Blood Magic

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Blood Magic

by SpinnersendSlytherin, ThestralHouseofBlack

Summary

A story of thestral magic, forest lore and recovery from all the things that haunt us.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
March 18, 2008

Harry had been itching all morning. His shoulders, his back, his forearms. Fuck, even his eyes felt like they had a persistent layer of sand behind the lids. Long rows of flaking skin along his forearms stood out. He pulled his sleeves back down. Down more. Over the backs of his hands. I must tell lies. *Don’t look down.*

He rolled his shoulders, his right irreparably tight and throbbing, persistent and distracting. He pulled both shoulders back, winged scapulae struggling to reach each other in the middle, somewhere in his spine, between ribs, his vertebrae popped. His skin felt stretched tight over bones, like he was nothing else but leathery hide taught on his frame. Falling apart. Falling away. *Don’t nod off.*

He stretched his neck from side to side, taking several deep breaths, forcing his shoulders down. He breathed in and out, focusing himself, fortifying himself against all of the thoughts that lay around the edges of his consciousness, layering them back behind his singular goal: get through today. Get through today. *Don’t think too hard about it.*

He rolled his shoulders again, spasms of tightness and a gnawing, clawing feeling of unease, tremors of his magic made his grip tighten reflexively before he consciously demanded they open again. The ache he felt, across his back, along his spine and shoulders and wrapped around his very core, was maddening. Tremulous and insistent, it was loud, louder than his thoughts, and he was reduced to nothing but swarms of insects beneath his too tight skin, buzzing to and fro, making honeycombs out of his bones. A hive. Thriving. Dripping in the nectar of the bees. *Don’t imagine it.*

He couldn’t sit still another moment. The paperwork in front of him swam in his vision, words on the page jumping to snarl and claw at his brain. Blood curses and potion records, ingredient lists and shipment dates. He pushed his shoulders down again and the room swam as he closed his eyes, tilting his head back. Vertebrae crowding each other, spinous processes converging as ligaments slid over bones. Bones carefully crafted around the hive. *Don’t feel it.*

He was sweating. Shivering. His mouth was so very dry. *Don’t feel anything.*

His singular goal, to survive today, was already so overwhelming and it was only 8:15 in the morning. He knew because he could see the wall clock in the corner. A muggle one. Red. It stood out so clearly on the wall of the room because it was the only red thing as far as the eye could see. To be fair, he couldn’t see far. He worked out of a cubicle. In the ministry. White walls. White cubicles. Grey carpet. Red clock.

No windows.

He could feel sweat dripping down his back, just adjacent to his spine, in the gutters that ran right down to the desperate flare of his hips. Despite the cool, refreshing air of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Harry was boiling over.

His face was shining with perspiration. He didn’t notice until a droplet slipped from just beside his nose, down the corner of his mouth and off his chin, smudging the bit of ink he had just scratched
onto form 349B. His shoulders twitched again and he closed his eyes. Stop feeling everything.

He needed a cup of water, but he was afraid of getting up from his corner cubicle, where at least his co-workers couldn’t watch him fidgeting and sweating like a suspect cornered in interrogation. Gods, what they must think of him.

He ran his hands through damp strands of hair, falling along his forehead, covering his scar. How did he get here? How had this become his life? He was the chosen one, the golden boy, he was the hope and awe of the magical world – yet, here he was, feeling as though he may crawl out of his own skin with need. Need.

Harry chewed at the edges of his fingernails and stared at the blank cubicle wall in front of him, trying to remember how he had managed to get through the most stressful, most terrifying, most difficult days of his life. How had he survived living under the humiliation, the sickening hatred of the Dursleys? How had he faced Voldemort, year after year? He was a child then. He was a child then, and he had more courage, more bravery, more stamina than the adult he had grown into. Everything was washing over him in waves. Where was the stoicism that had kept him going, the gentle guidance of Dumbledore leading him to his death, a lamb to slaughter. A martyr for wizard-kind. Where was the boy who lived. The boy who lived.

He realised, again, his shoulders had come up, tight as possible, his back in an impossibly tense spasm. He focused, again, on pushing them back down, just as he swallowed down the nightmare of his youth, his past, everything that had brought him here, that had made him an Auror and a pawn in yet another game of good versus evil. He rubbed his hands, feeling the hardened lines along them, snaking beneath his ‘I must not tell lies’ scar, the irony not lost on him. The lies not lost. How humiliating.

He felt sick. The nausea was back. He had thought he had thrown up as many times as a human being could throw up already this morning, but it seemed he was mistaken. After three hours bend over the pewter hewn snakes in the upstairs bath at Grimmauld Place, he imagined the staccato dry heaves were all that could be left, there was no chance his body could put him through any more. He was wrong.

The nausea was building. His abdominal muscles were taught, he hunched over, pulling around himself, his vertebrae spreading, fanning wide and pointed and poignant, hidden beneath Harry’s leather jacket. Sharp.

Harry wanted to hide. The impulse flared bright and bold as he curled around his hands, around his core, his face tucked neatly against his knobby knees. He wanted to hide back in Grimmauld Place, amidst the mould on the walls and the peeling wallpaper and the creaking of old floorboards, dry and cracked with age. In the dark and muffled silence. Dusty and forlorn, amid memories everyone had forgotten, the world turning ever onward.

The thought of his den, his refuge, resulted in a sharp, sickening pull deep in his viscera. He could feel his magic asking to apparate him right back there, straight through the wards of the Ministry. It felt so excited, strong, like it hadn’t for ages. Bold and resplendent at the mention of his godfather’s home. The house full of slithering pewter snakes.

He forced himself to still, to dispel images of his dirty mattress, the shabby, disintegrating wallpaper that hung, suspended in rolls from where the wall had rejected it, preferring to ooze dark magic and blackened, slimy mould. The takeaway boxes and plastic silverware from that Indian restaurant down the road he’d left in a pile by the bed. He thought of his kit, still laying haphazardly across the dusty carpet from where he’d kicked it from his bedside this morning in a rage.
Then he remembered the closet door and the nails he’d driven into the splintering wood, over and over again. He could hear the echoes of his own screams now, the voices he had heard in the dark. The waves of nausea returned and his magic flickered around him, just as itchy, just as tremulous as he felt. For what must have been the hundredth time this morning, he tasted bile in his mouth.

Oh god, he thought, panicking, what if he threw up right here at his desk? He couldn’t do it silently? Everyone was quietly shuffling papers around and making chit chat and it would be a cacophony of violent choking sounds if he let this happen here at his desk. He had to get up. He had to get to the loo. He had to get through today. Get through today.

He paused, steeling himself. Ron was just on the other side of the cubicle, making his way through the paperwork Harry couldn’t begin to address. It had been like this for weeks now. Ron just picked up his slack. Carried him through the bureaucratic process. Without him, Harry was sure he would’ve lost his job by now. He couldn’t bring himself to ask Ron for any more help, not with this. He wasn’t sure how he’d react. He didn’t want to disappoint him… or, god forbid, give him even more stress than he was already under. With the anniversary of George’s suicide looming (the twin’s birthday, April 1st) and the fact that he and Hermione had a six-month old daughter at home – no, Harry couldn’t bring this to them, not now. This was just something he had to do on his own. Alone.

He sighed out the breath he had been holding, realising that thinking of his friends had distracted him, had given him a moment’s composure. It was now or never, and he pushed out of his chair, hiding his trembling hands by splaying them on the desk and leaning heavily on them as he rose. He straightened up, shoved his hands in his pockets and focused on walking calmly and confidently to the loo. He could do this. He was doing it.

He was making his way down the little aisle between cubicles and everyone had their heads down and were focused on whatever light versus dark, death versus life versus unregistered magic violation nonsense that was neatly catalogued on each incident report page. Harry tried not to let the anger rise in him as he turned the corner and headed out into the thankfully deserted main corridor and to the staff bathrooms, his feet treading a hauntingly familiar path.

Harry both loved and cursed the policy of the Ministry when it came to the toilets. Wizards were less gender obsessed than their muggle counterparts, and instead of having banks of toilet stalls in gender-divided bathrooms, they just had a few single bathrooms that were gender neutral and disability accessible scattered throughout the various departments. No one really minded who used which ones, as long as they were kept neat and orderly.

Harry realised what a bad idea his little escapade was just a moment too late. His feet had already carried him to his usual loo, and as soon as he opened the door he slammed it shut again, a slew of curses softly trailing along the sharp exhale he forced out. He wasn’t prepared for the image his mind supplied of the many times his kit had been laid out in that very room. How he had nearly left a spoon on the floor one day when he was too far gone to pick it up and slip it back in his pocket. How much oblivion he had sought there. And, oh, how he’d found it.

Harry stood facing the closed door, his hand white knuckled around the handle, his heart pounding. He forgot to keep breathing and his vision darkened before his brainstem sent a spark of desperation that prompted him to take a deep, shuddering breath. He opened the door and slipped inside, deftly popping the deadbolt lock in place, just another daily routine now soaked in his habit. Fuck.

Harry wretched and heaved and spit bile into the toilet. Sweat was dripping off his nose, drool spilling from his lip, hanging down from his mouth. The force of his heaving stomach had made
his eyes water, but he didn’t know now if he was just tearing up or sobbing outright. Everything was running together, the violent spasms of his gut, his stuttering lungs and pounding heart. In his head all he could hear was this is it, Harry, you’re going to die. You have no choices left. You’re going to die.

Slumping backwards against the wall, legs sprawled out in front of him on the cool tile floor, Harry ran the back of his hand across his mouth, reflexively wiping away the drool and tears and sick that had come pouring out of him. He felt each bone of the back of his hand as it slid across his lips, and he startled, looking down at his hands in the iridescent lighting of the bathroom. When had he gotten so skeletal?

The track marks stood out, even against his dark skin, bruises, old and new, filling in the hollows between his metacarpals. How had he let himself get this bad? His skin no longer looked soft and inviting, just ashen and papery. Rough, and like it barely felt the need to wrap around the tips of his phalanges.

It hadn’t, last night. He grimaced as the memory of the closet surfaced. He had spent hours clutching his ruined hands, splinters lodged deep against bone. The surge of relief he had felt when his magic returned and his healing spells finally worked was the reason he was here today; the reason he was fighting so hard to keep it together. He never wanted to feel so vulnerable ever again. He had to get through today. He just had to.

Could he? His vision swam and black spots appeared throughout as he tried to focus, to rally, to do anything but slip back to that place of beautiful, comfortable apathy. A place where molten honey fed the swarm that had made a hive inside him. To where he lay with death beside him, stoic and soft and kind.

Consciousness eventually left him, and his features finally relaxed, the grimace that had been holding his secrets for the last two years melted away, his glasses resting skew across closed eyes. He was out cold.

Harry returned slowly, gradually becoming aware of the world around him. He could hear the hum of diagnostic spells, clipped and professional tones interspersed with confident footsteps to and fro. And, he thought reflexively, he could smell it, the lemony fresh scent of St. Mungo’s. Fuck.

This was it, as soon as he opened his eyes and they noticed he was awake, he’d have to start explaining what was going on. He’d lose his job, he’d probably lose his friends, he’d be a disgrace. He was a disgrace. The thought of the Daily Prophet getting hold of this juicy bit of gossip made him burn with anxiety. Golden Boy Falls from Grace. The Boy who Lived a Lie. Hero of the Wizarding World- Nothing But a Junkie.

Harry concentrated on laying still, keeping his eyes closed as he felt them fill with tears. Despite the fears of discovery, he felt a little better than he did this morning… how was that possible? What had they given him? Before he could let his thoughts snowball into a panic, he heard Ron on the other side of the curtain to the right of his bed.

“Healer Sprigg, thank you so much for looking after Harry – do you have any idea what caused this? I had Robards send over the list of potions with blood magic from the raid earlier this week as soon as I realised something was wrong and got him here – there’s nothing to push you into immediate action like your best mate lying unconscious in a toilet, I’ll tell ya.”

Harry nearly groaned, realising Ron had been the one to find him, shrinking in shame against his crisp hospital sheets, starchy and thick. He could hear the fear beneath the attempt at humour in
Ron’s voice. He let the guilt wash over him. Let it suffocate him.

“Well don’t thank us just yet Auror Weasley, we’ve still got no clue what’s going on here – he doesn’t seem to be reacting to any of the curses from the raid and so far we couldn’t find anything other than him being a bit dehydrated – we’ve found no magical contaminant in his blood, and we’ve just hydrated him and given him a calming draught.”

Harry felt a distinct twinge of hope in Healer Sprigg’s measured words. They didn’t know? They didn’t think to test? Oh fuck, he might just get out of this. Harry couldn’t believe his luck, and he forced down the bubbling of excitement that he might not have to face abject humiliation just yet.

It didn’t mean he was going to be okay, that any of this was any less inescapable than yesterday, or this morning. He hadn’t managed to get through today. How was he expected to try tomorrow? And the day after? And, eventually, St. Mungo’s would catch on and he’d be forced to explain all of the lies, the deceit, the failings. The excitement he’d felt moments before was effectively obliterated and Harry welcomed back the familiar feelings of despair, hopelessness and the sense that this was a trap with absolutely no way out.

Harry felt his magic ripple around him, nudging him, reminding him that there was a way. He could give in. He could let it have him. He could leave from King’s Cross station and escape everything; the job he hated, the life he was barely living through, the need that had him in such a crippling hold he could barely manage the space to draw in breath, that squeezed him ever tighter the longer he went without it.

His magic soothed him a moment, giving him a rare glimpse of peace. Yes, he thought, that was the way out. There was nothing left to do. The fight was over, the battle won, he was tired and worn out after all these years of desperately pushing back against the dark. He wanted the dark to envelope him, to hold him in that graceful, soft, euphoria he had come to know. He wanted the weightlessness of it, of death, of never having to awaken on that soggy, soiled mattress ever again.

His resolve thickened as his quiet breathing marked time, as he imagined the bright white room, where pain and fear didn’t exist, where Dumbledore had told him he could choose his own destiny. Yes, this is the choice he would make. He would go…on.

He lied his way out of the hospital easily later that afternoon. Yes, dehydrated, he had said. Working himself too hard these days, forgot to get breakfast this morning and had been a bit under the weather with a flu. Yes, a perfect storm, he nodded and agreed with everyone, his hands neatly hidden beneath the folded sheet across his lap. I must tell lies.

He had promised to take tomorrow off. He was very adept at smiling and nodding and reassuring. Everyone trusted his deep and familiar voice, the Saviour’s voice, though he had already decided he would Imperio anyone who caught on or got suspicious to keep them from interrupting the next several hours. He had a plan, and it would be over soon. What’s one more unforgivable, he thought, for what I am about to do, they will have no choice but to forgive.

He would have to write Hermione, he thought, as he exited through the atrium of St. Mungo’s, out past the double doors and into the afternoon sunshine. He couldn’t write Ron. No, he didn’t deserve another one. George’s had nearly sealed his fate as a permanent psychiatric patient in St. Mungo’s Janus Thickey ward. No one would’ve blamed him, of course. Harry never saw the note himself, but he had heard from Hermione that it was seventeen pages long. Seventeen pages of why he couldn’t, not without Fred.

And then Ron had found him, in the back office at Weasley Wizard Wheezes, strung up with one of their extra long jump ropes that had been charmed to stay swinging without anyone holding their
ends, just in case you didn’t have enough friends to skip rope with you, and you had wanted to
perfect your double-dutch. Ron had told Harry, tears streaming down his face and voice catching
every syllable that George must have done it moments before he walked in to help take stock,
because as Ron had rushed forward, his legs were still swinging gently and they were still warm to
the touch. *No one would’ve blamed him.*

Molly and Arthur had sold the shop that week. It’s now full of potions for skincare and bath
products. No one speaks of the jokes, or the shop, or what happened, or the twins at all, these days.
Harry misses their laughter, more than anything. Laughter at all, these days.

It had taken a month before Ron was discharged, given antidepressant potions and a strict schedule
with a mind healer. That was a few years ago now, and he’d made an incredible recovery. Harry
was so proud of him, he couldn’t put him through it again.

So, it would have to be Hermione. She would be heartbroken, but, ever the practical witch, she
would find a way to carry on, she would know this burden was too much, she would know how
long he had carried it. How long he had carried them. He needed rest. And quiet. She would
understand. *He needed rest.*

His magic rumbled in excitement and he felt the familiar deep thrumming in his abdomen, begging
him to apparate straight to his den. To Grimmauld Place.

Yes, he thought, and he grimaced as he turned on the spot, this is exactly what he needed to do.
Off Call

March 18, 2008

Draco stepped out of the doors to the curse damage ward as several Aurors shoved past. He’d just come off a 24-hour call. My last 24-hour call for the next year, he reminded himself, relishing the release of responsibility as he picked his way through the corridor to go through his familiar post call routine. It’s not like he needed to fulfill this routine now that he was off-call, but as a creature of habit he just couldn’t help himself. Making sure those ducks were in order, and whatever the fuck else his compulsions compelled him to do, was second nature. Like grabbing tea and having a catch-up with his one and only work-friend before the last of his post-call rounds.

His feet swiftly carried him back to his office where he changed out of his black scrubs. Once Draco had achieved his status as a specialist, he never deigned to wear the St. Mungo’s ghastly green robes again, preferring to stick to something he felt more suited too. Never mind that it made his complexion even paler and his hair more abundantly noticeable.

He donned his button-down, waistcoat, and fitted trousers, also in black. Draco was a creature of habit after all.

His office was small but not uncomfortably so. It was cosseting. His department too, was small as he was the only double specialist there making it Draco’s very own tiny fiefdom. He had spent many nights sleeping on his little beige couch or pouring over research behind his little oak desk.

Due to the size of the haem department Draco had spent a criminal amount of time on-call and in his office over the last two years. He was going to miss this little room, he thought with another twinge of unease in his chest as he thumped his fingers nervously on the worn oak desk before him. But, as he kept reminding himself, it would be waiting for him in a year’s time. Waiting for him to step back into this life and routine.

The thought made him a little nauseous. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, he thought. One step at a time.

Draco felt an indescribable about of discomfort leaving the dread Healer Sprigg in charge of the haem department, unchecked. Leaving his carefully cultivated and meticulously planned department in the hands of someone so bumptious.

Yes, Sprigg had specialized in blood curses. Yes, he was a perfectly capable healer. But, he didn’t have the double mastery in potions that Draco had earned in France. And, his dismissal knowledge of muggle haematological concepts and their uses in blood magic just made Draco want to rip the man’s larynx out. Especially, specifically, when that oversight and unearned pride put muggleborns in danger due to inept care.

Draco huffed a derisive laugh, not missing the irony that he, Draco Malfoy, was indignant and rage-filled on behalf of muggleborns. The same people only years ago he would have stuck his nose up at, would have stood with Sprigg and scoffed about.

Sighing as he moved around his desk, trying to redirect some of his jittery anxiety about actually leaving, he grabbed his March edition of the British Journal of Haematology and leafed through it quickly, looking for an article he kept meaning to read. Flipping through the glossy pages he landed on the article and skimmed it for the dozenth time. It was an American study about using peripheral blood in bone marrow transplants, and he felt amazed that anyone could
look down on this kind of work. He had used a similar technique when studying Dragon bone marrow, thanks to the muggle innovation.

He sighed heavily, his angst at Sprigg and his anxiety about leaving all this behind for the next year crawled beneath his skin, made him feel restless and itchy. He dropped the well worn magazine back on the desk he compulsively tidied his few belongings before shaking himself from his melancholy and stepping back out into the corridor.

He couldn’t believe his last day was finally here, after months of encouragement from his therapist and few friends. He’d been teetering on the edge of a vicious burnout for so long, and he knew, despite his fears and existential dread that this change would be good for him. He sighed in relief as he strolled towards the Janus Thickey ward, his feet carrying him down a familiar route as he thought. He had worked so hard to get through Healer training, to get into his speciality, to do good in his community. He jumped through every fucking hoop and obstacle the wizarding world could throw at him, and did it without complaint. It was his penance, after all.

But, it had finally been too much. The chaos of the hospital, the disregard from his patients, the fearful mistrust of patient families, the dread of the 24-hour calls, the constant walking on eggshells to maintain the fragile trust he had to basically grovel for from his colleagues. Each day tore at a piece of him, layered his anxieties to new heights.

Clearly making it through all the training in the world and being a highly skilled specialist in dark blood magic didn’t get you jack-shit for respect or human decency when you have a Dark Mark and enough familial baggage to scare off even most therapists.

He snorted to himself thinking about the last two years as he passed another small crowd of frantic aurors. Pushing himself into a stairwell he took the steps two at a time marveling at how much his life had changed how much he had changed. Sure, he still had crippling anxiety that ran amuck in his personal and sometimes professional life, but I’m working on that, he thought, as he crinkled a post-it note in his pocket.

I am at peace with all that has happened, is happening, and will happen.

If he said it enough times maybe it would ring true one day. He clung to that hope. That was the point of this whole exercise, Beatrice had reminded him during their 3rd appointment.

That woman did not fuck about when it came to delivering hard truths and digging up dark history in their hour-long sessions. Draco’s crippling self-doubt caused the nausea to come in waves when he thought about his responsibilities, about his life choices, about what he would make for dinner that night or wear to work.

Beatrice had told him, in gentle and soothing tones, that it was because he carried too much responsibility from his childhood and took on even more as an adult. That the weight of his past was so immense, that even small decisions, like ordering takeout, felt like slaying nine dragons.

Fucking Beatrice, he thought fondly, always digging up shit he didn’t want to look at, knowing he needed to if he ever wanted to feel like he wasn’t drowning.

Reaching the Janus Thickey ward, he tapped the door with a wandless alohomora, and walked confidently towards the nurse's station.

“She’s already in the break room.” Said the dour Nurse Smith, her eyes never leaving the file in front of her.
“How do you always know it’s me?” Draco asked with real curiosity.

“You’re the only one in this entire building who wears shoes that click like you’re about to start tap dancing.” She said, with zero humor, still not looking up at him.

He couldn’t decide if he should be offended, mortified, or laugh hysterically. Honestly, how had he never noticed his shoes clicked like that? Instead, he went for plainly unamused.

“Well— thank you— good to know, Nurse Smith.” He nodded, awkwardly. “I’ll just be going to find Healer Rhoda, then.” He finished politely and turned promptly towards the break room.

This is why he didn’t have friends, when someone tried to have friendly banter or tease him he just choked on his tongue, panicked on the inside, tried not to break out into cold sweats, and ended up being mildly rude. He was so fucking awkward, but to others, he was sure he just seemed surly and unpleasant. Anyway, he thought, glazing over impaired social skills, at least I have one friend. He ducked into the break room and felt his shoulders relax instantly at Unice’s knowing smirk.

“I was wondering when you’d come to see me. I thought maybe you’d run off to your fortress of solitude without saying goodbye.”

“Unice,” he feigned in mock indignation, “how dare you imply that I wouldn’t have the grace to say farewell to my one and only friend in this abominable hell hole.” He smiled as she rolled her eyes and began making him a cup of tea.

“Tell me,” she said, “how was your last 24-hour call? And, did you manage to get through the ordeal without strangling Sprigg?”

Now it was Draco’s turn to roll his eyes.

Healer Sprigg often swooped in behind Draco to act the hero and swoon over patients that were less than comfortable with Draco’s history. Sprigg loved placating them in the most pandering tones while they shot shifty looks towards Draco and asked to be switched to another Healer. Draco always pretended not to hear, and never inquired as to why some patients were taken off his roster because he wouldn’t give Sprigg the satisfaction of being able to talk down to him. Though every time it happened it increased the leaden feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Irritating hero-complex aside, Sprigg also looked down on Muggle science and health advancements with maddening superiority. Honestly, how did he get off treating Draco like a muggle-hating bigot when he himself was worse than half of the blood supremacists? Draco loved muggle science. Loved it. And after dealing with many muggleborn teenage magic folk coming through his department through the years that had participated in muggle recreational drugs, he had become even more fascinated.

“Salazar, I cannot even begin to tell you how elated I am to not think of that man for a full 12 months.” He sighed in ecstasy at the thought, rubbing his hands down his face and accepting his tea from Unice.

“Hmm.” She said sipping her cup and looking thoughtfully at him, “So, you didn’t murder him today. That’s good at least.”

“The day is young.” Draco said sardonically.

“Indeed it is.” She laughed. “Have you told your mother yet?” She asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“That I want to kill and then sell Sprigg’s body to muggle science experiments? No, I didn’t think
she needed to hear about my dark daydreams.” Draco smirked, deflecting.

“You know what I mean, Draco.” She said with a deadpan expression. She was the only one at the hospital who called him by his given name. He loved her for it.

He sighed and avoided her gaze, looking into the steaming hot liquid in his cup. “Ugh no. I know I should have told her weeks ago when I applied for my sabbatical.”

“Yeah.” She said simply. “Now it’ll be extra fun telling her that you’re leaving civilization to stalk unicorns in the forbidden forest by yourself for a year, excellent planning.” She paused, seeing the look of forlorn pleading on Draco’s face.

“You don’t owe her anything,” she consoled, “but, considering you’re trying to have a healthy relationship with her now, telling her your big life decisions like this is probably a step in the right direction.”

Unice was right of course, she nearly always was. The first time he met her was during training. He had been lonely, everyone in the hospital gave him a wide berth and everyone in his program even more so. His fellows didn’t want to be painted with the same brush and risk losing patient trust like Draco so often had. After being asked to leave his 4th consult in one shift due to the patient recognizing him and requesting his removal, he had wandered off to the cafeteria to stare bleakly at the formica table top and tried not to cry into his coffee.

He was an adult, he was a Malfoy, he was a healer, and he wasn’t going to cry, he told himself. But there he was, all by himself, no friends, no comfort, and completely at a loss for how to move forward in his education and career. Tearing up, he had grabbed a sugar packet off the table to pour into his coffee, but his sad shaky hands had spilt sugar all over the table. That was the last straw, the last of his dignity, and he cried.

Unice came out of nowhere and quietly sat down, swept the sugar aside, pushed a chocolate croissant towards him, and handed Draco a tissue.

He had felt mortified by being caught out, but oddly touched. Surprised that someone would actually sit with him and offer quiet comforts instead of skirting past and ignoring the sad weeping Death Eater in the corner, covered in sugar and shame.

He had accepted the tissue, blew his nose and thanked her. She looked at him evenly and indicated to the croissant. “Eat.” She said sternly. “Chocolate fixes everything.”

Draco had snorted an unattractive and wet laugh, but didn’t argue. She seemed formidable, yet not unkind. He hadn’t recognize her and panicked internally about what she might think when she discovered his identity. *She must know, mustn’t she?* He thought. Everyone knew. Everyone gossiped. Maybe she wasn’t from around here. As if reading his mind she said soothingly, “Even Death Eaters need comfort and chocolate, young man.”

He nearly choked on the proffered croissant. Never had he heard anyone joke about his Death Eater status. *Oh god,* he panicked, *was she some creepy muggle hater trying to make friends with a former Death Eater?* He’d met weirdos like that before, and he was just beginning to spiral into full blown panic mode when she sighed and patted his shoulder to help him cough up the bit of inhaled chocolate.

“Please don’t choke to death in front of me that would really put a damper on my day.” She said.

“Sorry,” he said trying his hardest not to sound rude, “do I know you?” His tears were no longer of
sadness, but of burning embarrassment and of the effort to expel buttery pastry flakes from his throat.

“Unice.” she said shortly.

“Draco—” he coughed, “Draco Malfoy.” He regained his composure to a degree and shook Unice’s hand.

“I know.” She said, and Draco hadn’t know what to say to that. “I trained in France, but gossip travels far.” She explained. He still hadn’t know what to say. He had tried to regain the polite indifference he usually wore but it was no use, she had already seen the panicked flailing behind the mask.

She smiled. “I too, am a disgraced pure-blood.” He stared at her. “Only instead of helping win a war and stand up to a mad man, I married a muggleborn and gave birth to a squib.” She was still smiling.

Draco was mildly astonished by the admission and comfort with which she spoke about it. It was nice, it felt almost like having a friend. Whatever those were. “And the shit people prattle on about you in this gossip mill is nonsense. If anyone was actually paying attention they’d know you’re clearly too soft to be evil. Eat your chocolate.”

“Thank you?” He croaked. She just smiled and continued chatting to him like they’d been friends for years.

They took tea together every day from then on. That had been nearly four years before.

“I have the letter written, I just need to send it.” He half lied. What he meant to say was that he knew what he wanted to say to his mother, he just hadn’t found the courage to actually put it on parchment and send the fucking thing to her.

Draco knew she was going to be furious about it. His mother had been terrified of the forest since the war and when he finally told her that he was going to live in the forest, alone, she was surely going to try and stop him with profound guilt and no small amount of manipulation.

“Are you waiting to send it until you’re safely ensconced in your forest lab?” Unice teased, seemingly reading his thoughts.

“Perhaps…” He averted his eyes. That was precisely what he meant to do. “Anyways,” he tried changing the subject. “no Sprigg for a year, no Manor tea invites for a year, I’m clearly, finally, living my best life.” He giggled, giggled. He really was excited about this next year. Nervous, anxious, and full of second-guessing self doubt, but still excited.

“Your best-life indeed.” She smiled softly. “Too bad you haven’t found someone to come relieve you from those lonely nights in the forest yet.”

Draco sighed heavily. “We both know my love life is a sad cosmic joke and that will never change my dear Unice. I’m just happy my sabbatical was approved.”

“I’m happy for you Draco,” she said honestly and lovingly, “but honestly, who will reprieve me from Nurse Smith’s omnipresent judgements when you’re gone?”

“I’m sure you’ll find another sad student crying somewhere to ensnare.” He laughed.

“Oh the sad strays, how I do love to inflict my company upon them.” She smiled wistfully, rolling
her eyes. “What do you have left to do before you leave?”

“I need to go finish my rounds, make sure nothing interesting hasn’t dropped into the haem department, and pack my encourage-mint. I’m basically done.”

Unice smiled. “You and that plant are something else.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Draco snorted.

Walking back through the long corridors of the hospital, towards his office again, Draco tried not to sigh in exasperation at the way the click-clacking of his shoes reverberated around the halls, echoing. Honestly, he thought, how had he never noticed before?
Working as an Auror, as one might expect, was full of danger and intrigue, and Harry had gone right out of Hogwarts straight into training with Ron without a second thought. Not even a year or two to collect his thoughts and reflect on the absolute nightmare that had been his life, not an eighth year, for which so many others had opted. No, he signed up the moment he could, didn’t even take his NEWTs. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, so they say.

Harry sighed, thinking about it. He had never known a moment’s peace, even in those early days when it was supposed to be all fun and exciting in training. And then there they were, showing off their skills and revelling in their fame for being dark wizard conquerors before their twenties even hit.

He had always thought he would enjoy how experienced he was, how capable, but the truth was more complicated than that. Every spell he cast had memories, even something as simple as expelliarmus. It was loaded with flashbacks as it rolled off his tongue, gilded with pain and the shattered feeling of having the extra bits of soul inside him pulled away into nothingness. Memories and deaths.

Sitting at his desk in the ministry, Harry watched as people scurried back and forth between meetings, briefings, interrogations and extra training sessions. He rolled his quill between his fingers on his right hand and absentmindedly reached up to rub the scar on his forehead. It didn’t hurt, and it hadn’t for years, but somehow he still felt like there was a residual feeling, something… heavy. Maybe it was just his thoughts, this time.

“Potter.” The stern voice from off to his left popped right into his reminiscing and Harry nearly jumped through the ceiling, his wand out and the quill snapped and clutched in a balled fist. His heart thudded in his chest, the prickle of adrenaline flooding through him. It took several seconds before Harry could let his wand fall and gather his thoughts, the pounding of his heart loud and dangerous in his ears. He focused on fixing his posture as to not appear too battle ready. Appear soft. Appear calm. Appear approachable.

Robards wasn’t even looking at him, his eyes downcast at the pile of folders in his arms, distracted from whatever he was about to say and, apparently, oblivious to the tension he had caused.

“Where the fuck is this file? You know I wanted you on that case tracking down the Lestrange leads we’ve collected – we’ve got a few properties we need you to sweep with your team this week.”

Harry swallowed with difficulty, his mouth having gone not quiet dry but oddly sticky. “Yeah, I’ll make sure to get it done, Ron’s been going over the plan and details with a few of the others – but we know the drill, sweep the house and dismantle curses, stun anyone we find, it’s nothing new.” Appear capable. Appear ready.

Robards nodded, finally finding the file he was looking for and slapping it down on the desk in front of Harry, not bothering to answer.

Harry wondered if it was obvious to anyone else that he wasn’t keen on his work. That he hated the idea of still having to track down Death Eaters, still having to fight, still having to dodge jets of green light. At the thought, Harry felt his heart quicken again, and he shoved the thoughts right
back down. He couldn’t afford to dwell on that, he told himself, quietly counting the number of shafts of hair along the left side of his ruined quill until his mind returned to a disinterested blank and his heart didn’t feel as though it might escape his chest. Appear functional.

It had taken longer than usual to calm down, he thought with a dull resignation. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the file below him. Lestrange. What a joy.

Ron’s voice helped pull Harry out of his ruminating. “Hey mate, you coming to dinner tonight?” he asked as he stood to stretch. His cubicle was situated just across from Harry’s, though they couldn’t see over the divider between them. A design flaw that annoyed Harry to no end. Solitude when seated. Uncomfortably close when standing.

Harry envied the way Ron seemed so at ease. He had slowly morphed into the cool and confident Auror that Harry had always envisioned himself becoming, a visage that was clearly and painfully not part of Harry’s foreseeable future. At least he was no longer labouring under that delusion. Not like the early days. When he’d tried so hard to love the work. To feel good about arrests. About dodging death. Eventually, he couldn’t ignore how much he hated it, and he resigned himself to just being okay with faking a love for the work. Appear happy.

Ron, though. He was different. Even with all of the struggles, with the twins gone, with his parents barely keeping things together, Ron was an anchor. A lifeline.

Across the cubicle, Harry was just there, doing the Ministry’s bidding, trying not to die in the meantime, holding on to nothing, nothing keeping him grounded. Nothing but a mirage.

“Yeah, of course.” Harry replied, his voice more quiet and thoughtful than he had anticipated. Ron gave him a quizzical look and drained the rest of his cold coffee before smiling slyly.

“You know Gin’s going to be there, and we haven’t seen her in a dragon’s age – it’ll be good to catch up – though, now that I think of it, I’ll probably just have to sit through a rundown of all the hookups she’s had this past year, and even if she doesn’t, as soon as I get home, Hermione is just going to give me a play by play of every single new and exciting sex trick she learned from my sister. God, what is wrong with my family. More things to tell the mind healer, I guess.” Ron shook the dregs of his coffee cup, his freckled cheeks rounded with a reluctant smile.

Harry snorted in acknowledgement. It’s true, Ginny and Harry had parted ways at the end of the war with nothing but a hug and the promise to remain friends, and they had done just that. She’d gone off to play Quidditch internationally and had made quite a name for herself. Off the field, she was finding distraction in every new city she visited, fucking away the memory of the war with reckless abandon, letting the mouths of her lovers wash away the scars of a time and a place best forgotten.

She was brutally open about her coping methods, and every time they got together at the Burrow, she gave thrilling renditions of the exciting new ways she had found to scrub her soul of the heaviness they all felt. From BDSM retreats in Barcelona that helped her relearn to relinquish control and still feel safe to fetish clubs in Helsinki where she experimented with orgies in the snow, Ginny was leaving no moment left unlived, no corner of herself unexplored.

Harry sometimes wondered if he had helped push Ginny to this sexually extravagant lifestyle. The one and only time they had gotten the courage up to strip down and make an honest attempt at vaginal intercourse, Harry had struggled to get hard. It was in the weeks after Voldemort’s defeat, and while everyone was celebrating and decrying the return to a free and fair wizarding world, he couldn’t shake the prickling notion that there was so much left to be afraid of, so much left to fight. He may have mastered the art of appearances, but his cock was inclined to lie.
He found himself constantly transported back to saying goodbye to Ginny at the castle, before he walked off into the forest. He looked at her and he saw the moment he had relinquished his hopes for romance, he had even taken the time to think that Dean would be there to comfort her and hold her after, that he’d be there to pick up the pieces. He had imagined her moving on and building a life without him. When he looked at her, he replayed those final moments of resignation, and his erection had no interest in staying the course.

She had tried to fix things, of course, but even the soft curves of her naked body sliding against his and her eager mouth wrapped around his wilting cock did nothing but convince him that he was unable to experience pleasure. He had survived the war only to look down at the girl he had envisioned marrying and having a family with struggle to keep him hard for more than thirty seconds at a time. Eventually, she had gotten him just a little past halfway erect and climbed on top of him so they could pretend to enjoy the vaginal sex they had convinced themselves they needed. Keeping up with appearances. Happy couples have sex, right?

She had looked the absolute picture of how Harry imagined every boy’s fantasy, her hips and breasts full and round, her nipples hard and eager for his attentions, which would never come. Harry had winced, Ginny’s enthusiastic motions hurting him more than anything, and, eventually, they just gave up. She had tried to kiss him and promise him that it was okay, and that they could try again, and asked him what she could do differently, but he was dismissive in the glaring light of his own failings. He cursed himself, he cursed the war, he cursed the fact that he was just 18 and he couldn’t get his cock to work.

He had gotten up from the bed, dressed in a hurry and did his best not to slam the door on his way out as a profound rage boiled inside him. He was never sure if Ginny cried or not afterwards, but he wouldn’t blame her if she did. He had wanted to cry, desperately, he wanted to fall into the arms of someone who understood his confusion, his loss, his terror that his future would hold no pleasure, that there would be no one for him to share his affections – but he had no one, and that was that.

Instead of crying, he stormed out of the Burrow, his magic breaking a dish in the sink behind him, and he apparated to an empty moor from his year on the run, where he lay in the dew-covered grass and tried to cool the burning rage that threatened to consume him. He stayed there that night, his anger at himself, at the world, keeping him awake as he stared at the shadowy clouds drifting across the night sky – a lazy, peaceful sight that filled him with a deep and gnawing envy. Until, that is, he finally succumbed to a fitful and clenched sleep under no one’s gaze but the northern constellations.

Although he had returned to the Burrow the next morning and apologised, their relationship never recovered. He had spent months ruminating over his failure, filled with a sense of dread that somehow, after everything he had been through, something inside him was broken. He was broken. Deeply and profoundly.

Harry didn’t want to judge Ginny now. She was doing her best to forget, to move on, to exchange the years of fear for years of pleasure, and who was he to say he knew any better how to heal the wounds of the past.

He let the thoughts of his failed romance linger as he stroked the feathered tip of his broken quill. He had never lost the anger after that night, after the war, really – it stalked him, relentlessly, always just below the surface, like a persistent ringing in his ears, invisible to everyone save him. He had never tried to fuck anyone after that ever again.
After dinner catching up with the Weasley’s, where Ginny, predictably, updated them all on her extensive exploits and Bill and Charlie both floo called to say hi and send their love, Harry was exhausted. He loved his family, he did, he just found it so tiring to go through the motions of being happy, of laughing at jokes, smiling at his friends.

Even hugging Molly and Arthur drained him. All of these motions felt hollow, with the external Harry laughing while internally he wondered how anyone could stay living in this house with all of the terrifying memories that haunted it. Haunted him. Fred and George’s room was just upstairs, literally hanging over their heads. It was in this house that he heard Bellatrix taunting them, heard the cracks of apparition as Death Eaters swarmed, surrounding them. The house where he learned he’d be a failure at making love.

Harry had to shake his head and push down the rising feelings of panic, of loss. Hermione looked at him across the table and he just shrugged, smiling. He registered the motion as a lie, like much of his behaviour at the weekly dinners, he was faking happiness for them, and it left him feeling as empty and numb as ever. Every now and then, he looked across the table and caught Molly’s vacant eyes, sometimes brimming with tears, but she would smile quickly and shake it off as soon as she caught him staring, playing the same game as he was, sitting across a table but too distant for them to share in the reality of their pain together. Appearances. Appearances. For everyone’s comfort but their own.

After picking apart a treacle tart he barely tasted, listening to Molly practically beg Ron to get on having grandchildren already, Harry apparated back to the tiny garden flat behind Ron and Hermione’s four-bedroom house. It was just one room and a bathroom, with a tiny kitchen in one corner, but he didn’t need more space than that. He’d been living here the last few years, and he never wanted for more. He no longer had big dreams of a family where he’d need more bedrooms, hell, he didn’t even have dreams of sharing his life with a partner. He had enough lies on his plate, thank you very much.

His one bed and one reading chair, cupboards with instant noodles, they were enough for him. Every now and then he told Hermione he had plans to renovate Grimmauld Place and move back in there, but he knew it was another lie. He wondered if they would ask him to leave ever, or if they’d just let him waste away in his single room in the shadow of their happiness.

Most of the time, he enjoyed living so close to Ron and Hermione, it often helped hedge away the loneliness that filled his nights, but sometimes… sometimes he looked up at their big family home and their holding hands and the laughs they shared with each other and he had to bite back the horrid rush of jealousy that threatened to consume him. He had given so much; he’d been so selfless. Why couldn’t he feel something close to that happiness? Why had he fought so hard for this? For what?

Harry sighed, slipping into bed and casting a silencing charm, sealing his little garden flat tight, like he did every night. All these years later and it was all too often he still woke himself screaming, sheets wrapped around his ankles, desperately grasping for his wand, the terror just as fresh and real as ever.

That Friday was Auror Pub Night.

Actually, every Friday is Auror Pub Night. Like clockwork, they leave the office and head to the pub, get drunk and celebrate whoever’s locked up someone big and bad recently. Every week, Harry gets the routine shoulder slap and “see you at pub night, Harry!” usually with finger guns from one, two, sometimes three different coworkers. Harry always smiles and laughs, confirming
his attendance with a thumbs up, hating the sick ritual and the fact that he’s not even sure of the people’s names who are asking him.

They only want him there because, let’s be clear, Harry is a fun drunk. He’s funny and charming and is the first to come up with cheers or jeers, bar games and silly pickup lines. Externally, Harry is the picture of a fun work mate, a good time guy, and Gods, they love him for it.

Internally, Harry spends the whole time chasing the relief that alcohol brings, he needs distraction from what’s happening in his mind: the shudder of panic each time the pub door opens and a stranger walks inside, the flickering images in his peripheral vision, ghosts of villains and heroes, both. Every shot he drinks is an attempt to escape, a layer of protection against his own reeling thoughts. He hates the crowds, hates the smells, the touching of strangers as they move past him, trusting nothing and no one to be benign.

This week, when he shows up at the bar to a round of cheers and offers of shots, Harry grins and feigns his delight, like always, but as soon as they look away and he’s following Ron to their usual booth, and his grin has dropped, replaced with a grimace. He downs two tots of firewhiskey in quick succession, feeling especially raw, waiting for the stiff drink to push the weight on his shoulders aside.

For a room full of people who are trained to pick up on the subtleties of behaviour, Harry is shocked that no one has noticed just how miserable he is. This routine is just as much of a farce as his weekly dinners at the Weasley’s, just, this time, he has endless rounds of whiskey, bought by his many fans and admirers, to fuel the desperate need he has to numb himself, to dial back the wretchedness, the constant choking dread that this is the summation of his life.

In the midst of an inane discussion of Quidditch that Harry couldn’t care less about, he clings to a moment’s courage, and interrupts to ask, “Ron, do you think I’ll ever be happy?”

Ron laughs, startled, and counters “Only if the Harpies take the title this year, I can’t imagine how much of a sore loser you’ll be if they fuck it up – their best chances in nearly a decade and a seeker to rival Krum back in the day! I can’t pretend the Cannons have a shot, really, so I’m willing to put myself out there and root for your team, just this once though, as my favour to you”.

Ron grins stupidly and gets up to grab another round from the bar, while Harry seethes inside. He feels ignored, rejected, minimised and it stokes the anger that has become his constant companion. His magic sparks in response and shatters the shot glass in his hand. No one notices over the noise and chaos of Auror Pub Night, and Harry watches the blood seep slowly from a gash in his thumb before whispering a healing charm.

He doesn’t try honesty with Ron again that night, nor any night after. Instead, he gets as drunk as he can before letting Ron drag him home, collapsing on his bed, not even changing out of his clothes.

In the night, he wakes to his screams, which quickly transform into sobs as consciousness takes hold. He cries until his throat is raw and his eyes feel nearly swollen shut. He had dreamed about the fiendfyre. The heat of the flames and the burning of the soot and ash stood out vividly in his mind, but he couldn’t remember much else. He didn’t think that was why he had broken down though.

No, that was the loneliness.

In the morning, after Harry rinsed off the grime of Pub Night, he stood, his head hanging below the stream of near boiling water, his dark hair hanging down around him, unmoving. His hangover was
brutal, but he didn’t have the energy even to go ask Hermione for a potion to quell the merciless pounding of his headache. He didn’t have the energy for anything, really. He closed his eyes and brought his forearms up against the cool tile of the shower wall and leaned his forehead between them. His shoulders shook as the sobs came again, hidden this time by the water falling all around him.

This time, it was the emptiness.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, under the water, drowning out his despair. When he got out, he wrapped a towel around his waist and padded into the kitchen for coffee. Not for the first time, Harry added a healthy dash of whiskey in his mug to help him get through the day.
The sun broke through the clouds and came peering in through Draco’s kitchen window above the
sink as he busied himself making his morning tea. His kitchen was much like the rest of his house,
stark white, clean, decidedly clinical. He had had very little time, or even the desire, over the last 5
years since leaving Hogwarts to personalise his living space, to make it a home.

He’d barely had time to do anything other than cram information into his brain and try to diligently
distance himself from his past indiscretions in the war.

After repeating his seventh year and finishing his NEWTs, Draco was accepted into healer training
with letters of recommendation from not only Professor McGonagall but from Hagrid as well.
Without the backing of those two, he knew he would have been rejected on principal alone, grades
notwithstanding. He was so desperate to distance himself from the absolute failure of a teenager he
had been.

It had certainly helped that Potter stood up for him and his mother at their trials, unexpected as it
was. Potter’s stoney face and searing green eyes telling the wizengamot that under no
circumstances was Draco a real Death Eater, a bully, yes, a spoilt brat, definitely, but a child
nonetheless. Potter told a breathless court room how Draco had tried to help and save him on
multiple occasions putting himself at risk, that Draco had been a child that that did what they could
with the cards they were dealt. Told the room how Narcissa had saved him as well. Potter sat
silently during Lucius’s trial.

Draco had watched Potter with rapt attention, astonished, disbelieving. He hadn’t spoken to Potter
since Draco had awkwardly and stiffly thanked him after he gracelessly shoved Draco’s wand
towards him after the trial. Potter nodded in return, not meeting Draco’s eyes.

Draco surprised everyone at the start of term when he began making personal and heartfelt
apologies to everyone he had wronged, literally everyone. He had known his only way forward
was to make amends, mean it, and to throw himself at their feet. He was no longer loud and
confident, he no longer swaggered down the corridors of Hogwarts, too overwhelmed by his own
guilt, his own self awareness. He had become quiet, reserved, serious, keeping to himself as much
as he could.

He spent the first year of his four year probation with his head down at Hogwarts, plowing through
school work like his life depended on it, which it certainly felt like it had. Draco pushed himself to
be constantly busy lest he let the ever pressing reality of his experiences in the war enter the
forefront of his mind and swallow him whole.

He had taken eight subjects; arithmancy, charms, defense against the dark arts, potions, muggle
studies, transfiguration, herbology, and even care of magical creatures. He received eight
Outstandings for his hard work.

Everyone had been further perplexed when he signed up for Care of Magical Creatures, including
Hagrid, who regarded Draco with curious suspicion. When he got around to Hagrid he laid it all
out. He apologised for being an absolute horror of a child, for trying to get Buckbeak executed, for
being a pompous asshole and disrespecting Hagrid during his lessons, and for generally being an
unpleasant toe rag during his youth.
Hagrid had responded to Draco’s apology with a hearty slap on the back, one that sent Draco flying forward onto his knees and into a giant pumpkin, with a “Tha’s o’right lad, ‘ou were a product o’ your up bringin’.”

It didn’t mean Hagrid trusted him as far as he could throw him, or that they were suddenly mates by any stretch of the imagination, but it did open the door for Draco to actually learn something during his classes and get what he could from his education. What neither of them expected, however, was that by the end of the year they had become quite friendly with each other. Draco excelled in COMC with Hagrid’s enthusiastic lessons that really had improved in quality since his OWLs.

Not all apologies went this well, though. He received a fair few point-blank hexes, several flying fists at his face, and those who responded with a cold, sneering indifferenc. Lavender Brown slapped him in the face and stormed off when he tried to apologise to her for what happened with Greyback. Neville Longbottom simply stared at Draco for an uncomfortably long time, holding intense eye contact and unblinking, before shrugging and walking away. Oh, and Dean Thomas had to be pulled off of him in the middle of the entrance hall as he tried to put his fist through Draco’s skull.

That had not been a pleasant experience, but he took what was dished out to him. He felt that he deserved whatever he got. He did royally fuck up, after all. What was a few trips to Madam Pomfrey with black eyes and hex wounds if it made everyone else feel better?

He barely felt the strikes to his body when they came after him, anyways. He never defended himself, he didn’t see the point. He felt detached, like he was watching himself through a tunnel. Being beaten and ganged up on by a group of Gryffindors in an empty corridor after dinner felt like it was happening to someone else rather than it actually happening to him. He wondered why he didn’t feel angry or indignant about these attacks and retaliations. He wondered why he didn’t feel anything other than cold emptiness when he realised it was because the old Draco was dead. The Draco with fire and confidence, with pride and humour was gone. He was a grey shell filled with roiling unsettled magic and shame.

To his utter astonishment, Luna not only accepted his apology but gave him a hug which made him feel like crying and bursting out of his skin and fleeing. He hadn’t been hugged in, god, he couldn’t remember how long, and the touch was decidedly foreign. She said that she knew Draco had been just as trapped as she had been and in much more danger than she was. Her eyes were filled with a knowing look that bored through Draco’s soul and he avoided her for the rest of the year. He hated that anyone could know what had happened to him. It made it too real.

After the blur of emotional turmoil and feverish school work that was his last year at Hogwarts, he began his training at St. Mungo’s. Which, as it turns out, was just more emotional turmoil and feverish school work. Who’d have guessed? Draco didn’t mind so long as he was busy and didn’t have too much idle time to allow the deep recesses of his brain to air out their dusty corners full of skeletons and cobwebs— or, rather, full of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord.

He felt like there was a bogart in his skull, constantly looping his worst fears and nightmares in garish detail while he furiously tried to ignore it by doing more and more and more.

When his probation had finally ended in his 3rd year of Healer training, he applied to do a potions rotation in France. At this point, the panic attacks were a part of his routine. Make tea, panic, get ready for rotations, crushing dread, see patients, break out into cold sweats, lose his favorite pen, existential crisis, ask a nurse for tests, vomit on the way to break room, etc.

To those around him he was cool, calm, collected, professional, prepared, and well spoken. While
many didn’t particularly like him because he was so often clipped and curt, they couldn’t fault his impeccable behaviour and focus.

The boggart in his head was a sadistic bastard, really, and he felt like a complete fucking fraud most of the time. No one realised that while he appeared still and methodical, his insides were writhing. He constantly had to fight the urge to run or puke on himself and he was hoping that some time away from England would clear his head, give him some space to breathe away from the crushing oppression of the past looming over him like a persistent storm cloud.

What he didn’t expect was to run into some of his past in France. Neville Longbottom was doing a medical herbology rotation at the same university. He was startled to see Draco, but regarded him with wary, polite professionalism. Draco tried to stay out of his way, but found he often had to consult with Neville’s department, and by default, Neville himself, for potion ingredients in his research. Neville’s standoffish behaviour was like nightmare fuel for Draco’s imaginary boggart, and he was eventually forced to admit that the panic attacks were starting to interfere with his studies.

One day, a few months into his potions rotation, he was looking for Longbottom in a greenhouse on the campus grounds. He needed some information about Lily of the Valley root for its use in cardiac arrhythmia potions and wanted a sample to experiment with. He even wrote down what exactly he wanted to ask Neville, because often when he went to find the former Gryffindor, Draco couldn’t seem to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth to spit the question out, and would inevitably walk away without speaking, probably seeming really rude, and giving his skull-boggart more food for thought.

“Longbottom? Are you in here?” He called cautiously. “Sorry to bother you, but I have a quick question on Lily of the Valley root…”

He couldn’t see anyone at first glance, but sometimes the Herbology students were hidden amongst their plants in the large space. He started to pick his way across the greenhouse to see if Neville was working out of sight. He found him bent double, crooning over a venomous tentacula waving its creepy vines to the sound of Neville’s dulcet tones. “Um—” Draco coughed.

Neville looked up, his open smile and apparent joy at loving the plant slide off his face as he looked up into Draco’s stony countenance. “Malfoy.” He nodded as he stood from his crouching position. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Draco said curtly, fingering the note with his question written on it in his robe’s pocket, “I wanted to know if I could get a sample of Lily of the Valley root, and to ask if you had any information regarding cardiac uses.” He hated how formal he sounded even to his own ears, but it was the only way to maintain control.

“Oh, sure.” He sounded happier than Draco had anticipated. “I’ve got some really interesting stuff you might enjoy, let me just clear this up first and we can head to the back.” He had turned around and began picking up jars filled with fire whiskey and venomous tentacular leaves—he’d clearly been making tinctures. As he stooped down to grab the last jar, a half-filled bottle of fire whiskey slipped from under Neville’s armpit and shattered at Draco’s feet.

“Oh! Shit, Malfoy! Sorry!” he sputtered as he tried to reach for his wand, dropping another jar that shattered spectacularly.

The pungent smell of firewhiskey hit Draco’s nostrils and it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. His ears filled with the sound of a thousand angry bees, his lungs were filled with glass, and it felt like he was looking through the top of a pensive memory down at a familiar and
horrifying scene. It didn’t feel like he had a body anymore. The stench of whiskey had taken him somewhere he never wanted to think about. A part of his memory he kept occluded behind layers and layers of denial and the sheer will of forgetting. He could hear jeering and feel hands on him, too many hands, and a rough voice, the smell of blood and sweat—

“Malfoy! Come on mate, Malfoy! Draco— Breathe. In and out.” Draco could hear someone yelling somewhere. Why were they yelling? he thought distantly.

“Draco! Mate, breathe. That’s right, just breathe. Here, feel this?” Draco didn’t know how he ended up on the ground, how long he was there, or what Neville had shoved into his hands. But, he suddenly realised that he did indeed still have hands and that they were attached to limbs, and that they could move according to his will. His hands were being brushed over something spongy in a small shallow pot, guided by Neville. The entire world seemed condensed into that small pot in his lap.

“Feels nice, right?” Neville asked softly, “Deep breath, good. Doesn’t that smell better?”

Draco could smell something minty and wet that slowly replaced the fire whiskey smell in his brain. He became aware that he still had a body and he slowly began to re-inhabit it again. He was in France, not the manor. He was with Neville, not Greyback. Neville, who was helping him pet a small plant that made nice smells the more he touched it.

“What… the fuck?” Draco finally managed to croak when he realised how absolutely fucking ridiculous this situation was. He was sitting in dirt on the floor of a greenhouse, hyperventilating like a total freak, while being instructed to stroke a tiny plant. He was mortified with himself.

Neville sighed in apparent relief. “There you are.” He said, smiling slightly. “It appears you’ve had a panic attack, my friend.”

“Yeah… that happens.” Draco was startled by the word ‘friend’. He tried to get his bearings. He wanted to flee but he was still incredibly dizzy and hadn’t entirely regained the control of his legs yet.

Neville’s brows creased in thought, “Do they?” He asked gently. “How often?”

Draco eyed him warily wanting to brush the whole thing off but his exhaustion and complete lack of dignity in his current predicament had him folding his head into his hands on his lap and sighing.

“… all the time.”

He wanted to cry. He was so embarrassed, so tired. His adrenaline was crashing, leaving him feeling like he had fled to the moon and back. He took a deep breath in, hiding his eyes with the heels of his hands, and smelled the sweet little minty thing still in his lap.

Neville hesitated, hovering his hand over Draco’s shoulder, “Can I touch you?” he asked quietly. Draco shrugged and continued to breathe deeply and pressing into his eyes. Neville carefully placed his hand on Draco and clumsily rubbed soothing circles onto his arm.

He felt drained and distinctly uncomfortable as Neville had never been this nice to him before and was sure that he was only doing it because he felt awkward and didn’t know what else to do.

“I’m sorry Longbottom, this is entirely unbecoming of me.” He tried with his usual clipped tones, which were completely undermined by the fact that he still hadn’t taken his hands away from his
eyes which had filled with tears in the meantime.

He couldn’t believe he was crying in a greenhouse in France, being soothed by a serpent slaying Gryffindor.

“Don’t apologise, I’m the one that doused your senses in fire whiskey. I’m assuming that’s what triggered it?” He ended awkwardly.

“Yeah, I suppose it must have.” He tried casually, but knowing full well it was indeed what caused his abrupt departure from reality. He shuddered at the thought and tried again to regain his composure. When he finally looked up from his hands Neville was holding out a tissue and smiling weakly at him.

After that they were… friends? Friendly? Enjoyed one another’s company in their free time? Neville had insisted that Draco keep the little plant, mint corsica, stating that its entire existence was to encourage happiness. Neville called it his Encourage-Mint.

Now standing in his kitchen cradling his cup of morning tea Draco looked over to his little encourage-mint, the only sign of life in his otherwise bleak existence. Neville had told him when he had given Draco the little mint corsica, three years ago, that it was an extremely difficult plant to care for requiring constant attention and moisture. He had also said that anyone who could keep a mint corsica plant alive for more than a few weeks was an all right bloke in his books.

From then on Draco had taken it as a personal challenge to prove he was capable of loving something other than himself and obsessed over his tiny pot of encourage-mint with nearly neurotic devotion. With the sun streaming through his kitchen window he wandered over to poke his wand at the charmed cloud that hovered above the soft bed tightly packed tiny green leaves to ensure that, yes, his charm work was holding. It was part of his morning ritual.

His little charmed cloud assessed moisture, humidity, and shade, and would rain when needed. Not only had he managed to keep this finicky plant alive for two years, but it really was thriving, spilling itself over the edges of its pot, feeling its way onto the window sill in search of more fertile grounds to lay new roots.

As satisfied as he could be that the mint plant may survive another day without his constant vigilance, he scrubbed his hands over his face and began the motions to clear away his empty tea cup. Lost in thought, he was startled and nearly dropped his mug when an owl flew straight into the window with such gusto he was worried that it may have given itself a concussion.

The adrenaline that exploded in his gut at the sudden sound had jacked up his heart rate and made it feel like his chest might explode. He chastised himself for his body’s overreaction to the appearance of a bloody owl. What was he, a coward? Spooked by a fucking owl? His mother’s owl no less, Merlin’s pants. He sighed and rolled his eyes when he realised he was shaking and pointing his wand at the interloper. Salazar, he was embarrassing.

The owl stood there, perched on the window sill looking expectantly at Draco and tapping its beak persistently on the glass. He finally forced his legs to move, trying to shake out the sudden adrenaline in his system and breathing shakily. There was no fucking reason to be this worked up about a god damn post delivery, he thought bitterly, wiping cold sweat from his forehead.

He opened the window, retrieved the scroll and opened it. Scanning the contents quickly he felt a sudden, second upsurge in the adrenaline in his system. His whole gut felt like a sack of writhing snakes. It was just a polite invite from his mother to come to the manor for tea. Simple, really, he received one every few weeks, this should be no surprise. But with every letter and every invite she
offered him to return to his childhood home, he always had to suppress the urge to empty the contents of his stomach into the nearest receptacle.

The Manor, with its lush lawns and manicured flower beds, with its timeless beauty and haunted corridors. It was filled with memories and experiences that Draco spent every waking moment trying not to think about. How was he expected to ignore those haunted thoughts when his mother kept asking him to come and have tea in a room where Greyback and his lackeys had taken turns using him in their perverse weekend reveries. He swallowed down the taste of bile as he remembered sharp nails on his hips, teeth against the nape of his neck, and the smell of blood and sweat—

He leaned against the counter behind him trying to keep himself here and now, in this moment. He nearly yelped with shock when the owl gave a soft hoot, reminding him of its presence, clearly waiting for a response to take back to his mother. He shook his head, trying to clear the resurgence of unwelcome thoughts and memories from behind his eyelids and scribbled a rushed apology. Work he told her. Too busy to get away, even for tea. He offered to meet her at a café near St. Mungo’s. A muggle café, he thought wryly, if she wanted to see him then she could be the uncomfortable one. After the owl had left with his response he quickly ran to his bathroom and promptly vomited.

Stepping into the shower and letting the boiling water scald his skin, he placed his forehead against the cold tiles and let himself sob into the silence of his lonely existence.

Charlie Weasley sat across from Draco in his office looking apprehensive, formidable.

“You mean to tell that you don’t need to kill them to do this?”

“No.” Draco said. “I think it’s barbaric that no one’s come up with an alternative method of obtaining bone marrow from Dragons, when it’s so incredibly valuable to magical medicine, specifically with rare blood curses.”

“I agree, and I’m certainly not going to let anyone come and kill off my dragons for a bit of marrow. It’s a disgusting waste.” Charlie said with a hint of challenge in his voice. He certainly was an intimidating bloke. And fit— No, he wasn’t, Draco amended in his head, he was not fit, he was a Weasley and those were two mutually exclusive states of existence, obviously. Draco groaned internally. What is wrong with me?

“Of course.” Draco ceded. “All we would need to do is stun the Dragon. Then, using a muggle extraction technique, we would harvest the marrow from their external iliac. It doesn’t injure them, but they may be a bit sore and… testy afterwards.”

“Testy.” Charlie stated, with a lifted eyebrow.

“Testy.” Draco confirmed with a curt nod.

“I guess that’s a decent compromise. You’re on, Malfoy.” Charlie had stood abruptly and jutted out a weathered and worn hand to shake Draco’s with far too much intense eye contact.

“Excellent.” Draco said, trying to hide his surprise and maintain the grueling eye contact, grasping Charlie’s outstretched and scarred hand with conviction. He had planned to argue much more than this.

“So long as you’re the one to come and extract the bone marrow, you have my blessings and help
to use my dragons.” Charlie said, his intensity never wavering as he let Draco’s hand fall.

“Thank you Mr. Weasley, I really appreciate your help.” Draco said sincerely as he retracted his hand, and finally broke eye contact, speaking to his desk as he sat back down. The writhing snakes in his gut hated too much eye contact, no matter how fit the participant.

“Oh god.” Charlie winced, “please never call me that again, I told you, Charlie is fine.” He started towards the door.

“My apologies, Charlie.” Said Draco with the smallest smile and hint of humour as he watched Charlie’s retreating back.

Charlie exited the office with a salute and his most charming grin. *Fuck*, Draco was not ready for a charming Weasley.

May 09, 2006

Draco walked up the road to his apartment, eager to get inside. He had apparated a few blocks from his flat on purpose, wanting to work off his adrenaline with a brisk march through the neighbourhood. He quickly stepped past the line of boxwood shrubs and nearly ran up the walk, nodding at Newman the doorman, in his bright red coat.

*Good old Newman, ever the constant,* he thought as he strode past him. Newman was always there to greet Draco no matter what time of day or night he came or went. Draco wondered absently if Newman ever had time off. He couldn’t think about that now though, he had to get to his flat before his unsettled magic lit him on fire from the inside.

He let himself into the dingy flat and closed the door quietly behind him, leaning back against it and letting his head rest on the warm wood as he breathed in the familiar smells of his clean living room.

He was a fucking idiot.

He felt sick to his stomach. His insides were a vacuum of black numbness. He was and always will be the Death Eater, the fuck up son of Lucius Malfoy, the reckless failure. How could he ever think anyone could look past that? How could he have let himself get his hopes up, for even a fraction of a second?

He had gone to Romania to hold up his end of the Dragon bargain, meeting Charlie at the international portkey office. Charlie had side along apparated with him to the Dragon sanctuary. After an intense day of trapping, stunning, collecting samples, and soothing pissed-off dragons, Draco had been exhausted, but pleased with his work.

Charlie had insisted on being a good host and taking Draco to dinner to talk more about his research with dragon marrow. Against Draco’s better judgement, in the face of an appealing plea from an unsettlingly attractive Charlie, he had had a glass of wine. The first in years— since the war— it made him feel distinctly warm and loose. A feeling that made him wary and more nervous than he usually did, but Charlie’s eyes were so gentle and seemed to hold a kind of promise that Draco had never seen before.

So, Draco had allowed himself to get swept up in it. In the experience of being wined and dined. He let himself entertain the notion that Charlie might *like* him. That Charlie might be *interested*. As the night wore on, he allowed the ever present knot of dread and nerves in his stomach to soften and slowly unfurl as Charlie found excuses to gently touch Draco’s hand in passing, bump their
feet together under the table, and eventually rest his knee against Draco’s and not move it away.

Draco felt giddy with nerves. He’d never done this before.

Charlie had been sweet, respectful, kind, and so very interested in Draco’s explanations of his research into blood magic and blood curses. During their long dinner and subsequent stroll back towards the sanctuary, he had gotten incrementally closer to Draco until they were walking so close their shoulders brushed as they made their way up the lane.

It was a chilly night and Draco’s breath curled in steamy vapours in front of him as he walked with a feeling of butterflies and apprehension in his chest. Charlie couldn’t have been any more different from Draco if he tried, with his tatty jeans, dragonhide boots, long chaotic red hair, piercings, and assorted tattoos, but he made Draco’s mouth water in a way he hadn’t experience since before the war.

Draco hadn’t been intimate with anyone since… well, he didn’t really want to think about it. But, he was warming up to the idea that he could do it now with this very attractive, very muscular dragon trainer who has been basically eye fucking him all night, while maintaining a very polite distance. Draco appreciated that immensely. Nothing spooked him more than a strong come-on. They came up to the guest house all too soon and Draco’s speech faltered as he tried to finish telling Charlie about how his research could help muggles with their cancer treatments, and turning to see Charlie looking intently at him, clearly no longer listening.

“Do you want to come back to mine for a drink?” Charlie offered as soon as Draco had finished talking, not acknowledging what Draco had said.

Draco’s heart did a somersault and he felt a little nauseous. He willed himself to be brave. He wanted this, right? Yes, okay he did, but holy fuck was it scary when it was staring right at him.

“Yes— I mean, yes— that would be lovely.” He tried, voice a bit scratchier than he anticipated. Charlie’s face broke into a huge grin and he uncrossed his arms from his chest.

“Great.” He said. “This way.” And, he nodded his head to another path and indicated for Draco to follow. Draco followed but had lost his ability to speak. His palms were sweaty and he was wondering if it would be rude to turn around and **run**.

*No*, he told himself, *this man is gorgeous and nice*. He tried to steady his jagged nerves with slow deep breaths and will his feet to keep following Charlie through the wooded path to his cabin. Charlie didn’t seem to mind the sudden lack of conversation, his arm pressed against Draco’s. He walked with purpose, his hands stuffed into his pockets, stealing glances at Draco in the moonlight with a soft smile on his lips. Draco felt giddy, like a teenager.

Charlie climbed the front steps to his cabin and held the door open for Draco. He walked through the door and took in the charming site of a one room cabin that reminded him painfully of Hagrid’s hut. There was a large four poster bed in the corner with red hangings that immediately drew Draco’s attention and he resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *Fucking Gryffindors.*

The rest of the large room was filled with a wood fire stove, a plush sofa, and rustic but well-stocked kitchen, and a cabinet of assorted alcohol. It wasn’t what Draco would call messy, but it certainly wasn’t to his exacting standards of organisation.

“It’s nice in here, it reminds me of Hagrid’s.” Draco said without really thinking, and immediately feeling a bit stupid for it. *Why would bring up Hagrid in a moment like this?*
Charlie chuckled. “Yeah I guess you’re right. What can I get you? Wine? Whiskey?”

“I don’t actually drink all that much.” Draco felt it was important to be honest, but blushed all the same. Charlie raised an eyebrow and smiled at the implication that Draco had come back to his place on the pretence of sharing a drink, but didn’t actually intend on drinking.

“Alright.” Charlie said stepping forward. Draco’s mouth went dry and he tried to remember how to breathe. Charlie was still moving towards him and Draco could smell his cologne and fuck he smelled so good. Wrapping his arm around Draco’s waist, Charlie gently pulled him towards his chest and kissed Draco so lightly on the lips that Draco smiled a little at the sweetness. It was an invitation to reciprocate and Draco was deliciously warmed by the tenderness this Dragon trainer was showing him.

Draco kissed him back and now it was Charlie’s turn to smile against Draco’s mouth. They stood there kissing and softly running their hands against one another for what felt like an eternity before Charlie grabbed Draco more firmly and pulled them flush together and Draco let out a startled gasp into Charlie’s mouth. He felt dizzy with lust, something that generally made him uneasy, and profound relief running through him at the physical contact of another human, the novelty of actually wanting someone.

Charlie broke the kiss. “I should light the fire.” He said still smiling. “Come sit.” He lead Draco to the couch and lit a fire in the grate. Turning back to Draco he grabbed his hand and pulled Draco down on top of him as he lay back on the couch. Draco could not believe this was happening. He was laying on top of a Weasley in a front of a fire in a Romanian forest surrounded by Dragons. How was this his life? Their kisses began taking on a more desperate and eager quality, and Draco could hear the familiar buzzing in his head, the panic such closeness heralded. Charlie’s hands were running up Draco’s back beneath his shirt and pressing eager fingertips into his hips. Draco could feel Charlie’s erection straining against him through their layers of clothing, and he felt in over his head.

What was he thinking?

“Godrick, you’re gorgeous.” Charlie whispered into Draco’s neck as he kissed up and down from his jaw to his collarbone. “I want to see more of you.”

Lost in a haze of lust induced panic, lips numb from Charlie’s stubble and terror, Draco acquiesced, afraid of voicing his hesitations and fears. Charlie sat himself up under Draco and began tugging at his layers. Calling on whatever courage he had, afraid to stop, wanting desperately to have this experience, whatever it was, Draco grabbed the hem of Charlie’s t-shirt and pulled it over his messy red head. He drank in the site of lean muscles, tattoos, and burn marks, trying to quell the rising tide of adrenaline in his body, trying to hide his shaking hands.

Charlie finally managed to pull Draco’s last long sleeve shirt off of him to expose his bare chest. As Charlie took in the site of Draco sitting astride his lap, clearly enjoying the view, the hungry look on his face slide into one of sudden shock and then revulsion as his eyes found Draco’s left arm.

They were suddenly very still and Draco felt like he had been doused in freezing water with shards of ice in his lungs. He felt the telltale flush of a panicked sweat break out across his body.

Charlie still hadn’t looked away and Draco, feeling supremely uncomfortable and suddenly disgustingly vulnerable, crossed his arms across his chest hiding his Dark Mark and Sectumsempra scars in one move.
Charlie finally looked up into Draco’s eyes with an unreadable expression and there it was, all of Draco’s mistakes and all the dead people they knew hung in the air between them. It was as if the bodies of the fallen 50 were stacked in the corners of the room, the air thick with tension and death.

Draco moved his leg swiftly over Charlie in an attempt to get up to retrieve his clothes as quickly as possible, but Charlie grabbed his wrist. “Draco—” he started and Draco reluctantly looked at him.

“You don’t have to leave.”

“Don’t I?” Draco spat.

“No, I just… forgot.” He said lamely.

“You forgot.” Draco repeated. “You forgot I had the Dark Mark.” Incredulity etched on his face.

“Yeah I just, I don’t know. I got so used to thinking of you as Draco that I forgot you were Malfoy as well.” Charlie said, suddenly having a hard time making eye contact.

Malfoy’s eyebrows were raised up so high he was sure they had disappeared into his hairline.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you.” Draco said coldly.

“Don’t be like that Draco, come here let’s just—” He tried to drag Draco towards him.

“Just what, exactly? Forget? This is who I am Weasley, I can’t change what happened.”

“Maybe if you just…” Charlie started, trying to read what Draco’s reaction might be to the rest of his suggestion, and stealing himself to finish it.

“Just what?” Draco pushed, not sure he wanted to know the answer. Feeling more and more stupid to be shirtless in the lap of someone who could look at him with so much disdain.

“Just cover it up.” He finished softly. Draco stared back, incensed. “Just cover it up and we can keep going. I know a good glamour charm.” He offered, looking hopeful.

Draco could hear the swarm of angry bees getting louder in his ears.

“Fuck you.” Draco said, his voice even. “This is the thanks I get for nearly getting fucked by a Weasley. You’re no better than the blood purists who won’t have my mother to tea after saving Potter’s life.”

He pushed himself forcefully off of Charlie’s lap, grabbed his clothes and his shoes and marched out the front door without even bothering to put them on first. Slamming the door behind him, he shoved his feet in his shoes and began walking and dressing at the same time. What the literal fuck just happened, he thought. What in circe’s saggy left tit did I just put myself through?

Of course, his Dark Mark had been a problem. Of fucking course.

We may as well have been shagging surrounded by the ghosts of his deceased brethren and friends, he thought angrily.

He stomped his way down the lane and to the guest cottage. Charlie hadn’t bothered to come after him but he also knew that he would never speak of this indiscretion to anyone as Draco had given him enough shame to earn his silence. He pushed his way into the cottage, warded it so thoroughly it made Azkaban look like a fucking joke and crawled into bed without changing his clothes, tears
soaking his pillow.

This is the last time I ever try to be naked with someone again, he thought bitterly. What, with the disaster of Astoria, and now Charlie, pureblood and blood traitors alike, he was done.

He rose early that next morning, packed his bag, organised his notes, and disapparated to Bucharest for his international portkey, still furious with himself for thinking he could indulge in a bit of romance. He was snippy and irritable with the customs officials at the portkey office and nearly reduced a small girl to tears, but hey, no one expected anything different from a Malfoy, anyways. He may as well live up to his family name.

Now, in his apartment leaning against the door, he felt absolutely overwhelmed by his stupidity and shame. He felt his magic vibrating around him and with a single-minded effort he pushed off the door and walked into his kitchen to boil the kettle. After ensuring his encourage-mint was alive and well, he went through the motions of tea making. He inhaled the floral vapours of his jasmine tea, and sighed, trying to shake the tension out of his body.

But, as he stood there he thought of how gentle Charlie had been before he saw the Dark Mark. He thought about how much Charlie had wanted Draco, and how terrified he had been by it.

Draco’s control unravelled.

He hurled his mug through the kitchen as hard as he could and watched in silent horror as it exploded against the wall. Choking out a strangled sob he pulled out his wand and cleared away the mess as quickly as he could. His knees feeling weak, he slid down his cupboards and sank onto the floor of his sterile kitchen and wondered if anyone would notice if he laid down to die here. Behind him, he heard his enchanted cloud erupt into a tiny thunderstorm and he let the smell of mint wash over him as it was doused in a vernal rain.
Harry rubbed his thumb across his wand, staring blankly at the cubical divide in front of him. He’d been like this for at least an hour, his magic tingling against his wand beneath his fingers, his mind far away and ruminating.

His thoughts were circling around the months they had spent in the Forest of Dean, the fear, the panic, the nights he would spend unable to fall asleep at all, heart racing at every small sound the forest produced. He had carried a horcrux and lived on adrenaline and scavenged mushrooms and he had survived amid the terror. He had fought his heart out, he’d rescued his friends from certain death, he had kept it together. He’d even felt strong under the cloak of fear, sure of himself, sure of his mission and his path. Each morning he rose with purpose, he had scrubbed his face clean and gotten dressed knowing exactly what he needed to do. He’d been full of this incredible and unyielding desire to live, to persevere. In the end, he’d done just that. Lived. Won.

And now? Why did he keep reliving these moments? They came to him in nightmares for the first few years, but now, here he was sitting at his desk at work, smelling the wet moss and hearing the small streams of that little glen they had sheltered in as if he was still standing there, his wand held up against the dark as he whispered *lumos* to the blackness beyond the protective enchantments and began his watch.

He could feel the shimmer of Hermione’s charms ripple against his skin in the cold, see his breath forming tumultuous clouds of steam with each forceful exhale, the adrenaline making him nearly pant, the cold making him shiver. On those night watches, Harry had to focus on every little snapped twig, every whisper the wind threw up between the branches of trees that would hide him just as well as hide his enemies. He could never shake the feeling of being followed, being watched, and it ate at him in the lingering dark, the cold seeping in to his bones beneath his threadbare clothes.

Harry’s magic pulsed with alarm as Ron stood up quickly, knocking the cubicle wall as he stood and turned, likely to hand in the paperwork they had been working on. Harry shoved down the panic that had risen, ripping him from his memory of the forest to stare at the fire that had erupted in his empty coffee mug, though, to be fair, it was often more whiskey than coffee these days. He doused it with a quick *aguamenti*, and swallowed hard, staring at the cup. He had started a fire. Accidentally. His magic buzzed around him, defensively.

His magic had erupted uncontrolled before, usually in moments of rage or profound grief, he’d notice something had broken. But this, this was the first time he had started a fire. He felt another slow, building wave of panic as he realised that this was a decidedly bad sign. He was slipping. Falling. Tumbling down somewhere deep and dark and unknown. He felt unsafe.

Harry shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and stomped his way down Shaftesbury avenue. He should have been cold, with just a sweater pushed up past his elbows and t-shirt underneath, but flames of jealousy licked and curled their way around inside his chest. He hated how angry he was, how hurt. He hated it as he hated himself, blindly. Consumingly. Why couldn’t he be happy for them? His two best friends in the whole world, his family, were expecting.

Hermione and Ron had invited him over to the house for Sunday dinner with a whole speech planned and everything. They’d nervously fussed and twittered and gone on about the weather and
Hermione had eventually come out with it. With the big news. That she was now in her second trimester and she could start telling people and they’d wanted to tell Harry first.

He shouldn’t’ve been so surprised, really, something in the back of his mind told him they’d been trying for months to conceive, and he had always known this day would come. So, why did it bother him so much? He had schooled his face into a huge grin and hugged them both. He knew they would make excellent parents, their child would be loved and spoiled and would have the best the muggle and wizarding world could offer them. It was a joyful thing, having kids. Wasn’t it?

They had asked Harry to be godfather. He knew he should be happy, it was an honour for them to ask and they had been so sweet and kind and considerate. But, what did he really know about kids? He certainly wasn’t responsible enough or capable of raising a child if Ron and Hermione died. Remus and Tonks had trusted him with Teddy and, yet, Andromeda had stepped in and Harry hardly featured in the little boy’s life anymore. It’d been years and years since he’d seen him.

Harry knew it would be the same with Ron and Hermione’s child, if they died that is. He’d be pushed aside for Molly and Arthur and Bill and Fleur and for fuck’s sake even Percy would be a better godparent than he could ever be.

Harry sucked in a breath as he thought of his own godfather, of Sirius, of the hope that had risen in him that this man could be a father to him, be his family. How crushed he had been when he died. What if Harry died? What if he did the same thing to these poor children who were relying on him to be their source of love and care in this whole wide, bitter world. Harry shook his head and concentrated on his footfalls.

He had told Ron and Hermione he was meeting up with Seamus and Dean at the pub around the corner to catch up, and had warned them not to wait up for him, heaping congratulations and back slaps and hugs on them all the way from the dining room to the door, but he’d lied. He had apparated right into muggle London as soon as he had gotten far enough down the road to evade suspicion. He had wanted to be alone.

He turned a corner when he recognised the seedy porn shop across the way and went halfway down the block, just far enough away from the lights and busy shops, and ducked into a dingy, derelict establishment.

The Gallows was marked only by a soot-covered row of blocky red letters against the grimy brick, painted white many years ago, a small doorway in a recess to the right. Harry had stumbled upon his new haunt a few years back, when he used to take his mind off of things by walking around muggle London, often late into the night, finding solace in his anonymity.

Back then he had fretted about being recognised and constantly updated his glamour charms, nervous and suspicious and so self aware. After enough time had passed, however, the press no longer obsessed about his every move, and he hardly had anyone notice him. No one thanked him or stopped him to shake his hand.

Perhaps it was his sunken eyes and sallow cheeks, the years of stress and loneliness wearing him down, trading his boyish physique for a sinewy, strained body of an Auror, the countenance of a man with too many memories for his years. Yes, perhaps it was that.

The bar was as it always was. Empty save a few regular patrons, either hunched over at the sloping and splintered bar or nursing their drink in the shadowy booths along the wall, the back being taken up by a disgusting pair of toilets, used more for nefarious activities than relieving oneself. Well, maybe both, if they’re not the same, anyway.
Harry had never spoken to any of the other patrons, preferring to seat himself two thirds of the way down the bar, comfortably distant from the elderly mumbling gentleman at the front stool and the three snickering women taking up a booth in the back. He came for the drinks and the solitude, and that’s what he got.

Nodding at the barman, who’s name he didn’t even know, Harry received his regular fare down in front of him. A double of Jameson, chosen because it was the first bottle that caught his eye when he walked in that first night. He had found he liked it, so he never bothered to try anything else. He tossed it back easily, sighing and listening to the soft crooning that came across the half broken radio behind the bar. The barman stood off to the side, wiping glasses with the same dirty rag he was always carrying about. Harry liked that he never tried to make conversation. Maybe he knew this was the kind of place people came when they wanted to drown their thoughts, not voice them. Harry motioned for a refill and swallowed another.

“I’ve seen you here before.” A voice next to his ear was accompanied with a soft hand sliding around his waist. Harry tensed, throwing a glance over his shoulder. One of the women from the booth at the back had walked up to him, and was smiling deviously, batting her eyelashes, popping her hip out and dragging her fingers along his back, slow and single-minded. Her intentions were obvious, and Harry simply grunted in acknowledgement. He didn’t feel the need to explain himself to her.

She was pretty enough, short blonde hair framing her pale, slightly sharp face. She had gold hoop earrings and bright red lipstick, her mascara thick under winged eyeliner. “You look like you could use some company,” she murmured, breaking the silence as Harry drank in her features.

He nodded slowly, reaching in his pocket to pull out the muggle money he could lay on the counter for his drinks. The barman snorted a laugh, not looking up from his diligent cleaning of the same glass tumbler. She took his hand and lead him outside and down an alleyway, stopping just behind a trash bin. Harry hardly noticed the less-than-luxurious setting, as his eyes were glued to her round ass, shifting enticingly with each step beneath a gold glittering miniskirt.

She turned and caught him staring, laughing quietly and reaching up to cup his face as she leaned in to kiss him, her familiarity and ease in the gesture catching him off guard. Her lips were soft, and her tongue slid against his as they kissed, his hands reaching down to appreciate the cleft of her ample ass. He groaned and pushed up back up against the wall, his head spinning as she slid her hands between them, deftly unbuttoning his jeans.

Harry dropped his head and looked down at what she was doing, rivulets of fear breaking through the fog of whiskey.

“I need… something more…” Harry stumbled over his words, an idea sticking to the roof of his mouth.

“Oh!” She laughed, reaching in to her top, slipping a little fold of plastic out of her bra. “I’ve got just the thing, babe, don’t you worry. I was hoping you’d say something; I could use some myself.”

Harry stared as she tapped out the contents of the plastic baggie onto her hand, her palm to her chest, loading the depression just beyond the base of her thumb. She brought it up to her nose and sniffed greedily. Her smile big and bright, she tapped out a second hefty helping of the white powder and offered it to Harry.

He copied her, plugging one nostril and inhaling as hard as he could with the other pressed up against the strange white powder she had so graciously offered him. Before he had time to assimilate the strange burning sensation and then very unusual numbing of his nose and throat, she
had refocused her attentions on his cock.

She knelt, pulling his jeans and pants down with her, brazenly grabbing and stroking his cock with one hand and fondling his heavy balls with the other. Harry felt himself getting hard just as he felt his heart start to pound, his ears filling with the sound of his blood rushing with each frantic beat. The volume of his thoughts increased, as did the speed at which they careened around his skull. He swallowed repeatedly against the strange numbness of his throat. Was he drooling? Was he panicking? Was he okay? Was his heart supposed to be doing this? He didn’t know, and he was too overwhelmed to ask.

He looked down and was greeted by the sight of a blonde head bobbing up and down along the length of his erection. His cock twitched and his balls ached. He felt like he was reliving a teenage fantasy. He could feel himself getting close, despite the strange numbing sensation, as he ran his hand through the short blonde hair. It felt so good. So right.

She looked up at him with glassy eyes and her smudged lipstick and he felt himself falter. No, he liked it better when she couldn’t see him and he couldn’t see her. He didn’t want too much reality intruding on his fantasy. The fact that he was letting a complete stranger, high off her tits on cocaine, suck him off in an alley behind a dumpster. Fuck, he didn’t even know her name… Not that he wanted to, really. No, he couldn’t think about that too much or he’d go soft and it would be yet another failed attempt at fucking for his resume.

His stomach clenched and he reached down to interrupt her ministrations, turning her to face the wall while he continued to stroke his cock, willing himself to stay hard. He flipped up her miniskirt and found her without any underclothes, his thoughts racing as he trailed his free hand down the curve of her ass, grabbing a handful and pulling her cheeks apart. He felt hypnotised, and the blood surged back to his cock, fears of his faltering pushed aside by a desperate need to fuck.

It was several seconds before Harry realised she was saying something, reaching back into her bra and tearing something between her teeth. She handed him the open condom and he slipped it down around his now aching hardness before letting her lean down and grasp him, guiding him to her waiting ingress. Harry leaned forward, following her prompting. He felt his cock slip into her, and he groaned, his hands trembling.

His heart felt like it might explode and his chest hurt, but he was fucking her. He was moving in and out, snapping his hips, gasping each time he buried into her. He was fucking her and he was staying hard.

He leaned his head down, his nose against her ear, nestled in her platinum hair. His thoughts raced, first about how ridiculous this was, then about how he had needed this, needed it for years, hell, this is what he was supposed to be doing while he was busy fighting off Voldemort, being a sex-crazed teenager. His days at Hogwarts could have been spent buried deep between the legs of his crush, learning how to be intimate with someone, instead of constantly afraid, building up his walls, trying to learn occlumency, for fuck’s sake. He wanted openness. He wanted someone to know how he was feeling. To be able to look at him and notice how much he hurt, how scared he was. He spiralled, his mind flooding with images of his first awkward kiss with Ginny, his ridiculous attempt at dating Cho, his mornings spent staring across the great hall, seeking out his nemesis. Malfoy.

Harry’s memories blurred together and reformed into that fateful day he swung open the door to the girl’s bathroom and caught Malfoy crying. How soft he had seemed. How vulnerable. How Harry’s first instinct had been of empathy, of a desire to reach out, to comfort before he had looked up in the mirror and caught him standing there. Harry’s mind held the scene a moment, the
honesty. He thought of Malfoy’s soft hands on the edge of the sink, the graceful line of his shoulders, bent with the weight of the same world that had been haunting Harry.

Harry felt his balls draw up and the warmth of his orgasm spread across his body, up his spine, a pleasant humming vibration that soothed the raw parts of his soul, his head still full of thoughts of Malfoy.

His cock softened and Harry pulled off the condom, tossing it in the dumpster. He suddenly felt flushed, embarrassed, and overwhelmingly confused. Why had he thought of Malfoy? His hands continued to shake as he redressed, his thoughts feeling as though they were screaming in his ears. He looked up at the smug look and raised eyebrow of the woman he had just fucked, unsure what to do, what to say. He panicked and backed away. Stuttering a quick “thanks” before turning and walking out the alley and back down the street, getting only a few meters beyond the bar before breaking into a run.

It was several blocks before he realised she had taken his wallet.

Harry was running flat out in a full sprint, his eyes wide, his breath frantic. He couldn’t escape the thoughts. The bewilderment. What had he done? He had tried to apparate away as soon as he’d found another empty alleyway, but his magic wouldn’t respond. The air he needed to move through wasn’t there, and he had spun on the spot just to stumble and nearly fall into a pile of trash bags. Whatever she had given him had stolen his magic. For the second time that night, he panicked.

Luckily, in the nights he had spent walking London, he had learned a few things about the layout of the massive city. He knew that if he kept on down Adderley street, he’d eventually hit the abandoned storefront that hid St. Mungo’s, and from there he could find his way back to Grimmauld Place for the night. It may take an hour, but he would be safe there, he thought.

He tried to focus on deep, even breaths as he ran up the quiet street, one block east of St. Mungo’s, his hand dragging along the perfectly manicured boxwood bushes that lined the avenue.

He only saw one other person between there and Grimmauld Place, a lone doorman in a bright red jacket, who nodded and smiled at him knowingly as he ran past. Harry filled with dread as he realised this man probably recognised him – famous Harry Potter running wildly through London at three in the morning, looking like death incarnate. A block later, turning left on another broad boulevard, Harry decided it didn’t really matter anyway. He had no magic, no way to use glamour or confund or obliviate anyone he came across.

He ran straight up the overgrown walk to the sloping stoop of the house Sirius had left him, former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. The townhouse had fallen into a more serious disrepair over the last few years, Harry having sent Kreacher to stay at Hogwarts after the battle, help with reconstruction and live out his days in the company of those he had rallied to fight against the Dark Lord. An unsettling aura leaked from the cracked, dusty windows and the foundation groaned in the last of the winter winds that whipped around the deserted street.

A sinister tremor reverberated through Harry, courtesy of the house’s antique wards, awakening as his hand rested on the front door. His fingers traced the ornamentation carved deep into the ironwood, smoothed with time yet still razor sharp with spells of the Black forefathers, a forest scene. He watched the wood awaken to him, thestrals pawing the ground, their heads held high, nostrils flaring in anxiety. The hawthorn and blackthorn trees rustled as the charmed beings unfurled their colossal wings, beating them fretfully, as if in preparation to take flight. Beneath the
trees, tangled within the roots, *toujours pur* was barely legible.

Harry rested his palm flat against one of the heavy brass knockers, a twisting berg adder that squirmed beneath his hand. He felt the layers of magic of the pureblood relic, thrumming with an unrepentant animosity. They knew, as he did, that he didn’t really belong. The snake hissed softly, but without his magic, he wasn’t sure what it had said.

“I am the owner of this ancient and most noble house of Black, entrusted to me by it’s former master, my godfather, Sirius Black” Harry intoned, his head low, aware of how much stronger the magic of the house seemed, how much more alive. “Let me in,” he finished, his voice hiding the quavering of his thoughts.

He was washed in warm relief as the wards shimmered and the lock clicked, the door swinging open to him. The thestrals shook their heads, silken manes the last to ripple with the house’s magic before the door swung shut behind him and all went still again. Harry stood, motionless in the familiar entry hall, taking deep breaths, willing himself to remain calm. To not think of the last time. Of the days before they started camping, the days before the heaviness of the horcrux they carried. It had been hard even then, in the terrible old house. It had been filled with uncertainty, of fear.

The house of Black was dead. The only ones of their name, Regulus and Sirius, both succumbed to a bitter, unjust end. An end with no rest for their souls, no plot of their own to lay buried and mourned by their loved ones, few though they may be. No place to be at peace. In its own way, Harry thought, this house had become a mausoleum to the two brothers, the only place left to remember them, the only place their magic still lingered.

The house reeked of dark magic, a scent so similar to the metallic aroma of blood that Harry placed it easily, instantly, the coppery odour sticking to his palate, as if he had just developed a nosebleed. Any trace that the Order had met here, worked here, even that they had attempted to clean, was gone, and the dust lay thick across everything Harry could see illuminated in the single dim light of the entryway. Harry took a tentative step forward, his foot landing silently amid a little cloud of dust. He sighed as another of the old light fixtures on the wall sparked to life, casting a second sphere of the dim, yellow glow. It seemed the house was doing as little as possible, as slowly as possible for it’s new master.

Harry pushed his shoulders down and walked ahead into the dark where he knew he’d find the staircase, the lights popping in and out of order as he made his way up to the third floor, to Sirius’s old room. He needed the comfort of something familiar. He needed to feel less alone. Somehow, in his addled state, his dead godfather’s bedroom was the answer to how helpless he felt.

“Sirius,” he choked, as the door to his godfather’s bedroom swung open, the room a mess of hippogriff feathers and tattered bed linens. Despite the relative chaos, he could still feel his godfather’s presence throughout the room, as if he’d just left that morning. His clothes were still piled haphazardly in a corner, a book he must have been in the middle of reading had fallen by the bedside and never been picked up. Harry moved toward it, leaned down to grasp the old binding and brushed the layer of dust off the cover.

*Homeward Bound* was spelled out in an ornate gold across the dark green canvas covering. Harry felt his heart ache. He imagined Sirius’s wry smile and jaunty confidence, his moments of kindness and bravery. He had wanted a home with Harry to live out his life, to enjoy the sunshine and sing and be nothing but carefree. A home away from this hateful place. This mausoleum. Harry held back a sob. It was his fault he was dead. It was his fault.

“I’m sorry Sirius. I’m so sorry.” He shook his head as the tears fell from his cheeks and splashed
across the book, still in his hands. He let the guilt wash over him, his shoulders shaking, his anger finally dissolving. He cried for his role in Sirius’s death and what had become of Harry’s life. What had he even done with the freedom he had fought so hard for? He was here, and Sirius wasn’t. He was here and he could be singing in the shower and laughing at the constellations and playing pick-up Quidditch in the lazy afternoons with the friends he still had living.

But he wasn’t. Because guilt and misery and all of his failures sat so heavy on top of his shoulders, and all the memories nipped viciously at his heels as he walked and then they whispered terrors in his ears while he ran, until he was so exhausted all he could do was let them catch him and pull him down. And like the ravenous hands of the inferi, thoughts of all those who had died with him, for him, curled around his softest parts and dragged him deep beneath the depths of his own consciousness.

He felt raw. Ashamed. Vulnerable. Harry gathered himself together and climbed onto the four poster bed with it’s ripped and ragged blankets, not even bothering to pull them back. He curled up with his head against a dusty pillow, still clutching the book against his chest. He thought about all of the events of the evening, all of the twists and turns that had brought him back here to seek the one person who may not have judged him for the mistakes he had made. Sirius would have clamped him on the back and laughed a deep, hearty laugh, with his head thrown back and his long hair waving wildly. He would’ve told Harry some even more over the top nonsense that he and James had gotten into, and he would’ve told him everything would turn out okay. And he would’ve meant it.

Even in those terrible days he had been forced to be sequestered, alone and locked back up in a house he hated, Sirius had remained strong, stoic, patient. True to his lion’s nature. He had been waiting to start living his own life again. To be free.

Harry sighed, squeezing his eyes shut against the threat of another deluge of tears. “I’m sorry you never had anyone to love either, Sirius. I’m sorry you never had someone love you. It’s hard to be alone. I know that.”

He slept fitfully, tossing and turning and occasionally shouting out in his sleep, a voice that echoed around the still and silent house. Just after dawn, Harry knocked the book from the bed. Had he been awake, he may have noticed the little piece of parchment that fluttered out from between the pages and slipped beneath the wooden frame of the four poster bed.

To the only star worth noticing in our night’s sky,

I saw this today while browsing our local muggle bookshop and thought of you. A story about love, devotion, perseverance and friendship? And the two main characters are dogs? It seemed just sappy enough for you to secretly enjoy. Just as I secretly enjoy you.

I miss you terribly, Sirius. It’ll be several weeks before I can get away again, but I promise to come as soon as I can – I’ve spent too many years separated from you, and it is wearing on me. I feel compelled to start telling people of our plans tonight, even, the war be damned. Maybe that’s what I will howl to the moon– an epic declaration of love for one Sirius Orion Black, master of my heart, the man I want to make my husband – let all the forest hear me.

I know we can’t, Sirius, I know. Just let this man be madly in love with you on parchment, if not out loud. I saw you wearing our rings at the last meeting, and that is declaration enough for me. It’s enough to have kept me smiling all week.

Yours, since the day we kissed under the Blackthorn behind the greenhouses and got caught by Professor Sprout, but you managed to let out a yell, punch me in the shoulder and tried to convince
Harry slept another hour before snapping back into consciousness, whatever dream he had been having slipping right back down to the depths from whence it came. His eyes fluttered open to the sight of Sirius’s bedroom. He huffed a feather from under his nose and scrambled up, staring around in shock at the hell hole of a place he had managed to fall asleep in, before desperately feeling his jeans pockets for his wand. His fingers closed around the holly gratefully, and he felt the quiet hum beneath his fingers once again.

Hopeful, he cast a *scourgify* at the bed. A layer of dust and some of the less putrid looking stains lifted from the blankets and the sheets straightened themselves out, if only slightly. Harry sighed, mostly in relief. He didn’t want to think about the repercussions of losing his magic… forever, even if he realised it had been sort of nice to sleep without the wild, pulsing, trembling forces that swirled around him. He hadn’t been worried about setting anything on fire in his sleep, at least.

The house’s magic seemed to have settled in the daylight as well, with less animosity creeping around every corner. Though Harry still smelled the coppery hue of blood, it was less as though someone had exsanguinated in front of him and more akin to having bitten his tongue unexpectedly. Harry wondered if maybe he should’ve been a bit more afraid of the place, being full of unruly dark magic and whatnot, but he couldn’t really bring himself to reject the house. Dark magic may be formidable, but Harry felt a strange comfort in the nastiness. In the simmering animosity. It was what he was used to, anyway.

Harry scrubbed his face in his hands and looked down at himself, considering the disgusting clothes he had spent the night in. He eyed the pile of Sirius’s old wardrobe in the corner and plucked a t-shirt and jeans from somewhere in the middle. It would have to do. He had to go into the office this morning, and though he rarely cared about how he looked, he at least didn’t want to appear to have spent the night in a cave.

Harry shucked off his clothes and threw on the ones he had found – the black jeans were nice and snug, with artful tears in the knees and tapered close over his calves and ankles. He realised they must have been a pair Sirius purchased soon after his escape from Azkaban, when he was nothing but a shell of man held together on a pile of bones. Nothing but skin and bones and fearlessness.

Harry liked the idea that he’d gone out shopping for himself, getting excited over some rocker skinny jeans he could look suave in while he rode his motorcycle. A distant dream of a happy future, full of luck and good fortune. He had probably flirted mercilessly with the shop girl, too. Harry snorted and imagined there must be a leather jacket and boots around here somewhere. He pulled what he thought was a plain black t-shirt down over his head, smiling to himself, missing his godfather but treasuring the moment he could feel close to him again.

Harry was out the door in the boots he’d found near the front entrance and an old black leather jacket Sirius must have had or bought second hand, the leather inescapably soft and comfortable as he slipped it on, his nose filling with the familiar smell of his godfather, like orange blossoms and cigar smoke and dragon hide. A smell that made Harry feel, if just for a moment, the immense love of Sirius and the unapologetic way he had taken on the world.

He strode out of the house, the wards bending smoothly beneath his request to leave, and walked up the street on his way to the ministry. If he had looked more closely, he would’ve caught the fact that his supposedly plain black t-shirt was actually emblazoned with a since faded insignia. A dragon, guarding over a royal crown, two lions, reared up on their back legs, flanking each side. Below that, QUEEN stood out in red lettering.
March 30, 2007

The sun was weak in the sky and the warmth of its rays were lost in the biting wind that snaked its way into the folds of Draco’s traveling cloak. He shivered against the cool air, pulling his scarf tighter around his neck. He tried to close himself off from the chill as he marched dutifully down the gravel lane towards the familiar cast iron gates, counting his steps, and trying not to think too hard about where his legs were taking him.

When he reached the wrought iron entrance, he stopped. He knew he didn’t need to, it's not as if he needed someone to grant him entry. He knew if he kept walking the gates would melt around him and welcome him, the heir, into the sprawling expanse.

He took a deep breath, shuddering at the thought. The smell of moss, of moist earth, and decaying wood from the nearby copse of deadened trees was carried to him on the sharp breeze. He saw hyacinths pushing up through the otherwise barren flower beds and wondered how this place could look so…

Draco struggled to find the words to describe it, it was grand, it was stately, it was unabashedly grandiose—it looked so innocuous, even after everything that had happened.

Draco always anticipated seeing evidence of the horrors that were hidden here, to feel the shimmer of dark magic that had once coated the grounds, thick in the air, like tar.

It’s not as if he hadn’t been back here since the war, it's just that it became harder to come back with every passing day, with every subsequent visit. He couldn’t fathom how his mother lived here day in and day out with the ghosts of the past and constant reminders of war and carnage.

Just inside the grounds was a beautiful oak tree he used to climb as a child. He had loved these grounds, found refuge and solace in them. Loved the freedom to run and play as any carefree child should. But now, looking at that tree, all he saw were the victims of a muggle hunt hung by their wrists from its branches, their limp bodies swaying in the wind. No matter where he looked in these godforsaken grounds, he saw a memory of the war superimposed over the placid scene.

There were no more peacocks. They had been used as target practice and mother couldn’t bear the thought of replacing them. Of all the things she couldn’t bear the thought of, the peacocks ranked high on her list. He groaned internally.

_in and out, he thought. We go in, we drink tea, we placate mother, and we leave. Quick. Simple. And go._

He had a duty to his mother, he knew, and that's why he was here, torturing himself. But, holy fuck, he did not want to be here. It had taken him nearly two hours of pacing that morning to gain the momentum needed to carry him this far. He had thrown up twice, touched and watered his encourage-mint a half a dozen times, and drank three cups of very strong, very hot tea.

Now he was here. He was here, and he was ready to move through the motions of formal tea in the drawing room with his mother and be talked at about how she was waiting for grandchildren.

He reached out his hands towards the wards and felt the magic thrum in recognition, wrap around his wrist and climb up his arm, joyful. The sensation should have made him feel welcomed, but all he felt was a kind of coldness that had nothing to do with the weather. Stealing himself for another
second he inhaled deeply and on the exhale he stepped forward through the gate. He began counting his methodical steps towards the house in twos, grounding him.

His mother greeted him on the front steps with a warm smile and a kiss to his cheek.

“I was beginning to worry you weren’t coming.” She simpered, taking Draco’s offered arm and turning to walk through the front doors with her son at her side.

Draco smiled stiffly and inclined his head. “The hospital has me running laps, we’re so very understaffed in the department. How are you mother?”

“I’m well.” She stated. *She’s aged remarkably well*, thought Draco, eying her. Only the thin wrinkled skin on her hands, giving away her age. She clutched to his forearm as though she feared he may disappear at any moment. Draco certainly considered it. “It’s so lovely today I thought we could stroll through the back gardens, and you can see the work I’ve done on the flower beds.”

Draco felt himself sag in relief at the thought of postponing the inevitability of the drawing room. He used to love the back tulip gardens with its pebbled pathways and delicate water features and acquiesced to her suggestion gratefully. They chatted and strolled slowly through the corridors towards the South entrance. Halfway through the expanse of corridors his mother changed direction suddenly and pulled him towards the East wing.

Draco felt a prickle of fear and apprehension. “Aren’t we going to the tulip garden, mother?” He asked, trying to keep his voice steady. Surely they weren’t going to the rose garden? That couldn’t have been what his mother meant when she had said *back gardens*, right? She knew Draco didn’t go to the rose garden.

“No darling, it’s the rose garden I meant to show you, I’ve done some lovely work to change the space, it’s really—”

“No.” He said, cutting her off. “No, mother.” His eyes were wide.

“Draco, it’s been years since you’ve seen it, come and spend time with your mother— see how I’ve changed it for you.” She said with reproach.

Draco felt shaky suddenly. He had not anticipated his mother would be so dense in this regard. That she could simply forget, as Draco tried with all his might to do, that Draco didn’t go there.

It had been during a Death Eater’s meeting before he took the mark that he had decided to hide away in the rose garden amongst the large old roses bushes. With its dozens of colours blooming large and heavy with that beautiful floral smell he had loved as a child, he took solace in their protective thorns. He used to hide there when he felt overwhelmed, when he needed reprieve and comfort. It was a soothing place to try and think on the marble bench set into an arched trellis, covered in wild tea roses, his own secret place.

The comfort he sought from that serene place had been taken from him when Rudolfus Lestrange had found him hidden from view of the house on his marble bench, reading one of his mother’s old romance novels.

Lestrange had jeered at the book in Draco’s lap and asked Draco if his daddy knew he was a poof that read smutty romance novels. Draco had summoned every bit of spoiled, self-assured teenage confidence he could to stand up and try to push past Lestrange in an effort to leave his discomforting presence.

Draco didn’t like how Lestrange looked at him, how he licked his lips and clenched his fists, or his
conspicuous absence from the meeting in the house. As Draco tried to rush by Lestrange he had grabbed Draco’s bicep with biting fingers. He tried to yell his fury and indignation at Lestrange but his open mouth was violated by a greedy tongue as his hair was pulled back painfully. He had been filled with rage and panic as he tried to punch and kick the Death Eater off of him. But, he had only been a skinny 16 years old. It didn’t take much effort on Lestrange’s part to drag him deeper into the rose garden.

The summer before his 6th year had been full of shocking revelations, one of which was that he would never be safe in his childhood home again. Another, was that he was entirely responsible for his own safety. The adults in his life could do nothing to keep him safe.

The afternoon in the rose garden had ended in blood, his blood, dripping on the white marble flagstones. That night Draco learned his first healing charm, and it wasn’t the last time he would have to use it.

Draco couldn’t hear what his mother yelled after him as he walked away from her back towards the entrance hall. The angry bees filled his ears and he tasted bile as he stepped out the front door and turned into the crushing darkness, the wards opening up to him in his haste to escape. He was pulled away from the Manor in a swirling haze of panic and frantic magic.

The gleaming white surfaces of Draco’s kitchen shone with the glint of his obsessive scrubbing. He had tossed his wand aside in favour of muggle cleaning methods years ago. The sponge is a wonderful invention, he thought passively.

He pushed his short fringe off of his forehead with the back of his hand before resuming his attack on the perceived griminess of his countertops. He knew he was being ridiculous, he really did, but he was afraid that if he put his sponge down he would have to think about how he had left his mother standing in the corridor gaping at him like an indignant trout.

Serves her fucking right, he seethed.

His shirt stuck to his sweaty back and his white knuckles were rubbed raw as he scrubbed, and scrubbed every last inch of his kitchen. It would never be clean enough, and after his 4th pass on the tiling grout, he finally relinquished his sponge.

After cleaning his bucket out and replacing all the cleaning items to their rightful homes he gently lifted his encourage-mint from the window sill and sat on the floor with it in his lap to run his usual diagnostic charms on its cloud. Satisfied that his cloud was functioning as it should he let his fingers brush softly over the itty bitty leafy tendrils, and in response to his ever-so hesitant touch, the plant released the minty fragrance that so soothed Draco’s ragged nerves.

Letting out a shaky breath he looked around his bleak kitchen and up at the fridge. There was a Christmas card from Pansy and Blaise, the menu to his favourite curry place, and his last letter from Neville. Pansy and Blaise had fucked off to France immediately after the battle, and over the years their correspondence with Draco became less and less until it was only the mutest exchange of perfunctory holiday cards.

Neville though, Draco thought, Neville had always encouraged Draco to reach out if he had free time or needed someone to talk to. Draco felt he didn’t deserve the Gryffindor’s kindness, but ever since Neville had seen Draco’s humanness in the French greenhouse, he made an effort to keep in touch and offer words of comfort and solidarity when he needed them.

“Fine.” Draco sighed into the silent and empty kitchen. “Fine.” He didn’t have an owl but decided this was worth the effort of getting to a wizarding post office before they closed. He marched over
to his desk, after replacing his encourage-mint on its sill, and scribbled a hasty note before he could berate himself for his moment of weakness.

Neville,

It's been an age. Are you free this evening? Would love to chat about the last issue of Herbology Today.

-Draco

After apparating to the post office and sending off his note, he went back home and paced a few dozen laps around his apartment. He decided that if Neville didn’t respond or couldn’t make it out tonight that he would go to work and pick up an extra shift. He just couldn’t stand the thought of pacing for another six hours or re-cleaning his kitchen all night. He was startled from his obsessive pacing when an owl tapped on his balcony window. Flinging himself across the room he yanked the window open and nearly cried with relief when he read Neville’s response.

Draco,

I’d love to chat about the abomination of this last issue, how did you know I would need to debrief my many feelings about lovage and its use in memory potions? Let’s make it 7, but you choose, anywhere I can get an ale.

- Neville

Draco scribbled the affirmative and chose a bar within walking distance from his apartment, the Green Lion. After seeing the owl off, he glanced at his watch, he had two hours to kill and decided to tackle his bathroom.

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Draco resisted the urge to squirm in his seat, as squirming was unbecitting of a Malfoy. Instead, he tapped his fingers on the table, stealing himself before looking up into Neville’s eager face. The bar they were situated in was Muggle and the smell of ale and cigarettes floated around him like a warm blanket. His cranberry juice was dripping condensation onto its coaster and he wondered vaguely why he kept choosing these muggle bars to meet up with his friend. Neville always bought Draco his cranberry juice without comment and drank ale, never whiskey, while they talked of potions, life, and magical theory, but never Draco’s love life, until now, apparently.

“I don’t want to talk about my nonexistent love life anymore, Longbottom.” Draco pleaded.

“C’mon Draco,” he intoned, “it was a nice gesture and maybe you should give it a go.”

Draco finally looked up into Nevill’s open smile, with raised eyebrows. “Give it a go?” he asked
incredulously.

Neville snorted into his beer. “The bloke sent you a drink and winked at you, ergo, give it a go.”

“Malfoys don’t give strange men at bars ‘a go.’”

“You can hardly infer that he’s strange at this point in time.”

“Can’t I?” Draco asked redundantly. His control broke and he sagged backed into the vinyl booth, rubbing his face. Sighing he said, “I wouldn’t even know what to talk about with him, honestly.”

“How do you normally start conversations with men at the bar?” Neville teased, poking the metaphorical dragon.

Draco dropped his eyes to the proffered alcoholic beverage at the end of the table. It had been nearly 5 minutes and he had no intentions of touching it. He could feel the sender at the bar starting into the side of his head, clearly waiting for Draco to accept his offering.

“I don’t.” Draco said defiantly, looking back at Neville.

Neville’s smile faltered a bit, “Where do you normally pick up blokes then?” Draco’s silence and angry stare were enough of an answer for Neville.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pushed.” Neville had the decency to look sheepish.

“It’s fine. Dating opportunities are just a bit slim on the ground for ex Death Eaters and I would have no fucking clue where to start with a muggle.” He picked at his flimsy paper coaster. “But, it’s fine, I’m too busy with work, anyways.”

Draco hoped he didn’t sound too petulant and defensive, frowning and crossing his arms. “Why aren’t we talking about your love life instead, you’re a war hero for Merlin’s sake, shouldn't you be swimming in admirers?”

It was Neville’s turn to look uncomfortable and seemed to be weighing his words. “It’s hard… for someone… like me.”

Draco furrowed his brow in confusion. “Gryffindor?”

Neville laughed, some of his tension bleeding from his shoulders. “No, you plonker.” He retorted. “I mean—” There was a long pause as Neville struggled with his words.

“Longbottom, I’m gay, whatever you’re trying to say shouldn’t be this difficult— unless you have some rare fetish no one can satisfy.” Draco said with mock impatience, trying to project his usual cold indifference.

“Godrick, you’re charming.” Neville replied. When all Draco did was respond with a raised eyebrow, Neville sagged and finally clarified, “I’m asexual.” He wouldn’t meet Draco’s eye.

“I’m not sure I know what that means.” Draco said honestly.

“It means… It means I like romance, sometimes. I like being close to someone. But sex just isn’t… it’s not really for me.”

“You don’t like sex.” Draco tried to clarify.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, it's that I want it so much less than your average person. So, whenever I
try dating, the other person wants more than I can give them. No one is content with nonsexual intimacy, apparently—except me.” He was blushing and Draco felt a surge of affection for this awkward man that bought him cranberry juice at bars.

“I see.” Draco really did see. He felt he could empathise. Maybe he was asexual too? Well, he supposed there was a difference in not wanting sex and not being able to have it. No, he wasn’t asexual, if his daydreams and want fantasies were anything to go by. “I guess we’re doomed to loneliness then.” Draco surmised with an empathetic smile.

“I guess so.” Neville shrugged. “I didn’t know I was asexual until I started seeing a mindhealer. Luna recommended her to me. I thought I was going mad or that something was wrong with me and I would talk to Luna about it. She helped me see that there’s nothing wrong with not wanting a sexual relationship. There are different kinds of intimacy.”

Draco just nodded. He was starting to feel uncomfortable. The word intimacy stuck to the inside of his head and his internal boggart started to take form. He made such an effort to appear cool and collected, but something about Neville’s admission broke through Draco’s walls and he found he had been shredding a napkin on the table without even realising. Chastising himself for his hiccup in composure, he quickly swept the napkin bits on the floor before realising Neville was watching him curiously.

“You know, Draco,” Neville began, hesitating, “have you ever thought about seeing a mindhealer?”

Draco’s shoulders stiffened quite without his permission. “No.” he said quietly, averting his eyes.

“Mate, we lived through some shit during the war, and honestly it’s really disturbing we didn’t have post-war counselling in our last year at Hogwarts. I mean, that’s how Luna got into her substance abuse counselling, because there was nothing for the traumatised masses of the wizarding world.” Draco looked at him with an unreadable expression.

“I know you’re a self-deprecating bastard, but think about it. You’re about as tightly wound as Filch on a Peeves hunt, and thin as a bowtruckle.”

“Are you trying to help me or insult me?” Draco said, feeling very nettled in the spotlight of scrutiny.

“Don’t be like that.” Neville berated with an affectionate smile. “Here.” He pulled from his wallet a small piece of card stock and slid it across the table towards Draco. “Just think about it.”

Draco accepted defeat. Nodding, he sighed and slide the card into his pocket. Thankfully, Neville finally changed the subject. Draco was still acutely aware of the man at the bar that seemed to be holding out hope that Draco would change his mind and saunter over for a chat. But, he held firm that he and romance didn’t mix, and continued to talk to Neville about his plans for the next phase of his research, without giving the other man so much as a sideways glance.

After another two hours of amiable chit chat, Draco was feeling the tension from his flight from the Manor slowly leave his body. Neville had bid him a good evening with promises for a repeat outing in a few weeks, and Draco was counting out muggle money to leave a tip on the table before exiting his now empty booth.

Standing to leave he felt the sudden heat of another body standing much too close, the smell of liquor and cigarettes invading his senses. Turning his head sharply he was met with the glazed, drunken eyes of the muggle man who had sent him a drink nearly three hours previously.
It appeared that he had waited for Draco to be alone before approaching. “Hey beautiful, wanna drink?” He slurred slightly, his gaze unsteady. “I see you didn’t finish the one I sent you, not yer type?” He waggled his eyebrows creepily and Draco felt his stomach clench. *What the fuck was this guy’s deal?*

“I don’t drink— excuse me.” Draco said curtly and made to leave.

“You’re at a fuckin’ bar, you tease.” The man leered and shot his arm out to grab Draco’s bicep. “Come have a fuckin’ drink.”

The familiarity of that painfully predatory and possessive clutch on his body made all the hairs on Draco’s neck stand in alarm. A jolt of fear and anger pulsed through him and the drunken man yelped in shock. He let go of Draco’s arm, looking scandalised. “What the shit, man?!” He yelled at Draco, drawing the eyes of a few patrons over the hum of chatter.

“Get the fuck off me.” Draco hissed, and he stomped towards the door. As soon as he cleared the front entrance he sprinted down the street and apparated in the first alley he came too. He could have walked home but he didn’t want that creep following him.

*Fuck*, he thought, *fucking fuck.*

*For fuck’s sake.* His magic had reacted in front of a muggle. *Shit.* Would the ministry know? Would they contact Draco? Would he be in trouble? Would that muggle need to be obliviated? *Shit.*

He didn’t know. He didn’t know if that small amount of magic was enough to alert the ministry to his activities. His probation had ended three years ago but he was sure the ministry still kept tabs on him.

Closing himself in his bedroom, he growled in frustration. This had been the longest, most frustrating day he had had in a very long time. He decided that all he could do was wait and see if he received a summons. Hopefully, it didn’t happen while he was at work tomorrow. His colleagues loved to make assumptions about his supposedly solicitous behaviour.

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The next morning, Draco was awake nearly an hour before his alarm was set to go off. He was filled with dread and trepidation, but his sense of duty and responsibility drove him to roll out of bed and ready himself for the day.

He decided to go a step further for his wardrobe, in the event he was called into the ministry. He wasn’t about to be disciplined in lime green healer robes or his black scrubs. Dressing in smart grey fitted trousers, a white button down, and soft grey woollen vest, he picked out his snappiest shoes and a dark blue tie and gathered his paperwork.

The street that housed St. Mungo’s was deserted this early in the morning. He wasn’t meant to start his shift until 8 but he was here at 6:30. He relished the idea of working on some potions theories before beginning his rounds. He was relieved to know that Sprigg wouldn’t be there for most of the day. Small mercies.

Strolling into his department, expecting some quiet time, he was startled to hear someone call his name. Turning his head he saw a nurse running up to him. “Oh, thank Circe you’re here Healer Malfoy, Sprigg went off call early and we can’t get a hold of him. We didn’t think you’d be here for at least another hour! We’ve just sent an owl off to your home!”
“What’s wrong Nurse Wallace?” He asked the frantic looking woman as she beckoned him to follow.

“Patient was sent to spell damage four days ago, and they just realised he has what appears to be a blood curse. They’ve already sent him to room three.”

“Walk with me. I need to change and be filled in.” He said briskly.

She nodded and they picked up their pace towards Draco’s office. “42 year old male, owns an antique shop, said he pricked his finger on an old broach that came through his shop not long ago. His initial symptoms were that he couldn’t stop singing hymns at the top of his lungs. Wife brought him in four days ago and intake sent him to spell damage.”

They had reached Draco’s office, and he began changing with complete disregard to his audience who kept up her reiteration of patient information.

“After analysing the broach Healer Smithweck thought it was an antiquated form of the _Hymnis Charm_ but Mr. Deklerk didn’t show any response to the usual counter charms and potions. After three days he began showing symptoms of dark magic and no reprieve from the hymnals, which took on a malicious intonation.” Draco’s eyes shot up to meet hers as he changed into his rounds shoes and stood up to leave the office. “He’s singing in Latin now, and it’s really creepy stuff, too.” She added, before continuing her clinical observations. “He’s in acute kidney failure, fulminant liver failure, and he’s tachycardic at 148.”

Draco walked swiftly down the corridor hearing the sounds of eerie hymnal chanting coming from down the hall, from room three.

“…et moveri non possunt,

spiro, dicere aut audire

quod suus ‘ita tenebras…”

Knowing Latin as well as any old pureblood, Draco felt a shiver run down his spine. “How long has the singing been this… ominous?” He questioned.

“Since last night. By 3am this morning the healers knew we weren’t dealing with a misfiring _Hymnis Charm_.”

“…in omni tempore

Si scirem quod sola esset,

non fuissaet pro cremationem…”

Walking through the door and up to the bed, Draco saw, and smelled, immediately that this was dark, dark magic. The unmistakable stench of musty copper, with an undertone, one Draco hadn’t experienced before as it was specific to this curse. Its signature was sinisterly floral, but sickeningly so, like cheap perfume was dumped in a bucket of blood. He grabbed the file to scan what potions had been given over the last four days and groaned aloud.

“This greatly diminishes my ability to help him— The potions I would use in this circumstance are completely contraindicated with what’s in his system at the moment.” He thought quickly while the hymnal chanting got louder and the patient began shaking on the bed.
“…non timebis portenta vultus eorum…”

“Nurse Wallace get me the asphodel infusion, the bezoar powder, and the silver alloy solution. We need to move fast.”

“RESPICE AD SINISTRAM TUAM…”

Draco took the proffered potions from nurse Wallace and forced them down poor Mr. Deklerk’s throat. Mr. Deklerk’s delusional intonations didn’t miss a beat, even as he writhed from the effects of the potions.

“ET DEXTERA TUA
TUUM IN LECTULO
POST TEGUM TUUM CULTOREM VINEAE”

Draco waved his wand in the familiar diagnostic movements checking the shimmering magical auras of his writhing, babbling patient. The potions were undoing the damage of poor healer management but did nothing for the exponentially worsening blood curse.

“Grab the Nettled Salt solution, and mix it with 2 parts dragon’s breath infusion, with two healthy sprigs of purple heather, full bloom— we’ll use the powdered narwhal horn to act as the main chelator, since I doubt there’s any unicorn horn available, though it would be preferred— we need to start stripping his blood and bone of the remnants of this curse, it’s had far too long to incubate.”

“NUNQUAM AUTEM IN
CUBICULO SURSUM RESPICERE”

Draco checked to make sure Nurse Wallace was following his instructions to the letter and hovered his hands over Mr. Deklerk’s shuddering frame. “I’m sorry, Mr. Deklerk, please try and remain still while I perform some counter curses and while we ready a potion for you. I know you may be scared right now, but we are doing our best to help. Please hold on.”

“NON VIDETUR ESSE ODIO HABUERIS”

Between the spluttered latin phrases, Draco saw a nod of understanding, a moment of peace, and he began following Mr. Deklerk’s latin with his own intonations, pushing back against the onslaught of dark magic. He would have to send the broach to the DMLE in a lead box— whoever had cursed it had hoped for death.

Back in his office, Draco sagged into his chair, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. He wasn’t good at his job, he was excellent at it. And it was that excellence that had saved the cursed Mr. Deklerk, despite the overwhelming odds. Healer Sprigg would have botched it if he had been on rotation, Draco was certain. But despite Draco’s abilities in his job, the subsequent adrenaline crash from coping with a life and death situation, always left him feeling spent.

At the sound of a knock at his office door, he jumped and stiffened, straightening his back, and laying his hands firmly down on his desk. “Come in.” He said sharply, smoothing his hair. Nurses were always nervous approaching his office, as he had a reputation for little patience and no humour. A short nurse from the front desk walked in holding a familiar style envelope and Draco resisted the urge to sink in his chair. Malfoys did not sink.

“Healer Malfoy?” she queried hesitantly, waiting for his acknowledgement. He inclined his head in
response. “There’s an urgent letter from the ministry for you, sir.” She scuttled forward and handed the heavy parchment envelope to Draco, whose expression gave nothing away.

“Thank you, is that all?” He asked plainly, putting the envelope down and shuffling his papers, feigning preoccupation.

“Yes, that’s all.” She replied and hurried from the room without a backwards glance. The moment the door was shut, Draco grabbed the envelope and shuddered, dread flooding his body.

_Well, there’s nothing for it_, he thought, and tore the envelope open to read the damage.

_Draco Malfoy (HLR),

_You have been named the contact information for one Mr Gregory Goyle, who has been arrested and remanded on the charge of drunk and disorderly conduct and threatening the Statute of Secrecy. He is being held at the DMLE headquarter cell #21 on level 7 of the Ministry of Magic.

_His bail application may be submitted tomorrow morning at 9am._

_Respectfully,

_Susan Bones_

_The Ministry of Magic_

_Secretary for Bail Applications_

Draco groaned aloud, a mixture of relief and exasperation rolling through him. “Not again—” He sighed into the empty room. He was thankful that he wasn’t being called in for his own mishaps, yet unsettled that he was needed to post bail for Greg, again. This was the fourth time since Christmas.

_Oh well_, he thought. At least he could use this as an excuse to talk to Greg about getting help, again.

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Draco startled awake, covered in sweat, sticking to his bedsheets. He bolted upright and touched the slight scars on his chest. He had dreamt of the bathroom— Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

Gingerly stepping out of bed, he padded over to his ensuite and splashed water on his face, washing away the remnants of the dream. He repeated to himself, a mantra, that he was 25 years old and no longer trying to repair broken antique furniture under threat of death. He was no longer being stalked by Potter.

It irritated him to no end that Potter had known he was up to something, and it irritated him even more that when he had finally confronted Draco, instead of doing something fucking useful, like Gryffindors are supposed to do, he threw a curse that nearly bled Draco dry.

He supposed he deserved it, though. And, he knew Potter hadn’t known what that curse did, Snape had told him. But still. _Really?_
What did it mean to be marked by the two most powerful wizards of the century, Draco wondered.

He didn’t want to think about it, and he certainly didn’t want to think of Potter at, he waved his wand for a tempus charm, nearly midnight on a Sunday. He replaced the towel after drying his face and walked back to his bed. Climbing in, he vowed to not think of Potter or that day in the bathroom or how Potter’s eyes were full of terror and regret as he knelt down by Draco with shaking hands outstretched, blood swirling around the shower drain.

Draco had an aching erection in the morning, something he wasn’t accustomed to. He had had a strange dream. He was a king, and, in order to ensure the survival of his kingdom, he was betrothed to a queen, obligated to produce an heir. This wasn’t the first time he had this particular dream, but the version he had become accustomed to over the years was narrated by Lucius, and his usual queen was Astoria Greengrass, looking profoundly disappointed.

But— it was different this time. In this dream, his queen was a dashing handsome young man with dark hair, familiar eyes, and strong hands.

He shook his head, really not wanting to think too hard about those eyes or the fact that Kings and Queens were men and women, and this was something that would never, could never, happen in his world. He was a gay man, and these kinds of fairy tales weren’t for gay men. Groaning in frustration, he buried his head in his pillow and tried to will his erection away.

He didn’t want to think about why he spent so much time getting ready that morning. He wanted the ministry to know that he was doing well for himself, by himself. He was helping people, he wasn’t living off his inheritance, and he was a productive member of society, dammit. And, he looked good doing it. He wore a casual but dashing dark fitted pants, light grey jacket, white button down, and a Wedgwood blue tie. He knew he looked formidable, his features sharp and countenance icy. Checking his hair one more time, he disapparated to the visitor’s entrance at the Ministry.

Clearing security with only moderate scrutiny, he marched towards the lifts, looking for all the world as if he commanded the space. He hated the idea of being pushed around here and left no room for others to think they could do so. He was feeling distinctly lucky when he arrived at the lifts and they were mercifully empty. He prodded the button for level seven, lost in thought about what he would say to Greg when he got down to the cells.

He stood back as the doors started to close. Just as the atrium was disappearing from sight, a dark hand jutted out to stop the door with a muffled, “Sorry, going down!”

What fresh hell— Harry mother effing Potter shoved the lift door aside with ease and stepped into the small space without realising who he was moving to stand next to. Draco nearly had an aneurysm trying to make sense of what Potter was wearing.

Did his shirt say Queen? Were those leather boots? Clearly, the Golden Boy was not expected to follow the auror dress code. Draco nearly had an aneurysm trying to make sense of what Potter was wearing.

“Malfoy?” He asked with more alarm than Draco thought the situation warranted.

“Potter?” Draco mirrored.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” He demanded.

“I’m sorry, why is that any of your business?” Draco sneered.
Potter looked suspicious and narrowed his eyes, clearly not knowing how to respond to that.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Honestly, you act as though you’ve caught me doing something nefarious—Is riding the lift to the DMLE that big of a scandal for you?”

Potter looked… Draco couldn’t figure out what adjectives to use. At first glance, he looked… well, he looked rather… fetching? Had Potter always worn black skinny jeans? What’s with the leather jacket? Biker Harry was—fit.

Draco had clearly lost his mind.

Potter was just staring unnervingly back at Draco with an unreadable expression. He looked tight and drawn, ready for a fight. Draco’s knees felt a little funny at the visceral reaction he seemed to elicit from Potter by his mere presence.

He felt a little vulnerable and exposed under the intense scrutiny and reflexively brought his hand up to his chest at the same time as Potter awkwardly adjusted his jeans. Was he blushing?

“Why are you going to the DMLE?” Potter finally asked turning slightly away from Draco and finally breaking eye contact. He seemed to not be able to restrain from interrogating Draco. Old habits die hard.

Draco barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes again and briefly thought about lying. “If you really need to know, I’m bailing Greg out for another drunk and disorderly.” He knew that Potter would either follow him and find out or use his hero status to dig around the DMLE files, anyway.

Potter looked back up at Draco, and there was so much softness and sadness in his eyes. “Yeah.” He finally said. “That’s been happening a lot, hasn’t it?”

“Well, not everyone coped with the war as admirably as the Golden Trio, Potter.” Draco said coldly, but was oddly touched by the apparently genuine concern in Potter’s face.

Potter’s eyes seemed to harden. He turned away from Draco again and slouched back against the wall, seeming to sink into himself and hanging his head. “Well, I hope he gets the help he needs.” He pushed out softly, like it cost him something to say.

At closer inspection, Draco thought Harry looked exhausted. Crumpled. His normally dark skin was tinged grey and the bags under his eyes made him look slightly skeletal.

His eyes—his eyes looked haunted. And what was that smell? It smelled like copper and something else, something more insidious. Something bitter that made the back of his tongue a little numb.

Draco turned more fully to Potter. “Thank you—But, now can I ask you something?” His healer voice was coming out in full force. Potter looked startled and weary.

“What?” Harry demanded, straightening his posture, and pushing off the wall of the lift.

“Why, in the name of Salazar Slytherin himself, do you smell like you’ve been dunked in a vat of dark magic?”

“Excuse me?” Harry asked indignantly, looking a little offended.

“You reek like dark magic, Potter. I specialise in it, and I’m particularly sensitive to the smell,
especially anything in your blood. And, you stink.”

“Wow, thanks.” Harry said, with real offense now. “But, in case you forgot Malfoy, I am an Auror, and dark magic is part of the job description. It’s my speciality, too.” he sneered back, petulant and challenging.

Draco narrowed his eyes in response “I suppose.” He finally let out, searching Potter’s worn and angry face. “If you say so, Potter.”

Draco noticed a small feather sticking out of Potter’s rat’s nest of hair. “And, is sleeping in an eagle’s nest part of your job description as well?” He asked with a smirk, pointing to the feather before turning to look back at the lift door.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Potter blush furiously as he reached up to disentangle the feather from his unkempt hair. Draco didn’t know why he gleaned so much enjoyment from flustering Potter, but he really did.

Finally, the gods smiled down on Draco and they reached the DMLE floor without further incident. The lift doors opened and Potter muttered a quick “See you around, Malfoy”, before dashing down the hall and away from Draco. He gritted his teeth and did not watch him go, skinny jeans be damned.
Harry was back at The Gallows, nursing a drink with his head bent low over the bar, lost in thought. He had come here in a blind rage, infuriated after what had happened at work. The raid had been going alright, pretty standard Auror business, but once they cleared the main house of miscreants, stunning and holding them in an *incarcerous*, he and Seamus Finnegan (Ron had taken Hermione to a healer appointment that morning) had made their way out back to a barn that glistened with protective enchantments and the scent of dark magic hung heavy in the air.

Harry had been startled by three more stragglers. Death Eaters: Lestrange, McNair and Yaxley. Three of the bastards Harry would’ve given anything to *crucio* himself; the last of the old crew that had continued to dodge the ministry at every turn, who had fled the final battle when Harry had been revealed to be alive. They had sparred with them, flinging curses and swapping hexes for what felt like hours.

As Harry left Seamus’s side to gain better ground, ducking low to hide behind a stone wall, a jet of green light singed his shoulder. The curse had missed him, but it left a tattered streak in the leather of Sirius’s jacket. It was though a vice had been placed around his heart and lungs, his vital organs squeezed incomprehensibly, his ears ringing with his own growling howl.

He had felt an immense concussive wave of magic leave him, dragging with it all of his anger, his festering guilt and rage. He looked back up over the stone wall and his heart stopped. It was as though a bomb went off; trees bent backward, an entire wall of the barn had been destroyed, and what was left was on fire. Three bodies lay in the clearing between them.

Harry stumbled over to the forms on the ground. Yaxley and McNair lay unconscious, blood trickling from their noses and ears. Next to them, lay Seamus. No, Harry thought desperately. No. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be.

He knelt next to Seamus and shook him, willing him to wake up, his voice shrill when he finally screamed back toward the house for help. He hadn’t needed to though, Aurors had felt the blast, spotted him and already called the team medic to the scene. They pulled Harry to the side, bound the two Death Eaters, and Seamus was whisked away to the care of someone much more skilled in the art of healing.

Lestrange must have disapparated just before the blast. Fuck.

To his left, he heard Robards say he assumed Seamus’s spellwork had gone awry, leading to another of his infamous explosions. Harry’s mouth was hanging open, his hands balled so tightly into fists that his nails drew blood on his palms. He wanted to stand up for Seamus, to explain, to tell someone that he had done it. It was him. It was his fault. It was an accident. But the words didn’t come. Instead, he felt consumed with fear.

If they knew he was having outbursts of magic, he’d be benched, maybe fired. He’d be a disgrace. He wouldn’t be safe. Not to be around, not for anyone, at any time. Harry swallowed hard and told Robards he was headed back to the office to make his statement and write up paperwork.

Harry had lied. He’d come straight to The Gallows to drink away the fear. He was on his seventh Jameson, and it wasn’t working. He could still feel the peppery notes of adrenaline, the deep rolling shame in his gut that threatened to spill out across the bar at any given moment. He couldn’t
do this. He needed to tell someone about his magic. It was getting too powerful. He felt unsafe. He was unsafe.

The idea that he was putting those around him at risk was eating a hole straight through his core, burning him, devouring his insides. He couldn’t have more bodies to his name. He needed help.

“You want another?” Came the gruff voice of the bartender.

“It’s not doing enough.” Harry’s answer was gravely, strained, like it was being dragged across all of the guilt he was trying to hide.

The bartender laughed, and slipped him a coaster across the bar. “Try this. Go home, get yourself comfortable and get ready to feel like you’re flying.”

Harry snapped his head back up and held him with a piercing stare. What did this muggle know about flying? Did he know who Harry was? What did he mean, if he didn’t? Did muggles have a drug that could mimic the freedom of soaring through the air? That’s what Harry was assuming was beneath the coaster, drugs, since that seemed to be muggle’s answer to everything. At least, at The Gallows it was.

Harry debated slipping the coaster and whatever was beneath it into his pocket. His experience with cocaine hadn’t been very positive. He didn’t like how his heart raced and his thoughts got even louder. He already had enough adrenaline in his day to day life, what with the flashbacks and the startling so easily, and the fact that his job as an Auror put him in constant mortal danger. However, on the plus side, he had managed to keep an erection, fuck someone and orgasm, even if it did end in confusing thoughts of Malfoy and his wallet being stolen. Harry swallowed.

Then, with a start, he remembered why he had ended up at Grimmauld Place. Why he’d run through the streets. Why he’d had to. The drugs had suppressed his magic. His decision was made that instant, with his palm covering the coaster, sliding it across the bar, and stuffing it and the plastic packet beneath it into his leather jacket’s pocket in one fell swoop.

He finished his last drink of the night and paid, leaving a significant tip. The bartender laughed as he polished the glass tumbler in his hand, shaking his head.

Harry slipped around the corner into the same alley he had managed his first, and only, orgasm with a partner, and apparated back to Grimmauld Place, one hand on his wand, and the other gripped tight on his purchase.

On the stoop, Harry reached up to the knocker on the door, watching the forest scene stirring to life. He startled when the adder beneath his hand puffed up slightly and admonished him. “You are not a stranger, but you are not welcome here, troubled one,” it hissed out, punctuating the statement with breathy emphasis in time with his irritated puffing.

Harry focused on the slitted eyes and flicking forked tongue, hissing back “I am master of this house, small one, you will welcome me as such.”

The serpent stilled, and the lock clicked open. “You are not a Black, but I would not be such a fool to deny a parseltongue entry to my lair. The winged beasts will be harder to convince, though, and they are the true keepers of the family Black.”

Harry pushed the door open and slipped through, leaving the politics of which dead lines were claimed by thestrals and which weren’t for another night. Tonight he had other things on his mind.

He stomped his way up to Sirius’s bedroom, not even bothering with a lumos to help light the way.
He didn’t mind that it was dark. He needed the darkness to shore up his courage. He didn’t feel like this, tonight, was a part of himself he wanted illuminated.

Harry found Sirius’s bedroom just as he had left it. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled out the tiny packet to look at it in his hand. The powder was darker this time, not so stark white, sort of brown, really. Harry steadied his nerves and tapped some out on his left hand like they had in the alley, laying the packet down on the bedside table and staring at the little mountain he had created - before he could second guess himself, he leaned down and snorted the small pile up into his left nostril. As he raised his head from his hand, letting it fall to his side, Harry let out a startled, bark of a laugh, the first authentic one in ages.

Oh my God, he thought. Oh my God, it was brilliant. Fucking brilliant. It wasn’t flying, it was free falling, careening deep down into something soft and beautiful and lovely, like dropping into a bathtub full of honey. The golden liquid was being painted all over the raw parts of him, coating his very bones, dripping across all of the wounds he carried, knitting them back together, making him feel whole. It was sweet and sticky and Gods, he felt nourished. Like the empty parts of himself were filling with something pure and beautiful and golden, like he finally had sunlight within him, warming his soul.

Fuck, this was better than anything. This is how he imagined it felt to fall in love. Maybe this was love. If it wasn’t, it was better than love, Harry decided. If the cruciatus curse was the most horrible soul-wrenching pain a person could feel, this must be the most ethereal, analgesic pleasure, it was delicious. Ambrosial.

He let himself fall backwards onto the bed, his legs still dangling off the edge of the mattress, a huge grin on his face amid the cloud of dust and feathers that flew up around him.

Fuck. It was good. Too good. Eventually, he drew his legs up onto the bed and curled onto his side, hugging his core, a smile still lingering on his otherwise placid features. He could feel the joy bubbling inside him, like it hadn’t in years, like it hadn’t ever, even when he first got his letter for Hogwarts and learned he was a wizard. It escaped from his mouth in sporadic, quiet laughter. He didn’t know you could be this happy.

He was soothed, and his magic had dampened, just barely curling around his edges, licking at the honey dripping, pooling at his sides. Again, it purred softly. Again.

Harry spent all night like that, curled up in Sirius’s old bed, refreshing the high every time he felt it slipping away and reality come crawling back, pouring himself back into that beautiful place of calm, serene, tenderness. It was better than any sex, any orgasm, any triumph, any success. It was better than anything Harry could imagine.

He finished the packet by daybreak.
June 05, 2007

War was horrible. It was the worst thing he had ever experienced. Day in and day out he had lived with gnawing terror. After the war everyone celebrated. Everyone wanted their life back. They wanted joy and comfort and families. They wanted it to be easy again.

But, it wasn’t easy for Draco. Some people got up the next day and moved on, but trauma didn’t have a universal expiration date. The war had been done for years, but Draco only just now began to feel that he could maybe one day hope to begin to heal. *Maybe*.

He had lived to see a life on the other side of Voldemort but he couldn’t manage to write something hopeful about it. That therapist Neville recommended, Beatrice, gave him this seemingly useless task. She gave him *homework*. Everyday he needed to write down an affirmation and stick it somewhere visible, or carry it with him.

For his birthday she suggested he write something about the future, about something he hoped for. What did he hope for? He didn’t really know.

He thought about his one motivating factor; work. It was at the hospital he felt secure. He felt powerful and competent. He felt in control in a way that eluded him in the rest of his life. Work was exhilarating and exhausting. It was a challenge and a puzzle.

But, just as he couldn’t escape his blonde hair and sharp features, the ghost of Lucius on his own face, he couldn’t escape how everyone knew he had taken The Mark. Even though he never showed it at work, they all knew, and they ascribed it meaning. It didn’t matter how hard Draco worked, or how compassionate he was with his patients, no matter how many hours he put in fighting dark magic, there were some that would never let him forget that he was a marked man. A Malfoy and a Death Eater, and that’s all he would ever be.

He sat at his desk, in his apartment, tapping his quill with increasing intensity, staring down at the little green post-it note.

He liked muggle stationery. It was cute and soothing and *neat*. It was also intimidating, staring right back at him, empty, taunting, devoid of the hope that was supposed to be written there. He picked up a little book that he had discarded immediately after bringing home; *Positive Affirmations for a Peaceful Life* leered at him, and he narrowed his eyes in apprehension.

Draco sneered at the grand assumption that he of all people could have a peaceful life. He finally opened it and leafed through. He supposed he’d better just pick one. He hastily scratched his note for the day, *my future is beautiful and bright*, and tried not to feel supremely stupid.

Draco paused a moment, staring at it. Beautiful and bright? He scoffed, then shredded the post-it into dozens of pieces before vanishing them. Feeling slightly better, he hastily penned, *I heal people*. It was true, and it made him feel slightly less empty.

He got up and moved to stick the garishly yellow square on the window frame by his encouragement before he could think better of it.

He decided he would do something nice for himself, it was his birthday after all.
Several hours had passed. Draco’s butt was numb in his desk chair and he was surrounded by a hurricane of paperwork, but his application was done. He had finally written the research proposal he had always wanted to submit.

He had thought about it for years and years. Three months back when Mr. Deklerk with the rare blood curse had nearly died, it had pushed the issue more centrally into Draco’s mind. If he had had access to unicorn horn or blood, even in the smallest of amounts, that case wouldn’t have been such a close call. But, the ministry had a ban on unicorn harvests for years now, and magical medicine had suffered as a result.

He knew from his own research, from family lore, and from eavesdropping on the Death Eaters that unicorns had been known to willing offer pieces of themselves to help humans. It was this caveat of gifting that had intrigued Draco. He knew that sacrificing a unicorn to save your own life was what caused the curse of a half life, but he also knew that gathering horns, hair, and blood from a naturally deceased unicorn did not wreak havoc on the person to use their magic.

The issue came in finding a unicorn in the wild that had died of natural causes before the materials expired. It was incredibly rare and unrealistic to rely on as a source. He wanted to explore the use of unicorn blood in curing blood curses from freely given blood. But, how does one persuade a unicorn to freely gift their blood? He thought he knew someone who might have an idea.

After setting aside his application and petition to the ministry, and brushing away a birthday card from his mother, he pulled another fresh piece of parchment to himself and dove into the inquiry.

_Hagrid,_

_I hope this letter finds you well. How is Hogwarts? How are your classes? I was hoping you could help me with some information on unicorns, as you have such regular interactions with them. You see, I am applying to St. Mungo’s to take a leave of absence in order to research the use of unicorn blood in curing dark magic, specifically blood curses, with the proviso that the blood is freely gifted._

_Do you have any stories, lore, research, anecdotal or otherwise, of unicorns providing humans with blood? We know that they have the proclivity of offering their horns and hairs, but it is specifically the blood that I am interested in studying. Obviously my priority in my inquiry is to ensure that no harm comes to the unicorns in question, but imagine the good that could be done if we forged a greater connection with the unicorns to help cure blood curses?_  

_Looking forward to hearing your insights._

_- Healer D. Malfoy

Draco rose first thing the next morning to send off his letter to Hagrid and to hand deliver his research and sabbatical applications to the St. Mungo’s research board. Returning to his office, feeling lighter than he had in ages, he found two scrolls of parchment waiting for him in his in-tray. The first read;

_Draco,_
Can we get cake at that place? 3 pm? Hope you’re free.

- Greg

Ominous, thought Draco. Greg only ever asked him to his favourite cake place when he wanted a favour. But he didn’t like how they had left things at the Ministry after Draco had bailed him out. Greg had been embarrassed and didn’t want to hear Draco’s suggestion that he get help. Again. He shoved passed Draco, leaving him fuming in the atrium, alone, and hadn’t made contact since.

He scribbled on a scrap of parchment and sealed it, setting it in his out-tray, it disappeared to the St. Mungo’s owlery.

The next scroll read;

Draco,

Come by for tea. I have too many stories and not enough parchment. Are you still free on Sundays? If so let’s make it 11.

- Hagrid

Ps. Happy Birthday

Draco smiled, shocked and pleased that Hagrid remembered his birthday was yesterday. His intriguing response from Hagrid overshadowed any apprehension he may be feeling towards his meeting with Greg later.

Again, he scribbled an affirmative response and watched it disappear from his out-tray.

Draco spent the rest of his shift on rounds in the haem department, cleaning up after Sprigg’s ineptitudes with a blood cursed auror. Another Death Eater safe house had been raided. Lestrange was still on the run, and he recognised Lestrange’s signature curses.

Draco was irate when he had learned that Sprigg hadn’t call him in on the case and rushed behind him to mitigate the damage. It’s not that Sprigg wasn’t literate in blood curses, it was his speciality after all. It was that he was overconfident and failed to recognise indistinct differences in certain forms of Dark Magic.

Certain curses often took on a flavour of their own if they had been performed over and over again by a single caster. Those curses evolved subtly, different to those that had been cast once-off in a fit of rage or premeditated to curse an object. Sprigg wouldn’t deign to respect Dark Magic enough to understand this complexity or to adjust his treatment plan to reflect the circumstances.

But Draco knew.

He knew from close study that Lestrange’s blood-curdling curse needed more prickly pear and less queen anne’s lace in its detox potion than most first stage antidotes for similar curses. He knew it because he paid attention and was good at his job. Fuck those who thought he was being unnecessarily overbearing.
When Draco finally glanced at the clock on the wall it read 3:05 and he swore under his breath. Rushing back to his office, he discarded his healer robes, grabbed his research material for the evening, and left his office to meet Greg.

Draco found Greg slouched in a little spindle legged chair in the corner of the cafe. He looked too large for the tiny table with delicate flowers and miniature fragile crystal vases. Greg was looking with great concern into his coffee as if it had started speaking Greek to him. Draco wondered what he could have been contemplating so deeply as he sat himself down across from his old friend and startled him to attention.

“Greg.” Draco nodded. “You look… better.”


Draco felt his lips curved into a smile without his permission. “Thank you.” He said softly. “How have you been?”

Greg shifted uncomfortably and Draco braced himself. Was he in trouble again? Did he need another bailout of some kind?

“I’m— uh— Well, you know when you said—” He stuttered and stopped, looking nervous.

“I’ve said many things Greg, you’ll have to be more specific.” Draco said, not unkindly, but trying to get to the point, his nerves on edge.

Greg blushed and looked back down at his coffee just as the waitress came over to deliver their cakes. Greg had gotten what looked to be a slice of carrot cake with candied pecans and white chocolate mousse, and, in front of Draco, she placed his all-time favourite creation— a dense fudge brownie with chocolate gateau and crystallised pieces of caramel. Greg was a cunning Slytherin to use this beautiful monstrosity to distract Draco from whatever thing he was struggling to say.

Without prelude, Draco raised a shard of caramel to his mouth as Greg blurted out, “I’m an alcoholic.”

Closing his mouth, and slowly lowering the caramel away from his face, Draco turned his head slightly to the side and looked carefully at Greg. “Well, I’m glad you’ve finally come to terms with that.” Draco said evenly. The fact that Greg was an alcoholic wasn’t news, but Greg’s acceptance of his condition certainly was.

“Yeah…” Greg began and stared mournfully down at his carrot cake. “I know I fucked up. I am fucked up.”

Heaving a large sigh, Draco put down the caramel and sat back in his seat. “You aren’t fucked up Greg.” At this, Greg looked up into Draco’s face with imploring eyes. “You have a condition. This is a disease. And the first part of getting your life back together is recognising it.”

“I think I need help.” He whispered.

“Of course you need help. And, if you’re ready for help, I have some contacts for you.” Greg cringed at this.

“I don’t like the idea of people knowing. I’m not crazy, I don’t want to have to see a mind healer.” He said looking full of shame.

“Greg.” Draco said sternly now, leaning forward. “We lived through a war, and you think you
don’t need a mind healer? Do you think you’re the only one who’s struggled? The only one who’s fallen into a pit of despair and poor coping skills?"

“Do you see a therapist?” Greg asked with surprise and incredulity.

“Of course I see a fucking therapist!” Draco said raising his voice. “Greg— We. Lived. Through. War. Everyone should have a fucking therapist! I don’t know how I made it as far as I did without one for as long as I did. I should have had one starting when I was eight, honestly.”

Greg smiled. “Your family was a bit fuckin’ weird, weren’t they?”

Draco smiled back. “You have no idea. So, are you going to let me put you in contact with some people?”

Looking profoundly relieved, Greg nodded. “Good.” Said Draco. “Now let me eat my cake before I have to hex you.”

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June 08, 2007

The summer sun cast a haze of heat over the Hogwarts grounds as he walked up to the wrought iron gates. Hagrid stood waiting, crinkled beetle black eyes smiling at him from under the tangled mop of hair on his head.

“‘Ello there, Malfoy!” Hagrid boomed, gripping Draco’s arm and shaking it with far too much vigour.

“Hello, Hagrid.” Said Draco smiling, feeling thoroughly disoriented from the strength of Hagrid’s greeting. He stepped inside the gates and waited for Hagrid to close them. “I hope you’ve been keeping well?”

“Oh, abou’ as well as anyone, I s’pose. Can’ complain too much.” He smiled and shrugged and they started up the lane together towards the game keeper’s hut. “Cornish pixies been givin’ me grief, bunch o’ grea’ pains in the arse, sneakin’ inter me ‘ut and rearrangin’ me tea cups.” Hagrid glowered and Draco snorted most indignantly. Hagrid glanced sideways at Draco and smiled.

“Any who, enough abou’ meself, how’s Mungo’ treatin’ you these days, haven’ heard from yeh in quiet some time. If yeh ask me, they’re workin’ yeh to the bone, they are.”

“They do keep me busy, yes. There’s only two of us that specialize in blood curses so the haematology department is always understaffed— Considering most of what we deal with is blood curses, it’s a bit ridiculous. And my counterpart leaves much to be desired if I’m honest.” Draco huffed.

He felt oddly comfortable around Hagrid. The great half giant was a gentle soul, and a pang of remorse rang through him at the thought that he had missed out on years of getting to know this man. The things that he must have seen on these grounds and in that forest.

“Ah yeah.” Hagrid nodded. “Blood curse’ is a nasty business, I tell yeh.” They chatted amiably as they walked through the grounds. They rounded the walk up to the hut and Draco felt flooded with nostalgia and anxiety at being in this place again. Images of happy school days and battle flickering together in his mind’s eye. He felt for the post-it note in his pocket, the past is in the past, and stepped up into Hagrid’s hut.
“Now.” Hagrid started. “About them unicorns.”

“Yes.” Draco encouraged. “Anything you can tell me would be great.”

“Well first, where was you planning on studying them?” Hagrid asked.

Draco was quiet for a moment. “I actually hadn’t really considered where exactly I would go or be in order to study them. I mean, my application included a petition to the Ministry to conduct my research on the herd in the Forbidden Forest, but I don’t know if it’ll be accepted. And if it is accepted, I don’t know how I’ll situate myself.”

“Ah, well then, in that front I have some good news for you. But we’ll come back to that in a mo’.” Said Hagrid, busying himself with making tea and setting a plate of rock cakes down in front of Draco. “First I wanna tell you about something that happened to me in the forest a right few years back. Somethin’ you might find useful for yer research and such.”

Draco sat up straighter and took a cake to be polite, but knowing it would break one of his teeth if he tried to bite into it without soaking it in tea first.

“Back when Gropie first came to live in the forest… Eh, he was, well—a handful.” Hagrid looked around for the milk jug and sugar before bringing the tea to the table. “He had such a temper on him, bless him. Much better now though. Gentle as a flobberworm, he is.”

Draco tried not to frown. Gentle was not the word he would have used to describe a flobberworm, or Hagrid’s giant half-brother.

“Any who, he broke through his bindin’ and ran towards a heard of unicorns in a clearing that had just recently foaled. The little things were jus’ so helpless and small and the mothers were right displeased with me, I tell you.” Draco could imagine that displeased was a gross understatement for being charged at by a giant. “So Gropie saw one of the little gold foals and got it in ‘is head that he wanted to touch it, being as it’s so cute and all.”

“Sure—” Draco said. Trying not to feel horrified for the unicorns.

“A mum unicorn ran forward to defend her foal but Gropie accidentally clipped her with his fist and knocked her down. En I was so worried about ‘im hurtin’ the foal that I dove in front of ‘im and took the blow to me head instead and managed to knock Gropie out before collapsin’ meself.”

“You collapsed in the Forest?” Draco asked with alarm.

“Yup. Must have been out cold for hours too. When I finally came round the mum unicorn was standing near me bleeding from her leg from when she fell. She had been standing there rubbing her bleeding leg on me head from where I was bleeding.”

“She was rubbing her wound on your wound?” Draco clarified, feeling confused.

“Yup. En at first I panicked. I didn’t want no cursed life, no half life, did I?” Hagrid took a gulp out of his bucket of tea. “But when I tried to get up, I was too dizzy to stand, Gropie had really done some damage to me head. So I laid back down and let her keep rubbing her blood on me. After a while she stopped, turned around and started licking me face.”

“Licking you?”

“Licking me, like a dog, yeah. And she eventually started to walk away, and it was then that I realised I felt fine, just tired. I got up, tied Gropie to the nearest tree, and started to walk home. The
mum and her foal followed me all the way back, and once they saw me to me front door, they left.”

“Wow.” Draco said, astonished.

“That’s what I said, yeah. I thought maybe I’d wake up the next morning with bruises and be cursed half to death, but the next morning I woke up and all me bruises and cuts were healed. The lump on me head was gone, and I felt right as rain. Never better, actually. Went back to check on the unicorns the next day and they were friendly as ever wit me.”

Draco sat quietly for a while. “Well.” He started. “That kind of confirms from what I’ve heard from dark magic lore, Death Eaters and the like. If you can persuade a unicorn to willingly give up their blood for you, then the curse of taking it is void. Imagine what we could do with that.” He finished thoughtfully. After a beat, he looked up at Hagrid. “But how could I get close enough to study them? How could I persuade them to give up their blood to me? Where would I even stay?” He wasn’t looking for answers, more thinking aloud rhetorically. Draco was surprised when Hagrid had an answer ready for him.

“Well, we could set yeh up in the ol’ potioneering hut deep in the forest. It’s right near some of the bigger unicorn herds.” He looked at Draco as if this place in the forest was common knowledge. Nothing of really significant interest.

“What potioneering hut?” Draco asked, bewildered.

“Oh way back in the day, Professor Vindictus built a little stone cottage in Tenebris Hollow. It’bout a 4 hour hike from here, through some of the thickes’ wildernis’ out there. You pass all sorts on that route.” Hagrid shuddered a bit. ‘I can take yer there once, but after that it’s bes’ if yer apparate yerself. There’s magic protectin’ the whole hallow, but the wards should be reinforced. En yeh have to have yer wits bout yeh when yeh go out lookin’ for unicorns.”

Draco nodded enthusiastically. He couldn’t believe his ears. There was an old potioneer’s cottage in the woods amidst isolated unicorn herds. “Thank you Hagrid. You’ve given me much more than just interesting stories.”

Hagrid beamed and shook his head. “It’s right important what yer doin’ and I wouldn’t trust anyone else to do it. Yeh wouldn’t hurt the unicorns and ye’ll find ways to help others with yer work.”

Draco didn’t know what to say. He knew Hagrid didn’t hate him anymore, but trusting him like this felt so... good. He smiled and nodded, looking down into his own bucket of tea, trying to reign in his excitement. Nothing was set in stone, his application was still being scrutinised, and he hadn’t even spoken to the Headmistress about staying in the forest yet. As if reading his mind, Hagrid cleared his throat to say, ‘Jus’ write to Professor McGonagall to ask for permission and maybe she can even write to the Ministry and Mungo’s in favour of yer research. She’d right love to see you succeed in this.”

Draco blushed. He was feeling a bit overwhelmed by Hagrid’s confidence. Agreeing with Hagrid, he set to work chewing on his rock cake and they passed the early afternoon away with more stories and myths, gossip and laughs. Draco hadn’t felt that hopeful in years.
Harry hadn’t had any more outbursts of destructive magic. At first, after that fateful night in June, he had come into work smiling, energised, excited even, for the first time in what felt like years. Everyone noticed. Everyone complimented him on how good he looked all of a sudden, how happy. He was pleasant with the office secretary, he did the paperwork for Ron this time, he even winked at the barista who made his coffee in the morning. Everyone assumed he was seeing someone.

This was the golden boy. This was who everyone expected Harry to be, who they loved and adored.

It didn’t last long though, eventually he started feeling the edginess creep forward sooner and sooner in his work day, his magic starting to hum and demand he get back to The Gallows and then promptly to Grimmauld Place. The lack of sleep was starting to catch up to him as well, and he felt himself start to nod off at his desk more and more often.

He barely spent any of his nights by Ron and Hermione these days. When they had confronted him and asked where he had been going all these late evenings, Harry lied outright. He said he had been looking for apartments since they had told him they were expecting, wanting to give them room for their growing family and to get out of their hair. Hermione cried, and had hugged him, reassuring him that he was always welcome, and Ron had rolled his eyes and mouthed “hormones” over her shoulder, but thanking Harry for being so considerate all the same.

Harry had promised him he’d invite them over soon to see his place, but with Hermione so close to the end of her pregnancy and Ron running around to make sure everything was in order for paternity leave, he doubted they’d take him up on his offer. It had worried him, how easily he could lie to them. It slipped off his tongue and out of his mouth in a silky, easy fashion, without hesitation. His magic had thrummed happily, and he had indulged in a full night of debauchery after he’d left, moving a few boxes of his meagre possessions to Grimmauld Place, dropping them in the foyer and not bothering to unpack anything but his toothbrush.

It didn’t matter now, Harry had things he needed to see to first. He leaned forward across the bar, not even bothering to order a drink, looking imploringly at the barman.

“What you gave me wasn’t enough for this week.” He hissed. He had a hard time controlling the sudden surge of anger within him. He had spat the words, even though he hadn’t needed to. He was the only one there this early in the afternoon.

The barman raised his eyebrow. “I gave you enough to kill someone - how you’re still standing is a bit of a mystery at the moment. How do you have any places left to hit?”

Harry furrowed his brow. “How do you mean? I’ve been snorting the stuff.”

A look of understanding crossed the barman’s face, and he motioned for Harry to follow him back to the toilets. Harry had never seen him leave behind the bar before, and he followed him, eagerly, his magic crawling around, hungrily.

In the next 30 minutes, Harry learned how to mainline. The barman took him through the steps, showing him how to mix, cook and load a dose, then how to hit a vein - even so far as to show him
which veins he could use. He helped him assemble his kit - he seemed happy to take Harry’s muggle money in exchange for this strange service he provided, an introduction into the world of heroin.

He let Harry practice a round on him, a simple smile crossing his face as Harry pushed what they had prepared. He untied the bit of rubber tubing they’d used as a tourniquet, and watched as the barman slumped back against the wall, his eyes falling half closed. Harry’s mouth was wet with envy.

“Flip the sign to closed when you leave, kid. I’ve got business to attend to.” The barman slurred out the last few words and let his eyes close fully, sinking down to the floor of the bathroom, groaning in absolute pleasure.

Harry left, flipping the sign as instructed, and apparated away to his own den of iniquity.

He hadn’t expected it to be so good, like it was the first time, but it was. Maybe better. He had hit the vein in his hand, as it had seemed easiest, just beneath the lower points of the ‘m’ in the ‘I must not tell lies’ that lay a permanent ghost, white lines on his brown skin. He could feel the rush along his arm and into his heart, and it fluttered a greeting in response.

It was like a swarm of bees, a gentle, building buzzing that tickled and caressed him. He had become the hive, he thought to himself, his eyes fluttering closed as he lay back on the bed, feeling the golden pool of honey collect deep within him - his magic was completely still.

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Harry awoke slowly to the persistent angry cracking of a beak against glass. And screeching. So much screeching. He rubbed his eyes and set his glasses straight, wiping the drool from the side of his face. It must be past midnight, he thought blearily as he stumbled over his kit on the floor, kicking his used supplies beneath the bed in a small moment of shame. He got to the window and worked the swollen wood and rusted frame open, letting in a bedraggled looking owl. It fell to the floor, hooted, and was joined by four more insistent and annoyed looking birds.

Fuck, Harry thought quickly. Fuck. Someone must have been trying to get a hold of him for ages. Five fucking owls?! Fuck. What could’ve happened? He grabbed the nearest owl and unfurled the note attached to his leg.

Harry,

Herm’s off to the hospital. I think this is it! Come to St. Mungo’s maternity ward when you can. I think i’m about to shit my pants, so you won’t want to miss it.

- Ron

Adrenalin pulsed through Harry as he grabbed the second owl’s leg.

Harry,

Where are you? Hermione is screaming at all the healers who try to touch her. She keeps telling me to keep to the birth plan (I was unaware of the birth plan?!? If you’re at the Ministry can you check and see if it’s on my desk?). I’m out of my depth, mate, and they said to expect a few more hours (???????) of this. I need reinforcements. I have to go back in there she’s started cursing everyone who’s ever touched her vagina. I am high on the list. Parvati Patil is on the list? I can’t handle the revelations I’m having.
Harry groaned. He’d really fucked up. He had promised he’d be there with them if they needed him. His best friends were becoming parents and he was in this hellhole getting himself obliviated. The third owl had ripped the parchment off his foot already and gone, so Harry picked it up off the floor, his stomach churning.

Harry,

I want to be mad at you for missing this, but I just held my daughter for the first time, so nothing is going to keep me from being the happiest person on earth. Her name is Rose and she’s beautiful. Hermione needed some stitching up, so I expect we’ll be here for a few more hours. She’s all blissed out on bonding baby hormones at the moment, but she has been asking for you, and I expect she’ll want your head on a platter if you’re not here ASAP. I hope you’ve got a good excuse for missing this. Also, we have a finite number of birthdays with Rose at home before she’s off to Hogwarts spending it on the damn train (Hermione is already making a schedule), so you best bring it with the gifts. And you’re doing a lot of babysitting.

- Ron

Harry’s heart pulled with the guilt. He had missed his goddaughter being born. Rose. What a beautiful name. They must be so happy.

The last owl was staring daggers at Harry. Ah, he thought, this must be Hermione’s letter. He took a moment to appreciate that it wasn’t a howler, and unrolled the bit of parchment.

Harry James Potter.

You had better be dead. Because there is absolutely no other acceptable excuse for you not showing up to help me bring my beautiful daughter, your goddaughter, into the world. Ron was useless. Pathetic, really. He nearly fainted and the healers spent half the time making sure he wasn’t dehydrated. Can you believe he forgot the birth plan? Lucky I had spares. Still, I could’ve used your help. It’s no small thing to create and deliver a small human.

Come see us, please.

Love,

- Hermione.

Harry sighed with relief and grabbed his jacket from where he’d dropped it on the floor. He rubbed the back of his hand absentmindedly as he ran down the stairs and out the door to apparate to St. Mungo’s. He didn’t notice the bruise that had formed.

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Harry shoved past patients, family members and healers in lime green robes as he sprinted through the hospital foyer. The blonde hair and sharp features caught his eye right as he knocked straight into the last person to cross his path before the lifts.

“Watch it, Malfoy.” Harry growled, dashing off to the stairs instead, not keen on another awkward elevator ride.

He didn’t have time to worry that Malfoy would pick up on anything amiss, he had apologies and introductions to go make.
Self Care

September 01, 2007

Draco noted that his bathroom mirror was beginning to look more like a memo board than a mirror. He had finally gotten into a rhythm with his daily assignment and sometimes produced more than one affirmation. Beatrice said that he was ready for his the next step. He looked balefully at this reflection, wreathed with hopeful post-its, and clutched at the hem of his sleeping shirt.

*Your mark does not define you* looked back at him and he took a deep breath, finally taking off his shirt. “Just spend time without your shirt on.” She suggested. “You don’t have to look at yourself, you don’t have to engage with anyone. Just be in your skin. Learn to love and accept yourself as you are, Draco.”

*You are beautiful.* He had written after that appointment. Now it seemed to taunt him.

*You are worthy of love.* Rolling his eyes, he realised he couldn’t do this near a mirror. *Sure,* he thought, he could spend time without a shirt, even though it felt stupid and pointless, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to stare at himself while he did so.

He walked into his sitting room and grabbed a copy of Haematology Today to review an article that caught his eye the day previous. Trying not to feel supremely self-conscious and vulnerable, alone though he was, he sat on his couch and tried to focus on the words in front of him.

He lasted 15 minutes. 15 very unsettled minutes. His resolve broke when a familiar owl appeared at his window. Knowing he would be incapable of confronting even written words from his mother while half dressed, he ran off to the bedroom to grab his shirt before letting the owl in and retrieving the note.

*Darling Draco,*

*I was hoping you would reconsider your position and accompany me to visit your father. I dread the thought of visiting him alone in that place and could use your strength. For your mother, please.*

*With Love,*

*xx*

Draco clutched the letter in his hands breathing out slowly. He had finally gone for tea at the Manor with his mother after weeks of avoiding her after the rose garden incident, and she had spent the entire time begging Draco to come to Azkaban with her to visit Lucius.

He flat out refused. Draco had only visited Lucius once since his incarceration and didn’t intend to repeat the experience. Narcissa went every three months to maintain her good graces with the Manor grounds and house—Old magical houses could be finicky with their magic and wards and since she was only a Malfoy by marriage and not blood, she did what she needed to do to appease the ancient house and its deep magical laws.
Now he sat beneath a deluge of emotional blackmail. He scribbled a hasty response, noting the owl was waiting for him and told her that work was too frantic to get away— sorry, but if she wanted to have some tea she could come to the cafeteria in St. Mungo’s.

He knew she would never accept the offer, which was precisely why he extended it to her. Beatrice had told him that lying to his mother was a perfectly acceptable coping skill when she didn’t respect his needs or boundaries. He clung to that validation like a drowning man at sea. Feeling relieved as the owl took off out the window, he made a mental note to talk to Beatrice more about their relationship. The well was deep.

Greg had been incredibly trepidatious about attending a group counselling session run by Luna Lovegood, but Draco had insisted that she came highly recommended by a reputable source. Neville thought the world of what Luna was doing and Draco knew that she was very embodiment of *good*, through and through. No matter what nonsense she may have thought about nargles.

Draco had reached out to Luna asking for her meeting schedules for Greg, and thus began a weekly correspondence that Draco hadn’t anticipated or entirely wanted. It was as if they’d always been friends, though. After the initial inquiry, Luna never spoke about the meetings again, they were anonymous after all. She instead asked him about his research and life, inviting him over for tea a fair few times, and was generally very pleasant.

Each invite so far Draco had declined until his therapist confronted him on intentionally isolating himself. That’s what led to him walking up Luna’s garden path one sunny Sunday afternoon. His internal boggart performing a relentless circuit, and his insides writhing like fire snakes.

*Why was he doing this to himself?* It was one thing to have a friendly correspondence, it was another to go to someone’s *house*, someone who had been imprisoned in his *cellar*, and do what? *Talk?*

Since apparating to her disturbingly charming garden, he nearly disapparated away twice in panic. This was new and uncomfortable territory. He hadn’t made a new friend since Unice— not that Luna was new, but her company was. The path to her front door was overrun with beautiful sprawling plants. Nasturtiums, violas, lavender, daises, and creeping thyme tumbled over one another in bundles of fragrant bursts of colour. Big fat bumblebees meandered pleasantly from blossom to blossom and clouds of butterflies erupted in front of him as he walked.

A large wisteria draped over an archway in front of her door dropping large purple blooms on the porch that released their delicate smell as his shoes crunch pastel petals underfoot on the step. Her garden and house seemed to radiate life and he felt a little intimidated. It was all just so… *enchanting.*

Eying a particularly large green praying mantis on the door, he forced himself to stand up straight and exude that trademark Malfoy confidence— he was an adult and would act like it. He finally reached out for the door knocker after talking himself up to it. What kind of door knocker was this anyway? It looked like a hippo with wings. Written above the door frame in golden cursive was a sign that read, *“Dreamers and Lost Souls Welcome Here.”*

Well, Draco thought as he rapped the door, he certainly was one of those things.

After a beat, the plum purple door swung inwards and Draco was startled to see Greg standing beyond the threshold, wearing a tool belt full of muggle contraptions and covered in grease stains.
“Hey Draco.” Greg said with a smile, as if this wasn’t weird at all.

“Greg?” Draco asked stupidly. “What on earth are you doing here? Is— is there a meeting happening?”

“Oh no, I’m just doing some work for Luna. This place is a bit… temperamental. Come in, Luna is in the kitchen— this way.”

“But what are you wearing?” Draco was still confused as he followed Greg into the very eclectically decorated home. Nothing matched. It was an explosion of colour, of mismatched furnishings, of house plants in strange containers, and inspirational quotes painted on the many coloured walls. It was slightly overwhelming at first, as was the garden, but as he moved through the house behind Greg, he thought it was very suited to Luna and what she did.

“Oh, it’s a muggle tool belt. You know, I can’t fix everything with magic all the time because the meetings are mixed muggle and wizard and there’s usually a bunch of muggles wandering around.”

“Mixed meetings? How does that work?” Draco asked, genuinely intrigued.

“Well, when someone wants to talk about magic or something wizard related we just use metaphors. Works really well once you get the hang of it. Muggles just think we’re really poetic.”

Draco snorted at the thought of Greg being poetic as they walked into the kitchen. A great open space with a large centre island surrounded by stools. The walls were peach with yellow cupboards and blue countertops. The appliances were all teal enamel and there were tumbling hanging plants everywhere. It was like being in an odd sort of greenhouse, with the large windows streaming in sunlight.

“Draco’s here.” Greg said before scuttling out of the kitchen, blushing when Luna thanked him.

“Draco, it’s lovely to see you.” She said, turning her large eyes on him and moving to wrap him in a big hug.

“Thank you for inviting me Luna.” He said, stiffly but smiling all the same.

“Oh, I know you hated the idea of socialising. But I’m glad you came anyway.”

Draco blushed furiously. All of his pureblood etiquette was horrified. “Luna, it's not— it’s just— I —” He stuttered awkwardly, hoping the ground would swallow him whole.

“Draco, please don’t worry. I’m not offended. You do what you have to for your emotional stability. And if that means turning down invitations to tea, then that’s what you do.” She didn’t seem to need to blink as much as normal people. “That’s why I kept extending invitations, so that one day when you were ready, you would still feel welcomed and not like you’d missed your chance.” She smiled knowingly at him.

“Oh…” was all Draco managed.

“I assumed your therapist had something to do with you finally coming?”

Draco blushed again and looked down at his feet, his hands restless at his side. “Please don’t feel embarrassed, Draco.” She smiled more broadly and squeezed his shoulder. He normally didn’t like being touched, but he didn’t seem to mind so much with Luna. She smelled like chocolate and sandalwood, like nasturtiums after a thunderstorm. It was oddly specific and almost overwhelming, startling, but not offensive. Draco found it comforting. “Take a seat, how about some tea?”
“That would be great.” He croaked out, thankful for something routine to swim towards.

Luna worked on gathering the bits and bobs for tea in silence as Draco sat stiffly, trying not to fidget. As Luna sat the tea tray down in front of Draco he looked up into her kind face and felt suddenly curious. “Luna, how did you know I was seeing a therapist?”

“Oh, Greg told me.” She said simply.

“Did he?”

“Yes, he said it was very inspiring to him to hear that you were seeing someone for your emotional turmoil. Greg said you’d be open to talking about it.”

*Godrick, why must she be so blunt?* He thought. “I mean, emotional turmoil might be a bit dramatic —” Draco tried, but Luna raised her hand in reproach.

“We lived through a war, Draco. Horrific things happened at the manor— emotional turmoil is a grave understatement.” He didn’t know how she could speak about these things so lightly and calmly. He spent most of his adult life ignoring what happened in the Manor, and here she was, setting it out on the table with the tea and biscuits.

“I guess.” He said lamely.

“You know, I wanted us to be friends, in our last year at Hogwarts, terribly.” Luna said serenely. “But it seemed you couldn’t stand to be around me.” She smiled at him, genially, as if what she had said wouldn’t make Draco feel *supremely* awkward. He stared at her with wide eyes, not knowing what to say, his mind reeling with regret about his life choices and the decision he made to come for tea.

“It’s okay, I know I reminded you too much of what happened there, at the time. I hope now though that we can be friends, and that you’re unpacking those feelings with your therapist.” She was spreading an assortment of cakes and sweets on the tray beside the floral patterned cups and tarnished silver spoons.

“Yeah...” Draco said dumbly. It was true, he was starting to unpack those things with Beatrice, but if a friendship with Luna meant this kind of raw emotional honesty, then he wasn’t sure he was ready for it.

“That’s enough of that for now—” She said, fixing Draco his tea and handing it over to him, her big blue, unblinking eyes surveying him calmly. “Tell me more about unicorn blood. Your letters were informative, but lacked depth.”

Draco sighed in relief, grateful. Work he could talk about.
Harry had lasted five days before he used again. He had started three fires at work the day before. Small ones, but a fire is a fire, really. He was feeling too dangerous to be in public again, so he shoved his hands deep in his jeans pockets and arranged a quiet night in for himself.

The fires, the outbursts of magic, they were bad, but Harry really couldn’t handle what his thoughts were doing when they were told to cope without their newfound crutch.

His nightmares came back with a terrifying insistence - Nagini tearing pieces of his flesh away from his legs as he tried desperately to scramble away from her, the inferi pulling him beneath the surface of the lake as he screamed for Dumbledore to help him, he even had one where Ron had been imperiused and who kept trying to poison him, until he finally got frustrated and shoved the sword of Gryffindor through his abdomen, telling Harry he never really liked him anyway. That last one had kept him up replaying their friendship over the years, looking for hints that they weren’t anything but best mates.

To be fair, when Harry was awake and at work, he wasn’t doing much better. Aside from the outbursts of decidedly more insidious and violent magic, he jumped at every little noise. Ron, who was just back from paternity leave, was now in the habit for heckling him about how much coffee he spilled on himself. Harry, who didn’t find this funny, was back to being annoyed at everyone for everything, and he even told Susan Bones to go fuck herself after she commented on his lack of Auror approved uniform. Decidedly unprofessional, that was.

And, when he wasn’t busy with the aforementioned, when he was quiet and still, he struggled to shake off the yearning, the longing for that sweet dip into his bath full of golden honey, the place where he could turn down the volume on everything and everyone and just feel. Feel loved and held and safe. He had developed a crick in his neck from having to shake his head to clear his thoughts of it, that’s how familiar this daydream had become.

So, here he was, apparating back to the stoop of Grimmauld Place, his pockets heavy and his thoughts light for the first time in what felt like forever. The berg adder on the door huffed and puffed at him, as usual, his tongue flicking as he berated Harry “The half master of the house is always alone, why is that?”

Harry paused for a second. “Because it’s easier to be alone than with people who would never understand you.” He said, his voice dropping an octave as the truth of what he said hit him. How rare it was that he told the truth, these days. What a sad state he was in that it was his door knocker that coaxed it out of him. It had gotten into the habit of asking him existential philosophical questions whenever he came home, and Harry did his best to be honest with the little snake. Who else did he have, really?

He pushed through the door, ignoring the thestrals and their impatient pawing, and slammed it behind him, not wanting to think too hard on why things were the way they were. He was just trying to survive. Like the years he spent fighting Voldemort, he was just doing what needed to be done to keep everyone safe, right? He knew this wasn’t good for him, hell, it wasn’t like he’d picked up jogging and eating celery, he wasn’t an idiot. But he’d always been the one to put himself on the line, the one who went headfirst, alone, into anything, because he knew that was how to keep his loved ones safe.
Harry grumbled as he took the stairs two at a time, annoyed at himself that Hermione may have been on to something with all that talk of a ‘hero complex’ or whatever. She wouldn’t understand. Plus, she was busy now. Busy with Rose, being a mom to someone else, someone new. She didn’t have time for this.

He didn’t feel like thinking about it now, not when he was so close to the sticky, sweet relief he had procured for himself. He took his shoes off, sat at the end of the bed, and let all of his thoughts drift away.

Harry was lucky most of the raids he was called in for happened in the morning. He’d show up, run into the chaos, fake a few spells or feign an early injury, congratulate Ron with a slap on the back, and head back to the office by lunch time. Other times, he declined going on the raid at all. By the early afternoon, he’d be shaky and feel his magic panting in his ear for another round. It was easy enough to shrink his kit and keep it hidden, lock himself in the bathroom and give himself a taste to keep the edge off for the afternoon, at which point, he would happily do mindless paperwork until his eyes bled. Sometimes, if he loaded enough, even a dopey smile sat placidly on his face.

At night, he’d repeat his routine, saving his heavy doses for when he could lay back and exist in a state of absolute bliss, eyes rolling, mouth open, his body humming with the absolute pleasure of it all. He’d be gone from the world for hours at a time. Blissful. At peace.

He had stopped eating regularly weeks ago. The kitchen at Grimmauld Place held nothing but an old can of beans at the back of one thoroughly cobwebbed kitchen cupboard, and Sirius’s room was slowly piling with detritus from his favorite haunt, an Indian restaurant by the name of Bunny Chow a few blocks from his lonely townhouse. It was run by Indian Durbanites from South Africa, but Harry didn’t really mind, all he cared about was being able to order their signature dish.

A few years ago, Harry had spoken to Hermione about what he had described as a feeling of “wanting to know more about his family”, but he privately termed his “chronic feelings of emptiness”. He thought getting to know the Potters’ history and culture might help him feel connected, less directionless and less alone. He knew they had come to London from Madras, now Chennai, two decades before independence, adapting to British life and culture with great ease, assimilating themselves into the old pureblood families right as they were compiling the sacred 28, though they hadn’t formally made the list.

Harry had tried to read up on some of the magical traditions of Tamil Nadu, but he’d been lost in their intricacies and complexities, the characters and the names that felt incredibly foreign to him/Even some of the magical theory was based on things he had never heard before.

He hadn’t felt any of the connection he thought he might have had in those old texts, but he found something much better the next time he was out walking in London. He had spotted the Indian restaurant, Bunny Chow, and decided to give it a try. This, this was something Harry knew he loved the moment it had touched his tongue. The flavours, the spice, the heat of some of the dishes, he couldn’t get enough. It became a habit for him, on nights where the Ministry had kept him late and he couldn’t even be bothered to microwave two minute noodles.

Now, though, it became part of his habit. A bunny chow, which was basically a hollowed out loaf of bread full of curry, was the last food he could feel motivated to force himself to eat. He’d slink in, grab his takeaway, and get out, and that’s only if he started feeling significant hunger pains. These days, the only cravings he felt were directed at the contents of a heated spoon, brown and soupy. 

This particular evening- no, morning, it had just passed 2 AM, Harry stepped through the glass
door, and breathed in the tantalising aroma that filled the shoebox sized establishment. He ordered his chow and stood to wait, arms crossed, tapping his fingers against the sleeve of Sirius’s leather jacket and trying not to think of how sore the crooks his elbows felt.

He leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed, sighing deeply. He knew he looked a wreck. He’d started only wearing long sleeves or keeping his jacket on, as the insides of his arms were marked, and he was pretty sure one of the veins in his left was collapsed. He had been stupid to use his hands, then arms to begin with, he just hadn’t thought much about how it might start to look. These days, Harry really wasn’t making too many plans with his future in mind. What future, really?

At this moment, he was simply surviving. How long he could keep that up, he didn’t know.

His order was up, and he grabbed the bag and headed back, head down and watching the street beneath his feet, wondering what the little adder would comment on now.
Helped

December 15, 2007

Draco was not well pleased.

After waiting weeks, and weeks to hear back on his proposal from the St. Mungo’s research board, they finally called him in for a hearing to discuss his methods. It started off well enough, but by the end of it he was fending off thinly veiled accusations of his supposed insidious desires to use unicorn blood in nefarious ways.

Someone even inferred that such research “could see a return of unpleasant times”. Draco had to count to 10 before dealing with absurdity that they could ever think he’d want to use unicorn blood to somehow bring back the dark lord.

The meeting had ended with a blustering old warlock in pompously ornate robes, telling Draco that his application needed more consideration. He left the meeting room seeing red and it required every ounce of self control and maturity he had honed and developed over the years to resist setting the door on fire.

He just wanted to help people. Couldn’t they see that? He would rather be sacrificed— throw himself head first into a pit of blast-ended skrewts and be eaten alive— rather witness the return of Voldemort. Why wouldn’t they believe him?

But, it was a pointless, rhetorical question— he knew why. How could he ever forget?

He had stormed off to Unice’s department to participate in rousing 20 minutes of shouting choice swear words and empty threats behind a strong silencing charm in the Janus Thickey break room. When Unice had asked him if he had yet to contact McGonagall about staying in the forest, or requested her support for his application, he shook his head, feeling suddenly meek.

He hadn’t asked yet. He was feeling nervous about approaching her, nervous about what she would say, how she would react. She had never given Draco reason to think she wasn’t on his side, but that didn’t make her any less terrifying. Unice told him to get his head out of his ass and ask the woman already. She had a point.

He couldn’t do this on his own steam. He needed support to help convince St. Mungo’s and the Ministry that not only was this research important but that he was a person capable of doing it— and that he wasn’t so easily corruptible and tempted by dark magic as they all assumed him to be.

Draco had tossed aside four pieces of crumpled parchment before finally penning a letter that didn’t make him want to crawl out of his skin with nerves and embarrassment. He quickly sealed the letter and set it in his out-tray before jumping up to start his rounds.

After six gruelling hours of emergency management on an upsurge of blood cursed Aurors, courtesy of Lestrange, he went back to his office and found a reply waiting for him.

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December 23, 2007

Draco had always loved how Hogwarts made him feel around Christmas. It was the epitome of a magical castle in Draco’s mind. The school always felt so safe and held in the snow, buffeted by
the howling wind. He tried to enjoy his happy memories of holidays past and not to think of the last two years and a battle that haunted him. He squeezed a worn post-it in his pocket You have ample opportunities at hand.

His letter from McGonagall hadn’t been very illuminating. She had only requested the presence of his company. With an ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach, as though he were heading towards a reprimand and three weeks detention for wrong doings, he walked towards the statue of the gargoyle, counting his steps as he went.

The halls were covered in wreaths and fairy lights. Suits of armour lined the walls and mistletoe hung from the rafters. He stifled a laugh as a group of first years crowded around a suit of armour and tried to teach it an off-brand carol, before catching sight of the approaching adult and fleeing down the hall, shrieking with laughter. He felt an odd sense of joy that they ran from him because he was an adult who could tell them off and not because they knew who he was. Reaching the gargoyle he opened his letter from McGonagall to double check the password before saying, “Malva Pudding” and watching the statue leap aside to reveal a moving spiral staircase.

Reaching the headmaster’s door he knocked and heard an imperial, clipped voice command, “Come in.”

Minerva McGonagall hadn’t aged a day. Her ever-greying hair the only sign that eight years had passed since he saw her last. “Good evening, Healer Malfoy.” She said with what appeared to be a proud glint in her eye at the word healer, and gestured him to sit across from her.

“Good evening, headmistress. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.” He said as he sat, trying as he might not to feel like child.

She nodded and watched him for a moment before standing to fix a tea tray for them. Draco resisted the urge to look past her seat at the portrait of Dumbledore and Snape— he didn’t want to see anything in their expressions.

“You’ve been a busy man these last few years.” McGonagall stated as she set the cups out, her back to him. “Healer training and two specialities. And, from what I hear, you’re essentially running the haematology department there, at the hospital.” She carried the tray back and set it on the desk between them and gestured for Draco to help himself.

“Yes. I have been busy.” He agreed. He had the unnerving feeling that he was being sized up.

“Indeed.” She said. After a pause, she pushed a plate towards him. “Have a biscuit.” She directed.

Feeling it would be stupid to refuse this woman, he leaned forward and grabbed a chocolate digestive. “Thank you.” He said, feeling a little stupid, anyways. The anticipation that he was about to be sent to detention had yet to dissipate, and he wasn’t sure how to steer the conversation towards a place he felt more in control.

But, before he could make a decision, she spoke.

“Now, I assume the hospital and the Ministry are giving you grief about your desire to study the unicorns in the forbidden forest?” She asked though she seemed to already know the answer. He nodded. “And your interest in this is to broaden your medical scope for curing blood curses, correct?”

“Blood curses are just the beginning. I feel that there is a lot we can learn about the uses of unicorn blood once the magical stipulations are properly understood. But yes, my primary focus is in blood
“Yes, I think there’s a dearth of information on the concept of consent and gifting with unicorn blood— with many manner of creatures, in fact. That being said, the superstitions around unicorns tend to make people uncomfortable.”

“IT certainly does. People seem to think that I’m trying to get close to the unicorns to do unspeakable horrors with them.”

McGonagall almost smiled at this. “Honestly, Mister Malfoy, if you had intentions on bleeding unicorns dry, you’d be dooming yourself. Even if you did have salacious intentions to bring Voldemort back, it would be a wild goose chase— he’s gone. He’s not coming back, and no amount of unicorn blood would change that fact. So, why they haven’t approved your research yet is beyond me.”

Draco was stunned by the cavalier use of Voldemort’s name, and by the assertion that McGonagall thought it preposterous Draco would be up to anything morally dubious.

“My thoughts exactly.” He eventually managed to croak out. He couldn’t help it, his eyes flicked to Dumbledore, then Snape, before he could stop himself. They were surveying him with quiet amusement. Dumbledore smiled and winked and Snape observed the scene pensively with an amused smirk.

“So, then, it seems to me that the way forward is for me to speak out in your favour, and of course to grant you official permission to use the potioneer’s cottage in the forest.”

Wow, Draco thought, the woman did not fuck about.

“Headmistress, I would be so grateful for your support.” He sighed, feeling giddy with relief, and finally relaxed back into his chair.

This time McGonagall did smile. “With any luck, you’ll have some good news about your proposal in the new year. And when your research proposal is approved, Hagrid can take you to see the cottage. No one has stayed there in nearly 100 years, but the protective charms around it have held up extremely well. Have another biscuit.” She encouraged.

Draco did as he was told, feeling cautiously hopeful.

January 23, 2008

Draco’s stomach grumbled in protest as he finished the tower paperwork piled onto his office desk. He was at the end of another 24-hour call and had only managed to sneak off to the cafeteria once.

Abhorring the thought of another vending machine dinner, he quickly packed away his things and dashed out before he could be intercepted by the nurses.

He decided to walk home from the hospital so that he could stop by his favourite Indian restaurant, Bunny Chow. He’d loved Indian food from his first year of Healer training when he would study late into the night, and Bunny Chow was one of the few places open at 1 am. He came for the tiki masala, but he stayed for the people watching.

Due to the unusual name of the west London eatery, it became a hot spot for queer folk looking for a bite to eat during their pub crawls. It’s not that there was anything overtly gay about this
restaurant—there were no waving rainbow flags or streamers, no secret messages or tokens—just a little “safe space” sticker in the corner of the window the owners had affixed after realizing they had amassed a cult following in the late night queer community.

It’s not that Draco was interested in meeting anyone, talking to anyone, or engaging in any way at all—but he like the thought that he could be closer to a community that he wished he was part of.

He knew that if, maybe, someday, he were interested in bridging this gap in his life, Bunny Chow would be a good place to start. But for now, he would just order his chicken tikka masala, sit at his usual corner table, and enjoy watching the comings and goings of the local nightlife.

It was just after 2 AM and he was nearly done with his meal. The late night revellers came and went and he could hear loud voices from up and down the street from the bars getting ready for last call. Just before he decided to get up and leave he noticed a familiar mop of untamed black hair and a worn leather jacket.

Harry stood there leaning against the wall, arms crossed with his takeaway number in his hand. He was looking down at his feet which tapped impatiently. He huffed a few times in quick succession, apparently frustrated. He looked ill.

When Draco had seen him on the elevator at the ministry, and even intermittently in the atrium at St. Mungo’s, he had filled out his skinny jeans and jacket, he looked strong and confident. Now though, now he just looked deflated—wasted even. He had an aura of dark magic. When his number was called he jerked his head up, startled like a stray cat. He grabbed the bag and made a hasty exit—not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Draco stared at the place where Harry had walked through the door and sat lost in thought over the reasons why the No-Longer-Golden-Boy would look so utterly wrecked, or why he was at a notoriously gay curry place at 2 AM.

Must be a coincidence, he concluded.
“Give me what you have.” Harry growled, his eyes closed, his fist tight around the collar of the barman’s shirt. He was breathing heavily. He couldn’t focus. He just needed to get what he came for and get out. The barman was nearly twice his size, yet Harry held him easily. He was full of frantic power.

“I told you, kid, the amount I’m giving you lately, it’s too much. You’ve gotta cut back.” He was trying to shake his head.

Rage swirled around Harry. He felt it boiling inside him, tearing at him. The glasses behind the bar started to rattle and shake, the tinkering getting louder and more insistent as the barman started to panic. Some of them fell to the floor. Harry tried to take deep breaths, but his magic was insistent. It was demanding. It knew what it wanted.

Harry opened his eyes and stared straight at the barman, his eyes sharp and full of an unyielding fury.

“Give me what you have.” He repeated, tightening his grip.

“… I can’t. I need it too.” The barman replied, feebly, his eyes now wide with fear. Ah, the truth, Harry realised. And his magic sent out a concussive force that knocked the barman unconscious instantly. Blood dripped from his nose and Harry let him fall, slumping down amongst the broken glass.

Harry searched his pockets, coming up with just enough for the rest of the day and into the night, making quick work of searching the bar. He knew he wouldn’t be able to come back here. He needed enough to last him the time it would take to find a new supply. And sunrise was already slated to be a restless, itchy affair.

Fuck, he needed a lot.

He found the rest, eventually, behind a broken bit of wall near the floor in the pitiful loo. It was wrapped in plastic and inside a black backpack, but it was enough. More than. A solid brick of the stuff. It felt so precious in his hands. Soft and dangerous.

Harry laughed, his heart singing, his magic turning around him, keening. He apparated from just there, without bothering to clean the bar, to check on the barman, to make sure no muggles had seen – he was beyond caring. He had his singular objective.

He went on a binge that lasted a solid three days in bed. He didn’t get up; he didn’t go into work. He didn’t eat. After he woke up from the first round, he sent his patronus, the stag, looking tired and at half its usual brightness, to Robards to say he’d taken ill and need a few days recovery. He didn’t care about the reply he got. He didn’t even open it. It didn’t matter, he was the saviour of the wizarding world, they could leave him alone for a few days while he sorted himself out. While he lay in the soft, dusty quiet of the house and let the honey drip around his shimmering skin. While he felt nothing and thought of no one.

He told himself he was busy healing.

Eventually, he did go back into work. He had been told he was needed for a raid on the morning of

Claustrophobia

March 09, 2008
the 15th. Some kind of follow up on whichever dark wizard was busy cursing potions or some such nefarious business. Harry couldn’t really be bothered with the details of the case, he just showed up where they told him to and trailed along as the other Aurors fought their way into a basement potions lab. Harry took his time wandering around looking at all the various ingredients and brewing stations, the cauldrons still smoking with whatever they had been cooking up. He knew some of these potions were used to put blood curses on objects, but he didn’t understand much of the theory behind it.

The coppery smell of the lab reminded him of the room where the wallpaper hung in rolls from the walls and he could stare up at the ceiling for hours, soft and quiet and at peace. No thoughts. Just breathing.

In and out.

Sticky and sweet and golden. Washing it all away.

It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. Just breathing.

In and out.

Bones full of honey. Thick and syrupy.

Gods, he missed it. He needed it. There wasn’t anything else that could compare. That could be more important. That could compete. It was everything and nothing all at once. Suspension in time. Effortless and beautiful. Kind and safe and gentle.

Everything that his life was not.

It had been a few hours since he had left the comfortable hellhole of Grimmauld Place, and his magic was getting panicky. He had started to sweat a little bit, and not from the effort of the raid. He felt an overwhelming, sickening urge to just apparate back to his den, to hide from all of this, to just get away. He stumbled backwards and knocked into an already rickety shelf holding several bottles, three of which tumbled to the floor and smashed, their contents sending up black and blue tendrils of smoke. Harry coughed, his eyes tearing up.

Shit.

Ron came in at the sound of bottles breaking, and Harry gave him an apologetic look.

“Hey mate, I think I’m still sick a bit, got a bit of a dizzy spell and knocked these bottles over. Can you have the cleanup crew come in here and make sure it’s nothing serious?”

Ron sighed “Sure Harry – you alright? You don’t look great. I think you ought to just go back home and I’ll finish up here.”

“I’m ok, just been sick with some nasty flu. Forgot to eat breakfast, that’s all.” Harry recited the now very familiar excuses. “I’m headed home then. Thanks, Ron – send my best to Hermione and Rose, I’d come visit but this flu isn’t something I’d like to give as a gift.”

Ron nodded and Harry watched him zone out happily for a moment, obviously thinking of his wife and daughter. Harry tried to not let the bitterness overwhelm him. He had treasures awaiting his return, too. He nodded to Ron and jogged back up the stairs and out to an apparition point. His shirt was sticking to his back.

Not yet an hour later, Harry was nodding off after a particularly venomous hit, rolling onto his
side, sighing softly. His mind was blank. He refused to engage in anything outside the world of
Sirius’s bedroom, of bliss, of quiet and gentle breathing that slowed and slowed and slowed as he
slipped away.

