllable contained in that question. Harry let his worries fall away and pulled Draco even closer, his arms winding around his shoulders.

“Harry…” Draco’s breath wafting over his skin made him shiver, the tiniest moan escaping his lips. “Did you take me here because you… do you — ”

Harry pulled back, clasping Draco’s face in both hands, and kissed him ardently before he had time to talk himself out of it.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter with the brief mention of thoughts of self harm/suicidal ideation. Lots of other much happier things going on before and after it, but as promised, I wanted to note which chapter contains this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Relief washed over him as Draco groaned into his mouth, opening his lips to accept Harry’s tongue, his hands traveling up Harry’s back, fingers twining in his hair.

The kiss grew more rapacious with every passing second, their tongues dancing against each other like they were seeking, imploring with the stores of desire that had been coursing through both of them for months now, simmering into a fever pitch that neither wanted to deny any longer. Harry answered Draco’s question by devouring his mouth, funnelling every clandestine thought, every painful craving that felt like it had branded his very skin, into the joining of their lips. He hoped Draco could hear it all, hoped he could hear the way Harry’s every cell was calling out for him. When they broke apart, Draco’s eyes were all fire and smoke, and it made Harry’s cock thicken.

“Come here,” Draco whispered, leading Harry by the hand to sit on the couch. The fire was burning as brightly as it had been before they left for the sleigh ride, the screen erected to contain it even though Draco had meticulously guarded it with charms. His painstaking care had made Harry’s skin feel too tight around his chest; he wondered whether or not Draco possessed a distrust and wary respect of fire since it had nearly claimed his life.

As Harry sat down, Draco straddled his lap, palms flat on Harry’s chest, his ruby lips parted slightly as he gazed back at Harry, eyes at half-mast. The fire crackled behind them, the whole cabin effused with the mollifying glow of the flames.

“Is it okay if we just… do this for now?” There was that timid tone again, a pitch rarely heard from the brash, confident Draco Malfoy. It was irresistible.

“Yeah, of course. It feels like I’ve been waiting years to kiss you. I could do it all night.” Harry sighed as the veracity of that came over him, the push and pull they’d always engaged in, that dance of challenge and acceptance, competition and clash. Had it all led here? Was their friction only waiting for the right axis on which to spin, pivoting just the right measured turn in another direction to transform into something else entirely?

Draco and Harry’s past and present felt like adjacent rooms, paper-thin walls separating them, only a gentle knock needed for the call to be heard on the other side. The fluidity of time and perspective had all but dissolved the barriers between those rooms. They were both orphans of war, boys who had no choice, boys who trusted in the guidance of the adults in their lives only to unmask their faults and hidden agendas, finding out they were simple, flawed people underneath. Harry and Draco were very different, their lives had followed different trajectories, some might even say contradictory ones, but there were echoes of the same elements at every turn. Whose arms should they fall into but each other’s? Who could Harry divulge to more starkly than Draco? He was more than content with Draco’s mouth on his at the moment. The rest could wait. Draco was worth it, and Harry was in no hurry.
“I didn’t think you’d ever… I never thought you’d want me like this.” Draco buried his head in Harry’s neck, his hands sliding up to grip Harry’s shoulders, speaking the words into his skin as though they might absorb there, safe in Harry’s flesh instead of the volatile air, where they could sail away.

“I do. Merlin, I want you so much.” Harry squeezed Draco’s waist, pulling their chests flush, his cock continuing to thicken as Draco’s arse dragged across his lap. He kissed along the side of Draco’s neck, sucking his earlobe into his mouth, his hips bucking up as he heard Draco moan. It was a sweet, breathy sound. Harry hadn’t expected him to sound like that. How could a moan be melodious and clear as a crystal bell? It was one of the most exquisite things Harry had ever heard.

Draco claimed Harry’s mouth again. It was leisurely this time, the fire between them stoked to a smolder, arousal winding its way through every part of Harry, blood pumping steadily to his cock. He wondered if Draco could feel it, if he liked it, if he knew that one kiss from him reduced Harry to a writhing mess in a way no other person had. Harry shuddered just thinking about how his body would react to more.

They kissed and skated their hands across shoulders, chests, and backs, dipping under jumpers to stroke heated skin. Every time Harry’s hand met Draco’s skin, it elicited more of those musical sounds, his slim hips grinding in Harry’s lap, teasing his cock. Draco nibbled on Harry’s bottom lip and continued to travel down, scraping his teeth across his pulse point. Harry gasped as he felt it, thinking about his heart beating under Draco’s lips, the surge of his life throbbing into Draco’s mouth. It made him think about other things throbbing in Draco’s mouth, and suddenly, self-discipline seemed like an impossible feat.

“Oh — Draco —” Harry began to halfheartedly push him away, but then Draco sucked a mark onto the space between Harry’s shoulder and neck, his hand pushing up under Harry’s jumper to lightly pinch his nipple. Suddenly, Harry wasn’t capable of doing anything other than moaning and arching into the touch.

Draco was the one to regain some composure, pulling back and dropping his hands at his sides. He was a vision: normally impeccable hair rumpled from Harry’s hands, his cheeks and lips red, his jumper bunched up about the waist.

“Fuck, I am…” Draco caught his breath with a chuckle. “Not obeying my own instructions.”

Draco carefully extricated himself from Harry’s lap and collapsed beside him. He was panting like he’d just run a marathon, adjusting his trousers. Harry smiled at the thought of Draco being as achingly hard as he was right now.

“What are you so smug about, Potter?” Draco raised a flirty eyebrow, the left corner of his mouth quirking up.

“Need some help taking care of that?” Harry promptly cringed at his cheesy line.

“Not yet.” Draco’s countenance went mournful, his eyes turning a little melancholy as he redirected his gaze to the fire.

“Why not?” It wasn’t that Harry didn’t respect whatever pace Draco wanted to take this. He was just genuinely curious. After all, Draco had consistently been very bold and open about sex. While he didn’t always detail his encounters the way Seb and Harry did, he made enough uncensored comments to let Harry know he was a man who reveled in it without shame. A small, insecure voice inside Harry wondered if Draco thought he’d been terrible at it.
“It’s complicated with us. You aren’t just a one-off I met at a party. I’m not trying to take cues from some terrible romance movie about ‘waiting’ right now, I just… think things might go better if we did. Besides, it’ll give you time to back out and recoil in horror when you realize you just snogged Draco Malfoy.” Draco smirked, trying to play it off as a joke, but Harry couldn’t help but ponder if there was truth to that. Probably not. He doubted Draco was as plagued by self-doubt as he was. He certainly never acted like it.

“I’m not going to do that, Draco,” Harry replied sincerely.

“Well… I’m sure you’re glad we’re not at Hogwarts for this. Can’t imagine the stares we would have gotten.”

“You’d have cared?” To Harry, Draco didn’t seem like he gave much thought to how other people perceived him. One of the things Harry admired most about him was how Draco was so unapologetically himself. It pushed Harry to do the same, to dig in deeper. Harry had never excelled at introspection, but he liked to think he’d made some progress on that front over the last few months.

“Wouldn’t you?” Draco gave him an unreadable look, and Harry tried to ascertain what was going on behind the walls of his mind. Harry paused and thought it over.

“Not really. It’s sort of business as usual for me. I don’t know that it would have made much of a difference if they’d been staring because of that instead of the hundred other reasons they used to stare.”

Draco shook his head and smiled.

“I don’t know that I’ll ever completely figure you out.”

“That feeling is 100% mutual.”

They lapsed into silence, both watching the fire and occasionally hazard ing glances at each other.

“Harry, I… as much I would love to just obey my id at the moment, I have to say something.” Draco chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes going abruptly grave.

“Okay.” Harry sat up straighter, his pulse speeding up as he waited to hear what Draco would say.

“I’m still a wreck in so many ways. And so are you.”

Harry rolled his eyes with a huff.

“I’m not saying that to be cruel. I’m saying it because it’s true. We’re both still getting our lives together, and I just… I don’t want you to be… fuck, I don’t know how to say this right…” Draco ran a hand through his hair and turned back to the fire.

“It’s okay, really. Whatever it is, I promise to not… it’ll be fine.” Harry smiled, but it was disingenuous. The truth was that he had no idea if he’d crumble apart from whatever Draco was trying to tell him. He had a nagging feeling that it wasn’t going to be good news.

“I’m not ready for a serious relationship. Whatever this is going to be… it has to be slow and no pressure for now. I know saying this is probably a huge risk. I don’t want to screw up this holiday, but if I didn’t say something… Well, I imagine that would be even worse.” Draco let out a harsh exhale and eyed Harry anxiously.
However, Harry chuckled and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, I’m glad you find my vulnerability so entertaining.”

“Not at all. I just thought you were going to say you didn’t want this at all, that you wished you could take back that kiss. Draco, I know I’m a mess, and I know what it’s like to be thrust into a relationship that’s too serious too soon.” Harry’s thoughts darkly shifted to images of Ginny. He truly regretted that he hadn’t broken it off sooner. She’d been understanding about it, even looked as though she had known it was coming. There was no hint of shock on her face when he tearfully broke up with her, only sorrow and something akin to pity. Still, he’d felt like such a piece of shit at the time. Even if they weren’t right for each other, Ginny meant a lot to him, and he detested the thought that he’d strung her along. “I don’t want to go down that road again. I know you love to remind me how dense I am, but this is one case where I know not to charge in like a free-falling idiot. Besides, I think you’ve heard enough about me sleeping with people this year to know I’m… a little bit looser about these things now. I’m not in a rush.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“What?”

“That is a very un-Harry Potter-like statement.”

“Yeah well, you’ve said a lot of un-Draco Malfoy-like things this year.”

“Fair enough.” Draco relaxed a bit, leaning into the comfy couch cushions, and the silence resumed.

“So… we’re…”

“Friends who want to sleep together, not label it for now and just see what happens,” Draco said definitively.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

The wind outside picked up to a howl, tree branches shaking in the gusts.

“In your newfound sense of clarity, do you realize this is probably going to be the dumbest thing we’ve ever done?” Draco turned back to Harry with a gentle smile.

“Absolutely, but I can’t bring myself to give a shit.”

“Me either.”

They both laughed, and Draco moved closer, draping his limbs around Harry. They cuddled by the fire until they both grew sleepy, retiring to their separate (for now) bedrooms. Harry fell asleep with a smile on his face.

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“I hope you didn’t think you had to do something this grandiose. Do I seem like I’m still that much
of a snob?”

Since the sun was high and bright, they had decided to take a walk and catch a glimpse of the surrounding wilderness.

“No! I mean, we’ve gone to grungy basement shows together. Like I said, I just knew how special this time of year was to you. And to me too, honestly. I had so many terrible Christmases with the Dursleys. I’m not saying there wasn’t part of me that didn’t want to impress you, but I think I also wanted to do whatever the hell I wanted, no matter how outlandish it was. It’s nice being able to control what my holiday is like.” Currents of memory skidded through Harry’s mind like ripples in a Pensieve. He shunned the images of an icy Godric’s Hollow, a Christmas that was a holiday in name only, a pair of gravestones covered in a layer of frost.

“I understand that. You did, perhaps, go a bit overboard though.” Draco laughed softly. “No need to get us an entire island next time.”

“I know. I’m shit at knowing what’s — I’m not used to my money.” Harry kicked a mound of snow with the toe of his boot, shrugging coyly.

“Hey, I’m not complaining.” Draco put a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and Harry’s skin warmed underneath it. “Allow me to tell you once again that is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever done for me. I just also think you should know that it’s sort of… a disproportionate gift unless you’re about to propose to someone.”

Harry laughed and nodded.

“Yeah, I think I sort of figured that out when we brought the chef over. She kept looking at us like she was waiting to see who would get on bended knee first.”

“Please, the whole bloody staff keeps looking at us like that. They’re covert about it, I’ll give them that, but I see it.”

They stopped walking as they approached the edge of Saranac Lake. It was a beautiful sight of winter brutality, the body of water iced over completely. At the edge of the lake, the sheets of ice were staggered as if the water had frozen in mid-wave, its motion halted by the temperature drop that wouldn’t subside for months. It resembled an opaque, sparkling quartz.

“What did Ron and Hermione have to say about this trip?”

“Oh… I didn’t exactly tell them. I just said I was staying in New York for break which… isn’t a complete lie, I guess. We’re still in the state, at least.”

“Harry.” Funny how Draco could admonish with only one well-placed use of his name. “Do they even know about me?”

“Yeah. Around Thanksgiving, I told them that we’d become friends.”

“And what horrors ensued from that?” Draco shoved his hands in his pockets and gazed off into the distance. There were tall trees as far as the eye could see.

“Dunno. I didn’t get a response, and then when I sent letters about hols, we were gone before I could hear back.” Harry omitted the part where he’d waited until the last possible second to send those letters, thereby guaranteeing he wouldn’t get a response before they left for Dry Island. “Aren’t we supposed to be taking a break from all that?”
“You’re right. Forget it. Let’s go get drunk in front of the fire. Gisele gave us quite the wine selection. Would be a shame not to put it to good use.”

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“So how long have you been wanking to me in your bedroom, desperately calling out ‘Draco, Draco!’” Draco squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip like he was in the throes of passion, and Harry slapped his bicep. “Hey! Glass of wine in hand! Red wine, no less! Watch it.”

“Are you trying to make me regret fucking you before I even have? If so, you’re doing an excellent job.” Harry rolled his eyes and took a drink from his wine glass.

“Whatsoever, you love it when I rattle you. It turns you on. You can’t stand it when people fawn over you. You find it… what’s the word?” Draco snapped his fingers and tilted his head back, eyes squinting in concentration. “Sycophantic! You don’t want someone to worship you. Even though you’re obstinate as they come, you like someone who pushes back.”

Draco had a knack for delivering perspicacious truths about Harry’s nature like that, always uttered as conclusive statements rather than questions. Between Gisele and Draco, Harry was beginning to wonder if he had wise friends or if he was simply that pathetically transparent.

“Pot meet kettle,” Harry said, raising his eyebrows as he finished his wine. He was learning that he wasn’t particularly a fan of red wine nor could he tell what made a costly bottle “better” than a fifteen dollar one, but he wasn’t about to reveal that to Draco. Despite what he’d said by the lake, Harry still sometimes felt unrefined next to Draco. In New York, it was easier to forget where Draco came from, his former self masked by who he was at NYU, everything from his clothes to his increasingly natural conservations with Muggles diverting Harry’s attention from the past to the present.

But here in the cabin, among the luxuriant food spreads and the rare wine pilfered from Gisele’s father, there were glimmers of the old Malfoy lurking underneath. Watching Draco’s careful handling of utensils over dinner, the way he lightly pinched the stem of his wine glass instead of cradling it clumsily in his entire hand like Harry, brought to mind the world he’d been raised in, a world that Harry really knew little of, when all was said and done. Questions took shape on Harry’s tongue, but he was careful not to let them slip.

“Oh believe me, I know. Do you ever think…” Draco started but petered off.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Draco put down his wine glass, and when he turned his attention back to Harry, the salacious look in his eye made Harry want to vanish all their clothes. He crept toward Harry, and when he was close enough, their lips met like they were drawn by a magnetic pull, the kiss deepening immediately.

Harry had always found kissing to be a hard riddle to solve with someone new. How did you anticipate which direction they might move? How did you figure out the steps and tempo of the dance when you’d never done it before? This usually resulted in a lot of overthinking and bumping of noses, his glasses knocked askew as he tried to guess what the other person would do next. Kissing Draco wasn’t like that. Kissing Draco was like falling in step with an old, familiar dance
partner after years apart, their mouths slotting together like they knew the shape of each other’s lips.

Harry hauled Draco into his lap. After last night, he realized he wanted Draco in that position as much as possible. He loved the way his weight felt on top of him, Harry’s arms wrapped around his waist as Draco’s hips undulated against him. Harry’s mouth traveled down Draco’s neck, and he let out a string of those adorable, kittenish mewls Harry was quickly becoming addicted to.

“Merlin, the noises you make. I can’t wait to hear what you sound like when you come.”

“Fuck, Harry… why don’t you get to it, then?” Draco breathlessly asked, punctuating the question with a few calculated movements of his hips.

“What happened to slow?”

“Mmm, there’s slow and then there’s puritanical. Take your fucking clothes off,” Draco practically growled, shedding his own jumper. Harry tossed his off too, nearly strangling himself in his haste, and halted as he took in the sight of Draco’s naked chest.

“Don’t you fucking dare. I don’t want your pity. I don’t want a flowery emotional speech right now, and I definitely don’t want you looking at me like I’m some ugly, scarred thing — ”

“God, no. Draco, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I just… I didn’t know…” Harry struggled to articulate what he felt as he looked at the evidence of his wand work, the indelible proof of the moment he threw the Sectumsempra curse in Draco’s direction without considering the dreadful consequences.

He was surprised that the presence of the Dark Mark didn’t really matter to him. Despite all it used to signify, it had lost its power now, faded and stagnant, no force of evil alive to trigger a slithering movement in the coils of the snake. The only thing he felt was sympathy. He knew Draco was revolted by it, his affinity for long sleeves exhibiting his need to cover it up at all times. Harry knew that Draco letting him see it like this meant something.

Draco clasped Harry’s chin in his hands, lifting it and forcing their eyes to meet. Draco’s countenance was staunch, and Harry knew better than to contest whatever he was about to say.

“I will say this once and only once. You did what you thought you had to. I forgave you for it a long time ago. You should understand that, if you can forgive me for everything you clearly have, you should be able to accept that I’ve done the same for you. I want your cock in my hands and my mouth. I want your body on mine, and I don’t want those flawed, lost boys we were in that bathroom to get in the way of that. Do you hear me?”

Harry nodded, and the concern in Draco’s expression lessened, some of the heat of earlier returning in its stead.

“Good.” Draco ran his hands up and down Harry’s chest, fingers playing with the tufts of hair there, tracing the line of it that disappeared underneath the waistband of his jeans. “Upstairs or here?”

“There.” Harry tilted his body and nodded toward the fluffy rug in front of the fire.

Draco raised an eyebrow and licked his lips.

“Good choice.” He removed himself from Harry’s lap, and Harry missed his warmth straightaway. But then Draco lay down on the rug, the blaze of the fire highlighting his perfect features, and
Harry’s imagination ran wild as he thought about all the ways they were most certainly going to defile that rug. He couldn’t have asked for a better setting. Snow was falling outside, picturesque and pristine, and they were warm inside the walls of the cabin, safe in each other’s arms for the night. It was surreal that this was about to happen.

Harry took note of every nuance of Draco’s face, the firelight across his silver eyes, pupils grown large with desire, the way he kept biting his lip. Was he nervous? What was he thinking? Harry didn’t want to ruin the moment by throwing a barrage of questions at him, so he ignored the insecure voice in his head and joined Draco, lying next to him and placing an entreating hand on his waist. They watched one another for a minute, turning on their sides so they were face to face.

“Are you nervous or is that just me?” Well, so much for ignoring that voice.

“We’re firmly standing in that muck together, Harry.” Draco cracked a smile and swept his fingers through Harry’s hair. Harry closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

“Kiss me,” Draco whispered, his hand dropping to Harry’s shoulder.

Harry obeyed, drinking in the hushed sigh that spilled from Draco’s lips, their breath merging into one. Harry was so warm, the rays of the fire tickling his skin as Draco’s body heat flowed into him. Draco’s skin was soft and smooth; Harry couldn’t get enough of it. Draco’s hand made its way down Harry’s back, sliding beneath his jeans to cup one arse cheek, and Harry was struck by the inescapable fact that this was Draco touching him. He was no longer absorbed in fantasy, flattened against the tiled wall of a shower, panting as he imagined what Draco’s body would feel like. He was here, he was real, and he was everything Harry always knew he’d be.

Harry’s hand ran up and down Draco’s flat stomach. He was so small. Harry knew he was very slender, but something about Draco’s imposing presence always made him seem larger than life, a towering figure in Harry’s mind, a force to be reckoned with for whom words like “fragile” and “delicate” need not apply. Harry played with the waistband of Draco’s trousers, wanting to unfasten them but feeling like a fumbling teenager. He had more experience now, a bigger sexual repertoire than he’d started college with, but once again, this was Draco. Pleasing him was of the most vital importance.

Draco took charge, stroking over Harry’s hand before replacing it with his own, undoing his trousers and shucking them off before starting on Harry’s, covering his shoulders and chest with kisses as he undressed them both. Looking down and seeing that familiar blond head, his eyes closed as his lips pressed against Harry’s skin again and again, was nearly too much for him. He closed his eyes for a moment, gasping as he felt Draco removing his jeans.

“Are you okay? Do you want me to stop?” Draco’s voice was gentle as he sank his fingers into Harry’s hair, his lips brushing against Harry’s ear.

“Don’t stop.” Harry’s voice sounded desperate and hoarse to his own ears. “I’m just — still feels like this can’t be happening, I guess.”

Harry carded his fingers through Draco’s hair and continued his path down Draco’s body, admiring the curve of his lower back that arched into the small swell of his perfect arse, made all the more tantalizing by the black briefs that clung to it.

“Remember what I said?” Draco chuckled softly, moving back down to lick across Harry’s left nipple. Harry groaned and clutched at Draco’s back.

“Yeah… in the muck together.”
“Mmm-hmm.” Draco kept descending, his tongue lapping down Harry’s stomach until — oh — Harry wasn’t sure he could handle what was about to happen. He would need something extremely solid to grip onto for balance. Something that didn’t break easily, preferably a slab of fucking concrete. Draco mouthed around the outline of Harry’s cock through his boxers, and Harry’s eyes rolled back into his head. “Can I?”

Draco looked up at him, and the sight of him, earnest grey eyes and flushed cheeks, asking for permission to suck Harry’s cock, made Harry wish he could freeze this moment in time, replay it on a loop like a wizarding photo.

“Y-yeah. Please, I — yes.” Harry nodded, probably a little too frantically, and Draco smiled impishly as he eased Harry onto his back and out of his boxers, his hard cock springing free with a soft thump against his stomach. Draco wrapped his hand around it, his tongue swiping across his bottom lip as he gave Harry’s erection a few agonizingly slow strokes. Draco’s eyes fixed on Harry, and they were so full of desire, fierce and predatory like an animal on the hunt, that it made Harry tremble.

“Your body is so fucking beautiful. Do you know that?”

Harry shook his head, unable to look anywhere but into those intense eyes.

“It is, and I just want to show you how much I like it.” Draco didn’t wait for a reaction before ducking his head and licking one long stripe along the underside. He wrapped his lips around the head and sucked as he kept stroking the shaft.

“Draco.” Harry threw his head back, his fingers involuntarily tightening in Draco’s hair. Harry almost apologized, but then Draco moaned. “Do you — is that something you like?”

Draco pulled off his cock and gazed up at Harry a little timidly.

“Yeah, I — it’s best when you sort of — pull at the root, not the ends though.”

“Like this?” Harry pushed his fingers deeper into Draco’s blond locks and grasped the hair at the point where it met his scalp, pulling firmly but not jerking back.

Draco moaned, his eyes fluttering closed as he nodded.

“Yes, fuck — just like that. No one ever does it right. I don’t know why it’s such a hard concept to grasp, but you’re the first one to do it right without a sodding hour of coaching.” He smirked, and seeing the bite return to Draco’s demeanor made Harry’s cock twitch.

“Glad to hear it. You deserve to get exactly what you want.” Harry traced Draco’s bottom lip with his thumb, groaning at the thought of how red and used his lips would be by the end of this. Draco sucked Harry’s thumb into his mouth for a second before returning to his cock, swallowing it down about halfway this time. Harry’s hips inadvertently thrust up, seeking every wet inch of that heat.

“S-sorry.”

Draco pulled off again, stroking Harry up and down.

“Don’t be. If you do that while you pull my hair, I’ll be a very happy boy.”

“Merlin’s fucking tits, Draco.” Harry slung a forearm over his eyes. He’d never been so turned on and mortified in his life. Draco’s dirty instructions in that sultry purr were going to be his undoing. Draco laughed and licked at the head of Harry’s cock as his fist pumped up and down.
“I had a feeling I could kill you with the dirty talk. Am I making you blush, Harry? Talking about how I want you to fuck my mouth and pull my hair?”

Harry didn’t have time to answer before Draco was bobbing up and down, making his cock slicker and harder, so inconceivably fucking harder. Although he was quickly becoming too submerged in his own burning need to string together a thought of any kind, Harry forced himself to think about Draco, to think about what he wanted from Harry. He wanted to be the best Draco’d ever had, wanted to keep satisfying him in ways other men hadn’t. He pulled on Draco’s hair as his mouth was sliding up Harry’s shaft, and this time, when Draco moaned his approval, he stayed where he was, obediently waiting for Harry’s next move.

Cautiously, Harry made a shallow thrust into that perfect mouth and was rewarded with another delicious sound. Draco’s hand scrambled for Harry’s free one. Harry found it, lacing their fingers together. He continued pushing in and out, gripping him by the hair, enthralled with the sight of his cock disappearing inside Draco’s mouth, emerging wetter every time. Draco squeezed Harry’s hand and started to move in time with Harry’s thrusts, his head pushing down as Harry’s hips tilted up.

“Fuck, that feels so good, Draco.” It was unlike anything Harry had ever experienced. There was a touching intimacy to the joining of their hands and the way Draco looked so blissed out, but there was also a rough edge to it, Harry’s grip on Draco’s hair, his cock plundering Draco’s willing mouth. He didn’t think he would last much longer, not when Draco’s mouth was this hot, this tight, this avid for Harry’s cock. He stilled his hips to stave off the inevitable, but Draco sank down anyway, taking nearly all of Harry’s cock in his mouth. “Fuck! I’m so close. Draco I — ”

Draco stopped, drawing back with a mischievous glint in his eye, a string of saliva trailing from his mouth to Harry’s cock. It was so utterly obscene, the always put together Draco Malfoy looking thoroughly debauched and ecstatic about it, like he’d been waiting for this.

“Merlin, Draco, you are so...”

“Shameless?” Draco asked with a laugh, slowly stroking Harry’s shaft. Although that was right, something clicked in Harry’s brain. He didn’t know where the spark of recognition came from, but suddenly he was convinced that that was what Draco expected him to say. But Harry didn’t want to say it. Harry wanted to catch him off guard, to inspire that soft blinking look of astonishment Draco so rarely wore and even then only seemed to wear for Harry.

“Stunning,” Harry corrected, his hand leaving Draco’s hair and cradling his face, his thumb skimming along Draco’s jaw. Draco swallowed, his rosy cheeks growing even more crimson.

“I want you to come in my mouth.” Draco averted his eyes and devoured Harry’s cock with renewed vigor, whimpering around the length. His legs tangled with Harry’s, his own engorged cock rutting against Harry’s thigh, his hands reaching up to find Harry’s once again. Harry came with his fingers twined with Draco’s, Draco’s name on his lips, his mouth on Harry’s cock as it pulsed down his throat, Harry’s hips thrusting up one last time.

He couldn’t remember a time when it had felt that fucking good to come, his vision blurring at the edges, the shadows dancing around the room from the fire. He wished being alive always felt this good. Draco gave Harry’s cock a parting suckle, licking the remnants of come from the head before coming to rest by Harry’s side, planting a kiss on his cheek.

“You’re really good at that,” Harry croaked.

“Of course I am.” Draco gave Harry a smug smile and kissed his lips. “Helps that you have a great
cock though.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry waggled his eyebrows, and Draco swatted at his arm.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those insufferable men whose ego is dependent on cock praise. I should know better than to feed into that.”

“I’m not like that!” Harry just liked hearing the words from Draco. It probably would have sounded ridiculous from anyone else.

“Mmm, sure you’re not.” Draco kissed Harry’s neck and rolled his hips, reminding Harry that he hadn’t returned the favor yet.

“Let’s get you out of these,” Harry whispered, tugging Draco’s briefs off. Harry groaned as Draco’s cock was freed. It was a little bigger than his own, a lovely shade of pink against his ivory complexion, a thatch of trimmed blond hair at the base.

God, he could have looked at Draco’s naked body for hours. His long, shapely legs, the hollow on either side of his hip bone, his pert, pink nipples, even the scars… he wore them so well. They adorned him, enhanced rather than detracted from his beauty, a reminder that he’d seen so much terror before the tender age of nineteen and come out stronger. He wanted to build on the notion of bringing Draco something he hadn’t been given before, but he didn’t know what that would be.

Harry remembered something, a snippet over breakfast after Halloween.

“Would you — I know you said this makes you self-conscious, but… would you sit on my face?” Draco gasped, his eyes going half-lidded and dreamy.

“Harry… that’s… are you sure?”

“Fuck yes, I want to taste you, and I want — ” Harry pictured it, Draco’s body framed in firelight as he licked him open. “I just want you to ride my face, make it feel — the way you want it to feel.”

Draco sat up and looked around, frowning as he began to sift through the piles of clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for a wand. I — would prefer it if you could kiss me afterward.” Draco’s cheeks reddened as he said it.

“I don’t need a wand for that.”

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Harry shook his head.

“Lie on your stomach. I’ll show you.”

Draco continued to look puzzled but followed the order all the same. Harry spread Draco’s legs, whining at the image before him: Draco prone and exposed, ready for the taking. Harry focused his magic and uttered the words, knowing he was successful when Draco’s body stiffened slightly, the tingling effect of the cleaning charm no doubt running across his skin. Draco looked over his shoulder.

“How did you learn to do that?”

“Don’t know. Just experimented until I figured it out.” Harry didn’t bother mentioning the reserves
of magic that seemed to stem from his unresolved mental health problems, the way it spilled out like an overstuffed sack of grain, a rush of unregulated energy leaking over the edge. He only now recognized this for the early warning sign it was. At the time, it had seemed like a bonus, a new ability to treasure and hone, but that was before it had taken more perilous forms like the bursts that exploded from his nightmares. People could say what they wanted about Harry’s inability to admit his problems, but at least he had enough sense to keep the wandless work to simple spells. It felt extremely unwise to wade into the unplumbed depths of more complicated magic. The source of it all was too mysterious.

Harry returned to his back on the blanket and met Draco’s eyes.

“Scared, Malfoy?” Harry winked, and Draco laughed, hanging his head in his hands.

“I can’t believe you just said that. You’re the most ridiculous person who ever lived.”

“And you like me anyway.”

“I do. I must have a masochistic streak a mile wide,” Draco murmured, running a hand down Harry’s torso as he stood up. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes, but if you’re uncomfortable, it’s fine. I’m sure we can find something else to do.” Harry hoped he sounded husky and alluring. If Draco’s smile was anything to go on, he was doing just fine.

“No no, I — I want to.” Draco got into position, facing away from Harry in much the same way Harry had in a strange man’s bed not long ago. Harry pushed that thought away. Other men didn’t have a place in this moment. There was only room for him and Draco. Draco remained up on his knees, his arse still a foot or so away from Harry’s mouth. “Um, should I just — ”

Harry put his hands around Draco’s thighs, stroking the muscles for a moment, enjoying the sensation of Draco’s skin under his fingers before gently lowering him, parting his cheeks and bringing him close enough for Harry to lick.

“Ah!” Draco quivered in the most delightful way as Harry’s tongue met the furled skin, his hands falling onto Harry’s chest, fingers flexing and releasing. Harry felt like this should be awkward. Having someone’s arse pressed into your face was surely off-putting to most, right? What did it say about Harry that he loved it, that he couldn’t wait until Draco became relaxed enough to not worry about how he looked or tasted and start rocking back onto Harry’s face, taking his pleasure, moving until he made Harry’s tongue press into his flesh in the precise way he needed?

It was warm and soft, and Harry could feel his own cock filling out again as he traced circles around the tight muscle with the tip of his tongue. He laved over it in broad, flat strokes, switching to an up and down motion, gradually building to a faster pace, listening carefully to figure out what reduced Draco to frenzied moans. Harry breached his entrance with the tip of his tongue, and finally, Draco seemed to let go. He made a tentative push backward, and Harry egged him on, squeezing Draco’s arse and moaning in the hope that he would know it was okay.

Draco began to roll his hips in a languid rhythm, and Harry tried to match it with his tongue.

“God, that feels good,” Draco breathed, bucking back a little harder. Harry’s cock was at full attention now. He could feel the ache between his legs, and again, he remembered that Draco hadn’t come yet. He snaked one hand around Draco’s stomach, fingers groping for his cock. Draco wrapped his hand around Harry’s and placed it where he wanted it. Harry let Draco take control, moving Harry’s hand on his shaft to show him what he liked.
Merlin, everything about this was so unbearably hot. Harry wondered if he could come just from Draco grinding down on his face, his tongue in his arse as Draco fucked his fist. Draco didn’t seem to know which he liked better, torn between leaning into Harry’s hand or his mouth. He began to alternate between the two, and Harry was lightheaded with arousal. Harry wanked him faster, so anxious for Draco to spill on his stomach.

A few moments later, he did just that, letting out the most beautiful, unbridled cry, his back arching, his thigh muscles growing taut. Wet heat splashed on Harry’s hand and stomach, making him groan. He wished he could see it. Draco tilted forward, lifting off Harry’s mouth and standing up. He collapsed on the blanket next to him in a spent heap, rosy-cheeked and smiling. Harry wandlessly cleaned them both, and Draco chuckled.

“Allow me to repeat myself. Every time I think I can predict you, you prove me wrong.”

“Same, honestly.” Harry opened his arms in invitation, and Draco happily settled against him, head on Harry’s chest.

“I can’t believe I rode your face while you jerked me off. I’m reaching new heights of shameless.”

“Did you just say ‘jerked’?” Harry teased.

“I know. America is slowly drilling the English out of me. It’s detestable.”

“Whatsoever would Narcissa say?” Harry chuckled, but then promptly wished he could duct tape his mouth shut. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s not like we can avoid the shit subjects forever. You’re right. She would be downright horrified. Can you imagine her on the subway?”

“Do you think she’d sit down or stand and grab a pole? I can’t decide which she’d hate more.”

“I honestly don’t know. She might very well be engulfed in flames after setting foot in the car. Like a heretic entering a church.” Harry stroked Draco’s back and his hair. He couldn’t get enough of his hands in Draco’s hair.

“You must miss her.”

“Always,” Draco said ruefully, cuddling closer. “But it is what it is, as the yanks love to say. Such an idiotic phrase, don’t you think?”

“I like it.”

“You would.”

“Did you… like tonight?”

Draco’s head popped up to deliver a look of playful scorn.

“Do you really have to ask that?”

“Only yesterday, you were worried about me recoiling in horror. Humour me.”

“It was brilliant, and you have a very… enthusiastic tongue. I’d like to see what it can do to my cock,” Draco murmured huskily, winding his legs around Harry’s middle and nibbling on his neck. Harry’s cock twitched at the thought of his mouth around Draco. “Can we sleep here?”
“Yeah, I’d like that.” Harry smiled, soaking up the warm rays of the fire and Draco’s body. Christmas had never been better than this.

“Can’t let you suffer like this though.” Draco grinned as his hand found its way to Harry’s hard cock. “I want you going to sleep tonight thinking about hard I made you come.”

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“Since you asked me, it only seems fair. How long have you been wanking over me?”

“If you recall, you never answered so I will let that question ricochet right off me and back to you.” Draco pointed an accusatory finger and took a sip of whiskey. It was from an aged bottle that Harry had a feeling was extremely expensive, but Gisele had insisted he take it (“He can buy more. Trust me. He won’t miss it. I’ve been pilfering this stuff since I was fourteen.”)

“Fine. It’s been… I don’t know. A month and a half? Started sometime between Halloween and Thanksgiving.”

Something dark flashed across Draco’s eyes. Harry couldn’t tell what it meant.

“Ah, Thanksgiving. Also known as ‘Harry Potter can’t tell someone’s flirting with him even when they drape their legs all over him and loudly complain about how long it’s been since they had a good shag.’”

“Right, because you were so direct. Whatever. You still haven’t answered.”

“The only way I could have been more direct is if I had a neon sign pointing to my crotch that said ‘put your mouth right here.’”

“Or if you… I don’t know, KISSED me?!”

Draco threw his head back with a theatrical sigh.

“And risked humiliation like I was eleven years old all over again, sticking my hand out and waiting? No, thank you.”

“You still haven’t answered me.”

“I don’t know, Harry…” Draco downed his whiskey, and his leg started bouncing up and down. When he spoke again, it was barely above a whisper. “Does it matter? We’re here now, aren’t we?”

“Yeah… yeah, we are.” Harry didn’t know what cloud had descended upon Draco’s mood, but he hurried to eradicate it, cradling Draco’s face and bringing him in for a passionate kiss.

“Why do we even bother putting on clothes? We should be naked this whole trip.” Draco smirked and slid a hand under Harry’s jumper.

“You know, in addition to all the weird bits about discretion and whatnot, the information for this place mentions that you can ‘wear whatever clothing you like because privacy is imperative.’”

“What the fuck? What the hell goes on here?! Bacchanals? BDSM sex parties?”
“Right?! I can’t help but wonder. I’d say we corner one of the sneaky staff and grill them about the goings on, but obviously they’re trained not to spill.”

Draco stood up and started to disrobe. Harry laughed.

“Not worried they’ll wander in here?”

“Not at all. They’re supposed to leave us alone unless summoned, remember? Strip, Potter.”

Draco’s voice was low and commanding, and it made Harry quake with anticipation. Harry undressed, and when he caught Draco’s eye, they both fell into giddy laughter. “It feels wrong, doesn’t it? Like we’re going to get in trouble. Why is that?”

“I don’t know! I guess we’ve never been anywhere we could be naked all the time, you know? Our families’ houses, the Hogwarts dorms… we’ve always been supervised kids. We both have our own suites now. Why haven’t we been wandering around naked in our rooms just for the hell of it?! Or maybe you have! I don’t know.”

Harry winked, and Draco shook his head.

“No, I haven’t! I honestly had no idea I’d internalized this nudity-related propriety. Who am I wearing clothes for in the privacy of my rooms?! What the actual fuck is that about? How many things do we do only because we’re programmed to do them and don’t even notice it?”

“So many things! Holidays are one of them. There’s no law that says we have to suffer through family or celebrate with turkey or do any of the whole song and dance, but we do. We never question it.”

“Correction, I know I am. Come on, let’s keep this subversive train running. I want to do something I’d never do naked. I want… to make a sandwich! I have never entered a kitchen in the nude in my entire life.”

Draco jumped up excitedly and skipped to the kitchen. Harry followed him, grinning from the alcohol and the silly mood of the night. When he entered the room, Draco was standing in front of the refrigerator, rifling through the contents. It was a humorous image that was also somehow extremely cute, and Harry had half a mind to ask Draco if he’d brought his Polaroid camera.

However, regardless of his newfound predilection for casual nudity, Harry severely doubted Draco would allow him to document this.

“Okay, I’m thinking leftover turkey is the best sandwich base in here. What do you think? This fancy German grain mustard? Swiss? God, I’ve been spending too much time in New York delis. Do you know how fucking much I love sandwiches now?”

“Gisele was aghast to learn that they hadn’t immediately taken a visit to Katz’s Deli after arriving in New York. She made sure to correct that oversight, and Draco, predictably, had balked at the mile high pastrami sandwiches (“Literally no human being needs to consume that much meat. That’s repulsive!”) In the end, he’d acquiesced to the power of the appetite-stimulating aromas, devouring his sandwich and reluctantly admitting he’d been wrong. The journey back to campus was
soundtracked by Draco chastising his parents for raising him without introducing him to the divine creation that was pastrami on rye bread.

“It’s borderline child abuse!” he’d laughed. “Someone needs to raise awareness for the deli deprived masses of children in the world.”

Draco began to lay ingredients on the counter. Harry was a bit peckish too, but that hardly mattered when Draco was naked in front of him, repeatedly bending over and displaying his amazing arse. As Draco bent down to grab something from the middle shelf of the fridge, Harry snaked an arm around his waist, pulling Draco against him. Harry kissed the back of his neck and ran his hand up across Draco’s thigh, trailing his fingers upward until they reached his cock.

“Mmm, what did I come in here for?” Draco murmured as he leaned back into Harry’s embrace. Harry stroked his cock and lapped at his neck.

“Something about a sandwich,” Harry muttered into his skin before spinning Draco around and backing him into the counter. He pushed everything aside, some of it falling into the basin of the sink, and patted the butcher block. “Up.”

Draco nodded dazedly before hoisting himself up on the counter, and Harry sank to his knees. The tile was cold and hard, but he didn’t care. He looked into Draco’s eyes, cherishing the way he gazed back expectantly, and wrapped his lips around Draco’s cock. Harry licked and sucked, hoping his zeal made up for how sloppy it probably was. He loved feeling Draco harden in his mouth, loved Draco’s hands finding their way into his messy hair. Draco ran his fingers over Harry’s cheeks, his jaw, his throat, the corner of his mouth, as if mapping the way Harry’s lips stretched to take him as he started to bob up and down.

“You look so good like this,” Draco gasped, eyes falling closed as Harry hollowed his cheeks and sucked harder. “C-can I — when I’m close — do you — ”

“I want to taste you,” Harry said, pulling off Draco’s cock, turned on and embarrassed by the pornographic sound it made, his wet lips smacking against Draco’s skin. Harry still hadn’t done that with anyone. Maybe it was unwise to be dumping the weight of so many firsts on Draco. Maybe it would imbue everything between them with more significance than they wanted, but god, Harry wanted it all. He felt safe with Draco, and he wanted to show him that.

Draco shut his eyes again, his head falling back against the wooden cabinets, but it wasn’t long before his intense gaze was back on Harry, his hands continuing to stroke Harry’s face and hair with such tenderness.

“I’m sorry I — ” Draco’s sentence was broken by a stuttering moan as Harry sucked on the head, his eyes fixed on Draco’s, “keep watching you, but fuck Harry — you’re — you look so perfect with my cock in your mouth.”

Harry smiled around Draco’s erection, moving faster now, trying his best to coax Draco to orgasm.

“Yes yes, that’s perfect. Don’t stop,” Draco whined, panting above Harry, his hands squeezing Harry’s shoulders. Harry wanted him to come, but he knew he would miss the weight of Draco’s cock on his tongue as soon as it was over, the insistence of Draco’s fingers tugging him closer. As Draco tensed, his mouth hanging open with a long, deep moan, his hands tightening around Harry’s shoulders, spurts of warm come filled Harry’s mouth.

The taste was a little bitter, but Harry basked in the way it felt to have Draco pulsing inside him, this private piece of Draco moving in his mouth and spilling down his throat. He kept his eyes
open as Draco came, witnessing the exact second he lost his struggle to keep his gaze on Harry, squeezing his eyes shut as he threw his head back against the cabinets again. Seeing him that overwhelmed was the best gift Harry could have asked for. “God — I — We are not going to come back from this holiday feeling rested.”

They both laughed as Harry rose from the floor, wincing a little as one of his knees cracked.

“Are you okay? I didn’t think about your knees. I was a little… preoccupied.” Draco smiled and pulled Harry between his legs, squeezing his knees around his waist.

“Oh, I know… and it was well worth it. Now make me a sandwich.” Harry gave Draco a quick peck on the lips before stepping aside and leaning against the counter, arms crossed expectantly.

“Bossy.”

“I mean, it’s the least you could do.” Harry smiled, and Draco rolled his eyes before hopping down off the counter.

“Only if you ogle me the entire time and tell me how nice my arse looks.”

“I don’t think I could stop doing that if I tried.”

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“I still can’t believe the nerve of that fucking show. Is that really what they think it’s like?!?” Draco was a little drunk, his typical impromptu diatribes happening more frequently as the night went on. Harry didn’t mind; it was always hysterically funny to witness.

“Here we go again.” Harry slapped his own forehead and took a big gulp of his gin and tonic. “I told you Draco, it — ”

“I mean, what is with the nose twitch?! Did they think that was clever? It’s an absurd mechanism for using magic. Suppose she has a cold or a dusty room triggers her allergies! What the fuck happens then? The whole bloody planet blows up because Samantha accidentally wriggled her nose?! Does she have to focus her intent for the wiggle to work? What are the rules of all this?!”

“It’s a sitcom, Draco. It’s not supposed to make any sense, and literally no one else analyzes it this closely. It’s supposed to be a fun, fantastical universe. No one thinks it’s real.”

“I’m just saying, they would need to fetch their fainting couches if they got a glimpse into the actual magical world.” Draco waved his tumbler of whiskey dramatically.

“Of course they would! But that would have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not they’d grown up on Bewitched reruns! Why do you keep watching it with me anyway?!”

“Because the 60s aesthetic is amazing. When I buy a house, I’m hiring an interior designer to make all my kitschy mid-century American dreams come true. And Endora! So utterly fabulous all the time. You just know she’s running on two dry gin martinis at any given hour of the day, lounging about in those epic kaftans.”

“And let’s not forget Darren.”
“God yes, so dreamy. *First* Darren, that is. Fuck second Darren,” Draco agreed with a twinkle in his eye.

“Fuck second Darren!” Harry confirmed, raising his glass to toast Draco. They clinked their drinks together with a laugh and watched the blazing fire. It was New Year’s Eve, and their holiday was coming to a close. Harry was sad to see it end. He felt like he could exist here with Draco forever, sequestered away in their private cabin with a staff who could whip up the most delectable meals known to man. Dinner had featured goose, oysters with apple and horseradish dressing, quail eggs with caviar, and piles of raclette melted onto bread and charcuterie. Harry had never eaten food this fancy in his entire life.

Further thought made him realize he probably couldn’t tolerate it year round. He missed greasy diner food, Gisele and Seb, the smell of the NYU Library, and the crowded New York streets. Still, a bereft feeling always accompanied the end of a holiday, and this one in particular stung Harry’s chest. He had no idea what it would be like when they returned to school. There had been no further discussion on the parameters of their relationship; they’d been far too busy eating and drinking and fucking to stop and have any serious conversations.

“Speaking of Muggle nonsense, I can’t believe they’re all in a panic about this Y2K absurdity. Do they really think every computer is going to go up in flames at midnight and bring about the apocalypse? People bartering with goats on the streets by tomorrow morning? If their system is really that fragile, they deserve a catastrophe.” Draco snorted derisively and took another drink.

“I don’t think we have any right to talk. The wizarding world is always hanging on by a thread. I mean, Merlin, we can blow things up at will. It’s a miracle we don’t accidentally kill each other more of — ” Harry halted his words, ominous memories taking hold.

“Stop thinking about it,” Draco said with a warning glint in his eyes.

“You don’t know what I’m thinking about,” Harry mumbled, taking a hearty swig of gin.

“Yes, I do, and I already told you I’ve forgiven you.”

“I know, but I almost — ”

“But you *didn’t*. There were times I could have almost killed you too.”

“You wouldn’t have.” Harry looked back at Draco and hoped he could see how much he believed in him, how much he didn’t think Draco had ever really been capable of the dark deeds expected of him.

“Neither would you.” The loudest silence imaginable stretched between them, and Harry had to ask.

“Why didn’t you say anything? That night at the Manor?”

“Because I wanted you to live. Because I didn’t want anyone to hurt you. I’d…” Draco looked down into his whiskey, rotating the glass in his hand. “I’d seen Charity Burbage murdered and fed to Nagini. A *teacher* at Hogwarts, just a… harmless woman who deserved nothing like that, and it made everything feel so close to home. Not that I wasn’t already shaken before then, but I — you want to talk about hanging on by a thread?” Draco fixed Harry with a solemn gaze. “I don’t know how I made it out of that house alive. Countless times I thought about cutting my wrists open, dragging the blade all the way down until it slashed the fuck out of that fucking Mark, until I — ”

Draco stopped talking and sucked in a shaky breath, his hand gripping the glass so hard now, his
knuckles were white.

“Draco, I’m so sorry. I… I don’t know what to say except I’m terribly glad you didn’t do that. It means so much to me to have you here. How do you… deal with everything? You always seem so together.”

“Do I?” Draco laughed mirthlessly. “That’s a laugh riot. I don’t feel together. I feel fragmented. Like a mirror someone tossed to the ground and stomped on, spikey pieces falling out, cracks running down the ones that stayed. Not enough Reparos in the fucking world to fix me. God, how did we get here? We’re supposed to be drinking and screwing our brains out.”

“We are. It’s my fault. Let’s forget it. Please. I’m sorry.” Harry put his drink down and held Draco’s hand. He felt like such a moron for ruining their last night here.

“It’s not your fault. We are who we are. Can’t ignore what we have in common,” Draco declared with a heavy sigh, his fingers squeezing Harry’s. “The answer, by the way, is mostly therapy. After I came here, I didn’t look for another Mind Healer. I started seeing a therapist instead. My Healer from England recommended her. She knew I wanted to leave the wizarding world behind as completely as possible for a while.”

“Wow… a Muggle therapist. What’s that like?”

“It’s… I don’t know… an eye-opening experience that is, oddly enough, sometimes the only thing keeping my pieces tied together.” Draco shot Harry a strange look. Harry didn’t know what he was thinking, but he could see the wheels turning all the same. “I could… if you’re interested in that or in a Mind Healer, I could go with you. Help you find someone. I know it’s hard to make that first step. Believe me, I was dragged kicking and screaming, but I truly wouldn’t be alive without it. I’m sure of that.”

“Oh… maybe. I’ll think about it,” Harry said quickly. Blimey, this was not at all how tonight was supposed to go. Harry had to shake this off as soon as possible or he was going to descend into a hole from which there was no hope of getting out. “Can we change the subject?”

