Notes on a resurrection

by newleaves

Summary

The plan was never to raise Sirius Black from the dead. Draco’s intentions were only ever to free him from the veil, most likely so that he could move on. It’s Harry’s actions as he entered the forest, ten years ago, which have afforded Black the prospect of life and are causing these accidents along the way…

A story about hope, courage and the act of changing state.

Notes

So, here we are! I thought I’d left fandom years ago, but then what did I do over Christmas but read HP and end up down a rabbit hole of Drarry and Wolfstar? I began this fic as an attempt to both have my cake and eat it, but in the end it became something else. I’m not sure how to describe it, but I really hope you like it, HP fandom… I don’t have a blog presence anymore, so if you do like the fic, please let other people know that it exists. :)
The unspeakables take their name from their objects of study. Down in the depths of the Department of Mysteries, they research the very essence of magic: love, hate, fear, joy, thought, memory, time and the turn of the seasons. To define these things is to be initiated into the wizarding world’s deepest unknowns, and such initiation is the dream.

Many who work in the Department in fact believe that such knowledge will forever remain out of sight. They work from a sense of duty, well aware that true knowledge is enlightenment, the gift of grace, rather than a trophy to be found. They see themselves and their fellow unspeakables as readers and as torch-bearers, committed to the truth, but more likely to be ever excluded from direct encounter with the magic of that they research.

Somewhere or other in the Department, Hermione Granger works on time, because she has experience with its manipulation. At the same time, she has the sort of body clock that brings her into work between 8:10 and 8:25 every morning and sends her home between 18:05 and 18:20 every evening, taking lunch about halfway through. She became a girl by age eleven, a woman around eighteen. It’s the spring of 2008. Granger’s well past twenty-five now, and will likely not quite become a wife before the age of twenty-nine, but it’s all in hand. Her boyfriend is known to be looking at rings.

Elsewhere in the Department, Draco Malfoy works on death, because it was the only thing that he could choose. He turns up when he’s clothed; he leaves much later than he should. Sometimes he sleeps on the staff-room sofa, and Granger finds time for him in her routine – when she arrives, on a break, when she leaves. If he hasn’t been home in more than a day, she wakes him with a cup of tea and sends him there to sleep in a bed.

They talk. They’ve been talking for years now, in seminars and mandatory sessions of mutual supervision. They talk about Granger’s boyfriend, the ways that he’s slow but more often the ways that he’s quick. They do not talk about his secret interest in engagement rings, because Draco is rarely a bastard to Granger anymore – because of time or because of love, perhaps, though neither is his area of expertise.

More often than is funny, Draco and Granger joke that the Department’s focus is not magic at all, but the biography of one of their peers from school, Harry Potter. Potter has not only travelled through time, but utilised its manipulation to cast a spell in which he was unskilled. He has not only seen others die, but has died himself and come back from the dead. Others have died for him and he has saved many lives. He has been hated and more often adored, remembered, imagined. He has been the subject of prophecy. Draco says that he’s ridiculous. Granger loves him, and everybody does, so this is no surprise – but she laughs at the joke, when Draco brings it up.

It’s a life, of a kind, devoting oneself to death, and Draco’s happy to have it. It’s a life devoted to the mysteries of Harry Potter, but that simply cannot be helped.

One day, something peculiar happens. One day, Draco casts Dissendium into the veil between life and death, angling it between seven circular mirrors, to help loosen the veil’s sharp edge. One day, the veil whispers to him with voices much louder than usual, but he doesn’t hear them clearly, because he isn’t listening. One day, at that very moment, a man stumbles from the veil’s far side, wand aloft and power surging around him, the last echo of his own call, Dissendium, joining the whispers in the air.

The magic wears itself out in an instant, diffusing, but the man remains. Still in motion, he turns on
a heel and darts three steps closer to the veil, its great stone arch, and he hurls a voiceless, much ill-advised Confringo at the old stone structure.

The spell does nothing, and then the man is bellowing, “SIRIUS!” He’s frantic as he lowers his wand. He seems confused for a moment, lost as he contemplates the arch, but he divides himself and calls again. “SIRIUS, CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

It’s been a long time since Draco last slept in a bed. He can feel it between his eyes. He wonders if he’s finally succumbed to Granger’s promised hallucinations, and this is the first.

All the same, Draco hasn’t lowered his wand, and he’s circling the wooden platform on stone from below to get a clear shot between the mirrors. The man hears him, but thinks that he’s someone else.

“Moony,” the man demands, transfixed by the veil. He’s carding fingers through the back of his hair, emotion in his jaw. His voice is rough from shouting. “Moony, don’t just stand there, you prat; we need to try again; we need…”

It’s lack of sleep and the clear, if basic, resemblance that makes Draco address him as he does. “Potter?”

The man starts at the name, turning towards Draco’s voice. He’s tall enough and straight-backed, more like Draco’s own stature and bearing than those of the man that he recognises. His hair is just as wild, but there’s more art to its tweaks and its turns. There is no familiarity in this man’s expression, no mocking humour or hate but merely raw, easy contempt, a frown which frames cold eyes of some neutral colour that isn’t very interesting.

He’s around Draco’s age, give or take a few years, perhaps. His clothes and his glasses are as much out-of-date as his hair, but they’re well made and well fitted. The clothes are wizarding robes, not muggle abominations, in gold and green. The man should be Harry Potter, but he very clearly is not.

“Who – ?” the man asks, before Draco can correct his mistake. Then in the next instant he dismisses Draco entirely, dividing again. “There’s no time for this,” he says, aiming his wand back at the veil. “DISSENDIUM!” he shouts, sending gold sparks along the edge of life and death, stepping forward so that the platform creaks and shouting, “SIRIUS!” so loudly that his face goes red.

More than anything, it isn’t the man’s clothes or his appearance that makes Draco think that this man is in no way at all Harry Potter. It’s the man’s divided attention, when the Potter Draco knows has only ever been singularly focused.

If there were not a pensieve in Draco’s office upstairs, rolls and books of parchment detailing the topics of Draco’s study, books upon books in the library detailing studies past – if Draco didn’t work in the Department of Mysteries – he knows that he would be holding himself back from saying his next, because his words are those of a madman.

“Mr James Potter,” Draco addresses the man, who startles, because it’s his name. Draco remains calm, just, because he’s able to draw on this protocol. “Please do not be alarmed. You may be wondering where we are, and who I am... You see –”

It’s platitudinous rubbish, designed for idiots who manage to cock up their apparition so badly that they don’t splinch themselves so much as find their way into nowhere. Before the Department successfully built the Nowhere Room in 1938 – a place within that nowhere place – this had left
these failed apparitionists as good as dead, a quirk of history which brought the Nowhere Room into Draco’s purview. Two wizards and a witch have found their way into nowhere over the last ten years, and Draco has welcomed all three of them home with a version of these words, followed by a summons to have their apparition licence reviewed.

All three of them took it well. James Potter does not.

“Fuck off,” he barks, his voice brighter, rounder and deeper than that which Draco continues to expect from his mouth. The swearing’s not right either. Easy money, easy life, even if it was all cut short. Private tutors before school; penmanship and elocution. That’s what James Potter sounds like. Draco’s childhood. “We’re busy. Can’t you –”

Then the man stops, dividing again. He looks around the veil’s arch, turning his head to the whispers, seeming to realise for the first time that his spells have had an effect that he did not intend, and that he and Draco are alone here in the dark, subterranean space.

“Remus?” he asks, his voice echoing as he searches the darkness. “Lil-“ And then his panic is back. “Lily?”

He leaps from the platform to the stone floor, casting light into the corners of the room, blazing out the darkness in a way that makes Draco’s tired eyes sting. The whispers are frantic.

“What the fucking hell have you done?” he shouts at Draco. The moment he starts casting hexes, thankfully, Draco is ready for him. “LILY!” he shouts into the light, as many times and more as he shouts for Remus Lupin, aiming for Draco with curses that would bind him, that would trip him, that would lift him up into the air.

He uses nothing that would permanently wound. He tries Expelliarmus, but he is divided and Draco is not, so Draco’s hawthorn wand barely moves in his hand. There’s power in James Potter’s magic, but he can only keep trying to build up to it, can’t concentrate, at least not for now. He’s distracted, split in two between his panic and his foe, and in the end Draco catches him with the Jelly Legs Jinx the way that the Dark Lord must have once caught him with the Killing Curse. From the Jelly Legs follows Draco’s own Expelliarmus, which brings to his feet with a clatter a solid red-brown wand that feels like tradition and brimstone, deep in Draco’s heels.

“Potter, will you calm down?” It feels odd to call another man by that name, especially one whose legs are wibbling. Draco ends the jinx. “You’ve found yourself in the Department of Mysteries, do you understand?” You’re the bloody mystery, he thinks.

“No,” Potter states categorically. “Because I should not be anywhere near here.” His hand is clenching around his absent wand, his eyes maybe brown, maybe blue. “What have you done with my wife?”

“I haven’t done a blind thing,” Draco tells him. Like son, like father, it seems. “She’s probably back there,” he says, gesturing to the veil. “Where you should be.”

Potter’s laugh is a deep and resounding rainforest sound, and Draco isn’t sure what to do. Out of everything that he’s committed to study, resurrection from true death is really much too close to religious experience. It’s an accident; it’s grace. He needs to confirm that this is really happening, and that he hasn’t fallen into delirium. He needs to confirm that the figure of James Potter is solid. He needs to consider why the man no longer appears twenty-one, but somewhere around thirty. He needs – he needs to talk to Harry Potter.

First, though, surely, he can get away with talking to Granger.
“Come with me,” Draco insists, to a man who is shaking his head. *You’re mad,* he seems to be saying. *Utterly mad.* “We’re going upstairs,” Draco repeats, refusing to say a single word else.

The Department of Mysteries, like magic itself, is an alliance between the mundane and the impossible. The experimentation rooms are odd, surreal places, directly connected to nowhere and all the other kingdoms. The veil itself, the Department’s core, is one of the oldest curiosities in the building, bringing death to the heart of wizarding London since before the modern Ministry was made.

Yet there are also the Department’s other rooms – its staff rooms and its library, its owlery and its individual working offices. Draco’s and Granger’s find themselves on their own short landing, a staff room hubbed with them to the stairs, and Draco knows from mandatory seminars that there are many more landings than this in the Department somewhere else, more offices and rooms, though he’s never been inclined to determine how many.

The Department’s funding is sacrosanct, though it waxes and wanes, much like the number of those accepted to pursue their chosen path of study. The wizarding community is small, and it is mainly British witches and wizards who study in London now after the Dark Lord’s wars, but the Department is renowned and its head is well known.

Sometimes Draco and Granger joke that in three generations half the British wizarding population will have to be born a Weasley. “Not according to Molly,” Draco says, and Granger sighs to remember Mrs Weasley’s complaints that only Bill and Percy have yet reproduced.

“Oh, the poor woman worries too much.” This is rich, coming from Granger. “I tell her, there’s plenty of time. For George and Angelina, and yes, for Ron and me.” She smirks, a little wicked. “I’ve started giving her books on the theory.” Of time, is what she means.

It seems certain, nonetheless, surely, that Molly Weasley’s collection on time cannot rival that in Granger’s office. They all have their personal collections, the unspeakables, and sometimes they borrow from each other. Draco has two walls full of books on death, on nowhere, the here and there and the come and go, another wall full of papers, with an angled desk between them made of cypress, typically clean of everything besides an empty spread of parchment, a crow-feather quill and a well of forest-green ink. The desk is tall, without a chair. At some point over the years he’s stopped sitting down, by choice.

Granger’s office has just as many books, and just as many papers. Her desk is flat, with a chair, and larger than Draco’s, bearing a number of clocks and watches and other timepieces that she’s found herself working on. There are spare items of warm clothing littered around the room – the odd jumper, scarf and hat. There are pictures of her family and friends and places that she’s been, her boyfriend and the man who’s like a brother to her. It’s an office more real than Draco’s, but then Granger has always found her feet set more firmly on the ground.

Draco feels out of place, standing within its walls. He feels even more out of place given the man who follows at his shoulder.

“Oh, hi Draco!” Granger glances up as he enters, responding to her call to come in. “This is unexpected.” She looks harried, sat at her desk, finishing a rough set of calculations with her vinewood wand still trained on a carriage clock. Harried but not rushed. “What’s…”

She glances up again, frowning for an instant at the figure now looking at books before hiding her grin in her work.
‘You’ve brought Harry! Have you finally made up, then? Is it now? I can act surprised, if you like, or outraged, perhaps?’

Draco has no idea what she’s talking about. ‘Granger.’ He tries to regain her attention.

‘You haven’t been to see Ron yet, have you?’ she continues jokingly, marking out her calculations. “Gimme a sec and I’ll come with you – he’s been itching to have a go at you both since, oh, New Year’s, I think it was, not this year but last. 2006. He’s going to –”

“Granger.” She really doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

“We’ll do something special, tonight, just the four of us. You’ll have to tell me the story – I’ve been dying…” She’s embarrassing herself now. “I thought it might have been when we were gone for the Cup, but that never…”

“Granger!” Draco bites out, on his last nerve.

“Though, wait.” She looks up, her frown complete. “The school holidays aren’t till next week. How –”

Not far from Draco’s shoulder, making both of them jump, James Potter interrupts the circles of their conversation. “That’s my son.”

He’s standing by a set of shelves, holding a photograph that must have been tucked between two runs of books. Draco has seen it before. It bears his image, among others, and it annoys him because he doesn’t think that Granger should own an image of his face. The thing was taken at a party for Ginny Weasley, with Granger, her boyfriend, Harry and him at a table in the beer garden of a countryside pub. The freckles on Granger’s boyfriend’s face suggest high summer, as do the long streaks of orange and pink in the sky. The photographer is clear from everyone’s behaviour – Granger’s easy grin, her boyfriend’s rolling eyes, their best friend’s flirtatious perch of his chin on the back of his fist. Draco is drinking his pint.

“He looks just like my grandfather.” James Potter’s expression now, today, is lost, his back still rod-straight, his brimstone wand still in Draco’s hand. “But those eyes…” He’s divided again. “Harry,” he says, echoing Granger’s intonation. “You two, you know my little Harry, and he’s grown up a man.”

“Draco,” Granger says, too calmly.

She’s standing up from her chair, setting down her quill. She’s wearing a fuzzy mustard-gold jumper with dark muggle trousers, her outer robe hung on the wall. The strength of her magic is plain as she pushes her hair back behind her ears, without success – the way that it always is. She accepts what Draco has done without question, but she’s not too happy that he’s palming off the problem.

She sighs, gathering strength. “Tell me that you haven’t brought Harry’s dad back from the dead.”

Draco glances at the man, remembering their mutual use of Dissendium. He’s an accident, really. “I think that he might have brought himself back, to be –”

Granger ignores him. “Please tell me that this isn’t the project that Vespers is letting you keep quiet.”

It’s been four years since the resurrection stone was found on the floor of the Hogwarts forest. It fell into the wrong hands, of course, but the episode led to a conversation in which Draco learned
some crucial information. That information was not about James Potter.

“Please tell me you told him that you know his son,” Granger demands, glancing down at Draco’s hands, the brimstone wand and his own hawthorn stick. “Tell me that you didn’t duel him to get him up here.”

“To be fair, he had a little speech,” Potter interrupts at this point, sounding amused for the first time that afternoon. Intelligence dances in his eyes, which now appear more blue than brown, his expression undivided in joy. “I’m afraid that it’s my fault, because I told him where to shove it.”

He puts the photograph down and strides forward, bold. His right hand is extended firmly in front of him, set for Granger to shake over the debris of time on her desk.

“James Potter,” he introduces himself, smiling at her, his vowels too warm and round. “Charmed.”

Unlike the Department of Mysteries, the Ministry of Magic’s Auror Office is full of people, in uniform robes, none of whom spares them a glance. Its domain is a large open room, which smells of coffee and parchment and only a little bit of something like blood. One of the walls hosts a sober array of framed photographs, accompanied by the legend,

*KILLED IN ACTION, 1975-2000. NEVER FORGET.*

Draco recognises his fourth-year Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, as well as his ever-estranged cousin. The man whose apparent death he’s been interested in, who fought with them both, is not memorialised. Nor is his aunt’s grandson’s father. It’s funny, Draco thinks, what people choose to remember.

On the far side of the room, there is a desk mostly buried in tall stacks of parchment, a sneakoscope, a foeglass, a framed photo of Granger reading a book as well as a few other odds and ends. Here sits Granger’s boyfriend. He’s as tall as he long ago came to be, ginger as ever, and he’s hooked over what looks like a report of some kind. His hunched shoulders have leaked blue ink from his quill onto his fingers, and his handwriting runs in a storm of uneven, ugly scratches.

“It’s the other one,” James Potter says pointlessly as they approach.

The man at the desk glances up. “Bit early for the pub, innit?” he says, finishing his sentence and fiddling his quill between his thumb and forefinger, spilling more ink as he glances at the clock on the wall. “Gimme half an hour.”

“Ron, we’ve got a situation,” says Granger, curling a hand over his shoulder in the chastest of caresses.

The boyfriend looks up more fully, frowning at Potter. “Oh,” he says, taking the situation in. “Oh hell.” He turns to Draco, ink on his fingers. “You don’t half like making things difficult, do you, Malfoy?”

Still exhausted, Draco just sweeps a hand in front of him. You said it, he thinks.

They leave immediately for number 12, Grimmauld Place, where Granger and her boyfriend live with their best friend, just as they have done, practically, since the age of eleven. The papers used to speculate, but Draco knows that the three of them would never be so interesting as to blur their boundaries with an ill-advised bunk-up in the cool hours of the night.
The thought amuses him, sometimes, if only to imagine whether Harry or Granger would run screaming first. For some reason, Granger’s boyfriend seems the most likely to go through with acting out. He’s pragmatic, Draco supposes. Less concerned with the principles of the thing. He could shut his eyes, if pushed, and lie back to think of England and let come what may.

Now, arriving through the downstairs floo and faced with something well beyond the bounds of sensibility, Granger’s boyfriend is not coping well.

“This is mental,” the man keeps on saying, now brushing ash from his robes. “Completely mental. Draco, mate, you’ve gone off the deep end this time.”

“Is he always like this?” James Potter asks over his shoulder, as though he and Draco are friends. The tone is uncanny, but what is there to say? “He’s usually worse.”

They’re greeted by Kreacher, whom Potter seems to find difficult, but Draco has always thought a class act. Master Harry isn’t home yet, but Kreacher is delighted to receive them, and doesn’t need to be asked to prepare some drinks. Mr Malfoy is a most pleasant surprise, here in the parlour, and Master Harry’s father, back from the dead – well. Tonight is surely the night for fillet of beef, and pistachio soufflé. Kreacher will decant some of the best wine from the cellar.

“Kreacher,” Granger says, because it’s her place to. She’s trying to let him down gently. “That all sounds very nice, but why don’t we save it for tomorrow? Let’s – let’s keep tonight casual, let Harry…”

They all know it, after all. The most likely outcome of this evening is going to be one of Harry Potter’s famously catastrophic strops, so there is no need to waste something from the Blacks’ astonishingly shameful, stunningly fantastic collection of well-stored vintage claret.

Granger continues, most of her hair in a great big clip on the back of her head. “Didn’t you say this morning that you were thinking about shepherd’s pie?” Kreacher looks mulish, always wearing his crisp black linen toga and his locket. “We’d be ever so grateful for something like that, Kreacher. Something straightforward.” Before the elf can protest, Granger’s boyfriend pitches in, leaning on the back of the parlour sofa, both of them stiff and serious. “But you can put us straight on the Ogden’s, Kreach,” he suggests. The elf perks up. He’s practical, Granger’s boyfriend. “Or anything else we’ve got in for everyday.”

“Ah,” the elf says, earnest now as he re-reads the situation. “Kreacher understands, Master Ronald. No more is needing to be said.” He excuses himself, vanishing with a crack.

Once he’s left, Granger’s boyfriend turns to the rest of them. “Don’t mind me,” he says, his eyes skating over Potter like the fiction he is. “But I’m getting trolleyed. It’s the only rational response, and I’m off shift.”

They take drinks upstairs in the drawing room, where the fireplace these days only holds a standard flame. Downstairs is the parlour; here was once the tapestry of Black. Now there’s newly purchased muggle wine, in a fresh and fruity style, as well as firewhiskey, because Kreacher knows what they drink. Harry will arrive downstairs, not here, and Granger will be the one to bring him up.

While they wait, they drink, and at one point Potter admires what’s been done with the house. “Padfoot always called this place a mausoleum,” he explains, relaxing, swirling whiskey in his cut-
crystal glass before he knocks it back and lets his ears steam.

“It took a long time,” Granger carries the conversation, leaning back into one of the two honey-gold Chesterfield sofas. The colours of the drawing room are warm yellow and green, mirrors opposite three full-height Juliet windows to fill the room with the last of their light. “And there were enough bad memories… It would have made just as much sense to sell up, but the place is enormous, and there was Kreacher to think about. Plus, you know, there’s always someone who can use a spare room in London. Ron’s mum…”

She pauses, having run into dragons. Draco glances at Granger’s boyfriend, who on the sofa next to her is studiously looking at the ceiling moulds. He’s thinking about engagement rings again, and children. The thoughts remarkably never look like fear.

“Well,” Granger rallies, her expression dogged. “This is Harry’s home now, and for ten years it’s been our home too. It was Sirius’s, in the end, and he left it to Harry. That means a lot.”

“Right,” Potter replies, in a posture of ease at the other end of Draco’s sofa.

"I’m home! Anybody here?"

The call comes from downstairs, unnecessarily, and Granger blinks, as though she’s forgotten what they’re here to do. Potter launches to his feet, a little edgier than anyone could have guessed. There’s a new prickling tension underneath Draco’s ribs, and he wonders whether he should make himself scarce.

It’s the drunknest of their group who reacts most honestly, sinking lower into green cushions and knocking back another finger of fire.

The plan was for Granger to collect Harry from downstairs, easing the path of his arrival with logic, common sense and the promise of emotional support. However, they have all apparently forgotten that number 12, Grimmauld Place is these days run impeccably by a house elf of the old stock, who is quite capable of welcoming his master and informing him that there are guests in the drawing room, including his master’s own father. They have also seemingly forgotten that climbing a staircase doesn’t take that long.

The door to the drawing room lies open, so even as Granger is disentangling herself from her knees, they’re all quite able to hear the familiar plods of a Potter on treads, as well as the tail end of a short conversation.

“… been on the butterbeer again? I’m not complaining, but the idea that Mr Malfoy’s here makes even less sense than…”

Harry Potter is rabbiting on the way that he always rabbit on, his accent flat and suburban, his tone light with irony – self-deprecation, for the most part, but with an edge that’s poised to turn on others and mock them for being foolish, for being earnest, when that’s all long gone by. Teaching has only further habituated him to the sound of this voice, his own, and it would drive anyone up the wall, the way that he speaks without thinking, letting his thoughts turn where they will.

When Harry appears in the drawing room, his robes dark grey and brown, the physical differences between him and their new acquaintance become visibly acute. Harry has never looked more twitchy, more scrawny, more quick in the way that his eyes dart to Granger, on her feet but paralysed, to Granger’s boyfriend, off his feet and halfway to paralytic, to Draco, who can only stare back at this carriage crash.
It takes a second for Harry to catch sight of his father. The old man sets his whiskey on the table and lurches around the sofa, back straight, striding swiftly with some combination of arrogance and manners which has him holding out his hand like the world’s biggest fool. “James Potter,” he says, introducing himself. “Charmed. You must be…” He almost doesn’t manage it, but, in the end, of course, when it’s all exactly wrong, he does. “You must be Harry.”

For a few moments, there’s nothing said at all. You’ve cocked this up, Draco thinks.

At the end of the day, Harry’s kind. He only leaves their new addition hanging for a couple of seconds. “You know,” he says lightly, arms crossed, “now’s about when most people say that I look like you.”

“Well –” James Potter starts to joke, because he doesn’t realise that he has really, really cocked this up.

Even as he speaks, Harry’s drawing his wand, entirely undivided. There’s no verbal command, but he flicks holly at his father like a conductor starting a symphony, feet firm on the wooden floor where he stands just off the old Turkish rug.

James Potter is forced to take a step backwards, blue-white sparks flushing from his clothes, fingers and hair in an icy shower. He shakes his head and more sparks fall out of his ears, vanishing into the air. “Bracing,” he remarks, sounding amused.

“A little something that I picked up from the goblins,” Harry replies, facetious but not joking. The two men sound nothing alike.

“What –” Potter starts again, but he’s left speechless as his son rudely sidles past his arm.

“What’re you doing here, Malfoy?” Harry snaps at Draco, who finds himself cowed against the arm of the tan leather sofa. There’s no wriggling out of the accusation in his green eyes.

Draco rests his hands on his knees, squeezing his muscles to quiescence and wishing that he’d stayed standing up. “You know me,” he says coolly, holding himself together. “I live for your emotional breakdowns.”

Harry snorts. Granger’s boyfriend pours himself more whiskey from the coffee table, the liquid sloshing.

“Hermione,” Harry demands. She squeaks. “What’s he doing here? What the hell –?” He can’t finish.

“It happened at work, Harry,” Granger says, still on her feet, her expression warm and wet and kind. “Something to do with the veil, you know. James – he appeared.” She sighs, rolling her eyes. “They – well, I think they had a duel, but he seems to be…” She glances at Harry’s father. He seems to be real, is what she’s trying to say.

“Right.” Harry looks around a little wildly, eyeing the whiskey and the wine on the sideboard behind him, eyeing his father, though the man seems unable to speak. “Well, I’m gone,” he declares finally, as though this is the last straw.

He vanishes himself with a familiar swish and snap through the air.

The tension in the room collapses, spinning out into something wretched. It makes Draco’s eyes hurt and his lungs feel short of breath. There’s a prickling feeling underneath his ribs and he clings to it.
“Oh no,” says Granger, crestfallen. She looks to her boyfriend. “Oh no, oh no, you don’t think…”

The man shakes his head, sloshed, holding out an arm for her to fall into. “It’s been a long time,” he says, and he seems to have an inkling that Granger doesn’t. “And it’s early yet; let him sulk for a bit.”

“It’s Friday,” Granger worries, and Draco wishes that he didn’t know why.

The boyfriend casts a nod to Potter, not quite looking at him, thinking of England, Draco suspects. “Come and sit down, mate,” he says as Granger worries, sucking whiskey from his teeth.

“He’s so inconsiderate sometimes.”

Granger’s boyfriend kisses her hair. “Food’s in an hour. He’ll be here.”

“Right. Yes. Shepherd’s pie.”

Poor Potter sits down slowly, his eyes wide and his body stiff. Draco’s squeezing the arm of the sofa behind him. “I cannot believe that that’s my son,” Potter says, and Draco doesn’t know what he feels. Sympathy? “I don’t –” The man sounds miserable. “Lily would say that I’m overreacting,” he continues, bringing all three of them into a confidence as he refills his whiskey from the bottle on the table. “But I never thought – he’s so…” He drinks his measure, topping himself up again as he implores Granger, “Sirius raised him, you said?”

Draco flinches.

“Oh mate, no,” Granger’s boyfriend tells Potter kindly, holding out his own glass for the man to fill up. Draco shuts his eyes, just for a moment, his fatigue overwhelming. He’s still perched on the end of the sofa. “Sirius – we only knew him a few years, poor bastard.”

“Didn’t he, um, didn’t he tell you?” Granger asks carefully, as though it could ever be that simple.

“No,” is Potter’s response. “It’s not…” He sighs, apparently overcome with the difficulty of describing what happens after death. He’s staring at the table, into nowhere. Draco can almost feel it; hear the whispers. “You can’t talk about these things. You’re there and there’s people around you – there’s a feeling of who should be, and Padfoot…”

Sirius Black is not where he should be, Draco knows. Granger is going to figure it out, any moment now. They’re all going to figure it out, just like James Potter and whoever he’s been working with in the beyond. It’s all collapsing around Draco’s ears – the time and solitude and peace, the things which Draco needs to think objectively, to work carefully, with accuracy –

“I should be going too.” Draco forces the words from his mouth, diverting the conversation. He stands, catching sight of himself in one of the mirrors. He’s an embarrassment, his face drawn and his hair flat, a touch of stubble like glitter around his lips and his jaw. His robes are solid, flat black, and they leave him as a floating head and hands. “Bye all.”

“Wait –” Granger says, confused.

Her boyfriend sticks to practicalities. “We still on for the weekend?”

Draco’s agreed to help with Granger’s engagement ring. “Yes, yes,” he dismisses, disapparating.

As he leaves, his eyes meet Potter’s uncanny hazel frown. The man’s thinking something, but Draco can’t read what it is.
With a *pop*, Draco appears in the midst of an argument. It’s a relief, unfortunately.

It’s his bedroom, really, and all Draco wants is to sleep in it, but he might have guessed that there’s now Harry Potter to contend with, pacing a gale across the rug in front of his bed.

“What the hell have you done?” Harry’s yelling at him, as if he started before Draco arrived. “You can’t *do* this – you can’t bring back my *father*... What the hell were you *thinking*?!” He’s still moving, a storm in his expression and too much tension in his angled jaw.

It’s disorientating. Draco’s head is spinning from the trip, and he didn’t imagine, not entirely...

“Three months, Draco,” Harry spits, his eyes bright and too green suddenly now, again, like always. “You’ve been avoiding me for *three months* and then you turn up with my *father*? Do you even understand how normal people behave? You are *unbelievable*.”

The room’s nothing special, and neither’s the flat that it belongs to. He bought a divan when he moved out of the Manor as a stopgap, but he’s never got round to replacing it. He has a feeling that the mattress is officially old. For some reason he chose a palette of neutral, bloke-ish white, blue and grey. It felt minimal at the time.

Poor choices aside, the place is his home, and he’s unaccustomed here to guarding his tongue. “You think that it takes three months to break all the rules of life and death.” He sneers at Harry now, “Are you *simple*?”

The man looks at him like he’s falling apart, flapping his arms uselessly. “Then what?” he demands, with a furious sniff. “This is some Lord of the Dead rubbish if it’s anything, and I want an answer. I want to know how long he’s here for.” He counts on his fingers. “I want to know why he looks like he’s our age – he died when he was twenty-one, for Merlin’s sake, and was born fifty years ago. It makes no sense at all.”

The end of the paragraph is weak, but Harry keeps a hold of himself.

Draco’s looking at him, thinking, tired. *Lord of the Dead.* It’s not one of his Department titles, which are for the most part ceremonial. Mysteries has roots which run much deeper than the Ministry.

“No. This is your fault,” Draco snaps before he can stop himself, realising that it must be true. Only one of them has come close to bearing the title *Lord of the Dead.* “You fucking used it.” There are tears in Harry’s eyes and he can see them, but Draco’s not sure that he cares. It’s coming together, here in front of him. “You didn’t fucking think for one fucking second...” Draco wraps his hands around his elbows, clenching for a moment because this is a nightmare, he’s sure of it. “Why can’t you ever *think*, Potter?” he despair, gesturing again.

“What are you *talking* about?”

*The resurrection stone,* Draco bellows, half to himself.

“That was *years* ago,” Harry yells back, too comfortable in Draco’s bedroom – always so fucking comfortable. His voice is cracking now, deep with tears. “I was still at the Ministry; why are you...”

They don’t talk about it. No one talks about the little adventure they went on, a few years ago, which saw Draco’s parents both fall down dead. Granger and her boyfriend were out of the country, and it was Ministry business, but it isn’t safe – it will never be safe to talk about the stone.
“Not then,” Draco tells him shortly, because he isn’t talking about it now. “You told me…” He’s so tired, and Harry’s standing so far away. “You had it in the forest, at the close.” Ten years ago, it must be, nearly. “You were, for one phenomenally stupid moment of your phenomenally stupid life, the very real Master of Death.” With the help of one blatant act of thievery, he doesn’t add. But he includes the part that Harry’s never told him. “You used the resurrection stone. On your father, I presume.”

Harry freezes, clenching his fists. There’s something he’s not saying, but he doesn’t say it, so Draco doesn’t know what it is. They’re separated by a rug. The room smells faintly of turning soil, and Draco thinks that it’s coming from him. All the white and grey in here is awful.

“You used the resurrection stone on your father,” he tells Harry again. “He appeared as he died, a youth aged twenty-one. That was ten years ago, and now he’s here with us.” There, that adds up.

“But…” The words tumble out of Harry’s mouth without any thought for their meaning. His eyes are full, glimmering behind his glasses. “But he was just a shade, and then – he was gone, and I…” He sniffs again, forcefully. “What is he now?”


“And why is he here?” Harry asks more firmly, the bastard. “What have you been doing?” Draco answers through gritted teeth. “I’ve been working on the veil. It shouldn’t have…”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see its insides.”

Harry looks at him, and he’s not a child. He must be full of adrenaline, and he’s been on the edge of tears since surely before Draco arrived in this room. And yet, Harry Potter is Professor of Defence against the Dark Arts, these days, at Hogwarts of everywhere, and he’s more than clever enough to keep the title.

“I told you a lot of things, back then,” says Harry now, cautious, a pair of frowning black eyebrows beneath dark hair. He’s told Draco a lot more since, and Draco’s sometimes exchanged the favour. He’s a leaky bucket, Harry, with his thoughts and with his secrets. “I haven’t seen you in three months and now…”

“Three months?” Draco said it before, but it’s still so stupid. “Harry, I’ve been working on this since the day you told me.” Because Sirius Black is lost in the veil. Draco’s fucking veil. Lost like an apparition accident to the Nowhere Room, but somewhere else, somewhere hidden. “I have a responsibility.”

“Since the…? What are you talking about, you have a responsibility?”

“To the dead.”

There’s a pause. And then, with no sense of propriety at all, Harry Potter is storming across Draco’s drab, threadbare rug to kiss him full on the mouth. Draco’s hands rise instinctively, and then Harry’s tears are falling on Draco’s fingers from behind closed eyes and his glasses, which always get in the way. “You utter helicopter.” He never knows what to do with his own hands, Harry, and they’re fidgeting now between Draco’s shoulders and elbows – but his lips are full and soft, insistent, overwhelmed. “Stop it.”

“We don’t do this,” Draco murmurs, not letting go of Harry Potter’s jaw, which would never have
seemed weak if it weren’t for his father’s.

The comment gets him half a laugh, and a smirk that makes the kissing feel like a joke. “That’s my line,” Harry says, pecking Draco on the cheek before he drags them decidedly into a hug, ducking his nose into Draco’s collar. “And I know,” he adds after a moment, gripping tighter. “It’s just – been a while.”

Draco has one hand in hair that’s too thick to exist, like an animal’s winter pelt – and then he’s tracing wizarding embroidery on the collar of a robe, which Harry Potter should never have found a taste for, teaching post or no. He sighs, because it isn’t supposed to be like this.

“There’s shepherd’s pie tonight,” he tries. “I hear that Kreacher…”

“Kreacher’s like clockwork,” comes the interruption, muffled. “It’s not tea time yet.”

Tea time. Something in Draco wants to scream, Dinner, dinner, dinner. Such a stupid thing to worry about, with things where they are, and yet so fundamental.

“I need to sleep.” Draco shuts his eyes, pulling back when he finds the scent of something like the seaside in Harry’s hair. “I spent the day transfiguring mirrors from sunlight and it’s as much of a headfuck as it sounds.”

“Didn’t start your day in the morning either, I reckon.” Harry’s looking at him owlishly, pushing glasses up his nose, the lenses smudged to shit. He shakes his head. “You’re a disaster.”

Draco scoffs, because he has enough strength for this. “You’re one to talk.”

He earns himself a fragile smile, and too much hope.

“Don’t,” Draco warns, looking away to start pulling off his outer robe, to work on the inner one’s fastenings. “I’m not telling you anything.” He didn’t imagine that there would be a route back this way, and it could still go horribly wrong. “I’m conducting research; that’s all.”

“And it’s not likely Dad can stay. I know. If he even… Merlin,” Harry snaps, sounding entirely like himself for one crystal-clear delayed reaction, while Draco pulls his inner robe over his head. “Who greets their son with a handshake and an introduction?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Draco replies, risking a glance. Though he imagines that it’s exactly what he would do himself in the same situation.

Harry’s frowning. He slumps to sit on the end of the bed, sighing as he takes his glasses off and tries to clean them with his sleeve. “Oh,” he complains, as Draco crawls beneath the covers in his underwear – eventually and finally. It feels like bliss to shut his eyes. “I dunno how to do this. I don’t even know him.”

With a wave of his wand, Draco dispels the lights. He’s had enough father-son strife to last a lifetime.

Harry snorts as the room turns dark. “No pie for you, then, I take it.” He leaves the bed, the mattress shifting. “I s’pose this is sweet dreams.”

“Fuck off,” Draco tells him, curling into the pillow. Harry shouldn’t be using Draco’s flat as a hideout anyway.

“I’m glad that you’re over your snit,” Harry says before he leaves.
It’s only then, on the cusp of sleep, that Draco remembers why he’s been so annoyed since Christmas. It’s because he found out that Harry hates him.
The story really begins in 2004, when Harry Potter told Draco to run.

Draco was finishing his dissertation, back in 2004, because he was as yet unqualified as an unspeakable, and he worked in the Department of Mysteries only as a student. He had not yet conceived of his project to free Sirius Black from the veil. Instead, he was working on the Killing Curse, because no one ever had, because it was important, and because his memories provided more than enough of a dataset.

Vespers Avalorne, Head of Department and every other honorific – Draco’s supervisor, with her most famous work on memory – she liked the project not least because it wound up the other departments of the Ministry. Draco liked the project because he found it almost therapeutic, sieving his thoughts until the details meant more than the whole.

Sometimes, Vespers sent him home with calming candles and bath salts, saying that they had been a gift. Draco exchanged them for bottles of wine that he purloined from his parents’ cellar. He wouldn’t finish the thesis for another year, and Vespers would have to send him home many times in the second half of 2004, early 2005, with nothing exchanged between them but an order. But no one yet suspected that this would happen. Back in the summer of 2004, Draco was weeks away from completion, months at most, and there wasn’t yet any rush.

One day in June, 2004, weeks away from completion, Draco found himself in Vespers’ office.

“Potter?” he found himself saying, the syllables like an old friend. He hadn’t seen the man in years – hadn’t thought about him in at least a week or two. He hadn’t had cause: Granger was on qualification leave, which had an official name that nobody used. She was using the time to yet again attempt to restore her parents’ memories, out in Australia with her boyfriend. Queensland, as Draco recalled.

“Potter?” Draco insisted, that day in Vespers’ office, deep underground but cheery despite it, the walls a soft sky blue, floating clouds above a bookcase concealing what felt like borrowed sun.

“Potter?” Vespers told him, offering the memo over her desk. She was short, a little stout, and she had a boxy haircut. “Request for consultation,” she quoted, not looking at the parchment. “Misuse of Muggle Artefacts. Investigating Officer, H. Potter. Subject matter, ghosts. That’s you, Draco, my dear.”

She always insisted on first names, Vespers. Collegiate familiarity. The result was that Draco felt no shame in checking the parchment for himself. “But Potter’s an auror,” he said, because he knew this to be true. “He must be undercover.”

“Nope,” Vespers looked sceptical, her grey-blonde eyebrows raised expressively. “Not sure why they’d bother, to be honest.” Vespers looked sceptical, her grey-blonde eyebrows raised expressively. “But it would make it all a bit more fun. Don’t waste too much time on whatever it is he wants,” she advised. “You won’t be paid by the hour.”

“I’m going to be paid?” Draco thought. He wasn’t stupid enough to ask.

Vespers heard the question anyway. “Yes, and I’m sure you’ll appreciate the jolly new pair of shoes you’ll afford, in exchange for ten days’ work.”
Draco gave the joke half a grin. This was the Ministry, as far as things went. The pay never covered the hours. But the place had been good to him, Draco thought, considering his role in the war. The Dark Mark was still on his arm, after all. He’d leached it and leached it and leached it, but the scar remained with some of the green colour, the deepest tendrils of its magic. He’d grown used to it, almost, but it was still there.

“Off you pop, then,” Vespers told him now, shooing him away from her desk.

_H. Potter_, Draco double-checked again as he left for the lifts. _Misuse of Muggle Artefacts_. A sink subsection of the DMLE, full of Hufflepuff and Weasleys.

Yeah, right.

They’d gone as far as to mock up an office for Potter, though Draco wasn’t surprised. It was down a distant back corridor of Level Two, and there were three names on the door. Draco knocked, not waiting for an answer before he let himself inside.

“Come in…” called out a familiar voice, too late. “Oh.” The bastard still managed to react first, climbing to his feet. “Malfoy, it’s you. Well, I suppose Hermione said…”

“Potter.” It really rolled off the tongue, that name, in a breath of disdain that Draco was proud of. “You asked for someone from Mysteries.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

They were the only ones there in the office, which was a catastrophe, as Draco might have expected. Its three desks faced away from each other, shelves above them stacked with papers and muggle knickknacks, which Draco only half recognised. He vaguely recalled that one was used for making Belgian waffles. Everything was a shade of brown, from the carpet tiles to the walls to the wood, to Potter’s hideous muggle trousers and the belt that bound them around his white buttoned shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled to his elbows.

“So, ghosts,” Draco prompted. He crossed his arms, his robes black. “Would you care for the full lecture series, or will the ten-minute set of soundbites suffice?”

“Right – no, er…” Potter blushed, taking the slight as intended, looking down at his desk where in amongst the other rubbish were three large volumes that Draco recognised as the standard reference work on spirits, ghouls and other revenants. One of the volumes was open to a page faced with a woodcut, as though Potter had been _reading_. “I wasn’t expecting – I mean…” He stalled, hand on the illustration. “How’re you keeping?” he asked. “It must’ve been five years or more.”

Since the Malfoys passed their supervised probation period, before the two years of check-ins and passive monitoring. Yes, Potter had been in the meeting, _because he was an auror_.

“One can’t complain,” Draco allowed, quite pleased to see Potter flustered, even if this cover was the flimsiest charade in existence. He pushed his advantage. “In all honesty…”

Then his composure was completely ruined, quite suddenly, by the sound of an intense scuffle behind his head. Draco ducked immediately, wand out and head turning to see a dragon – an infant, honest to Merlin _dragon_ – ruffle its way free of a scarlet-red dog bed set on top of a filing cabinet. It reared back, about two foot in height, wings spread to maybe four, its hide a mélange of pink and purple, lavender and plum…

The dragon should have breathed fire, but instead it breathed pompoms with a wheezy squeak,
shooting them at Draco in a gleeful stream of rainbow-patterned fuzz. Potter laughed, the sound crackling and whipping like birch twigs.

Hand in front of his face, Draco caught about five of the walnut-sized knots, and it was only then, squeezing them, that he realised that the dragon was a plush children’s toy. Squeaking, but quite animate, it took flight over Draco’s head, corkscrewing through the air to land awkwardly on Potter’s desk. Papers slipped from their piles.

“Sorry; this is Puff,” Potter said, grinning like a maniac, completely unapologetic as he scratched the thing’s felted head. It squeaked again and breathed a few more pompoms. The ones in Draco’s hand were vanishing as though to be conjured anew. “Did he give you a fright?”

Bastard, Draco thought, his heart hammering and hammering. You utter bastard.

“He’s a prototype from George’s shop,” Potter continued, sharing a glance with the thing’s glassy eyes.

The part of Malfoy well trained by departmental seminars wondered why Potter had gendered the thing. At the same time, the part of him that had grown up self-obsessed with dragons remembered that there was something about crests and tail shapes, all of which stood for most species. It could be sexed, probably.

“He’s supposed to be for kids, but as a first go he came out a bit too real, so he’s more like a pet than a toy. George had him in the shop, but then I said I’d look after him.”

At this point in time, Draco had no way to associate the name Teddy with his estranged aunt’s grandson, who was called Edward, as far as he’d been told. He settled for brushing his hair out of his face and rearranging his cuffs.

Potter paused, as though wrong-footed. He’d been trying to wind Draco up, it suddenly became clear. Right, yes. Ha ha, that Malfoy: scared of a children’s toy… Only now Potter was blinking, off-centre. “Er… I think so. I got Teddy a phoenix, last birthday.”

At this point in time, Draco had no way to associate the name Teddy with his estranged aunt’s grandson, who was called Edward, as far as he’d been told. He settled for brushing his hair out of his face and rearranging his cuffs. “They – they’ll be popular.”

This wasn’t right. The pair of them were supposed to be at each other’s throats. Draco knew it, and the expression on Potter’s face said he knew it just as well.

He just – he missed Pansy.

“OK.” Potter seemed nonplussed, but he recovered well enough, re-arranging some of the loose papers on his desk. “Well, anyway,” he said, visibly now in his twenties, rather than bearing the shadows of Draco’s memory. There was a touch of poorly shaven stubble above his lip, and his skin seemed a little ruddier, more swarthy than that of the angel child in school. He was relaxed, absentmindedly shoving his glasses up his nose and scratching his head with firm fingers, his arms toned with stringy muscle. “I need some help with a case. It’s not really MOMA’s remit anymore, but no
It was a vision, really. The boy who lived, their saviour, the wizarding world’s greatest living hero – hidden in plain sight by layers and layers of beige. There was a different energy to him, Draco thought, deferring teenage indignation in favour of caffeine, outdoor sport and late-night binge drinking. He’d heard tell of it from Granger, but it had never fully registered. She’d said that the Prophet had all but given up, and now Draco could see why.

The scar on Harry Potter’s head was barely visible these days – to look at him, no one would guess what he’d done, or what he was capable of. It was astonishing.

“D’you have a muggle change of clothes somewhere?” he was asking Draco now. “It’d be easier to go and meet her.”


Potter glanced at him, his mouth crooked in a smile beneath screwed-up eyebrows. It was as though he couldn’t believe what he was doing.

They apparated to the centre of muggle Salisbury. Potter had a backpack – brown, of course, but quite handsome in worn leather – and he’d somehow managed to secret his books inside it. Draco had changed into black jeans and a black t-shirt, leaving behind the zipped, hooded thing that he also owned on Potter’s insistence that it was June.

Draco had actually tried to refuse this point quite forcibly, but Potter’s banishing charm was stronger than Draco’s summons, at least for today, which was highly embarrassing and Draco would never speak of it again.

It wasn’t especially warm, this June day, but the sun was high in the blue Wiltshire sky. Draco rubbed his arms as they made their way out from the shade of St Thomas’s church, feeling peevd.

As the day went on, he was going to see that a good number of muggles were wearing hooded jumpers of their own, which wouldn’t help with this particular feeling. At the same time, the jumpers were most often going to be teamed with overly long frayed jeans that trailed on the ground where the muggles walked, dragging in dirt. Warming up in the sun, of which he usually saw little, Draco was going to end up feeling torn, most of all.

Cutting between buildings, for now, Draco and Potter were soon in front of the old Victorian corn exchange, across from the open-air market place. Tudor, Georgian and more Victorian architecture stood squat quite happily around them, only as tall as the trees, and a confluence of roads made a three-way fork of shopping routes.

They were looking for a ghost, and she was there to be found at the centre of this crossroads, on a large traffic island that was bridged to the mainland by pelican crossings. The crossings had recently been replaced and the local press was saying that they were haunted. The press had it right, Potter had found out earlier that week.

“There’s something off about her, though,” Potter explained as they pushed the button for the crossing and waited. “She’s got a little toddler, but – I don’t think that’s it.”

He didn’t need to say it, but of course it made everything that bit more sad.

As the green man appeared, Draco didn’t make the connection between Wiltshire, the Dark Lord and this woman’s death. He hadn’t been into Salisbury for years, and the Manor was miles away.
To Draco’s mind, geography mattered little: it was only one of the factors that could affect the ease of apparition, or the length of time taken by the Knight Bus or the floo. He would come to adjust this opinion in time.

Sara Chaudhury was sitting on the edge of a raised flowerbed that took up one point of the traffic island. She was staring into space, spectral white and absentmindedly rocking a similarly translucent pushchair, which the muggles clearly couldn’t see, just as they couldn’t see her. She’d died in her late twenties, early thirties, perhaps, and she wasn’t dressed for the weather, instead for something more like late autumn.

“Hi Sara,” Potter said as they drew close, his thumbs hooked behind the straps of his backpack. “Good to see you again.”

“Harry,” Sara greeted him, with a warm smile. She didn’t stand up. “Who’s your friend?”

They didn’t correct her. “Draco Malfoy,” Draco introduced himself. He did not say that he was charmed.

Sara looked at him, bemused. “Fun name,” she said.

“He’s here to help out,” said Potter, which was a joke in itself.

It was easy to sit either side of her, like two men in the summer who wouldn’t want to be close. Their conversation met in the space between.

“How’s Amy?” Potter asked, apparently not in a rush. He was talking about the toddler in the pushchair, whom Draco assumed to be sleeping.

Sara shrugged. “She’s been OK. Up early, though.” She sighed, apologetic. “I know you said we shouldn’t, Harry, but I’m afraid we had another round of Mummy button Mummy button Mummy button at maybe six AM? So, um, there’ll probably be another story about it.”

“You can push the button for the crossing?” Draco asked, just to be certain.

Sara nodded easily, no matter the redundancy of this question – as though she was used to doctors’ appointments, or similar, and had been informed about Potter’s plan to request consultation. “Only the button, though. We can cross, too, but we get stuck about ten feet past the kerb.”

Draco looked around them, into the morning sun, into the city’s quiet weekday business. It wasn’t a huge sphere of influence that Sara had, but it was well within normal range. The crossing button was an odd point of focus, but not necessarily significant.

“Can you remember,” he asked, “how you died?”

“Well,” the woman said, glancing at Potter. “Like I told Harry here the other day, it’s sort of yes, sort of no.”

Sara had been shopping, Draco learned, on a Tuesday morning in late 1997. She’d been in the habit of getting out every day, just for air, and her husband had been at work. He was a solicitor, and Sara was qualified too, though she’d stopped practising once Amy was born, because she’d wanted to be home and they’d been planning to have another baby.

The last thing she remembered was crossing to the island. It had been a gloomy, grim day, though Sara had risked the trip without an umbrella. There had been lights cast into the sky. “Like a horrible face.” The green man had appeared, the cars tamed by him and the crossing beeping, and
Sara didn’t remember anything else.

The lines were faint on Draco’s arm, these days, but they were there. He wished he had a jumper-jacket to cover them, but it was easier, also, not to have to roll up his sleeve. “The face in the air,” Draco asked, because he had to confirm, “did it look something like this?”

Sara the ghost peered at his inner forearm, which Draco rubbed to raise the Dark Mark’s old colour. Potter said nothing, and Draco couldn’t look at him.

“Yes, I suppose it did,” their victim agreed.

It would be on record somewhere, Draco supposed: an attack on muggles in central Salisbury, November 1997. There’d be a list of the dead and the perpetrators, the names of Sara and Amy Chaudhury crisply printed on beige parchment in ink. Another record for the piles on somebody’s desk.

That record would explain what had happened, but not why Sara and Amy were here in 2004, on a Thursday, returned as ghosts or something visually very similar.

“Do you remember how you were feeling,” Draco took another tack, hiding the old Mark back against his jeans, “when you were shopping that day?”

“No,” Sara replied, frowning and shaking her head. “Not really. I think I was weighing up chops versus mince…”

“And your plans – to have another baby…”

“Oh, there was nothing set in stone!” Sara laughed, looking at Potter before she turned back to Draco. Potter was smiling sympathetically, but his green eyes were shrewd.

Draco avoided them. “Certainly, but –”

“I mean, we were giving it a go,” Sara interrupted, with a wink to her voice. “But the idea was to see Amy into playgroup, maybe school; see what happened. It’s not clear we’re very fertile,” she added, waving away whatever she saw on Draco’s face, “but you don’t want to think about that.”

Draco hadn’t realised that there was a list in his head, but he felt himself cross off Second Baby. The next item was Husband. “Mr Chaudhury, then. Have you seen him since your return? Would you like us to – ?”

“Rav?” Sara asked, less amused but clearly not agitated by the thought. “No – I mean, it’s been years, Harry says.”

Draco risked a glance at Potter, who shrugged. He wasn’t getting it, apparently, but he could tell that Draco’s questions weren’t aimless.

“He’ll have been gutted,” said Sara, with certainty. “The last thing he needs is me or you two dragging things up for him.” She laughed, lightly. “He won’t even be able to see us, will he?”

“Right,” Draco agreed, because muggles couldn’t see ghosts.

"Look, I had a good run,” Sara said, a little impatient now, rocking the pushchair back and forth. “I could get angry about Amy, but I’m not sure there’s much point. We’ve nothing to do here. I want to know our options.”
Draco asked a few more questions, to be friendly, but from here the route forward was clear. He didn’t bother consulting with Potter, because in the end there was only one decent thing to do, and there was no world that existed where Potter didn’t do the decent thing.

“I need to fetch a few supplies from my office,” Draco told her. Amy was starting to wake up now, fussing, so he got out of the way and stood with one shoe hitched to the flowerbed. “But we can come back after lunch and get you both moved on.”

“Really?” Sara sounded pleased, as expected, taking Amy into her arms. The child stared at Draco with a wise, blank expression, her hair tied up in a tuft on top of her head. For some reason he immediately felt like crying, his eyes searing hot. “That would be wonderful.”

Potter looked startled, but he said the right things. “Yeah, that’s great.”

“I’d like to take some readings, too, if you don’t mind.” Draco said this to his knee, but it was etiquette; it was necessary. “Completely non-invasive,” he promised. “Just in case…”

Sara Chaudhury of Salisbury said yes to everything, because she wasn’t a ghost, by the strongest definition. She wasn’t here to haunt them; she was just here. That afternoon, she pushed her child’s buggy into the sacred circle, concealed by the traffic island’s flowerbed, and only smiled as Harry Potter threw down the ashes and bid her farewell.

She was gone by three o’clock, and Draco didn’t know why.

“That makes me feel better,” Potter said simply, collecting the runestones. “Thanks, Malfoy.”

Draco didn’t reply, uncertain how he felt. The reading of Mrs Chaudhury’s passage was caught in his hawthorn wand, and he would have to return to his office again to spin it out and conduct the analysis.

“But I mean…” Potter continued talking to himself, their Notice Me Not meaning that only Draco was paying attention. “There was something off with her, right? Ghosts don’t usually… They don’t want to go.”

He had no control over his speech patterns, Draco thought. That was Potter’s problem. That and his awful suburban accent, the consonants scratchy and the vowels inarticulate. He was trampling around a council-managed flowerbed and he looked right at home, the way that he looked at home everywhere, the darling of ghosts and muggles, witches and wizards alike. He’d just cast an advanced runic spell with nothing more than a glance through Draco’s painstakingly drafted instructions and a single practice flick of his wand.

“Ghosts are trapped in this world by unfinished business.” You irritating fuck, he didn’t say.

Potter rolled his eyes, trampling geraniums. “That’s what I said.”

How had Draco forgotten? How? The man was intolerable. “Sara Chaudhury had no such business.”

“So,” Potter completed the thought, as though they were in this together. “What was she doing here?” The runestones went back into Potter’s bag, which was impossible, just like him.

It was a mystery that they would solve over the next week and a half, perhaps. They would do it together, much to Draco’s chagrin. The few galleons he was paid by the DMLE would not cover the hours that he spent working at anything like a standard wage, and nor would they compensate for the consequences of their investigation.
But for now, on this first day in June, in 2004, Draco didn’t know these things. He didn’t know much of anything. Having spoken directly to one, maybe two of the Death Eaters’ victims, not watching his memories but outside in the Salisbury sun, Draco knew that he needed to be alone, and he left with a sharp word. “You’ll hear from me by the end of tomorrow. I’ll try to keep my comments to words of one syllable.”

There’s a little more to it, but suffice to say that from this day on it all went to shit.

Sara and Amy weren’t the last of the Death Eaters’ muggle dead to reappear, and nor were they the last to reappear in Wiltshire. Location mattered sometimes, well enough. Sometimes it indicated the actions of a man who couldn’t apparate very far anymore, because the Crucio had given him a dicky heart.

Harry Potter’s instincts were to keep the details quiet, as things went along, because there was something off with it all that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Draco wanted it all to be done with, but he returned the man’s memos – ignoring the fact that Potter had signed and sent in the remittance claim at the end of their first day together.

Reports of ghostly activity took them out to the countryside villages, but it all ended up at Malfoy Manor, to where Hogwarts’ first post-war Defence against the Dark Arts teacher had brought the resurrection stone, sending word to a number of men known only to themselves and to one Lucius Malfoy, who had not been the same since the war.

The plan to retrieve the stone followed from the need for haste more than anything. As a magical artefact that had been cursed, dashed with a sword and repurposed in the first place to house part of the Dark Lord’s soul, the resurrection stone did not work reliably and the plotters of Malfoy Manor were, for that June, still making sense of how it might be controlled. But there was no telling in June what might have come from July.

There was, moreover, an issue of use-by dates. In a clear testament to his upbringing, it seemed that Harry Potter always kept bottles of the Polyjuice Potion in the kitchen of number 12, Grimmauld Place. It was Granger who brewed the potion, however, and Granger with her boyfriend remained out of the country. The batch in stock was on the turn by the time that things had been figured out, and nothing had been brewed for July. Potter had never gained his NEWT in Potions, after everything, a fact that it stunned Draco to learn at the time.

They bungled it because it would have been a greater risk not to try, and the moment came. They had the help of Draco’s mother, the Polyjuice and the contents of Harry Potter’s backpack – and they got the stone away from the plotters – but the rest of the raid was a mess. They were seen, and Lucius Malfoy tried to cast the Killing Curse on his son. Narcissa took the hit without words, apparating directly into the line of fire, disillusioned such that her dead body fell to the floor looking mostly like carpet. On Malfoy’s next attempt the curse rebounded, and it was Harry Potter who got Draco out of the building, unable to disapparate but alert enough to keep his head, grab hold of Draco’s wrist and tell him, sharply, to run.

It was the sort of thing that no one expected to happen, and certainly not twice in the space of twenty-five years. The deaths were accidental, for the most part, pure bad luck and collateral damage in a bumrush of a fight that stunned the soon-to-be former Professor of Defence against the Dark Arts and generally incapacitated the group of long former Death Eaters, who had not allied themselves to the plot out of faith in their fallen master, not in all reality, but out of desperation as their names sank down into infamy.

The Malfoy Manor wards trapped the plotters in the house from the moment that Lucius fell dead,
though Draco did not realise at the time that it was he who had made it so. It was ultimately Minerva McGonagall who put the call through to the Ministry, which sent investigators to find the seven men and to make the arrests. Ronald Weasley would likely have been one of the arresting officers, but he was away with his girlfriend.

As the Polyjuice wore off, Harry Potter successfully dragged Draco Malfoy to the edge of the estate and disapparated them three times in succession, his grip tight on Draco’s upper arm and his breath plain ragged. He brought them to a sheltered outcrop on some sort of moor, and he pulled a tent from his impossible leather backpack, because the wind was howling with spite and the promise of a midsummer storm.

He cast spells to protect them, Harry Potter, one, two, three after each other, one hand caught on Draco’s elbow. Draco noticed the feeling, but couldn’t place it. He couldn’t really see his other hand when he tried to hold it in front of his face.

The tent was new, perhaps, but old fashioned. The interior was all flowers and warm tones of brown. The arms of the furniture were round with tufts and tucks and buttons. There was no minimalism, no white or blue or Scandinavian wood. It was all wrong; it wouldn’t do.

“Malfoy – Malfoy, are you with me?” Potter demanded, while Draco took in what was wrong. His hands were rough on the collar and lapel of Draco’s robes, his fingers hot on Draco’s cold cheek. “Are you in there? Malfoy.” His breaths were coming in huffs. “We need to decide what to do with it. We can’t… There’s no time.”

The resurrection stone was in Draco’s hand, he realised then. The one he was looking at. He didn’t think about using it, and that was probably for the best. He thought instead about time, and the way that Granger would have understood how little of it they had, the quantity of it, and what it meant.

Draco’s parents were dead, and that changed everything. It was changing time, right at that moment, and it was changing Draco’s life as well. He could feel the changes gnawing at him, pulling him loose and stretching him into a new, uncertain shape.

Annoyed by the ugly, outmoded tent interior, Draco couldn’t comprehend why Harry Potter was there, holding Draco’s arm. It was inevitable, he supposed, because Potter was always there at times like this, but it shouldn’t – it shouldn’t have been allowed. He shouldn’t have smelled of sun and the sea, sharp stones. He shouldn’t have appeared in the closing moments of the war, nor now, not freed the family prisoners nor stolen his wand, not saved Draco from fire, not now dragged Draco out of the house where his parents had just killed each other. He bore no boundaries and felt no restrictions, Harry Potter. He simply appeared when things turned to shit, maybe made them that way, maybe saved them from turning to worse, and he always smelled like fresh rock oysters, something warm and salt.

Harry Potter had no right, Draco thought, no right to be here, to be pulling at Draco’s clothes and prodding Draco’s face, no right to be skilled and clever and quick when he only had half a clutch of NEWTs and a shitty dead-end job in Misuse of Muggle Artefacts. He had no right to feel familiar in the certainty of his impossibility, not when everything else had gone wrong.

The tent was full of chintz. Why chintz? It was all far too much.

The black stone ring made a dull thunk as Draco dropped it to the carpeted floor. Then he was scratching hold of Harry Potter’s jaw and kissing him as though his life depended on it, because in that moment it really felt as though it did, always had done, and he didn’t want to die. Not if there
was an option besides doing it all on his own.

"The hell are you doing?" Harry Potter asked, his grip loosening on Draco’s black muggle clothes. And yet he was reacting with desire, his eyes blowing to a dark tunnel focus.

Draco kissed him again, wrapping his arms around neck as the man kissed him back, complaints on his tongue, which tasted sour.

“We don’t do this,” said Harry Potter, his hands high and uncertain on Draco’s ribs. His mouth was more certain than his voice, pushing back when Draco pushed forward. “Mmpf – I mean…” There were teeth.

If Draco knew that Harry Potter could be easy with his kisses, he wasn’t thinking about it. Had he read between the lines of Granger’s chatter over the years, to determine that Harry Potter could have, might have, must have kissed a few men before? Maybe. And if Harry Potter hadn’t, well, he was figuring it out easily enough on this day in June, 2004.

“We don’t…” Harry Potter continued to kiss him, his hands light on Draco’s waist and his hips, then firmer on his elbows as Draco barrelled him backwards, up and over the unfashionably high arm of the tent’s main sofa. “Ah – you’re… You’re very pointy!” he complained, his voice crackling as he pressed his dick into Draco’s thigh, one of Draco’s knees up hard between his legs. “Oh Merlin,” he breathed, dark and hoarse, grabbing the back of Draco’s head. “I don’t…” A swallow. Something like a moan. “You’re sure that you –?”

By the time that he’d come, he’d about stopped complaining, and Draco could feel it on his jeans, a job well done. Harry Potter then rolled Draco underneath him, solid and heavy and considerate, fumbling with Draco’s belt.

“I don’t… I don’t know what I’m doing,” he cursed, apologetic, kissing to the count of three, intense and acid. “You’re – you’re Draco Malfoy. Oh hell…”

Draco didn’t want to know. He covered his face, breathing hard as Harry Potter hesitated, touched him with fingers that jittered and then for some reason gave him head in a chintzy store-fresh tent. When it was over, there were green eyes and concern, and Draco couldn’t think of anything to say besides, “Fuck.”

“I know,” said Harry Potter with a laugh, his glasses askew, his eyes bright. They kissed, and it was slow this time, sand and sea surf, a hand on Draco’s thigh under his clothes, squeezing with comfort. “I know,” Harry Potter said again, seriously, kissing the side of Draco’s nose. He sounded exhausted this time, and a lot like he knew.

They fell asleep after that, crushed together on the sofa, something fresh and dark and crackling around their stolid inertia that they didn’t want to speak about. Draco woke up with a pain in his leg and they disapparated to Hogsmeade, where Harry Potter took to Hogwarts and Draco took to the pub.

It was an easy solution, barely discussed. Neither of them was clever when it came to hiding places, and both of them trusted McGonagall. Potter was offered work for September, and the resurrection stone was hidden in plain sight. They met in Draco’s room at the Broomsticks and brought each other off again, took dinner, spent the night apart and made their way back to London in the morning.

Or – that was sort of how it happened, but there was also a long conversation, deep between Draco’s sheets, at what was probably five o’clock in the evening, well before twilight and well
before tea time.

“You know,” said Harry Potter, his head on Draco’s hip. The man loved sucking cock, apparently, so he’d been down there a while. It made his voice sound like treacle, black and tart. “I’ve had terrible luck with parents.” He was toying with the skin inside Draco’s thigh, but Draco was too out of it to have more than a half-hearted reaction. “Lupin was the last one to go. I’m not sure I really saw him that way… Sirius was more – not that he ever… But Lupin, Remus Lupin was the last of my dad’s mates and he died when there were only hours left, and then that was all of them. I don’t know why he had to go. You can see him in Teddy, but it’s not… I don’t know why any of them had to go.”

He paused, fingers and voice, just as Draco’s fingers paused in his hair.

“Is this all right?” asked Harry Potter, looking up for a moment so their eyes met, his own near black and stormy in the clean Scottish light. “I’m not trying… We don’t need to talk.”

Draco said nothing, at first. This was the reason, he thought, that everyone loved Harry Potter. He was so kind, so considerate. Far be it from him to make a fuck awkward with emotion. Use me if you need me. It was there in his eyes, entreating. You’ve had a shock. I don’t want to burden you.

But Draco wasn’t kind, and he didn’t need kindness, he thought. He tipped his head back into the pillow, eyes to the ceiling as he twined another man’s hair between his fingers and rolled knuckles against scalp, releasing tension from the strands before raking his fingers to find them once more.

Words came to him: “Potter, I’m not listening to a single word you say.”

The line earned him a snort, and then a silence before the man began to ramble again.

The next day, Draco went to work and ditched his dissertation, his sleep habit and most of his peripheral vision. He gave no thought to when he might take them up again. He had a bright, dark feeling in his chest, and he had the story of a man trapped in the veil between life and death, and that was about it.

What came from July, in the end, was that he finally leached the last of the Dark Mark out of his arm, because fuck him, fuck him, fuck him.
In the weeks that followed the saga of the resurrection stone and the death of Draco’s parents, June 2004, a few things happened. Not least, Draco discovered that he had an aunt who wasn’t a lunatic, and a cousin once removed with a strong Essex accent, who idolised Harry Potter. This intense, childish love was no surprise, but the boy, Teddy Lupin, also insisted that the man did the best of every hippogriff impression in the world, along with whatever creature one decided to ask for, and the image of this would have been have been funny if it hadn’t also been horrifying.

Draco also heard from house elves and lawyers and witches who insisted that they’d been his mother’s friends, though Draco had never met them in his life.

Around the time that this stopped feeling like some sort of play that he'd found himself lost in, Draco was finally paid the money that he’d been promised by the DMLE. It felt a lot like a very bad joke. Vespers had been right, after all: in the wash of the goblins moving gold around grottos, these galleons were going to make no difference to his life whatsoever.

A couple of days later, he received a much more hastily scrawled note that would in the end have a much more significant effect.

Malfoy –

Some of us are heading to this bar on Saturday (31st July), address below. You should come. We’re starting from about 8 o’clock, maybe 9.

Harry Potter.

The address was in London, but Draco didn’t know it. There was no mention of the fellatio, but that was to be expected. Draco rather thought that he might have dreamt it all anyway.

When Draco arrived at the address, well into nine o’clock, the place turned out to be an upmarket wizarding restaurant with a downstairs drinks den, which was hosting a private event with a list. He gave his name and was welcomed inside with a stamp on the back of his hand, a golden X.

The stairs and the bar floor were dark, and his eyes couldn’t adjust, not at first. The music was loud, with bulbs of coloured light throbbing with emphasis to the bassline. They grew and shrank and looped among the dancers like overgrown snitches – exploding in euphoria when a song met its chorus, flaring and shrinking with the beat.

The place was full enough, in part because it wasn’t terribly large. Intimate, that was a word. A little desperately, Draco looked around the edges of the room, at the booths set away from the dance floor on a platform, three steps leading up to each pair. Around half of them were occupied, and he tried to find someone he knew. There were too many Hogwarts Gryffindors that he never wanted to see again – he could see Neville Longbottom, for one – and far too many people that he didn’t recognise at all.

Thankfully, Granger’s hair was difficult to miss, so he made a beeline for her. Better the devil one knew, he’d always thought, and he’d been surprised earlier in the month to have contemplated inviting her to the funeral. In the end, he hadn’t. His widowed aunt had said that she’d come and he’d sent Luna Lovegood a letter. Potter had been happy to watch the grandson, he’d heard.

She was laughing with her boyfriend, Granger, in this downstairs bar, and when Draco took the last step up to their booth he could hear them. There was a charmed bubble of quiet around them,
seemingly part of the décor, offering yet more intimacy and muffling the music down to something ambient.

“Draco!” greeted Granger, clutching half a piña colada. “This is a surprise.”

Draco shrugged, fearing that he’d made a mistake. It was odd, seeing her outside of Mysteries.

“Sit down,” she said, patting the seat next to her, which he promptly took. Her hand hovered near his shoulder for a moment, overly familiar, before she set it back on the table. “I was just telling Ron about the seminar last week, but I think that you have to have been there. Do you remember? Me-mory! I mean, honestly…”

It had been a little funny, but not so much that Draco could remember it. He didn’t laugh, just crossed eyes with Granger’s boyfriend, who nodded over his pint as if to say, Yeah. I’ve heard stories about you too, Hermione’s colleague.

“What are we celebrating?” Draco asked, his eyes tracking back to the lights above the dance floor. He was able to make out people’s faces by this point, arms and eyes. “I wasn’t told.”

“It’s a party for Harry and Ginny,” Granger explained, and Draco immediately felt mortified. Harry and Ginny. Of course. “It’s their birthdays,” she added, making it worse. “Harry’s is today, though I expect he didn’t mention it – he never does anymore – and they’re both moving jobs.”

Not an engagement party, then. Draco breathed a sigh of relief. He’d long forgotten about Ginevra Weasley, but it was probably high time that he started to remember.

“Ginny’s just accepted a transfer. Puds United.” Granger was being even more informative than usual; it had to be the rum. “So the hire charge was on her…” This was almost a joke. “And you know about Harry and Hogwarts.”

It was an important occasion, all in all, and Draco had arrived empty-handed, in workaday robes. It wasn’t the most embarrassing scenario that he’d ever found himself in, but it was surely in the top five. “You might have told me,” he accused, remembering now, how to talk to Granger.

“I didn’t know you were coming!” she protested, earnest and easily flustered, absolutely half cut. “I…” She swallowed whatever it was that she was going to say, looking at him warily.

Her boyfriend rolled his eyes. “Have a drink, mate,” he said. “And calm down.” He took another swallow of his pint, nodding towards the golden rectangular plate set into the wooden tabletop at its centre. It was inscribed with dense calligraphy, listing choices and prices. “You must’ve been to this place before?”

Draco hadn’t, actually, but he wasn’t going to say so.

But either Granger could see straight through him, or she didn’t even care. She launched into an explanation as though they were back in sixth-year Ancient Runes. “It’s house elf labour, Draco, like Hogwarts,” she insisted, thrilled by her own information, but stern. “You tap what you’d like with your wand, you put your money down here, and the drinks appear with your change when they’re ready.”

Draco wondered what one did when the sums became difficult, but presumably the bar had thought of that too. “Thank you, Granger,” he said, saving face. “I’m quite aware.” He selected a glass of good elven wine for an extortionate number of sickles.

The boyfriend scoffed, but when Draco’s wine appeared it was at least perfectly chilled. It tasted a
little sickly, like most wizarding drinks, but he knew that it was very good.

As he swallowed that first sip, Draco’s eyes wandered back to the dance floor. It was easier to recognise the different groups of invitees, now that his eyes were working. There were surely Potter’s friends from the Ministry – junior officers from low-ranked departments, with bad haircuts, bad clothes, soft waistlines and faces – and then there were the quidditch players – fit, bouncing and bright, moving like a pack of hunting dogs among rabbits and grouse.

Too easily, Draco’s eyes found Potter. He was bouncing to the music with some of the quidditchers, then with his hands on the shoulders of a man who must have played seeker, whom Draco would never, never, no, no, no idea, what do you mean, couldn’t possibly recognise as a twink. Beyond the table’s bubble of quiet, Draco thought, the music was surely pounding like a revelation, hard in their ears. The men’s heads were close together and Potter’s grin was like the sun.

Draco looked away, quickly. “No aurors?” he asked Granger’s boyfriend, because he recalled that that was what the man did for a living. It should have been Potter’s job too, he still thought, but the man had never taken Potions NEWT, and now he would never need to.

Facing away from the dance floor, Granger’s boyfriend swallowed down two cheeks of beer. “Most of ‘em are in their thirties,” he said, “going on fifty-five. Us low-rankers have a three-pint limit, because the sobriety potion won’t work on more.” He shrugged, as though this was an explanation. “You get used to it.”

Maybe it wasn’t a job for Potter after all. Though Merlin knew what he was going to do in a school full of children.

“She took on every colour that the club would cast her in, more blues and greens and pinks, and Potter found her with her hands working low on the chest of some Ministry drone. He couldn’t believe his luck, the drone, and Ginny Weasley had the eyes of everyone who could see her.

Potter said something to her, face in her ear and his arm sure around her waist.

Reacting like a mare to her hand, Ginevra Weasley threw back her head and laughed, arm on Potter’s shoulder, shaking with joy while Potter’s mouth spread into another of his grins.
“You’re staring,” Granger’s boyfriend said, and Draco jumped.

Luckily – thank the three Gorgons – the man wasn’t talking to Draco, but to Granger.

“Who is it this time?” he asked, as if this was a tiresome but familiar game. “Not Tilda from Accounts again… He said he could taste her lipgloss for days.”

“No,” Granger replied, shaking her head with a distant smile on her face. Her boyfriend glanced over his shoulder. It was as though Draco wasn’t there. “Oh, give up the dream, Hermione,” he said. Potter and Ginny Weasley were dancing now, a light-hearted thing where they held each other’s hands and jived, Ginny spinning in the light of Potter’s laughter, horse-tail of hair like a whip. “Your gambit worked,” Granger’s boyfriend continued, “but the game’s over.”

“I just think it’s a shame,” Granger said, taking another sip of cream and melting ice through her straw. “They’d be so… Do you think that he’ll ever?”

“No,” her boyfriend said bluntly. “To be honest.” His expression was serious. “And I think that we have to accept it.”

Granger sighed. “And even if he does find someone, the last thing he needs is us meddling. Yes,” she conceded, “you’re right.”

Even as she said it, Granger couldn’t seem to let the thought go. And it was rare – very rare – that Granger didn’t have a point.

“It’s not…” she began again. “I don’t need him to be anything he isn’t; it’s just…” She glanced at Draco, because apparently she did in fact remember that he was there. She seemed to be appealing for support, if not an alternative point of view. “You know that this isn’t Harry,” she argued with her boyfriend, as though they were in a seminar. “Harry’s not – he likes long talks on cozy afternoons, with milky tea and syrup cake.”

“Harry likes people,” came the counterclaim, with affectionate tolerance, rolled eyes. “He likes a buzz, and he likes low expectations.” This insight sounded hard won. “You know he’d gladly trade spit with half of this lot in here, just as long as none of them asked him to Puddifoot’s.”

“Or made him do the asking,” Granger insisted. “He’s scared, Ron. Of being left again, or having to leave.”

“Do you want me to go?” Draco interrupted, finding the whole conversation distinctly uncomfortable. They were entirely wrong, after all. He knew what the end of things looked like, and it looked like Harry Potter’s arm around Ginny Weasley’s waist.

Granger’s boyfriend frowned at him, toying with the last inch of his pint. “Thought you were mates now,” he said, as though that were qualification enough for Draco to share an opinion on Harry Potter’s assorted psychological issues. “Whole adventure, down in Wilts, with muggle ghosts and romps through the forest.”

“Ron…” Granger began cautiously, and she knew, Draco recalled. She knew that his parents were dead. She didn’t seem to know the full of it – Potter, it seemed, had kept their liaison a secret, unlike Tilda from Accounts and her lipgloss – but Granger knew nonetheless that the Malfoy name was mud and finally, at last, only his.

