Light up the Night

by Saras_Girl

Summary

This year, despite his better judgement, Harry’s love life is going off with a bang. Advent fic 2019.

Notes

Well, here we are on our seventh year of festive madness! This story is full of pining, ridiculous stubbornness, family, food, and a wee nod or two to previous fics. Just a few things to mention:

I know I’ve touched on the dating thing in previous fics but Marie loves it and asked for it specifically, so here it is :) I am aware that Wizards Unite is a thing already (Marie has it on her phone and I particularly enjoy rescuing Moody’s eye from the naughty chicken) but it was too perfect a name not to use!

Obviously I don’t own any of the HP characters or the films they talk about. I do, however, own a lovely set of pointy maces that I use to hit people over the head with.

Nighthawks is loosely based on the painting by Edward Hopper, which I have always loved.

A special thank you to Mara from AO3 for our exchange re the ageing of pets in the magical world, and, as always, all the gratitude in the world to my wonderful Marie, who takes the most amazing care of me when I’m immersed in writing and is generally just my favourite everything. I love you.

Finally, this story is dedicated to my brilliant sister, Kelly. She just started reading my stories this year and has been fully converted to HPDM. It’s been so nice to share all of this with her. She was excited to read along this year, day by day, and I hope she enjoys it <3
Harry startles at the sound of Molly’s exasperated voice and looks up from the pan of cooked carrots he’s been idly poking for the last few minutes.

“Sorry,” he says, shaking away all thoughts of black powder and antimony trisulphide and just about preventing an over-curious chameleon from pulling his glasses down his face. “What did you say?”

“I said lunch is nearly ready and you need to put some muscle into those carrots,” Molly says, turning back to the stove and stirring a steaming pot of gravy. “Are you chopping them or making friends with them?”

Harry smiles and attends to his job, knowing that he has no answer, and knowing just as well that it isn’t a real question.

“Give him a break, Mum,” Ron says, floating plates from the cupboard to the table in a slightly haphazard fashion. He gives Harry a rather stern look that doesn’t really suit his face. “I bet he’s had no sleep getting ready for tonight.”

Again, Harry says nothing, but sighs when a small, grippy foot reaches up and tugs at his hair.

“Stop it, Ken,” he mutters, amused when Ginny bears the chameleon away, spinning him in circles around the kitchen in her arms and just about avoiding a collision with Rose, who is folding napkins while idly wandering around the room.

Molly looks at him now, face creased in concern. “You do look a bit pale, love.”

“I’m fine,” Harry insists, covering an unhelpful yawn. “It’s just a busy time of year and I could do with seeing a bit more light.”

“Not much chance today,” Arthur says, poking at the custard and craning his neck to examine the grey sky beyond the window.

It’s barely two o’clock and the light already seems to be fading for the day, but Harry doesn’t mind too much. The kitchen of the Burrow is brightly lit with lamps and candles in jars, and is so alive with family activity and delicious cooking smells that even the weariest person couldn’t feel
downcast for long. Harry applies himself to his task, chopping at the carrots into small pieces with the usual table knife and basking in the soft feeling of Sunday that wraps the whole room in a gentle haze.

“You do the carrots, Arthur,” Molly decides.

“When I’ve finished with the custard,” he says mildly.

“I’m fine,” Harry insists, but no one seems to hear him.

“I can do zem,” Fleur offers from the other side of the table. “Knives and forks are finished.”

“I’ve got a chameleon full of hot, strong love,” Ginny sings to Kenneth, who swivels each of his conical eyes in turn. He’s heard it all before.

“Why don’t you just use a spell for the carrots?” Ron asks, attempting and failing to conceal a mouthful of ill-gotten roast potato.

“Because,” Molly says, taking the tray from his hands with a reproachful look, “they are your great-grandmother’s carrots and they have to be done by hand, as you well know. They are a family tradition, and… Percy, what are you doing with the stuffing?”

“I tried,” Ron says, and Harry grins at him.

“I like doing the carrots,” he promises, and he does.

He has been in charge of Great Grandma Bertha’s special carrots for several years now, and he is quite contented with the job. Being entrusted with something so important to the family makes him feel like the honorary Weasley he knows he is, and besides, it’s a more interesting job than laying the table. Or, he suspects, looking around for Hermione, crashing about in Arthur’s wine cellar, looking for something to accompany the roast. It’s dusty in there, and full of the kind of beetles that make startling noises at people with bottles in their hands.

Most importantly, these are the best carrots Harry has ever had, and if he has to chase the butter-slippery little buggers around the pan with a blunt knife every Sunday, then so be it. As he adds salt and fresh black pepper, someone creeps closer to him with a grimace.

“I don’t like carrots,” announces Bill and Fleur’s younger daughter, her gentle voice caught somewhere between Fleur’s French accent and Bill’s southern English.

“If you want to grow as tall as Victoire, you must eat your vegetables,” Fleur says, and Camille’s face darkens.

“Victoire always eats her vegetables,” she mumbles to herself.

“If I remember rightly, she hated peas when she was your age,” Harry says, thinking not of the rather elegant teenage Victoire, but of her younger self, a theatrical little ball of contrariness, not unlike her sister.

“I’m going to eat all my peas,” Camille declares, before diving under the table in a whisk of blue cotton and strawberry blonde hair. “Hugo! Where did you get that? Let me see!”
Harry opts not to interfere, instead casting a gentle warming charm around the saucepan and turning to smile at Fleur, who is peering under the table with a resigned look on her face. With Victoire all ready to start at Hogwarts, Camille had been somewhat of a surprise to Bill and Fleur, but they have taken the whole thing in stride and she has proved a perfect, if somewhat mischievous, playmate for Hugo.

“How’s work?” Harry asks, always curious to hear about her adventures in appraising what she calls ‘beautiful zings’.

“We found a painting inside a cave,” she says.

“Like a stone age thing?” Ron asks, pulling up a chair.

“No,” she says, pale eyes lighting with enthusiasm. “It was a painting from the fifteenth century. But zis was on a canvas, in a frame, hidden inside a cave zat has been blocked up for many years.”

“How very mysterious,” Arthur says, bringing a vast joint of beef to the table and setting it down with a flourish. “I’m sure Bill will like to see it when he comes home. Where is he now? Vietnam?”

“Cambodia,” Harry says, breathing in the savoury scent of the meat and closing his eyes for a moment.

“He sent us a postcard with a temple on it,” Rose adds, setting a cotton napkin next to each plate.

“Yes,” Fleur nods. “Bill will examine it. We must ensure ze painting is free of curses before we move it.”

“Let’s not talk about curses around the table,” Molly chides, waving her wand and settling an array of steaming platters to rest beside the roast beef. “Arthur, would you like to carve?”

Arthur stands up with an air of ceremony and slices the meat into perfect, neat portions. As soon as he’s done, the table descends into chaos as everyone helps themselves to roast beef, vegetables, Yorkshire puddings and piping hot gravy. Harry takes a bit of everything, watching the others with quiet contentment. Molly, spattered with batter and meat juices, looks around fondly at her family and beams when Arthur squeezes her hand under the table. Camille and Hugo whisper to each other, seeming not to notice when Fleur spoons both carrots and peas onto their plates. Hermione pours the wine with a cobweb in her hair, jumping when Ron pokes her with his fork.

“Where’s George today?” Ginny asks, and Harry notices that she is no longer in possession of Ken.

He opens his mouth to ask when Molly squawks and scrapes back her chair.

“He’s climbing up my leg again, Harry,” she sighs, reaching down and retrieving the chameleon.

He peers up at her, bandy legs cycling pointlessly in mid-air. Harry reaches to take him, but Molly has other ideas.

“I’ve got something for you,” she says, heading for the corner of the kitchen with poor Ken dangling from one hand, opening and closing his toes like tiny scissors. “There. That should keep him out of trouble for five minutes.”
Triumphantly, she places him on the floor several feet from the table and sets a large, overripe tomato in front of him. Ken opens his mouth and attacks the tomato with gusto, and Molly smiles to herself as she retakes her seat.

“Sorry about that,” Harry says, watching his ridiculous pet as the attention of the room turns slowly back to the matter of lunch.

“He’s your favourite grandchild, isn’t he?” Ron teases.

Hugo and Camille continue to plot quietly, but Rose frowns, and Molly pats her hand.

“Of course not. I don’t have favourites, Ron. He’s… my most colourful grandchild,” she says firmly.

Ken straightens his tail importantly and plunges deeper into the tomato. Harry chews on a piece of perfectly cooked roast beef and watches him, remembering the day he’d found the little bugger mixed in with a shipment of salamanders. Harry had been fairly certain that while the salamanders would be willing participants in his fiery display, a misplaced baby chameleon would be less enthusiastic. One curious eye-swivel later, both of their fates had been sealed.

Consultation with Rose and Teddy regarding a name for his new pet had descended into argument, with Rose championing ‘Minty’, for his green stripes, and Teddy insisting he be christened Kenneth Crump, after his favourite Quidditch player. In the spirit of compromise, Harry had chosen the name ‘Minty Kenneth’, or Minty Kenneth Crump-Potter in moments of naughtiness, which are, he has to admit, quite frequent.

As though reading Harry’s mind, Ken’s scales darken from their default green to a rich blue-black and he headbutts the remains of the tomato across the kitchen floor.

“Be good,” Harry whispers, noting the sticky trail of seeds on Molly’s immaculate tiles and shaking his head.

After a moment’s consideration, Ken makes his ponderous way across the kitchen to retrieve his snack and Harry turns back to the table. No one seems to have noticed his pet’s poor behaviour. At least for now.

“So, where is George, anyway?” he asks.

“He has a date,” Ginny says, nodding when Ron lets out an ‘ooh’ sound. “I know.”

“She must be quite something if he’s missing Sunday lunch for her,” Percy says, gazing at the roast potato on his fork with reverence. “Audrey’s terribly upset she had to miss out today, but we decided that none of you would want Lucy’s cold. I opted to represent us here while she stayed home.”

“How thoughtful of you, Perce,” Ron says, rolling his eyes.

“One day I hope to have such a chivalrous husband,” Ginny says solemnly, and at her side, Hermione giggles and chokes slightly on her food.

“What does chivalrous mean?” Rose asks.
“It means acting like a proper gentleman,” Molly explains, eyes fixed on her son. “Unlike your Uncle Percy. I’ll box up some leftovers for them and you’d better not eat them yourself.”

“It’s not like that,” Percy insists, reddening. “We flipped a Sickle for it.”

Harry snorts. “All’s fair in love and Sunday lunch.”

“Exactly,” Percy says, shooting him a grateful look and then turning to Ginny. “What do we know about this girl?”

“The rumour is, it’s someone we went to school with,” she says, and Harry has known her long enough to suspect that she has all the information already and is choosing to drip-feed it to the rest of them for her own entertainment.


“She is zat,” Fleur sighs, and Camille brightens.

“You don’t like girls, do you Uncle Harry?”

Ron covers a snort and manages to spray gravy through his fingers and onto the tablecloth. Molly sighs. Rose giggles and Arthur stares at Harry, clearly curious for his response.

“Of course I like girls,” Harry says firmly. “I like all the girls in this room. But I don’t want a girlfriend, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Please forgive her,” Fleur whispers. “She has yet to learn tact.”

Harry shrugs and pokes his fork into his carrots. It’s no secret that he’s gay, though he’s never been asked about it with such directness from such a small person before. Really, he’s just hoping that the conversation doesn’t now turn into a lamentation of his single status, but he’s been here too many times before.

“Don’t worry, Hugo, I’ll save some leftovers for George, too,” Molly says, and Harry lets out a relieved breath; apparently the conversation has moved on without him.

“Maybe you should have a date, Uncle Harry,” Rose says suddenly.

Harry freezes, wine glass halfway to his mouth. “You know, I think I’m alright.”

“It would be nice to see you bring a young man home,” Arthur says, and then flushes. He glances at Molly. “Sorry, that’s the sort of thing you usually say, isn’t it?”

“You’ve been married too long,” Ginny suggests. “You’re becoming one person.”

“Uberparent,” Ron intones, grinning.

“Or monoparent?” Hermione offers.

“The Ultimate Weasley,” Percy adds, forgetting to be serious for a moment.
“Stop it, all of you,” Molly says, flapping her napkin, but when laughter ripples around the table, she smiles at her extended brood. “Besides, he’s right. It would be nice. Do you think you’ll be bringing anyone for Christmas this year?”

Harry groans inwardly and exchanges weary glances with Ginny, the only other single person at the table.

“I doubt it, Molly,” he says, heart lifting when Ginny flings herself upon the sword.

“Just me this year, too, Mum, unless I find the man of my dreams in a pile of paperwork.”

“I’m just trying to make sure I buy the right size turkey,” Molly says, pursing her lips and peering at Harry in a way he that he doesn’t like one bit.

He feels as though she can see right into him and all at once he wants to hide under the table. He’s fine; he’s never alone with Ken at his side, and he’s certainly not lonely. He has friends and a bizarre family and a wonderful set of eccentrics that fill his working life with colour. Unfortunately, he knows that none of those things will ever stop Molly looking at him like that.

“Let’s just say I don’t need a plus-one this year,” he says eventually. “I’m not very good at the whole meeting people and dating thing, and I think we all know that.”

“You’re just too picky,” Ron says, mopping up the last of his gravy with a roast potato.

Hermione stares at him and the look on her face makes Harry want to laugh.

“Zer’s nothing wrong with being selective,” Fleur says. “You don’t want just any husband, you want ze right one.”

“Who said anything about husbands?” Harry asks, throat suddenly dry enough to require several gulps of wine.

“You could try one of those dating agencies,” Percy offers, scowling when Ron bursts into laughter.

“Harry’s not that desperate,” he snorts. “Those things are useless, anyway.”

“I didn’t know you were an expert, Ron,” Hermione says, and he falls silent.

“Please stop, all of you. Harry is fine. Harry is perfectly alright,” Harry says, and though Molly’s expression suggests that she doesn’t believe him, she is helpfully distracted by Ken’s attempt to scale the pantry door, which results in a loud thwap and the patter of little footsteps as the disgruntled chameleon scuttles into the living room and out of sight.

“I’ll get him,” Harry says, relieved for the excuse to leave the table.

“I’ll get the pudding out,” Arthur says, scraping back his chair and only slipping a little bit in the tomato mess as he goes to open the oven.

A delicious buttery toffee smell follows Harry into the living room and he inhales it deeply, scanning the floor and furniture for a small, mischievous entity that can change colour at will. He sighs and hopes Ron doesn’t eat his pudding.
The sky is dark long before Harry says his goodbyes, retrieves his case and heads for work. There
is a damp feeling to the air and he pulls it deep into his lungs as he steadies himself from his
Apparation and crunches along the pebbled beach, eyes focused on the coloured lights in the
distance. The tide is out but he can still hear the crashing of distant waves and taste the salt carried
by the cold sea breeze. As he draws closer to his destination, his weariness evaporates and is
replaced by the thrill of excitement a new display always brings. Inside this ordinary-looking case
with its green chameleon logo is a riot of colour and exhilaration, a story told in light and
movement.

He shoves his free hand into his coat pocket for warmth and tightens the other around the heavy
handle. On his shoulder, Ken shifts inside his warming charm and plucks gently at Harry’s collar,
making him smile. Their friendship is years-old now, and Harry knows that he isn’t the only one
ready to get going.

“Fancy a beach hut, Ken?” he asks, pausing to admire the long row of tiny buildings.

Each one is little more than a clapboard shed, but with their pitched rooves and pastel paint-jobs,
they look so inviting that Harry can easily imagine curling up inside one on a cold winter’s day,
drinking tea under a chunky blanket and watching the sea birds swooping over the water. Ken
could have branches for climbing and there could be someone to lean against, someone with a
warm jumper and a pile of tatty books for reading aloud, and… and nothing, because he does not
need a man and he does not need a beach hut. Even if some of them are draped in fairy lights and
even if he misses hugging someone who isn’t a member of the Weasley family.

The trouble is, Harry is a hopeless romantic, and as much as he doesn’t want to be one, there is
very little he can do about it. He knows that the perfect man doesn’t exist, nor does the perfect
relationship, but his attempts to settle for less-than have left him disillusioned, disappointed, and
sad. He has all the wrong expectations and all the wrong feelings and he doesn’t know how to be
any different, so he doesn’t. Not any more. If he’s completely honest with himself, he has to admit
that he would love someone to share his life with, but he doubts he’s going to find that person
while working nights and spending days hiding in his basement, so he creates beautiful things with
powders and spells and that, he thinks, is enough excitement for him.

He had tried an awful lot of jobs after school, spending much of his early twenties hopping from
speaking engagements to charity work and everything in between. There had even been a brief spell
filling in for Madam Hooch at Hogwarts. The only thing he’d been certain of was that he didn’t
want to fight, and he had enjoyed trying every other thing he could find, but Hermione had always
insisted there was a job out there for him to love, and Hermione, as usual, had been right.

It had only taken one drunken evening at the Leaky with his old Gryffindor dorm-mates to spark
his interest, and as a slurring Seamus had waxed lyrical about his love of pyrotechnics, Harry had
listened with singular, firewhisky-driven focus, and mumbled promises of demonstrations and
lifelong friendship had been made. Days later, in a scrubby field behind Seamus’s house, they had
lit up the night sky and Harry had fallen in love with the smell of the powders, the cascades of
metal stars, the blend of careful assembly and the ignition of wild, wheeling sparks and colours.
The next day had seen a huge order placed with Seamus’s suppliers, followed by months of study
and careful experiments in Harry’s newly fire-proofed basement.

When Seamus went to China to study under a master of the art, Harry had branched out on his
A combination of night-time displays and working in a windowless basement take their toll, especially in the winter, but Harry’s work is full of joy and he wouldn’t swap it for the fanciest desk in the Ministry. Seamus, having settled in Beijing, sends letters and Christmas cards featuring his Chinese wife and their ridiculously good-looking children. He, too, is happy, even though Meili insists his Irish accent makes his Mandarin all but impossible to understand.

Ken picks his way around the back of Harry’s coat collar and settles himself on the opposite shoulder.

“What are you doing, weirdo?” Harry asks with a series of gentle hisses.

Ken stares at him, rotating each eye in turn. Harry isn’t sure why he sometimes attempts to address the chameleon in Parsel-tongue, but something about it always seems to snag Ken’s interest. He is a reptile, after all; perhaps the sound is familiar to him, like an Irishman speaking Chinese.

When Ken shoots out his ridiculous tongue, Harry instinctively sniffs the air, grinning when he detects spices and grilled meats and fried everything. He’s still full from Molly’s roast, but he can’t wait to see what his friends in the food vans have come up with for the first day of advent, and he suspects that there might be a little bit of room to try something new. As he crunches closer to the strings of lights, he sees that a rather loud crowd is forming, and the knot of anticipation in his stomach tightens.

There are shows throughout the year, of course—displays for weddings, religious festivals, birthdays and even funerals—but the run up to Christmas is always something special, and this year there will be an event for every night of advent and their little band of artists, cooks, musicians and performers will light up December for the wizarding community.

“Hello, Ken,” calls a short man in a puffy red coat, waving and lowering his wand as he spots the chameleon. “Hi, Harry.”

Harry laughs. “Hello, Selwyn. Good to know where I stand.”

Selwyn shrugs. “Everyone knows Ken’s the brains of the outfit. Listen, I’m having trouble with that far corner,” he says, pointing with his wand to a spot behind Harry. “Is it going to be a problem if we can’t fully conceal it?”

Harry looks and then leans back, calculating the distance his larger shells should travel. “No, that should be fine. I’ll set up a bit further to the left, if that’ll help?”

Selwyn gives him a grateful smile and then dashes away, wand held aloft. Harry feels for him; it can’t be easy being the only Ministry employee amongst a large group of what he calls ‘creatives’, but he manages to corral them with mostly good humour and always ensures that whatever they get up to in the name of entertainment is hidden from the non-magical world. Harry watches him for a moment, admiring the powerful concealment charms that shoot out of his wand and wrap themselves around a large section of the beach.

Soon, the intriguing aroma becomes too much to ignore and Harry heads for the food vans, where he finds three smiling vendors and a frowning Draco Malfoy.

“Do you want one or not, love?” asks Glenda, a squat witch in red robes, the breast pocket of which is emblazoned with the legend ‘The Original Stick Tram’.
Her vehicle has been decorated to look like an old fashioned tram car, painted in glossy green and white, with a hatch for her to lean out of and peer at difficult customers, just as she is doing now.

“I don’t know,” Draco says, mouth twisting. “I’m just not sure that a chicken kiev belongs on a stick.”

“It’s not just a chicken kiev, it’s a Cajun spiced deluxe chicken kiev,” Glenda points out, indicating the chalkboard on which today’s menu is written. “It’s on a stick because all our food is on a stick. On a stick is what we do, love.”

Amused, Harry steps closer. Glenda smiles at him but Draco just sighs. “Yes, I understand that.”

“Well, good, because we’ve been having this conversation for years,” Glenda says, folding her arms. “Every time we make something new, you’re here wondering if it should be on a stick. At this point, I’m not sure what to tell you.”

“You’d miss it if he stopped,” Harry says, and this time, both of them look at him.

“I don’t know about that,” Glenda says, but her expression is good-natured even as she waves Draco away and attends to a customer who seems to know what they want.

“Good evening,” Draco says, looking so intensely at Harry that he feels, as he always does, like he’s taken off all his clothes and shouted for everyone to look. “How is the swivel-eyed menace?”

Ken studiously ignores him and continues rubbing the bony casque on the top of his head against Harry’s chin. It’s an odd sensation, but one to which he’s accustomed.

“Lorna and Jim are doing hot ice cream,” he says, indicating the van behind him, where a handsome, dark-haired couple are doing a roaring trade in steaming cones brimming with spices. “You could get one of those. No stick to contend with.”

Draco wrinkles his nose. “It’s too soon.”

“What is?”

“It’s too early in December for hot ice cream,” Draco explains, as though it should be obvious.

Harry just nods. Draco rarely makes sense, and he’s comfortable with that. They’ve become almost-colleagues over recent years, as Harry’s firework displays bring him easily within Draco’s remit as a member of the Wizarding Arts Council, and his constant presence at events like tonight’s has slowly become as normal as Molly’s roast dinners or powder burns on Harry’s hands.

Draco is an odd character, frequently frustrating, but he isn’t the person he once was, and more than that, he’s fascinating. He’s the sort of person that you could spend hours talking to, and Harry frequently does, ignoring sleep in favour of nocturnal, post-firework visits to a corner café with booths for secret assignations, or, in their case, hiding talk of magic from the Muggle staff and customers. Harry wonders if there will be a Nighthawks moment tonight, or if he’ll chance a dodgy Apparation straight back to his bedroom and fall asleep with a chameleon on his face.

“Have you gone to sleep?” Draco asks, lifting one eyebrow. “Actually, you do look a bit—”

“Oh, god, don’t you start,” Harry says, and Draco just smiles. “I’m going to set up. I’ll see you
Suddenly feeling his weariness all over again, Harry trudges across the pebbles and crouches down to open his case. The moment he does so, the excitement sparks back into life and he watches the cascade of drawers slide open, revealing neat rows of paper shells and potion-impregnated fuses fluttering in the sea breeze. Grinning, he rolls out a piece of fabric that becomes stiff and stable with a touch of his wand, then hums to himself as he lays out the shells in order. Tonight’s display will begin a story that will continue throughout advent, and it’s more important than ever that everything happens in the right order.

When he’s satisfied, he protects the shells with a charm and buys a large, steaming cup of coffee from Lorna, who seems disappointed that he’s not ready for ice cream. He sits on the cold pebbles next to his case and drinks it slowly, wondering if Draco has decided to risk the chicken kiev on a stick. He’s usually quite adventurous with food, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t like to complain about it for a while before trying. Harry smiles into his coffee, remembering the quiet outrage that had ensued when Glenda had dared to make sausages on sticks with brown sauce rather than ketchup. Harry had thought such a thing would be far below Draco’s interest, and Harry had been wrong.

Feeling warmed by the hot coffee, he keeps half an eye on Ken and the rest on tonight’s musical entertainment, a rather impressive steel band. By the time his cue comes, his legs are frozen stiff, but he manages to scramble into position and cast the first ignition spell. At his whispered words, a streak of light screams into the air and explodes into soft, blue waves. The crowd seems to gasp gently as one, and Harry casts three spells in turn, watching, exhilarated as the colours fizz and hiss before exploding into distinct shapes, forming three multicoloured fish beneath the fading trails of the waves. He pauses to let them swim, glancing at the crowd and spotting Draco, who is eating something on a stick with his eyes fixed on the sky.

The next part is complicated, and Harry holds his breath, letting it out again when several glittering lines of red jumble and coalesce at his command to form a signpost that reads ‘To the north pole’. He follows this with three more fishes, who seem to peer at the sign and follow it before fading into showers of silver stars. There are delighted mumbles and gasps from the crowd as Harry continues, lighting and directing and filling the sky with underwater creatures, all beginning their journey towards the Arctic. He breathes in deeply, relishing the charcoal-sulphur scent of the black powder and the almost sweet smell of burning paper. The air is cold in his chest and he loves it; his fingertips are burned and he doesn’t care. He’s worked hard for this, and it’s glorious.

He finishes the display with a cavalcade of vast, arcing explosions in red, green, and gold, each going off with such a bang that he can almost feel Selwyn checking his silencing charms in a panic. When it’s over, the crowd bursts into fierce applause and he grins, so cold that he can barely feel his face. With an excitable Ken attempting to crawl over the top of his head, he vanishes the debris of his display, packs up his case and heads for the food vans. He is stopped every few paces by children and adults wanting to congratulate him on his display, ask about Ken, or both, and by the time he reaches Glenda, she’s all sold out of chicken kiev on a stick, or, indeed, anything else on a stick.

“Sorry, love. I’ll make some more for next time. When are you on again?” she asks.

“I’m not doing another show until Tuesday, but I’ll probably be around tomorrow,” Harry says, knowing that it will take something fairly drastic for him to miss any of the advent events.

“When do you sleep?” she asks, looking for a moment very much like Molly.
“Leave him be, Glenda, he’s already got a mother,” Draco says, and then cringes. “Sorry.”

Harry shrugs. “It’s fine. I have got a mother. I’ve got two.”

Relief flickers in Draco’s eyes. He coughs. “Nighthawks?”

Harry smiles, catching up Ken and stuffing him into his favourite coat pocket, a warm place in which treats can often be found.

“I think so.”
Harry’s dream about being chased by a horde of ice cream cones on legs is interrupted first by a loud clattering sound and then by the insistent drumming of the rain against his bedroom window. His head hurts and he’s almost certain he hasn’t had enough sleep yet, but when a second clattering noise is followed by a third and a fourth, he opens one eye just in time to see a glass candle holder falling from his chest of drawers and hitting the floor. Fortunately, the object is sturdier than it looks and merely thumps against the waxed floorboards and rolls under the bed.

With a feeling of resignation, Harry rubs his eyes and turns to regard Ken, who is perched on top of the drawers and head-butt ing a framed picture of Harry’s first solo display. As the daft chameleon prods at the glass, the photograph loops through a series of brightly-coloured bursts of light, and the memory that tugs at Harry’s weary brain makes him smile. Ken knocks the frame onto its back and he sighs, propping himself up on his pillows with one arm.

“Why do you have to mess with my stuff?” he asks, and Ken swivels his eyes mysteriously. “You have your own stuff. So much stuff. Everywhere.”

There is no response from the chameleon, so Harry flops onto his back, shoving on his glasses so he can better appreciate the network of wooden planks that circle the room. The one directly above his head is one of Ken’s favourite sleeping spots, along with Harry’s face and pillow, and the platforms lead out into the hallway and all around the house. Ken loves to climb, and as he is spoiled silly, Harry has filled number twelve with shelves, plants and rough vertical surfaces that allow the little bugger to roam and scramble to his heart’s content. None of this seems to prevent Ken from interfering with Harry’s possessions, however, and at this point, he has pretty much given up trying to stop him.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, and Ken swivels an eye towards him.

A long, scoop-shaped tongue darts out and swipes at empty air.

“You have food. Go and find something,” Harry yawns. “A bacon sandwich and a cup of tea would be nice, if you’re going near the kitchen.”

Ken continues to peer at him for a moment and then turns, knocking over a propped up postcard with his tail before beginning his ambling descent from the chest of drawers. Harry wonders, as he often does, just how much he understands. Draco always says that he understands every word and
opts to ignore most instructions. Draco also refers to him as the swivel-eyed menace, and while Harry tends to protest on his pet’s behalf, there are times when he has to agree.

He closes his eyes again, listening to the tap-tap of tiny claws on the landing and the lash of the rain against his window. He doesn’t know what time it is and he doesn’t want to know. He has slept badly, and he doubts he’ll rest now that he’s awake. He probably shouldn’t have stayed up half the night drinking good coffee and eating dreadful pastries with Draco, but it always seems like a good idea at the time. Harry smiles in spite of his exhaustion, remembering a conversation about just what Selwyn might be keeping in his enormous coat that had made Draco’s eyes seem to glow in the soft lamplight of the café.

That first time at Nighthawks had been Draco’s idea; in fact, he had all but dragged Harry there after a display to interrogate him, scribbling rapidly in a little leather notebook and firing out questions about future displays, costs and overheads and cultural contributions. Harry had left with a sheaf of funding application forms and a feeling of confusion. He had filled them in, imagining that to be the end of it, but Draco had cornered him again, apparently thrilled with the new grant his fireworks had apparently netted the arts council, and before he could say Minty Kenneth Crump-Potter, all three of them were back at Nighthawks and a new tradition had wriggled its way into Harry’s life.

Draco likes beautiful things, exciting things, strange things. Harry likes the plate glass café that stays open all night, the slightly surly service and the way that the world outside seems to fade to nothing but a hum of background static. He likes strong coffee with a hint of whisky and varnished wood under his fingers and he likes Draco. Draco is beautiful and exciting and strange, too, and more than that, he is a surprisingly excellent friend. Harry has the feeling that Ron and Hermione are confused by the whole thing, which just makes him want to laugh.

“Hermione thinks he’s a bad influence,” he says to Ken, and then remembers that he’s alone in the room.

With a groan, he hauls himself out of bed and forces himself to look at the clock, just as his bare foot squelches onto what feels like a slimy piece of fruit.

“Good,” he says to no one in particular and lifts his foot.

It’s half past one in the afternoon, the sky outside seems to think it’s the middle of the night, and he has just stepped on a half-eaten slice of mango. He sighs and vanishes it with his wand, deciding that if Ken had really wanted to eat it, he would have finished the whole piece. He heads for the shower, trying not to think about the fact that his house is essentially a giant fruit salad for a naughty chameleon. He had, on the recommendation of the Magical Menagerie’s Mr Pike, initially tried to feed Ken with live crickets, but Ken’s habit of catching them, crunching them and spitting them out again had put paid to that idea. It is, he maintains, one thing standing on a bit of tomato and quite another treading in a pile of half-masticated insect. As a result, Ken now feasts on a diet of fruit and dried tubeworms, which he likes to distribute around the house at his own convenience.

Following a particularly thorough scrub in the shower, Harry returns to the bedroom and rubs at his hair with a towel. He sits on the edge of the bed and carefully heals the burns on his hands, taking a moment to examine the scar on his chest that serves as a reminder of his first and only proper accident. He touches the shiny, faded patch of skin with his fingertips, tracing the edges and remembering his carelessness so vividly that the scar flashes with a white-hot pain that only exists in his memory. He heals the little wounds, the powder burns that just seem to come with the job, but the mark on his chest serves a bigger purpose, and it’s staying right where it is. It isn’t
particularly attractive, but as no one even knows it’s there, he doesn’t have to explain.

Finally dry, Harry dresses and picks up the items Kenneth has knocked onto the floor. He replaces the candle and its holder after a brief scrabble under the bed, props up Bill’s latest postcard and sets his photograph back on its stand. Harry has a whole collection of photographs in this room, and fortunately, most of them are attached to the wall where they are safe from Ken, unless he’s in a particularly energetic climbing mood.

Harry gazes at the pictures, eyes drifting from one frame to the next. Each one contains someone or something important to him, and while he has photographs all over the house, hung on various walls and stuffed into albums, these are the ones he sees when he wakes up and they have been chosen to bring a smile to even the weariest of winter mornings. It’s a pretty diverse bunch of images, none of the frames match and there’s no particular logic to the arrangement; Molly and Arthur smile down at him from next to a fantastically vivid picture of Ken covered in watermelon seeds; beneath that, Harry, Ron and Hermione laugh and hug each other in front of a pink, orange and gold sunset.

In pride of place is his favourite photograph of his parents, beaming down warmly from their burnished copper frame, and directly opposite them is another picture that bursts with fireworks, featuring a large group of his fellow creatives and friends. So many people are stuffed into the picture that it often seems to destabilise on its hook, and Harry leans up to edge it straight again. Draco peers out at him from the edge of the image, ruffled hair and long coat whipping in the wind, and beside him, Selwyn stuffs his hands into the pockets of his mysterious red jacket. Several other grinning Weasleys flank the group picture, including one featuring Charlie and his partner Serghei standing proudly in front of a wild Hungarian Horntail.

Harry’s smile fades slightly as he regards his picture of Hagrid and Fang. It’s been several months now, and Harry still finds it difficult to picture his old friend without his old friend at his side. Fang had lived to a ripe old age, even for a magically bred animal, but the loss has been painful all the same. Everyone has told Hagrid that he must get another dog, but these things cannot be rushed. Feeling suddenly raw inside, Harry grabs his wand and casts a charm that sends a tendril or white light spooling into the hallway.

“Ken,” he calls, following the light down the stairs and into the kitchen, where he finds the chameleon sitting on the windowsill with his little feet splayed across the glass. Harry wonders if he’s waiting for the rain to stop or just absorbing the small amount of light available.

With a protective little rush of love, Harry picks him up and hugs him to his chest, smiling when grippy little feet close around the loose fabric of his jumper.

“You’re a good boy,” he murmurs, and Ken rubs his casque lazily against Harry’s jawline in what he knows to be a gesture of trust and affection.

As Harry wanders around the kitchen, assembling toast and bacon and tea, Ken scrambles onto his shoulder and keeps a rapidly swivelling eye on proceedings. After a fortifying breakfast-slash-lunch-slash-whatever-it-is-at-this-hour, Harry deposits the chameleon in a plant and heads for the basement.

“No,” he says firmly, when Ken flails and scissors his little hands in protest. “It’s dangerous down there. Peligro! Achtung! Erm… c’est dangereux… I think. I’ll ask Fleur. Look, it’s just not a good place for a lizard, alright?”
Ken disappears into the vast cheese plant and Harry sighs. He’s sulking, of course, but a basement full of flammable chemicals is no place for a nosy chameleon. Shaking his head, he reaches for the basement door, smiling to himself at the sign that was his most recent Christmas present from Ron. In the curliest, most delicate script, set amidst a riot of pink flowers and a picture of a coy Victorian lady, is the legend, ‘Welcome to the Powder Room’.

Harry had been certain that Ron hadn’t actually expected him to put it up, and in the end that had made the decision very simple for him. It is a powder room, and Harry isn’t afraid of a few roses and a crinoline.

“Won’t be long,” he calls to the hidden Ken, and then stops.

Someone or something is tapping at his living room window. Intrigued, Harry runs up the stairs and flings open the curtains to find a bedraggled owl with a large, paper-wrapped parcel. The bird doesn’t hang around for a treat, so Harry closes the window and tucks the parcel under his arm, opting to light the fire and the lamps before he settles himself on the sofa. Soon, the whole room is alive with flickering light and the air smells deliciously of burning wood and inevitably of fruit. There is an envelope attached to the package and Harry reads that first, rubbing the heavy paper between his fingers as he does.

Dear Harry,

I hope this parcel finds you well. I wanted to speak to you at lunch yesterday but found myself the subject of mockery, as usual. I don’t want to interfere with your personal life but merely wanted to make a recommendation. You see, the others think that Audrey and I met through work, but I’m afraid that is a lie. In truth, we both signed up with a service called ‘Magical Mates’, which is a dating agency of sorts. Our compatibility was guaranteed through many points of common interest and we are now, as you know, very happily married indeed.

I have had a poke around and come across a similar agency that I think might meet your needs. Please just have a look at their literature, Harry, that’s all I ask. I would hate to put you under any pressure but I would also love you to find the kind of happiness that you so richly deserve. Also, they seem to be running some kind of a special offer for the run up to Christmas! You never know. It could be a lot of fun.

Please forgive the imposition. I assure you that I have only good intentions.

Yours,

Percy.

Harry reads the letter three times, staring at Percy’s neat handwriting and trying to decide if he, Percy, or both of them have taken leave of their senses. The secret is rather a juicy one; he’s already itching to tell Ron and Hermione but he knows he mustn’t. Percy has offered his confidence in order to… to what? To help Harry? To get him married off so that Molly and Arthur can stop fretting that he’s going to die alone in his basement, surrounded by half-finished fireworks?

Harry has no idea, but the paper package beside him pulls at his curiosity, and he waits only a moment before tearing it open. Two glossy items slide onto his lap. One, bound in rich purple, is a brochure of sorts, extolling the virtues of an agency named ‘Wizards Unite’ and featuring a smiling pair of young men on the cover. Harry rolls his eyes and picks up the second booklet, opening it to
find page after page of questions, each more personal than the last.

“What kind of underwear do you prefer your partner to wear?” he reads aloud, eyebrows disappearing under his messy fringe. “Are you a ‘grower’ or a ‘shower’?”

Letting the booklets slip from his lap, Harry slumps back against the sofa. There’s no way Percy has actually read any of this… but then again, Percy is a very thorough person. Harry groans, suddenly certain that Percy has read both publications from cover to cover, and unsure he’ll ever be able to look him in the eye again.

Something slips out of the purple brochure and Harry picks it up.

FESTIVE SPECIAL, proclaims the glittery piece of paper. A BOYFRIEND BY CHRISTMAS OR YOUR MONEY BACK! DON’T BE LONELY THIS CHRISTMAS, LET WIZARDS UNITE FIND YOUR PERFECT MATCH. GO ON JUST THREE DATES PER WEEK AND IF YOU DON’T CONNECT WITH THAT SPECIAL SOMEONE, WE’LL REFUND YOUR MONEY, NO QUESTIONS ASKED!

“Three dates a week?” Harry mumbles, horrified. “Even I have better things to do than that.”

He’s not sure exactly how long he sits there, mind whirling with the idea of doing such a thing, of telling a bunch of complete strangers all his personal… things, of the very thought of Percy coming up with this scheme and carrying it out. None of it makes sense, and he definitely won’t be doing it.

With that decision made, he looks at the Wizards Unite literature and laughs. It’s so ridiculous that it’s funny, and suddenly he wants to share it with everyone. Impulsively, he gathers up all the papers and throws them into the bag he’s packed ready for dinner at Ron and Hermione’s later on. They should get a laugh out of it, and they don’t have to know anything at all about Percy’s involvement.

Harry douses the fire and gets to his feet with renewed energy. Having located Ken among the stalks of the cheese plant and fed him a handful of crunchy tubeworms as a peace offering, he descends the stone stairs to the powder room and absorbs himself in his work. He has already planned his displays all the way up to Christmas, careful diagrams and notes lining the walls of the basement room, and the vast majority of the fireworks themselves have been assembled, but there is always room for a finishing touch or two.

Humming contentedly to himself, Harry sits cross-legged on the cold floor and draws the tools of his trade around him with a slow sweep of his wand. He touches each filled paper shell, unpacking and adjusting where necessary, pressing explosive metal stars into position with his thumb and inhaling the familiar but thrilling scents of his trade. A little potassium chlorate for a burst of violet here, a touch of copper for brightness there, a tricky little charm that makes his hand cramp painfully but will make a shimmering tiger move just so… lost in concentration, Harry barely notices when he coughs and covers himself in black powder.

His head is full of vivid creatures made of light, each one so clear in his head that every bit of focus he possesses is taken up with making them come to life. Over the next three weeks, he will launch each group into the night sky and send them on their journey to the North Pole in his most ambitious Christmas display yet. When he finally pauses, he is breathless and perspiring, surrounded by tubs of stars and strewn empty shells. The air is thick with magic and chemicals and his fogged glasses are attempting to slide down his nose.
Slowly, he untangles himself and gets to his feet, remembering with a wince that people in their thirties are not ideally suited to sitting hunched over on stone floors for hours at a time. Probably. It definitely could be hours, but he can’t be sure. He emerges into the blissfully cool kitchen to find that Ken is sleeping on the toaster and that he is already ten minutes later for dinner.

“Fuck it,” he mumbles, quickly washing his hands and face in the kitchen sink and stuffing an unprotesting Ken into his coat pocket.

Ron and Hermione have seen him in worse states, and the children always seem to enjoy telling him when he has bits of coloured paper in his hair. He grabs his bag and Disapparates, arriving in a warm, delicious-smelling kitchen just in time to hear someone yell, “Can somebody grab the bloody cat before I stand on it?!?”

Harry watches with amusement as Rose scoops up the offending animal and throws it over her shoulder. The cat dangles there placidly, long, striped tail slowly flicking from side to side.

“Hello, Uncle Harry,” Rose says. “You’ve got firework stuff on your face.”

Hermione turns from the counter and scrutinises him. “You have… and you look really pale.”

“Hello to you, too,” Harry laughs. “Something smells good.”

“Dad made special stew,” Hugo sings, dancing into the room to the beat of a song only he can hear.

“Sounds great,” Harry says, stomach rumbling at the thought of one of Ron’s stews. “What makes it special?”

“Worms,” Rose deadpans, just as Hugo looks up at Harry with an earnest expression and says, “Because Daddy made it.”

Ron grins and shrugs. “There’s your answer. Obviously, it does have worms in it, but I think you already knew that.”

“Of course,” Harry says, setting Ken on the table. “We’re both big fans.”

“Don’t eat worms, Kenny,” Hugo instructs, climbing into a chair and petting the chameleon very carefully along his crest. “You don’t know where they’ve been.”

Harry suppresses a snort of laughter and grins at Ron. Hugo is the most hopelessly sincere five-year-old he has ever met, and they have all learned that laughing at him leads only to confusion and occasional tears.

“How do we know where any of our food has been?” Rose asks, and Harry isn’t sure how to respond to that, either.

“Here, drink this,” Hermione says, thrusting a large glass of green liquid into Harry’s hand.

“What is it?”

“A new potion,” she says proudly, and Harry notices her stovetop cauldron is still steaming gently,
which explains the startling warmth of the glass in his hand. “It’s an energy draught that also aids natural sleep. I’ve just started some of my patients on it.”

“Oh, so I’m a guinea pig?” Harry teases, catching a whiff of the potion and trying not to wrinkle his nose. “Me and your geriatric patients, we’re the test subjects?”

Hermione folds her arms. Her mouth twitches as though she wants to smile but she’s determined not to. “You could look at it like that. Or you could be grateful that you get to try all the latest remedies before everyone else.”

Harry grins at her and she caves, letting her smile out. He takes a deep breath and then gulps the potion down as quickly as he can, knowing from the smell and from experience that Hermione’s potions taste disgusting. Which must mean they are very good for him indeed. This one has an algae-like flavour with a twist of something sour that catches the back of his tongue. The texture is a revelation, managing to be both lumpy and strangely silky all at once. He powers on until the glass is empty, and then presents it to Hermione in triumph.

“There you are, Healer Weasley. That was delicious.”

Ron laughs quietly as he pulls the stew out of the oven. Hermione ignores him.

“No, it wasn’t. I know what I put in it. It’s not important what it tastes like as long as it works,” she insists.

“I’ll let you know,” Harry promises.

Apparently, he doesn’t hide his grimace as well as he means to, because Hermione sighs and pours him a glass of apple juice. Harry drinks it and moves to the table, where Ken is now sitting very nicely while Hugo draws around him with a felt tip pen.

“I brought dessert,” he announces, pulling a chocolate fudge cake from his bag and placing it on the centre of the table. The cake is followed by two bottles. “Rioja for us and banana milk for anyone too sensible to drink wine.”

Rose peers at the bottles with interest. “Wine’s horrible. I don’t want any.”

“Very sensible, Rosie,” Ron says, waving a ladle at her. “Excellent decision.”

“Grandad is really silly when he has wine,” Hugo says conversationally. “Last Christmas he put his shoes on the wrong feet.”

Harry grins. He remembers that evening, and he also thinks he remembers Molly doing the washing up by hand with a doily on her head.

Amused, he picks up the bottle. “I’ll open this, shall I?”

Ron hands him a corkscrew and then brings the steaming bowls of stew to the table, followed by a golden-crusted loaf of bread.

“Did you make it?” Harry asks hopefully, barely restraining himself from tearing a chunk off and stuffing it into his mouth. His bacon and toast suddenly seems like a distant memory and he’s ravenous, especially for anything Ron has made from scratch.
Ron nods proudly. “Rosemary sourdough.”

“We’ve got a thing in the pantry that helps Dad make it,” Rose says. “He’s alive and we have to feed him.”

“What kind of a thing?” Harry asks, digging into his stew. “A gnome? A fairy with a wooden spoon?”

“It’s a sourdough starter,” Hermione says, getting up and fetching a jar containing an odd, bubbly substance. “We have to feed it flour and it forms a base for bread, apparently.”

She looks rather bewildered and Harry doesn’t blame her. He can cook a little bit, and sometimes even enjoys it, but Ron’s love of food is something else, impressive and baffling all at once. He seems capable of making anything he puts his mind to, and his office-mates at the Department of Magical Games and Sports gleefully test out new recipes on a regular basis. It has never occurred to Harry to make his own bread, never mind that there might exist a strange potted pet to help the process along.

“His name is Reginald,” Rose says.

“Non,” Hugo insists, speaking for the first time since receiving his stew. “He’s appelle Jean-Paul.”

“I don’t think that’s proper French,” Rose says, and Hermione smiles into her glass of wine.

“It’s my French,” Hugo says airily.

“You can’t have your own French,” Rose says, looking rather distressed.

Harry glances between Ron and Hermione and decides not to get involved. Rose and Hugo get on surprisingly well for a young brother and sister, and he knows better than to interfere in their disagreement, which seems to be simultaneously pointless and Very Important.

Hugo gives an impressively Gallic shrug. “Camille said I can. We’re making our own language. It’s better.”

Rose frowns for a moment, stymied, and then decides to concentrate on her stew. It is well worth concentrating on, Harry decides, and he eats in contented silence as the rest of the family chat back and forth, discussing days at school and at work, people who might or might not have copied Rose’s spelling test, and the importance of not getting ahead on one’s advent calendar. Harry cuts himself a second slice of bread and dunks it into his stew, soaking the crumb with rich beef gravy and biting into it without caring when it drips onto his jeans. The meat is just falling apart, and he knows that Ron will have left it cooking for hours on an agonisingly low heat, along with the soft, sweet-salty carrots and the bits of potato that have kept their skins on for extra flavour. The bread brings its own savoury tang to the experience and the red wine is its perfect accompaniment.

Harry is soon so relaxed that he feels as though he is melting into his chair, and the thought of leaving this cosy kitchen to stand in a frozen field somewhere in North Yorkshire seems very unappealing. When Rose and Hugo are excused and run off to play and both Ken and the cat follow them, Harry just watches them idly, too full of food to wonder what any of them are planning.
“Are you alright?” Hermione asks, touching his arm.

Harry sighs and smiles at her. “Very. I don’t think I’d want to move if Rita Skeeter herself Apparated in and started doing the dance of the seven veils.”

“Mate, why would you even have that thought? And share it? I’ll have nightmares,” Ron groans, pouring himself another glass of wine.

“Speaking of Rita Skeeter,” Hermione begins.

“Must we?” Ron asks.

“Well, it’s not really speaking of her, but you reminded me,” Hermione explains. “I was going through some old boxes looking for Christmas decorations and I found some old newspapers. Did you know it’s almost ten years to the day that the *Prophet* outed you?”

“Thanks for that, Hermione, now I feel really old,” Ron complains.

Harry laughs. “I haven’t exactly been keeping track,” he admits.

“It was headline news at the time,” Hermione says, frowning when a loud thump issues from the living room. She waits for a few seconds and then shrugs.

“I’m not sure why they thought they we’re outing me… I wasn’t ever really *in*,” Harry points out. “It just took me a while to realise some things…”

Ron bursts into laughter and Harry gives up.

“It took you ‘a while’?” Ron snorts, making dramatic air quotes. “You broke up with Ginny and then…?”

“I was busy,” Harry says, attempting indignation and failing.

“I knew,” Hermione says, and Harry sighs.

“Of course you did.”

“Of course you did, ’Mione,” Ron agrees. “But not the rest of the world. And then the *Daily Prophet* published their article, and a million girls cried into their cereal.”

“Oh, god,” Harry groans, rubbing at his face and transferring black powder to his fingers.

Hermione frowns. “Why cereal?”

Ron shrugs. “I don’t know. Everyone likes cereal.”

“Draco doesn’t,” Harry offers. “He says it’s like misery in a bowl.”

“Yeah, but he’s not normal, is he?” Ron says. “He goes to parties for a living. What kind of a job is that?”

“They’re events,” Harry says automatically. “And I never said he was normal. I said he doesn’t
like cereal.’’

“He is a bit strange, Harry, you have to admit,” Hermione says, fiddling with her wine glass. “I mean… I know he’s alright and everything but he’s still… odd.”

Harry laughs. “That’s okay, I think I’m a bit odd, too. Speaking of which, I’d better go and rescue Ken and then get going. Thank you both for a lovely dinner. And, erm… the potion was…”

“Revitalising,” Hermione suggests hopefully.

“Yes, definitely that.”

Harry heads for the living room, where he finds Ken and the cat sitting side by side on the sofa, playing audience to what looks like an improvised production of the Nativity, featuring Rose, Hugo, several stuffed animals and a sea of Christmas baubles. As he says his goodbyes and Disapparates with Ken on his shoulder, he realises that he has forgotten to tell his friends anything about Wizards Unite.
“It’s the coordination that impresses me,” Draco says with an envious sigh.

Absorbed in his frosty yet steaming ice cream cone, Harry makes a noncommittal sound. Tonight’s featured flavour is peppermint, and it is glorious. He doesn’t know how Jim and Lorna do it, but they never disappoint; every single blend of hot and cold and smooth and crunchy is completely perfect. Today’s offering balances a creamy texture with the freshness of mint and a sprinkling of tiny crystals that seem to dance and explode on his tongue, leaving behind a sensation of warmth and comfort and the most wonderful confusion.

“Are you listening to a word I’m saying?” Draco asks with a touch of exasperation.

Harry glances at him, taking in his green scarf and calf-length wool coat. Draco always has nice coats, he thinks, but this one is a favourite. It has a dark grey and white herringbone pattern and a collar sturdy enough to turn up against the wind.

“You’re impressed by your coordination?” he tries, licking at an escaped drip of ice cream.

“You’re not impressed by mine? You don’t think my coat goes with my shoes?”

Draco snorts. “I don’t, as a matter of fact, but I didn’t mean my coordination or yours. I meant theirs.”

He points across the cobbles to a spot just outside Flourish and Blotts, where five drummers in pure white costumes are moving in perfect synchronisation, each step in rhythm with one another and with the beats of their magically lit drums. Every stamp and kick sends streaks of coloured light chasing around their bodies, which combines with the primal thump of the drums to create a dizzying effect that makes Harry want to dance. He doesn’t, because he doesn’t want to dislodge Ken, and also because he dances like a drunk heron, but he bobs his head a little bit and wishes he had the discipline to learn a musical instrument.

“I found them in Paisley,” Draco says. “What do you think?”

“I think they’re a hit. Everyone’s looking.”

Draco smiles, following Harry’s eyes to see that almost every eye in the place is fixed on the drummers. Even the food sellers have paused in their frantic activity to peer out of their vans as the
small procession pauses beside the fountain and sends up clouds of multicoloured smoke. The
drumming intensifies into a storm and the frantic lights flash through the haze for long seconds
before the lead drummer drops back into a slow, pounding rhythm and the whole group moves off
in the direction of the flower shop.

The smoke is sweet in Harry’s nostrils and he relishes it, wrapping his fingers more tightly around
the handle of his case. He still has another half an hour before his display, and he plans to have a
proper look around the stalls before he has to set up. Last night had been a lot of fun, but he’d
ended up so cold and waterlogged that despite the best efforts of blankets and warming charms and
algae potions, it had taken him forever to get to sleep. Glenda’s skewered chicken kiev had rather
made up for it, but he is definitely happy to be back in Diagon Alley.

He doesn’t really mind where his work takes him, but there is something comforting about the
familiar setting. He loves the cobbles and the fountain and the shops draped in coloured Christmas
lights. And the shops that aren’t yet draped in coloured Christmas lights, because the owners think
it’s too soon, even though most of them are in the crowd now, clutching hot chocolate and
watching the brightly lit drummers marching along the street. Harry knows these people, buys
bacon sandwiches from Mrs Purley’s café and the occasional fancy bottle of whisky from Mr
Borteg, who owns the wonderful-smelling spirit shop at the top of the alley. He smiles at both of
them, receiving a broad grin and a jerky little bow in return.

As he crunches the last of his cone, he spots Molly and Arthur, bundled up in coats and hats and
nibbling at stick-based treats. Harry waves, pleasantly surprised to see them even though he knows
that they always attend at least one of the advent displays, perhaps because they enjoy the
fireworks, perhaps just to show him that he’s loved. They wave back, pink-cheeked and clearly
caught up in the festival atmosphere.

When the drummers end their performance in a storm of light and sound, there is a lull of just
seconds before jaunty calliope music fills the street. Everything seems to snap back to its usual
speed as the milling crowd bursts back into laughter and conversation and applause. Harry heads
for the new stalls and Draco follows him without a word, examining scarves and assorted trinkets
with a wonderfully baffled expression. Next to a cart full of pointy wooden elves, Harry finds a
rack of Christmas cards that the vendor tells him were made by ‘strange children’.

Draco bites his lip, eyes gleaming as he picks one up to show Harry.

“I think I’d like a three-eyed reindeer this year.”

Harry grins, taking the card and examining the drawing on the front. If he’s honest, a third eye is
the least of this reindeer’s problems. It also seems to be missing two legs and has what looks like a
whisk growing out of its bottom.

“How much?” he asks, and the man gives him a bristly grin.

“Two Sickles. It’s for a good cause.”

“Strange children,” Draco whispers, and Harry kicks him in the ankle as he hands over the coins.
“Harry, no… you mustn’t.”

“Don’t you want to help the strange children?” he asks innocently, walking away from the cards
and over to a stall selling sparklers and light-up everything.
Draco stares at him, one eyebrow flickering. “I’m not really sure. Exactly how strange are they?”

Harry doesn’t know the answer to that, and as he isn’t about to go back and ask questions, he is still wondering when he leaves Draco to set up his display. Finally, in an effort to concentrate on his work, he pushes away all thoughts of children, strange or otherwise, and runs through tonight’s series of spells in his head over and over until his name is announced and he sends the first firework screeching into the night sky.

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Leaning back against the solid support of his leather seat, Harry groans.

“It was terrible. Really, really shit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Draco says, and Harry looks at him.

He’s still wearing his coat and scarf despite the warmth of the café, and Harry knows for a fact that underneath there will be a proper jumper with long sleeves and possibly a t-shirt under that. Draco runs cold, in contrast to Harry, who had struggled out of his jacket the second they had taken their seats. Ken is currently luxuriating in a pile of warm fabric with only the very tip of his tail poking out. Harry covers it up quickly. This is a Muggle place, and the fact that it is Draco’s favourite spot continues to amuse him even after years of coming here. He’s not denying that Nighthawks is beautiful; even his far-from-stylish eye can appreciate the sweeping lines of dark wood, the panoramic curve of plate glass and the staff who wander languidly with pencils tucked into their hair. There’s a sense of safety in the shady booths that follow the line of the window and offer a view of the dark street beyond but also a thrilling edge in the crisp, spidery shadows painting every surface and the low, moody lighting offered by single dangling bulbs.

Every time Harry moves, he can see his reflection in a series of artful Deco mirrors, and he tries not to focus on his wind-raked hair, but it’s difficult not to when Draco is sitting just two feet away looking perfectly poised as bloody usual. He fits in here, Harry supposes, and the general feeling of noir seems to encapsulate him perfectly until he reaches over and pokes Harry hard in the shoulder.

“Stop it, immediately.”

Harry blinks. “What?”