He opened his eyes a fraction at a strange sound, the rustling of the blankets next to him. His brain
clawing back out from the white fog he had been drifting in, his tongue running repeatedly over his
teeth, glorifying in the sensation. Everything was buzzing. Singing. It took him a moment to
understand what he was seeing.

There, before him on the bed, facing him and far too close for comfort, lay Sirius.

“Harry.” He said, simply, his voice a little foggy around the edges. He wasn’t smiling, but his
voice was kind and soft. His hair was tied up in a bun, loose tendrils framing his face. A small line
creased the middle of his brow. He looked sad.

Harry froze, his mouth too full of the sticky soft buzzing to speak. Everything felt thick and slow
and intangible.

Eventually, his thoughts drifted by. What was happening? What is this? Was this a ghost?

“If it’s easier to think of me as a ghost, I suppose you can do that.” Sirius replied to his own
thoughts, and Harry immediately knew this was a product of his own mind. He sighed, tears
leaking from the corners of his eyes without permission. Something surged within him, rolled
around him, like the ocean against the shore. Grief.

“Sirius.” He slurred the name out of his mouth, drool pooling on his pillow.

“Harry, I need you to get up. You can’t die like this.” Sirius whispered. He looked so broken. All
his hard edges softer than they had been in life. Like a watercolour. Blended. Forgiving.

Harry blinked slowly, looking back at him, a steady stream of tears wet on his face.

Couldn’t he though? Couldn’t he die like this?

“He can if he wants.” Another voice, louder and more clear came across the room and Harry forced
himself to focus beyond Sirius. To seek the dark form, backlit by feeble light of the afternoon, just
barely making it’s way into the room from the window, half obscured by a tattered curtain.

Leaning against the wall, arms folded and legs crossed at the ankles, was the haughty face of the
seeker. Regulus. The second son of the House of Black ran one hand through his shorter hair and
smiled softly at Harry.

“Sometimes living is more painful than dying, brother.” Regulus said, his eyes colder and more
sure than Sirius’s.

“In the end, he must be the one to decide.” Regulus finished. Silence hung in the room around
Harry, who closed his eyes.

He was struggling to breathe.


“Sirius, I can’t keep living like this. I don’t know what to do.” Whether or not he said it aloud, he
didn’t know.
How Harry had needed this. Someone to tell who wouldn’t judge him, who wouldn’t yell at him and scream how stupid he’d been. He needed someone to see his pain, his fear, to feel how little of a choice he felt he had.

“I know Harry, but it’s hard to watch the ones you love die.” Sirius said softly, as if in his ear. Kind and gentle and soft like the honey. Like the honey that felt thick and heavy in his lungs. In all the places it shouldn’t be.

Harry knew that it was hard. He had watched nearly everyone he’d loved die. He didn’t open his eyes again, but tears fell freely around his cheeks.

He drifted in and out of awareness.

Later, when the heaviness pulled back, just enough, just barely, just to give him a little more freedom to breathe, he sobbed for what felt like hours, exhausted and overwhelmed, his eyes squeezed shut against the soft words of the dead brothers, one arguing for his life, the other for his death. Both asking for a choice.

Eventually, he slept, body curled into a crescent, hands pulled against his own chest.

Harry startled awake, taking a deep gasping breath. He had hallucinated. The parts of his mind still in touch with reality registered this as something terrifying, and he found himself sitting up, woozy and slow, as if underwater. He pulled himself up and to out of the bed. He could hear his heart pounding so hard, and fear was so quick to replace the unknowing passivity of sleep, building into a horrible crescendo.

He had hallucinated. He had struggled to breathe. He had been so close to death. So close.

“I never wanted this fucking life - I never wanted this fucking house, this death trap, this mausoleum. I don’t need your dead looking after me. Stay the fuck away from me” He was standing and screaming nearly incoherently, lurching forward as he stumbled out of Sirius’s bedroom door. He was scared, and he was still feeling the hit he’d taken, his limbs heavy and his vision dark in the already dim light of the hallway, his skin flush with gooseflesh and shivering. He wanted to leave. To run.

To get out.

He tripped on his way to the first landing of stairs, pitching sideways as the world spun around him, falling into the open linen closet to his right. Before he could recover his balance and orient himself, the door slammed shut and clicked locked behind him.

Harry screamed and screamed until his voice was in tatters. His thoughts raced while he clawed at the heavy wooden door, desperate to get out. His blood was so full of junk he couldn’t do any magic, and the terror of being so helpless, shut in the dark, all alone, was crippling his ability to think clearly. Splinters lodged under his fingernails, tearing up the soft tips. He couldn’t feel any pain, the fear and the drugs kept him numb, but eventually he gave up, heaving with panicked breaths, clutching his bloody hands in the dark. Shaking.

He was so hungry for air. Like he could never get enough. Like his lungs were never going to be satisfied. Hungry.

Gods, his chest burned with the effort of it, the thrumming of his heart loud and terrifying in the dark, just as ravenous just as desperate, just as full of fear.
And then. Then there were noises beyond the door.

He placed one of his hands over his mouth as he heard something heavy coming down the hallway, rhythmic but slow, solid clunking sounds. He heard big blowing breaths next, even felt the little gusts come tumbling, beneath the bottom edge of the door. He recognised the sound once he heard the shaking and stretching of those long, leathery wings. A thestral. It pawed the carpet outside the door twice before continuing along the hallway.

Harry panted, gasping and wheezing, his heart hammering on and on in his chest and his head swimming. He nearly jumped out of his skin at the small voice that broke the silence next to his ear.

“Fred?” It called softly, inches away. “Fred, is that you? I’ve been looking for you everywhere. I couldn’t find you.” The voice broke into little sniffling sobs. “I’ve been looking for ages. All I want is to find you. I came to look for you.”

Harry shoved himself as far into the wall on the other side as possible, blatantly hyperventilating now.

“Harry,” the voice pleaded, “have you seen Fred? I’ve got to find him.”

Harry scrunched his face up and forced himself to say, out loud, “This isn’t happening, you’re hallucinating, Harry. It’s going to be okay. It will wear off, you’ll get your magic back, and you’ll open the door. It’s just your thoughts trying to scare you.” He chanted the same sentences over and over again, struggling valiantly between the same line to catch his breath. To swim to the surface. So desperate for air. So desperate to drown out the sounds of George.

He was slumped, curled up with his face against the corner between the wall and the door for what felt like hours. The voices had faded into the background, and the dark linen cupboard, reminiscent of his own childhood cupboard, was full of the sounds of his own tremulous breaths. His hands were throbbing now, the blood having dried around the edges of his ragged fingertips, still full of chunks of wood, the splinters lodged deep against bone.

It wasn’t a long time later that Harry promised himself he would quit and get his life together if he got out of this alive. He swore he’d be a good godparent, he’d write Andromeda to see Teddy again and he’d buy Rose one of those adorable hoovering brooms his parents had gotten for him when he was small. He’d come clean and tell the truth and go to therapy and he’d rebuild his life. He didn’t want this. The dark, the terror, the loneliness. It was crushing and horrible and Harry didn’t want eternity in fear. He didn’t want to slip along the spaces between life and death, reality falling away, spiralling, falling ever closer to losing himself. Drowning.

Eventually, Harry sobered enough that his magic returned enough to grant him a hoarse *alohomora*. He crawled out of the closet and lay in the hall, crying, with relief this time. He was done. He had to be done. It was still another hour before he could manage to heal his hands, but strips of white scarred tissue remained.

When he had gathered the strength to stand, Harry had summoned a hammer and a handful of long nails, both last used by order members in the repair efforts of the house. Repair efforts. It would have made Harry laugh if he hadn’t been so exhausted. So scared.

By the time he was done nailing the closet shut, he was sweating and his arms were aching.
Escape

March 09, 2008

Draco felt dizzy. It was incomprehensible. He could not believe what he was reading. Clutched in his white knuckled hands was approval for his research proposal, paid leave for his sabbatical, and Ministry approval to study the unicorns.

Suddenly he was sweating. He should be happy right? This is what he wanted? He realised he was shaking slightly. It was like the bottom had fallen out of his stomach. Did he even have a stomach? Or a body for that matter?

He was dazed and a little confused. After months of waiting, they had approved his wildest dreams and thought it best to tell him with an unassuming letter in his in-tray. Well, he supposed, judging by his dramatic reaction he was more than a little grateful no one had come to find him to drop this bombshell in person.

Feeling uncomfortably aware of how small his office was, how nauseous he was, and just how fucking terrified he was at the prospect of upending his entire life to study fucking unicorns in the forbidden forest, oh my god what was he thinking, he made a hasty exit. He needed someone to talk him off the ledge.

He hoped beyond hope that Luna wasn’t in a meeting— if he had to sit alone with his thoughts for one more second he would have to light himself on fire. He hadn’t bothered to owl ahead and he cringed internally at his own presumptions— but she had always said with her lilting singsong voice and unblinking eyes that he was welcome day or night to talk.

He hoped she meant it.

Nearly sprinting up her garden pathway he was stopped by the site of her front door opening and a stream of people leaving, chatting with one another, and waving fair-wells.

Well, at least the meeting seemed to be ending, he thought. He dashed around people idling on the front porch and snaked his way into the house to find Luna. He found her in the kitchen carrying empty tea cups on a tray to the sink. She turned to the sound of his approaching footsteps and didn’t seem remotely surprised to see him standing in her kitchen.

“Oh, hello Draco.” She said, smiling warmly.

Draco didn’t respond, he rushed up to her with wide eyes and shoved the innocuous parchment that was causing him so much distress into her hands. She took the letter without question and stood reading pensively.

After a moment she looked up at him with her large, loving eyes and grabbed his arm to pull him into a hug. He resisted for only a moment before letting himself be comforted, cosseted. He felt his shaky limbs tremble without permission and his breathing felt laboured and tremulous. He chastised himself for completely overreacting to what was supposed to be good news.

She held on to him taking deep steadying breaths that Draco began to mimic, feeling himself come back from the brink. They swayed slightly on the spot, and Draco thought he must look absolutely ridiculous.

He had never been comforted like this before— his mother had never hugged him like this, even
when he was an inconsolable child.

He felt like a child, now.

Eventually, they pulled away when his breathing was more manageable and he felt less like he was going to rip his skin off and run away screaming into the void. His hands were still clammy and he was covered in a cold sweat, but Luna didn’t seem to mind. She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the centre island of the kitchen to sit down. She lay the letter down on the table and squeezed his shoulder before moving to make them some tea.

This is why he loved Luna. Sometimes she made him unbearably uncomfortable with her raw emotional vulnerability, and other times she was stoically quiet and gave him exactly what he needed to feel like he wasn’t lost in a hurricane.

After Luna had finished assembling a new tea tray in silence she walked over and sat across from Draco and asked, “There now, are you ready to talk about how exciting this news is?”

“I know I should be excited, I’m supposed to be— I’ve worked so hard for this— to get here— but I’m honestly just— terrified.” He forced out the admission. It cost him every bit of pride to be honest about his fears, but he needed Luna’s advice.

“Why do you think you don’t deserve good things to happen to you Draco?” She asked without blinking.

He looked at her, mouth slightly open. No words were forthcoming.

“You’ve worked so hard,” she continued, “to convince the hospital and the ministry that this research is important and that you’re the one to do it, and now that you’ve received the all-clear and you’re acting like you’ve made a grave mistake.”

“I’m just wondering if— if I’m even doing the right thing.” He finally said after a moment of contemplation. “Should I be up-ending my life and abandoning my patients for research that might not go anywhere? I mean— what if I can’t convince any unicorns to give me their blood?! What if they just scoff at me and I spent the next 12 months following them around for nothing?!” He was feeling slightly hysterical again and his voice shook.

She simply smiled at him. “You won’t find out until you try.” She said. “And, as for up-ending your life and abandoning your patients, it’s only for a year, and the hospital will survive without you. You deserve to do things you find fulfilling.”

Why did it all seem so simple and logical when Luna said it?

“I suppose.” He said. Feeling a bit lost, and a bit stupid for over-exaggerating.

“This calls for a celebration Draco.” Luna declared, standing up with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“No, Luna it’s fine— I don’t want to make a fuss— please don’t—” He said feeling suddenly horrified at the thought of sharing this news with others.

“Oh, Draco, you’ve already made a fuss, but not the fun kind. As your friend, I am allowed to make a fuss about you, for you.”

Draco felt embarrassed and a little nauseous again. “No, really Luna, we don’t need to celebrate this—”
“Yes, we do.” She stated imperially, as she wandered out of the kitchen, humming to herself. She called from out of sight. “Don’t you run off on me, Draco!”

After several long minutes in which Draco really did contemplate running off, Luna reappeared in the kitchen with a satisfied smile. “Now tell me, love, what would you like for dinner?”

Draco had been surprised when Greg, Neville, and Unice had all walked into Luna’s kitchen over the next hour bearing congratulations and proud smiles. Luna made veg korma and samosas, Greg brought Draco’s favourite brownies, Neville brought his homemade nettle and cranberry cordial, and Unice brought flowers for Draco.

He was completely overwhelmed by affection of his friends and the fact that they had come together to support him. It made him feel that maybe he really was making the right decisions with his life. He didn’t know how to express his gratitude at having his favourite people in one place and only managed to push out a stuttering, “Thank you, really—” at the end of the night. He blushed furiously and hid his face in his hands when they all clapped and toasted him with cordial and hilarious hopes for his future.

“To Draco!”

“May the unicorn blood flow freely!”

“May he enjoy his year as a forest hermit!”

“Here’s to the hopes that he eventually comes back to civilisation, and doesn’t leave us for good!”

“May the blood flow freely?” Draco asked in mock horror, stifling his laughter. “Honestly, Longbottom, what do you think I’ll be doing out there?”

Neville shrugged and laughed, “I’m just saying, I hope you get what you need. When do you leave anyway?”

“My last day is on the 18th according to my letter from the research board. I’ll have to arrange with Hagrid this week to hike out to the cottage where I’ll be stationed in order to learn the coordinates. And to make sure it is suitably inhabitable before I move in. So, after my last shift on the 18th, I’ll grab my stuff and disparate to my new forest home for the next year.”

“Wow, you’ll have so much to do before then, that’s less than two weeks away.” Luna marvelled. “Have you discussed with Beatrice how you’ll continue your self care and manage your panic attacks while you’re there?”

Draco experienced a knee-jerk flush of embarrassment at Luna’s question, as he would normally feel incredibly exposed talking about his mental health issues in front of more than one person. But, looking around, he realised that everyone present knew about his persistent anxiety, knew he struggled to get through the day sometimes, understood his panic, and accepted him for it. He was awash with gratitude that not a single one of them had even batted an eyelash at Luna’s question.

“I’ll have to meet with her this week to go over a care plan, I guess.” He contemplated. He hadn’t really thought about how he would continue his therapy from the middle of the forest, but Beatrice knew he had applied for this sabbatical and he was sure she would have a few suggestions for him.

They passed the rest of the evening deep in conversation on magical theory and going over Draco’s research methods. He hadn’t had such a social evening since his 5th year at Hogwarts, and thought, maybe, it wasn’t so bad to have friends.
March 18, 2008

Discharged from St. Mungo’s, Harry has only two things on his mind – first, to write a letter to Hermione explaining why it had to be this way, and how sorry he is for letting his friends down, but knowing that they’ll be okay without him – that they deserve the happiness they’ve built up around them since the war. They’ll be great parents, he knows. The second is to get to Grimmauld place and choose to die.

Regulus was right, he thought has he scrubbed his hands over his face. It’s easier this way. It’ll be quick and then it’ll be over. His hallucinations had scared him of what the afterlife was like, but that was just his panicked thoughts - he didn’t think George was stuck in eternity seeking Fred. Right? That couldn’t be it. It had felt so peaceful in King’s Cross with Dumbledore - the train would take him to the countryside to be with Sirius and his parents and Remus. It would be okay.

He repeated this fantasy to himself as he apparated. Grimmauld Place loomed in front of him as he caressed the little adder knocker.

“You angered the guardians of the house of Black last night” it hissed at him, though it didn’t sound angry.

“I know. But, tonight, I’ve come to join the thestrals. They can have me.” Harry replied, his voice sure and his hand steady. The adder merely huffed before the ancient door swung open. “I’m not sure that’s how it works, half master.” The adder hissed softly at his back as he crossed the threshold.

Harry didn’t mind. He was done. He couldn’t bear the thought of the shame and the embarrassment of having to explain what was going on, not to Ron, not to Hermione, not to anyone. He couldn’t withdraw on his own, he had proven that this morning when he’d collapsed in a goddamn toilet at work. His work didn’t even need him there, anyway. He felt redundant, useless. He didn’t want to spend his days catching dark wizards, he just wanted to be left alone.

He didn’t want to live through the withdrawal anyway, not for the meagre reward his life would be, it was too painful, too hard and at the end of the day he’d be back with the feelings of emptiness he’d been feeling from in the first place.

He didn’t think he could actually do it, get clean, if he wanted to be honest with himself. Visions of him confessing to everyone, relapsing, disappointing them and doing this all over again flooded his thoughts.

No, he thought, it’s just better this way.

He dragged himself up the stairs and into Sirius’s familiar bedroom. He dragged out the bag he’d hidden his half brick of supply in when he’d been convinced he could quit earlier that morning. It was more than enough.

He paused. It was time to say goodbye.

He grabbed a bit of parchment and a quill, dipping it only once in the inkpot by the bed stand.

Hermione,
It’s ok if you don’t understand. I love you and Ron and Rose more than anything, and I know you have a beautiful, happy life ahead of you. Don’t waste time being sad.

I’ve talked it over with Sirius. This is for the best.

I’ll be ok.

- Harry

He loaded the largest dose he could. He knew he’d pass out once he hit it, and he didn’t want the moments of worrying or regret, of wondering if this was the right choice. It was. In this moment, he was sure.

He pushes in and lets out a sob of exhaustion, his letter to Hermione fluttering from his hand as it drops next to the mattress, his eyes roll back in his head and he gently slips away, laying back against the ratty, stained pillow. The house falls silent.
Beginning

March 18, 2008

Draco walked back to his office feeling exhausted after his 24 hour shift, but pleased that he had been able to chat with Unice before leaving.

The last 10 days had been a whirlwind of activity for Draco. He had spent a full 16 hours with Hagrid one blustery day, hiking out to the stone cottage and preparing it for human habitation. After a 4 hour hike in which Draco sweat half to death under his layers and layers of winter clothes, they had spent a solid 12 hours re-warding the hollow and fixing up the little dusty cottage. It was a quaint little place nestled into the sloping forest, something out of fairy tale, and Draco was filled to the brim with excitement about the next year.

McGonagall had had the idea to charm a cupboard in the cottage that could connect to the Hogwarts kitchen so that the house elves could supply him with food. He would simply place a list of needed supplies and the house elves would oblige.

Now, all he had to do was to satisfy his neurotic compulsion to micromanage the haem department before handing it over to Sprigg and washing his hands of responsibility. He took a deep breath, practicing releasing the tension from his body that occurred when he thought about Sprigg—a handy little tip from Beatrice.

Counting his slow exhales as he marched down the antiseptic scented halls he thought about how he could finally let go—he could leave and start the next phase of his life, without worry.

Draco packed up the last bit of his personal effects from his office, including his new bag of hobby supplies. Beatrice had suggested he pick up an activity that didn’t involve medicine in which he could participate in when feeling overwhelmed. That’s how he ended up with a bag of yarn, a few pattern books, and an assortment of knitting needles.

He hadn’t quite gotten the hang of it since acquiring the supplies from Luna, as he only managed to pick it up on his rare breaks, but he was hoping that with a few weeks of solitude in the forest he would figure it out. Winters in the forest were cold, after all—he would need all the socks, scarves, hats, and jumpers he could pile on to his thin frame.

He shrank his things and stowed them carefully in his pocket. Looking around his little dreary office, he said a quiet goodbye, closed the door behind him, and strolled towards the nurse's station.

There was only one thin innocuous file in the active patient tray, and Draco almost decided to leave it—almost chose to ride the wave of the newfound equanimity he was cultivating. Almost bypassed his innate tendency to micromanage. Almost.

He was just about to stroll past the nurse’s station, ready to congratulate himself on his self control—when it broke. He stopped and walked the two steps back and snatched the file from the tray, laughing at the idea that he could just not look at the file. He’d be away from patients for a whole year, he wanted to, no, need to see what lucky patient landed in Sprigg’s care before he left.

The name in the file could have jumped off the page and slapped him in the face with how startled he was to see it. Harry James Potter stared up at him from the creamy white paper covered scratchy black-inked notes. He was instantly, consumingly, curious as to how and why Potter had landed in
Suddenly, Draco was filled with adrenaline and a surprising fear that Potter could have been another victim of Lestrange’s blood-curdling curse, or possibly another victim to Sprigg’s ineptitudes.

He read quickly, scanning the file trying to ascertain the circumstances of Potter’s admittance. His suspicions and concerns became more and more pronounced with each note, his eyebrows rose higher and higher into his hairline as he read.

*The patient presented with: tremors, hyperhidrosis, confused speech, irritability and aggression—potentially accidental magic?*

The diagnostic spell results were even more curious and suspicious. Sprigg seemed to have missed the small and seemingly innocent red line whose indication made the hairs on the back of Draco’s neck stand up.

Instead of that red line, there should have been a network of golden threads to represent Potter’s nucleus accumbens in his mesolimbic pathways. Shocked, he stood for a moment, alarm bells ringing in the back of his memory banks—something was telling him he should know what this means—one of his old haem journals did an article on—what was it—Addiction?

Potter’s symptoms suddenly made sense—he was withdrawing—without any medical help—without anyone knowing—Merlin, his friends might not even realize what was happening—Potter was using muggle narcotics to avoid detection in the Aurors—

Heart racing, Draco flipped frantically to the blood chemistry results that must have just come in from the lab—

Potter’s blood contaminant numbers were off the charts.

They looked nearly lethal—whatever he was using was causing a mass buildup of magnesium in his system. How did Sprigg miss this? What did the muggles call it? Opiates? Heroin?

It was heroin, it had to be—Draco had read once that muggles often cut the drug with other compounds to take advantage of less discerning clients, often using talc, which was composed of magnesium and silicate.

It was a second or two before Draco realised he had stopped breathing.

Harry Potter was in withdrawal from heroin and no one had noticed.

“Nurse Wallace, where is this patient? Where’s Potter?” he nearly shouted, with rising panic and rage, at the nurse behind the desk.

Nurse Wallace jumped, looking startled. “He was discharged not 30 minutes ago, sir—Sprigg sent him home with orders for bed rest and hydration.”

“He WHAT?!” Draco screamed. He was on the edge of being consumed by panic. If Harry Potter had been sent home in this condition, then he was as good as dead. He couldn’t understand the sense of dread and fear that gripped him at the thought of Potter dead.

Draco broke out in cold sweat. Why did he feel such a sudden and violent urge to protect him? Is it
because Draco recognised that no one else knew what the saviour had been up to? How close he was to death? That not a single one of the most famous wizard in Britain’s friends know anything about his imminent self-destruction? Had not a single fucking person noticed Harry was using?

_Fuck._

Where would he even find Potter now? Without stopping to think about what he was doing he flipped feverishly through the file to the personal details to find an address. It felt like a gift from the universe that he knew exactly where to go.

Draco dropped the file and dashed off down the hall to his office where he grabbed every dispenser of naloxone he had in his cupboard. He had begun stocking the muggle drug, after losing a patient to an overdose a few years back. He never wanted to be that ill prepared to deal with muggle narcotics again. Stuffing the naloxone into his robes, he took off running full speed towards the apparition point in the hospital lobby hoping against hope that he wasn’t too late.

Draco landed on the steps of Grimmauld place, stumbling in his haste and fear. He had never been there but he knew it well from stories of his mother’s childhood. The thestrals carved in the door looked up and gazed at him, breathing softly and stretching their wings. The little snake by the door knocker huffed and puffed itself intimidatingly.

Draco didn’t have time to dick about with ominous door carvings. He said with a loud and thunderous voice, “I am a Black, let me in!”

Cold and shivering magic settle around him, it felt relieved and oddly welcoming— as the wards do when he returned to the Manor. The door swung open to reveal a pitch black interior and a wave of musty dampness wafted out around him. As he stepped in he felt the house respond to his presence; the air felt less and less oppressive as he moved in through the front hall and the horrid smell began to dissipate.

But, he had no idea where he was going.

“Potter!” He yelled. “Harry Potter! Don’t you dare be dead!”

He started to run towards the downstairs hall but stopped, maybe he was upstairs? He didn’t have time for this—

“Where the fuck is he?” He screamed at no one, his breaths coming in frantic gasps. The house responded immediately. Oil lamps on the wall lit up at the sound of his command, illuminating a pathway up the stairs.

Without hesitating, he bolted up the steps taking them two at a time, his robes wiping around his legs, his pockets heavy with naloxone dispensers. The smell of dark magic was nearly overwhelming as he scaled the floor landings one after another, feeling shock at how Harry had been living in such a place. The house was derelict and diseased.

He wavered for a split second at the top most landing where the row of lights stopped in front of a bedroom with the door ripped off its hinges. As he moved towards the room, trying to calm his breathing and collect his strength, he passed a linen closet nailed shut with a staggering number of jagged and rusted nails. An ominous trail of dried blood stained the floor and wall— he didn’t have time to contemplate the horrors of the house as he approached the open room, feathers spilled out into the hall, the smell of mouldy food wafting out and overpowering Draco’s senses.

Draco dashed over the threshold. The sight before him hit him as effectively as a punch to the gut.
Potter was curled in on himself atop a disgusting nest of old soiled bedding, surrounded by discarded take away containers. He wasn’t moving.

Draco ran over to his collapsed form and rolled him onto his back, checking for a pulse, noting the foam and drool trickling out of his mouth.

Next to him lay a bit of parchment addressed to Hermione. Draco realized with mounting horror, taking everything in, that this must be his goodbye. Not daring to read it, he grabbed it and stuffed it into his pocket.

He checked Potter’s breathing. After confirming that, shit, he wasn’t breathing, Draco grabbed the naloxone from his pocket, peeled the plastic backing and shoved the device up Potter’s nose before pushing the plunger. It seemed he waited for an eternity, although it must have only been 5 seconds before Potter gasped weakly. Draco could barely feel a pulse and his breathing was irregular.

“No, you fucking don’t—” Draco snarled and ripped open another naloxone packet and discharging its contents into his other nostril. “BREATHE POTTER!” Draco screamed at him, rubbing his sternum hard with his knuckles, knowing that it would bruise.

This was bad. This was beyond fucked. Draco didn’t trust St. Mungo’s to treat Potter after sending him home with such glaringly obvious and dangerous symptoms, but he was terrified of Potter dying on Draco’s watch. They would surely blame him, wouldn’t they? Potter couldn’t die. This fucking prat couldn’t die and leave Draco in this shit storm.

Why was it always Potter when everything went tits up? Casting a quick but strong stasis charm on his limp and gasping body, Draco grabbed a tight hold on his arm, announced to the house that he needed the wards to let him out, and disapparated them both into Draco’s apartment.

Back in his quiet sanctuary, Draco transfigured a mat on the floor and levitated Potter on to it. He stripped Potter out of his filthy clothes, first fishing Potter’s wand from its pocket and stashing it in his own. He vanished the offending garments to the wash closet, noting how thin and gaunt Potter was under the layers of grimy fabric.

After covering him in a sheet, not bearing the sight of his wasted frame, he pressed his fingers into his eyes and tried to organise his thoughts into something helpful. Think, Draco, think, he urged himself, tiny lights bursting behind his eyelids from the pressure of his fingers.

Potter needed potions— a lot of potions. He needed a blood cleaning potion, a cardiac potion, a liver repair potion— Draco ran through the list, mentally noting that he had most of what he needed in his personal stocks.

Getting up he dashed off to collect everything he would need for an emergency resuscitation and prepared to remove the stasis charm in order to properly assess the damage.

With a wave of his wand, he removed the charm and nearly passed out in relief as Potter moaned pitifully. Thank Merlin he was breathing. Praise Salazar’s braided beard.

“Potter.” He said, “Harry, come on—” He rubbed Potter’s sternum again, trying to rouse him to consciousness, but he was far out of reach.

Grabbing his potions he began trying to bring Potter back from the brink, hoping against hope that his year’s sabbatical wouldn’t turn into a life on the run from the ministry for killing their saviour.

After hours of pouring potions down Potter’s uncooperative throat, vigilantly rolling him over so
he wouldn’t aspirate his vomit, running diagnostic charms, and rehydrating the emaciated man, Draco slumped back against his couch when it seemed that he was out of the worst of it. Potter still hadn’t woken up but that wasn’t surprising, what with the combination of the blood cleaning potions and calming draughts Draco had given, Potter would be out for a couple of hours.

At least it seemed he was done puking. The potions were doing what they needed to do to keep his vital organs safe and functional and he was no longer teetering on the brink of death. Draco placed every alarm spell he could the still body before rising from the couch.

He had an idea— It was a mad idea— surely an idea that Potter would rail against— perhaps even murder Draco for once he came around— but it was the only one he could think of to keep the prat alive.

This had clearly been a suicide attempt after months and months of deteriorating mental and physical health, Draco thought, sifting through his memories of the past year, reviewing his infrequent interactions with Potter in a new light, feeling stupid for not figuring it out sooner. He had always watched Potter, always noticed him— there had been signs.

Maybe it was the life-debt that he owed Potter, but Draco felt it was paramount to keep him alive— even if was against his will.

Satisfied that he would be alerted if Harry woke up or needed any kind of intervention, Draco grabbed his packed bags and disapparated to the little stone cottage, isolated in the forest. He would need to prepare it for two people.
Harry had been dreaming. He was shuffling along in the dark, the forest towering above him. The summer air, normally thick with the calls of birds and other forest dwellers, was deathly silent. It took him a moment before he recognised the small clearing he came across. It was here he had turned the resurrection stone - where his loved ones had returned to encourage him to let go - to die.

Harry stood, breathing softly, considering the forest ahead. This is what he wanted. The quiet, the calm, the chance to go on to new adventures with those he loved.

But what if they’re not there? His thoughts reeled as he remembered George’s pleading for Fred. What if it was eternity of searching this forest? Unable to see or speak to any of them again?

Harry sighed. He would never know until he got there. He continued on from the clearing, just as he had that night, committed.

Harry was pulled back from his ethereal thoughts into something that felt far more real. More tangible. In fact, as the moments passed, he could feel himself laying on the floor. His hands brushed along the sheet that was over him and he realised, yet again, he was naked.

Harry sighed, wondering if he would see Dumbledore again, Death personified, wondering if he’d have to talk about this. About why. Would he be angry at him? Disappointed? Did it matter? What if he didn’t come? Would he know what to do?

His eyes fluttered open and he regarded the room in front of him. White. Stark white.

Okay, he thought, so far so good, but this is not King’s Cross Station. Harry rubbed his eyes and noticed the tension he suddenly felt, the ache of his muscles, his bones, his very being suddenly came rushing into his awareness. Surely the dead don’t feel pain, do they? Harry’s heart sped up a bit at the thought - was he cursed to spend the rest of eternity in pain rather? He shook his head and dismissed the thought. Don’t panic. Not yet, anyway.

His eyes darted around the small room. The mat he lay on was adjacent to a small sofa, and on the other side, a simple fireplace. Next to him, lay a folded set of clothes and a pair of trainers, but not ones that Harry recognised. Behind him, there was a window sill. All about the room were little splashes of colour - pink and blue and yellow, apparently stuck to various items and areas. Harry stood, rather shakily, his head spinning for a moment as a wave of nausea overcame him.

This didn’t feel like last time, not at all. Last time was painless and easy and quiet. This time, his whole body hurt, his head was reeling, the world tipping back and forth around him, and, for fuck’s sake, he was sweating again.

He pulled on the faded grey shirt, black pants and black jeans that had been left by the mat. Every movement was torturous, his stomach clenching and threatening revolt every time he leaned over. Putting on the trainers was a veritable nightmare. His glasses he found beneath a bit of the sheet that he must have kicked off. The only thing missing now was his wand. If he was dead, though, he supposed he didn’t really need one. He sighed and took another look around, unsure what to do next.
Harry stumbled over to one of the little yellow squares stuck on the wall.

“Your life is your own to live - you are only beholden to your own happiness” stared back at him. The pink square next to it read “I am doing what is right, what is good.”

Huh, he thought to himself. This may not be King’s Cross, but it seemed like a much kinder, sort of motivational waiting room. He felt a bit of comfort seep through the pain. How did he get to move on, though, if not take a train? He stopped on the last note in the row toward the kitchen, a blue one.

“You are not your Dark Mark” was written in, what he now realised was, a familiar hand. Harry narrowed his eyes.

The sound of the lock clicking and doorknob turning interrupted Harry’s ruminating on what the fuck could possibly going on. The door to Harry’s left swung open, revealing none other than Draco Lucius Abraxas Malfoy. Fucking Malfoy.

His blonde hair was disheveled, his clothes more rumpled than usual. Harry had never actually seen him in such a disarray.

“So. I’m not dead then.” Harry deadpanned, his voice scratchy, barely recognisable as his. His hands balled into fists at his sides.

“No, I’m afraid I got to you first.” Draco answered, quieter than Harry had expected. Rage was building inside him, a close second was embarrassment, then terror. Malfoy knew. He wasn’t dead and Malfoy knew. He knew everything. Harry was shaking. He wanted to scream.

“Fuck” he managed to breathe out as Malfoy quickly closed the gap between them, grabbed his arm and apparated them away, not giving him a second longer to think on the absolute horrendous absurdity of the situation.
Not a Prisoner

March 18, 2008

Harry had collapsed to his knees. They had landed in a small meadow, covered in the shoots of green, just peeking out beneath their new growth in the tepid sun of the clearing, ready for spring, fighting their way through the frosted ground. Just ahead of them, across the clearing, was what looked like a cabin, yet the roof was covered in the same small green stems, blending the small hut into the rocky hillside that rose up behind it. To the west, there was a large mass of bramble bushes and an overgrown well before the clearing relented and ancient and gnarled trees held sway over their territory, dark and twisted, yet full of small signs of life.

It was several seconds before Harry registered that he was yelling. Screaming, really.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Was the first intelligible thing Harry managed to get out. “This isn’t happening. You stupid fuck. Where the fuck are we? Take me home. I didn’t want this. I need to go home.” Harry’s teeth almost felt as though they were chattering - he was on edge, his thoughts streaming right past his consciousness and directly out of his mouth, desperate to go back to his stash and back to his den, desperate to finish what he had set out to do. He didn’t want this, he wanted death.

Malfoy didn’t say anything, he simply started walking toward the rundown little cabin, refusing to engage with Harry’s tirade.

“How fucking dare you.” Harry hissed out as he scrambled to his feet. He was too angry, too lucid. He needed oblivion - he needed it. It was the only thing that had felt viable for weeks, months, now. His voice quavering, he caught up to Malfoy, tugging his shoulder to make him turn and face him.

“I know I’m fuck up, Malfoy. I know. Just let me go home and die. I’m tired. You can gossip all about it once I’m gone - you can sell the story to the Prophet for all I care. Please.”

Anger flared in Draco’s grey eyes and Harry realized he had hit a nerve.

“Just give me my wand and let me go, Malfoy. You can’t keep me prisoner. I can’t live like this.” Harry held out his hand, unable to hide how much he was shaking.

“Fine. Take your wand. I’m not making decisions for you, Potter. Apparate home to die, if that’s what you must do. I wouldn’t stay with someone I thought would sell me out to the highest bidder, either.”

He looked sad, but Harry didn’t care. He snatched his wand from his hand and stomped off to the West, crashing his way through the thicket and into the trees, not once looking back.

As he winds his way down a path through the underbrush, Harry is met with a withering chill that descends over his aching body like a cloak, quieting the fiery rage he had been consumed with. It was March, but winter still held the shadows, there were no signs of spring beneath the ancient boughs, and there was still snow on the ground.

Harry raised his wand to cast a warming charm. Nothing happened. His magic must still be out, he realised with a grimace. There was no chance he could apparate if he couldn’t do the most basic of charms. He growled to himself in frustration, his whole body vibrating with rage, with fear, with the absolute shame of having to face Malfoy of all fucking people. He trekked deeper amongst the
old, gnarled trees, their branches creaking and leaves fluttering down around him as the winter wind stirred their canopies.

Harry paused. The anger had propelled him, but as his escape wore on and his mind quieted, his limbs felt heavier and heavier. He was fading. Exhausted. He tried another warming spell, but the Holly of his wand felt dead in his hands. He brushed away the nagging, panicky thoughts that it was gone for good, and stumbled on, his feet like lead weights.

He shivered against the chill. He felt feverish - one moment flushing with heat and sweat dotting his forehead, the next second covered in gooseflesh, violent shivers wracking his body. He felt weak and desperate, overwhelmed and overcome with shame. Shame, for even in these moments, lost in the forest, likely to freeze to death, all he could think of was getting back to the embrace of what he had left. It had felt so good. So soft and quiet and right. His brain latched onto this and drove him onward, his feet catching on roots as he nearly fell, the brush opening into a small glade amid a stand of Hawthorn and Blackthorn trees.

Harry stopped, tilting his head back and looking up at the heavy grey sky.

It was too much. Everything. He couldn’t even set out to die. And now, Malfoy knew his secret. He’d probably already owled the Ministry. He would’ve lost his job, and it was only a matter of time before the press caught wind. Oh, and how he’d be destroyed by them, eaten alive, ridiculed, demonised. And the worst part, it would all be true. He’d have nothing to hold him on the course, he’d have no legs to stand on in refuting their claims. They’d call him pathetic and weak and lawbreaking scum. And he was. He really was.

He’d be a disgrace. He was a disgrace.

What would Ron and Hermione say? They’d know by now, if the Ministry had been informed.

The thought of Hermione’s shocked, disappointed, then determinedly mothering face was enough to cause Harry to drop his head into his hands. They’d have to give Rose another godparent. There’s no way that he, Harry James Potter, heroin addict and suicidal fuckup, could be trusted with anything anymore.

He lurched forward, his legs nearly giving out beneath him.

“I didn’t want this. I didn’t want any of this,” he choked out, addressing the gaps between the trees, or perhaps the trees themselves. His eyes were blurry and tears were falling on his sallow cheeks. His scarred hands were clutching at the front of his shirt, the collar feeling tight, or maybe it was getting hard to breathe, or maybe it was all just suffocating him, stripping the air from his lungs.

His stomach lurched, nausea rolling up from his abdomen to settle in his raw throat.

“I wanted to be happy. I wanted to feel free.” He choked out, his fingernails leaving streaking red lines along his own throat. It was so hard to breathe.

Harry sank down against a fallen tree, shivering openly, tears free falling from his swollen and puffy eyes.

Why had Malfoy saved him? The thought struck him suddenly, without warning. What did he know about death? Harry felt guilty as soon as the thought materialised. He had read the reports of the bodies removed from Malfoy Manor, of the blood, of the dark magic that had taken on a life of its own there.

Maybe Malfoy knew death, but he certainly would never understand what Harry was going
through. It didn’t matter, Harry realised, as his vision began to fade, he was going to die out here in the cold, anyway.

Harry heaved, vomiting nothing but bile, having no idea when he last ate anything. He leaned his head back against the fallen tree behind him, tasting blood in his mouth. He groaned, softly.

“Just let me go already.” He pleaded, his eyes falling shut, his consciousness falling away as darkness closed in. Snow fell lightly in the clearing.
March 18, 2008

Well, Draco thought, that had gone just as bad as he and his inner boggart could have predicted. He was honestly surprised Harry hadn’t tried to murder him, or at least beat the shit out of him. He had been so mad, and then he just stomped off into the forest in a towering rage. The fucking forbidden forest, with no idea how far he was from anything. No winter clothes, no protection from the elements.

Draco let out a yell of frustration. God damn it Harry Fucking Potter that insufferable PRAT. First, he couldn’t let Harry die because he had been the only one to know that he was in trouble, and now he was in the same fucking position, because no one out there knew he was wandering aimlessly through a malevolent and unforgiving forest. Maybe he would send a patronus to his friends, Draco reasoned.

Draco paced the short length of the cottage a few dozen times before halting. He had felt in his pocket for a post-it note of hope but instead he felt the letter he had found next to Harry at Grimmauld Place. Pulling out the torn parchment he braced himself to read what Harry had anticipated to be his last words.

Hermione,

It’s ok if you don’t understand. I love you and Ron and Rose more than anything, and I know you have a beautiful, happy life ahead of you. Don’t waste time being sad.

I’ve talked it over with Sirius. This is for the best.

I’ll be ok.

- Harry

The simple letter had clenched a tight fist around Draco’s insides.

He knew what he had to do, just as he knew when he read Harry’s file. He needed to go out and find Harry. He was convinced that Harry would try and punch his lights out, but he couldn’t just leave it like this. Maybe after Harry cooled off he would… what? What did Draco think this would accomplish? Well, if anything, he thought, perhaps he could postpone Harry’s suicide for another day.

There was nothing for it. He pulled on his layers and stomped out the front door to try and follow Harry’s footprints in the thin layer of old snow and detritus. God, he hoped Harry was okay. Frustration and anger was giving way to worry and slowly rising panic as he tramped through the thick woods. He was on the path that he didn’t recognise. Harry hadn’t even set off in the general direction of Hogwarts. The hot headed ass-kettle.

Thinking quickly, Draco stopped, turned back to look at the cottage, and cast a honing charm. At least, now his wand would know how to get him back to the cottage if he was out past dark. He really hoped he wouldn’t be out past dark. Alone. In the forbidden forest. This was not a good start.
to his sabbatical. 6 hours in, and things were already tits up.

Snow had begun coming down lightly. What if Harry got lost and died of hypothermia? He had maybe 3 hours of daylight left. How would he even begin to explain this to someone if he had Harry’s body on his hands to deal with? Draco did not want to think about it.

He cast a warming charm on himself and pulled his scarf tighter around his neck and face. This was not pleasant weather for someone who had just nearly died to be wandering around in. Fear licked at his insides. He both wanted to find Harry as soon as possible, and didn’t want to face him. It seemed, Harry was far easier to deal with when he was in a medically induced coma. Awake, furious, vulnerable, and embarrassed Harry in withdrawal from heroin was another bucket of flobberworms altogether.

The leaves crunched underfoot and Draco scrutinised the path in front of him. Snow was beginning to obscure Harry’s footprints, and he had to take a deep breath and count to 10 to try and quell the looping image of Harry lying dead under a blanket of snow that was replaying in his mind over and over again. Maybe he disapparated? Probably not. Harry was probably too weak to disapparate such a long distance. And even if he could, there was the issue of his self-destructive behaviour that had led him to a heroin-assisted-suicide. Draco wondered if he should alert Granger in the event he couldn’t find Harry. Or maybe Luna. This was her department, after all.

Draco had been walking for nearly an hour when the path split and the snow had officially obscured the remainder of Harry’s trail. Fuck. He took a deep breath, trying to fight the urge to cry and laugh maniacally. It would be Potter that pushed him right over the edge into insanity. He rubbed his face roughly trying to warm his cheeks and hope for some inspiration.

“Come on Draco.” He moaned to himself. “You stalked this prat for nearly seven years in school, use your inner Potter-Locating skills and find this nuisance of a man before he dies of exposure.” Finally opening his eyes he reassessed the two paths to look for signs of recent traversing. A twig snapped behind him and he whirled around. He had nearly forgotten that he was in a dangerous wilderness full of wild magical and non magical creatures that could easily kill him with no one being any the wiser. After staring into the thicket of trees he had recently exited before coming to the fork, he was shocked to see a thestral meander slowly out towards him, and behind it, her little foal.

Odd. Draco thought. He knew there were plenty of thestrals in the forest and that they were essentially harmless, but the sight of their milky glass eyes staring through him made him feel a bit creeped out at the best of times. “Have you seen someone blundering about with the emotional range of a teaspoon?” He asked the thestral, stupidly. He felt compelled to break the silence, and talking to it seemed to make more sense than ignoring it. How do you ignore one of these things anyway? They look so ominous.

The thestral just continued its slow ambling towards Draco. He watched as it passed by him so close that Draco had to take a step back to allow it forward on the path without brushing against him. As the little foal scrambled to keep up, it sniffed at Draco hopefully before moving along to follow its mother. At the fork, the thestral lifted its head to smell the air before choosing the path to the left. He watched it walk slowly before realising something horrifying.

Thestrals were drawn to the smell of blood. Were they being drawn towards Harry? Was he injured? Fuck. Maybe they were just smelling their next meal, but Draco didn’t want to chance that next meal being the body of the Golden Boy. He decided to hurry along the path after the thestrals. They didn’t seem to be too concerned that Draco scooted past them and ran ahead down the path. After 20 minutes of jogging, the path opened up into a little clearing with a few old fallen trees. On
the other side of a rather large log at the opposite side of the clearing, Draco saw the familiar site of a rats nest of hair slumped against a fallen tree.

Oh thank fuck, was Draco’s first thought. Fuck, not again, was his second.

Draco darted over to Harry to check his vitals. He was freezing, there was a puddle of foamy bile next to him, and he had had a nasty nose bleed that was drying down the front of his face and chest. No wonder the thestrals were interested.

Draco felt his pulse, it was racing. Harry’s withdrawal was going to be ongoing for a while and he wasn’t surprised that Harry passed out after a bit of exertion. He cast a scourgify on the blood to keep the thestrals and other wild animals at bay, then the strongest warming charm he could before drying Harry’s clothes. After the basics were taken care of, he braced himself to wake Harry up. With the probability of another row pretty high he decided not to have his face a mere six inches away from Harry and backed up before casting enervate.

Harry moaned and furrowed his eyebrows but didn’t open his eyes. Draco felt stupid for not bringing some potions with him, he must be in a lot of pain. But Draco had left in too much of a hurry.

“Potter?” He asked warily.

“Mph.” Was all Harry managed.

“Potter, what happened?”

“Fell over.” he mumbled, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes and drawing his knees up to his chest. “Why are you here?”

“You think I was going to let you wander off into the fucking forbidden forest in a snowstorm in your state? How much of an arsehole do you think I am?”

“Enough of an arsehole to pitch up at all.” He slung.

Draco sighed. “You can hate me all you want Potter, but I’m not going to be complicit in this.”

“I couldn’t disapparate.” Harry said after a long pause. He still hadn’t looked at Draco. “I tried to disapparate.”

“I suspected as much. Your magic has probably taken a huge hit.” he said, risking moving a little closer to Potter.

He finally looked up at Draco. “I can’t use it at all.” his face was blank. Resigned.

“What do you mean ‘at all’?” Draco asked.

Harry had a pinched and sick look on his face. “Like it’s gone. Couldn’t cast my patronus, could disapparate, couldn’t cast a warming charm, nothing.” He sighed heavily, like this admission had been painful. “Then I got dizzy, puked and then I don’t remember.”

“Can you stand? Do you think you could walk?” Draco asked. He didn’t want to risk disapparating them both, Harry was obviously unstable, yet he was feeling antsy to get back to the cottage before dark and they only had just over an hour of light left. He heard the thestrals enter the clearing behind him.
“Yeah, then you can apperate me home.” It was a statement, an imperial decree, and Draco felt his alarm bells going off.

“No.” Draco said with wide eyes.

“No?” Harry asked acidly. “You can’t just keep me here, Malfoy!” He spit the name Malfoy at him like an insult and then suddenly Harry was furious again. All sleepy confusion gone. Just rage in his eyes. He looked like he was about to rip Draco’s throat out if he got near enough.

“You tried to kill yourself today, twice! You’re clearly incapable of making responsible informed decisions for yourself at the moment!” Draco yelled, getting to his feet, and gesticulating wildly. “Your behaviour is erratic, and you’re clearly trying to get back to your hovel to use again, where you will most likely die as a result. So, no.” He took one more step back for good measure. He didn’t feel like getting into a brawl just now.

Harry just gaped at him, mouth opening and closing like a pissed off goldfish, not able to find the right insult to throw at him. “Just fucking take me back!” He eventually yelled. He was clearly too weak to actually attack Draco, but he could see the consideration Harry was giving it.

“No!”

“Well I’m not going with you to your stupid fucking cabin. I cant believe you fucking kidnapped me and brought me here of all places! Why the fuck are we in the forbidden forest, anyway?” Harry was turning a blotchy shade of purple with anger and indignation.

“Yeah, well, I can’t believe no one at the hospital picked up what was going on with you and sent you home with orders for bed rest, but here we are!” Draco finished dramatically, indicating how unbelievable their predicament was, completely ignoring Harry’s second question.

Harry just glared at Draco. “I’m not coming with you, Malfoy.”

“You have literally two options, Potter,” Draco started, “come with me to my stupid fucking cabin where I can help you finish withdrawing safely, or stay here and freeze to death and let the thestrals eat you.” He finished pointing over his shoulder with his thumb at the two thestrals that were watching the scene with quiet interest. “That’s it.” Draco held his eyes for what felt like an uncomfortably long time.

Eventually Harry glanced past Draco towards the thestrals, eyebrows still furrowed in anger, and mouth in a hard line. After a beat he looked up at Draco, something shifting subtly in his face. Something that looked a lot like fear.

They just looked at one another. Harry seemed to be examining him with a look of deep concentration, the lines on his face drawn into a serious glower.

“What if I can’t do it.” He asked, looking away. His knees were drawn up to his chest, his arms around them, curling into himself as tightly as possible.

“There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” Draco finally said after a pause. His insides twisting violently at the vulnerability of Harry’s position. If he were in Harry’s situation, he too would be weighing the pros and cons of allowing the thestrals to eat his body in the woods, rather than try and cope with the reality of what he was being faced with.

Draco took a deep steadying breath. He was a Slytherin, and he knew what he would need if he were in Harry’s shoes. He would need an offering, a show of solidarity, a fuck up for a fuck up, tit for tat. He had seen Harry in a moment of despair, of vulnerability, and he would have to let Harry
see a part of that in himself before he had a hope of convincing Harry to live for another day. He knew the man was too seriously considering staying to die in the woods, alone, as he intended to do in Grimmauld Place. Draco couldn’t give up yet.

“I tried to kill myself in 8th year.” Draco said evenly. Harry just tilted his head slightly in response, considering the statement. He rolled up his sleeve to show his dark mark and the long scar that stretched along it from his wrist to the inner crook of his elbow. “It was during Christmas holiday at the manor. Pansy found me. She was so pissed off that I had asked her to spend Christmas with me then decided to kill myself anyways, that she moved to France. We communicate exclusively through holiday greeting cards now.”

“But why do you have a scar? Couldn’t they fix that?” Harry asked as if he was solving a riddle instead of discussing death.

“Oh, my mother refused to take me into the hospital.” He told him, as he recovered his arm. “She thought it would make us look bad if people found out, make us seem weak after everything that had happened. It’s very unbefitting of a Malfoy to do something so plebeian as wrist slitting. I mean, I didn’t even use magic.” Draco smirked without humour, and crossed his arms. “So, she called a private healer who could be discreet, but by the time he got there he couldn’t do anything about the scar. Once I came to, she acted as though nothing had happened. Like everything was fine. Like her son hadn't just tried to off himself in the rose garden.” Harry just stared back without comment.

They looked at one another for a long while.

“The rose garden, really?” Harry asked, breaking the silence. “How dramatic.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Quite.” He said, examining his fingers. Draco weighed his words before speaking again. “What I’m trying to say, is that you’re not the only one who fell down after the war and didn’t want to get back up again.” Draco didn’t look up to meet Harry’s eyes.

They sat in silence again for what felt like an eternity. Draco resisting the urge to chivy Harry into making a decision because he was feeling antsy about the amount of daylight they had left. But he knew this silence was heavy with real deliberation and he didn’t want to interrupt Harry’s processing by being impatient.

Harry eventually looked up at Draco and just stared at him. It felt like he was being picked apart piece by piece and examined for faults. “Why are you doing this?” Harry asked none too gentle.

Draco weighed his words. “Like I said, I can’t be complicit in this. Call it my duty as a healer, call it the fact that you’ve saved my ass a fair few times, or call it my poor decision making skills that I do stupid shit when you’re involved. You choose.”

Harry didn’t respond. He didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, but he didn’t press it. He just sat there fidgeting with the twigs and wet leaves strewn around him.

Draco’s restraint finally broke. “Well if you’re done pondering the meaning of life, we’ve got about 45 minutes until dark, and it’ll take us twice that long to get back.”

“What if I decided I want to be eaten by thestrals?” Harry asked, a bit too seriously.

“Well then I’d say you’re a bit of a dick for not telling me sooner so I could get back before dark.” Draco said, not being able to resist goading Harry.

He thought he saw Harry’s mouth twitch in response. “You’re a right git, you know that?” He said,
with only half the amount of venom.

“Yes, and you’re a right ray of sunshine, are you?” He raised his eyebrows in question.

Harry sighed heavily, the fight bleeding from his body, his shoulders slumping. “Fine.” He said. “I’ll come to your stupid fucking cabin.”

“Well thank merlin’s sagging testicles for that. Let’s go, then.” Draco said running his hand over his face in relief.

Harry looked awkward and embarrassed again. “I don’t feel too great.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” Draco said, kindly. “I’ll help you get there, don’t worry about it.”

He walked closer to Harry, no longer fearing physical retribution, and held out his hand to help him up. Harry looked at the proffered hand and seemed to consider rejecting the offer of help, but eventually he took Draco’s hand and was slowly hauled to his feet.

Harry looked like a wreck, and seemed wobbly on his feet. It seemed he was running on pure adrenaline and panic when he left the cottage, and now he had no fuel left. He clutched at Draco’s arm for support as he tried to straighten himself out to begin walking. Draco noticed he shivered slightly, and he pulled off his hat and scarf and began shoving them onto Potter’s wasted frame.

“Fuck off, I’m fine.” Harry tried to protest.

Draco just clicked at him disapprovingly, taking advantage of Harry’s weakened state to firmly wrap the scarf around him. Without warning he pulled out his wand and cast another drying and warming charm on Harry. “Let me know when you need another warming charm.” He said as Harry yelped in shock.

“Jeez Malfoy, warn me next time will you?”

Draco didn’t respond. He just looped his arm through Harry’s, trying to make it seem like a totally ordinary thing that they often did, so Harry wouldn’t feel anymore awkward than he needed to, and they began the slow walk back to the cottage.

As they passed the thestrals, Draco nodded his thanks and brushed his hand along the snout of the foal, Harry didn’t comment. The thestrals watched him walk along the path and out of site.

Night had begun to fall by the time they reached the fork in the path. Fuck, Draco thought, at this rate it would take them another two hours in the dark before they made it. Harry had to walk slowly, there was nothing for it. He had had to stop twice already to lean against a tree, to calm the buzzing in his ears and fend off the urge to dry heave. He really didn’t look good. This foray into the wilderness was probably the last thing he needed on his precarious path to recovery.

“I have a suggestion.” Draco announced, when dusk had settled around them and Harry had stopped for a third time.

“What?” Harry breathed.

“How about I levitate you there? I can conjure a stretcher, we do it at St. Mungo’s all the time.” Draco suggested calmly, channeling his inner Severus, knowing this suggestion could make Harry feel angry and overly self aware again.

But, apparently the gods were smiling down on Draco. That, or Harry was feeling even more
fucked than he looked, because he just shrugged his acquiescence and said, “Sure. Whatever.”

Trying not to let on how relieved this made him, Draco turned his wand on Harry, whispered the spell, and watched as Harry floated off the ground and tipped back to be wrapped snugly onto the stretcher.

“Well this is fucking weird.” Harry mused, tiredly, almost smiling.

“I’m sure it is.” Draco did smile a little. “Let me know if you’re feeling motion sick and need to stop. Maybe you can even sleep a bit if I keep it still enough.”

Harry just grunted in acknowledgement. He had already closed his eyes and nestled back into the spell holding him up. After feeling fairly confident that the spell work was steady, Draco began jogging towards the cottage. Finally, they were making progress.

45 minutes later, Draco was panting and sweating as they came through the trees in front of the cottage. He carefully lowered a very groggy, also sweating Potter, who grunted a little at the contact with the ground. Stumbling as Harry stood on shaky legs, Draco helped him slump up the steps to the front door.

As soon as they walked in the house, Draco lit a fire in the grate and began peeling off his coat. Harry followed warily behind, stopping in front of the bunk beds that Draco had transfigured.

“Bunk beds? Really? What are we, twelve?” Harry was going for scathing, but not having enough energy to get there.

Draco just snorted as he added logs to the fire and boiled a kettle for tea.

“I call top bunk.” Harry said, a hint of challenge beneath his exhaustion.

“What are you, twelve?” Draco countered, enjoying the snipping. He didn’t really care honestly. Harry could be top bunk if it would keep him from running off into the woods again.

Harry snorted in response, then his quiet voice broke through the clinking of tea cups and spoons, “Was that story real? Or did you just tell me that to get me out of the forest?”

Draco paused his movements for a moment, not that surprised by the question, but didn’t turn around. “It was real.” He almost whispered. Harry didn’t respond, and Draco resumed his fiddling with the teapot when he heard the creaking of the bunk beds as Harry climbed up and collapsed onto the mattress. Draco glanced over at the beds, he hadn’t even bothered to change his clothes or take the scarf and hat off.

“Tea?” Draco asked quietly, feeling it would be rude not to offer. But there was no response. Harry had passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Draco grabbed his night things and went to change in the small wash closet in the corner of the cottage and do his evening ablutions. When he came back out, the room was feeling warmer and it was filled with the soft sound of Harry’s breathing. It was oddly soothing.

He drank his tea, conjured a blanket to cover Harry with, then climbed into his own bunk, thinking that maybe today hadn’t been a total disaster. He wondered what tomorrow would be before giving in to his own exhaustion and falling asleep.
April 2nd, 2008

He was in the forest again, but it was warm, like summer, and smelled as though it had just rained, the ferns curling around bases of trees that jutted up toward the softening afternoon sky. He could hear their soft breathing and rustling of leather wings, of hooves on the damp forest floor. His hands dropped down to the bucket in front of him, searching around in the half congealed mess, the powerful smell of metal greeting his movements. His fingers finally settled on a half slab of ribs from deep in the pail before him. He held it out, dripping, for the nearest thestral, who pinned their ears back and sniffed it, a long tongue curling out to lick around the bony edge. It grabbed the piece from him, crunching the bones in its teeth, stepping up closer to the bucket.

It’s ears flicked forward and Harry reached into the bucket again, finding a ragged bit of flank. The thestral was close enough now that he had barely brought it up out of the bucket before it was being wolfed down. The thestrals lips and nose bumped up against his hand, surprisingly soft and gentle. A tongue snaked out and licked the blood from his hands.

“You’re not just death, are you?” Harry asked, smiling as the velvety black lips nuzzled into his palm. There was a snort of hot air into his hand and Harry laughed. He watched as the thestral licked his hands clean.

More thestrals gathered in the background, eager for their turns, antsy with the smell of blood so heavy in the air.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, the dream fading instantly. The dried herbs hanging above him smelled sweet, and it instantly made him feel sick. Why did he have to take the top bunk? Climbing up and down to dash to the tiny loo to sick up every few hours was actual torture, but he’d be damned if his pride would allow him to voice his weakness and ask Malfoy to swop with him.

Malfoy. That fucking git.

Yes, he had saved his life. Twice. He’d nursed him through the worst few days of his life - when he had openly sobbed, convinced the pain would eat him alive - he’d fed him and helped him change his clothes when he was too weak to do anything for himself.

They’d spent those days mostly in silence, Harry taking whatever potions and food Malfoy offered - he was still angry, more more at himself now than anything else.

Malfoy was a fucking enigma, but at least he didn’t make Harry feel bad for his many needs.

He rolled on his side to escape the sweet smell that threatened his tentative gastrointestinal integrity. Malfoy noticed his movements from across the room.

“Breakfast, Potter.”

Harry clambered down into their tiny living space, scrubbing his face and rubbing away the sleep
Malfy slid a lime green potion across the small table in Harry’s direction, part of their morning breakfast ritual. Harry had never asked what it was, it just usually made him warm and sleepy, and it helped push away the most intolerable of the symptoms.

“I…” Harry started, unsure of himself for a moment, then pressing on. “I’m not sure I need it today.”

His voice was rough with lack of use, but he finished, rubbing his hand along the back of his head, musing with the birds nest of hair absently, obviously feeling self conscious. He was standing, not so dizzy, his thoughts not so frantic, not sweating, it seemed like the day to try.

Malfy looked up at him, his face impassive, expression unreadable. “Good. then I’ll need your help today with something.” He replied, simply.

Harry was almost already regretting letting on he was feeling better, but he sighed and let it go - Malfy had done so much for him already, the least he could do would be to lend a hand where he could.

Harry took the offered tea and toast silently, staring at the small window in the kitchen, hints of blue sky and deep green trees beyond.

“What day is it?” Harry asked, mouth half full of the buttered rye.

“April 2nd.” Malfy answered, gingerly sipping his tea.

“Shit.” Harry said, his newfound feelings of tentative ease evaporating in an instant. He had been out for two weeks. He wasn’t there to comfort Ron and Molly and Arthur on the twin’s day. He swallowed hard, tears bubbling up with the guilt.

He stared into his tea, his hand wrapped around the warm mug.

“Ron will be okay. He has Granger.”

Harry’s head snapped up at Malfy’s softly spoken words. His eyes narrowed as he stared across the table.

“The way you had planned things, you wouldn’t be there anyway, Potter. No need to let the guilt eat you up now.”

“What do you know about it, Malfy?” harry hissed, his hackles raised, his shoulders tightening with the anger.

“I know you were going to die before you were going to mention to those same people you treat with such care that you couldn’t handle anything yourself. That you needed their help.” Malfoy replied calmly, meeting Harry’s stare.

Harry let his statement hang in the air between them. Nothing he had said was false.

“Come on.” Malfy said, standing up and vanishing the crumbs left from their meal.

“We’ve got work to do.”
It was hours later in the garden before they spoke again.

“How did you get into Grimmauld Place?”

Harry’s voice carried across the little thicket they were trying to clear, which had obscured ancient stone rectangles that dotted the little area around the house. It was all thick with thistles and other weeds, grasses and wiry stemmed forest growers that were adamant they belonged. Harry hadn’t realised it was a garden until they had pulled apart the mass of blackberry bramble that had taken over the paths between the two closest raised beds.

It had been two hours since breakfast, and Harry had ruminated on many things in the time they had been hacking and chopping and pulling away at the under and overgrowth, much of it circling back to what he had made of his life, of his home. He couldn’t shake the desire to go back, even if he could logically understand it was just the desire to use.

He was exhausted, covered in scrapes, scratches, even bubotuber pus, and had needed a moment to sit in the shade by the edge of the cabin. He collapsed with a heavy sigh, leaning back against the wall beneath the overhang of living roof, where little strangler vines stretched toward the ground below.

He knew Malfoy had heard him, as he had stilled from where he was trying to uproot and replant an old and rather delicate looking aconite plant. Harry watched him, his back bent over the bed, hair stuck up in indelicate ways, as it never was when they were at school. He looked sweaty and rather out of his element, and Harry liked that his posh exterior was easily tarnished.

“I’m a Black by blood. Technically, I’m the Black heir, the house belongs to me.” Malfoy didn’t bother turning around, but he didn’t return to fussing over the aconite, so Harry took it as an invitation.

“Sirius left it to me.” Harry couldn’t keep the venom out of his voice, even if he knew Malfoy was, at least partially, right.

Malfoy didn’t answer, but leaned back on his heels, his nice trousers covered in the rich black dirt of the little hillock the cabin sat upon. Harry could see a sigh raise and lower his shoulders.

“He probably shouldn’t have, seeing as what I’ve done with it.” The words were out of his mouth and hanging in the space between them before Harry could stop himself. He turned away to look out across the little meadow, his heart suddenly heavy with reality. He didn’t deserve Sirius’s house, or his legacy. Fuck, he definitely didn’t deserve him sacrificing his life for… this.

“I will sell Malfoy Manor as soon as it comes into my name.” Malfoy stated, still turned away from Harry.

“Why?” Harry asked, his eyebrows raising in surprise. He knew it had been a hellhole, but he never guessed Malfoy would give up all that family history and whatnot with such ease. He was supposed to be the proudest of the purebloods, lording over his magical manor and fortune, siring heirs and hoarding priceless dark artifacts.

“You think you have sullied the House of Black? Voldemort lived in that house. He tortured, then murdered people there. I wouldn’t have chosen it, but I will always feel the guilt of not being able to stop it. I can barely stand to go see my mother for ten minutes once a month.”

Malfoy stood and dusted his hands over his pants, barely making a dent in the dirt that covered them.
“Come on then. Let’s break for tea.” Malfoy closed the conversation and stalked back into the cabin.

Harry was grateful, gardening without magic was much harder than he remembered, and he definitely needed a real break, with some sugar, and he was oddly looking forward to Malfoy’s strange teas. Each morning was something new and different, odd flavours and sensations that Harry was entirely unfamiliar with. Each evening, however, was the same, something that made him warm and comfortable climbing into the tiny mattress of the top bunk. He would have to ask him about it sometime.

He stood, stretching his arms high above his head, groaning with the stiffness that had settled into his bones. His mind was still preoccupied with thoughts of the temptations that lay far outside the forest, but they were so far out of his reach, and thoughts of this new Malfoy with his own struggles quieted them significantly.

Harry followed him inside, and sat down at the kitchen table, watching Malfoy busy himself with the tea. He wondered what he and his mother discussed when they met once a month. The weather? Something pureblood and uptight and full of hidden meanings in the repartee?

A sudden tapping on the window broke Harry away from his thoughts, and he looked up to see an owl nibbling at the corner of the pane. Malfoy glared at it and shooed it away, nearly knocking over the kettle in his haste to get the bird away.

“But it had a letter, Malfoy - why’d you chase him off?” Harry asked, completely bewildered at why Malfoy would be shunning communication. He had seen him answer an owl perfectly happily just the other morning in one of his rare moments of lucidity.

Malfoy brought two cups of tea to the table and sat down across from Harry. “It wasn’t for me - it’s an owl looking for you. I’ve been chasing them away every day since you’ve gotten here.” Malfoy’s voice was even as he eyed him, measuring his response.

“Oh.” Harry said suddenly, taken aback by the immense gratitude he felt. Malfoy was right, he wasn’t ready to deal with anyone asking him anything - he wasn’t ready to give answers and talk about what was going on. No. He didn’t want to. Anxiety gripped his stomach and his hands grasped the warm mug gratefully.

“If the owl returns with the letter, there will be two reasons. One, you’re dead. Two, you’re somewhere unreachable or untraceable. With Ministry owls like that, odds are on the former, not the latter.” Malfoy supplied, still watching Harry closely. Harry looked up and caught his gaze.

“So, they think I’m dead?” he asked. He wasn’t sure if this was a good or a bad thing yet.

“Yes.” Malfoy said simply. He took a sip of the scalding tea and made a face as if he had forgotten it would be so remarkably hot. “I didn’t want to take the letters for you to read, in case you wanted… solitude. While you figure things out, anyway.”

Harry grimaced. He was glad Malfoy hadn’t accepted the letters - it would be easier to not feel obligated to answer anyone’s inquiries. He didn’t revel in the idea that his friends thought he was dead, but he needed the space. The time. To… figure things out? What did that even mean? At least he wasn’t beholden to anyone but himself. And Malfoy, though he didn’t much count.

“Thanks.” Harry finally said. Relieved, for the moment.

Harry leaned back in his chair, the ancient, spindly thing creaking ominously beneath him. He
wondered what the Ministry would do.

The chair snapped back down as Harry’s mouth flew open, staring at Malfoy.

“Malfoy. Grimmauld Place. What if they look for me there? I mean, I told Hermione and Ron I had bought a new apartment somewhere, so maybe they haven’t gone yet, but … hell, if they go… I mean. I left it... I left a note even.” His mind was racing. He grabbed at his hair and stood, pacing in the tiny area between the table, fireplace and bed. Nausea was piling up behind his tongue. He wanted to run.

Malfoy looked back at him evenly, his cup of tea still between his hands, seated at the table. “Well, the wards were quite strong, it will take them quite a while to get in, when they do eventually think to check there. That house has a particularly vicious nature, I can’t see it giving in without a fight.” He raised an eyebrow, almost to himself as he sipped at the tea again.

“And I took your note.” He finished, producing a crumpled bit of paper from his pocket and laying it on the table, not meeting Harry’s shocked gaze.

“Why?” Harry finally managed, completely taken aback, and recoiling into himself at the memory of writing it.

“To help remind myself that even the Saviour of the wizarding world is also human.” Malfoy shrugged. “Do you want it back?” He asked, finally looking up into Harry’s bewildered expression.

“No.” Harry pulled the word from deep within himself. It came out as a rough, rather forceful sound, full of emotion - defiance?

This was it, he thought, dropping his shoulders down, this is what he was waiting for - somewhere buried within he had felt an old, aching longing for himself. Somewhere, there were hints of the courageous, stubborn, lion-hearted boy who defied everyone’s expectation. Harry wanted to feel that again, to feel bold and brave and firey with determination. He wanted himself back.

To be himself, but to feel… human. He could be flawed and scared and struggling and still be Harry. Malfoy, in his own way, had given Harry permission to exist as both, and to not be judged for it.

In the forest, coming back from the thestrals in the clearing, yeah, he had decided not to die, but he had been waiting these few weeks to decide if he did really want to live. And there was a difference, one he hadn’t thought about until that moment, with his letter of goodbye on the table and the one man he would’ve never trusted with anything, painstakingly nursing him back from the edge, not holding him to anything, not asking for anything.

He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, feeling the weight of everything pull down on his skull, his thoughts pooling, circling around what he would need to do, the impossible mountain he would need to climb. He still felt bound by the incomprehensible urges and desires that gnawed at his edges, reminding him over and over of what he needed, what he wanted, those had not dissipated. Instead, mixing with those poisonous tendrils were glimmers of determination, of resilience.

He groaned, not realising that Malfoy’s eyes were still on him, overwhelmed with ideas of his next step. He wanted to go to Grimmauld Place, but not to use the drugs he had left there, to get rid of them, for good.

He held to his moment of strength as he thought through what that would take. He would have to
resist, reject, refute and deny the parts of himself that were sick with desire - he would have to fight for every moment to be able to leave Grimmauld Place alive.

Harry felt the familiar prickling in his skin, the beads of sweat forming down his back, the buzzing sensation licking at his shoulders, but he held tight to the word he had conjured. No. He wanted to live.

“I need to go to Grimmauld Place.” Harry intoned, not yet opening his eyes, but enjoying this new sensation of connectedness to his own body - as if he felt more in control of the different pieces of him, and it was satisfying in a way that the numbness and the flaccid apathy of opiates couldn’t mimic.

“Why?”

Harry opened his eyes and regarded Malfoy, both frustrated that he had to explain something so incredibly intangible and ethereal and that he had only just barely worked out for himself moments ago, and grateful he hadn’t just said no, assuming that he was going there to fuck himself up again.

“I want to get rid of it. Everything. My stash, my kit, everything that reminds me of…” Harry tried to gesture at something, not finding the words to describe what he wanted to call his love affair with a pain free life, his dalliance with death (part two), his addiction, his habit, his disease? He didn’t have the language for this.

“And, I’ll need your help…” Harry finished, meeting his gaze, hoping he could trust Malfoy with this.

Malfoy nodded. “Ok.” He said simply, finishing his tea.

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They apparated together as evening fell, Harry gripping Malfoy’s arm, his nerves on a knife edge, stumbling slightly as they landed on the stoop of the familiar face brick townhouse - the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black towered above them. He swallowed down the trembling misgivings that threatened to spill out of him, and stepped up to the giant ironwood door. He had been imagining this all day. He had reassured himself that he could do it.

He gazed at the forest scene before him, the thestrals peeking out from behind trees whose boughs moved softly in an imagined breeze. It was beautiful, ornate, delicate, even. It was lovely, but Harry was overwhelmed with thoughts of all of the nights he had slipped into this hidden fortress to seek out solitude, to carve away at himself. His hand was shaking as he reached toward the door, his eyes drifting up to the little serpent he had befriended on those very same nights of abandon.

“Welcome back, half master of the House of Black.” Hissed the little Berg Adder, shimmering into life, tongue flicking into the air. “You’ve brought the other master - the true keeper of the family Black. The death-beasts must be pleased.”

Harry looked down, and the thestrals had indeed come to the foreground of the forest scene, as if waiting for Malfoy to lay claim to them. The carvings themselves seemed to shimmer with gold, the outlines of their wings looking as though they had been dipped in filigree, ornate patterns dripping into a softened existence on the dark planes of wood.

“He is here to help me reclaim my life.” Harry whispered back, too quietly for Malfoy to hear, knowing that Malfoy couldn’t understand what he said anyway, but not wanting to share in that reality with anyone else just yet.
“A noble man, indeed.” Said the little snake in reply, the lock clicking open and the heavy door sliding away from his outstretched hand.

He turned, looking over his shoulder, seeing Malfoy standing at the edge of the stoop, not wanting to interfere, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Come on then.” Harry said, “we’re waiting for you.”

He took a deep breath, imbibing the familiar smell of dark magic and dust, and walked through the entry, Malfoy close behind him. As they crossed the threshold, Harry was shocked to see the house light up, no longer the dark and secret passages around single lit lamps that Harry had become so used to - he could gaze down the familiar hallways unhindered. It felt different, lighter, more clear? It was as though they were being welcomed, and Harry wasn’t sure what to make of it - should he be jealous that the house was so fond of Malfoy?

He supposed it didn’t really matter, the old pureblood magic had a thing for blood, and Sirius had long been burned from the family tree before Harry had been entrusted with the dilapidated wizarding home. He wasn’t sure if he ever wanted to come here again after this was done, let alone try and reclaim the place from Malfoy. Tonight, the only thing he wanted to do was make sure the lingering image of his cache wasn’t hanging over his head, reminding him it was waiting for him, should he succumb to a moment of weakness.

That, and ensure if anyone searched Grimmauld Place he wouldn’t be outed to the public. If he was going to start on his climb back from ruin and start finding himself again, he didn’t want to have to deal with everyone in the wizarding world knowing all of his secrets - he would tell his close friends when he was ready, he had reasoned. He would tell them when he felt strong enough, like he could handle their questions, or if they were insensitive, it wouldn’t break him. He would tell them when he could tell them not to worry so much. And things would be ok. Everything would be ok. Harry held on to this little fantasy of normalcy and replayed it in his mind, using it to push back against the aching in his bones, the thrumming sensation radiating up from his toes into his chest, a burning, salivating knowing that what he wanted more than anything was just upstairs, waiting for him.

Harry had been lost in his thoughts, standing at the foot of the staircase, breathing heavily and looking up at the landing above. Several minutes had passed, and he hadn’t noticed Malfoy watching him closely. Watching the way he flexed his hands into fists, rocked onto his toes, pulled his shoulders up and down. The way he kept having to swallow back the saliva pooling in his mouth, and how his adams apple would pull down next to the visible pulsation in his jugular notch - and that there was sweat collecting in the dips where his skeleton protruded against his wasted flesh.

Harry startled as he felt a soft presence at his left wrist. Looking down to see Malfoy’s hand nudging against him.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his grey eyes calm and collected, a refuge in the dark chaos of the house where Harry had died.

Harry nodded, his foot lifting up and onto the first step, propelled by the moment of reprieve from his eddying thoughts.

“I’ll be right behind you.” Malfoy said, his voice steady and even, washing over Harry’s building panic, soothing him. Even if he lost control, even if he fucked up, Malfoy was here. He wasn’t going to let him do something horrendously stupid. Harry let himself think of that while he climbed the stairs. For the first time, he was doing this with someone, he wasn’t alone.
Harry paused when they reached the landing with Regulus’s room. He had idolized the man when he had heard his story, he had held him up as brave, as a silent martyr, a hero. But he wasn’t, was he? He was just alone. And he made the choices he thought he had to make because he had nowhere else to turn, no one to help share the burden. No one to fight with him, only against him.

Harry shook his head and sighed, looking over to Malfoy, who had been watching him again.

“The world isn’t split between good people and death eaters.” The words fell out of Harry’s mouth before he could stop himself.

Malfoy smirked back at him. “ Caught on, did you?”

Harry allowed himself a smile, relieved Malfoy didn’t take it the wrong way, glad for the break in tension. He looked up to the last flight they needed to climb, and put one foot in front of the other, summing the landing and staring down the familiar hall. Sirius’s room was just there, waiting for him.

Blood was starting to rush in Harry’s ears, the noise drowning out his ability to think clearly.

“What happened here?” Malfoy’s voice pushed through his thoughts as he looked to the left where he was pointing. His eyes traveling from the doorway to the dark bloodstains on the floor, one eyebrow surreptitiously raised.

Ah, the linen closet. The one he had nailed shut. Harry shuddered.

“I was hallucinating.” Harry answered, not wanting to get in to the details of how the house had retaliated against him insulting the Black brothers, the ones who had been deliberating over his desire for death. How it had shut him in there. With George. And how he had panicked.

Harry shook his head. Fuck. The reality of it pushed down the buzzing of his cravings - it was a dark place he had been in, a place where his mind wasn’t only his.

He pulled his shoulders back and walked down the hall, turning in the doorway to face where he had once come to find solace. The smell of dark magic was thick in the air, combined with the general filth and wretched conditions of the place. Harry balked, taking a moment to absorb the utter squalor he had been immersed in. How had he lived here? He saw what was left of his supply of heroin on the bedside table. Ah, he thought, that’s how.

He didn’t move from the doorway for some time. He felt like sobbing. He was so exhausted, overwhelmed, embarrassed, confused. Half of his brain, as if in a stupor, couldn’t stop reminding him how good he would feel. The other half was scrambling, panicking, grabbing at any hold on reality it could, trying to force images of the closet and filth and horrid reality of his life to break through into his brain.

He couldn’t take it anymore. He stepped forward, gathered up the plastic around the innocent looking powder, and gripped it tightly in his hands, turning and passing Malfoy on his way out of the room, down the hallway, and into the loo, slamming the door behind him.

He stood over the toilet and emptied out the packaging into the bowl, his breathing heavy, sweat pouring off his face, his hands shaking uncontrollably. He leaned over and flushed the chain, afraid of looking at it any longer, afraid of his hands touching even the wrappings that had kept it safe all this time, letting them flutter down onto the green marble floor.

It was done. It was over. Relief poured through Harry at the same time as waves of the familiar nausea gripped him. He wretched up into the toilet, his abdomen clenching and heaving and his
body rebelling his decision with every stuttering breath. He was shaking, not just his hands, but his
arms, his legs, everything was overwhelming him and he stumbled back, slumping against the wall
and sinking down to the floor, his head leaning against the ancient looking tub for support. He was
exhausted.

Harry was focusing on slowing his breathing and swallowing back more rounds of nausea when
the packaging he had been staring at across the floor from him vanished suddenly. He looked up to
see Malfoy in the doorway, his wand out, and the same calm expression on his face. Harry hadn’t
even noticed the door opening.

“You want me to vanish the rest of that mess?” He said, no trace of the familiar sneer or haughty
tones.

Harry nodded. He wanted a bath. He wanted to scrub his skin clean of the smell of dark magic and
regret, and shame. He needed out of this place - he had done what he had come to do, but it had
taken a toll on him. He curled into himself and waited, too overwhelmed even to engage the little
serpents on the taps of the bath, who were looking up at him expectantly.

Malfoy returned to the bathroom doorway, Harry’s leather jacket in one hand.

“What should I do with this?” he asked, holding it out.

Harry looked up, the sight of it knocking the air out of him, his mouth hanging open, his eyes
drinking in the familiar sight. Familiar, because it was Sirius’s. Familiar, because it had been with
him on this whole journey, it had been his constant companion, from the first time until the last.

Malfoy looked back at him, his brows creasing as he processed that Harry was struggling through
something immense.

He crossed the small room and slid down the wall to sit next to Harry, still holding the jacket.

“It was Sirius’s.” Harry croaked out, sounding suspiciously like he was on the verge of tears. “But
I… I ruined the memory of him in it.” Harry brought his hands up to his face and pressed the heels
of his hands into his eyes, breathing deeply, obviously struggling to keep himself together.

“It’s just a jacket,” Malfoy said softly, “who you are and what you do when you wear the jacket is
up to you. Life is nothing but choices. Sometimes we make bad ones.”

Harry sighed, lifting his head up to look over at Malfoy. “You don’t understand - the smell, even -
it’s like I’m reliving things I don’t want to.”

“Hmm,” Malfoy ran his hands along the leather, “How about I work on getting it clean? I could
weave some protective magic into it instead? You might be surprised to know I have quite the
knack for scrubbing dark magic out of things that I wanted to reclaim as my own.”

Harry nodded, “just don’t let me see it until I ask for it, okay?” He was too tired to argue anymore.

“Can you apparate us straight from here?” Harry asked, suddenly eager to get back to his top bunk
in the middle of the forest, away from all the things that haunted him, but unsure he had the energy
even for the trek down the stairs and out the front door.

“I did the day I found you.” Malfoy said, his voice quiet and soft.

“Oh.” Harry breathed out the word all in a rush. He realised, for the first time, that this may have
been less than a pleasant excursion for Malfoy as well.
“Thanks, for saving my life. And for bringing me here today. And helping me… with this.” Harry blurted out, awkward and unsure. He was hugging his arms to his chest, cradling himself against the wall and the tub, yet feeling incredibly open, vulnerable. But, he was thankful, he should say thank you. Yet, why did it have to feel like pulling his intestines out of his mouth to say it?

“You did the same for me, Potter.” Malfoy said, as if resigned to the words, looking down at his oxfords, his hands still running over the bundle of leather in his lap.

“So, we’re even, then?” Harry asked, his voice coming out more hopeful than confident.

“For now.” Malfoy said, a hint of a smile on his lips as he stood, turning to offer a hand to Harry to help him up.

Harry grasped his hand and let Malfoy do most of the work hauling him to his feet. He felt weak and shaky, but bolstered by the truce they had reached. He didn’t want to feel indebted, just as he didn’t want Malfoy to feel obligated to take care of him. From here on, he was going to do his best to make his own way.

“Let’s go back” Harry said, offering his arm for Malfoy to take, and they disappeared to their forest clearing with a resounding crack.
Draco was fucking exhausted. They’d only been in Tenebris Hollow for a few short weeks, and he was already feeling completely in over his head. Between helping Harry stay alive, trying to make the space around the cottage usable for a potions garden, tracking the unicorn herds, trying to learn how to knit a hat, and writing his research theories, he felt utterly wrecked.

He was tramping his way back through the forest to the cottage after another failed attempt to get near the unicorns. He knew it would be a challenge getting close to them, he knew that, but it didn’t make the reality of it any less frustrating. He wished they could just see him and understand that he didn’t want to harm them. Maybe they could sense he was after their blood, and just assumed he meant to obtain it through malicious means? Or, maybe they were wild animals and he was a strange human with no grace in an unfamiliar wilderness.

He was sweating profusely as he rounded the last bend in the path before it started descending into the little valley that was Tenebris Hollow. The cottage was down at the very bottom of this dip in the forest floor and the angles of the mountains rose up gently around it protecting it from howling winds and the worst of the weather. From his vantage point he could see the top of the forest that surrounded the little cottage and the small furls of smoke that indicated human life amid the ancient trees.

Stripping off another layer to allow the cool spring breeze better access to his skin, he tried not to feel so overwhelmed by his predicament. What if he spent the next eleven months chasing a unicorn herd that would never let him near them? What if this was all a huge waste of time? What if Harry decided to fuck off as soon as his magic came back? Despite the intensity and fragility of their very precarious arrangement, Draco had come to appreciate having another human around. Even if that human had spent the last two weeks mostly unconscious or in debilitating pain. Draco didn’t know what it would be like when Harry started to come back to himself. He panicked a little at the thought of sharing such close sleeping quarters with someone who wasn’t on death’s doorstep.

He couldn’t think of that now, he had other things to worry about. Perhaps he should write to Beatrice about this. How would he even explain this to his therapist?

Dear Beatrice, I’ve kidnapped the saviour of the wizarding world and am helping him get clean, I quite enjoy his company when he’s unconscious but I’m worried about our sleeping arrangements once he’s not half dead. Any advice?

No. He didn’t think he could even speak to Beatrice about this. He was going to have to use his coping skills on his own. The training wheels were off.

He stomped his way down the forest path through the thick brambles and under the towering trees of oak, pine, cedar, and hawthorn. The smell of damp spring heavy in the air. There were little patches of snow eddies still visible that hadn’t melted yet since the last snow storm, but there were signs of new life everywhere. He heard a rustling off in the underbrush to his right and he drew his wand as a precaution. Maybe it was a squirrel, or a rabbit? Or maybe it was a centaur? A loud squawk startled Draco so badly he nearly lost his balance. A large crow flew out of a bush and landed on a branch ahead of Draco. “You feathered heathen!” he chastised the crow, but it just continued to squawk at him. Draco rolled his eyes, more at himself than the bird, and continued down the path with his wand still out.
As the musings of the crow faded into the background of other forest noises, Draco saw the swish of a long black tail from behind a tree. He recognised the thestral in an instant, and shook his head, smiling. He had been shocked at the number of thestrals he came across in the forest. There were dozens of them. And they didn’t seem in the least bit wary of him. Quite the contrary, actually. He found himself being followed by a number of them as he tried to stalk the unicorn herds. He would have blamed the thestrals for his inability to get close to the unicorns, if he hadn’t seen them walk right up and mingle with their herds. The unicorns seemed supremely unconcerned by their presence.

He chuckled out loud when he realised he had wandered into the middle nearly twenty thestrals picking their way quietly through the underbrush. They all perked their ears towards Draco and watched him curiously as he passed through them. A few stepped towards him and began amicably lumbering in his wake. He thought vaguely that maybe he should be unnerved by so many of them, and that they all seemed fairly interested in his comings and goings, but rather he found them quite endearing. Odd, and a bit awkward, but endearing nonetheless. He would have to bring some meat for them tomorrow when he went back to the unicorns he thought, as looked behind him to see four or five of them slowly ambling down the path after him.

He was hungry, and took the last bit of the trail to the cottage at a jog. He didn’t like to leave Harry on his own for more than a few hours in case he was needed, and he had been gone for nearly five hours already this morning. He stopped jogging and resumed his brisk walking pace just before entering the clearing to the garden at the back steps of the cottage to the West, and held a stitch in his side as he breathed deeply through his nose.

The cottage really was a beautiful place. The gently sloping forest around it seem to hold it like in a cradle. The wild living roof was full of the signs of spring, and thick carpets of green moss and lichen clung to the rough stone walls all along the round little building. Off to the left of the garden was a beautiful little pond where little green lily pads started to pop up, and on the other side of the cottage was an old stone well and iron pump for filling the bath or large cauldrons when an *aguamenti* just didn't cut it. It felt like something out of a fairy tale. Something surreal and ethereal.

Coming into the clearing, he was surprised to see Harry in the garden, pulling weeds with a look of deep concentration on his face, looking far less ill than he had since they came back from their outing to Grimmauld Place.

Draco walked forward, panting from his exertion, holding his stitch, and nodded at Harry when he looked up and saw Draco approaching. Harry nodded back and continued his attack on an impressively large burdock that saw fit to sink its taproot into the middle of the walk way. Their conversation had been minimal since first arriving. Not that they didn’t have anything to talk about, but in the light of the intensity they seemed to always share, they didn’t really have a need to talk. Not yet, anyways.

Once inside the cool shelter of the little cottage, he made a mental list of things he needed to accomplish. First, he needed to get out of his gross clothes. He was sweaty and covered in detritus from crawling on the ground trying to edge his way towards the unicorn herd. Then, he would make lunch, have a strong cup of tea, write to Hagrid about his frustrations, write down his feeble attempts with the unicorns for posterity, go work in the garden, then settle Harry in with his afternoon potions. Finally, after dinner he would pick up his knitting and try to soothe his ragged nerves with some soft yarn. He felt like his head was full to bursting with a million things to think about. He took a deep breath and reminded himself as he closed himself into the bathroom, that all he could do was take this moment by moment and not to panic about what lay ahead.
Draco found himself kneeling in the garden later that afternoon. His quick bath before lunch had been utterly pointless, as he was now covered in more sweat and dirt than he had been before. He was breathing hard and staring daggers into a hedgerow of roses he had unearthed under a gnarled sprawl of brambles and weeds. He felt personally offended, betrayed even, that this garden had been harbouring these dozen or so rose bushes within its midst without Draco’s knowledge. He felt a sharp stab of anger at the thought of the rose bushes awakening after their winter slumber and going on to produce an array of heavily scented flowers to gawk at him every time he walked pass.

With swift retribution, he grabbed his spade and began hacking at the base of the nearest rose bush. It was grueling work, as these plants must have been at least 100 years old judging by the thickness of their trunks, but he revelled in the physical exertion and the non magic of the task. The rational part of his brain said that perhaps he should feel some guilt for senselessly murdering an ancient hedgerow of roses, whose magical properties were probably very powerful, not to mention interesting. But the part of his brain that was trapped in the manor’s rose garden felt a vindictive pleasure at driving the sharp spade into the gnarled roots of this plant and bringing about its timely death.

After 20 minutes of hacking that grew more and more frantic and desperate, Draco was finally able to wrest the rose’s ball of roots from the earth and toss the mangled form of thorns and branches into a heap next to the compost pile of weeds. He sank back down on his knees in front of the hedgerow and resumed his pensive and angry staring. One down, another dozen or so to go.

Draco managed to bring about the demise of five whole rose bushes that evening. Each successive thorny mass harder to pull out than the last one. He eventually tried to resort to magical means of destruction but magic didn’t seem to help much, either. These were old and magical roses, and they were putting up a fight. Well, two could play at that game, he thought bitterly. But after three hours and only five bushes, he decided he would have to save his strength and resume his attack the next day.

“You okay?” he heard an apprehensive voice from behind him that caused Draco to start. Turning around from his seated position, surrounded by the carnage of his rose assault, he saw Potter standing there with a look of profound concern on his face. A look he hadn’t seen directed at him before from this man. Draco thought he must look a right mess if Harry, of all people, were looking at him like that.

Draco just shrugged and turned back towards the rose hedge. He didn’t have much energy left in him to try and explain this, nor did he think he wanted to. Harry could think what he wanted about Draco’s behaviour towards the unforgiving hedge. He wondered with a flush of embarrassment how long Harry had been watching him, and how mad he must have looked hacking maniacally away at the roses. It hadn’t been his normal methodical weeding. He had really viciously attacked those plants.

He heard footsteps approaching and felt Harry’s arm brush against him as he sat down next to Draco. He didn’t say anything. Just sat there, and let his presence comfort him. He hadn’t even realised he was craving comfort, but he really was. Fuck those rose bushes, honestly, he thought.

“I don’t like agapanthus.” Harry said after a long while. Draco’s breathing evened out and he was no longer panting. Draco just looked at him, feeling a little confused, not knowing how to respond. Surely, Harry couldn’t think Draco hated roses just for the sake of it?

“No, really. I hate agapanthus.” He continued, after seeing the apparent look of incredulity on Draco’s face. “My aunt had them in her garden and she fawned over them in the grossest way. I
used to poison them when she wasn’t looking.”

He had heard, in moment of Harry’s delusions and nightmares, during the worst of his withdrawals, some of what sounded like Harry’s childhood memories. He didn’t know much about Harry’s early years, other than he was raised by muggle relatives. But given the state of terror Harry had been in when wrapped in another nightmare, it gave Draco a pause to think that growing up with them may not have been the most pleasant experience.

Draco snorted, trying not to laugh at the image of boy wonder poisoning his aunt’s agapanthus out of sheer spite. “Not the nicest, were they?” Draco said, finally responding, fiddling with some twigs on the ground.

Harry smirked and shook his head, but didn’t answer.

“I use to love roses.” Draco said finally. He didn’t actually mean to say it. It just kind of slipped out.

“Not anymore?” Harry asked, without looking at him.

“Not anymore.” he said sighing. “One of the many things Voldemort and his Death Eaters ruined for me.”

They were quiet for a while again before Harry spoke. “I’m hungry, let’s go eat something.”

Today was full of little surprises, thought Draco as he watched Harry busy himself making them peanut butter and jam sandwiches. He himself began the ritual of tea making and preparing Harry’s evening potion. Harry glanced sideways at him as he spread liberal amounts of raspberry jam onto several pieces of seeded bread in his sandwich assembly line. “I think I’d like to try and leave the potion for tonight.” He said hesitantly, as if he was wary of Draco’s response.

Draco stilled for a moment, pondering this. Yes, eventually Harry wouldn’t need these potions anymore, but Draco wasn’t so sure that tonight was that night. “Are you sure?” Draco asked.

“What do you think?” Harry countered, unsure.

“I think you could try.” Draco said after a moment. “If you feel like it’s too much without it, I’ll leave it out for you, over here.” He indicated to the tea tray. Perhaps Draco’s nervousness about this was his own baggage. Perhaps Draco only slept so soundly at night because of the knowledge that his unlikely housemate was incapable of much more than vague shuffling to the loo when under the influence of these potions. He tried to shake off his not so irrational fear of people near him when he slept.

“Thanks.” Harry said quietly. “I just want to feel like myself again.”

Draco nodded.

“Shit, we’re out of peanut butter.” he said as he scraped the remnants of a jar feebly with a butter knife. “When do you find time to go grocery shopping by the way? The cupboards are always stocked.”

“Oh, we have an enchanted cupboard.” Draco supplied, pointing to the nondescript cupboard door at the far end of the kitchen under the counter. “If there’s something specific you want, just write it on a piece of parchment and stick it in there. The housetwelves will read it and send you what you want. It was McGonagall’s idea.”
Harry seemed rather impressed by that. “How quickly do they usually respond?”

“I don’t know actually, I usually leave the list in there at night before bed and empty it in the morning. Why don’t you find out?”

Harry didn’t hesitate grabbing a scrap of parchment and scribbling a few words down and placing it carefully on the centre shelf in the enchanted cupboard. He closed it and after waiting for what seemed like 30 seconds he opened it again. They were both surprised to see a jar of peanut butter there so quickly.

“Damn.” Harry said impressed, grabbing the peanut butter and closing the cupboard.

“Houselves.” Draco intoned “They don’t fuck about.”

Harry let out a surprised laugh. The first genuine laugh Draco had heard from him since they arrived together. He found himself smiling at the sound as he finished fixing their tea.

Draco had moved the tray of peanut butter and jam sandwiches and tea to the little rickety table and Harry followed. Settling himself down across from Draco he grabbed a sandwich and took a large bite, looking pensively at Draco.

“So.” Harry chewed his food thoughtfully. “What exactly are we doing out here? I have a feeling you didn’t come here on the fly after you found me.”

“No.” Said Draco. “I applied for a year’s research sabbatical. I’m here to study the unicorn herds.”

“Oh.” Harry replied. “What are you studying them for?”

“I’m looking at the caveats of unicorn blood magic.” He said, picking up a sandwich. “If their blood is freely given it can counterbalance the cursed half life effect of killing one for it. I’m trying to see if freely given blood can be used in practical applications for curing dark magic and blood magic curses.”

Harry considered this. “How are you going to convince a unicorn to give you their blood?”

Draco sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I have no fucking clue honestly.” he felt exhausted after the emotional rollercoaster of the day. “I’m hoping I’ll have an idea when Hagrid writes me back.”

“You speak to Hagrid?” Harry asked incredulously, sandwich halfway to his mouth.

“Shocking though it may seem Potter,” Draco drawled with a smirk, “but I apologised to Hagrid for being a git, and we’ve been quite close since I went back for 8th year. He’s the one who suggested this cottage.”

Harry just observed him with a puzzled expression on his face. Like he couldn’t figure something out.

“What?” Draco eventually asked, his smirk faltering, beginning to bristle under the gaze of scrutiny.

“Who the fuck are you and what have you done with Malfoy?” Harry cracked a small smile, looking thoroughly confused.

“What the fuck am I supposed to say to that Potter?” Draco asked, chucking the crust of his sandwich at Harry’s face, who swatted at it in exasperation. “Was I supposed to stay an arrogant
brat who couldn’t see past his father’s faults? Honestly, get your head out of your arse, of course I changed. You stood up at my fucking trial, you couldn’t possibly think I was still that same person from before and then stand up and defend my honour. You berk.”

“There you are.” Harry mused, picking up the crust Draco had thrown at him and eating it. “Was beginning to worry there for a minute.”

Draco rolled his eyes and started to clear away their dinner.
Harry sat straight up, nearly knocking his head on the rafters above him, getting dried lavender all over his bed and hair as he swatted the stiff hangings from his face. He was panting and sweating, pulled out of a nightmare about being tortured by Death Eaters in Malfoy Manor’s opulent dining room. Bellatrix had been there. She had run her long nails across Harry’s cheek, taunting him for being so weak, laughing at him for using muggle drugs, of all things.

Harry shook his head, pushing the images away. He didn’t know what time it was, but the little cabin was dark and silent, save for the hushed breathing of Malfoy on the bunk below and the soft chirruping calls of frogs, gaining confidence on their wavy pond reeds in the warmer spring air.

It had been hell, these last few days, sleeping without the potions and the tea Malfoy had been giving him, but at least he woke up with a clear head - the drowsy, dizzy and blurred effects of the tonic had reminded him too much of being high, and it now made him more uneasy than anything. He wanted to be himself, and he guessed that meant a return to his nightmares, too. Each night he’d been awoken by horrors from before the war. Tonight, at least, it seemed he had woken up before any real screaming happened, as Malfoy was still asleep.

Harry sighed, laying back against his soft bedding and slightly damp pillow. Was this what it was going to be like now? He couldn’t take any potions. Would he ever get his magic back? Malfoy had said he thought it would return, but what if it didn’t? Would he be able to live in the wizarding world like this? Did he want to live in the wizarding world at all? And what about the muggle world? He didn’t like the thought of having to go into a muggle pharmacy and getting cold medication or, fuck, painkillers any time he got sick. The thought alone stressed him far more than the dream had. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and rubbed his hands over his face. The floodgates of panic had opened, there were millions of things to consider and stress about and be ashamed of.

He stopped, dropping his hands down. One step at a time, he said to himself, nearly uttering the words aloud. I’ll deal with all of these things when I get there, he reasoned. I’m not even two months clean. I’m sure there will be a way. I’ll ask Herm... Well, maybe someday I’ll ask her. For now, I guess I could ask Malfoy? His train of thought paused.

Malfoy.

Harry leaned over the side of his bunk to peek at Malfoy’s sleeping figure. It was too dark to make out any details, and Malfoy was cocooned in a giant, featherdown duvet, of course, but his body was rising and falling rhythmically, with what seemed like the deep breaths of sleep.

Harry rolled and stretched back out on his bed, his hands behind his head, looking up into the mass of drying plants that obscured the woven reeds beneath the living roof. Malfoy had added to it exponentially in the short time that they had been there, pulling whole plants from inside his shoulder bag after days tracking and observing the unicorn herds. He recognised sage, queen anne’s lace, rue and milk thistle from the day before’s harvest, and they had sat together while Malfoy had prepared half to dry and used the other half in a marathon brewing session.

The milk thistle had been for hangover remedies, the sage in a poultice for fiendfyre burns, queen anne’s lace for contraceptive potions and the rue had been the strangest of all - Malfoy had cooked it down and soaked a skein of white yarn in it, dying it yellow. It had been fascinating to watch,
and Malfoy’s concentration and dedication to the precise and delicate nature of the craft was hypnotising. They had talked late into the night, about Hogwarts days and Malfoy filled Harry in on the horrors of his 8th year, and then the triumphs and the victories.

He was really different, Harry mused. The boy Harry had known at school would never be here. He would have never have become a healer, or cared about advancing research for those affected by dark magic. He wouldn’t be dying yarn and knitting. He wouldn’t be soft, and kind. Sure, he was still a bit posh and very pointy and mostly the same self important twit, but there was more. Layers and layers more.

He had never once made Harry feel guilty for what had happened, for the choices he had made - granted, Harry had done enough of that for the both of them - but, no, Malfoy had just looked at him and told him it was okay to be human. He didn’t think even Ron or Hermione could have done that - they wouldn’t have been able to let him find his own way back, either.

It’s because he needed that from others, too, Harry realised, forgetting to breathe for a moment. He had known what it meant to make mistakes, and to be fallible, and to fuck up miserably because he was scared and alone. He didn’t pity Harry, and he didn’t coddle him, because he knew that wasn’t what Harry needed to come back from this. He needed to feel strong and capable and Malfoy was going to let him. Harry sucked in air, almost laughing at the realisation that he’d been holding his breath. It felt so good, and he felt full of a warm and satisfied feeling, a real one, this time, and it was because Malfoy was probably the only person in this world who could’ve saved him, and he had. And he didn’t expect anything at all in return.

The soft hooting of a owl echoed around the clearing, the frogs taking their cue to quiet their raucous mating calls, and Harry smiled to himself. He felt wide awake, but calm, at ease. He was safe, even from himself, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had genuinely felt this way.

Malfoy stirred on the bed below him, making a small noise in the depths of his goose down burrow, then rolling back over. Harry furrowed his brow - it didn’t sound like he was sleeping peacefully anymore? Was Malfoy having nightmares too? His thoughts were answered as he heard Malfoy gasp and flail in the bed below him, making a sound like someone was strangling him, his breathing ragged and pained.

Without thinking, Harry pushed off his thin quilt, threw his legs over the side of his bed and hopped down to the floor, leaning over Malfoy and resting a hand on his shoulder, rocking it gently.

“Malfoy - hey, can you hear me?” Harry said softly, not wanting to startle him too badly.

Even in the darkness, Harry was close enough to see Malfoy’s features, normally so serene and blank, twisted in a panicked distress, flinching away as if he was being hit. His fingers were twisted around the collar of his own shirt, pulling the neck down as if he couldn’t stand it near his throat.

“Malfoy you’re having a nightmare. Wake up.” Harry said, louder this time, his palm pressing against him, solidly.

Malfoy gasped and his eyes flew open, and he scrambled to get away from Harry’s outstretched hand, clearly still lost in the dream that had been tormenting him.

“Shh, you’re okay. You were having a nightmare.” Harry said again, moving his hand away and moving back from the bedside slowly.
“I’m sorry for waking you, but you sounded like you were in pain.” He finished, realising that maybe it was a bit weird he had woken him up? Ron had always woken him up back in the dorms, and he had always preferred it, but maybe that’s not what most people do?

Malfoy blinked up at him, his breathing still fast and ragged. It took him several seconds to compose himself, but eventually he swallowed, and managed a scratchy “thanks.”

“You alright?” Harry asked, unsure what to do in this situation. He was overwhelmed with curiosity - did Malfoy have nightmares since the war? Were they the same things that Harry had nightmares about?

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, his blonde hair sticking up at all angles, making him look even sharper and pointier than usual. “Of course I’m alright. It was just a dream.” His voice had found the hard edginess it had always had at school. Harry nodded, to himself, more than anything. Malfoy was scared.

“I’m only awake because I had one too, you know. And, I’m pretty sure you’ve seen me through much worse.” Harry offered, shrugging. Malfoy said nothing, but he was sitting up in his bed now, not looking like he was about to go back to sleep.

“Do you want some tea?” Harry said, on a whim. He was craving a cup - not one of the medicinal ones that Malfoy had been making, just a proper cup of chai, milky and sweetened just how he liked.

“What?” Malfoy said, staring at Harry as he moved toward the kitchen to put the kettle on.

“Tea, Malfoy. We are British, aren’t we? Flavoured hot water. It’s basically our national pastime. Surprised you haven’t heard of it before, really, it’s quite a thing.” Harry said, pleased with himself, and looking forward to being in charge of making it, for once.

“I know what tea is, Potter. But why are we doing this now? Why are you even awake?” Malfoy asked, sounding resigned now, no hint of the cold and irritated venom of fear.

“Nightmares.” Harry said again, still smiling, grabbing his wand from where it usually lay on the kitchen table and wordlessly casting lumos so he could find the little black box of chai he had found in one of the cupboards on the second week here, but had yet felt the unyielding desire to sample.

“Potter.” Came a small voice from the other side of the room, as Harry grabbed two mugs, taking the one with the chip in the rim for himself.

“I know Malfoy, you like a quarter cup of milk and a single spoon of honey. I was kidding before, I know you like tea. I’ve watched you make it for years across the great hall.” Harry was still smiling, pulling the silver jar full of honey toward himself.

Harry opened the rather sticky lid and pulled the dark wooden dipper up out of the soft pool of golden liquid.

Harry stopped, dropped the dipper back in the pot, closed the lid and took a step back.

His heart stuttered in his chest and he felt a familiar snaking tingling run up his sides, up his spine and across his shoulders. It was like a breathy shiver of ice, pulling his insides this way and that, squirming uncomfortably.

The light of his wand went out, and Harry stood in the dark, feeling the crushing weight of what
was happening. He couldn’t even make tea without being hit with an overwhelming wave of desire - of need.

“Lumos.” Malfoy said softly into the dark just behind Harry, his wand casting the illumination that Harry’s had held moments before.

“Fuck.” Harry breathed out, still looking at the ornate little silver pot that had caught him so unawares, that had so effectively reminded him just how early in his recovery he was.

Malfoy stepped around Harry toward the stove and pulled out a little glass jar of sugar from behind the salt grinder, placing it next to their mugs, ready and waiting.

“I’ll take a half spoonful, please.” Malfoy said, looking up at Harry expectantly.

Harry swallowed and busied himself with finishing his chai preparation, dutifully spooning in the sugar, grabbing the kettle as it boiled and finally pouring in the milk, handing Malfoy his mug when he finished.

His hands shook only a little by the time he was done, but he was more wounded psychologically than anything. He had been having fun, he had cast lumos, he was feeling strong and capable, and something so infinitesimally small and inconsequential had stolen it all from him. He hung his head and looked down into his tea, quiet and full of dread. How was he going to manage?

“I was dreaming about Lestrange. About him choking me.” Malfoy said, turning and taking himself and his steaming mug of chai back to bed, bypassing the kitchen table where Harry was about to sit down.

Harry stopped, midway to the ancient spindly chair, looking over at Malfoy as he re-entered the cocoon of bedding, sitting with this duvet around his shoulders, his features darkening as he worried his bottom lip.

“He used to like to do it. He’d corner me in some distant hallway or quiet room I had been reading in, back when the Manor was swarming with Death Eaters.” Malfoy continued, his face blank, staring into nothing beyond the edge of the bed.

Harry straightened up and crossed the room to the edge of the bunk, sitting himself down on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest, his bare feet on the hide rug. He didn’t ask anything, he just sipped at his still too hot tea, letting what he had said hang in the air, the horror of it.

“It became like a game for them, to choke me until I passed out, then have their way with me.”

“Fucking hell.” Harry said, unable to stop the words as they came out, his stomach rolling with profound disgust. Anger flushed his skin deep red beneath the light browns, and he looked up at Malfoy’s expression, expecting to see his rage mirrored, but finding nothing but sadness, of pain and maybe a hint of shame.

Harry wanted to reach out and touch him, comfort him, let him know he didn’t think anything else of him than admiration for having lived through it. But his hands clutched his mug instead, and his throat went dry, the silence between them stretching out into the darkest corners of their room.

“I’m glad you made it out alive.” Harry finally said, feeling inadequate and overwhelmed in the face of something so inhumane.

Malfoy looked up from his tea and smiled the smallest of smiles at Harry. “You going to tell me what the deal is with the honey, then?” Malfoy said, and Harry understood. He had given Harry
something personal so that Harry could give him his issues right back. He was showing him that he
could handle it, he could understand, and that it would be a fair trade between them.

Harry sighed, the anger vanishing and resignation taking its place. He was glad he had the tea, to
sip at tentatively while he thought about what he could possibly say to explain what he was feeling.

“You know what it does, right? The stuff I was using?” Harry started, his voice sounding small and
pathetic, worried and tremulous. He cleared his throat, in an attempt to control how much fear was
in it. Malfoy had been brave. He could be brave, too.

“It’s a painkiller.” Malfoy said, watching Harry, who had started to fidget, and was rolling his
shoulders back as he nodded.

“I used to imagine - as it hit me - that it was like falling into honey. I know it sounds bizarre, just,
that’s how I used to feel, like it was soft and soothing and healing and it would just soak away the
pain, heal everything, all of my scars.” Harry finished, swallowing hard.

“I don’t think I can talk about this.” He said, after a moment, his skin crawling.

“It’s okay.” Malfoy said, his voice even and healing next to Harry’s gruff mumblings. “It will get
easier, even if it doesn’t seem like it now. Eventually, you’ll be able to make tea with honey
without thinking about it. You’ll find yourself doing lots of things that might seem impossible
now.”

Harry looked up at him. “You believe that?” He asked.

“I have to.” Malfoy returned, setting his mug down on the floor next to Harry. “You did magic
earlier,” he said suddenly, his eyebrow raising and the smile returning to his face.

“Yeah.” Harry said, also feeling the corners of his mouth pulling up at the idea that it was still
there, within him, waiting for him to be ready, waiting for him to heal. “I was feeling so good -
happy, you know, like I haven’t in forever. Do you think it’s related to how I’m feeling?”

“Probably.” Draco mused. He looked smug and at ease again, but somehow more animated than
Harry usually saw him in the daylight. “It’s part of you, it’s part of your confidence and your sense
of connectedness to your ideas and thoughts and what you want. All of us, our magic is a reflection
of who we are.”

“Do you think it’ll come back? I can’t feel it at all now.” Harry asked, his fear evident in his voice.

linear.”

Harry put his empty mug down next to Malfoy’s and hugged his knees to his chest, deep in
thought.

They stayed like that for some time, sharing thoughts, worries, mundane details of their lives.
Harry asked Malfoy about St. Mungo’s, and Harry was very annoyed to learn that even those who
he had respected and known to be good and kind people had ostracised or been outright cruel to
him there. He felt surges of his old protective instincts toward Malfoy, and it was only later that he
realised how strange this was, how much of a transformation.

Not even three months ago, he would have sworn they would be mortal enemies until death, that
Malfoy was nothing but a stuck up, entitled narcissist with a penchant for blood purity bullshit.
How wrong he was, how thick to think that the war didn’t change Malfoy in the same ways that it
had changed him - that the war hadn’t created Malfoy in the same way it had created him. They were kids, terrified and pushed and pulled by forces they didn’t understand, trying to make the adults in their lives proud, trying to hold on to approval and love and the idea of a happy future.

Just before sunrise, Harry fell asleep on the floor next to their bed on one of the seemingly infinite pillows Malfoy used to help create his nest, and that he had begrudgingly handed over when Harry had complained his arse was numb. It wasn’t long before Malfoy was asleep too, but not before he reached up and pulled down Harry’s quilt, laying it over him.

It was two days later when Harry was confronted with how to respond to unfamiliar territory again. After they had woken up, Harry still on the floor, Malfoy had been his cold and repressed self, even quieter than usual, stalking off to search for unicorns and leaving Harry to his own devices for much of the day. Harry had spent a whole morning making repeated cups of tea, with honey, just to challenge himself and ensure that he wouldn’t be held captive by a damn condiment. Each successive cup became easier, and he found it more and more rewarding that he had conquered something that had been so debilitating just the night before.

By late evening, when Malfoy finally returned, Harry had offered to make Malfoy a cup of darjeeling to show off his newfound honey-using skills, but the blonde had been in a horrid mood and refused the offer outright, showering and sleeping without more than a few words passing between them. It was alright though, Harry knew he could do it now, and that’s what mattered.

It was the next morning, when Harry came across Malfoy in the garden, offering to help weed, that things had erupted into chaos.

They were on opposite paths, each working on one of the two large beds on the edge of the garden, the forest just on the other side. Harry had sat back on his heels, wiping the sweat from his brow after a particularly draining fight with a thorned valerian bush, it’s purple flowers giving off an offensive, rancid smell anytime they so much as swayed in the soft breeze. Eventually, Harry had won out.

He was pleased with how much his strength and stamina had returned, helped along by how much physical labour he had been doing in the garden and around the cottage. Aside from chopping wood for the fire, Harry had kept busy fetching water and keeping their quarters as clean as he could manage. Malfoy still insisted on much of the cooking, but between the two of them, they made a successful go of things.

Harry pulled an apple from his pocket, having saved one from the bowl on the breakfast table that morning, just after he’d wolfed down a sizeable helping of both eggs and bacon. He sunk his teeth in and savoured in the sweet taste, sitting back on the damp earth of the path, leaning against the bed behind him. It was amazing how much he had neglected food, neglected eating, and even the simplest of flavours at their fastidiously routine mealtimes was more than just physically nourishing, it made him happy.

“You could have saved some for me, you know.” Came a tiny voice behind Harry, and he turned to see a small black snake with a yellow stripe down its back slithering around the half cleared garden bed. “I am an eggeater. We eat eggs. You have eggs. You share with eggeater.” Harry laughed as he regarded the little creature. It seemed so affronted that no one had thought to save him any eggs.

“My deepest apologies, small eggeating friend.” Harry hissed back, a smile lifting his features and crinkling his eyes. “Tomorrow I shall be less careless.”
“See that you do, big eggeater.” He hissed as he slithered away beneath the broad leaves of a comfrey plant, and Harry chuckled.

He looked up to share his chastisement with Malfoy, but stopped before any of the words came out of his mouth. Something was wrong. Malfoy was breathing heavily, hands gripping the edge of the bed, staring ahead, eyes unfocused.

Harry jumped up and walked to his side, kneeling down next to him, but not wanting to invade his space too much.

“Malfoy, are you okay?” Was met with silence, zero recognition that he was talking, so he hastily added, “can you hear me?”

Fuck, Harry thought. What if he touched some kind of poisonous plant? He knew fuckall about potions. He’d never be able to brew any kind of antidote, and he highly doubted he’d be so lucky with a bezoar out here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe he could ask the houselves for one?

“Malfoy, I’m right here, tell me what I can do? What do you need?” Harry asked, unsure if anything was getting through to him, as Malfoy hadn’t broken his stare and he didn’t seem to be reacting much aside from his stuttering breathes and shaky limbs.

“You know I’m horrid at potions Malfoy, you really don’t want me attempting to try to fix you with anything I’ve brewed.” Harry said, unsure if he should touch him or not.

Malfoy stuttered what looked like an attempt at a deep breath, and turned his head toward Harry, his expression still vacant.

“Hey, Malfoy, can you tell me what’s happening? I’m worried about you.” Harry said, completely unfiltered, unsure if anything he said was getting through.

“Yeah” Malfoy squeaked. “I’m ok. Just… panic…” Malfoy said very slowly, color slowly returning to his decidedly pale cheeks.

“Can I touch you?” Harry asked awkwardly and unsure, sitting down on the ground next to him, his brow creased.

Malfoy nodded slowly, and Harry reached up to lightly rub circles on his upper back, doing his best to be comforting through the thin material of Malfoy’s grey t shirt.

“Panic? Like a panic attack?” Harry asked, watching Malfoy closely, making sure his own worry didn’t course through him and cause him to rub too fast, too frantically.

Malfoy nodded again, and Harry relaxed considerably. The looming threat of advanced healing potions out of the way, he realised that this was something he could handle. He had never seen someone have one before, but they had had a training seminar once, a few years ago, for when victims of crimes or people on the scene have one. It was mostly about just being calm and quiet and comforting in a respectful way, and Harry thought he could be rather good at that. He sat and rubbed Malfoy’s back and refrained from asking any more questions.

Several minutes passed, and Harry watched Draco slowly relax, start moving his limbs and lean his head down, his breathing evening out. He finally let up with the back rubbing and, after another few moments, asked “Hey. Welcome back. Can you tell me what happened?”

“You were speaking parseltongue, you prat.” He said, trying for venom but only sounding weak and scared. “I haven’t heard it since… well… since that sadistic fuck lived in my house with his
giant death snake that he used to murder people.” Malfoy tipped his head back with his eyes closed, the morning sun catching his face and illuminating his features. He looked tired.

“Oh fuck.” Harry said, feeling like a complete ass. “I didn’t think about it, it just sounds like English to me, just a little more… hissy?” He shrugged, apologetically. “I didn’t mean to, honestly. I won’t do it again. I was just going to tell you that there’s a little snake in the bed who is demanding eggs and apparently knows that we’re hoarding them all and eating them without him. He was very upset.” Harry was rambling. He felt bad for causing Malfoy such distress.

Malfoy startled them both with a laugh. “You were getting bullied by that little thing?”

Harry grinned, rubbing the back of his neck. “I promised him I’d bring him an egg tomorrow?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Serpents excel at emotional blackmail, ask anyone in Slytherin.” He gave Harry an appraising look, regaining his composure. “Good to know that Gryffindors are especially susceptible, though. No one will be surprised.”

“I’m sorry though, really.” Harry managed, still smiling, but wanting to be serious.

“It’s okay, Potter. I just wasn’t expecting it, I suppose.” He looked distinctly embarrassed now. “For fuck’s sake, that’s the second time that’s happened and I’ve had to have a lion come to my rescue. It’s how my friendship with Neville started, actually.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open. “You’re friends with Neville? Neville Longbottom? Our Neville? And Neville saw you have a panic attack?”

“Oh you can stop with the theatrics, Potter. He’s perfectly nice.” Draco said. “We correspond by letter and get together at bars every now and then. And the point I was trying to make,” he said waving his hand at Harry, “was that this is embarrassing enough happening once, particularly since Gryffindors seem so keen to come to my rescue, so I really hope it doesn’t happen again. If it does though, you did well. Just do the same thing, and eventually I’ll come around.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and peered over at Malfoy. “Are you shagging Neville?”

“Excuse me?” Draco asked with a shocked face. “Potter. First of all, no. We’re friends, I’m capable of having friends. Platonic friends. You berk. Second of all, have you just assumed this whole time that I’m gay?” Malfoy looked infuriated, deeply amused, but also very angry.

Harry laughed awkwardly, blushing deeply. “I mean, aren’t you?” He asked tentatively. “I don’t know why I thought so, it was just … something I always thought? I’m sorry if you find that offensive? Am I way off base? I know I’m not the most observant person-” Harry hadn’t really thought about it before - well, not since sixth year. He had thought about it some then, but that had been a dark, confusing time for everyone, right?

“I’m not offended.” Malfoy cut Harry’s rambling off. “I am gay. I just am not really a fan of people making assumptions about me. Aside from this particular thing, people tend to assume the worst when it comes to me.” Malfoy sniffed, looking haughty.

“That’s very reasonable of you.” Harry considered. “I’m coming to realise a lot of what I thought about you was dead wrong, as well. Like, you’re not a bad person, for one.” Harry said, feeling guilty and a little shy of all the honesty. He got to his feet, rubbing the feeling back into his legs and brushing the dirt off the seat of his jeans. He paused and reached a hand out to help Malfoy to his feet as well.

“Yeah, and you’re not so much of a git as I remember you being either, Potter.” Malfoy said,
taking his hand and getting to his feet.

“Come on, I’ll make tea.” Malfoy said, stretching his arms above his head, revealing a small strip of his back to Harry as he walked back toward the house. Harry shook his head, trying not to focus too hard on the fact that Malfoy had dimples, his lower back tapering down between the muscles of his spine and his sacrum.

“So, Malfoy,” Harry called after him, “are you seeing anyone, then?” He liked seeing Malfoy happy, he decided, at least. Smiling and laughing Malfoy were a great improvement on the stony silence he had grown so accustomed to.

“Yeah,” Malfoy called back, knocking his boots outside the door, “that’s who I’m sneaking off to in the forest each day, Potter, my secret lover. The unicorns are just a clever ruse to distract you from my very sordid and taboo love life.” Malfoy snorted with laughter and set to work on the tea, completely sidestepping the question.
Draco was lying in a patch of grass near the unicorn herd about an hour away from the cottage. He had a headache. He was hot, and sticky. He was frustrated. He had been following this herd for weeks and was just now able to get within a few meters of the unicorns without them running off in offense. He lay there at ground level and scribbled in his journal about his ideas to obtain blood. None of them seemed remotely realistic.

Sticking out of his journal were two letters. One very worn letter from Hagrid that he had reread a dozen times, and another from his mother that he had just received that morning. Hagrid’s letter had been sweet, but essentially useless. He suggested Draco injure himself in their presence and hope for the best, or to walk up and ask a unicorn point blank for what he wanted. Draco didn’t think he wanted to know whether the unicorns thought he worth their help if he was injured and needed them. He didn’t think his soul could take the punch. Nor did he think asking them for blood would be remotely helpful.

The letter from his mother was anything but sweet. She had become more and more cold and insistent towards Draco with every passing letter she sent him in the forest. She didn’t like that he was essentially inaccessible to her and she hated that he was “alone” in a dangerous place. And, instead of voicing her concerns in a manner that befitted a caring parental figure, she was using emotional manipulation and gaslighting to try and get Draco into leaving the forest “for his own good”.

He sighed and rested his head on the page of notes he was rereading, contemplating his life choices and how to respond to his mother. He decided that it was time he sent an owl to Beatrice. He hadn’t corresponded with her in nearly three weeks. Not since Harry woke him up from his nightmare and they swapped horror stories in the dark. Draco mused at the irony that, while they may have been on different sides of a war, and that their upbringings couldn’t be any different, and that as children they could fight like no other, they were more similar in their brokenness than he ever could have anticipated.

They seemed to have formed an unspoken accord. There were no expectations. No demands. No facade. Draco helped Harry, and, when Harry could, he returned the favor without comment. Whether it was waking Draco up from a nightmare or ripping out a rose bush or two, without even understanding why it was important, he did it.

That next morning he had felt exhausted, but lighter. He had never told anyone about his sexual assault aside from Beatrice. And, though he was aware that Luna somehow knew, he had never spoken about it with her. Potter just seemed to have that effect on him. And the admission felt important. It felt freeing in a way to put it out there in the space between them so that he didn’t have to explain why he couldn’t change his clothes in their shared space with abandon like Potter did. Why he couldn’t fall asleep before the other man did. Why he slept with his wand under him. Why he slept in a dragon’s nest of blankets and pillows. Why he was grateful that he had the bottom bed and could remove himself quickly when feeling overwhelmed. But, while it felt freeing to say the words out loud, he also felt profound fear with it.

There were no taking those words back. No pretending it wasn’t real. Keeping this discourse between himself and a therapist almost made it separate from his reality. Admitting it to Potter was letting the two worlds bleed together in the most uncomfortable of ways. The way that reminded him every time they were together, that yes, Harry held his secrets. His closet of skeletons was
open and he couldn’t close the door again. So, in true Malfoy style, the next morning he panicked at the thought of facing Harry after his admission and he stormed off in a proper strop of shame fueled indignation.

He lifted his head as a juvenile unicorn wandered closer to his patch of grass, nibbling little clover flowers as he went. Draco watched the unicorn without real scrutiny. It felt almost pointless to even be here in this patch of grass among them. He fiddled with the corner of Hagrid’s folded letter and huffed.

“So.” He mused, feeling stupid as he looked up to the unicorn. “Fancy donating blood to help cure blood curses?”

The unicorn didn’t acknowledge Draco’s words, or even his presence. He just kept munching the little white clover heads as he slowly walked past Draco towards a cluster of older unicorns. Draco laid his head back down on his journal and moaned in abject misery. What was he doing with his life?

He heard a gentle rustle of underbrush off to his left and lifted his head to see a thestral wander past towards the unicorn Draco had spoken to. He was really coming to enjoy the thestrals. They were slow and deliberate. They didn’t spook, and they didn’t worry themselves with proximity to Draco as the unicorns did. Just that morning, he had walked out the door of the cottage and found five of them sniffing around the mutilated rose bush heaps that had formed a barrier between the clearing and the dense trees. As he walked past and into the forest, they had slowly followed after him. It was becoming a bit of a morning ritual, actually. It made him feel less alone in the forest, and even a bit safer.

Draco pushed himself up into a sitting position and picked mindlessly at a new cut on his hand that he sustained from his hike after stumbling through a bramble patch. He hadn’t worried to heal it yet, as it wasn’t so bad. He couldn’t really be bothered. He could hear the soft sounds of another thestral approaching from behind him but didn’t turn around.

He was surprised when a thestral stepped right up next to him, invading his personal space. And he was even more surprised to see the thestral was dripping blood onto his journal off it’s flank where there were 3 long and fresh gashes. Draco grabbed his journal and jumped up backing away from the thestral. It just gazed at him mournfully as the blood trickled down its side. Coming back to himself, Draco realised that the thestral didn’t seem to want to get away from him. In fact, it seemed to be there waiting for Draco to do something.

Draco stepped forward carefully and pulled his wand out. He lifted his other hand and gingerly placed it on the thestral’s side near the deep gashes. The blood on it’s leathery skin was wet under his palm and he was surprised at how warm the creature felt. He raised his wand and began to murmur his healing spell as he wondered what this thestral could have gotten up to to earn these gashes.

The deep lacerations slowly began to knit themselves together as Draco repeated his incantation. Once he was sufficiently pleased with his work, he made to vanished the congealing blood from the thestral’s side, but stopped when he noticed the cut on his hand from early was gone. Draco stared at it. The thestrals blood drying in the lines of his hand, but there was definitely no longer a cut there. Had his healing spell transferred to his hand? That didn’t make sense, he thought, he didn’t do shoddy spell work. The thestrals turned it’s milky stare towards Draco and held his gaze for a long time. Draco felt unnerved by the stare, but neither of them moved. He felt like the thestrals was trying to impart something to him.

Finally Draco had an idea. It was an odd idea, but why the fuck not? This whole interaction was
odd. He leaned down and grabbed a few vial out of his pack at his feet. Instead of vanishing the congealing blood, he siphoned it into his potion vial. He would have to investigate this later. Once the thestral was cleaned off, the somber creature turned its steady gaze towards the unicorns and began to stalk off.

Feeling frustrated with the unicorns and intrigued by the unusual behaviour of the thestral, Draco gathered his things and headed back towards the cottage, mentally planning a letter to his mother.

Draco was startled from his knitting at the kitchen table by two large eagle owls thumping into the window next to him. He jumped up, tossing his lopsided beanie in progress on the table, and quickly let the owls in. They were carrying a rather large wooden crate that was seriously heavy. He was impressed these two owls managed the flight from Wiltshire as quickly as they had. Draco had only written back to Narcissa the day before, asking for any and every book the manor had on thestral and unicorn magic. Although Draco was prepared for sloughing through some serious dark magic tomes, he was hoping that if he read between the lines, he would gather some useful information.

Draco began unloading each book onto the small table when Harry walked into the kitchen. Their ability to converse instead of bicker was improving, and Draco was trying his hardest not to get irrationally mad at his own vulnerabilities in the sharing they did. Sometimes, he was overwhelmed by a desire to lash out at Harry like they had at school, just to keep him at arm’s length. Just so he wouldn’t get too close. But, he knew that was unhealthy. He knew that was just a poor attempt at protecting his fragile sense of security. So, he was really trying to be as genuinely vulnerable with Potter as Potter was with him. It was a fucking chore, even if he was kind of beginning to enjoy Harry’s company, just a little bit.

“What’s all this?” Harry asked, picking up one of the ancient texts and examining the embossed leather cover.

“They’re called books, Potter. Books.” Draco drawled, continuing to pull the books out of the box.

Harry rolled his eyes and smiled, picking up another book and leafing through it. “Fine, you prickly prat, don’t tell me then.”

“They’re books for my research.” Draco said emptying the crate and setting it aside.

“You don’t say.” Harry said distractedly as he studied an etching of a blood sacrifice in one of the books. “Are you planning on sacrificing unicorns on an altar in the name of medicine?”

Draco snorted as he began to unroll the letter from his mother. “Obviously. Will you help me construct the pyre on which to burn their remains? I mean, a half life, a cursed life, how could it possibly be any worse than it already is?”

Harry shot him a look as if he couldn’t be sure of the subtle sarcasm. “You better be fucking joking, Malfoy.” He said with an unsure smirk.

“I’m not even gracing that with a response.” Draco said, rolling his eyes and taking the book from Harry. He grimaced at the explicit etching before closing it and setting it on stack for unicorn research. “Mother sent me all the books the manor has to offer on unicorns as well as thestrals.”

“Thestrals?” Harry asked, tilting his head.

“Yes, the large winged skeletal horses, Potter, do keep up.”
“Oh my god, you’re absolutely insufferable, you know that?” Harry asked, amused and exasperated.

“So you keep saying.” Draco said, sitting down in front of the books, a discreet smile playing at his lips.

“Why thestrals, then?” Harry tried again.

Draco stopped his reorganising of the books to properly engage with Harry. “I had an interesting incident in the forest yesterday. A thestral approached me with huge gashes down it’s side and allowed me to heal it. Some of it’s blood ended up on my hand where I had a small cut, and by the time I was done healing the creature, my hand was healed as well. Couldn't figure out how. So, I asked mother to send me everything she could and I collected some blood samples to study.”

“Has anyone studied thestral blood before?” Harry asked.

“Not that I’m aware of. You know, the wizarding world is embarrassingly superstitious. We know thestrals are inherently magical, but no one’s tried to figure out what that actually means for us. People just don’t like them.”

“I like them.” Harry shrugged, his voice quieter than it had been.

“I do as well, but we’re not most people.” Draco said emphatically.

“Yeah, most people prefer unicorns I guess. They’re just so... pure. They make people feel like there is such a thing as absolute good in the world.”

“Well,” Draco considered, “with souls as damaged as ours, Potter, I guess we would prefer thestrals.” he said smiling wryly.

“And it certainly seems they prefer us. They’re always around the cottage.”

“I know, and I can’t get within a few meters of the unicorns without them spooking and running off.” he said gesticulating dramatically. “How Hagrid is able to touch them is beyond me.”

“If anyone has a pure and undamaged soul, it’s Hagrid. The man is a saint.” Harry said fondly. “The unicorns can probably sense it.”

Draco thought about this. The whole conversation was esoteric and based on nothing but emotional whimsy, but it felt like there was a ring of truth to it. How does one study the purity of a soul? Is that why the unicorns wouldn't let Draco near them? Was he too damaged? Too broken? Too hardened by the war? Had Hagrid’s heart of gold allowed him to be saved by the unicorns? Draco groaned inwardly, how the fuck was he suppose to study this?

Harry must have sensed Draco’s internal turmoil, as he stood up a few short moments later and announced it was tea time.

A few days later Draco was kneeling in the garden. Between the two of them they had managed to pull out just over half of the rose bushes and Draco was determined to make the place they occupied beautiful and useful so he could pretend they never existed. He took his sun hat off, wiped the sweat from his forehead and pushed his damp hair off his face. He needed a haircut desperately. But the thought of engaging with the outside world really wasn’t appealing. He sat back on his heels and let another wave of apathy wash over him. He was feeling distinctly
depressed today. Not only depressed, but filled with abject misery.

That morning he had been hiking and stalking the unicorns. And finally, finally, after weeks, and weeks, and weeks of trying and scheming, he managed to get near a unicorn who had a nosebleed from a strenuous run. The unicorn was too tired to flee away from Draco and resigned itself to dripping it’s foamy silver blood from its nose into Draco’s vial. Draco had been ready to dance with glee and unbridled joy as the vial filled up drop by drop, but as he stood there, a drop of blood landed on his hand. Almost instantly his hand began developing a rash. By the time he had returned to the cottage with a few vials of freely gifted unicorn blood, his whole arm felt itchy and sore as if he had rubbed his arm through poison ivy. He was beyond confused and baffled by the effect of the unicorn blood. He wasn’t even sure such a reaction had ever been documented.

He had been so thrown off by the experience, that he had asked Harry if he wouldn’t mind being subjected to exposure for the sake of research. Harry agreed and Draco handed him a vial while he dug in his bag for a swab to run the test, but while Harry was just holding the vial his hand began to show signs of developing a rash as well. Draco quickly took the vial back from Harry and set it on the counter and grabbed his hand to examine it. Even without having direct contact, the blood began to create the same swollen red welts on his hand and Harry had complained that he felt itchy. Draco had made them a chamomile and comfrey poultice which helped bring the swelling and itchiness down after a few hours.

Now, here he sat, fucking confused and irritated and lost. His theories on unicorn blood had been way off base, and he seemed to be at a dead end. How was he even supposed to experiment with it when simply touching the bottle created a caustic reaction? Perhaps they weren’t pure enough souls, after all.

He replaced his hat, sighing, continuing to turn the soil over in the old rose hedge and prepared the area for planting. From his pocket he withdrew a few old crinkled envelopes with faded writing on them full of old seeds. Harry had found the seeds in the back of a closet along with old smutty wizarding romance novels and some moth eaten afghans. They weren’t sure if the seeds would even germinate, being god knows how old, but they were both intrigued. So, Draco plated his rows of beans, carrots, spinach, and peas. After mulching and watering the beds he sat down to admire his work and brood on the prospects of his research.

He turned his attention to Harry, who was chopping wood off to the side of his house. He was getting stronger, and, with regular meals, he wasn’t looking so wasted and pale. He was regaining the bronze glow of his dark skin and his thin body, once hardened by years of auror training, was beginning to redefine itself. Harry’s hair was also becoming long, much more wild. It was a mangled sweaty mess plastering itself to his forehead and the back of his neck and Draco was struck with a desire to push it off of his face.

He watched as Harry swung the axe down and split a log, his face contorting with effort. This man that Draco had spent the last two months with was nothing like the Potter he had remembered from his days at school. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He was still a bit of a prat and seemed to enjoy goading Draco for the sake of it, and with each passing day he seemed to gain more and more confidence and self assurance in Draco’s presence. But, he wasn’t the attention seeking golden boy he seemed to imagine Potter was. He was shy and reserved. It seemed the loud reactionary child in school was a direct result of Draco’s equally loud and reactionary self. Harry looked up from his work and met Draco’s gaze. Draco felt his face flush and turned away. Why was he blushing? It wasn’t like he was checking Potter out. Right?

No, of course not. This was entirely medical and morbid curiosity. He just needs to keep an eye on Potter to ensure he’s healing. Right?
Draco sighed again. He was doing that a lot lately. Draco thought back to when Potter had asked him if he was seeing anyone and felt himself flush again, wondering why he wanted to know. Probably more morbid curiosity, he reasoned. He wondered what the savior’s dating history looked like. It didn’t seem likely that he was currently in a relationship judging by the state of Grimmauld Place or the fact that Potter only ever seemed to mention Ron and Hermione when he did allude to his social circle. He wondered why Harry had assumed Draco was gay. Was it that obvious? Did he just exude gay vibes or something? His parents had seemed pretty fucking shocked when he told them.

His father had been stoney with distaste when he found out Draco had been fooling around with Theodore Nott and Lucius and Narcissa responded to Draco’s confession by setting up a “premarital matching” with Astoria Greengrass in his 5th year. He shivered at the memory of being in a forced sexual situation with a girl without his consent. Well, he supposed, that was what he got for thinking he could be honest with his parents. They were convinced that he didn’t know what he was talking about and he clearly hadn’t tried hard enough with girls, even though Draco had never once thought a positive or sexual thing about a woman in his life. It usually didn’t matter if a pureblood was gay or what their preferences were, so long as they were capable of producing an heir. After his truly horrifying and embarrassing experience with Astoria, he knew he couldn’t impregnate anyone without the help of a lot of potions and a lot of alcohol. He was as gay as gay can be, and his father resented him for the weakness of not being able to copulate with a woman for the perfunctory purpose of reproducing. He pushed the thought aside, feeling nauseated.

He didn’t think he’d ever be capable of having a healthy sexual relationship with anyone. His parents well and truly fucked up, and that was even before he had been designated the weekend rentboy for the depravities of the Death Eaters in his home. It’s not as if he wasn’t interested in sex, either, he just didn’t know how to unpack his baggage after that. How could he ever open up and show these dark parts of himself to another person without scaring them off? He had given up on thinking it was possible.

Harry’s voice cut through Draco’s wallowing. “Hey, can I make dinner tonight?”

Draco cast him an appraising look, trying not to look at anything other than his face. “Do you know how to make anything other than peanut butter and jam sandwiches?”

Harry rolled his eyes and dropped the axe. “I can make Bolognese?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“Both?”

“Good lord.” Draco sighed again.

“I don’t have to.” Harry started, looking self conscious. “It’s just you’ve been doing all the cooking and I thought I could return the favour.” He wasn’t looking at Draco.

“Okay.” He said simply. “That would be nice, thank you.”

Harry smiled a small smile, looking relieved and pleased and turned to walk inside. After a few moments, Draco followed.
It was early morning, with fine mist still clinging to the trunks of ancient elm trees and gnarled oaks, moss carpeting the plants and stones that jutted out from the nearly black soil, ferns unrolling lazily in the warming air. Harry could hear a stream in the distance, cutting across the new growth of summer, snaking across the miles of untouched wilderness. He breathed in the smell of wet soil and leaves, running his hand across the deeply furrowed bark of an impressive wych elm, it’s roots covered in wood sorrel and violets, their purple and white flowers carpeting the path at Harry’s feet. He was smiling to himself, full of the gentle quiet of the forest in summer.

He let his hand drag along the tops of ferns as he continued on, the sound of a rushing stream growing louder, and the path dipping down and disappearing into the riverbank below. Alder trees hung their branches across the steadily flowing brook, a willow in the distance trailed its leaves in the water below. Stones of the river bed formed a natural bridge and sequestered little pools at the edges, where eddies circled, the water dark with tannin. He had come here often since he had started exploring the area around the cabin, and he picked his way across easily, his old trainers gripping the stones as he jumped from one to the next, his jeans rolled up around his ankles.

He disturbed a river otter on his way up the opposite bank, who loped and shuffled his way lazily into the refuge of the stream, circling and diving with grace and ease. “Hi Alice.” Harry greeted her as he summited the small rocky outcropping. He turned and saw her flip onto her back, gnawing on something clutched between her claws. Harry huffed out a laugh and disappeared into the grove of Rowans to the West, bluebells shedding the dew they had collected as he brushed past.

The Rowan grove had quickly become his favorite spot to sit and think - a place of such gentle quiet, Harry could easily slip beneath the branches of his usual tree and pass hours reading and whittling away fallen branches into tiny woodland creatures. He had found the small knife in the meagre supply of tools at the cabin, and had pocketed it for protection the first day he had ventured out alone.

Once he realised that nothing in the forest seemed to care much about him at all, he’d brought it out to shape little bits of wood into the creatures he met along the way. His first attempt had been of one of the river otters by the stream, but it hadn’t been much more than a rotund oval with four different lengthed legs and a misshapen head. Carving had taken far more patience and skill than he had first anticipated, but he liked the challenge, and it kept his mind and his hands busy, especially while he couldn’t do magic. The little otter had reminded him of Hermione, images of her playful patronus bubbling up from the past, the only spell she had really ever struggled to cast. He tried not to think of her and Ron and Rose too often. The owls had stopped coming so regularly, and Harry still hadn’t gotten the courage up to accept one of the letters. He was making so much progress, and he was so relieved to be away from the world outside the forest, he wasn’t sure he could open that door, not yet, anyway.

Harry stretched his legs out in front of him, leaning back against his old rowan and contemplating the small glade ahead of him. It was full of tall grasses and foxgloves in full bloom, their bright rows of bell like flowers housing the busy grumblings of bumblebees. Harry had gotten overwhelmed with the buzzing the first day he had come, his heart going fast and his focus bleeding away into a haze of craving and tightening around his upper back, but he had stood there, slowly stretching himself right, swallowing down the feelings, focusing on the idea that, like
making tea, he could do this, and it would be alright. And, eventually, it was.

Today was much the same as the days before, however, and Harry had come to like and appreciate the tireless ethic of the rather large and ungainly insect, bustling between the many blooms, pollen coating it’s black backside. He reached into a satchel he had been borrowing from Malfoy and pulled out one of the books on dark magic that Narcissa had sent. *Rites for the Pureblood Household* was thick and the green leather binding with silver filigree was worn, the pages well turned.

Harry had taken a liking to leafing through the many unusual books that Malfoy had procured, and he took particular interest in reading about spells, potions and rituals that made his days in Defense Against the Dark Arts look like child’s play. He had gained more of an understanding about Malfoy this way, too - growing up in a household where this was a family pastime, it couldn’t have been healthy. Of course, growing up with the Dursleys hadn’t been nurturing and loving either, but they were so incredibly blatant about their hatred of him, and their preference for their own son, it had been easy to know that what they were doing was wrong. Immoral. To be raised in a household where such nasty things were cloaked in affection and love and care and preference? To be bound to ideas by honour and family and fidelity and loyalty? It was poisonous. Insidious and vile.

He had told himself he took the books out to learn more about the dark arts, but what he really wanted was to help Malfoy with his research in some way - he hadn’t let him come with to go sit with the unicorn herds, but Harry had wanted to be useful nonetheless, and they both knew it wouldn’t be with the potions side of things. His work was important. Harry believed it would help many people, and he wanted Malfoy to succeed in it.

Harry flipped through a section on taking unwilling pureblood brides captive and bonding them in servitude of their new households and wrinkled his nose. The section on ensuring a fulfilling wedding night and conception of an heir was particularly nauseating. He shut the book after a particularly gruesome passage on incantations to force a person to open themselves up to your advances, to encourage compliance and feign enjoyment. How did this not qualify as unforgivable? Harry bit down on the anger boiling up in him. He had been struck by the thought that maybe Malfoy had these things done to him.

Harry stuffed the offensive text back into the satchel and leaned his head back, looking up through the canopy of leafy green to the bright blue of the sky beyond, focusing on relaxing his hands and then his arms. His shoulders were last, and by the time he had managed to let the tension fade away, he was confronted with the fact that he cared about Malfoy. He was a good person, a friend, and he didn’t deserve the things that had happened, or the prejudice he had been gifted after the war. He was just trying to survive, just as Harry had been.

The sun was rising higher and warming the forest, reaching deep down even to the shady spots beneath the trees, covered in lichen and mosses. Everything was calm and beautiful and still, and he felt decidedly comfortable, comforted, even. Maybe this is what he had been seeking, all those nights desperate for a reprieve from his own life. This was healing too, in a new way, a way that didn’t leave him with the empty sour burning of guilt and the metallic ring of shame - no, this was good.

Harry reached in his pocket to feel the familiar Holly of his wand - his thumb tracing a favorite groove. He felt soft pulling and tingling of magic beneath his hand, a feeling that had been steadily growing stronger and more sure since the night he had managed to cast lumos. He hadn’t succeeded in any more spells, but he didn’t feel like rushing the process, either. It would come back. He had to do the work first, though. He was comforted by the fact that all of his anger had been his own, and hadn’t escaped in his magic, hadn’t boiled over into something uncontrollable
Harry picked up a thick piece of branch that had fallen not long before in one of the last storms of spring. He broke a piece free and ran his hands over the light and supple wood. He pulled the little wood knife from his pocket and began pulling it across the thin layer of bark, exposing the pretty blonde grain beneath. Harry smiled to himself - the colour was eerily close to Malfoy’s nearly white hair. He decided right then he would make him something. Something small, just to show his gratitude. He wasn’t helping much with the unicorn problem, so this would have to do.

He spent the next few hours pulling the blade across the wood and imaging what the chunky bit of branch might yield. His hands were sore and blisters were forming, and he’d nicked two fingers already, but it was soothing and carefree there in his circle of Rowans, and the time passed easily.

He pushed his dark hair from his forehead, it having grown completely wild and utterly untameable in the months since he had come to live in Tenebris Hollow. He let his thoughts drift as he looked out across the small glen, the rowan trees circling the foxgloves and the flycatchers and pipits chattering at each other from their various vantages. He caught sight of a red deer emerging from the opposite edge of forest, it’s coat lightly dappled and blending in to the shade and shadows of the forest underbrush - it was a doe, her movements soft and careful as she skirted the open area of high grass. Harry didn’t move, and watched her lift her graceful neck and scent the air, no doubt scanning the area for hidden dangers.

She was beautiful and delicate, and he admired her for several minutes, not wanting to move and frighten her off. He couldn’t not think of his mother, Lily. Or of Snape. Of all of the animals and creatures that a patronus could manifest as, Harry would have never, ever associated Snape with the gentle forest grazer before him. It was hard to imagine him as someone cautious and soft, but then, he hadn’t ever known the real Severus Snape, had he? He had known the anger and bitterness of someone who had sacrificed themselves for something he believed in. For love. And the spiteful hatred that had followed.

In the distance, Harry heard the low call of a stag, and the red doe trotted off to the South.

It was a few nights later when Harry lay staring at the now familiar rafters and hanging herbs, his sheets kicked from his sweaty legs in the sticky summer air. He had just woken from a dream, one he was desperately trying to cling to, to analyse, to make sense of. It was sixth year again, and he had been following Malfoy in the dead of night, tailing him with the marauder's map, hidden beneath the invisibility cloak. The familiar rush of excitement and enthusiasm for the chase had led him out of the castle and down to the edge of the forbidden forest. Malfoy hadn’t once looked back as he strode across the lawn and into the trees, his robes sweeping around his long legs and his blonde hair easily visible as Harry followed.

He had caught up to him, standing just past where the trees had thinned, moon flowers blooming big on vines that snaked up the towering trunks of silver birches, their blue and yellow flowers drinking in the reflected light. Malfoy was standing in the middle of the clearing, his head low and his shoulders slack, as if the weight of his arms alone was too much for them to carry. He looked soft and gentle, but it was sixth year and Harry knew in his gut he was scared and surrounded by decisions he wanted nothing to do with. Harry pulled the invisibility cloak from around his shoulders and stepped towards Malfoy. He wanted him to know he knew. He knew about the threats to his family, about his obligations, about the torture, the pain and fear. He wanted Malfoy to know he understood, that he was safe to talk to. That he could help. He was safe.

Harry stepped up behind him, sliding his hands around his sides and up on to his chest, pulling him
back softly as he lay his forehead against the back of soft blonde hair, his lips against the back of his neck. Iridescent beetles with blue lights on the ends of their antennae took flight from the grass around them, skittering away from the two figures.

“Draco.” He whispered against the pale skin, his voice breaking the stillness of the forest, shimmers of magic rippling away from them. Beneath his hands he felt the steady beat of his heart, felt his chest rising and falling with even breaths. He smelled of soft lavender and mint, and his pale hands came up to his chest, covering Harry’s.

They stood together, Draco leaning back against Harry’s chest, and Harry holding them both steady.

The hooting of an owl had broke through from Tenebris hollow and into the dream, and before Harry had realised what was happening, he was awake, laying in his bed, contemplating what this dream could mean. It had stirred in him feelings he hadn’t felt in … well, since before the war. It was confusing, but full of tenderness and hope, and Harry had loved it.
The Bonfire

June 05, 2008

Draco woke up early on the morning of his birthday. He didn’t intend on celebrating, but before he had even finished his tea he had received six birthday owls. He felt gratitude that his friends hadn’t forgotten him, even in his absence from their lives.

He decided that since it was his birthday, he wasn’t going to work on his dead end research. He had spent every morning since receiving the unicorn blood experimenting with it in his potions corner of the cottage. He was determined to put it through every feasible test he could to determine that it was indeed useless. He felt absolutely defeated, convinced that his entire sabbatical would be for nothing. No matter what he did to the unicorn blood, it made every remedy, every potion, every spell not only useless but sometimes even dangerous. The blood cleaning potion he tried to make with it ate its way through the beaker he poured it into. There was no way he could have fed that to someone, let alone someone ill.

No, today was his birthday, so he decided he would work in the garden, pull out the last rose bush, then finish knitting the yellow rue scarf he was making - planning on sending it to Neville for his birthday next month. Perhaps he would write to his mother and Beatrice while he was at it. He just wanted a quiet day.

Shortly after he finished making breakfast, Harry stirred on the top bunk. Draco cleaned his own plate while Harry dismounted the bunk and set about his morning rituals. Leaving Harry’s food under a warming charm he put on his gardening clothes, donned his sun hat and walked out the back of the cottage and into the little garden.

What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

It was like a dirt bomb went off while they were sleeping. All of the neat little raised garden beds they had been tending had been dug through and torn up. Every tender little shoot and growing seedling that had pushed up towards the sun over the last month had been chomped down to the roots. Even the pile of dead rose bushes had been disassembled and scattered. The compost heap laid flat, the potion herbs, half crushed. It looked like a giant had come through and stomped on everything. How could so much devastation happen in the night without a sound? He walked forward towards the bed where he had planted all of the ancient seeds Potter had found and stared down at a blank mess of disturbed mulch. Everything that had been growing was gone. Laying on top of a large gouge mark in the fertile soil were two porcupine quills.

Son of a - Draco thought, closing his eyes, and pinching the bridge of his nose as he prayed for patience and calm. He took a few deep steadying breaths while he stood there in front of all his hard work gone to shit. His research was shit. His garden was shit. His shitty knitting was shit. He couldn’t even grow a fucking pea plant without some accursed quilled rodent coming along and ruining what little joy he tried to cultivate. He felt the familiar buzzing in his limbs and the numbness in his lips that preceded a panic attack. No, he thought as the bees got louder in his ears. “No! I am not having a meltdown over this fucking garden!” He yelled to himself. He used his rage to push through the quickly vanishing feeling in his limbs and started stomping off towards the forest. He just needed to get the fuck away from here.

“Malfy, you alright? What happened?” He heard Potter calling, from what sounded like the other end of a long tunnel, his voice laced with uncertainty and confusion.
Draco just threw his one hand up in the air as he marched into the trees as if to halt any further inquiries and yelled, “FUCKING PORCUPINES!” before disappearing from view of the cottage.

He was certain he must have seemed completely unhinged to Potter, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He stomped off, huffing in great lungfuls of air as he tried to push off the rising adrenaline in his system. He felt completely out of control, and so absolutely furious. He knew the panic attack was inevitable, but he was fighting it with everything he had, overwhelmed with a sense of growing despair.

Eventually he was taken over by the wave of adrenaline and panic, his surroundings vanished as he stumbled forward onto his hands and knees, and all he could hear were the swarm of angry bees in his ears as he let out a choked sob.

He didn’t know how long he had been laying on the forest path with his knees under him and his hands bracing against the hard earth, but when his vision came back into focus and his breathing felt less laboured he was surprised to see he wasn’t alone. The buzzing was subsiding and he was regaining feeling in his lips as he looked up and took in the sight of three mildly interested thestrals and one very concerned looking Potter.

Draco pushed himself back into a sitting position and tried to regain some composure. He suddenly realised that he had been crying as the wetness on his cheeks were cooled in the breeze. He felt like he had no dignity left. This was the second panic attack Potter had witnessed, and now he was crying, could that get anymore embarrassing?

Harry was sitting on the ground directly in front of Draco, who was shocked when he felt a rough thumb swipe across his cheek to wipe away the last of the wetness on his face. Harry dropped his hand away quickly when Draco’s eyes met his.

“Sorry.” They both said at the same time. They looked at each other with mild expressions of curiosity and sheepishness.

“Fancy a walk?” Potter asked after an awkward moment of silence.

Draco looked back up at him and nodded. Harry jumped up and extended a hand to Draco, helping him to his feet before stepping back quickly and beginning to walk further away from the cottage. Draco brushed the detritus from his clothes and wiped the last of the tears from his face, trying to pull himself back together before going forward.

“Where are we going?” Draco asked, following his lead.

“You’ll see.” was all he got in return.

The thestrals who had watched the entire exchange with somber expressions now began to amble behind them.

“We have company.” Harry said, noticing the odd procession behind them and smiling like a loon.

“Indeed, we do.” Draco said, feeling uplifted by Harry’s easy manner in the face of Draco’s distress.

“So aside from pulling carriage, and having a great sense of direction, what else do thestrals do?” He asked, looking sideways at Draco.

“Well.” He pondered. “I don’t actually know. I haven’t gotten through the thestral books my mother sent me, yet. Accompany us wherever we go, apparently.” Draco shrugged.
“You know the Elder Wand core was a thestral tail hair.” Harry threw out like it was a comment on the weather.

“What?” Draco asked sharply, his previous panic fading from his mind. “How do you know that?”

Harry shrugged. “You know I had the Elder Wand.”

“Yes. I know.” Draco said warily.

“And, you were technically master of the Elder Wand, for a while.” Harry said looking over at him, one eyebrow raised and a hint of a smile on his face.

Draco just shot him a searching look. Yes, he technically knew this because Harry had shouted it at Voldemort during the final battle, but he didn’t know how that made him feel or what to really think about it.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that we were both master of the Elder Wand? And then it was your wand that finished him off?” Harry looked pensive.

“Sure, weird is one word for it.”

Harry huffed a cynical sounding laugh.

“I wonder if the other hallows are real.” Draco wondered aloud. “Pureblood families tell the story of the three brothers to their kids all the time, but we all assumed it was make believe. But, I mean, if the Elder Wand was real, maybe the other two aren’t so far fetched. An invisibility cloak would be pretty useful.”

Harry was silently staring ahead before taking a deep breath and saying, “Well, they are real. All three of them are real.”

“How could you possibly know that? And what are the chances?” Draco asked incredulously.

“Didn’t you ever wonder how I was able to sneak around school without being caught?” Harry asked with mischievous smirk worthy of Draco himself. Draco stopped walking.

“I thought Snape was fucking joking about you having an invisibility cloak.” His eyebrows were in danger of being lost in his hairline, his mouth hung open in complete disbelief.

“Nope.” Harry said as he kept walking, a smile back on his face. “Snape was on to me. It drove him mad. My dad had it when he was at Hogwarts, as well. Seems like tormenting Snape is a bit of a family tradition at this point.”

“I can’t believe this. Where is it now?” Draco asked earnestly.

“Well, it’s at Grimmauld Place, for the moment.” Harry shrugged, his smile fading slightly.

“Don’t tell me you have the resurrection stone, too, and you left it in that derelict building?”

Any hint of a smile slid off Harry’s face entirely at the mention of the stone. “No, I don’t have the stone.” He said sadly, looking at the ground as they turned in the path and began to pick through lush ferns towards the sound of water. “Not anymore.” He added softly. So softly, Draco almost didn’t catch it.

“What do you mean, not anymore?” Draco asked cautiously.
They came out of the undergrowth of ferns and onto a gentle river bank buffeted by huge trees guarding over the quiet water. Harry jumped his way onto stones in the water with comfortable ease. It was obvious he’d spent time here. He held his hand out to Draco to help him across the water and they hopped onto a large flat boulder jutting into the water, covered in dappled lighting.

Sitting down, Harry finally spoke. “Do you remember in the final battle, when I walked into the forest to face Voldemort?”

“Yes.” Draco said immediately. Who didn’t remember that? Draco would never forget thinking Harry had died and that all hope was lost.

“Well, Dumbledore had given me the resurrection stone. I used it before going to face him. It was part of the plan for me to be killed, and Dumbledore gave me the stone so I could have my loved ones with me to bring me to the other side. It brought me my parents, Remus, Sirius, the people I loved and lost. And they walked with me to face him.”

Draco sat dumbly quiet. What did you say to that confession?

“And then I died. I chose to die. It was the only way, at the time, to allow him to kill me. To surrender. Here in this very forest.” He said, laying back and stretching his arms above his head, closing his eyes.

“You died?” Draco asked. He had heard rumours, but no one could ever satisfactorily explain them. “My mother said that the spell didn’t work, just like when you were a baby, and that you were alive when she came to check your body.”

“No. I died. I died and came back by the time she walked over to me - I decided to come back.” Harry said, sounding exhausted. “I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Can I ask why you came back?” Draco said, his expression soft, knowing he was in dangerously unsure territory.

Harry shot him a curious look.

“Because I needed to end it. I was the only one who could do it.” he said closing his eyes again.

“Do you regret coming back?” Draco asked, his morbid curiosity increasing. He didn’t know if he would have been selfless enough to come back if he had been in Harry’s position.

“Sometimes.” He said eventually. They were quiet for a long while. Draco had laid down as well and stared up at the leaves. “You going to tell me about your panic attack now?” Harry asked.

Draco smiled a little. It was such a Slytherin habit they had developed. Trading vulnerabilities. Trading secrets. It meant neither of them were at an advantage over the other. They were both on even ground.

He let out a long breath. “Honestly, I don’t know where exactly that one came from.” He said. “Sometimes they don’t make sense. Sometimes I can’t identify the trigger.”

“Porcupines?” Harry suggested, innocently.

“Yes, Potter. It was definitely the porcupines.” They were quiet for another long moment before Draco spoke again. “I just wanted to do something good.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.
“I mean, I feel like I’m at a dead end with this research and I need something to come out of my time here so it’s not a complete waste.” He was quiet for a moment but Harry didn’t push him. “I- I just wanted to create something beautiful in the garden. Something living and growing. So, when I saw it destroyed, it just- it just felt like, oh well, typical. And it was just the last straw, I snapped.”

He saw Harry nod out of the corner of his eye. Draco was sure he must seem completely barmy.

“And, for my birthday, I just really wanted to incendio all those hideous carcasses of rose bushes.” Draco said honestly. “And I feel so insulted the porcupines felt it necessary to tear down the pyre.” he smirked sadly.

Harry snorted. “It’s your birthday?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Happy Birthday.” Harry said.

“Thank you.” Draco replied.

They had passed a soothing hour trading more stories, and eventually walked back to the cottage. Draco couldn’t bear the sight of their mangled garden so he just walked straight inside and picked up his knitting after fastidiously checking his encourage-mint, who was flourishing in the kitchen window. At least he could keep one plant alive, he thought bitterly. He would deal with the garden later. Draco spent the rest of his morning finishing Neville’s scarf, cleaning, writing letters, and making lunch with Harry, who had been in and out all morning doing god know what.

In the late afternoon, when he finally decided he would face the mess outside, he was shocked to see that it had been cleaned up admirably well. The beds were tidied, the last rose bush had been ripped out and the pile neatened, and the compost heap repaired. And, to top it all off, the most impressive feat was a simple wattle fence that had been constructed around the garden.

He just stared in dumbfounded disbelief. “Potter?”

Harry turned around from fastening another wattle stake in the fence. “Oh, uh, happy birthday?” He said with an awkward smile.

Draco didn’t know what to say.

“I, uh, I’ll need help reinforcing the fence with magic, but I think it should do the trick to keeping those fuckers out.” He ran his hands through his mop of hair and turned to face Draco.

“Thank you.” Draco finally said, staring at the fence.

Harry shrugged, then said, “Wait, there’s something else, too” Before running back into the house.

Draco stood there and looked at the assembled pile of dead and dying rose bushes and felt a settled sense of gratitude that Harry never asked about why Draco wanted them dead, nor did he make any disparaging comments about it. He just nodded and helped.

Harry came back out of the house with a paper bag full of stuff. Setting the bag down next to Draco he pulled out a box of something called graham crackers, 2 large slabs of chocolate, and a basket full of marshmallows.

“What is happening?” Draco asked, with mounting confusion.
“Well, first I need you to *incendio* the shit out of this mound of offensive thorny excuses for flowers. Second, we’re going to roast marshmallows on their burning corpses and eat s’mores.” Harry concluded with a satisfied grin.

Draco couldn’t help but smile, his heart felt lighter than it had in such a long time. “What are s’mores?” He asked.

“A muggle dessert that they make when they go camping.” Harry explained as he began setting everything out on the ground on a cloth.

“What’s camping?” Draco asked as he watched Harry work.

Harry looked up. “You don’t know what camping is?”

“Should I?” He asked, feeling confused.

Harry shrugged, tearing open the box of crackers, “Like, sleeping in a tent in the wilderness. Remember, like at the quidditch world cup? Only they don’t use magical tents.”

“Huh.” Draco responded, unsure of how to process this information.

Harry finished laying out all the bits and pieces for the mysterious s’mores they were about to participate in, and then he began scanning the ground for something Draco couldn’t see. “What are you looking for?”

“Sticks, for roasting the marshmallows over the fire.” He explained as he picked up a long skinny stick, and weighed it in his hand with consideration. Eventually, Harry found two sticks that met his mysterious marshmallow criteria and walked back to Draco. “Are you ready?” he asked, gesturing at the large pile of prickly branches.

“You have no idea.” Draco said, turning his face stonily to glare at the roses. With a feeling of cathartic release, he wordlessly cast the strongest *incendio* he could at the mass of tangled thorns. The whole pile went up in a spectacular ball of fire that forced them both to take a large step back. He felt a grin spread across his face as he turned to Harry who handed him a stick with two of the squishy marshmallows on it. He followed Harry’s lead, and they spent the rest of the afternoon watching the pile of roses be reduced to a smouldering heap of ash while steadily eating their way through the entire supply of s’mores components. It was the best birthday he had had in years.

Late in the evening, when the pyre had burned down to a more manageable size, and Harry had brought out the kitchen chairs to sit by the edge of the flames, he had asked Draco, “So, what do you want for this year?”

Draco took a long time to answer as he ate another burnt marshmallow. “I want to be comfortable with who I am.” He finally said. Not looking at Harry. He wasn’t sure if Harry had ever seen the inside of the kitchen cabinet full of Draco’s post-it notes of hope and affirmations, but he had never mentioned them to Draco before.

“Fuck,” Harry said, sitting back in his chair, contemplating his own burning marshmallow, letting the fire blacken it before blowing it out and sticking it on a slab of chocolate, no longer bothering with the graham cracker. “Sounds nice, honestly.”

“Yeah.” Draco said. “Still can’t figure out if its a pipe dream or not, but it does sound nice.”

“I remember your notes, you know, from your apartment.” Harry said, watching the fire burning down on the most stubborn of the remaining branches.
“I thought I had died when I woke up. That’s how it was the last time, in the forest, I woke up naked in an all white room. It looked like King’s Cross Station, though. So, when I woke up in your apartment, I thought that was it. That I had done it. I was reading your notes thinking that I’d finally found somewhere that was making me feel good about myself.”

Harry smiled, still watching the flames. “Until the last one. That’s when I knew I wasn’t dead, and the words of encouragement weren’t for me.”

Draco couldn’t look away.

“You are more than your dark mark.” Harry recited, finally looking up to meet Draco’s gaze. His smile stayed, giving him an easy, contented expression. “You are, you know. More than a mark. A lot more.” His words were genuine, and Harry said them easily. Draco looked away, overcome with emotion.

“If you had asked me a year ago, hell, even six months ago, I don’t know what I would’ve said, but today, I know. I know who you are, Draco Malfoy, and the mark on your arm is one chapter in a life full of kindness and goodness. The mark is both the most and least interesting thing about you.”

Draco was at a loss for words. He felt inherently uncomfortable with Harry’s seemingly effortless, kind words about him. He had to work not to fidget in his seat. Eventually, he swallowed hard and looked up at Harry and nodded. What could he say to that? No one had ever said such soft words to him about his mark, of all things.

“I know you try to hide it, and I don’t blame you for it, really, but I wish you didn’t. You shouldn’t feel ashamed. It’s something you had to do, like dying was something I had to do. It’s dark parts of us that make people uncomfortable, but to deny them is being dishonest with ourselves. It made us who we are, for better, not for worse.”

“When did you become so sage?” Draco asked, trying to beat back the swelling upsurge of emotion in his chest. He was not going to cry in front of Harry twice in one day.

“Somewhere right around me destroying my own life, killing myself, getting rescued and having a whole lot of humility and respect for the idea that I need to accept who I am, darkness and all.” Harry scrubbed his face, his smile faltering, but only for a moment.

“You’re more than who I thought you were, too. More than famous Harry Potter, saviour of the wizarding world.” Draco said quietly. “I know I said I kept your note that night to remind myself that you’re also human, but if I’m honest, I couldn’t take how lonely it sounded. For someone so loved by everyone, it seemed as though you were so alone.” Draco said, trying to do this honesty thing.

The smile faded from Harry’s face and he turned back toward the fire. Draco could see the deep lines of his scowl, flickering in the light of the flames.

“Do you still have it?” Harry asked, his voice deep and gruff and full of determination.

Draco looked up from the fire at Harry and saw the sadness in his face. “Yes.”

“Can I have it back, please?” Harry said, closing his eyes for a moment, looking as though he was struggling to keep his emotions under control.

Without a word, Draco withdrew the crumpled piece of parchment from his pocket and handed it over to Harry.
Without unfolding it, Harry held it in his hand for a moment, before standing up and unceremoniously tossing it into the middle of the flames, watching as it caught alight and blackened, before disintegrating into nothing but ash.

Before he could stop himself, Draco reached out and squeezed Harry’s hand. Harry seemed surprised by the small gesture, but Draco had pulled away before he could react.

“Why’d you keep it with you?” Harry asked, finally turning to retake his chair at the fireside next to Draco.

“To keep it safe, until you wanted it back.” Draco said softly.

Harry’s smile returned, his features relaxing. “You were right, you know. I was incredibly lonely. I thought I wasn’t, but I was. It took me too long to see what was really happening, and by then I was so isolated I didn’t know where to turn.”

Draco hummed in agreement. He understood lonely.

“I’m not lonely anymore.” Harry said, simply.

Draco smiled, “Me either.”
Remnants of Crucius

July 10, 2008

Harry had been antsy all day. He had struggled to get up in the morning after a night of dreams of being subjected to the cruciatus curse. It was amorphous and confusing, but he distinctly heard Bellatrix laughing as she held him under, the pain enveloping his mind, sending lightning through his limbs, down his spine. Just rounds and endless rounds of the cold sound of crucio on the mouths of people who delighted in his pain.

He had tried to shake it off by working in the garden, but his body was stiff, and every little ache and pain was a reminder. By midday, he was feeling incredibly raw and frustrated, and a little bit scared. He had started fantasising about ways to stop the pain, and he knew it was only a short moment from there to fantasising about heroin. He felt his mouth filling with saliva at the thought, his body crumpling a bit, as if to remind him how sweet the release would be to just give in.

By dinner, he had snapped at Malfoy four separate times. They had hardly said more than ten words to each other all day, and none of it held the casual familiarity and soft consideration that had become part of their friendship. He had tried to read to keep his mind busy, but it hadn’t worked, and he just found himself angrily reading the same sentences over and over again, his mind drifting off to Sirius’s room and The Gallows and all of the things that had once defined his life. And his death. It was as though his hackles were raised, and he couldn’t bring himself to relax them down.

Malfoy had gone to sleep early, probably to avoid Harry’s horrible mood, but Harry couldn’t stop feeling edgy and like his skin was shivering, even though he was hot all over. It was overwhelming. It was a reminder of all of the things he had worked so hard to get away from.

He paced back and forth from the kitchen to the little bunk bed in the corner. He was trying to be quiet not to wake Malfoy, but he also desperately didn’t want to be alone. He wanted Malfoy to comfort him. He wanted words of wisdom and normalcy and care. He wanted to not feel so alone.

He walked over to where Malfoy was snoring softly and gently touched his shoulder.

“Malfoy.” He said softly, feeling profoundly embarrassed, but not knowing what else to do.

“Hmph.” The sound from under the light summer quilt confirmed that Malfoy was indeed awake.

Harry took a deep breath, and before he could stop himself, he was frantically rambling.

“Malfoy. I’m sorry to wake you up. I’m sorry for my shit behaviour all day today. It’s just. I’m... I’m struggling with something and it feels really awful and I don’t know what to do. It’s scary. I feel like I want to use, but... the rest of me doesn’t want to. I like being sober. I do. I’ve been doing so well, and, now, all of a sudden, I wake up sore after all these nightmares of Bellatrix hitting me with the cruciatus curse and it’s been after me all day. It’s making me worried. Like, maybe I don’t have as good of a handle on things as I thought I did. Maybe I’m a lot weaker than I thought. Or, mentally, I’m not going to be able to say no.”

All of the fears of the whole day came streaming out and he couldn’t help himself. He was worrying his hands and musing his hair and walking back and forth and he couldn’t believe he was saying all of these things.

Malfoy rolled over and looked up at him, Harry stopped mid-pace, his face open and full of fear,
body full of tension.

“It’s ok, Potter. You’re ok. This is normal.” He said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“How is this normal, Malfoy? I don’t feel ok. I feel sick. And scared. And like I did in that first week, almost. Like my skin is crawling.” Harry had stepped forward, and he was laying everything on the table. This was it, it was time to be vulnerable. Keeping secrets had nearly killed him, and he wanted things to be different this time around.

Malfoy looked at him a moment longer, his eyes sleepy but seeming to take in how badly Harry was handling things at the moment.

“Ok,” he said, scooting over and lifting up the quilt. “Come on, then.”

Harry stared at him, but only for a second, before crawling in to the warm sheets and letting Malfoy drape his arm over his shoulder so he could rub his back in slow, soothing circles. This left Harry with his head almost laying on Malfoy’s chest, his knees curled up against his, one hand draped over his chest.

Harry was so grateful for the contact. He instantly felt less raw, less needy, less panicked. Malfoy’s hand on his back was a gentle reminder that he was safe and nothing had changed, he was still in Tenebris Hollow, still sober and not in danger of running off to get drugs, he just had to get through this feeling and he would be okay, right?

As if reading his thoughts, Malfoy spoke into the mess of hair below his chin. “This is completely normal, Potter. I’m surprised it didn’t happen sooner, honestly. Recovery isn’t linear. You don’t just wake up magically cured from addiction. Some days are much harder or worse than others, and some days are easy.”

Harry took a deep breath in, his exhale sighing out against Malfoy’s pyjama covered chest. He knew that, he thought, it was just felt distant and unreal until the words had come out of someone else’s mouth.

“Will it always be this hard?” Harry asked, his voice small and his normally self-assured personality hidden beneath his uncertainty for the future.

Malfoy paused a moment in his gentle rubbing and thought. “I don’t know,” he said, finally. “But, even if it is, I know you can handle it.”

Harry considered his answer. It was kind of Malfoy not to lie to him and tell him it was all easier from here on out. The honesty of the first half of his answer made Harry feel like he could believe the second half. His mind quieted at that, and Harry let himself relax down against the soft mattress.

“I don’t know how I’m going to handle things outside of this forest. What if I can’t go back to my old life at all?” Harry voiced the thought that had been haunting him for some time now, but he hadn’t wanted to engage with.

“You will make the changes you need to make, you’ll adjust your life so it fits you, not the other way around. You don’t need to do anything, Potter. You don’t need to prove anything and you don’t owe anything to anyone. Don’t you think it’s about time you started putting your own happiness first?”

“Mmm.” Harry groaned, really not liking the idea of having to do all of that, on his own, back in the real world.
“Oh, stop worrying for now, I’m not handing you over to the wolves just yet.” Malfoy said, his voice oddly protective and caring. Harry smiled, despite himself. It felt nice to be the one taken care of, for once, and he was thankful he could tell Malfoy these things. That they could be honest with one another.

He closed his eyes and breathed in, letting his mind just focus on the slow circles that Malfoy formed against the space between his shoulders. The tightness that had followed him all day was leaving, and being slowly replaced by a thick sense of exhaustion. It wasn’t long before he had drifted off to sleep altogether.
The Trouble with Intimacy

July 11th, 2008

Draco slowly swam into wakefulness with the familiar brassy sounds of jays calling outside the cottage. The sun had barely begun to rise and he was feeling deliciously warm and contented in his soft bed wrapped in blankets and … oh. Wrapped in unfamiliar limbs. Harry’s limbs. Oh, shit. Right. There was a person in his bed. Oh dear. The sudden realisation that there was a body in his bed and that he had a particular morning situation in his pants crashed over him like a bucket of ice water. Now what?!

Draco was fueled with a desire to get away as fast as humanly possible. Surely, he was overreacting? It was normal to have morning wood? It was a normal response to existing with a penis? It had nothing to do with another person being in his bed, right? It certainly had nothing to do with who was in his bed. Right?!

Draco drew a shaky breath and slowly began to extricate himself from Harry’s octopus sprawl across him. Oh dear god, Potter was so close and so warm. Sweet Circe’s sagging tits, deliver him from this awkward nightmare. He didn’t know what was more horrifying, that they were laying in bed together and Draco had a hard on, or the fact that part of his brain found this rather intriguing. No! he screamed in his head. RUN. Before Harry wakes up and the world ends.

Draco was peeling back the comforter and stepping over Potter as he began to stir.

“Hmph.” Harry muttered. Draco didn’t respond. Just extricated the last of his limbs and turned away from the bed. He was deciding if he would go change in the bathroom and pretend none of this ever happened or if he would cave to the overwhelming desire to dash to the door and run as fast as he could.

“Malfoy?” Potter muttered as he stirred sleepily under the blanket.

Nope. Draco couldn’t do this. Fuck this. Without even grabbing his shoes, he moved swiftly to the door.

“Malfoy? Where are you going?” He heard Harry’s soft and sleepy voice laced with confusion.

He didn’t answer, and as soon as he was clear of the door he ran flat out for the forest. And wasn’t that just a sight? Striped drawstring pajama bottoms and thin grey nightshirt be damned.

This wasn’t the leadened numb buzzing of a panic attack, weighing him down. No, this was somehow worse. This was adrenaline pulsing through his body as it spurred him faster and faster, and it wasn’t long until he was flat out sprinting. He heard the angry bees in his ears but it was as if his frantically thumping heart were urging him to outrun them. All he could think as he ran and ran was “whatthefuckwhatthefuckwhatthefuck” over and over and over again.

His bare feet were pounding the packed earth of the path and he didn’t even notice it when a sharp stick stabbed into the soft flesh of his arch as he hurtled away from the cottage as if he were outrunning fiendfyre.

After what felt like an eternity, or maybe it was only 20 minutes, Draco finally succumbed to his body’s limitation for panicked running and collapsed at the base of an impressive oak. His body was racked with shuddering breaths as he tried desperately to draw more oxygen to his lungs. What the fuck had that been about?
Last night Harry had been so vulnerable, and it had felt easy for Draco to offer comfort to him by allowing him space in his bed. He felt in control of that interaction. Offering comfort and holding Potter. But, then he had to go and fall asleep like an idiot and woke up being held, and suddenly he had become the one feeling open, and exposed. And trapped. He was the one who was being held. He was the one with his guard down.

God, that had been so stupid. Draco had this consuming, irrational fear that if Harry had woken up before him and noticed his erection that he would have turned into some sex crazed demon and forced himself on Draco. The thought made his skin burn and his lungs desperate for air. For space. For escape. Draco tried to rationalise with himself that, no, not everyone is a creepy rapist with boundary issues, but it didn’t stem the rise of panic he had felt.

Draco’s breathing began to even out and he buried his face in his hands and berated himself. What the fuck? He had had a genuine moment of vulnerability and connectedness with another human, and instead of easing into it, he fucking ran. Literally. He literally ran away. Into a forest. To avoid being in an intimate situation. How was he ever going to go back to the cottage and face Harry now? That had been so fucking embarrassing. It’s not as if that situation had even been inherently sexual. If he had stayed and not been a complete berk, Harry probably would have woken up, rolled away and not even noticed, and they could have had a perfectly normal morning.

Apparently fucking not. He looked up to see two thestrals walking towards him, and noticed the cut on his foot bleeding pretty badly. The smell probably drew them, but then again, they seemed to follow him anyways.

“Good morning.” Draco sighed and said politely. He really did enjoy their company. “I’m sorry there’s no food, just my foot bleeding.” He indicated to his foot.

He resumed his self deprecating thoughts as the thestrals lazily wandered around him. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the large tree and tried to think of how to rectify this situation. He could just apologise for being weird and hope Harry didn’t ask any further questions? Not likely. He ran away in his pajamas without shoes. There would be questions. And he didn’t want Harry to think it was because of his need to be comforted, no, Draco didn’t want him to feel bad or think that this was in some way his fault.

Fuck. How do you explain to someone that you simultaneously crave the kind of interaction they had last night and find it fucking terrifying enough to run screaming into the distance? Draco thought back to what it felt like to have someone in his arms, to have that casually intimate contact. There had been no expectations, no ulterior motives, no pressure. It had felt so nice.

And now, Draco felt like a fucking idiot because he probably put an axe in that ever happening again. He sat, utterly woebegone, with his elbows on his knees and the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes feeling completely exasperated with his behaviour. He didn’t even want to let his mind bring up the fact that he had had what one might call an obsessive crush on Harry in school. He really didn’t want to allow that to bleed into their tenuous friendship, or complicate his intimacy issues.

He startled at something cold on his foot. He opened his eyes to see the smaller of the two thestrals licking his cut. “Hey!” he protested, but when he pulled his foot back to examine the wound he was dumbfounded to see it knitting itself together. The thestral didn’t seem to mind Draco’s outburst and quietly turned away to walk towards its friend.

Draco sat and marvelled at what had just happened. The simple act nearly entirely eclipsed his reason for being in the forest in the first place. He would have to go read the stack of thestral books and test the blood he had collected, yet forgotten in the excitement of the unicorn sample he had
collected, immediately.

Just as he decided to get up and begin his walk back, he saw three more thestrals walk through the trees, followed by a furrow-browed Potter. Shit, Draco thought. He wasn’t ready for whatever discussion they were about to have. He didn’t feel ready to trade anymore secrets just yet. There was a flicker of relief on Harry’s face as he spotted Draco and walked over to him, swinging a bag off his shoulder at Draco’s feet, and sliding down to sit next to him.

“I brought your shoes.” He said.

Draco sighed heavily, trying not to feel embarrassed. “Thank you.”

They were quiet while Draco opened the bag and put on his well worn loafers.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.” Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck, a note of shame in his voice.

Draco turned his head quickly towards him. “Potter, I want to be clear that what happened last night in no way made me uncomfortable.” His own discomfort evaporating in the face of Harry’s discomposure. “This morning was - I panicked.” he said, feeling stupid. Obviously he had panicked.

Harry chuckled softly. “Did you? I hadn’t noticed.”

Draco smiled a little. “Do shut up, Potter, this really can’t be any worse than it already is.” Potter grinned and huffed a laugh in response, and then Draco was also smiling. And soon they were both laughing hysterically, falling over sideways at the base of the tree. All the terror Draco had felt seemed to wash away between the two of them, surrendering to how needy and broken and ill-equipped they both were to deal with anything.

They laughed for a long time. Each time they thought they were reigning themselves in, they would look at one another and burst out in another fit of hilarity. It felt light and Draco felt the anxiety of the morning start to bleed away. When they finally calmed themselves down, Draco’s face hurt from smiling so hard and his stomach ached with the effort. He hadn’t seen Harry’s face look so young and carefree since school and he was flooded with memories of that easy, smiling face.

Harry must have noticed the change of expression on Draco’s features, because he asked with a cocked head, “What, Malfoy? What now? What’s with the face?”

Draco tried to school his features into something more neutral, but didn’t think he was accomplishing it after the rollercoaster of events of the last 12 hours. “Just thinking about how fucking ridiculous this situation is.”

“Which situation?” He chuckled, “The one where you’re living with your old school rival, or the one where you fled into the forest from said rival after too much snuggling?”

Draco rolled his eyes, trying not to laugh or grimace. “Both, obviously.” He said, trying desperately to comport himself in a more fitting manner. “And I thought we established that we weren’t rivals anymore?”

“True.” Harry said, smiling with a look of concentration on his face. “I don’t think we were really rivals in school, either. I think I was just a bit obsessed with you, really. You drove me mad.” Harry’s features softened as he watched a pair of jays hopping through the branches of the nearest tree. They were goading each other, as Harry and Draco once had, their screeches just as shrill and
desirous of the other’s attention.

“I think that’s actually the quintessential definition of school rivals, Potter.” Draco said, managing a smirk. “I, too, had an unhealthy interest in your comings and goings.” The admission didn’t feel scary in the light of all the laughing they’d been doing.

Harry considered this, the jays moving off to fight over the next bit of forest territory. “Did you know I had a map of Hogwarts that showed me where anyone was in the school at any given time?”

Draco just grunted in disbelief. “I don’t know how to respond to that information. You had all three hallows and now you’re telling me you had a fucking magical map to help you sneak around school? What else did you have?!”

“An inability to listen to authority figures?” Harry laughed.

“Oh my god.” Draco sighed. “Go on, tell me about your magical stalker map then.” he gestured with a dramatic flourish.

“Well,” Harry said, with a slow blush creeping up his neck, “I spent most nights looking at that map trying to figure out what you were up to. Drove Ron and Hermione spare, to tell you the truth.”

Draco shook his head in disbelief. “I spent most of my Hogwarts days trying to get your attention and get under your skin, and here I find you spent the whole time stalking me.”

“You were trying to get my attention?” Harry asked with a half smile, he looked back at Draco with one eyebrow raised under his impossible nest of hair.

“Wasn’t it obvious? We spent six years screaming at each other from across the great hall, Potter. There were two tables between us, and we still managed to heckle one another.”

“Yeah, I guess we were both pretty ridiculous.” Harry admitted. “You were pretty dramatic.”

Feigning outrage Draco scoffed, “Me? Dramatic? I don’t really have a counter argument for that, but fuck you anyways.” He said, dramatically.

“Ron was convinced it was because you fancied me, but you were such a git I never believed him.”

Now it was Draco’s turn to blush, which was so much more obvious on his pale skin. “Yes, well.” He cleared his throat. “After much distance and self reflection over the years, I can see now that my behavior was probably driven more by teenage hormones than anything.”

“Oh my god, you were pulling my pigtails, you prat.” Harry laughed at the realization.

“Well that’s an odd mental image.” Draco grimaced with a huff.

Harry shoved him over, “You know what I mean.” he jested. This conversation was getting out of hand.

Harry shook his head in disbelief at him and, after a moment of silence, said. “So, about this morning?”

Draco sagged. Back to this.

“We don’t have to talk about it.” Harry offered softly. “But if it’s something I can prevent from
happening in the future, I’d like to know.”

Use your words Draco. Beatrice had given him the vocabulary to discuss these things. Be an adult. Be honest.

“I panicked this morning because…” This was going to be harder than he thought, he decided as he fished for the words. “… because I was afraid of being out of control and I was afraid of the intimacy of the situation.”

“The intimacy?” Harry asked.

“You know, being close to someone, physically. It’s not something I do - not since the war.” He felt his face flush and knew he must be hot pink.

“Oh.” Harry said. He seemed stunned by the admission. “Well, I won’t push that on you again, if it upsets you.” he sounded remorseful, and he scooted sideways a bit to make sure he wasn’t crowding him too much, now. They had leaned quite close to one another as the conversation wore on.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” Draco snapped, felt frustrated with himself. “I found last night comforting... for me as well.” he felt his face getting warm again. “It was nice, really nice actually.” He said softly, decidedly not looking at Harry who was very still beside him. “It’s just, when I woke up this morning, I felt exposed and vulnerable, and I had this fear that you would use it against me if you woke up before I removed myself from the situation.” Draco held up his hand to stem the protest forming in Harry’s mouth.

“I know, Potter, I know you wouldn’t have done anything untoward, and I know it’s completely irrational, but I haven’t been able to work through these things yet. It has nothing to do with you, honestly. Just me and all my baggage.”

Harry considered this a moment. “I understand. I have baggage, too.” He paused, then finished his thought. “I mean, I only think I needed the closeness last night because I was scared too… Just, I was afraid of me.” He sighed heavily.

“I know.” Draco said, almost whispering.

“So, I propose that next time you feel the need to run into the forest, literally” he smirked at Draco, who rolled his eyes, “that you just talk to me about it. You’ve done that much for me. And honestly, last night helped me so much. I haven’t felt that stable in a long time.”

Draco looked up to search his face for misgivings, and found nothing but earnest sincerity there.

He sighed and rubbed his face hard with his hands before running his fingers through his hair, trying to organize his thoughts.

“I’ve never slept next to someone like that before.” Harry admitted quietly, almost timidly.

Draco stilled at the admission. He had always thought he was a bit of an outlier, having never spent the night in someone’s bed with whom he had chosen to do so. Opening his bed up to Harry last night had been a huge deal for him, but apparently it had been just as big of a deal to Harry as well.

“Me either.” Draco finally replied.

Harry looked surprised. “You seemed so confident.”
Draco shrugged. “It seemed like the most logical thing to do.”

“Thank you, it really did help. I was shocked, actually, at how well it worked.”

“It’s not a problem, like I said, it was nice for me too.” Draco flushed again, feeling stupid. “It’s just the aftermath was difficult to face, apparently.”

“So, I could ask for that again... if I’m struggling?” He clarified.

“Yes, Potter, I actually insist.” He breathed out heavily. “Just please don’t be offended if I scarper again.”

“Don’t worry. Now that I know you spook easily, I’ll be more prepared for it.” He gave Draco a hesitant smile.

“How did you find me?” Draco asked.

“Oh, well, I just followed the thestrals, actually.” he said, looking pensive again. “They really are interesting creatures aren’t they?”

“Yes they are.” he said getting to his feet and turning to help Harry up. “And I actually need to get to my books, because I have a lot of questions about them.”

“What kind of questions?” Harry cocked his head in curiosity.

“Like how and why they keep healing me when I’m injured.” Draco said. “Come Potter, let’s get back, I’m starving.”

“You know, you were the one who ran out without breakfast, Malfoy.” Harry said with exasperation and something that sounded like affection in his voice.

Draco tried to regain his composure as if this was all a routine morning and march them back to the cottage to indulge in a full English before beginning his research. He couldn’t help but feel grateful that Harry had sought him out, and that he didn’t pressure him to explain why he was the way he was. Who would have thought Harry sodding Potter would be helping him unpack his baggage.

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July 31, 2008

When Draco asked what Harry wanted to do for his birthday, he explicitly said he didn’t want to do anything. He had told him that he never enjoyed his birthdays, nor did he every make a fuss and he didn’t intend to start now. Then he paused and looked inquisitively at Draco and asked, “How did you know when my birthday was?”

He felt himself flush before answering in a disparaging tone, “Everyone knows when your birthday is, you’re Harry fucking Potter. I’m surprised it’s not a national holiday, to be honest.”

Harry seemed satisfied with this answer, and they didn’t mention Harry’s birthday again. But while Harry was out, working in the garden, Draco surreptitiously made a cupcake in Harry’s favorite chipped mug. After decorating it with a lion and a serpent wearing party hats, he stuck a single candle in it and left it near the kettle for Harry to find.
“Pockenello’s body upon a central low table was a glorious sight to behold - his arms tied behind him, a silken sash over his eyes, naked and spread, his ass raised high in the air for all to see. He was to be defiled by Bulloxinion forthwith, king of the land and notorious for his adamant proclivity for male flesh. The onlookers were reddened, ladies fanning themselves with abandon. Pockenello’s cock was hard and jutted out before him, his ass prepared by Borastus’s tongue.”

Harry paused, his face turning pink, his brow creased at the pages before him.

“Why’d you stop, you’re just getting to the good part it sounds like.” Draco said, laughing at Harry’s flustered expression.

“Hell, I had no idea muggles wrote such excellently graphic smut back in the day. This book is from the 1600s, Malfoy. And muggles were notoriously touchy about homosexuality - this is a right shock.”

Draco snorted, rolling his eyes and laying back against the edge of the garden bed he had been weeding. Reaching up to pluck one of the recently regrown broad beans and snacking on it idly.

“Go on then, I want to hear what happens.” He said, though he sounded more interested in Harry’s reaction than the abject depravity of the ancient story.

It was hot and pleasant in the sunny little garden, and Harry had tempted them both into a lunch time open air reading - he had found a stash of horribly old books in the bottom of the cupboard he had found the seeds in, half hidden by stone slabs, and it had turned out to be a wonderfully erotic gay porn cache from centuries ago. There were quite a few wizarding books, though they were in French, and Harry hadn’t been able to keep his composure with all of the moving illustrations, so he had settled on something that had looked less intimidating by comparison. The Quintessence of Debauchery, it turned out, was anything but.

Harry cleared his throat, obviously overcome with embarrassment for having chosen something so explicit to read aloud, but too far in to his performance to back out now.

“And so Bulloxinion sauntered to him, stroking his own impressive member to erection, his tendency to exhibitionism and the whispered fawning of the crowd goading his cock to thicken with blood. He positioned himself behind Pockenello’s raised and loosened hole and thrusted in without prelude, the silken embrace of his lover eliciting a cry from deep within him. The slickened sounds of their seditious thrusting gave way to punctuation with the eager and ravenous pleading of Pockenello, whose member leaked and twitched with the agonising pleasure of Bulloxinion’s deft assault of his prostate.”

Harry stopped reading. His face flushed crimson. He was holding the book aloft still, but no longer focused to the words on the page, a smile spreading across his face. He looked both startled and uproariously happy. He started laughing, finally dropping the book, tilting his head back up and giving way to an absolutely carefree bout of giggling.

Draco sat up and regarded him, “What’s wrong Potter, think it’s hilarious the way gay men get each other off?” His eyebrow was raised and he seemed unsure about his own defensiveness. It was a hilariously odd tale, it was a bit funny, but something about Harry laughing at it seem to
make Draco incredibly uncomfortable.

Harry, still red in the face and looking beautifully surprised looked over at him. “No, you twit, I’m laughing because I got hard.” His grin was lopsided and easy, his posture relaxed and his admission was as though it was simple as saying the time of day.

Draco’s mouth fell open for a split second before he reined himself in as he clearly attempted to process the words that had just come out of Harry’s mouth.

Before he had time to form a reply, Harry had sat down across from him, leaning back against the opposite bed. “It just hasn’t happened in a long time.” He said, shrugging, the embarrassment only catching up to him now, as if he had forgotten that this wasn’t something that friends discussed often.

Harry wrinkled his nose and laughed away the nerves, committing to the discussion. “I was using and I never wanted sex. I never thought about it, I never had any desires, nothing. It’s been … months and months at least, before I even got here. It’s like that whole part of me was numbed and I didn’t even notice.” He paused, his eyes closed and his head tilted back, soaking in the afternoon sunlight that dappled their little garden. “And then this story goes and gets me hard like I’m still a teenager reading a naughty scene in a racy book. I had forgotten, almost, what it was like. I had forgotten about sex and wanting someone.”

Draco watched him make his confession, his lips still parted, halfway to a word, but it was as if he could think of nothing to say. Draco was watching Harry and the exposed stretch of his neck and the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

Harry eventually scrubbed his face, sighed and looked back over at him, smiling shyly. “Sorry, if that was weird. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine, it’s not like it’s not something we discuss as Healers, you know. You’re not the first person who’s struggled with lack of desire.” Draco was resorting to putting this in the context of work to keep the distance between them safe, and comfortable, and not too intimate. Harry watched him, and noted the change in his demeanor.

“It’s not just lack of desire.” Harry went on, knowing he’d have to give something more for Malfoy to be coaxed into feeling safe and comfortable and not professionally distant - he didn’t tell him to tell Healer Malfoy, he wanted to tell him as a friend.

“I couldn’t even stay hard to have sex with Ginny. It was a nightmare. A disastrous fucking nightmare. It’s why we never worked out together.” Harry admitted, his embarrassment deepening and the shame running across his skin making him feel prickly and uncomfortable, but needing to share all the same.

“Are you trying to tell me you’ve never had an orgasm while having sex with someone?” Draco asked, an eyebrow raised and his curiosity clearly getting the better of him, apparently completely taken aback that Harry Potter, of all people, would struggle with something so fundamental as sex.

Harry scowled. “Once.” He said, tearing up a leaf between his now fidgeting fingers. “I tried cocaine and slept with a prostitute. That’s the only time I’ve ever managed to finish.” He was angry now, and Draco breathed out loudly.

“I knew I was gay in 5th year already.” Draco offered, trying to mimic the ease with which Harry had given his secrets up. “My parents disagreed. So they tried to set me up with a nice pureblood girl and force us to have sex so I could just … I don’t know… change my mind - or to prove to me
that I could just marry a woman to sire an heir and keep my own devious nature to myself, I suppose.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.” Harry said, his eyebrows far up in his messy hair, his scar creased and hidden. “What happened?”

“I took a whole bunch of potions and drank myself into a near stupor and by the end of it we were both crying. Needless to say, just another reason for Lucius to be disappointed in his son, I suppose.” Draco finished, his voice getting more and more acidic in tone.

“He’s an idiot for not loving you as you are. Children aren’t made to be the instruments of their parent’s dreams. They’re made to be loved and cared for.” Harry said, his tone resolute, but his features soft.

Draco nodded, sighing away the tension of the memory, then his smile falling abruptly. “But, you know Potter, at least you’ve had consensual sex. Aside from that one time bullied in to it by my parents, of all people, I can’t say the same.”

Harry watched as the absolute heartbreaking reality of what he had said fell over the both of them. The sun shifted behind a stray cloud and the shadow cast a chill over the two men, as if to remind them of just how cold the world could be - how unkind and unforgiving.