The man sitting opposite them winced, and it seemed that he knew it too – he’d just forgotten. That
was forgivable, Draco supposed. The Weasleys had lost a son in the war, as well as a host of family friends. Draco had lost Crabbe, and then Goyle and Pansy to the aftermath. Now his father had taken his mother for the chance of doing it all again, and the grief was no less than Draco deserved for once admiring him.

Draco had had a month to think through all of this, of stasis. He wasn’t yet at the end of his thoughts, and he wasn’t sure that he ever would be.

None of these considerations belonged to a conversation in an open bar.

Draco turned to Granger, because he too had learned new information since his adventure down in Wilts, though this had come from Vespers. “How are the Grangers?” he asked. “I hear you were finally successful, reversing the charm.”

This was happy news, the return of parents, and it was the sort of thing that belonged to the victors. “Oh yes,” Granger said, perking up with the new subject. “I meant to tell you. It’s wonderful.” She frowned. “It’s odd,” she corrected. She finished by adding, “None of us are who we used to be.”

“But her dad taught me to play the guitar,” said Granger’s boyfriend, saving the mood.

“He taught you three chords, Ron.” Granger sounded amused. “And Eleanor Rigby.”

“Yeah, and now I’m a pro.”

“Let me buy you both a drink,” Draco said, looking at their empty glasses. “I doubt there’ll be a chance to buy one for Potter.”

It’s this first real conversation with Granger’s boyfriend that Draco blames when he finds himself in Florean Fortescue’s ice cream parlour, not long past eleven o’clock on a Sunday morning in March, 2008, nearly four years later. The establishment’s named proprietor is long gone, but the ice cream remains, and Draco is drinking the same chocolate milkshake that he always chose as a child. With every slurp of the straw, he hears a fuck you to the Dark Lord in his head, once in his arm, and a fuck you to his father.

“I tell you, mate,” Granger’s boyfriend says today, working on a sundae. “I am glad to be out of that house.”

It’s been scant days since James Potter returned to the world, but this is all the time that Harry’s needed to make a flagrant mess of things.

“It was all right to start with, I’d say,” the boyfriend complains. “Formal. Like an uncle visiting. But since then it’s all gone a bit snide.”

“Mm,” Draco doesn’t reply, slurping on his straw, his hands cold even under the heat lamps.

“And we’re all sympathetic, aren’t we?” the complaints continue. “And I’ll agree, James is a lot to take in, both in the fact that he’s been dead since 1981 and in terms of raw personality.” His spoon clinks against glass. “It’s only – it’d be easier if Harry knew how to adjust. He doesn’t do adjusting, never has.” The man sighs, clucking his tongue. “You ought to say something, mate,” he tells Draco. “He listens to you.”

“He does not,” Draco reacts, successfully avoiding all splutters, splurts and spills as he pulls his mouth back from the straw.
“Don’t be coy,” snaps Granger’s boyfriend, unfairly. “I’ve not got the patience.”

There’s no adequate response to this comment besides changing the subject.

“So, how goes the search for Granger’s ring?” Draco asks, setting his milkshake glass to one side. “You said that you needed advice.”

Granger’s boyfriend clearly knows exactly what Draco’s doing, but he lights up anyway. “Well,” he says cheerily. “It’s been a disaster.” He pulls out a folded quarto of parchment from an inside pocket, opening the sheet to a half-fold in front of him, as though he intends to sketch out a plan. “I’m thinking that I need to come up with some guidelines. I’ve been out looking a bit, but this isn’t a hunt like I’m used to.” He sounds decided. “It’s a creative task.”

Right. “How many times have you been out looking?” Draco asks.

This invites a casual shrug. “Oh, about twice a month, I’d say, since October.”

It’s March. “Right,” Draco says, out loud this time.

The man frowns, his eyebrows ginger.

Draco casts around for another thing to say. He’s never given much thought to engagement rings. They come from family, traditionally, he knows, and they mark out the betrothal. Of course a sixth son would have to buy new, but there are classic designs, aren’t there?

“And you’re certain that you’ve not been overthinking things?” he suggests.

“This is Hermione,” comes the immediate response, the frown now a scowl. “There’s no such thing.”

And that makes sense, of course it does. But since when did someone like Granger ever care about the trappings of tradition? “She’s not even taking your name.”

Now, there’s a story to this, which comes up rather too often to Draco’s mind. It involves a lunch and Molly Weasley, an argument and a flight to the Forest of Dean. The moment that he alludes to it, Draco feels like a cad, because it doesn’t lack for significance, no matter how much he and Harry make jokes about the whole business.

“I apologise,” Draco says immediately now, dropping his eyes to the glass of chocolate milkshake, taking a slurp to remember innocence and fairy tales. “That was uncalled for. A ring worthy of Granger,” he recapitulates. “Yes. Of course.”

There’s a tick in the boyfriend’s jaw. Some would call it irritation, born of panic, most likely – but it isn’t, Draco knows. It’s determination. It’s thinking through the angles, and avoiding this argument because – despite everything – there’s a job to be done and Auror Weasley’s convinced that Unspeakable Malfoy can help him with the task.

Marriage is the centre of some people’s lives. Draco doesn’t know when he forgot.

“Start at the beginning,” he suggests in the end, nodding at the parchment on the table as though this is an academic exercise. “Define your scope.”

“Good,” says Granger’s boyfriend, because at last they’re there back on track. He fiddles with his sundae spoon, spilling a blob of white ice cream splat onto the parchment in front of him. The spoon is promptly dumped in the sundae glass with a clatter, sinking into sludge, and he wipes the
parchment clean with the meat of his long hand, which is then scrubbed absently with a napkin.

It’s an horrific display, but Draco doesn’t comment.

The man then pulls a short quill from his outer robe’s inner pocket. It’s the self-inking kind sold in his brother’s shop, and it comes with a cap. It’s a white feather, this one, and it writes in black ink. There’s no particular reason for Draco to dislike them, these quills, but Draco can’t imagine ever using one, and has no intention to ever do so.

“Blue,” the man says, as his first parameter, numbered 1.

“Blue?” Draco asks, with another slurp of his half-finished milkshake.

It’s being scratched down, the table wobbling once on Florean’s uneven floor. “I always think of Hermione and blue,” he explains, with underlines. “She casts these little charmed flames, like bluebells. There were bluebells in the Forest of Dean when we…”

“No need to go on.” They grin, and it’s a joke this time, the allusion. Draco also knows the spell that he’s referring to. It’s from an appendix to Grade 1 of Goshawk’s Standard, but he doesn’t point that out. With loving marriage on the cards, who knew what could become sentimental?

“No need to go on.” They grin, and it’s a joke this time, the allusion. Draco also knows the spell that he’s referring to. It’s from an appendix to Grade 1 of Goshawk’s Standard, but he doesn’t point that out. With loving marriage on the cards, who knew what could become sentimental?

“Practical,” the man says next as number 2. This seems more self-evident as a parameter, given that this ring is for Granger, though Draco thinks that it’s generally a little counter-intuitive as a description for an engagement ring. “Not goblin-made.” This is number 3.

“Really?” Draco asks, surprised as the point goes down.

“It’s something Bill told us once.” Another brother, Draco recalls. “Goblins see their stuff as sold under licence, for the life of the owner. Hermione’ll want something that she can pass on in good conscience.”

This isn’t just about marriage, it seems; this about children, grandchildren, all the rest. Merlin, Draco thinks, he’s supposed to know this, isn’t he?

And Draco does know this. He could have sworn. It’s all been beaten into him by a thousand passing remarks. It’s just – he never realised…

“All right,” Draco agrees, looking out into the bustle of spring’s Diagon Alley. He didn’t know all that about goblin-made jewellery, but it doesn’t matter. They’re moving on. “You might as well shop muggle if you…”

“No,” Granger’s boyfriend interrupts, shaking his head again. He stabs a finger into the parchment. “Practical’s what I want. It’s needs a useful enchantment of some kind.”

“Well, then, shop muggle and have it enchanted. I’m sure Potter would –”

“I told you that I don’t want Harry to know about this,” he says, and he did, when he made their appointment.

Milkshake isn’t enough. Draco’s completely out of his depth, and he finds himself rubbing an eyebrow, a gesture that isn’t his, but which belongs to a man who tries to avoid rubbing his scar, no matter that it still stings if there’s too much dark magic around.

“I don’t at all understand why not,” Draco says, because he doesn’t.
Granger’s boyfriend sighs. He puts down his quill and there’s ink on his fingers. “When you saw us in school,” he starts again, from somewhere else. “Who did you think was the centre of our group?”

Draco doesn’t dignify this with an answer.

“He puts down his quill and there’s ink on his fingers. “When you saw us in school,” he starts again, from somewhere else. “Who did you think was the centre of our group?”

“Harry, yeah?” his best mate insists. “Right.” It’s like he’s laying out the facts in an interrogation. “But sometimes it wasn’t. Sometimes it was me. We’ve always done Christmas at my family home. My mum knits us all these jumpers.” Which became smothering, Draco suspects, around the age of twenty-three. “And then there’s Hermione,” he says, carrying on. “And I bet you don’t even know her parents’ names.”

It’s Wendy and something, isn’t it? Wendy and Nathan. Draco has no idea. He knows that they’re muggle healers who specialise in teeth.

The boyfriend rolls his eyes. “The point is, people forget that Harry’s Hermione’s best mate too. If I’ve got any – stuff to talk about that I don’t want Hermione knowing, I’ve got George to ask, and Bill and Percy…” I can’t take Harry from her, not for this.” There’s something else that he isn’t saying, hanging in the air, but it isn’t going to be said.

They never talk about Charlie, Draco thinks. That’s the other one left alive. He’s probably not fucking a dragon out in Romania, but it doesn’t sound like he’s got any human being out there either. They never talk about him, so Draco doesn’t ask because it would be a very strange thing to do.

“And I know that at the end of the day, it’s all a big party,” says Granger’s boyfriend, the romantic, apparently. “But it’s also important. Like dying, or being born.”

*Bit morbid,* Draco thinks, not in his own voice.

“It has to be right,” the boyfriend insists. “And with Ange and Dominic down under, there’s only Harry left for the run-up. Because he might as well be her brother,” he says expansively, to Draco’s surprise, “and I don’t need another one.”

“So you’ll buy muggle and I’ll do the enchantment,” Draco says, because that seems to be the obvious conclusion.

“Yes you will,” Granger’s boyfriend agrees, and it’s suddenly clear that Draco’s been had.

Fuck. This is why they’ve been here all along.

Granger’s boyfriend caps his quill, then tucks his unnecessary list back inside his robe with the parchment folded up again, an air of smug satisfaction about him. “And you’re going to come up with something good,” he tells Draco, with only the slightest threat between his eyebrows.

“Fine.” It will be an intellectual exercise at best. It shouldn’t be, Draco knows.

“Shall we muggle it then?” asks this man on a mission. “It can’t be any worse than World War Potter.”

Death is easier, Draco thinks. It’s only a funeral.

James Potter is a showman. It should have been obvious, but if it wasn’t before then it quickly becomes so by the time that Draco finds himself back in the drawing room of number 12,
Grimmauld Place, hard on the heels of Granger’s boyfriend.

“So, there we were, smack bang in the heart of King’s Cross.” The man’s regaling Granger and his son, on his feet and gesturing purposefully. His voice is liquid and measured, well-trained, and it itches like a burn on Draco’s ears. “All sides, we’re surrounded by muggles and, what do you call them, Hermione? Ticket machines! Yes. People, paper, change, the new summer, our new lives. And there I am, thinking to myself: James, my boy, Hogwarts is over.” There’s a dramatic pause, but Draco refuses to care. “There’s only the war; she’s for that sister of hers, and then what?”

They’ve hidden several marked catalogues under Draco’s sofa, he and Granger’s boyfriend. It feels more meaningful than whatever lies at the heart of this story, which is much too much on the nose.

“And the voice in my head,” Potter says, his eyes round with conviction. “It’s telling me, James, you can’t lose her now. You have to take her with you. And so I asked her, right then and there.” He nods, leaving time, a long pause for everything to sink in. “Did I have a ring?” he asks rhetorically, sweeping a hand out in front of him. “Of course I didn’t have a ring – but she answered her name when I called it and she didn’t move when I took to a knee.”

Harry’s facing his father at the fireplace, all scowl, deep into the opposite corner of the near tan sofa while Granger sits in front of the Juliet windows, her expression amused if a little unsure. The story is very much not the ballad of Harry’s beloved Ron and Hermione, and Draco wonders if this is the full or real reason for the scowl on Harry’s face.

“Padfoot thought that I was joking – thumped me on the back so hard, I nearly fell over.” Potter laughs to finish his story “But I think I made Moony cry. Lily looked at me and she said, ‘Potter. How many years are you going to ask for, if I say no?’ Best moment of my life, because that was what she said when she meant but wouldn’t say yes.”

He throws a look to Granger, who glances at Harry.

“Obviously, it was outclassed by the moment when she said I do,” Potter concedes, irritated, adjusting his glasses. He was expecting a laugh, Draco thinks. “And then when you were born.”

He swallows the last to his son like resentment, turning to retrieve his teacup from the mantelpiece. He swallows what seems to be around half a measure of tea, presumably cold.

“You embarrassed her,” Harry says flatly, not enchanted at all.

“I did not embarrass her,” his father snaps back, short. His teacup clinks in its saucer and his face closes tight. “Your mother’s not one for embarassment. She said yes,” he insists.

Harry’s about to retort, but Granger has thankfully noticed their arrival. “Ron! Draco!” she says, standing up and succinctly ending the conversation. “You’re back. How were the shops?”

“Good,” Granger’s boyfriend replies, taking the hint even though he has nothing to say. He makes his way around James Potter to sit with her.

The most obvious place for Draco to sit is the other end of Harry’s sofa, next to where James is standing. He makes his way there more slowly, trying to remember the shopping trip’s cover. “Yes, the disposal of my parents’ estate continues.” He nods at Granger’s boyfriend. “Who would have thought that this one would be good at reading goblin parchmentwork?”

Harry looks at him with a frown, but the lie holds. He watches Draco as he sits down, drinking tea from a chintzy cup that Kreacher must have scrounged up from somewhere, because Draco doesn’t recognise it.
“I thought that Gringotts was closed on Sundays,” says James Potter, unhelpfully. He’s surely different now, a few days in, relaxed and yet upright, his eyes canny and round like his vowels. There’s an aura about him, personality too large for his flesh to contain, and Draco finds it highly suspicious.

Granger’s boyfriend is helping himself to tea and lemon drizzle cake. His posture screams studied nonchalance, and Draco imagines that Granger will guess his game well before it’s over, in the coming weeks or months, but he also imagines that that’s all part of the fun. He is certainly not going to say anything himself.

As for now, it’s his part to keep the secret. “Not for private appointments,” Draco lies coolly to James Potter, sitting back into the cushions uncomfortably. “Goblins rather like Sundays for those. It puts the wizards ill at ease.”

“Hm.” Potter makes a noise as though he doesn’t quite believe it, but he isn’t going to say that out loud.

Harry scoffs anyway, as though he’s been looking for this simple excuse. “You’ve been dead for twenty-five years,” he says to his father, quite cruelly, his own charisma scratchy like static. “How would you know anything?”

“Harry,” Granger reacts.

“It’s a fact,” Harry tells her, turning his knee off the sofa and bubbling up again with something repressed, familial. “It’s all very well him telling us stories, but the fact is –”

Draco has no interest in hearing what the fact is. He doesn’t know why Harry is taking his side over his father’s, but he doesn’t care. The man needs to be taught a lesson, Draco thinks, because Draco is not over his snit. “I have a story,” he interrupts, turning away from the lines of Harry’s frown to catch the eye of Potter the elder, who looks annoyed but willing to take it as he sits down on the arm of Granger’s sofa. The boyfriend obligingly shuffles up a little, chomping on cake. “It’s about the time that Potter and his sidekicks here were so desperate to try being Slytherin that they took the Polyjuice Potion to assume my best friends’ appearance.”

James Potter looks as though he doesn’t know whether to smile or frown. He looks Draco up and down, assessing. “That desperate, were they?” he jokes, with a warning.

“That is not why we did it,” Harry himself declares straight, clonking his empty teacup and saucer down on the coffee table. “This is the most ridiculous…”

“You wanted to see how the other half lived,” Draco says plainly, rolling his eyes, rather pleased by this reaction. “Honestly,” Draco continues, turning back to Harry’s father. “All that effort for a shufti round the dungeons.” It’s a good line, he thinks. James Potter’s mouth is drawing into a grin, the shape of which is familiar. He’s bemused to be talking to him, nonetheless. Draco can tell. “It took me years to work out what had happened. Why would anyone invest so much effort in a gambit that yielded little more than five minutes of inane conversation?”

“So how did you work it out?” James Potter asks wickedly, never sounding like his son and well caught, Draco hopes, on his hook.

“You kept doing the same thing, as though he expected different results. Take the Hogwarts Express,” Draco offers, easing himself into the memory, which isn’t easy. He’s not really answering the question, but that isn’t the point. “A little slapdash in the execution, but equally obsessive and unnecessary.” He rolls his eyes again, for effect. Harry breathes hard down his nose.
Harry hates him, Draco remembers. He deserves this. “Extensive stalking. Every trick of the trade…”

“My cloak?” Potter suggests, for some reason, looking pleased.

“And the rest of it,” Draco says. Not like you’re thinking, he means. “Forgot his trainers,” Draco recalls. “Snuck his way in, made a mess of himself, and ended up curled on his side like a baby. All for what? Again, little more than five minutes of inane conversation.”

Potter laughs with a joyful little titter, right on cue. He ruffles up the back of his hair, which is so much like Harry’s.

Elsewhere – “Yeah, and you kicked his nose in for it.”

Harry – “Malfyoy, why are you doing this?”

James Potter’s tone is idle. “A nose for some espionage? Sounds like a fair cop.” He shoos Granger’s boyfriend away with a spare hand. “What’s a nose? Episkey? Piss easy.” Another shrug. It’s as though he’s trying to wind up Harry, or him. “The important question,” he carries on, catching Granger down on her sofa, “is whether you came out on top.”

Hermione laughs like a cat, Draco thinks, curled up with her tea in the late afternoon. A cat or a particularly smug canine, her tail wagging as she meets Potter’s grin, a gleam in her eyes when they catch Draco’s. Because she knows his game, she’s saying, and she knows that he is full of shit. “Oh, I would say so,” she tells Potter airily. “And in any case, it was fun. The Polyjuice was my idea,” she explains. “I’d been wanting an excuse, because I thought that brewing it sounded like a good challenge.”

Her boyfriend grins quite suddenly, glancing at her. “And I had my doubts, it’s true,” he tells Potter cheerfully, and fuck knows whether he’s talking about second year or not. “But we got there in the end.”

It’s around this moment that Draco risks a look down his own sofa. And there’s Harry, clearly unappreciative of this conversation. He’s got an elbow dug deep into the arm of the Chesterfield that they’re sharing, his face leaned into his fist, his jaw clenched. He looks resentful, his gaze unfocused over Granger’s head towards the windows, their forest-green curtains and London beyond.

Good, Draco wants to think, the way that he always would have done.

But, of course, Draco instead feels the urge to tell the Harry’s father the truth about the train in sixth year, and he wonders why he’s bothered sitting down. The words are there in his head: I also used the Body Bind and hid him under the cloak that you mentioned, intending for him to be sent back to London bleeding out on the floor. I remember tucking in his feet so they wouldn’t show. You think that’s clean?

He doesn’t have the nerve to say these things. Of course he doesn’t have the nerve.

Harry seems to realise that he’s being observed, because he turns slightly, the expression in his eyes obscured by the lines of his glasses. “There’s some lesson plans that I need to look over,” he says in the end, with flinty suburban spite. His eyes are on his father, on Draco and Granger. “I’ll leave you all to it.”

He doesn’t give any of them a chance to call him back, and Draco is deeply, fundamentally annoyed.
James Potter watches his son escape from the room, his eyes dark as he glances at Draco. There’s something in his expression, but Draco doesn’t know how to read it. He may also have figured out that Draco is full of shit.

Granger sighs, eyes also on the doorway. She’s serious now, and she throws Draco an irritated glare. “Oh, we’ll go after him,” she announces, grabbing her boyfriend by the sleeve. “Come on, Ron.”

“Wha-ff?” the boyfriend says, his mouth full of cake as he’s yanked off the sofa.

And then Draco is left with James Potter, who takes the seat opposite him, looking him in the eye.

“I know what you’re doing,” he says, with a nod but no preamble, his voice a deep, mellow sing-song.

“I’m sorry?”

If the man thinks that he’s won, then he’s really learned nothing yet. His hazel eyes are calculating, but Draco doesn’t care. He thinks of Harry in the luggage rack, of leaving him bound and the feeling of his nose going in against his foot – he thinks of holding him smelling and sweating in his arms and thinking of the ways that he could die, terrified of all of them, the man’s trainers abandoned on the floor.

“You think you’re hot shit, don’t you?” Potter says. He’s poking through the things on the table, lifting the lid on the teapot and then tapping it with his wand so that steam comes out of the spout. “But I’ve figured you out. You’re trying to save my mate Padfoot.” He says it shrewdly, and it’s a surprise. “Correct?” he demands. “Why is it a secret?”

“It’s not precisely a secret,” Draco demurs, though he fully intends to tell no one. “The veil is my responsibility, as are apparition incidents and – ghosts, as far as they need to be registered.”

“And?”

“And a common thread is a concern for the dead,” Draco explains, “as well as those no longer alive. I have a responsibility,” he repeats. “Do you see where I’m going with this? And I have no intention to save…”

“So you’ll make him move on,” Potter concludes, pouring tea for them both. “As you will us.”

Draco catches the slip. Harry, you fucker, he thinks. “Us?”

“My,” Potter corrects, looking down. He doesn’t say anything else, just sits back with his tea.

In all honesty, it’s been less than a week, and Draco has no considered opinion on whether James Potter will need to return to the dead. The man apparently has his full range of faculties, his magic and his wand and his youth, even if ten years of it have gone west. He was torn from the world by magic, and Draco knows better than anyone else on the planet that that’s what the Killing Curse does. It tears. He remembers Sara Chaudhury, who’d made peace with the end of her life, by all appearances, at the same age as Potter, as Draco himself – but she was left without a body, and a sphere of influence limited in the most part to a traffic island. She had no means to repair her own life, whereas Potter is sat here drinking freshly brewed tea.

“He reminds me of Padfoot, you know,” says Potter, the phrase idle like low-hanging fruit.

Draco’s suspicious, but he asks the question anyway. “Who?”
“My son.” It doesn’t seem as though the thought makes Potter pleased. He wrinkles his nose, as though looking for words. “He can act perfectly laid back, but – he’s never relaxed, not for a moment. It’s no good thing. He doesn’t get it from me.”

“You do surprise me,” Draco says, because who in the world thinks that personalities are supplied by cleanly inherited traits? He doesn’t pick up his tea.

“Oof.” James Potter is grinning, half a laugh in his teeth. “You’re not easy, are you?”

Draco’s not sure what the man wants from him. There’s something ticking behind his eyes. “Why would I be?”

This gets a laugh, but there’s mockery in it. “Cake?” Potter offers, as he moves to take a knife. The look in his eyes isn’t trusting.

The night of Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley’s party, 2004, did not end with Draco’s introduction to Granger’s boyfriend. The invitation had been to come out, but the note had been signed with Potter’s name, and on the back of two strong drinks Draco supposed that it was rude to leave without telling Potter that he’d been by, whoever his co-host was. Or something like that anyway.

It wasn’t as though he was in any rush, when he finished his second drink. He had no school friends left on the continent. Granger and her boyfriend were leaving, but they were self-confessedly square, apologising that they were off early, refusing to interrupt the dancing and thanking Draco again – too many times – for the drinks that he had bought them both earlier.

The bar was very nearly a nightclub now, the music louder than Draco remembered from when he’d arrived, the dance floor fuller of friends and presumably friends of friends, admirers, hangers on. Leaving the booth’s bubble of quiet, Potter was easy to find, jumping with a group as though the place was playing thrash metal, when Draco was fairly sure that the muggles called it disco. It felt like the sound was coming out of the floor.

Potter was laughing as the music changed, all sweat and heavy breath, blue light failing to catch him in his shadows and his secrets. Draco reached out a hand for the man’s shoulder but instead found the nape of his neck, his digits hidden by the lighting design. It didn’t keep Draco from feeling it, the hot sweat and thick hair in the curls of his fingers. He swung in close, wearing black, feeling like a different person from the one who he’d been five minutes ago.

Fuck it all, he thought to himself, and then he stopped thinking at all.

“COME WITH ME,” he shouted into Harry Potter’s ear.

Potter jumped to hear his voice – to feel his hand, Draco almost hoped. “WHERE?” he asked, turning in and pressing their cheeks close together. Neither of them was catching the light, Draco knew, because the hour had turned and it was hiding faces, the way any good nightclub would.

“OUTSIDE,” Draco decided, because there had to be a way.

They ducked out of the group and weaved between constellations. The thump in Draco’s heart promised that they were invisible. He led Harry Potter by the hand, out past the toilets, out towards the sign marked FIRE EXIT that he didn’t remember knowing was there.

There was a sign on the door they were heading to – NO RE-ENTRY WITHOUT STAMP – but Draco had a stamp and Harry Potter did too, a simple X that would gleam gold on the back of their
hands until four o’clock in the morning, when the sun would rise again.

Draco pushed through the door and they found themselves in an elegant courtyard garden, with benches for smokers and rose trees, fairies winging pale light through the air. It was the end of July, but there was a stiff breeze to cut through the heat of the club as the door slammed shut behind them, taking with it the swell of the music.

They were the only ones there, but none of that mattered. Draco turned on the paving stones and shoved both of his hands into the wilds of Harry Potter’s hair, kissing him until they both surely saw only darkness. It had been over a month, after all, and he still didn’t know how to live.Fuck it all, indeed.

The man snogged him back, groaning as Draco wrenched his hair and dug a hand behind his trousers with a snap-crackle-pop of his belt. He was hard and practically going already, groping Draco’s hips with half an idea this time, at least.

“Bit public,” came the complaint nonetheless from their hero, mumbled right into Draco’s mouth.

Draco yanked hair and Harry Potter opened his eyes. “Then where?” he demanded, hooking his finger into the hole of the button he’d just undone.

Stepping back, Harry Potter looked around, grabbing Draco’s wrist away from his jeans. “This way,” he said, cocking his head as he led them down into a neat bricked-up alleyway.

“You are not casting a disillusion,” Draco stated, because he was halfway to turned-on himself and he wanted nothing squelching on his head to ruin it. Part of him remembered his mother, falling to her death as a carpet.

Harry Potter’s green eyes crinkled as if this was funny, and he kissed Draco on the bridge of his nose, tipping forward with some sort of delight and some sort of understanding. “Peruvian Instant Darkness.” The words were breathy, close to Draco’s face; he was pulling a mint tin from his pocket. “So much better.”

And this was Harry Potter. Because it was only Harry Potter, no one else, who came to his own birthday party with a tried and tested escape plan. He’d probably have brought his full backpack of tricks, if only it would have fit in his baggy muggle jeans.

Idly, Draco wondered what had happened to the cloak. It had to be in the backpack along with everything else. It must simply have been joined by about fifteen other new gadgets.

Thinking these thoughts, Draco found himself holding his breath, a lurch in his chest as Harry Potter threw black-blue powder from a tin to the paving around them, biting his lip as it swirled up to vanish their faces. He winked just before he was gone, invisible.

The tin shut with a snap, and Draco couldn’t see anything. His thoughts left him again. He shoved a man who felt like Harry into the wall with a knee to his crotch. He plucked the man’s glasses away and tucked a tine down the collar of his robes. Then Draco was kissing the most eligible bachelor in Diagon, doing Ginny Weasley’s job, and there were jittering hands on his wrists, not quite taking hold, not quite asking him to do work somewhere else.

The man was so fucking useless with his hands, but the way that he breathed was addictive. Draco let their kisses grow long, directing fingers down south, letting Harry faff, but focusing himself on stroking cock and pushing jeans, underwear out of the way. His kissed the man’s neck, tasting sweat and bitter cologne, a fougère like a garden on a clifftop.
Potter’s voice was hoarse from all the shouting that he’d been doing, all the singing, all the laughing. He groaned like a rattling drum. “Muffliato,” he managed in a croak, with a wand from somewhere and a rush of magic. The wand went away and there was a hand softly tracing Draco’s jaw, all warm fingers. He moaned, and it sounded like yes, not at all like complaint, thank fucking Merlin.

The spell was unfamiliar, but Draco assumed that it was good from the way that it made Harry slump towards his fingers, creaking gasps escaping him. His whole body now was hitching in time to Draco’s ministrations. “I thought you didn’t do this,” Draco sneered wickedly, editing out the old ‘we’.

Hidden in the darkness, Harry’s response was prim, even playful. “I don’t see anyone doing anything,” he rasped.

The laugh escaped without Draco’s permission, bubbling and dry. “Fucker,” he complained, squeezing low as Harry wheezed, kissing him on the mouth.

“Another time,” Potter croaked, rattling, and he was awful, awful, awful.

He also grunted like a dog when he came in Draco’s hand, stomped on the ground and breathed as though he’d just pulled out of a hundred-foot dive. His jizz was somewhere between a geyser and a spring as it shot out and slopped over Draco’s fist. His fingers seized up deep under Draco’s collar, curling to find hidden skin.

“You should’ve – told me you were here,” Harry Potter insisted, breaking the hard kiss that Draco wasn’t able to help. He turned Draco against the bricks, dragging hands from Draco’s shoulders down his chest over the robe fastenings, ultimately lifting the skirt of the thing up and wedging folds of it behind Draco’s back, using the sort of terrible technique that Draco imagined he applied to making a bed. “You should’ve worn normal clothes.”

“This is a perfectly fine wizarding – ”

Harry dropped away, yanking underwear, and there was tongue on his cock, again, like before, but more real. It came with a scalding hot mouth, on the cusp of hot August, with the day’s coming heat in the air no matter that it was midnight.

“Oh.”

Oh.

They didn’t do this, Draco remembered. It wasn’t just Harry – it was him. He didn’t do this. He didn’t have relations with anyone that people worth knowing would know. He didn’t return to the scene of the crime in this way. He didn’t shamelessly work a sticky hand into Harry Potter’s hair, craving the image of that, knowing that it was him, it was him, and cry out into his wrist as an invisible head swallowed him whole.

“Oh fuck.”

It was a man, it was a man just like him. It was Harry Potter and Draco was familiar with his technique, the stops and starts and snickers, his fidgeting, nervous fingers, the muttering – “Malfoy,” which was probably an insult, and, “What the hell do you taste of?” which hopefully was not.

All the while, Draco couldn’t breathe from sensation, thorny sticky tumbles of hair between his fingers, the sound of their bodies heavy in his ears and panicked complaints pulling at his throat.
“Potter,” he said, too much aware. “Please, shut up. Fucking, please – just shut up.”

But Harry kept on murmuring, clear as a bell in their thick cocoon of darkness. “You’d be in trouble if I did.” He nipped, kissed and blew.

Then Harry Potter swallowed again, as if to prove the point, and it felt so good that Draco failed to keep safe hold on his thoughts. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you,” croaked out of his mouth.

Because this was something else. This was a dream that he’d had. This was all possible, now that he was alone in the world. Now that his parents – his family…

Emotion struck hold of him then, as his eyes shut, and it didn’t come with a name. Maybe it was grief; maybe it was shame; maybe it was pure desperation. Maybe it would have seen him come if he’d only been able to leave it one more minute. It was bright and painful – more real than the nonsense thought of Harry Potter, everybody’s favourite, sucking him off at a Gryffindor party held in an upmarket nightclub. It hurt, it hurt to know that neither of them would be doing this if Draco’s mother were still alive, or his father. It hurt to know that all the secrets he’d kept were for nothing, that he could have done it this way all along and it would not have mattered an inch.

“Fuck – fuck…” Draco was crying then, sobbing as he collapsed against the wall and down to curl around himself. “No,” he said to Harry Potter, hands in his face to push him away, his questioning sound of surprise. His own voice was thick with tears and surely seven different types of mucus. “No, fuck off; this isn’t… This isn’t real; this isn’t – it’s not. I don’t – I don’t want this.”

But the man remained there between his ankles. His hands were firm and warm on Draco’s pointed knees, squeezing and solid rather than fidgeting, for now. “Stop panicking,” he said, with authority. No matter that he should have been fucking off, that he should have been disgusted by what his shag had become. They both still had their cocks out, though Draco’s robe was collapsing back over his. Who knew what had happened to Potter’s. “Merlin’s sake, Malfoy,” Harry seemed to mock him, but his voice was deep and serious. “I’m not going to tell anyone.”

He wasn’t going to, was he? Breaths heaving in his throat, Draco knew it. Who would ever want to be thought of as touching Draco Malfoy?

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” Harry Potter continued, as though he was in a different conversation. “Not if you don’t… Is it Parkinson?” he asked, as if he was trying to get a grip on something beyond his experience.

Draco had no idea what he was talking about. “Is what Parkinson?” he demanded, shaking. He wiped his hands over his eyes, and they smelled like fresh spunk. He needed to get a grip on himself, but he couldn’t; his eyes were leaking and he didn’t know why. They hadn’t since before. “Whoever it is that you’re supposed to be remembering.” Potter spoke too reasonably, as though he had the faintest idea what he was talking about. “Or waiting for… I don’t know how these things work.”

“Don’t pretend you…” Draco began, talking to the darkness. But Harry squeezed his knees again, and there were tears falling from Draco’s eyes, wet on his fingers, and he didn’t know how to stop them. “Pansy’s in New York.” He wasn’t sure what he was saying, and he kept having to sniff. “Has been since the war. We don’t write.”

“You must’ve been lonely,” Harry said, spinning off somewhere else. They weren’t supposed to be talking; they were supposed to be drunk. They were supposed to be secrets, lost in Peruvian darkness. That was how this all worked. “Though, I mean…” Harry conceded for a moment. The
voice in the air sounded like Harry Potter, just as he always had, nervous and mealy-mouthed, common. He came back to the point. “She always seemed to fancy you in school.”

“Pansy’s not – she’s not stupid,” Draco spat. And there he was crying again, because he remembered long talks with the Greengrass sisters, both Daphne and Astoria, his mother laying out cake and Draco trying carefully, so carefully, to ask about their views on romance.

A few more years, darling, his mother had said. Girls grow out of these things.

Draco missed his mother, who’d died bearing the image of carpet. He missed her advice. He missed the frail touch of her fingers in his hair, all her dreams for his future, no matter how they – Morgana, he missed her, he missed her, he missed her so much.

Harry Potter was gathering him close into the crook of his neck, an awkward mess of arms and cologne and sweat and sex, Draco’s damp saltwater tears. He was too many of Draco’s desires, and every one of them felt like shame. “I want children,” he found himself saying in the Darkness, and he didn’t know why. His eyes were screwed closed and wet, his breath hitching. “I do. I want all of it. I want a home where we host a hundred at Christmas. I don’t want – not this.”

“I know,” Harry told him back, tightening his hold. “I want that too. Two point four.”

Then why? Draco almost asked. Why were either of them here? Why did Draco Malfoy hunger for sex that couldn’t bear children and why did Harry Potter act as though fidelity was a concept invented for cardstock?

Both of these were foolish questions. Potter’s public behaviour meant for nothing, just like his behaviour with Draco here and now, and with whomever else he had on the go. This was the underworld, the demi-monde, another kingdom and an unspoken place. It belonged in with death, and Draco had committed himself to the magic of these places, so he knew that he was supposed to accept them.

“You and Parkinson will be stunning,” Harry Potter was promising, an arm curled around Draco’s back and a hand stroking his hair. Never until his parents had died had Draco felt so riven with loneliness. The tears hurt where they tore at his eyes. “Devastating,” Harry insisted, with barely a G. “There’ll be blokes you can share and you’ll eat them alive.”

It was an old dream – old-fashioned, even, tinted sepia. They’d take a house in Cannes, him and Pansy, or somewhere less déclassé. Pansy Malfoy would wear exquisite cat-eyed sunnies, of the sort that she loved, and she’d smoke cigarettes from a holder as long as her wand. She’d ensnare new prey every month and pass over the scraps when she grew bored, and they’d host thousands, him in blue and black and her in pink and white.

But it was the twenty-first century these days, and Draco wasn’t sure that things like that were done. The queers were all like Potter, relaxed and flexible and hopped up on muggle vodka, fizz and taurine. They ended up together, or with women like Ginny Weasley, who knew the game just as well and knew how to take someone home at the end of the night. Everything was backwards, debauchery the front to wilful domesticity.

And that was why, wasn’t it? That was why Harry Potter could do what he did, because he knew that he’d be OK. This mess in an alleyway was a passing cover for the cake and kindness in his soul, just like Granger knew.

Draco’s soul was thick with darkness, no matter how much he might want to bleach it clean. And even then… It was 2004, and Draco felt younger than he had at fifteen. He didn’t know what he
was doing, and there was no one to explain, no one to hide things from. He needed that; he needed to be told that whatever he did, he was wrong.

“Remember who you are, Malfoy,” said Harry Potter, fingers raking and smelling like cologne, like sex on the warm night of his twenty-fourth birthday. He was saying the wrong things. “No one gives a toss if you get off with a few men you shouldn’t. You’re rich and you’ve got an old family name. Yesterday’s newsprint’s all for today’s fish and chips.”

Bollocks it was. “No one gives a toss about pre-marital fucking,” Draco quoted back at the man, “as long as the bastards don’t draw breath.”

Potter sighed, his arms loosening. “You could put it like that,” he wearily agreed. “If you wanted to sound like a callous git.”

Draco fumbled around for the man’s cock, feeling more in control than he had the whole evening. Potter was half hard – almost certainly against his will. “Then don’t tell anyone I said it,” he suggested, taking the man’s hair for himself in his other hand.

“Mmph,” Harry moaned against Draco’s mouth, falling in for a lazy snog. He didn’t care, Harry Potter, that was the thing. “You talk so much rubbish,” he reflected, still rasping.

Draco yanked harder, sucking on jaw, because he meant every word.
It’s the Hogwarts Easter holidays from Monday, late March 2008, which brings Harry round Dracco’s flat. He’s apparently decided to disregard both Christmas and Sunday afternoon, rambling on about his father as though it’s anything that Dracco might be interested in.

“I keep trying to think who he reminds me of,” Harry says, while Dracco hovers the kettle back to the hob from where he stands leaning against the sink, the room’s windows behind his back. The cabinets, sink and utilities of his kitchen are tucked away where the room swoops into an L, the main leg a dining area with a table for four, and then a space where there’s a sofa and the floo opposite.

It’s about lunchtime, so Harry has helped himself to a sandwich, settling himself contentedly at the dining table. Dracco might have been up earlier if he hadn’t gone back into work last night, but Potter the elder put everything back on his mind.

“Who does he remind you of?” Dracco asks, before realising that there’s surely no good answer. It’s too early in the day for this. And Harry Potter hates him. “Actually, no, forget I asked. This is inane.”

Harry looks at him, munching, tipping his chair back with a spiteful expression as if he’s going to answer anyway and doesn’t give a single toss what Dracco might have to say about it. Bastard. “I’ve come back to Cedric Diggory a few times,” he continues, pointedly, “but Cedric wasn’t such a bellend.”

Dracco honestly doesn’t remember that much about Cedric Diggory, only that he was The Real Hogwarts Champion, and that he was murdered, possibly by Dracco’s father. He’s never asked for clarification on that point. Diggory must have fought a dragon, like Harry and Viktor and Fleur, and swum the Great Lake, like Harry and Viktor and Fleur, but fourth year was a year of so many obsessions that the rest of school life is somewhat hazy in Dracco’s memory.

“He spent breakfast going on and on…” Harry is now talking to the ceiling. “Cedric was more the strong and silent type.” Ah, so not Dracco’s at all. “You could tell that all he wanted, in the end, was to get through things the right way and settle down for the quiet life with Cho, or someone like her, work his way up somewhere. All those Hufflepuff values.”

Wait – was Diggory the Galahad-wannabe Hufflepuff seeker from third year? Were they the same people? Oh, never mind, Dracco thinks. “And your father,” he offers spitefully, “is too much of Gryffindor.”

“He’s too much of a prick,” Harry complains, moving into the rant so easily that Dracco has no time to point out the obvious. The words come out of him as if they’ve been waiting in his head longer than James Potter has been returned to the world. “Trying to get us going with stories of what him and that lot got up to, chatting up Hermione, when, you know, she’s not interested, mate… Why the hell does he think we care?”

“Potter, I don’t care,” Dracco points out, charming the water, coffee and cafetière without much thought. If his mother could see him now, he thinks, after all the times she’d speculated that he would never cope without an elf.

“Oh, don’t talk rubbish,” Harry dismisses, his feet taking up all the space under the table. He must have worked out at some point that Dracco rarely sits down these days, given the choice. “I’ve had
enough of your rubbish. Whatever Sunday was about… You’ve been sticking your nose in my life since I met you, so whatever. I’m your Corrie, innit.” He plays up the accent sometimes, Draco knows, just to wind him up.

“Pardon?” Draco directs this question to his face, before turning back to the mug of sweet, sweet (bitter, bitter) milky coffee that’s hovering its way into his hands. “I have no idea what you’re saying.”

Harry rolls his eyes, and then he seems to be back on his father. “Apparently I should’ve known that there was a secret alcove in the wall behind Sirius’s old bed,” he complains, and it’s on complete faith that Draco doesn’t take this as a non-sequitur. “Apparently I’m not allowed to go through any of it until the whole lot’s been vetted, but I should admire this absolute relic of a television set, which Sirius made run and get pretty good reception. Apparently he used to spend the holidays as the lovechild of Arthur Weasley and my Aunt Petunia, watching muggle soap operas and keeping the others caught up on the details.”

It’s not clear why this is offensive, although Draco is naturally appalled.

“I mean,” Harry says, swallowing the last of his sandwich. His expression is hot again, jealous, perhaps. “You tell me, why didn’t I know this? And what gives him the right to commandeer Sirius’s room? He was my godfather. I don’t want to read his dirty magazines from the 70s, or whatever else Mr James Potter Esquire thinks is in there –”

Draco flinches. Mr Esquire. Merlin, this acquaintance is embarrassing.

“– but I don’t see why he gets to rummage around… He could have had any of the spares. It’s not his house.”

An edge enters Harry’s voice, distracting Draco from the bob in his throat.

“I don’t trust him,” he finishes, green eyes flashing. There’s a sullen set to his jaw.

It’s clear that Harry finds this crisis at least vaguely existential. His body language is closing off, as though he’s said something he’s ashamed of and he’s waiting to be excommunicated.

It’s pathetic in the extreme. “Potter, you don’t trust him because he grew up with more than two galleons to rub together.” The coffee is sinking in now, and Draco’s mind is clear. He should probably change out of his dressing gown, he thinks as he moves to find some toast. “He offends your sensibilities.”

“He does not,” Harry grumps, barely managing the final T.

And, oh, look, now Draco’s offending them. What a surprise. “You have a streak of inverted snobbery a mile wide,” he says, rummaging through cupboards. “Just look at the Weasleys. It was cute when you lived in Slough or wherever it was –”

“Surrey.” The look on his face is acid. “What d’you even know about Slough?”

It’s perfect. “– but these days you own a castle-like townhouse in Bloomsbury. You work only to keep yourself entertained. You’re going to marry a professional quidditch player, or someone else with celebrity status. It’s time to let go.”

After a second, Harry rolls his eyes, letting free a sigh that seems to be covering for a laugh. “You’re such a bloody – shithead,” he mutters towards the ceiling. It gives Draco a wicked little thrill, because Harry Potter so rarely swears. “And that’s not it at all,” he repeats, unconvincingly.
“Really,” Draco says, duly unconvinced as he locates a sliced loaf of bread.

“I feel like he’s hiding something.” Harry insists, and it’s enough to break someone’s heart. “Malfoy, please…” he asks, and Draco pauses for a second before bringing the bread down to the worktop, but he refuses to say anything. “He keeps trying to be matey,” Harry says, now clearly begging for another opinion, “but his heart’s not in it, you can tell. I think – oh, I don’t know, it could be a lot of things, but I don’t think I’m what he was expecting.”

He frowns, as though there has to be a mystery, all black hair and dark clothes in Draco’s gloss-white and wood kitchen.

“I don’t think that people are supposed to come back from the dead.” Harry finishes more quietly. “I think there’s something wrong with him.”

Again, Draco pauses, and he hates himself for doing so. “So it isn’t that he’s a prick, then.”

Harry’s eyes flash, and Draco turns away to the toaster, not giving him a target.

“He should remember,” is what Harry comes out with. “From when he came out of the stone and when he came out of Tom Riddle’s wand. What more does he want?”

It takes a moment for Draco to work out what must have happened. The Killing Curse’s Priori Incantatem is an image of the person killed, and Harry must have seen it. It’s one of the spell’s more peculiar aspects, which Draco has only read about.

“He said… He acted differently.”

And it would be a very curious thing to know, if the living form of James Potter remembered anything from his previous states of resurrection, but it doesn’t seem as though today is going to give Draco the chance to find out.

“I’ll see you later,” Harry interrupts himself, as though he’s said too much.

Draco doesn’t know what he wants to say. He turns around, but Harry won’t meet his eyes. The man spells his plate to the sink, adding a Scourgify, and on his feet, then, he disapparates.

Approaching six months after his parents’ deaths, Draco found his life almost starting to make sense. It was a very thin kind of sense, and looking back on it he would see that he spent most of his time avoiding anything that required completing a thought – but it was something other than a blur. He was pursuing a new project, namely the veil, which had apparently killed a man. He was finishing a thesis that only needed one short chapter and a sensible introduction, though this had been just as true six months ago. He was visiting his aunt and young cousin on high days and holidays and the odd time in-between.

He hadn’t seen Harry Potter since the turn of August when it came to late November, 2004. Then, one evening, he was bullied out of Mysteries and into a countryside pub by Granger, because she had just received the offer of a book contract – of course she had – and it was her birthday, or near enough – she’d been busy. There wouldn’t be a fuss, Granger insisted, but she was going to the pub with her boyfriend and Potter and some of her other merry Gryffindors, and there was no excuse for him not to come.

Luna Lovegood wasn’t Gryffindor, at least, so Draco sat with her.

A couple of drinks in, someone made the mistake of asking Granger what the book was actually
about.

“It’s… Well, I’ve called it Serendipity between Magical Cultures,” Granger said, already looking as though she wished the room would swallow her whole. Her boyfriend covered her hand with his, there on the table between the empty glasses and the beermats. “It’s, well, it’s difficult to explain…”

It wasn’t difficult to explain, Draco thought, but while Granger excelled at explaining other people’s ideas, she tended to lose bottle when it came to her own.

He glanced at Potter, who was frowning, trying to understand. He had no idea what Ginny Weasley was thinking – she was leaning close in the booth next to their saviour, her elbow about an inch behind his head. She’d been tapping Potter on the arm all night, every now and then, or he’d turn back to her. They were ever between squabbles and jokes, radiant.

Longbottom looked vacant, whenever Draco looked at him, which wasn’t often, and Luna was drinking her drink through a straw, her hair plaited with ribbons.

This was Granger’s night, Draco thought, and she was fucking it up. “Jam,” Draco reminded her over the table, in the end, taking pity on her aimless ramblings.

“Jam?” her boyfriend demanded, suspicious as though Draco was making a dig.

“Oh yes, jam,” Granger said, remembering. She looked relieved, pushing her hair back a little as though she wanted it behind her ears. It sprang forward. “Thank you, Draco, yes.”

“What about jam?” asked Potter, with a frown.

Thus began a much more coherent narrative, relatively speaking, starting from Granger’s time back at Hogwarts, where her conversations with Firenze and the house elves had led her to the reflection that, “Centaurs are very much jam tomorrow-type people, you see, whereas house elves are very much jam yesterday, when they’re trying to explain why there’s no jam today. Individuals can be all over the shop, but wizards have a tendency too, to say that someone else has the jam. We don’t consider the past very much – wizards and witches, I should say – and we’re very sceptical about the future.”

Draco took a glug of his pint, trying not to despair.

“Serendipity is about jam’s arrival,” Granger continued, toying with the empty glass in front of her. “The happy accident. And there’s a Greek word, kairos, which has similar connotations of a happy moment in time. Happy accidents are the core of conjuration, really, so, so the idea is to compare approaches to conjuration against attitudes to time, to better understand how conjuration works in essence. What it means to have jam.”

There was a silence for a moment.

Then Ginny Weasley laughed, as though this was a punchline. “Love it,” she said, her grin affectionate.

“The methodology is ground-breaking,” Draco pointed out, because it wasn’t a joke. Granger was biting her lip, embarrassed, while Luna slurped on her straw, surely thinking. “No one’s ever given a single fuck what house elves and centaurs get up to.”

“We always cared,” said Potter, affronted, pushing his glasses up his nose.
“No one who reads,” was Draco’s correction. It was a good line, he thought.

Luna tittered, at least, her shoulders shaking.

“I think it sounds brilliant,” Granger’s boyfriend announced then, supportively, much as he’d been doing all evening. “What the ruddy hell is jam, anyway?”

Granger opened her mouth, as if to start another explanation, but then she shut it again. “Very complicated, according to me,” she finished with, making Longbottom laugh and then look guilty about it.

“Let me get you another glass of wine, Granger,” Draco told her, exasperated. She looked grateful.

Later, Draco was the first one to leave, but he didn’t get very far. His shoes were still crunching through the gravel forecourt when Harry Potter ran up behind him and snagged him on the elbow.

“Hey, Malfoy,” he said, a flush in his cheeks. “You all right?”

It was a very odd thing for him to ask. “You’ll be missed, Potter,” he pointed out, nodding back towards the pub. It was quite lovely, really, an old thatched construction with several rosettes in the glass by the front door, promising good food. Draco hadn’t stayed because he didn’t intend to eat.

Potter glanced over his shoulder. “Nah. Hermione and Ron are on to Oxford for dinner,” he explained. “Some place she used to go with her parents. Those other three won’t miss me.”

Draco couldn’t imagine that this was true, but he didn’t question it. He was about to ask what the man wanted, but then he spoke up again.

“You’re proud of her,” he said, like an accusation. “Hermione,” he added. “I could see it on your face.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s how me and Ron’ve always felt,” Potter barrelled on, shorter than Draco by an inch or two and scowling, his eyes flashing behind his glasses. “I mean, till Ron decided that he fancied her, I s’pose.”

The gist of what was being said began to sink in, but Draco wasn’t going to take it without a fight. “You make her sound like a pet.”

Potter sighed. “No, I…” He rolled his eyes, looking backwards again. “I didn’t mean it like that. I mean that you act like you’re proud to be her friend.”

This was extremely uncomfortable. “Don’t talk bollocks.”

“Ron saw it too,” Potter insisted. Draco didn’t even know when Potter could have spoken to him.

There was nothing to say, then, for a moment. There was only the two of them, standing together in the light from the pub sign at the side of the road.

“Look, I still owe you one, don’t I?” said Potter, his expression nervous and his eyes very green. “For the summer.”

“Owe me one what?” Draco asked him, because most of the summer was a haze.

“Yeah.” He bounced on his toes for a second, nodding as though he was making sense of
something, reaching a decision. He didn’t answer.

It was a surprise when Potter kissed him, an arm hooked over his shoulder that didn’t stay there. It was a surprise for a number of reasons, and an important one was that they were both reasonably sober.

The other was that Draco hadn’t thought about kissing anyone in a long time. His experience with Harry at the club hadn’t been a fluke: his sex drive was nearly non-existent these days. He wasn’t up in the mornings; he wasn’t up in the shower… It would have been a concern, but the cause was so obvious and it made his life a lot easier, really.

Now Harry Potter was kissing him, a sharp burst of energy against him, a hand squeezing his shoulder and hot breath that tasted like dark malt and hops. They were outside a beautiful old pub, gravel crunching beneath shoes, and it was startling, wrong. It felt terribly wrong, like he was being comforted or something else indecent, dark feelings bubbling up just as many as there were soft, and he was pushing the man backwards, shivering with adrenaline.

He needed this not to be happening.

“Don’t panic!” Potter commanded, grabbing his wrist. His hand was hard, hot. “All right?” he demanded in the evening, mostly glasses and eyes, hair. “You don’t have to… D’you fancy it, I mean?”

It was a pointless command and an unfriendly question, but it was all kindly meant. The problem was, how could there ever be an answer? There was something curdling in Draco’s chest, warm desire rising beneath it, and all his feelings together were nothing more than a mess.

“I’m not asking for anything,” Harry Potter continued, earnest, green eyes and glasses. “I said I owe you, didn’t I?”

“Stop saying that,” Draco snapped at him, unable to tear his eyes from the man’s face, not least his flushed mouth. “None of this is quid pro quo.”

And he had no idea, the simple fucking bastard. “I have no idea what that means,” he was even saying now, laughing. His thumb was rubbing against the heel of Draco’s palm. “But I think it says that you don’t get out much. Look,” he said, letting go to cautiously run his hands down Draco’s upper arms, watching himself do it. “You’re fitter when you’re clever than when you’re being cruel. Yeah? That’s – that’s what I meant. You’re Hermione’s fit friend, and I…”

He made the mistake of glancing up, and it was all so clearly a lie. Maybe Granger’s attractive friends were exactly the sort of people whom Potter was supposed to be running after in pub forecourts, but that wasn’t who Draco was, and Potter knew it.

*Use me,* his eyes were saying, the way they had back in June. Draco doubted that he even realised. *I can see that you’re in pain, so please, make use of me.*

“Do you fancy a go, Potter?” Draco asked him, shrugging off his hands and crowding closer to take Harry’s shoulders. He stared down all of the man’s kindness. “What would you do, if you could?”

“I never got to see you that night –” Potter protested, blushing as he cut himself off.

That was more like it. Draco kissed him, and Potter responded, hotly enough that Draco could pretend that he was the one being used.

Potter took his wrist again, before apparating them somewhere that Draco didn’t know. The gravel
and the floodlight were gone: here they were stumbling across tarmac, under the moon, a few stones catching under their feet. The wind was blowing strong. There was a brick wall that Draco stumbled into. Potter pushed harder against him, mouth open and his tongue tense against his as Draco took his face in his hands, lenses in the way of his thumbs.

There were hands on Draco’s belt, not at all interested in comfort, fumbling into fastenings and making his hips buck as fingers felt their way behind the muggle denim that Draco never liked to wear.

“Where are we here, then?” Draco mocked, his back scraping against the brick. There was a certain quality to the space around them; the wind was howling and the ground was a little spongy… All right, maybe Draco was genuinely surprised. “Have you brought us to a *roof*?”

They could be anywhere, Draco thought. Anywhere at all.

“All right,” came the answer to the first question, between kisses. The equivalent of anywhere, for all that Draco knew of the place and for all of it that he could see. “My old primary school.” Potter had enough undone that he was working Draco’s underwear down over his hips. “First place I ever apparated, actually,” he added conversationally, “though I didn’t know that that was what I’d done at the time.” His fingers were cold when they found flesh, making Draco jump, but he leaned in closer, cutting the wind and breathing hot breath into Draco’s ear. “I was on the run,” he said with what sounded like a wink.

There were many questions to ask – when? why? how? It couldn’t have been the war – just Harry Potter being Harry Potter, escaping. “Why the *roof*?” was all that Draco managed.

Potter was on a knee at this point, and he laughed. “I’m not doing this in a *playground*,” he declared, before his mouth was otherwise occupied. It was much, *much* hotter than his cold hands.

He’d learned some tricks, Potter, since their last encounter, and there was little scope, Draco found, for thinking much besides, well, fuck. It took a long time, he thought afterwards, and he spent a lot of it holding his tingling nose as though he’d been deep underwater and was still adjusting to the surface. He tried not to think when there was ever the option, and certainly not about Harry Potter, and so he thought about Surrey instead when he wasn’t thinking fuck. Why Surrey? Fuck. Had he ever been to Surrey? Fuck. Fuck. Oh –

In the end there he was, ragged and gone missing, Harry Potter coughing softly as he climbed back up to his feet and pressed fingers to Draco’s face that smelled like late mornings.

“Quid pro quo implies straightforward exchange,” Draco told him, gasping deeply from this throat, just for something to say. His heart was pounding and he felt alive from his moment of pleasure – too much like himself. The world seemed momentarily more real around him. What the hell had Potter been up to, he wondered, to bring about that unbelievable feat? He was probably diseased. “This is not quid pro quo.”

On top of all this, Potter was a very courteous partner, putting Draco away and doing up his jeans. It was a kind gesture, because this was November. It was cold. The wind was blowing. Harry’s smile was quite beautiful, he tried not to think.

“So what?” he asked, fingers pressing Draco’s fly down neat. He sounded content.

Draco’s eyes had adjusted by this point, so he could make out the planes of Harry’s face and the horns of his hair, which he whorled now again around his fingers. “So there’s nothing so simple in this life.”
He turned Potter to the wall, kissing him slowly, thinking. The man responded, tasting of filth, and there was a lot of him, then, hard against Draco’s leg.

“I should make you understand,” Draco told him, breathlessly. Because there was no such thing as straightforward exchange. Not for Harry Potter.

“OK,” came the reply, without guile.

The idea, after that, was to get Harry Potter off so hard that he couldn’t move, so hard that he felt as weak as Draco did, falling apart and desperate. Then he would see how degrading this was – then he would stop offering himself…

The attack was not well thought out, if it could be said to have been thought out at all. Potter came in his jeans, the first time, and was up again soon after. He came again before Draco acquiesced to touch him, and he was crying out, quite incoherent, the times after that, as Draco worked his hand and worked his mouth on the man’s hot neck. He should have gone to his knees, probably, but the point was for Harry to feel vulnerable, and realise what it meant, to be doing this with Draco Malfoy.

By the last of it, Harry Potter was down on the tarmac roof, with Draco sat straddled over his jittering thighs, bum on the cold ground, wind buffeting them, and he was still finished when Harry Potter wasn’t, because he was fucking broken, Draco, and Harry Potter was a Merlin-cursed wristache.

“Oh Merlin, why?” Harry croaked, groaning as he came yet again “You fruitbat, Malfoy,” he swore, grabbing his head and his shoulder and kissing him. “Have you gone completely mental? I feel…” From what Draco could feel of him, he was hot and jittery and weak, like an errant puff of steam.

“Men aren’t supposed to come like this,” Draco told him, trailing fingers, because as far as he knew it was true. He was murmuring into Potter’s mouth, because he was weak and it was frankly addictive, how the rumble in his throat was making this man slur underneath him, loose and trembling. “Always have to be different, don’t you?”

“Have you won yet?” Harry begged, wrapping his arms around Draco now and burying his his head in his collar. There was little for Draco to do but cradle him close. “Please tell me you’ve won,” he huffed, his voice deep, and he was still laughing. “This was a game, right, and you’ve… I think I might die.”

He didn’t die, and Draco hadn’t won, but he did fall asleep for five minutes while Draco found himself lost in thought, fingers trailing up and down the bones of Harry Potter’s spine. Primary school, he told himself to think, rather than anything else. It was an odd phrase, and he’d never been sent to one. Some of his peers had been sent to a preparatory school, of which there were two or three in the country, as far as he knew, which he supposed were the same thing. Draco’s mother had wanted him at home, and Pansy’s mother had too.

They went their separate ways after that, and Harry did up his own trousers, laughing as he said goodbye. It seemed that, as always, he was quite capable of looking after himself.

It’s more than a week after James Potter returns that Draco next sees the man’s son, quite unexpectedly on Easter Sunday, 2008. The day brings him to Andromeda’s house in Brentwood, Essex – a place with little more to recommend it than Surrey’s Little Whinging.
“Well,” Andromeda says, moments after Draco’s emerged from the floo. The fire’s gas, but the magic still seems to work. “He came over to give Teddy an egg, and I thought to myself, what’s one more?”

She looks so much like Bellatrix sometimes. Even here, in a room full of beige, the heavyset cream leather sofa the most muggle thing that Draco has ever seen, Andromeda’s brown eyes are glinting with cunning. There’s a smirk on her lips that would be wicked in many other circumstances.

“What’s one more, exactly,” agrees Draco, refusing to spring a single trap. He adds in passing to Harry, “I merely thought that you would have been due at the Burrow.”

It seems that Harry can’t look at him. He’s sat on the sofa with Teddy, who’s wide-eyed and likely learning to read subtext, which is necessary but quite dangerous when he’s turning ten in two weeks. They’re both holding game controllers, the boy and his godfather; whatever’s on the television is paused, playing upbeat music that lends the room a jaunty air. It looks like a car-racing game, which is not what Draco would have chosen for Teddy at all.

“Yeah,” Harry says, inarticulately. “Thought I’d give it a miss this time.”

Draco recalls some of what went on at Christmas with the Weasleys. His impression at the time was that the whole affair had been very much par for the course, but apparently it’s put Harry off.

“And then I thought,” Andromeda pitches in, as if Harry hadn’t been the focus of her thoughts at all, “if we’re having Harry, why not Teddy’s Uncle Ron and Auntie Hermione?”

She hasn’t, Draco thinks to himself. One look at Andromeda’s face, however, is enough to confirm that she has.

“Which of course led me to finding out that you’ve been raising Teddy’s father’s friends from the dead, dear Draco. The things you get up to…”

Right on cue, before Draco can react, the floo flares to life and Granger’s boyfriend emerges, holding a parcel of what might well be meat, wrapped in white paper.

“Uncle Ron!” Teddy interjects immediately, leaping off the sofa with all subtext forgot.

Draco wonders if he should feel miffed, not to have received such a reaction himself. Here he is, still clutching a very handsome Honeydukes egg to his chest, wrapped in gold foil and tied up with a green velvet ribbon. There are some of the shop’s signature honey truffles inside it, for spring.

“Hiya Teds,” Granger’s boyfriend offers a very standard greeting, ruffling the child’s hair. “Put that in the kitchen, would you, mate?” He presents his parcel. “It’s some extra lamb for lunch.” Teddy goes and the man adds, “Cheers for doing this, Andromeda; it’s nice to have a change.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Andromeda says. Draco’s the butt of this comment, he thinks, somehow.

Granger herself emerges next, laden down with bags and a harried expression on her face. “Kreacher insists,” she says to Andromeda, as though they’re mid-conversation, “that if you and young Mr Tonks aren’t coming round to ours, then you should at least know what you’re missing.” She sighs, gesturing to her burden. “He’s made simnel cake – I don’t even know… And I’ve got a bottle each, almost. Two of bubbly and three of something from the cellar.”

“Ooh, lovely,” Andromeda coos, sounding exactly like a second Bellatrix as she peers inside the bags. “Is the fizz chilled? Oh, yes it is…”
“He’s not happy,” Hermione stresses. “I think he was looking forward to having us at home, but it’s one thing for us to do our own thing and quite another to start hosting. Or I mean, um…”

She goes pink, as if she’s spoken without thinking, looking to her boyfriend.

He wraps an arm around her shoulders, dropping a kiss to her hair. “She means that my mum would’ve had a fit,” he says plainly, and Andromeda laughs as she pulls bottles from the bag.

Teddy’s back then, and Draco’s able to catch him. “Young Teddy!” he says. “I have brought you an egg. In the spirit of spring and new life.”

Teddy blinks at him, and then declines his head in a slow nod of acceptance. He takes the egg in two hands. “I thank you, Cousin Draco, for this boon and for your presence here today.”

It’s easy to forget, because he’s still quite small and soft-featured, but Teddy Lupin is a cheeky little shit. Draco’s not sure why he bothers.

He takes after Andromeda, Teddy, in appearance, most of the time. Even Bellatrix too, with his darker hair. The boy has been interested in appearing as himself for the last few years – in part, Draco suspects, because he’s not allowed to use his metamorphmagus skills at his muggle primary, which seems to enjoy sending letters home about hair dye. Draco suspects that this will all change when the boy goes off to Hogwarts, but Teddy also possesses a stately kind of centredness that reminds Draco of Andromeda if not his own mother, so he can’t imagine the boy ever becoming prone to vagaries.

Perhaps this is all prejudicial. Sometimes, Draco wonders why the boy doesn’t choose to look more like his godfather or his beloved Uncle Ron, given that he has a choice in the matter, or will when he changes schools.

For now, it’s not clear whether the face Teddy usually wears is the one that he was first born with, but it’s certainly his own. Curly brown hair that runs dark, with Andromeda’s austere mouth, small in his soft face. His eyes don’t come from Bellatrix, thank Merlin, but are rather a warm amber-brown, and his nose isn’t pureblood at all, coming in a little crooked at the bridge. It offsets all of his expressions, adding something wry to every grin.

“Do not give me your sarcasm,” Draco scolds him now. It comes out almost as a joke, because he actually quite liked the boy’s use of boon. He glances at Harry, who’s caught their exchange and is grinning Teddy’s grin. “And I see that you’re letting your godfather corrupt you, as usual. What’s this one called?” He nods to the TV. “Death Traps 2000?” The music has a bassline that he’s certain is going to give him a headache.

Teddy groans dramatically, tossing his head and rolling his eyes laboriously as he flounces back to the sofa. “You’re just jealous, Cousin Draco. I shan’t let you have a go if you’re not more polite. Grandma says that we’re not to let you pretend.”

Pretend what? Despite himself, Draco puts on a sigh and goes to join them, leaning against the wall next to the sofa. He ignores Harry’s snickers.

James Potter emerges from the floo just as Draco is coming to terms with what an odd lunch this is going to be. The week has changed the man little, and it’s clearly true now that there’s something guarded about him, no matter his broad grin and energy. He sets his back straight and holds out his hand to greet Andromeda, who’s replacing the crystal stopper on a decanter now full of red.

“Andromeda Tonks?” he introduces himself as stiffly as ever. “James Potter.” The experience with
his son doesn’t seem to have put him off. “Charmed.”

It’s a little odd, the dynamic between them, because they’re supposed to be the same generation, but Potter looks thirty and Andromeda might well be nearly sixty. But of course Andromeda doesn’t let it show. “Yes, I remember,” she says, shaking his hand.

Potter ends up rather off-balance.

“Is that your dad, Harry?” hisses Teddy into the pause, less a stage whisper than an expression of reverence.

Harry fidgets. “Yeah, supposedly,” he manages, in a darker voice. It doesn’t sound as though hostilities have ceased.


James Potter is frowning at their host. “I’m sorry,” he’s saying, and Draco supposes that Andromeda was too old for them to have met in school. “I don’t recall…”

“Oh, silly me,” Andromeda says, meaning something else entirely. “I realise that you weren’t there.” She gestures dismissively. “I made Teddy’s grandfather drive us to your parents’ house once upon a time, just to check that you weren’t going to rob my cousin blind.” There’s a story here that Draco doesn’t know. “They were delightful hosts. Very proud of you.”

“There was no need to be suspicious,” Potter says, with a quick, disarming grin.

Andromeda looks at him levelly. “There was every reason,” she says, in the tone she usually uses to talk about her own childhood.

With this, some of the wind seems to leave James Potter’s sails. He grows serious, glancing at Granger and her boyfriend, then his son and Teddy, then Draco there against the wall. His shoulders twitch, and something like sympathy turns in Draco’s chest, because it’s as though he feels hunted. He looks very lonely, out of place in the centre of their room.

The expression on him is driving Harry to distraction. He’s clenching one hand around the games controller and the other into a fist on the flat arm of the sofa. The leather’s rustling around him as he draws himself back to sit up straighter.

Abruptly, then – “Can I help you with something in the kitchen?” James Potter jokes with Andromeda, grinning with his unfamiliar, murky eyes. “They say that I work wonders with potatoes.”

Lunch is boozy, in the end, but they avoid disaster. Teddy runs riot after they’ve eaten, but Granger’s boyfriend keeps up with him, insisting on a game of chess and slurring out commands in the voice of a pirate captain, which is probably why he’s the favourite. The game takes up most of the living-room floor, while Granger herself matters on to Andromeda, glass in hand where they remain at the dining table, the other end of the room from the sofa. Granger is feverishly recounting histories of various time travellers, explaining how they came to sticky ends, while Andromeda pitches in with ways that the idiots should have done it all differently.

This leaves Draco and Harry on the sofa, with James Potter on the matching armchair, the back of which faces the bay window and the doorway into the hall. Draco doesn’t like sitting down and his muscles itch with it, even as he finds himself slumping low and letting his head loll back.

“And then they tried to keep themselves from making it not happen…”
James Potter is asleep, or he’s at least performing a decent approximation of the state, straight-backed like a corpse.

“See, when he’s like this, he’s all right,” Harry murmurs ungenerously, barely loud enough to hear, especially with Granger in the background. He’s got an arm stretched down the back cushions, facing his father, and the tips of his fingers are pulling lightly at the longer strands of Draco’s hair. They’re not talking about it, and neither of them are leaning away. Draco’s hoping that no one can see, and trying to work out why someone who hates him can sit so close. He feels quite tired, and it is certainly the wine. “You can look at him and think… But he’s just a man, you know? He’s my dad, but it doesn’t feel right.” He taps his chest. “It doesn’t feel like it should.”

Draco groans, quietly, low in his throat. “You can’t know how it would feel, if he’d not… You have no idea.”

“I don’t know why one would attempt these things without the imagination to realise…”

“Yes I do,” Harry insists, ardent, defiant, whispering, his eyes glancing between Draco and his father. “I do. It should – it should feel like Sirius always did.”

That bastard again. James Potter is still sleeping, and Draco wonders if the man knows, exactly, what he’s supposed to be living up to.

“That’s dreadfully unfair,” Draco murmurs, and he hates how earnest he sounds, but he can’t control it. He can’t remember, on all of Kreacher’s wine, exactly how it is that he’s supposed to speak. Harry doesn’t look like he hates him, not here, and Draco – “You were a child when your godfather was alive. You think that the man can’t tell that you find him deficient? Imagine if Teddy said that you had to make him feel like Ron.”

They both turn to the game of chess for a moment, and the easy grin on Teddy’s face.

“Arrrr, my crow’s nest, aye, you!” Ron is saying, waving a hand. “Advance!”

Then Draco turns his head back, and Harry turns his head towards him, crooking up his elbow to prop his head on his fist. They’re a little less than armslength away from each other, which is probably too close, especially in company. Neither of them pulls away.

“Teddy’s not my son,” Harry says with conviction, quiet. Granger and Andromeda are laughing; Teddy himself is laughing as he shouts on a pawn to the exaggerated laments of Granger’s boyfriend.

"Increase the rum rations! We’ll mourn him, shipmates, and he’ll be avenged!”

“Fuck off,” Draco tells Harry. He’s not sure why he says it, because he’s never thought it before – but he’s not taking back the point. “You’re his absentee father who works long hours.”

Nose screwed up, Harry absently pushes at his glasses, like he’s amused. Like he’s frustrated. “What kind of father is that? I barely see him outside of Harry Saturdays.”

“That’s many people’s fathers, Potter.” Draco wonders if he can get away with touching Harry’s knee, which is twitching in discomfort. He wants to say that Harry is a good influence on Teddy. They all know it.

“Then who’re you?” Harry asks, levering his arm on the sofa to prod at Draco’s forehead with two fingers. “And who’s Lupin? Remus. He’s Teddy’s dad. You shouldn’t say things… You shouldn’t say.” There’s a bee in his bonnet now; he’s frowning, highly inebriated. “You’re rude.”
“I’m not rude; I’m stating facts.” Draco tries for aloof. “Life’s not fair, and neither am I.”

That earns him silence, but the flash in Harry’s green eyes means that Draco knows exactly what he’s thinking about.

There’s warmth in Draco’s chest, not only from the alcohol. A smile crosses his face – and very quickly dims, because Harry’s distracted, and when Draco turns his head he sees that James Potter is watching them, blinking out of sleep.

“Oh James, you’re awake,” trills Andromeda, not in another room at all.

One night in early 2005, Draco was emphatically inebriated. He hadn’t come out with any intentions: Granger frequently invited him to the pub, and more than often enough he and Potter found themselves in each other’s company at the end of the night – but they just as often did not.

Tonight was one of those times. Tonight, Granger and her boyfriend had long gone home, but the rest of them had stumbled into a muggle club that they’d found in Nottingham, which was more bar than dance floor for the most part. They’d secured a booth: Harry Potter, Ginevra Weasley and Neville Longbottom had all singularly failed to come back from the bar, and so Draco was left, drinkless, with Luna Lovegood.

He was lolled back on the bench seat, in this bar, playing idly with the ends of Luna’s long hair. Luna herself was staring up at the lights on the ceiling, moving her head from side to side in time with the music.

“Ugh,” came a voice from behind them, where the muggles had put a ramp for some reason. “I hate it when people bring their straight mates to gay night.” He didn’t sound like the city they were in; he was London misplaced.

Draco looked over his shoulder towards the source of the voice. It was some muggle fucker in a pair of jeans and an offensively bright, tight t-shirt, his face a scowl and his hair stuck up in spikes. He was with another man dressed in more muted colours, with curly hair, who was stumbling as though he hadn’t expected his friend to stop.

Draco wondered what they saw, looking at him, even as Luna spoke up. “The posters say that it’s LGBTQ night,” she declared, vaguely. “Q for Queer.”

“I thought the Q was for Questioning,” the mutedly clothed friend remarked, in an equally vague tone. He was Yorkshire, Draco thought, maybe Harrogate like the coffee and tea.

“OK.” Luna questioned him sweetly, “Do you believe in the fey?”

“It’s about fucking, love,” the fucker told her, and Draco had a mind to tell him to watch his tongue. He was clearly very drunk, but that was really no excuse. “Fucking someone whose bits are like your bits.”

“It seems strange to call it fucking if there’s not a cock involved.” Luna didn’t seem to need any protection from unpleasant language. Her voice rose slightly, as if to make that clear. “Fuck is a very violent word, especially when used figuratively. It implies penetration and it implies pain. So I’m not inclined to agree with you.”

“You saying you’re gay then?” the fucker demanded, pointing at her, though Luna didn’t act threatened. “You and him.” He nodded at Draco.
Draco didn’t say a word, observing, but Luna shook her head. “Oh no,” she said, smiling.

“Then fuck off out my club night, the pair of you.”

“All right, Alex, calm down,” his friend then said, patting his shoulder clumsily while the fucker wrenched himself away and stormed off.

Yorkshire watched him go. He had Longbottom’s accent, Draco thought, a lighter version. Just like Longbottom he was perfectly happy to stand where he was.

“I apologise for my friend,” he said, on a delay. He couldn’t seem to quite focus on their faces. “He’s being a bitch because his regular’s necking some… The new boy’s got better hair.”

“I bet you it’s Potter,” Draco said without meaning to, because he had no opinion about Harry Potter’s hair whatsoever.

“Mm,” Luna agreed, nodding at him and then turning back to their friend on the ramp. “Harry’s been snogging men a lot lately,” she explained as though the man would find it interesting. “And he has very nice hair. His eyes are nice too.”

“OK,” the man agreed, and none of them gave any mind to the slimness of the probability that this was true.

“Tell your friend not to worry,” Draco added as it occurred to him. “Potter will not be looking for a serious relationship in this club.” He already had Ginevra Weasley, though she was apparently off on tour in a week.

“That’s good!” came the muggle’s last. “I’ll tell him,” he insisted, before setting off down the ramp.

“You shouldn’t say that, you know,” Luna told Draco as they turned back around to face the bar proper. “All of Harry’s relationships are serious.”

If that were true, Draco thought, then he would feel a lot more annoyed about the prospect of Harry being necked by a man on the dance floor.

He wondered if Luna was telling him that he was supposed to care. In the end, it wasn’t clear why it would be Draco’s business. His and Harry’s infrequent liaisons were a matter for the present of their moments, neither responses to the past nor preparations for the future. What Potter did at any other time was irrelevant.

If Draco had any decent libido, he thought, he’d be off fucking strangers too. He’d make an excellent slut. He’d always been so furtive before.

“I have a secret, Draco,” Luna declared then, looking at him with her wide eyes, flashing blue with her skin and pale hair in the lights. “I should like to tell you.”

Draco didn’t know what to say, his mind caught on the memory of Harry Potter sucking him down. “What?” he asked. “No, Luna,” he said, catching up. “If you tell me, then it won’t be a secret.”