“Stop over-analysing your display and drink your coffee before it gets cold.”

Harry pulls a face, considers telling Draco that he was thinking no such thing and then decides to just drink his bloody coffee. It’s excellent coffee as always, perfectly brewed with a rich, almost chocolatey bitterness that soothes him from the inside. When he puts his cup down, Draco is still regarding him with a steely eye.

“Look, you saw it. You know I can do better,” Harry says, quietly loathing himself.

“Yes, I saw it. I saw all the colours and the birds. I saw the way you made a peacock out of magic and little bits of metal—”

“Stars,” Harry mumbles.

“Don’t interrupt. Magic and little stars—a peacock, for fuck’s sake, Harry—and I saw how it
fanned its tail out and everyone gasped and said, ‘Wow, look at that!’ and then I saw a massive flock of multicoloured seagulls fly over the water, and then I saw those dots of blue light that made people shiver as though they were actually cold, and then I saw you, crouching there, looking like you’d just slapped the Minister for Magic in the face,” Draco finishes, folding his arms on the table.

“The crows were a bit fuzzy,” Harry says quietly, and then falls silent because Draco looks as though he might just explode.

“Excuse me?”

Harry wrinkles his nose. “I suppose it was okay.”

Draco rakes his fingers through his hair and regards Harry with his chin resting in one hand.

“I’m not sure what to do with you.”

“I don’t need you to anything with me,” Harry says, attempting a shrug but finding himself distracted by the slide of Draco’s ruffled hair across his forehead. “I’m fine.”

“You’re a lunatic,” Draco says. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out his leather notebook.

As he flicks through it, Harry rests against the table on his forearms, relishing the coolness of the wood next to his skin and listening vaguely to the gentle chatter that wafts over from the other diners. It must be two o’clock in the morning already, but Nighthawks manages to attract a steady stream of customers with no alcohol beside the occasional slosh of whisky or rum into hot coffee. Harry doubts anyone is here for the food, which seems to consist of dry sandwiches, rubbery biscuits and pastries that look and taste as though they have been varnished.

“Maybe we’re not supposed to eat them,” Harry muses, gazing at the beautifully curved cabinet behind the counter, where rows of weaponised Danishes sit on shelves that might, long ago, have housed decanters of bourbon and serious drinking glasses. “Maybe everyone who works here is laughing at us every time we order them.”

“Have you ever seen one of them laughing?” Draco asks without looking up.

“Good point,” Harry says.

He watches one of the waitresses walk behind the counter with an empty tray and frowns. They don’t walk, do they? They saunter. Nothing happens in a hurry and nothing ever seems to change the world-weary expressions on their faces. As he watches, a young man with rolled-up sleeves and braces wanders over to their table and asks if they need a refill. Draco is still absorbed in his notebook so Harry orders for both of them and the waiter takes away their cups with a nonchalant shrug.

“This is a weird place,” Harry says, knowing he’s said so many times before.

“You’re a weird person,” Draco counters, looking up at last. “Here,” he says, tapping at a page in his notebook. “Here’s where I started getting owls about you and your fireworks. Do you want to know how many I’ve received so far?”

“No,” Harry says, but he has a feeling he might be about to find out.
It’s his own fault. He usually knows better than to express self-doubt around Draco. For someone who styles himself as the last word in cynicism, Draco is possibly the most encouraging person that Harry has ever met. His methods are unorthodox, that’s for sure, and Harry quite often feels as though he’s receiving a lecture from a cross old man, but he always feels better afterwards.

“‘Mr Malfoy, please convince the Arts Council to back Harry Potter’s firework displays’,” Draco is saying, and Harry thinks he might have missed something. “‘My daughter loved Harry Potter’s fireworks and she hasn’t smiled in a year.’ ‘Why are you people wasting money on boring old paintings when you could be sponsoring fireworks, like the kind Harry Potter does.’ Would you like me to go on?”

“Bugger off, Draco,” Harry says, face heating as a fresh cup of coffee is placed in front of him. “Why do these people think you’re paying me?”

“Because I don’t have the time or the inclination to explain to them how it works,” Draco says. “Are you sure you don’t want to hear some more? I’m sure we could find something about fuzzy crows if we looked hard enough.”

“No,” Harry says firmly. “No more shop talk. I’m tired and I want to drink my coffee without you telling me how brilliant I am.”

Draco laughs and lets the book fall closed. “You know why you’re tired, don’t you?”

Harry sips his coffee, even though it’s too hot. “Please enlighten me.”

“Because you spend all day in your basement and all night sitting here with me. You don’t get any sunlight and you don’t sleep properly because the swivel-eyed menace thinks your bedroom is a playground. How am I doing?”

“Why do you know everything about me?” Harry grumbles, eyes flicking to Kenneth, who seems to have gone to sleep in preparation for early morning pillow-crawling.

Draco gives him an odd look. He sighs. “Because, despite my better judgement, I am your friend, and friends tell each other things. For example, what do I take to the Manor every time I visit my mother?”

“Tea,” Harry says, without stopping to think. “You take her tea because she doesn’t like coming to Diagon Alley and she doesn’t use owl order because she thinks owls are creepy.”

“Sinister,” Draco corrects, mouth flickering at one corner.

“That’s right. Scary old owls,” Harry grins. “Okay. I’ll tell you something that’ll make you laugh if you take your coat off.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because I’m hot and I’m fed up of looking at you all bundled up like that. It’s making me feel all… I don’t know… wriggly,” Harry confesses, and Draco says nothing, but he slowly removes his coat and scarf and lays them neatly beside him.

“Are you feeling… straightened out?”
Harry rolls his eyes. “I know I can’t do magic in here, but I can still kick you in the shin.”

Draco folds his arms again, pulling the sleeves of his cable knit jumper down over his hands.

“Colour me terrified. Now, tell me the thing.”

Harry folds his arms, too, mirroring Draco’s posture as he leans closer, instinctively lowering his voice as he tells the story of his family’s nagging ways and the subsequent parcel from Percy. Draco’s eyes grow wide and then bright with amusement as he listens, interrupting frequently to inquire after more details. When he hears about the form full of personal questions, he can barely contain himself.

“They aren’t really asking what kind of underwear you prefer. That makes no sense.”

“Not just what kind of underwear I prefer but what kind of underwear I want the other person to wear,” Harry says, wishing he had brought the booklet with him.

The fact that Draco seems to find the whole thing as ridiculous as he does makes him feel better, less as though he’s going mad. It’s nice.

“This is wonderfully bizarre,” Draco says with a happy sigh. He peers into his coffee cup in a rather calculating manner. “It’s a shame we won’t get to find out just how bizarre.”

“No,” Harry says, and then frowns. “What?”

“Well, you’re not going to do it, are you?”

“I’m not,” Harry says slowly, something in Draco’s tone catching at his pride. “What’s your point?”

Draco shrugs. “You’re afraid.”

“I certainly am not,” Harry snaps, bristling. “I’m not afraid of a… whatever this is.”

“You are. When was the last time you went on a date? When was the last time you even went out for a drink with someone?” Draco challenges, and he’s enjoying himself.

And Harry is going to murder him.

“Oh, and when was the last time you—?”

“This isn’t about me. It’s about you,” Draco says.

Harry shakes his head. “No. No, you’re not going to do this to me. I’m not falling for it, Draco. I have absolutely no need to prove you wrong.”

Draco smiles like a shark, and something in the pit of Harry’s stomach grows points and takes hold.

“Of course not,” Draco says, draining his cup and draping his coat over one arm. “I’d better be going. See you in Cornwall tomorrow for the acrobats?”
Harry nods vaguely. “Yeah. I’ll see you there.”

He watches Draco put on his coat, tuck in his scarf, and pass far too much Muggle money to the girl behind the till. As he pulls open the heavy glass door and walks out into the night, he is smiling to himself, and Harry knows only one thing for sure – he is definitely not going to fill in that form.
Chapter Four

Fourth of December – a fountain pen

There is something in Harry’s ear. Something rough and slimy and worryingly familiar. Grimacing, he opens his eyes and looks around for Ken, finding him peering down from his shelf as though butter wouldn’t melt, even as Harry extracts the peach stone from his ear and lobes it in his general direction. Both his face and pillow are sticky with juice, and while he has never been able to prove it, he is certain that Ken uses his face as a makeshift fruit table when he’s sleeping. The stone, he thinks, is a gift of sorts, and it could be worse. Ron and Hermione’s cat brings them dead voles.

“There’s still something very wrong with you,” he tells the chameleon, but there is no response.

Rubbing at his face, Harry gets up and looks out over Grimmauld Place, relishing the pale winter sunlight that streams in through his window. It’s a beautiful day, crisp with a clear blue sky, and he suddenly can’t wait to be out in it. When he checks the clock and finds that it’s not even ten in the morning, he leaps into action. If he hurries, the café in the park will still be serving breakfast, and that is strong motivation indeed. Following a shower in which he pays particular attention to his left ear, he dresses warmly and throws gloves, wallet and a half-finished book into the first cotton shopping bag he lays eyes on.

“Coming with?” he asks Kenneth, ready to cast the usual warming charm.

Ken fixes him with a lazy eye and attempts to blend into the bed linen.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

Harry plunges into the lightly frozen morning, relishing the sunshine and the rare opportunity to experience everything a winter day has to offer. The air is cold and harsh in his lungs, softening and sweetening as he leaves the streets behind and enters the park. He exhales in gentle clouds, breath quickening with each step along the upward-winding path that leads to the pavilion. His heart is racing by the time he reaches the top and he wonders if he should be doing more exercise, but that doesn’t stop him from buying himself a sausage bun and a large cappuccino from the grumpy old woman inside the café.

He takes his breakfast outside and looks for a free table, finally finding one tucked into a corner from which he can sit and read his book and watch people feeding bits of bacon to their dogs. As he sets down his bag, he realises there is something substantial still inside it, and he frowns.
Slowly, and with a sinking feeling of inevitability, he draws out the glossy literature from Wizards Unite. This is the bag he took to Ron and Hermione's house, and he should have known.

Draco’s voice echoes inside his head. “You’re not going to do it, are you? You’re afraid.”

“No,” Harry says, loudly enough for the woman at the next table to pause in feeding her pug a treat.

“Sorry?”

“Nothing,” Harry promises. “Ignore me.”

The woman turns away and Harry stares at the cover of the booklet containing the ridiculous questions. Draco is wrong, of course, and he’s not afraid, but at the same time… he can’t actually remember the last time he went out with anyone that wasn’t a friend or a member of his family. And it isn’t as though he wouldn’t like a person to… a person to be his person. Someone to take to breakfast in the park and firework displays and Sunday lunch with his family. Someone to curl up with in front of a crackling fire and someone who wouldn’t mind being a climbing frame for a naughty chameleon.

Harry opens the booklet and stares at the rows and rows of questions. He can’t help thinking that this is a strange way to go about finding that someone, but then he thinks of Percy and Audrey, who are happy, and of Draco, who apparently doesn’t think he has it in him. And, god, he hates it that Draco can still get to him like this, but he knows that a challenge has been issued here, and he just can’t bring himself to back down.

“Right,” he whispers, fishing an old biro from his coat pocket. “I am going to do it, and maybe I’ll find someone, and then he’ll bloody know about it.”

Harry gulps at his coffee and turns to the first page. It starts simply enough:

Name: Harry Potter
Age: 34
Occupation:

Harry pauses, considering ‘fireworks bloke’ for a moment before carefully writing ‘pyrotechnician’. His fingers are already numb with cold and he pulls on his gloves before continuing.

I am interested in: (tick all that apply)

Long-term relationship
Casual relationship
Multiple partners
Physical encounter
Other
Harry blinks. Taps his pen against the stone table. Wonders for a moment what the writers of the form might mean by ‘other’. After a moment, he ticks the first option and then stops, knowing that he’s already lost and he hasn’t even come to the difficult questions yet. Perhaps he could ask Ron and Hermione for help. They’d be delighted… a bit too delighted, he decides, quickly abandoning that idea. There’s always Percy; he’s done all this before. But then again, it’s Percy, and Harry doesn’t even want to imagine how red he’d turn when he saw the questions. If he’s honest with himself, there’s only one person he can ask for assistance, and he’s going to have to swallow his pride so hard that he might never see it again.

Harry drops his pen and hides a groan in his gloved hands. The woman with the pug turns to look at him.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

Harry nods and smiles in a way that he hopes looks perfectly normal. “Brilliant.”

**~*~**

“Brilliant,” Draco says, examining the cover of the purple booklet and then the piece of paper containing the special offer. “A boyfriend by Christmas or your money back! You can’t say fairer than that.”

“Do you want to help or not?”

“Of course I want to help,” Draco says, setting down the booklet and picking up his coffee cup. “Though I do remember you saying you weren’t going to do it. Just last night, if I recall. In fact, I think we were sitting at this exact table.”

Harry gives him a half-hearted glare from the other side of the booth. “This is at least partly your fault and you know it. You can at least help me fill in the fucking form.”

“Gladly,” Draco says, shifting in his seat and allowing spindly shadows to fall across his face. “How far did you get without me?”

He opens the question booklet and sighs. Harry lets him. It’s well after midnight, he is full of stick-based food and Cornish cream teas, and he doesn’t have the energy to defend himself. At least not yet. He suspects a cup or two of Nighthawks coffee will help.

“Do you think you should put your real age?” Draco asks.

Harry snorts. “Don’t you think people would notice? Most people seem to know my date of birth.”

“Ah, yes. Famous birthday,” Draco mutters to himself, turning the page. “Famous Potter.”

“Shut up.”

“Did you really have trouble with ‘what are your hobbies and interests’?” Draco regards Harry with curiosity. “Really?”

“Shut up,” Harry repeats. “I didn’t want to sound boring.”
“If you are boring, you might as well be honest about it.”

“But I should lie about my age?”

Draco lets out a long sigh and takes off his scarf. “No. Actually, I don’t think you should lie about anything.”

“Even though I’m old and boring?” Harry asks, amused.


“I went to the park today, if that helps,” Harry offers.

“There—you like nature and going for walks. This is all good stuff.”

“I’ll write that down then,” Harry says, taking out his biro and reaching for the form.

Aghast, Draco bats his hands away. “Not with that horrible thing,” he insists, drawing an elegant fountain pen from his inside pocket and handing it to Harry. “First impressions count.”

“Oh, really?” Harry mumbles, removing the cap and admiring the shiny copper nib. “You’d better do something fairly drastic about my handwriting, then.”

“If only,” Draco says, looking around before poking his wand out of the end of his sleeve and vanishing everything Harry has written so far. “You can, at least, start again.”

“More work, thank you,” Harry sighs. He takes back the booklet. “Fine. I’ll redo this bit with your fancy pen and you can start on the next section. “I need… five words to describe my personality.”

Draco smiles, wrapping both hands around his coffee cup and settling himself comfortably.

“How about… ridiculous, irritating, stubborn…”

“Yep. All good. I’m so glad I decided to come to you with this,” Harry says, concentrating hard on avoiding ink splotches.

“Well, actually, I said you wouldn’t do it.”

“And I said I didn’t want to hear a word about that, didn’t I?”

Draco presses his lips together in mock obedience and Harry hides a smile. “Good.”

He starts with the simpler questions, reading each one out and deciding whether to heed or ignore Draco’s offered advice. They speed through a series of yes or no selections without too much of a problem, despite helpful interjections like ‘well, if you can call that a broomstick’, ‘I suppose you can call ‘wash and ruffle’ a hair care routine’ and ‘you can definitely say that you’re on good terms with your family but is there an option to say that they’re all barking mad?’

The middle section contains the sort of questions that make Harry squirm, the sort that secretly want him to show off and sell himself as though he’s the last cauldron in the shop. In preparation, he orders a coffee with a good slosh of rum but it turns out that he barely needs it; Draco is brilliant
at this kind of thing and provides answer after flattering answer with the barest effort. Harry’s pen flies over the paper as he tries simultaneously to keep up and not think about what he’s writing.

“ errores. “I am attractive without being imposing,” Draco dictates, finally unbuttoning his coat. “I have strong features and a lean physique. My bottom is an excellent shape.”

Harry flushes. “I’m not writing that. I don’t even know what shape my bottom is.”

“Triangular? Conical?” Draco suggests. “Why don’t you get up and I’ll have a look for you?”

“Fuck. Off,” Harry sighs, suddenly very aware of his backside. “I don’t need to write anything about my bottom.”

“There might be a question about bottoms later on,” Draco points out. “I have a very trained eye, you know. I spend most of my life examining art.”

“That’s what I should write,” Harry says, grinning at him. “‘My bottom is a work of art.’”

“I wouldn’t stop you—this is all about presenting the best side of yourself. That’s what everyone else will be doing.”

Draco finishes his coffee and sets down his cup with a clank.

“I really hope my best side isn’t my bottom,” Harry sighs, following suit and gulping down the rest of his drink. The rum startles him and then warms him all the way down to his stomach. “Okay. ‘Do you consider yourself to be good in bed? Explain why or why not.’ Oh, fucking hell.”

“I can’t help you with that,” Draco says, and Harry meets his eyes in a silent look of ‘oh, very helpful’ that just seems to make Draco smile. “Make sure you sound virile and you know... like you know what you’re doing.”

Harry snorts, scribbling something about being ‘attentive and fun’ before he can change his mind.

“Virile?”

“You know what I mean.”

Harry shakes his head and takes a moment to check on Ken, who is moving around slowly under his coat. He fishes a treat from his pocket and pokes it under the pile of fabric, waiting until he hears crunching sounds and then returning to the form. By the time his next cup of coffee arrives, his hand is beginning to cramp painfully and when he attempts to shake it out, Draco grabs the booklet and the pen.

“I’ll write for a bit,” he informs Harry, and then sighs, eyes tracing the lines of handwritten answers. “Mrs Weatherby strikes again.”

“Who?”

“Mad old woman,” Draco says. “Takes minutes for the council meetings. They’re almost completely illegible.”

“Then why do you let her take notes?”
“She’s been doing it forever. We knew she’d be heartbroken if we told her, so we let her get on with it and just keep sound recordings of all he meetings as well.”

“That’s nice,” Harry says, stretching out his fingers with some relief.

Draco looks up. “Yes, well, I do allow myself to commit acts of kindness occasionally.”

“Like this?”

Draco shrugs. “I suppose.”

Harry says nothing for several seconds and just watches the long, pale fingers gripping the fountain pen. He just knows that the handwriting from here on in is going to be beautiful, and he wonders if he should spell all of his to match. It wouldn’t be honest, but would look an awful lot nicer.

“Why are you helping me with this?” he asks, lifting his eyes to meet Draco’s. “Seriously?”

Draco’s lips curve into a slow smile. “I think it will prove entertaining.”

Harry laughs. “For me or for you?”

“For both of us.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to be bored,” Harry says, settling back into the booth and wondering yet again what he’s getting himself into.

“Goodness, no,” Draco murmurs. “Now, onto religious and political views.”

“No,” Harry groans. “Anything but that.”

“We’ll come back to it. Ah, musical taste… I can manage that,” Draco says, already beginning to write. “Celestina Warbeck, The Gringotts Goblin Voice Choir… bagpipes…”

“Draco, don’t you dare,” Harry protests, leaning forward to see that the answer field is still completely blank. He slumps back against his seat. “Please be good.”

“I’ll try,” he says, flipping several pages. “Let’s have a go at some of these unusual ones.”

Against his better judgement, Harry nods and relaxes as best he can. Yes, this is embarrassing, and yes, he’s probably going to regret it, but he thinks he might just be having fun. And it can’t possibly get any worse than the questions he’s already seen. It just can’t.

“What are your thoughts on man-scaping?” Draco reads, eyebrows in his fringe. “What on earth does that mean?”

“I think it means… you know, what do you do with your…” Harry trails off, gesturing vaguely at his crotch and then stopping when the people at the next table start to look alarmed. “Hair,” he finishes in a whisper.

“I see.” Draco waits, pen poised. “And what are your thoughts?”
“I don’t have any,” Harry mumbles, dropping his head into his arms. “I don’t care. I’m open
minded. Write that if you want. What is wrong with these people?”

“I imagine they’re trying to align you with someone who gives similar answers,” Draco says,
unperturbed. “The more questions they ask, the more closely they can match you up. Now, how do
you feel about food in the bedroom?”

“No,” Harry mutters against his forearms. “Sticky. Messy. Do you know I woke up with fruit in
my ear this morning and I haven’t even got a boyfriend?”

“What are you talking about?”

Harry looks up. “Don’t write that down.”

“Public displays of affection?” Draco asks.

Harry smiles.

When the entire wretched thing has been completed, Draco sits back and lets out a heavy sigh. The
answer booklet is pristine, but his fingers are smudged with ink and his hair has been raked into a
frustrated chaos. Not only has his coat been discarded but the sleeves of his jumper have been
pushed up around his elbows and there is a glow of exhausted accomplishment around him as he
closes the glossy cover and stares at Harry.

“It is done.”

“It is. Let us never speak of it again,” Harry says, and he’s only half joking.

Draco is a good friend, a trusted friend, but there are some things he never needed to know. Harry
wonders if he can get away with altering his memory, but only for a moment. He knows that spells
of that kind are extremely delicate, and more than that, he has a feeling that Draco would be ready
for him.

“So, are you going to send it?”

“Yes, Draco, but as you may have noticed, it’s four o’clock in the morning,” Harry says, yawning.

“I think you should do it before you change your mind.”

“Good idea, I’ll just get my owl,” Harry says, whipping back his coat and pretending astonishment.
“Oh, no… it’s just Ken.”

“I can get you an owl.”

“It can wait,” Harry assures, covering a confused Ken before someone sees him.

“Meet me in the alley in two minutes,” Draco says, and before Harry can say another word, he has
dropped several notes on the table, grabbed his things and hurried into the street.

“There’s something wrong with that man,” Harry says, but he’s oddly excited as he finishes his
coffee and puts on his coat.
Ken stretches his legs one by one and climbs quite happily into his favourite warm pocket, head poking out as though he, too, is intrigued to see what Draco is planning. The night is icy with no clouds to keep in the warmth of the day, but there are more stars than Harry has ever seen in London, and he gazes up at them, shivering, as he waits. The alley provides a little shelter, and he is grateful for it, feeling almost serene until Draco appears beside him with a barn owl perched on his wrist.

“Harry, meet Javin. Javin, this is a strange man in a dark alley who has a job for you.”

“Is this your owl?” Harry asks. “Because you aren’t exactly teaching him to make good decisions.”

Draco grins, eyes glinting under the streetlights. “Don’t worry. He’s sensible.”

He takes the booklet from Harry and stuffs it into the large, pre-addressed envelope provided.

“Last chance to change your mind… sure you don’t want to check my answers?”

“No,” Harry says stubbornly. “Send the bloody thing.”

Draco seals the envelope and attaches it to Javin, who blinks his vast eyes and hoots gently. When the owl takes off into the night sky, Harry tips back his head to watch until he disappears from sight. Beside him, Draco looks extremely pleased with himself. Harry sighs, wondering what the hell he has just done.

“Off it goes,” Draco says brightly. “Shall we have one more drink before home?”

Harry walks slowly out of the dark alley and back into the nocturnal bustle of Nighthawks. Perhaps Javin will drop the parcel and it will never reach the offices of Wizards Unite. Perhaps they will reject him for being too strange or too boring. Perhaps. Cheered by this thought, Harry slides back into his favourite booth and orders himself another cup of coffee.
“So, the spider monkeys will swing through the trees until we reach the river,” Harry explains, shifting on the cold stone of his back step in an attempt to restore feeling to his backside. “At that point, I’ll set off the first orangutan, and then another and another until everything is very… orange.”

Ken regards him with his head tilted on one side, which Harry takes as a cue to continue.

“Of course, the gorillas are tricky because they’re black and we need to see them against the night sky, so what I’m going to do is use a glitter…”

Harry pauses, catching movement in his peripheral vision. When he looks around, there is nothing there, but the sunset is astonishing and he takes a moment to admire it. The sky is melting into heavy layers of pink and gold, tinged with a soft purple that only seems to exist inside the depths of winter. It’s going to be a clear night, all the better for a sky full of monkeys, and he smiles to himself. His case is packed, sitting in the hallway with his coat draped over it, and he’s ready for his trip to Skegness… or is it Scarborough? He has the coordinates. It will be fine.

Ken scuttles towards him just as the something he thought he saw draws closer and then lands at his feet. The owl sticks out its leg and waits for him to take possession of a glossy purple envelope. Harry opens it slowly, stomach churning. He knows exactly what he’s going to find inside, even though he can’t quite believe it’s happening already.

“Pray for me, Ken,” he mumbles, and unfolds the letter.

_Dear Harry, he reads._

_Thank you for choosing Wizards Unite! You have a match!_

_Your date’s name is Dennis. He has chosen The Leaky Cauldron (portkey) at 10am on 6th December for your first meeting. Please reply by return to confirm._

_Good luck from the W.U. team!_

Harry stares at the letter. He isn’t sure what he finds more alarming, the oddly chirpy tone or the fact that his first date is just hours away.
“A portkey?” he mutters. “A portkey to where?”

Ken clambered onto his lap and rubs his casque against Harry’s forearm as if to say ‘just go with it!’ and Harry sighs. He summons a pen and scribbles a note on the back of the letter while the owl watches Ken with wary orange eyes.

“No, you’ve done it,” he tells Ken, carrying him into the house and climbing the stairs. “I’ve got to meet an actual person tomorrow and I’ve got nothing to wear.”

Of course, that isn’t strictly true. Harry has plenty of clothes. The problem is, almost every item he owns is a pair of jeans, a t-shirt or a jumper. He opens his wardrobe and hopes, but as usual, it is empty save for a black suit (too formal), a set of dress robes (even more formal) and a vague smell of mothballs (impractical at best). He sets Ken down on top of his biggest chest of drawers and rifles through the contents, even as Draco’s voice echoes in his head to dismiss every item.

He’s not a fashion-type person, or even a classically stylish-type person, and that isn’t usually a problem, but what if Dennis likes his men nicely turned out?

And what if he does? counters another voice, this time Hermione’s. The last thing you want to do is pretend to be something you’re not.

Harry groans and drops onto the edge of the bed. The situation is already ridiculous, and he has a feeling he’s overcomplicating it all by himself. He takes a deep breath and watches Ken, who is reaching up and attempting to grab the woollen bobbles on the lampshade that Molly gave them two Christmases ago. It’s a hideous thing, all clashing colours and extraneous twiddly bits, but he loves it, and Ken thoroughly enjoys playing with it until the whole thing destabilises and the lamp falls over.

“You knew that was going to happen, didn’t you?” Harry says, following a loud crash and the terrified scuttle of little feet.

He mends the lamp and switches it on. In the soft, diffused light he can now see Ken hiding in his sock drawer. Deciding to leave him to it, Harry walks around the bed and faces his last resort. He lowers himself into a cross-legged position and runs a reverent hand over the smooth wood. The chest is one of his favourite possessions, having once belonged to his godfather. It is one of the few pieces of furniture Harry has kept from the Black family, and not only because it is one of the only items not to be saturated in dark magic. There is something about the warm wood that appeals to him, and the idea that it might have been used by a young Sirius to hide away his rebellious secrets makes Harry smile every time he looks at it.

It had been empty when he found it, but it retains a vague scent of something almost forgotten, leather and motor oil and incense. Harry opens the lid and breathes in heavily, picturing a wolfish smile that he still misses terribly. Inside, he finds a tangle of memories: old school books mixed up with posters from his first firework displays and a handful of pure white owl feathers. In amongst them, as he had hoped, are scattered items of clothing, and he pulls each one out to inspect.

It’s not a particularly stylish haul, but he thinks there may be potential in a striped shirt he wore just once and decided was too gaudy, a sort of Argyle sweater thing and a long-sleeved t-shirt featuring a watercolour image of a tree. The denim jacket, he decides, needs to be left in the nineties, and he has no idea where the beret has come from; he certainly has no memory of wearing it. Opting not to think about it, just in case the memory decides to reappear, he grabs the clothes
and stands in front of the mirror, trying on each one in turn.

“Sirius, wherever you are, please give me a clue with this,” he pleads, but it’s hopeless.

The sweater makes him look like a bank manager on a golf course, the tree t-shirt gives him a desperate air of ‘don’t call me Mr Potter, I’m too young’, and the stripy shirt is so vividly coloured that it hurts his eyes. That being said, it fits well, and perhaps with the right pair of jeans might look presentable. Eyes narrowed in concentration, Harry sits on the bed and hits the shirt with spell after spell until the stripes soften from rainbow bright to shades of soft green and brown. It’s not ideal, but it will do, and Dennis will have to live with it.

Impulsively, Harry puts the shirt on and buttons it up, hurriedly casting another quick spell to stop the fabric from steaming.

“Think of this as a test run,” he tells Ken, who pokes his head out of the sock drawer with a mouthful of tubeworms that Harry definitely didn’t put in there. “We’ll see what everyone thinks and go from there.”

“Don’t you look smart, love?” Glenda says, just about the second she lays eyes on him. “Is there a young man in the picture?”

“I’m meeting someone tomorrow,” Harry admits, feeling ridiculous.

“I thought you and—” Jim begins, but Lorna elbows him in the ribs.

“I’m ever so pleased for you, Harry,” she says, lyrical Scottish accent making the words sound like a song. “You deserve a good man.”

Harry smiles at her and then grimaces when Ken grabs his nose. “Stop it.”

“I hope he likes animals,” Jim says, still looking confused as he glances between Harry and the customer he is serving.

Harry prises Ken’s grippy little foot from his nose and shoos him onto his shoulder. “If he doesn’t, Ken is free to a good home.”

“You wouldn’t,” Draco says, stalking over and taking the chameleon, who swarms up his arm and perches on a herringbone patterned shoulder with quite an air of smugness.

“I wouldn’t,” Harry admits.

“Good shirt,” Selwyn calls as he passes. “I’ve got one like that!”

Harry smiles at Selwyn and wonders if that’s a good thing or not. He’s known the manic little man for years but has never seen him out of his coat and hat, both of which are always a vivid shade of red.

“Thanks,” he says eventually, and Selwyn pauses, wand outstretched.

“Five minutes, and then I need you to come and check these wards for me—there’s bloody birds
“Five minutes,” Harry promises, and the moment Selwyn turns his back, an enormous herring gull lands on top of Glenda’s van and regards her chicken sticks with covetous little eyes.

“He looks so stylish, Draco?” Glenda says, face crinkling happily as she leans out and passes Harry something so fantastically fragrant and golden that he doesn’t even mind when Draco looks him up and down and says, “Hmm.”

He leans around behind Harry with a critical frown and he can’t help wondering if Draco is looking at his bottom. Perhaps to see what shape it is. He bites into the thing on the stick and pretends not to notice.

“This is amazing,” he sighs, tasting warm spices, coconut, and something that gives the chicken a delicious crunch. “What is it?”

“Katsu chicken curry,” Glenda says, beaming. She turns away as several customers seem to swarm around her van. “How can I help you, my loves?”

“Harry’s going to see a man, you know,” Lorna tells Draco, and his face is a picture.

“Already?”

“Tomorrow,” Harry says. “Believe me, I was as surprised as you. Now, don’t I look smart?”

“Yes,” Draco says solemnly. “And a little bit like a humbug.”

Harry looks at his shirt and laughs. “You know what? I’ll take that. Now give me back my chameleon.”
Harry is almost late for his date with Dennis, partly because his eyes do not want to open at eight o’clock on a dark December morning, and partly because he spends several minutes explaining to Ken why he’s being left at home.

“I don’t know where I’m going,” he tries, but Ken curls his tail and gazes at Harry with his mouth open before disappearing down the back of the bed, clearly unimpressed.

In the end, Harry leaves him a ripe tomato, his favourite, and heads out into the gloomy morning. Dressed in his best pair of jeans, the new-old stripy shirt and a coat that doesn’t smell of black powder, he feels confident that he looks at least presentable, and as long as Dennis isn’t planning on a morning of haute cuisine or a visit to Buckingham Palace, he should be alright. He walks briskly against the wind, forcing down his nerves as best he can.

It’s just a man, after all. He’s just a man, and Dennis is another man, and they have enough in common to warrant a meeting. It’s just a meeting. He’s had plenty of those, especially in the early days of his business, when people wanted a demonstration of what he could do before they hired him, and this, he supposes, is very much the same thing. As he walks into the Leaky, he imagines Draco telling him to stand up straight, so he does, and when a tall man at the bar waves to him, he waves back.

“I’m Harry,” he says, sticking out his hand and suppressing a grimace when the other man grips his fingers as though he’s trying to break them off.

“Dennis. Shall we get going?”

He’s smiling, which Harry takes as a good sign, and there is no anxiety visible on his tanned, rather handsome face. It’s a square sort of face, framed by wavy, sandy coloured hair and a hint of stubble. Like Harry, he is wearing a coat and jeans, and he is clutching a cardboard object in one large hand. He turns it around to reveal a pattern of candy canes and small square windows. Harry smiles, relaxing a fraction at the sight of the advent calendar and its promise of fun, and perhaps chocolate.

“Bit of a daft Portkey, sorry,” Dennis says. “I just grabbed something cheap from the shop to convert. Are you ready?”
“Yes,” Harry says decisively, and no sooner has he taken hold of a cardboard corner, he is being pulled through space in an uncomfortable rush.

“Open your eyes,” Dennis suggests.

There’s a note of amusement in his voice but it’s warm, unlike the air now whipping around Harry in ferocious gusts. He opens his eyes, startled to find himself in the middle of a vast, open moor. The sky is laden with clouds but he can, in the distance, make out the craggy shapes of hills. Around his legs, wild grasses shake and hiss, and from some unseen perch, a crow yells in what sounds like protest. Harry can’t say he blames it. His eyes flit back to Dennis, who is stuffing the advent calendar Portkey into his rucksack and pulling out a large, folded map.

“Don’t look like that, I’m not going to murder you,” he says, and Harry doesn’t realise his hand is on his wand until he forces it away.

“That’s exactly what someone who was going to murder me would say,” he points out, and Dennis grins broadly. He looks rather at home in this windblown place, even seeming excited as he passes Harry his own map and an elaborate compass.

“Double bluff, maybe?” Dennis suggests. “I’m guessing you like the outdoors, or they wouldn’t have matched us. Have you ever been orienteering before?”

Harry shakes his head, privately thinking that there is the outdoors and the outdoors. Still, he’s here now, and he’s never been one to back down from a challenge. “No. What do we do?”

“I usually do this competitively,” Dennis explains, “but I thought it might be a fun way to get to know each other. We use the map and the compass to find all the control points along the route. We’ll try to get there as fast as we can. Sound good?”

“Great,” Harry lies, studying his map and its collection of unfamiliar symbols. “Where do we start?”

“The first control point is due west,” Dennis says, reaching over Harry’s shoulder to show him a piece of spell-protected paper with a grid on it. “Let’s head that way. Mind your step.”

With that, he sets off across the moor at a terrifying pace. Harry soon finds himself having to jog to keep up, and despite minding his step as well as he can, he has soaked his feet in icy puddles within minutes, and only just managed to avoid twisting his ankle when the uneven ground throws him off balance. The wind howls into his face, pushing his answers to Dennis’s cheery questions back down his throat and he finally opts for silence. Fortunately, Dennis is so intent on his map and compass that he doesn’t seem upset, and Harry just stumps along behind him, wondering why anyone would choose to do this for fun.

It feels an awful lot like the time he, Ron, and Hermione had spent on the run during the last months of the war, only without the warm tent and the constant threat of Death Eaters. He hadn’t had a choice then, and now that he does, he likes to be comfortable and he’s not afraid to admit it.

“Having fun?” Dennis yells, looking over his shoulder. “I think we’ve got a flag just beyond these rocks!”

“Yeah, I’m great,” Harry manages before the wind slaps him in the face again. He shivers and gives Dennis a thumbs-up.
“The brilliant thing about this terrain is that you could walk around for days and never get bored,” Dennis says as they perch on a rock and drink hot soup from a flask. “I think being bored is the worst thing in the world.”

Harry breathes in the smell of the frozen ground and rests his chin on his knees.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be bored but I’d rather be bored than miserable.”

Dennis wrinkles his nose. “This isn’t you, is it?”

“I didn’t mean…” Harry sighs. “I didn’t mean it like that, but no. I’m more of a walk in the park and a cup of tea sort of person. God, I’ve just realised… I’m really boring.”

Dennis laughs. “I’m sure you’re not. You’re definitely not the first person I’ve tried this with who didn’t like it much. The first guy I brought out here fell half a mile in and refused to go any further. I couldn’t get him to stop crying.”

“I promise not to cry,” Harry says.

“Good,” Dennis says, getting to his feet. “We’ve still got five more flags to find.”

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“You know, I genuinely thought I might never get warm again,” Harry says, holding a cup of Lorna’s hot chocolate close to his face and breathing in the steam.

Draco snorts. “You could have stayed at home tonight. No one would have minded.”

Harry glances at him, unsure whether or not he should be offended. “I would have minded.”

“Oh?”

“Ghost cave,” Harry points out, gesturing around at tonight’s location. He yawns. “Ghost cave is not to be missed.”

“It would be a shame.”

Harry nods sagely. By the time Dennis had finished with him, he had been exhausted and half-frozen, and the last thing he had really wanted to do was stand in a freezing cold cave for hours on end, but this location is special. The light show here is spectacular, with several groups of performers coming together to fill the gigantic cavern with colours and sparks, and even Selwyn can relax tonight. The place has been abandoned by Muggles for many years on the grounds that it is haunted, and, of course, it is. The ghost cave, or Spirit Grotto, as the locals call it, is home to hundreds of spectres, all of whom stream out of their hiding places once a year to take part in the festival. It is one of the most beautiful things Harry has ever seen, and easily worth a few aches and pains.

“I had a bath,” he says, stroking Ken and meeting his swivelly little eyes. “We had a bath, at least for a moment, when someone fell in.”

“How did he like it?”
“He was not a fan,” Harry says, smiling at the memory of Ken’s desperate scramble back onto the rim of the tub and his subsequent sulk.

“Did you put a muscle relaxing potion in it?” Draco asks. “That’s what my mother does when her arthritis is playing up.”

Harry stares at him. “No, Draco, because I don’t have arthritis. I’m just a bit stiff because I got dragged around a moor all day by a mad person.”

“Don’t tell me you had it plain,” Draco says, sounding rather disquieted.

Harry laughs. He doesn’t think he’s ever heard a bath described that way before. “No, I put normal stuff in it.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “Bubbles?”

“Yes,” he says defensively.

Draco nods. “Good man.”

Surprised, Harry says nothing for some time. He just stands there and drinks his hot chocolate, watching the ebb and flow of the queues for food and drinks, Lorna and Jim laughing while they work, the frenzied discussion of the group of wizards who are preparing to use wandlight to set the cave aglow. All is movement and chatter and chaos, but just here, in this spot beside Draco, all Harry feels is calm. He lets his eyes drift from the preparations, idly wondering how this man manages to look so elegant in spite of the bulky jumper stuffed under his heavy coat. Perhaps it’s good breeding, whatever that means, or proper posture. Harry tries to stand up straight and something pings unpleasantly in his lower back.

“What’s the matter?”

“He made me run,” Harry says. “I was this close to falling flat on my face. And do you know what the worst thing is?”

Draco looks at him expectantly. “Go on.”

“While I was in the bath—in the bath—another owl turned up. It literally came in through the bathroom window,” Harry says, wondering why his brain wants him to add the words, ‘protected by a silver spoon’.

“They’re determined. I like that.”

“I’m glad you like it, Draco, because it’s all your fault,” Harry says crossly. “Now I’ve got another date tomorrow and the other bloke has chosen it again. When do I get to choose?”

“I certainly don’t think I should shoulder all the blame,” Draco says, and he has the nerve to smile.

“You filled in the form. You dashed off to your house in the middle of the night to get an owl.”

“So, you won’t be seeing the mountain man again?” Draco says, neatly changing the subject.
“No. We agreed that we weren’t very compatible after all. It was a sort of mutual rejection, I suppose. I don’t want to be dragged around looking for flags, and he doesn’t want to sit indoors and pet my chameleon.” Harry frowns. “Or something that doesn’t sound like a weird fetish.”

Draco snorts. “What if you don’t want to reject them in person?”

“You can do it through the agency,” Harry says. “They’ve thought of everything, except how to actually match people with people who like the same things.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s only been one date.” Draco rummages in his coat pocket for coins. “Queue’s down—do you want some chicken?”

“Yes, please.”

Draco walks away and then pauses, turning around. “So, where is he taking you?”

“The cinema. We’re seeing a matinee.”

“What could go wrong?”

“Please don’t say that,” Harry says, but Draco just laughs and walks away, returning with their loaded sticks just in time for the performance to begin.

The cavern seems to shiver as the sound of strings rises and echoes around the rock face. A group of dancers with magical halos strike their opening pose. The wizards light their wands, first with a spark and then with flowing, rippling streams of colour that collide with the towering roof and shatter into glittering fractals over the crowd. Harry stops eating and waits, breath caught. Beside him, Draco’s eyes are fixed on the cavern wall opposite. Everyone in the place seems to stand perfectly still.

As the music reaches its crescendo, the rock face erupts into translucent splendour. Ghosts of every size and shape stream into the cavern, spiralling upwards and outwards until the whole space is alive and dead at the same time. The stone crackles with ice, glittering, frosted, ethereal, and Harry’s breath seems to freeze in his lungs. Just as he is beginning to feel as though his fingertips might drop off, the sea of ghosts parts and each individual takes up a position in mid-air. Harry strengthens Ken’s warming charm without taking his eyes from the display, spellbound by the perfectly synchronised swoops and sways. The light from the wizards’ wands filters through the ghostly shapes, drenching the cavern in an ocean of soft, pastel colours, and the dancers below echo the movements of their ghostly partners in a way that appears perfectly effortless.

“You’re right,” Draco murmurs, cold knuckles brushing against Harry’s and making him shiver. “Never miss ghost cave.”

Harry nods, startled and delighted when a ghost in Cavalier garb swoops so low over his head that he has to duck.

“Such a thing just isn’t done,” the ghost says grandly, holding onto his feathered hat as he spirals back towards the roof of the cave.

Harry watches him and then turns back to the main spectacle. By the time the first piece of music is over, his chicken is stone cold and his back seems to have frozen in place. He eats the chicken anyway and wonders where Mrs Malfoy gets hold of her muscle relaxing potions. The string band
starts up a jolly festive tune and the ghosts wheel around in a new, joyful rhythm.

“It never feels like Christmas until I’ve seen a lit up ghost dancing to ‘Adeste Fideles’,” Draco says.

“I think that might be a brand new sentence,” Harry laughs.

Draco laughs too. “I aim to be original.” He frowns at his chicken for a moment and then sighs. “Listen, don’t think I don’t feel a little bit responsible for all this dating palaver. Are you going to be alright tomorrow?”

Harry shrugs. “It’s just a film. Like you said, what can go wrong?”
On Saturday morning, Harry leaves the house with plenty of time to spare. He makes it to the cinema before his date and feels oddly proud of himself, a feeling which dissolves when he leans back to look at the façade of the old building and his lower back twinges sharply, reminding him that he is, and probably always will be, an idiot. The building is worth a look, though, small and old fashioned with mismatched letters on a white board announcing the day’s films. There are only two titles, and Harry suspects his date hasn’t chosen ‘The Tale of the Sugarplum Princess’.

“Harry?”

He turns to see a man who appears to be Dennis’s opposite in every way: short and rather delicate looking with dark hair and pointed features. The eyes that are fixed nervously on Harry are almost rodent-like, and the hand now held out for him to shake is small and pale. Remembering that he had answered ‘I don’t mind’ to every question regarding appearance, Harry smiles at the man and returns the shake.

“You must be Wilson. I’ve been dying to see this Sugarplum Princess film.”

Wilson laughs, and his whole face lights up with amusement. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I went with the other option. Shall we go in?”

Harry follows him, offering to buy popcorn and drinks when Wilson insists on paying for their tickets, but Wilson shakes his head, frowning at the concession stand as though it might bite him.

“I thought you might like this, being raised by Muggles,” he explains as they settle themselves in the dark theatre. “I’m Muggleborn myself and I’m very passionate about cinema.”

Harry rests his popcorn in his lap and nods, happy to listen as Wilson chats away to him about the early days of film, the emergence of different genres and his favourite directors, ranked by a system that seems very carefully thought out. His enthusiasm is charming, and much more interesting than the trailers for upcoming films. Harry is happy to listen and nod until the film begins, at which point he turns his attention to the screen. Wilson falls silent for a few seconds and then leans close, startling Harry’s nostrils with a waft of musky cologne.

“This film is set during World War Two,” he whispers.
“I gathered,” Harry says mildly, restraining himself from adding, ‘The tanks were a big clue. And, you know, the pictures of Hitler’.

Wilson takes a handful of Harry’s popcorn and continues. “The interesting thing about this film is that it actually has three different directors. This section here was—”

“Shh!” someone hisses from the row behind, and Harry shoots them an apologetic look.

Wilson doesn’t seem to notice, or perhaps doesn’t care, and continues his lecture in a loud whisper in between mouthfuls of popcorn that Harry decides he is welcome to. Up close, there is something about him that doesn’t seem quite clean, and the thought of sharing food with him now makes Harry’s stomach turn. He tries to focus on the film, but it’s difficult. He’s never been a fan of war movies, and any interest this one might have had is ruined by the drone of Wilson’s commentary.

“Of course, it’s filled with inaccuracies,” he confides, pointing at the screen as the camera pans along a row of German soldiers. “Those boots are all wrong, and a Luftwaffe pilot would never—”

“Shh!” the man in the row behind hisses again.

Harry attempts to become one with his seat. Wilson turns around and gives the man an indignant look.

“You shush! Now, as I was saying, Harry, if you look closely…”

Harry gazes at the screen without really seeing it. He’s going to murder Draco. He’s going to have him flayed alive, because this is all his fault. This is partially his fault. He doesn’t know what Wilson is saying any more, and the only thing keeping him from walking out of the theatre is the instinctive fear of causing a scene that he suspects is as British as Yorkshire pudding and the royal family.

“Though they’re a bit German, aren’t they?” he mumbles to himself.

“German? It’s World War Two, of course they’re German,” Wilson whispers, clearly exasperated. “You need to pay attention.”

Harry sighs, holding onto the popcorn box as the contents slowly disappear and tuning out Wilson as best he can. When the action returns to Ten Downing Street and a cigar-chomping Churchill takes over the story, Harry is surprised to feel a flicker of recognition.

“That guy,” he whispers, voice so quiet that he can barely hear it inside his own head. “The one shouting at Churchill—didn’t he play Caesar in that—?”

“Shh!” Wilson interrupts crossly.

“Seriously?” Harry whispers, and the look he receives in response is so filthy that he doesn’t say another word until they are back out on the street, blinking in the midday sunshine.

“Well, that was edifying,” Wilson says. “Would you like to do it again some time?”

Harry stares at him in disbelief. “No, not really.”

Wilson frowns. There are bits of popcorn stuck to his face. “Why not?”
Because you are rude and inconsiderate and you stole my popcorn. Because despite claiming to be a cinephile, you have no idea how to behave in a theatre. Because you wear too much aftershave and I think it’s because you don’t bother to wash yourself properly. Because you *shushed* me, Harry thinks.

“Because I don’t think we’re a good match,” he says politely. “It was nice to meet you.”

Wilson just gapes at him, and Harry decides to walk away before any of his thoughts escape and make the whole thing worse. As he puts more and more distance between himself and his second ridiculous date in a row, a strange sort of amusement starts to flicker in the pit of his stomach. By the time he finds a place to Apparate home, he is grinning like a loon, and as he puts the kettle on and takes off his coat, he loses it completely. He leans against his kitchen counter and laughs himself silly.

“Oh, god, Ken, what an idiot,” he gasps, picking up the chameleon and giggling into his confused little face. “Come on, let’s go and get warm and I’ll tell you all about it.”

**~*~**

Nighthawks is stuffed almost to capacity by the time Harry and Draco get there, and the Saturday night rush means that they have to give up on their usual booth and settle for a corner table. Harry finds himself having to raise his voice in order to be heard, a task that becomes easier as the night progresses and Draco orders up a storm of alcohol-laced coffees. After a while, Harry can’t tell whisky from rum and he doesn’t care. Everything feels warm and lovely, and the previously irritating din of voices around him fades until he exists only in a pool of dim light containing a table, Draco and himself, and a lapful of sleepy chameleon. When someone dares to trouble his calm with a whiff of obnoxious body spray, he wrinkles his nose.

“He smelled like a nightclub toilet. Wilson, I mean.”

Draco looks quietly horrified and then admits, “I don’t think I’ve ever been to a nightclub.”

“You’re not missing much,” Harry says, gulping at his coffee and spilling several drops on his jumper. “Bugger.”

“Did you at least enjoy the film?” Draco asks.

Harry laughs. He leans across the table and Draco leans, too. “No,” he says firmly, and then laughs again because their noses are almost touching and he can feel warm breath against his lips. Draco smells nice. Clean. Not like a nightclub toilet at all.

“Why not?” Draco asks, eyebrows knitted in concern.

“Have you been listening at all?” Harry asks, having to repeat himself when a group at the counter decide to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to one of their number. Again.

“Yes,” Draco says gravely. “I have been listening. It’s not my fault if you haven’t been making sense.”

“Draco,” Harry sighs, holding the eye contact for several seconds and then slumping back in his hard chair. He misses the booth, but some very inconsiderate people are sitting in it. “Did you
know that the film, the title of whom… the title of which…? The title of it I can’t remember, but the film is filled with inaccuracies.”

“Terrible,” Draco says. He rests his chin on his hand and closes one eye. “Tell me about them.”

“The boots were wrong,” Harry remembers, attempting to cast his mind back to the matinee, which now feels like a very long time ago.

“The boots?”

“Mm. I mean, there’s a war going on… who’s looking at boots?”


Harry snorts. “I don’t think he was a pur—one of those. He was…” He waves an arm at himself. “Scruffy. Like me.”

“No,” Draco says loudly, and there is a hand on his wrist. “You mustn’t say that.”

“I’ll say what I like,” Harry says grandly, and now the hand is poking him. “Stop it. I’ve had a hard day.”

“I went to a museum thing,” Draco counters, reclaiming his hand and draining his coffee with an unsteady jerk of the wrist. “Do you want another one?”

Harry peers into his cup, pressing his rubbery lips together and quickly becoming distracted by the play of light on the surface of the remaining coffee. He doesn’t know if he really should have another one, but he thinks he’s going to have one anyway.

“Mm,” he mumbles, squinting through the crowd and somehow managing to make eye contact with a waitress, who mouths ‘same again?’ and disappears behind the counter. “That was very efficient. Was it a nice museum?”

Draco pushes up his sleeves and folds his arms. “Yes. No. I don’t know. It was boring.”

Harry laughs. “Don’t let the farts council hear you saying that.”

“Did you just say farts council?” Draco demands, mouth twitching.

“Of course not. I’m a grown up person. I went to the cinema during the daytime and learned all about assistant directors. Or assistant something-or-other. I learned that I’m not allowed to talk but other people are.” He sighs. “I don’t think it was a very good film.”

“How would you know?” Draco asks, turning to the waitress as she arrives with their coffee and thanking her so extravagantly that she almost cracks a smile. “You didn’t even watch it properly. You disrespected the art of cinema, Harry, and I think… well, I think something should happen to you.”

Delighted by this assessment, Harry rests his head on his arms for a moment and grins.

“I didn’t know you were an expert on the art of cinema,” he says at last, attempting air quotes and slapping himself in the face.
Clearly affronted, Draco sips his coffee and peers at Harry over the rim of his cup. ‘I’ll have you know that I am now in possession of a brand new VD player,” he says.

“DVD, maybe?” Harry mumbles, trying not to laugh.

“Yes, that. I got it from that little place next door to the record shop. They make it so that… you know, so it doesn’t blow up when it sees a spell.”

“How much?” Harry asks, nudging Draco’s knee under the table when his attention is snagged by a passing woman in a red dress.

“How do they walk in such tall shoes, Harry?” he asks, eyes wide and, for a split second, almost childlike.

“I have no idea. How much?”

Draco lets out a long breath. “I can’t… erm… ten Galleons, maybe? Twenty?”

“You’re an idiot,” Harry says, resting his chin in his hands when his head starts to swim. “I could have got you one from Asda for twenty quid and asked Hermione to convert it. You know… so it didn’t blow up. What did you go to the weird place for?”

“I go to the weird place every time I’m with you,” Draco mutters. “What’s an Asda?”

“It’s a big Muggle shop with cheap DVD players. Answer the question.”

“Selwyn said…” Draco shrugs. Sighs. “Selwyn.”

Harry groans. “Selwyn is great at that… thing he does. You know. He’s hardly the last word in devices. Do I mean devices?”

“He sounded as though he knew what he was talking about,” Draco says defensively, avoiding Harry’s eyes and spreading out his fingers on the table to examine each one in turn.

Harry watches him for a moment. They all seem to be there, which is good. Intact hands. Clean fingernails. His knuckles are a bit pointy, which is a good word. Pointy.

“It doesn’t work, anyway,” Draco says.

“What isn’t it doing?” Harry asks, deciding that a bit of electronic troubleshooting is exactly what he needs right now. It’s possible that the rum, and perhaps the whisky, are making him overconfident, but Draco doesn’t need to know that.

Draco regards him, confusion clear in his eyes. “It’s not doing anything. The man in the shop gave me a film to try it out with and I put that in and did the spell he showed me and it all lit up… and then nothing happened.”

Harry chews on his lip. Frowns. “Well, it sounds like it’s working a bit. Maybe you don’t have the proper connector for your television?”

“It’s not that. I don’t have a television,” Draco says, looking at his fingers again. “Do you think
I’ve got one hand bigger than the other?”

Harry shakes his head slowly and then drops his face back into his hands, grinning against wool and skin and dissolving into silent laughter. He can feel Draco staring holes into him but it doesn’t matter because he can barely breathe with the ridiculous brilliance of the whole thing.

“You’re laughing at me,” Draco says crossly. “I forbid it.”

Harry snorts so hard that the back of his throat stings, and when he finally manages to meet Draco’s eyes, his face is damp and a little bit too hot.

“You forbid it?”

Draco jumps and then starts to stroke something in his lap. Sure enough, Ken has left the safety of Harry’s coat and defected to a perch that is not vibrating with laughter.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Draco, what did you expect the thing to do? Project the film into the air?” he asks, surprised when Draco’s face turns pink. “You need a television to see the images.”

Draco scrubs at his hair until it stands up in little waves. “How was I supposed to know that?”

“I don’t know… Muggle Studies?”

“I didn’t take bloody Muggle Studies, did I?” Draco says mutinously. “My father said it was a stupid subject and I listened to him and now I look like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. I’m sorry,” Harry promises, all at once awash with unsteady guilt at having made Draco think about his father. He might be long gone, but he isn’t forgotten, and he serves as a pointed reminder of a time when Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy could have not sat together in a place like this and put away boozy coffees without a real worry in the world.

Draco picks up his cup and drinks steadily. When he replaces it in its saucer, his face is clear.

“I know what you’re thinking and you can stop it. I am an idiot sometimes and it doesn’t do me any harm to remember that.”

Harry smiles, sliding his hand across the table and touching his fingertips to Draco’s.

“We’re both idiots,” he says. “Look, why don’t you bring your VD player to my house and we’ll make it work? I’ll make popcorn.”

“And I won’t steal it,” Draco says. “I’m a very well-behaved date. Not that I’m going to be your date. I’ll just be there, at your house. At the same time as you. And the swivel-eyed menace. Do you want him back?”

Harry takes possession of a pleasantly toasty Ken and feeds him into his coat pocket. He has seen Draco drunk enough times to know that when he starts to stumble and over-correct himself, it’s time for home. Congratulating himself on his sensible decision, he gets to his feet and only wobbles a little bit.
“Come on. We’re both too old to risk regretting this in the morning.”

“You’re old,” Draco mumbles, but he struggles into his coat and follows Harry to the door.

“Yeah. But I didn’t get any owls with fucking dates today,” he says, prodding Draco in the chest for emphasis and putting rather too much force into it. “I can actually enjoy my Sunday lunch in peace.”

“Stop it,” Draco says, gasping as the icy air hits him and blows his scarf into his face.