Harry could see the gooseflesh forming on Draco’s bare arms and the tears collecting in his bright grey eyes, and it hurt him so sharply to see him fold under the weight of those horrific memories. He wanted so badly to reach across the little garden path and envelop him in a hug and hold him and tell him it was going to be okay and that he deserved love and kindness and gentleness. He deserved to be safe and respected, and deserved pleasure, real pleasure. He deserved it all.

But he held fast, for he didn’t want to scare him, he didn’t want to invalidate his control of his space, he didn’t want to be part of the endless roll of people who had taken pieces of him for themselves and given him nothing but terror and pain, and memories that piled up like stones.

Harry felt his magic pool around his hands softly, a gentle tingling reminder that it was there. It felt calm and collected in the face of his reeling thoughts and the anger and outrage he felt toward the injustices of the past. He raised one hand softly and thought of how he wanted to show Malfoy he cared, a warming charm lifting the chill in the air ever so slightly.

Draco lifted his head and looked over at Harry, his arms crossed over his chest, but the gooseflesh disappearing in the gentle warmth of the spell.

“Your wand is inside.” He said, his brow creased and his cheeks ruddy and splotchy.

“Mm” Harry replied, not having realised himself that he didn’t have it on him. “But, you were cold.”

Draco stared at him, wiping his cheeks. “Your magic is different.” He said, finally.

He seemed unsure how else to phrase it, and Harry could understand why - the shock that he could even do wandless magic himself was making him feel a little out of his depth as it was.

“So am I,” said Harry, getting to his feet and offering a hand to Malfoy. “Come on inside, I’ll make us tea.”

Draco reached up and took his offered grasp, Harry’s magic curling and twining itself around Malfoy’s graceful fingers. He was no longer the raging wildfire, but a warmth that burned like
It had been hours of Malfoy pouring over potions, muttering to himself, making notes, scratching them out and rewriting them in his tiny scrawl, the kitchen table overflowing with books and recipes and charts and scraps of parchment in various languages. Draco had broken in to excited french at some point, having been immersed in a francophone text from Haiti via France for several hours, which had been nothing short of charmingly adorable. Harry had laughed and made him another cup of tea, occasionally reminding him to eat something and shoving peanut butter and jam sandwiches his way, which Malfoy occasionally nibbled on.

Harry had tried to help, but he’d ended up in the way more often than anything, and by the early evening, he had given up and dragged the bearskin rug outside to the meadow on the southern side of Tenebris Hollow. He was happy there were breakthroughs on the Thestral front, but his desire to be supportive seemed to be getting in the way of actually being supportive.

He dropped it down amongst the carpet of wildflowers, some of the tiny glowing blue beetles buzzing away from the skin as Harry shook it out and stretched it flat to lay upon. He smiled and watched the little insects zipping off into the dusky evening, finding new homes amongst the closing flower buds.

It had been achingly hot during the day, and Harry was thankful the sun was dipping below the forest on the mountainous horizon, the temperature dropping to a comfortable chill. Evening birdsong carried across the clearing and bats occasionally flitted around the open sky between the trees, finding their way with their own inaudible trills.

Harry lay back on the familiar skin, cushioned perfectly on the plush greenery beneath him, his hands resting comfortably behind his head, legs stretched out and ankles crossed, his bare feet finally accustomed to the rough terrain of the hollow.

His hair was long enough to tie back in a bun on top of his head with a stolen bit of Malfoy’s white yarn, and his face had filled out with a solid layer of scruffy stubble. He had tried to keep it shaved and neat in the second or third month, but by now he was happy to let it grow and not to worry so much. Malfoy had chastised him a bit about it, but Harry was ok with it for now, it felt more him, and it had been so long since he had explored what that really meant.

He watched the sky fade and the stars come out, slowly at first, and then all at once. With no moon, the darkness was thick and viscous, and Harry let it pool around him, his magic keeping him warm and gently running along the tips of his fingers and up his arms, now thick with muscle from life in the Hollow.

It was true what Malfoy had said. His magic felt different. It was calm for him, and quieter, but it felt even more powerful. He relished the new control he was developing - it was as if he was relearning all of the spells he had always known, but with more finesse, more innate and intuitive knowledge of how his magic would respond. It was strange at first, that he had started to prefer wandless magic, but the more he worked with it, the more it felt natural.

He felt more in tune with what he wanted, what he was feeling, and it was as though his magic was a conduit for him to access that, as though his very flesh and bone were the core and his mind the wand. He felt powerful, but without the anxiety of being out of control, as if he was reaching in to a deep well within himself. It felt good. He felt good.
The clouds that had gathered cleared and the stars shone out from the depths of the firmament, scattered across the sky, and Harry scanned the constellations he recalled from his Hogwarts days, the milky way stretching between the various characters. He wasn’t sure if it held any meaning, but it was beautiful in its immensity. And, for perhaps the first time in his life, he lay back and drank in the absolute vastness of the night sky.

“Mars is bright tonight” came Malfoy’s familiar voice, and Harry smiled, patting the rug next to him, thinking back on the centaur who had first warned him of the fiery planet’s red hue.

“There are no wars left to be fought, not for me, anyway. Mars is bright for someone else’s battles.” Harry said, watching Malfoy sink onto the skin next to him, his blonde hair and pale skin making him just barely brighter than the stars above.

Harry knew he was smiling, and he could feel it radiating from him.

“I’m more interested in these two figures on the horizon, as far South as you can see.” Harry pointed just above the tops of the trees, tracing the figures with his outstretched hand, his magic producing a beautiful silver glow for one and a glorious gold for the other.

Draco laughed as the figures he traced took the forms of a little Welsh Green and a miniature Lion. They regarded one another, the Lion roaring regally while the little dragon huffed tiny jets of flame from it’s haughty nose, whipping its tail from side to side in imagined indignation.

“You found my constellation.” Draco said shyly, looking over at Harry’s cheeky grin, illuminated in the light cast by his anthropomorphic charms.

“Did you know we are next to each other in the sky?” Harry asked, turning his brilliant smile to Draco. “I’m just above you, just so you know.” He turned back to watch the lion and his companion fade from the sky, their respective stars burning brightly in their places.

Draco nodded and smiled back.

“Why did they name you Draco?” Harry asked softly, Draco laying back next to him to look up at the rest of the night sky.

“My mother chose it. It’s a tradition in the House of Black, to be named after a constellation. She wanted something powerful for me, her only son, something that would connote fear and respect, and, above all, power. I’m not sure I could have ever lived up to it, but, in the end, I’m not sure she wanted me to.” Draco answered, his hand resting next to Harry’s, the warmth of his magic snaking around his fingers and up his arm, tethering them, and Draco’s own magic letting it.

Draco pointed up in the sky behind them, North of the dragon and lion, and said, “Andromeda and Bellatrix are this side. There’s Sirius and Regulus, the last of the brothers Black, also named for stars. Regulus’s star is within your constellation, the Lion, and Sirius, by all irony, the Dog. My mother was the only one to be named for a flower, and maybe she was trying to make sure I didn’t forget I am just as much a Black as a Malfoy when she gave me my name.”

Harry followed Draco’s outstretched hand from his lion to canis major, and saw the legendary brightness of the dog star, his heart straining with the longing for his godfather. His eyes reflexively burned with tears at the thought that all these years he’d had a star and Harry had never thought to look to it.

Draco must have sensed his mood change, and he stayed quiet. He seemed unsure about having brought attention to his second cousin’s mark upon the heavens.
“He was the closest thing I’ve ever had to a father.” Harry said, finally, his voice hoarse and quiet in the night air. “I loved him, really. And I’m the reason he died.”

“Are you really going to take responsibility for something my deranged aunt did? You were fifteen.” Draco said, not unkindly.

“It’s more complicated than that.” Harry said, clearly still hanging on to the guilt.

“You’re right.” Draco started, carefully. “It is more complicated than that. But to say you’re wholly responsible for Sirius’ death, in an adult’s war, one you fought and won as a child, is taking a lot on.”

“Don’t you ever feel guilty?” Harry asked, turning his face to Draco, regarding him with nothing but the desire to see his own haunting reflected in someone else. To see he wasn’t alone in the weight he carried from the war.

“Constantly.” Draco said quietly.

“We were on opposite sides and even still, neither of us can escape the feeling that we did so much wrong. That we should have known better. It’s not very fair.” Harry said, watching Draco’s reaction to his words, wanting him to not feel judged, just understood.

“I worry that Sirius would be ashamed of me.” Harry said, the words feeling heavy in the stillness of the evening.

“What did you mean in your note when you said you had talked it over with him?” Draco asked, the question seemed curious and cautious at the same time.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. He wasn’t ready to tell Malfoy everything about that night, but they had come this far together.

“I was hallucinating. Sirius. And Regulus. They were the only people I could talk to about wanting to die. Sirius wanted me to live. And Regulus… well, he wanted me to know it was okay if I chose otherwise.”

“Why Regulus?” Draco asked, “I didn’t think you ever knew him? He died before we were born.”

Harry paused, realising for the first time that perhaps the Malfoys had never heard the truth about his death - thinking rather that he had remained a loyal Death Eater until the end. He opened his eyes and found Regulus’s star in the sky, just a shade softer than the ferocity of his brother’s, deep within the lion. Perhaps he had, like him, argued with the sorting hat to be placed where he thought he needed to be, afraid of following his older brother to Gryffindor.

“He killed himself to help stop Voldemort.” Harry said, not wanting to dishonor his memory with anything but the honest truth, no matter how cruel.

“He gave it all up, in the end. The pureblood mania, the nonsense of it all, it caught up to him. He couldn’t watch people die. But, he didn’t feel like he could escape. He had no one to turn to, so he conspired with a house elf and gave up his life so that others may live.” Harry said finally, turning until his gaze met Draco’s, both of them facing each other.

“The world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters.” Draco said, mirroring the sentiment that Harry had all those months ago on the staircase of Grimmauld Place outside Regulus’s door.

Harry stretched his fingers out across the bearskin they lay on, just enough to lace them in Draco’s.
“I know.” Harry whispered, his gaze holding steady, watching Draco’s face for any sign that this small gesture was too much, too close. But in Draco’s eyes he saw nothing but the placid pale grey and understanding. Harry silently wondered if Draco had known what Regulus had done, if he wouldn’t have felt so alone. So trapped. So incapable of asking for help. Incapable of believing that you could stand against Voldemort, Death Eater or not. Perhaps, he would have believed there could be redemption.

They lay side by side, hands entwined, silently holding tight to what they had forged together, beneath the stars.
Night Terrors

August 30, 2008

Draco was running. He was zigzagging through the corridors of his childhood, fear licking his insides, looking for a place to disappear. The manor had so many places to hide, but, unfortunately for him, these secluded alcoves and rooms often already had a lurking occupant, with greedy hands and forceful aims. So he ran, trying to keep his footsteps quiet and his breathing even so he wouldn’t be discovered.

He needed to find somewhere safe. He needed to hurry. He could hear footsteps following him, a deep laugh ringing out and echoing around the cold marble of the halls. Before he could turn another corner, he felt a solid mass slam into him, hot breath on the back of his neck as he was cornered in a niche in the wall, the moment of impact in slow motion, prolonged and emphatic in it’s goal - to make Draco feel powerless.

He felt sharp fingers pushing his face into the cold marble wall before sliding up and gripping tight to his white blonde hair, and a hard and unwelcomed cock insistent against his ass as he tried with everything he had to fight back against his attacker, another hand raking its way along his back beneath his clothing, pulling his trousers down and ripping them at the seams. He could smell the firewhiskey on his breath, hot and unrelenting just behind his ear. He could hear him whispering in that marbled low voice of all the terrifying things he was about to do. Lestrange had loved to call him pet names, and his subconscious dragged them all out in the dream, each word rolling off Lestrange’s tongue and coiling like acid deep within his gut, slicing him open.

“Don’t worry sweetheart, I like it when you scream,” was punctuated with Lestrange’s tongue licking the patch behind his ear.

But, his arms moved as if in molasses, and when he opened his mouth to scream, nothing came out. The thrill of panic exploded in his chest as he was wrenched from the alcove by a familiar and concerned sounding voice.

“…Malfoy. It’s okay Malfoy, it’s just a dream. Wake up.”

Draco hadn’t realised he was screaming until he was out of breath. He was covered in sweat and his hair and clothing clung to his damp skin. He was shaking as Harry whispered soothing things he couldn’t understand. His eyes darted wildly around the room, taking in the details as if he was bidden to memorise them. He was in the cottage. He wasn’t at the manor. He was with Potter, not Lestrange. He was safe. He was okay. He realised he had a vice grip on Harry’s shoulder, perhaps to steady himself, to anchor him to reality, or to keep him away. He wasn’t sure, but the realisation filled him with embarrassment and he let go quickly, rubbing his eyes as if to clean away the images of his dream from his mind.

Harry just sat there on his heels at Draco’s side, watching him carefully, keeping his hands to himself. Finally, Draco got up shakily and pushed past Harry and stumbled to the loo where he promptly vomited, the smell of firewhiskey still clinging in his nose, crisp and smokey and stale as all the days and nights he had felt drowned in it on their breath.

He could hear Harry moving around the kitchen and boiling the kettle. Draco hadn’t had a nightmare that visceral in a long time. It had been years since he’d thrown up from one. He felt fevered and filled with a sense that his grip on reality was shaky, tenuous at best. He kept feeling his face and stretching his hands out in front of him to try and ascertain whether or not he existed.
Whether or not he had a body or if he was just an amorphous blob of bad memories and adrenalin. Whether or not this was real, or if he had simply dissociated here while his real self lay battered and bloodied by Lestrange’s sadistic needs.

After what seemed like hours, although it was probably only ten minutes, he hauled himself off of the bathroom floor and washed his face. He was still shaking. He felt wracked with cold and a fear that just wouldn’t dissipate. He didn’t want to face Harry, but the thought of being alone in this wash closet for one more second might make him puke again. He wanted Harry’s comfort, his presence, his solid calm and easy voice. The confirmation that his safety wasn’t a grand delusion - that this was real. Their cabin, in Tenebris Hollow, was real.

He came back out of the bathroom and saw that Harry had lit a candle on the bedside table and sat on Draco’s bed with a cup of tea. The sight of him sitting there, so comfortable and patiently waiting, sent a shock of affection and gratitude through him so strong he felt he might burst into tears. Crossing the room he noticed the faint and fresh smell of his encourage-mint lingering in the air - Harry must of rubbed their leaves for Draco. The thought made his heart feel tight in his chest.

Shuffling over to the bed, shivering with fear or cold, he couldn’t tell, he gratefully accepted Harry’s proffered tea and sank down onto the mattress beside him with a shuddering sigh.

He spent a few minutes trying to even his breathing while Harry just sat there in comfortable silence.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Harry asked quietly.

When Draco didn’t answer, Harry continued. “It seemed worse than the other ones you’ve had while we’ve been here.”

“It was.” Draco said, his voice was scratchy and hoarse from screaming.

Harry nodded. He moved his hand in a weird way as if he wanted to reach out and touch Draco but thought better of it and restrained himself. Draco suddenly realised that he really, really wanted that comfort right now. That if he didn’t have someone to anchor him to this reality, he might float off into space or get sucked into a vortex that would take him back to the manor with Lestrange. He looked into Harry’s face with pleading eyes, not knowing how to ask for what he needed.

“... can we...” Draco tried, but couldn’t get the words out.

“Can we, what?” Harry asked, patiently.

“I don’t want to run again.” he pushed out, not knowing how else to say it.

Understanding flashed across Harry’s face and he slowly got up from the bed, took Draco’s tea mug from him and placed the two cups on the bedside table. Then, turning back to Draco, he indicated for him to move over. Harry wordlessly crawled under the covers with Draco and wrapped a solid arm over him, pulling him into his chest. He waved his free hand almost imperceptibly and the light of the single candle went out.

Draco took a huge cleansing breath and blew it out into Harry’s shirt as his shivering started to ease. Harry’s smell drenched his sense and he felt safe.

“Is this okay?” Harry whispered.

“Mm.” Draco managed, and nodded, focusing on his breathing. Trying not to burst into tears. The reality of this soothing gesture fighting with his past experiences for dominance. He could hear
Harry’s heart beating, slow and rhythmic, and he counted the beats in sets of 20 to calm himself.

He didn’t know how long they lay there like that, with Harry gently stroking Draco’s hair, their legs tangled together, and Draco’s hands crumpled under his chin, but eventually the fear began to seep away from him and his trembling ceased.

“It was Lestrange.” Draco whispered into the darkness. He couldn’t see Harry’s face which was pressed into the top of Draco’s head, but he preferred it that way. Harry’s hand stilled in Draco’s hair for only a fraction of a second at the admission before continuing it’s methodical carding.

“He, he was…” Draco stammered. Not really sure what words to use to describe that pitiful excuse for a human.

“A monster?” Harry offered softly.

“Yes.” Draco said, glad he didn’t have to explain it more fully.

“I know.” Harry said. “I was the auror on his case over the last few years trying to catch him. It was after I messed up the raid that caught Yaxley and McNair but let him free that I tried heroin for the first time. That very night. I had hurt Seamus Finnigan with uncontrolled magic and I knew the drugs would keep it suppressed.” Harry had a distracted sound to his voice and he paused his hand in Draco’s hair, but eventually he seemed to shake it off and the small tender movements continued, just as before.

Draco considered this. He didn’t know how to react to that information. Not only the drugs, but he had given up hope on Lestrange ever being brought to justice. “He was…” He tried again. “...he was the one that I had to watch out for. All the others I could fight off, if he wasn’t around. But if he was there, there was no getting out. Him and Greyback.”

Harry responded by giving Draco a gentle squeeze and breathing deeply as if to steady himself. “Is that what your dream was about?” he asked with a forced calm.

Draco nodded. “He use to chase me through the corridors, like it was a game. The dreams are so real sometimes.” He paused. “Please tell me this is real and that we really are in the forbidden forest laying in a bunk bed. Please tell me this isn’t a clever hallucination.” He tried to sound derisively amused but it came out sounding scared and timid.

Harry huffed a soft, sad laugh. “It’s real, Draco.”

Draco sunk into the space against Harry’s chest. His given name on Harry’s lips felt so safely kept.

“He’s the reason I can’t even smell firewhiskey without flashbacks anymore.” He said. “That’s how I had a panic attack in front of Neville, he was preparing a tincture in the greenhouses with it and broke a jar and off I went.” After a beat he added, “Please promise me you won’t ever drink it around me.”

“Draco, I’m a recovering drug addict. I promise I won’t be drinking anything around anyone. I’ve just been quietly thankful you never have wine with dinner, even.” Harry said, his tone sure, as if he had spent a lot of time and consideration on the thought.

“Oh.” Draco considered. He’d never thought about that.

They laid in silence for what felt like another hour before Harry spoke again. “Do you want me to stay down here or go back to my bed?”
Harry’s consideration made Draco want to cry and vomit at the same time because it was so... nice. He didn’t think he would ever have someone understand him like that.

“Stay.” He said, and they eventually slipped into an easy sleep.

August 31, 2008

The first thing Draco realised when he woke up was that he was alone in his bed. He felt instantly relieved, and maybe a hint disappointed. He felt like he’d been run over by a rampaging dragon and he curled deeper in to his duvet. He could hear shuffling in the kitchen and wondered when Harry had gotten up. Wondered if he had intentionally gotten up early to avoid another forest flight. The thought made him feel a little embarrassed and he shifted uncomfortably. The memory of the night before washing over him, making him feel stupid. He hated giving away his secrets, leaving him feeling vulnerable and useless. But, it had felt so… good? Yes. It had felt good having someone understand him. Having someone ground him, hold him.

Draco’s shifting out from the pile of covers must have caught Harry’s attention because his soft voice cut across the room. “Malfoy, how do you feel about pancakes?”

Draco smiled. He was grateful he wouldn’t be forced to speak about last night just yet. “By pancakes, do you mean crepes or flapjacks?”

“Uhhhh… I don’t know?” Harry said, sounding bemused. “Small circular cakey things fried in a pan? Covered in syrup and jam? Not the super thin ones.”

“Flapjacks.” Draco confirmed. “And I have only good feelings about them.” He smiled at Harry as he gathered his clothes and marched off to the loo to change.

“Well, good.” Harry said to Draco’s back.

Harry didn’t bring up Draco’s nightmare over breakfast and instead suggested they spend the day hiking to a small pond he had found while exploring the Western woods, one where they could swim as the weather was hot and muggy.

“C’mon, Malfoy, it’s too hot for you to be cooped up and bent over your cauldron today. It’s too hot to do anything other than be slothful.” He looked like an eager pleading child, so full of joyful anticipation.

The idea of a hike and a swim sounded amazing actually, but Draco was suddenly filled with apprehension about taking his clothes off. Fuck it, he thought, he would have to start breaking down his walls eventually.

“Alright.” He said. “Lets pack a lunch.” Harry beamed at him and Draco thought a smile that radiant should be illegal, so he rolled his eyes in return.

Harry lead them to the spot by the rowan grove and the stream where they had laid on the boulder after Draco’s forest flight, and then began to pick his way downstream, pausing only to say hello to a playful otter that followed them briefly, cajoling in the stream’s more turbid waters, diving and twirling and making a spectacle of her obvious skill. Harry had laughed and chatted to her, calling her Alice, and Draco had been profoundly taken aback that they had almost seemed old friends.
The air was thick with moisture and after only twenty minutes outside the cabin, their clothes were stuck to their sweaty skin and their hair damp. “How far are we walking?” Draco asked, trying not to sound exasperated already.

“It’s not too far.” Harry consoled. “Maybe twenty minutes or so from here.”

“Not so bad.” Draco said, more to himself. “When did you find this place?”

“A few weeks ago, but I didn’t take the time to go swimming then. Thought it would be nice for both of us to go.” He flashed Draco a smile and Draco felt a confusing mixture of pleasure and embarrassment that he didn’t want to think too hard about.

They walked in comfortable silence, bugs flying up around them as they disturbed the undergrowth of the trees, frogs leaping out of their way, and a few thestrals picking their way after them. Soon, the canopy cover began to thin as the stream let out into a little clearing that nestled a beautiful pond against a rocky outcropping. The stream ran into this pool before continuing its path out the other side and down further into the valley. The far side of the pond was buffeted by rocks and boulders piled high with moss, vines, and water loving flowers growing thick in the crevices.


“I thought so.” Harry seemed chuffed with having unearthed such a beautiful place, carefully hidden in the depths of their forest hideaway.

They found a shaded spot to drop their things, and, without preamble, Harry stripped his sweaty shirt and trousers off, quickly disrobing down to his black pants and running off to the other side of the pond, where he unceremoniously scaled the rocks. After reaching, what Draco thought to be, an unnecessary height, Harry launched himself off an impressive boulder and hit the water with a fantastic splash. Draco had been so enamoured by Harry’s enthusiasm and near nudity, that he hadn’t even taken his own shoes off yet, a dumbfounded smile plastered across his face.

“What are you doing over there? Watching the trees grow?” Harry shouted at him, laughing, splashing water his direction and swimming out into the middle of the pond.

“I am in no rush, Potter.” Draco said smiling back, and slowly beginning to disrobe. He felt better about this that Harry was already in the water and wasn’t standing right next to him, and he began peeling his clothes off. Each button exposed him, each centimetre of skin felt like uncovering a dark and terrible secret. He decided against discarding his last layer - his dark mark on display was enough, for now.

“Well, you should be! This is amazing.” He was floating on his back with his eyes closed.

Draco began walking towards the water’s edge with bare feet in his grey pants and white t-shirt. Oh, the water was so nice and cool, he thought as he began to slowly walk out. The bottom was thankfully sandy instead of murky, and since the water in the pool was technically running, it was relatively clear, save for the tannin tinge from the forest plants. After walking in waist deep, he dove in, ducking his head under the cool relief and swimming a few lazy laps back and forth past Harry, who continued to float idly.

Draco eventually joined Harry in his aimless floating. After a relaxing beat of silent drifting, Harry asked cautiously, “Can I ask why you’re wearing a shirt while swimming?”

Draco cracked one eye open to glance at Harry, who had a curious look on his face.

“You don’t have to answer that.” Harry said after Draco didn’t answer, looking a little shy, Draco
was sure he could see a pink tinge somewhere on his cheeks, instantly jealous that he could hide a
blush so effectively, one that would have turned him a clear and violent scarlet.

“Actually, I kept my shirt on for your benefit, Potter.” Draco eventually answered with feigned
nonchalance.

Harry looked profoundly confused. “My benefit? What, you think I’d find you so blindingly
attractive it would ruin my day?”

Draco snorted. “No you berk. Honestly, how vain do you think I am?” Then he added seriously. “I
just don’t want to add another layer to your Gryffindor guilt complex.”

Harry’s look of utter confusion lasted only a few seconds more before it was replaced with a look

Draco stopped floating on his back to properly face Harry while treading water. “Yes.” He said
gently. He could tell Harry was searching his face for signs of anger, resentment, or even hatred.
“But really though, Potter, I tried to crucio you. We don’t need to rehash this.”

Harry didn’t look mollified, he looked mortified.

“How bad is it?” He asked, clearly uncertain whether or not he wanted the answer.

“It’s not any worse than any of my other scars, honestly. But I really, really didn’t want you to get
like...” He indicated at Harry with a flourish, “this.”

“How can I not?” Harry asked, voice a little too loud, his eyes were still huge.

“Potter,” Draco said, feeling that he would like this to be done with, “do I look upset?”

“Well, you can’t even enjoy a swim without taking your shirt off.” Harry retorted.

Draco took a deep breath and asked resignedly. “Okay, do you really want to have this discussion?”

“Yes!” Harry nearly yelled, spluttering a bit as he tried to keep up treading water.

“Okay, but just calm the fuck down please, you’re being dramatic.”

Harry just huffed and rolled his eyes, indignant but not denying the assertion.

“First of all, like I said, I kept my shirt on to avoid having this discussion at all, actually.” He said
pointedly. “Secondly, I haven’t been shirtless willingly in front of someone since I was fourteen.
And it’s certainly not the scars doing that, not the physical ones anyways.” Harry just looked at
him contemplatively.

“So, really.” Draco continued. “I did this for your benefit, not my own. Can we please drop it?”

“If you want to swim without a shirt on you should be able to.” Harry challenged.

Draco sighed. “Not if you’re going to let it ruin your day. I’d rather keep it on, thanks.” He said
with a sardonic laugh.

“No, really, Malfoy. I won’t be weird. Just let me say this - I am really sorry about that curse.
There’s no excuse for me having used something like that on someone, and I am sorry. And I’m
sorry it took me this long to apologise for it.”
Harry’s face was earnest - his green eyes bright and full of sincerity, of regret and determination all at once.

“Thank you.” Malfoy said sincerely. It was nice to hear the apology. “But now that that’s out of the way, can we please drop it?”

“Are you going to keep your shirt on?” Harry asked.

“Why are you so intent on seeing me with my clothes off?” Malfoy tried to deflect.

“I’m not!” He spluttered. “I just - I just want you to feel comfortable, and to be able to do what you want without worrying about me.” He averted his eyes, seeming to feel he may have overstepped.

Draco considered him for a while then sighed. “If you say one. fucking. word. about it - I don’t know what I’ll do - but it’ll be unpleasant.” He pointed at Harry, threateningly, emphasising his sincerity.

“Not a word.” Harry said, looking solemn, drawing a cross over his heart with his finger like a small child solemnly swearing.

Draco looked intently into Harry’s eyes before he swam back towards the shallow end, peeled the wet fabric from his body before throwing the sopping shirt at their shaded spot. He took a deep breath, collecting his courage, feeling more nervous than he wanted to let on. He turned resolutely on the spot and swam back to Harry who looked constipated from trying to keep in the things he clearly wanted to say.

“Not a word.” Draco warned with a raised eyebrow.

“Mm” Harry agreed, screwing up his face as he reigned himself in. He let out a long suffering sigh then said, “Okay.” Before looking back up into Draco’s face with a look of devious mischief. “I bet I’m a faster swimmer than you, Malfoy,” the all too familiar challenge back in his voice, “first one to the rock wall wins!” And he dove off without waiting for a reply from Draco.

“You lousy cheat!” Draco yelled after him as he too dove towards the rock wall.

They passed two easy hours challenging each other to more and more ridiculous feats of water-related strength and stamina. Harry was faster, but Draco could hold his breath longer, and neither of them could figure out how to do a proper backstroke effectively.

They were laughing and exhausted by the time Harry suggested they break for lunch. Clamouring out of the water, they startled the three thestrals that had come to drink by the edge of the pond. The two ducked into the shade by their picnic lunch of leftover flapjacks and a treacle tart Harry had snuck into the bag. Harry had bribed the house elves with a gift of half finished knitted socks that Draco had started but wouldn’t miss.

They were lying lazily in the grass, Draco on his back with an arm slung over his eyes and Harry on his stomach, head resting on his hands as he watched the thestrals gather at the water’s edge. Draco had caught Harry stealing guilt-ridden glances at Draco’s curse scars since he had removed his shirt, but Harry had kept his promise and didn’t say a word about them, nor let them ruin his day. The only comment Harry had made about Draco’s appearance was a “Merlin, Malfoy, you’re so pale it’s blinding me,” to which, Draco couldn’t even argue against. And Draco had been caught stealing similar glances at Harry - although for entirely different reasons.

Draco was listening to the orchestra of bird song in the forest mingling with the sound of a gentle breeze playing in the field flowers around them. It was a perfectly gorgeous day, and he felt
They were just about to go back in the water when Harry shushed Draco’s tirade about atmospheric charms. “What?” Draco asked, feeling a prickle on the back of his neck at Harry’s sudden seriousness and distant staring. Harry just held a hand up towards Draco to reinforce his silence. Then, all at once, Draco realized what was wrong. It was deathly silent around them. The raucous sounds of frogs and birds and insects that had been the constant backdrop of their time there that day had evaporated. And the thestrals. Where was their ever present company of thestrals?

“What the fuck is happening?” Draco whispered, trying not to sound as on edge as he felt.

Harry didn’t answer, but he sprang to his feet as he said quiet but assertively, “Get dressed.” And he began walking in a fast circle around their picnic site muttering under his breath and waving his hands in an arcing motion. “...salvio hexia... inimucum....” Draco heard him saying as he dressed in record speed and packed away their things even faster.

When Harry was done doing whatever it was he was doing, he came back to where Draco stood with wide worried eyes and started pulling his own clothes back on. “I don’t think we’re alone.” Harry said quietly. “But with the charms I just put up, they won’t know we’re here.”

“What?!” Draco whispered, feeling panic rising. Judging by Harry’s behaviour, he could be sure that whoever or whatever was nearby, wasn’t a friendly guest popping by for tea.

Just as he was about to press Harry for more information, when he saw movement on the far side of the clearing at the edge of the forest. Three figures emerged and began walking towards their hidden spot. Draco felt Harry’s hand squeeze his bicep, reassuring him. “They can’t see or hear us.” He reminded Draco. But as they drew nearer, Draco felt unease increase. He recognised two of them. They were werewolves. Lackeys of Greyback. They had been in the manor before. They had participated in muggle torture. Weekend debauchery.

“Can they smell us?” Draco’s voice came out shakier and higher than he meant.

Harry shot Draco a quizzical look. “Werewolves.” Draco mumbled, feeling absolutely filled with terror now. “And not the nice Professor Lupin kind. The Greyback kind.” He reflexively grabbed Harry’s arm to steady himself.

Harry didn’t respond he just found Draco’s hand and squeezed it tight, pulling Draco behind him.

It seemed they would go completely unnoticed until one of them began sniffing the air in earnest. Draco repressed a violent shiver of fear as the two he recognised began walking towards their hiding place, the third wandering out of site on the other side of the pond. “They can’t see us or come past our protective enchantments, Draco, we’re safe.” Harry intoned, keeping himself between Draco and the intruders.

“They can smell us, can’t they?” Draco asked again.

“It doesn’t matter if they can.” Harry assured.

As the unwanted guests drew nearer, they could begin to make out their conversation.

“...thought I smelled something, Frankie.” The smaller one growled.

“Nah, there’s nothing, you’re still smelling your last kill on the wind.” the larger one retorted.

“No, I smell men. I do, I can smell them.” He sounded excited, his chin lifting up as he scented the
“Wishful thinking, my friend.” The other jeered. “You’re just hoping to catch something that’s not a deer.”

“It’s been too long,” a third voice sounded from directly behind Harry and Draco just inches from the barrier of their protective charms, making Draco nearly jump out of his skin in fright, “since we had that pretty girl near Hogsmeade. Too long! And I can smell something too.”

“You’re both barking mad!” Frankie roared, clearly agitated by his companion’s distraction. “Come on, let’s get going. We’re still hours from camp and I don’t fancy a nighttime stroll.”

The the earnestly sniffing werewolf looked at him and seemed to deliberate whether it was worth arguing the point or not. Mercifully it seemed, it was not.

“Yeah, alright.” He conceded. “We should head back to Hogsmeade next moon, I’m starved for a real hunt.” he leered.

The three werewolves enjoyed some graphic banter as they moved off, continuing to follow the stream out of sight.

It was another hour before Harry canceled their protective enchantments and marched them back to the cottage in a strict and careful silence, not a single thestral to be seen along the way. Upon reaching the comfort of their forest home, Draco went straight for his bed and hid beneath his mountain of blankets and pillows for the remainder of the evening.
Harry watched Draco retire to bed before he walked back outside, ducking down beneath the overhang of the living roof outside the doorway, recently weighed down by the nest of lapwings and their substantial brood, who seemed to have mistaken the living roof for a proper hillock and who were all curled up together fast asleep.

He walked to the edge of the clearing and raised his hands in front of him, murmuring the same protective enchantments, enchantments that had kept them safe from the eddying forces of evil all around them.

*Salvio hexia. Protego totalum. Cave inimicum.*

Harry’s lips moved around the words, but his magic flowed easily and generously from his palms and fingers, a latticework of gold that shimmered in the air before disappearing. He walked the entire perimeter, focused on the singular goal of reinforcing the protective wards of their home. Their home. His. And Draco’s.

The little stonework cabin had been synonymous with safety since he had first accepted his residence here, and the idea that something so sinister could be lurking nearby was unfathomable to Harry - the idea that anyone else could come here at all filled him with a lingering and nagging dread. This was their sanctuary.

*Salvio hexia. Protego totalum. Cave inimicum.*

Over and over he repeated the charms, his magic snaking and weaving between the ancient wards that had stood centuries of disuse and the newer hints of Draco’s spellwork, a flitting song between the slow drumming of the Hollow’s magic.

*Salvio hexia. Protego totalum. Cave inimicum.*

The thought that someone could hurt Draco burned on the tip of his tongue and his skin was peppered with a familiar rush of adrenalin. Harry poured his desire to protect him into the magic that swirled around Tenebris Hollow, a warm breeze from the South sweeping across the clearing, lifting the tendrils of hair that had escaped Harry’s top knot before disappearing down the other side of the valley.

Harry dropped his hands and walked back across the field of wildflowers to their front door, checking in on the little garden as he passed. An empty eggshell by the lettuce heads made him smile for the first time since he had left the rock pool - Draco had been leaving presents for the eggeater.

Draco, who, beneath everything, was soft and kind and full of good. Who was scarred and scared and vulnerable, who had lived through horrors that Harry had only just started to imagine, so different from his own hauntings. Harry had seen the scars that his sectumsempra had left, yes, but there were so many more. There were deep gashes from his ribs curving around to his back, and jagged edges that dipped below the waist of his pants. Those were scars from other men. From men like Lestrange and Greyback. And the three they had just barely escaped that afternoon. Men who liked to leave marks on the things they claimed.

Harry tightened his grip on the wattle fence he had made all those months ago, enraged with the
idea that Draco’s life was still saturated in fear, doused in unrelenting memories of the cruelty of others, of the depravity. Harry had struggled at the pond to keep his magic contained and soft and not reach out and snap the necks of the men who threatened them, who endangered their safety. Who had made Draco shrink in fear. He had felt Draco’s heart racing in the frantic grip of his hand, and Harry had known that he could have easily killed them.

The forest around him made it’s usual night time noises - owl hoots and the chirruping of frogs, the rustling of wind in the towering trees. It was calming in it’s familiarity - the silence had been far more terrifying. As was the reminder that the world outside still existed, with all of it’s persistent evils. He heard a faint howl in the distance.

“Potter?” He heard Draco’s call from inside as he walked up the steps, pushing the old wooden door and ducking inside, a candle flickering to life as he waved his hand to ask for light. He wanted Draco to see him. He wanted to see Draco. For them both to know it was okay. They were safe.

“I’m here.” He said, his smile soft, walking to the edge of Draco’s bed and sitting on the floor.

“I made you something a little while ago, and I haven’t found the right time to give it to you, but I think after today I have very little reason not to do it tonight.” Harry said, reaching deep within his pocket and pulling out the tiny bit of white blonde Rowan wood he had been whittling away at for the last few months.

In the centre of his palm, he held the little cube of wood, the size of a die.

The four sides facing out all bore the same symbol, two crossed spears, burned into the wood and blackened with magic.

The top of the cube, facing up, featured a tiny serpent, wriggling and writhing around itself, hissing softly.

“What is it?” Draco asked, peering over the edge of his duvet, which he had wrapped around his shoulders.

“It’s a protective talisman.” Harry said softly, taking Draco’s hand and dropping the little cube into his palm, the opposite side from the snake now facing up and featuring a tiny lion, napping.

“I’ve enchanted it to protect the carrier, you, from unwanted advances. The person will feel an immense burning pain if they try and touch you when you don't want them to. Anyone. Me included.” Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously, watching Draco’s face for signs of approval.

“I just… wanted you to feel safe.” He finished, not wanting to tell him that he had first started working on it the day Draco had fled from them falling asleep next to each other. Or that he had looked up the ancient spellwork in one of the books Narcissa had sent, and it had taken months for him to refine the magic and make it strong enough to really work.

Draco stared at the talisman in his palm, blank shock written on his face. He was quiet so long that Harry began to feel even more nervous. Did he not want it? Was it too much?

“You don’t have to keep it on you if you don’t want, I just wanted to do something for you, for everything you’ve done for me. You made me feel safe, you deserve the same.” Harry shrugged, feeling supremely self conscious.

Draco finally looked up to meet Harry’s eyes. “This…” He started in disbelief. “This is the nicest thing anyone has ever given me.”
Harry’s worried expression broke into a smile.

“Thank you.” Draco said, finally.

“There's something else too, something I'll need your help with tomorrow.” Harry said, his smile now more mischievous.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “What do you need my help with?”

“Do you know what a Wiggentree is?” Harry asked, his eyebrow raised, keen to one-up Draco on something magical-theory related.

“Of course I do.” Draco said, amusedly. “It's a Rowan, imbued with healing and protective magic. Anyone who touches one is safe from dark creatures. They're incredibly rare and highly valued by potioneers.”

Harry sighed. “Of course you knew. Well, did you know I found a seed in that old cupboard in a bit of parchment labeled Wiggenweld? I had forgotten what it was until I came across it in one of the old potion books. I knew we used the bark in brewing healing potions, but I didn't realize the actual trees were living, protective sentries.”

Draco’s eyebrows raised significantly in interest.

“I planted the seed a few days ago in an egg carton with some compost, like you showed me for the bean seeds. It sprouted the other day, and I think with some helpful growth magic, we'll have ourselves a proper tree in a month or two.” Harry got up as he was speaking and grabbed the little bit of egg carton hidden behind the encourage-mint, giving the fragrant creeper a little rub before heading back, filling the little cabin with the joyful smell of corsica.

Harry knelt back down and showed Draco the little treeling. It had two leaves and a wispy stem, but he whispered some growth charms over it and they both watched as it stretched up, forming another leaf and the stem thickening before their eyes.

Harry grinned up at Draco who grinned back and placed the little tree on the bedside table.

“Will you help me plant him tomorrow? I was thinking just outside in the clearing by the well - and we'll need to make him his own protective fence so the porcupines don't get involved.” He asked, excitement clear on his face, having obviously spent much time and consideration on where he wanted their tree to live.

Draco’s face broke into a shy smile, clear bewilderment on his face. “Of course I’ll help.”

“Good.” Harry said with an air of finality, getting to his feet again and wandering over to the kitchen. “What kind of tea would you like before bed?” He asked, turning to catch Draco stuffing the little talisman he had given him into the left breast pocket of his pyjama top.

Harry smiled as Draco just said “Ginger, please,” and busied himself with putting the kettle on and arranging their mugs, always keeping the chipped one for himself.

_________________________

September 16, 2008

It was pouring rain in the Hollow and the chill of fall had settled satisfactorily in the air - Harry had been preparing for winter for weeks now, chopping and piling endless stacks of wood for the many
fires they’d need to keep the little stone building habitable when the snow began to pile up.

For now, just the rain soaked the little hillside and Harry and Draco waited it out inside, Draco pouring over his cauldron and experimenting with various ingredients and reactions to thestral hair and blood in potions, producing clouds of noxious yellow steam one moment and the sickly sweet aroma of strawberries in cream another.

Harry had grown so fond of watching him work, the humidity making his blonde locks stand up on end, the concentration ensuring a furrow in his so often haughty brow. Harry had sequestered himself away up on his top bunk and was re-reading The Quintessence of Debauchery for the fourth time. He had hidden it up above his bed in one of the little nooks behind a cross beam, and often took it out late at night, his wandless lumos creating a soft glow from his hands.

It was on this particular rainy midmorning that a thoroughly soaked barn owl came fluttering to the window, tapping frantically on the edge to be let in. Draco hardly glanced up from the bubbling sludge in his cauldron, but Harry put down his book and hopped to the floor, letting the poor little owl in from the deluge outside.

It had been long since they’d gotten any mail, and Harry curiously reached for the outstretched leg, letter held aloft. Whoever had sent it had included a crafty waterproofing charm that kept the pages neat and smudge-free, despite the rain.

Draco looked up and cleared his throat pointedly just as Harry reached out for the bit of twine around the correspondence.

Harry froze. The owl had come to him. The letter was addressed to him. If he accepted it, the outside world would know he was alive.

Was he ready for this? He was committed to returning, eventually, he knew that, but… was this the moment to set things in motion? Did he feel capable of contacting his friends? His family? Could they be alright with waiting for him to explain things at his own pace? To his leaving some questions unanswered?

Harry’s hand hung in the air, outstretched. He recognised the owl, he realised. Once he could see it properly, out of the rain and puffing his feathers out in the warmth of the cottage. The little barn owl was Hermione’s. The waterproofing charm, as good as her signature.

He reached out and undid the twine, the letter unfurling and laying open on the counter. The owl hooted, happily, clearly ecstatic to have accomplished his delivery, one that would’ve been a failure on any other day.

The parchment was soft, the handwriting, so incredibly familiar. He felt as though he was opening a door inside himself, one to his past, but to a past he still loved dearly, a place before it had become tarnished.

Harry,

Rose is growing like a little dandelion. We just celebrated her first birthday at the Burrow, and it was such a sight - pink icing everywhere, including Ron’s hair, Teddy was nearly crosseyed trying to mimic it in his own - just imagine, pink in the red, it was a worse combination than the damned Chudley orange. I laughed myself nearly sick.

Fleur and Bill were there too with little Victoire, oh but she cried nearly the whole time - I’m so glad Rose isn’t so fussy - she wouldn’t stop unless Arthur was holding her and singing old muggle
showtunes. What a mess.

We missed you terribly at the party, Harry. It wasn’t the same without you. It’s as though there is a hole in our life, all of our lives - we left a seat for you at the table, even though no one’s heard anything from you in months. I think all of us were so hopeful you’d just surprise us all and walk in through the kitchen door, like you used to all those summers ago, smiling like nothing could keep you from us.

Ron isn’t the same without you Harry - he tries so hard to be strong, and I know he’s convinced you’re still out there, somewhere, fighting some dangerous battle you didn’t think you could tell us about, keeping us all safe from whatever new monsters you’d found. But me, I don’t know, for the only thing I can think is that a piece of me will be gone forever if I never see you again.

We both think of you often, and send our love, whether it finds you or not.
- Hermione

His tears slid off the parchment, just as the rain had, a sob catching in his throat. He felt so overwhelmed with her love, her kindness, how much she still held him close, even after he had abandoned them all. Here she was, still writing, months later, still sending her love after what must have been a hundred unanswered letters.

How could he ever have lied to her, how could he leave her with the pain and guilt of his disappearance? How much he missed her, and Ron, and little Rose even - it hit him all at once. The tears came and the sobs wracked his body, his legs going weak and dropping him to the middle of the kitchen floor.

Draco was across from him on the floor when he finally brought his head up off his knees, his arms hugging his legs to him, curling tight into himself with the shame of having left his family with the weight of his possible death. How cruel he had been, to not let them know he was okay. How selfish.

“They’ll be okay,” Draco said, reaching out to put his hand over Harry’s, “they’ll understand.”

“I should have told them.” Harry sniffed, not caring that there was snot running down his nose and he must have looked an absolute mess. “They love me.”

“They know now,” Draco assured him, “and they still love you. You needed the time, and you took it, it’s ok.”

“I don’t know what to write back.” Harry said, rubbing his face and worrying his bottom lip, looking back at Draco’s calm and steady grey gaze.

“You don’t have to write anything yet, just you accepting the letter lets her know you’re alive. You can leave it like that until you feel ready.” He said, rubbing his thumb in small circles over the back of Harry’s hand, as if to erase the I must not tell lies that remained etched there.

“Okay.” Harry’s voice was muffled as he dropped his head back onto his knees and breathed a deep sigh.

It was several hours later and the rain had long let up that Hermione’s little owl returned, hooting excitedly at the window, hopping around on one leg, eager to deliver his new message. Harry sighed, he knew this was coming, but he felt ready. It was time. He had his response ready in his pocket.

He reached out and unfurled the bit of parchment.
Harry?

Just the one word on the page, the ink blurred and shaky, as if she had struggled to write it. Blurred, he realised, with tears that had since dried.

He sighed and pulled the little wooden otter he had carved from his pocket, his magic coursing from his fingers to the fine grained Black Walnut and swirling around the polished lines he had so meticulously poured over. He had spent hours enchanting the little figure, focusing all of the newfound joy and peace of his new life, all of his new feelings of freedom and the weightlessness of being carefree. It was magic he had always wanted to try, but had never found the time, or the place, or the energy to pour himself into something so complex and detailed, yet beautiful. He never would have been able to, he had realised, midway through the complex enchantments. He would have had to know these feelings to replicate them.

He had gotten the idea from his mother. Well, from Slughorn’s story of his mother. All those years ago she had impressed him with her little charm that enchanted a petal to transform into a fish. A little bit of herself she had given, so thoughtfully, so carefully.

The little otter was carved to be curled up, sleeping, head tucked against her little body.

Harry pulled out a little scrap of parchment and scribbled his first words to the outside world since March.

*For Rose. Put her in water.*

It was all he needed to say. Hermione would feel his magic, she would know he was fine. Better than fine. She would see the joy as soon as the little carving was submerged, as the little otter would come to life, splashing and winding through the water, flipping on her back and floating happily, a perfect replica of Alice’s lazy days in the summer stream. Hermione would know. It was the most comfort he could ever give her, far more meaningful than words.

Harry rolled up the parchment and attached it to the little owl, who had been waiting patiently. He gave the bird a pointed look and said, “you can tell her I’m ok. She doesn’t need to worry.” But the little owl just hooted and hopped to the window to take off, her silent wings carrying her off into the night, ghostly white amongst the trees.
Draco’s mind was boggled. All of his theories of unicorn blood were somehow being transposed onto thestral blood. The unicorn blood, by all accounts, seemed utterly useless. Thestral blood, on the other hand, was proving far more interesting than he could have ever anticipated.

Nearly every blood magic related potion he tried to incorporate the thestral blood into seemed to increased the efficacy. And what’s more, he couldn’t seem to find the same caveats the unicorn blood held. He sat hunched over his notes, scribbling theories and results frantically at the kitchen table. He often got up and raced over to his potions bench. He was beginning to wonder if he should be testing thestral hair and saliva as well. All the while, Harry was an ever present entity in the little cottage, making sure Draco didn’t skip meal times or forget to take breaks. He even helped with scanning the small ancient texts looking for clues and deciphering the sometimes vague meanings.

He glanced towards the top bunk where Harry lay reading, face contorted in thoughtful concentration. Really, though, those old smutty stories weren’t that interesting, but Draco smiled nonetheless. He realised he needed a break from his notes. While the thestral blood research was proving fruitful, he still didn’t know how to organize it in a way to present to the research board at St. Mungo’s.

He decided he would respond to Luna and Neville’s last letters and then pick up his knitting for a while. It was getting frightfully chilly in the hollow, and he was determined that he and Harry would have ample warmth before the snow came. He was getting rather good at knitting hats and scarves and was beginning to experiment with patterns and colour work. It was thanks to Luna that he had a steady supply of wool, and thanks to Neville that he knew how to dye it many fun colours with the plants around the hollow, which he and Neville had traded samples and stories about since April.

Moving aside his research notes, he pulled a piece of blank parchment towards him and began to write.

Neville,

I’m glad you enjoyed the scarf, it was my pleasure, really. Thank you again for the tips on the rue. I’ve harvested oak galls, acorns, pokeberry, and woad as per your recommendation for my next dye batch. How is the greenhouse coming along?

I appreciate your Halloween invite, and I know you’re worried about me being a hermit, but I am really in my element and I’m not lonely. Like I said, the thestrals keep me plenty of company.

And no, I hadn’t heard Harry Potter was missing. I hope he’s found, but honestly I wouldn’t worry too much, isn’t he prone to reckless abandon and secret missions? And you know The Prophet loves blowing up every little scrap of news about him. Maybe he’s on a secret mission with the aurors.

I’ll send you samples of my dye experiments when I finish them.

Thanks for being a gem of a friend.

-Draco
He tapped the parchment with his wand and watched it wrap itself into a tight scroll with Neville’s name on the side. He pulled his next piece of parchment and began to write again.

Dearest lovely Luna,

Thank you again for the wool. It was perfect.

I was honestly astonished to hear you and Greg had become romantically involved, but I’m pleased for the both of you. Greg needs someone who can show him that the world can be full of kindness.

It sounds like you’ve been keeping yourself busy by expanding your groups and increasing meetings. I agree, substance abuse is neglected by and large and your work is so needed. You’re doing something truly incredible. I hope St. Mungo’s can someday catch up to your groundbreaking work.

No, I hadn’t heard Harry Potter was missing until I received Neville’s owl just before your own. Perhaps you’re right though, perhaps he was lured by a wrackspurt infestation. I’m sure he’ll turn up eventually. If Voldemort couldn’t off him, I fear nothing can.

Please send my regards to Greg.

-Draco

He hadn’t told Harry that his friends were bringing him gossip of his mysterious absence, or that he spent most letters deflecting said gossip. He tapped Luna’s letter and watched it furl into another tight scroll. He scribbled delivery instruction on a scrap of parchment and went to place the letters in the enchanted cupboard. Those wonderful little elves would get his letters delivered for him.

He straightened and looked over and met Harry’s gaze, who instantly blushed and looked away. He did that a lot, Draco mused, what an odd man. He sighed deeply and went over to his knitting bag and pulled out the moss green yarn he had dyed with mushrooms from the birch stand to the South, and sat down again to work on his next hat. He had been beginning to feel a bit cabin feverish, having not gone out hiking again since his brush with the werewolves. He had felt so exposed. So unsafe. Suddenly, the wilderness he had come to love and enjoy, felt dangerous. It was as if someone had pulled back a curtain to show the horrors behind it.

At least the thestrals kept coming around. They were nearly alway in the garden these days, and Draco never had to stray very far from the house to see one, lumbering along or rolling in a bare patch of earth. But, he wasn’t yet ready to face the forest beyond the house’s wards again. Beyond the spell work that Harry had cast.

Harry.

That enigma of a man. Deeper and more intelligent than Draco had ever given him credit. Plagued with guilt and a heavy burden of expectation from everyone. Draco had never met anyone as broken and shattered as he was, someone who could see his dark parts and be seen in return. He felt truly safe in Harry’s presence, even with the looming cloud of his doubting past and his internal boggart. He felt in his pocket for the talisman Harry had gifted him and felt a swooping sensation where his stomach should have been, his thumb running over the rounded edges, ghosting across the etched spears. The gesture was profound to Draco. So few had ever recognised Draco’s need to control his personal space, and no one had ever done so much to support that.

Their relationship had blossomed into this strange and beautiful mixture of support and banter. Respect and care. It was the most intimate relationship he’d ever had, and it terrified and elated
him. Just being in Harry’s sphere allowed him to learn things about himself that he couldn’t have on his own.

When he tried to reconcile this version of Harry with the boy he went to school with, he just confused himself further. That relationship had been fueled by righteous indignation, teenage hormones, jealousy, and a healthy dose of spite.

Draco had been a prat back then. He had been misguided, spoiled, neglected, and desperate for attention all at the same time, and Harry drew his eye and his focus no matter where or what he was doing. And that hadn’t seem to change, he thought wryly to himself as he found himself watching Harry again. Some things never change, it seems.

Draco stood sweating over his cauldron when a tapping at the window caught his attention. He looked over to the kitchen window to see a Hogwarts barn owl looking expectantly at him. He recognised the seal of the headmistress as he strolled across the room and opened the window. He was relieved that McGonagall had responded so quickly to him. Earlier that morning, in a moment of desperation, he had sent a request to the headmistress to ask if he could visit his godfather’s portrait in his old potion’s office. He had thought to himself on more than one occasion in the last few weeks, “What would Severus say?”, when it finally dawned on him that he could probably ask his portrait just that.

Unscrolling the letter he read:

Dear Healer Malfoy,

You are welcome to come speak to Severus’ portrait today if that suits you. Send your response with the owl so I know to be ready for you.

Minerva

He suddenly felt giddy with nervous anticipation. He desperately missed his godfather and hadn’t spoken to him since 8th year when he would sneak into the potion master’s office and talk with Severus late into the night. To have the space and time to speak with him again would be a special thing indeed.

He scribbled his response and sent it off with the waiting owl before dashing back to his cauldron to finish off his work.

Harry walked in a short while later while Draco was packing his research notes.

“Going somewhere?” He asked, with a surprised look on his face. Draco hadn’t left Tenebris Hollow since the werewolf incident.

“Actually, yes Potter.” Draco glanced over at him as he clasped his bag closed. “I’m heading off to the school to have a chat with Severus’ portrait. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but it may be all day. Think you’ll manage?”

“Oh.” Harry said, considering this. “Yeah, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I have some things in the garden I’m finishing. I can make dinner for us tonight, too” Draco could tell he was trying really hard to appear at ease with being left to his own devices all day.

He smiled at Harry reassuringly, “That would be great.”
Draco apparated just beyond the iron gates of the Hogwarts grounds and saw Hagrid standing there waiting to let him in.

“Hello, Hagrid.” Draco called warmly.

“‘Ello there!” He said loudly, and as Draco crossed the threshold Hagrid wrapped him in a near crushing hug. He found he didn’t mind one bit. Hagrid may be huge and overwhelming, but like Harry said, there wasn’t a more pure soul alive. “How’s the unicorn stalking, ey?” he asked.

“Oh, you know exactly how that’s going, Hagrid.” He said with a dry smile as they began to walk up to the castle. “But I’d love to come and hear what you have to say about my research when I’m done with McGonagall.”

“O’ course!” He beamed at Draco, clearly relishing the idea of sharing his knowledge and experience. “Well, I only came to let you in and say ‘ello, so I ’spose I’ll leave you to it. But me classes end at 4, so please come and have a look in before you go off to yer hidey-hole.”

“Will do, Hagrid, see you later.” He said happily as Hagrid stomped off to his cabin and Draco continued his march to the castle entrance where he could see the stiff and domineering figure of Minerva McGonagall waiting for him at the castle doors. She was unchanged, perhaps more gray, slightly more lined, but in all the ways that counted, she was that same immovable fixture.

“Headmistress.” He nodded with a small smile as he climbed the steps towards her.

“Good morning, Draco.” She nodded back with a nearly imperceptible smile, as she turned and began marching back into the entrance hall with Draco at her side.

“How is the start of term treating you?” He asked politely as they turned and began descending down the stairs to the dungeons towards Snape’s old office, a few lagging students scuttling past them towards their morning classes.

“Oh, it’s been fine.” She said. “Well, I’m sure you’ve heard the news by now, even in your isolation. Harry’s been missing since March, and no one’s heard a word. While we tried to keep it quiet, the prophet got wind and the public story just broke the other day.” She was trying to relay the facts briskly but Draco could hear the pain behind her professional manner. They both glanced as what looked like a second year scuttled down the corridor crying. “Even some of the students are being affected by the news.” McGonagall said shrewdly.

Draco rolled his eyes at the student’s retreating figure. Plebeians. “I’ve heard, that must be hard for the people close to him, I’m sorry.” He finished awkwardly.

“Thank you, yes, it concerns us deeply.” She nodded gravely. “Merlin only knows what he’s gotten himself into this time.”

“Something harrowing, I’m sure.” Draco tried for coolly indifferent, but it came out sounding more knowing than he meant it to.

McGonagall shot him a sideways glance, seeming to remember who exactly she was speaking too, “Yes, well, I suppose I would prefer something harrowing than something fatal.” She said stoutly.

When they reached the door to Severus’ office, she turned a softened and kind look to Draco and
said, “You can have as much time as you need. No one uses this office. I’m sure you’ll want to catch up with Hagrid afterwards, so don’t feel obliged to come find me if you haven’t the time.”

“Thank you, headmistress.”

“Of course.” She said as she tapped the office door to unward and open it. “Oh, and Draco, I hope you know you’re welcome to this school any time. Even if it’s just to eat in the Great Hall and be near another human being. It doesn’t have to be in a professional capacity.”

He could tell that, she too, was concerned about his supposed isolation.

He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner and bid her goodbye as he stepped in the room to face his godfather.

“The prodigal son returns.” He heard the soft snarky voice of Severus and couldn’t help but smile as he approached the portrait and pulled out a chair in front of the desk.

“Hello Uncle.” he said, putting his bag down and looking to his godfather.

“Hello, Draco.” He said with a surprisingly soft look in his eye. “And tell me, why in the name of Merlin’s tits have I seen neither hide nor hair of you in nearly six years?” he asked, poorly concealed exacerbation and irritation clear in his voice.

Draco snorted in a most undignified way. It was something he learned in his 8th year, once he was an adult and not a pupil of Severus’, the man had a crass sense of humour and swore like centaur in winter. Something that never ceased to shock and amaze him.

“I’m sorry, I should have come to see you.” He admitted, feeling suddenly very guilty.

“I have a portrait in your mother’s house Draco, care to explain your neglect? Your mother has been telling me some very interesting things about you.” he added, seeming amused.

“You know how I feel about the manor.” Draco said shortly. “And I cannot begin to fathom the things my mother must be telling you.” He sighed, and began to unpack his bag.

“Yes, she says you’ve become a most unsociable hermit with a tendency to rudeness.”

Draco couldn’t help but laugh. His mother would say that about him. “Well, she’s not wrong.” Draco grinned.

“Back to your gross neglect of me,” Severus said shrewdly, “from what I hear you’ve been in the forest since March, and you’re only just now coming to me for advice?”

“Are you going to be like this all day?” Draco asked in mock exhaustion.

“Probably.” Severus smirked.

“I’m sorry I haven’t visited you. Really, I am. I’ve been busy, and going through a lot. Maybe I can get a portrait for my flat and you can heckle me on a more regular basis.”

Severus seemed mollified by this suggestion as he finally sat in his painted chair to give Draco a speculative look.

“So, how’s your painted existence in the headmistress’s office?” Draco asked, trying to change the subject.
Severus rolled his eyes dramatically. “Dreadfully dull.”

“I’m sure anything compared to the life you lived would appear dreadfully dull.” Draco said, his admiration of his godfather evident in his smile.

“Although, have you heard the-Boy-Who-Couldn’t-Brew has disappeared without a trace? That’s causing quite a stir. Honestly, why did I get killed by that vile serpent for him if he was just going to go and disappear. Probably died doing something absolutely embarrassing like choking to death at a hotdog eating contest, and it’s been covered up to add to his mystique.” He scoffed, watching Draco closely.

“Yes, Uncle, I’ve heard, and I doubt he’s dead.” he said, feeling irritated by this suddenly omnipresent topic.

“Hmm.” Severus said after a while. “I was expecting a more dramatic response from you.”

“Like what?” Draco asked, feeling nettled, crossing his arms and leaning back in the chair, defensively.

“You two were alway so… hormonally charged.” he said evenly.

“What?!” Draco squaked, throwing his hands in the air. He already knew this, but seriously could they not have this discussion again?

“That’s more of what I was expecting.” Severus said smugly.

“Yes, yes, I already know your cock and bull theory on Potter and my… rivalry.” Draco said, blushing. He really did not want to rehash this right now.

“So, imagine my surprise when I ask you about boy-wonder’s disappearance and you barely bat an eyelash.” Severus teased.

“It’s because your theory is wrong and Potter’s probably off fighting some dark wizard somewhere far away and forgot to tell his friends. I’m sure he’ll turn up and everyone is just overreacting. I really could care less, either way.” He said flustered. “Can we talk about why I’m actually here now?” Draco asked trying to keep the note of desperation out of his voice.

Severus just stared at him, and Draco realised what he was doing only after a few seconds. “Uncle, we’ve talked about this, portraits can’t perform legilimency.” He sighed, feeling definitely unamused now.

“Fine.” Severus said shortly. “But we’re coming back to this later.”

Draco rolled his eyes in response as he leafed through his notes. “Okay, let’s start with the unicorn blood.”

Draco went over his research from top to bottom starting with the unicorn conundrum and his (and Potter’s) theory on soul purity, finally ending with the thestral blood and his nonexistent theory on that. Severus nodded along and asked sporadic questions.

Draco finally got to his last page of notes and looked up at the potion master’s portrait and said, “And that’s all, really. I have no idea why the thestral blood is working better than the unicorn blood, and I can’t find any information or previous research on thestrals. I have no idea how to carry on.”
“Hmm.” Severus considered. “Draco, really, this research is very thorough. You should do the testing on hair and saliva as you said and then submit what you have to the research board. You don’t need to solve the why just yet.”

“Don’t I?” Draco asked, feeling a little taken aback by the high praise.

“You’re studying the ‘how this work’ aspect, not the ‘why does this work’ part” He said shortly. “The ‘why does this work’ part comes later, after your research has been peer reviewed and the studies have been duplicated.”

Draco thought about that for a moment. He knew his results would need to be investigated and that the “why” really would be another research project entirely, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something here that he needed to discover before giving his precious research over to the scrutinising eyes of others.

“May I make a suggestion?” Severus asked, snapping Draco out of his deep concentration. “I think it would be wise to share your research with the department of mysteries.”

“The department of mysteries?” Draco asked in shock. “But they don’t usually deal in medicine.”

“They don’t usually, no.” Severus conceded. “But your consideration on soul purity has intrigued me. And so has the behaviour of the thestrals. Perhaps the fact that you were the master of the Elder wand and have been physically marked by very powerful wizards has created an energy around you that the thestrals and unicorns respond to. Hagrid may be able to access freely gifted unicorn blood, but you may not due to some force that is yet to be understood by us. And, perhaps, that same force has allowed you to access the healing properties of the thestrals that others have been unable to. Just a thought. But the department of mysteries study these types of esoteric things, they’ll want to know.”

“I’ll write to them and see what they have to say.” Draco said after a long pause. “Thank you for your insight, Uncle, really. It’s nice to talk about this with someone who understands the material.”

They passed a few more hours talking potions and gossiping about lives of former students. Severus was shocked into a comical silence when Draco told him about his close friendship with Neville. Yes, Neville Longbottom. Gryffindor Neville.

“Are you shagging him?” Severus asked with incredulous curiosity.

“Why does everyone think that?” Draco asked in horror. “No, I’m not shagging him, he’s a good friend and it’s entirely platonic. I’m allowed to have friends.”

“Of course you are.” Severus said, regaining composure. “Any other male platonic friends you care to share about?”

Draco paused for a moment, a snarky sentence about Harry on the tip of his tongue. “No, just Neville and Greg.” He sniffed, trying and praying for an indifferent delivery.

“I’m just having a hard time believing that you’re not seeing someone. You just look too… pleased with yourself.”

Draco just gawked at him, “What in Godrick’s name does that even mean?” Draco realised the slip too late, Potter’s use of the Gryffindor founder’s name when he swore having obviously rubbed off on him. Fuck.

Severus eyed him shrewdly. “You just have that sickening happy and contented visage that I only
ever saw when you bested Potter in school or when I took house points from Gryffindor for Potter's unnecessary heroics. Notice the common thread.” he said poignantly.

Draco blushed furiously and slumped in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Good lord, not this again.” He pleaded.

“Draco.” His voice sounded oddly serious now, and Draco looked up to see Severus surveying him pensively and thrumming his finger’s on his chair arm. “You don’t know where Potter is do you?”

Draco resisted the urge to shout ‘NO’ too soon, so as not to sound suspicious. “Are you asking me if I’m responsible for his disappearance?” Draco asked disparagingly, hoping the sarcasm and disdain was not overdone.

“I suppose not.” Severus said, looking keenly suspicious at his godson.

“Right, well, if you’re done accusing me of school boy crushes and nefarious deeds with the Golden Git in equal measure, then I think I’d better be off. I still have to go see Hagrid.” Draco said with supreme nonchalance as he packed his bag, stomach feeling more and more in knots.

Severus seemed suitably placated with this response, and Draco promised him that he would visit his portrait over Christmas at the Manor and send McGonagall research updates for him regularly.

Draco left Hagrid’s feeling distinctly pleased by the pleasant visit and equally starved, as he hadn’t had anything since breakfast and Hagrid’s rock cakes were simply inedible. It was getting dark, and he wanted to get back to Harry. He had had to sit through another rousing rendition of “Did ye’ hear Harry’s missing?” and it was beginning to wear on his nerves.

He apparated just outside the gates after waving goodbye to Hagrid and was filled with a sense of ease at the sight of their little garden laying out before him, the stone cottage comfortably nestled into its hillside. He stopped to whisper a few growing charms over the little wiggentree that they had planted, now nearly as tall as Draco himself, and reaching valiantly up to the sky and down into the earth before it hardened too much with the frost of winter. He picked a mint leaf and chewed it as he walked up the steps and opened the door.

The shock of seeing the kitchen in a state of complete disarray rooted him to the spot as he took in the chaos before him. “Potter?” He called, with mounting concern.

Had Harry been attacked and dragged off after a vicious food fight? There was yellow powder all over the counters. The smell of burnt rice was strong. There were peas all over the floor, and a strange red sauce splattered across a few cupboards. The old smutty novels were laying all over the house in odd places and he was about to start panicking when Harry came out of the small loo in the corner of the house looking sheepish. His hair looked like he’d recently been electrocuted, his flannel overshirt was buttoned incorrectly and covered in what looked like turmeric, and the knees of his jeans were stained with mud. He looked a fucking state.

“Potter, what the fuck happened?” He asked, his eyes wide and eyebrows subsequently lost in his hairline.

Harry pushed out a long suffering breath and scrubbed a hand through his truly wild looking hair that was threatening to come loose from it’s lopsided topknot. “I tried to make dinner.” He said, not meeting Draco’s eyes.

“Uh huh.” Draco replied. “And when did you release the hippogriff into the kitchen?”
Harry bit down a small laugh and finally looked at Draco. “I think I’m having a crisis.” He said finally, with a confused and pained look on his face.

“All right.” Draco said softly. “What kind of crisis?” They were standing facing one another from across the cottage, and Potter began to fidget where he stood.

“Well, first it was a craving crisis.” He admitted, with what looked like a lot of effort. “And then... then it was what I think was an... identity crisis?” He said with an even greater effort. He was alternately running his hands through his hair and tugging awkwardly on his mis-buttoned shirt, and didn’t seem to know whether or not to look at Draco or the floor.

“All right. Can I help you clean this up? Do you want to talk about it?” Draco asked, uncrossing his arms and indicating to the mess.

Harry looked profoundly relieved that Draco wasn’t mad and his tight shoulders slumped down, releasing their tension. “Yes. Please. To both.” He rubbed his hands over his face before marching back to the kitchen towards Draco and beginning to clear the chaos of the spices on the counter. Draco pulled out his wand and began to help. Within a few short minutes the kitchen was back to its state of order and cleanliness and Harry was standing awkwardly by two pots on the stove. Shifting his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Dare I ask what’s in there?” Draco asked tentatively, moving a little closer to where Harry stood.

“It’s supposed to be dinner, but I’m not sure if it’s going to be good or if I should even eat it.” He said sadly, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck, his top knot coming undone completely and tendrils of his black hair sticking out at odd angles. He really did look frazzled.

“Start at the top.” Draco said firmly but gently.

Harry continued his staring at the offending food before taking a deep breath and saying, “I used to live on Indian take-away. It was literally the only thing I managed to eat, especially when I was...” Harry paused, his face drawn and his shoulders seeming to droop under the weight of the memories. “Well, when I was living at Grimmauld Place, anyway. And the place near to there was the only place open at the ungodly hours I wanted to eat.”

“Bunny Chow.” Draco said, and Harry’s head snapped up to meet Draco’s eyes.

“How did you—”

“I’ve seen you there, it’s my favorite takeaway spot.” He said simply, shrugging.

Harry regarded him for a moment curiously. “Huh. Well, anyways. I was thinking maybe it would be great if we had Indian tonight because I haven’t had it in so long. I didn’t even think about it. But there I was, halfway through making aloo matar when it all just hit me. The smell. It’s like it brought back every memory of every time I had eaten it and gotten high. Even every time I’d gotten high and thrown it up. Everything was there. It was like I was in Sirius’s room.” He was staring into the distance, his chest visibly rising and falling with each breath.

“And I still had my magic, and I was afraid I would go apperate off somewhere to use again, but I didn’t want to. I mean. I did. I really wanted to...” He looked up at Draco, his bright green eyes almost apologetic. He was sorry for having the thoughts, and he wanted Draco to know. To see that he felt guilty. It was clear on his face.

“So, I tried to power through. Like I did with the honey. I grabbed a bunch of books and tried reading to distract me. I even tried wanking.” He blushed violently again, looking down at his
hands, which were resting on the counter.

“Walking, running laps, doing pushups, all kinds of stuff. I wanted to keep busy, because my skin was crawling but not my skin, my insides. Like everything inside me was crawling around and unsettled and I couldn’t manage a way to make it stop. I tried making other foods. It was all a bit of a frantic blur actually, but, eventually, I managed to calm down, I just hadn’t gotten around to cleaning the mess I made.” He looked embarrassed.

“Potter, you should be really proud of yourself.” Draco said, watching Harry recoil at the praise. He reached over and grabbed Harry’s shoulder to get him to face Draco, and grabbed both of his arms firmly, looking at him evenly. “I’m really proud of you Potter. Really, really proud.”

“But I made a fucking mess of the house and flailed wildly for hours.” He said, looking pained. “I didn’t know it would be so hard without you here.”

“Be that as it may.” Said Draco with a soft smile, jiggling Harry’s limp arms. “You did it. You didn’t use. Even though you could have left and done so, easily. You should be really proud of yourself, that’s a huge step.”

Harry seemed to consider this for a long while before looking back up at Draco and returning the smile. “I guess so, yeah.” Just as Draco released his hold on Harry’s arms, Harry very ungracefully flung himself forward at Draco and squeezed him in a desperate hug. It took Draco a moment to realize what was happening before returning the hug soundly.

Harry smelled like spices and fire smoke and sweat and he really liked, more than he wanted to admit, how solid he felt against Draco. They both broke away quickly without looking at one another and after an awkward pause, Draco walked towards his potions bench to set down his bag before going to grab some more comfortable clothing to change into, while Harry resumed scabbling around the kitchen.

When he walked back out of the loo Harry was setting the table and serving up his homemade Indian food.

“I decided I want to eat it.” Harry said determinedly. “I want to have better Indian food memories. I want to replace them, starting here.”

“Okay.” he replied simply, feeling his heart swell. “Smells amazing. Although,” he said peering at the rice, “the rice smelled a little… overdone.”

“Just the bottom of the pan.” Harry reassured, smiling.

Draco didn’t respond. Just smiled and shook his head.

“Would you like to tell me about the second part of your crisis?” Draco asked as Harry sat down across from him. He was surprised when Harry blushed a deep purple, no small feat on his dark skin. “That good, huh?” Draco asked with raised eyebrows in response to Harry’s embarrassed silence.

“Yeah.” Harry said, seeming to gather his strength as he picked up his fork and stared at his food. “Let’s just get it all out in one go, then.” He seemed to say more to himself and his plate of food than to Draco.

Harry took a committed bite of his dinner and chewed with his eyes closed for a thoughtful moment before swallowing and looking up at Draco, who found himself profoundly distracted at the quietly pleasurable look on Harry’s face.
Then, he began without prelude, as Draco took his first bite. “How did you know you were gay?” The shock of the question made Draco nearly choke on a piece of potato.

After a bout of fitful coughing, he looked at Harry with watering eyes and a bewildered expression and said, “That is not what I was expecting.”

Harry looked, if possible, even more embarrassed now that Draco had nearly choked to death in front of him because of the question. “You don’t have to answer.” Harry hurried, his voice quiet and small, his shoulders rounding as he hunched over his plate of food, keeping his eyes downcast and obviously keen to avoid the issue and move on.

“Don’t be silly, I don’t mind.” Draco reassured, using his healer voice, feeling his heart race and his hands start to sweat. “It just took me by surprise is all. This is really good by the way.” He said pointing to his food and eliciting a small smile which seemed to relax Harry before continuing.

“I think I’ve always known, but I didn’t want it to be true with how my parents spoke about it.” He answered thoughtfully and slowly, trying to calm his sudden nervousness. “And then, in 5th year, I fooled around with Theo as well as Pansy and that was enough proof for me. Women are an enigma to me.” He ended, with a look of haunted and bewildered disgust on his face.

Harry apparently couldn’t stifle a laugh at that.

“And then, as if to seal my fate as a gay man, my parents arranged that premarital night with Astoria.” He said dryly.

The smile on Harry’s face dropped and he looked seriously at Draco. “So, you’ve never enjoyed sex with a woman?” he asked gently.

“If you can count what I did with Astoria as sex, then no. No, I have never enjoyed sex with a woman.”

“But you find men sexually attractive?” Harry asked, an unreadable expression on his face that increased the nervous fluttering in Draco’s stomach.

“That is the definition of gay, Potter, yes.” Draco said, with what he hoped was sarcasm.

Harry huffed a laugh and rolled his eyes, looking more at ease, straightening up in his chair. “So,” he started again, but looking awkward, “even though you’ve never had consensual sex with a man, you know you’re gay?”

Draco stilled at the question and felt his stomach churn uncomfortably. It was a valid one, he supposed, for someone who didn’t know any better. He looked at Harry hard and watched him fidget uncomfortably, trying to figure out the expression on his face, trying to figure out the curiosity. “I know I’m gay.” Draco finally said and Harry nodded, looking back toward his plate of food, knowing better than to push further.

Trying to lighten the mood a little with some false bravado, Draco asked, “Are you considering coming to the dark side, Potter?” and sent him a half hearted smirk.

Harry blushed again, dropping his fork and fiddling with his hands in his lap. “Well, no, but when I was frantically trying to get my mind off using earlier, I was reading one of those books and I ended up wanking a whole bunch to distract myself and I couldn’t figure out if it was because of what I was reading or not.”

He looked mortified at his admission, worrying his lower lip with his teeth, but powered on, still
not looking up. “And then I was just thinking, like you seemed to know without too much fuss, and I thought it would be so much easier if people just got letters like we did from school. I didn’t know I was a wizard, and then I got a letter saying ‘hey, you’re a wizard’ and everything clicked for me. Like, it would be really great if I could get a letter saying, ‘hey, you’re gay’ or ‘hey, you’re straight, you just have an issue with your cock’ or ‘hey, you’re incapable of a sexual relationship stop thinking about it so hard’, or ‘hey, you’re asexual’, you know?” he rambled at his plate before looking up pleadingly into Draco’s face.

“For the longest time, I just thought I wasn’t going to be able to have sex with anyone. Ever. I thought, fine, I lived this whole rancid life just to get to the peace and quiet of post-war freedom and surprise, Harry Potter, your cock doesn’t work and you hate sex and no pleasure for you, get ready to die miserable and alone. I really thought that was me.” Harry paused, looking at Draco intently. “And I’ve never told anyone that before.”

Draco repressed a grin, trying to not let on how light headed and nervous this conversation was making him feel. He had the very inappropriate urge to laugh. Get it together Draco, he thought to himself. Don’t. Make. It. Weird.

Suddenly the smut made sense, they way he watched Draco made sense, his failings with women made sense. This oblivious man was so fucking clueless, and so fucking gay.

“It’s okay.” Draco said kindly, trying with all his might to keep his healer mask in place. “Well, let’s start from the top. Did you enjoy having sex with that prostitute?”

“No.” Harry said, without hesitation. “No, I did not.” His cheeks were ruddied purple again.

“And you couldn’t get an erection for Ginny?” He asked, using his clinical voice while his insides writhed like snakes on fire.

“No. Not without extraordinary effort, and even then, it wouldn’t last.” Harry said, his face hardening.

“But you get hard reading 400 year old gay smut?” They were getting closer, he thought.

“Apparently.” He said with wide eyes.

“Have you ever had specifically erotic thoughts about women? Like, ever imagine being with one, and just get a raging hard on?” Draco asked, having so much empathy for the man in front of him, but wanting to make sure this was as clear as possible for him.

Harry just stared at Draco with a shocked expression before saying, “No. Have you?”

“Absolutely not.” Draco said with a smile. “But, we’ve already established I’m as gay as they come. You’re the one having an identity crisis.” Smooth, Draco, smooth, he congratulated himself.

Harry had a look of abject shock on his face. Draco continued, “Ever fantasise about touching a woman or having sex with a woman?” Still using his healer voice, despite the rising tide of flutters in his chest.

“No.” Harry said quietly.

“Could you be asexual? Do you even like to think about sex at all?” Draco asked, taking another bite of his dinner as if they were chatting about the weather. Chew, he reminded himself, chew the food, and swallow the food, don’t make it weird, don’t choke to death. He was trying desperately not to hear Severus’s voice in his head nor see his knowing smug face.
“I mean, I wanked like six times today, and I do really want to experience more intimate sex with another person, so no, I don’t think I’m asexual.” He said, still looking very bewildered. “Since I have been clean I feel like I’m going through a second bout of teenage hormones - I’m constantly having urges and desires and emotions I had completely forgotten about these past few years. It’s a bit overwhelming, really.” And he certainly looked overwhelmed, Draco thought.

Draco nodded his understanding before asking the final question. “Ever fantasise about touching a man? Having sex with one?”

They just stared at each other for a long, long time, while a look of dawning realisation slowly crept across Harry’s face. “Oh my fucking god.” Harry said quietly not looking away from Draco, and Draco working hard to maintain this intense eye contact and not burst into flames. “Oh my god.” Harry said again in complete disbelief, running his hands through his hair.

“I mean, I think I would feel so much fucking better if all this is, is that I’m gay and I actually just don’t like women and there’s a chance I’ll be able to get naked and have fun with someone and maybe fall in love with them and maybe I’ll get to live my happy post-war life after all.” He said looking towards the ceiling with this hands over his face, muffling his voice.

Draco just smiled knowingly at him and nodded, trying not to spontaneously combust at the realisation that Harry Fucking Potter was gay. GAY.

Harry suddenly looked absolutely panicked when he returned his gaze towards Draco. He awkwardly cleared his throat got up to clear their plates, nearly running back to the little sink in the kitchen and asked, his voice a scratchy squeak, “so, how was Hogwarts?” in a valiant effort to change the subject.

Draco didn’t push the issue and they finished their evening in peaceable conversation while Draco’s insides did odd things that made him feel a little nauseous and excited at the same time, catching himself smiling every time Harry’s back was turned. Harry didn’t seem to have any more questions about being gay, but nothing else needed to be said.

After Harry went off to take a much needed bath, so as to decompress after his harrowing day, Draco pulled a piece of parchment out onto his desk. He spent some time marking and charming the paper before sneaking over to Harry’s bunk, pulling his ‘hidden’ copy of *Quintessence of Debauchery* from behind the beam by his pillow, and tucking the folded parchment inside, and replacing the book.
Harry’s lungs burned with the effort, his feet flying across the well worn path, dashing across the gurgling stream, not even pausing to say his customary hello to Alice, who scuttled over to her burrow in alarm as he leaped across the riverbed, barely breaking stride, his feet scarcely touching the ground as he sprinted back up the path to the hollow, leaving half footprints in his wake.

He cleared the grove where Draco had first found him all those months ago, broken and battered and defiant in the face of forced survival. How different he was now, his muscles toned and his heart strong, and he made it to his familiar clearing in record time, bursting through the wards and yelling “Malfoy” at the top of his lungs, coming to a standstill in the field beside the cottage, his hands on his hips, his chest rising and falling heavily, but a grin wide on his face, his features exuding a profound sense of joy.

“Malfoy! Come and see!” He yelled, again. His voice strong and clear in the cold air. He knew the other man had heard him, and the door to the cabin swung open with a muffled swear.

“What, Potter? What in the name of Salazar Slytherin do you want?” Draco said, pulling on one of his winter boots and looping a green scarf around his neck, the evening air getting steadily colder as the sun sank behind the mountains to the West.

Draco looked up at him with his characteristic unpleasant glare. Harry knew he had been working on writing up his preliminary results all morning, but he was too thrilled, too shocked not to come right back to share with him what had happened. This. This was Draco’s triumph as much as it was his.

Draco was still glowering as he stomped over to where Harry was standing, his arms crossed and his features dark.

“Are you going to tell me what all the yelling was about? I was in the middle of something very delicate and important, Potter. This is not the day for interruptions…” His voice trailed away as he caught sight of something coming gliding over the trees behind Harry, illuminated against the blue violet sky, and his mouth hung open, his eyes going wide.

“Harry…” He said softly, watching the glowing form alight in the field behind Harry, shaking its head and snorting indignantly as it folded its impossibly large leathery wings.

Harry grinned, nearly bursting at the seams with excitement. “I did it. I cast a patronus again. It was the last spell I wanted to try, I was so worried I’d not be able to. But here he is. He’s changed, as you can see. I needed my wand for this one, but now that he’s here I’m not sure I would need one again, and it’s lasted so much longer than my stag used to. I ran all the way from the Rowan grove and he’s still with me. Isn’t he beautiful?” He said in an unrelenting stream of commentary.

“It’s a thestral.” Draco said, rather stupidly, still staring at the glowing form.

“Yes, you dolt. He’s a thestral. It took me all morning, but he’s here. I did it.” He said again, the pride pouring out of him.

“Why did it change?” Draco said, almost to himself, his brow furrowing.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I died and I didn’t want to come back this time? I haven’t really
had time to think about it, I just wanted to show you as soon as it happened.” He shrugged, his stubble nearly hiding a beautifully lopsided smile and his hands reaching out to Draco reflexively.

“I thought of you. Of these last few months.” Harry said, softly now, his bright green eyes searching Draco’s pale grey ones. “Of how you believed in me and trusted me enough to help me. Of how you gave me the space to be who I am, the space to even figure out who that is. I’ve never had that before.” He paused, and licked his lips nervously. “I thought it was over, my life, I thought I was never going to be anything but a pawn in a game I didn’t know how to play. But, you saved me and, fuck, you did so much more than that, you showed me how to have a life worth living. How to be honest, with myself first.” Harry’s green eyes were bright and emphatic and he stepped closer, his hands just nearly grazing the bottom edge of Draco’s sweater, their foreheads almost close enough to touch.

Harry paused his advances and whispered across the space between them, “I thought of the first night you let me sleep next to you, and holding your hand while we watched the stars, and I thought of all of the days you made me tea and told me I am more than my failures, and the night you let me hold you and all the ways you knit me back together when I am coming undone.”

Draco closed his eyes at the same moment he leaned down, resting his forehead against Harry’s, their breath mixing in the space between them, visible in the cold October air.

“I’m so proud of you.” Draco said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Harry heart was pounding in his chest, but he wasn’t sure if it was still from the run or being let in so close to Draco, sharing this with him. He had balked all those months ago at the term intimacy when Draco used it to describe them sleeping next to each other, but here, in the clearing, bodies close and Harry’s nose full of the smell of Draco’s dyed yarns and potions brews, of the hints of lavender and mint, he knew exactly what he meant. Intimacy.

Harry closed his eyes too, overwhelmed with the urge to pull Draco into his arms and hug him tight, to tell him he was proud too, just for this small step between them, for this closeness, and all the nights he had let Harry in. But, this intimacy was scary for Draco, he knew that, so he was the first to pull away, looking up into those soulful grey eyes to smile reassuringly, and to walk Draco back to the cabin and out of the cold, still holding his hand. To put on tea and listen to him go on and on about his editing drafts upon drafts of highly technical potions research, that mostly went right over his head anyway. To have a night like the many others, a night full of Draco’s bedtime rituals and Harry’s rather loud snores.

To the life they had reclaimed together, piece by piece.

October 10, 2008

Harry came back late in the evening, his hike up to the mountainous areas to the North having taken much longer than he had anticipated. He had thought he’d just get some exercise for a few hours, but once he spotted a peak, he had known he wanted to summit it, scaling near vertical stretches of rock face and scrambling up stretches of vine covered cliff, his magic helping him grip and climb up what would have been insurmountable stretches of terrain.

It had been worth it though, for once at the summit he’d found a flattened overhang that looked out across the forest. His forest. He could see a tiny column of smoke in one of the valleys to the South that marked Tenebris Hollow, the thick carpet of trees stretching for miles and miles - it felt insulating, sheltered. Far off in the distance, on the horizon, he thought he could just make out the
turrets of Hogwarts, and that too brought him comfort. Hogwarts had always been his home. He had always felt he belonged here.

It helped significantly that there had been no other contact with werewolves or any other stray humans wandering their way for months. Harry had also expanded his protective spells and started concealing his more well worn paths, just in case anyone did come near their little hideaway, including repelling spells and disillusionment charms. It was as though he was claiming his territory, marking his kingdom as his own. Building concentric circles of protection around the cottage. Around Draco.

Thestrals had swooped and glided in the sky, and Harry had laid back on the sun-warmed granite and watched them, marvelling at the beautiful creatures. He had come a long way from the scared boy who first saw them pulling carriages, who had only imagined that they could be one thing - the tragedy, the heartbreak, the pain of death. But they were merely guarded, they only showed themselves to those who had seen such loss, felt the ache of their own mortality in the light of someone else's end. They only appeared to those who had learned that this life is fragile, that this life must be so carefully kept.

When Harry saw them now, he thought of them as harbingers of empathy. Of reminders that there is a world we cannot see, even if it is existing right alongside us, and that world holds mysteries we may never explain.

As he had lay in the glowing warmth of the autumn rays, he had thought about the place beyond the veil, about the dead who had appeared next to him, who had never left him. They too, existed right beside him.

Sirius and Remus were with him, for all of his failures and all of his work he’d done recovering, his parents too. For those we love never truly leave us. Dumbledore’s words echoed in his head as he cast his own patronus and watched it take flight in the afternoon sky, stark white next to his all black companions.

It was easier, now. To imagine himself less alone. He knew it was because of Draco.

Draco.

It was when his thoughts had focused on his companion that Harry felt the chill of the season settle on him, and he had roused himself to trek down the mountain. He spent far too much time these days reflecting on the feelings he might be having. The strange stirring within himself that Draco was becoming more than an enemy turned friend, more than a focus of his admiration, and much more akin to the epicenter of his world.

Harry barked out a laugh at the memory of the note Draco had left him in his Quintessence of Debauchery, a little roughly drawn Hogwarts delivery owl hooting out an unmistakably clear announcement that Harry was, indeed, without a doubt, gay - his official notice. It had been so kind of him, thoughtful, and that just was Draco. He was like that, now.

Harry was noticing it more and more, how he cooked Harry’s favorite meals when he was having a rough day, how he kept the sugar and honey out next to each other so Harry could decide on sugar if he was already struggling, how he was always offering reassurances, even in the smallest of ways. The note was just like him - he had listened to Harry, even in all of his panic and confusion and he had come up with a way to show him he understood, and he could help. Harry’s chest swelled at the thought and he rubbed his stubbled cheek thoughtfully.

But there were so many layers there, so many problems. Harry had spent the hike back convincing
himself that he was only suffering so many waves upon waves of embarrassingly vivid fantasies about the blonde man and his graceful ways and charming smiles and furrowed brow above his ever-hiccuping cauldron because of their isolation. Because Draco had saved him. Because Draco kept saving him. And because, with Draco, he felt needed. He felt strong and protective and safe, more so than he had in years. And that was just it, wasn’t it? He was attracted to being a saviour, wasn’t he? Hadn’t Hermione diagnosed him with this complex in first year already?

Draco didn’t need someone lusting after him. He didn’t need the added complication of Harry’s newfound sexuality and markedly increased libido. He didn’t deserve it, actually. He deserved someone he wanted back, and Harry felt awful at the idea of trapping him into this nightmare where they shared a cabin in the middle of nowhere and Draco had no options for escape, no choices. How would that make him any better than the men who had hurt him? No. It wouldn’t do. Draco deserved better.

He had reached the conclusion that he was just a newly gay man with a newly refreshed sense of self and a new grasp on his life, with very little fantasy fuel and too much spare time just as he entered the Hollow, the familiar smell of woodsmoke coaxing him home.

Harry stopped alongside their Wiggentree and whispered his little growth charms, the ritual having resulted in the little twig doubling in height and quintupling in girth, looking as though it had inhabited it’s little mound for a decade already. Harry ran his hand across the trunk happily, so pleased with how much progress it had made. Draco was right, it was so satisfying to watch something grow, to be part of creating life. To have something they were nurturing, together.

He ducked under the little sag in the roof that now housed a family of bearded tits, their redecorated nest re-lined with moss and accentuated with a wild collection of twigs and dried leaves, who’s little pinging calls had become part of the symphony of the hollow, and often punctuated much of their morning routine. Harry had named the little breeding pair Marie and Pierre, after listening to Draco go on in French nearly a whole afternoon, and he was looking forward to meeting the little brood of chicks they would hatch, and giving them equally fanciful and exotic names.

Draco was in the kitchen, humming to himself while he peeled carrots for dinner - carrots from their own garden, even. Draco hadn’t turned around when Harry came in, and he didn’t rush taking off his boots and winter coat, distracted instead by the graceful line of Draco’s shoulders, half uncovered by an oversized sweater he had obviously knit himself, though about four sizes too big for his slight frame, the sleeves pushed up dramatically so his hands could be free to work, dark mark be damned, scars be damned. It was a dark maroon, almost purple, but Harry could imagine it was nearly Gryffindorian, and his heart clenched in his chest at the sight.

Draco turned and caught him staring at him, coat still only halfway removed.

“What’s wrong you git? You look as though you’ve had such a fright and I know it can’t be this soup I’m making because it smells incredible and if you don’t want any it’s fine I’ll eat it all myself, even though you’ve been gone all day and didn’t even let me know when you’d be back and if you’d be here for dinner.” Draco was grinning slyly, his eyes bright and soft and kind and creased at the corners with his obvious joy that he was indeed home at last and Harry’s mouth was suddenly so very dry with how effortlessly beautiful he was, and how stupid he had been to take so long to notice.

Draco had turned back to sweep the carrots and celery and potatoes he had chopped into the pot on the stove, and Harry felt such a surge of all of the things he wanted to do, an all consuming hunger that made him lick his lips and hold his breath. Waves of desire, inevitable as the rising tide,
Harry’s magic conjured lube within his palm without him really thinking about it, a spell he had found written in the margins of one of Draco’s books on pureblood housekeeping, and quickly memorised and mastered wordlessly. His hand slicked, he slowly pulled his grip down his shaft, softly groaning at the sensation. He knew he wasn’t going to last long, his hand twisting back up and circling the sensitive head of his cock, his skin shivering and his mouth falling open with the
hedonistic pleasure of it.

The lube he had conjured dripped down his shaft and Harry coated his second hand, rolling his fingers around each ball in turn, not wanting to come too quickly, too caught up in enjoying every sensation. He brought a foot up and rested it on the edge of the still steaming tub, his lubed fingers now rubbing slow circles over the sensitive slip of skin just below his testicles, his brow furrowing with the new sensation, his breath hitching and his balls drawing up in response. He kept himself balanced on the edge of his orgasm for a moment, his eyes closed and a low desperate moan escaping his parted lips, before pulling a few quick strokes up around the head of his cock and coming hard into his hand, the force of his orgasm leaving his legs weak and his breathing fast.

Harry stood a moment, revelling in the petite mort, his mind blissfully blank and his desire quelled for the moment. He did a quick cleaning spell and lowered himself down into the hot bath, feeling more at ease than he had in months, dropping low into the water, eyes closed and the heat wrapping itself around him. It was long before he felt the need to get out.

A pair of common loons called from the little pond, their eerie tremolo trills echoing across the Hollow and out into the night.
Voileami

October 20, 2008

Draco was pulled from his dream by the sound of a guttural moan, and he realised, after a moment of horror, that the sound had came from his own throat. Good Godrick, he had been dreaming of Harry. Again.

He had dreamt that he had Harry pushed against his potions bench and was pressing his aching groin into him, moaning into his mouth as they shared a sloppy and frantic kiss. But instead of pressing into Harry and moaning into his mouth, he was pressing himself into his mattress and gasping into his pillow like some randy teenager. For fuck’s sake, he thought to himself and he listened intently to hear whether or not Harry was awake, if he had heard Draco. He cringed at the thought of what else may have slipped from his lips during sleep.

He could hear Harry’s even breathing as he slept on, oblivious to Draco’s dilemma. Thank Salazar's tits for that.

He was so hard it was painful and it was making him see spots when pressed against it with the heel of his hands. Fucking hell. All these erotic dreams couldn’t be healthy, he thought. He had never in his adult life been this constantly preoccupied with getting off. And it was so difficult to toss off in a one room cottage when you were constantly in the company of the person you wanted to fantasize about.

No. He reminded himself. NO.

He was not allowing himself to fantasise about Harry, no matter how insistently his subconscious tried to force the issue in his sleep. Ever since Harry had cast his patrons and gotten so deliciously close to him, Draco couldn’t stop wanking over it. Just remembering the feel of Harry’s hands on the hem of his shirt and their foreheads together made him forget to breath and sent a jolt of pleasure to his groin.

It was fucking embarrassing. Draco had taken a pure and chaste moment and turned it into wank fuel like a total creep. It had taken every ounce of self control and self flagellation not to run his fingers through Harry’s hair and pull him into a searing kiss. He was eternally grateful that Harry had pulled away first, as he didn't think he would have had the strength to do it himself.

He felt embarrassed and ashamed for the desire he felt towards Harry. It wasn’t fair to either of them, and Draco needed to get his shit together before he let it ruin their peaceful existence.

Harry was in recovery. He was just barely seven months sober, and he was scared and vulnerable and unsure of his hold on his sobriety without all of the complications of Draco’s erratic emotions. And fuck, on top of that, Harry had only just figured out he was gay. Even if he was fairly certain Harry had been subtly eye fucking him for a few weeks, Draco was 110% certain it was because of their isolation and the fact that Draco had been there, had helped him through the thick of it. Draco had been Harry's lifeline, and then they had traded places and Harry had proven that he could handle the things that Draco had given him to hold, and it was natural for them to feel bonded in the intensity. Any adoration from Harry must certainly be circumstantial.

Right?

As soon as they left the forest, Harry would realize that the world was his gay oyster and he would
find any number of suitably attractive and unbroken men to experiment with and fall in love with, god knows they’d be lined up around the block to prove they were worthy of Harry fucking Potter. Draco was too damaged, and marked, and a fucking death eater, and he couldn’t put himself through the trauma of opening himself up in that way to his schoolboy crush just to be left when reality set in. Draco felt it would be entirely predatory and immoral to allow anything to happen between them. This was supposed to be a safe space for both of them.

Harry should explore his newfound sexuality with someone who wasn’t terrified of intimacy, he reasoned. Someone who could enjoy sex. Someone who wasn’t covered in scars. Just as he had come to the conclusion that he wouldn’t think about getting Harry off anymore, he mindlessly pressed his hand against his raging hard on again and had to stifle another moan as Harry’s brilliant green eyes flashed across his mind.

Those eyes that laughed with him and watched him so closely and with such kindness as they worked together in their cozy kitchen, making tea and sharing parts of themselves. The green that had haunted him since he was 11, that had captivated him since his early years, a green that had coerced the death of his godfather at the same time they had stared down the most dangerous wizard who had ever lived. Everything about Harry was like that, powerful and dangerous, while at the same time it was soft and safe. He was the kind of man who had collected the deathly hallows and felt no need to use them.

It was all fine and well, too, he reasoned, to wank himself raw thinking about the things he wish he could do with Harry, but he knew that faced with the reality of sexual intimacy, he probably would never be able to cope.

He would get spooked and end up running, he knew it already. He had accepted the fact, ever since his fiasco with Charlie, that he would be alone, and the best he was ever going to get were vivid dreams of Harry’s hard body against his.

God dammit.

He grabbed his wand out from under his pillow and cast a silencing charm around him. It was over in four frantic pulls, white spots erupting behind his eyelids as he squeezed them shut. He came over his fist and stomach as an unbidden image of Draco pressing himself into Harry’s heat forced its way into the forefront of his mind, and he couldn’t stop a desperate moan from escaping his lips. He let the wave of euphoria and exhaustion wash over him as he regained control of his breathing. He cast a cleaning charm as the aftershock of pleasure left him feeling empty and doused in shame.

He couldn’t do this to him, to Harry. He needed to get a grip. Fuck, being around Harry made him feel like a horny teenager again and it was getting ridiculous, he chastised. After canceling the silencing charm and rolling onto his side he stuffed the duvet around him and tried not to think about Harry as he let sleep reclaim him.

October 21, 2008

The next morning, Draco felt tense. Their usually easy morning banter didn’t feel easy at all. It felt like it was taking everything he had to be… normal. To not let it slip through that he was having these unbidden desires flood through him. That every time his and Harry’s eyes locked he fumbled on his words and forgot what he was saying.

It didn’t help that he had been avoiding leaving the hollow. It was making him tetchy and twitchy
and altogether unpleasant to be around. He needed to get out, it was time. He was a wizard, he lived through war, and he had a talisman to protect his personal space. Not to mention, he had spent months hiking through the same woods, by himself no less, without incident. It was time to get back outside before his constantly close proximity to Harry melted his brain and his ever thinning resolve.

“I’m going out!” He spluttered, taking himself and Harry by surprise, after he realized he had been staring at Harry’s ass while he made tea. Harry turned to look at him with an odd expression while Draco tried to put his cool mask in place and pray to whoever was listening that he wasn’t blushing madly.

“For a hike.” Draco clarified, stupidly. Harry just tilted his head in curious contemplation as Draco turned to start gathering his things to leave the cottage.

“Want some company?” Harry offered. He was so kind and open and fucking friendly. Insufferable, really.

“No, no, it’s alright, Potter.” He hoped he didn’t sound too dismissive, but he needed to clear his head. Alone.

“You sure?” Harry sounded cautious, and maybe even a little nervous.


“I mean, it hasn’t escaped my notice that you haven’t left the hollow since we went swimming.” He said slowly and carefully, sensing Draco’s raw nerves. “So, I’m just making sure.”

“Well, thank you for your worries, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. I managed before.” He said, pulling his trainers on, decidedly ignoring the many thoughts of all of the things they could get up to on a hike together.

Harry just continued to watch him speculatively, sipping his mint tea. Draco suddenly realised he must be worried. About him. The git.

“And, this crafty wizard with terrible hair gave me a rather fascinating “fuck-off” token, so really, I will be fine.” Draco smiled at him as he pulled his coat on and patted his pocket to indicate the talisman Harry had made him. He had yet to see it in action, but that was only because he had yet to be on the receiving end of unwanted physical advances since it was gifted to him, but he was sure Harry’s magic would work as intended.

Harry seemed to relax at that and gave him a lopsided smile over the rim of his chipped mug that made Draco’s insides writhe and his brain forget what the fuck he was suppose to be doing. He just stood there watching Harry smile like a dumbass until a squawking raven broke through his haze and he turned with a mumbled, “later” before he could embarrass himself further.

The air was crisp and cool, but the sun was still warm on his skin. He loved this time of year. The changing colours, the clear air, the harried preparations by the forest creatures for the change of season. He took the well worn path to the East, the same he had used to track and follow the unicorn herds in the early spring. He thought he would just walk until his racing mind calmed down and he hoped, that after all the exertion, his body would be too tired to produce an erection later.

Self pleasure was something he had spoken to Beatrice about a lot in their sessions as an important part of reclaiming himself after what had happened in the war, but it always made him slightly
uncomfortable. And now, what with getting an unwanted erection nearly every night, he was being made to cope with his shame at an alarming rate. He decided, following this train of thought, that he would write her about this. It had been a few weeks and he didn’t want to get behind on his own mental health needs just because he was grossly distracted by Harry’s mere presence. She had indicated in her last correspondence that she was worried he was isolating himself, as she did not know he wasn’t alone, and asked him to reconsider coming in for physical appointments.

Perhaps he should. He thought to himself. He knew though, that if he did go see her, he would have to admit that he was staying with someone. He couldn’t effectively utilize the therapy or address the layers there if she was unaware of that most important fact. And, if he was being honest, he wasn’t ready to share his cottage-mate just yet. He thought that maybe he should discuss this with Harry. He sighed aloud to himself. Being an adult was difficult.

He was walking at a fast clip down the path, relishing the exertion. He was not one to sit still for long and it had been stupid to coop himself up like that for weeks on end. His mind felt more clear already.

He was breathing in the clean cool air and feeling sated on a level he hadn’t in weeks when a thestral popped out on to the path ahead of him and blocked his way. He smiled at the leathery creature and patted its flank as he tried to scoot past it to continue his walk. But instead of lazily standing by while Draco moved on, as they usually did, the thestral backed up and stopped Draco from walking past, swinging its head around to regard him, and sniff toward his outstretched hands.

Draco didn’t think much of it, and tried again to manoeuvre around it. It stepped back again, off balancing Draco, who stumbled into a bush. “Excuse me, good Lord.” He mused as he righted himself and tried to move again. He managed to get past the thestral just as another stepped out and blocked his path again.

“What the fuck?” He asked the thestrals. This was very odd behaviour, indeed. The two thestrals just looked at him as he heard the rustling approach of more of the winged beasts coming in on either side of the path.

“What is this?” He asked, feeling very confused. He was soon surrounded by a dozen or so thestrals, all encircling him with the same intent expression. “I’m sorry I haven’t been out recently, really.” He said, feeling they must be disappointed in him and hoping to placate the strange creatures. One of them stepped forward towards him, and he was suddenly filled with apprehension, a feeling he had never had around the gentle beings before. Thestrals didn’t eat people, right? That’s not something he ever learned about them, right? No, that couldn’t be it. Strange though they were, surely he wasn’t in danger. Not to mention, he had his talisman. He was fine.

The small thestral, whom he then recognised as one that spent a lot of time in their garden, the one with a scar through her left wing and that he had taken many samples from, moved to stand right beside him, nibbling the sleeve of his coat.

“Can I help you?” he asked, feeling bemused, reaching out to stroke her face as he had done so many times before.

In response she pulled his sleeve and began towards the trees to his left, forcing him to turn on the spot. “No, we can’t go in there.” Draco protested, feeling frustrated with this one sided conversation, but curious all the same. He was about to yank his sleeve away from her when a second came up to his other side and grabbed his left sleeve, helping to pull him forward.

“Okay, I guess we can.” He said with a bewildered smile, as he began to follow his two new
guides. He figured that, since they had always been so kind to him over the months, he could entertain their odd behaviour for a moment. As he stepped into the thickness of the trees, he saw the thestrals before him form a line and begin walking along a well hidden deer trail. The thestrals on either side released their grip of him, and the small scarred one stayed close at his back, nudging him forward.

“Yes, yes, I’m moving.” He said in response to her gentle encouragements.

He walked amid the slow procession of thestrals for what felt like an hour. Every so often, when he lagged or was distracted by a bird or an interesting mushroom, his little thestral friend urged him forward.

The forest floor was now beginning to slope downwards and the trees and undergrowth around him was getting thicker and more difficult to move through. The thestrals seemed superbly unconcerned with the tangled branches that slapped across them as they moved, but Draco was getting frustrated with how often he was getting hit in the face.

Soon, the floor’s decline became so dramatic he was finding himself crouching and using the trees and bushes to help him descend the precipitous slope. The thestrals, on the other hand, seeming to have no issue at all. His curiosity was mounting more and more as they descended. Where in Merlin’s testicles where they taking him?

He thought briefly that if it got too much he could just apparate away, but he was so intrigued that he couldn’t stop himself from sliding enthusiastically down the embankment they had brought him to. He was covered in mud and sweat, his hands were filthy from groping for tree roots to help leverage him lower and lower into what seemed to be a large crevice in the forest, and he knew his slacks would never recover from this excursion. The plants and trees were so thick around him that he couldn’t gauge his location whatsoever. All he knew, was that it was much darker down here than in the upper forest around Tenebris Hollow, and yet, the thestrals kept on. Eventually, he took out his wand, cast a lumos, and stuck it in his mouth between his teeth as he continued to climb down.

Lower and lower they sank into this forest valley. Before long, the leaf strewn earth began to give way to sharp, pink granite outcroppings covered in detritus from the forest above. As the trees thinned out and dropped away, he finally saw a bottom to their descent. Using a straggly birch as leverage, he dropped himself from the edge of the forest and down onto a what looked like smooth basalt planes of a riverbed. About four meters wide, and stretching out around a bend on either side, it looked as if they were standing in a dried up waterway.

Though, he supposed, when it did rain, this was probably flooded with water. He looked up and noted that his view of the sky was nearly completely obscured by the trees around this valley. He could just make out the deep walls of the mountains on either side, blanketed in thick growth. All around him, his entourage daintily found their way down onto the rock floor and began to walk to the South. They were now following the smooth water-worn floor uphill and Draco’s sense of curiosity burned in him. Where the hell were they taking him?

Suddenly, at the bottom of this unknown crevice, he had a moments speculation about how foolish he was being. Harry had no idea where he was and what if Draco fell and broke his leg or hit his head or got lost? He had clearly been spending too much time with a certain Gryffindor, he mused as he continued on his way, the small thestral close at his back, he was a perfectly capable wizard, after all. And a healer. If there was anything he could manage, it was broken limbs. He shook off the troubling idea and continued on.

He wondered if he should give his little thestral escort a name. It only seemed right. That way, he
could address her properly when they spoke. He turned slightly as he walked and reached out to touch her face. She seemed to enjoy that. As he felt the fuzz of her nose and smooth tight leather of her skin as he contemplated what to call his companion.

“Voileami.” He said, and smiled, because she was. She was his veiled friend. The beast that could walk between the veil, only to be seen by those who’ve been touched by death.

She just nudged his hand as he rubbed the smooth space between her eyes.

Turning his attention to the procession ahead of him, he saw that the crevices they walked along turned ahead and meandered out of sight. As he followed the thestrals around the bend, he saw that the deep walls of the valley became even more sheer and domineering. He felt as if he were in the jagged heart of the forest.

He paused to look up at the towering cliffs above him to see the the sun passing behind the ridge as the morning wore on, casting the gorge into deeper shadow. He heard a soft rush of water now, and saw a trickle coming off the rock wall ahead, the water following the flat expanse of stone and dissipating down past where they had come from.

A nudge at his back reminded him of his herd, and he continued his march up and around the bend to find where the procession went. But, when he came around the turn, they had gone. Vanished. Perplexed, he turned back to see his lone companion staring intently at him.

“Where did everyone go?” He asked as he surveyed the area, looking for signs of a long black tail swishing and listening for a rustle of leathery wings.

As if she understood the question, Voileami walked past Draco towards the steep cliff wall at their left and began climbing up, carefully placing each hoof on well-considered ledges and landmarks. She didn’t look back to see if he was coming, and she needn’t have worried, because Draco was soon scrambling up to follow her. His curiosity obscuring any sense of caution.

“What in Circe’s name are you getting yourself into, Draco?” He muttered to himself.

One moment he’s pining over Harry, the next he’s being led by thestrals into a deep gorge in the forest where no one would be able to find him. Good planning, he thought. Really top shelf work.

As he ascended the near vertical wall, he was amazed at the speed and ease with which the thestral summited the climb. At about four meters, he saw an opening in the cliff wall just above him and to the right. That, he considered, must be where they were climbing to. The rushing sound of the water was getting louder, and he could see where it was escaping out of the mouth of this apparent cave.

Above him, his guide disappeared into the stone wall and soon he was reaching for the last ledge and hauling himself onto flat ground.

Whatever he was expecting, it was not this.

He was at the mouth of a spacious cavern that was hidden to anyone looking up from ground level. The opening was just tall enough for him to pass under and about 5 meters wide. Along the right wall of the cave was a shallow stream of water coming from the dark depth at the back and pouring over the smoothed ledge and into the gorge. The rest of the cave was full, literally full, of thestrals. Almost as astonishing as the sheer number of thestrals before him were the colonies of glowing blue algae spattered along the walls and ceiling of the cave, casting everything in a moon-like glow.
There were dozens and dozens of beautifully constructed round nests of woven sticks that were blanketed with green moss, some of the glowing algae, and leaf litter. The cave was huge and wide and there must have been near 100, that he could see, of the giant winged beasts all meandering between the large nests, greeting tiny foals, bringing food, and cleaning one another.

He couldn’t tell how far back the cave went, as it plunged into velvety blackness, but he could assume it was deep, judging by the stream that stemmed from it.

He quickly did a mental inventory of everything he had every read about thestrals living in their natural environment, and not one scrap of research he had done had told him that they were capable of such beautiful nests, or that they congregated in glowing caves. Most resources stated that they were forest dwelling herd animals, and must surely, simply, sleep wherever they roamed. Yet, these were well established nests, he marveled, similar to what some large eagle species would build over the course of years.

He stood there at the opening of the cave gaping in bewildered astonishment at the majesty before him. Why did they bring him here? Why did he deserve this secret? Why did they keep helping him?

He was pulled from his reverie when Voileami approached him and stood watching him as if she waited for him to follow. He re-lit his wand and started forward as she turned around and began walking away. He moved with her through the maze of nests, watching the love and attentiveness of the thestrals to their young, the care they took in adjusting the nests, in placing new moss or plants, weaving new saplings into the walls.

Some parents slept curled around their foals, large leathery wings draped over them like a blanket shielding them from soft glow of the walls, others took flight off the cave ledge and up into the forest beyond, to do whatever it is that thestrals do. Not a single one of them took notice of his presence, aside from his guide. He felt simply dumbstruck by the fact that he had been brought here. These creatures were far more intelligent and sentient than he could have ever thought. Far more complicated, and mysterious.

Voileami stopped in front of a nest no different than the others, which was occupied by the smallest little thestral he had ever seen. It looked fragile, and it’s skin had a papery look to it. Voileami, who must be its mother, he thought, stepped into the nest, onto a soft carpet of moss, and nudged the foal, encouraging it to stand. The thestral bleated in protest and Draco saw what the problem was immediately, as it wobbled on unsteady legs and fell. The foal had a clearly broken front leg.

He smiled, finally realizing why he had been led here. They had brought him to help. To heal. He had healed that male thestral’s gashes all that long while ago, and they had remembered.

He felt touched that they trusted him enough to bring him here, and he gingerly stepped into the nest and over to the foal, softly speaking words of comfort and care to the little one.

Draco ran full speed from the spot where he apparated to the front door of the cottage and burst in with a loud “Potter!” Only to see the handsome git sitting right in front of him at the kitchen table, looking disheveled and startled.

“What?!” He said looking supremely concerned, standing up. “What happened?”

“The most amazing thing.” He said, slightly out of breath from his mad dash. “The thestrals.”
breathe, grabbing his side. “They took me to their cave.”

“What?” He asked, looking dumbfounded, as if Draco was speaking French.

“The thestrals! They led me through the forest down into this gorge and up a cliff face to their lair!” Draco was gesticulating wildly with excitement, but Harry just looked more and more concerned.

“What?!” He asked again, even louder.

“How are you not understanding this?” Draco asked impatiently.

“Start over, from the beginning, explain what you’re on about.” He said, looking more alarmed and sounding more severe than Draco thought the situation warranted.

But Draco did, he told Harry about being stopped on his hike and being led into the thick of the forest. About following the herd into a gorge. About scaling a rock wall into a glowing cave. About the stunning nests they constructed. About his friend Voileami. About the foal with the broken leg. About how he promised them he would return tomorrow with food for the foal and to check on the healing. About how he apparated from the cave entrance to the cottage so he could tell Harry his theory on thestral magic as soon as he could.

“So let me get this straight.” Harry said looking completely flustered. “You don’t leave the hollow for weeks, and then the first time you decide to get back out there, you just, what? Follow thestrals into a deep dark cavernous gorge and into a cave?!” he asked with bemused incredulity, his voice a little too loud.

“Is that what you’re taking away from this story?” Draco asked frustratedly.

“Can you cast a patronus?” Harry asked, suddenly serious. The question totally taking Draco off guard.

“What?” He asked.

“Can you cast a patronus?” Harry repeated.

“No?” said Draco.

“Is that a question or a statement?” Harry smirked, despite the serious tone.

Draco rolled his eyes.

“No, Potter, I cannot cast a patronus.” Harry’s face hardened. “Would you like to tell me why in blithering fuck that’s relevant right now when I’m trying to tell you about half-mythical creatures being all mystical?!” Draco was so bewildered by Harry’s attitude.

“Because you could have gotten hurt!” Harry shouted, making Draco step back. “You could have gotten hurt, and how on earth would you have been able to call for help?! Honestly, you’re supposed to be the smart, careful one here!” Harry looked angry and pained.

Draco was completely flabbergasted by Harry’s concern. He had never had anyone shout at him because they were worried about his well being like this before. He had no idea how to feel about it. Or even how to respond.

“…uhh.” Draco felt a complete loss for words. “I am uncertain if I should be apologising, or what
it is you’re expecting from me.” He said, trying really very hard to convey that he was confused and not wanting to sound like a dick, but probably failing.

Now Harry rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair at the kitchen table, sighing heavily, crossing his arms.

“I’m sorry I shouted, I shouldn’t have.” He averted his eyes and he didn’t really sound all that sorry. “I just don’t want you getting hurt.” The admission sounded soft and sincere.

“Thank you for your concern Potter, but I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” Draco said feeling both touched and irritated, finally taking the seat across from Harry.

“I know, I know you’re a perfectly functional adult and you don’t need saving. I know. I’m not trying to save you, really I’m not.” He now looked beseechingly into Draco’s eyes. “I would just be at a total loss if you broke your leg, froze to death, and got eaten by thestrals.” He offered a small smile and was clearly going for some humour, but there was too much vulnerability there for it to be funny. Draco’s mouth went dry and his pulse quickened and he had to mentally shake himself.

Draco didn’t know what to say. He just looked back into those impossibly green eyes and was momentarily lost until Harry spoke again. “Let me teach you how to cast a patronus.” He said, the words coming out like a soft plea.

“Okay.” Draco said softly. “If it’ll get you to calm the fuck down.” He said, taking a stab at humour himself. It failed miserably. Harry didn’t smile. He just looked back at him with a blazing look that went straight through Draco and to his groin as tried with all his might to regain control of the conversation. “Are you going to let me tell you about my theory on thestrals now?” His voice came out scratchy and breathier than he intended, and he kicked himself internally for giving his inner boggart more fuel.

“Tell me about your theory, then, go on.” Harry said, finally smiling. His face softening and his shoulders relaxing as he un-crossed his arms and settled back into his chair, ready to hear what Draco had to say.
Harry rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, his hands shoved in his tattered black jeans pockets. “Come on, Malfoy, let’s go!” He yelled at the cottage, eager to get started on helping Draco with his patronus charm.

He had really scared him, that day, coming back from his grand adventure in the forest. It was exciting, yes, but what if something had happened? Harry had been gripped with a burning, nauseating fear, and it hadn’t left him for days. What if Draco had been attacked and lost his wand? What if he had lost consciousness and frozen? Roils of anxiety rolled around in his gut at the thought. He knew he was being irrational, really, Draco was a trained healer. He was a very capable wizard. He didn’t need Harry babying him. In fact, he was just as safe as Harry was wandering around the forest. Well, aside from the fact that Harry did 90% of his magic wandlessly these days and he felt more powerful than he ever had been before, and more in control.

He sighed, smiling to himself. His magic these days was immense, but not in the terrifying and unpredictable way it had been before - it was calm and placid and gentle, and responded to his needs without him having to do much thinking about it. When he had walked out this morning, the grey sky had cleared and the weak winter sun had shone through to the clearing where he wanted to practice. He had started to notice that he had a bit of an effect on the weather these days, the atmospheric charms he had learned so long ago crackling up from his fingertips without him actively thinking about them, the winter chill constantly buffered by a sense of warm and comfort that surrounded him.

Draco stumbled out of the door, pulling one of his winter boots on over his mismatching wool socks. “Merlin Potter give me a minute, I only just woke up, it’s hardly past the crack of dawn. I didn’t even get to have my tea properly before you started demanding we get a move on.”

Harry smirked and watched Draco straighten up, run his fingers through his long blonde hair, his cheeks already pinking in the cold breeze of the early morning.

“Come on, I’m just excited, and we have a lot of work to do. The patronus charm isn’t easy magic, and we’ll likely need long to practice.” He paused a moment, watching Draco intently. “Are you ready? Did you think of a place you wanted to take us?” Harry asked, Draco fumbling with his scarf and stomping rather pointedly across the thick layer of snow to where he stood, radiating warmth and calm and serenity.

Draco furrowed his brow, but nodded, reaching for Harry’s hand, which he had held out to him. As they grasped each other, Draco turned on the spot and apparated them to the dry riverbed in the canyon where Draco had found the thestral cave.

Harry had told him to choose somewhere he felt safe, and protected, somewhere he felt was all his own. Where he could focus in on himself. He didn’t know why he had never been able to produce the charm before, but he imagined it had something to do with the vulnerability of it. Accessing your memories, especially when you had such a precious few good ones, was a difficult task, and reaching down within yourself, dredging up the power of the memory, it was exposing. Raw. Shining a light into the dark usually was.

Harry let Draco’s hand fall from his own as he hummed in appreciation of his choice - it was sheltered and quiet, still and so protected. Little snowflakes drifted down from the sliver of grey
winter morning far above, just dusting the slate rock of carved earth. He walked a bit, taking in the dense trees high up on the granite bank at either side, finally turning back when he realised he wasn’t being followed. Draco hadn’t moved from the spot where they had appeared.

His cheeks were red now in the cold, his lips pink and parted, accented with little puffs of steam marking his breaths. He was radiant. His nearly white hair and grey eyes, he looked princely, like something out of a fairy tale - snow dusting his shoulders as they regarded each other.

Harry smiled against Draco’s obvious apprehension - he had already taken his Hawthorn wand from beneath his sweater, and he was nervously tapping his fingers against it. He was scared of what they would uncover. Harry knew. He had been scared too. But it was okay, for he also knew that Draco would be okay. He could do this.

“Close your eyes.” Harry said into the expanse between them. His voice strong and full of reassurance. Of confidence. “Clear your mind.”

Harry started walking back slowly toward Draco, watching him shake his shoulders out gently and lean his head back a bit, a small sigh falling from between his lips. He was beautiful, and Harry had to fight to keep his own mind clear, focused on the task at hand. Now was not the time for lust. Now was for trust, and refuge.

“Feel your magic.” He said. “I know you can feel mine, now show me what yours is like. Describe it to me. Make me feel it.”

Without opening his eyes, Draco cast a wordless warming charm, and Harry felt the gentle lapping of Draco’s magic against his skin, the distinct buzz and careful softness coating him in liquid warmth. He stepped forward into it, drinking it in.

“It’s beautiful, like water, soft and careful. Your magic is life-giving.” Harry said softly, almost to himself.

“Can you feel it? Between your fingers, in your palms, up your arm and into your chest? Can you feel it pooling there, filling you?” Harry said, watching Draco swallow, his adams apple clearly visible as he tipped his head back further, his pale face up to the grey sky.

Draco brought his head back down and nodded slowly. His features were relaxed and calm, not a ripple of the usual anxiety, of the fear, of the tension. His breaths were deep and even, and Harry could feel the buzzing of his magic, strong and yet so serene, swirling around them.

“Now, stay with your magic, but concentrate in your mind on a memory of joy. Something powerful and clear. Something that filled you with happiness. Something no one could ever take from you.”

Harry stepped around to Draco’s right, watching him worry his lip slightly between his teeth, a line appearing between his brows. He was concentrating too hard, just as Harry had when he first tried. He was seeking, searching, happiness being such an unfamiliar place, a foreign land to them both.

Finally, his features settled into staunch determination.

“When you’re ready.” Harry said softly, watching Draco raise his wand in his left hand, intent on casting now, as though afraid to lose the resolve, the joy, the memory itself.

Harry knew it wasn’t going to work before the incantation had left his lips, and he let Draco open his eyes to the empty space ahead of him, letting him see for himself that the thing he had clung so shakily to had not been enough. He needed to dig deeper.
“Nothing.” Draco said softly, full of disappointment.

“I couldn’t cast one for months. Don’t let it stop you from understanding why. What memory did you choose?” Harry said, trying to be kind, knowing the sting of the failed spell first hand.

“The first time I flew on a broom. I was so young and father had given me one as a present for Christmas. It was a day just like this one, with the snow falling, but I couldn’t wait to try and I ran out onto the manor grounds and was up in the air, flying for hours.” Draco answered, his eyes unfocused and his mind far away, reliving the moments of freedom that he had equated with unbridled joy.

Harry nodded, a smile hinting at the corners of his mouth, remembering all of those years ago when, he too, had thought of flight. And, he too, had failed to produce a whisper of his father’s stag.

“This is part of the process. That memory is happy, but is just the freedom of the air, of flight, something many of us find joyful. You need something of yourself. Something that has fed your soul. Has kept your blood warm in the darkest of nights. Something that has carried you.”

Harry was trying to find a way to describe the life force that was required to form a corporeal patronus. It was as though he had to send it with a part of himself. A part that kept him alive. Harry had thought that this was why it had taken him so long to be able to do the spell while his magic was returning. For so long, he had only had so little to keep him going, he couldn’t spare any. He had held it too closely, for fear of it leaving him again.

Draco looked down for some time before raising his head again and giving Harry a nod, signalling he was ready to try again. He wasn’t smiling, but Harry could see there was an air of the confident, capable Draco that ruled his professional life.

Draco raised his wand arm again and his voice rang out clear into the cavern. “Expecto patronum.”

A thin wisp of silver smoke snaked from Draco’s wand tip and furled in on itself, winding around slowly, languidly. Draco’s face split into a soft smile, and he looked over to Harry, who couldn’t keep the grin off his face either.

“That’s certainly better than I did on my second try, you show off.” Harry chided.

“It’s more than I’ve ever been able to produce practicing on my own.” Draco said, his smile suddenly faltering. “But, it wasn’t enough to produce a corporeal one. What am I missing?” His over-analysing was back, as was the worrying of his lip and the drumming of his fingers. He was frustrated.

“What memory did you use this time?” Harry asked, trying to refocus the spiralling thoughts.

“The day I qualified as a Healer. It was the proudest moment of my life so far. I was finally able to say that I could do good with my life. That I could be proud of who I am.”

Draco’s voice was unnaturally hard and cold, and Harry waited a moment before Draco continued on, sensing there was more to the memory.

“Some idiot witch took it upon herself to spit in my face just after I had received my diploma and robes. I cried about it for hours when I got home.” The grey eyes that had been so soft and placid were steely and unforgiving.
Harry nodded solemnly. He didn’t need to remind Draco why that memory hadn’t worked. It was tainted. It was full of the resentment and pain of being humiliated.

“Try again.” Harry said softly, moving around behind Draco and sliding his left hand behind Draco’s wand arm, his magic simmering just below Draco’s, his fingers slipping around the exposed skin of Draco’s wrist. “Close your eyes.” He nearly whispered in Draco’s ear.

Harry raised Draco’s arm and felt him lean back slightly against his chest, his wand outstretched. Harry took a deep breath to clear his mind, closing his own eyes at the soft smell of mint and lavender, of sandalwood and yarn. He hadn’t been so close to Draco in ages, and it was pulling at him, igniting fires in him.

“Focus.” He exhaled the word, breathy and soft in Draco’s ear, more to himself than anything. Harry felt the flames of his magic licking softly at Draco’s skin, everywhere it was exposed, the cold long forgotten, his face warm and flushed. Harry swallowed hard and closed his eyes against the closeness, against the nakedness of the moment, how sinful and pleasurable it felt as Draco melted into him.

He felt Draco tense for a moment and gather the incantation in his chest. “Expecto patronum” fell from his lips as Harry mouthed the spell simultaneously, his eyes still closed and his head tucked against Draco’s scarf. He felt the beautiful warmth of the spell ripple through Draco’s outstretched arm and a soft wind swept around them, closely followed by a gasp. Draco’s.

Harry opened his eyes to see the beautiful ghostly form of a thestral gambol away from them, wings outstretched and head high, nostrils flared in the novel glare of existence. They both watched the creature turn and stare at them, sides shuddering in a silent nicker. It was beautiful and wild, but different from his own - taller, more regal. It was stunning.

“Expecto patronum.” Harry whispered, still leaning into Draco’s back, their magic fluttering around one another, suddenly timid, careful.

His thestral leapt into existence and joined it’s fellow, shaking its head and wings as if having just rolled in the dust of the world behind the veil, stretching its nose out to nip at it’s consort playfully. The two beasts danced around each other, their sharp hooves leaving no prints in the perfect snow.

In the trees around the crevasse, other thestrals silently watched the pair of ghostly shadows, and the snow continued to fall amongst the trees. The two men stood motionless, captivated, the only sounds their gentle breaths and the steady beating of their hearts.

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November 05, 2008

Harry was up as the sky was staining red in the East, the snow that had fallen in the night reflecting the sun’s first rays, glittering in the half light of the morning. He had his customary morning cup of tea and a chocolate rusk, moving about the cottage quietly, not keen to wake the sleeping dragon before the sun was higher in the sky.

Draco had been in such a tempestuous mood since casting their patronuses together, he’d said nothing and apparated home without Harry, leaving him open mouthed, bewildered, standing in the snow at the bottom of the gorge. His elation at guiding Draco, teaching him, and seeing him succeed in something that had evaded him for so long was crushed by the other man’s enigmatic reaction - a moment he had been so keen to celebrate, for them to rejoice together.
In the days that followed, he’d become so cold, aloof. Harry had taken to spending more time outside, leaving him to his work. He knew he was struggling with something, and he’d hopefully come to him when he was ready. Harry was happy to give him the space, but he couldn’t shake the nagging thought that he missed Draco. He missed their closeness.

Harry didn’t have any plan for the day in particular, but he had taken a great liking to rising early and running a great loop around the Hollow, checking his wards and spellwork, greeting the forest dwellers who weren’t hiding away for winter, and spending the time to clear his mind properly. It helped him gain perspective.

He slipped out into the bitter cold air, securing the cottage door behind him, his glasses instantly fogging up. Snow dusted the tops of the Wiggentree and its branches hung heavy with a sheet of ice. Harry hadn’t realised the ferocity of the storm they had the night before, and he rubbed his hands together and blew on them out of habit more than anything, jogging off across the clearing to the Western wood, his waterproofed trainers crunching in the fresh snow.

He hadn’t gone more than a kilometer before he noticed something strange, just off the path ahead - a dark shape was jutting out of a snowbank at the base of a giant wych elm, waving erratically in the gusts of wind that snaked through the leave-less trees. He slowed to a walk and approached with caution, his magic sending tendrils out ahead of him to scan for signs of hidden dangers, yet nothing sinister appeared.

As he got closer, Harry realised the dark shape was a large black and dark brown wing, feathers splayed and sticking up at odd angles, from a bird that must have fallen from the tree in the storm, and who had been unable to free itself from the snowbank properly.

Harry knelt down and dug out the snow around the wing, not expecting to find the little creature alive, but wanting to at least lay it to rest somewhere less painfully exposed. To his great surprise, a feeble hoot was heard through the snow, and he dug faster, finally exposing the body of a little black owl with comically large pointed ear tufts on either side of it’s black feathered head.

“Oh!” Harry said in alarm, completely taken aback that the owl was still alive, reaching down and gingerly lifting him up out of the snowbank. The birds eyes were closed and he didn’t seem to respond much to being touched. Harry furrowed his brow and decided at once he couldn’t leave him behind, with a wing that badly broken there’d be no chance of survival.

The bird barely struggled as Harry swaddled him in his scarf and stuck him inside his jacket, trying to accommodate his bent wing without hurting the exhausted avian, who gave just one more little hoot as Harry stood to head back to the Hollow, a low and throaty call that filled Harry’s heart.

“It’s ok little one, I’ve got you now.” He crooned softly as he hurried back down the path. He was already running through a mental checklist of what Hagrid would do. Step one, reignite the fire that had burnt low during the night, step two let the little guy warm up on his own a bit and get some kind of split on the wing that he’d reset. Harry silently hoped *episkey* would be good enough, as he didn’t know any more specific healing spells for animals. Step three, convince Draco this wasn’t a terrible idea and the cabin could fit one more just fine, that it’d be good for them, for Harry, to have some company. Step four, food. He’d have to write the house elves for raw chicken and owl treats as soon as he got back.

Harry sighed and smiled a bit as he felt the little owl squirm against his chest. Movement was a good thing, he thought to himself.

“Just a little further and I’ll get you inside where it’s warm and we can find something to eat, little dipper.” Harry laughed to himself, having already decided this would have to be his name. The
little dipper. It was a constellation, and he was black. Draco couldn’t argue. Not with that. He was already family.

The answering hoot seemed agreeable enough, and Harry grinned as he stepped into Tenebris Hollow, hurrying up to their front door and stomping the extra snow off his shoes before pushing open the wooden door with his shoulder, his hands busy cradling the little owl in the front of his jacket.
“…to Malfoy. Hello. Earth to Malfoy.” Draco was startled out of his blank staring at his notes by Harry’s hand waving in front of his face.

“What?” He asked, feeling incredibly distracted and snappish. His throat felt scratchy from days of disuse.

“I asked if you wanted tea.” Harry asked seeming flustered, cautious, like he was approaching a dangerous animal. “I’ve only been calling your name for the last five minutes. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” He answered in a clipped tone. “And no, thank you.” He righted himself and began scratching notes without looking at Harry. He had been in a foul mood ever since he had cast his patronus and he had taken it out on Harry by being withdrawn, cold, and moody.

He was still in shock from seeing a great silver leathery winged horse staring back at him. It was a spell he never thought he was capable of accomplishing. His first feeling was of pride, it swelled in him like a rising tide of goodness. She was beautiful after all. Taller and regal. And he had created her.

Not only that, but he and Harry had matching patronuses. For the love of Salazar. The thought made him dizzy and caused his stomach to roil in waves of nausea. Replacing his pride with terror. Draco was practically screaming on the inside. His internal boggart had never been so happy. Ever since he saw their two thestrals standing next to one another in the dim light of the gorge with Harry’s warmth pressed against his back, Draco had been experiencing a low level of internalised panic that Harry couldn’t seem to untangle him from.

Of course, Harry didn’t know what this meant. The completely oblivious twit.

“Alright then.” Harry sighed, walking back to the kitchen. He had been trying to pull Draco out of his black-hole for days, to no avail. The stupid handsome git. Why was he so nice? It was infuriating.

The poor bastard didn’t know what Draco knew. Harry didn’t realize that the only people whose patronuses matched or changed in the way that Harry’s did were soul mates, or deeply in love. The thought made Draco want to peel his skin off and run screaming. How could what Draco felt be considered love? And how could Harry even have the potential to feel that way in return?

None of this made sense. He had the hots for Potter, that wasn’t love.

Right?

Harry had seemed so proud of Draco, so happy, so assured, so strong and solid. But the sad sod didn’t know what that meant. Didn’t know it meant he was apparently falling for a broken mess of a man who would never be able to fulfil his own needs, let alone Harry’s. Draco couldn’t be that person for Harry. He didn’t know how. The thought made his heart pound and adrenaline flood his veins. He had puked three times this week from sheer nerves.

Sitting, hunched over his research, he heard Harry moving around the cottage tending to his sodding owl. Draco refused to look up or engage at all. He had been giving Harry a wide berth
since the patronus incident because he couldn’t allow their closeness and obvious draw to one another come to anything. If he just kept his distance, resisted Harry’s easy presence, no matter how fucking good he looked or kind he was, even crooning over an injured owl, then Harry would eventually realize that there could never be anything between them and Draco would be able to breathe again.

Draco felt so terrified by what their patronuses meant, by what that meant about Harry’s feelings towards him. He was already filled with a sense of weighted dread by the memory he had used to produce the patronus. When Harry first prompted him to pull his happiest memory he immediately thought of one hundred different memories he had made in the last few months with Harry. He had instantly chastised himself for the foolishness of wanting to use one of those memories. Surely, he could think of something joyous on his one. Something without Harry.

So, he thought of flying. Which clearly didn’t work.

Then, he thought of graduating as a Healer. That was also a failure. And, Harry was right. Every single joyous memory he pulled from the depths of his mind was tainted in some way. Blemished by the war, by his parents, by his own stupidity and shame. He couldn’t find anything that filled him or kept his blood warm on the darkest of days like Harry said.

Until, that is, he thought of Harry himself. Before casting that third time, he allowed his mind to see the simple domesticity they had cultivated together, and before he knew it he was being flooded with all of the joy and struggle they had experienced in their time in the forest. It was shocking and overwhelming how visceral and emotive those memories were to him.

He had raised his wand and allowed the memory of Harry comforting him after his nightmare to rise to the surface. Filling his heart and his soul with a feeling of contented acceptance and security. Even if the circumstance wasn’t romantic, it held the profound feeling of being safe and loved. And, although that memory wasn’t particularly joyous, it was overwhelmingly positive. A testament to how far Draco had progressed in overcoming his fear of closeness, of letting others in. He had asked for comfort and received it, without judgement. After he let the memory fill him and warm him down to his very bones, the thestral flew easily from within him and out through his wand.

As soon as it appeared in front of him, his exuberance and joy melted into self deprecating shame. He felt like a sinking rock in water. He was fucked. So unequivocally fucked. How did he let this happen?

He shook himself. He couldn’t think about that now. He couldn’t stand to think about it any longer. He had been ruminating over the same terrifying thoughts for a week. He needed to focus. He needed to get back to work. He needed to get through this potion proof for his letter to the Department of Mysteries.

At least work was still safe. Calculated, controlled, and measured. Work was an existential crisis he could cope with. Not the burgeoning affection he held for someone who didn’t fucking know any better. He scanned the long list of ingredients and brewing instructions before reevaluating his word choice for the theory.

“…universal application for reversal of damage done by unforgivables and blood curses; namely the cruciatis, imperius, blood curdling curses…”

He nodded along with the phrasing and looked for places to edit.

“...theorised efficacy for reversal of psychic damage caused by dark magic…”
Yes, yes, he thought. That was all good. All in order.

His eyes lifted to look at the row of four bottled potions. Each containing a deep velvety liquid of royal purple. Each labeled with the specific ingredient it was testing. All of them were blood cleansing potions, but he had made them with either tail hair, mane hair, saliva, or blood. He was planning to send samples with his research to the Department of Mysteries, along with a few theory papers on other potions he thought he could make.

His final page of his dissertation were the other conundrums of the thestrals he was hoping to unravel with the help of the DoM. Such as, why they seemed so keen on Draco, specifically when he couldn’t get near a unicorn to save his life. Why the unicorn blood reacted so poorly to contact with Draco, but the thestral blood seem to have the opposite effect. And finally, how Draco seem to be able to create these efficacious potions when none of the research literature seemed to hold any information on the usage or efficacy of thestral ingredients to begin with.

Draco stretched and cracked his tense back, he knew he would be here with his paperwork for a while. Good, he thought sourly. He needed all of the distraction he could get.

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November 17th, 2008

It was the early hours of the morning, still dark outside, but the last of the birds that hadn’t yet migrated had begun to sing their chilly morning song. Draco moved quietly about the cottage, trying not to wake Harry, as he made himself tea and mentally prepared himself to finally stop being a complete twat to him. It wasn’t his fault, and they needed to maintain civility if these last few months weren’t going to be miserable.

And, he missed Harry. Missed their easy conversations, missed their closeness. It wasn’t Harry’s fault they had the same patronus.

Draco had an appointment booked with Beatrice in a few days time. He was going to actually leave the forest and go back out into the world outside Hogwarts and the forest for the first time since March. He felt nervous and apprehensive. And he still hadn’t discussed things with Harry, since he had been ignoring him, or being outright rude all week. He felt unaccountably uncertain about telling him, and he wasn’t really sure why. Probably because, in order to talk to him, he would have to apologize for being a complete berk.

He took his tea, crept over to his bench and sat down, pulling his research and letter to the Department of Mysteries towards him to study as he sipped his tea and waited for the sun to rise above the horizon. He needed to send his research off soon, but as with his uncertainty of sharing more of himself with Harry, so too was he uncertain of sharing his research with others.

He wanted to keep these pieces of himself to himself. To contain them, and hold them. Letting them out, to others, to the world, felt like it would leave him empty and exposed. Unsafe.

He sighed and dropped his head on the table, feeling a little overwhelmed and a bit lost. His inner boggart dancing to a familiar tune.

After a few deep breaths, Draco lifted his head and reached blearily across the desk to his corner of stationary to fish out a few post-it notes. He didn’t make them every day, and he only made them when Harry wasn’t around or sleeping, but he had kept up his homework, filling the inside of one of the kitchen cupboards and spilling into another. He was certain that Harry had seen them, though he never mentioned them.
Your needs are valid. He scratched onto a pink post-it.

Dishonesty helps no one. He scribbled onto a green one.

Your integrity allows others to see you as you are and not as you were. He wrote on a final blue square.

Feeling a little better, he got up and walked to the kitchen, his thick handmade socks muffling the sounds of his feet on the floor boards. As he stuck 2 of the post-its on the inside of the cabinet, which was now beginning to resemble some sort of inside out pinata, he heard the tell-tale signs of Harry stirring in his bunk.

Quickly folding and stowing the pink post-it in his pocket, he closed the cupboard and began to set about making breakfast. He silently hoped that talking to Harry would be easier over a full english and a large pot of tea.

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“So,” Harry began, chewing his toast thoughtfully, “you need to go see your therapist, but you want to tell her about me?” His expression was… concerned? offended? confused?

“No by name.” Draco corrected quickly, feeling so very flustered.

Harry had woken up as Draco was starting breakfast and offered to help. He probably expected to be shot down as he had been every time he offered to help Draco over the last week, and seemed elated when Draco accepted. Much to Draco’s dismay, and exhilaration, they ended up dancing around one another in the small kitchen the entire time.

Harry placing a gentle hand at Draco’s back when he had to scoot past with a plate. Draco gently nudging Harry with his elbow when he needed to reach over to the stove for the bacon. The dance went on and on, and each time they grazed hands or make unexpected eye contact, the bottom fell out of Draco’s stomach. He was already regretting being nice to Harry.

Draco was now grateful to be sitting down, but he felt that his grip on his cool mask of indifference was tenuous and strained.

“Okay.” Said Harry slowly. “I don’t quite get why you’re so nervous if all you want to do is talk to your therapist about having a flat-mate.” He looked speculatively at Draco. “Unless, I’m doing something horribly offensive that you haven’t told me? Is that why you’ve been so tetchy?”

Draco felt embarrassment and shame rising in his chest at the insinuation that it was Harry’s fault Draco had been a complete asskettle.

“No, no!” Draco said. “Nothing like that.” He sighed and slumped forward, running his hands through his too long fringe. “It’s just. She’s under the impression that I’ve been out here all these long months in near total isolation and she’s worried that that’s having a negative impact on me. And the things I need to discuss with her are the exact opposite of isolation, so I’ll have to tell her I haven’t been alone. And I just wanted to talk to you about it because this is supposed to be a your place of refuge as well and I didn’t think it was fair to out you, even if not by name, without discussing it with you first. Do you see?”

“So the things you need to discuss are specifically related to not living in isolation?” Harry asked, his tone falsely light.

“I suppose you could say that, yes.” Draco confirmed, reluctantly.
“So are you going to talk to your therapist about how my snoring keeps you up at night? Or how about how casting a patronus sunk you into a deep depression for a week?” He teased, but there was a tenseness in his face.

“Potter.” He said softly. “Things have arisen for me, as I feel they inevitably would with two people sharing close living quarters, and it’s not because of you. You’ve done nothing wrong. But, I have a lot of shit to work through and your presence has kind of expedited that process. So, really, it’s a good thing.” Draco tried to reassure.

Harry looked dour. “It’s a good thing that being around me makes you need to see your therapist?” his voice dripping with unamused disbelief.

“I feel like you’re missing the point here.” Draco sighed, feeling bad that Harry was feeling bad. “I feel like I am too.” Harry ceded, smiling awkwardly at Draco.

Draco took a deep breath. “Living with you has been really good for me.” He pushed it out before he lost his nerve. “Really good, actually.” He wasn’t looking at Harry but rather looking intensely at a crack in the kitchen table.

“And it’s also been… enlightening … about a lot of things.” He finally looked up to see Harry’s green eyes boring into him with that intensity that made his knees week and his throat scratchy. “And it’s these things that I need to discuss with my therapist. Not your snoring habits. And maybe the patronus.” He smiled weakly, trying to break the intensity of Harry’s gaze. “But I just wanted you to be okay with the fact that I have to out your presence to her.”

Harry didn’t answer right away, but his eyes softened as he studied Draco’s face with that same intensity. “Do what you need to do, Malfoy. Don’t feel bad about outing me.” he gave Draco a smile that could only be described as sweet, which made Draco want to flip the table and run.

“Are you going to tell me why exactly you’ve been so thoroughly displeased as of late? I still don’t understand why you were so mad about your patronus.” Harry was speaking softly and cautiously, as if Draco might lash out at any moment. Which, to be fair, wasn’t off the mark for his behavior of late. Draco cringed inwardly at himself.

Draco leaned back and crossed his arms, tipping his head back to the ceiling to look at the dried herbs dangling above him. How the fuck was he going to answer that? He couldn’t just outright tell Potter what that meant, that would be a disaster.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Harry said offhandedly, feigning disinterest, as he gave an almighty yawn and stretched his arms over his head, revealing a trail of dark hair down towards…

Draco could feel his face turning pink and warm and hoped Harry was too self involved in his basically erotic stretching at the kitchen table to notice Draco’s odd expression and unfortunate tinge.

Pointedly not looking at Harry he finally asked. “How much do you know about patronuses, Potter? Specifically those that change or those that match with someone else’s?” He was using his clinical voice again, but his insides told a different story.

Harry stopped his languid stretching to look carefully at Draco. “Are you mad our patronuses match?” His voice was even but he sounded… hurt.

He sighed heavily and raked his fingers through his hair with more force than was necessary. “No, Potter, I’m not mad they match.” He said without looking at him.
“Then what is it? Why have you been so pissed with me? What did I do? Because I would like to fix it so we can go back to enjoying one another’s company, if you don’t mind.” Harry asked, his voice was hard but his gaze was imploring.

Draco looked back at him, trying to figure out how to even start. “So, I take it you don’t know anything about patronuses that change.” Draco tried again.

Harry just looked at him with bewildered irritation clear on his face. “I mean,” he started, “I know Tonks’ patronus changed to match Lupin’s werewolf form.” He was waving his hand and looking around him as if the answer must be dangling in front of his face but he just couldn’t see it.

“Anything else?” Draco asked. He could feel it. They were right there.

“And the only time I’ve ever heard of matching patronuses was Snape’s and my mum’s. I mean my mum had a doe and my dad had a stag so I guess that’s also kind of matching. But, Snape had a doe just the same as my mum.” He was staring off out the kitchen window with a furrowed brow as if solving an intense mathematical equation in his mind.

“Mhmm.” Draco agreed. They were so close. Soon the penny would drop, and it would be out there in the space between them. The point of no return.

“Honestly, Draco, I thought it was because we were both touched by death and brought back against our will. I thought they were claiming us. I didn’t think it had anything to do with…”

Harry’s gaze idly found its way back to Draco’s and for a long moment he just stared confusedly into Draco’s eyes. The green questioning the silver. Draco could practically hear the cogs working in Harry’s mind as the pieces slid into place. The little owl on the other side of the cottage hooted softly in its sleep.

Harry’s look of pensive confusion changed into one of wide eyed bewilderment and dawning realisation as they continued to stare back at Draco, and Draco tried his damnedest not to panic and run.

After what felt like a searing eternity in the 9th layer of hell, Draco’s bravery and resolve broke. He stood abruptly and began clearing their plates.

“Are you going to be okay on your own for another whole day when I see Beatrice?” He croaked out. “Since I’ll be out in the real world I thought I would do some Christmas shopping and errand running.” Draco’s tone was one of false nonchalance and he avoided looking at Harry. He could feel his face was so, so red.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Harry said, his voice scratchy and filled with an equal measure of false normalcy. He wasn’t looking at Draco either, but Draco could see out of the corner of his eye that his face was equally as scarlet.

“Good. That’s settled then. I have to get back to my research.” He said before abandoning the plates at the sink and bounding off to bury himself in paperwork, pointedly not looking in Harry’s direction.

The silence and tension in the cottage could have been cut with a knife that evening.

November 21st, 2008
Harry and Draco had slipped back into the stiff politeness of their early weeks together at the Hollow. Neither wanting to address the the giant proverbial glowing thestral in the room. They didn’t acknowledge their conversation, or whatever epiphanies may or may not have happened as a result. Their conversations were short and impersonal, and they avoided eye contact like the other was a giant basilisk.

Finally, the day of Draco’s appointment with Beatrice arrived, and he bid Harry a curt farewell before disapparating to an alley around the corner from her office. He ran his fingers through his hair and realised he must look like a rogue forest dweller with his long fringe and scruffy face. Since he had an hour before his appointment he decided to pay his barber a quick visit.

His hair now significantly shorter, he strolled up the walk to Beatrice’s office and prepared himself for what he was sure to be one hell of an appointment.

Draco apparated back to the hollow just after dark, ladened with shopping bags for Christmas, some new yarn and knitting needles, and a few snacks they couldn’t procure from the house elves. He felt lighter after his appointment, but nervous about the conversation he was about to have. Beatrice reminded him that open and clear communications about emotions and feelings were an important skill, no matter how uncomfortable. Damn that woman, he thought, feeling so grateful to have her as a resource.

He could smell something delicious coming from the cottage as he walked up the steps and pushed open the door. He was met with the incredibly pleasant and disarming sight of Harry Potter wearing a floral print apron standing over a steaming pot, his hair looking ludicrous in a disheveled bun, as he turned, wooden spoon in hand, to greet Draco.

“Hi. Oh.” He said in surprise. “You cut your hair.”

“Yeah.” Draco said as he came in and dropped his bags by the table. The owl hooted at Draco and he shot it a small and affectionate smile. This was a bad idea, Draco thought, he should definitely leave and never come back.

“It looks nice.” Harry said, returning to his cooking after looking him up and down in a way that made Draco so very nervous.

“Thank you. It smells great in here.” Draco said, trying not to let on how awkward and freaked out he felt.

“Thanks, it’ll be ready soon.” He said turning to look back at Draco. He must have seen how pale Draco felt, or sensed his tension because he asked “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” Draco said out of habit. “I mean, no. Not really.” He sighed and came to slump in the kitchen chair. “We need to talk.”

Harry seemed simultaneously relieved and alarmed by the admission. “Yeah, okay.” He said. “Let me just finish this up.”

“Do you need some help?” Draco offered.

“Just grab the plates, please?” Harry asked.

After they settled down with huge plates of spaghetti and meatballs, Harry looked tentatively over at Draco and asked, “So, what did you want to talk about?” even though Draco was sure Harry
already knew.

“Well, as you know, I had therapy today.” Draco said, focusing on winding his pasta onto his fork with extreme intensity.

“Mhmm.” Harry said cautiously.

Draco seemed to steel himself. He couldn’t believe he was about to say this to Harry. Dear god, someone save him.

“…It appears. I mean. See, you know… oh god.” Draco brought his head down and laid it on the table next to his plate of food.

Harry didn’t say anything and Draco couldn’t decide if he was relieved for the space or desperate for Harry to break the silence.

With his head still on the table he mumbled “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“You can’t believe what’s happening?” Harry asked, sounding concerned.

Draco finally picked his face up off the table and looked at Harry. He knew he was beetroot red, he knew his hair probably looked a right mess, even with its new shortness, and he knew he had no hope of reclaiming his mask of cool collected Healer Malfoy. Vulnerability is okay, he reminded himself. You can trust Harry, just say it. Just say the words.

Harry looked expectantly at Draco with worried eyes and a creased brow.

“After a rather enlightening conversation with my therapist. It seems that I have… I’ve… Well.” He paused again, swallowing nervously, and unable to look away from those eyes. “Remember when I said that sometimes things inevitably come up when two people live in isolation together like this?”

Harry nodded, his expression of worry unchanging.

“Because we’ve been living in isolation. And because we’re both people in our own forms of recovery and we can identify with one another, and well, we’re both gay.” He said, his face feeling impossibly warmer.

“Well, it seems that I’ve developed… feelings.” He said, feeling horrified with himself. This was worse than the 9th layer of hell. “For you.” He added, redundantly.

Harry just looked completely shocked. “Is that why you’ve been completely unreasonable for days? Because you have… feelings for me?”

Draco nodded, wanting to light himself on fire. His boggart would never forget this day.

He finally looked away, not being able to stand the searing heat of Harry’s gaze. “And, I think that’s happened because of the intensity of our circumstance and forced proximity.”

“Forced proximity?” Harry echoed. “Is this really forced?”

“You know what I mean, Potter. It means we’re with each other 24/7 without outside influence and we’re entirely reliant on one another for all our social and emotional needs.” Draco finally looked back up to see that Harry’s gaze hadn’t left and was boring into him.

“And you think that means that these feelings we have aren’t valid?” Harry asked carefully,
cautiously.

Did Harry just say we? No, he couldn’t have.

“It means that it would be unhealthy to pursue them because this environment is unrealistic and cosseted. This isn’t real life. This is…” He threw his hands up in surrender, casting about for something to say to show Harry how unreal and unfair this was for both of them.

“…a fairy tale.” Harry finished for him, looking sad.

“Yes.” Draco said, feeling just as sad as Harry looked. “It’s a fairy tale. And you only just figured out you were gay, what, two months ago, and you’re only going on nine months sober, and I’m a wreck and incapable of being close with someone without constantly panicking. If we did anything about how we feel, it would be unfair to the both of us.”

Harry didn’t say anything, he just searched Draco’s face.

“You deserve someone who isn’t as broken as me, Harry. And I deserve not to be an experiment in sexuality.”

Harry nodded, looking defeated, his gaze finally falling down to the kitchen table.

“So, then, I wasn’t imagining all those times I thought you were checking me out?” Harry huffed, with a self deprecating smile, trying to inject a bit of humor into this thoroughly depressing conversation.

Draco could feel the heat rising in his face again, his palms sweaty, his heart aching, and his stomach swooping pleasantly. He could feel the pull between them, holding Harry’s gaze, his lips quirking into a smile of their own accord. “No, I suppose you didn’t imagine it.” Draco said softly.

In that moment, looking across their tiny table into Harry’s eyes he felt the overwhelming desire to retract everything he had just said and succumb to the relentless pull he felt. The tension between them was palpable and he could feel their magic reaching out to one another, desperate for contact, for relief. It was finally out in the open and they both knew how the other felt, and yet...

“We can’t.” Draco said quietly into the silence, in response to their magic twining around them, it was like his new mantra he was chanting inside his head to keep him on track. To keep him strong.

“You don’t have to be so afraid of this.” Harry offered back, almost whispering. “I wouldn’t ever do anything you’re not comfortable with. That’s not what my feelings for you are like. I can go slow.”

Oh dear god, Harry really did feel the same way.

“Can we just pretend this isn’t happening?” Draco asked, it was a plea, and it sounded desperate.

Harry must have picked up the desperation in his tone and he reached across the table towards Draco’s hand to console him and Draco felt a thrill of fear run through him at the thought of touching Harry. If Harry touched him, he wouldn’t be able to maintain his defenses, he wouldn’t be able to hold his resolve. It would be too much for his crumbling walls. He processed this all in a fraction of a second, before he could think to react and remove his hand from Harry’s reach. But when Harry’s hand finally met his and their skin brushed, Harry pulled his hand back with a startling yelp of pain.

“Ah, fuck!” Harry shouted, holding and rubbing his afflicted hand, and looking at Draco in
surprise. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Draco didn’t know what to say. He felt relieved Harry hadn’t touched him, but also terrible that the fact that he didn’t want to be touched was so obvious that his talisman reacted and shocked Harry for the first time since he had given it to him. “I’m sorry.” Draco said, feeling even worse now.

“Don’t be sorry.” Harry said, much louder now. “That’s why I gave it to you. If you don’t want to be touched then you shouldn’t be, and I’m sorry I tried to touch you without your permission. But, I’m really glad to see it works.” He gave such a sweet smile that Draco felt he might burst into tears. This was a nightmare. How could he be so happy for Draco, so happy that he had gotten shocked for trying to touch him.

“Like I said, I wouldn’t do anything you’re not comfortable with. And not just because of the talisman. If you don’t think our feelings are genuine or that they’re coerced by circumstance, then I understand. But, can we please still be friends? I value you too much to just ignore you for the foreseeable future. And, though you might think these romantic feelings aren’t valid, I think our friendship, at the very least, is.”

Harry’s face was full of that unwavering determination that was so characteristic of their Hogwarts days, of the years of struggle and the build up to the war. It made Draco’s heart hurt in a bittersweet way to see it, but relief flooded through him to hear that Harry still wanted to make their friendship to work.

“I’d like that.” Draco said with a soft smile, after a considerable silence, full of deliberation. Harry was right. They could be friends.

November 26, 2008

Draco had finally, finally put the finishing touches on his dissertation. Two days after their talk, and things were falling back into a more normal rhythm. Harry was a little more quiet than usual, and spent more time outside, but they were slowly melting back into their routine. The next day, Draco had felt so distracted by how Harry had looked at him across the table that he hadn’t realised he made a significant spelling error throughout his edits.

He had been on the edge of a nervous breakdown when Harry walked in and saw the horror etched on Draco’s pointy face. When he asked what the problem was and Draco told him that he had stupidly misspelled alchemical as alchemicle without thinking, Harry just smiled and began reading through every page of Draco’s dissertation and tapping the misspelled words to correct them. That beautiful bastard had saved him hours of panicking, and he was so grateful just to be able to just exist near him.

Now, he was binding his research, making copies and preparing his samples for transport to the DoM. He had wavered for nearly three days as to whether he should include his 5th potion and theory. It wasn’t as complete as the others, and it wasn’t in his speciality of blood curses, but he had a good feeling and hoped whoever tested his samples could give him some decent feedback for improvements. He had recommended a specific case study to the DoM if the potion proved to be safe and effective.

He took a deep breath, shaking the apprehension from his shoulders, and sliding his dissertation into the box with his potions. He carefully lettered the box for the DoM research division and walked it over to the corner of the kitchen, where he placed it into the magical cupboard for the house elves to deliver for him.
He stared at it, feeling terrified and elated, before finally closing the cupboard and sending this piece of himself out into the world.

“I’m really proud of you.” He heard Harry say softly from directly behind him. He hadn’t heard him approaching.

Draco righted himself and turned to face Harry. The anxiety of the months prior leaving his body, a huge weight lifted from his shoulders. The sight of Harry’s kind eyes and warm smile and obvious pride in Draco’s work overwhelmed him, and in a moment of weakness he reached out and pulled Harry towards him, his hands around his waist and his face buried in his shoulder.

Harry wrapped his arms around his shoulders and held him close, but not tight. Earnestly, but not possessively. He smelled like the forest and of clean air, of worn leather and wood shavings, and it felt so good. It was safe, and warm and everything he wanted, for months now. But it was dangerous territory. And this sense of calming closeness, this intimacy, was too scary to hold on to for too long.

“Thank you.” Draco whispered against Harry’s chest, before releasing him and walking out of the kitchen.
Harry had hiked all morning to find the right tree. A proper conifer. Tall enough to reach up into the rafters of their little home, thick at the base with plenty of space for tinsel and lights, and fragrant, like Christmas should be. Harry had always loved the smell of fir trees - the Dursleys had always had a fake plastic Christmas tree, that Harry of course was in charge of setting up, but never touching again. His first memory of a proper smelling Christmas had been his first winter holiday he stayed at Hogwarts, the infusion of cheer and joy and his first memories of what family felt like were all deeply soaked in the aroma of fir, and fire, and treacle tart.

He had trekked North, past the base of the mountain he had summited months ago, a place he routinely returned on afternoons he wanted to be alone. He had followed a frozen stream around to the North-East and came across a thick stand of fir trees on the shadowed slopes on the far side of the forest. He had brought an axe, because he wanted to do it by hand, as an homage to the tree. Cutting it down by magic felt too easy, and he relished in the sweat of the labour. Work he had become used to in his early days, when he had to chop all of their firewood by hand. His back was tight and his arms heavy with the exertion by the time the tree fell, but his reddened cheeks were accompanied by a smile, and the pride of finding the perfect tree for their Christmas together.

Harry vanished the tree to the snow covered clearing outside their cottage before apparating there himself, ignoring the butterflies that had appeared in his stomach at the idea that he wanted Draco to be impressed by the tree he had found. He wanted Draco to know he’d cut it down for them both, that he wanted Christmas to be special for them both. He wanted Draco to feel full of the same joy and cheer, to feel full of love.

Harry stopped himself in the middle of sawing away one of the lower branches of the tree in an effort to clean up a section of lower trunk and make space for presents beneath it. He wanted Draco to feel loved.

The thought made his chest feel tight and he sat back on his knees a moment. Was it normal? Was it normal to want your friends to feel loved? He wanted Ron and Hermione to feel loved. Was it the same? Ever since their talk where Draco had returned to therapy and let Harry know that whatever was going on between them was tainted by circumstance, not real, just a product of their isolation together, Harry had been avoiding thinking about it. He felt panicked when he looked at Draco now, as if he couldn’t trust his own feelings, his gnawing desires. Was he still gay, then? Was he still attracted to him? Was everything in the forest just a mirage?

He scrubbed his face in his hands, feeling overwhelmed. Defeated, even. He knew what he wanted. He did. He wanted Draco. It was painful how much he wanted him. Every second of the day, every stolen glance and soft sigh from his lips, every languid detail of him. He wanted serious Healer Draco, grimacing over his cauldron just as much as he wanted the Draco who knitted in bed and wore his own handmade mismatching wool socks. The Draco that read french bedtime stories to himself and loved to laugh as much as he loved to be kind. The Draco who had gardened in the summer months, who pepper their ceiling in hanging herbs and who had taught him the beauty of tending carefully cultivated life. The Draco who had planted a tree with him, who had held him. The Draco that had hugged him, had pulled him close, who had felt so perfect against him.

Harry’s tight chest gave way to a dull ache. Draco had to be wrong. This was real. It had to be real. It was too painful to be chance happenstance, too consuming.
It wasn’t just the cottage in the forest, and isolation and their searing vulnerability. It wasn’t just that Draco had saved him and Harry had kept him safe right back.

Harry closed his eyes, his jaw set tight. These feelings had been brewing for ages. It had always been Draco. The two of them had revolved around each other since their first meeting. Harry, bright and bold and fiery, and Draco, cold and dangerous like deep water, like you could drown in him.

They were the sun and the moon, opposing forces, pushing and pulling, but never taking their focus off one another.

The forest had given them the space to see that they were both cut from the same stone, made of the same earth, in need of the same things. They had pushed back against death, both of them, they had survived and they had reclaimed their lives. They had been reclaimed, in turn, by the thestrals. The forest had given Harry clarity, not confusion. Strength, not weakness. Draco was wrong, and Harry was sure. What he felt was real.

For now though, Harry realised sadly, he’d have to rein himself in. He’d give Draco his space. That painful shock he’d received was enough to remind him that he couldn’t be caught up in the fervour and forget that his autonomy and his sense of safety would always take precedence. He could wait. He could bide his time. He knew what they had was worth it.

Harry stood and levitated the tree, shrinking it and carrying it into the cabin easily, then restoring it to its original size, propped up with charms meant to hold until New Year’s. It took up nearly all the space they had, crowding the kitchen table and their beds, but it smelled incredible, and filled Harry with a sense of holiday cheer and the feeling that not all was lost. Draco needed time. He needed space. He needed the ability to decide for himself that what he had with Harry was okay, that it would be good. And Harry could take this time to show him that it would be. He wouldn’t rush him.

He passed the afternoon stringing up popcorn and bits of tinsel, transfiguring the tips of the branches into ornaments - little reminders of their time in the forest together - an otter, a little thestral foal, carrots from their garden, a little wiggentree. He spent the whole time narrating his thoughts to Little Dipper, who was happily napping on his perch in the corner by the fire, wing long since healed, but too content with his lodgings to be bothered with leaving the cottage hearth, especially during the daytime.

Harry was grinning like an idiot to himself, humming Christmas carols, by the time Draco finally came in from the cold, shaking off snow from his boots.

“This is lovely.” He said, and Harry could see he was trying hard to be kind. To be nice without being sweet. Soft, without being open.

“Mmm.” Harry agreed. “Come help me with the rest of the ornaments.”

Draco walked over and took stock of the little figures Harry had been transfiguring, his smile lighting up his whole face. He grabbed a branch and transformed the end into a little cauldron, bubbling and hiccuping steam. The next he made into a rather haughty and irritable looking unicorn. Harry laughed openly at this, looking down at the branch he was busy with. A little Welsh Green appeared, coiling around the little fir needles, tail whipping back and forth.

Draco looked over and smirked. He reached over and grabbed the branch next to the little dragon to transform the end to a little sleeping lion, yawning and stretching, occasionally snoring.
They laughed together and Harry felt the warmth of the man pooling inside him, as though his presence was enough to sustain him, to fuel him. It was the thing that would keep his heart beating in the darkest of nights.

The two of them bumped shoulders as they worked, not needing to say anything, but both happy in each other’s company.

Later that evening, Harry was folding up brown packaging paper around his present for Rose, giving Little Dipper a pep talk about how to deliver a package, having no idea if he understood or not, but trusting the little bird nonetheless. He’d sent him on a few test deliveries (to Draco while he was out and about in the forest, mostly, but a few to Hermione) and he’d done perfectly well so far. He seemed keen to repay Harry for his kindness, and the little black owl was tilting his head this way and that at the large and rather cumbersome package Harry was wrapping.

“Now Dipper, we’ve talked about this, but you need to fly straight to the Granger-Weasleys. No stopovers, no dilly dallying, no nonsense. This package must get there by Christmas.” The bird nibbled Harry’s thumb and forefinger cheekily, ruffling his feathers.

Harry sighed and smiled down at his gift. He was so pleased with how it had turned out. After one of their winter storms, Harry had gone outside to find the Wiggentree had lost one of its main branches, a nice and straight one that was too slim for carving figures, but he had held on to it anyway, storing it above the rafters to dry out a bit. One evening, he’d looked up to it, worrying over what he could possibly give to Rose for Christmas, and just knew he’d found the perfect solution.

His hands were sore from all of the frantic carving, but Harry had just finished the broomhandle in time. He’d added twigs from the same branch for the bristles, demanding Draco help him seek out the straightest, most perfect ones he could find.

Wiggentree wasn’t a proper wood for racing brooms and speciality flying, and the little broom only hovered slightly off the ground, but it would keep her safe, and that’s what mattered most. He added extra enchantments for balance and smooth motions, even some cushioning charms to help if she did ever fall, the wood being exceptional for holding spells - drinking his magic in easily.

He was proud of it, when he finished. It was a gift of love, and he knew that it would be a gift for both Ron and Hermione too, equal parts fun and safe. They’d be delighted. Harry was only a little envious he wouldn’t be there to see her putter around on it for the first time.

Harry scribbled a little note on parchment to accompany the package:

*For Rose, from our wiggentree. Merry Christmas. Love to you all.*

* - Harry

Harry rolled up the parchment and attached it to Little Dipper’s outstretched leg, along with bits of twine to hold up the rather cumbersome package. But the owl hooted happily and hopped to the window, taking off and supporting the child sized broom with no problem as he flew off into the night, headed South.

Harry realised too late that he had said ‘our’ and not ‘my’. He swore to himself, but smiled all the same. Hopefully, Hermione wouldn’t ask too many questions.

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*December 24, 2008*
“Hey Malfoy, you awake?” Harry whispered into the darkness. He had cast a tempus and it was 11:55 pm, Christmas eve. They had gone to sleep early, but Harry hadn’t been able to get comfortable. He felt full of feelings, full of things he wanted to discuss, full of jitters and he didn’t know exactly why.

“Mhm.” Came the soft reply below him. “Can’t sleep.”

“Me either.” Harry said, rolling to his side and hanging his head down over the edge of the bed, barely able to make out Draco’s features in the absolute dark of the cabin, lit only by the dying embers of an earlier fire.

“It’s nearly Christmas.” Harry said softly, watching Draco stretch in his mountain of blankets, imagining how warm and soft he must be beneath them. His skin pricked and he shook his head of the thoughts that threatened to cloud his already fragile judgement.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked suddenly, obviously picking up on Harry’s nervous energy.

“I’m… okay. I think. Just the holidays always are a bit hard for me. Are you alright?” Harry asked in return.

“Come down so we can talk.” Draco said, the quietest yet.

Harry’s heart jumped into his throat, and he shimmied out of his blankets and over the edge of the bed. Draco was already lifting up the edge of his comforter as an invitation, and Harry’s body burned in excitement, anticipation.

He crawled into the heat beneath the blankets, staying far to his edge of the bed, laying with his knees against Draco’s, the only parts of their bodies touching, both of them seeming overcome with sudden shyness in their proximity.

“Is this okay?” Harry asked, his heart pounding in his chest. He wanted so badly to reach out and touch him, to run his hands over those hidden parts of him, swathes of skin he had dreamed about for months. But, he lay still, distanced.

“You know, Harry, you can call me Draco.” Came the soft voice, a hint haughty, like he was still the same Slytherin who had taunted him all those years ago. Like the tension between them wasn’t more than a silly schoolyard rivalry.

“Draco.” Harry said, closing his eyes. His name in his mouth feeling so natural, so perfect. He had thought of him as Draco for months now, but the unspoken rule that they had to be Malfoy and Potter, not Draco and Harry had always kept him at bay. Had kept that distance between them. He laced his fingers together in his own hands, determined not to ruin this chance he had been given, the invitation to be so close, to share in the quiet warmth of Draco’s bed at midnight.

“The holidays are hard for me, too.” Draco said. “Hard to imagine anything happy ever happening around my father, to be honest. And, well, you know how things were after sixth year. And, since the war, it was never the same. I couldn’t really go back there.”

Harry nodded and sighed. “It must have been horrible, Draco. I’m sorry.” He wanted to reach out and hold him, to rub circles on his back and stroke his hair.

Draco shrugged, as if his words hadn’t carried any weight. “What was it like for you?”

“Before Hogwarts?” Harry snorted an indignant laugh. “The Dursleys kept me locked in the cupboard most of the day for Christmas, especially if they were having company over. At least I’d
eat, though, they’d always have leftovers.”

“Your guardians sound like they were a fucking nightmare.” Draco said, shuffling closer to Harry.

“Yeah, that’s one way of putting it. It got better once I got to Hogwarts. The Weasleys really took me in like one of their own. My first Christmas there I woke up to actual presents under a tree. For me. It was amazing.” Harry said, rolling onto his back, keeping his hands tucked behind his head, trying to avoid thinking about how close Draco was.

“I always had mountains of gifts for Christmas, but really they were elaborate bribes. Nothing was given to me without the expectation that I would owe them in return.” Draco sighed heavily, his hands twisting into the hem of Harry’s shirt.

“Is that why you get so scared of people being kind to you?” Harry said, his voice suddenly hoarse, his mind frantically trying to push away the fantastically sinful images of Draco’s hands on him. He forgot to breathe a few moments. Draco must have noticed, for his hands stilled at his side.

“Perhaps.” He finally said. “I have a hard time deciphering kindness and ulterior motives. And sometimes, I just assume everyone is acting with a means to an end in mind.”

“Do you think I’m using you?” Harry asked, suddenly serious, turning his head to look at Draco directly, bringing one hand down to meet the ones at his shirt hem, stilling his twisting hands in his.

Draco was quiet for a long while before finally saying, “No, I don’t.”

“I would never, Draco. I would never use you, not for anything. You’ve taught me too much about kindness. About humanity. About empathy, even. I owe you my life.”

Draco was still and quiet, and for a moment, Harry was worried he had said the wrong thing, pushed too far, crossed a line. Then, he felt Draco’s hand snake across his abdomen and Draco pulled him closer into an embrace, settling in at his side and breathing out heavily, as if the action had cost him something. As if it was an admission of his own.

Harry brought his other arm down and pulled Draco close against him, returning the tenderness of his actions, giving as much as he received.

“Merry Christmas, Draco.” Harry said softly, into his blonde hair.

“Merry Christmas, Harry.” He whispered back.

And, at last, they drifted into sleep.
December 25, 2008

It was dark and warm and he could hear the soft hooting of owls. He felt safe and held. He had been dreaming of about stacks of Christmas presents; boxes and boxes with ornate wrappings and lavish bows, and each one he opened was a memory of Harry in a crystal ornament that he hung up on a giant tree that Harry had chopped down for him. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what that meant.

This too, must be a dream, he thought realising that the cozy and intoxicatingly warm feeling wasn’t leaving him as he came into consciousness. Nothing in the waking world had ever made him feel this beautiful warmth.

Or, was that just Harry?

Harry who was laying on his back, with his arm around Draco who in turn had his head on Harry’s chest and was curled into his left side, his arm and leg slung over him. Draco who was becoming more and more aware in his awakening state of the erection he was pressing into Harry’s hip, and after shifting subtly, noticing the hardness pressing into the inside of the thigh that was draped over Harry.

Draco remembered the last time he was here, and his panicked flight, and took several soft steadying breaths, not wanting to wake Harry just yet. This was an exercise in just being. Sitting with the discomfort in favour of growing past one of his hangups.

Harry wouldn’t use him, Harry wouldn’t hurt him for his own gain. He was safe. He could just be.

They weren’t doing anything, this didn’t have to lead to anything, and Draco could just exist here for the time being and enjoy feeling Harry against him. Of his hardness on him.

He was fast forgetting all the reasons they discussed why they couldn’t pursue their feelings for one another. This just felt so unbelievably good.

In his half awake state he allowed his mind to peer into the corner of buried thoughts where he kept Harry and the possibility of more. A place he occluded heavily.

After their talk, he had actively resisted that corner of his mind, understanding it to behave like a pandora’s box of need and want. He knew that if he opened it and started thinking about it, it would be impossible to close again. But now, in this sleepy stupor, their bodies intertwined, and their waking selves nowhere to be seen, Draco didn’t have the strength or force of will to keep that box closed or his walls up.

He allowed himself to feel everything. Every desire, every need, every pull of magic that wrapped around them. The hope, the affection, the protectiveness, the pride he felt in Harry, all swirled in his chest as he breathed in air that smelled and tasted of Harry. Every one of his senses felt saturated in this man as he lay there, eyes barely open, just breathing him in. Why did it have to feel this good?

Just as he wondered how long he could lay here before the spell broke, Harry gave a deep guttural moan and arched his back into a little stretch in his sleep, pushing his groin up into Draco’s leg, before going lax again and dropping his hand back on Draco’s shoulder.
The sinful feeling of that movement making Draco impossibly harder. His erection could no longer be considered morning wood, this was one of pure and desperate arousal. He wanted Harry so bad it made the saliva pool in his mouth and his body was becoming uncomfortably warm, tingling sparks shooting down through his spine and out through his limbs. He fought the urge to fidget or press himself harder into Harry’s hip, lest he wake him and lose the moment.

He played with the idea of simply waking Harry up and just finally fucking kissing him. Oh dear god, he had been wanting to for days, weeks, years now, actually. What would happen then? Would they have sex? Could they get each other off? Would that ruin their friendship? Would Draco panic?

Draco allowed himself the time he had, nearly laying on top of Harry, to just imagine what it would be like. Something he had never really comfortably done since the war. Sex always felt overwhelming and scary, even if he wanted the closeness quite desperately, and he tried to be comfortable with the idea of actually being physical with someone.

Much to his surprise, the usual swell of rising panic at the thought of being touched, didn’t come. That was a first, Draco thought. He had always thought it was a panic he would have to force himself to get through in order to be close with someone. He never thought that, if he found the right person, there wouldn’t be a panic to fight off.

…The right person, Draco thought, as an image of their patronuses popped into his mind, and he smiled against Harry’s chest. He was such a berk. Of course Harry thought it was because they were touched by death, and maybe he was right, maybe they weren’t soulmates, maybe they weren’t in love. Maybe Draco had outed himself for no fucking reason. But, hearing the admission from Harry that he felt the same way had elated him.

And terrified him.

The sobering thought of Harry’s very new sexuality and sobriety and their isolation washed over him and he took a deep breath, finally reining himself in. He couldn’t do this. Not because he was afraid of being touched, but because it wasn’t fair to either of them. He allowed Harry’s warmth and smell to saturated him for one last moment, savouring every second of it, committing it to memory to pack away into that corner of his mind, before gently rolling off of Harry and climbing out of the bed.

He would go have a long hot bath, and wank like a teenager, before facing Christmas with a man he desperately didn’t want to want.

Draco apparated to the gates of Malfoy Manor. It had been nearly a year since he had been back, but the span of time did nothing to dull to the sharp shock of memories flooding through him at the sight of those old black wrought iron gates.

He gripped his basket of gifts harder. His knuckles white.

He already wished he was back at Tenebris Hollow with Harry. They had had such a beautifully cozy morning together. After waking up next to him, and not panicking, Draco had felt more confident in himself and oddly more comfortable with his attraction to Harry. It didn’t need to be so scary, it didn’t need to feel like an out of control beast. They could coexist with their feelings and be okay.

But now he was here, at the Manor. This cesspool of dark magic and even darker history. He was
about to partake in ‘Christmas Cheer’ with his mother, and try not to think about how people were
eaten on the dining room table. About the Christmas they spent with Greyback and Lestrange. He
shuddered, struggling to repress the memory, and thought about how he could at least visit Snape’s
second portrait, the one that was made just for his godson, and update him on the DoM.

His mother had greeted him at the front door, glass of wine in hand, and walked with him to the
drawing room where they would spend their Christmas brunch. It was just the two of them, and
Draco felt more awkward than he thought the situation warranted. He had given his mother the
basket of gifts and she looked through them with an expression of polite interest, that Draco could
see through in a second.

He had made her a knitted shawl with wool that Luna had spun for him and that he had dyed with
woad he picked from his and Harry’s garden. He was rather proud of it. It was a gorgeous deep
blue, and the lace weight of the yarn meant it had taken him nearly six weeks to finish. It was a
bloody fabulous work of art and she just set it aside with a nod and continued to unpack the basket.

“Vegetables?” She asked incredulously, her polite mask slipping in confusion and maybe offense.

“I grew them, over the summer. I have a whole stasis cupboard full of what I grew in the garden.
Carrots, potatoes, there’s a cabbage in there, and a whole mess of broad beans. They’re quite
delicious, I found a packet of ancient heirloom seeds and I grew enough food to feed an army in the
garden.” Draco felt pride swelling in him like a balloon, buoying him in the face of Narcissa’s
calloused disdain for something Draco gave her which cost him his physical exertion. He knew she
thought it was unbefitting of him to make and do with his hands, and Draco felt a flash of anger at
her arrogance.

Honestly, how did he stand a chance to be a kind child with this woman raising him?

“Lovely, dear, thank you.” She said without looking at him. After an awkward pause in which
Draco didn’t respond, she sighed heavily and finally looked at him to see what must have been
very obvious annoyance and probably hurt etched into his face. Realising her mistake she leaned
over to grab the shawl and unfolded it to study it closer.

“You made this, you said?” she asked, her voice sounding more curious than it had when she first
saw the gift.

“Yes. Luna spins wool, so she sent me the yarn, and I dyed it with herbs Neville recommended.
And then I designed and knit the pattern. It’s peacock feathers, see?” He said reaching over to lay
the shawl flat across his mother’s lap. He had thought he was being rather cleverly amusing to
make her a shawl of knit peacock feathers. He thought it suited her.

Her face softened and she looked up at him with a real genuine smile, small though it was. He
relaxed a little, and was glad he wouldn’t have to steal it back to give to someone who would
actually appreciate it. “Its beautiful Draco, thank you.” She finally said.

“You’re welcome.”

His mother had given him a book entitled Rites of a Pureblood Heir. No need to speculate the
implication there, he thought.

“A grandchild, Draco, that’s all I’m asking for.” She said, sipping her second glass of wine, as if
what she was asking for could be picked up on Diagon Alley.

“Mother, you know I’m gay. Why are we doing this again?” He snapped at her, to which she
completely ignored and kept talking on as if nothing was said.

After 30 minutes of stilted small talk in which Draco spent most of the time defending his life choices in the face of a lecture on pureblood duties, he had excused himself to see his godfather’s portrait to update him on the DoM. It had been a fruitful conversation with much gossip and speculation about the Golden Git.

“Apparently,” Severus had said, “they’ve confirmed contact from Potter, but still, no one knows where he’s gone or what he’s doing.” He eyed Draco closely. “They’re trying very hard to get the Prophet to stop running stories and speculations, so McGonagall says.”

“Mmm.” Draco had hummed in feigned interest. He could not escape Severus’s knowing eyes fast enough. After updating him with as much work related detail as he could, he fled his childhood wing, but not before spotting and sequestering two brooms, to find his mother half way through a second bottle of wine.

Oh good. This should be fun, he thought, setting the brooms down next to his basket. He knew Christmas was going to be exhausting but he didn’t realize it would be this onerous. His mother was tolerable when she wasn’t drinking, but her and a bottle of chablis were an entirely different monster.

“You know, Draco dear, it’s awfully unbecoming that I can’t seem to get you to visit.” She said, her eyes like daggers, her voice like ice, and her words too sweet sounding. “It’s almost as if you don’t want to see me.”

“Mother, you know I’ve been busy with research.” he sighed. Couldn’t they get through one visit without sniping. Couldn’t she just enjoy him while she could?

“Yes, too busy to grace the woman who raised you with your presence.” She smiled a cold, false smile.

Draco didn’t have the energy to smile an equally fake smile back at her. He just looked back into her eyes. A battle of wills. She wanted Draco to apologise to her for being absent, for taking the time he needed for himself, for avoiding this hell hole. He wasn’t going to.

Gone were the days where she could wrest false promises and apologies from his lips. Gone were the days where he felt bad that she lived alone in this mausoleum of torture. She made her choices, and they were not Draco’s.

“Yes, I am too busy.” Draco said, his gaze unwavering, his voice even.

Narcissa’s cheeks tinged pink in anger, and he saw her eyes darken slightly as she readied a verbal assault, fake smile unwavering.

“I didn’t raise you to turn your back on family, Draco.” She said, her words enunciated sharply to wound as well as to fight past the chablis in her system.

“You didn’t raise me to do much more than be a spoiled brat, actually.” Draco retorted. “I can’t tell you how hard I’ve worked to undo the damage you two did, to be a decent human.” He had never spoken to his mother like this, and he didn’t realize he had so much venom in his system. All the unsaid things, spilling out.

“We gave you everything!” she shouted, her smile gone, the audacity of his words shocking her out of her poise. “Everything! You selfish and ungrateful!”
“Oh? Everything?” He asked cutting her off, voice steely and dripping with cruel sarcasm. He knew she was drunk and that he shouldn’t rise to the bait, but he was so, so very angry.

“Are you including the deep well of psychological issues in ‘everything’? Does this ‘everything’ include my years of therapy trying to get over the gas-lighting joke that was my childhood? Hmm? How about the suicide attempt that you ignored? What about the fact that I was raped, oh, I don’t know, like,” He threw his hands out, gesticulating wildly, “dozens of times, some of which happened, in this very room? Is that part of the ‘everything’ you and Lucius gave me? Because, excuse me for my lack of gratitude.” He spat out, feeling gratified by the look of shock written across his mother’s face, as if she had been slapped.

He was standing now and striding over to grab his basket and broom sticks, “But you could have fucking kept all of it.” and he marched out of the room without a backward glance.

Draco apparated just outside the protective enchantments of the cottage and stood there clutching his brooms and basket, with his eyes closed, trying to steady the flood of rage coursing through him.

It felt so good to tell his mother off like that. Years of pent up feelings. Her stricken face flitted across his mind’s eye and the slight guilt he felt was nothing in the face of the cathartic release of tension from his body.

He opened his eyes to the sound of the front door opening and Harry striding out towards him, whisk in hand, floral apron on, and what looked like dusting sugar on his face, a concerned furrow to his brow.

“Draco?” He asked, “I heard the apparition, but didn’t think you’d be back so soon, are you okay?”

“No, I am not okay.” He said, trying not to take his anger out on Harry. He was so bloody handsome with sugar on his face and that stupid apron, and he was so fucking nice.

“Come inside, yeah?” He said, reaching out to take the basket from Draco and indicating with his head back towards the cabin. They crunched over the snow on the path, between the frozen dead beds of their garden and back inside. Draco dropped the broom sticks by the door and looked to see what appeared to be a confectioner’s workshop in the kitchen.

“What are you doing in here?” Draco asked, curiosity maligning his anger.

“Oh, well. I know you said you didn’t want to exchange gifts, but I thought I’d make you marshmallows for cocoa tonight.” He smiled back at Draco who felt his stomach flip and he couldn’t stop the smile spreading on his face.

“Can I help?” Draco asked, shucking off his coat and kicking off his boots.

“No, you cannot, because this is a delicate operation that I barely have control over.” Harry laughed. “But you can tell me about how your short Christmas visit was with your mum. I thought you’d be there for hours yet.” Harry was pouring what looked like molten hot syrup into a bowl of liquid with a charmed whisk mixing it furiously into a white foam.

“Is that mallow root?” Draco asked picking up the herb and inspecting it. There were herbs on the counter, pots of honey, packets of gelatin, pans dusted with confectioner sugar, jars of fragrant vanilla, herbal infusions, bowls of whipped egg whites, it was a chaotic mess, and Harry looked
like he was in his domestic element. Draco felt his heart tighten in his chest.

“Yeah.” Harry said, concentrating on pouring the mysterious ingredients into one another while they whisked together. I asked the house elves for the recipe and they sent all these ingredients. I think it’s a very old recipes, actually. I don’t think marshmallows from the shop are made with mallow root and honey anymore.” He chuckled.

Draco grinned. “I don’t know much about marshmallows if I’m honest. Not something I have a lot of experience with other than they’re delicious burnt over a fire.”

“They’re wait til you have them in some of my famous cocoa.” Harry said, shooting Draco a playful smirk.

The look shot right through Draco in the most pleasurable way “Famous is it?” Draco teased, realising how easy this was, how natural it felt.

“Just you wait.” Harry said, slowly adding whipped egg-whites to the mixture now. The strong smell of vanilla filling the air.

Draco just smiled at Harry’s profile and took advantage of the opportunity to look at him while he worked.

“So, tell me about your mum.” Harry said, turning to catch Draco staring, and blushing slightly.

Draco groaned and slumped into his seat at the table. “Where to begin.” He started, ignoring his own flushing skin, before launching into a dramatic tirade about his short but eventful visit.

They passed a few hours chatting pleasantly. Harry said the marshmallows needed about 6 hours to set before they could eat them so it would be ready for their evening cocoa. The house elves had sent over replenishing plates of food from the Hogwarts Christmas feast as a gift, and they gorged themselves on the comfort of it.

When evening finally fell, they settled down on the skin rug in front of the fire in their pajamas, wrapped in blankets, mugs of cocoa in their hands, and a plate of marshmallows between them.

Harry had said the secret to his cocoa was cream, honey, and cardamom. He was right, it was the best fucking cocoa Draco had ever had, and the marshmallows were divine.

“So,” Draco said at a lull in their conversation, feeling a little nervous, “I know we said we weren’t going to do gifts-”

“You did not, you sneaky bastard.” Harry cut him off, looking offended.

“But,” Draco continued, “since you gave me that lovely talisman.” He said without looking at Harry. “I thought it would be only fair if I made you something as well.” He flicked his wand at the Christmas tree, and a hidden package came zooming out towards Harry and into his lap before he could protest further. “This way we’re even.” Draco finished.

“Even, huh?” Harry said, clearly unable to stop the smile on his face. The parcel was small and lumpy, wrapped in parchment and tied with yarn. It looked as if it were wrapped by child, and Draco felt he should have asked the elves to wrap it for him instead.

Harry plucked the note off the lopsided bow and read it, his eyes going soft, his smile becoming shy and sweet. Draco blushed just as he had done when he wrote the note.
Harry,

To keep you warm on your darkest of nights.

- Draco

Harry carefully unwrapped the gift and Draco had to resist the urge to tell him to get a move on already. His nerves felt raw and exposed.

Finally removing the parchment wrapping, the knitted items fell into Harry’s lap and he stared at them for a long while before looking up.

“They’re thestrals.” He said softly.

“Well spotted.” Draco said trying for haughty, but his voice came out deeper than he meant it to.

Draco had knit Harry a purple and grey hat with matching mittens and a scarf, all with thestrals knit into the patterns.

Harry rolled his eyes affectionately before saying with wonder “I can feel your magic.”

“Mmm.” Draco agreed, not quite trusting himself to speak just yet.

“I placed a warming charm on them, and some protective magic as well.” He said finally after Harry pulled the hat over his head and slipped the gloves on. He looked like an adorable, oversized child.

“When did you make these? I never saw you working on them. I never even saw you dye these colours.” He said looking at Draco in amazement, like he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“I’m a Slytherin Harry, we have our ways.” Draco smiled.

“You certainly do.” He said, and the searing look he sent Draco ran through him like fiendfyre.

“Anyways.” Draco looked away quickly before he did something stupid, playing with the rim of his mug, his voice croaking. “Thank you for the talisman.”

“Thank you for the thestrals.” Harry said.

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December 31, 2008

In the days from Christmas to New Years Draco found himself less and less capable of resisting the inexplicable pull towards Harry. Their days were lazy. Draco wasn’t working on his research, and Harry didn’t have anything to do around the hollow in the cold so they spent much of their time laying around reading, talking, or in Draco’s case, knitting.

It was the closest Draco had ever felt to Harry, and he found himself looking for excuses to bump against him, touch his arm, or graze his shoulder. He would have felt bad about crumbling resolve but it seemed Harry had the same ideas. It was nearing twilight and Draco was trying to teach Harry how to say a few sentences in French, which Harry was not grasping, when they were distracted by Neville’s owl at the window.

Draco jumped up to retrieve the letter in good spirits. He had sent Neville a pair of moss green socks with a leaf pattern for Christmas, along with several unidentified seeds from the old closet.
Some of them were labeled with very ominous warnings such as “Unforgivable Beetroot” or “Blood Letting Bean” and thought Neville would enjoy them immensely.

He unfurled the letter as Harry set about making them tea.

Draco,

Thanks so much for your gift. The moss socks were amazing. Your skills are really improving, you’re a right old lady now. ha ha.

And the seeds were fascinating, what a special gift, thank you. I’ll let you know what comes of them.

You’ll never believe what happened over Christmas. I was approached by the Department of Mysteries (again) and they asked if they could test a new potion on my parents meant for psychological damage. And you know, I always agree to whatever they come up with. They thought there was real promise.

And, well, whatever they gave them made some sort of an impact because, over Christmas when I went to visit, my mum recognized me and said my name. She hasn’t ever been able to say my name before. It was incredible. This is the first time I’ve had hope that someday they might be okay. Just thought you’d like to hear.

Anyways, hope you’re having a good Christmas. If you get lonely, come for coffee.

Love,
- Neville

Draco’s tears dropped onto the parchment in his hands that shook slightly as he read and reread the letter. The DoM had tested his potion and concluded that it was safe for patient use. They used his suggested case study of Neville’s parents. It had made a positive impact. His research and months of work hadn’t been wasted. It had helped two people that had been harmed by Death Eaters. By Bellatrix. And Lestrange.

He felt Harry’s hand on his shoulder and he turned a watery smile to him as he handed over the parchment, not trusting his voice to explain.

After Harry was finished he looked back at Draco with a huge beaming smile. “This was your potion, your research, wasn’t it? You did this?”

Draco wiped the tears from his face and nodded, trying to regain control of himself. He felt like he was exploding with a sense of pride he had never known. He thought he had been proud when he became a Healer, when he started therapy, hell he thought he had been proud when he could cohabitate with another human. None of that compared to what he was feeling now. It overwhelmed him.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Harry said, jostling his shoulder, coaxing a shy smile from Draco who was lost in his own thoughts. “Does Neville know this was you?”

“Not yet.” Draco finally said. “I didn’t want to get his hopes up. I’ll tell him after I hear back from the DoM.”

Harry grabbed Draco’s hand and pulled him into a hug that Draco melted into, and they swayed slightly on the spot.
“What would you like to do to celebrate?” Harry asked quietly in Draco’s ear, and he was sure Harry didn’t miss the way Draco shivered in response.

“Let’s go flying.” He said, voice low, before he could say what he really wanted to do.

Harry pulled back, a huge smile on his face, and a mischievous glint in his eye.

After a pause of excited anticipation, in which they grinned slyly at one another, they moved at the same time. They lunged across the cottage, scrabbling for boots, jackets, and mittens. They were laughing and shoving each other, shouting inane threats and jeers.

“I bet I can get in the air before you!” Draco shouted, tripping Harry who was pulling a hoodie over his head and didn’t see it coming.

“Ouf!” He grunted. “Like hell you can!” Harry yelled from the floor, reaching for and throwing one of Draco’s boots across the cottage as scrambled to his feet in search for his own shoes.

Draco squawked in indignation as he dove for his boot. He frantically laced them up as Harry was donning his last layers.

Draco shoved past Harry, who had been just about to bound for the door himself, knocking him over onto Draco’s bunk. Draco stole his advantage and bolted for his broom.

“You cheating berk!” Harry shouted, righting himself, soon in hot pursuit at Draco’s heels.

As Draco cleared the steps, laughing wildly, and made to jump on his broom in the yard, but Harry lunged forward knocking Draco to the ground and launched himself into the air first, cackling madly.

“Dirty git!” Draco yelled after him, pushing off hard and tearing through the stinging air after Harry.

The two of them tore after one another, chasing and being chased, flying higher and higher, looping, diving, showing off, and laughing.

Draco charmed a pinecone to fly through the air for a very non-regulation compliant seeker’s game. They both cheated gratuitously, each more interested in teasing and out flying the other than in catching the pinecone. They kept challenging one another to more and more ridiculous feats of flying and tricks.

After nearly three hours, they were frozen to the bone, exhausted, and sweat drenched. The dark night had long since consumed them and they landed back at the cottage under a blanket of stars, panting heavily and laughing.

“That was amazing.” Harry huffed, looking thoroughly disheveled and brimming with happiness that he directed at Draco.

“I completely agree, but I’m freezing. Can you make more of your cocoa? I need a quick wash.” Draco said, following Harry up the steps.

After they each respectively washed and changed into pajamas they wordlessly migrated to Draco’s bed with cocoa in hand. They sat cross legged, facing one another, a roaring fire on the other side of the cottage heating their small space. They talked about flying and quidditch, about Hogwarts and their best memories of the place.
They eventually finished their cocoa and ended up laying down on their sides, under the blankets and facing one another, their knees touching.

Harry cast a *tempus* above them. 11:30pm.

“What do you want for the new year, Draco?” He asked, his face looked sleepy but content, soft and open.

“I want to make sure I’m happy where I am and doing what I’m doing. I love being a Healer and helping people, but St. Mungo’s will never respect me. I’ll always be struggling beneath people. This year of research on my own has shown me I’m capable of so much. I want to keep experimenting, I want to find new ways to heal others. Particularly those hurt by the war.”

Harry nodded, reaching between them to offer his hand, which Draco met halfway and repressed a shiver as their fingers intertwined. Harry’s hands were strong and warm and he could feel some of the calluses and blisters from all the hard work he did around the Hollow. God, why did they keep doing this?