She frowned, and Draco wondered when it was, that he and Luna Lovegood had become so close. There should have been a reconciliation. He should have issued her an apology, with penitent tears if not with blood. But he couldn’t remember what he’d ever said, and here she was, the only person that he saw now, really, who wasn’t Gryffindor.
He wondered, sometimes, if she’d simply never left him, from the day when she’d been dragged through the halls of his parents’ house like a prize, like a girl, like the truth; when she’d looked at him with tears in her glassy eyes, water falling to her cheeks.

“Secrets are only fun when you confess them,” Luna countered him now, her face bright with a knowing smile and her eyes a clear blue. “My secret,” she carried on, leaving Draco no time to stop her, “is that I’ve been seeing Harry’s cousin Dudley. I sent him an owl after he and Harry fought, and since then I’ve been meeting up with him in London.”

Draco hadn’t even known that Harry Potter had a cousin. “Who the fuck is Harry’s cousin Dudley?”

“He’s a muggle,” Luna said, devastatingly. “He’s very wise. We talk about the ways that it hurts to spend life inflicting pain.”

Something in her voice chilled Draco’s chest cold dead. “He doesn’t hurt you, does he?”

“No, Draco,” Luna said, smiling as though this was a terrible thing. She patted him on the arm. “He’s scared of me. Wizards have baited him in the past. He baited Harry,” she added softly, as though it would hurt Draco to hear it. “His worst memories are of Harry suffering. He loves him more than anything, I’ve noticed.” Luna said it, and Draco believed her. “But he doesn’t think that Harry will see him again.”

“That doesn’t sound like Potter.” Draco could barely imagine it, Harry Potter rejecting love.

Luna shook her head, shuffling over to encourage Draco’s head onto her shoulder. “He doesn’t realise that his cousin feels that way,” she said. “It’s very complicated.”

The weight of Luna against him was warm, her shoulder hard and familiar against his ear, her hair soft where it pillowed on his crown. They might as well have been back in the Manor’s cellar, hiding and waiting while Ollivander told them stories about making wands. Someone should have found Draco out, really; discovered that he’d been down there with them.

He hadn’t come often. It had always been harder, somehow, to sit in a cellar and contemplate the threat of punishment above him, rather than to walk on floors and forget the suffering beneath them. But sometimes he had come, and sat in silence, his head on Luna’s shoulder while the old man croaked on about Scamander and his bowtruckle.

“I won’t tell Harry about Dudley, I don’t think,” Luna said eventually, as though to herself. “At least not for now. It will only cause a bother.”

Luna’s hair was soft in Draco’s fingers, if only for now, and in the end it was Longbottom who came back from the bar with another run of shots. He gave them a look, as though Draco hadn’t seen him snogging Ginny Weasley an hour ago by the toilets. Because it was all fair play, really, wasn’t it, between her and Potter? It was all sewn up, their future, so the present mattered for little.

“Something you both want to tell me?” Longbottom asked them now, not meeting Draco’s eyes as he threw back whatever stuff it was in his glass, tinted blue.

“Fuck off, shitforbrains,” Draco said, not moving an inch. It was a little harsh perhaps, but it made Luna laugh.

“All right, Malfoy, don’t hex me.”

Luna apparated them to her home that night, with a promise that Draco could stay in the spare
room. They appeared in a very spacious flat, the living room of which for some reason had been entirely painted black. There was a woman scurrying around the place with a list in her hand and a quill between her teeth.

She was around thirty, perhaps, about five years older than they were, and when she looked up Draco was surprised to recognise her as Liz Townsend, star keeper for the Holyhead Harpies, reaching back to the days when he’d kept up with the quidditch leagues.

“Loons, have you seen my back-up gloves?” she greeted, teeth clenched, barely stopping.

Luna kissed her on the mouth, over the quill. “I think I froze them for safe-keeping.”

The woman – Townsend, she’d always been – nodded at this, heading to the far side of the living room. An archway here seemed to lead into a kitchen.

“This is Liz,” Luna introduced the woman’s back. “She’s not a secret, though most people don’t ask about her. She knows you already and she likes you very much.”

“How was the club?” the woman asked when she came back, quill now out of her mouth and held in a hand with the list and the frozen gloves. The way she said club was clipped and northern – from one of the cities, not Longbottom’s North. She had three bottles of butterbeer in her other hand, her fingers spread-eagled around their necks. “Here you go, Draco,” she said with a smile, pushing one into his hands.

He hadn’t realised that he felt like a butterbeer, he thought, pulling the cork.

“We had fun,” Luna said. She grinned broadly. “It was gay night.”

This prompted Liz, who was surely Ravenclaw, to go on a spontaneous, long and at times witty discourse about the fundamentally different nature of the lesbian experience from anything defined by the word gay. “If we might still call ourselves radical feminists in the new millennium,” she began at one point, while Draco drank his butterbeer.

“Isn’t she lovely?” Luna asked him, eyes alight as Liz went off to finish packing. “So much better than a secret.”

Draco didn’t know what to tell her.

The Ministry is closed on Easter Monday. Not for any religious reason, they say – rather because it is seen as too likely to break the Statute to have too many people coming into work on a muggle bank holiday.

Because of his duty to the Nowhere Room, Draco has special leave to apparate in and out of the Ministry building, so he could ignore this problem if he chose. There is no reason for Draco to stay at home, but he does so nonetheless, in 2008, mostly sleeping, seeing Luna for a couple of hours in the evening, generally avoiding all things Potter and arriving back on Tuesday with everybody else.

There’s a note that arrives on his desk, sent through from the owlery. It’s one sentence long, and he reads it one more time than it deserves, before setting it aside and working on his calculations for the day.

Much later, he makes his way downstairs to the veil room.
The whispers seem louder after a weekend without them, all of them hissing. They make the chamber seem threatening in a way that it wasn’t before James Potter’s return, and Draco can feel the cool damp of its cavernous atmosphere.

Today’s test is both extremely simple and extremely difficult: he plans to vanish something into a place beyond the Nowhere Room, which he believes should be the veil, and then conjure it back. He’s struggled for a long time with the question of how to manipulate the inside of the veil magically, because it is to that degree impenetrable. But he believes that he may be able to use the Nowhere Room as a waystation, which will open up a host of new possibilities. Or else at least one.

He conjures a bird into the real world – a canary, for tradition – and then he vanishes it, with concentration. Another flick of his wand, and he disapparates to the Nowhere Room.

It has the rather dead feeling of a budget hotel, the Nowhere Room. The place lies empty for years at a time, and Draco was asked to redecorate when he took it over, at a time when he knew nothing about interior decoration. It’s ended up looking a lot like his flat, but in beige and puce rather than white, blue and grey.

There’s no living room, only a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchenette to the side. Draco checks the place once a week for those who have fallen in and the idea is for them to not go mad in the meantime before he comes, because it’s very rare that people can find their way out of here on their own. They’ve rarely splinched themselves, the visitors – splinchers want for deliberation, typically, even though they have determination enough to power the spell. Those who find the Nowhere Room want for destination, even as they’re determined and deliberate in their travel.

Today it seems that Draco’s calculations for the vanishing spell are correct, because his canary is here, trilling happily as it flits around the softly lit room. There’s a pang in his chest as he attempts the second stage, but his wand moves unerringly, meaning to vanish the canary into the veil, possibly to its death. It disappears to somewhere, at least, with a pop that ends its song.

He apparates into his office, holding his breath, then takes the stairs quickly down again into the chamber, just for the sake of completeness. The Department seems empty, for some reason, as though they’ve already arrived at the end of the day, though it doesn’t feel that way to Draco. The stairs flit by under his feet, and he counts them for not much reason at all.

When he arrives against in the cool stone chamber, there’s no way to tell if the canary really has gone where it should have done, because nothing can be seen in the veil, for the moment, but he tries to conjure it into the real world and it won’t come, not the same bird. The spell catches in his hawthorn wand.

This is encouraging, at least for his purposes: the bird was nowhere, and now it cannot be, which means that he can test his strategy for reversing this obviously unsatisfactory predicament.

Pursuing the same route as before, Draco disapparates again to the Nowhere Room and takes a breath, holding out a hand and steeling himself. His hope is that the bird will have remained very much alive, in suspended animation, even, between life and death, and will be able to be conjured here again. He’ll have analysis to do on its journey.

“Avis,” Draco mutters aloud, pointing his hawthorn wand at his palm. His wand doesn’t like it, but then – with a chirp and the feeling of needle-like pressure on his skin, the bird returns to him, stalking sharp footsteps over his fingers and looking at him with curious eyes.

He tries to send it away again, the bird, but it won’t go, not back to the veil. It’s become something
else, coming out of that place between, and it refuses to return.

It’s an impossibility, this bird, Draco thinks. He doesn’t know what it is.

And then there’s another impossibility, though he doesn’t immediately realise this. Much like the bird, which appeared with a chirp, there’s a yelp and a clatter of the bedside table, quickly followed by a sproing from the bed. A man appears. He’s stumbled over onto the duvet.

“What the fuck?” spills out of Draco’s mouth. The bird is in the air, tweeting loud calls and swooping around his head. He quickly conjures a cage to contain it, setting it down on the floor. “I mean…”

Draco’s heart is pounding, and he feels rather short-tempered as he collects himself. He was hoping to do his analysis today, or tonight, whenever it is. Now he’ll have to do an interview and fill out a form. Of all the coincidences…

“I mean to say – you’ve rather bollocksed up your apparition, whoever you are.” Needless to say, this greeting is not standard protocol. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.” He rolls his eyes and remembers the most important parts. “Your licence is now subject to review, as per Ministry Statute 1945.4.13. As Steward of the Nowhere Room, Unspeakable Malfoy, I must ask you to submit your…”

“Unspeakable Malfoy?” the man asks as he sits up, wearing some quite appalling raggedy robes. He looks to be around thirty years old, with sandy-coloured hair, his limbs long and awkward. “What on earth is going on?”

Wrinkling his nose, he looks like his son. He sounds like a mild-mannered news reporter for the WWN.

“Professor Lupin,” Draco says, out of long forgotten habit. He is going to kill Harry Potter, he thinks. “Aren’t you a surprise?”
Draco isn’t in shock at Lupin’s appearance, not really. In fact, he is rather more prepared this time. With a little effort, he manages to convince his old teacher to come back with him to his office, and bring the bird along too. He even pushes his luck:

“Do you mind if I perform one or two analytical charms? You are not the first, ah, new arrival and it would be very helpful…”

“No, no, please, go ahead,” says Lupin, apparently completely out of it. It’s at least five minutes before he cottons on. “Wait. Who else is here?”

Draco is filling up a roll of parchment with spellscript, which comes out rather akin to musical notation, keyed to his wand. He won’t be able to make out much until he goes over it, likely tomorrow.

“Not…” Lupin continues, before he looks away for a moment.

Hands in pockets, there’s a wry twist to his eyebrows, but when he looks back it’s gone. He looks younger than Draco’s ever known him, and unlike James Potter there’s something almost attractive about him, despite his terrible clothes. It’s a sort of rangy wildness in the way that his collar doesn’t sit straight. Maybe Andromeda’s daughter could have chosen worse after all, Draco thinks.

He’s not sure where these thoughts have come from. They would have disgusted him ten years ago.

“I’m afraid that I was involved in something rather stupid on the other side,” Lupin apologises now, to whom Draco doesn’t know. “Apparating without one’s body. Very foolish, I’m sure you’ll agree… The thought was that it couldn’t leave me any more dead.”

Well, that’s true enough, Draco thinks. “And?” he asks.

“The target was a certain veil,” Lupin replies, off-hand. “You must know it, if you really are an unspeakable.”

The canary is apparently having the time of its life, hopping around its cage in the corner of Draco’s office, trilling a little tune every now and again. Draco wonders if it has the capacity to appreciate the true level to which the man’s statement is ridiculous.

“So,” Lupin finishes, “is it Sirius Black, the one who’s here?”

“No,” Draco says simply. The spellscript finishes in a sputter of ink. He puts his wand away and the parchment roll down on his desk. “It’s James Potter. He’s with Harry and the others. We should probably head off and find out if the atrium floos have closed for the day.”

They likely will have, which is always his luck. He’s going to end up taking Lupin to his flat, just so they can floo from there. It can’t be later than seven or eight.

“James?” Lupin reacts quite suddenly, turning pale. “No, no, no, you’re…” He looks around the office, as though for a chair, and it’s true that the room should probably have one. Draco’s just never seen the point in it. “James Potter is not here,” Lupin insists, feeling a hand along the edge of the desk, escaping to the other side of it, where Draco usually works. “Don’t be ridiculous. In fact,” he adds, with something like a grin, “I’m not here either, am I, surely?”
Draco stares at him. “I have no time to watch you collapse into insanity.”

“No, I suppose not,” Lupin concurs, looking down. He sounds unhinged. His eyebrows knit together suddenly, as though he’s been distracted. “What’s this?” he asks, picking up a slip of paper that is about the only loose scrap of parchment on the table. “I know that there’s something going on between you and my son,” he reads, a frown on his face. “How odd. Is this your handwriting? Are you threatening someone?”

“It’s nothing,” Draco says quickly, flicking his wand to burn the thing, just as he should have done earlier. Lupin tosses the parchment away from him as it crumbles into flame, suspended in the air and gone black with a crackle-crunch-woomph.

“All right,” Lupin agrees, blinking as the ash falls.

Draco sighs. “Look, I will have to take you to my flat,” he says to Lupin’s blank face.

The canary tweets again, then, and Draco realises that he has nothing to feed it with, and he needs to keep it in existence until tomorrow. He could pump the thing full of magic and sustain it that way as a conjuration, but he wants the readings clear and food works just as well.

He conjures a bowl, anyway, and fills it with water, deciding that the food will have to be some biscuits from the staff room.

“Wait here,” he tells Lupin.

By the time he returns, naturally, the man has done a runner.

Throwing the digestives that he’s found into the canary’s cage, crushed and crumbling from his fist, Draco disapparates to the Ministry’s atrium. There are a couple of other late workers, and the lights are still on, but on the whole the place is empty. One of the lifts is moving, according to the lights, and Draco takes the risk to wait for it, because the journey up from Level Nine is long – longer, he thinks, than the time that he spent in the kitchen.

Sure enough, Lupin emerges when the bell dings, looking shaky. He stops still, seeing Draco. “How did you…?” He looks back over his shoulder. “I’m hallucinating, aren’t I?”

“We’re getting out of here,” Draco insists.

Maybe it’s because the man looks like Teddy, but Draco finds himself almost feeling almost kindly towards Lupin as he takes hold of his elbow. “Where are we going?” the man asks, his voice strong though he is certainly shaking from some sort of shock.

“My flat,” says Draco, mustering his deliberation.

“Ah,” is what Lupin says, when they arrive in Draco’s kitchen. It’s a kitchen-diner-lounge really, but he uses it as a kitchen. The whole flat is only this kitchen, his bedroom, its bathroom and a hall, taking up the third floor of a converted townhouse. “So it really is a flat.”

“That is what I said,” Draco confirms. There’s too much blue in here, he thinks. He shouldn’t have bought all the furniture at once.

“Yes,” Lupin agrees, looking around. “Very stylish. Do you not listen to any music?” he enquires, like a shit.
Draco doesn’t answer the question. “I’m very busy.”

Cautiously, Lupin makes his way over to lean against the bookcase, which is mostly full of things from school and Draco’s childhood bedroom, as well as a little of the overflow from his office. “Because you work in the Department of Mysteries,” he says, as though he’s still piecing it together.

“With Granger,” Draco explains. “She and her other half live with Harry. We should catch them on the floo before it gets too late.” He’s not sure what time it is – nine o’clock?

Lupin’s looking at him as if he’s said something strange, but Draco doesn’t know what it is.

“We can call on Andromeda first, if you prefer. I imagine that Teddy may be in bed…” He feels a brief flush of concern, because this isn’t a situation to spring on a child, even if Teddy will be ten in a couple of weeks.

But Draco isn’t the child’s father, so he can only feel relief when Lupin startles in abhorrence. “No. No,” he insists, frowning. “That’s… Merlin’s hat, how old is he now?” A look crosses Lupin’s face like a sharp shock of hail. “I didn’t… I forgot Dora – and then a month later… I knew it was too soon,” he finally settles on. “I should have said something.”

He’s looking away, and Draco realises that he didn’t remember, until this moment, that his wife gave birth to a son before they both died. Fuck the crows.

“It’s not her fault,” Draco attempts, because he’s seen photographs of his cousin, at least.

“Of course it’s not,” Lupin scoffs. “It’s mine. I had no business being there either, not on two hours’ sleep. I saw what that did the first time around.”

There’s nothing that Draco can say to that.

“It’s a bit odd,” Lupin comes out with next, sharper. There’s bite to him, and Draco remembers that he’s a wolf, not a man, or whatever it is that he’s supposed to think. There really is something of the moor about him, the wilds of November in his shabby clothes. “Imagining you on friendly terms with Harry.”

“I wouldn’t call us friendly,” Draco demurs, not dropping his gaze.

Lupin frowns, his mouth quirking a little as though Draco’s missed something. “What happened to those… To Crabbe and Goyle,” he recalls, “and the rest of them?”

“Crabbe died in a fire,” Draco recounts, seeing no reason to lie. “I sold out Goyle and the rest in exchange for leniency from the Wizengamot.”

It’s gratifying, how startled Lupin looks. He reacts with little more than stillness, but he’s clearly wary, disapproving, even disgusted.

Draco has found himself by the fireplace. He prefers to feel a wall behind him. “It was my father’s idea,” he concedes. “But one of his better ones, I’ve come to think. If I hadn’t got in first then another of the seventh years would have done it. Maybe someone from sixth, which would have been embarrassing.”

“You sold out your entire house,” Lupin repeats, with nothing but the slightest frown between his eyes.
“Not Pansy,” Draco explains easily. “Parkinson, if you remember her.” Lupin doesn’t react, so Draco carries on. “There was no point – her father had the presence of mind to get them all to New York, a month before the Ministry had its act together.”

Pansy wouldn’t have judged him, that was the thing. The Parkinsons were clever, and Pansy the cleverest, as far as Draco was concerned. She would have understood.

“And it’s a common misconception,” Draco adds for information, “that only Slytherin was involved in the Carrows’ dirty regime.” He’s ended up looking at his sofa, the square blue lines of it. “Some of Ravenclaw were sadistic little shits, really, and there was a Hufflepuff sixth year whose name I can’t remember now…”

Draco pauses for a moment, but the name is completely gone. How odd. He feels winded.

He rallies. “Obsessed with rules,” he describes, “and used to say that fair was fair for breaking them. Well over seventeen when she started.”

“So you did it for justice,” Lupin suggests, watching him.

“I did it for an easy life,” Draco counters, bald. “And that’s what I got.”

That should have been the end of it, but Lupin pushes on. “An easy life raising the dead?”

“You were an accident,” Draco snaps at him. How hard is this to understand? “If it weren’t for Harry…”

Now Lupin crosses his arms, suspicious. “Is that so?”

Draco rolls his eyes, because he still can’t quite believe it, though he supposes that he owes the man an explanation. “It seems as though Potter decided that he needed some help at the end of the war.” Before he died, Draco doesn’t say, mostly because he chooses not to think about it. “He used a very powerful, very dangerous artefact, and I’ve been thinking that he only recalled his parents, but apparently he included you as well. This and the coincidence, I believe, of us all working on the veil has led us to where we are.”

He explains that the stone may have given Lupin back his youth, keeping him on the same line as James Potter, because that’s the only explanation that Draco has at this precise moment. He’s not certain of its accuracy, but it suffices for now. Youth, and then time beyond the veil, resulting in the body that Lupin’s been given, of around thirty years in age.

“That seems a little far-fetched,” Lupin observes mildly, for his part. “To be given a body.”

All Draco can do is snort. “A body is nothing,” he points out. “Mungo’s can remake you one five times a day. The point is that the Killing Curse should have shorn you quite cleanly from yours, with no hope of return.”

“True,” Lupin agrees.

Lupin’s heart never stopped, Draco reminds himself, and his brain was never starved, so his soul would never have received any natural signal to leave. It would have been forced out by the curse, the same way that Harry’s was before he found his way back. There’s something that Harry once mentioned, about a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul which the Killing tore away, but the point is that Harry’s soul left him. There must have been something that allowed him home.

The kitchen of Draco’s flat is silent while he thinks this through, and Lupin watches him the entire
time. In the end, Draco catches himself, and wonders if he should offer the man a cup of tea to
distract him. It remains a question, where these bodies have come from, since Harry’s had been
there, but spontaneous conjuration is not a ridiculous idea. A broken wand can exhibit spontaneous
conjuration, and the veil currently contains a man of flesh and blood. It’s always easier to conjure
with a template.

“Is James really here?” Lupin asks eventually, a spark of genuine emotion in his eyes.

We’re both full of shit, Draco realises, staring across the space that he never lives in. He failed to
see it when he was thirteen. Absolute fucking shit. He wonders whether his cousin ever worked it
out. “As much as you are,” he says, about James Potter.

“It’s been a long time.”

Two minutes later, Kreacher is answering the floo.

“Ah, yes, Kreacher,” Draco addresses him through the fire. “Is everyone still up? I apologise for
the hour, but I have a guest whom I think they’ll want to see.”

“The masters and mistress are recently withdrawn,” Kreacher says, “with Mr Potter.” He’s
inclining his head, bowed in attention where he stands in the parlour. “But number 12 is always
open to Mr Malfoy.”

Kreacher knows a lot more about most things than he ever lets on – there’s forever something sly
in his old, oil-lamp eyes. And yet Draco doesn’t mind, and never has done. Kreacher is the only
one left among them, Draco thinks, who knows how the game is played.

“You’re very kind,” Draco thanks him, beckoning to Lupin before he steps through.

The shift in Kreacher’s demeanour, after that, is a sudden and unexpected treat. “Mr Lupin,” he
croaks unguardedly, and the disdain in his voice will keep Draco warm for weeks. The disbelief.

“Kreacher,” Lupin replies awkwardly.

This is wonderful. “Would you care to announce us, Kreacher?” Draco suggests, for the hell of it.

Lupin shoots him a look as if to ask, Why on earth?

But Draco ignores him, accepting the bob of Kreacher’s head with a feeling somewhat like
satisfaction.

The feeling quickly disappears as they make their way out into the hall and up the stairs. The doors
to the drawing room are open, and it’s clear that the two Potters are needling each other again,
probably helped along by whatever wine Kreacher wasted on them at dinner.

“– never said I was bad at Potions, only that I never took the NEWT.”

Harry’s sounding defensive, more than likely because he’s being disingenuous. He was complete
rubbish at Potions, as far as Draco can remember.

“If I’d wanted another year with Slughorn –”

“Slughorn was still knocking around?” James Potter’s derision is likely intended to forge bonds,
but Draco has a feeling it’s only going to wind Harry up. “Merlin save’s, why?” he demands,
sounding dreadfully, dreadfully well-bred. “Old Sluggy was useless. The only concern that that man had was his own fat arse, and those awful soirées he used to hold, leching after the girls… You know that Alice took me along to one of them once? Bastard was lucky that I only nicked his pineapple.”

And, yes, Harry’s wound up. “Have you ever gone anywhere and thought, ‘You know, maybe I won’t nick something today?’” This sounds more than a little hypocritical, to Draco’s ears. “Like a normal human being?”

“Oh Harry, come now. Where would be the fun in that?”

There’s something like a snort from Lupin, part laugh and part surprise. Draco only has a chance to look at him for a second, before his eyes are drawn to Kreacher once more. He doesn’t want to miss this, after all.

The house elf enters the room ahead of them, drawing himself up into his most aristocratic mien with his black linen toga and locket.

It’s enough to make the Potters stop arguing, for the moment. They look over, their expressions matched in steely irritation.

Thankfully, for Draco’s nerves, they’re easy to distinguish besides that. Harry is full of storms, as usual, on his feet as he paces the rug not far from the door, shoulders up around his ears. His father is leaning artfully against the honey-brown Chesterfield sofa, one foot crossed over the other and hands in his pockets, all clean lines and angles.

It’s not clear why they’ve been keeping each other company, but Draco supposes that Harry at least can’t resist throwing himself at a problem until it’s either solved or successfully killed him.

Granger and her boyfriend are keeping out of the way by the sideboard, sharing looks.

“Masters and Mistress,” drawls Kreacher, living for this moment. Draco’s often thought that it’s a cruelty, the way that Harry and the others so frequently refuse to let Kreacher express himself. “Mr Potter. May Kreacher present Mr Malfoy…” The pause is exquisite. “And his guest.”

The house elf disapparates with a crack, just as Granger catches Draco’s eye and asks, “Guest?”

This is Lupin’s cue to come out from behind the doorframe, and Draco gets the impression that he’s very nearly run off again. “Just me, I’m afraid,” he says with half a wave.

There is the requisite pause as the room takes him in, but then it’s James Potter who reacts – or, more accurately, erupts. Collapsing away from the sofa, he lights up like nothing that Draco has ever seen, breaking into an ebullient laugh, storming movement and a bellow.

“You fuzzy cunt, Moony – what?!” he shouts, laughing. Lupin's puffing out an awkward titter.

He’s rushing forwards, Potter, meeting Lupin not with a hug but with two violent hands on his shoulders, clapping down tight and squeezing with visible effort – and it’s something, Draco supposes.

“I knew it!” Potter declares, alight, ruffling Lupin’s hair so hard that his head rolls. The wolf practically squawks, stumbling as Potter slaps him on the chest. “I knew that you wouldn’t make me do this on my own.”

“Hello Prongs.” There’s half a grin on Lupin’s face, all teeth, unintended. His eyes are warm, and
it’s the autumn leaves missing from Potter’s squall of joy. “You’re looking well.”

And then Potter snatches him into a back-slapping embrace, laughing again.

Lupin holds him tight, just for a moment.

“Lily,” Potter asks afterwards, still tripping over himself. “She’s not…?”

Lupin shakes his head solemnly, pulling back and thumping James Potter on the shoulder with his fist.

“He murdered her, Moony.” Potter’s voice is turning dark, full, vivid, and something lurches in Draco’s chest, because for the first time since all this started the man seems to be drawing himself up into something real, as though he’s only been a sketch of himself before now. He’s an earthquake in the making, in the way that his jaw clenches and his eyes flare brown. “Peter. That fucking whoreson bastard –”

“I know,” Lupin says, wiping his eyes, and that seems to be enough.

Draco glances at the others, trying to work out if they’re following. Harry’s looking down and Granger’s looking away, her boyfriend looking at her. So, yes, presumably, and it’s nothing that Draco wants to know.

Then, with a physicality that makes Draco startle, Lupin’s shoving Potter hard in the chest. “And fuck you,” he bites out, “James, for thinking that it was me.”

Potter shakes his head, not even fazed as the rest of them tense. “I never thought that it was you,” he swears, earnest. And yet he’s also, for what might be the first time, a little bit funny. “To be honest, I thought that it was me somehow.” His accent has a touch of parody, idling over possibilities. “Legilimency or, I don’t know, some other Voldymold…”

“Shut up.” Lupin’s smiling as though he doesn’t want to, half a laugh escaping him as he tips his head up to the ceiling for guidance. He looks off-kilter, moved. “I had to think that it was Padfoot, you jumping prat, for over a decade.”

“What?” Potter’s deep voice expands to fill the room, empathy down to the skirting boards. For the first time it makes sense that this Potter, James Potter, is the first word on anybody’s lips the moment that they see Harry’s face. “Godric, and you’ve seen what he did to our son.” This Peter, Draco supposes.

“I’m standing right here.” Harry’s voice cuts through the tension, all of him bristling and his eyes up, alert. He’s fire and water, to his father’s air and earth, completely unafraid by this vision of righteous anger.

Hearing Harry’s voice, Lupin blinks, glancing at Draco and then looking properly at Harry and the others. His nerves have clearly returned, but he seems astonished by the sight of in front of him, seduced. Draco knows the feeling.

James Potter’s clenching his jaw, as though he still wants to bring walls crashing down.

“Harry,” Lupin says, looking at his friend and then back to the man’s son, crossing the remainder of the floor and turning mild, greeting Harry with a handshake of all things, two hands to Harry’s one. “Harry, it’s you.” He doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself. “Look at you. Merlin,” he says, “I’m so sorry, I… I’m sorry.”
Equally awkward, Harry’s clenching his jaw just like his father. “I’ve been trying really hard,” he says aimlessly, looking down at their hands.

Lupin nods without sense, nods and nods again. “Hermione! Ron,” he greets next, as if he’d had no idea that they’d be here.

“Oh Remus, we’ve missed you!” daft bloody Granger cries out, wrapping her arms around the man to positively batter him with her hair. Her boyfriend slaps him on the arm in what seems like sympathy.

This unfortunately gives Harry the chance to catch his father’s expression again. “What the hell do you mean, what he did to me?”

But Potter isn’t saying, just glaring at his son and shaking his head. Draco feels himself to be entirely superfluous.

“What was the plan, Dad?” Harry sneers, and Draco isn’t sure that he’s ever heard anything like it. He wants to intervene, but he doesn’t know how. “For me to grow up just like you? A bully and a thief?”

“Harry!” Granger exclaims, but it’s Lupin’s expression of shock, Draco thinks, that makes Harry blush.

“Don’t pretend,” he insists, and Draco knows that he’s begging for his friends to back him up. “Don’t pretend that he hasn’t spent all this time acting…”

“James,” Lupin calls over. Potter looks profoundly lost, wounded. “Prongs, what’s going on?”

Draco doesn’t even know. From what Draco’s heard, James Potter has been more than matey enough, but maybe that’s the problem. Fuck, he thinks, watching James Potter’s expression become guarded again, still violent, still full of grief, but unfriendly with it now. This is a mess.

“It’s nothing,” James Potter snaps, with rounded vowels, plainly defensive. What it must be like, Draco thinks, to be thrown into a situation like the one the man’s found himself in. “A few differences of opinion.”

“Don’t worry, mate,” Granger’s boyfriend cuts in, eyes on the man even as he’s talking to Harry. “We’re on your side.”

“There are no sides,” Lupin proclaims, ineffectively.

“What are you about to do, Weasley?” Potter throws back without humour.

“Enough,” Lupin snaps more forcefully, shoving his friend in the shoulder.

If Granger were anyone else, she would have been pulling on her boyfriend’s elbow, but instead she’s standing firm on Harry’s flank, commanding James Potter, “Don’t talk to him like that.”

"He should keep his freckles –”

“You realise that Harry’s patronus is you,” Lupin declares, as if into a void, as if calling on the first thing that he can think of. “A great arse-faced twat of a stag. And yours, Prongs…”

It’s about now that Draco freezes, wishing that he hadn’t come, wishing that Kreacher hadn’t let him through the fireplace.
“Mine changes,” James Potter bites out, stubborn.

Draco remembers Harry Potter’s patronus very well. He remembers it running him down in third year, the sensation of it much like a giant Fizzing Whizzbee crossed with milky hot chocolate. Unexpectedly euphoric. The stag was terrifying, hurtling through the air, but Draco can imagine it majestic at rest, proud and short-tempered, the perfect prize for any discerning killer. James Potter. Of course.

“I doubt it’s changed,” Lupin is saying, completely reasonable as he takes hold of James Potter’s attention. “Not between before and now.”

“Of course it changes,” Harry scoffs. “You ever heard of being constant?”

There’s something on Lupin’s face, as if this is all a complete reversal of the way that things are supposed to be.

Potter simply snorts, as though his son has made a joke. He pulls his wand in a flash of dark wood, aiming to their side at the back of the sofa. It seems to take him very little effort. “Expecto patronum.”

Compared to the stag, the figure that emerges from Potter’s wand is tiny. It leaps to the buttoned tan leather, tail lashing, mostly fluffy mottled fur and paws, iridescent white and glimmering beneath of the modern chandelier above them. It’s a cub of some kind, cautious and soft though it’s the size of a housecat. Following its tail and struggling a little on the sofa’s curve, it ends up crouching low over its front paws to watch them all watching, secure in its vantage point, its tail high and swishing as though it wants someone, please, to come and play.

“Some sort of wild cat, we thought,” Lupin explains to Harry. “A lynx or a mountain lion.”

“He’s only a baby,” James Potter points out, with resentful duress. His expression is closed.

Granger’s charmed, despite her earlier mood. “He’s so cute!”

And that’s it, Draco decides. He’s leaving. None of them have paid him the least bit attention since Lupin said hello, and no one will notice if he leaves, so he’s gone.

It takes him seconds to get through the door.

There’s a garden behind number 12, Grimmauld Place. It’s not huge, and these days it isn’t any source of great pride, but it’s neat enough with some decking at the end near the house and a long lawn supposedly bordered with flowers. The lawn ends, or alternatively begins, with a cherry tree and a shed.

Draco became familiar with this shed around the same time that he became familiar with the house, when Granger started inviting him around for dinner every now and again in the summer months of 2005. It was part of her campaign to put Draco on a regular routine, and more than that to force a square meal inside of him. A year of very much unfocused attention to either food or sleep had taken a visible toll, she insisted, and it was all very well meant. The food was excellent, and Kreacher was an unexpected delight.

There were side-effects, however, which Granger and her boyfriend didn’t know about and Kreacher might only have suspected. As a result of these dinners, Draco and Harry found themselves in intimate company rather more frequently than they might have otherwise anticipated. By October 2005, slipping out to the shed instead of going home had become a something of a
habit. First, Draco would leave by the front door to pass beyond the wards that prevented apparition by non-residents. Harry would follow him out to the doorstep and side-along him to the garden and the cherry tree, where he would wait. Then he’d pop back inside and make his excuses, head upstairs and out to meet Draco.

By October 2005, the nights had begun to grow cold once more, which made this routine somewhat tiresome. There was a difference, after all, between the odd wrench and suck in a garden shed, and the odd wrench and suck in a garden shed that was cold.

“*I have a flat, you know, Potter,*” Draco told him one night as he came back to, naked apart from the undershirt that he was keeping on. He was sitting on the floorboards against the back wall, splinters in his buttocks, surely, and the smell of loam thick around the both of them. His legs were wide in a V. “*With a bed. You’re very welcome to visit.*”

Harry was slumped around himself between Draco’s legs, hands on Draco’s knees and his cheek against Draco’s thigh, breathing heavily as though he needed more time. It was ridiculous; Draco had only managed the feeblest of ministrations earlier, working a hand through the mess of clothes still gathered around Harry’s hips. It had got him off, but pretty much everything, it seemed, got Harry Potter off. He lived to feel pleasure.

The moment that Draco put his offending hand in the man’s hair, Harry was up on his knees, throwing one over Draco’s thigh to present a vivid vision of his cock, again. He kissed Draco against the slatted wall of the shed, long and deep, fidgeting to get comfortable.

“*A bed,*” he repeated as he moved to Draco’s jaw and pulled away, his mouth a one-sided smirk. The lamp hanging over them cast his face in deep shadow. “*You spoil me, Malfoy.*”

“I aspire to a certain level of comfort,” Draco disagreed. Also, if they were going to be vulgar, there was something that the man had been promising with frequency of late, which was rather difficult to find pleasant on hard ground and against unclean walls.

Then Harry Potter said something that threw most of these thoughts straight out of the dusty and cobwebbed, single-glazed window. “*Yeah, well, I didn’t sleep in a proper bed until I was eleven years old.*”

“*Pardon?*” Draco asked, quite taken aback.

“*Only when I was in Surrey,*” Harry conceded, wrinkling his nose as he looked over Draco’s head. “*I know I had a cot when I was a baby… It was my aunt and uncle’s house.*” The one with his cousin in, Draco thought. The baiting. “*They raised me in a room quite a lot like this one.*” He glanced over his shoulder, shrugging. “*It’s probably the same, scale-wise, now I’m big.*”

The wall behind Draco was about the width of three people, or two people sitting comfortably, or one alone in a sprawl. There was a wooden crate of gardening tools and gloves behind Harry, beside a metal trunk of quidditch balls which looked to be in much more frequent use, and then a sack of potting soil, mostly full. Harry’s old Firebolt and a few of what were surely Ginny Weasley’s cast-off brooms rested in racking attached to the walls. About six feet long, four feet wide? The shed was full enough, and there was certainly no room for a bed.

“*It was the cupboard under the stairs,*” Potter explained, making no sense at all. “*Same feeling, with the spiders and the overhead bulb.*” He nodded towards the lamp. Draco dearly hoped that there wouldn’t be spiders until after they’d gone. “*Less earthy-smelling, though. More dusty. Warmer, mostly.*”
Draco took Harry Potter’s jaw in his fingers, watching his mouth to be sure that he wasn’t joking. Of course he wasn’t. He’d heard about the cousin, but not… “Why on earth are you telling me this?”

“Dunno,” Harry told him, trailing a hand under the hem of Draco’s shirt. His digits were warm and, as usual, less certain than even his mouth, which went where it would. “Sounded like you were inviting me to, er…” *Fuck you up the arse.*

Well, yes, Draco thought.

“Only seemed right that you knew a bit more about me,” Harry ran on. “I’m quite fond of cupboards because of it, you see,” he joked wryly. “Cupboards and sheds.”

*Only seemed right that you knew a bit more about me,* in that flat suburban voice. Thus spake the greatest wizard of their generation, talking about the hiding places that he’d made home.

Draco’s fingers worked on their own, smoothing Harry’s hair behind his ear. “How many other people know?”

The man looked down, blushing. “Er, not many,” he said. His fingers were spidering loosely above Draco’s hip, because the two of them here were only half finished. “I told my godfather once.” Sirius Black, Draco’s brain supplied. Mother’s cousin. “He hit the roof. I don’t…”

The look of him, Harry, was all desperately, violently unfamiliar. It was the apologetic angle of his head. Draco wasn’t sure what to do.

“Did you think…?” Draco wondered. Did you think that I wouldn’t want you, if I knew? “Do you not realise, Potter…?” He shook his head, an odd smile pulling at him in the light of Harry’s round eyes. “Honestly.”

They were looking at each other, and Draco had the urge to tell him things that he had never told another person. The urge, deep in his throat, but not the bravery.

While you were in the cupboard, he thought desperately, aged six, seven, eight, I can’t remember, I was one of those children who would take off their clothes at the slightest provocation, and I thought that it was hilarious. I used to proclaim that I was a boy, then cover my bits and proclaim that I was a girl. I used to imagine going inside something and wonder whether it would feel like wearing mittens.

They were kissing then, Draco the child deviant and the boy from the cupboard. Draco had his hands in the boy’s hair, and it felt right that their bodies were tangled between them. The mouth against his own tasted of dinner and wine and something familiar, bitter and saline.

The summer before Hogwarts, Draco wanted to say as the kiss broke and they breathed, but only gasps came out of his throat, hitching, I told Pansy quite solemnly that our friendship was over, because girls were physically and emotionally repulsive. By the age of thirteen it was all that I could think about, those words and what she’d seen in childhood. The power that I’d given her to destroy me.

Harry Potter was straddling Draco’s thigh and holding him tight, fingers spread under his ribs with Draco’s shirt ridden up on his wrists. The man had grown up in dirt and darkness, apparently, in a place much like this shed, but he felt warmer than a summer bath.

They kissed again and the thoughts swirled around Draco’s head. Can you not tell how much I’ve always wanted you? From the moment you flew free of that Horntail, fourth year, I knew that there
was no looking back. And it should have been a crisis, but yours was the safest want I had. Everyone wanted you, but I, no, not me, I wanted you and half of Gryffindor, and I had no excuse for it at all. I had an elaborate fantasy life centring around Viktor Krum, and I couldn’t stop, no matter how much I knew that everyone could tell. We were going to reside in Bulgaria where nobody knew me. We were going to go out flying and share a bed at the end of the day.

And you think that a cupboard is enough to put me off? I used to wank over Lee fucking Jordan and his quidditch sneers, Harry, and I’d had my father in my ear since birth, telling me that Zabini and her boy were tolerable company, but they’d never be like us, never never no. You’ve not seen it, how insatiable I truly am. I’m…

“Potter,” came out of Draco’s mouth, and it was more like a gasp, Ps and Ts and breath. His heart was hammering, and his hands were full of thick hair and wiry trapezius. “Come home and fuck me, will you?” he invited plainly, blinking his vision into focus. They needed their wands, he thought. Harry’s holly wand to take them out and then his own hawthorn wand to take them home. They didn’t need the clothes. Some part of Draco cracked the joke, “I’ll let you try out the springs.”

Harry’s grin was like the sun, dawning up his face to his eyes. “You’re too kind,” he played along. “Don’t get used to it,” Draco told him, smoothing hair around his crown.

It’s Lupin who finds Draco in the garden, when he ends up there in 2008. He’s not in the shed, but back by the house, leaning against the conservatory windows. He’s looking up at the stars, for want of anything to do. It’s London, so only Polaris is visible, but Draco can imagine where the others should be.

To be more accurate, Lupin doesn’t find him so much as nearly run into him. He cracks through the conservatory’s French doors like a burst of bitter wind, stalking towards the outdoor chairs and table. These take up most of the decking and are quite out of character from the rest of the house, made from tubular metal in bright red. Reaching them, Lupin pulls a silver cigarette case from his robes and snaps a white stick from inside it to his mouth. The case is thrown to the table with a clatter and he begins brutally clicking his fingers, reaching for a spell that Draco’s heard tell of, Addict’s Flame, though he doesn’t know the incantation.

Wandless magic is usually more trouble than it’s worth, and this seems to be no exception. The flame won’t hold for long enough, time and again, and Lupin fights it, swearing, “Come on, you fucking…” Then, eventually, the cigarette is lit and he takes a deep draw of smoke, turning back to the house and stilling with a guttural snort.

Draco eyes him, saying nothing.

“What –! What the fuck are you doing out here?” Lupin asks him, hoarse. It’s exactly what Draco is thinking.

The man thought that he was hallucinating, Draco remembers. What a relief it must be, to know that his cigarettes came with him.

“Did you not look at that,” Draco asks, nodding to the silver on the table, “and think that it could be a risk?”

“What?” Lupin snaps, squinting. He’s all Teddy’s nose, his face ashen beneath the gibbous moon above. “Oh, sod off,” he dismisses when he understands the dig, turning to find the railing by the
steps that lead down to the basement kitchen. He rests his spare hand on the iron bar as though he needs it to hold him up. He takes a deep breath through his nose, pressing his hand against his face. Exhales. The next breath is smoke.

It’s interesting, Draco thinks. He’s always remembered Remus Lupin as a loaf of sliced brown bread.

He looks up to the sky and the moon, which is waning gibbous, barely off full. They’ve been lucky, Draco thinks. What blood was left in Lupin’s face drains away. “Teddy,” he asks breathlessly, “he’s not…? The wolf,” he emphasises.

Draco didn’t know that lycanthropy could be inherited. They must have skipped that in school. “No,” he says plainly, because the boy is his cousin after all.

Lupin laughs, clutching his cigarette desperately to the hollow of his mouth. “The pull’s too weak in newborns; we didn’t… That’s one bit of luck,” he suggests.

“As opposed to?”

The cheer drops from Lupin’s face, and he looks at Draco balefully.

“It’s good to see everyone again,” Lupin begins with an obvious lie, lazily. He sets his jaw, the idea of a smirk around his mouth. He’s spiteful, spiteful, and Draco thinks that it must be because he’s caught the man smoking. “Whatever happened to Ginny Weasley?” he asks into the darkness, smoke between his lips, his tone barbed. He breathes, pulls the stick free and exhales, spits acid, all while peering down the garden. “She was such a sweet girl.”

Draco blinks, holding still. This man is a complete fucker, he thinks. “She plays for Puddlemere United,” he says. “Why?”

Lupin throws him a look that says clearly, Don’t take the piss. He’s inhaling again. Smoke then leaves mouth in a single long stream. “It took a tick,” he explains, “but about halfway up the stairs I realised that yes, actually, I recognised that handwriting quite well.”

That fucking note from James fucking Potter, Draco thinks. He thinks he knows, does he? He thinks he fucking –

“And?” Draco asks, as though confused.

Lupin scoffs, forcibly ignoring whatever it is in his head. “You’re good, I’ll give you that,” he says. “Six out of ten. No, let’s say seven. But that’s being generous. James is oblivious to most things at the best of times, so you must have done something very obvious to give yourselves away.”

Lupin’s James Potter sounds a lot like his son. Funny. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It helps if you don’t flee the room at the sight of infant patronuses.”

“I came out for some air,” Draco corrects, kicking his foot back against the brickwork that runs around the base of the conservatory walls. He lets the words hang in judgement of Lupin’s smoking habit, before adding, “In any case, I can hardly be expected to stick around for hugs and sweet baby cougars.” He squints, trying to read a little more of the man’s expression. “You’re the one hiding from all your bestest chums.”

Lupin scoffs, most of his words swallowed by the cigarette in his mouth. “I lived most my life
without my bestest chums.”

The stone has given Lupin youth, and ten years without transformations, and he is in this way quite unrecognisable from the man who taught Draco when he was thirteen. At the same time, there’s a weariness around his eyes that can’t be disguised, and a scar that runs down his neck like a scratch in clean white, the same colour as the thing that he’s smoking.

He looks down again to the decking, drawing lightly and pushing the back of his hand to his face as he exhales, as though he needs to keep his soul from escaping through his nose or something else equally extreme.

“You are full of shit,” the wolf says eventually, as if observing something inconsequential.

We’re both full of shit, Draco finds himself thinking, again.

“I don’t know how you feel,” continues Lupin, doggedly, “but no one shops their friends of seven years and feels nothing.” He taps ash to the decking, still looking away. “Peter,” he says, and it’s the same name as before. “I’m sure that he must have hated us. It’s an act of anger, to do what he did.”

It’s not clear where this is going, but it seems to be away from Harry, so Draco doesn’t interrupt.

“If nothing else,” Lupin reflects, “one would think that he must have hated us for giving him the means to survive.” He’s looking up to the moon, before he draws once more. “I expect that he didn’t want that at all, by the end. But there we were, so easy to manipulate. James and Lily, too trusting, and Sirius and I, not trusting enough.”

“Who the fuck is Peter?” Draco asks, because he doesn’t know.

“You must have known Peter.” Lupin now looks at him, confused. “In that bastard’s court. Pettigrew,” he glosses, before sneering the last. “Wormtail.”

Wormtail. Now, that is a name that Draco hasn’t heard in ten years, and which he never wanted to hear again. He goes cold, feeling himself lose grip on the present. He had a silver hand, Wormtail, and a balding pate. He couldn’t be bought, because he’d already sold himself completely. A traitor from the first war, his mother told him in warning. She didn’t say that he’d betrayed Harry, nor that he’d been Harry’s parents’ friend, once upon a time, as seems clear now, as clear as –

He did the Dark Lord’s bidding, Wormtail, and no one would see him. He could turn into a rat, and the Manor’s doors were very old, many of them with gaps between their base and the uneven floor, which were of a size that a small creature could just about squeeze through. No one would know if he was there, or if he was listening, or –

Something snaps in front of Draco’s face. It’s the clumsy lid of Lupin’s cigarette case.

“One won’t kill you,” he says, standing closer to Draco than a second ago, his features quite legible in the slanted light from the house. “Though I often think…” He spins out the thought with his other hand, his own cigarette idling through the air. “It may well be the addiction that makes them soothing.”

Draco shakes himself. It’s been a long time since he’s found himself lost in thoughts of the war. “My mother could do a trick with runes,” he says, accepting a single stick of poison. Maybe it will help. “What do I use now – Incendio?”

Lupin shakes his head, tutting as he pops his own stick back in his mouth and collapses into one of
the red metal chairs, snapping the case closed once more. “Only if you want the whole thing to go up in flames.” He inhales, then takes the cigarette back in his hand, sighing. “It’s an old Moodyism, not to carry lighters, but it was always a pain in the... Think *Flamma*,” he interrupts himself, instructing. “Movement like *Lumos.* If you use your wand, then it’ll come out the end a foot high, and if you hold it too long it’ll catch and bugger up the varnish. The click’s easier, but it tends to gutter when you register your fingers burning.”

Draco looks at him.

“They can hold out for longer than you think,” he insists, sounding reckless, with a quick grin. This is clearly a spell from the Gryffindor common room, rather than anywhere reputable. “It’s a very orange flame.”

“Yes,” Draco says, practising a click and thinking *Flamma*. He’s surprised by the flash of red at the base of his thumb, its warmth, though it disappears almost instantly. “This seems unnecessarily self-destructive.”

Lupin raises his eyebrows to emphasise the joke, a flare of gold-red between his lips. “That is entirely the point,” he says, and for a moment he is very attractive indeed. This is all a distraction, of course. Draco gets a light easily enough, and Lupin’s breathing is easy to mimic. He doesn’t know if he likes the taste, but of everything that he’s been inducted into over the years, this certainly has the easiest spells.

“It’s a strange thing,” Lupin says, drumming his fingers once on the table beside him. His energy remains turbulent, wild and moor-like, but it’s calming down. “To be reunited with someone whom you once mourned so deeply.”

For a moment, Draco is struck by the fanciful idea that Lupin and James Potter must have been fucking, back in 1981. But that isn’t quite right.

“The four of us had one of those friendships... Well,” Lupin corrects, and Draco thinks that he must suffer from the same rambling habit as Harry. “James always used to say – that we’d be friends for the rest of our lives. The Marauders,” he mocks the name. “We make it ten years, and then in less than twenty-four hours two of us are dead, so I think, and one of us is revealed to be a spy and a murderer. And after all that there’s me, asking myself how and why for longer than we were ever friends.”

The smoke is warm and bitter in Draco’s mouth, not unpleasant, though he has a feeling that he rather prefers breathing. He thinks that he can feel the drug of it going somewhere, but he’s not certain that it’s *soothing*, exactly.

“I still don’t know what to tell him,” Lupin confesses. He looks up with a short, snapped smile. “So that’s why I’m here. What brings you?”

You were definitely fucking one of them, Draco thinks, unsure where the instinct comes from. It strikes him that it wouldn’t have been the rat, either. “You and the dog,” Draco suggests, ignoring Lupin’s question.

The man freezes. “What could you possibly...?” he begins before he can catch himself.

Draco laughs, but it comes out as a cough. Ugh. He holds a sleeve in front of his face until he’s recovered. “Most people let go of these things,” he points out, cheerfully having a go on his cigarette again. It’s always fun to be right. “Do you really think that Goyle’s crying himself to
sleep at night over what I did to him ten years ago?” This makes sense too, when he says it. “He’ll be out of Azkaban by now and well shot of me. Pansy too, I’m certain, is perfectly all right.”

Lupin’s mouth quirks, and Draco supposes that he can read the implication. “No you and Pansy, then, I take it?”

“Obviously no me and Pansy. Merlin.” Though he misses her, the slag. Of course he does. He misses Goyle too, perhaps, a little bit. From before he and Crabbe learned the Crucius and they both lost their sense of fun.

Or perhaps that was him.

Lupin is clearly suppressing a grin now. “I’ve never told anyone before,” he says in an odd tone of voice, his puffs of smoke growing fewer and further between. He swallows, toying with the cigarette case on the table. “I’m fairly sure that Sirius told James… Something or other or everything about it. Padfoot used to tell Prongs if he tripped and banged his knee.”

His voice has grown fond, and Draco tries not to hear it. “That seems a little extreme.”

He’s referring to the secrecy, and the comment earns him a look. Lupin is not impressed by whatever he’s reading into Draco’s words, most likely about him and Harry. He can fuck off, Draco thinks.

“There was more to worry about in those days,” Lupin says shortly. “And after Azkaban….” He raises his head and breathes, looking Draco in the eye. “The only concern that Sirius had – and I mean the only concern, quite rightly – was to be thought a suitable guardian for his godson.”

He’s trying to make Draco understand, for some reason, his eyes brushed by lines at their edges. He almost appears guilty.

“It was an uphill struggle,” Lupin reflects, as though Draco should care. “He was fighting his own slippery sense of what decade we were in, and I had already failed to pass muster in 1981, so I was no help at all. He had a dream for the end of the war…” He shakes his head.

Draco wonders whether he should have a go at the man about Nymphadora. She should have been told all of this, if Lupin had any sense of decency. She didn’t deserve to be –

But Draco’s here, smoking on the decking behind number 12, Grimmauld Place, not talking about a cousin whom Draco never met, but Sirius Black and his dream for the end of the war. It leaves them with 1981 and James Potter’s infant mountain lion. Harry Potter. Always Harry, who had that same dream, Draco knows.

“You have no idea what you did you him,” Draco finds himself saying, suddenly quite angry as he taps ash from his first ever cigarette. Oh dear. He didn’t realise that he was angry. “The four of you and your fuck-ups.”

Lupin looks at him, sharp and silent.

Draco leans into the cool glass behind him, shutting his eyes. “I cast my first patronus in 1998,” he describes, because he wants Lupin to know. “It was around this time of year. Maybe a few weeks before. My mother was very proud.”

His mother’s patronus was a small thing, Draco remembers. A quail if not another game bird of some kind, easy to miss as it whipped and wheeled through the sky. It was almost like a snitch, Draco thought, ever hunted and waiting to be caught. It was the part of her that was always
watching, always responding to changes in circumstance.

There is no way to explain this to Lupin without showing him, Draco thinks. He doesn’t have the words.

He opens his eyes briefly to drop his cigarette to the ground and stamp it dead, coughing one last time into his sleeve. It wasn’t finished, but he’s had enough. Lupin’s leaning forward, alert with a mild frown across his forehead, and Draco takes a few steps towards the edge of the decking, looking towards the shadows on the lawn, the shed and the cherry tree.

The memory that he draws upon, without shame, is that of his mother gathering him up out of battle and hissing in his ear. The boy’s alive; he thinks he’s dead; it’s over; hold your wand. Draco had been coming apart at the seams, near dead by fire, near dead by the Killing Curse. This was certainty, this was his mother, this was happiness. He can remember it that way. He can.

“Expecto patronum.”

It’s not quite a dragon that emerges from Draco’s hawthorn wand, but it’s close. The creature is as large as a Shire horse, with the same power, the same grace. With two legs and wide, fanned wings, the patronus flies the length of the garden, all sinew and bladed scales like feathers, bright white and shining in the darkness. Perhaps it’s more translucent than James Potter’s, but the shape is solid enough. It turns over itself when it reaches the cherry tree, breathing a stream of ice-white fire into the sky from its beaked, serpentine face, casting tree branches in light before it spirals back to meet Draco and Lupin on the decking. Huge hollow eyes behold them as the creature’s image lands on two clawed feet, a long arrow-tipped tail flashing to one side and the other before it comes to rest, curling in the grass.

Draco can see what the image reflects, more clearly now than before. Its head, wings and tail should be bright gold, he thinks, gleaming here under the moon, blinding when its jewel-like scales have a chance to reflect the sun. The creature’s chest should be white, but softer than this, to cast the beast in the same colouring as a cougar.

Lupin says nothing to begin with, folding to his feet in shock. He circles around behind his chair to look more closely at the beast. “Your patronus is a wyvern,” he says, disbelieving and cautious, but apparently quite capable of making the classification. The decking creaks beneath his feet.

Ten years ago, Draco recalls, this creature represented months of work and an embarrassing insight into his psyche that he thought he had long occluded away. Tonight, Draco is only summoning the nerve to banish the thing. It’s been a while, and it’s difficult now. The sun wyvern is tasting the air, forked tongue flickering from its mouth, and its wings are fidgeting close to its chest like a jackdaw’s. It’s looking at Lupin like a curiosity, not blinking, at least two feet taller than the man where it’s perched on the lawn, but leaning forward, a little ungainly on its feet, wings flaring slightly to steady it as its tail swishes up.

“Mother and I indulged in the fiction that it could be me,” Draco comments idly, sickly, dragging the words one by one from his throat. “Draco, draco… The connection ignores several key problems.”

Very nice, Draco, his mother said, in fact, that first night in the orchard, under the light of a bloody great magical beast. This is very nice indeed, don’t you think?

Everybody loves a wyvern. They’re creatures of legend and heraldry, eldritch and wily. Beasts straight from Merlin’s time, not the turn of the second millennium. They have power that mortals, muggles, wizards and witches can only dream about.
It strikes Draco, then, from nowhere, that Granger's bluebell flames from the appendix to Goshawk I would make a far better cigarette-lighting spell than real orange fire. He clicks his fingers, and sure enough a blue flame buds just under the knuckle of his thumb, cool on his skin but hot above. It’s funny, he thinks, how things intended for children can be useful.

Though presumably not, if the point is self-destruction.

He looks up at the wyvern again, remembering the image of James Potter’s playful lion cub, and Draco’s angry once more, because, no, actually, Mother. No. He dismisses the patronus and the bluebell flame, leaving himself and Lupin in darkness that’s emphatically new. The bright moon is still waning gibbous above them, and they’ve been lucky, one might say, with the phases. The wolf is a man when he turns around, confusion mild between his eyebrows, but Draco in a moment, intensely, cannot stand it, because some things cannot be tracked against the phases of the moon.

“Do you know what it takes,” he demands from Lupin, who’s holding his cigarette like a teenage rebel, the thing ashing down to his knuckles, “to turn a mountain lion into the dragon’s miniature form? One has a beast already quite capable, but what one wants is something that can raze a county.” Draco sneers, disgusted with the lot of them, with himself. “All the necessary qualities are there in abundance, but it takes something else to let the animal breathe fire, to give it scales like plates of steel, to make it hoard with that protective, consuming desire. To make it something that refuses to die,” Draco snaps, with feelings that he didn’t know he had. “Do you know what must be done?”

“No,” Lupin says simply, turning to face him. His expression is shuttered. “No, I couldn’t begin to imagine…”

“Be fucking grateful,” Draco tells him. There’s a tremor in his right hand, and he finds himself pressing the back of his palm to his mouth. He has to go. “Tell the others that I’m gone,” he says, and he leaves.
Remus Lupin, part 3

The first time that Draco and Harry had sex in a bed that belonged to one of them – the first time in a long while that Draco had had that kind of sex – it seemed necessary to fill the silence afterwards lest it eat them alive, right there in late 2005. Harry was staring at him, absentmindedly trailing fingers in the crease of his elbow, and it was very off-putting indeed. Draco was watching their hero’s chest expand and contract, returning to rest, feeling the same calm come over his own heartbeat.

“I trust that it was to your satisfaction?” Draco asked, attempting to make a joke as he tucked his wand back under the pillow, vanishing complete. “The bed,” he pointed out.

They were lying next to each other, washed up on the open mattress. The duvet had long been kicked down to the end of the divan, the prospect of its warmth an unusual feature in their shagging. Harry was on his side and Draco was on his back, his head buried between the edges of skewiff pillows. Nothing was quite where it was meant to be, and Draco wasn’t sure that he recognised his own grey bedclothes, his own bedroom or his ceiling, not with Harry Potter lying there, a foot away from him all cord and flex and shoulders, fading tan. It had all been his suggestion to come back here, Draco’s, but he hadn’t known what he was getting himself into.

“Oh right, yeah,” Harry eventually managed, placing the joke. His accent was as flat as ever, but he sounded different with a healthy flush to his skin. There was the usual smirk around his mouth, but his green eyes were bright without glasses, a little unfocused. He looked good against the dull grey sheets, all colours, his hair a richer black than usual. “Thought you meant the sex,” he mocked.

“Well,” Draco began, because that was always a question too.

“But no, the bed’s good,” Harry said, his voice a touch hoarse as it rose. He left Draco’s arm to pat the space between them, sounding out two muffled thumps. “Bouncy. I’ve got Regulus’ old room at Grimmo and it’s not right, I expect, sleeping on a mattress from the 70s.”

Draco couldn’t help the grin that pulled at his mouth. “No,” he agreed, in respect of the understatement. “Not if you’re intending to sleep on it for another ten years.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I never think that far ahead, do I?”

This wasn’t a subject to pursue, because with all being well they’d both be married in ten years’ time. Draco didn’t think that Ginevra Weasley was the sort of woman who would want to sleep on a dead second son’s old mattress.

Really, they should have been talking about when Harry was going to fuck off, given that the deed had been done and it was getting late. Draco wasn’t sure that he had anything else left in him, the middle of him from his hips to his cock feeling nothing but heavy and worn out. Harry, of course, was already twitching with insatiable interest, but it was unlikely that he’d do anything about it. He had work in the morning.

And yet he also had absolutely zero sense of etiquette. “You done that before, then?” Harry asked, as if to continue the conversation.

Draco stared at him. The allusion was vague, but easy to decode. “Yes,” he said shortly, refusing to read anything into the question besides Potter’s crude manners. “You?”

Strangely, Harry avoided answering. He rolled away onto his back, looking up. “Dunno if it’s my favourite,” he rambled on, as if Draco hadn’t spoken.
“Sorry, was my arse not good enough for you?”

This at least made the man freeze. He switched to his side again, blushing purple. “I didn’t mean it like that, I promise,” he swore, reaching out a hand to place his palm on Draco’s ribs, squeezing fingers. This was really not a part of his body that Draco was used to having touched. “I meant…” Harry’s voice circled aimlessly, his gaze focused somewhere else. “I meant the stuff, you know.”

He meant the paraphernalia that Draco had just vanished, which traditional apothecaries still let one refer to as sheepgut and gutoil, because it was all a very fun game. Thankfully, Draco’s conjuration was more than up to the task, else this evening would have caught him short.

“It’s gay sex, Potter,” Draco pointed out, surprised at himself for using the word. “It’s not supposed to be easy. Besides —” His next thought was a little uncouth, but fuck it, Harry had shown him no courtesy whatsoever. “Half of it’s only because I don’t know where you’ve been.”

Harry snorted, and for some reason Draco found himself remembering where this adventure had begun, with them both in a shed and Harry in a Surrey understairs cupboard. He’d said nothing, at the time, but Draco had a feeling as though he’d confessed just as much as he’d heard, leaving the air thick between them.

Maybe that was why Harry spoke again now. “Sometimes I don’t know myself where I’ve been,” he came out with. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”

Draco frowned, shoving his head up the pillow behind him to get a better look at Harry’s face.

“It’s been better, the last year or so,” Harry continued. “Since I started at Hogwarts,” he clarified. “But there’s still Friday nights…” A line of worry took hold of his lips, matching a certain glassiness in his eyes. “The morning after, I don’t remember getting home, and I can be such a mess, there in my clothes. I think to myself, did I apparate here? Did I take the Knight Bus, really, in this state?” He can barely manage the Ts. “Maybe someone threw me in the floo, but then am I going to go downstairs and find out that Ron or Hermione put me to bed like this — or Kreacher, you know?”

“Kreacher will have seen worse,” Draco dismissed, even if professional concern had his chest drawn tight from the thought of drunken apparition.

As for the lost time – he didn’t know if this revelation was better or worse than that of childhood incarceration.

The tone in Harry’s voice was disgust, his old righteousness. “Yeah, well, I don’t think that that sort of business is on the list of things that house elves prefer to the prospect of freedom.”

“And has it been Kreacher? Usually?” Draco didn’t know why he was asking.

“I don’t think so,” Harry acknowledged, a bob in his throat. “I go down to breakfast and everything’s the same. It’s like it never happened.” Then he added, “You realise that I don’t even know if I’m attracted to men.”

It was a complete non-sequitur, and it seemed designed to divert the conversation from whatever conclusion it had been drawing to.

Despite himself, Draco let himself be led, because this was… “Fuck off,” was all that he could say.

“I don’t!” Harry insisted, his cock quite half-hard where Draco glanced at it. “I mean, I’ve never talked about it with anyone, and I don’t know what…”
He waved a hand in the air, dismissively, and it was supposed to be awkward, Draco thought, seeing the whole of each other’s bodies for the first time. They’d both spent too many years in communal showers. Now, on his dark grey sheets, half a *Lumos* in the light fitting, Harry Potter was crossing his ankles and settling in.

He crossed his arms too, and Draco was torn between those and his thighs. He didn’t get to see any of this, usually.

“It’s the same with girls,” Harry said. “Women,” he corrected, like a dog well trained. “Or girls, really, back in school. I knew that I fancied Ginny because I felt this thing in my chest…”

He pressed a hand to his heart, and Draco thought yes, because that was rather nice too.

“But that could’ve been anything. Ron had this thing about Madam Rosmerta, but I never felt the same way. Everyone else saw what Ron saw, and all I could think was that she seemed friendly.”

He rolled his eyes, looking at Draco for understanding, as though he’d entirely forgotten Draco’s fundamentally horrific relationship with the woman. “She was pretty, I s’pose, but so were half the girls. At some point they all started doing things with their hair.”

There was entirely too much here to unpick, Draco thought. He didn’t know where to begin, or at what point an invitation to his flat had become an invitation to whatever this was – this tour through Harry Potter’s psychological wasteland. The man spoke as if he didn’t know *anything*, as if the whole world was a mystery.

“What if I’m only doing what I think I’m supposed to?” Harry spoke quietly, as if he’d never fully articulated this thought before and it was after all worth articulating. “What if I don’t feel any of it for real, you know?” His vowels really were too flat. “What if that’s why I have to get so out of it?”

Draco sighed, feeling rather less tired now, and rather like he would fancy Harry Potter to hold him down and pound him into the mattress again. It was impressive, this thought, given how useless at sex he’d become since his parents’ death, given the insomnia. “Harry,” he demanded. “What possible delusion has you convinced that you’re supposed to be here with me?”

“But that’s what’s so reassuring,” said Harry, something dark like a laugh in his tone, “about you.”

He smirked, glancing down at Draco’s hips before he threw a leg over them to lean on his hands. All of Draco tingled from the hot feeling where they met, just grazing, and he let his head slip back between the pillows. “That’s what I meant,” Harry continued, contradicting himself, collapsing to his elbows and filling Draco’s nose with his scent, seawater sweat and rough sand, a little dirt left over from the shed. “I mean, I don’t know what I like. Is this what I find fun?”

He let the question hang, and the bastard of it was that Draco held his breath, the scant heat inside him pulling to the mess of genitalia that Harry's weight was crushing between them.

Harry smiled at him, a little sad even as he rolled his hips down, making the breath puff out of Draco’s throat. “But then,” he said, while Draco brought hands up to his shoulders, into thick, dark hair like an animal’s, “I think I’d do whatever it takes to put this look on your face.”

He shrugged into Draco’s hands, and Draco was too far gone to really hear what was being said. “You’re a fucking cocktease,” was all that came out of him, before the night was on again.

The morning after Lupin’s return, at half-past ten on Wednesday the twenty-sixth of March, 2008, according to the clock on the wall, Draco finds himself highly agitated. Harry appears while Draco’s still in his dressing gown, drinking coffee and working his way through some toast. The
school holidays go on till the weekend, and Harry’s likely claimed to the others that he has work to do, but for now he’s here, casual and rambling in Draco’s kitchen.

“…good influence on my dad, or my dad’s a bad influence on him! All right, the stories are slightly less ridiculous, but the pair of them, their language is foul, worse than yours. We’ve put him in the spare on the second floor for now. Lupin,” Harry’s saying as he leans against the sink, which faces the window and sets him in silhouette against the gathering sun. “Remus,” he corrects himself with a frown, before shaking his head. “Nah, it doesn’t suit him. I might have to join in calling him Moony.”

“He’s a rake,” Draco says, because finally, at last, he’s found exactly the word that he’s been looking for. He finishes off his last slice of toast.

“What?” Harry asks like a dullard, pushing his glasses up his nose. He’s not offended, Draco thinks. He doesn’t know the word means in this context.

Draco doesn’t explain, putting down his plate and picking up his coffee. “He showed no concern for my cousin Nymphadora’s reputation.”

Harry’s still frowning at him, dressed in jeans and a Puddlemere United shirt as though this is 1997, and that is exactly what’s wrong with Draco’s kitchen and with his flat, he thinks – it’s starting to look dated. The millennium really fucked everyone over, design-wise.

“They were being seen together for no time at all before the wedding – was there even a period of engagement? – and then it was much more like eight months than nine post that weighty occasion that Teddy was born.”

Taking all this in, Harry’s reaction is far from what it should be. He’s soon laughing, the sound high pitched in his nose, matched by something warm in his throat. He scratches some stubble on his sharp chin, which Draco can’t see. “I think that Tonks was all right with it,” he suggests casually.

“She was the only daughter of Andromeda Black!” Draco declares, feeling outrage down to his fingernails. “She deserved better.”

“He did use to tell her that,” says Harry, even-handed and suburban, looking at him through the top edge of his lenses.

Draco scoffs, taking a slurp of hot caffeine. “Yes, and it’s the oldest trick in the book.”

This earns him another laugh, deeper in Harry’s throat. “What is going on with you, Malfoy?” he asks, a peculiar expression on his face. “What did you two talk about last night?”

Draco shakes his head, because he doesn’t want to go into it. Not that he has any qualms whatsoever about revealing the details of Lupin and Black’s arrangement, but the fact is that he knows very few. He fears that Harry will declare it sweet. Or – well, he’s not even sure what.

“I do miss Tonks,” Harry’s saying for now, leaning back again against the sink. “She was fun. I think that she was more like her dad than Auntie Dromeda, so I can’t work out if she’d have raised Teddy to be like her, or if he’d have eaten her alive.”

He’s a rake, Lupin, Draco thinks. A curse on Draco’s mother’s family. He shall be telling Andromeda his thoughts.

“Do you still fuck around?” he asks Harry then, because he doesn’t know the answer.
Green eyes blink.

Draco puts his coffee cup down with a clunk. “I mean,” he rephrases, finding the words and saying them to Harry’s face, “do you still go out drinking with the habit of forcing your tongue down the throat of whomever’s convenient?”

“Well,” Harry answers with forebearance, eyeing the crumbs on Draco’s empty plate where it sits at his side. “It’s been a while,” he suggests, “but I s’pose that I never sat down and made a vow that I was stopping…”

“So you are still quite capable of abstracting all significance from the action?”

Thankfully, Harry picks up on Draco’s meaning well before he’s finished crossing the space between them. “I thought we –” he begins, and then sighs, tucking his hands around Draco’s ribs. “Oh, never mind.”

Draco kisses him, hands on his neck and his jaw. It’s necessary, he thinks, and not significant at all. He needs to know, and this is the only way. He’s pushing Harry back against the sink, getting his nose caught up in his glasses – and he needs to know that Harry’s still in there, that the magic hasn’t taken him yet. He needs to know that Lupin and his father haven’t –

Things very quickly turn heated. Snogging is one of the few skills that Harry learned exclusively after the war, Draco imagines, even if there must have been some practice with Ginny Weasley during. He’s not thinking about Ginny Weasley, though. Not as Harry pushes him back across the kitchen floor, up against the humming muggle fridge that contains little more than milk and the last of his mother’s old mead. Draco doesn’t recall either why they stopped doing this, and why they can’t go back to bed, hot breath all over him, hot life against his chest, the smell of the sea on his sheets.

There’s a tongue against his own, and it’s charged with something eldritch. Draco’s eyes are closed, his arms digging into bladed shoulders as his hands grapple with hair that’s warm. It shouldn’t be warm. Much more mundane than this mouth, one of Harry’s hands is finding strength to smooth down his front, pull his dressing gown apart and take a grip high on his thigh. Draco’s muscle jerks, and the hand swerves to reach between his legs, fumbling over the stretching fabric of his shorts. His touch is slightly tentative, which it shouldn’t be, Draco thinks, and it’s then that Draco remembers.

He pushes Harry back, his heart pounding, his eyesight fizzing with overstimulation on this bright spring morning.

“I’m sorry!” Harry exclaims, stepping back further and throwing his hands in the air. He straightens his glasses and wipes at his mouth. “I didn’t…” He’s panicked, his face red. “At some point I stopped being able to do that without needing to say sorry afterwards,” he says, “so sorry, sorry, I’m…”

“Don’t you ever fucking apologise to me,” Draco snaps, because it’s obscene.

Harry shuts up, his expression wary.

“Fuck,” Draco snaps again, frustrated, because he’s fucked up with this. Hands on his face, fingers in his eyes, he’s not sure what the fuck is going on or what he thought that he was doing.

Then the doorbell rings with a short sharp buzz, and it all gets ten times worse.

“Who’s that?” Harry asks, confused.
And Draco can’t say, because it’s fucking *Ronald Weasley*, and with everything that’s been going on Draco has forgotten that this is a day off for the man in lieu of last Friday and they are due to reconvene this morning over Granger’s fucking engagement ring. Only now Draco’s found himself with Harry Potter in his kitchen and a stubbornly insistent part-cockstand that he’s not sure he can cover no matter how tightly he ties the belt of his stupid fucking dressing gown.

“You need to fuck off,” he tells Harry, who sighs but does as he’s told.

“I’ll see you later,” he says before he goes, too fucking kind for someone who hates him. “I, er… Good luck with everything in Mysteries.”

There’s less heat than Draco intends in his reply. “Enjoy pretending to work.”

Then Draco is heading out into his flat’s small hallway. There’s a mirror beside the door to the shared stairwell, and Draco looks at himself in it as he waves his wand to allow his guest access. He looks abominable, and the mirror agrees. “You need a good night’s rest!”

Draco sighs. His black dressing gown covers all of his front and goes down to his knees, sawing him starkly into a mass with lower legs, hands and a head, all while the garment refuses to hang so that the heavier parts lie where they should. His face is drawn, his eyes tired, and his hair has gone fluffy on one side. This flattens quickly under his fingers – but to think that he just kissed Harry Potter, looking like this wreck.

Granger’s boyfriend knocks on the door to Draco’s flat then, saying nothing as Draco lets him in. He’s never seen Draco like this – but then, Draco supposes, it’s only recently that he’s seen Granger’s boyfriend on the hunt for an engagement ring, in jeans that fit and a collared muggle shirt.

He huffs. “Shall I look through the bumpf while you get yourself dressed?” he suggests, standing away from Draco and not looking down from his face.

“No,” Draco bites out, even as he leads the man though to the kitchen. “You can watch me in the shower and wank.” He doesn’t care to imagine what Granger’s boyfriend is thinking right now. He doesn’t care to imagine anything at all. “They’re under there,” he concedes, waving a hand at the sofa. “And there’s coffee made.”

Emboldened by a long discussion and fortified by a light lunch, Draco and Granger’s boyfriend find themselves at an independent jewellers that afternoon. The address is a short walk from Bond Street, which ultimately means Mayfair.

Draco’s worried that he approves, and Granger’s boyfriend is equally uncomfortable en route. As the streets grow quieter and cleaner, the boyfriend spends more time than he should peering into the passing windows of art galleries and antiques shops, coming out with slightly punch-drunk asides, such as, “Well, you only do this once, don’t you?” and “I’ve not had any rent to pay, that’s the thing, for a long time now.”

“I can do the talking, if you like,” Draco offers despite himself. The mood is rubbing off on him, making him feel underdressed in his slim trousers and shirt from a man named Reiss. His coat is black wool, and he’s beginning to think that it’s too warm for this time of the year. It’s a fine day: if they were heading to the pub, Harry might have insisted that they sit outside, as he does, and told him, *Take your coat off, Malfoy – enjoy the weather*, which he would have done.

“It’s only a shop,” the boyfriend insists as they turn another corner, neither listening to Draco’s
words nor guessing at his thoughts. “George owns a shop.”

Despite this, they end up having a certain amount of fun.

Not to begin with, it’s fair to say. The atmosphere in the jewellers is heavy, with a great deal of wood panelling absorbing the light, along with the velvet lining in the glass cases around them. A lot of the work is ornate. Draco remains certain that the goblins do it better, but he has seen enough heirlooms in his life to agree that the pieces look expensive, at least. He doubts that Lupin bought anything so nice for Nymphadora.

Granger’s boyfriend is clearly intimidated. He has a marked-up brochure in his back pocket, but he doesn’t dare take it out. “Yes,” he says, to the Good afternoon, sir, from one of the men behind the counters. “I, er, I was here before Easter.” They won’t remember him, Draco thinks. By the time they arrived in this place on that trip, their routine for each shop had been timed down to less than a minute. And Draco had agreed that they could stop for a quick half. “I’d like to pick out an engagement ring.”

These words nonetheless trigger an immediate reaction, producing a slew of questions about budget, carats, metals and stones. It’s all the same stuff that Draco’s had in his ear over too much coffee this morning, but Granger’s boyfriend seems to have forgotten that he is these days a consummate expert in women’s jewellery. He’s fumbling over the difference between an Asscher and a princess cut.

“He would like the ring to incorporate some sapphires,” Draco chips in when things get desperate. Blue; practical; not goblin-made, he remembers. His suggestion begins a steady parade of choices up to the countertop.