“Absolutely. I had very different plans for tonight.” Draco laughed, and a little bit of joy returned to the sound this time.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah…” Draco grinned and set his glass down on the coffee table. He leaned closer, alcohol-laced breath ghosting across Harry’s lips. “I was hoping we could ring in the New Year in a very specific way.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh wow… I wonder how they'll end this holiday... I'm sure it has nothing to do with sex and nudity whatsoever.

I've debated whether or not it's self-indulgent for me to put this much sex (saddle up for some more cause THERE'S MORE COMING NO PUN INTENDED) in this fic, but I think, when you're this young and there is that much pent-up tension between two people, this is sort of what happens. You fall in HARD (again, no pun intended). Also,
my beta assured me that there's never too much, and I should bite my tongue every
time I think such a thought lol. So I hope you enjoyed all that and will continue to do
so.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Oh damn, I guess they aren't quite done fucking in that cabin. What a shame... Happy Monday, darlings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is this okay?” Harry was overwhelmed by the spectacle of Draco pliant beneath him, legs spread wide, knees pulled back to accept Harry’s fingers. He felt sweat prickle at the back of his neck, and he was certain it wasn’t just from the fire. Merlin, he was going to miss making Draco come in front of that fireplace. He pushed his lubricated finger in another couple of inches before easing it back out again.

“It’s just one finger, Harry. I’m fine,” Draco chuckled fondly. “Keep going. You can add another now. Please?”

Harry gave a jerky nod and drizzled lube on his forefinger and middle finger, rubbing around the rim before slowly pushing in. Draco groaned softly and bit his bottom lip, head falling back onto the pillow Harry had placed on the layers of blankets underneath them. Although one man had done this to him and Harry had done it to himself, his fingers had never been inside another person this way. It was a heady sensation. Draco was so hot and tight, his muscles forming around Harry’s fingers like a fitted glove, stretching and contracting to accommodate him. Harry started to relax, the worry about hurting Draco or doing something wrong ebbbing away as he thrust his fingers faster, encouraged by the way Draco was opening up around him, his cheeks flushed and his moans growing more frantic.

“Show me how to….” Harry was cut off by his own groan as Draco shifted, the movement causing his arse to clench around Harry’s fingers. “Fuck, show me how to touch that spot inside you.”

Harry didn’t think he’d experienced his prostate properly yet. That mounting pleasure that men spoke of, a line of sensation connecting their cock and a secret button that demanded to be pushed, was still elusive to him. Yet he liked the feeling of fingers moving inside him. It made him think about what it would feel like to truly be fucked, to accept a man’s cock inside his body. At turns, it both terrified and titillated him.

“Oh, yes that’s it!” Draco exclaimed with a moan, eyes closing and hips arching up. Harry kept stroking across that spot, his mouth hanging open as he watched Draco writhe and pant only from this subtle movement of Harry’s fingertips. Merlin, what it would it be like when his cock was dragging across that spot? As if providing an answer, Harry’s cock throbbed between his legs, his every thought consumed with Draco and his response to Harry’s touch. “Harry. God, that’s — I
want you inside me now. Please.”

Harry’s insides liquefied at the almost plaintive way Draco said his name, and in his lust-filled haze, he pulled his fingers out too quickly. Draco winced a little.

“Sorry!”

“It’s okay. Always hurts a little if you pull out too fast, you know?”

Harry nodded even though he most certainly did not know. Draco hadn’t asked if Harry had ever topped or bottomed for that matter. He simply told Harry how much he wanted his cock inside him, and well… there hadn’t been much need for words after that. Harry wasn’t sure if Draco had picked up on his novice level skills, if he dismissed it as nerves, or if he thought Harry just wasn’t quite used to gay sex yet. He told his worries to fuck off for now. Draco would guide him through it.

“Um so… I brought condoms, but we’re both wizards too so I’m not sure how you want to do this?” Draco smiled uncertainly and ran a hand through his pillow-tousled locks.

“Oh yeah, I hadn’t thought about that. Hermione gave me a rather embarrassing lecture on wizarding protection spells before I left, but I haven’t had a use for them since you’re the only…” Harry trailed off with a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, same. Condoms for now? Keep it simple?”

Harry nodded. He was flustered enough already. He didn’t need the added pressure of muttering incantations correctly.

“Do you want to stay on your back or…?” Harry felt his cheeks flame. He hoped he wouldn’t mess this up.

Draco nodded.

“It’s more comfortable like this. In my experience, anyway.”

A spark of jealousy flared through Harry at the thought of other men sleeping with Draco. Who were they? What had they been like? Did they know how lucky they were? Did they ask about his scars? Harry watched as Draco took another pillow, lifted his hips, and slid it underneath him.

Harry grabbed one of the foil packets from the small bag Draco had brought down, filing away a reminder to tease him for coming prepared, as though he knew this would happen. He tore the package open and rolled the condom on, thanking his hands for mercifully not shaking as he did it. After he slicked his cock, his eyes returned to Draco, and every misgiving came flooding back. Draco was so beautiful, almost angelic in the firelight, his ivory skin bathed in soft yellow and orange. For possibly the hundredth time that weekend, Harry thought he could spend hours staring at Draco’s naked body, lithe and strong and so much more graceful than his own.

Harry kneeled between Draco’s legs, and Draco drew his knees up to his chest. Harry sucked in a breath, another jolt of arousal surging through his cock at the image of Draco readying himself for Harry, waiting patiently for Harry to fuck him. He lined up his cock and swallowed, his throat parched and his pulse hammering as he pushed in a couple wary inches.

“Okay?” Harry whispered, his hands running up and down Draco’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Draco whispered back. Harry was touched to see that Draco’s eyes were as wild as Harry
felt, nearly completely black, the silver of his irises shrunk down to a thin ring. Harry pushed in again, and Draco’s face changed, the pink of his cheeks deepening, his eyes steeped in some mixture of anticipation and disbelief. Did Draco hold the same reverence for this night that Harry did?

He kept rocking into Draco until he was fully seated. Harry had never felt anything like it. Draco’s body was hugging him so tightly, molding to his cock like it was made for it. Harry begged his own body not to come. When Draco was this hot and fitted to his cock, Harry didn’t know how he could be expected to last. They both sighed as Harry tilted forward, arms caging Draco’s chest. Draco’s legs wrapped around Harry’s waist, dragging him closer until they were pressed against one another, their bodies joined at every possible point of contact.

“Hi,” Harry whispered shyly.

Why am I such a hopeless idiot?

He expected a retort about his lack of eloquence, but instead, Draco just smiled so sweetly, it made Harry’s heart feel like it might burst out of his chest.

“Hello there, Harry Potter,” Draco murmured, pushing a few errant curls off Harry’s forehead. Harry pulled out slowly and pushed back in. Draco let out a breathy sigh, his eyelashes fluttering.

God, he was perfect.

Harry made a few more shallow thrusts, watching Draco’s face for any signs of discomfort. He wanted this to be good for him, wanted to make him forget about all the other men who had touched him. When Draco started making those lovely, desperate moans Harry adored, he knew it was okay to go a little faster.

“Draco, you feel so… I can’t even tell you. I — ” Harry’s head collapsed against Draco’s shoulder. He covered his neck with kisses, whispering incoherent praise, telling Draco how good he felt, how much he wanted to make him come, how beautiful he was. Harry was half-mad with desire. He wasn’t in control of his own mind, his mouth, his thoughts, anything at all.

“I can’t — I can’t believe you’re finally fucking me. I didn’t think — fuck, that’s so good. Keep doing that,” Draco panted in Harry’s ear as Harry tilted Draco’s legs back, fucking into him deeper. Draco clasped Harry’s face and kissed him, the wet stroke of Draco’s tongue escalating everything coursing through Harry. His whole body was inundated with pleasure, his skin singing with it from every thrust into Draco’s tight heat, every caress of Draco’s hands as they clawed at Harry’s back, his lips as they claimed Harry’s mouth. Draco’s hand traveled down to grip Harry’s arse, bringing him closer still. Harry wondered if they might accidentally fuse somehow, their magic mingling in the same manner as their flesh, one body and one singular force of life.

Draco dissolved into a litany of yes and Harry, and it was the most beguiling song Harry had ever heard.

“I’m so close. Can you — please — ” Draco fumbled for one of Harry’s hands and placed it between their sweat-slick bodies, angling it downward. Harry got the hint and continued his path down Draco’s stomach until he reached his cock, grasping it firmly and beginning to stroke him, furiously intent on making Draco come. Draco’s moans grew louder as Harry’s hand worked his shaft, his arms clutching Harry’s back, his breath warm against his neck. Harry could feel the rise and fall of Draco’s chest, the stuttering cadence of his breath as his climax approached. It was beyond intimate, and Harry couldn’t think about what that meant. Not yet.
Draco let out a high, desperate whine and sank his teeth into Harry’s shoulder as his release shot across Harry’s hand, his come trapped between their bodies as Harry continued to thrust into him. Draco’s arse squeezing Harry’s cock, his orgasm making the walls inside him contract, pushed Harry over the edge. In seconds, he was following Draco, his cock jerking inside him as he came.

He pulled out, causing Draco’s face to twitch again.

“Sorry!” He would have to remember to be more mindful of that next time. There would be a next time, right? He lay down next to Draco, aware that he should probably take care of the mess gathered in the condom but too happy to care. “I’m sorry that was so quick.”

“Are you forgetting that you weren’t the only one who came in less than five minutes?” Draco turned on his side to face Harry, propping himself up on an elbow.

“True… does that mean… was it okay?”

“Are you going to do this every time we have sex? I never knew you needed this much validation, Potter.” Draco stretched out the arm that was propping him up, laying his head on his bicep. He looked so lovely, Harry could barely stand it. “It was great. I’m indulging you again just this once, but you should grow some confidence for next time because that will become very tedious very quickly.”

Harry laughed and sat up. Draco reverting to his snarky self put Harry at ease.

Next time.

The words made him smile.

“I’m going to, er, go take care of this.” Harry blushed and absently waved to his groin. He didn’t think vanishing a used condom was wise. Where the hell would it go?!?

“Please do. And bring me cigarettes. And a drink. And a blanket.”

Harry glared at Draco as he stood up.

“There are three blankets underneath your bony arse!”

“You didn’t think it was bony a few minutes ago. The three blankets are creating the perfect level of cushion! I want one to throw on top of me. I’m not disturbing the flawless construction of this fluffy pile. Bring me another one. Plleeaassee?” Draco pouted, strategically lengthening his body to showcase every bit of it. How had he learned to manipulate Harry this easily already?

“Fine, you spoiled prat. I’ll be back.” Harry turned around as he started to ascend the stairs, memorizing the vision of Draco stretched out naked by the fire one last time.

***

“Oh Merlin, I think I’m going to throw up,” Draco said, clutching his stomach right before he did just that into the bag Harry had handed him. About two minutes into the plane ride, Draco’s pale complexion had shifted to grey, and Harry knew this was coming. “Why did we drink so much?!”

“We? It was you who said we had to finish all the half-drunk bottles before we left!” Harry wiped
his sweaty forehead. He was feeling a bit peaky too but thought he could hold out for the short duration of the plane ride.

“You didn’t have to agree to it!”

“I was drunk! I’m pretty sure I also agreed to help you with a ‘whose arse is that’ Polaroid game of the all the best boys’ arses in the freshman class. I can’t be held accountable for any decisions I made last night.”

Draco laughed weakly before holding his midsection once again, closing his eyes and breathing through another wave of nausea.

“I forgot about that. Fuck, we were pissed last night. I am never drinking again.”

Harry thought about pointing out that Draco tended to say that after every night of heavy drinking but never actually made good on the vow. Since Draco was currently puking into a paper bag, Harry chose to show some clemency.

***

Once they made it back to campus, sluggish, hungover and in dire need of a long nap, Harry and Draco retired to their separate rooms,. Gisele wasn’t due back for another couple of days, but the next afternoon, Harry’s dorm phone rang. It startled him; the blasted thing rarely ever rang. They all tended to have a policy of showing up at each other’s doors unannounced. Harry liked that. There was a comforting intimacy to it.

“Hello?”

“Hey dude, I’m back a day early. Couldn’t fucking stand it anymore.”

“I’m sorry. That bad?”

“You have no idea. You around? I feel like I’m going to break something if I don’t see someone I don’t hate in the next hour.”

“Yeah, I’m free. The only thing I’ve done all day is stare off into space while I wait until it’s late enough to bother Draco.”

Gisele laughed.

“We’ll go bother him together. Seb should be back by now too. Reunion in thirty?”

“Definitely.”

***

“So, how was everyone’s break?” Seb asked from his position on the floor, leaning against the closet, fatigue written in the slump of his body, his hands thrust into his hoodie pockets. Gisele sat
“My dad still wants me to major in finance or any of his other ‘approved’ areas so we got into a screaming match that ended with him telling me he’s not paying for college next year if I don’t do that. My mom walked in on me and a girl from high school fucking on my bed and told my dad, who was even less thrilled than she was. So… you know… status fucking quo. I’m queer; they hate it. I don’t want to be a corporate drone; they hate it. I got rrreeeaalllyy fucking wasted on New Year’s. It was amazing.” Gisele smiled sarcastically and gave two thumbs up.

“My dad is still pretending I never told him I was gay. He asked if I’d met any ‘nice girls’ in New York yet. My mom knits every time I try to talk to her about anything she doesn’t want to hear because she is so goddamn Midwestern it hurts. Imagine someone being completely dismissive while sounding like they’re about to cheerily make lemon bars for the church bake sale. Confusing shit. Sometimes I wish they would yell. I hate when they freeze me out.” Seb exhaled slowly and hugged his knees.

“Yep. I call it the ‘cold silence approach.’ I hate it too. It’s that total refusal to acknowledge that part of you even exists. It always feels worse than no reaction at all to me. At least when they’re screaming, I know what to do with that, you know?”

Seb nodded sadly, and Gisele squeezed his hand.

“Okay, enough of us dour fucks. How about you two? Anything… interesting happen?” Gisele leaned her chin in her hand, rubbing it in mock contemplation as she looked across the room at Harry. Harry was perched on Seb’s bed while Draco sat in the desk chair a few feet away. Harry had hoped he would sit closer to him, but maybe that was too much to expect for now.

“Oh, well… we… er…” Harry rubbed his eyes beneath the lenses of his glasses. How the hell was he supposed to answer that?

“Come on, we both told you how disastrous our vacations were. Give us something to lift our spirits. Did you fuck or not?” Seb bluntly queried, and Gisele threw her head back in laughter.

“Yes, we did! Happy?” Draco rolled his eyes and shot Harry a repentant look. “How did we end up with friends who have not one ounce of tact?”

“I don’t know, but I think we have to accept it. Something tells me it’s only going to get worse.”

Seb and Gisele fulfilled Harry’s expectations by wolf whistling and clapping.

“It’s about time! So what’s the deal with you guys now?” Seb grinned devilishly and crossed his arms.

Harry faltered again, mouth agape as he struggled to form words.

“We’re just taking it slow. No labels. I realize you’re both utterly incapable of this, but if you could refrain from relentlessly prodding us while we figure it out, I think I speak for us both when I say we’d be most obliged,” Draco interjected, rescuing Harry from the burden of answering once again.

Harry felt a twist of discontentment in his stomach. He didn’t know how to interpret that. Harry had agreed to this, hadn’t he? Well… he supposed he had, but still… he’d meant to sort it out before they’d left the cabin. He really, really had, but every time he got the courage to pose any questions about it, just looking at Draco evaporated his resolve. Draco had been so content throughout the trip, and Harry didn’t want to burst that bubble of peace by asking for things Draco had expressly stated he wasn’t ready for. Besides, Harry didn’t really know what he was ready for.
“Okay,” Gisele remarked with a smirk and a shrug. Draco cocked a dubious eyebrow, but she held up her hands. “Hey, you said not to say anything so I’m obeying. If you want me to say more, I — ”

“No! I’m quite sure I do not.”

“Well, if you’re not going to give us any juicy details, I say we stuff our faces. It’s lunchtime, and it honestly might be the only way to keep me from grilling you guys.”

Harry smiled at Seb, and then sought out Draco’s eyes. Draco couldn’t seem to meet his gaze for more than a second at a time, and Harry couldn’t help but wonder if he was regretting everything that had happened over the winter holiday.

The first couple of weeks of classes were hectic as usual. He was thankful to leave Logic and Comparative Politics behind for 1920s American Literature and Queer Identity in Pop Culture, both subjects that felt much more suited to his tastes. In two weeks’ time, he’d already learned so much. He couldn’t believe he had the privilege of talking about queer icons and queer representation in media and actually getting graded on it.

Draco had been too busy to hang out with him so far. Harry was worried that it was a hollow excuse, that Draco was actually avoiding him. He tried to remind himself that Draco had always been more studious than he was. It didn’t banish the incessant thoughts of his long neck stretched back as he moaned, his body tight as a bow as he spilled on Harry’s hand, Harry’s name on his lips, but Harry shook it off as best he could, focusing on his schoolwork.

Besides that, there were other matters to occupy Harry’s mind, specifically the letter he’d received from Ron, a letter he had yet to respond to.

I know you’re going through a lot, but so are the rest of us. I completely understand why you left. Hermione might not, but I think she’s getting there. But mate… cancelling on Christmas? Only a couple weeks before we were expecting you? That hurt. That hurt everyone, and I’m over here with a disappointed mum and a distraught girlfriend, trying to defend you when I’m not even sure I want to anymore. I guess I didn’t think that when you left England, you’d be leaving us too. Maybe that was stupid of me, but I miss my best mate. I don’t like feeling as if we’re losing you. None of us like it. Maybe you could head to the magical quarter some time? Give me a floo call? Letters feel so... like we’re old ladies waiting for the post before they had anything else. I want to work this out with you. I want to know what’s going on with my friend, and I want you to know what’s going on with me. Do you understand that? This only works if you meet me halfway. Give it some thought, yeah?

Harry had crinkled the edge of the parchment in his hand, his breath heavy as he absorbed the letter’s message. When had it become so hard to talk to Ron, the person he’d always trusted the most in this world? They’d been through myriad hardships, certainly things much worse than this. So why were they drifting apart now of all times? Harry didn’t want to examine it. Why deal with anything when you could put it off until tomorrow?
Harry laughed bitterly. He knew that was a misguided sentiment and the poorest of coping mechanisms, but he couldn’t get the rational and irrational sectors of his brain to come together and compromise these days. It was a Sisyphean level of dysfunction that Harry didn’t know how to break out of.

So he continued to cordon off all the problematic parts of his mind, erecting walls with the proficiency of a bricklayer.

***

“Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry turned away from the movie they were watching, some convoluted farcical noir called *The Big Lebowski*. Seb was obsessed with the filmmakers, the Coen brothers, and prone to professing their inimitable genius, but Harry couldn’t focus on it. He found that Seb was watching him intently.

“I know you don’t… really like talking to me about serious stuff, but I wanted to ask you something.”

“What? That’s not true. We can talk about whatever. I trust you.”

Seb frowned.

“Maybe, but… you tend to always go to Gisele when you have something on your mind. We don’t talk when you’re upset about things. And that’s fine!” Seb rushed to add, sitting up straighter.

“You’re not *obligated* to. People have different kinds of friendships…”

Seb’s sentence trailed off, and he looked down at his lap. Harry had never thought about it before. He felt like an oblivious arse. How had he never thought about it? When was the last time he’d asked Seb what was going on with him? Not about classes, but really hard-hitting things the way he asked Gisele?

“Fuck… Seb, I’m sorry. I don’t do that on purpose, honestly. I want us to talk about things.”

Seb smiled with a short nod.

“Okay… what’s going on with you and Draco now? You go on this ridiculously romantic vacation, Gisele and I are expecting you to come back disgustingly sappy boyfriends, but then… you’re both super cagey about what happened. I mean, shit! I’ve barely even *seen* Draco since the semester started. But I’ve seen you so that means… well, what does it mean?” Seb turned back to the TV. There was a surreal dream sequence unfolding that made it even harder to ascertain what the hell the movie was about. Someone in a red body suit was holding comically large scissors and chasing the titular character.

“Fuck if I know. Our class schedules are practically opposite, and then when we both *are* free, he says he’s busy. I’m starting to think he regrets what happened.” Harry covered his eyes with his hands, dragging them slowly down his tired face.

“What *did* happen? Besides the obvious.”
“Nothing. We talked, we got drunk, we had sex. It was brilliant. A perfect holiday.”

“Did you iron out the important shit?”

“What important shit?”

Seb canted his head in Harry’s direction, and Harry wondered if he was thinking about what a simpleton he was.

“Are you exclusive? You should probably know if he’s going to be fucking half of New York. Like… emotional implications aside, that’s just practical. And not to be your dad friend again, but you need to use condoms, especially if you don’t know if he’s sleeping with other people.” Seb was kind but firm. Harry blushed. This conversation made him feel like he was sitting through an awkward lecture in one of those Muggle health classes he saw so often in films. He was thankful he went to Hogwarts before he could reach that age, escaping that particular brand of pre-pubescent suffering.

“I don’t know. I meant to ask him before the end of the trip, but I kept putting it off. You don’t know him like I do. He’s hard to approach about… a lot of things. He’s different now, but it’s like I’m trained to wait for that reaction. We had the same pattern for so many years.” Harry leaned his head back against the edge of the bed.

Part of Harry was still completely on board with putting off any decisions about their relationship. But every time they had slept together in that cabin, every time he made Draco come, their bodies entwined as Draco panted in his ear, the ability to maintain a laissez-faire attitude about it eroded a little bit more. Two weeks of being that close had made Harry’s feelings for Draco spiral into some inconclusive level of attachment he couldn’t quite name. It made Harry wonder what Draco meant about not rushing into anything. If they weren’t only friends but weren’t boyfriends, what were they? What was this new limbo they were existing in and how was Harry going to navigate it without driving himself insane? It was mindboggling how something “casual” could feel so complicated.

“Okay, I’m just abandoning all pretense. I am dad friend; hear me roar.” Seb twisted his body around until he was facing Harry. “That’s the sort of shit that makes it clear you really can’t fuck around with this. Look, I don’t know everything that happened with you guys at school, but it’s obvious there’s a lot of loaded history. I don’t think he’s the best guy for you to fool around with, particularly like this where it’s so… up in the air. Friends with benefits is a recipe for disaster. Those stories never end well.”

Harry huffed indignantly.

“What are you saying? I’m too fragile to handle it? Trust me, Seb, if anyone’s going to break me, it’s not going to be Malfoy.” Harry crossed his arms. He could feel the mask of annoyance spreading across his face. Seb threw up his hands in surrender and moved back against the bed, settling next to Harry.

“Forget I said anything.” As the silence engulfed them, Harry started to feel like a lowly worm. His friend had tried to bring them closer, and Harry’s reaction had been to push him away.

Seb was wrong though. Yes, Harry missed Draco. Yes, he was worried Draco regretted sleeping together and wanted some evidence to the contrary soon before he went completely barmy with speculation. But he also didn’t care about being boyfriends riding off into the sunset holding hands just yet. Did he?
No… he and Draco were anything but typical. Everything about how they’d come together was anomalous so it would follow that everything about their relationship would be too. Who cared if other people didn’t understand it? Who were they to tell Harry what to do, to tell him what he could and couldn’t handle?

“What about you?” Harry finally spoke up, and Seb jerked a little at the sound. “Seeing anyone?”

“Oh… yeah, sort of.” Seb tried to be offhand about it, but his sincere smile revealed how excited he was. “I met this guy, Ravi, in my art history class last semester. The professor had this hypnotic drone to his voice; I don’t think anyone was more excited about the subject than the man who was actually teaching it. Anyway, Ravi used to do a killer impression of the guy’s monotone, and by the end of the semester, we were just giggling and passing notes back and forth every class period. I totally would have bailed on that class if it weren’t for him, but… then I started to look forward to it. I didn’t know if he liked guys though, and well… you know how that usually goes for me.”

Harry nodded compassionately.

“So I stalled on asking him, and then… just before break, I figured, fuck it. If he rejects me, I’ll be on break in a few days and probably won’t even see him next semester. It’s a big school. So I asked him out, and I actually made it clear what I meant. God, I was shaking like I was thirteen and had a mouth full of metal, Harry. It was ridiculous.”

“Buuutttt?” Harry encouraged with a nudge to his ribs. Seb’s smile widened.

“Yeeeaahhh so… it turns out he’d been wanting to ask me all year too but was going through the same stupid anxiety hurdles. He gave me his dorm phone number, and I was thinking he’d forget about it all, you know? I was still convinced it wouldn’t happen, but I called him, like, the second I got back. He picked up right away, and we’ve been dating ever since. I mean, I know it’s only been a coupe of weeks, but — ”

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“Seb, that’s great! I’m so happy for you! You’re the sweetest bloke I know. You deserve someone who knows it too. I’m sorry again that I’ve had my head so far up my own arse. I should be asking you things like this more often.”

“It’s okay. I can tell…” Seb swallowed, taking a breath before continuing, “You might not talk about it, but you can’t hide that you’re going through some deep shit. I see it sometimes. So does Gisele. You just… drift off to somewhere else when we’re hanging out. I don’t know where your head goes, but maybe you’ll tell me about it someday?”

Harry smiled despondently. What could he say? He knew he couldn’t ever tell Seb about the ordeals of war, about the source of his potent nightmares. He dearly wished he could, but that was so far out of reach, like blistering stars suspended light years away in another galaxy. Harry leaned his head on Seb’s shoulder, and Seb leaned in to meet him. Even if he couldn’t tell them what secrets his past held, at least he had people who cared enough to ask.

***

It was another couple of days before Harry ran into Draco, both of them walking off the contiguous elevators and exchanging wary smiles as their gazes collided.

“Hey!” Harry tried for a bright greeting, attempting to conceal the knee-wobbling, stomach-
flipping effect of seeing Draco. Merlin, it felt like it had been years. Like Draco had been lost in international waters, and Harry was waiting to receive the letter that would inform him he’d just become a widow. Wait, what was that all about —

“Nice to see you. Feels like forever, huh?” Draco’s laughter made Harry’s tense shoulders relax, shaking off the dramatic, needy thoughts. “Sorry, I’ve just been… I get a little academic tunnel vision sometimes. On top of that, there were… some other things.”

Draco vaguely waved his hand, his eyes taking on a glassy, faraway tint. A second later, it was gone, and he was smiling at Harry. It made that thudding heart and shaking knee feeling fall over Harry like spring rain.

“It’s okay. I just… you’re not…” Harry took Draco by the arm and led him away from the elevators as they dinged open again, steering them down the hallway toward their rooms. “Do you wish you could take back what happened?”

“No, no. Merlin… no, I’m sorry if I made you think that. I got lost in my head, but it had nothing to do with you or us. I promise.” Draco smiled again, squeezing Harry’s arm. They stopped in front of Harry’s rooms. “I’m free now if you want to…”

“Yeah, definitely! You want to come in?” The pressure on Harry’s heart eased a bit as Draco nodded. He opened the door, and Draco followed him to the bedroom. “What do you want to do?”

Harry squirmed as he registered the suggestive nature of the question, given they were standing in Harry’s bedroom, a mere foot from his mattress.

“I believe it’s about 2:30.” Draco’s lips quirked up in an adorably coy smile. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Harry grinned back and hopped onto the bed, grabbing the telly remote.

“Can’t wait to see what we’ll bicker about this time. I hope it’s one of those episodes where a Muggle sees everything Samantha does, and they explain it away carelessly until you start screaming at the telly.” As Harry flipped to the right channel, the theme song was ending. Draco groaned as he sat next to Harry.

“I know it’s not a serious drama, but god! Make a little bit of effort, maybe?! If this were real life, so many people would have been carted off to the asylum by now, Samantha included.”

“Asylum? Your Muggle vocabulary is so outdated sometimes. It’s more like a mental hospital now. It’s the year 2000, Draco. Catch up. And move over. I’m lying down.” Harry began to get into position, poking Draco with his foot. Draco sighed in exasperation that Harry knew to be false and lay down in front of him. Harry crept closer, wrapping his arm around Draco’s middle, his chin settling in the crook of his neck. Draco shifted against him with a warm sigh, their legs fitting together like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“I missed this,” Draco whispered, his hand coming to rest on top of Harry’s.

“Me too,” Harry replied with a kiss to Draco’s neck.

Just like that, it was as though the last two weeks hadn’t happened. Draco was where he belonged, nestled comfortably in Harry’s arms watching a quirky Muggle sitcom he pretended to despise but obviously loved. Questions formed in the back of Harry’s mind.

He almost asked.
He really did, but then Draco swiveled around in his arms and kissed him deeply. Every word on the tip of Harry’s tongue dispersed, eclipsed by the heat of Draco’s kiss.

Chapter End Notes

That sex scene was actually originally the last scene in chapter 9, but it made 9 over 12k and 10 a measly 3.8k or so. Still not totally sure I 100% like the restructuring I did, but it's the sort of small decision I could have oscillated on for weeks on end lol so eventually you just have to CHOOSE.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Okay, I have a bit of a poll for you all. I'm having surgery next Thursday, April 18 so I won't be able to do an update on that day. I'll be laid up for a while, but I'll still be able to return to the update schedule on April 22. :) That said, do you want double chapters next Monday? Or a chapter on Monday and then one on Weds, a day earlier than usual? Let me know your thoughts!

Growing up, Harry never had the chance to go to the cinema much, but it had always been a place of refuge. There was something soothing about the hushed quiet of sitting in a room full of strangers all focused on the same moving story in front of them. The modern architecture of the East Eighth Street Cinema felt very New York to Harry. There was something severe and urbanite about the clear, sharp lines of the metal stairs and railings.

Going with Draco made it hard not to think this is a date this is a date on a relentless loop, and Harry wasn’t sure what to do with that. Should he hold Draco’s hand? Should he pay for his ticket? As was often the case, Draco took care of those decisions before Harry could descend into too much over-analyzing, striding confidently ahead of him to purchase his ticket first. Draco leaned into Harry’s space as they took their seats, brushing his fingers over Harry’s knuckles. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Draco smile as Harry followed the cue and laced their fingers together, leaning to the left just enough to bring them shoulder to shoulder.

Seb and Gisele had already seen Magnolia on a hapless double date (“I’m really glad that you have someone to be nauseatingly happy with right now, but if you ever try to fix me up with someone again, I may have to hurt you, Seb.”), and the passionate argument that ensued made Harry anxious to see it for himself. Seb thought it was a masterpiece, and Gisele thought it was a “bloated, over-indulgent example of what happens when no one will tell a dude ‘no’ in the cutting room.”

By the end of the first hour, Draco was firmly on team Gisele, and Harry could sense his petulance. He was shifting in his seat as though he couldn’t find a comfortable position, and his sighs were rising in volume.

“How long is this thing?” Draco whispered in Harry’s ear.

“A little over three hours,” Harry answered, bracing himself for the inevitably unfavorable reaction to this news. He had very purposefully kept the runtime of the film hidden from Draco.

“Three — ” Draco’s eyes roamed the mostly empty theater, and he lowered his voice back down to a whisper. “Three bloody hours, Potter?! Is this a film or a prison sentence?”

Harry muffled his laughter with the sleeve of his jumper while Draco flopped back in his seat with a flourish and a groan. A few minutes passed before he leaned back in, clearly about to speak again. Harry rolled his eyes. While Draco wasn’t invested in the film’s story, Harry was enthralled. The complex intersecting plotlines were intriguing, and the mournful cast of characters, each dealing with their own unique personal tragedies, captured Harry’s attention. He wanted to learn more, to find out how it was all connected and how it would tie together in the end. He got the
distinct sense this wasn’t a film you could pay half-arsed attention to.

“How about we pass the time in a much more exciting way?” Draco purred, his hand coming to rest high up Harry’s thigh. Despite his reluctance, Harry’s cock stirred in his jeans, his mind and body at odds with one another.

“Draco, I’m trying to watch this!” Harry shrugged him off and focused on the screen. Jim, the policeman, was in Claudia’s apartment as Claudia tried unconvincingly to hide her cocaine-addled state, but Harry was waiting for the Donnie and Stanley storylines to pick back up. The desperation of Donnie in that bar as he watched the quiz kids jumping through mental hoops on TV, remembering what it was like to be one of them, was compel —

“You find this pretentious drivel more interesting than me?”

“Oh god, Draco, you can be so…”

“So what?” Draco hissed, his eyebrows arching peevishly. Harry shook his head, and Draco softened a bit, leaning back in and nuzzling Harry’s neck. “Please? If it’s really three hours long, you can spare fifteen minutes. We never got to be teenagers snogging at the cinema.”

Harry smiled at that. He looked at Draco, his sharp cheekbones shadowed by the dark theater, his eyes alight with want, and he was all that mattered in that moment. Harry stroked his thumb across Draco’s cheek, and Draco tilted his head, licking lightly across Harry’s palm before turning back to him and meeting his lips.

It felt good to kiss him like this, Draco’s soft sighs underscoring the sound of the film, a private melody that only Harry could hear. Draco’s lips were slightly chapped from the cold, but his mouth was warm, that initial spark of tongue meeting tongue drawing a small moan from Harry. Draco’s hand was stroking up and down Harry’s thigh, always stopping a few inches away from his cock. Harry moved forward in his seat to tempt Draco’s hand closer, and a low rumbling laugh emanated from Draco’s throat. He trailed his lips up Harry’s jaw, lapping at his ear.

“Do you want something, Harry?”

“Yes, but I — I don’t know… It’s probably not a good idea.” Harry ignored his libido and looked around the theater. There were only four other people there, and they were near the front. The film had been out for several weeks now, and it was pretty early in the day. Harry and Draco were seated at the back, but Harry still didn’t know if he was bold enough to have Draco wank him off in public.

“Come on, you’re Gryff enough for this. Put your coat over your lap.” Draco nibbled on the edge of Harry’s ear, and Harry didn’t have any choice but to obey, his limbs acting of their own accord as he plucked his coat off the seat next to him and covered his lap. Draco flashed him a conspiratorial smile as he slowly pulled Harry’s zipper down, deftly flicking the button open and plunging his hand inside Harry’s pants, his ministrations hidden by Harry’s coat. Harry was already painfully hard, and Draco’s hand wrapping around him was like cool water splashing on summer-warm skin, his whole body shuddering with relief.

He couldn’t believe this was happening. All the near-death experiences in his young life, and it was Draco Malfoy who was going to do him in with his stupidly sexy, dangerous ideas. Harry buried his blushing face in Draco’s shoulder, taking care to stifle his moans, his breath hot and moist against Draco’s jumper as he stroked up and down Harry’s cock, quick, little staccato motions that were impressively unobtrusive beneath the coat.
“Do you know how much I love making you come? Sucking you off… squeezing your cock in my hand while you tighten up and make those helpless, needy moans?” Draco whispered, lips pressing gentle kisses on Harry’s forehead. “Do you like the way I touch you?”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to answer. He wasn’t sure he possessed the power of speech any longer.

“Tell me,” Draco urged.

“Need encouragement to get the job done?” Harry replied cheekily, lifting his head in an attempt to gaze back defiantly. Unfortunately, biting back a gasp didn’t make for very convincing defiance.

Draco grinned and bit Harry’s ear a little too hard to be pleasurable.

“Ow!” Harry jerked back in his seat, scanning the room to see if anyone had heard him. When no one turned around, Harry relaxed.

“Don’t be such a disobedient boy, and I won’t have to bite you,” Draco crooned in his ear, wanking Harry faster.

Harry moaned as quietly as he could, blushing fiercely. It felt so dirty and taboo to be sitting here with Draco’s hand around his cock, the people around them suspecting nothing as Draco whispered filthy things in his ear.

“I never knew you were so — ” Harry’s eyes rolled back in his head as Draco slid two fingers through the wet mess leaking from Harry’s slit, “perverted, Draco. Far from the proper pure-blood now, aren’t you?”

“Me? What about you? Does anyone else know the Saviour of the wizarding world is like this when he’s aching for it? Thrusting into my hand? So fucking desperate to come?” Every salacious word brought Harry closer, his orgasm building inside him, unraveling quickly as Draco’s hand pumped up and down. Draco was panting as hard as Harry was now. It gave him endless satisfaction to know he could turn Draco on that much.

“Shut up. You love it,” Harry choked out. It would be over any second now.

“Of course I do. I wish you could fuck me right now. Will you fuck me tonight? Pull my hair back and fuck me until I can’t think about anything but you and your cock inside me?” Draco whined, sucking on Harry’s earlobe, his words sounding less like questions and more like begging. It pushed Harry over the edge, and he swallowed a garbled cry as he came, painting them both with a sticky mess, the public nature of it somehow failing to make Harry ashamed. It only made it hotter.

Harry’s head fell against Draco’s shoulder as he composed himself, his breath equalizing for a minute before he lazily cast a few cleaning spells. When he met Draco’s eyes, the blond looked entirely too pleased with himself.

“Do you want…” Harry squeezed Draco’s thigh, but Draco shook his head.

“Are you mad? I wouldn’t let you wank me off in a cinema.” Draco arched a flirty eyebrow, and Harry flipped him two fingers.

“You’re the worst kind of prat, Draco Malfoy.”

“Shhh, watch the film. You’re being quite rude, Potter.”
They both laughed quietly, falling back into place, hands clasped and shoulders pressed together.

Unfortunately, Harry’s endorphins didn’t last long. Magnolia was decidedly not the best film to fool around during, the depressing tone of it seeping into Harry’s mood as Donnie showed up on screen ten minutes later. He was drunk and upset, pacing around the bar as he ranted about how he confuses melancholy and depression.

“I used to be smart but now I'm just stupid... Make him live this life like this — ‘A man of genius’ gets shit on as a child and that scars and it hurts and have you ever been hit by lightning? It hurts and it doesn't happen to everyone, it's an electrical charge that finds its way across the universe and lands in your body and your head — and as for ‘ruined but by himself,’ not if his parents take his friggin’ life and his money and tell you to do this and do that and if you don't? well, what — ”

“Maybe I spoke too soon when I said you could spare fifteen minutes. I have no idea what’s happening now,” Draco whispered with a muted laugh. Harry nodded with a faint smile, but he did know what was going on. He knew that feeling Donnie was describing, that cheated feeling of being lauded as a wunderkind people used until there was nothing left, never caring to ask what you wanted, what you needed, retreating after they were done, after you’d grown up into a messy adult they didn’t know what to do with anymore.

Where did you go after that? What box did you fit in? Whose expectations did you fulfill now? What was your goddamned purpose? Harry so often felt like a glass on a table, the cloth underneath him yanked free until he toppled precariously, crashing against the wood with a shattering bang, still in the same spot he was before, just broken now. He gripped Draco’s hand tighter, feeling Draco’s eyes drift in his direction. Harry didn’t turn to meet his line of sight. He was afraid he might start crying if he did.

God, it didn’t used to be like this… did it? Harry was tired of moods that changed direction without a moment’s notice. It was exhausting. He always fooled himself into thinking it was over when enough time passed by in that blissfully neutral zone, the extremes receding in the distance, but it always came back. He took measured breaths, timing them, but he quickly lost the ability to count in anything but a frenzied fashion.

“It’s just a film, Harry. It doesn’t matter. It’s not you. He’s not you.

The plot switched back to little Stanley, crushed by the expectations the quiz show and his father had put on him, the audience the unwitting witnesses to his misery. He sat there, paralyzed and suddenly unable to answer the questions.

“I’m sick of being the one, the one who always has to do everything, I don't want to be the one always – ”

“This isn't funny. This isn't 'cute.' Jimmy — Jimmy — we're not a toy — we're not dolls, here. This isn't funny you see, the way we're looked at if you think that we're cute — Because what? What? I'm made to feel like a freak if I answer questions and I'm smart...”

Stanley started to cry as Jimmy, the game show host, and the audience gaped in helpless confusion.

“And what is that, Jimmy, I'm asking? I'm asking what is that, Jimmy? I'm asking you that — ?”

“Harry? Are you okay?” Draco gently nudged his side, his thumb rubbing along Harry’s palm. Harry tried to nod, not entirely sure if he was successful. He slowly became aware that he was trembling, tears beginning to stream down his cheeks. “Hey… look at me. Please?”
Draco cradled Harry’s chin, pushing up lightly in an effort to get Harry to look up. Harry lifted his head but kept his eyes downcast. Draco pushed a hand through Harry’s hair, the soft touch marginally pacifying him. It always felt so good when Draco ran his fingers through his hair.

“Do you want to leave? We can go. I don’t care,” Draco softly assured him, inclining his head closer, planting a kiss on Harry’s cheek. Harry wondered if Draco could taste the salt of his tears. The strains of the Aimee Mann song, “Wise Up,” started, the emotion swelling as all the characters collectively hit rock bottom, and suddenly Harry couldn’t take it anymore.

“Y-yeah, can we — I — ”

Draco nodded and stood up, extending his hand to Harry. Harry shakily took it, hurriedly grabbing his coat as he stood.

“Bathroom,” Harry muttered as they exited the doors, the black void of the room replaced by the harsh lights of the lobby. Harry blinked rapidly, weaving past people as swiftly as possible. Out of all the things to happen since they’d gotten to the cinema, Harry didn’t think crying would have been the most mortifying thing to be caught doing. He splashed his face with cold water, absently aware that he was about to venture back into harsh winter weather, but for now, he needed to banish the telltale heat of his cheeks and wipe away all evidence of his tears. He glanced up at his reflection. His eyes were red-rimmed, and the magnification of his glasses did him no favors. Harry sighed as he patted his cheeks dry with the rough brown paper towels from the dispenser.

“You’re a walking disaster,” Harry scolded his reflection before leaving the bathroom, sheepishly looking at Draco, trying to avoid confronting the furrow in his brow that told Harry he understood what had happened. He hoped Draco wouldn’t force him to talk about it. “Let’s go.”

Draco nodded, and they exited the building. Harry could feel his eyes on him the entire time, burning through him like he could reach inside Harry’s head and pull out all the whirring thoughts, trapping them in his fist like wily fireflies. When they boarded the train back to campus, Draco didn’t say anything, only grabbed Harry’s hand and gave him a pointed look that said more than a thousand words ever could.

“Oooohhh, pasty motherfucker’s got himself a boyfriend.”

Draco flashed the teenage boy across from them a withering look that would have made most people cower, but it only seemed to spur him and his friend on.

“Oh, now he’s mad as fuck! What are you gonna do about it?” his friend chimed in, laughing and crossing his arms, leaning back in his seat with a smirk.

Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to Harry. Harry could barely even process the taunting kids. He was too far gone, withdrawn inside himself and all the feelings that film had brought to the surface.

“Don’t worry about them. I’ve got you,” Draco said quietly enough for them not to hear, continuing to give Harry’s hand reassuring squeezes. “But if you say the word, I will gladly hex them six ways to fucking Sunday, consequences be damned.”

Harry cracked a smile. It was small, and the labor to make it happen amounted to lifting a hundred pounds with one hand, but it was still a smile.

“There you go. Want me to make fun of anyone else? Perhaps a brutal dissection of every abhorrent outfit clinging to every wretched person on this train? It won’t be as funny as it would be
in any other season, on account of the heavy coats, but I promise to be as witty and scathing as I can manage.” Draco beamed at Harry, and the idiotic teenagers whooped and uttered an awful word that turned Draco’s silver eyes into molten steel. He whipped his head around and fixed them with a glare. “Don’t you have a rubbish bin to crawl back into? I doubt you have any fucking parents who give a shit whether you live or die, you worthless vermin — ”

“I will fuck you up!” One of them stood up, and a man standing on the train, holding onto a nearby pole, stepped between them.

“Try it, and my gay ass will break your goddamn arm before you can even blink. I’m tired, I’m old, I’m queer, I’ve got nothing to lose, and I have about six inches and a hundred pounds on you so don’t fucking try me,” he warned. The kid rolled his eyes and stepped aside, butting his shoulder against the man as he did. The subway car had arrived at the next stop, the doors opening onto the platform. The kid’s friend got up and followed him. They both exited the train, but not before spinning around to deliver a parting “fuck you.”

The man who had intervened turned around and sat in the vacated seat with a sigh. He looked tired, an I’ve seen it all and am so goddamn over it kind of tired.

“Thanks,” Draco said with a small smile.

“No problem, honey. Life’s too short to be afraid of fifteen-year-old assholes, you know?” The man laughed, and Draco and Harry laughed back. The tension in the subway car let up, but Harry’s insides were still wound tightly, layers of springs compacted into something he knew he couldn’t stop from bursting forth.

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“You’re not Stanley, and you’re not going to become Donnie either.”

“I never said that.” Harry could hear the rising acrimony in his voice. He didn’t mean it. He wasn’t mad at Draco, but he also wasn’t in the mood to be analyzed right now.

“You didn’t have to.” Draco sat on the bed next to Harry, close but not touching.

“You know, that gets really fucking annoying after a while. Can’t some of my thoughts just be private? I don’t want you or anyone else rooting around in my head scrounging for tidbits about my next existential crisis. Just because you notice something doesn’t mean you have to say anything.” Harry fell onto his back, flinging an arm over his eyes.

“Existential? Big word for you.”

“Just stop it!” This time it did come out snappish, no mistake about it. Harry instantly felt bad. He knew Draco was just trying to lighten the mood, to return them to their regularly scheduled banter and propel Harry out of this dark torrent of thoughts. “I’m sorry… I didn’t — I’m just…”

“I know. It’s okay.” Harry felt the mattress dip as Draco lay down.

“I don’t have anything to offer.” Harry removed his arm, his eyes flying open.

Where did that come from?
“What? Why would you say something like that?” Draco curled around Harry, his arm making its way across Harry’s stomach. His eyes were laden with such sympathy that Harry had to look away. “You’re brave. You’re kind. You’re a fiercely loyal friend. There’s so much about you that’s — ”

“There’s nothing… marketable in being a good friend. It’s not a skill that leads me any closer to what the fuck I should be doing for the rest of my life.” Harry fixed his eyes on a point in the ceiling, a chip in the paint, a small dent where something must have punctured it ages ago. He let his mind wander, imagining how it got there, who made it, how many fucked up teenage lives had unfolded in this very spot where he lay right now, this very room where he slept every night. What had those people been like? Did they feel this adrift and untethered when they lived here?

“Wh — marketable?! Fuck marketable. Fuck capitalism! Look what it did to me! Besides, you don’t even need money. You could be a professional layabout from now until the day you die. Buy a farm in the south of France and raise chickens and paint naked in the fields every day. Get drunk by noon on the finest wine the world has to offer and nap until three. It doesn’t matter. Being happy is what fucking matters. Especially when it comes to people like us. We’ve seen the darkest alternative.” Harry finally looked at Draco. He was so lovely. Harry was being an obstinate wreck, and Draco was here making the best of it, saying all the right things. Why did Harry still feel like shit?

“I know. I don’t — I didn’t mean it like that. Not exactly. I just… as much as I don’t want to admit it, sometimes I miss feeling useful to people. I don’t know how to live for myself. It’s strange… missing the very thing I left behind, the thing that fucking tortured me and ruled my life for years. How can I hate it and still… feel lost without it?” Harry turned on his side to properly face Draco, searching his mournful eyes as though they might hold some answers.

“We both suffer from that,” Draco whispered.

“Your father?” Harry whispered back. Now it was Draco’s turn to avert his eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about Lucius. I pay a professional for that.” Draco slowly turned back to Harry, biting his lip. “Speaking of which… I know you haven’t really… been amenable to this conversation before, but I really think you should consider talking to someone.”

Harry took a deep breath and traced one of the stripes of Draco’s jumper with his forefinger.

“Everyone else seems fine, you know? Hermione just carried on back to Hogwarts and took her N.E.W.T.s. Ron went on to Auror training. You seem great too, and I’m over here just… floundering.”

Harry hated the thought of being left behind while everyone else galloped ahead. Draco carded his hand through Harry’s hair.

“People are not fine. I guarantee it. We all… process in different ways. For Hermione, I imagine throwing herself back into books felt like the safest thing, the best chance of keeping it together. Ron is… well, I don’t know. You’d know better than me, but he never struck me as the outwardly emotional type. And me? I’ve always been a functional depressive, Harry. Trust me, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. People don’t notice you’re falling apart until it’s too late because everything appears in order. The only time it didn’t for me… well, you were there. You remember. Point is, plenty of us are mentally ill and struggling even if it’s not on the surface.”

“Mentally ill…” Harry muttered it sourly. “I hate the way that sounds.”

“Why? It’s not shameful to have a cold or a stomach ache is it? Why should it be worse to be
mentally ill? Think of it as having a virus in your brain. Something that eats at it, affecting the way you think and perceive the world around you, keeping you stuck in a dank cave you can’t crawl out of. It warps the truth until all you can see is the darkness. Until you no longer know how to fight it. It’s not your fault.” Draco kept stroking Harry’s hair, his hand swiping across the length of Harry’s neck on the way down. The storm inside Harry was starting to die down. He didn’t feel whole again, but he felt better knowing he wasn’t entirely alone, not while Draco was there with him.

“And… going to therapy helps you fight it?” Harry diffidently asked, meeting Draco’s eyes.

“It does. It takes time and a lot of work, but it helps. My offer still stands. I’ll go with you, if you want. Or at least help you find someone to see.” Draco’s voice was gentle, not pushy.

“Yeah… it might be time for that.”

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He wasn’t sure why he did it. Maybe it was cathartic to cry in the dark, casting a Muffliato and knowing no one would bother him for three hours. It defied all logic in Harry’s mind. Wallowing in sadness wasn’t an attempt to climb out of its bottomless pit, was it? And Harry didn’t want to stay down in that cavern, did he?