“And you?” Draco asked, voice quieter. Trying to pretend like it was absolutely normal that they were laying in bed together, holding hands.

Harry took a deep breath, sighing it out slowly. “I just want to stay sober. I don’t know what that will take, or what I’ll have to change, or where I’ll even be living.” He looked down at their hands between them, under the thick duvet. “I try not to think too much about it, honestly. I’m scared I won’t do well back out in the real world.”

Draco hummed in thought. “Are you going to stay with the aurors?” He asked.

Harry groaned. “If they haven’t fired me for just disappearing for an entire year with no explanation whatsoever, they’re all idiots anyway. I mean, I know I’m the saviour and everything, but even that seems a bit excessive.”

“That still doesn’t really answer the question, Harry.” He pointed out. “You have to make the choice.”

“It’s not good for me.” Harry said softly, looking back up to meet Draco’s gaze. “The stress, the constant fear of dark magic, always feeling like I’m on a hunt that never ends. That there’s danger everywhere. I don’t want to live like that. I want to be happy.”

“That seems like a good first step.” Draco said, idly rubbing his thumb over the scars on the back of Harry’s hand. “What do you think you’d want to do instead?” He wondered if anyone had ever asked Harry about what he really wanted to do with his life. If anyone had ever given him the opportunity to think of himself as anything other than an auror.

“Do you promise not to laugh if I tell you? I’ve been thinking about it for weeks. Ever since your patronus. But… I can’t tell if it’s a stupid idea or not.” Harry scrunched up his face, obviously uncomfortable with the idea that he was about to put himself out there.

Draco cringed internally at the thought of how he had acted that day. But he didn’t want to let on to Harry. “Of course I won’t laugh. Don’t you trust me?”

Harry smiled. “I want to teach.” He was watching Draco’s face for a reaction, green eyes clear even in the soft light of the fire. “That day, with you, it brought me back to some of my best memories. Of teaching others how to fight for themselves. How to access their magic. How to cast, almost without thinking. It always filled me with so much pride to see others master something I
had explained to them. I felt useful and god, I used to have so much fun.”

“You’re a brilliant teacher, why would I have laughed?” Draco asked incredulously. Harry really did have a talent for teaching, it was Draco as a student that had been their problem.

“You think so? Really?” Harry’s smile was genuine and his face radiant with the compliment. “I never thought I’d live to see the day Draco Malfoy said I was brilliant at something.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry and shook his head. “Don’t get too cocky, now.”

Harry, still smiling, leaned in close to Draco, dropping his voice to near a whisper. “You know, this is exactly how I wanted to ring in the New Year. With you. Like this.”

Draco’s stomach was filled with a nervous fluttering sensation, and he could feel the heat in his face rising. Good thing it was so dark.

“You know they say what you’re doing at midnight on the New Year is how you’ll spend the rest of the year.” Harry said, voice still soft and low, his eyes now searching Draco’s. He looked nervous suddenly, tentative. Like he was asking something, without asking.

“Are you asking me if things are going to be like this when we leave the forest in February?” Draco felt suddenly serious, feeling the weight of the unsaid words.

“I want them to be.” Harry licked his lips nervously, and Draco’s mouth was suddenly equally dry.

“I know you think this is just us in isolation, that I’ll be someone else once we leave. But, Draco, this is me. This is who I’ve always wanted to be. It’s with you I feel at home. I know who you are. I know what’s between us. I can feel it, and I can wait until you’re ready.” Harry was so close to him now, their noses nearly touching, Harry’s hand reaching up to brush the soft blonde hair from Draco’s face.

Draco felt his resolve crumbling around him. His defenses were gone. He could feel Harry’s breath on his lips and feel the weight of his hand in his hair and on his face, and he didn’t think he could stop this from happening. He didn’t want to stop it. He reached his hand out to touch Harry’s chest.

“Tell me you don’t want this. Tell me you don’t feel what I feel.” Harry said the words quickly, his eyes never leaving Draco’s. “Tell me this is too much, and I’ll stop.”

Draco looked back into Harry’s face, he could feel his heartbeat under his hand, and smell the safe familiar smell of him. He knew he couldn’t deny what Harry was saying, knew he was right. He could feel it, it was real. This wasn’t their isolation, this wasn’t an experiment. But was he ready for this? Could he take the leap? He studied Harry’s face, who looked back at him intently, waiting patiently for a response from Draco, and he felt a sweeping sense of safety and affection. Draco braced himself for Harry’s reaction to what he was about to say.

“I’m not ready.” He whispered, barely audibly, his eyes not leaving Harry’s, their mouths so close together.

Instead of the look of disappointment he expected to see, Harry’s face broke into a huge smile. Draco could tell that Harry realised he wasn’t being rejected, his feelings weren’t being denied, and Draco felt relief wash through him.

He knew that Harry wouldn’t begrudge him for not being ready, knew that his acceptance and admission of their feelings could be enough for right now. His smile was victorious and full of love.
Draco’s heart felt fit to burst when Harry didn’t close the gap to kiss Draco on the lips, but instead reached out to pull him into a soft embrace and whispered into his hair, “You can take as long as you need, I’m not going anywhere.” before placing a gentle kiss to the top of his head and saying “Happy New Year, Draco.”
It was the fifteenth evening in a row that they had fallen in bed together at the end of the day. Harry had gotten so used to making their evening cup of tea, sitting with Draco a bit, talking idly, flirting even, before Draco would smile shyly and pull Harry down into the nest of covers with him, sometimes more urgent than others. It was routine, now, but no less exciting and enticing every time it happened.

They had not much to do during the day, the snow piling high up against the exposed stone walls, the wind whipping around the Hollow. No research to be done, no garden to be tended, no chores to prepare for the months ahead. Harry and Draco passed the time recounting stories of the months passed, Harry attempting to read snippets of the French erotica they found, Draco creating more and more elaborate meals. Their time together was full of tenderness, of care, of the joy of each other’s company.

That, and Harry was constantly stealing time away for baths or other solitary moments to address the maddening sexual frustration - he’d slipped into a comfortable twice a day routine. He’d make sure he had just orgasmed before crawling into bed at night, usually with a bath. And, in the morning when they finally came to terms with getting up and making breakfast, Harry would take an extra long time in the loo, brushing his teeth, getting ready, frantically pulling at his cock, sometimes Draco’s name falling from his parted lips, a silencing charm long since mandatory in his ritual ablutions.

And it was always Draco he thought of. He thought of him on his knees, sucking Harry’s cock, his blonde hair falling over his eyes as he licked long stripes up from the base to the tip. He thought of the particularly devious dream he had had on New Year's eve, one where he had been rutting up against Draco under the covers while Draco begged Harry to let him fuck him. He’d woken in time, but he'd nearly come in bed, Draco fast asleep against him, Harry’s chest pulling in deep breaths of air as his cock strained against his boxers, slick with precum. He had shuffled out of bed, slowly, carefully, worried about waking Draco, but desperate for release. He’d snuck to the little bathroom, cast his charms, and had the most intense wank of his life so far. He’d nearly fingered himself, the gentle external rubbing of his prostate just not satisfying his fantastic urges. He had wanted to, imagining Draco sliding into him, but he’d come too quickly, and he’d been overcome with embarrassment, shyness, even hints of shame once his breathing had settled and his leg, the one he had put up on the edge of the tub, had stopped shaking.

In the moments he wasn’t drowning in rampant desire and holding fast to his self control, Harry couldn’t help the oft distracting thought that they would soon be leaving. That their time alone together was coming to a close. That he would be separated from Draco. That his nights would be spent alone. That his days would be filled with others, with outsiders, with people who wouldn’t understand him. Well, the new him.

The Harry who wasn’t interested in drinking or couldn’t go to pub nights anymore. The Harry who shied away from honey on dark days, and who sometimes had to pause and stretch his shoulders, even now, when something would settle on his deeper wounds. The Harry who wouldn’t take sleeping draughts or who would feel uncomfortable talking to Healers ever again about his medical history. The Harry who had fought his way back from a different battle. One no one had bothered to see. One that was somehow so much crueler and more unfair than the first. One that was even lonelier. A battle that had been fought on the many nooks and exposed pieces of his own body.
The Harry who didn’t want to be left alone too long.

The Harry who was gay.

Harry was worried about introducing this new self to his friends again. He didn’t think Ron and Hermione wouldn’t understand - In all Harry’s letters to Hermione these past few months, she hadn’t pried, she’d let him just be him, let him give what he could and providing him with nothing but love and comfort, of a sense of connection to his family.

Harry sighed deeply, pulling Draco closer onto his chest. He wanted to feel his weight on him. To feel grounded. He wanted touch, skin on skin, to feel his breaths and his heart and all the things that soothed him when his thoughts started to congeal in the parts of his brain that craved oblivion.

Draco sat up a bit and looked down at Harry, an eyebrow raised. “What’s going on in your head, Harry? What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared of leaving, Draco. The more I think about it, the more unprepared I feel for the outside world.” Harry said, not for the first time.

“The stress, I think, it’s making me crave and feel uneasy. I don’t like it. But it won’t leave me alone.”

Draco pushed Harry’s hair back away from his face, his features full of affection and understanding. “Well, what ideas for support do you have? Have you got a therapist? Are you going to go to meetings?”

Harry cringed internally at the thought. How could he ensure anonymity? What would a group meeting be like with the famous Harry Potter admitting he used narcotics to cope?

“I want to tell Ron and Hermione, I really do.” Harry started. “But, I have no idea of a therapist who I could trust - and groups? Draco you know that sounds like a nightmare.” He was absent mindingly tracing abstract figures across Draco’s back while he spoke, his fingertips running over the puckered ridges of scarred skin, barely hidden by Draco’s thin t-shirt.

“I think you need to write to Luna.” Draco said evenly, a small smirk on the corners of his lips. “She’s a therapist who works with addictions, Harry. She runs groups that are mixed muggle and wizard, so there’d be no chance of anyone mentioning you or why you’re famous. You’d be just another attendee.”

“I know, Draco. We’ve had this same conversation before. I know I should write her. I just… You’re the only person in the world who knows. It feels safe that way.” Harry was feeling the intensely uncomfortable pulling apart that recovery required. The admission and recognition that you, a person you had known and trusted your whole life, were an addict. You were flawed, and sick, and not always in control.

“Harry James Potter don’t start with that. Secrets. They’re the bitter fuel addictions run on. They’ll do nothing but keep your relapse just as secret. They’ll keep you sick. Even if it’s just me, I can’t take this on alone. Neither can you.” Draco’s stern look softened a bit. “You’ll be okay. You can do this. It’ll be hard at first, but it was hard being here in the forest at first, remember? You barely got out of bed for two weeks. You were angry at everything. But, eventually, it got easier, you got better at coping, you got good at it, even.”

“What if I relapse, Draco? What then?” Harry rolled to his side, facing Draco now, his head down and his forehead tucked against Draco’s chest.
“I don’t want to hurt anyone anymore.” Harry said into his white cotton t-shirt, trying to hide the tears threatening to spill over his already wet lashes.

Draco pulled him into his chest and rubbed his back. “Harry, I’m not going to lie and say it will be easy, or it couldn’t happen. But I believe in you. You’re the strongest person I know. And this is exactly why it’s so important for you to have people you can tell if you’re struggling. That’s the whole point of therapy, of groups, of telling Ron and Hermione. So that they can be there on the bad days to help you through.”

“And you, Draco? Won’t you be there for me once we leave the forest?” Harry said, his voice choked and hoarse.

Draco ran his fingers through Harry’s hair and shushed him softly. “I can’t be the only one, Harry.”

January 18, 2009

It was a few days later that Harry brought up the subject again, this time while they were sitting at the kitchen table together.

“Move in with me, Draco.” Harry said, watching Draco cut up his full English into bite-sized pieces.

Draco froze, his fork midway to his mouth, laden with eggs and rashers and bacon.

“Move in with you?” He said, his cheeks reddening, obviously unsettled by the question.

“I want to move back to Grimmauld Place, but I don’t want to try to make a go of it alone, and, well, the house already sees you as one of it’s masters. You could help me, maybe? We could reclaim the house together? Try and get some of the dark magic there under control? The last time I was there with you, it felt right. It felt good, even though it was horrible. I at least felt like I could do it.” Harry was rambling a bit, but he was full of hope. He had been thinking about it for ages. He didn’t want to give up Sirius’s old home, the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, the place that had provided them refuge in the war. He didn’t want the building always marred by the memories of his fall, of his failures. He wanted to reclaim it. Like he had reclaimed honey. He wanted to sit with the discomfort and overcome it.

Draco just stared at him in what looked like wary confusion, then sadness, before saying, “Harry, I can’t move in with you.”

“But we’re already living together. Draco, we sleep in the same bed together.” His eyes were wide, imploring. They had woken up together that morning, both hard, both too comfortable to move, no longer shy of each other, but Harry not daring to make any sudden moves, waiting for Draco to take all of the first steps. Harry had nearly kissed him for not moving away, and his chest was tight with longing, but he had turned away instead, he had been the first to get up and start his morning routine.

“Harry, I’m not ready.”

“Ok.” Harry said softly, and cleared his plate from the table.

Later that evening, Harry whistled for Little Dipper, who came soaring through the window and
hopped onto the kitchen table, ready and waiting for whatever errand Harry had for him.

He was always like that, so playful and chipper, full of excitement for any delivery and whatever strange instructions Harry had for him.

Harry smiled and sighed, rubbing the owl’s little ear tufts.

He pulled out the letter he had just written to Hermione. When Draco had rejected his idea of moving back in to Grimmauld Place, Harry had thought long and hard about what he was going to do instead.

He re-read the letter once more, trying to strengthen his resolve. He could do this. It was going to be okay.

_Hermione,_

I am coming home. Is the flat at the back of your and Ron’s house still available? I’d really appreciate it if I could stay again.

We have a lot to discuss. I know you haven’t asked questions this whole time, and I’m so thankful for that, but you and Ron deserve the truth, and I think I’m finally ready to share it with you. In person, though. I need you to be able to see that I’m okay.

I’ll be back at the end of February. Please let me know if that’s okay. I promise to stay out of your way, and I can help with Rose if you need it! I know you’re back at work and must be very stressed and busy, what with Ron gone during the day as well.

_Hope to hear from you soon._

_All my love,_

-Harry

Harry sighed and stretched his shoulders down. He was nervous, but Draco was right. He couldn’t hide away. He couldn’t expect Draco to carry everything for the rest of their lives. He had to start making a life that he could live. And this was the first step.

He rolled up the bit of parchment and attached it to Dipper’s leg, giving him a fond look and an owl treat.

“Off you go then, be safe.” Harry said, as the little owl hopped from the table to the back of the little chair and off out the window again, hooting happily.

One down, Harry thought to himself, one to go.

And this one. This one would be short, but so much harder to write. He sat back down at the little table and pulled a second bit of parchment and a freshly inked quill toward him.

_Luna,_

_I need your help. Please send me your group meeting schedule and a list of appointment times where you will be free in March. Please._

- _Harry_

Harry stared at the parchment for some time, tapping the quill and jiggling his foot beneath the desk. This was harder than he had expected, even.
When he sent this, she would know. She would know and he would be beholden to therapy with her. To group sessions. She would know if he didn’t come, if he wasn’t taking care of himself. If he ever relapsed.

Sweat was starting to break out on his forehead, and Harry wiped his arm across his face, swallowed hard, and rolled the bit of paper back up.

He stood up from the chair, quickly, a bit unsteady, and shuffled over to where Draco was lounging, reading his French smut and eating pistachios.

“Draco.” Harry started, his voice soft, nearly wavering.

“Mm Harry?” Draco answered, not looking up, slowly turning the page from a rather raunchy looking pen and ink illustration. Harry could just make out that it was a man, legs wide in the air.

Harry paused, the words sticking in his throat, his heart beating faster than it should, needing to swallow more than he thought was normal. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Draco looked up after the pause, and saw Harry. He saw his sweaty face and his open mouth, his shaking hand gripping the tiny bit of parchment.

“Harry?” Draco said, softly, lowering the book, reaching a hand out to Harry’s. Harry took it gratefully, and let himself be pulled down onto Draco’s lap, leaning his head against his shoulder and letting out the breath he hadn’t realised he was holding.

“What’s wrong?” Draco asked, rubbing Harry’s shoulder gently, feeling the tension that was gathering there.

“I wrote this. For Luna.” Harry said, face hidden against Draco’s neck, so reassured by the smell of his soap and hints of mint. It calmed him, and he reached out to Draco’s hand to deposit the bit of parchment in it.

“Can you send it for me? As soon as Dipper gets back?” Harry asked, closing his eyes, not wanting to think about what he was committing to. He needed this. And he wanted Draco to see what it was taking from him.

“Yes.” Draco said, still rubbing Harry’s shoulder. “I can do that.”

And they sat like that for a while longer, before Draco sent Harry off to have a bath and they both climbed into bed for the night.
In the Light of Day

January 27, 2009

“I thought you were done with your research, what’s with all the paper?” Harry asked jovially, striding over to Draco’s workbench where he sat hunched over many sheets of parchment, letters spread out in front of him from many different senders. Harry smelled like outside, and he had brought a clean chill with him when he came in the cottage.

Draco lifted his head and leaned back just far enough to press his shoulder into Harry’s side. “I finally got a letter back from the DoM.” He said, feeling elated with the response he had gotten. “And, I’m finally getting around to responding to letters from Christmas.”

“Oh, and what did the DoM have to say for themselves?” Harry asked, eyes bright and smiling. He let his hand drop casually on Draco’s shoulder, smoothing the wrinkles in his sweater as he asked in a mock simper. “Dear Healer Malofy, thanks for blowing our minds, please keep being amazing?”

Draco huffed a small laugh. “My god, Harry, don’t be ridiculous. By the way, you never told me Granger worked for the DoM? She’s the one who responded to me.”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess I never really thought about it.” He said, looking surprised.

“Anyways,” Draco went on, “they sent pages and pages of reviews on my potions, theories, and test results, as well as a massive list of suggestions and places to improve.” He picked up the stack and started riffling through, looking for a specific page. “Then they ended it with this.” He said, handing the page to Harry to read.

Dear Healer Malofy,

Your dissertation has been reviewed and your potions tested. After thorough investigations into your formula and rigorous metrics, all of your potions were passed through to the live participant testing stage with St. Mungo’s. We are pleased to inform you that, not only were your original theories and assertions correct, but we were able to find more diverse applications, of which we listed per potion on page 17 of your review.

In addition, your suggested case study has shown marked improvement, and we feel that, with time, we could see, at the very least, a partial improvement of the damage.

What interested us the most was the notable fact that Unspeakables in the past have tried to study the use of thestrals in healing potions, and none have been able to reap the same results that you have. More interestingly, the same can be said about unicorns. We are studying the individual magical signatures that certain witches and wizards carry that allow them to access the properties of these ingredients. We believe you may be one of the rare magical people who are able to engage with and use thestrals in this way. Our questions are as follows;

Would you be interested in working more closely with the DoM in research and application of thestral magic in healing? We are eager to continue these investigations.
In your research with the unicorns, did you come across anyone with the same affinity for them as you have for thestrals?
Do you know anyone else who is able to use and approach thestrals in the same manner as you?
Do you have access to rare magical plants such as wiggentree, gentian root, bog myrtle, or
tormentil?
Would you be interested in pursuing research avenues of healing outside of blood curses?
When can we make an appointment for you to come to the DoM for an in-person meeting about your research?

We await your response.

Ministry of Magic
Department of Mysteries
Senior Administrator
Unspeakable Hermione J Granger

Harry, looking notably impressed as he ready to the end of the page, smiled at Draco when he was finished and handed back the parchment. “Looks like you have a lot to think about, don’t you?”

“Indeed, I do.” Draco smiled, turning back to his work, enjoying the lingering feeling of Harry’s hand on his shoulder before Harry turned and walked to the kitchen to make them tea.

He set aside the DoM paperwork in favor of getting his social calls out of the way. Pulling the letter closest to him he read;

Draco,

Thank you for the copies of your books on magical creatures, they were ever so enlightening and fantastic! There’s very little that can beat an old, old book. They have deep meaning and hidden truths, if you know how to read between the lines. I most appreciated the sections on yetis and the majestic lochness.

And thank you for the crocheted crumpled horn snorkack. I think you really captured their likeness from my descriptions. I can even use it as an educational tool to teach others about them.

I hope your putting the yarn I sent you to good use. Greg loves his scarf and we miss you terribly.

We can’t wait to see you in March.

Love and holiday cheer,
Luna and Greg

Draco smiled to himself thinking about the ridiculous stuffed creature he had made for Luna. It was ghastly and deformed, but he knew Luna would love it anyways, the odd woman. He had been so thrilled for the bag of yarn she had sent him for Christmas. Wools, cottons, silk blends, and other soft and luxurious textures that his fingers were itching to make into more beautiful things.

He scratched out a lengthy response to Luna before reaching out for the next letter.

Malfoy,

Hope you’re well. Thank you for the dragon mittens and for Fang’s sweater. He looks right adorable, and these mittens are the warmest I’ve ever had. Hope you’re able to get some good use out of that wolf fur I sent you. I remember you said that Luna spins wool, so I thought she could spin it for you into some yarn. They shed their undercoat in the spring so I collect it to felt blankets for small critters that need help, and I thought you’d like the extra. How neat would it be to have a scarf made of wolf yarn?

Anyways, happy holidays.

Love,
Draco snorted at the memory of opening a bag full of what looked and smelled like shedded dog fur with the simple label: Wolf. Sure, it was soft, and yes, wolf yarn sounded pretty awesome, but it smelled like a wet dog and made him sneeze for twenty minutes. He would have to figure out how to make it usable with Luna when he got back to real life in March. Smiling fondly, he wrote back to Hagrid.

Next was a letter he wrote to St. Mungo’s, confirming his return date to work with an accompanying summary on his progress with thestrals and unicorns. He also included his intentions to consult with the DoM, clarifying that his work schedule would now have to accommodate their needs as well as his.

He worked his way through a stack of neglected letters, finally resting on his mothers. She had written a formal apology for her behavior on Christmas, as well as for his ‘inadequate’ childhood. It didn’t quite seem sincere, more a force of pureblood habit and impeccable social skills, and Draco bristled at the tone.

He didn’t have anything to say to her quite yet, so he replaced it to the corner of his desk, and instead pulled out his final piece of parchment to write to Neville.

He had been nervous about writing to Neville. He felt a lot of guilt for bullying the boy in school, for being a part of the group that hurt his parents, for being related to the woman who cast the curse, for also being a victim of Lestrange. But, when he finally got the courage to write to him two weeks ago and tell him that he was the one researching ways to help victims of psychological spell damage, Neville had been over the moon.

He had written to Draco four times since, discussing potion and thestral theories, ways to improve his work. It had been a relief and a joy, actually. He and Neville really worked well together, and he was a refreshing burst of insight for his work.

After finishing this final letter, he stood to take his small stack of scrolls to the cupboard in the corner for the house elves to deliver them.

That night laying in a tangle of limbs with Harry, under his thick duvet he thought about what the future would hold for him, for them.

Draco was so proud of Harry for writing to Luna, for taking the steps necessary to keep himself sober. To peel back the layers. They were checking all the boxes to give this a real try out there in the real world.

Harry’s deep, slow breathing indicated that he was fast asleep. Draco studied his soft, relaxed features, breathing in his familiar smell, and feeling the rise and fall of his chest under Draco’s hand. He was finally comfortable with the want he felt. It was okay to want someone this badly. It was okay to have these feelings.

But, a new feeling was emerging from his depths, something acrid and stained, spreading its insidious tendrils around Draco. Something that had been keeping him up late these past nights, well beyond the time when Harry fell asleep. Draco was combating a new form of fear. One that was superseding his fear of being physically intimate. He was afraid he wouldn’t be able to give Harry what he wanted, what he needed. He was afraid of his shortcomings and inadequacies.
He was afraid that when they left the forest, Harry would get tired of waiting for Draco to be ready for him. And Draco wasn’t ready. He wasn’t ready to reopen himself in that way, even if it was with Harry. But if he didn’t, would Harry leave? Would he realize there were easier ways to get off than sitting around waiting for Draco to unpack the rest of his baggage? Draco wanted Harry, he really did, and perhaps that’s all it would take to push himself through the discomfort and just give Harry what he wanted.

Give himself over, so Harry wouldn’t leave.

The thought of anyone, even Harry, breaching him in that way again, of penetrating the place that was last violated by Lestrange, was a nauseating prospect. Even in his recent foray into constant self pleasure, he never once fingered himself. Never once tried to reach his prostate. It was a place he had yet to reconcile with after the trauma. A place too burdened with memories that threatened to drown him.

And, of course, Harry would want to top, wouldn’t he? The gorgeous and newly gay man laying next to him wouldn’t bottom, would he? No, Draco didn’t think so. Didn’t think Harry would allow Draco to take control like that, be opened in that way.

He would just have to get over himself if he didn’t want to lose Harry, he thought to himself, resolve settling in his gut like a jagged rock.

Draco had already denied Harry when he had asked to move in together. He had felt so touched by the thought, by the offer, and felt a sinking guilt to say no. But, Draco needed Harry to figure out who he was and what he wanted on his own first. If they were going to be together out in the real world, Draco couldn’t be the foundations on which Harry built his sobriety. So, in the end, he had said no.

That no felt like a lead weight on his chest. A suffocating pressure that only felt heavier as they days slipped by. And with every passing moment, his worry about losing Harry increased.

He needed to do something before it was too late and he lost his chance.

Taking a deep breath, he buried his face deeper into Harry’s hair and drew comfort from the familiarity of it. Trying to be as close to him as he could without waking him. He counted the days until their last night in the Hollow, and knew that his time was running out. Knew that on their last night he would have to do it. Have to get it over with. He had a month to work up the courage. In exactly one month, he would give himself to Harry and hope it was enough.
All of the Goodbyes

February 27, 2009

The day was here. Their last day. The time for all of their goodbyes. Harry and Draco had gone on a final hike in the morning, visiting their favorite places in their corner of the forest - the Rowan grove, Alice’s stream, the Unicorn fields, the Thestral cave. Saying their goodbyes, but recounting all of their memories, good and bad, laughing and joking with each other as the morning wore on. Harry hadn’t wanted it to end.

Eventually, they circled back to Tenebris Hollow, their little stonework cabin such a familiar and comforting sight, tucked away next to the garden they had laboured over for so long, now ready to begin anew with spring growth once the final frost had cleared. But they wouldn’t be here for it. There would be no one to till the soil and plant new seeds.

Harry rested his hand on their Wiggentree as he passed, whispering a final growth charm, and a word of thanks for it’s protection. At least it would remain sentry here, guardian of their little home.

Harry and Draco both left out eggs for the eggeater, who had yet to awaken from hibernation, and would likely be furious that his keepers had up and left without a proper goodbye. Harry would miss the little miscreant.

They stomped the snow from their boots and went inside to pack, carefully shrinking and stowing away everything they owned into a small box for Harry and a little suitcase for Draco.

Harry only had his clothes, really, and many of his little carved figures, some half in progress, some finished. He decided to keep his knife, to keep working on them once at home. He had already slipped the sheet of meeting times and information from Luna, as well as Hermione's reply in the bottom of the box, safe and out of sight, out of mind.

When it came time to pack up the massive number of books (all Draco’s, really), they had a final laugh over the smut, and decided together to re-stash it behind the loose stone in the old bottom kitchen cupboard in the corner. Perhaps it would provide enlightenment for centuries to come. Harry was a bit sentimental handing over his copy of Quintessence of Debauchery, but, if he was honest with himself, he had memorised the whole play twice over by now.

The day was full of stolen glances and secret looks between the two of them. Knowing smiles and nervous laughs. Harry insisted on standing with Draco in the kitchen and holding his hand while they cooked a final meal together. Of course, it was Indian food. Aloo gobi and paneer, naan aplenty. They ate until they were uncomfortably full, so much that they had to forego their traditional evening cup of tea together.

That night, their last night, in bed together, Harry laying on his back and Draco curled up at his side, they spoke very little, each of them reflecting on the complex mix of emotions - the fact that this was it. The end of something beautiful and safe, something they had come to love, to cherish. And it was after the waxing crescent sliver had fallen from the sky, well beyond midnight, that Draco nudged Harry awake.

“Harry.” He said softly, into the darkness, tracing his fingers along Harry’s bare stomach.

“Mm.” Harry said in response, his hand slipping under Draco’s shirt to lay against his back, tracing
the dimples he found there, lazily, still half asleep.

But Draco was sitting up, pulling his leg over Harry, and sitting himself on top of Harry’s stirring erection, nothing but a thin layer of pyjama between him and Draco’s own underclothes. It was maddening, the sensation, the weight of his ass, Draco’s knees on either side of Harry’s hips. Draco leaned down, his hair falling forward into Harry’s face, his hands on his chest, fingers splayed out. His breath was on Harry’s lips.

Harry was suddenly so very awake, startled, taken aback by this drastic change in their routine. By Draco taking control. He was fully hard in moments, and he had to keep his mouth closed over a groan lest it sound too wanton, too needy, too revealing. He had to stop himself from arching up against Draco, from pulling his hips down onto him. He needed Draco to show him what he needed.

“Do you want me?” Draco asked softly, his lips just ghosting over Harry’s as he formed the words.

“More than anything.” Harry said, nearly breathless, his heart pounding in his chest.

And Draco was kissing him, just touching his lips to Harry’s softly, sweetly, tentatively. And Harry was right there, his hands under Draco’s shirt and running up his back, tasting his lips and his mind blank with desire, his mouth falling open, inviting something more, something deeper. He wanted it so badly.

And Draco giving it to him.

Harry had never kissed anyone like that in his life, eyes closed, desperate for more, moaning when Draco bit at his lower lip and leaning his head back for Draco to suck and bite at his neck, just as wanton, just as reckless. He had imagined kissing this man so many times before, thinking it would feel different than kissing a woman, than kissing Ginny. It was different, but not in the way he anticipated. He thought it would be rough and chaotic - but this, his lips were so soft and gentle and then insistent and hungry all at once. And Harry was melting against him.

Harry was panting, his body rocking beneath Draco, pressing his undeniably hard cock up against him, his stomach taught and his mind nothing but the sounds of their breathing and the weight of him against his cock, and oh fuck the noises Draco would make when Harry’s hands would slip lower and grab the fullness of his ass. Little gasps and muffled moans against his neck.

And Draco leaned down further to kiss his naked chest, and Harry felt the distinct hardness of Draco’s own cock pressed up against his abdomen, next to his own, and he groaned, no longer shy of how turned on he was, knowing Draco was feeling the same.

Draco.

His eyes were closed and he was sucking and biting and Harry’s chest, his own hips rolling over Harry’s cock as he moaned. He was beautiful and overcome with it all.

He was overcome with it all.

“Draco.” Harry said, softly at first. But there was no response, his lips kissing further down his stomach now, his hands sliding toward the flimsy waistband of his bottoms.

“Draco.” Harry said again, more forcefully this time, reaching down to lift his chin and raise his face to his own, his other hand stopping his hands from going further, down to his cock.

“Look at me, Draco.” Harry said, his voice firm. Draco raised his gaze to Harry’s, his lips full and
swollen, parted with each shuddering breath. His eyes looked glazed, his face slack.

“Is this really what you want, Draco? What you want, not what you think I want.” Harry asked, pushing away the absolute desperation of his cock and focusing in on the man before him.

Draco had been so slow and shy for months. He had been careful, controlled, nervous and measured. This Draco before him looked beautiful and like a god of pleasure, a nymph, but empty, vacant. He knew Draco’s dissociation of panic, and this looked too eerily similar, a ghost of the same visage.

“You said you wanted me.” Draco said, his voice husky, almost unnatural, almost angry.

“Of course I do, Draco. But, if I’m being honest, we’re going a little too quickly for me. And, I’m not sure it’s what I want. For us. I want to go slow. This is my first time, for any of this, after all.” Harry said softly, probably blushing, trying to guide Draco back up to the bed beside him.

“I get it, Potter.” Draco said, his features going hard and cold, pulling away from Harry’s gentle hold on his arm. “It’s all fun and games to play house, but when it comes down to it, you’re not for cock, you’re not gay, you might as well have just told me you prefer pussy.”

Harry stared, his mouth agape. “It’s not that at all, Draco, honestly.”

Draco put a hand up to stop him mid sentence. “It’s fine, Potter. But you could’ve told me before the fucking months I’ve spent trying to work up to letting you fuck me. Get the fuck out of my bed.”

Harry was still staring, completely shocked, unable to formulate a reply. How could Draco think that? How could Draco imagine that he didn’t want him just the same? How could he think he wasn’t just as attracted to him? He was just… shy. He was inexperienced. He was concerned that Draco was rushing it to get things over with, and that’s not how he wanted things between them. If they weren’t both going to enjoy it, then it didn’t need to happen. And why did Draco assume Harry wanted to fuck him? They hadn’t even talked about it. And, if Harry was honest with himself, he had always fantasised bottoming their first time, anyway.

“How could you think that? How could Draco think that? How could Draco imagine that he didn’t want him just the same? How could he think he wasn’t just as attracted to him? He was just… shy. He was inexperienced. He was concerned that Draco was rushing it to get things over with, and that’s not how he wanted things between them. If they weren’t both going to enjoy it, then it didn’t need to happen. And why did Draco assume Harry wanted to fuck him? They hadn’t even talked about it. And, if Harry was honest with himself, he had always fantasised bottoming their first time, anyway.”

“Draco, I promise, it’s not like that. Please.” Harry said, tears welling up in his eyes. He was so hurt, so confused, so taken aback by how Draco had responded. He couldn’t think straight.

“Get out, Potter. Get the fuck out.” Draco hissed, pulling his blankets back from Harry, staring daggers at him. His eyes were dark and cold and Harry really was drowning this time, lost in the tempestuous tide that was Draco Malfoy.

“Okay.” Harry said, softly, getting up. He felt wrecked. Ruined. He felt sorry, but jilted, hurt. Tears were running down his cheeks and he turned to get up out of the bed before Draco could see.

Harry pulled his sweater and hat on, the purple ones Draco had knit him for Christmas, even, and his boots.

“Where are you going?” Draco asked, watching Harry, his eyes still narrow, but a hint of fear beneath the false bravado of his voice.

“Out.” Harry said, his voice thick, throwing his jacket on over the sweater and pushing open the door, before he lost his nerve. Before he apologised to Draco for something he didn’t do wrong, for something he didn’t regret.

He hadn’t even left the garden before he apparated, twisting in the deep snow, a whimper burning
in his throat.

His feet landed uneven on the ground before him, and he fell to his knees, letting out a sob and openly crying out into the surrounding silence, his voice carrying around the high walls of the canyon, snow falling softly around him.

He knelt in the snow, his chest burning with the cold, his body shivering, but his mind elsewhere. What had gone wrong? What had just happened?

A soft and rhythmic thudding sound made Harry raise his head up, peering out into the dark of the slate riverbed, the crevasse where he had taught Draco to cast his patronus. A place Draco had felt safe, and Harry had felt like there could be more between them, like there was a hope that they were meant to fall together - that their fates were just as intertwined as they had always been, but, this time, they weren’t on opposite sides of a war, but on the same side of the struggle. The struggle to find someone who could love them for who they were, who could look at their broken, damaged selves and see nothing but the promise of happiness, see nothing but worth.

Out of the darkness ahead of Harry emerged a thestral, slowly plodding through the fresh layer of thick snow, huffing breaths of steam from flaring nostrils, moving up the riverbed from further South. It was massive and as black as the moonless night, the light only able to catch his bones moving eerily beneath the sheen of his stretched skin.

Harry watched it approach, still kneeling, still sniffling back tears and still crumbling beneath the weight of Draco asking him to leave. Of Draco casting him out. Of Draco hurting him.

The giant creature ambled up to Harry and slowly stepped around his left, circling behind him, nuzzling his steaming breaths into Harry’s reddened face, muddying the streaks of his tears.

Behind Harry, the thestral opened his massive wings, and dropped slowly onto its heavy forelimbs, gingerly laying down, its side tucked up against Harry’s back, scooping him up beneath one of his massive wings as he refolded them to his sides, drawing Harry close.

Without thinking, Harry curled up against the leathery hide, surprisingly soft and warm, closing his eyes and fighting back against the dread that had filled him. He was still safe. He could survive this. He had come this far.

And eventually, soothed by the slow drumming of the thestral’s beating heart and quiet motions of its deep breaths, Harry fell asleep.
Run, Just Run

February 28, 2009

Draco had watched in stunned horror as Harry walked straight out the door of their cottage, and hearing the crack of apparition felt like he had been electrocuted, shocked out of his stupor.

Harry was gone.

He was gone.

Draco dragged in a strangled breath and choked out a sob of pure agony as terror gripped him. Draco had kicked him out and now he was probably out back in muggle London, relapsing. And it was entirely Draco’s fault. Even if it wasn’t logical, even if Harry had shown no warning signs of breaking his sobriety, Draco’s panic was beyond reason. His mind took him to the worst possible scenario and wouldn’t let him leave.

What the fuck had he done? Why did he push himself on Harry? Harry, who was just as scared of their intimacy as Draco. Harry, who had never kissed a boy before. Draco dropped his head in his hands, gripping his hair painfully, and cried out into the empty cottage. Little dipper hooting softly at Draco in response.

He had never felt more foolish, more lonely, or more guilty. Tears streaming down his face, he tried to drag more oxygen into his lungs but there didn’t seem to be any air left in the room. The familiar tingling in his limbs threatening to take his mind and awareness away from himself.

He was shaking, and terrified for Harry, as he reached over for his wand and desperately tried to cast a patronus to ask Harry to come back, to apologise, to beg for forgiveness.

“Expecto patronum!” He cried, lips numb. Nothing happened.

He tried and tried to pull his happy memories forward, but thoughts of Harry dying of an overdose, trapped in the tomb of Sirius’ old bedroom, clouded his thoughts.

“Expecto patronum!” He sobbed again, vision tunnelling. Still nothing.

He tried and tried, repeating it over and over. His panic dragging him further and further under. Each failed attempt fueling the burning fear in him. Harry was surely dying.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat, immobilised by fear and heartbreak, sobbing and repeating the incantation like it was the only thing keeping Harry alive, but eventually he was finally overcome by his panic attack and he lost consciousness on his bunk, wand still gripped in his hand.

Draco woke early the next morning with a start. He jumped out of his bed, weary on his feet, limbs still heavy with sleep. “Harry?” He called. It felt like the bottom had dropped out of his life. When no one responded, tears sprang forward with shocking readiness.

The sun was coming up, and Draco saw that there were two thestrals staring in through the kitchen window. He couldn’t tell if their presence soothed or worried him. Were they here to take him to Harry? Was Harry injured? Was he alive?
He dragged his layers on in a hurry and shoved on his boots as he walked to the door, flinging it open and stepping out into the bitter cold morning.

“Where’s Harry?” He asked the thestrals, realising one of them was Voileami. They turned slowly and began walking towards him.

“Voileami, where is he? Is he okay?” She didn’t react as if she wanted to take him anywhere, instead she nimbly walked up to him and pressed the whole length of her face into his torso and gently rubbed it against the scratchy fabric of his sweater.

Tears streamed down his face as he stroked her neck and the sides of her face. Through his blurry vision he could see the second thestral moving closer, and others coming out of the trees towards him.

“Why are you here?” He whispered to his friend.

They didn’t provide an answer, they just came and circled him, nudging him, and rubbing their faces against him.

“I just want to know if he’s okay.” He said pathetically. He realised now, in the light of day, that Harry was probably very much safe from a relapse, but hurt by Draco’s behaviour, nonetheless. He had probably gone back to London. To give Draco the space he had demanded from Harry. Draco felt ashamed of himself, of how he had acted. How he had kicked Harry out after all they had been through together.

He stood there in the biting cold, in too few layers, shivering against the icy wind that swept through the yard, wondering what the fuck to do.

He and Harry had packed all their belongings the day before. They had planned to apparate back to London together before going their separate ways. Now, it was just Draco. Harry had left his things, so surely he would be back at some point for them, but Draco didn’t think he could face Harry. Didn’t think he could stand to wait.

He wiped the tears from his face, sniffling his frozen nose and steeling himself to make his move. “I have to go.” He said softly to Voileami.

She nibbled at his hand with her velvety beak as she backed up to give him space. As if taking the hint from her, the other thestrals followed suit and retreated.

He breathed out a sigh of gratitude before he turned and walked back into the cottage. It already seemed cold and derelict with their things packed and Harry gone.

He picked up his suitcase full of everything he owned and stood staring around the room that he had called home for the last year.

He fought another upsurge of tears as he pulled his wand out and transfigured their bunk bed back into a single cot.

There was only one thing left to do now.

Pulling out a scrap of parchment and a quill he wrote with shaking hands.

Harry,

I’m sorry. I hope you can see now why this could never work between us.
Work on you and your recovery. You have your whole life ahead of you. It would be easier if we didn’t contact one another.

DM

He left the note sitting on the table as he grabbed his things. He turned on the spot, feeling his way into that familiar crushing darkness as he shattered through Harry’s protective wards and enchantments, and left the Hollow for the last time.
Harry came back to himself slowly. First, he became aware of the soft and gentle rise of the warm body behind him, then the slow thudding of a heart, soft breaths slipping into the frigid morning air. He opened his eyes, blinking twice before the thin stretch of black wing laying gently above his head came into focus, the memories of the evening before trickling from the back of his hippocampus and into his conscious mind.

Draco had asked him to leave. And he had gone.

Harry pulled the wing back from above him slowly and the thestral stirred, skin shivering as it shook off the thin layer of snow that had collected over him through the night. The air beyond the wing crept over Harry and he was suddenly so incredibly thankful that this creature had known to come for him. Just known. As if in response, the gentle beast shook his heavy head, breaths still creating little clouds of steam on every stoic exhale, and turned to nudge Harry softly from his side.

It was time to go.

The sun was just now warming the depths of the deep valley, and it had to be high in the sky to clear the precipitous forest walls.

Fuck, Harry thought to himself. It must be nearly midmorning.

He stretched his legs from beneath him and stood, the thestral reaching out his giant wings away and above Harry’s form, also slipping it’s forelegs out into the snow and gingerly raising it’s skeletal form, the great slopes of his hip bones and knobs of each vertebra sliding below his coal colored skin. With one last forlorn look at Harry, the glassy eyes impassive as always, the thestral snorted softly and started off to the North, picking it’s way through the unmarked snow.

Harry watched him go, his magic swirling around him gently, warming him against the cold, replacing the comforting warmth of the winged stallion. The sun shone down a bit brighter, and Harry lifted his face to the light of the new day.

Last night.

The memories continued to trickle back, like sand running through an hourglass - images of the two of them curled around each other, the softness of Draco’s skin and the smell of his hair, freshly washed in a bath that afternoon, the comfort and the security of his bed. The bed they had shared so many nights. Together.

His hands sliding across his stomach, so close and familiar and yet, daring.

The kiss they had shared.

Harry felt a numbing tingling sensation ghost across his lips as he thought back to that moment in the dark, in the warm rush of Draco leaning down and the pull of everything they had been through together. The months of building trust of creating a place of their own to explore who they are just as much as what they wanted. What they needed. A place to reclaim themselves.

And it had led them there. To each other’s arms, to drowning in the depths of everything that Draco was. To kissing him. To kissing him like he would die if he couldn’t be with him.

But it had changed. And the thought of Draco’s vacant expression flashed before him - the
automated movements, Draco’s attentions turned from him to his body.

Draco wasn’t one to rush things. He never had been. Harry had been swallowing back urges for months, afraid of the shock of that talisman. Not afraid of it, conscious of it. He always waited for Draco to initiate contact between them.

But, this time, last night, it hadn’t felt right. It had become empty and mechanical. Gone was the smouldering and consuming heat and it was replaced by something cold and suffocating. Harry had known that instant that Draco was dissociating, that it wasn’t real, that it wasn’t what he wanted.

Hell, Harry didn’t even want more than a kiss, not really. He was still scared. Scared of what to do, what to say. Scared of the future, scared of hurting Draco. Scared of loving him. Love, something he had never learned to receive without scars, nor to give without sacrifice.

He’d rejected Draco’s insistent advances, and Draco had been so… hurt. Hurt, and bitter, and so very angry. Harry scrubbed his face in his hands and pushed his hair back.

He did the right thing, in the end. Harry knew it to be true. It wasn’t time, not yet. This was just the beginning.

He steeled himself, turned on the spot and apparated back to Tenebris Hollow, his feet landing on the solid, familiar ground, the little cabin looking oddly forlorn in the winter sun.

The wards were torn. Harry felt it instantly. His magic flitting around him, searching for any source of potential danger. Instead, it was only moments before he felt the bitter traces of what had ripped them to pieces. Draco’s magic. Cold and cruel and surgical in it’s precision.

The anger was palpable, and Harry rushed to the door of their little home, opening it to see just his single box of possessions on the kitchen table. And, the bed, transformed from their bunk bed, back to a single, one that looked nothing like their own. The only hint that this cabin had been their home was the soft and gentle lingering of the encourage-mint that hung, like an unwritten apology, in the air. The Little Dipper’s perch was empty. It was strangely still. Quiet.

On the table was a scrap of parchment. Harry bolted toward it, grabbing the crisp sheet betweens shaking hands. His throat tight.

Harry,

I’m sorry. I hope you can see now why this could never work between us.

Work on you and your recovery. You have your whole life ahead of you. It would be easier if we didn’t contact one another.

DM

Harry’s heart contracted painfully in his chest, the air squeezed from his lungs as his breath stagnated in his throat.

Draco had left. He’d left angry. Without saying goodbye. This was goodbye. This pathetic string of
words, hollow and sharp and exacting. He had left and he had wanted to hurt him. And he had.

A year together, a year of the careful beautiful thing they had built together. Grown together. They had nurtured and tended, with soft and stoic respect, whispered secrets in the night and the grasp of their hands, fingers laced together. A year of stolen looks over cups of tea and hours of silence that held as much meaning as a thousand letters. A year of furtive touches and their magic - their magic growing into the space between them, like beautiful, ornate lace tying them, knotting them ever closer, strands spun together like the elaborate work of a spider. A year and they had the same patronus.

Harry stood, unraveling. Unwinding himself from the traces of Draco. From the feeling of him that draped across his skin, that pulled around his very bones. It was painful, touching him, eating away at him. Like an acid that had been spilled across his viscera, it gnawed. Harry wanted it gone. He wanted it numb.

Harry felt hot tears sliding down his cheeks and the breath he was holding stuttered out of his mouth. He stood there a moment, his thoughts reeling. Panic rising.

All of that for a fucking note on a table as a goodbye. For Harry saying no - for Harry saying he wasn’t ready. His cheeks were wet as stuffed the little slip of paper with venomous words that cut him like knives deep into his pocket. He needed it to stop.

Harry spared a moment gritting his teeth and breathing deeply. Swallowing down the tears, blanking his mind, refusing to break. Not now. Not after everything. He didn’t want to be numb. Numb is not joy. Not even content. Numb is too close to death.

He would fix this. He would show Draco he could be the man who didn’t break. Who didn’t run. Who didn’t need Draco to fix him. He would take the lesson of this year and know that it was possible. What they have together was possible. And he’d just have to show Draco he could carve out space for it in the outside world. A world where Harry could forgive Draco for being so scared. A world where Harry still wanted him, still wanted to go slowly.

He took his box from the table and turned back to the door. The outside world was waiting.
The crack of apparition announced Harry’s arrival, the cold air carrying the sound out across the snowy country lane and into the fields beyond. Harry pulled his shoulders back, trying to push down the nerves that were snaking up around his middle, and stepped up to the little picket fence and white wooden gate that lay between him and the home of his two oldest and closest friends, his meagre box of belongings tucked under his arm.

Harry took a deep breath and took in the sweet white farm house, somehow such a strange contrast to the warm and inviting world that the stone cabin had been - it looked large and imposing and oddly formal. As if he hadn’t lived here once before, in the little flat in the back. As if that was a life that belonged to someone else, and here he was, almost a stranger.

The front door snapped open and Harry looked up in time to catch Hermione’s gaze, her coat half on over a Mrs. Weasley Christmas sweater, red with a giant golden H, and her bushy hair haphazardly shoved under a nearly matching maroon wool cap. When their eyes met, she gasped, clapping her hand over her mouth and turning around. After a moment, her shoulders began shaking softly.

“Hermione.” Harry called softly, his heart breaking as he watched her try to hide her sobs, for him, he knew. She was refusing to turn back around to spare him the sight of her crying. He pushed the gate open, set his box down on the first step and ran to her, folding her tightly into a hug, pulling her around and into his arms, her face against his chest.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” He said softly, holding her to him, smoothing down the errant curls of hair that escaped the bottom of her winter hat.

“Hermione!” Came a familiar voice from just inside the house.

“She’s out here, Ron.” Harry called back, still rubbing gentle circles over Hermione’s back as fresh sobs continued to pour forth, her hands clutching tightly to fistfulls of Harry’s sweater, as if convinced he would disappear again should she even think of letting go.

Ron, tall and red haired as ever, opened the front door with a jaunty smile on his face, one that instantly warmed Harry’s heart.

“Welcome home then, Harry!” Ron said, folding the both of them into an even grander hug, clapping Harry on the shoulder and ruffling the purple hat he still had on over his even-more-unkempt-than-usual hair.

“Can you tell we missed you?” Ron said, still smiling and gazing lovingly down at Hermione, who had finally started to detach herself from Harry.

“I missed you both, too.” Harry said, full of the love and warmth his friends exuded for him. They loved him, and he could feel it. The air was thick with it. His magic could feel it, and it was flowing around them, softly reacquainting itself with something so familiar, so much a part of himself.

“Come on then, let’s get out of the cold at least. Rose will want a hello too, you know.” Ron said beckoning them both through the front door and into the warmth of their home, grabbing Harry’s
box from the stoop and carrying it inside.

And it was as though he had never left. They were kind and soft and Hermione’s eyes filled with tears whenever she looked over at him, and he held her hand while she showed him up to Rose’s room to say hello, and Rose held her little arms out to him to be picked up like Harry had just put her down for her nap an hour ago. And so, he carried her back down to the living room, where she was sound asleep against his shoulder before long.

And then it was late afternoon, long after Little Dipper had swooped in the kitchen window and stolen several treats from Pigwidgeon, to much riotous laughter and general amusement. And then they were sitting together in the living room, and Harry’s throat was suddenly tight and his mouth was going dry, because it was time. It was time to tell them. Gone was the rush of happiness of having him back, seeing he was ok, seeing he was alive.

Ron had just finished updating him on the Quidditch he had missed, and Hermione was busy making jokes about Rose’s new words (Hermione was very proud her vocabulary was now at an impressive 35 words). And then there was a lull, and they were both looking at him. Harry shifted and handed Rose over to Ron, who barely stirred as she adopted the exact same slumped sleeping posture over her father’s shoulder.

“I know you probably have a lot of questions about where I’ve been.” Harry started, looking down at his hands in his lap, trying to concentrate on keeping them still. His fingers were calloused from all of the wood he had carved, roughened from life in the forest. He took a deep breath, rubbing away the lines his nails had made across his palms from clenched fists, fraught with nerves, tight with the threat of the truth. They loved him. They wouldn’t blame him or think less of him. It was going to be okay.

“You don’t have to tell us… Harry you look so much happier and healthier. It shocked me, really. I had forgotten how bad you looked. But now, Harry you look like yourself again.” Hermione started, her voice small and careful. Ron gave her a pointed look, the first hint of anything but joy on his face since Harry had arrived. Ron wanted to know why he left. He deserved to know. They both did. They had to know. This was not the time for easy lies. This was not the moment for excuses.

“Hermione. Don’t do that. Don’t give me an out. I need to be accountable. I have things I need to tell you because I have things I need you to understand about who I am and my life going forward. Telling you is a way for me stop hiding.” He paused, closing his eyes for a second. “I just needed you to see that I’m fine. I’ve spent the last year getting better. Getting healthier. Trying to redefine what I want my life to look like. And yeah, that may reflect on how I look now, but I need honesty to stay this way. To stay alive.”

He opened his eyes to see Hermione, tears slowly rolling down her cheeks, and Ron, his face dark over Rose’s slack shoulder, but full of concern, not anger. They waited, and Harry steeled himself against the quiet of their living room, scattered with children’s toys and piles of books. Against the normalcy of their life.

“I died. Again.” He said, his voice low and serious and the words surprising him. He had thought he would start out with how bad things were and his magic getting out of control, and then that had just slipped out. Because, well, it was true. That’s how serious this was. He had died.

“I did it on purpose.” He said, looking down at his hands again, renewed rubbing against the lines of his palms, listening to Hermione’s sharp intake of breath. He could feel Ron tense from the other side of the room. He couldn’t bring himself to look up. Not yet.
"I was brought back. Even though I didn’t want to be. I really meant to be gone. I was convinced it was the only way." The words were tumbling out of his mouth in a rhythm of their own. He was so far off script, he wasn’t sure how to continue. But this felt the most pressing. They needed to know just how bad it was.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Harry… you know I… I would have done anything to help. Harry, after everything. After George…” Ron was hurt, his voice strained, Rose was making small noises of protest and Harry imagined it was because Ron was holding her so tightly.

Harry dropped his head into his hands. “I couldn’t Ron. I couldn’t.”

He took a deep breath, lifting his gaze to meet Ron’s, startled by the tears forming in them, and the look of absolute fear that hung, heavy on his features.

“I’m a drug addict, Ron. I was using drugs. Every day. All day, really. I was stuck in this horrible cycle and I couldn’t see a way out and Rose was just born and I couldn’t put you two through dealing with it. So, I just thought it would be easier. Safer.” He looked away, full of shame. Sickening, burning and nauseating shame.

Harry wanted to claw at his throat. He wanted to obliterate himself and the two of them and run. He wanted to give up and hide in the forest, even if it meant never seeing another person again.

“Oh, Harry.” And Hermione was there, next to him, hugging him tightly, crying harder than ever. And Ron was at his other side, draping his arm around him, his cheeks wet and worry lines across his face.

“You could have told me, Harry. But, I’m glad you did now.” Ron said, his voice thick with emotion. “Nothing is worse than losing you. Nothing.”

And Harry sat there, the fear and anxiety of telling them giving way to the slow and gentle relief of both of them at his side, of their love.

“So,” Harry started again, trying to get out all of the important details at once. “So, I don’t drink anymore. I’d appreciate not being around people who aren’t sober. I’ve been off drugs for a year but I’m not going to pretend that it isn’t still a struggle. Especially when I’m stressed or upset or … yeah. Just, please. I don’t mean to be a burden, I just want to stay healthy. I don’t want to go back. It took me a long time, but I want to live. I want a life I want to live. I don’t want to be dangerous.”

He took a deep breath, and started as Hermione stood up and marched off in the direction of their kitchen, staring after her. He hadn’t upset her, had he? He didn’t mean to be such a bother, coming to their house and asking them to change their ways.

Ron ruffled his hat again, also getting up and letting Rose stay asleep curled up on the sofa.

“Great idea, love.” He called after Hermione.

Harry stared after them, completely confused. Standing slowly and following them, he heard sounds of cupboards opening and the sink running.

He peeked around the doorway to the kitchen and his mouth fell open, his heart straining against his chest. Hermione had grabbed the two bottles of wine that were in the top cupboards and was emptying them into the skink. Ron was standing next to her, systematically emptying several bottles of beer. His favorite brand, Harry remembered.
It was such a startling act of solidarity. Of acceptance. It warmed Harry, immensely, his nose
burning and his eyes going bright and filling with the tears that had been threatening all day.

“Is there somewhere you’d prefer to meet in place of the pub on Fridays?” Ron asked over his
shoulder, his jaunty grin back, though his eyes were still wet and the worry lines had not
disappeared.

“Oh.” Harry said, his brow furrowing, rubbing at his eyes beneath his glasses. He didn’t feel ready
to see all of the old gang. Or anyone, really. He didn’t want to rush. Just Ron and Hermione felt
like a lot at the moment.

“I think Fridays I’ll go to meetings.” Harry said softly, looking down at his feet. “And Mondays.
And Wednesdays. If it gets bad I might go every day.”

He felt small in that moment, admitting how bad things were. How scared he was that the cravings,
the thoughts, the urges would be more than he could handle. Especially now, without Draco. His
heart stuttered in his chest at the thought of Draco. Push it down, he thought, not now. I can’t think
about him. Not now.

“Whatever you need, Harry.” Hermione said, turning around and wiping her hands on the dishcloth
by the sink. “Anything. And no more secrets. If you need to tell us things to stay accountable, tell
us. What else can we do to make this a supportive home for you?”

“I have more to tell you, just not tonight. I need some time to get used to this.” Harry said, his
magic smouldering quietly and warming him, comforting him. The ache wasn’t gone from his
chest, but he pushed on, thinking of all of the steps he needed to get through to prove to Draco that
he was ready. That he could do this. That they could be together, even here, in the outside world,
where it was all unknown and scary. But, more importantly, all of the steps he needed to get
through just to prove to himself that he was going to live. That he wasn’t dangerous. That he could
love, even his friends, safely and carefully and with all of the gentleness they deserved.

“You’re the first people I’ve told, really told about what was going on. And I’m so appreciative of
you both. I just, I need to get into a rhythm of normal here, and then I can do more.” Harry smiled,
his voice thick and gravelly, and Ron pulled him into another hug.

“Take your time, Harry.” Ron’s voice was equally rough and kind and Harry didn’t struggle to
remember that even without red hair and freckles, he was his brother. For their lives had been
knitted together since their first shared sandwich on the train, to here and now. And, it was true
what Ron had said the autumn before, Harry was off fighting battles he was too scared to tell them
about. But, it was just as true what they had always told him, in the days before the war, that they
would always be there, and no matter what evil. That he would need them, and they would be
there.

“Mommy!” Came Rose’s sleepy voice from the living room. “Dinner time.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“She’s not wrong.” Said Ron, raising an eyebrow, ruffling Harry’s hat once more. “I’ll start on
pasta. Harry, can you set the table? If we don’t get ourselves together quickly it’ll be a full blown
tantrum.”

And just like that, they went about their evening, eating together and laughing at Rose’s wildly
demanding demeanour. She was a perfect combination of Hermione’s insistence and Ron’s
defiance. Harry loved her instantly.
Harry only let his thoughts drift back to Draco as he cleared dishes. Draco would be proud of him, he thought. He’d give him that look, the one where he’s smug but there’s that softness, where he was revelling in Harry’s triumphs, as if he had known Harry would succeed all along.

And when he crawled into bed, the guest bedroom for tonight, he imagined Draco lying next to him, his blonde hair all disheveled and his guard down, all of their walls crumbled and all of their secrets strewn between them, dissolving into the folds of the sheets, irrelevant in the wake of their honesty. And how he missed the little sighs Draco would make as Harry would curl around him, fingertips tracing the smooth and rough of his once forbidden skin.

He pulled a little bit of parchment and a self inking quill toward him and scribbled out a horridly untidy note, but one he felt he had to write. Draco had to know he was okay, and that things were going to be alright. It would be cruel to be silent - even though he had said not to contact him.

**Draco,**

It's ok, I understand. I know, you thought I was rejecting you and it hurt. You panicked. I saw it in your face. But, you don't owe me sex to keep me around. You don't owe me anything. I wasn't ready. I'm still not, to be honest. I left because I was hurt, too. And scared. And, I'm not shy to admit that to you.

It's ok if you need space to recollect yourself. It's ok. I'm going to take this time to show you that I'm capable of handling the outside world. That I don't need you to carry me through recovery. That I can do it. I'm not your responsibility, and you don't have to worry about keeping me alive or keeping me safe. It was an unfair burden to push on you, and I'm sorry.

I will give you this space Draco, I will because I respect you and your process. You have things you'll need to work out, too. And, when you do, I'll be here. Ready to pick up where we left off. Because I also know that you will be with me, in my thoughts, every day and every night until we see each other again.

Our year in the forest was the best of my life, and I will look back on it with nothing but immense fondness for the things that you showed me. For what you nurtured in me. For the honesty of what we had together.

You're not broken or damaged Draco, you're beautiful and smart and kind and you deserve happiness. More than happiness. Joy. You deserve to have the sun shine on you every day and fill you to the brim until you are overflowing with the golden liquid light, because that is what you are, decadent and extraordinary.

But, until then, find your wings and strengthen them. I will be here, waiting.

Yours,

- Harry

He doodled a bit on the other side of the parchment, a little thestral. He smiled, but his heart was aching. He wanted Draco to hold the parchment, to see his words but feel him. His magic threaded itself into the page, animating the little winged beast and charming it to fly around both sides of the page. Harry held it to his chest a moment, eyes closed and breathing deeply, concentrating on sending a bit of himself with the letter, like he would his patronus.

He opened his eyes as Little Dipper fluttered in through the open window, his gigantic ear tufts
swivelling this way and that, a single hoot as he held his leg out for Harry to attach the parchment.

“You miss him too, don’t you? That’s why you’re so keen for a delivery. Be nice to him, I’m sure he’s not going to be happy to see you. Don’t let it discourage you. He’s hurting.” Harry said, letting the funny little owl nibble at his fingers affectionately. Once he was done fixing the note securely to him, he took flight and ghosted silently back out into the night.

“I’m doing it, Draco. One day down.” Harry said softly into the dark of the room, and sleep overtook him.

He dreamt of thestrals in the forest, wild and free.

On Friday morning, five days after his arrival, he awoke, and an assortment of words peppered his half broken thoughts, leftover strands of dreams and memories. The world isn’t split into good people and death eaters. And it was after that particularly vicious night of cravings, sweating and twisting in his sheets, that the words changed, nearly without Harry’s permission, into something else. Something that left a coppery taste on his tongue. The world isn’t split between good people and drug addicts.

And it was okay. And he could be both.

He talked about it later, in his third meeting of the week. When Luna went around the circle and asked the attendees (nine of them in total) to share their recent thoughts on recovery. She had smiled at him, and a few of the others had nodded in agreement. One of the muggles had laughed and said he hadn’t stopped thinking of himself as a bad person, not since he’d stolen the last of his parent’s savings and used it to buy a night of mindlessness. They’d all shared the wicked things they’d done.

Harry had squirmed and sweat in his seat, dripping down his back and been entirely uncomfortable the first few meetings - which is probably why he couldn’t remember anyone’s names or much of what they had talked about - or even who had been magical and who was muggle. It was all a blur, really. Luna had simply asked him to introduce himself and gone over the ground rules - always anonymity, always honesty and always respect. Harry had felt her nearly invisible charm work go around the room, enforcing the first of the conditions, and he had breathed easy knowing that his secrets would be safe.

Greg had done him the absolute favour of pretending they didn’t know each other, which was to Harry’s great relief. He seemed so far along in his recovery, comfortable in his skin, talking freely and openly about the complex struggles of the boredom of the work, of the ubiquity of drinking, the ever present marketing of alcohol. Of how tiring it gets to be conscious and careful every day, disappointed and overlooked. He talked about struggles that Harry wished he had, because he was too overcome by the ringing in his ears and the adrenalin seizing his stomach. How nice it will be to be bored, he had thought.

It was so hard to listen to others talk about using drugs. About their experiences. About the things they thought and felt. About the way they drooled around certain words and held their breath after others. It made him feel like his flesh was desperately seeking a way out of his skin, and by the end of the first meeting, he’d pulled Luna aside and told her he couldn’t do it.

She had patted him on the arm, said of course he could and she’d see him on Wednesday, and that was that. Harry had gone home and written Draco another letter.
Did you see Mars is bright again tonight? Perhaps it is for our battles after all. No matter, I am ready.

- Harry

He’d gone back to the meetings, of course, and he’d been slightly less visibly disturbed, but it had exhausted him to the core. By that Friday, he had spoken for the first time to share his morning revelation. The world isn’t split between good people and drug addicts. He had sweat just a little bit less.
Fairy Tales Aren't Real

March 3, 2009

Draco gazed with bleary eyes through the dim light of his bedroom. The air was stale and his bed smelled of dust, evidence of his long absence apparent in the lack of personal effects in his once comfortable bedroom. From the other side of the drawn shades he could hear the relentless tap, tap, tapping of an owl.

It had been three days since he left the hollow. Three days and he had barely left his bed since stumbling into it upon his arrival, leaving his things still packed in the bag on the floor. He chose instead to hide away from the world under his duvet and subsist on stale crackers from the kitchen when he forced himself out of bed. He was fucking miserable.

He continued to ignore the tapping, choosing instead to entertain his internal boggart, who, as it turns out, was insisting that Harry had told everyone all about their… je ne sais quoi… and now all of his friends hated him and the world would be an even more unbearable place. He questioned all of his life decisions on a never ending loop of self flagellation and deprecation, his mind slowly torturing him into what felt like madness.

Even the involuntary act of breathing felt as if it was too much work. He laid there staring at the ceiling, listening to the incessant tapping, and fantasised about starving to death.

He knew this wasn’t healthy. He knew he was being entirely self-indulgent in his misery. Knew he should speak to someone. Owl a friend, or probably more importantly, Beatrice, but he just couldn’t face anyone. Couldn’t face their sympathy, their pity, their… disgust.

The tapping grew louder, and he absently wondered if the owl was under orders to try and break in. He had chased off Little Dipper twice since arriving home, and even Luna’s owl once. He had missed lunch with her the previous day without an explanation and he couldn’t bear to see what Harry had written him. To see his handwriting trace words of hatred, because surely, after the way Draco had behaved, Harry hated him.

A sudden, loud banging jerked him from his stupor and he jolted upright. He had warded his flat to hell and back against any visitors, so, who the fuck had managed to get to his door? His first thought was of Harry, who was certainly powerful enough to get through Draco’s wards, but he didn’t think he’d know where to find Draco, as he had been nearly dead when Draco had first brought him there.

“Draco, I know you’re in there!” called a dreamy voice that carried through his apartment from beyond the front door.

Draco froze at the sound of Luna’s voice, feeling like a trapped animal. His joints creaked in protest as he crawled out of his den of blankets and shuffled towards to the door. He was not prepared to face anyone in his condition, let alone Luna and her knowing eyes.

“Luna, I’m sick.” He lied with a cracked voice standing before his front door, his heart in his throat.

“Good thing I brought soup, then.” she replied and he could hear the smile in her voice. He rested his head on the door and listened to the endless tapping on the window from his bedroom. What was this hell? Couldn’t she let him wallow in peace?
He had the overwhelming urge to cry and didn’t respond. Surely, Luna knew and that’s why she was here. As if performing advanced ligilimens, Luna said in a soft voice, “Draco, I won’t make you talk about anything you don’t want to.” He felt his resistance cracking as she continued. “Just let me in so I can love my friend, whom I haven’t seen in a year.”

Draco’s fight bled out of him and he unlocked the door. It slowly creaked open to reveal a radiant Luna dressed in layers of mismatched fabric. If Draco looked as bad as he felt, she didn’t let on. She just smiled warmly and hugged him tight before picking up two large grocery bags from the floor and walking in.

Draco sniffed and wiped the unbidden tears that threatened to spill over as Luna moved towards the kitchen with an easy gait. She had never been to Draco’s flat before, but she seemed to know how to get around.

“How did you get through my wards?” Draco asked, his voice low and hoarse. He certainly sounded ill.

Luna was unpacking her bags and setting up a tea tray as she answered thoughtfully, “Draco, I work with recovering addicts who sometimes need someone to break through their wards to help them. I’m rather gifted at dismantling protective enchantments.”

“Oh.” was all Draco managed in response. He supposed that made sense.

After she assembled the tea, Luna shuffled Draco towards his couch and settled him in before leaving him to begin cleaning. Draco felt embarrassed, but knew it was best to allow Luna to do what she came to do, which was to, apparently, care for the giant man child Draco had devolved into. She vanished the layers of dust coating everything, shook out the carpets, fluffed the cushions, opened the curtains, and, before Draco could stop her, opened the window to retrieve the letters from Little Dipper. She made no comment or sign of recognition as she placed the letters on Draco’s desk and continued her cleaning.

Draco sat in a heap on his couch, knees drawn up under his chin as he hugged himself and tried not to cry. Before long, Luna was re emerging from the kitchen, the smell of encourage-mint following in her wake. A smell that had once soothed him, but now called forth tears with alarming speed. Luna carried her tray laden with the aforementioned soup, as well as sandwiches, and what looked like a bottle of calming draught. After settling the tray in front of them on the table she settled in, perfectly content to sit in silence with Draco as she waited for him to make a move for the food.

Instead, Draco let go of his knees to sit cross legged. He looked down at his hands, feeling his lip tremble, his vision blurring with unshed tears. Luna reached out and pulled him into a hug. She smelled so familiar and so safe. And he ached with how much he had missed her without having realising it. He didn’t know how long he cried onto her shoulder, but his sobs eventually subsided and he found himself laying in her lap, her fingers running through his hair, a soothing comfort. This is why he loved Luna, Draco thought dazedly, she had no expectations, only love and empathy.

“Thank you.” He whispered into her skirt covered leg. He felt lost.

“What are friends for, Draco?” she asked. He didn’t have an answer. He didn’t feel like he had been a very good friend to her. “But, if you really want to thank me, you’d eat something.”

He sighed and nodded, finally righting himself. Luna smiled and combed her fingers through his hair again, trying to tame it into something less embarrassing, he supposed. “There we go.” She
said, patting his cheek. “Much better.”

Draco huffed an involuntary grunt of disbelief and Luna’s smile grew even wider. “There you are.” She teased gently.

He couldn’t stop the weak smile forming on his face, feeling odd and foreign, as if he had never smiled before. He picked up his bowl of soup off the coffee table and began to eat while Luna chatted about whatever seemed to float into her mind. She talked about her relationship with Greg, about work, about her proposal to St. Mungo’s for opening an addiction counseling and withdrawal service, about her new favorite ice cream shop, the latest sighting of snorkacks, and, of course, her latest spinning project.

He was so grateful that she didn’t expect him to participate in the conversation. He just enjoyed her company and soft voice as he allowed his forgotten hunger to finally be attended to.

Just as Draco finished the last of his soup, Luna announced, “Alright then, I think it’s time I run you a bath, then we unpack your things before making a care plan. Yes?”

Draco considered protesting for a fleeting moment, feeling nettled, but he heard the bite of pragmatism in her voice and remembered that he had been acting like a lost child for days, and knew better than to argue. He nodded and allowed Luna to pull him up off the couch and towards the bathroom.

April 5, 2009

Draco wanted to burn this god forsaken hospital to the ground. He wanted to chase out every healer with a god complex while brandishing a pitchfork. He wanted to light himself on fire, for Merlin’s sake!

Coming back to St. Mungo’s had been a huge mistake, he thought bitterly to himself as he strolled through the too familiar and suffocating halls back to his office. Sprigg hadn’t changed one bit in the last year, and it seemed no one around him was aware that everything had changed for Draco. Draco felt completely separated from his surroundings and the others in it. His usually easy conversations with Unice were stilted and full of sympathetic sighs, which made Draco want to puke. He didn’t want anyone’s sympathy, he just wanted to be left alone.

He hadn’t told anyone what had happened over the last year, except for Beatrice, who was encouraging him to talk to his friends about it. He point blank refused. No, sir, he was not about to talk to anyone about anything.

Stepping into his office he felt the ice in his heart melt slightly at the sight of a familiar looking parcel on his desk. Luna had been regularly sending him meals at work and at home, even when he made excuses not to see her. She had not pried once into what had happened to him, but Draco suspected Harry had told her. He felt he didn’t deserve her help or her affection.

He sat down at his desk and pushed the parcel of food off of his desktop calendar to peer at his month. He was seeing Beatrice three times per week, as per Luna’s encouragement and Beatrice’s insistence. Beatrice was worried about his inability to feed himself when he was feeling like this, and he knew she had a point. Perhaps, he too should be worried about it, but instead he only acknowledged it with a detached resignation.

He was also meeting with Hermione at the DoM next week, a fact that made him push the fragrant food in front of him even further away, lest he dry heave bile all over his desk. How was he meant
to work with Harry’s best friend, one who most definitely knew about how much of a monster Draco had been, and who would probably make his life a living hell?

And, finally, he was meeting with Neville and Luna this evening for dinner, even though he would rather wallow at home in the dark.

He also had meetings lined up with the St. Mungo’s research department where he anticipated he would have to defend his integrity, instead of actually disseminating information.

Draco felt an overwhelming wave of crippling apathy wash over him and he placed his forehead on his desk, thumping it down harder than he meant to, but not bothering to do anything more than grunt. His limbs felt too heavy, his head felt too light, and breathing still felt like a fucking chore.

Reaching into his pocket he let his fingers idly play with the frayed corner of folded parchment that had taken permanent residence on his person over the last month. It wasn’t a brightly coloured piece of hope that he was so accustomed to, but rather the two letters that Potter had sent him when he had first arrived home. The letters simultaneously comforted Draco, and tortured him. They made him furious and weak. They fuelled his boggart and his depression, and he didn’t want to think about why he couldn’t throw them away.

The letters had been so nice. So understanding. Forgiving, even. They made Draco want to scream. Didn’t he know that Draco was a fucking wreck? That he was too damaged? Too broken? That he couldn’t be trusted with the responsibility of someone’s affections? That he would always end up hurting Harry, in the end? That he didn’t deserve Harry’s forgiveness or understanding?

He never wrote a response. And, while he had read and reread the letters a dozen times when he finally gathered the strength to open them, after he had folded them and put them in his pocket and hadn’t opened them again. There they sat against the little innocuous talisman that he kept telling himself he would throw away.

Later that evening, after another appointment with his therapist, Draco apparated to Neville’s place for dinner. He was at the top floor of a muggle apartment building with a broken elevator. Draco had apparated directly to the 13th floor landing, as Neville was the only tenant on the floor. It was a vast open loft, half of which was a remodelled greenhouse with glass panels in the ceiling and walls, overlooking the little neighbourhood below. It was like being in an indoor jungle, and the smell of soil and moist earth made Draco ache with missing the forest, his garden, with missing Harry.

Stepping inside, he saw Luna and Greg sitting at kitchen island to the left, nibbling on snacks while Neville danced around his kitchen preparing dinner. There were hanging baskets of herbs dangling from the pot rack and potted plants fixed to the available wall space around the window above the sink.

“Draco!” Neville yelled in greeting when he looked up from his chopping board, sending carrots flying in all directions. “Oh, damn!”

Draco huffed a laugh of affectionate exasperation in his “hullo.” Neville was just as clumsy as ever, his fond adoration of Neville cutting through his haze of macabre disinterest for a shining moment. Perhaps tonight wouldn’t be so bad. Feeling less heavy than he had since coming home, he made his way over to a Neville, who was crawling around the kitchen after rolling carrot pieces, to give him a hand.
After spelling the mess away and giving everyone a proper hello, he was put to work chopping the vegetables so Neville could continue enthusiastically explaining his plans for moving forward with his greenhouse business.

He was relieved not to be expected to participate in the conversation aside from vapid ‘mhmms’ and ‘ahhs’, and was particularly grateful that he had something to do with his hands. The kitchen was pleasantly warm and softly lit by the setting sun streaming in through the misted windows. He let the calm chatter and fragrant air wrap around him like a blanket as he went through the process of preparing dinner.

“He’s not even listening, is he?”

Draco startled as he realised he had been so caught up in remember what it was like to make dinner with Harry dancing around him that he had completely disengaged from the conversation going on around him.

“Sorry?” He asked apologetically, looking up from the cutting board to see 6 eyes curiously trained on him.

Greg grunted a smile, “Must be weird having to be around other people again, huh?”

“Yeah, I ‘spose it’ll take some getting used to being back in the land of the living instead of by yourself in the forest now, won’t it?” Neville mused.

Draco had just opened his mouth, trying to figure out how to respond when Luna chimed in, “Oh but haven’t you two noticed how few nargles Draco has since he’s been back? He definitely wasn’t alone that whole time.” She smiled serenely at Draco while his face morphed into one of beseeching horror. She wasn’t going to out him, was she?

“Wha- I- Luna!” Draco sputtered.

“No denial, I see.” Smirked Neville, good-naturedly.

Draco’s eyes snapped to Neville’s feeling utterly lost in the proceedings. They couldn’t possibly know, could they?

“I don’t want to talk about it.” he stated emphatically as he dropped his eyes back to the cutting board and resumed his chopping.

When no one responded, he glanced up to see the three of them exchanging worried looks that held an entire silent conversation.

Neville cleared his throat and broke the moment, “Tell us about the thestrals Draco, we’ve been dying to know more about what you’ll be doing with the DoM.”

Draco sighed, grateful to his friends for not pushing despite the clear concern writ large across their faces. Work he could talk about.

Hours later after much food, of which Luna ensured he had at least seconds of everything, and homemade cordial, Draco found himself standing on Neville’s balcony alone with Greg. Staring out at the bright cityscape with Greg’s solid presence by his side, Draco felt at ease for a moment. The constant ache caused by Harry’s absence seem to soften as he took deep breaths of crisp air and grounded himself.

The moment was short lived however, for Greg soon broke the silence, “Draco,” he said
awkwardly, “I know you don’t want to talk about it, and that’s fine and all, but it’s really obvious something is very wrong.”

Draco felt frozen in place, unsure of how to respond. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the next, eyes fixed ahead on the skyline of high rises.

“All I want to say,” Greg pushed on, an air of being completely out of his depths, “is that you were there for me to point out when things were bad and when I needed help, and without that I wouldn’t be here now, and so now I’m here to return the favour. Whatever this is, that has you this tied up, isn’t good and you need to talk to someone about it.”

Releasing a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, he finally chanced a glance at Greg and saw nothing but empathy in his large eyes. “I am talking about it to someone.” He all but whispered.

“And? Is it helping?”

Draco shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

“You know you can talk to us about it, right? We’re not going to judge you, we’re your friends and we love you. Whatever it is, I’m sure we can handle it.”

“He’s right, Draco. You can talk to us.” Neville’s voice sounded softly from the shadows behind him. Luna and Neville seem to have snuck up on them without Draco realising.

Draco was starting to feel like a cornered animal. Luna must have noticed because she spoke next, “Draco, this isn’t an intervention,” she smiled softly. “We just want you to know we’re here for you, and when you’re ready to talk about it we’ll be ready to listen.”

Draco forced himself to look up and face them. “Thank you, really,” he pushed out, fidgeting with the talisman in his pocket. “I’m just not ready for anyone to know yet.”

“Draco, that’s an incredible piece of magic you’re carrying around in your pocket. Who made it for you?” Neville asked, his look of shock having also been replaced by one of impressed curiosity.

“I can’t tell you.” Draco said sadly. “Really, thank you all for your support and concern, but I’m not ready to divulge the details of my last year. I’m still processing it for myself.”

“With who?” Greg yelped, still looking shocked and slightly offended, inspecting his hand for the offending wound.

Draco pulled his shaking hand out of his pocket to reveal the talisman Harry had so expertly carved for him. “It was a gift from-” he said quietly. “A gift from someone to make sure no one could touch me when I didn’t want to be.” He huffed an awkward laugh. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about it.”

Greg’s look of indignation melted into one of sympathy and sheepishness. “I’m sorry Draco, I shouldn’t have touched you without asking, especially after we kind of cornered you.”

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“Well, whoever made you that must care very deeply for you. That’s a very thoughtful token.”
Luna said dreamily.

“Mmm.” Draco murmured, not so much in agreement, but in acknowledgement. It was still too painful to think that Harry might care about him after everything that had happened.

“Well, we won’t push you anymore tonight Draco if you say you’re getting the help you need and that you’re not ready for us to know. But, please remember that we care and that this is a safe space for you. Whenever you need us.”

Draco was at a loss for words. How could he express his deep gratitude for his friends?

He took a deep breath, letting the love of everyone gathered wash over him and saying what he needed before he lost his nerve, “I think- I think I’d like a hug now… please.”

Without another word, and without fear of Draco’s talisman, the three of them moved forward and enveloped him in a comforting embrace.

And he thought maybe he’d be okay one day.
On the 18th, Harry marked one year sober. He woke up quickly, pulled from a dream that ached of nights in Tenebris Hollow, that was steeped in the smells and the sounds of the forest. Harry blinked the sleep away, staring up at the thickly painted, white panel ceiling of Ron and Hermione’s guest bedroom, which was rapidly replacing visions of the hanging herbs above his top bunk, lavender, yellow dock and thyme, brittle and fragrant. The tremolo of the loon was just as quickly fading in his early morning thoughts, the frogs stilling on their waving pond reeds while the calls of jays faded in the distance.

In their places came the sounds of Ron frying up eggs and bacon in the kitchen, singing his breakfast song to Rose, who could be heard laughing and giggling, slapping her hands on the table with squeals of delight, probably flinging bits of egg about the place. Hermione would be at work already.

Harry sighed, breathing in deeply, the smell of a proper English in the Granger Weasley’s country home quickly erasing the soft smell of their garden in early bloom, of the forest waking under a wavering spring sun. Of tea each morning with Draco.

While his heart ached pitifully for the latter, he was immensely comforted by the former. The past month had been nothing but gentle encouragement, honest communication and compassion. The absolute steadying comfort of routine. He had no complaints, not really.

In the mornings, he hung out with Rose, read to her and took her on walks, talked to her about things that were troubling him. Occasionally, he pulled her down their isolated country lane in an ancient red wagon, waxing poetic about things she certainly, definitely, absolutely did not understand, and were almost certainly never ever about a certain blonde who hadn’t responded to a single letter Harry had written. The git.

Rose would clap her pudgy hands and sometimes cry, occasionally yelling one of her now 37 words. Harry didn’t mind, because her smile and joy at the world around her was enough to quell the darkness that often curled up around his feet, licking at his calves and pawing at his new sense of balance. She had helped him, even without knowing it, keep the dread at bay. He felt responsible and capable with her. She gave him a sense that he could be trusted, and he could make good choices, even if it was just for a few hours in the mornings while her parents were busy at work.

He had been going to afternoon meeting three times a week, slowly opening up more and more to the other group members, meeting with Luna in solo therapy sessions in between. He was doing the work. He really was.

Yesterday’s meeting he had talked about what living when his loved ones died had done to him. He had told the silent room of watchful eyes what it felt like to be left behind. He told them how often he had, over decades of his life, thought of what he could say to his parents, how he had imagined their kind and gentle words of love. How they might have cherished him, filled with pride at his accomplishments, and offered comfort when he was met with the trials and tribulations of his youth. How he lost his godfather, and then his mentor, and a beloved teacher, and a friend. And then more friends. And slowly death had piled up around him, consumed him.

One of the muggle attendees, Sylvia, had offered up the idea that because he had spent his whole
life imagining the dead, it had become easier for Harry to accept that he could join them. That he could find peace and happiness there. That death was truly rest from the loneliness and pain of life. She had said she felt the very same way after her fiance had overdosed in bed next to her, just a few months before. Her face had hardened, and her voice became sharp, her breath quick and cutting. How dare he have rest and freedom from pain, she had said, eyes glued to the floor in the space between them, on Luna’s ornate blue oriental rug, edged with blooming lilies and climbing vines. How dare he leave her to carry all of the loneliness and the suffocating reality of recovery alone, and her voice was accusatory, still aimed at the ancient threads snaking across the wide timber floorboards. How dare he leave her stuck in all of the bitterness and anger, and her gaze snapped up to meet Harry’s. And Harry had felt her absolute rage seep into their circle, poisonous and powerful, crackling with a ferocity that he thought only magic could produce.

But, before he could recoil, it was Greg who reached up to grab her hand, and with his soft and steady voice remind her that she was not alone, not in pain or in grief, not in hardship nor fear of failure. He met her rage with quiet understanding, acceptance and the gentle acknowledgement that she may have lost much, but she is also not incapable of regaining much. He spoke softly to her about the rewards of a life well tended and safely kept. A life where rest and joy and peace is possible, and so very often worth the absolute hardship of wrestling it from our own demons. And Harry had felt the rage slip away into grief.

“If all you can do is crawl, start crawling” Luna intoned into the silent circle, Sylvia’s grief like a glass pool in their midst. She often closed the meeting, now nearly always with the same familiar nine attendees, with odd quotes or sayings for the listeners to mull over, but this one was the first to hit Harry so clearly and profoundly - for it was just like her, and it was painfully good advice. It was, in those early days, the only advice.

Across from him, Hestia was rolling a bit of paper between her fingers, her black nails long and threatening, but her touch left no creases. She was another longtime member of Luna’s meetings, one of only four magical people not including himself. Harry had thought she had said she was several years sober from dreamless sleep, but he had avoided speaking to her too much, as she was another face he had recognised from Hogwarts, a Slytherin he had thought. Perhaps from the Slug Club. Thankfully, she had followed Greg’s lead and pretended to be none the wiser as to Harry’s identity and infamy, nor the fact that he’d been presumed missing for the past year and been all over the Daily Prophet. He had grown very fond of her as the meetings wore on.

It was well into his second month of group meetings that Harry had met the third wizard, ducking in from a virulent and unusually cold rainstorm outside Luna’s plant-covered patio and shaking himself off haphazardly. He had stumbled into the living room and plopped down on a chair, his countenance taking Harry’s breath and trapping it in his throat. Dennis Creevey had looked back up at him, a moment of shock on his face, before deftly extending his hand.

“Dennis,” he said softly, smiling at Harry. “I’m an old hat here, just fresh off a relapse though, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Harry said, his voice faltering slightly. “I’m Harry.”

“Glad you found Luna’s meetings, Harry. They’re an island in rough seas.” Dennis cleared his throat and busied himself towel drying his hair, then wiping his glasses, smudging them far worse than the rain had. He had a tremor.

Greg came in and rested a hand on Dennis’ shoulder, welcoming him back, and a knowing nod passed between them. It was only later in the meeting, after Harry heard Dennis’ story of how he was lost in the bottle after his brother died in the war that he allowed himself to cry. Really cry. For
Dennis and for Colin. For all the times he had brushed his older brother off. For the times he didn’t recognise his bravery, his heart of gold, his love for his fellow students, muggle and wizard alike. For the fact that Dennis had watched his father die of grief for the loss of his son.

Dennis had pulled and torn at all the raw parts of Harry - all of the guilt, all of the grief, the burden of the war. Luna had watched the two of them closely all meeting, and afterwards had pulled Harry aside.

“You didn’t cause the war, Harry.” She had said, softly and with care. “We all carry grief, though we do not all carry blame.”

He had told Dennis he was happy to see him back in meetings the next time they met. And his heart was open, without feeling as though he would die of the pain.

Luna had ended their last solo session with a suggestion for homework. For something to mark his one year date. For a challenge, something he felt he was ready for, something he would have been scared to do in the past. It hadn’t taken him long to think of what he wanted to do.

“Harry! Brekkies!” Came Ron’s voice from the kitchen, and Harry smiled, pushing the thought of what’s to come to the back of his mind as he slipped out of bed and grabbed a shirt off the chair in the corner. It was the one he had been wearing yesterday, plain black and not too disgusting to have made it to the wash pile in the corner on the floor.

Harry padded into the kitchen and kissed Rose on the cheek good morning - as he had extrapolated, there was egg everywhere, including in her hair. And Ron’s hair. But it didn’t matter, as the two of them were thoroughly enjoying their morning routine, Ron still humming his breakfast song.

“Fry up?” Asked Ron, pushing a plate of eggs and back bacon toward Harry.

“If you’re offering.” Harry said, taking the plate and sitting next to Rose, who was now waving her bit of bacon at him like a wand.

“Today’s going to be a good day, mate, I can just feel it.” Ron said, wiping his greasy hands on his orange Chudley Cannons apron. Harry had a vague memory of Hermione giving it to him for Christmas some years ago.

“Oh yeah? You’d be making Trelawney proud, talking like that. Saw it in the crystal ball, did you? Not just fog, today?” Harry said, mouth full of eggs and a smile on his face. He also had the light and airy feeling that today would be going his way, he was feeling strong and capable and ready. No hints of the darkness creeping along the edges of his shadow.

Ron snorted, nearly spitting out his own mouthful of sausage. “You git, nothing like that. How dare you remind me of some of the lowest moments in my otherwise unmarred academic record. It’s just got some great intel on the Lestrange case yesterday. We might be closing in. Should be a raid today in a few hours. I’m due to go in and organise the thing.”

Harry stared at Ron, a familiar prickling sensation traveling up his spine, his hair raising on the back of his neck. Harry felt his smile fall and his face turn stoic, hardening with hatred. His magic, which had been so calm and careful flared beneath his hands, singeing the wooden kitchen table beneath his palms, smoke curling gently upward.

Ron stared, his mouth hanging open. “Harry.” His voice was soft, but scared. Rose had gone quiet, her lower lip quivering, a cry building in her tiny chest.

Harry swallowed down hard and focused his thoughts. He didn’t want to scare them. He didn’t
want his magic running wild. He wanted Lestrange, wanted him caught, captured, held in the cells far below the ministry, but he could trust Ron to orchestrate it. He didn’t need to jump in. He didn’t need to.

Beneath all of Harry’s writhing and twisting malice, was fear. He needed Draco to be safe. As soon as Harry recognised it, he took a great shuddering breath and slumped back in his chair, his hand over his own chest, his heart thrumming against his palm. He was scared.

Harry reeled himself in, pulling his magic to him, letting the gentle ghost across his skin soothe him. He was okay. Draco was okay. Ron was going to get Lestrange. It was going to be okay.

Several slow, deep breaths later, Harry looked up and met Ron’s gaze. They were both silent a moment, Ron slowly stroking Rose’s hair until she calmed down, going back to drooling on the edge of her bacon wand, eyes big and staring at Harry.

“Was that what you meant? When you first came back you said you were dangerous. Was that it? Your magic?” Ron’s voice was soft and careful, and Harry nodded slowly.

“We’ve always known you’ve had more magic than the average wizard, Harry. We’ve known it affects you, responds to you, that you channel it like none of us ever could. Even Hermione, with her perfect technique and lexicon of spellwork, she never had power like you did.”

“Lot of good it did me.” Harry said, his voice sour and sullen, his shoulders rolling forward as he put his elbows on the table, head in his hands.

Ron scoffed, clearly not accepting Harry’s bitter defeat so easily. “Saved the world with it, didn’t you?” He reached over and rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “It just feels different now, stronger. But you didn’t do anything but singe the table a bit from your hands. You weren’t dangerous. We’re all fine.”

Harry sighed heavily, scrubbing his face with his palms, pushing his hair up off his forehead.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re so affected by my mentioning Lestrange? I know you worked that case, Harry. I won’t talk about it if it bothers you.”

“No, Ron, no. It’s not that I worked the case, it’s not that I don’t want to hear about it. I just really want you to get him. I really, really want you to put him away. He doesn’t deserve to be free.”

Harry looked up at Ron’s now serious face, the face he wore at work, as an auror.

“He hurts people, Ron. He’s still hurting people.” Harry said this part softer. His mind was full of the scars on Draco’s hips and down his stomach. Of his fear. Of his nightmares, where invisible hands closed around his neck. As he begged to be released. Gasping.

“I’ll do my best, Harry.” Ron said, untying the hideous orange apron from his lanky frame, hanging it up by the stove, twitching his wand at the stove to arrange clean up.

“When you bring him in,” Harry started, suddenly full of resolve. “I want to speak at his trial. I want to ask for the maximum sentence.”

Ron raised an eyebrow as he flipped a cleaning charm at Rose, clearing away all remnants of the fry up. “I’ll arrange it.” He said simply, grabbing his auror robes and briefcase by the door.

It was the late afternoon by the time Harry could get away from the farmhouse. Hermione had been
late coming from work, mumbling incoherently about needing to read up on some things, cheeks unusually flush and hair even more wild than usual.

Harry had put Rose down for a nap and made her a cup of tea, which he brought to her in the living room, her books already strewn about the table and sofa, her shoes off and her stockinged feet crossed beneath her. She looked exactly as she had all of their Hogwarts days, worrying her lip and flipping pages frantically.

“Hermione.” Harry said, trying to keep the laugh out of his voice.

“Mm, Harry?” She said, not looking up, but twitching her wand to flip through the index of an absolutely ancient looking encyclopaedia next to her.

“I’m going out for a few hours. If I’m not back by midnight, please come and get me.”

Hermione’s head snapped up and the encyclopaedia next to her fell shut. She looked instantly worried, and she pushed a section of hair away from her face to stare up at him.

“It’s okay. Nothing will happen, and I’m feeling fine. Good, even. I’m just trying to be accountable. Extra accountable. I’m going to Grimmauld Place, and I wanted to tell you, so you didn’t worry.”

His attempt to comfort her didn’t seem to work very well, as her brows were creasing more and more as he spoke.

“It’s been a year, ‘Mione. A year today. I have questions that I need answered. I have things I need to finish there.” He didn’t want her to know how nervous he felt, so he was putting on a brave face and schooling any of the uncertainty from his voice. It was at least partly truthful.

Harry picked up some of the books and put them on the coffee table, sitting next to Hermione and taking her hand in his.

“I know I disappeared for a year, Hermione. I know I broke your and Ron’s hearts. I know I messed up a whole lot of things in my life, and it’s okay if you’re worried and you don’t trust me or don’t trust that I’ll be okay. But, I can’t stay here forever, and I need you to believe that I’m capable of taking back my life, because I need to believe that I’m capable.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes bright and her hands tremulous in his. “Okay, Harry.” She said softly. “By midnight.”

“By midnight.” He repeated, and kissed her temple. He got up from the sofa and let her hand fall from his.

He strode to the door and pulled on his purple hat, shoving it down over his unkempt hair and slipping his wand into his jeans pocket. It was now or never.

At the end of the lane, Harry took a deep breath and spun, concentrating hard on the familiar stoop of number 12 Grimmauld Place.

“You have returned to us,” hissed a soft voice as Harry straightened up, opening his eyes and glancing up at the ironwood barrier before him, the last light of the afternoon falling on the familiar carvings, and he reached out to feel the ancient grains of the door.

“More whole than you ever were, I see.” The little adder had uncoiled itself and was sliding around the knocker, peering down at Harry, forked tongue flicking into the air.
Harry’s fingertips brushed the intricate carvings of the forest scene before him, trees swaying in the warm wind of spring, the visage coming to life as he traced the edges of a large beech tree. His magic thrummed beneath his hand, rejoicing as it recalled the feel of the vernal grasses and budding shoots, new leaves and the thawing springs beneath stretching boughs. The smell of lilacs and the familiar hum of bees amongst the undergrowth.

He had always rushed his arrival, ignoring the ornate door, sniping with the little adder and demanding entrance, mind occupied with secrets and needs, with dying rather than living. Today, he let his magic reacquaint itself with the wards, disused and dusty, lingering with the dark and coppery smell of curses and malintent. He let himself seep into the ironwood and around the ancient hinges, the rough stone and wrought iron that fortified a place he had once been desperate to call home.

It was true what Ron had said, he had always been powerful, always full of magic, bursting at the seams, but he had never been this aware, this awake, this connected, and settled with his power. In the days before, when he would come to Grimmauld Place to obliviate himself and dampen his casting, to blend his blood with opiates, he was always fighting, always at odds with himself, constantly at war, always with a sickening unease.

With the re-emergence of his magical skill came a newfound synergy - these days, when he cast, it was all of the pieces of him, together, united. The bickering, the mischief had stopped. Wordless, wandless, he could bring forth the most beautiful and complex of spells as if they were just an extension of himself, part of his being, in his blood.

As his fingers moved across the forest scene, thestrals began to emerge among the trunks and lower branches, shaking their heads and beating their wings, gold filigree unfurling from their manes, down their withers, across their scalloped hip bones and into their tails. Harry could imagine their screeching nickering, so familiar to him now, and a smile ghosted across his lips.

“So, parselmouth, the death-beasts have chosen you too,” hissed the little berg to his right. “Just as well, for the House of Black should not be sitting empty for so long.”

“For too long this house has been full of dark and hidden things. The thestrals were right to take it back from death. He has taken too many here.” Harry said softly, looking over at the little snake, now puffing impressively, the dark half moons along it’s back expanding and shrinking with each huff of air, the orange ringed eyes trained on Harry’s.

“Yes, young master Black. Too long death has hunted here. I am glad to see you have escaped him. I did not think you would.”

“Nor did I.” Said Harry, closing his eyes and picturing the day he had been so intent on dying. So resigned. Trapped. “Nor did I.”

Harry closed his eyes a moment, focusing on his magic, winding its way up the face of the towering dwelling, it was coiling around tendrils of the dark magic that had lurked there and melting it away, replacing it with the same golden latticework that had once protected Tenebris Hollow. That he had conjured to keep Draco safe.

The thought of Draco pulled the air from Harry’s lungs and he, for a moment, forgot to breathe. Images of the last time they had come here flickered from his memory, Draco standing behind him, waiting, patiently. Draco’s hand just brushing against his as they climbed the stairs, and then grabbing for him while they apparated away, just as he had when he saved him.

The lock clicked and the heavy ironwood door swung inward, pulling Harry from his reverie. Harry
took a deep breath, thanked the adder, and crossed the threshold into the familiar musty hallway. The ancient lamps along the wall flickered to life, one by one, far more than the single bulb that used to guide his debauched journeys throughout the house.

He stood in the foyer, contemplating the house, sending his magic out along the stairwell, into the kitchen, across ancient oak floorboards and slabs of marble cut from the south of France. He let tendrils snake into the darkest corners and crevices that had not seen light since years before Sirius’s death. Everywhere that Harry felt resistance, felt the sickly snaking pull at his visceria, the creeping shadows and burning hum, he focused on it, met it and challenged it. “You cannot have me” he thought, over and over, as his skin prickled and his hair raised, like the air had suddenly become heavy with electricity. The smell of blood was thick and purulent by the time he paused a moment, hand reaching out against the wall to steady himself, drained by the intensity of the depths of the house, by the layers of magic that death had sewn there.

Harry felt weak and overwhelmed, nausea building up in his gut as he stumbled over to the foot of the stairs. He sank down on the second step, leaning his head into his hands and breathing deeply. He didn’t know how much time had passed, but the house had fought him, fought to hang on to it’s ways, to stay comfortable and sick.

Harry concentrated on his breaths. In and out. Deep and slow. The nausea would leave him soon, the thoughts of what he had done upstairs, the pleasure, the slick feel of the honey, it would follow. He could manage the upwelling of desire. He had been prepared for it. Prepared for it to hit as soon as he weakened. He groaned out loud into the otherwise silent house, willing it away. “You cannot have me.” He said, into the unsettled dust, still pooling in the air, his head still hanging down, his hands threading through his hair.

He felt a soft gust of hot air against his hands at the same time he heard a familiar snort and the rustling of wings. Harry pulled his head up so quickly he instantly became lightheaded, the room spinning around him, his stomach threatening, his hands reaching to steady himself on the stairs behind him.

In front of him was a thestral. The very same stallion that had come to him in the gorge the night Draco had asked him to leave. It was leaning it’s head forward and into Harry’s chest, snorting another jet of warm air across his lap and nuzzling against his sweater.

“You.” Harry said, completely awestruck, reaching out and sliding his hands up either side of his skeletal skull, rubbing slowly up underneath the ragged forelock that stretched down from between his ears, which were swiveling back and forth.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked, letting the gigantic beast lean into his hands and watching in amazement as he stretched out his enormous wings in the seemingly impossibly cramped space of the hallway.

The thestral nudged Harry’s chest a bit, as if to rouse him into standing up.

“Okay, okay, I can see you don’t want me lounging about while there’s work to be done.” Harry said fondly, his limbs still feeling a bit weak, but his spirits lifted by the visitor from the forest. He steadied himself against the wall and pushed up onto his shaky legs. He hadn’t realised this would take so much out of him.

Harry cast a tempus, and swore instantly at the time. 23:49. Hermione would come tearing down the place in a few minutes if he didn’t get back.

“Thank you.” He called to the thestral as he ran back down the hall and out the front door, though
he was met with another disgruntled sounding snort and the stamp of a hoof.

“*Until next time.*” Hissed the little adder at his back as Harry nearly fell across the threshold in his hurry to disapparate back to the little farmhouse in the country.

He arrived, panting at the front door, which was already standing open.

“Hermione!” He called, kicking off his trainers and throwing his hat back over the hook by the door.

“Hermione! I’m here! No need to raise hell!” Harry slid in his socks across the wooden floor and into the living room, coming to a haphazard halt as he nearly knocked over a coffee table covered in books.

Hermione was kneeling on the ground by the sofa, where Ron was seated, just taking off his auror robes.

“Ron.” Harry said, his voice strained.

“What happened?” Harry was already by Hermione’s side, his eyes drawn instantly to the dark blood stains that spread across his uniform.

“It’s ok, Harry. I’m fine. We got him. We got Lestrange.”

Ron was pale. Paler than normal. He looked exhausted. Harry looked to Hermione, who was worrying her lip, eyes fixed on him, her hands applying some kind of salve to the curse marks that had marred his left arm, her wand tucked behind her ear.

Harry let out the breath he had been holding. He needed to send an owl.
April 11, 2009

The usually familiar office of muted tones and soft furniture felt uncomfortably warm today. Stifling, even. Beatrice’s gaze seemingly more sharp than usual. Pining him to the spot with a worried crease in her brow. It was subtle, but Draco could see it.

He was sure he had done it now, was sure she was going to recommend he was admitted to the Janus Thickey ward, where Unice would have to spoon feed him for the foreseeable future. Sure that his year in the forest, and subsequent fallout had irreparably broken him somehow. That loving Harry had, continuing to love Harry, had fried his brain and sense of reality. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, trying to think of how best to expound on the odd statement he had blurted out at her when he first came into the office 5 minutes ago, “I’m seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Would you care to clarify?” Beatrice prompted, when it seemed Draco was just going to continue to stare at her in wide eyed befuddlement. “What are you seeing?”

“Theystrals.” He muttered, shocked by his own confession.

“And how do you know they aren’t real?” Her voice was smooth now, eyes less hawk-like.

“I don’t. I just- how many thestrals are usually wandering around the Ministry grounds? Or Diagon Alley? Or St. Mungo’s?! For fuck’s sakes I-”

“Draco-“ she interrupted his increasingly frantic gesticulating, “let’s take a deep breath and go back to the beginning. When did this start?”

“3 weeks ago, I saw the first one after my first meeting with the DoM.” he mumbled, his head now in his hands, elbows propped on his knees. He had minimal shame with Beatrice, as she had seen him in much worse condition, but he knew the fact that he had waited 3 weeks to bring this up would cause at least one raised eyebrow of disapproval that he did not want to see.

“And you’ve never seen thestrals in these areas before?” She asked, scratching a few scant notes on her clipboard.

“Not that I’ve noticed, no.” He finally picked his head up from his hands and tried to regain some dignity.

“And you’re certain no one else can see them?”

“Well, honestly, how many people can see thestrals to begin with?”

“That’s true.” She conceded. “And I don’t want to dismiss this if they’re truly hallucinations, but I want to get a more clear picture before we jump to anything. Thestrals are unusual to begin with because so few people can see them. Have you seen them in any muggle areas?”

“No, only wizarding.”

“And what predicated this? You said you were in a meeting with the DoM, do you want to discuss what happened?”
Draco thought back to that painfully awkward, yet thoroughly engrossing experience.

He had arrived nearly an hour early and paced the alleyway near the visitors entrance as he tried to calm his overwhelming nausea and stop sweating so much. He had had to cast three drying charms on himself by the time he was due inside. He had managed to make it through the atrium and security with minimal eye contact, which was a huge relief, but the lifts down to the DoM were a different story.

Packed with people making their way to the various ministry departments, most didn’t recognise let alone engage with Draco. But, there were a few others that gave squawks of surprised and awkwardly shuffled away from him, causing many a curious eye to swivel in his direction. This attention, minor though it was, was causing the all too familiar flush of crimson to rise on his neck and cheeks, and he had broken out into another bout of uncontrollable sweating.

He had fished compulsively in his pocket for a post-it note to soothe his nerves and distract his mind before remembering that he didn’t carry hope with him anymore. Instead, he touched Harry’s words traced on frayed parchment that further tightened the vice grip of nerves in his midsection.

Harry had sent him another letter. One he hadn’t read yet, but that took up its place next to the other two. Surely this one would condemn him in the way he knew he deserved. With a jolt that had little to do with the descent of the torture device he was traveling in, he remembered when he had bumped into Harry on these lifts well over a year ago. The smell of dark magic, the hopelessness.

By the time the lift reached his floor, it was empty, but he was wrecked. His knees shook, his shirt under his robes were damp, and his hair felt gross. Leaning against the wall after stepping off the godforsaken box of emotion, he took deep breaths and tried to regain his footing. He had had to cast an extra strength drying and cleaning charm on himself before convincing himself not to get right back on the lift and flee from this hell hole.

Glancing at his watch, he saw he had 10 minutes to get down the hall. He schooled his features, gritted his teeth, tightened his grip on his briefcase, and marched forward into the dimly lit stone passage.

The entrance hall to the DoM was dark. Much too dark. Behind a rather innocuous wooden door was a large dark antechamber with a small reception desk piled high with parchment that hid a rather old and frail looking witch.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were the same monotone slabs of shiny black granite, giving the place a look of wetness. It reminded him of Voileami’s cave, he thought with an ache in his heart, but not as beautiful. No glowing moss, no artful nests. The light from the numerous torches on the wall seemed to be sucked into the blackness of the granite. He honestly didn’t know how the receptionist could see anything on the parchment in front of her.

“Hello,” He said, his very formal Healer voice echoing off the walls loudly, “I’m here to see Unspeakable Granger.”

Without looking up from her parchment, the pale woman said in a dusty voice, barely above a whisper, “Have a seat, she’ll be here in a moment dear.”

Draco looked around, trying to see what seat she was referring to, but the room was so dark he found himself squinting into the blackness. It wasn’t until he walked off towards the torches in the corner of the room that he located what seemed to be one of a few black leather armchairs scattered along the back wall. Honestly, Draco thought, whoever their interior decorator is should be fired.
He settled himself into the surprisingly comfortable chair and wondered if Granger would even be able to see him when she came out for him.

He needn’t have worried however, for only after a few moments of enduring his internal boggart’s insistent insinuations that Draco should have stayed home, Granger was striding out of a door behind the receptionist and towards Draco.

Since Hogwarts, Draco had had zero personal contact with Granger. He apologised to her in 8th year, yes, a painfully awkward experience. But they had essentially ignored one another since. It wasn’t until they began exchanging professional owls about his research that he had had anything to do with her. He was filled with trepidation that his youthful apology all those years ago wouldn’t be enough to transcend their history and allow them to work together as professional adults.

And, a rather large part of him, a part he was studiously trying to ignore, was praying to any deity that was listening that he would be able to get on with Harry’s best friend. That she wouldn’t hate him. That hopefully she would maybe even like this Draco. That the promise of Harry’s letter wouldn’t be lost because Hermione didn’t want anything to do with the petulant bully that called her a mudblood.

Draco jumped to his feet on her approach, he was sweating again.

“Healer Malfoy.” She said professionally, but with warmth and a hint of an ironic smile, as she extended her hand to Draco as if they were meeting for the first time.

“Unspeakable Granger.” He said mimicking her tone and gesture.

At that, she really did smile, “Please call me Hermione.” She said as she turned and gestured to the door she had come through.

“Alright. Hermione. Then please call me Draco.” He said surprising himself. He almost never encouraged first names in a professional context. Harry was melting his brain, and he hadn’t even spoken with him in two months.

Hermione cast a curious and appraising glance towards him as they came through the door and into a larger circular room with identical doors placed around its wall.

“Okay, Draco, through here.” She said, leading him through an inconspicuous door like all the others. They stepped into a large warmly lit office with wooden paneled walls and an enchanted window with a view of a forest. He was so relieved to be in a place with adequate lighting that he let out an audible sigh of relief.

Hermione chuckled and offered Draco a chair in front of her desk. “The darkness is a bit oppressive out there isn’t it?”

“A bit? I know you guys have a reputation, but is the aesthetic necessary?” Draco huffed with amusement.

She actually laughed at that. Oh god, he was doing this. He was joking with Hermione Granger. Looking at her in this light without having to squint he could see she had grown into a stunning person. Her hair was still all wild curls and frizz, but it looked somehow edgy and stylish with a quill sticking out from behind her ear. Her skin was clear and radiant, and although he knew she had a small toddler, she didn’t look like a frazzled mom. She looked powerful. Her eyes were kind but calculating. And although her smile was genuine, he could see the reproach behind it.

Sitting there before her he was suddenly overcome with the knowledge that she had probably seen
Harry that very morning. That she was his best friend. That she knew how Harry was doing. What he was doing. He was filled with an almost overwhelming urge to ask how he was. To shake her and demand that she tell him that Harry was safe and loved. He wanted to tell her to tell Harry that he was proud of him. But he swallowed the impulse. This was not the time nor the place. He still didn’t know if Harry had told anyone about them.

“So,” Hermione began, rocking in her chair, “thestrals.”

They had talked about his research for nearly four hours. Hermione had gone over it with a fine tooth comb and knew it nearly as well as Draco did. Draco couldn’t hide that he was thoroughly impressed with her tenacity and academic rigor, and he was thankful that her single-minded focus seemed to leave little room for awkward lulls. She asked probing questions and Draco felt solid for the first time in weeks, being able to discuss his work with someone who matched his intellectual and interest level.

As they were winding down their discussion of how to move forward, they began picking through some of the more esoteric aspects of thestral and blood magic.

“My supervisor seems to really think there is something to the theory of a soul having a certain imprint that allows certain people to work with thestrals and unicorns. I’m not entirely convinced.” She had a shrewd look on her face.

“Why not?” Draco asked, feeling suddenly watched.

“It’s an unusual circumstance because there are so few people able to access the magic of unicorns and thestrals as it is, so its not like I can gather 100 of you and see why and how this is all happening, you know?”

“Yes, it would be ideal if there were more of us.”

“I just have a hard time believing that you couldn’t access unicorn magic because you weren’t pure, or that you have to be somehow evil to access thestral magic.”

Draco stilled. “Is evil the opposite of purity?” he asked carefully. This suddenly felt like a very fragile conversation. After four hours of amicable camaraderie discussing research, he was afraid that Hermione had forgetting who she was speaking to.

She seemed to have realised what she had said, and took her time choosing her next words. “I didn’t mean that Draco, I know you’re not evil.” she said softly, genuinely. “I’m just having a hard time conceptualising the dichotomy of these two creatures and what that means for the people who can access their magic.”

“How it’s felt for me, and for other people I’ve known,” he asked carefully. This suddenly felt like a very fragile conversation. After four hours of amicable camaraderie discussing research, he was afraid that Hermione had forgetting who she was speaking to.

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“How it’s felt for me, and for other people I’ve known,” he said vaguely, pointedly, watching as Hermione narrowed her eyes, “is that these creatures seem to have chosen me, us, because we’ve chosen death at some point in our lives. Accepted it to the point of seeking it willingly.”

Disregarding Draco’s confession, she narrowed in, “Who are the other people you’ve known? You didn’t mention that in your research.”

“It’s anecdotal.” He said, waving his hand dismissively, not meeting her eye. “People I’ve met along the way.” He said even more vaguely.

She didn’t seem satisfied with that but moved on anyway. “So, because you’ve chosen death at some point, but clearly didn’t die, they chose you?”
“I think so, yes.”

She looked pensive, brow furrowed in consideration. “I wonder…” she said, tapping her chin, swivelling her chain.

“Wonder what?”

Seeming to have decided something, she jumped up from her chair. “Come with me, I have something I want to try.”

Feeling startled, he got up and followed her from the room, leaving his researched scattered on her desk. They walked back out into the circular room. As soon as the door closed the room began to spin around them. Feeling slightly alarmed, he turned to Hermione, who stood tapping her foot impatiently as she stared ahead in concentration. When the wall stopped spinning she grabbed his sleeve and pulled him through another door.

“How can you tell where you’re going?” He asked in confused amazement.

“The doors know I mean business, they don’t mess me about anymore.” She replied ominously.

Feeling even more confused, and a little afraid, than he did before he asked the question, he allowed himself to be lead through hallways and rooms of weird tanks, shelves of odd instruments, and halls of towering storage. Finally, they reached a door that opened at the top of what appeared to be a circular stone cathedral. At the bottom of the steps in the center of the room was a dais, upon which sat a simple stone carved archway, underneath which hung a tattered veil.

He slowly followed Hermione down the steps and towards the dais, a subtle echoing murmur quietly reverberating through the room. He noticed that while there was no breeze, the veil fluttered as if caught in an eternal draft.

As they got closer, he realised the echoing murmurs were actually whispered voices. Quiet and indistinct voices, but very real all the same. He noticed too that Hermione was watching him closely, seemingly unbothered by them.

“What is this?” Draco asked, eyes transfixed by the softly swishing veil as they arrived before the dais.

“This is The Death Chamber.” Hermione stated, still watching him, as if waiting for something.

Draco huffed an uncomfortable laugh. “Are you going to ritually sacrifice me on the altar of blood magic research in here?”

The fierce look of concentration on Hermione’s face broke and she smiled, looking away from Draco and towards the veil. “Sorry, this was a bit ominous, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, just a little.” He smiled back, but eyes never leaving the archway, feeling inextricably pulled towards the veil. The voices sounding even louder now that his foot was resting on the first step of the dais.

“I brought you in here to see if you were affected by this archway.” She said, crossing her arms, watching his fixation curiously.

“Why would it affect me?” He asked, the voices getting a bit louder, more familiar.

She didn’t respond, but Draco felt something tugging at his sleeve and he realised that he had
climbed the last of the steps without noticing and Hermione was now trying to pull him back.

He shook himself and stepped down, finally looking away from the archway to see the concerned and thoughtful look in Hermione’s eyes.

“Honestly, Draco…”

The sound of that quiet yet undeniably familiar voice coming from the archway caused Draco to jump quite involuntarily with shock.

“…what?!” He stammered, looking panic-stricken between the veil and Hermione, who seemed to be watching him even closer now.

“What?” Hermione asked, with a clinical voice.

“What the fuck was that? Did you hear him?” Draco asked, his voice shakey.

“Heard who?”

“You’re telling me you didn’t just hear Severus’s voice?” he said, desperate for confirmation that he wasn’t going insane. He knew he had heard Severus’s voice from his portrait a thousand times, but this, this felt different.

“No.” She said interestedly. “I never hear anything come from the veil. That’s why I brought you down here, to see if you could.”

“What?” He asked distractedly, staring at the veil, looking for any sign of his godfather to appear through the tatty fabric.

“The only people who hear voices are those who have a deep connection with loss and death. Honestly, I think I’m too… clinical, to hear them.”

Draco made a strangled sort of noise, one of exasperation, confusion, and incredulity. “I’m a healer! I’m incredibly clinical!”

“Yes, true, but you seem to have a deep connection to your magic and the magic around you. And something deeper than just a theoretical interest in death and thestral magic. These are things you’ve lived and experienced. The truth is, I’ve never loved someone who has died. Not like you have. Or… others.”

He was looking at her now as she spoke, but the veil kept catching his eye from the periphery. Each time it fluttered, he was reminded of the swish of a thestral tail disappearing behind a tree. Of the sound of their deep snorting ambling behind him. This large room with its omnipresent voices and hypnotising veil made him crave the forest and the presence of his thestrals so strongly that it was like a physical pain. His missed Voileami terribly. Missed Harry terribly.

It was only after finally leaving a very distracted Hermione flipping feverishly through giant tomes on her desk, and regaining the light of day outside the ministry, that Draco heard it for the first time since the morning he left the forest. The familiar rustle and flap of leathery wings.

He spun around on the spot in the alleyway and found himself standing face to face with Voileami.

He was so shocked, so startled, so convinced that he was hallucinating, so afraid that he had lost his marbles after hearing Severus’s voice, that he apparated home before he could convince himself to touch her.
What if she wasn’t real?
What if she was?
What would it mean, either way? Were thestrals visiting Harry, too?

After that day, he started seeing Voileami in the strangest places. Constantly. And every time he encountered her, he was too afraid to reach out to see if she was real. Too afraid to ask others if they could see thestrals. Too afraid to tell anyone, lest it be confirm he really had lost the plot.

He saw her in the deserted halls of St. Mungo’s, down the side roads of Diagon Alley, and once even in the hallway of his flat. And even when he didn’t actually see her, he could often hear her soft snorting, hear the rustle of her wings, the gentle clip of her feet on the pavement behind him when he walked to work.

Now, sitting in Beatrice’s office, awaiting for what felt like a verdict in nervous anticipation, he felt in his pocket for the unread letter.

“Draco, first I want to say that you’re okay. Even if these are hallucinations, you have no other history of psychotic episodes and no other symptoms to indicate that you’re a danger to yourself or others.” Draco felt a bit of the tension writhing in in stomach lessen at her carefully chosen words.

“But, because this is such an unusual situation, I’m going to give you homework.” Her face was soft and those familiar hazel eyes didn’t flinch from his wary gaze. “Next time you see Voileami I want you to try and touch her. And, I want you to tell a friend that can also see thestrals about this, and ask them to confirm her presence. If you had said you were seeing people who weren’t alive, or literally any other hallucination I wouldn’t indulge in this, but because this is so out of the ordinary and with your work with the DoM and strong connections to thestrals, it's best we be sure. Do you think you can do that?”

“What if it’s really her?” He asked, feeling small.

“Then we’ll figure out what she wants. But for now, let’s rule out complex stress-induced hallucinations.” He gave her a thankful smile.

“Now,” she continued, “you haven’t mentioned this mysterious Harry of yours in a few sessions, do you want to discuss why that is?”

Draco felt himself blush. He had let Harry’s name slip from his lips in a moment of sobbing hysteria when he finally told Beatrice what he had done. Although he didn’t clarify that it was the Harry- Harry Potter, he still felt a bit like he had done something wrong by saying his name out loud. “He sent me another letter.” he responded sheepishly, looking at his hands.

“And?”

“I haven’t read it yet.” he admitted.

“When did you receive it?”

“The day before I saw Voileami for the first time.”

“Draco,” she sighed, “we’ve talked about the importance of open honesty. We’ve been working together for nearly two years. How can you deal with your depression and anxiety when you’re hiding these things from therapy? You’ve been holding onto this letter for 3 weeks as well as the fear of possible hallucinations, which is making your recovery more difficult for yourself.”
“I know.” he groaned petulantly.

“Secrets are how mental illness flourish, Draco.”

“I know.” He said more softly.

“Would you like to read it with me now, so we can discuss it together? Discuss whether or not you’re going to respond?”

Draco let out an all mighty sigh of defeat. “Yeah, okay.” He said as he withdrew the letter from his pocket. Sometimes therapy felt like being skinned alive.

The next morning Draco sat staring at a blank piece of parchment. Harry’s last letter open in front of him. He was thankful, really, that Beatrice had encouraged him to open the letter in her office as he wouldn’t have known how to cope had he been alone.

Draco,

They’ve got Lestrange. The Ministry is still determining a trial date. I’ll be speaking against him, and I thought you might want the opportunity to do so as well. Ron is the lead on his case, and I’m enclosing his contact details at the ministry if you would like to reach out.

I’m sending you all my strength.

- Harry

Draco had felt as if he had been electrocuted, swiftly followed by an all-consuming full body numbness, reading those words. That was not what he had expected. He couldn’t believe these words had been sitting in his pocket for three weeks. He felt like a fucking idiot.

Beatrice had talked him down from his panic attack and together they discussed his options. His options for the trial, and for Harry. Draco knew now that he couldn’t just continue to avoid Harry because he was scared and embarrassed and hurt. Couldn’t lock these part of himself away and hope to be okay one day without acknowledging them.

He knew it was time to face the broken and tattered parts of his being and to bring them into the light. To sift through and make himself whole again. To face LeStrange. To reach out to the only person whom he had allowed himself to love.

He was filled with anguish and apprehension as he brought a shaking quill to parchment and struggled to find a way to put his gratitude and tumult on the page.

Harry,

Thank you for your letters, and for telling me about Lestrange. I will write to Ron.

I haven’t been brave, but I’m trying to be.
Did you see Mars last night? The battle continues.

- Draco

Before he could talk himself out of it, before his boggart could show him anymore horror, he apparated directly to the wizarding post office to send off his letter to Harry and another to Ron.

He was filled with so many emotions after he apparated back home that he couldn’t seem to settle. Double checking the meeting schedule on his fridge, he apparated to the corner of a brilliantly familiar garden. One filled with dandelions and clover.

Making his way towards the path that lead up to the purple front door, Draco was distracted by the swish of a long black tail, and the smell of something. Something that reminded him of woodsmoke and sun. Of herbs and soil.

Distracted, he turned and pushed deeper into the garden, following the snorting huffs. When he cleared a rather large and unruly rosemary bush, he stood facing, not Voileami as he had expected, but a huge stallion of a thestral. It was taller than Voileami by a few hands, and his wings were massive. Draco stood, obscured by the lushness of Luna’s garden from the house and surrounding area, contemplating the creature before him.

It stood there, silently watching Draco, seemingly waiting for him to do something.

Remembering his homework from Beatrice, he reached out a tentative hand. He was flooded with emotion as the animal’s breath ghosted across his skin. Closing the gap, he placed his cold hand on the warm beaked muzzle, and sighed with profound relief. He wasn’t mad. He wasn’t hallucinating. He still needed to find outside confirmation, but for now, this was okay.

“Will you come with me?” He asked the thestral, not sure if he would get a response.

He turned towards the house and was glad to hear the thestral following him. When he was back in sight of the house, he saw that Luna was on her front porch, watching him with mild amusement.

“The wildness suits you, Draco.” She smiled as he awkwardly stepped over a lush patch of nasturtiums.

At that, Draco snorted an amused laugh, checking behind him to make sure the thestral was still there.

“Luna, I need to ask you something.” He said, thestral trailing behind him.

“Oh?”

He ran his fingers through his hair nervously, what if she couldn’t see the thestral?

“Can you see thestrals?”

“Yes.”

“Can you see the thestral behind me?”

“Of course.” She smiled, tilting her head and pointing behind him. “I can also see that small one on the other side of the yard.”
Turning to see his Voileami ambling up the path towards him, Draco cried, “Oh, thank gods.”

He felt such profound relief that he actually doubled over with his hands on his knees and hung his head.

“This large thestral has been following a group member around for weeks.” She said dreamily. “But I’ve never seen this small one before. Odd, isn’t it?”

“He’s been following Harry?” Draco blurted out, righting himself. Shocked by his own stupidity, Draco just stared at Luna, waiting for the shoe to drop. Instead, Luna surprised him yet again by smiling widely and reaching for his hand.

“Care to tell me how you know about Harry and his thestral?”

Draco took a deep breath as he grasped Luna’s hand and allowed her to pull him inside the warm and fragrant house towards the kitchen. His secrets and fear of judgment had allowed his depression to fester for weeks. It was time to come clean to his inner circle. He needed accountability and support. Luna was seeing Harry for meetings, and if she didn’t know yet, he was sure she would soon enough.

“I’m in love with him.” He blurted. Fuck, that was not what he meant to say. Shit.

“I think that much is obvious.” Luna said serenely, not missing a beat, gathering the necessary things for a tea tray. “What is not obvious, is why exactly you’re not together.”

“How is that not obvious?” Draco asked, feeling gobsmacked. “Has Harry not told you what happened?”

“I can’t talk about what Harry and I discuss.” She said simply, pouring boiling water into a floral painted teapot. “I’m asking you to explain it to me.”

So he did. He laid all his cards on the table, willingly. Each time he thought about holding a detail back, he remembered how he had laid in bed without eating for three days. He thought about how Luna had told him repeatedly that she was there to listen and keep all his secrets, when he was ready.

It was a different kind of confession than what he did in therapy. This felt more real. Scarier. More freeing. This felt more healing in a way. Luna wasn’t paid to help Draco unpack his baggage. She did it willingly, and enthusiastically, for no reason other than the fact that she loved him and wanted to rejoice in his growth. Wanted good things for him. Wanted him to feel whole.

“Then, I disapparated like a complete and utterly selfish demon. And then, you found me three days later.” He finished lamely, after his second cup of tea and an entire package of chocolate digestives.

He felt drained, but lighter. He felt the familiar sense of connection with Luna in this moment as he had with Harry when they traded secrets all the last year. He felt like something in him was bursting, some wall that had held him back all these years, crumbling. Harry had prompted this growth, and now he was doing the work. He was starting to bloom.

“Mm.” She replied thoughtfully.

“So, you see, that’s why we’re not together. Why we can’t be.”

“Oh, Draco.” She said with that too kind smile. “I think this is a decision you should be
making with Harry, not without him.”

"Luna, I'm trying." He said softly.

She patted his hand and they drank their tea late into the afternoon.
Hestia always arrived early to meetings. She’d wander the garden, her hands just barely caressing the tops of daisy shoots and early bluebells, forget-me-nots and irises that were eager to grow tall for when summer would come. She’d pick whatever blooming flowers she could find, grab a few vines of ivy along the eastern wall and twist them all together into a crown, her black nails careful to press and wind each stem into its proper place. That crown would sit atop her voluminous natural hair, much like Hermione’s, all meeting, and Hestia’s brilliant amber eyes would gaze out from beneath white petals or dark ivy leaves, full of questions, full of answers, full of calm and comfort.

When Hestia talked about recovery, she talked about growing through pain, about using it to reclaim and retake what was hers. Using it to help define her strength.

Harry hadn’t known what she meant, until he had thought back to the day he had conquered the honey. How now, every time he saw it, smelled it, mixed it into his tea, he remembered that this was something that could not break him. It became an affirmation of his strength, a small moment in the day to feel powerful. He began nodding along as she spoke, her voice always soft, but clever and musical when she was focused, lifting up with emphasis, questioning the others, and slowing into deeper tones to challenge them.

Hestia had picked only black dahlias that day, twisting them together into a fervent deep red ring. The crown upon her braided hair had blended beautifully with her skin, and she seemed to Harry to be made of nothing but the depths of the earth itself. Of pain, regrown and reformed into stunning, silken beauty, raw and powerful.

She had recrossed her long and slender legs as she spoke, sitting back in a purple velveteen settee, feet clad in ancient chucks but legs bare to high waisted silken black shorts, belted with a black bow across her midriff. He had watched the graceful movement curiously, wondering if he had felt any attraction beneath the appreciation he had for her long and graceful form. Not attraction, he had mused, just wonder, maybe envy of her poise. She reminded him of someone.

It was as his gaze traveled back up that Harry had noticed the purple slips of scar tissue that ran across the back of her upper thigh, normally hidden by stockings or leggings, sometimes jeans. Raking marks, clawed hands had found her flesh. He recognised the wounds as the same kind that Draco bore. That poise. That stoic control. The same that Draco shouldered when he was scared. Accompaniment to marks from men who liked it known that they owned their prey. Marks meant to last, to persist. Hestia had never spoken about her scars, but Harry didn’t need to hear words from her lips to confirm the story etched across her otherwise flawless skin. Hers were souvenirs from a war fought on her very flesh.

Harry felt a sickening wave of nausea wash over him, and it was only when he reopened his eyes that he felt Hestia’s burning gaze. Amber eyes tinted with fire, an eyebrow raised.

“I’m sorry. Please excuse me.” Harry choked out as he stood, clawing the arms of the little yellow armchair by the door, the spot he had preferred and claimed for his own since his first meeting.

His chest was tight, and Harry fled from their circle, from the room that had always seemed safe, but now felt fraught with thoughts of Draco, and of Hestia, who were both bonded in their histories. In their horrors. Harry felt his magic pulling and swirling around him as he fumbled into the main
hallway, his hand on the front door, opening it out into the misty April afternoon before he knew what he was doing, clamouring down the steps full of potted plants, taking deeper breaths now, his hands on his own chest, willing his heart to stop beating so fast, blinking back the tears that threatened in the burn of his nose and the catch of his inhale.

He found himself standing, struggling to catch his breath, in the center of Luna’s garden. The beds full and bursting with greenery, flowers peeking out at the tops of stretching stems, bees beginning to find their way from stamen to stamen. For once, his thestral companion was nowhere to be found.

“Did you think you were the only one in there with poetic scars, Harry?” Hestia’s voice carried across the little garden. She had followed him here.

Harry turned and faced her, braids tumbling down around her bare shoulders and dahlia crown perched regally atop her head. He felt so foolish, falling apart at her scars, falling apart at a story she hadn’t even told, falling apart because it was Draco who was scaring him, not Hestia in her calm and her power, in her growth through the pain.

Draco in his isolation, his loneliness, his fear, that’s what made his chest tight and his heart race. Draco, unprotected, unguarded, alone. He was falling apart because maybe Draco needed him, and here he was, falling apart at the very scars he promised to tactfully ignore all those months ago.

“I’ve seen them before, Hestia. On someone I love. Someone...” Harry didn’t realise he was crying until she reached out to rub her thumb across his cheeks, her smile sad but knowing, his voice disappearing as he realised what he had said. He loved Draco. Loved him even after a month of silence, of separation, of filling his life with all of the ways he could move on. He loved him enough to fall apart. Maybe, even, he fell apart because he loved him and he had spent all this time pretending that whole part of him did not exist, didn’t recover alongside the rest of him, didn’t need space in himself to reclaim and find power.

Hestia shushed him softly and pulled him into a hug, her black painted nails nestled in his unruly hair. She smelled like the river after a rain, swollen with the richness of the earth. He breathed her in, and the weight of it all settled against him.

“He left me, Hestia. He got scared and he left.” He whispered into her shoulder, dahlia petals drifting from her crown to the garden below.

“Did you think you could just soldier on? Recover without acknowledging that he hurt you? Recover without acknowledging that you hurt at all? That you love? Recovery isn’t just unpacking trauma, Harry - it’s not just discussions of the war, ruminating on death. Recovery is learning how to live with all of the parts of yourself, together and whole. Broken or scarred, hidden or shameful, all of the parts of you deserve love and healing - parts that aren’t about the war or death, but are about the strength it takes to live, really live.” She pulled her nails across his back and rocked slowly back and forth, and Harry could hear the running of the river, louder and louder, drowning his protests.

“Addiction lives in secrets.” He said, mostly to himself.

“Mm.” Hestia agreed, waiting for him to tell her. For him to give space for his feelings, to give words to his struggles, to pay homage to the tension that had been simmering within him since he had returned from the openness, the honesty that had been his life in the forest. She was telling him it was safe to have that here, too. Not just safe, necessary, instrumental.

“I haven’t told anyone. I haven’t told anyone I’m gay.” Harry lay his head on her shoulder, hiding
his face and focusing on breathing. On the words that he had said. Words he had only shared with Draco.

“It can be hard to open up, Harry. But the ones who love you and want you to be happy will only be interested in rejoicing that you discovered something about yourself. Something healthy and wonderful, something that tends your soul and keeps you closer to who you are. Something that will help you mend all of the parts of you.”

Hestia lifted his head in her hands and her amber gaze met his, his green eyes puffy and red, tears still tracking down his cheeks.

“Harry, it’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with being gay. Or being in love. And if he ran because he was scared, if he ran and he has scars like mine, it’s also okay. You just may need to go slow. Extra slow. But it doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you too.” She smiled, and Harry finally felt her magic, slow and stirring around their feet, a soft vibration, like the gentle thrumming of the earth, like running barefoot in the forest. Forget-me-nots were blooming around his ankles as she spoke.

“I ran too.” Hestia said, her hand slipping down Harry’s arm as she turned away, her fingers slipping into his.

He looked up at her, brows pulled together, full of so many questions he was too afraid to ask. She seemed so strong, so capable, so sure of herself. Was she like Draco? Did she shy from sex? From intimacy? Nothing felt appropriate to ask, and he held her hand softly, not wanting to mar the trust they had built, the gentle understanding.

“Hestia…” Harry started, as she had turned to go back inside, leaving Harry standing alone in the centre of the garden, flowers carpeting the once barren earth.

“How did you stop? Stop running, I mean. What changed?”

“I changed, Harry. I did the work. I went to therapy. I came to meetings. I still do. I removed myself from a family I could no longer stomach to be associated with. I changed my name from Carrow; and I grew with the pain until there was nothing left to run from. And here I am.” Hestia climbed the steps to Luna’s door, her palm on the wrought iron handle.

“And, it helped that when Lestrange was done with all those nights at the manor, Greyback came and turned me. It’s hard to be the one who is afraid when you are the wolf. And it’s even harder to hide from who you are when every moon brings a transformation.” As she spoke, Hestia smiled at Harry, pushing open the door and stepping inside, shaking her long braids down her back as she did.

It took several minutes for Harry to collect his thoughts before he went back inside. In the meantime, he had resolved to tell Ron and Hermione. No more hiding. He wanted freedom.

_____________________

That night, after dinner had ended, Rose had been put to bed, and Hermione was just settling down to read an absolutely massive text from her work at the DoM, Harry cleared his throat and set down the leftovers he had been putting away, rather more forcefully than he had meant to. He stood over the kitchen table, awkward and unsure what to do with his hands.

Ron looked up from his casting by the sink (he was busy washing and drying dishes, meal prep for tomorrow and scrubbing the floor where Rose had spilled apple juice), and Hermione stuck her quill between pages to mark her place, still seated at the table, both of them looking up at him.
expectantly. Hermione’s brow was furrowed, concerned, but Ron’s expression was open and at ease, his wand in one hand and a dish towel in the other.

“I have something to say.” Harry said, rather redundantly, and stupidly, but his nerves were getting the best of him. He thought of Hestia, and how she had owned every inch of herself, unapologetically, unflinchingly. He took a deep breath.

“Harry you can tell us if you relapsed, or slipped up, or if you’re struggling with the drugs.” Hermione looked as if she hadn’t been breathing this whole time as Harry had been collecting his thoughts. Her face was paper white, her voice pinched, her nails digging into the soft and old leather cover of the book, still in her arms. “I’ve been reading up on if that should happen and we’re supposed to remind you how much we want you alive and healthy and…”

“No, Hermione, no.” Harry said, shaking his head, blindsided by her statement, but touched by her obvious concern. “I’m okay, actually. I’ve been okay, better than I thought I’d be, if I’m honest. The meetings help a lot. I’m sober.”

The tension drained from her instantly, and she sat back against her chair, now smoothing the indents her nails had made in the leather binding with her thumb. “Then what is it Harry? What’s got you so nervous to talk to us?”

Harry opened his mouth again to speak, then shut it, still uncertain of how to start. He looked down at his hands and rubbed the callouses there, biding his time.

Hermione was nearly on him again when Ron spoke up from the other side of the kitchen. “Give him a chance ‘Mione. You can be a bit intimidating, you know.”

Harry slumped back down in his chair, taking a deep breath.

“I’m gay.”

The silence in the kitchen was astounding. He chanced a look up at Hermione, whose mouth was hanging open. She closed it quickly as he looked at her, shrugging, giving her a small smile.

To his utter surprise, her mouth split into a shockingly wide smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners, her hands coming up to her cheeks, letting her book fall to the table with a heavy thud.

“Oh, Harry! That’s wonderful. Well, it’s great. And it’s great you told us! Oh that was not what I was expecting. Gods, Harry I really thought you were about to tell us something awful. But this, being gay, this is lovely. I’m so happy.”

Harry startled as Ron’s arm came around his chest and he grabbed him in a haphazard hug, his dirty dish towel still grasped in his hand.

“I’m glad you finally told us, you big idiot.” Ron said, squeezing Harry tightly.

“Oi, what do you mean finally? I’ve only just found out for myself, you can’t be saying you knew?” Harry said, so pleased with Ron’s reaction, but affronted with this revelation that Ron may have guessed his sexuality before him.

Ron shrugged, grinning at Hermione, who was now gazing at the two of them across the table.

“I may have guessed about it. Back in third year. And the whole time you were convinced you wanted to be with Gin. I just always thought it was a bit off. You were just not interested. I’ve been waiting for this moment for nearly a decade now, and I’m just glad we’re all on the same page,
finally.”

Harry snuck a half hearted punch to Ron’s exposed ribs, and he yelped, releasing Harry from his grip.

“You could’ve told me, you know. Would’ve saved me a whole lot of existential dread.” Harry sniped, putting on a sour face.

Hermione giggled and reached for his hand across the table, holding it firmly in hers.

“Harry, we love you. Just as you are. Whatever that means. We’re happy if you’re happy.” She squeezed his hand, and for a brief moment a flicker of uncertainty crossed her face.

“But… Harry… Does that mean… Did you meet someone?” Hermione’s brow was furrowed again, and she was scrutinising his reaction, looking for clues, solving him like any other puzzle.

Harry smiled and looked down at their hands.

“Yes. But we are not together.” He said, wondering what Draco would think of his friends, their fanfare, their guessing about his desires long before he ever thought to. He considered telling them the story of reading and re-reading quintessence of debauchery, but he decided against it. That was something he wanted to keep between Draco and himself. It was enough for them to know just this, that he had discovered this small part of himself.

It was bad enough that Luna kept hinting at it in his therapy sessions - if she wasn’t some kind of master legilimens, Harry would be shocked. Being gay, being in love, these were things he had only just started discussing in his solo therapy sessions, and only in the broadest terms.

Sure, he had thrown out the term intimacy, and he had briefly mentioned his reawakening from a decided lack of interest in sex to what was now a raging onslaught of hormones and desires. He had even touched on his sense of failure when it came to making love with Ginny and all of the baggage he had been carrying around from that, but it was painful and awkward, and he missed the quiet comfort of Draco’s understanding, his reassuring smiles and the trading of secrets that they had done.

He thought of Hestia and her words of wisdom. Growing through pain. That’s what this was. He felt himself relax, the tension bleeding from his bones. This wasn’t just growing, this was blooming. He was allowing the truth to come to the surface, to unfurl and be beautifully, decadently free. And the flower crowns and the rush of spring that followed her, it made sense, because she refused to be anything but honest about her scars and honest about each transformation, each petal a eulogy to pain.

When Harry lay down to sleep that night, laying back on top of his sheets, the comforter pushed back around his legs, he whistled for Little Dipper, who swooped through the window, a mouse in his beak, settling upon the perch harry had erected in the corner of the room. Harry grinned at the little owl, his black ear tufts still absurdly large and comical as ever.

“Shall I send a letter? Up for a delivery? We’ve got big news to share.”

Little Dipper hooted, the sounds a bit garbled, a fraction of the mouse’s tail still dangling from his beak.

Harry summoned parchment and a quill to him with a wave of his hand, laughing softly to himself.
Draco,

I wanted you to know that I am thinking of you. That, if I’m to tell the truth, I think of you nearly every night, and often in the day. But here, laying in bed, I think about the quiet of the hollow, and the evenings we stayed up late, drinking tea and trading trust. I think about the nightjars calling and the smell of lavender and citrus, and the way you let me find myself again. The way you brought me back to life when I was so intent to leave everything behind.

And, in the spirit of being honest, if I’m feeling particularly vulnerable, I worry about if there is anyone there for you to give you the same rousing shake back from the grips of the things that haunt us, the same grounding hold to the truth - that life, our lives, are full of promise and hope, even if they have been so shrouded in pain.

I am hoping that, before long, the dreams that plague you will leave you once and for all to sleep in peace. The trial date has been set by the Wizengamot. May 27th at 09:00.

Though our stars are low on the horizon this time of year, it doesn’t stop me from searching for them. It seems Mars, in the meantime, has dominion.

Fret not, for as the world turns and the seasons change, so shall the stars, and we will be together in the night once again.

- Harry

Harry let out a great huff of air, smiling to himself. Draco’s last reply, three weeks after he had sent the letter, let him know he was still thinking of him too. He lay back on the rumpled sheets of his bed, the parchment resting on his bare chest as he waited for the ink to dry.
Do You Ever See Thestrals?

April 30, 2009

“There’s just something we’re missing here, I just know it!” Granger growled to herself as she raked chewed fingernails through her increasingly frazzled looking hair. Dropping her elbows onto the desk, she slumping over to rub tired eyes with the heels of her hands.

Draco didn’t look much better. He had tossed off his dark grey suit coat, taken off his tie, and even unbuttoned a few of his shirt buttons, revealing pale skin stretched tight over too-prominent collar bones.

They had been at this for hours. Hermione had given up her Sunday at home with her family to accommodate Draco’s increasingly frantic schedule. On top of everything, he had been meeting with Ron in the auror department regularly to go over his testimony, an experience he honestly wished he could obliviate himself from. It’s not that Ron had been mean, or crass, or even inherently oppositional as Draco had expected. No, Ron had treated Draco like any other victim giving testimony, professionally detached. Draco had to walk Ron through all of his worst memories and experiences with Lestrange in gross and graphic details over several painstaking days.

He didn’t know what he had expected. He knew he would have to explain what had happened in order to testify, but he hadn’t been prepared for how invasive and how brutal the questioning would be. Didn’t realize how panic stricken he would feel, knowing that his story would ultimately be public information once the trial was underway.

He certainly hadn’t been expecting Ron’s tact or sympathy. After their third meeting discussing the events of 7th year, however, Ron had looked at Draco with an entirely new gaze. Pity. He had tried to hide it, but Draco knew it was there. It made him regret his entire existence. Though, he supposed, pity might be just slightly better than disgust.

So, now, sitting with Hermione, trying to determine what exactly they were missing from their theory on thestral magic, Draco felt a little raw and badgered. Grateful for the distraction, yet drained, and feeling slightly useless.

“I’m at a loss, Hermione, you win.” Draco conceded.

“What do you mean, I win? What do I win?” She asked in a confused, bemused tone.

“The battle of wills.” He mumbled into his elbow. He had slumped forward onto her desk as well, with his head in the crook of his arm. “You carry on, just leave me here to die, tell my thestral I loved her.” He said with faux drama, flopping the dead weight of his other hand next to his head.

She snorted indelicately. “I didn’t realize you were so funny.”

“I’m not funny.” Draco insisted. “I am defeated by your academic prowess. I don’t know how you have any brain power left after all we’ve looked through today. I’m completely brain dead. Just donate my body to science and get on without me.”

“Wow.” Hermione intoned, drawing out the syllable with a smug smirk on her face. “I never thought I’d see the day when Draco Malfoy admitted defeat to my academic prowess.”

It was Draco’s turn to snort. Lifting his head of his arm, hair askew, and shirt rumpled.
“I was never a match for you. I was always rather jealous of you and your marks in school. It drove me mad. Actually, it drove my father mad, which drove me to act like a complete prick. God, I was awful. I totally deserved you punching me in the face in third year.”

Hermione seemed truly shocked and a little amused by his admission and candor. “And now?” She asked. Her face had shifted into something else, something serious and thoughtful.

“Now, I don’t have the energy to be jealous and my father is in prison.” He said, with a small smile. “I’m just grateful you’re the one working on my research with me,” his words were nothing but the truth, and he hoped she noticed.

She returned his smile. “That’s very Slytherin of you.”

“You can take the boy out of Slytherin, but you can’t take the Slytherin out of the boy.” Draco said in a mock serious tone. He was doing it again, he was joking with Hermione Granger. It was a little terrifying. He hoped Harry would be proud.

Hermione laughed and rolled her eyes. “You’re telling me. I think the same can be said for Gryffindor.” She shuffled some papers as Draco thought about her living with the two lions, herself being a third of the golden trio, and was met with a wave of surprising and novel affection for them. For Harry, specifically. Godrick, he missed him.

“Okay, let’s just go over this one more time, and then we can stop for today. I know you must be tired from your week.” She looked up from the papers in front of her, seeming to have realize what she said. “I mean, Ron doesn’t talk to me about the trial or his cases, but I do know you’re testifying.”

“It’s fine.” He waved her off, not meeting her eye. He knew Gryffindors were too noble to gossip, and Ron had assured him that while they worked on his testimony, everything was confidential. Magically binding. “It’s not like it won’t be common knowledge in a few weeks time anyways.” He said defeat evident in his voice.

She smiled sympathetically before putting her research face back on. “Okay, so, suicide attempts.” Draco marveled at how she could dissect concepts such as suicide with such cool, clinical precision. He was really beginning to understand her detachment from the esoteric concepts of death.

“What about them?” He prompted, throwing his hands in the air. They’d done this dance for what felt like the 80th time today.

“We know that people who’ve attempted suicide can see thestrals, even if they haven’t seen death in others.” She repeated, for what must have been the 50 millionth fucking time.

“Correct.” He agreed, again.

“But, no one has reported being followed or ‘chosen’,” she said the word with dramatic air quotes, “by thestrals. And, of those we’ve surveyed and who have agreed to participate in questioning, people who have attempted suicide seem to have a closer affinity with the thestrals. As in, thestrals seem more drawn to and interested in these people than others, with more reported sightings per year compared to control groups, none seem to be followed like you are. In fact, very few seem to have such positive interactions as you do. Most people are quite afraid of them, and are both startled and upset upon seeing them.”

“Which is ignorant, because they’re amazing.” He said, feeling a bit petulant and defensive about
his little Voileami.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, they’re very nice.” Her voice was pandering. “But, I just can’t figure out
why you’ve got one tailing you. How you were able to get hair, and blood, and saliva. The others
weren’t able to do that, even when prompted - really, the results of that trial in Bulgaria in 1808
were simply disastrous. People lost limbs, even.”

She chewed thoughtfully on her pinky nail, and stared off into the void for a few moments. “And,
you’ve said you’ve met other people who have…” Her voice trailed off thoughtfully before she
turned back to him. “It’s only one thestral you’ve seen?”

“Just the one is following me.” He subtly corrected. It wasn’t a lie, it just wasn’t a whole truth.

She leaned back in her chair pensively. “But, have you seen other thestrals in odd places? I mean,
you said you saw Voileami in St. Mungo’s. On multiple occasions. In empty rooms and deserted
corridors. You’ve even seen her here.” She gestured around her office vaguely.

He had, indeed. The second time Hermione had taken him to The Death Chamber, Voileami came
out of the archway to greet Draco, giving him quite the shock and giving Hermione a thousand
more questions. She was nearly rabid after that particular experience.

He sighed. “Yes. I’ve seen one other.”

“And how do you know that one isn’t following you too?” She demanded.

“Because I only ever see him in one place, so I assume he’s following someone else. Or that he just
enjoys loitering there.” Draco conceded, feeling so tired, and not meeting Hermione’s eyes. Her
sharpness sometimes put him in mind of McGonagall. It was unfair to keep such information from
her, not when withholding it could impede their research.

“Him? Where do you see him?” She asked, starting to scribble frantically on a piece of parchment
littered with notes.

“At Luna’s.” He finally said, after a moment of deliberation. He knew once he said where he saw
the other thestral, he would be setting Hermione on Harry, and any secrets he had left would be
brought to light. The thought was quite terrifying. He would have to reach out to Harry, clear the
air. Make a decision.

Hermione looked up sharply. Many emotions and reactions danced across her face in the fraction
of a second.

“Luna Lovegood’s?” She clarified.

“Yes. Luna and I are very close. I spend a lot of time there when she doesn’t have meetings.”
Draco said. “The male thestral isn’t always there, but often enough.” Draco knew exactly where
this line of dialogue was leading Hermione, even if he didn’t say Harry’s name.

Hermione jumped up, a chaotic look that only exams and peer reviewed research could cause. Her
afro looked nearly electric with enthusiasm. The air around her crackled with magic. It was almost
as if she was possessed, and anything in her way would be decimated, should it dare impede her.
She pulled out her wand and in a flash, all the papers on her desk were organised and her books
whisked away into her handbag.

“Draco, you wonderful, wonderful man. I have to go get some more books from the archives,
follow me out so you don’t have to fight with the doors. I will owl you. Go get some rest.” She was
bustling out the door without giving him time to pack up his things, even. He accioed his notes, shoved them in his briefcase, grabbed his jacket and tie and bustled out behind her.

Hermione left him at the lifts, refusing to expound on her renewed fervor. Draco watched her go, muttering furiously to herself down the corridor, with a growing sense of fondness for this completely wild and beautifully intelligent woman. No wonder Harry loved her so much. No wonder everyone said she carried them through the war, that without her, Voldemort surely would’ve won out.

Draco sighed, looking down at his pocket watch to check the time. He had to hurry home, he had a letter to write.

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When Draco arrived home from the DoM, he found Little Dipper waiting for him on his balcony. His heart leapt into his throat. Harry hadn’t sent a letter, just a drawing of a little thestral blowing steam out of his nose, pawing the ground. He must have been having a bit of a rough day and wanted to tell Draco about it, without really having to tell him. The smile splitting his face felt so out of place that he didn’t know what to do with himself. He realised Little Dipper was still there waiting for him, and he made his decision on the spot.

“Come in, then.” He told him, holding his arm out. He looked simply delighted with himself, his black tufts comically bouncing on his head as he hopped out onto Draco’s arm. “I’m sorry I’ve been a pain.” He told the owl. “I’m ready to be an adult now, if you’ll kindly wait for me.”

Giving the owl a cracker from the kitchen he snatched a piece of parchment off his desk and began to write. “Just lay it all out there.” He told himself, silencing his boggart. “Secrets are disaster fodder.”

Harry,

I’m sorry. I’m really, truly, repentantly sorry.

For pushing you. For asking you to leave. For running again. For my silence. For my distance. For taking this fucking long to send this letter that I should have sent weeks ago. For letting it go this far. I also wasn’t ready. I was embarrassed, still embarrassed. But it’s no excuse. You deserve better.

I don’t want to run anymore. I am working on myself. Your words had ripped me apart in the most beautiful way possible. When did you become so poetic? I hope your recovery is teaching you the things you need. I know mine is.

I think of you, too. Almost constantly.

Do you ever see thestrals? I think I may have set Hermione on you, so, apologies for that, too, it seems.

- Draco

On the other side of the letter he drew a picture of two thestrals circling one another. One of them pushing the moon in front of it with its beak, urging it along its trajectory, and the other the sun. Orbiting one another as Harry and Draco had done for what felt like an eternity.

Rolling the parchment up, he secured the letter to Little Dipper and took a moment to give the owl some attention. He had been quite rude to him over the weeks, and felt he had a lot to make up for.
“Fly safe,” he whispered as he opened the window and extended his arm towards the sunset.

That night Draco lay in bed, his thoughts twisted in furling tendrils of hope and promise. Lestrange was going to face trial for all the things he had done, and he had finally apologised to Harry.

Draco had never realised what Lestrange’s incarceration would do for him. He never realised that his perpetrator’s continued freedom and evasion of the law had been draped across his shoulders all these years.

Lestrange’s freedom was fetid and heavy, like something since deceased, but foul and putrid, more so with each day that passed. Like carrion. The weight of it was dripping with the things that kept him up at night, that stopped him from engaging with his own sense of self and pleasure, too distracted by the rivulets of rotten offal and shame. How could he lose himself to the throws of passion with himself or another when he could always feel the pressure of that corpse dangling from his frame?

Whenever he had tried to pursue closeness with another or himself, his body would take over and go on automatic. While the rest of him seem to detach, go far away. Leave the scene. He could go through the motions but couldn’t really participate with it. There was a wall.

Laying in the dark, he could no longer feel the burden of it. The subtle undertone of that dead weight he carried, of the acrid sense it brought into his life, wasn’t there anymore. The scent lingered, yes, but the body was finally gone. Left in the interrogation room with his testimony at the Ministry; marked as evidence.

Over the years, when Draco had tried to experience pleasure, his body’s memories of Lestrange had spoilt it rancid. Time and time again it had expired to something putrid, curdling in his gut. But, now, in the safety of his solitude and the knowledge that Lestrange was behind bars, that once evasive sybaritic indulgence lay across his skin, unmarred and wanting. Light and free.

Lestrange was locked away, and while Draco still had far to go, tonight he could see that what had happened to him wasn’t because there was something wrong with Draco. The inborn guilt carried by survivors that usually dragged him down, was lessened. No, for the first time, he could see, truly see, that what had happened to him was entirely Lestrange’s doing. That Voldemort’s reign of chaotic evil had given space and permission for heinous impulses to be acted upon, without fear of retribution, and Draco had just simply been in the way. That no matter what horrible part Draco had played in the war and in Voldemort’s madness as a child, he irrefutably did not deserve what had happened to him. No, that turpitude belonged to Voldemort and his followers, not Draco.

Draco’s pleasure and ability to access it shouldn’t be hung up on the perverted choices of an irredeemable soul. He could have it, and Lestrange couldn’t touch it. It could be for him and him alone. For him and for whomever he chose to share it with.

He thought of Harry, and of all the things he wished he could do with him. Of the ways they could explore this newness together. He hadn’t felt desire in weeks, too marred by the guilt of having run again. But, now, basking in his newfound sense of freedom and self discovery, he felt desire wrap around him like the warmth of the impending summer sun. Dancing across his skin like golden rays of brilliant daylight after a storm.

Goosebumps crept across his shoulders and he sank deeper into his soft duvet, smiling to himself. He let the cossetting embrace of this new hunger mingle with the flutters of contentment that emanated from his core like the pure reflective light of a full moon. It engulfed him in new sensations of hopeful expectancy.
This feeling, this one that normally carried with it the metallic taste of blood and shame, reminiscent of blood curses, rose from his depths and pulsed gently out through his limbs, tasting of something entirely different. Something new. Something yet unnamed.

Draco reached down and felt his waiting erection with a confidence he’d never experienced before. This was okay. In fact, this was better than okay. This was good. Draco could feel good, and no one could take that from him. He spent a few minutes exploring himself in a way he had never allowed himself to do. Never felt he had permission to do.

What do I even like? He wondered. Marvelling at the fact that he had never asked himself this question. Where to even begin? He was sure there were thousands of things he could possibly like, and he suddenly felt a burgeoning curiosity about discovering them. Thumbing the head of his cock and feeling along the sensitive skin of his perineum with his other hand, he thought about Harry. His green eyes, his strong hands. His soft mouth.

Harry would be proud of him, in this moment.

Draco spend long minutes postponing the inevitability of his release, challenging himself to just feel and to enjoy. To allow himself to exist as he was. His normally cold fingers felt hot and soft in a way that was entirely unfamiliar as he brushed across his entrance and traced along the crease in movements that were becoming more self-assured as he lost himself in his gratification.

He came with a loud cry, his orgasm washing through him as if pulled by a lunar tide. He fucked up into his fist, riding the last of the receding waves until the sensation was almost overwhelming and his cock was nearly flaccid again. He lay there feeling elated with his breakthrough. Floating on a cloud. The shame that normally broke through his post orgasmic haze only danced on his periphery, unable to gain entry into the hallowed space he had cultivated during his explorations.

He fell asleep that night hearing the gentle rustling of wings in the hall.

May 1, 2009

The next morning, he received a package from his mother. They had had very stilted contact in the months since Christmas, and he wasn’t feeling overly optimistic about what she may have sent.

After reading the letter and seeing the packages contents, his jaw hit the floor. He could not believe this woman.

Reading and rereading the letter she sent, just to be sure he was seeing things clearly, he pulled the books out of the crate and onto his desk. One by one, he examined each cover in turn and marvelled at his mother’s brazen attempts to make amends with her son. Sure enough, as the letter indicated, she had sent him smut. Old. Gay. Magic. Smut. Draco’s boggart laughed maniacally, and he almost joined in.

Apparently, she had managed to find ancient copies of wizarding erotica in an old study, hidden away somewhere in the manor that had belonged to Ursus Malfoy III, whoever the fuck that was. He couldn’t figure out how or why she had come upon the very subject-specific stash of literature, but he was beginning to think their “discovery” was more transparent than she wanted it to appear.

Her letter had said that he wasn’t alone in their family tree, and that he should have these “very important family heirlooms”. Well, that was not what he had expected this morning. His mother was been trying to be supportive, yes, that much was clear, but it was in the most embarrassingly
ludicrous and weird way possible.

He flipped open one of the more decadently illustrated volumes, his mouth parted in abject shock to find it was overflowing with explicit depictions of pure hedonistic pleasure. Sex for sex’s sake, or, he supposed, porn without plot.

Suddenly being gay was a Malfoy family tradition, Draco mused to himself. That’s what Narcissa was trying to do. Draco could see how his mother was trying to find ways to make him more acceptable to her worldview and expectations of him. And, however fucking weird and problematic it was, she was trying to accept him.

She was endeavouring to make Draco feel like he could still belong to his family and legacy if he wanted it. He wasn’t sure how to process that or even engage with it. I mean really, he thought, what was he suppose to write back, thanks for the porn?

But, the gesture had given Draco a glimpse of something. Of a cracking visage. Of the crumbling institution that was Narcissa Malfoy. Maybe, just maybe, he’d have hope for her one day, too.

Despite his initial horror and disgust that his mother sent him decidedly ancient pornography. His curiosity, in the wake of his evening, had eventually won over his annoyed incredulity.

He spent hours reading through the dozen some books that she had sent. Some were novels, others were epic poems, others still were graphic picture books, hand drawn and inked with absolutely astounding detail. All of them, however, revolved around gay romance and sex. It reminded him painfully of Quintessence of Debauchery and filled his stomach with a nervous anticipation, remembering the letter he had sent the day before. He thought that Harry would love these.

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May 03, 2009

It was two days later, after much boggart wrestling and a long talk down from Luna, that Little Dipper finally returned with a letter from Harry. When he hadn’t received an immediate response, he had been terrified that his apology was too late, that Harry had come to his senses. He was feeling so restlessly impatient that he took a 24 hour call at St. Mungo’s just to distract himself.

He had just gotten off of said call when he received an urgent letter from Ron that they needed to work out some bureaucratic nonsense with his testimony. Now, deliriously exhausted and emotionally drained, he walked into his flat, followed by the ubiquitous Voileami. Joy and fear fought for dominance as he saw Little Dipper’s ridiculously comical face at the window. Round eyes and black ear tufts so large, he couldn’t take the poor animal’s reproachful glare at being made to wait very seriously. He dashed to the window with a complete lack of decorum, fumbling for the scroll on the owl’s leg.

Wasting no time, he unrolled the scroll as Voileami and Little Dipper reacquainted themselves.

Draco,

Thank you for your apology. I wasn’t expecting one, to be honest, but it was very nice to hear. I accept it, wholeheartedly. If there’s something I can understand, it’s being the one who messed up horribly and needs forgiveness. Let’s not rush things. We managed to flirt for all those years in school without getting anywhere, a few more months won’t kill me.

As far as recovery teaching me, most of what I am learning is that sobriety was easy in the forest. And, that I was relying on you too much to carry me through it. Don’t worry though, I have a
handle on things. I’m doing well. I hope you are too. I think you’ve been by Luna’s recently, as
sometimes I almost feel as though I can sense your magic lingering and it will smell like lemon
thyme. Maybe I am imagining it, but I hope you are seeing friends and you’re not keeping yourself
lonely.

And yes, I have been seeing a thestral. Have you? He’s been following me for a few weeks now. He
doesn’t venture out in front of other people as much, but if I’m alone, and I need him, he comes.
What do you think it means? Why us? What about us is different from all the others who’ve seen
death during the war? Or all of us who’ve chosen death? Perhaps, it all comes back to the
hallowes, as so many of the mysteries of my life have, as we were both masters of the elder wand?
There aren’t any other wizards alive today that I could ask for comparison, though. Hermione has
been quizzing me about it for days on end. I don’t know how to explain the majority of it, so she
seems to just get more and more frustrated with me as time goes on. I’ve seen her quite a few times
pick up my purple hat and stare at it, though.

Write me again soon, Draco, I’ve missed you.

- Harry

Ps. I told Ron and Hermione I’m gay, and I’ve started talking about it in therapy. Not meetings,
yet, but I am working up to it. I thought you would be proud. My Hogwarts delivery owl you were
so kind to draw for me is now tucked inside a copy of Advanced Transfiguration. Terrible wank
material, not even close to Quintessence, but I’ve now memorised a whole page of spells on
household item transfiguring, so I can’t say no good has come of it.

Finally reaching the bottom on the letter and having not read a single hateful word, Draco dropped
to the floor in sweet relief and laughed. Harry missed him. Harry told his friends he was gay.
Harry was talking about it in therapy. Harry wanted another letter!

Draco flopped himself back on the floor like a boneless starfish, smiling like the sun had shown out
of that piece of parchment and lit up his whole flat. Maybe he was delirious. Opening his eyes, he
saw two sets of very inquisitive eyes above him, watching, waiting.

He righted himself and tossed his robes on the couch so he could write his response
unencumbered. He felt giddy. He felt like a lovestruck teenager getting a letter from their crush in
class.

Harry,

Thank you for your letter, and your forgiveness. I promise, I’m not keeping myself lonely. I see
your thestral at Luna’s often, and I can feel your magic when you’ve been there, too. It feels warm.
Like I’m walking through the remnants where a wildfire has burned. Ashen, full of smoke, but with
life pushing up all around.

Voileami has been around much more than I think is strictly normal for a forest dwelling omen of
death in the bustling and grimy streets of London. She’s beside me now, in my flat. How is this my
life? I’ve been working with Hermione on my research, but we’re no closer to discovering why
than we were in the forest. Perhaps the elder wand is the missing puzzle piece. I don’t know what
to believe.

I’m happy for you that you’ve got a handle on things. And you’re right, I am proud that you’ve told
Ron and Hermione. That’s wonderful.

I’m spending a lot of time preparing for the trial and working with Hermione on top of my work at
St. Mungo’s, but I will write as often as I can. This feels good.

-Draco

Ps. As part of my apology and sympathies for you having had to leave Quintessence behind, I’m giving you something. You would not believe how many of them my mother sent as an olive branch, the odd woman. But, that’s a story for another time, perhaps. Hope you enjoy.

He was sending a beautifully graphic copy of *Intrinsic Immodesty: The Salacious Adventures of Gable and Herbert circa 1483* to Harry. It was basically a pornographic picture book of two wizarding princes from different kingdoms that meet in secret to have sex in every which way possible, before battling the armies of their lands to be together.

He hoped he wasn’t be too forward, but he was feeling bold for once in his life.

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May 11, 2009

Draco was sitting in with Unice in the St. Mungo’s canteen surrounded by whispers and odd looks when he saw it. *The Daily Prophet* had been left open on a neighbouring table and his own face was glaring back at him. It wasn’t a recent photo, it was one that had been taken after his graduation ceremony, soon after he had been spat on, so his face was twisted in the trademark scowl that made him so easily recognisable.

When Unice saw what had caught his eye, she reached over to snatch the paper off the table to see why Draco’s face was glowering at them. As she read across from him her eyebrows rose higher and higher into her hairline. Surprise and incredulity evident in every line of her face.

“Do I want to know?” Draco asked nervously, catching the unreadable glances of a gaggle of nurses passing by. He felt his back going rigid with each passing moment, each odd look that passed his way.

“It’s not… I wouldn’t…” Unice began, sounding unsure and sympathetic. Her face crinkled in concentration as she tried to decide how to say what it is she needed to say. “It could be worse.” She decided on.

“Oh.” He responded, eyes large and eyebrows high.

“I just mean that it really isn’t that bad.” She tried to placate, patting his hand. “They’ve just released the witness list for the prosecution and-”

“They what?!?” Draco blurted, snatching the paper out of Unice’s hands. He knew this was going to happen but he didn’t realize that it was going to happen so soon. The trial was still over two weeks away. He was really hoping to live in blissful denial that it was happening at all until five minutes before he had to be in the courtroom. His eyes scanned the paper frantically, not taking in a single word. His panic had seem to magically turn the english alphabet into something illegible. All he seem to be able to do was stare at his own petulant photo.

Unice sat quietly, waiting for Draco to speak again. Finally, after managing to remember how the english language worked, he began to skim through the article. “*In a shocking revelation late Saturday evening when the Wizengamot released their finalised witness list to the public defender… only four witnesses had come forward… most notably the notorious son of a Death Eater, Draco Lucius Malfoy (27)... had been indicted in Death Eater activities after The Second Wizarding War, but was cleared of all charges after receiving supporting testimony from The Boy
Who Lived... what could an ex-Death Eater have to say against his late aunt’s husband?... other witnesses include Hestia Lamadaya, Susan Bones, and Harry Potter himself, along with his long time Auror partner, Ronald Weasley, who had both worked the Lestrange case for the past four years...

The article continued in this vapid vein of wild speculation about what could have possibly happened to Draco that would have driven him to testify against Lestrange, followed by even wilder speculations about Harry Potter’s sudden reappearance to public life, just in time to testify.

Dropping the paper in front of him he looked up into Unice’s kind eyes. “There’s only four of us testifying…” He said dumbly. “There were supposed to be more. Ron said there were more than that.”

She gave him a sad smile. “When it comes down to it, Draco, it takes immense bravery to do what you and the others are doing by actually going through with the court proceedings.”

“I’m not brave.” Draco said obtusely, still with that flat voice and blank face.

Unice gave him an incredulous smile. “Of fucking course you are. Don’t be a berk.”

The startle of the insult broke Draco from his spiralling trance as he squawked his protests at her.

“I don’t want to hear it.” She said gently. “What you’re doing takes serious guts, and not just the trial itself. Dealing with the press is a huge added layer of stress. And we’re going to be here for you every step of the way.”

Draco felt touched by her words, even though he still didn’t quite fancy himself brave by any means. “Is that why everyone is staring at me? Wondering what secrets I have to spill?”

“Probably.” She said unconcernedly, picking at a blueberry muffin.

Draco made a pinched face and slumped in his chair, rubbing the creases on his forehead. “As if people didn’t gossip about me enough already. This is going to be a nightmare.”

“Yeah, probably.” Unice agreed. She never sugarcoated anything unless it was a biscuit. “So, now is probably a good time to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Draco asked with extreme wariness, surveying her with a furrowed brow.

“Luna asked me for your work schedule.”

“Why didn’t she ask me for it?”

“Probably because you’re a pain in the ass.” She jested.

“Oh Salazar, Unice.” He reproached. “And what did she want my schedule for?”

“She wants to make sure you’ve got enough support from all of us. We know you’ve been busy with court, and the DoM, and Mungo’s, but we want to make sure you’ve got us as well.”

“Oh.” Draco said. It was such a Luna thing to do, so sweet, so supportive, so slightly invasive. He loved it. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, just owl the woman your schedule so she can get on with her we-love-Draco-Malfoy campaign.” Unice laughed. Draco knew she found Luna odd, but captivatingly charming. He really loved his friends.
Draco managed to make it through rounds without incident or any comments about the newspaper article. It was on his way to his office that he ran into Sprigg, whom he spent most of his professional hours avoiding. “Healer Malfoy!” He boomed jovially at Draco, who cringed a tight smile in return and nodded.

“Sprigg.”

“Was wondering if you saw little miss Pennyfort on rounds this morning, any improvement on her curse damage?”

“Yes, I upped the bloodroot concentration in her morning dose to counteract the heavy handed use of copper that was used in the offending potion.”

“Hmm, is that wise?” Sprigg asked, a condescending tone laced in his stupid voice.

Draco did not have the patience for this today. “I certainly think so.” He said without any delicacy. “But, if you think otherwise, you’re more than welcome to reevaluate her history and reread our introductory haem textbooks from second year healer school.” Draco’s voice was professional, acquiescent sounding, demure almost, but his point couldn’t have been more clear. He might as well have just shouted Sprigg you’re a fucking idiot stop questioning me!

Sprigg’s smile didn’t falter but Draco could see ice crystals forming behind his eyes. Sprigg hated to be contradicted, and while Draco normally was able to put on his healer mask and play the role of compliant colleague, today was not that day. He was too raw, too exposed.

“Surely you had your reasons.” He spoke genially, waving his hand randomly, but Draco stiffened all the same. “What, with the stress of the upcoming trial you’re to speak at, I’m sure you’re feeling rather distracted.”

“I assure you, sir, I am feeling nothing but a desire to do my job, and do it well.” He said cooly. “In fact, do you think it’s wise to be working in this setting with such a public trial looming on the horizon?”

“I don’t see how this trial has anything to do with-” Draco tried to respond but Sprigg just kept going.

“I mean, is all this really worth it?”

“Is what worth what?” Draco asked, temper simmering just below the surface now.

“You’ve already gone and become a healer, a public servant if you will. I think that’s as good as you’re going to be able to do.” Sprigg said with mock sympathy.

“And what on earth does that mean?” Draco demanded.

“There’s no need to go through such extreme measures to rebuild your reputation, Healer Malfoy.” He said the word Malfoy like it was the name of a flesh eating disease. “I’m saying, you’ve done all you can to fix your public image by becoming a healer. Publicly speaking out against your uncle, and father’s old school mate, just seems to be overkill. It’s a bit transparent if you ask me. Public opinion is so fickle anyways, you should have stopped while you were ahead and just focused on your work. Your patients will suffer because of this.” Sprigg’s face was set in a falsely somber and empathic frown.
Draco was seeing red. This pompous bottom feeding urchin thought Draco was testifying to help his public image. Thought he had become a healer to fix his public image. Thought he was a danger to his patients.

“I quit.” He said simply. “I fucking quit.” Turning away with fiery satisfaction from the shocked and confused face of Sprigg, Draco marched off to HR to tell them personally that he was walking out of this cesspool of ineptitudes and not coming back.

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After packing his office and chasing off the third HR personnel that came by to plead for him to stay by yelling “There is literally NO amount of vacation time you could offer me to stay!” down the hall at her scurrying back, he used his outtray for one last letter delivery.

_I quit my job. Maybe I'm having a midlife crisis, or maybe this is the best decision I've ever made. Who knows. I'm making dinner at 7, could use some support._

_-Draco_

He tapped the parchment which split into 3 separate identical letter. He addressed them to Luna, Unice, and Neville and set them in the out tray.

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_May 13, 2009_

The ministry was blissfully empty this early in the morning. No sideways glances, no squawks of fear, no bouts of uncontrollable sweating. Perfect.

Since _The Prophet_ ran its article stating Draco as a witness, Ron hadn’t wanted Draco to be seen in the ministry for fear of being mobbed by reporters. So, when Ron summoned him to practice his testimony, he asked for a 6 am meeting.

Coming to Ron’s now very familiar office door, Draco could hear other voices speaking in low measured tones behind it. He stood looking at the door, feeling a little confused. They had never had others in their meetings with them, and anyways, who else would be here at 5:54am?

He rapped lightly on the door and the voices inside faltered. After the sound of scraping chairs on the floor, followed by heavy footsteps, the door was opened to reveal an exhausted and harried looking Ron.

“Malfoy.” He greeted, opening the door to invite him in, revealing two others seated in front of his desk.

“Weasley.” He nodded back. “Did I get the time wrong?” He asked, not yet moving into the room.

“Oh no, sorry, these are the other two witnesses. You remember Susan?” He gestured towards the mousy woman in a plain brown dress with frizzy blond hair and freckles. Then to the other vaguely familiar face wearing deep mauve robes with gold bangles that stood out stunningly against her dark skin, a crown of white Zinnias atop her braids. Ron continued, noting Draco’s black expression, “and this is Hestia Lamadaya. She was a few years under us.”

Draco nodded at each of them, and hesitantly stepped into the office as Hestia’s face slid into place in his memory.
Ron gestured to the remaining empty chair between the two women and Draco awkwardly shuffled to take his seat as he addressed Hestia, “Carrow, wasn’t it?” he asked, unsure of himself.

Hestia tilted her head and gave Draco a small smile. “It’s Lamadaya, now, but yes. It was Carrow.”

Draco gave her a smile in return, he could understand wanting to disassociate from a plagued name.

Ron cleared his throat and they turned to face him. Draco felt suddenly less out of sorts. “So,” Ron started, “as you’re all well aware, there are now only four witnesses, five including myself.”

“What happened?” Draco asked, feeling somehow betrayed by the lack of others willing to come forward. Why did the three of them have to go through this, and the others just got to back out?

“Well, when word first got out that we apprehended Lestrange, about a dozen people came forward, but one by one they dropped out during the questioning process. You three are all that’s left aside from Harry’s and my own auror testimony.”

“It won’t matter, Draco.” Hestia said soothingly, her purple nails brushing the top of his hand that was clenched tight on the arm of his rigid wooden chair. “He’s been a Death Eater on the run from the ministry for years. He has a rap sheet longer than Filch’s banned items at Hogwarts, and there’s not a single public defender that would risk their own career trying too hard to protect him from the justice that’s due. We don’t need more witnesses than the five of us.”

Draco nodded, feeling the tension that had twisted his insides start to lessen. He hadn’t known Hestia well in school, but he felt an undeniable appreciation for her presence in this room. She was a Slytherin and child of Death Eaters. She spoke bluntly and she seemed to be someone you couldn’t push around. He felt he could like her rather a lot.

“That’s right.” Ron said. “This case is closed before it’s started, and really, this is mostly a formality to see how much he can be punished for his crimes. But what I wanted to talk to you three about today is the questioning. You’ll all be administered veritaserum, and they’re not allowed to ask you questions outside of the case. We’ve practiced each of your stories and you all know the kinds of questions you’re expecting. The public defender has been given your testimonies as of Monday and they’ve sent over a list of the possible rebuttal questions. That’s what we’re going to go over today.” He looked them each in the eye to make sure they were all on the same page.

“The reason we’re doing this all together is because some points of each of your stories overlap and we want to make sure we have all of our details straight. Please let me know if anyone needs a break.”

And with that Ron dove into the interrogation, leaving Draco with no time to panic about sharing his story with two new people.

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Draco was in awe of both Hestia and Susan by the end of their meeting with Ron. They were so strong. So clear. So seemingly unafraid of what had happened to them. So determined. Haunted yes, scarred yes. But they no longer carried fear. Hestia wore her scars without shame and spoke without flinching. When Draco faltered in his story he felt Hestia’s magic reach out to him like the vining tendrils of a morning glory, grounding him, reminding him to bloom.

Susan powered through her story with the air of having recited it a thousand times. When Ron
threw a provoking question at her, she glanced down at her forearm where Draco saw a tattooed list of names. Every time she did this, she seem to be fortified by it, responding with a stronger voice that rang through the room.

When they were done, Susan nodded her goodbyes and swept from the room without a backward glance. Ron said his own farewell and closed his office door behind Hestia and Draco as they made their way to the lifts together. Draco felt completely enamoured by Hestia. After they had heard one another’s story, they seemed to draw strength from each other during the interrogation process. He’d never felt that kind of camaraderie with anyone before and, seeing how far down the path of recovery she was made him feel hopeful in a new and beautiful way.

Hestia looped her arm into Draco’s and he felt himself smile. She was quiet and safe feeling. “Let’s have dinner next week, Draco.”

“Dinner?” He felt himself blush furiously. He always felt so out of sorts with new people, always so confused when people seemed to like him.

“Yes. Dinner. We’re one in the same you and I, more dragon than serpent. I think we could be good friends.” She smelled like cinnamon and dirt, and she reminded him, strangely, of Neville. Safe and inviting, surrounded by blossoms.

“Okay, dinner.”
Harry sat with his feet up on his yellow armchair in the corner, one tucked to his side and the other resting on the frayed fabric of the arm, his legs rather suggestively spread in old and tattered sweatpants, but he was too annoyed to care. Not annoyed, per se. He was stressed. Confused. Struggling. Something was eating at him. It had been all morning.

The conversation was pinging around the circle of nine now very familiar faces without him noticing, engaging, participating. His features were schooled into a dark and turbid mix of irritation and ire. His foot that was draped over the arm of his chair was jangling distractingly.

“Harry.” Luna’s voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and he glowered at her, waiting for her to prompt him into a response. He knew he was being unfair, childish, unnecessary. He did, he really did know it, but everything else was raking along his skin and the darkness was curling around his gut, lapping at him and making him feel so unsteady, so unsure of his hold of sobriety, for the first time in ages. His shoulders were impossibly tight. He felt like fighting.

“Talk to us, Harry. That’s the point of meetings. We’re here to help you through this part.”

Luna wasn’t smiling, but she was soft, and warm, and terribly nice and Harry pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes and tried to shake off the anger that had been layering itself over his skin.

“I’m overwhelmed.” He finally said, not knowing how else to start. He’d been so good in meetings recently, talking about minimising his stress and taking care of himself in other ways, constantly choosing to prioritise his needs. He still hadn’t gone out in public, he didn’t answer owls he didn’t recognise, and he didn’t even read the Daily Prophet, which was apparently still speculating on him and his sanity.

He’d been proud of himself, he’d felt capable these last few months. He’d attended all his meetings and he’d made efforts in solo therapy to delve into why his life had made him so miserable and what he could do to keep himself honest and committed to his own happiness going forward. Hell, he’d come out of the closet to people close to him, even. Why, now, was this happening? Why was he feeling hunted by the sickest parts of himself, the parts he had tried so hard to soothe and stow away? He picked at his dirty fingernails as he spoke. He’d been in the garden saying hello to his thestral and weeding one of the marigold beds before they’d convened.

“That much is more than clear,” said Sylvia’s voice from his right. “You look like you’re back to one day sober and ready to crawl out of your own skin.”

Harry huffed, still looking down at his dirty hands. She was right. And, what’s worse is that she knew exactly what she was talking about. For all the differences in the lives that Harry and Sylvia had led, both of them had been seduced by the painkilling powers of heroin.

“I know. But, I’m as sober as I’ve been all these months. I just am having this horrible resurgence of that feeling - not being able to be comfortable in my skin - wanting to hide, wanting to drown. I just, I don’t know what’s prompting it. Whenever this happens it just makes me feel sick, and I just hate it. I hate every second of it.” He stopped fussing with his fingers and moved them to each side of the chair, clawing at the yellow armrests, and leaned his head back with his eyes closed as he spoke.
Sylvia reached across from her own perch, a high backed white wooden kitchen chair with a woven wicker seat, and patted his hand, which was taught and gripping the fraying fabric of the ancient chair. It had been months since she had raised quite the eyebrow at his scars. Her many rings and bangles felt cool and soothing against his feverish skin. He looked across to her and let out a sigh, giving her a weak smile.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it? Please, it’s not like we all don’t know the feeling. Dopesick or dying for a drink, pleading for escape - it’s familiar stuff for this bunch.” Sylvia’s kindness took the edge away, and Harry felt himself relax for the first time since they had gathered. Nods around the circle reassured him. Dennis was smiling from a half circle leather chair next to the fireplace, his hands steepled in front of his chest, perhaps to suppress his tremor.

“When did the feeling start?” Luna asked, and Harry knew she was gearing up to get to the bottom of it, whether he was ready to or not.

“As soon as I woke up this morning it was on me. Though, it’s almost felt like it’s been hanging around for a few days before this, just not as bad.”

“Did something happen? Did you dream about something?” Luna’s face was professionally impassive, but Harry’s cheeks instantly darkened and he pulled his sprawled legs back toward himself, at her completely innocuous question.

He had been dreaming. He had woken up groaning face down into his pillow, hips pressed down, achingly hard and cock slick with precome, images of Draco holding him down, sliding his cock against his ass, kissing along his spine, each press of his lips followed by the whisper of his name. It had been absolutely decadently sinful, full of lust and abject hedonism, and Harry had reached down to tug at his cock, coming to the thought of the feel of Draco’s skin against his, of the way Harry’s name was a plea, desperate and wanton.

Harry was snapped back from the memory of the dream by Hestia’s soft voice, “It was sex, wasn’t it? You were dreaming about sex.” She was sitting with her legs folded beneath her on her purple settee, wearing a floor length but simple flowing white dress, but no shoes this time, her crown full of daisies.

Harry blinked, the blush on his cheeks spreading down his neck and making him feel like the collar of his shirt was just a bit too tight, though it had been absolutely fine moments ago. He nodded, appreciating how Hestia could be so blunt, but in a way that made him feel safer, less ashamed. He knew she wouldn’t shy away from whatever he brought to the circle.

“When we eventually succumb to the desire for sex, some addicts often become overwhelmed with guilt. We think we’ve relapsed.”

Harry nodded at her, too overwhelmed to speak. She had put words to it, the feeling that he was bad and wrong, that he couldn’t trust himself with pleasure, with surrender, with allowing himself to experience something that felt so close to the gentle fall into the bath of honey, something that took him away from his tenuous grasp on control and surrendered him to the space between conscious and unconscious.
“It hasn’t happened to me before, and I’ve spent a whole year sober. Why is this happening now? Am I not ever going to be able to enjoy sex? Even thinking about sex?” Harry was panicking a bit, and his voice was full of a tremor he was too startled to try to hide. There was no space for embarrassment next to the dread that was building.

Luna was the one to answer him this time, sitting back in her red, high backed chair in front of the fireplace - which was never lit - and pulling her blonde hair back into an artful twisting bun, secured with a red hat pin.

“Harry, this is something you’ll have to moderate yourself as you move forward in your recovery. That all of you will likely face in the future. Only you will know if you’re trading one addiction for another, indulging in something to cure your pain or having healthy boundaries with your biological urges. Dopamine is a fickle friend and a frightening foe, and unfortunately it controls all of our sense of pleasure and reward - both entirely normal as well as pathological.”

She smiled kindly at Harry, trying to soften the blow that, after all this time and years of thinking he would never have a healthy sex life, here he was again - facing the worry that the petit mort was just another way for Harry to feed his demons.

“There is nothing wrong with enjoying sex, Harry. Don’t think this is a lecture on how you’re never going to feel pleasure again. You will. You are allowed to. You just have to know when you are spiralling. Much like any other person who has any other needs they have to monitor.”

“Okay.” Harry said softly, his arms now wrapped around his knees, which were pulled to his chest. Sylvia was gently rubbing his arm, as if to tell him to hang in there.

“As for the question about why is this happening now, if it hasn’t been a problem before - well, it could be that you were so focused on the pleasure being part of something healthy and good in your life that you didn’t associate it with any feelings of guilt, or maybe now you’re under more stress from other areas that are making you feel more vulnerable to your tendency to avoid difficult situations?”

Harry stared back at Luna. “Both. Easily both.”

“Well, I’m glad we could discuss this - it’s not only a common issue that many people in recovery may face at one point or another, but it’s often shrouded in so much stigma and shame we avoid talking about it, even in groups like this one. Does anyone else experience something similar and would like to discuss it?”

Felix, a recovering methamphetamine user who had gotten sober around the same time as Harry, though was a few years younger, had raised his hand to answer. He didn’t often speak in meetings, preferring to nod along and reassure others that what they had said was valid and important.

“Sometimes I worry that I’m enjoying something too much. That I am getting too excited. That I shouldn’t be this happy. That if I let myself get too up, I’ll start hallucinating again.” He said the words with a deadpan from the forest green beanbag across from Harry, and Harry’s heart went out to him. Felix had been referred to Luna’s group after a drug induced psychotic episode refused to abate, and had kept him in a mental health facility for months. As far as Harry was aware, he was still living at the facility and heavily medicated to keep his hallucinations and delusions at bay. He often lay the whole meeting on his beanbag, as if disconnected from the discussion, only to chime in with something insightful toward the end, something that would tie everyone and everything together beautifully.

The group spent the rest of their time reassuring Felix, folding him in to their supportive and caring
embrace, as he had often done for them. Harry left the meeting feeling calm and reassured.

May 03, 2009

It was the following morning that Harry received Draco’s third letter.

He had left Luna’s yesterday feeling so much better, reassured, but still with so many questions. His individual therapy session with her afterward had been intense. Probably the most intense, yet, really.

How was he supposed to mitigate this balance between pleasure and mistrust of his own brain? How would he walk the line between enjoyment and indulgence in something harmful? It had made sense, what Luna had described, the link between dopamine, pleasure and reward, in other words, addiction, and sex, which often accessed and stimulated the same parts of his brain that drove him to toward a sense of oblivion in the first place.

This last year was the first time in Harry’s life he had started feeling positively about sex, about pleasure, about understanding that he did have desires that he wanted to fulfill, and now, here he was, feeling shy of his own inability to control himself. His struggle to remain clean and removed from indulgence. It was true that he’d sought out much fewer orgasms since he had left the forest, not being so stimulated by Draco’s constant presence, but he still felt immense urges piling up, nipping at him, scratching at his skin in ways that made him feel restless and uneasy, another feeling that mimicked the horrendous torture of withdrawals.

Harry glared down into his porridge. He had to find a way to soothe his perfectly normal hypothalamus and, at the same time, shush his rather eccentric and often impish nucleus accumbens. That’s how Luna had put it, anyway, when they had discussed the matter further in his appointment with her. She had suggested limiting himself to an orgasm every few days. Harry had stared at her, completely blank. What an absolute nightmare. Seriously, by the time he figured out sobriety, there would be nothing that could possibly ever embarrass him.

“Morning Dipper.” Harry said through a mouthful of porridge, the black owl dropping a letter and a package unceremoniously on the table, hooting and flapping his wings, knocking over Harry’s half drunk orange juice, which he vanished with a twitch of his hand, without even thinking.

“Well you’re in an especially good mood, aren’t you?” Harry said, laughing at the bird’s antics and rubbing his knuckles by his cheek with great affection.

“Draco must be spoiling you.” He said, now softly, not wanting his voice to carry outside the kitchen, where he had been enjoying his early breakfast alone.

Harry picked up the letter and read it, then reread it, his cheeks warm and a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, a laugh in his throat. His porridge was pushed to the side, now forgotten and soggy.

Draco’s words across the bit of parchment, the parchment that even smelled of him, lemon with some herbal component, was warming Harry immensely, making him think of all of those mornings waking up next to him.

After their parting in the forest, Harry had been heartbroken, but he could see now that the months of quiet had been good for both of them, because they had things they needed to work on things that took up nearly all of Harry’s energy and emotional wellbeing, even on a good day. And now,
with the trial, he could imagine Draco was taught as a wire. Neither of them had been ready.

This Draco though, this man who had written this sweet little note and sent him something kind and thoughtful. Perhaps this was a man Harry could fall for all over again, in the real world, and with the skills to make it last.

Harry caught himself running his fingers over the finely formed letters across the page, imagining Draco writing it with Voileami at his side, agonising over the choice of each word.

He was still smirking to himself at the thought when a crash immediately to his left made him jump out of his chair.

“Dipper, you menace!” Harry half laughed the scolding he was meant to give, as the little owl tried to extract himself from the bowl of porridge and milk he had knocked over, obviously desperate to sneak a serving for himself.

Harry chuckled while he waved the mess away, turning his attention to the package that had just escaped getting doused.

What could Draco have sent him? What could Draco’s mother have sent him to send to Harry, even more curiously? Hopefully this wasn’t some horrid heirloom that may or may not be cursed or responsible for murders. He did used to be an auror, after all.

Unwrapping the object, Harry was startled to find a beautiful white leather bound book with gold vines and floral designs all around the cover. It did not look nearly as ominous and foreboding as the large black books that Narcissa had sent while they were in the forest (Harry had done his best to absolutely abolish the memory of “Rites of a Pureblood Household” and it’s gruesome pictographs, though the smell of vinegar and dead slugs had been difficult to forget).

Harry opened the obviously ancient book carefully, handwritten ink of the title page appearing as he pulled back the cover.

_Intrinsic Immodesty: The Salacious Adventures of Gable and Herbert_

_Erotic Stories and Accompanying Art_

_by Thomas Parr_

_Goshawk Publishing_

_London, 1483_

_For Wizarding Folk of the Gayest Sort_
Harry nearly choked at the last line to appear. He flipped further into the rather thick novel to find magical illustrations of reddened, painfully erect penises being fellated with vigour, men spread open as their lover licked slow and sadistically around the rim of their spread ass.

He promptly shut the book.

Harry pulled Draco’s letter back toward himself and flipped it over, summoning a pot of ink and quill from the living room without even looking up. The quill flew right into his hand and he dabbed the inkpot quickly to scribble onto the back of the page.

Draco,

Are you trying to kill me? Did you struggle to pick your poison and decide to go with both embarrassment when Ron, or god forbid Hermione(!), finds this later or with sheer absolute wanton horniness? I don’t think my cock has ever gotten that hard that fast.

Don’t tell me where this came from. I don’t want to know why your mother had it or why she gave it to you - or how I’m now sitting with what looks like deliciously gay erotica from the Malfoy family vault that’s making me absolutely indecent in my friend’s kitchen on this otherwise innocent and innocuous Saturday morning. You’re lucky it didn’t arrive when all of them were at the table with me. Godrick, Draco. What exactly are you trying to do to me?

Just yesterday I had to agree to an orgasm schedule, and now you send me this? I think I might actually just die, rather. All that talk in meetings about resisting temptation? Was it training for this moment?

I’ll have to think of something just as devious to send to you. Come, tell me, what are your secrets? You’ve clearly got me all figured out - Quintessence was my Achilles heel and here you come with this - Draco… I’m a newly gay man with a very vivid imagination and lots of free time and did I mention I have an orgasm schedule? I’m being limited in my pleasures to make sure I’m not just slaving to hedonism in a new and less illegal way.

I’m going to run and put this book away somewhere safe, secure and secret. And we’re not going to speak of it again, lest I ruin whatever tenuous hold I have on my libido, understood?

Salazar himself would be proud of you, for you are devious and delinquent and I will not be able to think of anything else but you and your plans for me.

- Harry

Ps. Thank you.

Harry shoved the book back in it’s box and hurried upstairs, Little Dipper chirping and flying along behind him. He would have to hide it away, for now, but the fact that Draco had sent it bubbled up in his chest and kept him smiling all of the day.

May 27, 2009

Harry had disillusioned himself thoroughly and walked quickly through the ministry lobby, his head down and watching the patent leather dress shoes Hermione had ordered for him. She had put
his whole look together, actually, ordered from a wizarding wardrobe catalog, The Red Cap Haberdasher. His dark grey three piece suit and overlying black robes were sombre and gave the impression he was professional, clear headed and collected.

She had insisted on a dark green tie to offset his eyes, and the ornate silver buttons on his waistcoat featured winged lions, the only hint that the ensemble was worn by a Gryffindor. Harry had tried on some of the older suits and robes he’d once worn for court cases in the days before, but they had been tight and uncomfortable, his frame much larger than it had been in those troubled times.

Plus, if Harry was honest, he was feeling incredibly nervous to be seen in public again, to be photographed and critiqued, to speak in front of the Wizengamot and perhaps to answer questions about his long absence and subsequent departure from the Aurors. He hoped no one asked. He had prepared an answer, just in case, asking them to focus on the issue at hand and resist the temptation to enquire about his personal life.

It was early still, long before the trial was set to start, and his shoes clipped across the marble tiles of the Ministry entryway. He shuffled up to the lifts, which were thankfully empty, and rode the rickety elevator down to the courtrooms below. On the way down, he smirked to himself, remembering the repartee he and Draco had shared in this very lift all those months ago. Back when Harry was still in the grips of a downward spiral, and Malfoy had been by to bail Greg out for drunken disorderly. The memory to Harry was crystal clear, Draco’s features sharp and cold, his voice full of his trademark sneer. He laughed to himself as the lift left him to find his way to courtroom B.

As he entered, Harry recognised the large room as the same that had held many of the major trials just after the war. And even before that, the same room that had witnessed the sentencing of Barty Crouch Jr, Bellatrix and the two Lestranges after they had tortured Frank and Alice Longbottom into insanity. Rabastan and Bellatrix had died in the final battle of Hogwarts, so it was just Rudolphus left now. The last of them to remain free.

It was empty still at this early hour, and Harry walked around the circular room, the chair in the middle of the sunken floor that would soon hold Rudolphus. He traced his fingers around the bannister that separated the three sections of onlookers. The far bank of wooden benches was reserved for Wizengamot members.

These days, Percy Weasley presided as chief warlock, a role that provided the perfect outlet for his immense neuroticism and obsessive love of law and order. Not to mention his absolutely inability to show favouritism of any kind. Percy had been nominated as the youngest chief warlock in modern history, and no one had questioned the hundreds of decisions he had presided over, each was measured and fair, thoughtful and considered.

The row of benches on the left of the shrouded entryway from the cells below was marked off for family members, spectators and other interested parties. Closest to the entrance on this third was a special area for members of the press. It afforded the best view of both the wizengamot and the witness stand, which was the final third on the right of the entryway.

Harry climbed up into the third row of the witness area, sitting down on the creaky and splintered benches, seemingly older than time, and laid his hands in his lap. He had gone over his testimony plenty of times with Ron - his was rather straightforward. He was simply to discuss his role on the Lestrange case before he left the Aurors, give testimony on the horrendous nature of Lestrange’s curses, killings and his unrepentant bloodlust, one that often left innocent muggles in his wake.

Ron had mentioned that Susan Bones was testifying, and Harry shuddered even now at the memory of what she was there to discuss. After Susan had left school in their sixth year, just after
she had received the news her mother had been killed, she had started a safehouse for muggle born witches and wizards, reinforced with the ancient magic of the Bones family home, a place her mother had layered protection over before her death.

After the war, Susan had continued to provide refuge for those who had lost their families, their homes, their sense of safety - it was well known throughout Britain as a place for those who had suffered much in the war to regain their foothold and find others they could grieve along with.