Seeing the diamonds in real light, rather than as photographs or behind glass, Granger’s boyfriend seems to completely lose it. “I don’t know what I’m doing, mate,” he tells to Draco, eyes wide as he furiously wipes his hands down the front of his shirt. “What if she doesn’t say yes?”

“We offer a very generous returns policy…”

Draco snaps his eyes to the jeweller. The one dealing with them is around their age, maybe older, though he has an older colleague still, who has gone off to do something in the back. He’s well turned out and his accent suits their surroundings, but Draco doesn’t like his tone.

“They’ve been together since they were teenagers,” he corrects the man now, with all the pureblood disdain that he remembers. “She’ll say yes.”

Besides, Granger’s boyfriend isn’t listening. “He’d tell me to trust my instincts, Harry, if he was here, but I don’t know what those are.”

“Oh?” the shopkeeper inquires, blandly. Draco wonders what sort of customers he usually deals with, to allow him such a cynical expression.

They should never have come muggling, Draco thinks. Having to explain the dynamic of Potter, Weasley and Granger is quite tedious. “Harry’s the best man,” he says shortly.

“No, no,” the boyfriend interjects, back with them, locating some sort of solid ground. “I told you, didn’t I? You’re my best man. Harry’s Hermione’s.”

Draco doesn’t know how to respond to this. He thought that his job was to enchant the ring. “But your sister…”
Tall and irredeemably ginger, Granger’s boyfriend tuts. “You’re closer to Hermione than Gin’s been in a long time. She’s never in the country.” He turns to their assistant, shaking his head and seemingly quite confident when talking about his friends. “Harry’s been our best mate since forever,” he explains, to the man’s polite nod. “We share custody of him. Along with this one.” He jerks a thumb towards Draco, before gesturing between Draco and the air. “He and Harry are not together,” he adds pointedly, presumably in payback for some ten-year-old slight. “The four of us are a set.”

It’s an irritating thing for the man to say, but it’s only when the shopkeeper’s smile turns a touch forced that Draco realises something odd. He’s annoyed that Granger’s boyfriend has implied that he and Harry are an item – when they most certainly are not – but he is not especially bothered by the implication that they could be, the way that he once would have been. A muggle in an expensive jewellers is looking at him differently from the way that he did when they first walked through the door, but Draco doesn’t care. Who’s this bloke to him? Tosser.

And yet it seems to matter to Granger’s boyfriend, which is very strange. “Oh, come off it,” he tells the man behind the counter.

The shopkeeper looks startled, and Draco thinks that this is a little unfair. The man is surely only disappointed that he’s lost the prospect of Draco’s future custom.

“You could take some responsibility for heteronormat…”

This is the moment when Draco laughs.

The boyfriend’s ears are turning red, but he looks unrepentant. “I’m marrying Hermione Granger,” he explains himself.

It’s tempting fate, really, to say so before Granger has agreed, and the shopkeeper only looks more bemused, but the words seem to galvanise Granger’s boyfriend into action nonetheless. Draco’s too entertained by the sudden appearance of her voice to take issue over it.

“Look,” Granger’s boyfriend says plainly to the muggle. “I want to buy a ring today.”

He’s been weighing up the option of getting something custom-made, Draco learned this morning, but has become convinced that this is a step too far. I’ll only change my mind fifteen times, and you know that Hermione qualified with her work on serendipity…

“My mate here’s going to help me, because I want it to be a surprise. I like everything you do, and…” He gestures to the rings laid out on the counter. “All of these are nice.”

“Well, thank you, sir, that’s…”

“My best man,” Granger’s boyfriend interrupts, clapping a hand on Draco’s shoulder as if this is war. Draco’s glad that he wore the coat. “He’s good at seeing the flaws in things. So, he’s going to point them out to me,” he directs, “and it’s nothing against you or your shop, but it’s going to help me think things through. Draco, have at it.”

The jeweller’s smile is very, very forced now, but Draco feels a curl in his chest of something like anticipation. It’s rather like the feeling that he used to get when someone would ask him his thoughts on the Prophet’s front page in the Slytherin common room.

“Well,” he begins, looking at the array in front of him. The pieces all look rather different now that he has permission not to like any of them.
It’s at this point that their visit to the shop turns fun. Granger’s boyfriend says little as Draco speaks, listening to his comments with a wry look on his face, but he’s clearly enjoying himself too.

“…and this one really belongs to a dowager duchess who drinks too much sherry and has a spoilt, irritating dog named Bathsheba.”

“A ‘no’, then?” the shopkeep offers politely.


“Everyone’s taste is different, sir.” The jeweller is clearly offended, and yet also amused. It feels like power.

Engagement rings are ridiculous, Draco concludes, for the most part. There’s a setting in rose gold with pink sapphires, completely over the top…

But then, as he takes the ring in his fingers, it strikes Draco that Pansy would have loved it. She never would have chosen it, because she always tried to hide her love of everything pink and frivolous, and that’s likely the most ridiculous thing about this ring – certainly moreso than the nature of the metal or the stones.

He would have bought it anyway, Draco decides, defiant, tilting the oversized diamond to the light until the ring gleams more brown. Another tilt, and the ring is all pink again. He would have bought it for Pansy even though it is ridiculous and they would have been told to come back for something classic before the wedding.

A pang stings in Draco’s chest. Because, oh, isn’t that a lie? They would never have been allowed to buy a new ring.

In the end, he can’t dismiss the piece in his own voice.

“Oh Ronald,” he says instead, channelling Granger and making her boyfriend jump. “Did you know that pink used to be thought a masculine colour? It was appropriated in the 1950s as part of a regime that gendered women back into the domestic sphere…”

“Yeah, not that one,” the boyfriend agrees with a laugh.

The options begin to narrow, but more rings come out to replace the ones that are taken away. It’s not clear that they’re going to be successful after all, but then, just as Draco feels himself flagging, Granger’s boyfriend points his finger at a piece that’s been sitting to the side since the beginning.

“D’you think this one’s too folky?” he asks. “It’s a bit folky,” he says, and it’s the first negative opinion that he’s expressed all day. It’s also the first opinion that he’s really expressed at all.

The setting is in yellow gold, with a diamond surrounded by what Draco has been told is called a halo, of petal-shaped blue sapphires and emeralds. Together, the gems appear as a rose sitting in leaves and sky. Leading up to the stones, the gold band is engraved with chevrons that end to hold everything in two Vs, in air, in fletches.

“No,” Draco says, looking at the ring. They’re after something for a witch, are they not? Roses and feathers are appropriate reference points, and this thing belongs in a fairy tale. “But I didn’t realise that this was a wedding to celebrate school unity.”

“You what?” asks Granger’s boyfriend. The jeweller is silent, even patient now.
Draco sighs, pointing to the gold band with his little finger. “Your lot,” he points out, not wanting to say a word like *Gryffindor* in front of their muggle audience. “My lot,” he adds, pointing out the emeralds. “The eagles,” he adds, for the sapphires, “and the badgers,” he finishes, pointing at the diamond. There’s even the slightest earth-yellow tint to it, as though it’s been found brilliant and aged on a woodland floor, rather than mined and cut.

The boyfriend titters. “You’re right,” he realises. “But I like it. It makes me think of bluebells. I thought that she’d want something simple, but they’re too dressed up, some of these, like she’s turned into Percy or something. Have you ever heard her recite from *Hogwarts: A History*?” he asks as though this is a common occurrence. The book is a child’s encyclopaedia. “I reckon that she knew more about that place than Dumbledore. Now we’ve got Harry and Nev gone back to teach…”

There are two other rings of a similar mood, but this is the one that they leave with, less than half an hour later. The size even matches the ring that has been purloined from Granger’s jewellery box, as well as the shopkeeper’s advice about the typical relationship between ring and dress sizes.

It seems like a risk, to Draco’s mind, to buy the ring and enchant it all without seeing the thing on Granger’s finger. It must be a risk. But this is a Gryffindor match, and apparently that’s part of the deal. The boyfriend’s eyes are lit with adrenaline, nodding his consent to the sale. He’s grinning, almost on his toes as he proudly presents his Gringotts debit card, making the most expensive purchase that he’s ever made in his life.

“You’ll have to look after it,” Granger’s boyfriend says as they leave the shop. He holds out the bag, his fist tight on the rope handle. There’s a tremor to his wrist in the Mayfair sunshine. “I can’t take it home,” he insists. “She’ll find it. She’ll see straight through me.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Draco demands. He realises quite suddenly that this is all actually happening. He’s become Ronald Weasley’s best man and he’s agreed to enchant Hermione Granger’s engagement ring. He has no idea what he’s going to do.

The boyfriend is looking at him, tall, maybe equally lost. “Keep it a secret,” he insists, as if he trusts Draco to do that. “Think of something practical. Find something to test things on. Don’t send me any letters about it, of all the bloody things…”

There’s a heft to the bag when Draco takes it, promising the black velvet box inside. “I have to go into work,” he says, recalling his duties without thought. “I conjured a canary. I need to feed it and do some analysis.” Merlin, he hopes that the canary is still alive. There’s no way that he’ll have the focus today to disapparate safely to the Nowhere Room, let alone vanish something into the veil again.

“Yeah, well,” Granger’s boyfriend replies, looking at his watch. “I told Grimmo that I was only browsing down the Alley and seeing George for lunch. Harry’s probably killed his dad, and if he or Kreacher gets a hint of something going on there’ll be no escape at all.” He nods at the ring, its terrifying reality. “Is it safe for you to apparate around with that thing?”

“Theoretically.” Fuck alone knows.

Then the man is off down a side road and gone, leaving Draco behind, trusted with a fairy tale.

It’s a simple enough route home, and the journey should have been simple too. By the time that Draco’s recovered his wits, he’s certain that he’ll do no useful work that afternoon, so he commits to popping into his office only to check on the canary before he heads back to his flat. It’s after
lunch but before Granger’s tea break, so she won’t be looking for him. He can probably find something in the staff room to complement the digestive biscuits.

When Draco appears in his office, Lupin is standing at his desk, leaning on his elbows and reading something.

“Ah, Draco,” the man says, looking up.

It’s unexpected. Fuck, Draco thinks. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he hisses, full of Gryffindor adrenaline. It’s not a feeling that he enjoys. He’s holding a bag containing thousands of muggle pounds’ worth of jewellery and it’s supposed to be a secret.

His gaze twitches to the door, but it’s closed. The canary seems happy enough in the corner, a flurry of wings.

Lupin’s frowning at him, about to speak.

“Shut up!” Draco commands, still hissing.

“Ah, yes,” Lupin says, a little surprised, it seems, to find himself holding the still-unpublished book. *The Killing Curse and Unnatural Death,* by Draco Malfoy. “Sorry,” Lupin continues, not sounding it as he secures his grip on the thing. “I got started while I was waiting for you. It’s quite interesting.”

“What’s that in there?” Lupin asks, whispering and pointing to Draco’s heavy paper bag.

There’s nothing for it. Draco marches around the desk to where Lupin’s standing, grabs the man and disapparates, before things can get any worse.

They appear in Draco’s kitchen – he’s clutching his bag and Lupin is clutching a book by the front cover and a number of its handwritten pages. Draco recognises it very well.

“This is a mess.”

“What’s that in there?” Lupin asks, whispering and pointing to Draco’s heavy paper bag.

There’s nothing for it. Draco marches around the desk to where Lupin’s standing, grabs the man and disapparates, before things can get any worse.

They appear in Draco’s kitchen – he’s clutching his bag and Lupin is clutching a book by the front cover and a number of its handwritten pages. Draco recognises it very well. “Is that – Why are you reading my thesis?” he demands, in a much firmer voice, holding onto the ring for now until he can think where to put it.

“Ah, yes,” Lupin says, a little surprised, it seems, to find himself holding the still-unpublished book. *The Killing Curse and Unnatural Death,* by Draco Malfoy. “Sorry,” Lupin continues, not sounding it as he secures his grip on the thing. “I got started while I was waiting for you. It’s quite interesting.”

“Why were you waiting for me?” Draco asks, looking around the room.

He’s going to have to keep the ring in his bedroom, he thinks. The catalogues left over from the last shopping trip need to be taken out and burned, even though they’ve survived until now under the sofa. He should own a safe of some kind.

“Thomas Childs: Fine Jewellery and Watches,” Lupin reads off Draco’s bag, ignoring the question. “Are you proposing to someone?” he jokes, as if they’re friends.

Once upon a time, Draco could keep a secret. He knew what he was doing and his acquaintances could take his word seriously. Now, he thinks, he has become just as bad as the sandy-haired bastard who’s laughing at him, throwing himself in and out of relationships and failing to stay
dead.

“I will obliviate you,” he threatens.

Lupin sighs, before his eyes go wide. “Oh,” he suddenly concludes, “that’s why Ron was looking shiftly. It’s about time,” he says, because of course he thinks that three months is enough. “And you’re helping.” This seems to be almost as startling. “Interesting.” He nods towards the kitchen with a whiskery grin. “Should I put the kettle on?” he suggests. “You’ll want to stash that somewhere safe.”

The man is a rake, Draco thinks.

“Harry’s mum’s engagement ring was a transfigured galleon,” is Lupin’s opening gambit when Draco returns. He’s ended up putting Granger’s ring in the drawer of his beside table, for want of anywhere better. “Sirius made it for her in the Leaky, while she and James were up at the bar.”

There are no words, Draco thinks, moving to make yet another coffee and refusing to sit down.

“James’ proposal was rather spontaneous,” Lupin explains from the table, as if this is to be admired. He has a teapot in front of him, optimistically, as well as the copy of Draco’s thesis, which did not need to be transported here. “We’d barely left Platform 9¾ when the spirit moved him to ask her, the very last day of school.” Draco has heard the story, but doesn’t feel the need to say so. “Peter and a couple of the girls had trains to catch, but James insisted that he would buy everyone new tickets and we were all due at the pub.”

There isn’t coffee enough for this, Draco thinks as he pours in the milk. It’s been a very stressful day.

“It was quite stunning, what he came up with,” Lupin continues mildly, as though the memory doesn’t infatuate him. He’s breathing in the steam of his tea. “He was always good at that sort of thing, but gold doesn’t like transfiguration and it can’t be conjured, as I’m sure you know, so it took a couple of goes to get the alloys out. An oval cameo with silvery shadowing,” he describes. “Their initials and the date on the back; lots of filigree… Well, it was the 70s,” he allows. “The relief was of a stag and a fox approaching a river, near trees.”

“Is there a point to what you’re telling me?” Draco finally breaks, turning back to the man.

Lupin takes a sip of his tea. “He acted as though it was all a bit of fun, Sirius,” Lupin insists on finishing the story. “Something for the afternoon, to entertain them. But they never bought another. Lily’s sister thought that that was because Prongs was cheap, proving herself an idiot.” This is a statement. More tea and a swallow. “And then we all thought that the man had killed them.” This is supposed to be a joke.

This is always the problem, Draco thinks. One is told things that no one else knows, and somehow this mutates into the obligation to endure further conversation. He seems to have become Lupin’s gay confessional.

“The reason that I’m telling you this,” he finally concludes, “is because of the fox.”

“No it isn’t,” Draco tells him, blowing on the surface of his café au lait. The man is full of shit.

Lupin gives him a look, but doesn’t change course. “You’ll have gathered that it was there to represent Lily, but that was a bit of a punt. We were going by James’ impression of her. They hadn’t yet butchered the NEWT syllabus at this point, so we were casting patronuses from sixth-
year Defence, but his could never make up its mind.”

The patronus form can only reflect something drawn from the caster, Draco recalls. It may mimic one’s animagus transformation or that of another, in the rare circumstance that either are known. But if it does not reflect the self, then the patronus recalls the caster’s image of another person, rather than offering true insight into their soul’s nature. Else – well, those are the current working assumptions surrounding the spell.

“We were all certain that his was Lily, but now she was a fox, now she was a doe, now she was a hawk…” Lupin rolls his eyes, just a touch, as though this is a very James Potter thing to have happened. “The doe seemed rather egotistical and she was a fox by the exam, so that was what we went with.”

We. Apparently Lupin was also involved in crafting Lily Potter’s ring. Draco doesn’t point out the slip.

“As I explained to Harry,” Lupin concludes, “this means, rather contrarily, that the impression of his father that he had at thirteen, when he cast the patronus at you, if I recall…”

Draco gives him a look.

Lupin seems amused by it, his expression remarkably jovial for someone who has been returned to life for less than twenty-four hours. “It means that the impression of his father that he had at that age is rather more trustworthy than he’s given himself credit for.”

“Oh, I see,” Draco says, because he understands now what he’s being told. “And you don’t think that I should credit my own patronus at all. Harry’s fine, and none of you are at fault.” As if it’s ever been about the bloody patronus.

Lupin’s expression dims. He looks away, rapping his fingers on the table where Draco’s thesis lies.

You are full of shit, Draco thinks, again. “Is that why you’re here?” he demands. “For me to take it all back and tell you that your son never suffered?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Lupin snaps, his jaw quick. “Harry’s not my son.” He seems appalled by the idea. “I had no formal standing with him at all. He had his parents and Sirius was his godfather.”

Draco rolls his eyes to the ceiling, remembering Harry’s words at Andromeda’s about his relationship to Teddy. “What is it with you all?” he complains, the cabinets creaking behind him. “Godfather is a meaningless honorific. I might as well be Teddy’s godfather, and all I do is see the boy three times a year and buy him chocolate.”

Lupin is still staring at his hand on Draco’s dining table. He probably wants a cigarette.

“Why is it, you think, that you’ve been dragged back into this world?” Draco demands, because the answer is surely nothing more than Harry’s deep and abiding affection.

Lupin doesn’t answer the question, and for a few seconds it sits in the air between them.

In the end, Lupin sighs.

“Neither of us ever wanted Harry to think of himself as…” Broken, he doesn’t say, or something like it. Abandoned. Suffering from the fate that Lupin and Black recognised themselves as suffering.
Draco is losing patience. “Then you’ll be glad to hear that he very rarely thinks about himself at all.”

Oddly, this response makes Lupin laugh, the sound abrupt as he raises his head. “Oh…” he comes out with, as though he thinks that he’s hallucinating again. “It’s an astonishing thing, how much you love him.”

These things shouldn’t be said. They should never be said. Draco rejects the point bluntly. “Everybody loves him,” he points out. “He’s Harry Potter.”

Grin on his face, canines and whiskers, Lupin shakes his head and glances at Draco with a flash of amber eyes. “Sirius Black, this boy is the spit of you,” he says whimsically into midair.

It’s only for a moment, then, but Draco’s watching. It’s as though the full weight of Lupin’s death suddenly passes over him. He rubs his face with his hands, just for a moment, and looks towards the sink and the window that faces the garden that downstairs doesn’t maintain very well.

“I should have recognised your resemblance,” he adds blandly, his emotions parcelling themselves away. “I should have realised,” he insists, “just once out of any of the times that Harry mentioned the lengths you would go to in tormenting him.”

Draco remembers staying up all night to finish his POTTER STINKS badges. It was worth it, he’s still convinced.

He is not at all convinced by this suggestion, nonetheless. As far as he can remember, Sirius Black caused a huge amount of fuss when no fuss at all was needed, acting out when he could have easily sat through a few more dinner parties and walked away at eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-four… James Potter and Lupin seem to be much the same in this regard, seeing a dead man everywhere for want of seeing him anywhere and for want of seeing him in death.

“He would have agreed with every word of this,” Lupin continues, tapping his fingers to Draco’s thesis, still lying on the table. “Even when it makes no sense, I can hear his voice.” He picks it up, turning pages of Draco’s handwriting, doubled to this clean parchment. “What is it you say in the introduction? Death is a natural state,” he reads after a moment, “but dying is an unnatural act. When the body fails, the soul must naturalise its will to be made separate. What on earth does that mean?” he demands, his voice a touch hoarse. “It’s pure sophistry.”

“It means exactly what it says,” Draco counters. He explains, “Death is in our nature, but the act of dying is not. It only makes sense only ex post facto.” He sighs, because the next part still frustrates him. “I intended to prove that the Killing Curse produces a different kind of death from that which follows after bodily corruption. But it doesn’t. It’s a compulsion on the soul, I concluded, forcing it into a decision that usually only comes when the body cannot sustain the soul any longer.”

Lupin frowns, hearing ‘decision’. “Like the Imperius?”

Draco takes a slurp of his coffee. The end of it has gone cold. “The Imperius affects the mind,” he corrects. “I have something of a theory,” he says, remembering it only in this moment, “that there is a link between the Unforgivables which has been forgotten by the emphasis on their legality. The Imperius does to the mind what the Killing Curse does to the soul, what the Crucius does to the body. It forces them to tear free. But that thing in your hands,” he concedes, nodding to the thesis, “is about the only extended piece of writing on the Killing Curse, and there’s nothing equivalent on the Imperius or the Crucius, so I’m rather making that up as I go along.”

He hasn’t read the thesis again since he qualified, Draco doesn’t say. He was barely able to look at
it in the year following his parents’ death.

He dedicated the thing to his mother, though she isn’t mentioned in the chapter on the boy who lived. “Tim Davies in the Department…” he adds, though he’s not sure why. Lupin looks interested, and only he and Granger have ever seemed so, without being paid for it. Draco has talked about many things with Harry over the years, but he’s never been able to find words to talk to him about this. “He agrees that my theory might explain the power of love on the Killing. Love compels the soul to remain, in the manner that self-assertion compels the mind to resist the Imperius.” Merlin knows what defence there is against the Cruciatius. Pleasure, perhaps. “But this is Davies,” he points out. “He thinks that love is the answer to everything.”

Lupin nods, taking this in. “Where does that leave us?” he asks. “And Sirius?” he adds unnecessarily.

“I don’t know,” Draco tells him honestly. “Resurrection should not be possible for this very reason. Once the decision is made, the soul is gone, even if it’s unwilling to leave the mind or this world.”

“Wonderful,” Lupin says, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

Draco drinks the last of his cold coffee, putting down his cup.

“Did it feel good, anyway?” Lupin asks in the end, shutting the thesis and returning it to the table. “Submission?”

Draco can barely remember. “It was something of an anti-climax.”

“Mm.” Lupin nods, as though this makes sense. “Most acts of rebellion are.”

“Pardon?”

Lupin looks at him down his crooked nose.

That’s Teddy’s nose, Draco thinks. The man has stolen it.

“Your father was a highly skilled politician,” Lupin points out. “Do you mean to suggest that becoming an academic was not an attempt to reject him? No one likes academics, Draco,” he points out. “They cause a great deal of fuss, when no fuss need be made.”

“I have a responsibility to the dead,” Draco says stiffly, leaning on his hands. No one ever understands this.

“No, I don’t think so,” Lupin disagrees, though the observation is mildly offered. “I think that you rejected the living.”

Draco looks at him.

“I rebelled too, you understand,” Lupin says, and Draco wonders when they will end, these confessions. These secrets, Luna would say, though they aren’t secrets at all here in Draco’s flat. “After Sirius died.”

“Ate two chocolate biscuits with your mid-morning tea,” Draco suggests, “instead of waiting for lunch?”

Lupin rolls his eyes. “I stopped hiding,” he says. “Or I tried to,” he concedes. “Harry had to give me an earful.”
And it was very kindly meant, Draco’s certain.

“Sirius was always terrified,” Lupin begins again, idly, in the way of one whose identity has been long been bound up with another. Sirius, Sirius, Sirius, Sirius… “From the very first day that I met him – and I was little better. One of our many failings was that we didn’t want to bring things down on each other’s door. James never had any such qualms.”

He shrugs, wry, awkward in his limbs as he plays with his wedding ring, which Draco hasn’t noticed until now.

“Dora was a sweetheart,” Lupin declares with warm affection, as though this is what he’s been trying to say all along. The emotion sounds odd, no usual part of his WWN voice at all. “She couldn’t walk into a room without breaking china or otherwise making a racket, and I thought that that was the most wonderful skill to have. She could carry a conversation entirely by herself and I was going to listen, get to know her.” He shakes his head. “I was going to have the wife, the family, the house… Fuck being a werewolf and fuck being miserable and fuck being bent.” He says it with no vehemence at all, smiling the softest of grins. “Dora’d earn a salary and I would raise the children, so there. Fuck the Ministry and fuck Dumbledore too.”

It sounds utterly self-defeating, Draco thinks, for possibly the first time in his life. “I imagine that death would be everything of an anti-climax after that.”

“I don’t even know if she was there,” Lupin admits, his eyes a warm amber, the brutality of his words a joke. “Her father never liked me, so maybe that was it. Maybe it’s the artefact that you mentioned, which got us into this mess.” His memories of the afterwards seem vague, and that’s probably about right. “I found James and Lily; I knew it was them – and all of us knew that someone was missing. And that’s ten years of existence without her, apparently.”

“Quite,” Draco supposes, leaning against his cabinets.

“And now… He’s not coming back, is he?” Lupin says finally, staring at Draco with his mouth flat. “When he escaped… I had to be there at Hogwarts, if only to witness it.” He says it so lightly, like a summer breeze. “Then he fell, and we all said that it was an accident.” The man taps his fingers to Draco’s thesis again. “But there are no accidents, you’re saying. Death makes them a choice that one was going to make all along.”

Draco thinks of the veil, and the way that it stands between. “Technically, it would be a choice that he’s forever making, the veil catching him in the moment.” Maybe the stone drew them all back there, to the moment of choice. That’s an idea.

Lupin breathes, wiping his mouth in anticipation of evil. “I think that he died the night that James was killed.” He says it bluntly, mocking himself. “And there’s nothing that can fix that.”

A dark feeling turns in Draco’s chest. He refuses to bear it. “Get out of my flat,” he tells the man.
It’s easy to avoid number 12, Grimmauld Place for the rest of the week, and Lupin too. Draco gets on with his work, beholden now to a canary which reads like nothing that his wand has ever seen, but which makes for interesting comparisons against old work from 2004. He’ll have to set the bird free, he thinks, when this is over, or at least spell some natural light into his office for it.

As the Easter holidays come to an end, Harry appears in his flat one more time.

“I told Auntie Dromeda,” he says, popping into Draco’s room. They don’t talk about before – they never do. “Teddy went with AJ to the skate park, but I was hanging round theirs for a bit and I couldn’t not tell her.” He seems to want Draco’s approval. “Yeah?”

“It’s best that she knows,” Draco agrees, because this can only be about one thing. “Lupin can’t hide forever.” It’s late at night, Saturday, but Draco’s just come home. There’s a sketch on the parchment in his hands that he’s still not sure is right. He doesn’t look up from where he’s sitting on the bed, working at it with a pencil.

“He’s always done this,” Harry says, seemingly already adjusted to Lupin’s renewed life. He huffs, his clothes rustling. “Hid from things, I mean. He tried to run away, did I tell you, when Tonks was pregnant? He wanted on the tent adventure with me and Ron and Hermione.”

“Rake,” Draco says simply, not looking up.

“No,” Harry disagrees, sitting on the end of the bed and making it tilt with a silent bounce. “No, that’s not…” He tuts. “No, I think that no one told him – ever, you know? That he could have a future; any of it.” He lets out a sound of frustration. “I was such a git to him because I never really thought about it.”

The man’s scowling when Draco does glance up, rubbing his face with his hand for a second.

“D’you think that’s why he died?” Harry asks softly, looking to where Draco sits, cross-legged in the middle of the mattress. It’s more comfortable here than the kitchen, though the windows face north and never get the sun. “Did I make him feel trapped, d’you think? If he could’ve only held on…”

“None of us has a future, Potter,” Draco reminds him. “Nothing is certain besides death, and here you don’t see us all jumping off cliffs.”

When his parents died, that had very much felt like an option. Draco chose to jump another way, towards one Harry Potter. He’s not sure that he’s yet hit the ground.

Harry shakes his head with a bemused hint of a smirk. “If I ask what you’re doing, you won’t talk to me about it, will you?”

The question comes like a challenge, sharp green eyes tracking the twitch of the pencil between Draco’s fingers.

“If I ask why now,” Harry continues, “or if you think my mum…”

Draco says nothing. He never promises what he can’t deliver. Never sets a timetable. Never again. He shouldn’t have entertained any of Lupin’s questions, and he won’t make the same mistake with Harry.
“Lie down,” Harry commands in the end, kicking off his shoes and shuffling up the bed. “You’re home now. Stop thinking for a bit.”

Draco isn’t thinking of very much at all, because he is an accomplished occlumens and his thoughts stay thin, most of the time – but he complies, lying back to stare up at the ceiling, his head borne by the soft pillows. Inevitably, Harry slumps over half of him, digging between his arm and his chest to rest his head in the crook of Draco’s shoulder. He wonders if they’ll ever talk about this, or the argument that they should be having.

“It’s exam term,” Harry jokes, his arm a dead weight and his hand lolling into Draco’s heartbeat, “or I’d lend you Puff to keep you happy.”

Puff, the ridiculous enchanted dragon who breathes rainbow pompoms. He and the canary would probably find themselves on good terms, Draco thinks. “I had no idea that that ghastly thing was still alive.”

“He’s as cute and as volatile as ever,” says Harry, proudly, always fucking fidgeting. “George calls him a lesson in built-in obsolescence, but he’s only joking; he’s dead proud. Always asks for updates.”

Draco has no idea what this means.

“It’s a muggle idea,” Harry says, apparently quite capable of reading him. “Things like washing machines, they build them to break after five or ten years, to make sure that you buy a new one. The idea’s that everyone thinks a washing machine is worth whatever amount of money, so you might as well make it that people have to buy a few of them over their lifetimes.”

“That sounds very sensible,” Draco observes.

Harry scoffs. “Yeah, great. That’d give Teddy’s Fawkes, what, only another five years or so?” He’s referring to the slightly less volatile and needy phoenix that Harry bought for his godson, perhaps in 2004, as Draco recalls. “He loves that thing to death. I’m not telling him that it’ll be done with by the time he’s fifteen.”

“Most things are.”

“Blimey,” Harry says, mocking him, his voice a sing-song. His head is warm and heavy in the crook of Draco’s shoulder, his arm resting lightly on his chest. “Someone’s feeling cheery today.”

Draco doesn’t respond.

Sighing heavily, Harry fidgets against his leg, and he’s a little hard, of course he is. “Well, anyway,” he says, as though nothing is amiss. “The adventure continues. He’s only got some ancient remote-controlled car working now from Sirius’s hidey-hole…” This is James Potter, Draco surmises. “Keeps playing with it all the time; I had to get out of there… And Ron! He’s getting just as bad…”

This goes on until Draco falls asleep.

It was surprising how quickly sex with Harry became a normal part of Draco’s life, just as it was surprising how quickly it became normal not to touch him that way. Their liaisons had been a regular occurrence for a while, when the year turned into 2006, but it had been until this point difficult to see the affair as normal, given that it often involved quite bracing exposure to the elements and disorganised pops of apparition.
As January turned into February, 2006, a nightcap at Draco’s flat became practically the only way that any night out would ever end, along with every other social occasion that he and Harry found themselves at together. Sometimes an actual nightcap of wine or whiskey was involved; sometimes they fucked themselves sober, readying for sleep. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes they’d been mixing in each other’s company all evening; sometimes Draco had no idea at all where Harry had been, before he arrived.

Most of the time, Harry left promptly, now welcome to apparate freely in and out of Draco’s flat. The favour hadn’t been repaid: Granger and her boyfriend would have required consultation to add Draco to the wards of number 12, Grimmauld Place, and neither Harry nor Draco wanted to start that conversation when there were no other friends of the household with access.

Occasionally they rolled free of each other and simply lay there in the light, the half-light or the darkness that they found themselves in. Draco’s insomnia made him no promise of sleep; there would be no clear reason why Harry stayed.

“Do you ever think,” Harry asked, one such night, of little significance otherwise, “what it would’ve been like if we’d started all this earlier?”

“When?” Draco asked back. He was growing cold, so he summoned the duvet from where it had ended up, half on the floor. Curling to his side, he pulled the thing over his shoulders, while Harry held it down at a slant across his waist, a great slash of grey.

It was odd to talk of their past, even now that it had been months since Harry had spoken of his own. Typically their conversations focused on the present and the universal, the abstract. Maybe the latter was what this conversation was intended to be.

The fitting above them was full of light tonight, even harsh. Draco had a crick in his neck and a burning ache where one should never have conscious feeling. Harry had a trail of sucked bruises where his ribs ended, just starting to colour, and Draco knew who had put them there.

“I dunno,” this bruised man said, looking up to the light. “I mean, I never fancied you in school – or at least I don’t think I did.”

This made Draco’s ears prick.

“But what if I had? Or if I’d realised? What would I have done?”

“Occluded the feeling until it had no effect,” Draco told him. And he’d had a few to drink, as well as some very decent shags these last few months, which was why, on this day, he found himself admitting, “That’s what I did.”

Harry looked at him, no glasses but his green gaze still penetrating, his shoulders broad and sharp and free from the covers that Draco was buried in. He had black eyelashes under ragged black eyebrows, stark against his light-paled skin.

Draco was going to remember this moment for the rest of his life, because he had planned to never allow it to happen. The idea that Harry Potter would find out –

“You didn’t,” Harry said, sounding scandalised, a corner of his mouth pulling wide.

Draco’s heart hammered, but his voice was cool. He knew that if he withdrew too quickly then Harry would only be after him. “It was nothing personal, Potter,” he scoffed, rolling onto his back, crossing his arms under the winter duvet. “It was puberty.”
Harry laughed, as though this was funny. “No, no, no, no, no,” he said. “You fancied me in school.” The idea seemed to delight him. “Like, properly?” he asked, sounding hideously common.

No, Draco wanted to say. Like, idly. Completely in passing. Or perhaps, like, improperly. That would be more accurate.

“What did you use to think about?” came the next question, brightly. “And don’t say that you won’t tell me, because I’ve heard you say lots of nasty things, Draco Malfoy… I won’t tell anyone,” Harry promised, not for the first time, though his tone was eager tonight. It reminded Draco of Pansy’s, from the good times.

This wasn’t Pansy, though. This was Harry Potter.

There was a name for this feeling, Draco thought. The jittering adrenaline of it, up in his throat.

“I honestly cannot remember anything specific…”

“Yes you can.” Harry, curse him, knew well that Draco remembered many things.

After a silence, then, despite himself, Draco shut his eyes and told the darkness. “There were several variations on a theme,” he admitted. The covers rustled, and the warmth of Harry’s arm moved closer. “You would be doing something Potterish,” he told the older version of that boy, peeking a glance at him. He was biting his lip. “I don’t know…” The ceiling, white. “You would be using that cloak of yours to read something in the restricted section late at night, with no respect for hours.”

“Always late at night,” Harry agreed, a gleam in his green eyes.

Draco nodded, because it was late at night now, and it had always been late at night then, when he’d known that the rest of the dormitory were out for the count. He’d never been accomplished at sleeping. “And I would find you, obviously,” he told the ceiling, “because you would have made a complete pig’s ear of it – stuck your hand out or caught the thing on your shoe, or you’d have left your bag in plain sight like an imbecile…”

Draco took a breath, then, and it wasn’t clear at all why the next part was so difficult to say. He swallowed, tilting his head back.

“And then I would do nothing,” he managed to dredge free, eyes on the ceiling light, its glare, a lump still in his throat. This was the core of the fantasy, and it had never made sense, why it got to him. He could feel his blood stirring from the thought of it even now. “I wouldn’t tell Umbridge. I wouldn’t tell Filch… I would simply walk away and not tell a soul.”

Some flicker of sense saved him from adding anything else at this point, but something else remained stuck in his throat, so he kept going, quickly and dismissive.

“And then of course you would follow me and drag me into one of your Harry Potter secret passages that no one else ever knew about and you would snog me silly or what have you.”

Harry Potter himself said nothing, now, for a little while. He fidgeted, and the heat of him was closer. Draco couldn’t bear to look at him.

It was unimaginable, really, them in school. Draco had never given mind to it, and Harry clearly hadn’t either. He didn’t know what it meant, bringing up everything tonight, whether it proved that this was how they were supposed to relate, together in bed with too many intimacies, or if they were lying to themselves, forgetting years of brutality and pain.
The words that Harry eventually came out with were cautious. “I’d have thought that there’d have been a lot more shouting. You know – feelings bubbling over and all that.”

“No,” Draco told him, quite easily, his own body finally warming under the heavy duvet. “No talking at all, really.”

“Bit unhealthy,” Potter said then, as a joke, though it was cautious. He reached out and trailed fingers over Draco’s wrist, dragging it towards him under the bedclothes, out of sight. “Were you still thinking about this stuff in sixth year?”

He’d caught on about Umbridge, Draco thought. “I was rather preoccupied in sixth year, as you may recall.”

“Yeah, I know, but…” Fingers, tracing.

Then Draco remembered. “Oh, fuck you,” he breathed, flushing, eyes closed, because he’d forgotten this. He entertained the thought that he’d forgotten this the most, with desperate occlusion.

“What?”

“Nothing. The train.” It was late at night and it was easy to talk and Harry was squeezing his thumb. “I used to think about it when I couldn’t sleep.” He turned to look Harry in the eye, perhaps in an attempt to make himself shut up. “It was never truly a wanking fantasy, you understand.” Apart from the odd time when it had been.

“All right,” Harry said, and the frown on him was plainly apprehensive.

It was this moment that Draco would remember, among others, in the drawing room of number 12, Grimmauld Place on a Sunday afternoon in March, 2008, after James Potter had returned from the veil. Because this too was a moment that Draco was going to remember for the rest of his life, and for three months he was going to bitterly resent Harry for sharing it with him.

“Our argument on the Hogwarts Express,” Draco described, for want of a better term, remembering the piercing, unfettered anger that he’d felt, to be observed, for Harry Potter to exist when his father, his father –

He looked up again at the light, his heart racing.

“At the start of the year,” he tried again. “You snuck into my compartment when I was trying to keep Pansy and the rest of them entertained.”

Harry said nothing, though he very clearly wanted to. His hand was warm and dry; Draco’s was starting to feel clammy.

“I cast the Body Bind on you in the luggage rack. My easiest ever victory,” he crowed, with mock reminiscence.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he thought. He’d forgotten. He really had.

“And then,” he confessed, darkly, to the ceiling, “I spent the rest of the year imagining myself losing.”

The shame of it burnt hot in his chest, but Harry just kept fidgeting with his hand.
“I would miss, or you would counter me…” Draco explained. “There were a number of variations, again, but in the end it was always the same. I would be there under the curse, unable to move, on the floor, sometimes, or the bench. Then…” Draco rolled his eyes, setting his jaw. Fuck it, he thought. Why not? “I suppose one could say that you would have your way with me.”

Silence. Until – “Have my way with you,” Harry mocked quietly, a small smile on his face that was infinitely, painfully kind.

He didn’t get it, Draco thought, and Draco wasn’t going to explain it to him. So many nights, he’d imagined the scene in excruciating detail, every button that Potter would have unfastened, every touch of his fingers and motion with his tongue and his lips and his teeth. He’d been very skilled in his imagination, and not very fidgety at all. It had never ended in his thoughts, as he’d been falling asleep. He’d imagined the rest of the school steadily vanishing to the feast, while they found themselves lost on their way back to London, quite forgotten. Lying in his bed, the thread of his thoughts would wink out and then he would start it again, their meeting in the compartment, until he wasn’t anywhere at all, no longer awake.

Pulling his hand free from the duvet, Harry closed the distance between them now and stroked fingers through Draco’s hair, gently, thumb resting at the edge of his eye. Draco could feel it when he blinked, all of him unsettled. “Gotta say,” Harry said, tapping the pad of that thumb, looking down and smiling with lines in his skin. “I definitely wasn’t expecting that. I was expecting, you know…” He affected a snooty voice. “I would think about you in the shower, Potter, obviously, on the odd occasion that I had any peace.”

The impression sounded nothing like Draco at all, and was not at all funny. “Piss off,” he told Harry’s grin.

“Malfoys don’t entertain these thoughts when there’s someone in the other cubicle, you realise,” Harry carried on, wriggling in, his cock lurching between Draco’s own and his leg. “Can one imagine? Trying to knock one out when Goyle’s in his birthday suit and only three feet away…”

The facts were that this Malfoy had done so very often. He had simply done so quietly. Draco wondered if these rules about solitude had been for Harry’s thoughts of Ginny Weasley.

“You really wanted things out of your hands, didn’t you?” concluded Harry then, barely easing his way into the question.

“Some people get off on it,” Draco pointed out, lying there in bed with his hair being pawed, legs tangling with his own, knocking knees. “Control freaks, typically.” He was making that up, because he had no fucking idea.

“But you never had any control,” Harry proposed, his expression oddly wise. “Only responsibility.”

It was then that Draco felt his eyes burn. It was only the half-bottle of wine that he’d drunk, surely, he thought, and he breathed through it. Eventually the feeling died back a little. He scolded himself, because this usually only happened when he was trying to knock one out in his own shower, now, this year, in 2006. Here he was, one false move away from ruining what had been a very decent fuck, and the next one that Harry so clearly wanted. All because he didn’t like to think of the past, when it was hardly as if it could hurt him. Stop it, Draco, he told himself, stop –

“One for the road, d’you reckon?” Harry asked him, interrupting his thoughts. He didn’t wait, but took a firmer grip around Draco’s head and made it clear how ready he was.

It was a gesture of hope over experience, Draco rather thought, for him, but he was never averse to
Harry’s attempts. “Mm,” he offered in approval, putting his mouth to better use than reminiscences.

Harry was inside him again when he said his last. Draco was enjoying it, but the pleasure was an idle tide, with only the most distant promise of surf.

“That’s what Hermione says, you know,” Harry muttered hoarsely, wrapped around him like a snake warmed by the sun. “About how I feel sometimes.” It was an aside at a moment of pause; he kissed Draco’s neck, stroked his arm and thrust his hips.

It felt good, but Draco couldn’t – “Don’t talk about Hermione,” he wheezed into a gasp, dropping his forehead to the headboard. He needed not to think, not to remember, not anything at all. “Not now, Harry, please.”

They stopped talking. It was probably a bit unhealthy.

There’s a cage of iron in Draco’s hand, much like the cage that he conjured for his new pet canary. It has no base, however, and it’s perfectly spherical by design, hanging from a pole that he’s affixed to the wall of the veil chamber. The pole stretches out into the whispers, ending as close the veil arch as he can manage. From here the suspended sphere hangs over the step up to the wooden platform, mere feet from the edge between life and death.

The skin of the veil has been stretched; his canary has moved freely from the real world to its confines. Now Draco begins one of his final tests.

The problem is that Draco doesn’t know where to stand. He keeps his feet on the stone floor, in the end, the cage between him and the veil, the pole leering over his head. He conjures a hoop of iron to encircle his feet. It isn’t much, but he feels a little better. There are no true shields that he can cast to protect him which will yet allow him the use of his wand.

Breathing, he waits until his heart has slowed, and then there is little for it. Like an idiot, he aims his hawthorn wand into the cage and conjures the substance of the veil as he knows it, invisible, snapping his wand free before the material can grow to touch the tip. It hasn’t come from the veil itself, this stuff, if it’s come from anywhere at all, but he has no idea how the two quantities will interact, and so working in close proximity to the veil seemed like the most sensible measure when he was planning out this test. Just in case he managed to produce a vortex that destroyed everything that lay between the veil and its new twin.

It might not lead to death, this second veil – Draco doesn’t know this either – but he’s taking no chances. His intentions are to risk manipulating this see-through material, aiming his wand between the cage’s bands of iron and dragging the veil stuff to their cold, sharp edges.

He succeeds well enough, dragging out a bubble of the veil stuff, which is thankfully more resistant to his efforts than eager to expand and take him alive. It drags in stretches like colourless jelly, something of nothing inside of it. The whispers around him crescendo in uncertainty, until the stuff is caught by the cage, a spherical skin swollen to rest full inside the iron, which holds.

Now Draco should throw a living thing inside the bubble he’s created, but, fuck it, even he’s not that cruel. He’d have no way to retrieve the thing and if he’s right then it would never die. He can vanish something to the veil and conjure it back, but he cannot set something there without magic and simply wish it free. Resolving such a situation has been the entire point of this exercise, because Sirius Black simply fell.
Instead, he pierces the shell of his new veil with a copper knut, flicking it with his thumb through the cage’s bars. The coin finds the centre of the sphere and holds there, suspended. Most importantly, it’s visible.

Draco nods, content.

“It’s a good trick,” a woman observes, “but I don’t know what it’s supposed to do.”

Flinching violently, Draco has instinct enough to turn towards the voice with both the veil and his trick still in sight. “Fuck –” He comes face to face with a shrewd, disbelieving frown that is uncannily familiar.

She has red hair, this woman, and for a moment Draco thinks that she’s Ginny Weasley. But of course she isn’t. Her hair is darker, heavier as it swoops over her shoulders – less attractive than Ginny Weasley’s, to be honest. She’s wearing a knitted jumper with square shoulders in some sort of cream wool like a lamb’s above high-waisted trousers that run straight before tapering to her ankles. On her feet she’s wearing loafers.

She has a wand in her hand, and it’s a pale, cool brown that makes Draco think of the countryside and the year’s first outing on the water.

“Hello?” she says, and her voice is toned in swallowed shades of some emphatically regional accent. Birmingham, maybe, for the canals. “Am I speaking English?”

No one told him that Harry’s mother was fucking ginger with the rest of it. Did he know this? “Lily Potter, I presume?”

“Who’re you?” she doesn’t answer, and her voice, Merlin.

“Draco Malfoy,” he says, holding out his hand. Fuck it, he thinks; she married James Potter. They might as well borrow a leaf from his book. “Charmed.”

Lily tucks her wand up her sleeve and accepts his hand, a grin crossing her face as they shake with mock formality. “You met James then, I take it.”

“He passed through,” Draco says. For the first time in this whole adventure, the conversation feels easy, and he has no idea why. He really does hope that this is the last of them, apart from Black. “Our encounter here involved more of a duel, I’ll admit.”

“He does that,” comes the easy observation. Then she’s frowning at Draco again. “Malfoy,” she repeats, and he hopes that she isn’t going to hex him. “All right. Whatever happened to Lucius?”

“Dead,” Draco says, because it’s the simplest answer. He glances over to the cage, which looks like some sort of mediaeval torture device, hanging from its pole. He’ll have to come back to it tomorrow. “I’m his son. Look –” He turns back to Lily Potter, not entirely sure how the next part of this is going to go. “I need to put through a call, but it might take a while to get an answer.” Harry won’t have planned to be in London this evening. Term has started again, and it’s the middle of the week. He likely has work. “We can wait somewhere else, but I’m not sure that flooing to the house is the right idea…”

He’s grown rather tired of denouements in the drawing room of number 12, Grimmauld Place. A nice quiet reunion between Harry and his mother…

“Who’s the call to?” Lily asks him, and Draco realises that he’s already cocked things up.
“Sorry,” he says. How the fuck did this become routine? “I mean… Merlin.” He sighs and starts from the beginning, attempting to sound sincere. “Welcome to the Department of Mysteries, Ministry of Magic. It’s 2008. Just turned April. The war that you remember ended, but there was another in the 1990s. Everything is well now, and the joke is that I am on good terms with your son Harry, who should probably hear about your return.”

“My babby Harry James?” Lily Potter lurches forward, grabbing Draco’s wrist in tight fingers. She looks into his eyes, holding his wand hand up between them, her own eyes gleaming in the chamber’s gloom. It doesn’t feel like legilimency, her looking at him. It feels like something much more effective. “He survived it,” she says, as if this is a deeply pleasant, unbelievable surprise. “You’re joking – no, I want to see him. Nobody else. Not a soul, not before.”

“All right,” Draco agrees, a little unnerved. “Another friend of his, my colleague – she’ll be working upstairs, and your husband will be at Harry’s house with Remus Lupin…”

“Moony! Moony’s here, of course he is… I thought I saw him come this way.”

“So, I am not sure of the best place to wait,” Draco finishes, looking towards the door that leads out of the chamber. “I have a flat, but I would never suggest…”

“I trust you,” the woman says, shaking her head. It’s utterly bizarre. She drops his hand and twitches a finger at his eyebrows. “You’re crap at the Unforgivables, I can tell. And don’t tell me that I can’t; I get enough of that from the rest of them.” She grins at him, mostly with her eyes, patting his upper arm quickly like a mother. “A cup of tea at yours, Mr Malfoy,” she suggests, “and a floo to our son. I’ll catch up with James and Moony later. Why’s my Harrybye not in London?”

She’s been making all the contact, but Draco still offers her his arm because that is what he was taught, and he’s sure that James Potter was too. “Harry teaches at Hogwarts,” he answers because he sees no reason not to. “Defence against the Dark Arts.” Not for the first time, Draco thinks that it’s quite irritating, the way that Hogwarts is closed to all floo travel from the outside.

Mrs Potter doesn’t hesitate to accept Draco’s elbow, still talking. “Of course he does,” she says, the words lilting. “I bet he’s a wonder.”

She’s not wrong, Draco supposes.

“Draco? What’s going on? Puff just came and pelted me… I left the door open, didn’t I? I think I need to talk to George about… We’ve got a huge mess in the greenhouses, so I need to –”

“Harry, it’s your mother. My flat.”

“My… All right, I’ll be there as soon as I can. I can’t leave the… I had to tell McGonagall, because I’ve been all over the shop, so I’ll explain… An hour. Give me an hour.”

He always sounds responsible when he’s teaching, Harry.

An hour and a quarter later, by which time Draco and Lily Potter have been through a full pot of tea as well as a long conversation about muggle technology of the last thirty years, which Draco didn’t realise that he’d known anything about, the man appears in Draco’s kitchen. His robes are a sporty combination of claret and blue, and he’s wrinkling his nose as though he’s needed to concentrate to arrive in this particular location, presumably rather than Draco’s bedroom.

Lily Potter is on her feet in an instant, with grace. “Look at you!” she cries, enchanted. “Look at you, look at you, look at you, Harrypop-pop!” She draws her son into a hug, arms around his
shoulders and then her hands on the back of his head. Harry stands there like a sack of potatoes, stunned. “Oh, you feel like sunshine, babby owl.”

Somehow, in the woman’s bottlebrush Black Country tones, the endearments don’t even sound ridiculous.

Being called a baby owl in fact makes Harry laugh, his eyes bright, innocent, his whole self off-kilter from the version that Draco knows. “What?” he manages, perplexed, southern.

“Don’t say what like I don’t make sense,” Lily Potter scolds him, her voice light with irony, her quick smile hard and bright. She’s patting Harry on the shoulders, releasing one to guide him to the sofa. “Come sit with me and be my babby owl.” More like Howell, really, Draco thinks, with the H dropped. “We’ll catch up some, while my new best mate here goes and tells Dad and Moony that we’re coming along.” She shoots Draco a look, which is both warm and obviously dismissive. “You will go tell them, won’t you, Draco love?” Dracull’ve.

“Fine,” agrees Draco, because he supposes that he’ll have to.

---

When Draco finds Dad and Moony, they are very successfully having a row.

Kreacher’s informed him that Granger and her boyfriend are holed up in the library, both just returned from work, so Draco treads cautiously up the stairs to the sound of voices. He pauses on the landing.

“– reason.” Potter, his tone earnest.

“How long are we going to talk about this?” Lupin, frustrated. “I won’t scab off your son and that’s the end of it.”

“Yes, you would see it like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Look, if this is about what I said –” Lupin sounds hoarse, even though the full moon is yet weeks away. All Draco wanted, he thinks, was an evening without a row in the drawing room.

Yet Potter’s voice is argumentative, much stronger than Lupin’s, deep and uncompromising. “That is not the issue at all, Remus.” It is very odd indeed to hear the man’s first name. “You’ve been off with me since the day you got back.”

“Got back?” Lupin’s tone is brutal. “James, we didn’t nip to the shops. The both of us are stone-cold dead. I’m dead, you’re dead, Lily’s dead and Padfoot is a fucking doornail.”

Well, Draco thinks, frozen. Lupin must have passed on his theory about the unlikelihood of Black’s return.

“Is that the case?” Potter, unamused. “How peculiar, because I feel very much alive.”

This statement has no bearing on how Lupin continues. “We know that Lily…” In an instant Lupin is arch, withdrawn. “But she died for Harry, James, so that may change things. And Sirius wasn’t there at all.”

This is the wrong thing to say. If they could have only waited five more minutes, for Merlin’s sake…

“Lily will be here,” Potter declares, deathly certain, and it’s irritating that he’s right. “And so will
Padfoot. Why must you –"

“‘You cannot possibly know what will happen,” Lupin barks at him, thundering.

"They will be here!” Potter shouts back.

“Why must you be so bull-headed?” Lupin demands. “What are you afraid of, Prongs?”

“Do not turn this around on –”

“What is it?” Lupin pushes harder. “That you’ll have to get by on your own for once? I can imagine that you find the prospect difficult.” This is a dig.

Potter cuts straight through it. “I might as well be on my own for all that you’ve deigned to talk to me.” He snaps, actively angry, “How long do you intend to hold Peter over us, Remus? Or will it be me alone who gets this treat?”

“This is not about Peter,” Lupin bites out. “You didn’t trust me, James, but I have had a long time to accept it. The problem here,” he insists, “is that you want to wish it all away.” His voice pitches, incredulous. “Three decades, you want gone, and you can’t do it, James. You are here now and you have a responsibility. You have a son who needs a father,” he states, “who’s still recovering from Merlin alone knows what, right along with the man he’s… He has no use for your pining over Sirius, not when he may never yet come home.”

Oh Lupin, Draco thinks.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” scoffs Potter, shortly. “Pining, really?”

”You have no idea what he went through,” Lupin declares high-handedly, out of nowhere. About Black, Draco assumes. “The way that you talk to Harry… It’s cruel, James, don’t you see? It’s cruel. You miss him like your right arm and – and I have been through all this before! It doesn’t end the way that you want it. He feels guilty,” Lupin counts off, referring to Harry, presumably, “he feels as though you’re making him compete…” Lupin can’t seem to finish, exclaiming, “You have no idea what any of us went through for you!”

“I would have proudly done the same,” Potter states. It’s a weak answer, as though he’s still taking in Lupin’s argument.

Lupin laughs, for his part, unsympathetic. “I would like to have seen you try.”

There’s silence for a moment, broken by Lupin, whose tone is immediately laced with guilt.

“James – James, no, I didn’t mean…”

“Oh Moony –” Now Potter sighs, his voice more measured, but still irate. “Whatever should I say to you?” He doesn’t seem to know. “I can apologise, and I will do so right now, over and again until the ceiling caves in – I will forgive you, if that’s what you want. But there’s never anything that works, is there? You won’t listen –”

Lupin laughs more loudly this time, and it is not a friendly sound at all. “Do enlighten me about listening, Jim Potter.”

“Merlin curse you, Remus, we are your family,” Potter swears, angry once more. “You are ours.” There’s a slap, which sounds something like a hand on padded leather. The sofa, Draco thinks. “When will you realise it?”
Silence follows, and the door is not so closely ajar that they won’t see him if they look around, Draco knows. He’s been eavesdropping long enough. Really, he’s been eavesdropping too long.

Gathering his nerve against trepidation, Draco doesn’t bother with theatrics: he pushes the door fully open and walks over the threshold into the drawing room’s awkward tension, which thrums in the uncanny warm light of the room.

He stops just in time to hear Lupin cut off his nose to spite his face.

“I’ve lived without any of you for a very long time.” He’s full of shit, Lupin, and here it is again, in a warm autumnal murmur. “I am not, James. No.”

And here’s Draco, standing in the drawing room, where James Potter looks as though the world has turned on its axis. “Ah,” Draco begins, not sure how to intervene.

“What the hell do you want?” Potter demands, whirling around. He’s distracted and clearly not at all happy to have a witness to whatever it is that is happening.

It’s been a long time since Draco has faced the kind of fury on Potter’s face: complete and excoriating. It takes him aback, because Potter’s tone is now very different from the one that he’s been using to talk to Lupin. It’s darker, stronger, harsher, crueler, drawing on a deep swollen pit of emotion that has been to this point restrained, just.

“This is your fault, you realise?” Potter accuses, building momentum, shooting looks at Lupin until he can tear himself away, when he rounds on Draco. “Fucking around with no thought to… Why are you here? Again?”

Lupin sounds emphatically weary. “Oh, leave him alone.”

Potter reels, digging in. “Is this who you keep with now, Moony? Lucius Malfoy’s brat?” His tone is clipped, short, and Draco hates him, violently, immediately, for bringing up his father’s name, the feeling of it hot in his heart. “A fair replacement for your oldest friends, what say you?”

A door opens, further down the landing.

“You realise that it’s tempting not to bother,” comes out of Draco’s mouth, which he’s always relied on in crisis. His elbows are shaking; he feels magic in his ribs. His own tone is an old and familiar friend, one whom he despises. “All the grief that you’ve given me, I should pack up and move on to something else.”

Lupin breathes out, eyes closed in relief, because apparently he is quite capable of reading between the lines and divining why Draco Malfoy has appeared in the drawing room of number 12, Grimmauld Place.

James Potter apparently does not possess the same skill. “What did you say?” he demands, murderous.

“I said,” Draco tells him flatly, a pulse in his neck, a hollow feeling in his eyes, ”that you should act a little more grateful if you want any news at all about your bloody wife.”

“Silencio.”

Potter’s wand is in his hand and the jinx hits Draco before he can blink. It’s an indignity, and the room goes still.
Thankfully, Draco doesn’t need a voice to cast his own hex. He is an accomplished wizard these days. *Flipendo*, he casts, hawthorn wand in his fingers with a flick. He turns away as Potter goes stumbling backwards.

Granger and her boyfriend are in the doorway, mute, and Draco wants them to get *out of the way*, Merlin burn them, fucking –

Before they do, however, there’s the sound of Potter regaining his feet, and Granger’s eyes are narrowing.

Draco turns and intercepts whatever the next attack was supposed to be. He wrenches himself free from silence. “No wonder that you couldn’t protect them,” he sneers, sharing a thought he’s had before, twisting it a little, staring down James Potter’s strange earthen eyes. He can no longer remember why he’s here; he just feels rage, his heart in his chest. “You’re a fucking amateur, Potter.”

He casts a stinging hex at the man’s wand arm, but Potter swerves neatly out of the way. The charge burns a black mark on the gold-yellow wall.

The man’s eyes narrow. “Oh, how this takes me back to duelling your dear old dad.”

That’s when Draco’s lungs leap to his throat, because he can imagine it, of course he can. He takes a step forwards, hexing again, and again. “Don’t you dare say a word about my father,” he spits, his blood pounding.

“Prongs, Draco, this isn’t *necessary*.”

“Whatever did happen to him?” Potter jokes, his grin cruel as he avoids every sting. They all mark the wall. “Did he finally choke on all that shit he licked from Voldemort’s –?”

“Shut *UP*.”

*Don’t say his name, Draco. He’ll hear us, everything we say.*

*Don’t* –

“I can’t see him repenting, somehow. You must have been such a disappointment.”

*Ah, the young Mr Malfoy. You all see his cowardice. You see how he expects to fail me, just like –* “Silencio!” Draco casts, desperate.

The snake in his house. Draco remembers the snake’s cold eyes and his father screaming, a drawing room where the walls were painted slate blue. His aunt and a chandelier. His mother’s empty expression – the rites of humiliation. Screaming muggles, up from the village.

Somebody’s laughing at him. A hex flies towards his knees, making him jump. Green sparks flare from the floorboards, the wrong shade, perhaps, but –

“SILENCIO!” Draco casts again.

Screaming; always screaming. The woman broke yesterday, and all night, all night –

*AVADA KEDAVRA!*

That’s how I’ll punish your failure, Draco. Just like that.
“Malfoy? Hello, Earth to Malfoy – are you in there?”

Draco isn’t sure where he is, what year it is, or why he can hear Harry Potter. He’s kneeling on grass, over a set of casting stones. His hawthorn wand is in his hand, tingling as though it’s reading something. There are screams in his ears – muggle screams, he’s sure. But he isn’t sixteen; he’s in his twenties. He’s twenty-four. It’s 2004, and the Dark Mark lurks in shadows on his arm.

It’s warm, and he’s not alone. He can’t be, anyway, logically – someone else has to be casting the magic that his wand is reading. He knows that.

Draco looks up, and there’s Harry Potter, in silhouette against the morning sun and blue sky. Their hero is masquerading as a junior member of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office; he and Draco are attending to reports of ghosts. They were in Salisbury last week; they’re now in deeper Wiltshire. It’s hot. It’s June.

“I’ve finished moving them on,” Potter says, his frown clearer as he crouches to pick up the casting stones, tossing them back inside his leather backpack, which lies on the grass next to them – tan and curling brown on its straps and the edge of its top flap. It’s full of things, but half-empty somehow. “Did you get a sense of much?”

“I’ll have to do some analysis,” Draco tells him shortly, non-verbally ending the charm. “That much is obvious.” The ghosts – the muggle ghosts – Draco should have recognised them, but he only knew them on hearing their screams, frightened as though their souls were being sent to torment, the woman surely recognising his face. Nothing like Sara Chaudhury and her daughter, no matter that they’re safe now, that they’re free. “I don’t know why they were down here.”

“You mean that it wasn’t the phone boxes?” Potter jokes as he put his backpack back on over his buttermilk-yellow shirt, nodding to the graffitied glass booths. They stand cheerily unhaunted and muggle on the side of the road by the common land where Draco and Potter have been casting magic.

Draco clambers to his feet. “They died at the Manor,” he tells Potter, trying to get his head in order. It was all a long time ago. “The muggles, I mean. You-Know-Who murdered them.”

Potter nods, thankfully not asking how he knows this nor reacting to Draco’s use of murder to describe the slaughter of muggles. “I forgot that you live round here.”


“All right,” Potter agrees. “So we’re looking at a thing, then – an object,” he changes the subject, pushing his glasses up his nose as if he’s knowledgeable about anything to do with this situation. “Something or other you can carry, to summon ghosts of people to different places from where they died.”

Draco shrugs, still looking at the green grass around them. It makes sense.

A terrible, terrible feeling strikes him in the chest, quite suddenly. Of course, he thinks. Of course. “There are wards up at the house,” he says, hating himself as he makes the decision, not looking Potter in the eye. “Around the orchard, against dark magic. They’ll have registered anything untoward.”

From the way that Potter stiffens, it’s clear that he’s understood. The feeling in Draco’s chest. The
prospect of it all. The location. Draco’s father… “We don’t have to,” Potter says, and it seems as though he’s going to be kind about it. “At least not today. We can go back to the Ministry, you know, read the reading. Should probably try and hand the case up the line again anyway.”

It’s terrible. Draco can’t look the man in the eye. “We can take the back route,” he says, cradling his nerve. “My parents won’t know if we don’t apparate.” He nods over Potter’s shoulder, towards the woodland at the rear of the common, which collapses into countryside eventually. “We can pass through the trees over there. It’s only a couple of miles.”

Potter’s frowning at him, too kindly.

*

There’s a hex being thrown at him, when Draco comes back to himself in 2008. It’s not the Killing Curse, but he doesn’t know what it is. “STUP-!” he shouts desperately, the spell barely breaking from his hawthorn wand. It won’t work; he knows that. It won’t –

“Draco!” The shout comes from the doorway, just as there’s a shimmer in the air, like heat, sending the gust of sparks into a dust cloud. Not a second later, Granger has apparated to his left-hand side and is dispelling the sparks into white light. She’s shouting at Potter, who isn’t Harry but his father, “Are you blind?”

Another hex comes, with Potter shouting something at him and it’s Ron now who intervenes, throwing a jinx and running forward to Draco’s right. The spell zips through the air to collide with Potter’s. Something rebounds into a mirror, which smashes into glittering shards that flood Draco’s nerves so that he can’t hear, can’t think, can’t really see. He can feel the glass on his skin, like flecks of cold water, even though it’s far away, in that other room.

He wants to disapparate, but he can’t remember how.

“Levicorp-!” someone shouts –

– but it’s intercepted, “Finite!”

“James, stop this!” Lupin tries, throwing unspoken counterjinxes. “Hermione, for Merlin’s… Protego!”

“Relashio!” shouts Ron. “Accio!” His hand is on Draco’s shoulder, warm.

“Fuck,” Potter swears, his wand torn from him.

“Protego!” Lupin shouts again. “This is…”

And then there is an almighty CRACK of apparition, just like before, with Aunt Bella.

Who even knows where he’s come from? Draco doesn’t.

In any case, Harry Potter is there, a foot in front of where Draco’s trying to keep tall on his feet, Ron on his right and Hermione on his left.

For a moment, Draco blinks at the sight, and he can see James Potter’s wand in Ron’s hand. It’s dark red-brown and undoubtedly feels like brimstone. They had a chat in a pub, once, he and Ron, about the aurors’ preference for Relashio-Accio over Harry’s Expelliarmus. Hermione – Hermione is bristling with power and concentration, her vinewood wand like a whip ahead of her. Every spell that she’s cast has been silent.
James Potter and Lupin are behind a gummy white shield, Potter flexing the fingers of his wand hand as though they hurt, a mulish, focused expression on his face. Lupin has his wand trained at the floor, not at Ron or Hermione or Harry, but his face is hard, concerned.

Harry wastes no time at all, his back straight and all of him warm and fierce, the feel of him like nothing else, impossible to mistake. “Expelliarmus,” he casts, by preference, and the Shield Charm doesn’t make a jot of difference. The fact that the Disarming Charm typically requires a distracted target doesn’t make a jot of difference. The fact that it’s ultimately a very rude manoeuvre that can fuck up a wand’s allegiance, and that’s surely why Harry likes it, doesn’t make a jot of difference. The command cuts through Lupin’s shield like butter, not wrenching so much as plucking the man’s wand straight from his grasping hand.

As the wand shoots towards them, a hunter’s arrow, Lupin’s face bursts with shock. Ron pulls the yellow wood from the air – because it hasn’t even come to Harry. “Intectum.” Their hero is throwing a ball of white-gold sparks across the room. They fizz and spread loose, flooding across the floor into blazing white-gold flames to trap Potter and Harry’s favourite Hogwarts teacher behind a roaring semicircle of healing magic, actually, which inhibits spellwork nonetheless, catching them against the yellow-orange wall.

It’s another pub, Draco remembers, and another conversation. Harry, complaining that most defensive magic is simply offensive magic repurposed. Ron’s suggestion. Hermione on the specifics. Draco choosing a bottle of wine.

“Dæg, sigel, ēoh.” Hermione casts last in a mutter, pointing down at their own feet. “Beorc, eoh, wynn,” she continues, with more Old English on repeat until bright white runes wink on and off in concentric circles, chiming with the sound of bells on the floorboards beneath them.

\textit{Dæg, sigel, ēoh, beorc, eoh, wynn –} \hfill

\textit{Day, sun, yew, birch, horse, joy –} \hfill

A deep sense of calm floods up into Draco’s bones, tingling over his skin, and he almost feels like himself again – like he can think. Like he can see.

\textit{Dawn brings strength from the roots of the yew to the leaves of the birch, comfort to the restless and shelter from pain.} \hfill

“Don’t you \textit{ever} raise your wand against this house,” Harry’s spitting at his father, his anger like a howling storm in every vein of his body, his holly wand sharp and straight ahead of him. He slashes it down again, and the flames across the room burn brighter, louder. They forcibly repel the presence of magic, Draco knows, never hurting, but pushing wizards, witches and creatures away from their boundary. “What the \textit{hell} d’you think you’re doing?”

It’s the brightness of dawn after hours of darkness. It’s loud in his ears. It’s the sun, and Draco only has himself to blame, really. He’s spent so many years mocking Harry for saving them all that he’s forgotten what he looks like, their hero, in heroic mode. He’s just plain forgotten \textit{why}.

In the end, it’s James Potter who breaks the roaring silence, with a very deliberate, very considered, “Fuck me.”
“James,” Lupin barks, caught between his friend and Harry, amber eyes alight. He makes no move towards the flames.

Harry’s father doesn’t seem to hear Lupin; it’s not clear he ever does, but it seems more pointed this time. Neither Potter nor Lupin are that far away – the room isn’t terribly huge, in the end – but James Potter’s expression is distant, his face paling with horror. “Fuck me,” he says again, as though he’s found the solution to a puzzle and the answer is beyond contemplation. “The prophecy… What did they make you do?”

No one answers. The flames continue to burn.

“My son.” Potter is disgusted, Draco thinks, and bitterly angry. It’s never been about Harry at all, has it?

“Weren’t expecting you tonight, mate,” Ron says briskly, just between them. Granger’s boyfriend. Ron.

Harry neither looks at him nor drops his wand. “At least it’s clear that the wards work.”

Granger lets out a laugh. “And I imagine that you know why Draco’s dropped by.”

“Obviously,” Harry answers, with spite, still facing down his father. “My mum’s in his flat. I told her to floo.”

“Harry,” James Potter finally manages, his voice shaking with something, maybe guilt, but that doesn’t feel right. He steps towards the crackling barrier of flames, but Lupin puts a hand on his arm. “Harry…”

“You’re supposed to be my father,” Harry shouts at him over the noise of the fire, his wand lowering but not by far. “All you do is act like a git. Why?” he demands, and it’s as if he’s asking for his entire childhood back.

“He gets wound up, Harryowl.”

They all turn to look, and Harry’s mother is not in Draco’s flat, but there in the doorway. There’s a familiar wry smile on her face, light in her green eyes. They should have heard her coming up the stairs, Draco thinks, but none of them did, not against the sound of the flames.

She continues, “But he means well, I promise you.”

Harry sighs, frustrated, and there seems to be nothing else that he can do besides flash his wand and dispel the fire with a brash pfipp.

Immediately James Potter rushes forwards, and Draco sees the action before it happens: a man running to his wife, pulling her into his arms without words and spinning her through the air like a doll. They’ll all get out of his way.

But instead he runs up to Harry, a man who’s exactly his height with exactly his hair, if less well styled. They’re close in age like brothers, and they look like brothers when James grabs Harry by the shoulders and squeezes him, ignoring shouts of protest to wrap an arm around his neck and complain into his crown, “My son, my son, what did you do?”

Harry struggles. “Geroff me; Merlin…”

"You must have been so..."
“James Potter, you are hopeless,” Lily declares as her husband pulls back, whacking him on the shoulder blade while Harry shakes himself free. She turns to Lupin and goes to him, taking his hands. “Moony, Moony,” she says, “why the flip did we let anyone say it was you?” Yow.

James Potter is retreating to them, ducking his head.

Harry’s speechless, but then, “Draco,” he’s saying, turning around.

“It really doesn’t matter, Lily. Just to see you both again, I…”

Harry’s eyes are very bright, wary behind his glasses. His holly wand is there in his hand.

“You all right?” he asks.

“Moony, how did the war end?” James Potter still doesn’t know, Draco thinks, not for certain.

Granger’s squeezing Harry on the elbow, tutting over the mirror with Ron, who’s soon checking over the drinks bottles and pulling flakes of glass from glass.

“Never better,” Draco assures the man in front of him, though he can’t quite meet his eyes. “I had my defence planned to a detail, you realise, but your entourage got in my way.”

This earns him a smirk, as well as a look up and down, as though to check he’s still got all ten fingers and toes. “Five inferi and a poltergeist?”

“I don’t know how it ended, Prongs. You’ll have to ask if you really want to know.”

Necromancy, yes, right. Draco could manage that these days – a complete repertoire of magic that he didn’t know at seventeen. “Exactly.”

“Lily – Lily, tell Moony that he isn’t leaving us. We need him here. I don’t…”

And then, Harry, the bastard, has the nerve to reach out and squeeze Draco’s wrist. He looks at him solidly, just for a moment, his expression full of concern that makes Draco’s chest constrict, before – “Ron!” he shouts, turning away. “Where’s my whiskey?”

Draco puts his face in his hands, resting his eyes for a few long seconds.

James Potter finds him a while later, when Harry’s showing off his friends to his mother.

“Malfoy, forgive me,” he demands, holding out his hand. Outwardly he seems utterly transformed from earlier in the evening, lightness in his expression and his shoulders which seems to blossom with every note of Lily Potter’s laugh. There’s something in his eyes nonetheless, and Draco doesn’t know whether to trust him. “What I said was uncalled for.”

He shakes the man’s hand. Potter’s grip is, inevitably, firm and secure, just like his hazel-blue gaze. “I appreciate the sentiment,” Draco tells him. “I too spoke out of turn. You are an excellent duellist.”

“Steady on,” Potter jokes. “I did cop it, once upon a time…” A twitch in the man’s smile suggests that he understands the full of what they’re saying to each other. They would both say the same things again without hesitation, if the situation called for it. “You and I should have a chat, wouldn’t you say?” Potter continues now. “There was some positively disgraceful muggle scotch, last I inspected the library.”

The hypocrisy of the Blacks’ drinks collection is astounding. It will be a very sad day indeed,
Draco thinks, when it all goes dry. There’s little that can be done, since the purchasing ended in 1985, but Kreacher’s been making some in-roads, at least, with what guidance he’s been given.

These are thoughts for another day. For now, it is only for them to marvel at the fact that Orion and Walburga were surprised when the younger generation defected. “It would be a shame not to try the odd thimble,” Draco agrees to the invitation. “Any wizard would want to understand the full scope of muggles’ inferiority.”

Potter narrows his eyes, still smirking, and he calls casually over to his son. “Professor, I’m borrowing your unspeakable for a few.”

Harry looks at him, taken aback by the tone. The rest of them pause apart from Lily Potter, who seems to think that nothing is amiss. “Was that a joke?” Harry asks, suspicious.

The man waves him off. “You worry too much, sir,” he suggests facetiously, steering Draco to the doors by his shoulders.

Before they can make it, however, there’s a sound of indignation from one Lily Potter. “James!” she shouts over the sound of Granger’s laugh. The man whips his head towards her. “Did you know that Moony has a son?” She is outraged. “Nearly ten years old!”

From the look on James Potter’s face, it’s clear that he’s managed to forget the boy whom he met at Easter. Lupin must have avoided the subject. Merlin alive, Draco thinks.

“You wonder why he wants to run away… Tell him that he can’t ignore the boy,” Lily commands, her tone harsh. “We’re not having a repeat of that time with his mother.”

James Potter simply sighs, staring. “Bloody hell,” he breathes. “I wish Padfoot were here.” He shakes his head. “That Moony’s going to be the death of me.”

Draco gives him a look.

Potter cringes for a moment, before breaking into a laugh, because he clearly meant nothing by it at all. “Don’t you dare fucking tell him I said that,” he tells Draco, pointing at him as though this is a joke that they’re in on together.
Lily Potter, part 2

The chat with James Potter is postponed, but Draco can’t avoid the summons to breakfast, the Saturday after Lily Potter returns. He understands why. He can’t leave Teddy Lupin to meet his father on his own, even if he’s not sure at all what comfort the boy will derive from a formerly estranged cousin.

Even so, he rather thinks that he could have skipped the conversation. They’re back on the war, and Draco only has his tea to occupy him where he leans against the basement wall. Kreacher’s spread is excellent, with bacon and beans, eggs and toast, tea and pumpkin juice, the smell of it all suffusing the downstairs breakfast room with its refectory table and benches, where everyone is finishing eating with the tinkering sound of cutlery on crockery. Draco was almost tempted to sit down with them, but he didn’t.

“Moony, you need to tell me who’s dead.” Lily Potter makes Draco flinch, appearing down the stairs with a clatter, notebook in hand and a muggle pen from somewhere. “I remember Mackers and Benjy and Edgy and Dorcas… But I’m thinking that we should do something anyway; we can’t all of us sit around growing mould. I’m thinking Sturge, Alice and Frank, Gids’n’Skids… That sister of theirs from antenatal, you remember, married to Frank’s mate? All that lot. Dockers.”

“Frank and that lot knew Bilius, not Arthur,” Lupin says simply, not looking up from the paper. He seems to have been convinced to stay put for the moment, but he’s hiding his face nonetheless. “We lost Dockers. Sturge might still be around, but Gids’n’Skids bought it,” he adds before stopping, as though hearing himself. “Sorry, Ron,” he adds contritely.

Ron is scarfing down the last of a boiled egg next to Granger, who’s working on something with her knife and fork, and then Harry who’s on his pumpkin juice. “Wait,” Ron says through the crumbs of his soldiers. He looks at Lily down the breakfast table. “You mean Uncle Gideon? Who’s Skids?”

“He’s Skids,” Lily insists, confused, looking up from her list.

“Fabian,” Lupin clarifies, his gaze returning to the paper, which effectively cuts him off from the rest of the group. “He was always Skids at school. D’you ever hear why, Prongs?”