He didn’t think so, but for whatever the reason, he found himself compelled to ride the subway to the theater the following week. Harry sat alone in the darkness, the tears flowing freely as he watched Magnolia again, feeling like an animal startled from hibernation when the lights came up. He wandered out into the cold, almost relieved to feel the bitter wind on his cheeks. Harsh as it was, somehow it felt like the truest sign that he was alive.

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“The anti-Valentine’s Day party is a time honored tradition in single culture. It’s an important ritual among friends that allows us to get together and shun the antiquated traditions of heteronormative romance and capitalism.” Gisele was speaking at the front of the room, a wry smile on her face.

“Or to be bitter bitches who just wanna eat cake!” Piper shouted. Harry only knew the girls at this party on a cursory level, introduced in passing when he went to parties with Gisele. Despite getting to know more people now that the year was over halfway done, Harry pretty much stuck to his core group.

“Or that!” Gisele pointed at her with a smile before waving over to the table against the wall. “A feast of epic sugar proportions has been assembled, my fellow bitter bitches! Now tonight, we have a great lineup of entertainment that will show us what goes wrong in love. There will be no anesthetized stories of romantic fairytale bullshit here. We’re gonna watch some cautionary tales that will leave us all glad we dodged that fucking bullet. Kicking off the night is the excellent Fatal Attraction — I know you just got dumped, Hailey, but please don’t use this movie as a how-to guide.”

Gisele waved at a blonde girl laughing in the back of the room.
“Following that is the alcoholism classic, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Ending the night is one of my personal favorites, an incomparable tale of suburban ennui, a movie that will surely join the ranks of the classics someday, *The Ice Storm*. Now, I realize you’re all going to be drunk as fuck by then and not paying attention to how amazing it is, but that’s the sacrifice I make for you all. Eat up, drink, and ignore those two.”

Gisele gestured to Draco and Harry, who were cuddled up in a pile of blankets and pillows.

“Why are they allowed to be here again?” Piper narrowed her eyes as she took a sip of beer.

“Sod off, Piper. You’re hostile even when you are in a relationship. Go be miserable in the corner.” Draco waved her away. She laughed and lobbed a pillow at his head. Draco snatched it in mid-air. “Thanks! Needed another to properly pad the fort.”

Harry smiled and bit into a chocolate cupcake. Valentine’s Day was a holiday Harry had never been particularly attached to. He was perfectly content to spend it here with Draco and Gisele and a room full of single queer people stuffing their faces and watching anti-romance movies.

Seb was off with Ravi for a romantic evening, reservations at a nice restaurant and then a winter stroll through Central Park if the cold didn’t turn unbearable. He had looked at Harry like he’d grown a third head when they talked about his low-key plans with Draco.

“You really don’t care?”

“But really. It’s just a day like any other day.” Harry had shrugged nonchalantly.

“I’m used to not getting these things,” Seb had lamented as they ate lunch. “Gay guys in small town USA don’t get to take who they want to prom or go on a public date for Valentine’s Day.”

Harry’s heart had gone out to him in that moment, and he felt a little guilty for not having the same desire. It wasn’t something that had really occurred to Harry. He hadn’t been openly queer long enough to spend much time thinking about the limitations that came with it. He was learning more about it every day, but the simple things like that, the everyday pleasures of coupledom that straight people took for granted, were only just now hitting Harry.

He leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder as the film started. Underneath the blanket, Draco’s hand crept its way up Harry’s leg, delivering the lightest pressure on his groin, not stroking or squeezing, just resting there. Harry looked up to find Draco’s expression was maddeningly blank, the teasing wanker.

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“Who knew being in a room full of single, celibate people would make me so fucking horny?”

“God, I know!” Harry assaulted Draco’s neck, all sharp teeth and tenacious tongue. He had Draco pinned against the closed front door of his rooms. “I don’t know how we lasted through a whole film.”

The group had collectively rolled their eyes and bid them good riddance when they announced they were leaving.
“Yeah yeah, get out of here and leave us lonely fucks in peace! Treat him right, Draco! Don’t be selfish tonight! It's Valentine's Day!” Gisele had drunkenly shouted with a laugh.

“Mmmph,” Draco mumbled, pushing Harry off and starting to back him toward the bedroom. They collapsed on Harry’s bed in a tangle of limbs. Harry spread his legs so Draco could fall between them, rutting against him as he covered Harry with the length of his body. “What do you want?”

Harry sighed, stretching his neck back as Draco nibbled on it, the now familiar warmth that Draco’s touch imparted flooding through him, ending in a swell inside his jeans. He thought of what they’d done earlier that week. Harry had pressed Draco against the wall of the shower stall, his legs apart so Draco could reach around with a wet, soapy finger and coax Harry’s entrance open, rubbing across the tight muscle until Harry sagged against him, hot and whimpering, consumed by the need for Draco to push that finger inside him. Draco had all too willingly obliged. Oh, how Draco had obliged… penetrating him so gently as he whispered in Harry’s ear, telling him how tight and hot he was and how it set Draco on fire.

“Would you let me fuck you, Harry? Fill you up, stretch you around my cock, and come inside you? Merlin, I want you so fucking badly all the time. I want you to come on my cock. I want — ” Draco had spilled on Harry’s hand with the most exquisite moan, neither of them caring anymore about who might wander in and hear them, knowing exactly what they were doing in there with Harry’s hand wrapped around both of their pricks, Draco’s finger buried in Harry’s arse.

Since then, it was all Harry could think about.

Not that he hadn’t thought about it before. Harry had been curious about bottoming for a while, especially with Draco, but something stopped him from indulging the thought too far.

“Are you sleeping with anyone else?” Harry blurted out.

“What?” Draco pulled back with astounded eyes.

“You’re really fucking smooth, Harry. The best.

“I — fuck, that’s not how I meant to — ” Harry sat up, thrust his hands in his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve just been meaning to ask, and well — it popped in my head right now because I want you to — ”

Harry blushed and added softly, “I want you to fuck me.”

How odd it was that he could still turn red from words like that. Merlin knew they could fill a ledger a mile long with all the dirty things the two of them had said and done over the past couple of months.

“Oh… no, I haven’t… I wouldn’t do that to you,” Draco softly intoned, reaching for Harry’s hand only to sharply withdraw it once again. “Wait, you think I would do that to you?!”

“No! I don’t know…” Harry confessed. “You don’t want to be boyfriends so…”

Harry’s cheeks heated yet again. The word sounded so pedestrian and childish for some reason.

“We’re in this weird label-less… thing,” Harry gesticulated wildly, wishing he could be more articulate, “so I didn’t know! And every time I thought about asking, it just seemed like the wrong time or… I don’t know. I’m shit at this, Draco. I mean, you know my spotty history. I never know what the fuck I’m doing.”
“When I said I wanted to take it slow, I didn’t mean I wanted to flaunt my arse all over New York. I just…” Draco drew his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on top of them. “Commitment terrifies me. I don’t want to feel like we’re in some sort of… predetermined box. We’re nineteen and while I’m sure you feel ancient as fuck because of what happened to us… in the same way I do sometimes… I don’t want to be… restricted. Does that make any sort of sense?”

“Restricted sounds like you do want to sleep with other people.” Harry was feeling sullen, the heat of a few moments ago drying up.

“No, I don’t. Not at all.” Draco laid his hand on Harry’s knee. “I come from this world where relationships are formed with the intent to marry and produce heirs. It’s like being thrust onto a conveyor belt that you can’t stop. There are all these elaborate courting rituals and archaic nonsense. I’m not saying people aren’t in love when they marry in pure-blood families. Sometimes they are. I think my — it doesn’t matter. The point is it’s very traditional and fast and — not for me.”

“Draco, I’m not asking for your bloody hand in marriage. I’m just asking what we are. If we’ve been sleeping together for two months, and you don’t want anyone else it just seems like… aren’t we a couple even if we don’t say it? What’s going on with us doesn’t feel all that casual. We’re more than just two people getting off together. We’re friends. You held my hand on the train while I cried about a stupid film.” Harry was starting to see why Seb said these situations never worked out. The more he voiced his concerns, the more he realized what a tangled web this was quickly becoming.

Draco leaned back on the heels of his hands, closing his eyes and seeming to contemplate Harry’s words. After an agonizingly long minute of silence, he opened them.

“Okay.”

“Okay what?” Harry cautiously asked.

“Okay, you can… refer to me as your boyfriend, if you like,” Draco said with a beleaguered sigh and a toss of his artfully tousled hair.

“Wow, don’t give yourself a stroke there.” Harry couldn’t help but laugh. This was so very Draco. He sounded like he was deigning to bestow the privilege upon Harry rather than conceding to something that was basically already established.

“But I swear to god, Harry, if freshman year wraps up and you’re asking me to move in with you —”

“Merlin, no. Have you completely lost your mind? I don't want to share a room with you. Waking up to you spending an hour in the mirror on that hair, blaring Kate Bush while I'm trying to sleep, sounds like the quickest way to break us up.” Harry shook his head. Merlin, Draco really thought highly of himself, didn't he?

"I do not spend an hour, and Kate Bush is a goddess and a queer icon. Honestly, they should revoke your queer card for not owning a copy of The Hounds of Love."

"We've been through this already. I can't bloody stand her high-pitched warble. It sounds like she's a cat in heat being strangled by another cat."

"I'm seriously rethinking this relationship right now. I can't be seen about town with a boyfriend
who can't comprehend the genius of Kate Bush."

Harry smiled and straddled Draco's lap, his hands coming to rest on his chest.

"You just called me your boyfriend."

Draco rolled his eyes and tilted his head toward the ceiling, an exaggerated display obviously designed to make him appear as put upon as possible.

"I've clearly gone round the twist if I'm willingly enduring this. I knew you'd be like this."

"Shut up," Harry said as he kissed him, his lips still stretched into a giddy grin, "boyfriend, and fuck me already."

"Are you sure? Just because I said it doesn't mean you have to. People agree to all sorts of things when they're coming. If promises made during orgasms constituted binding agreements, we'd all be in trouble." Draco laughed, but Harry could see the hunger in his eyes, the dark, hopeful tint.

"I want to. I need you inside me," Harry whispered, grinding his hips in Draco's lap. Draco's eyes fell closed with a gasp.

"Okay, okay. Fuck — you're amazing, you know that?" Draco kissed Harry fiercely, parting their lips only long enough to get them both out of their jumpers. They undressed in record time, clothes tossed carelessly to the floor. Harry groaned as he fell back onto the bed and Draco's naked skin met his own. He never tired of that initial contact, the first rush of heat from Draco's body sliding against his, his comforting weight on top of Harry, the tickle of the sparse hair on his calves, the drag of his cock against Harry's own. They were both hard already, full of anticipation for what was to come.

"Finger me. I don’t — " Harry moaned as Draco sucked on his nipple, his hand kneading the flesh of Harry's arse, making sure the thought of Draco inside him wouldn’t leave his mind. "I don’t want to wait anymore."

Draco kissed Harry and then leaned over to open the nightstand drawer. They were both acquainted with where they each kept their condoms and lube. Draco knew his way around Harry’s bedroom like it was his own. Harry liked that. It made his space feel less lonely when Draco was gone, like the imprint of him lingered there, his scent on Harry’s pillow, indentations in the mattress reminding Harry of where Draco had slept, where he had come with his fists in the sheets. Draco almost lost his balance as he stretched his arm out to reach the drawer. They both laughed as Harry clutched Draco’s waist to hold him in place. Draco set a condom and tube of lubricant down on the bed as he kissed Harry again, deep and slow.

“Actually, um… part of the reason I was asking about, er, other people… I figured since we’ve both been tested and we haven’t slept with anyone else…” Harry felt a flush rising up his neck as he said the words, watching Draco’s pupils dilate in realization. Gisele and Seb had been adamant that they all needed testing periodically: at the very least, at the end of every semester. Harry was eternally grateful for their guidance. Although he had known enough to take precautions, he knew so much more now.

“Oh — y-yeah, I’d really — I mean, if you want to — I’d like that,” Draco stuttered. It wasn’t often that Draco was overwhelmed enough to be driven to choppy, broken sentences, but Harry treasured his ability to make it happen. It was especially precious now, knowing that imagining fucking Harry without a condom caused Draco’s brain to malfunction.
I would. I want… I want you to come inside me.” Harry shivered at the thought, a thread of pleasure igniting within him, his skin tingling as he pictured Draco’s white come splattered on his fucked-pink entrance. He didn’t know why it was so tantalizing, but there was something starkly intimate about it. He felt the same way about Draco coming in his mouth, a part of him remaining inside Harry long after they were finished, a private reminder of what they’d done that only Harry and Draco knew about. Harry got a thrill out of thinking about it hours later, knowing that anyone he talked to, anyone who looked at him, didn’t know what he’d done, didn’t know that Draco had spilled down his throat a few hours ago, hot and urgent, leaving Harry with a secret parting gift.

Draco nodded with a quiet whimper and grabbed the tube, leaving the foil packet next to it untouched. He flipped open the cap and coated his forefinger. Harry spread his legs wider, pulling his knees back. The exposed position made him blush again. He jerked back a bit as the cold substance met his skin but relaxed as Draco warmed it, rubbing the pad of his finger in leisurely circles across the rim. When he pushed in, Harry sighed, basking in the contrast that always made this part so fascinating to him, the resistance giving way to pleasure, the emptiness traded for glorious fullness. It wasn’t enough though. Harry wanted to be truly full soon. He wanted to know what it felt like to have Draco changing the shape of him, making room inside this personal place no one else had ever shared with Harry.

Draco was watching Harry with rapt attention, his eyes lust-filled and full of wonder as he began to pump his finger in and out, stroking up and down Harry’s legs, dropping tender kisses on the insides of his thighs. The further Draco reached inside him, the better it felt, that mysterious pressure building. It made him want more.

"It’s not enough. I need — "

Draco nodded and licked his lips, withdrawing so he could coat two fingers before sliding back in. Harry squirmed, making infinitesimal thrusts toward Draco’s fingers as he moaned for more. Draco worked his fingers in gradually, until he could stroke across Harry’s prostate.

"Ah!" Harry’s hips twitched up as he felt his nerve endings awaken, a match to gasoline-soaked tinder that made Harry reach out for Draco, his fingers scrabbling for purchase. Draco leaned forward so Harry could clutch at his back.

"Look at you," Draco whispered, voice thick with arousal. "I love seeing you like this. Love seeing you let go for me. I wish you could see how perfect you look right now."

"Nngghh," Harry choked out, his legs hooking around Draco’s back as he continued to apply the perfect amount of pressure to that spot. Harry’s mind was rife with all the possibilities, all the ways Draco could take him apart and make him feel good, relentlessly thrusting into him until they were both spent. "Draco, please — I want you."

Draco groaned and swept his hand down Harry’s side as he leaned back, removing his fingers and slicking his cock. He looked at Harry before he lined himself up, a poignant smile passing between them, that treasured moment of nervous excitement before sex. Neither of them had to explain it; Harry knew they were feeling the very same thing.

Draco pushed the head in, and Harry gasped, involuntarily tensing.

"Okay?" Draco halted, his wary silver eyes flickering to Harry's.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Harry nodded, but when Draco continued, sinking in a few more inches, the pain only made Harry lock up even tighter. "Okay, stop! Stop."
"Sorry! Do you want me to pull out? We really don't have to do this. I — "

"No, I want to," Harry cut him off. "It just hurts more than I thought it would. I don't know... I'm used to your fingers now. I didn't think it would be so much... more."

"I know. It's different." Draco leaned forward again, a hand cupping Harry's cheek. "You seem... it's natural to tense up, but you have to force yourself to relax. Ignore everything your body is telling you. It gets so much better then."

Harry nodded jerkily, his eyes seeking out that marred point on the ceiling, but Draco gently turned his head until Harry met his eyes.

"Hey... take a deep breath with me."

Harry obeyed, breathing in when Draco did and then out again.

"I'm not going to hurt you, okay? Even if you tell me to keep going, I'll know when you're being a stubborn git, and I'll stop. You can't fool me." Draco smirked, and it made Harry laugh. He took another breath and focused on loosening his muscles. He felt his arse open up around Draco's cock, the burn of the stretch still present but the intensity of it fading.

"Keep going," Harry quietly urged. Draco gradually pushed in the remaining couple of inches, and Harry fought against his body's instinct to clam up. Now that he was hilt-deep, Draco paused, running his fingers through Harry's hair and petting his arm. "Can you... tell me how it feels for you?"

“God, I don’t know. It’s... one of the best feelings in the world. The way you fit around me, the way we’re...” All the sharp defenses of Draco were gone in that moment, his eyes filled with adoration. He seemed to consider saying something else, his mouth opening and closing twice, but instead, he buried his head in Harry’s neck, his arm wrapping tightly around Harry’s waist. “You feel amazing, Harry. I can’t believe I’m inside you. Can I... is it alright if I move?"

Harry nodded, but then remembered Draco couldn’t see it.

“Yes. Move.”

Hearing Draco’s sultry drawl, seeing how happy he was, made Harry’s body relax even more, his limbs feeling fluid and warm now, arousal replacing doubt. Draco made a few shallow thrusts, and Harry was at a loss to describe the sensation. It was an intrusion but entirely welcome somehow. It felt like the greatest act of surrender, letting Draco inhabit his body like this, testing his limits, his walls adjusting to take him.

Draco was panting in his ear, his soft, breathy moans just a little different from the chorus of carnal sounds Harry knew. Something about the pitch, the ebb and flow of it, was more awe-struck, more desperate than anything he’d ever heard spill forth from Draco’s mouth. There was an urgency to how tightly he was holding onto Harry. Harry’s cock had flagged a bit from the pain, but it rose back to attention now, encouraged by Draco’s moans and the way the drag of his cock was slowly transforming into a new kind of feeling.

Draco reached underneath Harry, lifting his arse off the mattress, and oh — there it was again. Harry let out a high keening sound and shifted, chasing the ripple of pleasure he’d just felt.

Draco pulled back to meet Harry’s eyes.

“Better?”
“Yeah, that was good. It still hurts a bit, but that — oh — fuck, keep doing that,” Harry gasped as Draco entered him in one long, slow thrust. Harry threw his arms around Draco’s neck, their eyes locked as he fucked into him. Draco’s thrusts sped up a little, and Harry found he couldn’t control the grunts and groans tumbling out of his mouth. He didn’t know if he’d ever felt closer to anyone, bodies linked like tenacious vines, that smoldering gaze fixed on him as Draco moved in and out, mouth open to let out the noises Harry couldn’t get enough of.

The pain was a distant memory now, replaced by a blissful heat that spread through Harry rapidly. Draco’s cock was hitting him in the right spot now, and Harry wrapped his legs around him, trying to pull him impossibly closer. Draco kissed him, moaning in his mouth, and Harry gratefully swallowed the sound.

“Fuck, Harry — I can’t — you feel so perfect — I can’t last long — I’m sorry,” Draco lamented with a whine, reaching down to clumsily fist Harry’s cock, his rhythm erratic as he continued to fuck Harry. Harry could barely cope with the dual sensation of Draco’s hand squeezing his cock as he thrust into him. God, how had he ever lived without this? “I want you to — I want you to come first — Harry — ”

It didn’t take long. A few more strokes of Draco’s hand, Harry’s name whispered like an invocation, and Harry was coming so hard that his vision whitened, the pressure of Draco’s cock on his prostate never letting up. Harry moaned as he rode the waves of his orgasm, feeling his arse clench around Draco’s cock. It enhanced everything, toeing the line between pain and pleasure in a way that was entirely new to him.

It was only a moment before Draco was coming too. Harry loved the way it felt, Draco’s cock pulsing inside him, Draco’s body stilling against him as he reached the pinnacle he’d been chasing, groaning Harry’s name one last time. They lay like that for a few minutes, Harry running his hand down Draco’s perspiring back, a smile plastered on his face, waves of euphoria keeping him afloat in a state he never wanted to come down from.

“Am I crushing you?” Draco croaked, his hands stroking up and down Harry’s sides.

“No.”

“Harry… Merlin, that was…”

“Yeah, it really was. Can’t think why we waited so long.”

“Mmm, we’ll have to make up for lost time.” Draco rolled off Harry, propping up on his elbow, head leaning in his hand as he smiled mischievously, fingers playing with Harry’s chest hair. He continued downward, twisting his fingers in the nest of curls at the base of Harry’s now softened cock. “I like this… that you don’t get rid of it, I mean. I like touching it. Is that weird?”

“No,” Harry chuckled. “I’m glad you like it. I feel like I’m supposed to be ashamed of it or something. Everyone here seems eager to hack it off, but I don’t really want to.”

Draco kept smiling at him, both of them sex-drunk, elated in that special way where everything else flies away like petals on the wind for a while, the present the only thing in the foreground for once. Draco traced the crease where Harry’s thigh met his groin, curious fingers dipping lower until they brushed Harry’s tender entrance. Harry flinched a little, and Draco retracted his hand.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. You can, if you want to,” Harry whispered. It felt irresistibly forbidden somehow,
letting Draco touch it, come-soaked and sensitive, freshly fucked and loosened. Draco sat up, maneuvering back between Harry’s legs, kneeling between them almost piously, his hands resting on the tops of his thighs. Harry moved his legs apart just as he had not long ago, when he readied himself for Draco’s cock. Just the knowledge of it made Harry’s soft cock feebly stir with interest. A hesitant finger rubbed across his entrance, and, tender though it was, it felt good too.

Draco looked up, eyes seeking permission, and Harry nodded.

Draco thrust in slowly and moaned, shifting on the bed like the sight was too much for him to handle, like he couldn’t be still when Harry was there, spread open with Draco’s come leaking out of him.

“I must be truly disgusting if I like this. Merlin, you — look at that — ” Draco’s eyelids were fluttering, his voice so reverent it made Harry’s heart ache.

“You’re hard again,” Harry whispered, bucking back into Draco’s hand as he inserted another finger.

“So are you,” Draco said with an amused look, inclining his head toward Harry’s erection. Harry hadn’t even noticed. Not so feeble after all, apparently. Draco flashed Harry a ravenous look as he crooked his fingers and started massaging Harry’s prostate. “What have you done to me, Harry? I don’t think you — do you know what you do to me?”

Something shifted in Draco’s face, something sincere but sad, and before Harry could say anything, Draco leaned forward, scooping Harry into his arm with one deft motion, mouthing at his neck and ear as he continued to stroke that spot inside Harry. Harry was over-stimulated, a raw, stripped wire, nerves exposed and perched on the knife’s edge of ecstasy and excess, not caring for how he might fall. Harry took them both in hand, the press of Draco’s prick against his sending Harry’s senses into overdrive. Merlin, he felt intoxicated, drowning in peaks that only seemed to reach new heights with every passing second until he thought he might burst, shatter into a thousand pieces like porcelain crashing to the ground.

Harry wanked them both feverishly, Draco’s lips meeting his again and again, his fingers, slick with come and lube, insistently caressing Harry’s prostate. It was all too much, but Harry willingly ushered in the heavenly unraveling, practically shouting as he came for the second time that night. He pushed at Draco’s chest, wordlessly trying to communicate that he wanted him to sit up, wanted to be able to watch him come. As Draco complied, Harry possessively gripped his thighs, putting him exactly where he wanted him.

“God, I love it when you do that,” Draco groaned as Harry began to pump up and down his shaft again.

“What?” Harry ran his free hand over Draco’s taut stomach, his pebbly nipples.

“Pick me up. Move me. Put me where you want me.” Draco leaned back, gasping as he got closer. “Like you — like I’m your toy — I just — love it.”

Harry’s eyelids fluttered. Draco was truly going to be the death of him. Draco grabbed Harry’s free hand and brought it to his lips, sucking two of Harry’s fingers into his mouth. Harry’s rhythm on Draco’s cock stuttered as Draco moaned around his mouthful, tickling tongue delivering feathery licks across his fingertips. Draco’s hand clamped around Harry’s hip in a bruising grip, and he started to come, Harry’s fingers falling out of his mouth as he cried out, splattering across Harry’s chest.
Harry was torn between watching Draco’s flushed face and his spurting cock. Ever since that first encounter with Luke, Harry had been addicted to watching a man come, but it was never as enthralling as it was when that man was Draco. Draco caught his breath, threading a hand through his sweaty, disheveled hair, and smiled at Harry.

Harry loved Draco like this, sex-mussed and beatific, his normally pale cheeks rosy and his eyes devoid of any weighty dilemmas. There was something to be said for the rejuvenating powers of great sex, and Harry was smitten with it, overjoyed to be the one to usher in that cleansing mood for Draco and to have Draco be the one to do it for him. Sex never felt like a simple release of tension with them. It always signified something more, a deeper-seated mutual yearning to transcend everything that burdened them, the tight yokes around their necks that none of their other friends would ever be fully aware of.

Draco reached for his wand and spelled them both clean. Harry let out a small noise of discontent. He was almost sorry to see the erasure of the mess they made, the proof that the fastidious Draco Malfoy was besotted enough with Harry to revel in the sight of his come leaking out of him, trickling down his thigh and soiling the sheets.

With a deeply satisfied sigh, Draco lay down next to Harry, turning on his side so he could rest his head on Harry’s shoulder, his palm flat on Harry’s stomach.

“I’ve never done that with anyone.”

“What?” Harry quietly asked. He knew the answer, but he still wanted to hear it.

“Come inside them. Had nothing… separating us,” Draco whispered, tracing invisible patterns across Harry’s stomach. Harry looked down, watching Draco’s ivory hand skate across his lightly tanned skin.

Sometimes he wanted nothing to ever separate them, wanted to crack Draco open and crawl inside, hidden for safekeeping, away from the rest of the terrifying world. Nothing was simple between them, yet somehow nothing in Harry’s life was ever as simple as it was when he was lying next to Draco.

This is love.

The revelation made Harry’s heart falter, skipping a beat before pounding against the cage of his chest like timpani. He didn’t dare speak it. He wasn’t entirely sure he even wanted to. Surely it was too soon to even think it.

So he didn’t say anything at all.

Harry’s arms found their way around Draco’s body, curves and dips matching up the way they always did, their bodies two interlocking pieces who had miraculously found their way to each other after all this time in enmity, a truce giving way to friendship giving way to something else Harry treasured even if he couldn’t reconcile its truth just yet.

Harry pulled Draco closer and slept the way he only could when Draco was in his bed.

Chapter End Notes
Sex can be a form of avoidance, can't it lol? Btw, I hope you know that Harry's long journey to get help isn't just for the sake of angsty torture. It's heavily inspired by my own journey and those of people I know. You may remember Draco saying in the cabin that he had to be dragged kicking and screaming into therapy, and I think, to a degree, that's true for everyone. But it's especially true when you're that young and haven't been before.

And I promise all threads that have been hinted at (what's going on with Draco behind the scenes, Ron and Hermione, etc) will be resolved. :)

Good morning (or afternoon, whatever it may be where you are!), friends. Thanks for all the kind words about both the chapter and my health. After considering all the input, I’ve decided to do Monday and Wednesday updates. Things are a little bit nuts in the mad rush to finish stuff here before Thursday, and I like there being a bit less of an update gap this way too. (Plus, as a couple of you pointed out, it may be nice to have some comments to read in those early days of laying about!)

“So my dad and I are officially on the fritz. I don’t know how the fuck I’m paying for NYU next year. I think my future is basically going to be that scene in *Reality Bites* where Winona is on the couch calling psychic hotlines for advice. Want to get a place with me?” Gisele crossed her legs and took a sip of coffee, leaning back on one hand. They were sitting on the edge of the fountain at Washington Square Park; it was still shut off for the winter. Early March was brisk, winter feeling like a stubborn, drunken party guest still standing in your living room long after everyone else has gone to bed. Every fresh gust of icy air left everyone wondering if it was the last gasp, the death rattle of dead leaves and frozen ground.

Only a minute ago, they had been warm and comfortable in Gisele’s dorm room, blaring PJ Harvey’s *Rid of Me*. Gisele had introduced Harry to so many fierce women in indie rock: Sleater-Kinney, Bikini Kill, Liz Phair, and Hole were now all in Harry’s regular rotation.

“Okay, I love Pavement and Guided By Voices as much as the next 90s indie kid, but you have got to diversify, Harry. Throw out some of the testosterone for these. You’re missing out on so much,” Gisele had said as she held up a few CDs that Harry counted among his favourites now.

Winter had been droning on long enough that everyone began to experience a persistent itch, this hissing voice that demanded to go outside in hopes that they might find the first balmy spring day blowing through the bare branches, a few tentative sprouts poking their heads through the brown grass grown soggy from melted snow. It was madness really, but they all kept doing it anyway. It helped that the negative temperature days had sort of warped their perception of what constituted “warm.” Forty-five degrees (Harry was learning to adjust to Fahrenheit since every thermometer and American weather channel used it) felt like a veritable heatwave at this point.

It wasn’t too bad on that day, a bit of bite to the wind, but nothing they couldn’t handle for half an hour.

“Damn — er — maybe I can think about it a bit before I answer?” Harry rubbed the back of his neck as he considered her offer. Gisele had a talent for casually dropping into serious subjects in the middle of an otherwise low stakes conversation. It was one of the things Harry liked most about her. Most people had topics that they walked on eggshells about, dipping the volume of their voices carefully as though afraid of upsetting a precarious apple cart, some measure of shame or reverence in their tone as they pulled a person aside for a private moment. Gisele’s propensity for just barreling in without so much as an “oh hey, by the way” to signify the upcoming shift put Harry at ease. When nothing was off limits, everything seemed lighter and more natural. It was less
daunting to bring up a subject that might make anyone else balk.

That said, some topics of conversation required more consideration before diving in headfirst. This was one of those.

“Oh dude, trust me. I’m not out to back you into a snap decision. I just want to get it out there ASAP since we’ll be figuring all that shit out soon, checking the boxes on our little forms for sophomore year.”

“You don’t sound like you’re looking forward to it.”

“I am… and I’m also not. As much as I hate the bastard for trying to force me into whatever life he’s decided is ‘acceptable,’ he’s right about one thing. I need to make decisions. Don’t really feel like doing that yet, you know?” Gisele offered him a largely cheerless smile, and Harry returned it. He wished he could tell her exactly how marrow-deep he understood that statement.

“We don’t have to decide yet. We have time.” Harry wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince. “But forget about that for a second. How are you doing? I mean, with everything between you and your dad.”

“Ugh, I don’t know. It’s weird when you hate your parents but still love them. It’s like someone wove strings into your skin and gave them the reigns. You jump when they pull, you feel it when they make a move. Even if you wish didn’t. Sometimes it feels like hating them only makes it stronger, like they’re establishing this power over you that’s even tougher than love.”

“Is love tough?” Harry asked in a small voice.

Gisele looked at him, her brow furrowing like there were tragedies lurking within life that she couldn’t begin to explain to him.

“It’s the toughest, bitterest old bitch on the compound, Harry. Like that picture of the mother in the Dust Bowl that everyone loves. People love that image, but they don’t ever seem to know why. They think they do, but it’s just surface shit. ‘Look at all the hardship. It’s so tragic! Can you imagine? People can endure more than they think.’ But it’s more than that. It’s because we all know that’s love’s true face. It’s not some greeting card or a fucking jewelry commercial with pretty white faces getting engaged on Christmas. It’s tough, tired skin and beaten down dreams, but you’re still there. You still don’t bail because you’re… bound. And that makes it all the more fucked when it is time to bail. How do you do it? How do you really cut the string, Harry? Because, as far as I can tell, the little cuts we make, the knives we jab into each other, don’t really make it stop. They just make it worse. They just make the string that much tighter.”

Harry let that sink in, the sounds of the city uncharacteristically hushed around them as they sat on the cold concrete edge of the fountain.

“I will take that to mean you’re not doing well.” Unsure what else he could provide, Harry tried for a little laughter to shake her out of it. Gisele joined in, shaking her head.

“Yeah, man… shit is fucked. But it’s okay. I shall prevail!” she pronounced, raising her coffee cup to the cloud-covered sky.

“Do you ever talk to Draco about this? It seems like he might be more help than I am.” As he said it, Harry absently wondered how Gisele had ended up his closest friend instead of Draco’s. They really did have a lot in common, both chasing the shadows of their parents.

“Oh yeah, we got drunk and hashed it the fuck out last weekend. He was sitting on a bench outside
the law school when I found out. I had just stormed out of my room and walked. No idea where the fuck I was going, just… needed to go.”

“Oh… that’s good you ran into him.” Harry was happy they were supporting each other, but there was also a tug of jealousy he tried to stamp out. He wished he could do more for Gisele, wished he understood the specific set of familial struggles she faced. He empathized, but he knew he couldn’t quite grasp it in the way Draco did. Not to mention that Draco tended to be more organized with his thoughts. Harry’s head often felt like a jumble that refused to sort itself. Often, the sentiments were there but trying to close his fist around them felt like chasing motes of dust in the air.

“It was. Helped me stop feeling sorry for myself for a while. So I’ll graduate with mountains of debt and a dad who doesn’t speak to me. I figure that basically makes me like half the kids in America. At least I can try to talk to him if I want. Did you know Draco’s dad is in prison for some like… crazy political assassination attempts? Treason and shit?” Gisele’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. “I wanted to ask him more about it, but like… he rarely ever talks about personal stuff. I didn’t want to push my luck.”

“Yeah, it’s best not to with him. You have to catch him at the right time.”

Harry turned to see Gisele leering at him.

“What?”

“How’s that going?” she asked suggestively.

“It’s good,” Harry offered with no elaboration.

“I’m going to take good to mean ‘mostly naked’ in this scenario.”

He laughed but didn’t deny it.

“Don’t still disapprove then?” Harry asked.

“I never disapproved.”

Harry canted his head in her direction.

“What? I didn’t! I was just… cautious. I’m still cautious. Happy for you but cautious.”

“Understandable.” Harry figured that was an appropriate reaction to his relationship with Draco. “I don’t need more time to think about it. Let’s get a flat together.”

“Harry, you really don’t have to commit — ”

“What objections am I going to come up with in between now and the end of the semester? I’m bullheaded, and I rush into things. But you know what? I’ve gotten this far on instinct. I don’t feel like changing it up now.” Harry shrugged with a smile, and Gisele grinned back. She raised her coffee cup, and Harry tipped his against it.

“Roommates,” she said.

“Roommates,” Harry agreed.

“But we’re not getting a ‘flat’ because this is New York, mate.”

“Sod off, I’m English! No amount of pastrami sandwiches and lox is going to change that.”
Harry leaned back and surveyed the park for any signs of burgeoning greenery. A cardinal perched on a spindly branch a few yards away. Maybe spring was coming after all.

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Harry gave the nut around the middle of the pipe three clockwise twists. He was in a stall of the first floor men’s bathroom of the main branch of the New York Public Library. The pipe connecting the toilet to the wall was the key to opening the entrance. There were three other magical gateways scattered throughout Manhattan as well, but Harry dearly loved the library. The stone lions standing guard out front, the stately columns framing the doors, the marble staircases, everything about it was majestic. There were shades of Hogwarts in its ornate architecture.

Draco had scoffed when Harry told him about the entrance to the magical sector of Manhattan.

“This is why I continue to drift further away from the ridiculousness that is the wizarding world. All this unnecessary pageantry! Who do wizards think they are? James bloody Bond? Turn the knob three times, tap out ‘Mary Had a Sodding Little Lamb’ in Morse code with the toe of your shoe, spin around in a circle, and say ‘I am a daft monkey dancing for the Ministry’s amusement.’ I’ve had it up to here with these wonky mechanisms. Why not install a damn keycard? Give me credentials and let me log in on the internet. There’s no reason for the wizard aesthetic to be stuck in the 1850s.”

“It’s three turns of a nut. I don’t think it’s that outdated!”

Despite his vehement rant, Draco had offered to accompany Harry.

“I’ve never made fun of the Weasel via floo call. Might be a nice change of pace.”

Certain that he didn’t need any added complications, Harry elected not to take him up on that, trekking to the magical sector on his own instead.

Although the entryway to Cortlandt Corner was in keeping with the traditions of the English wizarding world Harry had come to know, when he crossed the threshold, the appearance of it was decidedly more Manhattanite.

Even though it bore almost the same name as a street in Tribeca near the World Trade Center, as Harry understood it, it was at the other end of Manhattan.

“Yet another example of wizards being purposely obtuse, Potter. They probably did it just to confuse everyone.”

He vaguely knew the name stemmed from some powerful old New York family that had wizarding roots even though they’d made their fortune in Muggle occupations. The origin story was quite a contrast from the way prestigious wizarding families comported themselves in England. Harry tried to imagine Lucius Malfoy as an investment banker on Wall Street, pinstriped and Rolex-ed, brokering deals in the Rainbow Room over a juicy steak. It was an unsettling image.

Most of the people ambling down the street were dressed fairly Muggle. Those that were in wizarding clothes looked more like eccentric performance artists than traditional, robe-clad wizards. They wore vibrant colors and flowy fabric that might have been mistaken for the costumes of someone on their way to a cabaret stage. Well… until their fringe and feathered arms
began to move of their own accord. Were it not for a couple goblins roaming the street and the Billiwigs Harry saw flying overhead, he might not have known it was a wizarding quarter at all.

Granted, things became more definitively magical the longer one looked. As Harry began to explore, flying advertisements whizzed past his head, beautiful witch and wizard models advertising products sold by various shops. He couldn’t focus on them. Being in a wizarding area for the first time in months was far more overwhelming than Harry had anticipated. He was beginning to regret not taking Draco with him.

Everything was so flashy and kinetic, a street performer transforming himself into the shape of a lamppost and then a park bench, a hat with tiny dancing legs laid out in front of him to collect tips. When the hat stretched up to accept some coins from a passerby, Harry saw that it had eyes. The magic was pulsating all around him. Had magic always been so… palpable? The atmosphere sizzled with it.

Harry consulted his map, breaking into a jog as he walked down the street, dodging a salesgirl hawking fragrant soaps charmed to do all sorts of things. He was eager to bypass the cacophony of Cortlandt and get to his destination.

“Never cast a sticking charm on unruly hair or glamours on nasty scars ever again! Step out of the shower and be ready to go! You’ll save so much time on your morning routine!”

Harry hung a left and found himself right in front of the store he needed. Firenze’s Firecalls: rent by the minute or the hour, the banner read.

Harry took a deep breath, trying not to think about how this call would go. True to form, he hadn’t really prepared for it.

That word stopped him in his tracks. Since when had talking to Ron required preparation?

Maybe since Draco became your boyfriend? And you avoided telling anyone back home about it?

Harry ran a hand down his face and approached the counter.

“I’d like to use a floo, please. How much is it?”

“How long would you like to rent one?” the girl behind the counter asked brightly, flipping her thick red hair over her shoulder.

“Um, fifteen minutes I guess? That’s probably all I need.”

“Five dragots or five dollars, if you prefer. We take Non-Magical currency. Owner says it’s all money so what should we care, right? It spends the same.” She smiled, and Harry looked down to see she had a charmed nametag that read “Rosemary,” the R and the Y made of vines that blossomed into flowers on the curlicues, the vines growing and snapping back into place and extending downward all over again.

“Oh, great!” Harry gratefully handed over a five dollar bill. He’d completely forgotten to find a bank and make an exchange in Cortlandt Corner. Since he’d never visited the magical sector, he hadn’t had much need for magical currency until now.

“Right this way.” Rosemary motioned for him to follow and led him between two rows of heavily curtained square sections. When they got near the end of the row, she parted one of the large velvet curtains to reveal a fireplace and an armchair with a small bowl of floo powder in front of it. “It’s very quiet today, but I’ll put you at the end here for a little extra privacy. Just in case. Let me know
“Thanks.” Harry nodded and when she had gone, he tossed the powder in before he could overthink it, thrusting his head into the green flames. He winced from the disorienting sensation of his head being dizzily transported while his body remained securely in New York. “Ron? Are you there?”

Harry heard a noise that sounded like Ron jumping up from a couch in the living room, and a second later, he was sitting in front of the fireplace, waving and beaming at Harry.

“Hey! Nice to see you. Er… part of you anyway,” Ron said with a laugh. “How’s New York?”

“Cold. I’m ready for spring.”

“I hear that. It’s rainy doom and gloom here, but we’re not eighty-year-old biddies so let’s talk about something else. The day we spend ten minutes on the weather is the day we’ve officially joined a bridge club and started knitting jumpers.”

Harry laughed, and it was an easy, natural sound. This was Ron. There was nothing to be afraid of.

“Okay well, I actually have something I wanted to ask you. It’s kind of short notice, but I wondered if you and Hermione might be interested in coming for a long weekend? My spring break is a couple weeks from now, and I’d really like to see you both. It’s been ages. Do you think you’ll be free?”

“It has! I’d love to, and I’m sure ‘Mione would too. To be honest, even if she had a dinner scheduled with the Minister himself, I think she’d drop it to come see you. She pretends she’s stopped worrying about you, but I can tell she thinks about it a lot.”

“Of course you can. You’re perfect for each other.” Harry smiled, and Ron’s freckled cheeks pinked a little as he grinned back. “I’ll arrange for your travel and hotel too, if you don’t mind? It’s the least I could do after missing Christmas. I thought I might put you up in the Algonquin? It has all this rich history, especially with famous American writers. I thought Hermione might like it.”

“That’s really generous of you, mate. You don’t have to do that though. I — ”

“No, I do. I want to. Please let me.”

_Especially considering what I’m about to tell you. A fancy hotel room might soften the blow._

“Well, all right. If you don’t mind. I’ll run it by her and let you know as soon as I can, yeah?”

“Great. Um…”

_Tell him tell him tell him. You can’t put it off anymore._

“Yeah? What is it?” Ron gazed back curiously, and Harry wrung his hands.

“Malfoy — er, _Draco_ is my boyfriend now.”

Ron looked stupefied, his face frozen as though the impact of the words had fixed his features into that expression for all eternity. He was so still, that for a moment Harry actually wondered if someone had run in and hit him with a _Petrificus Totalus_. After a torturous stretch of silence, Ron’s lips moved, his head canting as he squinted into the fire.

“I’m sorry, mate… I think we might have a bad floo connection. I’ve never done one of these
internationally. Did you… did you say Malfoy is your boyfriend now? Draco Malfoy, right? We’re not talking about some American Malfoy I don’t know about? Someone sweet and charming and the opposite of a slimy git who thinks he’s above the rest of the world?”

“No, we’re… we’re talking about the Draco Malfoy you know. Look Ron, I know it’s a lot to digest — ”

“Digest?! You digest a pumpkin pasty, a turkey sandwich. This is… I understand being friendlier now. The war’s over, things are probably different, but… isn’t there anyone less pointy and snooty to date out there? Is there a deficit of good-looking American blokes? Just… help me understand, here.”

Christ, I should have booked more than fifteen minutes for this.

As soon as it crossed his mind, Harry wondered if he’d done that subconsciously in an effort to bypass the potential conflict, cutting the conversation short before anything too nasty could happen.

“It’s hard to… connect, Ron. You and me — Hermione — Draco — we’ve all been through this gargantuan thing we can’t tell many people about. But he gets it. He gets me. He understands what made me cross an ocean and enroll in Muggle college, and well… I get him too. It didn’t happen overnight. At first, we were at each other’s throats like usual, but then… we became friends. We talked about everything and nothing too. I got to see him just be a teenager out in the world, you know? It was different. We were both different. And after a while… I wanted him… and he wanted me too.” Harry was thankful his blush wouldn’t show through the green flames. Admitting that to Ron was difficult. They hadn’t spoken about his attraction to men in that kind of detail, and the subject at hand being Draco made it feel that much riskier.

There was a pause as Ron sighed and scratched his scalp.

“I… guess when you put it that way… it makes a warped bit of sense, but I’m not going to lie to you. It’s going to take some getting used to. I honestly don’t know what to say. I don’t think you’d like most of the thoughts rattling around in my brain right now anyhow.”

Harry’s stomach seized up. It wasn’t as though he had expected a gleeful reception, Ron busting out the champagne to celebrate his new relationship. But all the same, sharing the news with someone who didn’t approve stole a bit of the luster from the situation. It was like a chip out of the corner of his happiness, and it struck him that this was largely why he’d been avoiding it in the first place.

“I understand. I’ll talk to you soon. Iron out the visit details, yeah?”

“Definitely. Hermione’s going to be over the moon when she hears.”

Harry smiled, but he wasn’t so sure Ron was right.

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“Do I look okay?” Draco was nervously finger-combing his hair and straightening his lapels. He was wearing a dark navy blazer over his Kate Bush t-shirt (white with the cover of *The Hounds of Love* in the middle, Kate’s long hair wild and untamed), form-fitting black jeans, and the black
ankle boots he’d bought during their vintage shopping excursion.

“Since when have you ever needed confirmation of that? Especially from me.” Harry was touched that Draco cared about making a good impression, but he didn't say anything lest Draco feel patronized.

“This is hard! I can’t look too much like the old Malfoy, but I can’t look like I don’t care either. Merlin knows your clothes do that enough for the both of us.”

“Hey! You love my flannel and everything else you complain about. Admit it. You want to lay down a bunch of Mudhoney records and plaid shirts on the bed, and roll me in it.” Harry crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. Draco rolled his eyes and tugged at his cuffs.

“Look, just tell me if I look too much like I’m about to tell the entire room how much better I am than everyone else.”

“You always look like that. That’s just your face, Draco,” Harry replied with a laugh. That earned him a formidable scowl. “Okay, calm down!”

Harry turned Draco’s body back around so he was facing the full-length mirror. Harry wrapped his arms around his waist and nestled his chin on Draco’s shoulder.

“You look amazing. You always do.” Harry kissed the space below his jaw, and some of the tension flowed out of his boyfriend. Draco smiled back at their reflections and reached back to card his hand through Harry’s curls.

“I do, don’t I?”

***

Harry elected for their first group meeting to be at the Waverly. He thought a fancy, upscale place would just amp up the friction, making everyone self-conscious on top of everything else, so the local diner seemed like a better choice.

The previous day had been reserved for Harry to hang out with them alone. He’d taken Hermione to the main branch of the public library and the university library as well. Ron and Harry had exchanged looks as they gave her room to breathlessly gush about every single stack of books, twirling around and smelling rare volumes like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*.

“You reckon we’re going to get kicked out for acting completely mental?” Ron had delightedly chuckled. Even though it wasn’t as exciting for either of them as it was for her, they both got a kick out of seeing her so happy.

After that, they’d done a bit of sightseeing. It being their first trip to New York, Harry figured they should hit a few of the basics. They did their Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty duty, taking in the epic New York skyline.

Harry was relieved that everything seemed to be falling into place with them so far. When he’d greeted them at the airport (there was a concealed section for wizards to portkey into, JFK being too bustling of a place for new faces to be noticed), it was like no time had passed. They hugged for an embarrassingly long time.
“Let’s never go this long without talking again, please?” As Hermione wiped away tears of joy, Harry had nodded emphatically, all the anxiety that had led up to the visit fading away. Seeing his friends’ smiling faces reminded him how very much he loved them. Maybe “out of sight, out of mind” was more than just a trite adage. Maybe not being able to spend time with them had made Harry forget about everything that made their relationship special.

Overall, it had been a very auspicious day. They’d caught up on Hermione’s work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and Ron’s Auror training. It had been so strange to hear about the magical world. Harry didn’t realize quite how much he’d dissociated from it, engrossed in his Muggle life for the past seven odd months. The time had flown by.

Now that Draco was with them, the mood had markedly shifted. No one was being rude, exactly, but the tension in the atmosphere hung heavily like humidity in August, oppressive and impossible to ignore.

“So um… Hermione… Harry said you’re working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures now?” Draco cleared his throat and fiddled with his water glass. Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen Draco this nervous, not even when they’d first gotten together.

“Oh! Yes, we’re looking into the business of improving house elves’ quality of life right now, listening to what they want, their opinions on their station in the wizarding world rather than deciding it for them. It’s been really eye-opening, actually. It’s — ” Hermione stopped short, the excited smile on her face fading. Was it dawning on her that this was a subject that held a few implications about Malfoy’s past?

“Oh… that’s… sounds like you’re doing important work. I would expect nothing less.” Draco tried for a smile. Hermione returned it, but it felt forced.

“Well… this feels completely and totally natural, doesn’t it?” Ron remarked with raised eyebrows.

“It’s not going that badly… all things considered…” Hermione chimed in optimistically. “I think we all knew it would be a bit awkward at first.”

“It’s absurd that we’re going along with this at all. Smashing idea, dating Malfoy. I’m sure it’ll work out swimmingly, in the end.” Ron huffed and leaned against the window on his side of the booth.

“Thanks for all the support, Ron. Cracking friend you are,” Harry snorted. Under the table, he placed his hand on Draco’s leg, not surprised to find it was bouncing up and down furiously. He lightly squeezed it, and Draco’s manic movement slowed down.

“Yeah? Well maybe I’d have had more time to get my supportive face sorted if you’d told me months ago.”

“What?! Are you serious right now? I — ” Harry started, throwing his hands up.

“Ron, let’s — ” Hermione’s interjection was lost in a sea of blooming argument.

“Actually, I don’t see why Harry has to tell you anything by some… deadline you’ve decided without him. I know there are many complex factors here, but it’s his life. He came here to live it without prying eyes, and — ” Draco had suddenly found his voice, and while Harry appreciated his support, being caught in the middle of these two was making his head spin.

“I’m prying eyes? We’re prying eyes?!” Ron gestured between himself and Hermione. “We’re his
best friends.”

“I understand that.” Draco took a deep breath, but before he could continue, Ron jumped in.

“Oh do you, now?”

Draco’s eyes narrowed, but he ignored the challenging note to Ron’s question.