Harry keeps his head down, stomping against the wind and making for the alley. If he just keeps his head together for a few more seconds, he’ll be fine to Apparate home, and if he hurries, can be under his quilts before he has time to feel the cold. Unfortunately, the transition from warm and noisy to cold and silent seems to shock his system, causing his pleasant intoxication to surge and twist into something far more incapacitating. Head spinning, he leans against the cold brick of the alley and holds on tightly while the world tilts around him. When he opens his eyes, Draco is watching him closely, one hand on his arm.

“Are you alright?”

Harry nods very carefully. He concentrates on the frosty ground and the pattern of Draco’s coat. Taking a slow, deep breath, he meets Draco’s gaze and the world seems to decelerate. Everything is silver-bright and familiar and full of drunken anxiety. He smiles.

“You have pretty eyes,” he says. “But an evil soul.”

“I’m not evil,” Draco says, and god, it’s almost a pout. “I’m a good… Draco.”

Harry laughs. His throat hurts. “You’re an evil best friend.”

“I doubt I’m anyone’s best friend,” Draco says, and Harry can feel the sadness in his voice.

He just about manages not to shake him, instead sighing, “You are my best friend, you wanker.”

“Don’t be daft,” Draco says. “What about Granger and the Weaselface?”

“Hermione and Ron,” Harry says very deliberately, “are family. It’s different. Stop arguing with me.”

“Why break the habit of a lifetime?” Draco laughs, fingers closing tightly around Harry’s arm.

“I don’t know,” he says, suddenly feeling warm despite the freezing wind. “I think I’m drunk.”

“Are you going to be alright to walk home?” Draco asks. “Best friends don’t allow each other to have splinching accidents.”

“Indeed,” Harry says a little too loudly. “It’s opposite directions now, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Draco nods and lets go of his arm. “See you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Harry echoes, watching him turn up his collar and stalk out into the night.
Harry arrives at the Burrow to the sound of warbling carols and the warm scent of mulled wine. In the kitchen, Arthur is hanging up star-shaped lights while Molly fusses over the skin of her roast chickens and the rest of the family apply themselves unhurriedly to their usual tasks. Charlie, who is rarely available for Sunday lunch, grins at Harry from behind an enormous box of Christmas baubles.

“Mum was just about to start panicking,” he says, and Molly shoots Harry an appealing look.


“I’m fine,” Harry promises. “I had a bit of a late night, but nothing to worry about.”

“Out on the town, were you?” Arthur asks brightly. “Painting it pink?”

“Red,” Hermione laughs, returning from the cellar with two dusty bottles. “I wasn’t sure how many you’d want, Molly, since you’ve got the mulled stuff on the go.”

“Yes, yes, wine,” Molly says, clearly not listening. “If you’re a bit worse for wear, Harry, I’ve got some of that potion George makes…?”

“I promise, I’m okay,” Harry says, and apart from a vague sort of fuzziness behind his eyes, he really is. “Please stop worrying. I just had a few coffees with Draco, that’s all.”

“Coffees?” Hermione repeats, smirking.

“Well… some of them were Irish,” Harry admits. “Some were… Caribbean? What do you call coffee with rum in it?”

“Lovely,” Ron says wistfully. “Sounds lovely. Why have I never tried that?”

“Because you only need to sniff a bottle of rum and you fall over?” Charlie suggests, neatly dodging Ron’s stinging hex and ducking down behind the box of baubles.

“No curses in the kitchen!” Molly scolds.
“Listen to your mother,” Arthur says, words slightly mangled as he climbs onto a stepladder with a string of lights clamped between his teeth.

“How is Draco?” Molly asks, turning back to the stove. “He looked well the other night, didn’t he? You were as thick as thieves. Funny how things turn out.”

“He’s good,” Harry says, even though he has the feeling she’s not listening to his answer.


“We had a lovely evening, didn’t we, Arthur?” Molly continues, and Arthur makes a small sound of agreement before accidentally spelling his hand to the wall. “I bought some very interesting Christmas cards from a man who said he had strange children.”

“Aren’t all children strange?” Ron says, grinning when Rose pulls a face at him.

Harry sends Arthur an unsticking spell as he tries to make sense of Molly’s words. Finally, he remembers, and he laughs.

“Yes, I bought one, too. He said they were made by strange children. He didn’t mention that they were his strange children.”

“Oh, well, we chatted for quite a while,” Molly confides. “He gives all the money he makes to good causes.” She turns from her pots and looks around, eyes narrowed. “Where are Hugo and Camille?”

“I have zem,” Fleur says wearily, appearing at the top of the stairs with a child dangling from each hand. “Harry, I am very sorry about zis.”

“About what?” Harry asks, and then he sees it.

Clutched to Camille’s chest, looking very confused indeed, is Ken. He is wearing what appears to be a doll’s dress, legs fed through the frilly armholes and head poking out of the matching collar. On his head, neatly resting on his casque, is a tiny straw bonnet. Harry stares, torn between compassion for his humiliated pet and the very real urge to laugh out loud. In the end, the indignity is just too much, and when Hermione turns away from her child to giggle into her hand, Harry can’t help it.

“We were just getting him ready for Noel,” Hugo explains, in the fruitiest French accent Harry has ever heard.

“He is ready now,” Camille confirms, breaking free from her mother and holding out the chameleon to Harry. “Would you like to have him back?”

Harry takes him with as much solemnity as he can muster. Hermione, having managed to compose herself, exchanges significant parent-type glances with Fleur, while Ron ruffles Hugo’s hair and mumbles to himself about strange children. Ken seems to have accepted his fate, and he sits quietly on Harry’s shoulder in his dress and bonnet.

“Maybe they’ll help to keep you warm,” Harry tells him, getting to his feet when he sees Percy coming in from the garden. “Got a minute, Perce?”
“Er… yes, I suppose,” Percy says, darting nervous glances out of the window to where Audrey and Lucy are watching the fish in the half-frozen pond.

“It won’t take long,” Harry assures, steering him into the living room and closing the door.

In truth, he doesn’t know how long it will take at all, but he’s pretty sure he has time; the carrots aren’t even cooked yet. Percy already looks anxious, and when Harry turns up the volume on Molly’s record player, his eyes grow large with panic.

“He’s rather setting me on edge here,” he says, stepping back as Harry moves closer to him.

He sighs. “I’m just trying to make sure that you can hear me and they can’t,” he explains, indicating the closed door that leads to the kitchen.

“Oh, I see,” Percy says loudly, and Harry might laugh if he didn’t have things to say. “Press on, then.”

“Wizards Unite,” Harry says, folding his arms.

Percy reddens. “Oh, that. Well, it was just a thought. I honestly didn’t mean to offend you, Harry.”

“I’m not offended,” Harry promises. “I was a bit surprised, but I thought I’d give it a go.”

“You did? Really?” Percy shouts as the chorus of the carol roars into life. “Good heavens. How was it?”

Harry rubs at his face, remembering the form with a shiver of horror. “You wouldn’t believe the questions I had to answer. Percy, do you know what manscaping is?”

Percy frowns and shakes his head. “No, I… do I want to know?”

Harry laughs. “No. But I answered all their bloody questions and so far I’ve been dragged around a moor by a mad outdoorsman and lectured in a cinema by a bloke who smelled like an armpit. I don’t suppose you know where I’m going wrong?”

“Goodness,” Percy mumbles and then remembers to raise his voice. “I don’t know what to tell you. When I did it, it was just a handful of questions and then we were off out to a nice restaurant. I really… I just thought it would be the same sort of thing.”

“Yeah, it’s not.”

Percy frowns. “I have to admit, I’m surprised you took it up. You’re always saying you don’t want… that sort of thing.”

Harry sighs, turning away from Percy and watching the smooth rotation of the vinyl disk. He polishes the brass trim of the machine with the edge of his sleeve. Wonders if Molly’s record player is as old as him. Older, perhaps.

“It was a wedding present,” Percy says, and Harry looks up. “Mum and Dad have had that for nearly fifty years. Every now and then it breaks down but they always manage to get it going
“That’s what I want, I suppose,” Harry says, just as the needle hisses and lifts from the record, leaving the room in silence. “Something that’s made to last. It doesn’t need to be perfect, it just has to be willing to be fixed.”

Percy gives him an odd little smile. “That sounds sensible. Are you going to keep going on the dates?”

Just as Harry opens his mouth to answer, the door bursts open and Molly hurries into the living room with an owl flapping behind her.

“It’s for you, Harry,” she says, ducking as the owl swoops past her and onto the back of the sofa. “I tried to take the envelope for you but it wouldn’t let go.”

At the sight of the glossy purple envelope, Harry’s heart sinks. They have found him. Here, in this safe, warm place of roast dinners and family rituals, is an invitation to meet another bizarre human being, and worse than that, he now has to come up with a lie to explain it all.

Percy shifts guiltily at his side and then heads for the door not currently being blocked by his mother. When he pulls it open, three small people tumble into the room. For a moment, they all look as shifty as Percy, and then Rose grins at Harry.

“Is it a love letter?” she asks, and Hugo and Camille giggle.

“No,” Harry says quickly and then, “What do you mean?”

“Is it from the mad man?” Hugo demands, nudging Camille in the ribs.

“Or the smelly man!” she says, fiddling with something stringy and flesh coloured that makes Harry want to curl up into a little ball.

“Where did you get that?”

“We were listening at the door,” Camille says proudly, ignoring his question. “With this!”

“George!” Percy bellows.

Second later, he ambles into the living room. “You rang?”

“Did you, at all, give your nephew and nieces an extendable ear… at all?” Harry demands, knowing that he’s becoming incoherent with embarrassment and knowing just as well that there is nothing he can do about any of it.

“I might have done… why?”

“Because they were eavesdropping on our private conversation and now everyone is going to know that Harry has joined a dating agency!” Percy snaps, and then slaps a hand over his mouth.

Every eye in the room turns to fix on Harry, and the silence is suddenly deafening.

“Right,” he mumbles, dropping into the nearest armchair and preparing himself.
He can’t be sure what form it’s going to take, but something is coming and he is going to be ready for it. In the end, he is barely surprised when George leans into the kitchen, yells, ‘Harry’s joined a dating agency!’ and the rest of the family swarms into the living room. As they take their seats and gaze at Harry with gossip-hungry eyes, Molly apprises the three parents of their children’s misdeeds. Ron and Hermione decamp to one of the sofas to roll their eyes at one another, while Fleur peers down at Camille with her hands on her hips.

“Do you not remember ze talk we had about grown-ups and how zey might like to have a conversation zat does not include you?” she asks with such quiet intensity that, beside her, Charlie shrinks in confused apology.

“But Maman…” Camille protests.


“Uncle George gave us the incredible ear!” Hugo pipes up.

“Extendable ear,” Rose corrects, and then looks guiltily at George.

Fleur turns on him, delicate eyebrows raised. “And you are not helping.”

“Right, you lot, go and play for a few minutes,” Molly says, settling herself beside Arthur in a flowered armchair big enough for two. “You too, Rose. Call me if any of my timers go off.”

Rose pouts. “Can we take Minty Kenneth?”

Harry glances at Ken, who is attempting to pluck at his new lacy collar. “Minty Kenneth is sleeping,” he lies. “Maybe later.”

“But—”

“Rabbits,” Hermione mumbles, and Rose darts into the kitchen after her cousins.

“What was that?” asks Audrey, releasing Lucy and allowing her to join the others.

“We’re trying to teach her to stop arguing about everything,” Ron says. “It’s a work in progress.”

“And the rabbits?” Percy asks, frowning.

Hermione smiles. “She might get some if she stops arguing.”

Molly beams. “Rabbits are lovely. She could keep them here if you haven’t got enough room.”

“That’s very clever,” Arthur says. “We should have tried that on some of ours.”

“Hey!” Ginny protests, and then shrugs. “It wouldn’t have worked.”

“I think you’re just proving Dad’s point there, Gin,” Ron says.

“If you think Ginny was the cheekiest one out of all of you, you’d be wrong, Ronald Weasley,” Molly says, and Ron pulls a face at her when she turns her attention back to Harry. “It’s alright,
dear, we’re all just a bit surprised.”

“I’m getting that,” Harry says, taking in the sea of pale skin and freckles, the ten pairs of curious eyes and the air of expectation so intense that his mouth suddenly feels like the desert. “Oh, god, Hermione, please don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” she asks, all curls and striped jumper and feigned innocence. “I’m just surprised. This is my surprised face.”

“Funny, it looks a lot like your ‘Harry, you’ve lost your mind’ face,” he sighs, and then hits upon inspiration. “George went on a date last week, why aren’t we getting excited about that?”

“Thanks, mate,” George says, but he smiles when the attention of the room shifts to him. “Nice girl, went for lunch and then to see the Harpies play at home. Held hands, kiss on the cheek, seeing her again soon. Now, do you think we can get back to the much more interesting matter at hand?”

Harry watches in dismay as his family trades whispers for a moment and then, almost as one, turns back to focus on him.

“Really?!”

“George knows that we have follow-up questions,” Percy says.

“I do. The thing is, I don’t think we’ve finished being surprised.”

Harry groans and rubs his face. “Okay. Yes, I’ve joined a dating agency. I’m not sure why but I thought it was worth a shot. It’s been pretty weird so far but I’m trying to give it a chance.” He glances at Percy, who now looks terrified, and smiles at him, hoping to convey the assurance that his secret is safe. “I suppose you all thought I was committed to dying an old… maid?” he says uncertainly. “Is there a male version of that?”


“Harry isn’t… oh. Yes, of course he is.” He blushes and Audrey gives his arm a squeeze, hiding a smile in her cup of tea.

“Perce, did you take your brain medicine this morning?” Ginny asks, while George draws his wand and spells a glittering dunce’s cap onto his brother’s head. He doesn’t seem to notice.

Harry leans back in his chair and bites down on a guilty smile. Yes, they are definitely surprised, and he knows there will be questions, but no one seems to be horrified or falling over themselves to dissuade him. They are his family, and they love him, and that certain knowledge makes his heart glow as brightly as the mismatched tangle of lights on Molly and Arthur’s Christmas tree. None of them are perfect, but all are adored; Percy, who is nothing less than an upstanding buffoon of a man, has found a woman who is patient and kind, and perhaps more importantly, seems to find humour in his funny little ways. Molly and Arthur can bicker until the cows come home, but they are nearly fifty years strong and clearly love each other to pieces. He has had a front row seat to Ron and Hermione’s relationship since the beginning, and while they couldn’t be more different, they knit together with startling grace. Fleur misses her frequently absent husband more than she lets on, but between them, they keep their marriage strong with letters, postcards, and international fire-calls.
There are many ways to conduct a relationship, he supposes. He just has to find the one that works for him, and maybe the start of it is sitting right there, inside that purple envelope attached to the owl that is now attempting to eat Molly’s Christmas pot pourri. Taking a deep breath, he leans over and takes the envelope.

“Does anyone have a pen I can borrow? I think I’d better send this back before the owl loses its patience,” Harry says, and Molly is already out of her seat.

“Are you eating my Festive Florals?” she demands of the owl. “Get down. Go on, off the table. Here you are, Harry, dear,” she adds, handing him a self-inking quill from her apron pocket.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, pleasantly surprised when he reads the first line of the note.

*You have a match! Your date’s name is Corrigan. Please reply by return with your suggested meeting place, date and time.*

“What is it?” Arthur asks, leaning forward in his chair.

“I get to choose where we go,” Harry says, potential activities flitting through his head already. “Which means no talking in the cinema and definitely no orienteering.”

There is a moment of contemplative silence before the room explodes with questions, and Harry thinks he probably should have seen it coming.

“What the heck is orienteering?” George asks, looking rather worried.

“I imagine it’s something to do with China,” Percy says sagely.

“Chinese food?” Ginny suggests with a hopeful expression.

“Flags!” Arthur says triumphantly. “You run around and collect flags! We did it on a team-building thingy, years ago. I broke my ankle!”

“Oh, yes,” Molly nods. “It’s very dangerous. Did you hurt yourself, Harry?”

“No,” he promises, “but you’re right, Arthur. It wasn’t really my cup of tea.”

“Tea!” Molly cries, hurrying out of the room. “I was just about to pour the pot!”

“I think it’ll be a bit stewed now, love,” Arthur says mildly.

Harry thinks it probably will, but when the mingled aromas of roast chicken and vegetables come streaming in through the open kitchen door, he decides not to think of anything at all. He already knows exactly where he’s going to take Corrigan, and now, if his family will let him, he’s going to give his Sunday lunch the attention it deserves.

“We still want to hear all about it,” Hermione says, tucking her arm through his as they all make their way to the table. “Molly, you’ve got about ten seconds before those alarms start going off.”

“Thank you, clever girl,” Molly calls, silencing the timers with a sweep of her wand before they even begin to make a sound. “Carrots, Harry!”
Harry takes the steaming pan and sets it down on the table. “‘Mione, I promise to tell you everything. After lunch.”
The sun shines brightly on Harry and Ken as they make their way to the park for date number three, a nice, relaxed lunch at the pavilion followed by a wander through the trees if all goes well. At five minutes to one, Harry chooses an outside table and persuades Ken into his usual pocket. At one o’clock exactly, he is joined by Corrigan, and at two o’clock on the dot, he is once again alone, staring at their empty plates and wondering what on earth has just happened.

Letting Ken crawl back onto his shoulder, he leaves the café and makes his way home slowly, crunching over the glittering frost and barely noticing when little grippy feet tug at his hair. Back at number twelve, he drifts from room to room in a state of distraction, making cups of tea and then leaving them in strange places to go cold. He checks and rechecks his case, making sure that everything is present and in order for tonight’s display, and when his checks cease to make sense, he sits in his favourite chair by the fire and attempts to absorb himself in a book.

Eventually, he gives up and runs himself a bath, soaking in the soothing, herbal-scented water and musing on the three men he has met so far. Dennis was nice enough, if completely barking mad, Wilson was obnoxious and grubby, and Corrigan… Corrigan was handsome and clever and so strange that all Harry can think about is getting to tonight’s event and telling Draco all about him.

In the end, despite his best efforts with baths, books, and singing to a confused Kenneth, Harry still manages to arrive at the stone circle before almost everyone else. Selwyn is running around, throwing up wards and stumbling over bits of frozen grass, and Jim and Lorna are just dismounting their tandem, but otherwise, the landscape is calm and the ancient stones are still sleeping beneath the last of the sunset.
“Why are so many of these things in the north?” Jim complains, hitting his thighs with a rough warming charm. “My legs are frozen.”

“You’re from the north,” Lorna points out. “You should be used to it. He’s not here yet.”

Jim frowns. “Who?”

Lorna looks at Harry. “Draco. He’s not here yet.”

“I know,” Harry says, setting down his heavy case. “Do you want some help with that?”

“It’s nice of you to offer, Harry, but we’ve sort of got this down to a fine art now,” Lorna explains, pulling a folded pile of fabric from the basket of the tandem.

She throws the whole thing into the air with a practised movement, catching up one side while Jim grabs the other. As Harry watches, they shake and twist the heavy fabric with a coordination that comes only from years of working side by side.

“How long have you two been together?” he asks, and Jim grins.

“Since 1066,” he says, and Lorna sighs.

“Seventeen years. How are your dates going?” she asks, and Harry can see her sly smile even through the curtain of dark hair that whips across her face.

“Dates?” he repeats. “I remember telling you about one date.”
“Ah, Harry, you know news travels fast around here,” she says, and then, “Now!”

“Rigidatus!” Jim shouts, slashing his wand at the fabric.

Harry watches as the mass of flying fabric snaps into the shape of a small vehicle and then, with a flick of Lorna’s wand, gains a hatch and a coat of shiny red paint. He has witnessed this transformation many times over the years, but it never seems any less impressive. Perhaps even more compelling is the process of spelling the whole thing back into the bicycle basket at the end of the night.

“News, did you say?” he asks when Lorna ties on her apron and gets inside the tent-van. “Or gossip?”

She shrugs. “Potato, potahto.”

“Cherry, cherroo,” adds Jim, opening a tub of ice cream that is already steaming gently. “Do you want to try it? I’ve got sprinkles… chocolate sauce… beetle bits?”

“Maybe later,” Harry says, glancing at the empty spot where Glenda will set out her stall. “I think I’ll see what’s on a stick first and then come to you for dessert.”

“It’s good,” Jim whispers. “I put kirsch in it.”

“Did someone say kirsch?” Selwyn demands, appearing suddenly at Harry’s side.

“I did, but you were all the way over there by the stones,” Jim says, frowning.
“I can hear for miles with this thing,” Selwyn says proudly, turning his head to show them a tiny ear trumpet wedged into his left ear. “And I’ll have one of those cherry ice creams if they’re ready.”

“We are always ready,” Lorna promises, scooping hot ice cream into a cone and passing it to Selwyn.

The rich, fruity smell is delicious and Harry breathes it in along with the frosty night air. Conditions are perfect for his display, and it’s going to be bright and noisy and beautiful.

“Actually, you might want to take that off before I get started,” he says, eyeing Selwyn’s ear trumpet. “It’s going to get loud.”

Selwyn frowns and peers at his clipboard. “I thought you were doing butterflies?”

“Yes, and loads of other insects,” Harry says. “Including the Ecuadorean shouting moth and the giant rumble beetle. And bats, because why not? Basically, things that make a racket.”

“Do they have to make a racket in firework form?” Selwyn asks.

“Selwyn, are you really asking for quiet fireworks? Because if you are… there’s something wrong with you,” Draco says, and Harry turns to look at him so sharply that his neck twinges in protest.

“You match,” Lorna laughs. “Are you coordinating outfits now?”

Harry glances at the garment he is now calling his Date Shirt, today spelled a determined dark blue, and then at Draco, whose coat appears to be the exact same shade.
“Yes, Lorna, that’s what we do,” Draco says gravely. “We owl each other every evening and make sure our outfits match. I don’t know how you’ve never noticed it before.”

Lorna pulls a face at him and starts making his hot chocolate without a word. Ken, who has been sleeping in the glow of his warming charm, stirs awake and stretches out towards Lorna, little feet scissoring and eyes swivelling wildly.

“Yes, she’s very pretty but she’s taken. You’re stuck with me,” Harry says, putting out a hand to prevent the daft chameleon tumbling to the ground.

“You’re not a bad catch,” Jim says. “Ken’s a lucky young man.”

“Thanks,” Harry laughs. “I’ll make sure to tell him that.”

“Look sharp,” Selwyn mutters, letting out a wisp of cherry-scented steam. “Ye olde stick woman is on her way.”

Harry follows his eyes to see Glenda’s green and white van approaching slowly on its metal legs like some kind of gigantic metal spider.

“I’ll tell her you called her that.”

Selwyn pales. “Please don’t.”

“I won’t,” Harry promises, and Selwyn suddenly finds he has something very important to do on the far side of the stone circle.
“I might,” Draco says.

“Not now,” Harry murmurs, eyes fixed on Glenda’s approaching van. “You never know when you might need some leverage.”

Draco lets out a bark of surprised laughter. “How very Slytherin, Harry Potter.”

“I’ve got a bit in me,” Harry says distractedly, barely noticing Lorna’s snort.

The Original Stick Tram is almost upon them, and Glenda is now visible in the front window, sipping from a mug of tea and looking utterly relaxed, as though she is not currently bobbing up and down on eight creaking copper legs. Each one must measure six feet long at full stretch, articulated on a series of hinges and spells that allow them to pick their way over any terrain while Glenda sits comfortably in the tram all the way to her destination. Harry knows from experience that it’s a bit of a bumpy ride, but Glenda doesn’t seem to notice, and has been witnessed knitting, mixing up ingredients, and, on one memorable occasion, curling her hair with a hot iron while the spider-tram bobbed its way up the side of a mountain.

Soon, the strange beast settles into place beside Jim and Lorna’s tent van, and the legs fold neatly in on themselves at the prod of Glenda’s wand. She pops open the hatch and leans out, wafting a cloud of magical steam from her face.

“Hello, loves, you’re here nice and early,” she says, beaming. She lifts her mug of tea to address Jim and Lorna. “Something smells boozy… I hope you’ve got an option for the little ones.”

“Yes, Mum,” Lorna says, showing her a fresh tub of ice cream with barely an eye roll.

Harry smiles to himself, knowing that Glenda has been mothering the creatives since long before
he met any of them. Selwyn, too, despite the fact that he is a little bit terrified of her.

“And what have you got?” Draco asks, peering at the chalkboards and finding them blank.

Glenda sets down her tea and pulls a piece of chalk from her apron. Without a word, she begins to write, and all four of them watch her in silence. Finally, she steps back, dusting off her hands and smiling with pride.

*Toad in the hole on a stick with a Cumberland sausage and onion gravy centre.*

*Halloumi on a stick with a roasted red pepper relish.*

“That sounds fantastic,” Harry sighs, stomach grumbling at the vague memory of lunch.

“Well, the gravy just spill out everywhere?” Draco asks, and it sounds a lot like a challenge.

“No, love.”

“Well, not?”

Glenda sighs. “Because, as I’m always telling you, I know what I’m doing. There are spells for these things, Draco, and just because you don’t know about them doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“And then, Draco Malfoy was told,” Lorna says solemnly.
“Yes, love, and he’ll be told again before too long,” Glenda says, but she’s smiling, and Harry suspects she would also be patting Draco on the head if she could reach him.

“I’ll come back for one later,” he says, defeated, and follows Harry when he heads off to set up his display. “One day I’ll catch her out.”

Harry continues to crunch over the frozen grass, bemused. “Do you even know the first thing about cooking?”

Draco lifts one shoulder in a hopelessly elegant shrug. “I can make mashed potato and cheese on toast and I baked a cake once… so, not really. But it’s not about that. I just enjoy being right.”

Harry laughs. “I never would have noticed that about you.”

Draco just arches an eyebrow. Harry lets him. When he finds his spot for the evening, he sets down his case and watches for several minutes as a large group of people arrive with what appear to be bright red lanterns of all shapes and sizes. Selwyn greets them and immediately starts waving his arms around to indicate the strength and placement of his obscuring and Muggle-repelling wards. He is extremely entertaining to watch, and Harry doesn’t realise how long he’s been crouching on the ground until he tries to move and cannot feel his legs.

“I’ve never understood why you don’t have a chair,” Draco says helpfully.

“Because,” Harry says, rubbing at his thighs, “it’s never occurred to me to have one.”

Draco sighs, but he draws his wand, concentrates, and conjures a chair that fits Harry’s needs perfectly; it’s low to the ground so he can reach his case, but raised just enough to keep him dry. The cushions are padded and even appear to be waterproof.
“Thank you,” he says, secretly moved by the thoughtful gesture.

Draco stares at him until he lowers himself into the chair and then creates an identical one beside it, settling into it and wrapping his long coat around himself.

“So, how was it?”

“My date?”

“Obviously.”

Harry sighs and opens his case, watching drawer after drawer spring out as he tries to decide what to say about Corrigan.

“It was different.”

Draco makes a dismissive sound. “Good different? Bad different? Scared for your life different?”

“Wouldn’t that come under ‘bad different’?” Harry asks, poking around for his roll of fabric.

“Harry… please just tell me what happened.”

Having found the fabric, Harry leans back in his new chair and pushes his fingers into the slippery roll. Intrigued, Ken descends from his shoulder and conducts his own investigation.
“I invited him to the park for lunch.”

“Shocking.”

“He was on time, which I thought was a good thing. But he wasn’t just punctual, he was obsessed,” Harry says, releasing the fabric and letting it unravel over his legs. “He had this pocket watch and he must have looked at it once a minute at least.”

“For the entire date?” Draco asks, frowning.

“Such that it was,” Harry says. “He arrived exactly on time and left precisely one hour later. Apparently, he organises his whole life in ten minute slots, so I suppose I should consider myself lucky that I was assigned six of them.”

“Why ten minutes?”

Harry looks at Draco and shakes his head. “We didn’t get that far. I have a feeling there was a philosophy behind it but I didn’t get to hear it. He just kept asking things like, ‘do you think there’s a queue for the toilets?’ or ‘how long did it take you to get ready today?’ or ‘I see you have a pet, does it take up a lot of your time?’”

Draco laughs. “Well, we all know that the swivel-eyed menace is a notorious time-suck.”

Harry gazes down at Ken, who has managed to wrap himself in the black fabric and is gripping onto the edges as though daring someone to take it from him.
“I wasn’t sure how to answer that, I have to admit. He also spent ages trying to figure out how long every item on the menu would take to cook, which seemed like a waste of time. Bit ironic. Decided not to say so.”

“Well, I must know what he went for,” Draco says, tone caught somewhere between sarcasm and genuine curiosity.

Harry laughs. “I believe it was a ham and cheese baguette with a green salad. In fact, I know it was because I couldn’t take my eyes off it. I’ve never seen anyone eat a sandwich so quickly.”

“I hope he didn’t use an entire ten minute slot,” Draco says.

“Nowhere near. He’d have been even quicker if he hadn’t kept stopping to check his pocket watch and shake his head. Honestly, it was like being on a date with the White Rabbit.”

Draco smiles, tipping back his head to look at the star-strewn sky. People are starting to arrive now, Harry can hear them, and the familiar scent of frying means that Glenda’s stick-based treats are almost ready for her eager customers. Harry observes Draco’s sharp profile for a moment, admiring his relaxed posture and remembering Corrigan’s restless energy with a shudder.

“Are you put off pocket watches for life?” Draco asks suddenly.

“No, just the ones that turn lunch into a time trial.”

“This was my grandfather’s,” Draco says, dipping into his pocket and producing a small watch with a delicate mechanism and an etched silver case. The chain slips between his fingers and sways in the gentle breeze. “I take it everywhere because... you never know.”
“May I?” Harry asks, and Draco tips the watch into his palm.

He opens the watch and then closes it with care, turning it in his hands to admire the swirling designs. On the reverse, the letters ACM have been engraved, and are now slightly faded.

“Did you know him?” Harry asks.

“No. He died when I was very small,” Draco says, taking back the watch when Harry offers it and tucking it back into his pocket. “He was a quiet man, by all accounts. Fair-minded. The only member of my father’s family my mother could stand.”

“He’d be proud of you,” Harry says, turning his eyes to Ken when his heart starts to feel as though it’s been scrubbed raw.

“Perhaps. My mother did say that all he ever really wanted to do was paint,” Draco says, and Harry still doesn’t look at him but the smile is clear in his voice.

“Beautiful things,” Harry mumbles. “You and Fleur would have a lot to talk about.”

“Excuse me,” someone says loudly, startling them both. “Have you any idea how dangerous those lanterns are?”

Harry gets to his feet, taking a moment to put on his professional expression. This isn’t the first time someone has come to him at one of these events with a problem that has nothing at all to do with him, and it won’t be the last. Like it or not, his is a recognisable face, and he has learned that the best solution is to listen calmly and point the person in the direction of someone who can actually help them.
“Okay, well, that sounds like a valid concern but I’m not actually—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses,” the woman snaps, and the little girl at her side looks like she wants to cover her face. “Those things are deadly. They can set fire to fields, they can injure birds, they can even kill cows if they accidentally eat them. I can’t believe an event like this would allow such a horrible practice to go on.”

The woman glares at Harry with such indignation that he almost takes a step back.

“I don’t know if that’s the case or not, but you need to talk to the artists who brought the lanterns,” he tries, pointing over her shoulder. “They haven’t lit any yet, so maybe—”

“I’m so disappointed that someone like you would support such a thing,” she interrupts. “What kind of example are you setting for my daughter?”

The little girl, who can’t be any older than Rose, tugs on her mother’s sleeve. “Mum, we should ask the other people,” she attempts, but the woman doesn’t seem to hear her.

Harry looks around for help, catching a brief shower of red sparks in his peripheral vision, then Draco stands up beside him and fixes the woman with a cool stare.

“Someone is coming to help you now,” he says with such politeness that the woman rage fades into confusion.

“What?”

“Hello,” says a breathless young woman with an unlit lantern in her hands. “I saw your sparks. Did you need something?”
“Yes,” the first woman says, rage back in place. “I need these two to explain to me why they’re using lanterns… ones like that… when they are terrible for the environment. Even the Muggles have banned them, you know. Even the Muggles.”

“Okay.” The girl holds up the lantern. “You’re right about the lanterns that the Muggles have. That is the traditional model and they can be very dangerous because you can’t control how and where they land. Our lanterns are different. The fire is a magical one and will go out the moment it touches a solid object of any kind. Also, the whole thing, including the paper, is charmed to vanish completely with a simple spell. None of these lanterns will land, I promise.”

The little girl smiles. “And the birds and bats are safe, too?”

“Yes. I promise, these lanterns are completely safe. They’re just going to look beautiful for a few minutes and then…” She waves one hand and the lantern disappears. “Gone.”

“I just don’t think you should be endorsing something so dangerous to nature,” the woman says, eyes fixed on Harry. “It’s a bad example.”

“Harry isn’t endorsing anything,” Draco points out. “He’s an artist for the event, just like this lady. He’s here to set off fireworks.”

“I like your fireworks,” the lantern lady says, and the little girl whispers, “Me, too.”

“I don’t care about fireworks,” the angry lady snaps. “I want these lanterns stopped.”

“Mum, it’s alright,” the little girl insists. “The animals are safe, the lady said.”
“I’m not leaving until someone listens to me,” she says, folding her arms, and Harry can’t help imagining the scene should she choose to stay where she is. In less than an hour, hundreds of fireworks will launch from exactly where she’s standing and then she’ll move, one way or another.

“Why don’t you come and talk to our team?” the lantern woman says, stepping away and motioning for the woman and her daughter to follow. “I’m sure we can find someone who can reassure you.”

The woman hesitates, reluctant to give in, but finally stomps off across the grass with her daughter in tow.

Draco folds into his chair and sighs. “Why do these people always find you?”

“I’ve got a vaguely familiar face and I don’t run away when someone starts carping at me,” Harry says, dislodging Ken from his firework fabric and spelling it into a rigid surface. “Good thinking with the red sparks.”

“I learned a lot in that forest,” Draco says, and Harry smiles to himself.

Slowly and carefully, he lays out his shells and rehearses his spells until muscle memory kicks in and the night’s routine settles into his mind. Draco sits in perfect stillness with Ken on his knee, and together they watch the glowing lanterns take to the sky. Harry wonders if the angry woman is still hanging around somewhere, shouting at no one in particular, but he doesn’t wonder for long because the sight is just too beautiful to waste. The lanterns rise slowly over the stone circle, speckling the darkness with warm, orange light until Harry wants to jump on a broom and chase them.

“Good luck following that,” Draco says, getting up when the last of the lanterns has, as promised, disappeared.
“Thank you for the encouragement, as always,” Harry mumbles, but he’s grinning as he prepares for the start of his display. “Are you going?”

“I don’t want to distract you,” Draco says. “I’ll buy you a stick thing if there are any left when you’ve finished.”

_Distract me_, Harry thinks, and then shakes himself. “Okay,” he calls, but Draco is already halfway to Glenda’s van.

Distraction and fireworks definitely do not mix, he tells himself, wondering how he could forget such an important thing, even for a moment. When his name is announced, he takes a deep breath and throws himself into his display. This is a delicate one, and the slightest off-balance spell could ruin the whole thing. Harry barely breathes from the moment he ignites the first shell to the moment the last shimmer of light fades from the sky, but it’s perfect. Every flower, every beetle, every ant is rendered with such clarity that even when the heavens open and the rain begins to pour, not a single eye can be persuaded from the images above. Harry smiles, watching a mass of umbrella charms pop up over the audience as he releases clouds of migrating butterflies and swarms of bumblebees made of nothing but light and magic.

The fireflies draw a gasp from the spectators, and there is gentle laughter when the noisier creatures soar into the air with buzzes and bangs. Harry finishes with his Bhutanese fluorescing bats, sending them screaming out in a puff of gunpowder and a shell full of stars that explode over the stone circle one after another after another. The last appears to crash into the sign pointing to the North Pole, sending it whizzing on its pole and then bursting into crackling points of light.

The applause rings in his ears as he looks around for Draco, who is still staring at the sky. He doesn’t appear to have bothered with an umbrella charm at all, and his pale hair is dripping into his face. Harry isn’t sure what makes him do it, but he throws a protective spell over his things and jogs over to his side.

“What did you think?”

“One of your best,” Draco says, and god, he’s soaked. He smiles at Harry and a droplet of rainwater rolls off the end of his nose. “Well, I heard someone saying that.”
“Are you still coming tomorrow?” Harry asks, ignoring the back-handed compliment.

“Yes. Should I bring anything?”

“Just yourself and the DVD player that doesn’t work,” Harry says. “I’ll sort the rest.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to run off on a date?”

Harry grimaces. “No dates tomorrow, I promise. Just you, me, Ken, and ‘The Fellowship of the Ring’.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“No, it doesn’t. Are you going to buy me a toad-in-the-hole on a stick or not?”
When the knock at the door comes, Harry stops fussing with the position of his sofa and makes his way downstairs. He had expected Draco to use the kitchen fireplace, especially as it’s been snowing since early in the morning, but then again, it’s rarely any use trying to predict what Draco will do in any given situation. He opens the door to a gust of icy wind, grateful to be back in his warm jumpers instead of his flimsy date shirt, even just for a little while.

On the doorstep, Draco is staring wildly at his pocket watch. “Am I late?” he demands, looking up at the sound of Harry’s laughter.

“Hello, Corrigan. Would you like to come in for ten minutes?”

“Perhaps a multiple thereof,” Draco agrees, stepping inside and ruffling the snow from his hair. “You know, if I really like you.”

“Of course you like me. I’m wonderful,” Harry mutters, waiting for Draco to hang up his coat and then leading the way up to the living room, where the fire is crackling in the grate and the frosted windows seem to luminesce with its reflected glow.

The room looks cosy and much neater than usual, but Draco doesn’t need to know about the last
minute rounding up of cups and books and half-chewed tomato stalks.

“I was going to ask why your house smells like fruit, and then this little reprobate turned up,” Draco says, picking up Ken and holding him level with his face. “What is that? A sultana?”

“Er… a bit of tubeworm, I think,” Harry says, removing the fragment from the corner of Ken’s mouth and vanishing it with his wand.

“Lovely. Fortunately, I brought you something better,” Draco declares, producing a bunch of red grapes and watching Ken’s eyes swivel in excitement. “Perhaps I’d better leave them with you.”

Harry takes the grapes, pulling two from the bunch and setting them on Ken’s nearest shelf. Draco makes his arm into a bridge and Ken ambles onto the platform, curling his tail neatly as he settles down to enjoy his prize.

“These things go all around the house, don’t they?” Draco asks, running his fingers along the wood and meeting Harry’s eyes with such soft amusement that he forgets to breathe for a moment.

“Yes,” he admits. “I’ve heard it all before, don’t worry. I know I spoil him, but he’s my friend and this is his house as well as mine.”

Draco blinks. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

Harry scrubs at his hair, defensiveness fading into embarrassment. He has no idea what’s wrong with him today, just that everything around him feels fraught and pulled painfully tight; he thinks he might burst into laughter or tears or rage at the slightest provocation and Draco’s concerned expression isn’t helping one little bit.
“Sorry,” he says at last, and Draco shrugs.

“I understand. People are sensitive about their pets. Listen, I’m soaked up to my knees from the snow, would it be terribly uncouth if I took my shoes off?”

Something about the formality of the request tickles Harry and he feels his bonds begin to slacken. It’s just Draco, he tells himself firmly. There’s absolutely nothing to worry about here.

“No, old chap, it would not be uncouth,” he pronounces. “Put them over there next to mine and then park your arse so I can look at this malfunctioning… thing.”

Draco gives him a withering look but complies, setting the DVD player on the coffee table and settling himself on Harry’s side of the sofa. Harry lets him, turning his focus to connecting cables and examining buttons. He doesn’t look up even when there is a crackle of magic and then a waft of cotton-scented steam from Draco’s socks and trouser cuffs, and within a couple of minutes, he is able to cast the activation spell and bring up the DVD loading screen on his television.

“Well, I feel like an imbecile,” Draco sighs. He picks up the plastic case that houses the disc and peers at it, eyebrows knitted. “Good grief, do you know how long this film is?”

“We don’t have to watch all of it,” Harry says, putting the disc into the player and retrieving a loaded tray from the windowsill, where it has been sitting under the glow of a warming charm. “I thought you might like to see one of the ways Muggles imagine wizards. Plus, it’s a good story.”

“Marshmallows?” Draco murmurs, taking his mug of hot chocolate and wrapping his fingers around it with a small smile of contentment. “Wonderful.”

“Obviously,” Harry says, placing a large bowl of popcorn in between them and pulling his feet up onto the sofa cushions.
“I thought you didn’t like to share popcorn.”

“I don’t like to share popcorn with people who said they didn’t want any and I don’t like to share anything with people who look like they don’t wash their hands,” Harry corrects. “Would you like some popcorn, Draco?”

“Yes, please,” Draco says, pale eyes bright with amusement.

“And have you washed your hands?” he asks, almost managing a stern expression.

“I can go and wash them now if you’d like.”

“I think you’ll be alright,” Harry says, reaching for the remote. “Tell me if you want to stop or have a break or a cup of tea or whatever.”

“You’re not going to subject me to the full cinema experience, then?”

“Mine and Ken’s cinema is better,” Harry promises, closing the curtains with a sweep of his wand and plunging the room into near darkness. “Ready?”

“Mm,” Draco says, and then: “I really thought you’d be one of those people who had their Christmas decorations up right from the start of advent.”

“Sorry to disappoint. I’m more one of those ‘put the decorations up in a panic when they finally remember where they left them last year’ sort of people,” Harry admits. “I do, however, have some Christmas candles if you like.”
He scrambles to his feet and lights two red tapers that immediately begin to release the warm aroma of oranges and cloves into the room.

“How’s that?”

Draco sips his hot chocolate and regards him with gentle curiosity. “You’re nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. Why would I be nervous?”

“I have no idea. Why don’t you…er… park your arse so we can watch this film?”

Harry parks his arse and presses play.

Draco is quickly captivated by the opening scene, leaning forward to better focus on the story of how the One Ring came to be, and Harry feels pleased with his selection, even if he does think he hears Draco muttering the words ‘Mount Doom’ under his breath in a rather disbelieving manner. It doesn’t take long, however, for the questions to start.

“Why isn’t that child wearing any shoes?” he asks, scooping up a handful of popcorn.

“That’s not a child, that’s Frodo Baggins, and he’s a hobbit. Hobbits don’t wear shoes.”

Draco frowns. “Why not?”

“They just don’t,” Harry says. “Just watch.”
“Sorry,” Draco whispers, and is silent for so long that Harry almost forgets he’s there.

“Why doesn’t the big wizard just sort all of this out by himself?”

“I don’t think that would make for a very exciting film,” Harry says. “Not that I’m an expert on the subject.”

Draco makes a small thoughtful sound and allows Ken to climb up into his lap, resting a gentle hand on his back and watching his colours fade from green to pale blue.

“Not very efficient, all these swords and daggers,” he says. “Do you think this is set in a time before wands?”

“Gandalf has a staff,” Harry points out, trying not to smile.

He thinks he should be irritated by Draco’s interruptions but he can’t bring himself to mind at all. If anything, his questions and suggestions make the film even more enjoyable, and by the time they reach the halfway mark and decide to pause for a break, Harry feels light with amusement and so comfortable that he can barely be bothered to get up. Draco gazes at him in the candlelight, stretching out his long limbs and hiding a yawn in the crease of his elbow, while Ken snoozes on his chest, head resting against what looks like very soft, moss green cashmere.

“Harry,” he murmurs, expression suddenly serious.

Harry swallows dryly, mouth arid from far too much sugar. “Yeah?”
“Do you think Gimli’s angry because he’s ginger?”

Harry lets out a surprised bark of laughter and then hits Draco with a cushion. He pushes himself to his feet and heads for the door.

“I’m going to tell Ron you said that. In fact, I’m going to tell the whole Weasley family.”

“Do you think that will make them angry?” Draco asks, following him down the stairs and into the kitchen with Ken still attached to his jumper.

“I don’t know, but there’s a lot of them, and I’d be fighting on their side if something started,” Harry advises. He sets the kettle to boil and turns to face Draco, whose expression of challenge has begun to waver somewhat.

“I think I’ll leave it,” he says, taking a startled step back when Harry’s fireplace roars with green flames that melt into the image of Molly Weasley.

“Did I do that?” he whispers, hand flying to his wand.

Harry shakes his head. “No. Hello, Molly.”

“Hello, Harry dear.” She frowns. “Oh… hello, Draco. I didn’t expect to see you there.”

“Hello, Mrs Weasley,” Draco says with hurried politeness. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Harry watches distractedly as he makes a beeline for the back door and opens it, hesitating only for
a moment before stepping out into the frozen garden.

“No date today, Harry?” Molly asks.

“No today. Draco and I are just watching a film,” he explains, suddenly feeling nervous again.

Molly purses her lips. “Arthur likes films,” she says, pronouncing the word as though it feels foreign in her mouth. “Sitting there for hours on end watching people pretending to be cowboys, it’s very odd.”

Harry smiles. “This one has magical jewellery. And elves with longbows.”

“I’m not even going to ask,” Molly says. “Now, I just wondered if you might have a couple of eggs I could borrow. The chickens are apparently on strike with all this snow and I’m in the middle of a fruit cake.”

“No problem,” Harry says, grabbing his egg basket and passing the whole thing through the fireplace to Molly. “But… if you thought I’d be out on a date, why didn’t you ask someone else?”

“No one else is home during the day,” Molly says, just a little bit too quickly, and Harry has the strongest feeling that the fruit cake is a fictional one and that she is merely nosing around for a progress report.

“Right,” he nods, deciding to let her get on with it. “I’ll see you on Sunday, then?”

“Yes, but I just wanted to ask…” Molly begins, and then turns her head in the flames. “Arthur, leave that alone! No, I was just talking to Harry… I don’t know, do I, because you keep interrupting me! Harry, I have to run,” she sighs, and leaves him staring into an empty fireplace.
Shaking his head, he finishes off the tea and looks out of the window at his snow-covered yard. It takes him a moment to find Draco, eventually spotting him pressed against the side of the house, apparently showing Ken how to make a snowball. Surrounded by a warming spell that Harry doesn’t recognise, the chameleon is reaching out from Draco’s shoulder and trying to grip the snow, shaking his little feet in confusion when it turns to powder and falls to the ground. As though realising he is being watched, Draco turns and meets his eyes through the kitchen window.

“You can come in now,” Harry mouths.

Draco lobs the snowball at the fence, where it explodes into a million pieces. He tucks his hands into his sleeves and grants Harry a careless smile that sends his stomach into freefall. All at once his heart is hot and painful and all he can think about is dashing out into that icy yard and doing things that make no sense at all, no sense because this is Draco and that would be ridiculous, and yet his knees seem to have turned to water and he’s holding onto the edge of the counter as though his life depends on it.

“No,” he mumbles to himself, bracing for impact when Draco hurries inside.

His wet footsteps slap against the tiles and Harry realises he has decided to play outside in the snow with no shoes on, because he’s Draco Malfoy, and he’s… he’s looking at Harry with those eyes, anxious and grey and everywhere, one cold hand on Harry’s wrist, and god, there’s no need for his pulse to jump like that.

“What’s the matter?”

Harry picks up his tea and gulps at it, burning his tongue and then biting it hard. “I… erm… felt a bit weird. Probably need to eat something, that’s all. I’m fine now,” he promises, and he is.

He’s losing his marbles, but he’s alright. Too many bizarre dates, too few hours sleep, his brain is making leaps that he could do without, but it’s totally fine. He’s in a romantic mindset, after all, and with the candlelight and the snow and Draco being Draco… if he thinks about it, it almost makes sense.
“I could make you some toast,” Draco offers, letting go of Harry’s wrist.

“Okay,” he agrees, opting to play along. And then, when Draco goes home… strike that, when tonight’s event is over and they both go home, Harry can go to bed and make this feeling go away.

“Molly seemed quite disappointed to see me,” Draco says, and Harry’s insides decide to twist themselves up for no reason at all.

“Molly’s never disappointed to see anyone. Your feet are wet.”

“I know,” Draco says, sounding amused. “Listen are you sure… oh, good grief.”

Harry turns around at the sound of flapping. The owl swoops through the open back door and lands heavily on the tiles, shaking snow from its plumage and fixing Harry with furious eyes.

_Don’t look at me like that, he thinks. I don’t want your letter any more than you want to deliver it._

After a moment’s stand-off, he takes the envelope, scans the note, scribbles a reply and sends the grumpy owl packing.

“You have a lot of interruptions here,” Draco says, just as the toast pops up. “Doesn’t it drive you to distraction?”

“A bit,” Harry says vaguely. “I have another date tomorrow, apparently.”
Draco nods. Something flickers in his eyes for a fraction of a second and then it’s gone, and he’s calmly handing Harry a plate of buttered toast.

“Craig,” Harry says. “You know, that’s his name. Should be… good.”

“I knew a Craig once,” Draco says, starting up the stairs with his cup of tea. “He collected glass eyes.”

“I’m not sure what to say to that,” Harry admits, and that, at least, is true.

Draco laughs, and the sound takes up residence in the pit of Harry’s stomach as he sits carefully on the sofa and restarts the film. Ken comes to him and tucks himself into the crook of his arm to sleep. Draco lounges against the cushions, exuding languid contentment, and Harry keeps his eyes fixed firmly on the screen.
I just want to say that I don’t think all people like Craig are crazy. But he is. He really is.

Eleventh of December – a wood-burning stove

Craig is ten minutes late to the pavilion café, which Harry finds oddly reassuring. He bypasses the usual handshake and leans in for a backslap-slash-one-armed-hug that surprises Harry but lets him know that today’s date is, at least, clean, and smells pleasantly of the outdoors. Taking his seat, Harry offers him a menu. He already knows what he’s going to order; this place is familiar and unchanging, a fact that in his current state of mind is immensely comforting. Not only that, but he hopes it will allow him to focus all his attention on the man in front of him, rather than worrying about what might be going on around him. He knows what’s going on around him, and it’s mostly trees, dogs, and sandwiches.

“Everything okay?” he asks, realising that Craig is still standing up and frowning at the menu.

“Yeah, sorry, it’s just…” Craig pauses, smile apologetic. “I thought this might happen.”

“What’s that?”
“I’m afraid I have a rather restrictive diet,” he explains. “I don’t think I can eat anything on this menu but I thought it might be easier to meet you here and see if you wanted to try something different.”

Determined to throw himself into the experience, Harry shrugs and smiles. “No problem. What’s the plan?”

Craig’s eyes widen in momentary surprise, as though Harry is the first to agree to this suggestion, and maybe he is. They’re nice eyes, he thinks, chocolate brown and not at all like Draco’s. Which is good, he supposes, until he remembers that he’s not supposed to be thinking about Draco. A night of fractured sleep has done nothing to calm the writhe of his stomach or the leap of his heart, but there’s every chance that a nice lunch with a nice man will do the trick.

“I’ve got an allotment,” Craig says. “I grow all my own vegetables there and I’ve got a few animals… I know it probably sounds a bit weird but I think I can make you a decent lunch if you want to give it a go.”

Harry hesitates, knowing that Hermione would go mad if he went off to some stranger’s allotment, possibly to be murdered, but he needs this today, and he knows that he can have his wand out of his coat pocket in very short order if the need arises.

“Great,” he says, getting to his feet. “Let’s do it.”

Craig beams. “Brilliant.”

They make unhurried progress through the park, chatting idly about the birds and squirrels that dash across their path, until they reach a safe spot for Disapparation. Harry takes Craig’s offered arm for the jump and quickly finds himself in a small wooden shed. Craig flings the door open and Harry steps out into a riot of living colour. All around him, vegetables are growing in neat rows, while vibrant flowering plants climb over trellises and, in the corner of the plot, several small trees are groaning with fruit despite the winter air. The air here is intoxicating, heavy with life and earth and Harry wants to spell it into a bottle that he can hide in a drawer for emergencies.
Craig’s allotment is warded to the teeth, shimmering with protective magic, and so, Harry realises, are all the others. Several plots away, a woman in wellingtons is charming the frost from her cauliflowers, and she waves when she sees them.

“Hi, Priya!” Craig calls and then turns to Harry. “She makes the best parsnip soup I’ve ever tasted. Very protective of the recipe, though.”

“I know some people like that,” Harry says, thinking of Glenda, who would sooner lose an arm than reveal how her food stays on the stick.

“You’re friends with Draco Malfoy, aren’t you?” Craig asks, and something swishes unhelpfully in Harry’s stomach. “What’s he like?”

“He’s… erm… he’s fine.” Harry swallows hard.

Craig winces. “Sore subject? Sorry. I always say the wrong thing. Look, why don’t you have a seat by the wood burner and I’ll get some lunch going.”

“It’s not…” Harry tries, but Craig has already dashed back into the shed.

It’s a lie, anyway. Draco is a sore subject and Harry needs to get a grip of himself, to give himself a good shake or whatever it takes until Draco is a perfectly normal subject. A subject that does not make him feel like he’s forgotten how to stand up straight or control his temperature. Draco is his friend, and not only that, he is a friend that Harry is going to see every single night until the end of December, and quite often enough after that.

Which is fine, because he is in control of this. He’s on a date with a man who likes nature, and this time it’s the kind of nature he can get along with: allotments and fresh air and absolutely no risk of breaking an ankle.
“That’s quite a frown,” Craig says, returning from the shed with a tray full of vegetables and taking the seat opposite Harry’s. He lights the wood burner with his wand and slams the door shut with a clank. “Everything alright? Is this too boring for you?”

Harry laughs. “No, it’s the opposite. I keep thinking about how I used to be so adventurous and now I just want to do quiet things. I think I’m getting very dull in my—”

“Don’t you dare say ‘old age’,” Craig interrupts. “Anyway, that’s rubbish. You make fireworks for a living, don’t you think that’s exciting?”

“I love it,” Harry admits, allowing Ken to climb out of his pocket and onto his knee, where he leans towards the wood burner and basks in the warmth radiating from it.

“Aren’t you handsome?” Craig says, pausing in his chopping to admire Ken. “I love animals. I’ve got a goat and five chickens and some bees…”

“Where are they?” Harry asks, looking around.

“I have to put them in their pens when I’m not here, otherwise they eat the plants. After lunch you can meet everyone.”

“Okay. Is there anything I can do?”

When his offer of help is waved away, Harry settles in his chair and watches, listening to Craig’s enthusiastic descriptions of cheesemaking as he chops and shapes and cooks a large pizza on his stove. Harry has never seen anything like it, but the combination of warm bread and icy breeze is wonderful, and his first bite of molten cheese, vegetables and crisp base makes him sigh with happiness. Craig watches his hot breath stream into the air and smiles.
“Good? Better than the café?”

Harry is reluctant to be disloyal to the pavilion, but he has to admit that Craig’s wood burner pizza is one of the best things he has ever tasted.

“It’s delicious,” he says, opting for diplomacy.

“You know why, don’t you?” Craig asks, fixing him with an earnest eye.

“Why it’s delicious?”

“They’re better than food you get in cafés and restaurants,” Craig says, and Harry shakes his head. “I’m going to tell you something now, and it will change the way you think about food.”

“Alright,” Harry says slowly, licking tomato sauce from his finger before casting a new warming charm for Ken. The chameleon stretches and curls up to sleep on his thigh.

“First of all, any food grown or produced by Muggles is tainted by their electricity supply,” Craig explains. “It can make you sick or even infertile, so you should stop eating any of that straight away.”

“I see,” Harry says, heart sinking. “And second of all?”

Craig’s chocolate eyes grow wide. “Second of all, we used to be able to trust the food grown by wizarding farmers, but recently, the Ministry have started adding suggestibility potions to everything. It’s in the fertiliser, the animals’ food, everything. It’s how they control us.”
Harry sighs. All he wants to do is Apparate out of here and hide under his quilt until night falls and he can tell Draco all about his latest eccentric. Or not Draco. Someone. Ron and Hermione will get a kick out of it, he thinks, and he won’t have to worry about unhelpful feelings for either of them.

“Why?” he says at last, deciding to finish his slice of pizza, because it really is delicious.

“Why what?”

“Why does the Ministry want to control us?”

Craig leans forward, elbows on his knees, and peers into Harry’s eyes. “All the usual reasons. So they can get up to dodgy things without us asking questions. If we’re all nice and compliant, we won’t make a fuss when they bring in unethical new laws…”

“What sort of laws?” Harry asks, because he has never been good at not poking the thing that should not be poked.

“Open your eyes, Harry!” Craig whispers. “It’s all there if you want to see it. What an advantage it must be for them to have you on their side… if you just stop eating their food, you’ll see what I see.”