James Potter is pouring everyone more tea, concentrating on the task. He’s not including Draco, because Draco’s not sat down. “No, I don’t think so,” Potter says easily, then frowns. “No, hold on, Alice did tell me. Their first year, first flight sesh.” He nods, remembering, laughing at himself. “Skids fluffed the landing and nosedived into half a bath of mud, came off head over heels and yet somehow managed to end up on his feet, the jammy tosser. He went by Skidsy till Christmas, but Gidsy wouldn’t stick.”

He seems glad to have the story, and happier to tell it, his eyes bright above his grin. Ron and Granger seem interested enough; Lupin’s only half listening, by Draco’s guess, but he appears oddly content as well, as if despite himself he rather likes to have the air filled with his friend’s voice. But of course.

Harry’s frowning.

“I never really met either of them,” Ron says with a shrug. Draco recalls Harry’s complaints about Ron making time for James Potter’s chitchat. The pair do seem to be on friendly terms.
“They were good mates,” Potter says, about Ron’s uncles, sitting back with his tea. “The three of us were Gryffindor chasers from second year. Their third.” He runs a hand absently down his wife’s arm where she’s paused up behind him. “Bit of a story, that, with all of us so ickle, but what is there to say? We were the best, and we proved it.”

Harry snorts at this, earning an elbow in the side from Granger. It means that Draco doesn’t have to reveal himself, at least, and can keep drinking from his mug.

“Did Sirius ever play quidditch?” Granger asks politely, knife and fork in hand.

It’s Lily who laughs, a sharp shriek in the sound as she takes a seat by her husband on the bench. “Oh yes,” she says eagerly, making a note. “Dung.”

James Potter’s grin is kinked, and clearly fond. “Padfoot wasn’t one for team sport.”

Lupin huffs into the paper.

“That never stopped Malfoy,” Ron cracks, before the silence can take hold. He’s looking up, and somehow Draco isn’t invisible anymore. “Slytherin just made him seeker.”

“You played?” Potter asks, turning his head. Draco gets the impression that he’s trying to be polite, and there’s certainly more curiosity than suspicion on his face. His eyes are almost warm, in their murky colour.

“Discounting the war years,” Draco tells him coolly, “I had the second highest points-per-match average in the school.” He can’t help but add, “Against the second strongest academic record.”

Granger’s gaze flicks to him, sharp; Harry fidgets, looking down. “Always the bridesmaid, eh?”

“Something like that.” It still irks, even as he decides to give the man a hint. Lily Potter is idly tapping her pen, and it’s not clear that her husband is going to get the point on his own. Draco lets his gaze trail towards Harry, Ron and Granger on the other side of the table. “I suffered rather from the reign of Gryffindor.”

“Did you really?”

“Don’t be thick, Prongs.” Lupin sighs, folding the Prophet away with an air of sublime disinterest. He’s terrified of meeting Teddy, Draco can guess. “Ask your son if he can still feint as well as he used to.”

The Potter men are both so embarrassed by this suggestion that they can barely manage it. “Oh,” James says awkwardly, looking at his son. “Ah.” How this hasn’t come up yet Draco doesn’t know. “I, ah, never thought of you as a seeker… Did you make captain?”

“Yeah.” Harry starts to turn red. “Though it was a bit of a…”

Draco gives him a look when he glances up. They both remember how Harry’s quidditch career ended, but Harry’s guilt is unnecessary. Draco’s never cared about the few faint scars on his chest. There’s mercy in a quick, sharp cut that the Cruciatus doesn’t know, and Harry’s always been merciful.

Shaking himself, Harry turns quickly to nod his chin past Granger. “Ron played keeper,” he tries to deflect.
“Cheers, mate,” says Ron, waving his spoon and sounding about as impressed as he should be by that faint praise.

“Oh James…” Lily Potter is saying. She leans over to pat her son on the hand. “Your dad’s dead proud, Harrio,” she tells him warmly while James Potter ducks to his eggs. “I’m glad that you didn’t let it go to your head, unlike some people.” Her words to Granger are sharper. “Hermione love, I hope you rubbed it their faces.”

Granger turns a deep pink as Ron answers cheerfully, “Not nearly enough!”

“As I recall, Ron, I had my hands full correcting your essays…”

“Believe me,” Draco tells Lily Potter, because this is a cheat. “We all got the message.”

“Isn’t Andromeda expecting you?” Granger shoots his way. There’s a slightly odd look on her face, and Draco wonders if they thought that his father sat as a governor to keep an eye on Dumbledore.

“Yeah.” Harry’s eyes, at least, promise retribution as he climbs free of the bench. He feels guilty about the whole thing, Draco knows, the idiot. “Come on,” he says, pushing his glasses up his nose. “You ruddy snitch.”

Draco winces. “That was neither witty nor clever.”

“I’m worried about this, Malfoy,” Harry murmurs before they travel through the floo, and he sounds about as nervous as Draco feels. “It’s Teddy, and Lupin – Moony… He can be a complete mess sometimes, as much as I remember. Standoffish. He’s…” Harry shakes his head.

“He talks a lot of shit,” Draco agrees, though he can hardly blame the man for feeling out of place among so many Potters, the more of them that multiply.

Harry gives him a look. “You realise that I still love him with all the itty-bitty pieces of my heart?”

What is there to do but sigh? “I could be at work if it weren’t for your love, Potter.”

“What does that even mean?”

As Draco throws the powder to the flames, he isn’t sure. What he knows is that part of him wants to hide Teddy Lupin far, far away from the rake of his returned father, but he can’t, because the man is not a monster and Teddy would never forgive him. Even if the man vanishes tomorrow, how could they tell Teddy that he’d missed his chance? Lily Potter has been adamant on this point, and Draco has come to accept that he agrees with her.

The atmosphere at Andromeda’s house is duly tense. Teddy is young, not yet ten, and sitting on the arm of the sofa with wide eyes as he squeezes his hands into his jeans. His grandmother is sat at the dining table, her face set, and the room smells faintly of toast. It has to be done, Draco knows, what they’re doing today. But he has no idea how.

“Young Teddy,” Draco greets his cousin, with a nod to Andromeda. He’s never entirely joking with these formalities.

And Teddy isn’t entirely joking when he nods back. “My cousin.”

It’s about then that Draco has an idea for one way to at least take the edge off things. Andromeda will approve, he thinks. Maybe there is a reason for him being here after all.
“We’ll be taking control of this situation,” he decides, looking between his cousin and his aunt.

“We will?” Harry asks, still brushing soot from his jeans. The fire in Andromeda’s house is gas, so who even knows how that got there.

This has been the problem all along, Draco thinks. Three parental reunions so far and they’ve cocked up every one by not thinking ahead. “I have a plan,” he says.

“Thank Salazar,” says Andromeda, looking relieved in her cardigan. “It best be good.”

Draco looks to Harry for approval. “We’ve been playing it too straight with these things,” he suggests. He can only imagine how Lupin would react if they brought Teddy to him in earnest. “Lupin needs to be wound up.”

The child they take back to number 12, Grimmauld Place bears Teddy Lupin’s face, but otherwise has undergone something of a transformation. His hair is combed and parted cleanly down his crown, growing straight for the moment, and he is wearing a sharp little outfit of leather shoes, twill trousers, a white shirt and a frock coat. It is much like an outfit that Draco remembers wearing for an important Christmastime party, held when he was about Teddy’s age. Young children have not yet earned robes, Draco remembers being told, because they cannot yet control their magic – but there are always standards.

Draco is especially proud of the frock coat, which cuts sharply around Teddy’s elbows and knees, and represents quite a good bit of transfiguration on his part. He guides his cousin by the shoulders, followed by Harry and Andromeda, into a room of five adults: two friendly-looking couples and a man in beige and brown. The man has a familiar nose, set in a face to be seen in the odd photograph at the Tonks house in Brentwood, Essex.

Teddy stalls, just for a moment, in this parlour muraled with flowers, but Draco thinks that no one will notice besides him. He remembers walking nervously into his parents’ drawing room, slate blue, and no one noticed him stall there either. He places a comforting hand on Teddy’s unfamiliar hair, brushing his thumb once to remind them both that Teddy Lupin is a cheeky little shit.

“Greetings, Father!” the boy then declares with no preamble at all, stepping away from Draco’s hand to execute a perfect bow into the ice-silent room, one arm in front and the other behind. His voice, Draco thinks, is what his own must once have sounded like, sweet and high in his ears. “It is I, Edward Lupin, your son, named for my grandfather Edward Tonks, who was wed to Andromeda of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It was she who bore my mother, your wife Nymphadora.”

This improvised spiel is even better than Draco imagined. He glances at Harry, but it’s really a good thing that the man is looking down, because his twitching grin is clamped closed as though he’s one false move away from collapsing entirely. The speech is a piss-take, of course, of everything that Teddy’s ever picked up from Draco, so Harry undoubtedly thinks that it’s hilarious.

Lupin is staring, transfixed, as though he wants to throw up.

“Upon this moment of our reunion…” Teddy continues in his treble-bright voice. Draco loves him. Andromeda presses a hand to her face in ostentatious despair. “I hope that we may both ag– acquit ourselves with honour, in – due credit to our shared name of Lupin.”

They wait, and it takes so long. “Yes,” Remus Lupin eventually manages, looking utterly and catastrophically at sea.
James Potter coughs, turning his eyes to the ceiling. Ron shakes his head, dropping his nose into Granger’s hair. Lupin’s eyes flicker to Draco’s –

– but Teddy manages to catch it, the instant before his father figures it out.

“You were right,” Teddy says, an Essex boy again, looking over his shoulder to Draco with Harry’s best shit-eating grin. “That was fun.” He turns back to his father, shaking his hair to its usual curls just as Draco dispels the transfiguration on his clothes. He’s a suburban little boy of nearly ten, in trainers, jeans, t-shirt and a hoody, with a crooked nose and a sarcastic tongue. “Dad, your face,” he mocks, just as James Potter bursts out laughing. Lily slaps his chest with a smirk.

Lupin, bless him, bursts into tears and Lily Potter has to help him sit down. It must tear him in two, Draco thinks, Teddy’s promise for the future. It tears Draco in two with some regularity.

The two Lupins seem to find words to talk with, after that, as Lupin introduces his son to James and Lily Potter, with back-up from Granger and Ron. Draco hangs out of the way with Harry and Andromeda, giving the dynamic between them some space.

“He does a better me than I do,” Draco mock-complains, hoping beyond hope that the boy’s use of acquit means that he isn’t spending all of his time on muggle dirt bikes and computer games.

Harry claps a grateful hand on Draco’s shoulder, and it makes the space under his ribs feel so warm that he fears that his aunt is going to comment – but her gaze is trained past his ear. “It’s all a game to him,” she says, her voice level. “No – not even a game. A style. What it would have done to my mother, to hear Ted’s name... Boys.” She’s back with them, merely blinking once at Harry’s hand, which he withdraws. “I don’t know whether to celebrate or to be absolutely terrified.”

“He’ll be all right, Aunt Andromeda,” Draco tells her, though he can’t know it for sure.

Andromeda tightens her mouth, watching her grandson closely.

Draco turns into Harry’s side to observe the scene.

They aren’t out of the woods yet, after all. Teddy is still a boy of nearly ten, and he remains propelled into an unfathomably new situation. He’s stood by the arm of the prim parlour sofa, where his father sits with Lily Potter at his side, her husband leaning down behind her head. His Uncle Ron and Auntie Hermione stand nearby, listening with anxious looks. Granger’s is quite watery.

“Your dad was always good at keeping a straight face,” Potter is saying, in a kind voice that makes Harry twitch. “Got us out of trouble more times than I can remember. Do you play many jokes on people?”

“Er.” Teddy is a little pink, and his voice seems higher than usual, now. “Me and Harry like to wind up Cousin Draco sometimes. Once we pretended that a hinkypunk ate my toe.”

And wasn’t that a fun afternoon?

"Then me and Harry hid the floo powder, so he had to stay for Finding Nemo.”

Draco hears his mother’s voice telling him to correct the boy’s grammar – *Harry and I, Teddy darling*. The boy is already feeling self-conscious, Draco thinks, so it isn’t the time. But then there’s never a good time to have one’s grammar corrected, so perhaps –

“Do you see a lot of Harry?” Lupin asks, as though afraid that he’s going to be bitten.
“He comes round for Harry Saturdays,” Teddy tells him, equally formal. “And Harry Holidays too. At Christmas we went up to Hogwarts and I helped old Hagrid feed the unicorns.”

They must have gone up soon after Christmas itself, Draco thinks, which was the day that he discovered –

“Well.” Lupin is still wiping his eyes. “That sounds wonderful. We’ll have to find our own day or two, I expect,” he says, as if he suddenly intends to exist. “I don’t know yet where I’ll be living…”

“I live with Grandma,” Teddy tells him, his voice high and blunt, and Draco sees it, when the boy’s panic sets in. Lupin recoils slightly, and Teddy can tell that he’s been rude, but he doesn’t know what to say or what this man from less than a dozen photographs expects of him. “I’m going to Hogwarts when I finish Year 6, but for now I’m from Brentwood and that’s not to be ashamed of, Grandma says. I like it there and my best friend AJ’s a muggle, but we both have BMXs, so…”

The boy’s godfather takes his cue. Crossing the few feet that separate them, Harry lifts him by his waist and turns on his heels until Teddy squawks.

“Harry, put me down!”

“Oof, Teds, you weigh a ton,” Harry says, dumping the boy back on the carpet with blood up in his face.

“I am not a child,” Teddy declares, pulling down his hoody sleeves with fisted hands.

“All right,” says Harry amicably, distracting, and Draco doesn’t know what to do with the feelings in his chest, too busy occluding everything else. “But how about a game of quidditch – you and me versus the dads? I’m well bored and I heard this morning –”

He looks up, shooting his own father a look that can only be a challenge. “– that someone here thinks that he’s the best.”

James Potter nods. Draco can see his face more clearly than Harry’s and it’s occupied by an odd expression, almost like conspiracy. “Sounds like an idea,” he says, thumping his friend on the shoulder. “Come on, Moony,” he jokes, “let’s get you on a broom.”

“I…” Lupin struggles for words, standing up. He’s lost. He apologises to his son, for so many things, “I’m quite terrible.”

Teddy rolls his eyes. “I can pedal my bike faster than the broom Harry lets me fly.”

“Ahem,” Andromeda coughs loudly at this point, and Draco’s not sure why. It’s a harmless observation.


And Harry ruffles his hair with forgiveness.

Not long after the sons and their fathers have headed outside, Ron is called away on auror business.

“Looks fairly routine,” he reassures Granger, reading the note that’s flown spontaneously from his pocket in the form of an origami crane. They’re flash bastards, the aurors, sometimes, for no reason. “Should be back after lunch; might be later.” With a reflexive peck on her lips he takes out his wand, transfigures his robes to uniform and disapparates.

Response time? About fifteen seconds.
Granger releases a tuneful breath, smiling a forced, closed smile. “It’s important not to worry,” she states.

Draco feels the tension somewhere in his shoulders. Lily Potter reaches out a hand to briskly rub Granger’s upper arm.

They’re left in the conservatory, with a clear view through the windows and roof as two quidditch has-beens, one never-been and a might-be rise up into the air. They’re throwing the quaffle between themselves, attempting to aim it through the goal hoops that have been roughly spelled with black sparks, one near the house and the other at the end of the lawn, above the shed and the cherry tree.

It’s Potter versus Potter, really, as anyone might have guessed, with Lupin support on each side. Neither Harry nor Teddy prefers chasing – Teddy’s more of a keeper, Ron insists – but together they seem to be a match for James Potter, whose clear familiarity with the quaffle is hampered by Lupin’s miserable display of hand-eye co-ordination.

“I’m certain that I remember the garden expanding well beyond this,” Andromeda says, watching out of the window. It’s not clear whether the comment is intended to fill the silence, distract Granger, or if Andromeda has in fact been pondering the issue for a while. “There was a fountain, I’m sure, and a gazebo with roses. Bella and I used to play adventures with Sirius and Regulus, while Cissy went off to hide as Nimue… It would have all been quite pathetic on that scrap of land.”

Draco hasn’t thought about it, in all the years that he’s been familiar with number 12, Grimmauld Place. There was never any reason to expand rooms or land at the Manor. “It would be nice to have space somewhere for a proper match.” He and Harry have spoken a couple of times about getting the snitch out, but the garden of number 12, Grimmauld Place is too small for that to be any fun.

“Seekers,” Lily Potter scoffs with half a wink.

Granger, in any case, seems happy to distract herself. “Well,” she says, peering out of the window. “The charms should be relatively straightforward. It’s the longevity that’s the problem, and of course the gardening…”

This topic occupies them for a while. In the end it becomes Andromeda and Granger’s project and Draco leans back in his chair, eyeing Lily Potter on the two-seater around the conservatory’s wicker coffee table.

She doesn’t slouch, Lily Potter, but she doesn’t sit like any pureblood witch that Draco once knew. Her legs are crossed and she leans on one hand, as if ready to leap to her feet. Her resting expression is half a frown, and she nods as she listens, alert.

It doesn’t take long for her to notice Draco watching. She quirks half a smile, catching his eye and shivering. “Bit too familiar, this feeling,” she confides, glancing away to the quidditchers outside. “Waiting.” She rolls her eyes. “It was always us ladies waiting, by the time I got knocked up… But that’s not we’re doing,” she chides herself, hitting her leg, “and you don’t want me calling you a lady, so tell me something about what you do when you’re not resurrecting old Phoenixers.”

She’s still thinking about her planned get-together, Draco imagines, even though it’s surely only going to to turn into another Weasley do. He’s always managed to avoid them; he’s not sure what will happen if he ends up putting the final names to faces.

With the way the last few years have gone, Draco never thinks that he has anything to say for
himself besides what he gets up to in the Department. And yet, somehow, words come to him, looking at Lily Potter’s warm expression, responding to the brief confession that she’s offered him. He describes his adventures with Luna to begin with, starting from the year that she finally accepted Ollivander’s invitation to become his apprentice.

“She is genuinely bonkers,” he explains, because this does need to be said. “The trick is to let her keep talking and see how far she’ll take it. Once she spoke for half an hour, and I am not joking, about a hidden department at the Ministry whose sole interest is the price of butter.”

He skates over his reasons for befriending Luna, and more fiercely over the reasons why Ollivander no longer has the strength to hunt for wand trees himself.

It’s easy to side-step around Harry too, but Draco recalls his visits to Teddy’s school – the Christmas pageant one year, when Teddy played a sheep. “Very effectively, I thought – and I was born in the countryside. Wiltshire. He made his hair white and curly; we pretended that it was a wig.” Then, from another year, he describes going to the bazaar and winning himself a tin of baked beans – that he had no means to open – on something called a tombola.

“Oh, the tin of beans is a classic,” Lily tells him, a bright grin on her face. “Everyone has to get a prize,” she explains. “It’s just that some of them are better than others.”

“Yes,” says Draco, unimpressed. “Well,” he admits. “I swapped it when the woman wasn’t looking. For a glittery mermaid-themed hairbrush. Gave it to your son as a joke.”

He doesn’t intend to say that last part. Lily’s giving him a look.

“He was making friends with the Hogwarts mermaids at the time,” he explains. “And he never brushes his hair.”

She laughs.

The quaffle hits the conservatory roof at this moment, and the combination of mocking shouts and complaints makes clear that this is another of Lupin’s failed throws. He’s doing a loop-the-loop, as if to throw off the criticism. The ball springs back to the centre of the lawn and hits his broom like a bludger, ruining his line.

“Oh, it’s embarrassing,” Lily says, hand to her mouth. Her engagement ring is quite visible behind her wedding band, delicate filigree and a glinting gold-silver oval. “One of us should take over.”

“You play quidditch?” Draco asks, not sure why he’s surprised. Of course Harry Potter’s mother plays quidditch. It simplyannoys him, because until now, even with her hair, she hasn’t been reminding him of Ginny Weasley at all.

“I’m not the best,” Lily tells him, and the wry quirk of her head is a relief that he should be ashamed of. “But I’m all right. I never took it seriously. One of the girls in school, Mackers – she went down, but you might know her? Marlene McKinnon?”

Draco shakes his head. Only as a name from the Order of the Phoenix.

Lily takes this on the chin, with a slight frown, and here they seem to be back on the war. “Well, she played beater with Emmeline Vance, who was a couple of years ahead of us.” Another name. “That left an opening in sixth year and none of the little ones played well with her, so I got roped in.” She jokes, “I had to refrain from hitting James in the back of the head.”

Half a laugh finds its way out of Draco’s lungs. “Why do I get the impression that the Order of the
Phoenix was in fact little more than the Gryffindor quidditch team?”

Lily laughs more easily. “Oh, it was, at least in the early days.” Her familiar eyes are alight with humour, no glasses to hold them back. “Not Moody and the other oldies, of course, but most of us knew each other through quidditch. If you hadn’t played or weren’t from the common room, then you got in as James’s mate. Dorcas did match commentary, and he’d always give her the goss… I think he found Benjy and Edgy through some adventure with gobstones, back before he was cool.”

“Which was never, surely?”

“Which was never, absolutely,” Lily agrees with him, sly. No wonder the Dark Lord chose Harry as his counterpart, Draco’s thinking. What a joke.

“We told James that we were in it for Dumbledore,” Lily tells him more seriously, as if he might be interested. He almost is. “And of course old Dumbly was in charge and told us what to do, but he’d never been that matey with us, so I don’t know what he would’ve done, really, otherwise, for recruitment. Padfoot used to say that we were all there for Peter.” She goes quiet for a moment, her expression closing off. “Probably shouldn’t have spent so much time having a go. But he was like their little brother, and no one ever got it, what the four of them…”

The players are landing now, two Potters and a boy exhilarated while one Remus Lupin looks as though he’s had more than enough.

“They were dark times,” Lily says, with another wry grin. “School was dark too, looking back. I’m not sure us girls… You needed your mates.” She rallies, looking at him. “Don’t know what it was like for you four, but in our day none of the teachers were interested. Dumblydore was always on the continent or down at the Ministry. Slughorn, head of the snakes,” she adds unnecessarily, “he was useless. Never punished anyone, no matter how evil…” She tuts, shaking her head. “Sorry, love, I know that it’s your house.”

Draco waves her on, because what is there to say?

Lily Potter rolls her eyes. “Well, then we had Flitters and Pomona, who spent most of their time getting squiffy, and they thought that we didn’t know. Meanwhile, McGonagall was as soft as a teddy bear, so no one took her seriously. Saw us all as her babbies.”

Draco isn’t sure that he’s heard this right, though the news about Flitwick and Sprout is no surprise. “Pardon?” he asks.

“Oh, was she still there in your day?” Lily looks confused.

For a moment Draco tries quite seriously to imagine a school of witchcraft and wizardry with next to no discipline and an absent head. He finds a word – complacent – but that’s as far as he gets.

“Some of it was Frank’s lot,” Lily concedes, sitting up straighter in her chair as the door opens to the conservatory. “The Order, I mean. But James was good mates with Alice and Frank as well – weren’t you, James?” she calls over.

James Potter is clapping Harry on the shoulder, grinning like the leader of a rebellion. “I call that a draw, don’t you?” he’s saying, before raising his voice, attention dividing to his wife. “What’s that, lovely?”

“I think I belong on the ground,” Lupin is saying to his son.
"I think you do too," says Teddy, like a little shit.
Lupin laughs.

"Alice and Frank," Lily tells her husband, looking around the table and then reaching a gentle hand over towards Granger. "Hermione love, do you think that Kreacher would make us some squash?"

"Kreacher?" Andromeda calls to the air before Granger can answer. "Some squash if you have a…"
The quidditchers gather in with them, filling gaps, and Harry takes the chair on Draco’s right, radiating heat and brushing his hair out of his face. Draco thinks that he might need to challenge him to a match of their own, garden or no garden.

“What about Alice and Frank?” James asks, as some sort of frothy, fizzing, presumably non-alcoholic punch appears on the table in a jug full of ice, fruit and flowers, a tray of glasses popping in beside it. Potter blinks once, then shrugs and pours a glass for his wife, before moving on to offer everyone else. It doesn’t seem to bother him that he’s sweating bullets at his temples and his breath is a little ragged.

“I don’t know when he does this!” Granger complains, looking at the punch. “Thank you, Kreacher!” she calls to the ceiling.

"Where’s Ron?" Harry asks, frowning.

“Aurors,” Draco tells him, an aside.
He nods, leaning close as though his intense heat is an excuse. It’s true that Draco has been feeling a little cold.

“Can we get a house elf?” Teddy asks his grandmother, taking his glass from James Potter.

“One doesn’t get a house elf, darling,” Andromeda chides. “One inherits a house elf and tries not to let that be ruinous.”

“Like Dobby, Teds,” Harry says, accosted by a glass from his father, which he accepts with an awkward, "Oh, thanks…” He shuffles back into his chair, slumping towards the arm that lies between him and Draco. He’s still talking to Teddy. “You remember that I told you about Dobby. He was my friend and he found me.”

Draco’s never thought about where house elves come from, which he attributes to never listening to his mother. Beside him, Harry's blood is high in his face, and he’s on the edge of being turned on, Draco can tell. He always picks the most perverse moments possible, Harry.

“What happened to Dobby?” Lupin asks. Draco catches his eye and shakes his head, because he at least knows the answer to that one.

He receives his own glass with a blink from James Potter and a jolt of his own surprise. “Thank you.” It feels very odd to take it.

All the same, the fruit punch is light and refreshing, the flavour something of elderflower and spring. Draco isn’t sure that he’s had it before, and he imagines that Kreacher is spoiling them as a treat for having so many people in the house.

“I was telling Draco love here,” Lily’s now saying, bobbing against James Potter’s side and resting
her hand on his arm. Apparently she feels the same way that Draco feels about rank Potter sweat. “About how you were mates with Alice and Frank.” She’s not serious anymore, if she ever was, instead turning sly again. “They were very close at one point,” she tells Draco.

Potter rolls his eyes, finally taking a glug of his own punch.

“He was on the outs with this lot,” Lily supplies for him, nodding towards Lupin and aiming her words at Harry.

“We don’t talk about that era,” Lupin says plainly, droll and in vibrant spirits, it seems, despite himself.

“What era?” Harry asks, suspicious.

He doesn’t look like his father at all, now that the man is resting back into the small conservatory sofa. James Potter occupies the space with one ankle hooked over the other, an arm stretched out to frame his wife’s shoulders. Harry, meanwhile, is hunching down over his glass, slumped towards the chair arm between him and Draco.

Draco himself never joined a rebellion for anyone, but James Potter is at least beginning to make sense as a figure to rally around. Quidditch and a full room has turned him into a glowing, grinning Gryffindor lion, and he’s more charismatic the more that he keeps his mouth shut. Lily Potter too seems ready to lead the masses, with her quick laughter and pointed interjections, more winning the more that she speaks. They’re a king and a queen waiting on a chess board.

Why has anyone ever followed Harry Potter? Everybody loves him, but not for his charisma, Draco thinks, at least not outside of battle. He was always a shouty, scowling mess back in school, even when Draco was only watching him, rather than trying to rile him up. He tries to imagine the recruitment process for his vigilante anti-Umbridge club back in fifth year and mostly he sees Granger badgering people and Ron giving them a glare.

A castle and a bishop and a knight, he supposes. Straight moves, slanted and surprising. Most people like surprises.

“Oh, it’s all water under the bridge,” Lily is insisting now, putting her half-finished glass of punch down on the table. “The point is that if someone had played his cards right, Harrypop, then you could’ve been your dad and Alice Dearborn’s son.”

Lily winks at Draco as this sinks in and he can’t help it – he laughs again. Granger’s saying something to Andromeda, who’s pulling one of Teddy’s books out of her bag. They’re probably still on gardens, Draco thinks.

“All Longbottom,” James Potter notes, and Draco supposes that he could have worked it out. Alice and Frank. “And she’s pulling your leg,” he tells his son, still looking at Draco slightly askance. “Christmas of sixth year, Moony wasn’t talking to us, and I didn’t have much to say to Padfoot or…” He stumbles over Pettigrew’s name, pressing his glass to his forehead. “Although I’m not certain that they noticed. I’ll confess that I wasn’t terribly…” He nods towards Lupin. “Uncle Moony,” he mocks, “is much more stubborn than I am.”

“I simply take the view that it’s polite for friends to tell friends on the occasion that they’ve nearly murdered someone.” Lupin offers these thoughts airily, peering to see what his son is reading. “Only complete idiots would let that fester.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s… We thought that Dumbledore had told you and you didn’t want to talk about
The book is one of the muggle fantasy books that Teddy insists that Draco buys, and which Draco doesn’t mind buying as long as they extend the boy’s vocabulary and he keeps in mind that the magic is all backwards. It’s nice to see one being read, and Lupin seems to approve well enough.

As for the conversation, Draco has no idea what is being referenced, but it seems that Harry does, from the sound of his swallow.

“It was my fault,” Lily says, tutting, one hand on heart and the other bouncing off her husband’s shoulder. “I lost a friend at the end of fifth year,” she explains to Harry and Draco, “and Moony was a dear listening to me harp on about it every time that we had Prefect’s.”

“There was a lot more going on than that,” Lupin protests, “and you know it.”

Lily waves him away. “I happened to mention something from fifth that I thought he would have known about, and it was all rather more serious than I… Well, then, of course –” She sighs, changing the subject off a look from Lupin. “– poor James only had Padfoot and that other one to listen to his rhapsodies.” She pats her husband’s shoulder, plainly patronising. “They pointed out – both of them sharp as tacks, they were – that I wasn’t interested.” She says it as if to suggest that no one should have been asking Black or Pettigrew for romantic advice. “And the two of them told him that if he didn’t ask another girl out to Hogsmeade, then he would wake up one morning with his best broom turned into woodchips.”

“Unfortunately,” Potter chimes in, categorical, “I had no interest in other girls.” Harry rolls his eyes, but he can’t conceal the small grin on his face. “So instead I found Gids’n’Skids’ mate Alice, whose boyfriend was so old that everyone had forgotten he existed.”

Lily huffs, turning to her husband. “Frank was never that old.”

“He was Head Boy when we were in first year,” Potter argues, as though this is a familiar and fond point of conflict. “Two years later and he’s going out with Alice in fourth. Those are the actions of a rag, Evans, and I told Frank so.”

Lupin shrinks a little into his seat at this point. As he should, Draco thinks.

“Girls in my town were setting up home by fifth,” Lily tells her husband nonetheless, with little quarter, “and they’d’ve been a damn sight happier with Frank than with those no-hopers that they had to choose from. Honestly, James, you old woman,” she finishes, whacking her husband lightly on the arm, where there must be a bruise by now, Draco thinks. “You don’t half make a fuss sometimes.”

There’s a pause then, and Draco looks to his right. And there’s Harry, watching this interplay with a skewed frown and a closed smile on his face.

It was inevitable, really, Draco thinks, that Harry would fall in love with his parents. He falls in love with most people he meets, and the Potters are playing with a home advantage. This has been coming since the night that Lily Potter returned. Now, as the pair of them perform for their audience and a great deal more for each other, Draco feels as though he can hear their son’s heart skip a beat, even as he’s thinking, even as he’s…

Oh Harry, why?

“It was Snape,” the man says shortly, as though he doesn’t want to, but feels as though he must. He puts his drink down on the table. Far be it from him to enjoy this pleasant morning. “Severus,” he
stumbles over the name, which is the very last thing that Draco expected to hear today. “Your friend and… What happened.”

Draco glances at Lupin, who’s looking back seriously, his jaw tense. Wonderful.

“Harry,” Granger interrupts her conversation with Andromeda, who goes quiet. She glances quickly at Draco, Granger, as though he’s supposed to be doing something. As though Harry would ever listen to him over something like this.

As for Lily and James Potter, they both look completely taken aback.

“He was on our side,” Harry insists, and Draco wonders, absently, if that was what everything on the Astronomy Tower was about, because it’s never made sense to him. As usual, he’s certain, they’re going to gloss straight over the fact that Harry knows more about a man who actively made his life a misery than Draco, for whom the same man swore an unbreakable vow. “He was Dumbledore’s from – from before I had to go and live with the Dursleys.”

“You grew up with the Dursleys?” Lily Potter asks, her hair whipping as she turns to her husband. He shakes his head, as if to say that he can’t believe it either, and doesn’t know what to tell her.

“He taught us all Potions,” says Harry, sticking with Snape as though he’s building up to something. It can’t be good, Draco thinks, whatever it is. There’s something in the way that he’s saying the man was Dumbledore’s, when Lily Potter’s Order of the Phoenix was clearly about friendships on the front line. “First to fifth year.”

Granger tries to intervene. Her hand twitches and it’s reaching for Ron, Draco thinks. “Yes,” she says, glancing between between Harry and his parents. “And he wasn’t very nice about it.”

That seems unfair. “He had high standards,” Draco corrects instinctively, well used to having it out with Granger. “Someone needed them in that school.” The prospect of Slughorn, for seven years…

Granger’s looking at him as if he ought to shut up.

“He…” Lily Potter looks confused, and Draco imagines that she’s still taking in the fact that her son and his friends know someone whom she would have thought long forgotten rather better than they know her. “Sev was never very patient.”

“That’s who you bloody remind me of!” is what James Potter comes out with, looking at Draco with distinct distaste.

Draco is appalled. In an instant he doesn’t care an inch about anything that’s just been said, nor the expression on Granger’s face, only this. He puts his own glass down. “I remind you of an hermitic potioneer with a poorly disguised Birmingham accent, who bans profitable enterprise even when there’s no school rule against it?”

“Black Country,” Lily corrects, as if equally by instinct, thinking about things long past. Her accent is not disguised. Blackcorn tray, to Draco’s ear. “Neither of us were from Brum.”

“That is not the point,” Draco says, hearing the sharpness in his own voice. The point, he thinks, is that, all right, it may well have been that one person’s profitable enterprise was another person’s fleecing of the first and second years by selling them Hogsmeade products at 100% mark-up. But some of them were willing to pay. “Professor Snape and I had absolutely nothing in common.”

Shockingly, some of the others back him up. Granger’s first. “Draco has a much more pleasant sense of humour,” she says, which is harsh but flattering.
And Lupin, of all people. “He’s not nearly as weird, Prongs.”

Finally Harry comes out with a simple, straightforward, “No.”

It sounds like the end of the matter, but of course he goes on. Draco should have seen it coming.

“Malfoy never could’ve done what Snape did,” he says sharply to his father. “It would’ve killed him, playing spy.”

He’s a coward, Harry’s saying, in other words. When Snape wasn’t.

Well, –

Well, –

Well, Draco thinks, they all knew it. Maybe this point will put paid to Lupin’s suggestion that he could be anything like anyone’s beloved Sirius Black.

“That’s not a very kind thing to say,” Lily suggests, a worried frown creasing her forehead.

“Quite true, though,” Draco points out, rather proud of his unaffected tone. He’s known for a long time that Harry doesn’t think much of him. Approaching twenty years, in fact.

“Shut up, Draco,” Granger scolds. Teddy’s looking up from his book, by her side, and Draco wishes that he didn’t have to hear these things about his cousin. He can’t look at him.

Lupin’s watching him, Draco then realises, his jaw ticking. As if he’s about to fucking say anything.

“We’re all glad that you aren’t dead, dear,” Andomeda comes out with eventually, as though it pains her to intervene. She gives Harry a look. “Too many people are.”

“What?” Harry responds, glancing at Draco and scowling. “What d’you think I’m saying?” He shakes his head. “Look,” he pulls them all back a few minutes, drawing his father’s attention. “You’ve been telling us these stories for weeks, but I know how you treated Snape in school, all right? All of you.”

James Potter looks back, singularly unimpressed. “And I know how his curses feel, when he and his disgusting friends are trying to kill me and the people I care about.”

“He did invent some nasty curses,” Lily mutters, rubbing her chest as though she wishes that it weren’t true.

“He was a hero,” Harry states, and Draco knows that this is what it takes, ultimately, to earn Harry Potter’s respect. It’s why they all suffer, in the end, not only Draco but Harry’s father too, who didn’t manage to save anyone with his final breaths, the way that Lupin and Black must have saved people as they fought, as his mother saved him at the beginning. But there is no reason for Harry to bring it up now. No sensible reason apart from to sabotage his own happiness, and Draco is quite irritated that he’s done it. “He could still be here if you hadn’t…”

“Harry, that is unfair and untrue,” says Granger, bringing silence.

It’s time to change the subject, Draco thinks. For his own mind, if not Harry’s. “Speaking of heroes,” he says, addressing his remarks to Granger and leaning away from Harry towards Lupin on the right-angle. “Will we be seeing Neville?”
Granger’s scowling as if she can hear everything that Draco isn’t saying. Good luck, he thinks, occluding. “That’s a nice idea.” She says it cautiously. “You might remember Frank and Alice’s son,” she says to the Potters. “I’m sure that he’d love to hear some stories about them. They’ve been in St Mungo’s since he was a baby.” Her voice is clipped.

“Oh, that’s sad to hear,” Lily says, with a sweep of emotion. She glances at her husband, who’s equally, swiftly affected. “We’d love to see their son again.”

“Yes,” Potter agrees, drawing his arm around his wife’s shoulders. It takes him a moment to find more words. “If the weather’s nice, then we can have a barbecue.”

Draco says nothing about the fact that it has barely turned April.

In March 2006, Harry flirted with feeling Draco up while they were in company.

It was all quite subtle, and it took a lot of feeling up for Draco to react anyway, so he didn’t discourage it. The third night that he did it, Harry kept his hand on Draco’s knee for all of the first pint. It should have been obvious, but Harry had the terrible habit of never sitting up straight and Draco had quirked out his leg under the table in a way that he never usually did.

They were the only ones there, with Granger and her boyfriend. It felt different, somehow, from other pub trips that they’d been on in the past. When Granger and her boyfriend went to the bar for the next round, Harry’s hand crept higher, with intent, and Draco wondered if this was what it meant to reach his late twenties.

He wanted to say something, but he wasn’t sure what. Maybe it was time, he thought, to ask Harry whether he had a plan. Harry always had a plan, after all, mapped out by the possibilities of where he was and what he was carrying with him, if not a real route through the air. Draco had known this for as long as he’d known the man himself, but he’d been too afraid to ask.

Luna – Luna was a subtle darling, but she’d been hinting that he should.

Draco didn’t like sitting down, and nerves made his leg jump under Harry’s hand, just as Granger and her boyfriend reappeared at the table with four pints and two packets of crisps.

Harry shot him a look as though he was worried about something, pulling his hand away to swipe at his nose and ask Ron, “So, mate, when’s Gin back?”

And Draco had never felt so humiliated in his life.

Or, well, this was very much a lie, not that he was thinking about any of that, but he felt violently, violently stupid nonetheless – because of course there was a plan. Ginny Weasley was the plan.

“Gone for the summer, mate,” Granger’s boyfriend told Harry, and Draco wasn’t sure that he could keep his face immobile. “Australia and New Zealand. Puds U have got a tour and then it’s World Cup year…” So it was. Draco had forgotten. He felt like laughing. “Some mates of hers are playing, so she’s staying out there. I told you, the brothers Weasley have clubbed together to get Mum and Dad tickets to the final and a holiday.”

“We thought that we might go out for a couple of weeks too,” Granger added, as if this were new information. She glanced at Draco and frowned slightly, but it didn’t stick. She didn’t know half as much as she thought she did, Granger, though she knew a lot more than most. “Let Mum and Dad show everyone round.”
The boyfriend squeezed her shoulder, before moving his arm to the back of the booth and taking a drag on his pint. “You could come,” he suggested, including Draco. “You two, Nev and Luna or something. Got to be loads of plants and bugs and things to see.”

They’d all heard Granger’s boyfriend’s theories on Neville and Luna. Draco thought that he should be quite indignant about the suggestion that he could act as Harry’s plus-one. “I’ll pass,” he said. He’d already agreed to go with Luna to Russia on a birch hunt anyway, while Liz played whatever two matches it would be that England survived.

Harry looked at him, gnawing at a fingernail and then rubbing the same thumb through one of his eyebrows. “Yeah, nah, mate,” he said into his fist, before swooping to his drink. “Thanks, though.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Granger’s boyfriend seemed to take offence. “Mum’s been in a much better mood since Percy had his second,” he insisted, ripping open one packet of crisps and eating as he talked. “Nothing happened at Christmas and you saw her at the weekend.”

“Well, I saw you finish your pudding,” Harry joked awkwardly. “Didn’t bugger off to the Forest of Dean, at least, and leave me, George and Arthur to fix things for you.”

The boyfriend huffed. “She was positively solit… What’s the word, Hermione?”

“Solicitous,” said Granger, reaching for her own crisp. Draco had grown used to these things since he’d started drinking muggle, but they still seemed slightly mad to him, and far too oily. “But I’m not sure that that’s better.”

“Oh, not you as well…”

Draco could feel the memory of Harry’s hand on his traitorous leg, and he wanted the feeling gone. “Yes,” he said, harshly. “And you’re inviting us to witness your mother’s encounter with three Grangers now, rather than one?”

Harry laughed, sounding slightly off-kilter. “Yeah,” he agreed weakly. “Though it’d be nice to see Gin play,” he made the point again, completely unnecessarily in Draco’s opinion. “And your mum and dad,” he told Granger.

“They’d love to see you, Harry,” she encouraged brightly, over the rim of her pint. “It’s been years and years… And I think they’re quite anxious to see you in one piece, you know, ever since they tracked down that book about the end of the war.”

Harry blanched, and Draco felt him flinch. “You – you never said that they knew,” he accused. “All the stuff I pulled you into…”

The look on Harry’s face matched the way that Draco felt. He could never meet the Grangers. He wouldn’t be able to look them in the eye. He didn’t know what he’d been thinking, this whole evening.

“Oh Harry, you’re going to make me cross,” Granger insisted, with a glance at her boyfriend. “What have I said? As for Mum and Dad,” she added, “I erased their identities and compelled them to leave the country. They have no illusions about their precious daughter, believe me.”

And yet Draco wondered if they knew the full of what had happened to her, by the end. Granger only ever said that she had played a good trick on an evil bitch, and then scolded herself for using the word.

The evening fizzled out from this moment on. Granger was still huffing when she and her
boyfriend left to disapparate, and he was scowling too. Draco didn’t know what to say to Harry, even as they left the pub together, stopping off by the loos so that Harry could take a piss.

“Are you coming back to mine?” Draco asked, well aware that his tone was cold.

Harry either didn’t dare say yes, or else didn’t notice the crisis. He seemed distracted, and that probably hurt the most. “I thought I might go by the Leaky,” he said, looking out into the night of wherever they were. Herefordshire. Who bloody cared? “The old crowd are usually starting there about this time.” The Ministry crowd, he meant. A covey of brawling idiots whom Draco had no interest in associating with.

When Harry arrived at Draco’s flat that night, he fell out of the floo so drunk that he couldn’t stand up.

“Malfooooooooy,” he bellowed until Draco came to find him, levering over the sofa arm with the backside of his jeans in the air. “Draco Malfooooooooy…”

Well, Draco thought. This had never happened before.

Draco stood there, until Harry managed to climb to his feet. He stank of someone else and squinted at him through smudged glasses. “Where’m I?” he asked, before lurching forward over himself.

With spite, deep and silent, Draco wrestled him into the shower – clothes, trainers and socks, all of him, the sweat of his t-shirt thick like a residue on Draco’s hands. Five minutes later, Draco came back to find that the man had fallen asleep in the downpour, chin on his chest as he slumped against the tiles, water pounding on the back of his head and hammering to the tray in thick trails from the ends of his hair.

When Draco turned off the water, the man smelled only like a dog, which was a mild improvement. He moaned, leaning heavily on Draco’s shoulder, his head hung and his eyes closed. “’ve you seen Draco Malfoy?” he asked in a slur, before laughing as though this was some sort of joke.

It was pity, ultimately, though it still felt a lot like spite, that made Draco cast hot air from his wand, testing his control to see how much water he could blast away without burning Harry’s skin.

“Ow,” he said, the moment that Draco went a touch too far. Draco shot him in the mouth with an _Aguamenti_. He’d be fine, Draco knew. Physically.

The water was too much, though. Squeezing hard, Harry Potter lurched back from Draco’s shoulder to throw up in the sink. Not the toilet, but the sink. The fucking sink. Merlin alone knew what was in that vomit. Half of it slurried down his chin to his chest.

He now smelled of sick, which, all right, belonged to him at least. Draco shot another _Aguamenti_ at his chin, which the man wiped roughly, staining his sleeve.

It was too late at night for any of this, Draco thought, because that was better than thinking anything else.

“Is that it?” he demanded, but Harry only moaned, squinting.

The last of the Malfoys then dragged Harry Potter back to his bedroom and guided him firmly to the mattress, pulling the duvet away before wrenching off his shoes and plucking his glasses from his ears. Harry’s socks were still wet, but Draco left them as they were. He installed the man on his side, knees bent, and he hopped in behind him, even though the far side from the door was not
Draco’s side of the bed. He shuffled close and hugged his arms into a stained, stinking t-shirt and clammy muscle so that no one would roll onto their backs in the night, throw up and choke themselves to death.

He summoned the duvet to cover them, up to their shoulders. Harry’s sodden trainers lay left on the floor by the bed. Draco didn’t sleep, and the first question that rose to the front of his mind was simple. How many times had Harry’s friends fucking done this?

After that, they just came to him and came to him and came to him, all the ways that it was easy for someone to die, and Harry most of all. It took all night, until morning.

It was his fault, Draco knew, this situation. It was his fault, and everyone like him. Everything that he’d ever wanted to be.

When Harry woke up, Draco kept his eyes closed and his muscles limp, and that was easy because he was exhausted.

“Draco,” Harry said, his voice like a tar pit. He struggled, rolling over like it hurt and pressing his cold palm into Draco’s cheek, to his jaw, to his throat and the start of his shoulder. His hand smelled like sick. “Are you there…? I can’t – I’m… I’ll go. I’ll go. Thanks for looking after me; you didn’t…” His hand tightened for a moment into a loose fist against Draco’s skin. Then he was sniffing, rolling loose and disapparating before Draco could pretend to wake up. He forgot his trainers, sad and sodden on the floor. And that was that, that terrible night.
Lake Baikal is the largest freshwater lake in the world, by volume. It lies towards the south of Russia in the eastern part of Siberia, not too far north of Mongolia, and it is easiest to approach through the important hub city of Irkutsk, a crossroads of sorts for muggle train lines. The lake’s plankton are some of the most effective that have ever been found at purifying the water in which they live, and it is for this reason that in 2006 Ollivander became interested in the region as a source for silver birch, for wands that believed in renewal.

When Draco visited the city of Irkutsk and Lake Baikal with Luna Lovegood in May 2006, he wanted nothing more than to be out of London, and away from Harry Potter. He learned the sounds of Cyrillic so that they could read the signposts, and he spent a large sum of money on a charmed ring, which allowed for mutual comprehension between Russian and English speakers. He offered to buy one for Luna, but she and Liz had been discussing language a great deal, he was told, and Luna felt that it was important to hear everyone’s unmediated voice, even if she couldn’t make sense of a blind thing they were saying. “At least I will hear them, and that’s why we have ears.”

Thank you, Luna.

They drank a lot of vodka, and had a lot of fun convincing people that they were two runaway siblings from an important Swedish family, who may or may not have founded a city called Ikeya. Neither Draco nor Luna knew where Ikeya was – it was famous for some sort of convoluted muggle entertainment which could take up a whole weekend, so Draco gathered from those whom they met in their hotel – but the place was what everyone wanted to talk about, and so talk about it they did.

They also did some work, unfortunately.

Hiking the trails around Baikal, Luna explained her methodology. “I’ll know where I’m going when I get there.” Which was terribly useful, as usual.

They’d been walking the hills for a week now, trousers tucked into socks against ticks. Against the soothing sounds of the woodland, Draco broached a subject that he’d been trying to avoid.

“I may have to go back to the Manor,” he said.

“Oh?” was Luna’s vague reply. She was switching away grass from her feet with a branch of birch, which was no good for a wand, but which she said was about halfway there. A dozen whippy twigs diverged from its main stem, which Luna was holding, and they bore handsome glittering blossoms of young Maytime leaves.

Draco walked behind her. “I think it may be time,” he said. “I’m only renting my flat, after all, and I don’t like any of the furniture. That divan I bought is terrible, and living in London has always made one far too easy to find.”

None of this was true, exactly, but it also wasn’t a lie.

Luna left the remarks hanging in the air for a good few minutes, walking them through the forest, swish, swish, swish.

“The crunchy-faced bornabee has eyes on the back of its head, did you know?”

The crunchy-faced bornabee was entirely made-up, but Draco didn’t point that out.
“It uses them to see where it’s come from.” They were off the trail now, lost in the middle of nowhere. That was all right, Draco supposed; he had taken a good look around by the coast, so he thought that he could apparate them back to the path if necessary. If worst came to worst, they would have to go for a swim. “But every time the bornabee turns around, it’s looking in the opposite direction again and can’t be certain at all where it’s been. Isn’t that funny?”

Fucking life advice, from Luna Lovegood. “Is that all you have to say?” he asked.

Luna sighed, an irate sing-song sound. She turned abruptly left, and Draco could have sworn that it was so she could lead them around in a circle, a punishment for his rudeness.

“I don’t like the Manor, Draco,” she said softly, later, looking up at a single silver birch tree, which to Draco had no distinguishing features at all.

Draco’s heart hurt, and the back of his neck was covered in the feeling of cool sweat evaporating, blood pulsing through his legs now that they weren’t moving. “I know,” he said.

“And neither do you. I don’t know why you would suggest going back there.”

He felt quite chastened.

With a gentle, enraptured smile on her face, Luna used the silence to begin tickling this particular chosen birch tree with her branch, wafting it up the tree’s split white bark and towards its own lower branches.

To Draco’s sincere surprise, there was a glimmer of movement in the leaves above them, something darting with a hiss – and then there was a slender black-and-white bowtruckle spindling its way through the green-silver leaves of Luna’s branch.

“Hello little friend,” Luna said, lowering her hand so that the bowtruckle was at eye level. “Would you mind terribly if we took some of the branches from your tree?”

The bowtruckle hissed at her, tightening its hold on the young stems of wood that lay underneath its fingers.

“I would offer you some woodlice, but it’s much kinder to take things freely given, I have always thought.”

The bowtruckle hissed again, incensed.

Luna nodded. “Well, I’m afraid that we’re here to harvest these branches anyway.”

She walked away from the tree a few paces, towards another and another and another, the whole forest around them full of these things, though it was clear that the bowtruckle felt allegiance to one and only one of them.

“I won’t do you the dishonour of making you think that it’s your fault. It isn’t,” Luna continued to explain. “We’re much bigger than you, and more powerful.”

This was the end of the negotiation.

“Draco,” Luna snapped, her voice clipped, and for a moment she sounded exactly like the old man. The sound of it brought Draco’s hawthorn wand to his hand and a shiver up his spine. Luna’s ice-blue Ravenclaw eyes remained trained on the bowtruckle. “The Severing,” she commanded, “on seven straight branches, their base the size of your fist. Don’t think; don’t look at me – and don’t
Draco couldn’t take in the details of what was there in front of him, up above him. He didn’t even know if there were seven branches of the kind that Luna had specified. How was he –

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

“Cut,” she said, and Draco cut.

And there were seven straight branches stumbling out of the canopy to fall around the tree at Draco’s feet.

“There,” Luna said to the bowtruckle, in her dreamy sing-song voice. “It’s over now. I’m sorry.” She picked her way back to the tree and set her branch at its base like a wreath for the dead. The creature fled up into the many branches that waved, still attached, under the blue Siberian sky.

Draco sheathed his wand, while Luna drew her own, of cherry wood and phoenix feather. Ollivander had made it for her from the tree at the rear of number 12, Grimmauld Place. He had taken the core from Tom Riddle’s old yew, which belonged to a phoenix long missing named Fawkes. Draco wasn’t sure if Harry knew about this, but Harry was aware of many things that he never let on about, so it was safe to assume that he’d been instrumental.

Draco had been too.

“Do you remember when we harvested the wood for this wand?” Luna asked, gathering the branches of silver birch together in the air like a wedding bouquet.

Draco nodded, because he did.

“It was the day of your parents’ funeral, when you didn’t go,” Luna reminded him, birdsong all around them. “We went to the Manor orchard and you led us to the ripest fruit. I took the branch and Hermione took the tree. You spat two stones into the earth and we buried them, and then you led us back to the stile.”

She was using Incarcerous on the branches, Luna, to bind them tightly together, and it was only an act of conjuration. With another swish of her cherry wand she had vanished them. When she and Draco returned to Irkutsk she was going to send an owl to Ollivander, who would recall the branches to the back of his shop quicker than they could make it home. Even so, this marked the end of their holiday.

“You lead better than you follow, Draco,” Luna said, and she was warning him, her blue gaze passing over him like a beam from a lighthouse. “I’ve noticed that.”

Teddy Lupin turns ten on Saturday the twelfth of April, 2008. Andromeda has organised an outing to something called a bowling alley for him and his little friends, and Draco has long been doomed
to help organise the terrors along with Harry, Teddy’s godfather. There isn’t much chance for Harry to realise that Draco’s upset about being called a coward, because the children are too busy endangering their fingers and getting ketchup on things, and it doesn’t matter anyway, really, in the long run.

On this day, his tenth birthday, Teddy Lupin receives his first ever present from his father. The man can’t come to the bowling alley because all of the boy’s little friends’ parents think that he is dead.

The man has never had much money, and as yet he has earned none new. For this tenth birthday, in the Tonks-family living room, he gives the boy his wedding ring. It bears a new inscription inside, which runs in florid script coloured bright fuchsia pink.

Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi.

“Your mother gave me that ring because she loved me,” Lupin tells his son, sitting on the obese cream leather sofa, his voice that nowhere voice of the WWN. “And now I’m giving it to you, because she loved you very much.” His breath hitches. “And so do I.”

Andromeda translates, hovering between the sofa and the kitchen, where she’s just put away the leftover party bags. “If we want everything to remain as it is, then everything must change,” she quotes. “I think I read that novel, once.”

“Bit gloomy,” says Harry, cross-legged on the carpeted floor. He smiles, though, briefly.

Draco’s leaning against the wall by the fireplace.

Stood between them all, ring in his hand like the blue-eyed fellow in those torturously long films that the boy sometimes makes them watch, Teddy Lupin looks at Draco as though he wants to understand.

Draco nods, because Teddy will do, one day, as much as any of them can. Though he rather thinks that Lupin is trying to get at something about being a metamorphmagus.

The boy nods back, and turns to his father. “Thanks, Dad,” he says, and Lupin breathes a shuddered sigh of relief.

The next day, there’s another party, organised by one Lily Potter to reunite old members of the Order of the Phoenix, and Draco can’t avoid this either. It’s outside in the cold, and James Potter has found a barbecue from somewhere.

The garden is mostly full of Weasleys, as predicted, and a couple of names that Draco’s not sure he ever knew. Who is Sturgis Podmore? The Weasleys are ginger, apart from the wives and most of the children. Molly Weasley says something about how everyone could have come to the Burrow, which makes Ron roll his eyes and kiss her on the hair with a grin. Arthur says that the house is too empty and that they’re thinking of getting a kneazle. Professor McGonagall makes a flying visit from Hogwarts, and does indeed treat Lily and James Potter as though they are her long lost daughter and son.

Lupin accosts Draco, because they both end up leaning against the conservatory, out of the way.

“I get the impression that you might see Teddy rather more than three times a year,” he says.

Draco doesn’t look at him. “I get the impression that you might have loved his mum.”
“Cigarette?”

“Please.”

Draco shows him how to use one of Granger’s beloved bluebell flames, instead of burning his hand. He doesn’t seem that fond of it.

Towards the end of this, Harry comes steering Teddy Lupin towards them, out of a crowd that includes one George Weasley, whom Draco always tells the boy to be highly suspicious of. “Wait here,” Harry says. “I’ve got something to show you, and your dad’ll like it too.” His green eyes flash to Draco’s, including him, and Draco wonders if he knows where the cherry tree came from at the end of his garden.

No one seems to notice when Lupin dashes his wand to vanish their cigarettes, along with the smell of them. Draco thinks that the man will have to teach him that spell, because it’s not *Evanesco*.

When Harry comes back from the house, he’s cradling something precious in his arms that’s about the size of an adult human head. “It’s the shell of a mirror crab,” he tells Teddy, stepping down from the decking to the grass. “I’ve been a friend of the mer for a year now, and they gave it me as a gift.”

It’s been three years, in fact, that Harry’s spent swimming the Hogwarts lake with his wand and his gillyweed, working on his shaky language skills and even shakier diplomacy. That the mer have given him a gift is quite something, and Draco is almost impressed.

Teddy is in awe. “Wow; it’s amazing.” Wah; it’s’mazin. Oh well. “What’re the black bits?”

The mirror crab shell is bright silver, polished and shining, but there’s an inscription on it too, which Harry explains. “It’s writing, Teds. In different letters from ours.” They’re logograms, but Draco supposes that Harry is right not to split the hair for now. “It tells the story of Veyra, which is a very important Mermish myth. They say that Veyra was a wild and beautiful knight of the court, and she lived in the bright blue sea…”

The myth of Veyra is one that Draco already knows, but it’s soothing to hear it told in Harry’s voice.

The impetus of the tale is that Veyra’s betrothed, a Prince Momtin, equally beautiful, was killed one day while out hunting, shot with a spell by a wizard in a fishing boat. Heartbroken and bitterly angry, Veyra left the bright seas and went searching for him, down into the depths of the deepest black ocean.

There Veyra met Tanemoha, the black ocean king, and he put her through a series of tests and puzzles to prove her worth. It was difficult, but she bested him at every stage, pushing herself beyond even her own expectations. In the end, the king had no choice but to let Veyra take Prince Momtin back to the blue surface waters.

So far, so predictable, but the important turn of the myth is how it ends. Prince Momtin was duly glad to be alive again, enjoying a season of feasting with his family and friends. But Veyra was not so happy. After so much time in the black ocean depths, she found the sunlight harsh on her eyes and she spent her days longing for the shadows of Tanemoha’s kingdom. She found her duties to the court unappealing, and she spent her nights remembering Tanemoha’s capricious games of skill.
Her relationship with Prince Momtin fell apart. The common version of the myth says that Momtin went on to marry Veyra’s sister, who was not a knight at all but an octopusherd. As for Veyra, one day, on a swift current, she left the blue seas with the sunset and was never seen again. To this day it is said that she tests the dead at Tanemoha’s side, down in the deepest black ocean.

As he finishes this story, Harry’s tracing a finger over the black sigils inscribed on the shell, which wind in a dense corkscrew from the spiked tip to the hollow base along ridges and gnarls. “Your Auntie Hermione’s helping me translate the writing,” he tells Teddy like a teacher. “It’s a poem, we think. The merpeople like to write in poems.”

Teddy Lupin is spellbound. “What kind of poem?” he asks. “Can you read it?”

With a wry grin, Harry deflects. “Why don’t you go and ask your aunt?” he suggests, nodding over to where Granger’s talking with Lily Potter and Angelina Weasley. He offers the shell for Teddy to take in two hands, attention but little fear in his frown. “Watch that you’re careful with it, right?” he says. Teddy solemnly accepts, walking slowly across the grass.

“There’s a volume from the 1950s,” Draco pitches in as they watch Teddy process. For a moment he’s able to forget his emotions. “Tales of the Mermen. I should have a copy at work, and can lend it to Granger if you like.” Or you, he thinks. “It has a version of the Veyra myth – I believe that the account is from a Mediterranean saltpeople, off the west coast of Turkey.”

“It was my understanding,” Lupin says, sounding interested, “that the Hogwarts families had their roots in the Med, at least originally.” This is something that Draco didn’t know. But then he was reading the myth for its ideas on death, not a cultural study of the mer.

“Yeah,” Harry seems to agree, a smile on his face as Granger exclaims over the shell, taking it out of Teddy’s hands. Lily and Angelina are laughing about something else, and George comes to join them; Granger is soon screeching through some verses of plummy-sounding Mermish. She’s holding the shell into her stomach, the marks she’s reading turned out to face Teddy as she traces them.

“You’ll have to forgive my accent,” Draco watches her say. “But you see this symbol, with the little tail? Well…”

“But there’s been all this intermarriage with the Atlantics,” Harry continues, light glinting over him from the mirror crab shell where it turns in Granger’s hands. “There’s a route out to sea, they reckon, from Hogwarts, but a lot of it’s underground. Most of the year it’s too treacherous to make it all the way, they told me.”

There’s a note in Harry’s voice as if he wants to make the swim. Even though his security under the lake still rests on nothing more than gillyweed, just as it has for the last three years. “You realise that they’re concerned about you,” Draco observes in passing, because that also seems very clear.

“What?” Harry asks, startled, shielding his eyes against the glancing afternoon light.

“The myth of Veyra,” Draco points out, because it needs to be said. “It’s a story about the dangers of choice. The mer are great believers in choice, and certainly moreso than fate.”

Lupin concurs, though Draco’s not terribly interested in the man’s opinion at this moment in time. “Yes, I’ve heard that.”

Draco continues his explanation, recalling the few months that he spent reading every myth on
magical death that he could find. “Veyra can’t come home because she made her choice to leave, whereas Momtin was taken against his will.” He was only hunting when he met the wizard, who was unduly violent in the way that wizards always are in Mermish myth. “She made her bed with Tanemoha and in the end she had to lie in it.”

“So what?” Harry asks, perverse.

It is possible, Draco thinks, that Harry Potter might be the most irritating man in the world. Draco hates him sometimes, so violently. “So,” Draco says, “it is no coincidence that they chose Veyra’s story to carve out on your gift. You keep taking these reckless jaunts into the depths of the lake, and they clearly do not see that choice as inconsequential.” The mer are worried about him, it seems obvious now, and he doesn’t even realise. Draco can feel an old anger in his jaw. “They have given you that shell as as warning.”

Harry’s rolling his eyes, arms crossed. “Oh, no they –”

“Do they know about the forest?” Draco demands, interrupting.

“I don’t see how they could,” Harry blusters, his eyes serious, gaze off to the side as though he’s thinking. “There are some frogs, they say, in touch with the Acromantulae, but I’m sure that they’re having me on. Although –”

“What happened in the forest?” Lupin interrupts, as mild and stark as this April afternoon.

Harry stalls, and Draco stalls with him. He shouldn’t have said anything; shouldn’t have brought it up. Draco isn’t supposed to know much about the forest. It isn’t something that Harry likes to talk about.

It certainly isn’t something that he talks about in front of other people.

“My mother changed the family allegiance,” Draco says quickly, glancing at Lupin, because this is true, even if it’s entirely irrelevant to a conversation about merpeople. “Reverted to type and played out a good old-fashioned Black doublecross in the final moments of the war.”

“Yeah, she did,” Harry agrees, picking up the line immediately. “I mean, it’s funny,” he says to Lupin, safe and alive between green grass and blue sky, wearing a blue shirt and jeans that he should have thrown away years ago. “All that Black-family ideology, and there in the end all he had was Bellatrix.” He means the Dark Lord, but he doesn’t say the name. “Andromeda was pitching in with us, and Sirius was Sirius, fine.” Harry pauses, his expression earnest. “But he’s the one who lost himself Regulus and Narcissa. It just goes to show, doesn’t it?”

They’ve at least managed to divert Lupin. He’s frowning, looking between them. “I suppose that’s right,” he says. “I didn’t realise that Regulus…”

“It was because of Kreacher,” Harry says tiredly, and Lupin seems startled. Draco thinks that he would more likely follow Kreacher into a rebellion than James Potter, if it wouldn’t have killed him, as Harry has decreed. “He hurt him dreadfully, and Regulus gave up his life to get revenge. We found it all out not long after you and I, er…” He waves a hand through the air. “Argued.”

Lupin blinks, his tone wry. “Well,” he says, with half a smirk. “Regulus always was an odd duck.”

This exchange is deeply irritating, because Draco doesn’t want to talk about the war. He is sick of talking about the war, and deathly sick of remembering it. He wants to talk about now, and the fact that Harry, apparently, is concerning the merpeople of the Hogwarts Great Black Lake. Fucking merpeople, who still have duelling laws and merrily pursue them.
“You aren’t making that fucking swim,” he tries to insist, though it comes out more like a murmur, the conservatory brickwork hard behind his foot.

Harry’s head whips around anyway, and he’s squinting into sunlight, raising his hand again. It must be glaring off the glass. “It’s a swim,” he says casually, with a hard shrug. “A couple of the lads down there fancy it. Best time to go’s supposed to be the summer…”

Draco can’t listen to this. “You do not need to swim to get to the Atlantic.” Out of the corner of his eye he can see Lupin catching no one’s attention and walking away, the coward. “You’re not a merman,” he tells Harry, the glass-green shadows behind his glasses. “You can breathe air and walk to the coast. Or apparate, or take a broom, or, hell, a muggle car.”

“Getting there isn’t the point.” Harry’s shielding his eyes, his mouth hard.

“You won’t get there,” Draco snaps. “You’ll be dead.”

Harry sucks his teeth. An old part of Draco’s mind wonders if they’re attracting attention, and of what sort it is, but he really doesn’t care. His vision is filled entirely with blue sky, green grass and Harry Potter, who wants to swim down through the black water of Hogwarts just to find out what it’s like and say that he’s passed the test. “It’s a swim,” he says again.

“It is the purposeful risk of self-destruction,” Draco insists, because he knows this. He knows it with every fibre of his being. “It’s wilful escape with no certain route back.”

A sigh. “Oh Malfoy,” Harry says, dropping his shoulders and his hand back to his side, his face full of sun, bright white streaks of it. “And am I the only one?”

Draco stares at him. “The only one what?”

“You have a go at me,” Harry continues, light glinting off his glasses, “but then there’s you. You never sleep, you hardly eat, and you refuse to act like any of us are your friends.”

“Fuck you.” Quite galled, Draco looks away from Harry now, towards the barbecue where James Potter’s frying sausages. The smell is vivid, but Draco’s not sure that it isn’t coming from somewhere else, not here in this garden where he and Harry are. “None of that is true.”

“Then why isn’t Luna here?” Harry asks, short.

Draco rolls his eyes, watching Lily Potter laugh with a grungy-looking man whom he doesn’t know. “Because this is a party for the Order of the Phoenix, organised by your mother.”

“Who cares, though, Malfoy, who cares?” Harry sounds exhausted, and it’s both strange and emphatically startling. “You love Luna, and this is a party. You should have invited her.”

“Why didn’t you invite her?” Draco demands.

The expression on Harry’s face is kind and spiteful and defiant all at once. Harry loves Luna Lovegood. He clutches his jaw before speaking, breathing out. “She said that she wouldn’t come round here anymore until you asked her. She’s been telling me that since New Year’s 2006. She hasn’t been here for over a year and you haven’t even noticed.”

“That is preposterous,” Draco complains, even as he realises that this sounds exactly like something that Luna Lovegood would do. “This is your house. I can’t –”

“This is number 12, Grimmauld Place,” Harry says, with little patience. “And you live in the third-
“And you’re quite certain that this is all right?” was all that Draco could ask in late July, 2006, even as Harry finished keying him to the wards of number 12, Grimmauld Place. Kreacher was knelt there with them in the wine cellar, which lay underneath the kitchen and the breakfast room, which lay underneath the ground floor. The three of them were surrounded by racks of aging wine, Draco’s preferred fresh and fruity whites in less extensive supply by the ladder. They were knelt in a triangle around a pentacle filled with runes, the lines of which were carved deep into the cellar’s old flagstones, under which the Blacks had once buried a stag.

The wards were a new addition to the house from after the war, and Draco had always assumed that they were of Granger’s design. From the way that Harry handled their lattices, however, it was clear that their forging had at least been a joint effort, if not an individual project of Harry’s.

The keying ritual was familiar to Draco from late 1997, when his mother had woven them both into the orchard of Malfoy Manor. The priority there had been stealth; here it was security. The runes were greater in number and their bindings were far more intricate. Harry tapped each of them in turn with his wand, weaving webs and knots from their magic, looping strands of old belonging over Draco’s fingers and crossing bones on backs of his palms. Verses ran glowing on his skin, matched to the floor and ever changing, curling into one form and then another.

Draco was holding his wand between his hands, flat against the flags, and the house’s magic ran through it as Harry wove his fingers into cold stone. It was clear and Draco could feel it, how the roots of the house had once been rotten by hate and darkened by the Dark Lord’s torn soul, but they now held strong in the earth like Christmas holly, midsummer willow and vines ripe with fruit for the harvest. In the midst of all this, knowing nothing but cold stone, warm wood and the beat of his own blood, Draco realised that his magic was of the springtime, blossoming hawthorn, rounding out and starting the year anew. He had no idea what to make of it.

“Bit late to back out now,” Harry said when it was done, grinning his shit-eating grin.

“Master Draco,” Kreacher said as they rose to their feet. There were tears in the old elf’s eyes as Draco took his hands. He only wanted to be acknowledged, Kreacher, that was the thing. To be called by his name.

“Mr Malfoy,” Draco corrected, because he knew that they would have to start as they meant to go on. “I’m only a lodger, Kreacher.”

Kreacher opened his mouth to protest, but then nodded, vanishing with a crack. Draco could feel him in the house nonetheless, a presence deep in his solar plexus like ancestral fault, original sin.

“We should have waited until the other two got back,” Draco said. Granger and her boyfriend were on holiday in Australia, where it was winter, supposedly forging harmony between Molly Weasley and the Grangers. “I could have used the floo in the meantime.”

Harry shook his head, catching him by the wrist to drag him back towards the ladder. He had a crackling energy, Harry, like spines and tines and flames, and Draco had always known it, odd though it was to feel it with certainty. “I would’ve done the casting anyway,” he said, and Draco remembered when Harry had pretended not to understand runes, back when they had been moving on the dead two years previously.

“Well,” Draco mocked. “Aren’t you full of surprises?”
“Had to do something while I wasn’t getting Potions NEWT,” Harry told him, climbing up into the main kitchen. “Runes was something new.” He shrugged. “You feel like white flowers and hedgerows,” he continued as an aside, his tone suburban and flat. “I could go back in time and laugh myself stupid. Do you really intend to act as a lodger?”

He’d been evicted, that was the thing, of all the most mundane unhappy accidents. Heir to the fortune and last of the name, Draco Malfoy had never found the time to purchase a London residence – and then his squib landlord had sold the place that he’d been renting, to a couple of muggles no less, and they’d wanted to live in it themselves. He’d been given eight weeks to find somewhere else, eight weeks ago, and the easiest alternative had been a fifteenth-century Wiltshire manor house which made him remember wishing that he was dead.

It had been Granger who’d offered up the third floor of number 12, Grimmauld Place, once Luna had made clear that the Manor was in no way an option.

“I know that the rooms are set up as a flat,” Harry rambled on as they emerged, suburban to the last though he’d said that he had no intention of asking for rent. Kreacher would be managing expenses, talking to the elves who were looking after the Malfoy estate. “But we could get our bloke back in. I don’t know who we were planning on… It was all Percy – you know Percy.”

Harry continued in an affected voice that Draco knew was supposed to remind him of a Head Boy from many years ago. Draco had no recollection of what Percy Weasley looked like, but he assumed that the man was ginger. “Oh yes, Harry, you should turn the third floor into its own one-bed! Put in a kitchenette and you can rent it out; think of the income! Build a wall and you’ll never see a whisker; wizarding flats rarely share stairs or front doors, don’t you know? My first flat after Hogwarts was little more than a cupboard, with a floo and a loo and a kettle…”

He broke off at this point to roll his eyes. Draco wasn’t sure whether or not he was supposed to laugh.

“It wasn’t a cupboard,” said Harry, blunt as he cast Nox and shut the cellar hatch. “Anyway, you wouldn’t believe the people we had who enquired.”

There wasn’t much that Draco could say to that, so he took advantage of his new entitlements to seize Harry by the wrist and apparate them both upstairs. It wasn’t something that he was going to do again for a while.

The flat’s layout is simple. There are two rooms: principally, the main lounge-diner-kitchen, which faces the rear of the house and which Draco tends to think of as simply his kitchen, with areas for units and utilities, the dining table and the sofa. The sofa lies opposite the floo.

This main room leads out into a small hallway, with a front door to the house’s third-floor landing, because Harry, Granger and her boyfriend all found the idea of a flat without a door deeply unsettling. They had thought that in the end it could be charmed somehow, to open in an emergency but otherwise block off the quarters. Draco’s plans on moving in included at least installing a doorbell. He ended up with a ward that prevented entry by apparition when he wasn’t in the house and at all times bolted the door.

Second to the main room is the bedroom, which mirrors the drawing room and the master bedroom on the floors below, facing Grimmauld Place itself – the Bloomsbury address. This part of the flat contains a small en suite, which ruins the lines of the architecture, stealing a window from the frontage, but is well appointed and well suited to Draco’s needs.

The bedroom was familiar, even on this first day in late July, 2006. It was a larger space than he had become used to, but it hosted the old divan which he had always intended to replace, as well as
his other odd bits of furniture. It also now contained Harry Potter, with a smirk on his face and a
glint in his eyes.

“I’m going to know when you’re home now,” he said, quirking his eyebrows.

Something lurched low in Draco’s stomach. The man had stopped feeling him up in pubs, and it
was clear that they were not the plan, unlike Harry and one Ginny Weasley – and they hadn’t
spoken about that disastrous evening earlier in the year. But Harry was looking at Draco with fire
in his eyes, and Draco liked the light. It was warm.

“What about Granger and…?”

Harry shrugged, his smile dimming slightly. He swiped at his nose with the back of his hand.
“Yeah, they’ll know too,” he admitted, embarrassed. This probably should have been mentioned,
Draco thought. “But you’ll know about them, and you can put down any mufflers you like. It’s
Ron and Hermione,” he said, in the same way that he always did, ever since they’d come home
from the Forest of Dean. The pair of them were now to sleep directly underneath him, while
Harry’s room was the smaller one on the floor above, faced to the garden like Draco’s kitchen.
“They’re not about to barge in on you or anything.” Anythin. Anyfin. Anyfing. “The sound-
proofing’s good already.”

This was an old pureblood family residence, Draco supposed. There had always been secrets to
conceal.

“Fine,” he said, moved in, not sure what to do now. The keying ritual had been for midday with its
bright noon-sun energy, surely belonging to Granger’s boyfriend. Draco thought that he might as
well head into the Department, but there was always another option. “Well, Potter,” he started
again, picking up the man’s attention. “Welcome to my new flat.”

Harry looked around him, acting as though he’d never seen the place before. “I like it,” he said,
pushing his glasses up his nose. “What’s the address?”

“You won’t have heard of it,” Draco dismissed, stepping in close and raising his arms to rest them
on Harry Potter’s shoulders. “It’s Bayswater, really.”

The man laughed as he fumbled for Draco’s ribs, up then down to his hips. “Always a headgame
with you, isn’t it, Malfoy?”

They stayed in bed until dinner time, though from this day forward Draco only ate with the rest of
the house when he was invited, at least until the end of this story.

Harry stalks off after their argument in 2008, and Draco spends the rest of Lily Potter’s party
deeply disturbed. He hides in the light of James Potter, who draws people to him in crowds,
apparently, when they aren’t Harry, Ron or Granger, and when his dramatic pauses can be filled to
everyone’s amusement by sly remarks from his wife.

Finally, someone remembers why the whole event was organised – to reminisce about those
absent.

Of course it’s Neville Longbottom.

“So,” he says, heroic and butch and straightforward with a bottle of butterbeer in his hand. “Harry
was saying that you could have been my dad.”
“Not quite,” Potter corrects. “In fact –” He brightens, looking around at his audience, which is mostly constituted by Percy Weasley and his attachments plus Angelina, now a Weasley by name and by law. “I played a crucial role in one of your father’s more romantic endeavours. Imagine the scene…”

They are taken to Hogsmeade, 1977. The Gryffindor common room has been convinced since Christmas 1976 that James Potter in sixth and Alice Dearborn in seventh are an item. They’re a popular duo: Dearborn is known as the smiling face who runs the betting on Gids’n’Skids armchair rally, held every Thursday on the quidditch pitch and sometimes in exotic locations if there’s been time to plot out a special stage. Potter is known for quidditch, and for being impressively loyal to the three misfit boys with whom he shares a dormitory.