It was a year or so after Susan had started her work as a secretary in the DMLE that Lestrange, along with his new following of purists, had found the house of Bones. They hadn’t been able to penetrate the wards, but Lestrange, in his sickness, managed to break into the water supply to the house, replacing the water that flowed to the taps with his trademark blood curdling potion. Six muggle born witches and wizards had died before Susan came home that night. She found them, some still twitching and gurgling in the pools of blood flowing from their eyes, noses and mouths. The house of Bones has been empty since, and Susan moved in with Hannah Abbott in Dovetown, never to offer a place of comfort again.

Harry was pulled back from the memories of those dark days after the war by the sound of voices and footsteps, heralding the arrival of the other witnesses, spectators and wizengamot members. Harry cast a notice-me-not charm quickly, just in time for robed witches and wizards to come filing through the dark entryway.

Harry watched each person as they trekked into their appointed third of the great circular room. He was surprised to see Pansy Parkinson, hand in hand with Blaise Zabini, both in dark suits, Pansy wearing bright red lipstick under her styled black veil. Behind them came Theo Nott and Flora Carrow, twin to Hestia, who had not retaken her grandmother’s maiden name of Lamadaya, as Hestia had.

Hestia had explained it’s Somali origin one night after a meeting, both of them sipping cold cups of tea in the warm evening, her hands dancing over the moonflower vines in Luna’s garden, big blue and yellow flowers blossoming beneath her touch. It had meant “not to be looked at”, and Harry felt guilty that he hadn’t been able to look away, for she had mastered the art of reclaiming, of drawing everything beautiful toward herself, coating herself in nothing but the grace of her name.

Flora, her twin, lacked all of Hestia’s gentleness. Her spine was perfectly straight, her head high and her chin angled up, decidedly haughty. As her gaze swept around the room, her tight posture gave the distinct impression she was looking down on everything around her. She slipped behind the other three Slytherins to the spectator section of the benches, and perched herself between Pansy and Theo. Her nails, painted black like her sister’s, were clutched in her lap. A white oleander lay pinned to her jacket lapel.

Hermione and Ron entered the room together, Hermione leaning to kiss Ron on the cheek before she split from him to sit in the spectators area, while Ron turned and shuffled down the third row toward Harry. Harry’s notice-me-not charm was so strong, even Ron seemed oblivious to his presence, and Harry let it be for the time being, wanting the stands to fill more before he revealed himself amongst the crowd.

Hermione had just sat down when Luna and Greg entered. Luna’s deep purple robes a contrast to the black and grey of the other attendees - spotting Hermione by herself, Luna half dragged Greg over to her, hugging and kissing Hermione on the cheek. Harry smiled to himself. Luna could bring joy to any occasion.

The stands were so full, Harry was having a hard time keeping track of everyone he recognised from his Hogwarts days. Dean and Seamus had arrived together and both sat in the top corner of
the spectators section, closely followed by Lavender Brown. Astoria and Daphne Greengrass had joined the other Slytherins in the meantime as well, their faces stony and resolute.

Professors McGonagall and Sprout took the front row seats in front of the Slytherins. They both were dressed in sombre dark tones, Pomona in charcoal grey and Minerva in a deep forest green set of robes. They both had serious expressions on their faces, and Harry reveled in seeing them there.

Harry felt his disillusionment charm wearing off, and checked the press box quickly to see who had been assigned to cover the trial for the Prophet. To his immense relief, he saw Dennis Creevey was seated in the front, a press badge on his jacket and a large flashbulb camera at his side. In the immediate aftermath to his relief came crushing dread. Romilda Vane sat one row behind and to his right, sucking on her quill, her own camera on top of her obnoxiously bright fuchsia bag. She was often behind the gossiping, outlandish and highly speculative romantic advice column that more often that not featured Harry, and he had never lost the absolute hatred he had cultivated for her in their school days. Dread pooled deep in his gut. He would have to do something about her, and soon.

His attentions were undeniably drawn to the entryway, however, when he saw a familiar shock of white blonde hair trailing behind Hestia’s voluminous, curly locks, conspicuous to Harry for their lack of flower crown. She was leading Draco by the hand into the first row of the witness box, and Harry lost sight and sound of all else in the room. Draco was here. He was here in front of him, not a meter away, in a perfectly tailored light grey suit, his robes draped around his shoulders. Hestia was still holding his hand, and around both their wrists were twisted braids of bright green garlic leaves, tough and full of bravery.

Harry’s heart was pounding in his chest, his magic light and full of joy, twisting around him. He didn’t want to disturb Draco, distract him, he and Hestia made quite a pair, and he could see they were here together to close a chapter in both their lives, with finality, because they had lives to live outside of the horrors. He was proud of both of them.

Ron finally noticed Harry and slid closer to him, nudging his side gently with his elbow.

“Mate, your magic.” He said softly into his ear.

“Oh, yeah thanks.” Harry said, pulling his gaze from Draco. He took a deep breath and reigned himself in, concentrating on stowing and controlling the prickling sensation within his hands, for now. He scanned the crowd again, smiling to himself at Neville with his grandmother, who’s large vulture hat was now obstructing the view of a small ministry witch he didn’t recognise. At last, Susan Bones had slid into the witness box, and the Wizengamot seemed properly seated and arranged. Percy, in his chief warlock robes of pastel blue, was standing at his designated bench, calling for order, setting out final reminders to the press to remain silent and for spectators to resist from any commentary, jeering or unnecessary facial expression.

“It’s Harry Potter!” came Romilda’s high pitched screech. She was pointing from her perch in the press box over at Harry, a ripple going through the assembled crowd. Harry felt everyone’s eyes fall upon him, his charmwork falling away at the attentions of so many. He sighed, leaning back against the wooden bench, schooling his face into a relaxed expression, his hands still laying in his lap.

He focused down on his magic and sent it out across the room, quiet and stealthy, to suck the ink from all of the quills and ink bottles in Romilda’s bag, overexposing all of the film in her camera and disconnecting the flash of the irritating contraption. She had grabbed for her camera at once to start snapping away, only to glower in frustration that it didn’t appear to be working. Harry smiled
to himself as he shifted in his seat, the whispering muttering of the crowd rippling around the room. At least that was sorted. She wouldn’t be writing a word or snapping a single garish shot the whole morning. Dennis smirked from his seat below her.

Percy had cleared his throat and grabbed his wand to cast a silencing charm. At least Percy didn’t show a moments interest at all in the comings and goings of Harry Potter.

Harry dropped his gaze to Draco, who had turned in his seat to look behind him at Romilda’s outburst. Harry smiled at him, just fractionally and for only a half of a single moment, before turning back to Percy, who was introducing the Wizengamot, then Lestrange. Harry could hear the jingling of heavy chains as DMLE agents began filing into the room. Draco turned in his seat as the prisoner was brought to the chair in the centre of the floor.
May 27, 2009

“It’s Harry Potter!” That irritating bint’s voice cut straight through Draco’s anxiety, and he simply couldn’t help himself, turning in his chair to seek Harry out. He knew Harry would be here today, but when he didn’t see his shock of wild black hair upon entering the courtroom, he had tried to push it out of his mind. But, there he sat, just two rows behind Draco, his flashing green eyes trained on Romilda, taking deep calming breaths.

Draco took advantage of the fact that everyone else in the dimly lit room was also staring at Harry, trying to get a good look at their absent hero. Draco’s hungry gaze feasted on him for as long as he could, drinking him in. Harry looked good, even in this dismal dungeon. Better than good. Draco’s magic reached out to him without permission, longing for contact. Whoever dressed him, he supposed it must have been Granger, deserved an award. Good lord, Draco had never seen him look so healthy, so in control of his magic.

After a moment of trying to remember every detail of him, from his nearly tamed hair, his brown skin, his grey suit, down to the way he was seated, one arm now up and draped across the bench, exuding relaxed and reserved confidence. It was then that Harry turned his eyes from the press box in the corner and onto Draco. He felt his heart leap into his throat as he allowed those green eyes to burn into him before Harry cocked him a ghost of a smile, and turned away to face Percy.

The sounds of the rest of the room finally filtered back into Draco’s brain. Remembering why exactly he was sitting in this courtroom dungeon with a dapper Harry behind him, he moved to face the darkened antechamber, just as Percy cast a silencing charm on the assembly, and the clanking of chains grew louder.

Draco stiffened, straightening his spine against the ancient wooden slat bench, watching the sickeningly familiar sight of Rodolphus Lestrange being led into the circular pit at the nadir of the courtroom and chained to the interrogation seat before him. He felt Hestia’s firm hand on his, grounding him. He reminded himself that this experience was finite. No matter how awful it was going to be, it would eventually end. It would be over. Lestrange had already done the worst he could do to Draco, he had no power here.

Despite Percy’s silencing charm, a low rumble of hissing from the spectator section had broken the heavy and ominous atmosphere that had settled on the courtroom when Lestrange had entered. Draco couldn’t help looking over, the familiar chant of Slytherin dissent tugging his heart strings. Seeing the entire assembly in the spectator section for the first time, he found himself momentarily stunned to see the small horde of Slytherins and, with the greatest shock of all, his mother, all hissing vociferously at Lestrange.

He hadn’t spoken about the trial with his mother at all, didn’t think he could stand to have her hear the things he needed to say. But, despite all of that, and despite their tenuous history together, her presence was achingly comforting. She was his mother, after all.

“That’s enough, that’s enough.” Percy said imperiously, casting his silencing charm again, neatly cutting the tail of the building hiss. Draco continued to watch his mother amongst the Slytherins in shock. Pansy, who’s dark winged eyeliner he could just barely make out beneath her wickedly fashionable veil, winked at him when he caught her gaze, before turning her hardened expression back to Lestrange, her venomous red lipstick accenting her scowl. Narcissa continued to glare at the defendant in chains, hatred in her eyes.
Draco turned himself to face the front of the courtroom, where the cushioned and far more comfortable benches of the Wizengamot were arranged. He was feeling distinctly off balance—everyone he loved was in this room supporting him and the other victims, yet, he was so exposed, vulnerable. The thought was nearly overwhelming.

He squeezed Hestia’s hand, their garlic leaf bracelets momentarily pressed together, and pooled all of his strength to cement his mask of cool indifference. He wouldn’t let Lestrange see him as anything but immensely powerful, decidedly in control.

After much paper shuffling and whispered acknowledgements with the witch to his left, Percy finally cleared his throat. “All parties being present, we’re ready to begin. Are you ready Vance?”
He called to the scribe down the bench.

“Ready, sir.” Answered a meek voice, quill quivering in anticipation in a pale and veiny hand of the minuscule wizard.

“Right, then. Criminal Hearing for Rodolphus Lestrange on the 27th of May for the following; Multiple violations of the Muggle Protection Act of 1992, namely torture and murder by use of the illegal Blood Curdling Curse. Multiple violations of the Statute of War Crimes of the International Confederation of Wizards, namely joining an illegal terrorist organisation and using sexual assault and rape as a weapon. Additionally, there are numerous occasions of breaching the International Statute of Secrecy when participating in Death Eater exploits and subsequent criminal activities.” He paused to allow Vance to catch up.


Draco stared down at Lestrange, who lolled his head to the right to leer at himself and Hestia at the mention of their names. Bile rose in his throat, but he held his mask in place. He was untouchable.

The room was silent save for the echoing of Percy’s well trained voice and the monotonous scratch of Vance’s quill. Draco could feel Harry’s magic responding to Lestrange’s wandering gaze. Dangerous and electric. It singed the back of Draco’s neck hairs like an impending lightning strike. He drew in a deep breath and imagined his own magic like a blanket, wrapping around the witness box. Protecting all of them inside it from Lestrange.

He felt when Harry recognised it and pulled his own magic back in, sheepishly regaining control. Draco took strength from it. Even in this position of immense vulnerability, he could feel his own control and power asserting itself. This was his moment of bravery.

He focused back on Percy’s voice, “For the charge of escaping Azkaban to join an illegal terrorist organisation known as the Death Eaters, how do you plead?”

“Guilty.” Smith’s irritating voice answered. Draco wondered if Lestrange would speak at all during the proceedings. If they’d even have to testify. If he would just go down quietly.

“In the case of torturing and murdering muggles during the course of the Second Wizarding War as a part of an illegal terrorist organisation, how do you plead?”

“Guilty.” Smith answered again.
“In the case of poisoning and the use of the illegal blood curdling curse on muggles, muggleborns, and members of the auror department, how do you plead?”

“Guilty-”

“I’m not guilty!” Lestrange’s disused voice, cracked vehemently.

_Sssssss Hisssss Sssss_… broke out around the room. The Slytherins made their displeasure known.

Percy lazily flicked his wand, silencing the room without comment, his brow deeply wrinkled in frustration.

Draco sighed. It had been too much to hope that any of them would be spared their testimony. He could sense, rather than see, Susan’s fury. He felt Hestia’s magic now, weaving with his to strengthen the blanket of magic over the five of them. Draco fiddled with the braided garlic on his wrist and wrestled with his boggart.

“Very well,” said Percy in an impatiently resigned voice, “witness for the prosecution on the charge of poisoning and the use of the illegal blood curdling curse on muggles, muggleborns, and members of the auror department; the court calls Ronald Bilius Weasley, Harry James Potter, and Susan Bones. Please stand.”

The three of them stood in the witness box and Draco just focused on his breathing and magic.

“The court will now administer veritaserum for the purpose of the testimony. Let me remind the court that questions will be limited to these specific cases. Past criminal activity from prior to the Azkaban breakout is inadmissible.”

A woman in DMLE that Draco hadn’t noticed stood up next to the witness box and administered one drop of veritaserum to the three witnesses.

“Please start the timer. If the questioning has not commenced in 60 minutes we will recess to allow time between doses for the safety of the witnesses, if-”

But Percy was cut off from speaking by a startlingly shrill voice, “Harry Potter, where have you been for the last year?!” Draco spun in his seat to see the look of outright rage on Harry’s face as he struggled to hold his truths in.

“Ms. Vane, that is completely out of the question!” Boomed Percy. “The use of veritaserum in a Death Eater criminal trial is not the opportunity for the Daily Prophet-”

“The forest!” Harry finally blurted, unable to hold it in anymore. He was sweating with the effort it took to keep it in, he looked furious. Draco sagged with relief. Thank fuck, that was all that came out. He could kill Romilda.

Percy cast a personal silencing charm at Romilda before she could squeak out another utterance. “One more word from you, Ms. Vane, and you’ll be facing your own criminal court case for abusing court proceedings and interrupting justice. Mr. Potter is here as a witness, not as the focus of your report. This is your final warning.” He nodded to members of the DMLE standing by and they moved closer to the reporting box. Dennis Creevey looked unnerved, but Romilda looked absolutely predatory with the way she continued to gape at Harry. She was practically vibrating with the energy it was taking to hold her tongue.

After the initial drama of Romilda’s outburst, the questioning went on seamlessly. Harry, Ron, and Susan answered their questions from the three interrogators and Smith in under and hour. Draco couldn’t follow the question and answers, but instead let himself sink into the sound of Harry’s
voice when he spoke. Felt the comforting addition of his magic to the blanket around them. He started when Percy banged his gavel and announced they were prepared to vote on the charges before moving on to the next one.

The vote was unanimous. Guilty. On to the next. They went through each charge and Lestrange pleaded guilty for every one of them, resigned to his fate. Until the very last one.

“And finally, in the case of sexual assault and use of rape as a weapon of war, how do you plea?”

Before Smith could even open his mouth, Lestrange said with a strong voice, eyes trained on Draco, “Not guilty.”

His voice was insolent. Taunting. The responding hiss from the crowd was only one or two people, but as the seconds wore on the hissing from the assembly grew to near deafening. It wasn’t just Slytherins, either. Looking away from Lestrange, Draco could see Luna, Neville, and even Neville’s grandmother adding to the swell of sound. He could see McGonagall and Sprout. He could even see members of the Wizengamot, unable to maintain the visage of unbiased, hissing along with the crowd. Percy couldn’t seem to silence the reverberating note of disgust and dissent, and resorted to banging his gavel. This seemed to make the hecklers more persistent.

Looking around, Draco caught Harry’s eye again, he too was hissing unashamedly. Hestia squeezed his hand, bringing his attention back to the front, and leaned in to whisper, “hiss hiss.”

At that, Draco gave a genuine smile into her shoulder. The thunderous disapproval of Lestrange appeared to make him shrink in his chair. As a Slytherin, Lestrange would feel how thoroughly he was being shamed and ostracised by his own house, one that had filled these horrid wooden benches more than any other. The same house that once helmed the disturbing ideology for which he had fought and killed and tortured.

Percy’s gavel banging eventually cut through the noise, and once again the room fell into an ominous silence. The torches flickered on the walls, and everyone waited while Percy shuffled through another stack of papers.

When Draco and Hestia were called to stand, they did so on sturdy feet. They accepted their dose of veritaserum and they answered every question fired at them. Draco glared down at Lestrange through every single second of it. Not breaking eye contact. Hestia continued to hold his hand and she did the same. They stood together, telling their story in unashamed detail. Even though veritaserum was helping to pull the words out, Draco felt like he could have told the story just as accurately without it. Standing here, in front of the man that haunted his dreams, he wanted to tell it. Wanted everyone to know how sick and wrong Lestrange was. How deserving of justice.

He vaguely registered Romilda scribbling furiously, with a quill she seemed to have nicked from an irate Dennis, the sound of someone sniffling in the spectator stand, and of Harry’s ever present magic. Soothing, comforting. Warm, like the sun.

It felt surreal. To be standing there in a room of people, spilling his darkest horrors. He felt remotely detached. As if he was floating above his body, watching it happen.

“That was the last time it happened.” Draco finished with a flat voice, staring directly into Lestrange’s eyes.

“But you liked it.” Lestrange spat back at him. He was smiling. Smith had given up at this point. He leaned back on his bench waiting for the proceedings.
The chorus of hissing responded.

Draco didn’t speak. The veritaserum didn’t pull any words from him.

“I think we’re ready to vote.” Percy said in a clipped voice. Everyone in the room was ready for this to be over.

“Those in favour of clearing the charge?” Not a single person moved. Every member of the Wizengamot looked profoundly uncomfortable. “Those in favour of conviction?” Every hand flew up. “Good. Does anyone have anything they’d like to add before we sentence?”

Harry stood. A murmur ran through the crowd.

“Mr. Potter?” Percy prompted.

“I’d like to ask for the maximum sentence. No less than life in Azkaban. As someone whose been fighting against Lestrange and the Death Eaters since I was 15, I think it’s no more than he deserves.” Harry’s tone was stoney and his face was set. It sent a chill down Draco’s spine.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. It is noted. We’ll adjourn for 30 minutes to discuss.” He smacked his gavel before casting a silencing wall to divide the Wizengamot from the spectators. Members of the DMLE rose to and began walking amongst the crowd to maintain order as a chatter rose around them.

Draco watched as members of the Wizengamot rose from their seats, not a sound escaping their wall of silence, and began darting around to one another, conferring, nodding, jotting notes, and passing messages to one another. Percy was gesticulating wildly, apparently shouting to certain members for information or opinions.

Hestia was turning in her seat to whisper something to Susan, and Draco could feel the pull of Harry’s magic from behind him. He could hear Ron and Harry whispering in low voices to one another. Not wanting to be obvious to the hawk-like gaze of Romilda, who seemed to be sans quill again, Draco closed his eyes and sent his magic back to Harry. Acknowledging. Loving. Thank you he pushed into his magic thank you for being here.

When the 30 minutes were up, the silencing wall came down, the DMLE took their seats again, and a hush rippled through the crowd.

“Rodolphus Lestrange, after reviewing the charges laid against you and the witness testimony we, the Wizengamot, sentence you to life in Azkaban with no chance of parole. And, in light of your violation of War Crimes of the International Confederation of Wizards, we have moved to additionally sentence you to magical castration. Do you have anything you wish to say to the court?”

Draco felt faint.

Lestrange, who had paled significantly at the mention of castration seem to be at a loss for words. Smith spoke up in his place. “No, sir, we accept the sentence.”

“Then, court adjourned. Your management will be jointly monitored by the DMLE and a team from St. Mungo’s stationed at Azkaban. Thank you all.” Percy gave a final clanging bang of his gavel and then it was over.

It was over.
The crowd began to murmur and move. The DMLE members stood to open the doors, where the rest of the press presumably waited, hungry for any scraps of information they could knit together into gossip.

Draco didn’t know what to do with himself. He felt Hestia pulling him to his feet and into a consuming hug, her garlic braid scratching his neck. Lestrange was being led on heavy legs to a side room for processing. He would never have to see that face again.

He heard a throat clearing from behind him and he broke away from Hestia to see Ron and Harry standing and watching them.

“Well done, all of you.” Ron said. He looked exhausted but supremely pleased.

“Thank you.” Draco said dumbly, starting to regain feeling in his limbs. He was trying not to stare at Harry, who was making this difficult by looking directly at him.

“Ron, thanks for preparing such a strong case.” Hestia said reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. Susan nodded in agreement

“Trust me, it was my pleasure.” He said grimly. “Excuse me, I need to find ‘Mione.”

The crowd was milling around them now, Susan ducked out after Ron to grab Hannah Abbott into a hug, and Draco could hear Romilda trying to fight through the crowd towards them.

Harry cleared his throat again, he seemed to be trying to find words. “I just wanted to say,” he looked sideways, seeing Romilda closing in, “that you both did amazingly, and you should be really proud of yourselves.” He smiled shyly and extended his hand to shake Draco’s.

“Thank you, Potter.” Draco quirked an curious little smile as he reached out to take Harry’s hand. It was such an odd gesture, incredibly formal but soft at the same time, and it made Draco’s heart soar.

Draco’s magic sang at the contact with Harry’s hand. He was so consumed with the simple touch, one seemed to light him on fire from the inside, that he almost didn’t realize Harry was actually trying to pass him something with the handshake.

Withdrawing his hand he tucked a small object and folded piece of parchment into his pocket. Nestled next to his talisman and an assortment of old letters from Harry.

Before he could say anything else, however, Romilda and the rest of the press had descended on Harry and Draco.

“C’mon.” Hestia said, plucking at Draco’s sleeve and pulling him towards the exit. “We don’t need to be here for this.”

Feeling slightly guilty for leaving Harry to the nearly rabid throng of reporters, notebooks and quills waving wildly in the air, but thoroughly agreeing with Hestia. He cast one last look at Harry before descending the steps into the milling crowd.

Harry stood there, fielding questions and completely ignoring Romilda’s attempts to wheedle information out of him, looking strong and firm, hands clasped behind his back and his chest broad, unwavering. Draco ached with wanting to stay with him, but allowed himself to be led through the crowd. There would be time.

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Later that evening, he sat at Luna’s kitchen table, surrounded by Neville, Hestia, Greg, Luna, Pansy, and Blaise.

It had been an awkward at first, realising that Hestia and Luna had invited Pansy and Blaise to dinner for their celebration. They hadn’t spoken, not meaningfully, since Draco’s suicide attempt. But, Draco was surprised to see how easy it was to slip into conversation with them, as if no time had passed. As if they weren’t all entirely different people.

They spoke with him differently than the rest of his friends. They were Slytherin through and through. They teased him with sharp wit and nearly indiscernible sarcasm. He forgot how much fun they were, but any time they ran into a heavy topic or neared the taboo of their long estrangement, there was an awkward lull and a quick change of subject.

By the time Luna was clearing plates, Greg was doing the wash up and Neville had taken Hestia to the garden saying something about yellow tulips and white violets. Sharing the last of the grape cider, Luna was chatting animatedly with Blaise about brain chemistry in relation to addiction, leading him down the hall toward the room where Luna hosted meetings. Pansy and Draco sat alone at the table, and an uneasy silence descended on them.

Pansy broke first with a heavy sigh, “Draco, I- I should have written more.”

He was surprised. He honestly thought they were going to play nice until the end of the evening and pretend nothing had ever happened, simply going back to only corresponding through greeting cards.

“Well, I probably could have as well.” He offered uncomfortably, studying his hands. Being open felt more difficult with Pansy than with his other friends. There was so much history. So much unsaid.

“I was a shit friend Draco, I was selfish.” She pushed on, compulsively examining her nails.

Draco snorted. “I mean, yes. But, I also don’t blame you.”

“Well you should!” She nearly yelled, before dropping her voice self consciously and nearly whispering, “I didn’t even invite you to the wedding, for fuck’s sake, Draco, what kind of a monster am I?!”

“A very Slytherin one.” Draco said, a sad smile on his face. “I just assumed you didn’t want to be friends after everything I put you through. I wasn’t exactly a good friend to you and Blaise in school, either.”

“We’ve been friends since birth Draco. That has to count for fucking something.” She insisted, looking pained.

“Oh course it counts for something, Pans. It’s just-” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. It had been such a long and draining day, and hashing out childhood fallouts was the last thing he wanted to do right now. “It’s just that we each clearly had some shit to work out.”

“And we should have helped each other do it!” She persisted.

“But we didn’t.” Draco’s voice was sharp.

Pansy’s face fell. “So, what? Are we just sad school acquaintances now? We exchange pleasantries at events and ignore each other otherwise?”
“That’s kind of what we’ve been doing for years.” He pointed out.

“Well, I hate it.” She said mulishly.

“I didn’t even know you’d be here at the trial. Why didn’t you owl me?”

“I didn’t want you to tell me not to come.” She admitted sheepishly.

“Did you come for me?” He was touched at the thought but exasperated at Pansy’s pigheadedness.

“Of fucking course I came for you, you prat. Your mother wrote my mother and sent a copy of The Prophet, and I couldn’t not come! And besides,” She continued vehemently, “Theo, and Flora, and Hestia… We’re all Slytherins and we need to support each other.” She looked determined, righteous.

“Hiss hiss.” He quirked a smile at her, and she smiled back.

“Hiss hiss, dragon boy.”

“So what now, Pans?” He asked, genuinely curious as to the direction of this conversation.

“Well,” She said imperiously, “we’re fucking friends again. Still. We were never not friends, we were just stupid, and I was selfish. So, get ready for two owls a week. And if you don’t respond to them promptly, I’ll floo my ass across the continent and kick down your door.”

“Salazar, woman. Alright. I accept your apology.”

“Good.” She sniffed, appearing to be overcome with emotion but not wanting Draco to see. She picked up her mug and made her way out of the kitchen, presumably to save Blaise from Luna.

Alone at last, he revelled in the silence for a moment and mindlessly fished in his pocket for his talisman. It was only then that he realised he never had a chance to see what Harry had passed him. His heart leapt as he pulled out the small plastic token and a tiny folded note.

The token was a plastic coin-like medallion, painted bronze with a large triangle in the centre and the number one printed in the middle. On the edges of the triangle read the words Unity, Service, Recovery. Around the edge of the coin read To Thine Own Self Be True.

He stared at the coin for a while, feeling a bemused curiosity before unfolding the note.

Draco,

I’m so proud of you. You were incredible today, and so, so brave.

The chip is what I was given for my one year sober. I wanted you to have it. To see that I’m doing it.

Your birthday is next week, did you know?

Sorry, I think I’m very funny when I’m nervous.

Draco Malfoy, will you please go on a birthday date with me so that I may take you out and woo you properly? I miss you.

Owl me.
Ps. Please don’t laugh too hard when you read The Prophet’s story about me tomorrow. Unfortunately, I think my reappearance may have overshadowed the Lestrange case.

Draco read the letter a dozen times, twirling the coin in his hand. When he heard footsteps returning to the kitchen, he quickly hid the letter and chip.

Luna came in carrying empty tea cups, “Draco, what are we doing for your birthday next week?”

“Perhaps we can do something on Saturday. I actually have plans on my birthday.” he couldn’t help the stupid grin splitting his face.
Can't Have You Falling for Me Just Yet

May 28, 2009

The moon was still hanging on to the western horizon when Harry was pulled from a restless fit of dreams, fantasies and images that spilled over from his unconscious mind to his half wakeful state. The sheets were pulled, twisted and clumped about his ankles, pillows lay on the floor and he had disrobed in his sleep down to his pants. Harry groaned into the soft sheets below him. He was sweating, and his skin was on fire.

He rolled onto his back and kicked the tangle of sheets from his feet, laying his right hand across his stomach, fingertips just below his navel, draped across the dark trail of hair that bisected his abdomen, feeling each deep breath, concentrating on each slow, though unsteady, inhale. His left came up to rub across his face, pushing his hair away from his dampened forehead. He was breathing heavily, despite having been asleep, and he was fighting to regain some composure.

It wasn’t that the night was particularly warm, in fact, a cool breeze from the open window belied a rather cold summer evening. The chirping of crickets was slow and languid, and mist hung about the rolling hills and valleys of forest that peppered the landscape around the little farmhouse. Somewhere in the distance, Little Dipper was hunting.

No, it wasn’t the heat that was stoking the gentle lick of flames and the heat he felt pooling within him. Harry had been fighting back the incessant smouldering all afternoon, and well into the evening, when he had finally fallen into that fitful sleep.

It was Draco.

Seeing him, Gods, touching him. It had taken all his willpower to control himself, the whole of the trial, sitting behind him, watching him be nothing but powerful and confident and gloriously unashamed. Watching him revel in the ardent support and nearly fanatical admiration of those he had always feared had turned on him.

That grey suit and his grey eyes, and the way he had looked at Harry. Gods, the way he had looked at him. Soft, and beautiful, and vulnerable, a moment that was for Harry, and Harry alone, for, to the rest of the world, Draco Malfoy was nothing but composure. Control. And that dichotomy - that’s what was making Harry burn so furiously hours later and deep into the night.

He swallowed hard, pressing his hand against his abdomen, as if to stifle the waves of desire that kept making him feel so very unsteady with lust. As if he were simply drowning in all of ways Draco had grabbed him and held him and refused to relinquish his hold, the way he had opened for him, and him alone. In public, in front of all of the fears of the world and the weight of his past, Draco had looked to him.

It had felt nearly impossible for Harry not to act, not to respond, not to give away how tethered to each other they were. How wrapped up in each other. How much Harry craved Draco’s attentions. How much he wanted to lavish Draco with his own. How Draco’s magic had painted Harry’s very skin in tantalising strips, had made Harry so hyper aware of every careful tendril, every fire it ignited.

Harry realised he was panting, and fought to slow himself, to swallow back the undulating desire, and he took a slow and shuddering breath.
Draco brought out something in him that felt reckless, hungry and animalistic. Primal, and demanding - full of urges he had never felt before, never thought to feel, even. Urges that felt like he might collapse from the weight of them.

Just the thought of the man made Harry swim in images of pulling off his robes and fancy suit beneath, and licking his skin to taste him, dragging his teeth across the sharper parts of him. Of the feel of Harry’s hands wrapped around his hips, pulling him closer, full of desperation. Of the thought of cock, slick with his saliva. Of the thought of how his come might taste.

Harry made a deep noise in his throat, before he caught himself, shoving his knuckle into his mouth and biting down to keep the moan that would follow from escaping. His right hand had slipped lower and was pressing now against his cock through his pants, which was painfully hard, precome having dampened the spot just over the swollen head.

His hips were rocking up against his palm, his body begging for sensation, for the mercy of release.

No. Not now.

The thoughts were broken and incomplete, vying for room in his mind.

Not today. Today is not on the schedule.

Harry pulled his hand from the swell of his cock and gripped the sheets beside him instead, his hips still canting, the loss of contact nearly painful. He bit down on his bottom lip, closing his eyes tightly against the absolute need he felt. Gods, he wanted to come.

He did growl this time, a sound full of frustration. Today was not on the schedule, no. Today was not on the schedule, and giving in to this wasn’t worth the self doubt and the guilt that would come after. He could wait for tomorrow. He could wait for tomorrow, even if at this exact moment, he wanted nothing else.

This was another exercise in self control. Luna had given him such a stringent schedule because she knew it would be hard. She knew it would be unfair, at times. The point was for Harry to show himself that he could resist. That sex wasn’t going to be a place of fear and weakness and constantly questioning whether pleasure was part of sickness, was something he should be worrying over. She was making him do this now, so he could build up to not feeling full of doubt.

He made the decision that moment to get up out of bed and take a cold shower. Freezing. Unbearable. The kind of cold that took your breath and made you wonder if you’d ever be warm again. He turned on the water, removed his pants (ignoring the tempting slide of fabric against his still leaking cock) and stepped in before he could find a logical reason not to be so cruel to himself.

Several hours later, Harry was in a mood. His body had protested vehemently against his early morning shower and the rather punishing run he had taken. When he had showered a second time and finally gotten to sit down around the breakfast table with Ron, Hermione and Rose just after eight, he sank into the wooden chair with an exhausted sigh.

Hermione and Ron both eyed him suspiciously. Rose was throwing cheerios on the floor, one by one, still singing the breakfast song.

“T’m okay. Just working on something new.” Harry said, giving them both a small smile.
“Mmm, best not to read The Prophet then, I think.” Hermione quickly folded up the newspaper that had been sitting behind large the jug of orange juice.

Harry raised an eyebrow, interest very clearly piqued. “No, it’s fine let’s see what the damage is. I thought I did well afterwards with all the questioning, and my sabotage of Romilda must have helped for the first bit.” Harry reached across the table and took the paper from her, unfolding it to reveal a front page smudged with the condensation from the juice.

**GOLDEN BOY BACK IN LONDON**

After over a year since the disappearance of the Wizarding World’s hero, Harry Potter was sighted at the trial of Rodolphus Lestrange, held yesterday at the Ministry of Magic. Potter was there to give testimony as to his work in the DMLE as an Auror on the Lestrange case, and to give an impassioned plea for harsh sentencing.

After the trial, Potter refused most questions about his whereabouts, but Romilda Vane of the Daily Prophet was able to get an exclusive admission that he had been in the forest, which Potter had delivered with a sly wink, having been longtime friends with Vane since their Hogwarts days in the same house.

What forest could he have meant? Was this a reference to the dark Albanian woodlands where He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named once regained strength? Could Potter have been sent on secret work from the ministry to quell unrest and burgeoning nefarious underworld activity on the continent? Or was he there on a personal quest, seeking meaning and understanding about the figure who had hunted him for most of his young life?

Justin Finch-Fletchley, junior under secretary to the Minister of Magic, let slip that he was shocked at Potter’s appearance, having recalled a gaunt, harrowed and rather unsteady visage just before Potter had disappeared last year, completely different from the healthy, confident and rather fetching man who appeared in court yesterday, very dapper in a dark grey ensemble and austere black robes. Was Potter ill and taking time off to regain his health, and not on ministry business at all? This would explain the dramatic and secretive way he had vanished, and why he has not returned to the DMLE and since quit his post as one of Robbard’s top Aurors, but would not explain the very enigmatic clue of the forest. Efforts to uncover an establishment or health facility that went by the name the forest were unsuccessful.

Readers may recall that last year we ran a whole month of theories as to why, where and how Potter had disappeared - highlights included Potter’s devastating breakup with Meghan Rexford of the Wemborne Wasps being the cause of his flight from the public eye, as well as theories around his deteriorating mental health and a stint in St. Mungo’s Janus Thickey ward, neither of which were verifiable at the time, with Meghan Rexford declining any comment at all and staff at St. Mungo’s remaining characteristically uncooperative with The Prophet’s request for commentary. Our most popular theory was that Potter was injured irreparably in the line of duty, perhaps being bitten by a werewolf and forced to take a leave of absence.

At the end of the day, this writer remains thankful that Potter has reappeared at all, looking charmingly handsome and still without a ring on his finger. It seems there remains hope for us ladies out there.

Harry snorted in amusement, rolling his eyes. Romilda Vane really was as vapid as ever. The idea that she and other women in the wizarding world should remain hopeful for his affection was beyond laughable. Not only was he very much gay, but, he remained more than a little obsessed with the same man who had captivated his attention for the last decade, one Draco Lucius Malfoy.
The photo that accompanied the article was of him in the witness box, leaning back against the bench with one arm up over the backing. He looked relaxed and at ease. It was while he was trying to pretend he wasn’t thinking about pulling Draco down onto his lap and kissing him senseless.

Thinking of Draco, though trying to school his thoughts away from all of the heretical fun he wanted to have with him, Harry flipped to the third page of the paper to find a little column on the trial, written by none other than Dennis Creevey. It was kind, supportive and very fair, roundly condemning Lestrange and uplifting those who had spoken against him, as well as those who had hissed their dissent from the spectator stands. It applauded the witnesses without throwing the details of their testimony on display for the masses to consume. Respectful and poignant.

The article ended with information for those who were still struggling after the war - signs and symptoms of PTSD, issues of addiction, what constitutes sexual violence, then where to get help, even how to help loved ones, and the like. It was wonderfully done, and brightened Harry’s mood considerably. Dennis was a gem of a man, and how much he cared for others was evident on the page.

He looked up from the paper to Ron, peeking over the most recent Quibbler, and Hermione’s waiting gazes. Rose remained oblivious, now pointing her spoon at her mother and pretending to cast spells, babbling an attempt at the incantation.

Harry gave them a half smile, “not half bad, I think.”

The other two seemed to let out held breaths, full of relief. It was sweet, how much they cared. How much they had always cared. Always trying to spare him the details, holding him like he was made of glass, ready to shatter. Hermione went back to her chia seed yoghurt and Ron sipped from his orange juice. It was nearly the same shade as his Chudley Cannons apron, which was draped over the back of his usual chair. The cover of the Quibbler featured articles on Harry’s reduction in wrackspurts and the calming effects of herbal teas.

Harry reached for some porridge and the milk, making himself a bowl, his stomach rumbling.

“Expelliarmus!” He snatched the spoon Rose was waving about from her hand, blowing a raspberry on her cheek as he did it, causing her to erupt into a fit of giggles, her surrogate wand easily forgotten.

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June 02, 2009

Harry,

What did you have in mind?

- Draco

Harry looked up at Little Dipper and raised an eyebrow.

“He thinks he’s going to play hard to get with me? After all this?”

Little Dipper hooted and ruffled his feathers, clearly just as frustrated.
Draco,

Five days you’ve had to write me and that’s all I get? I’m not giving away anything. Say you’ll come with me. Say yes, and meet me at the Ruined Arch in South London at half 12 on Friday. There’s an apparition point just West of the main archway. I promise, I won’t disappoint.

In fact, don’t even write back, I know you’ll be there - you’re just trying to steep me in the same nervous anticipation I know you’re feeling. Oh but Draco, you must know by now that won’t work on me. I am as sure about you as I ever was, just as I’m sure you won’t be able to resist seeing me. Don’t run.

See you then,

- Harry

Ps. Wear something comfortable.

Harry smirked to himself as he folded up the parchment. He knew his arrogance would have Draco rolling his eyes, but he didn’t mind. Draco needed to know he wasn’t tentative. And, besides, it was all true. He wasn’t tentative. He had done nothing but think of all the ways he could charm Draco, could shock and surprise and delight him into being impressed with him. At the end of the day, however, what Draco really wanted was that sense of peace and security and safety. He didn’t need anything flashy or over the top. No, the way to win Draco over was by showing him Harry understood him. Understood everything beneath that facade.

He sent the little scrap of parchment on with Little Dipper, who seemed just as pleased with himself as Harry was, hopping to the windowsill and swooping out of sight.

Harry leaned back in his chair, still smiling to himself.

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June 05, 2009

“Rose, it’s you and me in the kitchen today. You’re in charge of making sure I don’t mess this up. A certain someone is very picky and terribly discerning. And, Godric, I want to impress him.”

Harry had gotten up with the sun, run a full 10 kilometres around the farms of the area, showered and rushed Hermione and Ron out the door to work. And now, now he was preparing lunch. Picnic lunch.

Why couldn’t he just be a normal person and invite someone to a restaurant for a date? Why did he have to plan this grand romantic thing that had fifteen million different potential reasons to go terribly?

Harry tasted the aloo gobi that lay simmering on the stove. Perfect.

He had checked the weather obsessively over London for the past few days. No chance of rain, light breeze, just a few perfectly plush and whimsical clouds. Harry thought he might be solely responsible for the glorious June weather, with all the concentrating he had done on making sure it didn’t rain.
He stirred a pot of dal absentmindedly, watching Rose nibble on a potato.

“I’m an idiot, Rose. I fell for someone with impeccable taste. Is this what it’s going to be like, forever?”

Harry grinned at her. He wasn’t really stressed, or worried, or upset that he had gone and bent himself backwards to impress Draco. He liked it. He liked that he knew he could do it. He had planned the perfect day.

By eleven, Harry had packed away a slew of dishes into a neat little basket, full of naan and saffron rice and Neville’s bottle of lemon and jasmine cordial. He shrunk the basket down and handed it off to Little Dipper.

“You know when and where you little monster, don’t you mess this up. I’m counting on you, we can’t have a lunch date without lunch.”

Dipper hooted and danced about the kitchen window, hopping from one foot to the other, his ear tufts wagging hilariously. Harry grinned at him. The little bird had never let him down, and he seemed nearly as excited as he was himself.

The kitchen was an absolute disaster. Flour was spilled across one countertop, pans and burnt remnants of previously attempted dishes were piled high in the sink. Curry was smeared along the bottom cabinets where it had unceremoniously splattered as Harry ladled it into serving dishes frantically. It was astounding, but it smelled delicious, and fresh, and the final result was beautifully made and lovely food. Harry was very well pleased with himself.

He wasn’t pleased, however, to hear the kitchen door open and see Ron’s freckled face duck in, a look of interest instantly turning to bereft incredulity at the state of his beloved kitchen. He had obviously come home for lunch and to check on Rose.

“Blimey Harry, what have you done with the place?!” He was looking around, his mouth open. Rose was not helping, bouncing in her chair and yelling “potato” over and over again.

“Ron. Forgive me. But, I have a date. I have a date and I’m making the food. And, if I don’t leave now, I’ll be late, and that’ll be an absolute disaster, so, hold the questions for tonight. I’ve gotta get dressed!”

Harry dashed up the stairs to the spare bedroom, yelling behind him, “can you take Rosie over to the Burrow for me? Your mom’s in on the plan, I just wasn’t expecting to be so far behind already or I’d’ve taken her myself.”

He could hear Ron asking Rose what in the world was going on as he shut the door and grabbed a clean pair of black jeans, his trainers and a passable but plain dark green shirt. He ran his fingers through his hair a few times, knowing it wouldn’t be doing much good in any case, and rubbed some flour off his own cheek.

“Okay Draco, here we go. This is what you get.” He said to his own reflection in the mirror.

Harry dashed back out the front door, just after 12, and up the lane to the apparition, twisting into the crushing darkness at a run, Little Dipper having already flown off in the direction of London.

He appeared just off to the side behind one of the many old arches, dusting himself off and moving aside the leaves of a rather spindly elm.

Harry hadn’t been in muggle London for quite some time, and certainly not in such dense crowds
as the summer at Kew Gardens would draw. He could hear families with raucous children, foreign languages and laughing. He steadied himself and focused his magic.

Great rippling waves, slow and rolling, moved from his hands. A spell he had learned back in the Forest of Dean but one that would serve him just as well today. *Repello Muggletum* he whispered softly, walking out into the crowd, which had now thinned significantly. People were turning around and ambling off, remembering important issues or the idea that they had perhaps parked illegally. Some felt compelled to visit the London Eye or the National Archive in place of the sprawling lawns and bursting gardens of Kew.

Harry smiled, focused and intent on the fact that today, June fifth, he and Draco would be alone in this sprawling expanse of green, beds bursting with just blooming buds, placid rock pools and steamy greenhouses.

This was his gift to Draco, a world of living, breathing artful wonders, carefully kept and flourishing under the guidance of those who lived to watch the world come alive.

He walked ahead a ways, ensuring the borders of the gardens were thick with his repelling charms, hustling the last of the small children, just now learning how to run, and senior citizens, leaning on canes and pushing walkers in front of them. He pulled them back from the gigantic annual waterlilies, grown from seed each year and the graceful wisteria vines that delivered long clusters of bright purple flowers year after year, for centuries now, and sent them on their way.

Returning to the archway, Harry took a deep breath, letting the quiet settle, now punctuated only by birdsong and the rustling of the breeze in the grasses and trees.

The pop of apparition made him nervous for the first time that day. Butterflies swarmed in his stomach and he couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face.

Draco stumbled out of the overgrown arch to the West and Harry couldn’t help but laugh, his voice punctuating the still and quiet world of the garden.

“Careful, can’t have you falling for me just yet, I’ve got a whole thing planned.” Harry called to him, walking up the now empty stone lined avenue toward him.

Draco dusted himself off, huffing, obviously startled and overwhelmed. He had taken Harry’s advice to dress comfortably and donned chinos, for Salazar’s sake. He looked sharp and attractive, as always, but Harry was more taken with the blush that had crept up his cheeks and threatened to cover his neck.

Harry held out his hand. “Come on then, I’ve got so much to show you.”

Draco reached out and took it, though it almost seemed like he wanted to refuse.

“Where is this? Where are we?” He said, after a moments silence, gazing around at the tree lined expanse, otherwise empty save for themselves.

“This is Kew Gardens. It’s a muggle garden, tended by the city of London, people come here to view plants from all over the world and connect with nature, to get away from the big city life.” Harry was smiling, gesticulating with his hand that wasn’t interlaced with Draco’s.

The other man’s palm was a bit sweaty, and Harry could feel how nervous his magic was, but he wasn’t put off by it. Draco was Draco, nerves and sweat and all, and Harry just launched into a speech about the history of the garden, the size, the number of plants, how muggles had come up with new and inventive ways to create greenhouses to keep their specimens alive. He had done his
research for this, he’d read up.

Draco let him prattle on as they walked, his magic slowly growing against Harry’s, finding its foothold, unfurling. Draco seemed mesmerized by the beds full of blooming specimens, bees happily buzzing between yellow and purple and violet petals, hydrangeas and hyacinths, coating themselves in pollen before flying off again.

Harry paused in his explanations to watch Draco take it all in. They had come to the end of their avenue, and directly ahead lay a greenhouse. Well, several greenhouses, all connected, pulled together by large arches of steel and coated in hundreds of glass panes.

“Can we go in?” Asked Draco, tentative but clearly overcome with curiosity.

“Of course.” Harry was grinning, bolstered by Draco’s interest. He had been quiet, unsure, but Harry could see his love of the garden starting to bubble up beneath the doubt, the intimidation that was their first proper date in the real world.

Harry squeezed his hand softly and led him up the stairs and through the glass doors into the world beneath the glass. It was humid and the air was thick with moisture, giant palms and strelitzias towering above and draping their leaves across the paths that wound between the beds.

“Muggles started bringing plants back here from all over the world, to study them, particularly in medicine.” Harry said softly into the new quiet of the hot house.

Draco let go of Harry’s hand for the first time that morning, dragging his fingers across mossy rocks and the thick leaves of tropical water dwellers that lined a large pond to the left. Harry watched as Draco closed his eyes, breathing deeply and slowly, Jacaranda petals slowly falling about him, their purple petals littering the floor and the surface of the pond.

“You didn’t need me to tell you my weaknesses. You knew them already. That’s why you’ve brought me here.”

“It’s true,” Harry said softly back, “I do know you, Draco Malfoy. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to know more.”

Draco smirked and huffed a laugh, turning back to marvel at a yellow pincushion in full bloom, stretching out across the path in front of him.

Harry followed along behind him in silence, watching him move from bed to bed, marveling at ancient cycads and stopping to sniff at kiwi flowers, the vine decadently wound around a wrought iron railing. His heart beating hard in his chest at the smile that curled the corners of his mouth when he came across a bank of flowering clivia.

“I quit St. Mungo’s.” Draco’s voice was unnaturally loud in the thick hush of the greenhouse.

“I think I’m going to devote myself to the research full time. The Department of Mysteries has been making a lot of offers, promises of support, materials, guidance, anything I want.”

Harry watched him walk slowly around the end of the path, sitting himself on a bench just below a golden lotus banana. He crossed his legs, the chinos tailored to the perfect length that just a strip of his ankle was now visible beneath the stylishly folded cuff. It seemed as though this career change was something he wanted to discuss, something weighing on him, so he let the silence hang, waiting to see what else would come.

“I don’t want to stop helping patients. Healing is a calling. One I’ve always been at peace with. I
just couldn’t deal with people assuming I was there just to clear my name, just to prove something about my past.” The admission came as Harry sat himself down on the bench next to him, and Harry nodded to himself. Draco didn’t want to stop caring.

“And, I’d like to keep making potions. I’m the only person in recorded history who’s gotten thestrals to agree to work with me, so I feel like I can’t not do this work.”

“Mmm.” Harry hummed his agreement. “Can you do both? What about working at your own practice where you can brew potions on days you’re not seeing your own patients? The DoM could let you hold your research from there, couldn’t they?”

Draco looked momentarily shocked, rolling the idea around in his head before answering. “I never thought about that, actually. Haematology is quite a speciality, but it wouldn’t be unheard of if I worked outside of the hospital. I would have a lot more autonomy, at least. And I’d be able to monitor my own patients that I am treating for the DoM. I had never thought about it before because there was a time where I didn’t think any patients would come to a practice run by Draco Malfoy.”

Harry nodded again, understanding the stigma that still lay heavy in the wizarding world. They would come around, though. Draco had put in the work. He had earned their trust.

“And you?” Draco had turned his eyes to Harry, expectantly. “What are you planning in your life?”

Harry paused a moment, sighing deeply. “To be honest, I told myself I’d work on recovery this year and do the career thing next year. Eventually, I want to teach, and be around young people who need the kind of help I needed, and be that person who can help guide them. For now, it’s just meetings. And therapy. So much therapy. And helping Ron and Hermione out at home with Rose.”

He quirked a smile at Draco. “It’s hard work, therapy, you were right. I thought maybe you were just being a bit dramatic.”

“I was not being dramatic, therapy is like being skinned alive and rolled in salt.” He deadpanned.

“Well, I don’t know if it’s that horrible…” Harry was smiling, goading him.

“Oh? How’s that orgasm schedule working out for you then?” Draco bit back.

“Alright. Enough. It’s torture, you were right. You’re right about everything.” He knew he never should have mentioned that, shaking his head with a soft, albeit embarrassed, laugh. “Are you hungry? I’ve got more to show you.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “More?”

“More.” Harry repeated, standing up and offering Draco his hand, pulling him to his feet and leading him back out into the comparatively brisk summer day.

He led them both down a flight of steps and off into a shady copse of trees, in one of which, sat Little Dipper. He hooted frantically and swooped over to land on Harry’s shoulder, nibbling at his ear, obviously ecstatic he’d done his delivery properly and all was not lost.

Harry struggled a moment to untangle the parcel from his leg, returning the basket and all its contents to their proper size, sweet smells of cumin, cinnamon and coriander filling the air.

“Did you make me lunch, Potter?” Draco was smirking, looking wildly impressed.
“Are we back to Potter, now? Call me Harry, Draco. And yes, I’ve made us lunch.”

“Okay. Harry.”

Harry turned and smiled at him, pulling out a blanket, spreading it out beneath a tree, and patting the spot beside him.

“Are these gardens always so empty? Don’t muggles spend time here?” Draco asked, seating himself primly next to Harry, who had started unpacking the basket, laying out ever more colourful and delectable smelling dishes.

“I’m repelling them.” Harry scooped himself a pile of malai kofta onto his naan, adding a heaping of the saffron rice.

“All of them? This whole time?” Draco had paused midway between helping himself to the aloo gobi. That was an extreme amount of magic, even for Harry. London was not a small city. This was not a small garden.

“Yep.”

Draco was quiet a moment while he tore pieces of naan and arranged them on his plate. “I have to say, I’m feeling distinctly wooed.”

“That’s the idea.” Harry had just taken his first bite of the food, and he closed his eyes happily. It was delicious. Perfect.

“I don’t think I can top -” Draco was interrupted by Harry actually choking to death on his food, his eyes wide, staring at Draco.

“This date, you prat. I meant I wouldn’t be able to come up with something as romantic.” He gawked at Harry, who was turning a deep shade of red.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He chastised, slapping Harry hard on the back as he coughed up rice.

“You are 100% trying to kill me.” Harry spluttered, roaring with laughter. “First that damn book, now this. Draco, I was just trying to take you to lunch.”

“Merlin, help me…” Draco was trying hard not to laugh. “You are unbelievable.”

“Hey, you’re the one keen to discuss who’s topping on the first date. I just wanted some food and nice scenery, maybe some privacy. I would’ve settled for a kiss, at the end.”

Draco was bright pink now, but he had finally succumbed to a bout of very undignified giggling.

“Are you going to tell me why your therapist put you on an orgasm schedule? I’ve been dying to ask, but I didn’t want to pry.”

Harry groaned, setting his plate down and looking over at Draco, resting his head in his hand. He wasn’t really keen to talk about this. This was not where he imagined the date going, but he supposed this was Draco, and honesty was always the thread that ran between them.

“It’s part of my recovery. Like a test. To make sure I still feel in control of parts of me. Particularly, the parts of me that like pleasure.” He sighed heavily, shrugging. “I don’t think it’ll be for long, just for now, while I was working on some things.” He looked away and out across the expanses of lawn, dotted with trees. In the distance, he spotted his thestral, rolling in a singular dusty patch beneath an old elm tree.
“I’m doing it, but it’s making me a bit mental. It’s certainly made me a little more intimidated by
my modest efforts to court you. I keep thinking I’m going too fast, or not fast enough, or wondering
if you’re expecting me to be someone I can’t be.” He was thinking back to the night in the forest.
The last time they had been together, alone. He could feel the sadness creeping in to his voice, the
way his magic pulled at him, a sense of longing.

“Harry, I know you too. I know what mistakes I’ve made with you. I’m not here because I expect
you to be someone you’re not. I’m here to start again. Because what we had was important. It was
real. You were right, we weren’t ready, not yet. Not then.”

Harry was watching him while he spoke, watching the way he committed to each word. The way
he emphasised important. His magic had crossed the gap between them and Harry felt the gentle
lapping warmth against his skin, the honesty there, the truth.

“I think I’m ready. Not for everything, just, maybe, just for something.” Harry said, looking up
into Draco’s grey eyes. His blonde hair was a mess from the humidity in the green house, his shirt
rumpled. He was beautifully disastrous, his posh exterior nothing but a memory of the man in front
of him. Harry wanted to unravel him, to see him come apart in his hands.

“Tell me what you’re ready for.” Draco said, meeting his gaze. His face was flushed. Their food
lay forgotten. Harry’s thestral was loping across the far lawn to greet Voileami, who had appeared
in a thick bed of lavender, dust trailing out behind him.

And Harry was smiling in his mischievous way, his eyes bright and eager. “I want to kiss you,
Draco. I want to kiss you properly. Like you’re meant to be kissed. Like I’ve been dying to kiss you
for months now. Maybe even years.”

“Show me.”

And Harry closed the gap between them, the smile still broad on his face, pausing just before their
lips met.

“Draco.”

And Harry kissed him, his name still hanging in the air between them.
You Wanted to Know My Weaknesses

Draco was dead. Clearly he was dead, or in a coma, or hallucinating. These were the only options. Because, Harry Potter was kissing him. Harry, who had used enough magic to power a small village in order to repel hundreds of muggles from this stunningly gorgeous botanical garden, just for Draco. Harry, who had made him a picnic from scratch. Harry, who wanted him. Who wanted him.

Harry, who was nipping at Draco’s bottom lip after each successive kiss. Who had his hand in Draco’s hair. Who smelled like coming home. Who tasted like months of pooling lust. Of adoration. Who’s magic was heavy and thick and decadent across his skin, sublime and consummate.

There was no way that he, Draco, was laying back, pulling Harry with him, grabbing the front of his shirt and guiding him down. Not in his wildest dreams did he think this would be happening on their first date. No, see, what must have happened was that he was trampled to death by a herd of thestrals on his way out the door this morning, and he was being rewarded in the afterlife for some bizarre reason.

Harry was kissing him so sweetly and firmly that Draco’s bones felt like they were melting. There was nothing harried nor frantic about it. Just a closeness that Draco didn’t even realize he had been desperate for. The kind of kiss he wished he had been able to give Harry in the forest.

He had one hand on Harry’s face and the other tentatively gripping his shirt. Draco had pulled Harry down and over him so that he was straddling his groin, and Harry was valiantly trying his best not to sink the full weight of his hips down onto him, despite Draco’s clear invitation and the gentle, nearly insistent tug of his hand, fisted in his shirt. Draco was shocked by his own bravado, but he had never felt so sure, so safe. So open.

Draco knew that Harry was nearly as inexperienced as he was, but there was such a confidence in the way he kissed Draco, the way he slid one hand along Draco’s side and slipped it beneath his lower back, lifting him just slightly up toward him, the way he kissed the corner of his mouth and along his jaw and the low, hungry sounds he made as he kissed down his neck, like he wanted nothing but to savor every moment of his lips on Draco’s flesh.

It was Harry who broke the spell of the moment, who showed restraint. Harry who had paused, rested his forehead against Draco’s shoulder and growled.

“I don’t want to give you the wrong idea. I just... You...” He was obviously blushing, struggling to speak. “It’s unfair. What you do to me. I forget about everything I’ve just said about going slow. I forget about everything but what I want to do to you. To give you.”

Draco was certain he was in a coma. How could Harry want him this much? It was nearly unbearable. Draco could feel Harry’s magic pulsing around them, demanding, keening.

“Slow is good.” He said stupidly. He did want to go slow. Slow was safe. But he couldn’t deny that he was swept up in the feeling, the pull of Harry, the allure. The weight of him. Draco felt like he was balancing on a sharp edge between falling into a lust fueled race to the finish, and pushing Harry back away from him to reclaim his personal space.

“Yeah, and you say that with a look on your face like you want me to undress you right here, right now.” Harry’s voice was low and warning, and Draco chanced a glance between them. He was
obviously hard.

Draco dropped his head back and covered his eyes with the crook of his arm. He was grinning and blushing, but he still felt nervous. Overwhelmed. “Harry… Can we…” His stomach was filled with the flutters of anticipation but his limbs felt tingly and numb. The urge to run was there. In the background. Despite how much he was beginning to enjoy the attention. This was all very new.

Harry smiled into the nape of Draco’s neck, rolling onto his back at Draco’s side unceremoniously, his hand coming up to find Draco’s, squeezing it firmly. “Draco.” And, at the fleeting moment of worry that crossed Draco’s features when he looked to him, he added, “Sorry, I mean. Don’t run, Draco. This is okay. It’s enough to kiss you just once. Much more might make me come untouched in my pants like a horny teenager, anyway. I have no expectation of more.” He was trying to joke, but his voice was a bit too pained. “Just lay here with me another minute so I can take it all in.”

Draco’s heart hurt with the sweetness of it all, and he squeezed Harry’s hand back in acquiescence. Harry had turned to look at him, his eyes drifting from his tousled hair to his mouth, his lips.

“You’re beautiful, you know. I’ve wanted to tell you for ages.” Harry was smiling at him.
“Especially now, when you’re blushing like that. When I know it’s me who’s made you so flustered. When I’m the one who’s made you look like this.” He reached out and touched the side of Draco’s face as he spoke, running his thumb across his cheek bone.

Draco felt himself blush even more and he couldn’t stop smiling like a complete idiot. It was too much. He was filled with immense relief that Harry didn’t expect more, but the jumpy tension in his stomach wouldn’t dissipate. He was completely out of his depth.

The intensity of his feelings bubbled up inside of him, he couldn’t tell if he was scared or excited, or maybe it was both. The desire to extricate himself from this kind of intensity warring with his new desire and longing for this new thing he was cultivating with Harry.

He took a deep breath, grounded himself, and make the conscious choice to sit with the discomfort that came with this growth and opening. It was like deciding to walk on ice you knew was too thin to support your weight.

“Have dessert with me.” Harry nosed at his shoulder and planted a kiss on the fabric of his shirt, coaxing him. “I made you something special. It’s your birthday, after all.”

Draco nodded, still smiling, not trusting himself to say anything. If he opened his mouth he was sure something embarrassing would come out. Or he’d wake up from his coma.

Harry sat up, not even shy about adjusting his now awkwardly tight pants, resting his back against the tree behind them. “Come here.” He patted the blanket in front of him.

Draco moved from next to Harry, positioning himself directly in front of him, nesting his back into Harry’s chest. Harry’s legs spread out on either side of his. Harry slipped his arms on either side of Draco’s waist to lay across his thighs.

He was beginning to think that maybe he wasn’t dead. Maybe this was real.

He thought for a fleeting second, that pervasive instinct always dancing on the periphery, inserting itself into even the most enjoyable and loving of circumstances, that maybe he should just get up and run screaming into the distance.

No, no, calm down.
This is great. Life is great. Harry’s great. Harry kissed him. No need to panic. He trusted Harry. That ardent look of adoration and adulation from him was enough to make Draco want to fight all of his tendencies to flee.

Harry summoned a container from the basket to his left, uncapping the container and nuzzling the back of Draco’s shoulder. “Is this okay?”

Draco nodded, taking a deep breath, reminding himself he could trust. This was Harry. His Harry. Who carved him protective talismans and wove magic to keep him safe.

“Try this.” Harry’s voice was soft in his ear, goosebumps erupting down his neck.

Something sticky and sweet pushed past his lips. It tasted like rose water and cardamom, soaked in honey. The ball of dough was syrupy and decadent. Draco made a small noise of pleasure at the saccharine taste, relaxing back against Harry, who had huffed a laugh at his reaction.

“Good?”

“Merlin’s tits, that’s amazing.” Draco said, the soft and sticky sweet dough was more than good. He could feel Harry’s magic pulling at him, like electricity singing across his bare skin.

Taking a few steadying breaths, Harry reached for a sweet morsel for himself.

“Draco I- I need you to help me- to tell me if I’m being too much. If I’m pushing too fast or even—even if there’s too much silly romance. Set boundaries for me, otherwise I’m going to be too much.” Harry said, chewing the decadent dessert, using the fact that Draco was faced away to bare himself a bit more.

“Are you saying you’re not usually a hopeless romantic?” Draco asked, a hint of disappointment escaping in his voice.

Harry huffed a laugh. “No, you git, I’m an incorrigible romantic. There’s no changing that. I meant that I need you to tell me if I’m taking it too far.” He finished, adjusting himself behind Draco who could feel that Harry was still noticeably hard.

Draco didn’t really know what to say. It’s not that he minded, but he did feel a bit out of his depth. Filled with a sense that he wouldn’t be able to meet Harry’s needs, damaged and full of apprehension as Draco was.

“Please don’t take that the wrong way.” Harry hurried on, clearly worried by Draco’s silence. “I find you unbearably attractive, yes, but I don’t want you to think that that’s the only reason I’m doing this. You’re more than your stunning good looks. You’re more than an object of my desire.”

“Mm.” Draco hummed in response, carefully considering Harry’s words. The admission unraveled a ball of apprehension in the pit of Draco’s stomach. A worry he hadn’t even recognised he was carrying. “And why are you doing this?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harry asked, grinning into Draco’s neck, gently tightening his hold around his waist. Clearly relishing their closeness.

“Consider me an oblivious fool.” Draco teased, trying to mask just how unsure he felt.

“I like you, Draco. More than. I way more than just like you, actually. I’m completely captivated by you. By your strength and your heart. I think we only just scratched the surface of what we could have been when we were in the forest, and I want to see where that can go. When we were
alone, I held myself back, quite a lot, actually, because you said our feelings were falsely generated by our isolation, and the fact that I had only just figured out I was gay.” He paused a moment, trying to find the right words. “But, I’ve realised since leaving and being on my own, that what I felt was genuine. That I’ve been harbouring an attraction for you for years, and just didn’t know how to cope with it around you. But, I know how to cope better now, I think.”

He held Draco firm against him while he spoke, as if trying to convey his surety. “I am completely enamoured with you, and it makes me… it makes me feel things that I never thought I would.” He was talking into Draco’s shoulder, voice slightly muffled by the material of his shirt.

Draco’s heart had sped up while Harry spoke. The intensity of those feelings buzzing on his insides. He was becoming aware that his body didn’t seem to know the difference between elation and terror, and seemed to register Draco’s excitement and trepidation as something scary.

Draco let out a long breath when he realised he had stopped breathing. “I like you, too, Harry. And,” He admitted quietly, trying hard to prevent his voice from shaking, “I also want to see where this goes. What we can be.” He felt slightly breathless.

“Well, thank Salazar for that.” Harry laughed, seeming relieved. “I’m sorry if this feels overwhelming.” He was suddenly serious, though still compassionate.

“It’s not-” Draco tried to deny feebly, automatically, before Harry cut him off.

“Draco, I know you well enough to know when you’re feeling overwhelmed. You get quiet and sweaty and I can practically hear your heartbeat. It’s okay.” he reassured when Draco started turning red and getting even warmer. “Don’t feel self conscious about it.”

“Easier said than done.” Draco laughed awkwardly, starting to feel a bit too warm and stifled. He was starting to fidget, hands compulsively searching for something to keep them occupied. Shredding leaves, pulling pieces of grass mindlessly.

“Hey,” Harry said, using his softest voice yet, “just take a deep breath, and tell me what I can do to make this less scary for you. What do you need from me?”

Harry loosened his grip on Draco’s waist and used soft fingers to run light touches across Draco’s shoulders and he felt himself feel instantly soothed. He took a deep breath and thought for a moment.

What did he need for this to be less scary?

“Honestly, I think it’s going to be a little scary no matter what.” He admitted, feeling a little defeated by his own nature. Why was he like this?

“Okay.” Harry said thoughtfully. “And, do you feel ready to face scary things? Even if that scary thing is me sometimes - I trust you know I’m far from perfect and I have my own demons I bring to the table.”

Draco thought about that, fidgeting restlessly with a twig he had picked up. “Yes.” he said quietly.

“Are you sure?” Harry, stilled his fingers on Draco’s biceps.

“I want to be. I want to be the kind of person who can be in a... be in a - whatever this is. And I’m not scared of you.” he waved his hand vaguely back at Harry.

Harry chuckled and continued stroking his fingers, featherlight, up and down Draco’s arms and
across his shoulders. “And what do you want this whatever-it-is to be? Hm?”

Draco was feeling more and more relaxed the more Harry ran his fingertips across his skin. He smiled considering what he wanted he and Harry to be.

He reached over and took another sticky dough ball and considered what he wanted. “I think it’s too soon to say.” He finally said, hoping not to hurt Harry’s feelings.

“That’s fair.” Harry acquiesced.

“What is this?” Draco finally asked, picking up another dough ball. “It’s positively sinful.”

“Mm” huffed Harry in amusement. “It’s galub jamon. And, yes, sinful is how I might describe it.” He teased roguishly, popping one into his own mouth.

Draco didn’t have a response. He huffed with fond exasperation and reached for another. Finally settling into Harry’s embrace, relaxing his full weight back into his strong chest.

Harry hummed in approval. He wrapped one arm around him to pull him closer and resting his chin on Draco’s shoulder.

They sat like that for a long while. Listening to the song birds and rustle of leaves, feeling the breeze on their skin. Harry, taking deep breaths into his neck, stroked Draco’s left arm while holding him securely with his right. Draco, resting his head back on Harry, traced light patterns with his fingers on the back of Harry’s hand.

“So, does this mean there will be a second date?” Harry asked, unable to hide his own anticipation, his own nerves. Draco wondered how long he’s been waiting to ask.

He smiled and turned his head to see Harry’s face, which was so open and hopeful it squeezed Draco’s insides. “Yes, Harry, there will most certainly be a second date.”

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*June 15, 2009*

Draco’s last week had passed in a blurry haze. After his exquisite birthday picnic, Harry had apparated Draco home and escorted him to his apartment, where he had left him with one last earth shattering, mind numbing kiss. One that had Draco falling back against his own door with Harry’s full weight pushing against him, his thigh confidently asserted between Draco’s legs.

The suddenness of Harry’s deft pinning of Draco’s hands and the weight of his groin against Draco’s hip as he pressed against him forced a shocked, but no less desirous, moan from Draco into Harry’s mouth. It was quick and searing, and, in that moment, it left no room for doubt about Harry’s feelings or intentions for him.

He left Draco standing there, feeling light headed from desire and shock, mouth open and panting softly. Harry was grinning mischievously, clearly pleased with himself for making Draco unravel in a single, swift kiss.

Harry backed away, relinquishing him, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. The only sign that he was absolutely struggling not to run back at Draco to continue what he had so ambitiously started, not wanting to push too far. “Happy Birthday, Draco.” He had smiled, looked Draco’s wrecked appearance up and down thoroughly, biting his own bottom lip, face full of the lust that Draco had been given tantalising glimpses of all afternoon, before turning and apparating away.
After Harry had left, Draco ran to the floo like a teenager in hysterics, throwing powder in and yelling, “Vignoble Zabini!” and shouting, “Pansy! I have shit to tell you! Get over here!” As soon as the connection went through. She was the friend he could be absolutely ridiculous with, and Pansy thrived off of his dramatic flair.

They chatted for nearly two hours. Draco had refused to relinquish the identity of his mysterious suitor, which had only increased Pansy’s insistent curiosity.

“Which means he’s either famous or I already know him.” She coaxed.

“I’m not giving anything away, you nosy hag.” Draco said, knowing Pansy’s knack for wheedling information out of people was legendary amongst Slytherins. The blackmailing menace.

“Fine, be that way.” She rolled her eyes. “Either way, as lovely as your one-singular-date sounded, it concerns me how smitten you seem. What exactly does this Romeo want from you?”

Draco scoffed indignantly. “What? People can’t like me?”

“Oh, come on, of course people can like you, and I’m sure more people than you realize are interested.” It was Draco’s turn to roll his eyes. “What I’m asking,” she clarified dramatically, “is what are his intentions?”

Draco buried his head in his arm and moaned like a dying whale, just to annoy her.

“Oh don’t give me that.” She chastised, trying not to laugh. “What is wrong with you? Honestly. What are his plans for the future? How do you fit in them? From the sounds of it, he has a full plate. I’m just saying it’s not fair for him to offer you these grand romantic gestures if he’s just going to put you on his backburner. And, not to mention, are you taking things slow in the bedroom?”

“Pansy we haven’t even mentioned the bedroom, and I’m the one who told him that one date was too soon to put any labels on anything.” He felt an intense and slightly irrational desire to defend Harry from Pansy’s vicious, though protective, nature.

“Yes, and that’s all fine and well, but it sounds like you two have a bit of a history from the previous year. Sure, it’s your first official date, but does all that friendship building you went through - and you said two months of sleeping in the same bed- mean nothing? And, how have you not discussed the bedroom?!”

“No! Of course it doesn’t mean nothing! And, I don’t know!” Draco gesticulated wildly into the floo. His knees were so sore.

“Well, then maybe you should clarify with him what these dates mean? Where are they going? Are you just having fun? Do you want a long term commitment? You said he’s living with friends as a live-in baby sitter, is that what he plans on doing forever? And, you know, what are his kinks. You have to talk about these things, Draco!”

“Oh, Salazar! When did you become such a relationship guru?” He was exasperated and nettled. He felt like his choices and behaviours were being scrutinised.

“When Blaize and I went to marriage counseling, dear.” She deadpanned. “I just don’t want you getting hurt. He sounds lovely, really. And clearly, he makes you happy. Even though it’s only been one date.” She added poignantly. “But, seriously, com-mun-i-cate.” She enunciated dramatically, gesticulating ridiculously to punctuate each syllable.
He had eventually agreed to communicate properly with Harry before ending the call.

Draco had spent the next few days reliving that date, that final kiss, spending an alarming amount of time wanking. In addition, he was sending a constant stream of letters back and forth with Harry. Their correspondence becoming more and more flirtatious. More and more bold. Well, to be fair, Harry had been bold from the beginning, that was sort of his way. It was Draco that was becoming bold. Feeling brave. Feeling safe. But all the while the nagging threat of Pansy’s words dancing in the background. Wrapping themselves around Draco’s boggart and twisting his newfound excitement into more nervous doubt.

In their letters, Draco was meeting Harry’s double entendres with explicit requests. Draco who had earmarked a page in one of the more sadistic manuals of gay eroticism that had found his way into his collection. He had drawn a black ink box around a passage he had particularly enjoyed, writing in the margin “You wanted to know my weaknesses, my secrets. Here’s a fantasy of mine.”

He felt elated and terrified. He wanted to keep flirting with Harry, pushing the limit, but he knew he would have to sit down and talk about expectations with him, and soon. Knew that owl-Draco and in-person Draco had very different limits.

Between his numerous owls with Harry, Draco had spent his time bouncing from Luna, Hermione, and Beatrice. Luna smiled slyly every time she caught Draco grinning to himself and, when asked why she was looking at him like that, she only responded with, “Your nargle infestation has diminished significantly.”

Hermione, on the other hand, insisted they were doing research. Draco wasn’t convinced. Hermione claimed they were making progress, Draco felt more like they were banging their head against a brick wall.

“I have a new theory.” She had told him with a shifty look in her eye, after hours of scanning ancient texts.

“Would you care to expound?” Draco asked, really craving a distraction from all this Latin text.

She eyed Draco critically for a moment before answering. “No. Not yet. I need to do a bit more reading first. It won’t make any sense otherwise.” She said airily,

Draco had sighed dramatically and continued to scan his medieval tome on thestral lore from the depths of the DoM’s own private library. He noticed Hermione had shot him calculating looks the rest of the evening, and his nascent interest in her new theory piqued.

And, Beatrice, oh Beatrice. Well, she only agreed with Pansy, increasing Draco’s anxiety and filling him with guilt every time he and Harry shared another salacious note. She insisted that Draco analyse his limits and clearly communicate them, lest he create another scenario like he had in the forest. One where the tension inevitably builds until he panics and flees.

Uhg. He would have to talk to Harry. Get some clarification. Remind him that while, yes, Draco was feeling braver, more sure, enjoying the security of exploring sexuality through writing letters, he was still afraid of sex. Still fearful of intimacy. Still worried about what he could give to Harry. Afraid of his own intense feelings for the other man.

Buzzing with nervous anticipation, he scribbled on a small piece of parchment.

Harry,
June 18, 2009

Draco was seated in his favorite muggle coffee shop. The one that he normally frequented with Greg, where no one ever recognised the two of them. Where no one would recognise Harry Potter. The one with the delicate spindle-legged chairs and sinful, chocolate monstrosity cake. He had gotten there 30 minutes early and was a complete wreck. He was sweating and his hands were clammy. He felt irrationally embarrassed about meeting with Harry, especially after some of their letters. He sat with rigid posture in his chair, perched on its very edge, anxiously shredding a discarded sugar packet.

Every time the bell at the door tinkled, Draco’s nerves inched just that much closer to a full blown meltdown. Why was he so nervous? This was just Harry. They were just going to talk. Nothing dramatic about that, right?

He had to keep reapplying a freshening charm to himself undercover, lest he be a sweaty mess by the time Harry arrived.

At long last, Harry’s mop of black hair appeared in the doorway, effectively shutting down Draco’s brain and increasing his already rapid heart rate.

Merlin, he was so far gone for this man.

Absolutely hopeless.

When Harry spotted Draco, he couldn’t stop the smile from brightening his face, and he made his way over without taking his eyes off of him.

“Draco.” He said, stopping in front of his table, and leaning down with an air of complete ease and familiarity to plant a chaste kiss to Draco’s cheek.

“Hi.” He said breathlessly, stupidly. Godric, how could Harry render him this speechless? He was beet red, he knew it. And felt somehow wrong footed that Harry had had the thoughtfulness to greet him so tenderly, so much more bravely than Draco could have done in that moment.

He plopped down unceremoniously across from Draco, smiling widely at the way Draco continued to blush.

“You know,” he said with that smug, self assured voice, “if I had known how flustered and speechless you get with a peck on the cheek, I would have started doing it back in school.”

“Oh, do shut up, Harry.” Draco attempted to drawl, but it came out more of an awkwardly huffed reprimand. The fact that he was smiling didn’t help either.

Harry only smiled more in response, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“So, you thought we should talk some more?” Harry prompted. “Our owls weren’t explicit enough for you?”

Draco had been taking a nervous sip of his tea to give himself something to do, and promptly
choked on it.

Spluttering, Draco looked at him with bemused incredulity while Harry continued to smirk. “Must you?” Draco reprimanded, hand to his chest.

The waiter came over to take their order and Draco tried desperately to compose himself, grateful for the break in Harry’s intense focus.

After the waiter left, there was an unsure silence between them as Harry waited for Draco to expound.

“I thought we should talk about… about where this is going… and about the owls we’ve been sending.” Draco said, trying his hardest to maintain eye contact and not squirm under Harry’s singularly focused gaze.

“And I thought you said one date was too soon to decide.” Harry countered, seeming surprised by Draco’s topic of choice.

“Yes, I did say that.” He conceded. “But, it’s been brought to my attention that perhaps we should work on communicating our expectations. Especially about-” You can do this, Draco. He thought to himself. “About sex.”

“Okay.” Harry said kindly. “And what might your expectations be?” Draco felt the soft whisper of Harry’s spellwork spiral around them. He had cast Muffliato, though his focus never seemed to have moved from Draco.

Draco pressed his fingers into his eyes for a moment and sighed heavily. Honestly felt so embarrassing sometimes. At least he didn’t have to worry about anyone overhearing his meltdown. Small mercies.

“I’m not ready to have sex, yet.” he said, finally. Dropping his hands away from his bright red face. When he looked to Harry, all he could see was fond exasperation.

“That’s okay, Draco, neither am I. The owls we send are supposed to be fun, and they don’t have to create an expectation.”

Draco blew out a sigh of relief, but wanted to make sure he was getting everything out. “But, I mean what I’m saying in the owls. I just- I just don’t think I’m ready for it in practice.”

Harry chuckled softly. “I’m not either Draco. This is okay. The first time isn’t going to be full of all the kinks in the books, I’m not sure if you remember but I’m not exactly well learned in the art of gay sex. Or sex at all, really. Pretty shit at it, if you ask anyone I’ve slept with.”

“I just really like you, and I don’t want to fuck this up because I’m saying things in letters that I can’t live up to at the moment.” He said feeling a little defeated.

Harry’s eyes were kind and soft and his expression was open. Draco felt like he might puke. “What if we get that far and I can’t do it. What if you hate having sex with me?! What if-”

Harry snorted a tender laugh and reached across the table to squeeze one of Draco’s failing hands. “Draco, I’m not going to hate having sex with you-”

“You don’t know that! I don’t even know if I’ll be able to!” He felt a little frantic, incapable. “Just the thought of opening up again makes me want to get up right now and run.” He looked pleadingly at Harry, just to convey just how pained about this he was.
Harry’s expression became even softer and he dropped his voice. “Draco, why are you assuming that you’ll have to bottom for me?”

The question stopped all rational thought. He didn’t have an answer. He didn’t even think he had any brain cells left. He never, ever, once considered that Harry wouldn’t have that expectation of him. The silence stretched and Harry must have read Draco’s wide eyes and stunned expression correctly.

Harry’s smile was a bit sad. “See, this, this right here is what we need to be talking about.” Draco felt overwhelmed all over again and he rubbed his eyes. When Draco looked up he saw Harry giving him that adoring smile that made him melt. “Draco, can I be completely honest?”

Draco felt instantly wary, sitting up straighter, more alert. Was the shoe about to drop? “Yes?”

“Like, completely, brutally, honest?”

“Yes… Of course.” He said stiffly.

Harry took a deep breath. “If I’m being terrifyingly honest with you,” he began, reaching again to grab one of Draco’s hands and squeezing it reassuringly, “then I need you to know that I’m ass over tits for you, and that despite the fact that I feel an overwhelming amount of lust for you, I’m not ready. And, it’s completely, 100%, perfectly, okay that you’re not comfortable bottoming. It’s actually something I had imagine that I would want to do, but I’m also not there yet.”

Draco sighed and sagged a little in his chair. His boggart was wilting under the look Harry was directing towards him.

“Not only am I ass over tits for you, but I want to make sure there’s room for you in my future, so I’m going to do this properly. This next year is going to be tough, yes, because it’s so important for me to focus on my recovery. And I can’t even let my adoration of you get in the way of that—”

“I would never want to jeopardise that, Harry.” Draco interrupted, a pleading note in his voice.

“I know that.” Harry said softly. “So, this year may be compiled of random coffee dates, sprinkled with grand romantic gestures, and if we’re lucky, some good snogging.” He waggled his eyebrows at Draco, whose nervous posture finally relaxed as he rolled his eyes. “But, whatever this is,” he gestured between them, “isn’t just a fling. And, it isn’t just about sex. And, I’m really hoping these dates we go on lead to something more serious, more stable. I want my future to include you in it. Sex can wait. We have ages to figure it out. And, when it happens, it will be when we both are at a point where we can enjoy it, together. We don’t have a deadline we need to meet.”

Draco just looked at him feeling overwhelmed again, but not in a bad way. He didn’t know how words worked anymore.

“A response would be nice.” Harry goaded with a small, slightly insecure smile.

“I would really love that.” Draco said, finally finding his words, his voice shaking a little. “Thank you.”

Harry’s face relaxed and their waiter broke the moment, bringing their plates of cakes to them.

They ate in silence for a moment, Draco trying to figure out how to convey his feelings. “I’m not good at talking about how I feel, like you are,” Draco said. “I’m trying to be. I’m trying to be better at communicating. And, I want to be honest with you about what I’m feeling, even though it’s terrifying sometimes.” He was looking at his cake while he said it.
Harry’s fork came into view as he took a big piece off of Draco’s plate. “You need boundaries with me Draco, like I’ve been telling you. I tend to push. Don’t let me. Don’t let me make you feel uncomfortable, ever. I need to know.” Draco’s eyes followed it back to Harry’s face and he saw the confident smirk back on his lips.

“So, are you saying you’re still happy to continue letting me court you, even though I’m not ready to have sex yet either?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I am.” Draco smiled. “And, I’m also saying that I would like you to be in my future too.”

“Okay. Then I think we should go on some more dates to start planning it together.”

“How about dinner next week, then?”

“I’d love that. Why don’t we spend the next week thinking about our limits and expectations and on our next date we can talk about them.”

Draco felt like his heart would burst. “Okay.” He said, smiling softly. “It’s a date.”

Harry beamed at him. “But, before we get ahead of ourselves, let’s focus on the date we’re currently on. Tell me how unemployment is treating you. Hermione seems particularly frantic lately about your research.”

“Has she told you she’s working with me yet?” Draco asked curiously.

“Oh, no, she has not. I’m sure she’s too worried I’ll start stalking you again.”

Draco laughed at the notion.

They spent a few comfortable hours sharing cake and drinking too much tea. Bidding a chaste farewell, Harry planting another soft kiss on Draco’s cheek, they reluctantly parted.
“Harry.” Luna’s voice was almost pandering. It was infuriating.

He was sitting across from her, his legs and arms crossed, one foot jingling. It had become a familiar stance for him.

“Luna, I just want to be able to be close to someone. Why can’t I have that? Why can’t I? We’ve had five dates. Five. Dinners. I’m fine with going slow. I’m not doing this for the promise of pleasure. All this is making me do is feel distracted. And like I’m hyperfocusing on sex, and I don’t want to. I want to be positive about it, to think of sex as something good and normal and for fuck’s sake I was wrapped up in so much unhealthy self flagellating doubt about it for so long...I don’t want that.” He was so angry, he was nearly crying. His voice was thick in his throat. Therapy these days kept making him feel trapped. Kept pushing him toward things that made him feel out of his depths.

Luna was watching him, but her face was impassive, as always.

“For Godric’s sake, I’m not trying to replace intimacy with sex. I’m not.” Harry had uncrossed himself, and he was leaning toward Luna, his face open, his palms up toward her. “I just want him. It’s that simple.”

Luna had one eyebrow raised, and Harry was so furious with her, he couldn’t focus. He let out a veritable roar of anguished frustration, rising from his chair to pace up and down her little office. He let his magic swirl away from him, manifesting as a breeze that rustled the paperwork across Luna’s desk and the leaves of the houseplant by her armchair.

“Ok. I believe you.”

Harry had stopped his pacing and looked at her, her eyes now downcast on the pad of paper she had been taking notes on.

“Luna. Everyone has always been worried about me, how sick I was, how I was making poor choices and not coping, except for the one time I actually wasn’t coping - the one time I really was dying, and trying to die. And, even then, I knew I was sick. Trust me to know when something feels good. Feels right.”

“Okay, Harry. I trust you. And I’m more pleased to hear that you trust yourself. That’s what this exercise was about, wasn’t it? Did you not come to the group with feelings you did not comprehend? Do you now feel as though you have a handle on them? Comprehend them?”

“I do.” Harry said, sitting on the arm of the grey sofa across from Luna, one he had spent much time agonising, crying and pleading with her over. One where he had curled up and talked to her about wanting to die. And now, the place he argued with her that he was at peace with himself, for the first time in many years. He was at peace with desire, with lust. He didn’t feel out of control. If anything, he felt too in control, and, he had admitted earlier that session, as an addict, that is usually quite a good thing, though it felt even too constraining in this case. It felt unnecessary. He wanted freedom. He didn’t want the rules.

Harry had known why she had done it - why she had tested him. It was a good learning experience.
He had learned how to check himself, how to be challenged and exercise his control. He could apply this method to other things. Coffee, even. His magic simmered around him, hanging in the air, crackling with the tension that wrapped around Harry’s very bones.

“Harry, I just want you to remember it’s early days still. Recovery is a very long process, and it may change as you change, as time goes on. You came here and talked about pleasure, talked about how it hurt you, lied to you, captivated you. Then, you were the one to raise doubts about your ability to coexist with pleasure in a healthy way. Your ability to keep one separate from the other. These are issues that you brought to me and we are trying to manage together. I am happy for you to relax your own rules now, but don’t expect this question to go away overnight.” She flipped the long braid, laced with flowers, little buttercups, over her shoulder as she wrote near the bottom of the page across her lap.

“Sometimes, things creep up on you, things you never expected to. That’s what my mother used to say, anyway. I’d rather we were cautious.” She was looking back up at him, her large eyes taking in every detail of his dirty jeans and scuffed trainers. A line of worry had crossed her face, one he had not seen there since the first day he had come to her, when he had told her everything.

Harry slumped a bit on the sofa arm. “Your mother? Luna, what do you mean?”

“Oh, she struggled with drugs, didn’t you know? Psychoactive substances. Though, sometimes other things. Muggle stuff, mostly, with which she often experimented with her own magic. She used to say she was in love with the escape. With the ideas of what was possible. With the feelings she could create. She would say she was looking to discover new emotions. It was what eventually killed her, though she was sober for the several years just before that. It’s why I got into this line of work.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open, staring at Luna. “Luna, you never told me.”

“Didn’t I? Well, no matter, now you know.” Luna was packing away her notebook and rearranging some of the items across her desk. She looked uncharacteristically stiff in her movements, tired, even.

“I think that’s quite enough for today, don’t you?” She was smiling at him, in her way. Harry nodded back, sensing how she had closed the conversation, had not invited more questions, more discussion. He had never heard her speak at all about why addiction, why muggle and magical mixed, why any of the things she did. She was just Luna, and he supposed he didn’t need much convincing around the why.

Harry moved from his perch on the sofa to open the solid oak door that Luna had charmed to be more than just a physical barrier to her personal office, a room that doubled as a space to see individuals, depending on the context. The plain oak ensured that secrets shared within the room would stay there, and it was warded such that no one could disturb a session in progress. As the mechanism clicked to allow the door to swing open, Harry heard a voice just outside mutter, “oh thank the Gods.”

Hestia was there, her long braids held back under a thorny ring of bramble.

“Tom called from the Leaky. Greg just left to go and get him.”

Luna sighed heavily from her desk, and Harry looked between the two women, their normally carefree countenances marred with apprehension, with worry.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked the knowing silence between them.
Luna spoke first, Hestia looking to her for guidance.

“Dennis.” She said simply, leaning back in her chair, rubbing her eyes, moving to undo her braid and, one by one, remove the little yellow flowers from her hair. Harry had never seen her look so exhausted.

“Fuck.” He was unsure what else to say, suddenly so incredibly troubled by the idea of Dennis drinking. Dennis, drunk at the Leaky Cauldron. Relapsing.

Dennis had spoken at the meeting yesterday. He had been proud of his progress. Hopeful, even. What had changed?

Harry felt an icy uncertainty spread around his limbs, winding its way through his gut. Were relapses so easy? Was there no warning? Had they missed something, as a group? Could you fall so far in just twenty four hours alone?

Harry glanced between Luna and Hestia again, not able to hide the questions, the doubt, the subsequent anguish, from his searching looks.

“It’s ok, Harry. We have him. Go home. We can discuss in group tomorrow. This isn’t Dennis’ first time slipping, and we have a plan in place.”

A plan? A relapse plan? Harry’s ears were ringing. Hestia was taking his arm and guiding him down the hall. She was pouring comfort and calm with her earthy magic, rising up from the floor like petrichor.

Hestia paused at Luna’s circular front door, the golden shimmer of “Lost souls and dreamers welcome here” draped around them.

“He’ll be ok, Harry.” Hestia’s voice was a balm, a soft and reassuring touch, but Harry could clearly see the sadness that crossed her face. She had a heart that could hold love for everyone she’d ever met and all the living souls in between.

“Why?” Harry’s voice came out strained, and he felt oddly childlike asking. Why do people relapse sounded like many a pamphlet he had read, but what he meant was why Dennis, why now?

Hestia looked down at her black painted nails a moment, both of them hovering just beyond the doorway, sheltered from the afternoon drizzle by Luna’s wisteria vine, blooming lazily in the humidity, the heat.

“Dennis, like me, struggled to ever leave the war behind.” Hestia ran her fingers along one of the large, grape-like clusters of hanging purple flowers as she spoke, errant petals fluttering away and drifting down to the ground by their feet.

“Eventually, I chose a new life. I chose to find beauty in the living things around me. I grew so tired of death, of pain, of suffering. I wanted meaning. I wanted all of that horror to mean I was free to choose the verdant sprigs of life and the vernal pull of love.” As she slid her hand along a second wavering bell of blooms, a praying mantis, bright green and full of mischievous magic of it’s own kind, came away, nestled in her palm.

“Dennis couldn’t leave the war behind, because he couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Colin behind. Of being the only one left alive who cares for his memory, who keeps it. And to keep it, he must think of the war. To live there, in the moments of his brother’s bravery.”

Hestia’s dark amber eyes met Harry’s gaze. “When he misses Colin, when he feels the world is
forgetting him, he drowns it away. He used to say he’d get drunk enough to hear his voice again, to keep him close. To not forget.”

And Harry felt as though the ice that had been snaking around his insides had seized his heart. Fear trickled through him. He knew so acutely what Hestia described. The pain, the terror of forgetting - leaving behind those who no one else was carrying. Memories that could die with him. For Dennis, it was Colin, but for him, it was Sirius.

“I have to go.” The words felt sticky in Harry’s mouth, coated in fear.

He felt Hestia’s hand grab for his as he moved from under the wisteria and out into the rain. Her fingers just slid past his, and he didn’t look back, breaking into a run before spiralling into the crushing darkness of apparition.

Wingbeats sounded from the garden as a thestral took flight into the rain.

“Returning so soon?” The hiss was soft, punctuated by the pitter patter of fat droplets on the stone steps of number 12 Grimmauld Place. Harry had been returning nearly once a week since his first visit back, spending each day replacing layers and layers of ancestral magic - magic that was dark and twisted with hate, that oozed and seeped the coppery smell of blood and malice.

“Full of troubles today, I see.” The adder’s orange eyes were bright against the black ironwood door, tongue flipping into the air. To the adder’s left, thestrals were thick in the foreground of the forest scene, nipping at each other, rearing up and taking flight, restless. Harry didn’t know if the serpent had meant him or the death-beasts. Or both. Or, were they one in the same?

Harry looked up at the writhing snake around the old brass knocker. “Always.”

The ironwood door opened of it’s own accord, the wards shimmering around Harry as he stepped into the arched foyer. The normal dark and dusty smell had dissipated a bit, as he had spent nearly every visit standing here, working on the first floor of the ancient house. The lighting was brighter, curtains pulled back to let rays of sunlight in from the high arching windows in the sitting room. One night, the kitchen hearth had even rumbled to life, expanses of copper pots hanging above it warming it’s fiery glow.

Harry moved to the familiar stairwell. One he had yet to venture up. The higher floors of the house still felt dark, twisted and captivating. The magic there still full of the allure, the promise of oblivion, of hatred, of how easy darkness becomes.

Harry felt his legs moving him up each step automatically, each a flashback to the times where he was feverish with need, propelling himself into the swirling comfort of escapism. The comfort of the pain of the war, the memories of those he loved - the reassurance of the familiarity of it. The comfort of the ritual.

Harry had passed Regulus’s room in a daze and alighted to the hall of Sirius’s. It was dark as ever, the smell of metal thick and purulent in the stale air. Harry could hear his own pulse thudding in his ears, and the thrum of magic that had been building since he left the foyer was arching into a crescendo, ringing, like cicadas in the summer night after seventeen years of fitful sleep, now desperate in their quest for noise, more and more of them joining the fray. Harry could feel his heart in his chest and the pull of each breath and the sound of his own swallow as he tried to focus himself, tried to drown out the cacophony of noise, grating, vibrating, shuddering noise that was raking around his thoughts like nails beneath his skull.
Until a singular note of thought broke through.

*Is this what Dennis felt?*

*Is this the moment before a relapse?*

*Is this the feeling of the rest of your brain going dark and the desperation of escape becoming the singular goal?*

*Yes. I think it is.*

As soon as Harry let that singular thought enter the part of his brain that was still cognisant, he focused upon it, seized it, like the moment of quiet in the overwhelming storm of sound.

The singular fact of knowing that his brain was creating the illusion of panicked chaos, of fear, of need, made him feel as though a small space between the noise had opened up. Space for him to think just a moment longer, a little deeper. Space for his thoughts to be heard.

*This is the feeling of needing to escape. But what do I need to escape from? I am okay. I like being sober. I like my life. I want to live.*

And like that, the noise around him was dampened, the incessant vibration of cicadas muffled and pushed aside. His heart was slowing, and his breaths no longer so haggard.

And with each passing second, Harry felt himself holding stronger, on surer footing, more in touch with his limbs and the sense of his own body, his own self. And it was glorious, to feel so in control. To know that he had met with the moment of weakness that would have broken him, would have stolen him, and had survived it. Today was not his day to relapse. Today was just another day in recovery. A day he had mastered.

He hadn’t realised he had closed his eyes, but when he opened them, the hall was dark and quiet.

His magic, as if it had been waiting for him to call upon it, burst forth from his hands and pushed back against the festering coils of spellwork, of despair. The gold latticework of Harry’s magic spun itself into the walls and along the ceiling, pulled deep into the ancient floorboards beneath dusty carpets and Harry’s own blood stains.

He stepped forward down the hall, past the closet that had terrified him, the door still nailed shut, streaks of blood pulling away from it across the peeling wallpaper.

*I am okay. I survived. I choose life.*

And he walked down the hall, pausing at the doorway to Sirius’s old room, most of which had been vanished by Draco’s own spellwork the year before, just the old furniture and mattress left, none of the mess, the spoils of Harry’s old life.

Harry stood there awhile, letting his magic weave it’s way around the room, removing the dark and replacing it with brilliant strands of intricate gold, of light. Reclaiming.

He could feel it pouring out of himself, out of his comfort, of his knowing that he had mastered himself, had met the pull of oblivion, and today, he had won.

As he peeled away the slick and putrid remains of the old magic, Harry felt something new beneath it, something soft and careful. Something not dark and reeking of copper, but something that felt like the quiet moment when a fern unfurls itself in the undergrowth of the forest, still wet with the

Harry had never felt this magic before, especially not here, and he fumbled for a second, seeking it out, tracing it’s roots, letting it pull him toward it. There was a familiareseness there. A sense of something. Something that smelled of dragonhide and tasted of a kiwi, just under-ripe, bursting with flavour, tempered with the smell of woodsmoke, the crackle of wet logs popping on the fire.

Harry followed the pull of this new magic, magic he could not believe he had never noticed, too suffocated in his own misery, too dull and dampened by the drugs he had always needed to be so near to his godfather’s things.

His godfather. Sirius. That’s who this magic belonged to. And a ripple of pain cut so quickly and sharply through Harry, he sucked a breath in. For how much he missed him still sat so close to the surface, grief he had never known had to abate.

Harry flipped the disgusting mattress over with a flick of his hand and his hands ran along the floorboards that had hidden beneath the ratty old bed. The magic pulsed through to his palms and called to him. Harry gripped an old floorboard in a little cut out corner and pulled it up easily, revealing a little hidden cubby beneath.

Harry didn’t hesitate to reach in and remove the little wooden box that was slotted there, dusty but smooth with human touch. Walnut, the wood dark and rich and fed by the contact with skin.

The magic he had felt seemed to fall upon him in blissful, rolling waves, gentle and undulating like deep, contented laughter. Sirius’s laugh.

Opening it, Harry was met with parchment. Rolls of it. Scraps and pieces and essays worth. Some tied with ribbon, others folded, a few looked like they had meant to be little animals at one point. There may have been thirty or forty in the box, all covered in scrawling handwriting, the ink old, but not yet faded.

Harry gingerly removed a long bit of parchment, one that looked well read, the edges blunted with repeated handlings and re-readings. Harry unfurled it, overcome with curiosity.


Moony,

I’ve loved you since fifth year, though I wasn’t brave enough to admit it until sixth. And, I’ve loved you through every waxing and every waning of every moon since.

You kept me alive. You kept me whole when everything threatened to break me apart. Memories of you kept me strong in a place of abject despair. They still do.

Twelve years I lasted on just the thought of how you used to run to the forest edge at dusk, and I’d hear you laughing, how it would catch me, fill me up with the thrill of seeing you so open, so free.

Some nights you’d want me to chase you. Like that night just after our potions final in sixth year. Do you remember? The night you first let me kiss you, there in the forest, in the glade full of foxglove and fairy rings. The one that always smells like it’s just rained.

There was never any fear between us, Moony. I loved the wolf in you just as much as you loved the man in me, and everything that came with it. All of our hidden selves we shared and you were everything I’d never needed. You still are. Twelve years and my love for you hasn’t wavered,
hasn’t aged, it’s just as fiendish and consuming as it was that night I kissed you and you kissed me back.

Some day, we’ll run again through the thickets and chase each other between ancient elms. Between banks of ferns and hidden streams. And, you’ll let me catch you, just as you used to. Because, that’s all I’ll need to be happy, Moony, you and our freedom. Let me chase you. Let me catch you and let me love you. Wholly, completely.

Until then, come visit me often in this veritable hell, we’ve twelve years of shagging to catch up on.

- Sirius

Harry’s mouth was hanging open, staring down at the parchment in front of him. He flipped it over to the other side.

Pads,

You romantic sap. I kissed you, because you were prattling on about us not seeing each other over the summer holiday and I couldn’t take it anymore.

You tasted like apple cider and maybe a single glass of mulled wine for bravery, and I’ve never for a moment stopped loving you. How could I?

Yes, come chase me. Then keep me.

I’ll come by Saturday.

- RJL

Harry felt a laugh bubble up inside him. A laugh, but really just joy. Sirius was gay? Sirius and Remus were together? He was wrong to imagine Sirius without any love in his life. His life, it seemed, had been nothing but love for his dearest friend, he had just been quiet about it. Subtle. And no one would have expected that from Sirius Orion Black.

Harry reached in the box and picked up another small letter, eager to know more, to revel in the idea that Sirius had been happy, that he and Remus had shared laughter and joy and love between the horrors of the war.

Pads,

Do you think Harry is onto us? Was the joint Christmas present a giveaway? When can we tell him? He is so stressed these days, and I’d think he’d be happy for us. Happy to hear we’re busy being happily in love. He worries about you, you know.

- RJL
Harry pulled his knees to his chest, grinning. They had given him a gift together. Together. Of course. He flipped the parchment to see Sirius’s familiar hand, much less scratchy and more refined than Lupin’s scrawl.

_Moony,

_Soon. I think it’s about time I sat him down and talked about sex and relationships and all of that nonsense, anyway. He’s about that age, and I’m sure the Dursleys didn’t tell him anything and I’d imagine Molly will wait until he’s 35 before she thinks it’s time.

_He’s got to know it’ll be okay and everything’s a bit confusing at that age, but he’ll find his way. We did, didn’t we? And, you’re a wolf (I say that with a raised eyebrow and a wink, because there’s nothing I like more than you and your need to rut) and my parents gave me a book on how to goad a woman into a pureblood marriage binding ritual and, for the love of all things holy, we owe it to the next generation of kids to just tell them that love is beautiful and normal and they should just be safe and careful with their hearts (and other parts).

Anyway, come help me devise a lecture plan? I’ve got so many ideas, I’ll need to work out the kinks. (I’m winking again, Moons - I’m such a dog, get it?).

- Sirius

Below it, a reply simply in Lupin’s scratchy writing read.

_Oh, now that’s just horrible. Very naughty. I’ll be there tonight, you animal._

Harry rested his chin on his knees and hugged them to himself. Sirius’s huge personality and unapologetic lust for life was shining through, even in these little scraps of correspondence. It was unfair that he had died. It was painful, still, but knowing he had spent his last years being playful and in love, writing letters and having secret romance, it warmed Harry. It seemed to lay salve along a wound that had been open so long he hardly even noticed how much it hurt anymore.

Harry was pulled from his thoughts by the feeling of his wards giving way, the sound of the front door slamming open and shut, and the thudding of steps up the stairs.

Harry had stumbled to his feet, but before he could cross the room to see who it was, Draco’s red, sweaty and panicky face appeared in the doorway.

“Harry.” The man choked out, his chest heaving from sprinting up the stairs.

“Draco, what are you doing here? What’s wrong?” Harry felt fear radiating off of him, and it gripped him, freezing him to the spot.

“What’s wrong? What do you mean what’s wrong? Are you okay?” Draco was staring at Harry, then over his shoulder and around the room. Harry felt his eyes rove over his bare arms, and he reflexively crossed them, now aware of what the fear was about, the panic.
“Explain, please.” Harry’s voice was cold and hard and he couldn’t hide the irritation that refluxed up at the idea that Draco would think he would hide something like a relapse. That Draco had expected him to relapse at all.

Draco didn’t say anything, but pulled a letter from his pocket, one that bore Hestia’s signature flowing script.

_Draco,_

_Worried about Harry. Please check on him. He looked like he was going somewhere he wouldn’t be found._

- _Hestia_

Harry feels himself fill with anger at first. He’s being nannied, and no one trusts him. The suspicion felt like a betrayal. Like they didn’t believe he was capable of being an adult, taking care of himself.

After a moment, however, the anger subsided down into the fact that Harry had people who cared, and who worried, and who had a pretty valid reason to be worried. He had come here to die once, that was true, he couldn’t fault them for remembering that.

He uncrossed his arms and stepped toward Draco, pulling him into a firm hug, one that recognised that Draco’s fear was because he cared. Because, he too had seen Harry dead, in this very room, had known the depths that Harry had fallen.

He felt Draco melt into his hold, and Harry let the tension and the anxiety bleed away, his feet firmly planted, supporting the other man’s weight, wanting him to know he was still strong.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” Harry’s voice was soft into the sudden quiet of the room. He let his magic meet Draco’s, run across his skin, let him know he was not here to be oblivious. Not here to use. He was here to reclaim.

“Someone from our meetings relapsed. A friend of mine.” Harry wanted Draco to understand, wanted to open the door to himself. The place where he was scared and vulnerable. The place that watched someone relapse and felt the ground shake beneath his feet, watched someone lose their sobriety in a moment of respite from the constant battle for control. For the tiredness that is life in recovery. A place that wondered when he too would tire. When he too would be too fatigued to fight.

“That’s why Hestia was worried. She was right. It bothered me. He was in the meeting yesterday, happy, sober, like normal.”

It felt good to tell him. To share the sadness of it.

“He lost people, in the war. He lost them and he feels alone in carrying their memory. Like they won’t matter if he doesn’t stay grieving. I… understand, I guess. Hestia says they relapse because it’s too painful to let go of the war when the war is the only place memories of those you love live.”

Draco pulled back from the hug to look into Harry’s eyes.
“Sirius.”

“Yeah,” Harry looked away from the kindness in Draco’s face, kindness that was edged in worry. The vulnerability of it was astounding. Destabilizing. He had never had the courage to talk to anyone about Sirius. Not even Ron and Hermione, who had tried for years to get Harry to grieve, to grieve and let go. To grieve and be at peace.

“I thought the war was all he knew. That he never got a chance, never knew…” Harry had stopped mid sentence because understanding had unfurled around him. He reached for the box. The magic he had felt, that sang of the forest and freedom and the immeasurable but undeniable growth of trees, reaching up toward the sun - it was love. Love, painted full and thick and heavy across every grain of the dark wood and each dash of ink in the warn parchment. Love, every time the letters had been unfolded and read. And read again. And held, softly and dearly. It was love that was emanating from every single moment, a monument, a testament to how much Sirius had treasured Remus.

Harry was smiling, basking in it. “Gods, Draco, I was wrong. I was so, so incredibly wrong.”

Harry passed the box to Draco, and watched the weight of it settle in his hands, he could imagine the magic curling around his fingers. Would he recognise it, or would it take time, like it had for Harry? “Sirius lived every moment he had. He didn’t let his freedom pass him by. He just never told me.”

“Sirius and Lupin?” Draco had scanned a tiny little letter folded like a star.

“It seems so. I never knew he was gay. It explains how Lupin acted after his death, though. How scared he seemed to be with Tonks. He probably never told her, never felt like he could grieve. The first time he seemed really happy was when Teddy was born.”

Harry watched Draco looking through some of the letters, his eyes widening at some of the more saucy moments of Sirius’s attempts at flirting. Harry had a feeling quite a few of those letters would be explicit.

He watched the smile pull at the corner of Draco’s mouth. Their love was undeniable. It was pooling around every word, every moment. It was beautiful.

“People should know they mattered, their lives were full and mischievous and happy. They were people who took every moment outside of the war and the fear and they chose to be happy.”

“So make it known.” Draco was running his fingers across a bit of black ribbon that had tied a thick scroll shut.

“How do you mean?”

“You’ll think of something. Just honour their memory. Honour their happiness in a story that is otherwise dark and full of pain and imagined isolation. Maybe that is what your friend needs, too, a way to make their memory something outside of the war. Or, maybe just a memory that they alone don’t have to carry.”

There was silence between them as Harry thought it over. The lightness he felt, even here, in a room where he had once decided to die, was undeniable. Sirius’s memory was enshrined in something outside of himself. And the jaunty smile and unyielding joy of the man was palpable, shareable. It wasn’t Harry’s alone, and it was freeing.

“I’m glad you’re ok.” Draco’s voice pulled Harry from his thoughts, and he felt a moment of guilt
for worrying him so much, reaching out to take Draco’s hand.

“Do you still have his jacket?” Harry hadn't thought about the jacket in ages, but it suddenly came to the forefront of his mind. The thought of being wrapped in Sirius, in his magic, in his fearlessness, it no longer felt like a way to hide from the rest of the world, but an homage to him. Harry could be fearless, too. He could be unapologetically full of the clever bravado that Sirius had used to flirt with reckless abandon. Had used to charm Remus, to chase him.

“Mm. Removed all of the blood magic when we were in the forest. You had just said to wait to give it to you when you asked for it. Are you asking for it?”

“I think so.” Harry squeezed Draco’s hand softly.

The smell of copper was gone from the air.

July 11, 2009

Draco had left Harry at Grimmauld Place, explaining that he had sprinted from the Ministry of Magic, leaving a very startled and disgruntled Hermione in the middle of a tirade/explanation/diatribe on the origins of born-and-die-people or some such translation. She had found it in an old scroll collection on loan from the wizarding library at Timbuktu, and it had been the breakthrough they were hoping for. It had answered questions they had yet to ask. It’s origins were in the Niger delta, sometime before the rise of Alexandria, and it chronicled the lives of souls who had been born only to die, accompanied by descriptions of the beasts they used as guides to walk between spirit worlds. Leathery black horses, winged, beaks dripping with blood.

In Nigerian traditions, the born-and-die-people were often a reference to stillborn children or miscarriages, even babies who died shortly after birth or early in childhood, but Hermione had found older legends, legends from the forest tribes that spoke of mediators of death, those who had been marked for it, those who walked in and out of the dark places of the forest with death-beasts as guides. Those who had guarded against the deaths of others.

Harry had been quiet during Draco’s explanation. They both had felt the weight of the implication. They had both been marked for death, born and meant to die. Harry, by Dumbledore and Draco by Voldemort.

Harry had encouraged Draco to go back to work, knowing that he would have too many questions, too much to think on, should he have stayed. He was like Hermione in that way. He’d need to be working, what with this new batch of scrolls and a whole four bins of untranslated Nri markings that expanded on these otherwise undescribed pieces of magical lore.

Neither of them liked uncertainty. They had walked back down the stairs together, both of them pausing and Draco huffing a laugh at the sound of hooves and soft huffs that trailed behind them and around corners of the house that remained dark.

And Harry had left him with a soft kiss in the foyer, simple and sweet, and a promise that he would be okay, that Draco could trust him to be sure in his recovery. To be safe.

Just as Draco was stepping out from behind the old ironwood door, Harry stopped him, grabbing his hand quickly, a thought desperate to be heard, like fire on his lips.

“I want to tell them, Draco. About us. I want to tell the people close to me. I don’t want to be like Sirius and Remus and everyone thinking I’m tragic and lonely.” He paused, trying to read Draco’s
expression. “I’m not shy for everyone to know. I don’t want parts of me to be secrets.”

“Soon.”

Draco’s singular response had been replaying in Harry’s mind all meeting, and he was having trouble focusing as Greg talked about what fear can do. Instead, he was lost in his own thoughts and watching Dennis, who was back to his spot on the half circle leather chair, looking the same as he always had, albeit slightly red around the eyes.

At the end of the hour, Harry hadn’t said anything of note, continuing rather to mull over his own thoughts, his plans. He caught Dennis in the hallway after the meeting and asked him to follow him into Luna’s office, where they could talk alone, closing the oak door behind them.

As the door clicked shut, Harry felt his magic burn a little brighter.

“I’m working on something. To memorialise those we lost in the war. I want to make something for Colin. Is that okay?” Harry tried to reel in his intensity, watching Dennis recoil a bit from his blunt delivery. His right hand had come up across his heart, and Harry could see his eyes were bright. When he finally answered, his voice was quiet and raspy, and the familiar joviality that Dennis so often used was gone - the mask was off.

“I’ll need your help. We’ll have to sit down together to do the work, and it will involve you telling me everything about Colin - about his laugh about his fears about his every whim and what caught his fancy. It will take hours, but your memories I’ll use to pour into what I’m making, to give it life, to have it echo with a feeling, so others can experience it. Is that alright?”

Dennis was trembling, more even than usual. Tears were spilling over puffy lower lids. “You don’t have to…” And Harry was hit with the shame that Dennis carried for loving his brother so much, so much it had consumed him, so much it left no room for anything but the terrifying undertow of a grief that left him drowning all these years.

“Dennis. The people we loved. They died. They died and it was horrible. They died and they mattered, they mattered and they deserve to be honored. They deserve to be known. Their bravery, their heart, their courage, their sacrifice - their flaws. All of it. Colin deserves to be remembered by people other than just you.”

And Dennis was crying openly, his back up against Luna’s door, his legs giving way beneath him as he sobbed, hands over his mouth, as if to stifle the pain. Dennis had never cried in their meetings - had never broken - had always remained upbeat, supportive, enthusiastic - quick to lend a helping hand. But this, this was what had been pooling beneath that veneer.

Harry knelt next to him and pulled him close, enfolding him into his arms and feeling Dennis’s stuttering gasping breaths against his shoulder. And Harry stayed like that, holding him close and letting him cry, until Dennis sat up, wiping his face on his shirt, his face blotchy and eyes swollen, but somehow looking as though he had been scrubbed clean of a layer of guilt. Had been given a place to put all of the sadness he’d been carrying around, weight that had been piling up atop his bony shoulders.

“Can we start tonight?”

“We can start tonight.” Harry’s smile was genuine and he let his magic pour from him, gentle and warm and knowing, knowing the relief of laying down the things you carry.
July 13, 2009

Harry stood, leaning his aching shoulders down over his workbench, his hands splayed out on the table beneath him. He needed a break.

He padded to the kitchen and summoned a glass, letting the tap pour in icy cold water, the first sips of which washed away the sawdust that had gathered in his throat without his even noticing.

Dennis had come by to Grimmauld Place the past two nights. They had sat together in one of the old drawing rooms. One that Harry had moved all of the furniture out of to convert to a work room, just a simple table and some old chairs. His workbench was in the centre of the room, across from the old Black family tapestry. He had spent the whole afternoon after the meeting preparing it, wiping the horrid, spiteful magic away, replacing it with his own calm and soothing spellwork, magic that stemmed from his desire to help, to heal. By the time Dennis had arrived, he had polished the ancient mahogany mantle, rubbed oil into the window panes, the eaves, the floorboards. He had tended to the room, had nourished it, and he could feel the ancient beams had craved it.

Heading back to the drawing room, the oil lamps on the walls burned brighter, the house felt warmer, more welcoming. Harry had owled Hermione every few hours to keep her from worrying, and Little Dipper was snoozing in the corner on the back of one of the chairs.

Harry’s thestral had joined them in the afternoon, too. He had simply appeared in the back of the large room without either Harry or Dennis noticing, eventually giving himself away with a snorting huff after Dennis had finished telling Harry the story of Colin coming home for the summer after his first year at Hogwarts, full to the brim with fantastical stories and bursting with excitement. He barely mentioned being petrified, waving it off as a small inconvenience. The bigger picture was the absolute magic of the wizarding world, the wonder of Hogwarts, of spells and charms and 1001 magical plants, herbs and fungi.

Dennis had been laughing, but it changed to a scream when he realised there was a gigantic thestral just behind him, wandering over to sniff Harry’s new workbench, his wings folded neatly along his bony sides.

Harry had apologised profusely for the inherent creepiness of his ominous companion, and promised he was really harmless, quite good natured, really. A bit of a mischievous trickster, if he’s honest.

Dennis had to be convinced to stay with a cup of tea and much reassurance, but they made little progress after that, and eventually, he had gone home, though not before telling Harry about how he and Colin had stayed at home that year, the year of the final battle, reciting happy memories to each other, just in case they needed to cast a patronus charm, making sure they knew they were loved, were cared for. Trying to keep safe.

Harry took another sip of the cold water, thinking over Colin and his patronus. It had been a hummingbird, zipping around the room, fast and flighty and full of energy. It had been perfect, and Colin had been thrilled.
Steam filled the sterile white kitchen and the pristine counters were spattered with aromatic droplets of rich tomato sauce. Draco was leaning over his counter, hair wild with sweat and the humidity of cooking, squinting down at tattered piece of parchment covered in faded writing and years worth of food stains.

He had spent the day lost in the meditation of making a birthday dinner for two, from scratch, and with minimal magic. Walking the muggle markets to pick out the perfect roma tomatoes, the most pungent garlic, querying the old lady at the mill about which flour was the most appropriate for pasta making, tasting the cheeses on offer, all of the steps required to build the perfect meal by hand.

Draco didn’t know how to do big romantic gestures, but he did know how to take every component of his gift into consideration. To choose each ingredient with care. To pour his gratitude and affection into every quiet action. He may not be able to whisk Harry away somewhere and repel a thousand muggles, but he could spend eight hours making sure this dinner was thoughtful and nourishing. Something Harry would appreciate.

Draco cast a tempus and saw that he had another two hours before Harry would arrive. He was full of nervous anticipation, yet it was tempered by a comfortable excitement. He had spent enough time alone with Harry in the past weeks to feel safer, less pressured by their relationship. But, even still, he couldn’t deny that he was desperate to impress him. To make him feel loved and cared for. To show how much he meant to Draco.

Draco had asked his mother for this family recipe he had loved as a child. Something familiar he wanted to share. The recipe reminded him of what family should be. Togetherness, safety, nourishment. Things he felt with Harry. The recipe was also similar to the bolognese Harry had made for him last year in the forest. The first time had offered to make him dinner.

Normally, the house elves would have done all the work, but Draco’s gift to Harry was this labour of love. He had measured the flour onto the counter and used his fingers to create a well in the centre, into which he dropped egg yolk after egg yolk. Mixing and stirring each one into the flour with intense focus until he was kneading an elastic yellow dough in his hands. He hand rolled large sheets of pasta across the length of his granite work space, and used a large cleaver to cut thin linguine-like strips.

Half way through cutting the pasta, he was regretting his ambitious food choice, wishing he had acquired more specific utensils for the job. The large knife unwieldy in his hand, he was sweating with the effort of making each cut even, each flayed strip uniform.

He cast an appraising look around his kitchen as he draped the last fringe of pasta over the bars of a laundry rack to wait for cooking. The old woman at the market insisted that this was the easiest way to keep fresh pasta from sticking together before it was ready to be cooked.

The tomatoes had been steamed, meticulously peeled, stewed, and milled into a thick and decadent sauce, filled with garlic, butter, basil, ground beef, oregano and bay. The salad had been assembled and the fresh mozzarella placed in its brine. The bread had been cooked, cooled, sliced, and filled with garlic butter and aged parmesan, ready again for the oven. The rich vanilla custard had been made and frozen for dessert to have with espresso. All that was left was the angel food cake and
berry compote. Everything was coming together.

He cast at the dirty dishes and levitated them to the sink where he set them to wash. His eye was distracted for a moment by his encourage-mint, which, in his benign neglect of the creeping plant over the past months, had outgrown its tiny container and begun cascading down of the window sill and towards the sink. He took a moment to prod the little charmed cloud and considered the overgrown tendrils. The angel food cake could wait a moment longer.

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Despite Draco’s calm confidence throughout the day and focused ritual of creating his masterpiece dinner, by the time Harry was set to arrive, he was sweating profusely and feeling nauseous with nerves. Oh god, what if Harry hated it? Does he even like pasta? He should have made something better, surely. Why did he invite Harry to his apartment? What if that sent Harry the wrong message?

Draco was pacing. Doing laps around the apartment. Into the bedroom, to the bathroom, back to the kitchen, around the living room, and back to the bedroom. Every time he walked past the little table for two in the living room, with the two gifts wrapped in brown paper and ribbon, he doubted himself further.

He had set the table with a traditional checkered red tablecloth. There were two bottles being used as candle holders and in a tiny vase sat a single pink camellia, looking vibrant against the green olive oil bottles. The plates were set meticulously and he cursed his compulsion to layout formal utensil placements. Would Harry even know which fork was for what?

Feeling morbidly self conscious he decided to move the two gifts to the desk on his 5th pass of the small table.

Every time he walked to the bathroom, he cast a freshening charm on himself, berating his armpits for sweating so damn much. Why was he so nervous? He had been fine all day! It’s just Harry, for the love of Salazar. Harry, who had promised he liked him.

Back and forth he walked, lost in his own spiraling thoughts, going deeper and deeper into his doubt, until he heard a snort from just ahead of him as he walked back out of the kitchen. Stopping his frantic steps, he lifted his head with a laugh to see Voileami standing, very out of place, on his balcony. Her awkwardly shaped head sticking in through the window, sniffing the air hopefully for raw meat.

He walked forward to stroke her neck and said, “Sorry beautiful woman, but I’m afraid I’ve cooked all of the mince in the sauce. You should have gotten here earlier.”

She snorted again, this time indignantly, and tossed her head. He felt calmer now, but still nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a frantic pounding on his door and the sound of a panicked voice calling, “Draco! Draco! Please! Draco! Open up!”

“What the—” he muttered to himself as he strode across the room and wrenched the door open, “Greg? What? What are you doing here? What’s wrong?”

“Draco, oh thank the gods.” Greg looked stricken as he threw himself onto Draco. He was somehow pale and beet red at the same time, an impressive combination, to be sure. His hands were shaking and his face was sweating. He looked on the verge of tears, and it seemed like he was struggling to breathe. He clung to Draco’s small frame like a drowning man and Draco clumsily tried to pat him on the back while maintaining his balance, staggering backward a bit.
“Greg,” He asked again, completely bewildered, “what’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“I can’t do it. I just can’t. I can’t.” He repeated nonsensically.

“What can’t you do?” Draco asked into the top of Greg’s head, feeling lost, still standing in his open door way.

“I don’t know how anyone could think I could- I mean, I panicked and the first thing I thought was, I gotta get to the bar… what kind of person does that? And, sure, I love muggles now, but I didn’t use to! What if they’re the same?!” Greg was rambling and shaking.

“Greg-“ He tried again, to no avail.

“Twins, Draco! I don’t think I’m capable of one! How am I supposed to take care of two?!” He yelled, pulling back to look into Draco’s face with a pained and beseeching look.

Draco just stared blankly for a moment, processing his words.

Oh.

He asked gently squeezing Greg’s shoulder, “Greg, is Luna pregnant?”

Greg burst into tears and fell back onto Draco, just has Harry came into view through the doorway. Perfect. Just perfect.

Harry froze comically mid-step at the sight of a sobbing Greg and bewildered Draco, who just shook his head in confusion to try and convey that, he too, had no idea what was happening.

Draco, distracted as he was by the heaving lump of a man in his arms, did not miss the fact that Harry looked like a walking daydream, having donned dark grey trousers and a forest green jacket. He was holding a bouquet of ferns, lily of the valley, and what looked like the white tendrils of ivy. He had been looking hugely pleased with himself before stopping and staring at the unexpected, though honestly rather comical, sight before him.

Before either Harry or Draco could decide what to do, Greg lifted his head and and stepped back from Draco, noticing Harry.

“Oh, hi Harry— did Luna send you?” he asked sheepishly, wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve, looking ashamed of himself.

“Oh—” Harry answered, but Greg was already surveying Harry’s very dapper appearance and the bouquet clutched in his hands. Distracted momentarily from his own misery, he glanced with suspicion between Harry and Draco, the pieces sliding together. “No… she didn’t send me,” Harry finally responded, “but is everything alright?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to interrupt, I shouldn’t have come unannounced—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Draco interrupted, waving Greg off, “come in already, both of you, we don’t need to give my neighbours anything more to talk about. Dear Mrs. Amendilla is nuisance as it is.”

Greg’s shoulders slumped in defeat and he walked past Draco and into the flat. Draco gave Harry a shy smile, who leaned in to place a sweet kiss on his cheek, fingers brushing together, as he walked in.

“You weren’t supposed to bring me flowers, you berk, it’s your birthday.” Draco chastised, his
face feeling overly warm where Harry’s lips had brushed his skin.

Harry smiled slyly, but didn’t respond. With the arrival of Greg, Draco had forgotten about how nervous he had been about dinner, but now, walking behind him he stiffened when Harry stopped in the living room and saw the table set for two. Draco stood awkwardly waiting for Harry’s response, listening to Greg blowing his nose in the bathroom. Voileami had gone with the arrival of Greg.

“Draco, I—” He said a little breathlessly staring down at the little candle lit table, as Greg came out of the loo.

Completely ignoring the romantic atmosphere, Greg shuffled past Harry and the little table and threw himself onto the couch. Harry and Draco exchanged concerned glances before moving as one towards him. Harry first conjuring a vase for the flowers and setting them on the table before moving to sit on the other side of Greg.

He and Draco each had an arm around Greg and all of their knees were knocked together on the small couch. Sandwiched snuggly between Harry and Draco, Greg took a deep breath and started speaking. “We’re having twins.” he croaked, fresh tears leaking down his face. Harry catching Draco’s eyes, looking startled at the confession.

“When did you find out?” Harry asked softly.

“Last week I found out she was pregnant, today we found out it was twins. I was scared shitless. Still am I guess.” he shrugged.

“It’s normal to be afraid, Greg.” Draco offered. “How does Luna feel about it?”

“You know Luna. She’s amazing and understanding and beautiful— she— she said that if it was too much for me, that she had no expectations. That she wanted to have kids because she wants to give love, and not as an extension of our relationship. I can be as involved as I want to be or not at all. Said she’d love me either way.” he sounded miserable, as if he didn’t think himself worthy of Luna’s love.

Harry was smiling ruefully. “That sounds like Luna.”

Greg laughed with a self deprecating edge. “I don’t deserve her or these kids. I’m not capable. I’m going to fuck them up just as bad as my parents did to me and.“

“Greg, stop.” Draco intervened. “I understand you’re scared, but you are deserving and capable. You’ve put your life back together and you work your ass off every day to be a better person. The real question is— is this what you want? Do you want children?”

“I won’t be a good parent, I’m terrible with kids—”

“That’s not what I asked you. Do you want children?” Draco tried again.

Greg was quiet a long time, and they let the silence hang around them, anxious fingers picking at the hem of a plaid shirt. “Yes.” he admitted as if it pained him. “But, that doesn’t mean I should have them.”

“I think it means that you deserve the chance.” Harry interjected.

Tears started leaking down Greg’s face again and he covered it with his hands and mumbled into them. “I don’t want them to hate muggles.”
“With you and Luna as parents? How could they?” Harry asked incredulously.

“I’ll have to teach them about— about my tool belt—” His sobs shook his broad shoulders. “I love my tool belt…” He mumbled into his enormous palms.

Draco bit back a smile. Indeed, Greg was wearing his tool belt on the couch.

“You will definitely have to teach them about your tool belt. And so many other things, too. But, you won’t be alone. It’s not entirely on your shoulders to teach them everything.” Draco reassured.

“But— but what about my sobriety? Will I be able to do it?” He asked even more quietly, and Harry tightened his grip around Greg, protectively.

“You’re not alone in that either, Greg.” He said softly. “You’ll still do your meetings and you have friends that love you that want to help.”

“But, Luna says if we’re having children that she wants to move the meetings away from our house. And she’ll need to train someone to run things when she’s on maternity leave. And— and— and we need a new meetings space and— and I’m just so worried that this is too much change— I mean for fuck’s sake I was halfway to the bar before I realised what I was doing and came here instead.”

“And you should be really proud of yourself making that decision to come here, that couldn’t have been easy.” Draco assured.

Greg nodded tightly, sniffling hard as Harry spoke. “Just remember that you’re not alone. Whatever you decide to do, or need, you have people around you that want to help. And, for what it’s worth, I think this fear and hesitation and awareness you have is exactly what will make you a great parent. You’re under no illusion about how hard it will be and you understand the hugeness of the job. I’m sure it feels terrifying, but you’re entirely capable if you choose to do this.”

“Thanks, mates.” Greg said, sounding a little less desperate. “I think I need to get home to Luna, she’s probably worried. I just up and fled the prenatal when the midwife confirmed it was twins…” he sounded full of shame.

Draco and Harry moved at the same time, wrapping themselves around Greg and squeezing tightly. Draco feeling so much empathy and heartache for Greg, and sure Harry was feeling the same.

“Go back to Luna, Greg. And don’t worry about a meeting space. I think I have an idea for that, but we’ll talk about it at our next meeting.”

Greg nodded, bracing himself for going home and facing his pregnant partner. For facing his future. He rose from the couch and glanced towards the dinner table, “And, uh— sorry about— uh, interrupting—” he waved vaguely, awkwardly, at the table. “I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Draco waved dismissively. “We— we haven’t told anyone, yet.”

“Except Luna.” Harry chimed in. “And, I guess, you now.”

“Of course she knows.” Greg smiled, exasperated. “Well, your secret is safe with us.”

He gave Harry and Draco each one last hug before apparating away, leaving them standing alone in Draco’s living room.

“Well,” Harry said into the silence, “that was not how I was expecting this date to start.”
Draco snorted, “Me neither.”

Harry extended his hand towards Draco, and he took it. He was pulled flush against him and held firmly. “I wanted to do this as soon I saw the table.” He said, breath ghosting across Draco’s lips, his hand on the back of Draco’s head, the other around his waist.

“Is that one of your kinks? Tables?” Draco asked, teasingly, trying to cover his nervous anticipation, hands on Harry’s back.

“Don’t be a prat.” Harry huffed a laugh before pulling Draco in for a slow kiss that felt like electricity running through Draco’s veins. His magic wrapping itself around Harry’s, his skin erupting in goosebumps wherever Harry’s hands wandered. Draco breathed in Harry, doused in the familiar scent of a forest after a rainstorm, fire from a lightning strike. It was intoxicating. Their kissing was becoming more heated, their hands more demanding. Harry's tongue tasted like a promise in his mouth, and Draco began to forget his fears.

Harry’s magic responded with an urgency that Draco could tell he was trying to hold back, and he remembered they were supposed to be taking this slow. He broke the kiss and their breaths were ragged with the effort it took not to jump head first into the feeling.

“Too much?” Harry asked, his eyes were closed and his forehead was resting against Draco’s.

“No.” Draco said, surprised by how true it was.

Harry smiled, and tilted his chin up to look into Draco’s eyes. Perhaps to make sure Draco was still there and hadn’t floated off in a disassociation, for confirmation.

Whatever he saw must have been enough because he pulled Draco into a hard kiss, his one hand wandering down to grip Draco’s ass and pull him closer. When he elicited a small moan from Draco, he pulled back with a smug smile, kissed him swiftly one last time and asked, “Dinner?”

After being completely thrown off balance by Harry’s teasing, Draco somehow managed to pull himself together to get dinner out to the table. He was honestly surprised he remembered how a fork worked with Harry’s eyes on him.

Over the next few hours, they slowly ate their way through the salad and bread, the bolognese topped with fresh mozzarella, the angel food cake, and the affogato, Harry offering a running commentary on what he thought about each component of their dinner. When he realised that Draco had, in fact, made the entire thing from scratch, down to mozzarella and ice cream, he dropped his fork and bowed on the table.

“I’m not worthy.” He had said with mock solemnity. Draco had simply told him if he hadn’t been worthy, he wouldn’t have made it. The creeping blush on Harry’s neck was worth every second he spent slaving over his ingredients.

They spoke about Harry’s plans for Grimmauld Place, about his memorial project, his plans for the next year. They spoke about the thestrals when the two familiar spectres of death appeared comically crammed together on Draco’s porch. Harry’s batting its wing out to make more room for itself and Voileami with her face smashed into the window, trapped by the limited space. Odd creatures, Draco had laughed.

They spoke about Dumbledore and Grindelwald. The Elder Wand. When their conversation lulled in pensive thought, Draco summoned the two gifts from his desk and pushed them towards Harry.
“Draco, no! You weren’t supposed to get me anything on top of the dinner!” He scolded, but his smile told a different story. “You’re showing me up.”

“It’s not a competition, you git.” Draco countered with a smug smile.

“Yeah, well, that smirk says otherwise, and it also says you’re winning. I’m on to you.” He threatened, punctuating his suspicions with a spoon, before picking up the smaller of the two gifts. “Two gifts, and dinner? Unbelievable.”

Draco didn’t respond, he just watched anxiously as Harry began to pull the moss green ribbon off the small square box before tearing off the paper. When he opened it, the smell of the parcel immediately filled the air.

Harry’s face melted into one of fond recognition, “Draco.” He said, tenderly pulling out his very own little pot of encourage-mint, with its own little cloud.

Draco looked away and shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal, like it didn’t mean anything. His insides were twisting around in joy.

“Thank you.” He said softly, rubbing the little tendrils and gazing at it with adoration.

“Mine was overgrown and ready to replant—” Draco dismissed, trying not to feel too pleased with himself. “Open the other one.”

Harry carefully set his plant down and pulled the larger gift towards him. He had a small smile dancing on his face as he tore open the box and stared down at its contents. His smile fell away and, for a horrifying moment, Draco thought he had done the wrong thing. That he had monumentally fucked up. Harry pulled Sirius’s jacket out and gazed at it with a conflicted expression.

He set it down carefully, stood up, and pulled Draco out of his seat and into a crushing hug.

“Thank you.” He said with a gravelly voice into Draco’s ear.

“Is it okay?” He asked, still unsure with himself.

“It’s perfect.” He sounded like he might be near tears, and Draco squeezed him tighter. “I can feel his magic.”

Draco let out a sigh of relief.

Harry pulled back and looked at Draco and there was no mistaking the heat in his eyes. The longing. The adoration. The desire. Draco’s mouth went dry and his palms were sweating, but he wanted Harry so badly he thought he would die if he didn’t kiss him. So he did.

And Harry moaned into the kiss in apparent relief, gripping Draco hard as if worried he might disapparate somewhere without him. Their embrace was heated but considered. There was nothing mindlessly frantic about it. Harry was doing an admirable job of controlling himself, trying not to spook Draco with his intensity, but moving forward nonetheless. He began walking Draco back towards the couch, laying Sirius’s jacket on the back of his chair as they went. Draco was pushing Harry’s own forest green jacket off his shoulders, earning himself consenting groans and a smile against his own lips as he urged Draco on.

Draco fell back onto the couch, pulling Harry with him, and this time Harry didn’t hold his weight back, didn’t treat Draco like fragile glass. He treated Draco like the capable and strong person he
thought he was. Harry sank his full weight onto him, between his legs and onto his chest, kissing him like his life depended on it. One hand in Draco’s hair and the other also tugging at Draco’s shirt. Draco welcome the full weight of Harry on him for the first time and moaned at the contact. The feel of Harry’s erection pressing next to his through too many layers of fabric.

Draco was fumbling with the bottom of Harry’s shirt, trying to untuck it from his waist, the single minded focus of getting his hands on more skin urging him forward. Not to be outdone, Harry was putting an equal effort on Draco’s shirt buttons.

When he finally got his hand under Harry’s shirt, he raked his fingers down his side, and Harry shivered in response, he did it again. Draco couldn’t believe what they were doing. Couldn’t believe he was getting this far and hadn’t fled. He was shocked with his own bravery, his own want. Relishing every kiss Harry placed on his neck as he slowly finished unbuttoning Draco’s shirt, and carefully ran his fingers across Draco’s bare skin.

Harry gave a slight experimental roll of his hips against Draco and asked into his neck, “Is this okay?”

Draco’s brain felt like it had short circuited with pleasure and panic. He didn’t answer because he couldn’t think of what to say. Yes it felt good, yes he wanted to continue, but something about it felt off and scary. His silence gave Harry pause and he pulled back to look at Draco who was doing his best to stay present. Feel the feelings. Decipher the conflicting emotions.

“I’m okay.” Draco said, too quickly.

Harry smiled, appearing to see the warring confusion on Draco’s face. “C’mere.”

Harry sat back and pulled Draco up and onto him, so it was Draco now who was between Harry’s legs and Draco who was on top and in control.

“Better?” Harry asked tentatively, breathlessly, and Draco melted into him, kissing him hard in wordless gratitude.

“Perfect.” Draco said, voice a little raspy, and it was his turn to roll his hips cautiously. The sound Harry made into his mouth was the best thing he’d ever heard. Draco thought he would probably sell his soul to keep hearing it.

After a few more minutes of painfully slow rutting and fierce kissing, Harry’s broken voice spoke into Draco’s shoulder, “You know, we— oh— we don’t have to do this— mmmm— right?”

“I know that. I want to.” He said breathlessly, surprised at how much he meant it. He ran his hand down Harry’s leg and onto his ass. “Do you want to?”

“Fuck yes.” He moaned, and the rest of Harry’s reservations and tentative movements fell away. He gripped Draco’s hips and pulled him in a rough rhythm with his own, kissing him everywhere he could reach.

Draco had wound his hand into Harry’s hair and groaned into his neck. His fears were slowly melting with each passing moment. He was being carefully taken apart by Harry’s kind and attentive hands, his considerate mouth, his loving moans, his knowing gaze. He was safe. Even if he did panic or ran or had a meltdown— it would be fine. Harry would understand, would forgive him, wouldn’t think less of him.

He realised he was close, and that if Harry kept moving the way he was, with those strong hands and determined thrusts, that he would most definitely come. A ripple of apprehension shot through
him, and he felt himself stiffening, suddenly unsure if he wanted to let go, cross that threshold just yet.

Harry released his tight grip on Draco’s hips, instantly sensing the change, allowing Draco to grip his hands and set the pace.

But, while Draco held Harry’s hands tightly, and their lips moved tirelessly, the pace Harry had been driving slowed to a stop now that it was in Draco’s hands to continue. He felt unsure of himself, too self aware to cross that threshold. Too tied up in doubt to let go.

Harry pulled back from their kiss to look at Draco. To run his fingers through his debauched hair, to touch his face. “What do you need from me?” He finally asked, his voice was gentle and there was no judgement in his face.

“I don’t know.” His lips felt numb from all the stubble around Harry’s mouth. Or maybe it was panic. He couldn’t quite tell.

Harry gave him a smile. “Draco, we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Draco sighed, dropping his head to lay his face against Harry’s chest. “But, I do want to. That’s the issue.”

“What do you mean?” Harry had begun running his fingers through Draco’s hair and holding him firmly against him.

Draco was quiet for a moment, trying to piece together what exactly he was feeling. “I just— I’m enjoying this. I am. I want to be doing this. I’m choosing it, and it’s good. But— I can’t seem to— just— let go.” His face felt too hot now, and he was sweaty.

Harry hummed in acknowledgement and Draco started to feel fidgety like he wanted to get up and go literally anywhere else.

“Hey,” Harry’s voice cut through the slight ringing in his ears, “take a deep breath. This is fine. We can just lay here. Whatever you want, whatever you need.”

Draco did take a deep breath, but he let out a frustrated groan. He felt less like fleeing, but more irritated with himself than anything. Here he was laying on top of one of the most gorgeous men he’d ever seen, who was kind and attentive and adoring, and Draco couldn’t just enjoy it. Couldn’t lose himself in the moment. Couldn’t have an orgasm without a nervous breakdown.

He reeled himself in and tried to push himself off of Harry. “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to deal with my baggage.” He huffed, hating himself. “This should be fun.”

Harry let Draco get up but grabbed his hand to maintain contact. “Draco, look at me.”

Draco looked back at him hesitantly, worried he had ruined their night. “Was this fun for you?” he asked seriously.

“Y— yes.” Draco said.

“Then, please, for the love of Salazar will you let me decide how much of your baggage I’m capable of dealing with.” His voice was still kind, but there was an edge of impatience. “I’m not going anywhere, and I’m enjoying all of this, even this part, right here.”

Draco searched his face for signs of deception, but found nothing but sincerity. “Okay— I’m
“Don’t be.” He said, then smiling slyly. “Just tell me what you need from me to let go.”

Draco looked at him with surprise, “You mean— you still want to—”

“Want to what?” Harry gently teased, stroking Draco’s arm.

“Continue what we were doing?” Draco responded, feeling a little wary by the provocation in Harry’s voice.

“And what were we doing?” He asked leaning in to trail kisses up and down Draco’s neck.

“Uh—” Draco blushed, he found Harry’s lips on his skin incredibly distracting, “correct me if I’m wrong but we were rubbing against each other like horny teenagers and about to come in our pants.”

“Mm. Correct. Would you like to continue?” Harry asked, stroking his hands across Draco’s abdomen.

“I—”

“I mean,” he stopped, looking up at Draco, “would you like to continue. To finish. To come in your pants like a horny teenager. Because, you know, I’m pretty sure I could help. I’d like to help.”

“What about you?” Draco asked, feeling stupid. Feeling exposed and on the spot. Feeling like too many eyes were on him even though there were only Harry’s. Feeling like his heart was in his throat.

“But, what I want is for you to enjoy this.” Harry said, encouragingly. “For you to feel good. I want to give you that. That would be more than satisfying for me.”

Harry waited patiently while Draco thought about the offer. His crippling sense of self awareness at war with his equally overwhelming desire to go with the experience, to lose himself with Harry. Last time he was here, he fucked everything up, left Harry in the woods, and they didn’t speak for weeks. He wanted to choose a different path. Face the unknown.

He felt like he was standing on the edge of a precipice, preparing to jump off and struggling to maintain eye contact. Finally, he nodded at Harry, who smiled with something that looked like victory.

“Is that a yes?”

“Y— yes.” He stuttered, stepping off the ledge. His hands were sweating again and he felt a bit clammy. This couldn’t possibly be sexy for Harry.

Harry’s smile was like sunshine breaking through the clouds and his eyes showed something that, for a moment, Draco thought was pride. Or maybe worship.

It was overwhelming, and Draco didn’t know if he could live up to either.

Harry leaned in to kiss him with purpose, breathing him in, wrapping himself around Draco.

Draco was melting back into the kiss against the soft cushions of his couch when Harry swung himself around to straddle Draco’s lap. The sudden pressure and new angle shocking a groan from Draco.
“Tell me if you want to stop. If you don’t like something.” Harry whispered in his ear before gently biting his neck. Draco felt his skin erupt in goosebumps, spreading down his neck and to his chest. He gripped Harry’s hips hard and breathed in harshly, trying to ground himself.

“Okay.” He agreed.

Harry huffed a pleased sound in response as he started to carefully grind his hips down onto Draco’s lap. His erection, that had faded during their brief interlude, now filled rapidly in reaction to the gaining momentum of Harry’s movements. He could feel Harry’s through their trousers and couldn’t believe he was more interested in Draco’s orgasm than his own.

Harry was kissing and biting from Draco’s mouth down his neck and shoulder and back up as his hands wandered ardently across every inch of his exposed skin. Draco’s hands remained on Harry’s hips as he slowly, slowly, slowly allowed himself to be taken further and further from his comfort zone to a place he’d never been. Never thought he’d go.

Part of him briefly wished that Harry would just get it over with so he didn’t have to sit with the part of himself that was unbearably uncomfortable with the intimacy of their movements, of what they were doing. But, the other, truer part of himself, was grateful for every second this pleasure dragged on. Grateful for Harry’s patience.

Harry. He moved slowly, deliberately, sensuously. Draco was starting to suspect that he was doing this so achingly slowly to push him past the point of no return. To get him so desperate that he took control of the situation to chase his own release.

And maybe, Draco thought, it was working.

Draco’s breathing was becoming ragged and he was unable to stop himself from panting as he tensed his stomach muscles and fidgeted, trying to seek more contact and friction.

His hands were restless, he could no longer sit idly, as he had intended, while Harry methodically ground his hips down onto Draco’s groin. He had to move. He had to grab Harry and thrust up against him. He needed more.

He couldn’t take it any longer. He reached up and gripped the back of Harry’s neck to pull his mouth to his, hard. With the other he grabbed Harry’s thigh, thrusting up against him with frantic, uncontrolled movements. Harry was moaning softly, encouraging him, grounding him with firm hands.

Draco’s skin was flushed and clammy, his fingers white with gripping Harry hard enough to bruise and his toes curled of their own accord.

He was in a free fall. And for the first time in his life, he wasn’t thinking about it.

His orgasm came suddenly, almost shockingly, forcing a nearly panicked, “Harry—” from Draco’s lips as Harry helped him ride out the uncontrolled waves of pleasure that swept over him until Draco’s hips were still.

Harry panted with Draco and held him tight. He kissed all over his face, softly, tenderly, reassuringly. Running his hands through Draco’s hair and whispering affirmations that his brain couldn’t quite decipher. Draco’s hands were firmly wrapped around Harry, feeling their breaths evening out, and reality slowly seeping back in. He was safe, and he wasn’t running anymore.

Before Draco could begin to feel embarrassed about what they had done Harry asked, “Let me run you a shower?”
Then, before Draco could articulate a response he followed up with, “And I want to stay the night. I mean— please let me stay the night? Let me run you a shower and sleep next to you. Just sleep.”

He looked so open and awed in the face of Draco’s own raw vulnerability that he nodded, feeling flooded with some unnamed emotion that squeezed his heart.

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**August 5, 2009**

Draco rose early to the sound of a ministry owl causing a complete racket outside his window. Shuffling across his bedroom, just warming in the early morning light, towards the nuisance of an animal, he opened the window and groggily took the parchment. The owl didn’t wait for a response, choosing instead to fly off without a backwards glance.

*Draco, please meet me today in the Death Chamber at 9am - HJG*

That was all.

Ominous.

In response to her one line of urgency, it was with exhausted defeat in the face of Hermione’s single minded determination that he dragged himself out of his flat. It’s not that he wasn’t enjoying his work with Hermione, he certainly was, he was just missing the healing arts, thinking more and more on what it would be like to have an office of his own, a practice, a place where he could work his own hours and separate days for research and days for patients. It would be the best of both worlds.

After working with Hermione for months, he had realised he didn’t want to be a full time researcher in the way that she was. It was too tedious, too hyper focused. Which, he huffed to himself, was saying something, because, he was certainly a man who loved tedium. Hermione, brightest witch that she was, just took it to a whole new level.

Thankfully, navigating the Ministry had been an easier experience since the trial. He received fewer sneers, fewer awkward glances, and fewer people tried to shuffle away from him. He was suddenly becoming just a normal person, ambling through the throngs of people milling about. Blissfully invisible. Beautifully nondescript.

His shoes clacked merrily on the stone passage outside the lifts as he made his way to Hermione’s favorite haunts. The ancient receptionist greeted him and led him straight to the Death Chamber, saying, “Mrs. Granger is already there, my dear.” Of course.

Reaching the door, the withered old woman opened it and ushered him in. He was distracted from thanking her when he heard Granger’s voice drifting up toward the doorway. She was speaking to someone. A very familiar someone. Someone with atrocious black hair and dark skin that seemed to shimmer in the half light of the chamber. The two of them were at the base of the dais, facing the archway, clearly discussing something at length, and they hadn’t yet noticed Draco.

Draco couldn’t hear what they were discussing. Hermione’s hands waving wildly and Harry’s arms crossed, leaning back, considering her. Draco continued towards them with a bubble of nervous anticipation. What in Salazar’s name was Harry even doing here?
When he was close enough for his shoes to be heard on the stone steps, Hermione turned up toward him with a look of pure panic, worry creasing her face. The sudden change made Draco stop in his tracks, unsure if he should be intruding. Realising they weren’t alone, Harry turned to see Draco there, and his countenance changed with the marked raising of his eyebrows, the hint of a bemused smirk at the corner of his mouth.

Hermione spoke quickly, voice determined, but dripping in anxiety. “I know, I know this is a bit of a surprise,” She started, not-so-subtly stepping between them as Draco finally took the final steps towards the dias, as if worried they would start throwing hexes at any moment, “but, I thought it was important for all of us to be on the same page with our theory on thestrals and I think Harry here, may be the missing link, Draco—”

“No Harry! Please! This research is so important,” her voice was loud and determined, “and I know this is sudden, and perhaps I should have done this differently, but—”

“I was just hoping we could all put the past behind us and work together, because I think there’s something about the two of you being masters of the Elder wand and your connection to the thestrals, and what I found in those writings from the The Republic of the Congo—”

“HERMIONE!” Harry and Draco yelled together, finally silencing her panicked justifications.

“I’m sorry—” She tried, but Harry cut her off.

“You want me to leave you two alone? In the Death Chamber?” Her shrill voice was beyond worried, nearing incredulous.

“Hermione, you are the one who thought it best to throw us together in this room without warning.” He pointed out, goading her. When the humor did nothing to break the tension on her face, he smiled reassuringly. “Please, ‘Mione. We’re adults. We just have some things to talk about. Don’t you trust us?”

Draco was trying hard not to smile now.

“I mean— well, yes. Of— of course. I trust both of you, I just—” She looked pained. Harried. Like she was regretting everything. “Just, please don’t kill each other.” she pleaded, looking between them.
Draco snorted. “Trust me, Hermione, I am way past wanting to maim your Precious Potter. I’ll behave.” He didn’t look at Harry, but he could feel Harry’s magic respond to the provocation. Poor Hermione had no idea what she had walked into.

“Okay—if you’re sure.” She looked suspiciously between them before ascending the stairs.

Harry and Draco just stood there looking at one another until they heard her footsteps recede and the door close, the little triangle of light that had flowed in from the hall, suddenly gone.

Harry waved his hand lazily and he heard the bolt lock. Draco smirked.

“So, Potter, are we hear to hash out our differences and have a heart to heart?”

Harry smiled widely and moved towards Draco. “It appears so.”

“Well, in first year, on the train, you bought out all of my favorite sweets before the trolley got to my compartment and, I will have you know, I was furious. Enraged, really. I believe that was the start of all this animosity.” He said with a mock serious tone, one eyebrow raised in righteous indignation.

Harry laughed loudly, throwing his head back. “Is that right?” He said, reaching out for Draco’s hand. “You’re unbelievable.”

Draco took the proffered hand and pulled Harry to him, kissing him softly. “I think I’ll forgive you, though. You more than made up for it since then.”

Harry smiled against Draco’s lips, slipping his hand under his blazer and onto his lower back, pulling Draco flush against him.

Draco went without protest, relishing the fact that Harry’s casual, rather tatty t-shirt allowed Draco’s hands to find bare skin much more easily than Harry could on Draco.

They swayed on the spot, sharing a knowing kiss that nearly erased their surrounding from Draco’s mind. When he finally pulled away from the kiss, Harry held him in place, resting his forehead on Draco’s and smiling. “I want to tell them.” He said softly, reaching for one of Draco’s hands. “I want our friends to know. Secrets, hiding things. They’re not something I want to bring forward into my new life. You though, I’d like you there.”

Draco was surprised he wanted to do this here in the Death Chamber. They could hear the whispers of the dead and gone just feet away. But, Harry didn’t seem to mind. Harry was asking him to be part of his life. To be public with his affections.

Sure, Hermione and he got along well enough, and Ron wasn’t so bad, not anymore, but how would they feel once they found out he was dating their best friend? Would they turn on Draco? Would he lose Harry as a result? Surely Harry would choose his friends over Draco, right?

He realised he was expected to respond with some sort of answer, but fuck if he could think of one.

“Hey,” Harry said softly, lifting his hand to touch Draco’s face and forcing him to look into those green, penetrating eyes, “Draco, it’s okay. It’s not going to change anything.”

“Isn’t it?” He couldn’t hide the apprehension and fear in his voice. “What if they hate it?”

“They’ll come around. And they don’t hate you.” He reassured.
“If that’s what you want.” Draco said. Why was he feeling so afraid of this?

“It is, but what do you want?” Harry asked.

“I just don’t want your friends to hate me when they realize we’re—you know—” He couldn’t find the right words to describe them.

“When they realize we’re what? Together? Boyfriends? Mad for each other? Partners? Fucking?” Harry teased, but the words went straight through Draco like fire and he was sweating again.

He huffed, feeling a little overwhelmed, too aware of Harry’s body against him, but trying to smile. “Yeah—I mean, all of those things. Except—we’re not fucking. Not quite.”

Harry smiled even bigger, “not yet” and kissed him hard, sliding his one hand to the back of Draco’s head and the other slipping down to rest just above the swell of his ass. Draco broke the kiss, “Not here you brute! We’re in the Death Chamber,” he protested feebly, smiling, “for fuck’s sake.”

“Yeah, well, I’m making better memories. And distracting myself from all that damned whispering.” He said before trying to resume his ministrations. But before they could even get another proper kiss in, the door at the top of the stairs blasted open, startling them apart.

Ron, in his full auror robes, red hair flying, wand drawn, had burst into the Death Chamber, dashing down the steps, ready to split up the duel Hermione was apparently convinced they’d be having.

Harry and Draco had jumped apart at the sound, but they were still standing intimately close, their appearances rumpled and hair disheveled, Harry’s smile looking far more guilty than anything else. Ron stopped short at the sight of them, followed closely by Hermione, who was positively quivering with nerves.

“Uhh…” Ron said, face slack, appearing at a complete loss for what to say. “‘Mione said you were trying to kill each other.”

Draco couldn’t help it. This was ridiculous. Ron looked like he was about to arrest both of them, Hermione looked like she had been close to tears when she first came in, and he and Harry were both definitely sporting half masts. He started laughing.

Harry was quick to join in.

Soon, Harry and Draco were doubled over giggling, leaning on one another, with Hermione and Ron just staring between the two of them and one another, trying to figure out what in Circe’s name they were missing.

“So, you’re not trying to kill each other, then?” Ron asked, an annoyed, albeit relieved, note in his voice.

“No, Ron, we’re not trying to kill each other.” Harry wheezed, trying to right himself. “Not since sixth year, anyway. And, even then, not sure how pure my motives were.”

Draco regained his composure first, straightening his jacket and shirt beneath it, smoothing the front of his ensemble, resisting the urge to reach over and tug Harry’s t-shirt back down to cover the pieces he had exposed.

Hermione was now looking at them shrewdly, brow furrowed, eyes darting between them, seeing
their casual touching and easy posture. Noting Harry’s guilty smile and embarrassed laughter.

“Oh my god.” She said, eyes going wide, realisation dawning. Ron was still looking very confused. And annoyed.

Harry straightened up, and grabbed Draco’s hand, holding it firm, and looking straight at his best friends. “I’m gay for— Draco— I mean—” Dear lord, thought Draco, closing his eyes and sighing. Ever the poet, Harry was.

Ron made a choking noise, and Hermione huffed a disbelieving laugh.

“I mean— we’re together.” Harry corrected, his dark cheeks turning red. Draco squeezed his hand.

“Uhh…” Ron said, rather stupidly. “What?”

“Draco is who I’ve been seeing. The one you haven’t shut up about for weeks-- the one I kept dodging questions about.” He said sheepishly. “And, he was the one who saved me last year when St. Mungo’s discharged me. And, he helped me through, well— everything. He was who I was with all last year. In the forest. The forbidden forest. He brought me with him to his research post. We lived together for the year.”

Ron and Hermione silently gaped between Harry and Draco, and he felt himself growing uncomfortable under their gaze. He was starting to sweat again and his heart was beating too fast.

Harry whistled and waved his hand in front of their shocked faces, “Be happy for me or be angry at me, but don’t just stand there will you? It’s unnerving— more so than the voices of the dead up there.”

“Oh Harry, why didn’t you just tell us?” Hermione said, breaking from her glazed stupor. “This is wonderful!” She rushed forward. “I mean, it was the literal last thing I expected to happen in a million fucking years, but— well, you seem so much happier. Merlin, I’m an idiot! Oh Godric, your hat, and— oh and Salazar, the wiggentree! And— the THESTRALS. HARRY. DRACO.”

She stared between the both of them, mouth agape. “Oh, I’m a fool. An absolute fool. It seems so obvious, now. You idiots! We could be so much further with this research had I known! Oh my gods, I’ve been panicking about this for weeks—” She threw her arms around both Harry and Draco, surprising him with her strength. He found he didn’t mind.

But, over her shoulder and around errant tendrils of curly hair, Draco was watching Ron closely. He was most worried about his reaction, and felt more than a little intimidated by his very official appearance, still in his fighting stance, even if his wand arm dangled uselessly at his side, face twisted in confusion.

“You’re gay for Malfroy?” He asked weakly. Hermione moved away from hugging them to glare at Ron in reproof.

“Uh— yeah.” Harry responded with a wary smirk, with conviction. “Very, in fact.”

“Well, then.” He said, straightening up, coming back to himself. “I’ll have to tell McMillian he’s got no chance.”

Harry laughed incredulously.

“Oh, the Hufflepuff never had a chance, Weasley.” Draco said stiffly, readjusting his dress shirt again, still full of nerves but a smile ghosting across his face. Hermione and Harry snorted a laugh.
After an awkward pause, Ron moved forward and extended his hand to Draco. “Thanks for watching out for him. For saving him, when we couldn’t.”

Draco just stared at it for a moment, feeling completely wrong footed. “Uh— It was my pleasure. Though, if you must know, I gave him the choice, and he was the one who eventually chose to save himself.” He reached for Ron’s hand.

Harry snorted a laugh at the flustered look on Ron’s face, who was shaking Draco’s hand, his mouth still not quite closed.

“Oh, this is wonderful, Draco you can come to dinner at our place and we can do research from there! And oh, we can go—” Hermione was in full blown excitement planning, and Harry had to head her off before Ron’s head exploded with too many new things.

“Hermione, thanks, but we’re taking things slow. Let’s give Ron maybe another 24 hours to get used to this before we start planning double dates.” Harry cut in.

“Oh— Oh, right, yes. Well, of course.” Hermione stumbled over her words, clearly struggling to keep herself in check.

“Not to change the subject mate, but where the hell is all that whispering coming from?” Ron said with a jerk of his head as if he were being irritated by fly.

“Oh—” Harry started, unsure what to say.

“Not since 5th year, and I don’t remember this much noise.” He said, staring at the tattered veil.

“What can you hear?” Hermione asked clinical interest warring with genuine concern across her face. “Draco heard Severus the first time he came here. Harry hasn’t heard anything specific yet...”

“I’m— I’m not sure... It’s just— whispering, isn’t it? I can’t really be— Do you lot hear that?”

“Yes.” Harry and Draco chimed in unison, but Draco couldn’t place the voice he was hearing, rising above the chattering din. Hermione was still watching Ron closely.

“Well, since we’re all here,” she started, “why don’t we go over what I was sent from the Magical Foreign Liaison Office together.”

Ron seemed to shake himself and he tore his gaze away from the archway to look at his wife. “I should get back to work, since you don’t need me here to keep these two apart.” He deflected, shooting a rueful smirk at Harry, who blushed a deep purple. Draco blushed in sympathy and grinned, letting the tension of the previous moment fade away.

“If you’re sure.” Hermione said carefully, still watching her husband.

Ron looked at her thoughtfully, and could tell she was a bit worried about how the archway had affected him. Draco felt like he was intruding on something. “I’ll stay for a bit— if you want— I just thought I heard— Never mind, tell me about the books you got ‘Mione.”

She looked relieved and smiled at him, marching towards one of the nearest stone benches to dig in her bag. “Come, sit.” she beckoned to the rest of them.

When they had all arranged themselves around her and her bag of books, she started to explain.
“Honestly, I don’t really know where to begin other than by saying we don’t know anything.” Her right arm had disappeared entirely into her bag as she felt around for what she needed.

“Well, that’s… affirming.” Draco said dryly, watching her trying to pull out something heavy from the depths of her bag.

“No, really.” Hermione huffed in disbelief, “not only did it take me the last few months to locate the right people to ask, but I had to do some right grovelling to convince the foreign liaison offices in dozens of countries at countless schools to send me copies of their history and research on thestrals. And, what I found in these books are— more questions.” She finally managed to extricate one massive book and went back for more.

“How so?” Harry asked, his eyebrows drawn together in thought.

Hermione took a deep breath. “You know, I always thought our education on magical theories and history was a bit— lacking. Understanding the depth of the essence of magic, even when I started my training here, I had so much to learn before I could begin actually working as an unspeakable. But, when I looked through these books from schools from all over the world— I’ve never felt more out of my depth.” She looked shocked by the fact that she met concepts in books that she couldn’t fully grasp.

None of them knew what to say to that. One by one she pulled out large volume after large volume.

“Honestly, ‘Mione,” Ron said, sounding bewildered, “but, if this is stuff you can’t figure out, how can anyone?”

“But, others have figured it out Ron, that’s what I’m trying to say.” She sounded awed and frustrated in equal measure. “These books have the answers we need, but honestly, I feel like I could spend the next three decades just trying to understand the vocabulary and concepts they’re using to explain the information.”

“Where did you find them?” Draco asked, feeling elated at the idea that the pages at their feet held answers for them, but dismayed that they might not be able to understand their contents.

“Well,” she said, leaning over the five monstrously thick books that she had pulled from the capacious depths of her leather satchel, “I first contacted Uagadou, as its the only school listed in our foreign liaison office for Africa. But, when I asked them for information on thestral history and lore they said that it was such a diverse topic and their resources weren’t inclusive enough to speak for the entire continent’s worth of local magical lore, so they sent me the names of other schools in Africa.”

“There are other schools?” Ron looked as startled as Draco felt by the news. They had only ever been told about the one.

“I was surprised, too.” Hermione conceded. “But, honestly, it makes sense doesn’t it? Africa is a huge continent encompassing hundreds, thousands, of diverse groups, cultures, languages, territories— to expect that large of a land mass to be accommodated by one school is unreasonable. Uagadou is the only school with a relationship with the European Ministries. The others have only begrudging contact, most have outright distrust.

When I contacted the Uroyi Chikoro in Great Zimbabwe, all they sent back as a reply was a beaded bracelet, which was, I kid you not, charmed to repel witchcraft from outsiders.” She looked exasperated. “Which is unfortunate, because according to the other schools they hold a huge amount of knowledge about thestrals.”
She laid her books out on the bench and began speaking again.

“These two were from Nganga ya Zamba school in Toumbi, Republic of Congo— written in an ancient form of Lingala— the language key they sent is cryptic at best.” These two books had a wooden cover and binding, carved in intricate patterns showing the flora and fauna of its origin, with thestrals hidden amongst the leaves. They reminded Draco distinctly of Harry’s front door at Grimmauld Place.

“Then this one is from a school in Diepwalle, South Africa in a language called Khoekhoe, or maybe Griqua, I don’t know the difference, honestly.”

She smoothed her hand over the rough greyish black leather cover, embossed with outline of a light and silvery herb, something like sage, perhaps. A dull, thick metal clasp held it shut. “It came with a note that said,” she produced a tattered bit of thick parchment from inside its cover and passed it to Draco, who saw the incomprehensible arrangement of letters and exclamations that read !Gâi!gâb.

“It took me a month to figure out it meant good luck, and, somehow, I don’t think they intended it as an encouragement. It’s all we have to go on for the translation.” She huffed in bewilderment. “Pages disappear and reappear seemingly at random from the book, like it’s taunting me. Occasionally, I’ll open it just to find a praying mantis running across the pages.”

Harry had reached down and picked up the book she indicated, a grin growing ever wider on his face. “Hermione, don’t bother with this one. The magic— I can feel it— it’s mischievous and only interested in a laugh. The mantis, it’s his idea. They didn’t send you something to help, they just wanted you to waste your time a bit.” He was grinning still as he lay the book back down, Hermione looking stone faced, resigned, exasperated.

Draco shook his head and snorted. He had never given much thought to the diversity of languages, cultures, or even magical theory that could be present in the amorphous idea that was Africa in his mind, but he was beginning to appreciate just how little he knew.

“So, are all of these books from Africa?” Ron asked, his freckled brow wrinkled.

“No.” she looked a little overwhelmed. “They said if I wanted to see the rest I would have to physically go there and investigate. This one is from China,” She indicated to the gold embossed book, then to the light blue fabric bound tome, “and this, Japan. These are the two I’ve at least been able to translate to some extent.”

“Were you able to locate others, from other places in the world?” asked Harry, his interest clearly piqued, running his hands over different works, pausing over the blue fabric, a crane flying across the cover. His smile had disappeared, his face now almost pained. Draco had noticed he avoided touching the two from Congo.

“Oh, yes.” Hermione said. “I’m still waiting to hear back from the schools in South America, North America, and northern Russia. As it turns out, there are traditional magical schools all over that we didn’t know about. We were only taught about the ones that have official European ministry connections. Its infuriating, really, how the European magical communities have turned a blind eye to the vast knowledge of these other systems of magical learning. There is so much we don’t know.”

“So, what next? Where do we go from here?” Harry asked.

“The only conclusion I’ve been able to draw so far, aside from how utterly inept we as British
people are, is that in every single resource thus far old-growth forests seem to be a unifying theme. They appear to be important to thestrals and the lore around them.”

“Should we be researching forest magic?” Draco wondered out loud.

“Perhaps.” Hermione shrugged. “All I know is that this research isn’t going to be concluded any time in the near future. This is work of a lifetime. Many lifetimes, in fact. And, I’m not even sure we’ll ever be invited to know much of it— this is tradition and culture protected by more than just hexes, it’s protected by people who have been exploited and who have good reason to distrust those who want access to their secrets. Even at just the beginning of this quest for resources, I think I am even more intent on focusing on our forest, on our herds. I think this is something we have to work to uncover, and once we have, then, perhaps, we will be allowed to know more.”

Draco thought for a moment about how thestrals were a bit like that anyways. How one could not see them unless they’ve come to terms with death and understood empathy. How they protect their herds and their secrets by making people work on themselves to get near them.

“Then, we’ll study our own magical forest and work on our relationships with schools and ministries abroad.” Draco concluded. “In the meantime, I’d like to work on my potions theories and help you translate these.” He said, picking up the wood carved book, feeling something distinct about them.

“Let’s get to it then.” Hermione stood with determination, that detailed oriented fervour glinting in her eyes.

Ron escorted them all back to Hermione’s office before taking his leave, saying that Robards was going to flay him alive if he didn’t finish the paperwork for his newest case. He dipped to kiss her cheek quickly and waved a brief but meaningful goodbye to both Harry and Draco.

The three of them settled down around her desk and began passing around the books, making lists of deadlines and to-do’s, splitting up tasks. When the leather-bound edition from South Africa landed in Harry’s hands again, he held it and smiled, flicking through the pages, looking at it fondly, admiringly. Draco felt his own grin forming as he watched Harry exploring the pages, himself now also able to feel the trickster, the laughing deception the Diepwalle school had sent them. There was no doubt they’d be facing new and unknown magic in their research from here on out.
Between Rays of Sunlight

August 3, 2009

Harry blew the dust away from his work table just as the sun crept in through the high windows to the East, strips of golden light warming floorboards, then Harry’s back, hunched over Colin’s finished monument.

He had been pleased with the way the slab of cherry had soaked up magic, had called to it, played with it. It married perfectly with Colin’s bubbly personality and the flitting, flighty, excitable nature of the hummingbird he had carved into the supple wood. It was his first time carving into wood rather than sculpting it, but he had enjoyed it immensely, nonetheless. The feeling of the grain beneath his fingers, coming to life, almost trembling with the joyful, tinkling laugh that Dennis had described, the wood rising up to greet him in relief. He had used a mixture of muggle carving technique and sanding and spellwork to etch the design, not wanting to overwhelm the sense of Colin with his own signature.

Harry had charmed the hummingbird to flit around the slab of cherry, and for anyone who walked near to feel the surge of curiosity that so defined Colin, that defined his magic. For several seconds, they’d feel immense wonder, the desire to know, to ask, to investigate the world around them. They’d feel the incredible possibility of discovering magic for the first time, for opening the door to a world where anything could be wondrous and delightful. A breath of firsts, a charming sense of undeniable possibility, of hope, bright and bursting.

Harry stepped back from the table and admired the plaque - cherry wood, bright and red and vibrant, the hummingbird dancing along the edge of plain letters.

COLIN CREEVEY

Died a Hero in the Battle of Hogwarts

May 2, 1998

Harry felt a weight pull down from his shoulders, which were sore with working the wood, with holding and casting and channeling the magic of the piece. He wanted it to last. He was sure it would.

Later, he would show Dennis, along with the tight scroll of parchment that lay across the table, Minerva McGonagall’s elegant script just visible. It was her blessing to come and secure the plaque at Hogwarts, an invitation to come whenever they so choose.

Harry vanished the wood dust from the floor and the pile of shavings from the table. He was tired, but a fulfilled tired. A tired that came from a place of meaning, a place of pouring himself into something. Of creating and reshaping the realm of grief. Of reclaiming.

He heard the soft and rhythmic, echoing steps of his thestral in one of the halls upstairs, moving from one silent room of the dark house to another, perhaps avoiding the molten sunlight that was warming the rooms, one by one. Harry huffed an exhausted laugh to himself, allowing his mind to wander briefly to the meeting he had had in the DoM, where they had unearthed the thin threads of truth - that thestrals held sway over the shadow between life and death, and that shadow was cultivated, nurtured, in the heart of old forests.

And, sometimes, the thestrals chose magical folk to help them, guardians that they are.
Harry shook his head and pushed his mess of hair up out of his face, blowing air out of puffed up and reddened cheeks. He reached over and rubbed his little growing encourage mint, the cloud dark and thick with impending summer rain. The smell washed over him, scouring the room in it’s own gentle way, filling Harry’s mind with images of Draco, soft and gentle and sure against him.

Of the night they had spent together. The night that Harry had stretched out in Draco’s too-small bed, enamoured by the soft ghosts of Draco’s sleep-even breaths across his bare chest, their feet tangled together in soft cotton sheets. Of how he had passed half the star strewn night laying awake, struggling not to burst with happiness, his hands draped across scars. Scars he had once shied away from, had concentrated on not staring at, but now he let his hands re-acquaint themselves with the wounds that had struggled so valiantly to heal, that had knitted together against all odds. And he let his touch honor that, to be a balm, soft and gentle and unafraid of all of that pain.

Harry stayed up that night reliving the evening, perfect and decadent as it was. Thoughts of Draco’s perfectly crafted dinner, and the soft smiles and delicate repartee. Of their neediness for each other, wrapped up in their stubbornness. Of their tentative fears and moments of bravery, of vulnerability. Of communicating.

And then, of watching Draco come apart. Of the softness of his features and the stuttering grasps of his hands, desperately seeking, pulling, drawing Harry to him. Of the way he had melted into him when he finally let go. The way he had panted, eyes closed but unguarded and open with Harry, and the way Harry could not resist but kiss the sheen across his skin, the gentle laugh on his lips, bemused in the moments after pleasure.

He couldn’t think about that just now. No, now was time for a quick shower and shave, then a meeting, and he’d be off with Dennis to Hogwarts. Colin, and, Dennis too, shouldn’t be waiting a day longer than they had to. And there would be time for thoughts of Draco. Whole nights, stretching on into the future, for Harry to take him apart, piece by piece.

Dennis was nearly running up the gravel path from the gated entrance to Hogwarts, his camera bag slung dutifully over one shoulder, but his face sporting a ginormous grin, one he kept flashing Harry as he shouted for him to hurry up. Harry had given him a glimpse of his work before they started the trek up to the castle, and Dennis had burst into tears, full of excitement, seemingly powered by Colin himself and had immediately dashed up the path, yelling for Harry to keep up.

Harry had never seen him so full of life, so light and full of joy. Harry’s own dragon-skin bag was carrying the magicked slab of wood, the hide keeping the delicate spellwork safe and concealed at his side.

He laughed as he watched Colin hustle up the steep grounds and to the front entrance, delighted to see the whomping willow, verdant and green, and the lazy tentacles of the giant squid splashing about the surface of the lake.

After the war, Hogwarts had been painstakingly rebuilt, and every last detail of the ancient castle had been recalled, replaced, reclaimed, held fast with magic that would carry through the centuries, cemented and re-guarded with stone. Harry hadn’t been there for it, he’d gone directly into Auror training.

His new sensitivity to the magic around him made the experience of walking into the grounds and up to the towering castle all the more intimidating, threads and strands of spellwork running through him, calling to him, sighing out memories of days, of people - of the moments of magic.
that had fortified the castle, knit it together, polished each stone and tarnished each metal.

He could feel Dumbledore here, and there was Snape, moments hanging on the edges of his thoughts as they crossed through the ancient front doors and into the entrance hall, echoes of all Harry’s memories flooding the otherwise empty foyer, all of his years pooling and swarming - laughter and tears and fear and triumph, all molten together as one.

“Ah, there you are Potter.”

The familiar sharp Scottish accent and sweeping green robes brought such joy to Harry, he couldn’t help but grin, sidestepping Minerva McGonagall’s outstretched hand and pulling her into a hug, completely foregoing all notions of decorum, ignoring the “oh my goodness” that followed, for he was too full of love for the woman who had raised him, who had shaped the wizard he had become. She smelled of her old mahogany desk full of dried sprigs of lavender and camphor cream and Harry felt instantly at ease.

“Professor McGonagall.” Harry said, finally relinquishing her to dust off her robes and look disapprovingly down at him from her perfectly austere nose and wire spectacles. Memories of first and second year, particularly, held sway, and he imagined all those moments he cowered at the thought of expulsion by her decree.

“Yes, Potter, well, hello. I’m glad to see you seem to be in good health. You gave so many of us quite the scare with your long absence. Wherever you were, you didn’t seem to learn any more manners than you knew in your first year, so it couldn’t have been too bad. And hello as well, Dennis. You’re looking well, too.” She had stepped around Harry to shake Dennis’s outstretched hand.

She was trying to be serious, but Harry could see the fractional pull of a smile on her cheeks and her magic, stern and sharp and militaristic fluttered for a moment, full of happiness. She had been worried. Maybe about the both of them.

“Whatsoever it was, it did me good. And, I’m glad to be back at the castle, it still feels like coming home, even after all these years, and all the memories of the war, the battle. It feels loved and tended to again, full of promise.” Harry was looking around the high arching walls, the portraits, the staircases, every tiny detail that was seeping with the history of the place, far more ancient than the war, than Voldemort, even.

“I can see that. You said you were coming to put up a monument for Colin?” She regarded the two of them, and Harry caught just the slightest waver in her voice.

“Yes. Just a plaque commemorating him, with a bit of magic I worked in.” Harry answered, motioning to the dragonhide case he was carrying, trying to downplay the month he had spent crafting, making the cherry wood vibrant and full and the effect beautifully instantaneous, though fleeting. For a solid two weeks the magic had been too strong, the radius of his casting far too wide, and he had been sure that he could hear his neighbours asking a million questions about the stars, the moons, the galaxy above them. Colin had really taught him patience, temperance, control. He had spent late nights stewing in the irony.

“May I see it? I was so happy to hear of your plan to do something for Colin, he was one of my favorite students, and I already have such a fondness for those in my house.” She lifted her right hand and lay it across her heart as she spoke, her words heavy with truth. “I was thinking, after we did the renovation, that what we really needed was to commemorate what happened, not just smooth it over and return the castle to as it was. The battle happened here, we lost lives here, people we loved. I had wanted so badly to hold on to that and make it part of the history of this
place, but by the end of the reconstruction, we were all so tired, and in the midst of our own grief, it just never happened.”

As she was speaking, Harry had opened his case and pulled out the slab of wood to show her, letting the hummingbird wake up and take flight, the magic of Colin spilling into the place between them.

There was an audible gasp, a burst of laughter, delightful and carefree, that slowly folded into the choked and gasping sobs of shock, of grief. Of relief.

Minerva McGonagall, the woman who had remained a pillar of strength and unrelenting stamina in the decades she had ruled over her pride of lions, in the decade since she herself had become headmistress, had her hand now clutching the collar of the robes that lay across her heart, and was gripping Harry’s shoulder with the other, staring at enchanted object, her eyes wide.

“Colin…” She managed, though only just. Her voice was weak and Harry could watch the memories of the young Gryffindor pulling at every string of her heart, for she had loved him, as she loved all of them, like a mother. Fierce and proud.

When she straightened up and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief pulled from the depths of her forest robes, she was already moving to pull Dennis into a hug. Handshakes and formalities forgotten. Harry could see her talking softly over Dennis’s shoulder and into his ear, Dennis nodding and his own tears leaking down his reddened cheeks. Eventually, they pulled apart, and she turned to Harry.

“Potter…” She had regained that tone, the one that he was sure had been used to scold his father, all those years ago. That had been the only thing that kept Sirius toeing the line. That had told Remus he was welcome, but not to expect to get away with the shenanigans of his friends, because of her houselings she expected order. “That. That is more than just a bit of magic.” She was staring at him, and he could sense she was appraising him. Full of questions she wanted to ask.

“That was Colin.” She finished, her words final.

“Yes.” Harry was smiling. He could feel his magic, a gentle heat, radiating up from the stones beneath them, as if they had spent the afternoon sun warmed.

“How?” Minerva McGonagall was so rarely stumped, so rarely confronted with things she did not understand, with magic she was unfamiliar with. “How did you do this?”

“I’m not sure, honestly. Things have changed for me, recently. My magic has changed.” Harry smiled at her, shrugging.

“Yes. Indeed.” She was still looking at him. “You remind me of Albus, Harry.”

Harry nodded to her, understanding what she meant. It wasn’t praise, it was acknowledgement. He had touched upon the ethereal realms of magic that did not fit in textbooks. Old magic. Magic full of questions and muddied with the complexity of time and humanity, of love and death. Magic that Dumbledore had been close to.

“I know where you should put this brilliant homage to my student, and a hero of Hogwarts.” She was bustling along the nearest staircase before Harry had realised what she said. “Come along.”

He and Dennis looked at each other quickly before hurrying along behind her. It wasn’t long before Harry realised where they were going. She had stopped just outside her classroom. Where she had been teaching transfiguration for as long as living memory. Where she had guided young
minds to seek out magic, to remain curious, to learn and grow and thrive.

“Just here will do.” She indicated the little bare strip of wall outside of the classroom door, where students would gather, awaiting entrance to Professor McGonagall’s realm.

“A permanent sticking charm will do, and I think all three of us shall cast at once, to ensure that this place will be forever held by this magic. By Colin, and his memory. And I will ensure to tell my first years every year from now on the story of the battle and his bravery.”

Harry levitated the plaque, Professor McGonagall not mentioning his lack of a wand, though an eyebrow remained raised, and fixed it against the wall, using his hands to guide the freshly polished cherry wood to its new home. On the count of three, they all cast to affix the wood to the stone, and Harry stood back, marveling how this bit of Hogwarts had been transformed, had changed.

They stood silently a moment, all three of their eyes bright and thoughts full of the boy who had snuck back to the castle, who had given his life to protect a world that had forced him out. A world that had told him he wasn’t worthy. A place that had buried him without the recognition he deserved, who had let his memory go untended.

Not anymore.

Dennis snapped a photo of Professor McGonagall and the monument to Colin. Harry knew he’d spend the next few days crafting a beautiful obituary. A memorial of his own making. It was long overdue, but he could already see how this simple act was unlayering the guilt and the heaviness of grief from Dennis. It was a way to move on, to leave the pain, to leave the fear of forgetting.

They walked down to the edge of the grounds by the gates to Hogsmeade and apparated together to a meeting.

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August 10, 2009

“In the months to come, there will be some significant changes.”

Luna spoke softly but clearly, her wide eyes seeking out each attendee in turn, her silvery hair falling in sheets around her shoulders, pushed back from her face by purple rimmed spectacles that clashed horribly with her red armchair by the fire.

There were murmurs, flickers of unease.

“My home will, most unfortunately, no longer be available to us for meetings in a months time.” Luna was smiling, but there was a palpable indrawing of breath from attendees. “Come September, we’ll be making alternate arrangements for everyone. While we will ensure everyone has a new place of support, it may not be all together. I have quite a feeling that the next few weeks may be the last times we gather, all of us, together.”

Harry felt the air shimmer with the tension. The fear. Luna had held them all, so softly and carefully. Had brought them back from death, had guarded them, had kept them safe and nurtured. Luna had made a place where they were welcome, they and their demons. And no one shied from the darkness.

“Change is difficult. Change is often, however, necessary. This is a lesson that I know addicts who are sober are well acquainted with, though I also know that sobriety itself hangs on stability. On
routine. On not changing the things that are working well. I know this, and yet, here I am, asking you all to manage this upheaval.”

Harry had at least known this discussion was coming. He, of all the attendees, looked the least worried. Greg, who had also known, looked the most. His collar was sticking up at an odd angle and so was his short blonde hair.

“I hope we can move through this time, meeting new challenges, problem solving together and supporting one another in our efforts to maintain sobriety and cultivate the life that supports that.”

Harry looked up from his chair and caught Hestia’s gaze. She sat against her velveteen settee with her legs crossed, an elbow on one knee, her hand supporting her chin. A wisteria vine, coiled in purple cones of petals, carefree and buoyant, contrasted her stoic visage. Harry sensed the deep rolling thunderstorms of summer, the charge of the air before the crackling rain, the smell of the impending showers. He could almost see the cool wind at the head of the storm ripple around the hem of her long white summer dress. Harry let his magic reach out to her across the space between them, a reminder that they were safe, that they would weather this storm together, warm and sheltered.

The discussion that followed Luna’s announcement floated around between members voicing their fears, others piping up and offering support. The moments of quiet that stretched between the lilting conversation was peppered with soft snuffling and Sylvia valiantly blowing her nose, having sequestered the box of tissues on her lap early in the hour.

Harry was sitting cross legged in his yellow armchair, and he reached over to rub Sylvia’s back softly as she blew her nose for the fiftieth time, her silver bangles jangling on her wrists. He would miss her most, he thought to himself.

“I’m stronger for having known you all.” Harry found himself saying, without thinking much about it. It was just true. The months amongst his nine fellows had been a refuge of honesty and kindness that had healed him in ways that isolation in the forest would never have. “And I will take that strength with me. I hope I have given you something in return.”

Sylvia broke into tears again, leaning over to hug Harry. Felix nodded at him from across the room. “You’ve given us acceptance. Shown us care and understanding. Helped us hold together a place to heal. You’ve given us the only things we ever really needed, things we didn’t have outside of this room.” He reached up and held Luna’s hand softly in his, his voice breaking as he finished, looking down at his worn sneakers. “Not only will I carry that with me, but it has built me. Fortified me. It is part of me.”

Luna held his hand and let herself cry, and it was a long time before anyone spoke again.

That night, Harry lay awake in Ron and Hermione’s guest bedroom, a heavy book open across his chest as he squinted to read the miniscule print, even with his glasses on. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, sticking a bit of scrap parchment between the pages, having just finished up a section on generalised anxiety disorder, and closing the text with a dull thud. He had made it 100 pages in before he was just too tired to continue on, but that should be enough for now. Tomorrow would be all the mood disorders and PTSD. The chapter on addictions he was leaving for another night. One he felt less exhausted, less frayed at the edges, torn at the seams.

Harry lay back with his hands behind his head and stared up at the painted slats of the ceiling.
Luna was due in December. They didn’t have much time to plan and prepare before she was on maternity leave. Luna had asked Hestia to run the meetings in her place - a wise decision, Harry had thought. Hestia had been sober for the longest and had the best handle on her recovery, on top of being a well of empathy and compassion, a light in the dark of a storm. She would take the role on beautifully.

Greg had pledged his help and support of Harry’s plan nearly instantly. He was so eager to be doing something, it pained Harry to watch him twisting a bit of twine between his fingers, chancing glances over at Luna as she had leaned her head back and laughed, beautiful and carefree and radiant as she had thanked him.

Little Dipper clattered onto the windowsill and hooted, ears swivelling around his dark shadow as he bobbed his head up and down, eyes wide and staring directly at Harry.

Harry laughed at the ridiculous little owl, who continued to wobble and bob, hooting loudly.

“You want me to write him, don’t you? Getting tired of how little errands you get to run over to your favorite treat-giver?”

Dipper hopped from the windowsill over to the bedpost, scrabbling a bit to regain his balance, wings wide but silent.

Harry grinned and relented, summoning a roll of parchment and self inking quill from the table across the room picking up his textbook to use as a hard surface against which to write.

He had been waiting for Draco to write to him. Waiting for him to relent and demand they meet. Waiting for flirtatious letters and subtle hints that would leave Harry hard and palming himself through layers of clothing he’d be desperate to shed.

But the letters hadn’t come. He had begun to wonder if he’d pushed Draco too far, if his fear of intimacy was catching up with him, if he’d taken him apart but failed to lace him back together. If Draco was stewing in the embarrassment, flailing in the openness, the uncontained unknown. Harry chewed the end of the quill, staring at the blank parchment, a furrow in his brow.

Or, perhaps, he had just been busy at work? Or, even worse yet, waiting for Harry to write him?

Eventually, he put quill to page.

Draco,

Meet me tomorrow at Grimmauld Place. Early, if you can.

- Harry

He spent several long minutes sketching a scene that had been replaying over and over in his mind for the past few days. A view. A memory.

The sky, full of swooping and diving thestrals, lazily gliding along strong winds and updrafts that carried them far across the forest, Harry laying back against the sun warmed stone of the mountaintop, high up above the carpet of green stretching out across the undulating terrain to the South.
After rolling up the parchment and letting Dipper carry off his wistful invitation, Harry fell asleep thinking of the sounds of the forest, of wings rustling beneath the trees.

Harry had his head leaned down on Draco’s shoulder, licking and kissing at his collar bone between moans. He could barely stand, pressed up against his workbench, his hand shaking as he pulled away the layers between them. He could hear himself whispering Draco against his flesh, compelled to, as if a compulsion to worship the man before him. As if his name was a prayer. A grace. Simple and absolving.

The man who had been waiting for him.

Harry had woken up late, showered and foregone his morning run, eager to get started on ensuring Grimmauld Place was devoid of any darkness that might prevent them from using it as a space to hold meetings, ensuring it was safe. That it could provide a refuge, as Luna’s had.

On the stoop, Harry had greeted the adder, marveling at the carved thestrals, dripping in anointed gold, soaring above the forest that marked the old ironwood door.

“He’s been waiting for you, parslemouth. He and the death-beasts.” The little snake had huffed, coiling himself around the old knocker, flipping his forked tongue in Harry’s direction.

“Who?” Harry had stopped, halfway to pushing open the door himself.

“The half master, of course.”

Harry’s heart had been pounding in his chest, a smile quick to pull at the corners of his mouth. He pushed the door open into the entryway, already lit and warm with the midsummer morning.

He had let his magic pull him up the stairs, to his workroom, let it guide him along, keening and calling for Draco without him having to break the silence of the house.

When he rounded the doorway, he had felt his heart flutter in his chest and his breath catch in his throat.

Draco was standing with his face tilted up to the large, open windows, basking in the morning rays of sun, his white button down shirt untucked over smart grey trousers, his sleeves rolled up, his outline illuminated as if ringed in fire, his sharp features, ignited. It was arresting. Ethereal.

Harry had nearly stumbled, shocked at how utterly beautiful he was. How powerful he looked, drenched in sunlight, how breathtaking.

“It’s been ten days, Potter.” Draco had spoken without turning around, without even opening his eyes.

“Back to Potter, is it? I was trying to be the gentleman, Draco. I was waiting for you.” Harry couldn’t help but smile, Draco’s pretend icy fury to cover up what was an obvious insecurity was too much. He stepped further into the room, his hands outstretched, a silent apology.

Draco had opened his eyes and turned to give Harry a hard look, his eyes a steely blue. Cold and deep.

“Draco.” Harry couldn’t keep the fondness and the smile out of his voice. He’d missed him. He’d missed the snark and the facade and the haughty aire, the schoolboy side of Draco he hardly ever
saw anymore. “I’m glad you came.” Harry didn’t miss the double entendre, and half of a laugh crossed his lips, still slanted in a crooked smile.

Draco had crossed the space between them in three long strides, grabbing a fistfull of Harry’s shirt and pulling him for a searing kiss, desperate and unrefined. Hungry, starving, even.

And Harry had enfolded Draco into his arms, pulled their hips flush together, returning the kiss with a groan, feeling himself sink into the embrace, into the fit of their hips sliding together, so reminiscent of the last time they allowed themselves to be so close.

Harry’s groan had turned to a whimper as Draco nipped at his lower lip and pressed into him, Harry now acutely aware of the hardness against his own stiffening cock.

“You missed me.” Harry had said softly, sweeping Draco’s hair back from his face in a moment of respite, planting soft and lingering kisses along his jaw and down his neck, revelling in the thrum of Draco’s heart and the way he tilted his head back and sighed as Harry kissed his way down.

Draco’s hand, still holding a fist-full of his shirt, slowly relaxed, and Draco had let it slide down Harry’s stomach, stepping back slightly and looking him up and down, his hair askew, his lips full and eyes bright, still full of hunger.

He had pulled Harry around and pushed him up against the workbench, stepping into the space between Harry’s feet, pushing his thighs apart just slightly. Harry’s smile had disappeared, and his breath had stuttered in his throat.

Draco leaned in and kissed him again, this time softer and more careful, both of their breathing now shallow, as if afraid of what happens next, afraid to ask for more, afraid to be the one to voice how much they want it. How much they need it.

“And I can touch you?” Draco’s eyes met Harry’s and he swallowed hard.

“Please.” Harry tried hard to keep how broken he felt away from his answer, but the word cracked all the same as it left his throat.

And all of it had brought them to this moment, with Harry murmuring against Draco’s skin, unable to keep himself from mouthing his name into his flesh, his eyes closed and his breath ragged, his hips canting and rocking, his hands gripping the table behind him, nails marking the wood as he sucked in a breath.

Draco still stood between his legs, but he had pulled off Harry’s ratty t-shirt and undone his black jeans, pulling away all of the layers of clothing to reveal Harry’s thick cock, already flushed and seeping.

Draco was running his thumb across the slit, now slick with precome and the oil Draco had wordlessly conjured into his hand, and had let drip down Harry’s shaft and down his balls. He was stroking his cock slowly, deliberately, watching each slide of his hand down to the base and up again around the head, Draco’s mouth open and his breath ragged, reveling in each desperate, keening sound Harry made, each plead of his name, each time his cock twitched beneath his hand and Harry hissed and shuddered against him. He watched each moment, consumed it, as though starved, as if Harry’s surrender is what fed him.

Draco brought his other hand up to rub his palm against Harry’s balls, his hand curling to rub and knead against the slip of skin just behind them. Harry panted and groaned against Draco and his brow furrowed, his eyes still closed, pushing himself back up on his work table and drawing one
leg up beside him, leaning back and opening himself to Draco. Harry had long since stopped thinking about what he was doing or saying, what he wanted, he was drowning in every painfully pleasurable slide of Draco’s hand along his cock, of the gentle nudge against his prostate through his perineum, of the way Draco’s hands brought him to the edge and seemed to hold him there indefinitely, his entire body thrumming with each sensation, each wave of pleasure.

Harry leaned his head back, his stomach contracting each time Draco pulled his hand around the head of his cock, soft ‘Nnugh’s escaping his lips as he panted. Harry needed to come, he needed the release, the relentless pleasure was drowning him in wave after wave, his hips rolling and twitching, his body begging for release. Draco’s hand had started stroking him faster, more earnestly, and Harry could feel himself tensing, feel his orgasm pooling, drawing him in, relentless and devouring.

“Come for me, Harry.” Draco’s voice reached through the haze, through the onslaught of sensation, and Harry opened his eyes in time to catch Draco’s, his blue eyes sharp and voracious and his cheeks pink and his lips just parted and wet and Harry let all of it take him, drown him, devour him.

He let his head fall back as he moaned Draco’s name one last time, come spilling from his cock across his stomach and Draco’s hand, still wrapped around him, dragging each shuddering gasp of pleasure from him.
Uneven panting filled the air as the two men caught their breath. Harry was no longer clutching the table behind him, but rather Draco’s arms, either to steady himself or to make sure Draco didn’t go anywhere. Maybe both. Draco’s legs felt unsteady as he leaned in to kiss Harry again. Reassuringly. Possessively.

Harry sighed into the kiss and relaxed his vice grip on Draco’s arms enough that Draco could pull out his wand and cast a surreptitious cleaning charm over the pair of them. Harry’s hand reached up to Draco’s face to draw his attention. There was a glint of mirth, of mischief in his eyes, of love and smugness.

“You were stewing this whole last week, weren’t you? Furious with me for not writing.” It was a statement, not a real question. Harry’s voice was low and teasing, his smile bright, defiant.

Draco felt his face heat and a smouldering irrational irritation, so reminiscent of his school days, bubbling irascibly at the surface. Those days he spent steeped in sexual frustration after every altercation he had with Potter, seething, seared by the closeness, by the very proximity of the object of his desire. He began to withdraw himself from Harry’s grip so he could straighten his shirt and avoid looking at him. Avoid telling him he was right. Avoid the sight of him, wrecked.

Draco had been furious. Of course, he had been furious. He had thought he’d wait for Harry to write so that he wouldn’t feel too pushy, too needy, too consumed with his moments of pleasure, too shocked and unburdened by the release.

Though in the wake of that pleasure, that sweet and fluttering moments of his sexuality, reawakened, he had been filled with unease. Filled with a writhing boggart that would not rest. A voice of incessant and relentless cadence, words, no echoes, of past indiscretions. Of pleasure that came with a price, one so much more than brittle gold and silver, knuts and galleons. Pleasure that was haunted, his flesh so often visited by ghosts.

He also felt completely incapable of voicing this to Harry, of reaching out and asking for the gentle hum of his voice, his small touches, considerate and tentative. Of his acceptance, which never cost Draco anything. Unburdened. Unfettered to pain. But Draco had been mum, afraid of asking for the reassurance he needed. That it was real. That had been beautiful and extraordinary. And okay.

He felt weak to let Harry know these things— these ghostly thoughts.

“Draco—” Harry’s voice was softer, reaching for Draco’s hand and keeping him near. Draco reluctantly looked up to meet his gaze, not knowing how to explain himself. How to open those wounds in the early light of the morning, wounds that were too gristly for the day, for the sun. Wounds that he had so desperately wanted to heal, yet were stubborn and irascible.

“You’re right, I should have written, but you should’ve as well.” He was rubbing his thumb across Draco’s wrist, slowly, rhythmically.

Harry didn’t look angry or even upset, but Draco’s stomach twisted in knots. He knew he should have swallowed his pride and penned a fucking letter that just said “I’m needy and lonely and I want you near me.” But, who had the bravery for that?

Draco huffed an affirmative nod and looked away. Unable to continue staring into eyes that saw
right through him, right through his constructed confidence. Harry chuckled and pulled a now limp-limbed Draco into his arms and breathed him in, holding him tight. The two stood there holding on to one another, limbs woven together, half dressed, and completely rumpled.

Draco spoke softly, reluctantly, into the tangled mass of Harry’s hair, “I missed you.”