“Right. And why do the farmers let the Ministry mess with their crops?” Harry asks.

Craig sighs. “Money. Harry. They’re paid to do it. That’s why I grow everything myself; I have my goat for milk and my chickens for eggs and my bees… do you want to see my bees?”
“Er… okay,” Harry says.

Craig has clearly lost his marbles, but he doesn’t seem dangerous, and besides, Harry has always been a bit curious to see the inside of a beehive. He stuffs Ken in his pocket for safekeeping and gets to his feet.

“It’s alright, you stay there,” Craig says and dashes off behind the shed.

“Because the bees are going to come to me?” Harry wonders aloud, and when Craig re-emerges a minute or so later, he knows for certain that he is in the presence of a very odd person indeed.

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“A beard of bees?” Draco repeats, staring into the side of Harry’s head as he sets out his shells in a neat row. “A beard of bees?”

“You can keep saying it but it’s not going to get any less weird,” Harry says.

Of course, there is no avoiding Draco, not really, but Harry doesn’t have to look at him. He’ll just sit in the nice comfortable chair that Draco made for him, while Draco sits beside him in his identical chair, eating cinnamon ice cream and asking ridiculous questions.

“Did he at least have some sort of explanation for them?”

“He said they were very friendly and he liked… wearing them,” Harry says. “But you know, he also thinks the Ministry is paying farmers to drug our food and that electricity makes wizards infertile, so I’m pretty sure you can take all of it with a sack of salt.”
“I thought he seemed rather promising, too,” Draco says, and there is something in his voice that makes Harry look at him for the first time all night. “Ah, there you are,” he says lightly, and the eye contact makes Harry ache.

“I’m here,” Harry says, trying to sound casual and failing miserably.

“Are you upset with me?”

Harry’s whole body hurts with the effort of shaking his head and saying, “Of course not” in a voice that sounds vaguely human.

“Nighthawks later? I’ll buy you a horrible sandwich with extra electricity,” Draco offers.

“Not tonight,” Harry says, turning back to his shells and wondering when this feeling is going to go away. Fuck, he hopes it’s soon. “I think I need a good night’s sleep.”

Draco says nothing for a while as he finishes his ice cream and crunches into the cone.

“Look after yourself,” he says finally. “People here care about you.”

Harry glances at him just as the announcer introduces his display and the assembled crowd breaks into excitable applause. The silvery eyes are so intent on his, so full of questions, that his fingers almost slip as he lines up his wand for the first shell.

“I know,” he promises. “I will.”
He takes a deep breath and steadies himself. He can do this. All of it. All he has to do is focus.
Chapter Twelve

Twelfth of December – a pile of books

“I don’t suppose you can explain to me why I’m doing this to myself?” Harry says, standing in his hallway in his coat and winding a scarf around his neck.

Ken flicks out his tongue and rocks from side to side on his little platform. Harry offers his hand and the chameleon climbs aboard, tucking himself into a coat pocket without complaint.

“I suppose you’ll get back to me when you have a serious suggestion?”

Once again, there is silence. Harry braces himself and steps out into an icy, wind-whipped world. Following his date with Craig the conspiracy theorist, he had barely hesitated when two owls had arrived at his house with two separate purple envelopes the previous afternoon. Nothing, he thought, could be as ridiculous as a beard of bees, and the idea of multiple distractions from this Draco business could only be a good thing, so he’d agreed to brunch at the park with Anders, followed by afternoon coffee at a bookshop with Samar.

Now, though, as he struggles against biting wind and hailstones on his way to the pavilion, he is starting to think he might have made a tactical error. In spite of his thick coat and scarf, he is soon shivering hard and is forced to duck behind a tree to strengthen Ken’s warming charm. When a little grippy foot reaches out and grasps his thumb, he smiles. At least he thinks he does; his face is completely numb and no doubt turning bright red.
But he’s out. Out in the world during the daytime and not thinking about this evening or anything that goes with it. He’s here for food and coffee and conversation, and if he’s lucky he’ll get all three. Fortified by Ken’s silent support and the promise of bacon, he steps back onto the path and starts towards the pavilion. When he gets there, a man in a bobble hat waves to him from the window. He’s tall and blond with a neat beard that doesn’t seem to be made from bees, and that’s a good start.

“He looks normal,” Harry murmurs to Ken, and then stops, realising that from Anders’ point of view, his date has arrived and started talking to his own coat pocket.

Attempting a sane sort of expression, Harry pushes his way into the café and is immediately surrounded by the smell of warm food, brewing coffee, and wet coats. He locates Anders in the steam and pulls up a chair at the window table.

“What a day,” Anders laughs, just as the hailstorm intensifies and flings a fresh round of ice pellets against the glass. “Reminds me of home.”

“Scandinavia?” Harry guesses, detecting a trace of an accent.

“Sweden. I’ve been here only five years,” Anders says, picking up a menu. “This all seems very nice. Do you know, I met a man just recently from the agency and he wanted to take me to his… what was the word… a small farm for vegetables?”

Harry holds back a snort of laughter. “An allotment?”

Anders nods, frowning and rubbing at his beard. “I didn’t think it was a good idea, but he refused to eat at the restaurant I chose… so we parted ways.”

“Probably a good decision,” Harry says.
He can’t wait to tell Draco that Mr Beard of Bees is really doing the rounds. He’ll be… Harry groans inwardly. He fishes around for an interesting question and comes up with nothing.

“Do you like the UK?” he asks at last, and Anders smiles, revealing straight, white teeth.

“It suits me. I’m hoping to get a job in the Ministry soon, but at the moment I am mostly walking dogs. British people seem to really love dogs,” he says earnestly.

“Dogs are brilliant,” Harry agrees. “Have you got one of your own?”

“I have no pets allowed in my flat,” Anders says. “I did think maybe I would get a goldfish and keep it hidden from the landlady.”

Harry laughs. “My pet decided to come with me today. I can’t get him out because we’re in a food place, but if you want, afterwards, we can…”

“What is it?” Anders asks, eyes darting around as though he’s expecting a Bengal tiger to appear from somewhere on Harry’s person.

“His name is Ken and he’s a chameleon,” Harry says, and Anders shrinks back into his chair as though he’s been hexed.

“Like… a lizard?”

“Yeah.” Harry places a protective hand against his coat pocket, as though Ken is somehow in danger from this man who is backing away in terror at the thought of him. “Are you alright?”
Anders nods but stays where he is, pale skin turning grey. “Is it in your pocket?”

“Yes, but he can stay there,” Harry promises. “I take it you’re not a fan?”

“Reptiles,” Anders whispers, meeting Harry’s eyes and granting him a wavering smile. “Snakes… lizards… crocodiles… I can’t even look at them in pictures. You must think I’m ridiculous.”

“No,” Harry says, and he means it. “Everyone’s scared of something.” I’m scared of my best friend, he adds silently, and that really is ridiculous.

“You’re being very kind,” Anders says. “I didn’t write about it in the application form because… it felt silly and I didn’t think it would come up. It is going to be a deal-breaker, isn’t it?”

“Well, Ken is a big part of my life, so you and I probably aren’t a good fit,” Harry admits. “If you still want to get something to eat together, though, I’d like that. We don’t have to talk about him. We can even pretend he’s not here and that I never mentioned him.”

Anders smiles, but his posture is still rigid and Harry isn’t at all surprised when he shakes his head.

“I don’t think I could eat a thing now,” he says, and he slowly gets up from the table. “I’m so sorry. I think I’d better go. I’d shake your hand but…” He gestures at Harry’s pocket and shudders. “It’s not you, Harry. You seem very nice. I’m going to go now.”

Harry watches him hurrying away and then opens his pocket to check on Ken.

“You’re terrifying,” he whispers. Ken opens his mouth in a clear attempt at intimidation.
“He left in a hurry,” the waitress says, whipping out her order pad. “You ready to order?”

Harry only hesitates for a moment. He knows exactly what he wants and he’s ravenous.

“Brie and bacon baguette and a cappuccino, please.”

“Is he coming back?”

Harry laughs. “No.”

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Following a quiet but pleasant date with himself, Harry walks home through the hail in good spirits. He lights the fire and the Christmas candles and then settles in his armchair to thaw while Ken trundles around his platforms in search of hidden fruit. The room is soon warm and comfortable, and he is just beginning to doze when Hermione’s voice snaps him awake.

“What are you doing in my fire?” he mumbles, and she laughs.

“How rude.”

“You’re rude, I think I was having a nap.”

Hermione’s eyes sharpen. “You know, if you’re still tired during the day, I can make you another
potion. You look quite—"

“I swear, Hermione, if you say I look pale, I will reach through the fireplace and poke you in the
eye. Or set Ken on you. Apparently, he’s capable of sending big Swedish men into fits of terror.”

“If there’s a story behind that, I’d love to hear it,” Hermione says, appearing to settle herself more
comfortably on the other side. “I’m on my lunchbreak.”

“Are you calling to check on me, too? Because Molly tried that yesterday and I gave her nothing,”
Harry says, giving Hermione a significant look.

“Oh, I know,” Hermione says. “She called me last night and told me you were sitting around
watching gay cowboy films with Draco. Multiple ones, apparently, which is odd because I can only
think of one.”

“We weren’t watching gay cowboy films!” Harry protests, sitting up in his chair. “We were… you
know what, it doesn’t matter. My reality is whatever Molly wants it to be. Her version is probably
more interesting.”

Hermione laughs. “Probably. I just wanted to confirm the time for the Portkey tomorrow. Ron got
it but we lost the label, and missing the Hogwarts display just isn’t an option. Rose and Hugo are
pretty unimpressed that they’re going to Grandma and Grandad’s but it’ll be nice for Ron and me
to go somewhere on our own.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to be on your own at Hogwarts,” Harry says, finding himself caught up
in her enthusiasm. He’s just as excited to return to his first real home and put on an extra special
display for staff and students alike. “The Portkeys leave at seven, so… good god, what was that?”

Harry leaps up and strides over to the window, where he finds an owl slumped on the sill, pecking
disconsolately at the glass and carrying a shiny purple envelope. He sighs, opens the window and
takes the envelope back to his chair. He can feel Hermione watching him as he opens it and he
pretends she’s not there. He could really do with a day off from dating tomorrow, but…
“Oh,” he mumbles, surprised. “It’s a Christmas card from Teddy.”

“Jumping at owls now, are you?” Hermione asks, and Harry doesn’t need to look at her to see her expression.

“I didn’t jump.”

“You really did, Harry.”

“I don’t jump,” he insists, examining the front of the card. Teddy has chosen a winter scene featuring a very anxious looking sheep. He opens it to see that his godson has filled both inside spaces with his untidy handwriting. “Dear Uncle Harry… I picked this card because I thought the sheep looked like Gran does when she’s got people coming round and she hasn’t had time to scrub the curtains.”

Harry shows the card to Hermione and she smiles guiltily. “He’s right. Poor Andromeda.”

Harry grins and then groans. “I know you’ve joined a dating agency because I’ve had owls from Rose and George, and also Victoire had one from her mum.”

“We’re an efficient family,” Hermione says. “That’s something?”

“Hmm,” Harry says, and continues reading. “You’re quite good looking and not that old, can you really not find a man on your own? I’m surprised it hasn’t been in the Prophet yet. You should be careful. There are a lot of weirdos out there. Anyway, Merry Christmas! It will be nice to see you tomorrow. If you haven’t been kidnapped and held for ransom. Love, Teddy.”
“Why is everyone so convinced I’m in mortal danger?” Harry asks Hermione. “What happened to all that ‘you’re Harry Potter, you’re basically indestructible’ stuff I used to get?”

“You didn’t like that, either,” she points out.

Harry shoots her a rueful smile and then looks at the empty envelope. “Purple,” he mumbles. “Almost exactly the same as the Wizards Unite ones. You don’t think he did that on purpose, do you?”

“I think sometimes you forget who his father is,” she says. “I imagine he loves playing pranks on you—it’s like Remus getting one over on your dad.”

Harry laughs, warmed by the idea of the two of them watching from the afterlife and approving Teddy’s decision to spook his godfather.

“Good one, Ted,” he sighs, setting the envelope aside and levitating the sheep card over to a spot on the mantelpiece. “Now, would you like to hear about my first date of the day before I have to set off for my second?”

“Yes, but can I just tell you that I’m worried for your sanity?”

“Noted,” Harry says, settling back into his chair. “It starts with a hailstorm…”

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There is no change in the weather by the time Harry has to leave for date number two, so he Apparates most of the way and then darts from one shop doorway to the next in search of his destination. He is breathless and shivering when he finally finds the little bookshop, impossibly
narrow and tucked in between a broomstick repair place and a brightly-lit nail salon. Pushing open the heavy door, he looks around and grins. It doesn’t seem to matter how many times he experiences it, he is always delighted to step into a small place and find it much bigger on the inside.

Compared to the vastness of Flourish and Blotts, this bookshop is made of modest proportions, but the contrast with its meagre exterior is still impressive, and the place has a warm, quirky feeling that just could not exist in a larger store. Every available surface has been turned over to books, with shelves that snake up the uneven walls to the ceiling, where the hailstones continue to drum against a dome made of intricate stained glass. At first it seems as though the place is deserted, but as Harry stands and observes, he picks out movement everywhere; ladders glide along the shelves, carrying members of staff and customers to the more difficult to reach sections, while others browse the aisles, ducking occasionally when books and periodicals fly over their heads.

In one corner, a small café crouches in a sea of literary gifts and trinkets, and, sitting alone at a little round table is a man with brown skin, shiny black hair and a worried expression. Harry approaches him, patting his pocket for Ken and then remembering that he has left the daft chameleon at home.

“Samar? I’m Harry.”

“Yes, hello,” the man says, smiling and almost knocking over the table in his hurry to lean over and greet Harry. “Wow, you came.”

Harry sits down and takes off his coat. The bookshop is beautiful and he already loves it, but the air is stifling and he wonders how Samar isn’t boiling in his leather jacket.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

Samar wrinkles his nose. “I’m not feeling my most confident right now. Recent break-up, you know. But never mind that, shall we order some coffee?”
Harry glances at the menu, surprised when Samar insists on going up to the counter to order and pay. In his experience, people often seem to expect him to foot the bill for everything, and while he doesn’t mind all that much, the entitlement is pretty difficult to swallow. His family are the big exception, of course; Ron and Hermione always pay their way and Molly is perpetually on the lookout for ways to sneak little treats into his pockets without him noticing. Draco, who has grown up with money, seems to have no interest in it whatsoever, and when in possession of Muggle currency is entertainingly generous, often leaving tips that defy logic.

“Here we are,” Samar says, setting down a tray with two cups and two unexpected slices of cake. “I should have asked, I know, but everyone likes chocolate cake.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever said no to cake,” Harry says. “Thank you.”

Samar smiles and then seems to sag. “I’m sorry if this is a rubbish place for a first date. Gavin—that’s my ex—always said I was such a nerd… you know, because I spent so much time here… but I just really love books.”

“I like it,” Harry says, breathing in the mingled aromas of coffee and paper and ink. “I’ve got a friend who says the smell of books is so wonderful that she’d like to wear it as perfume.”

Samar grins. “A girl after my own heart. You know, you and I already have a connection.”

“Oh?”

“My mum sits on the Wizarding Arts Council,” Samar says, stirring brown sugar into his coffee. “She says you work with them quite a bit.”

“She must know Draco, then,” Harry says, and the words are out before he realises that Samar probably wants to hear about his link to the arts council, not Draco’s.
“He came to our house once,” Samar says, apparently unfazed. “I mean, my mum’s house. I mean… I don’t live with my parents. Well, I’m there temporarily, since I split up with Gavin.”

Samar starts into his cake with such a forlorn expression that Harry decides not to ask about Gavin, even though he’s starting to feel curious. As it turns out, he doesn’t need to ask. While the coffee and cake slowly disappear and Harry and Samar attempt to get to know one another, the story of Gavin unfolds rather naturally. In fact, his name is mentioned so many times that Harry begins to keep a mental tally, only stopping when he starts to feel sorry for Samar, who is perfectly nice, kind, and full of self-deprecating humour. The problem is, he is clearly still in love with Gavin, and if Harry’s honest, probably shouldn’t be here at all.

Pushing his plate away, Samar groans. “I’m so sorry. I’ve been talking you to death.”

“It’s fine,” Harry says. “Don’t even worry about it.”

“Oh, I will. You don’t want to go out with me again, do you?” he sighs.

“No,” Harry admits, adding quickly: “But not because of that. I think you need some more time to recover from your last relationship… and god, that sounds pretentious, because what kind of an expert am I? But you’re lovely and I think you should be kind to yourself,” he finishes in a rush, face heating as Samar gazes at him with large, dark eyes.

After a moment, he laughs, and then presses his hands to his face. “I’m so sorry. You’re right. I’m a mess and I don’t know what I’m doing. I only joined the agency because my mum suggested it. She never liked Gavin… and there I go, mentioning him again.”

“I think… it probably just takes time,” Harry says, wishing he were better at this. “I’ll get us another coffee, shall I?”

Samar nods and Harry heads for the counter. When he returns with two steaming cups, Samar
seems a little brighter, accepting his drink with a grateful smile.

“So, what about yours?” he asks. “How long has it been?”

“How long has what been?”

“Since you and Draco… I assumed you were in the same situation,” Samar says, frowning. “You mentioned him quite a bit and whenever you did, you seemed really sad. Have I put my foot in it?”

“No,” Harry says quickly, even though something inside him is now trying to tie itself in an elaborate knot. “No, you haven’t, but Draco and I… we’re just friends. Good friends, but… not more than that. He’s not my ex. You know, because he hasn’t ever been my boyfriend.”

Samar raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

“Yes?” Harry says, and he doesn’t like the way it sounds like a question.

Samar laughs gently and leans closer. “Do you love him?”

Harry’s heart twists painfully. “I… are you really asking me this?”

“Well, we’re not going to be dating, so we might as well use this time for something,” Samar says, growing bolder by the second.

Harry lets out a long breath. “I don’t know. But I think I’m in trouble.”
Draco leans back in their usual booth, crosses one leg over the other and stares at Harry. Nighthawks is relatively busy for a weeknight, shimmering with people in office party finery and the tasteful glass baubles that have been hung as a noir-style nod to the festive season. Harry is weary of socialising and feels as though he’s been flattened by an emotional steamroller, but he’s here, partly because he doesn’t know how to say no to Draco and partly because late night coffee at Nighthawks is normal, and he needs that now more than ever.

“So, there you go,” he says, when he has shared everything—almost everything. “One debilitating reptile phobia and one serious case of the ex.”

Draco arches an eyebrow. “Two in one day now, is it?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks, irked at his tone but attempting to keep it light.

Draco shrugs, picking at his coat sleeve in an irritable rhythm. “You keep saying how weird this all is but you’ve been on six dates already and today, apparently one wasn’t enough.”

“And what’s it to you?” Harry demands, indignation rising and prickling through his veins. He stares at Draco with his hands clenched in his lap, feeling every rapid heartbeat in his throat and wishing he could look somewhere, anywhere else.

Draco stares back. For what feels like several minutes, there is silence at the table, but Harry hardly hears the chatter from the people around him. He’s angry and confused and aching all over, because Draco’s eyes are hard and sad and Harry just wants to grab him and hug him and oh, fuck, Samar was right, because this feeling is going nowhere. It’s real and it hurts and he wants to pull out his wand and send it shattering into pieces against the shiny counter. To clean it all away and go back to the way things were before he even considered seeing this man as more than a friend.
“I’m sorry,” Draco says suddenly, and Harry sloshes coffee into his saucer.

“Sorry?”

“No… I’m sorry. I’m trying to apologise. Please pay attention,” Draco says, face so serious that Harry doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry, because he’s in love with Draco Malfoy and it’s the most ridiculous, wonderful, terrifying thing he has ever experienced.

“I’m paying attention,” he promises, keeping his voice even.

Normal. He just needs to be normal. He can fall apart on his own time; Draco doesn’t need to know. Harry needs this friendship. He needs a partner in crime, a not-really cynic in a sea of free-spirited creatives, someone to eat ice cream with, to drink coffee with at ridiculous times of the night. He needs Draco, and he’s not about to ruin what they have with his stupid, messy feelings.

“I did not sleep well,” Draco says, and when he finally takes off his coat, a little of Harry’s tension falls away with it. “And the people at the Asda were very rude to me.”

“You went to a supermarket? On your own?” Harry asks, astonished.

“There’s no need to sound so shocked.”

“There’s every need. Why the fuck would you do that?”

“I wanted to buy a television so that I could watch films on my own,” Draco explains.
“Right,” Harry says, stung with disappointment at the loss of further movie afternoons at number twelve. Which is for the best, he tells himself firmly. The last thing he needs right now is for the two of them to be stuck in a dark, comfortable room together, but still… Harry gives himself an imaginary slap. “And did you get one?”

“Eventually, but the way they spoke to me, you’d think asking questions was against the rules,” Draco says, and his cross expression makes Harry feel rather warm.

“What did you ask?”

Draco picks up his cup with a little shrug. “I’m not going to tell you. I already feel as though you’re mocking me and I haven’t even started.”

Harry grins. “I wouldn’t. You can mock me about me dates some more if you want?”

“I am sorry about that, Harry,” he says with a sigh. “I don’t know where it came from and I assure you, your love life is your business.”

“It’s all good, I promise,” Harry says, and if it’s not true right now, it will be. “It’s not like I’m getting very far with it. Six dates and not a thing to show for them. I haven’t felt… you know…”

“Oh, really?”

Harry laughs. “Not that. I mean, that, but also… the feelings. Some of them have been nice but there’s no attraction,” he says, and now it all makes sense. Too much sense.

Draco sets down his cup and peers at Harry intently. “Not with any of them?”
“No… did you think I was just keeping those parts to myself?”

Draco wrinkles his nose and looks away. “Perhaps.”

Harry checks on Ken, who is sleeping comfortably under his coat, and then drops back against the padded seat with a ragged sigh. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this dating thing.”

“It all seems very formal,” Draco says. “I think it makes more sense to meet someone through a common interest or through friends, but I doubt anyone is interested in what I think. I’m even more clueless than you.”

“Is that a compliment or an insult?” Harry asks, jumping slightly when he stretches out his legs and his knee brushes Draco’s under the table.

“Neither.” Draco rests his chin in one hand and fixes Harry with a ruinous half-smile. “I went on a blind date once.”

“No, you didn’t,” Harry laughs.

“I did. My mother decided to set me up with the son of someone from her poker club. I didn’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“Your mother plays poker?” Harry asks. “How did I not know that?”

“Of course she does. She’s got an eye for it, too,” Draco says, and the smile now seems to gleam in the low light. “She invites all these rich, well-to-do people to the Manor and takes all their money,
“That… is such a fantastic image,” Harry says, picturing Narcissa’s poker face and feeling pleased he’s never been asked to play. According to Ron, he has no aptitude for card games and no patience for them, either.

“I used to watch sometimes, when I still lived with her. She’s like a shark in silk robes,” Draco says.

Harry snorts. “What about the date?”

Draco heaves a weary sigh. “Digestion Douglas… good grief. It took him the best part of two hours to eat a ham sandwich because he had to chew every mouthful thirty-six times. Apparently, most people under-masticate, did you know that?”

“I didn’t,” Harry says, smiling despite the madness swirling around inside him. “He wouldn’t have done very well with Corrigan, would he? Two hours is twelve precious segments of time.”

“And I’m certain Corrigan would have suffered a lecture on the consequences of hurried eating,” Draco says. “I was told in great detail that I was damaging my alimentary canal and upsetting my colon. You wouldn’t believe the things he suggested I do to… learn more.”

Harry grimaces. “I can imagine. I’m going to try not to imagine.”

“Good. I wish I’d had the choice.”

“So, there was no second date?”
“Not with Douglas, but my mother had another go recently,” Draco says, and a fresh spark of jealousy ignites in Harry’s gut.

*How recently?* he wants to demand, but instead, he just waits for Draco to continue, because that’s what friends do.

“I’m afraid I was very rude to him in the end,” he says, and though his tone is spiked with guilt, that little smile is back and Harry wants to cheer. “We went bowling. He thought he was some sort of expert on Muggle culture, but he was just another pureblood who thought he knew everything. And before you say a word, I know I’m just another pureblood, too, but I am quite aware of how ignorant I am.”

“You aren’t,” Harry says, and then wrinkles his nose. “Did you have to wear the shoes?”

Draco shudders. “The shoes that have been worn by hundreds of other people? Those shoes?”

“Those are the ones.”

“I wore them because I didn’t want to upset my mother, but believe me, Harry, I cast so many *Scourgifys* when I got home that my house smelled like pine and burned magic for a week,” Draco says, and Harry can feel him shuffling his feet under the table. “Then he said, ‘bowling has great significance for Muggles…’”

“Is that so?”

“He pointed over at another lane and said, ‘Draco, don’t look now but those children are performing a sacred ritual. That’s why they have candles and pointy hats’. I did look, and I said that I thought they were just having a birthday party, but he didn’t like that.”
Harry laughs. “You know, I keep wondering if I’m the weird person in someone else’s terrible date story,” he says. “I think I’m acting normally but… I think the weird people think they are, too.”

“You’re thinking about it too hard,” Draco says. “You should stop before your head explodes.”

“Don’t be rude.”

“No promises.” Draco gets up from the table and pushes up his sleeves. Harry watches him. “Do you want another while I’m up? With a splash of something?”

No, Harry thinks. Alcohol will only make this worse. He needs to be sensible. “Rum, please.”
Chapter Thirteen

Thirteenth of December – toadstools

Harry opens his eyes, peers out of the window at the grey sky and closes his eyes again.

“Nope,” he announces to the room, pulling his quilt over his head and startling Ken, who abandons his shoulder for a spot on his pillow.

Outside, one of his neighbours continues to drill into what sounds like a cliff face, and halfway along Grimmauld Place, someone with a very impressive car speaker system blasts the local radio station directly into Harry’s fractious brain. He pours every last bit of his famous stubbornness into remaining exactly where he is, but gives up when Ken crawls back under the bedclothes and starts rearranging his hair for him.

“Tea,” he tells the chameleon, pushing him down onto his shoulder and stumbling out of bed.

He heads downstairs in his bathrobe, unsurprised to find that he can still hear the car radio in his kitchen.

“I see a little silhouetto of a man, Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the fandango?” he sings, holding out an imaginary microphone to Kenneth for the next line.

Ken fixes him with confused little eyes and says nothing.

“We need to work on this,” Harry tells him. “It’s ‘thunderbolts and lightning, very very frightening’.”

Ken opens his mouth and then closes it again, in what Harry suspects is a very rude fashion. Harry flicks on the kettle and mirrors the action back to him. That’ll show him. When he opens the back door in search of fresh air, he finds a glass bottle on the step.

“I wonder who this is from,” he mutters, but he doesn’t, because only one person in his life leaves potions on his doorstep, and this one is still warm, meaning that she has gone out of her way to put it there before her shift at St Mungo’s.

Harry reads the label and smiles.

Drink me – I’m full of INGREDIENTS. See you tonight. H x

Ingredients, he thinks, slamming the door on the cold garden and bringing the bottle inside. How reassuring. He holds it up to the light and peers into its orange depths. Uncorks the bottle, sniffs the contents and grimaces. It smells healthy in the worse possible way, and he knows he should drink it, but instead he finds himself taking his tea and half a packet of biscuits back to bed, where he stares at the ceiling and tries to think of anything at all beside Draco.

The trouble is, his mind seems to have been rewired without his permission, and every thought that sparks into his head leads back to the very thing he is trying to block out. Thoughts of food are
derailed by thoughts of Draco eating ice cream or trying to catch out Glenda with his ridiculous questions; an attempted musing on what he might wear to Hogwarts this evening turns into perfectly tailored dark trousers and jumpers that are soft to the touch and herringbone coats with turned up collars. He tries to focus on work, but his mental run-through of tonight’s spells just disintegrates when he remembers a rain-soaked Draco staring up at the last glittering traces of fireworks in the sky.

He groans and buries his face in his pillow, but he is powerless to stop the onslaught of images and sensations. All he can do is allow himself to be pummelled by them and wait, hope, that his rarely used sense of self-preservation will kick in at some point. If not, he supposes he can always stun himself in the face.

When the slideshow in his head shifts from memory to imagination, he flops over and stares helplessly at the ceiling, furious at the way Draco fits so easily into his life. In many ways, falling in love with him is just the final step, a tiny shift sideways into something that feels like it’s always been there. Suddenly, he’s the man in the cosy beach house, the person at Harry’s side for every Weasley Sunday lunch and the one cutting up bits of fruit for a hungry chameleon. It’s so easy, and Harry’s heart can’t take it.

It’s all very well here in the privacy of his bedroom, in his own addled mind, but in the real world, Draco Malfoy is his own person and not a figment of Harry’s brand new self-destructive fantasies. He could feel the same way, Harry supposes, but life is rarely so kind, and besides, Harry knows him. If nothing else, he knows Draco, and there is no way even the most Slytherin Slytherin could hide something like that.

Harry lets out a long, wobbly breath. “I’m going to go mad, Ken. I think it’s started.”

He turns to find Ken asleep on top of the biscuits, little eyes rolling in dreams. Deciding to throw his focus into something useful, Harry puts on some old clothes and goes down to his powder room. He lights the lamps and starts to lower himself to the floor before he remembers Draco’s chair—the chair… his chair—and conjures himself a seat to save his back. It’s not as neat as the other one and the padding comes out in a strange shade of pink, but it will do, and he sits on it, feeling rather pleased with himself as he assembles his shells and packs his case.

Tonight’s event is special, and he wants to make sure that every last point of light is perfect. He runs through his spells, casting a gentle version of each at the stone wall opposite and perfecting each incantation and wand movement. The basement is soon full of static and coloured light, Harry’s whole body humming with anticipation as he carefully locks his case and carries it upstairs, along with a large, stripy spider who has decided to hitch a ride on the handle.

“Down there or up here?” he asks, lifting the case to bring the two of them eye-level. “I can’t leave the door open for you, Ken will go down there and blow himself up.”

The spider regards him for a moment and then flings itself off the case on a string of silk, spreading out its striped legs for the jump before landing neatly and scuttling under the oven. Harry watches it go, wondering if he can borrow just a fraction of that confidence for himself. Then again, spiders probably need all the confidence they can get.

Certain now that he’s losing his mind, Harry throws the orange potion down his throat with a grimace, gets into the shower and scrubs himself in a frenzy. He heals several days’-worth of fingertip burns and dresses himself in a frenzy. He heals several days’-worth of fingertip burns and dresses warmly, checking his coat for wand, keys and Ken before grabbing his Portkey and squeezing his eyes shut. He arrives on Hogwarts’ lawn just as a fierce gust of wind
tears across the lake, stopping his breath and almost knocking off his glasses. He grins, face already numb with cold. He’s home.

The castle looms out of the night, dotted with lamplit windows and festive decorations, while below, the trees have been strung with lanterns of every colour, and a gentle fall of magical snow shrouds the lawn and lake in a wintry veil. Harry waves to Lorna, Jim, and Glenda, who are hard at work setting up their stations for the evening, and then looks around for other familiar faces. Most of the students are still inside the castle, waiting to be released into the night, but a gaggle of older pupils are putting the finishing touches to a row of traditional games, including whack-a-gnome, bowtruckle bingo and what looks like fanged frisbee hoopla.

“Is that a pumpkin shy?” Draco asks, peering over Harry’s shoulder and making him shiver.

“I think so,” he says, watching McGonagall stride down the castle steps and resisting the urge to wave.

Draco rummages in his coat pocket. “I’m going to get one.”

“You do know you can get a pumpkin pretty much anywhere?” Harry says.

“Yes, but they taste better when they’ve been knocked off a stick, don’t you think?”

Despite his better judgement, Harry turns to look at him. It’s a big mistake. Draco grins at him just as the wind blows his hair into madness and Harry’s insides tip like a ship in a storm.

“What are you going to do with it?” he asks after a moment.

“I don’t know. Do you think Ken would like some?”

Rather more charmed than he’d like to be by this offer, Harry opens his mouth to respond and is saved by a familiar bellow.

“Harry!” Hagrid yells, ambling towards them at quite a speed for a man dragging a vast heap of striped canvas and a barrel big enough to swim in. “Draco, now, that’s a smart coat!”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” Draco says, and Harry can tell he’s pleased, even though the compliment is coming from a man who wears the same muddy old jacket every day and keeps fish food in the pockets, just in case.

“What’s all that?” Harry asks, eyeing the canvas and the barrel.

“Circus stuff,” Hagrid says, grinning. “I said I’d help ’em move it, yeh know. Professor McGonagall wants all of us to make ourselves useful gettin’ everything ready. I’m lookin’ forward to your fireworks, I really am.”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” Draco says, and Harry can tell he’s pleased, even though the compliment is coming from a man who wears the same muddy old jacket every day and keeps fish food in the pockets, just in case.

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“So am I,” Harry says, grinning back. “It’s good to see you. I’d give you a hug but you’re a bit…”

“Over-burdened?” Draco suggests.

“Yes, that.”

Hagrid laughs. “I’ll be back in a minute, and then I’ll show you my toast.”
Harry turns to Draco as Hagrid hauls the circus items into the middle of the lawn, where a group of artists are waiting for him with their wands ready.

“He did say ‘toast’, didn’t he?”

“You heard that, too… thank goodness,” Draco mutters.

“I hope he’s alright,” Harry says, glancing down at his case, where Kenneth is now perching and peering at himself in decal form. “I should probably go and set up, but I don’t want to miss… whatever weird thing is about to happen.”

“No, you mustn’t,” Draco says, and together, they stand in a tight sort of silence as Hagrid chats to the circus people without a care in the world.

By the time he starts to make his unhurried way back to them, the catering vans have begun to emit tempting savoury smells that make Harry all too aware of the bitter aftertaste of potion still clinging to the inside of his mouth.

“Don’t start without me,” he instructs, jogging over to Jim and Lorna’s van. “I need a drink with a strong flavour—have you got anything I can just sort of gulp down?”

“I’ve got some lovely juices here but I’m not sure you should have any if you’re not going to taste it,” Jim says, pretending offence.

Lorna grimaces, tying up her long, dark hair and fastening her apron. “What did she give you this time?”

“Something orange.”

“Orange flavoured?”

“Er, no. Not really,” Harry says, trying to place the lingering flavour with some difficulty. “It was sort of sweet… and… kind of yeasty?”


“I don’t know, but I’m sure it worked. I do feel quite energetic now,” Harry admits, bouncing lightly on the spot and sending Ken scuttling up onto his shoulder.

“Try this,” Jim says, pouring him a vibrant yellow drink while Lorna takes his offered coins. “It’s got pineapple, yuzu and mango. Not too sweet and definitely not yeasty.”

“You overpaid,” Lorna says, handing several coins back. “It’s student night, remember?”

“I’m not a student,” Harry points out, and tries to push the coins back into her hand.

“Yeah, but we agreed with McGonagall, didn’t we?” Jim says, looking around as though she might appear at any moment. “She set the prices for these dos and they’re for everyone. Harry, please don’t get me in trouble with that woman. She scares me to death.”

“She’s been scaring people to death for longer than you’ve been alive, love,” Glenda says, leaning
out over her hatch on folded arms.

“You’re not afraid of her, Glenda,” Harry laughs, but Glenda nods firmly.

“I was frightened of her when I was a little girl and I’m not much better now. Remember when we tried to give the food away for nothing? I thought I was going to get detention.”

“I would have thought a group of entrepreneurs such as yourselves would want to help these children to develop proper budgeting skills,” Lorna says, aping McGonagall with such accuracy that her husband steps away from her and brandishes a ladle.

“Please don’t do that. I didn’t know you could do that. How did I not know you could do that?”

Harry laughs, leaving his change behind while Lorna isn’t looking. When he returns to Draco with his drink, he is smiling and pointing to something in Hagrid’s pocket. Baffled, Harry gulps at his juice, relieved when the refreshing flavour chases away the last of Hermione’s potion.

“What did I miss?”

“Hagrid has a new friend,” Draco says, turning his easy smile on Harry.

Mouth dry again, Harry looks at Hagrid, who is beaming through his beard and lifting a fluffy white something from his enormous coat pocket. The something twists joyfully in his hands and seems to laugh up into Harry’s face, revealing a pink tongue and pointy little teeth.

“You got a new dog,” he grins, delighted for his friend and unhelpfully amused by the contrast in size between Hagrid and his companion.

It is, quite possibly, the smallest dog he has ever seen, short of snout and leg with upright little triangle ears and an impossible amount of fur. Apart from a pale brown patch on its face, the dog is pure white, making its round black eyes and twitching nose stand out boldly.

“Will it get any bigger?” Draco asks.

“Not much,” Hagrid says. “She’s still a puppy but only just, like. Aren’t you, Toasty?”

The little dog yaps and licks Hagrid’s hairy face, much to his delight.

“This is Toast?” Harry asks, amused. “Toast the dog?”

“You mustn’t,” Draco whispers, forcing Harry to hide a snort in his scarf.

“She’s a pure-bred pandemonium, I’ll have you know,” Hagrid says with clear pride.

“A Pomeranian, perhaps?” Draco suggests.

Harry grins and gives the dog a gentle stroke, which is met with an insistent wet nose and several licks.

“What did I say?” Hagrid frowns, bending and allowing Toast to jump down to the frosty grass.

Harry watches the little dog running in circles and attacking Hagrid’s trousers with gusto. Toast
clearly has spirit, and Hagrid looks happier than he has seen him in a long time, even when Toast grabs his shoelace and attempts to gnaw it to death.

“I think perhaps it is a pandemonium,” Draco says.

Hagrid nods. “That’s what the bloke at the pub said.”

“Which pub was that?” Harry asks, and Hagrid shuffles guiltily.

“The Hog’s Head,” he admits. “Bloke was sellin’ ’em. Said her mum’d had fifteen puppies. Can you imagine?”

“So, basically, you’ve learned nothing,” Harry says, trying and failing to look stern.

“That sounds about right,” Hagrid laughs. “At least this one’ll still fit in my coat pockets when she’s full grown.”

“I’d almost forgotten about that dragon,” Draco says, and Harry decides to leave both of them to their memories.

He ruffles Toast’s soft fur and then takes himself, his case and his chameleon over the spot he has agreed with both McGonagall and Selwyn. Settling himself on his waterproof chair, he takes each shell and places it in careful order, making sure that each paper case is perfect and ready to go. As he works, he listens to the shouts of the circus performers, who have erected their performance space and are now lighting torches and filling the air with intriguing crackles of magic. The Hogwarts choir has been allowed onto the lawn for a last minute rehearsal, and an excitable Flitwick leads them through a series of breathing exercises. At five minutes to seven, McGonagall and Selwyn emerge from the castle. In her tall, pointed hat, the headmistress seems to tower over poor Selwyn, and though Harry has never actually been afraid of her, the usual steel in her gaze makes him feel sorry for Jim and Glenda.

When the bells ring for seven o’clock, McGonagall gives the nod and Hagrid opens the main doors. In an explosion of controlled chaos, people begin to appear all over the lawn, clutching their Portkeys, as students stream down the steps in a mass of coats and house scarves. On Harry’s shoulder, Ken looks around with interest and darts out his tongue to taste the air.

“Shall we go and say hello?” Harry asks, shrouding his shells in several layers of mischief-proof magic and making his way back towards Draco.

Both food vans are swamped with customers and it takes him a moment to find Draco, who has already been found by Ron and Hermione.

“There you are,” Hermione says, hugging him and squashing his face into her hair. “It’s so lovely to be back.”

“Have you seen Hagrid yet? He’s got a new dog,” Harry says. “It’s smaller than your cat.”

“That cat is enormous,” Ron points out, but he cranes his neck to search the crowd. “Here he comes.”

Hagrid arrives just as the choir breaks into their first carol, dropping his voice to show Toast to Ron and Hermione as everyone around them seems to do the same. The sound of the choir lifts into
the night and spreads out across the grounds of Hogwarts, sparking a festive sort of magic that binds every one of them until the last note. The subsequent applause seems to break the spell, allowing the choir and the rumble of conversation to coexist quite happily. The students at the game stalls begin their noisy patter, and, beside Harry, Draco fiddles with his pocket change and eyes the pumpkin shy with interest.

“Hagrid, she’s so tiny,” Hermione says, holding Toast against her chest and beaming. “Isn’t she frightened to be around all these people?”

“She’s not frightened of anything,” Hagrid says. “Not like Fang at all, rest his soul.”

“Not even fireworks?” Harry asks.

“Not nothin’,” Hagrid shrugs. “If there was a thunderstorm, Fang’d hide under my bed and I’d have to block his ears. If she hears a loud noise, she just barks at it. I reckon she thinks she’s tellin’ it what for.”

“I’m going to get a pumpkin,” Draco announces.

Ron and Hermione watch him stride away and then turn to look at Harry.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t make him like that,” he protests. When Hermione continues to stare at him, he looks around for a distraction. Fortunately, the first circus performers choose that moment to step onto their podiums and light their torches. “Look. Things are happening.”

Hermione falls for the bait immediately, and Harry doesn’t blame her. Each juggler has seven burning torches and he can feel the heat of the flames from at least fifty yards away. When they nod to each other and fling the torches into the air, the crowd seems to gasp as one and Hermione holds Toast tightly against her coat. The fire eaters are next, contorting their bodies into impossible positions and swallowing flames with such casual grace that it almost seems easy, and Harry suspects that he’s not the only person wishing he could have a go. When Draco returns with a pumpkin under his arm, he looks so pleased with himself that Harry can only say, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. It took me quite a few tries but I think it was worth it.”

“How many tries?”

Draco looks at the ground, where Toast is running laps of Hagrid’s legs. “Seventeen.”

“But it was worth it.”

“Yes.”

The next act features a pair of witches who use tiny balls of fire to create stunning patterns in the air, throwing and catching and twisting the flaming spheres with delicate wandless magic. Harry has seen them several times before, but he has never been able to figure out how they seem to breathe the fire into life without any sign of a spell, and he watches raptly, forgetting to blink and then trying to clap while rubbing his sore eyes under his glasses.

“Er… I don’t want to alarm anyone, but where’s Toast?” Ron says.
Everyone looks at the ground. Hagrid turns in a slow circle, eyes combing the area around their feet.

“She’ll be alright,” he says, sounding uncertain. “She never goes far.”

“We could split up,” Hermione suggests, lighting her wand. “If we all head in a different direction we might find her faster.”

“Yeah, that’s…” Harry begins and then stops. Ken is no longer on his shoulder, or perched on his case, or attempting to cling on to the back of his coat. He checks his pockets. “Ken’s gone, too.”

Hagrid pales. “What if she’s led him off somewhere? He’ll get cold.”

“What if he’s eaten her?” Ron says under his breath.

“Is it really likely that the two of them have run off together?” Draco asks.

“She’s very sociable,” Hagrid says, gazing at the forest and then striding off towards it. “Toasty!”

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Draco exchange anxious glances and then split into pairs without stopping to discuss it; Ron and Hermione run after Hagrid, while Harry and Draco head in the opposite direction, avoiding the forest and wading through clumps of long grasses. The air here is cold and damp, encouraging moss and fungi to proliferate on every available surface, lit by the glare of Draco’s wand and seeming to glow in a range of colours that exist only where magic is present.

“I know we’re looking for Toast, too, but it’s freezing out here and Ken can’t control his body temperature,” Harry says. He feels stupid to have forgotten about his chameleon-locating spell and almost too guilty to use it now that two animals are missing.

“Do it,” Draco urges, renewing his wandlight and stepping so close to Harry that a shiver slips all the way down his spine.

“Toast!” yells Ron, voice echoing through the trees. “Come on, Toasty!”

“I’ve got bacon!” Hagrid booms. “Come and get it!”

“Come here, Toast, your dad’s worried about you!” Hermione tries.

Harry takes a deep breath and points his wand into the long grass. When the incantation leaves his lips, a string of white light unfurls itself and snakes through the undergrowth. Harry and Draco follow it over uneven ground, through an icy bog that makes both of them swear in surprise, and along a dirt path, where the light trail ends in a strange sort of fairy ring. Inside the circle of red and white spotted toadstools, tucked into a tall tuft of grass, they find Ken. The chameleon’s colours match the wild grasses perfectly, and he has wrapped himself around the fluffy white form of Toast, who barks up at Harry and then applies several tender licks to Ken’s scaly head.

All at once relieved and amused, Harry peers down at them. “Friends, are we?”

Ken swivels both eyes and plucks at Toast’s fur.

“I think that’s a yes.”
“I think you’re both very naughty,” Draco says, softening his wandlight when Toast squints and tries to hide behind Ken. “Everyone was very concerned, and there you were, hiding in the mushrooms without a care in the world.”

His voice is so stern that Harry can’t help smiling as he casts a new warming charm around both of them and then sends up a shower of green sparks. Draco raises an eyebrow.

“Like you said, that evening was very educational,” Harry says, and when the five of them are reunited on the edge of the forest, the whole thing begins to feel rather nostalgic.

Hagrid scoops up the tiny dog and ruffles her fur, huge hands almost enveloping her as he lifts her up to his face and beams.

“Thank you, lads,” he says, and then turns to Ron and Hermione. “And you two, I bet you weren’t expectin’ to have to go into the forest, but I’m ever so grateful.”

Harry picks up Ken and addresses him sternly. “I was worried about you, you little bugger.”

Ken climbs onto his shoulder and rubs his casque against Harry’s face in a placating gesture.

“Hmm,” Harry mumbles, secretly thrilled that the swivel-eyed menace is alright, and appears to have a protective instinct for small, fluffy creatures.

“And here we are in nature,” Ron says in a tone that reminds Harry of David Attenborough.

He picks a slender toadstool from the ring and tucks it into Hermione’s wild curls.

“I’m not sure that’s sanitary,” she says, but she smiles when Ron kisses her cheek and uses her wand to fix the toadstool in place.

Draco squints at the lights on the lawn. “We’d better get back.”

“Is there a rush?” Harry asks, even though he is very ready to dry his feet and buy something on a stick from Glenda before it’s time for his display.

“We’ll, there’s a girl over there, jumping up and down and pointing at you,” Draco says. “And a boy next to her with a camera. I may be wrong, but I think they’re trying to get your attention.”

Harry follows his gaze. Sure enough, a pair of students are doing everything but turning upside down to make him look.

“School newspaper,” Hermione says, linking her arm through his as they all head back to the lawn. “I’m sure they have plenty of questions for you. I have a few myself, actually.”

“Are they about dates? Because I think you’re all caught up on those.”

“No,” Hermione says. She slows down and allows the others to pull ahead. “They’re things like… why does Ken change colours when you talk to Draco?”

Harry darts a glance at her, and then at Ken, who is displaying his standard green stripes.
“He doesn’t.” Harry pauses. “What colour?”

“Sort of bluey-purple?” Hermione says. “Lilac, maybe?”

“Are you trying to mess with my head? I don’t think he’s ever been that colour.”

Hermione laughs. “No, Harry. But maybe you aren’t paying attention to Ken when you’re paying attention to Draco. Do you know what I mean?”

Harry knows exactly what she means, but he’s not about to let her have the satisfaction of knowing for fuck knows how long what he’s known for approximately five minutes.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“I think you do.”

“He’s not a fucking mood lizard,” he snaps, and Hermione stifles a snort of laughter.

She stops him on the edge of the lawn and peers up into his face with such patience that something inside him wilts with shame. She hugs him tightly and he hugs her back, releasing her and hanging back for a moment when she runs over to the others.

“Excuse me, Mr Potter? Harry Potter?”

He turns to find the excitable pair from the newspaper hurrying towards him. The girl in the Hufflepuff scarf is clutching a quill and notebook while the boy, dressed in red from head to toe, is carrying a camera that looks to be on the verge of falling apart.

“How can I help?”

“Please can we ask you some questions? We’re doing an article on tonight’s festival for the school paper and the fireworks are the best bit, so…” She looks around, worried that one of the other performers will hear her. “Is that alright?”

“Can I take your picture?” asks the boy before Harry can answer.

“Yes, but…” Harry blinks as the flash goes off before he’s ready. “I’d love to answer your questions but I’m not sure how long I’ve got. Maybe you can come back later.”

Both children look so disappointed that he looks around for a distraction.

“Okay, well, there are some interesting people over here,” he says, guiding them over to the food vans, where Draco, Ron and Hermione are examining the menus. “This is Draco Malfoy. He’s from the Wizarding Arts Council.”

Draco turns, surprised to find two sets of curious eyes fixed upon him.

“I know you. You played House Quidditch,” the boy says. “And you were chess champion, I saw the shield in the Trophy Room.”

“Was I?” Draco murmurs, eyebrows knitted.
“Our last year,” Harry reminds him. “After the… you beat Ron. He was furious.”

“Good grief, I’d forgotten all about that. How did you remember…?”

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugs, feeling the heat creeping up the back of his neck.

“So… you went here, too?” the girl asks Draco.

“Er, yes.”

“Which house were you in?”

Draco hesitates. “Slytherin.”

The girl wrinkles her nose.

“There’s nothing wrong with Slytherins,” Harry says, giving her a meaningful look.

“There is,” she says flatly. “My sister’s one.”

“Can I take a photograph of you, too?” the boy asks, and Harry is gratified to realise that Draco is going to look just as startled in his picture.

When they have finished grilling Draco, Harry introduces the budding reporters to Ron and Hermione, and then, to their clear delight, to Glenda, who sneaks them free samples and answers every question with stories that send the Hufflepuff girl’s quill flying over her notepad.

“How do you get your van all the way up to Hogwarts?” she asks. “Does it go on the road like a Muggle car?”

“No, love, it walks on legs,” Glenda says, and when she spells out the spidery metal limbs in demonstration, everyone in a twenty foot radius turns to stare.

The boy shakes himself and manages to snap a picture of the spectacle before Glenda folds in the legs and returns the van to the ground with a shudder. Both children fall silent when McGonagall approaches, though Harry thinks he sees Glenda wink at them behind the Headmistress’s back.

“Mr Potter, we’re ready for you,” she says, and then frowns. “Ms Granger, you appear to have some wildlife in your hair.”

“I know,” Hermione says brightly, opting not to point out that she has been Mrs Weasley for several years now.

McGonagall grants her an odd little smile. “It’s wonderful to have you back at Hogwarts. You must visit more often,” she says, flicking a pointed glance at Draco. “Albus in particular loves to hear about your adventures in the world of art. Now, you’ll have to excuse me. I must rescue Professor Sinistra from that strange little Ministry man.”

With that, she walks away, thick winter cloak flapping behind her. Harry glances at Draco, who is staring after her with such astonishment that he wants to stay, but it’s time for him to put on a show. After a moment’s hesitation, he squeezes Draco’s arm, apologises, and takes off across the lawn.
He drops into his seat and takes a moment to finally dry his shoes and socks before spelling away the security charms and preparing to ignite the first shell.

He has saved the magical creatures for tonight, knowing that the students will appreciate the pyrotechnic representations of the animals they have learned about or met in Hagrid’s outdoor classroom. The first streak of light hits the sky with a bang and Harry waits for the characteristic rabble of noise that always tells him that he has the attention of the crowd. The next shell bursts into an enormous star that, with a whispered incantation, turns into a gnarled tree trunk. With the help of another spell, the third shell explodes into a shower of green sparks that settle around the trunk, forming a shimmering canopy of leaves.

Using an extensor spell to keep the images in place, Harry uses all of his focus to fill the sky around the tree with glittering, moving creatures. The unicorn and hippogriff draw the biggest cheers, but Harry’s favourites are the smaller animals: puffskeins that bounce, frost snails with sparkling shells and waving eyestalks, beetles and bowtruckles and, just for Hagrid, a blast-ended skrewt. Soon, the tree is bristling with life, and Harry surrounds his tableau with palm-like eruptions of light in each house colour, plus enough screeches and bangs to make him regret forgetting his ear protection.

He lights two shells, one after the other, to add a glistening stretch of water that hovers over the lake itself, and then just one more to send the tentacles of the giant squid flailing into the night. He glances at the lake, knowing that the squid himself will be sleeping, and laughs with delight when a single tentacle breaches the water. He leans over to better see the great limb splashing back into the depths and manages to scorch his palm on a still-hot fragment of shell, but he doesn’t care.

Flapping his hand in the cold air, he grins, tipping his head back and watching the last sparks of his display fade to nothing. He breathes in, grasping for the scent of success and exhilaration that a perfect show always provides, and it’s there, bitter and smoky and metallic in the back of his mouth. He may have no idea what he’s doing with Draco, but he can do this. He can really do this, and it’s a rush that never grows old.

Carefully, making sure to vanish any leftover debris, Harry packs up his things and walks back to his friends. He has barely taken one bite of his ice cream when he is mobbed by students of all ages, who surround him in an excitable ring.

“That was brilliant!”

“I love the puffskeins!”

“Are you coming back next year? Or sooner?”

“Did you see the squid come out?”

“What’s that smell?” asks a girl with blond plaits so long she is in danger of tripping over them.

“Okay,” Harry laughs. “First of all, thank you! I would love to come back, but that’s up to Professor McGonagall. I’m glad you liked the puffskeins, I like them, too. I did see the squid, which was fantastic; I haven’t seen him for a long time. The thing you smell after the fireworks is gunpowder and sulphur and magic. Anything else?”

“Bad move,” Draco says, just as the students seem to explode into more questions.
“What’s sulphur?”

“Did you really play Seeker?”

“I really, really want a unicorn.”

“It’s brimstone,” Draco offers, and the girl with the plaits whispers, “Ohhhh.”

“Thank you,” Harry whispers, turning back to deal with the rest of the questions.

He is still dealing with inquiries when Teddy and Victoire turn up to congratulate him, and he manages to hug each of them while Draco takes his place with a very serious frown.

“Maman says you are meeting all sorts of strange men,” Victoire says, nudging Teddy with her elbow.

“I’ve been thinking… if they’re all strange, maybe it’s just you,” he says.

“Not another word,” Harry says. “And I don’t need anyone to tell me I’m strange. I know. I really do.”

“I just don’t think you need it,” Teddy says, backing away and grinning. “We have to go now!”

“We loved the fireworks!” Victoire adds, waving.

Harry watches them dash away across the lawn. Victoire’s silver-blond hair whips out behind her, while Teddy’s mop, currently dark green, flaps in the wind like the wild grass that lines the forest.

“Lovely show, Harry,” Hagrid says. “Shame there weren’t any dragons, though.”

“Come to Cardiff on the fifteenth. Dragons aplenty,” Harry tells him. “I decided to save them for the Welsh audience.”

Hagrid brightens, allowing a tiny student to take possession of Toast when she asks politely.

“Don’t let ’er lick you to death, Ruby,” he advises, and the girl nods. “Well, the Welsh do like a dragon, don’t they? Me and Toasty’ll come along if there’s room for us.”

“Hagrid, there will always be room for you.”

“Harry,” Draco calls, sounding rather urgent. “I seem to have run out of questions that I can answer without you.”

Apologising to Hagrid, Harry returns to the students, all of whom regard him expectantly.

“Okay. Fire away, then.”

“They want to know how you make fireworks,” Draco says.

Harry says nothing for a moment. He looks around at the eager faces and knows he can’t disappoint them, but at the same time, he thinks it might be a bit irresponsible to teach them how to make things explode. Perhaps if he’s very general and doesn’t give away any of the magic…
“Right,” he says at last, crouching down and clicking open his case. “I will show you some of the stuff I do but you have to promise not to try any of it yourselves or you will get hurt and Professor McGonagall will blame me and I won’t be allowed to come back. Ever. Got it?”

Everyone nods furiously and Harry goes to reveal the contents of his case.

“I didn’t hear any promising,” Draco says, and he pauses.

“I promise,” says the girl with the long plaits, followed by the pair from the newspaper, who are now scribbling and clicking away with gusto.

Soon, the promise has travelled around the whole group, and Harry lets the drawers of powders leap open.

“So, here are some of the chemicals I use to make the different colours. If I wanted a green like the leaves on the tree tonight…”

“Sorry, but does your lizard bite?” asks a girl in the front row, eyeing Ken nervously.

“Not unless you’re a worm or a bit of fruit, no,” Harry assures.

“Or a scarf,” Draco adds, and the girl shuffles backwards but turns her eyes to the case.

“Okay, so if we wanted a green firework, we might use a bit of this barium chloride,” Harry explains, holding up a small jar. “That’s a type of salt, and a lot of the colours of fireworks are made from different salts.”