On the last Hogsmeade trip of the year, exams are well enough over and everyone’s in high spirits – some of them even higher than that. The summer – which belongs to Gryffindor, surely – is so vividly near that they can taste it. The Three Broomsticks barely cares for anyone’s age, but for the uptight there are plenty of generous buyers over seventeen, and Slytherin is wilting in the sunshine, unlikely to come near a pack of Gryffindor that is practically the whole of seventh down to third. After all, they keep third and fourth under very close watch these days.

But what’s this? A man appears in the centre of town, tall, and he challenges James Potter to a duel. Over Dearborn! He declares his love for her, and Gids’n’Skids refuse to confirm or deny a dormitory mate’s recollection that this is Frank Longbottom, who was Prefect when they arrived at school, Head Boy the year after, one of theirs, a lion too.

Potter is an accomplished duellist, but it seems that so is Longbottom. Neither of them speaks a word of their hexes, but they strike sparks at each other thick and fast. In the end, Potter is flying through the air, to land behind a stack of old barrels by the Broomsticks – rolling, somebody notes, in the manner of a chaser used to jumping the dismount from his broom. The girls of fourth and fifth all swoon nonetheless.

But then – Longbottom takes to a knee and pulls a box from his pocket, right there in the road. He asks Dearborn, will she marry him? Will she throw aside Potter for a man from the Dales?

Someone points out that Dearborn has been laughing like a drain since the first insult was thrown – “Collywobbled flea-urchin!” – and that Gids’n’Skids look far too smug, and that Sirius Black looks both confused and put-out, rather than angry or cruel, the way that he can be when his family’s house come near Potter.

The game unravels, and Potter’s buying up supplies from the Broomsticks for what becomes the greatest Gryffindor party in anyone’s memory. Potter and Dearborn share a tearful scene of parting in front of the common-room fireplace, clutching each other’s arms and promising the world that they’ll always have Herbology.

“And that’s when I turned to Mackers,” Lily Potter adds as a coda for the rapt audience of number 12, Grimmauld Place, hand trailing on her husband’s arm. “‘And I said, ‘I am going to snog that boy’s glasses off.’’” She nods. “And Mackers said to me, ‘Go on, then, I dare you.’ So I walked over, and he had no idea what had hit him.”

Laughter rolls around the group, and James Potter cranks it up brighter. “And even then she never bloody agreed to go out with me!”

He’s helped by Lupin, who cuts in lightly, as if offering a passing thought while eating his burger.
“It’s true,” he says. “He should have stuck with Alice. He spent all of seventh year in Hogsmeade fretting about whether she was going to turn up.”

“But I always did,” Lily says, and the Potters share a film-ending close-mouthed kiss, as though they were never ever dead.

Draco feels as though he might be ill.

He turns away from the barbecue, his hand shaking a little as he heads to the drinks chest on the table held by the decking. He makes it up the step and there’s a bottle of wine in ice, a supermarket Sancerre that Kreacher’s told him is excellent value according to the magazine in the Sunday Times. “Kreacher is still looking for a Riesling, Mr Malfoy,” he said when last they spoke, and Draco hopes that he finds one soon.

He’s not alone by the time he’s finished pouring a glass, as he keeps pouring it higher, nor as he tastes the first swallow of what must be good value, because the party’s for Gryffindor and this swallow’s quite nice.

It’s Longbottom. Still. Again. Always. Why?

“So, you and Harry,” Longbottom says, as though they’re friends. As though he hasn’t just been listening to a story that his parents should have told him on his mother’s knee. “When’s the wedding?”

Draco stares at him.

Longbottom stands there on the decking, pouring himself a tall glass of what Granger calls Wizard Pimm’s, smelling faintly of HP sauce. “I’m joking, Malfoy,” he says, his Os long and oop noorth. “But you can’t hide it from me. I teach teenagers. There’s oonly soo many tricks in the book.”

Draco stares at him. He drinks more wine. *Bit compulsive,* he hears.

“That boy Teddy clearly thinks the world of you both.” He yarns on, Longbottom, built like a brick shithouse, body, mind and soul. “And he’s a sharp lad – I’d have thought he was coming up this September rather than the next. You must be proud.”

Another swallow, and Draco’s wine is almost gone. Funny.

“Was it Harry, then, who took the plunge?” He reminds Draco of Goyle, whom Draco shopped. “Did he ask you for coffee? We always knew that he was due to settle down in the end. And there, he must have been looking for you all along.”

And there, Draco’s wine is gone.

“We all knew he was gay by – when was it? Must’ve been the end of 2005, maybe 6…”

Filled quite violently, quite suddenly, with an old, incandescent rage, Draco slams his glass down on the red metal table.

“Watch it!” Professor Longbottom proclaims, his face knit with surprise in the cool spring sun.

“You…” The words pour out of Draco like fire. “You are the most stupid fucking man that I have ever fucking met.” His mouth tastes like wine; his eyes burn. “You were stupid as a child, stupid as a teenager and most of all you are stupid as this slovenly fucking arse standing here in number 12, Grimmauld Place.” He leans hard on his hands, until it hurts. “You are an *embarrassment* to your
family and your name, and the idea of you existing makes me ill. How dare you speak, how dare you think, how dare you breathe?” He spits, “Your dreams should be torn from your head and spun into wires to garrotte you, you disgusting waste of flesh.”

Draco’s tempted to disapparate right there, from inside the boundary, but there are appearances to maintain. He settles for shoving the table away from him and picking up the chair in his path with all the excess magic in his fingers, all that hawthorn smell of decay, red gleaming gold in the sun as he hurls the chair with deafening prejudice over the railing and into the dining room windows, where it clatters down into the space below by the kitchen with the noise of broken glass. He stalks through the French doors to the conservatory, their handle too weak underneath his hand.

He’s almost to the front door before he registers the footsteps barrelling behind him. They’re Ron’s. Fucking Ronald fucking Weasley is here to keep Draco fucking Malfoy from leaving through the door of his fucking honeymoon fucking house that he shares with Hermione fucking mudblood Granger who was tortured, there, before Draco’s eyes, shrieking and breaking apart from her mind like she should have always been fucking shorn, too fucking clever for her own fucking birthright as cattle, the fucking, fucking –

“Oi!” Ron shouts, when they’ve passed by the stairs to the basement, into the entrance hall proper. “Draco, what the fuck, mate?”

“I’m afraid that I must be getting back to work,” Draco says, his voice sounding in his ears as if it’s far away, muffled by his heartbeat and the screams of the dead, the absence of Fred Weasley, George Weasley’s ear, Bill Weasley’s elegant face –

He opens the porch door, but Ron ducks through it ahead of him, backing up against the main front door, all its serpents writhing with glee. “Whatever Nev said,” he tries to mediate, “he can’t have meant it.” He tries to catch Draco’s eyes, but Draco won’t meet his gaze. “Come back outside.”

He’s nothing, Draco, that’s the thing. He’s a parasite; he’s a worm; he’s nothing of value at all.

“I’m afraid that I shall have to withdraw from our arrangement,” Draco decides, adjusting his wand in his sleeve. There are appearances – there are appearances… They aren’t a choice, but a clear category difference between those who live in this house and the rest. Draco doesn’t live here; he lodges. He lodges where he should never. “For Granger’s ring. I shall have to withdraw. I apologise, but I’m simply too busy with work. Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

“Draco, you utter prick –”

He reaches forward, but Draco steps back, giving up, tempting fate and vanishing himself without another word.
Sirius Black, part 1

Draco’s sleeping on the staff-room sofa when Granger wakes him up.

“That was rude,” she says, with little preamble. “The way you went off last weekend.” She’s scowling, a mug of tea in hand, looming over Draco’s head so that he’s forced to sit up. “I’ve been trying to catch you all week to give you a piece of my mind.”

He didn’t mean to fall asleep here; he’s been downstairs and sleeping in his flat during school hours. Waking up now makes his head spin. Food, he thinks idly, with few intentions.

“You’ve put Ron in a foul mood,” Granger continues, “and Neville thinks that you’re homophobic.”

“Good,” Draco replies shortly, pressing his skull into his hands, fingers over his eyes to block out the light. “I can’t stand the lot of them. Bunch of queers.”

“Draco,” Granger laments, and it’s not at all the tone that he was trying to provoke from her. She sits down next to him, holding out the warm beacon of her tea. “Here, drink this,” she says. “I’ll make another.”

It’s a sign of Granger’s earnest engagement with this moment that she sets the next mug of tea going with her wand, rather than faffing around the kitchenette by hand. She’s told him a hundred times that the ritual is the point. The tea that Granger has ritually made, after all, is perfectly warm and milky and comforting. Draco hates every sip, suppressing the shivers that run to the ends of his fingers. It’s been days, and yet Granger is here, with her tea. It’s been days; she should have let it go.

“It’s not good, Draco,” Granger says, and he wishes that she would stop using his name. “You left and we haven’t seen you. We’re all… Neville keeps talking to Harry and now he thinks that you… Well, what did you expect? You’ve never been polite and now Neville refuses to believe that you didn’t mean it. He thinks that you must loathe Harry somehow.”

“Fucking chosen cunt. I always have.”

“You and I both know that that is not true.” Granger’s tone is short.

Draco drinks his tea in silence. It seems to be about eleven o’clock in the morning. He’s going by Granger, who runs better than his watch. He was given a watch for his seventeenth birthday. He thinks that he remembers smashing it, but he can’t quite –

“And he said to tell you that he’s not sure that he is gay, actually, strictly, and he’s very worried that you might think he’s told Neville something that he hasn’t told you – not that I am asking about that… He promises that he’ll have a proper conversation with you about it at some point, and maybe Ron, and maybe me…”

He can dash out to Diagon Alley for some food, Draco thinks, then come back. Because of his duty to the Nowhere Room, he has special dispensation to apparate in and out of the Ministry, which is convenient for lunch, always has been. Also for avoiding Grangers.

“You’ve done so much for him,” Granger continues to prod. “I know that you say you didn’t intend to, but no one else could have given him his parents. And Remus! Remus knew Sirius best of
anyone, and sometimes I think… Well, it gives Harry someone to talk to about those years they had.”

Granger apparently doesn’t know the sort of thing that Lupin and Black got up to together. Draco isn’t about to enlighten her. It feels good to know something she doesn’t, whenever he can, always has, because he’s –

“And you’ve never said, what you’re really working on. But I…” Granger’s drinking her own tea now, her eyebrows knit in a frown as she swallows. “You don’t have to do this, Draco,” she insists. “I’m worried about you. You’ve taken out everything there is on apparition and I’m not sure that you’re thinking straight. You know that it’s dangerous. To become nothing and then something again…”

Draco’s bored of this conversation. “You want to see a trick, Granger?” he asks, handing her his mug, now empty. He doesn’t wait for her reply before he makes himself disappear.

Harry finds him when Draco goes home one day to his flat. It’s past nine in the morning and not yet four: he should have been fine. He’s annoyed that his calculations aren’t correct, not here and not at work either, and he’s tired.

“Why aren’t you in Scotland?” Draco snaps, frozen where he stands by his bed, still dressed.

Harry looks about as concerned as Granger did, whenever that was. “I’ve got a double free,” he says, coming closer, padding footsteps across the threadbare rug. He’s wearing blue and gold, sharp robes that make him look like a wizard, fuck him, the fucking nobody, who is he? Who is he? “Still supposed to be in, but it’s not… I left a broom at the gate.” He puts a hand on Draco’s shoulder, soon palming his neck. “Malfoy, you look –”

Draco wrenches himself loose. “If you’re here for a chinwag,” he says, not really focusing, “I’m afraid that I cannot oblige.” He gestures dismissively. “I’ve been quite busy and now… If you’ll…”

“Sod it,” Harry says, putting the full of his arm around Draco’s shoulders, strong and warm, pulling him close as he cradles the back of Draco’s head. “There’s no point talking to you when you’re like this. Don’t tell Hermione, all right?”

“Fuck off; get away from me,” Draco hears his own voice, sinking his forehead into the crook of the man’s neck. “I’m not safe.” Harry smells like the seaside, buckets and spades and starfish and sugar. Draco thinks that he might be dreaming. “Go back to Hogwarts. You can’t –”

“I’ve gone, I’ve gone,” Harry’s voice insists, nonsensically, his hand stroking Draco’s greasy, disgusting hair. “I’m not here.” He’s a dream. It’s a dream. It’s all right if it’s a dream. “I’m far, far away.”

“Did you use the stone on him, Harry?” Draco asks, because he’s weak, and it’s the last piece of the puzzle. He could try without knowing, but he wants to – He needs to –

He wakes up tucked into bed, stripped down to his underwear of t-shirt and shorts, his face buried in a stupid fucking longhair-fleece teddy bear as big as Teddy Lupin was when he was six and Draco first met him, which must have been transfigured or conjured from Merlin and Morgana and Arthur knows where. He vows to be more careful. And he’s fairly certain that Harry told him yes.

By the time that the last of Draco’s work is complete, he’s practically forgotten why he’s not
talking to the residents of number 12, Grimmauld Place. He’s practically forgotten that he’s on friendly terms with them at all, because he occludes that sort of thing away for safe-keeping. He underlines the last of his notes and reads them over, eating lasagne from a tin-foil tray with an odd fork from the staff room that’s far too light in his hand. He’s on his feet, because his office doesn’t have a chair.

He thinks about going home to his flat, but his heart is pumping, a little sickly, and in the end he goes downstairs. He takes each step one by one, because no one, not even him, would risk apparating to the veil room.

He takes his hawthorn wand and nothing else. The veil waits in the centre of the chamber on its platform, troubled by a phantom breeze and it’s whispering to him. He ignores the sound of it, walking the circle of its lower step and the main dais. He conjures a ribbon ring of iron, binding the upper platform in runes, just for luck, and heating the metal until he can feel the warmth where he stands.

On the lower step he spreads conjured salt, feeling his wand resist against every grain. It shouldn’t be possible to conjure salt, but technically he’s conjuring salt acid and lye. It’s a trick that he’s quite proud of. They fizz violently in the air, scarring the wooden step black, but they leave behind pure salt and water, which the heat from the iron turns to steam.

The steam drifts up into the black vaults of the chamber. The humidity is foreboding, the smell in the air all minerals like an underground grotto, maybe a route below land to the sea.

The iron cools on its own, the veil leaching most of its heat. Feeling the change on his skin, Draco’s not sure of how much time passes. He simply watches, waiting with his hawthorn wand.

Eventually the calm inside his chest is absolute, and he can visualise perfectly what needs to be done. He’s crouched around his ankles. Standing up straight, he sees nothing but the edge of the veil.

With a swirl of his wand, Draco manipulates the between of it into spindles, teasing them out to meet the cold ring of iron. The strands are invisible but deadly, lively, stringy like starch, and he can feel the edge growing and tensing in the air, the whispers undulating in pitch. Slowly, the tines melt into one another, forming a tent-shaped bubble with the old arch at its centre, the keystone at its point, the veilskin stretched to a round. The form weens and pops to encase the stone structure entirely, a bell jar now not of glass, but of the end of life itself.

And there, sprawled on the ground underneath the veil’s old wedding arch, visible in the moment that Draco takes a step, is their perfectly preserved specimen, new life. It’s the stunned form of one Sirius Black.

Draco imagines that the veil may have been caught in the act of conjuring this body for very nearly ten long years. He’s certain that the soul and maybe the mind have been here longer. The former body? He’s not sure where that went.

“Ennervate,” Draco casts, pointing his hawthorn wand.

The charge doesn't hit the man's body, because the spell can’t reach him in the veil. Instead, the idea of revival is loosened as it whistles over the salt and red sparks diffuse into the veil’s edge, which does not conceal Black so much as consist him.

The man jumps up to a slouch over his feet, scrambling on the platform to face Draco in surprise. He’s a bird in a cage, Draco thinks, floundering and flustered, tousled hair, and Draco thinks that
he loves him.

He looks to be the same age as the others, Black, just gone thirty, perhaps. His face is gaunt, but his hair is dark and thick. His mouth moves – quite possibly asking, *Who the fuck are you?* – and he raises his wand, moves his feet to stand, but Draco waves his arms to prevent him from doing anything that might disrupt the jar between life and death that he is caught in.

A great, monumental sense of relief starts to fill Draco from the stomach, and he’s alert, connected to the world it feels like, for the first time in weeks. This is good, because there’s a great deal left to be done.

The whispers are loud in the room’s artificial gloom, the cold humid air, but they’re not saying anything useful.

Raising his own wand once more, Draco casts gleaming white letters into the darkness. *SIRIUS BLACK?* he writes. *IT’S 2008. I SHOULD LIKE TO GET YOU OUT OF YOUR PREDICAMENT.*

The man’s expression doesn’t change, and his question seems to be the same. He gestures with his wand, quite dangerously. Sparks emerge, but he doesn’t seem to recall the spell to produce letters. Draco reads his lips. *Who – the – fuck – are – you?*

*MY NAME IS DRACO MALFOY,* Draco writes in the air. *I WORK WITH HERMIONE GRANGER,* he adds despite himself. *MY MOTHER WAS BORN YOUR COUSIN NARCISSA.*

This earns him a sceptical eyebrow.

Draco’s planned for the man’s distrust, though it’s never been an especially satisfying solution.

He hesitates, but in the end Draco spells out the question.

*DO YOU MIND IF I USE LEGILIMENCY? WE SHARE ACQUAINTANCES; I MAY HAVE BEEN MENTIONED.*

There’s no guarantee that Black will have heard any favourable report, Draco thinks, but if he can at least make it clear who he is, then they can work on building their relationship. They will need a secure relationship for what’s to come.

Sirius Black is as reckless as his godson. It’s clear when curiosity overrides his common sense: a brief moment’s suspicion holds him, it looks like, but then the man shakes his head. *Go ahead,* he mouths, with a gesture.

Draco isn’t sure what he’s looking for when he enters the man’s mind, making eye contact and casting a spell on himself rather than Black. It’s clear, just from the feel of him, that Black is a reasonably well-practised occlumens, which is a relief, in all honesty. It shouldn’t be possible for Draco to find anything too embarrassing or unpleasant – which gives him the confidence to root around swiftly for memories of Malfoy, *Malfoy,* a teenager not his father…

*Who’s this Malfoy cretin?*

And here they are.

Draco recognises the drawing room of number 12, Grimmauld Place. It looks nothing like it does now, all faded opulence in black and muddy gold, the windows shuttered against daylight, dust dulling the stone of the hearth. There are two sofas, in much the same arrangement that there are two sofas now, but these are moth-eaten and high-backed. Black sits deeply into one of them, feet
on the coffee table and a letter in his hand. There’s a snowy owl perched on the back of the sofa beside him – Hedwig, Draco remembers, the post owl – clawing dark chenille with her head tilted to accept the absent scratch of Black’s fingers.

On the opposite sofa is Remus Lupin – of course it’s Lupin – with a bearing that surely belongs to Black alone. He’s lying lengthways on the cushions, feet hooked on his own sofa’s arm, all long limbs. He’s smoking a thin roll-up cigarette. Autumn has gone in favour of harsh winter, and there’s something like a tick in his jaw, a hunger as though he’s alive.

*He’s your boy’s bête noire,* Lupin states dismissively, and Draco remembers to keep his own feelings in check. *Narcissa and Lucius’ son. Given name Draco, the dragon.* The words come out clipped, not in a sneer but something scathing nonetheless, the WWN turned waspish.

*Snivellus the second?* Black responds, and it’s the same problem that Draco remembers from every time he’s ever eavesdropped. No one cares to explain their shorthand.

Lupin, after all, quite clearly understands. He wrinkles his nose, smoke swirling gently from his nostrils. Black follows it with an absent sort of fascination. *They’re close,* the wolf says. *But not the same. Boy’s not weird enough. And he’s head of his little gang.* He seems to be committed to this character assessment. *Comes across as quite the little shit, but it’s all child’s play. Harry’s his raison d’être; softer targets are collateral.*

*Rank and file, then.* Black’s tone is equally callous, but there’s something else in it too – speculation. He’s not paying mind to Lupin’s tone, at least not for now.

*The boy’s fifteen,* Lupin dismisses.

*So were our lot,* Black replies. *Take Mulciber.*

He scores a point, which marks itself out in Lupin’s nod of concession. Neither of them speaks for a while after that, and the silence is comfortable, long as though they have all day. It’s clear that neither of them intends to do anything but sit out the hours in this drawing room. Draco can feel the calm deep in Black’s bones, at odds with the flickering, nervous irritation over the way in Lupin’s fingers.

There’s a teapot and two empty mugs on the table between them, Draco notices, to the side of Black’s laced leather boots. There’s a carton of milk, mostly empty, and a half-eaten packet of chocolate bourbons. A green bag of tobacco and a packet of Rizlas. One crystal ashtray, poorly used. Two wands, no lighter.

Draco wonders when Lupin acquired the silver cigarette case, and if it would match the décor around them.

*It’s peculiar,* Lupin finally comes out with. The roll-up has nearly burned to his knuckles. He doesn’t seem to care. *Boy could conjure snakes at twelve, so says Flitters, but he spends most of his time on parlour games. Mulciber and his…* He seems unable to find a word to match the distaste in his expression. *Ron’s more like James with these things, but even he’s never had what Prongs used to get in the dungeons.*

There’s a vision in Black’s mind, then, quite vivid – a diversion in the memory to bloodied wounds, adrenaline and Lupin, young and whippy, adroitly muttering healing charms while a boy with a young, fudge-toffee voice groans loudly somewhere else. Another voice is squeaking, unused to maturity, *They’re going to wake up!*
He’s fixated on Lupin’s hands, Black, can’t focus on anything but those fingers. They twitch over bloodied black robes and quite clearly possess a raw, painful beauty like alabaster, like the Pietà, which is funny.

They’re all down on stone – Draco can feel it under his knees – and there’s an intense, brilliant flush of Stupefy fading in the fingers of Black’s wand hand, his stick of blackthorn wood with its unicorn core. He’s lightheaded from throwing the spell too many times, too fast, and before today he’s never got the casting right. He’s laughing, because it’s a good joke, Potter nearly dying, the blood of him. It’s happened before, and every time they laugh.

Draco isn’t sure what any of this means, and he can’t work it out before Black’s thoughts are belatedly pulled from him. He’s not meant to have seen these things.

What’s changed, then, you reckon? Black asks Lupin in number 12, Grimmauld Place, not outwardly perturbed by whatever he’s remembering from school, either fourth year or fifth, maybe third.

Couldn’t say, Lupin replies. It’s generational, from what I saw. All of them are treading the boards these days, slurs only so much quidditch. That Malfoy belongs at the Old Vic.

But now there’s Umbridge. Black’s tone remains speculative, calculating and low. Irony’s lost on her, as I recall.

Yes, Lupin agrees, pulling back his leg to stab out his cigarette on his shoe. Fucking cow. Wants us all as our base. He says it with feeling, flicking the burnt-out bit of white to the table, vaguely at the ashtray. Fuck this Ministry.

Silence. Then – Should’ve been our band name, Black remarks flippantly, but not quite. It’s as though he’s spotted something in Lupin that Draco hasn’t. His speculations are tidied away with neat stitches of occlumency, leaving only charming, rolling good humour. Top of the charts. Me up front; you on lead; Prongs on bass and back-ups. Get banned like the Pistols; gross indecency. He puts the stress on gross.

Lupin laughs – a deep, rolling sort of cackle. The feeling of it seems to have been unexpected. He looks at Black with stark, bright affection, a glare of winter sun. You and James were both tone deaf, he insists, looking awfully, awfully attractive. Don’t even pretend…

Draco feels himself getting nudged out of the memory just as Black kicks his feet to the air, rocking into the sofa with intent to lurch to the floor. Firmer stitches start tightening against him. He withdraws without hesitation.

“That’s me,” Draco tells Black in the depths of the Department of Mysteries, before he remembers that sound can’t travel into nowhere. He taps a hand against his chest. “The cretin.”

Still sitting on the wooden platform, bound by a rune-cast ring of iron and a step caked in salt, Black looks confused. What? he mouths.

THAT’S ME – DRACO MALFOY, he spells out with his wand, frustrated as he’s forced to whip it through the air. HARRY’S BÊTE NOIRE FROM SCHOOL. He doesn’t mind that description, for some reason or other. I’M HERE TO FREE YOU FROM THE VEIL. NOT FOR A GAME, he adds. OR ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU-KNOW-WHO. HE’S LONG GONE.

Why should I trust you? the man’s expression clearly implies.

Draco goes for broke. YOU CAN CAST LEGILIMENS, he writes, though it seems unlikely that
Black will be able to, judging by his occlumency. OR I CAN PUSH HARDER; TRY TO PICK MY WAY THROUGH. It’s frustrating, writing all of this out; Draco’s letters are dashed in terrible wandmanship through the space of his old lines, which fade away. YOUR DEFENCES SHOULD ALLOW YOU TO REVERSE THE SPELL EVENTUALLY. YOU MAY DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION TO ANYTHING OF INTEREST.

Within reason, he doesn’t add.

Honestly, Draco isn’t sure what the man will go looking for. There is no way on this green earth that he’s letting Sirius Black anywhere near the image of his godson fucking – but that shouldn’t be an issue. Draco’s occlumency is more than strong enough to keep those images deeply hidden, even if legilimency backlash can be utterly horrific.

For a few moments, Black stares at him. There’s a speculative, suspicious gleam in his dark eyes as he grits his jaw, more intense than before. Then, as if deciding something, he makes a gracious, old-family gesture with his hand, the other holding a knee as he stays on the ground. Go on, then. He’s curious, that’s the point, and that’s good. It gives them a chance in hell of all this working. He’s admitting that he isn’t a legilimens, which is rather useful too.

It might have been easier, Draco realises, to bring one or more of the others into the room with him. But he’s agreed with himself that he will not tell any of the others until it’s clear that Black may be free or that he’ll have to move on. The entire situation is too fraught to discuss, even if they’ve all worked it out.

When he enters the man’s mind this time, Draco shuffles through thoughts like a healer seeking out a loose tooth. He needs something raw, a little painful, but not so deeply personal that it will make his skin crawl to see it. He needs to limit the backlash, no matter that he could probably, with effort, find his way to whatever he desired. Black’s occlumency is not that advanced.

He finds himself in a bedroom, once grand but now stripped to its bones with what seems like vengeance. The dimensions suggest number 12, Grimmauld Place, three windows facing the square that are slightly shorter than those in the drawing room and slightly taller than those in Draco’s flat. This is perhaps the master bedroom on the second floor. There are no curtains, and only one window is shuttered. The room smells of occupation and not a little like a farmyard, which Draco realises is because Black is lying on dusty floorboards in straw, curled against something feathery and furred, staring at a scratched hearth and slashed strips of wallpaper.

The creature is grey. The colours in the room are all a little off, Draco feels, rather yellow and green with the browns of the floor not quite red enough – but he’s certain that the creature next to him is a cloudy lead grey. Oh – Black is currently a dog, it seems, heavy-pawed and shaggy-haired, huge and dark, and he’s curled up next to a hippogriff that once tried to claw Draco clean apart for his impertinence.

There are stitches around the memory, raw but poorly drawn, such that it’s easy to shake them loose. Black’s animagus form is supposed to be a secret, Draco realises, and so is his association with the hippogriff – but these are both secrets that Draco already knows.

It’s not clear why Black is ashamed of this scene, for all its ragged edges. Certainly Draco has to suppress his own feelings of pain and humiliation at the sight of Buckbeak’s face, and he wonders if these have led him to the memory, sympathetic magic drawing him and Black and Buckbeak together. But right now the dog is simply lying on the floor, unmov- ing, drawing breath and huffing it free, smelling dust and hippogriff farmyard, pungent against the smell of the bed where he’s been sleeping.
There’s a knock on the door. *Sirius?* It’s Lupin, sounding brisk and autumnal once more, late September. *Are you coming down for lunch? There’s a meeting at three.*

He lets himself into the room without waiting for an answer, which strikes Draco as overly familiar. Black doesn’t even twitch.

It takes a moment for Lupin to spot where the man is, his frown resolving from confusion into wry frustration. *What’re you doing on the floor, you daft dog?* He says ‘daft’ with a short, northern A, regional in his affection, just this once.

At Black’s side, the hippogriff stirs, bristling at Lupin’s tone with the pride that Draco remembers.

*Buckbeak,* Lupin greets the thing formally, offering a sharp nod of respect from the doorway. He sounds like the Wireless again.

Black nudges his head into feathers, and the hippogriff settles back down.

A long silence follows, but not of the kind that Draco felt in Black’s other memory. Black is staring into feathers and Lupin is watching him, sadness growing in the line of his shoulders. Stitches of *occlumency* prickle at Draco’s sense of self, about where Black’s feelings should be. It’s unpleasant, actually – moreso than Draco anticipated – but he starts working to undo them, feeding the tension in the air.

*Padfoot,* Lupin says softly, eventually. *What’s –*

There’s a creak on the stairs or somewhere else, in the floor, in the ceiling. Lupin startles, looking behind him to the landing. When he sees no spies he doesn’t hesitate, slipping into the room and closing himself in with the animals.

*Colloportus,* he mutters, leaning on the door handle, and he seems able to cast the spell without a wand.

Black and the hippogriff are lying at the foot of a grand four-poster bed, an ancient bedspread abandoned in one great lump of torn tapestry on the mattress. Black buries his face in his paws, but Lupin swoops down towards him, purpose stripping friendliness from his expression. He’s mostly legs and hands, all angles and sandy-grey hair. Compared to the way he looks now, in Harry’s number 12, Grimmauld Place, this man is old. He ends up on the floor, a joint cracking with the movement, one knee up and the other flat to the boards.

*Come here,* he commands, as though Black were a real dog. He holds out his arms until Black slopes forward to find them.

Limbs curl around him. Bigger than a man, the dog buries his face in Lupin’s chest, snuffling into his checked flannel shirt. Lupin smells of moss, cedar, tea and chocolate, all of these scents quite distinct to Black’s nose. There’s more, stitched away, and Draco plucks it free, smelling cigarettes and whiskey, then with effort musk, skin, sex, none of these scents necessarily here but always somewhere on Lupin in Black’s memory.

Sure fingers bury themselves behind Black’s ears, scratching the scruff of his neck before they rub hard at his haunches. There are memories of the wolf tucked away in another direction, jaws biting and wild, thrilling though they should feel like terror. There’s the acid-bright smell of the wolf in the rain, and his uncanny joyful yelp. There’s a feeling in the memory of number 12, Grimmauld Place, like a kiss to the top of Black’s head, vague even after Draco’s dug it loose as though Black’s never believed that it was real.
It’s all all right, Sirius, Lupin says, his voice dry, sorrowful and thin like January snow. The words have a heavy weight nonetheless, filling Black’s sensitive ears. We’re both here and we’re alive, Padfoot. I’m in London for a while and Harry’s coming soon. We both need you.

With one last tug on the stitches, Draco unlocks the tide of Black’s deep, swallowing misery, the pepper-sharp pain of it all, the sound of him snarling, not crying, as a dog. Thoughts emerge as clearly as if they’ve been spoken.

It’s funny, though, isn’t it, Moony? Don’t you think so? Me back here, full circle, practically in the womb. I could lie here till the end of the war and it would make no bloody difference. I could die a dog and you could bury me in the garden. It’s absolutely fucking hilarious. All of it since James and Lily, all of it since I boarded the Express and sat under the hat… Fuck you and fuck Harry, I say, fuck it all. They’re right, I don’t know him. I’m nothing but a handful of letters. So fuck him. Fuck –

Get out, Draco feels himself being told. Get out.

Something breaks, and layers of occlumency stitching snap like jaws, forcing Draco out of Black’s feelings, out of his senses and the smell of moss, out of his memory, out of his mind and back into himself, retribution hard and fast, pushing so that Black can follow.

It’s a tumbling sensation, and Draco feels small, disorientated. The memory slips around him clean and whole.

It’s… It’s 2004, and Draco fears that he may fancy Harry Potter.

Fuck me, he thinks. I’m FUCKED.

It’s a stupid thing, really. He’s still out of sorts from his turn on the common, when he was faced with the screaming muggle revenants. They shouldn’t bother him, these feelings. Harry Potter has been triggering more than the odd impure thought for nigh on ten years now. But those impure thoughts have typically come on him in times of high stress, whereas now he is trekking with the man through woods, approaching Malfoy Manor, and the stress has either passed or remains yet to come.

Their pace is steady, but it’s June. The sun is high in the sky and the air is fragrant with leaves. By Draco’s side, Potter has the first touch of sweat glistening around his temples. There forever in Draco’s peripheral vision, he’s either brushing hair away from his forehead or pushing his glasses up his nose, fidgeting and frowning and it’s distracting, really, like the exertion colouring his cheeks. Birds are twittering, rustling through branches as the breeze dapples Harry Potter and Draco himself in shifting patches of shade and sun.

“Are you certain that you’re not an auror?” Draco asks because he needs the distraction. He lets his eyes linger on the strap of Potter’s apparently bottomless leather backpack, the tan hide breaking up the pale yellow of his shirt, the sleeves of which he’s rolled up to reveal the wiry muscle of his arms, more dark hair. “It would be useful if you were…”

“For the last time,” Potter insists, his patience clearly wearing thin. He wrinkles his nose, as though he can feel an insect on his face. His voice is just the right amount of rough. “I’m not an auror. I work in Misuse of Muggle Artefacts.”

Because he’s looking at Potter’s backpack, not at him, Draco scoffs. “No one in Misuse of Muggle Artefacts carries around a bag of tricks like yours.” Potter has everything in there, from what Draco’s gathered. Yet it’s not even close to half full.
Glancing down to the leather straps and his thumbs, Potter sighs. “It’s not a… It’s an Hermione special,” he explains as they continue to walk, his vowels flat and his consonants distant, and it feels as though Draco is being drawn into a confidence. He loves confidences. “One handy bag with everything you need to make a hasty escape and otherwise solve a mystery.” Potter grimaces, mocking himself as he adds, “I’d make them standard issue, for everyone, but no one listens to me, because I –“ And this is the joke, the refrain. “– I work in Misuse of Muggle Artefacts.”

“Of course you do.” Somehow it’s attractive in itself, the idea of Potter carrying around an emergency escape kit, undoubtedly full of righteousness and wit and a corkscrew. It’s intolerable.

They walk a few yards further, and Draco has to brush a branch out of the path. He holds it back for Potter, sap on his fingers, making an exaggerated gesture with his other hand. It winds up Potter enough that he – finally, Merlin – reaches breaking point.

“Look,” Potter says, his jaw tight, his dark hair wild as always, and it’s better. It’s worse. Twigs crinkle-crackle under his feet as he turns and stops in the path. “I couldn’t be an auror without passing Potions NEWT, all right? And I couldn’t pass Potions NEWT without going back to Hogwarts.” He wipes his forehead, again, looking at the ground, rubbing his eyebrow. “I didn’t want to go back to Hogwarts, so I never got Potions, and Hermione and McGonagall had to drag me through Defence, Transfiguration and Charms. Arthur did me a favour.”

“And, no, I don’t want to work at the Ministry forever, but for now it’s perfectly fine, thanks.” Fanks, or not quite.

The move to London has not been good for Potter’s diction, but it seems that he can still turn a neat little speech. This one in particular seems practised, as though he’s had to give it before. Draco wonders to whom. “You ought to have hired a tutor full time,” he says, surprising himself and surprising Potter, who looks over to him with a scowl. Draco knows what he means; he’s supposed to have been wound up by Potter’s shirty tone. “That’s what Mother did for me.”

“You didn’t go back to school?” Potter’s curiosity seems unintended. He rubs his nose.

“You couldn’t pay me.” There’s no way that Draco will ever set foot back in that place.

Potter seems happy to accept this point without comment. “To be honest, I didn’t have much patience after everything,” he says, as if settling into the confession. “Working for three was enough.” His tone is perfectly moderate as they trudge along together, flat and suburban and aimless. “Wouldn’t have expected you with a tutor, though. Didn’t they freeze all your cash?”

It was the entire Malfoy estate, frozen by a Wizengamot too grateful for Malfoy intelligence, too suspicious to let the family walk free. Draco can still see their sharp eyes raking over his mother and father and him, their expressions a lot like the Dark Lord in the end, hungry for what they could get.

Potter likely doesn’t know the difference, Draco thinks, between cash and other assets. It’s enough to make one wince, thinking of what must be happening to all of his poor gold.

“You would be surprised what the Malfoy name can get on tick,” he says quickly, before his thoughts can run on further. This is Harry Potter’s innocence, he supposes. This is his righteous, bristling naïveté which gives everyone and everything a chance. This is what tears him straight out of Ministry politics and fixes him into Arthurian legend. “The man has been paid now,” he adds,
He was a funny man, Draco’s tutor. Up from France, and so deep into his books that he apparently hadn’t noticed when the entirety of wizarding Britain had descended into murderous chaos. Every day he would ask Draco when his parents were going to finish clearing out the dark magic from the Manor, as though they’d simply set off a box of cursed heirlooms in the attic.

“Hermione said,” Potter reflects, as though he’s merely thinking out loud, and doesn’t care to manage his thoughts for Draco’s ears. “In five years there’s only been you two accepted by Avalorne.”

First Granger’s bag, and now her report… This is all getting a little close to the bone.

“Yes, well,” Draco covers quickly, forcing himself to look at dirt and twigs and leaves and trees, not Harry Potter in the sun, not Granger’s friend, who could be his, according to the woman herself. He can see Granger in one of their seminars, bright and brilliant and laughing, trying and failing to tuck her hair back, racing him and the other attendees as they discuss their reading on Gamp. She’s making tea and talking about Ron and Harry – Harry, Harry, Harry – as though she’s set herself the task of making Draco join their neat little circle. She’s listening to Draco’s jokes about the Department of Harry Potter.

“She says that you’re working on Avada Kedavra.”

“Don’t!” Draco flinches, back in the woods.

“What?” Potter’s pausing on the path again, his eyes concerned and green.

“Never say a curse incantation that you don’t intend to cast,” Draco insists, a tight feeling in his chest. “Did you not pass Defence NEWT?”

“Sorry,” Potter replies, as though unnerved. He glances Draco’s way another few times as they move on again. “I didn’t… I can’t summon the hate for the Killing Curse anyway.”

“You’ve tried?” It’s Draco who stops them this time.

It’s not innocence, Draco thinks then. Harry Potter bites his lip, aged twenty-three, having been through too much to care what other people think of him, or at least to care what Draco thinks. “No,” he says at last, holding a branch out of the way. “Look, I just meant that it must be rough, working with that all day. But it’s important, I s’pose. If we could ever find a way to block it, you know, without someone needing to die…”

And in three years, Draco’s never thought of posing that very practical question to the research that he’s been conducting. It’s beautiful in its simplicity, its audacity. It’s –

“You get stick for it, Hermione says,” Potter plods on, though they’re both still stationary, and he’s looking at their shoes. Draco can’t help it; he’s looking at him. “But you should ignore all that. The stuff we’ve been doing with these ghosts… Someone needs to understand these things. We’ll never get anywhere if we aren’t willing to think about stuff that no one wants to talk about.”

Thank you, Draco thinks to himself before they carry on, but he doesn’t say it out loud.

They both say little after this as they take the last half-mile through the woods, until Draco leads them out into the long grass so that they can approach the edge of the estate. There’s a stile that breaks up the fence into the orchard. The sun’s hotter out here than underneath the trees, and it feels like a rough burn on Draco’s skin, the first hint of a headache.
“I’ve got sun cream in my bag if you need it,” Potter says, hitching his backpack over his shoulders again. He’s joking, the bastard.

It’s rather too late now. Ignoring the taunt, Draco makes his way to the stile with his head held high, and Potter follows him.

“How d’you even have a warded orchard?” Potter tries another tack, clearly amused and unwilling to let it go. “Bit random.”

“The aim is to grow fruit, Potter,” says Draco, because it’s easy.

The man makes a face, but there’s a smirk in it. Draco feels a flicker of terrifying fascination once more, because here he is, Harry Potter, the most famous wizard of their age, only three NEWTs to his name, making faces ten minutes after justifying research into the foulest spell that wizardkind can work.

They arrive at the stile when Draco gives in. “My mother –” he begins to explain the wards, climbing up the wooden steps and over, but –

The wards are active. He feels them as he crosses the boundary, a familiar snap and buzz that comes to him straight from the war. His mother’s magic, like a well-placed whisper telling him to have patience.

“Oh.”

This is odd.

“Malfoy?” Potter asks, his auror-like frown back on his face, his shoulders set square.

“They’re active,” Draco says out loud. “The wards.” He frowns, because it doesn’t make sense. These are his mother’s wards against the Dark Lord, hidden in plain sight by the orchard’s wards against pests. “Here,” he directs, holding out his hand, lost in his head for a moment. “Take this else I’ll disappear and you won’t be able to find me.”

Potter takes hold of him without hesitation, and it’s like a recurring dream. His hand is warm and solid, and Draco’s pulling him to safety, fingers gripping tendons, the smell of dry wood and green leaves in the air. Potter smells darker than that, just briefly as he passes into Draco’s space, sour and salty, the glance of his head rough and black like a curse. With his hand in Draco’s he climbs over the fence and jumps down to the soft ground on the other side.

“It’s a spell keyed to your family?” Potter asks once he’s landed, pulling off his glasses to wipe his face with his sleeve and to clean his lenses on the tail of his shirt. “Who would they be active against?”

“It’s only me and Mother,” Draco corrects, feeling blood pump through his legs as he steps down into dappled shade. The cool of it is a relief. “They’re old agricultural spells,” he explains, “but with adjustments, to make it so...” He shakes his head. “If they’re active, then something’s not right. Mother will be at the pumpkin patch.” He looks through the cherry trees, which are coming into fruit. “Come with me.”

It’s around now in the memory that Draco begins to feel the presence of another in his mind. And yet it tallies with his own sense of unease, the nerves on the back of his arms, and in the end he can’t place it, can’t return to himself. The presence, whoever it is, has enough curiosity to follow as Draco leads Potter through the trees to the centre of the orchard, encouraging him to remember times past when there was a snake in the house, when there was a werewolf, when there was fear
and Luna Lovegood locked up in the cellar. Draco fights it, but that’s a familiar feeling.

On this midsummer day, in 2004, Draco’s mother is sitting on an old wooden bench by the greenhouse which overlooks the pumpkin patch. She’s wearing lilac and white summer robes, covered from shoulder to ankle with a wide-brimmed hat perched on her head. She’s going to scold Draco, he expects, for exposing his arms and the back of his neck to the sun, not to mention his nose, which already hurts.

When they first arrive, however, she’s distracted. Her wand is in her hand and she’s watching something flitter through the trees.

It’s her patronus, Draco realises, a tiny quail no larger than a cooking apple, though it’s effortlessly graceful on wing. Another turn, and then it escapes into sunlight. He remembers its vivid white form like a star in winter darkness, a model that he needed to follow and a pick-me-up for their spirits.

“Draco,” his mother says in greeting. She rises to her feet, putting her wand away. “I wasn’t expecting…” She seems to shake herself. “And you’ve brought Harry Potter to visit us – well, well, well.”

Potter, being Potter, smiles awkwardly. He’s clutching the straps of his backpack and slouching on one leg. “Nice to see you again, Mrs Malfoy.”

It’s the aftermath of the war all over, an awkward meeting in the Ministry atrium when Draco’s father deigned to shake their saviour’s hand. His mother took Potter by the shoulders and they shared something, a nod, while Draco looked away and wondered how it could be that the war was over and the four of them were all still alive: three Malfoys, one Potter.

Draco doesn’t know what he expects from his mother today, but he feels dread when she smiles at Potter and laughs. Her hands are ethereal in the sun, one touched to her mouth. “Narcissa, please, Harry,” she corrects. “Let not old friends stand on ceremony.”

“All right.” Potter shrugs, common to the last.

Draco has never asked what happened between his mother and Potter that day in the Hogwarts forest. Frankly, it’s bizarre to see his mother met by Harry Potter’s rough-and-ready deference, just as it is to see Harry Potter met by his mother’s most private whimsical charm.

It makes his chest burn. “You never told me that you were such close chums,” Draco says.

Potter grins at him, because he’s a shit – but Draco’s mother shoots him a look to quell trolls. “You should know better than that, Draco,” she says shortly. “One does not mock an important alliance.”

It’s enough to make Draco very nervous indeed. The feeling that he’s being watched is intense, almost overwhelming. “Mother, what’s going on?”

“Oh, you know your father,” his mother says lightly, and it’s not reassuring. “He’s receiving some guests at the house, and I’m loath to disturb them.” A smile. “One of them thinks that he’s found a Deathly Hallow,” she drops in, as though it’s of passing relevance. “So of course they’re all plotting.” Boys will be boys and men will be men, she might as well be saying. “Bring back the Dark Lord, stoke the Ministry to chaos…” She shrugs with elegant leisure. “The world is their sickleclam.”

Draco looks at Potter, and Potter looks at him. He remembers the wand, and there’s no way that Potter abandoned the cloak – which is so obviously the cloak from the myth, now that Draco
thinks about it. What was the point of reading all those myths about death if he’s not going to remember them? And what does that leave but the stone? The stone, the stone, and that’s where their ghosts have been coming from. Lo.

“Forgive me, Narcissa,” Potter says, all cordiality, the light of battle in his eyes. It’s arresting as much as it ever was. “But didn’t Voldemort spend the last year of the war torturing your husband?”

“And the rest of us,” Narcissa confirms, as though it’s quite the joke. Draco sometimes wonders about the way that his mother was raised. “But we cannot let the details get in the way of a good plot now, can we, Harry?”

“What –” Draco begins, but he finds that he can’t finish. His throat is closed tight; he can barely breathe in the heat of the sun. He never does well when someone says the name.

His mother continues, her sarcasm thick, her expression open and serene. “We can be grateful that Draco’s Aunt Bella is no longer with us,” she says, adjusting her hat. “At least for now. Far be it from me to complain about family, but her courtesy as a house guest always left something to be desired. Of course one is willing to host her little pets, as many as she likes, but lifting blood from the floorboards, well, when one’s elves would rather boil their heads than enter the East wing…”

Merlin, the blood. The elves. Draco was called to the kitchens once and he can’t even imagine it now. His mind refuses, whether through occlumency or pure self-preservation.

“Breathe, Draco,” his mother is saying there in front of him, taking his hand and spelling a rune on the back of it, the horse, eoh, the short E, . Its colour’s a flinty black-blue, and Draco’s arm is red. He’s calmed like a jolt to the chest. “I dare say that the sunstroke isn’t helping,” she chides.

Potter’s looking at the rune with a speculative frown before his gaze flicks up to meet Draco’s, his eyes a startling green.

“What are we going to do?” Draco finally manages to ask, looking away.

“If I can make a suggestion,” Potter says to Draco’s mother, all business, back straight with his thumbs loosely tucked behind the straps of his bag. “Narcissa,” he adds. “Might you be willing to break us into your house, so that we can steal whatever it is that they think is a Hallow?”

Of course he won’t confirm or deny the facts either way, the fucker. Draco feels quite lightheaded.

“Harry,” Draco’s mother says, a cool smile on her face. “Nothing would give me more pleasure.”

There’s surprise that’s not his own, and there’s grief, upon him too early.

Draco shakes his head, feeling love, feeling grief, feeling the cool, damp air that fills the veil room of the Department of Mysteries. There are tears in his eyes and it’s still raw, after all these years.

He takes a needle to his heart and stitches it closed, binding the edges tight and opening his eyes. He’s sorry, so very, very sorry, just for a moment. For all of it. For everything.

But it’s not June; it’s not yet May. It’s 2008, and Sirius Black is looking at him like he’s family.

The man is sitting in the bell jar of the veil, relaxed, leaning back to the floor on one hand. The wooden platform circles around him, while the arch swoons high above his head. He says something, and it comes with a quizzical frown. What happened after that? Draco supposes he’s asking.
Rubbing his eyes, Draco takes another moment to sear his heart closed, pulling thread.

*WE SUCCESSFULLY MADE OFF WITH THE STONE,* Draco casts quickly, before he can think too much about it. *THE COUNTRY’S BEEN AT PEACE FOR NEARLY TEN YEARS. MY FATHER SUCCEEDED IN KILLING MY MOTHER AND HIMSELF. I LIVE IN A FLAT.*

The final detail is a nervous tic, he admits it.

Black makes a gesture for him to carry on, and Draco supposes that he wants to know about Harry, just like everybody else. *HE’S DADA PROF AT HOGWARTS,* he writes. *YOU CAN ASK HIM ABOUT IT IF THIS WORKS.*

Merlin, Draco hopes that Black doesn’t have a death wish, the way that it seems he once might have done.

But Black, it seems, is amused more by life. He’s laughing – he’s laughing at Draco, who goes on while his parents are dead, and somehow it doesn’t seem cruel. It’s almost as though he likes him, Draco thinks, bemused, and he’s laughing at this ridiculous world, because he thinks that Draco will see that it’s funny.

Maybe he saw what Draco now realises – that his mother was ready to die. Maybe he heard the embarrassing parts about Draco liking the look of Harry in the sun with his backpack. It seems so childish now, his infatuation with those tools of escape.

*Get on with it, then,* Black seems to gesture, twirling his wand through the air.

Draco remembers the next part of the plan, to remotely teach the man how to consciously disapparate to the Nowhere Room. Thank Merlin that he made copious notes.
Sirius Black, part 2

Who knows how long it takes? Once Draco has written up the principles of the plan in a numbered list of headings and subclauses, capital letters dashed through the air, Black becomes a committed student where he’s trapped in the veil. He holds up his fingers to indicate which point he has a query about, and then Draco waxes on until Black’s quizzical frown is joined by a thumbs up.

The first stage is to successfully vanish an item to the Nowhere Room. For this, Black is working with one of the leather boots that Draco remembers from the vision of his afternoon with Lupin. The man’s first attempts achieve nothing out of the ordinary, but this is as expected. In fact, it’s quite reassuring: one of Draco’s fears has been that Black would have lost his *Evanesco* during and after his imprisonment. The boot disappears from the air with a swish of his wand and then returns straight back to Black in the bell jar.

From here, Black absentely lets the boot disappear and return to existence once every few seconds, switching his wand through the veil’s insides as he reads Draco’s notes and apparently thinks. It’s quite irritating, but there’s nothing that Draco can do to stop him. He suppresses the urge to write up a request that the man desists.

A while later, but sooner than Draco might have guessed, the boot comes back missing two of its eyelets. Black pauses, blinking and pointing out the new result with his wand until Draco recognises that something has happened.

The man became an animagus by sixteen, Draco reminds himself, and the disciplines of Transfiguration are all interconnected.

They both stare at the splinched boot, Black holding it up with an astonished look on his face while Draco stands as close to the platform as he dares to see that it’s true.

Everything in the veil is part of it, Draco remembers. The vanished objects that return are only ever sharing the infinite space that Black stands in, winking into another dimension that Draco can’t see. Those that don’t return are becoming something else, somewhere else.

Harry hasn’t used the resurrection stone on Draco, Draco reminds himself, and he shouldn’t use it ever again, because the thing is powerful beyond the telling. The elder wand lies buried. And so even if Draco knows the theory, there is very little chance that he would be able to find his way out the veil if he fell inside. He *cannot* stand closer, no matter how much the whispers suggest that he should. He *cannot*.

He and Black both take a moment to breathe when it’s clear that the eyelets are gone, before Draco tells Black redundantly that he’s going to the Nowhere Room.

Once a week at least, Draco disapparates to the Nowhere Room to check for lost witches and wizards, replacing any food that’s out of date. There have only been three visitors besides him over the last ten years – four including Lupin – and there aren’t any here now. Yet there are, in this simple beige-pink bedroom off a bathroom and a kitchenette, two steel eyelets taking up space in the middle of the floor. They were once enamelled black or painted, maybe, but a lot of the colour has since worn away to silver, seemingly where they’ve been rubbed by thick woven bootlaces.

Draco picks up the eyelets, and they’re cold in his hand. He apparates to his office, because apparating to the veil room is a foolish, foolish thing to do, and the eyelets come there with him. He runs into Granger on their shared little landing, and she looks at him as though she wants to ask
a question. It seems to be late afternoon.

He swaps one of the eyelets for the full cup of tea in Granger’s right hand, pressing it to her left hand’s fingers. She squawks in complaint, but only out of habit.

“Lupin and no one else,” he tells her, locking eyes before she looks down. “I trust you to have patience.” It’s bollocks, but fuck if he doesn’t need to tell someone, and fuck if he’s having James Potter turn up to nag him. Lupin will only keep anticipating the worst-case scenario. He can’t tell Harry.

“No, no, it isn’t,” Granger says in disbelief, and Draco thinks that she realises that the eyelet in her hand is not the last of Sirius Black, but hopefully the start of him, a match for the hope that he keeps in his own fist.

They’ve seen three people back to life so far, but this resurrection was always the goal, the aim, as far as there was one – the resurrection that Draco wanted to see born at the end of his hawthorn wand, calling on magic rather than pure dumb luck in a magical world, or whatever else has been the reason. Draco thinks that Granger understands that, and what it means.

She’s panicking, sweetheart. “And it was the moon on Sunday, oh dear…”

“My thanks for the tea,” is what Draco says, because he needs it. “Only Lupin,” he reminds her as he rattles back downstairs.

_I WANT A WHOLE BOOT AND THEN AT LEAST THREE THINGS IN A ROW_, Draco whips up when he’s returned to the veil chamber, cool and dark.

Black makes a gesture, And?

It gives Draco great pleasure to flick the eyelet up into the air and catch it back in his fist. _I GAVE THE OTHER ONE TO GRANGER_, he writes, not concealing his grin. He doesn’t mention Lupin.

Black grins back at him, looks at the boot in his hand then holds up a finger. He puts the shoe back on, its top two holes naked of their eyelets, then unlaces and removes his other boot instead.

Working the new boot down from his heel, the gesture that he makes with his blackthorn wand is of a complete circle turning in the air.

_A whole boot_, Draco realises that he means. The former is compromised, aesthetically and magically, and they should be practising with things that are wholes. It’s a catch that Draco should have made, but it gives him confidence that he is not the only one thinking this through.

The room is full of thoughts, in fact. Draco’s outlined instructions remain shimmering in one part of the air, while his extended remarks run next to them in scattered paragraphs ready for consultation. The words circle the veil jar, point by glistering point.

Black reads his way through them again, standing in the bell of the veil. He does this several times over the period that passes next, sending the boot away and then back. It always returns, but it doesn’t splinch, and that is probably progress given what they plan to do.

He asks for further clarification on a few of the written-up points. Draco attempts to offer whatever he can.

From here Draco watches again, pacing on the floor, pausing and thinking – is there anything that
he’s missed, is there anything that can be better explained? He works his way through the text, over and again, editing sentences to sharpen them, ordering the logic of his thoughts.

The irritating switch of Black’s wand becomes less regular, and as the man sinks into concentration Draco realises that he is not dealing with that Sirius Black who became an animagus at sixteen, or at least he should hope that he isn’t. This is not a venture for someone precocious and cocky.

It is, however, the right task for the first wizard ever to escape from Azkaban without aid. A wizard who knows that after twelve years it will be worth it to wait another six months, but equally that opportunities can pass and fade in an instant.

At some point, Draco and Black both end up crouched low to the floor, divided by life itself and a cold iron ring, spread salt, staring at a motorcycle boot as if it might be passed between them by the force of their intentions alone – which in the end it will be. They’re surrounded by writing, glimmering in the air in Draco’s roughly drawn capitals.

Draco has a mug in his hands, long emptied, and he sets it on the ground as his own thing to stare at. He drops the eyelet inside it with a tinkering clatter, pours it out sometimes and drops it again. He reworks point 2.1.2 five times.

Later, with little fanfare, Black rises to his feet and flicks his wand. Evanesco is on his lips, and the boot vanishes away. A reverse flick of two precise twirls would be expected to bring it back, just like every time before. This time, however, the boot doesn’t come.

Draco disapparates; the boot is in the Nowhere Room. He returns to his office and lights are on in the staff room, but the rest of the Department is dark; he heads straight downstairs.

Black’s eyes follow him as he returns with the boot and he nods, grave. He waits as Draco sets the boot next to his mug on the floor, checking it for its integrity. The thing seems to be as much a part of this world as the mug, stiff in parts and creased in others, scuffed on the inside curve of its toes. Rubber, leather and stitching. Its eyelets look much like the ones they made earlier.

The next step is all there in the message still shining above Draco’s head: he wants at least three things in a row. Another nod, and Black removes his muggle leather jacket, his belt and a coin pouch from his back trouser pocket, which holds one single galleon and two little knuts. These are set on the ground in front of him. For a short while, or longer, he turns to face away from them. He reads his instructions again, and then Draco’s sub-explanation 4.2.7 one more time. Then there are three flicks of his wand: Evanesco, Evanesco, Evanesco.

The things don’t come back.

Draco disapparates; the things are in the Nowhere Room. He checks the pouch for its coins and takes it with the belt in his wand-free hand, tossing the jacket over his wand-free arm. He returns to his office.

There’s a light on, startling. There’s Lupin, standing and leaning over Draco’s desk, wheezing a little as he breathes, poring over the forest-green ink of Draco’s thesis on the Killing Curse, taking notes. His fingers fumble with the quill when Draco appears and he raises his head.

He had to be there at Hogwarts, Draco remembers, if only to witness it.

“Is that…?” he asks, disbelieving.

Draco doesn’t stop to talk, leaving Lupin for the stairs.
The things join the others outside the veil and Draco sets them in a line, the pouch and its three coins like old spots of blood on the stone. He tips the eyelet out from the mug and flicks it up into the air before catching it, feeling the metal of its form. He throws it up again and lets it drop into the mug, setting that on the ground too before drawing his hawthorn wand. He meets Black’s eyes and nods.

Black shrugs as if to say, *Here goes nothing.* He grins, flicks his wand and vanishes himself.

The one final uncertainty in all of this remains a single question. What would happen if the final act of vanishing didn’t work, and Black only found himself turned into another dimension of veil?

Draco’s fairly certain that it would be back to the drawing board. For now, Black winks out of the chamber, and there’s no one in the bell jar to call him back.

Draco disapparates to the Nowhere Room, and there’s a man there screaming in agony.

It was a nightmare that woke Draco from sleep. This wasn’t a strange thing, even now, ten years after he’d joined the Dark Lord in earnest in 1996, with this the 2000s with the end of the year the same digit. The images behind his eyelids were generic, typically – screaming and bloodshed that he couldn’t pin to a single memory. Sometimes he heard his Aunt Bella screaming the Cruciatius, the Killing; other times it was the Dark Lord, or his father, or him.

He was fairly certain that the voice this time had been Sirius Black, who always looked a little like Andromeda, a little like Teddy, a little like Draco’s mother and a little like him. He had been screaming and raging against Bellatrix, who looked like all of them too.

Draco always forgot the specifics of these dreams in the end, but every time he found himself trapped in the moment when his eyes blew open, when the violent pulse of his heart made him certain that he was dead or that he’d killed someone else, and it always felt the same.

“*Fuck,*” Draco swore, jerking onto his back –

– and digging his elbow straight into Harry, who wasn’t supposed to be there.

“Bah!” the man shouted, his hand shooting from somewhere underneath Draco’s pillow, rough across Draco’s shoulders.

They must have fallen asleep, here in late 2006. If it had happened before, the both of them together, then Draco didn’t know about it. Maybe that was surprising. Less surprising was that it had happened now, here in Draco’s flat, where he could feel the prickles somewhere underneath his ribs that told him that Harry was home, just like Granger’s curling vines behind his ears and the sunlit, sounding strength of her boyfriend in his shoulders. When pushed, Harry said that Draco felt like bitter honey on his tongue, here at home, whatever that meant. He couldn’t taste it himself.

“What the fuck?” Draco reacted, sitting up. It was hardly articulate, given that he’d already sworn – but they were somewhere deep in the middle of the night, the room dark and cold around them. The prickles were fine, but Harry’s chest and arm were not expected.

“What the fuck?” Draco reacted, sitting up. It was hardly articulate, given that he’d already sworn – but they were somewhere deep in the middle of the night, the room dark and cold around them. The prickles were fine, but Harry’s chest and arm were not expected.

“Draco?” Harry asked, squinting, presumably as blind from his missing glasses as he was from the night time. “Am I still in your flat?”

“No, we’ve apparated into your fucking wankbank.”

This made Harry laugh, and Draco was transfixed by the spread of the smile across his face. The
shades of him were grey-purple-black-blue-brown, black hair on a grey pillow, bright dark eyes, shadowed skin. He tweaked Draco’s ear for some reason, then encouraged him down by the back of his head. “Come here,” he said.

Draco relented, slumping over him, and he put his mouth to use.

“OH MERLIN, OH FUCK, FUCK ALIVE, GOD HELP ME…”

There’s a man roaring in pain, sat solid on the carpet floor of the Nowhere Room and curled around his left inside leg. His knee is almost thrashing, so there’s motion in it, but there’s blood too, so much blood, spilling from underneath him and staining outwards into puce. There have been so many hours of whispering silence; the spit and burst of a full voice in Draco’s ears is now quite otherworldly.

He’s laughing, the man. He’s laughing like this is the end of times. “AH-OH FUCKING HELL, MERLIN, MEDUSA, FUCK-AH-AH-OH BUGGERING SHIT, HELP ME, FOR FUCK’S…”

He looks whole, but he also looks like he’s dying. Draco doesn’t think in words, falling to a crouch to conjure wadding, to conjure bindings that might hold heavy cotton tight against the inside of a leg which is only red where there should be black denim – because Draco’s expertise is death, not keeping things alive, and he doesn’t know what to do. He conjures and he conjures and he conjures.

“AH-OH, OH, OH…”

Then he grabs the man around the back of his shoulders, a rough embrace, and he apparates them both in a mess to his office, because it’s the only route out that he knows.


And the man keeps chanting as they swirl into new existence, some of the noise left behind but most of it brought with them. They appear with a pop, but the keening, high-pitched hyena’s laugh of a man terrified out of his wits is much louder. It’s enough to send Lupin – who should not be in Draco’s office at all, actually – clattering forward into the desk, knocking it so that the ink well falls and clonks and spills green ink onto the hard floor just like all the blood in the Nowhere Room, though here the stuff’s another colour.

Draco’s conjured canary, which he had forgotten about and which Granger’s been feeding, he assumes – it screams, buffeting wings around its cage, its voice high and alarmed and alive.

“Mungo’s!” Draco roars, his voice a hard, clear snap of lion-fanged jaws, and the other man barely has time to seize a spare shoulder – Draco barely waits for him – before he disapparates them on again, because he’s the only one he knows who can vanish in and out of the Ministry like a wraith.

They appear in another place, and Draco can only imagine how the movement feels to the man in his arms. Like white and perfect terror, he surmises from the noise still blurring out of him. They’re on the floor, and Draco’s spelling wet conjured dressings back against blood, harder, harder, harder than he could push with his hands. The man who’s bound up with him is still wheezing, laughter in his nose, “FUCK-OH-FUCK-OH-FUCK-OH-FUCK…”

But they have a third, who’s bellowing, “SPLINCHING!” right into the waiting room, his voice dry and hoarse like a gale. “SPLINCHING!” His voice cracks with old pain. “Please, Merlin…”
The healers react, because they know what to do. Splinging is the realest physical emergency that a wizard or witch can know, because it’s impossible in the first moment to be sure what’s missing, whether it’s flesh, bone or key stretches of the veins and nerves themselves.

Sirius Black, Draco’s greatest achievement, is seized and sedated and re-swaddled, whisked away. Draco is left on his knees, covered in blood that shows as oil slicks on his black robes and as red all over his hands and his hawthorn wand. He thinks he can feel something wet on his face, and maybe that’s blood too.

He’s shaking as he stands, and a witch is asking if someone’s all right, repeatedly, varying her intonation and the details of the question. It’s background noise, all of the sort that one expects from the reception room of St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

“Draco.” There are hands on his shoulders, quite suddenly, and they’re accompanied by a face that fills his vision. “Draco, the healer’s asking whether you’re all right. You’re not physically hurt, are you?”

Now, Draco thinks. Why is his third-year Defence against the Dark Arts teacher asking him whether or not he’s physically hurt? Harry Potter’s his favourite, isn’t he? Not Draco. It’s the same as with everybody else, quite unfair.

“I think he’s in shock,” the man says over his shoulder. There’s a ragged scar that cuts behind his jaw, down his neck, but otherwise he looks very well. Too well, though he’s wheezing. He’s shaking his hand as though he might be missing part or more of a fingernail. “He’s… Well, I shouldn’t say this, I imagine, but he works in the Department of Mysteries, and…” Professor Lupin’s face reappears. He’s pale, and he doesn’t seem willing to meet Draco’s eyes. “Draco, breathe the way that I’m breathing, all right? In.” He breathes. “And out.” He exhales.

There’s a lot of this rubbish. It goes on until Draco’s rolling his shoulders with the man, and he remembers that he hasn’t had a Defence against the Dark Arts lesson in a very long time, unless one counts the witless ramblings of an off-duty Professor Potter, which Draco does not. Remus Lupin, Teddy’s father, he died in the Battle of Hogwarts, only he also did not, because he’s currently alive, pending certainty, which no one sensible would ever hold their breath for.

“A cup of sweet tea and a biscuit, I think,” Lupin says, with a winning smile for the mediwitch as he claps Draco on the shoulder. She’s still looking at them, her green robes stained with some of the gore that Draco has soaked up like a sponge. He’s a rake, Lupin, Draco remembers. “He’s a bit iffy around blood, but he’s had much worse. You know what these unspeakables are like.” Lupin grins, a joke in his tone. “You couldn’t help us out with some siphoning, could you? My Tergeo’s useless on anything but red wine.”

They don’t want the healers asking too many questions, and Draco realises that Lupin has worked this all out, whether consciously or not. Chauvinism is his answer. Maybe it’s supposed to be flirtation, but chauvinism can make any man invisible, and it probably comes easily to a bastard rake like him. Just give in, he’s begging, practically asking the healer for a drink.

“Sorry; I’ve got to get back if you’re both all right,” the witch says, her tone suggesting that Lupin is nothing more than an oldschool sexist, but maybe she’s willing to play. “I’m sure that someone can help you at reception,” she offers. “We’ll bring you news of your friend when we can.” Then she’s vanished.

“Right,” Lupin says once she’s gone. The word friend remains in the air, and for a moment Lupin seems lost behind one of his masks. Draco knows the feeling. “We’ll ask at reception, get some tea and – and a biscuit,” he concludes, desperate for a smoke, Draco’s sure. “And that’ll be fine.”
“I need to go back to the Department,” Draco comments, though it’s not actually true, or maybe it is; he can’t remember. They join an orderly queue. “I made him practise on half of his clothes.”

“I’m sure he’ll live,” Lupin says passingly, clapping Draco on the back, both of them covered in blood.

The injury isn’t mortal, in the end, not today. A wedge of muscle and artery went missing, and it’s not clear where they’ll have gone. They’re probably waiting to be left for dead in the veil. Draco didn’t check what was left before he disapparated.

“Along with my other boot,” insists Sirius Black, hopped up on analgesic potions while his flesh knits together. The man’s cheeks are white from his missing blood, currently replenishing. “You know the one, Malfoy, with the eyelets splinched off. Its integrity was fucked!” He laughs and laughs. “I knew that it was never about to come with.” He huffs now, aloof and very, very high. “It’s probably what did for my leg, because I fucking nailed that spell – put me back in there; I’ll show you.”

“Malfoy,” Lupin quotes, as though anything Black might say would amuse him today. He doesn’t comment on the rest of it. He and Draco are both sitting to one side of the hospital bed in comfortable green chairs, their robes and skin about clean enough, though Lupin was the one to cast Tergeo in the end. “Why on earth are you calling him Malfoy?”

“It’s what Harry calls him,” comes Black’s reply, his pupils blown wide where he sits against puffy white pillows.

Again, Lupin laughs, a little winter-dark titter that he can’t seem to help. “I didn’t realise that Harry had mentioned…”

“He certainly did – I remember.” Black can’t seem to focus his gaze at all. “And he calls him it later too; I saw it.”

“What?” Lupin asks, amused, confused.

“We conducted a brief trust-sharing exercise,” Draco feels the need to explain, gripping the arm of his chair to keep himself solid. “Legilimency.” And that never sounds good. “Nothing sordid.”

Lupin is not amused by Draco, only plainly, soundly astonished. “You performed legilimency across the veil between life and death,” he says.

In his bed, Black shares Draco’s shrug, looking stoned, and it’s official. Draco is fond of him, the rebellious fuck. “It only requires eye contact and the presence of a mind,” Draco explains. “If one accepts Al Amir’s theory of the mind-soul-body complex in relation to standard spectral remains, well…”

This is irrelevant, he remembers.

“Eye contact?” Lupin asks.

“He’s a fucking genius,” Black declares to Lupin. He sounds exceptionally old-money, and Draco isn’t sure for a moment whether or not he’s putting the accent on. It’s gratifying anyway. He can feel it in his face. “Boy wrote it all up like a textbook.”

Boy?
“In those fairy capitals we could never… And they were legible too.”

Lupin shakes his head, distracted and amused. He throws Draco a look like a feast on Halloween. “I look forward to reading it,” he tells Black.

“It cannot be more than a single short chapter,” Draco clarifies, though he can feel the tingle of something in his chest. “The first premise is controversial.”

Again, this is irrelevant, but it takes Draco a moment to remember why.

“I need to shrink the veil back down,” he says to no-one, to himself.

He doesn’t rise from his chair, caught in the thought of it. It’s soon clear, in any case, that he might as well not be there.

“Moony, I’m sorry I died.” A clear and straightforward declaration, in a voice as gold as galleons. “Fucking misadventure, that was.” Farking.

There’s a pause, and then the reply comes quietly in the murmured tones of the Wizarding Wireless Network. “No need to apologise.” A little briskness here too. “I only managed two more years, in any case. And I – I picked up a wife and son.”

“A wife and…?” Black sounds bewildered, his head lolling on the pillow. “All right,” he accepts.

“All right?” Lupin is hoarse, wintery once more. “Is that all that you have to say?”

With the many potions that he’s on, it’s entirely possible that Black doesn’t understand the conversation, or else won’t remember it later. Either option or something else would explain his confused blink.

And Draco should be leaving, he knows, but his body seems to have excluded itself from his brain’s commands.

“I married little Dora Tonks, Sirius,” Lupin says. “Like a rag.” At least he admits it, Draco thinks. “We have a son, Teddy; Andromeda’s been raising him with Harry, ever since Dora and I… He’s just turned ten.”

“Dromeda and our Harry?” There’s an upward lilt to Black’s brutally mannered voice. “A boy named Teddy?” He muses on the idea for a moment. “When can I meet him? I love him.”

Lupin tuts, impatient or else feeling something more emphatic. “Really, Sirius, there is no need for this –”

“Oh, what?” Whot, mostly breath. Black is expansive, loud for a moment, before grumbling. “You are top-shelf-whiskey fucking shaggable, Lupin,” he declares, quite irritated, stoned, raising an arm as though it should be sweeping through the air. It drops almost immediately. “Everybody knows it. Put you out in the open and you’ll be hunted down.” He makes a feeble gesture with his hand, which may be intended to mimic the snap of jaws. “I can stay out of your way,” he offers vaguely.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Lupin’s eyes rake over him, from his face to his hand and back up to his eyes. “No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m the one who fucked off.” Farkdoorf. “Again.”

“And now you’ve fucked back in, haven’t you?” Lupin tells the man shortly, as though this is a
terrible inconvenience. “Again.” He’s leaning forward on his knees, all limbs and joints, his voice
dark and his expression intent. “Bloody jammy, if you ask me.”

“I must go,” Draco declares. “The veil is a hazard. The iron boundary is insecure.”

Neither of them is fucking listening. “I had to come back,” Black croaks. The unspoken reasons
why sit thickly in the air.

Lupin’s demeanour softens. “Just wait until you see who’s here,” he says kindly, obtuse. “There’s
a couple of faces that I think you might remember. And Harry’s…”

Thankfully, before Draco can truly start panicking about the only man in the world who would be
stupid enough to break into the veil room now and get themselves killed, surely, Harry Potter
himself bursts into the ward like a bat out of the abyss.

He blames Granger, Draco. She must have been acting twitchy.

“Draco!” Harry shouts, in such a state that it’s embarrassing. He catches Draco’s eye and the words
pour out. “Are you – your office, Malfoy, there’s – there’s blood and the desk… I’m supposed to be
heading up… Hermione’s getting Ron; what’s…”

Gradually, Harry’s cuckoo-clock little brain comes to acknowledge that Draco is sitting in a
visitor’s chair, not the bed, and in the bed is a man who should by rights be deader than dead.

“Oh Merlin’s beard,” he finishes, the sound of it low in his throat and stolen from one Arthur
Weasley, that other father. “Sirius, it’s you.” And then he’s crying like a banshee, or maybe a
fifteen-year-old boy. “What are you doing here? No, no, you can’t be –”

Harry’s crying sets Lupin off, to the point that he excuses himself for the loo, surely meaning the
fire escape. “I – I’ll, er… Yes,” he says, edging out past Draco.

"How are you here?"

Black is so stoned that Draco suspects that a hug from a real banshee would have made him blub,
let alone a childish dive-bomb from his godson, who falls over the other side of the bed and slams
into the man’s chest to be held. Thank Merlin it was only Black’s leg that was splinched, Draco
thinks.

For his part, Black seems incapable of grasping that Harry is not only alive but of good age and in
rude health. “Harry?” he says, his arm frail and loose across Harry’s shoulders. In his accent the
name makes sense as the familiar form of Henry. Harry, for certain. Harry of England and St
George, whose day it must be, or close, the twenty-third of April. “Herry?” The man reforms his
jaw, focusing on the task of finding an Ah. “Harry.” Hari, he ends up with, as if trying to say hara-
kiri. “Ha – how old are you, sausage?”

Harry laughs, crying, the sound rich with high-pitched hysteria. He stumbles back to half a hug,
precariously leaning over the bed and shaking quite visibly. “I’ve no idea!” he says, pulling off his
glasses to wipe his face on his sleeve. “I don’t understand how…?” he tries to ask again.

“I…” Draco tries to tell him.

Black isn’t listening to Draco, and seems to think that his godson is hilarious. His laughter is deep
and rough as he ruffles Harry’s hair, or splats it with his hand in any case. “I proclaim you one-
hundred-and-five!” He’s completely off his head. Harry slouches down beneath the force of his
palm. “Supreme Mugwump!”
“But of course!” A sob catches him, and another laugh, but Harry plays along, now down to his knees on the floor. He’s on the other side of the bed from Draco, giving a clear view of his wild, gleeful expression as he wipes his nose, transfixed by their new arrival. Black’s uncertain hand falls off his hair to his shoulder. “I have many views,” Harry says. His voice cracks, wet as he puts his glasses back on. “But I was elected on a campaign about treacle-tart-flavoured Bertie Bott’s beans.”

“Oh yes? What’s your position?”

“You know,” he insists. “That they’re the only ones allowed to be that funny yellow-brown colour.”

Draco wonders if he hasn’t in fact fallen into the veil after all, and this conversation is the afterlife.

“Hear, hear!” Black barks anyway, his grin like light on his waxen face. “I like it. Let the crumpet ones be a true yellow!”

They both burst out laughing, perhaps in reference to something long past. Draco is certain now that he’s stuck in his chair.

When Ron and Granger arrive, there’s another flood of waterworks, and everyone keeps talking about Every Flavour Beans, at least after Black’s initial greeting. “Why aren’t you two little twiglet children?” he complains, getting louder, it seems, the more that he recovers.


“Ron, it’s Sirius!” Harry tells him, pointing at the bed and climbing off the floor. “He’s awake and he’s in a bed in Mungo’s!”

“I can see that, mate.”

“You, little Ronald, what’s your view on the raw-pastry-flavoured bean?”

When Lupin comes back, at last, Granger and Ron and Draco leave Harry and Lupin to it. Or Ron takes charge and makes them, anyway, because Granger keeps sobbing into her hand and compulsively patting Black’s feet through the bedclothes.

“Come on, Team Mysteries,” Ron tells them, long-suffering as he pulls Draco finally free from the chair. “The lot of us are going to get kicked out if we’re not careful.”

Lupin seems happy enough to be left. “No, no,” he’s saying, holding his knees. “I’ve never seen the point of chocolate-flavoured things that aren’t chocolate. Ban them. Tell Honeydukes to bring back the Madagascar bar from the 74 World Cup.”