Harry hummed in agreement, squeezing Draco in response. “Was this okay?” Draco asked quietly, feeling grossly self conscious and over exposed. He was transparent and naked, despite still having all his clothes on.

“Perfect. Absolutely perfect.” Harry said, propping his chin on Draco’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I should have written you sooner.” Draco admitted, trying to get out all the words that had been swirling in his mind for the last ten days. “I wanted to shout at you when you got here.”

This was a gross understatement. Draco had wanted to take his frustration and insecurities and hurl them Harry in a hurricane of hellfire and hexes. He wanted to rip his head off for making Draco feel so attached, so dependent. Wanted to take their new and beautifully budding relationship and watch it explode spectacularly with his proclivity for self destruction by needling Harry and pushing him away.

“So, instead, you pulled me off?” Harry laughed, the sound reverberating in Draco’s ribs.

“Well—” Draco admitted reluctantly, feeling embarrassed again, his face in Harry’s neck, “you walked in the door— and just looked— you’re so— Merlin, you drive me mad, and—” Harry chuckled fondly as Draco tripped over his words ineloquently. “And, all my senses flew out the fucking window it seems.”

“I’m glad.”

“.Me too.”

Sure, he had spent the last week in a state of high strung indignation at the lack of Harry’s communication, but at the end of the day, Draco had had every chance to reach out. He could only blame himself for flailing in self deprecating misery for a week.

Then, as soon as he had seen Harry walk through the door, he was filled with a kind of frantic rage at himself that he had wasted a whole week wrapped up in his own insecurities, not owling this gorgeous man at every chance he got. A man who smiled at him, who trusted him, who let go with him.

Once Harry was within reach, he could only think of one way to release his pent up frustration and overwhelming feelings of intensity he had for this enigmatic person that held so much of Draco’s brokenness with acceptance and awe. He had grabbed Harry’s shirt, all thoughts of dueling and shouting gone in one moment of soft lips and hot breath, and how Harry had melted beneath him.

He had to admit it was a better way of diffusing his adrenalin than his original plan.

Harry murmured inaudibly, his face growing impossibly red as he broke their embrace and raised Draco’s hand to his mouth to kiss the knuckles.

“What was that?”

“Thank you.” Harry said, louder, still a bit shyly.
Draco blushed furiously in response, his heart leaping, still stunned by his own bravery. Draco leaned in for one more slow, deep kiss. A thank you. A promise. An offering. A warning not to stay away so long again.

When he pulled back, Harry’s eyes looked glossy and soft, his mouth was red, and he looked properly taken apart. “Now,” he said, reaching down to help Harry put his trousers right and straighten his shirt, “why don’t you tell me why you asked me here to begin with.”

Blushing further and tucking his pants back into his trousers, Harry smiled and nodded.

“So, you see,” Harry was concluding, after nearly two hours of walking from room to room with Draco, “the space is big enough for both. The meetings can continue, and even be expanded, and we can house people who need a place to stay after their initial detox at the hospital. Luna is speaking with St. Mungo’s to work on a referral system. Greg is in charge of meeting schedules and housing arrangements for anyone who needs to stay. Hestia is expanding some sessions for trauma survivors. Sexual assault, PTSD, other mental health needs where the wizarding world seems to be seriously lacking. Dennis wants to run a weekly column on recovery from the war, surviving loss, that sort of thing.”

“Harry, I can’t believe how much work you’ve done.” Draco murmured again, easily for the 100th time.

“It’s not all me.” He shrugged as he said it, letting the words roll off of him, drip down his sides and away from the idea that he, Harry, had single handedly founded a sanctuary. Had turned the pain, the horrors, the loneliness and isolation, and he had transformed into a means to heal—a light in the darkness.

Grimmauld Place would soon be filled with life, and hope.

After visiting every room, every hallway, every closet and cupboard, he was stunned by how little residual darkness there was, how safe it felt. The house had been nearly a black hole of condemnable dark magic only a year ago, and in as little as a few months, Harry had removed most all traces—single handedly. Exchanging the dark web of metallic scented magic that clung to the very foundations, seeped into the wood, and hung thick in the air like noxious poison, with the light lattice work of powerful golden protective magic that felt so wholly like Harry. Warm, and safe. Like a campfire in the forest, cosseted by rowans standing sentry. Like a midsummer sunset over the older Elms around Tenebris Hollow.

Harry’s magic was unmistakable, and it wound around the foundations just as the thestrals slinked around the forest on the ironwood door, golden and decadent, guardians of the souls that would cross the threshold.

Grimmauld Place was no longer a dilapidated war-time headquarters, no longer an abandoned ancestral home, tomb of bigots and blood supremacists, prison to Sirius, shrine to Regulus. It was a clean slate, ready for new life, a new purpose. Inoculated with Harry’s magic and own story of rebirth, it was a new era for the ancient wizarding home. Draco couldn’t have felt more pride in Harry’s work.

“So, what about the group being mixed muggle and wizarding?” He asked Harry, resisting the urge to smooth back his hair, wild with excitement. “Surely that would breach the statute?”

“I haven’t figured that one out, yet.” Harry sighed, leading Draco back to his workshop by the
hand. It was warm and calloused and made Draco feel that undeniable bursting sensation deep in
his chest. “I’ve asked Ron to help me figure out the legalities, but I don’t have a solid plan quite
yet. In the meantime, it’ll be magical folk only.”

Draco hummed in acknowledgement and allowed himself to be pulled down onto the ancient
chaise lounge in the corner of the room, trying hard not to show how pleased he was about it.

“And, what about your plans? For life after Ron and Hermione? Isn’t it going to be a bit much to
stay here with all that’s going on? Not having your own space? Constantly being in the thick of
everyone’s sobriety struggles? Especially, if you’re offering your home to people who are very
new to the process.” He watched Harry carefully, his resolve finally breaking and tentatively
carding his fingers through his unruly hair.

Harry was quiet for a moment, allowing his eyes to close and leaning into Draco’s soft touch,
mulling over his thoughts. “I don’t know if I want to live here at all.” The words came finally, as if
well considered, opening his eyes to meet Draco’s gaze. “I think I want a fresh start when I’m
ready to leave the Weasley-Granger nest. Grimmauld Place will take on a life of its own, and I’m
not sure I’m capable of living in a constant state of the initial withdrawal. It was hell, Draco. You
remember.”

He pulled Harry towards him and they lay wrapped around one another on the musty chaise,
speaking softly about the future, and, eventually succumbing to sleep in the rays of afternoon sun
streaming through the window. The thudding of hooves on ancient Persian carpets echoing down
the hall.

Judging by the darkness, they woke hours later, though, to Draco it only felt like minutes. He was
groggy, and his mouth had that dry sawdust taste that so often accompanied unintended naps. Harry
had leapt up from the sofa on sleep-unsteady legs, knocking into the coffee table and cursing at the
sound of a persistent pounding on the front door. “Fuck, what time is it?” He moaned, “Hermione’s
gonna kill me—”

Draco glanced at his watch as Harry disappeared through the door, “It’s only half eight!” He
shouted to Harry’s retreating footsteps on the stairs. “Half eight?” He mumbled to himself, rubbing
his eyes hard. They had slept for nearly six hours.

Draco listened as Harry walked across the front hall and opened the immense carved ironwood
door. Concerned voices carried to him in a restless murmur. “I’m okay, Hermione—I’m sorry, I
fell asleep—” More hurried murmuring drifted upstairs, and Draco thought it best to make himself
known so Hermione wouldn’t tear Harry apart for making her worry. He was moving down the
stairs, still feeling heavy from sleep, his brain foggy, when he heard Hermione’s voice more
clearly. It was thick, like she had been crying. “I need to talk to you both, right now, go and get him
—”

She was a commanding sight, coming into view in the foyer, a head shorter than Harry, and yet,
somehow towering over him. Her hair was as frantic as her magic, pulsating around her. Not its
usual tiny soft curls and gentle friz. It was static and unkempt, as if she hadn’t slept in days, nor
had the time to tame it. They both glanced up to Draco when the sounds of his footsteps reached
their ears.

“Draco.” She nodded. “In the kitchen, please, both of you. I don’t want any chance of being
overheard.” He was surprised to see the worn and puffy-eyed sight of the usually collected
Hermione, laden with her usual work bags, fresh tear tracks on her face.
“What’s wrong?” Draco worried his lip, looking between the two, feeling a sense of forbidding settling in the pit of his stomach. The unshakeable Hermione Granger had been shaken, and badly, from the looks of things.

Harry, in his interminable calm, wrapped his arm over her shoulder and gave her a squeeze, an intimate and familiar gesture. “Let’s go make some tea, yeah?”

Hermione smiled weakly at him and allowed herself to be steered towards the kitchen. Draco followed in their wake down the dank steps and into the dark room.

Harry lit lamps wandlessly, not only flooding the room with light, but with the warmth of his magic as well, as kind and comforting as his arm still draped around her shoulders. It felt instantly less gloomy, the darkness held at bay by his golden aura. Draco tapped the kettle with his wand, wanting to do something with his hands, as Harry steered Hermione to the bench closest to the grate, and lit a fire with a casual wave.

“I’m glad you’re both here.” She said. Her voice was strong, despite having clearly been in distress. “I’m sorry to worry you both out like this.”

Draco walked over with the antique silver tea tray, a novelty in that it had survived the purge of the Black family home, silently preparing their cups of tea, waiting for Hermione to explain.

“I needed to come see you both as soon as I found out.” She let out in a shaky breath. “The books —” Trailing off as she leaned over to pull them out of her bag, the sound of clattering and clinking echoing from it as she rummaged. Draco and Harry exchanged confused and worried looks.

“I’ve received more of them from other areas of the world, and completed translations of a few others.” She took a deep breath and drew the first tome into her lap, sky blue and covered in gold embroidered Kanji, laying her hands flat across the cover, staring down at it.

“What did you find?” Harry asked, his calm facade flickering in the fire light. Draco felt profound unease in his midsection when his eyes found the book. His hands had begun to sweat.

She sniffed, wiping her nose on the back of her sleeve and Draco could see her quickly pulling her academic mask back into place. “This is where it started.”

“Where what started?” Draco asked, pushing a cup of darjeeling towards Hermione, and then a second to Harry. He had scrounged a packet of biscuits from the desolate cupboards and set them on the tray.

“Thestrals appear to choose people, right?”

They both nodded.

“Well,” she continued, “it appears they really do. All over the world— herds of them choose people around densely magical forests to be a sort of,” she paused, gesticulating, trying to find the right word, “Shepard? Herder? Like a guide, of sorts. Or messenger, may be a more appropriate word. But, it’s deep magic. Old and complicated.”

“There are more people like Harry and I? People they’ve attached themselves to?” Draco asked, feeling that this news shouldn’t be upsetting Hermione as much as it was.

“There were once hundreds of people like you and Harry.” Her tone was laden with regret, and her hands dropped back down into her lap, her shoulders hunched.
“And now?” Harry asked.

“Now, we’re lucky if there’s a dozen of you across the whole world, for all the thestrals, in all the forests.”

“Yes, but, what does that mean?” Draco asked, feeling his shoulders tense in annoyed anticipation.

She took a deep breath. “From what I can understand from the texts I’ve translated, is that, in every old growth magical forest where thestral herds live, they choose at least two people who have chosen death, and also chosen life, to be the mediator between the two. To ensure a balance remains. As we have come to know, thestrals are gatekeepers to the world beyond the veil, guardians of empathy and beings of incredibly powerful magic. They seem to play a critical role in mediating the passing from our existence here, to the land of the dead.”

There was silence in the room. The fire popped and fizzled behind Harry, his face cast in shadow, his brow furrowed and eyes dark.

“Every Death Herder’s powers manifest differently,” Hermione continued, “the thestrals in turn lead them to people who are on the cusp of death—or in need of their help. The Death Herders can then use their abilities to heal them, or push them towards death. It’s very esoteric stuff that I don’t quite understand fully, and I’m giving you a very literal translation—I’m sure its much more nuanced than this—I mean, I wouldn’t ever have believed it, not until—well, that doesn’t matter now. The issue, it seems, comes in when—when those people, the Herders, don’t exist.”

“I don’t understand.” Draco said blankly. He knew Hermione struggled with such imprecise branches of magic, and couldn’t for the life of him understand why she was putting so much stock in folklore. Vague, intangible, poorly described and entirely unproven. This couldn’t be real. It sounded like another fairy tale. It couldn’t be them, even if there were grains of truth in it.

Why would it be them?

Hermione huffed and flipped open the silk bound book. Glancing at Harry, he could see sudden sadness drift across his face. He, too, could feel the dull ache of heartbreak that emanated from the pages, with its elegant black ink drawings and precise handwriting.

“Japan is a good case study because the land size is so small and it’s more recent history in relation to its forests makes the most sense to an outsider.” She explained, regaining her strong voice.

“When muggles started tearing down old growth forests to plant timber plantations and create farmland, it lead to an imbalance of magic. The thestrals herds started to dwindle, the Death Herders couldn’t draw from their magic, meaning they couldn’t do their healing. More people started to die. Suicide rates increased. Murders became more frequent.” Hermione busied her hands by tackling her hair into submission in a haphazard bun on the top of her head, sticking her wand through the core, looking down at the silk covered book as she spoke. Her voice was becoming stronger, more Hermione-like.

“In an effort to fix the damage, wizards began practicing dark rituals to keep the power in the forests. In this particular instance, they began partaking in human sacrifice. Taking their elderly and leaving them in the forests to die as part of the ritual blood offering to ensure their own protection. It didn’t work, obviously. Hundreds of elderly magical folk were left to starve to the death amongst the trees. It ended up damaging the forest magic more.”

Draco hadn’t noticed he had been holding his breath, frozen by the implications. The dread of what magic had been spilled into the very earth.
“The Death Herders, or the people that worked with the Thestrals, struggled with the fluctuation in magic, too. They worked for years to restore balance, to protect the forests, to increase the number of thestrals. They traveled around the country endlessly working to rebuild the devastated magic using secret rituals passed down to them from previous Death Herders, to help others heal from the trauma of land being ripped up. But there were only two of them for the whole of Japan, and they couldn’t keep up or combat the dark magic that was being performed. Thestrals were still dying, forests were still being taken down, death was proliferating. It was bad. Then, in the 1950’s one of the Death Herders found the forest where the elderly were being sacrificed, and, well,” she took a deep breath, stealing herself, “they committed suicide, too overwhelmed by what they discovered.”

“Shit.” Harry’s voice broke the thick quiet in the kitchen.

“And that’s not all of it—” She said grimly. “Since then, the thestral herds have died out in Japan. Their magic is so deeply connected with the forests and their chosen humans that without them, they can’t survive. Where the two wizards died, a type of magical furore has been created, like a parasitic growth where the forest magic used to be. It’s called Aokigahara now, its known as the suicide forest. Hundreds of people have been drawn to this area, incessantly pulled in by its malignant magic, to die. It feeds on misery, much like a horcrux would.”

There was only silence and sound of blood rushing in Draco’s ears. Harry was staring into the fire, looking up after a moment to catch Draco’s harried gaze. Draco was certain that, he too, was thinking about the times they chose to die. Would their suicides have created such long lasting effects if they had been successful?

“There are other places—” Hermione continued into the silence. Draco and Harry turned horrified eyes on her as she pulled another volume forward, leafing through her translations.

“In the Congo, the thestral herds and their Herders lived deep in an area of dense forest just south of Kivu, where mining contaminated their water sources, not just the rivers but deep in the aquifers below the forest. Magical people began killing thestrals for their bones as charms for protection against death, pouring their blood into rivers and streams to purify it. Very few thestrals remain, and there are no Death Herders reported, as far as I can tell. The last three have been killed in the ongoing conflict that started in King Leopold’s genocide.”

Draco struggled to form his racing thoughts into words. “Hermione— how—”

She shrugged. “Death begets death in the places where thestrals aren’t keeping the balance with their Herders.”


Like Hermione said, she could only locate ten other Death Herders in five other locations where Thestral herds were strong and the forests were healthy. The Great Bear Rainforest in Canada, Diepwalle in South Africa, Linzhi in Tibet, Waipoua in New Zealand, and one small herd and a single pair of herders left for the entire Amazon.

After Hermione had spoken herself hoarse listing all the places Death Herders and thestrals had died out, as well as the devastating consequences for the surrounding magic of the land, and its effect on people, wizarding and muggle alike, she paused. The weight of it all sat around her.
Eventually, she murmured quietly, “The forbidden forest was almost on that list. Both of you almost didn’t come back. I’m fairly certain you two are the last Death Herders in Europe. In this entire area of the globe, in fact.”

“What does that mean, though?” Draco demanded, feeling goosebumps erupting down his spine, despite the warm glow of the kitchen fire. He could hear soft hooves treading delicately on the floor boards above the kitchen.

Hermione pulled out one last leathery book, its pages falling out, its words faded with time. It was a ledger, an old one, at that. “If my supervisor knew I had this right now, I can’t even begin to explain the shit storm that would follow.” She began. “I need you both to know that this research is being carefully monitored by higher ups at the ministry, and we’re going to have to talk about what that means for us moving forward.”

Draco and Harry nodded apprehensively.

“This book is a list of all the Death Herders for the Forbidden Forest thestral herds going back since before the founding of Hogwarts. Thestral lore used to be common knowledge some 400 years ago, but became secret when people wanted to use their magic for malicious purposes. That’s why this book is in the DoM, and not in its own public department in the Ministry.”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up and he repressed the urge to reach across the table and wrestle the book from her hands, his curiosity nearly bursting out of him.

“The earliest names listed appear to be ancestors of Slytherin and Gryffindor. Diarmaid Gryffindor and Fianna Slytherin. But, I’m sure the line goes back much further. Its indicated that Death Herders were identified by the thestrals and then the tradition was handed down from the old Death Herders to the new. There is meant to be continuity. Tradition.”

“But, instead we’re finding out late and flailing in the dark?” Harry asked dryly. “Some things never change, do they?”

Hermione nodded with a stoic smile. “It appears the tradition was broken with— with Dumbledore.”

Draco could feel the instantaneous change in Harry’s magic. It had been a slow constant pulse of unease since the conversation had started, but at the mention of Dumbledore, it became sharp and metallic tasting. The hairs on Draco’s neck stood to attention, mirroring its threatening thrum. It felt as though impending lightning crackled in the air, hot and electric. He could sense Harry’s frustration mounting.

“Of course it was.” Harry sighed. “Why does everything in my life always come back to Dumbledore?” He asked redundantly, his face stony.

Hermione nodded with understanding at Harry and squeezed his hand. Draco felt the tense magic soften, even if just a little. He took a deep breath and sent his own across the table to anchor Harry, who glanced at him with a ghost of a grateful smile.

“It appears that Dumbledore was chosen shortly after his sister died.” She said, pulling the most recent page of the ledger out to examine. “They weren’t sure if another was ever chosen, but they suspected it could have been Grindelwald. Unfortunately, Dumbledore died before he could teach the next in line. And, Grindelwald died in Nurmengard; a Death Herder who had never learned his tradition. There’s speculation that Snape could have been the next, but the war very effectively destroyed the chain. No one knows if Dumbledore managed to teach him anything, and who
knows if it was ever meant to be Harry after he sent him to die in the forest. That’s what’s so scary about this. Humans do things, like start wars, deforest an area, practice dark magic, and it damages the balance between life and death. Damages the delicate thestral and forest magic. From there it spirals. Creates chasms of dark magic, more human conflict, more death, more damage.”

They fell into silence for a few long moments, listening to the crackle of fire, processing the information. “So,” Draco broke first, “I have a few questions.”

“Me too—” Interjected Harry.

Hermione nodded.

“First, what the hell are we supposed to do as Death Herders? What is that job description, even? Keep the balance between life and death? How the fuck does one do that?”

Harry snorted. Hermione looked pained. “I have some information on that.”

“Great.” Draco deadpanned, not feeling that it was great at all. “Next, what does this mean for our research? How the hell do we quantify this? Analyze it?” If possible Hermione went even paler, looking even more worried. “What?” Draco pushed. “What’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath. “We have to stop the research, Draco.” She said in barely a whisper. “It’s not safe to continue.”

“What?” He shouted, startling both of them. “What do you mean it’s not safe?”

“Draco—” Harry reached out a hand to soothe him, but he wasn’t having any of it.

“No— no, no, no!” he bleated, feeling wrung out. “Explain! How are you going to tell me we’re some chosen death oracles and then say we can’t keep researching after we’ve made the biggest break yet?”

“Draco, please,” she said quickly, “I was called into a meeting with higher ups in the DoM, people who technically don’t even exist, that’s how deep they are in unspeakable research, who have been very interested in the progress of your work. They mentioned in passing that they have an eye on you and Harry, and whoever else may be connected with thestrals. That’s why they’re so keen to get you on the payroll. That’s why they were so keen for me to pursue this research with all my time and energy. I don’t know what their intentions are, but I’ve worked for the DoM long enough to know that when they want to study someone, it’s never for the benefit of that someone. I can say with confidence that their interest in your roles as Death Herders is not benign.”

Draco felt enraged. Not at Hermione, but at the faceless entities who could pull strings so effectively from the ministry to exert control over him. “So, what? We just stop? I thought I was a Death Herder, doesn’t that have a list of responsibilities? Some power? Some sway?”

“Yes.” She said placatingly. “But, I think we need to get it off the record. They’re not interested in keeping the forest safe, or magic of the land balanced to prevent evil maelstroms from forming, they’re interested in the power behind your connection. How they could weaponise it. This is what’s happening all over the world. Magical governments using these connections to create conflict and fear. We can’t let that happen here. You two need the space and freedom to discover what this connection means without worrying about the ministry breathing down your necks. I’d never be able to live with myself if one day I wake up and you two have disappeared to some deep dark level of the DoM, never to be heard from again.”

“Shit, is that possibility?” Harry asked, real concern lacing his words.
“Yes, Harry, it is. Even for you. Especially for you—and, it’s why so many other places are so careful about sharing their thestral lore. They realize how important it is to the magic of a place, and how quickly it can be exploited to destabilise an area.”

Draco looked up and met Harry’s eyes, studying his face hard. Draco was thinking about all the unbelievable ways their lives were intertwined. It made him feel a sense of panic rather than finding it romantic in anyway. The fear he felt in the forest that they were only drawn to one another by circumstance doing circuits in his mind again. His internal boggart stretched languidly, readying itself for an evening of theatrics.

“Stop.” Harry said quietly, breaking the emotional spiral Draco was starting. He jumped in response, but didn’t say anything. “Stop thinking so hard, we’ll figure this out.”

Draco felt Harry’s magic wrap around him like a heavy blanket, the weight of it containing him.

He nodded and Harry sighed.

“What must we do?” He said, turning his attention back to Hermione, who had watched their nearly silent interaction with interest.

She shook herself before answering, “I think Draco’s manifestation of his healing powers are most obvious. He’s a healer. He’s a potions master. He’s capable of using his thestral to heal people. Draco, you seem to have the physical healing side covered.”

Draco nodded, feeling that this was okay, it seems he could just carry on as he had been. Not too bad.

“You’ve seen thestrals at St. Mungo’s, have you ever noticed them in specific patient rooms? Have they ever seem to lead you anywhere?”

“Not that I’ve noticed—” Draco started, trying to think of all the rooms he had seen them. “I mean, Voileami was always near my most dire cases, yes, but that could just be a coincidence. Those were the patients I spent the most time with.” He thought carefully. “No— wait— she was always nearest the patients I administered my thestral potions to—” he realised.

“Hmm.” Hermione nodded fervently. “That’s good. That’s great, actually. We’ll come back to this. Harry, you, on the other hand, are a bit harder to figure out. Can you think of where your thestral comes around the most?”

Harry had a hard, contemplative look on his face, his one arm drawn across his midsection, his other hand fisted under his chin, his mouth a hard line.

“Luna’s.” Draco said, softly. “He’s always at Luna’s. And here.”

“Yes, but what do the two places have in common?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know.” Harry said, sighing heavily. “One place is full of healing deep wounds, another is full of dark magic that allows the wounds to fester.”

“Not anymore.” Draco, countered. Grimmauld Place was no longer the nightmarish place of dark magic, it was full of love and light. Full of the smell of wood shavings and hope. “You’ve made this place just as welcoming as Luna’s. You couldn’t spend your free time here if it wasn’t. You couldn’t make those memorials if you were surrounded by dark magic.”

Hermione gasped. “Harry that’s it! Your healing power!”
“What?” He asked, looking dumbfounded.

“You help people heal on an emotional and mental level. Draco puts them back together physically and you help put them back together psychologically! Don’t you see?”

Harry looked startled. “Hermione, I barely have my own emotions figured out, I don’t think I’m healing anyone. I’m just doing my best to get through one day at a time.”

“I think she’s right.” Draco said before Hermione could explode with her next argument.

Harry’s eyes flicked over to Draco, questioning, he felt his chest tighten. “Look what you did for Dennis, what you’re doing for others. Look what you’re doing with this house. At your meetings. You’re helping people heal, Harry. It might not seem as straightforward as what I’m doing, but your thestral has been subtly guiding you as well.”

“Okay. I think I can accept that, if you think I’m already doing something helpful. But, we’re avoiding the giant thestral in the room, aren’t we? The healing stuff is all fine and well, but what about the other side of the coin? Pushing people towards death? I don’t want to do that, that sounds like playing God. Sounds like Dumbledore. I had enough of that. I won’t do it again.”

“From what I understand, it’s not about playing judge, jury, and executioner, like you’re thinking,” Hermione countered quickly. “Death Herders have the capacity to push people towards death when the person in question is upsetting the balance of magic. People like Voldemort or Grindelwald could have been pushed towards death, you see?”

“Not really—”

“No—”

Harry and Draco had both spoken at the same time.

Hermione sighed and leaned back over the bench, reaching back into her bag. She pulled out a book from the Congo, it’s hard wooden cover carved in deep marks. It looked like a work of art, with its grooves cast in stark relief in the flickering fire light. She leafed through to a place she had marked with a sheet of translations. “So, when I said that thestral Herders keep the magic balanced, I mean that they mostly accomplish this by healing the land and people. Okay? Their ability to push people towards death is a rarely used power that comes with checks and balances. You don’t just go around killing people you don’t like, that would give you too much unchecked power. And, besides, you could accomplish that well enough by choosing to turn your back on your thestrals and healing skills, like Grindelwald did.”

She pushed the open book towards the two of them to show an illustration. It showed two figures standing in ceremonial robes at the centre of a circle, their hands held high above them, a look of supplication underneath the lines of tribal paint. To the left stood a thestral and a sun, to the right was a large black dog and the crescent moon. An enormous tree stretched from the bottom of the circle to the top, its roots curling around to meet its own branches. It reminded Draco of the norse Yggdrasil, but distinctly African. Instead of surrounded by Celtic knots or norse runes, it was encircled by geometric markings and shapes.

“What’s this other creature?” Draco asked, pointing to the dog. “It looks like a wolfhound—or a Grim.”

“I think that’s exactly what it is, Draco. A Grim.” Hermione rushed out her words, eager to follow his train of thought. “According to this translation, The Death Herders use thestrals to heal, and
Grims to kill. But in order to use the Grim, the Death Herder must gain its trust and allegiance willingly. If not, the Grim won’t do a Death Herders bidding. There are, of course, blood rituals that can be used to trap a Grim into doing a Death Herder’s work, but the ritual is very, very dark. I can’t be sure if I believe there are people who have used it——”

“Okay, so we don’t know any Grims, and we’re not under threat from people like Voldemort, so that part of the job doesn’t really seem relevant.” Harry said dismissively, eagerly. It was clear to Draco that he didn’t like the idea of death being part of the job.

“Well, yes.” Hermione conceded. “But, I think we’ll have to re-examine this. I have a lot more reading to do, but I need to start protecting my work from the DoM. They won’t expect me to come up with nothing, though I’ve already destroyed much of my initial notes.”

“So, what now?” Draco finally asked after Hermione had pulled her wand from her messy bun, casting charms to erase her pages of careful notation.

Harry took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes hard. Draco felt the way Harry looked. Tired on a bone deep level. “I know we need to keep this quiet from the DoM and the Ministry. But, I don’t want to live like Dumbledore. Secrets and lies. I can’t live like that, I need to be different.”

“What are you saying?” Hermione asked, her voice laced with concern.

“I’m saying we need help. We need reinforcements. We need a plan.” He sounded like he was teetering on the edge of being frantic. Like it was taking all of his effort to remain level headed and calm in the face of so much information, so much change.

“Where do we start?” Draco asked.

“Right here.” He had stood and was walking back around the old wooden table, pushing his hair back from his forehead. “It’s going to be a long night.”

Draco watched as Harry waved his hand to cast his patronus. As Harry spoke to the silvery thestral, Draco walked back to the kettle to make more tea and a plan for food. It appeared they would be having company after all.

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It was nearing midnight when the last of the patronus responses came in. Luna’s hare had just faded into silver vapour, her voice trailing after it, “We’ll be there in 30 minutes, dear”, when Harry began pacing like a caged animal. Draco didn’t feel much better, but instead of pacing, he sat still as stone, taking in the details of the room as Hermione furiously scribbled notes.

They had moved upstairs into the sitting room to accommodate their guests. The same room that Harry had prepared to one day hold meetings. Harry had run out of the kitchen the moment his patronus had left and begun pulling chairs from every which room. He had carried them, without magic, down to the sitting room, and by the time Draco had arrived with a full tea tray, a very sweaty Harry had quite neurotically arranged them all in a near perfect circle, mismatched and uncoordinated as they all were.

The room was unrecognisable from the first few times Draco had visited. The carpets were soft pastel greens with grey filigree. The house had produced sumptuous mossy curtains that hung in lush folds, and the wall paper had changed from peeling yellow to a muted silver. It reminded him viscerally of his Slytherin dormitory, only more grown up, and softer, less demanding. Harry had worked the wooden floors and moulding back into a healthy shine, and the empty marble fireplace
had a single photo of Sirius and Remus in a tiny silver frame just on the left of the mantle.

Draco could sense Harry’s mounting distress. Could feel the prickle on his skin. Could taste the tinge of metal on his tongue. It mirrored the same acrid sense of panic Draco could feel in the pit of his stomach, and he was desperate to soothe it away.

He stood on numb legs and walked directly into Harry’s line of fire. Nearly running Draco over, Harry stopped abruptly, clearly startled that his path and train of thought had been impeded. He reflexively reached out to stop himself from falling forward with momentum and steadied himself on Draco’s biceps, his fingers digging in to the hard muscle.

Draco levelled his gaze at Harry, steadying him, and took a deep breath. “Spit it out.” He said, and Harry frowned.

“What?”

“I said, spit it out. If you pace anymore your magic is going to catch the rug on fire.” He knew Harry was feeling overwhelmed, knew he was feeling caged, but also knew that if he stewed in the feeling it would only get worse. Draco saw his own warning signs reflecting in Harry.

Harry sighed, his shoulders drooping. His hard edges softened a bit. Avoiding Draco’s eye he growled, “I don’t want this.”

“What don’t you want?”

“Any of this— this— chosen bullshit.” He spat, gripping Draco’s arms harder. His face contorting in rage. “I just wanted a normal fucking life! Why can’t I have a normal life? I didn’t ask for these thestrals to come find me!”

Draco brought his hands up gently to Harry’s elbows to ground him, his heart aching, and Harry released his painfully tight grip on Draco quickly, looking guilty, and, if it were possible, even more angry with himself. Harry withdrew and Draco stepped forward to maintain their proximity, taking his hands firmly in his, not saying anything yet. Waiting.

Looking down, Harry spoke in a low and pained voice. “First, I was chosen by a prophecy, then I was chosen by Voldemort, then Dumbledore chose to use me as a pawn in a war. I don’t want to be chosen for things I didn’t sign up for any more! I don’t want this, Draco.”

Draco didn’t know what to say. He had already accepted that the thestrals had chosen them. Accepted his role among them. He had been doing it for years without realising it. What scared him most was the possibility of being stopped by the ministry or DoM or messing up somehow, maybe even the looming threat of Azkaban, a punishment they had threatened him with in days before. What scared him now was how few Death Herders were left and how little they knew. Harry, it seemed, was still fervently stuck on the first step of assuming his role.

Draco couldn’t relate. Not because he didn’t see Harry’s plight, but because he finally felt vindicated to be chosen for something with purpose for who he was, a healer. The thestrals saw something in Draco that made him worthy. He had rarely felt anything like that before. He had been chosen for things in the past, sure, but only to be used as a means to an end. In school he was often chosen for things because of his name, not because of who he was. And, later he was chosen to be a Death Eater because of his family, then chosen to kill Dumbledore to punish his parents.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Draco said. “I know you don’t want to be used, but this, we can do good with this. We can make a difference.”
“I did good as the Chosen One, didn’t I? That wasn’t exactly a fucking picnic.”

“No, I don’t suppose it was.” Draco conceded. He felt utterly lost. “So, what are you saying? Are you saying no? Am I on my own with this?” He felt overwhelmed by the task.

Harry met Draco’s eyes, and he saw a war there. Confusion and hurt, trauma and desperation.

Before Draco could hear his answer, however, they heard the ironwood door open and familiar voices calling from the hall. The caged animal in Harry returned and he dropped Draco’s gaze and hands, turned on his heels, fleeing the room, leaving Draco standing there, struck with the overwhelming urge to cry. As if in the distance, he heard Hermione greet their very concerned friends.

Ten minutes later, everyone was settled in the sitting room. Well, everyone except for Harry, who had yet to return. Fuck.

Luna had brought food that was being set out on the low, ornate coffee table by Greg. Hermione walked in circles around the room, reinforcing the magic for privacy and safety, silvery wisps of delicate charmwork dissipating into the air like smoke, breathy and ethereal.

Draco didn’t know where Harry had hidden himself in the empty expanses of the house, and he didn’t know how to explain to everyone why they were here at 12:30 in the morning on a Wednesday. He stood in the middle of the room, his hands at his sides, completely out of his element, fraying the sleeve of his jacket between his thumb and forefinger nervously.

Gregg and Luna were still in their pyjamas, wrapped in fluffy bathrobes, Luna complete with bunny slippers. Across from them draped on the old settee he and Harry had napped on earlier, carried down from the work room, Hestia looked regal. She was adorned with violet flower crowns and wrapped in purple and gold silk, her feet tucked neatly beneath layers of luxuriant fabric.

Neville, who was perched at the far end of the same settee, was still wearing his gardening apron, a smudge of compost across his freckled cheek, as if he had been interrupted doing midnight replanting.

Across the room on a high backed sofa, Ron was wearing an atrociously ratty orange t-shirt, emblazoned with “world’s best cannons supporter and mom” and matching bottoms, covered by an ancient oilskin coat. He appeared to be the mother hen of the group, fussing over the tea tray and hoarding several biscuits and two cups of tea. He had come laden with bags of pies and biscuits that he proudly announced he had absconded from his mother’s when he dropped Rose off.

Hermione soon joined him with a small grin, digging in to the assortment of pies, Ron smiling triumphantly.

“Well,” Draco started, keenly aware of the fact that he wasn’t sure what the hell he was going to say. How does one start?

Greetings, I’m the new reaper, please help yourself to some light refreshments?

“Where’s Harry?” Asked Luna, concern etched on her normally placid features.

“I think he may be having a meltdown about what we need to tell you.” Draco sighed, his heart heavy.

“Well, we can’t start without him, dear. Won’t you and Neville go and get him? I’m sure he’s a wreck. He doesn’t handle much stress well, you know.” Luna snuggled up in her bathrobe against
Greg, who was marveling at a mince pie he’d nicked from Ron’s supply. He gave Ron a thumbs up.

“Yes, better hurry. It’s likely a destructive one if it was worth calling us out of our beds at this time of night. He never did deal with change well, our Harry.” Hestia sighed, reviewing her black polished nails and nudging Neville with her foot. “Off you go.”

Draco sighed and looked to Neville. “Come along then, Longbottom.”

They looked in room after room before Draco caught the faint sound of smashing glass somewhere in the distance. They were up on the third floor by this time, creeping through the dark and dusty rooms, many of which decorated in verdant Slytherin green, still adorned with snakes. Drawn by a growing chorus of muffled yells and grunts and tinkling glass, Draco crept toward the bay window of the third guest bedroom they’d searched. Their faces nearly pressed to the glass, he and Neville knelt on the bench, noses tipped down at the figure of a rampaging Harry in the back garden, complete with his ever watchful thestral.

“Oh—” said Neville softly, and Draco groaned, his breath fogging up the pane. They watched as Harry threw empty pots at the garden wall, paced back and forward, and yelled at his thestral. He was kicking with supreme incoordination at a haggard rose bush, and shouting things like “Fuck you, destiny!” and “Dumbledore, you cock!”, or Draco’s favorite “Chosen one MY ASS”.

Draco watched as Harry seized a fistful of dirt from the ground and attempted to fling it away from himself, only managing to hit his own face with the crumbling clump of earth, exploding with a sonorous, “FUCK you, you piece of shit dirt!” He tried to go back to kicking the rosebush, but underestimated the distance and ended up kicking his own legs out from under himself in his violent flailing. It was a full blown tantrum, the proportions of which, Draco had never seen in adult before.

“I suppose we should intervene.” Draco said with a sigh as he turned from the window to walk back downstairs.

Coming through the back of the house, they approached the glass garden doors, through which they could hear Harry raving at his lone companion. “What’s the fucking point?! What are you even looking at you stupid demon horse bird?! I can kick plants if I want, it’s my house, and I’m a fucking adult! An adult who doesn’t want to be anyone’s fucking saviour anymore! That’s right! Take your emotional needs and shove them up your ass!”

Draco reached out to turn the handle to the garden, not caring to be quiet, as he didn’t want to startle Harry. It didn’t matter, however, Harry was too far gone in his rampaging tirade to notice anything. “Dumbledore, you cocksucker! What other surprises are you going to spring on me from beyond the grave, huh?! What else you got?! Who else needs to die for world peace?!” He was screeching at the garden wall as he paced and kicked over more gardening tools.

He was picking up another pot to hurl at the wall, his hair plastered to his face with sweat, his shirt damp, and soil streaked across his face and arms, when he yelled, “You know what? I’m just going to go back to doing drugs! Yup! That’s right! It was way fucking easier!”

Draco felt the bottom fall out of his stomach as he stared at Harry, who hurled the pot at the wall, watching it shatter spectacularly.

The stillness of the moment that followed seemed to crack through Harry’s rage and bring him back to himself. Before anyone could react, however, Harry’s thestral moved forward and grabbed the back of his shirt collar, deftly yanking him off balance and pulling him to the beast’s side.
“Oh my god.” Harry moaned, loudly, fighting off the creature with ineffective shoving. “What is wrong with me? Get off!” He shouted as the thestral moved to wrap him protectively in his wings, its own yells of displeasure drowning out Harry’s. As if the thestral knew better than Harry and wanted everyone to know. “I’m sorry I said it! I didn’t mean it! I’ll go to the meeting, you rotten menace!”

“Harry James Potter, what the absolute FUCK did you just say?” Draco finally found his voice beneath his shock and anger. Neville took a step backwards, as if mortified by being caught in a domestic, eager to make a quick escape.

Harry stilled comically with huge eyes as the thestral continued to flap its wings around him, pulling him closer, as a hen does with an errant and disobedient chick. “I didn’t fucking mean it!” He yelled in defeat. “I didn’t mean it, and I’ll go into the meeting if this fucking demonic bat gets off of me!”

Harry let out one last childish howl of indignation, and Draco felt his frustration in the magic rolling off of him. The rose bush Harry had so valiantly tried to stomp to death caught fire. Neville jumped forward to douse the flames.

Voileami had appeared silently behind Draco, her ears pinned back staring at Harry, clearly very irritated by the display. Draco touched her neck gently for reassurance.

“Come on, you fucking fleabag, lets go inside and be adults! We need to keep the bloody balance or some such bollocks.” Came Harry’s muffled voice from beneath the wings of his screeching thestral.

“Fleabag, really?” Draco said. Feeling supremely unimpressed with Harry’s meltdown, and wanting to goad him for making him worry so very much.

“Well, sorry I can’t speak fucking French to give him a snooty name!” Harry shouted as he finally freed himself from his captor, uselessly straightening his sweat soaked shirt and pushing past Draco and Neville into the house. The gigantic beast following inconveniently close, still making an inordinate amount of noise that sounded suspiciously like nails being raked across a chalkboard.

Between the horrific sounds, Harry muttered mutinously under his breath, “Voileami, fucking posh French names, who speaks French, anyways?”

“I speak French, you fucking prat.”

“Well, my thestral’s name is fucking Fleabag. Because I’m a poor, uncultured swine!”

Draco rolled his eyes so hard it nearly gave him a headache. Harry was being difficult for the sake of it. He shouldn’t engage. This was clearly a tantrum. An absolute meltdown. But, oh how he wanted to pick at their discord, to let Harry’s rage grow into a fight he could partake in.

“I want my fucking yellow chair.” Harry demanded petulantly as they came into the hallway leading to the sitting room.

“I brought it, Harry.” Came Luna’s soft call, singsong and instantly calming, and Draco could visibly see Harry’s shoulders dropping down, defeat marring his posture. He slunk into the room like a kicked dog and took up his position, arms and legs crossed in his yellow armchair so tightly it looked as if it may take several years to untangle them.

Their thestrals slunk into the room, snorting their disapproval, crowding about. Voileami’s tail swished like a metronome, repeatedly hitting Greg on the back of the head.
Draco took up the low ottoman next to Harry’s yellow chair and pulled his legs up to sit cross legged. He felt drained and wanted to collapse in on himself. The magic radiating off Harry felt frayed and disjointed, frightened.

Despite his supreme irritation, he knew that this was Harry’s poor coping getting the better of him. Harry wasn’t perfect. He was achingly human, and it was in these moments of painful regression that Draco remembered how far Harry had come. He pooled his inner reserves to send soothing tendrils of his own magic to buffet the raw waves rolling off of Harry. Their magic clashed for an instant, electric and sharp, before settling into one another, slowly beginning to wind down. Harry let out a ragged breath, scrunching his eyes against some rising emotion.

Hermione began speaking. She let Harry and Draco sit silently next to one another. She fielded the questions and filled everyone in on everything they knew. How Harry and Draco were the last Death Herders in this part of the world, how Draco’s healing was physical, Harry’s psychological. What this meant for them moving forward, how being a Death Herder meant needing to be close to the thestral herds, needing to engage with their gift, lest death beget more death.

She told them about the Grim, about keeping balance. About Dumbledore and the DoM. She stressed how much emotional support they would need to make this work. How they needed to learn their calling without letting the Ministry catch wind of what they were up to. When she had filled them all in and they fell into contemplative silence, Neville was the first to speak.

“Harry, mate, I can see you’re having a hard time with this, but, it could be an incredible opportunity.”

Harry didn’t move. Didn’t look up. But, Draco felt his magic raise like hackles.

“No, really, I mean, see what those potions did for my parents? It’s been unbelievable—”

“Yeah, Harry, and you honestly saved Dennis. If it weren’t for what you did for him I don’t think he would have ever had a chance at long term sobriety—” chimed in Greg.

Harry shifted uncomfortably as if shrugging off an irksome fly. His thestral stomped his feet. Draco wanted to reach out and take his hand, but instead kept still. Fearing it was unwanted.

Softly from beside Neville, Hestia spoke. “Neville, it may seem amazing to you, but a lifetime tethered to death isn’t something most people would be too thrilled about. And Harry’s seen enough death to last several lifetimes.”

At that, Harry finally looked up, his magic smoothed back down, his shoulders softened. Draco knew that Harry just wanted to be heard, to be understood, to have authority over his own life. He didn’t want to feel guilted into something. Didn’t want to feel ruled by a savior complex he worked so hard to leave behind.

Draco felt an idea solidify in his mind that made his heart sink. He knew it was the right thing to do— for Harry. He reached over and set his hand on the arm of the chair tentatively, earning him a sideways glance from Harry.

“Harry, no one can make you do this. You’re right. It’s not fair. You didn’t ask to be chosen for anything. If you choose not to—”

“But—” Hermione tried to interrupt, but Draco quelled her with an imperious look.

“We’ll all support that decision.” He finished. Before he could remove his hand, Harry’s reached out and grabbed it tightly and he nodded stiffly, seemingly too overwhelmed to speak.
“I’m sure that if you chose not to follow this path, the thestrals will eventually choose another person. I can get by on my own in the meantime.” Their thestrals stood perfectly still and silent behind them, their ears pinned back in reproach.

Harry was sitting perfectly still, his eyes burning holes into the rug. His magic felt conflicted. Possessive. Frustrated. Angry. Undecided.

Draco felt his eyes prickle and his nose burn and he valiantly fought down the stupidly embarrassing urge to cry for the second time that night.

“Okay,” Hermione ceded, “while Harry decides what he wants to do, Draco, in the meantime, we need a reason for you to be closer to the thestral herds. A front of sorts—I know you were thinking of opening a private practice, and I think that would be a perfect opportunity for you to relocate to Hogsmeade, maybe. What do you think of that?”

“Well, since the DoM is off the table, and I’m still woefully unemployed, I might as well start looking for premises.” Draco huffed, feeling entirely exhausted and overwhelmed. It was past two in the morning and he was ready for the sweet release of sleep.

“Great. You can continue to make your potions there, and Luna and I, with our work with St. Mungo’s, can get referrals for patients to come to you. Next week we’ll officially close down our research saying we’ve reached a dead end, and you’ll announce that you’re planning to open your private practice. This way you can continue to heal with the thestrals but appear to be just a normal healer with a potions clinic. I think we also need to involve McGonagall—”

Draco numbly nodded his head. Harry still held tight to his hand, but he felt incredibly alone.

After everyone had said their goodbyes around three, each with a part to play in the grand plan of keeping the Death Herder tradition alive and well, and Harry from another tantrum, Draco was left standing with the golden trio.

Harry, who had barely said two words the entire meeting, still had a vice grip on Draco’s hand, and Hermione, who was gathering her things, listened while Ron talked genially about Rose, seemingly oblivious to the tension.

Hermione turned to Harry, who still appeared lost in thought, and chimed, oh so innocently, “Are you coming home with us? Or?” She blushed a little, leaving the unfinished question hanging in the air.

Draco opened his mouth, not sure what he was going to say, but Harry got there first. “No—not now, Hermione. I need some space, some time.” His voice cracked with disuse. “If—if that’s alright with you.” He asked awkwardly, finally meeting Draco’s eyes for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

Draco nodded dumbly feeling relieved and irritated at the same time.

They said their goodbyes and soon they were standing alone together in the sitting room. Their thestrals watching with interest. Harry took a deep breath and turned to face Draco. “I’m sorry, Draco. But, it’s true what I said. I need space. And time. To think things through. Alone.”

“Harry—”

Before Draco had time to voice his thoughts, his concerns, his rising panic, the questions that came with the notions of space, of time, Harry had swept past him and out the door, the crack of apparition fading on the wind.
Harry sat with his back to the wind. It was late, now, the sun sinking into the endless fields to his left, shadows stretching out across the moor and into the oncoming dark of of the evening.

His shoulders were shaking, and he rocked forward slowly, big, uncontained sobs falling from his chest, swept away into the wind. By his side, his left hand was wrapped around the neck of a bottle full of amber liquid. His right was curled tightly in a fist around the cap.

He had apparated to one of the tiny villages they had pilfered food from during their year on the run, a place where no one would ever recognise him. Where no one would think anything of him walking into the little corner liquor shop and picking up a bottle of Jameson. Where no one would imagine that magnitude of that simple, innocuous action.

The brown paper bag they had slipped the bottle into had felt soft beneath his hands, gentle over the solid, cool glass. They had wished him well and he had walked along the country lane leading away from the village for a long time before he gathered the courage to take himself to the moor. The same hillside he had fled to the night after he couldn’t fuck Ginny, the same that had held their little tent in the quiet and the fear of the year before the war.

Harry had sat there many long hours before he had slipped the paper bag from his purchase, letting the wind take it tumbling away across the hillside, all softness gone. The bottle had been cold and hard but comfortable, and he had uncapped it without too much thought or struggle, it was muscle memory, after all.

It was only after the smell had wafted up from the open vessel that he had started to cry. Really, truly, cry.

Big, gulping breaths, scared and confused, childlike. Hiccupsing and uncontrolled, unmanageable, sobs with a life of their own, sobs that sounded like toddlerhood, when the world is nothing but unmanageable emotions. Though, Harry would never had known that, as Harry had never really been a child.

Harry kept wanting to bring the bottle up to his lips to drink, but the cataplexy that accompanied his relentless crying would not lend him the coordination, and he was trapped, limp and lifeless, and the bottle stayed at his side.

As the stars began to make their nightly appearance along the deep purple of the Eastern horizon, Harry found himself finally able to breathe again. In. And out. Deep breaths. And he concentrated on marking each cycle, each exchange, each renewal, and letting the last shudders of his hysterics ease away into the gathering night and the relentless wind.

He sat at the edge between relapse and sobriety for some time, his left hand still curled around the neck of the bottle, but not capable of stomaching the memories that the acrid smell of alcohol would bring. The disgusting. The revulsion.

How he craved to be free of all of the pain, the fear, the terror of his future. How he needed to let go of the responsibility, of the pressure. How he begged for escape. All of that juxtaposed against the knowledge that he loved his new life. His sobriety. That happiness was his, was attainable, that drowning all of these things in a bottle of Jameson was cowardice, was easy.
But this, again. Chosen for death. He was a marked man, no matter how far he fled, no matter how much work he put in to building a life he loved. Death followed him from that place. It had followed him since he was barely a year old. Followed, and hunted. Haunted, even.

Harry pulled the bottle closer and into his lap.

Two paths diverged in the woods.

Here he was, again. Deciding between life and death. Alone.

Alone.

But, was he? By choice, this time. He wasn’t isolated in a web of mistruths and secrets. He had his support system. He need only to reach out…

“Ron.” It was nothing but a whisper on the wind from his lips, but there was no one else. Harry needed the kindness of the boy who gave him half his sandwich on the train, and the friend who had shaken Harry awake from his nightmares for years, who had given him a home and a family and who had struggled and persevered when the depths of his own mind had held him prisoner. Harry needed his best friend.

There was a crack, and Ron was slipping the deluminator back into his pocket as he sank down on the hilltop, next to Harry, still wearing an apron, splattered with spaghetti sauce, a bit of flour on his nose.

Harry handed him the bottle, and Ron vanished it, and that was that.

They sat together on the moor, the night somehow much warmer and kinder, now, the wind not so frantic, giving way to a gentle breeze. And, eventually, they talked.

It was during a lull that Ron turned to look at Harry, his hand idly picking at the blades of grass between them. After a moment, he spoke, his voice soft and careful.

"The moments where I could imagine his voice - how it would catch me. His laugh. An echo of me, a haunting I could never outrun. Sometimes, I wanted to tell the jokes that I know would echo with his laugh. I wanted to jump into that place of joy with him again, at my side, in my mind, following me, raucous and unburdened. But, everywhere I go, there is a depth of sadness, a pity, a drowning plea to move on. To forget. To leave the painful memory of Fred in the ethers, to carry on without him."

Ron tilted his head back, looking up at the stars.

“But, little brother, I can’t do that. I can’t carry on. How can everyone expect me to? I remember him in every freckle on my face, in every wave of my wand, every spell and every charm. Every breath of mine was once also shared with him, for our worlds were just so intertwined, just as we were before we came into this place. Before breath. And so, when they wanted to forget, they asked me to join them. And they couldn’t understand why I could not. I could not. How can they not see what cruelty it is to ask me? Here, I am surrounded by his muse, a vision of a world of chaotic happiness, and I am mourning. Always mourning. Mourning and forgetting. I can not. I will not."

He paused, the wind falling across the moor, long grass waving in the fading light. Rustling. His hand was still at his side, and clouds drifted along the Western horizon.

“The last page of George’s note.” Ron’s voice was steady, in a way that let Harry know that this
was a passage he had recited many times before. A place that once stung with loss, sharp and unforgiving, but had grown into an ache. A dull and sordid pain. Pain that lingers. Lingers like the memory of two brothers, long lost to the world this side of the veil.

“He was drinking a lot. Near the end.” Ron turned to look at Harry. A sadness had settled over him, an exhaustion. He had carried this secret for long.

“I didn’t stop him. I didn’t help. He needed me, and I didn’t know what to do.” Plaintive words, thick and heavy. Tears were tumbling down along his long freckled nose.

“It’s not your fault, Ron.” Harry was reaching for him, and Ron let himself be pulled into a crushing hug, Harry’s grip so tight around him, so desperate to scrub the guilt from him, to pull the weight of his admission aside.

“Harry he needed someone. Someone to tell. Someone to help him. Someone to make death okay. To make Fred’s death okay. I didn’t know how.”

Harry released him from the hug, leaning back to look at Ron, to regard him in his apron, long and gangly and red-haired. Ron, who had tried so hard to believe in him, to stand by him, but who struggled with demons of doubt and regret. Of inadequacy. Of guilt.

Ron, who had become a father in these years, who had lost and gained so much from life. Ron, who now knew death. Who saw thestrals. Who heard voices from beyond the veil. Ron, who was asking Harry for something in his words. Words that told Harry that George could have been saved. That George had needed a guide, a gentle pull from the arms of death, who waited for him as it had for Harry, as a respite. A friend.

Ron was asking him to walk the brittle line between the two, life and death. To heal, in his own way, the wounds that death would come sniffing out, hungry and hopeful.

Ron, who had never asked him for anything.

“I don’t know if I can.” And Harry reached down to hold Ron’s hand in his.

“I know, Harry. I know.” And there was no animosity in his words and the squeeze of Harry’s hand. Ron believed in him. Believed in Harry, but didn’t temper his belief with expectation. Perhaps, just with hope.

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August 17, 2009

It was several nights later that Harry left the sanctuary of Ron and Hermione’s and returned to Grimmauld Place. He brought his box of things, meagre though they were, and carried them upstairs into Sirius’s bedroom, laying them gingerly on the floor next to the bed. The bed he had built himself, strong beams of Khaya Mahogany, so keen to soak up the new magic of the place. He paused a moment to revel in the feel of Sirius and Remus, lingering love that seemed to scatter itself about the room, as if it were at home amongst the dust.

Harry let his magic reacquaint with theirs - a wild and untamed feeling, but stoic and strong. Sure. He pulled Sirius’s jacket from the box and slipped it around his shoulders. He wanted to be strong, like Sirius. Strong and unafraid of doing what is right. What is good. Strong, and unencumbered by doubt. Strong, like the mahogany.

As he lifted the jacket, he had uncovered the white and gold book that Draco had gifted him so
many months ago. The Salacious Adventures of Gable and Herbert had been hidden under his bed at the Granger-Weasley’s, though frequently taken out and rifled through, beneath the most impenetrable of silencing charms. Aside from being delectably erotic, it was a beautiful and romantic story of love conquering all kinds of odds. Of extraordinary people being propelled into the most dire of circumstances for the sake of their person.

Harry sighed deeply, laying back on the new sheets and soft blanket, thinking of Gable and Herbert. Remus and Sirius. Of his parents. Of himself, and Draco. Love, grown in the garden of extraordinary odds. Why did it always seem to end in death?

It wasn’t long before he drifted off to sleep, his mind still deeply troubled by the cruelty of fate.

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Harry was panting, running close to the ground, long legs and broad black paws stretching out in front of him as he loped through the underbrush. It was dark in the depths of the forest, the sky obscured completely, but he could sense the moon rising high on his right. He was running North.

As he ran, Harry noticed that this forest felt much different than the boreal and deciduous forest of Northern Europe he had grown so accustomed to. No, this forest was soaked, smelled of rain and growth and the trees sprawled like giants up to the sky and across stretches of earth, buttressed roots forming high walls and caverns of their own. It was humid beneath their canopy, and mushrooms of many strange colours fruited along decomposing trunks, long since fallen from the sky to the earth below, reclaimed.

The forest felt old and undisturbed, like a city unto itself, riotous with life if only you knew where to look and how to listen. Harry heard rustling to his left and a short trumpeting call. The ground shook, and he ran further, slipping away from the grove of forest fig trees and sliding down into a valley below.

He cleared a dark stream, pulling himself up the opposite bank with ease, his paws sinking into the mud. He paused, sniffing the air. A strange smell lingered. His hackles raised. A growl pooled in this throat.

Laughter. Cackling laughter. Harry looked up toward the sound to a tall rock jutting out across the edge of the stream. Atop it sat a creature. Stout, round with thin spidery fingers and sharp teeth, its laugh was harsh and disarming. Full of malice. A tokoloshe.

“They’ll find you here, Grim. Better run fast.”

The cackling laughter followed him as he took off through the forest, fleeing the sounds of wingbeats and the screeches that followed.

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Harry woke up quickly, sun streaming in through the window and warming the room, the leather jacket long since pulled off in fits of sleep. The dream, however, lingered, as if heavy, images of those sharpened, barred teeth and the great black paws below him refusing to dissipate into the waking world, as dreams are want to do.

He made his way down the hall to the stairs, pausing at the linen closet, the one he had left nailed shut, his hand trailing over the door, remembering the splinters that he had pulled away along the inside. Come what may, he could not go back. Not to that. He took a deep breath, and jogged down the stairs into the tea room, surprised to hear laughing voices drifting in from the garden.
Setting his encouragement and it’s enchanted cloud in the sunny window of the tea room, Harry opened the glass doors to the patio beyond, a grin quick and broad across his face at the sight before him.

Neville was sitting on the grass, looking up at Hestia, who was calling all the flowers in the West bed to bloom, foxgloves and lavender, sweet little tea roses amidst butterfly bushes, and a large hydrangea blushing pink and blues in the shaded corner beneath a blackthorn tree. A little arbor now housed a flush of jasmine flowers, fragrant and florid in the late summer heat. Neville had on a bit of a dopey expression, chin held in his hand, elbow on his knee, face full of wonder and delight, a shy smile on his lips. A dirt smudge ran across his left cheek, which was blushing a soft pink.

Hestia, in a long, white summer dress of soft swathes of cotton, was adorned in gold bangles, gold hoop earrings and a crown of purple daisies. She was stunning, as ever, her magic pouring out across the once-neglected city garden, now transformed into a calm and sunlit sanctuary, bees and butterflies now reacquainting themselves with the space. Harry had known they had made a plan to come re-enliven the small yard, but he hadn’t been prepared for it to be so soon. For it to be today. He should have known, however, that the two of them together would make something so beautiful.

“Good morning, Harry.” She called, not yet opening her eyes, still running her fingertips over the last of the blooming foxglove. Her magic lay around the garden like dew in the first breath of the morning.

“Hestia. Neville. Tea?”

Neville seemed to snap out of his trance, dusting his trousers quickly and pulling himself to his feet, his blushing paradoxically deepening. “Yes please. A splash of lemon ginger if you don’t mind. I’ll just finish up with the table and chairs for out here - we can take tea in the garden!”

Hestia smiled, watching Neville rush off to set up a little wrought iron table and chairs in the corner, dragging them to the little alcove beneath the blackthorn. He conjured a little tablecloth and pulled a chair aside, motioning for Hestia to sit.

She rolled her eyes at Neville, but smiled and alighted, her amber eyes taking him in the dappled light.

Harry returned with the tea tray, setting it on the table between the three of them, interrupting Neville’s doe eyed stare and shy giggling.

Harry drank his tea quickly. It was too much, watching Neville shamelessly flirt and Hestia pretend not to notice, both of them fawning over more plans for the little space, though Harry couldn’t imagine it would hold much more. He zoned out while they discussed where to put the aconite Hestia would use for her wolfsbane, which she brewed herself, and always needed a steady supply nearby.

He stared into his tea, letting his thoughts wander back to the dream he’d awoken from, their voices blurring in the background as he swirled his cup absentmindedly.

“Harry, darling.” Hestia’s voice broke through the fog.

“Hmm?” He looked up at her as she rested a hand gently on his arm, stopping him from nearly spilling the last of his tea.
“Won’t you be late for Luna’s? It’s nearly 10.”

“Oh, shit, you’re right. I’m going now. Thanks for the tea and company. I’ll see you both later!”

Harry rushed out the words as he jumped up from the little table, turning to head back inside, grab Sirius’s jacket and apparate to therapy.

He stopped halfway through the door to the tea room, staring back down into the last bit of tea in his cup. He could have sworn the dregs had formed the spectral black dog that had haunted his divination lessons so long ago, but in his haste to confirm the sighting, he swirled the cup again and the image was lost.

He shook his head, set the cup on the table and rushed out to the front door, eager to see Luna for therapy.

The hour seemed to have passed in mere moments, Harry barely able to explain how much was crowding his brain, pulling at his thoughts, keeping him overwhelmed and frustrated. How much he wanted everything to be simpler, to be a normal person with a normal job and not an addict on top of everything.

Luna had been uncharacteristically quiet, aside from praising him to no end for using his resources, for staying sober and for finding his way amongst the chaos. And reassuring him that it was not unusual to slip, to struggle, to fall just a little from the great heights we attain. She had repeated her mantra, that recovery is not linear, and Harry had felt it, for the first time in ages, ring true in his bones. Afterward, she had been gentle and soft, and let him ramble, all of his fears filling the room, deep into the corners.

“There is a lot to weigh on you at the moment, Harry. It is okay to take the time to reacquaint yourself with how you feel. To be angry, even. And scared.” Her quill, normally so active across the writing pad at her side, was still, the page blank of notes. She looked thoughtful, reflective. It was strange to have a session where she was not pointedly chasing his analysis, challenging him.

“When will things stop changing? When will I be able to feel like I have solid earth beneath my feet and no one is pulling my world out from under me?” Harry’s voice was quiet, but the silence of the room was amplifying, and he hated the waver in his voice, so obvious to both of their ears.

She sighed deeply, so uncharacteristically, and shifted in her chair. Harry felt selfish for a moment. Luna was at the cusp of drastic change, as well.

“Shall we floo?” Luna asked, wearily. She couldn’t apparate, not now in her third trimester.

“Yes, I imagine they’re all there and waiting for us already. No one will want to be late for our first official Grimmauld Place meeting.” Harry helped her over to the fireplace and threw in some powder.

Their first meeting was a resounding success. Luna had taken a backseat and let Hestia lead the
session, and she had risen, graciously and gloriously, to the challenge, a new light in their midst. She glowed on her settee, purple daisies still perfectly prim in the forest of her hair.

She had expertly welcomed the old and the new, ensuring introductions and greetings were made. St. Mungo’s, Dr. Unice Rhoda, to be exact, had referred more clients to the meetings, and the regulars welcomed two more into their midst.

Joaquin was a shy and gentle soul who had struggled with dreamless sleep and calming draught after a particularly traumatic upbringing in the south of Wales, never having been able to leave the potions while he was a young student at Hogwarts, and only falling deeper into a wormhole of desperate escapism after the war. He, like Dennis, shook ever so slightly under the watchful eyes of the strangers, and Harry silently had sent him courage in the face of all the vulnerability of one’s first meeting, a warm and gentle wave across the room.

The second attendee was someone Harry had recognised, her face having featured in so many of his nightmares in the early aftermath of the battle. She had been young then, but her countenance was unmistakable. Ginny had comforted Alethea as Harry walked to his death, and he had watched them share that moment together, awash with the pain, desperate for home, for times of peace and comfort. Like Ginny, Alethea had buried the pain in sex. She could not look up at Harry for the entire session, and unlike Joaquin, he held his magic from her, watchful of her boundaries.

After they had left, and the house was empty again, Harry took another piping cup of tea out into the garden, steam rising as the sun fell in the Western sky. He sat at the little table where Neville and Hestia had spent their morning, his hands wrapped around the mug, lost in the same thoughts that had been forming eddies in his mind all day. Thoughts of thestrals and Death Herders, of Dumbledore and lies, of self sacrifice and of healing. Of what he wouldn’t do to keep wizardkind safe. That was the Gryffindor in him, after all.

And that other thought. The main thought. The one he’d been so avidly avoiding. The thought of Draco. Draco, who was ready to be the chosen one. Ready to do good. To be good. To be part of a destiny. To be rare and to walk into the unknown, the uncharted.

Harry reflexively recoiled from the thought, shrinking unto himself. He wanted to the exact opposite. To be normal, and boring. To be chosen for nothing and to be beholden to no one but himself. To be given the chance to be in the background, to let others take the reins.

How cruel it was that they had fallen together so perfectly, had built something soft and kind and lovely between them, to feel as though he had a real chance at happiness. Only to have this, this horrible giant thestral in the room, shoved between them. Harry resented it. He felt trapped by it. If there was one thing he knew, it was that he never wanted to feel like something was not his choice ever again.

He took a sip of the still scalding tea, burning his tongue, cursing himself, silently.

“I know you’re there.” He said, still looking down into his tea with great contempt.

A snort behind him, and he felt the hot gust of air ruffle his hair. Harry smiled, not able to help himself, the bitterness falling away as he reached up to pat the skeletal cheek, the winged stallion drooping his head over Harry’s shoulder, nuzzling him. Though he hated to admit it, Harry had missed his spectral creature over the last week. The beast had disappeared after the night he’d left Draco in the foyer, and had left him to his own devices on the moor.

“Maybe you do let me make my own mistakes, after all.” Harry said softly, the thestral’s ears flicking back, listening as Harry rubbed the leathery skin beneath his eyes.
“Come on, flea, I need an early night tonight.” Harry stood, and the two of them ambled inside, Harry giving the encouragement a quick rub before trudging upstairs and falling into bed and, before long, into a deep sleep.

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He was running again, big paws landing in the tall grass that seemed to stretch out into the horizon like an ocean, waving gently in the night breeze, stars bright across the sky. There was no moon.

A cackle sounded in the dark ahead. Then another. Loud, high pitched whooping, chorusing, howling and crying into the night, interspersed with the eerie laughter. Harry stopped, the cacophony of sounds coming ever closer, arising on all sides, the tall grass rustling, perhaps with more than just the wind. The smell of blood filled the air.

To his left, a dark figure emerged, hunched, with rounded ears, it scooted through the patch of starlight and back into the tall grass. Another form followed. Then, on his right, two more creatures emerged, Harry catching glances of their spotted fur, their sloping spines. The giggling laughter and howling calls were growing ever louder, drowning out any other sounds of the night. Harry could hardly breathe for the smell of blood and rotten flesh was thick and purulent in the air.

Just in front of him, a form slipped between the grasses, taking shape. A hyaena, the head of a wildebeest lodged between gaping jaws, the spine, still articulated, dragging behind her as she waddled ahead, her stomach grotesquely swollen with their kill. She slipped alongside Harry without giving him a second glance, the vertebrae dragging through the earth at his feet.

Harry stood frozen as the clan surged around him, the forty or fifty members calling to each other, laughing into the night, some of them shining with blood in the starlight, others carrying trophies back to their den, all of them full with fresh meat and raucous in their celebrating.

As their calls fade behind Harry and the smell of blood disappears on the wind, he finally moves again, heading off into the night. Ever onwards, ever North.

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August 20, 2009

Harry sat in the tea room, slowly picking at muesli and yoghurt with bananas and strawberries, a glass of orange juice on his left. He had awoken from another night full of dreams, thick and molten, like memories, all of which refused to fade in the light of a new day.

He sighed, leaning back and sipping his juice as a large barn owl swooped in the open door, dropping a letter in his lap, the molten wax seal emblazoned with the insignia of the ministry.

Harry glanced down at the letter a moment, unsure if he was ready to face whatever it was the ministry was haranguing him about in the early hours of a Thursday morning. He flipped the letter over to find the absolute afront of “Mr. Harry James Potter, the Tea Room, 12 Grimmauld Place” in a sloping and fanciful script.

He snorted, ripping open the expensive envelope and unfurling the parchment inside.

Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well. I have been meaning to write since I read Mr. Dennis Creevey’s
I want to honour Fred. And George.

Please, help me do so.

Yours,

Percy Ignatius Weasley

Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot

Harry pushed his muesli aside, all other thoughts dissipating in the light of what he must do, and headed up to his work room, not to be disturbed for the remainder of the day.

August 23, 2009

By Sunday, Harry had drafted his plans for the twin’s monument. He had contracted a supplier, and a wide slab of sneezewood lay across his work table, a grin playing on his face. Sneezewood was so named because of the irritating oils that escaped the wood as it was worked, making the carver sneeze uncontrollably. It was a beautiful timber, and prized for xylophone keys, the perfect mix between playful and mischievous.

Harry ran his hands across the wood, dusting away some shavings, feeling the grain beneath his palms. He had carved a hyaena for Fred, the little spotted semblage of his patronus, rolling in the grass, laughing at the sun, full of joy. At the other end of the slab, he had crafted a coyote, one that howled and yipped and called for his brother. Both of the creatures longed for their pack, often meeting in the middle of the wood, rolling and snapping around each other, the love between them plain. Brothers.

Harry pulled the cloth he had tied around his mouth and nose away, stepping back and taking his first true break in days. He had skipped meetings, even his lunch date with Ron and Hermione, to stay working. He had felt unendingly called to answer Percy’s simple, but poignant, letter. To make something just as joyful and witty as the twins, something that could hold the grief that their loss had created. To fill the wound they had left behind. To bind it with their laughter, their carefree smiles. To honour them.

Harry sipped at his long cold tea, his heart full, but the days of unending, single minded work wearing at him. He stifled a yawn, then a sneeze, waving his hand with a soft laugh to clear that last remnants of the wood dust.

He yawned again, overcome with the bone-weary tiredness that had nipped at his heels all afternoon, often fighting for dominance with the pangs of guilt Harry felt deep within his gut each time he looked at the corner of the workbench where Draco had found him that morning, the morning they had found out why the thestrals followed them. The morning Draco had made him come, but then everything had changed.

Harry huffed a sigh and rubbed his eyes, pushing his hair from his forehead, laying back on the small settee in the corner.
Every time he thought of reaching out to Draco, he recoiled. He had started several letters, only to crumple them up and throw them into the fire. Draco, they’d always start, I nearly relapsed from the stress. Ron had to come collect me on an abandoned hillside with a bottle of Jameson. I’m a wreck. Again. I don’t have any control over my life, and I don’t want to drag you into the nightmare I’ve been in. Plus, I’m having the weirdest dreams. Then, without fail, they’d end with something like, but I miss you and I have not been able to stop thinking how you got me off and I want that every day until I die. Please don’t abandon me.

Nothing was appropriate to say. Nothing sounded right. Nothing was the full truth, yet fair to Draco. Harry flipped over onto his stomach and groaned into the silver decorative pillow. Trapped. Again. And he let sleep wash over him.

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In a forest again, large black paws slowly stalking the edge of the shadows that flickered around the clearing ahead. A voice called out.

“Show yourself, Grim.”

And the paws morphed into hands, and he was a man, his bare feet padding into the glen, the firelight ricocheting off his flesh. Harry approached the man who had spoken, thick and heavy, black skin painted with white ornamentation. A string of bones around his neck, a thick skin across his shoulders.

Harry held out his right hand in greeting, his left supporting his outstretched elbow. Harry looked down at their hands meeting, surprised to see his skin marked with tattoos. Runes and dark bands.

“I am no Grim.” Harry’s voice was hoarse with disuse, but oddly familiar.

The man laughed, deep and hearty, throwing his head back, the bones around his neck glinting in the firelight.

“A snake is still a snake, no matter what you call him. His venom is no less, nor the speed at which he will kill. You are a Grim. It is in your blood.”

The man sat at the edge of a fire on a wooden stump, his round stomach snug between his legs.

“Why aren’t you afraid?” Harry’s voice was rough, like gravel.

“Death comes for us all, Grim. You are just a messenger.”

“I am not a Grim. That is just a story.” Harry felt anger rise in him.

“Mm. We are all just stories, somewhere.” The man’s smile was wide and bright in the dark.

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Harry awoke suddenly, the sliver of the moon high in the sky beyond the window of his work room.

“Sirius.” He gasped, to no one in particular. The house was silent.

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September 1, 2009
It took Harry a full week to bring up his dreams to Hermione. It was a bad habit of his, pretending his nights weren’t haunted, weren’t filled with messages from ethereal and unnerving places. And Hermione, he knew, would be full of questions, overwhelming in her quest for understanding. She’d ask him things he couldn’t answer. She’d want details he wouldn’t recall.

So, it was one week later at Rose’s second birthday party, that he pulled her aside, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly with one hand while he shuffled about, his eyes on his feet.

“Harry?” Hermione tilted his chin up so he would look at her.

“I think Sirius was a Grim.” There. It was out. That was that.

Hermione was silent. Her eyebrows were drawn together. Her mouth was half open, as if she was on the verge of saying no Harry, of course he couldn’t be. But the words didn’t come.

“I think Sirius was a Grim, and I think Dumbledore was keeping him in Grimmauld Place because of it. Because he wanted to use him, as a Death Herder would. I think he trapped him there with blood magic. That’s why the house was so full of it. Why it took me so long to…” But, Hermione was already off, running back into the house, calling over her shoulder that she’d need to check her personal library.

Harry slumped back against the table, relieved to have told her, but still fraught with the implications, with the possibilities that were unfolding. Secrets and lies, indeed. He looked down at a gentle tugging on his hand. Rose was reaching up to hold his two fingers in her tiny grasp. She had a sippy cup to her mouth in one hand and was pointing a stick at the pile of presents, levitating one.

Harry smiled down at her, happy to hold her hand and enjoy the joyful simplicity of the moment, a place so far removed from the complicated mess his life had become.

That was, until he felt the familiar swirl of magic around him, a panicked and startled wave, cold and unfettered. He looked up to catch Draco’s equally as startled gaze. He opened his mouth, eager to apologise, to explain, to fix what he had done. To undo the time and space he’d built between them. But it was too late, Draco had turned on the spot and was gone.
The sounds that drifted into the dusty bedroom window were different than Draco was used to. Hogsmeade was softer on his ears compared to the restless bustle of ambient noise that permeated his flat in London. Under normal circumstances, he would find the quiet soothing to his jangled nerves, but no, these were not normal circumstances. Instead, the deepening silence of the coming night descended on Draco like a suffocating blanket.

Draco had spent the last twenty days balancing on a knife's edge, and now, now felt like his breaking point. He was hunched at his little desk in his little one room flat above his new practice. It should all be new and exciting, but instead, it felt off. It didn’t feel like home. He felt like he was losing whatever tenuous grip he had on his sanity as he sat at this unfamiliar desk in this unfamiliar flat, frantically scribbling on post-it after post-it. The corner of the room looking like a rainbow flurry of crumpled paper.

He had picked up writing on post-its again after Harry had asked for space and disapparated without an explanation. He went to Beatrice in a state of near hysteria when he hadn’t heard from Harry after three days. She encouraged Draco to go back to this tried and tested method of self soothing. He bought out the entire section of muggle stationary at his nearest office supply shop when he left her rooms.

Draco remembered when he used to carry one or two meaningful messages, carefully and neatly folded in his pocket to reassure himself throughout the day when he was struggling.

Then, for a while he carried Harry’s letters and talisman to keep his heart strong. But now, his pockets were crammed with crumpled paper covered in illegible handwriting. He couldn’t spare a single moment for careful folding or considerate placement, and as soon he managed to write something halfway intelligible he shoved it into his pocket in the hopes that it might keep him from drowning.

And, he couldn’t stop. If he stopped, he would have to face his sudden and new life with all these new responsibilities and monikers and the silence of a world without Harry. And, no, he just couldn’t do that. Not yet.

He was falling apart, he reasoned maniacally to himself as he scratched out another pointless phrase of hopeful cheer before squeezing it in his hand, feeling the sharp edges of the neon paper bite into his skin. He tossed it over his shoulder, not caring where it landed, before starting the process over again.

*I love my life* he wrote, and scoffed, before throwing it aside.

*Things will get better* he tried again, before tossing that one behind him as well.

*Existence is a fucking joke.* Yes. This. And, he stuck it to the wall in front of him.

Ever since Harry had walked into his life, he had been falling apart. This man who repeatedly took him apart and put him back together. Who gave him grand romantic gestures and then left him, seething and alone. Who asked for him to be in his future and then asked for space.

Draco had replayed that entire day’s events in his head over and over and over again, trying to see where he could have done better. Where he could have behaved differently. What was it about him
that drove Harry off? He knew, logically, that this wasn’t about him, that Harry really did have some hard choices to make, that he needed to think over on his own. But, the fact that he didn’t want Draco around stung more with each passing day.

He felt less and less sure about their relationship. Is that even what they were? Were they in a relationship? Or was Draco something Harry was merely interested in on his good days? Not privy to help him in his struggles. Why would he be able to help? Draco thought bitterly to himself, when he has Granger and Weasley back? He doesn’t actually need Draco for anything anymore. Fangs from poisonous childhood insecurities sank deeper, and Draco let them.

Ron and Hermione had been so kind and empathetic to Draco’s poor attempts to conceal his distress over Harry. When he had finally broken and asked them if they’d heard from him, Ron had said, in kind and gentle tones, that when Harry needed him, he’d come to him, and, until then, to just trust him and give him the space he’d asked for.

Draco had wanted to hex Weasley, and then cry into his stupid orange t-shirt, the git.

He threw his pen away from himself in frustration, running his fingers through his hair, feeling as though he might burst through his skin with fire or electricity. He felt clammy and sweaty, and he could hear the buzzing of thousands of bees in the deep corners of his mind. Closing his eyes, fingers still threading through his blonde locks, he tried desperately not to think of Rose’s birthday party. The one he had fled from mere hours ago. The scenes kept filtering back to him, no matter how many stupid pieces of paper he scribbled across.

He needed bigger post-its, that’s what it was. Reaching to his left, he pulled a squeaky drawer and grabbed an economy sized pad of post-its, a new pen and began scribbling. Not bothering to close the drawer, his teased hair standing on end from his haphazard ministrations.

Yes, this would make it better, he was sure of it.

I’m trying to like who I’m becoming. He scribbled the words, half script half print, letters joined together in his rush to convince himself of the content. He placed the slightly larger yellow square besides the others on the wall in front of him. Perhaps he could wall paper the entire flat, he thought to himself, bitterness finding equal footing with resignation.

I’m not useless, I can be used as an example of what not to do with one’s life. He smirked self deprecatingly, and placed it too on the wall, trying to block out the whirlpool of thoughts. Thoughts about that morning. About the past. About the future. Thoughts about Harry and death and all the work he had put in to recover. To make progress.

This is an abnormal amount of bullshit. He jotted with a flourish, placing it highest above the rest.

Someone from the outside may say that Draco was having a breakdown, but Draco knew he was doing just fine, thank you very much. This was all perfectly okay. He and his post-its were really doing this coping thing well. Recovery. Yep, that’s what this was. Recovery.

He got up, needing to move through some of his pent up energy. Kicking through a mound of colourful paper on the floor, he stomped over the kitchen, making the whole room rattle. He decided to himself that a cup of tea would be wonderful. Something warm and soothing, something to still the writhing snakes in his core. He boiled the kettle and, while he waited for the tea to steep, he prodded the charmed cloud over his encourage-mint on its new drab window sill. He noted with regret that in his frantic anxiety of the last three weeks, he had rubbed a bald spot in the centre of his plant, and, even now, he couldn’t seem to stop himself from touching it apologetically.
With a hot cup of mint tea in hand, he turned to survey his new home, letting the fragrant vapours curl around his face as he inhaled it gratefully. He hated it. Not the tea, the tea was life-giving. He hated his flat.

Everything, from the walls, to the ceiling, to the floors, and countertops, was a muted and insipid wood tone. It was one monotonous heap of dull browns and washed out greys. Hermione had given him some yellow curtains in an effort to brighten up the space, but all it did was depress him more. He felt like a prisoner in a Hufflepuff’s garden shed. But, it was all he and Hermione could find on such short notice, and the downstairs had been perfect for his practice space. But really, brown.

Sure, he hadn’t needed to move in as soon as he did, but he had been agitated waiting endlessly for Harry, and he had thought a change would do him good.

It didn’t.

The dirty tones and drab dullness of his new life reflected how he felt about his existence at the moment. His brand new bed in the corner felt too big for him, and for the flat itself. The appliances were mustard yellow enamel that seemed on the verge of crapping out at any moment, and the sink sputtered unevenly when he ran the tap. All of the floorboards creaked, all of them, and he’d given himself three splinters since moving in. Even his thestral didn’t want to spend time here, he thought balefully. Voileami had only appeared twice this week, and he was used to her being a near constant presence.

Perhaps, he would have felt more excited about opening his new practice and facing the world as a newly minted death omen, if Harry had been standing beside him. But, as it was, he was on his own. The story of his life, it seemed.

Hermione and Ron had insisted that Draco come to the party earlier that day, since all of their friends would be there, and they both seemed suspiciously keen to reacquaint him with the entire Weasley clan. Hermione had even quietly reassured him that Harry had been keeping to himself and was unlikely to make an appearance.

Ron had met him at the front door and made introductions to everyone in the house on their way to the back garden, his arm slung around Draco’s shoulders, brooking no argument from him, or anyone else for that matter. Ron had kept shoving sweets and pies and other various baked goods at Draco, prattling on about learning to cook and keeping everyone fed. Something about camping — no need to fight. Ron talked a lot with his mouth full.

He should have felt grateful for the very Gryffindor welcome, but instead, Draco felt sweaty and nauseous, waiting for someone to spit on him. He had gripped the fistful of ratty post-its in his pocket the entire time. It had been reduced to a ball of moist paper after merely twenty minutes of light socialising.

The worst part of the whole ordeal was that everyone seemed to treat Draco like a part of the group. The family. When Molly pulled him into a crushing hug and thanked him for being so kind to her Harry, he wanted to scream and run. At least Ron had the decency to look embarrassed, cheeks full of courser sausage, but Hermione’s pitying eyes made him want to puke. He was eventually led towards the back garden, to where most of the guests were mingling in the bright afternoon sun. Dozens of children ran screaming in circles, some laughing, others falling and crying, toddlers crawled under tables, and there was an air of general chaos that is so common in children’s birthday parties.

After saying hello to a few more people, they rounded the garden and, well, there he was.
Of course he was there. In all his stupid glory, leaning against the picnic table, all haphazard and gorgeous, with a giggling Rose at his feet. Potter, in his stupid leather jacket, with his stupid hair, and his stupid glasses, and his stupid scar, as if he had not a care in the world. He was going to kill Hermione.

When Harry looked up and his green eyes landed on him, Draco’s blood ran hot and delirious, and he had to resist the urge to crush the paper cup in his hand. He felt his nostrils flare with his sharp inhale, and knew he must be turning a lovely shade of rage-red.

Harry had looked surprised for only a moment upon seeing him, before Draco had turned on his heels and walked straight back into the house. He had stomped, really. The burrow rattled and swayed at his conviction. At his anger.

Draco had made it all the way to the front door, pulled it open and crossed the front yard, breathing heavily, sweat breaking out across his whole body, the urge to destroy something beautiful at the tips of his fingers, flighty and persistent, when he had heard Harry’s familiar low call from behind him. The sound had halted him, affixed him to that patch of ground, time spinning effortlessly around him, as if mocking him for thinking he could escape the low rumble of Harry’s voice, as if he could flee from it, as if it didn’t pour along every inch of his skin, settle in every woven thread of his bones.

How he hated how easily he responded to that sound. He loathed it. He turned to see Harry slipping out the front door of the haphazard house, trying to catch up, a look of sheepishness, and possibly regret, etched on his face. Pure and innocent and simple. Like he hadn’t just spent twenty separate days depriving Draco of that resonating rumble. Of his light, his ambrosia, of Draco’s name on his lips. Of that smile. Of the feel of his magic, agonisingly kind and careful as it warmed Draco’s skin. No threat, no warning that it could burn him alive and leave him nothing but ash, in pieces on the wind.

He tore himself away, his ears full of the crack that broke the magic between them.

He had apparated directly into this sad little brown flat and immediately started a three hour marathon of post-it note writing.

Now, sipping the too hot tea, he reflexively reached out to stroke his badgered and balding encourage-mint, the smell doing little to soothe his electric nerves. Every time he thought about Potter chasing after him at the party, he was overcome with another wave of fury and anguish.

How dare Harry, honestly. As if Draco had not spent night after night panicking, crying, worrying, pacing, writing letters only to burn them before sending? Draco’s whole being felt sore and raw as if an infected scab had been repeatedly picked at over days and nights.

A muffled thumping from the front door downstairs startled Draco out of his stewing and he stood frozen, eyes wide, panic mounting. Who the bloody hell was here? He couldn’t let anyone see his flat in this state.

Dear lord, if Luna came to check on him he would have a hell of a time explaining the chaos of rainbow paper covering the floors and walls. The pounding was relentless, echoing through the emptiness of the downstairs lobby and up the rickety wooden stairs to his attic flat.

He took a fortifying breath and tried to vanish a few heaps of post-its, but in his haste to get to the door, he knew he missed most of them. Coming down the stairs and reaching the front entrance, he pushed his wild hair out of his face and yanked open the door.
The sight of Harry standing at his front door in ratty jeans and his leather jacket, a box in his arms, and large, apologetic eyes was enough to knock the wind out of Draco. He stood there, nostrils flared, eyes wide, and eyebrows so high he knew they were lost in his hairline. He was at a complete loss, there were no words. Twenty days of nothing, and now this?

“I know you’re angry—” Harry started, and Draco slammed the door in his face with a satisfying, rattling thud.

He huffed an incredulous breath, nearly hyperventilating with shock and anger, his palm flat on the slab of cheap pine in front of him, steadying himself. His eyes were impossibly wide. The audacity of Potter.

“Can we talk?” Draco felt the muffled, hopeful voice beneath his hand, and in his disbelieving rage, he wrenched the door back open, breathing hard, ready to throw a hex. Or a punch. Harry seemed unsure of himself, shuffling from one foot to the next, and despite Draco’s ire, a flicker of endearment broke through at the sight of a rumpled Harry Potter on his doorstep. Draco was weak. He hated it, but he was.

“Three weeks, Potter!” Draco shouted, and Harry winced.

“I’m sorry, Draco, really—” He tried, looking helpless, but so eager. He had dark circles under his eyes, and Draco could see a few white hairs in his stubble that weren’t there before.

“THREE WEEKS.” He bellowed. “I know you had things to figure out, and wanting space is PERFECTLY REASONABLE,” his voice cracked with incredulity, getting louder with each syllable, “but nothing? For three weeks?!” Soon only bats would be able to hear Draco’s shrill crescendo.

Harry didn’t try to speak this time, he had an embarrassed and constipated look on his face.

“What?! You’re all fine again, so you want to talk, now?!” Draco demanded, gesticulating nonsensically.

“Can I please come in? I want to apologise properly. I— I’ve really missed you.”

Draco’s nostrils flared so wide he was surprised flames hadn’t erupted from them, his mouth drawing down into a tight line and he was sure his eyes were large enough to put him in mind of Little Dipper, “You missed me?” His voice was dripping with disbelief. “Ever heard of a fucking owl?! I do believe you HAVE ONE.”

Harry just looked at him pleadingly with those too-green eyes and raw vulnerability that always seemed to rip Draco open.

Unable to formulate any words after a long and tense silence, he rolled his eyes in defeat and stepped aside to let Harry in, internally kicking himself for how quickly his resolve had broken. Harry seemed relieved that the door hadn’t been slammed in his face a second time, and Draco’s stomach lurched with a thousand unnamed emotions as he closed the door and led Harry upstairs.

It was suddenly quiet. Too quiet.

“So…” Harry said, following closely behind Draco, clearly reaching for something light to break the tension, “is this your new space?”

Draco nodded stiffly, his limbs shaky with adrenalin, as they reached the top of the stairs. He felt a fresh flush of embarrassment as he scanned the room. The bed was unmade, there were dishes in
the sink, he had pants on the floor, and most distressing of all, he still had hundreds of post-its littered across the floor and stuck haphazardly to the wall. It felt exposing for Harry to see the evidence of his struggles. To see how Draco had coped in his absence. That his absence had had such a profound effect on him.

The vulnerability made Draco angrier.

“This is nice.” He said softly, gesturing vaguely to the flat, eyes lingering on Draco’s desk a fraction too long.

Draco didn’t respond, he was filled with too many things to respond. Anger, yes. But also profound relief at Harry alive and well in front of him. That his nightmares of Harry dead in an alleyway hadn’t come to fruition. That he hadn’t run off with someone else to help him through his emotional turmoil as his boggart insisted. The combination roiled in his stomach, bile rising in his throat. He turned and stomped to the kitchen, rattling the windows as he went, and started the kettle for tea.

Harry let out a huge sigh, setting his box on the floor by the door, and walked slowly towards Draco as if approaching a dangerous animal.

When the kettle whistled, Draco busied himself with the familiar reflex of preparing tea. Letting the series of movements distract him from Harry standing far too close. His magic radiating out, curling around Draco’s frame.

Carefully setting down the teapot and cups onto the tray and arranging all the necessary pieces, he finally turned to face a patiently waiting Harry, whose eyes watched Draco closely.

Draco cocked a single brow in question, still not trusting himself to speak.

Harry scrubbed his hand over his face, stealing himself, seeming unsure.

“Thank you, for giving me space.” He finally said, looking sincere. The bastard. “I should have let you know how I was sooner.”

Draco shrugged. Feigning an indifference he didn’t feel. He had never felt indifferent about Potter.

Harry sighed again. “I know it was a lot to ask, but I am really grateful. It’s been a really rough few weeks—I mean, it hasn’t been easy.” He paused, seeming unsure how to continue. “And I was feeling too embarrassed by how I acted to reach out again, even though I really, really wanted to talk to you. Desperately.”

Draco’s gaze shot up, feeling a little called out. Hadn’t Draco done the same thing to Harry all those months ago?

“I still don’t know what to do about being a death omen.” He said, and the small bit of relief Draco had allowed himself to feel upon Harry’s reappearance evaporated.

“But,” he continued, seeing the defeat in Draco’s face, “I do know, that I want to be with you.”

Elation and confusion warred inside Draco and he still had no words to offer Harry.

“And, if I want to be a Death Herder?” Draco asked, finally finding his voice after a long silence.

“Then, you should be. Hell, at least one of us should be.”
“It isn’t going to bother you if your partner is an omen of death? I thought you wanted a normal life? A boring life? Nothing about me is normal or boring, Potter. Is that really what you want?”

Draco pushed, intentionally dramatic.

“Potter still, huh?” He cocked a disarming smile.

Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to the tea tray. Picking it up he pushed past Harry and walked it to the low coffee table in front of the small sofa on the opposite wall.

Sitting down, he began fixing Harry’s tea, just as he liked it. Too much milk and not enough honey. A small smile curved Harry’s mouth as he sat down next to Draco and took the flippanently proffered cup.

They sat in silence, sipping their hot earl grey, uncertainty hanging around their shoulders.

Harry put his half drunk cup down and turned to face Draco. “I know there’s nothing normal about you or this situation. There’s never been anything normal about you, and I wouldn’t ask you to give this up. But, that’s just it, I always thought I’d be the one to say this in a relationship, that I’m too difficult, too broken. But, I’m just as fucked up and complicated as you are. I can handle your sharp edges, your darkness. And, you can handle mine.”

Draco was staring into his tea, refusing to look up, letting Harry’s words wash over him.

“Draco, I don’t want to do this without you. These last weeks have been hell. I don’t want fate, or destiny, or to be told what I must do, but you, I want you. I want to choose you. I want you in my life. I just didn’t want to drag you down as I fall.”

“Are you going to leave me to stew in my own worry, for weeks on end, every time something happens? I want to be there when you fall, you pillock.” Draco retorted sharply. He knew he was being unfair. Harry was saying all the things he wanted to hear, but he was too afraid to have. It felt too easy after the turmoil of the last month.

Harry deflated. “Draco— I’m sorry— I can’t promise it won’t happen again, but I do promise that I won’t shut you out like that anymore. It wasn’t fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Draco agreed loudly. He seemed to be struggling with volume control, and he averted his eyes. “I’ve been so—” he cut himself off, not wanting to tell Harry just how pathetically distraught he had been.

Harry glanced past him towards his desk at the explosion of paper, and Draco knew he understood. Understood that Draco had been holding on by a thread. That he cared so deeply and profoundly for Harry’s wellbeing and boundaries that he spent his waking moments doing anything he could to keep himself sane while respecting Harry’s wishes for space.

Harry reached a tentative hand out, and Draco resisted all instincts to pull away. He wasn’t ready to let go of his anger.

Harry took Draco’s cup and set it aside, and Draco reluctantly allowed his hand to scooped up and held tightly by achingly familiar fingers. Calloused and dry. Gentle and firm.

Draco looked into Harry’s searing gaze and knew the battle was lost. Stupid Potter, with his kind eyes and his nice smile. He hated how weak Harry made him. His shoulders drooped and he squeezed Harry’s hands back, a quiet surrender.

Casting about for something else to talk about to quell the rise of emotions in his throat, Draco’s
eyes landed on the box that Harry had dropped by the door.

“What’s in the box?”

“Oh.” Harry said, looking a bit caught out, unsure of himself. “Uh, well. See, so you know how Grimmauld Place is holding meetings now, and it’s always so full of people, and I was feeling cramped at Ron and Hermione’s, so—” he trailed off, seeing the amused smirk on Draco’s face.

“So, you thought you’d just pitch up and stay here, after three weeks of silence?” He said, unable to keep the fond exasperation from his voice.

“Well, I was hoping you wouldn’t be terribly opposed to seeing me, yes.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Draco stated.

Harry smiled shyly, bringing Draco’s hand up to his mouth and kissing the knuckles. Draco was fucked.

After tea and cleaning up, Harry hovered awkwardly in the kitchen, seemingly unsure where he should settle himself. Where he would be sleeping. His eyes flickering between Draco’s unmade bed and the tiny sofa.

Draco hid his smile as he went to change in the bathroom, deciding to let Harry dangle for a while. When he came out a few minutes later, Harry hadn’t moved from his spot in the kitchen, but he had stripped down to his black pants and white t-shirt, the sight erasing all rational thoughts from Draco’s mind.

“So, do you have an extra blanket I can use for the sofa?” He asked carefully, casually, just as Draco was climbing into bed.

Draco eyed him for a moment from under his fluffy cocoon of blankets, considering him. He lifted up the edge of the blanket in a clear invitation. Harry looked surprised and hesitated.

“Come on, then.” Draco sighed, feeling overcome with nerves, excitement and relief.

Harry’s face mirrored Draco’s feelings and he stepped lightly on bare feet over to the bed and gingerly slid under the covers. He hesitated for a fraction of a second before scooting in close and wrapping an arm around Draco, lazily waving a hand to put the lights out.

“Show off.” Draco grumbled as he nuzzled in as close to Harry as he could, not able to control how needy he felt once the lights were out. He was like a starved animal and Harry’s touch was his sustenance. Draco allowed himself to melt into him in the darkness of the room, under the heavy duvet. The painful ache he had been carrying all these long nights seemed to dissolve under the weight of Harry’s body pressed against his. Both holding tight, seemingly afraid that the other might disappear at any moment.

“You like it.” Harry said lightly, as he held Draco tight, breathing deeply into his neck.

Draco huffed and felt a sudden surge of prickling in the corner of his eyes. He was not going to cry. He refused. Harry had seen too much of Draco’s rawness, of his vulnerability. He couldn’t have this as well.

But he was here, and he was safe, and he was choosing Draco. He was afraid of the relief that came with those thoughts.
“We have a lot to talk about, Harry, if this is going to work.” He said gruffly. Trying to keep his voice even, to hold the tears back.

Harry was quiet as he rubbed soothing circles on Draco’s back. He didn’t say anything about the growing wetness on his shoulder or the soft sniffing coming from Draco, just pulled him closer and considered his words.

“Like I said, I want you. I want us to be together. This is a choice that I want to make for myself because you make me happy and feel whole. And I’ve fought so hard for this. For us. I don’t want to give it up.”

“But, how is that going to work if I’m spending all my time focusing on the thestrals and what they need from us— me.” He corrected.

“I— I can give you space when you need it.” He said carefully, reluctantly. “I just don’t know if I want the expectation and responsibility that comes with this kind of deep magic. It makes me feel like I’m starting back at square one. In the aurors. On assignment. Now with even more death.”

Draco snorted indelicately. “Harry, I don’t think it’s about doing the bidding of unforeseen forces, or the ministry, or anyone else. I think we were chosen for who we are and what we want to do without our magic. I think it’s about just being ourselves and letting the healing come from that. Are the thestrals forcing you to make monuments to the dead against your will? Are you being coerced into helping others at meetings? Do you not want to do either of those things?” Draco asked.

Harry was quiet for a long time, and if it weren’t for the continuous movement of his hands on Draco’s back, he would have thought he had fallen asleep. “Well, when you put it that way.” Harry said quietly, after a long while.

“I’m very intelligent.” Draco said into Harry’s shoulder, his voice still thick, still holding himself back. His throat was sore from the sobs he wouldn’t let escape.

“That you are.” Harry said, rolling onto his back and pulling Draco to lay on his chest. Draco hiked his leg up across Harry’s body and curled around him. Letting the feeling of Harry’s hands in his hair and the light touches to his arm sooth the rise of emotion flooding his insides.

“What do you want in all of this?” Harry asked, in his softest voice yet.

The question tore at something in him. Broke his flimsy grip on composure he had managed since leaving Grimmauld Place. He couldn’t stop the sob that erupted from him.

His body shook with silent tears as he clung to Harry. The stress of not knowing for weeks washing over his wrecked frame. Harry squeezed him tightly planting soft kisses into his hair. It was too much. Too kind. Too sweet. Too everything, after so much pain. He couldn’t stop himself from crying like a fool into Harry’s chest.

Harry was softly touching him all along his arms and sides, running his fingers across Draco’s leg that was laid across his midsection. “I was so fucking worried.” He finally said after his halting sobs subsided into deep measured breathing.

“I know.” Harry said, remorse evident in his voice.

“What I want—” Draco said hesitantly at first, raising himself up on his elbows to look at Harry, the last of his tears drying on his face “is for us to stop running from things.” He finished, more loudly than he had intended.
Harry nodded, his face just barely visible in the dark, “Okay—”

Whatever else Harry had intended on saying was lost as Draco, overcome with a desperate urge to be closer, kissed him hard.

Harry was startled for only a moment before responding with equal vigour. His lips parting under Draco’s insistence, the slide of Harry’s tongue against his own melting the last of Draco’s reservations.

He pulled back, sat up and pulled his shirt over his head, breathing heavy.

“Draco, we don’t have to do this.” Harry said, his breathing uneven, his voice strained with effort.

“I want this. I need this, Harry. Please.” The last word sounded desperate. He wanted Harry to know that he was here, that he wasn’t going anywhere, that he really wanted this. Him. For himself, for them.

Harry studied him in the dark for a moment, taking deep, steadying breaths. Sitting up he pulled his own shirt from over his head and tossed it aside. He reached out to pull Draco’s mouth against his. The relief Draco felt as he laid himself on top of Harry’s bare chest, settling between his legs, and pressing against his lips, was profound. Nearly frightening.

He ran his fingers through Harry’s hair, gripping it too tightly when Harry rolled his hips underneath him, and a current of electricity fluttered up Draco’s spine.

He moaned into the kiss and Harry drank him in, running his hands over Draco’s body, migrating slowly down, stopping only to appreciate the dimples on his lower back.

Draco couldn’t seem to touch enough of Harry, he was burning up with the need. His hands moved in time with their hurried kissing from the hard muscles of his arms to the long stretch of skin down his side, his thumb dipping gingerly below the waistband of his black pants.

Seemingly unable to restrain himself any longer, Harry gripped Draco’s ass with strong demanding hands, and with exquisite precision he lined their now hard cocks up against one another, trapped behind the fabric of their thin pants. They both moaned into the sensation and Harry arched up into it, seeking more friction. Draco gave it to him, kissing down his jaw and neck, tasting the sweat on his collar bone, rutting languidly against Harry.

“Draco, can I—” Harry panted, “Can I try something?” his fingers hooked into the waistband of Draco’s pants.

“Uh, yeah— yes.” Draco acquiesced, feeling elation and apprehension. Fueled with a need for release and strung tight with a desire for Harry’s hands on him.

Harry deftly rolled Draco onto his back and carefully, lovingly kneeled above him, his hands on Draco’s hips. “Can I take these off?” He asked, his voice uneven.

“Yes.” Draco replied, feeling weak in the knees, letting his head fall back on the pillow. Fighting those pervasive instincts to run. He wanted whatever Harry wanted to give him.

Draco lifted his bum off the bed as Harry gently pulled the fabric down from his waist. Leaving him naked and bare for the first time under Harry’s gaze.

“Yours too.” Draco croaked, lifting his head again. Harry huffed a nervous laugh and swiftly pulled his pants down and off, revealing a similar state of arousal. The sight forced a pitiful sound
of need out of Draco’s throat and Harry carefully lowered himself over Draco, slowly kissing a trail from his jaw down his chest.

Draco tried his best to lay back and accept the lavish affection Harry peppered across his skin, but he couldn’t be still. He huffed quietly, trying not to moan at the feeling of Harry’s lips on him. He ran his fingers through Harry’s hair, raked his nails down his arms, and squirmed underneath him, seeking friction. He could feel the small smile on Harry’s face. He was going slowly on purpose, Draco knew, trying to elicit more of the moans of desperation that Draco was hesitant to let out.

When his mouth reached Draco’s hip bone and he sucked lightly on the skin, he finally, finally wrapped his hand lightly around his aching cock. Draco let out the moan he had been stifling for long minutes. That seemed to be all the encouragement Harry needed, as he languidly stroked Draco’s cock, settling himself between his spread legs and planting wet kisses to his inner thigh, his heaving breath ghosting across Draco’s skin.

Draco was lost in the sensation. It was both too much and not enough, not nearly enough, but he was afraid to ask for more. He was hot and cold all over, and his entire existence had narrowed down to the feeling of Harry between his legs, his mouth so near his cock and that hand moving so slowly up and down his shaft, his thumb casually swiping across the head.

Draco’s knuckles were white as he gripped the sheets, trying desperately to still his hips that seemed to be moving of their own accord, fucking into Harry’s hand. “Please.” He whimpered, unsure for what exactly he was asking for. More friction, more anything.

As if answering his plea, Harry slid his hot, wet mouth over the head of Draco’s prick, and he couldn’t stop the surprised, needy groan that erupted from his throat.

Harry torturously, slowly ran his tongue down Draco’s shaft. Each bob of his head taking in more and more, aquatinting himself with the sounds and reactions Draco made to each movement.

He was out of his mind with the need to come, with his desire to see Harry come, to fall apart with him. Looking down and seeing Harry, with his eyes fixed on Draco, his lips stretched around him, was a nearly overwhelming sight.

“Harry—” Draco whimpered, unable to stop himself. He instantly hated the loss of contact when Harry stopped.

“Do you like this?” Harry asked shyly, licking a broad tongue up the underside.

“Nnngh—” Draco affirmed incoherently, his eyes going wide.

“What about this?” He asked, taking Draco in his mouth as far as he could, slowly, teasingly.

“Fuck.” Draco whimpered, throwing his arm over his eyes. He was dying. In the most excruciatingly beautiful way possible. He felt like he was about to explode into a thousand pieces.

“Mmm.” Harry hummed, sucking gently on the head, softly swirling his tongue around it.

“Please.” Draco begged again, for what exactly, he didn’t know. He was beyond caring, he just needed the release of this overwhelming tension in his body.

“Tell me what you need, Draco.” Harry asked with a sly smile on his face, slowly working his hand up and down. Just enough pressure to make Draco’s toes curl, but not enough to bring him over the edge. He was starting to feel frantic.
“I— I—” he was struggling to find words. Harry’s hand and mouth were rendering him speechless and incoherent. “I—I, uh, I want you to finish too.” he groaned out.

Harry’s face split into a surprised and pleased smirk. “I’ll finish.”

“How?” He panted, the increased pressure of Harry’s lips pooling heavy in his groin.

Letting Draco’s dick slide back out of his mouth he said smoothly, “I’ll come from just the sight of you— the taste of you.”

“Ngggh—” Draco moaned as Harry redoubled his efforts, his mouth working up and down, faster now. Harry had drawn himself up slightly on his elbow, and using his other hand, he reached down and fisted himself as he worked Draco to the edge. The sinful sight of Harry with his mouth wrapped around Draco and his other hand working himself, pushed Draco past the point of no return and he panted out soft breathy moans.

His stomach clenched with his impending release and he tried to warn Harry by calling out his name. Harry, who moaned his encouragement from around Draco’s cock.

Lights erupted from behind Draco’s eyes and his orgasm tore through him with brutal strength as he emptied himself into Harry’s moaning mouth, unable to still his frantically rocking hips. His lips parted in a silent cry as the overwhelming sensation ripped him open. Harry’s fist was flying fast over himself and spilling over Draco’s thigh, a stuttering groan escaping his lips.

Draco’s limbs felt limp and lifeless. Harry coughed slightly and wiped his mouth, before crawling up the bed and wrapping himself around Draco as tightly as he could. Containing him.

They shared a quiet, slow kiss, breathing deeply.

Draco didn’t know how long they laid there kissing but he found himself drifting and heard Harry whispering words like beautiful and perfect as he was wrapped in blankets and held firmly to a strong chest. He felt peaceful for the first time in weeks and began floating off to sleep on the wave of exhaustion that overtook him, surrounded by Harry.

Draco swam slowly to wakefulness the next morning. The sounds of the nearby woods and of Harry’s soft, even breaths in his ear were familiar and safe. And, for an aching moment, it put him in mind of Tenebris Hollow, before the memories of the night before came flooding forward.

Harry came back. Harry came to bed with him.

His eyes shot open and he felt hot all over. Sweat and apprehension pricking his skin. Under cover of darkness, it was easy to be carried away on a wave of lust, longing, and release. But now, in the light of a blinding morning, what must he do? Harry stirred sleepily next to him, reaching an arm out and lazily pulling Draco’s side flush to his chest, not yet opening his eyes. Not realising how startled Draco felt by the familiarity of it all.

Draco, who could feel the beginnings of an epic battle raging in his insides. Joy at Harry’s return, righteous fury at his long absence. Victory at their progress, embarrassment at his own need.

He took the opportunity to glance at Harry’s placid face resting on his shoulder and collect himself. He was still furious with Harry for leaving him dangling in the wind for three weeks, and even more furious with himself for giving in so quickly at his reappearance. He felt a pervasive fear that this was temporary, that the rug would be pulled out from under him at any moment, that
one of them would run again. His inner boggart had begun it’s relentless song and dance. It was far too early in the morning for this.

Draco let out a quiet breath he hadn’t realised he had been holding as he tried to decide what came next.

“Stop panicking.” Came Harry’s gruff voice, hoarse from sleep. His eyes were still closed.

“I am not panicking.” He countered too quickly, his body flushing with another wave of heat and sweat.

“Mhmm.” Harry pandered, squeezing Draco and planting a kiss on his shoulder.

“I’m not.” Draco insisted petulantly, squirming uneasily in Harry’s embrace. He could feel Harry’s mouth smiling against his shoulder, and when he turned his head to look at him he saw two slivers of very green eyes, squinting at him in the morning light streaming in from the curtained window beside the bed.

“I can literally hear your brain working.” He teased in a low voice, releasing Draco to stretch. He huffed indignantly and cursed his body’s overexcited stress response as he watched Harry out of the corn of his eye.

Harry who looked completely at ease, well rested, and beautiful. It knocked the wind out of Draco to see Harry in his bed like this. So comfortable. So normal. He was simultaneously enamoured and irritated. How dare Harry be well rested and at ease after the month Draco had. How dare he show up unannounced and let Draco take him to bed. How dare he let Draco fall apart like that. How dare he sleep so peacefully afterwards. How dare he make Draco feel all of these fucking feelings. The nerve of him.

He had half a mind to storm out of bed and lock himself in the bathroom, just so he could breathe . His circuitous thoughts for petty revenge were interrupted, however, by a gentle hand on his jaw, turning his face towards a suddenly very serious looking Harry. “We’re not running anymore, remember?”

Draco sighed, the fight bleeding out of him. He looked away.

The fact that Harry knew him so well almost made him more angry. He sat quietly, swirling with a thousand emotions that he couldn’t place, couldn’t organize, couldn’t explain, sweat breaking out across his skin, again. It took every last bit of will power he had to not pick a fight. To not lash out irrationally. To not say something crass and hurtful. To not push Harry away. These things were all he could think to do to still the writhing snakes in his stomach. He swallowed hard before looking back at Harry, whose eyes never left him. Considering.

With a heavy tongue, he spoke. “I have a lot of cleaning to do downstairs.” He said finally, painfully, as evenly as humanly possible. It was all he could think to say, lest a volcano erupt from his throat and burn Harry alive.

Harry watched him closely for a long moment, understanding clear in his eyes. “I’ll help.” He stated before squeezing Draco’s hand and smiling easily. Draco couldn’t manage to reciprocate the smile, but he did manage to squeeze Harry’s hand and nod. Baby steps.

Three hours later found Harry, covered in cobwebs and sweat, on his hands and knees in a corner of the downstairs potion’s room, scouring the floor, cursing under his breath. His clothes were smeared in dust and grease, and his hair looked like he’d gone flying in a strong wind. Draco
smirked to himself from his vantage point on his new potion brewing bench, as he unpacked and organised ingredients on the shelves. He had decided to take his revenge in a more constructive, Slytherin way.

“Tell me again why we can’t scourgify this?” Harry panted as he scrubbed the large bristle brush with soapy water along the dusty and parched floor boards.

“Like I said, it doesn’t get out all that soaked in grime, and we can’t have my potions space contaminated, can we?” He said, matter of factly.

Certainly they could have scourgified first, but, honestly, Draco was enjoying this too much.

When he had first presented Harry with a brush and bucket, Harry had eyed them with an air of surprising determination. He seemed to accept his flagellation for his transgressions with grace.

They carried on in this vein all morning. From room to room they went. Draco organizing supplies and furniture while Harry carried out the deep cleaning in the muggle way. Throughout the day Harry caught Draco watching him shrewdly, a knowing smirk on his lips. But, to his credit, he never wavered. Harry did every menial and hard task Draco could throw at him no matter how tedious and did it without complaint. Did it as cheerfully as one could covered in sweat and dirt with splinters under their fingernails.

They were unusually quiet over their lunch break and Harry watched Draco carefully, as if considering something important.

“What?” Draco finally snapped. Unable to take the knowing looks any longer. Harry smiled ruefully and shook his head.

“Nothing.” He said slyly. Draco narrowed his eyes but didn’t say anything, continuing to pick at his jam sandwich.

“So, what next?” Harry asked with much more enthusiasm than Draco felt when they returned to their work downstairs.

Later that afternoon Draco’s feelings of frostiness towards Harry hadn’t abated and he was feeling uncomfortable in his own skin. He found himself compulsively pacing from room to room with no clear course of action, minutely rearranging things he had already organised.

He simultaneously wanted to be unnecessarily close to Harry while he painstakingly cleaned Draco’s practice space, and yet, couldn’t bare to be in the same room with him. He wanted to go upstairs and write on his post-it notes, but decided that would be too revealing with Harry there.

A soft flutter of leathery wings being stretched in his periphery caught his attention and he stopped his macabre mulling to see Voileami sidling up to him, sniffing curiously at the potions ingredients in Draco’s hands.

“Hello, you.” He said, smiling despite himself. He hadn’t seen her in days. “Where’ve you been? Where’s your friend?”

“Flea’s in here!” He heard Harry calling cheerfully from down the hall. Draco rolled his eyes to Voileami but didn’t call back.

“Fleabag… honestly. You don’t even have fur. It’s not even clever.” Draco muttered his ire,
smiling despite himself as he stroked her velvety smooth beak. She closed her eyes and hung her head, enjoying the affection, completely unaware of Draco’s internal strife.

A pounding at the front door startled Draco and Voileami tossed her head nervously. “It’s fine, it’s probably just Neville coming to bring plants.” He told her soothingly, patting her neck.

As Draco scooted around Voileami, whoever was at the door, pounded again, more vigorously.

“Yes, yes, yes.” Draco said to no one in particular, reaching his hand out for the door.

When he pulled it open he was momentarily stunned at the definitely not-Neville Longbottom standing on his front stoop.

“Can I help you?” He asked, sounding far too confused.

The two ministry wizards didn’t answer him right away. They stood, surveying him with clinical detachment, as if sizing up how best to tackle and hogtie him. They wore plain and imposing black robes over tailored suits and dark aviator sunglasses. These were not aurors, nor were they unspeakables. These were upper level ministry dogs. The kind that usually protect the minister when he’s out in public. The kind no one wants at their front door.

Just as Draco was feeling distinctly uncomfortable, in his sweaty t-shirt and wrinkled trousers, under their scrutiny, and about to ask what the fuck they wanted, the short one spoke. Pulling a roll of parchment out from his black robes he drawled lazily, as if in no rush to get to the point, “Mr. Malfoy we have a few questions for you, if you would be so kind to show us in.”

“Healer.”

“Pardon?” The other one grunted.

“It’s Healer Malfoy.” He corrected coolly. “And, I’m perfectly capable of answering questions here, if you don’t mind. I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“We mind.” Said the first one, shoving the parchment towards Draco. “We have orders to search the premise.”

“For what?!” Draco asked shrilly. He hadn’t been accused of anything nefarious since before he was cleared at his trial.

“We’ve been advised that your potion license may have expired and that you’re brewing illegally. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“Draco?” Harry’s voice called as he came to investigate.

The two men stilled, exchanging a look before plastering on passive, bland expressions.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked eyeing the men with narrowed eyes. Draco could feel his magic raising, pulsing like defensive quills around him, pointing at the intruders.

“They think I’m brewing illegal potions.” Draco scoffed, his arms tight across his chest.

“Based on what?” Harry demanded of them.

“An anonymous tip.” Said the short one.

“Where’s your warrant?” His voice was hard and commanding.
Draco passed the scroll to him, not yet having unrolled it.

Harry snatched it, unfurled it, and scanned it quickly, his expression growing more stoney.

“This is bullshit. It doesn’t give you the right to come inside. It’s just an order to clarify Draco’s potion brewing status.”

Simultaneously the two men retrieved identical law enforcement badges from within their robes, eyes not leaving Harry.

“The entire point is moot, by the way, my license is *not* expired. It’s good for five years and I reapplied three years ago. I needed it to get the business permit—”

“We’d like to have a look around. Put the ministry’s mind at ease, you see.” the taller one said smoothly.

“No.” Harry’s voice rang out.

“It’s fine, they can bloody well come in.” Draco muttered mutinously, feeling it would not be clever of him to get on the ministry’s bad side just as he was about to open a private practice.

“No.” Harry said more loudly, and Draco winced. “They don’t have the right to or a reason to come inside. They’re just trying to push you around. Draco, go get your brewing license so they can be satisfied and be on their way.”

Draco hesitated, not liking to be ordered about. But, looking uncomfortably between the law enforcement agents and Harry who were having an intense stare down, he accepted defeat and turned towards the stairs. Harry’s magic was crackling around the whole room, making all the hairs on Draco’s arms stand at attention as he walked away.

Coming back to the front door, license in hand, Draco noticed that they hadn’t moved a muscle, their stare-down going strong. He cleared his throat and thrust his brewing license towards the agents. Neither moved to take the paper nor did they show any particular interest in it. The short one’s eyes flickered down for a fraction of a second before he spoke, taking his aviators off.

“Thank you, *Healer* Malfoy. That all seems to be in order.” he drawled cruel amusement as he methodically cleaned his lenses with a soft grey cloth he pulled from an inside pocket. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing you around.” He gave Draco and Harry one last contemptuous look before donning his sunglass and turning in unison with his partner.

Harry wandlessly slammed the door shut before they had reached the street, rattling the window panes. Draco jumped, the loud noise grating his nerves.

They exchanged a concerned and charged look before wordlessly making their way upstairs.

After their unexpected visitors, Harry spent the late afternoon and early evening brooding. His magic felt sharp, like rolls of barbed wire draping around his shoulders and Draco didn’t know what to do to soothe his sharp edges.

He, himself, had succumbed to the overwhelming pull of his post-it notes and sat hunched at his desk, scribbling away his nerves.

When the clock on the wall showed 5:30, a thought occurred to Draco, and he straightened his back before turning to face the room. “Potter, don’t you normally have a meeting at five on Thursdays?”
Harry who had been cleaning the kitchen with an almost frightening determination, froze, his magic swirling around him, the air of someone cornered. He didn’t answer. Just stood there looking down at his hands in the sink, his shoulders stiff with tension.

“Harry?” Draco tried again, getting up and slowly walking towards him.

Harry shook the water off of his hands and dried them on the damp dishcloth draped across his shoulder before turning to look at Draco. His jaw was tight and his eyes were downturned. He leaned back against the sink and gripped the edge of the counter behind him with white knuckles, as Draco stood opposite him against the breakfast bar.

“I’ve only been to one meeting since I last saw you.” He said, still not looking at him.

Draco’s arms were tight across his chest and he could feel their magic dancing carefully around one another. Uncertainty thick in the air. They had spent the entire day ignoring the last month.

“Why?”

“I, um— I almost relapsed after— after I left you at Grimmauld.”

Draco stood very still. He didn’t know what to say. Nothing felt appropriate. All he wanted to do was reach out and squeeze Harry’s arm, just to anchor him. He did so carefully but firmly.

“I didn’t.” Harry deflected, not responding to Draco’s touch. “But, it was close. Too close. Ron came to get me.”

He was silent for a moment, waiting for the right words to form in his mouth. “I know you don’t feel good about this slide backwards, but “almost” is still a net positive, Harry. Your sobriety is intact. It’s okay to not be okay 100% of the time. It’s human to struggle.” Draco said softly. He didn’t want to excuse anything or dismiss Harry’s feelings, but he needed him to know that he could be proud of himself for resisting. Even if it was an ugly battle that he dragged himself through the entire time.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, hard, and scrunched his eyes. As if he were trying to hold back a raging flood. Or fiendfyre.

Draco finally dropped his hand from Harry’s arm, but Harry darted out to catch it and squeezed it hard. Draco let him hold his hand too tightly as he wrestled with whatever it was he wanted to say.

“I was afraid to tell you.” Harry said, still scrunching his face, his eyes closed.

“Why?”

“Same reason I didn’t go back to the meetings.” He sighed and finally looked up. His eyes were over bright and his face looked like he might be sick. “I was embarrassed by how far back I fell, so quickly. It was like a reflex. And, I’m just not ready to tell the group yet.”

Draco squeezed his hand in understanding. He resonated with the embarrassment that comes with feeling incapable of getting yourself from one moment to the next without crawling through the battlefield of your own mind. “Harry, you can’t isolate yourself from your support system just because you’re embarrassed. Trust me. It doesn’t work.”

Harry smirked with a small self deprecating smile, “Secrets and lies.” He murmured.

“Exactly.”
“I thought you’d be furious.” Harry said, searching Draco’s face.

“I’m furious that you didn’t speak to me for three weeks, not that you almost relapsed. What kind of monster would be mad at your for struggling?”

Harry shrugged, looking down at their joined hands.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Harry took so long to answer that he began regretting that he had asked.

When Harry spoke, his voice was small and he continued to look down at their hands. “I left you and apparated directly to a small town that we had hid near when we were on the run. Where no one would recognise me or find me.” He began uncertainty, and Draco gently swiped his thumb over Harry’s knuckles in encouragement. “I bought a bottle of Jameson—I went to the moor that we had camped on, and I sat there. I was so sure that I was going to do it. So sure that I wanted to forget for a while. I had even opened the bottle.”

“What stopped you?”

“I realised I didn’t have to be alone. I called for Ron and came and sat with me. Vanished the bottle.”

“I’m glad you called Ron.” Draco said quietly.

Harry finally looked up to meet Draco’s eyes and he looked relieved by the confession.

“Me too.”

He moved forward slowly, giving Draco the opportunity to refuse, but when he didn’t, Harry wrapped his arms around him tightly. Draco could feel his magic, lighter than it had been since their visitors. The stress of the day suspended as he gripped Harry tightly to him.

Draco woke disoriented in the dark. The heavy, irregular breathing and grunting next to him alerting him to Harry’s dream. He turned quickly to face him and ran his fingers through Harry’s sweat soaked hair. His face, just visible in the low light of the room, was twisted into a painful grimace.

“Shhh, Harry. It’s okay.” He whispered soothingly as he continued to methodically and firmly caress Harry tangle of damp hair. “You’re okay.”

“I’m not a grim—” Harry grumbled in his sleep.

“Shhh, of course, you’re not.” He said, knowing full well that dreams were usually entirely nonsensical.

“I’m not a Grim, Remus.” Harry retorted with more force.

Draco’s brows furrowed as he tried to figure out Harry’s dream logic, gently shushing him, alternating running his fingers through his hair and rubbing soothing circles in his back.

Harry mumbled a few incoherent sentences that made Draco smile to himself. Whatever dream he seemed to be having didn’t appear to be a nightmare that he needed to be saved from.
“I wonder where you are.” Draco mused to himself as Harry mumbled and twitched.

“North. Always North.” Harry answered, to Draco’s surprise.

No more cryptic words were forthcoming after that. Draco fell asleep with their foreheads inches apart as Harry’s mumblings lessened and he too drifted off.

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They woke the next morning to yet more pounding on the front door. Harry was out of bed and rushing down the steps, his magic furious and protective, before Draco had even oriented himself. “Fuck.” Draco muttered to no one. The last thing they needed was Harry getting arrested in his underwear for trying to protect Draco from pushy ministry agents.

He tossed on a shirt and ran down the steps after Harry who had already reached the front door and was speaking with someone.

“Hiya, Draco!” Neville shouted cheerfully as Draco came running down the stairs. “Sorry that I’m here so early.”

Harry looked relieved, but wild, standing there in his pants and undershirt, his hair and magic standing out in all directions, his glasses skew on his face.

Draco for his part felt overly exposed idling in the front hall in his pyjamas next to his half clad boyfriend, greeting a friend at the door who was carrying a box of many plants.

“It’s fine Neville, come in. Do you want some tea?” asked Draco, his brain still thick with sleep.

“No, thank you, I’ve got to get back to Hestia, I just wanted to drop these off while I had the time.”

Neville shoved a large box into Harry’s arms, whose face was awash with startled confusion. It was clear he had rushed downstairs expecting a fight to the death and instead he was faced with a box of potted ficus. He turned dazedly to walk back across the room, setting it down on the reception desk.

Neville followed behind with a second box and set it on the floor. “These are for in here,” he indicated to the box on the desk, “and, these are for your exam room.” He indicated to the box on the floor.

“They’re all shrunk down, obviously, so you’ll need to lift the charm, but just set them where you want and place an atmospheric charm on the lot. Let me know when you’re ready to start your potions garden.” Neville was beaming brightly.

“Thanks, Neville, you’re a star.” He said examining the waxy deep green leaves of something he was sure was called a philodendron.

“And, uh, sorry for interrupting your morning.” He said with a sly smirk towards Harry’s revealing clothing choice.

Draco blushed furiously and sputtered incoherently. Harry cracked his first smile since flying to the front door and shook his head, walking towards the stairs. “Bye Nev!” He shouted, by way of response.

Neville laughed and turned to leave. “Enjoy your day!” he shouted back. Draco groaned in embarrassment as Neville closed the door behind him.
He had just reached the top of the stairs, ready to snipe at Harry for running to the door half naked, when the front door sounded again. “Merlin’s sagging tits, what now?!?” Draco moaned.

Harry, looking just as furiously resolute as he had when he greeted Neville, brushed past Draco, fully clothed this time, to answer the door. He seemed determined that Draco should not do it himself.

“You know, I can answer my own door!” Draco shouted at his descending back. Harry didn’t respond. He moved to throw some proper clothes on while Harry dealt with whatever was happening downstairs. As he was pulling his socks on he heard two sets of feet walking up the stairs, and he quick jumped up and pointed his wand at the unmade bed and piles of clothing on the floor, in an effort to look less like a slob for whoever the fuck was visiting at 8 in the morning.

Harry emerged from the stairs followed by a woman Draco didn’t recognize, but whose affect was strangely familiar. Before he got a chance to ask who she was and what she was doing in his flat, before he even got a chance to take in the straight white hair and pale wrinkled face, she pointed her wand at herself and said, “Finite Incantatum.”

The small old white woman was instantly replaced with the much younger, black, Hermione Granger.

“Granger?” Draco asked, but she shot him a murderous look that begged for silence. He closed his mouth as she began casting around the room. Lacing the dark wooden room with her ice blue lattice threads of magic.

“I’ve already done this Hermione.” Harry said softly, eyes darting to Draco, but she didn’t stop.

“I’ve already done it too, and I know Draco has, but a little more reinforcements never hurt anyone.” she said firmly.

Draco just sat dumbly on his bed, completely flabbergasted that the two of them had already cast enough protective magic to make his flat an impenetrable fortress without him realising. “I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself, you know.” He said testily as Harry watched Hermione work.

“We know.” She said simply, her wand ceaselessly working.

Harry turned towards the kitchen to start the compulsory tea making process. “What’ll it be today?” He called gruffly to Draco.

“There’s a blue tin in the cupboard, I think that’ll be most appropriate for this morning.” He said rubbing his eyes. He needed something strong and fortifying. His motherwort blend should do the trick. They didn’t call it the lion-hearted herb for nothing. Harry nodded and began rummaging for the tin.

“Okay.” Hermione said when she was finished. She turned and smiled kindly. “Good morning, Draco. How are you? Sorry about the cryptic entrance.”

“Not at all.” Draco said flippantly, resigned. “I’m fine, things are almost ready here. I should be able to open by Monday the 13th. I don’t have a receptionist, but I don’t think I want one yet.”

Hermione nodded approvingly. “Good. Yes, I think you’ll be fine on your own for now. Unice has a few patients line up for you, and St. Mungo’s is happy that you’ll be brewing speciality potions.”

“Okay, that sounds great.” Said Draco. “So, why the cloak and dagger visit?”
Hermione smiled. “Old habits die hard, I suppose.” Her eyes swivelled to Harry. “I turned in our report on your research to the DoM. Your initial research, that you completed in the forest, will be made available to the public through St. Mungo’s research department, but everything we worked on afterwards is classified and incomplete. I gave them your resignation letter stating that you wanted to focus on your speciality and private practice and that you weren’t interested in pursuing the thestral lore because there was no science behind it.”

Draco nodded.

“I just wanted to come and warn you to watch out for anything unusual. The DoM accepted the story pretty gracefully and I wasn’t questioned in a way that was out of the ordinary, but it would be unusual if they didn’t follow up on you—”

“They came yesterday.” Harry interrupted, his face and posture rigid.

“What?” she asked, startled.

“Yeah, two agents came and tried to strong arm their way on to the premise. Some bullshit story about Draco’s brewing license being expired. They seemed surprised to see me.”

Harry was standing with his feet wide and his arms across his chest. He looked every bit like an auror in that moment.

“I’m sure they were, your relationship isn’t common knowledge yet.” Hermione said, looking between the two of them. “As far as they’re concerned, Draco is a bit of a hermit with few friends.” She shrugged apologetically. “Sorry.”

Draco shook his head, it wasn’t an entirely false description.

“Either way, I’m surprised they used Ministry agents right out of the gate.” She chewed on her lip, thinking. “I think you’ll need to be very careful about what you talk about and where. Don’t mention the thestrals, Death Herders, or the Grim, Harry, unless you’re in a protected location, like this flat. Don’t even speak about it downstairs.”

Something stirred in Draco’s memory. The grim. *I’m not a grim, Remus.*

“Harry, you were talking in your sleep last night about a grim.”

Harry’s eyes shot towards Draco, a look of deep concentration lined his face as gears worked to place Draco’s words.

“You said, ‘I’m not a grim, Remus.’ and then you said you were ‘going north, always north.’” he explained.

Harry’s eyebrows rose and his mouth was in a comical ‘O’ as he clearly remembered his dream.

“Yeah— Yeah, I dreamt I was Sirius again.” He said, looking towards Hermione.

“Again?” Draco asked.

“Really?” Hermione sounded excited like she did when she was on to something. “What was this one about?”

“There were more?” Draco tried again. They continued to ignore his questions, too caught up in revelations Draco wasn’t privy to.
“Yeah, I was him, but this time I wasn’t in Africa, or I was leaving Africa... I was with Remus, or going north to be with Remus. I can’t remember this one as well. Neville woke me up so suddenly this morning.”

“Neville?” Hermione sounded confused.

“Yes, Potter was expecting a duel and greeted him in his pants.” Draco snorted.

Hermione laughed.

“Fuck off.” Harry grunted, trying to hide his amusement and embarrassment.

Draco couldn’t help smiling. “It was very gallant.”

Hermione chuckled as Harry turned, red faced and smirking back towards the tea tray.

“Anyway,” Harry deflected, carrying the tea tray to the sofa, “we think Sirius may have been a grim, and that Dumbledore was keeping him trapped in Grimmauld Place to use him.”

“Wow.” Draco didn’t really know what else to say to that startling proclamation.

“Yeah, we don’t know the details, really, but I keep having these dreams about him from when he went into hiding after he escaped the dementors. I think he went all the way to South Africa, but something spooked him while he was hiding in a forest and he started making his way back home for answers.”

“Why don’t you ask Dumbledore?” Draco said, burning with curiosity and a desire to put all the pieces of this puzzle together.

“What?” Harry and Hermione asked together.

“Ask Dumbledore.” he repeated. “We spoke about going to tell McGonagall anyways, we can ask his portrait while we’re there.”

“Oh.” Harry seemed shocked by the idea. “I never thought to do that...”

“Remember when I went to speak to Severus last year? Powerful wizards have powerful portraits. I’m sure he’ll have information for you.”

“Okay, yeah. Let’s do that. I have another monument to take there anyways.”

“Did you finish it?” Hermione asked very quietly, her face soft, sitting on the arm of the sofa and resting her hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Yeah.” Harry said gently, smiling at her and squeezing her knee. “I’ll show you before I take it to Hogwarts.” Draco was missing something. His eyes volleying back and forth between them as they shared a moment. He felt like they could probably have entire complex conversations with mostly facial expressions.

Remembering his presence, Harry turned to Draco and handed him a cup of the strong herbal tea with a slice of lemon. “For Fred and George.” He said in explanation. “I made something for them when Percy asked me to a few weeks ago.”

Draco hummed his acknowledgement. It was moments like these when he felt the weight of his part he played in the war. He didn’t know Fred or George very well in school, though he had secretly and desperately wanted to be a part of their pranks and misadventures. But, the reality was
that he didn’t fight on their side when it counted. The pain in Harry and Hermione’s eyes when they spoke about them, cut Draco open.

He took a sip of the too-hot tea and let it burn his tongue. Some penance, at least.

After Hermione left, Harry gave Draco a swift kiss on the cheek before disapparating to his first meeting in weeks. The house felt oddly empty without him, though the entire flat bore evidence of his presence. His toothbrush in a cup next to Draco’s on the sink, a pair of blue socks on the floor by the couch, a ratty hoodie draped across Draco’s desk chair, his encourage-mint on the window sill next to Draco’s.

He curled his hand around his third cup of tea and smiled to himself as he ran his fingers along the hem of the ghastly jumper. Allowing himself to feel happy for the first time in weeks.

When Harry came—home? Back to Draco’s(?)—that night, Draco felt a thrill of relief. He didn’t want to admit to himself that by six pm he was feeling distinctly worried that Harry wasn’t coming back or that something had happened.

He had spent the day organising all of Neville’s lovely plants. All specially chosen to create a comfortable atmosphere. Many of them well known for their excellent oxygen-producing capabilities. He got lost in the process for a good few hours, but by three in the afternoon, he was done and needed to do something to distract himself from spiralling into a crisis.

He organised his post-its. Did the laundry. And, even tried to read a book, to no avail. He decided to scrub down the entire flat. Getting out his trusty bucket and a stiff bristle brush, he relished in the catharsis that was muggle cleaning. He even cleared out a drawer in his chest of drawers for Harry to put his things in, then panicked at his own presumption, proceeding to pace around the flat questioning his every life decision that led him to this point.

He made dinner, as well. Bolognese. Not for any romantic or nostalgic reason, obviously, but, because it was simple and easy, and he was sure Harry hadn’t fed himself all day.

None of these activities, however, were consuming enough to stop Draco from circuitously pacing around the flat, sweating with nerves.

When the crack of apparition sounded in the hall downstairs, he nearly jumped out of his skin with giddy anxiety. He couldn’t figure out how to place himself to appear natural. Like he wasn’t frantically worried about Harry the entire time. Harry didn’t need to know how hard it was for Draco to maintain composure. He didn’t want to overwhelm him with how extra he was.

Boots thudded up the stairs and Draco turned to busy himself with the kettle so as to appear occupied and at ease. Smooth, he thought to himself, spooning loose leaves of tea into the teapot.

“Smells good.” Harry said, pulling his leather jacket off and tossing it towards Draco’s desk chair.

Draco turned around, feeling relief and over excitement flooding through him. Why was he like this? Harry had been sleeping here for two nights now, this shouldn’t be so overwhelmingly exciting that he came back at the end of the day.

But it was. Dear Gods, it was thrilling.

“Thanks.” Draco managed to say, still toying with the tea tray, even though there was nothing to be done. “Tea?”
“Sure.” came Harry’s voice from right behind him.

He turned to look at Harry who was smiling at him in a knowing and affectionate way.

He narrowed his eyes and he surveyed him suspiciously. “What?” His voice was far too defensive.

“Nothing.” Harry smiled placatingly, reaching out to tuck a rogue strand of hair behind Draco’s ear. The gentle and familiar movement left Draco nearly speechless. He continued to watch him and Harry continued to smile back.

“How was your day?” Draco finally asked, unable to take the suspense or the feelings in his chest.

Harry shrugged. “It was really good, actually. Hard. But, good. Thanks for encouraging me to go back to meetings.”

Draco nodded, hyper aware of his own body and movements. “Dinner?”

They grabbed their plates and tea and made their way to the sofa where Harry filled Draco in on the progress at Grimmauld place, how things are moving forward and expanding faster than Harry could have anticipated. How the house felt happy to have a purpose again.

“This is nice, you know.” Harry said after a while.

“What is?”

“The food, you, coming back here at the end of the day.” Harry was looking at his plate but Draco could see the pink tinge on his cheeks. “Thank you, for letting me stay. I realised today how hard it would be for me to stay at Grimmauld with the meetings going on. We had some new members and I could smell how recently they had used. Just their posture put me on edge.” He sighed. “I know we haven’t talked about this, or how long I can stay— I suppose we should do that, huh?”

He felt surprised by Harry’s shyness. His usually brash Gryffindor was oozing vulnerability and insecurity and all he wanted to do was shake him and scream you can stay as long as you want, never leave! But, “I cleaned out a drawer for you.” was what he blurted out instead. Very smooth, he thought, face turning pink.

Harry looked at him in surprised confusion. “What?”

Draco cleared his throat and stuttered an incoherent, “You know— if you’re going to be here and your stuff is going to be here— so you don’t have to live out of that ghastly box, and uh— you know, leave your ratty hoody by my desk— You can put your things away properly like a civilised creature.”

The force at which Harry lunged at Draco was quite startling, but it happened so quickly all he had time to do was brace himself on the arm of the sofa. The kiss was sloppy and there was far too much teeth involved, but it was consuming and Harry tasted like his.

When Harry pulled away he had a dazed look and he was still holding Draco’s face tightly between his hands. Draco was a little breathless and didn’t know how to articulate a single one of the bursting feelings in his chest.

So instead, he kissed Harry again.
To the East, the sun had not yet broken over distant mountains, yet the moon had long since sank behind the rolling hills in the Western sky. Between the two, Harry rolled over in bed, just as he rolled away from the ethereal grasp of a dream. A dream about something soft and careful and lovely. Kind and safe. He felt it lay across his skin, just as the simple cotton sheets did. Just as warm, and yet, breathable. Protective, yet not suffocating. Draco had insisted on them. Harry didn’t mind.

He slipped his arms around the sleeping figure next to him, sighing softly into his hair. He smelled hints of lemon and lavender and that strange little herb, dragon’s blood Draco had called it, and Harry had laughed. Draco must have been brewing half the night, and the vapours had clung to him, subtle yet persistent, they had remained.

He felt Draco stirring in his grasp.

Harry kissed the slip of shoulder that had appeared beneath the oversized jumper Draco had donned before bed. Soft and careful and safe and just a hint of salt, left dusted across his skin. He kissed it again, the dragon’s blood sweet and enchanting, his nose full of the smell of him. His lips pressed against the tip of one of the many marks that swept across Draco’s chest, and Harry let a familiar ridge slide against his tongue and his teeth and the hot breath of his exhale against the resilient shine of the arching slip of scar tissue, almost graceful in it’s curvature. So many things about Draco were sharp and exacting, but not this. This was all subtlety, round and lunate.

“Harry.” Draco’s voice was full of sleep, thick and languid, but Harry could hear the smile that had pulled around the sound of his name. Such a simple thing, his name, but to hear it spoken like that, in the folds of night, as if it was a gift, a joy. He felt himself get hard.

“Draco.” Harry’s voice was deep and rough and he felt needy in the way he asked for Draco by name. The way the word spilled out of him, affected as he was. He exhaled softly against Draco’s neck, his hips pressed firmly up against Draco’s bum, no longer shy, no longer timid.

Draco rolled beneath his arm to face him, the smell of dragon’s blood stronger in the tousle of his hair and the press of Draco’s lips against his, soft and wet and agonising.

It didn’t always happen like this, in the quiet hours of the morning, between sleep and dreams and the distant rotation of the galaxy. Some evenings, it happened in the kitchen, the kettle on for tea, empty mugs and waiting teabags, and Harry finding himself on his knees, enamoured with the man before him, messy kisses up his newly naked thighs. Full of worshipful fascination, licking and kissing and swallowing all of his prayers.

Sometimes, Draco waited for Harry to walk in the door after meetings, just there in the hallway, frantic kisses and Draco in his arms, his legs wrapped around his waist, back pressed up against the ugly wallpaper, his hands deep in Harry’s hair, fingers curled against his scalp. Desperate for reassurances. For touch. For certainty.

Some of these days, Harry would carry him up the stairs like that, arms wrapped around Draco’s thighs, their breath mixing together, humid and unfocused. He’d lay him out across the bed and take the afternoon to wash away every anxious moment, scrub away the doubt from his flesh, clean him of each insecurity, slow and deliberate and he’d be so delicate to them both. He’d let Draco
unravel in his arms, then put him all back together again, flushed and beautiful and consuming.

But this night. This night was not that. This night was Harry’s turn to feel the ache of something so primal and inexplicable, something that lapped at the edges of him, made his skin hot and feverish and emphatic.

“Draco.” He already sounded broken.

And he could feel Draco smiling against his lips, his leg sliding over his hip, pushing him onto his back, Draco’s hands splayed across his bare chest, bright against the dark, his blonde hair hanging down, the smell of dragon’s blood strong between them.

Harry groaned as Draco let his weight settle against his chest. His hips. The tops of his thighs. He loved the press of his body. The sureness of it. The gravity. Holding him. Melding them together.

He let his hands drift along Draco’s hips and slid his jumper up his back to trace fingertips along the soft and sweeping curves he found there, expanses of flesh he wanted to commit to memory, to read like braille.

Gods, he was decadent. Decadent and extraordinary.

“Draco.” His voice was the softest yet, his cock straining against the thin fabric of his pants, and he had to close his eyes against the rush he felt, the draw, the longing, his fingers curling into the thin fabric of Draco’s jumper.

“Tell me what you need, Harry.” Draco ran his fingers down Harry’s chest, nails just grazing his skin, pulling down across the flat of his stomach.

“Unhh.” Harry sucked in the words that had formed, his stomach taught and heart fluttering. Gods, he needed anything. Everything.

Draco was looking at him. Blue grey eyes soft and welcoming in the dark. Focused on him, unwavering. His hands lay against the flat of his belly, rising with each of his breaths, which were coming quicker now.

“I need…” Harry closed his eyes against Draco’s gaze. He could feel heat in his cheeks and imagined they were darkening.

He felt split. Discordant. As if a remnant of himself was preoccupied with carrying vestigial shame. Fear. Anxiety about what he wanted. What he needed. What Draco had just asked him to voice. To name. To speak into the humid air between them, thick with their breath and all the things they had left unsaid. Had yet to speak about.

The rest of him, oh, the rest of him ached. His skin was hot and flushed, his hands twisted into the fabric of Draco’s jumper, as if he needed them trapped, or else they would wander. They would betray what he wanted, what he needed Draco to understand. What he wanted to ask for, but couldn’t find the words to explain. He wasn't brave enough. Not for this.

Harry swallowed hard, opening his eyes to Draco’s still patient visage. Patient and calm and knowing. And Harry was reacquainted all at once with the knowledge that Draco knew exactly what it was to feel overwhelmed by your own desires, to question them, to need someone safe and careful to hold you fast as you rocked up against the fear, too intent on being consumed by the pleasure. Draco knew. Draco was safe.

And he let that small part of himself that was shameful and shy and scared, he let it fall away,
unwinding his hands from the fabric that had unwittingly held sway, running his palms down Draco’s thighs. He swallowed hard, eyes seeking out Draco’s once more.

“I need you to open me up.” And the words rushed out of him, grateful and hopeful all at once, and Harry’s breathing was fast for the excitement, for the knowing that for all his trepidation, Draco was the one he trusted to let him be honest with what he wanted. What he needed.

And, without waiting for his reply, Harry rolled beneath him, his stomach flat to the bed, cock pressed tightly up beneath his navel, his hips pulling up and lifting his ass, thighs just barely spread, Draco’s hands now dragging along the slow sweep of his lower back and the arch of his sacrum, fingers just at the hem of his pants.

“Evanesco.” And Harry breathed out heavily into the pillow below him, his body thrumming with the knowledge that Draco’s voice had wavered, just the tiniest bit, as his pants disappeared from his body, Draco’s magic gentle and calming against his feverish skin.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

Harry turned his head to the side to look back over his shoulder, catching Draco’s staring open mouthed down at his ass, his hands running down his hips, feeling each cheek in turn, pulling them apart, spreading him.

“I’ve thought about this for ages, you know, having you like this.” Draco was kneading fistfuls of his ass in his hands, pushing his flesh up and aside, exposing him.

“Me too.” And it was Harry’s turn for his voice to waver. He turned his head back to the pillow below him, concentrating on breathing deeply, on relaxing, on sinking into the feeling of Draco’s hands on his skin, of his magic, so reassuringly familiar. Whispered cleaning spells and a lubrication charm and Harry felt Draco’s hands slide against the slip of skin between his cheeks, against his hole.

Harry rounded his shoulders and tensed, reflexively, and Draco froze, his other hand coming up to rub slowly against Harry’s sacrum, soft and slow pressure up against his spine, long and gentle strokes.

“Shh. I’ve got you. I’m going to make you feel so good, I promise, Harry.”

Harry let out the breath he was holding and felt himself sink back into Draco’s touch, against the unfamiliar, yet tantalising, pressure against his ass. Eventually, his heart slowed, and his breathing began to match the rhythmic slide of Draco’s palm along his back. In and out, deep and even. Draco must have noticed his shoulders fall, because he slowly began to rub a gentle circle around the rim, the soft ridges of Harry’s flesh giving way as he pressed a finger inside

“You’re doing so well.”

And Harry let the strangeness of the sensation slide away into the awe in Draco’s voice, thick with want, and the way his hand stroked against his flesh, strong and firm and grounding, as his other hand pressed deeper, slowly but surely working into him.

It wasn’t long before Harry felt himself pressing back, his hips arching, his knees drawing up, thighs spread.

“Gods, Harry, you look incredible like this.” And it was the desire in Draco’s voice that rippled through him. Harry recognised it in the soft, gravelly tones, the way he spoke, as if to himself, as if
there was nothing in the universe but that moment between them. As if there could be nothing but Harry, naked and pliant in his hands. Harry moaned into the pillow below him, and Draco slipped a second finger beside the first.

And there was an initial burning sensation, but it was so quickly drowned out by the sweep of Draco’s fingers against a part of him that caused his mind to go blank and his body to tremble, his breaths coming as wanton pants, his hands desperately grasping to the sheet below him, his back tight with the new sensation.

“Nng.” Harry managed, his brows knitted together, his eyes closed, his whole body focused in on the slide of Draco against these hidden parts of himself, parts that had sent such a tangled pleasurable thrum through him. The fear and the newness had left his cock soft, but this. This and Harry felt himself getting hard again, lifting his hips further from the sheets, his growing erection desperate for its own attentions. He wanted to come like this. Desperately.

“Draco.” And Harry’s voice had passed wrecked, and he couldn’t think of what to say, only that he didn’t want him to stop. Didn’t want him to ever stop. That he needed more. That he wanted to come. That he needed to.

“Come for me, Harry.” And it’s as though Draco could hear his thoughts. Could feel his desperation, thick and curling around the sheets that Draco had demanded and Harry hadn’t minded, sheets that had been pushed aside for the shimmering gleam of their nakedness, luminous and radiant and shining with sweat. With vulnerability. Unguarded.

His eyes still closed, Harry relinquished his hold on the sheet and reached down his stomach, soft and damp with sweat, and took hold of his cock, unbearably hard and leaking at the tip. Harry moaned as he stroked in time with Draco’s deft sweeps of that slip of flesh inside him, the one that makes his body tremble, an inevitable building of heat and tension forming within his balls, which were tight against him. He could feel his orgasm building, a relentless onslaught of sensation, of every tremor running through him, all convalescing, summing, engulfing him.

And he’d said Draco’s name over and over as he finally let himself go, as his orgasm overtook him, and he was nothing but a trembling mess on the bed, panting and mewling and whimpering in the petit mort.

And Draco’s voice was muffled, as though distant. “You’re okay, Harry. I’ve got you.”

And he was enfolded into Draco’s arms, and it was long before either of them spoke, their heavy breaths slowly blending into the soft and quiet stillness of the night. It was long after Draco had pulled the rumpled sheet from around their feet and lay it across their skin.

Only then had Harry’s voice rumbled softly into the darkness, thick with sleep and fatigue, his voice soft and tempered.

“Draco.”

Harry rolled to face him, sleep chasing his every movement, his body sinking down into the softness of the bed they shared, the warmth of Draco’s body close and comforting. His eyes were closing, thoughts slipping away into dreams. The smell of dragon’s blood still lingered in the air between them.

“Love you.”

And Harry was asleep, dreaming of the soft herbal smells of the hollow and the calls of the loon,
deep and resonant into the night, not even sure he’d said anything at all.

October 14, 2009

Harry woke to a sharp thudding that vibrated through the little attic flat, the windowpanes beside the bed rattling threateningly. He grunted, throwing the tangle of sheets from around his legs, waking Draco in the process.

“Someone’s at the door again.” Harry was still half asleep, valiantly trying to organise himself into the semblance of a man who could answer the door without violating any public indecency laws.

“I’m already dressed.” Draco was pushing him back down against the soft blanket, throwing a black silk kimono over his ratty jumper, tying the sash as he jogged down the stairs, feet pushed into black slippers. Harry could hear him calling for just a moment in his poshest accent, probably smoothing his hair as he went.

Harry lay his head back against the pillow, rubbing his eyes and trying to shake the last of sleep from him. It was too early for this nonsense. Not after the night he’d had. He smiled to himself, his body just sore enough to ensure he wouldn’t forget the way Draco had…

He could hear raised voices from the hall, all thoughts of their midnight escapades faded from his mind.

The front door slammed, and Harry could hear Draco’s thunderous footsteps making his way back up to the flat. Harry was sitting up now, his brow creased in concern.

“Seven in the morning and these brutes think it’s acceptable to call on me. At my home. Absolute harassment. Do they know who I am? They’re lucky I didn’t crucio them. The swine.” Draco was stomping on past the bed and toward the kitchen.

“Draco?” Harry called as he huffed past, Voileami trailing at his heels, ears pinned back in equal anger.

Harry clambered out of bed, picking up a spare pair of pants off the pile of folded laundry in the corner, slipping them on as he followed Draco to the kitchen.

“Who was at the door?” He asked as he slipped around the winged creature in the entrance to the kitchen, giving her a pat and a scratch behind the ear hello.

“Ministry hags.” Draco spat, his magic twirling the tiny honey spoon in his tea far too fast, scalding water threatening to splash across the counter. Harry silently tampered the spell with his own, earning him a venomous look from Draco, who was now busy cracking eggs.

“Pretending to have been sent for the regulation and control of magical creatures. Saying there’s been an increase in complaints of thestrals about the neighbourhood. What utter rubbish.” Draco was now scrambling the eggs with what could be termed excessive force.

Harry sighed and sidled in behind Draco, slipping his hands around his chest from behind, palms flat against pectorals, his forehead pressed to his shoulder.

Draco tensed for a moment before leaning back against Harry, sighing deeply, his hands coming up to cover Harry’s.
“I only just managed to shut the door before Voileami popped out from the reception and into view. Imagine the scandal. I’m sure they were really from the DoM, Harry. I’d write to Hermione if I wasn’t so sure they were intercepting our letters to read through first.”

“What did you tell them?” Harry spoke softly, enjoying the feel of Draco leaning back against him, his magic shimmering around them both, protective and just as rattled as Draco to have the Ministry monitoring their doorstep, an effervescent web of golden threads painting itself into the walls and ceiling of the little brown flat, soaking in to the creaky foundation.

“To eat slugs, in so many words. And that I’ve never seen a thestral here before and to not come knocking at such an ungodly hour ever again.” Draco sighed, returning to his abandoned scrambled eggs. Voileami swished her tail in the entryway.

“And to think, I was having such a good morning.” Draco turned, smiling at Harry over his shoulder, wooden spatula covered in egg still in hand. Harry blushed, burying his face into Draco’s shoulder further, reaching for Draco’s abandoned cup of tea on the counter.

Draco smacked his hand away with the spatula, reaching for it himself, taking a small sip, hiding his own pinkening cheeks.

A moment passed between them, the sounds of the eggs cooking on the cheap stove and the autumn wind picking up in the chilly morning, the old flat complaining of the chill in the shifting whines of ancient floorboards and curmudgeonous support beams.

“I didn’t believe you, you know.” Draco turned again to look at Harry over his shoulder. “All those months ago, when you said you imagined bottoming. I thought you were just trying to placate me. To make me feel less bad for panicking and running.”

Harry huffed into Draco’s shoulder, nosing it softly before answering. “I don’t lie to placate you, Draco. Don’t ever expect me to.”

Harry kissed the back of his shoulder softly and let his hands slide back down his front, his bare feet padding out of the kitchen and back to the bed, keen to get dressed, showered and start his day. He was due at Grimmauld Place early, and he knew Draco would have patients lined up to see downstairs. He liked apparating away before it got too busy, not wanting to distract Draco from his work he liked so much.

No, their time together was safest in the depths of the night, where they could be trusting and open, contained within their sliver of the world together. The confines of their bed. Sometimes he still woke and imagined them together in the cabin, herbs hanging and birds calling awake the dawn, drawing the sun out over the field, warming the hollow, but it would fade into the muted browns and dusty corners of their attic flat, the sounds of Hogsmeade residents replacing the songs of the forest.

Harry apparated onto the stoop of number 12 Grimmauld Place at ten past eight, swearing to himself as he spun into existence there, well aware that Hestia would not be pleased with his tardiness.

He looked up at the gentle huff of the adder guardian, who was far more decorative than protective these days, now that the house had been repurposed.

“Why do so many troubled souls come to this ancient and once noble house, half-master?”
Harry smiled ruefully to himself, always the instigator this little serpent was, never one to let him be.

“They need a home.” The words came easily, and without much thought. But, Harry mused, in retrospect, that’s really what he had wanted. To make this place, bursting with magic and power and potential, a place of love and growth. Of healing. For all the pain that once lived here. Safe, and kind.

“And what about you, half-master? Where is your home, now?”

And Harry stopped, hand halfway to greeting the ironwood, black and gold and full of magic, trees swaying in an imagined wind ghosting through the forest, thestrals pawing amongst roots, wings delicately unfurling below boughs shedding autumn leaves.

Where was his home? Certainly not the little attic of mustard yellow and dusty browns. He was there because Draco was there, but it wasn’t formal. Wasn’t permanent. He had never unpacked his little box of things, just slid them unceremoniously under the bed for safekeeping. Just his encourage-mint sat in the kitchen, right next to Draco’s, their clouds occasionally bumping together, furling and unfurling as one large thunderhead.

Where had he ever felt at home? Not the Dursley’s, not the Burrow, not the Granger-Weasleys, not even at Grimmauld Place. Where he slept in the House of Black had always and would always be Sirius’s room.

He let his hand rest on the ironwood of the door. Strong and stable. Unmovable over the centuries. Thick and dense and resilient. They say that those who worked to fell the ironwood returned home with broken axes and blunted saws, a wood so heavy it sank in water. Gold filigree blossomed and spread from where his hand pressed into the magic beneath his palm, against the grain that had weathered centuries in a forest far away, that had stretched up to the sky, defiant and unfettered, roots curling deep into the earth below. A thestral, his own golden ornamentation blooming across black leathery bones, swooped through the sky.

“And where would you suggest death makes its home?”

He stepped inside without waiting for a response, the hiss of the adder fading behind him in the warmth of the hall.

Harry was late, and he snagged a coconut dusted donut, the only one left from the batch that Greg always brought to the early am meeting, off the antique sideboard as he entered, scooting around behind the settee and into his yellow chair, nodding his apologies to Hestia as he did so, doing his best to be polite in the faux pas of his lateness.

She was across from him, perched in a purple and aged leather chair, deeply wrinkled with time and faded from the habitus of many bodies before hers. Even so early in the morning, Hestia never failed to impress Harry, and she looked absolutely regal, hair pulled up into bantu knots, a crown of yellow roses fantastically set against her knee length deep burgundy dress and black ankle boots over fishnets. As he observed her, however, he noted a stiffness in her posture, a subtle jingling of her booted foot. Her hands, they seemed unnaturally still, as if forcefully kept motionless.

She had ignored him, and was listening intently to one of the new members that Harry didn’t recognise, there were quite a few in this particular meeting he could not name, introduce herself.

“...and I knew they’d wanted me in Slytherin. Coming from Death Eaters, they expect it, you know.” Hestia was nodding, a small, tight smile on her lips. She would know, too. She was a
Carrow, after all.

“The hat argued with me for what felt like ages, pure Hufflepuff it told me. I nearly cried, sitting there on that stool. I was desperate to make my father see I belonged. That I was worth his care and affection. Mum, she had died when I was young, sent to Azkaban during the war. Never came out. You know how it was.”

Harry turned to regard the voice that had spoken as a small silence settled over the room, and he found himself catching sight of the youngest person to attend their meetings yet. She couldn’t be more than 17 or 18, just out of Hogwarts, he thought to himself, scruffy trainers and dirty jeans, bandages from St. Mungo’s still freshly wrapped around her arms. Her faded yellow shirt had holes and her lanky blonde hair looked unwashed. He was forcibly reminded of himself, and that conspicuous lack of care and love that surrounded children who had been guests in the homes of others. Of children who had never belonged to anyone.

“Dad had died in the battle of Hogwarts and I’d been living with my Grandmum until just recently. She was a nightmare, that one. Hated me, from the moment I’d been sent to her doorstep. It was a quick hop, skip and a jump from there to finding solace elsewhere. In the potions cupboard, for instance. I was young still when I found that out. And now, well, now I’m here.”

“No matter where you start, no matter how many years you spent coping the ways you knew how or grieving or surviving by whatever means, we are all here today. We all begin again, from here. Welcome, Juniper.” Hestia acknowledged and honored her admissions - She had this beautiful habit of welcoming each newcomer, of saying their name, of speaking them into their circle, and Harry let her familiar magic wash over him in greeting.

The young woman, Juniper, Harry surmised, leaned back on the brushed velvet sofa, one cushion down from Alethea, exchanging her easy introduction for the chance to stare down at her ragged nails, cuticles bitten and torn. Harry watched the discomfort of the moment, the agony of the first meeting, settle around her, pulling at her skin. Her scraped knee, visible through the hole in her jeans, drawn up against her chest, a barrier. One that no one had thought to heal.

Juniper didn’t speak the rest of the hour, and neither did Harry. Though, both of them startled mid way through a newcomer talk about withdrawal to watch Flea nearly knock over an antique vase in the corner of the room. Black family heirloom, most likely. Sirius would have been thrilled. They had both had to stifle their laughter, and Harry caught Juniper’s gaze as she dropped her hand from her mouth, the smile still half formed on her face.

So many years after the war, and she could see thestrals. Harry sighed, and did his best to focus back on the conversation at hand.

Hestia coaxed the room into a discussion on redefining relationships within sobriety, finding new friendships, leaving behind people who weren’t supportive. It was something Harry had struggled with in the early months, telling Ron and Hermione, opening up to those he needed beside him when the days were dark, building his life around meeting schedules and a structure that did not leave too much room for boredom. He needed all those rules to stay alive.

Now though, now he had felt the room to be less rigid with his daily life. The meetings still held sway, and the support of his closest friends was key, but he felt capable, at least. He had been tested, had been through the hellfire of days that ate away at his rawest parts, and he had persisted. He had survived the forest fires of his own making. And Draco, Harry mused, Draco had been there for it all, a respite in the many storms. Just as cursed, as tormented, as he was, and just as intent on surviving. Draco, though, Draco struggled to step away from all the rules he made for himself. All the careful caring, tight and sinister.
They were at opposite ends of the war again, somehow calling to each other, seeking a moment’s peace in the middle.

Harry let himself wander away from the discussion a bit, thinking of all the ways that Draco shared his life with him. How entwined they were. The place of safety they had built, together. The trust.

Flea nuzzled his untidy mop of black hair from behind his chair, as if chiding him for slipping away from the meeting, for letting his thoughts wander too far. Juniper was staring at him from across the room, an eyebrow raised. Harry shook his head ever so slightly. It was not a discussion for now, not when their focus was meant to be with the others. The others, who were so used to his thestral companion they hardly even bat an eye at his heavy footfalls and indignant snorts. Harry shooed him away, issuing his second silent apology to Hestia, who only rolled her eyes.

Alethea led much of the repartee after that, her own addiction making her prone to chronically supplementing lasting connections with those that are fleeting, shallow or convenient. In the last month, she’d had homework to reconnect with friends and family she had removed from her life who were supportive of her, and to try and focus on strengthening those bonds, revitalising them. Hestia had beamed at her, and Greg had congratulated her on having the strength to be honest with family, since that isn’t as easy as many of us would like to think.

Hestia closed the meeting with some house rules for the newcomers from St. Mungo's who would be staying, with a schedule for the week ahead, therapy contacts and medication needs, and Greg tidied up the remnants of snacks, crumbs and detritus that lay about the room, Dennis was leaving flyers of resources along the sideboard. It was a well oiled machine, at this point. Harry felt a bit superfluous.

He wandered into the tea room and out into the garden, taking a seat beneath the blackthorn, mulling over the words of the adder at the door. Over his own muddled thoughts on sobriety and recovery.

The clip of heeled boots came from inside, and Hestia was gliding through the house and into the garden, alighting beside him, the dormant flowers behind her valiantly stirring to life in the wake of her, little vines and tendrils reaching out toward her, growing, as heliotropes are want to do, toward the sun of their world, even in the chill of the season.

Hestia sighed deeply, her hands now in her lap, picking at a loose thread in the hem of her burgundy dress. Her crown of yellow roses looked heavy rather than joyful.

“Tell me, Hestia.” Yellow and orange leaves from the tree above them floated down beside them, the winds of autumn stirring the upper branches.

“I didn’t expect today to feel like it did. To be so personal. It’s the first time in a long time I’ve felt so hurt by someone else’s story. By their pain.” Hestia wasn’t here to lie or pretend she didn’t need him to listen. She was direct, clear. Unencumbered by doubt or disease with sharing.

“Juniper?” Harry asked softly, watching Hestia’s black nails run along the fabric, teasing errant threads and defects in the cloth, his magic throwing privacy spells up around them without much thought.

“She’s so much like Flora.” Hestia shook her head and looked up into the changing leaves of the blackthorn, and Harry could see the brightness in her eyes, deep and amber and beautiful. She felt raw in the moment, and her magic rumbled, awash with the pain of it.

“Your sister?”
“My twin.” Hestia dropped her gaze and looked to Harry, the saddest of smiles crossing her beautiful face, an expression so rare, so uncommon for her features, always so fortified with daring and cleverness, with resilience and power.

“We are the same in looks and in history, but Flora, she always had a larger heart than I did. She was kind and soft and gentle with every living thing. From the time we were children, she used to cry for snails who found themselves lost outside the protective furls of the water plants by the pond. She’d carry them to the arum lilies and sneak them into folds of ferns. She’d rescue errant ants and drop them back in the grass where they’d be safest. She’d find all manners of life, out in our garden.”

Harry watched her as she spoke, her right hand now coming to lay across her chest, black nails splayed along her collar bone, as if holding back all the memories she kept deep within her chest.

“She learned of cruelty young, too. We both did. By the time we came to Hogwarts, we knew what was expected of us. I felt I belonged in Slytherin, though, hungry and ambitious. It suited me. But Flora, she followed me to that house, I think because she was afraid of being alone. Of being different. Of being the only child of summer in a house of snakes.”

Hestia’s black nails pressed against her skin as her fingers curled under, as if all that hurt lay just there, as if she could just reach in and claw it out for good.

“She bottled herself up. She bottled all that love and kindness and that heart full of caring, and hid it I don’t know where. She became someone she thought we all wanted her to be, cold and dead where life once flourished. Animals used to find her, you know? Rabbits and little voles from the fields in the hills. Once, I woke up to a fox curled up at the end of her bed.” She smiled to herself, lost in the memory. “They’d find her. Not anymore.”

Harry let the quiet between them settle into the scattered leaves and the beds, ready for rest beneath the snows of winter. Hestia’s sadness settled between them, too, thick and plain. A hurt without answer, without treatment or cure. She dropped her hand back to her lap and took a deep breath.

“Juniper.” Harry said again, nodding to himself. Juniper was Hestia watching her sister transform again, right before her eyes. Juniper was the summer child, lost and cold in a world that wasn’t home.

Hestia nodded.

“She’s found us, Hestia. She’s found a home where she can make her own way. She is not lost to us.” Harry said softly, knowing that it was not always so simple, so clean. But, knowing too that they would do their best. That the souls who found their way to Grimmauld Place would know love. Would know care. Would know that this was a place to grow through the pain, to grow through the pain and into your truth.

Harry reached out and held Hestia’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“She found us.”

October 20, 2009

It was early in the next week by the time Harry found himself walking up the long central street in Hogsmeade, dragon skin bag at his side, his heart full of love and trepidation in equal parts. He
greeted the shopkeepers and patrons, shuffling about in the soft powdery snow that had fallen in the night, and they greeted him, sometimes with great affection and sometimes with awe, stilted and staring. Aberforth Dumbledore merely grunted in his direction, busyng himself with clearing the snow from his doorstep, a very irritated looking cat peering around the edge of the door jam behind his greatcoat.

He didn’t often walk through the village, preferring to apparate into the front hall of Draco’s practice after hours or flooing into the great fireplace in the waiting room, not having been interested in catching the public eye and landing himself back on the front pages since his disappearance from the Aurors. But, today was a day for bravery, and Harry had made peace with the notion that he wouldn’t be able to hide in Draco’s shadow forever. Plus, with the fresh snow and the quiet of the morning, his odds of traveling relatively unnoticed were good.

Once he stepped out from their side street and on to the main road, Harry found himself marvelling at the little shops that had sprung up, re-opened and revitalised after the chaos of the war, places he had never stopped to consider the few times he had returned this far North in his work with the Aurors. Of course, Honeydukes, The Three Broomsticks and Scrivenshaft’s were the same as ever, institutions of the village that they were, but little bay windows full of magic and intrigue had sprouted up, painted signposts and spelled banners advertising the wares within.

Harry passed a dark little corner shop, windows heavy with purple velvet, fine golden instruments, impossibly detailed, thin and delicate, whirring and spinning on individual display stands. Fanciful black script was just readable on a little embellished card, stuck against the window glass. Leaning closer, Harry read ‘Magic is without time or place, without want or need, without rhyme or reason - until, that is, it finds you’. To the left, another read ‘Death comes for each of us in turn.

The desire to stop in and enquire about the esoteric messages and the instruments that seemed oddly familiar (had he not broken one of those spiralling globes in Dumbledore’s office?) was decidedly fleeting in the light of the ominous tone of the cards, so close to a part of himself he didn’t want to explore, not now, not this morning. He shook his head and hurried on, letting himself be quickly distracted by the shop immediately next door, not wanting to linger, as the instruments had all seemed to vibrate in renewed intensity at his approach.

The adjacent shop was painted in dark forest greens with soft golden accents, windows full of growing things, odd flowers of dark purple and indigo, twisting vines that swayed, seeking something of which to grab hold. The large sign hanging above a wood and glass door was carved with a fat and familiar spotted toad, a roundly disapproving expression in the way he peered down from prominent black eyes, set high on his rather dignified head, his webbed feet just resting above the words ‘Longbottom’s Magical Herbs and Fungi’.

Harry could feel Neville’s subtle magic pouring from beneath the old wooden door, soft and earthy, tilled soil, rich with life, hot and humid and strange in the wintery world, so reminiscent of a greenhouse. He caught the seraphic smells of wet leaves in summer storms, drenched and swollen with life, and he could sense Hestia’s magic in the swirling steam and the beautiful blooms of white bell flowers, the deep reds and golds of an orchid, tall and defiant. He smiled to himself, letting the tendrils of that careful loving spellwork twist about his booted feet, the snow beyond the door long since melted. The vines in the window seemed to wave farewell as he walked on from the little garden of eden, thick with it’s own esoteric magic.

Harry made his way past the Hog’s Head and the little post office, and then the meandering side street that housed Madam Puddifoot’s, the sun gaining strength in the sky and the glare of the snowfall reflecting about the little village, the wind soft and idle around corners, occasionally creating little plumes of snow, swept back up into the air from the ground.
He stopped briefly outside The Gorgon’s Apothecary and Potion Supply, adjusting his dragon skin bag, the weight of the twin’s monument ever present at his side, just heavy enough to remind him that Fred and George once dreamed of opening a shop here. They had dreamed of their future, bright and happy and mischievous, a place to stow away the horrors of war and lose yourself in friendship, in camaraderie. In laughter.

Harry sighed and looked up into the grey blue of the sky, just catching sight of the dipping and gliding of a thestral in flight, high up in the wispy thin strips of clouds, the sun catching the shine of his leathery skin. He adjusted the bag again, turning the collar of Sirius’ jacket up against a new gust of wind, more chilling and biting, more foretelling of the winter ahead. Harry let his magic warm him, soft and tempered, the coals of a long burning hearthfire, and continued on.

He trudged up the gently climbing hill that sloped away from the village and toward the Hogwarts grounds, into the more wild bits of forest and wilderness that edged the castle, passing between the giant winged boars that flanked the ancient gates, full of centuries of magic that felt as solid and strong as stone, yet that greeted him with recognition, always welcome to his return. It was, after all, home for the child who had needed it. A lost boy, like so many others.

He heard Flea screech in greeting to another thestral, soaring out into the world above the forbidden forest, abandoning Harry to make his own way up to the school. He spotted Hagrid teaching a Care of Magical Creatures class in the distance, gesticulating wildly over the heads of comparatively minuscule students, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws by the looks of things, maybe third years, still spindly, but so earnest. Eager.

Further up the path, two Ravenclaw boys, clearly late to the aforementioned lecture, hustled past him on their way down to Hagrid’s hut, arms full of rolls of parchment, a few books, and a quill stuck haphazardly in the taller one’s hair.

“Come on, Thaddeus, we’re so late already. It’s ten past nine, for Rowena’s sake. I can’t believe I let you talk me into skipping breakfast to research Venus’s position in relation to Mercury. I don’t care about your love life. I really don’t. I don’t care how many times you get hit with the jelly legs jinx, you deserve it.”

“Hey! That was Har-”

Langloc reverberated around Harry’s mind, silent and wandless.

“I don’t care, Thaddeus. Don’t speak to me for the rest of the lesson. Venus isn’t the problem, it’s your personality, honestly. How could you think a charm would fix her opinion of you? You have no one to blame but yourself.”

Harry made his way up to the front entryway, stifling his laughter, hurrying away from the pubescent drama and his potential notoriety. If it was only ten past nine, he was early to meet the Weasleys, and he slowed as he approached the entryway to the castle, the giant wooden doors welcoming him, the magic of Hogwarts pooling and swirling in every moment of the immemorial stone walls, drawing him in.

He paused in the atrium, drinking in the same rush of history that accompanied every visit he made to the castle, the magic, the lives that had been lived here. He sighed as soon as he felt the whispers of Dumbledore’s magic, light and airy and breathy, deceptive in it’s atmospheric quality, as if it could not be heavy, be burdensome, be harsh.

Harry sighed and turned to the great hall, wanting to move away from the memories, from the questions, from the anger that had sprouted deep within him, from the conflict that still grew there,
nurtured by those who, unlike the living, could no longer answer for their actions.

Harry stepped into the empty hall, drinking in the enchanted ceiling, the staff table where McGonagall would have welcomed students to the new year, to the house tables. Gryffindor, at the end, loud and brazen, forever alight with the fire of youth. Next to it, Hufflepuff, bright and bubbling with love and loyalty, yellow as sunshine.

Harry stopped himself, mid reverie. The great hall wasn’t empty. Hufflepuff table was occupied. A single, tiny solitary figure, bent over the far end of his house table, his head laying across his hands, a shock of bright blue.

Harry’s stomach clenched, the wind knocked right out of him.

Teddy.

Edward Remus Lupin, who must have just turned 11, was sitting just there. The child of Tonks and Remus. Harry’s godson, whom he hadn’t seen in years. A child that Harry had been too young to know how to care for, that Andromeda had took in to raise on her own. A child who filled Harry with guilt, with remorse. A child born into the pain and suffering of the war, and who had needed him when he was too broken to care for even himself.

Harry sucked in a deep breath and let his feet carry him down the hall and to the Hufflepuff table. He stopped and cleared his throat, standing awkwardly just next to the pale and lanky boy who had raised his head to look at him. Who looked so much like his father. Like his father before the scars.

“Can I sit with you?” Harry was indicating the bench beside Teddy, he was dropping his bag down to the floor, he was smiling and pouring love and warmth and apologies he didn’t know how to even begin to write into the space between them.

“Okay.” Teddy was turning to face him, taking in his boots and leather jacket.

“Do you remember me?” Harry had swung his leg over the bench and was facing his godson, not sure how or where to start, but so sure he was on the right path.

Teddy shook his head, eyes wide, appraising Harry’s face, memorising his features. His eyes were big and beautifully amber.

“That’s ok, we knew each other when you were very young. My name is Harry. I used to come by Andromeda’s to watch you or to play. I haven’t been by to see you in years, though and that’s my fault. I’ve been… unable to visit.”

“Were you sick?” He was looking up at Harry expectantly, hair bright and brilliant and in that moment, full of curiosity, he lost the sadness that Remus carried and burst with all the excited questioning of Tonks.

Teddy’s question had caught Harry off guard, and Harry smiled. Was he sick? In a way, yes. The war, and everything that had come before that, had hurt him, and not just in the way where he had broken bones or needed blood replenishing potions. It had hurt his ability to give love, his ability to feel safe. It had made him believe he was dangerous, not deserving of love or safety. Only solitude.

“In a manner of speaking. But, I am doing much better now.”

“That’s good. ’Dromeda always says you shouldn’t go over to friends if you’re sick, so I understand.” He nodded, wise in his many years.
“That’s very good advice. Is that why you’re here in the great hall by yourself?”

“No. I’m here because the other kids were making fun of me and I started crying and Dromeda always said if you get overwhelmed it’s ok to take a break.” He had shrugged it off, as if it was nothing. As if bullying and tears were to be expected. From other Hufflepuffs, no less.

“Why were they making fun of you?” Harry frowned, stiffening on the old bench, his nails making small marks in the ancient table. He felt his magic flare protectively, and he had to focus a moment on making sure Teddy felt nothing but a gentle calm.

“Because I was asking Professor Sprout about my mom. Grandma always said my mom loved being in Hufflepuff and I wanted to know more about her, since I’ve never been around so many people who knew her when she was young.” Teddy was shrugging and rambling and used his sleeve to wipe at his nose, which was still a bit runny from crying earlier. “And Professor Sprout told me about all of the pranks and jokes she used to get up to. And how clumsy she was. And I miss her. And she died here.”

He looked up at Harry, his eyes still wide, and the sadness of Remus settling on his features, mixed with the curiosity of Tonks, a child split between the two. And Harry’s heart hurt for him.

“It’s ok to cry when you miss them, but I want you to know that your parents both wanted happiness for you. They wanted it so much. Happiness and safety and love.”

“I know, Harry. Grandma tells me all the time. I’m going to go back to class now, we have Flying next and it’s my favorite.”

He hopped off the bench and regarded Harry, who remained sitting, both of them now the same height. “I like your jacket,” he said, and tottered away, limbs long and awkward, his hair bright.

Harry watched him go, another child who could have found themselves in the company of Hogwarts’s lost boys.

“Thank you.” He said, long after Teddy was out of earshot. He picked up the dragon skin bag and headed back out into the hall to await the arrival of the Weasleys, whose loud voices and Ginny’s laughter he could hear coming up the steps.

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“My boys.” Mrs. Weasley was sobbing against Charlie’s chest, figure slack with the years of pain, of the grief, bottled and stored in all of her empty moments, her hands both curled into fists over her heart, as if the two of them were just there, where she had been keeping their memories safe. Charlie was holding her up, swaying softly, shushing her.

They had come up to the corridor where Fred and George had once left a massive, bubbling swamp. Where memories of their magic still peppered the walls and floor, still floated about like the reflective shine of dust, disturbed by the wind. Here, just outside the Defense against the Dark Arts room, just down from the Charms corridor, here is where Harry had decided to affix a monument to their bravery.

He had showed them all, the whole Weasley family - Bill, Charlie, Percy, Ron, Ginny and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley both - the slab of sneezewood, fickle by nature but the light grain smooth and eager to be put to use, streaked with grey. The hyena had laughed, the coyote howled, and Ginny had been the first to really cry, her sunny demeanour falling away amid the love she had for her brothers, and Bill had pulled her in close, smoothing her long red hair, tears running haphazardly
across his scarred face while she let the memories of the twins rent her heart open with big, hiccoughing sobs.

In the moments that followed, Percy, who had been staring, open mouthed, chin quivering, had found himself swept up into a crushing embrace from Mr. Weasley, who’s stoic visage was cracked, his eyes squeezed shut, his love for his third son so huge.

And there was Ron, the first to laugh, grabbing Harry and pulling him into a hug, tears of joy and forgiveness and peace. After all these years of holding fast to guilt, to heartache, Ron was letting it fall away. Harry could feel each of the seventeen pages he had memorised fall away as Ron finally let himself laugh for the memory of the twins. For the power of them.

The monument, which had taken Harry the longest to craft so far, was permanently stuck to the wall of the castle, and radiated magic in just the little strip of corridor it occupied, so that anyone who passed by close enough, would know the gigantic hearts and endless cleverness of the twins. Harry had captured the fierce loyal, protective and bonded nature of them, making anyone who passed by instantly reach out, full of fielty, and full of the desire to get up to great mischief together.

Ron released Harry and stepped back, looking up at the plaque. A deep sigh escaping him.

Fred and George Weasley
Let there be laughter, even in the darkest of times.

“It’s brilliant, Harry.” He wiped his nose, looking over at Percy, who was still clinging tight to his father, a smile broad on his face. “It’s them. Through and through. As they deserve to be remembered.” He laughed, surprised at his own outburst. “God, I want to replace everyone’s wand in this castle with a fake one. Imagine the chaos.”

“Imagine.” Bill’s voice was soft and he was still rocking Ginny softly, still stroking her hair. “The ideas they used to have. The sky was the limit. Nothing could ever stop them from a laugh. And now, Harry, now they get to keep doing it.”

“They were incredible, weren’t they?” Mr. Weasley was wiping his ruddy cheeks, arm still around Percy’s shoulders. Percy had taken off his horn rimmed glasses and was charming them purple, giving the rims little feathers. He slipped them back on and looked over to his father, who burst out laughing, renewed tears on his cheeks, laden with joy this time. Percy let a shy smile cross his features.

Harry laughed openly at Percy’s idea of acceptable mischief. Bill and Charlie joining in, pulling each other closer, Mrs. Weasley reaching over to hold tight to Ginny’s hand, smiles replacing the rush of grief, the flood of tears. Ginny had charmed Mrs. Weasley’s ears to release big, beautiful bubbles to slowly balloon out and drift off into the hallway. Bill had nicked a shiny new galleon out from behind Charlie’s ear.

Revelling in the lightness, the carefree way in which they stood together, united in their healing, Harry’s heart felt full. It felt good to be able to bring love and hilarity back to the Weasleys, a family who had spent so long heartbroken, struggling for normalcy. A family that spent every April 1st drowning in the loss, in the pain.
Maybe, maybe next year would be different. Maybe Molly would be able to walk by their old bedroom door without feeling the icy vice around her heart. Maybe Arthur would laugh again, maybe this time at Percy’s new penchant for tomfoolery. Maybe Charlie wouldn’t be so afraid to come home, so full of guilt, so painfully aware how absent he was when his family had needed him.

Maybe this death herder thing wasn’t so bad, after all.
At 10:55 am, Draco was inking the last of his notes into a file with his eagle owl feather quill as the front door swung shut with a sonorous thud. Little old Mrs. Diedry, his last patient of the morning, had taken much longer to examine than he had anticipated. She’d asked enough questions to test his saint-like patience, and Salazar he was tired. Standing in his suddenly silent clinic, he ran cold fingers through neat hair and sighed heavily, letting his professional mask fall for a few moments.

He was running late, but he couldn’t motivate himself to move any faster.

The gentle simmering hiss of the cauldron behind him was soothing in its familiarity, and the smell of herbs, snakewood and anise seed, clean wooden floors and antiseptic spells filled his nostrils as he breathed deeply, tapping his quill absentmindedly on the file before him.

Mrs. Diedry was an interesting case. She had inherited a blood curse from her father’s line that should have killed her when she was young, but she had held on to 76, it seemed, through sheer spite. Sharp as a razor, and keenly observant, she said she came to see Draco because he was the best, and she believed he could see her through another few decades. Draco hoped that he was up to the task— he already had a working theory he would need to discuss with Neville about African wormwood and its uses with thestral tail hairs.

He wasn’t looking forward to meeting Harry at Hogwarts. His work allowed him the blissful distraction of avoidance. He could get lost in potion brewing, spend hours scratching furious notes on theories, scattering dozens of sheets of parchment across his desk. He didn’t want to face the Weasleys in their state of heartbreak.

He would rather pull his herbal encyclopaedia down from the shelf and lose himself reading about African wormwood. He certainly didn’t want to see Charlie today. He didn’t want to be seen by the students. He wanted to let his potions room swallow him whole where he could absorb himself in something that nourished his mind rather than making him want to peel his skin off.

He didn’t want to see Dumbledore today, with his enigmatic knowingness, nor did he want to discuss his relationship with Harry with any of his former teachers. The absoluteness of the impending embarrassment washed over him again, and he looked quickly around the room for something else to focus on, spinning the quill in his hand with unnecessary speed, avoiding the moment when he would have to apparate to the Hogwarts gates.

He dropped his quill and closed the file when he realised he was flinging bits of ink all over his desk. Sighing in frustration, he looked down at the worn grain of ancient walnut. He had found the beautiful piece at an estate sale in Kent— he’d nearly fought an old lady for it. Using his wand he cleaned the specks of smudged ink before running his hands over the smooth wood apologetically.

Perhaps he would walk, he reasoned, tapping his fingers on the desk. Give himself more time to work off his excess nerves. Postpone the inevitable.

It was incredibly childish of him— he knew— and yet, he couldn’t seem to force himself out of it.

He stood from his desk, stretching and scratching fingers through his mussed hair. Turning around, he faced the brewing bench that lined the wall opposite his desk. The bench itself held a row of large cauldrons, in varying stages of brewing, steeping, and curing. On the wall behind the brewing
bench were a set of stacked shelves, on which rested a rapidly growing collection of bonsais.

He had taken to propagating a few species as a bit of an extra hobby, encouraged by Neville, who had recommended specific ones to keep by his brewing station, near his cauldrons, for the sole purpose of helping maintain air quality while he brewed. The beautiful trees in their shallow pots breathed in the vapours of the potions, maintaining an adequate level of safe breathing air, and prevented cross-contamination.

This was a life-saving tip, as this back room had but one small window and otherwise poor ventilation. It was so very different from his set up in the forest, where his low bench had sat beneath a large window that looked out at the little field of wildflowers before the line of ancient gnarled trees. The vaulted thatch ceilings had been specifically designed to whisk away noxious fumes, as it had originally built for potionering. Sometimes, he had even had occasion to move his set up outside to the garden where the wind would carry the steam away and he could work in the clean air of the forest, surrounded by the smell of damp earth and the sounds of life.

There was no such luxury in Hogsmeade, and the single window he had now in his narrow, dreary office, looked at the brick siding of his neighbour. Not a leaf of green nor blade of grass to be seen. The wistful memories of his forest dwelling made him ache.

Pulling himself from his maudlin spiralling, he began his checks with several of his *Dracaena* species, those whose smell he couldn’t resist. Next, was the *Celtis africana* with mottled bark and, sensing the coming winter, a cascade of falling yellow and brown leaves into its purple tray. To the left was the *Ficus sur*, with its fat trunk and roots nearly bursting from its black and golden pot, a few rogue roots sneaking its way into its neighbour’s soil.

The *Kigelia africana* had reached an impressive 30 cm in height, despite the fig’s lack of boundaries, and bore a single, blood red, large cupped flower. It was unique in the arboreal world in its design and colour, as it was meant to draw its unusual pollinator—a bat. Its leaves were hard and waxy, protected by a jagged edge, and Draco, unable to resist, leaned in to caress the drooping blossom.

He touched each tree in turn with doting hands, and, seeing that they, indeed, were all safe and happy, he finally admitted to himself that he had nothing left to do but face the rest of his day. He pointlessly tried to flatten his hair in the small mirror on the back of his office door before conceding that he was only wasting more time, and, sighing audibly, finally opened the door.

He marched dutifully out of his backroom to close up shop. He scolded Voileami for rooting through a potted tree fern in the corner, dirt scattered about the floor, and, incriminatingly, her face.

“I can’t deal with you right now—” He huffed impatiently as he turned resolutely from her incredulous stare to focus instead on the coat rack before him, muted hues of wools and cashmere, most bought from the poshest of stores, though some, the most loved items, knit by his own hands.

He pulled a dark, greyish green scarf off its hook and, in a moment of painful nostalgia, buried his face into it. It smelled like the cottage, of wood smoke and of dried hanging herbs, sweet and dutiful. He remembered the day he plucked the plants from their garden home for the dye bath. Late July had been hot and humid, and the egg-eater had been sunbathing on the garden path when Draco had stepped out that day to find what he needed. It was visceral, the memory. Tangible. There in his hands.

The scent of sage and artemisia had clung to his clothes for days after the wool had been dyed and washed. The pungent and woody aromas permeating his very skin that week. His fingertips held
the greyish tinge for days and his nail beds had taken two weeks to lose their green hue. Harry had watched him pensively those few days, considering him with great intensity. His eyes had followed Draco as he dried his newly green wool and crafted it into something soft and warm, with all the mistakes of a then-novice knitter, slightly lumpy and skew.

Shaking himself from the sweetness of the memory, lest it pull him down into its warmth and prevent him from leaving the house, Draco wrapped the scarf soundly around his neck. Letting its weight settle around his shoulders soothingly. Pulling on his winter cloak, he took a moment to centre himself.

Closing his eyes, he felt the talisman in his pocket. He pressed it into his palm, feeling its familiarity and safety radiate up his arm in recognition. In his other pocket, his fingers brushed against a worn post-it. Words faded over the last few weeks.

*We are safe.*

Stepping out into the bleak light of the day, the shock of cold wind slapped him in the face as he pulled the front door shut and locked it behind him. The chill shook him from his melancholy and he hurried down the steps, following the same footprints that Harry had left a few hours earlier. He followed the shapes Harry made in the light dusting of snow to the pavement and turned towards the high street, where the tread became lost in the bustle of village life.

He felt a bit exposed, the weak early winter sun breaking through grey clouds, the wind whipping his hair out of place, carrying distant voices and sounds of fellow Hogsmeade inhabitants shuffling through their daily lives. He walked determinedly forward, head held high, even when the cold and his crippling self-awareness made him want to hunch in on himself.

As he approached the Hogshead, Aberforth violently swung the door open to the street, a slinky cat dallying on the threshold, “In or out, you wretched thing! In or out!” He was shouting at the creature, who gave no notice of his irate tone or menacing stance, rubbing itself leisurely on his leg.

When he saw Draco approaching he grunted, “Morning Malfoy” before continuing his angry tirade at the feline that ceaselessly danced undecidedly in the door frame, cold wind billowing the pub owners raggedy grey robes.

“Morning.” Draco inclined his head, grinning slightly at the irritating cat that endlessly wound itself around Aberforth’s legs, content with torturing its owner with indecision.

Aberforth was the only person in the village who would greet him openly. Draco always appreciated it, feeling immense gratitude towards the slightly alarming man. He made Draco feel less alone— less of an outcast. Most people avoided him out of fear or disgust, or a simple desire not to consider him at all. Most shop owners politely tolerated his existence, greeting him only when absolutely necessary, while others still were openly hostile, refusing to let him forget his past. As if he ever could.

The sign creaked ominously in the frigid wind and he saw a shadow pass over him; Voileami had taken flight towards the castle. Soaring high above him, leading the way it seemed.

Several shop goers crossed the street upon recognising his familiar Malfoy features, and he began to doubt his decision to walk. His usual determination to get from point A to point B often painted his expression into one of haughty disdain, and despite his glower being an unintentional byproduct born of sheer anxiety and avoidance, he was sure did him no favours in the public’s opinion of him.
His mask kept him safe. Kept everyone out. Let him get through the world without having to engage in small talk or be faced with the fact that no one was willing to give him a chance. Each person passing him, hurriedly avoiding his gaze, giving him a wide berth, quickened his step forward. He walked with a hurried pace, giving himself no time to dwell.

Turning left onto the high street, Draco glimpsed Gladrags Wizardwear. Mannequins draped in rich fabrics, classic and modern robes displayed neatly in the front window. An old woman, hand in hand with a small child bustled out of the shop, laden with packages of brown paper and twine in her spindly arms, bemoaned the cost of a decent travelling cloak. The child rambled animatedly as they crossed the street and passed Draco, and she muttered under her breath about needing a brandy.

Lost in thoughts about the innocence of children and the exhaustion of age, he didn’t see the gentleman backing out of a coffee shop to his left. By the time Draco realised what was happening he was covered in hot coffee. The man had turned around and walked straight into Draco’s chest. Both of them muttering profuse apologies, Draco ducked to help pick up the scattered and spilt coffee cups. Just as Draco was offering to compensate the man for his own lack of coordination, he saw dawning recognition cross his features. The jovial, apologetic person quickly morphed into a cold and sneering git. “Don’t want so much as a knut from the likes of you.” He spat, quickly righting himself and dropping the empty coffee cups at Draco’s feet. He turned and stomped off down the road.

Draco stood stock still for a moment, feeling distinctly hollow inside, before vanishing the mess at his feet and drying his robes with the flick of his wand. Despite the cold, he was hot and flush under his clothes, feeling observed and self-conscious of himself, a marked man in a crowd of ordinary and innocent people. He pulled his scarf more tightly around his neck out of habit and continued his resolute march forward, determined not to engage with another person if he could help it.

His spiralling thoughts carried him back to his boggart’s most recent form of torture. Thoughts he had been trying to push down all day, now crept up on him, his will power feeling fragile in the light of the day’s events.

It had been a full seven days since he thought he heard Harry mutter those two fateful words to him in a half sleep state. One week of Draco feeling completely out of his depths. One week of his boggart pulling his attention back to that night at every chance it could. Whenever his mind was most vulnerable.

Had Harry really said it? Had he meant it? Or had Draco been hallucinating? If he had said it, should Draco have said it back? Was Harry mad that he hadn’t reciprocated? Had he only said it because they had taken things to the next level in the bedroom?

Draco had been stunned into shocked silence to hear those two quiet words whispered against his skin, so stunned that he had stopped breathing. Harry, already asleep by the time Draco remembered how to exhale, slept peacefully through the night pressed against Draco. Draco on the other hand, spent the next several sleepless hours doubting whether or not it had really happened.

He let his boggart dance a familiar jig as he passed the post office with swiftness, the echoing hoots of owls and the smell of pine bedding following him as patrons strode passed through the swinging door, intent on their errands.

That next morning, Harry had given no indication that anything had changed, but didn’t say it
again. Draco then spent the last seven days trying to figure out how to bring it up. How to say it back.

He had realised, with frightening, blinding clarity, that night, as he stared at the ceiling and felt Harry’s warm body, asleep against him, that he felt the same way. He had told Luna all those months ago that he loved Harry, but he didn’t think he even really knew what that meant back then. He had thought the words, sometimes, in the depths of night with Harry wrapped around him—or, in the quiet moments sharing tea on the sofa—or, in the thrill of sparring words and diatribes over what sheets to put on the bed. He had been thinking it for weeks—months, now. But, how does he tell Harry?

Say that he really did love that stupid man, with his dumb hair, and his amazing eyes, and his compassion, and his strength?

_Dear gods_, he loved everything about him. His darkness and sharp edges, his radiance and resilience.

He loved the parts of Harry that Harry himself sometimes shied away from, embarrassed by their intensity and brokenness. Draco loved it all. All of his shadows and light—his fortitude and vulnerability. He loved him desperately, consumingly. He admired Harry for everything he had gone through, everything that he let Draco see and hold. He loved Harry for the faith he had in him, and humanity at large.

Harry felt like _home_. The home Draco had never had but had always wanted. The place you go to when you are weary and broken and in need of respite. Where you go when you want to share in your joys and victories—full of acceptance and unconditional tenderness. Harry allowed him space to grow and bloom, tended the potential within him like a devout gardener.

To Draco, Harry embodied every kitschy and saccharine adage about love and family, found scripted on ghastly decor in second-hand shops. He made Draco want to buy floral embroideries that said ‘_Home is where your heart is_’ and hang it on his front door.

It was incredibly nauseating and decidedly overwhelming.

And he had no idea how to say it.

He quickened his step as he approached The Three Broomsticks, one of the last shops out of Hogsmeade. The mounting urge to curl in on himself, or pray for the ground to swallow him whole, as he neared the familiar red entry and swinging sign, intensified as the door to the pub was thrown open.

Madam Rosmerta swept the debris from the bar floor out onto the pavement and froze when she looked up and met his eye. Draco nodded dumbly but she did not reciprocate the greeting. She only stood and watched him pass, her broom held tightly in her pale hand, her eyes hard and demanding, as if daring him to try and come over her threshold again.

He would do no such thing.

Instead, he ducked his head, having succumbed to the wave of shame that poured over him, and his feet carried him quickly past. His apology back in 8th year to her did not go well, and he wouldn’t soon forget the ensuing tussle that ended in Rosmerta’s partner pulling her away from a retreating and black-eyed Draco, shouts to never darken their doorstep again following him out onto the street. No, he would not be approaching that threshold again in this lifetime. He could feel the burn of her eyes on the back of his head and braced himself for the possibility of an unforgivable.
How could anyone love him after all he had done?

He couldn’t relax his shoulders until well past the Hogsmeade station. He reminded himself for the 50th time since leaving the house that apparition was the only suitable form of transportation.

Draco was climbing the path to front gates, Voileami no longer in view. He was secretly hoping that he had been late enough to avoid seeing the Weasleys today. Not that he hadn’t grown incredibly fond of them, no, but that he was afraid of reminding them of who exactly he was. The role he played in their family’s heartbreak. He was afraid that Mrs. Weasley would look at him and decide he wasn’t good enough for her Harry. He felt the familiarity of his cowardice grip his insides.

Despite the cold in the air, he was sweating again and knew his face must be splotchy with the effort of the walk and of the anxiety he felt welling within him.

He stumbled slightly on a rock in the path when he reached the winged boars. He had spent the entire walk up the sloping lane battling with his boggart on an incessant loop, and hadn’t realised how fast he had been striding towards the castle. Righting himself, ready to move through the open gates, he caught sight of a mob of red hair between him and his destination and felt his insides freeze. Oh no, he thought, please no.