“Like salt you put on food?” asks one boy, and his friend laughs.

“Don’t be an idiot.” He pauses, uncertain. “Do you use that kind of salt?”

“Not exactly, but table salt has sodium in it, and other sodium salts are used to make yellow colours,” Harry says, allowing them to pass around the first jar. “Draco, please could you hand me the sodium oxalate?”

“What am I, your assistant?” Draco says, rummaging around in the case and placing a jar in Harry’s hand.

“My lovely assistant,” Harry mumbles to himself, grinning as he allows himself to imagine Draco in sparkles. Even inside his head, the expression on his face is glorious. “Thank you for that. So, if we wanted to make a silver firework, we’d… does anyone want to guess?”

He looks at the array of thoughtful expressions and waits for an answer with more patience than he knew he had. Draco passes him the jar of magnesium without a word, and Harry smiles at him. He’s way off-balance and a bit too hot but it doesn’t matter. For now, he’s actually having a good time.

When he gets home and lights the lamps to find a very fed up owl on his kitchen windowsill, his good mood threatens to slip away.

“You just don’t need it,” he mutters to himself, thinking of Teddy’s grin and the fact that he’s a
teenage boy who obviously knows everything. “You might not, Ted, but I think I do.”

Pushing all thoughts of lilac lizards and silver-grey eyes from his mind, he scribbles an affirmative reply and dispatches the owl with a crunchy treat for his time.

“Come on, Ken,” he yawns, taking off his coat and replacing the chameleon on his shoulder. “Bedtime.” He hesitates, eyeing the kettle. “In a minute.”
Leo is a very nice man. He’s tall and ruggedly handsome, he has a charming Yorkshire accent, and judging by his clothes, he makes an excellent living doing… something. Harry thinks it might be sculpture or glass-making, but it could just as easily be stuffing badgers with sand, because Harry isn’t really paying attention. He’s trying; every time he realises his attention has wandered, he drags it back, but it’s a losing battle, and all he can really do is hope that Leo hasn’t noticed.

So far, their tour of London’s best street art has taken them all over the city, with Leo’s guide book sending them into surprising, tucked-away places as well as others that Harry has walked past countless times without noticing the colourful pieces painted on the bricks. They have taken in vast, vivid portraits, political messages, and a whole tunnel covered in monochrome designs, and while Leo has attempted to give Harry an interesting guide to what he’s looking at, he has been scuppered by the fact that Harry’s mind is firmly stuck on a single track.

It’s not Leo’s fault. He has planned a creative date for a person who isn’t really there, and Harry feels terrible, but his attention just keeps slipping, and it’s getting harder and harder to pull it back. As they weave through the crowded streets in search of the next piece, Harry casts around for something to say, but he knows he’s got nothing. He hopes Ken is having a lovely afternoon on the bedroom windowsill, where Harry has left him to bask in the sun.

“Lazy little bugger,” he mutters to himself.

“Did you say something?” Leo asks, with a note of hope that makes Harry feel horrible.
“No,” he lies, and fuck, he’s done it. He’s a dating disaster and Leo is going to tell all his friends that Harry Potter—yes, that Harry Potter—is a complete wanker.

Leo says nothing until they stop walking and look up at a nondescript three storey building, on which someone extremely talented has painted a vast tabby cat, somehow managing to make it look as though it is reaching down to the street below, paws outstretched and eyes falling closed.

“I love this one,” Leo says. “It’s just so real.”

Harry nods. “Yeah.”

The image is so lifelike and three dimensional that Harry wants to lean up and touch the white paws. He almost thinks he sees the cat’s pointed ears twitch, and he smiles when he hears Draco’s voice in his head telling him that he’s in a Muggle area and he must be dropping marbles at a worrying rate. Maybe he doesn’t need them. Maybe he can just trundle through the rest of his life with no idea what he’s doing at any given time. Leo can definitely do better than that. And Harry… what Harry needs to do is go home and write a letter to Wizards Unite, asking them to remove him from their books and perhaps informing them that matching people according to their answers to ridiculous questions isn’t as brilliant an idea as it might appear.

He has shared at least some interests or opinions with every match he has met so far, but none of them have made him feel… Harry sighs, gazing up at the massive cat and slowing his breathing, unclenching his fists at his sides. His heart feels sore, as though someone is holding on to it too tightly and refusing to let go, and he supposes that isn’t too far from the truth.

“So, this piece was licked on by Mongolian yak herds,” Leo says.

Harry blinks. Frowns. “What?”
“I said, this piece is by a Russian artist,” Leo says innocently.

“No, you said something about Mongolian yak herders,” Harry insists.

Leo’s mouth twists into a strange half-smile. “Ah, you were listening.”

Harry sighs. “A bit.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Leo shrugs. “I thought you might like all this stuff, being an artist yourself.”

“I do like it,” Harry promises, horrified with himself. “It’s brilliant, and you’re… I’m so distracted at the moment and to be honest, I shouldn’t really be here. I’ve been useless and rude and I’ve wasted your time. I’m not usually like this. I’m sorry.”

“Well, if it was that good, maybe I’ll try it on someone else,” Leo says, looking at his guide book and then stuffing it into his coat pocket.

“You should. I really am sorry.”

Leo laughs, and a little of the heavy feeling lifts from Harry’s shoulders. “Please stop apologising. You weren’t a bad date as such… more of an absent one.”
“That’s awful,” Harry sighs, but he smiles when Leo shakes his hand. “Better luck next time?”

“You too, Harry. I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Leo says, disappearing into the crowd and leaving Harry alone.

He stares up at the giant cat again, suddenly feeling so weary that all he can do is duck into an empty alley and Disapparate. He lights the fire and curls up on the sofa, pulling a thick blanket over himself and closing his eyes. When Ken climbs up to tuck into his side, he smiles, and drifts into sleep.

When he wakes up, the room is dark and the fire has burned down to embers. Rather than feeling refreshed, he is stiff and confused, with an uncomfortably full bladder and a raging thirst. He squints at the clock and leaps up in horror, managing to tangle his legs in his blanket and go crashing to the floor in a heap before he remembers he doesn’t have a display tonight and therefore cannot technically be late. Resting his chin on his bruised knees, he forces out a calming breath.

“Ow,” he mumbles, and then frees himself from the blanket with some effort. “Maybe we won’t tell anyone about that, eh, Ken? Or about this afternoon, if we can help it.”

Ken regards him solemnly, at least, as solemnly as anyone can with a mouthful of tubeworms.

“Your support means a lot to me,” Harry calls to him, running up the stairs to change out of his date shirt and into something warm and comfortable.

Diagon Alley is positively arctic, and Harry is glad for his thick jumper and trusty old overcoat. Ken darts into his pocket the moment they arrive and he feels the biting wind on his scales, and Harry guiltily pulls him back out in order to grab his gloves before stuffing him back in and casting an extra-strength warming charm over the fabric. He looks around for Draco and finds him chatting to Glenda, herringbone coat and pale hair flapping in the icy wind. Harry’s heart gives a resounding thump at the sight of him. Just standing there. That’s all. It’s enough, and Harry is doomed.
Lorna waves to him from the other side of the street, so he waves back and walks over to join them all, feeling as though every step looks a little bit odd. Like he’s forgotten how, and maybe he has. He buys a steaming cone of stollen ice cream that is rich with marzipan and spiced fruits, and listens to Draco and Glenda’s traditional argument as he eats. Draco will never stop asking ridiculous questions about the way the stick-based food is made, and Glenda will never reveal her secrets, nor will either of them back down. It’s almost comforting to witness, Glenda all hands on her hips and pursed lips and Draco with his arms folded and his flickering eyebrows.

“Oh, not this again,” Selwyn says with a sigh.

“It’s an argument as old as time itself,” Jim says, grinning.

“Oh, just like your mother,” Lorna says, and Jim thwacks her lightly with a tea towel.

“Shall we start on your family, then?” he asks. “Mad Auntie Agnes and her snakes? Your dad’s light-up kilt?”

“Don’t you two start,” Selwyn groans. “Arguing gives me a headache.”

“We’re not arguing, we’re having a debate,” Jim insists.

“Spirited debate is a healthy part of any relationship,” Lorna says. “Even the relationship between a fussy customer and his favourite food-seller.”

All three of them turn to look at Glenda and Draco, but neither of them seems to notice.
“Did you say light-up kilt?” Selwyn asks. “That’s an idea. Could your dad get some friends together and put on some sort of illuminated Scottish dancing display?”

Harry takes one look at Lorna’s expression and nearly chokes on his ice cream. Jim grins.

“I’ll speak to him at Christmas.”

“What’s on tonight?” Harry asks Selwyn, who grimaces.

“Flamborough Fliers. They’re the Quidditch display team, you know, whizzing around on illuminated broomsticks and throwing things about.”

“Sounds fun,” Harry shrugs.

Selwyn shakes his head. “For you, maybe. For me, Harry, they are a logistical nightmare.”

“Worse than fireworks?”

“Yes. You can tell me exactly how your display is going to go. You know how high your fireworks are going to be when they explode, what sort of distance I need to cover with my wards. These people seem to have no idea what’s going to happen after they get on their broomsticks!” Selwyn gestures with his clipboard and almost hits Harry in the face. “Chaos! If we weren’t in Diagon Alley, I’d send them packing.”

“That was dramatic,” Draco says. He picks up Harry’s wrist, cold fingers slipping against his skin. “Excellent gloves.”
“Thanks,” Harry says, reclaiming his hand with a caught breath.

He’s so hyper-aware of every touch now and it must be so obvious. It must be. Draco isn’t a particularly tactile person; he doesn’t even touch his oldest friends, but he touches Harry. He tucks errant hairs back into place without a thought, grasps Harry’s forearm to underline a point, lets their knees rest together under the table at Nighthawks.

Someone shouts Selwyn’s name from the other side of the alley and he groans.

“Everyone, think good thoughts for me so that I might not trip them up with their own broomsticks.”

“Do you want some help?” Harry offers, shoving the last of his cone into his mouth. “I’m not bad with security spells.”

“It’s nice of you to offer, Harry, but I’m afraid that’s not possible. Ministry regulations,” Selwyn explains.

He pulls himself to his full height and marches across the cobbles, ready to do battle with all that is spontaneous and unruly. Harry leans against Glenda’s van and Draco leans beside him.

“Have you seen this before?”

“No, but Ginny saw them in New York. She said they were really impressive.”

“I went to New York once,” Glenda says, arms folded on the ledge of her hatch. “It was ever so noisy. Like everyone had something to say and they all had to say it at once.”
“Sounds like Sunday lunch to me,” Harry says, laughing as all seven fliers whoosh into the air and the street erupts into cheers and applause.

At first, the individual performers are almost impossible to see in the darkness, but one by one they light their broomsticks from end to tail, creating seven glowing white outlines. Harry watches as each flier’s jumpsuit becomes illuminated with a different colour of the rainbow, and when they swoop up and down the alley in formation, their brooms jingle softly and tiny stars trail from their bristles.

The flier in green slows to a stop above the fountain and produces a box out of thin air, from which he takes fluorescent clubs, balls, and a dazzling Snitch. He throws the other items to his colleagues and holds the Snitch aloft, whipping the crowd into a frenzy with repeated shouts of “Shall I let him go?!”

“Let him go!” Lorna cries, caught up in the excitement.

“Let him go!” Harry echoes, meeting Draco’s eyes in a flash of electricity as he, too, joins their call.

“Let him go!” yell Jim and Glenda and every last person in Diagon Alley, starting up a deafening chant thunderous enough to give Selwyn an ulcer.

The man in green releases the Snitch, watches with everyone else as it zips over the rooftops, and then pelts after it, leaving stars in his wake. The remaining fliers take up the other team positions, creating a thrilling game of Quidditch without the need for an opponent. The Keeper traces magical rings in the air and darts this way and that, defending them from the blurs of luminous red, orange, and yellow that each take fleeting possession of the Quaffle. The Beaters, in indigo and violet, send glistening Bludgers streaking across the sky and draw gasps from the people below each time a Chaser has to duck or barrel roll to avoid a collision.

Every few seconds, there is another glimpse of the Seeker or the elusive Snitch, and Harry’s skin
tingles with the thought of being up there with him, flying into the wind with fingers stretched out and every muscle drawn tight with the thrill of the chase. When he lands, Snitch struggling between his fingers, Harry claps until his hands hurt, cheering along with the crowd as each flier touches down on the icy cobbles.

“Anyone fancy a fly?” shouts the Seeker, and everyone starts talking at once.

“I might have a go,” Draco says with an air of nonchalance. “I bet you won’t.”

“Stop trying to reverse-psychology me,” Harry says. “And no, I won’t, because they’ve only got seven brooms and I’ve got one at home if I want to fly.”

“Come on,” the Seeker wheedles, as his teammates hand over their lit-up broomsticks to eager volunteers. “We’ve got plenty of brooms with us… yes, you can just have a fly around, or you can have a go at catching this.” He holds up the fluttering Snitch and grins. “Whoever catches it can take it home.”

“Plenty of brooms,” Draco murmurs, and the next thing Harry knows, he is handing Ken to Glenda and climbing onto a broom supplied to him by the Keeper, who startles at the sight of him and keeps calling him ‘sir’.

Draco takes the next broom and smirks at him. He wraps leather-clad hands around the handle and fixes his eyes on the Snitch. Harry can’t quite stop looking at him, and is one of the last into the air when the Seeker yells, ‘Go!’ and a dozen people kick off in a muddle of jingling bells and sputtering stars. It’s a good broom, and once Harry begins to concentrate, he easily outstrips most of the other fliers. He catches up with Draco near the top of the alley and they wheel around over the whisky shop to dart after the Snitch, side by side and then trading advantages of just inches as they urge their way through the icy air.

“I’ve missed this!” Draco calls, pulling ahead and almost leading Harry straight into a chimney pot with a well-timed feint.
Harry’s pulse is hammering in the most wonderful way as he sticks two fingers up at Draco and drops underneath him, causing a split second of confusion that allows him to re-take the lead.

“If Madam Hooch saw me now,” he laughs, and Draco pulls up alongside him.

“She’s down there. I saw her.”

Harry glances at him, loses sight of the Snitch, and curses himself. “Really?”

“No,” Draco laughs, streaking ahead in a blur of herringbone coat and whippy scarf.

The Snitch reappears in front of the Leaky Cauldron, and suddenly everyone who has been trailing Harry and Draco wheels around to find themselves in the lead.

“No, no, no,” Draco mutters, pushing his broom so hard that several of the lights go out in protest.

Harry is on his tail in an instant, quickly pulling level as they filter through the others and emerge at the front. He leans close to his broom and tucks his head in against the wind, already stretching out a hand in preparation. When he darts a glance at Draco, he is doing the same, eyes narrowed in concentration until he seems to notice that Harry is looking at him. His eyes slide to meet Harry’s, and in that one moment of inattention, someone whooshes past both of them and grabs the Snitch out of the air.

The crowd cheers and the young woman holds the fluttering Snitch above her head in triumph.

“I can’t believe I got it! I can’t believe… fuck, it’s you,” she falters, and then reddens. “I didn’t mean to say fuck to Harry Potter. Twice. I’m sorry.”
Harry laughs, sitting back on his broom and rubbing his sore hands. “You should say ‘fuck’ if you want to. That was a brilliant bit of flying.”

“Well done,” Draco says, eyeing the Snitch with envy and then covering it with a smile. “You need discipline to catch a Snitch, and I’m not sure either of us have that any more.”

“Oh, no, you were both fantastic,” the woman says, nodding with such vigour that her woollen hat almost falls off her head.

“In which case, you must have been really fantastic,” Harry says. He urges his broom slowly down to the cobbles and calls up to her: “Don’t look now, but the Fliers are watching you.”

She turns to see that several of the performers are indeed peering up at her and murmuring to one another. Turning pink, she stares at Draco.

“Don’t mind him, he’s getting old,” he says helpfully, following Harry back to the ground. “He’ll be fifty next year.”

“Really?”

“No, I will not,” Harry shouts, but he doesn’t think she’s listening.

With a twinge of regret, he hands his jingling broomstick back to its owner while Draco chats to the Fliers and scribbles in his notebook.

Nighthawks is noisy and overheated but surprisingly manageable for a Saturday night, and they are
able to secure their booth without too much difficulty. Realising that he is ravenous, Harry decides to risk ordering a sandwich, reasoning that there isn’t much that can go wrong with a bit of bread and ham. Draco looks at him as though he’s taking his life in his hands but orders a pastry to go with his coffee.

“I would have won, you know,” he says, and Harry stops draping his coat over Ken to stare at him in disbelief.

“You would not.”

“Harry, I was ahead of you for most of the race,” Draco insists. “And not only that, you looked at me right at the last minute and that was very distracting.”

“I didn’t look at you,” Harry mumbles, even though he knows he did. “If you can get distracted by a look, maybe you’re not as good a flier as you think you are.”

Draco snorts. “Nice try.”

“It’s the truth,” Harry lies.

“Harry,” Draco says, leaning across the table on his elbows, “I don’t know if you know this, but you have a way of looking at me that I can feel on the back of my neck. It’s not just a look, it’s as though you’re poking me with your cold fingers and it rather grabs my attention.”

Horrified, Harry stares at his hands, wondering if the dimly-lit interior of Nighthawks will cover the fact that his entire face is turning red.

“God, that’s… awful,” he stumbles, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I had no idea I was doing that.”
Draco laughs. “I didn’t say I didn’t like it.”

Harry’s head jerks up. “What?”

“We’ve been friends for a long time now,” Draco says, eyes painfully gentle on Harry’s. “Just because I tell you that you’re doing something weird, doesn’t mean I’m complaining about it.”

“Draco, sometimes you make my head feel like soup,” Harry says, and Draco is still protesting about the many ways in which that statement doesn’t make sense when the food arrives.

The waitress sets the cups and plates on the table and turns to go, but Harry holds up a hand.

“Hang on. This isn’t right.”

“Did you order something else?” she asks, pulling out her order book. “I wrote down two coffees, a cherry crown and a ham and tomato sandwich. Which it looks like you got.”

“Yeah, it’s not that,” Harry says.

Bewildered, he touches the bread on his plate. It’s soft. He picks up his sandwich and takes a bite, surprised to find the ham thick and full of flavour, the tomatoes ripe and the butter… butter, rather than the usual horrible replacement spread. Granted, it’s just a sandwich, but it’s a nice sandwich, and as such, not what he was expecting.

Draco watches him, frowning, and then takes an experimental bite of his pastry. His eyebrows shoot up and he chews slowly, as though waiting for something unpleasant to happen. The waitress
looks at them as though she’d like to tell them they have lost the plot, if only she could be bothered.

“This is a nice pastry,” he says at last. “It tastes good.”

“The sandwich, too,” Harry agrees. He gazes up at the waitress. “What the hell is going on?”

She continues to gaze at him with utter dispassion for several seconds, before she looks over her shoulder for a moment and then, to Harry’s delight, drops the mask and grins at them.

“We’ve got a new chef,” she says, voice now soft and bright and completely at odds with her surroundings. “He seems to actually like food.”

“Would you say it’s now safe to order other things?” Draco asks, picking up a menu and scanning it with interest.

“Definitely,” she says. “But the new chef is designing a whole new menu, so don’t get too attached to the old one.”

“I think I might miss the old pastries,” Harry admits, noticing the way that Draco’s cherry crown flakes when touched. “I always felt like they could be weaponised somehow if the occasion called for it.”

The waitress smiles. “Me too. We used to use them as frisbees out the back when it was quiet. These ones don’t go very far but they do taste a lot better.”

“The coffee’s still the same, isn’t it?” Harry asks, darting an anxious glass into his cup.
“Yes, thank god,” the waitress says. “Listen, I can’t stand and chat. If the boss finds out I’ve been… you know, smiling and stuff, I’ll get such a talking to. You two are such good customers, please don’t tell on me… it’s so tiring looking bored all the time.”

“We saw no smiles,” Draco says. “Nothing but world-weary ennui.”

She treats them to one last smile and then turns her face carefully blank before walking away.

“It’s a thing,” Harry mutters, grinning. “I knew it was a thing.”

“Had to be a thing,” Draco says, biting into his pastry. “No one can really be that fed up all the time.”

“I don’t know, you used to do a pretty good job of it.”

Draco wipes jam from his bottom lip and affects a sneer. “Yes, and do you know what? It was hard work.”

Harry snorts. “That wasn’t a bored face, that was a… I don’t know what to call it, but I don’t miss it. Show me your bored face.”

“I don’t get bored,” Draco says. “There is always something to do. This week, I’ve been putting together a proposal for a multi-sensory art exhibition and watching films. Occasionally at the same time.”

“Do your arts council friends know about your DVD player?” Harry asks, biting into his sandwich.
Draco nods. “The older ones don’t understand why anyone would want to look at moving pictures for hours on end, but some of them are quite intrigued. I spent a good half an hour explaining to Amara Gupta that it doesn’t work like a Pensieve, and now she wants one, too.”

“Amara Gupta,” Harry mumbles. He knows that name from somewhere. “Oh! That’s Samar’s mum. He said the two of you knew each other.”

“Which one was Samar?”

“The one who was still in love with his ex-boyfriend,” Harry reminds him. “I hope he’s alright. He was a nice bloke.”

“Some of them had to be nice, statistically speaking,” Draco says, eyebrows drawn down into a little frown. “Are you planning on doing many more?”

Harry sighs. He warms his hands on his coffee cup and inhales the bitter steam. He doesn’t know how to answer the question and he doesn’t want to. The truth, he supposes, is that he’d rather not go on even one more date, but it’s going to happen anyway, because the alternative is too bleak to consider right now. Just like the alternative to this agonising feeling of longing is not spending time with Draco, and that’s not something he’s prepared to try.

He hesitates too long, and Draco cringes. “I’m being too personal again, aren’t I?”

“No,” Harry says a little too quickly. “It’s just… I don’t know what I’m doing, and if I can’t get it straight inside my own head, there’s no chance I can make it make sense to you.”

“Which… rather makes sense in not making sense, I suppose,” Draco agrees.
Harry smiles. “Tell me about this multi-sensory thing instead.”

Draco takes off his coat and gets out his notebook, flicking through the pages as he explains how the exhibition will fit together. Harry listens, gritting his teeth and allowing himself to feel every twinge and twist and ache and burn, nodding in all the right places and wishing he could kiss the corner of that serious mouth.

“It’s a lot of work,” Draco says at last, seeming surprised to realise that he has used nearly every object on the table to represent some part of his explanation. “And then there’s… this.”

Harry smiles. “It was good. I understood it and everything. Silly firework man.”

“I have never called you that,” Draco protests.

“Not yet. Here’s the thing, though,” Harry says, fiddling with a salt cellar that now represents a publication called *Cultured Vultures*. “Remind me how many people are on the Arts Council.”

“Twelve.”

“Okay, so you have all these different projects that you look after and things that you have to go and see, and report back, and all that?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Why are you the only one who ever comes to the night time events?” Harry asks, and Draco frowns.
“Well, Mrs Weatherby is ancient and likes to be tucked up in bed with a crossword by nine, four of the others have very young children, Mrs Gupta has a sort of allergy to the cold and can’t stay out in the winter…” Draco pauses. “They all do things, just things that happen at more sociable hours.”

“Why do you come?” Harry asks, knowing he should stop pushing but doing it anyway.

“I volunteer,” Draco says, meeting Harry’s eyes with a flicker of challenge.

“Why?”

“Because I like… fireworks and things,” Draco says, folding his arms and leaning in close. “Why are you being so fucking difficult?”

“I’m not,” Harry protests, but Draco’s clean citrus scent is everywhere and he can barely breathe. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t being overworked.”

Draco lets out a long sigh. “Do you want me to stop coming to your events?”

“Of course not.”

“Then stop worrying and eat your perfectly satisfactory sandwich.”

Harry wants to say something. He wants to say all sorts of things. He eats his sandwich.
Harry gets up from the table with a reluctant sigh. He collects Ken from George’s shoulder, grabs his coat from the rack and pauses, watching Molly pull a vast tray of steaming puddings from the oven. He is already full of roast beef and vegetables, but the aroma of sugar and stodge and lemons makes his mouth water all over again.

“I have to go,” he says, mainly for his own benefit.

Everyone around the table seems to peer at him with the same expression of confused sadness.

“But it’s pond pudding,” Arthur protests.

“I know,” Harry says. “But I’ve got to get to Cardiff and the food festival opens at five, and we’ve all got to be there really early because the Minister is coming and…”

“But it’s the best dessert, Uncle Harry!” Camille interrupts, gaining herself a smile from Molly.
“Oh? I thought you said my ile flottante was ze best dessert,” Fleur teases.

Camille darts panicked glances between her mother and grandmother until Rose leans over and whispers in her ear.

“Ile flottante is the best French dessert,” she says airily, as though she has come to this conclusion all by herself, “and pond pudding is the best English dessert.”

“That’s very diplomatic of you, Camille,” Percy says, earning himself a confused little frown and then a smile when Rose once again leans over to help.

“They’re saying it’s going to snow again, Harry,” Arthur says, as though this fact has some bearing on whether or not people should be allowed to skip dessert.

“I don’t like the thought of you standing outside all night without a proper meal in you,” Molly says, grasping his upper arm in a way that makes Harry feel as though he’s being assessed for soundness.

“Mum, he’s going to a food festival,” Ginny points out. “He’s not going to starve.”

Molly frowns. “Ginny, it’s all Welsh food. They eat seaweed, you know.”

“That’s right, Mum,” George deadpans. “Only seaweed. They just cook it in different ways. Seaweed burgers, seaweed fritters, seaweed soup…”

“Do you think Glenda’s made seaweed on a stick?” Hermione asks, and then, because she can’t help it, “I just want to point out that it’s called laverbread.”
“You joke, Hermione, but she probably has,” Harry says, already picturing Draco’s consternation.

“When you’ve all quite finished,” Molly says, hands on hips. “Harry, you could have had your pudding and left by now.”

Harry holds her stern gaze for a second or two and then capitulates, retaking his seat and accepting a bowl of dessert without another word.

“So, how’s the dating going?” George asks, but Harry’s mouth is full of delicious lemony pudding and all he can do is shrug.

“Let the man eat, George,” Arthur chides. “He can tell us all about it next week. I’m doing spotted dick and chocolate custard for the party.”

“It’s not funny,” Molly says, finally sitting down with her own portion of dessert and realising that at least three of her adult children are giggling and nudging each other.

“It is a bit,” Arthur admits. “But it will still taste nice.”

The giggling just gets worse, and Harry decides to concentrate very hard on his pudding, which appears to contain a whole, if miniscule, baked lemon. It’s very small and very lemony and there is nothing at all funny about the idea of Arthur’s tasty spotted dick. Nothing.

When his bowl is finally clean, Harry is allowed to leave. He hugs Molly and pretends not to hear her fussing about ‘such a long way to Apparate, Harry’ because he knows from experience that nothing he says will soothe her fretting. There are plenty of people around to distract her, and soon she’ll be warming her most enormous teapot for a post-lunch brew, the thought of which causes Harry a pang of regret as he whips himself and Ken off to Cardiff.
“Let’s go and find a hot drink, shall we?” he says to Ken, who grasps the end of his finger and grips it hard.

Harry scans the large courtyard, spotting Glenda’s van in one corner, sandwiched between Jim and Lorna’s magic tent and a stall where two young women are setting out trays of brightly coloured sweets and covering them in sheets of protective magic. Many of the other stallholders are still putting out their wares, but every stall and trailer and van has been draped in twinkling lights, giving the courtyard the appearance of a festive grotto. In the centre, a fragrant spruce has been decked out in tinsel and baubles and yet more lights. At the very top, a rotating silver star sits in pride of place, while Selwyn peers at it and shoots up a measuring tape. He shakes his head.

Amused, Harry ducks behind him as he retracts the tape and grumbles under his breath. The wind sweeps through the courtyard as he walks, stealing the clean scent of evergreen and mixing it with the delicious array of cooking smells until Harry can smell Christmas everywhere, and his heart leaps with the promise of festivity.

“You’re cutting it fine,” Draco says. “The Minister will be here at any moment.”

Harry takes a careful breath and turns around. Draco is all in black, with his best coat buttoned over perfectly pressed trousers and an immaculate black jumper. His hair is almost too neat, and Harry wants to ruffle it free, but he keeps his fingers to himself, one hand shoved into his pocket and the other holding tightly onto his case.

“You look like you’re going to a funeral,” he says, throat dry.

Draco arches an eyebrow. “And you, as I’ve often said, are the last word on style.”

Harry manages a smile. “I am.”

“Anyway,” Draco says, stepping closer and pulling at his scarf. “There’s a pinstripe in this, look.
Please tell me you wouldn’t wear a teal pinstripe to a funeral.”

Harry smiles properly now. He shakes his head. “No, Draco. I wouldn’t wear a teal pinstripe to a funeral. The very idea of it.”

Draco grins. “Come and see what Glenda’s made. I have no idea how she’s keeping it all on the sticks.”

Harry glances over at the stick tram, where Glenda is writing up the night’s menu on her chalkboards.

“I’ve got to go and set up,” he sighs, letting out a groan when he notices that Jim and Lorna are putting the finishing touches to a steaming cauldron of mulled wine. “Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

With renewed vigour in his step, Harry jogs over to Selwyn and manages to double-check his spot without engaging him in any rants about the height of the Christmas tree. Following that minor miracle, he sets out his shells without incident while Ken clambers back and forth between his shoulders and tastes the air with a curious tongue.

“You’ll like this one,” Harry tells him. “And not just because of the dragons.”

Dragons do seem to be the theme of the night, however, and Harry isn’t at all surprised to see them everywhere he looks. Several of the stalls are flying the Welsh flag featuring the King of Gywnedd’s red dragon, and many more are displaying Welsh Greens in their banners or uniforms. At one stall, an orange dragon no bigger than a Border Terrier is roasting chestnuts with its breath, and when Harry draws closer to get a better look, a smiling bearded man informs him that the dragon’s name is Jeffrey, and his chestnuts will be ready in about fifteen minutes.

“Is he a baby?” Harry asks, watching Jeffrey shaking his head before producing another burst of flame.
“No, he’s thirteen years old,” the man says, and he gives the dragon a pat on the head that suggests an enormous amount of trust and a lot of training. “He won’t get any bigger now.”

“Amazing,” Harry says, and he turns back to watch Jeffrey often as he wanders around to look at the other treats the festival has to offer.

Glenda has gone all out on her Welsh theme, offering triangles of rarebit threaded onto sticks, Glamorgan sausages, and balls of laver bread, which Draco regards with intense scrutiny.

“It’s made of seaweed, yes?”

“Yes, love,” Glenda says, glancing at Harry, who just shrugs, interested to see whether he goes with ‘but does it belong on a stick?’ or ‘how does it stay on the stick?’

“How are you keeping it on the stick?” Draco asks.

Harry laughs and orders a cup of mulled wine from Lorna. He holds it up under his nose, inhaling the warming scents of spices and orange zest, and sipping the hot liquid as he walks around the stalls. Glenda may be offering her best Welsh cuisine, but the locals are fiercely proud of their food and the quality tonight is clear to see. Lamb is a popular menu choice, appearing in just about every form

Harry can imagine: slow roasted, minted, stewed, minced with spices, and on one stall, in a profusion of little golden pasties, along with others labelled ‘Caerphilly and sweet peppers’ and ‘Potato and Leek’, which also features as a hearty soup with fresh, crusty bread.

“Bara Brith ice cream, Harry?” Jim asks when he completes his circuit and returns to his friends. “It’s just about ready.”
Harry is about to tell him that he probably needs a little bit longer to digest Molly’s pond pudding when Selwyn hurries over, holding his clipboard like a weapon.

“They’re late. Everyone’s ready early, just like they asked, and they’re late.”

“I expect the Minister’s a very busy man,” Glenda says mildly. “None of us are in a rush, are we, loves?”

Everyone shakes their heads. Selwyn sighs. “Look at all this lovely food. It’s not right.”

“That’s what warming charms are for,” Jim says. “It’s all fine, Selwyn. Calm down before you give yourself a coronary.”

Selwyn stomps away until only his bright red coat is visible. Draco watches him, frowning.

“I could never work for the Ministry. Far too much drama.”

Lorna laughs. “Because you’re not one for theatrics, are you, Draco?”

“I think you’ll find…” Draco begins, and Harry turns back to Jim.

“I think I will try that ice cream, actually.”
He eats it slowly, leaning against the tent van and savouring the delicious hot/cold confusion, along with surprising chunks of real spiced tea bread. By the time he has finished, there is still no sign of the Minister, and several of the stall holders are becoming restless. When Selwyn dashes off to find a fireplace, Glenda steps out of her van and, without putting down her cup of tea, conjures a pink armchair right there in the courtyard. She sits in it and looks at the others as if to say, ‘what do you think about that, then?’

Lorna stares down at her for a moment and then steps out and creates her own chair, a neat little thing in soft brown leather. She sits down and crosses her legs.

“I’ve been on my feet all day.”

“So have I,” Jim points out.

“Come on, then,” Lorna says, patting the arm of her chair. “There’s plenty of room for everyone.”

Her words seem to strike a chord with the other stallholders and performers, because all at once, there is a frenzy of activity as people abandon their places and conjure chairs of their own. Harry watches with interest as a group of ballet dancers spell themselves large cushions and sit on them to continue their stretches, and several members of the male voice choir work together to create a long bench large enough to seat them all.

Draco is one of the last to capitulate, finally conjuring himself a dark green wingback beside Harry’s squashy red armchair, and he sits in it with such poise that Harry wonders if he’s expecting to give a speech at any moment. Over at the chestnut stall, Jeffrey’s owner has made himself a recliner, from which he grins and gives two thumbs up as the dragon continues with his work.

“I could get used to this,” Jim says, rubbing his hands over the corduroy arms of his chair. “Maybe we should have a sitting down festival every year.”

“No customers… no displays… just sitting in nice chairs,” says a lady with ‘Cakes of Cardiff’ printed on her apron.
“I think I’d still like to dance,” says one of the ballerinas. “But we really should have thought of cushions before.”

“Why has my chair turned out sparkly?” wonders the man with the soup, eyebrows knitted.

“Good evening,” booms a familiar voice, and everyone scrambles to their feet.

“Minister,” Selwyn calls, sprinting across the courtyard and staring at his colleagues in breathless horror. “What are you all doing?”

Kingsley glances at each of his bodyguards in turn and smiles slowly. “Calm yourself, Selwyn. Why don’t you all sit down? I’m sorry to be so late but it could not be helped.”

For several seconds, no one moves, until Kingsley draws his wand, thinks for a moment, and conjures a chair of his own. It’s a large chair for a large man, but it’s simple: an armchair covered in rich blue fabric that clashes violently with his vivid orange robes. Harry smiles, catching his eye as he sits down and receiving a friendly wink in return. The two bodyguards stand behind his chair with their wands at their backs until Kingsley sighs and tells them to make themselves a seat.

“How wonderful this all looks,” he says, eyes travelling over the decorated tree, the lights, and the piles of steaming food. “What is that man doing?”

“He doesn’t like to leave the dragon while it’s roasting chestnuts, Minister,” explains one of the stall holders, and Kingsley laughs.

“That sounds wise. Now, Harry, what can we expect from tonight’s firework display?”
“Well, I don’t want to give too much away,” Harry says, giving Kingsley an answer that he hopes will be interesting enough for the moment.

The Minister nods and smiles, asking questions of everyone present and listening intently to their responses. It isn’t long before people begin to relax, and by the time they all vanish their chairs and prepare for the festival to begin, the atmosphere in the courtyard is bright and glittering with anticipation. Kingsley is a man of the people and seems to genuinely enjoy these social engagements, chatting easily to his poker-faced guards as he buys steaming ice cream from Lorna and insists on paying for it.

“What a ridiculously charming man,” Draco says, following Harry over to his corner of the courtyard and sitting beside him.

“I know,” Harry says. “I’m going to be like him when I grow up.”

Draco laughs, pulling up his knees and wrapping his arms around them. “If you grow up.”

Harry sticks out his tongue. Ken climbs into his lap, and together, the three of them watch the elegant spins of the ballerinas and listen to the choir’s booming mix of carols and traditional Welsh songs. The place is jam-packed with people, but Harry manages to spot Hagrid, who now has an excitable Toast on a lead, and George, who is holding the hand of a windswept but smiling Angelina Johnson.

“Aha,” he mumbles, catching George’s eye and enjoying the blend of embarrassment and pride on his face.

“What?”

Harry grins. “Nothing.”
When Kingsley’s voice rings out to announce the start of the fireworks, Harry allows himself one glance at Draco before giving his focus over to his work. Tonight’s show features reptiles of all kinds, and Harry fills the sky with snakes, turtles, alligators, and a chameleon that looks just like Ken. The dragons are met with shouts of approval that turn to whistles and cheers as each one that screams into the sky is bigger and sparklier than the last.

Harry creates a vast Welsh Green that, with a careful twist of his wand, grabs the North Pole sign and races away with it, glittering wings sending showers of sparks down over the audience. Two red dragons roar with screeching, fizzing explosions and take off after the Green, leaving the sky empty for several seconds. Just as the people below begin to applaud, the chameleon reappears and begins to change colour every few seconds. Harry bites his lip hard in concentration, setting off three small shells at once and sweeping his wand in a spiral. He knows that Draco is looking at him, and he wishes he wouldn’t. Finally, the chameleon unfurls its tail and produces a replacement sign before swivelling an eye and bursting into a thousand points of shockingly bright light.

“Ken, you’re famous,” Draco says softly as the crowd erupts into thunderous applause.

Harry turns to find him just inches away, leaning over to stroke the chameleon’s chest.

“Mmhmm,” he manages, trying not to jump when Draco’s upturned lapel grazes his cheek. “Wow, it’s really fucking busy. I can’t even see Glenda from here.”

“She’s still there,” Draco says, lifting his eyes to meet Harry’s. He peers out over the bustling courtyard and wrinkles his nose. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Feeling oddly guilty, Harry packs up his things, vanishes his chair and gets to his feet. There’s no reason that he has to stay. He’s done his job. It’s fine. Even so, he feels like he’s sneaking off somewhere he shouldn’t, and when Draco grabs his wrist and the ground whips away beneath him, he can’t quite stop himself from laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Draco asks, sliding into their booth and taking off his coat.
Harry shakes his head, trying to trap his amusement in his hands and losing it completely when he realises that he is still wearing his coat and Draco isn’t. For some reason this strikes him as the funniest thing possible and as he shakes with laughter, he wonders if being in love is enough to send a person properly around the twist.

“You took your coat off, and…” Harry stops, presses his lips together and then starts again, because Draco’s confused expression is both beautiful and hilarious.

“Good, yes, that makes sense,” Draco says, stopping a waiter and ordering coffee for both of them. “No rum for you tonight.”

Harry sighs, grinning and still taking shaky breaths. “I feel like I’m up to something and I don’t even know what it is.”

“Should I be worried?” Draco asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I really couldn’t say,” Harry says, and at least it’s the truth.

The waiter returns quickly, placing their cups on the table while hanging on to a pitcher of iced tea and several tall glasses.

“Two coffees, and—bollocks,” he mutters, as someone passes behind him and accidentally pushes him off balance.

He tries to hold on to everything, but a spill is inevitable and Harry sees it happening in slow motion. The waiter grabs the glasses hard, clanking them together and turning his knuckles white with the effort; he struggles to steady the pitcher but it’s too late, and the contents pour over Draco, soaking him with cold tea, ice cubes, and slices of lemon. Horrified, the waiter manages to pull
back the pitcher but almost all of the liquid is now soaking into Draco’s jumper.

“I’m so sorry… I mean, that’s a real shame,” the waiter says, remembering his character just in time. He affects a little shrug. “Spills… er… happen. I could get you a towel?”

“That would be helpful,” Draco says, and when the waiter returns with the towel, he dabs at his jumper and frowns.

“Are you alright?” Harry asks, deciding not to say that actually, the iced tea smells quite nice.

Draco sighs. “I’m sorry about this.”

He abandons the towel and pulls his wet jumper over his head. Underneath, a thin white t-shirt is not quite as saturated, but damp enough to make the fabric cling to his body in patches. For a moment, both layers pull up together, revealing a stretch of pale abdomen and the waistband of dark trousers than hang just so on angular hips. Draco pulls the t-shirt down and Harry forces himself to look away, but it doesn’t help. He’s hard and his mouth is dry and he can’t remember how to pick up his coffee cup.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” Draco asks, plucking at his t-shirt. “And please don’t say yes, because I don’t want to go home now and waste this coffee.”

“It’s fine,” Harry says, finally regaining his senses enough to gulp at his drink.

It’s too hot and he’s too hot and Draco… well, that way madness lies.

“Good. Did you see George Weasley, by the way? I didn’t know he was seeing that Johnson girl.”
“Mm. No… I mean yes. I didn’t know, either,” Harry says, wishing he could get out his wand and dry Draco’s clothes for him. Fuck the Statute of Secrecy. This could well be an emergency.

When Draco finishes his coffee and decides to head home for dry clothes, Harry celebrates silently and Apparates home before anyone notices that he is more turned on than he has ever been in his life. Back at number twelve, he collapses onto his bed still fully clothed and pushes himself roughly into his fist until he groans and comes in a breathless, sweaty rush.

“Not good,” he tells himself, spelling away his release and shedding his clothes.

He doesn’t care how early it is. He’s had enough. He crawls under his quilt and falls quickly into a restless sleep tinged with flashes of grey eyes and damp cotton and soft, cold lips brushing against his neck. Right in the middle of a particularly intense moment of skin against skin, he jerks awake. Something cold and slimy is touching him, and it takes a moment for him to realise that someone has dropped a piece of mango onto his forehead.


Harry turns over and closes his eyes. Opens them again. There is an owl on his windowsill.
Harry isn’t sure exactly what he’s doing on this date, but he suspects it has something to do with the dream that is still running through his head, despite Ken’s best attempts at helpful sabotage. Even as he wanders through the Diagon Alley Christmas market stalls with Lewis (Louie? Lenny?) his brain continues to throw out half-formed images that settle in a hot tangle at the base of his spine. This time, though, he is determined to pay attention to the man at his side. That’s the least he deserves, and he seems nice enough, if a little bit young and preoccupied with his appearance.

“Do you think I could wear this scarf?” he asks, striking a pose for Harry’s benefit.

*I’m pretty sure you are wearing it*, he thinks, but smiles and nods. “Definitely. It suits you.”

Lewis—he’s pretty sure it’s Lewis—flashes a blinding smile and hands the stall owner several coins in exchange for the scarf.

“I wasn’t sure if I could wear such a bright shade with my skin,” he confesses. “Some people seem to have no idea what they’re doing with colours and they end up looking all washed out. You seem to get away with it, which is nice.”

“Thanks,” Harry says, unsure if he has just received a compliment or an insult. “Shall we get a cup of tea or something? There’s a café just here.”
“I only really drink coffee,” Lewis says, eyeing Mrs Purley’s place uncertainly.

“She has that, too,” Harry says, hiding a smile.

Lewis brightens and leads the way to the café, narrowly avoiding the other shoppers with his armfuls of bags. Once warmed and caffeinated, they leave the noisy street to duck in and out of shops, each one full of shiny knick-knacks and festive music. Deciding to take advantage of the situation, Harry buys several gifts for friends and family, including a shiny, self-cleaning casserole dish for Ron, a set of unusual potion bottles for Hermione, and chocolate-covered everything for Rose, Hugo, and Camille.

“What do you think of this?” he asks, determined to be properly engaged with this person, even though he knows they have nothing to offer one another.

“It’s nice for an old lady,” Lewis shrugs, and Harry decides not to imagine Molly’s reaction to being described that way.

He replaces the item on the shelf and wanders into the next aisle, which is crammed with gleaming decorations in glass, copper, and painted wood. Lewis follows him and sighs.

“I’d get some of these but I always think… it’s a bit sad when people who live on their own decorate for Christmas. I mean… what’s the point?”

Feeling rather stung, Harry reaches up and smiles when a grippy little foot wraps around his finger in silent support. Lewis is entitled to his opinion, but both of them love Christmas, so he can keep it.

“I’m not on my own,” he says. “I have Ken.”
Lewis frowns. “Ken is a lizard. Does he know it’s Christmas?”

“What?” Lewis laughs, puzzled.

“It’s a Muggle song from the eighties. Probably before you were born,” Harry sighs.

“I was born in eighty-nine,” Lewis says. “I’m older than I look. And you’re younger than you look, so we’d make a good couple.”

Harry just nods and continues to browse the decorations. He decides not to spend too much time untangling that particular statement; he doesn’t think he comes out if it all that well. Lewis watches him with interest as he fetches himself a basket and fills it with glittery snowscapes, wooden animals and far too many delicate glass things for a person who lives with a clumsy chameleon. He feels stubborn and ridiculous but he doesn’t care, and there is something satisfying about the flicker of guilt on Lewis’s face when Harry takes his sparkling haul to the counter and pays for it.

“I didn’t mean to offend you before,” Lewis says, attempting to help Harry out into the street with his enormous new bags. “I suppose I’m just not much of a Christmas person.”

“I’m not offended,” Harry promises, and he’s not, not any more. He feels a bit daft but the house is going to look extra festive this year and that can only be a good thing. “Hang on, why did you want to come Christmas shopping, then?”

Lewis scrunches up his nose. “I thought it would be a cool date, I suppose.”
Harry smiles at him, suddenly wanting to give him a ruffle on the head. He won’t, of course, and not just because he suspects that Lewis spends an awful lot of time on his hair. Instead, they weave their way in and out of the shops all the way back down to the Leaky Cauldron, where they part ways with a friendly hug and Harry watches Lewis disappear into the pub, fairly certain that he will never see him again.

“I think it’s going to be just you and me this Christmas,” he tells Ken, dragging himself and his bags back up the street.

Now that he’s got more lights and baubles than he can possibly need, he might as well bring home a tree and do the thing properly. It’s about time he decorated, and perhaps he should be grateful to Lewis for giving him a kick up the backside to do it.

“Harry Potter!” cries a man in a checked shirt as he approaches. “Please tell me you’ve come to buy one of my lovely trees.”

“I have,” Harry says, relishing the fresh scent of pine needles as he approaches the rows and rows of pots containing living trees of all shapes and sizes. “I’d like one that really smells like Christmas… and that won’t fall over if a chameleon tries to climb on it.”

“Congratulations, that’s a completely unique request,” the man laughs, and he looks up and down his rows of trees with a critical eye. “Right. Follow me.”

Harry and Ken do as they are told, and ten minutes later they are struggling back down the alley to find a safe place to Disapparate. Though quite tempted to see if he can stuff his new tree through Tom’s fireplace, Harry opts for the sensible route, gritting his teeth when the fragrant needles poke at his skin and he repeatedly wishes he’d thought to use a lightening spell. Ken watches helpfully from his shoulder, gripping tightly to Harry’s coat fabric and occasionally rasping his scaly face against Harry’s skin.

Finding a quiet spot at last, Harry fumbles his wand from his pocket and stops.
“Of course, that means I’m constantly trying to find out how the food stays on the sticks!” someone says behind him, followed by a rumble of unfamiliar laughter.

Harry turns with some effort, just in time to see the back of a blond head, a smart coat, an arm linked with that of a taller, darker man in expensive robes. Granted, Harry can only see the back of his head, but it seems like a handsome head, and the sight of Draco’s easy closeness with someone else sends his stomach into knots.

“Young man, are you coming or going?” asks an old lady, prodding him gently with her cane.

“Going, sorry,” he mumbles, realising he is blocking her way and Disapparating before he can do something stupid like running after Draco and demanding to know what he’s playing at.

He can do what he wants, Harry tells himself firmly, setting down tree and bags and putting on the kettle with a little more vigour than necessary. As far as Draco is concerned, Harry is a nice, supportive friend who would love for him to find happiness with a man who is handsome from the back and laughs at his obsessive little ways. Harry groans and rubs his cold face.

He decides to allow himself to mope for as long as his tea takes to brew, and then, feeling quite efficient, he takes a deep breath and carries everything up to the living room. He opens the windows to let in light and fresh air, ignites the fire and the lamps and carefully unwraps all of his new decorations, setting them out on the coffee table in neat rows. After an uncomfortable struggle around the attic, he locates his existing decorations and repeats the process, until his sofa and rug are also covered in trinkets and both he and Ken are coated in a fine layer of dust.

Harry blasts both of them with a cleaning charm, unsurprised when Ken demands to be released onto his nearest shelf in protest. He remains motionless when Harry apologises to him, but when he manages to tune his wireless to a Muggle station and fills the room with cheery Christmas music, Ken rotates his eyes with interest and scissor’s his toes almost along with the beat. Harry moves his tree into the window and admires its spiky profile. He has chosen a shorter specimen than usual, perhaps four and a half feet tall, with a fat, round shape and a particularly impressive top branch, perfect for the fancy new star lying in wait on the coffee table. It is sturdy and smells wonderful, fresh and clean with a hint of spice that reminds Harry of his first Christmas at Hogwarts.
He grabs a set of lights and starts draping, ignoring the scratch of pointy needles and throwing himself into his task. Soon, he’s singing along to the Christmas songs of his childhood without a care for tone or volume, heart lifting with each remembered lyric until he almost forgets about anything that isn’t celebratory and covered in glitter. Ken returns to him as he starts to hang decorations from the branches, and Harry doesn’t realise that he is batting delicate baubles around the floor until he hears a crash and looks around to find Ken staring determinedly in the opposite direction of a pile of broken glass.

“Not these ones,” he scolds, throwing Ken an old plastic bauble that bounces when it hits the floor. “You mustn’t play with the fancy ones.”

Ken wanders after his new toy and Harry lifts the glass fragments with his wand. Deciding that he can’t make it any worse, he spells the pieces back together with a crack. It’s… not bad, he decides, examining his work and smiling when he realises that the snow scene inside the glass has taken on a rather surreal quality. The house is upside down, the little girl is wearing the carrot on her head, and the snowman has turned an alarming shade of green.

“No one else will have one like that,” he reasons, and hangs it up on the tree.

It isn’t long before he runs out of space on the branches, and when he really can’t cram any more onto the tree, he gathers up the remaining decorations and spreads them around the room, balancing several on top of the television, many more along his bookshelves, and hanging the rest from Ken’s plants. Impulsively, he conjures a small star for each and carries the chameleon around on a short festive tour before settling on the hearth rug with his presents.

He hasn’t really made a dent in his Christmas shopping yet, but he has picked up enough bits and pieces on his shopping trip with Lewis to be able to wrap a selection of parcels and stack them under the tree, which currently looks dazzling but slightly lonely. The wrapping paper he has chosen is much fancier than the shiny, cheap and cheerful stuff he usually uses, and he unrolls it with care, skating his fingers over the thick, almost rough surface and admiring the pattern of white fir trees against a background of soft, rich brown. It’s the kind of paper Hermione buys and then apologises over when it reaches the recipient covered in small, sticky fingerprints.
“Want to help?” Harry asks when Ken nudges his bauble over to the pile of presents. “You could be really good at this. When I tie the ribbon, you hold it down with your foot, and then I’ll… or you try to fit that entire bauble in your mouth. Whatever works for you.”

Resigned to doing all the wrapping by himself, Harry encloses presents in paper while keeping half an eye on Ken’s whereabouts. When he glances up from tying the last ribbon, he spots a striped green tail poking out from underneath his armchair and wonders if Ken really does change colour when he’s talking to Draco. It wouldn’t be like Hermione to lie to him, but the thought of it is quietly horrifying. He supposes all he can do is hope that Draco hasn’t noticed.

He’s just finishing his reheated tea when an owl flies in through the open window and perches itself on the back of the sofa.

“I’m not doing this any more,” he tells it, scrambling to his feet. “I’m going to write a letter and tell fucking Wizards Unite what I think of them, and in the meantime, I am saying no-thank-you-very-much to whoever this is.”

The owl regards him impassively. He takes the purple envelope and opens it.

Dear Mr Potter,

We’re delighted to tell you that Lewis has enjoyed your company and would like to meet again! If you would like to see him for a second date, please reply by return with your choice of date, time, and location.

All the best,

The Wizards Unite Team – a boyfriend by Christmas or your money back!
Harry frowns. Reads the words again, and then aloud to Ken. He doesn’t want to go on another date with Lewis, and he hadn’t particularly thought that Lewis wanted to go on another date with him. And yet here it is, just hours after they parted. Harry summons a pen into his hand without looking up and writes a polite but firm rejection that is soon covered in ink smears. He cleans the parchment and his hands and sends the owl on its way, closing the window behind it and resolving to write a letter cancelling the whole thing as soon as he finds a pen that works properly.

“No more,” he tells himself, flopping onto the sofa and admiring his decorated room.

The tree is bristling with lights and decorations, and the combination of old and new strikes a balance of familiar and exciting that wraps around Harry and soothes his frazzled nerves. He gazes at the presents under the tree and finds himself wondering what on earth he can give Draco this year, if it’s a good idea to give him anything at all, and if he’ll ever be able to push him out of his head for more than five minutes at a time.

He doesn’t want to go out tonight. It’s cold outside and he’s weary to his bones; all he wants to do is curl up with Ken, order himself a pizza and lose himself in a film or a slew of terrible gameshows. Of course, when the time comes, he puts on his coat without really thinking about it, and with Ken in his pocket, Apparates to some coastal town he can’t remember the name of to find Draco waving around an enormous sparkler and smiling at him as though everything is completely fine.

“You’re covered in glitter,” he says, flicking sharp eyes over Harry’s face and hair.

“I put my tree up.”

“So did I,” Draco says. “I got it from a very enthusiastic man in Diagon Alley.”

Harry’s stomach lurches and the words are out before he can stop them. “I saw you. Who was that man you were with?”
“I didn’t catch that,” Draco shouts, stepping closer as a children’s brass band starts up and fills the air with joyful honking.

Caught between relief and disappointment, Harry turns to watch as they march by. “Nothing.”
Chapter Seventeen

Seventeenth of December – frosty holly

“And furthermore, having answered approximately twelve thousand questions about the most intimate details of my life, your system has failed to match me with a single person with whom I am vaguely compatible,” Harry writes, reading his words aloud to Ken as he goes. “In conclusion, I must say that this venture has been a complete disaster. Please remove me from your books as soon as possible. I do not require a refund and suggest you spend my membership fee on owl treats for the only section of your organisation that isn’t completely useless. Yours, Harry Potter.”

Harry throws down his pen and gulps at his tea. Ken ambles across the parchment, smudging the scathing words and tracking ink across the kitchen table. Harry strokes a finger along his crest and smiles, irritation fading rapidly as he re-reads the letter. Yep, he sounds like a wanker, and more than that, this mess is at least partly his own fault. He balls up the letter, throws it into the fire and starts again.

The ink is still drying on the second, far more constructive letter when a flash of movement catches Harry’s eye and he goes to peer out of the window. Someone is sneaking through his garden. Someone with a potion bottle. Someone in lime green robes that stick out like a sore thumb among his winter-spindly plants. Amused, he opens the back door and smiles at the interloper. Hermione squawks and almost drops the bottle she is trying to leave on his step.

“Hello, potion goblin. Fancy a cup of tea?”

“I just finished the early shift,” Hermione says, pushing the warm bottle into his hands. “I was just
“Going to leave it for you.”

“Yeah, I was watching your stealth moves from the window. Tea?”

Hermione follows him into the house, immediately attempting to cover her embarrassment by poking around the kitchen, picking things up and putting them down again. Harry lets her get on with it, making the tea and eyeing today’s potion, which is purple and smells suspiciously like cabbage.

“This is very formal,” she says, and he turns to see her holding his letter to Wizards Unite.

“Yeah, well, the first one I wrote was a bit rude,” he says, cringing at the memory of his pompous words. “I thought I’d go with polite-but-firm.”

Hermione nods, setting the letter down and accepting a steaming cup from Harry. “I’m a bit relieved,” she says, stifling a yawn. “Sorry, long shift. I thought you might try to stick it out until Christmas.”

Harry catches the yawn. “What are you saying?”

“That you’re incredibly stubborn,” Hermione says, flashing him a weary smile that makes Harry set down his cup and hug her until she rests her head on his chest and hugs him back.

“My stubbornness has kept me alive for three decades and counting,” he says, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and then releasing her. “That being said, even I know that it’s time to give up on this.”

Hermione perches on the edge of the table and allows Ken to investigate her robe pockets.
“It’s for the best, Harry. We both know that you’re mad about Draco.”