“I must return to the Department,” Draco tries to tell Ron. He steers him and Granger purposefully into the lift and up to the tea room, ordering them all hot chocolates, as well as a sugary pastry for Draco — no, two, better make it two. “My office is a catastrophe. I need to fill out an incident report for the Nowhere Room and conjure new carpet. Atria and Oratories has samples.”

“So,” Ron mocks him as they all sit down at a sticky wooden table, “the important stuff.”

Granger is not recovering, shaking her head and playing with the whipped cream floating in her cup. “I cannot believe that you’ve done this, Draco,” she says. “You have to write it up,” she goes on, waving her spoon and compulsively eating half-spoonfuls of white. “With Harry’s mum and dad, I’m sure that we can get him cleared, and it will just have to be one of those things, like the
Fairy Isle Incident of 18… Oh, when was it? 1824? No. No. Oh, anyway… Twelve years in the veil; three accidents – it’ll be a question on the History of Magic OWL. 2008. At least when they broaden the syllabus beyond all those wars wot we won, rah rah rah, and won’t that be a day? I mean –”

“Hermione…” Ron says softly, covering her shaking spare hand with his.

The gesture immediately makes Granger drop her spoon with a clatter and cover her face with her hands. Most of her hair is clipped back, but there’s still a heavy frame of it, bunching over her shoulders. She breathes heavily.

“Oh Draco,” she demands with a sniff, “why? Why did you have to do this now? Harry’s so close – I know he is – but he’s still not ready, and now it’ll all be bound up with his gratitude and it’s not fair on you and you shouldn’t have to have done this…”

For a moment, there’s nothing that Draco can say. They’re sitting around a wooden table so blond and varnished and sticky that he’s not even sure it’s real wood. There’s some kind of pumpkin-raspberry-sugar crystal pastry on a plate in front of him – another one behind it – and Draco isn’t sure he could keep down a single bite of either of them, because he doesn’t deserve food at all. The taste of chocolate is chalky on his tongue, the milk of it heavy in his stomach.

“What.” That’s all he eventually manages.

He remembers throwing a chair in the garden of number 12, Grimmauld Place, using only the anger in his blood. The cup in his fingers is warm and nearly empty, and he doesn’t remember drinking its contents.

“It’s all right, mate,” Ron reassures him, all freckles and earnestness. “We know that you did it for Harry.”

“I did it because it’s my work,” Draco spits, unable to believe that he has to keep saying this. “I’m Keeper of the Veil and Steward of the Nowhere Room, Reader of the Other Kingdoms. It’s a big fucking deal.” His knee jumps under the table, jumps and jumps until Draco holds it down, clanking his cup to the saucer, unseeing as the words pour out of him. “Can you imagine, trying to get home from the Leaky, or going to the shops, thinking, ah, I’ll cross the road, only to end up in the absence of anything – nowhere, fucking gone? Can you imagine being stuck –”

“Yeah, we know,” Ron insists, throwing an arm around Granger the way that he always does, because she’s pushing at her face now, distraught and wet, when fuck, curse her, she has a core of infernal bonfire flames. “Just like we know that you did it because you’re not over your parents and you’ve got a god complex that needs to be reined in. But you also did it for Harry.”

“He’s always popping into your flat,” Granger pins him, tremulously. “But he never asks you to stay downstairs.”

“Half the time you’re both there you won’t say a word.” Ron.

“You’re our friend, Draco,” Granger finishes mawkishly. “We want you to be happy.”

This is awful, Draco thinks. This is the most awful fucking thing that’s ever fucking happened to him. His heart is pounding, and it’s really worked too hard today. He can feel its pulse all over him, in his head.

“Will you please stop trying to analyse my relationship with Harry?” As the words escape him Draco knows that they think that they’ve won. Also, the name comes out much too close to Herry.

“Aha!” Ron says, snapping his fingers and pointing at him, arm across the table between them, hot
chocolates forgotten. “Relationship, you see? First step’s admitting that you got a problem, mate, and we know, we *know*…”

“I am certain that you do not,” Draco says, because they don’t.

“Oh Draco, it’s so obvious,” says Granger, with pity.

“New Year’s Eve, 2006,” says Ron, just as Draco imagines that he would in an interrogation. “The two of you go missing for a snog, and from then on it gets painful. You don’t understand how many —”

“No, you don’t understand,” Draco tells them, because he sees no other way out. “New Year’s Eve 2006 is the night that we broke up.”

They go silent, stunned or appalled. “But…” Granger begins. Fails. Tries again. “But that was over a year ago.”

Draco laughs in their faces.

Boxing Day, 2006, Harry was behaving very oddly. He appeared in Draco’s bedroom like he was disorientated, and seconds later he was pulling Draco’s book from his hands and snogging him against the headboard.

Draco assumed that he was drunk, but it was no clear thing.

“I’m going to marry a woman like Ginny, you know,” was the first thing he said, several minutes later, wrenching Draco’s underwear from his hips and up his legs.

“Are you now?” Draco replied, startled, edging down deeper onto his back. But of course, he thought. He’d been telling Harry so for years.

“I saw her; Ron had tickets to her match.” Harry was clicking his fingers, and not to make flames, dear reader. He kissed Draco’s ankle, mouthing at the bones. “We got drunk and she snogged me.”

“Mm.”

“It was like going back in time.”

Draco wasn’t listening. Not really. He was lying in bed, the mattress pressing high on his back while he stared up at the ceiling, just like any other Tuesday. Harry had his knees wedged to box him in, holding Draco’s foot to his jaw while the fingers of his other hand worked into places that Draco didn’t like to think about. The smooth, stroking, pushing violent touch of them was good; made his heart flutter; made his hips jump; made him writhe and kick because *fuck*, Harry Potter knew how to make him go.

Draco wasn’t listening, but there were questions in his head nonetheless.

Did you like it, Harry? Did you want to fuck her, the way that you fuck me?

The voice in his head was dreadfully common. Draco didn’t reflect on it.

There was something heavier in him a time after that, easing in at an angle that Draco didn’t care to contemplate, slick and sloppy and triumphant as fingers pressed in a long wave up his thighs to his knees. Harry’s weight and heat pressed closer, and he was breathing out as though this was relief, then in time to his hips, good at this, always. One hot, wet hand stroked from where a cock was
going into him to where a cock was growing out of him, dragging up and around into a grip and then skimming back down, all in time and then again.

Biting his lip, Draco looked down from the ceiling. Harry was grinning over the gleaming mess he’d made, always so proud of himself.

Potter, Draco thought, not quite able to speak.

“Did I tell you?” he breathed through grunts, tightening his grip on Draco’s thighs as he withdrew a little further and pushed back in. “I snogged her.”

“Surprised you – didn’t do half the team,” Draco managed to gasp. His chest burned. “Two whiskies and you’re anyone’s.”

With a snort, Harry ducked his head and concentrated, teeth to Draco’s knee brutal like the fuck of him. Draco tipped his head back, eyes to the white above them, complaints that weren’t his falling out of his mouth.

“I’d go round theirs for more than Christmas, right?” Harry managed after a few moments, his voice strangled, deep, all of him like a tide that was pulling Draco somewhere dark.

Caught up in it all, Draco’s eyes closed shut. It had just gone Christmas with as little ceremony as always, now well into Boxing Day evening. These were the dark hours: too early for bedtime, and yet everyone’s hangovers were making them hurt and the high of Christmas Day was well and truly sunk. Draco had been a little down himself, but then he’d received a visitor and now he was caught in a storm. He didn’t know what he was feeling.

“Me and the Weasleys, matching jumpers, cake and a kiss when I’m thirty.” He was in a very strange mood, Harry Potter, holding Draco’s knees. Draco tried to tune him out. “All those candles. Molly’s cakes are the best.”

There was pleasure in Draco’s spine, in his throat, behind his eyelids. He put an arm over his face, sweat dewing above his ribs. His legs were struggling to find grip on a hot, kneeling body and the whole business felt wonderfully unclean.

“It’d be like Ron and Hermione.”

Yet there was the voice in Draco’s head, and it was getting worked up.

Ron and Hermione are barely ever round the Burrow, you berk.

“Part of the family. No need to owl in advance.”

They got into that row with Ron’s mother, when Granger said that she never planned to change her name. It was the only thing she had of her mum and dad from before.

Eventually there was a grunt, a pause. It was ridiculous, these false starts – a Harry Potter special in sex, and more and more so over these last few months. Draco found the knees under him and scratched welts with his nails, because the bastard was not stopping now.

You were there, Draco thought as the man inside him jolted, grabbed his wrists, elbows, shoulders, all of him hot and present, in his face. There was wet pressure to the side of Draco’s mouth, not a kiss and not a bite. He was wet, raw, a little rough inside of him, Harry, gentle in his movements but crushing in his reality, hands squeezing bone.
You were right fucking there! the voice shouted in Draco’s head, his hands finding hair, thick and resistant, his mouth stealing a proper kiss. Your brother snapped, said he’d always known her a Granger, had fallen in love with a Granger, shared his life with a Granger and hoped that he always would. He took her hand and disapparated straight from the dining room to the Forest of Dean, no pudding no nothing. They were there for hours, doing fuck knows what with the rabbits.

His breath was heavy in his throat. Harry’s nose slid against his, wet with sweat, his gasps loud.

Is that what you’re thinking of? Us against a tree? On the forest floor? Because Ginny – Ginny wasn’t at that lunch. She was in South America. It was over a year ago. It was the day that they knew that they were Ron and Hermione. It’s mythology, they talk about it so much.

“That’ll be us, I reckon.” The words came out of Harry in a choked whisper, tempering his movements even as his hands held tight enough to bruise and his nose was in Draco’s cheek.

It took Draco a long time to come. That had been true for years now. It was normal. It wasn’t why Harry denied himself, the way he did ten times a night. As far as Draco could tell, it was simply that Harry didn’t like it, the way a soft touch could make him arrive in minutes, seconds flat, and then get him up again barely any time later.

“Short courtship, short engagement.” A kiss on Draco’s cheek, under his ear, deeper thrusts that made him swallow goblets. He was tender, sometimes, the slaggy bastard, and it felt like thrills of static. “That’s how it goes, when you know.”

Sometimes, Draco got the impression that Harry didn’t like coming at all. He’d grown tired of it, in favour of fucking and sucking till the end, the way that he was fucking now, bold lunges that knocked the breath from Draco’s lungs. It made no sense, because Draco rather thought coming was the best part. He just wasn’t very good at it.

“We’ll have to stop doing this, I think,” Harry mused, whispering into his jaw, all of him a drag on Draco’s equilibrium. It was never a joke, when either of them said it, though Draco hadn’t in a very long time. Yet Harry was still quoting Draco, from some old joke that he didn’t remember, “It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Christmas was terrible, wasn’t it? The thought came unbidden. That’s why you’re round before New Year’s. On the edge of it, Draco’s thoughts always became plaintive. His stomach dropped. Did Ginny ask to try again? Did you tell her no?

There were teeth on his jaw, and in the heart of him there was something blunt and hot that made him swallow stars. He saw black.

You told her no, you fucking – fucking idiot.

“Will you not damn well come for me, you bastard?” Gritted teeth, gritted voice. Stars. Harry Potter. “I have had the worst fucking day.”

He didn’t swear, Harry Potter, as a rule.

But sometimes he did.

“Fuck, fuck – oh, oh…” Sometimes he crowed, sly and proud. “Yes, yes, that’s you, Draco Malfoy. Mm.”

The end of it felt like dying, Draco was so very sure.
He joined Draco with a laugh then, Harry, hot and bubbling, pushing and heavy until his hands slid over the sheets and he sank to crush Draco like ballast, burying his face under Draco’s chin. His shoulders accepted Draco’s arm as they breathed heavily and then as he burst into drunken tears, his breath hitching with wretched sobs, on and on.

There were words he was saying, but none of them made any sense.

“Go to sleep,” Draco told him, kissing his hair, his own eyes stinging as he squeezed Harry closer. “Just go to sleep.”

He didn’t stay the night, Harry Potter, but he did this time, because Draco didn’t want to let him go.

As the morning turns to nine o’clock on the day of Sirius Black’s return, Harry Potter goes to Hogwarts to fulfil the duties of his teaching post. He has a responsibility. Granger and Ron insist on following Draco back to the Department, where his own responsibility has dwelt for as long as he dares to remember.

They hound him with questions and other nonsensical remarks.

“And it really was mutual?”

“All the cosiness, mate, you have to admit…”

“He’s been so much less friendly when he’s been…”

“Would you not say yes if he asked you?”

“Not that I’m – I mean, he’s no McLaggen from school, and I realise that most people in their twenties…”

“What are you saying’s wrong with him? Because it’s clear that he fancies you, Merlin save’s.”

“We’re not the only ones who’ve noticed. Other people…”

"Bloody Draco this, bloody Malfoy that…”

It takes a certain level of effort, on top of what has been a very testing day – or two days, since it now seems to be morning again – but Draco ignores them, working his way through his pastries, which taste far too sweet. He floos into the Ministry like a good employee, and takes the lift down to the Department of Mysteries, uncertain who all these people are, in the building for once.

His office is surely still a mess, and the Nowhere Room is a concern, but Draco’s first priority is the veil. He finds his way into the chamber, glad that what lies there is enough to shut Granger and her boyfriend up.

“Don’t touch anything,” he snaps over his shoulder. “And especially don’t go near the platform.”

It’s all just as he left it. The outskirts of the room are filled with his conjured explanations, gleaming and rambling in white letters of his handwriting. His last communications with Black remain there too.

I WANT A WHOLE BOOT AND THEN AT LEAST THREE THINGS IN A ROW.

I GAVE THE OTHER ONE TO GRANGER.
There’s Granger’s empty mug on the ground, eyelet inside, the whole boot lying next to it, then three things in a row: the jacket, the belt and the pouch, three coins like spots of blood on the stone.

On the platform, past the salt on the scorched step with the rune-inscribed iron above, under the arch inside the bell jar of the veil, there’s the compromised boot with its missing eyelets, as well as the thin slice of what was once Black’s leg. It looks like something from the butchers, bloody and wet.

“Ah, Draco!” comes another voice then. It calls from the darkness, making Draco jump. “There you are. Do you know, I received the most interesting call from St Mungo’s.”

It’s Vespers Avalorne, his boss.

“And Hermione too!” she says as though this is a social gathering, emerging through the letters of Draco’s explanation. “Auror Weasley,” she adds more seriously.

Ron stands up straight, shuffling his robes on his shoulders. “Ma’am.”

“Not at your desk today?”

To Draco this is clearly as a joke, but Ron blushes, the colour high in his face. Apparently Vespers is known differently in other departments. “Thought there was an emergency, ma’am.”

Vespers nods, and then, as though remembering something, she turns on her heel towards the platform. “Of course, the splinching!” She peers forward, eyeing the pound of flesh left near the archway, inside the cold iron ring. “A bit dangerous, this, Draco,” she remarks, indicating the invisible skin of veil. “I like the salt, but it could have done with a few blinky lights. Warning, warning, warning, fuck off,” she quotes, making flashing gestures with her hands.

“Yes, well,” Draco agrees, abashed. “I intend to vanish it all back to normal.”

“There’s a reason that the arch was made to look like something out of gothic horror,” Vespers continues, indicating the old veil. It’s not clear to whom she’s lecturing. “They built it in 1839, and the idea was rather to put people off.” She walks around the outside of the platform, sighing. “And I suppose that we’ll have to leave that bit of leg and the boot for the next poor bugger. Bit messy, isn’t it?”

“The boot was disintegrated,” Draco admits, conceding the mistake that he should have realised at the time. He glances at Granger, who’s frowning, and he supposes that she would have caught it. “Cocked up the disapparition.”

“Ah well, never mind,” Vespers dismisses, now pulling a long, tight roll of parchment from inside her robes. “It’ll be a useful extra paragraph for this, which needs some work.” She thwacks the roll into Draco’s hand like a sword. He begins unfurling it, only to realise that it’s a copy of all his notes from the air in the room. There’s rather more to it than he’d thought that there would be. “You need a lot more on the first premise, my dear, because you know that no one will like it.”

Black had accepted the idea with a shrug, but seeing it written so baldly now makes Draco cringe.

1. **TO APPARATE IS TO VANISH AND CONJURE ONESELF INTO A NEW LOCATION.**

“We’ve had this conversation before,” Vespers says, with no allowance for their location, nor for their audience. “Full agency over the self is an incredibly unfashionable idea.”

“I’m not trying to say that there’s complete agency,” Draco mutters, looking down at parchment.
He never has done. “Only that there’s enough, pragmatically speaking.”

“You’re in the wrong career for pragmatics, son,” says Vespers, a joke in the twitch of her lips. “Appeal to one of the popular fudges, if you want my advice... Though it’s true that the world could use a new piece on apparition, if the spirit moves.”

Draco nods, trying not to think about how much work this is going to be.

“Good,” Vespers says, and that’s the conversation finished. “Hermione!” she continues, while Draco double-checks the parchment and starts vanishing his writing from the room. He doesn’t read every word, just skims to check that the points all look the way that they should. “How’s that piece on déjà vu?”

2. TO BE NOWHERE IS TO REJECT ONE’S ENVIRONMENT.

“Oh, it should be out in the next month or so, Vespers; I’ve got the proofs in and am nearly through...”

“Excellent. I want to put it in this year’s report. If you’ve an accessible précis...?”

“I can put one together – do you mean for the Minister?”

3. TO BE NOWHERE IS TO REJECT ONE’S IMAGE OF SELF.

“And the other lumps. No more than six inches – four would be better. Stress on the fieldwork; I want it clear that Mysteries is in with the Libs. Turrah now, chickens.” Heeled feet clop on the stone floor, as if Vespers is leaving. “Oh, and Draco –”

He looks up, down to 3.1.5 in his check.

Vespers is frowning at him mockingly, standing not far from Ron, who doesn’t seem to know how to set his face. “Whatever bloodbath’s in the Nowhere Room will keep,” she says. “Vanish your bubble of death, because that is a hazard, my son, and then conjure yourself into a new location, please. Preferably home.”

He rolls his eyes, but supposes that he’ll have to do as he’s told.

The thing is, Draco thinks, as he continues to check that the parchment has caught everything, vanishing text from the darkening air – the thing is that he believes in the first principle. He believes in it ardently, like something pure and white.

4. TO BE PRESENT IS TO TRIANGULATE ONESELF AGAINST CERTAINTIES.

They’ve come a long way from believing in true separation between the fields of conjuration and apparition. Old theory states that witches and wizards might conjure whatever they like, be the masters of animals, vegetables and minerals – but to wing oneself across country is to pitch a prayer upwards and hope, because to be nowhere is to be with Merlin. Of course, everything now leans much more towards the pitch-a-prayer model of things than old-fashioned beliefs in wizarding mastery. It’s all about visualisation these days.

Draco didn’t explain it that way to Sirius Black. He wouldn’t have known how. How does one visualise one’s way into nowhere, let alone out of it?

It’s probably the fudge that he’ll have to go with, anyway.
Granger and Ron are chatting while he works.

“She’s absolutely bloody terrifying,” Ron’s saying about Vespers.

“Oh Ron.” Granger’s rolling her eyes; Draco can tell. “People always say that about women in positions of power. She’s no more cut-throat than a wizard would be. I suppose you’d say that Robards made it to where he is by acting like a happy little lamb?”

“Robards says that she once vanished all the caffeine in the building because Fudge pissed her off.”

“Now that’s pure gossip, plain and simple. Draco,” Granger interrupts herself, “I know that you’re concentrating, but do you really not believe in the difference between conjuration and apparition?”

Draco ignores her, because his explanation of principle 4 is rather extended and bitty, and he’s still pissed off about the Harry business. Also, he’s always known that Granger wouldn’t agree, which is probably in part why he never told her what he was doing.

“What’s the problem?” Ron asks, and Draco supposes that he at least has always been pragmatic.

Granger sighs. “To say that conjuration and apparition are the same is a bit like saying that everything already exists, and there are no new possibilities. Successful apparition doesn’t change our nature or the nature of the world, after all. Its focus is the relationship between us and our environment. If we say that conjuration is the same, then we’re saying that everything we bring into being is already out there somewhere, and we’re simply manipulating its place in reality. There can be no new jam,” she glosses. “We’re only moving it around. Or spreading it, maybe…”

5. TO BE PRESENT IS TO ACCEPT THE FUTURE AND TO RECOLLECT THE PAST.

“Which winds up any right-thinking witch or wizard, because…?”

“Because it’s so blinkered and because it’s so sad,” Hermione complains. “It’s an attitude that says that our past determines our future. Novelty is an illusion. Our bodies, our minds, our souls…” She starts again. “All right. Say that we imagine that there are infinite possibilities, then maybe we can have everything, whatever we want. But even then we’re still picking yoyos out of someone else’s giant cosmic bran tub, rather than creating, rather than dreaming…”

“Alternatively,” Draco drawls, finishing his check – and he’s worried to hear himself sound rather like Professor Snape – “we may say that every time we apparate we create ourselves entirely afresh, like a conjured teacup, and that’s why the fields are the same.” He needs an example, or a concluding statement. “To have magic is to have no stable existence, and we’re neither really here nor there until we are.”

“Er…” says Ron. “Sounds a bit dangerous to me.”

This isn’t what Draco believes, which is probably something closer to Granger’s rushed explanation, but the turn of his sophistry at least shuts her up. He wonders to himself, idly, how the idea would work with the practical guide to resurrection that he’s holding in his hands.

It would help, rather, with the slightly unpleasant ethical quagmire of bringing Black and his accidents back from the dead. Because it would be to say that the versions walking around and drinking up Kreacher’s cellar are not in fact the same people as those who died, so their presence in real life is by no means to be feared at all.

“It bears little relevance to our present situation,” Draco dismisses, because the write-up is for him, not everybody else. With the parchment roll bound back up, he turns his attention to the veil’s
forlorn near-empty bell jar and makes ready to vanish its extension, hopefully without bursting the thing and trapping them all in the choice between life and death until the end of time. “Now, if you’ll let me,” he says, “I really do need to concentrate for this.”

Thankfully, they let him. When it’s done, the boot and spare flesh of Black’s leg are lost into two dimensions, that infinity, and the whispers beg him to reach out and see where they’ve gone.

Draco determines that he ought to perform some checks.

First, he banishes and summons the coins from Black’s pouch, rolling them around the platform just to be sure, and then he vanishes the iron hoop as well, every grain of salt from the scorched lower step, still not entirely sure that he trusts himself to walk on the platform, not that he ever does, or ever would, or ever really understands why it’s there.

They could do with building a waist-high barrier, he thinks, or something else that leaves the veil open for observation yet offers a modicum of protection against its vertigo. They could add some blinky lights.

The problem is, he imagines that the prospect of safety would only stoke the whispers into louder voices of temptation.

“Right then,” Granger says in the end, looking around the room. She picks up Black’s jacket and belt, passing them to Ron before she gathers the coins into their pouch and picks up that along with her mug from the staff room. “Shall we go and see what’s happening at the hospital?”

A little bereft now that the room has returned to its former state, and not sure what day it is, though he knows that it’s the morning, Draco decides that it might actually be time to go home. “Do what you like,” he says. “I’m going to bed.”

He disapparates, maybe to reveal his bedroom as something that he was always already in, or maybe to create himself anew from its motes of dust.

It’s the former, for now, but we’ll get there.
Harry Potter

All right, so there’s a year to cover.

It began, surely, at the stroke of midnight between 2006 and 2007, when the sky exploded with distant fireworks. Clouds hung low with the winter, and number 12, Grimmauld Place was a way north of the celebrations on the Thames, in Bloomsbury, but the display was enough for the gloomy London-orange sky to turn white, then red, then blue. Rattles, bangs and pops accompanied the colours, out of phase.

This stroke of midnight interrupted what had been a long, quiet snog against the rear conservatory of number 12, Grimmauld Place, between one Draco Malfoy and one Harry Potter. They had been talking, but that had segued into this, and Draco had felt no reason complain. His arms were around Harry’s neck as the new year came in; they now fell to his shoulders, and he was staring unabashedly into Harry Potter’s eyes. Every now and then the fireworks gave them enough light to flash at him, green.

“We missed the countdown,” Harry said, while Draco thought whimsically, I love you.

They were standing on the last of the decking, and by rights they should have been having it off. But they weren’t. Harry was smiling, up against the glass, his expression soft as though he’d heard Draco’s thoughts. His arms were settled around the lower rungs of Draco’s ribs with no obvious reason why, but they seemed to be happy enough where they were for the moment. Draco knew that this time, at this party, for certain, there was only one person whom Harry had touched like this, and only one person whom he’d kissed. It was him. It was odd.

The whole evening had been odd. Harry had popped by Draco’s flat on his way downstairs, told him that there was no such thing as being fashionably late and dragged him to the drawing room before anyone else could arrive. Granger had still been worrying about getting Jools Holland on a screen somewhere. They’d each tried one of Kreacher’s cocktails, which had tasted like lemons and ginger and treacle, strong enough to cleave one’s gullet in two. After that, they’d stuck together, and Harry had snickered while Draco had made catty comments about his guests.

It shouldn’t have taken all evening, but of course their hero had eventually started defending the no-hopers, drinks leading him into trailing anecdotes about what they’d been up to or how they’d helped him out with something, blah blah blah blah blah. Did Draco care that it was Luna Lovegood who’d painted the walls of the parlour with flowers, fruits, blossoms and blooms to speak of welcome and protection in a beautiful sea? Of course not; he cared that her hat made her look like a mushroom, and why was she wearing a hat inside anyway, the silly cow?

This had all led to another drink and a conversation about hats, which made a change from people not wearing hats, Harry was sure, just as he was convinced that Draco loved Luna Lovegood, he loved her, he loved her, he loved her, don’t lie – and he’d kept saying it, prodding Draco in the side until he hadn’t been sure that he was ever going to stop laughing.

“We can’t keep doing this,” Draco told Harry now, a minute after midnight, because it was true. Harry, after all, was going to marry a woman like Ginny, who was beautiful and brave and successful. Draco was going to marry someone like Pansy, if she ever wrote back, who could laugh like an ox and shriek with inelegant passion despite her perfect training in appearances. He was going to marry someone who knew how the game was played, if he could, so that they would both be aware going in that their fucking would feel exactly like killing and being killed.
Both Draco and Harry were going to father children and repopulate their names. It was two-and-a-half years since Draco’s parents had died, and they would have pointed out long ago that neither he nor Harry was going to get anywhere if they only spent parties in each other’s company – don’t make me spell it out, dearling Draco.

There was a look on Harry’s face now, just for a moment under the London sky. It was as though he wanted to fight it – to resist the inevitable death of what they had. It made sense. The man had never been able to hold onto a proper set of parents, so he lacked a full appreciation of generational responsibility. He didn’t feel the churn of the seasons – as indicated by the fact that he was wearing short sleeves outside in what was now January – and it was hard for him to realise that one couldn’t shag around forever.

And he was beautiful. He was so beautiful and brave and successful, all on his own. So he would be fine, Draco knew.

Most of all, Harry wasn’t stupid, which was one of the reasons that Draco and everyone else who snogged him surely loved him, the way that Ginny Weasley one day would most of all. He shook his head, letting go as Draco stepped away, and he pushed his glasses up his nose. “I know,” he said, crossing his arms against the cold. “You’re right. I’m pretty sure that Ron and Hermione suspect something.”

“Ugh.” Draco crossed his own arms against the nausea, because Granger and her boyfriend had been truly awful that night. There’d been some joke about what it was like to be tall, which had convinced Granger’s boyfriend that she needed to be given a piggyback tour of the house. The woman’s shrieking, Merlin. “If I am forced to sit through the tale of the Forest of Dean one more time…”

“I dunno why Ron hasn’t proposed yet,” Harry complained, his eyebrows high. “It’d be such a fun wedding.”

“Well, it’s a difficult proposal,” Draco observed, because it seemed obvious to him. He turned to look at the lawn, leaning back against the conservatory by Harry’s side. “What would he be saying?” He held up a hand, weighing it out. “They live together and they’re happy. Oi, Granger,” he offered in what was a spittingly accurate impression of the man. “Yeah, our relationship is perfect, but I’ve been thinking that we should change everything about it…”

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Harry dismissed. “The point is to make a show, so that everyone knows where you stand. It’s about changing the way that other people see you, not the way that you see yourself.”

This sounded about right, perhaps. “He’ll need to find her a decent ring,” Draco said.

“Mm,” Harry agreed, and Draco realised that they’d gone off track.

“Anyway,” he said, glancing at Harry again and holding out his hand. The night was cold, and the fireworks from the Thames were still heralding in the new year. There was a party to get back to, and Draco knew that he should make the acquaintance of the new Hogwarts Potions Master, whose name escaped him at this moment in time. “Potter, it’s been fun.”

“Likewise, Malfoy,” Harry agreed, shaking his hand.

They should have let go, after a few moments, and later on Draco would tell himself that they did. But there was also a brief exchange beforehand, and Draco found himself staring into green eyes that everybody loved, reminding himself that his feelings were nothing, or at least nothing special.
“You’re always welcome to visit my flat,” Draco assured Harry Potter, though it should have been obvious. Potter was welcome in everybody’s house, and these days Draco was only downstairs. “It won’t be appropriate, eventually, but I’m certain that you’ll recognise when.”

Harry nodded sincerely. “I’ll drop by.”

They stood, hands clasped together and warming in the chill. This was the demi-monde, Draco knew it.

“Malfoy, one thing,” Harry asked out of nowhere, biting his lip before he completed the question. “And I don’t mean to pry,” he warned. “But you’re gay, aren’t you? Like, entirely.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Draco told his green eyes, because it was.

Harry nodded. “I thought so,” he said with the faintest of smiles. His next question was soft. “How many people is it who know?”

This was all the sort of thing that they could ask each other now. “Well, there’s you,” Draco answered, because that fact was simple enough. His hand moved to hold Harry’s thumb. “And Ron and Hermione seem to have got wind.”

A scoff. “They don’t count. And Hermione would never assume…”

“Then there’s Pansy,” Draco concluded, looking at Harry’s hand in his. “Though she’s in New York. Likely my parents, or Mother at least.” They were dead. “A handful of men who do not matter.” He shrugged. “We never discussed it, but it was the likely conclusion, given the nature of our relations.”

He didn’t include Luna, because she didn’t believe in labels at all for human beings, the silly cow, though she mostly conceded to names.

“Why do you ask?” Draco finished, shaking his head.

“Just curious about it,” Harry replied with a brush of fingers before he let go. He smiled, wrinkling his nose so that his glasses nudged upwards. “I mean, you’re all full of secrets, aren’t you?” There was something in his eyes. “It’s interesting.”

“Well, there’s one for you to keep,” Draco replied, content. “Call it a souvenir.”

The next time that Draco emerged from his flat into number 12, Grimmauld Place, rather than flooing or apparating to the Department and back and around, it was spring. He’d been begging off dinners and the house had been busy, but he couldn’t beg off Granger’s boyfriend’s birthday party, not when Granger had roped him in to help organise.

“Harry’s been busy and a little bit flakey,” she said, as though the man had actually been flakey a lot.

All of this was fine, except, for some unknown reason, they were having the party outside.

“I’ve always wanted one of these outdoor parties,” was the boyfriend’s rationale, repeated on the day, “with balloons and jelly and ice cream.”

“Well, I hope it lives up to expectations,” was Granger’s cautious reply. “And we don’t all freeze to death.” The weather hadn’t been great.
The solution to the obvious problem of the weather had been for the residents of number 12, Grimmauld Place to source as many old jam jars as they could, filling them with Granger’s bluebell flames and floating them throughout the garden, to be easily gathered around oneself or a group. Draco had donated some of his own jars under duress, though he wasn’t sure when he ever expected to use them.

The system worked passingly well, but after a few hours Draco found himself relieved to be able to lurk in the warm conservatory while Granger put candles on the cake and tied a ribbon around it.

“No, you’re not imagining it,” Granger answered the question that Draco hadn’t really asked. She sounded tired, plotting out how to fit twenty-seven candles on the icing and separating them into bunches. “Ron and Harry have been having a bit of a tiff since Christmas.” She sighed. “It’s because of that awful Cannons game.”

“What was that?” Draco asked, because he didn’t know.

Granger looked at him sharply, as though she was trying to decide something. “I suppose I’ve never asked you, have I?” she said, and it seemed to be to herself. “It’s not really any of my business – but you and Harry, Draco,” she began. “You’re not…”

She was interrupted, then, as the door opened and Granger’s boyfriend appeared, looking remarkably serious for someone in the midst of their nostalgia-themed birthday party.

“Fire jars are holding up,” he said, acknowledging Draco before he swept an arm around Granger’s shoulders and took in the cake, which read, HAPPY BIRTHDAY RON! “That looks amazing; you’re brilliant,” he added, perking up as he kissed Granger on the cheek.

“Oh, what’s happened this time?” Granger asked, pulling away to sit on the arm of one of the chairs and cross her arms under her chest. She rolled her eyes at Draco as though her boyfriend had just done something obviously irritating.

“I thought that you were playing giant Jenga with Dean.”

“Well, I stopped fancying it,” came the reply. “And then I thought to myself, what do I fancy? And the answer, as always, as forever,” he finished with a flourish, “it was Hermione Granger.”

She wasn’t impressed. Apparently she didn’t like this vision of herself as an escape hatch. “Won-Won once went out with Lavender Brown,” Granger told Draco, cruelly but hilariously. “He tries to pretend that it was an attempt to suppress his feelings for me. I am fairly certain that he wasn’t thinking at all, or at least not with his brain.” She almost winked. “Parvati was saying that she’s never been sure why Lavender went for it either. There may have been a tarot reading about steamy love with a red-haired man.”

“Is that what did for you, then?” Draco asked in lieu of laughing, eating a leftover sausage that he’d bought in on a balloon-bordered blue paper plate. The boyfriend huffed.

“Oh, how I wish,” Granger replied, smirking. “A girl like me had very few options, not like Lav.”

The thing was, Draco possessed the very vivid memory of Granger dancing with Viktor Krum in some rather splendid periwinkle robes. He’d been spitting with jealousy, and Pansy had arched an eyebrow at him every time that she’d caught him glaring. Imagine Krum dancing with a mudblood, she’d said scathingly, always meaning something other than quite what came out of her mouth. And worse! With a girl! Has he no shame?!

Fuck off, Pansy, he’d told her, and she’d laughed the way that she never meant to, bursting with a bright, braying cackle which saw her head thrown back on her neck. They’d danced to another
three tunes.

“Yeah, well,” said Granger’s boyfriend now, puffing up.

“Here we go…” Granger intervened, as though she’d won a game of wits with her soppy double meanings.

“Your other option’s hacking me off.”

Granger sighed, looking at Draco as though he was supposed to be making something out of this. “What’s he done this time?”

Harry, Draco realised. They were talking about Harry.

“He’s leading her on,” said Granger’s boyfriend shortly, on behalf of whom Draco couldn’t be sure. “I told him after Christmas to keep his distance for a bit. He knows he’s not interested.”

“It’s been a bit, Ron,” said Granger, mollifying. She indicated the cake. “It’s March.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to start acting cosy again,” the boyfriend huffed. “She was really upset.”

“He’s apologised and they’re friends.” Granger looked quite frustrated by this argument, as though she’d had to say the same thing a hundred times already. “Just like Neville and Luna, and Harry and Draco, and everyone else that you think…”

As she trailed off, Draco found himself subject to both Granger and her boyfriend’s gaze. Both looked nervous, as though they hadn’t intended to broach this conversation in front of him.

“What?” Draco covered for them, grease on his fingers. He sucked them clean. “Surely the great Harry Potter would never lead a woman on.” He snorted, to imagine it. After all, if Harry had been leading Ginny on at Christmas then he’d been leading her on for years, hadn’t he?

Granger rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she looked back to her boyfriend. “Ginny’s a big girl,” she told the man. “She knows him as well as we do. If it was going to happen, then it would have done. That’s all we can say.”

They headed back outside for the cake, and Draco’s eyes easily found Harry among the jars of light and warmth, which seemed to be growing bluer in the fading sun. He was talking earnestly to Ginny Weasley, a little way away from the rest of the group, one arm crossed over his chest and the other gesturing with a beer.

She was smiling, her usual bright grin easy around her teeth, stretched a little wider for Harry, maybe, because everyone smiled wider when they spoke one-on-one with him.

It was the brightness in that smile that Harry longed for, Draco thought. It was why he would marry Ginny Weasley one day, or at least someone like her. Creatures of darkness craved the sun and they craved the warmth, and a creature of darkness was what Harry was.

In a moment, however, Draco seemed to catch Harry’s eye. He raised his eyebrows, beckoning, and Draco headed over to them both.

“Malfoy,” said Harry, his voice full of beer. “Where’ve you been? We’ve been missing you since New Year’s.”
Ginny Weasley was looking between them, her spilt-milk skin aglow in the jam-jar light. Her expression plainly said, *Speak for yourself, Harry.* It was something quirked and observing, in place of her wide smile. She liked to do impressions, Ginny, to make people laugh.

Draco tended to find her face difficult to look at, for many reasons. “You’ve not been coming to the pub,” he told Harry. It was true. “That’s not my fault.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, a little forlorn. It was odd. He turned to Ginny. “We’ll have to fix that, won’t we, Gin?”

“I’m back and forth to Europe till June,” said Ginny Weasley, rolling her eyes. “Internationals?” she reminded him. “It happens every year, Harry; there’s only two more games left of the league.”

“Right,” agreed Harry, looking guilty.

“Oh, what it must be like in that head of yours.” Ginny laughed, tapping Harry on the temple in a way that made him grin, though Draco wasn’t entirely sure that her tone was friendly. Her smile was full of teeth again for a moment, her eyes bright and her hair swishing.

They were singing for the cake, then, and Ginny crossed the grass away from them while everyone was still clapping.

“I heard that you were on your best behaviour,” Draco mocked, watching Ginny join the crowd over by the food table.

“I didn’t insult her dress sense or the way that she talks,” Harry shot back at him, brooding. “So I doubt that you could have done much better.”

“I –”

They were the last ones to the cake.

In May 2007, at the start of summer, Luna Lovegood hosted a party, which was something that she never did. It turned out that very few people had cottoned on to the business with Liz – namely that Luna was living with her, loving her, fucking her presumably (or whatever the word was), and had been now for five years. The reactions were stunningly hilarious.

“I thought that she was going to end up with Neville,” Granger’s boyfriend said as they commiserated over drinks, a funny punch that changed colour. Draco wasn’t letting on, and Harry wasn’t saying anything either.

Granger was working herself into a state. “I never saw this coming,” she said, swirling her glass of highly suspicious pink. Draco’s had already changed taste three times, and he wasn’t sure how the charm on it worked. “I feel like a terrible friend. How could I be so heteronormative?”

”Which one’s that one again?” asked Ron, and they were away.

The flat was a psychedelic paradise, this year, with walls that Luna had clearly gone to town on. The living room was themed around the four seasons, its ceiling full of fairies and no other light, and there were always two or three of them in glittering formation above Luna’s head, dropping down every now and again to make conversation.

“She looks beautiful, doesn’t she?” said Harry.
“She looks happy,” Draco corrected. Luna’s beauty wasn’t situational. “Luna-Loo,” he hailed her by accident, as she drifted by their group. “Na,” he added too late. His drink tasted strong on his tongue. The fairies giggled at him. “The fuck’s this punch?” he asked, raising his glass, the insides of which were all changing colour.

Luna smiled at him, airy and lost in a dream. “Queen Fifandel made it. Hello Draco,” she said, holding out a finger to one of the fairies above. Draco noticed when she landed that the fairy was wearing a crown. She perched herself at angles and simpered there on Luna’s finger, while Luna placed her other hand on Draco’s shoulder and swiftly kissed his cheek, left then right. “I shan’t ruin the surprise. Hello Harry.”

“Hello Luna,” Harry said with an easy grin. He raised his drink to say cheers. It was brown. “Mine tastes like Pepsi,” was what he came out with. “Should I be worried?”

Draco took another sip of his own punch, gingerly. It seemed to have strengthened again into something pungent and anise. It was clear.

“You worry too much, Harry,” said Luna, which made the man snort.

“What are we celebrating?” Draco asked, getting used to the flavour of his drink. “If you won’t tell us how, then at least give us what.”

“Beltane, of course,” said Luna, as though this had been a standard wizarding holiday at any moment in the last two hundred years. As though Luna Lovegood would ever commit to a single calendar of festivals. “And Liz is leaving the Harpies,” she admitted under Draco’s stare, her blue gaze blank and testing. “Her spring belongs to me at last, yippee.”

It turned out that Liz was joining the WWN as a match commentator. She could only have been thirty-two, thirty-three by now, so there were still years of quidditch left to play if she wanted them. But apparently she did not.

“Yeah, I’ll always love flying,” she said at one point, still Manchester, it seemed, or one of the northern cities. “But I got bored of quidditch. There’s enough games in life, really, so why play another? Games, games, games, and what’s at the end but death as a prize? Hang the lot of them and look at what’s there.”

“I s’pose,” said Harry, scowling with a glass at his lips. He took a swallow, throat shifting, before shaking his head. “Still rum and Pepsi,” he muttered under his breath. It was funny, somehow, his expression. Endearing.

"Oliver’s over the moon," joked Ginny Weasley to the group of them. She dug her elbow into the man at her side, a buff-looking quidditch player who jumped. “His face when I told him…” She gawped and everyone laughed.

It was fine, it was fine, it was all –

By the end of the night, Draco found himself very, very drunk, without ever meaning to become so. He was the last one to leave and he found himself lying on the floor when it was time, uncertain where the last few hours had gone.

He was on his side with his head in Luna’s lap and she was stroking his hair, conjuring sparks in the form of birds for the fairies to chase and for his own fingers to follow. His head hurt; his stomach; his ribs; his throat.

Ow, he thought.
“How’s he looking, Loons?” Liz was calling from the kitchen, sounding like footsteps, and then she was out and around, tidying up.

“Better.” Luna’s voice was errant, scratchy. “I think Fifandel….”

He’d been on the floor for a while, Draco realised. He’d been standing against the wall themed on winter, drinking and drinking, and then he’d been throwing up in the toilet, all of him, his head through his throat and his stomach through his ribs, shaking and breaking apart until Luna had found him. She’d pulled bottles from the cabinet, clattering and banging and trying to make him swallow, but he’d staggered away from her and they’d ended up back in the living room, the seasons of its walls. Luna had called on the crowned fairy queen and shrieked at her until she’d thrown sparks up his nostrils, which had itched and felt like spring rain.

*You’ll be all right,* she’d promised. *You’ll be all right, you’ll be –*

“Do you feel better, Draco?” Luna asked now, cherry wand in her hand with Riddle’s phoenix core.

“No,” he croaked truthfully, lying on his side and hurting.

Luna nodded, her eyes a bright blue. “The truth will set you free,” she said, her fingers soft. “I’m so, so sorry,” she added, as if she’d really fucked up.

“I don’t want you to be,” he told her honestly. “Where’d Grimmo go?” he asked, because he was still feeling drunk inasmuch as he felt unwell. He knew where they were. He could feel them. He remembered Harry’s touch on his arm – *Hey, hey, Draco Malfoy, we’re off*… He said it anyway. His head stung deeply on one side, just above his ear.

Luna’s smile collapsed as he spoke, her eyes turning glassy. “They went home through the floo. Around midnight, before…” Before they could have found him. Harry had gone home on time, it seemed, while Draco had been the one courting fate. That made a change.

She sniffed, now, Luna, her slender hand shaking as she stroked Draco’s face, the reverse of her fingers against his cheek and her thumb tracing his eyebrow. The ice in her eyes was cracking as she fissured.

“I could have really hurt you, Draco,” she sobbed. “I shouldn’t have – I shouldn’t…”

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” Draco croaked, in pain. He didn’t resent it in the least, whatever had been done to him. Everyone else had had a good time; he’d seen it. What was he, as a casualty? He wished, he wished deeply, that Luna would punish him more.

"I get lost," she said, shaking her head, curling over him. She sobbed, one arm across his front and her wand hand hiding her face. "I get lost and I…” He thought that he could see it in her eyes, how she wanted to hurt him. But what she said was, “I have to find you, Draco, but then you…”

“Hush,” he tried to tell her, unable to rise from her lap.

Her fingers were wet, trailing on his face, but she held him on the floor until he fell asleep. He woke up with her in the spare room, both of them dressed in old training kit for the Holyhead Harpies.

At the turn of August, 2007, in the dog days of summer, Draco found himself fixated on the date, lying awake as July went by for another year. The globule of light that he’d caught from the ceiling
was waiting to be vanished, but instead he was tracing it around the room’s elaborate cornice with his hawthorn wand, noting the odd crack in the plaster.

It wasn’t late, not yet even midnight, but he was somewhere else, somewhere meditative. He hadn’t slept in a long time, so this felt more natural. He could imagine the party that was happening, because he’d received an invitation weeks ago through the owtery at work and he could feel it, how no one was home. He could imagine Granger and her boyfriend keeping him entertained, while Luna played tricks with his drinks and tried to make him human, or kill him. He could imagine Harry dancing, on his way to getting lost in a corner with one Ginny Weasley, though he hadn’t seen them together since March and he didn’t want to now, not anymore, though he knew that it was all inevitable.

He jumped about a foot in the air when Harry apparated in.

The man appeared at the foot of the bed, stumbling like a drunk. The light flashed back to the centre of the ceiling, filling the room. Wand under his pillow, Draco scrambled for the shorts that he’d thrown off from the day because, well, it was hot, it was midsummer, this was his flat and he was perfectly entitled to sleep without clothes if he –

“You didn’t come.”

Shorts on under the light summer duvet, Draco took in the sight ahead of him. Harry Potter was loud, flushed, sweating and quite plainly drunk as he failed to take the divan’s end corner, falling over his feet and feeling his way with a clumsy hand.

“Why weren’t you there?” he accused, scowling through his glasses, which were a long way down his nose. He slumped to the floor in front of the bedside table, slowly regaining his feet with a hand on his own thigh. “I was – I invited you!”

“Yes, and it seems to have been quite the jolly hurrah…” Quite suddenly, Draco’s brain caught up with his eyes.

“You could have killed yourself, you reckless fucking imbecile,” Draco continued to splutter, clenching his hand into a fist around hair and looking for any sign of splinching, looking at the back of Harry’s neck and down to his calves. “You could have… you could have… you could have… sent yourself into nowhere, Draco thought. He could have splinched himself into nowhere… It still wasn’t clear whether the Nowhere Room caught every case because how were they supposed to know? He remembered the time before; he remembered –

“I’m fine!” Harry protested, meeting his eyes and batting his hands away. He looked down between them and at Draco’s face and then – “Budge over,” he commanded, shooing Draco backwards before clawing his lumbering drunk self up and into the bed, kicking off a truly hideous pair of sandals. The rest of him was a short-sleeved shirt in some quasi-tropical pattern and an even worse pair of long cargo shorts. Sweat and clean heat, angles wiry but powerful, the only smell coming off him was nonetheless beer. Wasted or not, he had a clear grip on his wand. “I said budge over, Merlin…”

There wasn’t time for Draco to budge over especially far, let alone retreat like he wanted to. “Harry –” he tried to intervene, against knees, canvas, cotton and buttons, a cock hidden away but rampant affronté where it struck for a moment against his, which was merely passant inside rather hastily
pulled-up shorts. “This isn’t…” Well, it wasn’t something that they’d ever done, really.

“Stop fussing, Draco Malfoy.” Harry said it as if none of this meant anything. He smacked a fraternal kiss to his cheek. “You look shattered; we’ll talk in the morning. Nighty night now,” he added, waving his holly wand up to the ceiling to pitch them both into darkness, pulling his glasses from his ears by the feel of it and throwing them somewhere with his stick. “Mm,” he finished, burrowing down.

He was asleep before Draco could think to ask him what on earth he had been implying. He was snuffling, if they were being honest, and snuggling in, soft in sleep. The body of him was like a furnace, but then Draco was asleep and it was morning and Harry was pulling out of his arms, bright pink and biting his lip as he picked up his sandals.

“Sorry about this,” he said, waving his wand aimlessly. “I don’t know what I was…” He wouldn’t meet Draco’s eyes, and then he was vanishing away, leaving Draco starfished and cold and abandoned with the duvet shoved down to his ankles, a smell in his bed that wasn’t unlike the sea.

It happened again, a form in the night at the end of Draco’s bed. It happened again, sometimes with words.

“Malfoy, hello, I, er, hi. Is this all right?”

It happened when Draco was already dozing, a soft touch to his elbow and a whispered, “Don’t panic!” with a sharp C that was straight out of residential Surrey. It happened when he was eating late-night toast in his kitchen before he turned in, giving him the option of starting a row or sliding into bed to be mauled by a bear in its sleep.

Merlin help him, but he chose the latter.

They didn’t snog, they didn’t shag, and they talked about quite a few things, eventually. Harry never once smelled like sick or someone else, just himself – but he always left quickly in the morning, if he was ever there at all when Draco woke up.

“We’re still trying to figure out Luna’s drinks. Hermione reckons that they had something to do with false consciousness, whatever that is. Ron says guilt. It all sounds a bit complicated… I was wasted, but I suppose it was fun. You stayed late, didn’t you?”

Draco didn’t want to tell Harry what had happened at the end of the party, so he didn’t answer the question. “They’ve always said that fairies are spiteful little things.”

“Luna says that they’ve got a lot of face, but more depth of heart than most witches or wizards give them credit for.” Harry liked quoting Luna, as though if he kept repeating what she said it might eventually make sense. “She and Liz went on a trip for Ollivander…”

"Have you ever been on one of those?” This was a distraction. “She had me severing birch. I swear, that witch is a closet dominatrix.”

“Merlin – she comes out, and you want to shove her straight back in!” Harry was laughing, but also quite serious. “Give the girl a chance, Malfoy,” he chastised, grinning from his side of the bed. “Besides,” he finished wickedly, “you know that she’d only ever wear leather for you. And you’d like it, you kinky git.”

Draco blustered, lying on his back, “I told you those things in confidence!”
“And I was very shocked,” Harry joked, eyebrows raised before he was rolling out to the floor. “I’ll see you later.”

It was an odd period, to say the least. It happened, whatever it was, more often than anyone ever guessed, and the autumn leaves of these visits fell mulching into something that looked like soil. Sometimes it felt filthier than anything else they’d done.

It was Christmas again in no time at all, eventually, and by the afternoon Draco was surely three-quarters cut.

He was sitting in bed in his underwear, top and shorts, covers up to his waist. He’d lit a fire. A half-consumed bottle of mead was open on the bedside table and he fully intended to polish off the whole thing. Andromeda was well; Teddy was well; lunch had been quiet and suburban, taken at the end of the living room in Andromeda’s three-bedroom Essex semi. A solid close to a long and pointless year. 2007.

Draco had left promptly after lunch, and now he was intending to drink mead and enjoy one of Andromeda’s gifts, a muggle novel – a social tragedy about a woman in her final years of the marriage market, set in late-nineteenth-century New York. It wasn’t going well. Lunch and his half of the wine sat heavily in his stomach. The print before his eyes was making him feel quite sick, a sea of tiny muggle roman letters.

Andromeda – Andromeda was kind, and Teddy was charming, and they’d both been very proud of themselves, returned from holiday with a dozen souvenirs and a copy of New York’s society pages. He’d been delighted to see Pansy in her finery, her hair not a bob but quite a bouffant these days. He’d been shocked to see her face, to be honest, because she was no longer fifteen.

At least Draco finally had a solution to the mystery of why she’d never replied to his letters. International post wasn’t like that sent by personal owl: it relied on the name, and Pansy’s hadn’t been Parkinson since 2001. The articles about her sister-in-law’s wedding were very informative. She had two children, and the second was a newborn son called Draco Tiberius, as if he was fucking dead.

He should have seen it coming. It was a joke, the idea that Pansy would have waited on a match that had always been less than perfect. Draco was nothing in society these days – he had nothing on the go and no means to pursue a worthwhile engagement, nothing that could shake him out of his torpor when it came to the Manor, which had been left under the elves for too many years now.

He’d taken a cherry tree from the Manor, three-and-a-half years ago. He’d taken it with Granger and Luna and left behind two buried spat stones. The tree’s blossom and fruit had been for number 12, Grimmauld Place, and the branch had been for Luna Lovegood’s hand.

And the truth? The truth was that Draco wanted nothing else to do with his parents’ house. He could see it now. He wanted nothing else to do with the man whose name was to fly from death. Draco had flown straight towards it.

Oh, he was a joke, Draco Malfoy. A joke because he felt relieved, for Pansy if not for himself, if she was happy, if she really was. A joke because he felt riven with guilt, for all of it since 1996, when his aunt had killed her cousin and his father had taken her place in Azkaban. He was a joke, he was gay, it was almost 2008 and he loved Harry Potter, a year and a lifetime not enough to occlude the feeling away. He loved him, he loved him, he loved him, don’t lie.

And there, then, at the thought of his name, Harry Potter appeared beyond the end of Draco’s bed,
holly wand in his hand on this Christmas afternoon.

Seeing him, Draco wiped his eyes, and resolved –

Well, he resolved to say nothing. It took all the nerve and daring that he had.

“Really, Malfoy?” Harry spoke first, raising his eyebrows at Draco’s state of undress. He was loud, undoubtedly a little drunk himself. It was always the way. “It’s only four o’clock.”

Already dark then, probably. Draco hadn’t opened his curtains and they were heavy, so he didn’t know.

“Why is it that you always apparate here?” he demanded, turning to refill his mead. He pointed his wand at the bedroom door out of courtesy, turned the handle and bit out a quick, “Accio mead glass,” so that he could pour another for Harry. “Outside would be polite; familiar would be the hallway or the kitchen… This is frankly invasive.”

It had been nearly five months since the beginning of August, and Draco had lost count of the times that this had happened. They hadn’t discussed it, but today Draco was thinking of the real world beyond his bedroom walls.

For his part, Harry shrugged, kicking off his shoes before he climbed to sit cross-legged by Draco’s feet. He accepted his mead with grace. “Easier to visualise,” he offered with a smirk. “I just think of you sitting here like Lord Muck.”

Draco rolled his eyes. It was a familiar game, these deflections.

Harry had a new jumper, Draco noticed then. It was plum purple, and it brought out the bright contrast between his eyes and his hair and his skin. Molly Weasley might have grown broody, moreso the more it seemed that only Bill and Percy were interested in fulfilling the family duty, but she could still knit an excellent jumper.

“I take it that lunch was terrible,” Draco surmised. Perhaps even as bad as his.

Harry smirked again, apparently not realising that this was a room for miserable people. “Oh, lunch is still happening. I’m out clearing my head for a bit.” He raised his glass, joking, “Too much wine with the goose. Between you and me,” he added, the performance turning overwrought, “I’m not sure that I’m taking Ginny’s news very well.”

Draco played along, supposing that they had to be about as drunk as each other, which lent the conversation something at least. “Zounds,” he said dryly. “And what news is that?”

“Would you believe that she’s engaged?” asked Harry, his eyes bright as he grinned. It was too much of a coincidence, Draco thought. Too, too much. And yet there was no reason to suspect Andromeda of shopping him. He bit his tongue.

“Mm,” Harry answered with himself, sipping mead. “Fiancé’s some bloke that she met out in Peru. Very on-again-off-again, bumping around in various places, apparently – only he was signed to the Falcons this summer, so now it’s all very much on.”

“Seems a little quick,” Draco mused, his tongue loosening despite himself. He really wasn’t sure why he drank mead; it always did this. It was his mother’s drink, and it was terribly rich.

“Not really,” Harry answered, shrugging again. “She says that she met him on tour, 2005.” Over

Matías sounded like one of the usual quidditch crowd, and Harry’s old friends from the Ministry. A devotee of a very solid idea of courtship that involved sporting victory, heavy drinking, and then a good snog for whomever one ended up dancing with. A good proper lad.

“I thought that the girl had fancied you since she was Teddy’s age,” Draco found himself saying, the tone of his voice more sneering than he would have liked.

“Sounds a bit creepy, when you put it like that.” Harry was back to joking, and it wasn’t clear at all what he meant by his flippancy. He shrugged. “She must’ve sussed out that I’m not that great a snog after all.”

Draco snorted, because in his experience that wasn’t true. Not that he was going to say so. He let his tone turn wicked. “Didn’t you shag her at some point too?”

This earned him a kick, right in the knee, though the covers softened the force of it. “No,” Harry said solidly, kicking him again. His cheeks were turning pink. “Dickhead.”

“Don’t get mead on my sheets,” Draco complained as the duvet rustled around. “Fucking barbarian…”

“You’re a terrible layabout, Malfoy.” Harry took an ostentatious swallow of his drink, shuffling his legs underneath him. “I mean, mead. You need beer and a biryani.” He stuck out his tongue, wrinkling his nose as though top-shelf Aspen’s was too rich for him.

“If the accommodations are not to your taste,” Draco told him, “you can leave.”

Harry rolled his eyes, pulling up a knee.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Draco asked, more seriously. He could use a distraction from his own misery, he supposed, but that wasn’t really the point of his question. “If news of Ginevra’s engagement has not stung you to flight, then…”


Something stung in Draco’s chest. “Bored of what?” he asked, changing the subject. “How’s Auntie Dromeda?”

“Aunt Andromeda,” Draco emphasised, “is fine. And of course Teddy liked his present. It threatened him with imminent destruction.”

Harry, the bastard, grinned triumphantly at the news. “You’ll kill him,” Draco insisted, quite serious.

A muggle stunt bicycle, of all things – that was what Harry had bought his nine-year-old godson. All because Teddy’s stupid little muggle friend AJ had been given one for his birthday. Harry had wilfully taken it upon himself to let Draco’s flesh and blood find himself prey to dangers like speed and stones in the road, just when the boy’s accidental magic would be settling into more conscious acts of protection, from humiliation, from uncertainty, rather than from bumps and broken limbs.
He was at the age when this happened, Teddy, Draco knew. His magic would be coalescing into something that would form his core, shape his soul and allow his wand to find him. Ollivander had explained it all once in the cellar of Malfoy Manor. Draco couldn’t remember the details.

“I wish I could’ve seen his face,” Harry said, finishing his mead and summoning them both another cleanly poured measure. It was a display of finesse that Draco never thought to expect, and it almost made him miss what Harry added as an aside. “I should’ve been with you lot.”

As far as Draco knew, Harry saw Teddy more than often enough. He’d paid his last visit to the Tonks house less than twenty-four hours ago, for dinner and hot chocolate, Exploding Snap and a muggle game called Scrabble. Draco had been there with him, staying overnight for Christmas morning while Harry went home, just like last year.

“The thing is,” Harry continued, knocking back his hated mead quite happily now. “I love Molly to death and beyond, but…” He shook his head. He didn’t complain easily, Harry, so this was clearly an effort for him. Draco didn’t interrupt. “I dunno; ever since the Forest-of-Dean thing, you know how it is. It’s like she’s decided that she and Hermione don’t get on.”

“And?” Draco prompted, sipping. “And – and they were never especially friendly, but Hermione’s my sister.” Harry said it expansively, forgetting in his inebriation to mask the claim as a simile. “She –” They seemed to be back on Molly now. “It’s like she’s playing favourites with Percy’s wife, who’s obviously and merrily a Weasley and gave up her job, you remember, the first time that she got pregnant.”

“Right.”

“And they both weren’t busy, you see, like Hermione – though, you know, it’s not in Hermione’s contract that she needs to work so many hours… It was all so much easier for them to co-ordinate the cooking and stuff between them, no bother at all, right, no, no, really…”

Well, Draco thought. This sounded like Christmas.

“And Hermione doesn’t care,” Harry insisted, in his own voice again. “But she gets this stuff from so many angles, always has done, and I…”

It sounded grim, if Draco was being honest. He’d bought Granger a watch as a birthday present this year, which was a little forward, even if it had been partly a joke about her research specialism. She’d never been given one at seventeen, and he’d found out a few months before. Hearing all this, he was rather glad that he’d bothered.

“And Ron…” Harry shook his head, swallowing. “He’s only trying to help, but by the time we’d sat down he’d cooked up this mental plan where we’d have everyone round for Easter here at Grimmo.”

“Well,” Draco remarked, trying to imagine it. He wasn’t quite sure… “It would give Kreacher a challenge.”

A noise escaped Harry’s nose, but he didn’t look up. “We should do a big dinner at some point,” he agreed, as if Draco was included in this responsibility. “But this Easter thing…” He sighed again. “You wouldn’t believe the can of pixies it opened. Suddenly we’re all talking about whether Ron and Hermione should be inviting people round to quote-unquote ‘Harry’s house’, and whether it’s time for us all to start ‘thinking about the future’…” He finished adroitly, “They’re looking at me with this too, and Ginny shared her news to put an end to it, I think, and it made the whole thing
taste sour. Now,” he added, “I don’t know what… Or if…”

He shrugged, lost.

Draco let himself think for a moment, saying nothing. He wasn’t good with emotions, Harry Potter, so there were a few conclusions that could be drawn from this anecdote, and it was up to him to make the effort. Maybe Harry really was disappointed that he wouldn’t become Mr Ginny. Maybe he was annoyed at Ron for his presumption.

More likely, he was sad that his friends were sad. Less likely, he was having a moment of queer crisis, and all this talk of weddings and babies and two-adult households had left him unable to breathe, no matter that it was what he wanted, one day, deep down, the same way that Draco wanted it too, like that final gasp of peace.

It was a mystery that would fascinate anyone, Draco thought, how Harry Potter even existed on a day-to-day basis. He might have saved them from the Dark Lord, but he clearly couldn’t fathom out why he’d rather be sitting on a dreary divan bed with a drunk than in the bosom of his very favourite soppy ginger family, fighting to get back the woman who could be the love of his life.

In the end, for the sake of them all, Draco took an aimless stab at it. “You think that Ron’s next mad plan is going to be to move out.”

Whether or not Draco had located the true source of his malaise, Harry seemed willing to run with it. “I know that they’ll have to eventually,” he said, knocking back the last of his mead and banishing the glass to sit neatly on the bedside table. “But then I also think why?” He asked the question quite angrily. “Why do they have to go? The house is huge and we’re only us.”

Draco gave him a look.

“I know,” said Harry, frustrated. “I know that people get their own houses so that they can screw in the living room, or whatever, but Ron and Hermione never seem that fussed, I swear to you.” He scowled, rolling his eyes. “Maybe they do it when I’m not here. But I mean, we have the library. Two living rooms, really, with the parlour,” he ran through the house like an estate agent. “Two places to eat, the conservatory… It’s Kreacher’s house, isn’t it, in the end, and he likes it full. If they had children, you know, we would both of us so happily – it would be like…”

He trailed off, laughing, apparently unable to finish his sentence. Breathing hard, he pressed all of his fingers to his eyes underneath his glasses, clenching his jaw before he spoke again.

“I just think,” he said abruptly, looking at Draco with sharp eyes of a blazing Christmastime green. He was angry, Harry, quite suddenly, cleanly and honestly pissed off. “If I was really Hermione’s brother, or really one of Ron’s, then no one would kick up a fuss.” He looked, for a moment, like a force primaeval. “If Fred was here, and he was living with George and Angelina, and he had a job up at Hogwarts, Grimmo would be about the price of London housing, the bloody great size of the place. The situation would be, you know, convenient, what with Professor Fred so often up north and away.”

Harry, Draco thought, as he often did in these moments of acute distress. He tried not to think anything else, but the man had to realise how the game was played. They both knew it. They knew it in their bones, Pansy or Ginny or nothing.

“But I’m not anyone,” Harry said, damning himself, the muscles of his face drawn tight. “Not really. I’m not anything. Give or take a bit, I’ve lived with Ron since I was eleven, and Hermione since I was seventeen. Let’s say eleven too if we’re allowed to sleep with a wall in the way, for
Merlin’s…” He shook his head. “But it’s not enough,” he insisted. “Not for me to want what I want. I’m only allowed,” he spat, “to dream of being Mr Ginny, of proposing to some girl-woman that my family barely knows, a few nights out and a bit of bunking up all I get to decide that it’s serious.”

“There’s always Ginny-Ginny your Ginny…” Draco suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

It didn’t work. Harry exploded, “I don’t want Ginny.” The violence in him made the mattress bounce, and he was looking at Draco unseeing. It was quite terrifying. “Ginny is fit, and funny, and a good kisser, sure, and if the timing had ever been right then maybe we would have had a nice life.” He sniffed an angry rush of air up his nose, as if holding himself together. “Maybe if I’d have gone back to Hogwarts, or gone into quidditch with her, or – or anything. But she was never much more than a dream and a pair of soft arms in school. Something to think about while my life was turning to complete – shit,” he swore, and he so rarely swore badly. It was always this time of year.

Harry, Draco thought again, feeling the stem of the glass in his fingers, the sheets underneath his legs.

“Meanwhile, going through the shit with me, shoulder to shoulder, putting up tents and doing raids on Gringotts, muddling through this impossible – thing,” he spat. “Who was there?”

“Ron and Hermione,” Draco supplied dully, because he remembered, vividly, his own Crabbe and Goyle drinking Polyjuice day after day. It wasn’t the same, but he remembered it.

“It would have been a bloody cheat,” Harry said, focusing on Draco’s face, his eyes and chin, green eyes clearly emeralds. “A bloody bastard cheat, to try and force something with my best mate’s sister, all because what I really wanted was for him and my other best friend to let me keep them.”

Draco winced.

But Harry was defiant. Harry was always defiant. “They’re all I have that means that much to me,” he swore, before he took the conversation on a very abrupt swerve. “There’s them and there’s this,” he said, whacking the bedclothes with his hand, breaking every covenant they had. “This bedroom, with you in it. This friendship – exes – whatever we are. It’s what I’d keep, if you took away everything else. If they took it again.” His tone was the flourish of a sword. “I prefer it to the shagging.”

Now Draco cringed, on his own behalf this time. Because of course Harry felt that way, he told himself. The shagging hadn’t been anything worth its salt.

All the same, the idea seemed to pull Harry up short. He breathed deeply, flushing red. “Crap, Merlin, Draco, I didn’t mean… That wasn’t –”

He looked mortified, quiet and so clearly blushing, his eyes screwing up at their edges. The shade of his face clashed with his plum-coloured jumper.

“The shagging was amazing,” Harry insisted, boyish and ardent and definitely drunk. “Don’t listen to me.”

Draco rolled his eyes.

“I promise,” he said desperately, putting a hand on Draco’s shin over the covers, just under his knee. “You don’t understand; you used to touch me and I…” He squeezed, working up to Draco’s kneecap and shaking his head. “It’s all the old hate, yeah? It’s like a reflex. It burns.”
“Please stop talking,” Draco begged him, feeling naked and ridiculous, suddenly, sitting in bed wearing a crumpled black t-shirt and holding the end of a glass of mead. Because this was the truth of him, wasn’t it? What he had to look like on Christmas Day at four o’clock, his hair all flat as he drank in a lonely divan bed, miles from anywhere he knew.

Hate. Oh, but of course. Never anything to dream about was Malfoy, not for Harry Potter. He wasn’t even a worthwhile shag. The man had always preferred women and their soft arms, didn’t he know it? What was Malfoy’s bony arse but a novel curiosity, which Harry clearly didn’t miss.

“I’m saying this all wrong,” Harry complained with mature frustration as he withdrew his hand. “You’re the best – sex I’ve ever had. I promise you.” He paused. “But then –”

But then.

“But then this last year, since we called it quits, it’s been…” Harry shook his head, waving his hand around in the air, absent circles. “Just hanging out, or whatever you call it, trading insults. It’s been fun.”

His expression was distraught as he ran out of words – hopefully, Draco hoped, because he could perceive some of Draco’s feeling about being called a hate fuck, the fucking, fucking bastard. What it took not to claw him and cut him into ribbons for saying these things. And Draco could – he could, that was the thing. Harry had given him every weapon in the world to cut him to the core. It would be easy; it would be so fucking, fucking –

When Lupin told him about Peter, in spring of the coming year, Draco would remember this emotion. And before he realised that they were talking about Wormtail, he would feel empathy for the man who in the moment of crisis chose to destroy everyone and everything he loved, because they had all stopped pretending, at last, that he would ever deserve their attention, their kindness, their interest. It didn’t matter that the words weren’t there, not really. There was enough to suggest that the words in his head were all true, and so there was no hope left to be had, only that the last of those words were being left unsaid in one final gesture of pity.

But for now, Harry was trying to articulate the way in which Draco was to him like a particular branch of magic, because he was in a very different conversation, and it had been coming upon him for years.

“Draco, when we talk,” Harry was saying, here and now, too quickly as he leaned on the bed, “it’s like I can be a different person. When I come here, it’s like I step out of myself and I’m…” He didn’t seem to know. “And I don’t know if it’s something that I could be but I’m not when I’m with other people, or if it’s something that you make me, but it’s, it’s important. You’re important to me, and I don’t think it’ll stop.”

It was a nice enough sentiment, Draco thought. Looking at the man on his bed in his comfy purple jumper, all of him festive with his black Holly King halo of hair that even after all this time Draco wanted to claw at until it –

The facts were that Draco felt insignificant, lonely and ugly. He wanted a fuck. He wanted to wank without getting bored or distracted or depressed halfway through, after all these years, which felt like forever.

If Harry was going to have them making comparisons, then Draco knew that he had preferred the shagging to whatever it was that they had become. This likely made him unfeeling and self-centred, but what else was new? He preferred the idea of Harry fucking him without looking, with hate, because there was nothing in this bedroom worth being. He was only a waystation for Harry;
all of this was only a detour. Better to be a fun distraction than a haunted fucking traffic island that one could hold a conversation with.

Because he still thought about Sara Chaudhury and her baby, after all this time.

They weren’t friends, Draco and Harry, by any stretch of the imagination. Draco was sure of it. The old hate, it was like a reflex, of course. That old hate was Draco’s love, more fool him, but who cared?

However it was that Harry thought he was escaping, appearing here in Draco’s flat, Draco knew that there was no way now, in 2007, for him to do the same – because he was already here, always already here, nowhere. He had to be, so that Harry could pass through the wards and escape to be with him, the way that he still seemed to feel that he needed to. There was no truth here to set Draco free. There were only four walls and a bed with Draco at their centre, a disgusting waste of flesh.

“They’ll be missing you at lunch,” Draco said to Harry now, putting down his glass and picking up his book, rolling to his side and blocking it all out.

"Draco..."

“Fuck off and die, Potter,” he said, because in this moment he let himself be a coward, and he let his love spill out. “Stop coming here and don’t speak to me.”

"Malfoy, don't do this…”

"I said fuck off; are you deaf?”

“But I thought…”

“That I enjoyed your pathetic whining? Please. I couldn’t care less. All you ever do is fuck up your life, and I’m sick to death of hearing about it.”

"All – all right." Harry’s tone was firm, hard, proud, because of course he was their fucking hero. “I'll go.” He left, and they didn’t speak again until March 2008, when they had a row about James Potter.
When Draco wakes up in April 2008, Harry is there. He’s sat in the armchair that Draco tends to throw half-clean clothes on, a few feet beyond the bedside table by one of the handsome windows. His knees are drawn up to his chest. It’s dark, and Draco sees him as a shadow, an owl at roost.

He shouldn’t be able to recognise this figure, Draco thinks. He should be terrified out of his wits. As it is, he squeezes his eyes shut and blinks away feelings of sleep. “This is harassment,” he states, an old claim, not raising his head from the pillow. “What time is it?”

“Well eleven,” Harry replies dully, chin on his knees, suburban. “Everyone’s gone in for the night.”

Draco’s had about twelve hours, then, a round of the clock. “They let Black out of Mungo’s?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry says. “Hermione signed him out at two. Got your boss to wangle things. I came home at four…”

“I imagine that your father made a scene.” Why he’s perpetuating this inane conversation, Draco doesn’t know. It’s quiet, and it’s dark, and he’s warm in his bed, but that doesn’t seem like enough.

“Not really.” Harry sighs, sounding exhausted. “Sirius cried buckets, Hermione said, over Mum as well. Dad had to calm him down and they went off on their own for a bit.” He just about manages to joke, “We finally met the great stag. Moony was saying that he should’ve realised how much he had in common with Buckbeak.”

Draco thinks that he can imagine Sirius Black crying. It would be like an unyielding, lashing floodrain, and James Potter would be one of the few who could bear it. Also Buckbeak the hippogriff.

Harry shakes his head, his smile turning into a frown. “Tea was… I forgot that he found us all.” Harry’s voice is thick with self-disgust, on the edge of tears. “I’d forgotten… And we had to tell him about Regulus. He hates the house so much.” Here he presumably means number 12, Grimmauld Place. “I should have remembered…”

“You do remember,” Draco says, because it’s as easy as thinking it, in the dark, and Harry Potter is an idiot. “You didn’t expect this today, so it’s not at the front of your mind.”

“I think I love him more than my dad,” Harry says, and it’s not a response to Draco’s comment.

“It’s not a competition,” Draco points out.

Harry shakes his head. “I know that they’ll have to go back,” he says. “But I love him so much.” He says it steadily, firmly, as though Draco wants to take it away. “I thought that I’d imagined it. But it’s like how you’d love a limb or the whole of your head. Just there from when I was small, like it always was. I thought that I’d lost it; I didn’t think that I could still…”

“They’ll have to go back eventually,” Draco agrees, refusing to react though it disturbs him to hear Harry talk about love like this, to really mean it. To really mean anything, in all honesty. “Death is the end of things. But it doesn’t mean that they won’t be here for another hundred years.”

Harry breathes in – a terrible, wet sound – and he covers his face with his hands, fingers over glasses. “It won’t be,” he tells himself. “It doesn’t work like that. You can’t bring four people back
from the dead.”

I can and I did, says a voice in the back of Draco’s mind, but the professional in him knows that he did not – he aided a man caught in the veil and he had three accidents. He keeps quiet.

“It’s the story of the resurrection stone,” Harry continues into his hands, his voice weak. “They’re never really going to be here, so it’s never really going to be them. They’ll have to go back, and it’ll have to be soon.”

“Poppycock,” Draco says, and it’s the professional in him that speaks. “The world is not a fairy tale, Potter.” How to say it, he thinks; how to explain? “These are beings each with a body, mind, and by all indications a soul. They can perform magic. They remember everything that one would expect them to, no matter that they have a confused recollection of their existence in the beyond. You’ll forgive me for saying that you do too.”

Harry swallows. “King’s Cross,” he says. It’s only twenty minutes from where they are in Bloomsbury.

When did they talk about this? Draco thinks. He doesn’t even remember. “Exactly. Your parents, Black and Lupin – are they the same people as the wizards and witch who died in 1981, 96, 98?”
Draco leaves the question hanging in the air. “They no longer have the same bodies, but neither do I have mine from those years. Their thoughts are their own business, as are their souls. There is no reason to assume that their presence in this world causes any greater cosmic problem than our own, as wizards, given that we vanish in and out of existence on a day-to-day basis.”

“It’s unnatural,” Harry insists, clutching his knees. “When Nicolas Flamel died, Dumbledore told me…”

“Nicolas Flamel lived for seven hundred years,” Draco says bluntly, sitting up. “How is that fair?”
It’s simply – annoying, what Harry is saying. “How is that fair unless there is no fairness, and it is all of it magic, for want of a better term?”

“There’s magic and there’s the stone,” Harry argues today. “It’s too much; it shouldn’t be possible…”

“Your parents died when they were twenty-one years old.” Draco locks eyes with him, the son, as well as he can when they’re here cast in the shadows of the night. “At least once a month, Lupin loses his body and mind to a ravening beast. Black spent twelve years under the dementors for a crime that he didn’t commit, and twelve years in the sort of in-between that I don’t have a name for yet.” He sets his jaw, rather too earnest himself, but he says it anyway. “Fuck Dumbledore, and Flamel, and anyone over a hundred who thinks that their blessed life is more natural, more deserved than this – second lease.”

Fuck it, Draco thinks, full of some emotion that he knows he shouldn’t feel. Fuck it all, Harry; don’t you see? What’s so special about this one rule, when magic ignores so many others?