“I do. But Harry and I have been friends almost all year. You knew this, and while perhaps you
don’t think of me as deserving his friendship — ”

“You’re right. I don’t. You don’t deserve to speak to him, let alone… do whatever you’re doing
now.” Ron waved helplessly at them.

"Ron, I get that you're upset, but — " Harry was cut off as Draco’s composure finally broke.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Weasley? Resorting to masculine stereotypes now, are we?
Whatever you're doing now?” How utterly boring. Yes, your best friend and I enjoy each other’s
cocks. Get the fuck over it. Yes, he’s perfect Harry Potter, and I’m disgusting Draco Malfoy whom
you wouldn’t touch with a thirty foot pole no matter how much time passes. If you want to still see
me in the same colors you always have, fine. I get it, but time has passed. So much bloody time. If
you want to have it out with me, okay. I won’t pretend I don’t deserve it, but you don’t get to
dictate who Harry spends his time with. Making him feel guilty about it is — ”

“Somebody bloody well should. Obviously he can’t make those decisions for himself, if you’re
who he chooses.” Ron glared at Draco, and both of them were leaning across the table now. Harry
was starting to think there was a very real possibility of this ending in blows. He was at a loss for
what to say. Hermione, who had been cowering in her seat, eyes roaming the diner to see if anyone
had taken notice of their rising squabble, finally spoke up.

“Enough!” She slapped the table, her singular word a definitive command. Both boys sat back in
their seats, quiet for now. Hermione’s uncanny ability to put an end to petty shenanigans had only
grown with age. Harry flashed her a grateful smile, and she nodded before turning her attention to
Draco and Ron. “Harry’s affection is not a prize to be won. He’s not the last chip in the basket so
stop fighting over him.”

“Honestly, your girlfriend is right, Weasley. I think you behaved better at age eleven.” Draco
sneered, and Hermione fixed him with a stern stare. At the same time, Harry clamped a cautionary
hand down on Draco’s thigh.

Stop making things worse. This is not the way today was supposed to go.

“That goes for you too, Draco. Ron makes a childish dig, and you can’t resist clawing back like a
cornered alley cat. We’re not going to get anywhere behaving like that, are we?” Hermione said,
and Harry let out a labored breath. He didn’t realize how tense he’d grown over the last few
minutes, his stomach taut and his jaw clenched.

Draco continued to glower, but he backed down.

“Good.” Hermione nodded sharply and sat up straighter. “Now, Harry likes Draco. Draco likes
Harry. I severely doubt that would be the case without a lot of changes we haven’t witnessed.
I’m… feeling a lot of convoluted things right now too, but I didn’t sign up for a vacation full of
petty bickering. I haven’t seen my best friend since last summer, and I want to spend some time
with him. Nice time wherein we listen to what he… and Draco have to say before jumping down
their throats.”
“Thank you. I don’t think I deserve that from you, but I greatly appreciate it,” Draco said sincerely with a bow of his head.

“Oh, you’ll behave like a gentleman with her?” Ron scoffed.

“Well, when one behaves reasonably, they get a healthy dose of rational behavior in return.”

Hermione gave Draco a warning look, and he held up his hands.

“I’m sorry. I… how about we have lunch tomorrow? The three of us? Or just Hermione and me, if you don’t feel up to it, Ron. I… have a lot I would like to say to you both. If you’ll let me,” Draco confessed quietly. Harry was stunned into silence. He didn’t know what he expected, but this wasn’t it. Knowing Draco, he doubted it was a spur of the moment decision.

“I’d really like that, Draco,” Hermione responded with a genuine smile. She elbowed Ron and gave him a flinty look.

“I suppose I could… try it. For Harry’s sake,” Ron agreed with a groan.

Their food arrived, giving everyone a much needed respite.

“Well… at least we’re all still alive so far,” Harry whispered in Draco’s ear, giving his leg another squeeze.

“Bite your tongue. We haven’t even made it to dessert.”

Chapter End Notes

ETA: Btw, I hope it’s clear that Ron isn't actually being squeamish/homophobic about Harry being with a man. His "whatever this is" comment is meant to mean "whatever the hell you think this relationship is going to be because it seems like a totally mental idea." Draco making that dig about masculine stereotypes is just, as Hermione notes later on, Draco not being able to resist responding to Ron’s ire with some baiting comments.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Here it is, lovelies. A chapter a day early, as promised. Not to sound needy, but I will likely be spending today trying desperately not to stress about tomorrow so I welcome all distractions. So if you’re a Tumblr buddy, feel free to send me silly things (fandom or otherwise) and of course, feel free to comment on this chapter and let me know your thoughts. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, I have to know what happened at that lunch!”

Hermione and Draco had come back from their outing all rosy-cheeked and laughing, enthusiastically talking about their favorite books and gushing about all the food they’d eaten. Ron and Draco still weren’t exactly thrilled with each other, but there was a reluctant armistice forming there as well.

“He’s still a git, but he’s funny too,” Ron had hesitantly admitted. “Did you know he was funny?”

“I did,” Harry had confirmed with a smile.

“And he’s mad about you… even I can see that. All I’ll say is that he better be good to you or I’ll sock him right in his pointy jaw.”

“That’s fair.”

“It feels sort of private,” Draco said. “I don’t want to go into detail, but suffice it to say I apologized, people said what they both needed to, and then we sort of… tried to start over. Hermione and I got some alone time wandering the stacks at The Strand. I think Ron was about to die of boredom if he saw one more dusty old book so he took off to Union Square Park for a bit. We got a chance to talk more, and it was… good. Difficult for sure, but ultimately good.”

Draco grinned broadly, and the pressure on Harry’s chest eased up.

Tonight, they were meeting Gisele and Seb at a party. Harry wasn't sure that would be the best location for them all to get to know each other, but Gisele had presented a solid case.

"First off, the obvious: alcohol! People get loose, people chill out. Now, obviously that has the potential to go the other way if everyone gets fucking crazy and sucks on the shit like babies to the bottle. We'll keep it in check. Second benefit is that it's easy to disappear for a bit when things gets too heavy. Move to another room, separate the feuding dudes, start conversations with random people. Soooo many opportunities for distractions. Add to all that the fact that it's the most informal place so you can leave whenever the hell you want? Perfect."

"Maybe you're right. If everyone hates it, we'll just leave," Harry had agreed in the end. He couldn't deny there was something attractive about being able to diffuse arguments with the uproar of an NYU party. Merlin knew there were plenty of sights and sounds that would have Ron too slack-jawed to even remember Draco was in the room.
Now that they were a couple drinks in, Harry could breathe a bit, heartened to see that Gisele had been right. Ron was whispering astonished asides to Harry all night. Sometimes Harry forgot how little time Ron had spent in the Muggle world.

"These outfits?! They put wizarding weirdness to shame, Harry! Is this what they always look like? Like... is this typical?" Ron asked as a Gothic Lolita wandered by.

"No no, NYU is... a bit more colorful than the average Muggle on the street. At least, the parts of it we hang out in. Gisele's friends with a lot of arty types." Harry smiled and took a sip of his gin and tonic. This party was luckily hosted by upperclassmen, giving all attendees the fortune of avoiding sub-par liquor and light beer.

"Ugh, I am pissed at all of you." Gisele dramatically waved around at their group. Half of them were seated on a red couch shaped like lips and the other half were perched on an ugly 70s floral patterned loveseat. All the mismatched furniture in this place made it clear the people who lived there had raided several second hand stores. "Ron and Hermione, Draco and Harry, Seb and Ravi... I am surrounded by love, and it's disgusting!"

"Quit being a jealous bitch! You want me to find you someone? Boy, girl, otherwise identified? Just say the word! I'll work my magic." Seb lifted his arm from where it had settled around Ravi's shoulders and waggled his hands like he was casting a spell.

"Nooooo. No no no!" Gisele vehemently shook her head. "Don't forget what happened last time! No setups. Your privileges have officially been revoked."

"So you're... bisexual like Harry then?" Hermione turned to ask. Gisele was sitting on the arm of the couch next to her. Hermione's brow wrinkled as soon as the words left her mouth. "I'm sorry, it's not very polite to ask that outright, is it?"

"You are adorable and sweet, and I promise you, whatever you say, I won't be offended. You've probably noticed by now that Seb and I have no filter. We told Harry we'd keep the sex talk to a minimum, but like... let me apologize in advance because I know we're both going to fail at that really fucking soon."

"It’s not my fault. I’m like that movie Speed, except I explode if I don’t say ‘cock’ every five minutes,” Seb said with a laugh.

“It’s true. We have to protect him from spontaneous combustion. So if you hear us burst into a chorus of ‘cock, cock, cock,’ just know that it’s for the greater good,” Ravi added.

To Harry’s surprise, Hermione giggled. She was blushing, and Harry was sure there was some measure of embarrassment mixed in there, but she also seemed to be sincerely enjoying herself.

“You are all... rather bold. I feel like a frigid English cliché over here. Please don’t take my silence for judgment. I’m just really not used to talking about this stuff.”

“To answer your question, I am firmly with Harry in the bisexual trenches, although I lean a little gayer most of the time. And no worries! Participation is not required. I’m relieved you don’t mind our filthy mouths,” Gisele confessed.

“Not at all. It’s rather refreshing, actually. I’m relieved that Harry has all of you to talk to. I... don’t know if I’ve always been the best resource. I think I’m too academic about it or something. Like I’m giving a queer theory lecture instead of just having a casual conversation.” Hermione looked down at her lap, and Harry’s heart plummeted into his stomach. He was sitting across from her,
and he leaned forward to clasp her hands.

“You were wonderful to me when I came out, Hermione. If it weren’t for you and Ron being so cool about it, I don’t think I would have been able to start my life here in such an open way. You are absolutely a part of that. Don’t forget it.” Hermione beamed at him, blinking back tears that had started to form in the corners of her eyes.

“Guuyyss, stop!” Seb wiped away actual tears that had begun to roll down his cheeks.

“Yeah, you better put away your beautiful friendship. You know Seb can’t handle this kind of thing without blubbering like a mom at his kid’s piano recital,” Gisele laughed. Seb flipped her off. “I’m so glad you guys came to visit! It’s like the two worlds of Harry coming together.”

Harry and Draco exchanged glances.

*If only she knew.*

“It is, innit? Thanks for letting me be the token clueless straight guy in this group.” Ron raised his red solo cup with a laugh.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Ron. You’re probably the token clueless straight guy at the whole party,” Draco said with a laugh. To Harry’s surprise, Ron joined in.

Harry leaned back, enjoying Draco’s hand absently trailing down his back as he talked, Harry’s friends loudly bantering, alcohol-soaked and relaxed. He didn’t say much; he just happily took it all in.

***

“He was upset about something… something that we kind of have in common, so I helped him through it. We sat on his bed and — ”

Their friends erupted into a series of salacious “ooooohhh”s. It was later in the evening, the party still raging on, and Ron had asked Harry and Draco when the turning point had happened, what made them cross over from enemy territory.

“It wasn’t like that! Calm your tits!” Draco rolled his eyes and took a sip from his cup. “Although fifteen-year-old me was positively shrieking over the fact I was sitting on Harry Potter’s bed.”

“Well yeah, you hated me back then!”

Draco looked at Harry with one of his patented *you complete berk* looks. Much to Harry’s confusion, as he looked around the room, everyone else was wearing variations of the same expression.

“What? Why are you all staring at me?”

“It’s a bit obvious now, right?” Ron asked with an amused smile.

“What’s obvious?”

“He’s always been like this, hasn’t he?” Gisele asked Hermione with a smile. Hermione nodded
and smiled back.

“Will everyone stop talking about me like I’m not sitting right here?!”

“You should have seen him at fifteen, Gisele. He was so cute, like a floppy little stray puppy. Clothes too big, hair always a mess,” Draco sighed with glassy eyes and a drunken smile, threading a hand through Harry’s hair. “Well... it’s still a mess. That hasn’t changed. And he’s still cute. Cuter, in fact. I guess that hasn’t changed either.”

“How drunk are you?” Harry asked with a laugh.

“I’m not drunk!” Draco protested, his elongated vowels and flushed cheeks completely contradicting this assertion. “I just... felt like telling you. I liked you then. I just wasn’t allowed to.”

“You’re drunk,” Harry replied with a soft smile, planting a kiss on Draco’s cheek.

“Fine! I’m plastered!” Draco laughed, precariously waving his plastic cup around, whiskey dangerously sloshing against the rim. “Doesn’t mean I’m not telling the truth. Just means I probably wouldn’t be telling you if it weren’t for the help of Mr. Jack Daniels.”

The rest of their group quieted down, sharing furtive smiles as they soaked in the reverence of this private moment they were witnessing. Harry was still a bit skeptical. It was difficult to match up the sneering, guarded Malfoy of Hogwarts with the tender, loopy drunk Draco sitting right next to him. Harry had assumed Draco’s feelings for him had started in New York.

“It's kind of... sweet? Or is it?!” Ron looked at Hermione, his features twisted like he was concentrating really hard on figuring this out. “Bloody hell, you're making me all sorts of confused, Draco.”

“To be fair, Ron, I'm not certain that's a hard thing to do.”

“Piss off!” Ron and Draco exchanged jabs for a bit, but it was more like brothers quarreling than bitter rivals threatening each other. Harry silently said some prayers that it would stay that way, at least until the end of the visit.

As the night went on, Draco grew even more affectionate, any reservations he seemed to have about touching Harry in front of his Hogwarts friends melting away. It was thrilling to have him not care, to be openly claimed by him in this way, the whole room aware of what they were to each other.

“Let’s get out of here.”

The low rumble of Draco’s request made what he was asking for undeniable.

“I feel like I’m a bad host if I abandon my wizard friends at an NYU party.”

“They’re having a good time. They won’t care. You did your duty. Come on.” Draco tugged on the hem of Harry’s jumper and leaned in to lick at his ear, his needy sigh making all the blood rush to Harry’s cock. “Please, baby?”

Harry was stunned, and judging by Draco’s throaty chuckle, he knew exactly the effect that carefully worded request had.

*Draco just called you baby. Draco Malfoy, with all his hard edges and sarcastic defense mechanisms, leaned against you, tender and pleading, and called you baby.*
There had been moments where Harry wanted to call Draco something, deliver a term of sentimental endearment, but nothing ever seemed appropriate for Draco. Every word was too commonplace. Instead, Harry simply tried to imbue Draco’s name with longing and admiration and want, everything he felt when he looked at him, his name like a secret spell passed down in hushed tones between lovers in the dark. He’d never considered that Draco might be the one to utter something like that.

“Okay mate, I may be more tolerant since Hermione took me aside and told me it’s not for me to understand why you’ve chosen the Slytherin prat as your boyfriend, but… please spare me this?!” Ron frantically gestured to the two of them, Draco practically in Harry’s lap at that point.

“I gotta take Ron’s side here. You know my policy on borderline fucking right in front of us, Harry,” Gisele admonished with a good-natured narrowing of her eyes. “Seb and I will make sure they get back to their hotel okay.”

Gisele turned to Seb, only to find him locked in an intense makeout with Ravi. She sighed and shook her head before looking back at Harry.

“Okay, I, the lonely spinster, will make sure they get back okay!”

Harry looked to Hermione and Ron for approval, and they both cheerfully waved him away, apple-cheeked and tipsy.

“Go, Harry! We’ll be fine,” Hermione assured him.

***

Thick, scaly skin was coiling around his entire body, constricting his airway with every crushing squeeze. An infernal hiss filled Harry’s ears. It was deafening, like the buzz of cicadas consuming all the sound in the summer air. Except it wasn’t a lulling chirp. It was sharp and menacing, the noise of a predator before it strikes. He felt certain the serpent wrapped around him would break every bone in his body, grind them into inconsequential dust until all that remained of Harry was a fine powder carried on the wind, mixed with other debris and scattered to unknown areas. His dead body would be spread across so many places, impossible to locate and gather. No one would ever be able to find his remains. No one would visit his grave because no grave would be found.

The snake was covering every part of him except his eyes. Harry looked out into a dark void, and out of the blackness, two ethereal red eyes blinked into existence. A maniacal laugh began to sound over top of the incessant hissing, a laugh that rattled Harry’s bones and mocked his mortal fate, a laugh that stole all happiness and meaning from the world.

“Harry!” Draco’s terrified cry brought Harry back to consciousness. Harry gasped for breath as he jolted awake, the oxygen burning his lungs. It was akin to running in the dead of winter, inhaling icy air so rapidly it stung.

Everything slowly came into focus as Harry’s eyes roamed the room. He was panting, his heart racing at a worrying speed. His t-shirt was soaked through with sweat. The room was in disarray; books that had been on the desk were now on the floor, a section of the wall across from him looked battered, paint scraped away as though something with claws had scratched it.

Oh no. Nononononono.
Harry didn’t want to look at Draco, but he knew he had to. How could he avoid this when it was right in front of his face? He took a deep breath and felt Draco’s hand on his back. So he wasn’t heading for the door yet. Harry supposed that was a good sign. When he finally turned his head, Draco looked so scared and confused. It made Harry avert his eyes in two seconds flat.

“Harry — fuck, the room — I woke up, and you were thrashing around and the room — I — We should see if any of your magic leaked out into the hall. I know you probably aren’t ready to think about that right now so just sit here, and I’ll — ”

“It won’t be out there. It’s all in here,” Harry interrupted, squeezing his eyes shut and rubbing his temples. He would have given anything to not have this conversation, but it was impossible to deflect now. His room was in shambles, and Harry was beginning to understand that Draco had been given the unfortunate opportunity of watching that happen.

“What do you mean?” Draco slowly asked.

“I…”

Merlin help me, he’s not going to like this. Just please don’t let him leave me. He can yell at me, tell me I’m stupid and reckless because I fucking AM. He’s not wrong. But don’t let him leave me like this. Not right now.

“I warded the room. It’s secure. I know it is because… well, it’s happened since I did it and nothing got out.”

Draco removed his hand from Harry’s back, and Harry instantly missed it.

“You… warded the room…” Draco sat back against the wall and heaved a weighty sigh. “How long has this been going on?”

Harry still didn’t meet Draco’s eyes.

“It doesn’t happen that often,” Harry whispered.

“More than once is bloody often enough, Harry. How. Long?”

“I don’t know… some time in November…”

“Novem — Merlin’s fucking tits, Harry! I’m such an idiot. I knew I should have kept asking you. I knew you were hiding something. You always looked so guilty any time I asked about your nightmares, but I didn’t think… I didn’t want to think…”

“I’m sorry. I only — ”

“Harry, you could have been fucking killed! Look around you!” In his periphery, Harry could see Draco gesturing to indicate the wreckage surrounding them. “You tore this room apart, and you were asleep the entire time! What if something had hit you? What if you didn’t wake up? Hell, what about me? Did you think about me?! We’ve slept together countless times! I didn’t realize I was at risk of being pelted by flying objects.”

“It never happens when I’m with you. I didn’t think… you make me feel…”

Safe. Warm. Like no phantoms in the dark can touch me. I didn’t think it would ever happen with you here. I thought you were chasing it all away.
“I’m sorry, Draco,” Harry whispered. Silent tears began to spring from his eyes. Harry didn’t bother to wipe them away.

Draco moved closer, his arm making its way around Harry’s back again.

“I know. I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Draco quietly said. Harry stiffened under his touch. He felt like he didn’t deserve comfort right now. Draco was right. Harry had put them both at unnecessary risk. “But holy fucking shit… what a way to wake up… Harry, you have to see someone. I didn't follow up with you the last time we talked about this. I should have. You can’t go on like this. What if it’s worse the next time?”

“I’m scared.” The words came out weak and small. Harry lifted his knees to his chest and hid his face from the world.

“I know you are. That’s why I said I’d go with you. But you have to do this. It’s not going away.”

Draco rubbed circles into Harry’s back, and no matter how much he wished it wasn’t true, Harry knew he was right.

***

“Thanks for bringing us here, Harry. I missed you so much.”

“Me too. It was great to see some familiar English faces. Can’t have me calling biscuits cookies, now can we?”

Hermione and Harry hugged tightly. He couldn’t believe the visit was coming to an end already. He’d been so worried about how the trip would go that four days had sounded eternal at first, but now it felt like a blip on the radar of time.

They reluctantly let each other go, and Harry moved to hug Ron.

“You’ve really made a new life here, Harry. I don’t feel as worried about you now that I’ve seen that. Just don’t replace us with more fashionable American versions, yeah?” Ron laughed as he embraced him, but Harry wondered if there was a very real insecurity underneath it. They’d had a rocky time keeping in touch over the school year. Harry regretted every foolish second of that. He vowed to be better from now on.

“No one could ever replace you two.” Harry meant it with all of his heart.

Although it made his heart ache, Harry watched them walk away. He didn’t turn around until they were long gone, disappearing like smoke around a crowded corner of JFK.

***

Draco had held Harry’s hand as he made the call. The Mind Healer Draco recommended to Harry was a colleague of the woman he had seen back in England. Draco had seen her briefly before deciding he was a better fit with a Muggle therapist, but he thoroughly vouched for her skills. He’d
hesitantly nodded when Harry’d stated that he wanted to go to the actual appointment by himself. Draco accompanying him made Harry feel too infantile. This was something he needed to do on his own.

“She’s wonderful. I just… didn’t have magical problems to work on by then. You have a bit of a different situation.” It was phrased as diplomatically as possible, but Harry heard nothing but you are much more of a fucking mess than I am. He knew deep down that Draco didn’t really feel that way, but Harry couldn’t shake that pathetic feeling, that sense of being a wretched thing in need of care, a soul bent out of shape that needed correcting.

Harry stood outside of the disillusioned entrance to the office of Dr. Victoria Baxter, Mind Healer and Licensed Psychiatrist. Dr. Baxter was trained in both magical and Muggle disciplines, making for a unique approach that Draco thought Harry would benefit from.

“I imagine you probably agree with me when it comes to the idea of going to a two hundred-year-old wizard who doesn’t even know how a telephone works. Dr. Baxter is young, she understands the challenges of living in both worlds at once… I think she’ll understand you better than some old codger in formal robes shouting about ancient runes.”

Harry had to agree with him there. He didn’t fancy going backward. Seeing someone who knew what it was like to want to be free of the magical world — or if not free entirely, at least divorced from it for a little while — sounded ideal.

Still, Harry had been standing in between two brownstones on Park Place in Brooklyn for ten minutes, unable to unglue his feet from the pavement and take the final two steps through the shimmery magical barrier.

This was Harry’s first time in Brooklyn. Crossing from one island into the next always seemed too grand of a shift for Harry even though he knew he was missing out on so much of the vast metropolis. It seemed a shame to finally cross the threshold only to chicken out on his purpose for doing so.

Spring had finally landed in New York, and it was a balmy day with warm sun and chirping birds. Harry knew there must be something fundamentally wrong with him if all he could think about was crawling back into bed and never coming out again.

He stayed for another five minutes, staring at the liminal space before him, an invisible curtain he couldn’t bring himself to penetrate.

With shaky breath and sweaty palms, Harry turned on his heel and headed back to the subway.

***

Harry dearly wished he could rewind to that night and refuse Draco’s sultry “please, baby.” He wished he had stayed at the party until Ron and Hermione were ready to leave, accompanied them back to their hotel, and enjoyed a solitary journey back to his dorm room, curling up in the covers alone, no one bearing witness to his nightmarish episode.

He ran his mind ragged going over the details, hoping to overturn some tiny stone that would lend a clue as to why it had happened. Harry didn’t understand. It had been a carefree night of drunken revelry with friends. Everything had turned out better than he had ever dared to hope. It didn’t
happen in the middle of finals. It didn’t happen after another relentless wave of insomnia. Harry and Draco were on good terms at the time so why —

*At the time.*

Harry clenched his jaw as the words ran an exhausting loop in his head. The truth was, he didn’t know what sort of terms he and Draco were on anymore.

Ever since that night, Draco had been treating Harry differently, his approach just off-kilter enough for Harry to notice. Outwardly, it might have looked normal to someone like Gisele or Seb, but Harry knew Draco. He knew when he was mimicking composure rather than embodying it. He held Harry like glass now, like he was afraid to get too close, like an arm too tight or a mouth too ardent, might shatter Harry into too many pieces to gather up again.

Everything about Draco was… careful. His conversations with Harry felt censored now, like they’d gone through a rigorous filter in his head before exiting his mouth. Previously, they’d had a very open door policy about almost everything. Maybe it wasn’t always comfortable. Maybe they stumbled and regretted opening those doors sometimes, but at least the possibility was there.

Now, he wasn’t so sure. Draco was stepping around things, mincing his words in a way that was very unlike him. Gone were the witty barbs, in their place a sort of sanitized politeness normally reserved for interactions with people of authority, the kind of people for whom formality was a necessity. People who weren’t Harry.

Was he afraid of upsetting him? Was he afraid of learning more things he didn’t want to? More dark truths about how bad Harry’s mental state was?

Harry missed the blunt Draco who didn’t treat him with delicacy. It wasn’t as though Draco’s care for Harry hadn’t always come through. Draco was deeply compassionate; he just didn’t believe in wasting time. He got to the heart of the matter when it was important to do so, and Harry had always admired that about him.

Harry thought about mentioning it, but every time he opened his mouth to speak, he remembered the way he’d stood in front of the entrance to Dr. Baxter’s office. If he asked Draco, there was no way he could avoid being honest about his failure to start therapy.

Harry leaned back, trying to encourage the pressure of Draco’s arm to evolve from something tentative into something full of heat, something familiar, something that would let Harry know some semblance of their passion remained. As Harry leaned back, Draco lifted his arm, moving it onto the back of the couch so it only lightly rested across Harry’s shoulders.

He looked at Draco, but Draco didn’t return his gaze. He laughed at something Gisele said, and Harry had never heard his laugh sound so hollow.

***

With finals rapidly approaching, Harry braved the clamor of Cortland Corner to obtain a vial of Dreamless Sleep. The last thing he needed was another incident that destroyed his rooms or worse, finally battered his own body. As usual, people began retreating to their respective holes, nesting in their dorms, the library, whatever their chosen spot of concentration was.
It made it even harder to ascertain where he stood with Draco. Draco was always more focused on schoolwork than Harry. He tended to retreat into the books like Hermione, but in the past, he’d been prone to distraction when Harry was around, pretending to be reluctant as he gave into Harry’s lascivious demands. It was like a running bit they had. Harry would grope and kiss and beg until Draco rolled his eyes, acting as though he was making a great concession when they both knew he wanted it just as much.

“You have ten minutes, Harry. Some of us have work to do,” he’d say with a smile as he pulled Harry on top of him. It was never just ten minutes. They would both drink their fill until they found themselves curled in one another’s arms, naked and happy, all studying goals forgotten.

“If I fail all my classes, I’m blaming your cock, Potter.”

Harry smiled at the memory, but it was bittersweet. Now, he was lucky if he could get Draco to look him in the eye, let alone have sex with him. As they saw each other less and less, it got harder for Harry to convince himself that Draco wasn’t avoiding him intentionally.

***

Near the end of April, they all decided to attend a party together, a last hurrah before disappearing back into their study caves.

“The year is gonna end soon! Let’s put the pause button on finals because I’m gonna miss you fuckers this summer! It’ll just be me and Harry versus all of NYC,” Gisele had proclaimed as she slung her arm around Harry.

That was the rotten cherry on top of everything. As if Harry didn’t have enough to contend with already, Draco would be gone for the summer. He was staying at Pansy’s Paris flat. She’d been on a traveling spree ever since Draco had left for New York so they hadn’t gotten to see much of each other. They would be living together for most of the summer. She had a few short trips planned all over Europe with some bloke she had met in Romania.

“Don’t ask. Anytime I interject into her love life, it doesn’t end well. She’s a sexual nomad, and I don’t bother her about it. I just make sure her wand arm is always poised to strike, should anyone turn out to be a creep,” Draco had said with a wry smile.

There had been a halfhearted mention of Harry coming to visit for Draco’s birthday, but no concrete plans had been made. Harry wasn’t convinced they ever would be.

Harry had hoped this party would be a chance for things to return to normal, but the night was rapidly taking a turn for the worse. Draco was dour from the very beginning. Harry could tell something was bothering him, but he refused to answer Harry’s questions.

“Look Potter, I’ve slept about five hours in as many days. Finals are coming up, and the insides of my eyelids feel like gravel. Forgive me if I’m not ready to jump up and break out into song.” His tone didn’t contain any of the usual humorous sarcasm. It was spiked with hints of the old Malfoy scorn, and Harry tried his best to ignore it, to have a good time with their friends. A lot of the people Gisele had introduced him to were there as well (Piper and Hailey from the anti-Valentine’s Day party, among them). It should have been a lighthearted atmosphere, but for Harry, it was far from it. Gisele caught his eye a couple times, and he could see she was picking up on it.
She mouthed “want to talk?,” but Harry shook his head with a sad smile.

Somehow, being close to a surly Draco was better than not being close to him at all. Besides, he wasn’t sure how he could even begin to explain to Gisele what was the matter with him.

Sometime later, Draco disappeared, and Harry was left alone with his thoughts, a dangerous thing to mix with alcohol.

“Hey,” Gisele softly said, approaching Harry from behind, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. “What are you doing in here?”

“Just… taking a minute,” Harry responded, turning around and leaning his back against the kitchen counter.

“Something happened with you two. Did he do anything? You know I’ll fucking kill him if he did, right? All you have to do is say the word.” Gisele smiled, and it dissipated Harry’s dark cloud a bit.

“No, he didn’t. There’s just been… distance. Feels like he’s pulling away. Fuck! I can’t talk about this right now. I’m sorry. I can’t. If I talk about it, I…” Harry trailed off, thrusting his hands into his unruly hair.

“I get it. It’s a fucking nightmare time right now. We’re all hanging on by a thread. Talk to me when it’s over?”

*The school year or my relationship with Draco?*

“Yeah, sure.” Harry smiled weakly, and Gisele rubbed his arm.

“By the way, I think the grumpy blond is outside smoking. If you’re looking for him, that is.”

“Okay. I think I’ll go hunt him down.”

***

When Harry found Draco, he was leaning against the side of the building, smoking and looking like he was about to burst into tears.

“Draco?”

He stubbed out his cigarette and pushed off the wall as Harry approached, stranding up straighter and fixing his hair as though he’d just been caught. Doing what exactly?

“Hey,” Draco replied nonchalantly. Harry wished to god that he could see shades of anything at all in his eyes. Excitement, affection, anything but the casual recognition that made Harry feel like the air was far too cold for April.

“What’s wrong with you tonight? Please Draco… I’m going fucking mad over here. I feel like you… do you hate me? What are you *thinking*? I look at you lately, and I… I can’t tell.” Harry bit his lip, angry with his voice for cracking to reveal his desperation.

Draco’s eyes softened, and he walked a few paces closer.
“No, Harry I… if I didn’t hate you even when I was supposed to, believe me when I say I couldn’t hate you now.”

“Then why are you so far away lately?”

“Because everything is fucked!” The change in his voice startled Harry. He was drunker than Harry had noticed, his vowels thick with alcohol, the pungent smell of whiskey on his breath the closer Harry got. “It’s irrevocably fucked, and I don’t know how to fix any of it. So I’m just…”

Draco leaned back against the building again, running a hand down his face.

“I’m just trying to keep everything at arm’s length. I thought it would help. I thought… I don’t know…” Draco looked down at the ground. “I guess I thought I could insulate myself, but I should know better. Never worked before, why would it work now? My therapist should fucking throttle me. I’ve learned nothing.”

“All that progress — ” Draco snapped his fingers. “ — gone in a month’s time.”

“Is it… is it us? Is that what’s — ”

“How’s therapy going for you, Harry?” Draco speared him with shrewd eyes, and Harry struggled to hold his gaze.

“I — I tried — I just couldn’t — ”

Draco laughed mirthlessly.

“I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t go.”

“I will go! I just… I don’t know… I need time.” Harry looked off into the distance, the ever present drone of cars on the streets. He wished he could spell the city completely still for a moment. “Every time I think about talking about it, it’s like… someone is crushing my windpipe.”

“That’s called anxiety, Harry. You have it in spades, but so do the rest of us. We’re all just trying our best, but you need to at least try or I can’t — ” Draco stopped short, his jaw clenched.

“Or you can’t what? Be with me anymore? Can’t stand the war-torn basket case that is Harry Potter? Is that it? Are you giving me an ultimatum?”

Draco opened his mouth, but Harry cut him off.

“I swear to Merlin if the next words out of your mouth are ‘big word for you,’ I will fucking snap.”

Harry felt the walls closing in on him, the breath stolen from his lungs like he’d been flung into space without an oxygen mask.

“I don’t like giving you an ultimatum, but I don’t know what else to do, Harry!” Draco threw up his hands, his eyes pained. It was too much. It was all too much. “You can’t go on like this. We can’t. I’m not expecting you to be right as rain overnight, but — you know what? Forget it. I can’t do this right now. There are too many things… everything feels like it’s hurtling into disaster.”

“Like what? What else is happening?” Harry felt myopic for not considering the possibility that it wasn’t all about him and their relationship. He felt like he was split in two. Half of him wanted to work this out, to lend an ear for whatever struggles Draco hadn’t told him about. The other half of him wanted to stalk off indignantly into the night. He felt cornered by Draco’s demands, and Harry had had enough of people controlling him and ordering him around for one lifetime.
Draco was taking shallow, ragged breaths, clenching and unclenching his fist. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands and shook his head.

“What is it, Draco?”

“That letter wasn’t the only one I got, you know? There was one waiting for me when we came back from the cabin, and there was one sitting in my room last week. Just… sitting there on my desk, a menacing cream-colored envelope, thick rice paper with that fucking wax seal. I don’t even know how it got there. It’s like it was taunting me. Like she was taunting me. ‘I can find you anywhere, any time. You can run to the ends of the Earth, but you’ll always be a Malfoy.’”

Draco took a long drag and exhaled, closing his eyes and tilting his head against the brick façade of the building. Harry moved closer. When Draco didn’t object, Harry came to stand beside him, leaning against the wall.

“What did the letter say?”

“All I ever wanted was for him to love me… to think I was worthy of his love. I always had to prove it. Every fucking day I had to justify my existence to him, convince him that I deserved to be his son. Do you have any idea what that’s like? For love to be so completely conditional?”

Draco met Harry’s eyes, and there were tears brimming on his delicate lashes. Harry was at a loss for words so he just listened.

“Love is something you should simply be given, don’t you think? Not something you have to earn like you’re passing a series of tests. It shouldn’t be heavy. It shouldn’t… be defined by the pain it causes instead of the lightness it gives. I hate him. I hate him so fucking much!” Draco tossed his cigarette to the ground and began to sob in earnest. Harry had never seen him so distraught, his sobs great choking spasms that sounded like they might sever him from the inside out. Harry didn’t know what else to do other than hold him, let him know he was loved. So very loved. Harry knew it wasn’t the right moment to tell him, but he hoped Draco could feel the affection spilling from Harry’s arms. Draco cried into his shoulder as Harry embraced him.

“So why does it still hurt so fucking much?! If I — why doesn’t hating him make it stop?”

“Because he’s your father, Draco. He’ll always be your father. No matter what horrible things he does, it’s still… that’s still there. It’s hard to forget that.” Harry stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head.

“Do you think he loves me? Do you think he ever did?”

Merlin… how could Harry ever answer a question like that? He wasn’t sure which would do more damage, his silence or an unwieldy attempt to say anything remotely helpful.

When Harry didn’t answer right away, Draco let out a frustrated huff.

“That isn’t a question you should have to think about. You should be able to tell me ‘yes, of course your father loves you, Draco’ — ”

“I’m sure he does. You’re his son. Maybe he hasn’t always been the best at showing it, but — ”

“That wasn’t a plea for you to give me some stock, greeting card answer, Harry.” Draco pulled away and wiped the tears from his face. “It’s just… the reality of the situation. I don’t need you to coddle me and tell me blood is thicker than water and love conquers all. I…”
“Draco, I don’t know what that letter said,” Harry took both of Draco’s hands in his, “but fuck him if he doesn’t love you as you are. Fuck anyone who doesn’t. You’re right. You shouldn’t have to earn love. That’s not how it’s supposed to work when someone has a child.”

*I love you. I love you just as you are, messy and broken and beautiful. We’re broken together.*

“Harry…” Draco bit his lip and then leaned in, letting go of one of his hands to run his fingers through Harry’s hair. “I don’t want to see you lose yourself. What if you stray too far and can’t find your way back?”

“I should have gone. I stood in front of her office for… I don’t know… twenty? Thirty minutes? But I couldn’t go in. I’ll go in next time. I *will.* You’re right. I need to do it, and I need to do it soon. I’m sorry I didn’t before.”

“Let’s… stop talking about this, okay? I’m tired. I’m heading to bed.” Draco passed by Harry like a ghost, his body so far away, Harry couldn’t be sure he’d seen him at all.

“Yeah, okay.” He turned around and watched Draco disappear around the corner, every part of him screaming to follow but knowing it was no use.

“We’ll be okay. We’ll both be okay,” Harry whispered to himself.

He wasn’t sure he believed his own words.

***

Finals were a barely registered haze. If pressed, Harry wouldn’t have been able to tell anyone how he did. Whether he’d failed any of them was an outcome he wasn’t ready to consider. School seemed so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. That night outside of the party, Draco crying in his arms, had done nothing to discourage the plague of hefty doubt about spending a summer away from him. It swarmed around Harry like a cloud of hungry locusts, overshadowing all other concerns.

He made another appointment with Dr. Victoria Baxter. That was something. A small, unremarkable accomplishment, but something nonetheless. Although it was still a couple of weeks away, Harry’s anxiety steadily mounted every time he thought about it. He became convinced that the only hope he had of making it to therapy was to be put under heavy sedation and wheeled in on a gurney, drooling and nodding off, too helpless and out of control of his faculties to protest.

In the meantime, everyone was saying their goodbyes, soaking up the welcome warmth of May and getting in their last taste of New York before they parted ways. Every time Harry took a walk on campus now, he would spy more parents driving up to the dorms, the hatches of their vans open as they helped their son or daughter load all their belongings for the trip home.

After winter break, Seb had driven his car up from Ohio. His parents had paid for him to park it in a weird suburban lot on a guy’s property outside of the city.

“Listen, it sounded sketchy as fuck to me too, but I wasn’t about to argue with them. It’s their money and now I can drive home in solitude. The chance to avoid a ten hour car trip with them is the best gift my parents have ever given me,” Seb had explained when he returned that January.
After finals, he had suggested they all take a farewell drive around the city.

“Only an out-of-towner would willingly take a drive around this gridlocked mess,” Gisele had said with a shake of her head.

“Shut it or I’m un-inviting you! We’ll head out of the city, take a little drive ‘upstate’ too.”

“How are you putting air quotes around upstate?”

“Because New Yorkers like you think anything outside of the city is upstate.”

“It IS!”

They were driving around now, Draco and Harry in the backseat with Gisele as Seb’s passenger. Gisele had chosen the music, Guided by Voices’ *Bee Thousand*.

“You indie fuckers and your music that sounds like it was made in a tin can under a fucking bridge,” Seb joked as Gisele put it on.

“Oh my god, we can’t all be victims of overproduced pop, Seb-ala. I’m going to miss you too.” She pinched his cheeks, and he laughed and swatted her away.

*Turn and run, the angel's calling*

*You say when and I say I'm falling*

*Up and down through broken down buildings*

*Back and forth, but you know why I left you for so long*

*You know why I left you for so long*

They all (except for Seb, of course) sang along, and Harry rolled down the window, sticking his head into the grimy heat of New York summer. It was all coming full circle, and it made Harry’s heart deflate. He thought back to his first lonely nights in the city, the sauna-esque humidity of August, the first time he spotted the friendly faces of the two people who were now his closest friends. He thought of Draco. Draco in a Galaxie 500 t-shirt and jeans. Both of them trying to hold onto the antagonism of the past until the levee broke, their old resolves giving way to new friendship. How had only nine months passed since then? What would Harry do differently if he went back to the start now? What would he tell that Harry of nearly a year ago if he could?

Harry felt a hand on his leg and turned to see Draco smiling at him. It was an unguarded smile, the likes of which Harry hadn’t seen from him in weeks. He wanted to question it but decided against it. This was his last moment with Draco for a while. Maybe for months. He wanted it to be happy.

“I love this city. You can always feel it beating like a drum around you. Even at its quietest it’s still… pulsing like a heart. You can feel it everywhere you go,” Draco quietly mused, the volume of the music concealing their conversation from Seb and Gisele. “I’m going to miss that.”

*Are you going to miss me?*

“It’s fucking terrifying sometimes. It’s chaotic and full, overstuffed like a waterfall jammed into a juice glass, but sometimes that just makes me and my bullshit feel so insignificant in the grand scheme of things. I can just blend in among the chaos because no one has time to care about my own particular brand of fucked up. Everyone has their own to worry about.” Draco rested his head
on Harry’s shoulder and kissed his collarbone through the thin cotton of his t-shirt. It had been so long since he’d done that. The press of his lips was so sweet, it made Harry want to cry. He didn’t realize how touch-starved he was until he felt the caress of Draco’s mouth, the impression of it marking him long afterward, the echoes of the touch feeding Harry’s soul.

“I know exactly what you mean. I love this city too. It was intimidating at first, but I think I picked a good background for a breakdown, wouldn’t you say?” Harry chuckled and felt Draco’s answering laugh against his skin. “Too noisy for anyone to notice me if I don’t want them to.”

“I don’t know if I could have done this without you.” Draco lifted his head and kissed Harry’s cheek.

“You could have, and you would have. You’re Draco Malfoy. You can do anything you want.” Harry meant it. Draco was capable of more than he realized. He was sturdy and enduring, planted firmly like an ancient, unmoving redwood tree. Nothing would get in his way in this life, no matter how many letters his parents sent. Harry was sure of it.

“I think you’re the only person alive who thinks that, but thank you.” Draco smiled, and Harry kissed him, drinking from the sweetness of his mouth like he could save it, store it and let it sustain him for the entire summer.

“Hey, control yourselves back there!” Seb shouted with a laugh.

“Harry… I know things have been fucked up lately, but I…” Draco was whispering now, his hand solid on Harry’s leg, his eyes sweet and kind.

“I know. It’s okay.” Harry whispered back. They looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment, and Harry tried to commit every inch of Draco’s face to memory. He wanted to believe in this moment and forget about all the horrible ones that had defined their last couple of months.

“I really want you to come to Paris for my birthday. Do you still want to?”

“Yeah, of course. I’d love to spend your birthday with you.” Harry smiled. He was pleased that Draco not only hadn’t forgotten but actually seemed enthusiastic about the prospect. He tried to trust in that.

As they left the city, the concrete jungle giving way to greenery flanking lonely stretches of highway, Seb plucked a joint from the glove compartment. They passed it around, reminiscing about their favorite parts of the year, recounting all the glorious mishaps and memories they’d made. Bee Thousand came to a close as they sped down the interstate, sunlight and pure white clouds poking between the trees on the edge of the road. Harry stuck his head out of the window again, the wind whipping through his hair as they made short work of the miles ahead, dashing toward no particular destination at all, just burning gas until it was time to turn around and say goodbye for good.

Not for good, Harry chided himself. Just for now.

Robert Pollard’s voice streamed into his ears. He could still feel Draco’s hand on his thigh. He could still hear Gisele singing along to the song.

Maybe they're twice as high laughing

Maybe the time is right, you know

Promise me not to leave
I'm looking inside your brain

Christ, it's a cluttered mess

I love you, I must confess

Harry sighed, the sound swallowed by the fierce currents of wind rushing past. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to start the next chapter, but it was here. It was here and waiting for him. He closed his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to leave you stewing in angst! As always, hold onto the knowledge of that "Angst with a Happy Ending" tag haha.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Me: I'm going to sleep in on my time off.

Also me: Ends up going to sleep at 9PM and waking up at 6:30AM today as though it's time to get ready for work.

I guess what I'm saying is: here, have a chapter really early in the day haha.

Also, not to be dramatic, but I have the best readers and commenters in all of AO3. You've all been so kind and supportive while I have personal stuff going on and while I'm dragging you through the muddy angst with this fic. Thanks for everything. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer in New York was emptier, students vacating the universities and the rich scattering to the Hamptons and wherever else they went. It was still vibrant and full of activity, but Harry got the sense of a different crowd around him. Then again, maybe that was the effect of moving to their Brooklyn apartment, the isle of Manhattan no longer his home.

Harry liked their second floor walkup. It was flawed and a bit shabby, patches of the kitchen cabinets and floor marred by ancient stains that no cleaning product could eradicate, but that only made Harry love it more. It was slightly bigger than his suite at NYU had been, and there was something that felt right about moving on from the dorms. It was an essential next step, and he was grateful for the opportunity to exchange Grimmauld Place memories with the welcome sight of Gisele home from her shift as a barista in a coffee shop nearby, the two of them smoking, drinking, and talking on the fire escape outside the window. Gisele always knew where to get booze underage.

“Why is that? You always get us into places,” Harry finally asked.

“Harry, this city is full of latchkey kids. We’re all in clubs at age fourteen doing shit we shouldn’t be. You learn where the spots are, which bouncers don’t give a shit, what nights they work, what liquor stores are shady. It’s… slowly changing,” Gisele mused, exhaling a plume of pot smoke into the muggy night air, “but me and all the kids I grew up with… we ran around this city like a bunch of fucking animals on the loose. You couldn’t tell us what to do.”

She told him about how kids chalked their IDs and how it was easier to do if you were born in a year that ended in a round number. She told him about being hungover and skipping school to go to Jackson Hole Diner. She told him all about summers in New York as a kid, and Harry eagerly soaked up every detail.

Harry didn’t realize how much he missed living with someone until he moved in with Gisele. It was infinitely less lonely. Even when they weren’t in the same room, he could hear her, a comfort in the bubble and hiss of the coffee maker or her humming softly as she made an omelet.

They hung out in Prospect Park, went to shows at the Knitting Factory, met up with some of her private school friends home from college, and ate from Gisele’s favorite Indian food truck.
Although he missed Seb and Draco, Harry felt blessed to have a summer with Gisele, all too happy to sit back and let the native New Yorker be his tour guide, seeing the city through her eyes. Every corner had a story.

“I used to watch the skaters here all the time in middle school. It seems like it died out as the 90s did, but it used to be full of kids in the summer. I thought they were so fucking cool for some reason. I wanted to be one of them. I need to find all the pictures of me in JNCOs and baggy t-shirts and burn them. Can’t have that blackmail-ready shit lying around,” Gisele said as they walked through Union Square.

“Did you do it? Did you skate?” Harry asked with a smile, trying to picture a thirteen-year-old Gisele on a skateboard, wide leg jeans covering half of her trainers.

“Uuughh, I shouldn’t have brought this up. Yessss, I tried to skate,” Gisele lamented with an eye roll. “It ended in scrapes and bruises and idiot boys laughing at me so I never tried again. I sort of resented them and myself for not trying harder, but to be honest, I’m way too uncoordinated for that shit. Probably saved myself some broken bones by giving up early.”

There was the small (gargantuan) matter of his nightmares to contend with. Now that he was living with someone, his unpleasant secret was in danger of imploding. If she saw, Harry would not only have to explain his mental health issues, but also have the unfortunate task of convincing her she hadn’t seen objects flying around the room, seemingly of their own accord.

Harry continued to ward his room as he always had, but he also finally did what he’d been avoiding for far too long: he went to see Dr. Victoria Baxter.

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“This is partly why I had such a hard time coming here. You asking me questions like that… who I am, what I’ve been through, it’s just… everyone in the wizarding world knows who I am! It feels like there’s no way to… I mean, even though you were in America when it happened, I’m sure you recognized my name, didn’t you?” Harry fidgeted in the armchair. He had expected to be forced to lie on a couch, but instead, Dr. Baxter had smiled and directed him to sit in a chair across from her.

Dr. Baxter didn’t look like a therapist. Not that Harry really knew what a therapist was supposed to look like, but he hadn’t pictured her this way. She looked to be about mid to late thirties, her black hair pulled back into a sleek, neat bun, her slate grey and white sheath dress professional but stylish, black ballet flats on her small feet. She was a compact but fierce looking woman. Harry imagined she was tender when she needed to be and unyielding when the situation called for it.

Harry supposed a therapist couldn’t do their job very well if they didn’t take notes, but he was unnerved by the notebook and pen in her hand.

“I like to keep notes for accuracy. It helps to touch base on previous sessions, follow up on any concerns you expressed. It’s also very essential for an intake session. With a new patient, you want to get an idea of what brought them in. Would you prefer a recorder? Something in the background that way you don’t have to think about it?” she asked with a warm smile.

“Er, the idea of being recorded sounds even worse, honestly. It’s okay. The notebook’s fine. What was I saying before that?” Harry sighed and swept his fingers through his curls.
“You were talking about your name coming with expectation. People knowing who you are before you can tell them.”

“Right… so, I assume you know what happened to me in the war?”

“Harry, any good Healer or therapist is impartial, especially concerning their patients’ histories. Well, anyone worth their salt, in my opinion. This is about you and your frame of reference. Not mine. If your fame is an issue that has caused you stress, you’re certainly welcome to talk about that here, but I don’t want you to be under the impression that it’s going to affect how I approach our sessions.” Dr. Baxter crossed her legs, leaning forward a bit. She was still wearing that warm smile, and Harry was surprised to find that it felt very genuine. It put him at ease a little. He got the distinct sense that she really did want to listen to him.

“Okay. That’s good to hear. I don’t know if I could have found that with a Healer in England, to be honest.”