“Please don’t,” he whispers, but Hermione isn’t done with him.

“You should talk to him. Would it really be the worst thing if you just told him how you feel? He’s probably—”

“Hermione,” Harry interrupts, picking up the cabbagey potion. “You know I love you like a sister.”

She smiles. “Yes.”

“With that in mind, if you keep trying to make me talk about Draco, I will pour this entire thing over your head.”

Hermione laughs and bats Ken away from a pair of curved scissors that he has managed to extract from her pocket.

“I’ll make you a deal. You drink that now while it’s fresh and we can talk about anything you like.”

Harry hesitates for a moment and then gulps down the potion. He tries not to taste it, but a very determined mustiness fights to assert itself, hanging around in the back of his mouth even after several swigs of strong tea.

“My tongue’s gone numb,” he says, wiggling it around with some effort.
“Yes, some of my other patients… erm, some of my patients found that,” Hermione says. “I know it’s a bit strange but it seems to be an indicator that the active ingredients are working.”

“Oh, good,” Harry mumbles, deciding not to ask what those ingredients might be. “Do you want to see my Christmas tree?”

Hermione follows him up the stairs and to the living room, where he spells on all the lights and tries not to bite his tongue. She looks at everything and pronounces the whole room ‘very festive’ before catching sight of the clock and shoving her cup into Harry’s hands.

“I’m going to be late for the end of term bring-and-buy at Rose’s school,” she explains, kissing him on the cheek and filling his nostrils with the scents of lavender and residual magic. “We were supposed to bring home made cakes but Ron got stuck at work last night and I tried and everything was so burned and now I have to get some from a shop and make them look home made…”

Hermione pauses for breath, already halfway into Harry’s fireplace.

“Put some icing sugar on them,” he suggests. “Squash them into a tin, make them look a bit wonky. You’ll be fine.”

“Icing sugar,” she repeats. “Harry, you’re a star. Thanks for the tea.”

Harry watches her disappear into the green flames and then looks around at his room with satisfaction. It looks wonderful, bright and clean and sparkling, but when he wanders through the rest of the house, it’s clear that the other rooms have been neglected. Everything feels a little bit cold and unused, and the fading light gives the house a feeling of greyness that threatens to pull Harry’s spirits through the floorboards.
Determined to shake off the gritty feeling that is attempting to claim him, Harry tidies his kitchen, mopping his floor until the tiles gleam and spelling away abandoned cobwebs with his wand. As he sends clean plates flying back into his cupboards, he starts to feel a new energy surging through his veins and he pushes on, silently thanking Hermione for her horrible health potions as well as her friendship. By the time he is shaking a fresh quilt over his bed, he can feel his tongue again, and he celebrates by poking it out at his reflection while he cleans his bathroom mirror. He pauses, regarding the face looking back at him with a sigh. He looks old. He shakes himself. He looks okay. He looks a bit pale, just like everyone always says, but it could be worse. His eyes are bright and there are no streaks of grey in his chaotic mop of hair.

“You’re alright,” he tells himself firmly. “You’re going to be alright.”

“Doing affirmations, now, are we?” the mirror asks, and Harry doesn’t like its tone.

“I thought we agreed that you were going to keep your opinions to yourself,” he says.

The mirror tuts and Harry rolls his eyes. He makes one last tour of the house, inspecting his work and breathing in the comforting scents of furniture polish and cleaning magic. There is a glow about the place that seems to seep into him and suffuse his whole body with wellbeing, vibrating through his veins and warming him even as he heads down into the cold powder room to pack his case for tonight’s show.

Freshly showered and wrapped up in his favourite coat, jeans, and red jumper, Harry makes his way to Fry Park, a large piece of green space set in the West Midlands with a lake full of ducks, a riot of winter foliage and the tallest conifers Harry has seen outside Hogwarts. Popular with Muggles and Wizards alike, tonight the magical community will have the place to themselves thanks to Selwyn’s crafty work with barriers and yellow tape and his world class repelling charms.

“I’ve made it look as though the park is closed for some sort of maintenance,” he explains when Harry stops to admire the scene at the main gates. “And then, if anyone comes near enough, they’ll suddenly have to run for a bathroom. It’s a bit crude, but it’s effective.”

Harry laughs. “I think it’s genius.”
Selwyn flushes. “That’s very kind of you, Harry. What’s in the case tonight?”

“It’s a sort of safari,” Harry says, dropping his voice and then realising that there’s no one here to eavesdrop but squirrels and magpies. “African mammals. I’ve been looking forward to this one.”

“Wonderful,” Selwyn says, and then darts an anxious glance over Harry’s shoulder. “I’d better go and double check your wards.”

Harry watches him scurry off without another word, and tries not to jump ten feet in the air when Draco appears at his elbow, all wind-ruffled hair and lemon sharpness and, oh, that coat.

“Do you think Glenda’s here yet?” he asks, eyes seeming to glow in the darkness.

“I don’t know.” Harry sniffs the air. “Maybe. I can smell something cooking.”

“Then let’s go,” Draco says, steering him onto the path with a cool hand at his back. “I watched a film about cooking today, you know. Not a single one of those chefs tried to put their food on a stick.”

“You’re obsessed,” Harry says, allowing himself to be propelled along because he doesn’t know what else to do.

“Maybe,” Draco concedes, pausing alongside a large holly bush to examine leaves that have become iridescent with frost. “I’ve been looking for you,” he says to the branches, letting go of Harry and drawing his wand. “Sorry, I just want to grab a bit of this for my mantelpiece.”

“Right.”
“I only need a little bit, but it’s very... *fuck it,*” Draco hisses, jerking his hand back from the holly and grimacing in pain.

Harry’s stomach tightens at the sight of the blood welling from a deep cut on Draco’s index finger, but he grabs his wrist without thinking, feeling Draco’s pulse race as he draws his wand.

“It’s okay,” he promises. “I’ve healed so many fingers, I could probably do it in my sleep.”

“Let’s stay conscious for this one, shall we?” Draco says, but he doesn’t pull away.

In fact, he steps closer and watches intently as Harry spells away the worst of the blood and then draws the tip of his wand over the wound. They share a caught breath, waiting for the edges of the skin to knit together, and release it when Harry murmurs a second incantation that erases all traces of trauma, leaving Draco’s fingertip just as it was before.

“There. Now, if you could be more careful with yourself, I’d appreciate it,” Harry says, realising he is still holding Draco’s wrist.

“I’ll try,” Draco says solemnly, twisting his hand in Harry’s grip until their fingers thread together. He meets Harry’s eyes and holds him there. “Harry... is there something you want to talk to me about?”

Harry opens his mouth and then closes it again as a tide of panic and longing rises and crashes inside him, making him feel as though he might lose his footing on the path despite standing perfectly still. Draco’s eyes pin him, demand of him, but they are kind, so fucking kind, and sad, and it hurts so much that Harry wants to plunge headlong into the holly bush and tear himself to shreds just so that he won’t have to stand here with his fingers laced through Draco’s and his chest ripped open to the night air.
“What sort of thing?” he asks, voice pulled thin and scratchy.

Draco’s eyes are beseeching now, imploring, and all he says is, “Harry.”

“I can’t think of anything,” Harry lies, giving Draco’s fingers a squeeze and then pulling away.

Draco looks as though he’s going to say something and then thinks better of it. To Harry’s relief, he turns away to more carefully extract a section of holly, and then falls into step with Harry as they continue to make their way through the park. By the time they reach the food vans, Draco seems to have recovered his usual spiky good humour and Harry pretends that everything is completely fine. And it is, because all around him is beautiful and delicious and lovely, and now that their strange moment of intimacy is over, he and Draco can go back to normal.

They can. They really can. Harry can just ignore the feeling that he’s falling apart, the shocking sight of Draco’s spilled blood, that question… all of it. He can pretend he doesn’t notice that Draco buys a stick of tiny little burgers from Glenda and doesn’t ask any maddening questions. He can smile at Lorna when she hands him a mug of hot chocolate and say nothing when she frowns and asks him if he’s alright. He can do it all, because denial is his friend right now and he’s sticking with it.

When Fleur shows up with Camille, Hugo, and Rose, Harry makes a fuss of them, insisting on paying for stick-based food, ice creams and drinks in an effort to focus on something familiar and safe.

“How did you end up with all three?” he asks, just as Ginny dashes up and leaps onto his back in a clomp of hair, heavy coat and boots. “A warning next time, maybe?”

“You know how it is,” Fleur shrugs. “Camille wanted Hugo to come, so I thought, why not bring zem all?”
“And I’m here for the food,” Ginny says, sliding down to her feet and peering at Glenda’s menu.

“The ice cream is hot, Auntie Ginny,” Rose says. “You should get one.”

“I’ve got cheese on a stick,” Hugo counters. “It’s brilliant.”

“Yes, but also, the hot chocolate has marshmallows that look like reindeer,” Camille says, holding out her cup to show Ginny. “This is the best one.”

“Don’t panic, I’m going to try everything,” Ginny promises, and Fleur looks at her with confused admiration.

“I think Selwyn wants you,” Draco says, and they all turn to look across the park, where Selwyn is waving his arms and mouthing Harry’s name.

“I’d better go,” Harry says, picking up his case. “There’ll be all sorts going on and my display will be at the end. Enjoy yourselves!”

He hurry across the grass, conducts a brief discussion with Selwyn and then sets up his shells in careful order. It isn’t until he glances back at the food vans that he realises Draco has decided not to follow him. There is no chair beside his, no one talking to Ken while they wait for Harry’s name to be called, because Draco is standing all the way over there, drinking hot chocolate and nodding while Fleur chats to him and waves her arms about.

Harry wonders if he should throw some protective magic over his shells and rejoin the others, but something keeps him glued to the spot. He waits for his moment, pulling up his knees for warmth and resting his face against Ken when he climbs onto one shoulder. The park is crawling with people: excitable couples, families with children bundled up in hats and scarves, gaggles of old ladies with pointed hats and elaborate canes. The noise is incredible, and when one of the acts starts up a sing-song, Harry thinks he might just miss his cue.
Fortunately, everyone goes quiet for the fireworks, alternating between awed hush and noisy applause as Harry uses magic, chemicals, and gunpowder to paint the dark English sky with the glittering African savannah. His giraffe stretches out her long neck to pluck leaves from a tree and startles when spots of sparkling white snow begin to fall around her. Soon she will be joined by elephants, leopards, lions and more, but first, Harry must concentrate on keeping her environment in place as he lights the next two shells in turn to send the rest of her family to join her.

He leans forward, holds his breath and casts, just as something hits him sharply in the back of the head. Even as his vision swims and he starts to slump forwards, he knows the cast has gone horribly wrong; he can hear the bang-bang-squeal of explosions all out of order and see the blurred shapes of lights and people moving towards him.

“Ken,” he mumbles, hitting the ground face first and gasping when white hot pain carves through his body. “Fuck… what…?”

“Camille! Stay back!” someone shouts, and then Harry’s world turns dark.
There is something cold and slimy on Harry’s face. He silently curses Ken and then realises that whatever it is doesn’t feel like fruit at all. It doesn’t smell like fruit, either; it smells sour and medicinal with a tang that shocks years-old memories into Harry’s fuddled brain. Everything is wrong. The bed is not his, nor are the layers of thin sheets that seem to be trying to bind him to the mattress. Fighting down a wave of panic, he opens his eyes and nothing happens. His eyelids are sealed shut.

“What the hell is happening?” he demands, but his voice comes out as a confused mumble and he gasps when he tries to move and pain floods into his body from all directions.

Someone scrapes back a chair and hurries out of the room. Harry isn’t sure if he wants them to come back or not; he’s pretty sure he knows where he is now, but there’s always the possibility of something more sinister. His mind is slow and jumbled, but if he can just grab onto the last thing he remembers, he can work from there.

*Draco*, he thinks, and his heart lurches in pain just like the rest of him. Draco’s eyes. Sad eyes. Little burgers on a stick. Rose. Ice cream. Ginny clinging to his back and laughing. Setting out his fireworks alone.

His fireworks.
“He’s awake,” someone says, entering the room and standing by his bed, and it’s not just someone, it’s Draco.

“You came back,” he mumbles, lifting a hand and letting it drop again when it becomes far too heavy.

“Hello, there, Mr Potter,” says someone with a soft voice and a strong smell of lavender. “You’re in the Spell Damage ward at St Mungo’s. My name is Healer Roden and I admitted you last night. You’ve been unconscious for just about fifteen hours and you’ve been given some pretty heavy sedative draughts, so don’t worry if you’re feeling a bit sluggish, okay?”

“I can’t open my eyes,” Harry says, discovering that if he speaks in a whisper, everything comes out a little bit more easily.

“Yes, I know,” Healer Roden says, and her voice is so calm that Harry is certain she’s about to tell him that he’ll never open his eyes again. “You sustained some severe burns to your face, which we’re treating with these bandages soaked in murtlap and spider silk extract. Because the burns were so close to your eyes, we decided to apply a healing treatment and then spell the lids closed. I realise it must be distressing but we wanted to make sure your sight wouldn’t be affected by the accident.”

“There was an accident?” he mumbles, shivering as his dark world is all at once filled with bright light and pain and the smell of gunpowder. “Something happened… what happened?”

“I’ll tell you all about it, I promise,” Draco says, and there is a reassuring hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Can he open his eyes now?”

“I think we can have a look,” Healer Roden says, steadying Harry’s head and casting a spell that makes his eyelids feel slippery in the most uncomfortable way. “Just keep blinking, Harry, and tell me what you can see.”
Harry does as he is told, almost giddy with relief when his surroundings begin to slide into focus. Everything is fuzzy around the edges and his corneas feel as though they’ve been scrubbed with lemon juice, but he can see. He can see the clean, white hospital room, he can see his arms wrapped in layers of healing charms, he can see Healer Roden’s bright green robes, and he can see Draco.

“You look awful,” he mumbles, and Draco laughs.

“I’m really not going to take that from you,” he says, and his weary smile is the brightest thing in the room. “You’re covered in sticky bandages and your hair looks like there’s a family of voles living in it.”

“Business as usual, then,” Harry says, but as his vision starts to sharpen again, Draco’s distress is painfully obvious. There are dark smudges under his eyes, his hair is dishevelled and his usually pin-neat trousers are rumpled and creased.

“Right, well, I think we can take some of these bandages off now,” Healer Roden says, and she peels each one away with a gentle spell. “Oh, that’s healed very nicely. The skin will be a little bit pink for another day or two, but there shouldn’t be any scarring. You’re a lucky man.”

“Thank you,” Harry says, trying to smile at her but finding his numbed face uncooperative. “Can I go home now?”

She and Draco exchange glances. “You were right,” she says, and Draco shrugs. “Tomorrow, if you’re good. You’ve had burns to the face and hands, a broken wrist, and a very dodgy Confundus charm to the back of the head. If I let you go now, I would be a very irresponsible Healer. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of visitors, Nurse Thistlewick is already quite exasperated about the number of owls coming in for you.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble,” Harry says, still trying to digest all this information.
Draco snorts. “But you’re so good at it.”

Healer Roden looks over her shoulder and then smiles. “You can cause as much trouble as you like, as long as you stay in your bed. Nurse Thistlewick needs all the help she can get dislodging the stick from her backside.”

Her little wink surprises a laugh from Harry that makes him grimace in pain. When she leaves and closes the door behind her, Draco folds into the chair beside the bed with a sigh.

“Thank you,” Harry says, turning his head on the pillow to meet his eyes. “For being here.”

“Everyone’s been here,” Draco says. “Ginevra followed us here, and your French girls… Fleur and… little Fleur.”

“Camille?”

Draco nods, leaning back and folding his arms. “I thought it was Camille, but then I convinced myself I only thought it because I had a rabbit with that name when I was a child.”

Harry smiles, wincing when his sore new skin slides against his pillow. “You had a rabbit?”

“You don’t need to sound so surprised. I like animals.”

“Ken!” Harry gasps, scrambling to sit upright and immediately regretting it. “Where is he? Is he alright?”
“Good grief, lie down before the scary nurse sees you,” Draco says, peering through the glass section of the door and then reaching for the coat hanging on the back of his chair. “He’s in here. I made him a little warm nest in my pocket.”

Harry lowers himself back onto the bed, so relieved to see his friend sleeping peacefully in Draco’s coat pocket that his eyes start to sting again.

“Ronald and Hermione were here for quite some time,” Draco says, covering a yawn. “She fussed around with your chart until Nurse Thistlewick came and took it away, and he read to you from a book about the invention of Quodpot. They had to go and get the children from Mr and Mrs Weasley eventually but they left you that.”

Draco gestures at Harry’s bedside cabinet, where a covered pot of something has been left for him, along with a bottle containing a violently red liquid.

“Where did all these cards come from?” Harry asks, startled by the sheer number of them.

“All over. I hope you don’t mind that I read a few of them; there’s not much to do in here,” Draco says, rising from his chair and selecting a handful of cards. “Here, have a read. You have a lot of fans, you know.”

Harry takes them, using his slightly stronger arm to open each one in turn.

_Dear Harry_, he reads.

_You are in our thoughts. Please take care of yourself and get well soon. We love your firework displays – they are such an important part of Christmas!_
Lots of love from Oscar, Kathleen, and the boys xx

“I don’t know these people… at least I don’t think I do. Who are they?”

“Fans,” Draco says with a wry smile. “People who like you.”

Harry doesn’t know what to say to that, so he opens another card and then another.

- Get well soon! You make advent so special. My wife and I got engaged under the big green duck (2008)!

- I know my father loved the fireworks you put on for his funeral. He’ll be watching over you and wishing you a speedy recovery.

- I’m so sorry you are hurt. I hop you get beter in time for Christmass. Love, Marlie (age 6 and a half)

“I can’t believe all these people sent cards,” Harry says, looking around at his cabinet, windowsill and tray table, all of which are bristling with coloured paper and kind messages.

In spite of his confusion and discomfort, he feels rather wonderful. When he attempts to reach for another handful of cards, Draco floats a selection over to the bed and rolls his eyes.

“You’ve got all the family ones, of course. And Glenda and the gang sent you that ridiculous thing made of fruit.”
Harry frowns and then laughs when he sees an edible arrangement that looks very much like Ken, made from winter berries and glitter-dusted soft fruits. A purple Ken, he thinks, pushing Hermione out of his head before she can say a word. He leafs through the cards in his lap, then takes a deep breath and forces himself to look at Draco.

“I think I need to know what happened now.”

Draco nods. “Alright.”

“I remember starting to do my display, but that’s about it,” Harry says, frowning when Draco casts *Aguamenti* and hands him a glass of water. “What’s this for?”

“If you’ve forgotten how water works, your memory is more buggered than I thought,” Draco says, and then sighs. “I thought it might be calming. I don’t think you’re going to enjoy what I’m about to tell you.”

Harry grips the cold glass tightly. “I need to know what happened.”

“I know.” Draco rests his hands in his lap and exhales slowly. “I want to apologise, first of all. I saw it happen but I couldn’t get to you in time. None of us could. You’d just started on the giraffes when this man started running across the grass. He had his wand out and cast before anyone could react… and it was such a big, flashy swish of a thing that I couldn’t believe it hit you.”

“But it did,” Harry says, touching the back of his head instinctively.

“It did. You were in the middle of a cast and you fell. That’s when you broke your wrist, and then when you hit the ground…” Draco pauses, eyes glimmering with rage. “The cast was ruined and all the shells ignited at once. You fell forward onto the remnants, which were obviously very hot, and stayed there until I managed to get to you. The burns were…” He shakes his head. “I thought for a moment that you might be… but you weren’t. You weren’t,” he finishes, gripping his knees
tightly.

“I’m not,” Harry mumbles, skin prickling in horror. “Healer Roden said it was an accident. That’s not an accident. Someone cursing me is not an accident, Draco. Who the fuck would do that? Did they get him?”

“One perfectly reasonable question at a time, I think,” Draco says. “Let’s work backwards, why not? Yes, they got him. He was a young man named Lewis Barnwick, and—”

Harry’s head jerks up. A shock of pain explodes behind his eyes, but he ignores it. “Lewis Barnwick? Are you kidding me?”

Draco sighs. “Sadly not. We all know a little bit about him now, thanks to the *Daily Prophet*.”


“That’s not all, according to him,” Draco says, retrieving a folded newspaper from the windowsill and reading aloud: “Mr Barnwick told MLE operatives that he and Potter had recently engaged in a brief fling, but Potter had put an end to the relationship.”

Harry stares at Draco, failing to notice that his water is trickling onto his sheets until the moisture seeps through to his skin.

“We did not have a fling. Or a relationship.”

“No one’s judging,” Draco says, eyes fixed on the article. “Although you clearly have dreadful taste in men.”
“Draco,” Harry snaps, and their eyes meet with such intensity that Harry drops the glass completely and it rolls onto the floor and shatters. “I matched with him on Wizards Unite. We went on one date, during which he made me feel old and scruffy, I made a fool of myself buying way too many Christmas decorations to prove a point, we had a sort of back-slappy hug, and I went off to buy a Christmas tree on my own. That was it. Do you believe me?”

Draco swallows hard. “Yes.”

“I barely know the man. I need you to believe me.”

“Why?”

“I just do,” Harry says, and he holds the eye contact until Draco looks away. “I just wanted to… I wanted you to know that.”

“What about everyone else who reads this?” Draco asks, holding up the paper and allowing Harry to catch a glimpse of the pictures attached to the article, one of his burned, lifeless face and another illustrating the tangled mess of light that should have been his safari display.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks,” he says, attempting to expunge the images from his mind by focusing on an intricate crack in the ceiling.

For several minutes, there is silence. Draco mends the glass with his wand, refills it and sets it on Harry’s bedside. Nurses and Healers rush back and forth in the corridor beyond Harry’s room. Ken stirs in his sleep and pokes his tail out of Draco’s coat pocket.

“The reason some people are calling it an accident is that he insists he didn’t mean to hurt you,” Draco says at last.
Harry lets out a derisive snort. “Right. That’s why he cursed me.”

“Well, that’s the thing. It wasn’t a curse, as such.”

“The Confundus charm?” Harry asks. “The Healer said there was a Confundus charm, but it couldn’t do this much damage, surely… I can hardly coordinate myself enough to hold a glass of water, and my head…”

Draco sighs. “Apparently, if it’s cast with enough aggression, even a simple spell can have a deleterious result. If it’s badly cast, there can be unpredictable side effects. Healer Roden says that your symptoms should fade over the next few hours, but it could have been a lot worse.”

“God, this is hurting my head,” Harry groans. “Okay, so do we know why he thought it would be a good idea to Confound me while I was fiddling around with fireworks?”

“Sadly, yes,” Draco says, tapping the newspaper. “I’m not going to quote him because I’ll lose my rag, but he says that he was very nice to you and it wasn’t fair that you rejected him. Apparently, you should have ‘given him a chance’ and because you didn’t, he thought it was only fair that you felt humiliated like he did. Hence, sabotaging your display.”

“What the actual fuck?” Harry murmurs. He wants to pull up the sheets and hide from all of this but he can’t because his hands won’t do as they’re told and the sheets will hurt his stupid sore face.

“I didn’t say it was going to make sense.”

“He didn’t seem very bothered when we went our separate ways after the… ooh, he asked for a second date,” Harry says, memory starting to click into place. “He was the first one to do that.”
“You don’t seem terribly upset.”

“Draco, I’m raging,” Harry promises. “I can’t move much and I can’t shout, but believe me, I’m furious. You can’t go around whacking people with spells whenever you don’t get what you want! Where does it end?”

“Azkaban?” Draco suggests. “Losing your nose?”

Harry manages a tight smile, which disappears when Draco’s eyes flit to the faded Mark on his forearm. He sighs, goes to pull down his sleeves and then stops.

“I know it’s just a scar now,” he says, eyes bright on Harry’s. “It’s just that it reminds me of practically all the stupid things I’ve ever done.”

“I know,” Harry says, lifting his hand with a massive effort and pushing his hospital robe aside to reveal…. Nothing. “Where’s my scar?”

“Should there be a scar there? On your chest?”

“Yes, it’s a reminder,” Harry says, peering at the unmarked skin with a little pang of loss.

“They must have healed it with all the new ones,” Draco says. “A reminder of what?”

“Stupid things, like yours,” Harry says, letting his hand drop back to the sheets. “When I first started out, I had no idea what I was doing. I had an incident with sodium… and water… and not paying attention.”
“Why was the sodium anywhere near the water?” Draco asks.

“No. Don’t ask that. Tell me what happened next,” Harry says, closing his eyes.

“It all happened very quickly,” Draco says, and Harry can hear him getting comfortable in his chair. “At first, everything was chaos. I ran to grab you and Ginevra hit that tosspot in the back of the knees with something that made him just crumple to the ground. She was livid, as was Glenda, who jumped out of her van like something possessed and sat on him, shouting and jabbing her wand in his face.”

“I wish I’d seen that.”

“It was quite something. Selwyn managed to alert the Ministry and apparently Lorna and Jim put up a great big barrier around the scene of the crime, so to speak. I think they have your case, too.”

“You think?”

“That’s what Fleur told me when she got here.”

“Did you bring me here?” Harry asks, opening one eye.

“Yes. You talk in your sleep, you know,” Draco says, looking at his hands. “Just the same two things, over and over again.”

Harry feels himself flush, and it’s an odd sensation against his raw new skin. “Which were?”
Draco frowns. “‘Where’s Ken?’ and ‘Who was that man, Draco?’”

“Well, that’s fine. Ken’s in your pocket.”

“Which man did you mean?”

“I don’t know, I was asleep,” Harry says, but he knows it’s no good. There’s nowhere for him to go and Draco knows it. “Fine. I saw you holding hands with a man in Diagon Alley the other day and it made me curious.”

Draco lets out a bark of surprised laughter. “That was Aziz Maramore and we were not holding hands.”

“Who is Aziz Paramour?”

“Maramore. He’s a soundscape artist and I’m trying to persuade him to create something for that multisensory exhibition I’ve been telling you about,” Draco says, and Harry has no idea why he looks so amused. “Aziz is blind. He was holding my arm so that I could guide him around Diagon Alley.”

“Why are you laughing at me?” Harry asks, starting to lose his grip on consciousness. “Look here…”

“Are you tired?” Draco asks.

Harry forces his eyes open. A bit too wide. He blinks. “Is Asda your boyfriend?”
“Aziz,” Draco corrects, mouth flickering at one corner. “No.”

“Well, that’s something,” Harry says, peering around the room without much purpose. “Wait!”

“I’m waiting.”

“My safari got all fucked up,” Harry says gloomily. “It was going to be really good.”

“I’m sure everyone understands.”

“I don’t. I think it’s inexplic… under… it’s an outrage,” Harry finishes, fighting the rising tide of sleep with every fibre of his being. “I’ll have to do it again. I’ll have to make it… again. But my hands are all… not good.” With some effort, he fixes his eyes on Draco. “You can help me.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Draco says, and fuck him if he still looks like he’s trying not to smile.

“I’ll show you. I’ll tell you, and you’ll be so very careful, and we’ll make it again,” Harry insists.

“Harry…”

“The world needs to see my big cats,” he insists. “You’ll do it, because you’re my friend. Aren’t you?”
“Yes. Okay. We’ll do that, but for now, get some rest,” Draco says, and it’s a nice idea.

Harry startles when the door swings open and a nurse walks in with a trolley full of food.

“Would you like some lunch, Mr Potter?” he asks, but Harry isn’t really paying attention.

At first, he thinks his eyes are playing tricks on him, but it soon becomes clear that the nurse really is wearing an apron in the shape of a gingerbread man, and that all the buttons are flashing in various shades of red and green. As he stares, the mouth opens and closes along with a high-pitched version of ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’ and glitter spills from each eye.

The nurse shrugs. “I usually work on the children’s ward,” he explains.

“I’m going to get a cup of coffee,” Draco says, face a little too straight as he stalks past the nurse and out into the corridor.

The nurse adjusts his apron and peers down at Harry. “He’s a good one, isn’t he?”

Harry blinks. “What?”

“Your man. I was here last night when he brought you in… practically carried you, actually, you were a right state. You’ve had loads of visitors but he’s been here all night. Never left your side.” The nurse sighs, somehow causing the apron to start singing again. “I wish I had a boyfriend like that. Mine’s too lazy to even take the dog for a walk.”

“Oh,” Harry manages, trying not let himself dwell on the image of Draco dragging him to hospital and sitting by his bedside for hours on end. “He’s not my boyfriend.”
“Are you sure?” the nurse asks, shrugging when Harry fails to answer and setting him up with a plate of sandwiches and another round of Rudolph.

Draco returns just as Harry is finishing a triangle of cheese and pickle and feeling rather pleased with himself.

“You have glitter on you.”

“So do you,” Draco says. “There was a thing outside the cafeteria. It sort of… vomited sparkles on me.”

“Merry Christmas,” Harry mumbles, yawning and settling back on his pillow.

“Merry Christmas to you, too. Are you going to sleep now?”

“Are you going to help me with my thing?”

“Yes.”

“It’s very messy. And fiddly. It’s difficult.”

“That’s fine. Now go to sleep or I’ll go and get the nurse.”
Harry scoffs. “I’m not scared of him.”

“Not him. Nurse Thistle… thingy. The one from the desk who looks like this,” Draco says, pulling a sour face.

Harry closes one eye.

“Close both eyes, please.”

“Are you staying?”

“Yes. Ken and I will be right here,” Draco promises.

Harry smiles. He feels dreadful. And wonderful. Draco will be here. He closes his eyes.
Harry opens his eyes to find his room flooded with soft, white light. Snow is falling outside the window and he watches the drifting flakes as his memory catches up with him. Everything is stiff and a bit sore but the worst of the pain has disappeared, leaving him feeling weak but resolute. He’s been good, he’s slept for god knows how long; surely Healer Roden will let him go home today. She’s not here but Draco is still in his chair, eyes closed and chin propped up on one hand, while at the other side of the bed, Molly and Arthur are peering down at Harry with identical worried expressions.

“Oh, Harry, you did give us a fright,” Molly says, reaching out to touch his arm and then pulling her hand back.

“It’s okay,” he says, relieved to find that his voice sounds like his again. “It doesn’t hurt any more.”

He lifts his arm to show her that his wrist is mended and his skin is healed. The movement costs him more energy than it should, but he smiles at her and she grasps his hand.

“I wasn’t asleep,” Draco says suddenly, and all three of them turn to look at him.

“Oh, Harry, you did give us a fright,” Molly says, reaching out to touch his arm and then pulling her hand back.

“Of course you weren’t,” Molly says. “You probably should be, shouldn’t you? When was the last time you went to bed?”

“We didn’t,” Harry mutters, and then realises his mistake. “Never mind.”

“What a load of rot in the Prophet yesterday,” Arthur says, rearranging Harry’s cards. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to that young man but the word around the Ministry is that he’s going to be spending Christmas behind bars.”

“Good,” Draco says sharply, and then frowns at something beyond the door. “Healer Roden is on her way… and two more Weasleys. You’re going to need a bigger room.”

In the end, Healer Roden sweeps everyone out into the corridor while she conducts a thorough examination of Harry and finally pronounces him fit for discharge. Harry is left with a stern reminder to rest, several potions to aid strength and healing, and his favourite red jumper. The rest of his clothes have been damaged beyond repair, but he puts on the jumper along with the trainers.
and jeans brought for him by Ron, which are far too big but will do to get him home.

“Did you like the stew?” Ron asks, steadying him as he prepares to step into one of the foyer’s fireplaces. “I didn’t like to think of you having to eat hospital food. You never know what they put in it.”

Harry smiles, thinking of Craig and his theories of mind-control. “The stew was great, thanks,” he says, because even though he has slept through most of his mealtimes, Ron’s cooking is always brilliant and Harry doesn’t want to hurt his feelings by telling him that he’s pretty sure Draco ate most of the stew.

Having reassured everyone that he’s going to be fine by himself at least three times, Harry steps into the fireplace and stumbles into his kitchen. He is exhausted and his legs feel as though they belong to someone else, but he’s home and he’s alive and that’s pretty fantastic. He makes tea in a fumble of unhelpful fingers and escaping spoons, feeling rather proud of himself when he manages to haul himself up the stairs, light the fire and collapse onto the sofa.

“He’s alright,” he tells Ken, wincing when the rub of a bony casque stings his sore face. He knows he should push the chameleon away but he can’t bring himself to do it. “I missed you, too.”

Harry lets out a long breath and opens his eyes. Ken is okay. He is okay. Lewis fucking Barnwick is being held at the Minister’s pleasure and will pay for his actions. Draco is… Draco is at home, catching up on sleep if he knows what’s good for him. There’s no use running over it, letting it take up space in his head. What’s done is done, and the important thing now is to move forward. He needs to take back control, and he’s going to do that by recreating his ruined display. He’ll have to start again from scratch, but it’s just possible that with Draco’s help he can have it ready for Christmas Eve, when it can serve as an opening act for the conclusion of his advent programme.

“We can do it, can’t we?” he asks Ken, who grips at his jumper and regards him with a slowly rotating eye. “If we have a lovely assistant, we can do it. Failing that, maybe Draco will help us.”

Summoning his strength, Harry draws paper and a pen through the air towards him and drafts a short announcement for the Prophet that is just about legible, despite his aching hands and the aid of Ken, who decides that holding onto the pen is exactly what is needed to help the process along.

“Christmas Eve,” he mumbles to himself, taking a fresh piece of paper and starting to sketch. “Christmas Eve on the beach. Safari take two, and then the big finish. We’re going to do it and we’re not going to panic. All we need is a steady pair of hands.”

Ken stares at him for a moment and then crawls onto a cushion to sleep. Harry continues to draw, even though the shapes are ugly and the elephants look like anteaters, but the room is warm and the sofa is comfortable, and when his eyes start to close of their own accord, he lets them. When the voice in the fireplace stirs him awake, it takes him several seconds to remember why he feels as though he’s been flattened by a double decker bus. He turns with a grimace to see Draco’s head in the fire.

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” he points out.
“You’re supposed to be in bed. Can I come through?”

Harry nods. His head jangles like an inside out tambourine. *Use your words,* he thinks, watching Draco step out of the fireplace with several bulky items in his arms.

“I tried to sleep but I couldn’t settle,” Draco admits, sitting beside Harry and wafting a freshly-showered scent into his nostrils. His hair is still damp, and Harry wants to touch it. “I thought we might as well lounge about like zombies together.”

“How did you know I wouldn’t be in bed?”

Draco meets his eyes with a little smile. “I had a pretty good idea that you’d be trying to do things, and I was right,” he says, glancing at Harry’s sketches. “Good grief, what’s wrong with that platypus?”

“It’s a leopard, and it’s fine,” Harry says shortly.

“Sorry. I take it your coordination is still a little bit…? Draco asks, letting his expression finish the sentence for him.

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter, because you’re here now,” Harry says. “Let’s go down to the powder room and I’ll show you how to put all this together. I’ve got some stars that we can use, but we’ll have to make a lot of it from scratch. But that’s fine, because we’ve got five days and I can tell you exactly how to… why are you looking at me like that?”

“Harry, I didn’t come here to make fireworks with you. Not today.”

“You promised,” Harry says, sitting up and then flopping back against the sofa, infuriated both at Draco and at his body’s refusal to cooperate with his needs. “Draco, I have to do this and I can’t start without you.”

“I know,” Draco says, leaning back and raking both hands through his hair. “And we will. But not today. I’m tired, you’re tired, anything we make is going to be shoddy at best and potentially dangerous.”

“It’ll be fine,” Harry argues, covering a yawn. He wants to rage against this weakness, to overcome it by sheer force of will, but it wraps around him like a heavy blanket and all he can do is let it have him.

“It won’t be fine. You’re not fine,” Draco says, and Harry can’t look at him. “Why are you putting this ridiculous pressure on yourself?”

“It’s not ridiculous. I don’t want to let people down. All those people with their cards, saying that my displays were part of their Christmas… I need to do it for them,” Harry says, feeling stupid and small.

When Draco draws his wand and sends those cards flapping around the room, Harry thinks he might burst into messy, idiotic tears. Slowly, each one finds itself a home, cramming into spaces between photograph frames and decorations until the living room is full of good wishes and tiny lights.
“All these people want you to get better,” Draco says.

Harry wants to curl up into a ball, but the best he can manage is folding his arms and scowling.

“You have no idea how long this stuff takes.”

“I don’t care,” Draco says.

“Well, I do,” Harry snaps. “And if we’re going to get this done, I need you to care.”

Draco says nothing for a moment, and Harry wants the words back. He knows he’s being petulant, and worse than that, ungrateful, but everything inside him is spiky with longing and everything on the outside looks ridiculous and smells like sour murtlap. He loathes himself, and if Draco looks at him like that for another second, he’s going to break into pieces.

“I care about you,” Draco says fiercely. “I care about you taking your potions and getting some proper rest. I care about doing whatever I can do to make sure nothing like this ever happens to you again. All this other stuff is completely pointless without you to make it happen, you idiot.”

“Oh,” Harry says, unable to do anything but stare at him in astonishment.

“I will help you tomorrow,” Draco says. “Not today. Do you know what you said to me, not even two hours before you were almost blown up?”

“Something really stupid, the way this conversation is going,” Harry says, heart sore.

“I cut myself on a holly bush and you said, ‘if you could be more careful with yourself, I’d appreciate it’. At the time I thought you being a little bit dramatic, but now I’d like you to return the favour,” Draco says.

“You were bleeding,” Harry murmurs, all at once bombarded by the memories of frosted leaves, shocking scarlet and the leap of Draco’s pulse under his fingers.

“Yes.”

Harry pulls in a long breath and then lets it out. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“That was an odd sensation,” Draco says, one eyebrow flickering. “Could you say it again?”

Harry snorts. “You were right. You were right, you were right, you were right. You should bank those for the next time we have an argument.”

“I wouldn’t call that an argument,” Draco says, turning to the collection of items on the coffee table. “Now, I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but the film we watched has a sequel.”

“Oh, really?” Harry says, making a mental note to hide his copy of ‘The Two Towers’ the next time Draco leaves the room.

Draco nods, clearly pleased with himself. “I’m amassing quite a collection now, you know. I brought my DVD player… and I’ve just noticed that you already have one. Never mind. I also brought lunch.”
“Oh, well done,” Harry says, feeling his stomach grumble and deciding that one cheese sandwich in thirty-six hours really isn’t enough. “Is it on a stick?”

“No,” Draco says. “Not even Glenda herself could make this lot cling to a stick. Pumpkin soup!” he announces, lifting a cast iron lid to reveal a pot of very orange liquid.

Harry peers into the pot with interest. “Did you make this?”

“Of course. I had to do something with my Hogwarts pumpkin, didn’t I?” Draco says. “I found a recipe in my mother’s library. It has chilli and cumin and coriander and…”

“Pumpkin?”

Draco sighs. “Yes. But not just any pumpkin. Hogwarts pumpkin. Grown by Hagrid in the Scottish soil,” he says, replacing the lid and giving Harry a significant look. “Alright. You deal with the film and I will go and heat this up. Do you want to come with me, swivel eyed menace?”

Ken hesitates for a moment before climbing onto Draco’s arm, and Harry decides not to be offended. When they are safely on the stairs, he summons his copy of the DVD and hides it in a drawer. He then takes the disc Draco has brought and spells all the necessary devices into life. With the familiar theme music playing, he lounges on the sofa and listens idly to the sounds drifting up from the kitchen. He’s too weary to think of anything much and it’s rather a pleasant sensation; he has no idea how much time has passed when Draco returns with two steaming bowls, and he decides that it doesn’t really matter.

“Ken helped me stir,” Draco says, passing Harry a bowl and making sure he can hold it securely in his rubbery hands. “He’s a very helpful… for fuck’s sake, Harry, do the owls ever stop?”

“Oh, god, I forgot to send the shitting thing,” Harry groans. The owl taps at the window with its beak and he knows it isn’t going to go away. “Would you let it in, please?”

“If by ‘the shitting thing’ you mean that cancellation letter I saw on the kitchen table, yes, you did forget to send it,” Draco says, setting down his bowl and opening the window. “Perhaps it’s an apology.”

“What?”

“You know, a nice letter to say sorry for sending you on a date with a psychopath,” Draco suggests. “You never know.”

Harry laughs, resting his bowl in his lap and tearing stubbornly at the envelope until several coins fall out and almost roll into his soup.

“This actually is an apology,” he says, glancing at Draco in disbelief. “And a refund. I’ve been given free membership for the next three months and they’re promising to review their screening process for new applicants. How did you know they’d do that?”

Draco shrugs. “Just a guess. It’s damage control. We see it all the time with dangerous exhibitions, narcissistic artists, that sort of thing. It pays to get ahead of the problem. They probably just want to put you off bad-mouthing them in the Daily Prophet.”

“How very cynical of them,” Harry says, setting the letter aside and carefully spelling the coins
onto the table. “The day I bad-mouth anyone to the Daily Prophet is the day… I don’t know. I don’t care. I’m starving.”

He can feel Draco watching him as he tastes his first spoonful of soup, and he wishes he could avoid dripping it on his jumper, but that’s a skill for another day.

“It’s lovely,” he says, and Draco smiles.

Harry starts the film and watches the opening scenes in silent contentment. The soup really is delicious, well-spiced and smooth and rich with the warming flavour of pumpkin that actually does taste better having come from Hogwarts. As he continues to eat, though, he realises that Draco’s soup is more than well-spiced; it is a pool of orange lava that heats Harry’s mouth a little more with every spoonful. Soon, his nose and eyes are streaming and his palate is torched. He can no longer taste anything but chilli and, as he begins to sweat, he wonders if he ever will again.

“I think I might have overdone it with the chilli flakes,” Draco says suddenly.

Harry turns to him, breath almost coming out in flames. Draco’s face is pink and he is peering into his bowl in utter confusion.

“Maybe a little bit,” Harry rasps. “I think it’s good.”

“I followed the recipe exactly. I think. I wasn’t sure whether ‘tsp’ was the little spoon or the big spoon.”


Draco stares at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“That might explain it,” Draco says, setting his bowl down on the table. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry promises, rubbing his damp face on his sleeve. “I might leave it there, though.”

“It did seem like a lot of chilli,” Draco says. “I’m very sorry I tried to poison you. Especially so soon after you were…”

“Attacked by a psychopath?” Harry suggests. “It’s all good. I’ve been meaning to clean out all my sinuses anyway.”

Draco covers his face with his hands, letting out a strangled mixture of laugh and groan. “I thought it would be just like making a potion. Please don’t tell anyone who actually knows how to cook.”

“You know, it was really nice before the chilli hit.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Harry says, allowing Ken to clamber onto his lap.

He makes himself as comfortable as he can, resting against the sofa cushions and letting himself dangle like a starfish while Draco sits neatly beside him and the two of them fall into a contented
silence. It isn’t long before Harry’s eyes begin to feel heavy again, and he doesn’t fight the lure of sleep. He has seen this film many times before and knows the story like the back of his hand. Draco is right beside him, he is safe, the room is cosy and the burn of chilli has faded from the roof of his mouth. As he loses consciousness, he is vaguely aware of a firm shoulder beneath his head, the softness of lemon-scented wool, a caught breath, and little grippy feet clinging to the belt loops of his ill-fitting jeans.

“That’s nice,” he mumbles, just as he is pulled under.

There’s a hand on his shoulder. His shoulder is sore, but he feels the ache from the touch deep in his chest. He wonders why nothing seems to make sense any more.

He wakes to find that he has sprawled across most of the sofa and Draco is standing at the window, gazing out over Grimmauld Place. The sun has almost set, the blunt orange light throws his elegant figure into silhouette and he looks as though he belongs there, as though he always stands beside Harry’s Christmas tree with his arms folded and his eyebrows drawn down in deep thought.

“Did I push you off the sofa?” Harry asks, stretching and finding that everything feels just a little bit looser than it had earlier.

Draco turns, expression indulgent. “No, but your snoring had a good go.”

“I don’t usually snore,” Harry says. “Well, I don’t think I do.”

Draco wrinkles his nose. “Perhaps it was the chilli.”

“Perhaps.” Harry sighs. “I suppose you’re going to talk me out of going tonight?”

“I wasn’t planning on it, but I can try if you like,” Draco says, looking amused.

“What about all that ‘don’t you dare do anything or I’ll murder you’ stuff?”

“That’s not quite what I said but… look, I know how to pick my battles. It’s one thing sitting in a cold basement and handling explosives, and quite another having a wander around an owl sanctuary where no one is even allowed to talk above a whisper,” Draco says.

“I would like to see the owls,” Harry sighs. “I need to have a shower and put something on that fits me.”

“Good idea,” Draco says, sitting in an armchair and helping Ken to climb onto the mantelpiece.

Harry watches in silent exasperation as the chameleon knocks several cards onto the hearth rug, and then gets to his feet with a violent wobble.

“I’m fine,” he calls, heading for the bathroom with slow, careful steps.

Slowly, he sheds his clothes and steps into the shower, lathering himself in the most unhurried fashion he can manage before making slow progress to the bedroom, swearing slowly when he steps on a slimy bit of tomato and dressing himself at an almost idle speed. He makes a point of walking very slowly into the living room, is met by a slow, warm smile, and doesn’t protest when Draco insists that they Side-Along to the sanctuary.
He can do things slowly. It’s not something he’s practised at, but he thinks he might just have a natural talent for it. The event itself is not a noisy, showy spectacular, but a soft, gentle sort of celebration, featuring a team of owls that carry lanterns across the night sky in formation, while the more reserved birds sit on their perches and accept treats from the visitors. The organisers have hung glowing signs all around the site reminding people to keep their voices down, and the resulting hush is almost otherworldly.

Harry drifts around in the gentle snowfall, smiling at everyone who stops to greet him and fuss over his health, while Draco hovers at his side so protectively that Harry feels like the Minister for Magic himself. Lorna, Jim, and Glenda hurry out of their vans to administer very careful hugs and whispered words that range from the emotional to the vengeful.

“If he ever comes near you again, love, I’ll show him what for!” Glenda hisses, taking Harry’s hands in hers and squeezing them until he gasps with pain.

“We all will,” Selwyn whispers, and several others nod, including the owl people and all the customers in line for food on a stick.

“Thank you,” Harry whispers back. “Although, if he ever comes near me again, I’ll have his wand before he can try anything.”

“Of course you will, love,” Glenda agrees, climbing back into her tram. “But it’s always good to have a bit of back-up.”

Harry smiles at her. Draco touches his arm so gently. So gently.

“Come on, let’s go and pet the one-legged owl while there’s no queue,” he says.

“Slowly,” Harry reminds himself.

Draco nods and offers his arm. “Slowly.”
Chapter Twenty

Twentieth of December – a chunky man’s jumper

It takes Harry almost half an hour to get from the Leaky Cauldron to the post office because he is stopped every few steps by people wanting to peer at him and make sure he really is on the mend after seeing the lurid pictures in the Daily Prophet. He doesn’t mind; he’s not in a rush and everyone seems so happy to see him, even the old woman who grabs his hands in gnarled fingers and tells him that he really should know better than to be gallivanting with young men at his age.

“At my age,” Harry tells Ken as the post office finally comes into view. “I am old, but not wise.”

Ken swivels an eye and reaches for the envelopes in Harry’s hand. Harry decides to let him carry them, and the chameleon sways from side to side, importance clear in his posture. Harry smiles. Thanks to Healer Roden’s potions, he has had an excellent night’s sleep and his head is wonderfully clear. His fine motor skills definitely need some work and the usual strength is missing from his magic, but he feels so much better, and the bright, crisp morning lifts his mood high above the pointed rooftops. Everything smells like frost and festive spices, and when he gets home, he and Draco are going to go down to the powder room and make fireworks.

Literally, Harry reminds himself. They’re going to mix chemicals and magic and fill paper cases with explosive powders. Because they are friends, best friends, and whatever Harry thinks he sees in Draco’s eyes these days is wishful thinking at best. Fighting the unhelpful feelings down, he walks into the post office and selects a couple of owls.

“You do know that the Prophet offices are just up the street,” says the clerk who takes Harry’s money. “You could just walk that over.”

“I know,” Harry says, watching her attach his cancellation letter for Wizards Unite to the leg of a very enthusiastic little owl. “But if you were me, would you go in there?”

She smiles. “Fair enough. You can hardly see those burns now, can you?”

Harry touches his face without thinking. Only the tiniest hint of pinkness remains, and with the help of the creams from St Mungo’s, all the soreness has disappeared.

“I was very lucky. And the Healers do amazing work.”

“I can’t wait to tell my mum I’ve seen you. She was worried sick,” the clerk says, gathering up
both owls. “Merry Christmas, Mr Potter.”

Harry smiles and darts a glance at her nametag. “Merry Christmas, Maya. Tell your mother I said hello.”

She waves as he leaves and Ken climbs over his shoulder to peer at her.


Opting to keep his secrets, Ken curls his tail and hangs onto Harry’s coat as they wander back down the alley and into the Leaky Cauldron. Flooing is still his least favourite way to travel, but Harry knows better than to attempt Apparation just yet. He has just stepped into his kitchen and taken off his coat when there’s a whoosh of green flames in his fireplace. He isn’t surprised to see Draco, but his arrival in the kitchen still knocks Harry off balance; the room seems too small for him somehow and wherever he chooses to stand feels far too close.

“You’ve been out,” Draco says, eyeing his discarded coat.

“I have been out carefully,” Harry promises. “You would have been amazed at how slowly I walked.”

“You were mobbed, weren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Harry says. “Well… they were very polite and only mobbed me in little groups. It was very civilised.”

Draco grins. “So, you’re not too tired to make a pyrotechnic platypus?”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Harry says, depositing Ken on a plant and leading the way down the basement stairs.

Draco follows him, standing very still in the darkness while Harry lights the lamps. He looks around with interest at the shelves and drawers full of ingredients, the rows of delicate instruments and the myriad scorch marks on the back wall. He breathes in slowly and smiles.

“I love this smell.”

Harry glances at him, surprised. “Black powder? Burned things?”

Draco shrugs. “All of it. Don’t you think it smells exciting?”

“Well, yeah, but other people don’t usually… I’ve been asked if I can make fireworks without the smell loads of times. Or to put something in them that smells like roses or chocolate when they go off.”

Draco stares at him, horrified. “That is completely bizarre. Did you do it?”

“I have done it,” Harry says with a shrug. “You can take smells out or put smells in with the right charm; it’s not that difficult. But I do think it’s weird.”

“You can’t have fireworks without a firework smell,” Draco insists, finding a battered wooden
chair and sitting on it. “So. Where do we start?”

“Well, attached as you are to my leopard, I’d like to construct the stars in the order they appear in
the show. Some people like to assemble all the like colours or forms together, but this way keeps
things clear in my head, so we’re going to start with the background and then the giraffes.”

“Alright,” Draco says, with a little smile that takes up immediate residence in Harry’s stomach.

“What?”

“It’s nice to hear someone who knows what they’re talking about,” Draco says.

“Was that a compliment?”

“Yes. Now, what do you need me to do?”

“You should probably take your coat off… and that jumper,” Harry sighs, gazing at the cabled
grey wool and stuffing his twitching fingers into his pockets. “I could probably find you an apron,
or…”

He trails off as Draco pulls his jumper over his head and hangs it on a hook that Harry didn’t know
he had, leaving a thin undershirt just like the one Harry had seen that evening at Nighthawks, but in
a rich forest green that only makes Draco’s pale skin seem paler and his posture more elegant.

“Okay,” Harry whispers, mouth dry. He can feel the blood rushing away from his limbs and he
can’t, he cannot teach Draco how to make fireworks like this. He can’t, and he’s pathetic, and it’s
just a man in a tight shirt in a basement, and the sight of it shouldn’t make him so hard that he can
barely speak, but this isn’t just a man, it’s Draco, and he doesn’t just want him so badly that he’s
ready to come apart, he loves the bones of him, and god, he’s such a fucking disaster.

“Okay?”

Harry lets out a controlled breath. He can do this. “Okay. I usually work on the floor, so let’s
conjure our chairs first. Then, if you could grab all the measuring spoons and bring over the metal
box that’s on the bottom shelf by the door…”

Draco springs into action, collecting all the requested items and creating two low chairs with a
sweep of his wand. Once seated, Harry gathers all his focus and starts to unpack the box. Draco
examines the spoons with a frown.

“Aren’t you worried I’m going fuck this up like I did with the soup?”

“No.”

“Why not? I’m worried I might.”

“Because,” Harry says, keeping his eyes on his task, “first of all, I’m going to tell you exactly
which spoon to use, and second of all, I’m pretty sure you’ll be more careful with explosives than
you were with chilli.”

“That chilli was pretty explosive,” Draco mutters. “Do you want me to do that?”
“No, thank you,” Harry says, corralling every last bit of coordination he can muster in order to release the end of a recalcitrant roll of paper. He might not be able to assemble a shell just yet but he is not about to be beaten by this stripy bastard. “Aha,” he cries, and the paper unrolls itself all the way across the basement floor.

Draco pulls it back with a lazy swish of his wand and Harry wants to groan in frustration. Not because he can’t control such a simple movement but because the sight of Draco doing it is alluring in a way it has no business being.

“Alright. How do we make this background, then?”

“Let’s start with some green,” Harry says, because he is a fucking professional and he can do this. He needs to do this. “Barium chlorate to begin with, and the very smallest spoon.”

Draco selects the spoon, mouth pressed tight in concentration. “Here we go.”

When Harry next looks at the clock, two hours have passed and Draco has amassed a small but impressive pile of completed stars. He is a fast learner, and, to Harry’s complete lack of surprise, a perfectionist, frequently demanding to start again and make minute adjustments at every step of the process until Harry pronounces each star flawless. The basement is cold and slightly damp, but both of them are soon sticky with perspiration and Harry’s muscles have turned rigid with tension. There is still so much to do, but when Draco stretches and declares a lunch break, Harry is quite happy to struggle to his feet and head up into the sunlit kitchen.

“What do you want?” he asks, poking his head into the pantry. “I’ve got bread for sandwiches or toast, or I could do us some bacon? I haven’t got anything on a stick but we could go outside and collect twigs if you like.”

“There’s a narwhal,” Draco calls.

“What?” Harry calls back, wondering how anyone could sound so fed up at the sight of a horned whale.

“An owl,” Draco says, louder this time, and Harry emerges from the pantry. “An owl with a purple envelope.”

“That was quick,” Harry mutters, letting in the owl and taking the envelope. “I only sent that letter this morning, and… no. Nope. Absolutely not.”

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s another date. Can you believe it?”

“The owls must have crossed in the post,” Draco says, peering over his shoulder. “It’s today… in fact, it’s in an hour. Are you going to go?”

“Should I be offended that they think I’m going to be available at an hour’s notice?” Harry asks, and then frowns. “Of course I’m not going to go.”

“Your date’s name is Gilbert,” Draco reads aloud. “He would like to meet you at the Pavilion Café at two pm. Isn’t that the place you like in the park?”
“Yes,” Harry admits, feeling slightly swayed by the choice of location. “I’m still not going.”

“I think you should,” Draco says, perching on the edge of the kitchen table.

“What? Why?”

“Well, a walk in the park is a nice thing, and the fresh air will be good for you… and perhaps it would be helpful to try just one more,” Draco says, and his fucking hair just has to glow in the sunlight. “Just so you don’t end the experience on such a sour note.”

Harry sighs. “Apart from the fact that you’ve lost your mind, we have work to do.”

“Call it a working lunch.”

“I won’t.”

Draco smiles. He gets to his feet and runs down to the basement, returning seconds later with his coat and jumper. “I’m going to go home. You can call me when you’re done and we’ll carry on… unless, of course, he turns out to be the one and you need the house to yourself.”

“Shut up, Draco,” Harry sighs, watching him step into the fireplace and away. “I’m not going.”

He leans against the counter and folds his arms. Ken peers out from the leaves of his cheese plant. The owl ruffles its feathers in clear impatience. He’s not going. It makes no sense. He doesn’t owe Wizards Unite one last chance, and he has nothing to offer Gilbert but a disappointing lunch with a confused, sad man who is completely lost for someone else.

Lunch does sound good, though. Lunch at the pavilion where he knows the menu inside out and exactly where to sit to best enjoy the view. Draco has abandoned him to his fate, and perhaps a conversation with someone he doesn’t… with someone else, might be a welcome distraction. His stomach rumbles and he sighs, rubbing at his face with both hands.