“They were cursed with their deaths,” Draco tells Harry Potter, crossing his legs, appealing. “Cursed by wizards. Shot with green light that tore them asunder and left them to accept death as the way of things. The resurrection stone, I am certain, cannot make a person decide that life is the better way. How can we imagine what it is to feel one’s heart stop, to wake up and be told that one day there’ll be that feeling again?” He’s running away with himself, but Draco lets the words escape. He has thought of everything, it feels like sometimes, in the depths of the long, cool night. “But – can the stone break the Killing Curse? Pull everything back together and ask the question again? Why not? It must do something at its core, and these deaths were magic themselves, not
anything natural. Your parents, the four of them, they all have a reason to be here.” It’s you, he
doesn’t say.

For a few moments, Harry says nothing. Eventually, he sighs. “You say it like they had jelly legs.”

Draco finds himself grinning. “It’s a matter of perspective,” he points out. “I’ve spent the last five
years vanishing between reality and nowhere, working on an archway that makes no sense at all.”

“At least until now,” Harry corrects, his own grin edging into his voice. Sirius Black, his parents
and Lupin: Harry Potter in love sounds like some sort of Heldentenor Egyptian sphinx.

Draco is warm, so warm, and the words are so present on his tongue that in the end he has to say
them. “Ron and Hermione think that we’re fucking, you realise.”

The dark burnished bronze of Harry’s voice falls into a mocking laugh. “No, no, no,” he corrects,
and clearly it’s come up on his side today too. “Ron and Hermione think that we’ve been seeing
each other.”

“How trite,” Draco says, moving to the edge of the bed. The idea is very funny, for the moment at
least. “Can you see anything?”

“Not really,” says Harry, still laughing. “It’s dark and I cried a bit, so now my glasses are all
smeared up.”

“Mm. Alluring.”

Sitting as though he could climb out of bed, opposite Harry, who’s curled up in his chair, Draco’s
about to distract himself from the warmth growing in his cock by saying that he’s starving, because
he is, and that he’s going to see if he has anything to eat; would Harry like to join him? But –

“Malfoy,” Harry says. “Why don’t we have sex anymore?” The question isn’t a surprise, because
this is surely the only difference in what they are from what they’ve ever been. “I know you want
to.” Because it wouldn’t even matter, would it, if he didn’t fancy Harry Potter like a paring knife
flaying his skin, and if he didn’t know that Harry Potter’s cock bore the touch of his hand like a
particularly well-formed specimen of Mimbulus mimbletonia.

The question catches Draco entirely off-guard.

“Because…” Draco sighs, barely certain of the old excuse. “Because you’re going to marry a
woman like Ginny Weasley,” he says, uncertain how they’ve ended up here, when they were
talking about the nature of death.

Harry sighs too, tutting as he lets go of his knees to sit properly, pulling off his glasses to clean
them on whatever shirt it is that he’s wearing. “Well, d’you know where one’s hiding?” he asks,
looking around the room. “Because Ginny-Ginny’s getting married – still, you know, not to me –
and she’s the only woman like her I’ve met.” He gestures vaguely. “I feel like I barely fancy
anyone these days…” He flinches. “Besides you, I mean,” he says quickly, pointing his glasses at
Draco where he sits. “I fancy you. Although…” He veers away from the point. “Is it just me, or did
Uncle Moony come back weirdly fit?” This is a wind-up, Draco thinks, but he isn’t sure.

Draco tries to think. It’s difficult, because he’s sitting in his pants and Harry Potter is sitting less
than six feet away. The man’s not saying anything about Pansy, and Draco wonders whether he
might have guessed the truth four years ago.

And if he goes near Lupin, Harry Potter, Draco will claw the wolf’s eyes out and the rest of him
too, his brains through his nostrils and his spleen and his heart and his lungs. He doesn’t want to
occlude this feeling, because he wants Harry to see it on his face and promise him that nothing like
what he’s imagining will ever, ever come to pass.

At last, he thinks Pansy would say if she were here, because Draco has been occluding this feeling
for a very long time.

“I keep thinking about Christmas,” says Harry, blunt, not clarifying.

Draco’s imagining Lupin’s blood under his fingernails, and the thing is that Sirius Black’s is
already there. Fuck, he needs a wash.

“When I said whatever I said,” Harry goes on with a gesture, “implying like an idiot, I think, that
all I’ve ever wanted from you is idle chitchat, forgetting all the times that we would, er, you
know…” He gestures, glasses in hand.

Get with it, Malfoy, Draco thinks. “Fuck?” he supplies as the end of Harry’s sentence.

“Yeah, that.” Harry Potter witters on, and it’s familiar. It’s soothing. “I know that you’re better at it
than me…”

This – is not true.

“But I used to try quite hard, most of the time.” Harry’s glasses are back on his face. “And you
always seemed to enjoy it in the end.”

Yes he did.

“Anyway,” Harry carries on, as if his spectacular lack of awareness is neither here nor there. “I
keep thinking about what I said, or what I must’ve said, because I was quite drunk and can’t really
remember, and I’ve been wanting to say that I was wrong.”

“You said that you hated me,” Draco tells him, before he can stop the words.

Harry’s facing him for a moment, then away, as if the words don’t make sense. “Well, that’s
rubbish,” he states categorically. “I mean, maybe back in school…”

Draco squeezes his eyes shut, dropping his chin.

“Oh, Malfoy, I didn’t…” Harry’s pleading with him, but it’s not clear what for. “I’m pretty sure
that cursing you cured me of that feeling, yeah?” he suggests. “At least the hatey parts of it,” he
fails to explain. “Let’s leave it in the past,” he concludes.

Why? Draco wants to ask, because he doesn’t know.

“Hermione says that she’s worried,” Harry finally continues, “that I’m feeling too grateful to keep
things in perspective with you, or something like that.” Harry is being dreadfully earnest, and it’s
dreadful. “And I am grateful, Draco.” His eyes are slanting with something like their own light. “I
am so grateful that I can’t even tell you. But, I mean –” He swallows. “It seems like I at least owe
you my honesty, given all of that, even if I’m clearly no good at explaining.” He promises, “I’ve
been on the road to thinking this stuff since ages before my dad came back.”

“All right,” Draco manages to say, still in his pants, still sitting in the dark, still sitting with Harry
Potter less than six feet away. His voice sounds rough on his own ears.
“Yeah,” Harry agrees, pausing for a moment. He frowns, and Draco fears that he’s forgiven him. “So,” he says, mocking himself, “you’ll probably laugh at this, but d’you remember Boxing Day, not this year but last?”

2006. Draco thinks that he can remember that far back. It was a rather significant time.

“It was a mess,” explains Harry, cleanly through the darkness. “Ginny beat the Cannons and Ron had dispensation, so we’d been drinking since the morning. I completely lost my head and did some things that I shouldn’t’ve.” He tuts at himself, ashamed.

*I snogged her,* Draco can hear him saying, with surprise more than anything.

“I made her cry, I think,” admits Harry now, hunching into himself. “Not that she was *really* serious, I’m sure of it. It was a Christmas thing; she must have been running around with Matías by that point. But when’s Ginny serious?” he demands, guilty. “Does anybody know? It was awful,” he admits. “We hadn’t in years and it was all my fault. Ron yelled at me right there in the pub, to get shot of it and go home, and he was angry with me for weeks and weeks and weeks. Hermione brewed me a sobriety potion.” He tuts again, rubbing an eyebrow with his thumb. “It didn’t work very well. I pretended to go up to bed, but in the end I came down here, sick of saying sorry when I couldn’t make any sense of it.”

Now Draco remembers the full of the night. As if there was a chance that he might have forgotten. “You regaled me with your plans for wedded bliss, as I recall. With Ginny.”

“Probably,” says Harry. His laugh is the perfect portrait of self-mockery. “But I spent the night – that’s what I remember. You looked after me and you made me breakfast. We’d been together for Christmas Eve at Teddy’s and that was Boxing Day and then we spent New Year’s downstairs. And then we broke up.”

“Yes,” Draco agrees, because this is factually accurate.

“So it’s about a week,” says Harry, looking up, “as far as I can tell. The bit that I preferred the most, if I have to have a bit.” And then he says it out loud, as if it’s true. “We were seeing each other for about a week. Seriously.”

Draco tries to speak, then, but finds that he can’t. It’s entirely possible that Harry has gone insane, because this makes no sense at all.

Harry waits for him.

“You – you – you’ve decided,” Draco manages eventually, trying to summarise, to start from the beginning. “You’ve decided that the pinnacle of our relationship was a week that consisted of Exploding Snap – which, I grant you, was fun – followed by a hideous argument with people that you love, a drunken fuck here with me, a cheese-and-pickle sandwich in a flat that if I recall correctly had no milk in, and then… A night at your own party, where you missed the new year’s countdown. A week,” he repeats, “when you weren’t even faithful to me.”

“Yeah,” says Harry, frank, sitting on his hands by the looks of it. “Or – not really. And I’m so sorry,” he interjects quickly. “I’m so –”

“Oh, shut up,” Draco tells him.

Harry snorts in frustration. “Look, I missed the countdown because I was with *you,*” he points out, as if this matters. “I’m always with you, but it was the only time that we’ve done it that way.” He barrels on, “All of it together. Sleeping through the night after doing it. Arriving and sticking close
and snogging at the end of things. The continuity, you know? It was nice. It had bearings.”

“Nice,” Draco repeats, bewildered.

“Weird,” Harry corrects. That sounds more like it. “But afterwards... I felt mixed-up and awful, all that spring. And I came back for the sleeping, didn’t I? Was never sure if you – but I mean...”

“Potter, this is pathetic.”

"I know," Harry says quickly, and then he’s on his feet. “But sometimes I think that I’m doomed to going round in circles forever with you and that’s not what I... Will you stand up, please?”

Not sure what else to do, Draco stands up. He steps away from the bed, and Harry steps away from the chair, rather more urgently.

There wasn’t much space between them to begin with, so there isn’t much time now for Draco to think before Harry is kissing him, mouth on his lower lip, hands pulling on his t-shirt with a rather feeble grip around his navel. Draco’s palate is raw from sleep, and Harry smells like late-night coffee when Draco pushes back, breathing, skimming his hands to Harry’s belt to bring the urgent pressure of his jeans flush against him, where it feels good. Harry kisses him again, pulling up with fisted hands before letting go to run his palms up the skin of Draco’s chest, to his shoulders underneath his t-shirt.

Soon there is a little and then quite a lot of tongue, the whole of Harry’s mouth at an angle over his, warm and interested and serious. The weight of it pulls on him like a sinking sensation, dizzying, and Draco’s fingers are tingling, his hips at a roll. He can feel his own eyelashes. It’s altogether very, very nice, but he’s not sure...

“This is odd,” Draco says, opening his eyes and stepping back as the moment breaks.

Harry sounds exasperated. He disentangles one hand to push his glasses up his nose, all of him silvery in the night time. His chest is rising and falling visibly. “Can you not get out of your head for five whole minutes?” he asks a little shortly.

“Why?” Draco demands, and he’s not sure how this is the first question that comes to him. He rubs at the goosebumps on his arms, pulling away from Harry’s other hand.

“So that either,” Harry explains, nodding at the bed, “we can get on with some of what I’m sure you’ll say is very ill-advised... You know. Or,” he continues with spite, “so that we can have a bit of something worse, like, I don’t know, cuddling.” He takes Draco’s shoulders again, over his t-shirt this time to squeeze each joint and rub his thumbs into Draco’s collarbones. “I miss you,” he promises. “I miss the feel of you, all jabby like a hedgehog.”

His eyes are black pits, solid and demanding like a snake’s. Draco can’t hold their gaze, looking down to Harry’s mouth, which is saying these things. The man’s wetting his lip with nerves and he’s a snake, Draco thinks, but warm-blooded somehow.

“My godfather came back from the dead, all right?” Harry says, reaching up to card fingers through Draco’s greasy, likely bloodied hair before he worms his other hand under Draco’s collar and pushes his fingers into muscle. “I’m very needy today.”

“Today,” Draco murmurs, running his fingers down Harry’s shirt buttons. It’s a casual thing that he’s wearing, but it’s well pressed. Kreacher must have done it.

“I will bite you,” Harry insists, pulling off his glasses. He throws them to the bedside table on what
has long been his side of the room.

Draco looks up again to the man’s black eyes. Do you promise? he thinks.

“I’m not saying that we have to tell people. Not if you don’t want to.” Harry can’t hold character, turning noble and kind and heroic once more, pulling on one of Draco’s t-shirt sleeves, talking quickly like a fire burning over oil. “I’m only saying that I like the thing with the sleeping and the snap, and – and I don’t want anyone else,” he declares. “I want to make like my parents and do it all again, Malfoy, Draco, you…” He takes Draco’s jaw in his hand, his grip firm, his eyes dark. “New Year’s Eve was stupid, is what I mean.” He presses a thumb to Draco’s lips, the skin calloused, and Draco is so turned on that he doesn’t know what to do with himself. “I should’ve told you to shut up and taken you to bed. Yeah? And I’m sorry, I am, I am, and you don’t get to tell me that I can’t be.”

His expression is intent, open like the sea in the night, and the depths of his eyes go on forever.

“You don’t…” Draco stumbles as Harry’s meaning slowly sinks in. He shakes his head. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do.” Harry’s defiant. Harry’s always defiant.

“And what about me?” Draco asks him.

It’s supposed to be a deal-breaker, but Harry’s still looking at him, his eyes clear and black and his tongue touching his lip, his teeth and the other closing over it, as though his mouth is going dry. “What about you?” is Harry’s question, his voice low and full of breath, his thumb still pressing on Draco’s lower lip.

“I don’t understand what’s changed.” He’s supposed to understand these things.

“You’re completely daft, I think,” Harry says, before he kisses him again with sincerity, arm over his shoulders to wrench up his t-shirt from the back. “Why don’t we go with that?”

And it isn't any different, really. Not as Harry piles on top of him and they fall back into bed, as Draco rolls them over and manages to get his head and arms free to start working on the buttons of Harry’s muggle casualwear, distracted by Harry’s mouth from whatever it is that buttons are. He forgets all the reasons why they can’t do this. There are limbs everywhere and the duvet makes a break for it, and Harry’s come twice before Draco even has a thought to fit him up his backside, the first time before he’s even fully undressed. There’s a lot of Harry grabbing him in strange places and having to be told in blunt language that if there ever dawns a day that Harry Potter can’t get it up again within the space of no time at all, then Draco will complain about his quaint little problem of coming too easily, but not before, and certainly not if he continues to do things like that, oh yes, thank you, Harry, mm – but that’s all par for the course.

They get there in the end.

And they lie tangled up together afterwards, summoning the covers back. Harry’s not jabby at all, but is instead as comforting and warm and heavy in his wires as an oversized stuffed bear, like the one that’s still sitting in Harry’s chair, actually, which was apparently transfigured from a hand towel. Only he’s better, because he’s Harry Potter, who’s always been better at everything.

“I don’t know what it is that I’ve done,” Draco admits. “With your family.”

“Don’t care,” is Harry’s reply, reckless, sleepy in his arms.
The next morning, Draco blinks his eyes open and stares up at the ceiling. He can feel the sheets of the bed around him and it’s dark, mostly, because the curtains are heavy and the windows face north.

Harry Potter is lying on his side, curled up and relaxed with his head nestled into the other pillows, taking up the side of the bed that he prefers. The dark grey duvet is around both of their middles, which leaves Draco feeling a little cold and he imagines leaves Harry feeling a little warm. The man murmurs as though he’s been half awake for a while. “I should be saying that you look beautiful in your sleep,” he says like a dick, his voice rough with the morning, “but mostly you look like a twitchy little mole in its hill. It’s cute.”

Draco returns the insult, because he remembers this from times gone by. “You look like Winnie the Pooh.” He read the books with Teddy, in those months when he should have been finishing.

Grinning his shit-eating grin, Harry opens his eyes and reaches out a hand, pressing fingers to the tip of Draco’s nose. It is possibly the most egregious thing that he has ever done. Without his glasses in the grey light of the room, he looks more like his eyebrows than his eyes, and it doesn’t help that his hair has blown up in strange angles around his face.

“What is the plan for today, then?” Draco asks, uncertain what time it must be now. He’s slept more in the last twenty-four hours than surely any time since 1996.

“Dunno,” answers Harry, in his way. “It’s Thursday. McGonagall said that she won’t have me back till next week. Sirius was saying that he wants to go for a run and a swim and a roll down a hill, but then he picked the tiny spare room by the library, and I don’t think he had any plans on…”

Draco can’t help his blink.

Harry gives him a look, which is very striking, if sleepy. “Oh, come on,” he says.

“You come on,” Draco tells him back, because he rather thinks that Lupin should pluck up the guts to tell Harry himself.

With a roll of his eyes, Harry slumps onto his back. “Auntie Dromeda told me that everyone knew about Sirius. Just not talked about it properly, you know?”

Funnily enough, Draco does. “Though I don’t see how they guessed,” Harry grumps, “when he was just…” He rolls his eyes. “She told me not long after… There was a thing in the news and it was her way of starting in on how she didn’t give a damn. I’m not sure I believe her. And I didn’t want to rethink everything,” he reports, “just because… But, well, maybe they got away with it when everyone thought that you had to be a drag queen or dress as a sailor or – whatever, but anyway, it is so obvious,” he scoffs. “And I know you know,” he accuses, “because you knew to tell Moony to be there.”

Harry’s point is not very clear, but the observations are sound enough. Draco’s not sure that he can advise about Andromeda, but it seems that once again Lupin has proven himself to be entirely full of shit. “You should have been an auror,” he jokes for something to say.

“You might be right,” Harry agrees, before letting out a short whine. “Merlin, I was an idiot when I was fifteen,” he complains, fidgeting. “Sirius spent most of his time staging rows, and dear old Professor Lupin had his hands full keeping the peace, when he wasn’t off… But I should’ve seen it,” he argues. “It was in all the staring. And I reckon that Sirius faked those tropical birds, you know – transfigured some owls to make me laugh… It’s the sort of thing he’d do, and he’d keep
his crappy clothes in case he was caught, so no one would suspect an accomplice. I mean, he could’ve nicked stuff from anywhere.”

None of what he’s saying makes much sense to Draco. It all sounds rather like wishful thinking, whatever it is. “Does it bother you?” he intervenes, not sure what he expects to be the answer. For a morning after, things have become rather weighty, rather quickly. This time of day really isn’t his forte.

Harry snorts. “It would’ve been nice for someone to tell me,” he says, which isn’t an answer at all. “Auntie Dromeda could’ve let me worry about the two of them, instead of leaving me to lie awake at night wondering if Sirius and my dad used to snog behind the one-eyed witch.”

“Yes,” Draco says. “That would have been kind.” He finds himself cringing at the thought.

And it’s funny, he thinks. For all the things that Harry’s talked to him about over the years, there are clearly so many more little paths and corners to him than he knows. He tries to keep the mood light, because for once they’re in the morning, and they’re supposed to know how to do this.

“You and Lupin could probably compare notes,” he suggests, because Lily Potter doesn’t seem like the jealous type.

This gets a laugh, a small flare of joy. “He shouldn’t worry,” Harry says, amused, glancing at him. “It could be friendly, but really… Sirius looks at Moony the same way that Dad looks at my mum, if you know what you’re looking for, and there’s all these jokes… It’s hideous.”

And he does not in fact sound like he’s joking. Oh.

In fact, a short, serious look crosses Harry’s face then, and Draco’s not at all sure how to read it. He remembers Harry’s concerns from the night before, but he also remembers the many difficulties that they’ve had to date with one James Potter, who seems to do wrong in Harry’s eyes just by existing.

“I don’t think that relationships should be like that,” Harry says now, as if he’s spent a long time thinking about it. “Like – a competition, like you said. All this worrying about what other people think of you.”

Draco remembers a time when Harry told him why Granger and Ron should mark their domestic bliss with a wedding. He thinks about buying Granger’s ring with Ron and how, in the end, it was fun. He thinks about the fact that Ron surely knows he isn’t going to renge on their agreement, because the whole thing is both fun and very serious, and he owes Granger too, of course he does.

“It’s all right, Potter,” Draco tells Harry, turning on his side in the dark grey sheets of his divan. “I won’t make you dance attendance while Granger and I watch television.” Draco has never watched television with Granger. But clearly it would be him and Granger versus the men. “You should probably be off anyway, if there’s breakfast.”

Harry looks at him now, turning just his head and frowning. “I’ve said something wrong,” he comes out with.

Draco has no idea what he means. “Pardon?”

“I can tell,” Harry says, bouncing onto his side and reaching out to take hold of Draco’s thumb. “I can tell, I can tell, Draco Malfoy, that I’ve said something that winds you up and you’ll be swearing at me in a second if I don’t suss out what it is.”
His eyes bear their old, entreating expression. *Use me. Shout at me. I can tell that you’re upset.*

Fuck off, Harry, he thinks. Why won’t you use me? He’s been using Harry Potter since he was eleven years old, along with the rest of them.

“Would you care for a coffee?” he asks, leaving his hawthorn wand underneath his pillow and rolling out of bed. “I’m afraid that that may be all I can offer you up here.” He remembers thinking that he had some bread, but, actually, that was a while ago. He hasn’t given Kreacher a list for this week, because he wasn’t sure that he’d be in the house.

In any case, Draco strides contendedly naked to the door, because this is his bedroom, isn’t it? This is his flat, and he has no call to wear clothes if he so chooses. The air is a little chill, because it is still April, and this is what happens in rooms with high ceilings. He pulls his thick black dressing gown from the hook and throws it around his shoulders, immediately warmer.

“Mal… *Malf—*” Harry says behind him, rustling covers though he doesn’t get out of bed. “You’ll bring it back here, won’t you?”

Harry Potter loves the bedroom of Draco Malfoy’s flat. It makes him feel like a different person.

Draco snorts, shaking his head as he leaves for the short hallway, pulling the handle behind him. The mirror by the door to the third-floor landing throws a wolf whistle at him, clearly recognising his walk of shame.

For many years Draco has occluded the urge to tell the thing *confringo*, but today he can’t quite manage it. The command is loud in his head as he flicks a finger, walking by.

*Crack*, the curse sounds, and a hairline spider-web fracture appears in the glass where his face should be, around the size of a sickle.

“Oh, that’s very nice,” the mirror says, but the brief hit of relief means that he doesn’t hear it.

There’s milk in the kitchen, because Kreacher has never forgotten the time when there wasn’t, at the tail end of 2006. Today, Draco pulls a glass one-pint bottle from the fridge, and the milk inside it is fresh, because Kreacher must have realised that Sirius Black’s return heralded Draco’s own to this place. The fridge is otherwise empty, besides the last two bottles of Draco’s mother’s mead—which he probably shouldn’t even drink cold, but that’s how he drank all the others. He’s always found the stuff too rich at room temperature, and he’s not sorry to see it nearly gone.

Closing the door, Draco sets the milk on the side. He busies his hands with the kettle and the water and the grounds and the cafetière, enjoying the smell, at least. Granger insists that making tea is a ritual of the familiar, but he’s never felt the same way, and certainly not about coffee. For him, the familiar part is stealing the mug of tea that she’s made from her hands, or being given it, or being told to sit and wait while he’s made one.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, this Thursday morning, Draco’s facing into the light of the window that looks out over the garden of number 12, Grimmauld Place, leaning on the edge of the sink. At the far end of the garden is a shed and a cherry tree, and they feel very far away. And yet—and yet, he can still taste the juice of the two ripest cherries that he could find on that last day at Malfoy Manor, sharp and sweet and sour on his tongue. Hermione on his left and Luna on his right. Hermione, because that was her name. A girl of eighteen who’d been tortured there and Luna, a girl of sixteen who’d been dragged and stored as collateral in a house full of captors. Two women, whom he loved. Two people, who had been hurt so deeply by the two people whom he was mourning.
One and then the second, that day, he ate the fruit, skin, flesh, and he cheeked the stones, while Luna – Cut, she said, and Draco cut.

Now he hears her voice again, telling him to cut, when all he wants to do is sew stitches in his head. Dear Luna, he thinks. You silly cow.

He’s leaning hard on his hands, Draco, shoulders around his ears. As the kettle boils this Thursday morning, he looks out of the window and he wonders what animal he would be, if he were anyone’s patronus at all. He’s always felt doomed to be something small or twitchy or embarrassing, hiding in holes, and that’s what he looks like when he sleeps, apparently.

But he remembers. He remembers when he felt no shame, and he wants to be a lion like that lion Aslan in Teddy’s books, set in that frozen wood beyond the wardrobe. He wants to swap places with every cheeky little shit spoilt child and take the knife for them, and then let them keep the Turkish delight. He wants to rise from the table and see the end of the ice and the snow.

He wants to be Peter Pettigrew, and to make the right choice.

This Thursday morning, as the kettle boils, Draco remembers how at seventeen he cast a wyvern from his wand to protect him. He knew then, as he’s sure his mother knew, that it was Harry, always Harry. A mountain lion broken and hardened by life in a cave and tainted by the Dark Lord’s soul, its heavy serpentine magic. Towards the close of the war it was hopeful, that wyvern: a promise that their hero was something more than a simple beast, something that the Dark Lord could not know. Narcissa Malfoy was always on the lookout for plan B, Draco remembers, and the wyvern’s promise was pleasing to her.

But even then, at seventeen, knowing the Dark Lord’s magic in his arm, Draco didn’t want that fate for Harry Potter. He wanted then, just as now, to believe that Harry never grew up to be anything other than his father’s mountain lion – or maybe the jungle cat that Draco always imagined, mottled or black, pouncing and slashing and then slipping out of view into leaves. The wyvern wasn’t Harry, he remembers pleading with himself, please, not him, not him broken.

Draco remembers wanting to believe something else. It’s Thursday morning, late April. 2008. He still wants to believe it.

He wants – he wants to believe that the wyvern isn’t Harry at all, but a vision of Harry and him. Potter and Malfoy. Lily Potter’s Harryowl and Draco the dragon, always, from that time when they were both perfect, grown up into something that no one cannot love. It’s never even had to be Harry, just someone like him...

Oh Merlin, Draco thinks, looking out past the sink. He doesn’t want to be a mole – a fucking mole. He wants to be that creature even greater than a lion. He wants to be a dragon-bird that can wing through the air and breathe fire, drawing on that time when he wasn’t afraid and nothing hurt but the grazes on his knees. He wants to be something that needs him for who he is and who he always was. His eyes burn and he can’t help it, because please, his heart begs him, here in this kitchen, just please. This was the dream that he always lived for, the way that Harry always lived for his dad, and – and he thinks that he knows exactly how Harry feels, looking the man in the face, because it hurts, this feeling, to be so close to a dream and yet so far away.

The kettle’s on, and it’s Thursday again, and Draco wants to be something different, but he isn’t. He is Draco Malfoy, and he is very, very gay, so very queer, so very needy, so very difficult, as he has been since he knew who he was. He’s that ghastly poof-Puff dragon that George made, for some reason, for children, which Pansy did love and which lives on and on, because it’s more like a pet than a toy and won’t die, a fuzzy nonsense of faux fur and felt with endless delusions of

Harry could happily shag women, Draco thinks, or maybe go without shagging at all, but Draco doesn’t care, whatever it is that Harry thinks he can’t explain. He doesn’t care, because he just wants his Harry to love him, and to tell him how to love him back in a way that doesn’t make things worse, the way that his love always has done.

Draco’s going to go into work today. He knows that he is. He’s going to apparate to his office like a wraith and clean up the mess, then disapparate to the Nowhere Room and clean up that and then apparate home to here, which is essentially the same place of nowhere. He won’t see the sky or the countryside he loves, actually, though his family let it fill with fog and foreboding. There will be nothing for him to do, in the end, but always something, and he knows that in the end he will feel as though he might as well die.

Maybe Harry Potter will fuck him, Draco thinks, because fuck if he knows what to say.

click-clack

There’s the sound of a door latch, then, and the squeak-creak-yawn of a door falling open.

“Lily was saying that one could fit two of her dad’s house in here. Both floors.” That’s James Potter’s voice, coming from the hallway. “More space than our first flat.”

“You mean yours and mine?” And that’s Sirius Black. Out of St Mungo’s, his accent has returned to the one that Draco heard in his memories: a haughty London nowhere voice, designed to take him anywhere he wants. “Sodom and Gomorrah?”

“I never accepted that name,” Potter states. He was born with a place already waiting. It belongs to Gryffindor.

“Come off it, Prongs,” Black scoffs. “The nights that we weren’t living in sin we might as well have been dead.”

“Is it a sin to be intimate with one’s fiancée? Is it a sin for two old friends –”

“Oh, it’s a sin, mate. And it feels –”

"Yes, and then the both of you swoon to gasps of ave Maria."

A bright gulp of laughter, like a dog.

The third-floor flat of number 12, Grimmauld Place has its own set of wards, to prevent apparition when Draco is not home and to otherwise prevent intrusion through the door without his say-so. The wards are themselves keyed to the house’s main protections in the wine cellar and are designed to yield in case of emergency.

This is not an emergency, Draco thinks. This is Thursday morning.

James Potter and Sirius Black have broken into Draco’s flat.

James Potter and Sirius Black have broken into Draco’s flat, Draco realises, because they care for his wards about as much as they care for the veil between life and death, which is to say not at all, the absolute fuckers.

“Malfy!” James Potter carols, his face alight with humour. “There you are.”
They’ve appeared in the kitchen doorway, Potter and Black, the sofa on their right. Draco has emerged to approach the dining table, wiping his face quickly and setting himself between the table’s cover and the wall, because he isn’t dressed and he can only tie a dressing gown so tightly. He tries to think of a wandless spell that will be of any use in this situation, because he’s left his hawthorn wand under his pillow.

“Is that the kettle I hear?” James Potter continues, adjusting his glasses.

“This used to be the playroom,” Black is saying, looking around. “I can’t remember what we called it. The children’s room?”

“Shall I make a pot?” Potter suggests, drawing his blood-red brimstone wand and waving it in short flicks absently towards the cabinets.

They’re approaching the dining table, so Draco orbits away from them towards the hearth and its floo. The room’s walls are a warm, snowy white, which gives him nowhere to hide as a figure in stark black.

Fuck, he thinks. What the fuck did I do?

“So,” James Potter begins again, while he and Black ensconce themselves at the dining table. Floating from the kitchen comes Draco’s coffee as well as a pot of tea and the bottle of milk, fresh and full-fat, the foil popped. Two coffee cups dance to sit by the cafetière like exhibits in a court room. “I’ve been saying for weeks that we were due for a chat, but we’ve all been distracted, and that’s no one’s fault.”

“It’s definitely bigger in here than Sod’n’Gom.” Still peering around, Black is blowing on his tea. “I’d say that you only need the space up to that sofa, even with the second bedroom.”

There are four chairs at the dining table, and two have been pulled out to leave room for everyone’s legs. Both Potter and Black have presences much larger than their physical selves, and they feel as though they’re taking up half the room, rather than only half of the table. Maybe all of the room. If they were vulnerable yesterday, they’re untouchable today.

“We should all be here, really.” Potter briefly smiles a somewhat unfriendly grin. “But the wife’s in the bath, and Moony’s come out as a conscientious objector. What was it that he said, Padfoot?”

Black turns towards Potter’s voice, before tilting his head to aim his remarks casually into the air, mug held in two hands. He sounds amused. “He said, I believe, that to break in here would be an unforgivable invasion of our son and his lover’s privacy.”

“That is correct. And –”

“Unforgivable,” Black repeats as though this is hilarious, eyes widening over his mug.

Potter throws him a look, nodding to Draco on the far side of the floo. He’s concealing a smirk.

“Malfoy, we’re the Marauders,” he says, and he loves the
name. He tuts. “You can’t hide from us.”

Fuck, Draco thinks, staring at the man. What the fuck is happening?

“Now,” James Potter continues unprompted, his vowels as round as eternity. He sits back, eyebrows raised with delight. “I,” he says, pointing a finger to the air. “I am very fucking interested to know whether you are serious about our son. Because I am not certain that you are.”

“Is that the line, Prongs?” Black asks him, curious and remarkably restrained. He offers a sharp turn of his head and a blink. “I thought that it was the other way around.”

Potter huffs, playacting. “Have you not noticed that our little Harrymophead is a very serious boy?”

“Yes, that’s true,” Black concedes. He’s sprawled in his chair, ankles crossed as though someone has taken James Potter’s perfect lines and sketched a few expressionist kinks into them. “But this one thinks that he looks right dashing in a backpack.”

A great deal of mock sincerity. “The time for backpacks is passed, Padfoot.”

Catching Draco’s eye, Black winks at him, tea at his lips. “There’s always time for backpacks, eh, Malfoy?” He sniggers before he can quite finish the line, whatever the fuck it means.

That’s it, Draco decides. They’re all going back to where they came from. This was a terrible, terrible idea.

The squeak of a door and noisy, clumsy footsteps.

“Draco, what’s going on? I thought I heard… What the hell are you doing in here?”

And here is Mophead Potter himself, standing in the doorway, wooden floorboards stretching out in front of him, high ceiling and its old cornice above.

“You can’t just waltz in like —! Who d’you think you are?”

Harry Potter is storming over the floor towards its centre, wearing yesterday’s clothes. Or some of them, anyway. He’s missing his buttoned shirt, which Kreacher must have pressed, in favour of the white t-shirt that he was wearing underneath it, blue jeans and bare feet. His arms hang at his sides — wiry, dusted with black hair — and his hands are in fists at the end of them.

They are all around the same age, by appearances. For a moment, turning forcefully, Harry looks older than his father, but James Potter can speak as though he’s as old as time.

“What are you doing in here, my son?” he mocks. “That is the question.”

The look on Harry’s face is fury as he turns to stand between the dining table and Draco, who’s on the far side of the fireplace. “Get out.”

At the sound of his voice, quite vividly, quite suddenly, Draco imagines Harry taking Tom Riddle’s wand and snapping it. Surely across a fulcrum of some kind — one of the gate pillars of Hogwarts, perhaps, half of the stick beneath his hand against the stone, the other pushing harshly until the wood splintered.

“Now, now, Harry —”

“Don’t now, now me —”
Ollivander will have burned the yew, his face set without mercy. His eyes will have been Ravenclaw blue, the fire Gryffindor red, and that wand the wand of a green man, the green curse – but with a red core from a long time ago. Harry’s core.

“I said get out,” Harry says to his father and god-, right now. Draco loves him, because that’s all that he can do.

There’s a squabble anyway.

"No, sorry –"

“You’ll want to hear –”

“I don’t need to hear –”

It ends with a creak on the landing. “What’s this racket?”

And now Lily Potter’s in the doorway, on her way back upstairs from the bath. Wonderful.

She’s as underdressed as Draco, looking very prim in a large pink dressing gown. It’s crossed high under her throat, while a white towel is wrapped around her head. Her green eyes are bright, vivid and hard against the softness of the rest of her.

There’s silence as she enters the room. Potter opens his mouth, and then closes it, his posture losing some of its arrogance. Black grins with his teeth, slouching in his chair and hooking his elbow over the back of it. Harry eyes his mother avidly.

“Have I completely lost it, James Potter?” Lily asks sharply. “Or do I remember saying that I was taking a bath and to give me half an hour?” Her tone is dangerous. “Because what I’m seeing is a man who’s completely ignored his wife, who is both sensible and attractive, all so that he can have his fun running rampant with the wammal.”

Black lets out a bright laugh, because apparently he understands what this means. “Woof,” he tells Lily, as though it’s the punchline to a dirty joke.

She rolls her eyes, clearly suppressing some sort of laugh. “Draco love,” she distracts herself, meeting his eyes across the room. He’s standing there in his own dressing gown, needing a wash. “I can only apologise for Bill and Ben the Flower Pot Men. We thought that it might be nice to see you downstairs today, but some people…” Then she’s looking back the way she’s come, leaning out of the doorway with her hand on the frame. “Moony!” she yells, loud enough to wake the dead. “Stop hiding wherever you are and take a hand to these two.” She slaps the doorframe with her hand. “I’m supposed to be having a bath.” The A is brutal, the B spat like a bullet.

Of course, Draco thinks. Lupin might have objected, but he’s still in on whatever this is, for Merlin’s…

"Dearest, we have a plan,” James Potter begins, a falsely innocent look on his face.

"That’s good,” Lily observes, “because you clearly don’t have any patience.”

Potter rears back theatrically. “That is a slanderous accu–”

“I,” Lily Potter interrupts, holding up a hand and looking around the room, “will be back in five –” She tuts. “Oh Harryowl…” she interrupts herself, softening as she looks at her son.
And she keeps looking at him, pausing, something glancing between her eyebrows.

Harry drops his head, guilty, and Draco feels it like a burn.

“Stop worrying so much, Harriypop,” Lily tells him warmly, drawing in and giving him a quick one-armed hug. “We’re not going anywhere.” She drops a facetious kiss to his cheek, nodding her head towards Draco with a pointed look. “You concentrate on this one. Maybe force some breakfast down him.”

Harry scowls at her, clenching his jaw. He mumbles unconvincingly that he isn’t worried about anything.

There’s more noise from outside the flat, and Draco thinks that this is all getting out of hand.

Harry’s mother gives her son another squeeze. “We’ll see you both at lunchtime, won’t we?” she commands, before turning around. “Weeeeed,” she squeals at Potter and Black nonsensically, maintaining an astonishing level of dignity as she whips her hands to shoo them out –
– but she’s interrupted as not only Lupin appears in the doorway but Ron, steering him over the threshold, and Hermione, bustling at Ron’s side with a scowl.

This is worse than anything Draco ever imagined. He is not wearing any clothes.

“– then tell ‘em that I’ll have ‘em for trespassing,” Ron’s saying, his face drawn roughly around his freckles. It’s odd. It’s terribly odd, because as Lupin demurs Ron’s not shouting at Draco, but at James Potter and Sirius Black, who are both still sitting with emphatically earnest expressions at Draco’s dining table despite Lily’s best efforts, turned away from its legs to spread their own across the floor. “Oi, you two, get up!” Ron’s slashing a long arm at them. “You can’t be in here…”

“Can’t?” Potter quotes Ron, squinting. He’s immediately leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. His elbows are points, proud antlers. He glances at Black. Are you hearing this? he seems to be saying.

Yes, and I’m shocked, Black replies with a scathing wrinkle of his eyebrows and a short shake of his head.

Potter’s tea is still resting on the table, and he’s a bastard as he looks at Ron. “I would have thought it an auror’s duty to take full account of the evidence, at least before reaching such a demonstrably flawed conclusion…” He’s cocky as fuck, and he’s still stolen Harry’s best grin.

Black grins too, falling over his tea with infernal laughter in his shoulders, lifting his head to casually toss hair out of his face. His expression seems to suggest that this is the best day of his life.

At least it’s clear that they’ll never fuck, Draco thinks. They’d be so busy basking in each other that they’d forget to touch up their dicks.

Leaning against the doorframe, Lupin is watching Black’s expression too, saying nothing, his legs and arms casually crossed while insects glitter in his amber eyes.

“You’re not funny,” Ron is snapping, entirely earnest. He’s tall and billowing like a sail at sea, freckles and sharp words. “This ain’t your house, mate,” he tells James Potter. “And it ain’t yours anymore,” he adds to Black, who’s mocking him with his eyebrows. “If Draco wants to have his flat, he has his flat.”
“Ron’s right,” Hermione agrees. “We can’t force…” She looks at Draco, her eyes too kind, and then at Harry, worrying her lip. “Oh Harry, what you both must be feeling,” she says.

The man is scowling at his father and at Black, who’s still grinning. His arms are crossed, and he’s angry, surely, just angry. It’s what most of his emotions turn into.

“Draco did all this because he loves you,” Hermione says, and it hurts like a knife between Draco’s ribs. “Everyone sees that, so no one’s going to say…”

“No he didn’t.” Harry shakes his head. “He… You could just as well say that I did it, Draco reckons.” His vowels are flat as he talks to Hermione. “It’s all one thing from before.”

Harry. No, Draco thinks, freezing.

“Look, it doesn’t matter,” Harry tells Hermione, before looking around the room again. “You can all get out,” he declares.

“What do you mean, you did this?” Hermione insists on asking, a frown across her forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Harry avoids her eyes.

“What…?” Lily begins, looking lost.

Ron’s frowning as though he’s remembered something.

“Do you know what he means?” Black asks James Potter, breaking character again.

Harry is watching him. “I brought you all back as ghosts, once,” he explains quickly to his godfather, as though it’s a compulsion. “Or near enough.” He rolls his eyes. “It improved your chances with the apparition or something.”

“The artefact,” Lupin says slowly, intervening for the first time as he pulls away from the wall and to draw Harry’s attention. “That’s what you’re…”

Draco wraps his arms around himself, rubbing hard and sinking as deeply as he can into the plaster behind him.

“Yeah,” Harry says, before sighing. “It was the end of the war,” he explains to his mother, who looks worried. “I went into the forest to finish it.” He says it briskly, rubbing his eyebrow. “I didn’t want to do it on my own, so I used the resurrection stone from the Deathly Hallows to bring you all back.”

Silence.

More silence.

“Harry.” Lupin is first to react. He jerks away from the doorframe, lurching towards their son. “Why would you ever have gone near…? Was that the mission?” he demands, his voice not bland, but harsh and icy cold, everyone’s most hated February. “Was that the end of the mission?”

“What mission?” Black asks in a growl. He’s on his feet, tea on the table, his energy switched in a moment from the sun to the moon, and he slips up to Lupin’s side like water into gravity. He’s not surprised by Lupin’s vehemence at all; he reads it like a cue.

Lily Potter is still looking worried, wearing pink, and she glances at her husband, who is clenching
his jaw, knowing and watchful where he remains in his chair. “Mission?” she asks faintly.

“Angel, come here,” James Potter says quite seriously, drawing his wife into his lap and kissing her on the neck. He’s worked it all out, Draco thinks.

“It was a long time ago,” Harry’s snapping at them all. He moves to sit on the arm of the sofa that Draco’s never found much use for. “Nearly ten years exactly, turns out.”

Hermione is biting her lip; Ron is scowling. Draco wants to speak up. He does. But he stays by the floo, arms crossed, because he knows the tale, and he knows that he doesn’t know how to speak about it. Almost everything that Draco’s ever said has been hateful, and he hates it. He hates it, and yet he also hates this story. He hates how it ends. What is he supposed to say?

“Ten years is not a long time,” Lupin’s biting out, arch.

"Ten years is forever," Harry snaps, his expression aflame.

“Where was everyone else? This mission,” Black demands with a sneer, always a dog, eyes flat and grey, taller than Harry and burlier. Draco hears the etymology in his voice, mission back to mitto, defining it as a thing on which one is sent. “Why was it yours? Last I remember we were sending you to bed with an Ovaltine.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry says, covering his face with his hands, swiping his fingers to hold himself by the neck for a moment. “It really doesn’t matter.” He gestures aimlessly through the air towards Draco. “The point isn’t that I died –”

“You what?!” Black roars, arms at his side, hands open, more threatening than his godson’s, always. Draco knows how he feels, intensely. He gazes with rage over Harry’s head, to the right. “This is bloody…”

“– it’s that you can’t keep hassling him, because Draco wants to be on his own, and to have his own space, and you can’t go around forcing people to share all of their –”

“No, the point is, Harry,” Black declares, now locking eyes with him and swallowing, “that you went through something that you never should have had to, and it’s brought you here to hiding in this flat.” He looks back to the table. “Did you know about this?” he demands from James Potter.

Potter says nothing, holding Lily, who’s squeezed her eyes shut against the side of his head. He offers Black a serious look. I had my suspicions. Why do you think we’re here?

Harry looks between them, frustrated. “This is nothing to do with –“

“Oh, come on,” Black tells him, forcing hair out of his eyes. “Hermione just said it – Malfoy fixed us for you, so the least you can do is –”

“He did it for you,” Harry spits, rising to his feet, scrawnier than Black and scrawnier than his father, but more than willing to face them down. Even if James Potter is simply watching him right now, a sharp tick in his jaw. “For you,” Harry bellows, pointing a finger through the air, making Black startle and Draco’s throat jump. “Because you were dead, and why, Sirius? Why did you die? There was no need for it at all, not like me.”

There are tears in his voice now, but his glasses obscure them. “Harry…” Black begins.

“I wanted you there.” His voice cracks, but Harry’s still violently angry. “I wanted all of you so desperately, at the end, because you left me on my own and all I had were the ruddy trees
surrounding me.” He sniffs, incensed. “And Draco – all he has are his trees, and he’s a nutcase, so he took one thing I said and he thought to himself, right, right, here’s one thing – here’s one thing that I can do.”

And then – it’s not about Harry anymore. Draco remembers what he’s been telling everyone until he’s been blue in the face. He has a responsibility. He has his work. He has all of the dead, grasping at his feet and screaming their whispers in his ears and he owes them, he owes them, he owes them.

Oh fuck, he remembers.

“Oh Harrio,” Lily Potter says at this moment, on her feet and crossing the floor to her son. Draco looks up from the wooden floorboards to see that Harry’s flinching away from her touch to leave her looking distraught. He looks at Draco and Draco knows, he knows that Harry is aware of everything that Draco’s been feeling for the last four years and more, all of it back to 1996. He’s always aware of so much more than he ever fucking lets on.

“He doesn’t deserve you lot having a go at him,” Harry says, swiping his hand under the lenses of his glasses and directing his words to James Potter. “And you…” His jaw ticks. “You couldn’t let him have his flat, could you?” he says, snapping at his father for want of anyone else. “How hard would it have been for you to just –?”

“Leave him in here on his own?” James Potter suggests, bald. “Leave you?”

Harry glares at him, clenching his jaw. “I could so easily hate you,” he says darkly.

“I am your father,” James Potter tells him before anyone else can react, leaning forward. “We call that feeling love.”

Then Harry’s laughing, a dark chortle that he aims towards the ceiling. James Potter’s eyes are bright.

Lily Potter is squeezing her nose, while Black is looking between them, fist to his teeth. “James, mate…” he begins. He turns his head. “Harry, I never…”

"Sirius,” Lupin mutters, interrupting, telling him to step back – which he does, looking down.

James Potter rises to his feet. “Do you know why we’re here?” he demands, staring down his son.

Harry glares back, defiant. “Because the war fucked up my mental boyfriend.”

“Harry,” Granger tries to intercede from Ron’s side, presumably for the use of mental rather than fuck. Or else boyfriend, which has dashed up the back of Draco’s neck like a taboo.

“No,” James Potter says. “In this room.”

“Oh,” Harry corrects himself. “That’s because you don’t like him.”

This sits in the air, poisonous, and Draco believes it. Until –

“We like him a lot!” Black protests, tossing a glance over his shoulder. “Moony half fancies him.”

“I said that he writes very elegant prose!” Lupin looks scandalised, and Draco feels it in a sudden surge of panic. “Merlin above, Padfoot.”

“To be fair,” Ron interjects, “Hermione says the same.” He throws the joke at Draco, and Draco
blinks. “Then she has a go at my spelling. Makes me feel quite inferior.”

“Oh, I do not, Ron –”

“Enough,” James Potter snaps.

“Oi!” Ron’s tone hardens.

Hermione - “You will not raise your voice at me.”

Draco’s heart is pounding, and he wants to be somewhere else. He’s looking down at the floorboards, tracing the grain with his eyes.

“James, you need to start making sense now,” Lily eventually says, a warning. She clutches her dressing gown closed at her neck.

It doesn’t seem as though James Potter knows how. He’s still staring down Harry, sharp angles against Harry’s coiled spring, and both of them are clenching their jaws.

“It’s all right, Lily love,” Black finally intervenes, squeezing her elbow and throwing James Potter an anxious look. His eyebrows are knit in calculation, and he seems to decide several things very quickly. “He’s only doing what he always does.”

Lily is not impressed. “Tossing his antlers where they’re not very welcome?”

“Yes,” Black concedes with a nod. Lupin snorts. “But it’s true, isn’t it? That just because something isn’t welcome doesn’t mean that it isn’t…” He seems lost for the appropriate word.

“Wanted,” James Potter supplies, with a sharp look of gratitude.

“I rather thought that that was the precise definition,” Lupin offers mildly, like a shit.

Black throws him a look that might as well be a wink. “Needed, let’s say.” You pedant. He turns back to Lily, telling her wearily, “He’s leading the charge in someone else’s battle.”

Oh, Draco thinks.

“Oh James,” Lily laments, dropping her chin and still clutching her pink dressing gown. She’s frowning at her husband, then glancing at her son. Her tone is startlingly fond, just for a moment as she shakes her head. “If you could’ve waited…”

Oh, Draco’s still thinking. Because for a moment, just for a moment, his eyes skew when he looks at James Potter, and he doesn’t see what he should be seeing at all.

For a moment, standing tall, James Potter doesn’t look like an arrogant fucker who never grew up, picking locks for the hell of it. He looks likes a man who’s fought his way out of the veil in search of his lost brother, who’s found his way home despite all the odds. He looks like a wizard who’s refused to forget that magic makes anything possible, bugger death, the loss of innocence, and whatever else it is that mortals succumb to.

He looks like a proud and impossible sneak thief who’s bullied his way into Draco’s flat – because he’s a father who looks like his son, all black hair and glasses and righteousness, bright eyes. His son, Draco thinks. James Potter is here to do everything that his son wishes that he could, that his son’s been trying to do all along. Namely, to drag this crowd of people straight through the wards and into the third-floor flat of number 12, Grimmauld Place, so that neither Draco nor Harry will
James Potter is here with his wife, his best friend and his partner in crime, because he needed them all to make the scheme work. He’s here the way that Harry’s always tried to be with his stories, no matter how much Draco’s tried to be rid of him.

Fuck, Draco thinks. What the hell is he supposed to do now?

“I do not want you barging in here,” Harry interrupts, turning red, shouting at himself, surely, at himself. “And Malfoy doesn’t –”

“Malfoy’s shitscared and so are you,” Black tells him shortly, his jaw ticking. “War does that to people. It’s what makes the whole thing so bloody miserable.”

His voice is rough, Black’s, despite his youthful face. He’s found jeans and a black t-shirt from somewhere, and he’s dressed much like Harry, but in socks rather than bare feet, and Harry’s t-shirt is white, that colour of peacetime. He was the first person to die, Draco thinks, whom Harry knew for certain that he loved and whose death Draco knew for certain could be placed at his family’s door.

“He thinks that he should hide and you think that you should help him,” Black maintains, glancing at James Potter as though to check that they’re still in agreement. Of course they are. “But at some point we all have to move on from our guilt, Harry. That’s what your dad and all of us want for you, and – we want it for Malfoy too, don’t we?”

“But I don’t feel guilty,” Harry insists, his expression a storm. His mother looks up to the ceiling. It’s an obvious lie.

“Everyone feels guilty by the time war is done,” Black tells him, hand on his chest. “Moppet, it’s not just you. It comes from there being no good decisions, and it’ll kill you,” he insists. “That’s why we’re saying that you and your lover –” He glances to his right. “Thank you, Moony, perfect word… You need to get out of this flat.”

The words crumble into silence, while Harry clenches his jaw.

“I want it known that I never said it that way,” Lupin interjects as though this is important.

“Oh shush, Moony,” Lily Potter shoots at him, flirting for one flick of her green eyes as she touches a hand to the towel on her head. The man startles like a rabbit.

James Potter lets out a loud, unseemly guffaw then, apparently despite himself. His wife throws him a wink.

“Fuck off, the pair of you,” Black tells them, as though this exchange is a dig at him.

Harry is blushing a deep and violent purple, because he was never supposed to take a lover, was he? Not the child of all these grown ups. Draco has a mind to –

Then, however, Harry’s not looking at his parents, dead for so long, but at Ron and Hermione, who became something else. Hermione looks deeply exasperated, while Ron tilts his head to his shoulder as if to ask whom Harry thought he was hiding from.

"Mate, we all know,” Ron says. “You said it yourself not five minutes ago.”
“That’s not…” Harry tries anyway, looking at Draco, who tries to tell him in a glance that it’s all right, because he thinks that he might understand, at last. Looking to Black, Harry insists, “It’s not your business.”

“Harry,” Black says, with a lifetime of patience, from Azkaban and from the fifteen long years he waited for the chance to leave his childhood home. “There is a wall between your shag pad and the rest of the –“

“And you’re so much better, are you?” Harry shouts again, blood in his face.

James Potter pipes up. “He does have a point, Padfoo-”

“I said fuck off,” Black snaps at him more harshly. He clenches his jaw. “This isn’t about…” Black begins, distracted, and Draco wonders whether maybe he didn’t in fact spend the night with Lupin, which seems quite sad, all of a sudden.

“No,” Harry agrees, loudly. “This isn’t about any of you. I’ve had enough of you lot making fun –” The outburst is unfair, Draco knows. If anyone understands him out of this lot, then it’s surely Black, who seems to be setting himself up as some sort of bastard uncle that Draco never knew he had. His face is full of surprise, grey eyes stormy with understanding and deep, clear guilt, of the kind that Draco feels so deeply.

But none of this matters now, because Harry Potter is charging towards Draco with his blood up, wand in his defiant hand.

“Harry!” someone complains.

Harry’s wand is of holly, Draco remembers, which belongs to midwinter, but also to Christmas, to Yule, the promise that winter will end. The core was once twinned with a wand made for churchyards, but it now has its pair in a wand made of cherry, which fruits at midsummer.

He doesn’t know why he’s thinking these things.

It seems as though Harry intends to take Draco’s shoulder, but he instead finds the nape of his neck, curling fingers into hair. The feeling of them is a lightning strike as Harry whips his wand and vanishes them both.

"Where are you –?"

They reappear. And he hasn’t said a word since he left his bedroom, but in his shock Draco now finds words easy. He doesn’t know where he thought they might be going but it wasn’t – “Where the fuck have you brought us?” he demands as he and Harry reappear, though he doesn’t pull away from Harry’s hand. “I’m not dressed.”

This is relevant, because Harry has brought them not only outside, but somewhere else, and here they are. Here they are. Here they are in the fresh air, under clouds and the promise of spring rain, in quiet and birdsong.

This is not the garden of number 12, Grimmauld Place, Draco realises, looking around. This is not the house’s roughly mown grass, nor anywhere with such a finite address. They’re not in London; this is a different part of the country, at least, if not France or Ireland. They’re surrounded by trees, and the earth beneath their feet is covered in a blanket of bluebells. Draco’s toes are squelching in the forest carpet and his legs are wet with dew.
Harry’s looking at him, blinking as though he can’t quite believe what he’s done, but there’s a smirk on his lips, cutting into his reddened cheeks. He’s vanished them both, no pudding no nothing, and here they are, together in another forest that Harry didn’t want to enter on his own. “It’s the Forest of Dean,” he tells Draco, sly.

And that – that isn’t nowhere at all, because Draco’s seen the name of that place on a map. He grew up just over the water, over the Severn, down past Bath.

“Why have you brought me to the Forest of Dean?” Draco asks, not sure that he wants to know the answer. He’s supposed to be swearing again – *why the fuck are we here?* – but he can’t seem to find the anger. They’ve shucked off the third-floor flat of number 12, Grimmauld Place, and this is outside, where birds whip and sing through the trees. It’s a place that he’s heard tell of, from Harry’s brother and sister, from his best friends. Ron and Hermione. Oh.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Harry says, rubbing his thumb up and down the side of Draco’s neck. “You’d gone quiet. Sirius and my dad – oh, don’t tell them I said this, but they’re right. Ruddy Marauders.” He huffs, once again irate. “I don’t know how Mum puts up with it,” he complains. “The two of them are completely impossible, and Moony’s just as bad. Nothing more than an enabler…”

Draco finds himself laughing, the sound bubbling out of him, because it’s love, isn’t it, that tone in Harry’s voice?

Immediately Harry’s anger vanishes into his grin and he’s glancing away, looking around them at the breadth of this wood full of bluebells, now squeezing Draco’s shoulder, now his wrist, sticking his wand in his own back pocket. “I haven’t been back here, you know,” he says, sounding bemused. “Not since the first time.”

“Have I heard this story?” Draco asks, looking at him. Because no one’s ever told him the significance of this place, before it became a retreat from difficult family gatherings.

“It’s where Ron came back to us,” Harry explains, and Draco didn’t know that he’d gone missing. “Hermione and I were at our wits’ end. I nearly drowned in a frozen lake.”

“Clever,” Draco manages, his heart constricting.

“Not on purpose,” Harry clarifies, his smile dim. “Ron saved me and then he destroyed the first horcrux. It was the start to the end of the war.” Shaking his head, he doesn’t dwell on this point. “He always comes back, Ron, that’s the thing. He always comes back.”

“I’m sure,” Draco interrupts, brushing a hand through Harry’s black hair. “Why are we talking about Ron?”

“Because he likes you,” their hero continues to rattle on, pushing his glasses up his nose, taking Draco’s hand and pulling them a few steps further through the soil into the sea of blue-violet flowers. “I knew it before, but it’s obvious now. It’s…” Harry doesn’t know what to say either, Draco thinks. “Ron’s protective of people he likes.”

“Aren’t you all?” Draco asks, prodding.

“Nah.” Harry shakes his head, stopping, turning around, still in bluebells and birdsong. “No,” he says, as if they really need to understand. “Hermione’ll just badger you, always, and she’s either nice about it or she isn’t. Me…” He stalls, as though he was running up towards this, but has lost his nerve anyway. “I dunno what I do.” He won’t look up, kicking one bare muddy foot idly
through the dewy flowers. “But I know that liking me is dangerous to your health.”

“Everything about you is dangerous to one’s health,” Draco jokes. Though it’s true, what he says. Harry has always felt like prickling in his chest, like fire under his ribs. Even when they hated each other, supposedly. Courage, in the face of despair, which can be dangerous, and hateful, and many other things too. It always takes courage to crush oneself down into nothing.

Instead of responding as he should, Harry laughs a little wetly, turning into their hands to scissor their fingers together and kiss Draco soundly on the mouth among the stems of spring flora, getting mud all over their toes. He tastes like the turn of morning into afternoon. Draco’s eyes fall shut for a moment, because, yes, all right.

“When Ron came back to us,” Harry tells him as they breathe, his voice weak, “it felt lucky. That’s – that’s what his friendship is like. There’s not much that me and Hermione can’t do, if we put our minds to it, but without Ron…” He swallows, and Draco watches the movement in his jaw. “You feel it, don’t you,” he begs, “his magic in the house? That summertime cricket-bat sunshine there across your shoulders.”

And Hermione’s vines twining around his ears, making him watch out and listen, actually look at the world around him. Her magic is the magic of realisation, and it is very sensible, in all senses of the word.

It strikes Draco, in this moment, that this is why he should be Ron’s best man, and Harry Hermione’s, and that Ron likely knew it all along. Because he loves Hermione the way that Harry loves Ron. Her magic is something that he never knew he was missing, and it is precious to him like nothing else.

The feeling of jam’s arrival, that’s Ron. Fuck practicality, Draco suddenly thinks – this is the enchantment that he is going to put on Hermione Granger’s engagement ring. Let her feel the tides of serendipity in the air, the way she can hear the tick of a clock. Let her understand comic timing and recognise those moments when it’s now, it’s now, it’s now, and it is not the time to be sensible. All the magic that Ron’s never known that he has.

And the bluebells – the bluebells belong to the fey, as this ring’s magic will, as it already does, to a muggle degree. He’ll ask Luna to gain him a session with her favourite fairy queen. He’ll find out what they desire in exchange for some knowledge, to teach him what he needs to know.

He’ll cast the enchantment on Litha, he’s sure of it, which gives him until the twenty-first of June.

“I just…” Harry is saying, and Draco feels quite divorced from the moment. “I want us to be lucky too. I dunno how to explain it.”

“Say that again,” Draco insists, blinking.

Harry looks around them, at the trees and the cloudy sky, bluebells on bluebells while the birds sing. “I want us to be here, Draco,” he says, his green eyes cautious. “Where it’s nice.”

It doesn’t make sense, but that doesn’t matter. The kiss is long, that Draco shares with Harry this time, and breath rushes up Draco’s nose as gravity or something else pulls them closer. He’s not thinking of anybody else. He lets go of Harry’s hand to keep his balance, taking his upper arm while his other hand finds the softer hair that’s always hidden at Harry Potter’s temples, broken up by the stems of his ridiculous glasses. There’s a tongue against his, welcome, and it’s been in half the mouths of the Ministry of Magic, but that was all years ago.
Everybody loves Harry Potter, Draco included, but he… Fuck it all, but he likes him, the flippant bastard, whatever danger that may bring. He likes him so very, very much, better than anyone, surely, it has to be. The man is pushy and patient and a rambling mess, and Draco likes the sound of his voice.

Just for now, Draco likes that when he pulls away and tells Harry Potter, his own voice hoarse with desire, “I’m not doing anything with you in Ron and Hermione’s sex forest,” Harry gets the joke, for which read the lie, for which read the statement that this place is theirs now, thank you, and he lets out a whooping cackle of a laugh before he buries his mouth in the side of Draco’s nose. “You love Ron and Hermione,” he croons, a rasp in his throat that makes Draco laugh with him. “You love them…” Fingers run from the top of Draco’s spine, up his neck, through his hair to the back of his head so that Harry can pull him down and kiss him hot between his eyes. He speaks again, the words half swallowed and his voice on the edge of a baritone. “And Merlin, Merlin, I love you.”

Draco freezes, the moment broken. “No you don’t,” he snaps.

“Yes I do,” Harry snaps right back, pulling on his hair. He looks Draco in the eye. “For so long now I’ve loved you, you fusspot and saucer.” He lands a sucking kiss on his lips, the sound of it a tut. “You taste like honey and hope, every time you come home.”

Hope? “No,” Draco refuses to accept it. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You are the springtime, Draco Malfoy,” Harry Potter tells him harshly, no small part of it a mocking titter as he tucks his nose against Draco’s again for a moment. “ Didn’t you feel it the day you moved in?” He’s still holding the back of Draco’s head, fingers crunching and his eyes are just… Green.

“Harry, you can’t…”

“Malfoy, I have spent all my life fighting,” he’s interrupted again by black hair and green eyes and pain, ever captivating. Harry smiles quickly, bright, skin hinting lines where his glasses are. “I run around making a mess of things, and then I get lost, and then there you are.”

He shakes his head, turning away to look at the trees. Draco kisses him again, quickly, taking the side of his face in his hand so that he turns back, his elbow now gripped by Harry’s grasping hand. Another kiss, because that is necessary, and Harry’s breathing him in, face flushed, smelling of salt, but Draco doesn’t – he doesn’t…

“Luna made me see it,” Harry tells him defiantly, pushing his face into Draco’s hand. “You don’t know how much I wish that it had been me, but it was her.” His words are quick and they mostly escape into Draco’s palm, which he kisses. “She feels the same thing,” he promises, as Draco squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. “She gets lost, and I get lost, and it only gets better when I find you.”

Draco opens his eyes, not seeing anything.

“And, well… I hope, I suppose you could say,” Harry jokes flippantly, possessively, looking down between them, “that Luna only needs you to exist – like, to know that you care.” He grits his jaw, because this is harder to know, the older they get. “They took her from her dad and they…” He stops. “But you cared,” he insists. “And you were there with her. So things can always go both ways.”
Draco can’t say anything to this, because Luna –

“Luna needs you,” Harry tells him now, intent, and it doesn’t sound like a lie. “And I need you. I need you more than anything,” he says, his head ducked. “Because I’m...” He grits his jaw. “I’m completely fucking lost sometimes.”

For now, though, Harry’s here, his eyes gleaming when he looks up, brave, and for the first time, Draco doesn’t think that word Harry. He thinks the word darling, that word for his love that he stole from his mother and his aunt.

And Harry – “The number of times that I’ve been out somewhere, you know, room spinning, me leaning against the wall, and I just – I just want you to love me, Draco.” He tries to smile. “After everything I’ve done. Please,” he begs with a grimace, wet. “I know it’s not fair.”

His eyes are wet, green, begging. Draco’s seen this look on Harry before, and he wonders if this is what Harry’s been meaning to say all along. Not use me, but love me. He feels like the world’s first fool.

“Of course I fucking love you, Harry,” Draco says, and he finds himself using a voice that is low and soft, if sarcastic. He doesn’t know whose it is, apart from his own, but it’s from here, the Forest of Dean in a carpet of bluebells. “How could you doubt it?” He tucks two fingers under Harry’s chin, though there’s only an inch or two between them in height, feeling skin on his knuckles and shivering. He meets green eyes, and he loves them. “Darling,” he doesn’t really joke, his voice edged with a rasp. “I adore you the way that the whole world adores you.”

“I don’t care about the world,” Harry spits, tearful. He blinks and saltwater breaks free to trail down one cheek. Draco plucks his glasses away, quickly, and tucks them into his dressing-gown pocket. “I care about the house,” Harry insists, looking down, “and you and Ron and Hermione...” 
He draws a breath, but he can’t seem to hold onto it, and he presses the heels of his hands into all of his tears.

“Harry...” Draco tries to interrupt, a sting in his own eyes.

“You can’t know how much I want it,” he says more loudly, hiding his face for a moment, his breath shuddering and shuddering and his voice made of bronze. “For magic to work the way that you say it does,” he clarifies. “I want my dad and my mum and those two idiots to stay, so desperately, you don’t... Because I don’t want them to be dead.” He breathes, full of tears, looking at Draco again. “I want it to be true,” he suggests, louder, joking and completely serious. “We were all children when we were at school, right? We were children, playing a game, and that means that neither of us has to play it anymore.” He’s breathing, losing control. “I don’t want to play it anymore, Draco, you don’t understand –”

Now they’re both crying, and Draco thinks that he’s been waiting to cry these tears for ten years, which is forever. He huffs a breath from the back of his wrist before he speaks, circling back because he doesn’t know what else to do. “Luna poisoned me, I hope you realise.” He says it approaching a joke, brushing his hand through Harry’s hair, fingers twitching. “It will take some effort to keep up.”

“What?” Harry asks him, confused, stress lines where he’s squinting, because it’s 2008, and he is almost thirty years old, Harrypompopheadsausageharryharryharryowl.

Draco wants to explain it, watching himself brush black hair with four pale fingers. Harry Potter’s blackboard hair. Here lies the promise that the slate can be cleaned, he thinks. Here lies the promise of winter, which has always been Harry’s season. “If you remember when Loo had her
Queen Fifandel make us that magic hooch,” Draco tries, and his voice is warm, which he doesn’t remember. “She put a spell on it to increase the proof, the more lies one tells.” Harry is pulling at the knot in the belt of his dressing gown, which isn’t going to last very long. “Luna hates lying,” Draco points out. “Truth was supposed to be a corrective, but you know me…”

He mocks himself, standing under the late April sky and the canopy of Dean. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. He doesn’t know what he’s done. His eyes itch, and there are words on his tongue, but he can only hear say that Harry Potter loves him.

He looks at the man and he loves him back. “It was not my finest hour.”

Harry’s scowling at him. Draco hears it, You helicopter. He feels the prickles in his ribs.

Draco thinks that he could cuddle Harry for at least the next ten years, please, and call him every pet name under the sky. “Could have killed me, I’m certain,” he admits out loud. “The whole thing could have killed me and maybe I wanted it to, because I don’t know anything, Harry. I will be playing games until I die.” He says it, knowing only that it’s true, searching green eyes because Harry needs to know. “I will never stop; I don’t know how.”

He went down into the depths of the deep black ocean, once, and he bought himself an ugly divan bed. He has no idea what reality looks like, only that it hurts his eyes, to the point that he can’t look at it, only Harry Potter’s hair, which covers the blood in his fingernails. There are people alive, but so many dead, and his parents are dead, but he doesn’t want them back. Not even his mother. Because the whole thing – the whole thing of his life fucked him up, and he doesn’t remember once liking how it felt.

“I don’t care,” Harry says, again, and a well of despair floods into his expression. Draco feels it in his chest. “Any game you like, put me down for it. Just not…” He swipes at his nose with a deep, grunting sniff. He wipes at his eyes, shaking hard. “That bastard destroyed damn near every bloody thing that I’ve ever bloody loved, Draco, all of them, and you, and – you don’t understand,” he begs, because he doesn’t want Draco to know what that feels like, though he does very well. “You don’t –”

Draco pulls him into his arms, sticky like treacle, and tells him to hush as he cries, burying his mouth and his nose in Harry’s soft hair and feeling warmth in his chest, his eyes burning with it.

Because what can he say? He was just a cheeky little shit spoilt child, once. He wasn’t evil. None of them were, once upon a time. He grew up in a place that’s worth loving, he thinks, if only for the fruit that grows so well in the English countryside, in all that green space under sky. He grew up there the way that Harry grew up in his cupboard: always up, in the end, no matter what.

Hermione told him all this, he remembers, on the day that he told her that he couldn’t go to his parents’ funeral, that he wouldn’t. He broke apart in her office, clutching at her desk, and she knew better than to touch him. Fresh from Cairns she made him tea instead and told him that he would regret it, sending his parents away without a single thing to remember them by. She said that she would keep it for him if he liked, whatever it was, until the day that he was ready to come back for it, but she wouldn’t let him make the mistake that she nearly did.

Luna told him that he was never going back to Tom Riddle’s house, the day that he finally left it. They would raid it as his final act in that shithole, find things worth taking and abandon the rest for the elves as a squat, fuck the scum. His mother’s honey-wine, that’s OK – because fermented things are things of safe-keeping, and we need those things to live, until they kill us – but no, not that, never that, Draco Malfoy, let us both be very clear about this.
He chose a cherry tree because he loved it, he thinks, that place, in blossom and fruit. He chose a cherry tree because he hated it, and a phoenix-core wand is always made to make things burn.

“Malføy, I’m begging you,” Harry tells him now in his arms, his breath hitching. His words are difficult to hear, muffled by Draco’s blank-slate-black towelling dressing gown. “Please let me be something else.”

“Don’t cry,” Draco tells him, because nearly thirty years have passed and he still doesn’t know what to say. He feels like he’s tearing in two or maybe into a full hundred pieces. “Fuck, Harry…”

“I don’t want to do it on my own,” Harry insists, panicking, and Draco pulls tight, “not again, not like that – not with only ghosts to come with me, I can’t…”

"Shh…” Draco feels the wires of Harry’s body in his arms and promises the top of his head that he won’t ever have to.

Who knows how long it takes? With a yank, Harry pulls on the lapel of Draco’s dressing gown and he’s swallowing the reassurance into his mouth, all while Draco’s shoving fingers into the black holly blades of his hair. Harry tastes so much like the sea. Together they experience the spring, the end of April, which it is, here in 2008. A decade at the end of next week, as they’ve known for so long.

Their bare feet squelch into mud as Harry pulls them both closer, one hand twitching to bat at Draco’s thigh, closing in a fist on the cock that is waiting for him. He locks a knee behind Draco’s and an arm behind his shoulders, while Draco lets his own hands close to fists against Harry’s scalp. Their faces are close together, noses and tongues and noise as they kiss so much harder than before. Harry’s muttering something, the sound running on, but it doesn’t make sense.

The feel of Harry’s hand in the Forest of Dean isn’t tentative but knowing, urgent and a little cool but firm enough to make a man wheeze. He’s pulling and he’s reaching around to grope Draco’s backside, pushing the dressing gown aside, kissing him and kissing him and sucking on his neck and pulling him close on stumbling feet, their shins and calves all wet together, denim rough between their legs, bright sparks across Draco’s skin.

Above them, the sky that surveys the Forest of Dean is darkening, the sun tucking itself away behind drifting, heavy clouds. The clouds blossom with grey, but it’s not the grey of death or despair, just of rain. The drops are heavy as they fall.

Harry grumbles, kissing the bruise that he’s made, and it’s funny, it’s funny, raindrops rattling in crescendo on the leaves all around them. “I’m trying to have a moment,” he complains, and Draco feels his deep voice in his tingling cold feet, in the grip of a hand which is now quite warm where it’s tugging him like something viscous.

“It’s…” Draco’s voice isn’t working. He groans because, fuck, he loves falling apart in Harry’s hands. “’s only a shower,” he manages to breathe into Harry’s hair, pulling at the tufty bit at the back. “You’d know it if you’d grown up in the countryside.”

Harry laughs, a running burble of sound, his spare hand on Draco’s neck rubbing in water while Draco draws breath. “I cannot believe you don’t see it, Malføy,” he says, his voice raw and more singing than desperate, at last, mocking them both. “You’re nothing but a ray of sunshine.”

Then Harry kisses him again, hard, and it’s stupid, but Draco knows that what he’s said to Harry is true. It always rains on the British Isles, but never for long. Here the weather is as fickle as the seasons.
He wants to swim with Harry, Draco realises, struggling against his mouth, the fist that he's fucking. He wants to swim from Hogwarts to the ocean, which will smell like Harry Potter smells in his bed, like a dream, something taken from that school, but always despite it. He wants to feel how small these islands are, set like stones in the wide expanse of the ocean, and he wants to love them again.

Draco’s fingers are caught the first touch of grey coming in at Harry’s temples, and he kisses the skin near there, husking breath, squelching toes, falling apart. “This place,” Draco breathes, and it doesn’t make sense, just croaks from him.

“Yeah,” Harry rasps just like he does, his hands both warm now and holding Draco tight, one of them pushing him loose with ever more ferocity and a fidgety thumb. “Yeah, love, I told you, it’s nice, look around.”

This place in the Forest of Dean – this is a place that Draco wants to belong to, he thinks. It’s a place on a map and a dream, full of hawthorn bushes and unicorns and bluebells and weather and the promise of spring, the promise that there is something better after everything that’s passed. His promise to Harry, that he’s promising now, mouthing at his scar, his nose, his mouth, saying yes.

“Yes,” Harry hisses, spare arm around Draco’s neck, and he’s snogging him and letting Draco hitch up against him, up to spill all over his hand. He laughs as Draco shudders, the wanker, speaking for him. He sounds so happy. “Oh, I should’ve done that the moment you woke up.”

Draco falls against him, and his voice is mostly a groan. “You’re filthy,” he complains, pressing into Harry’s cheek, which is going rough with stubble. It’s wet with the rain, still rattling down. He forces a thigh between Harry’s legs. “Perverted. We’re in public, Potter.”

Harry jumps, groping his hand around to squeeze Draco’s arse again as he chokes and grits his teeth, their mouths meeting in a kiss far more romantic than their actions deserve. “Mm, yes, sounds fun,” he swallows, his eyes bright. Maybe he’s come, just a little. Draco’s not sure, but he’s certainly here.

It’s still raining. But here they are, Draco thinks, blinking in the rain, him looking at Harry, the both of them muddied and surrounded by bluebells. Relieved, for now. Calm. In love. Damp. OK. Warm, because their hearts are racing.

“This is pleasant,” Draco points out, resting his arms on Harry’s shoulders. He smiles, looking into green eyes. “Darling Herry.” And it has to come out of his mouth like that, doesn’t it? England and St George. Because he was raised in a fifteenth-century Wiltshire manor house, which was beautiful once, perhaps, before it was ugly.

“Shut up, you daft git,” Harry tells him, shaking his head with an embarrassed grin. He barely manages the Ts.

It’s quite wonderful. The thought comes as he kisses Harry again. "Ron and Hermione are going to be un-fucking-bearable, aren’t they?" Not to mention the rest of them.

“We can say that I took you to Brighton,” Harry suggests, green eyes above his scrunching nose. His hair is swallowing raindrops. “Found a Thursday-morning S&M ring.”

Draco rolls his eyes, trying to hold in the obscene grin that wants to flood across his face. “I’ll let you be the one to tell your mother,” he says, finding strength in his limbs to stand up straight, the rain plink plonk quick on his face and his hands, flowers thick around his feet.
Harry helps him adjust his dressing gown, handsily. “’A’ight,” he says, wiping his face on Draco’s shoulder, flattening lapels and pulling Draco’s knot. “What we really doing?”

Who are they now? Either of them? Draco has no idea, but he wonders if maybe they can both be Sirius Black for today, the man who conjured himself back from death.

Draco feels it then, forking one of his hands through Harry’s. He may have left his hawthorn wand buried under his pillow, but he can feel its blossoming magic in his fingers, hope and honey on his tongue. He leans into Harry, and Harry leans into him, warm as he drops black hair against black. He’s their hero, Harry Potter, he’s lost, and he’s a soggy little moppet who never got the chance.

Fuck it, Draco thinks, they’ll both have another go. And this time he’ll show them the way.

“Oh, let’s live a little, Herry,” Draco Malfoy says, his voice wicked. Harry snickers, and it’s a new game declared. Draco can see it ahead of them, where the forest ends, breaking out into grass and then water. It’s all that he wants, and there’s plenty of time before lunch. “Let’s go for a farking walk.”

. 

FIN

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!