“That’s unfortunate. Is that part of why you left?”

“Merlin… why I left… I don’t even know where to start.” They lapsed into silence, and Dr. Baxter spoke up again.

“Don’t feel pressure to fit everything in during this first session. We have time to unravel everything at whatever pace is comfortable for you. What I do in an intake is try to identify some of the things that are bothering you the most, what brought you in to see me, and what magical factors might be working in tandem with your mental health issues. I want to get a baseline of what your goals will be in therapy, but I don’t like to get an exhaustive history in one hour’s time. I know a lot of professionals in my field do that, but I think sometimes that’s more helpful for the therapist than it is for the patient. Arriving at the decision to see a therapist is hard work. Getting to the appointment is even harder than that sometimes, so I aim not to overwhelm a person on their first visit. We can fill in the gaps as we go along.”

Harry felt a ripple of relief wash over him.

“Okay. Okay… um, well…” Harry tried to speak, but his throat closed up.

After a few moments of silence, Dr. Baxter gently prompted him again.

“How about you tell me what made you call my office? What made you decide it was time to see a therapist?”

“I have these… nightmares… they…” Sweat beaded on Harry’s forehead. Admitting this to a professional was difficult. What would she say? What would she do? He didn’t want to be scolded for not having taken care of this until now. He didn’t want to be pronounced hopelessly broken.

“Well, I have accidental magic flares when they happen.”

“I haven’t hurt anyone! And no Muggles have seen anything!” Harry hastily added, panicked at the potential consequences of his admission. “I promise. They’re just… unpredictable.”

“Harry, anything you say here is confidential. I’m not a double agent for MACUSA. You don’t have to worry about telling me anything.” Her voice was calm and soothing, but Harry was skeptical.

“Really? But isn’t that like… dangerous? What if I were plotting to kill someone or something?” Harry promptly cringed after he said it.
“If you are a danger to anyone else or yourself, making threats such as the intent to fatally harm someone, then yes, I do have to report it. An accidental magic flare, while definitely of concern for your well-being, isn’t something to report if it hasn’t led to you being revealed.”

“Doesn’t it qualify as harm? It’s… I may have warded my room so my magic wouldn’t leak out into the dorms and get me found out. I’ve… ended up with a few bruises.” Harry sheepishly looked down at the royal blue carpet, worrying the material of his t-shirt between thumb and forefinger, rolling the thin fabric back and forth.

“I see what you mean. Did you intend to harm yourself?”

“No! Of course not. I just… I didn’t want to worry about being hauled in by MACUSA for revealing myself to Muggles on top of everything else that’s going on, you know?”

“Of course. You tried to protect yourself, but it backfired.”

“Understatement, but yeah.”

“Do you have any intent of not seeking treatment for the magic flares or intentionally inflicting harm on yourself via the flares or any other means?” Her tone was still reassuring, easing Harry’s worries.

“No, not at all.”

“Then there’s nothing here to report, Harry. Accidental magic flares induced by bouts of anxiety, PTSD, depression, or any other exacerbating mental health hardships are not something to be punished for. I am concerned about you. Magic flares, as I can tell you now know, are dangerous, but I’m here to help you control them, not to send you off to MACUSA for a citation, okay?” She smiled again, and Harry’s shoulders relaxed. He didn’t realize he’d been so hunched and coiled into himself. His muscles ached as he rolled his shoulders back.

“And how can I control them? Is there a potion I can take?” Although he suspected he was grasping at straws, he desperately hoped there was a simple solution.

“Well, we want to employ a few strategies that will work together. Potions and medication in moderation to break the pattern and reduce the occurrences, yes, but in order to properly heal, you have to take a gradual and thorough approach. Think about how we treat major physical ailments. You wouldn’t slap a band-aid over a gash that is deep enough to require stitches. You want to seal the wound up in a way that will last, healing the tissue correctly so that it stays healed, treating it for potential infections, checking on the wound’s progress, changing the bandages periodically. It’s an ongoing process. Likewise, you wouldn’t want to treat a severe fever without searching for the virus that might be causing it. Potions treat symptoms but not the cause. We want to get to the root of what’s causing your flares so that you can regain control over your magic and your mind and maintain that control. Dealing with mental health problems and magical control is more like rehabilitation than searching for a quick, cure-all. We all have a toolbox at our disposal, a skillset that allows us to hone strategies to deal with trauma when it strikes. What we want to do here is expand your toolbox so that you feel more equipped when anxiety rears its head. You will have a game plan for how to help yourself instead of feeling like you’re fumbling in the dark. Does that make sense?”

“It would be nice not to feel like I’m fumbling in the dark.”
“That’s exactly what I’m here for,” Dr. Baxter replied. “Can you tell me more about these dreams? Are you reliving past events? Events from the war?”

“Not really? I used to at the beginning, in the months after the war, but... now it’s more like... parts of that come into play, but they’re jumbled and not like they were in real life.”

“Is there a sense of disorder? Chaos?”

“I don’t know… Yeah, I guess I’d say that. There’s always… a sense that I’m about to die and no one will find me. Like, sometimes I’m dissolving into dust or being swallowed by the dirt, pulled so deep underground that no one will find my body.”

Dr. Baxter nodded thoughtfully and made a few marks in her notebook, the precise scratch of the pen’s tip on paper filling the quiet room. She paused afterward, examining Harry’s face as though considering the information he’d just given her.

“The experience you had, of crossing over and coming back, a limbo between life and death few ever face, is a very traumatic experience. It doesn’t surprise me that it’s still haunting you. I think I know what your dreams might be trying to tell you with this repeated idea of your death coming to pass without anyone finding out what happened. If your death is something untraceable, it becomes meaningless, a senseless act of violence that has no closure by virtue of being a mystery. It may sound contradictory to you, but I think, in this dream, your death is effectively symbolizing your life. Are you afraid of your life being meaningless, Harry?” Dr. Baxter speared him with a concerned look, a little wrinkle appearing in the space between her brows.

“Jesus fucking Christ…” Harry exhaled a long, shaky breath. He couldn’t believe how effortlessly she had extracted that from him, and in the first session nonetheless. “I… yeah, I think maybe I am…”

***

Any reservations Harry had about seeing Draco melted away as he saw his boyfriend’s smiling face. They hurriedly walked toward each other and embraced.

“I missed you, you disheveled git,” Draco said into Harry’s neck.

“I missed you too, you snobby prat.”

They laughed, and Draco stepped back to look at him.

“You’re quite tan.”

“Summer in New York. It’s hotter in our bloody apartment than it is outside so I figure I might as well stay in the sun.”

“It suits you. You look even better than I remember,” Draco said in a suggestive tone.

“Yeah? Why don’t we get back to that flat of yours so you can show me?” Harry asked with a raise of his eyebrows.
Marais was a picturesque neighborhood with colorful shop fronts, wrought iron balcony railings, and brick streets. Harry had never been to Paris before, but after five minutes there, he was already in love.

“I should warn you that Pansy is probably in right now. Apologies in advance for everything I already know she’ll say,” Draco called over his shoulder as he ascended the curved, marble staircase. He opened the door off the second floor landing, and Harry’s eyes widened as he entered. The apartment was gorgeous, hardwood floors covering a spacious open area. It was loft style, the living room and kitchen connected, the space of one area flowing into the next. There were large windows lining the wall that looked out onto the street, lush light streaming into the place.

“Perfect, isn’t it?” Draco said with a smile.

Before Harry could respond, a voice he hadn’t heard in years emerged from the hallway off the living room.

“I thought I heard the lumbering footsteps of a certain famed Gryffindor on my property.” Harry couldn’t tell if Pansy’s smile was derisive or if this qualified as affectionate teasing. Harry had always found her hard to decipher. She was a quintessential Slytherin in that way, her true intent always hidden beneath a veneer of unreadable facial expressions and statements that straddled the line between insulting and humorous. There was always a sense of only having half of the information, the rest of the joke concealed behind Pansy’s eyes as she smiled wickedly, triumphantly guarding her private intel. She always seemed to be delighting in getting one over on the entire world. “Fancy a glass of wine, Potter?”

“Er, maybe? What time is it?”

“Potter, you’re in Paris. Any time is a suitable time for a glass of wine,” Pansy proclaimed, her black heels clicking menacingly on the wooden floor boards as she approached, flashing that inscrutable smile once again as she ambled into the kitchen and began to uncork a bottle of wine. She still wore her hair in that trademark black bob, her slim figure clad in a tight black dress with a plunging neckline and thin straps. She looked like Lilith on the prowl. Pansy handed the two of them a glass of wine before walking back to pour herself one. “Shall we take to the balcony? It’s a lovely day.”

“Definitely.” Draco nodded and opened the ornate double doors, taking a seat in one of the chairs. Harry sat next to him, and Pansy joined them a second later.

“Sorry to intrude on your time with our beloved Draco, Potter. I promise to make myself scarce soon, but I’m afraid I had to see it to believe it.” Pansy took a dignified sip of wine and watched Harry with scrutinizing eyes that made him wary.

“Pans,” Draco warned, narrowing his eyes.

“What?” she asked in mock innocence. “Potter and Malfoy together at last? It’s a fairytale for the ages. You can’t blame me for waiting with bated breath to witness this eccentric sight on my balcony. Tell me, Potter, is the hate sex after a rousing argument as explosive as I’ve always imagined it would be?”

“PANS,” Draco said again, louder this time.
“As you can see, Draco darling won’t tell me, so I’m afraid I have to resort to grilling you for the gritty details,” Pansy said with a feline smile as she fixed her eyes on Harry.

“Well, neither of us have any complaints. I’ll say that much.” Fuck it, maybe rising to Pansy’s challenge would earn her respect. Harry didn’t think cowering in shame or blushing like a schoolgirl would do him any favors right now.

“Well well! Color me impressed, you cheeky boy,” Pansy replied with a laugh. “Thank you. That’s more than I’ve been able to drag out of him all summer.”

“Harry hasn’t been subjected to your relentlessly loathsome personality for as long as I have. He simply hasn’t perfected the art of diverting your onslaught of nosy questions yet,” Draco protested, taking a sip of wine.

“Oh come now, spoil sport. Don’t presume to speak for your boyfriend. I’m certain Potter and I will be great chums by the end of the week. After all, we have a lot in common now. Namely, bonding over complaints about your many obnoxious shortcomings. Isn’t that right, Harry?”

“I think I know better than to answer that question,” Harry responded, taking a large swallow of wine. He sensed he was going to need it.

“Wise man,” Pansy praised, raising her glass before downing the remaining sip. “Well, sorry to be a poor host, but I’m off to break local men’s hearts and imbibe all the free drinks they will undoubtedly offer me.”

“What a shame. Whatever shall we do without your witty commentary on our every move?” Draco stood up and hugged her goodbye.

“Have a lovely evening, boys. Don’t wait up, and try not to ruin every surface in this flat.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as soon as she closed the balcony doors.

“She has that effect,” Draco said with a knowing smile. He craned his neck to watch her leave and set his glass down on the small round table in front of them. With a fiery glint in his eye, Draco plucked Harry’s glass out of his hand and set it down too, draping himself across Harry’s lap and crushing his lips in an ardent kiss. “Did I tell you that I missed you?”

“You did, but I might need reminding.” Harry grinned as he kissed down Draco’s neck. Maybe some space was all they needed. Absence made the heart grow fonder, right? Gisele hadn’t been wrong about the end of the year being a stressful time, everyone crammed in together, sleepless and frantic in their small rooms as they went berserk trying to meet deadlines and figure out where they’d be spending the summer. Arguments were bound to happen between the best of couples. Perhaps Harry had blown the conflicts between them out of proportion. Draco seemed content to forget anything bad had happened, and Harry was more than willing to go along with that. It was a relief to be carefree with him again.

“You know what I’ve thought about every single time I’ve been out on this balcony?”

“What?” Harry slipped his hands into Draco’s trouser pockets and squeezed his arse. Draco groaned and ran his hands down Harry’s chest.

“You fucking me out here. Me riding you on a chair, the city below us, charms set up so no one knows what we’re doing.”

“Fuck… Can we do that right now?”
“If your cock isn’t buried in my arse within the next five minutes, I’m sending you off with a Portkey back to New York, Potter.”

***

Draco sauntered over to the turntable, giving Harry an exemplary view of his naked backside, and put on Tom Waits’s Nighthawks at the Diner.

“Yeeesss, excellent choice,” Harry praised, sitting up in Draco’s large bed to pour himself some whiskey from the bottle Draco had left on the nightstand. The day had been filled with nothing but sex and food and drink. It was everything Harry could have hoped for in a summertime reunion.

He filled a glass halfway and smiled as he thought about the two of them on the balcony after Pansy had left.

“I have to give you a proper welcome to Paris, now don’t I, Harry?” Draco had whispered as he sank down on Harry’s cock, both of them gasping as Harry filled him. Harry had skated his hands over Draco’s torso as he moved up and down, back and forth, the sunlight reflecting off his pale hair, the bustle of the city and a clear blue sky surrounding them. It was heavenly, fucking Draco with that idyllic view, his senses full of Paris and Draco, the scent of his sun-warm skin, fresh baked bread, and summer air intoxicating him into a blissful stupor. He’d never before been afforded the luxury of seeing a naked Draco in such brilliant sunlight, and he made sure to take note of every nuance, every curve of his beautiful body as he fucked himself on Harry’s cock.

“Can we do this at night too? I want to see you under the city lights,” Harry had asked with a moan as Draco arched his spine, tilting his head back as he got closer, his hips pistoning with a new fervor as he chased his climax. Harry had thrust up to meet him, and Draco had bent down to sink his teeth into Harry’s neck as he came.

“Fuck… We can do this five times a day, if you want,” Draco had panted in his ear. “Pansy’s a fool if she thinks we’re not going to ruin every inch of this place.”

Since then, Draco had taken him slow and hard over the edge of the couch, his chest folded over Harry’s back as he told Harry how good he looked bent over for him, how well he always took Draco’s cock. And once more in Draco’s bed, Harry topping this time, lying on his back as Draco mounted him, surprising Harry by facing away from him.

“I know you love watching your cock slip in and out of me,” Draco had said with a devilish smile over his shoulder, sinking down only to rise up again, painstakingly slowly, making sure Harry was watching his cock slide from Draco’s slick entrance. “Thought you might enjoy this view.”

They’d dined on charcuterie and the creamiest cheeses Harry had ever tasted, fresh fruit and olives replenishing their spent energy as they lazed about, soaking up the sun as they lounged on the balcony or on Draco’s bed, spread out and smiling like fools.

It was a respite Harry was thankful for. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d been this relaxed with one another, no foreboding clouds pressing in, no unresolved issues popping up like omens of how short-lived joy often was. There was only the two of them and the dazzling city outside.

As the record started, Draco turned around and gave Harry a comical expression. It was a look
Harry had come to know as a sign that he was up to something, something he’d cooked up for his own amusement. It was so interesting to know that Draco could be silly and frivolous on occasion. Harry wondered how many people knew that or if any of their former Hogwarts classmates would even believe it. Regardless, Harry enjoyed being privy to that aspect of Draco. It filled him full of hope. It made him believe that the war and their troubled past didn’t have to be the only things to define them.

Draco lit a cigarette and, with a grin, reached behind him to grab a fedora hanging from the hook on the back of the door, and put it on.

Harry made a mental note to ask if that hat was actually his, and, if so, inform him that he was no longer allowed to judge the fashion choices of others. Draco took a long drag of his cigarette and began to talk along with the record, affecting Tom Waits’s guttural basso profondo.

“Well, an inebriated good evening to you all. Welcome to Rapheal's Silver Cloud Lounge.”

Harry laughed as Draco poured himself some whiskey and pretended to raise his glass to the crowd.

“Slip me a little crimson, Jimson. Give me the low down, Brown. What's the scoop, Betty Boop? I'm on my way into town,” Draco recited, sashaying around the room like a cabaret singer working their evening crowd.

“Stop! I can’t — ” Harry protested with a wheezing laugh. Draco waltzing around the room wearing nothing but a hat, whiskey in hand and cigarette dangling from his lips as he did his best Tom Waits impression, was the funniest sight in the history of humanity.

Draco began to laugh, missing a line of dialogue and almost breaking character, but quickly composed himself and resumed his routine.

“I'm so goddamn horny the crack of dawn better be careful around me,” Draco quoted, pointing a finger and winking at Harry. Draco sat on the edge of the bed and neatly folded one thigh over the other, taking another puff of his cigarette.

Harry loved everything about this record. It was a live record that felt like quintessential 70s Tom Waits to him; the clinks of martini classes and drags of cigarettes in the background, the muted din of the crowd calling to mind a dimly lit jazz club in old New York. All of his records from that era had that same atmosphere. It made Harry want to crawl inside and hang out there for a while. He felt cooler just by association, Tom’s gravelly voice crooning tales of mishaps in love and barfly antics. There was something furtive and mesmerizing about the way he wove tales. He was an eccentric wordsmith full of personality, always managing to sound like he was whispering to you on a barstool late at night, confiding his deepest woes with snappy turns of phrase that stuck in your mind long after.

“Yeah, I wanna pull on your coat about something here tonight. Yeah, a little news I’d like to throw your direction.” Draco leaned in as though Harry were a bar patron he’d just met. “See I... I used to know a girl, yeah and it was a hubba hubba and ding dang ding. I said ‘Baby, you got everything.’ A week later, it was a hubba hubba and ding ding dong, baby, it sure didn't last too long.”

“You are a ridiculous human being, Draco Malfoy. Should I let the rest of the world in on that secret?” Harry leaned in and interrupted his speech about the “emotional forecast” with a kiss.

“It only seemed right to give you an intimate cabaret performance. We are in Paris, after all. Thought I should set the scene, do an homage to a time-honored tradition.” Draco grinned and
pounced on Harry, sending him sailing backward into the bed. “What do you think? Should I take the act on the road? ‘Draco Malfoy does Tom Waits’?”

“Absolutely. People would pay top dollar to see that, even if only to make sure the flyers weren’t lying.”

*I love you. I’m head over heels for you, you absurdly strange and beautiful man.*

Harry idly wondered if maybe he should say it this time. After all, they were in the city of love, the sun setting on a landscape of beauty and wonder. If now wasn’t the right time, when was?

Nevertheless, Harry ignored the impulse, sealing his mouth on Draco’s skin as though he could put a stopper in the bottle of words threatening to spill.

***

The next day, they explored the neighborhood, eating a leisurely breakfast of crepes, soft-boiled eggs, and the best coffee Harry had ever tasted. They sat at an outdoor café table, taking their time to people-watch and talk about what they’d been up to in the past month.

“Mostly, I just enjoy being able to live at a slower pace for a while, no books to crack open, no trains to catch. Everything just feels… more languid here. That’s probably me being an obnoxious, romanticizing tourist, but whatever. I will sit in measured contemplation in as many gardens as I want over as many glasses of wine and delicious cheese as I want until it’s time to go back.” Draco leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee, observing all the people strolling down the street.

“When you put it that way, it sounds like maybe you won’t be coming back.” Harry laughed as he said it, but something deep down twisted that laugh into doubt.

“Oh no, I fully intend to finish my degree. I’m too obstinate to abandon a goal once I’ve set my mind to it. One should never move to the place where they go on holiday. It’s a philistine’s mistake. No place on Earth is perfect. Everywhere you go, there are always cracks under the surface. Your problems follow you; moving around can’t fix that.” The mood almost turned dark, but Draco’s face shifted into a tender smile. “And besides all that, I can’t leave you alone in New York. You wouldn’t survive without me.”

“I think it’s the other way around, Draco,” Harry said with a smirk.

“You wish.”

They strolled down the street, Harry admiring the old street lamps and the lush green ivy covering the sides of buildings as they made their way to Place des Vosges.

“This is the oldest planned square in Paris, you know. Built in the 1600s, originally with the intent of being a place for nobility to congregate. I like that about Paris. It’s an interesting contrast, going from New York to here. Everything here is so ancient and full of history going back so far, you can barely begin to trace it all without being an expert,” Draco said as they walked through the gardens and past a large fountain, water spouting through the heads of ornate stone lions.

“Are you sure you’re not planning on staying?”
Draco laughed and slipped his hand in Harry’s. Harry’s cheeks pinked. Draco showing him affection in public never failed to make his heart jump in his chest.

“I didn’t say I liked it better! It’s just fascinating to move from one place to the next, is all. Reminds me how big the world is, how much I have left to see of it, and how different every corner of the globe can be.”

They walked under the vaulted arcades, red brick on yellow stone above their heads, grand archways that made Harry understand what Draco was saying. The architecture in Paris was thrumming with history, the toiling hands of the past written in every artful line of a building’s construction. By comparison, New York’s face was young, the impressions of time, both the ravages and the exultations, still present but harder to discern, the lines not running through as indelibly yet.

They sat on a bench in a sunny spot half shaded by a tree, just enjoying the sounds of the fountain and the muted chatter of people walking by. Harry felt peaceful. He leaned his head against Draco’s shoulder and sighed contentedly when Draco’s fingers found their way into his hair.

“You know, there’s a small garden not far from here. It’s named after Anne Frank. It’s not the most grandiose garden Marais has to offer, but it’s one of my favorites anyway.”

“Take me there.”

***

“Happy birthday, Draco,” Harry whispered, his arm around Draco’s waist, his torso pressed against his back. He kissed the nape of his pale neck.

“Mmm, lovely birthday greeting you’re giving me,” Draco whispered with a small laugh, bucking his arse against Harry’s erection.

“Sorry, hazard of waking up every morning when you’re nineteen.”

“Oh, thanks. Don’t attribute it to being next to me on my birthday of all days. Twat,” Draco sleepily croaked.

“It’s definitely because of you.” Harry pressed closer and nibbled on Draco’s ear. Draco moaned softly, stretching a hand back to pull at Harry’s curls. “I got you a birthday present, but you can’t use it yet. Think you could come back to New York a little early? Say by August 24?”

“Mmm, that depends. What do I get out of it?”

“You get to see Guided by Voices at the Bowery Ballroom with me.”

Draco turned around in Harry’s arms, his sleepy smile widening.

“I suppose I could manage that.”

***
Draco’s birthday dinner was at a French bistro called Benoit that had been open for nearly a hundred years. It was a gorgeous, brightly lit place that, while more extravagant than Harry was used to, held a welcoming charm in the gold and red décor and cheery faces of the staff. What didn’t really put him at ease was the presence of Pansy and Blaise.

Sitting across the table from two Slytherins who had grown up with Draco, sharing secrets and the growing pains of puberty in close quarters at Hogwarts, gave Harry a new appreciation for what Draco had endured during spring break. At the time, he’d only thought of it in terms of the baggage created by the former antagonism between them, the uphill battle of apologizing to Hermione for the hateful word Draco had once thrown her way so casually. He’d neglected to consider how it felt to be the new person intruding on a group dynamic that had years of established development behind it. He wasn’t just Harry Potter in this context. He was also Draco’s new boyfriend trying to figure out where he fit in with these people who knew Draco in an entirely different way than he did.

“They bore me, I move on. It’s that simple. There is no complex analysis needed here. Men are tedious, and rich men are especially so. They need new play things as often as I need new stimulation… of all kinds,” Pansy said with a wicked smile, taking a sip of red wine. “Trust that both parties are thoroughly satisfied when all is said and done. No one’s grumpy that it’s over.”

“Talking about men like they have the expiration date of a box of eggs. How I’ve missed you, Pans! Have you considered that perhaps you might stop dating rich men, thereby avoiding their tedium?” Blaise leaned back with a laugh, draping his arm around the back of their booth. Harry looked at the starched white collar of Blaise’s dress shirt, the sleek lapels of the black jacket layered over top. Everything was tailored impeccably. In fact, everyone at the table, with the exception of Harry, was wearing clothing that clung to their forms as if it were designed with them in mind, which it very well may have been.

Harry hadn’t packed anything too fancy for his trip, but Draco had assured him he looked lovely and would have strong words with anyone who said otherwise. Still, Harry self-consciously pulled at the hem of his lackluster blazer, an unremarkable plain navy t-shirt underneath. Other diners were dressed more casually, but, unlike him, they weren’t seated at a table with Pansy and Blaise.

“Please, I might be disgraced, but I haven’t fallen so far out of favor that I’ll be settling on a farm in Provence with a cheese monger any time soon.” Pansy rolled her eyes, daintily approaching the plate of escargot with a tiny fork.

“Dear god, Pans. I’m thrilled to see your snobbery goal posts haven’t moved an inch.” Draco laughed and ate a snail.

“It’s not snobbery. It’s simply called knowing my worth and refusing to settle for less. We can’t all blend in with the hipster crowd in America, although I do envy your chameleon abilities, darling.” As always, Harry couldn’t tell if she meant it to be insulting or not.

“We’re being very rude to your boyfriend, Draco. I apologize, Harry. When the Slytherins get together, it’s like a meeting of a secret society. We devolve into inside jokes and tiresome old money talk,” Blaise said with a smile that Harry wasn’t sure if he could trust.

“Yes, you’re making it seem as though neither of you have changed at all. I expected slightly better behavior. What is this? Are you grandstanding? Lioness protecting the cub?”

Harry wasn’t sure what Draco meant by that. Everything about this group felt like it was two steps
ahead of his comprehension.

“Perhaps a bit,” Pansy confessed with a shrug. “Sorry Potter, but I’m afraid you’ll have to be a bit more forceful if you want to break into the conversation. Call on that famous Gryffindor brashness of yours. I assume it’s still in there or you wouldn’t have won our dear Draco’s heart.”

“Is his heart the one that needed winning? I would think it was the other way around.” Blaise sliced off a bit of pâté and raised a flirtatious eyebrow at Draco.

“I count you among the most appalling people I’ve ever met, and I’ve no idea why I chose to spend this very important evening in your company.”

Another thing Harry noticed was that Draco’s breeding came through when he was around these two, the nature of his language changing, his speech pattern more erudite and his word choice more formal. Even his posture elongated, returning to that intimidating stature Harry remembered from their school days. He was still attentive to Harry, his hand stroking Harry’s thigh under the table, his eyes darting to Harry’s with a private smile from time to time, but it was hard to get comfortable. This wasn’t the Draco he was accustomed to spending time with. It wasn’t even the Draco from yesterday.

“Don’t worry, darling. Soon enough, dinner will be over, and you’ll be free to take your Gryffindor back to the apartment to soil more of my furniture. Do cast a good Scourgify on the entire place before you leave in a few days, Potter. Even if you don’t think you need to.” Pansy narrowed her eyes in warning, and Harry decided to try his luck with matching her repartee again.

“Oh, by the time I’m done with him, there won’t be any doubt about the need for a good Scourgify.”

Blaise and Pansy laughed, and Draco’s eyebrows rose as he looked at Harry over the rim of his wine glass. Their main dishes arrived, cassoulet for Harry and poule au pot for Draco. Draco leaned in as Blaise and Pansy got caught up in their own conversation.

“Thank you for enduring this. You seem to have gotten a feel for how to handle it rather quickly.”

“You did it for me. Only fair I do it for you too, and on your birthday, no less.” Harry raised his glass, and Draco clinked his against it. “To you, Draco. Happy birthday.”

“To Draco!” Blaise chimed in. He and Pansy raised their glasses so they could all toast to their favorite blond Slytherin.

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“You feel so good, baby,” Draco purred in Harry’s ear, letting out a gratified hum when Harry moaned and pulled him closer. “I love how you turn to warm jelly when I say that. Wish I’d known it would have that effect. Would’ve said it sooner.”

Draco was fucking into him slow and deep, so slow Harry could feel every movement, every twitch of his cock sliding in and out, the startling intensity of the heat spreading through him leaving Harry a wrecked mess of raw nerves. His legs were over Draco’s shoulders, his body bent in half as Draco took him, every joining of hips to arse rippling through Harry’s entire body. He felt unbearably sensitive, his engorged cock trapped between his stomach and Draco’s, the friction
never quite enough to come, his prostate never given a moment’s peace as Draco made shallow
thrusts that kept him deep inside Harry, never pulling out far enough to take the pressure off. He
was safe in Draco’s arms, but he didn’t know how long he could stay suspended in this heightened
arousal. Harry didn’t know how long it had been. It could have minutes or hours, everything coated
in a dreamy film where the rest of the world faded and all that existed was this.

“Draco, make me come,” Harry begged. “I can’t — ”

Draco finally pulled out far enough to give that tight bundle of nerves a break, only to thrust back
in so hard, Harry nearly screamed.

“Fuck! Draco, please,” Harry pleaded. “Make me come.”

“I don’t know… it is my birthday. I think I should get to decide when you come. Maybe I don’t
want you to yet.” Draco sucked a mark on Harry’s neck, and Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco’s
hair at the root, pulling his head back. “Fuck, I love it when you do that.”

Harry pushed back, meeting Draco’s thrusts as he licked down Draco’s exposed neck. He felt so
hot from the inside out, like his blood had been replaced by steam, his sweat-drenched skin on fire.

“God, you feel so fucking amazing. I could fuck you for hours, Harry,” Draco moaned, his hips
speeding up as he finally reached down to touch Harry’s cock. Harry threw his head back, the
relief almost too much to handle as Draco began to stroke him. It felt like Draco had been building
him up for hours, bringing him to the edge only to back off, slowing his motion to a crawl, a push
so sluggish, it made Harry whine and beg more blatantly than he’d ever done. Draco would give
him a self-satisfied smile and take pity on him, fucking him faster until Harry tensed up, and then
he’d back off again. This time he didn’t hesitate, relentlessly pumping up and down Harry’s cock.
“Come for me, Harry. I want you to come.”

It only took a couple firm strokes for Harry’s orgasm to hit him, a rush of sensation that nearly had
him sobbing. Draco cried out a few seconds later, thrusting one last time as he spilled inside Harry.
He collapsed on top of him, the position suddenly waking Harry’s legs.

“Draco… I’m pretty flexible, but even I have my limits. My legs…”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” Draco said with a fatigued laugh as pulled out and lay down next to Harry. “God,
we certainly don’t have any problems in that area…”

“No fucking kidding. I came so hard.”

In that area.

Harry tried not to read into the unspoken part of that.

It should have deterred him. Perhaps there had been far more ideal moments to do this. But Harry
looked at Draco’s serene face, his sex-flushed cheeks in the moonlight streaming in from the
bedroom window, his hand idly playing with Harry’s pubic hair like he always did when they were
in bed, brushing through the soft curls and down Harry’s thigh, and he wanted to tell him. Draco
curled into Harry’s side, nuzzling against his chest with an adorable mewl, not caring about
cleaning up their mess, not caring about sleeping in it, his sarcastic defenses stripped away, and
Harry wanted to tell him. He thought about walking arm in arm with Draco on the Paris streets,
exchanging heated glances on their way back to the apartment, and he wanted so badly to tell him.

“Draco, I love you. I love you so goddamn much.” He brushed Draco’s sweaty locks back from his
forehead and kissed his moist skin. Draco stiffened in his arms. Harry heard him swallow, his hand
withdrawing from between Harry’s legs.

In the history of their relationship, their rivalry, their friendship, their romance — all of it — there had been many silences between Harry and Draco. Awkward silences. Silences where both boys were seething in anger. Silences where one didn’t know what to say to the other so they elected to give the comforting pressure of a hand instead, a touch that said I’m here. There had been agonizing silences that seemed to turn mere seconds into eternity, but this… this was colder than anything Harry had ever known between them. This was the devastating death knell that Harry had been afraid of.

“I… I’m sorry, Draco. I shouldn’t have… Look, can we just forget I said anything? Please?”

“That’s… sort of a hard thing to forget.” Draco sighed and rolled onto his back, covering his eyes with his hand. Harry acutely felt the absence of Draco’s head on his chest, his fingers on his thigh.

“I knew I shouldn’t — I just wanted to tell you — I couldn’t stop thinking it, and I…” Harry felt his chest rising and falling rapidly, and he tried to focus on regulating his breathing.

Oh no you don’t, brain. Not right now. Don’t make everything worse.

“Look, just — can we talk about this in the morning? I don’t think I can do this right now...” Draco trailed off in a defeated whisper that made Harry feel like someone had yanked his heart from his chest and thrown it against the pavement.

“But, Draco — ” Harry didn’t want to wait until morning. Harry couldn’t imagine getting any sleep if they went to bed with this unresolved.

“Harry, please? It’s late, and I… I need time to think, okay?” Draco cautiously looked Harry’s way, and Harry tried his hardest to read his mind.

It wasn’t any easier than it had ever been. If anything, it was much, much harder.

“Yeah… okay.”

Chapter End Notes

If there's one paragraph in this fic that is completely unnecessary it's that one that just waxes poetic about the atmosphere of Nighthawks at the Diner, but I just REALLY LIKE THAT RECORD, OKAY.
They didn’t talk about it over breakfast the next morning. They didn’t talk about it as they walked through the Picasso museum either. They didn’t talk about much of anything at all, and Harry clammed up every time he opened his mouth in hopes of breaking the silence.

Harry hadn’t slept a wink during the night, and he wasn’t sure Draco had either. He’d slept next to Draco enough times to know the sedate sounds of his breathing in the moments before he fell asleep. Harry didn’t hear that familiar rhythm while he was lying next to Draco last night, afraid to reach out and touch him. He was scared he’d find Draco’s skin icy to the touch, the tension of his muscles broadcasting a rejection of Harry’s hands instead of the tender melting he’d come to expect, widening the painful distance between them.

Even though they’d spent the day together, they moved through the Paris streets like strangers, two ghosts drifting side by side, disingenuous smiles exchanged from time to time, practiced expressions devoid of any real emotion.

“Want to head back to the flat? I didn’t really have anything else planned today unless you… have something you wanted to check out?” Draco asked without looking at Harry, his hands shoved in his pockets instead of swinging freely as his sides. Draco hadn’t held Harry’s hand all day.

“Sure… that’s fine,” Harry responded quietly.

The walk back to the apartment was only a few blocks, but it felt eternal. Harry couldn’t bear the quiet any longer, and when they stepped back into Pansy’s place to find she wasn’t around, he finally spoke.

“Draco, I can’t stand this. Honestly, you screaming at me would be better than nothing at all. Can you please just say something? Anything? What are you thinking right now?”

Harry sat down on one of the stools surrounding the kitchen island. Draco was across from him, arranging cheese and fruit on a plate. He sighed and gripped the edge of the island, his eyes not meeting Harry’s.

“Draco, I can’t stand this. Honestly, you screaming at me would be better than nothing at all. Can you please just say something? Anything? What are you thinking right now?”

Harry felt like someone had gutted him with a sharp hunting knife, his entrails spilling onto the
kitchen floor faster than he could gather them up. He’d been expecting it. Harry wasn’t a fool. He
knew that telling someone you loved them only to have them tell you they needed to think about it
could really only end one way. Apparently, knowing the train wreck was coming didn’t do
anything to mitigate the impact of the crash. It punched Harry with a force he didn’t think he could
recover from.

“Okay… Well, I said we could forget it if you want. Can’t we just… pretend it never happened?”
Even though that option did nothing to stop Harry’s heart from breaking, the alternative was too
hellish to consider. He couldn’t say it, couldn’t even think it yet.

“And make you lie to yourself every day? Pretend that you don’t feel the way you do? I would
never do that to you. You deserve… someone who can give you what you want, what you need.
I’ll just disappoint you if…” Draco’s voice was barely above a whisper. He sounded beaten down
by his own words, and Harry didn’t know how to take that.

Harry’s pulse quickened, the fog of an angry depression settling over him.

This can’t be happening. How is this happening? We were so happy only a day ago.

No… No, you weren’t. Not really. You’ve been up and down for a while.

Harry stuffed that epiphany down, mashed it like dirt underfoot.

“If you’re going to break up with me, can you at least do me the courtesy of looking at me when
you do it?” Harry heard the tremble in his own voice, hearing his tears before he could process the
sensation of them.

“I wish I could be everything for you, Harry. I wish I could climb inside you and chase away all
your demons forever, but I can’t. My own demons are enough to handle right now.” Draco finally
looked at him, and Harry saw there were tears welling in his eyes too. “I thought… if I invited you
here, everything would be better. I thought we could be happy in Paris like we were at Christmas,
and everything would just sort itself out. We were so happy in that cabin, I thought — ”

“And what? Everything in between was insufferable for you? That’s the only time you’ve even
liked being with me?!?” Harry stood up from his stool, gripping the island’s edge until his fingers
hurt.

“No no, that’s not what I meant. We’ve had so many great moments. Harry, my memories with you
are probably the happiest memories of my life since the war,” Draco pleaded. He tried to reach
across the island to clasp Harry’s hand, but Harry jerked back. “Please don’t take it like that, Harry.
I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m trying to be honest. I care about you too much not to be. This trip
reminded me of everything that was good about us, but — ”

“Until I ruined it by saying I love you?”

“You didn’t ruin anything. This isn’t anyone’s fault.” Draco sighed wearily, sitting down on a stool
and slumping over the island.

“Do you love me?” Harry demanded.

“Don’t do this. Please don’t ask me that.” Draco’s lip quivered as he shook his head vehemently,
squeezing his eyes shut.

“Do you?”
“What does it matter, Harry?” Draco asked dejectedly. Why did he sound so depressed? He was the one breaking up with Harry. This was his decision.

“What — are you fucking kidding me? Of course it matters. It’s the only thing that matters! If you’re going to do this, I want to know.” Harry glared through his tears, and Draco looked back at him, his silver eyes panicked.

“I don’t know.”

“Liar. Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t! Please, just stop — ”

“Stop what, Draco? You brought me to Paris and broke up with me so the least you could do is tell me to my face that you don’t love me,” Harry spat. Draco looked taken aback, like he hadn’t expected Harry to be so angry, but then his face shifted into something hard, shades of his former self returning.

“Fine, is that what you want? You want to goad me into hurting you so you can justify the rage you’re feeling? I’ll tell you what I do know. When you told me you loved me, all I wanted to do was run. All I felt was panic and fear, and that’s not what people are supposed to feel.”

Harry was stunned, yet he still wanted nothing more than to reverse Draco’s decision.

“Then I’ll… wait, okay? You’re not ready for that stage, fine. We’ll — ”

“Harry, you can’t have a nightmare without exploding all the lightbulbs or laying waste to your room. You think you’re ready for a serious relationship right now? Maybe you’ve fooled yourself into thinking you can handle it, but I’m telling you that I can’t.”

“I haven’t done that in weeks! Being with you it... it helps. You help me.”

“I’m not a substitute for therapy, Harry. I’m not a proxy for getting around actually dealing with your issues. That isn’t a reason to be with someone. That’s not love, that’s… codependency. We need to learn how to be better on our own. There’s a difference between support and reliance. I’m so happy you finally gave that doctor a call, but a couple of therapy sessions and some Dreamless Sleep doesn’t fix everything. It’s going to take time.”

Harry despised how practiced and resolute Draco sounded. How long had he been thinking about this?

“Then why did you keep seeing me? You had to have known…”

“Because I’m weak. I’ve always been weak when it comes to you,” Draco whispered, tears spilling down his cheeks. “I just wanted to be… I wanted to be as close to you as I could for as long as I could before things fell apart. But I feel like I’ve been waiting for the house of cards to collapse, and I don’t like that feeling, Harry. I wanted this to work so fucking — ”

Draco thrust his hands into his hair.

“God, you have no idea how much I wanted this to work, Harry… more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life, but it’s like we’re at the top of a landslide speeding down into bigger, faster ruin all the time. It doesn’t feel stable. It doesn’t feel… sustainable. Sometimes, I feel like I’ve defined my whole life by you: your rejection, your affection, your reactions to me, and it’s just… it doesn’t feel healthy to do that while I’m still so fucked up.”
“I don’t even know what you’re saying, Draco! You’re blaming me for an entire life’s baggage now? What is this?! Where the fuck is this coming from?”

“No! I’m not — I’m just saying that I have noticed I do this, and I don’t want to trade my father’s validation for yours.”

“Wow! So now I’m Lucius?! Jesus fucking Christ, Draco.” Harry threw up his hands and turned his back on Draco. He was fucking seething. How dare Draco say any of this.

“No! You’re not understanding me — fuck, I can’t find a good way to say this…”

“Maybe because there is no good way. Maybe because what you’re saying is shit, and there’s no way around that.” Harry whirled around and speared Draco with a hostile look. Let Draco be the one who couldn’t look at him. Harry wasn’t going to make this easy for him.

“I’m just trying to tell you this isn’t your fault. We’re no good for each other right now. I have so much to sort out and so do you. I’m used to love being this conditional, crushing force of obligation. With my parents — ”

“I’m not like them! Stop comparing me to them!”

“I’m not! I’m just trying to tell you what it’s like in my head! How my ideas of love are all twisted and gnarled and fucked up, and I can’t unravel them for you! I wish I could. You have no idea how much I wish I could. I’ve tried, I’m still trying, but I can’t. I’m not ready to… I’m not equipped to do this yet, no matter how much I wish I was. It’s so fucking scary for me, Harry. I don’t think you understand that.” His eyes beseeched Harry to understand, but he didn’t want to.

“Then I’ll wait for you, and we’ll work this out together. Draco, you matter so much to me. I can’t imagine not having you in my life.”

“Harry, I know you mean well when you say that, but the pressure of having you waiting for me, that’s… the last thing I need right now. I can’t get better, I can’t get closer to being ready for love, for us, for anything if there’s all this weighty expectation.”

“What about me? I don’t know if I can get better without you. You’re just going to leave me right when I’m starting therapy? Right when I need you the most? Forget love, what about friendship? Is that what friends do? Abandon each other when things get rough?” Harry started to cry in earnest. A life without Draco sounded about as bearable as having a vital organ ripped out.

“Please stop making this even harder,” Draco sobbed. “It’s already so fucking hard, I don’t… I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I don’t want you to hate me, but I don’t know what else to do. Just know that no matter how much you hate me now, I hate myself even more. But waiting longer… staving off the inevitable just because I’m a coward who doesn’t want to deal with it… that would be even worse.”

“Would you have done this if I hadn’t…” Harry hesitantly met Draco’s eyes. He had to know. “If I hadn’t told you I loved you?”

“I… I think so,” Draco whispered, wincing like the words were poison to his ears. “I… don’t know when, but yes. It’s been too much for a little while now. Your nightmares, everything with my parents, school, it’s all just crushing me, sitting on my chest like a Dementor trying to suck the life out of me, and I can’t handle it anymore. I’m riddled with regret about it, Harry. I promise I — Harry?”

Harry stormed off, walking to Draco’s bedroom to collect his things. He couldn’t stand being there
another minute.

“You don’t have to leave right now, Harry?” Harry heard Draco following him, sensed his presence in the doorway as he packed. He hated how he could feel his eyes on him, tracking his every move. It was a scorching pain, and he wanted to rid himself of it as soon as possible.

“And what am I supposed to do?! Stay here for two more days and pretend everything’s fine? I’d rather die again. I’d rather sacrifice myself and not come back this time.” Harry threw a shirt into his suitcase and stood up, glowering at Draco. Draco’s lip quivered, and Harry thought good. Hurt. Hurt as much as I fucking do.

“Don’t say that. Please, don’t say that. I-I don’t know…” Draco wrung his hands. It was an anxious motion Harry had never seen him do before. “I just… I feel so bad letting you — ”

“Well, that’s what happens, Draco. You don’t get to feel good after you break someone’s heart. You can’t get around that.” Harry finished packing, clumsily shoving things into his suitcase without a care for whether or not he left anything behind. He could barely see, his vision whitened out from anger and sorrow. The only thing he could think about was getting the fuck away from Paris and away from Draco. “Don’t come find me in New York. I don’t want to see you.”

Harry didn’t bother looking behind him as he walked out of the room, out of the front door, and out of Draco’s life. It wasn’t until he made it to the street that his knees gave out underneath him. Harry sank to the ground and cried on the streets of Marais, not able to spare a thought for what he looked like, breaking down in hysterical sobs as the people around him went about their day.

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“Hey! I thought you weren’t due back until — ”

Harry sped past Gisele, not up to fielding questions about what had happened. He couldn’t bear the thought of rehearsing the whole conversation, reliving every hurtful word that Draco had tossed his way.

Saying I love you is everything, and I can’t do everything right now.

Harry knew what he was really saying: “I can’t handle you right now. You’re everything.” Harry’s worst fears about being a burden to everyone, that deep-seated belief that he couldn’t shake, that plagued him in his darkest moments, was true.

He’d carelessly Apparated back. It was reckless, but he couldn’t abide by the long, rollicking journey of a plane ride nor did he have the strength to wander into the magical sector of Paris to buy a Portkey. The former comfort of long travel, the methods that used to give him welcome time for contemplation, sounded about as enjoyable as lying on a bed of needles after he’d left Draco’s apartment. His only concern was getting home and into his bed as quickly as possible.

Harry tossed his suitcase to the floor, shucked off his shoes, and dove under the covers. The heat of June didn’t even register. He wanted to be invisible, untouchable, concealed and safe from harm.

“Harry?” Gisele’s soft voice interrupted his thoughts. He felt the mattress dip as she sat down, her hand finding its way onto his knee through the blankets.
“We broke up. I don’t want to talk about it. Please, just… go away,” Harry choked out, the sobs overtaking him again.

“Harry… I know right now you might think — ”

“Please. I need to be alone.”

“Okay. I’ll be out there if you need me.” Harry felt her pat his leg before the mattress shifted again. He heard the door close as Gisele left, and he broke down for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

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Harry staggered out of his bedroom, disoriented and jet-lagged. At some point, either from the exhaustion of the time change or the emotional toll of crying for hours, he’d fallen asleep.

Now, it was dark outside, and he saw the light of the TV in the living room. He padded down the hall, not returning Gisele’s gaze as she perked up on the couch. He sat down, leaving a cushion between them.

“You’re still here,” he weakly remarked. His voice sounded raw and apathetic to his own ears. He didn’t sound like himself.

“Where else would I go? I wasn’t going to leave you like that. Well, not for long anyway. I went out and got supplies.” Gisele waved at the coffee table. Harry looked down and saw containers from his favorite Sichuan place. She tapped each one and identified it as she went. “We have all the hits here. Mapo tofu. Chongqing chicken. Dan Dan noodles. Chili oil wantons. That beef tripe we always think about getting but never do. And behind that, you’ll see a buffet of trashy ass snacks. All the Wise chips and honey buns you can eat. There’s ice cream in the freezer too, and of course we’re stocked on booze. Can’t go through a breakup sober. That shit just isn’t right.”

Harry lunged across the couch and hugged her. She laughed as she fell backward.

“I love you. You are the best friend I could ask for. I’m sorry I just… barreled past you earlier. I couldn’t…”

“It’s fine. Breakups are a process, and you know I never make anyone talk until they’re ready.”

Harry pulled back and selected a plastic container of mapo tofu, opening it and inhaling the comforting scent of chili oil and bean paste.

“I appreciate that. It still feels like maybe it was a horrible dream.”

“Are you a wallower or a Pollyanna? I’m betting the former but thought I’d ask first.”

“A Pollyanna?” Harry mixed some white rice in with the tofu.

“Do you like to stick your fingers in your ears and go la la la everything is good, nothing happened? Go dancing and pretend you’re happy? Or do you like to sit in the goddamn soup of a breakup and cry over every sad movie you can get your hands on?”

“Dunno… I mean, Gin and I broke up, but it wasn’t… like this.”
“Yeah, it’s different when you’re the one doing the breaking. You know it’s coming; it’s your decision. Being broken up with is like getting sideswiped by a Mack truck. One minute you’re standing there, thinking everything is fine, and the next, you’re face down in the gutter with broken bones wondering what the hell happened and where the hell it came from.” Gisele opened the carton of wantons and grabbed one with a pair of chopsticks, popping the whole thing in her mouth.

“Yeah, that’s about the long and short of it,” Harry agreed. “Let’s try wallowing. I don’t feel like I can leave this sodding couch. If that doesn’t work, we’ll try the Pollywhatsit method. I have nothing but time.”

“You got it, boy. Already rented some heavy art films to pair with the classics you missed on anti V Day.”

“You’re a fucking treasure, Gisele.”

“I know,” she said with a wink. “Let’s start with *The Ice Storm*.”

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“My boyfriend broke up with me. I don’t even know if I should call him that. He didn’t really want us to be official in the first place. That was *me*, but he agreed and… well, now I feel like an idiot for not having seen that from the beginning. Maybe he was reluctant the whole time, you know? Maybe he was just trying to pretend he wasn’t. But he *felt* like my boyfriend. He felt like…” Harry rubbed the back of his neck and looked around the room. It was sparsely decorated but cozy, plants and the cool greens and blues of the color scheme making for a soothing atmosphere. He had considered cancelling his appointment and staying in bed all day, pulling the covers over his head and refusing to face reality, but part of him felt like everything Draco said would be confirmed if he didn’t go.

*He felt like mine, and I felt like his.*

“The existence of a relationship isn’t always validated by whether or not we put an official name to it. Our relationships with people are intense, and they mean what they mean to us even if it isn’t always shared by the other person. Sometimes we’re not on the same page at the same time, and that’s okay. It happens, but it doesn’t make what you felt any less real.” Dr. Baxter regarded Harry with kind eyes, folding her hands over her crossed knees.

Harry considered her words. He wasn’t sure if he cared about whether or not his feelings had been real. He wasn’t sure he cared about his own feelings at all. It was the lack of reciprocation from Draco that mattered, the knowledge of it creating a chasm in the very center of him, burning a hole like acid dissolving everything in its path.

“Do you know who the Malfoy family is? I don’t know how much people in America know about the people involved in the war.”