The pull of familiar and safe magic of the Hogwarts grounds around him did nothing to soothe the dread of imminent and awkward social interactions with people he had wronged. Especially when he desperately wanted those people to like and accept him. The sting of his interactions in transit still fresh in his mind, the wounds still raw, he seriously considered whether or not he should hide behind the bushes off to his right. Before he could decide though, Ron caught sight of him and shouted a jovial greeting.

Son of a—

“Hello.” He said as he swept dutifully towards them, in a voice that sounded stilted and strained, despite his best efforts to be warm and welcoming. His tone did nothing to put Ron or Mrs. Weasley off, but Charlie managed to look even more uncomfortable than Draco felt.

The cowardly part of him thought he might just try walking straight past them, as if he were in a hurry, and hope for the best, but this older self, the part that had been significantly galvanised by Harry’s existence, stayed his footsteps in front of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley reached out to him and swept him into a crushing hug, her eyes red from recent tears, and she sniffled loudly onto his shoulder. Ron and Mr. Weasley patted him aggressively on the back in greeting, and Percy and Bill spoke loudly about god knows what. It was a confusing sensory overload. A common occurrence when near more than one Weasley.

When Mrs. Weasley pulled back to pat him on the cheek kindly, Draco felt the dam wall break in his chest as he looked her in the eyes.

“I know today mustn’t have been easy. And, I should have said this to you years ago— but— I am sorry for the part I played in Fred’s, and subsequently George’s, death— for the things my family did. For the way I behaved.” He looked around at all of their surprised faces. Charlie’s eyes were fixed on him with a puzzled expression. “I’m not looking for a pardon, and I don’t want to make excuses for what I’ve done, but you deserve an apology. You’ve been kind in ways I didn’t think I deserved.”

There was silence, but Ron was grinning at him. Mrs. Weasley burst into fresh tears and flung herself at him, gripping his slight frame, startling him. Ron rolled his eyes and spoke over the sobs as Draco clumsily patter her on the back.
“Mate, what happened happened, and we can’t change it. I know who you were and who you are now. You’ve changed. And you’ve become someone who I can be glad to call a friend. I know you’re not looking for forgiveness, but you already have it from me.” He clapped Draco hard on the shoulder as Molly finally released him, muttering her thanks before walking away from the group to blow her nose loudly, clearly finished with all of the emotions the day had presented.

“Thanks, Ron.” Draco muttered feeling a bit empty from his anxiety of the interaction. A faint buzzing of bees threatening in his periphery from all the eyes still on him. Arthur reached out to shake Draco’s hand, as did Bill. Percy nodded solemnly at him and Charlie continued to stare curiously.

“Thank you.” Ron said, squeezing his shoulder and looking at him meaningfully. “Harry’s waiting for you in the entrance hall.” He finished, as the rest of the Weasleys followed Molly’s lead. “He’s just having a catch up with Ginny.”

“I’d better get to it then.” His face felt hot and he was damp with perspiration, despite the chilly air invading his clothes. “I’ll see you all around.” He said and nearly ran from their midst, the echoing chorus of goodbyes following him.

He pulled his scarf tighter still around his neck trying to maintain his composure, as a gust of wind lifted his cloak and bit at his skin. It took all of his willpower to walk calmly forward along his trajectory and not sprint a lap around the castle to try and outrun the bees in his ears. He was trying to slow his breathing into deep measured draws and exhales, away from the gulping gasps that were threatening to overtake him.

The sound of Ginny’s enthusiastic voice spilling out of the door ahead, helped ground him as the sound of the others faded behind him. Nearing the steps, he saw a look of stilted hesitation on Harry’s face as he approached. His rigid posture piqued Draco’s focus and he let the adrenaline of his meeting with the Weasley’s drain away, replaced by hyper-focused concern.

Ginny was angled away from Draco and she didn’t see him approaching. “C’mon Harry, we haven’t had a catch up, just the two of us, in ages, we should go grab a pint tonight.” She was saying to Harry who was clearly having a hard time looking right at her, his body turned away, shifting his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, his hands crammed into his pockets.

He was watching Draco’s progress up the steps with determined focus, his mouth in a thin line. His eyes flicked uncomfortably to Ginny at her suggestion before she caught her mistake.

“Or a butterbeer!” She laughed awkwardly. “Sorry, Ron did tell me. What do you do for fun now, anyway?” Draco cleared his throat to announce himself, saving Harry the necessity of answering Ginny’s decidedly stupid question. “Oh, hey Malfoy.” She said by way of greeting, her eyes surveying him shrewdly, before focusing back on Harry.

“Hello, Ms. Weasley.” He inclined his head and stepped up and into Harry’s personal space before facing Ginny. He could feel Harry’s magic, unsettled, discomforted, pulsing off of him in waves of unrest.

“Uhg. Don’t call me that. Gin is fine. What are you doing here?” She asked with a raised eyebrow as she watched Draco stand just slightly too close to Harry. Harry, who let out a slow breath, his magic settling, his shoulders dropping fractionally.

“He’s meeting me.” Harry said before Draco could answer. “We’re due by McGonagall in a few minutes.”
“I see.” Ginny said, eyeing Draco. “Well, we could go out when you’re done with Malfoy.” She pressed.

Draco shifted fractionally, unsure of himself, unsure of what Harry wanted in the moment. He didn’t know what to do with any of his limbs.

But, Harry’s hand found Draco’s, and his voice was stronger with more conviction as he turned his body fully to look at Ginny.

“No, sorry Gin, we have plans. Maybe another time.” He said flatly.

“Oh.” She looked momentarily surprised at their joined hands, even though she must have heard from the others by now that they were together. “Vayne and Skeeter are going to have a field day with this.” She smirked and Draco bristled. He felt his face heating again. Harry scoffed noncommittally, starting to relax into the awkward exchange.

“Well, okay then.” She looked pensive and torn by some internal struggle before moving forward and hugging Harry. He dropped Draco’s hand to reciprocate and sighed heavily. The last of his fight draining out of him. His magic retracting into gentleness. “Let me know if you change your mind about that butterbeer.” She said quietly, releasing him.

Giving Draco one last searching look, she said, “See you around, Malfoy”, before turning on her heel and walking down the steps.

Neither spoke until Ginny had reached the bottom of the steps and was a few strides away. Draco turned supercilious eyebrows on Harry and asked, “A pint?” with disbelieving incredulity.

Harry barked a dark laugh, his frustration and discomfort still evident in the way he held his balled fists pressed into his pockets with far too much force. “She means well. It’s just—” Harry shook his head. Seemingly unable to know how to finish the thought.

Instead, he said, “You’re late. You’re never late.” His tone was accusatory, concerned.

“I— uh— I was busy.” Draco said evasively, looking anywhere but in Harry’s eyes, not wanting him to know how little he wanted to be here today. “And besides, Mrs. Weasley wouldn’t let me by without attempting to hug me to death.”

He reached out to smooth an errant curl from Harry’s disaster hairstyle as he huffed an endeared laugh at Mrs. Weasley’s expense. He was sure Ron would tell Harry what he had said to the Weasleys, but it felt too raw to bring it up now.

“C’mon, Minnie is going to be very displeased if we’re any later than we already are.” Said Harry, his voice brighter, he squeezed Draco’s hand and released it, turning towards the Headmaster’s office. “Let’s get out of here before lunch starts and anyone realises we’re still around. I had to hex a little Ravenclaw earlier— completely unethical.”

Draco consistently felt like he was about to receive detention when he was in Minerva McGonagall’s presence. He envied the relaxed countenance of Harry as he slouched in his chair, one leg stuck out, foot jangling, mouth full of chocolate biscuit, crumbs down his front. Envied the way McGonagall’s face softened when she looked at Harry, like she was surveying a favourite nephew.

Draco, conversely, sat perched on the edge of his seat, still as can be, his stomach roiling with
unsettled magic and nerves as McGonagall aggressively offered him tea and a ginger nougat. Harry was snickering and watching the exchange fondly. Relenting, Draco nibbled on his nougat, too aware of the sound of his own chewing.

“So, Healer Malfoy, I hear you left St. Mungo’s in order to pursue more professional autonomy.” She prompted, pleased she had won the battle of wills over the tea and biscuits.

“That’s a nice way of putting it—” Draco smiled awkwardly, and her lip twitched in return. “Yes, I opened up my own practice in Hogsmeade— after shouting at my superior and storming out of St. Mungo’s.” He finished, blushing.

Harry sniggered and McGonagall actually did smile. “I’m glad to see you’re doing good work. Now, gentlemen, why don’t you tell me why you’re here.”

Harry began talking through his full mouth of chocolate digestive, explaining why they needed to speak to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, who wasn’t even in his portrait, knowing full well that they were here to see him. Dumbledore, who had never even told Minerva McGonagall of all the ways he had become entwined in the ethereal magic of loss and death, of life and love. Who had never told her anything at all, it seemed.

Draco’s irritation prickled at him while Harry gave McGonagall a full and detailed rundown of the events of the last year. About the forest, about Death Herders, the thestrals, the blood magic. About Sirius, the Grim, Dumbledore and Grindelwald. Her face held the consistent expression of mild apprehension throughout the entire explanation, and by the end of it, she looked tired and worn in a way Draco hadn’t seen since just after the war.

Her face only gave the slightest indication of surprise by way of a twitch in her eyebrow when Harry finally told her that he and Draco were together, after Draco allowed him to stay hidden in the forest the whole of the last year. McGonagall’s eyes ticked momentarily to Draco, whose face, he was sure, was the colour of the Gryffindor banner. This was somehow his least favourite part of the entire exchange. Not only was he being outed to his former teacher and a room full of portraits, but his relationship was now on the table for scrutinising. He really couldn’t fathom how today could get any more awkward or demoralising, but, the day was young and he was on a roll.

He refused to look at Severus’ portrait while Harry spilt their situation out to McGonagall, not even glancing when he heard a stifled cough. His insides were writhing with embarrassment. He could just imagine the look of smugness and refused to give his godfather the satisfaction. His face felt hot and splotchy and he tapped his fingers compulsively on his knee trying to focus on Harry’s words and McGonagall’s reactions.

“So, that’s our predicament, professor.” Finished Harry. “That’s why we needed to speak to Dumbledore, since he was the last Death Herder and we don’t know what the fuck we’re doing. But, it seems he didn’t think it was necessary to pitch up to our appointment.” Harry gestured to the empty scene behind McGonagall. He was apparently completely unfazed about cursing in front of McGonagall, and she seemed fairly used to it. Or, perhaps too shocked herself to chide him for it.

“I see.” McGonagall said pensively. “Well. I have to say, that is a lot to absorb. Not least of which, your personal relationship and the fact that Mr. Malfoy so effectively hid your whereabouts for so long.” She eyed him beadily and Draco felt himself recoil in an unspoken reprimand. “But, unfortunately, Dumbledore has been absent from his painting since I told him you were coming to see him. He seemed less than keen to discuss the subject.”

Harry’s magic radiated outwards defensively, his face pinched while his foot bounced ever more restlessly.
“Severus?” McGonagall turned to face Snape’s portrait. “You don’t happen to know where he’s hiding, do you?”

“No, Head Mistress— Dumbledore has many hiding places, even in death.” His withering tone dripped with sarcasm and Draco couldn’t help but glance to see the bored expression and the dramatically discourteous eye roll.

Minerva rolled her own eyes heavily in return. “Indeed.”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh and stood up. “May I?” He asked, gesturing to the vacant gold-gilded painting. It was the largest in the room and hung at eye level behind the desk.

“If you must.” She acquiesced, rising from her chair and moving out of Harry’s way.

Harry rounded the desk, nodding solemnly to Snape as he passed him on his way to Dumbledore’s. He stood before the empty painting, feet set wide as if in a fighting stance, as if he were preparing to duel, shadows of the Auror training and a role he’d held so long, but had never prospered under. McGonagall stood close to Draco, her magic felt controlled, precise. Unassuming but powerful. Like a master archer waiting to loose an arrow at a target. Draco let the feeling of her confident stance behind him anchor him as he watched Harry square off with an unassuming blank canvas.

Dumbledore’s portrait was beautiful and simple. Grey toned stone walls held a simple stain glass window depicting a phoenix in flight sat in the upper centre. Soft blue and purple tones painted a single velvet chair with curved wooden legs and a high back. A small and tidy desk held a single candle, a stack of parchment, and a quill and ink pot. It looked like a place one would go to sit pensively and ponder the meaning of life. A gentle fire flickered in the grate behind the chair and cast dancing shadows in the foreground.

“Dumbledore,” Harry said with all the authority and command of an Auror, speaking to the velvet chair, “I don’t have time for your mysteries today, we had an appointment.”

Silence. Harry sighed in irritation as the seconds ticked by.

“The least you can do,” he said more quietly, “after everything, is tell us what you know.”

Silence again.

Harry’s shoulders sagged as he continued to stand there, the seconds dragging into minutes. Finally, he turned around, disappointment etched on his face. As he began to round the desk back to Draco, they heard a sigh and the familiar voice, “I had hoped it wouldn’t be you.”

Harry froze, startled by the admission, before turning around to see Dumbledore walking into view from the side of the painting.

The man certainly had a flair for the dramatics, Draco thought. It was the first time he had really seen Dumbledore’s portrait, really seen his face, since his sixth year.

Suddenly he felt sixteen again. Sixteen and desperate. All of the terror and choices that had followed him felt heavy in the corners of the room. He felt numb as he sat still as a statue, breathing shallowly. He could hear Harry speaking, but it sounded distant and he was only dimly aware of what they were saying. He began counting the portraits that lined the walls to steady himself. He was trying very hard to stop himself from being swept away like a wayward balloon on a windy day.

When he came back to himself, it was sudden. The buzzing had subsided and Harry was sitting in
the chair next to him. McGonagall had left the room, but he wasn’t sure when this had even happened. He felt Harry’s magic wrap around him like a weighted blanket, containing. Safe.

He breathed in sharply through his nose trying to shake the boggart and bees from the corner of his mind and focus back to the moment he was existing in. He wasn’t sixteen anymore. He faced different challenges now.

Harry was leaning towards him, “You okay?”

He nodded stiffly and shifted in his seat, remembering he had limbs and a body. His underclothes were damp with sweat again and his legs felt like jelly.

He looked back up to Dumbledore, who was watching them curiously.

“I’m glad to see you here, Draco. I hear you’re doing good things. Very good things, indeed.” Albus said kindly, like he was proud of Draco. Like Draco hadn’t plotted his murder once.

Draco nodded again, not knowing what to say. He could feel Harry’s eyes still on him and his magic around him. “Minerva speaks very highly of you. I think she’s quite fond.”

He tried a smile, but it might have come off as a grimace. Harry seemed to decide to take charge of the interaction, and Draco felt infinitely grateful.

“Dumbledore, did you know it would be us?” He asked.

“Honestly? No. I didn’t. I had a short list of names and suspicions, yes, and you, Harry, were on that list, but, as I said, I had hoped it wouldn’t be you.”

“Who else was on the list?” Draco asked, trying to anchor himself to the conversation. His voice coming out gruffer than he had anticipated.

Dumbledore sighed. “The Carrow twins, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, yourself Mr. Malfoy, and, of course, Harry here.”

“So, why us, then? Why us, if there were so many other possible candidates?” Harry’s voice had an edge of a plea.

“This is deep magic. Just like the power of love, infinite in its depths and capacity, so too is the power of death. The only explanation that I can offer you is that you have experienced realms of magic that had never been explored before. You, Harry, were Master of Death, and you both were keepers of the Elder Wand. You both chose death in your lifetime and you both hold an immense capacity for empathy. And, from what I can see you are both exceptionally gifted and powerfully magical wizards. Perhaps your affinity for one another, your strong feelings throughout your youth, the development of your bond in the forest, was a catalyst in your both being specifically chosen. These are not answers though— only observations.” He smiled kindly at them.

Harry let out a large breath he seemed to have been holding. Draco didn’t know how to process anything he had just heard. It didn’t give him any answers.

“This is not fate, Harry.” Dumbledore said. “This is magic we have no words to really describe. If you really want to know, I suggest you ask the thestrals.”

Draco scoffed a disbelieving note at the thought of trying to pry esoteric information from Voileami. The same fantastic beast that had her head stuck in a balcony guard rail just last week.
He could feel Harry’s mounting agitation, sure he was thinking along the same lines as Draco.

“Okay—” Harry ceded. “Say we do this. Say we take up the mantle. What do we even do? We can’t find any clarification on the job description.”

Dumbledore smiled wide, as if that were the question he was waiting to be asked. “You keep the balance, Harry.” He said simply.

Draco just barely stifled a groan. Barely.

Harry wasn’t nearly as adept at masking his emotions. He slid his hands over his face and through his hair. “From what I hear,” Dumbledore continued, “you’ve been doing an excellent job so far. Both of you.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked nonplussed. “I’ve been avoiding it entirely for the last 2 months.”

“Ah, but have you?” Dumbledore countered. When neither of them responded, he continued. “Twice, now, you’ve brought memorials to this school to honour those we’ve lost. You comfort those who grieve. Offer solace to those who are lost. You, Mr. Malfoy, you heal those who need it. Save those who can be saved. And both of you, have formed strong bonds with your thestral shadows, have you not? From what I hear, they seldom leave your side.”

“So,” Draco, drawled, trying to regain some of his composure, “Hermione was right. We’re already doing it. We’re already keeping the balance. The thestrals are just guiding us.”

Dumbledore beamed at them. Harry had his fingers pushed into his eyes. He was slouching so far back in his chair that he was in fear of slumping down onto the floor. Draco could feel the exasperation rolling off him in great big waves.

“I can’t tell if I should be relieved or angry.” He finally muttered, pulling himself upright in his chair and leaning forward to snatch another biscuit off of the tray on the desk. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “Tell me about Sirius. About Grims.”

The change in Dumbledore’s face would have been comical if it hadn’t been so disconcerting. As the old man’s weathered face appeared paler and more deeply lined, even in oiled brushstrokes, Snape stifled a cough before striding out of his own portrait without warning.

“I should know better than to ever keep anything from you, Harry.” He said solemnly.

“I dismantled the dark magic you used at Grimmauld Place.” He said evenly. “I know Sirius was a Grim. What I don’t know is why you were trapping him there with blood magic— why you needed him. I thought you, of all people, were against dark magic like that. The house was infested with it.”

He gazed out at them from his gilded frame, a look of profound guilt etched across his face.

“Before my plan for you to defeat Voldemort was underway, I had a different plan. One that would have spared your life and your need to go through what you did. I knew that if the plan fell on your shoulders, it would end in your death. I wanted to prevent that at all costs. It should never have been your burden to bear.” He was sitting now, in his velvet chair, looking tired and old. He leaned an elbow on the desk and rubbed wearily at his eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

“That night many years ago, after you saved Sirius from the dementors, just before I visited you in the hospital wing, I had the occasion to speak to Sirius. Up in the tower room, lost and afraid and
full of grief and vengeance, I visited him, and I knew. A darkness that has run deep in the veins of
the family Black had surfaced, one that had not been seen for centuries, brought out by the years of
torment in Azkaban, by the pain and the bitterness and the guilt. Sirius had a grim wake inside of
him, a creature that both protected him from the loneliest of thoughts, yet condemned all those he
loved to death—the shadow of death. True loneliness, dressed up in power and glory.” Harry
shifted slightly and Dumbledore stood again, pacing restlessly from one side of his portrait to the
other. Seemingly unable to sit with the guilt he felt at what he was telling them.

“It was only after he came back to England in your fourth year that I had the second occasion to
speak to him. By then, whispers in the darkest forests had come to him, had hunted him. Had
called him grim and many other names, and thestral herders had chased him endlessly, working to
trap them as their own. By then, Sirius had come to know what he was. Cursed. And bereft for it.”
Harry’s magic hummed in the air around them. He sat still save for his twitching foot, a fist
jammed under his chin, his eyes hard on Dumbledore, considering.

“He came to me to help, sure that his new powers could be of use, but unsure of ways to use them.
I offered him the binding ritual, offered him the opportunity to avenge his friend’s deaths. Make
his wasted time in Azkaban worthwhile. I offered him the chance to destroy Voldemort in exchange
for his own life. He agreed. He wanted to be of use, you know. And, he asked me to bind him to
his ancestral home. Afraid that he might hurt others without magic keeping him there.” He stopped
pacing, body turned towards Harry, his face imploring. Willing Harry to understand. To see why
things had happened the way they had.

“If his service was willing, then why use dark magic to keep him?” Harry’s voice sounded cold and
bereft.

“I wanted to use Sirius for his power, as Death Herders are want to do with Grims. And Sirius
wanted to help, but I was not forthcoming with what that meant, and he was unaware of the dangers
it posed to him. I couldn’t take any chances in him backing out.”

“So, you trapped him?”

“I did what I thought I needed to do to protect you and the rest of the wizarding world, yes. I
trapped him. I used ancient and dark blood magic to bind Sirius to my will. A Grim is the natural
ally of a Death Herder, as are the thestrals, you see. But, they owe themselves to no one, they are
not slaves to Death Herders. I used the blood magic to form and maintain a bond, so that he could
not change his mind, could not leave. When a Grim and Death Herder form a bond, the two are
able to access powers they wouldn’t have on their own, you see?”

Both Harry and Draco nodded.

“Did he know that I was next in line?”

“No. No one knew. No one could, or your life would have been in considerably more danger than
it ever was. And, as I’m sure you remember, your life was in near constant peril.”

Harry breathed a humourless laugh. His magic was a tangle of sharp edges and Draco could taste
the metallic tinge in the air and feel a dry heat prickling his skin.

“I bound Sirius to my will and Grimmauld Place with ancient Death Herding magic not used in
centuries. It is a ritual for dire circumstances. To be used only in the face of apocalyptic evil. The
balance must be maintained.” Dumbledore shrugged as if that was all the justification that was
needed.
Harry shook his head, not in disbelief, but rather in pained understanding and deep anger. His foot was bouncing erratically again and he wasn’t looking at Dumbledore anymore. Draco felt hyper-aware of him and his magic, sending his own out in an effort to ground him. To remind him that they were safe.

“If he was bound to you and the house, then how was he able to leave the night he died?” He ran his fingers hard through his hair, his voice low.

“If there’s one thing I have tried to teach you over the years, what would it be?” Dumbledore asked, enigmatically.

“Not to trust the adults?” Harry bit back, without missing a beat. Draco couldn’t stop the surprised snort that erupted from him.

“I have a list a mile long of things you’ve taught me, Dumbledore, can you elaborate a little?”

“Love.” He replied patiently. “His love for you and his desire to protect you was stronger than any dark magic I could have placed on him.”

Harry’s foot stopped moving and he looked at the portrait with a hard intensity.

“I take full responsibility for Sirius’ death, Harry.” He said quietly. “If I hadn’t forced him into servitude, he would have never been in that situation. If I had been more available to you, you may never have been vulnerable enough for Voldemort to plant that false memory. It was entirely my failings that killed him.”

Harry didn’t move. Didn’t reply. His magic felt still. Like the silence before a storm. Draco knew by sheer instincts to change the subject and allow Harry some space to process the information in silence. “How do we protect ourselves. How do we keep this power out of the wrong hands?”

“Keep your enemies close and your secrets closer.” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling and his face the picture of dire warning.

Draco didn’t like the feeling that answer gave him. Hadn’t Harry mentioned Dumbledore’s secrets and lies being exactly what he did not want?

“How do we keep ourselves in balance? How do we stop ourselves from being like you?” Harry asked harshly.

A sound to the right drew his attention, and he saw Snape back in his frame, scoffing at Harry.

“Yes, Severus?” Draco asked mildly.

“Isn’t it obvious, Potter?” Harry’s name didn’t hold as much contempt in Severus’ voice as it once had, but it sounded sneering all the same.

“Enlighten me, professor.” Harry sighed.

“As Dumbledore said, you were, still are, the Master of Death. You possessed all three Deathly Hallows. Were master of the Elder Wand. And, you gave it all up— willingly. You tossed aside the wand. You left the stone buried in the forest. And you only use your cloak for general misdemeanours .” His voice was nearly impatient in his explanation.

“You had the ultimate powers in your hands at seventeen, and you laid them aside in favour of balance, of normality. You are already a better Death Herder than Dumbledore could have ever
been. Keep your humanity alive, and your ego in check, and you shall be fine.”

“Well said, Severus.” Nodded Dumbledore solemnly. “Like I’ve told you before, Harry, I knew at a young age that I could not be trusted with power, and yet I continually found myself in possession of it. And, every time I did, I abused it. You and Draco will do much better than I ever did.”

There was silence for a long moment while they digested the information. Harry seemed a bit stunned that Snape apparently paid him some kind of compliment on his morality.

“What about Grindelwald?” Draco finally asked. He felt a parallel between himself and Grindelwald. Pureblood ideology from a young age, a desire for power and control of the world around them. He didn’t want to end up like him. To become someone who sought false ideals, balance at any cost.

“Gellert was chosen before me.” Dumbledore answered, a regretful note in his voice. “I was only chosen after Arianna’s death. It was his title as a Death Herder that spurred his desire to possess the hallows. His fervour for the balance of the natural world at all costs is what drove him to such destructive lengths. We were both incapable of wielding the power we were given. From what I know, even after his incarceration, the thestrals never stopped visiting him.”

“Neither of you ever renounced your titles?”

“No. Neither of us did. We remained connected in that regard until our dying days.” He said sadly.

Harry and Draco were silently descending the front steps as the bell for the last class sounded and the thundering of hundreds of feet began to fill the halls behind them.

“Do you ever miss it?” Harry asked quietly, watching Flea fly high above them as they walked down the sloping lawn to the gates.

“School?”

“Yeah.”

“Good gods, no. No—” Draco huffed.

“No?” Harry asked, curiously.

“Being completely in the care of adults who don’t know what they’re doing? Being filled with hateful ideology? Puberty? Good lord, no. Do you?”

“Well, when you put it that way—” Harry laughed. “Sometimes. Sometimes I miss it. It was home, you know? Probably will always be in a way. I’ve never really had that before.” He paused, mulling over his words. “I guess I’ve just been thinking of something Dumbledore told me once, help will always be given at Hogwarts for those who ask for it. The surety of that thought makes me miss it.”

“Maybe you’re the one who’s supposed to be giving the help now.” Draco offered.

Harry seemed pleased by the sentiment and spoke with a smile on his face. “I would like that.”

“And, maybe it’s not just at Hogwarts. Home is where you make it.” He said. Harry didn’t reply, but continued to smile, watching their feet as they strode across the lawn side by side.
They made their way through the gates with winged boars and Draco adjusted his scarf around his neck, loosening it.

“I guess Grimmauld Place and our brown, one room attic, don’t really count as home do they?” Draco asked after the silence stretched between them a ways. He was itching to take Harry’s hand in his, to stuff them both into his pocket for warmth, but he wasn’t sure if he was allowed or if they should.

“Our?” Harry asked, surprise in his voice, turning his big green eyes on Draco.

“Hm?”

“You said, our brown attic?” He clarified, a strange look on his face.

“Well— I mean. You’ve been there nearly as long as me, I guess I just sort of think of it that way.” He was fairly certain he was bright red again.

“Huh.” They lapsed into silence. The wind wasn’t as harsh and the sun had broken through the clouds, melting the dusting of snow that had fallen in the morning. The smell of damp ground and cold air reminded Draco painfully of the forest. A feeling, frightfully similar to homesickness, stole over him.

“Do you know where I felt at home?” Harry asked, voice soft and nostalgic.

“Where?” Draco queried, suspecting the answer.

“The forest.” He said simply, grinning.

“Me too.”

“Do you remember it this time last year?” His shoulder bumped against Draco, as if he too wanted to reach out and hold part of him, but didn’t know if he could, or should.

“Mm.” Draco smiled, remembering fondly. “I found the thestral cave. And you cast your new patronus.”

“Yours wasn’t long after.” Harry was also smiling. Draco bumped his shoulder into him in response. “Will we ever go back?” Harry asked.

“I’d like to.” Draco said quietly, hopefully. “Love to, actually. I really miss it. The eggeater is probably furious with us.” Harry laughed. “And, the garden is most definitely a disaster.” Draco ached with missing it. And, now that they were speaking openly about it, he was overcome with that crushing feeling of homesickness.

“Yeah, I’d love to look for carving wood in the Rowan grove again. Make marshmallows and sit on the fur rug by the fire. See Alice.” Harry’s voice was dancing that sharp edge of joyful nostalgia and sad longing.

Perhaps fueled by the overwhelming fondness for the forest, or the fact that his lacklustre, poop-brown flat with loose floorboards, and dodgy plumbing, was waiting for them at the end of the lane, “we should get our own place, together” spilt unceremoniously from his lips.

His face was immediately hot and he regretted his outburst almost instantly when silence met his words. Maybe that was too fast for Harry.
‘I mean, of course, we don’t have to, I just thought, since you’re there every night anyway, and we both hate it—’

‘I don’t hate it—’

‘Oh, yes you do Harry— you haven’t even unpacked your box. It’s a horridly drab place. Unless— unless you don’t want to make it official, or permanent.’ He finished, feeling terribly exposed and painfully vulnerable. Why did Harry always make him feel this way?

They were passing Neville’s shop and they could see him standing against his window display, standing intimately close to Hestia, speaking softly to one another, smiles big and bright and luminous in the soft dim lighting of the shop. She gently touched the outstretched leaves of a potted peace lily, Neville reached out and slipped his hand into hers. They looked nowhere else but at each other, as if the rest of the world could not possibly exist, couldn’t bare to interrupt the moment between them.

Draco barely took in the scene, his inner boggart having burst forth from its hiding place, doing cartwheels and setting off fireworks in his skull.

‘I wish we could do that.’ Harry’s gentle voice broke through Draco’s downward spiral.

‘What?’

Harry nodded his head back towards where they had seen Neville and Hestia. ‘Hold hands. Be a couple without worrying about who will see. What they’ll say.’

Draco didn’t respond. He was in the middle of an emotional roller coaster. He didn’t know what Harry wanted, and he didn’t know how to ask.

‘And, we are official, you git.’ Harry chided. ‘Our closest friends know, don’t they?’

‘Actually, no—’ His voice was soft and Harry looked up at him, brow furrowed. ‘I haven’t told my mum, or Unice, or Pansy and Blaise—’ Draco said slowly, watching his feet, feeling small.

‘Oh.’

‘I didn’t know what you wanted. If it was okay to tell people outside your inner circle.’

‘Do you want people to know?’

‘Honestly?’ He was forcing himself to be honest, forcing himself not to say no I’m chill, whatever you want to do, easy-peasy. He was forcing himself to be brave in the face of possible rejection. ‘Yes. I don’t want to live in secrets and lies.’

To his immense surprise, he felt Harry tugging his hand out of his pocket, and warm, calloused fingers entwining with his own. Draco turned a shocked expression to Harry, who was smiling slyly at him, his own cheeks tinged in an embarrassed sort of flush.

‘If you’re ready for the horrible things they’ll write about us, then so am I.’ Harry said, squeezing Draco’s cold hand. His own fingers were freezing, but he felt too giddy to really care. He squeezed back, trying and failing to hide his smile.

‘Nothing they write could ever be as devastating as the drivel I sold to Skeeter in our school days.’

Harry threw back his head, cackling loudly, and Draco’s heart felt full.
That evening, when Draco came out of the bathroom, after showering and donning his favourite thread-bare maroon sweater, the one that was too big for him and reminded him of brash Gryffindors, he found Harry sitting on the floor in front of Draco’s chest of drawers, his box pulled out from under the bed.

“What are you doing?” He asked, heading to the kettle. He set out two mugs and began the familiar tea ritual.

Harry sighed, not looking up at him as he rummaged through his scant belongings. “You’re right. I do hate this place. It’s drafty and miserable, and the windows shake when I walk too hard, and the shower is never hot enough, and the sun blinds me every morning— But—” he ran his fingers through his hair and sighed heavily, leaving his black locks standing on end, “you’re here. And, I want us to be together, and, until we can find a new home, together, I should probably unpack my stuff.” He gestured vaguely to his sad solitary box.

Draco was watching Harry pull out the contents of his life onto the floor. No rhyme or reason to the organisation. Just bold determination and a pile of unfolded pants.

Smiling, filled with a strange warm fuzzy feeling, Draco walked across the damnable creaky floor, over to where Harry sat crouched on the ground, and ran his fingers through untidy hair, trying to smooth it.

Harry leaned into the touch and Draco pulled out his wand. He waved it gently over the pile of unfolded clothes and scant few possession, a few books, carving tools, and a photo album. They all folded and stacked themselves neatly back in the box. Harry looked up at him with mock incredulity, “I can fold my own clothes you know, I am perfectly capable.” Draco laughed. “And, they’re supposed to go in the drawer, not back in the box. I’m trying to be romantic here.”

“Of course you are.” Draco smirked, offering his hand to Harry who allowed himself to be hoisted up. “You are perfectly capable, and not at all terrible at doing laundry.” He jested, wrapping his arms around him.

“Why do I put up with you?” Harry smiled against Draco’s mouth.

“I’m devastatingly good looking.” He said seriously before kissing him.

Harry laughed and pulled him onto the bed.

“You can unpack your things tomorrow, rather.” Draco said, regaining the breath Harry had squashed out of him on impact. “It’s late and it would be much more fun to read through Gable and Herbert instead.” He looked pointedly at Harry, feeling his face flush with the expression he received in return.

Harry laughed again, supposedly at Draco’s telling complexion, as he reached over and heaved the heavy book onto the bed and wagged his eyebrows in mock flirtation. “Mm, yes, which chapter shall we read tonight, then?” He said, imitating Draco’s posh tones. Draco swatted him with a pillow and Harry’s low laugh filled him to the brim.

The tea tray lay long forgotten as Harry flipped through the pages of The Adventures of Gable and Herbert and began reading aloud, doing the voices and all.
Draco sat at his little, dingy desk in a too big Weasley sweater with a giant H embroidered on the front, knee-high green socks, and his underwear. He had no patients today, and Harry had gone off to a meeting, leaving Draco alone to ponder life and the two letters in front of him.

His flurry of post-its, evidence of his threadbare sanity, had long since been cleared away in the days after Harry’s arrival. His desk was ordered and clean now, neat post-its lining the wall in front of him. Scattered among his own affirmations were a few with untidy, familiar writing. *Just breathe* was scribbled on a pink one. *Look how far you’ve come* on another blue. On a ridiculously large yellow post-it read *I’m proud to know you*.

Draco grinned and blushed every time he looked at them, an uncountable number of times since they had been placed on the wall two days previously.

They had faced a new hurdle together. One that Draco had been dreading. One that he was convinced would have ended in a blowout fight.

When they had begun their foray into sex, the physical side of their relationship had carried on with growing momentum and, really, Draco was well pleased with how far he had come. How far they had come, together. He was consumed with this new desire for closeness, for release, for everything they could do together. They were always keen for one another, in the newness and excitement of it all.

But, after a particularly hard day at work, and a few off-handed comments he had overheard in Honeydukes when he took himself for chocolates, he was feeling unsettled in his own skin. He had gone home feeling hot and prickly all over. His mind hummed and his bones felt unstable.

Unnamed, but familiar emotions reared from the depths, threatening to overtake him. He wanted to be near Harry, to feel his solidity, but at the same time couldn’t stand the thought of being touched intimately. It was so very different to the feeling he had grown accustomed to, the desire to have Harry touch him. The openness he had come to love. Now was yet a new feeling. A new desire. For touch and comfort, but for it to go no further. He didn’t know how to articulate any of this.

When he came into the flat, arms laden with bags of sweets he had impulse purchased, Harry eyed him closely. He had just barely dropped the parcels in the kitchen before moving for Harry with ill-disguised desperation. Harry had wrapped his arms around Draco in practised movements and began kissing down his neck with that new single-minded purpose.

Draco melted into the initial embrace but froze moments later when Harry’s hands continued to wander. It wasn’t what he wanted, but he didn’t want to reject Harry. Wanted to be touched, but not like this.

“Harry—” His voice came out soft and hushed and Harry hadn’t picked up on the tone Draco was trying to impart. He continued moving down Draco’s body, kissing his now exposed shoulder, pressing against him with familiarity and open longing, hands demanding.

“Harry.” He said again, a little more urgently as the chorus of buzzing echoed in his mind. Harry’s hands finally stilled on Draco’s hips.

“What is it?” He asked, panting slightly, pulling back, his flush face looking concernedly at Draco. Draco, who couldn’t think, stared helplessly back at Harry, mouth moving soundlessly, unable to say what it was he wanted. Needed.
“What’s wrong?” He rested a hand on the side of Draco’s cheek.

“Is it—” He tried. The words just didn’t want to leave his throat, but he desperately needed them to. He could not do this right now and Harry needed to know.

His mind was fuzzy and sweat prickled across his skin. “Is it okay— if we— if we don’t?” The words were stilted and frightened sounding, and Harry sagged a little and backed further away.

Draco felt instantly bereft. He felt immeasurably confused by his own needs. He didn’t want Harry to leave and was afraid that if he rejected him, for the first time since they started having sex, that Harry would be upset with him, think less of him.

“Don’t what?” Harry asked, clarifying.

“I need— I can’t—” His words were doing that thing again, where they wouldn’t come out in any way that was helpful. He didn’t want to revert to snapping and storming off— it would have been easier. Would have certainly gotten his point across, but he didn’t want to push Harry away.

The old Draco would have done that. This was a moment for growth.

“Just breathe.” Harry said, grabbing his hand and squeezing. Draco hadn’t realised that his breath had been coming in shallow, quick gasps. “We don’t have to do anything.”

It was Draco’s turn to sag. He took a deep breath and stared into Harry’s kind eyes, willing himself to be honest and clear with what he needed and wanted.

“I can’t do this right now— is that okay?” He asked in a small voice.

“Of course it’s okay.” Harry said with a stern look. “I never want you to do something just because I want to.”

“It’s just— I can’t— but—” He was really struggling to string words together. He needed to lay down. Needed Harry near him. Needed feather light touches on his arms. Needed his duvet.

“You don’t have to explain if you don’t want to. We can talk about it later.” He offered, gently, releasing Draco and taking a step back to give him space.

Draco took a deep breath. Relief flooding through him and he nodded. “Will you lay with me?” He asked meekly, avoiding Harry’s eyes now. He felt stupid and weak. Embarrassed all over again by his lack of desire.

“Oh course.” The smile Harry gave him was radiant and understanding. It held no malice or bitterness. “Can I touch you?”

“Please. Just— just not that. Not right now.” He mumbled. He was relieved that Harry understood. Profoundly relieved. Not just that he didn’t want to have sex, but that sometimes when he was overwhelmed, words didn’t come easily. He was never impatient with Draco, never demanded more than he could offer in the moment. Just gentle questions and held spaces.

Harry led him over to the bed and enfolded him in a tight embrace under the heavy duvet. The compression felt like a relief to his nervous system. It felt safe and held. Harry’s fingers danced gently up and down Draco’s exposed arm as he drifted off, thinking again of how much he loved this man.

When he had awoken several hours later, dinner was made and there were several new additions to
his post-it note collection.

He tore himself away from the memory of Harry’s gentleness and stared down at the letter from his mother, and another from Pansy. Neither of whom had he told about Harry. A fact that Draco was now deeply regretting.

*Darling Draco,*

_I hope you are well. I am writing to invite you to the Fawley family Sabbath Celebration on this coming Saturday. As you know, the invite list is incredibly coveted. But, Madam Fawley hand delivered our last minute invitation, you see. She may have heard through the grapevine that you were single. She’s quite fond of the idea of a Malfoy match for her grandson, you know. Our name may not be what it use to, but it is still sought after._

_It would be ever so favourable if you would consent to accompany me. I hear her grandson is quite fetching, and their family was far removed from the unpleasantness of the last few decades. It would be a beneficial match._

_Please consider, and owl back with your measurements for Twillfits._

_Love,_

_Your mother._

Here was his mother, again, trying her damnest to be supportive, but doing it in the strangest and most uncomfortable of ways. He couldn’t think of any amount of money or bribery that could persuade him to attend a Sabbath celebration full of pureblood snobbery and elf-made wine.

The thought of being set up with another man was truly laughable when he sat perched, wearing Harry’s Weasley jumper, his flat covered in things to remind him of Harry’s presence. He ought to tell his mother he was otherwise involved before she tried something like this again.

Next to that, lay another, hurriedly scribbled letter in familiar violet ink.

*Draco Lucius Dead Man Walking Malfoy,*

_You’re so lucky this isn’t the howler I planned on sending during business hours. SO LUCKY. I deserve an Order of Merlin, First Class, for this kind of restraint and maturity._

_I just heard from none other than Ginny Weasley that you are currently involved with a certain bespectacled SAVIOR OF THE WIZARDING WORLD. The utter BETRAYAL. You absolute berk! How have you kept that silent for so long?! A Gryffindor? Really? I owe Nott so much money._

_I need confirmation. I need details. I need wine. None of that herbal syrup of Longbottom’s. I need Goblin Gin. I’ll bring a crate. Remember when we used to break into your parent’s liquor cabinet? I would like to relive the memory, as older, wiser, more beautiful people with gossip worth telling._

_I’m coming to you this upcoming Friday. Prepare yourself._

_Love,_
Hurricane Pansy would be landing in six days, and Draco didn’t know what to do about it—it would be the first time they’d spend together since the trial. They had kept their promises of exchanging fairly regular owls—Pansy telling Draco about her marital troubles, about Blaise’s habit of working late and obsessing over his vineyard. Draco would tell her about work and pointedly avoided discussing his love life, despite her clear interest.

The thought of sharing his secret and quiet relationship with Harry with the rest of the world was unnerving and exposing. The thought of telling Pansy that they would not be drinking in his home was an uncomfortable one. He’d better get it over with. Uncapping his favourite muggle pen, he wrote;

Dear Pansy Bane of my Existence Parkinson-Zabini,

YOU are the lucky one to have not sent that howler, I would have skinned you alive and worn your flesh suit as a warning to others. I regret nothing, you trout. What do you mean you owe Nott money? There’s no way any of you foresaw this happening.

Yes, I am with Harry. No, you may not have details. Yes, please come for dinner on Friday. No, we are not drinking, and I mean this in all seriousness. Neither Harry or I drink, and we would appreciate it if you didn’t bring alcohol into our home. Yes, we’re living together. No, I don’t want to talk about it. Yes, we both hate the flat, as I’m sure you will too.

What I DO want to talk about is why you were cavorting with your own Gryffindor? Ginny Weasley? Really? Oh, Pansy, you treacherous snake, you. Tell me, is this visit to Hogsmeade really just to pry into my love life? What aren’t you telling me?

See you at 7 pm sharp.

Love,

Draco

He sealed the letter and pulled another sheet of parchment to write to his mother. This time dipping a quill in an ink pot.

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the invite and consideration. It is appreciated. But, unfortunately, I have not been forthcoming with you as of late. It seems now would be an appropriate time to tell you that I am involved with someone. It is quite serious. My apologies to Madam Fawley and to her, I am sure, perfectly admirable grandson.

To that effect, I am unable to make the Sabbath Celebration, too. I have plans already. You should go, though. Enjoy yourself. I will tell you more about my partner soon. Perhaps you can come to tea when we have time.
Love,

Draco

He whistled loudly and Little Dipper swooped in, as if waiting for the signal, from an outside tree. He was electric with excitement for a delivery. It had been ages since he’d had a job.

“Come here you knob.” Draco chided affectionately as Little Dipper’s ear tufts wobbled dramatically. His little legs bouncing with unconfined joy. “Now, this one, this one here is for Pansy, remember where she is in France? Yes? Good.” He nodded as Little Dipper listened with serious concentration, holding his leg out with focused determination. “And, this one here, this one is for mother, at the manor. Drop mother’s off first.”

Little Dipper hooted in understanding as Draco took a moment to stroke the soft feathers of his head. “Go on, then, you little menace.” He encouraged fondly.

The owl pushed enthusiastically off the back of the office chair and soared out the open kitchen window.

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October 30, 2009

Luna’s home looked as welcoming and full of love as it ever did when he and Harry walked up the front steps to the large purple door, hand in hand. The garden was covered in the colourful leaves of autumn, jack-o-lanterns lining the stone walkway, a large wreath of dried sunflowers and blackthorn branches hung heavy on the door under the bare wisteria vine, its thick black trunk and sprawling branches laying thickly across the arbour overhead.

The door swung open on their approach, and a very pregnant Luna beamed her gentle smile at them. “Come in, come in.” She beckoned, hugging them both tightly.

“Hi Luna.” Harry said, clearly wary of hugging her too hard, very aware of her enormous belly.

Luna was only nearing 36 weeks now but looked far further along carrying twins. She carried it well, in her serene way, draped in her usual layers of rainbow cloth and odd, jangling jewellery.

She led them to the kitchen, passed the living room that was once a meeting space, now decorated with all the trappings of an expectant family. A half-built crib in the corner, a plush family sofa crowded around a low coffee table before the fireplace, and stacks of folded cloth diapers on a changing station.

Draco stopped in the doorway to survey the newly acquired baby gear, as Luna waddled away down the passage to the kitchen. “Are you building that crib yourself, Greg?” He asked in a slightly teasing voice.

Greg grinned sheepishly, adjusting his tool belt. “Me and Weasley.”

“You and Weasley? Which Weasley?” Harry asked curiously.

“Ron.” Greg told them. “After we met at Grimmauld Place all those weeks ago, he wrote to me and asked if I needed any help getting ready. Did I ever—” He chuckled. “He’s been coming by pretty regularly with Rose. Helping us put things together, organize baby clothes. He’s really in his
element with children. Didn’t realize there was so much to consider.”

Harry had an unusually soft expression on his face, hearing about his best mate get excited about baby things. “Ron’s a great dad.” He said softly. “You couldn’t ask for a better role model.”

They turned to follow Luna’s lead, and as soon as they entered the kitchen, Greg began fussing over the tea tray. “We won’t keep you long, I know you’re both busy,” she said from where she sat perched on a stool at the centre island. She smiled fondly as she watched Greg dance around the kitchen with far more determination than seemed necessary, “but, we had something we wanted to ask you both.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, also watching Greg scuttle about with a curious expression on his face.

She placed her hand softly on Greg’s shoulder to draw him back to the conversation and he nodded as he passed out cups of tea and set down a large plate of raspberry scones.

He sat down and smiled adoringly at Luna, taking her hand in his and giving it a quick kiss before focusing on his guests.

“We thought, since you both have been surrounded by so much death, and heaviness in your lives, and in your new roles as Death Herders, that experiencing some life would be good for you.” She smiled at them expectantly with her huge blue eyes, one hand resting softly on her belly.

“I don’t understand— are you telling us we need to go on vacation or something?” Harry asked, looking perplexed.

Greg laughed openly and looked between them. Draco had a shrewd suspicion he knew what was happening.

“Luna, are you asking us to come to your birth?” He felt a strong welling of affection and gratitude for his friends deep in his midsection. Harry, in turn, inhaled a bit of scone he had been taking a bite of.

“Yes, I am.” She smiled, her hands dancing soothingly across her huge belly, Harry coughing violently, face turning purple. “I think it would be good for both of you.”

Greg was nodding eagerly and looking between Harry and Draco, waiting for their reaction.

Harry, still coughing, stood and pounded a fist to his chest to dislodge the errant crumb that was attempting to kill him.

Draco looked with bewilderment between his two friends as he stood to slap Harry on the back. “You really want us there? Are you sure you want an audience?”

Harry turned panicked eyes at all of them, face red with the effort of clearing his throat, and tried to push out a few raspy words, “You want what now?” the shrill disbelief forcing another round of hacking.

“No, I don’t want an audience.” She laughed softly, pointing her wand at Harry and casting a silent spell to clear his throat. “I’m not asking you to come into the room— just to be here when it happens. Be the first to meet them.”

Harry’s cough finally subsided into a guttural throat clearing and he sat back down with watery eyes. “You want us to be here when your children are born?” He asked, staring between them with confusion evident on his face. “Here as in, here? In this house?”
Draco exchanged a knowing look with Luna and Greg. Greg answered, “Well, yeah, mate, having your children at home is pretty commonplace in pureblood families— all three of us were born at home.”

“Really?” Harry asked, voice thick with confusion and skepticism. “I didn’t think anyone did that anymore— not with hospitals existing. Hermione gave birth at St. Mungo’s.”

Draco shrugged. “Personal preference, or medical necessity— it’s different for everyone. But, usually, given the choice, most purebloods would choose to give birth at home with their midwife.”

“Not a healer?” Harry asked, his eyes still wide.

“Well, no, healers heal things. Low-risk pregnancy isn’t something to be healed. They just happen. Midwives are experts in the low-risk range of normal.” Draco explained. He forgot how much information he took for granted about the magical world as a pureblood and a healer. “Honestly, you may have been born at home too. The Potters were a pureblood line. We could find out— in the birth records, if you wanted.” Draco offered kindly, knowing that this may be an information overload.

Harry was looking at him as if he were speaking mermish. “17 years I’ve been in the wizarding world, and I still feel like I have no idea what’s happening sometimes.”

“I think you’re missing the point here, Harry.” Draco said grinning apologetically, tilting his head back to Luna and Greg, who were watching with amused interest.

He turned his startled eyes back to Greg and Luna and mouthed soundlessly for a moment.

“It’s okay, Harry. I know it might feel overwhelming.” Her voice was low and kind and her eyes held nothing but fondness. “But, like I said, I’m not asking you to actually be in the room, just to be here, in the house. And, of course, you can say no. I wouldn’t hold it against you. I just think it would be good for you.”

“Good for me—” He echoed, looking a bit lost.

Draco smiled at Harry’s speechlessness. He reached out across the table to grab Luna’s hand.

“Thank you. I would love to be here. I think it would be good.” Greg gave a watery smile, as if he was overcome by the short exchange, and patted Draco clumsily on the shoulder.

Harry cleared his throat, seeming to come back to himself and making a decision. “Yeah—Yes. Me too.” He got up and hugged Luna, more soundly this time, clearly less afraid of breaking her.

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Later that night, Draco was pacing anxiously, waiting for Pansy to arrive. He didn’t know why he thought this was a good idea. Pansy was a viper, and she and Harry would either get on too well, or not at all. He didn’t know which possibility he was more afraid of.

Harry watched him wordlessly with an amused smirk on his lips. After coming back from Luna’s that morning, Harry had spent a lot of time in silent contemplation, making far too many cups of tea. But, as the afternoon wore on, he seemed to have settled into himself. Now, he was back to his easy manner, while Draco seemed to slip deeper and deeper into his own anxiety.

“Draco, anyone would think you weren’t looking forward to seeing Pansy with how frantic you look right now.” He walked over to him and placed a gentle hand on Draco’s shoulder, stopping the momentum of his movements. He instantly felt himself calm slightly at the touch. “Your
“It’s not your behaviour I’m worried about—” Draco mumbled, his feelings of apprehension mounting. “She tried to sell you off to Voldemort. Harry, I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to be here, or if you wanted me to cancel dinner.” He almost hoped that Harry would ask him to cancel dinner, just so he didn’t have to go through with it. He could spend the evening wrapped in his duvet with Harry pressed against his side.

“Oh, no—” Harry laughed. “You’re not getting me to ruin your dinner plans for you.” He made a show of straightening Draco’s collar and smoothing the front of his shirt. “You haven’t spent time with Pansy in ages, and you told me— not two days ago— that you wanted her and I to get to know one another— so, this is happening.” He said sternly, with a sly grin.

Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry. Equal parts annoyed and endeared that Harry was trying to order him about. He mumbled bitterly under his breath about bossy Gryffindors as he turned away from Harry’s grinning face to double check the stasis charm on their dinner.

“What was that?” Harry teased.

Draco tried to shoot him a look of deepest loathing, which he wasn’t sure he managed to pull off. Judging by the fact that Harry’s response was to laugh loudly and shake his head before walking towards the couch, he figured it may have been a failed attempt.

“Come help me with this, your highness.” Harry called, gesturing at the coffee table and couch.

Still grumbling, Draco stomped over to where Harry stood, causing the windows to rattle violently in the kitchen. Together they stood, and sent their weaving magic out to transfigure the stiff little couch and low table into a cozy dining space with three chairs. It was the perfect combination of their magic. The table was rounded and tall with sturdy, carved legs. The chairs were elegant with wide backs and rungs on the bottom, the perfect height to place one’s foot.

Harry reached over and pulled Draco into his arms, kissing his cheek chastely. The feel of Harry’s magic around him was something that never ceased to calm and elate him. It was alive, and so very Harry. The great torrential capacity within him simmered gently in the air and Draco momentarily forgot his anxiety. Forgot the outside world.

That is, until the telltale swoosh of the floo roaring to life in the grate downstairs. Harry released Draco and gave him a reassuring smile. “Go on, then.” He encouraged, smiling at Draco’s wide eyed nervous expression.

“Goodness me, haven’t you any lights in this house?” Pansy’s voice echoed up from downstairs. “Is this how you greet your guests?”

Harry snorted and Draco rolled his eyes, his tension breaking. Turning to the open door he drawled “I’m coming now—” before descending the steps into the dark and empty waiting room below.

Pansy’s heels clicked on the floor as she followed the sound of his feet on the stairs. She stepped into the light cast from the flat above as Draco cleared the last step. She was dressed impeccably, as she often was.

Her eyebrows were plucked and pencilled to perfection, and the edge of her short bob seemed to have been cut with razor precision. Her heels were dangerously tall, and her black dress far too short for the season. Her green fur travelling cloak draped across her shoulders and black felted cloche sat neatly on her head. Her burgundy lipstick and winged eyeliner put her in mind of
someone going out on the town— or a hot date— not to a friend’s dingy flat in Hogsmeade.

Unwelcome to Draco’s eyes, however, were two bottles of what appeared to be champagne from the Zabini cellars in her right hand.

“Oh, darling!” She cried, a smile splitting her face. She threw an arm around Draco’s neck and kissed his cheek. She smelled like lilacs and cigar smoke. The lining of her coat tickled Draco’s nose as he breathed in the familiarity of her. It had been so long since they’d been close like this, and he hadn’t realized how much he had missed her in his life.

“Hey, Pans.” He said softly into her hair, hugging her tightly. “Thanks for coming. Sorry about the dark room.”

“Oh, not to worry.” She seemed a little taken aback by the warmness of his welcome. They had never been too affectionate towards one another in school, but Draco thought that maybe it was time he started showing his friends how much they meant to him.

He led her upstairs by the hand, fearful she might fall in those ridiculous heels and break her neck on his watch.

“I thought I told you no booze.” He chastised as she clipped up the steps with far more ease than seemed possible.

Pansy sighed dramatically. “If you must know, one of these is sparkling grape juice.” She said with a lamenting edge. She paused for a moment, considering, before continuing quickly. “And, the champagne I didn’t bring for you— I have another stop after this.” She sounded slightly embarrassed.

“Oh, so you didn’t come all this way just to harass me and my quiet life? Why, Pansy, here I thought you missed me and wanted to pry.” Draco teased as he placed her bottles on the counter and helped her take her ridiculously large and luxuriant cloak off.

Seeing what was underneath it he chuckled and said, “But, I can see now that you’re not dressed for dinner with a boring gay couple— no, you’re dressed for something far more exciting than that.”

Pansy’s too short dress was completely open at the back. It laid delicately along the severe planes of her narrow frame in the most revealing way. She looked like sex on legs— even Draco could appreciate how stunning she looked.

“Oh, Draco, I am indeed here to pry. But, I so seldom come to this side of the world, I thought I should make the rounds.” She said, waving her hand flippantly.

“Who in the world are you going to see looking like this, and how did you manage to get Blaise to let you leave the house?”

Pansy just barely managed not to blush as she smiled wolfishly. “As if Blaise ever had any input on my wardrobe and social life.” She laughed.

Harry cleared his throat from the other side of the room and Pansy spun gracefully on her heels to face him. “Why, hello Potter.” She said sweetly, if not a little stilted, surveying him closely. Harry himself was wearing his favourite worn jeans, a Weasley jumper and a pair of socks that Draco had knitted. His hair was a rat’s nest tangled into a bun as usual and he stood with his arms folded.

“Parkinson.” He said with a smile, nodding his head curtly.
Draco was full of apprehension. He realised in that moment how much it meant to him that they be
civil to one another.

“I hope you’re hungry, I made paella for dinner—” Draco interrupted, trying not to let them lull
into any awkward silences where they could dredge up old memories and reasons to hate one
another.

“Oh, excellent! Is it your mother’s recipe? It used to be my favourite thing she made.” She
exclaimed excitedly. “Can I help with anything?” She walked towards the small kitchen, clearly
intent on being useful.

“Similar to mother’s, yes, but you know she never made it herself, Pans, the house elves made it.”
Draco said, smiling, remembering the amount of time they spent together in their youth. “Could
you grab the sparkling? We can go sit.”

Pansy obliged and Harry moved forward to help Draco carry the food to the newly transfigured
dining room table. “Of course I know the house elves made it.” Pansy snorted. “Neither of our
parents would recognise a frying pan if it hit them in the face.”

Draco was feeling jittery and nervous and he allowed a sympathetic Harry to take the heavy paella
pan from his sweaty hands and place it gently at the centre of the table. He decided to rather
summon the salad than risk carrying it.

Harry scooted his chair closer to Draco’s and rested a soothing hand on his knee as Pansy nattered
endlessly about the weather, pouring three champagne flutes of sparkling grape juice.

“So,” she said, finally changing the subject away from Scotland's apparently subpar seasons, and
handing them each a glass “I’ll have you know— Blaise bottled this special for us tonight.” She
beamed, and Draco rose an eyebrow in question as he held the suspicious, bubbling beverage. “It’s
non-alcoholic, as requested, but it is made from our late harvest riesling grapes.” She said with a
satisfied grin, clearly very pleased with herself.

Draco felt that warm fuzzy feeling in his midsection increase at the notion that Pansy had been so
thoughtful.

“Pansy…” Draco said, the fondness in his voice evident.

“To friendship—” She stated, imperiously, raising her flute.

He had Harry both inclined their heads with a smile and clinked glasses with Pansy and took a sip.
The mild sweetness and tart acidity was pleasant in his mouth and he knew instantly it would be
delicious with their seafood feast.

“Okay,” Pansy said, sounding businesslike, putting down her glass, “I need to know how,
in Circe’s sagging tits, did this happen?” She gestured flippantly at the two of them sitting so close.

Harry grinned, shooting Draco a sideways glance, and he felt himself blush.

“Because, from what I remember—,” she continued, addressing Harry, “you two never could pass
up an opportunity to sling insults or jynxes— or even the occasional punch in the face.”

“Believe me,” Harry said with a chuckle, pushing his hand uselessly through his hair, “I think we
were just as shocked to see how well we got along when we weren’t fighting.” He looked at Draco
and grinned softly when their eyes met.
Draco felt his face grow warm again and he felt sweaty thinking that Pansy was seeing them like this. That Harry’s soft eyes and gentle smile weren’t just for behind closed doors and in the dark of night, but that he could look at Draco like that in front of others.

Draco glanced back at Pansy and he could see her calculating eyes watching them closely. “Where? When? How?” She asked, brandishing a fork at them. “Details, people.”

“Uhhhh—” Draco intoned, turning a confused gaze on Harry, who looked equally as perplexed and slightly embarrassed. They hadn’t really talked about what they would say to people outside the inner circle. All of Harry’s closest friends knew, so they had never had to discuss it, but how did you explain the whole wild and deeply private story to someone new? Did anyone need to know?

“Well—” He started, awkwardly. “We met again through— work.” He said vaguely, looking to Harry for confirmation, who just shrugged apologetically. “And— then he came with me to my research post in the forest— as a— friend— We weren’t together yet, then. We only started dating afterwards— around my birthday.” He finished evasively. Harry nodding along.

“He helped me out with some personal stuff. And, we became really close. The rest is history.” Harry shrugged. He reached out and began to ladle heaping piles of paella onto his plate, seemingly as a distraction.

“History, indeed.” Pansy said, taking the serving spoon from Harry and serving herself a small, neat pile of paella with a scallop and two clams delicately placed on top. She sipped her sparkling grape juice pensively. “How did you get over your shared history?” She asked carefully, real curiosity in her voice.

“We didn’t get over it.” Harry said flatly. “We bonded over it. We both had a fucked up time of it in school, and after— Draco just understood what it was like.”

Draco felt his heart swelling. To hear Harry explain and defend their growth together to someone. It was validating and heartening.

“You know, it does kind of make sense, in a way.” She said, smirking at Draco. “Draco here couldn’t go more than six hours without talking about you in school— Potter this, Potter that, Potter’s broomstick, Potter’s hair, Potter’s eyes. It was exhausting—”

“Pansy!” Draco yelled, feeling immensely embarrassed by the base betrayal. “Silence!”

Harry was cackling gleefully, looking like Christmas had come early. “Thinking about my broomstick a lot in school, were you?”

“Honestly!” He moaned and Harry continued to laugh openly. “What did I do to deserve this?” He asked his plate of food. It had no answers for him.

“Oh, come now, Harry—” Pansy teased, her smile widening. “I hear you weren’t much better— maybe even worse. At least Draco didn’t follow you all around the school at all hours. Well, sometimes he did—”

“That is enough!” Draco threw a sautéed mushroom at her.

She squawked indignantly and Harry asked with a curious smile, “And, where exactly are you getting this information from?”

“Oh, you know, around—” She said with a prevaricate air, still smirking.
They passed the rest of dinner enjoyably enough. He was proud of both of them. Harry and Pansy were trying to be friendly, to chat amicably, ask one another engaging questions. He knew Harry didn’t care for Pansy’s desire to gossip about old school mates, and he knew that Pansy couldn’t give a rat’s fart about Harry’s wood carvings, but they were trying to find common ground for Draco’s sake. It made him feel loved.

At 9:30 she announced, “Alright, you old ladies, I best be off now. I have places to be—” as she donned her fluffy cloak and swiped the unopened bottle of champagne off the counter.

She hugged Draco tightly and kissed him on the cheek, smudging a bit of her dark lipstick. “Owl me—” She said softly before squeezing his hand.

“You better believe I will. I want to know what in Merlin’s name you’re up to.” He goaded with a raised eyebrow.

She gave him a wicked grin before moving to stand in front of Harry. “Potter.” She said, with all the authority she could muster at speaking to the man who killed Voldemort.

“Parkinson.” He returned, in a similar tone and they stared at one another for a moment, as if sizing each other up.

Her face broke into a reluctant smile, and she moved to hug him. Draco watched his oldest friend and his partner share a quick embrace. Pansy said something in a low voice in Potter’s ear, that made him grin and nod his head— something that Draco didn’t catch— before she withdrew and swiftly walked to the door.

“Can I walk you out?” Draco asked, watching her teeter on the top step.

“Oh, no, dear, I’ll be fine. Thanks for dinner, love.” She winked at him, and began walking down the stairs.

“Don’t break your neck in those heels!” He shouted after her.

“Fuck off!” She yelled back, reaching the bottom of the steps and striding out of sight.

Draco snorted and shut the door as the floo roared to life and Pansy disappeared.

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November 1, 2009

It was late. The sun had long since vanished from the sky and the hoots of owls were all that could be heard in the cold fall air outside the small window of Draco’s office. He was hunched over a scattering of parchments laid out across his large walnut desk, ticking off ingredients on a list for a potion concept that was evading him. Something that could be instrumental in his Haem work if he could just piece it together.

The cauldrons behind him hissed and bubbled gently in the dim candlelight, and Voileami kept regularly popping her head in the door as if to inquire what Draco was doing down here so late.

Harry had gotten an owl from Hestia sometime after dinner, and he left quickly without much of an explanation. “I have to run to Grimmauld Place. Hestia needs me.” He had said before throwing his boots and jacket on, and kissing Draco. He apparated away before Draco could respond, and he found himself idly wandering downstairs soon after his departure, his mind full of a web of concepts that needed to be laid out.
That had been hours ago, and Draco hadn’t realised how late it had become, alight with intensity about his ideas as he was. Engrossed in the thick cream parchment, covered in bullet pointed lists and margins filled with cramped, half formed thoughts.

He relished these quiet hours alone. The peace and carefully built stability of his relationship with Harry had gifted him a new freedom in his solitude. His time alone was no longer fraught with worries and concerns over Harry, but rather a time when he could truly begin to feel comfortable with himself. As someone who had spent so much of their life in isolation, this new sensation and joy in solitude was a very different experience. His mind was more clear, his thoughts less disjointed than usual.

*Leonurus Cardiaca x thestral umbilical cord*

*Angelica Sinensis x thestral caul*

*Rubues Idaeus x thestral placenta*

He was hashing out a new idea about the thestral's capacity for helping the cultivation of new life. Inspired as he was by Luna’s gift to him and Harry. He was thinking about the thestral cave. About their nests and the luminescent algae, soft and ethereal. He was wondering about their birthing rituals, their mating habits. There was so much he didn’t yet know— so much to learn about these beautiful creatures.

Voileami had idled into the room again, resting her oblong head against Draco’s arm as he wrote, as if he were the reason she wasn’t asleep yet. He stilled his pen from flying across the page to gently stroke her velvety, boney face. “Odd creature, why are you still here, you know you can go to sleep— you needn’t wait for me.” He teased, feeling fond that she was still here this late.

She huffed in a reprimand as if the idea of leaving him alone downstairs was preposterous. “I wonder, should we go revisit your cave one of these days?” He asked rhetorically. It was something he had been thinking about a lot recently. He missed the forest— missed the quiet contemplation.

Another idea caught his attention, and he hastened to mark it down lest it evaporate from his thoughts before he could grasp it. He was so lost in the rhythmic movement of his own hand and the words flying out onto the page, that he didn’t immediately notice Voileami’s sudden departure.

There had been no shuffling or clomping hooves, no swish of her tail, no reproachful snort. She was simply gone from the room. The absence of her warmth from his side left a trail of goosebumps along his arm and the hairs on the back of his neck rose uncomfortably.

He was suddenly very aware of the unnatural stillness in the house. Something felt off— something was wrong.

The wards around him wobbled slightly. They hadn’t swayed in their usual way to indicate someone’s presence in his home, but his finely attuned senses towards magic alerted him that they didn’t feel normal. They felt stilted, uncomfortable, as if they had been momentarily confused.

He stifled an urge to call out for Harry, to see if he was home, to reassure himself that nothing was wrong, but he couldn’t feel the safe and grounding swirl of magic that soothed him and told him he was safe. No. He felt— something unknown. He felt a prickle of unfamiliar magic in the air as he heard a muffled footstep in the front room.

Draco wasn’t alone.
All of the lights in the house were out save for the dim glow of a few candles in his office. He thought that whoever was here must presume Draco to be asleep upstairs or out of the house. Perhaps he was being burgled? Teenagers come to steal potions or cash.

Or, perhaps it was someone who didn’t appreciate a Death Eater opening up shop in a quiet town full of innocent people. He ran through a mental list of people that would want to snoop around his practice in the dead of night, as he heard more distinct shuffling of feet.

Draco sat perfectly still, his heart hammering in his chest, sweat beading under his shirt. He realised that once whoever was here came down the hall they would see the soft glow of light coming from his office and he would be found.

His mind raced, unsure of what to do. Apparate? Face the intruder? Perhaps it was just Luna being weird and wandering around in the dark? Perhaps Draco was just hearing things and being profoundly paranoid. It certainly wouldn’t be out of character for either of those scenarios to be true.

There was a creak of a floor board and a low whisper was answered by a rumbling mutter. There were two people—two unknown people—wandering around Draco’s practice at near one in the morning. The only people who could get in without the wards sounding were Harry and Luna, but, neither of them would creep around that quietly.

The only other kind of people who could get through his wards without detection knew dark magic—ex Death Eaters, or dark wizard catchers. His downstairs didn’t hold the same web of neurotically protective magic as did his flat upstairs and he cursed the oversight.

How could they have been that stupid?

Another footstep, closer this time—they were coming down the hall. He was just deciding to apparate away when a voice broke the tense silence of the house and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Healer Malfoy, we know you’re here.” Said a familiar voice that sent a thrill of panic down his spine. It was the stone-faced ministry worker with aviators. The footsteps were coming still closer and Draco felt paralyzed in place. Torn between protecting himself and protecting his work.

He took a fortifying breath and shook the stiff numbness from his limbs, vanishing the parchment to his desk upstairs and placing stasis and protection charms on his potions behind him—he couldn’t let them damage his work—couldn’t let them see his research. The two familiar and unwelcome faces came into doorway, lit by the soft glow of candles, their eyes triumphant and eerie in the dim lighting.

“Oh, here you are—” The short one said, smiling. “Was hoping you could answer a few questions for us.” He said smoothly. They stepped into the room and assumed a wide threatening stance, blocking the doorway. Their wands out and at the ready.

“Gentlemen.” He greeted in drawling, dignified tones as if they had had a standing appointment—as if Draco was expecting them. His voice was carefully controlled and didn’t reflect the utter terror he felt at being cornered in his own home by intruders. He spoke and sat in his desk chair like the healer he was. He wouldn’t let them see his fear. “And to what do I owe this pleasure?” He asked with a sharp voice.

“Oh, now it’s a pleasure, is it?” The taller one chuckled cruelly. “I knew you’d be more amenable to discussions when there wasn’t a door to slam in our face.”
“Or a famous boyfriend to rescue you.” The shorter one said, with a bite of anger, his lip curling.

Draco didn’t know why the reference to Harry frightened him so much, but he felt his heart stutter at the implication.

“We’ve been trying to get to you for weeks to have a little chat about your work with thestrals, but you seem to have some good friends to help you out with that ward magic upstairs.” The tall one sounded irritated and impressed in equal measure.

“It helps to have friends in high places.” Draco said flippantly. He slipped into the petulant brat attitude with shocking ease. “Generally helps keep the miscreants away.” He said pointedly, looking them up and down with obvious distaste.

“The ministry wants to know what you’re planning with Harry Potter and the thestrals.” The short one spat, clearly unable to restrain himself from meeting Draco’s challenging tone. He knew he shouldn’t needle them— knew he should tell them whatever they wanted to know to avoid getting arresting and sent to Azkaban, but his righteous indignation at the situation combined with his rising adrenaline and rage propelled him to act like the self-assured prick he once was.

“What Harry and I get up to is none of your concern. You can get your gossip from the Prophet like everyone else.” He snapped angrily. “As for the thestrals, I’ve told you repeatedly that I quit my research to focus on real science. Hence, the room you’re currently standing in.” He gestured around, indicating his cauldrons and stacks of magical medical textbooks lining the walls. “The DoM has all my research. If you have questions, you can ask them.” He resisted all of his instincts to cross his arms defensively like an angry teenager being grilled by their parents.

They stood and stared at him for a long moment as if considering what to do next. Draco silently and desperately wondered where the fuck Harry was.

“I think, Healer Malfoy, it’s time for you to come in for some questioning.” Said the taller one, eyeing Draco with amusement. Draco felt the low thrum of dread he’d been experiencing, mount to a crescendo.

“On what grounds?” Draco growled, getting to his feet. He did not have his wand in his hand, but felt his magic pool around him defensively, ready for the fight.

“On the grounds that we don’t believe a single fucking word out of your Death Eater mouth.” The short one said, his ire getting the better of him. He moved forward to seize Draco and the moment his hand made contact with his elbow, the current of powerful magic— that was Harry’s through and through— shot out at him— making him leap back in shock with a howl of rage.

His talisman had kept him safe.

In the split second before they realised what had happened, Draco took advantage of their distraction and moved with the speed of lightning. The crack of apparition was loud in his ears as his magic pulled him away from the stunning curses that came flying towards him, only one destination in mind.

Harry.
The Forest, Again

November 01, 2009

The dust that had once covered the entirety of Grimmauld Place was no more, and Harry felt nothing between his hands and the ancient magic of the wizarding home, a slow and gentle thrum, centuries of spells, decadently laid across floorboards and ornate paneling, along the moulding and every brick of the hearth. He let his fingers slide along the bannister wood, dark with the oils of many transient touches. He could hear Hestia’s voice from the meeting room, and he climbed the rest of the stairs, a newly steeped mug of tea steaming in his right hand, his left drifting across the dark, polished lines of oak. It warmed almost imperceptibly beneath his touch, gentle and reassuring. Grateful and at peace.

Harry had joined Hestia, Dennis, Luna and Greg to discuss the recent spate of lurkers in the square outside, trench coats long and brims of their hats wide, pulled low over stoic, unremarkable faces. Lurkers who had gone so far as to question Joaquin and Alethea about the house one blustery afternoon, crisp dried leaves and detritus swirling about their feet. They had been all smiles, feigned curiosity thinly veiled over deeply malicious intensity. It was as if the ghosts of the Death Eaters Harry had once spied from the same cobwebbed windows had returned to haunt the square, these new spectres of malcontent also sanctioned and sent by the Ministry of Magic.

“Unspeakables.” Hestia had said, a dark look settling across her regal features, a ring of holly, complete with tiny red berries, encircling her. She had pushed her long braids over her shoulder, crossed her arms and glared, her magic rumbling its discontent. Its anger.

“Not unspeakables, unknowables.” Replied Luna’s soft voice, tired and waning as she spoke, a yawn had stretched the corners of her mouth as she lay back against Greg’s shoulder, his arm snug around her. She was dressed in flowing robes of periwinkle blue, soft and delicate and edged in silver embroidery. She looked as though she was made of nothing but the moonlight itself, long pale hair in a thick braid, her hands crescent around her belly, round as the waxing moon.

Luna, in her way, though much subdued and even slower than normal, had explained that the Department of Mysteries swallowed up those who dug deeply into the esoteric and mystical world of magic, who were effectively erased from their lives—nameless wizards and witches, unknown to any, no histories and no names. Seekers of power, drawn to it, inexorably. It was the unknowables who had collected the artefacts that peppered the rooms behind the doors. The unknowables who had taken the veil, had lifted it onto the plinth, sealed away from the earth where it had first been formed, tattered cloth once free to blow in the gentle winds of the waking world, on sacred ground where knowledge seeped between the two worlds.

It was the unknowables who had harvested the brains. Had first unlocked time. The unknowables who had captured space and who had hunted love, pure and effortlessly true, the most powerful trophy of them all.

Power, in all of its forms, they craved it. They traded their lives, their identities, their histories, and they circled around their treasures like fervid, starving magpies, forever hungry for more. Forever hunting. Collecting.

In the days before, Harry would have smiled and taken Luna’s words with hefty grains of salt, laughing away the Rotfang conspiracy with the nargles and other such hiccupping stories of magical oddity and infamy, impossible and incomprehensible all at once. Stories that would have delighted a child, yet left all of the adults bored and irritable, as if Luna’s world of possibility was a
burden, not a gift. A distraction, not an insight.

But, that was the days before. A land where hallows were children’s stories, and life was simple and the ministry was just a cumbersome bureaucracy, like any other. Before magic had curled around life and death, around love and sacrifice. Before Grims and Death Herders, and thestrals with their milky, glassy eyes and knowing stares. Before ghosts parted the veil to whisper through dreams. Before magic he had never known had poured out of Harry, had threaded its way through his skin and bones, had anointed him, reclaimed him. Made a home in him.

“At first,” Luna continued, her hands slowly and rhythmically tracing paths along the swell of her stomach, “the unspeakables were interested in Draco’s research, because of it’s great application in the wizarding world, because it could explain some of the more mysterious aspects of magic and medicine alike. Because it was new and exciting. Previously unattained.”

The room had gone quiet, everyone listening, Dennis in his leather chair by the fire, legs crossed and chin resting on his palm, fingers tapping absently on one softly stubbled cheek. Hestia’s hands were clasped in her lap, her long black nails tight against her sable skin.

“It seems, however, that the two of you together have aroused the interest of the unknowables. Now, they are interested not in what you can do, but you, yourself. Your flesh. Your power. From here, they will likely hunt you. Trap you. I fear this is what Hermione was alluding to all those weeks ago when she mentioned the risk of disappearing. They will try to collect you, and all of the power that you both hold.”

It was then that Harry had stood, her words still settling in the air of their meeting room, finding space amongst all the other secrets and fears of other stories shared before. He had taken the opportunity to head to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Mint. With honey. The tiny silver spoon clinked against the ceramic, so loud in the quiet of the empty kitchen, only populated by himself and his thoughts.

As he climbed the stairs back to the room, he could hear their whispered voices, shuffled conversation and another of Luna’s yawns. Hestia was standing in the hall, watching out the window over the square outside, scowling, hand resting on her hip, her eyes pointedly narrowed, the holly leaves shining in the flickering light of the old oil lamps. Her mouth was just open, as if about to fog the chilled pane with murmured words.

It was in that muffled quiet that a shrill and violent scream rent the air, quick and sharp and harrowing, punctuated with the sharp rise and fall of wings. Large, leathery, bat-like wings and thudding hooves, and Flea was disappearing around one of the many dark hallways of Grimmauld Place, his long tail snaking around the corner into the realm of inky darkness beyond.

Harry froze, letting an icy wave of dread ripple around him, rolling across his skin, his mug falling from his hand and the boiling tea spilling out across the stairs. Harry looked up to catch Hestia as she turned to look at him, marking the end of her watchful vigil at the window, her amber eyes bright and fierce in the flickering light. She shone with a resilient, unfettered determination.

“They’re coming, Harry.”

A pop sounded behind Harry in the foyer just before the ancient door, keeper and guard of the House of Black, followed by a stuttered, forceful inhale, and Harry felt his magic fret and keen with fear, felt his heart beat an unsteady rhythm in his chest. He turned, adrenalin running rivulets down his limbs, across his chest. His thoughts faded. Faded into nothing. Into frozen, empty nothingness.
Draco.

He turned, as if in molasses. As if the world had been plunged into deep, icy water and everything made still with the cold and the dread and the weight of the depths on all sides.

Before him, Draco stood, one hand stretched out as if to catch himself, to touch the wall and regain his footing, as he was standing with feet at odd angles, inappropriately wide. His other hand was at his neck, pulling at the collar of his robes, holding them away from his throat. His throat. It was pulling in air. Harry could see his adam’s apple drawing down with each forceful, ragged breath. He could see Draco’s shoulders hunching up, working to move air in. Everything in slow motion. Silent. As if the two of them. The two of them were drowning.

“Harry, go!”

In a rush, sound came back to Harry’s world, Hestia’s voice cracking the stillness. The silence. Sound and time fell back together and Draco was coughing and spluttering and clawing at his neck, and Harry was flying down the stairs. Running to him. Arms outstretched, a fire kindling in him. Burning and roaring and his magic surging out of him, desperate and enraged, spiralling.

And Harry caught Draco as the other man fell, the two of them spinning out of existence and away. Away to where it’s safe. Away home.

Snow was falling softly in the clearing. The sky was dark and muted with clouds, the stars and moon hidden from view. Panting breaths released clouds of steam into the otherwise silent forest, muffled and dampened with layers of snow.

The two men were both kneeling, the snow moulding to their collapsed forms. Harry still had his arms outstretched, one firmly fastened around the forearm of Draco, the other lifted gingerly into the openness of the night sky, a point of focus, a calling forward of magic, of charms of spellwork, tried and true. His eyes were closed, and he held himself still with fragile focus.

He was chanting. Words soft and disheveled at first, the magic flighty and fickle. *Salvio hexia. Cave inimicum. Protego totalum.*

As he spoke, the familiarity of the chant took hold, deep within his heaving chest. It poured from him, like muscle memory. This is how you protect the ones you love.

*Salvio hexia. Cave inimicum. Protego totalum.*

This is how you keep them safe. How you layer them in your love, in your courage, in your sacrifice. This is how you protect the ones you love.

*Salvio hexia. Cave inimicum. Protego totalum.*

And Harry’s voice grew with each repetition until it rang out into the once silent field, no longer soft and muted but the sound of his chanting carrying cold and clear into the night. It was weaving deep into the valleys of the South and around the slopes of mountains that rose into the Northern sky. From the caverns and caves of the East to the peaks and rugged outcroppings that lay beyond the Rowan grove to the West. He chanted and his magic threaded deep into the earth, wound around the roots of ancient trees, soaked into the fissures in the granite, found a home in the polished stones of the riverbeds and the very soil beneath them. And it all entwined with his magic, bright and golden and true.
It was only after he had ensured the safety of their hollow. Their forest home. That he opened his eyes. His lips still moved, the spells still flowing from him, but his voice was soft now, soft and gentle. Gentle and safe.

Draco knelt before him, his breaths still coming in big heaving gasps. His eyes were wide, his hands shaking. Fear had consumed him, ravaged him. And Harry, who had been so focused on his own magic, sending it out across the stretches of wilderness around them, hectares of unkempt bramble and twisted, gnarled trees. Now, he found himself making his world small. Small enough to consist of just himself and Draco, kneeling together. Breathing out into the frigid air. Their bodies haphazardly thrown together. Together, in the snow.

He brought his arm down to catch Draco’s hand, still pulling at the collar by his throat, and lessened his powerful grip on Draco’s other arm, settling both of his hands in a gentle hold across the insides of his forearms. His lips never stopped forming the words of his charms, but now he let the warmth radiating from his hands coast along Draco’s skin. He let his hands, his rugged and worn palms, rest flat against the pale and delicate stretches of Draco’s limbs, tremulous with fear and fatigue. As if a reflex, Draco wrapped his trembling fingers around Harry’s forearms in return.


Harry spoke each spell softly and carefully, and eventually, Draco lifted his gaze to Harry’s, panicked breaths still full of fitful, quivering vibrato. His lips looked cracked with all of the rushing air, shallow and insufficient, ghostly and threadbare. His eyes were glassy, and struggled to focus, flitting back and forth from Harry’s face and the hands that lay so firmly and lovingly across his skin.


Harry was taking deep, slow breaths. He was focusing on radiating warmth and calm. On the repetition of these words. On the feeling of safety as much as the spellwork. On letting the stillness of the hollow wash back over them. Still, and dark and safe.

“I’m okay.” It was Draco who finally spoke into the space between them, their arms still linked, a reflected pose, each of them the strength of the other.

“You’re okay.” Harry responded, and his magic found Draco’s, like the battered coast after a storm sent wave after wave from the great, empty sea.

Harry stood, lifting Draco to his feet with him, guiding him softly through the light powdery snow. Their footprints tracing a long remembered path to the little stone cabin nestled against the hillside, Draco leaning on Harry as they went.

The old wooden door opened easily at Harry’s touch, as if they had only just left that morning. The living roof, now covered in snow, was still sloped above the entrance, downy feathers poking out between errant sticks in the eaves, as if the nest of all their avian neighbours hadn’t been empty in the preceding months. As empty as the cabin. As untended as the garden beds, weeds thick and unruly beneath the growing winter.

Harry conjured a fire in the hearth, and it roared to life, an instant balm to the cold and empty feel of a stone house, abandoned at the close of last year’s snows. The light from the flames flickered around the walls, filling the cabin with a subdued glow, warm and homey. A golden heat.

He slipped off his shoes and padded across the bear rug they had once laid out in the field under the stars, finding constellations in the dark. Finding themselves. The memory seemed to scatter
itself in the air like dust particles, newly disturbed, as Harry approached the bed. He let it wash over him, and he let it warm him as much as the fire.

He stared down at the bed. The only unfamiliar thing. No longer a bunk bed, a transfiguration Draco had relied upon in those early days. When Harry was the one trembling, wracked with withdrawals. When they had fought and bickered and sniped and eventually had reached a tenuous truce. When they’d found common ground.

A bunk that had allowed them to get close. Closer. Had allowed Harry to peer over the side and rescue Draco from a nightmare. The first of many. A nightmare that had opened the pages of Draco’s history. An invitation to share in the horrors. In the fear. And the pain of the past. A bunk that had led to many more invitations. Many more shared moments in the dark. A bunk that had given space for something beautiful and delicate to grow between them. Something neither of them had trusted to be real, so accustomed were they to the cruelty of love. Of vulnerability. Oh, how it had scarred them both. And so, they had run.

Harry let the memories swallow him up for a moment, before reaching down and tracing his hand over the old and patchy quilt on the mattress of hay. A relic from the days when Quintessence had first been published and potions gurgled in cauldrons en plein air amongst the beds in the garden, he imagined. As he finished the sweeping gesture, the bed transformed into the same mountain of pillows, softest satin sheets and thick featherdown duvet that simply sang of Draco. Of the nest he built himself. Of comfort, thick and plush and decadent.

A groan from behind him, and Harry felt a smile flit across his face for the first time that evening. Draco was pulling off his shoes and socks and robes and shirt and trousers, soaked at the knees from the snow, as he crossed the tiny room, throwing himself at the bed. He just barely managed to pull the thick layer of blanket back as he plunged into the veritable eyrie. Another muffled groan escaped him, and Harry sighed out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. They were okay. They were going to be okay.

Pulling his shirt over his head, and slipping his own trousers down over his still knobby knees, Harry slipped into bed beside Draco, the fire crackling and popping as he slid his arms around him, his hands covetous as his own fear finally caught up to him. Draco had only just escaped. Only just.

Harry pulled Draco closer, folding himself around the other man, acres of their skin pressed together, his nose buried in the tousled gold of his hair. He smelled of black pepper and queen anne’s lace, and all the fear that was washing away with the sweat that had poured beneath his clothes.

“I’m okay, Harry.” Came Draco’s muffled voice, thick with exhaustion. Draco was running his still cold fingertips along the bones that stood out on the backs of Harry’s possessive hands. “I’m okay.”

“But, what if you hadn’t been?” And Harry let himself sink with the dread that had bubbled up out of him. The horror. The fear. The knowledge that he hadn’t been there. He hadn’t been able to protect Draco. Hadn’t been there to keep him safe. His hands curled in and he felt his nails catch across Draco’s flesh, and he couldn’t help how tightly he gripped him, as the fear held him just so mercilessly.

“Shh, Harry. I’m okay.” Draco was falling into sleep, and Harry let him. And it was only once Draco’s breaths were sleep even and his body slack in the warmth and the safety beneath the duvet that Harry let himself break. And the sobs overtook him.
Far above, between thick clouds and the arcing dome of the night sky, two thestrals circled, nickering soft and grateful cries.

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Hours later, as the wind picked up and whistled around the frozen fields of the hollow, Harry awoke with a start. The fire had died down, lingering coals glowing red in the bed of ash, the cold seeping into the cracks and corners of the cabin. Harry rubbed the sleep from his swollen eyes, his mind prickling with the sense that something had wrenched him from sleep. Something sinister.

And then he heard it again. The slow, musical howl of a wolf.

Harry slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Draco, who was curled around a pillow, deep within the folds of sleep. He padded to the kitchen window, peering out into the night, the snow falling heavily now, thick and chaotic in the swirling winter winds.

At the edge of the clearing, near the copse of blackthorn trees, he caught sight of a silvery figure. He watched the small wolf, with its large and pointed ears, tip its head back, nose to the sky, another carrying howl across the dark of the forest. At the sight of it, Harry felt his fear fade. There was something familiar. Something comforting about the way the little wolf stood so graceful and resolute in the snow. It was not a timber wolf. Not a wolf of the north, slight and small and with long and dainty legs, howl so much more like song. He walked to the door and pulled it ajar, the wind instantly spilling into the warmth of the cabin, snowflakes whipped up from around their single step beyond the door and forming eddies in the air around Harry’s bare legs.

Hestia’s voice met him on the wind, tired but full of care and gentleness. Just as he knew her. “Everyone’s safe. We’ve reinforced the wards at Grimmauld Place and I took Neville, Juniper and Alethea to help me secure the office in Hogsmeade, and we’ve got excellent cover stories for the ministry and the prophet both. Stay out of sight until we can meet. Keep safe. You and Draco. Let us do what we need to here. We have a plan.”

With that, the little wolf took one last look at Harry before trotting off between the trees, the silvery light quick to fade in the dark and snowy world.

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As the sun rose, Harry was already running his morning circuit around the hollow, breaths coming hard from the months away, his body forgetting the demanding nature of the mountainside. He was panting as he jogged through the Blackthorns and across the frozen stream to the Rowan grove, his magic lingering and golden in the knots of the wych elm and the frozen banks of Alice’s stream. He looped up to the foot of the mountains in the Northwest before coming back along the ravine in the South, renewing his spells. His vows to the forest. His promise to keep this sacred place safe, just as it had kept them.

As he ran, he let the tension of the night before thrum and break with every footfall.

When he finally emerged from the thick canopy of the trees and into the open field of snow that covered the hollow, he stopped, hands on hips, catching his breath. His lungs burned with the cold air, and the rising sun casting light across the snow and ice blinded him a moment.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, Harry caught a glimpse of Draco, standing on the stoop of the cabin, leaning back against the stone wall, a giant blanket draped around his shoulders, a steaming mug of tea between both his hands. His cheeks were pink in the cold, but his posture was relaxed. Harry smiled up at him and was greeted with the smallest twitch of the corner of his mouth in
“I want to stay here.” Draco said, watching Harry approach, his shoes crunching in the snow that had since been coated with a thick layer of crusted ice. “This is where we belong, Harry.”

Harry stopped, relief surging around him. He leaned against the wiggentree they had planted together, now tall and strong, even in the face of the cold, ice frozen on the tips of its branches, waiting for new leaves to finally find their way to unfurl in spring.

He was relieved to hear these words from Draco’s mouth. He had thought they would argue. He had thought Draco would cling to the idea that he would make it work living in Hogsmeade, that he could still be immersed in his life amongst the everyday magical world. That he could be safe.

But it was, he remembered, Draco who had said he didn’t want to stay normal. Draco who was so eager to be chosen. To be special. To throw himself into this life. A place where he could do good. Bring hope and happiness. A life so entrenched in their forest home.

“We’ll stay.” Harry said, smiling, pushing off the tree and walking the last few steps to Draco, climbing the one single step onto the stoop with him.

“This is home.” And Harry leaned in, kissing his pink cheek, the steam of his tea, ginger Harry guessed by the smell, rising around both of them. Lingering.

Above the stoop, in the old nest that was just visible beneath the snow, were two Ptarmigans, resplendent in winter plumage, churrtling softly to one another.

November 5, 2009

Harry stood with his back against the frozen granite, sheets of ice scattered about the stone faces. Snow was only visible in cracks and crevices where the wind hadn’t swept it away and down into the forest below. His hands were deep in the pockets of Sirius’ jacket and he had swept his hair back into an untidy bun, the wind still able to flit at errant tendrils. He leaned against the rock with one foot up behind him, his knee peeking out from a hole in his now tattered jeans.

His eyes were closed, face tipped up to the weakest winter sun, the light brittle and pale against the mountain top. His magic kept him from freezing, but only just. He wanted to feel the winter, the bite and the chill, the power of the cold. It had been long since he had come here. Had climbed the mountain and sprawled out in the sun, watching the thestrals dive and cavort amongst the soft clouds of a summer sky.

The horizon was empty of the dark beasts, and only Flea stood beside him, milky glass eyes surveying the vast expanse of forest in the distance, jutting out from their cliffside perch. In Harry’s pocket, he ran his thumb along a circlet of birchwood he had carved that morning. The wood had made itself empty and plain and the soft grain felt almost needy for magic. For purpose.

“Just like me.” Harry said, opening his eyes and smiling fondly at Flea, who had snorted at the words.

Harry reached up and ran his hand beneath the ratty mane that covered Flea’s bony neck, his fingers sliding around individual vertebrae and along the arching curve of the string of bones. Flea leaned into the touch, pressing his skeletal face into Harry’s chest. It was a well practiced move, and Harry reached up to rub beneath his forelock without thinking, soft leathery skin against his roughened hands.
“I think I’m ready for whatever’s next, Flea. I think we’re ready. Me, and Draco.” Harry said softly, looking south. He could just barely make out the outline of Hogwarts’ castle turrets in the distance.

Flea shoved Harry gently and snorted again. Harry laughed and pushed him back playfully. The great beast unfurled his wings and made as if to nip playfully at Harry’s shoulder, which he dodged easily, still laughing at the beast’s antics.

“Are you bored up here with me? Sitting around agonising about choices?” Harry goaded the giant thestral, who was in the throws of a full body shake, as if he was throwing off the layer of indecision and inactivity that had plagued the last few weeks. Months. Years, maybe.

Flea nickered softly, ruffling just the tips of his wings, as if so eager to fly. His glassy eyes still hadn’t left Harry.

“Oh, alright, you incorrigible bastard. Come on. Let’s go.” Harry pushed himself off from the rock and stretched his arms over his shoulders, a playful smirk on his face.

“Try and catch me early this time.” Harry looked out to the South again a moment, the sheer cliff of the ledge dropping over 1000 meters to the next granite outcropping. He took a deep breath, steadying himself, ensuring his boots were firmly planted against solid rock, curling his hands into fists.

And then he took off, running straight at the ledge, leaping into the air with a whoop, the air leaving his lungs and he seemed to hang a moment, suspended, before gravity took hold and he plummeted toward the earth below, as if in a graceful dive, arms outstretched before him.

Above the rushing of air against frozen ears, Harry could hear the wingbeats behind him, could sense the dark shadow that fell between him and that brittle sun as Flea leapt from the ledge behind him, the giant beast swooping beneath him, then past him, coasting just beneath his outstretched hands as he fell, Harry’s fingers twisting into that ratty mane, gripping tight as the beast pulled them both from freefall, Harry’s knees sliding into place along Flea’s bony ribs, the two of them gliding out across the trees.

Harry’s whooping and laughter rang out in the cold, clear air. In the highlands to the West, Harry could just hear a golden eagle call.

Harry returned to the hollow to find Draco knitting by the fire, a half finished letter on the table beside him. He was counting stitches, knitting needle between his teeth, brow furrowed in concentration. Harry knew better than to interrupt him, and set about making tea, his face still burning from the rushing cold of the wind and feeling all the lighter and more carefree for it.

“Oh Helena’s left tit. I’ve missed a stitch.” There was a clattering sound as Draco threw what had looked like the beginnings of a tiny sock onto the table, heaving himself to his feet. He was wearing that maroon top that Harry loved so much, and his blonde hair was sticking up at an odd angle in the back.

Harry didn’t say anything, but smiled into his freshly steeping mug of mint tea, the chip radiantly familiar in the lip by the handle. He reached for the mug he had prepared Draco and passed it to him silently, watching Draco sniff at it, obviously still peppered at the audacity of his own knitting.

Harry took a sip, still watching Draco. The last few days they had slipped back into their forest routine, deftly avoiding the subject of the ministry’s attempt to intervene in their lives, Draco
picking up his old crafts as if nothing had changed. Harry hadn’t questioned him on what had happened too intently, as he could still see how rattled it made him, but Draco had told him it was the talisman that Harry carved that had saved him. And Harry had felt himself unclench just a little at hearing it.

“You’ve decided then.”

Harry looked up at Draco’s words, the other man surveying him shrewdly. His eyes were narrowed and the mug of tea was suspended halfway to his lips, steaming and giving nothing away.

“Decided what?” Harry raised an eyebrow, sipping at his own scalding tea. It burnt his tongue and he quickly set it back down on the counter, silently cursing himself.

“That you’re ready for what comes next.” Draco tapped a finger against the rim of his mug, eyes finally leaving Harry and glancing down into his tea. His voice was quieter, and Harry had no idea how Draco had known, but he was pleased that he could tell. At the same time, Harry realised, Draco was ready too. He was ready, and nervously knitting, and missing stitches.

“Are you trying to tell me you’re ready to go to Hogsmeade?” Harry had skipped all of the banter in between. It was like that, now. Between the two of them.

Harry left his chipped mug on the counter, and gently guided Draco’s own mug from his hands back down onto the unassuming slab of wood, and the two men stood facing each other. Harry was drawing him in close, hands first on Draco’s, then guiding up his arms and back down, soothing and soft. Draco sighed deeply, letting Harry’s attentions wash over him.

“Hestia wants us to come to the practice. To move the research materials they didn’t manage to steal, to pack up our things. She and Neville and someone named Juniper have been so kind to take care of all that cleaning for us— it sounds like they left quite a mess. Bubotuber pus and porcupine quills all over— together they let off quite an acrid steam, you know— Oh, and coupled with the quail eggs...”

Harry let him nervously ramble a bit, bringing a hand up to push the hair out of his face and smooth down the back where he had slept on it funny. He let a thumb drag across his cheek as he spoke. Slow and soft and careful.

Draco was leaning against him now, melting into his chest, worries all tumbling out around them and falling away in the warmth of the cabin and the sureness of Harry’s touch.

“My poor bonsais.” Draco sniffed, his head now tucked against Harry’s shoulder. “They’re probably irreparably damaged.”

Harry huffed a soft laugh into Draco’s hair. “I’ll wager that fig is as strong as ever. Probably took the chance to uproot the stinkwood once and for all, take over a whole new pot.”

Harry could feel Draco smiling against his chest.

“Do you want me there?” Harry asked softly. He had thought long and hard about it. His initial reaction, of course, was to never let Draco out of his sight ever again. To play guard dog, obsessively, until the day they both died of exhaustion. But, upon further reflection, he had realised that is a poor attempt at a happy life. And, it was belittling. Draco was a powerful wizard in his own right. He was more than capable. Babysitting him would be infantilising. Plus, letting his own obsessive neurosis run his life had not panned out well in the past.

“No.” Draco pulled back a half step and rubbed his face with both his hands. “Hestia is going to
help me with it all, and she said Juniper had been a huge help with things too, so between the three of us we should be just fine. Plus, it’s not like you can shadow me every time I want to see clients — I know you’d prefer if I just became a complete hermit, but we agreed that three days a week at the practice is more than reasonable. I have my work. And my patients. You have your own life to live too, Harry.”

Harry grunted, chewing the inside of his lip. He hadn’t quite worked through all the worrying about Draco wanting to see patients there still, but Hestia had told Harry to trust her to make sure it’s safe. And he did. He had to. Trust was part of the process. An annoying and vulnerable part.

“When does she want you there?” Harry said, watching Draco readjust the maroon sweater to cover his shoulders, distracted by the skin beneath them, by the way he had become so brave. Harry wondered if the sorting hat could take a peek inside their heads now, what it would say. Where it would sort them.

“Tomorrow.” Draco had picked his tea back up and was heading back to his knitting. Calmer now. Reassured. Ready to unravel a few lines and hunt down the errant stitch.

“Mmm.” Harry said, returning to his own tea and thoughts.

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In bed that night, Harry dreamt of the great black dog. He was walking through the forest, footfalls deep in the soft powdery snow, tracks of a pine marten snaking between trees and golden light filtering down from a rising sun.

He heard the familiar panting. Off to his left, a shadowy figure loping between the dense copse of Rowan trees. Harry walked on, his steps tracing a familiar path until he was emerging in his Rowan grove, quiet and still in the morning snow. Across from him, leaning against one of his favorite trees, was Sirius. He was young and jaunty and full of life, black hair long and effortless, smile crooked and genuine, broadening at the sight of Harry, running up his face and crinkling his eyes. Joy was painted all over him.

Sirius laughed his big, barking, hearty laugh and pushed himself off the Rowan tree, walking soundlessly through the snow to Harry, his hands running through his hair and pressed over his smiling cheeks. As if they had never been sallow.

When he gets to Harry, he pulls him into a hug, tight and furtive and they rock back and forth together with the fierceness of it. Sirius smells of oranges and dragon hide and woodsmoke and Harry can feel how real he is. The strength of him. The love. It’s in the feel of his ratty shirt beneath his fingers and the scratch of his stubble against his cheek and the absolute warmth of him, no matter that they stood in the cold, snowy world of the forest.

Sirius grabs Harry’s shoulders and leans back to look at him, eyes still crinkling and smile still broad and beautiful and seemingly unceasing on his features. Handsome and young and effortless, as Sirius was always meant to be.

“Gods, I’m so proud of you Harry. I’m so proud. We all are.” And Sirius’s voice is rough, not with disuse, but with joy. Bursting with it.

Sirius ruffles Harry’s unkempt hair affectionately, still positively beaming at him. “I knew you’d make it, Harry. I knew you’d grow up and find your way. You’d chose to live. You’ve got so much love in you.”
Harry’s eyes are filled with tears, and the dream swims in and out of focus for a moment, the sound of his breathing and the feeling of a great weight being lifted off his chest distracting him from the forest scene. He can hear a red deer calling in the distance. And a wolf howling. And it’s as if the forest is full of the same joy that is so evident in Sirius.

“Keep Flea close, Harry. He’ll guide you. And I’ll come in dreams when you need me. I’m just across the veil. We all are. Even Snivellus is here.” Sirius rolls his eyes and he’s laughing, as if he is full of nothing but the brilliant shine of sunlight, reflected off the shimmering, icy forest.

Sirius is still holding his shoulders and looking at him, and Harry can’t help the feeling that swells around them. Of being loved. So very loved.

“Just one more thing before I go, Harry.” Sirius looks at him. His brown eyes are deep and soulful and Harry can, for the first time, see both the love and loyalty of the dog and the haunted measure of the Grim.

“Moony wanted me to ask you to check in on Teddy, if you can.”

And Harry is awake before he can reply, his hands reflexively reaching out in the dark. Draco lay beside him, fast asleep.

November 6, 2009

By the time the sun finally agreed to rise, Harry had already made himself three cups of tea. He’d made Draco one as well, but it was so long ago that it’s long since gone frigid and is criminally oversteeped, and Harry knows that Draco will never deign to drink such swill, so he’s left it sitting beneath the windowsill.

The morning was cold, and the dying embers of the fire from the previous night were hardly keeping the floor just beyond the hearth warm anymore. Harry dressed quickly and quietly, wrapping himself up in one of the maroon and gold scarves that Draco had knit him, refreshing the warming charms so that when Draco does eventually rise, he wouldn’t be hypothermic just from getting dressed. He re-tied his hair up in a bun twice.

Little Dipper, as it turned out, is not as picky as Draco, and Harry had just looked up in time to watch him happily clatter along the counter top to the unguarded mug, nibbling the rim of Draco’s cup curiously before attempting to stick his entire face into the cold tea. Harry’s spellwork was just quick enough to catch the tumbling mug and save it from shattering.

“Dipper!” Harry hissed in the half light, and the owl flapped his wings, waggling his ear tufts as he hopped away back to the windowsill, completely unbothered by Harry’s feeble attempt at a reprimand. Harry cleaned the spilled tea with a wave of his hand and sets to boiling the kettle yet again.

“You’re too soft with him. He gets away with murder, that one.” Draco’s voice was still thick with sleep, and Harry couldn’t help smiling to himself. He added a dash of lemon to the green tea as it steeped. Just the way Draco likes it.

“I’ve made you tea.”

“I’ll be fine, Harry.”

“What, for the first time this century you don’t want tea in the morning?” Harry thought himself
funny, and he chuckled at his own joke. He already knows Draco won’t not accept his morning tea. It’s how Harry ingrates himself into Draco’s good books, each and every morning.

“No, you prat, I meant I’ll be fine today. In Hogsmeade. You don’t have to worry so much.” Harry could hear the smile in Draco’s voice. He wondered when he became so transparent. Then realised he’s always been this transparent.

Harry scowled down at the nest of soft down and pillows, handing over the newly steaming mug of tea. “Who says I’m worrying?”

Draco scoffed a laugh, not bothering to respond. He sipped the tea instead, cold hand wrapped around the warm pottery. Harry didn’t tell him it was Teddy he’d woken up early worrying about.

Harry had left Flea at the edge of the forest by the lake, and walked the rest of the way up to the castle. Friday morning, and the place was bustling with life. It felt warmer than their hollow, if not for the many lives that inhabited this place, bursting at the seams with magic.

He jogged up the grand staircase, pausing to ask a Hufflepuff prefect where he could find the Hufflepuff first years, and was told they were just about to finish Defense Against the Dark Arts before lunch. The prefect, so eager and with a kind, round face, had even asked Harry if he needed directions, which had caused the old hag in the portrait behind them to cackle wildly, and Harry had only just excused himself up to the right corridor before she had given away his true identity. He heard the prefect gasp just as he rounded the corner and ducked into a hidden passage behind a landscape that would bring him out just by the Defense classroom.

Harry waited a moment while the hall ahead of him filled with students, little Hufflepuffs in their black robes with yellow ties, chattering away. Harry could see Elphias Doge’s pointed hat far above the crowd of comparatively tiny students, heading down to the great hall for lunch, apparently continuing his lecture on the use of green sparks in duelling as he went, his wheeze audible from down the hall.

Harry paused in the doorway, watching the last few straggler students shoving books and parchment into haphazard bags. At the very back of the room, beneath a flush of light blue hair, big brown eyes looked up and saw Harry.

Harry smiled, and waited for the last two students to hurry by before walking up to Teddy. He looked a little more disheveled than the last time he had seen him. His eyes were puffy, and shoelaces were untied. He had a smudge of dirt across one cheek.

“Hi Teddy,” Harry said, helping him gather some errant parchment and a quill that had rolled across the desk. When Harry leaned closer, he could see the smudge of dirt was hiding a bruise.

“How have you been, Teddy?” Harry’s voice was soft. He agonised for a moment whether or not to tell him that his father was the one who had sent Harry. His father was the one checking in on him, just as his father had checked in on Harry in this very room, all those years ago.

“I’m okay.” He was looking down at his feet, scuffing one toe of his untied shoes against the floor.

“Are the other kids still being mean to you?” Harry knelt down and lifted Teddy’s chin, surveying the mark on his cheek critically. “That doesn’t look like a bruise from pick-up quidditch, Teddy.”

“They pick on me because I’m small. And I’m not great at magic, yet. They took my wand yesterday and I had to fight one of them to get it back.” Teddy looked angry for a moment, but it
paled in comparison to the rage that flooded through Harry.

“Did you tell a teacher, Teddy?”

“They were Gryffindors. Everyone thinks they’re above that kind of thing. No one takes me seriously,” Teddy said softly, eyeing Harry’s red and gold scarf.

Harry clenched his jaw. Teddy must have noticed how angry it had made Harry, to hear these stories, bullying and hurting kids just for their size. For their magical talent, or lack thereof.

“It’s ok, Harry. I’m learning to fend for myself. Me and my friend, Thor.” Harry took a deep breath and looked at his eager little face light up at the mention of his friend. “He’s in Slytherin and he gets it even worse than me. He’s also an orphan, you know, and even littler. He’s got such thick glasses! And a lisp!”

Harry couldn’t help but smile at Teddy’s enthusiasm for his friend. Another orphan. Another of the abandoned boys who ended up at Hogwarts. A Slytherin. Named Thor, no less.

Harry straightened up and walked to the front of the room, digging in the ancient desk drawers for anything he could use as a pretend wand. “Teddy,” he said, new enthusiasm in his voice, as he finally find a bit of birch branch. “I’m going to teach you something you can use to defend yourself. Get out your wand and stand just here across from me.”

Teddy did as he was told, and Harry turned to him, grinning.

“Ok, now, repeat after me. *Expelliarmus!*”

It was twenty minutes later when the birch branch finally went flying across the room, and Teddy howled and whooped in excitement, his hair changing color to neon yellow as he did a victory lap around the room.

“I can’t wait to show Thor!” He positively shouted at Harry, who was chuckling to himself, leaning back against the desk. “Harry he’s positively dreadful at spells. You should see him. Sometimes he tries to blame it on his asthma medication, but I think it’s the anxiety.” Teddy was nodding, knowingly.

“You know, Teddy, when I was at Hogwarts, we had a club where we learned extra spells to keep safe. And it helped us make friends. Friends we could count on if we needed help.”

Teddy stopped his victory lap, his hair changing back to bright blue, much brighter even than it was when Harry had first walked in. “Really? That sounds like so much fun!”

“You could start a club too, Teddy. If you wanted.”

Teddy stopped in the middle of the room, using his wand to absently scratch in his hair, contemplating what Harry had said. “Will you come teach us like you did today? I don’t know enough magic to learn anything but *Expelliarmus*, really. It’d be much more fun with you there. And you could meet Thor!”

Harry opened his mouth to reply, thinking of course he couldn’t, no, that wouldn’t be possible. But, before he could answer, a stern Scottish voice interrupted his thoughts. “Of course he can, Mr. Lupin. I’ll keep Tuesday evenings at seven o’clock free. You can use this classroom after dinner.”

Harry looked up, his mouth still hanging open, and Minerva McGonagall gave him an equally stern and knowing look, as if chastising him for even thinking of refusing. Her eyes were bright.
“Now, Mr. Lupin, Mr. Rowle has been looking for you. He forgot his inhaler in the greenhouses and is too scared to go look for it on his own. Please go and accompany him, before he has another hypoxic event. Poppy still hasn’t recovered properly from the last one.”

“Oh no, his inhaler!” Teddy grabbed his bag from the back of the room, then hugged Harry quickly on his way out. “Thank you, Harry! See you on Tuesday!”

Harry watched him go, completely dumbfounded.

“I’ll expect you to keep your promise to that boy, Mr. Potter.” Minerva was dabbing at her eyes with her tartan handkerchief. “Otherwise, I’ll be forced to inform the house elves to cease the unending supply of food to your forest hideaway. I expect you and Mr. Malfoy both to earn your keep.”

“But, Professor, I—” Harry stammered, unsure of how to begin.

“Honestly, Mr. Potter, it always amazed me you never chose teaching. You’ve quite a gift for it. It’s about time you stopped futzing around and followed your true calling. The children need you. I’ve got about seven who I’ll be sending to your first DA meeting. That’s what I assume you’ll be calling it, that is?” She sniffed. “Dumbledore’s Army, still recruiting?”

Harry sighed deeply, smiling at her. How could he possibly refuse? And it’s what he’d wanted, in any case. A way to give back. To help prevent the spiral before it ever happened.

She gave him a rare smile, tucking her handkerchief back beneath her robes.

“Seven. On Tuesday.” Harry agrees. His mind is already whirling with ideas for his first lesson.

On returning to the hollow, Harry was bursting with ideas. Depulso? Point me? What spell, what magic could he impart on the children McGonagall was going to hand pick for him to teach? Would they know who he was? What he did in the war? Would he have to talk about the war? About who were the good guys and who were the bad guys? Would little Thor understand that his dad was a bad guy, but that didn’t make Thor bad? Would the other children understand? What was it like being eleven?

He was full to bursting with thoughts, questions, ideas. Underneath all of it, like currents of electricity, excitement. He was thrilled. Nervous, yes. Terrified, really. It was so much responsibility, and so unexpected. He had so much on his plate already, really. What with Grimmauld Place just taking off and the ever-present threat of the Ministry and their cronies. And now, this? Teaching?

Was he ready?

Harry ran from where Flea had landed, his feet quick along the half melted snow of the meadow, little patches of earth visible where the sun had managed to warm the ground enough.

“Draco!” He was yelling his name by the time he was halfway up the little sloping hillside.

“You won’t believe what’s happened!” Harry was grinning ear to ear. Happiness poured across him, bursting, radiant.

It was then that Little Dipper swooped down, a soft hoot escaping him as he dropped a heavy letter in his outstretched hands. Harry stopped and looked down. Something about it. It felt heavy. Cold.

The happiness bled away. Dread began creeping it’s way up from the soles of his feet, winding
slow tendrils along his calves and knees and the cold reaching his thighs. He felt rooted to the spot. Suddenly. So suddenly. It was hard to breathe.

In the distance, he heard the cabin door open, and Draco’s voice was muffled. As if he were speaking through water. As if Harry were beyond thick glass. Partitioned from the world. Only existing here, and now, with this letter, so heavy in his hands.

He opened it carefully.

*Harry,*

*We’ve lost one of our own.*

*Sylvia is gone. This morning. Come to Grimmauld Place.*

*I need you.*

*We all need you.*

- *Hestia*

And Harry was on his knees, jeans now soaking up the melted snow, soft and still so cold in the mud, in the space where the sun had tried so hard to warm the earth. And he can’t breathe. Of course he can’t. How could he? They had lost one of their own.

Gone.

Just so.

*Sylvia .

____________________________

It was dark when the crack of apparition sounded again in Tenebris Hollow. Winter had returned, the cold retaking the earth as the sun moved to warm other, distant lands. The melted snow had since refrozen into ice, sharp and unforgiving in the faint light of stars, half hidden by clouds.

Harry didn’t look up at the sky, nor did he slip as he walked purposefully back to the cabin, hands balled into fists at his sides. His shoulders were high and tight beneath his cloak. A cloak he was already pulling off as he ducked beneath the sag of the roof just before the door. He welcomed the cold. The chill that hits his skin is near painful. Stinging. It’s distracting for a moment, from his own searing pain. He waited a moment, letting the cold whip the sweat from his skin.

Draco was sitting in bed reading when Harry opens the door, wide and forceful, a shock of cold nipping at his heels. He didn’t look up, but concentrates, really concentrates on closing the door without slamming it. On hanging the cloak up without shredding the soft fabric in his hands. On unlacing his boots. Undoing his belt. Every movement is slow and deliberate and takes all of his energy. All of his focus. Because it has to. Because if he lets himself drift for even a moment, he thinks of her, laying there in bed. He thinks of the slip of steel still hanging on in her cold, cold skin. If he stops focusing, he’ll think of the peaceful look on her face. And that. That’s what will take him. Grip him, all of him, painful and sure and oh, so convincing.
But Sylvia in death is not nearly as painful as thinking of her in life. Her beautiful smile and the way she used to reach for Harry. The way her bangles accented every move she made. Every wild movement. She was like music. She was a symphony. Complex and moving but thrumming with something so very human. So close to home. Home.

And now? Now it is so, so quiet.

No. He needs to be purposeful. Because, if he’s not. He’ll think of Hestia.

He’ll think of the way Hestia cried. The way it broke her. To lose not just a battle but the whole goddamn war. How every moment of the strongest woman he knows was marred with the pain of it all. How she had beat her fists against his chest and screamed and wailed. As if language would never contain her grief. As if sound itself—her throat pulling and vibrating and tearing at the air—would not, could not ever contain Hestia and her grief.

How she had cried. A deluge. A summer storm, thunder and lightning and tears in freefall, as if all she wanted was the whole wide world to drown with her, drown in an ocean, a sea made for Sylvia, borne of the love of Hestia.

Bury it, he thinks. Bury it. Swallow it down.

His jaw is clenched tight. His back is wire, strung tight across bones that hunger. That pull and keen and cinch tight. That hold all of that tension, all of that desperate purposeful containing. Control.

And it’s not enough. Because he could feel his hands shaking and he could hear his teeth grinding and he needed somewhere to put all of this. All of this anger. It’s eating him up inside and he can’t hear because his ears had filled with the rushing of his own blood and his heart, fast and frantic and vengeful won’t let him have a moment’s peace. A moment’s rest.

When he turns back around to the room, Draco is standing, moving toward him. Draco’s mouth is moving and Harry thinks he’s saying his name.

But he can’t hear anything but buzzing. Rushing, beating, buzzing. It’s chaotic and so familiar. Because he’s fallen into a swarm of bees— and they’re running along his skin and reminding him of all the ways he could drown with Sylvia. Maybe, he too could look peaceful in death.

The thought scares him. Everything feels so out of control. Fear buzzes too, now, in his ears it’s growing louder and Harry is frantic to maintain his purposeful control. Frantic. And angry. So angry.

He needs a place to bury it.

And Draco is there.

Harry reaches out and pulls Draco toward him, his hands sliding familiarly along the tops of his thighs and around his ass, lifting him up, pinning him to the nearest wall. Draco hisses as he hits the cold stone, rough and uneven, and Harry presses into him, pinning him with his hips. There’s a moment of stillness as they breathe, Harry’s blood surging through him, hot and uncomfortable, his eyes trained on Draco’s mouth. Pink and soft and just barely parted, wet from Draco nervously licking his lips. Harry wants to ruin it. Desperately. He wants to ruin that beautiful, soft mouth more than he’s ever wanted anything ever before.

So he pins Draco with his hips, his cock painfully hard, digging into the soft flesh of Draco’s hip, and Draco tries to complain but Harry’s kissing him. Kissing that perfect mouth, biting his lip.
plump and growling into his throat.

Bury it. And it’s all he can think.

He pulls back a moment, eyes still trained on Draco’s lips. He’s made them bruised and swollen and the image runs through his veins like fire. He pulls back and palms his cock, Draco is just barely standing, his silken pyjama top pulled skew from the rough rock behind him, a slip of pale skin of his belly on display. His palms are clutching at the stone behind him, as if they are what’s keeping him upright.

Harry undoes his jeans, no longer deliberate and purposeful, but rough and desperate, his eyes not wavering from Draco. From Draco’s bruised and swollen lips. He leans his left hand by Draco’s head, his ears still full of the sounds of rushing blood. He’s panting.

“Draco. Please.”

And Draco slides the rest of the way to the floor, his hands reaching up to Harry’s cock. They’re infuriatingly gentle. Soft. And Harry can think of nothing but how he needs more. More. He’s growling, deep and guttural and angry, spilling out of him. He wants to ruin all of Draco’s softness.

“I want to fuck your mouth.”

Draco looks up at Harry, eyes wide and shining. They look glazed. Unfocused.

Something in Harry breaks.

And the anger is gone and the all consuming lust is gone and Harry feels so very cold. And clammy.

It’s disgust. Disgust runs across his skin and he shrinks away from himself, falling and stumbling backwards. Away from Draco. Away from this horrible thing he’s done. This horrible thing he’s become.

He moves away so fast and so completely, he’s hit the opposite wall before he crumples to the floor, his cock soft and he’s incapable of understanding what to do with his hands because all he knows. All he knows is that he is a monster.

And all of his demons are here in the room. And look what they have done to the man he loves.

They stare at each other across the room, and Harry can feel himself going pale and he’s hyperventilating and all of the buzzing is back and it’s eating him alive and all of his demons are taking their pounds of flesh and he can feel nothing but horror. Complete horror.

What has he done?

Big, gulping gasping breaths, and now he’s crying. Sobbing. Sitting there on the floor, legs haphazard and pants still undone, hands white knuckled on the floor beside him and he can’t look away from Draco. He can’t look away because he loves him. And he hurt him.

The two of them stare at each other from across the bear skin, the same one that Harry had dragged out into the summer field to watch the stars, and Harry can’t breathe. He can’t breathe because he’s drowning. All of the grief and the horror is piling up around him and suffocating him and even now, as he’s clawing at his throat, he cannot breathe.

It’s Draco who comes back to himself first. It’s Draco who crawls across the rug to Harry, who
shushes him and holds him while he cries. It’s Draco who forgives him.

It takes four hours for Harry to tell him. To tell him everything. To let all of the pain and heartbreak and fear roll out into the room. To let all of his anger soak into the stones.

And through it all. Through it all, Draco keeps him afloat.

Neither of them drowns.

November 10, 2009

Sylvia’s funeral is the same day as Harry’s first DA meeting. He spent the whole morning at Grimmauld Place. Contained. Safe. Letting the grief take its turn. Take its flesh.

Felix is there. They cry together. They all do. The odd family they had made, broken and feeble in the wake of a tragedy. Hestia delivers a beautiful eulogy, and Greg doesn’t stop crying through every word, and neither does Luna. And Harry doesn’t feel so alone in his grief after that.

They put Sylvia in the ground, together. In a circle, as they all used to sit. Vulnerable, still. Dennis casts the first bit of earth that covers her, and Harry lends himself to the work of filling the grave, throwing shovelful after shovelful of near black earth, rich and loamy, into the hole. Filling it up. Burying her. As he’s buried so many others.

He washes his muddied hands and apparates away to the gates of Hogwarts, making the long trek up to the castle in the growing dark of the evening, candlelights burning in tower windows, ambient noise streaming from the great hall as he slips in the castle entrance and makes a dash for the defense room upstairs.

He’s early, so he moves the desks to one side. He wants them all to sit in a circle. To get to know one another. To talk. His eyes are puffy and probably still red, but he doesn’t mind. Let them see, he thinks.

He knows what he’s going to tell them this first lesson. This first meeting is going to be about the importance of friendship. Of having people to lean on, to rely on, to reach out to when you’re in the dark. When you’re worried you’re alone. When you can feel the dread come rushing down upon you. When you stop feeling like you can breathe.

Because true defense against the dark arts is just that. Bonds of friendship. Love. It’s the most powerful magic in the world, and it saved Harry. It saved him time and time again, and it will save him far into his future. Because darkness isn’t defeated alone. Darkness is drowned out of the circle by the light of many faces and the warmth of many beating hearts. Together.

The opposite of addiction is connection, he thinks to himself, sitting on the desk in the front of the room, the heels of his trainers kicking idly at the old slab of wood. Connection.

Teddy is the first to arrive. He’s so excited, chatting away and zipping about the room, arms waving wildly, that Harry doesn’t have a chance to notice the boy who slips in behind him. He’s so small. So very small and slight and his glasses are so incredibly huge, propped up on comically large ears, not hidden at all by bright blonde, nearly white, hair. Harry notices all of this only because the boy walks right up to Harry, sticks out his hand and says, very matter of factly (with a very thick lisp), “Hi Mr. Harry, I’m Thor. I’m Teddy’s best friend and he taught me expelliarmus and I used it yesterday on a 5th year and it was excellent.”
“It really was excellent, Harry!” Teddy shouts as he runs another lap around the room.

Thor looks immensely pleased with himself. Harry is laughing, looking down at the coke bottle glasses, wide magnified eyes and the inhaler that’s been spellotaped to one of the straps of his very muggle backpack, complete with a batman symbol.

He’s distracted nearly at once by the next three children who enter the room. Two girls in Ravenclaw blue and a boy in Gryffindor red, hanging back slightly. The two girls look slightly older, perhaps second or third year, one blonde with a royal blue bow threaded through her long plait, the other dark skinned like Harry, willowy and with a slightly haughty aire. He was almost reminded of Pansy Parkinson, though he couldn’t particularly pinpoint why. Perhaps it was the way she was scrunching up her nose.

The blonde girl nodded in Harry’s direction before wandering into the centre of the room, surveying Teddy and Thor. The second girl introduced herself as Freya Rookwood, holding her hand out for Harry to shake. She flipped her chin indolently at the girl she had entered with, “and that’s Orelia Pepper. She’s mute.” Freya rolled her eyes dramatically, and Harry took a moment to recover from the minefield of interpersonal hostility that coloured the interaction. Recovering quickly, Harry greeted them both, indicating that they could join Thor and Teddy in making a circle in the centre of the room. They arranged themselves far from one another, avoiding eye contact, and Harry sighed softly to himself. McGonagall had sent him enemies. Enemies. Children from opposite sides of the war, indeed.

None of the adolescent psychology books he had borrowed from Luna had prepared him for this. He rubbed his hands together, nervously.

The Gryffindor boy had watched this interaction, and once the girls moved off, he hadn’t moved forward. In fact, he hadn’t stopped staring at Harry, mouth agape, slightly in awe. He was a portly boy, all rounded edges, the theme perfectly accented by his bowl haircut, his black hair flat and a bit stringy.

“But… but… you’re Harry Potter.” His voice was incredulous. Bewildered.

Harry nodded at him, very solemnly. “Yes. Yes, that is true. I am Harry Potter.” He let his mock serious face break into a wide smile.

“And you are?”

“Edgar. Edgar Bones.” He stumbled a bit as he came forward, holding out his hand at a near ninety degree angle. He couldn’t stop looking Harry up and down and up and down and taking in every detail of him. Harry felt self-conscious for a moment about his rather tatty jeans and the Queen t-shirt he’d thrown on that morning, but he let his worries slide away. He wanted to be relaxed and comfortable. He wanted to be himself. No pretending he was the kind of person to don austere robes that so suited Minerva McGonagall, or the sweeping, dramatic black cape of Severus Snape. No, he was allowed to wear muggle clothes. Muggle clothes that made him relaxed and happy. Approachable.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Edgar. Have a seat so long. We’re only waiting for two more.”

Edgar Bones wobbled off to stand next to Thor, who was applying some kind of thick cream to his cheeks. Teddy was helping, though he was getting an awful lot on both of the boy’s robes in his enthusiasm. It looked rather like green sunblock, thick and sticky, and Harry thought he caught a whiff of bulbadox powder.
Edgar was watching them both, his eyebrows creasing in the middle. “What’s that for?”

“He got stung by dragon gnats in the greenhouse earlier and swelled up like a balloon. Madame Pomfrey said he’s allergic. He got such a horrible rash afterward. The knotgrass we were harvesting was full of them!” Teddy explained, waving the tube of cream wildly for emphasis.

“Oh.” Said Edgar.

“Madame Pomfrey says I’m medically complex.” Came Thor’s muffled voice, Teddy busy coating his upper lip and nose in the thick green paste.

Freya snorted a little laugh at this, and Harry had to stifle his own huff of amusement. There was something so incredibly endearing about the little Slytherin, though he could easily imagine he was putting the school nurse through her paces.

Thor and Teddy both had tensed, Teddy quickly putting the tube of paste back into Thor’s batman backpack, resuming his spot in the circle with his head down, hair fading from blue to black. Thor hiccupped softly.

Harry turned and greeted the last two students. Two more Slytherins. A boy and a girl, the boy simultaneously sullen and sneering, and Harry instantly recognised the pettiness that consumed Draco in his moments of self conscious ill-ease. The girl looked timid. Unsure. They both surveyed the others, then looked at each other with a knowing glance. The boy, whose thick curly hair had been pulled down into neat cornrows muttered “I told you.”

“Welcome,” Harry interrupted. “I’m Harry. And you two are?”

“Aldora Runcorn.” Said the girl, her voice more nervous than her housemate’s. She looked up and down at Harry, much the same way Edgar had. She seemed to be waiting for Harry to hold her surname against her.

“I’m glad you’ve joined us, Aldora. Have a seat in the circle and we’ll start just now.”

“I’m Winston Travers.” He said his name imperiously. As if it should mean something intimidating. Harry could see the ghost of Draco’s eleven year old self reaching out for a handshake. Draco’s pale blonde hair had been slicked back, Winston’s braids producing a similar effect, his cheekbones just as high as Draco’s, skin the colour of honey.

He shook Winston’s hand and gazed down at him.

“It’s nice to meet you, Winston Travers.”

Harry could tell, already, that he would have his hands full with this one.

“Lumos!” And Thor’s wand tip ignited, flaring to life. There was a raucous bout of applause, cheering and a deafening whistle of triumph from Orelia.

Harry was laughing and clapping loudly with the rest, his heart soaring at the look on Thor’s face, basking in the light of his wand, in the cheers of new companions.

Harry had tried to tell them what friendship could do. What support and understanding would bring. How it would be the force against the dark. But this, this is what they needed to see. What encouraging words and kindness could do to magic. How that alone could bring light where there
was once only dark.

Harry had thanked them all, promised to reconvene next week, and made his own way back down the steps of the castle to the edge of the forest. To Flea, and the hollow beyond.

Draco was waiting for him on the stoop with a cup of tea, the sun having set hours ago. Harry and Flea alighted in the clearing, and Harry jumped down, eager to recount his day. His victories. His triumphs.

He had mulled it over the flight back. He had lost Sylvia. But, in the shadow of her loss he had gained the start of something brilliant and luminous and immense. Something he knew he could build. That would give him a place and a purpose, that would feed him. Sustain him. Sustain others. Build others. Build light against the dark. Something that could start to heal the raw, open wounds of the war that lived on in the orphans it had left behind and the children who had grown up in the wake of fear and cruelty.

Something where he could do good.

And, flying low over the expanse of dark green, other thestrals from the Hogwarts herd occasionally swooping and diving by his side, playful and just as invigorated as he felt, he had realised something. He had realised that doing good. That warding off death. Off pain, and misery and despair. It wasn’t in the huge heroics of his youth. It wasn’t about self sacrifice, not anymore. Cultivating life. Saving lives. It was in the smallest of every day moments. It was in kindness and care. In telling a child they were important. In letting them cry. In validation of their dreams. Comfort in the face of their fears.

Reminders of their importance. That they are loved. And that love matters.

Tiny, seemingly insignificant moments. Every day, human moments. Those were how Harry could save lives. Could own his role as Death Herder. As guardian against suffering. Against fear. A way that he did not fight death, for that was not the point, and Dumbledore, for all his faults, had shown him that, at the very least. Death is a universal truth. But death did not always mean tragedy.

For death wasn’t the enemy. Not like fear, an enemy that birthed hatred and lust for power, that cultivated the worst kinds of violence in the hearts of men. No, death was not an enemy, but a truth, still to be greeted as an old friend.

A friend at the end of a long and winding road. A road that had made the traveler tired. A traveler who did not despair in rest. A traveler who had ventured far and wide and was content to let the future travel on, sure that those he loved would travel well, and their path would be full of triumphs yes, but that the obstacles they met would be challenges that the new traveler could handle, for they were well equipped. And they were not alone.

And that was what Dumbledore’s Army really was. A way to ensure they were well equipped, these children who had been left open to the insidious ways of fear. Harry was showing them that love, love can be the light that illuminates their way. That lets their path linger long in the winding forest of life.

And it was with these thoughts that he dismounted and met Draco, who had set down his tea on the stoop and hurried forward, meeting him in the snow covered meadow.

“What do you mean? I’ve just come from our first DA meeting. It was amazing, Draco—I have to
He’s you, in miniature!”

And Draco raised his hand and cut him off. “No, Harry. Your skin. What did you do to it?”

Harry stopped, looking down. “My what?”

Draco grabbed his hands and pushed back his cloak from his shoulders, the chill inapparent on his
skin. Draco was running his hands along his arms and pulling the neck of his t-shirt down to see
his chest.

And Harry saw what Draco had meant. All across his body, shimmering into existence, then fading
away, were minuscule golden threads. Designs, pouring over his skin in rippling waves, stark
against the dark of his skin, brilliant in the night.

Harry had seen them before, the same arching and swirling patterns. The same flickering golden
lines, intricate and delicate and full of magic in their own right. It was the same designs that coated
the thestrals carved into the front door of Grimmauld Place. Thesstral magic. Death Herder magic.

And Harry knew that he had been right. He had found his place. Where he needed to be.
“Are you sure you’re comfortable with this, I could always apparate back this evening after our dinner—”

“Draco, I told you about 50 times, I got an O in my potions NEWT, and your mystical thestral potion,” Juniper waved jazz hands from across the room, rolling her eyes at Draco’s pestering insistence, “is nothing I can’t handle.”

“Yes, I know, but this isn’t a simple blood replenishing potion we’re talking about, this— this requires precise timing when you add the usnea — and the pearl dust has to be stirred—”

“A quarter turn left and a thrice turn right until it comes up to 118 degrees celsius and the vapours are moss coloured.” She rattled off flippantly, finishing his sentence. Her fingers dancing determinedly across the labels of many jars with chipped canary yellow polish, taking no note of Draco’s clear distress of allowing someone else to help him. “Am I missing something?” She asked rhetorically, finally finding the flux-weed she needed and turning back to him.

He grunted his response, trying not to smile at the look of profound exasperation in her hazel eyes. She almost reminded him of himself. Almost. “Very well, I just—”

“Have crippling control issues?” She smiled, turning towards the brewing bench and filling an empty cauldron with whispered aquamenti.

In the two weeks, since he had been attacked in his office, and in the days he had spent trying to organise his life, Juniper had come as a surprising, and altogether incredible, help to him. He liked her instantly, but kept that to himself, feebly attempting to maintain some semblance of detached professionalism.

The potions room had been put back together immaculately with Juniper’s help and reordered in a way that made sense for both of them to work there. He had decided, with Hestia’s encouragement, and Harry’s excited cajoling, to hire her on as his much-needed assistant and receptionist.

When he offered her the job, she had been blindsided. She initially refused, telling him her whole history, it spilling from her in a panicked apology, awkward and unsure. It was full of hesitations. Reluctances. Mistrust, especially of herself. She didn’t know if she could or should work around potions this early in her recovery.

Draco looked to Harry and Hestia for advice, wondering if he had been too bold with Juniper. Though, after a few meetings at Grimmauld and some dedicated sessions with Hestia, she had
come back to him and said that she was ready. Ready to make a life for herself, ready for this step in her recovery. Ready to not let her past dictate her future, to give up her passion for a fear of herself.

After just a week of seeing how utterly adept she was with his patients and brilliant with the potions, he offered her the flat upstairs, for which she and Hestia leapt with joy. She had only been up there for two days, and it had made her even more austere in the workplace.

The timing, as well, was fortuitous, for Juniper was getting to the point in her recovery where she needed to move away from the protective beginnings of living within Grimmauld Place, so that it’s temporary rooms may open up to others who needed a safe and cosseted home to begin those early days of recovery.

“I have spent years getting to this point,” Draco pressed, watching her fluid movements carefully. Thick ropes of pinkish white scars stood out on her wrists as she carefully adjusted the heat and acidity of the potion base. “I think I’ve earned the right to be a bit… particular about how things are done, have I not?” His ire wasn’t much in the face of Juniper’s no-nonsense disposition, her unassuming tenacity, her lack of fear at his Malfoy glower.

She had an intuitive understanding of potions and herbal theories. She followed Draco’s orders to the letter, and when he was being ridiculous and obsessive, she let him know.

“Yes, and particular you are.” She laughed to herself, measuring out the flux-weed. “You have three appointments on Wednesday,” she continued, ignoring Draco’s affronted squawk, “and you can micromanage your cauldrons this weekend while I’m at my meetings. But, tonight, go, I will be fine with the pearl dust, and the usnea, and the flux-weed, and the—”

“Oh, okay! Yes, you’re very capable. Fine, I’m leaving!” He threw his hands in the air, defeated. Bossed out of his own office in his own practice by a 17 year old slytherpuff in ragged jeans. Oh, how the mighty have fallen, he thought balefully to himself.

Her triumphant snickers followed Draco from the room and into the hall. “Send an owl if you need me, don’t let anyone in outside of business hours unless you’ve invited them, and— and— Hestia and Neville said they’d stop by to deliver ingredients tonight, don’t forget—” he trailed off, running out of steam, worried about his potions, about Juniper on her own in the big empty house.

“Yes, sir!” She called back, a smile in her voice, the bitter smell of flux-weed wafting out into the reception area.

“I’ll just grab the last of my things and be off then.” He muttered to himself, still unwilling to just leave.

“You do that!” She called back cheekily. Rolling his eyes, he jogged lightly up the creaky steps to the little brown attic he had briefly occupied with Harry.

Looking around at the top of the steps, he saw it in an entirely different light. Now that he was no longer staying here, he felt almost fond of it. Almost. His large king size mattress was no longer in the corner, but rather a small, full-sized bed with a delicate floral pattern quilt and soft purple pillows. There was a small bookshelf acting as a bedside table filled with vampire romance novels and a few dogeared copies of Potions Weekly. He was leaving his little desk behind for Juniper, as well as a few pads of post-it notes.

The whole space was dotted with signs of youth, and it looked more loved and lived in after two short days with her than it ever did after weeks with Harry and Draco leaving their socks on the
Hanging plant baskets, furry throw rugs, a beaded hanging in the doorway to the bathroom, a poster of The Weird Sisters behind a lumpy brown sofa her and Hestia had found at a second-hand shop, and a grey cat sleeping softly under the battered coffee table. The cat and the coffee table had been found together in a dumpster, and no one had the heart to tell Juniper she couldn’t have both.

Down at his feet were two boxes. His and Harry’s entire existence parcelled down to just two dilapidated cardboard boxes held together with spell-o tape and hope. Some incomprehensible feeling of shock and suddenness hit Draco very completely, staring down at the two boxes on the floor. Standing here in this flat where he had agonised, where Harry had come back to him, where they had been chased out by the ministry, where so much had transpired in such a short space of time.

He felt oddly weepy, weirdly relieved, and yet, somehow still ached with a bizarre sense of fondness for this horribly drafty and splinter filled attic. It was the perfect place for a young adult to start their journey, not for two blotchy old wizards like he and Harry. No, they had never belonged here. The protective magic woven here by so many sang with lightness. It was ready to hold Juniper through this part of her life.

Lifting the two boxes, he said a silent farewell to the loud pipes and rattling windows and walked back downstairs.

Harry had thrown himself on to Draco’s mattress, groaning in delight, as soon as it had been unshrunk and placed against the wall in the cottage.

“I love this bed so much.” Harry muttered into it. Draco snorted a laugh, he couldn’t agree more. Harry had done a fine job with their transfigured bed, but nothing could compare to the magic that was his firm mattress.

Draco shook the sheets at Harry to make him move and he moaned pitifully and rolled off the bed and onto the floor.

“Honestly.” Draco laughed as he made their bed with the soft cotton sheets and plush pillows, Harry grunting his impatience from the floor all the while.

Reverently, he pulled his duvet out of the crumpled cardboard box and shook it out as Harry crept back onto the half-made bed from the floor. After fitting it with a new duvet cover, a dark burgundy, he threw it onto their bed, covering Harry completely.

“Come, we’re going to be late for Hermione.” He chided Harry, shaking his leg under the thick blanket, earning him another groan, this one of disappointment rather than delight. Harry sat up, pulling the blanket from his face and torso and looked at Draco for a moment with curious eyes.

Harry made a funny movement as if to reach for him but stopped himself and looked away—suddenly awkward. There had been many moments like this since Sylvia had died, and Draco didn’t know how to reassure Harry. How to scrub away the guilt. How to bridge the gap.

“Oi.” Draco said finally, sternly, after days of watching Harry torment himself. Keep himself away. The sudden fierceness of it startled Harry, who took a deep breath before looking back. Like he was bracing himself. “It’s okay.” Draco announced loudly, firmly.

Harry looked at him, guilt still shadowing his green eyes. His shoulders hunched, looking like he
Draco sat on the bed and reached for Harry who tried to disentangle himself from the dark duvet saying, “You’re right, we’re going to be late—” A little too loudly.

“Harry.” Draco said with authority, and Harry stilled, looking caught out. Draco grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around to face him. Harry took another deep breath and nodded, his magic felt careful, controlled, wary. Harry had held himself at arms length for days now.

“We’re not running anymore, remember?” Draco said softly, taking his hand, and Harry huffed an incredulous laugh, still not looking at Draco. “I get it.” He pressed on. “I get it, okay? Stop running from this— from me.”

He pulled Harry’s reluctant hand towards him and kissed the dry knuckles. Heard Harry’s rough, nearly pained exhale. Saw him nod absently at the mattress. “Now, will you fucking kiss me properly so we’re not late for dinner?”

Harry smiled hesitantly, looking down at their entwined hands, his magic becoming softer, still wary, but less stiff. Swirling around them. After a long beat, he finally looked up into Draco’s face and reached out to pull him in. The kiss was chaste and short. Nothing more than a brief press of closed lips. A shared breath. It was charged with a hundred things they couldn’t voice. Couldn’t explain. The apologies and forgiveness, the understanding and helplessness of it all.

They were okay.

They weren’t running, and they were going to be okay.

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Somehow, least qualified though he was, Draco ended up with a lap full of babbling and drooling Rose at the Granger-Weasley dinner table. Harry found this terribly amusing and kept smirking while he chopped potatoes. Ron was wearing his pink floral apron over his navy Weasley jumper, wielding a wooden spatula with great determination at the hob, the smell of garlic thick in the air. Hermione was concentrating hard on cutting up florets of broccoli into identical pieces with almost concerning determination. And Percy, the unexpected guest of the evening, was giving them all a lecture on outdated ministry policies as he cracked eggs into a large mixing bowl.

Draco had been surprised to find that Percy was joining them for dinner. He had thought him an odd addition to the group. As they hadn’t seen much of Ron and Hermione since early September, he and Harry had been very keen to spend time with them when the invitation was extended. They just hadn’t anticipated Percy’s slightly pompous declarations to be sprinkled through the proceedings.

He was just beginning to wonder why on earth Percy was talking at them, when he ostentatiously brought up the department that had so recently funded much of Draco’s life, that had catalysed so many of his discoveries, changed so much of who he is, at his core. Draco stopped trying to ignore him while making faces at the giggling child in his lap, turning a furrowed brow to listen more closely.

“…which brings us to your situation with the DoM.” He said sternly, but with decidedly dramatic flair. “The DoM became its own branch of the Ministry in 1542. The minister at that time gave it unprecedented centralised, autonomous control over itself, for the protection of our magical knowledge. So that the secrets of our inherent magical power could be protected. This move was created out of fear of muggles, at a time when we considered them most dangerous. A deeply
ingrained, generational bias that has followed many pureblood families to this day, as we know.” He gesticulated, nodding to Draco, who clearly would know the prejudices of pureblood society as intimately as any. Draco nodded back.

“They were entrusted to research areas of magic that wizarding society revered, feared, and felt too taboo to discuss in polite company, or were afraid of letting out into non-magic families, to muggle-borns or half-bloods. Owing to the wizarding population’s proclivity for superstition, no one questioned how the department was run, or what they got up to for centuries. Literally, centuries.” He enunciated firmly, pointing an egg covered fork at Harry. “We knew dismantling that wasn’t going to be easy work.”

“Will it even be possible?” Harry scoffed, scooping the cubed potatoes into a bowl and standing to pass them to Ron, who was smiling in an odd manner. Draco couldn’t figure out why Ron looked so pleased. “The ministry is dinosaurian and the bureaucratic cogs move far too slowly.” Harry continued grumpily standing against the counter next to Ron with his arms folded. Draco noticed Hermione, too, was smiling into her pile of perfectly dissected broccoli. He narrowed his eyes at Percy.

“Well, yes— it was the largest undertakings of our careers, I have to say—” Percy responded with a triumphant gleam in his eyes, smiling at Ron and Hermione, who grinned back.

“I’m sorry, what?” Draco asked, readjusting Rose on his lap so she could point her wooden spoon sternly at her mother.

“The story hits the papers tomorrow—” Hermione said, her voice dancing between righteous victory and malevolent cunning as she handed Ron the broccoli, reaching to take the eggs from Percy.

“What story?” Harry asked, looking to Draco, making sure he wasn’t the only one who was feeling left out. Draco just shrugged his confusion back, Rose continuing to cast nonsensical spells at her parents, completely oblivious to the conversation.

“After Draco was attacked and Grimmauld Place searched, Ron and I went to Percy and Kingsley to explain the entire situation. Our suspicions about the department and our concerns for your safety.” She said, nearly vibrating with great intensity, the air of someone made to keep a secret for too long. “We realised that when the Ministry was restructured after the second war, the DoM had been left out of the proceedings entirely, slipped right under the radar. They have no system of checks and balances— a law unto their own. No regulatory functions, no reporting system, nothing. They hadn’t been audited in three hundred years. YEARS.” She shouted, a manic glint in her eye.

“They were completely at liberty to issue search and arrest warrants without Wizengamot approval—,” Percy grunted angrily, “hold people in questioning indefinitely, so long as it pertained to an area of research.”

“And, most shockingly, they were able to keep their research in private archives. Shelves upon shelves of deep magical history and research, hidden from view!” Hermione finished, breathing hard, her hair looking electric with indignation.

“But, you worked there for years, Hermione, how did you not know any of this before?” Harry asked, looking even more boggled.

“Well, you know, Unspeakables under a certain clearance rank aren’t allowed in certain areas or access to certain information, it’s something you earn over time. And, obviously, I hadn’t been
promoted to that level yet— never realised how deep the secrets went. After the three of us with Kingsley carefully combed through all the bylaws pertaining to the DoM, we managed to find a few loopholes that allowed us to audit and investigate the department. We found some compelling evidence to present to the Wizengamot, and we were able to pass some bills that granted us access to, well— *everything* —” Her eyes were big and distant, as if she were remembering something she didn’t want to.

“What we found— it was shocking. I’ll spare you the details—”

“Oh, no you won’t!” Harry said loudly. “What did you find? Draco was nearly dragged off there!”

“No, Harry, trust me, you don’t—” She said seriously. Rose quietly watched her mother, no longer waving the spoon. “There were people being kept down there— Muggles. Wizards. Squibs. Children, even. The experiments we found—”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were doing all this?” Harry cut in, sounding more than slightly resentful. “I could have helped— I *should* have helped—”

“Mate—” Ron said interrupting Harry’s self-flagellation. He swung an arm around his shoulder like a brother, pulling him to his side.

“You had enough going on. And—,” He said at the irritated noise Harry made, “I don’t mean that in a ‘we don’t think you can handle this’ sort of way.” He shook Harry a bit with his large, freckled arm. “I mean it in a ‘your boyfriend was nearly kidnapped at wand point and you were forced into hiding and we thought we could get on without stressing you out further’ sort of way. Yeah? We’re very capable, you know.”

Harry seemed to grudgingly accept that answer but still looked petulant about it. “You could have told me.” He muttered.

“Yeah, we could have.” Hermione said simply. “But we didn’t. Sometimes we have to fight different battles, Harry. One person can’t— *shouldn’t* do everything.”

Harry nodded at her while Ron turned back to the counter to assemble their frittata.

Draco was dying to ask about the secret archives but didn’t want to interrupt Harry’s moment with his two friends. An entire conversation was contained in their silence, subtle movements and gestures, looks and nods. Percy saved him the trouble of reminding the trio that other people existed, too.

“Tell him about the upcoming trial, Ron.” He insisted, rubbing his hands together like a supervillain. A supervillain who used law and incessantly tedious bureaucracy to his alarmingly well-intentioned advantage. A hero?

Right. A hero.

“Oh, the sweet satisfaction of a conviction— our evidence we’ve collected is so strong they won’t have an option but to hold them accountable. I can’t wait to testify.” Ron intoned wistfully, placing the frittata in the oven with a violently orange hot mitt.

“Get on with it, then!” Harry said loudly, the suspense of the story clearly eating him up. Draco quite agreed, but he felt immobilised by the chubby child occupying his limbs.

And, get on with it, Ron did. It took him an hour to tell them the whole harrowing tale— how Hermione acted as a whistleblower in the department— how Kingsley and Percy motivated the
Wizengamot to confront generations worth of deeply ingrained superstitions in the name of protecting their society, least of all their Golden Boy. In the name of accountability and transparency. Of free knowledge and open discourse. How they had one by one agreed to allow the aurors and the DMLE to investigate the department, for the legal offices to run an internal audit, for every employee of the DoM to be questioned and investigated.

Turns out, the DoM had an unbelievable budget and the only records of spending were for employees. Not only did they have hidden libraries and archives deep below the ministry, but they had laboratories, many of them, fantastic in their size, terrifying in their scope. They had prison cells, too. There were people down there. Lost to the bowels of the department. Never given due process. Never heard from again.

Most troubling of all were the upper-level Unspeakables, so unlike Hermione and her fellow academics. The Unknowables that Luna had mentioned— turns out they were real— real, and dangerous.

With burnt identities and histories, living in the deep levels of the DoM like monastic monks, worshipping the mysteries of power and the powers of mystery. This secret community working tirelessly to unravel and harness the obscurities of magic while the wider wizarding world carried on, blissfully unaware of what lurked beneath them.

Hermione seemed personally offended that the DoM’s mysteries ran so deeply and so sinisterly. “I was a part of that work.” She said, angrily. “I added my hard-earned knowledge to their secret vaults of information that they were using to cultivate power— to abuse people. What they were doing down there was just—” She trailed off, setting plates down around the table with too much force.

“So, if these people don’t have names or identities, how can you put them to trial?” Draco asked, finally passing Rose off to her mother. He felt oddly empty without the perpetual motion machine in his lap. He didn’t know what to do with his hands so he fiddled with the cloth serviette.

“Well, essentially,” Percy said, in his courtroom voice, “since all of the Unknowables plausibly knew about the prisoners and highly illegal experiments happening, they’re all being tried on a variety of human rights abuse charges and international violations. They’ve violated hundreds of local and international laws about experimental charms, dark magic, human transfiguration, experimental curse damage— so much. They were doing so much.”

“And the archives?” Draco asked, eagerly.

Hermione smiled wolfishly. “I’m heading the team to catalogue everything and send it up to the Ministry’s library and research publication centre. All of it, centuries worth of knowledge, will be made public. Eventually.”

“When?” Draco asked.

“As we go through it. It’ll take years, but it'll be worth it. The DoM has been sitting on some incredible magical breakthroughs— wait till you see— the amount of—” Hermione was bursting with excitement. Her entire career leading up to this grand moment of breaking open the DoM and sharing its coveted secrets with the world. “Transparency and knowledge is so important! Accountability! Peer review! Ethics committees!” She smacked her hands on the table surface with fervent enthusiasm and Ron smiled indulgently at her.

“What about our research?” He pressed. “What about all of the work we did and had to burn? All that time.” He nearly pleaded.
Hermione sighed heavily looking sadly at Draco. “I did what I thought was best in the moment to keep you and Harry safe— If I had known where this would lead, I would have tried to save it or hide it— or something. But, well..—” She shrugged apologetically. “Most of the theoretical branches of magical research is going to be sent to live at Hogwarts in the library. All of the information about Death Herders, about thestrals, some other interesting areas that could benefit the school and be significantly advanced by learned academics and magical theorists, it’ll all be moved there. Hogwarts will keep it safe. Flitwick has set up a preliminary research ethics committee.”

Draco nodded. Still feeling more than a little nettled that after all that, their research had been reduced to a pile of ash and vanished into nothingness.

“Maybe—,” Hermione said carefully, “maybe, in a few years— when you have a better understanding of your role and your thestrals, maybe we can revisit the research. Re-publish. Add to the store of knowledge at St. Mungo’s and the Hogwarts library. Yeah?” She looked eager and hopeful. The regret of destroying their research evident on her face.

“Yeah.” He breathed out. “Maybe.” He had saved one of those early drafts. His preliminary notes — in the cabin. Stuffed in the hidden stone cubby with Quintessence. Most of it was angry ramblings about unicorns, but that wasn’t all too unheard of in magical research. The literature was teeming with failed first attempts. Bitterness. He’d fit right in. Yes, that could work—

“You said there were people trapped down there.” Harry interjected, interrupting Draco’s musings. Plots. Rekindled animosity for the silver, singled horned cretins. “Who? Who did you find? Were they okay?”

Ron sighed sadly. “We found about a dozen people down there. One young as maybe six— oldest at about, we guess, late 70’s. All of them had their memory wiped. They don’t know a thing. No idea why they were there or what happened to them.”

“We found the identities of at least four of them,” said Percy, “after searching through missing persons around Europe, but the other’s we have no idea who they are or where they come from. They’ll be staying in St. Mungo’s until the ministry has any idea what to do for them.”

“Mm.” Harry said, brow furrowed.

“And the people you arrested?” Draco asked as Ron placed the steaming pan of Frittata down at the centre of the table. “No idea who they are either?”

“It’s the weirdest thing.” Ron said, fanning steam away from the cooling mass of egg. “When we started digging, we found identities for about eight of the 22 people who had been living down there. And, so far, all of them had been regular Unspeakables at some point. Four of them had been legally dead— funerals and everything, obituaries in the paper. One had supposedly retired and moved off to Spain, and the others just went missing. And here they are, living in the bowels of the ministry. We closed a record number of cold cases.”

They were all silent for a moment, each lost in their own contemplation. Food being ladled out and plates passed around.

“So, what?” Harry asked, voice disbelieving. “It’s just over now?” He stabbed into his piece of frittata aggressively.

Ron and Percy both scoffed.
“For you, maybe—” Hermione huffed a humourless laugh. “I think you should still keep low and out of sight for a while. But, for us, no, it’s nowhere near over. We’re finding more and more levels, rooms, and secret passageways every week. Who knows if there are more people still down there, honestly. It could take us another decade to sweep the entirety of the DoM. Kingsley put a dedicated Auror guard on the three of us indefinitely, and we’ve had to reinforce our home wards — I had to move my office from the DoM for the time being— We don’t know how long we’ll be fighting this battle. Righting the wrongs.” She shrugged, kissing the top of Rose’s head, looking for the moment, worried.

Harry looked as conflicted as Draco felt. Draco knew Hermione and Ron were gifted and powerful magical people. Knew that they had been more than just Harry’s lackeys in the war against Voldemort. But, to hear that they had taken down the cultish underbelly of the Ministry while Draco had sat quietly in his forest hollow, knitting baby socks, made him feel oddly inept in the face of their tenacity and bravery.

Harry’s furrowed brow and thin mouth echoed this sentiment.

“I may not be as under-the-radar as I had originally planned.”

Hermione groaned. “Oh no, what did you do?”

Harry grinned sheepishly back at her, Draco saw Ron had frozen with a fork-full of egg balancing precariously halfway to his mouth, eyes wide at Harry, worried. Percy clicking his tongue in disapproval.

“I— uh— I may have been recruited to um— restart Dumbledore’s Army— at the insistence of Minnie.” He said, looking far too pleased with himself, unable to stop the smile from splitting his face as Ron open and closed his mouth repeatedly, no sound coming out. Harry took the moment of shocked silence to busy himself with shovelling frittata and bean salad into his face. Draco couldn’t help but smile at him and the looks of disbelieving befuddlement on Ron and Hermione’s face. Percy just looked curiously puzzled by it all.

“And, I may have also been offered the Defense Against the Dark Arts position for next year as Doge is well past his teaching expiration date.” He said quickly, blushing, actively avoiding Draco’s gaze.

“You kept that quiet.” Draco said with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah…” Harry pushed out, awkwardly, yet looking relieved. “Sorry, I meant to mention it— I just — didn’t know if I was going to take it. But, then— then, I thought of Orelia and how she had cast her first protego, wordlessly, I might add, deflecting a jelly legs jinx from Freya—”

Ron finally dropped his fork and rubbed his hands over his face and laughed. Hermione looked up to the ceiling, shrugging helplessly at it all, muttering under her breath, “All this time, trying to keep you safe— does he ever listen? Of course not— off he goes—”

Draco was shaking his head fondly at Harry, unable to hide the glowing adoration he felt for him in his moments of joy at the thought of his DA students.

Hermione finally drew her eyes back from the ceiling and onto Harry, also shaking her head fondly, Ron still laughing into his food. Harry was sitting, a little awkwardly, clearly waiting for the approval and validation of his friends. Wanting to hear that he had made the right choice. “I told McGonagall that I would take the job.” He finally said, watching them carefully, eyes resting on Draco.
“Well—” Hermione said, smiling at him in an indulgent sort of way, like she didn’t know what she should have expected from her Harry, “there’s no safer place than Hogwarts.” She intoned in a sing-song voice.

They all laughed.

Draco reached over and squeezed Harry’s leg under the table, earning him a relieved grin and Harry’s firm hand over his, squeezing back.

“So, how are the students?” Ron asked, interestedly. “Do you have a horde of mini Gryffindor’s filling your ranks?”

Harry laughed. “No, actually.” He looked so very wistful and pleased, thinking about his DA kids. “There’s only one Gryffindor. Two from each other house. Seven in total.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, her ire forgotten, genuine curiosity taking its place.

“Yeah, McGonagall handpicked a few students that needed the DA most, kids that either didn’t get along or those that were bullied by the rest of their classmates. Outcasts. Abandoned kids. There’s this one; Thor— his name is. You wouldn’t believe—” Harry chuckled to himself. “Thorfin Rowle’s son— You remember? The big Death Eater bloke?”

The others nodded, eyes questioning, Draco knowing the story well by now. “His son,” Harry continued, enthusiasm pouring from every bit of his being, “is this small, skinny boy— Slytherin— but, Teddy Lupin’s best friend, if you can believe that. He grew up in a muggle orphanage after his father died, and his mum. And no one would take him in. Thick coke bottle glasses, an inhaler spell-o taped to his school bag— McGonagall says he’s got a dedicated house elf because he’s ‘medically complex’ and gives Madam Pomfrey grey hairs, worse than we used to. Teddy and he adore each other, it’s the purest thing I’ve ever seen. When he cast his first lumos with his lisp and his wheezing I nearly cried for him. He somehow reminds me of the best and most awkward parts of Neville, Draco, Snape and Lupin all rolled into one adorable disaster. The kid deserves so much love and he gets picked on mercilessly—”

Harry had realised he was rambling, Draco saw, when he looked up and caught the indulgent smiles they were all bestowing on him. Draco looked around and saw that Percy was oddly misty eyed as he had watched Harry exuberantly download about these children he had become so attached to.

“You okay, Perce?” Ron asked, reaching out and squeezing his shoulder. Percy smiled a bit sadly and shook himself, nodding.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. It’s just— well, hearing about this. All these kids. Penelope and I, you know, I mean— we’ve been trying for years. Thinking about adopting. It’s nothing, really.” He waved them off, clearing not wanting the conversation to fall onto him and his longings.

“There are many ways to make a family.” Hermione said quietly, kindly. “And, there are so many children in need of homes after the war.”

Percy nodded. “Yes,” he said smiling at his empty plate, the words left him seemingly of their own accord, and Draco wondered if Percy had anyone to talk to about these things that clearly weighed heavy on his shoulders, “and after four miscarriages, I don’t think we could cope with the disappointment of trying anymore. We have the whole of St. Mungo’s flummoxed, I tell you.”

Draco was listening with such rapt attention that he almost missed the sad smile Hermione and Ron
exchanged with one another. The unspoken sorrow that passed between them as they both made to touch some part of their child as she mindlessly gnawed on a mushy stalk of eggy broccoli.

“She was recently screened for generational curses by Healer McDougal, and blood curses by Healer Sprigg. They found nothing. They can’t figure it out. She was crushed— we both were.” Percy continued, and Draco bristled harshly at the mention of Sprigg. Although he hadn’t had to see the man’s smug face in months, he still dealt with countless patients walking into his practice in need of care that Sprigg couldn’t provide.

“Percy— I don’t mean to be presumptuous, or to speak ill of another healer, but I worked with Sprigg for years, and I spent most of that time cleaning up his mess. If you’d like a second opinion on the possibility of curse damage, you’re more than welcome to bring Penelope to my practice in Hogsmeade.” Draco said, evenly, his healer mask sliding quickly into place. His mind whirring with a hundred possibilities.

Percy offered another sad, almost pitying smile in return. “Draco, I appreciate the offer immensely, I do, and I will speak with Penelope about it, but—” He looked a bit awkward, trying to decide what to say next. “but, it might be a challenge to persuade her to seek help from the nephew of someone who had tortured her during the war.”

Draco felt ice run through his veins and he suddenly felt lost at sea, “I’m— I’m so very sorry, Percy—” He said, quickly, but Percy cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“I certainly don’t blame you, Draco, for what Bellatrix did, and I know Penelope wouldn’t either, but the reminder may be a bit much for her at this point, surrounded by disappointment as she has been.” His voice had become stronger and slightly pompous again, clearly looking to end the discussion. “In any event, I will convey your offer, just in case.”

Draco nodded, feeling all at once antsy and frozen in place, his mind remembered words long forgotten to the deep recesses of his mind, Bellatrix’s voice echoing from the depths. Lost memories swimming hazily to the surface.

He was grateful when he felt Harry’s grounding hand on his leg and heard him clear his throat to cut in and continue his ramblings about how excited he was to teach— how endearing Thor was. How pleased he was to have the opportunity to bridge the gap between the houses. How much he wanted to draw the Slytherins out of isolation. How friendship is so essential for survival, for moving forward, for thriving. How he wants to cultivate that sentiment in the next generation.

He let Harry’s words wash over him and let his mind wander to his thestrals. To their cave. To blood curses and the healing arts. How they each were finding their place.

November 14, 2009

The next morning Little Dipper came swooping in the window with a letter from Hermione and a copy of the Daily Prophet. He crashed spectacularly into the tray of waffles, knocking over Harry’s tea and taking advantage of the general chaos to snap a piece of bacon.

“You little menace!” Draco squawked. “Harry! Your owl is a terror!”

Harry just laughed and waved his hand to clean up the mess. The spell did little to remove the maple syrup from Draco’s pants, so he stormed off to the chest of drawers to change while Harry cooed at his nuisance of a bird.
As Draco stripped down and redressed, Harry read Draco the breaking story of the ministry’s internal restructuring and the ominous things uncovered in the DoM. The story spanned five pages and went into a detailed and extremely tedious account of the bureaucratic processes involved in such a feat. Hermione and Ron were mentioned several times and exalted to the moon and back. There was talk of how this put Ron on a fast track to be Head Auror one day. How Hermione could be Minister for Magic in a decade’s time if she continued in this vein. How Percy was one of the most well respected Chief Warlocks in recent history. How Kingsley’s fervor for accountability and transparency in Ministry proceedings was unprecedented.

They ended up on their bed as Harry was finishing the final lines of the article and flipped the page to follow the final sentence. He trailed off, his brow furrowed, the fingers that had been mindlessly carding Draco’s hair as he lay next to Harry had stilled.

Draco sat up, “What is it?”

“That fucking— mhmm.” Harry growled. His fists gripping the thin paper, his magic radiating out in an angry wave.

“What?” Draco made to reach for the paper, but Harry pulled it away, looking at Draco with concern. “Harry, what is it?”

Harry sighed, and rubbed his eyes. Looking like he was having an internal debate about something. Seeming to decide something, his shoulders drooped, defeated, and he handed the paper to Draco.

He snatched it out of Harry’s reluctant hands and scanned the page for the offending words. It didn’t take long to find.

*Daily Prophet Special Correspondent Romilda Vayne’s Weekly Harry Potter Gossip Column.*

*Here for all of your up to the minute stories about your favourite Golden Hero.*

*This week’s story was sent in from an anonymous letter, disclosing to your very own Romilda Vayne that our Savior has been spotted spending quality time in Hogsmeade. The anonymous writer swears on their grandmother’s life that they witnessed one Harry James Potter strolling down the street holding hands with non-other than social pariah, acquitted Death Eater, and disgraced Healer, Draco Lucious Malfoy.*

Well, I can tell you, my dear readers, for absolute certain that there is no way on earth that the decade’s most eligible bachelor could possibly be a homosexual, for one. For another, it's inconceivable that our hero, who vanquished the Dark Lord, would ever be caught dead cavorting with such unsavoury characters! The scandal! The outrage!

*If this sighting is genuine, I’m sure my readers would want to know what the Ministry is doing to protect Harry from whatever dark magic Mr. Malfoy is using to besmirch the reputation of our hero. While it is known that Mr. Potter is adept at throwing off the imperious curse, there’s no question that while Draco lived under the tutelage of He-who-must-not-be-named and countless other Death Eaters, he may have learned dark magic to lure Harry to him. A love potion perhaps? Something worse than the imperious? Who knows what sinister skills he has tucked up his sleeve!*

*What this journalist wants to know is why Mr. Malfoy was fired from St. Mungo’s? Why was his healing license not revoked? What dastardly deeds did he subject patients to during —* 

And on, and on it went. Dragging Draco and his hard-earned, quiet, reputation through the mud. He could hear Harry speaking to him, but couldn’t hear what he was saying. Draco gently folded
the paper in his lap. He got up from the bed, crossed the room, and tossed it carelessly into the fire. He watched the pages ignite, curl in on themselves, and blacken in the flames. The hateful words turning to ash.

His boggart wrestled for dominance in his thoughts. Trying hard not to entertain the self-deprecating thoughts that were swirling around him, he took a deep breath, gathered himself, and turned to look at Harry.

Harry looked worried when their eyes met. He sat, childlike on their bed, hunched over himself, picking mindlessly at a frayed hole in his jeans, chewing on his lip, eyeing Draco warily. Looking as if he were waiting for the shoe to drop. Waiting for Draco to say that this was the line, and he was leaving.

His head full of all of the ways The Daily Prophet said Harry couldn’t want him, Draco walked purposefully towards him. He stopped at the bedside and reached out a hand to tuck a loose curl behind Harry’s ear. The Prophet and everyone else in the wizarding world may think Draco was a poor partner for Harry, and maybe he was, but there was no denying the pull between them. No denying the concerned look on Harry’s face, the fear that Draco may leave him, and the overwhelming urge Draco had to soothe that worry.

All those nameless people out there couldn’t take this away from them. No, Draco and Harry had worked too hard to get here. And, he wouldn’t let a few shitty words and half-assed speculations ruin the tender thing they had cultivated over months of tending.

Draco moved on to the bed, climbed over him in the process. It forced Harry onto his back, scrabbling for purchase, trying to drag himself up to the pillows to get out from under Draco, but having nowhere to go. Looking ever more worried and confused.

He looked at Harry for a hard moment, determined, his wide green eyes looking uncertain. He had continued to keep Draco at a distance, even after having been called out on it. Even after Draco had tried to clear the air between them. He was done with it. He wanted to wash all the guilt and hesitancy away from Harry. Show that he wasn’t afraid of his demons. That he wanted him, still. That Draco was willing to keep doing the work necessary for them to be okay.

“Do you want me to stop?” Draco asked evenly, hovering over him, his one knee between Harry’s legs, both his hands on either side of Harry’s head. Not touching him yet.

Harry made a pitiful groan in the back of his throat, his eyes darting away, his magic tingling across Draco’s skin, his breathing suddenly shaky.

“I’ll stop if you want me to.” Draco said, reaching out to brush the hair off of Harry’s forehead. He was seemingly unable to stop himself from leaning into the light touch. He looked anguished. Tortured. Guilt ridden.

“I— I—” Harry stuttered. “I— I don’t want to hurt you—” The confession sounded pained, pulled from him. He said it to a point somewhere on the ceiling rather than to Draco.

“You won’t.” Draco said, with a confidence he normally didn’t feel.

“But— I almost— I did—” Harry tried, looking so very hurt by his own nature.

“I’m not afraid of you, Harry.” He interrupted. And Harry breathed out a disbelieving breath.

“We don’t have to do anything.” He assured, running his hand lightly through Harry’s hair, watching the way Harry’s eyes closed and how he sucked in a breath at the touch. Draco had
desperately missed this casual closeness, and said as much, in a rough voice. “Gods, Harry— I— I’ve missed you this week.”

The last few days had felt like an eternity with Harry laying on the far side of the bed with his back to him, hours after he would normally come to sleep. Trying desperately to keep Draco safe by keeping himself away. “We can just lay here. I can just kiss you, and leave it at that.” Draco said quietly, patiently. Leaning down to brush his lips against Harry’s. “Do you want me to stop?”

Harry made another strangled sound, his eyes still closed, followed by a whispered no. Draco smiled against Harry’s mouth and kissed him gently at first. Carefully laying himself down between Harry’s legs and on his chest. Harry groaned at the contact and his hands came gingerly up to Draco’s ribs, barely there. Still so apprehensive.

Draco gave an encouraging mmph into Harry’s mouth and ran his hands through his unruly hair. He gripped it firmly, earning him a surprised and pleased sound. He used his hold to control and deepen the kiss. Harry holding on to Draco more tightly now, his arms wrapping around him— his body finally relaxing, melting slowly into the bed under him.

Draco put everything he had into holding and kissing Harry. Trying to make him see. Make him feel just how much— how completely— Draco felt all of these feelings for him. All of these swirling, keening, consuming feelings of tenderness, of devotion, of warmth, of love.

He laid his weight down on Harry and rolling into the V of his hips, holding him close. They laid there, tangled together, hands moving slowly, sharing the open mouthed kisses Draco had craved all week. Pouring all of his adoration into each breath they shared.

When they pulled apart, sometime later, Harry looked dazed and less apprehensive. Well kissed. Loved. They were both hard, but Draco paid no mind. There would be time later. So much time. He pressed chaste lips one last time to Harry’s slightly open and overwhelmed mouth and sat up smiling. He pulled Harry with him from the bed to the kitchen table where he made them tea and spoke gently about nothing in particular.

The last of their heaviness evaporated, Harry’s magic reached out in light swirling tendrils once again.

“I’ve been thinking—” Draco said into the dark, into the curve of where Harry’s neck met his shoulder. Harry smelled like wood shavings and leather. Of the sage he had helped Draco grind into a powder early that afternoon. The first time in a week Harry had come to bed with him, at the same time, had allowed Draco to wrap himself around him, hold him close.

They had spent the rest of the day together. Standing near, frequently touching. Draco guiding Harry’s hand to show him how to prepare the herbs for him, Harry chatting excitedly about perspective lesson plans, occasionally reaching out to push Draco’s hair behind his ear.

Later in the evening, Harry had written letters with a furrowed brow and serious eyes, while Draco had written out theories, his mind full of ideas. Half remembered thoughts from the war. Of Bellatrix. Of safety and fielt.

They had gone to bed early, quietly, but Draco couldn’t sleep. His mind swirling with a hundred thoughts, surrounded by the smell and feel of Harry. Disjointed worry from that morning’s Prophet article calling forth his boggart. Draco pressed in closer to Harry’s back, the cold of the room threatening to invade their nest of blankets. The fire had burnt down to glowing
embers long ago.

“Mm?” Harry grunted sleepily. “Whas’ happening?” he asked, turning lazily in Draco’s arms to face him, to burrow into his cotton-covered chest for warmth, his eyes sleepy and his mouth slack. Draco smiled and breathed in the familiar smell of Harry’s hair deeply and tightened his grip around him. Holding Harry to him.

“I’ve been thinking—” Draco repeated, still softly, not really sure how to articulate his whirring thoughts.

“What’rya thinkin’ ’bout?” Came Harry’s muffled voice, on the verge of slipping off into sleep. His breathing deep and measured. His fingers idly tracing halting patterns along Draco’s spine, as if he were valiantly trying to stay awake but fighting a losing battle.

“I think— I think we should— I want—” Draco let out a frustrated sigh, unsure how to continue. Harry stilled for a moment, letting Draco’s stuttering words rouse him from the grasp of sleep. He pulled his face away from Draco’s chest and propped himself on his elbow to look at him with bleary eyes and a furrowed brow.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, voice stronger now, more alert.

“Nothing is wrong.” Draco said, fighting off the feeling of impatience welling in him. “I just— I have an idea— I want to say something— and I don’t know how to— the words are eluding me...” He sighed, his limbs feeling a bit limp and useless.

Harry reached his hand up and rested it on the side of Draco’s neck, his thumb gently stroking his jaw line, waiting.

Draco took a deep breath, his insides jittering, restless. “I think— I think we should perform the fidelius charm on the hollow— on the cottage.” He said, it sounded more like a question than a statement. “We can be the secret keepers, ourselves. But, I wanted to do it properly. Like it used to be done, in ritual. Invite our closest friends. Share the secret with them.”

Once the words started flowing, they began spilling out of their own accord. “There’s an old ceremony that use to be performed. A pureblood ceremony—”

He searched Harry’s face, waiting to see the twist of disgust there, the outright refusal to participate in outdated pureblood rituals. He continued, emboldened when none came. When Harry’s unreadable, albeit patient countenance didn’t waver. His thumb still moving slowly across Draco’s skin.

“It fell out of fashion during the first wizarding war— the ceremony being reduced to a spell of necessity, rather than of cultivating a home or fielty— or family. I thought maybe— maybe we could do that. Together— since we’re— you know—” He finished a little breathlessly, trailing off, nervously, waiting for Harry’s reaction.

“Since we’re what?” Harry asked in a near whisper, Draco unable to see what his eyes were asking in the dark.

“Since we’re— we’re— since I—” He could feel a tremor radiating out from his midsection, through his limbs, out to the tips of his fingers and toes, gripping him in the overwhelming certainty of what he wanted to say, but was terrified to let out.

He was sure Harry could feel his erratic pulse under his hand and Draco could feel its warmth on his neck, burning him, and the blazing heat from Harry’s gaze in the dark making him falter. The
silence urging him to continue speaking.

“Since I love you.” He whispered, holding perfectly still.

“I’ve loved you for so long, Harry— I’ve been building up to loving you for— gods— years — maybe. Even through all the animosity— you’ve been this bright light in my life that I couldn’t look away from. I’ve always been circling you, drawn to you.”

He took a deep breath, figuring he may as well do the thing properly. Harry seemed to be holding his breath. “We’ve been through so much together— so much— and you know me. Gods, do you know me, Harry. And I want us to have a chance and a place to grow together. See what comes next. I want our home to be protected. To be safe for us. Because I love you.” He said again.

The sound that erupted from Harry could have been a choked sob, or a hysterical laugh, Draco wasn’t sure, but it didn’t matter when he surged forward with tremendous speed and rolled on top of Draco, kissing him with a kind of fierce desperation that he hadn’t expected.

“Is that a yes?” Draco asked when Harry pulled away slightly to look at him, his eyes restlessly looking over Draco’s face, breathing heavily.

“Of course it’s a yes.” Harry huffed, leaning back down, smiling against his mouth. “You love me?” He asked, sounding a bit disbelieving.

“Of course I love you.” Draco said smiling now, too, feeling a profound relief at being able to say it out loud after sitting on it for weeks— months. Draco felt like he had spent half his life layering the ways in which he could love Harry.

Harry kissed him again. They pushed and pulled at each other’s clothes. Harry’s trepidation of the last few days seeming to have finally been driven away in the face of Draco’s declaration. They were gripping each other hard, and Draco was pulling insistently at the hem of Harry’s shirt, urging it off. Harry sat up, straddling Draco and yanked his shirt off, tossing it carelessly at the floor. Pulling Draco up to roughly take his shirt off too.

Draco rolled them so he was over Harry, and they impatiently discarded their pants. Draco ran his hands reverently along Harry’s thighs, up his sides. Kneeling between Harry’s legs, he took in the beautiful sight of the man he loved, shivering with need. Draco was breathing heavy and his heart felt like it was about to burst out of his chest. Harry grabbed his hand and pulled Draco back down on top of him, moaning into his mouth, the feel of their cocks sliding against one another making them both tremble.

They moved quickly and eagerly against one another in the onslaught of emotions and need. Harry was breathing hard into Draco’s mouth, against the side of his jaw, whispering encouragements. Draco, reached down and hooked his arm under Harry’s knee, spreading him wider— grinding against him more urgently.

It didn’t last long, frantic as it was. Harry came with a strangled gasp, his hands gripping Draco’s ass cheeks tightly, controlling his trusts against him. The slickness of Harry’s release tipped Draco over the edge and his hips faltered, his cock spurting between them, his teeth dragging along the tendon in Harry’s neck.

They slowed their movements, catching their breath. Draco rolled off of Harry and pulled him close. They lay there, pressing sleepy, open and uncoordinated lips together. Harry barely managing to cast a wandless, wordless, cleaning charm before they both sank into a deep sleep. Safe in the folds of the heavy duvet strewn haphazardly across their skin.
Draco was walking down the dingy servant’s passage to the kitchens, briskly, his ears straining for the sound of anyone following him. Of Lestrange’s shuffling gait. Of Greyback’s stomping warpath. He’d barely eaten in days, too consumed with the horrors of the manor, the Dark Lord having taken to using meal time to feed his snake for all to watch.

Draco thought he might never want to eat again, but knew if he didn’t he wouldn’t have the strength for his occlumency, and that would be a death sentence. So, eat he must.

He was reaching the door to the kitchens when he heard raised voices. His mother. Bellatrix. They were arguing in furious whispers. Bellatrix sounding choked with tears. With rage fueled grief.

“—it’s not right, Bella, it won’t bring them back. It won’t fix it.” His mother was saying in near pleading tones. “Stop this madness—”

“You don’t know what this is like!” She threw back, acid in her voice. “You have a son! You have a beautiful, strong son, Cissy! And, he’s making you proud by serving! I can’t— I’ll never— the Dark Lord deserves—” she choked.

“Cursing those women, won’t change that.” Narcissa said in a voice that teetered between harsh reprimand and pity.

“If I can’t have sons, then neither shall they! Filthy blood traitors and half bloods they are. What does it matter to you, anyways?!” she challenged, voice shrill, near hysterical.

“It matters because you know what this curse does. You live the horror every time you conceive, how can you pass it on, knowingly?” He heard a scuffle and ragged sob erupt from Bellatrix. Draco turned on his heels, fearing he had heard too much. He didn’t need to eat, he needed to get away.

Draco woke with a start, the fear from the dream— the memory— gripping him. He was cold, he wasn’t wearing any clothes and the blankets had been tangled around them in a haphazard pile. He was suddenly starving. Ravenous. Remembering what it felt like to be so famished yet so incapable of eating. He crept over a softly snoring Harry, drooling peacefully on his pillow, and dressed quickly in the dark, cold cottage.

He rekindled the fire and let the blast of heat penetrate his clothes as he stood too close, trying to shake the jittery feeling from his limbs and piece together what his dream had pulled from the depths of his memories. He boiled a kettle for tea and opened a packet of chocolate digestives and proceeded to silently eat the entire package.

He needed to write to his mother. They had much to talk about. Much to resolve. Much to air out. He missed her, he realised. A feeling that had been buried by the resentment and animosity of what their relationship had devolved into. He was ready to try and see what it could grow into, how she could fit into his life. How she may be able to reconnect him to his heritage in a way that wasn’t rooted in bigotry and self importance.

He needed to know about what he had overheard with Bellatrix. Needed to understand what curse they were talking about. Why she had never had any children.

After penning a generally bland letter to his mother, and setting it aside for when Little Dipper returned from his hunt, he crept quietly back to bed and crawled under the blankets. His mind swirled for a long, long time before sleep reclaimed him.
The next morning Draco and Harry sat at their tiny kitchen table, legs pressed together, both soft and joyful, as they penned a letter to their seven dearest friends. To their chosen family. The people whose magic they wanted woven into their home, to hold them, and protect them. An invitation to their fidelius ceremony. A house warming party, of sorts. Officiating their relationship. Their roles as Death Herders. Their home in the forest.

November 21 would be a moonless night. A waxing crescent hidden from view. The stars would be dazzling and their garden would glisten in the quiet snow.

Sometime after lunch, Draco found himself by the fireside, sitting cross legged on the rug with a tiny set of double pointed needles and lace weight wool, knitting the most tediously small sock in the history of tedious knitting endeavours. He was determined to make a set of beautiful baby things for Luna. Committed. Maybe a little obsessed, sure. He could admit that to himself.

Trudging along, he was counting itty bitty stitches and doing silent math for making cables in the round when Harry’s voice broke the silence. Draco jumped, nearly forgetting that Harry was in the room with him, consumed as he was with his project.

“You know we don’t ever have to have anal sex, right?”

Draco nearly choked on his tongue, accidentally pulling one of the needles out of the sock entirely, losing all of the stitches. “I’m sorry— who— what?” He stuttered, his voice more shrill than he would have liked, turning supercilious eyebrows onto Harry. The sock unravelling in his hands.

Harry was rubbing his palms hard over his face and through his hair like he was gearing up to have a really painfully awkward conversation, and Draco felt his face turn fire engine red.

“I mean it.” Harry said sighing and coming to sit across from Draco on the rug. He took Draco’s mangled knitting from his hands and put it aside. “I know we’ve danced around this and talked a bit about topping or bottoming— as if its some kind of inevitability, or some kind of pinnacle of sexual expression or intimacy— but— it’s not. We don’t have to ever do it.”

Draco could tell his face must have been twisted into some kind of disbelieving shock. His mouth was moving and he was shaking his head, but no sound came out. He had no idea where this was coming from or what Harry meant by it.

“No, really—” Harry continued, reaching out and taking Draco’s hand. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately. There’s a lot of societal pressure— I mean— even in the literature that we read—” Harry wagged his eyebrows at Draco, clearly thinking of Herbert and Gable, and Draco snorted a reluctant laugh. “Well, I just don’t think it’s a necessary part of— of—” He was moving his hand in a circular motion by his face, casting about for the right words.

Draco had a welling sense of inadequacy rising like bile in his throat as he watched Harry try to string his thoughts together.

“I’m working on it, Harry—” He said quietly, feebly, trying to make up for his dithering. “I’m working on my trauma. We can—” he trailed off, not knowing how to end the thought but not wanting Harry to think they could never be a normal couple because of him and his endless baggage.

“No, oh no! Draco— that’s not what I’m— Gods, no—” Harry, interjected, wide, worried eyes.
“Fuck, that’s not at all what I’m trying to say—” He dropped his head into his hand and rubbed his eyes harder still, gripping Draco with his other. When he looked up his eyes were a bit pained, but so eager.

“Draco. This— this doesn’t have anything to do with that. Not really. I mean, yes, clearly your hang ups are because of that, and yeah, you should work on your trauma— but not for this.” He shook his head, speaking quickly.

“Not so that we can have sex in that way— you should work on it for you —but, that’s not why I’m saying this. I’m saying this, because— because, penetrative sex isn’t the only way to show love, Draco. It’s not some great accomplishment we have to reach to be close, or to prove anything. Do you see?”

Draco was watching him closely, the sense of crippling inadequacy ebbing slightly, but not leaving him entirely. “So, you didn’t like it when we did— that?” Draco asked, feeling himself blush.

Harry smiled sweetly, admiringly almost, at Draco’s shyness. “Fingering, Draco. It’s called fingering—”

“Salazar, save me —” Draco groaned and buried his face in his free hand.

“And I never said that.” Harry continued laughing, ignoring Draco’s embarrassment. “I loved it, actually—I mean, I really, really—” Harry had a distant, heated sort of look on his face that he had to shake himself from, “That’s not the point here!”

Draco shook his head, marveling at how much Harry seemed to have enjoyed it. Something that generally filled Draco with dread.

“Isn’t it?” Draco pressed.

“No!” Harry said, sounding exasperated. “Uhg— Yes, I loved it, yes I would love doing it again. But, I’m saying its not necessary. It’s not something you should feel you have to do for me if you don’t enjoy it. Okay?”

“But— but, what if I want to do it someday?” He asked feeling a little foolish and very small.

“Then, we will.” Harry said, smiling a little. “But I don’t want you going forward, thinking its something we have to accomplish, for this— for us to be— real. Okay? This is as real as it gets.”

He scooted closer and brought Draco’s hand up to his mouth to kiss and spoke into it. “I’ve told you before— you’re more than just an object of my desire. We don’t need to be or do anything differently. What we have is perfect the way it is. I don’t have any expectations of anything more — anything different. I never want you to think you owe me sex or something to keep me around or interested.” He picked up Draco’s mangled sock as if to demonstrate something. “You’re very interesting without it.”

Draco finally allowed himself to smile. The tight knot in his chest loosened slightly, but not altogether dissipating. He figured that bit of internalised guilt may stay with him for a while— forever, maybe. Even in the face of Harry’s eager pronouncements.

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November 18, 2009

Juniper, in her amusing/nosey sort of way, had been reading Draco’s notes over his shoulder, much
to his annoyance, when she commented on the structure of a potion he had been agonising over for weeks.

“I saw some notes you had left in that desk of yours upstairs,” she started thoughtfully, “I think this would be a good application for thestral placenta, don’t you? Look,” she pointed at his nearly illegible diagram, “it could replace the iron compound the *angelica* needs.”

He was about to tell her that, *no*, surely it could not, but he stopped himself because the cogs in his brain began moving. “Why didn’t I think of that?” he asked himself, scribbling madly.

Together they sat hunched over the large table, Juniper summoning the notes Draco had vanished to the desk drawer before he had been attacked. Draco muttering potion’s theories to Juniper who had an excellent handle on the understanding of oxytocic herbal compounds.

“Crippling period cramps.” She shrugged by way of explanation when he asked why on earth she had a master’s understanding of certain plants and physiological functions. “The stuff Madam Pomfrey gave out always made me vomit, so I learned to make my own. The trick is to add extra ginger, and lemon pips for the pectin.” She winked cheekily.

“When are you applying to a Potion Masters’ program?” He queried.

She blushed in an embarrassed sort of way and changed the subject without answering. “Your eleven o’clock is about to arrive. Their file is in the holder on the exam room door.”

“I thought I only had three appointments today?” He asked, he had seen Mrs. Diedry and Mr. Moran this morning, and his third appointment wasn’t supposed to arrive until two.

“Oh, it was a last minute booking while you were with Mr. Moran, sorry, I should have said, I got distracted by your potion puzzle.” She shrugged apologetically, looking slightly abashed at her mistake.

Draco sighed. “It’s fine, just give me some warning next time.” He stood, knees cracking loudly. “I’d better go, then. Watch the liver repair potion, will you? It needs to be cool down incrementally before we can bottle it. Send in the patient when they get here.”

“Sure thing.” she said, already moving with confident hands to the brewing bench.

Draco strode up the hall to the exam room and plucked the file out of the pocket on the door before walking into the room towards his desk. Opening the file, he felt complete and utter confusion wash over him before walking straight back out to Juniper with a furrowed brow.

“Is this correct?” He asked her, holding the file up. “This is who made the appointment to come at 11?”

“Yes, sir.” She said, glancing at the folder before she looked back down to the task at hand. “Mrs. Hermione Jean Granger-Weasley requested an appointment by owl for the earliest time you had available, and would I please squeeze her in today if possible. She said her work schedule is a bit hectic at the moment and free hours are hard to come by.”

Draco just stared at her, his confusion mounting.

“Is everything okay?” She asked, seeing his apparent loss for words.

“It’s nothing, no— Nope. Okay— that’s— right, then. Very well. Thank you—” He babbled, retreating back to the exam room, Juniper’s questioning gaze following him.
Back in the exam room, he read the brief notes Juniper had jotted down.

_Hermione Jean Granger-Weasley_

_Age: 28_

_Requesting exam and screening for possibility of blood curse. Hx of repeated miscarriage. Former patient of Healer Sprigg and Healer McDougal. No conclusive explanation of symptoms. Referred for fertility treatment._

Draco sat staring, lost in thought, until the tinkle of the bell at the front door jarred him out of his befuddled reverie. Moments later Hermione was being led into the exam room by Juniper, and the door was being shut quietly behind them. Draco smiled at her with a raised eyebrow and gestured for her to sit in the large plush armchair beside his desk.

She smiled back, looking, for the first time Draco had ever seen, a bit bashful.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Granger-Weasley?” Draco said, in his most practised Healer tones.

“Oh, please _don’t._” She grimaced. “I know you’re a professional and all— but just call me Hermione, please. Okay?”

“Oh, Hermione.” He corrected, smiling again. “What can I do for you? I see in your notes it says you’re concerned about a blood curse? Can you tell me more about that?”

Hermione took a deep breath, gathering her strength. “Before Rose was born— We both want— wanted— a large family. Ron loved having so many siblings, I had none, and loved his family— We wanted to give our children the same. Ron and I started trying two years before we had Rose. I had two miscarriages. Both at 20 weeks. Both boys.”

Her voice was sad, heavy, but she continued at a clipped pace.

“I’m sorry.” He said gently.

“It’s okay— It’s — thank you.” She took another deep breath, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “Anyways, I had spotting early in both of those pregnancies. The healers said it looked like they could be threatened miscarriages, and that I should take it easy. We didn’t tell anyone I was pregnant. Didn’t want to get everyone excited or to have people following us around, worrying. We didn’t want Harry to worry— he was going through so much.” She looked up to Draco, an unspoken question hanging on the end of her sentence.

“Everything we talk about stays in this room.” Draco quickly assured, picking up the file and waving it. “Your name on this file binds me to silence for everything you say here, unless it’s to another healer or law enforcement pertaining to a case. I am physically, magically, incapable of gossip. And even if I weren’t, I would never betray that trust. This stays between us. You have my word as a Healer and your friend.”

Hermione nodded, looking relieved. “I know that— I just— it’s been hard.”

Draco nodded and Hermione continued. “So, at 20 weeks on the dot, both pregnancies miscarried so quickly there was nothing to be done. Contractions came out of nowhere and it was done within the hour. The midwives and healers were baffled. They said they couldn’t find anything wrong. The baby and the placenta were perfectly formed, no anomalies, nothing— they just died.”

“Do you have copies of those files?” He asked.
“Yes, of course.” She reached into her bag and pulled out not two, but three files, and passed them to Draco. “The risk of miscarriage at 20 weeks is less than 1% and it just seemed so— sinister that it happened three times.”

“Three?” Draco asked, flipping through the pages of the file, Sprigg’s familiar scrawl in the margins, the notes of the obstetric healers and midwives lacing the pages.

“Yes— when I fell pregnant with Rose, I was in the hospital weekly after 12 weeks. Midwives and Healers keeping a close eye, but I had none of the early bleeding that I had had with the previous two, and the 20 week mark came and went without anything. I gave birth in St. Mungo’s just in case. Ron wanted a home birth, but, well— I felt better there, after everything that had happened.” She shrugged, trailing off.

Draco nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“As I said, we wanted a big family. So we started trying again when Rose was 8 months old, after she weaned herself and started solids. I conceived on the 31 of May. Right after the trial—we’re very sure about our dates. Ron was so chuffed—” She smiled softly at the memory, wistful and fond. “We didn’t tell anyone. Just kept it to ourselves. Wanted to wait ’til at least 12 weeks. But— but the bleeding started again around 6 weeks— the healers said to take it easy— but, I mean, we were getting into the research, and— I tried to take it easy— I tried.” She said, more to herself than to Draco. Guilt pouring out around her.

She shook herself and ploughed on. “Anyways— October 13th rolled around and the contractions hit like a freight train, just like the other two. I was already at the hospital, of course, just in case— we were prepared. Well, I mean, as much as one can be. Same story— beautiful boy, perfectly formed, no signs of malformation or any reason why it should happen. It just did. After that, they referred me to a fertility clinic. They also don’t know what to do with me.”

“Mmm.” Draco pondered, scratching notes into the file, letting Hermione’s story wash over him. “And, why do you think it might be curse related?”

She looked up into his eyes for a long moment, clearly choosing her words carefully. “I’ve had a theory for a while. After talking with others who had similar experiences. Luna, too, was worried in the beginning. She didn’t announce her pregnancy to anyone, not even Greg, until after 20 weeks. Penelope. Same story. Miscarriage after miscarriage— all boys— There are others as well, that I have found—”

Draco was looking at her with bemused confusion, trying to piece together what she was trying to tell him.

“When we were brought to Malfoy Manor.” She expounded. “When Bellatrix tortured me— do you remember what happened?”

They had never spoken about this. Never relived the horrid memory together. Draco had sucked in a breath and held it for a beat before blowing it out and shaking his head. “Honestly, Hermione— I was so— terrified. So unbelievably horrified that I couldn’t do more to help you— I don’t remember most of what happened to you. I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s okay—” She started. “It’s just that— what she said. It didn’t really make sense to me at the time, and there was so much happening— I was so out of it for most of it. But— but, when she carved that word into my arm—” She pulled up her sleeve to reveal the thin raised scar; mudblood. Silvery pink against her ember tourmaline toned skin.
Draco felt nauseous. He was cold and sweaty looking down at the scar on Hermione’s arm, being forced to remember that terrible day, forced to hear how much worse it was for her. His privilege at being on the side of the aggressors laid out on the desk between them. Bits of his dream from days before came filtering through to the forefront of his mind and flitting images began slotting themselves into place. Forming a larger picture. He swallowed around the lump in his throat.

“When she carved this— I passed out— but, before I did, I heard her whisper in my ear. An incantation of sorts. She said something about ending my family line— about not allowing mudbloods to carry wizarding heirs. The incantation sounded french— or Italian— anyways, I had forgotten about for years. Buried it. Tried never to think about it. But, after miscarrying three boys, all at 20 weeks, I started thinking about it again. Wondering. Had she cursed me? But, the healers couldn’t find anything. No trace of curse damage. Nothing.”

Draco was staring at her, his brain working at lightning speeds. Memories. Myths. Family legend. Pureblood rhetoric. All ricocheting around his mind as Hermione kept talking.

“Penelope, too, miscarried several times. All boys. All at 20 weeks. Luna’s twins— she was worried in the beginning, one being a boy— she had had some early spotting as well— the midwife says they share a placenta, though. That must count for something?” She finished hopefully.

“Hermione, thank you, for telling me all of this.” He started, a feeling of certainty settling around him. Suspicions and theories that had hung vaguely in the air, solidifying in his mind.

She nodded, looking tired— looking sad.

“May I examine you?” he asked and she nodded. He went through the motions of a full physical, carefully, with determined focus. He ran through a list of all of his diagnostic spells. Channeling all of his energy into feeling the spells, feeling their results. Looking for any sign of malevolence lurking in Hermione’s veins.

At some point, Voileami had appeared in the room. Standing still as a statue by the door. No plodding hooves, no shrill nickering, no endearing snorting. She silently watched as Draco concentrated deeply on the work at hand.

All of the diagnostics came back negative, except one. One shimmering so vaguely, so minutely, so indistinctly that if he had blinked at the wrong time he would have missed it. Would have chalked it up to a trick of the light. But, no, there was something there. He cast again, focusing more deeply, pulling at the thread of purple light that barely existed at all, tendriling its way through Hermione’s blood.

Hermione let out a grunt of discomfort and twitched away from Draco’s wand at her navel.

“Where do you feel the discomfort?” He asked seriously, captivated by the thread of dark magic winding its way into her skin. Spidering out from her belly button.

“In— In my pelvis and my chest, above my heart. My scar hurts a bit too. Tingles.” She said sounding confused.

Draco examined the faint tendril as much as he could without hurting Hermione before he was certain of what he was seeing— certain of a way forward. He cancelled the spell and turned away back to his desk and left Hermione to redress on the other side of the partition in the room.

When she made her way back to the desk she sat down and looked at him with an expectant
expression.