It’s a bad decision, a completely ridiculous decision, he tells himself as he splashes water on his face, grabs Ken and puts on coat, scarf and boots. Nothing good can come of this, and yet he is, apparently, doing it anyway. He walks slowly through the park, knowing he’s early, and kills half an hour on a bench in front of the duck pond, watching noisy gulls and mallards and wondering what on earth he thinks he’s doing.

Finally, heart pounding, he crunches up the frosty path to the café, scanning the outside tables for someone who might be waiting for him. His eyes flit from one elderly couple to another, a handful of girls in running clothes, a teenager with a dog… and then he spots something that almost makes him stop breathing completely.

Sitting at his favourite table by the railings, hands wrapped around a steaming cup and herringbone coat collar turned up against the wind, is Draco. Harry swallows hard. Every fibre of his body seems to leap with thrilling, terrifying hope, but he pushes back against it, heart swollen and sore and so not ready for this kind of disappointment. This can’t be, but it is—there he is—and he wouldn’t come here to play with Harry’s feelings. He wouldn’t.

Slowly, Harry walks up to the table and stands there, nails digging into his palms.

“Draco… why are you here?” he asks as calmly as he can manage.
“Well, I think there’s supposed to be a date,” Draco says, eyes steady and warm.

“Please don’t tell me you joined Wizards Unite.”

“No, but I think my letter was quite convincing, don’t you?”

Harry stares at him as realisation creeps in. “That last letter was from you?”

Draco nods, suddenly looking so nervous that Harry doesn’t know whether to kiss him or shake him. As it is, he just stands on the spot and gapes.

“You’re Gilbert?”

“Yes. In a manner of speaking. It was the first name I thought of.”

“You thought, ‘I need to choose a name’ and the first thing that came to you was Gilbert?”

Draco sighs. “Will you at least sit down?”

“I can do that,” Harry says, lowering himself onto the cold stone seat.

The moment that he meets Draco’s eyes again, every bit of anxiety and painful hope rushes back in and he grips the edge of his seat as hard as his weakened hands will allow.

“Is this a date?” he asks lightly.

Draco attempts a shrug. He doesn’t look away. “Do you want it to be?”

Harry shakes his head. “You know, I think I’ve had enough dates this month to last me a lifetime.”

“Thank goodness,” Draco whispers, mouth lifting at one corner. “I’m looking for something a bit more special than that myself. Something that will last. How about you?”

Harry’s heart leaps in impossible relief and his cautious smile threatens to tear at his face, but he knows he needs to hold onto it for just a little bit longer. He can’t quite believe that any of this is really happening, but there’s no use holding back. He needs to say what he needs to say, and he needs to do it before he loses his nerve forever. He takes a long breath and lets it out slowly.

“If I’m completely honest, Draco, I’m just looking for someone to love me, and I really want it to be you, but it’s taken me so long to figure it out that I’m worried I might have missed my chance, and I know you’re sitting here, and I really hope you’re sitting here because you want to be with me, but I’ve had a very strange time of it recently and I’d rather not make any assumptions,” Harry says, wishing he could have been more articulate and knowing there’s nothing he can do now.

Draco’s eyes seem to search his face, and all he can do is let it happen. Whatever is going to happen. He breathes slowly, inhaling the icy air until his nose and throat are numb.

“I ruled you out a very long time ago,” Draco says. “You weren’t interested, being friends was enough. I thought I was past it all until you started going on those dates. I don’t think I ever really got past it.”
“Past what?” Harry asks.

“Past my feelings for you,” Draco says, staring very hard into his coffee cup. “Past being in love with you, Harry. You really had no idea?”

“Er, no,” Harry says, astonished. “I never… sorry, but is this real? Am I sitting here or am I still in my bed at St Mungo’s having a really unfair dream?”

Draco laughs. He slides his hand across the table towards Harry’s and touches their fingertips together.

“It’s real, if you want it to be. I think you do, but I’m not a fan of leaping to conclusions these days.”

Harry smiles properly now. “I want it to be,” he says, lacing their fingers together and running his thumb over cold, sharp knuckles.

“We’re going to do this,” Draco says softly and then frowns. “Does this mean I have to come to the Weasley Christmas do?”

“God, yes.”

“I should have done this after Christmas,” he mutters to himself. “After. What an idiot.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” Harry laughs. He looks out over the park, at the bare trees and the snow clinging to the grass in bright patches. “Come on. Let’s walk.”

“Don’t you want to order lunch?” Draco asks, but he allows himself to be pulled out of his seat and towards the path.

“I don’t think I could eat if I wanted to,” Harry says, pausing at the top of the hill and finally allowing himself to tuck a strand of windblown hair behind Draco’s ear. “How did you know I’d come?”

“I didn’t,” Draco admits, fingers threaded tightly through Harry’s. “I just hoped you would.”

Harry smiles, and a creeping warmth spreads through him, bringing with it the bravery he needs to step into Draco’s personal space, slide cold fingers over his jaw and kiss him. Draco inhales sharply across his lips and kisses back, brushing their lips together with aching softness and then deepening the connection with an icy hand on the back of Harry’s neck. Eyes tightly closed, Harry can almost hear the fireworks and taste the charcoal as he grasps a woollen lapel for balance and lets the kiss carry him away. Draco tastes like cappuccino and smells like a whirlwind of citrus and pine trees and glittering, frozen earth and his mouth is hot enough to dissolve Harry’s spine. When they pull apart, breathing hard, Harry is almost surprised to find himself still in the park. The girls in the running gear are gazing in their direction with interest, and Harry suppresses the urge to sketch a little wave.

“Walking,” he says suddenly.

“What?”
“We should walk. You know.” Harry points vaguely at the path and the rustling conifers. “Over there. Around a bit. Walking.”

Draco nods. “I see. Yes, we should absolutely walk.”

He reclaims Harry’s hand and they wander down the path at an unhurried pace. Ken pokes his head out of Harry’s pocket and inspects the landscape, gripping onto his coat fabric for balance. Harry can’t quite decide if this is the oddest moment of his life so far or a thing that feels so wonderfully familiar that he can’t understand how he hasn’t been doing it for years.

“This isn’t like the films at all,” Draco says when they pause at the duck pond. “In the films, everything seems to happen at once and the whole world turns upside down. I feel as though… well, I don’t want to say it. I’m not sure how you’ll feel.”

“You’ve got to tell me now,” Harry says, intrigued.

Draco sighs. “This feels… it just feels like us.”

“I think that’s the brilliant thing about it,” Harry admits, and Draco kisses him fiercely, stealing his breath and almost knocking him into the water. “So, that’s… good?”

“That’s good,” Draco agrees.

Harry pulls him down onto a bench. “I take it you’ve been watching romantic films?”

“Yes. A lot of them. I liked the one where everyone is getting ready for Christmas in London, and the one with the dancing people in the nineteen sixties, but I didn’t care for the one where they met on the building in the end,” Draco says, tapping an irritable rhythm against Harry’s thigh. “They didn’t know each other at all, and we were expected to just believe they’d fallen in love and would live happily ever after?”

“Sleepless in Seattle?” Harry guesses, hitting on a vague memory of Aunt Petunia sniffling over the ending with a box of pink tissues.

“That’s it. The sequel was much better.”

“I don’t think there was a sequel,” Harry frowns.

“Of course there was,” Draco insists, fixing him with an exasperated eye. “There was a big bookshop and a little bookshop and the two people write to one another on the computer, but she doesn’t know it’s him and she doesn’t like him in real life.”

Harry laughs. “That’s not a sequel. It’s a completely different film.”

“It has the same people in it,” Draco protests.

“Well, yeah, some of them,” Harry says, and then decides to give up. “We should get going. We still have a lot of fireworks to make.”

“I had no idea you were such a taskmaster,” Draco says, eyes sparkling. “I think I like it.”

“That is not helping my focus,” Harry sighs, feeling his skin flush as he gets to his feet and nudges
Draco back onto the path.

Though Draco is clearly amused, he remains silent all the way back to the house. He coaxes Ken onto his arm and holds him out ahead, swooping him this way and that as though he is flying. Ken stretches out his tail to the wind and scissors his little grippers in excitement, and Harry is both warmed to see this easy interaction between them and resigned to realise that the chameleon’s scales are, in fact, a light shade of purple.

“Why is Hermione always right?” he mutters, opening the front door of number twelve.

Draco sets Ken down on a nearby platform and takes off his coat. “She isn’t. She’s a very clever person but no one is always right.”

“Even you?”

“Good grief, Harry, especially not me,” Draco says, and then he’s tugging Harry close and pressing him against the wall, brushing his lips against Harry’s neck until he groans out loud.

“Is this getting fireworks made?” he asks, even as he turns his head to capture Draco’s mouth in a long, searching kiss. “Is it?”

“I’m not sure how, but I suspect it’s an important part of the process,” Draco mumbles, pressing close and sending arousal spiralling into the pit of Harry’s stomach.

Harry laughs against his cold skin, swaying on a knife edge between pushing him away and tearing off his clothes right here in the hallway with Ken watching over them. Draco feels so good in his arms, so everything, and Harry is so in love that he can barely hold himself up, but in the end, he just about falls on the side of practicality, grabbing onto the image of his ruined safari animals and gently easing Draco away from him.

“We’ll still be here after the twenty-fourth,” he says, aching all over at Draco’s disappointed sigh. “Advent won’t be. We can do this… and this… I want to do everything, but I have to prioritise.”

“All this sternness is just making things worse,” Draco says, biting down on a smile.

“Stop it.”

“I can’t,” he insists, stalking off to the basement with a wonderfully ridiculous air of drama.

Harry follows him. This time, when he strips down to his thin t-shirt, Harry keeps his eyes on his work, summoning every last crumb of focus he possesses in order to think about salts and colours instead of everything that has happened in the last hour. It’s a struggle, but he manages it, and Draco, too, settles quickly into the fiddly tasks of measuring and assembling the all-important stars. Soon, conversation stops altogether and the only words are, ‘this one’, ‘careful’, ‘too much’ and ‘exactly’. The basement is charged with a new sort of energy, a bright bond between them that burns away Harry’s worries and makes him feel as though he can do anything. They can do anything.

“What was that?” Draco says, pausing with a tiny measure of white powder on his spoon.

There is a clatter from above, and Harry looks up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly when his eyes start to sting.
“I hope it’s not another owl.”

“If it is, it’s nothing to do with me. Gilbert only sent the one.”

“Gilbert.” Harry snorts. “I’ve never met a real person called Gilbert. I don’t think one exists.”

“Look,” Draco starts, and the door at the top of the stairs flies open, admitting a delicious savoury smell and a person with clomping footsteps.

“Harry, we brought dinner,” Hermione says, peering into the basement. “There’s plenty for all of us. Do you know it’s six o’clock?”

“Does she always just come in?” Draco asks, when Hermione walks away without waiting for an answer.

“Yeah, well, sometimes,” Harry admits. “Families are like that, aren’t they?”

“My mother wouldn’t dare.”

“God, I’d jump out of my skin if your mother just walked out of my fireplace,” Harry says, getting to his feet. “Are you coming?”

Draco hesitates for a moment before tipping the powder back into its jar and rising with enviable grace. “Is this going to be awkward?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “Let’s find out.”

“Well, I’m reassured,” Draco mutters, following him up the stairs. “Do you think my mother is frightening?”

“Do you think Molly’s frightening?”

“Hmm,” Draco says, and emerges into the kitchen. He glances at Ron, who is placing sections of a vast toad-in-the-hole onto plates, at Hermione, who is laying the table, and then at Rose and Hugo. “Children,” he mumbles, frowning as though he has never seen one before.

“Real ones, made of bones and brains and stuff,” Ron says without looking up.

“Ron,” Hermione scolds. “I don’t like it when you talk about their bones.”

“But you’re a Healer, Mum,” Rose points out. “You must have seen bones.”

“Loads of bones and blood and… and… eyeballs!” Hugo says, grinning and running to Harry for a hug.

“Eyeballs?” Draco repeats, startled when Hugo decides to hug him, too.

Harry smiles. “That smells fantastic, Ron… and it’s not that I’m not happy you’re here, but I don’t remember making plans for tonight. Please tell me my memory’s not going again.”

“No, it was a bit spur of the moment,” Hermione admits. “We thought it might be nice to see you
and make sure you had some proper food. I know what you’re like when you’re ill, you forget to eat.”

“I don’t…” Harry starts and then realises he hasn’t eaten a thing all day. “It’s really nice of you. All of you. Thank you.”

“Were you working, Uncle Harry?” Rose asks. “I thought you were supposed to be resting.”

“I was working,” Draco says. “Harry was giving me instructions.”

“I see, so you’re encouraging him?” Hermione asks, hands on her hips and Healer Face firmly in place. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Why are you not?” Hugo asks innocently.

“I don’t think that was really a question, mate,” Ron says, bringing the plates to the table and floating the jug of gravy through the air with a swish that he definitely learned from Molly. “Let’s get into this before it gets cold. Has everyone washed their hands?”

Harry turns on the kitchen tap and scrubs his hands with soap, hoping to set a good example for Rose and Hugo. He holds the little boy up so that he can reach the water and says nothing when his efforts render Harry’s clothes rather wet. Draco obediently rinses his hands, too, and takes his seat at the table just in time to find himself the subject of Hermione’s continued questions. Guiltily, Harry abandons him to his fate and pours gravy over his dinner.

“Sorry she’s been on your case so much recently,” Ron says quietly. “She’s just worried about you. All this dating stuff and then that basket case sending you to the hospital. People like her, you know… they’re so clever and capable… when they can’t fix something, they start to go a bit loopy.”

“I know,” Harry says, glancing at Hermione, who is now listening to Draco and looking a little bit less exasperated. “She cares about me and I’m lucky to have her.”

“We both are,” Ron says, crunching into an edge piece of Yorkshire pudding. “Eat your dinner.”

Harry slices into his cabbage and then his sausage, assembling a perfect mouthful and chewing it with a blissful sigh. Ron looks around the table at everyone enjoying his efforts and smiles with pride.

“I’ve given up the dating, anyway,” Harry says.

Ron raises a ginger eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“I’ve got to say, mate, I’m a bit relieved,” Ron admits. “It didn’t seem to be doing you any good.”

Harry nods in agreement, listening to Rose and Hugo’s conversation about haunted Christmas trees as he debates his next words. In the end, he opts for honesty. Quiet honesty. He wants to tell Ron the truth but he isn’t ready for questions from curious children.

“I realised that Draco and I should be together… so, erm… now we are.”
Ron stops chewing and stares at him. “You and Draco.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not surprised,” he says airily, and Harry isn’t sure he believes him. “Everybody knew.”

“Everybody?”

“Well, me and Hermione.”

“Really?”

“Well, Hermione,” Ron admits, attacking another sausage with his knife and fork. “She might have made some noises about it. You know how she is.”

“I do,” Harry says, feeling a rush of affection for Hermione, who looks out for him, no matter what, and for Ron, who makes sure he’s fed and who accepts everything that he is without hesitation.

“I don’t like cabbage,” Hugo complains loudly.

“What do you mean? My cabbage is lovely,” Ron says. “It’s got nutmeg on it and everything.”

“Dad, I don’t like it.”


“I don’t like kale,” Hugo insists.

“You haven’t even tried it,” Rose says. “You can’t not like something you haven’t tried.”

“I like it,” Draco says, and Ron grins.

“I like it, too,” Harry says. “Try it with some gravy.”

“I can’t,” Hugo says dramatically, and Rose sighs.

“Don’t be a baby, Hugo, or I’ll tell Camille.” When Hugo glares and shoves a piece of cabbage into his mouth, Rose turns to Draco. “I saw you at the festival. Do you make fireworks, too?”

“No… I work for the Wizarding Arts Council.”

“What’s that?”

Draco looks at Harry for help and he shrugs. “Er… well, I look at lots of different types of art and I arrange exhibitions so people can display the art and let members of the public look at it. I also help to decide which artists get help from the Ministry… I’m not sure I’m explaining this very well.”

“Do you make art?” Hugo asks.
“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Why not?”

Hermione laughs. “Not everyone is an artist, Hugo. Look at me, I can’t even draw a tree.”

“I can draw a leopard that looks like a platypus,” Harry offers.

“I’ve seen your drawings and that’s a load of… that’s not true,” Ron amends, and Rose looks at him as though she has heard the bad language he managed not to use.

“My hands are still a bit dodgy,” Harry says, flexing his fingers and willing them to obey him.

Under the table, Draco rests his knee against Harry’s in a supportive gesture that makes him smile in spite of his frustration.

“They are getting better,” he says.

“I know,” Harry sighs.

“Auntie Fleur wouldn’t let us see you after the accident but I know you got burned,” Rose says, little face full of concern. “Are you really alright now?”

“I’m really alright,” Harry promises, looking at each of them in turn. “Hugo, I’m alright. I’m a bit weak but I’m getting stronger.”

“Are you still tired?” Hermione asks.

“Yes. But it’s been a long day. There’s been a lot to do. Speaking of which, we should get going soon,” Harry says, setting down his cutlery and touching Draco’s arm.

Hermione shakes her head. “I think you should stay at home.”

“Hermione, I’m fine. I went to the owl sanctuary last night and Diagon Alley this morning and then the park… please don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.”

“That sounds like a lot,” Hermione says. “Look, I can see that you’re recovering and you’re making amazing progress, but if you’re going to do a display tomorrow, I really think you should have a proper night of rest first. Just one more, Harry. I’ve got another bottle of that sleeping potion and I strongly suggest you take it.”

“I’ll miss the horses,” Harry sighs, knowing she is right.

He can already feel the day catching up with him; every joint is protesting its use and the lethargic haze is starting to pull at his eyelids. It’s not even seven o’clock and he knows he’s not going to last the night, but he’s also far from ready to give up.

“Well, I do have to go and I will take pictures of the horses if you like,” Draco suggests.

“You do look tired, mate,” Ron says helpfully.

“My bedtime is soon, too,” Hugo empathises. “I won’t get to see the horses.”
“Maybe if I make some strong coffee, I’ll be alright,” Harry says, but he knows he won’t be.

“Harry, I am your Healer, and—”

“No, you’re not,” Harry interrupts. “My Healer’s name is Frances Roden and she is nowhere near as bossy as you.”

Hermione laughs. “I know her. She’s an excellent Healer. But I also know you, Harry. You’re stubborn and you’re neglectful with your health and you ought to set a better example to Rose and Hugo.”

“Low blow,” Harry mutters, looking at his niece and nephew to find that they are following the conversation with clear interest. “Draco? Do you have anything to add? Any home truths you’d like to share with me?”

Draco quirks a half-smile that wraps around Harry’s heart like a warm glow. “Not really, but I’d better be going. Ronald, thank you for the wonderful dinner. Harry, can I have a quick word with you in the hallway?”

“In the hallway,” Harry repeats through a yawn and follows Draco out of the room.

“She’s right, you know.”

“I know she is. She’s always right. I told you earlier.”

“Get some sleep,” Draco says softly, kissing the corner of Harry’s mouth until he smiles. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Harry watches him disappear and then returns to the kitchen to find everyone hard at work; Ron packs away the dish and jug with a blast of cleaning charms, while Hermione and Hugo wash Harry’s plates and Rose wipes his table with a damp cloth.

“So efficient,” Harry says, leaning against the doorframe. “It was really nice of you to come.”

Ron shrugs and grins at him. Hermione dries her hands on a tea towel and takes a potion bottle from her bag.

“Go on. Take this and get straight into bed. We’ll use the fireplace when we’ve finished.”

Harry takes the bottle and hugs her tightly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she whispers against his ear. “Don’t worry, Draco explained everything.”

Harry laughs. “Are you sure I shouldn’t be worried?”

“Not even a little bit. Goodnight, Harry.”

He lingers in the doorway for a moment, feeling sleepy and warm and loved. Draco loves him. Draco loves him and he’ll be here tomorrow. All Harry has to do is sleep.
Twenty-first of December – a fox in the snow

Harry stirs awake on Saturday morning to find a chameleon on his chest and two conical eyes fixed on him at very close range. He checks his hair and pillows for fruit and then strokes Ken under his chin.

“Hey, look at that,” he says with a smile, realising that he can now move each finger independently and in any direction he likes.

In fact, he feels great, well-rested and verging on energetic. The sky outside is grey and the snow is turning to slush but he doesn’t care. There’s a lightness in his chest that he hasn’t felt in weeks, and the thought of spending the afternoon in the basement with Draco makes him grin all the way to the bathroom. He showers and dresses in warm clothes, heading down to the kitchen with Ken following him, scuttling from platform to platform and sending dried worms flying.

“You really are a menace,” Harry tells him, revelling in his ability to fill the kettle without splashing water everywhere. “A swivel-eyed menace.”

Ken says nothing, but accepts the tomato Harry offers and bites into it with enthusiasm. Harry makes tea and bacon sandwiches, testing out his recovered dexterity at every stage of the process. When his plate is clean, he takes his tea up to the living room, spells on all the lights and firecalls the Burrow. It’s early, but he knows Molly will be awake. She’s always been an early bird, and with the big Christmas party only a day away, she’ll probably be elbow deep in pastry.

When she answers, she is breathless and covered in icing sugar, but delighted to see him.

“Harry, don’t you look bright-eyed? It’s wonderful to see you getting better. Did you get the cake I sent?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m feeling a lot better—look,” Harry says, touching each fingertip of his right hand to his thumb in turn and repeating the process with his left. “I’m almost there.”

Molly beams. “How marvellous. Ron says you have a display tonight. Are you going to be alright?”

“I’ve got some help,” Harry assures. He pauses, feeling nervous even though he knows he doesn’t need to. It’s Molly, for goodness’ sake. “Listen, I thought you’d want to know that I’m bringing
someone to the party tomorrow.”

Molly’s smile brightens. “That’s wonderful news, Harry,” she says, fixing him with a stern eye. “You know, I was a bit worried that none of those dates would stick because you were spending so much time with Draco.”

Harry lets out a sound that is caught somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. “Okay… well… it is Draco.”

Molly frowns. “Oh. You mean the two of you are…?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Harry. What a shame you couldn’t have noticed it sooner and saved yourself all that effort,” she says, and she sounds so wistful that Harry has to smile.

“Well, there is that,” he admits. “I’m trying to focus on the positive, though.”

“Yes, yes, you must,” she says, and then turns her head to bellow, “Arthur!”

Seconds later, Arthur’s head appears in the fire beside his wife’s.

“Did I hear something about Draco Malfoy coming to the party?”

“He’s Harry’s boyfriend now,” Molly whispers, as though Harry isn’t there.

Arthur gazes at Harry in surprise. “Oh. Well, that’s nice, isn’t it? Does he like vol-au-vents?”

“Er… probably,” Harry says. “Is that a requirement?”

“No, but we’ve got enough of them to feed the entire Ministry,” Arthur says. “You should see the kitchen. It’s like a tiny pastry battlefield.”

Molly shakes her head. “They’ll disappear in no time, and then you’ll be saying, ‘Molly, why didn’t you make more vol-au-vents?’ like you do every year.”

“You’re probably right,” Arthur concedes, and then snaps back to Harry. “He’s not bringing his mother, is he?”

“No,” Harry says with a smile. “She doesn’t like big crowds. She’ll be at Andromeda’s for Christmas dinner if you really want to see her.”

“Good to know,” Arthur mumbles.

“Draco must come for Christmas,” Molly says. “George is bringing his new girlfriend and everyone will be home, even Bill. I’m doing a ham hock.”

“No turkey?” Harry asks, and Molly stares through the flames, aghast. “Don’t be silly, Harry. It wouldn’t be Christmas without a turkey. But I’m also doing a spiced ham hock and a rib of beef. Just in case.”

“Just in case everyone in Devon turns up and says they’re hungry,” Arthur jokes.
Molly ignores him. “You’ll ask him, won’t you?”

“I will.”

“We all just want you to be happy, Harry. That’s all we’ve ever wanted,” she says, and the easy warmth in her voice makes Harry’s eyes prickle with tears.

“You deserve something really special,” Arthur says, and Molly nods.

Harry rubs at his face with his sleeve. “Love you both,” he mumbles.

“We love you, Harry,” Molly says. “Now, what size jumper does Draco wear?”

**~*~**

“Are you going to be alright tonight, love?” Glenda asks, peering down at Harry from her van.

“I’m going to be fine,” Harry promises.

“It’s just that it’s your first one since… you know, what happened, and we’re all a bit worried about you,” she says, picking out a stick loaded with buttery champ for a customer. “Do you want gravy with that, love?”

Harry inhales the scent of buttery potatoes and spring onions and steps into the queue.

“Glenda, I promise I’m okay. I’m excited. I want to… you know, get back on the horse.”

“Those horses were lovely,” Lorna says. “So clever and so gentle.”

“You might say that, but one of them tried to eat my coat buttons,” Draco points out. “I’m rather attached to this coat.”

Me too, Harry thinks, smiling and looking away from Draco.

“Harry’s here!” shouts a child, and she drags her father over to the food vans with impressive force. “Are you doing fireworks tonight?”

Harry tells her that he is, and answers all of her questions, even when it means losing his place in Glenda’s queue. Finally, her father leads her away, turning to mouth ‘thank you’ as the little girl bounces and speculates wildly about the contents of tonight’s display.

“We should get ready,” Draco says, and Harry turns to find him holding two champ sticks, one with gravy and one without. “I wasn’t sure, so I got one of each.”

“Thank you,” Harry sighs, desperate to add ‘I love you’ but far too aware of Glenda’s curious eyes to say it out loud.

It’s not a secret; neither of them wants that. It’s just that he wants to hold on to the part of it that is just theirs for a tiny bit longer, and if Glenda’s foghorn voice comes into play, the entire city of Belfast will know everything before Harry can say potato-on-a-stick. Draco smiles as though he hears it anyway, and hands the sticks to Harry in order to create an umbrella charm large enough to
cover both of them. Belfast is wet and oddly mild, and everyone in attendance is either carrying an umbrella or sheltering under a bubble-like charm. Fortunately, the weather has done nothing to dampen the spirits of the locals, and the Christmas lights in the square are so bright that they reflect in the rain-slicked paving stones with a fuzzy, underwater beauty.

They settle on their chairs and watch the traditional dancers, jewel-coloured velvet dresses flying as they leap and kick without betraying the slightest trace of effort. Harry is impressed, even more so than usual, and he wiggles his fingers along with the band just because he can. Following an afternoon’s practise, he is now confident in his ability to ignite the shells and perform the small, intricate spells needed to bring the animals to life. Draco will cast the extensors, which require simpler but much more powerful magic, and together, they will put on a show that Harry can be proud of.

Draco fixes the umbrella charm in place above them and takes his stick. Harry shuffles closer, resting his thigh against Draco’s and relishing its warmth. Above them, the rain drums against the protective magic and bounces onto the pavement, sending the scents of soil and moss and concrete into the damp air. A woman with a wooden cart full of hats and scarves walks past them, calling out her prices in a voice almost as loud as Glenda’s. Selwyn darts back and forth between the food vans and the Christmas tree, tapping his ear trumpet and scowling at his clipboard.

“That pigeon’s got a piece of toast,” Draco says, gesturing with his wand. “Is anyone even making toast?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry says. “Maybe he brought it with him.”

Draco smiles. “I enjoy your mind, you know. It doesn’t always make sense, but I like it.”

“This isn’t going to change, is it?”

“What?”

Harry sets down his empty stick and meets Draco’s eyes. “This thing you do, where I’m never sure if you’re insulting me or not… it’s not going to change just because we’re together, is it?”

“It’s not my fault,” Draco shrugs. “Besides, I’m not insulting you. I think you’re brilliant. You’re clever and creative and very good looking, and while I reserve the right to mock you, I would never insult you on purpose.”

“Oh,” Harry says, rather taken aback by this assessment, so freely offered.

“Yes, and don’t make me say it again or I might have to poke myself in the eye with this stick.”

“Don’t,” Harry says. “Mine had loads of black pepper in it. Your eye won’t like that.”

“I doubt it would like the stick, either,” Draco points out.

“No. Just don’t do it. It’s a lovely eye,” Harry says, and then laughs. “Okay, that sounded really odd. Both your eyes are lovely. You have very lovely eyes. I like them. Stop laughing.”

“I don’t want to,” Draco says, and his smile shocks Harry’s heart like an electrical charge.

“I love you,” he says, as the rain begins to pour and seems to seal them into their own private little
Cold, strong fingers wrap around Harry’s. “I love you. I think you’re about to be announced.”

“I should have asked for you to be credited,” Harry says, inspecting his row of shells and thanking anyone who may be listening for making him organised enough to have all of his displays ready weeks in advance.

“People don’t want to hear about me—this is a Harry Potter display,” Draco says, picking up his wand and applying his ear protection. “I’m just here to make sure all your colours and things stay where they are. I’m not really here. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, and all that.”

Harry snorts. “You are here, and I’m glad you’re here. I tried to levitate my kitchen table earlier just to test my strength and it just sort of… quivered.”

“Perhaps there’s an act in that. I’ve never seen a table quiver before.”

“Behave,” Harry whispers, and Draco doesn’t say another word until the display is over.

Together, they fill the rainy night with a journey through Asia, starting with giant pandas and working through tapirs, camels and bears, following a red and gold sunset to finish with a Bengal tiger running north with a flurry of exotic birds in its wake. Draco casts and holds with such concentration, allowing Harry to animate the images without worrying that his colours will fade, and they work together with such ease that he is able to communicate his needs with nothing but nods and hand gestures.

The relentless beat of the rain forms a backdrop so atmospheric that Harry finds himself moving along with it, swaying gently as he sends each little package of stars zooming into the sky. The heat, as usual, is oppressive, but he doesn’t find it stressful as he worried he might. Yes, he vanishes the burning debris more frequently than he has in the past, but he’s okay. This is his thing, and that poor excuse for a wizard isn’t going to ruin it for him.

Draco is here now, right by his side where he belongs. Where he’s been for years, being his friend and dealing with the rest in a way that makes Harry’s brain hurt. It’s only been a few weeks since everything fell into place for him, and that’s been long enough to drive him into madness.

“Draco?” he says, turning to find him inhaling the post-firework smell with his eyes closed.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for waiting.”

“Waiting?”

“Yeah, for me to… hi, Selwyn. Everything okay?”

“Oh, yes. Delightful display, as always,” Selwyn says, waving his wand vaguely and making his umbrella charm sway back and forth above his head. “I just wanted you to know—because I wouldn’t want you to think I was being sneaky—I wanted you to know that I hear things.”

“What sort of things?” Draco asks, pretending innocence. “Have you heard some gossip?”
“No, well… some people might think so, which is why I’m here,” Selwyn says, and though Harry is already fighting down embarrassment, there is something so awkward about his friend’s expression that he wants to laugh.

“You’d better tell us, then,” Draco says gravely.

“This ear trumpet,” Selwyn whispers, tapping it a little too hard and making himself jump. “It’s very sensitive. I can hear all sorts of things from quite a distance away. Conversations. Do you know what I mean?”

“Conversations, yes,” Draco nods, and Harry nods, too, frowning in an attempt to keep his amusement to himself.

Selwyn heaves a pained sigh. “You’re not getting this, are you? I know.”

“It’s good to know things,” Draco says.

Harry ducks into his scarf and lets out a silent cry of laughter.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Harry, there’s really no need,” Selwyn says, and his concern just makes things worse. Harry knows they should just put him out of his misery but Draco is merciless and this is all his fault and Harry supposes he can hex him a bit when Selwyn has gone away.

“Selwyn, please just tell us what on earth you’re talking about,” Draco says.

There is another sigh, and Harry composes himself enough to emerge from his scarf. Draco glances at him and fuck, he feels sixteen years old. He grins. Poor Selwyn.

“I heard you saying… romantic things to each other,” Selwyn whispers. “You were very quiet but this picks up everything.” He indicates his ear trumpet. Frowns. “Hang on a minute. You knew what I was trying to say all along, didn’t you? You just wanted me to say it!”

“Sorry,” Harry says, just as Draco shakes his head and murmurs, “Selwyn, we wouldn’t.”

“You would,” he says, flustered. He looks at Draco. “You would. As for you, Harry, you should watch out for him. He’s clearly a bad influence.”

“Selwyn, you’ve known me for ten years. I’m a delightful influence,” Draco says.

It’s Selwyn’s turn to laugh, and the sound of it just sets Harry off again.

“I’m so sorry,” he mumbles. “It’s not you. I’ve been taking a lot of potions.”

“I should hope so. Look… I’m pleased for you. Happiness can be hard to find,” Selwyn says, smile flickering into a frown when the band starts up again behind him. “That is quite a bit louder than we agreed for this time of night. You’ll have to excuse me. Just remember, I’ll be listening… whether I want to or not.”

He hurries away, and Harry turns to Draco. “That was mean.”

“Was it? I enjoyed myself,” he says, packing up Harry’s case and pulling him to his feet. As he does, the umbrella charm destabilises and disappears, leaving them exposed to the rain. “Alright.
Well… Nighthawks?”

Harry nods, pressing his hand to his pocket to steady Ken. Draco whips them away as quickly as he can but Harry’s hair is dripping into his face by the time they arrive in the alley outside the café. He dries it with a rough spell and Draco does the same, pushing the pale strands out of his face and then giving up and leaving them to wave against his forehead.

Unlike Belfast, London is dry and cold; the night is sparkling with frost and the plate glass that surrounds Nighthawks is almost opaque with delicate patterns of ice crystals. The place is busy even for a Saturday night, and as they search for an empty table, Harry spots a framed notice announcing that tonight is the launch of their new menu. The food that he can see looks a world away from weaponised pastry and woeful sandwiches, and the smells emanating from the little kitchen are intriguing, but he’s too full of potato to try anything right now.

“We should come back and eat when it’s a bit less stuffed to the rafters,” Draco says, finding a table in the window that is cramped but just about perfect for two people who are happy to sit with their knees pressed together and their elbows brushing.

“Definitely,” Harry says, cramming himself into his seat and letting out a giggle when Selwyn’s frustrated face pops back into his head. “Oh, I feel bad for him, but it was just so funny.”

Draco snorts. “Nobody’s forcing him to go around with that thing plugged into his ear. Sometimes he’s going to hear things he doesn’t want to. It could have been a lot worse,” he says, lifting an eyebrow and turning Harry’s insides to liquid without a scrap of effort.

“Don’t, or I’ll never speak again, just in case,” he says, and Draco just laughs.

They order coffees with whisky and drink them slowly, fingertips resting together in familiar, silent connection. Harry sheds his damp coat and lets Ken perch on his lap while he leans against the window and enjoys the warming effect of the alcohol without worrying about what he might say or do. Of course, there is every chance he might say or do something absolutely ridiculous, but it doesn’t matter any more. He’s with his person, his one, in a place where he’s always welcome, and there’s a happy chameleon on his lap. His heart is full to overflowing, and if he has a really stupid smile on his face because of it, that’s fine.

“This party tomorrow,” Draco says uncertainly.

“Mm?”

“Are you sure I’m… welcome?”

Harry snaps out of his contented haze and stares at him. “Of course you’re welcome. Why would you think you weren’t?”

“I’m probably just… it’s nothing,” Draco says.

“Are you trying to get out of coming? I’m not going to force you, but I’d really like you to be there.”

“No, it’s not that,” Draco says, turning Harry’s hand and stroking his thumb over his wrist. “You know I’m a little bit intimidated by Molly… well, I don’t think she likes me much, either.”
Harry frowns. “She does like you. I’m sure we’ve had this conversation before.”

“Harry, whenever she sees me, she says ‘oh, hello, Draco’ in such a disappointed way, and then she pulls a face like this,” he says, rearranging his features into a fair imitation of what Harry thinks of as Molly’s exasperated face.

“Ah, well,” Harry says, “I’ve come to a realisation about that. I think she’s been worried that I’ll never find a man because I’m always hanging around with you.”

“Did it never occur to her that I might be a man?” Draco asks.

“Only in the most literal sense,” Harry says with a smile.

“Did it never occur to you?”

“Eventually,” Harry says, feeling his face heat even though he knows that Draco is teasing him. “The thing is, when it did occur to me, it was like falling down all the staircases at Hogwarts, one after another. And then when I realised I’d survived it, I also realised that I’d probably been in love with you for quite a long time,” he finishes in a rush.

Draco’s eyes are warm on his for long seconds, and then all is challenge. “Don’t even try it, Harry Potter,” he says, pulling his hand away and folding his arms. “Don’t even try, because I have been fucked up by the thought of you for far longer than I’m ever going to admit.”

“It’s not a competition,” Harry says, even though every word speeds his heart a little bit more.

Draco laughs and examines a small burn on Harry’s fingertip. “Not one that you’re winning.”

“More coffee?” comes a bored female voice, and then: “Oh my gosh, is that a chameleon?”

Harry looks up at the waitress who isn’t supposed to smile, and then down at Ken, who is attempting to climb onto the table.

“Yes,” he says, because there isn’t anything else to say.

“Have you brought him before?”

Harry hesitates. “Well, I…”

“I won’t tell,” she promises. “You didn’t tell about my smiling. Can I pet him?”

Harry nods, sharing a startled glance with Draco. The girl bends over the table and holds out her hand to Ken, who ambles forward and allows her to stroke his head and crest.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispers, grinning. “Oh, he’s changing colour! Look at his little eyes!”

“He’s going to become very vain if you keep that up,” Draco says, and the girl laughs.

“Can I give him something? What does he like?”

“He’d love to borrow your pencil if you’ve got a spare one,” Harry says, watching her pluck one out of her hair without hesitation. “He likes to hold things.”
The waitress offers the pencil to Ken and he grips it tightly, changing colour again. This time, his scales fade to a speckled blue in an attempt to match his new toy.

“He’s amazing. What’s his name?”

“The swivel-eyed menace,” Draco says.

“Really?”

“No,” Harry says. “His name is Minty Kenneth, but I just call him Ken.”

“Amazing,” she says again. “Hello, Ken, my name is Olivia. Do you shake hands?”

She gently takes Ken’s grippy foot and shakes, laughing with delight when he clings to her finger and rotates each eye in turn.

“That’s very polite, Ken,” Harry approves.

“This is the best thing ever,” she sighs. “You three make such a lovely little family.”

“We aren’t,” Draco says, face solemn. “We’re actually a family of master criminals. Kenneth here is the safe-breaker.”

Olivia grins, taking back her finger with clear reluctance. “I’d better get going. It was lovely to meet you, Ken. You can keep the pencil.”

It takes Harry a moment to realise that she has wandered off without their coffee order. Right on cue, he yawns, and Draco’s eyes are all over him.

“You’re tired.”

“You’re tired,” Harry mumbles through another yawn.

“I am,” Draco agrees. “And I imagine we have about five million more stars to make before the party tomorrow?”

“That is a slight exaggeration. But yes. Lots of stars. I also want to show you how to put shells together,” Harry says, tucking Ken and his pencil back into his coat pocket. “I think I’m going to be able to work alongside you now, and I want us to be as efficient as possible.”

“Of course,” Draco says, settling up and weaving through the packed café just as another group arrives and attempts to surge through the door as one.

In the alley, Harry wraps his arms around Draco and rests his head against his wool-clad shoulder.

“Please don’t think I don’t want you to come home with me,” he says.

“I don’t. And I do want to come home with you.”

“But…” Harry sighs, sliding his hands up into Draco’s hair and kissing his gentle frown. “And believe me, I am incredibly sick of saying this, I need to sleep.”
“Sleep is a lovely thing,” Draco says, kissing back and making Harry gasp with longing.

“I don’t want sleep. I want you.”

Draco groans. “Oh, god, don’t say that.”

“I’ll probably keep saying things, so you should go home before you hear them,” Harry says, all at once feeling wobbly now that he’s back out in the night air. “I think I’ll walk. Fresh air and all that.”

“Are you particularly attached to that idea? I thought we could Side-Along and then I could Apparate home from your place,” Draco says.


“I don’t know,” Draco says, pressing his cold smile to Harry’s skin as he whisks them out of the alley and onto the steps of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. “Hmm. That was a bit risky, sorry.”

Harry looks around at his neighbours’ windows. Most are dark, and though several downstairs rooms are lit by Christmas lights, he is fairly confident that no one is actually up and peering out into the street.

“I think we’re alright,” he says, turning when he hears a rustle of leaves from the little garden in the middle of the street. “There’s something in there.”

He creeps closer, Draco at his back, until he is pressed up against the icy railings. He puts his finger to his lips and Draco rolls his eyes as if to say, ‘Quiet? No... I was planning to fire exploding hexes into the bushes!’ Amused, Harry waits, and is finally rewarded when a small fox trots out into the open. It looks up at the stars and shakes snow from its coat, either oblivious to their presence or choosing to ignore it.

“Mrs Brown next door always complains about them getting into her bins,” Harry whispers, framing the snowy scene in his head and imagining it as a Christmas card. *Fuck*. Christmas cards. He sighs. “I like them. It’s nice to have a bit of nature in the middle of London.”

“My mother likes foxes,” Draco whispers back. “They’re wily. Like poker players.”

Harry smiles. The fox whisks its brushlike tail and sniffs at the ground, and he pictures it sitting at a card table, dressed in silk and drinking from a cut glass tumbler.

“Go home,” he whispers.

“Me or him?”

“You,” Harry murmurs. “He probably lives here. He’s not going to distract me and ruin my fireworks.”

“He’d better not,” Draco says, and with a wink, he is gone.

The fox looks up, eyes fixed on the spot from which Draco has just vanished. Harry can almost feel
its confusion, and doesn’t blame it one bit when it turns and disappears back into the undergrowth.
Taking in one last breath of the icy air, Harry walks back to the house and lets himself in.
Of course he’s coming. If nothing else, he had promised Ken that he would see him soon, right before he had kissed Harry and stepped into the kitchen fireplace with black powder smeared across his nose and a stray bit of striped paper tucked into his hair.

“We did some good work today,” Harry tells Ken.

“Talking to yourself?” Draco asks from somewhere behind him, and he turns with a smile that the cold wind attempts to freeze to his face.

“I was talking to Ken.”

“Yes, because he did such a lot of good work today,” Draco says, aiming a sardonic glance at the chameleon. “He certainly didn’t sit in a plant and throw peach stones all over the kitchen floor.”

“He didn’t mean for you to stand on that,” Harry says, but Draco just smiles, stepping closer and letting Ken play with the ends of his scarf.

When he notices the dish in Harry’s hands, his smile turns to panic. “You’ve brought something. Why didn’t you tell me we were supposed to bring something?”

“It’s from both of us,” Harry promises. “We’re only allowed to bring desserts. It’s just some profiteroles. I got them from the bakery and then threw loads of chocolate stars and stuff on them at home.”

Draco’s frown softens, but not all the way, so Harry lifts the foil and shows him the festive, if chaotic, mass of pastry, cream and chocolate inside.
“Why only desserts?”

Harry shrugs. “Cooking is Molly’s thing. One year, she had a cold, and some of us tried to bring extra sandwiches and stuff to help her and she nearly ended up in tears. We don’t do that any more.”

“I understand. But won’t there be an awful lot of desserts if everyone brings something?”

Harry grins. “You haven’t seen my family eat, have you? There’ll be nothing left.”

“I shall look forward to that. Listen, you don’t think I’ll be under-dressed, do you?”

“No,” Harry says, but he doesn’t think Draco hears him.

“I looked in my wardrobe this afternoon and realised that I have a lot of jumpers, a few sets of dress robes, and nothing in between,” he says, darting an anxious glance at the house. “I had to go out and buy something new. I don’t want all those Weasleys looking at me and thinking I haven’t made an effort.”

“Let’s just go,” Harry says, because he has nothing helpful to say and he really doesn’t want to remind Draco of a time when the idea of impressing a Weasley would have made him laugh his snobby little head off. He grabs Draco’s hand and urges him towards the house. “It’s all going to be fine.”

They let themselves in at the front door and shed their coats within seconds. The house is warm with the bustle of red-headed people, many of whom call out to Harry and lift their glasses in welcome. Draco turns from hanging up his coat and Harry stares.

“What do you think?” Draco asks, indicating his fitted, charcoal grey trousers and white cotton shirt.

The fabric is crisp and clearly brand new, with a pale green pinstripe so subtle that it seems to play with Harry’s eyes. The top two buttons have been left undone, revealing pale skin and the edge of a collarbone that makes Harry’s spine feel weak. Draco’s eyes pin him with their uncertainty and he shakes himself, stepping out of the way to allow a grinning old lady to creak up the stairs.

“Looks good,” he says at last, and Draco laughs.

“I’ll take that.”

“Good,” Harry says, nudging him in the direction of the nearest door. “Let’s go and find some people.”

In the living room, they find several familiar faces, including Percy, Audrey, and Lucy, who are gathered around the Christmas tree, examining the decorations, Hermione, who is conducting a serious-looking discussion with Arthur, and Great Uncle Herbert, who descends on Harry with bristling white whiskers and confusing words of wisdom.

“Just nod and smile,” Harry whispers to Draco, allowing the old man to clasp his hand in papery palms and beam up into his face.

When he waves and disappears back into the sea of guests, they move on to the kitchen, where the
music is quieter and the smell of warm spices pervades the air. Molly is hurrying from oven to
table and back again, flustered and delighted in her sparkling red dress and flowery apron. At the
kitchen table, Fleur is dressed in soft blue silk, arranging little golden parcels on salad-lined
platters with her wand. She looks up and smiles, just as a chocolate Labrador puppy races in from
the garden and darts between Molly’s legs.

She catches her balance and saves the tray of vol-au-vents just in time. “Whose is that dog?” she
demands. “That’s the third time it’s almost made me drop something. Oh, hello, Harry!”

“Are we late?” Draco asks, looking around in bewilderment at the room full of people and the
frenzy of activity in the garden.

Molly laughs and kicks the oven door shut behind her. “No, dear, you’re right on time. It’s this
family. They just turn up whenever they feel like it. To be honest, I don’t know why we bother
putting a starting time on the invitations.”

Draco gazes at her in horror. “How on earth do you plan?”

“We plan for chaos,” Fleur says, and Molly laughs.

“That’s right. And never mind what time they turn up, they’ll get their supper when it’s ready,” she
says.

“Do you want some help?” Harry offers, placing his dessert on the counter with the others.

“Don’t be daft, Harry, go and enjoy yourself. I’ve got Fleur and Rose… somewhere, and I did have
Charlie, but he seems to have wandered off,” Molly says, glancing around as though Charlie might
have stuck himself to the ceiling to avoid buttering bread rolls. “If you see him, let him know I’ve
noticed, won’t you?”

Having promised to return Charlie to the kitchen, Harry and Draco wander back into the living
room, where they help themselves to mulled wine and allow the madness to carry them. They fuss
several dogs, an owl, and even a baby Kneazle, brought along by a little boy that might be a
nephew of someone on Arthur’s side of the family. Harry can never quite keep them all straight in
his head, but no one seems to care. The atmosphere is bright and cheerful and everyone is family;
even Draco, who stands out a mile in the ocean of red hair and freckles, is folded into the
festivities. Before long, Harry has lost track of him completely and has to work his way around the
room twice before he spots him by the kitchen door, deep in conversation with a glamorous
middle-aged woman in dusky pink velvet.

“I actually saw a retrospective in Geneva,” she is saying as Harry edges closer, voice raised against
the sound of the wireless, which someone seems to have turned up to ear-splitting volume.
“Stunning work. Such boldness, you know?”

Draco nods. “Her magical etchings are my favourite. I’ve got them in my hallway. Prints, of
course, but still.”

_Art_, Harry thinks, smiling to himself and deciding to continue his lap of the room. Draco is fine. He
knows how to socialise; it’s practically his job description, and in spite of all his anxiety, he seems
to be working the room with charisma and ease. Of course he is. Allowing himself to relax, Harry
refills his drink and chats to anyone who approaches him. As always, Ken is a popular guest,
clambering from shoulder to shoulder until he has hob-nobbed his way out of sight and Harry just
has to hope he’ll get the daft bugger back before the end of the night.

He is sitting on the windowsill, watching Hugo and Camille pretending to duel with candy canes, when Percy sits down beside him, pale fingers gripping a glass of firewhisky.

“Alright?” Harry asks, and Percy sighs.

“I heard that you left Wizards Unite,” he says. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out. With everything you’ve been through, I feel rather responsible. I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry nudges him with his elbow. “Hey, no…I don’t blame you for that. And you know… I think it did work out in the end. All those dates just helped me realise I was already mad about someone.”

Percy frowns. “Who?”

Harry smiles, gazing through the milling Weasleys to where Draco is standing with Teddy and Victoire, listening to their excitable conversation with a series of little nods. Percy follows his eyes and then turns to Harry, eyes wide.

“Oh! Goodness. Does he know?”


“Well… if you… of course. Merry Christmas,” Percy mumbles, and Harry leaves him on the windowsill with his thoughts.

He is quickly ambushed by Teddy and Victoire, who show him the Hogwarts newspaper and do a terrible job of pretending not to laugh at his picture. As he’d suspected at the time, the young photographer’s technique of Surprise! Flash! has resulted in an overexposed image with a blinking, startled subject, and god, he really does look old and tired. The accompanying article is rather good, and there a couple of decent pictures of the firework display, but Harry can’t quite let go of his portrait, even when Teddy and Victoire wander off in search of the Labrador puppy, last seen trying to chew the hem of Great Aunt Mildred’s robes.

“I don’t really look like that, do I?”

Draco hesitates. “Well, no, not any more.”

“What does that mean?”

“He means you’ve got some colour in your face at last,” Molly says, bustling past them and scanning the room. “It’s good, Harry. It means you’re healthy. Now, where on earth is Charlie?”

“Try the garden,” Hermione calls, and then peers into her wine glass. “Sorry, that was a bit loud.”

“Hermione, are you drunk?” Harry asks, grinning.

“Of course she isn’t,” Arthur says, refilling her glass and then his own. “She’s just happy.”

“The garden, is it?” Molly mutters, turning and heading back to the kitchen.
Harry follows her. “Er, do you want these fireworks before or after the food?”

Molly pauses. “How long will they last?”


“I always do a few fireworks at the Christmas party,” Harry says. “It’s tradition. It’s only a little one, maybe ten minutes?”

“Right. In that case, then, fireworks first, then food,” Molly decides, granting them a warm smile before setting her face and opening the back door. “Charlie!”

Intrigued, Harry steps out into the frosty garden, where he finds Charlie, along with Ron, George, Angelina, Ginny, and Serghei. At the sound of Molly’s voice, they turn towards the house with guilty faces, each of them clearly concealing something from view.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Ron blurts.

Draco smiles slowly. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t want to know,” Molly says, hands on hips. “All of you, in the kitchen, now. I need the big table setting up in the living room and all those platters put out before Harry starts his fireworks. Come on, all of you… except you, Angelina, dear. You can sit down.”

“What about Serghei?” Charlie protests.

“Serghei is part of the family now, and besides, he’s the best at animal-repelling charms,” Molly says briskly, poking her children back into the house. “I need a good strong field around the food while we’re outside. There are dogs and all sorts running around.”

“Would you like me to do something?” Draco offers.

“Yes, I’d like you to help Harry,” Molly says, just as the door closes behind her.

“Can I help Harry, too?” Angelina asks with a smile. “I don’t like to admit it, but I feel a bit lost.”

“You’ll get used to all this eventually.” Harry promises, and he conjures a third low chair for her alongside his and Draco’s. “In the meantime, have a seat.”

Angelina shrugs and lowers herself down among the long grasses, watching with interest as Harry sets out his stall. It’s a modest display in comparison to the ones he creates for the public, but he knows it will be appreciated just as much. The children tend to descend into raptures at the simplest shower of sparks, and they are already bouncing and pointing as they spill out into the garden, followed by the adults, some of whom are swaying from the effects of Molly’s mulled wine.

“Uncle Harry!” Rose calls, waving across the expanse of garden, and Harry waves back.

George’s face is a picture of confusion. “Angelina? What are you doing?”

“I’m helping!” she yells.
“Helping with what?”

She looks to Harry and he readies his wand for the first shell. “A countdown from five would be brilliant.”

Angelina nods, touching her wand to her throat. “Ready, everyone? In five, four, three, two, one…”

Harry lights the first shell, sending a vast, champagne coloured fountain pouring over the Burrow. Draco holds the cast without being asked, allowing Harry to add glistening bursts of red and green that twist into the shape of a wrapped present, tied with a ribbon that crackles across the night sky. Everyone at the other end of the garden applauds and cheers, and someone lets out a shrill wolf whistle that makes Angelina cover her ears. She tips back her head and grins as Harry follows the present with a stocking that seems to swing back and forth in an invisible breeze.

“And you do this every year?” she shouts over a series of loud bangs. “As well as all the big shows?”

“Yeah,” Harry shouts back. “Do you think I’m mad?”

“Completely,” she laughs. “I love it!”

“This is my first one of these, too,” Draco tells her, letting go of his spell so that Harry can have an empty sky for his big finale. “I’m starting to think that the best thing to do is let it all wash over you.”

Harry smiles, looking for Hugo and Camille as he sets off the last three shells in quick succession. He has a feeling they might enjoy this one.

“It’s Ken!” Hugo cries, grabbing Camille’s gloved hand and pointing it at the sky.

“And he has a Christmas hat!” she giggles.

“Where is your chameleon, actually?” Angelina asks, eyes trained on the shimmering image of Ken above her, complete with red and silver santa hat.

“He’s off with someone more interesting,” Harry says. “I don’t know who, but they’ve probably got red hair.”

“He’s very loyal,” Draco says, inhaling the scents of charcoal and magic. “I’m sure he’ll come back.”

“I’m not worried,” Harry says, vanishing the debris of his fireworks and allowing himself to be surrounded by family and friends, all of whom want to congratulate him at once.

He’s never found it easy to accept praise, but it’s always a little bit easier to swallow when it comes from people he’s known for years: people who have seen him as an awkward teenager, a reluctant warrior and a lonely but accomplished young man. These people are brothers, sisters, parents, cousins… they are strange and neurotic and wonderful, and they are his.

“That was lovely, Harry,” Molly says, hugging him tightly. “Well done to the helpers, too,” she adds, and then shouts, “Alright, everyone, the food is ready, so…”
She stops, watching the scramble for the house with exasperated resignation. After a moment, she follows the crowd back inside, and Angelina trails after her, leaving Harry and Draco alone in the garden. Within seconds, Ron joins them, carrying a plate of food and a cup of mulled wine. He is followed by Charlie, Serghei, George, and Ginny, all of whom seem to have gathered sandwiches and pastry treats in record time.

“Mum’s fussing over the desserts,” George says, stuffing a vol-au-vent into his mouth. “We’ve got ages.”

“Auntie Pip and Dad’s cousin—you know, the one with the pointy teeth—what’s his name?” Ginny says and then shrugs. “Anyway, the two of them are arguing over who brought which jelly, so she’s trying to sort that out.”

“Like I said, plenty of time,” George says with a grin.

“For what, exactly?” Draco asks.

“Did you start without me?” Angelina asks, emerging from the house with her plate piled high.

“You can eat,” Ginny says approvingly. “Excellent.”

“Somebody tell us what’s happening, please?” Harry sighs.

Serghei holds up a pinecone, tapered in shape and painted red. “Pinecone is happening.”

“And what are you going to do with it?” Draco asks, beginning to shiver in his thin shirt.

Harry wonders if he should fetch their coats, but he really doesn’t want to miss anything. After a moment’s indecision, he casts a soft warming charm around the entire garden. Ginny catches his eye and mouths something that looks a lot like ‘you soppy bastard’. He sticks his tongue out at her.

“I hide pinecone around,” Serghei explains, waving an arm at the garden and the woods beyond. “They look for it. We wait to see who wins.”

“Who?” Harry asks, just as Charlie whistles and the undergrowth parts to admit a line of small, trundling creatures.

“Gnomes,” Draco says, one eyebrow flickering.

“It’s alright and everything,” Ron promises. “They want to do it. We’ve promised every gnome who plays two cocktail sausages, and a packet of biscuits for the winner.”

“Very food-motivated, are they?” Draco asks.

“Oh, yeah,” Angelina says, moving her plate out of reach as the gnomes come crowding around her feet. “Where I grew up, you could get them to do little jobs for you if you fed them properly.”

“Where’s these sausages?” demands the largest gnome.

“Sausages, yes,” the others mumble, screwing up their potato-like faces.
“Sausage is after,” Serghei says. “Now, everyone not look, because I hide pinecone.”

Everyone turns to face the house. Ginny puts her plate down to conjure a row of little pointed hats, each in a different colour. Harry takes a sandwich while she isn’t looking.