“I have people with an enthusiasm for global politics in my life so I’m aware of some of the major players. I believe that was one of the families who followed Voldemort?”

“Yeah… Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater. He had been for a long time, since before Voldemort came back. His son Draco became one as well although… well, later I realized how much he didn’t
have a choice in the matter. It’s something he heavily regrets, but um… that was my boyfriend. Draco is the one who broke up with me.” Putting the words out there made Harry’s pain feel fresh, like ripping the plaster off a wound before it had closed up.

“Is that something that caused friction between you two? Your past?”

“No… I mean, at first yeah, but… that’s not why we broke up. He said it was too much.” Harry emphasized the last two words, bitterness on his tongue.

“What was too much?”

Harry sighed and rubbed his temples.

“Everything. Our relationship. My magic flares. His own post-war issues. I told him I loved him, and he — ” Harry’s breath hitched, and he swallowed hard, pushing down the impending tears. “He told me it was too much.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure that wasn’t easy to hear. It’s a vulnerable position to be in, telling someone you love them.” Dr. Baxter gave him a sad smile. “What was going through your head at the time? Can you remember how you felt?”

“How I felt?! How the fuck do you think I felt?! Angry, betrayed, depressed, like I wanted to rip apart the whole universe and drop into the void.” Harry took a deep breath. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to yell.”

“You’re allowed to yell here, Harry. You’re allowed to cry. You’re allowed to not be in control of your emotions. Trust me, I’ve heard worse. You won’t shock me.” Dr. Baxter smiled and let out a low laugh.

“Yeah, I bet you have,” Harry laughed back.

“What I meant by asking how you felt was whether or not you were able to dig deeper, beyond the impact of the breakup on your specific relationship with Draco. I know it can be hard to recall something like that. Emotions are high, everything is coming at you faster than you can parse, but I’d like you to try. Anything you remember thinking about yourself in those moments?”

Harry turned toward the curtained windows. He wished he could see outside and focus on some reminder of the sun and normal people going about their business like the world hadn’t fallen apart. Maybe it would put things into perspective and pull him out of this pit of despair. He assumed Dr. Baxter had them shut for privacy. Perhaps he’d ask next time.

“I remember thinking that he was right. That I was a burden. That I am too much, and it was only a matter of time before he realized it. Our days had been numbered from the start.”

“Do you often feel that way? Like you’re a burden to those around you?” Dr. Baxter gently inquired.

“Is every session going to end with me realizing something terrible about how I see myself?” Harry cracked a smile. He felt broken, but even though there was a paralyzing terror in admitting it, it was reassuring to have her assess him so well. It felt like he wasn’t in this alone, like he had a guide to steer him along, and wasn’t that really what he was there for?

“We’ll try to switch it up from time to time,” Dr. Baxter joked with a smile. “The important thing to remember is that you’re making progress. I know realizations like that hurt, but having them brings you one step closer to learning how to combat them. Have you ever heard of CBT or core
beliefs?"

Harry shook his head.

“I have a homework assignment for you.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. I legitimately have been dreading the publishing day of this chapter ever since I published chapter 1 of this fic because I haven't taken angsty risks this big with this pairing and don't want y'all to revolt, but trust that, as always, it was done for very specific and important-to-me reasons. While I'm sure most of you are furious with Draco right now, I hope there's a part of you that also thinks "yes, this makes sense for him, and he's stuck between a rock and a hard place emotionally because he grew up in an emotionally bankrupt household and has no idea what the fuck he's doing even if he tries to give the appearance that he does." I've talked a lot about trying to have things you want but aren't ready for in the notes to this fic, and this was a big part of that. I had a conversation with my grandpa once where he went on about how the Beatles song "All You Need is Love" is kind of bullshit because love isn't enough, and while he was just a bit silly by using that song as his example, the point was: you need to know how to share it, how to express it, how to nurture it, how to be honest with the person you love, etc etc. There's a lot more to it than just raw emotion, and sometimes we can't handle what we desperately wish we could. Anyway, I'm probably too sleepy to be babbling, and these notes are probably not as articulate as I hoped they would be when I've imagined them in my head. As always, I hope you know that happy ending tag will be hard won. I wanted it to be hard won and realistic and not shoving aside any of the issues just to rush to it. Hopefully, you're all still on board and in these fic trenches with me. <3
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

It was important to me to really show portions of Harry's actual sessions and breakdown HOW his therapist is going about helping him understand what's happening in his brain and how to deal with it. I also think powerful wandless magic is one of those tropes for Harry's character that's rarely explained in fic unless it's a really magical theory heavy fic? Which is fine! It doesn't usually need to be explained unless it's a magical theory heavy fic, BUT thinking about this made me want to play with why it might be happening with Harry here/flip that trope on its head a bit as you'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dr. Baxter taught Harry about cognitive behavioral therapy. She taught him how to challenge his anxious thoughts, how to recognize the errors within them and dissect them as they were happening. He felt a little silly filling out worksheets like a primary school kid, and he felt even worse when the dark thoughts were down on paper, staring him in the face with nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. But he also couldn’t deny that there was a relief in challenging the thoughts and slowly learning to tell himself that he wasn’t a burden. They discussed his upbringing and the role it undoubtedly played in his warped view of his self worth. As much as he hated giving the Dursleys any thought whatsoever, it was undeniable that they were a big part of all this.

Harry learned what cognitive distortions were. He learned that he catastrophized and fell into “should statements” and “emotional reasoning” when in the grips of anxiety and depression. Identifying the patterns and giving names to the malfunctions in his brain made it feel less insurmountable.

They began to incorporate therapeutic magical exercises in his sessions. Ten minutes of each session were now devoted to the balancing of objects in the air and maintaining that balance.

“It’s a very literal exercise, I know, but simple and to the point is best for this. We’ll get more complicated as we continue. I realize this might feel very rudimentary compared to how you’ve utilized magic in the past, but it’s essential that we start slow, especially given what you told me.”

Harry had told her about his wandless magic, and she had ordered him not to use it.

“While you’re feeling unstable, it’s a very perilous thing to meddle with. Wands were developed because of how fickle wandless magic can be. Having a vessel to channel it, to funnel the energy into, creates an environment that is streamlined. Think of it like a tap. When the pipes aren’t fitted in an airtight seal, you end up with water spouting out all over the place. It leaks in the weak spots and sputters out through the faucet in fits and starts that only grow more erratic the more you turn on the juice, so to speak. It’s the same here. I’m relieved that you’ve kept it to basic spells because the more complicated magic you attempt, the more magical energy you’re funneling through that unregulated vessel, therefore the more potential for it to go awry.”

Harry was surprised at how hard it was to keep two objects floating at parallel points. At first, ten minutes had sounded like a short duration, but he always found that he was fatigued by the end of it. When he started to get used to the exercise, Dr. Baxter switched him to objects that were of
different sizes, one larger than the other.

Slowly, they started to delve into the events of the war.

“Although it may seem like it’s receded to the background since you think of it in more abstract terms now, it is still at the forefront of your mental health problems. We can go as slowly as you like. It seems like the medications are keeping your flares under control for now so we’ll delve in gradually, unraveling events at a manageable pace. We don’t want to overwhelm you with triggers, but we do want to begin to deal with them and normalize the events until they aren’t as powerful.”

Harry found that she was right. Talking about the war at length was difficult but necessary. The more they cracked into the subject, the more he realized how much of it had been building inside him, cooking under pressure until it came out in the only place he couldn’t control: his dreams. The first time he spoke to Dr. Baxter about the night he died, he couldn’t breathe. She had to talk him down from his panic attack, grounding him in much the same way Draco had nearly a year ago. Dr. Baxter had assured him that it was a natural reaction and that she would teach him how to deal with the attacks on his own, that it would get easier with practice. She taught him breathing exercises and other ways to stop a panic attack from spiraling.

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He tried not to think about Draco. Some days were easier than others, his mind stuffed to the gills with everything else: the truths he uncovered in therapy, the exercises Dr. Baxter gave him to complete, the impending fall semester. There were no shortage of dilemmas to occupy his mind, but other times, it was all he could think about. He missed Draco’s laugh, his silly pajama bottoms, his arms around Harry’s waist, his voice in Harry’s ear, calling him baby and telling him how good he felt. He missed everything about Draco. He missed not only his lover, but his friend: the person who understood him better than anyone, the person he could tell anything to.

On the worst nights, he cried himself to sleep, exhaustively sifting through every detail of their Paris trip and their time together since Christmas. He wondered if Pansy knew it was coming or if Draco had confided in her afterward. He wondered if Draco was right, if it would have happened regardless of whether or not Harry had spilled those three pertinent words. And if so, when? What would it have looked like? Would Draco have waited until the school year started and broken Harry’s heart at the first chance? Had he just been lying in wait, a cobra in the grass, or did he really regret it as much as he claimed?

***

On Harry’s birthday, Gisele refused to take no for an answer.

“You are not moping on your birthday. We’re going out, and it’s going to be amazing,” she said, tugging on his wrist.

“It’s hot, I’m tired, and my birthdays have a way of always turning to shit. I’d rather not tempt the fates to have a go at me again this year,” Harry grumbled, pulling back.
“If it sucks, I’ll do all the cleaning until the end of the summer, okay?”

Harry paused. It was a tempting offer.

“Oh all right, I guess — ”

“Yay!” Gisele raised her hands in triumph. “Come on, we’re going to dinner at this place in the meatpacking district. You’ll love it. It’s a perfect place to queer watch.”

Gisele took him to a French-American fusion diner called Florent. She was right, it was a veritable “who’s who” of the gay community; professional drag performers in one corner, leather daddies in the next table over. Tucked in a dark area on the opposite side of the room was a stylish hipster couple who looked important. Harry couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was a well-coiffed yet purposely grungy look about them, like people who owned $300 designer jeans with deliberate rips in the knees.

“Holy fuck!” Gisele yell-whispered as they sat down, eyeing the couple across the restaurant. “That’s Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon.”

“Seriously?! From Sonic Youth?!” Harry ecstatically whispered back, leaning his head closer to Gisele.

“Yes!” Gisele hissed. “You can’t tell?! God, she is my indie rock goddess. I want to be her when I grow up.”

“I’ve never seen a picture of them! Well, except for like… the sleeve of Daydream Nation. I wasn’t sure!”

“Good thing I brought this!” Gisele plucked a Polaroid camera from her messenger bag and gave Harry a conspiratorial smile.

“Oh no… no no no…”

“YES.”

“They don’t want to be bothered! They’re eating!”

“If they didn’t want to be bothered, they wouldn’t come to a place like this looking like they fucking do. They know people are gonna shit their pants when they see them hanging out at Florent. It’s your birthday! We’re going over.” Gisele yanked Harry up, dragging him behind her like a ragdoll.

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“OH. MY. GOD.” Harry exclaimed as they left Florent, full of sesame chicken croquettes, spicy crab cakes with creole sauce, and too many carbs. Harry thought it might be overkill to order mashed potatoes, fries, AND mac and cheese, but Gisele made the executive order that one couldn’t have too many variations of potatoes and noodles on their birthday. He clutched the Polaroid to his chest, a smiling Harry sandwiched between two of his music idols. “I met Thurston and Kim! This is already ten points above every birthday I’ve ever had!”
“Come on, dude. The night is young! We’ve got stops to make and bars to conquer!” They linked arms and jogged down the pavement with a loud cheer into the night sky.

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“I’m sorry, man. Even my magic has its limitations.” They couldn’t make it into the Stonewall Inn or the Village Vanguard, turned away despite Gisele’s seasoned New Yorker attempts to charm the doormen.

They were outside the back door of the Vanguard, listening to a jazz chanteuse crooning a torch song about how someday a man would come along who would dry all her tears and whisper sweet little things in her ear. Gisele had brought a flask of vodka that they were passing back and forth as they listened to the warbled distortion of the music through the small crack in the door.

“Don’t be sorry. This is perfect!”

“Passing a flask back and forth in a dirty alley by the dumpster listening to muffled jazz?” Gisele laughed, handing him the booze.

“Yes. It’s absolutely perfect,” Harry said with a broad grin.

After the flask was finished, buzzed enough to possess a renewed confidence, they tried for the Cubbyhole.

“It’s his birthday. He’s my best friend, we’ve been turned down everywhere tonight, and we just want to sit with some fellow queers and celebrate,” Gisele begged the bartender, flashing her best flirty smile. This being a primarily lesbian bar, she had told Harry she might have a better shot of convincing the bartender. Judging from the smile brimming at the edges of the tattooed woman’s mouth as she wiped down the wooden bar, Harry figured she was right.

“Okay, but you’re only getting one round. I’m closing tonight, and I am not about to deal with sloppy drunk teenagers who can’t hold their liquor,” the woman cautioned. “What do you want?”

“Thank you! I promise we won’t be trouble. Gin and tonic for him and a double whiskey for me.”

Every inch of the ceiling of the Cubbyhole was pasted with vibrant color: Chinese lanterns, paper fish, and model airplanes dangling a few feet above. It was just this side of over the top, the bar bursting with a rainbow spectrum of decor, but Harry loved it. It was cozy, and there was a jukebox against one wall that Harry couldn’t wait to commandeer.

“It’s on me. Happy twentieth birthday, kid,” the woman said with a wink as she set down their drinks.

“Thanks!”

An hour later, they knew the bartender’s name (Gretchen), and had struck up a conversation with an older couple, Jen and Sasha, who were telling them all about New York in the 70s.

“God, it was a fucking cesspool. Be glad you weren’t born yet. You think this city is grimy now? Back then, we couldn’t scrub the soot, come, and vomit off the streets long enough to see the pavement underneath,” Sasha said as she bought them all a round of shots. Gretchen seemed to
have forgotten about her policy of only letting them stay for one drink.

“Don’t listen to her! It was gloriously filthy!” Jen leaned in to yell. “No AIDS, queens throwing bricks through windows instead of being peaceful about shit when it went down. There was an energy to it... It’s not the same now. I’m not saying it was better, just different. I’m not one of those New Yorkers that pitches a fit every time their favorite bodega becomes a trendy coffee shop. This place has always been mercurial. It’s why we stay. It moves with us, you know? It’s like a breathing animal. I was here for the Stonewall riots, and —”

“Okay, don’t give the boy a lecture on queer history. It’s his birthday! He didn’t sign up for that.”

“Actually, I want to hear about it! I don’t know enough about American queer history.” Harry downed his shot, shook off the burn, and leaned in.

“See? Sometimes people are interested in my babbling,” Jen protested with a genial slap to Sasha’s arm.

“Fine!” Sasha threw her hands up. “Take it away, babe!”

They talked and drank until the bar closed, singing along to Tina Turner and Blondie. Aching longing nearly overtook Harry when someone put on Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights,” but he pushed through it, absorbing Jen’s tales of queer New York and dancing with Gisele.

The couple insisted on paying for a cab ride home for Gisele and Harry.

“Call it a birthday gift!”

“You already bought me drinks!”

“And you listened to me talk all night! I owe you one.”

“She’s right. This is pay you’re definitely owed,” Sasha agreed with a laugh, tenderly kissing Jen’s cheek.

Gisele and Harry said goodbye as the cab drove away, turning around and waving until their new friends were out of sight. Harry leaned his head against Gisele’s shoulder and sighed when she ran her fingers through his hair.

He was happy, the warmth of booze and friendship keeping him light and breezy, but he still thought about Draco. As he drifted off, dozing against Gisele’s shoulder, he imagined it was Draco’s fingers pushing his hair back from his forehead.

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“Fuuucckkk, I used to love the smell of espresso. Now I can’t handle it anymore. Want to scrub my skin raw until I never smell that shit again. I’d also be pretty fucking happy to never see another hipster asshole who gets off on making my life miserable.” Gisele threw her apron down on the living room floor and collapsed on the couch.

“Gisele, I um... I have something to tell you.” Harry turned off the TV and faced her. Gisele sat up straighter, and her eyes went wide.
“Damn, you look morose. Who died?”

Harry chuckled, and Gisele’s features screwed up in confusion.

“Okay, now I’m extra worried. They say hysterical laughter after a tragedy means someone is about to have a breakdown.”

“No, it’s just… you choosing to say that right now is… well, you’ll understand in a minute.”

Dr. Baxter had asked Harry about his support system, who he could rely on in his life, and of course, he’d mentioned Gisele. After talking about her and the problems he’d had with Hermione and Ron, she suggested he might feel less alone if he told her about his past.

“She’s a Muggle — er, Non-Magical! Just how am I supposed to tell her a dark wizard killed my parents, then tried to kill me and start a race war in the wizarding world?” he’d asked incredulously, sure she’d completely flipped her lid if she was even suggesting it.

“I’m aware that it’s a challenge. It’s a burden we in the wizarding community face our whole lives. However, if you think outside the box a bit, I think you’ll come to realize that you don’t have to tell her exactly what happened in order for her to hear you,” she’d responded.

“Let’s go outside. I think I need air.” Harry surmised there was a good chance the muggy apartment would feel even more stifling once he popped the cork on this bottle of secrets.

“Do we need beer? I’m guessing we need beer.”

“If you can connect a tap to a river of it, you’d probably approach how much we’re going to need.”

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Gisele shook her head and took a swig from her can.

“I can’t believe you’ve been holding this in the whole time. I mean — Draco, but — fuck, that is a hell of a mess to keep to yourself.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but it’s hard to talk about it. In England, it was in the papers… local to where I was, anyway, and everyone I went to school with knew it too. It was nice not to be defined by that when I came here, you know? I could just be me instead of the boy with the tragic past.”

Harry had told Gisele the basics: a madman had killed his parents and almost succeeded in killing him as well, coming back to finish the job years later. He described him as a political extremist and told her that Draco’s parents were his followers, assigning Draco initiation tasks that included killing their headmaster, tasks he never completed. He had fretted about the details she might ask for, but it turned out she was as careful to not be intrusive as she’d always been. Anything Harry didn’t want to answer, she respected.

“I totally understand. That’s a giant shadow to live under. Damn… I always knew there was more going on with you and Draco, but fuck… I’m amazed you lasted this long considering everything you just told me.”

Harry smiled grimly, and Gisele cringed.
“Fuck, that was not a nice thing to say. I’m sorry, dude —”

“No no, you’re right. We’re… there’s too much to sort through. I thought we could start over, but maybe Draco’s right. It’s always there, and it’s too heavy.” Harry took a sip of his beer and leaned against the outer wall of their building. He looked up from their fire escape perch, grateful that the sun was starting to set. The heat in the city had been whipping up to a sweaty peak that was hard to endure, the humidity radiating off the pavement like squiggles in a comic strip.

Harry smiled as he remembered walking to Prospect Park with Gisele a few days ago. She had pointed out an iridescent rainbow in a slick puddle of grease on the edge of the road as they made their way to the park.

“Most people look to the skies after a beautiful summer shower to find a rainbow. New Yorkers look for rainbows in some grody ass oil spill a car leaked onto the road.”

They’d both laughed, their t-shirts clinging to their chests in patches of sweat.

“Do you think he was? Right, I mean?”

Gisele propped her Converse-covered foot against the railing.

“I think it was extremely shitty for him to bring you all the way there and break up with you.”

“That wasn’t an answer.”

Gisele swept a hand through her sweaty hair. The purple was faded since it had been a while since her last dye job, a couple of inches of natural black on her roots.

“I think… if he knew things were rocky… if he was having second thoughts, he should have done it sooner. He shouldn’t have strung you along, and he sure as fuck shouldn’t have invited you on a romantic vacation. Who the hell breaks up with someone in Paris?”

“He made it seem like it was a last ditch effort to save us.” Harry gazed down at the street. A group of kids who looked to be about middle school age were running down the road, hands sticking out at their sides to cradle the last wisps of summer air.

“Fuck that. He should have told you sooner.”

“You called it, you know. You were skeptical about us from the beginning.”

“I hate being right.”

“No, you don’t!” Harry laughed and jabbed her in the ribs.

“You’re right. I’m an omniscient bitch queen, and I love to gloat,” Gisele confessed with a laugh. “But this is one time I really didn’t want to say I told you so.”

Harry leaned his head on her shoulder, and she wrapped her arm around him. Overheated as they were, Harry thought that was the most ultimate gesture of love between friends.

“How does it work when we go back to NYU? We were all friends.”

“I can’t speak for Seb-ala, but that pasty fucker better duck for cover when I see his scrawny ass.”

Harry smiled and looked up at her.
“You don’t have to hate him. I won’t be mad if you don’t.”

“Well, too fucking bad because I do, and I will.”

“I can’t believe summer’s almost over. Feels like we just got out of school.”

Harry remembered how the summers used to stretch on forever when he lived with the Dursleys. The school break that most kids reveled in felt like a punishment from which he couldn’t wait to escape, shaking off the shackles of servitude to return to Hogwarts each September. He smiled to himself as he realized this was the first summer he’d ever understood that universal elation. The summer after the war had been defined by strife, the torment of his own head and the echoes of his experiences like ghostly wails reverberating in the rooms of Grimmauld Place, the visage of death everywhere he turned.

Although this summer had come with its fair share of hardship, he was going to miss the lazy days of sitting with Gisele on the fire escape, the yells of the neighborhood kids playing in the street, the sounds and smells of New York summer that he’d only just barely gotten a hint of last year.

“Yeah, you close your eyes, and it’s over as soon as you open them.”

_Just like everything else_, Harry thought, watching the skyline fade from burnt orange to black.

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Harry hadn’t forgotten the Guided By Voices tickets. They were in the drawer to his nightstand, and he could feel their presence like a fist pounding on his sternum every time he looked at that drawer.

“Fuck him. We’re going to that show, and we’re going to have a good time.”

Harry didn’t argue with Gisele. He agreed. There was a certain righteous reclaiming in going. He stood with her in the crowd at the Bowery Ballroom, thankful that the masses of people pressed on all sides of him didn’t send him into a tailspin. It was challenging once or twice, but he employed every tactic Dr. Baxter had taught him until the feeling receded, ready to bolt outside if he needed to.

They danced and sang along, laughing at Robert Pollard’s drunken banter in between songs. When they played “Peep Hole”, Harry was stricken by the memory of driving down the highway with Draco next to him in the backseat. He squeezed Gisele’s hand, and he didn’t have to say anything. She smiled at him and squeezed back, pulling him into a hug, stopping his tears before they could start.

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“God, it feels like it’s been decades! I’m never going back to Ohio for an entire summer. It’s too long of a stretch. I think it might kill me if I do it again,” Seb groaned as he bit into a waffle at the Waverly Diner.
“The boredom, the bigotry, your parents, or the cornfields?” Gisele asked, leaning back in the booth.

“All of the above. Write that down because I want all of those listed as the cause of death in my obituary. So what about you two? Tell me all the city dirt! What did I miss?”

Gisele and Harry exchanged glances.

“Well… Draco and I broke up… so there’s that.”

Seb choked on his water.

“What?! What the fuck happened? When?!”

“June. I went to see him in Paris for his birthday, and — ”

“June?! You bitches need to get better about emailing. I can’t believe I spent over two months in the dark about this!”

“Yes, because that’s what matters here!” Gisele scolded with a tilt of her head.

“I’m just saying! Sorry, Harry. Breakups suck.” Seb gave him a sincere look of lament, and Harry couldn’t handle it. Between therapy, Gisele, and the tireless conversations in his own head, Draco was a refrain Harry had been singing for the better part of three months. He wasn’t looking forward to another retelling of the story.

“Thanks, Seb. It’s… complicated. I hope you don’t mind, but I don’t really want to relive the whole thing right now. Not trying to make you feel further out of the loop, it’s just… I think I’ve finally stopped thinking about it every waking hour, you know?”

“Totally. I’m here when you need me.” Seb smiled, and Harry felt a wave of affection for him. It was good to see him again. “Just tell me one thing: do we hate him now? I need to know what level of bitchy I’m supposed to be when I see him on campus. Do I avoid or do I eviscerate?”

“Are you both just dying for an excuse to yell at someone?” Harry chuckled, a mixture of pride and reluctance filling him at the thought of his friends berating Draco on behalf of his broken heart. He dragged a fry through the little pile of salt and pepper on his plate.

“Always,” they said in unison.

“Let’s forget about my bad luck in love. How’s Ravi?”

“Great.” Seb instantly perked up, his posture straightening, his head held higher. “I thought for sure his visit was going to be full of WASP passive aggression. You know, no eye contact, my parents constantly referring to him as my ‘friend,’ subtle mentions of church and god over every conversation like they could chase the gay away with enough holy water?”

Gisele nodded with an eyeroll.

“Did they actually call him your boyfriend? I will faint dead away and faceplant in these damn hashbrowns.”

“Oh, they went full on ‘friend’ all week. Does your friend eat bacon? Will you and your friend be joining us for dinner tonight?”

“Lord, the white Christian parents don’t know what to do with a gay Indian boy in their house,”
Gisele laughed.

“Right? It’s like they thought he was another species, but also like… kind of nice and considerate? It seemed like their way of telling me they were coming around. It was like if my mom fluffed enough pillows, did enough cross-stitch, and baked enough cookies, she was going to work her way to tolerance. And to be honest, I think my parents insisting on separate bedrooms for us means they’ve moved one step further out of denial land.”

“Definitely. In conservative Midwestern terms, that’s basically a blessing,” Gisele agreed.

“I’m really happy for you, Seb. I had a feeling they would ease up soon. They care about you too much not to,” Harry chimed in, inhaling a crunchy piece of bacon.

Seb gave Gisele a pointed look, and she sighed.

“How’s that dad of yours?”

“How’s that dad of yours?”

“Horrified that I’m living in Brooklyn on my own and trying to coax me back into the Upper East Side womb. We’re having lunch in a couple weeks. Say a prayer for me.”

“It’ll be fine. Things are going to go our way this year. I can feel it.”

“I hope you’re right, Seb,” Harry responded with a hesitant smile

Chapter End Notes

Is it weird to miss your own characters? Because publishing this bit by bit sometimes just makes me miss Gisele.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Classes weren’t going so well for Harry. He didn’t understand it. Thanks to Dr. Baxter, he’d been steadily gaining control over his anxiety so why was he suffering this roadblock? He could barely even make it to class, let alone do the homework. At first, he blamed it on the commute. It was harder to get up and catch a train than it was to roll out of bed and sprint across campus, but that wasn’t the sum of it.

Harry had never been that academically-minded. In fact, everything he’d loved about Hogwarts had nothing to do with studying and everything to do with magic and community. Before he was accepted to Hogwarts, Harry had belonged absolutely nowhere. He didn’t have friends or family who cared about him. There weren’t any teachers or mentors in Harry’s life who helped guide him toward any places or areas of interest that might give him the acceptance he was craving. But once that letter had sailed into the Dursleys’ home, all of that changed. Suddenly, not only did Harry belong somewhere, he belonged to a very secret, exclusive club full of wondrous things.

Harry felt that in New York too, albeit in a very different manner. Here he had found his place in the queer community, slipping into a friend group where every aspect of queerness was up for discussion. It was as special and essential to his life as magic was, and he wouldn’t trade Gisele or Seb for anything in the world.

School felt like something extraneous. It had been his excuse to get here, his conduit into this new life, but now he wasn’t sure that it had ever mattered beyond that. Half of the classes he’d taken so far were interesting while the other half felt like a chore, and he wasn’t sure why he was slogging through it. What was the end game here? Get a bachelor’s degree from a Muggle college, and… do what exactly? He liked living in the Muggle world but was he really suited to working within a Non-Magical profession forever?

These were crucial questions, but Harry didn’t feel equipped to answer them. Furthermore, he didn’t want to try.

Typical Potter. You didn’t think this through at all, did you? Just hopped across the pond and into university, figuring you’d sort it out later.

Harry heard Draco’s voice in his head, conjuring a fictitious argument that he was sure wasn’t far off from the rows they’d had at the beginning of last year.

“Sod off,” Harry scolded fake Draco.

Wondering if Draco was going to turn up in the dining hall or on a quad bench was another thing that wasn’t helping Harry’s resistance to school. Every time he turned a corner, his breath caught in his chest, a nervous anticipation of what he would do if he saw those white-blond locks and slender frame. When Harry did manage to make it to class, he walked there like the ground was made of hot coals that would sear his feet if he didn’t move fast enough.

He’d get it sorted out. He wasn’t sure how, but he would.
“You have a lot on your plate, Harry. You’re a young wizard living on his own in a Non-Magical area, you’re really far from home, you have PTSD from the war, you broke up with your boyfriend, and you’re enrolled in college. Don’t discredit yourself. You’re doing remarkably well,” Dr. Baxter assured him, that trusting smile forming on her lips.

“Well, when you put it that way…” Harry chuckled and looked out the window. He’d asked her about opening the curtains, and she’d happily obliged.

“When you put it anyway at all, it’s a lot. It’s very common for teenagers to fall apart when they go off to college. Everything that they’ve been keeping at bay with schoolwork, friends, whatever chosen area of concentration distracts them the most, it stops working because they’re away from home. They’re away from all their defenses and the people whom they’ve relied on in the past, even if they didn’t realize the roles those people held in their lives. And I’m talking about students who don’t have any magical issues or double lives to contend with. Add that in, and it’s no wonder you’re feeling stretched thin.”

Harry thought about his defenses. He thought about the people in his life he’d counted on and the people who had counted on him.

“But… why have I mostly been avoiding the people back home who helped me? You’re right, they were my support system. Hermione and Ron were the pillars in my life who kept everything from crumbling. Why… why would I move so far away and ignore them?” Harry’s voice cracked as the guilt came over him.

“It’s complicated for you, Harry. The people who are most important in your life are a double-edged sword because they also represent the worst parts of your life. You’ve said that the main reason you left England was to escape all reminders of the war. I don’t disagree with that, and I think it’s a contributing factor for why you’ve drifted a bit from them in the past year. They were there every step of the way and avoiding that connection is hard.”

“But it’s not their fault! It’s not like they were responsible for any of the awful shit that happened! They helped me fight it!” Harry was confused, and he hoped Dr. Baxter could help him understand.

“It’s not about blame, Harry. I’ve never gotten the sense that you blame them for anything that happened. Rather, I think they’re inextricably linked in your mind from the war because that’s just a fact. You weren’t ready to face that yet so you took some well-deserved separation. It’s nothing to feel guilty about.” Dr. Baxter leaned forward, clasping her hands and meeting Harry’s eyes.

“I don’t know if they feel that way…”

“Have you tried talking to them about it? Explaining what you were feeling when you left? Maybe it’s time to revisit that. You might be surprised what happens when you open the dialogue. You’ve all had time to heal now.”

“Maybe you’re right. I do miss them. I love my friends here, but what I’ve realized is that it’s not like… one friendship is better than another. They’re just different. They serve different needs and purposes, but it’s all equally important.”

“That’s very astute of you.” Dr. Baxter nodded, and Harry laughed.

“I don’t think anyone has ever said that about me and actually meant it.”
“Well, I mean it completely. You’re capable of more introspection than you give yourself credit for. We all have revelations at different paces. Just because we might need a push here and there or have different needs in terms of what helps us arrive at those realizations doesn’t mean we’re not capable of it. You do the work here, Harry, and your effort is showing. Don’t you feel like you’ve seen a lot of changes in yourself since you first came here?”

“I do.” Harry was surprised at how much he believed the words. “I feel a lot better. Everything feels… less slippery? I feel like I have a grasp on myself in a way I haven’t felt maybe ever? But that sort of leads into why I’m worried about school.”

Dr. Baxter nodded, concern written in the tight line of her mouth.

“I know you expressed some trouble with motivation last time.”

“Yeah, it’s only gotten worse.”

“Is it anxiety that’s preventing you from making it to class? Any worries about succeeding and what might happen if you don’t?”

“Yeah, but it’s not about me? Like, I’ve realized that I don’t know if I really care about school as much as I care about what people will think if I fail.”

“Harry, your life has been largely governed by the expectations of others. Now, I know you’re aware of this. It’s part of why you left England, but it’s a hard thing to shake completely. When you’re making a decision about school, you have to put the opinions of everyone else out of your mind. You need to focus on your needs and what will be the healthiest decision for you.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Harry laughed and leaned his head against the back of his chair.

“Far from it. If it were easy, no one would need Mind Healers and therapists, but I promise you that it’s hard work worth doing. It’s work I know you can do. You have this profound sense of perceived failure, of not measuring up. It’s been instilled for years so it will take some time to dismantle it, but Harry... you’re twenty years old. That’s young for a Non-Magical human, but you’re a wizard, and, circumstances willing, you’re likely to live even longer. You’ve barely begun. You have time. I know time used to be in short supply for you, but it isn’t anymore. You don’t have to live like your death is around the corner anymore. In fact, I’d say you need to not live like that in order to have a healthy, fulfilling life.”

Harry sighed and considered this.

“I don’t know that hearing that brings me any closer to knowing what I want to do though.”

“Honestly, few of us do. Most adults are making it up as they go. There’s no fountain of knowledge that comes pouring in as you age. You make mistakes, you fumble through trial and error, and that’s okay. You’re allowed to do that. The people who matter won’t care. They might be taken aback sometimes, but if they’re people who love you, they’ll get over it quickly.”

“I just wish someone would tell me the right thing to do.”

Dr. Baxter smiled and shook her head.

“You’re the only one who can do that, Harry. That’s both the scariest and most thrilling truth of adulthood. You’re in charge. You can ask for advice, think it over, get all the information before you make a careful decision, but at the end of the day, the ball is in your court.”
“And if I make the wrong decision?”

“I don’t know that there are any ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ decisions. There are decisions that we regret, decisions that bring us to places we wish we didn’t wind up, but it’s not black and white like that. Everything in life is a spectrum of grey. If you make a decision that leaves you unsatisfied, then you make another one. And another one and so on until you end up somewhere that feels right. You have good guiding forces in your life to help you. You’ll decide what’s right for you.”

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Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to have a party. He preferred going to parties because it meant the party ended whenever you wanted it to. You left a person’s house and went home when you’d had enough. However, if you’re hosting a party, you can’t very well turn tail whenever you feel like it.

“But you can,” Gisele had tried to persuade him. “We get tired of people in our face, we tell them to get the fuck out! It’s our first apartment! We should have at least one party this year.”

In the end, Harry had agreed. A single-minded Gisele was hard to say no to, and besides, Harry was kind of in the mood for a big, loud, queer bash. He still hadn’t arrived at a decision about school, and he’d long missed the initial add/drop period. He had another week to drop his classes and still receive an “incomplete,” but at this point, he knew an incomplete was the best he could hope for anyhow. One actually had to attend class to pass it. Harry still didn’t understand why he could faithfully show up at therapy and get better each time while still failing to show up for school. Maybe Dr. Baxter was right. Maybe he was just biting off more than he could chew at the moment. He was leaning more toward withdrawing from school every day.

“Well, if you survived a week in Ohio, I guess upper level philosophy classes are nothing,” Harry joked as he poured Ravi a drink.

“True! I think I forgot to tell you about the culinary horror that is pretzel salad. Why do white people in the middle of the country eat such gross things, Harry? What they do to food is an abomination. It’s a violation of nature.” He accepted the plastic cup Harry gave him and grimaced, presumably at the thought of pretzel salad.

“I’m English so I wouldn’t know, Ravi. Do I want to know? I’m guessing I don’t.”

“You really, really don’t. Go to your grave without finding out what pretzel salad is, Harry. Do that for me. Protect yourself.”

“I will,” Harry laughed.

The party seemed to be a hit so far, a mix of Gisele’s pre-college friends and NYU kids, some of whom they knew and some who had tagged along blindly once they heard there was a party, mingling in the living room and the small kitchen. Some people were hanging out on the fire escape outside. Harry had magically locked his bedroom door so he didn’t have to worry about stumbling in to find a half naked couple on his bed or anything else that would make him want to Scourgify the room.

He was getting better with crowds. They were never going to be his favorite thing, but he now knew how to manage them pretty well when he needed to.
Everything was going fine until he overheard a voice he would recognize anywhere.

“I didn’t know it was your apartment. I promise if I had — ”

“Really? You’re in Brooklyn, Draco. Did you get lost on the subway? It’s not like this is a campus party you wandered into. Who the fuck brought you here?” Harry heard Gisele demand. He turned toward the direction of the voices, and his heart felt like a water-logged towel being wrung out. There he was. Gorgeous Draco Malfoy, hair a color that couldn’t be found in nature, dark rinse jeans clinging to his long legs, a Slowdive t-shirt underneath the brown leather jacket he’d bought that day they went to Family Jewels. He looked so beautiful, Harry wanted to die.

He knew it was only a matter of time. A big school and an even bigger city didn’t mean anything when it came to the universe’s propensity for throwing Draco and Harry together. It was amazing that they’d avoided it this long.

Five months.

How had that much time gone by? And how could the sight of him still make Harry’s heart stop as though that messy scene in Paris had only happened yesterday?

“I didn’t come here on purpose! God, why would I do that? Have I done that all year? Believe me, it’s not an accident that none of you have run into me. I’ll leave. You didn’t have to come at me like a rabid dog. I — ” Draco froze as he looked over Gisele’s shoulder and met Harry’s eyes. Harry looked away and bolted toward the door, pushing past clumps of people, the telltale rush of blood to his cheeks, the beading of sweat beginning on the back of his neck.

Harry gulped for air once he made it to the street, thanking Merlin and everyone else that it was early November, the chill of autumn cooling his sweat and easing his breath back down to a manageable pace.

“Harry, I’m sorry. I really didn’t know.”

Harry turned his head to see Draco just as he was coming out of the front door of their building. Gisele was right behind him, following him down the steps.

“If you want me to get rid of him, just say the word.” Gisele crossed her arms and glared at Draco as they both came to stand in front of Harry. Draco rolled his eyes.

“You hate me. You’ve made that abundantly clear, but I’ve known Harry since we were eleven. If he doesn’t want to talk to me — ”

“He doesn’t.”

Draco took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

“I’ve no doubt you’re right, but I’d like to hear that from him all the same.”

Harry slumped against the brick wall of the building as they both turned their attention to him. He felt like a freak on exhibition in a sideshow.

Come see the brokenhearted boy wizard as he fends off the inner turmoil he’s been running away from all summer and fall. Watch as months of progress slide away in the face of his breathtaking ex-boyfriend! We pointed him in the direction of Harry’s apartment just to see what would happen. Let’s take a look, shall we?
“Gisele, it’s okay. It was going to happen eventually. If he wants to talk, then… we’ll talk.” Although he wasn’t sure he really wanted to do this, he was curious what Draco would say. Harry looked at him from under his lashes, not capable of fully tilting his gaze upward. It wasn’t as though he needed to anyway. He knew what he’d find: those slate eyes that he could drown in with no hope of finding his way back to shore, enticing like glittering jewels but poisonous like mercury. Draco had always been like that, hadn’t he? A siren. An alluringly beautiful creature covered in thorns that would prick you if you got too close. Better to admire him from afar instead.

Gisele bit her lip and looked between the two of them, her eyes still hard.

“Oh,” she nodded after a minute, “I’ll be inside if you need me.”

The front door shut, and neither of them spoke for a moment, all circumventing gazes and shuffling feet.

“So… how have you been?”

Harry snorted.

“I know,” Draco sighed heavily. “Ridiculous question, but I… I want to know. I care about how you are.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do,” Draco softly said. “You weren’t just my boyfriend, Harry. You were my friend, my best friend, and besides all that, we’re… linked in so many ways. I miss you. I miss bloody sitting on your bed and watching mind numbing American shows. I miss… everything.”

You should have thought of that before you left me.

Harry’s chest felt like it might implode, his ribcage folding in on itself and piercing his heart.

“What are you saying, Draco?”

“Can’t we start over? We’ve done it once already. I’m not asking...” Draco looked out into the street, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets. “for it to be like it was. I’m not an idiot. I just… wondered if you thought we could be friends again… ever?”

Draco swallowed as he looked back at Harry, his eyes loaded with questions. Harry watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down.

“Draco, our whole relationship… ever since the beginning, it’s been mismatched expectations. When you wanted my friendship, I didn’t like you. When I wanted kindness from you, you were an angry, bigoted child. I fall in love with you, and you can’t decide what you want until it’s too late. You asked how I am? I’m doing better. Therapy is good. I feel less like a sketch of a person now. Every time I go to a session, I come out more whole than I was before I went in.”

“That’s great.” The filter of gloom lifted from Draco’s eyes as he smiled at Harry. Merlin, he’d missed that smile. Seeing it again was like stumbling across an old photograph in a box, that inexplicable power of memory descending upon you as your senses awakened, vividly recalling the day the picture was taken, the grass under your feet, the wind in your hair. It took Harry to places he wasn’t ready to recall.

“It is great, but I don’t know how great I can be if you’re back in my life. I thought we were finally... synced, but we weren’t. You said you wouldn’t want me to lie to myself, to pretend I
didn’t love you while I waited for you to catch up. I still love you, Draco. I don’t think I can forget about that so we can be friends. What do you feel for me?”

Draco bit his lip, his forehead creasing as he looked Harry up and down.

“I don’t know… I know I’m crazy about you. I know I need you in my life. I know that having you ripped away from me in one fell swoop made me feel like someone had gutted me. I know that probably sounds stupid to you, considering that I’m the one who…” Draco’s voice cracked, and Harry wondered if he was on the verge of tears. “I just miss you, Harry.”

“I miss you too, Draco, but I don’t think I’m ready. I’m sorry.” He did wish he was ready. He understood what Draco was talking about. Losing him wasn’t as simple as losing a lover. It meant so much more. It always did with them.

“I understand. I won’t bother you again.” Draco nodded with a pained expression and started to walk away.

“Draco?”

Draco turned around, hands still in his pockets, shoulders hunching a little. He looked young, like he was an uncertain first year back on the threshold of Hogwarts.

“I’m not…” Harry looked at the ground and back up at Draco, “saying I’ll feel that way forever. I don’t always know how I’ll feel from one day to the next. I just know how I feel right now.”

Draco nodded with a wistful smile.

“Hope springs eternal, Harry. I’ll see you around.”

“See you, Draco.”

Harry watched him walk away. Draco didn’t turn back around.

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“I can’t believe you’re doing this. It’s a terrible idea. People who take time off never come back.” Gisele was livid, and Harry hadn’t expected that. Maybe that was foolish, given this probably meant he was leaving New York, but it still hit him like a sucker punch.

“Well, maybe not coming back is what I need to do. The more I thought about it, I realized that coming here was an experiment more than anything else. I didn’t really have a… clear intent. I just packed up and left. In some ways, the experiment worked. Coming here was the first real decision I made for myself, and it means a lot because of that. I met you and Seb, I experienced so much I’ll never forget, but school… it’s not part of my plan anymore.”

Harry had finally done it. Armed with a note from Dr. Baxter about his PTSD and his reasons for withdrawing from the program while he continued to recover, Harry had marched to the Wizarding-Muggle Relations Department to give official notice.

It was the most formal meeting of his life. The man he spoke with was as stone faced and unapproachable as Snape had been on his worst days. Harry sweated bullets throughout the
meeting, his throat running dry, the bugs of anxiety tap dancing on his stomach, but he’d made it through. It was hard not to be affected by the intense air of judgmental disappointment when the man had asked with a derisive sneer, “You haven’t found your calling in Non-Magical university then, Mr. Potter? There are very few slots in this program.” He’d spat Harry’s name out so sourly that Harry had to sit on his hands and breathe for several seconds before answering. He’d gone home with a dizzy head full of catastrophizing thoughts, and it had taken him a whole day to come down, but he’d done it.

“And what the fuck is your plan, Harry?! Do you have one because ditching one half-cocked plan for another doesn’t sound like progress to me. And I’m sorry… ‘experiment?!’” Gisele exclaimed, looking at him in disbelief. “That may be the most privileged thing I’ve ever heard you say. This is one of the most expensive schools in the country. Must be nice to ‘experiment’ with such a heavy price tag.”

Harry's jaw dropped.

“You come from money too! The only difference is that I have direct access to mine because, oh yeah, my parents fucking died before I ever got to know them! If you’re going to make me feel guilty about my money, remember how I got it. I realize not everyone can fuck off for a year or two while they decide what they want to do with their lives, but I wish they could. It’s a wonderful opportunity to get. I’ve wasted too much time worrying about what other people think, and I’m fucking done. There’s nothing wrong with taking my time. I’m not a failure. I’m making my way in the world one step at a time. I’m done making excuses for why I haven’t done this or that. I have time, and I’m going to take advantage of that.”

“And what exactly are you going to do with all this time? Are you staying in the city? Because in case you forgot, you signed a lease with me. I wouldn’t have done that if I knew you were going to bail on me.” Gisele got up and started cleaning up the living room, plucking trash off the coffee table, busying herself with menial tasks. Harry had noticed she did that when she couldn’t climb out of a mood.

“I’m not going to bail on you! Even if I leave early, I’ll pay my half of the rent through the end of the lease. I wouldn’t leave you in the lurch like that, but I need to do this for me. School is like beating my head against a brick wall right now. The harder I try to make it work, the harder it hurts. I’m sticking with what does work right now: therapy and taking time to figure everything out before I make another move.”

“Whatver. Do whatever you want. Obviously you’re going to anyway.” Gisele gave him one last scowl before storming off to her room and slamming the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hey look, I'm not rambling excessively in the notes for once. :P I know this one is a bit short, but what I realized is that they're ALL a bit short in this end stretch so I'm keeping it to the original single updates for now because it just... feels right for the flow of events? We're closing in on the end in a couple weeks-ish. :/

ETA: I forgot that I wanted to mention that I don't necessarily condone Gisele and Seb siding with Harry so hard, BUT I think it's realistically what often happens when there's a big breakup in a tight friend group in college. I certainly saw it a lot in that era
of my life and was one of the unlucky victims of it once too so... as always with this fic, I wanted to be true to my experience and what felt right/instinctual even if painful.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Good morning, lovelies. Good to "see" you again as it's been a couple of miserable pain-laden days for me. You know when you have a situation where it's like "oh, this seems to be going well. better than expected in fact. I guess there was nothing to worry about." and then your body's like "HAHA BITCH WE HAD YOUR ASS FOOLED HERE'S SOME MISERY." Yes, well... my first followup appointment post-surgery is tomorrow so I guess I can complain to the doctor then lol. ANYWAY, this chapter has a lot of things and people we love so I think you'll be happy to see it. <3

Harry couldn’t believe he was back in England. It was surreal but familiar, like wandering into your childhood room years after leaving home to find someone had redecorated. It had been nearly a year and a half since he’d set foot in his home country. Hermione and Ron had eagerly agreed to spend Christmas with him.

“Are you kidding me, mate? You may have moved halfway across the globe, but you can't shake us that easily. You always have a standing invitation to Weasley family Christmas. You don’t have to ask to come,” Ron had laughed, wiping away Harry’s worries.

It was as though no time had passed, Molly fussing over him immediately.

“Are they feeding you enough in New York?” She always said ‘New York’ with a lilt to her voice and a twinkle in her eye, as though it was some far off, exotic location one could only get to by private helicopter. “You look too thin!”

“Mum, he could be twenty stone and change, and you’d still say that. He’s getting enough to eat. No one is feeding him. He’s a grown man! He feeds himself,” Ron protested with a groan and a mouthed “I’m sorry” in Harry’s direction. Harry didn’t mind. He rather liked the reassurance of having Molly fret over him again.

“Your mum just worries about him, Ron! He’s an honorary Weasley. Comes with the territory. Here, have a mince pie.” Arthur winked and held out a tray. Harry smiled and gratefully accepted two small pies.

“Bet you’re glad you avoided us lot for a year. Ron’s right. If you stayed in England, by now you’d probably be wider than you are tall. I saw the sausages mum piled on your plate this morning. You’d think you were still a scrawny twelve year old.” George whispered as he snaked a hand around Harry to grab a pie. He was in good spirits, and Harry was happy to see it. The death of Fred had taken all the wind out of his sails after the war. He’d been a rudderless ship drifting aimlessly, and Harry was glad to see the spark returning to his eyes.

“Really, it was a breakfast fit for a viking.” Ginny grinned and patted Harry on the back. Harry had been worried about seeing her again, but when she greeted him with a crushing bear hug, he knew he needn’t spare it another thought. “Still, it’s good to have you back for a bit.”

“Thanks. It feels good to be back.” Harry looked around the house, flaming red hair and fire-flushed cheeks everywhere, and it felt like home. Hermione and Ron were arm in arm in the
kitchen, Bill and Fleur were sitting close on the living room couch, and Percy and Charlie were chatting by the fire (judging by Percy’s face, Charlie was no doubt already relentlessly teasing him). Harry realized that there was no reason home had to be only one place. Maybe it could be as many places as you wanted, as many places as you felt safe and protected in. Home was wherever the people you loved were, and the older you got, the more those people scattered across the globe.

For Harry, home was a densely populated city, bustle stacked on top of itself until it became vertical, buildings stretching into the sky, stone facades scratching the cloud-studded blue overhead. It was the community fluttering through that chaotic energy, people bouncing off one another in an intuitive dance, sometimes crashing together but always moving forward, never stagnant. It was also a cluttered home in the English countryside, surfaces strewn with knickknacks, the leaning beams of the ceiling serving as proof of the flawed labor of love it took to craft them, a certain poetry in the imperfection that made the Burrow always feel inviting and cheerful.

Home was everywhere and nowhere. It was abstract and concrete. Like all things important in life, it was ever-shifting, evolving into something new as Harry grew and changed, shrinking and expanding to define itself in different ways.