Draco began without preamble. “Hermione, you were right, there is a blood curse— it evaded all but one diagnostic spell, and even that nearly missed it.”

Hermione slumped in her chair and closed her eyes. “I can’t tell if I’m relieved or horrified.”

“I don’t know this curse, Hermione, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to be done. I need to do some research.” He assured her.

“So, what should I do in the meantime?” She asked, clearly wanting a plan of action. Something to do.

“Be kind to yourself.” He said. “Those miscarriages weren’t your fault. They didn’t happen because you weren’t ‘taking it easy’— Bellatrix did this to you. There’s nothing you could have done differently.”

Hermione nodded, biting her lip, her eyes, for the first time since she arrived, filling with tears.

“It might take me some time, and I obviously can’t make you any promises, but I have a starting place. We have a way forward.”

Hermione nodded and wiped her eyes, laughing pitifully when Draco conjured her a handkerchief.

“If you could persuade Penelope to come in, as well, I think examining her to see if it’s the same curse would be immensely beneficial. I’m not going to approach Luna about this just now, though, seeing as she’s about to give birth in the next few weeks. But, I’ll speak to her sometime in the new year.”

Hermione agreed wholeheartedly, sniffling. “Gods, Ron has been obsessed with her pregnancy—the poor man. He’s been spending so much time with Greg— I swear if he could grow a uterus and birth babies himself he would do it in a heartbeat. He even offered to breastfeed Rose for me.” Hermione laughed thickly, blowing her nose.

Draco couldn’t help laughing. Not at the thought of Ron breastfeeding, no, there was nothing inherently funny about that. He laughed at how very Ron the notion was. He was the most capable father Draco had ever met and had no doubts that he would have gladly lactated in Hermione’s place if given half a chance. How fitting the role would have been for him.

Hermione stood, forgoing all formalities of the appointment, and hauled Draco into a crushing hug. “I’ll see you Saturday for the fidelius.” she sniffed before making a hasty exit past a silently watchful Voileami.

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At a quarter to two, Juniper walked into the brewing room with a cup of tea to chase Draco away from his notes and back into his exam room. “I just have one more— Juniper!” Draco said indignantly, trying to continue writing on his parchment as Juniper spelled his chair to roll towards the door. “I can walk myself!”

Juniper just smirked as the chair continued to make its way out the door and down the hall, depositing him at the threshold of his exam room. “Never in my life— I swear to Salazar— this is my — I’m your employer!” He muttered threateningly as he stood from the chair and turned to Juniper. She didn’t flinch, instead, she handed him his cup of tea, mint with honey, as he liked in the afternoon, and then the file for the last appointment of the day.
“Mr. Montgomery-Flint will be here soon.” She smiled. “I’m just finishing bottling the brew from this morning, but I’ll send him in when he gets here.” She finished, turning without waiting for a response. Confident in a way that baffled Draco.

He continued muttering in a half mutinous, half enamoured sort of way as he sipped his tea and sat down to read the file.

_Felix Montgomery-Flint_

_Age: 21_

_Squib. Known curse damage. Hx of addiction, hallucinations, delusions, psychotic episodes. Here to investigate curse related hallucinations. Psychiatric in-patient program as well as in muggle recovery program._

Interesting, thought Draco, rereading the file. Very interesting indeed. Though he had some experiences with curses that caused hallucinations, real psychiatric care was not his scope. He mulled over the curses he was familiar with that could cause profound psychiatric symptoms as he waited to hear the telltale tinkle of the bell at the front door.

A few short minutes later it rang, and within moments, a quiet young man with large eyes and a soft face was sitting in the plush chair, watching him with unblinking eyes. He looked tired. Worried. His fingers fiddling endlessly with an elastic hair tie on his wrist, as though he didn’t even realize he was doing it.

“Mr. Mont—” Draco tried to start.

“Felix, please— just call me Felix.” He interrupted, his voice slow, methodical. Something about his still, unblinking visage put him in mind of Luna.

“Very well. Felix. Your file says you have confirmed curse damage, and that you’re concerned about hallucinations. Can you tell me about that?”

At first, Felix didn’t respond. Didn’t make any indication that he heard Draco at all. He was staring at a point behind Draco, off to the left by the door. Draco turned with a raised eyebrow to see what had caught his attention, and he was not entirely surprised to see Voileami, again, but not happy at all that she had crashed another appointment.

“I’m so sorry.” Draco said in an embarrassing sort of way, as he stood to usher her towards the door. “She knows she’s not supposed to be here.”

“She’s real?” He asked his voice for the first time changing in pitch.

“Well, yes. She’s—” He wanted to say, she’s mine, pay her no attention, but he was sure that sounded much too bizarre.

“No, wait, let her stay.” Felix said, to Draco’s immense surprise.

“I’ve been seeing thestrals everywhere— hearing them. Hearing hooves in the halls at the home I stay at. Wingbeats. The funny noises they make. I thought I was going mad again. Thought the medication wasn’t working. That’s why Harry told me to come see you. He said it might not be that simple.”

Draco stopped trying to push an unmoving Voileami to the door, giving it up as a bad job, and turned to look curiously at Felix. He knew Harry. Harry thought Draco could help him. Thought
the Healers were missing something in his care.

“Why don’t we start at the beginning.” Draco prompted kindly, sweating a little from his useless tussle with his stubborn thestral.

“Yeah.” Felix sighed, finally breaking his intense gaze to rub his eyes with his fingers, and he started his story in a rambling burst of information. “I wasn’t born a squib— I was born with magic. Started showing signs young. I remember doing things like making flowers grow or changing the colour of things. Turn on lights. Little things. My dad was a pureblood. He got into a fight with someone— I must have six— it was with an old drinking buddy— I walked in to see what they were yelling about and the bloke shot a curse at me— I woke up in St. Mungo’s. Said it had damaged my magic somehow. Stunted it. I can still do little things— light candles. When I’m feeling a powerful emotion sometimes I have episodes of accidental magic— Exploded a few light bulbs last time I was hospitalised— started a few toilet fires— It’s why I started using. Helps kill the magic I can’t control.”

Voileami had rounded the desk and was standing unnecessarily close to Felix, who hadn’t seemed to notice. His eyes looked a bit unfocused as he stared at the desk in front of him and continued to talk. “Anyways—” he continued, “I’m not here because I’m trying to fix the curse, not really, I’m just here because I wanted to know why I was hearing thestrals— why I’m seeing them suddenly. I take muggle medication. No potions. Healers at St. Mungo’s don’t treat squibs in the same way— the muggle hospitals help as much as they can— don’t treat me different—” he trailed off, still staring at the desk. Snapping the elastic on his wrist to an even beat.

Draco thought carefully for a moment. “I can’t say why you’re seeing thestrals, not really, they’re strange creatures, I have to say. The one behind you is certainly not a hallucination. But, I am interested in learning more about this curse. Has anyone examined your curse since you were diagnosed?”

“No. I— I tend to avoid the magical community to tell you the truth— coming from the purebloods on my dad’s. My grandmother on my mother’s side was a muggle. Stayed with her most of my childhood after parents found out I wouldn’t be going to Hogwarts.”

Draco furrowed his brow. It seemed stupid and foolish for Felix’s parents to allow his curse to go unchecked for the rest of his childhood and for him to not know how important it was for things like that to be monitored. 15 years is a long time for a curse to fester.

“May I examine you?”

Felix shrugged and stood.

It didn’t take long for Draco to detect the curse. It wasn’t hidden like Hermione’s. There was no subtly, no finesse. Buried deep in the centre of Felix’s magical core like a tick— stunting it. It reminded him of an aphid infestation draining the life out of an unsuspecting tree. Weakening it. Felix may have been dubbed a squib, but that was an incorrect term. He had magic. His core was full of it, battered though it was. Strangled by the curse. He was a wizard unable to tap into his own well of bursting magic.

A squib had no well such as that. No, Felix was not a squib, and Draco was furious that he had been told he was. He was frankly astonished that Felix had lived and survived for as long as he had with such damaged and mangled magic. With a curse that had been allowed to smoulder in the depths of him.

He marvelled at its invasive roots, digging into Felix’s solar plexus, squeezing. The tendrils, like
citrine ropes giving off the faint smell of rusted iron and feted lilacs. Perfumed corrosion. Voileami snorted softly on the other side of the partition and Felix’s lip twitched into a distant sort of grimaced smile.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked, carefully plucking at the thick cables of spell work twined between his ribs.

“Sore.” He muttered softly.

“I’ll be done shortly.” He assured, taking a final moment to track the pulsing cords.

Draco left Felix to redress, walking swiftly past Voileami and out the room, towards his potions storeroom at the very back of the hall. He knew that curse. Recognised it. His brain following the threads of his memory through his training and early days as a Healer—working under Sprigg. He had seen this twice before—there were no cures then, though, only symptom management.

*Not anymore,* he thought victoriously, the DoM had tested his tail hair potion on one of those victims. There had been positive results. Slow, but positive.

*Excellent.*

He rummaged madly through the bottles at the back of his shelves. Pushed them aside and waved his wand to reveal a trap door in the wall. The cubby where he hid his thestral potions. Kept them safe. Out of sight.

“Felix, I have something I want to try.” Draco announced reopening the door. He stopped on the threshold, startled at the sight of Felix standing with Voileami, his arms wrapped soundly around her neck, eyes closed, head resting against her, face peaceful. Her head was tucked around his shoulder, holding him close, nibbling his shirt collar.

“Oh— sorry— didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Felix laughed quietly at himself, released the thestral, patted her beak tenderly, and came to sit back at the desk. Voileami followed closely behind. Resting the flat expanse of her forehead on the back of the tall chair. Tail swishing softly.

“She’s normally not this intrusive—I don’t know what’s gotten into her—” Draco said apologetically, but Felix wasn’t having it.

“No, no—I like it. She’s great, now that I know its real. I know some magic folk are scared of them—but grew up mostly muggle, and she’s not so bad, is she?” He looked happier, more animated than he had when he first arrived.

“No, she’s not.” He said kindly, smiling at the reaction Voileami seemed to have elicit from Felix.

“You said you had something for me to try?”

“I do.” Draco said, slipping back into his Healer role. “The curse you have, I’ve seen it twice before. It’s—It’s not something that should have been left to fester on its own without follow up, Felix. You’re not a squib. Even if you can’t perform magic, you have a magical core. Magic is a part of your physiology. And, as such, your livelihood is intimately linked to it. This curse could be fatal without proper management.”

Felix was quiet for a long while. An unreadable expression on his face. Draco waited.
“My— my delusions— I mean— my psychiatric problems— are they— are they related to this?”

“No. I don’t think they are.” Draco said, not unkindly, but directly. “This curse doesn’t cause psychiatric manifestations. I don’t think you were hallucinating the thestrals though, Felix, I think they sought you out because you needed this help.” Felix nodded, looking slightly disappointed.

“This potion shouldn’t have any interference with your muggle medication and you should continue to take it— but, just in case, if you start having any hallucinations that are not thestral related, I want you to stop the potion immediately and go to St. Mungo’s. Ask for Healer Unice Rhoda, and tell her to contact me. Alright?”

Felix left the office with full instructions on how to take the potion. 10ml, twice per day with meals — a follow up appointment set for the following week. Draco’s heart filled with the fluttering feeling of expectancy as Voileami nudged him with her soft beak.

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November 20, 2009

“Harry, you do not have to do this— I am not asking you to put yourself through this.” Draco reiterated, pleadingly.

“I know, I know. But I want to. We’re having this big ceremony tomorrow— and you’re trying to patch up your relationship— it only seems right that she meets me in this capacity, yeah?”

Draco didn’t respond. He stared in disbelieving bewilderment.

“I won’t stay the whole time. Just a cup of tea, then I’ll leave you to talk.” When Draco still didn’t respond he slumped his shoulders and moved forward, reaching for Draco’s hand. “Come on, Draco, what’s the worst that could happen?”

A shrill, strangled sound escaped Draco’s throat. What could go wrong? What could go wrong? His inner boggart nearly manifested in the room to show Harry just what could go wrong.

“Okay, yeah, it might be awful. That’s fine though. I’m prepared for it.” He winked cheekily at Draco before leaning in and kissing him lightly on his cheek. Draco was still trapped in a state of shock at the turn of the morning’s events.

Finally regaining the ability to speak he scratched out his rebuttal. “Harry, its high tea in an old pureblood parlour with my mother. Who still doesn’t know it’s you I’m dating, nor is she expecting to meet my— my— significant other. Ugh— no proper decorum, honestly— I’ll never hear the end of it— my poor mother might die of shock in public. In public!?” He suddenly shouted. “You want to meet my mother in public?!! After everything The Prophet wrote about us?”

Harry was smirking unconcernedly at Draco’s rambling rants.

“I’m not worried about The Prophet or your mother— or being seen in public with the two of you. It’s a small parlour, we’re going to a private table, it’ll be fine. Come, we’re going to be late.”

“You can’t go to high tea dressed like that!” Draco yelled, scandalized. “Dear lord, Harry— your trousers are basically falling apart. Go put on the suit you wore to court, I’ll transfigure it slightly —”

“You want me to wear a suit?!” It was Harry’s turn to sound scandalized.
“Well, obviously! You can’t wear leather to brunch!” He nearly yelled, stomping around the cottage, feeling sweaty and anxious by what he was facing.

Harry was muttering about stuck up purebloods as he changed his clothes. Draco paced a few loops around the circular room.

He was supposed to have a quiet tea with his mother on neutral territory to discuss what she knew about Bellatrix, and the ancient blood curse Draco suspected she had been using. He had not planned on an enthusiastic Harry insisting to be included in the exchange. Determined to introduce himself as Draco’s partner to his mother. What could go wrong? He thought a bit wildly. What indeed.

After transfiguring Harry’s suit, changing the colour from forest green to a deep mauve, he tried uselessly, one last time, to convince Harry to stay.

“Stop worrying so much.” Harry reassured, smiling. “I’m very charming.” Draco couldn’t roll his eyes hard enough.

Draco supposed that brunch could have gone worse. Certainly, it could have been less awkward, sure. But, it wasn’t the flaming hellscapes he had been anticipating. No one threw a platter of scones, they all parted with their limbs intact, and Harry hadn’t dumped him, so he supposed he would have to live with the rest of it.

The subtle twitching of his mother’s eye when Harry had waltzed in behind Draco, nearly sent him running. Though he did have to say he was rather impressed with how well she maintained her composure in the face of Harry’s brash existence— the shock of their relationship. His complete disregard for formality and social etiquette.

“Mr. Potter,” she had said, a confused lilt in her voice, “what a surprise. To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“Mrs. Malfoy, please, call me Harry.” He had replied politely, confidently, reaching for her hand. “I’m here to introduce myself as your son’s suitor.”

Suitor. Draco had thought a bit madly, trying hard not to vomit on himself from nerves. Her eyes flicked back and forth between them for a shocked moment before she settled on, “Well, then, we’ll need another chair, won’t we?” and flagged down a waiter.

Harry really was charming when he wanted to be, Draco had mused wryly as he watched Harry smoothly weasel his way into his mother’s good graces. Narcissa seemed to warm to Harry quickly enough after the initial shock of his appearance. She asked them all of the awkward questions; How did this happen? Where did you meet again? Where is it you disappeared to for that whole year? What do you do for work now, Harry? Where are you living? What are your plans for marriage? Will it be a traditional wedding? When are you having children?

Harry managed to answer every question without saying anything at all. Draco figured it must have been a habit of his from dealing with nosey reporters. Dodging anything that was too invasive. “We’re still working out what we want our future to look like.” He said sweetly, smoothly, shoving a scone in his mouth.

After an agonising 45 minutes of interrogation and painfully bland small talk, Harry had risen, apologising profusely for not being able to stay. He kissed Draco gently on the cheek before
making a hasty escape, leaving Draco in the line of his mother’s profoundly unamused gaze.

There was an awkward pause before Narcissa seem to shake herself. “He seems lovely. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you.” Draco breathed out, flooding with relief. “He really was looking forward to speaking with you.”

Narcissa smiled a brittle smile, and the tension broke slightly. After another 20 minutes of idle chit chat. Catching up— reacquainting themselves with one another. Draco brought the conversation around to his work. To Bellatrix.

“During the war, I overheard a conversation between you and Aunt Bella— she mentioned cursing others. About how she miscarried. I just— I wanted to know what you could tell me. It has come to my attention, through my work, that Bellatrix and her malicious nature may have had some particular lasting consequences.”

Narcissa looked shaken. She was silent for a long moment, searching Draco’s face before she sighed heavily.

“Bella— it’s an old curse.” She looked down at her hands, torn. “From what I know— from what our mother told us— Walburga, you see, was furious that her brother Cygnus married a Rosier, my mother— Druella. She believed, as did her parents, that all three of them should have intermarried into the Black line— cousins— purifying it— or so they thought. As did Walburga, who married her cousin Orion.” Narcissa was tracing idle patterns onto the lace table cloth in front of her with a manicured finger, recollecting the memories.

“Walburga used an ancient curse. Le Sang de l’héritier de la Cinquième Lune — old, deep magic —”

“The blood of the heir of the fifth moon?” Draco asked, the translation in english sounded clunky, confusing.

Narcissa nodded, sighing. “Roughly. Yes. Essentially it's a curse to prevent heirs from being born of those deemed unworthy to carry on a family name. It prevented muggle borns or half bloods from birthing pureblood heirs.”

“That seems incredibly dangerous. And foolish.” Draco scoffed.

“It is.” Narcissa agreed. “But, it’s not enough to just know the words. These old types of magic— like the unforgivables— they need intention. Powerful intention. A pure, unadulterated desire to cause pain. I could point my wand at every childbearing person in this establishment and say the words and none would be harmed.”

“So, Walburga placed this curse on Grandmother Druella?” Draco asked, sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning towards his mother, not wanting to miss a single word. “What does that have to do with Aunt Bella?”

“Yes, your grandmother was cursed, but she never knew. She miscarried once, early in her marriage, but went on to have three healthy daughters. No one thought much of it until—” his mother trailed off, clearly remembering something unpleasant.

“Until?” Draco prompted, trying not to be impatient.

“Until my mother was visiting dear Walburga one day with the three of us. We were young, Bella
hadn’t even started Hogwarts yet. She had left us alone with Walburga in the drawing room for mere moments, to use the powder room. When she came back she heard the spell, saw the swirl of violet smoke, knew what it was. She burst in, disarmed Walburga, grabbed the three of us, and took off.”

Draco was shaking his head, mouth opened slightly. “Mother, how—”

“Your grandmother had gotten there just in time to spare me. If she hadn’t, you’d have never been born— Dromeda and Bella— they weren’t so lucky.” She said sadly, her eyes misty.

“Was she even aware of what had happened to her?” Draco asked, numb disbelief at the whole sad story.

“Mother called her midwife to come to see us. An old, old very experienced midwife, she was— too bad she had retired by the time you were born— a lot of knowledge has been lost since then. Traditions not passed down. She understood the deep magic. Knew the pureblood myths and legends. She came to examine us. Found the curse in my sisters, but she couldn’t do anything to help. Didn’t know of a cure. As you saw, it ate Bellatrix up over the years after she realised what it all meant. She miscarried several times— wanted to do it to others. Didn’t want to be alone in her grief. She spent years hunting down the curse origin. Learned to use it.” His mother looked suddenly old in the soft light of the parlour. Sorrow deeply creased in the lines on her face under a thick layer of powdered makeup.

They sat in silence for a long while. Draco mindlessly stirring his cup of tea. Considering. After what felt like an eternity he asked, “Is this midwife still alive?”

Narcissa looked surprised, “I’m not sure, Draco, but I could tell you where to look.” She offered.

“I would appreciate that, thank you.” He said, reaching across the table and squeezed her hand.

November 21, 2009

The morning dawned bright and cold. Draco had been awake for hours, lying on his back, Harry wrapped around his side, an arm across Draco’s chest, drool on his shoulder.

He was thinking too hard about the day ahead. A thrumming crescendo of panicky anticipation crashing through him in regular intervals like waves on a battered coast. Relentless. Persistent.

His eyes stared unseeingly at the bare ceiling. No hanging herbs from the summer they hadn’t spent there. He couldn’t wait for spring to descend on them so he could once again obscure the thatch ceiling with floral and woody plants.

Harry roused in his sleep. Draco took a deep breath. Braced himself for the day. The inevitability of it.

Harry was fiddling with the kettle when Little Dipper swooped into the kitchen through the open window on a brisk wind, dropping the day’s paper neatly into Draco’s lap.

“Oh, you’re getting so much better at this.” Draco crooned, reaching out to stroke the ridiculous black tufts of feathers. He nicked a piece of toast from the table and gave it to the damnedly cute owl, whispering, “shhh” with a smile.

“I saw that.” Harry said, his back still turned to Draco.
“You saw nothing.” Draco retorted, giving the bird another piece.

Harry turned around, just in time to see Draco retracting his hand. He shook his head smiling. “Who’s the weakest link now? Mm? I thought you said we had to be more stern with him?”

“I am not! How dare— weakest link! I never—” Draco challenged robustly. “He was so good! He deserves bread! He didn’t knock a single thing over this morning—”

“That is a low bar if I’ve ever heard one—” Harry was smirking. Clearly not even caring, just enjoying winding Draco up.

“Oh, do shut up, Harry—” He spat with mock rudeness, unfolding the paper and pompously holding it up to block Harry from view. Harry snorted and continued making their tea.

He was flipping idly through the pages. Advice columns. International gold trade. Someone won a Dumbledore lookalike contest and with it, a year’s supply of Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans. Odd. He was just wondering about the day’s crossword, turning another page, when his name jumped out at him. Many times. An article.

Written by Dennis Creevy.

...on behalf of the staff at The Prophet I’d like to extend our deepest apologies to one Healer Draco Lucious Malfoy, for the slanderous accusations thrown at him in a previous addition of this paper —

...since then, your very own, Dennis Creevy, has received numerous letters of support for the well loved Healer. By no means are we trying to sugar coat Mr. Malfoy’s past misdeeds or history, but we want our readers to see just how well loved this acquitted and repentant former Death Eater really is —

...Harry Potter himself has reached out to make a public statement regarding the wild rumours surrounding the nature of their relationship —

...none of anyone’s business who I date, thank you very much. I am gay. And, not available by any means. As for whether I would deign to date someone like Draco, well, I think the work he has done to admit his mistakes, right his wrongs, give back to his community, and continuously stand up in the face of bigotry makes him an incredibly brave man, and anyone would be lucky to land themselves someone like that —

Draco felt hot all over and stunned like someone had smacked him in the face with a frying pan. He didn’t know what to make of this. And, it wasn’t just Harry that had written kind and loving words about him, extolling him as a loving friend and excellent Healer, no, there were so many others.

Hermione, Luna, Greg, Hestia, Neville, Pansy, even Ron had written something nice about him. McGonagall. Dear Salazar, what in Circe’s tits was happening? Was he having a stroke? Was any of this real? When had they all done this?

“—Draco, hey— Oi!” Draco didn’t know how long Harry had been trying to get his attention, he lowered the paper and blinked dumbly at him.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked, curiously.

“What am I— what are you doing?!?” Draco croaked, shaking the paper at him, feeling bewildered.

Harry’s eyes opened wide for a moment, before snatching the paper and saying “Oh— I uh— I
didn’t think that would be out ’til Monday, I—” He wasn’t looking at Draco as he ran a nervous hand through his hair.

“Why?” Draco croaked out.

“What do you mean why?” Harry asked looking up, almost angrily, definitely, no longer looking nervous.

“You didn’t have to do— no one had to— why did you all—” Draco just kept stuttering out incoherent bits of thought, feeling overwhelming confusion mixed with a deep sense that he didn’t deserve this. Didn’t deserve to be defended or protected.

“Of course we didn’t have to. But, we did. Because we wanted to. Because we all love you. Deal with it.” He was smiling in a challenging sort of way, waiting for Draco to argue some more.

After a long silence in which Draco’s brain worked very hard to do anything he croaked, “very well, then. Thank you.” His eyes felt a bit stingy and hot and his face felt flush. He was overcome with some sort of explosive emotion and didn’t know what to do about it.

“Why are you crying?!” Harry said looking bewildered, clearly not having anticipated this reaction at all. He sat quickly and reached for Draco’s hand.

Draco shrugged feeling immensely foolish, proof of his friends love and support for him laid out on the table in front of him. A public declaration. His boggart echoing in the recesses of his mind that he did not deserve it.

It had taken a few more cups of tea for Draco to stop feeling so overwhelmingly emotional about a stupid Prophet article. When he finally regained his composure, he and Harry went over the ceremony for the evening.

After writing down the incantation, the series of steps involved, how they needed to set up the garden, Draco was feeling more like himself. More in control.

Harry had spent the whole time watching him closely, a loose smile playing on his face every time he demanded to know why Harry was looking at him so intently. He would just shake his head, smirking saying, “nothing, nothing at all.” To which Draco would narrow his eyes and demand more tea.

The distant pops of apparition reached Draco’s ears and he was filled, fit to burst, with purest unease. The sun had long gone down. Their garden was cleared of snow. A dining table for 9 had been manifested in the clearing near the well and placed under an impervious. Draco was determinedly pacing around the cottage having dressed hours ago, sweating as much as he was. Harry was only just now in the loo, getting changed.

Draco’s apprehension for the evening was reaching a crescendo when the door open and in waddled a very large Luna followed by Greg looking as though ready to catch her should she suddenly topple over.

“Oh, this is lovely.” Luna was saying, her wide eyes sweeping the entirety of the room before settling on Draco who was frozen in place near the fire. She was wearing bright yellow formal robes under her purple winter cloak. “Hello, Draco, you look dapper.”
“Luna.” He sighed, feeling relief at the sight of her, moving forward to be enveloped in her arms. Hoping that she could somehow ground him. Keep him from evaporating.

“How are you feeling?” Greg asked in his gentle baritone, squeezing Draco far too tightly.


“It’s sweet how nervous you are.” Luna said embarrassingly. “Isn’t it lovely how similar the old *fidelius* ceremony is to modern nuptials? Is that why you look as though you want to run? Are you getting cold feet?”

Draco’s eyes had nearly popped out his head. “*Nuptials*?” He stammered, his voice nearing shrill, his heart racing. “Never—we’re not—I didn’t— this isn’t—”

“Please don’t spook off my man before this thing even gets underway.” Came Harry’s smooth, calm voice from the loo as he opened the door and strode across the room, smiling. Draco’s stammering ceased and he narrowed his eyes at Harry. He looked unbearably good in his deep green suit and tamed hair, wrangled into a bun, that Draco felt, momentarily, at a loss for words. Forgetting what on earth was happening.

Harry hugged Greg and Luna before turning to Draco with a challenging smirk. “Scared, Malfoy?”

*Yes.* He thought desperately. “You wish.” He said.

Harry’s grin lit up his entire face before they were distracted by more pops of apparition and the sound of Ron narrating his journey to the front door.

“Who’d’ve thunk— this cabin, way out here— that’s a big table— when do we eat— I could eat a whole cow— where should I set this roast?”

“Yes, Ronald, I’m sure they’re going to feed you—” Came Hermione’s amused voice.

More pops. Hestia and Neville’s familiar tones joining that of Ron and Hermione’s. Admiration in Neville’s voice as he exclaimed at the wiggentree, at the size of the garden as a whole.

“We’d better go outside, this place isn’t big enough to hold all of us.” Said Harry, as he bounded to the door, pure joy on his face for the chance to show off his forest home to his nearest and dearest.

One last pop sounded, followed by Pansy’s haughty intonations. “Dearest me— Hestia Carrow, is that you? Oh— Goodness, it’s been an age, darling!”

Draco followed Luna’s slow steps out the front door to see seven of their closest friends, all chatting together, dressed indeed, as if they were attending a wedding.

Draco was suddenly uncomfortably hot, even in the chill breeze of the dark evening. Luna, Hestia, Greg and Neville were all wearing formal wizarding robes. The kind worn to pureblood ceremonial occasions, with silver fastened cloaks. Pansy, Hermione and Ron were wearing muggle formal wear. Ron in a dark suit and dress shoes, Hermione in a burgundy pantsuit and heels, and Pansy in a long black gown and a deep purple coat.

Draco went through the motions of greeting everyone, his anticipation and nerves ramping up once again. This was happening. They were really doing this.

Harry cleared his throat, and Draco felt immeasurably relieved to see that he was taking charge. Because, if left to Draco, he might rather just accidentally-on-purpose wander off and get lost in
the woods. Hide with his thestrals.

He came to stand up by Draco on the porch, taking his hand and clearing his throat once more. “Before we get started— I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for— everything. For being here. For witnessing this. For sharing our secrets. For keeping us safe. For everything you’ve all done to help us both get here—” He squeezed Draco’s hand tightly and Draco returned the pressure, trying to keep himself together. “You’re— you’re all our family— and without you, none of this would be possible.”

Draco saw that his watery smile was being reflected back at him seven times over, under the star bright sky of the dark November night. Greg was openly weeping and Neville was sniffling loudly into a cloth handkerchief.

“Okay, so now Draco can explain to you what we’re going to do.” He smiled and looked to Draco who had to take a moment to try and subtly wipe his eyes on the back of his hand before clearing his own throat and saying. “Right, well. Yes— what Harry said, thank you for being here— I don’t think I can even adequately say how grateful I am to you all—” he said with a wavering voice.

Greg blew his nose and he saw Hestia wiping her eyes next to Neville. Pansy was looking straight up into the sky with a trembling lip as if trying to stop her welling tears from smudging her makeup. Luna was holding her belly, tears tracking down her cheeks, a radiant smile on her face as she looked up at them.

“You all have to stop crying—” Draco huffed a watery laugh. “We haven’t even started yet—” They all chuckled in response as Draco sniffed loudly and Harry kissed his hand. Hestia turned around away from them with an ironic snort to gather herself, leaning on Neville.

“Um— right—” He said more loudly, trying to inject some normality and authority in his voice. “So, Harry and I are going to perform the spell under the wiggentree just over here— We’ll need all of you to stand around us in a circle. Have you all been practising the incantation?”

Seven heads nodded. Luna blew her nose loudly. “Very well. Harry and I will say it first, initiating the _fidelius _charm, and then you’ll all have to repeat it a full seven times to set the spell. To strengthen it. Then— then the secret will be in you as well— with Harry and I being the Secret Keepers— You’ll always be welcome here— you’ll always know where to come.” His voice trailed off and his throat felt tight. Hermione’s lip was trembling as she smiled lovingly at them, clutching Ron’s arm. Ron was wiping his eyes on Greg’s shoulder, patting his back roughly.

Harry pulled at Draco’s hand, nearly dragging him down the steps, past their misty-eyed guests, eagerly marching towards the wiggentree. As Harry took his place and turned to face Draco, taking both of his hands in his, Hestia came up close to them and placed her own hand on the tree. They watched curiously as her magic twisted in jewelled tones up the trunk, causing the branches and twigs to shake off the frost and snow. Buds formed and leaves burst forth. The wiggentree, awake with life, was ready to watch the magic that was about to shield the hollow from danger for good.

Harry smiled at Hestia when she drew back her hand and walked to stand between Neville and Pansy. When Draco realised they were ready and that all eyes were on he and Harry, he took a deep, steadying breath. This was it.

Harry looked at him with the kind of radiance that made him want to melt. It was like looking into the sun. His eyes were gleaming in the dark and the stars above were reflected in green. All around them, seven hands lit with bluebell flames, casting their circle in a soft aquamarine glow.

Harry squeezed his hands tight and spoke into the circle. “The home of Draco Lucius Malfoy and
Harry James Potter can be found in Tenebris Hollow, the Forbidden Forest. I place this secret in you, Draco Malfoy.” He winked, still smiling.

Draco hoped his voice wouldn’t tremble like his limbs were. “The home of Draco Lucius Malfoy and Harry James Potter can be found in Tenebris Hollow, the Forbidden Forest. I place this secret in you, Harry Potter.”


Golden wisps of smokey tendrils rose from the ground at a point between where they stood. It grew, reaching out, reaching up to the night sky, surrounding them, their friends, their home.

Their witnesses took up the chant, repeating it in perfect, practised unison. He looked into Harry’s eyes, feeling like he could drown in them. Seeing everything they had been through together. Their triumphs and failures. Their growth. He could see his past and his future written in the lines of Harry’s face. The crow's feet by his eyes, the smile lines of his mouth, telling him just how far they had come, how much more they had ahead of them.

The humming rumble of the chant echoed in Draco’s mind and he could feel the pulse of the magic vibrating in his chest. He could feel the collective magic swirling around them, gaining momentum with each word that was spoken into the glowing blue circle. Feel the distinct presence of each person there, pouring their hearts out into the spell, just for Harry and himself.

The web of golden smoke emanating from the centre of the spell became brighter, more pronounced, encompassing more than just their garden and cottage. Draco could feel in his heart where the golden force was extending to. Covering miles of forest, following the spellwork Harry had placed to protect them weeks ago. The hollow would be safe. Sacred ground for them. For their thestrals.

Amid the chants and swirling mist of golden latticework, Draco and Harry’s locked gaze was distracted by the beat of leathery wings. Flea and Voileami were walking in a wide loop around the glowing circle. Watching. Adding their voices to the magic.

As Draco’s eyes tracked the path of Flea behind Harry, he saw, off even further behind them, illuminated in the ephemeral light of the dancing spell work, were more thestrals. Dozens of them. Standing just beyond the edge of the forest. Harry had noticed them too, his eyes wide, marvelling at their numbers. Their sentinel stance.

Their eyes met again, on the 6th recitation of the spell, the epicentre of the fidelius charm blazing with brightness. It outshone the bluebell flames, emanating a sense of peace and sanctuary. The same feeling Draco had when Harry was pressed to his side. When he kissed him. When he knew what Draco was thinking without having to say it. He wondered if Harry felt it too. If he also felt as if would burst apart with the immensity of it. A new place having suddenly appeared in Draco’s rib cage, a thing made entirely of Harry and all the ways he made Draco feel whole.

I love you he mouthed silently to Harry. I love you, too Harry mouthed back.

The rest of the night passed in a bit of a blur for Draco. When the last word of the spell had been sung, a ringing silence fell. The spell work fizzled out around them, the remnants of golden threads drifted on the air. The remaining floating wisps found their way to each of them. Every last bit of
ephemeral magic was taking up residence in each of their hearts; knit into their very bones, twining along their limbs, woven into their magic.

When the darkness enveloped them, Ron led a cacophony of cheering and clapping. They all rushed forward in an excited mob to hug Draco and Harry, together. Crying. Laughing. Exclaiming how beautiful it all was. How loved they were. Draco was overwhelmed. Overcome. Overflowing. His chest felt tight but his face couldn’t stop smiling.

They feasted in the garden, courtesy of the house elves of Hogwarts. Warming charms had been placed all along the table, candles floating, illuminating their faces, everyone talking with great enthusiasm. They passed large trays of roast beef, tureens of gravy, an elegantly dressed cheese board with a plethora of dried fruits and charcuterie. Pansy passed around her sparkling grape juice and Neville, not to be outdone, poured everyone his hot spiced cordial. Ron had made and brought his mom’s pineapple ham and wouldn’t stop fretting about whether everyone had had enough to eat.

Harry and Draco sat far closer than necessary at the head of the table, finding a hundred excuses to touch one another throughout dinner. Harry’s hand rested gently at the small of Draco’s back. His thumb moving methodically on his spine. Draco’s hand on the nape of Harry’s neck, fingering the soft black curls that had escaped his hair tie during the flurry of spellwork and subsequent mobbing. Harry shooting frequent, undisguised, adoring glances at him.

They all spoke long into the night, the stars blazing above them. The milky way hung along the mountainous horizon to the south. The outline of thestrals and bats swooping in and out of sight. The chatter and the din of their celebration ringing out into the cool, clear air.

It was long past midnight, everyone yawning in turn, the conversation slowing down. Harry leaning in frequently, almost as an excuse to press in closer, to touch his mouth to the shell of Draco’s ear, asking, do you need anything? Are you cold? What can I get you? A thick blush creeping up Draco’s neck each time.

Ron, seemingly unable to not comment on their inability to refrain from touching one another, announced, much to Harry and Draco’s chagrin that, “S’bout time we let these lovebirds be for the evening—”

Seeing the deep blush that had overcome both Harry and Draco after Ron’s pronouncement, everyone assumed Harry’s sweet whispers must have been elicit in nature. One by one, they hugged and kissed their friends' goodbye, and watched them pop out of existence into the dark night.

When silence settled in the garden once more, and they were finally alone, there was a charged moment. A beat of intensity. A hard blazing look, standing feet apart at the steps of their forest home. The heat smouldering between them, their magic dancing around their feet, reaching out. Harry’s green eyes looking at him, into his very being. His smile holding a promise.

“Tea?” Draco croaked. Unable to stand in the intensity of Harry’s gaze any longer, the blinding beam of his affection, loving though it was. Harry chuckled, in an endeared sort of way, smiling. He nodded, unclasping his hands from behind his back, and walked towards the door. His magic calling after Draco.

Draco who had to stand there in the dark cold night for a few moments. Collecting himself. Breathing. In and out. Deep breaths. Waiting for all the scattered pieces of himself to find centre. To come back. For his overwhelmed heart to calm down.
When the cold air was finally too much, when he heard the clink and rattle of the kettle, of Harry’s easy shuffling movements, he finally drew one last frigid lungful of frosty air. Glancing up at the stars shining bright above, he wiped his damp eyes and turned to face the rest of his night. The person he loved. The person who was waiting inside for him. Who was making him tea just as he liked it. Who knew the ugliest most ragged parts of him, and still loved him.

Closing the door behind him he was struck by the achingly domestic sight of Harry in his pants and a threadbare Weasley sweater. His bun falling off his head in a mangled pile of hair. A fire was blazing in the grate and Harry was sipping from his chipped mug, standing far too close to the flames. He looked at peace. At home. Comfortable in a way that Draco was only beginning to learn to feel himself. The smell of their encourage-mints strong in the air.

“Tea’s on the table.” Harry said pleasantly, not looking up from the fire.

“Thank you.” Draco said, moving to take off his shoes. He stripped out of his formal wear on the way to his chest of drawers. Dropping each layer without much concern for where it landed. Seeking to join Harry in his comfortable state by the fire.

Soon they were both standing, shoulder to shoulder, hands curled around their cups of milky sweet chai, barefoot in their pyjamas, staring down at the glowing flames.

Harry broke the comfortable silence. “I never thought I’d be a part of magic like that.” He said quietly. “Never thought I’d see myself in an old pureblood ceremony— it— it was beautiful.”

His tone was pleased and amused. Draco was smiling into his tea. “Yes. It really was.”

“I feel— I finally feel like we’ve come home. Like, this is it.” He turned to look at Draco who was still staring intently into the fire. Still feeling a bit overwhelmed from the whole experience.

“Me too—” He trailed off quietly. Wanting to say more. To say something more profound, but drawing a blank. “Me too.”

“Are you done?” Harry asked, indicating his tea. He was, and Harry sent the mugs back to the sink with a wave of his hand before taking Draco’s hand in his and leading him to the bed.

Ensnared in a mountain of thick blankets they lay facing one another, their legs hooked together, their cold feet seeking warmth.

“Thank you— for doing this— for planning this. For suggesting it.” Harry said.

Draco didn’t know what to say. He partially felt that his desire to perform the magic was hugely self serving, and that Harry and their friends were doing him a big favour by humouring him. He realized his silence had gone on too long when Harry squeezed his hands, looking for a response.

“I— you’re welcome—” He said, feeling a bit disingenuous.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothings wro—”

“Don’t bullshit me, you’ve been weird and quiet since everyone left.” Harry was smiling, but his voice was stern.

Draco took a few moments to gather himself. He didn’t know what was wrong. Nothing was actually wrong. Everything was, in fact, perfect. So perfect he felt fit to burst. And, maybe that’s
what was so scary. Maybe that’s what was causing the ants under his skin to crawl. The feeling that something must be lurking out of sight. A danger he hadn’t foreseen.

The night had been incredible. He saw proof in so many ways of how loved he was by their friends, by Harry, by the thestrals. He was overcome with it. So very overcome.

“Everything went perfectly.” He finally said, sounding a bit surprised.

“Were you expecting it not to?” Harry asked, still smiling.

Draco shrugged, not knowing how to answer that. Yes, he supposed he was expecting it to end in raining hellfire and hexes. He was always expecting that. He still felt like he was covered in ants. He was cold from the temperature of the room and yet suddenly flush with sweat.

Why was he like this? Why couldn’t he just appreciate the beauty of the evening?

Harry adjusted his hand in Draco’s and seemed to notice the clamminess. He lifted his other hand and traced it gently up Draco’s side, feeling more perspiration there, under his maroon jumper.

“You’re allowed to have nice things, you know.” Harry said softly, casting a soothing drying charm over Draco’s skin before the sweat could cool and make him even more chilled. He shivered in response to the soft magic coating his body.

Draco huffed. Not knowing what to say to that. Speechless at the ways in which Harry knew him. Sensed his thoughts. Understood how he worked. Leaned into it.

His mind reeled with memories of the day. Of Harry’s letter to The Prophet. Of his declaration of family and of love. Of the golden lattice spellwork settling down in his very soul.

Draco traced his hand up Harry’s arm and into his hair before leaning forward to place a chaste kiss on Harry’s forehead, not knowing what else to do with all of his feelings. Harry’s soft sigh ghosted across Draco’s neck. Sliding his hand out of Harry’s hair, Harry caught it and turned his head to kiss the inside of Draco’s wrist, before rolling onto his back. Pulling Draco over him, so that he straddled Harry’s hips.

Draco leaned down to kiss Harry, a soft, tender thing. Their lust built slowly over long minutes. Their soft press of lips turning into something more insistent. More open. Their gentle hands, roaming tirelessly. Their bodies, their hips, moving against one another as the minutes wore on. Their breathing becoming more uneven.

There was a slow aching sweetness to it that built in Draco’s chest, had him panting onto Harry’s neck feeling a bit light headed, his limbs shaky with the knowledge of what he wanted to ask for. What he wanted to do.

Draco’s mind was flashing with elicit letters shared in the night. In dog eared pages of Herbert and Gable, of Quintessence, of things that he had been brave enough to write down and send away at a distance but never brave enough to voice aloud or in person. Of things he had seen Harry read with lust raw on his face. Passages circled and highlighted. Underlined.

His mind was filled with a hundred fantasies of having Harry like that underneath him. If he could just be brave enough to voice it.

“I— I want to try something—” He breathed against Harry’s skin. He smelled like fire smoke and the air after a summer thunderstorm. Of their encourage-mint that Harry had touched with tender strokes.
Harry’s fingers paused on Draco’s sides and he gripped fractionally harder on his skin as he said, in a quiet, hesitant voice, “Draco— I said we didn’t have to do anything— you don’t have to—”

“That’s not— it’s— if you don’t like it you can tell me to stop— it’s just— I’ve wanted to try something for ages—” he asked, the pitiful waver in his voice apparent, “Can I show you?”

Harry’s magic felt like the static before a lightning strike. The anticipation hanging in the air, making Draco’s skin tingle. He looked both dubious of Draco’s motives and yet wholly interested in what he might be suggesting.

“I’m feeling brave.” Draco pressed, in a voice that didn’t sound brave at all. “Let me be brave.” He whispered. Knowing that this bravery was tentative. Fragile. Flighty. It could be gone in moments at the merest hint of doubt and insecurity. Draco was holding on to that thread of bravery with all of his might. Nearly trembling with the effort of keeping it.

“Okay.” Harry said, after a beat of silent intensity, before kissing him again reassuringly, rolling his hips, his hardness, up against Draco. “Okay. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to turn over.” Draco murmured, moving to match Harry’s movements.

Harry stilled, raising a questioning eyebrow, a small smile dancing on his lips. “Oh?”

“Yes.” Draco insisted, overcome with want, with nerves, resting his forehead on Harry’s.

Harry momentarily gripped his arms hard, his eyes seeking Draco’s, seemingly seeking some sort of confirmation.

“I’m here, Harry.” Draco breathed, looking back into the green, questioning eyes. “I’m here.”

Harry sighed a relieved sound, nodding, before pushing himself up. They divested one another of their clothes, quickly, tossing them aside, the cold air of the room prickling at their skin.

Sharing one more impassioned kiss, Harry finally, finally turned over underneath Draco.

Draco ran his hands lovingly up and down his firm back, his toned thighs, his gorgeous ass. He was leaning down to kiss along Harry’s shoulders, down his spine, down each butt cheek, adoringly rubbing his thumbs along the creases above his thighs. Harry’s breathing was shallow and uneven, his face buried in his pillow, his hair a disaster, sweat breaking out across his skin. Every now and then he responded to one of Draco’s kisses with a shudder, a moan. Draco filed each reaction away into his brain for later use, wanting to remember it all, learn all the ways he could make Harry feel good.

Draco, for his part, couldn’t believe he was even still capable of holding himself up. That his hands hadn’t betrayed the frantic staccato of his heart. He was barely keeping it together. So engulfed as he was with his own desire, with Harry’s trust in him, with how much he wanted to give Harry.

Leaning over the side of the bed he grabbed his wand from the side table and cast a quick cleaning charm over Harry, who startled at the unfamiliar spell.

“What—” He tried asking, before seeming to think better of it, before he buried his face into the pillow in front of him, breathing hard, his body tensing with anticipation.

“Are you okay?” Draco asked, resting a tentative hand on the suddenly tight set of Harry’s shoulders, doubt momentarily clouding his arousal, his confidence.
“Yes.” Harry said firmly, his voice muffled by the pillow. His body relaxing at Draco’s touch, his assurance.

Conjuring lube into his hand, Draco slicked his fingers and Harry turned his face away from the pillow, trying to see, his breathing already labored. Draco parted his cheeks and rubbed a wet thumb along the crease.

Harry groaned softly, turning his face back to the pillow.

“Tell me if you don’t like something.” Draco said as he continued his stroking motions, up and down, not yet stalling on the furled muscle that twitched with every pass of his thumb. Not really believing what he was doing.

“Nhggg—” Harry moaned, nodding, spreading his legs slightly wider.

Draco circled his thumb around Harry’s hole, teasing it, pressing it slightly. Harry’s hips were twitching against the mattress as Draco began to press in the tip of his thumb, rocking it, in and out. Kissing the top of Harry’s crease, Draco gripped his ass cheek harder, pulling him even more open.

“Gods— Harry— you’re so beautiful.” He murmured, his breath huffing against Harry’s skin. Harry’s breathy moans and softly rocking hips urged Draco on, expanding his confidence, building his bravery.

As his thumb worked in and out in shallow thrusts, and his open mouth breathed hotly on Harry’s open cleft, he traced his tongue around the tight muscle gripping the tip of his thumb. The touch caused Harry to buck hard into the pillows, seemingly against his will.

“Fuck—” he whimpered.

Draco removed his thumb, used both hands to hold Harry open. He alternated between tracing his tongue around the rippled flesh and licking broad strokes from the back of Harry’s balls to the top of his crease. Harry muttering a litany of curses into the pillow, punctuated with broken moans.

Harry’s legs were beginning to shake after long, agonising minutes of Draco working his tongue. His twitching hips were rolling back onto Draco’s face. Draco was gripping Harry firmly in his hands, licking, stroking, caressing.

He was feeling a welling sense of power and confidence he had rarely felt before during sex. To have Harry’s submission, his trust, to be in control of the act, meant everything to Draco. It catalysed his courage, his self assurity. To be able to reduce Harry to a pliant mass of whimpering limbs, melted into the bed, was a transcendent thing.

“—please— Draco — Gods— I —” Harry was babbling nonsensically and Draco lifted his face, his lips feeling swollen.

“What do you need Harry?” He asked, his voice husky, his thumb pressing back into Harry in lieu of his tongue.

“Fuck, Draco— I need— I need to come— please—” He begged. His whole body was trembling, his hips rocking back hard on Draco’s thumb before pushing forward into the mattress, seeking more sensation.

“How do you want to finish?” Draco asked, becoming suddenly very aware of his own aching erection. Squeezing it for some relief.
Harry moaned and pushed back again. “More — I need more— anything— you —”

Draco removed his thumb and inserted a finger, pushed it in smoothly to the second knuckle and pressed down, Harry’s wrecked voice groaning out one long, low note.

Draco had to stifle his own moan. Harry’s reactions to him were nearly unbearably good. The sounds reverberated in Draco’s chest, making him shudder, falter his movements.

“Up — up on your knees, Harry—” He panted urgently, pulling at Harry’s hips. Harry did so on unsteady legs, the side of his face still pressed into the pillow, huffing in desperation.

“Draco— fuck, just— please —” He was rambling, his mouth slack, eyes closed, his back swayed.

Draco reached around to grab Harry’s cock, hanging heavy between his legs, and pressed his own between Harry’s cheeks. Harry nearly sobbing with relief, a half hysterical laugh at the new sensation, the new contact. Draco stroked Harry in time with the movements of his own hips. Harry pushed himself up on his elbows to give Draco more room to manoeuvre his hand over his cock. Pushing himself back in time with Draco’s thrusts. Together they moved in an exceedingly frantic manner. Racing to the end.

Draco’s throat was dry, panting hard as he was. He was murmuring an endless string of endearments as he gripped Harry’s hip with one hand and jerked him off with the other. His own cock pressed tightly up against Harry’s slicked crease, gliding across his hole, over and over again.

Harry’s body tensed under him, a breathy string of fuck fuck fuck fuck — spilling from him as his dick throbbed in Draco’s hand and he came with a strangled cry, incoherent and disjointed words of praise being mumbled against the pillow as he slumped forward, breathing hard, Draco stroking him through it.

Draco gripped Harry’s hips with bruising fingers as his own orgasm ripped through him. With nothing on his mind but the overwhelming feeling of belonging as he rode out the waves of pleasure that crashed through him, Harry muttering things to him he couldn’t quite decipher.

Both still breathing hard, legs still shaking, Draco helped manoeuvre Harry into a more comfortable position. They rolled onto their sides facing one another, Draco feeling overwhelmed by the amount of love he had inside of him. Wanting to know if it was good for Harry, if he felt the same.

As if hearing Draco’s thoughts, Harry’s cracked voice broke the silence, his breathing having finally evened out, wandlessly cleaning them both.

“Fucking hell, Draco——” He sighed roughly, smiling an exhausted but pleased smile, reaching out and resting a hand on the side of Draco’s neck, bringing their foreheads together.

“Was that okay?” Draco asked, his eyes closed, feeling doubt sneak back in after reality settled around them.

Harry sputtered and snorted at the same time. “Was that— are you— fuck— Yes, Draco— That was more than fucking okay——”

Draco snorted as well. His eyes were still closed, the shakiness in his limbs finally calming. He could feel Harry’s hand on his neck jostling him to attention.

When he opened his eyes he felt breathless, his stomach bottomless, in the face of the look Harry was bestowing on him. It was a mingled look of reverence and pride, of love and adoration, of
worshipful fascination, of the undeniable pull between them. Harry’s eyes shone at him in the dark.

Harry pulled Draco to him, wrapping his arms around him and kissed him softly, his tongue gentling brushing Draco’s bottom lip.

“It was perfect.” Harry whispered when he pulled back. “This whole day has been perfect.”

Draco fell asleep against Harry’s chest, the constant thrum of his heart under Draco’s ear, Harry’s hand carding his hair as he held Draco to him with strong arms. He could hear the soft snorts of thestrals just outside the window— the call of owls in the forest beyond. Snow was falling gently in the hollow, a golden web of magic cradling their home as they drifted towards sleep in the dark hours before dawn.
Harry had his feet up on Doge’s desk, leisurely paging through one of Luna’s old textbooks on adolescent psychology, Flea rubbing his teeth against the corner absentmindedly, long marks scratched deep into the splintering wood, when Winston came in.

“Evening, Mr. Travers. You’re early.” Came Harry’s voice, distracted by a figure showing the rate of depression and anxiety among teens in the UK. He shoved his hand into the pocket of Sirius’s jacket, searching for a muggle pen to make another of his many notations in the margin. With retrieval of the pen, a fountain of wood dust followed. Reminders of the block of ash wood he’d been mulling over all weekend. Beautiful, bright pale grain, and yet, Harry had yet to do anything but obsessively smooth it.

A choked, bubbling sound interrupted his musings, and Harry dropped his boots to the floor, the textbook skidding across the desk surface. Winston had his hands up to his face in a vain attempt to stem the tide of blood that was streaming down from a nose that could only be broken, bruises starting to creep along the soft expanses of tissue below his eyes.

*Episkey*, Harry thought at once, hurrying from the other side of the desk, prising Winston’s trembling fingers gently from his face. A sharp cracking sound, and Winston winced in pain, his eyes downcast at his feet, all of his haughty aire as wounded as his nose, which was now righted and straightened, though still horribly swollen.

“What happened?” Harry asked softly, elbowing Flea back from his all too interested approach from behind him. The thestral was so eager to mop up the torrent of blood that had stained Winston’s starched white shirt beneath his Slytherin robes. Harry quickly vanished it with another unspoken spell. Flea’s long tail twitched.

Winston didn’t speak. His eyebrows knit together in embarrassed anger, he glared down at the floor, as if the stone tiles had broken his nose. As if the granite of the castle could have wronged him in such an obviously human way.

“What?” Harry tried again, recognising the wounded facade. The vulnerability. In that moment he saw Draco, fourteen, pinched face and defeated before him. Harry’s heart ached for him.

Winston huffed and muttered, but still wouldn’t look up. “Gryffindors.”

“What was that?” Harry asked, trying not to sound too sharp.

Winston finally looked up into Harry’s face. He looked wounded, almost frightened of Harry’s response.

“Gryffindors. 5th years mostly, but some 6ths as well. Calling me names and saying things. Saying things about my dad. And the war.” He shrugged, looking away out the window into the night. “It’s how it is. They want someone to punish. And here I am.”

Harry’s face hardened, his hand still on Winston’s shoulder. He squeezed it reassuringly, but couldn’t make himself smile. “Thank you for telling me.”

Winston still looked wary when he nodded his head. Two more faces appeared in the doorway.
“Winston, tell everyone you’re to practice disarming again, you and Teddy are in charge. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

And Harry strode out of the classroom, Orelia ducking back from the rippling magic in his wake, her eyebrows raised severely. Questioningly. He huffed, incapable of addressing her just yet. Incapable of anything kind and soft anymore. No. This. This required anger.

He strode down the hall, following the familiar route to Gryffindor tower, burning with a strange new sort of bone deep disappointment, and each step tightening his jaw, his teeth set against the fury building inside him.

How dare they. How dare they.

“Edgar.” The round boy with his bowl haircut, black and shiny in the half light of the flickering torch-lit corridor was bouncing toward him. Upon seeing Harry, the thunderous steps and magic sparking to life around him, he stopped, as if frozen in place.

“The password. To Gryffindor common room. What is it?” Harry was intent on keeping his anger from bubbling over. From frightening the small child in front of him. From darkening the hall deeper, from amassing thunderheads in the rumbling sky above, from torrents and sheets of rain battering the castle, his anger, his malcontent, his absolute fury for the depths to which his house, his first home and family, had fallen. Even still, his voice was clipped and the words shortened on the tightness of his jaw. On the sharpness of his teeth.

“Harry Potter.” Squawked Edgar, his voice a strangled squeak in the shadow of Harry’s towering anger. Harry could feel his magic, thick and crackling and steeped in daring, nerve, and chivalry. In righteous and sanctimonious disappointment.

Harry’s brow furrowed. Edgar was looking up at him, mouth half ajar, visibly trembling in his half untied shoes.

“It’s the password. Harry Potter.” His voice faded away on Harry’s surname, turning to a whisper.

There was a pause. And then, then there was the dawning realisation. The moment of reckoning. Edgar appeared to try and shrink into himself, his former jubilation deflating. Harry stepped around him and marched on. He heard thunder opening the sky above.

These children. These bullies. These hurtful and poisonous delinquents. Were using. His name. To pridefully and boastfully guard the laurels on which they rested. They invoked him as a justification in their meritless brutality.

“Well,” he fumed to no one in particular, the halls he stalked frosting in the terrifying chill that heralded his approach, “that ends today.”

The fat lady was dozing in her portrait, an empty bottle of wine half hidden beneath the floral tablecloth to her right, drool seeping innocently from the left corner of her slackened mouth.

Harry cleared his throat loudly, and she started, bleary eyes looking about. “Password?” She half gurgled, hurriedly swiping away the drool across her cheek.

Harry glared at her, waiting for her to recognise who he was. The hallway seemed to be darkening around him, the light fading from the torches. A bitter wind whipped up from the nearest stone staircase, whistling along the suits of armour and bracketed torches. A few went out.

“Harry Potter.” He positively growled into the newfound darkness.
Squinting suspiciously, she acquiesced, swinging forward, the bottle of wine rolling across the stone floor. Harry climbed through, the rain lashing the windows and thunder sounding ominously close to the sequestered hideout in the towering keep.

Noise, laughter, chatter and bodies, lounging in resplendent, inherited glory. The smell of the crackling fire and butterbeer. Merriment and joy. A chocolate frog hopped across the wide oak floorboards at his feet, croaking gleefully.

Harry paused for a moment, pulled in by the astounding familiarity of it. By the fond memories. The sense of belonging.

But Winston’s nose and Thor’s innumerable injuries and Teddy’s bruises, marks made on children just as wounded by the war, just as scared and hurt and alone. Thoughts of orphanages, full of children from both sides, of the pain and suffering that had pulled apart the pieces of those who had tried to live through the horror, just to find themselves drowning in a bottle or hiding their fears in the potions cabinet. Alethea and Juniper, Dennis and Greg, survivors still hurting and yet, still fighting to find healing. To find kindness. Space for them to be.

Thoughts of them intruded on the moment. Ignited his rage, let it build, let it form, like fiendfyre, relentless and full of untenable power. Furious.

The cold followed him in, and the howling wind, the fire extinguished. The laughter died. Heads turned in his direction. A queen struck down a pawn on the chessboard in the corner, unseen by the players. Suddenly, the room was deathly quiet, ignited for a moment by a flash of lightning and the fearsome vibrato that rolled across the room, altogether too close. Suddenly so dangerous.

An older boy with sandy blonde hair and muddied trainers from the quidditch pitch had been draped across the sofa before the fire, but had rocketed to his feet at the crack of thunder.

“Harry Potter!” He gasped, his eyes wide, a smile forming into a huge grin upon his face, his hands wiped across his trousers quickly as he hurried forward, his hand outstretched, his face so eager. “Such a pleasu-” A murmur, a ripple of recognition, fear bubbling into excitement, into awe. The faces turned to him became beacons of fervent whispering worship.

“Sit down.” And Harry’s voice cut straight across the path of the boy with sandy blonde hair, his smile faltering, his hand pulled back toward himself, his body collapsing as he seemed to be forcibly placed back down upon the sofa, fingers now neatly folded in his lap.

“I want everyone in Gryffindor house in this common room in the next two minutes. You and you,” he pointed to a boy and a girl in the front, young and terrified and shivering in the cold that had coated the room, “go and get whoever is upstairs.”

Harry stood before the smouldering remnants of the fire, so recently extinguished, the smoke still curling up from blackened logs behind him. He glared at those gathered before him. He focused hard on control. On his anger. On tempering it just enough to tell them what they needed to hear. What they all desperately needed to hear. He took a deep breath, watching other, newer faces fill the common room from upstairs.

For a moment, he wished Draco was here. Draco was better at anger. At rage. He’d know just what to say. He’d tell them. But, would they listen? No. This was his to deal with. His to rectify.

Once the room was full, his two minutes not yet even elapsed, Harry began.

“It has come to my attention,” Harry started off with the growl, deep and heavy and hoarse, “that
members of this house are using their newfound and undeserved power and glory and perceived victory after the war to harass, bully, physically harm and terrorise other children.” Harry stopped, swallowing back the incoherent yelling that threatened to follow.

“To be fair, Mr. Potter, sir, we’re only just a bit rough to the kids of death eaters and the like. Kids on the other side - you can’t fault us for hating them, can you? I mean, you’re still out there, hunting them down with the aurors, aren’t you? They don’t really deserve a place at Hogwarts, and we’re showing them we won’t stand for it!”

What followed was a thirty minute lecture on the obligation of every Gryffindor to be a champion of the weak, to be a shining, golden light in the face of unspeakable evil in this world. That’s what the hat meant by bravery. By nerve. And daring. And that evil was not death eaters or, for fuck’s sake, children, but the cruelty and savagery of perceived superiority, of bigotry. To be a fearless and relentless force in the face of loneliness and isolation, to be the one who views kindness as the same as goodness, who understands that fear cultivates far more dangerous and evil things than being born into a family with a name. That was bravery. That was chivalry.

“The lesson that you all were supposed to have learned from the war. From me. From all of us who died. Was that caring, that opening your heart, loving, being kind, these are far more powerful forces, far more primal magic, than any curses, hexes or jinxes. I am only alive today because of love. Voldemort rose to power in the absence of it. To hate children just for the legacy of their family is a doctrine of his, not mine. It is a product of fear. Of spiteful, ignorant hate. And I could not be more disappointed to hear that it is now being espoused by those who are using my name to excuse it.”

As he spoke, Harry had caught sight of Flea, lurking in the darkened recesses of a staircase, glassy eyes vacant and staring, as always. Tail swishing. So many of the Gryffindors seemed not to notice him, though a few had shuffled away.

“Don’t ever do it again.” He paused a moment. Letting them all drink it in. The shame he wanted them to feel. “And, just so you all know, I’ve left the aurors.” The fire sprang back to life and the cold lifted. The sounds of the storm echoed in distant mountains as it was pulled away across the sky. A girl to his right, sitting on the floor with her face in her hands, was crying noisily. The boy with the sandy hair looked as though someone had slapped him, mouth wide and gawking. Harry turned from the room, climbing back out from the portrait hole.

As it swung shut behind him, Harry paused, turning around.

The fat lady seemed to have heard much of the kerfuffle, her cheeks red and her demeanour embarrassed and subdued.

“I have suggestions for a series of new passwords.” He said, his voice softer, but still low and dangerous. “Of course,” she simpered, half curtseying, “you are, of course, a most distinguished alumnus, Mr. Potter. I’d be happy to oblige. It gets quite tiresome making them up myself all these years, always looking for more inspiration—”

“Start with humility. We’ll go from there.” And with that, Harry turned and walked back down the halls to the defense room, rubbing his eyes and sighing out the remnants of his anger one step at a time, only stopping for a moment when he caught his reflection in one of the mirrors by the top of the stairs, his reflection softened by a glittering, golden glow.

Flea nickered from down the hall, wings comically wide as he ruffled them.

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“And then, if you can believe it, I came back to find Thor schmearing Dr. Fix-it’s fortifying first aid cream all over Winston’s cheeks. Aldora and Orelia covered in the stuff, too. ‘Helping’, you know.” Harry climbed into bed, pulling back the mass of covers and sliding his cold feet next to Draco’s, who recoiled instantly, though still laughing at Harry’s recounting the earlier drama of the evening.

“That stuff is basically bulbadox powder with arrowroot, you know.” Draco said, sniffily, then grinning at Harry. Then, softer, “I’m glad you spoke to them. It will help. I’m sure it will help.”

Harry laid his head down on the pillow, looking up at Draco, who was still making notes on errant furls of parchment, three large books open to various pages across his lap, an ink bottle hovering nearby with a neat little levitation charm Draco had perfected for just this situation. The feel of his magic, just adjacent to Harry’s skin, was a comfort, soothing and lovely.

“I hope so. I really do. I can’t believe they had the audacity to use my name as their password. What utter rubbish. I nearly asked her to change it to ‘Harry Potter is disappointed in all of you’, but I decided against it at the last second.” Harry watched Draco’s eyeroll over the edge of Most Potente Potions, the same tome Hermione had used to concoct polyjuice potion in their second year. Back when they had convinced themselves that Draco was the heir of Slytherin, hair slicked and high cheekbones haughty, sneering and cold. When the password to the Slytherin dormitory had been pureblood and no one batted an eye.

“How noble of you.” Draco scoffed, turning to ruffle Harry’s hair, which had already been sticking up in all kinds of odd directions thanks to the howling winter wind that had persisted over the forest. Harry’s heart stuttered a moment, filling his chest. How far they had come.

Yawning around his smile, Harry added, “I had a split second where I thought of making it Severus Snape, since I thought that would be the most cruel and painful for us all, but I don’t think I’d ever be able to live down how smug that’d make his portrait. And I have to teach there next year, full time.”

They both paused a moment, contemplating what kind of fallout that would have caused, before they both chuckled softly, the fire burning merrily in the hearth, Harry slipping his arms around Draco’s middle, pulling him closer, breathing in the smell of cherry cordial and fir.

“They’re on holiday from next week, you know. You get me back for Tuesday nights.” Harry’s eyes were closed, and he had moved right in beneath Draco’s arms, still flipping through pages and scribbling notes. Harry felt so content. Full of love. Full of righteous and self satisfied joy at the life that they had finally managed to build for themselves. Together. The chosen one and the death eater. Names they had left behind. Legacies that paled in comparison to who they really were. Who their lives had carved them out to be. Who they had fought and struggled and so valiantly endeavoured to become.

“Joyous.” Draco shifted up on the bed to allow Harry more room, his ink bottle bobbing along beside his quill as he finished a hurried notation. Harry could hear it scratching away, punctuated by small pops and crackles from the fire.

“Teddy’s going to Andromeda for the holidays. Apparently she invited Thor as well, but Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t let him go without ‘Dromeda going for a muggle first aid certification.” Harry grinned, eyes still closed, laughing softly to himself. “That child has the whole world set against him, yet he’s as sweet as could be. All of them are. In their own ways.”

“Some of us had to work so hard to learn that kind of humility.” Harry was falling asleep as he said it, picturing Thor and his buck-toothed smile. Teddy’s adoring gaze. Winston’s careful laughter at
Freya’s really rather funny joke about the kneazle and the kite.

Draco hummed in agreement, and Harry was drifting away into a dream, warm and cosseted against Draco’s side, the wind still howling around the snowbanks at the edges of the hollow, the night full of thick clouds that belied the moon.

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December 12, 2009

It was days later, in the first hint of calm after a raging and vengeful storm, that Harry found himself running swiftly along the forest floor, feet landing soft amongst the new snow, the sounds of his frosted breaths muffled in the white forest. Above him, he heard Flea let out a furious, excited screech, the sound carrying across vast stretches of dense trees. Whatever it was the thestral had become so intent on the night before was drawing near.

That morning, as Harry left the cabin for his morning jog, Flea had taken off, circling above Harry, calling out in his sharp and eerie way into the dark grey of the cold morning, then streaking off through the half lit sky, powerful wings beating steadily.

Harry, of course, had taken off after him at a run, dropping his mittens by the door, not even having time to put them on. By the Rowan grove, he had ripped off his sweater, tossing it by the foot of his favorite tree mid stride.

Harry, though exceptionally fast and well honed by the months of exploring his forest home, was no match for Flea. It wasn’t long before Harry was pausing to listen for his calls before taking off again, his feet flying across the still fluffy banks of white powder.

Flea had taken him far across a valley and up the distant ridge line to the North West, an area that Harry had avoided in his wanderings, the trees growing thick and gnarled where the land made a second descent into a sloping ravine. As Harry crested the top of the ridge, he caught sight of Flea circling high above the lowest point of the valley, which seemed to funnel inward from the rolling hills around it, centring on a very dense thicket of Scots pine, tangled and twisted together around several enormous rocky outcroppings that jutted out from the forest toward the sky, barren and smooth. As Harry watched, a second thestral joined Flea, wings open wide as they circumambulated.

Harry scanned the crevasse before him, teetering on the edge of the descent, several more thestrals calling in the crisp air, their shrill screams distinct from Flea’s. Harry caught sight of rustling movement, flashes of dark wings beneath the dense trees in the centre of the valley, a place oddly devoid of the same carpet of thick snow as the ridge line above. Harry steadied himself and began to wend his way down to the exposed rock, his feet slipping along the steep embankment, loose stones and gravel skittering away from his boots, down into the forest below.

It was about halfway down the cavern that Harry had a curious thought. Should he be scared? Was he being reckless? Was this just another moment of him showcasing his blatant disregard for his own safety in the face of adventure? He had become so accustomed to fearlessness in the forest, he hardly ever wasted a moment on wondering with whom or what else he could be sharing it. And even still, he implicitly trusted Flea, his guard, his guide, his ever present companion. He would never lead him astray, would he? Sirius had told him to stay close.

He shook his head. No, it would be safe. Flea would not lead him to danger. He knew it. In his very bones.
And yet, a quarter of an hour down the path, another thought approached, not so easily assuaged by the trust Harry had forged with his thestral.

What would Draco think? Harry swallowed and stopped again a moment, standing atop a small rock at the base of an Ash tree, a warm wind seemingly rising from the centre of the valley itself, rustling the dried leaves at his feet.

Draco, he was sure, would be mortified. Harry couldn’t help the small smile that crept around the corners of his mouth as he imagined Draco’s deadpan stare as Harry recounted this to him later that evening, likely while the two of them had a quiet dinner—God, Harry hoped it was Indian food again—maybe even after dinner over their requisite tea? Or, perhaps Harry ought to save this particular story for after that still, when they were warm and safe in bed together, one of Harry’s favorite moments of the day, where he’d run his hands along Draco’s skin and distract him from his knitting.

Yes, perhaps that would be the right moment. The exact time he should just casually mention that he had followed a screaming thestral heard into one of the darkest places of the forest. Alone. Hours from home. Far outside the boundaries of their cosseted existence behind the *fidelius* charm. A place where winter seemed to be held at bay, and heat was rising from the earth itself.

Well, he had already come this far, Harry reasoned as he took a deep breath, trying to leave whatever worries and suspicions he had behind before he continued on. Before he discovered what lay beyond the ring of pine. What had the thestrals so enthralled. He jumped down from the rock and picked his way through the dense thicket and into a small clearing at the base of one of the boulders.

The smell hit him first. The warm wind had changed, and suddenly, Harry felt his eyes burn with the thick and acrid smell of meat. Of viscera. He brought his shirt collar up over his nose and squinted, trying to breathe through his mouth and blinking rapidly to clear the streaming tears from his eyes as he advanced slowly and into the small clearing, stepping over several uprooted trees, trunks blackened and scorched.

He could hear the thestrals before he saw them, rounding the edge of the boulder, ducking beneath the last thicket of trees. There were thirty or so of them, though none of them bothered to acknowledge his approach. They were busy. Busy feeding.

Sharp beaks ripped into flesh, pulling it apart, flies lifting and buzzing into the air in clouds as they did. The sounds of bone crunching and the tearing of wet slabs of meat, lifting from bone, fascia crackling apart was all Harry could hear. In the middle of a jostling group of five, Harry could see Flea, far taller and larger than his fellows, his body bent down low with his head thrust deep into the cavity before him, mane streaked in sticky, clotted blood. He was wrenching and pulling at something, leaning back against his hindquarters. The thestral beside him was dancing in anticipation, beak snapping and shrieking, the one beside it was hunched low, ready to spring, tail swishing furiously back and forth.

Flea won the battle, whatever he’d been after came away as he fell backwards, dragging a massive slab of something dark and thick and meaty, pulling it back from the cavity, toward the trees beyond. His fellows chased him, bounding and snapping and desperate for a taste of the thing. The thing, Harry swallowed, the thing he was quite sure was a heart.

He choked back some of the nausea that had been building, and tried to let his brain catch up to the sensory overload before him. He looked down at his feet, breathing deeply beneath his ratty t-shirt, trying to ignore the stench, which was inexplicably hot and fetid, dead and alive all at once. He blinked a few times, steadying himself. The ground beneath his feet was dark. Sandy, rocky soil
Harry listened for a moment to the chaos of the feeding reptilian beasts and the background buzz of insects. Insects who had forgotten the season, so enraptured they were in their frenzied feeding, in their hollow that seemed as though it was warmed by the core of the earth itself. A place that had it’s own fire. That did not need the summer sun.

The air was thick too, almost humid. Harry counted backwards from ten. When he raised his eyes, he took the time to look beyond the mass of viscera that had since spilled from the chasm, which Harry could see now was lined with massive, gleaming ribs. Further down, the belly had been torn open and the intestines pushed aside, far denser and more nutritious treats hidden beneath the slippery coils.

Walking slowly around the clearing, Harry cataloged the giant spines that protruded from the creatures back, the massive claws that lay, haphazard and forgotten, just beyond the deep gouging marks they had made in life. The scales. Black and shiny, moments of hide not coated in blood. Not yet peeled from the underlying fat by hungry mouths.

At the other end of the clearing, Harry stepped behind another sentinel fir and caught sight of the head. Eyes rolled back, nostrils flared and teeth glistening, white and shiny and mesmerising. A tiny thestral, a yearling perhaps, was peeling back the flesh from one of it’s massive jaws, shaking its head back and forth to help dislodge the fibrous muscle. The skull barely moved, thick and heavy bones unbothered by the little thestral’s concerted efforts.

A dragon. A Hebridean Black, Harry thought.

He stared for a long time. The unseasonable flies buzzing and swarming and resettling as they fed. The thestrals were making rapid work on the carcass, and Harry could both see and feel the presence of the beast diminishing. It was after some time that he realised he could feel the dragon’s magic, heavy and ancient and solid like iron, falling away. He could feel it moving. He could feel it feeding the thestrals. Dissipating.

It was when Flea pranced back into the clearing that he could see the transformation this brought. Flea’s wings were wide and resplendent and his neck was arched and haughty, nickering in triumph, loud in his glory. His feasting on the dragon’s heart had fed him. More than just physically. Magically. Harry watched him preen and gloat, and he could see the mystical golden threads, patterns, designs, glorious illustrations, shimmering in and out of existence along his leathery skin, the black so decadent in gold markings.

Flea picked his way over to Harry, his head caked in dried blood, teeth viciously sharp, each so much sharper for having pulled apart the dragon’s heart strings. The Lupercalia behind him carried on, unencumbered. Two thestrals nearby fought over what looked like a kidney, recently picked from the depths of the belly.

Flea leaned his face close to Harry’s chest, nickering softly, a growling rumble, full of the joy of his feast. He nudged Harry, strands of clotted blood from his forelock latching on to the soft cotton of his shirt, creating stringy threads, a bridge, between them.

Harry’s stomach tightened, and he suddenly thought that he knew what Flea was after. Why he brought him here. Why he was so desperate to share this with him. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, focusing on the softly ebbing thrum of magic that smelled like the earth and smouldering fire, deep and older than the stones that lay soaked in blood beneath them. Magic that was full of the same heat that barred winter from the land. He concentrated hard on the pull that the magic exerted on him, that gentle thrum that was seeking a new home. A home in him. And he
kindled the fire.

Flea’s nickering encouragements guided him as he made his way back to the ragged tear in the belly of the giant form, his thestral nipping at the other feeding beasts, clearing Harry’s way, pushing them aside. His boots were wading into the spilling sea of bowel, and he dropped to his knees, arms outstretched, seeking the pull, the thrum. He was no longer able to hold his shirt up over his nose, and the collar fell away, the smell, the heat, washing over him. Iron and bile and half digested things, the smell of burnt hair and simmering fat, like lamb over the fire, oil sizzling as it falls on coals. Acidic now, half consumed. Not yet transformed into blood. Into power. Into beats of that giant heart.

Harry knelt in the mass of ruined flesh, once so organised, so thick with life. He reached his hands forward, loops of bowel sliding between outstretched fingers, oily and discordant and so very warm. Hot. He swiped them aside, the sea of writhing eels, moving deeper, hands seeking the edges of something more solid. Heavier. The source of that gentle thrum. He could no longer hear Flea behind him, for his thoughts, everything, was obliterated by the feel of that magic. Just beyond his grasp. Calling to him. Rhythmic. As if it were breathing. Singing. Burning.

Harry’s eyes were closed when his fingers grazed the edge of what he was seeking, high up in the abdomen, nestled just behind ribs. There was a thrill that ran up his arms and to his own heart. He followed the feeling, and the flesh gave under his hands, smooth and even. He divided away the tissue around it with the flat of his fingers, until his palm curved around back behind the organ, where it lay anchored, beside the spine.

Harry guided his other hand back around the other side, his chest pressed up against the bloody mess, arms sunk past his elbows into the writhing mass of viscera, flies now frantic around his face, the buzzing so incredibly loud in his ears. He could feel fluid, hot and wet and thick, sinking into his shirt, laying against his own skin. He expected it to disgust him, but it seems to urge him on. He was drowning in the sensations. In the intimacy of it. It was intoxicating.

He divided the flesh away, ripping and tearing ducts and vessels, ligaments and aponeuroses, and pulled the organ out, slippery and heavy with blood. The dragon’s liver slid into his lap, smooth and edges sharp, an odd green sheen around it. It was heavy and warm against his thighs, and the blood from the resultant hole it left behind flowed haphazardly, disappearing to collect and clot against the ribs, down along the spine. Wherever gravity drew it down.

Flea was at his back, the flat of his skull pressed against his spine. Harry could feel the magic, loud and incessant now, no longer soft and waning, but full and vibrant and building. Like drums. Rhythmic and unrelenting. Hard and solid and built of iron. Centuries of it, melded and passed down, tempered with fire, laden with blood. He divided the two lobes of the liver, and the smell, the metal in the air, it swept across him, his cheeks smeared with blood, his shirt covered in sticky exudate, wet with sweat, the cold of winter long since driven from the circle of Scots pines, from the ring where a dragon spilled its blood, where steam from hidden hot springs rose in furls around the clearing. Where Harry burned with a magic rent from deep within the earth.

Harry brought the left lobe up and dragged his tongue along the surface. It was smooth. Soft. Hot. It tasted of metal.

His eyes were closed as he bit into it. As he swallowed. Bit again. Automatic. Unthinking. The drums loud in his ears. Bones made of iron. Forged.

Harry could not hear the thestrals screaming.
It was hours later, the sun sinking rapidly in its shallow arc across the sky, that Harry walked back into Tenebris Hollow. He picked up his mittens where he dropped them by the stoop, and pushed open the door.

Draco dropped a plate and it broke. Shattered shards spinning out across the floor, the sound jarring and sharp in the quiet, punctuated by Draco’s gaping mouth, his eyes wide as can be.

“Harry. What—”

Harry vanished the remains of the plate and started to strip off his clothing. He didn’t look at Draco, but concentrated on getting undressed. He untied his boots, pulling them off his feet, slipping off his socks, and unbuttoning his trousers. He pulled his filthy, stained t-shirt from his back and tossed it on the floor, sliding his pants down over his hips, then his thighs. All the while, Draco was silent. He didn’t move. He was hardly breathing.

Standing naked before Draco, skin painted with dark splashes, his hair congealed stiff in places, Harry finally looked up at him. He could feel his heart beating hard, and he knew his skin is radiant with magic, his body full of it, just as vibrant and loud and strong as the Dragon was. He let Draco drink him in a moment. He could see the pink on Draco’s cheeks. He could feel how flustered Harry made him.

“I’ll be in the bath.” He said, turning to go, gathering his clothes together to wash in the basin.

As he closed the door behind him, Harry could hear Draco frantically casting cleaning and freshening charms, could feel his frenetic energy. He smiled to himself, and conjured water for the old claw-footed tub, lighting a small fire beneath it to warm it up. He knew he wouldn’t mind it scalding. Let it try to burn me, he thought. Let it try.

By the time Harry had scrubbed himself clean, he’d had to refresh the water twice, and he’d left his clothes to soak in the basin for the whole night. He washed his hair three separate times, and his skin was flushed from endless rounds of scrubbing. He laid back in the water, letting the heat seep into him, letting the soft smell of lavender replace the fetid wafts of entrails.

There was a knock at the door. “It’s open.” Harry said hoarsely, nearly submerged in the depths of the foaming water, steam having long since fogged the small window and collected droplets along the exposed stone. Harry had conjured and lit candles around the room, and they floated in the steam, dripping wax onto the floor as they cast their soft, golden, flickering light.

Draco pushed the door in slowly, as if shy, as if afraid of what he’d find.

“Dipper brought this for you.” Draco said stiffly, holding out a roll of parchment for Harry to see.

“It can wait.” Harry said, shifting in the water, sitting up enough to look Draco up and down. To note his crossed arms and his fearful look and the timidness that kept him leaning up against the door frame. “Get in with me.”

Draco sputtered indignantly, recrossing his arms, then staring at Harry, eyes narrowing. “You’re gone all day, come back looking like you’ve murdered a whole town of people— You smelled like —”

“And now I’m all clean. So get in with me.” Harry smiled gently and leaned his head back.

He could hear Draco’s flustered huff of a breath, and Harry smiled wider, lifting his head to look at him, one eyebrow raised. “Get in with me, Draco. Please.” Harry’s voice was soft and rough, and he watched Draco melt in response, uncrossing himself and shedding his layers on his way to the
tub, leaving the roll of parchment to balance precariously atop his discarded trousers, his pale skin gleaming in the flickering firelight, Harry nestled in the watery depths between the two sources of flame.

Harry reached up and pulled Draco down into the bath as soon as he was close enough, ignoring more sputtering protests, his whole body keening for contact, for the feel of Draco against him, hungry for it, now that he was so close.

He slipped his arms around Draco’s narrow waist and pulled him into his lap, hands splayed possessively across his hips and the softness of his stomach, breathing in deeply against his back. “Much better.”

“Your magic is different.” Draco said softly, leaning against Harry’s chest, settling his weight into his embrace. His voice was breathy and nervous and Harry could feel Draco’s magic flickering around his. Reacquainting. Curious.

“I am all the parts of me, Draco.” Harry’s voice was softer still, Draco’s name trailing away from his lips as he kissed softly down his neck and shoulder. Their skin, dark and light, flickering in the quavering light.

It was several hours later, long after they had both sloshed out of the tub, candles burnt to the end of the wick, wax dripping around the stone, that they found themselves back in bed.

They had grabbed for each other in their nakedness and their desperation, in their flight from the bath, and they had only made it to the bear skin rug, warmed before their familiar hearthfire, when Harry convinced Draco to let him take him into his mouth. The embers were bright and crackled their approval, and Draco came with his hands twisted into Harry’s hair, his toes curling against the hide and his voice drowning in his own disorganised euphoria.

Panting, they had climbed into bed, and Draco had returned the favour, Harry’s eyes fluttering shut as begged and adjured and supplicated, hands curling against the sheets, his hips lifting, his desperation lending timbre and volume and such desperation to his voice, which tumbled and twisted around Draco’s name.

When Harry finally came, it was with two of Draco’s fingers inside him, his cock shoved deep into his throat, Draco’s lips around his teeth and his eyes bright and clear. Harry had shuddered and the sounds poured out of him, filthy and unashamed.

And they fell asleep, scattered between sheets and blankets, the fire fading into the dark.

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It was just after midnight when Harry woke again, sleep leaving him in a single breath, eyes fluttering open, his mind clear and determined. He slipped from the warm depths of the bed beside Draco, throwing on several layers, out of habit more than a fear of the chill, slipping out their door and onto the stoop, his breath condensing quickly in the air, though he could not feel the burn of the cold against his skin.

The hollow was silent. Ice glittered from the frosted tips of tree branches, heavy icicles brilliant in the silver glow of the moonlight. Not a breath of wind stirred the thick blanket of snow, crusted with ice, that draped itself along the valley of their home.

Harry stood a moment, drinking in the quiet and the beauty of it, the night sky inky dark and stars brilliantly clear, no haze of heat or clouds to distract him from the vastness of the universe. The
scene before him was timeless. So perfectly still. As if petrified.

The longer he stood, however, breaths evenly misting the air before him, the more Harry could feel the soft reminders of life beneath the frost.

An arctic hare was burrowed deep into the bank by the thicket that opens into the blackthorns to the West. He could just see the set of cautious spoor leading to an upturned pile of snow. He imagined the hare, black nose and ears tucked deep into it’s thick fur, protected within the snow, waiting for the soft light of morning to emerge and scavenge for lichens and mosses, woody shrubs and the scant nutrients that lay hidden in the winter forest.

After long moments of quiet, an owl hooted, the call eerie and single. Further down into the forest valley, another owl answered.

Harry leaned back against the wall of the cabin, then slid down to sit along the wall, his legs crossed. His movement had disturbed the little nest in the hanging roof above the door, and the two nesting Ptarmigans churtled softly, as if reprimanding him for disturbing the peace of their night.

Harry smiled to himself, and pulled from his pocket the hunk of white blonde ash that had been tormenting him, so soft and ready for magic. He smoothed his palm over the wood, and he felt the dragon stir. Gently, at first, he began to carve, the moon a waning crescent that drifted low in the sky.

The Eastern sky had hints of gold above the mountains when Harry finally felt finished. He had hewn a little dragon, curled up, asleep, scaly face tucked deep beneath the sharpened tail. He had stood, shaking out the stiffness in his bones, just as the hare had emerged from it’s snowy den, ears tall and steps still cautious. The Ptarmigans had awoken too, the male fluttering down to the field to scratch amongst the snow, his partner soon to follow.

Harry cleared the sawdust and shavings from his rumpled clothes, and stepped back inside, Draco still deep within sleep, though having starfished out across the expanses of their bed, the duvet half thrown from his form.

Harry smiled to himself and put the kettle on, then carried his little dragon in with him to the bathroom, the dragon’s magic, so quiet within him now, was still palpable from the blood soaked clothes in the basin.

He dipped the ash gently into the freezing water, and watched as the blood within seemed to be soaked right up into the wood, the little figure writhing in his palms, claws coming to life against his skin. As he lifted the little figure, the Ash now tinged reds and browns, black in places, it raised it’s head and regarded Harry thoughtfully. He was painfully reminded of those first moments when Norbert (later Norberta) had come cracking through the shell of her egg, fearless and full of curiosity.

The little beast seemed to shiver slightly, remaining curled tight, and Harry made to carry the little eidolon to the fire, remembering how Hagrid had hatched the little dragon in the flames themselves, no fear for the thought that this carving had been forged from wood, for that seemed irrelevant in the light of its new life.

As he moved from the basin, he felt something against his boot that skittered across the floor, still damp and coated in wax from an errant candle. The letter Draco had tried to bring him the night before. It can wait, thought Harry as he carried the little dragon to the other room, kneeling down before the fire, letting him slip from his palms and shuffle into the bed of coals, roaring softly with
delight, burying himself in the ash.

He watched him curiously a moment, but the kettle began to whistle for tea, and Draco groaned from the mass of blankets at his back. Leaving the little vulcan to his newfound home, he busied himself with preparing tea, even cracking a few eggs and requesting several rashers for bacon, sniping with Draco gleefully as he made small efforts to drag himself from the warmth and comfort of their bed.

It was just after Draco had disapparated for his practice that Harry remembered the parchment. He rushed to find it, spelling it dry and doing his best to fix the smudges of beautifully looped cursive, written in royal blue ink.

Harry James Potter,

I know you never knew your father. You rose in this world on the ashes of his sacrifice. On the petals of your mother's defiance. You saved all of our world in the shadow of their love. In the glorious and tender moment of fielty to their blood. Their son. You are a man who can surely appreciate that there is nothing a parent would not do for their child. For their happiness. For their success. For their glory. For their survival.

Lucius and I were never the earthy and provincial pair that your mother and father were, Harry. We were never so open and unbridled in our love. We were not taught to be, nor were we afforded the luxury of comfort in love. Of love without purpose, without scope or the context of our lineages. Where they shone with it, we held it close and sacred and private. Where we were told it was safest. Perhaps, in retrospect, we were wrong to do so, but there is no changing that past now.

In the years of the Dark Lord's rise, Lucius's love was fettered. It was inexorably drawn into the malicious and malingering web that dictated who would survive. Who would thrive. Who would inherit our world, as bruised and broken as it was. His love for Draco became contextual in his idea of the nature of our future. He became ruthless in his pursuit of securing our role in the rise of Pureblood elitism.

I am not excusing his allegiances, Harry, merely explaining them. Perhaps, I am trying to explain it myself as much as you. For, even now, I struggle to imagine how the man I married became the man who now resides in Azkaban.

In those later years, you never saw the man who read our Draco bedtime stories. Who did all the voices for all of his favorite stories, night after night. You never were given glimpses of the home where Draco was spoiled because we knew not how to push our love further into his pale and delicate skin. How to ensure that he could feel us, loving him, adoring him, creating the pedestal he stood on in those early, innocent years. You never knew the man who cried when Draco was born. Big, thick sobs.

Lucius was corrupted by fear in the years that followed. I know that. But he was once a good man, full of love. He was once a good father. Draco's father.

It is in that spirit that I am writing you this. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement's Prisoner Rights Division has communicated with me that Lucius has taken ill. That is he not long for this world. They indicated that he has been cursed, it seems something that has been brewing for a long time, but has only reared its ugly head now. Now, after all these years. When we thought we were safe.

I am telling you this because, if I know my son, he may be the only person alive who has access to
ingredients and knowledge that may save him. Little birds have whispered about him. About his work with thestrals. About curses. When he came to ask me about Bellatrix, I knew. I knew then that he was uncovering the graves of those things buried in hatred. That he was healing the wrongs of the past. I need him to turn his incredible talents now to his father. To Lucius.

I am writing to you, and not to him, because you, as I have said, know what it is for a child to be loved. And you, Harry Potter, may be the only one to convince him that Lucius might be worth saving. Temper his anger, please. If not for me, for him. And, be warned, he will be angry. Angry that I am asking. Angry that he has to choose.

Lucius is in cell 1CZ29X. Please. He may only have days.

Yours,
- Narcissa Malfoy
“What other spells have you worked? Have you thought about getting a wand yet?” Draco asked, watching as Felix’s shy smile widened from the chair across from his desk, his face reddening slightly, his hands restless.

Felix held out his slightly shaking hand before him, eyes focused, brows furrowed, and whispered something Draco couldn’t hear. A blue bell flame appeared in the palm of his hand. Dimmer and smaller than the ones Hermione produced, but it was there. Draco smiled with pride.

“I can do leviosa pretty reliably and scourgify — ” Felix said, the flame flickering out of existence with his concentration interrupted. “It’s a bit tricky to practice since I live with muggles but— I’m managing. I’m really trying not to get too excited about it all. I don’t want to go overboard— I don’t know if I’m ready for a wand, yet. I think I need to find a new normal with this first.”

Draco nodded and hummed as he scratched a few more notes. “I think that’s fair. But, maybe, regardless we should talk about what this means moving forward. If you are going to learn to harness the magic that’s returning to you, we might have to consider the possibility that you’ll need to find lodgings in a wizarding area. The last thing we want is for you to be fined by the ministry for accidental magic in front of muggles.”

Felix’s smile faltered and he picked at the hole in his jeans. “Yeah, I know. I just— I don’t know if I belong in the magical world— never felt like I fit in. And what about my meds? What healer knows properly about them?”

“I understand your concerns. Why don’t I speak to Healer Rhoda and see if we can’t make a plan— if you’re interested, of course. There’s no pressure.” Draco assured, watching Felix fray the hole by his knee. “But, your curse has reduced significantly, and with continued treatment I feel confident it’ll be gone by next year. Your magical core should recover for the most part. There’s no reason you won’t be able to properly hone your magic.”

Felix’s shy smile returned as Voileami ambled out from behind Draco’s examination partition. Her cheerful snorts blowing puffs of warm air into Felix’s hair, ruffling it.

“D’you think— if maybe— if I got a wand and a tutor, I could sit the OWLs eventually?” He asked meekly.

“Only one way to find out.” Draco smiled as the tinkling of the front bell floated down the hall. “Let’s schedule you for a month from now.”

There was an increase of tittering from the waiting room as Draco pulled Felix’s next month worth of potion from his desk drawer and began writing out the new schedule.

Feeling buoyant in the face of Felix’s diminishing curse and returning magic, he led the young man back out of the exam room to tell Juniper to pencil him into the schedule for next month’s appointment.

As they came down the hall Draco’s curiosity was piqued by the level of noise that filled the small front room, like a flock of overexcited pigeons.

“Potter.” Draco said, not unkindly, stepping into the waiting room to see a supremely awkward and
uncomfortable Harry squashed in a seat nearest the door, as if wanting to be close to an escape route. He was trying to ignore the over eager patrons, buffeting them with a quidditch magazine close to his face, his hair more disheveled than usual.

Harry had never turned up to see Draco during working hours before. Never subjected himself to a waiting room full of patients, with rapturous and overly curious eyes, glancing hungrily between them.

His startled green eyes shot up at Draco’s appearance, looking shifty and uneasy. He didn’t answer but stared hard at Draco with an unreadable expression. Clearly unwilling to say anything in a room full of nosey onlookers.

“Mr. Potter, sir, do you also have a blood curse? Or are the rumors of your courtship true?” piped up a creaky voice from the dark haired woman in the corner beside the philodendron in a red wooden chair. Another outbreak of whispered hearsay swept through the room. Draco nearly snorted at the discomfort on Harry’s face.

“That’s enough Miss Francine.” Juniper interjected from her desk as Draco rolled his eyes and motioned for Harry to follow him down the hall. Harry leapt eagerly from his seat, dropping the magazine and avoiding everyone’s eyes.

“You can wait in my office until I’m done.” He said quietly as they walked out of earshot.

“Draco— I’m so, so sorry to bother you at work— but, I don’t think this can wait.“ His magic felt frayed and heavy.

The chatter of Draco’s patients reached an unreasonable volume behind them, each talking over one another, badgering Juniper for information, calling out the latest gossip they’d heard. Harry winced as if he regretted his presence during business hours.

Felix ran up behind them and turned into Draco’s exam room. “Sorry— forgot my potion.” He muttered shyly.

“Hey Felix.” Harry mumbled, as they made their way down the hall.

“Hey, Harry. See you at the meeting tomorrow, yeah?” Felix said, reemerging from the office, bottle of potion in hand.

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Harry nodded, distractedly, looking at Draco with a fierce sort of intensity that Draco couldn’t read. Felix scuttled off back towards the clamorous waiting room.

Draco pointed Harry to the office. “I’ll be with you shortly.” He said sternly. Harry stood stock still for a moment before nodding his defeat and turning into the office. His magic lingered on Draco’s skin. Static.

It took Draco a few moments to gather himself before allowing Juniper to send in the next patient.

“Okay I can give you ten minutes.” Draco announced briskly, coming into the office 40 minutes later. Thankfully Mr. Wiffle had only needed a brief check up and refill for his inherited blood curse.

Harry didn’t speak, he didn’t stand up from Draco’s desk chair. He thrust a crumpled scroll covered in remnants of hardened, broken wax towards him.
Draco reached out a tentative hand, his brows creased. He couldn’t imagine what warranted such concern—

Unrolling the parchment, he saw the painfully familiar blue script.

Reading, he felt as though his insides had been replaced with lumps of cold iron, weighing him down. He was sinking.

Drowning.

When he reached the end of the letter he just stared at it in disbelief. Unseeing. It was a long moment before he looked up at Harry.

Harry who hadn’t taken his eyes off of Draco. Whose magic wrapped around him like a cocoon. Like his duvet, trying as it might to protect him from what it could do nothing about.

“What do you need?” Harry finally asked, in his softest voice.

“I need to see my patients.” Draco said too quickly, handing the letter back to Harry, looking away. Wanting the offending paper out of his sight. Away from his skin.

“Draco—” Harry said, reaching for the furled parchment.

“No— I can’t right now.” He took a step back, hands up. “I can’t believe she sent this— to you— of all people— what was she thinking—” He was talking to his fig bonsai. Its roots bulged dramatically out of its cracked pot. He couldn’t look at Harry. This was cruel manipulation. Cruel and merciless.

In that moment he was filled with vitriol and rage at his mother.

“Draco.” He tried again. “Whatever you want to do you have my support— but, there isn’t a lot of time—”

His mind hummed with distant buzzing, growing louder, closer. Images, memories, from some deep recesses of his mind, were forcing their way to the surface. Vying to be seen.

Lucius giving him his first flying lesson. Lucius telling him he didn’t deserve his family name if a mudblood bested him in his lessons. Lucius reading bedtime stories. Lucius standing there, stone faced as Draco was crucio’ed in a room full of jeering onlookers. All of these distant thoughts suddenly so very present, inescapable. Bile rose in his throat as his face prickled with perspiration.

He couldn’t do this. Couldn’t hear Harry be supportive of anything involving his father. Harry should be furious. He should have sent Narcissa a howler. He should not be this calm and collected. This equanimous. He should have remembered where— who— Draco came from— and left—

“I have to see my patients right now.” Draco said slowly, his tongue thick, urging his voice to be steady. Still speaking to the fig. He wanted to take this information and bury it. Burn it. Leave it as a pile of ash.

He had work. He had patients. He had people to care for. He couldn’t just drop everything because Lucius was dying. He couldn’t just clear his schedule because he was the only known person who might have a chance at saving him. This was not his responsibility.

Harry sighed and tucked the letter into his pocket. “Okay.” He said. Draco nodded and left the
He worked the rest of the afternoon. He saw every last one of his patients. He was a good and capable Healer. He did as he had intended. He put the responsibility of his dying father into a box in the corner of his mind and refused to look at it for the rest of his working day. All the while, Harry’s magic close by, radiating soundly from his office across the hall.

He deflected all of Mrs. Diedry’s invasive questions. He listened to a long list of ailments and complaints from Ms. Apoline. He even chortled good naturedly at the inane jokes of Mr. Deklerk. He asked Juniper for a cup of tea and ignored her questioning gaze. He did his job to the best of his abilities. He comforted and examined, and prescribed and scheduled.

The pervasive thought dancing on the edge of his mind, that these were all things he could—should—be doing for his father.

When the last patient sounded the tinkling chime at the front door on their way out, Draco placed his head down on his desk and finally cried. Silent, aching sobs that made his throat hurt and his eyes burn. The cold wood of his desk doing little to soothe the heat of his reddened and puffy face.

Harry found him there not long after. His strong capable hands pulling Draco’s limp form from his creaky leather chair and into pressing darkness of apparition. He took Draco to bed and wrapped him in blankets. Made him dinner. Let Draco ponder in silence the gravity of his position. The weight of this responsibility that gnawed at his heart.

Hermione’s words echoed through the intervening months from the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Back from when they spoke of the Death Herder’s role of keeping the balance. This is what she meant, wasn’t it? Draco could use his gift, his power, his connection with the thestrals to heal Lucius. To allow him to live.

Did he deserve to live?

Draco could just as easily not help. Not use his gifts. Ignore the letter. Let Lucius die. Disappoint his mother. Maybe even his thestrals.

Those were his options. Two sides of the coin. The choice was in his hands.

Life or death?

December 14, 2009

Draco spent the next day in his practice, brewing feverishly. He felt every second that ticked by, every minute grating on his frayed nerves. He had a very fixed, very tight schedule to follow to get things in order before it was too late. Voileami was close by all the while. The gentle thudding of her hooves on the wooden floors a familiar comfort. This was the right thing to do. wasn’t it?

He had this gift to heal and it would be a waste not to use it for someone in need—no matter who that person was. Right? It wasn’t up to him to decide who was deserving of life. Hermione had said that they didn’t have to be judge, jury, and executioner.

Right?

“Why aren’t you telling me to let him die?” Draco had asked after Harry had come to bed the previous night, his voice rough from disuse, heavy with sadness. Harry had been quiet a long
while, his thumb stroking the back of Draco’s hand. His arms wrapped solidly around him. His breathing steady.

“It’s not my decision to make, Draco.” He said softly.

“But, you’re also a Death Herder— and he tried to kill you— on multiple occasions. I feel like you should have some input on this.” Draco pushed. Desperate for guidance. For an answer. Desperate to be told what to do. To relinquish this crippling responsibility.

Harry was silent a long time again. “I can’t tell you what to do. This is a matter with your power, your ability, not mine. And— he’s your father. You’ve seen him at his best and his worst. You probably have a better measure of him than I do. You’ll know if there’s good in him. If he’s someone to save.”

Draco’s eyes were leaking silent tears onto the pillow again. “That was completely unhelpful. I’m a healer, it’s my job to save everyone. No matter what.” He retorted with a pitiful snort.

Harry huffed a sad laugh and squeezed Draco tighter. “Is this the difference between a healer and a Death Herder? Can you be both in the same moment?”

Draco didn’t have an answer. He was awake most of the night, long past when Harry had fallen asleep, his face pressed into the back of Draco’s neck, his breath hot on his shoulder. Wondering. Agonising.

Surely choosing life, choosing healing was always the best option. Clearly his mother thought Lucius was worth saving. Perhaps, he was.

And hadn’t Draco already proved he was no killer? He couldn’t even kill Dumbledore when his own life was threatened.

He spent the entire night pulling out every memory of his father he could. Scrutinising every single one. Who Lucius was, who he turned into. What he could have been. The family Draco wished he’d had. A sharp feeling, like shattered glass, bloomed in his chest.

When they rose together in the early hours before dawn, Draco had turned to Harry under the thick duvet, his eyes scratchy and raw feeling. “I’m going to do it.” He said, hoping he sounded more certain than he felt.

“Okay.” Harry said simply. “I’ll write your mother. And Azkaban.”

Draco searched his face for a long while. Looking for anything. Any hint that Harry might be against it, or for it. Or have some feeling other than this unbearable kindness.

“Thank you.” He finally said feeling overwhelmed, trying very hard not to be angry with Harry, and dressed for the day.

Late that afternoon, he stood hunched over his brewing bench, parchment scattered everywhere. He had canceled all of his appointments for the week. He had even tried giving Juniper the week off, but she was having none of it. She hovered incessantly. Bringing in endless cups of tea. He thought Harry might have had something to do it.

As if on cue, she entered the small office, a fresh cup of mint tea in her hand.

“Do you need anymore pearl dust?” She asked, setting the tea down.
“How did you know?” Draco asked, turning a raised eyebrow. Amazed at Juniper’s intuitive ability to sense a potion. Something that took him years to cultivate.

She shrugged, smiling softly. “The colour looks off. Pearl dust seems like it would fix it.”

“Well versed in thestral potions now, are you?” He teased, his small smirk feeling rusty and out of place.

She smiled more broadly at the banter. “I just remember the two you made last week, and they have this sort of shimmer. Like a golden, blackened, iridescent shimmer. You know? Its slight, not obvious, but this one doesn’t have it yet. Almost, but not yet. See?” She indicated the swirling steam near the surface of the potion, and Draco could just make the glimmer of dark gold catching the light.

“Ah.” He said, surprised and impressed. “I hadn’t noticed that before. I wanted the pearl dust to counteract the sloe berries.”

Draco resumed scanning the medical report his mother had forwarded to Harry that morning. Cursing the inadequate notes. Cursing the dismal state of the prison system’s healthcare. This had to be a human rights violation, surely.

At least he knew what curse he was dealing with. Surprisingly, it was not a curse sustained during the war, but rather a folly of Lucius’s own making. An heirloom. An antique. He had unknowingly contracted this old curse when he broke a hand mirror passed down through the Black line. Narcissa had tried to tell him to get rid of it, but Lucius, ever fascinated by power and fear, kept it. Looked into it often. He knew the Blacks to be well versed in old curses intended to be used on blood traitors. Lucius kept it in his study and joked flippantly of passing it on to the Weasley’s all throughout Draco’s childhood.

This curse was another one that festered— like Felix’s. Attacking Lucius’s magical core, wasting him. It progressed slowly, insidiously. It could have been counteracted in its infancy, when the mirror was first broken, but usually by the time the victim realises they’re sick, it was almost always too late. And, in Lucius’s case, having been trapped in the literal 9th layer of hell that was Azkaban, he had been far too weak to fight it. If he hadn’t been imprisoned all this time, he may well have lived another ten years before anyone realised he was ill.

Draco rubbed his tired eyes. Too many thoughts reeling through his mind. Lucius hadn’t told anyone he had broken the cursed mirror until the Healers in Azkaban told him he was dying. Draco wondered if it would have mattered if Lucius had told someone sooner, if he had been a little less proud.

He hadn’t noticed Juniper leave him to his rumination, or noticed that she had measured out the precise amount of pearl dust for him, leaving it neatly beside his cauldron.

He added the iridescent white powder and a single dark, wiry thestral tail hair. He watched the subtle shift of colour and opacity take place, mesmerised by the gentle rippling of the liquid around the glass rod with which he stirred his potions. He could almost see his reflection on the surface. The gentle steam distorted his features.

He was a healer, and he would heal Lucius. Perhaps it would be healing for himself, as well.

A gentle rap of knuckles on wood startled him out of his reverie, his contemplation. Harry stood leaning against the door, looking pensive. Draco didn’t want to ask how long he’d been there watching him stare into the cauldron as if hoping it would speak words of comfort.
“We’ve been granted permission to see Lucius at 7:30am tomorrow. The Wizengamot didn’t want to yield, but there are provisions granting even war criminals access to due process and so called ‘adequate healthcare’” Harry said the last two words with air-quotes, his voicing not bothering to hide how much of a joke he thought the whole premise was.

Draco couldn’t help but agree.

“I know some people deserve that place—” Harry said, looking troubled. “But not all crimes are created equally.”

Draco mmm’ed his agreement. He felt Death Eaters did deserve that squalid and damp place. That their continual discomfort was a daily penance they paid. For a long time he felt that he deserved to be there, too.

“I still don’t know if I’m doing the right thing.” Draco said after a beat of silence. Staring back into the cauldron, wishing Voileami would amble back into the room and comfort him.

Harry sighed and sat on the stool next to Draco. “Do you need any help with this?” He waved vaguely at a few scattered ingredients on the bench. Draco smiled to himself.

“No, I’m actually done. Just waiting for it to cool.”

“And that’s all he’ll need? This will cure him?” Harry had a curious expression on his face. As if he was continually impressed by Draco’s ability to take simple herbs and seemingly found objects to create liquid magic. Bottled sorcery.

Draco nodded stiffly. A deep sense of disquiet settling in the pit of his stomach.

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December 15, 2009

The day dawned cold and dark. Overcast. Heavy.

They stood in the cold, frost covered meadow just beyond the wiggentree, Draco in his sharp suit and long winter cloak, Harry in his leather jacket and black jeans. Their thestrals close by, ambling in lazy circles, Flea nibbling at a twig stuck in the frozen earth.

There were other thestrals nearby as well. In the periphery. Rustling on the edge of the forest. Watching.

Harry stood facing Draco and withdrew from his leather jacket’s breast pocket, a bent, once ornate, silver serving spoon. The portkey Kingsley had sent yesterday afternoon. It was set to depart at 7:30am and Draco’s insides felt simultaneously hot and writhing, yet frozen solid.

He looked at the tarnished serving spoon in Harry’s ungloved hand with an extraordinary amount of discomfiture. He felt exposed under Harry’s kind gaze. His magic radiating out from him, warming Draco on the periphery. The wind rustled the barren trees and the thestrals made soft crunching noises on the cold, frosty ground.

“Ready?” Harry asked, holding the spoon towards Draco.

No— he thought desperately. He considered, for a brief, mad, wonderful moment, wrenching the spoon from Harry’s hand and hurling it from them as hard as he could into the forest, costing him
this one opportunity to save his father. Freeing himself from this burden of facing the man he no longer knew.

Instead, his head nodded without his permission as he reached out a gloved hand with methodical grace and grasped the dull spoon, the silent valley around them dim in the soft light that heralded the sunrise.

Even through the knitted material of Draco’s grey and purple mittens, he could feel Harry’s magic. Feel the warmth and security. It wrapped around him, grounded him. The potion sat heavy in his pocket.

The spoon began to glow blue in their hands, illuminating Harry’s face before him, so similar to the glow of the blue bells during their ceremony. He barely had time to consider the thought before the uncomfortable sensation behind his navel jerked his midsection forward and pulled him into a cold whirlwind gale of magic. As the forest disappeared around him he saw Voileami and Flea launched themselves into the sky.

Draco and Harry hurtled towards the middle of the North Sea.

His feet were unprepared for the sudden contact of hard earth beneath him. He stumbled into Harry, who gripped him and steadied them both. The smell of seaweed and salt flooded his senses and the wind whipped wildly around them, chilling them, making Draco feel as if he were still being transported by the portkey, still hurtling towards something.

The island had the same dimmed quality of lighting from the predawn as did the forest, but looking around, Draco felt how different the magic was. Where the forest was thick and pulsing with life, even in the frozen months of winter, the earth here was drenched in sadness. In heartache. In unremembered brutality. The very rocks under his feet ached with it. It poured out around them and lapped at their feet. He shivered against the cold that invaded his clothes.

Harry looked as agitated as Draco and he felt immense gratitude that he was not doing this on his own. Harry’s magic pulsed out in a thick wall, surrounding them, and Draco felt his own rise to meet it. His fingers tingling against the cold emptiness that threatened to surround them.

They stood, taking in the scene as the dawn’s light illuminated the forbidding island with its serrated terrain and salt stained coast.

The fortress stood at the end of an imposing brick road, a block of solid stone seemingly carved out of the island itself. The windows lining the walls were mere slits in the rock face. The front doors were massive slabs of oak and iron. Azkaban looked like it was in a constant state of attrition.

Though the dementors were long since banished from the place, centuries of their presence could still be felt. Thick in the air. Soaked into the bedrock.

A flourish of wind and magic off to their left alerted them to the appearance of Narcissa. Looking unusually subdued and pale in a plain black gown and black lace headscarf, she looked to them and nodded.

Draco didn’t acknowledge her. He and Harry shared a look before setting off, marching down the long brick road, Narcissa trailing after them. Their collective magic buffeting them against the onslaught of cold wind and despair.

The sun broke over the horizon at their backs, its weak rays doing little to warm them. They strode
with determination towards the stone monolith bathed in red daylight. He wondered for the millionth time why on earth he was here, hoping lightning would deign to strike him down before he reached the entrance.

Through the whistling wind, he heard Voileami shrieking her eerie song, saw her shadow pass over them, Flea close behind. Draco was drawing in long, slow, steadying breaths as they walked, feeling suffocated by the salt in the air, by the metallic stench of dark magic and decay. He wished he were back in their cottage, so warm and cosseting, loving. There was no love here.

They stopped before the immense doors that stood twice their height. There were no handles, no knockers. Just plain, rough wood and thick iron hinges. Draco’s feeling of unease increased. He felt Harry’s magic strengthen against the grief and despair of discarded people that seeped out from the very pores of fortress before them. They weren’t even inside yet, and Draco could barely stomach the hopelessness, his nausea rising. His boggart reeling.

Before them, in the rough hewn wood, an entrance within the door melted into existence, reminding Draco briefly of the entrance to Diagon Alley. But, this one was was short and narrow, and gave Draco the increasing feeling of foreboding. He did not want to be sealed inside.

Harry placed a gentle, yet firm hand on Draco’s lower back, keeping it there while they filed in slowly, into the depths of Azkaban prison.

The hall in which they found themselves was dark and damp. It was lit by torches in ancient looking brackets, whose light couldn’t seem to penetrate the consuming darkness within the walls of the stronghold. A pair of Aurors stood inside, waiting for them. Their aggressively red robes glaring in the torch light of the dark antechamber.

They were searched and signed in as visitors. The Aurors took much longer than Draco thought strictly necessary in searching him, Harry tutting impatiently all the while.

After determining Draco wasn’t hiding anything nefarious to break Lucius out of prison, and after subjecting his phial of potions to half a dozen dark detecting spells, they set off, giving Draco a bland report on his father’s rapidly diminishing health, as if relaying the weather for the next fortnight.

He nodded stiffly and asked clarifying questions, allowing his healer mask to take over the interaction, allowing their words to distract him from his incessant boggart. Harry was silent all the while, but his magic felt formidable—protective. The Aurors continued to relay rules of engagement for visitors and healers while he, Harry, and his mother wound silently through many corridors, each darker and more dank than the last. The sounds of echoing water droplets and the infrequent hysterical cries from somewhere in the distance punctuated their seemingly endless journey through the labyrinth of the prison.

Draco was just beginning to feel the increasing urge to peel off his own skin and run when the Aurors stopped abruptly.

“You have visitors Mr. Malfoy.” The one Auror said stiffly. Draco felt like his insides no longer existed. He felt like the shell of Draco Malfoy, sixteen years old and doing the bidding of his parents.

The bars on the cell melted away, just as the wood at the front entrance had, and the one shorter Auror stepped inside to lead him in. The other stood sentry in the hall.

Draco entered the small cell behind the guard. Lucius’s old and wasted frame lay on a small single
cots under a thin blanket. The walls of the cell were musty and damp and the floor beneath Draco’s shoes was coated in a thick layer of grime. A single slice of daylight spilled in through the narrow window across the bed.

Lucius’s eyes were as bright as the last time Draco had seen them and he knew in that instance that, while Lucius’s body may be deteriorating, his mind was as sharp as it ever was.

“Draco, my son—” Lucius croaked with a rasp and an attempt at an ingratiating smile. “Thank you, Draco, for coming to me in my hour of need.” He sounded fond. Proud, maybe. Relieved.

“Father.” Draco nodded, summoning his strength from some distant place, stepping closer to the bed.

Harry and his mother had stayed behind in the hall, giving Draco space. He was grateful for it.

“My son—” He smiled, and Draco had to repress a wince, for the gesture did not suit his decrepit face. “Come closer, please.” he beckoned with a clawed hand.

Draco came and sat in a rickety chair beside the bed and Lucius reached out a withered hand to clutch Draco’s. He looked down to see his father’s wrinkled, weathered fingers, the skin nearly translucent, against his own. Lucius’s knuckles joints swollen and his nails yellowed.

“Your mother tells me you’ve found love— tell me, is it the Parkinson girl? Your mother won’t say. You know Draco, her family has so many connections—”

“No, father, Pansy married Blaise.” He said shortly. His father faltered a little at the interruption.

“Oh, Zabini, you say? Not sure what kind of a match that is—”

“May I examine you, father?” Draco asked, cutting him off, his voice nearly breaking with the heaviness of it all.

Lucius nodded, pulling his hand back and pushing himself up to sit as primly as he could on his thin mattress.

Draco began his exam, slipping into a rhythm. Doing his job. Lucius could have been any one of his patients in his practice. Except, of course, for the highly personal nattering he was doing, clearly making up for a decade’s worth of inane chit chat with his estranged son.

“Father—” Draco tried feebly, wanting his father to be quiet for just a moment. He was struggling to focus with his father’s reminiscence about the man of importance he once was.

Draco was trying to get a clear picture of the tangled curse he found forming a stricture around Lucius’s magical core, parts of it bulging out and affecting the surrounding organs.

Lucius was trying to pick up their relationship as if the war had never happened, as if Draco weren’t here to save his life so that he may live out the rest of his days in Azkaban.

The curse was bad, but his potion could heal the damage.

“Or is it the Greengrass girl? Astoria? I remember you being quite fond of her. Come, Draco, don’t keep an old man in suspense. Who’s the lucky woman destined to carry my grandchildren?” His eyes looked fond and eager, proud. Draco was torn for a split second. One part of him wishing he could make his father proud, just this once. Let Lucius think he was someone he wasn’t. But that was what the young Draco would have done.
He could feel Harry’s magic pulsate from the hall. Its restraint running thin.

“Father. I’m gay. And I don’t want kids.” He deadpanned, taking an odd pleasure from the twitch in his father’s eye.

Lucius looked like he had been hit over the head with a bludger. There were a thousand warring emotions crossing his face at lightning speed and Draco felt exhausted.

But, before Lucius could form response he was seized by a violent coughing fit. Draco took the opportunity to change the subject, scratching out a few notes, calculating how often Lucius would need the potion and at what dose. It seemed that without it he would certainly die within the next few hours. They had come not a moment too late.

Voileami ambled into the cell as Lucius was drinking a glass of water. Draco looked up to see his father’s reaction to her presence. Wondering what he would do at the sight of a giant spectre of death in his cell. There was none. Lucius appeared not to see her, and Draco felt speechless for a moment, his brain short circuiting with too many thoughts.

His father had seen death. More death than most, and yet couldn’t see the large leathery creature looming over his son. His father did not feel the gravity of death, nor could he feel empathy for it.

Voileami began circling Draco’s chair, once, twice, three times as Draco scratched more notes and wondering in amazement how Lucius couldn’t see the thestral passing between them, brushing the edge of his mattress, her tail flicking the cuffs of his shirt.

“Father— you haven’t much time and I think it’s best if we finish this exam and give you your po —”

“Yes— yes.” Lucius acquiesced impatiently, shaking himself from the clear disappointment written on his face. Draco wondered if this veneer of polite supplication would break at any point during their encounter.

Draco lifted his wand again to continue the exam, flourishing it above his father’s body. Different colours manifested above Lucius in a rainbow web. The intricate tendrils of the curse and the patterns of the diagnostic spells created a complicated matrix of magic before him. He remembered back to his days in school, the first diagnostic charm he cast on a patient, and the feeling of complete inadequacy and confusion upon trying to interpret the magic indicating a simple flu.

He was a million miles from that experience, here in his father’s cell in Azkaban, fluently and intuitively reading the weaving threads of magic that would have sent 20 year old Draco fleeing.

When the diagnostic spells were canceled, and the shimmering light of his magic faded, there was nothing left but to give Lucius the potion. All the while, Voileami stood close to Draco’s chair, watching. Her magic tingled against Draco’s skin; protective, curious.

“Your mother told me the thestrals follow you now…” Lucius said, so very politely, grasping for conversation. Completely unaware that there was a thestral 3 feet from him.
“Yes, they do. Ever since living in the forest last year. One’s always with me.” Draco answered quietly.

When the silence stretched between them, when he could feel Lucius’s palpable disappointment and regret rising like a great stone wall, Draco resisted every urge to fill the space with awkward small talk like, “So, how’s life in prison? What’s the food like? Do you ever regret what you did? Are you still disappointed in me for being gay despite becoming a better person than you were capable of raising? Do you wish you had made better choices? Is living like this worth it?”

Instead, he finally said, “Everything seems to be in order.”

“How quickly will the potion work?” Lucius asked, the first sign of real emotion in his voice, eager and concerned.

“Within the hour.” Draco told him, reaching into his pocket. “But, you’ll need to take multiple doses. I’ll leave instructions for the healer in the infirmary—” as the light caught the bottle in his hand, he saw immediately that something was wrong with the potion. Something was very wrong.

It must have shown clear on his face, for his father asked with a sharp voice, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Draco stared at the bottle, shook it slightly, saw that what was supposed to be a thick liquid, was now the texture of sand, or ash.

“Draco?”

He could feel Voileami’s magic radiating out from her, the intensity of it startling Draco. He looked between her and the bottle, remembered the odd circuitous path she walked around him, and the sickle dropped.

“The potion— the thestrals— they give me the ingredients so I can heal people— but—” He stammered trying to make sense of what happened, trying to figure out how to explain to his dying father that they had retracted their gift.

“But?” Lucius’s face was turning more stoney by the second, his gaze forbidding and hateful.

Draco opened the bottle, and began to pour the potion into the palm of his hand. Ash. It had turned to ash. Voileami had made the decision that Draco couldn’t.

“But, they decide who’s worthy of it.” Draco finally said, quietly, marvelling at the ash in his palm. All of his effort, his agonising, pointless. Lucius’s one last hope, gone in an instant.

Beside Draco Voileami snorted in agitation. Lucius gaped in horror.

“Draco— is— tell me there’s more—” Lucius uttered, his voice shaking with suppressed rage, his face blotchy, his eyes wide and accusatory.

Draco shook his head staring in bewilderment at Voileami who continued to snort and huff in a menacing fashion, her ears pinned back, glaring at the man who could not see his executioner. “I didn’t have enough time— there wasn’t enough time— the thestrals, I can’t believe—”

“You fool!” Lucius screeched his polite mask shattering spectacularly. Voileami tossed her large bony head in displeasure at the sound, stomping her foot. “You utter and complete failure —”

Draco turned his shocked eyes to his father. All of the memories about the man in front of him, the
ones that he cherished and the ones that he wished he could forget, all rising to the surface, yet again. He had always held on to the hope that one day his father would feel something other than disappointment for him. Would view him something other than a means to an end, but Lucius was who he was; a bigot and a war criminal.

Ten years in prison had done little to improve the view he had of his son, the one who turned his back on his family’s values and virtues, the one who was gay, the one who didn’t want children, the one who worked to help others for a living. Lucius saw all of Draco’s accomplishments as personal failures.

It was an ugly thing, Lucius’s hate. Draco sat as his father screamed and railed against him, Voileami at his side. Lucius raged at his perceived injustice, shouting that it was his god given right to be allowed the chance to live out his natural life, even if in prison, and it was now Draco’s fault he was sentenced to death. Just as it was Draco’s fault he was in prison to begin with. If only he had identified Harry that day at the Manor, Lucius wouldn’t be here, dying.

Draco let Lucius’s outrage boil over, even let him try to lash out with a fist, but, his wasted frame was no real threat. Draco bore it all. The homophobic slurs, the jeering, the insults, the degradation. It couldn’t hurt him anymore.

He wasn’t here to help Lucius heal as he had thought, his thestral had seen to that. He was here to help him die. A bone deep acceptance flooded his body with that knowledge.

He could feel Harry’s magic building like a pending storm in the hall, see the clouds gathering beyond the slit window.

Lucius eventually lost steam and lay silent, his face white and still as a death mask, wallowing in his own life choices, broken. His mother came in after a while, edging around Voileami with a wary gaze, and conjured herself a chair beside her son. They sat together, as a family, for the last time as Lucius grew weaker and weaker.

Lucius didn’t speak, didn’t look at Draco again, but when he began to shake and sweat from the constriction of the curse, he allowed Draco to wipe his face with a soft cloth. He allowed Narcissa to hold his hand and for them to care for him in his last hours as his breathing became shallow and pained.

It was two hours later, after his wheezing had become laboured and his moans pitiful, that Lucius drew his last rattling breath. The tight grip he held on Draco’s wrist in his last moments went slack and his piercing blue eyes stared unseeing at the damp ceiling of his cell. Draco didn’t cry. There was no buzzing in the corners of his mind. His boggart lay silent. He felt at peace with his thestral’s choice. His mother wept silently.

Draco released himself from his father’s grip, leaving his mother to say her own goodbyes. He found Harry alone in the hall, save for Flea, the aurors no where to be seen.

“Draco—” Harry said, reaching out a hand to touch the side of his face, looking concerned, surprised.

“What?”

“Your skin—”

Draco looked at his hands. The same golden filigree that had shown on Harry’s skin when he accepted his role as a Death Herder, danced across Draco’s. They looked at one another in silent,
stunned amazement. He felt the surety of Voileami’s actions in his very bones.

His mother emerged from the room, not looking at either of them. She seemed startled by the second thestral, his milky eyes watching her doefully.

“I must go— thank you, Draco.” Her voice was brittle, and she seemed unnerved by the presence of such a large beast in the narrow hall.

Draco didn’t know what to say. He didn’t save his father, her husband. He let him die. His thestral had dashed Lucius’s last hope.

As she walked away, Flea pushed into the room, followed by more thestrals that had appeared, seemingly materialising out of the dark corners and down long and empty hallways. Black leathery wings folded tight at their sides, ears pinned back and beaks stretched forward as they surged around corners and into slips of filtered sunlight.

“What—” Draco began, feeling startled by the intensity of the thestrals as they surged forward, nipping at one another, screeching, growling.

“We should go.” Harry urged sharply, gripping Draco’s hand. Pulling him away from the mob of thestrals crowding around his father’s body, the mass of shiny black skin stretched tight over bones, the mob of tense leathery hides shimmering in the half light of the slit windows. Their nickering and screeching, getting louder, insistent. Draco felt his own magic rise in response like a great tidal wave of power wanting to pull him back towards his father as Harry pulled him forcefully down the hall.

“Harry— how did they get in? What are they doing?”

Harry was guiding Draco with determined steps as the Aurors came up the hall, looks of panicked concern on their faces at the sight of so many haunted, hungry beasts crowding the cell.

They pushed passed and rushed into the mob of vying creatures. Draco heard a wet cracking sound from behind him, something like bone, and yells from the Aurors as Harry and Draco strode determinedly from the scene.

“They’re feeding.” Harry finally said, his voice rough like gravel, his hand tight in Draco’s, eyes focused ahead.

After apparating back to the hollow, Draco’s mind reeled. Standing in their snow covered yard, he expected the panic to set in, to hear the chorus of angry bees rush forth and claim his conscious mind. Instead, it stayed in the background, a low thrum, barely noticeable.

Seeing the quaint thatch roof of the cottage, though, dredged up a feeling of agitation, restlessness. The thought that they would go inside and have tea at their little table like any other morning filled him with a deep sense of disquiet and loss. No, he needed the openness of the forest, some freedom to think, to understand.

Harry turned a questioning look at Draco when he didn’t move towards the front door from the spot where they had landed. All Draco could manage was to shake his head and release Harry’s grip from his hand before turning away.

He left a concerned looking Harry in the garden and walked into the snow covered tree line without looking back, feeling Harry’s magic trail after him, rippling in his wake, questioning. His
own magic eddied around him, calmer than he’d ever known it to be, swirling, picking up bits of
detritus not yet covered in snow.

He had nowhere in mind. He just needed to walk. Needed to process what had happened back
there.

What it meant.

The gold swirls of magic still left faint traces along his skin, reflecting off of snow banks as he
passed, casting the trees around him in a golden hue. The sounds of the shrieking thestrals and wet
crunching still loud in his ears.

They’re feeding echoed around his head, and his magic felt immense at his fingertips, as if a
blizzard could burst forth from him and swallow the surrounding valley if he only called it forth.
Instead, delicate snowflakes fluttered around him. Gentle.

Draco, still in his dress shoes and sharp suit, allowed his feet to carry him through the underbrush
of snow and frozen brambles, down a path he had only walked once before, over a year ago,
allowing the magic of the place to lead him on, to pull him forward.

His thestrals were nowhere to be seen. They were still presumably in his father’s cell in Azkaban.
He thought, perhaps, he should feel mortified by that realisation. Disgusted, maybe. Guilt ridden,
at the very least. He should feel some semblance of remorse or sadness, surely. Instead, Draco felt
nothing but a well of relief. A morbid gratitude, of sorts. Reverence.

The snow crunched beneath him and he slid, catching himself on an old elm, his inadequate shoes
slipping on the icy downward slope, where the forest floor dipped towards the valley that held the
cave.

He didn’t want to apparate, it felt too easy. He wanted to rid himself of the adrenaline and
restlessness coursing through his veins. He wanted to push himself through thickets and thorns,
shed his cumbersome cloak and run until he collapsed. Cover his skin in mud and scratches and
bruises. He wanted to feel the forest around him, to be a part of it, to be something different than
the buttoned up person he was raised to be in the clean halls and spotless grounds of the manor.

He cursed himself for leaving home still in his ridiculous formal ensemble, crouched in the snow
looking blankly down towards the sea of barren trees. His trousers were slowly becoming cold and
wet, frayed at the hem and split by his left knee.

A twig snapped behind him and he jumped. Voileami ambled through the snow amidst the trees
towards the valley below, following her own path a few paces besides Draco’s own. He stood and
watched her walk, a flood of uncertain feelings swirling in his midsection. He wasn’t sure what to
feel towards her at the moment. He loved her, yes. She had watched over him for more than a year
now, yes. She allowed him to heal people in ways that others could only dream, yes.

And, yet—

He stood abruptly, and began walking, matching her pace. Down the sloping forest floor, he slid
through the snow and frozen leaf litter. His cloak caught on sticks and branches as he descended
into thick sea of trees. His clothes tore and became filthy as he went, uncaring. The air was still and
icy. Each inhale felt sharp in his nostrils and tight in his lungs, the meagre sun rays doing little to
warm him.

On he marched, slipping and sliding, breath growing heavier, morelaboured as he descended
towards the familiar valley below. Sometimes, Draco caught sight of Voileami, who continued to keep pace with him on her own path, often obscured by the rather large swath of forest between them. But, even when she was out of sight, Draco could hear the crunch of the snow beneath her hooves, the rustling of her wings, the snap of branches in her wake as she climbed down towards the ravine through thickets and frosty brambles.

Draco was breathing hard and his cloak was heavy with wet snow, cumbersome and cold. He couldn’t feel the tips of his fingers nor his toes, but he didn’t care. He was moving with purpose, relishing the exertion, perspiration chilling on his skin as he sat and slid down a particularly steep embankment, soaking his trousers. His shirt caught on a branch, tearing at the seam while a loose blackthorn branch caught his cheek, cutting into the soft skin.

The stinging pain made him falter as he tried to right himself. He slipped and fell, muttering a sharp “Ah— fuck!” as he felt his ankle roll underneath him. Voileami was there, in the blink of an eye, standing close, clicking her beak in a consoling sort of way as Draco lay on the frosted ground, chilled to the bone.

He sighed out deeply, accepting his defeat, looking up at his companion.

“What now, my veiled friend?” He asked, swirling white clouds obscuring bits of blue sky beyond the barren forest canopy. “What must we do? What does it all mean?”

She snorted and her cool huffy breath ruffled his already disheveled hair and he sighed in exasperation. Draco shivered, the cold ground seeping through his layers, pulling the warmth from his very bones. He felt he was lifetimes away from the person he was that morning, and he savoured it, laying there, sodden and chilled on the forest floor. He revelled in the raw coldness that sang through is body, setting his teeth chattering, goosebumps breaking out across his skin. He was so very alive.

He contemplated his thestral, who looked down at him expectantly, patiently. Only hours ago she had sabotaged his efforts and eaten his father’s body. The father that he watched die. The one he could have saved. Surely, he should be frightened of her, or at the very least he should be wary. Shouldn’t he?

He reached his icy fingers out to touch Voileami’s velvety face and she closed her milky eyes in appreciation. Her magic radiated out, strong, protective. Stronger than he had ever noticed. It wrapped itself around Draco in a way that Harry’s often did, but with more subtlety.

“We keep the balance, don’t we?” He asked quietly after a long time of him gently stroking her face, his hair soaked in melting snow, his voice feeling too loud for the forest now that it was no longer filled with the sounds of him crashing through the underbrush.

Voileami didn’t answer, but she opened her eyes a fraction, leaning more into his cold hand. Her magic dancing out around him in joy. He could feel the familiar softness that had always reminded him of his father when Draco was young, an undercurrent in Voileami’s own gentleness. It filled him with a sense of peace. Acceptance.

He sighed again, and slowly sat up. He reasoned he should probably go home and warm up. Change his wet, frozen clothes, be civilized and have some tea, avoid getting frostbite. But, the thought brought him no joy. He wasn’t ready to leave the stillness of the wilderness before him, didn’t want to taint this newfound sense of peacefulness.

He gingerly rotated his ankled, testing it, before carefully pulling himself up. Voileami nickered in a pleased sort of way as she moved forward to rub her face hard against the scratchy material of his
cloak. “We did what we needed to.” He affirmed and she stilled, seemingly waiting for Draco to make up his mind about something.

Draco wrapped his arm around her neck and gripped her scraggly main. He maneuvered himself to her side and grabbed a protuberant hip bone, before leveraging himself up and onto her back. She didn’t move, nor seem concerned. Astride her boney frame, he felt his own magic settle with Voileami’s, a swirl of cold wind gently lifting his hair and rustling his green cloak, the chill bleeding down his neck and into his clothes. His breath curling up in frosted mist before him.

Voileami began to move, to carefully pick her way through the dense forest underbrush. Not towards the hollow where Harry probably waited for him, but forward, downwards. He was carried off towards the cave of glowing algae and woven nests as snow began to fall heavily around them, muffling even the sounds of Voileami’s steps and their own breathing.

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December 17, 2009

The thestral cave at sunrise was bathed in pink light. Draco sat perched on the ledge of the overhang beside the stream that trickled over the edge and into the dried riverbed below, his feet dangling against the cold slate. His fingers flying across the small page of his pocket notebook. It was nearly full; brimming with possibilities, ideas, theories, drawings, observations, questions. Anything that ran across Draco’s mind flowed out onto the pages in his lap.

He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting there, the sun’s rays spilling over the mountain ridge before him, flooding the cave and ravine with molten sunlight, letting the warm light drench his face, when he heard a familiar hooting, a reproachful call.

When he lifted his head from his writing, he wasn’t entirely surprised to see Little Dipper swooping towards him, a bundle tied to his leg. The comical little owl landed without grace on the cliff edge, looking at Draco with profound disapproval.

“C’mere, you.” Draco smiled, feeling warmed by the sight of him. “I’m sorry I haven’t been home. I’m sure Harry is not well pleased.”

Draco had slept in Voileami’s giant woven nest for the last two nights. The first night was entirely an accident. After wandering with Voileami for what felt like hours, she brought them back to the cave where he had been thoroughly engrossed by collecting samples for his potions work. He had sat in Voileami’s nest near sundown, just to rest for a moment, just to warm himself against her. He woke the next morning to Little Dipper’s disgruntled hooting and a basket from Harry.

That day he was absorbed in a number of thestrals giving birth. Watching the process, meeting the new foals. The rituals of the thestrals seemed complex and he couldn’t tear himself away. Fascinated that so much life could happen in the depths of such a cold season, so near the winter solstice. Both nights he had fallen asleep beside Voileami, and both mornings he woke up wrapped in her large leathery wings, snug in a bed of dried moss campion. It smelled like dried sage and bog myrtle. Woody and floral. Safe.

Draco hadn’t told Harry yet where he was, or what he was doing, but this was the third time Little Dipper had shown up with supplies. He was touched that Harry was giving him space and still trying to take care of him. He felt a little selfish for keeping himself away. Trying to figure himself out, but he hadn’t felt ready to share his thoughts. His complicated process. He felt slightly ashamed of himself for how simple of a decision it was, in the end, for the ease at which he could accept Voileami as his companion, and his place amongst the thestrals after they’d essentially
killed and disposed of Lucius’s body.

But, this is who he was, he had realised. He had accepted the role he played in death and in life. He couldn’t rationalise to himself why the events of what happened in Azkaban were for the best, but it felt so right. Would Harry understand that? Would he think less of Draco? Did this make him as reckless and dangerous, as power hungry as he had been as a sixteen year old?

He opened the bundle to reveal a change of clothing, something he desperately needed, and his heart stuttered at the thoughtfulness. Unfolding his maroon jumper, a crumpled piece of parchment fell out. Picking it up, he saw a crude drawing of two thestrals, each one tugging on the other’s tail, circling one another.

Draco snorted, feeling loved. Feeling understood. Feeling maybe it was time to stop hiding himself away in a cave in the forest.

He turned the parchment over and wrote:

Fancy a picnic at the cave?

After Little Dipper flew off with the note and a bundle of his dirty clothes, he set to work investigating the cave, something he had meant to do the day before. He scratched off bits of glowing algae, dulled by the cold air, from the wall and placed it in a conjured phial. He had a stack of samples in a basket he transfigured from some twigs, including pieces of afterbirth he had been given from several thestrals. His thoughts whirred and his mind worked as he wandered deeper and deeper into the cave.

The rushing of the water echoed ever louder the further back he went, and the glowing algae doing little to light the way as the ambient light faded. He thought perhaps Harry would help him search for the back when he arrived. He supposed he shouldn’t be too reckless on his own.

“T’ve been worried, you know.” A firm voice said, and Draco jumped, not having heard Harry arrive. He turned from where he was engrossed in running diagnostic spells on one of the nests, investigating the magic.

Harry didn’t look angry, standing there silhouetted against the bright cave entrance. His hair was barely contained in a bun on his head, and he was unshaven. His hands were stuffed into his jacket and he looked more shy than Draco was used to. He felt the flush rising in his face as he looked at Harry, abashed.

“I know, I should have told you.” Draco agreed sombrely, turning back to his spell work, his wand hand moving in slow circles. He could hear Harry’s footsteps approaching and he could feel his magic reaching out, singing along his skin, his own magic leaping out in response, joyful at the connection. It was thoroughly distracting.

After finding nothing of note, he canceled the spell, unable to focus with the smell of Harry invading his space. “I’m sorry I didn’t come home.” He said, finally turning to face Harry, but speaking to his shoulder. Feeling a bit daft.

Harry just shook his head, dismissing Draco’s apology, as if it wasn’t needed, wasn’t necessary,
and reached out for his hand. Draco took it and immediately felt Harry’s warmth radiate up his arm. He almost hadn’t noticed how cold he’d been.

“You’re freezing.” Harry said, his brows furrowed with concern. Barely moving his hand he cast a powerful warming charm that settled over Draco and seeped into his bones. He sighed in thankful relief, squeezing Harry’s hand.

After they had eaten the picnic Harry had brought for them, and after Draco had word-vomited about everything he had done in the cave the last few days, they fell into a comfortable silence. Watching the thestrals swoop in and out of the cave entrance and the new foals wobble about on unsteady legs.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Harry asked gently, not looking at Draco.

He didn’t have to ask what Harry meant. “Not particularly.” Draco sighed, picking bits of dried leaves out of his hair.

“You left home for two days and slept in a cave.” Harry snorted, looking fondly at him as he reached out to pluck a small twig from Draco’s fringe. “We should probably talk about it.” His green eyes were kind and worried.

Draco scratched his nail mindlessly at a crack in the cave floor between them and Harry reached out to cover the nervous movement with a calm hand, grounding him.

He took a deep breath. “Voileami destroyed the potion because she knew I couldn’t do it.” He said, watching his thestral greet a new foal in a nearby nest. “I couldn’t be a healer and a Death Herder in that moment— she knew it— I knew it— so she stepped in. I’m— I’m really grateful for it though. It needed to happen.” He took a deep breath before looking up into Harry’s face. “I’m glad it happened. And— I was worried what that meant— about me— to be glad of his death. To feel joy that he’s fed the heard. What kind of monster does that make me?”

“You’re not a monster Draco.”

“I don’t feel any remorse.” He insisted, wanting Harry to understand. “I’m not upset with Voileami, with any of them. I’m relieved.”

Harry squeezed his hand. “It’s doesn’t make you a bad person to have the feelings you do. You’ve been chosen for this path for a reason. Voileami is guiding you. She stepped in because you couldn’t let him die on your own. You’re no killer, Draco.”

Draco said quietly. “Not sure my mother feels the same. There’s not even a body to bury in the family crypt.” He felt remorse for his mother in that moment, imagining Narcissa rattling around the expansive manor grounds, no official resting place for her husband for her to visit. It was something he had avoided thinking about since leaving Azkaban.

“She wrote to me again, you know.”

“Did she?” He asked, feeling a trickle of apprehension.

“Mm— she wanted me to tell you she’s proud of you and that she’s sorry for putting you up to it.”

Draco was stunned. “I think that’s the last thing I expected from her. I half expected to be disinherited.”

Harry just nodded, watching a little tiny new thestral stagger on unsteady legs towards its mother.
who had just landed in the cave entrance.

They sat in silence for a long while. Draco was lost in thought while Harry’s thumb moved in soft circles on the back of his hand. Their magic swirled collectively around them, dancing, melding gently with the ambling thestrals. He felt whole in a way he didn’t think he’d ever be.

“Will you help me with something?” Draco asked, breaking their peaceful silence.

“Of course.” Harry answered with a grin.

Draco smirked. “You’re such a Gryffindor, you don’t even know what I need help with. What if it’s something nefarious? Or dreadfully dull? Like cataloguing thestral stool samples?”

Harry laughed loudly, the sound warming Draco further. He smiled properly for what felt like the first time in days.

“Go on then, what nefariously boring task do you need help with?” Harry snickered. “Are we sorting dried moss by colour and shade, again, like last summer when you wanted to dye that wool?”

Draco snorted, gleeful at the memory.

Harry slumped forward, rolling on the ground beside Draco. “Oh, gods, please tell me that’s not what you need help with, that was nefariously boring, and Godric, you were so specific about it—”

“No, no, you dolt—that’s not it”—Draco grinned reaching out to touch Harry’s face as he looked up at him, remembering with fondness how eager Harry had been to help him that day over a year ago and how quickly Harry had regretted it. “I was wondering if you’d be keen to help me find the back of the cave. I thought about doing it on my own this morning but I figured you’d never forgive me if I fell down a crevice and died.”

Harry laughed. “You’re right, I’d have been right pissed off with you. Disappear for two days, and get lost in a cave? Unbelievable.” He huffed, getting to his feet. “Well, are we going or what?”

Draco took Harry’s proffered hand and allowed himself to be hoisted up. Draco lit his wand and Harry summoned a bright blue bell flame in his hand and they began to march towards the dark abyss of the cave.

As the light from the entrance receded behind them and the darkness loomed heavy before them, Harry stopped. “Wait, I have an idea.” With a casual wave of his hand, Draco felt the magic around them ripple and the giant glowing thestral patronus, Flea’s own glowing eidolon, leapt into being before them, casting a soft glow deep into the cave.

“Now yours.” Harry said, smiling at him.

Draco took a deep breath and pulled the memory of their fidelius ceremony forward, let the sweetness of it permeate his being. His patronus burst forth from his wand without the need to be summoned by the incantation.

The deep cave was bathed in silver light, and they saw in the distance what looked to be the source of the rushing stream. As they walked, their glowing thestrals before them and their black shadows trailing behind them, the sounds of rushing, crashing water became louder, echoing off of the damp walls.

They walked for a long stretch, the light from the cave entrance having long since disappeared.
They were deep in the mountain. But, as they drew closer and closer to what they now saw was a waterfall pouring into a pool that fed the stream through the cave, the ceiling rose higher and the echoing sounds of water softened. Became less thunderous and overwhelming. Draco could hear himself think again as the dark cave tunnel opened up into a great chamber.

They stopped at the edge of the pool, watching their patronuses walk across the water’s surface, casting the entire chamber in an ethereal reflective light. The waterfall came through a crack in the rock face only about four meters up and the sheet of water about a meter wide, cascading down the wall and into the deep pool.

They stood in silence watching the water flow and churn the pool. The patronus light showing long dangling stalactites from the ceiling and the deep body of water holding a pebbled bottom.

Flea bustled forward from behind them and stepped gingerly into the pool, sinking below the surface, wading towards the cascading waters. A gentle mist permeated the edge of the natural natatorium, obscuring him slightly. Draco stepped forward, right to the edge of the water, watching.

There was no way of walking around the pool to get to the waterfall, but it was clear that it was Flea’s destination as his hooves lost contact with the bottom of the pond and he began to swim his way towards the rock wall. Draco couldn’t figure out why, as to his own eyes, the water fell down a solid wall of dark granite.

“Do you hear that?” Harry asked, the inflection in his voice sounded nearly incredulous, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Draco didn’t know what he was talking about, all he could hear was the churning, frothing waters echoing around the great chamber. Flea reached the far side of the pool and in one swift motion, he leveraged himself up onto a rock and began to slowly disappear beneath the waterfall, the water draping around him like a curtain, like a veil.

What Draco had assumed to be solid rock, was an opening, an archway, a fissure, hidden by the waterfall. As Flea moved slowly through, the water parted around his skeletal frame, and a new sound met Draco’s ears. He stared in stunned disbelief.

Whispers. Voices. Familiar and yet, not.

Draco reached out to grab Harry’s arm, to tell him. To shake him.

“I know.” Harry’s voice carried through the din as he grabbed for Draco’s hand.

This was a veil.

Like the one in the Death Chamber at the Ministry, but not one crafted by human hands and magic. This one had been created in nature, by the cave, maybe even by the thestrals.

With Flea having disappeared completely beyond the veil, they stared in disbelief. The voices of the dead and gone damped by the wall of water shielding them from the land of the living.

Draco didn’t know much time had passed. Their patronuses circled the pool lazily as they stood transfixed, mouths ajar. Voileami was idling by Draco’s side, occasionally stamping her foot, when Flea re emerged from beyond the veil.

Yet again, as the water was parted along his spine, the voices and whispers could be heard more clearly, taking up space in the chamber. Echoing. Ringing through the air.

By the time Flea had pulled himself back out of the water, Harry had conjured a glass jar and
“For your potions.” He shrugged. Draco could have kissed him for the forethought, but at that moment he felt too dumbstruck to do much else but uselessly stand there.

Voileami and Flea began walking back towards the entrance. Harry and Draco nodded to one another before following their lead. Back into the narrow passage with the deafening sounds of rushing water, their patronuses behind them cast their shadows far ahead along the dark damp stone floor.

As they neared the entrance, sunlight illuminated the space before them and their patronuses dissolved back into nothingness, leaving them amidst their herd of death beasts on the edge of the world.

“\(\text{I’ve always felt drawn to go through the veil.}^{\text{Harry’s voice came quietly through the dark. They were wrapped together in their duvet, a fire burning in the grate, Harry’s body like a furnace against him. Draco had finally showered upon returning home and picked the remaining detritus out of his hair before allowing Harry to pull him under the covers. He felt properly warm for the first time in days.}}\)

He waited, smelling Harry’s hair, letting him finish his thoughts.

“Even after— I mean—the first time I saw the veil in the DoM, it transfixed me, I felt this powerful pull to go through it and find the voices. And— that next time, with you and Hermione— I felt it again, even after everything, even after deciding to live, deciding that I \(\text{wanted}\) to live. I felt this—pull.”

“And now?” Draco asked tentatively, when Harry didn’t expound.

“And now— now I don’t. I stood there, I heard the voices. I heard Sirius again. I heard— I heard Fred and George. Together. And, for the first time, I didn’t feel it calling me.”

Draco squeezed Harry tighter. “Me either.” Draco said, understanding what Harry was talking about. He too felt a pull of curiosity— of longing — when he was in the death chamber at the DoM. It drew him, gnawed at him. He never felt entirely safe in there alone, never really trusted himself. The sounds and whispers tempted him too greatly, lured him. But, today, standing before their very own veil, hearing the sounds of familiar and long gone voices of Severus and now his father, he wasn’t compelled to go through it.

He felt safe with himself. Trusted himself to know of its existence, to stand before it alone, and not be pulled towards it.

The embers in the grate glowed and in the distance a thestral cried out into the cold clear night.

\(\text{December 23, 2009}\)

Draco was dreaming. He was walking with Voileami in a frost covered graveyard. It was peaceful in the softly lit liminal space of the dream. Icicles formed on colossal rib cages and hefty femurs that scattered the clearing, jutted out from the frozen packed earth. Dragons, Draco’s mind supplied. It was a dragon graveyard. He was approaching a particularly large ilium, it’s curved shape sloping out of the snowy ground. He reached his hand out to brush his fingers along the
smooth surface—

tap tap tap

The dream blurred and faded out, the cold feel of the smooth bone dancing on his fingertips. He heard Harry swear from what felt like a great distance, and felt a whoosh of cold air under his warm duvet, thoroughly pulling him from the grasp of the dream, the yard of bones morphing into the dark cottage that surrounded him.

tap tap tap

“Whas’ wrong?” Draco slurred, half asleep, sitting up as a mostly naked Harry stumbled in the dark towards the kitchen window where an owl pecked persistently on the glass. It was dark out, still, and while Draco had no idea what time it was, the fire in the grate had died out completely. His sleep muddled brain reasoned it was well past 1am.

tap tap tap

Harry looked like a grizzled mountain man standing in the kitchen in his pants, unshaven, with his bed head like a lion’s mane haloed around his head.

“Harry?” Draco asked, curling the duvet around him tightly, protecting himself from the chill in the air.

Harry was squinting without his glasses at the letter he retrieved from the owl. A bluebell flame in his palm doing little to illuminate the words.

His eyes were suddenly wide, scanning the parchment, shock apparent on his face.

“Draco— we— get up— we gotta go— Luna!” He stammered, dashing back towards the bed. He flung the parchment at Draco and began pulling clothes from the chest of drawers and yanking them on. Draco took the parchment with interest, reading Greg’s familiar script.

Draco and Harry,

Just wanted to let you know Luna started having contractions around dinner time. Things started picking up after midnight. The midwives are on their way, but there’s no rush. It could still be ages, it is her first, after all. Come whenever you’re ready. I’m in way over my head.

—Greg
Draco smiled, while Harry continued racing around the cottage in a state of complete overexcitement.

“Harry—”

“Draco, get dressed! Merlin how are you still in bed?!”

“Harry— dear lord—” Draco muttered, getting up from bed, still wrapped in his duvet. He reached for Harry who was brushing his teeth while trying to put his jacket on, getting toothpaste all down his front. “Harry she’s just in labour, calm down. Put the kettle on— for Salazar’s sake, you’re covered in toothpaste.”

“Put the— what?! What if we miss it?! We have to go!” He tried shouting around his toothbrush. Little Dipper squawked indignantly from his perch.

Draco chuckled and went to put on the kettle himself, his large duvet swishing behind him. “It’s her first, its twins. It’ll be hours yet. The midwives are just getting there now, let’s give them time to get settled, and then we’ll go. No need to race out the door— come have some tea.”

Harry looked scandalised, gawking at Draco as though he had completely lost his marbles. “Are you joking?!” He asked around his toothbrush. Draco just hummed as he set out their tea cups. Harry stood staring at Draco for a moment before seeming to realize that Draco was not in fact joking. He stomped off back to the bathroom and finished brushing his teeth.

When he came back he looked pensive and distracted, his eyebrows furrowed.

“You’re sure we won’t miss it?” He asked, sounding wary.

The kettle had started whistling and Draco was back by the bed, changing into something warmer than his nightshirt and pants. “There are no guarantees in life or birth.” He intoned absently, the phrase coming to him easily. It was a mantra that had been repeated to him during his training days in school, something the midwives and birth attendants always said in response to unanswerable questions and unknowable futures.

Harry just cocked his head, looking completely nonplussed. Draco walked back to the kitchen, bathed in candle light, and poured the boiling water into their cups.

“I mean that we probably won’t miss it for the reasons I stated, but that there are no guarantees, obviously.”

“Shouldn’t we hurry then?” Harry asked, clearly agitated but trying to keep his cool in the face of Draco’s unusual ease.

Draco shrugged. “It won’t hurt to have tea and be calm when we get there. Luna and Greg don’t need us showing up in a whirlwind and fretting. They shouldn’t have to worry about us. They need to focus on having their children.”

Harry quietly came to sit at their small table. “I suppose that makes sense.” He said, his shoulders finally relaxing. “When Hermione had Rose, Ron sent me about a dozen owls, panicking all the while. I wasn’t any better off.”

Draco smiled, handing Harry his tea. “Birth is unpredictable by nature. And, often times that feels scary. You can try to predict it, plot it, graph it, say it should take X amount of time, or follow a certain pattern, but in the end it does its own thing. You can only sit calmly on your hands and wait until you’re needed.”
Harry sipped his tea. “Did you ever want to do deliveries? Reproductive healthcare, I mean?”

“Oh good lord, no.” Draco said, scandalised. “It’s entirely too stressful for me. Schedules go right out the window, you can’t plan a damn thing, and when its low risk, I’m entirely superfluous, the midwives are much more qualified. And when its not low risk, I’d rather not be involved, thanks. Blood curses are all the excitement I need.”

“You just seem to be really comfortable with this when you’re usually the most high-strung person I know.” Harry speculated with a small grin.

Draco snorted and looked down into his tea, remembering back to his training days. Remembering the feeling of being a scant 20 years old, screaming on the inside, feeling wholly overwhelmed and questioning his life decisions, as a labouring woman in the high risk clinic squatted on her bed before him, braced on a support bar and moaned through the contractions that were engulfing her.

The hilarity that he was expected to be mature and wise enough to help bring life into the world threatened to send him straight to the Janus Thickey ward. How the old midwives, seeing his large, shocked eyes, guided him by the elbow to where he was meant to be and taught him to sit quietly. Taught him to lean into the discomfort of the unknown, to be patient, to hold vigil when there was nothing to be done but wait. He remembered the feeling of utter inadequacy as he watched this mother give birth with the guidance of her midwives, as he did what he was told.

How, at the end of it all when the mother turned to him and thank him for his help, he had to refrain from shouting back that he had been a useless wreck and nearly a detriment to the process with his fear. Instead he had smiled politely and congratulated the mother on a job well done. And, when he left the room, if he broke down crying in the bathroom, no one needed to know, did they?

While he never wanted to attend births again after that rotation, as the emotional strain was almost crippling, he took those lessons with him, remembered them, practiced them. Leaned into discomfort when it arose. Sat it with. Became its friend.

“I loved the granny midwives and birth attendants during my training, they taught me a lot.” He said after a moment. “And, like I told you, home births are a bit of a pureblood tradition. It feels very— ordinary.”

Harry hmmed in response but he had a distant look on his face as he sipped his tea. “Maybe we should pick up groceries—”

“Harry, I’m sure they have food—”

“What if they’re out of tea or something? You can’t not have tea, what kind of British child is born into a house without tea—”

“Harry—” Draco smiled, the sight of Harry fretting over their friend’s tea and food supply making him positively melt on the inside.

Harry stood quickly and rushed to the cupboard in the corner and scribbled frantically on a piece of parchment before placing it on the shelf inside, and shutting the door.

Draco just sipped his tea and watched with great amusement as Harry repeatedly opened and closed the door, waiting for the house elves to work their magic.

On around the 5th time Harry opened the cupboard door, a basket appeared. “Yes—” He triumphed, grabbing it and rushing it to the table to investigate.
“Good haul.” Draco admired with raised eyebrows as Harry dug through the basket.

There were chocolates and biscuits, tins of teas of all sorts, a stack of fat oatmeal cookies, bananas, yogurt, coffee, a large jar of honey, cream, and assorted nuts and dried fruit.

“I read somewhere that bananas and yogurt were good labour food.” Harry muttered, pulling out a pack of biscuits and handing them to Draco. Draco opened the proffered sweets and sat down.

“For us or for Luna?”

“I don’t know...” Harry answered, grinning, finally settling at the table to finish drinking his tea.

After eating their biscuits and packing a bag, they were finally ready to go. Only about 30 minutes had elapsed since the owl had arrived, but Harry was convinced it had been hours and that they had surely missed the births.

“You’re going to be sorely disappointed when we’re still there at 3pm tomorrow and there are no babies yet.” Draco chuckled as they stepped out into the frozen night. Flea was at the bottom of the stairs and a few other thestrals milled around, pawing at the snow covered earth, or in Voileami’s case, scratching herself against a large oak tree.

“Yes, well, consider me an ignorant plebeian with far too much excitement for the birth of one of my best friend’s children.” Harry held out his hand with ill-disguised anticipation. Draco laughed and took it. In an instant he was pulled into the crushing void only to reappear in Luna’s frost covered garden.

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From the outside, the house looked dark. Innocuous. Not a place you’d expect momentous things to be happening. There were no lights, but for the blanket of stars above them, shining bright in the cold winter air. It was a moonless sky and Draco took a moment to breath it in, face turned up to its vastness. Harry didn’t wait for him, rushing up the stairs and letting himself in, leaving the door open in his wake.

After a moment of collecting himself, settling the nerves that had crept up on him, he walked up the creaky porch steps and under the barren trellis. Closing the heavy door behind him he heard whispers from the kitchen, saw a faint light coming from down the hall where he knew Luna and Greg’s room sat.

He toed off his shoes and crept quietly towards the kitchen after hanging his winter coat.

He walked to the arched doorway to the kitchen and saw Harry and Greg fused together in a tight hug, rocking slightly on the spot. He stopped short at the endearing sight, not wanting to interrupt them and leaned against the wall in the shadows. He could hear Greg mumbling something into Harry’s shoulder, his face hidden. He could see Harry nodding and whispering back.

The door to Luna’s room opened down the hall and Draco turned his head to see Luna waddling ever so slowly towards him, holding the bottom of her pendulous belly, her eyes nearly closed, as she breathed in deep even breaths. She hadn’t bothered closing her short silken house robe and she wore nothing underneath. She didn’t seem in the least concerned about her immodesty when she saw Draco leaning against the archway to the kitchen, looking at her.

“*Mmm...*” She hummed, holding her belly as she waddling closer, a hand braced on the wall, smiling. “Hello Draco.” Her face was soft looking and her eyes even more dreamy than they usually were.
“Hello there.” He smiled, marvelling at how serene she seemed to be mostly naked before him, in labour.

Draco moved forward when he saw the contraction coming. Her smile faltered and her eyes closed entirely. She began bending forward towards the wall, her left hand still holding her belly by her pubic bone. When he reached her she grabbed his hands and sank into a deep, wide squat and leaned back using Draco as a counter weight. Draco knew what to do on instinct, he’d seen the midwives do it before. He widened his stance and gripped her hands tightly, leaning back to allow Luna to throw her full weight into the position.

She moved back and forth rhythmically, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, in a circular movement. Her head rolled on her shoulders as she moved, her breathing deep and measured as she hummed a low sound.

A woman appeared from Luna’s room at the sound of Luna’s humming. Her wiry grey hair in a messy plait, her body wrapped in a dark shawl. She came forward and squatted behind Luna, placing her thumbs into the dimples at Luna’s back, moving with her. The three of them were a single entity in the dark hall, all swaying in time to Luna’s rhythm, all focused on this one moment, this one contraction.

Draco had no sense of time, he never did during a labour. It could have been 90 seconds or 3 hours, he couldn’t tell, but eventually Luna stopped humming and took a deep breath, shaking off the tension that had seized her. She opened her eyes and smiled at Draco, and he hauled her to her feet. She draped herself into his arms, hugging him to her. The woman behind her stood there and continued to massage her back. “Hi Harry.” Luna said into Draco’s shoulder.

“Hi Luna.” Harry’s soft, almost shy voice came from close behind Draco.

“Have you both met Persephone and Porter?” She asked, into Draco’s shoulder, her hips swaying slightly into the old woman’s touch.

“I’m sure we’ll become well acquainted soon enough.” The woman behind her said gently with a smile and a wink at Draco.

Luna hummed a small laugh. “I’ve no doubts, Porter. Greg?”

“Yes, love?” Greg had appeared at Luna’s side in an instant.

“Ice cream.” She said, a statement, not a request.

Draco surpassed a laugh as Greg scuttled quickly away to retrieve the demanded ice cream. “Don’t judge me, I’m in labour.” Luna said with a reproachful smile, sensing everyone’s amusement.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, darling.” he said squeezing her.

Luna had a dozen or so more contractions in the hallway, using Draco to help her squat. They became a well oiled machine. Everyone rotating through massaging Luna’s back, feeding her butter pecan ice cream straight out of the container or making tea for the rest of them. Persephone, a young black woman with hazel eyes and a shaved head, in similar dark draped shawls, eventually came out of Luna’s room and seamlessly joined the procession.

It was like being in the twilight zone, in a way, the passage of time feeling weirdly irrelevant. The only thing that existed were the 6 of them, the dance of labour in which they all played their roles, and each contraction. Its as if the rest of the world dissolved into nothingness past the threshold of Luna’s house.
Finally, after a particularly long contraction in which Luna didn’t hum, but groaned through, hands shaking in Draco’s, she let him haul her to her feet, and turned instead to Greg, reaching for him. She clutched his wide frame and began sniffling, crying softly. “I’d like to be done now.” She said, sounding defeated.

Draco wished there was something he could do for her, something to make it easier. He looked around to the midwives, who were smiling, looking pleased. Harry’s eyes were wide and worried at the sight of Luna’s tears, at her moment of helplessness.

Persephone came forward and placed a hand on the small of Luna’s back. “I think its time for a rest, Luna, why don’t we get you into the pool?”

Eventually, Luna lifted her head, sniffling, and nodded. She began to waddle back down the hall to her room after Persephone, Greg at her back, helping her along.

Draco turned to Harry, the soreness in his feet and back making themselves suddenly very apparent. He had no idea how long he’d been standing there, throwing his weight into Luna’s increasingly long contractions. The other midwife gripped Harry’s elbow, seeming to sense his discomfiture, and began leading him to the sitting room.

“Come along, you two. This is all part of the process. Why don’t we go have some tea by the fire.”

Draco wondered at how different Luna’s sitting room looked now that it was not adorned with a circular array of mismatched chairs. Harry stood in front of the fireplace that was usually never lit, staring down at the flames while Draco arranged himself on one of the sofas positioned around a large coffee table.

Porter came shuffling into the half lit room with a ladened tea tray. Harry turned and came to sit beside Draco, watching as Porter fixed their tea. Knowing after the stint in the hall, how they each took theirs. As she was passing them their cups, Persephone came into the room holding a file in her hand and took the third sofa, between where Harry and Draco sat across from Porter. After a few moments of silent tea drinking, Porter leaned over and pulled out what looked like a half finished knit sweater. Persephone settled back with the file and began writing notes. Draco took their lead and reached for his own knitting bag. Harry stared at them all in turn, a look of growing bewilderment.

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. “Um— not to be rude or anything— but I mean, shouldn’t you two be— I don’t know— midwifing ?”

Draco snorted into his knitting bag and looked up to see both of the midwives looking back at Harry with smiles of their own.

“We are.” Said Persephone, holding up her file.

“I mean—” Harry tried again. “Shouldn’t you be in there, with her, doing things? I don’t really know how this works, but—” He trailed off, clearly unsure how to finish his thought. Discomfort at the idea of Luna on her own in labor written all over his face.

“We do what needs doing.” Said Porter, counting her stitches and adjusting her glasses. “And right now, Luna needs to be left alone. She wants to be left alone. And, so, we sit and wait to be needed.”

“So, we’re just going to sit here?” Harry asked, sounding confused.

“Indeed we are.” Said Persephone.
“That’s why we brought knitting.” Draco said smirking, reaching over and squeezing Harry’s leg comfortably.

“What if she gives birth while you’re out here?” He tried, brows still furrowed.

“Then we weren’t needed.” Said Porter stoutly, pulling a length of yarn from her bag.

“Okay...” Harry acquiesced, looking back to the fire, clearly not completely convinced.

“Sometimes what people need is space to do things for themselves. Sometimes what they need is the knowledge that they have support and help should they need it or want it. Sometimes what people need is reassurance that they’re capable and a safe space to do what they need to do.” Porter intoned.

“I— okay, I can relate to that.” Harry said, looking a little more understanding, a little more at ease. He relaxed back into the cushions. Sighing, he slung an arm around behind Draco, his fingers idly playing with the short hair at the nape of Draco’s neck. It was incredibly soothing to Draco, who leaned more fully into the touch, pulling his knitting up to count his own stitches.

“Sometimes what people need is to have their hands held the whole way through, to not be left alone for even a second.” Persephone chimed in. “And, when that happens, we’re there, doing just that. But, that’s not what Luna needs, or what she wants. So, we’re here, where we’re needed, in the wings.”

“Besides,” Porter said smiling again, “if the midwives are knitting, what is there to worry about?”

Harry chuckled. “Nothing, apparently.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

They lulled into silence again. Draco concentrating on his knitting. He had just one hat to finish. He had made a full set of newborn gifts for Luna’s twins. Two pairs of socks, two vests, and two little hats. Luna had spun the yarn for him in her last trimester. It was a silk wool blend dyed with woad and potash, spun around a thestral tail hair core. It was an unusual yarn, as he wasn’t used to knitting with core spun fibres, it was just a little more stiff than he was used to, but it was soft and it was cossetting, and he could feel the thestral magic seeping out into the garments. The colour reminded Draco of a cold winter night, icy soft blue, like a snow drift in moon light.

By the time Draco was finishing off his hat, Persephone had slipped out to check on Luna again, Harry had fallen asleep, curled into his own corner of the sofa, and Porter was picking up the tea tray and walking it back to the kitchen.

Draco sat and admired the hat for a moment, listening to the sounds of Harry’s soft snoring before deciding to get up and stretch his legs, make a cup of tea.

Entering the hall he could hear Luna’s humming coming from her room, a little higher pitched than it had been when they arrived, a little more strained sounding. He could hear the gentle tones of Greg and Persephone carrying down the hall.

Porter was in the kitchen boiling another kettle when he walked in. He could see the lines of her face cast in stark relief in the dull kitchen light, and Draco thought she must be older than he initially thought. The whites of her eyes made her eyes seem darker than they probably were, and her hair glowed against her olive skin, a halo.

“Your mother wrote to me, you know.” She said looking up from the tea tray, an unreadable
expression on her face.

“My— what—”

“A few weeks ago. Asked me to put her in touch with her mother’s midwife.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“Of course I do. I trained under her for years. I was the one who took over her practice after she retired. I helped your mother when she gave birth to you. But, old Malory is, well, old. Not up for much these days.”

“Oh— I had no idea—” Draco said, startled, he’d never given a thought to his own midwife. What did you say to the person who was there when you were born?

She smiled, the lines around her eyes crinkling in a way that told Draco she spent a lot of time smiling. “You were such an unusual birth. Did your mother ever tell you about it?”

“No— she only ever said I didn’t cry like most babies—” Draco answered, a bit bewildered.

“That’s true, you didn’t. She gave birth in the smallest corner of the room, between the wall and the bedside table, where no one could comfortably help her. Your father was a wreck— I don’t think he expected labour to be so real, so raw. He was cool as a cucumber right up until your mother vomited spectacularly on the oriental rug.” She chuckled at Draco’s startled laugh. “You were born in the caul, right onto the floor on a towel. When your mum tore the bag, you opened your eyes, but didn’t cry right away. You just looked at us, calm as you please. It wasn’t until your father started howling and crying that you joined in. But for the most part, you were the quietest new baby I ever saw.”

“I had no idea—” He said, shocked at the story. He tried to imagine his mother, young like Luna, his father caring and soft like Greg, moving through the process of labour and birth. Tried to imagine his mother doing something as primal and real as squatting in a corner and birthing her baby onto the floor. Of her getting her hands dirty and lifting a wet squalling child to her chest. It filled him with unnamable feelings. A swirling sense of loss and longing warred inside of him, a sense of wonder and appreciation, of wishing he knew the person his mother was when he was born, of wishing he knew the father that sobbed at his birth.

She handed him his tea. “Do you know the superstitions of the caul?”

“No really, no.”

“They say, whoever they may be, that those born in the caul are— Special. Seers, sometimes. That they walk between worlds.” She eyed him speculatively. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed your little leathery friends outside. Did you know I could see thestrals before I ever witnessed my first death?”

Draco just blinked.

“Yes. I was surprised too. But, those of us who stand at the threshold between life and death, here and there, whether coming or going, can see them. I saw my first thestral after attending my 7th birth. After the romance of the process had evaporated for me, and I saw, really saw what this work meant. The balance of it, the precariousness, the intensity. Thestrals aren’t just death beasts, they’re gatekeepers.”

Draco looked back at her, wondering what to say, what to do with all of this information. But,
before he could respond, she continued.

“If you want to know more about the curse— the one your mother wrote about— then we can talk about it— another time. I’ll tell you everything I know. I think there’s much good you can do.”

“Thank you— for everything, I mean. Really—”

“Porter?” Persephone appeared in the door frame, glancing between them.

An unspoken conversation passed between the women in a heartbeat, and within moments, both of them were walking together back down the hall. Draco stood in the dark and silent kitchen sipping his tea, replaying the unexpected story over again in his mind.

Draco slipped in and out of restless sleep, cramped on the sofa with Harry’s sock covered feet in his lap. It was still dark outside, but the sky was taking on the deep blue which heralded the sun.

The fire was burning in the grate and Persephone and Porter sat together on the opposing sofa. Persephone was sleeping, curled like a cat against the armrest, and Porter continued to knit with methodical movements. From the hall drifted the sounds of Luna’s subtle hum, turned suddenly into a deep growling moan. Draco opened his eyes at the new sound. Porter paused her hands, her head cocked, listening until it petered out.

Everything was still in the waiting silence. When the grunting came again, Porter leaned forward and scribbled a hasty note in the file on the coffee table. She rose from the sofa and crept down the hall.

After a few more contractions, each producing sounds more pronounced, more raw, more animalistic, Persephone opened her eyes, too. Harry shifted in his sleep.

Persephone soon disappeared silently down the hall, file in hand.

As the minutes passed, the sounds became louder, longer, more visceral. The space between the contractions were now filled with the sound of Luna’s heavy panting, with Greg’s whispered endearments, with Persephone and Porter’s tinkling voices and guidance.

Harry sat up and reached for Draco, wrapped an arm around him.

“Is it happening?” He asked quietly.

“I think so, sounds like it.”

“We should make breakfast.”

Draco smiled. Harry didn’t do well sitting by while others worked hard and struggled. “Should we?”

“Mm. Pancakes. Luna will need pancakes.” He stated seriously. Standing up he stretched and reached for Draco’s hand.

Draco smothered a laugh and stood. “Very well, then, we can’t let her go without pancakes. Lead the way.”

In the kitchen, they moved to their own rhythm in tandem silence, dancing around one another, reaching, mixing, pouring. Luna’s labour song, with its own magic, filling the house around them.
The sky outside was turning pink, and out the large kitchen windows Draco could see Flea and Voileami, each with one end of a large stick in their mouths, each tugging trying to gain ownership of it. He turned to tell Harry, to get his attention, when it happened.

A particularly strained moan, deeper, guttural, magic rolling through the house, pulsing out, Greg’s gasp of shock followed by the longest silence Draco had ever experienced. He and Harry stood frozen in place staring at one another, waiting, waiting, before the strong lung-clearing cry of a new person in their midsts shattered the stillness.

It took all of three seconds before Draco burst into tears at the sound, nearly falling forward to collapse onto Harry, overwhelmed. Harry who looked wildly stunned, almost as if he didn't believe, or had forgotten, that there would be a baby at the end of the whole ordeal.

“Is— Are they— is everything fine?” Harry asked breathlessly into Draco’s shoulder. Draco, who could do nothing else but shake his head and squeezed harder.

Finally, after what felt like eons of uncontrollable emotions spilling out from him, he righted himself, wiping his eyes. As the baby’s cries quieted and settled, Luna’s groans started up again.

“Fuck— she still has to have the other one.” He said, feeling wrung out and shattered. Feeling drowned in disbelief that this is what humans go through to make more humans.

“Merlin—” Harry sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand and hurrying back to the hob, where he scraped half a dozen burnt pancakes off the griddle. “Merlin.”

The crescendo of moans and groans, of pants and whispered encouragements rose again. Draco paced the kitchen in a circle around the breakfast bar. He couldn't help himself, couldn’t hold still. Harry flipped pancakes with an intensity Draco thought was more suited to battle.

Again, the same earth shaking effort, rolling waves of magic eddying through the house, surrounding them, before another silence. This one longer than the first. Draco stopped pacing, Harry gripped his spatula and stood still as stone. Again they stared at one another. Waiting.

Each second that ticked by felt like a lifetime. Whole seasons passed them in the kitchen, waiting. Dynasties rose and fell in the silent liminality between birth and life as they waited. Waited for this second baby to come through its own veil, to join the land of the living.

They heard gentle whispers, Greg sniffing loudly. Then, unexpectedly, they heard Luna’s voice, singing softly, a lullaby, one Draco remembered from his own childhood. A song about finding your way home from the stars.

Harry’s eyes were burning questioning holes into Draco’s, but neither of them dare speak or break the unspoken spell that had settled around the house.

Finally, after what felt like an entire universe had formed and imploded in on itself in entropy, a baby cried. Loudly. Screeched, really. Ear splitting and frantic, the new baby tested its lungs out with shocking ferocity. Startled, the first baby joined in, adding to the din.

Both Harry and Draco stumbled in relief at the sound. Reached for one another, and sank onto the kitchen floor.

“I get it now—” Harry groaned in exhaustion, “I get why you don’t do this for a living.”

Draco laughed into Harry’s shoulder where they sat slumped against the breakfast bar, leaning on each other.
“Those midwives are— are—” Harry stammered.

“Something else—” Draco tried.

“I was going to say, completely mad — but sure, something else .” Harry waved his hand nonsensically, seemingly scandalised by the idea of doing what the midwives did for a living, on a regular basis. “I thought being a Death Herder— being someone who stood on the threshold of death and walked between worlds was stressful—” Harry muttered.

Draco shook his head. “They do walk between worlds— they just bring people here instead of sending them on their way. They’re the other side of the coin.”

“I think I prefer the thestrals to be honest.” Harry chuckled, rubbing his face hard.

Draco laughed loudly, the sound of crying babies drowning him out. He indeed preferred his thestrals, too. The birth, from the outside, had been completely straightforward, and yet here they were, a puddle of emotion on the floor.

He couldn't imagine the toll it would take on a person to carry someone the way the midwives did, through something less than ideal.

Still ruminating on that thought, Persephone appeared in the doorway.

“Your presence is requested, you two.”

Harry froze next to him and Draco, eyes wide, squeaked, “Already?”

She smiled knowingly at them. “Yes, already. We don’t normally allow anyone in the room this soon after, but she made a special request. So, come.”

Harry and Draco hauled each other to their feet, legs unsteady from emotion and creaky from sitting on the hard cold floor.

They followed Persephone down the dark hall and into the candle lit room. The birth pool sat at the foot of the bed in front of a roaring fire. Luna was tucked into bed next to Greg each with a baby on their bare chests, their cords still tethered to their placenta in a bowl between them. Luna looked exhausted but radiant. Her golden hair fanned out around her on the bed, her skin glowing.

Greg was speaking softly into the top of his child’s head, whispering. “There are so many tools I have to show you. The muggle world is amazing, you’ll see. You don’t need magic to use tools, my boy. We can do all the fixing, together—” he broke off when he saw Draco and Harry standing in the doorway.

He gingerly picked up the tiny bundle with his comparatively massive hands and placed the child gently next to his sibling on Luna’s chest. He carefully climbed off the bed, so as not to disturb the peacefully sleeping babes, and rushed to Harry and Draco. He pulled them together into a crushing hug, instantly beginning to sob.

“Well done, mate.” Harry said, patting his back, sounding teary himself. Draco said nothing, not trusting his ability to speak without blubbering.

“Luna did so well— she’s so amazing— the babies— they’re— everything is so good— thank you —” He stuttered through his tears and cries.

“Greg, my love, for goodness sake—” Luna chuckled, an endeared smile on her face. “Please,
Draco, come see.”

She maneuvered an arm out from one of the babies to uncover them as Draco extricated himself from the group hug.

She was still naked, as were they babies on her chest. They were still partially covered in white waxy vernix which had not yet soaked into their fair skin. Bits of partially dried blood clung to the sparse downy hairs on their heads. They were so new. Straight from the otherside.

Draco walked over, unable to keep his eyes off the tiny humans. He knelt beside the bed and reached a hand out to stroke Luna’s hair, speechless and reverent.

“Draco Malfoy, please meet Elio and Eilah. Your godchildren.”

“Wh—what?” Draco croaked, when the words penetrated his sleep deprived and overexcited brain.

She smiled. “No one better.”

He felt hands on his shoulders, Greg and Harry.

Draco sniffed, his eyes watered and his voice sounded almost angry with intensity when he spoke, shocking himself at how many emotions he was capable of feeling at one time. “They’re beautiful and I love them and I’m going to spoil them rotten.”

The morning went by in a whirlwind. Luna recounted the whole tale to them. They sat around her on the bed, like devotees to a prophet. Porter and Persephone danced around them, cleaning the room, checking the babies and Luna’s vitals, performing the newborn exams, bringing them all tea, essentially, functioning as if they hadn’t been awake all night, supporting someone in labour.

As it transpired, Eilah had been born first at 7:58am. Luna had squatted in the pool and she swam straight into Greg’s waiting hands. Elio was born exactly 21 minutes later at 8:19am. Luna had reached for him herself, pulling his body out of the water and on to her chest, while Greg held Eilah.

Elio was born in what remained of the shared caul, quickly followed by the placenta. “He was slow to join us, after he was born.” Porter told them.

“Nothing dire, he just took a while to come into his body.” Persephone said, and Draco understood that to mean he needed help in breathing; most likely with a gentle stimulating back rub, or perhaps, some postural drainage. He imagined a slightly limp, dusky baby laid across his mother’s chest as they all waited for him to take his first breath.

“That’s when I sang to him.” Luna explained, wisely. “Helped him find his way home.”

“He found us.” Greg said, a look of wonderment on his face as he gazed upon his children.

After the cords had been cut, by Greg, and after Harry had brought a full breakfast service into the bedroom, Luna wrapped each of her children blankets and handed Eilah first to Draco and Elio to Harry. He held the tiny human in hands that suddenly felt too large and yet woefully inadequate. Babies were just so small, he thought desperately to himself. How did anyone survive such a tiny and vulnerable state of existence?

Draco could feel Eilah’s magic radiate out from her little body, full of the blatant curiosity that was so specific to her mother. Her eyes were squinted open and she regarded Draco in quiet
contemplation. Staring into her eyes he made one silent promise; to be the best version of himself so that he could show up for her when she needed him.

Harry, holding Elio came and sat gingerly beside Draco with a watery smile.

“Swapsies?” He asked, and Draco snorted a wet laugh.

After exchanging their tiny parcels, Draco felt the immediate difference between the two otherwise identical siblings. While his sister was pulsing with magic, her core radiating out it, with Elio there was nothing but silent stillness. No magic could be felt.

He looked up to see Harry regarding him, knowing in that moment he had felt it too. The difference between the children. Draco looked down into Elio’s sleepy blue eyes and made the same promise as he had made to his sister, with one amendment; to make sure he was never left out for his differences.

There was something distinct about Elio’s lack of magic, and Draco wondered if the blood curse he suspected Luna to carry had something to do with it. He looked up to find Porter watching him closely, a look of consternation and wonderment on her face. He knew she was thinking the same thing, marvelling at the child’s ability to survive such an insidious curse, aimed at eradicating his existence, protected by his sibling’s magic and their shared placenta.

Draco thought about his thestrals and his new godchildren, about how much work he had left in unraveling the mysteries of life and death, with Harry at his side.

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Later that night, wrapped in his duvet, the smell of his encourage-mint strong on his fingers, Draco wondered at the depths of magic, its breadth and scope. The ways in which life pervades and eludes death, the ways in which they endure all manners of small and large deaths within their lives.

He could hear Voileami and Flea screeching, swooping through the air above the cottage, soaring through the heavy snow. He could feel Harry’s magic pulsing out around him, keeping him warm and safe, hot breath on his neck, his chest pressed tight to Draco’s shoulders, coarse hair on strong thighs prickling the back of Draco’s legs. Fire crackled in the grate, warming their forest home, and he could think of no other life he’d want to live.
Epilogue

August 31, 2019

They shared a quick kiss in the back of the practice, feet shoved between a bubbling cauldron and the stand of aged bonsais, the fig roots, though trimmed back each year, still hopeful in their reach toward their neighbouring *Kigelia*.

Love is like that. Hopeful.

Harry let his hands fall away from Draco’s tinged pink cheeks, lips half parted, breath slipping between them, as if ages may pass. As if nothing could interrupt them. Draco’s silver blonde hair was lifted and pushed back from his face, sectioned from Harry’s rough hands and insistent grip.

“See you tonight?” Harry’s voice was soft and carefree, but he was still looking at Draco with belied intensity. The steam from the simmering potion eddied around them. Soft aromas of honey and rooibos. Lemongrass and sage.

“At home.” Harry watched Draco’s lips form the words. The way he exhaled them. Full of relief.

“At home.” Harry felt the corners of his mouth turn up around the words. Around the feeling of it. Of home. Of home with the man he loved. Of the promise of their evenings. Of their lives. Stretching on into the future. Their future. Together.

Harry kissed him again quickly, stepping away, leaving Draco to compose himself before seeing the afternoon’s patients.

Harry loved to leave him flustered. Loved their quiet moments together. The way their lives were so separate, so fulfilled, yet they remained so intertwined. The way they drifted in the day and returned to each other each night. Two planetary bodies. Two souls, revolving, devolving, falling together and apart.

Harry made his way down the hall, his magic trailing behind, not as disciplined. Not as quick to untangle the threads that had woven themselves around Draco, that had bloomed and knotted themselves at his feet.

He waved a quick goodbye to Juniper, knowing he looked altogether too self satisfied, too pleased with himself and his afternoon visit, and she had rolled her eyes. The bell tinkled as he stepped into the street, her quiet laughter and the smell of lilies lingering in the waiting room.

Hogsmeade was the same. And different. Like Harry and Draco. It had been rebuilt, painstakingly, but with so much honesty. With homage to pain. To the war. To the sacrifice of love.

To the beauty in surviving.

At the end of the quaint side lane that housed the practice, Harry turned and made his way up the central high street of the village. The sun was high in the sky and he let its warmth wash across his skin, a magic of its own, soft but powerful.

At the ice cream shop on the corner, Greg was sharing a double dipped cone with Luna. Both of their attention was trained upon the two twins, who each had their own cones, though the heat of the summer afternoon had lent itself to drips of chocolate and vanilla down the fronts of the two ten year olds.
Harry watched them a moment, cheeks smeared with wide grins, Greg dabbing gently here and there for errant smears of their summer treat, Luna laying a hand on his shoulder, drenched in the happiness of the moment.

Harry sees them both regularly, at meetings, yes, but as friends when they can find the time to get together. It wasn’t two weeks ago he and Greg had repainted the first floor bedrooms at Grimmauld Place. Luna had popped in with Hestia and Neville to critique their colour scheme and deliver lemonade, and Harry had felt it.

There and then with their big smiles and laughter that came from their bellies, Harry felt all of the moments that replaced all of the bitterness that had once consumed the ancestral home. He felt all of the triumphs, so resplendent and sure, drowning out the loss and grief and pain.

He felt all of the lives that those rooms would rebuild, and the wide oak floorboards sang with it. All of the horrors the house would help swallow, for the stones were thick and their magic strong. The door, ironwood and carved deep with forest scenes, now helped keep those who needed containing safe inside, helped hold them, helped hide them. The ironwood helped keep death at bay, and the thestrals cavorted beneath the trees. The adder still huffed, but even he had grown soft for the lives that crossed his path.

And, no matter the colour of the walls, Harry knew that it had become a place where people learned what connection can do. What love can do. What it feels like. How it holds you. Safe and whole. And that it had come to be that way because he had fought for it. Had lived for it.

And Grimmauld Place was no longer a house for death.

Further along the high street, Harry caught a glimpse of Hestia’s long braids, spectacularly adorned in a ring of *Kigelia* flowers, deep red and pendulous in the summer heat, like bells, ringing the praises of Hestia. Harry watched her stop to trail her hand along the delicate petals of a withering daisy, and watched it as it returned to full bloom, bright and yellow and untarnished by the summer heat and the lack of rain. For Hestia was her own storm. Her magic was just as life giving.

Years ago, she and Neville had married beneath the sweeping purple clusters of wisteria flowers in a glen far to the East of Tenebris Hollow, petals gently drifting down around them, their bare feet on moss, hands knotted together in the old tradition.

And happiness had burst forth and bloomed in all of them, for their love for each other was like that. Beautiful and forgiving. It brought life forth everywhere, even in the darkest, most difficult of places. To be near them was to be awash in the summer rains. To drink from the forest springs and grow tall, unafraid of the sun.

Their binding had served another purpose, too. For it was after their summer wedding that they applied to adopt Thor. That they had made a home for a boy who’d never known the advantage of parents. Who’d never flourished in the shadow of such careful, unrepentant love.

Thor and Teddy had become fixtures of the little garden shop in the years that followed, and their friendship flourished in the exploration of the natural world. Thor, like his new found family, cultured a fascination with herbology, while Teddy found himself enraptured by the endless wonder of magical creatures. It was in his fifth year that he’d found a bowtruckle he’d named Fig, the little creature making himself a permanent fixture on Teddy’s shoulder.

The two boys were adults themselves now, having graduated Hogwarts four years prior. Thor had stayed to help run the shop, but Teddy had, under Hestia’s gentle guidance, found his way into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, as an expert liaison between
humans and werewolves.

Harry always wondered if this was Teddy’s way to reconnect with the distant memory of his father, or if it was just the great kindness of him that was drawn to advocacy. Hestia’s theory was that he had always had a bit of the wolf in him, and it spoke easily with other wolves, through the waning and the waxing of the moons.

Harry rounded the curve of the road, the towers of Hogwarts just visible in the distant horizon.

Hogwarts. Another of his homes. Where he’d been resident Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor since McGonagall had first offered him the position. The year after he had started Dumbledore’s Army back up.

Harry slipped his hands in the worn pockets of his jeans, smiling up at the familiar outline.

It had taken him a few years to get comfortable with the castle again. With being around all the curious gazes and strange questions of young students. Students who had read about him, heard stories and legends and all kinds of tall tales about him. Eventually though, he’d managed to find a pace where he could keep them distracted with hinkypunks and curses, hexes and disarming. He’d let them duel.

Every year, in early October, Ron, Hermione and he would come together and talk about the war. They’d sit with students and talk about what hate had done. Hermione always talked about house unity. About blurring the divide. She’d tell them all she nearly went to Ravenclaw. Some years, Harry would admit he was nearly a Slytherin. Ron never said anything at this part. Not until Rose was a Slytherin, and the Weasley dynasty officially broken. In her first year, he’d come to support her Slytherin Quidditch team in all green for the first game of the spring season. Hiss hiss painted on each cheek, Rose sitting on his shoulders, clapping and cheering, a massive serpent flag following wherever they went.

Ron was promoted to Head Auror not long after Fred, their first son, was born, an October child. The last few years, Ron’s been home every weekend. He no longer goes on raids. He got to be as much of a stay at home dad as he could be, and good thing too because George was born barely ten months after that, ensuring they’d both be in the same year at Hogwarts, when that fateful day came.

Last Friday, Ron had roped Harry into helping him repaint the nursery (again), and they’d talked long into the afternoon about Ron just quitting and staying home full time. It was hard to make any kind of argument against it, honestly, with little George’s tuft of brown hair sticking up from the sling Ron carried him in, nestled snug against his chest. Fred was down for his nap on a blanket next to them, a stuffed lamb held close to his little chest. It was hard to imagine ever separating them.

Ron had put in his notice a few days later. Hermione was thrilled.

She had taken a step back too, after all of the chaos that had unfolded in the Department of Mysteries, after all of the work she and Draco had put in to uncover another realm of magic, far more complex than anything they had expected. Far more political. Far more dangerous.

At the end of that first year, she had resigned from the Ministry herself, and, in September of the following year, she had strode up the same familiar path, covered in fallen leaves and with hints of early morning frost, to the entrance hall of Hogwarts. She had started her new post right alongside Harry, parchment and quill already in hand, fully committed to her new assignment.
She was tasked with writing an updated edition of *Hogwarts: A History*. While she’d only managed to finish about a tenth of the research required since that first year, Harry had been reassured on many, many occasions where they had met in the library together, that the history of castle would not solely focus on the wizarding inhabitants. House elves, for one, would have their own dedicated chapter.

She became such a familiar fixture of that much loved corner of the castle, and could occasionally be overheard tutoring students, giving advice, teaching fifth years tricky little charms, and thoroughly over-emphasising the pronunciation of *wingardium leviosa* to otherwise besotted first years.

Harry chuckled to himself at the memory while he walked between the winged boars. A shadow crossed above him.

“Been up to no good, have you?”

The answering screech ricocheted between trees. Flea swooped and dived, landing gracefully beside Harry, slipping his beaked nose beneath his outstretched arm. Harry ran his fingers down the familiar feel of his thick, matted mane and the bones that rippled beneath his leathery hide.

“Thought you must be. Didn’t see you or Voileami all morning.” Harry chided him softly. He’d missed his companion, but he didn’t say so aloud.

Magic burned between them, shimmering in the summer air, like heat. They’d been through so much together.

“We’ll go home soon, just some paperwork and preparations to finish up. Another year starting tomorrow. You’ll be my most excellent teaching assistant again, won’t you? You know how much they loved you last year. As long as you promise not to eat the desk again.”

Flea snorted and pushed back gently against Harry’s side, ears flipped back as he listened. His tail swished, and Harry took it to mean there’d be no promises of good behaviour. Harry didn’t mind.

“It’s a great lesson they learn. That, in the end, we’re all just misunderstood creatures.”

Flea ducked from beneath Harry’s arm and spread his wings wide, lifting off into the sky.

The summer sun had disappeared beyond the horizon, cooling the otherwise balmy air as Draco appeared in the field, dotted with yarrow and queen anne’s lace, outside the cottage in Tenebris Hollow, just as he had done with Harry all those years ago. His shirt sleeves were rolled up past his elbows and his fair hair flopped over his forehead. He felt relaxed in a way that his younger self had never known. He looked up to the cottage, just as sturdy and constant as it had been for centuries.

The coming dusk sang with the sound of buzzing insects and chirruping frogs as he walked past the wiggentree, now towering over its corner of the garden, touching its grooved bark as he went. Wondering as he did so at the wealth of memories made beneath it’s ever reaching boughs.

How Pansy had once sat with him under this tree and told him about Ginny, about Blaise, about the family they were making together. He remembered one spring day when he told Hermione he could reverse her blood curse, and how she had cried in relief. He remembered a hot summer night when Harry had tried to recreate their first date beneath this tree, but with less of the hesitancy they shared in those early days, with more bravery and more firsts.
He looked across the field, past the well, to the stone lauder Harry and he had built together into a small hill by the forests edge a few years back—when the kitchen just wasn’t big enough to hold all of their garden treasures and potion ingredients. Little things here and there that marked the passage of time, marked their growth, together.

He smiled to himself when Harry’s voice carried through the garden. “Draco?”

“I’m home.” He said simply.

Harry’s head popped up from behind an unruly rosemary bush, his disheveled bun threatening to fall down around his shoulders, a fistful of carrots held triumphantly in his fist. “I have dinner! Well, part of dinner?”

Draco snorted fondly as he walked towards him. So much, and yet not much, had changed in the intervening years. Their love had grown and matured, as had their wiggentree. It was stronger, solid like the bedrock on which their home sat.

Draco tossed his robes over the the little wattle fence that surrounded the garden and stepped over the newest generation of egg eater that sat in the path, soaking up the last warm rays of the day. Eggshell neatly discarded beneath the lettuce. He wound his way through the little intersecting paths, around raised beds and lush fruit trees. He tripped, as he always did, on a protruding fig tree root in the path beside his perennial vegetable bed.

“Damn.” He muttered ruefully, righting himself and closing the gap between himself and Harry, who stood to reach for him, a mischievous smile playing on his lips.

“Did you know,” Harry started, and Draco rolled his eyes, knowing what Harry was going to say, and smiling in spite of himself. Nine years they’d been having this argument-- nine years since Draco had planted the fig tree in the garden despite Harry’s repeated proclamations that the singular fig would take over the whole hollow-- and 9 years since he’d been tripping on the errant and destructive roots, “that figs have invasive root systems?”

Draco sighed in exasperation, wrapping his arms around Harry’s midsection as he continued, “Because, they do. I don’t know if you’re aware—but in case you didn’t know—they’re invasive and they tear down whole houses if you let them--“

“Harry, I swear to Salazar and on your thestral’s life—“ He laughed into his shoulder, knowing full well that one day their fig would dig its roots into every bed of the garden and lift every path, and knowing he would be hearing about it until his dying breath.

Harry kissed him, clearly satisfied with himself. “Just thought you should know.”

Voileami’s face was buried in an overabundant comfrey bush beside the porch steps as they walked up to the door. The nest in the low slung thatch roof was occupied, as it always was. The inside was much the same as it had always been. The ceiling was completely occluded with dozens and dozens of herbs, dutiful and abundant, waiting for purpose and Draco’s skilled hands.

Their kitchen had been updated, but their same mugs still sat upon the scrubbed wood counter. Draco’s encourage-mint was no longer in a small pot but a rather large shallow ceramic tray on his potions bench, sprawling happily out in all directions. Harry had moved his to the bathroom, where it had begun slinking up the clawed foot of the tub from where it sat, taking over, slowly but surely.

Their home was cozy and life spilled out from every nook and cranny, memories from every
surface, love from every corner. Harry threw the carrots down on the counter and began to make them tea. They stood facing one another, waiting for the kettle to boil, their magic dancing around them, swirling through their home.

Draco searched Harry’s face, counting each new line, each new wrinkle that had appeared there through their years together, feeling love blooming in his chest at the sight of them.

Beatrice had told him that growth and recovery meant allowing himself to sink into feeling love when he found it, to allow himself to enjoy the happiness that blossomed in his life. That of course there would be hard days, set backs and downward spirals, but that the sun would always come back. That love and carefully cultivated joy could lift you out of the deep well if you let it help you. He struggled with that sometimes still, but in the quiet moments of the peaceful domesticity he tended with Harry, he felt it. Let it lift him and fill him to the brim.

He pulled Harry to him, not wanting to let this feeling pass him by, to hold on to Harry and share his joy. The sounds of the coming night rose around the cottage and the thestrals nickered their familiar chatter as Draco threaded their fingers together and let the moment hang between them, heavy and full of promise. Full of their future and the love they had for each other. Full of all of the ways they had survived and woven their lives together with magic and trust.

There in the dim kitchen the smell of tea in the air, soft lips pressed together, Draco thought about how it all began. Two boys, the misunderstood creatures that they were, at odds, finally finding peace in one another, helped along by a pair of death omens.

End Notes

Thank you all for staying with us... until the very end.

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