Change could be dispiriting sometimes. It could upset your sense of stability, throwing that which you thought you knew to be true off-kilter, turning your perspective to illuminate truths you hadn’t understood only moments before. Change let you know how much you didn’t know, how much life was a Rubik’s cube whose squares were changing color and position without warning, always just as you thought you were about to solve it.

It could do that.

But once you accepted that, it could also be electrifying. Who knew what adventures awaited you? Who knew what you would learn along the way? Harry supposed that truly being alive meant holding onto that, never losing your zeal for finding out what was around the next corner. So much of therapy had been about challenging his outlook, becoming the master of his own mind even when that mind was fighting tooth and nail against him. Here, in the Weasley home, sitting among the members of his surrogate family as they laughed and feasted on their Christmas meal, Harry realized he was finally learning how to do that. He didn’t know what he was going to do when he got back to New York, but what he did know is that the uncertainty of the future no longer filled him with dread. Maybe he’d make a lot of gaffes along the way… in fact, he was sure he would, but he remembered Dr. Baxter’s words.

*If you make a decision that leaves you unsatisfied, then you make another one. And another one and so on until you end up somewhere that feels right.*

Harry smiled across the table at Hermione and Ron, the two people who’d been in his life the longest and would be for many more years of victories and heartbreaks, successes and failures, and he knew in his heart of hearts that everything would be okay.

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After dinner, the Weasley clan dispersed throughout the house, some retiring to their rooms for a nap, copious food and wine inevitably claiming a few victims to drowsiness. Ron and George decided to take a walk in the snow, and Hermione and Harry found themselves alone in the living room, soaking up the heat of the fire and catching up on the autumn’s events.
“I can’t believe Ron is going to be done with Auror training at the end of the year. Your lives are so grown up now.” Harry took a sip of wine and tucked his feet underneath him on the couch.

“Oh, I promise you he’s still Ronald Bilius Weasley. Can’t find his socks in the morning and falls asleep on the couch watching telly with his mouth hanging open,” Hermione laughed. Harry laughed back and watched the crackling fire for a moment.

“Hermione… I’m sorry about how distant I was when I first left. I… it was so hard for me to talk to anyone that reminded me of the war, even the people I loved. And then I’d feel bad about that because it wasn’t your fault. You hadn’t done anything wrong so why couldn’t I just push past it? It became this vicious cycle that I couldn’t break out of… I know it must have felt like I was abandoning you all, but I couldn’t see myself getting better here in England. It felt like there was no other way.” Harry watched Hermione, trying to gauge her response. Her eyes were glistening, and he wasn’t sure if it was from the reflection of the fire or a welling of emotion. She smiled and put her hand on his shoulder.

“I realize that now. I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have pushed so hard, but sometimes I want everything to be okay as quickly as possible. I’m a problem solver, but people aren’t things who need to be fixed. I hated seeing you suffer like that, all alone in that house… your eyes just lifeless and full of anguish… it made me furious. I was angry at the world, angry at Voldemort, angry at Dumbledore, everyone who had a hand in it. For me, going back to Hogwarts and studying until I couldn’t see straight helped me process everything. I know you and Ron will never understand this, but books and academia have always worked for me that way. But I shouldn’t expect everyone else to solve their problems by keeping busy. I just… it was hard watch you atrophy, you know? Not that you were! It just… felt like that, and I didn’t know how to sit on the sidelines and let it happen. It was so frustrating, not knowing how to help you.”

“I understand. Believe me, it was frustrating to me too. I had no idea what to do to make it stop, but… I’m loads better now. It might have taken me two and a half years, but I’m starting to feel like a real person again.”

“I know. I can tell. It’s marvelous to see you like this. I love you so much, Harry.”

“I love you too, Hermione. I always will. You and Ron will always be in my life. I need you to know that.”

“I do.” They hugged, both choking back tears that had gathered in the corners of their eyes.

“Look at us, a bunch of weepy old ladies.”

“That we are,” Hermione laughed. “Sitting in front of the fire drinking wine, no less.”

“By the way, you might be seeing more of me soon. I’m going back to New York for a bit, but I’m not finishing out the year.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?” Hermione’s eyes slanted in concern. “Is it because of Draco?”

“No, he’s… I don’t know. He asked if we could be friends, actually. Showed up at a party Gisele and I had. It was hard to see him. I miss him so much. It’s been lovely to see all of you, but I can’t help but remember what last Christmas was like…” Harry watched the red and orange tongues of flame consuming the logs in the fireplace. He thought of Draco’s pale hair and high cheekbones shaded in firelight, his face flushed as he came on Harry’s hand.

“Maybe it was just too soon. Forgive me for saying so, but he wasn’t entirely mistaken. You both
did have a lot to sort through. Maybe it was too complicated at the time, but... I have a feeling about you two.” Hermione’s eyes lit up with hope, the corners of her mouth quirking up.

“Really?”

“Yes, I don’t think you’re finished yet. Frankly, the two of you recoiling from each other has always had the opposite effect. Draco is like a Ever-Bashing Boomerang. You toss him as far away as you can, and he comes right back. I mean, Merlin, Harry, you moved to America, and there he was.”

“Yeah, but he tossed me away this time…”

“And apparently regrets it since he braved your doorstep to ask if you’d consider being in his life again,” Hermione pointed out, tilting her wine glass toward Harry.

“I don’t know, ‘Mione. I’m slowly sorting things out, but Draco Malfoy is one code I have yet to crack.”

“Well, there’s time yet. So what made you decide to move back?”

Harry chewed on his bottom lip as he formed the words.

“I meant what I said tonight. I feel much more solid now, but that’s sort of why I don’t want to stay? I have unfinished business here. I love New York. I love the friends and the life I’ve made there, but I think I’m ready to tackle some things back home.”

“What sort of things?” Hermione moved closer, excitement in her tone.

“I don’t want to say just yet. The truth is, I’m not totally sure. I have a couple ideas, but it’s... slow and tentative for now. I think that’s how rebuilding your life should be, anyway.”

“Well, I’ll be here for whatever you need. To the New Year, Harry. May it bring you everything you want in life.” Hermione raised her wine, and Harry toasted.

“To all of us.”

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“Good to have you back, dude. One of these days, you’re going to have to let me get you from the airport though. No one should have to endure that interminable trip on their own. It’s like you have to ride the entire subway line to get back, like you’re hiking the Appalachian Trail or some shit.” Gisele popped an olive in her mouth and shuddered.

“I like it. It’s meditative for me.” Harry poured some gin in a glass and swirled it in the ice before topping it with tonic water. They had a spread of cheese, olives, prosciutto, salami, bread, and crackers strewn across the table, bottles of cheap champagne, whiskey, and gin arranged behind them for ringing in the New Year.

“You’re a freak, Harry.”

“And you’re really dramatic about public transit. Have you ever even been hiking?”
“Fuck no.”

They both laughed, and Harry was grateful for the sound. The couple weeks leading up to winter break had been strained. They still hadn’t talked about their fight or what Harry was planning to do next semester. Gisele hadn’t been outright rude to him, but she was cold and aloof, spending more time out of the apartment. They hadn’t returned to the comforting patterns of their friendship.

“Look, Harry… I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don’t. It’s — ”

“No, I do. Next year is already up in the air for a million reasons. School, my dad, where I’m gonna live… it never lets up, and the thought of you leaving… I just couldn’t handle it. But you need to do what you need to do for yourself. You can’t hang around this trash city just because I want you here. That said, I still fucking worry about you. I want you to be sure you’re making the right decision.”

“I know. Believe me, I’ve weighed out every possibility until I’m blue in the face, but yeah… I need to do this. I’m going to miss you so fucking much, you have no idea. What happened with your dad? I figured things were looking up since you’ve been having lunches again.”

_The Apartment_ was playing on the TV. Gisele had told him it was an essential New Year’s movie, one of her all time favorite films, and preferable to every idiotic New Year’s coverage of the gaudy ball dropping in Times Square.

“They are, but I’m not a normal ass person, Harry. When things go well, I sit around thinking up all the different ways the other shoe could drop. I’m always standing with my fists up, ready to fight off whatever happens next, especially with him. He… said that he was out of line by not paying for NYU anymore, that it’s the kind of tough love lesson his father would give him, but that he doesn’t want to be like him. He was nearly crying, Harry. I’ve never seen my dad cry. He was all ‘blah blah, I just worry about you, and that worry leads to control, but I realize it’s just driving a wedge between us.’ He said he’s still worried about my future, but he cares more about me being happy and having me in his life.”

“That’s great, Gisele! Why are you upset about that?”

“I told you! I’m not normal. I hear that, and all I can think is ‘if I let him back in, what if he fucks up all over again and nothing has changed?’ What if he doesn’t really mean any of it?”

“I think that’s the risk you have to keep taking with family. Letting people in is always scary. If they’re not willing to change, that’s one thing, but if they are… I think you have to decide how important they are to you. If they mean a lot, then it’s worth it. As long as they keep trying, so do you.” Harry thought back to the first time he’d asked Gisele for advice, standing among the stacks of vinyl at Bleecker Street Records. It was funny how time came full circle. He thought about Draco and wondered if he was still struggling against the tide of his father, a presence so imposing Draco could feel it all the way across the world.

“That is the unfortunate truth. Is it stupid that I still hate myself a little for accepting his money?”

“Gisele… as you reminded me, college is expensive as fuck over here. There’s nothing wrong with taking advantage of the opportunities you’re given. If you take them for granted or you forget that they’re a privilege not everyone gets, then you’re being a privileged arsehole. I cannot imagine that ever happening to you. You’re always thinking about those things. It makes me think about them more too.”
“Thanks for the vote of confidence. See? What am I gonna do without you?”

“I really am going to miss you. You have permission to yell at me if I’m terrible at keeping in touch.”

“Oh, I’d be doing that anyway, permission or not. Enough of the glum. It’s New Year’s Eve. We have to eat all the good cheese before Seb and Ravi get here. They’re not touching my délice de bourgogne.”

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Harry spent the rest of winter getting his fill of New York and tying up any loose ends. Dr. Baxter had assured him that they could continue therapy in any manner he liked: video chats, phone sessions, floo calls. She also mentioned that she’d be comfortable referring him to someone in England if he preferred the personal nature of a face to face session. Although he did like having her in the room, he couldn’t imagine switching therapists mid-stream, so to speak. He trusted her completely now, and they’d done so much vital work together. She’d been invaluable to his recovery, and he had no doubt that she would continue to be.

Now that they’d waded through the events of the war incrementally, they had combined his magical control exercises with that aspect, gradually introducing the idea of thinking about his trauma while maintaining his magic. It was strenuous work, but Harry was steadily improving. Some sessions went better than others, but as always, Dr. Baxter reminded him that progress was not a straight line. People went through good and bad stretches, the waves of mental illness full of peaks and valleys that were influenced by myriad variables. Harry struggled with reconciling that sometimes, but she always reeled him back in, reminding him of all the techniques he’d learned to center himself.

Now that Harry was used to therapy, he realized that there was another way to frame it, a less stressful way that the serious nature of therapy often overshadowed. Harry’s sessions were essentially a free hour for him to talk about whatever he wanted to. He could examine his conflicting feelings about Dumbledore, the manipulation and darker traits that contradicted the love and support Harry had felt from him. Harry had hung a father figure halo around him, a void that Harry had wanted to fill in his life at the time. It was a complex relationship that was hard to talk about with people in the wizarding world. Dumbledore was a figure of great reverence there, and honesty about him could often feel like dissent.

But here, Harry could not only talk about it, but receive confirmation from Dr. Baxter that it was okay to have these oppositional feelings. Dumbledore was a complicated man, and his less favorable traits didn’t negate what he’d done for Harry. Maybe honesty honored someone’s memory more than false, glossed-over worship anyway.

When he told Seb he was leaving New York, his friend instantly got weepy.

“Damn Seb, you’re not the dad friend. You’re the granny friend,” Gisele amiably chided.

“Fuck off.” Seb stuck out his tongue and hugged Harry. “Harry is going to miss me crying at the drop of a hat.”

“I am, Seb. So much.” Harry hugged him for a long time.
He sold all his textbooks and packed most of his things. He visited every place he knew he would dearly miss and explored some new ones too. He sat in Washington Square Park in the icy air of late January and beamed at the sight of the snow-capped city. It was glistening with winter magic, and he was overcome with the duality of his emotions. He was standing on the precipice, one foot planted in the past and one poised in the air, ready to descend into the foggy future. In a way, he was exactly where he’d been when he first arrived in New York, but he wasn’t the same. He was glad to be leaving the city that had nurtured him on a good note.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered, “for bringing me back to life.”

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“Hanging around campus after you’ve dropped out? You’re not going to be like Wooderson in that dreadful stoner movie Gisele loves, are you?”

Harry grabbed his coffee from the counter and turned around to meet Draco’s eyes. The collar of his black coat was turned up to ward off the cold, his blond hair splayed across his forehead as it peeked out from under his black beanie, that jawline that could cut glass shaded a bit red from the winter wind. It wasn’t as though it was a surprise that he looked great. How much could he have changed since November? Still, Harry did a double take when he saw Draco standing there looking like an ad selling you cologne you couldn’t afford and didn’t know you wanted until you saw it. The ache within Harry, the longing for Draco, had receded to a dull throb over the months since that fateful Paris night, but it was still there. Always there.

“Sorry… I thought a joke would break the ice,” Draco said with a strained laugh when Harry didn’t respond.

“No need to apologize. It’s… nice to hear that from you, actually. Does make it slightly less awkward.” Harry stepped out of the way of a blue-haired girl whose name the barista had just called. The girl picked up her coffee and headed to a table. “Um, do you want to sit down? I think we’re causing a bit of a traffic jam right now.”

“Yeah! Sure,” Draco said with raised eyebrows, nodding a bit eagerly. They sat down at a table at the back of the coffee shop. Neither of them said anything for a minute, keeping all their heavy winter garb on like a shield.

“Er, how did you know I was dropping out of school?”

“Seb, but don’t be cross with him. He didn’t reveal your secret. Not that it’s necessarily a secret! Or maybe it is. I don’t know…” Draco shrugged and cradled his coffee. He still hadn’t taken his gloves off, and Harry didn’t need to look under the table to know his legs would be bouncing up and down so fast, he could probably power a lightbulb like one of those science fair experiments, a hamster running on a wheel connected to a circuit. “The point is he wasn’t fraternizing with the enemy willingly or anything. I sort of dragged it out of him.”

“That desperate for information about me, eh?” Harry smirked and lifted his cup to his lips.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Potter,” Draco said with a malice that had no potency behind it. It was all smoke and mirrors. Harry knew him too well not to notice. “I was just… curious. Every time Gisele and Seb are on campus, you’re nowhere to be found. I wanted to make sure you were all
right, and I certainly am not dense enough to ask Gisele nor do I have a death wish.”

“True. You probably would have lost a limb. She’s very protective of me.”

“Understatement. She’s like a hungry wolf backed into a corner.”

They both laughed, and for a second it was genuine, just two friends who knew how to banter with each other. But then the moment passed, and the tense silence trapped them in an uncomfortable bubble yet again.

“I’m fine. It’s actually a good thing, me leaving school. That probably sounds counterintuitive to you, but it’s sort of… well, it’s a long story. Let’s just say I’ve learned a lot in therapy, and one of those things was that failure can mean different things to different people. Just because you have to walk away from something you tried doesn’t mean you failed.” Harry blushed as he wondered if Draco was thinking about how those words could apply to them too. “It’s all about perception, you know? I’m doing better all the time, but school just isn’t for me, and that’s okay. I’ll figure out what I want to do, but for now, I want to focus on continuing to get better.”

“That’s great to hear. You look good. I don’t mean! Um — I just meant — happy and healthy — all that business, you know?” Draco’s facial features twisted into an intense expression of insecurity, the likes of which weirdly made Harry feel better. If Draco was this nervous, maybe he didn’t notice or care how much of a wreck Harry was across the table.

“Thanks, Draco.” Harry almost returned the compliment, but he couldn’t bear to say it. It made him think about everything he was doing his best to discard. “How about you? What’s going on?”

“Finished out last semester with all As so I’m quite happy. I’ve declared my major now, actually. Philosophy. That’s how I ran into Seb. He was meeting Ravi after class.”

“Yeah? Good for you. You were brilliant in Logic. I’ve no doubt you’re brilliant in the rest of it too.”

You’re brilliant in everything. I miss that. I miss the challenge of you, the way you always keep me reaching for more. I miss you.

“Thanks. I like it a lot… the debating, the nuances of different ideologies, applying them to life and history and culture. There are so many ways to approach the concepts of love and human nature, interaction and death. I never get tired of it.” Draco’s reserved expression slowly gave way to a delighted smile as he talked about philosophy.

“There are plenty of tedious grad student TAs in the department, pretentious men who love to flaunt their intellect and expect no challenges in return, pontificating with a lot of four syllable words. They talk and talk, but they aren’t really saying much of anything. They’re just insecure men covering it up with academic jargon.

“Then there are the types who went into it looking for a substitute for religion, an opiate that they think is somehow superior to believing in god? But I met these two amazing undergrads, Chiyoh and Graham, who are right there with me about all the guff. You know that feeling when you lock eyes with someone across a room and know you’re judging the same person for the exact same reason? That’s basically how we became friends. Beyond that, the material is riveting, the assignments are compelling, and the professors are… sorry, I’m rambling.”

“No! I mean, yes you are, but it’s okay. I like listening to you talk about your passions. I always have, and I bet you give those snooty grad students a run for their money,” Harry said.
“Oh, absolutely.” Draco smiled proudly, his slumped shoulders drawing back. “They didn’t see me coming at first, but now you can practically see their eyes twitch when I open my mouth.”

“I bet. You’re formidable in an argument. I told you you could do anything you wanted.” Harry smiled, and the way Draco’s eyes softened made his heart skip several beats. He had to get out of there. Harry stood up abruptly, Draco jerking back as the wooden chair legs scraped across the floor. “I should get going.”

“Same. I have class soon. It was good to see you though. Will you be… how long are you here for?”

As Draco stood, Harry thought he saw a tint of sorrowful longing in his eyes, but it was probably just wishful thinking. And even if it were true, would it matter? Harry was leaving, and he and Draco were… well… how they were, how they’d always been. A bundle of problems snapped around more problems like a thick network of roots underground. Not enough time in the world to dig them up and untangle each one.

“Not sure. Probably another couple weeks or so. Finishing up some things and heading out when I’m ready. There’s not a deadline or anything.” Harry looked at Draco, his lips slightly chapped from the wind, those pretty eyes making his blood boil, and he lurched forward, his arms acting of their own accord. Harry hugged him clumsily, an embrace that was too rough and tight, too urgent to be gentle, a drowning man grasping for a life jacket. Draco sucked in an astonished breath, going stiff for a moment before letting his arms fall around Harry. His chin found its way to Harry’s shoulder, and Harry could feel the puffs of moist breath against his neck.

“Harry…” He whispered it so tenderly, it sent electric pulses through Harry. He thought back to the cabin, that first hug when he thought Draco might kiss him and the second one when he finally did. Horrified at what he was doing, Harry jolted backward with a muttered “I’m sorry” and bolted out of the coffee shop, leaving his cup on the table. He heard the jingle of the bell on top of the door a second later, and he didn’t turn around to see who it was.

“Harry!”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and stopped walking. He could have taken off running, but it seemed childish. Harry was through with avoidance. He wanted to confront everything, even if it hurt. When he felt Draco’s hand on his shoulder, he turned around.

“Draco, I don’t know how to be around you. Sometimes I think I want it. I hate not having you in my life. I want you in any way I can get you, even if it’s just friendship. Hell, I shouldn’t even say it like that… just friendship… that makes it sound like a consolation prize, and it wouldn’t be. Anyone would be lucky to have you as a friend. There’s nothing lesser about that. You’re an amazing person, and I…” Harry stopped, his breath coming out in ragged huffs, little white clouds in the frigid atmosphere.

Draco opened his mouth like he wanted to speak, but he didn’t. Harry wondered if he was waiting for him to finish, but Harry wasn’t sure he knew what he wanted to say.

“When I look at you, I still think about how much I want to kiss you. I think about fucking you on that balcony in Paris. I look at your hands, and I think about your fingers inside me. I look at your neck, and I think about you on top of me in front of that fireplace, stretching back as you…”

“I think about it too, Harry. I…” Draco closed the distance between them, his mouth so near, Harry only had to lean in slightly to kiss him. If he wanted to. “I don’t know what to do either. Would you — let me write to you? Where are you staying in England?”
“Grimmauld Place. Sirius left it to me.”

“God, no wonder you left. Can’t think of a more dank, depressing house to recover in. Probably wasn’t much better than camping in tents on the Horcrux search.” Draco smiled impishly, and Harry’s heart melted.

“There’s certainly no shortage of dust and darkness. You can,” Harry said, taking a step back, separating himself from the temptation to kiss Draco, “write to me. If you want to.”

Letters sounded less intimidating. Maybe it was a compromise that would help them get what they both wanted without complicating things.

“Okay,” Draco agreed with a grin. “I’ll write to you.”

“You’ll write to me,” Harry said as though he were experimenting with how the words sounded out loud, what meaning they took on when flowing back into his own ears.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Oh damn, today marks the beginning of our last two weeks with this fic, friends! Time flies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe you didn’t want to go out tonight! It’s your last night in New York!” Seb exclaimed as he rearranged the pillows against the edge of the couch. They had moved the coffee table to the other side of the living room and made a pillow and blanket fort in front of the couch. The plan was to nest all night, a movie marathon on the TV as they grazed on all of Harry’s favorite New York foods. The coffee table was brimming with containers, the dishes practically spilling over the edge. The three of them had divided the food errands by sectors of the city, each of them traveling in a different direction and meeting back at the apartment to minimize the amount of running around. There was takeout from the Waverly and Veselka, a bevy of Sichuan, and every bodega snack Harry would miss.

“I just want to be with you two. I don’t want to shout over music or deal with dodging people on the street. This is definitely the perfect way to spend my last night.” Harry nestled into the middle of the comfy pile they’d made, Seb and Gisele coming to lie on either side of him.

“I agree. Besides, even though it’s your last night, we still have gossip. Good to the last drop, apparently.” Gisele leaned up on her elbows to waggle her eyebrows at Seb.

“Ooooohhh, spill!”

Harry’s cheeks reddened, and he stuffed his mouth full of onion and garlic flavored Wise chips so he wouldn’t have to answer the nosy questions he was sure were coming. He would be heading back to England calling chips “fries” and crisps “chips.” At this rate, ordering food in a British pub the first time was going to be very interesting and possibly embarrassing too.

“Harry ran into Draco last month and conveniently forgot to tell us.”

“I didn’t forget!” Harry said around a mouthful of potato chips. “I already owned up to the fact that I purposely omitted it from every conversation so drop it, please!”

“Oh no, you don’t. This is your last night, Harrykins. You’re not getting around this. Spill! Spill! Spill!” Seb began to chant. Gisele joined in, and they both started clapping every time they shouted “spill!”

Harry groaned and washed down the chips with a swig of Dr. Brown’s cream soda. He was going to miss that too.

“There’s not much to say. We ran into each other. It was as weird as you’d expect, but then… we caught up a bit. It was still weird, but… I don’t know… it reminded me how much I miss talking to him.” Harry watched Parker Posey being brilliantly quirky in Party Girl like no one else could (Harry had a huge crush on her, if he was being honest) and refused to look at either of his friends. Gisele had introduced him to it. It was her favorite film set in 90s New York, and she pointed out
the cameos of people from the club scene that Harry wouldn’t have known, like Natasha Twist.

“Aaannnnddd?” Seb drawled.

“And… he asked if he could write to me when I get back to England.”

Harry could see Gisele and Seb exchanging knowing glances in his periphery.

“Yeah, that story ain’t over,” Seb laughed. “You better write to me too because I need to know what happens. Learn to check your damn email, Harry. It’s imperative that I know everything that happens between you and blondie.”

“Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Bull fucking shit. That boy is realizing you’re the one that got away because he had his head too far up his ass to understand what he was letting go. Don’t take him back, Harry.” Gisele shook her head and got up to retrieve a box of pierogi from the table. She sat back down, ate one, and handed the box to Harry.

“He’s not offering anyway! We haven’t even become friends again. He asked to write to me. That’s all.”

“Oh, he’ll be asking for more. You know I’m never wrong about this shit.”

“Why are you so against it? You liked Draco more I did.” Seb accepted the box from Harry and ate one.

“I did. That’s why I’m so against it. That fucker drew me in, we bonded, and then he dumped Harry. I miss the sarcastic little shit sometimes, and I hate that.”

“Gisele, you can talk to him again. We were all friends. That doesn’t have to change just because Draco and I aren’t together anymore. If you’re still mad at him, fine, but I don’t want either of you avoiding him on behalf of me anymore. I’m going to be gone soon anyway so — ”

“Don’t remind me!” Seb linked arms with Harry and leaned his head on Harry’s shoulder. “And don’t listen to her. If you want to try again, and it seems like he’s different now, go for it.”

“Oh damn! Just bulldozing over me! Look, the whole getting back together shit only works in the movies. That’s all I’m saying. I’m just being realistic. If it didn’t work the first time around, why would it work this time?”

“Excuse you, but you have literally not been in a single serious relationship our entire college career.”

“Yeah, because I know better! We’re twenty years old. We’re hormonal, sleep deprived messes zombie-walking through life with our heads screwed on backwards. I’m not about to throw a long term relationship into my mess. I will never understand why people are in a rush to pair off already. It’s too fucking early for that.”

“Gee, thanks!” Seb laughed.

“I’m sorry! I’m not saying everyone has to be like me. You and Ravi are sweet. You know I love him, and I love you two together. Draco is… a whole different can of worms. Boy’s got more stone walls around him than a medieval castle. I just want Harry to be careful.”
“Reminder that I’m right here, guys. I can hear everything you’re saying about me.” Harry laughed and got up to bring some more takeout containers over to their blanket nest.

“Sooorryyy. You know… I don’t think he’s dated anyone all year. I haven’t seen him with anyone except those two he hangs out with from Ravi’s class. Even at parties, he always finds a way to reject any guy who hits on him. He’s mostly just studying every time I see him,” Seb said with a suggestive pitch to his voice.

“Really?” Harry tried to curb the hopefulness from his tone, but he couldn’t ignore the thump of his heart. Had Draco really been single this whole time? Harry had spent plenty of time torturing himself with images of Draco in bed with men better looking than himself, lovers whose skills surpassed his novice fumbling.

Harry hadn’t so much as gone on one date since June. He’d focused on therapy and his friends. It wasn’t as though he wanted to see anyone, anyway. Maybe some people got over a breakup that way, but Harry felt like he didn’t have energy for much more than sorting out his mental health issues. He was only just now feeling like he could think about the prospect of dating again, and with Draco (sort of) back in his life… Harry had no idea what he wanted. He didn’t want to be holding out for Draco, pining in futility when he could be moving on and finding someone he didn’t have baggage with. Clearly, Harry had a lot to think about. Seb was right, and so was Hermione. One way or another, the story with them wasn’t over. Harry just wasn’t sure what sort of ending was in store for them or even what kind of ending he was hoping for.

“Sorry, dude. You do what you want. Just putting in my two cents because that’s what I do.”

“I know. I’m probably going to die without getting your advice everyday. Both of you.” Harry linked arms with both of them, and they leaned against either side of him. He sighed contentedly.

This was undoubtedly the best way to end his tenure as a New Yorker, sandwiched between the two people he loved most in this city.

“Nonsense. Remember when you first came here? You could barely talk to anyone besides us. We didn’t want to be overbearing parents to someone we just met, so we didn’t comment on it much, but we noticed. Now look at you.” Seb lifted his head and smiled at Harry. “You rode a guy’s face, moved to Brooklyn, you go to therapy once a week, and you can ride the subway and keep your balance without holding onto anything.”

“He’s right,” Gisele said, looking up at Harry. “You’re a bonafide New Yorker, and you’re not afraid of anything. You’re gonna be fine.”

Harry smiled, and he believed them.

***

Harry spent his first few weeks at Grimmauld Place in a cleaning fervor. Every window he washed, every baseboard he scrubbed, every cobweb he dusted away made the house lighter and less like the dim crypt it had been. He had let Kreacher go long before he’d embarked on his American adventure, finding him a place at Hogwarts. There had been plenty need for all hands on deck after the war, the restoration of the castle requiring quite a lot of grunt work, even with magical solutions speeding up the process. Harry had never adjusted to the idea of having a house elf (or anyone else, for that matter) as a servant, and Kreacher’s perpetually sour attitude and
refusal to cease the blood-ideology related muttering had made Harry even less keen on the idea.

That meant that he was alone for now, but being alone didn’t hold the disheartening connotation it had the last time Harry lived within these walls. His center of gravity kept him from drifting too far into darkness, his focus on reshaping the house into something new fueling him and maintaining his mental balance.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t still have bad days. The first night there had led him to call an emergency session with Dr. Baxter, his chest tight as he woke up from a nightmare, his bruising grip on the sheets cramping his muscles, the disorientation of waking up in a place he hadn’t been in years adding to the post-dream panic, making it harder to do his grounding exercises. It was an adjustment for sure, and in those first few days, Harry had to work doubly hard to convince himself that he hadn’t made a huge mistake.

He religiously kept to the therapy schedule he’d established in New York, video calling in to Dr. Baxter. She always talked him down from his doubts, helping to remind him that this was simply a new challenge in his life, not a mountain he couldn’t scale. She reminded him how to check his internal gauge to figure out when he was overwhelmed and needed to back away from certain tasks, immersing himself in self-care and maintaining his interpersonal relationships, reaching out when he needed support instead of retreating inward.

He went shopping for curtains, couches, and end tables with Hermione, pitching all of the drab furniture in the house that had seen better days. She asked if he was interested in Reparos or transfigurations to maintain some of it instead. Perhaps she wondered if he had any sentimental need to keep parts of the house intact, but Harry found that he needed a fresh start in as many ways as possible. Changing the superficial facets of the house made a bigger difference than Harry had anticipated, a physical makeover that rendered Grimmauld Place nearly unrecognizable. He recalled Draco in that house party, his long legs dangling off the edge of the kitchen counter.

_I imagine I’m not the only one who wanted some changes after — everything. I can see why you did it. Little things make a difference sometimes._

He smiled as he ran a paint roller over the living room wall. Now that he was onto heavier projects, Ron and George had begun to help him with the manual labor, ripping the sooty wallpaper away and spackling the surface smooth to ready it for a fresh coat of paint. He had chosen cool greens and blues for the color scheme of the first floor. He asked Dr. Baxter if it was creepy that he was taking his decorating cues from her office.

“Of course not!” she laughed. “Colors in that palate are good for you. It sounds like junk science, I know, but cooler colors have been proven to promote good mood health. Reds and oranges can cause anxiety spikes. You might try muted tones of those in the kitchen though, maybe some yellows? Bring a bit of light and warmth to a place I know you’ll be spending a good amount of time.”

“Are we really talking interior decorating tips right now?”

“Harry, there’s no end to the spectrum of conversations I’ve had with patients. We don’t even cover one tenth of the gamut. Therapy doesn’t always have to be about the most dire aspects of your life. In fact, I’d say our tendency to shift into lighter topics these days shows how much you’ve progressed. You have less to unravel now. You’re occupied with a wider range of subjects because you have the mental space for it. This is a good sign, trust me. Your toolbox for dealing with heightened states of anxiety has expanded greatly over the last year. I’m endlessly proud of you, and I hope you take the time to congratulate and reward yourself for how far you’ve come.”
Harry beamed at Dr. Baxter’s comforting face on the computer screen.

“Thanks. I will. I’m proud of me too.”

***

Greetings, Potter. I’m so glad you agreed to email because I immediately regretted phrasing it the way I did. “Write to you”... after that, I was sure I had unwittingly agreed to correspond via owl. I can’t believe how long I lived like that. I know you’re tired of me saying this (or perhaps not... it has been a good long while since I was able to subject you, as a not-so-captivated audience, to a good rant about the antiquated aspects of the magical world), but if the wizarding world doesn’t join the 21st century soon, my resolve to never come back will only be strengthened.

This is turning out to be a very formal email, isn’t it? I’m always like that. Years of school and a tendency in the Malfoy house to place a great deal of importance on things like letter writing etiquette have made me default to some robotic professionalism as soon as the written word comes into play. My parents used to make me practice writing letters under various hypothetical high wizard society scenarios. Can you imagine? No wonder I was such an insufferable eleven year old. Who could turn out normal instead of an elitist prick when you’re forced to write an acceptance to Mrs. Van Uppity’s annual spring garden party at age nine?

Great, now I’m rambling about something that surely holds no interest for either of us. I must confess that I’m nervous. I’m probably just filling the space with nonsensical ranting for lack of anything better to do. I’m not sure what to say or even if you want me to say something. Perhaps you only agreed to this because you are an incurably kind people pleaser. Hitting the send button before I can descend into a loop of second guessing that will surely consume all of my time until I have failed out of school.

Sincerely,

Draco

***

I have to confess something as well. I love it when you’re nervous like this. You tend to be Mr. Suave, and I’ve always had a thing for seeing you stumble over your words and

Harry paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. Would Draco read those words and think of heated skin, sheets sliding beneath them as Harry fingered Draco until he devolved into stuttering begging, his arse tilted up, his legs spread obscenely wide as he moaned into the pillow? Perhaps the better question was did Harry want him to think of that?

Fuck it.

Let him think what he wanted. If Harry overstepped a boundary, Draco would let him know. Either
way, he would let him know.

losing that calm mask. Makes me feel better about myself ;) The truth is, I’m nervous too. I don’t
know what we can talk about or not talk about. I don’t know if this is going to result in us
screaming at each other (er… all caps typing at each other?) or what’s going to happen. Why did
you ask if you could write me? Maybe we should start with that? It might help me figure out how to
navigate this thing.

Your friend

Harry considered that for a moment, watching the cursor blink against the blank white screen. He
backspaced.

Your former nemesis,

Harry Potter

***

Getting right into it, are we? It’s funny how you can be a textbook case of avoidance when you
don’t want to talk about something, but you dive right into the heart of the matter when it suits you.
I used to think your bluntness was… unrefined when we were at Hogwarts. I always took it as a
sign of being ill-bred with a lack of manners. (I know, I know, hilarious coming from the git who
freely hurled racial epithets and blatantly commented on Ron’s poverty. Never forget my
perspective was beyond skewed back then.) But I like it now. As you know, I don’t like to waste
time either. Life’s too short.

Well… I want to be honest here, but I also don’t want to scare you off before I’ve even earned your
friendship back. I will simply say that I meant everything I said, both the night I showed up at your
party and the day we met in that coffee shop. I miss you, Harry. I don’t want to say much more than
that. I feel like, if I do, I’ll be setting up a sort of… expectation and emotional obligation for you to
meet. I don’t want that. I don’t want you to adjust to me. I should be the one rising to your comfort
level here, not the other way around. I’m the one who hurt you. I’m the one who has something to
atone for. Know that I’m sorry, and I hope we can be friends again.

Your (I hope) friend once again,

Draco

Harry read every word obsessively, poring over the email ten times, trying to read between the
lines to figure out if Draco was only being cautious out of consideration for Harry.

I meant everything I said, both the night I showed up at your party and the day we met in that
coffee shop. I miss you, Harry. I don’t want to say much more than that. I feel like, if I do, I’ll be
setting up a sort of… expectation and emotional obligation for you to meet.

Harry turned it over and over in his mind, speaking the words aloud, weighing them on his tongue,
closing his eyes and trying to imagine them in Draco’s posh cadence, trying to picture what he might look like if he were saying them to Harry’s face. *I don’t want to say much more than that.* To Harry, that sounded like Draco *wanted* him.

Over the last few months, Harry had slowly allowed himself to examine how he felt about Draco now, piecing it together one small bit at a time. He still wasn’t ready to accept the conclusion he’d come to. Harry wasn’t ready to get hurt again. He wasn’t sure he could survive that, but every time he closed his eyes at night, his hand descending beneath the elastic of his pants to cradle his aching cock, he thought of Draco. Harry still wanted him so badly. He read the email one last time and closed his eyes, imagining Draco was behind him, whispering those words in his ear.

He pictured Draco pushing a hand underneath his t-shirt, his long fingers caressing Harry’s stomach.

“I want you too, Harry. I just didn’t want to tell you yet. I want to do this right. I want to earn it.”

Harry grasped his leaking prick and pretended it was Draco’s hand wrapped around him.

“Merlin, I miss touching you like this, Harry. I’ve spent so many nights touching myself and wishing you were here. You feel so good. You *always* feel so good,” Draco panted in his ear.

Harry’s hand sped up, furiously wanking himself to a quick climax, spilling all over his hand with a sharp cry, a few drops of come leaking onto the chair beneath him. Harry caught his breath as he stared back at the words on his laptop screen. With his clean hand, Harry picked up his wand from the desk and got rid of the mess he’d made before snapping the laptop shut. He couldn’t respond to Draco’s email yet.

Chapter End Notes

I don't about y'all, but I love Harry wanking over nothing but words from Draco. Also, my longwinded ass feels so weird looking at these shorter end chapters haha. I'm like "is that a drabble?!" even though 4k-ish updates are perfectly normal for plenty of people.
Posting a bit early because I can't sleep (It is 6:45... kill me plz). Happy Thursday, all. And now, I'll be off to try for that elusive "second sleep" lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lovely to see you, Harry. It’s been far too long.” McGonagall smiled as she gestured for Harry to sit down, taking a seat behind her desk.

“It has. I’m sorry I haven’t been to visit in a while.” Harry took a sip of the tea she offered and smiled apologetically.

“No apology required. You’ve been busy seeing the world, finding out how the other half lives in several senses of the phrase. Did you enjoy your time in America?”

Harry was thankful that she didn’t comment on his withdrawal from school or quiz him on the details of why he’d left. Although she wasn’t his professor anymore and he wasn’t her student, being in her presence always made Harry snap to attention and assume that dynamic. They were both adults now, but Harry could certainly never think of himself as her peer. He held her in far too much esteem for that. Besides Hermione, McGonagall was probably the person he admired most in life. She was strong and capable, compassionate but unyielding.

“Yeah, I did. I like New York a lot, but it’s good to be home.” In a strange twist of fate, Harry really did mean that.

“And we’re glad to have you, Harry. I certainly can understand why you might have desired a bit of a recess from England. There are no shortage of vultures in the press and elsewhere, are there?” McGonagall peered over the top of her spectacles and gave him a wry smile.

“No, there aren’t. Um… not to be rude or anything, but I actually came here for another reason beyond catching up with you.” Harry shifted in his chair, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on her desk.

“It’s not rude at all. I think you know me well enough to ascertain that I am not the biggest fan of small talk. Cutting to the heart of the matter has its merits, and your expression tells me that something of importance is on your mind.” McGonagall leaned forward as well, mirroring his attentive stance and waving to indicate he should continue.

“Well… I have an idea of sorts… and I wondered if you might help me figure out what to do with it.”

***

Ron, George, and Harry stood back and admired their handiwork.
“Not bad for three clumsy sods reading how-to guides and watching videos, eh?” George smiled and slapped Harry’s shoulder.

“Not at all.” Harry surveyed his new wooden cabinets, fully installed in his butter yellow and cozy, pale orange kitchen. The kitchen was full of effulgent light now, a bright, cheery room that Harry couldn’t wait to spend time in. He looked around and pictured sizzling skillets and boiling pots, fragrant herbs chopped and ready on a cutting board on the butcher block island in the middle of the room. He imagined hosting a dinner for his friends and family (really, those two words were interchangeable in Harry’s life, weren’t they?), laughter and love filling the room.

“I reckon this house is starting to look like a real home, eh?” Ron’s hand clapped down on Harry’s other shoulder, and he nodded.

“Yeah… it really is.”

***

KoolThing80: Hey there, Golden Boy. Long time, no email.

“Damn,” Harry breathed as the name popped up. At first, he’d avoided responding to Draco because he really wasn’t sure what to say. Harry wanted to be sure. This time, he wanted to be absolutely sure every step of the way with Draco, but after that, he’d just forgotten. Between his meeting with McGonagall and the myriad of construction projects around the house, he hadn’t realized two weeks had passed.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: Sorry! I’m shit at responding to emails.

*And I had to get my head sorted first because you still make me feel like a gaggle of Snitches are flying around in my stomach.*

KoolThing80: I know you are, but I thought maybe you’d decided to call off this… truce or whatever we’re in now.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: No, I didn’t. I just got busy. We’ve been renovating Grimmauld like mad. Trying to remove all the gloom so maybe I can sleep here without thinking a serial killer will pop out of a closet. :P

KoolThing80: Who’s “we”?

GoldStar4RbtBoy: George, Ron, and me.

KoolThing80: Oh no… Harry, please don’t tell me you didn’t hire professionals for this??? You left the welfare of your home in the hands of Ron Weasley?! Did you invite Finnigan over to set fire to a few rooms as well?

Harry grinned as he read the message. Typical Draco.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: We did just fine! We made sure to read everything we could get our hands on before tackling the more complicated stuff. It’s soothing. I like working with my hands.

KoolThing80: Oh, I know you do. ;)}
KoolThing80: Sorry, that was in poor taste… all things considered.

KoolThing80: Really, I’m idiot, Harry. I’m sorry.

Harry watched the “KoolThing80 is typing” message for a few seconds, getting a perverse enjoyment from watching Draco agonize over what to say.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: I like IMing with you. So much better than in person. I can let you dangle and get niiccee and nervous before I reply :D

KoolThing80: Always knew you were a sadist, Potter. Those innocent eyes might fool some, but I know better.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: And it’s already been established that you’re a masochist so you have no one to blame but yourself.

KoolThing80: Story of my life. Well, I’m off to class. Do send me updates on all the destruction I’m sure you and Weasley are going to inflict on that poor house.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: Can you see me flipping you the bird all the way across the ocean?

KoolThing80: What’s that? I missed it. Must have a bad connection.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: We’re not on the phone, you insufferable prat!

***

Harry waited outside the Governors’ meeting room with Professor McGonagall, running his perspiring palms down the front of his jacket.

McGonagall had assured him that it was different than it had been during his Hogwarts days.

“The Board of Governors is much more progressive and diverse now. Out with the old money and in with the young blood. I wouldn’t hear of it, otherwise. We needed people from different backgrounds with fresh ideas after the war. Otherwise, what would be the point? We learn nothing and forge ahead with the antiquated rules that brought us here in the first place?” she had told him.

“Didn’t they fight you on that?” Harry had asked.

“Harry, I can be quite intimidating when I want to be. Have you not found that to be the case?”

“Oh, I have, Professor. Very much so.”

The doors opened.

“We’re ready for you now.”

***
Harry kept up with Gisele, Seb, and Draco through email, pleased when he learned that the three of
them had slowly begun to patch things up. Gisele’s recounting of how it happened had left Harry in
stitches, his eyes watering from laughter as he read her message.

_He told me I was allowed to give him one really hard slap in the face if I wanted to. I ALMOST did
it, but I decided it wouldn’t be satisfying enough if you weren’t there to witness it. Draco refused to
let Seb film the whole thing for posterity too so, in the end, your pretty boy’s face was saved from
the wrath of my hand._

Over the next few weeks, he and Draco grew more comfortable, emailing on an almost daily basis.
Harry’s heart soared every time he opened a new message from Draco, even if it was just him
complaining about mundane things like the dining hall food (The very concept of meatloaf is
offensive to me, Potter. The only acceptable use of it is shoving it into a cannon and shooting the
monstrosity into space.) or a pompous classmate. In fact, Harry liked those emails the best. He felt
closest to Draco when he read his petty grievances. If he closed his eyes, he could vividly picture
Draco next to him, ranting with a scowl and a cigarette between his lips. He remembered Draco’s
range of expressions so well.

They shared new music, gushing over the lyrical nuances of songs they discovered and excitedly
sent to one another.

_Drop everything you’re doing right now. Head to the nearest record store and buy Built to Spill’s
Keep it Like a Secret. Listen to “Carry the Zero” on repeat. Thank me later._

Knowing he could always trust Draco’s recommendations, Harry had obeyed and spent a dreamy
May afternoon with the windows open to usher in the late spring breeze, the music cranked to a
volume that seemed to entwine the melody with the rhythm of his pulse. He listened to the song on
loop, only getting up to pause the record and carefully place the needle back in the appropriate
spot. Harry thought of Draco’s grinning face, picturing Draco next to him, their hands linked as
they got lost in the song together, that lazy college procrastination that Harry missed sharing with
him.

_Hasn’t it come too far?_

_I was trying to help_

_But I guess I pushed too hard_

_Now we can’t even touch it_

_Afraid it’ll fall apart_

Draco filled him in on everything he was missing in New York, all the concerts he went to and all
the new food he devoured. Harry returned the favor, telling him what London was like now, how it
looked, how it smelled, how it felt to be back.

In time, the physical distance between them began to feel less like a safe necessity and more like a
frustrating barrier Harry didn’t want anymore.

***
Harry opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. As he opened it, a Polaroid slipped from between the folds. Harry held it up and smiled. In the picture were Draco, Seb, and Gisele. They were on the fire escape of Harry’s former apartment, a lit cigarette in the corner of Draco’s mouth. Gisele was kissing his cheek and Seb was leaning against his other side, his hand shading his eyes like he was a captain looking out onto the horizon at sea. It made Harry miss them all so much. He wished he could be there on that fire escape.

Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you in good spirits. Judging from the pictures you sent me, your house has not collapsed to the ground despite the fact that you and two Weasleys masquerading as carpenters sounds about as competent as the town drunks putting together a woodshed. Why am I resorting to ancient forms of correspondence, you might be asking yourself? Wasn’t he the finicky git who demanded we email instead? Well, as it turns out, I can be quite cowardly when it comes to you. (Stop it. I can practically hear you all the way over here. Stop grinning. Stop laughing. STOP IT AT ONCE.) I have a proposition, but I thought it would be safer to ask this way. If I email you or send an IM, I’ll know the precise moment you get it. Well… not the precise moment exactly, but I’ll know there’s no delay. It’ll be sitting there waiting for you immediately. But if I send you this letter, I won’t know when it reaches you. I’ll have to wait for you to tell me you received it, and maybe… if you don’t like its contents, you won’t even tell me you received it at all. And then I’ll be completely free of the stress of waiting for your response.

Enough prattling on. I’ve become a very maudlin sort, haven’t I? Maybe that’s what happens to me when you’re an ocean away. Harry, I’m coming back to England for a week. I’m meeting my mother and then Pansy for my birthday, and I wondered if I could see you? I know that talking like this has kept a well-needed buffer between us, and maybe that’s the only reason you’ve continued to do it. I’m not sure, but I hope that enough time has passed that you wouldn’t mind seeing me. I know I’d love to see you.

Your friend,

Draco

Harry logged onto his laptop. He didn’t think. He didn’t debate. He simply opened the chat bubble and clicked on Draco’s screen name.

GoldStar4RbtBoy: Yes.

He didn’t say anything more. He didn’t wait for a response either. Harry shut his laptop and smiled so broadly, his cheeks hurt.

***

Harry sat in the booth of the pub, nervously rotating his pint glass in his hand, wiping away the condensation on the glass, leaving finger-shaped indentations across it. He was starting to think it had been a mistake to come early. He had figured it would give him more time to collect himself; Harry hated wandering into a place and scanning a busy room for the person he was meeting. It always added to the anxiety of being in a loud, public place, and he certainly didn’t need any
exacerbating factors for this particular meeting.

However, he had failed to take into account that being early meant he’d be the one craning his neck every time the door swung open, eager to see if a head of pale hair, buttercream-white laced with stardust, was entering the bar. It had seemed like a position that granted the upper hand at the time, but now Harry wasn’t so sure. He took a purposely tiny sip of his beer. The last thing he wanted was to be tipsy by the time Draco arrived.

*If he shows up.*

*Stop it… he’s the one who suggested this. He’s not going to leave you waiting.*

“Harry.”

Harry stood up, not entirely sure why he did that instead of just lifting his eyes, and there he was. Smiling face, albeit reservedly so, his hair grown a bit longer than the last time Harry had seen him, the side-swept fringe falling over one eye. Draco shook it out of the way with a toss of his head, his fingers coming up to push the ends of the strands behind his ears. They were just barely long enough for that.

That’s when Harry noticed it. Draco wasn’t wearing a jacket over his fitted t-shirt. Draco’s Dark Mark was visible, and it was…

“Your arm! When did you get that?!?”

Draco sat down across from Harry, and Harry slid back into his own seat.

“About a month ago. Right before the school year ended. Seb and Gisele went with me. It was a sort of… going away present. Not to them from me! I paid for all this,” Draco clarified, laying his forearm on the table, the inside of it facing upward so Harry could see the design.

Starting at the base of the Dark Mark was a sturdy, twisting elm tree like the ones they used to sit under in Washington Square Park, its branches winding through the snake’s coils and clustering around them. At the top of the mark was a flower crown made of daffodils and two flowers Harry didn’t recognize, the petals coming out of the eyes and mouth of the skull as well.

“It was a present to myself to cap off the year, and the two of them graciously agreeing to come with me meant a lot.”

*I wish I could have been there.*

Harry knew what the Dark Mark meant in a way neither of their New York friends could. He wondered if Draco had held one of their hands as the needle did its work, squeezing their fingers and taking deep breaths as the new artwork skimmed across his scarred flesh.

“Tell me about it. Why’d you pick these?”

“Well, part of it is a sort of ‘this is your life, Draco Malfoy’ in plant form. The narcissus is for my mother,” Draco pointed to the yellow daffodils. “Gladiolus symbolize strength, honor, and remembrance.”

Draco traced the purple flowers on his arm.

“And white heather,” Draco continued, pointing to the small thin flowers laced between the other two, “is for protection and… making your wishes come true.”
Draco’s cheeks pinked as he said that, and Harry found himself fighting that battering Snitch feeling in his ribcage.

“Can I?” Harry’s fingers hovered above Draco’s arm, and he nodded. Harry touched the tattoo. He had expected the flesh to be raised somehow, the ridges of the design like relief on sculpture, but the skin was as smooth as the rest of Draco.

Harry swallowed hard as he realized his hands were on Draco in a way they hadn’t been for quite some time. He retracted his fingers and dropped them in his lap.

“It’s wonderful. That’s a really cool thing you did. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.” The waitress swung by their table, and Draco ordered a beer.

“Wait, you said ‘going away present’?”

“Oh… yeah, I’m doing the next year of school abroad. Paris.”

“Tu déménages où tu es allé en vacances?” Harry asked with a smirk. Draco rolled his eyes.

“Je ne déménage pas là-bas de manière permanente. Juste pour neuf mois,” Draco replied in a far better accent than Harry, the words effortlessly rolling off his tongue.

“I didn’t know you spoke French!”

“You never asked.”

“Draco, I took two semesters of French, and you never mentioned it once!”

“Yes, because if I had, you would have been nagging me to help with your homework all the time. I didn’t want to be your foreign language mule.” The waitress set Draco’s pint in front of him, and he thanked her, sparing Harry a cheeky smile before taking a sip.

“Figures.” Harry shook his head and took a swig.

“What about you? Any plans beyond working on the Winchester Mystery House?”

“Actually, yeah. I’m starting a new program of sorts at Hogwarts.”

“Oh? Color me intrigued.” Draco put his elbows on the table, cradling his chin in his hand, but it wasn’t a sarcastic gesture. He looked genuinely interested.

“Well… Hogwarts can feel like a bubble. That’s great in a way, especially for someone like me who didn’t have a chance to be around wizards and witches before he got there, but it can be isolating too. Hogwarts doesn’t have any sex education to speak of, and there’s definitely no one there to talk to if you’re struggling with your sexual orientation or your gender identity. Hogwarts feels like a tight-knit community, a family in a way. It’s the first time I ever had a sense of that, of what that could mean. But then, when I left, and especially when I went to New York, I got that in a whole different way. It made me realize how much I’d missed out on by going to a wizarding school. There’s a whole side to human experience that’s just missing, and I think you need that when you’re growing up. I mean, you need it always, but especially then, when you’re looking to everyone else to tell you what to do and who to be.”

“I’m sure you know I wholeheartedly agree.” Draco nodded encouragingly.

“Right! So… I went to McGonagall and asked what she thought about starting some kind of
program that addresses this stuff. Maybe a sexual health class and a gender studies elective in the way we had Muggle Studies. Maybe a couple staff members who are trained counselors, people who are like you and me in that they live with one foot in the wizarding world and one outside of it. And maybe these people could be queer themselves or at least specialize in talking to kids about these things, sort of how guidance counselors are at Muggle schools.

“I’m not qualified to do any of this, but I have the money to help fund it and all the time in the world to help them get it up and running. Help interview, decide how to incorporate it, whatever they need. McGonagall and I drafted a proposal together and brought it before the Board of Governors. We’re still waiting for final approval, but the Governors are totally different now. McGonagall made sure to wipe away the old system, and honestly, everyone around that table was just… their eyes lit up. You could see they believed in what we were talking about.” Harry stopped, breathless and suddenly aware of how long he’d been talking.

“Harry… that’s beautiful. You found a way to help people again, and you did it on your own terms.” The affection in Draco’s eyes made Harry sit on his hands lest he reach out to touch him again.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

It went quiet as they both drank their beers and watched each other, eyes connecting and bouncing away again, never settling on each other for too long. Harry could hardly believe they were sitting here together. It had been months since he’d seen those eyes looking back at him, but it felt every bit as intense as it always had.

“How was your birthday? Probably not as smashing of a celebration as last time, I imagine?” Harry boldly asked.

“Are we at the point where we can joke about that now?”

“I don’t know, but we can try.”

Draco looked at him, and Harry didn’t look away this time. He just let those molten eyes burn him.

“It was good. Less eventful, for sure, but Pansy knows how to celebrate.”

“Next round’s on me. Happy twenty-first birthday, Draco.” They raised their glasses and both took a hearty drink.

***

“Narcissa Malfoy… in therapy??? Can’t believe you’ve been saving this bombshell to drop on me.” They were nearing the end of their second round. Bit by bit, the conversation was getting easier, less stilted pausing as they talked about more things. Despite all the ease they’d built over months of emails and IMs, it was a shock to the system to be this close. Harry tried to ignore the ache inside of him that demanded to be quenched, his need to slide into Draco’s side of the booth growing stronger every time Draco laughed or ran a hand through his hair, the sparkle of his eyes when he smiled filling Harry with longing.

“Right?! Most of what’s left of the Malfoy clan, all in therapy. Who would have thought? She’s coming to visit me in Paris in the fall. Her therapist stressed the importance of starting to
compromise and meet me on my terms instead of demanding her own.”

“And she listened to someone else telling her what to do?” Harry downed the rest of his beer and raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Draco finished his as well and laughed.

“Believe me, I was tempted to check to see if hell had frozen over.”

The waitress stopped by to ask if they wanted another round, and they exchanged hesitant looks before enthusiastically nodding.

“And um… how about the other part of the Malfoy clan?”

Draco went silent and looked down at the table. Harry worried for a moment that he’d crossed a line. Asking about Lucius had always been a minefield.

“I’m going to go see him,” Draco said defiantly as he lifted his eyes. “I’m not doing it for him. I’m doing it for me. I want him to see the man I became in spite of him. A man he could never be. I want him to try his best to make me feel lesser and know that he can’t touch me anymore. I want to walk out of that prison and look over my shoulder as he realizes I’m walking out into the sun, and he never will.”

“That’s incredibly brave of you,” Harry said quietly.

“I think it’s necessary. Look the monster in the eye, tell him you don’t believe in him anymore, and then he can’t hurt you. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“Look at us… all grown up.” Draco grinned.

“Trying to be, anyway.” Harry laughed softly, and Draco’s tongue swept across his bottom lip. Harry remembered the first time he’d watched Draco do that and thought I want to kiss him. It seemed like a decade ago and only yesterday all at the same time.

“I didn’t feel deserving of you,” Draco said in a rush of syllables, shaking his head repentantly. It was nearly swallowed by the rising din of the pub. It was later now, the Friday night crowd descending upon the padded barstools and wooden booths.

“I wasn’t ready to accept your love or anyone else’s, Harry. It wasn’t —

“Draco, you don’t have to say anything —”

“I do have to say it, and I want to. You always said I seemed so together. I’d always tell you that wasn’t true, but maybe… maybe I wasn’t clear about what I meant by that. Almost all my breakdowns were behind closed doors. That first month in New York, I think I cried myself to sleep every single night.”

“I didn’t know that,” Harry quietly replied. He didn’t know what had prompted Draco to dive into the deep end of the pool, but his resolute expression made Harry think Draco had been dying to do it for months.

“I present well. I was taught to, and for whatever reason, that seems to be the one Malfoy lesson I carried with me to adulthood. It’s good in some ways. It helped me be functional, helped me focus on school, but it also put distance between us. When things took a turn for the worse… I stopped sharing with you. Maybe I was ashamed or I didn’t want to feel like a failure or be weak or…
whatever the reasons were… I think I could have been more open, and I’m sorry about that. I let things build until I was at my breaking point. I felt cornered at the time, and I just didn’t know what else to do.”

Draco placed his hand in the middle of the table, palm down, and Harry wanted to cover it with his own, stroke his calloused thumb across Draco’s thin wrist.

He understood what Draco was saying. He’d thought about the very same thing many times over the last year. Memories would crop up and take on new meanings. Draco readily accepting Harry’s suggestion to leave the party together that first time, his concerned eyes seeing right through Harry’s poor attempts to conceal his panic attack. Draco’s sudden disappearances for a few days that Harry had always attributed to schoolwork, blindly accepting Draco’s dismissal when Harry asked. Draco’s stoic face at a party when his mood would shift like the wind, excusing himself to smoke for long enough that Harry would venture out to find him.

Harry had no doubt that Draco did more silent suffering than anyone noticed, and he wished he could rewind time, armed with the knowledge he had now, and be better. It wasn’t Draco’s fault for not sharing. Harry should have connected the dots, but he’d never been the best at that.

“I’m sorry I broke up with you when you were already hurting. I just stuck the knife in further. I should have — ”

“No. Draco, you were right. I needed time to figure things out. I’m better now. I mean, I’m far from cured. Can you be cured from things like depression and PTSD? I don’t know, really… I think you just learn how to manage it, control the rising tide before it swallows you whole. But I’m better enough to feel like I’m not standing in quicksand anymore, and that means I see more clearly. I pushed enough of the muck out of the way to see how right you were. I was so f***ed up at the time. I was no good for anybody. I was no good for myself. If we’d stayed together... things would have hurt even more. You were right about that too. It’s hard to imagine it hurting worse than it did, but if we’d broken up even further down the line... everything unraveling... it would have been worse. I’ve had a year to think about this, and… you made a hard decision that one of us had to make. Maybe you didn’t go about it in the best way, but I don’t know if there is a good way to leave someone.”

Draco looked at Harry, his eyes mournful, his teeth worrying the skin of his bottom lip, and Harry didn’t know what he was thinking.

“Pansy took me to this amazing restaurant for my birthday. We drank, we laughed, we walked along the bank of the Thames, and I just…” Draco’s voice cracked, and his eyes grew moist.

Harry opened his mouth to interrupt, not sure if he was ready to hear what Draco was about to say, but Draco shook his head.

“I was there with my oldest friend in the world, watching the sunset over the river, arm in arm, and all I could think… all I could think was ‘I want my Harry.’ Can you imagine? Like someone wants their fucking mummy when they’re eight years old and sick in bed. I just thought ‘I want my Harry.’ Pathetic, I know.”

A tear leaked out of the corner of Draco’s eye, and Harry stopped suppressing the urge to touch him. He held Draco’s hand between both of his and squeezed it.

“Draco Malfoy, you have been many things. A total arse, a snob, a Death Eater — ”

“Listing my finer qualities, are you?” Draco smiled through his tears, and Harry didn’t think he’d
ever loved him more than he did at that moment, in a crowded, dingy London pub crying over a pint as Harry held his hand.

“Drafting a resume for when you have to find work after you graduate college, actually.” They both laughed, and Draco gave him a yearning look that shook loose every feeling Harry had been trying to ignore over the last few months, the heart-pounding excitement when he’d open an email from Draco, the lust-filled craving when Draco would err on the side of flirtatious for a second, always brief and cautious enough that Harry could never be sure what he’d seen. “You’ve been a lot of things, but pathetic was never one of them.”

“I did love you, Harry,” Draco whispered.

“I don’t want you to say that because you think it’s what I need to hear.”

“That’s not why I’m saying it, and I’m not telling you because I want you to say it back either. I’m telling you because I wanted… I needed you to know. There was so much that hurt after we broke up, so many things about you not being in my life that made me want to scream, but this… above all else, I couldn’t stand the thought of you walking around thinking I never loved you. I loved you with all my heart, Harry James Potter, and I still do. I just need you to know that. I couldn’t say it then, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t want to.”

The swirls of noise in the pub receded into the background, everything beyond the scope of their booth like the faded edges of a dream. Harry only saw Draco, his chest rising and falling as he waited for Harry to speak, his eyes intense, grave in that way they always were when he was speaking of something important.

In one swift motion, Harry let go of Draco’s hand and stood up, sliding into Draco’s side of the booth. He leaned in close, chest pressing against Draco’s shoulder and said so quietly, guarded like a secret, “I love you too.”

Harry heard Draco suck in a sharp lungful of air, and then his lips were on Harry’s mouth, his hands holding Harry’s mouth tightly as though he might run away if Draco didn’t latch onto him hard enough. Draco’s mouth was exactly as Harry remembered it, their lips slotting together like no time had passed. Draco’s tongue parted Harry’s lips and teased into his mouth. Harry swallowed the groan Draco let out, his hand slipping into Draco’s hair.

God, it felt good to kiss him again, the heat of Draco’s mouth awakening every limb as though Harry’d been asleep for a long, long time, his sense of touch locked down for safekeeping in the time they’d spent apart. And wasn’t that the truth? Harry hadn’t touched anyone since they’d broken up. He hadn’t dared to let himself want anything, knowing in the back of his mind that it would all lead back to Draco.

Draco broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against Harry’s.

“Harry…” he whispered, a low rumble that resonated right down to Harry’s bones. “Take me home with you.”

Chapter End Notes

** The two French lines here are calling back to their Paris trip, where Draco had told Harry that no one should ever move where they go on holiday. So, Harry is giving him
shit about it like "you're moving where you went on vacation?!" and Draco is like "I'm not moving there permanently. *Malfoy glower activated* It's just nine months."

I know this chapter leaves you on a bit of a cock teasing cliffhanger, BUT maybe you'll take comfort in the fact that I'm publishing both ch 21 AND 22 on Monday? The final two chapters are short enough that, combined, they're basically the length this one is by itself so I just don't feel like drawing it out. :D

ETA: IM screen names are takes on Sonic Youth and Guided By Voices songs because our indie boys remain indie af to the end of this fic.

2nd ETA (that's what happens when I wake at 6am lol): I know Draco getting a tattoo around the Dark Mark is such a Drarry trope at this point, but I LIVE for it and had fun picking the flowers haha.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Well, the day hath arrived. *starts swaying and singing Boys II Men - "End of the Road"* I can't thank you all enough for sharing this experience with me. I have a little surprise at the very end so if you skip any of these notes, don't skip the final one. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were both shy when Harry closed the door to Grimmauld Place, coy gazes and arms fidgeting at their sides like they didn’t know what to do with their limbs. It was a feeling Harry had experienced before, that sense of knowing what was about to happen, standing around an apartment or a dorm room with someone you were about to sleep with. The audacity always receded for a moment as reality sank in, the break in heated gazes and hungry kisses giving both people time to be self-conscious, time to second guess. It was a moment of potential, a pregnant pause that always made Harry equal parts nervous and excited.

It was different this time. He and Draco had done this before, but the reasons for the gap in time hung heavily in the space between them, unspoken but deafeningly loud. Harry wondered if Draco was contemplating all the same things, trying to push down the doubts and save the big decisions for later.

“It looks even more impressive in person. You really transformed this place.” Draco’s eyes roamed the living room. Harry hadn’t turned on any lights, the only illumination the dim glow of the overhead kitchen light and a small table lamp he’d left on.

“Thanks. Do you… want anything to drink or…?” Harry rubbed the back of his neck and promptly dropped his hand. He had a feeling Draco knew all his nervous habits by now. It probably wasn’t worth trying to conceal it. Harry had a feeling they were both suspended in the same strange, anticipatory mood, but still… Harry wanted to look less anxious. He always wanted to look more composed around Draco. Draco’s presence made Harry sit up taller, pay closer attention, be bolder. There had always been that odd dichotomy with them, their rivalry drawing out the best and the worst of each other all at once, but Harry felt like the latter had all but fallen away over the years, leaving only the best.

Draco shook his head, his eyes meaningfully sweeping down the length of Harry’s body.

Harry held out his hand, and Draco took it. Wordlessly, he led Draco up the stairs to his bedroom. The last light from the fading summer sun was streaming in through the windows, the burnt orange hues of it shading Draco’s features. He looked like a lovely dream, and Harry wanted to kiss him until there was no denying he was real. Harry moved closer, but Draco stopped him with a hand on his chest.

“Harry, I don’t want you to do this if you… I want you to be sure.”

“Draco, I don’t know what happens tomorrow…” Harry cradled his face in both hands, tracing the lines of his jaw and his cheeks. He looked so beautiful, and all Harry could think about was taking him to bed, laying his long limbs across the sheets and devouring him in every way. It had been far too long. “But I don’t care about tomorrow. I just care about being with you. Right now. Here.
Tonight, Draco, I *need* you. I’ve missed you so much.”

Draco turned his head and kissed Harry’s palm, pulling on his wrist until Harry fell into his arms. Draco covered his neck with open-mouthed kisses, urgent, wet, needy.

“I’ve missed you too, baby,” Draco purred in his ear, and any lingering nerves left Harry’s mind immediately. He spun them around and backed Draco toward the bed. Draco sat down as the backs of his knees hit the mattress. Harry stood between his legs, and let Draco undress him, his clothes falling in graceless heaps to the floor. Draco took off his own clothes, and Harry gasped when he saw that ivory chest, scars whose lines he knew by memory.

He barely had time to look at him before Draco slid off the bed and onto his knees. He kissed across Harry’s stomach, eyes reverently closed, his hands skating up and down Harry’s thighs. He pulled back, flashing Harry an ardent look before swallowing him down. Harry moaned, his hands instinctively falling into Draco’s hair.

God, he’d missed this. Draco’s eager mouth enveloping him, sucking and licking like even the whole length of him wasn’t enough, like the tip of Harry’s cock nudging the base of his throat only made him want more. Sometimes it felt like they might truly consume one another, Draco’s hands reaching into his chest to grasp Harry’s heart. They were moths drawn to flame, too engrossed in the magnetic pull of each other to care whether or not they burned to ash. Draco pulled off, stroking Harry as he gazed up at him, eyes lust-drunk and tender.

“Have you forgotten what I like?” There was a note of reservation in the challenge, as though Draco still wasn’t sure if it was okay.

“No, I remember,” Harry rasped, looking down in wonderment. He’d been sure he wasn’t ever going to see Draco like this again, kneeling and full of want for him. Only for him.

“Then give me what you know I want,” Draco whispered, slowly letting his mouth fall open, wide and ready.

Harry gripped Draco’s hair at the root, a current of pleasure thrumming through him when Draco’s eyelids fluttered in that familiar way. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Harry pushed into his mouth. He wasn’t sure if he was taking his time simply to torture Draco, leave him shaking and pleading for it, or if he was still uncertain that he’d be allowed this, sliding in a cautious inch at a time to bask in every second before the chance was ripped away again.

Draco didn’t seem to mind the pace, whimpering softly as Harry’s erection pressed down on his hot tongue, sharply thrusting back when he was almost fully inside, rubbing against Draco’s throat in a lovingly brutal caress.

When he heard that first obscene choking sound, Harry groaned, warmth flooding his body. Draco opened his eyes, and Harry could barely process what he saw there. Draco looked like a saint in penance, angelic face as he knelt in contrition before Harry, patiently waiting to take whatever he might give. Harry didn’t thrust. He didn’t move at all. With his fingers, he traced the line of Draco’s throat, his jaw, his pretty pink lips stretched taut around Harry’s erection. Draco swallowed around Harry’s cock, and Harry’s hand tightened in his hair.

They stared at one another for a long moment, Draco’s silver eyes gazing up into Harry’s emerald ones, Harry’s hand buried in his hair, his fingers splayed along the pale expanse of his lovely throat, and it was the most intimate moment of Harry’s life. He wondered how long they could stay like this, his hard cock cradled by Draco’s wet heat like a tender embrace, Draco’s eyes fixed on him with such devotion and love it made Harry’s chest feel too tight to hold his heart.
“You’re so good for me,” Harry quietly praised. He didn’t know why the words blinked across his mind, but the muffled moan from Draco let him know it was the right thing to say. Draco wrapped his fingers around the hand on his throat, and Harry tightly laced their fingers together. Gradually, he pulled out about halfway before thrusting back inside, the wet gagging sounds from deep in Draco’s throat making Harry gasp. He’d had trouble adjusting to this when they first got together, always afraid of hurting Draco, of pushing him too far. But Draco had always excelled at showing Harry how very much he wanted something, descending down his body with a look of wanton abandon that left nothing up for debate.

“If you don’t fuck my mouth right this second, Potter, you’re not coming tonight.”

Harry smiled as he remembered it, hardly able to believe he was getting the privilege of doing it again.

He continued to fuck Draco’s mouth, slow, hard thrusts just the way he liked to start, teasing but fierce. Harry wasn’t sure he could do it any faster without coming too soon, and he didn’t want to come like this. It was tempting, but he wanted so much more.

Harry pulled out, spit trailing from Draco’s lips to the head of his cock. He was so wet now, slick with Draco’s saliva and his sticky precome. It made him want Draco underneath him, fingered open, legs stretched back, giving him that pliant look that Harry didn’t think anyone else got the pleasure of seeing.

“Get on the bed. On your hands and knees.”

Draco nodded dazedly and obeyed. Harry retrieved the lube from the dresser drawer and sat on the bed behind Draco, his breath catching at the sight. He ran his hand down the slope of Draco’s shoulders, the dip of his lower back, the perfect curve of his arse, his strong, supple thighs. He’d missed every inch of him. The sun was set now, and Draco looked beautiful like this, beams of moonlight across his alabaster skin.

“Spread your legs wider,” Harry whispered, sighing when Draco did just that. He couldn’t resist licking across his rim. It had been so long since he’d tasted him, since he’d been allowed to explore this private part of Draco at will, lapping at the tight muscle until it relaxed under his tongue.

“Fuck, I missed this,” Draco breathed as Harry licked him, tracing circles around the furled skin, letting himself enjoy the feeling of it, the softness, the heat, the faint wrinkles in the flesh.

Harry opened the tube in his free hand, coating a finger as he withdrew his tongue. He stroked across Draco’s entrance, waiting for him to wriggle back, impatiently bucking into his hand. Harry’s lips turned up in a satisfied smile in the dark as he pushed his finger inside that tight heat, both of them groaning as Draco’s walls squeezed him. He began to pump in and out, adding a second when Draco grumbled a tetchy demand for more. He sat up, draping his chest over Draco’s back as he scissored his fingers inside him.

“You love this,” Harry whispered against Draco’s neck, pressing soft kisses into the skin. “Sometimes I think I should just do this all night. See if you can come from my fingers fucking you. Nothing else.”

Harry worried for a second that he shouldn’t have spoken like they were still together, like this was only another time in bed in a series of others, like they’d never separated at all. Maybe he had to earn that back.

“That’s incredibly fucking hot, but I swear to Merlin…” Draco trailed off with a moan as Harry
stroked across his prostate. Draco’s hands gave out, and he came to rest on his forearms, his head hanging down. “If you don’t fuck me with your cock tonight, I will hex your bloody bollocks off.”

Harry laughed and trailed his lips down the arch of Draco’s back until he reached the cleft of his arse. He licked around the rim as his fingers kept working, pulling out only to slick them again, adding a third this time. Draco let out a string of curses and pounded his fist against the mattress.

“Harry, please,” Draco whined, bucking his hips back, spreading his legs even wider.

Merlin, this view made Harry dizzy with desire. How had he lasted a year without this?

Harry carefully extricated his fingers and started to line up his cock. He stopped short as he remembered something. He didn’t want to ask. He wasn’t sure he would like the answer. It might sap all the heat out of the room in an instant.

“Draco… I have to ask… have you…” Harry swallowed and sat back on his heels.

“What? What’s wrong?” Draco’s head swiveled around, concern written in the slight narrowing of his eyes.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just… I don’t have condoms around because I haven’t had much need for them, and…” Harry waved a helpless hand as though there was someone in the room who could finish that thought for him.

“Oh… well, I haven’t slept with anyone since you.” Draco turned all the way around now, sitting up until he was facing Harry. “I… sometimes went out with the intent to try, but… I could never find it in me to want to.”

“So we’ve both been relative monks in the last year.” Harry spared him a small, timid smile, and Draco laughed softly.

“We’re hopeless, the both of us.”

“Good thing we found each other then.”

“Yeah… it is.”

Harry cupped the back of Draco’s neck and drew him in for a kiss. Draco crawled into his lap, his knees bracketing Harry’s waist. Harry wrapped his arms around Draco’s back, pulling him closer, their cocks sliding together.

“Can we do it like this?” Draco whispered into Harry’s shoulder, leaving a line of tender bites as he made his way to Harry’s ear.

“Fuck yes.” Harry leaned back on the heels of his hands, stretching out his legs and giving Draco room to move. Draco straddled Harry’s lap, gripped the base of his cock, and began to sink down, one careful inch at a time.

“Sorry… It’s so deep this way… It might take me a bit.” Draco looked at Harry almost shyly, his pale cheeks ruddy, his moist lips glistening in the dark.

“You say that like I care.”

*Take all the time you need. Take all bloody night.*

Draco smiled and bit his lip in concentration, adjusting his position and rocking his hips little by
little until Harry was completely sheathed.

“Fuck… I can feel you… all the way in here,” Draco gasped, taking Harry’s hand and placing it
low on his stomach.

“Does it hurt?” Harry whispered, pushing Draco’s hair back from his forehead.

“All the best things hurt at first… don’t they?” Draco asked as though he wasn’t sure, his tone
wavering as he searched Harry’s eyes, his hands linking behind Harry’s neck.

“Yes,” Harry agreed with a jerky nod. He ran his hands up and down Draco’s back, every bit as
much to soothe him as to just touch him, enjoying having him this close again. Draco made an
experimental roll of his hips, tentative and small, and they both moaned softly as they felt Harry’s
cock shifting inside, buried so thoroughly.

As Draco began to really move, impaling himself on Harry’s cock in shallow, slow movements,
rising up and back down again, switching to back and forth motions when it became too much,
they didn’t avert their eyes. Harry’s gaze was locked on Draco, and Draco’s eyes were fixed to his.
He seemed as intent to capture every moment of this as Harry did. Draco’s lips fell open on a moan
as Harry thrust up to meet him. Harry claimed his slack mouth, plundering it with a passionate
tongue. He wanted every sound of Draco’s to be his, and every groan, every murmur of his own to
belong to Draco, their sounds of pleasure passed back and forth until they were indistinguishable
from one another, entwined like their limbs. He wanted to seal their bodies in every way,
connected like a seamless thread that wouldn’t break this time.

They kept their leisurely pace, making love like there was no hurry, like they knew each other’s
bodies and knew exactly how to play them, every lingering stroke in just the right spot at the right
time.

Harry’s orgasm descended upon him like a rollicking wave that had been lying quietly under the
surf. He wished he had anticipated it so he could have held off, pulled back and edged closer over
and over again, making it last for hours. How could he do that when Draco was so perfect,
moaning so sweetly, chanting Harry’s name like it was the only word he could say? His slim hips
undulated in Harry’s lap, insistent but measured, a rhythm of life and sex that coursed through
Harry like the beat of his own heart, his body syncing to the tempo of Draco’s until they felt like
two components of the same piece of music.

“Draco, I — ” Harry came inside him, feeling the jerking motion of his cock as it jutted against
Draco’s walls, emptying inside that velvet heat. He didn’t know what he’d been trying to say.
Everything was a blur of pleasure and thumping blood.

*I love you. I need you. I’m so glad you came back to me.*

Harry clutched Draco close, panting into his perspiring neck as the aftershocks faded, the euphoria
remaining as he reached down to stroke Draco’s neglected cock. He braced his other hand on the
back of Draco’s neck, kissing him furiously. It was rough and messy, his hands and lips rushed and
needy. He just wanted to make him come. All of his patience had evaporated, replaced by a greedy
desire that could only be sated by Draco spurting on his hand as he moaned and tilted his head
back.

It didn’t take long before Harry was rewarded with that sight, Draco’s eyes squeezing shut as he
cried out, his hands clutching at Harry’s back as his cock pulsed in Harry’s fist, painting them both
with hot stripes of come.
They panted as they both came down, sharing a serene look that Harry hoped was about more than sex. Despite what Harry had said about worrying about the future tomorrow, everything here was loaded, pendulous like a saturated storm cloud. There wasn’t any going back now. He didn’t know exactly what that meant, but Draco’s searing gaze let Harry know he was thinking about it too.

They languidly separated, Harry grabbing his wand to clean them both.

“No wandless?” Draco said with a flirtatious lilt to his voice.

“Well… it turns out wandless magic is a particularly bad idea if you’re having PTSD nightmares resulting in accidental magic,” Harry confessed with a chuckle.

“I take it that must not be a problem anymore if you’re laughing about it?” Draco smiled and settled in under the sheets.

“There are still nightmares sometimes, but yeah… no magic flares and I know how to snap back to reality pretty quickly when I wake up.”

“You’re indestructible, Harry. Nothing can break you, can it?” Draco murmured, nestling into Harry’s arms as he slipped in next to him.

“I don’t know if I’d go that far. Standing next to an erupting volcano might do the trick.” Harry folded both arms around him, his chin resting against the top of his head.

“No, you’d just rise out of the ashes like a phoenix.”

“Flattery is a new look for you,” Harry mumbled, sleep already beginning to take him.

“I have a lot to make up for… I missed sleeping with you.”

“I’m going to ignore the part where you’ve been celibate for a whole year. Would rather think you’re telling me I’m a sex god.”

“Not what I meant. I missed the sex too, but… this… I missed sleeping next to you. Knowing you were there. I’ve never wanted that with anyone else. Hell, I don’t know that I ever even let anyone else have this… but I always wanted it with you.”

Harry opened his eyes, watching Draco’s fingers absently stroking his chest.

“I always wanted it with you too.”

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think I'd leave you without one more sex scene, did you? *in Jeff Goldblum voice* Smut, uh... finds a way.
“Tell me something no one else knows. Something you wouldn’t even want me to know.”

“Redemption is going to be a long and tedious road, isn’t it?” Draco propped up on an elbow and sighed heavily. The morning sun was beginning to peek in the window, giving Draco that golden halo that always took Harry’s breath away.

“Of course it is. Tell me.” Harry turned on his side to face him.

“When we were apart, I started a notebook. I would write down all the things I wanted to tell you. All the happy things I wanted to share, all the petty things I wanted to complain about that I knew would make you laugh… all the things I wished I’d said to you,” Draco admitted quietly, carding his hand through Harry’s disheveled hair.

They’d made love one more time during the night, waking in stark blackness as they groped for one another’s hands, Harry mounting Draco this time, bracing his hands on his chest as he rode him hard and fast, not caring about the burn from being stretched open after so long without it. Part of him loved the return of that ache he remembered from when they first slept together, the tangible reminder of Draco’s cock, the ghost of the shape of him still inside Harry anytime he moved, silently owning him.

Neither of them had really gone back to sleep after that, drifting in and out a little, but mostly awake and hyper aware of each other’s presence. Harry didn’t want to miss a single moment, half afraid Draco would disappear if he closed his eyes for too long.

“You’re getting sentimental in your old age, Draco.” Harry clucked his tongue, and Draco gave him a playful shove.

“Fuck off. I’m burning that notebook when I get back to my flat.”

“No, you’re going to give me a dramatic recitation from it.”

“Never.” Draco crept closer, hiding his face against Harry’s chest. Harry held him close. He couldn’t stop clutching onto him like he might dissolve into smoke.

“Tell me something else.”

“I take back everything I said. I didn’t miss you for a single second. You have a deplorable personality, and I’m happy to be rid of it.” Draco grumbled, but he kissed Harry’s chest, making his way down to his left nipple and sucking the hard bud into his mouth.

“Mmm, you can’t distract me.”

“Care to make a wager to that effect?” Draco looked up at him and smiled mischievously as he reached down to palm Harry’s cock.

“Tell me,” Harry repeated.

“I like the scars you gave me. They make me feel connected to you, like a dirty secret you
scrawled onto my skin… acknowledging what was between us even if you didn’t want to. Like you had no choice in the matter. And I…” Draco flopped onto his back and covered his eyes with his hands.

“What?” Harry coaxed, stroking Draco’s arms and his chest.

“It’s too embarrassing and twisted.”

“Tell me.”

“Christ, Potter — you’re a broken record this morning. I’m… turned on by them. I’ve been known to touch them when I jerk off.”

Harry leaned over Draco, his arms caging his chest, and licked across the length of one jagged mark, tracing over it with kisses when he’d finished.

“Harry — fuck — that’s — ” Draco lifted his head so he could watch, and Harry met his eyes, holding his gaze as he licked along the next one. Harry wrapped a hand around Draco’s cock, finding it already hard and weeping at the tip. He began to pump up and down the shaft, his hand enclosed in a tight grip, and continued worshipping Draco’s scars, covering them with his mouth and tongue. As Harry lapped at the last mark, Draco shuddered and tensed, his arse lifting off the bed as he cried out, wet heat splashing against Harry’s stomach. “Fuck! I — always knew — I’d come in five seconds flat if you did that.”

Harry stretched out beside him, folding his arms behind his head.

“Don’t you look smug… that’s my role in this relationship, Potter.”

They laughed, but their laughter turned into stammering silence.

Relationship.

“What happens now?” Harry finally asked.

“I thought you didn’t care about tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is now today. Harder to avoid.”

“I want to keep you. For good this time. Does that scare you?” Draco asked quietly.

It did. But it also didn’t.

“I don’t want us to fuck it up again. We have to think about it this time. I don’t… want to do what I always do, you know? I’ve gotten a lot better at that over the last year, and I don’t want to move backward.” Harry frowned as he tried to solve this. “And how do we even do this? I mean, if we want to do this. We can’t just jump back into a serious relationship after all this time but dating seems ridiculous too, doesn’t it?”

“I understand.” Draco nodded. “Are you free for dinner tonight?”

“Did you hear what I said, Draco?”

“Yes. Loud and clear. Are you free for dinner?”

“Yes.”
“Then we’ll talk over dinner.” Draco smirked mysteriously, and Harry got the distinct sense he was missing a large chunk of information.

“What are you planning?”

“You’ll see.”

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Harry had done it again. Twice in two days, he’d shown up early and wound up regretting it. He looked around the room. The place Draco had chosen was a bit upscale, a nice Italian place he said he used to go to treat himself during the year of his community service.

“It means a lot to me. It’s a place I only went when I felt like I’d truly earned it, like I’d made progress in becoming the person I wanted to be. It seems fitting to go there.”

Harry sipped his wine (ordering beer in a place like this didn’t seem right so he had asked the waiter what he recommended off the wine list) and jumped in his seat as he heard Draco’s voice.

“Hello.”

“Christ! You have to stop doing that. How is it you always manage to drop in the second I’m not looking for you?”

“Are you waiting for someone?”

Harry frowned in confusion at the sincere tone in Draco’s voice, the question in his eyes.

“Very funny. Sit down.” Harry motioned to the chair across from him, and Draco obeyed.

“I’ve seen you around, but I don’t believe we’ve officially met. I’ve thought about asking you out, but I never do. I get the sense that you like to be alone. But today, I saw you sitting there, and I suppose my ego won out over everything else.” Draco smiled at him, folding his hands together on the table, and Harry’s puzzlement grew.

“Draco, what — ”

“How thoughtless of me! Introductions, of course. I’m Draco.” Draco extended his hand, and Harry shook it, the haze slowly lifting as he began to understand. “And you’re Harry, right?”

“Are you serious, right now? We’re literally starting over?” Harry wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or roll his eyes.

Draco’s jaw tensed, his eyes slanting as though he were thinking up a quippy remark to send Harry’s way, but then his expression smoothed out, never breaking character.

“Were you waiting for someone or is it all right that I inserted myself into your evening? I know it’s a bit forward of me, but like I said… I saw you there, and I couldn’t help it. This is my favorite place, actually. I’m here quite a lot.”

“Oh yeah? This is my first time here. I’m not waiting for anyone. It’s okay.” Harry relaxed into the odd scenario as he realized how incredibly sweet this was. It was romantic in the kind of way that
would normally turn Draco’s stomach, but he was doing this for Harry. He had decided to make this potentially embarrassing effort to show how much he cared. “I’m — er — surprised to hear that you wanted to ask me out. From what I’ve seen, you’re not usually that interested in anyone. When you turned down that bloke at the office — ”

“Office?! How old are we in this hypothetical situation that we’re office drones already?”

Harry smiled at Draco’s snarky nature shining through.

“I don’t know! I wasn’t briefed on the role playing specifics before I got here.”

“We’re the same age that we actually are. Students, etcetera, the whole bit. We just… have only seen each other from afar. We haven’t officially met until now. I — ” Draco put his head in his hands with a groan. “Sod it all. This was a stupid idea. I never — ”

“When you turned down that bloke at the pub last weekend, you were pretty brutal. I thought he was going to need an emergency therapy session to get his self-esteem back. He’s certainly not going to be asking out any random blonds in pubs anytime soon. Definitely traumatized.”

Draco slowly lifted his hands from his face to reveal a smile. Harry returned it, and they just sat in silence for a moment, knowing eyes locked.

“I can be rather… relentless when I want to be. Refresh my memory. What did I say to him?”

“I believe you said something like,” Harry leaned in and lowered his voice, “‘if I wanted to sleep with someone who thinks floral print paired with striped gauchos is a fashion statement, I’d swing by the nursing home and bugger a ninety-year old toothless grandpa.’”

“I don’t remember that. Must have had a rage blackout. That does sound like me though,” Draco agreed with a grin. “That said… I think you’ll find that, depending on the person I’m with, I can be really good too.”

Draco placed his hand atop Harry’s, his fingers curling lightly around his wrist.

“That’s good to hear, but… I’ve been hurt before. I have to ask. Tell me about your last relationship. Why didn’t it work out?”

“The hard hitting questions already.” Draco tilted his head in consideration.

“I’m a man who knows what he wants. I like to make sure the person I’m dating is on the same page.”

“That’s fair. Before my last boyfriend, I had a lot of dates, one night stands, things that almost were but weren’t. But with him, I had a chance for something more. The only problem is that I cocked it all up. The timing was bad. I thought it was all my fault, but now I think maybe he was right. We both needed to grow up a bit first.” Draco’s eyes were soft as he stroked his thumb across Harry’s hand.

“Growing up is good,” Harry whispered, his pulse pounding in his throat. “Draco… are you still scared about this being… everything?”

Harry wasn’t sure if Draco knew how those words had cut him like a fine blade, their memory an acute warning of how ugly it could be when things went wrong.

“No,” Draco whispered back, scooting his chair closer. “You are… inescapable. Incurable like the
common cold. You’re like a rock stuck in the sole of my boot.”

“Great speech. I’m ready to leap into your arms for all eternity.”

“Wait, listen.” Draco grabbed both of Harry’s hands and held them in his lap, spearing Harry with that unyielding gaze of his. “You wedged yourself into my life when I was eleven years old, dropped in like an adorable, feisty, ragamuffin bomb I didn’t know what to do with, upsetting every semblance of order I’d ever had. You challenged me. You infuriated me, and you made me question everything in ways I never had. Plucking you out of my life was impossible. No matter what I did, you came back for me like a charmed bludger to the head. If anything, trying to get rid of you only made it worse.”

“Okay, I understand the boot and rock bit now. I still think it’s a shit comparison, but I get it.” Harry shook his head with a sigh.

“So I tried to keep you instead, and I failed at that.”

“We both did,” Harry amended.

“We both did, but Harry… we’re fated. You’re my fate, and I’m as sure of that as I’ve ever been of anything. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever known anything else in my entire haphazard, fucked up life was true. But I know this. It’s saccharine and moronic and if anyone else were to say it, I’d want to slap them in the face, but… you’ve always felt like fate to me. Merlin’s saggy balls, Harry! I crossed an ocean. I, Draco Malfoy, pure-blood bred wizard, enrolled in Muggle college halfway across the world only to find you two doors down, looking like the maddeningly gorgeous shaggable mess you are. If that isn’t a sign from the universe telling us to get our heads out of our arses and learn how to do this thing, I don’t know what is.”

“What happened to easing into it? We plunged headlong before, and it didn’t turn out the way we hoped it would.” Harry wanted to believe in everything Draco was professing. They were pretty, heartfelt words that Harry wanted to wrap around himself like a snug blanket, but he had to be sure.

“Baby, we’ve been easing into it for a decade.” Before Harry could say anything, Draco leaned in and kissed him, a bruising, passionate claiming of his mouth that made Harry quiver. Harry reached out for him, a hand finding its way into Draco’s hair as the other circled his waist, pulling him as near as he could. Draco broke the kiss and clasped Harry’s chin. “I love you, Harry Potter, and I want to make a glorious mess of my life with you everyday from now until as long as you’ll have me. Do you want that too?”

Draco gazed back at him, his eyes searching Harry’s. Harry wondered if he’d ever completely know what went on behind those enigmatic eyes. He doubted it, but he was willing to spend a lifetime trying. In fact, he couldn’t think of a better way to fill his time on this planet.

“I love you too, Draco Malfoy. You’re a stubborn, impossible person. You smoke like a chimney, and you broke my heart, but I love you so fucking much that I can’t see anything else.”

“I won’t break it again,” Draco said soberly, running his fingers through Harry’s hair.

“Damn right you won’t.” Harry kissed him, and his world had never felt so light and free.
“Why haven’t I told my dad about this? Can you imagine? He’d flip his wig! We have to have a Thanksgiving dinner at the Burrow next year.”

“It’s really not that special, Ron. I’m pretty sure you eat most of this shit here too!” Gisele laughed as she ladled some gravy onto her plate. Harry had considered inviting them for Christmas instead, but now that Seb and Gisele had grown closer with their parents, they tended to save that holiday for family. Besides, Thanksgiving occupied a special place in Harry’s heart. It was the first big holiday he’d ever celebrated with his New York friends.

“Ron’s father has a strong affinity for…” Hermione’s brow furrowed as she looked to Harry for a way to explain it.

“American traditions. He’s fascinated by them, and he sort of… um, lives a sheltered life in the country? Not big on the internet or anything so he doesn’t know much outside of his bubble. He gets really excited to learn new things.” Harry shot Hermione a helpless look. He wasn’t sure his save had been airtight enough to be convincing.

“Okay, but like… Thanksgiving?! I feel like ‘living under a rock’ is no longer just an expression at that point. If you haven’t heard of Thanksgiving, that’s like — ”

“You know what I really enjoy on Thanksgiving?” Draco interrupted Seb as he sat down next to Harry. “Remembering to state how grateful I am that my life and the lives of those I love have not been exterminated in a genocidal panic by white men who are terrified of what they don’t understand.”

“Here here!” Gisele clinked her spoon against her wine glass. “I’ll drink to that!”

They all raised their glasses and toasted.

“Do you remember Draco and Harry’s first Thanksgiving?” Seb waggled his eyebrows at Gisele.

“Oh, do I ever!”

“Please, can we not?” Draco rolled his eyes and bit into a slice of turkey.

“Draco rubbing his legs all over Harry. ‘I’m just so tired. I can’t mooovve.’” Seb made a face like a dramatic damsel in distress, the back of his hand to his forehead.

“Yes, I was terribly stoned and hopelessly infatuated. Ha fucking ha. Eat your dinner, you wankers,” Draco grumbled, tucking into his plate and ignoring them.

Harry looked around the table and admired the group they’d assembled in Harry and Draco’s new London flat, both sides of their lives converging beautifully. Draco, Seb and Gisele were all college graduates now, and Harry could hardly believe it. The commute between Paris and London hadn’t been much of an imposition, especially for two wizards, but Draco being in New York for the last year of his degree was a stress Harry was grateful to be free of. Having him close again made everyday brighter.

Draco still wasn’t sure what he was going to do for work.

“I suppose I’ll land in a career that has nothing to do with this humanities degree that isn’t worth
the paper it’s printed on. Just like a true Muggle,” he’d said with a playful smile when Harry had asked.

Mostly they’d been spending the months since his graduation taking advantage of having a clear schedule, spending time together however they wanted to, traveling or staying in bed all day, making love to the sound of the London rain beating against the window panes or walking under the cherry blossoms in the sun of Regent’s Park.

Gisele was off to grad school at Columbia, seeking an MFA in Writing.

“I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking, Harry. I’m going to have to listen to pretentious men who think they’re the next Bukowski talking over me and trying to explain mise en scène while they pat me on the head,” she’d told him over the phone after she first applied.

“And you’ll put them in their place every time they open their bloated mouths. It’s what you were put on this Earth for,” Harry had assured her. He was confident that he was right. She would challenge and change more than a few minds and turn out incredible work there.

Seb and Ravi had moved to Chicago together, Seb following Ravi on his journey to get his MA in Philosophy at the University of Chicago.

“Thank you, Draco, for sticking with me in our post-undergrad slackerdom. These fools are paying for Master’s degrees that are going to be worth even less than our Bachelor’s. I’m not gonna be duped like that.” Seb raised his glass to Draco’s.

“Cheers to that!” Draco laughed. “Although… I have been suppressing the urge to check out Oxford grad school programs…”

“Stop! Remain strong! Resist!”

“Thanks, Seb! Nice way to talk about your best friend and boyfriend’s life choices,” Gisele said with a good-natured scowl.

“Enough bickering! It’s time for pie,” Hermione laughed, walking out of the kitchen holding a pumpkin pie. Ron followed behind her, holding an apple one he was already descending upon with a fork.

“Ron! At least make it out of the kitchen first, mate!” Harry chuckled.

“It’s too good! The smell was calling out to me. Who am I to resist the call of the pie?” Ron mumbled around a mouthful.

“Wait! Everyone come over by the fireplace.” Harry grabbed Draco’s Polaroid camera, the same one Draco had used to document all the early New York moments Harry looked back on so fondly now. Their stumbles into friendship and love, two flailing, damaged boys trying to find solace in each other and a city full of lost people looking for the same.

Draco rolled his eyes.

“You take too many pictures. Not everything needs to be documented. I have a mashed potato smear on my jumper!”

“This coming from the man who had an entire wall of these in his dorm freshman year… You just like it when you’re the one deciding when to take the picture so you know you look your best.”
“Exactly.” Draco crossed his arms and arched a disapproving eyebrow.

“Get over here, you pasty bastard.” Gisele looped her arm in Draco’s and pulled him toward the fireplace.

“You heard the woman, you finicky git,” Ron agreed.

They assembled in front of the hearth, the tallest in the back, everyone crouched and squished together to get the whole group in the frame.

“Smile!” Hermione commanded.

Harry raised the camera and clicked the button, the whir of the Polaroid spitting out a moment later. He shook it to dry it quickly and held it up. Ron was blinking and only Seb’s head had made it into the picture. Draco and Harry were in the back, smiling heads tilted together. Gisele and Hermione were turned toward each other, the motion of their heads shaking in laughter making for a bit of a blurry image.

“Ugh, it’s awful. Should we do it again?” Draco asked, grabbing the picture from Harry.

“No.” Harry smiled and grabbed it back, looking at the picture for a long moment before setting it on the mantle, right next to the framed Polaroids Draco had given him their first Christmas together. “It’s perfect just the way it is.”

“You are the oddest man I’ve ever known, Harry Potter.”

Draco said a variation of that on a weekly basis. Harry had come to know it as one of the many private, unique ways he said “I love you.”

Draco said it by wordlessly replacing Harry’s tea with a freshly topped steaming mug when he was too absorbed in planning events for the next Hogwarts term to remember to drink anything. He said it by touching Harry every time he passed by him, trailing his fingers along the back of Harry’s neck or his shoulder, pushing a hand into his unruly curls as he walked through the living room on his way to the kitchen. He told him by the way he wound his arms around him, holding him tightly as he kissed the top of his head when he knew Harry was upset but didn’t want to talk about it yet, just wanted to sit in the comfort of Draco’s embrace until the pressure of the world went away. He told him by confiding in him about all the things he had trouble speaking of, trusting Harry to listen when he needed it the most.

He told him by saying the words too. He told him often and with emphasis, always looking into Harry’s eyes as he did it, intent on making sure Harry knew how much he meant it. Harry treasured every single way Draco loved him, and he knew Draco felt the same.

“I love you, Draco.”

“I love you too, Harry.” Draco smiled and planted a sweet kiss on his lips before taking his hand and leading him back to the table. Back to their friends. Back to the lives they’d carved out together, every ounce of joy hard-won and precious to the last drop.

First off, the Hannibal fandom gave me a scar worship/possession kink in the form of
scar porn so sorry if you're like "why is this even in here?!" because the answer is just BECAUSE I NEED IT OKAY hahaha. Moving along, I hope this cheesy cheesefest made you want to squeal with glee instead of vomit from its saccharine-ness, and I hope you enjoyed seeing our NYC pals again.

When I wrote my first Drarry fic, someone asked for a playlist of the music because, unexpectedly, a bunch of my readers got hooked on shoegaze and dreampop from reading the fic. I happily obliged, and when I wrote this fic, I knew I wanted to make three playlists: one for Harry, one for Draco, and one for the fic. Not sure if y'all will be into it, but here they are: Harry, Draco, Yours to Keep. The last one is songs that were featured in the fic but also songs that take you through the evolution of their relationship as well, and the individual ones are each boy's music taste. I wish Spotify gave you the option of putting liner notes in so I could tell you why I chose each song. I made a llooootttt of actual mix tapes with notes for friends and crushes and lovers back in the day so it's an art form I miss! (At this point, you're all probably like "thank god Spotify doesn't have a notes feature or we'd be seeing her goddamn longwinded notes from now until next Monday" lolol.) Also, word of warning that if these lead you to follow me on Spotify, you'll just be like "I don't understand how she can like Captain Beefheart that much while still listening to Taylor Swift." I contain multitudes, my friends.

Now that we're at the end, I hardly know what to say that I haven't said already. Thank you for following along with this fic. Writing it was a very important, personal journey for me that was hard at times. Seeing some of you who suffer from the same mental health issues as Harry does and as I do say that it was a good representation of depression and anxiety was the best possible reward to vulnerably putting this story out in the world. It's been really special to see you all from week to week. <3 I'm hanging around Tumblr as dracoismytrashson if you need to find me. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!