“She won’t notice,” he says, when Draco gives him a questioning look. “What are we playing for, anyway?”

“Bragging rights, of course,” Charlie says.

“And…” Ginny prompts.

“And first dibs on the leftovers from Christmas dinner.”

Harry rubs his hands together. “I’m in. And so is Draco.”

“Only if I can have the silver hat for my gnome.”


“I wanted blue,” Ron complains, biting into a slice of pork pie.

It looks crispy and golden and delicious, and Harry really hopes there will be something left on the buffet table after all this is over.

“You should’ve been quicker,” Charlie says, picking up the blue hat and handing a second to his brother. “Orange, to match your hair.”

“And your hair. And pretty much everyone’s hair,” Ron points out, but he gives the hat to the nearest gnome, who puts it on with a scowl.

By the time all of the gnomes have been allocated their hats, Serghei is striding back through the wild grasses towards them. Harry makes a mental note of the direction from which he has come, intending to steer his gnome that way, and then abandons the idea. Serghei is clever, and more than that, he is crafty; he has probably walked all over the woods in an effort to throw them off track.

“What on earth are you thinking about?” Draco asks, touching his arm. “You look as though you’re planning a military operation. Will we be hexed if our gnomes fail to find the pinecone?”

Harry laughs. “It’s unlikely.”

“Are we all ready?” George asks, looking around. He turns to Serghei. “I think we’re good.”

Serghei clicks a button on his watch. “Alright. Release the gnomes!”

Harry steps back along with everyone else as the gnomes take off across the garden in all directions.

“Look at them running,” Draco says, bewildered. “Do they always run like that?”

“Like they might fall over at any moment?” Ron says. “Yeah. Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a gnome before.”
“I’ve seen a picture of one,” Draco says, watching the others creeping across the garden to watch their gnomes and yell encouragement. “We had gardeners at the Manor and now I live in London. Gnomes are rather thin on the ground.”

“That’s just weird,” Ron says.

He wanders across the frozen grass, gnawing on a chicken leg and casually tripping George’s gnome when it crosses his path.

“Cheating,” Draco gasps, and then stalks off up the garden, bypassing Ron and leaning into the hedgerow to take his own gnome to task.

“He’ll fit nice in here,” Serghei says. Harry turns.

“You mean Draco?”

Serghei leans against the house and checks his watch. “Yes. Molly say I am part of the family now. Draco will be this way also. Soon.” He smiles at Harry and shrugs one shoulder. “I know these things.”

“I believe you,” Harry says, smiling back.

“You should check your gnome,” Serghei advises with such solemnity that Harry hurries to join the others at the edge of the wood.

Ginny has spelled each coloured hat to glow in the darkness, and Harry follows the bobbing red light of his gnome among the vegetation, quickly realising that he is going in circles.

“You with the red hat, turn left!” he calls, hoping his gnome can hear him over the racket of everyone’s else’s instructions. “Head towards the oak tree! No, your other left!”

“Keep going, Gilbert!” Ginny yells, and Harry meets Draco’s eyes.

“Gilbert?” he whispers. “Seriously?”

“You see, there are Gilberts in the world,” Draco says with a smirk. “We are everywhere.”

“You already looked over there,” Ron sighs, and he wades into the grass to redirect his gnome, but it’s too late.

Angelina whoops as her gnome hurries out of the woods in a streak of purple light, pinecone clutched to his chest. He barrels into her shins and then falls onto his backside with a yelp, still looking as pleased as Harry has ever seen a gnome look when Angelina takes the pinecone and holds it aloft.

“Well done,” she tells the gnome, grinning. “I guess the bragging rights are mine.”

“Beginner’s luck,” Ginny teases. “Now you’ll have to come to Christmas dinner.”

“You were already invited,” George says quickly. “I just wanted to point that out.”
He takes the pinecone from her and holds it above her head like mistletoe, pressing his lips to her cheek with a loud smack.

“Such a romantic, my brother,” Ginny sighs.

“I’ll go and get the prizes,” Charlie says, noticing that all the gnomes have now returned and are peering up at them expectantly. “Good job, everyone.”

“Indeed. And now I am going inside before there is nothing left to eat,” Draco says. “Harry? Are you coming?”

Harry nods and follows him back to the house. This time, he relishes the warmth of the living room, stopping to hold his hands in front of the fire for a few moments before giving in to the lure of the buffet table. To his relief, there is plenty of food left, and he assembles a plate full of meats, cheeses, and little pastry things before decamping to a spare sofa, where Arthur is holding forth on steam locomotives and Hermione is nodding sagely.

Over at the coffee table, Rose is engrossed in a trivia game with several adult relatives and seems to holding her own quite well. Hugo is sleeping peacefully on a nearby armchair, arms around the tired-out Labrador puppy, while beside him, Camille has curled herself into a weary ball, one blue eye still very much open. Everything is quieter now, softer, and the sound of laughter and conversation wraps gently around Harry like a cloak. He sips at his third—fourth?—cup of wine and clears his plate in contented silence. Draco rests a hand on his thigh. Hermione peers at them over the top of her glass.

“You’ve been outside.”

Harry nods. “We have.”

“I know what you’ve been doing,” she says, squinting slightly. “Don’t think I don’t know.”

“Are you upset about the gnomes?” Draco asks. “It really was very fair. They seemed to enjoy themselves.”

“You know what, Draco? I wasn’t very happy. I thought… this is exploitationary… it’s… erm… it’s bad. But I’ve thought about it. And now I think it’s fine,” she says firmly. “Silly boys and their silly games. Well.”

“Ginny and Angelina were there, too,” Harry says, chewing on a smile. It’s quite heartening to see Hermione allowing herself to relax, and he knows he should enjoy it while he can.

“Ginny and Angela are very silly,” Hermione says. She leans forward with a conspiratorial expression. “When Ginny gets married, I’m going to tell so many stories about her. So many stories. But… don’t tell her I said that because otherwise she won’t ask me to be her… you know, her…”

“Maid of honour?” Harry suggests.

“Matron of honour, technically, as you’re already married,” Draco says, and Hermione groans.

“Matron? Oh, no. They have a Matron at the hospital. She’s the big nurse. I mean, she’s the bossy nurse. I can’t. Ginny will have to not get married.”
Harry grins. “Arthur, how many has she had?”

“Oh, well… one or two,” he says brightly. “It’s alright. It’s Christmas!”

“That’s right,” Hermione says. “Now listen. Draco, you look after Harry. He’s my best Harry and I love him. And Harry… where is Ken? I want to find out if he likes wine.”

Draco takes Harry’s hand and squeezes it tightly. He squeezes back, scanning the room for Ken and finding him with Molly, chomping down a piece of tomato and getting seeds all down her dress.

“I don’t know, Hermione,” he lies. “Maybe another time.”

“It’s just fruit, though, isn’t it?” she says, holding her glass up to the light. “He likes fruit.”

“I like trains,” Arthur offers, draining his glass. “Draco, do you like trains?”

Draco sets down his empty plate and nods gravely. “Of course.”

Arthur beams. “He’s going to be a good one, Harry. I think you should keep him.”

Harry glances at Draco, then at Hermione, who is fixing him with a blissful smile. “I will.”
Harry is in his kitchen, attempting to fish Ken’s blue pencil out of his cup of tea, when a large owl lands on his windowsill. He tenses, ready for battle, and then notices that the owl is carrying a red envelope with neat, gold lettering.

“I know you,” he mutters, recognising the owl at last and allowing it to hop onto the counter.

He takes the envelope and fishes a handful of treats from a drawer, then sits at the table and opens the envelope with Ken watching from his shoulder. This year, Seamus’s Christmas card features his family sitting around an open fire, and the little figures smile and hug each other in an endless loop. When Meili turns to look at her husband, Harry notices that she is pregnant, and he smiles. When he opens the card and reads Seamus’s scrawled news and good wishes, his smile doesn’t falter like it has in previous years. His friend’s happiness doesn’t leave him feeling alone; it knits itself into the patchwork blanket that is casque rubs from Ken, wine-drunk Hermione, fireworks and food on sticks and Draco’s lips on his skin. It’s everything that is good in the world, and Harry gazes at the card with utter contentment for quite some time until the realisation hits him and he swears with such force that Ken scuttles under the table.

“Fucking. Christmas. Cards,” he mutters, glancing at the clock with a groan. He grabs his coat and his address book and turns to the owl, which is still working on the pile of treats. “Fancy a job?”

Ten minutes later, Harry is walking out of the Leaky Cauldron with a list and a plan. He knows that appropriating someone else’s owl is a bit cheeky, but he’s pretty sure Seamus won’t mind if the bird makes a quick trip to put Draco off for an hour or so before beginning the long journey back to China.

Diagon Alley is stuffed with last-minute shoppers, but Harry weaves his way through them with ease. He knows exactly where he’s going, and it’s not to the card shop. It’s too late for that, and anyway, who wants a card when they can have a crackleball? Feeling quite pleased with himself, Harry walks into the chocolate shop at the top of the alley and orders a crunchy-melty-truffly treat for everyone in his address book, using the free owl-delivery service to send each one out with an identical but heartfelt note of apology for his disorganisation. The lady behind the counter seems startled at the size of his order but quickly recovers herself, calling her colleague from the back to help her with assembly.

“I want to pay for the delivery,” Harry says, holding out a small money bag. “I know it’s free but I
feel like I’m abusing the system. It’s not your fault I forgot to do my cards on time.”

“It’s free,” the second lady says flatly. “If you really want to, stick that in the charity pot. We’re
doing a collection for the homeless this year.”

“Done,” Harry says, emptying the coins into the pot. “Thank you. Have a lovely Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” calls the tall lady with the colourful scarf. “Be careful!”

Harry smiles to himself, tucking away his address book and pulling out his list. He still has so
many presents left to buy, and it’s difficult to know where to start. What he really wants is a cup of
Jim and Lorna’s spicy hot chocolate, but he doubts he’ll find them in Diagon Alley at this time of
day. In the end, he settles for a cup of tea, sipping it as he wanders in and out of shops in search of
inspiration. Before long, he has managed to find gifts for almost all his family members and is left
with the more challenging recipients.

Keen to thank them for defending him in his hour of need, Harry attempts to show his appreciation
to Glenda, Jim, and Lorna with extra thoughtful gifts, in the end, selecting a gift card from Magical
Mechanicals for a full service on a spider-legged food van, and two pairs of Ache-No-More Magi-
Cushion shoes that the sales assistant assures him are the last word in comfort for people who
stand up all day (‘And I should know, sir. I never get a minute’s rest in this place’).

Draco, of course, is a problem all of his own. Harry has bought him presents before; bits and pieces
on his birthday, edible things at Christmas, and now he thinks about it, far more things than he has
ever bought for Ron or any of his other friends. Deciding that it might be best not to think about
that, Harry takes refuge in the Magical Menagerie, where he buys fruity rings and skittery toys for
Ken, as well as a bag of crunchy treats for Ron and Hermione’s cat, just in case he feels left out.

Back out in the street, he tries to ignore the rising panic and focus on what Draco likes. He knows
Draco. He’s still the same man. He likes food and art and fireworks. He likes… the night time.

Harry sighs. It’s no good. Everything’s different now. Food is too impersonal. Art is… art is very
nice, but Harry knows fuck all about it. What he knows about is fireworks. And that’s… he stops,
staring at the mannequins in the window of Madam Malkin’s without really seeing them. It’s a
thought. Suffused with a new sense of purpose, he returns to number twelve, revelling in the fact
that he can now Apparate and Disapparate with ease.

Draco arrives just as he is dumping his bags on the kitchen table. Harry looks at the clock and
wonders how he thought he might have time to make a start on his gift when he has apparently
taken forever to do his shopping. Still, he’ll find the time. He’ll have to.

“Shiny things,” Draco says, peering into the nearest bag. “May I have a look?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, and then frowns. “No. We’ve got loads to do. Leave my shopping alone.”

“You’re so strict,” Draco mutters, but he allows Harry to prod him down the stairs to the powder
room. “Where’s Ken this morning? Also, whose was that owl?”

“Ken was in the kitchen when I left him; I don’t know where he is now. The owl belongs to
Seamus and Meili. I was just borrowing it,” Harry says, spelling on the lights and then turning to
face Draco.
By now, he’s ready for the thin t-shirt and the ruffled hair, but it doesn’t really help. Worse than that, Draco now seems to be aware of the effect that he’s having on Harry and his slow smile is absolutely ruinous. Harry looks away, gathering his sketches and flipping through them in sequence. There really is a lot to do, but they are making good progress, and will continue to do so if only he can stop his mind from wandering.

“Harry, are you trying not to look at me?”

“I’m not trying to not look at you,” Harry says, and sighs. “That didn’t make sense.”

“You don’t make sense,” Draco says, slipping his fingers into Harry’s belt loops and tugging gently.

Harry lets himself look. Draco catches his breath, and all good intentions are lost. Harry presses close, kissing Draco with fingers twisted into his hair. He is on fire, every nerve ending seeming to glitter as Draco’s hands creep under his t-shirt and they share a sigh that goes straight to Harry’s cock.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispers, words lost against Draco’s neck as he presses his mouth to warm, citrus-scented skin.

When he reaches for another kiss, Draco holds him gently at arm’s length.

“Have you any idea how much we still have to do?” he says, lifting an eyebrow.

“Was that supposed to be me?” Harry demands.

Draco just grins, folding himself onto his chair and picking up the roll of striped paper.

“That was supposed to be me,” Harry mumbles, but he gathers himself and takes his seat, deciding not to look at Draco while he tries to breathe like a normal person. “What is wrong with you? Why do you make me feel like…?”

“Like?” Draco asks, and Harry wants to kick him. Hard.

“Like I’ve taken leave of my senses,” he says crossly, opening a jar of black powder. “Like I might explode if I don’t take you upstairs and—”

“Yes, and you’ll stop right there if you want me to produce anything decent today,” Draco interrupts, and when Harry glances at him, he is thrilled to realise that he is not suffering alone.

Draco’s eyes meet his for a breathless moment, and then he focuses hard on the roll of paper in his hands. Harry watches his strong, pale fingers as he works the end free, and then looks away. Display, he tells himself firmly. Display, display, display. In two days time. Not finished. Focus.

“Are you talking to me or yourself?” Draco asks, sounding amused.

Harry holds his hand out for the paper, cringing silently. “Neither. Both. Shut up.”

Draco laughs. Harry pokes him with the roll of paper. It doesn’t help.
Somehow, they make it through the afternoon, working right up until the moment they have to leave and managing to complete almost half the shells in spite of the tension between them that only seems to intensify with each moment that passes. They walk around the stalls and vans in near-silence, Harry gripping his case and Ken gripping his coat collar, as though he, too, can feel the thing that is shredding his owner’s nerves to pieces.

Harry thinks it might feel good… it might feel brilliant… but he doesn’t know any more, and every time he tries to sneak a glance at Draco, he finds him looking right back, eyes curiously dark and warm with longing. He buys a stick full of crispy roast potatoes from Glenda and answers all her questions without really paying attention. He thinks they’re very nice, but he doesn’t really taste them. Draco opts for hot ice cream with a hint of whisky that floats into Harry’s nostrils on the cold wind and startles him.

“That smells nice,” he says.

Draco nods vaguely. “Mm.”

“I’m going to set up my thing.” Harry points to the area Selwyn has secured for him. “Are you coming?”

“Mm,” Draco says, and behind them, Lorna laughs.

“Draco’s lost for words! Someone ought to take a picture.”

“I heard that,” Draco mutters, but follows Harry over to their corner and flicks his wand to create two chairs that are quite a bit bigger than usual.

Harry pulls him down into a seated position and takes his hand, grasping it tightly and watching the other creatives until his name is called, at which point he pulls himself together with a massive effort and somehow puts on the performance of his life. With Draco at his side and a surge of anticipation in his veins, his spells are powerful and his reactions sharp, making each image and transition shockingly crisp in the night sky. By the time the last sparks have faded away, his heart is pounding and the applause from the crowd seems to spark and echo through his body.

“That was very impressive,” Draco says.

Harry turns to him with a smile. “It was you.”

Draco bites his lip gently. Lets out an unsteady breath. “Perhaps it was us,” he suggests, packing Harry’s things into his case and closing it with a click. “Come on.”

Harry checks for Ken, finding him in his left coat pocket, and then catches up with Draco, startled to find himself being dragged behind Glenda’s van. Draco pushes him against the cold metal and kisses him breathless, icy fingers framing his jaw and urging his mouth open. Their tongues brush together and Harry gasps, grabbing fistfuls of herringbone coat and hauling Draco impossibly closer. When they pause, lips still touching, Harry laughs.

“That someone is going to see us,” he points out.

Draco sighs against his cheek, coffee and whisky and sugar. “You may not have noticed this, but the majority of the attention tends to be focused on the other side of the vehicle, where the food
“Yeah, alright,” Harry concedes, leaning back against the van and grabbing a convenient ledge for support, “but if we... fuck it!” he hisses, leaping out of the way as all eight metal legs shoot out and the whole thing lurches several feet into the air.

“Who’s messing with my legs?” Glenda shouts, easily making herself heard above the surprised laughter of her customers.

Harry and Draco exchange glances. “Shall we—?”

“Yes!” Harry agrees, wrapping an arm around Draco’s waist and Disapparating before Glenda can return her van to the ground.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” Draco asks, peering at Harry’s bathroom in confusion.

“Er, no. That was my first Side-Along since my magic went weird,” Harry says. “Could have been worse.”

Draco catches sight of himself in the mirror and sighs. “I’m covered in firework stuff.”

“Occupational hazard,” Harry says, unbuttoning the herringbone coat and slipping his hands inside. “Do you want a shower?”

“Yes,” Draco says, kissing Harry so slowly that he aches all over. “No.”

“No?” Harry asks, taking his hand and pulling him out into the hallway. He places Ken gently on a nearby platform without even seeming to wake him up.

“No,” Draco agrees, allowing himself to be led into the bedroom. “Yes to no. You know what I mean.”

“I think I do,” Harry says, lighting just one lamp that bathes the room with a gentle glow.

Draco stands in the middle of the room in his unbuttoned coat, looking so open and uncertain that Harry can barely stand it. He has never wanted anything or anyone so much in his life, and he can’t wait another minute. He closes the distance between them in two strides, capturing Draco’s mouth and pushing his coat to the floor.

“I like that coat,” Draco mumbles without breaking the kiss, and Harry grins.

“I like all your clothes, but they’re still coming off,” he says, catching up both woollen and cotton hems and pulling them up over Draco’s head as one.

His coat and shirt soon join them on the floor and Harry sighs into the kiss at the first brush of Draco’s bare skin against his own. He’s surprisingly warm where they touch, and when Harry presses his mouth to his shoulder, Draco’s breath hitches in his chest. Harry kisses him again, gasping when cool fingers slide inside his waistband. Already impossibly hard, he closes his eyes and hangs on when the touch makes his cock jerk and leak against his stomach. Draco’s fingertips slide over his slicked skin and he smiles; Harry can feel it. His knees begin to weaken and he pulls Draco to the bed, falling back onto his soft quilts as they discard the rest of their clothes in breathless silence.
“Sorry,” Harry whispers, “I didn’t want to fall over.”

“Very wise,” Draco says, settling on his side and stretching out, all long limbs and beautiful angles.

Harry nods, trailing his fingers over hipbones that make heat flare in the pit of his stomach. Now that he’s allowed to touch, he can’t stop, and he can sense Draco’s amusement without looking at his face. He wants to look at his face, though, and he meets Draco’s eyes just as he closes his fist around his cock, watching grey darken almost to black and sharing his caught breath. There is something so intimate, so indecent, about the touch, that Harry almost feels embarrassed—this is Draco, for god’s sake, his best friend, his… and Harry is stroking him into a frenzy, making him whimper and lift his hips into his fist. His coat is on Harry’s floor, and Harry’s black powder is under the fingernails that are now grasping at his bedclothes.

“Oh, god,” Harry whispers, pressing his palm to his cock.

Draco opens his eyes. “Please stop. I mean, don’t stop, but…” He stares down at Harry’s hand, still stroking over him in a steady rhythm. “Oh, good, I’m incoherent.”

Harry laughs, burying his face in Draco’s neck. His nerves dissolve into nothing, and all he feels is warmth and desire. He loves this man, and it’s as simple as falling. All he has to do is let go.

“I’m not fit for making any speeches, if that helps,” he says, kissing Draco with slow intensity and allowing the movement of his hand to slow along with it.

“A bit,” Draco whispers.

“I’m pretty close already,” Harry admits, relieved when Draco nods.

“We’ve waited a long time,” he says, shifting onto his back and pulling Harry close. He trails a hand down Harry’s back and gazes up at him, pale hair falling into one eye. “I might have pictured this once or twice.”

Harry bites down on a groan and grabs a bottle of oil from his bedside drawer. He slides a slick palm over Draco’s cock, relishing his hiss of pleasure, then strokes him open with slippery fingers. Breath coming quickly now, he pushes himself into his own fist, staring down at the man below him and trying not to imagine himself in the same position. There is so much, so much he wants to do, and if he thinks about it, this is going to be over before it begins.

“Harry,” Draco says, and there’s an insistent hand on his hip. “Please?”

Harry swallows hard and pushes himself inside, letting out a rough moan at the tight heat that grips him. Draco’s eyes are closed, but he digs his nails into Harry’s buttocks and wraps his legs around his back, pulling him deeper and crying out when Harry starts to move.

“Oh, fuck, we should have done this a long time ago,” Draco breathes, tipping his head back and stretching into Harry’s strokes.

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Harry gasps. “You have to let things happen at the right time. If we’d figured this out years ago… or did you mean we should have done this in the basement earlier?”
Draco laughs, opening his eyes. “Do you want to put the world to rights, or do you want to make me come all over myself?”

“Fuck,” Harry whispers, eyes flitting from Draco’s face to his cock and back again. “Don’t expect me to last if you’re going to say things like that.”

Draco says nothing. He just smiles, forcing Harry to hold eye contact even as the friction becomes too much and he comes hard, flushing and swearing and hanging onto the riptide of perfect relief even when he starts to become light-headed. Breathing hard, he pushes himself into Draco and presses a palm to his cock until he tenses and spills over his stomach in long, intense pulses. The sight of it is so painfully erotic that Harry wants to start all over again, but fatigue gets the best of him and he flops onto the bed beside Draco, sticky and satisfied.

Draco’s fingers find his in the rumple of quilts and hold on tight.

“We definitely should have done that sooner.”

“I thought it was worth the wait,” Harry says, mouth tugging into a smile.

“Oh, absolutely. Where the fuck is my wand?”

“Coat pocket? Maybe?”

“Ah,” Draco sighs, and Harry picks up his wand from the bedside.

He casts a couple of cleaning charms with a slightly shaky hand. “Better?”

“Yes. I love you,” Draco murmurs, shifting closer and resting his head on Harry’s shoulder.

“Love you,” Harry whispers, inhaling the scent of his hair and deciding not to care how soppy that makes him. He feels great and he doesn’t give a shit.

“I can’t decide if I want to fuck you into the mattress or have something to eat,” Draco says with a contemplative sigh.

Harry laughs, but there’s a ripple of arousal in the pit of his stomach that he can’t ignore.

“I think it’s a case of which you want first,” he says, feeling bold.

Draco smiles and stretches lazily. “I’m pretty hungry.”

Harry looks at his bedside clock. “It’s only just gone midnight. We could go to Nighthawks.”

Draco leans up on one elbow. “Yes. We could have a very early breakfast. They might even have proper breakfast things on their new menu.”

Intrigued by this idea and suddenly ravenous, Harry gets up and gets dressed, while Draco watches him from the bed.

“I like this room,” he says, when Harry helpfully collects his clothes and hands them to him. “It has a rather nice feeling to it, even if it does smell of fruit.”
“Everything in this house smells of fruit,” Harry points out. “Maybe you can show me your bedroom.”

Draco pulls on his jumper and shrugs. “If you like, but my house isn’t like this. It’s just somewhere I live. This is a proper home.”

You’re welcome to stay, Harry thinks, surprised and yet not surprised at how easily Draco slots into his life, or perhaps how both of their lives slot together. There’s no need to rush things, even if Draco is buttoning up his coat and giving him a look that makes his heart feel full to bursting.

“Let’s go,” he says, letting Draco make the jump to the alley beside Nighthawks.

The café is quiet, allowing them to sit in their favourite booth and peruse the new menu to the sound of laid back jazz. Harry is relieved to see that Olivia is not present, as he has left Ken sleeping on his shelf and would hate to disappoint either one of them. To Draco’s delight, there are several breakfast dishes on offer, and he orders maple-cured bacon with pancakes, while Harry opts for a stack of waffles.

“Ron would be horrified with all this,” he says. “He’d say ‘that’s not breakfast, that’s dessert’.”

“It’s American. It’s noir. They couldn’t go around serving fried eggs and beans, could they?”

“They used to serve pastries,” Harry points out.

Draco scowls. Or, at least, he tries to, but his eyes are warm and his lips seem to want to tug into a smile. “Don’t try to make sense of it. Just enjoy it.”

Harry laughs. “Yeah, that’s how I think about you these days.”

“I make plenty of sense. However, you should feel free to enjoy me,” Draco says, just as the waiter sets down their plates.

Harry is impressed to note that his bored expression doesn’t even flicker. “Behave yourself. I’m going to eat my waffles now.”

Draco blinks, stares at him for a moment, and then starts cutting into his bacon. Harry gazes at his plate and lets out a happy sigh. His waffles are golden and perfect, served with a side of raspberries, blueberries and strawberries, and a little jug of maple syrup. Nothing has ever looked so delicious, and when he takes a bite of everything together, he wants to groan out loud.

“Is it good?” Draco asks, looking amused.

“Yes,” Harry says, licking maple syrup from his bottom lip. “Very.”

“Is it good because it’s good, or is it good because… you know?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have anything to compare it to,” Harry admits. “I’ll have to order it again when… under different circumstances, and see if it tastes the same.”

“Science,” Draco approves, spearing a piece of pancake on his fork. “What time do you want to start work tomorrow?”
Harry touches Draco’s fingertips on the table top. “As soon as we wake up, I think.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“If you like.”

“What will Ken say?”

Harry picks up his coffee cup. “How do you feel about face mango?”
Ken does not drop any fruit on Draco’s face as he sleeps, but he does crawl onto his chest well before sunrise and stare at him until he wakes up. Harry, who has definitely not been watching both of them in contented silence, definitely does not laugh when Draco startles and swears.

“Swivel-eyed menace,” he mutters, sitting up in bed and raking his hair out of his face.

Ken peers up at him with his mouth open. Draco frowns and then reflects the expression back to him, an action that leaves the chameleon so confused that he scuttles down the bedclothes and out of the room.

“You’ll get used to it,” Harry says.

Draco settles back down onto his pillow and presses his mouth to Harry’s shoulder. His warm exhalation sends a gentle shiver over the skin, and Harry smiles against Draco’s ruffled hair.

“Why am I awake when it’s still dark?” he mumbles.

“It’s December?” Harry suggests. “Ken was looking at you? I was looking at you… a bit?”

“I could feel it,” Draco says, amused. “I can always feel it.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not the worst way to wake up.”

Harry laughs, and it only feels natural to pull Draco as close as possible and kiss him with slow dedication until the first pink streaks of light begin to creep over their skin.

“Tea? Coffee?” he offers, leaving the bed with a pang of reluctance.

“Now?”

“If we want to finish in time for tonight, yes,” Harry says, putting on his bathrobe and hanging back in the doorway for a response.
“Coffee,” Draco sighs. He turns onto his stomach and groans into the pillow. “Please.”

Harry walks down the stairs to find Ken on the kitchen windowsill, peering out into the sunrise with his front feet pressed to the glass. As he waits for the coffee to brew, he looks out, too, admiring the soft colours of the sky and scratching Ken under his chin. When he returns with the cups, Draco is also inspecting the sunrise, standing at the bedroom window and wearing nothing but Harry’s date shirt. Having been inexpertly spelled several different colours, the shirt has now taken on a muddy shade of green, and the stripes have become strangely distorted. It’s an ugly thing, but somehow Draco makes it look good, and Harry has no idea how he does it.

“I found it on the chair,” Draco says, turning and accepting a steaming cup of coffee. He glances down at the shirt, which he hasn’t bothered to button. “I think there’s something wrong with it.”

Harry snorts. “It’s my date shirt,” he explains, feeling wonderfully light at the realisation that he never has to wear it again. “It wasn’t brilliant before I started messing with it, and now it looks a bit like pond slime.”

“It’s not really you, is it?” Draco says.

“No. I’m not sure I was being me when I was wearing it,” Harry admits.

“We could vanish it,” Draco says, shrugging out of the shirt and throwing it onto the bed. Now completely naked, he continues to stand with his back to the window, apparently quite happy to give one of Harry’s neighbours a heart attack. “Or burn it?”

Harry laughs, but he rescues the shirt and folds it carefully. “Sometimes you have to hold onto these things,” he says, opening Sirius’s chest and tucking the shirt away, back where it came from.

“As a reminder?”

“Yeah.”

Draco sits on the edge of the bed and frowns. “You miss that scar, don’t you?”

Harry’s hand goes to his chest, feeling for the marks he knows are no longer there. He sighs. “Yeah. I’ve still got this one, obviously.” he says, tracing the faint lines under his fringe with his fingers. “It’s not the same. Not my mistake.”

“Maybe I can help you make some new mistakes,” Draco says, small smile sending little rushes of excitement under Harry’s skin, promises of adventures yet to come.

Harry grins. “I think a wise man would call them ‘experiences’.”

“Are you a wise man?” Draco asks, sipping his coffee.

“Yes. And the wise man sayeth, put on ye clothes and get ye to the basement,” Harry says, pulling on his jeans and frowning. “Or something like that.”

“The wise man needs to learn some manners,” Draco says, but he sets down his cup and starts to get dressed anyway. “It can’t be more than six in the morning.”
“It’s nearly half past eight.”

“In which case, I’m going to need more coffee.”

Deciding that this is an entirely reasonable request, Harry returns to the kitchen and makes a whole pot, plus a stack of buttered toast. The combined aromas of bitter and savoury draw Draco down the stairs as though on a string, and he helps himself to a slice and a cup.

“Second breakfast,” he says with a significant smile, and Harry makes a mental note to look through his DVD collection for the third instalment of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

“I should have done mushrooms,” Harry says, though he’s very happy with hot toast, and between them, they reduce the stack to crumbs within minutes.

Carefully, they wash their hands clean of buttery smudges and descend into the basement. Harry is as ready to work as he thinks he’s going to get, driven into action by the very real sense of urgency that is tonight’s show. The basement is dark and cold, even with the lamps lit and multiple layers of clothing, but he’s just going to have to deal with it; both of them are. The stack of completed shells is impressive, but there are many more still to assemble, and the fuses, always tricky, are still to be made.

“We’ll finish it,” Draco says, arranging himself on his chair and gesturing for Harry to join him. “We have time. I promise not to distract you, Harry. I know how important this is.”

Lifted by this little show of solidarity, Harry sits down and reaches for his next page of annotated sketches.

“Thank you,” he says, glancing at Draco’s sharp profile. He is already working, lips pressed together in concentration as he slices into the striped paper with his wand.

“Don’t look at me, look at your work,” he murmurs, and Harry smiles.

“Sorry.”

He folds himself into a comfortable position and sets about creating the first of many, many fuses. Each one must be impregnated with an incendiary potion of his own making, before being individually coated in layers of magic so fussy that Harry almost always ends up with a headache. This time is no exception, and by the time he is halfway through his task, a cloud of tension has begun to form behind his eyes. He pauses, rubbing at his temples and watching Draco, who is measuring black powder into a row of shells with agonising precision.

He looks at the clock and tries not to sigh, but the sound comes out without his permission, and Draco looks up.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. My head hurts. Do you think you could do that a little bit faster?”

Draco’s face flickers with irritation. “Do you want it done fast or do you want it done properly?”

“Both, ideally,” Harry says, and immediately wishes he hadn’t. He’s not being fair and he knows it, but now Draco’s eyes are full of challenge and he is holding onto the shell in his hands a little bit
too tightly. Harry cringes. “Okay, I’m being a bit… can you be careful with that, please?”

Draco relaxes his grip on the shell but he continues to stare at Harry. “I’m being careful. I’m being exact. I’m going as fast as I can, Harry, but you seem to be forgetting something—I’m not as good at this as you. I’m not as fast. There’s only so many of these fucking things I can make without a break because I don’t want to make a mistake and mess this up for you, so if you could stop looking over my shoulder, that would be very helpful.”

Harry stares at him, stung. He’s right. He’s completely right. Draco is sitting here, has spent the last few days sitting here, working his arse off to help Harry, and all he’s doing is burying him in the pressure that he’s created for himself. Draco is doing a fantastic job, and he’s not doing it because it’s his job to make fireworks; he’s doing it because he loves Harry, and Harry is being an absolute wanker in return. His head pulses with pain and he probably deserves it.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Draco starts measuring again. “It’s alright. I was being a bit dramatic.”

“No, you were right. You’re doing really well and I’m grateful… I’m just panicking, and I don’t know why,” Harry admits. “If it’s not finished, it’s not finished. It’s not the end of the world.”

Draco gives him a sharp look. “It’s going to be finished.”

Harry smiles wearily against his hands. “How do you know?”

“Because we’re both extremely stubborn,” Draco says. “Because you are very good at what you do, and because I refuse to let little packets of exploding powder get the best of me.”

Harry grins, kisses the corner of Draco’s mouth and gets to his feet.

“For stubbornness!” he calls, running up the stairs and returning a few minutes later with a bottle of painkilling potion and two cups of coffee.

“Are you sure?” Draco says, eyeing the cups uncertainly.

“Open,” Harry urges, producing a very long straw and tucking one end into Draco’s mouth.

He places the other end in the cup and fixes it in place with a spell, along with a second to ensure that the liquid has no other means of escape. There might not be time for a proper coffee break, but this way they can caffeinate and work at the same time. Feeling rather pleased with himself, he gulps down the potion and then settles himself with his own straw.

“I don’t think this is going to catch on,” Draco mutters around his straw, but he sucks up a mouthful of coffee anyway, returning to his task with a crooked little smile on his face.

“Everyone will want one,” Harry mumbles, applying himself to his fuses with renewed vigour.

Draco makes a small sound of amusement and then the basement falls into near-silence, the only sounds coming from rustling paper, clanking instruments and whispered spells. Harry’s back is stiff and his fingers are soon sore from pinching and twisting, but he pushes on, glancing at Draco every now and then to see him measuring and sucking quite contentedly. When the last completed shell is added to the pile and checked off the list, Harry collapses back in his chair, unsure whether...
he wants to laugh or fall asleep for a thousand years.

“I told you we’d do it,” Draco says, flipping open his pocket watch with a weary smile. “And it’s only half past six.”

Harry groans. “You know we have to be at the beach for seven, don’t you?”

“Plenty of time.” Draco rises and stretches, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet. “Do you mind if I use your shower? I can clean these clothes with a spell, but I think I’ll need hot water for all this,” he says, holding out his powder-smudged hands.

“I can help,” Harry offers, leading the way up the stairs and into the bathroom. “It’ll be more efficient.”

“No, it won’t,” Draco laughs, “but I think I’d like it all the same.”

Harry turns on the shower, shedding his dirty clothes as the bathroom slowly fills with steam. He follows Draco into the glass cubicle and pulls him under the hot water, sighing with relief when the pounding stream soaks his hair and sweeps away the last traces of his headache. He stands completely still for as long as he can, arms wrapped around Draco and mouth pressed to his wet skin. He thinks he could quite happily stay right here for the rest of the evening, display or no display, but the thought is pushed aside by a wriggle of guilt.

“I’m sorry I was such a wanker,” he says, and Draco pulls back to regard him, water-darkened hair dripping into his face.

“Stop it. You were angry because you were worried, I do understand that,” he says, resting his hands on Harry’s hips. “It matters.”

“What does?” Harry asks, catching his breath as Draco’s thumbs skate over his sensitive skin.

“Your work. You. Us. It matters,” Draco says, and then he’s sinking to his knees and sliding his hot mouth over Harry’s cock before he really knows what’s happening.

Within seconds, Harry is fully hard and gasping as Draco’s tongue flickers over him and his hands grip Harry’s hips, pushing him against the cold tiles. Harry tries to watch, wanting to see everything, but when his head starts to spin, all he can do is close his eyes and try to stay upright. The water hammers against his chest and shoulders and he’s almost too hot and too cold at the same time; he reaches for Draco and finds his sharp jaw with his fingertips, tracing it gently and feeling the moment when Draco tenses and sighs around him, finding his own release in his fist. The sensation is too much for Harry and he loses himself in Draco’s mouth, jerking his hips and letting out a soft moan that seems to dissolve into the steam.

Harry slides down to sit on the warm shower base, ducking his head under the water to kiss Draco with gentle languor.

“We’re going to be late,” he says, and Draco just laughs. “What?”

“I lied,” he says, reaching for Harry’s bottle of shower gel. “It was only six o’clock when we finished.”

Still feeling slightly hazy, Harry frowns. “Why?”
“Because now you have half an hour longer than you thought. You were tense. I thought it would be good for you,” Draco explains, sniffing the bottle. “This smells like you. What is it?”

“I’m not tense any more,” Harry says, feeling as though he could stretch out under the shower and just let the water rain down over him. “I don’t know what’s in it. It’s my green shower gel.”

Amused, Draco pours some out into his hand and lathers it on his own chest. Harry bats his hand away and takes over, fixing Draco with a serious expression.

“It’ll be more efficient this way.”

Draco lets him get on with it, and though Harry’s way is definitely not more efficient, they are still able to pack both displays into the case and Apparate to the beach before seven o’clock. Glenda, Jim, and Lorna are already there, setting up their vans on the shifting pebbles, and Selwyn waves to them from the water’s edge, scuttling inland when the tide swishes at his feet. Harry waves back, hoping he’ll be pleased with the magically-enhanced clipboard he’ll be getting for Christmas this year. Feeling hopeful, Harry finds his spot and sets out both lines of shells while Draco walks down to the water and lets Ken snip his toes at the gentle spray.

The sea air is bracing, everything it touches seeming to glitter with frost. Harry inhales it deeply, tasting the salt along with the intriguing scents from the great number of food stalls that line the sea wall. He and Draco inspect each one, finding festive food of all kinds, along with stalls selling ornaments, clothing and charcoal portraits for five Sickles and a smile. Tonight’s music comes from a large lady in a sparkly silver dress, who is currently warming up with her backing band and promises to be ‘the ultimate in festive soul’, according to the banner that flaps above her makeshift stage.

“Can I get the intro to ‘Please Come Home for Christmas’, again, boys?” she asks, and her band launches into an old song that Harry knows well.

He listens to the singer’s powerful voice and lets the bustle of the stallholders and performers drift around him, realising as though for the first time that tonight isn’t just the last event in the advent schedule, it’s Christmas Eve. He’s been so caught up in Draco and racing to complete his display that the spirit of the season has almost passed him by. Now, looking around at the haze of lights and jumpers with bells on them and brandy-soaked everything, he has no idea how it could have happened, but he is determined to seize the magic in the air and hold onto it tightly.

He grabs Draco’s hand, catching sight of the lit tree and nativity scene on the promenade.

“Come on.”

“What are we doing?” Draco asks, but he allows himself to be dragged up the slipway and onto the icy cobbles of the seafront.

“I want to walk around with you and look at Christmas stuff,” Harry says. He runs his finger along a frosted railing and then tucks his hand into his pocket. “Is that weird?”

“No more so than usual,” Draco says, looking at the slippery, uneven ground and taking careful steps. “I always wonder why Muggles have these little boxes at Christmas. I suspect it’s something to do with that baby.”
Harry watches him peering into the nativity scene and grins. “Yeah, I’d say it’s something to do with that baby.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“No, but I don’t think now is the time to explain the story of the birth of Jesus,” Harry says.

“Oh, him.” Draco says, going to touch the wooden baby and then appearing to think better of it. “Maybe another time.”

“Maybe next Christmas,” Harry says, and then wonders if he shouldn’t have.

“Alright.”

Harry smiles, relief washing over him and coating the next few minutes in a blissful haze. They walk along the seafront, fingers threaded together, examining the Christmas lights in the shop windows and discussing the charms Selwyn might have used to persuade curious Muggles away from the beach. When they return, Glenda is writing on her chalkboard and Jim is stirring two cauldrons of steaming liquid at once.

“Mulled wine and cinnamon hot chocolate,” he says, as Harry sniffs the air. “Can I tempt you?”

Conscious of his upcoming displays, Harry opts for hot chocolate. It is rich and spicy, sending warmth spreading out across his chest with the first sip. Lorna hurries past him and back into the van, pulling a woollen hat down over her ears.

“You wouldn’t believe how much they charged me for this thing, but I was just so cold,” she says, pressing her hands to Jim’s neck and making him jump. “Harry, are you all sorted? Two displays tonight!”

“We’re ready,” he promises, and Lorna’s eyes dart from him to Draco and back again.

“Hello, loves,” Glenda calls before she can say anything. “I’ve got turkey balls with stuffing centres, if you’d like to ask me how they stay on the sticks?”

“Turkey balls?” Harry repeats, frowning, and then sighs. “Oh. Balls of turkey. Not… okay.”

“I wonder if I should have called them something else,” Glenda says.

“Do turkeys have balls?” Jim asks.

“I don’t think so,” Draco says, but Glenda is already wiping the words from her board.

“Right, Harry, what should I call them?” she asks.

“Why me?”

“Because you started it,” Draco says brightly. “It’s your fault.”

“Okay… what about turkey globes? Turkey… nuggets?” Harry suggests, wrinkling his nose. “Sorry, Glenda.”
“Turkey spheres?” Lorna tries.


“I’ll have one,” Draco says. “If you can explain how it stays on the stick.”

“Back in a minute,” Harry says, spotting the announcer over at a stall completely given over to Christmas puddings.

He jogs across the pebbles, slowing down when Ken grips onto his ear in protest. The man turns and grants Harry a beatific smile.

“Hello, Harry. How are you?”

“Great, thanks, you?”

“I’m about to buy a very large Christmas pudding. All is well with the world.”

Harry smiles. “I was wondering if I could ask for a small favour.”

He rejoins the others just as the event opens and people begin to spill onto the beach. Draco lowers his turkey sphere on a stick and frowns.

“Where have you been?”

“Nowhere. Not doing secret things,” Harry says.

“Well, now I’m intrigued.”

“Harry?” someone calls uncertainly, and he turns around.

“Samar?”


Harry grins. “I’m… doing a lot better,” he says. “Draco, this is Samar. We met through Wizards Unite, believe it or not. Samar, this is Draco.”

Samar’s eyes go wide as Draco shakes his hand. He looks at Harry and laughs. “So…?”

“Whatever he’s told you about me is completely untrue,” Draco says, eyes bright with humour. “He is, however, rather stuck with me now.”

“Oh, wow, good for you,” Samar says, smiling again. “I’m working at moving on. Taking time, and all that. I’m trying to figure out how to do things by myself again.”

“You look happier,” Harry says.

“You helped a lot. Look, I’m not going to get in your way all night, but maybe we could get coffee again some time?” He darts a nervous glance at Draco. “Friends can be hard to come by, you know?”
“Definitely,” Harry says. “Give me a call. I’d love to have another wander around that bookshop.”

When Samar wanders off in the direction of the stalls, Harry turns to Draco, who is wearing an indulgent expression and biting into his turkey sphere.

“What?” Harry asks, and then cringes. “Was that awful? It’s not a date… it wasn’t really a date last time. Apparently, I spent most of it talking about you.”

“That’s rather gratifying,” Draco says, “but what I was wondering was… he seemed very nice, but what happens when no-talking Wilson or ten-minute Corrigan turns up wanting to be friends?”

“Don’t even say that,” Harry shudders. “Why would you say that?”

Draco smiles to himself. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a very bad person.”

Draco nods, gazing at the promenade. “Do you think it’s very bad that I’d quite like to steal that wooden baby?”

Harry laughs. “No, as long as you don’t actually do it.”

“I won’t.”

“You mustn’t.”

“I mustn’t,” Draco agrees, and Harry kisses him. He can’t help it.

Glenda whistles, Jim and Lorna break into a little dance, and Selwyn, who has appeared from nowhere, looks on with a knowing little nod. Harry is bright red and he doesn’t care.

“I’m going over here now,” he announces, heading for his fireworks before anyone has time to ask any embarrassing questions.

Draco walks beside him. He doesn’t say a word but Harry can feel his amusement, and by the time he takes his seat, he’s smiling. It’s all fine. These people are his friends, and as such, they will find a way to make him feel horribly uncomfortable. And it’s okay. It’s Christmas Eve, he’s sitting on a beach with the man he loves, and a woman with a big, gorgeous voice is filling the salty air with music that makes him feel nostalgic and hopeful all at once.

“Are you listening?” Draco pokes him.

“Not at that exact moment,” Harry admits, shivering and casting a fresh warming charm around Ken.

“I was just wondering if those beach huts ever go up for sale.”

Harry looks at the row of pastel-painted huts and his heart gives a resounding thump.

“I don’t know. Do you want to get one?”

“Perhaps. We could get out of London every now and then… you and me and Ken,” Draco says. “I
think he likes it here.”

“I like it here, too,” Harry says, watching Ken’s attempt to stretch himself across both of their knees at once. He scrabbles, reaches out for balance with his tail, and falls, ending up clinging to Draco’s coat and swivelling both eyes in frustration.

“That didn’t really work, did it?” Draco sighs.

Harry plonks the daft chameleon on his lap and sits back, letting the carnival atmosphere ripple around him. He glances over at the shells every now and then, just to check that everything is in order, and rehearses his wand movements until his hands turn numb with cold. Just as the announcer thanks the last act before his, two people materialise on the pebbles and dash to his side, windblown and breathless.

“Did we miss it?” Hermione asks.

“You’re just in time,” Harry says, surprised and delighted to see them. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“We decided we couldn’t miss it,” Ron says. “The kids are at Mum and Dad’s. Dad’s made them a treasure hunt in the garden. I think our gnome game inspired him, but he’s not telling Mum that.”

“We’ve just come for the display,” Hermione explains. “We thought we’d pick them up on the way back.”

“You should sit here,” Draco says, producing two extra chairs at his side. “I happen to think it’s the finest view.”

“We’ll be good,” Ron assures, looking at Harry for approval.

“Hurry up. We’re about to start,” he urges, and Ron and Hermione squash into their seats, eyes fixed on the sky.

“And now,” says the announcer, “a very special firework display—in fact, two displays in one—from the most talented Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy.”

The crowd erupts into applause and Draco stares at Harry, bewildered. “Harry, I’m not—”

“Yes, you are,” Harry says firmly, readying his wand and gripping Draco’s fingers tightly with his free hand. “You worked just as hard as me on this display, and you’re going to have the credit whether you like it or not. Okay? Let’s do this.”

“That’s you told,” Ron murmurs, and Hermione shushes him.

Harry takes a deep breath. This is it. His second chance to complete the safari display, and this time, he’s not alone. Draco squeezes his hand and then lets go, wand drawn and eyes fixed on Harry. It’s going to work this time, he tells himself, and then casts, sending the first shells flying into the night sky. Beside him, Draco holds the background in place, and Harry paints it with copper and yellow sparks, twisting his wand to charm them into the shape of the first giraffe. His heart is racing out of control, but this time, when he ignites the shells for the others, they erupt perfectly, and soon a whole family of giraffes is grazing high above the beach.
The leopards are next, streaking through the sky with glimmering grace, and Harry finally starts to relax. By the time the rhino comes crashing into the picture, along with crackle-bang sound effects, he is enjoying himself, and the fact that he is blue instead of silver grey is completely irrelevant. Draco lets out an irritated grumble and Harry just nudges his shoulder with a smile.

“It’s alright,” he whispers in between deafening bangs. “I like him.”

They finish with a whole pride of lions loping towards the north star, manes glittering with gold, and, in one case, fizzing silver stars. Harry allows the sky to darken and the applause to fade away before he launches into his final display. For the first time, Draco doesn’t know what to expect, and he waits along with everyone else to find out what Harry has in store.

Gathering all of his concentration, Harry lights two shells, then another three, letting them explode in a perfectly-timed pattern that dazzles with iridescent brightness. As the sparks settle, he stretches them and holds them in place, sketching out a choppy ocean dotted with icebergs. Setting off a series of swooshing silver fountains, he creates a tall, glassy palace, which is quickly brightened with showers of festive red. A final shell completes the scene with fizzing dots of snow.

Harry readies himself for the first of the animal shapes, glancing at Draco when he takes over the cast without a word, holding the background with a wave of strong, steadying magic.

“Thank you,” he whispers, now free to light and charm and twist without distraction.

He knows he can do it on his own; he’s been doing it that way for years. Draco knows it too, but there’s something uplifting and wonderful about doing this together, and when the woman and her band start up a gentle accompaniment, Harry feels like singing, too. He sets off several shells with a swish of his wand, sending small, skidding shapes spilling out of the ice palace. With a flick and a twist, they become seals, sliding on their bellies on the ice.

Next come polar bears, silver-white and majestic, arctic foxes and hares and a vast, lolling walrus. The sea is soon full of life, crashing with narwhals and white beluga whales, and as Harry launches shell after shell into the sky, the arctic creatures are joined by all the stars of the previous displays: leaping tropical fish, swooping birds, swarms of colourful insects and prowling jungle cats. A chameleon that looks a lot like Ken perches on the back of an elephant, drawing a rumble of laughter from the crowd. The spellwork is so intricate that Harry’s magic is pulled to its limit, and by the time he creates the last shimmering reindeer, his wand arm is shaking, and he is extremely grateful that Draco is holding the whole thing together.

With a last burst of effort, Harry launches the remaining shells and sends presents raining down over his cast of animals, allowing them to sparkle in happy celebration as the words ‘Merry Christmas’ loop through the air in crackling, golden ribbon. Exhausted, he lets go, dropping back against his chair and releasing a long, ragged breath. There is a moment of silence, and then everyone on the beach explodes into cheers and applause, including Ron and Hermione, who whoop and clap as though their lives depend on it.

“Bloody hell, Harry,” Ron shouts, even though he doesn’t need to any more. “That was a bit impressive.”

“Harry, you’re insane,” Hermione laughs, leaning across Draco to hug him. “That was the best one yet! You must be absolutely worn out.”

“I’m fine,” Harry promises, catching her smile and wearing it until his face starts to hurt. “I had
“I made a few mistakes,” Draco says, but he looks pleased, even when Hermione stops hugging Harry and starts hugging him.

“I liked that blue rhino,” she says.

“Was it not supposed to be blue?” Ron asks.

Hermione sighs. “Have you ever seen a blue rhino, Ron?”

“No, but I’ve never seen a chameleon riding an elephant, either, and I’m pretty sure that was deliberate.”

“Poetic license,” Harry says. “Ken wants to be famous.”

“Stupendous work, Harry,” Selwyn says, hurrying over with his clipboard clutched to his chest. “I especially liked the blue rhinoceros.”

“See,” Ron whispers.

“Thank you. It wasn’t just me,” Harry says, forcing himself to his feet and shaking out his wand arm.

“I know,” Selwyn murmurs, frowning. “Draco, I didn’t know you were a pyrotechnician, too.”

“I’m not. I’m a pyrotechnician’s assistant,” Draco says. “And a member of the Wizarding Arts Council. And hungry.”

“What about that turkey ball?” Harry teases.

“Turkey ball?” Hermione mouths, eyebrows knitted.

“It’s been a day,” Draco says by way of explanation, rising from his chair and vanishing it.

Ron and Hermione get to their feet, too, and all five of them make their way back to the food vans. It’s slow progress, and more than one person can be heard enthusing about the blue rhino, but Harry isn’t in a rush. He’s pleasantly weary, Draco’s hand is on his back, and it’s definitely starting to feel like Christmas.
Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this year's story. Thank you for reading along, commenting, and otherwise being a part of it. You are all wonderful and I appreciate you very much. Merry Christmas <3

Twenty-fifth of December – woodland sunset over a stream

“Draco,” Harry whispers, propping himself up in bed and running his fingertips over the back of a pale hand.

Draco continues to sleep, stretched out on his side with his legs tangled in the bedclothes and his breathing slow and even. Harry hesitates and then tries again, this time with a bit more volume.

“Draco… Molly’s here,” he says. “She’d like a word with you. About turkey balls.”

He waits, checking for any sign of movement. When he’s satisfied, he walks quietly out of the room, collects the clothes he has stashed in the hallway in order to avoid creaking drawers, and descends through the dark house to the basement. He gets dressed with a shiver and lights the lamps, drawing his ingredients around him and settling on his chair to work. He has forgotten his socks, and the stone floor of the powder room is intensely cold on his feet, but he isn’t going to go all the way back up and risk waking Draco, so he pulls them up and crosses his legs for warmth.

He smiles to himself, every part of him softly vibrating with the thrill of a secret. It’s well after midnight and he could be sleeping peacefully at Draco’s side, but he has something to do. The assembly itself may be happening at the last possible moment, but Harry has been sketching out the images in his mind for the last few days; he knows exactly what he’s going to do, and it doesn’t feel like work at all. After the panicked rush to complete the complicated safari display, this feels joyful, and Harry hums to himself as he measures out salts and packs them into tiny metal stars.

This project is simple, but he hopes it will make Draco smile after a day full of Weasleys and noise and chaos. It’s been a very unusual advent, after all, and there will be other Christmases, other chances to find gifts for Draco that properly demonstrate his feelings. For now, Harry thinks, he’ll have to settle for one last handful of fireworks.
He attaches the last fuse just before three and sits back to admire the small collection of shells, covering a yawn and surrounding them in a halo of containment magic that will allow him to carry them to the Burrow safely. Having slipped the whole bundle into his coat pocket, he trails back up the stairs and crawls into bed. Draco shivers in his sleep, pressing warm and close, and Harry is asleep within seconds.

When he drifts awake, he has the oddest feeling that he’s being watched. Blinking sleepily, he turns over to find Draco curled on his side, gazing at him with a soft, almost dangerous intensity that makes his stomach pull tight.

“He,” he mumbles, shuffling closer and wrapping an arm around Draco’s waist. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long,” Draco says, letting out a gentle sigh when a shaft of pale yellow light pokes through the clouds and spills across the bed. “You may have noticed that I’m not much of a morning person.”

Harry smiles, unresisting when he is pulled into a kiss. Draco’s hands skate over his body, leaving trails of shivers in their wake. Every last inch of Harry feels alive and responsive and full of an effervescent sort of peace that can only be Christmas morning and Draco’s mouth against his. As they tangle slowly together in the sun-warmed sheets, his mind is full of plans, ideas, images of spiced drinks and pine smells and walks in the snow, and he is soon lost in sensation. Draco trails kisses over his neck and shoulders, pinning him on his back with a firm hand on his hip, and Harry lets him. He wants to be held down, to be touched in any way Draco wants to touch him. He wants everything, and he wants Draco’s hard cock to brush against his just like that.

When he is nudged over onto his stomach, he laughs, aching at the loss of contact but struggling to care when Draco eases into him with slippery fingers and his cock twitches and drags against the rumpled cotton sheets. Every twist and stroke makes Harry groan into his pillow but Draco is not in any rush. He slides a hand up Harry’s spine, letting out a rough little sound when Harry lifts his hips from the bed in a silent demand for more, but he keeps up his slow, maddening slides until Harry thinks he can’t take another second, and then thrusts into him in one long stroke.

Harry isn’t sure which one of them makes the guttural, groaning sound, but he feels it from the inside out. Pushing up on his elbows, he grips the sheets and shifts against Draco, forcing a deeper penetration that steals Harry’s breath. Draco rocks into him slowly, hands seeming to tremble at Harry’s hips. Every intense, languid slide is the most wonderful torture, and Harry longs to touch himself but he doesn’t want to make a single movement that might shatter this perfection. Draco feels so good inside him that he wants to cry and come and hold onto this feeling all at once.

The sun slips back into the room and Harry can feel Draco’s smile. He stares at the blank pillowcase in frustration, even as he feels himself sliding to the point of no return.

“Wait,” he pants, and Draco pauses.

“What?”

“I need to… I want to see you,” Harry groans, flushing hard, but then Draco is smiling again and pulling back, waiting shakily for Harry to scramble onto his back and guiding himself back inside with eyes closed and lip caught in his teeth.
“Better?” he whispers, leaning close and kissing Harry, salt and ruffled hair and rapid breaths, drawn together.

“God, yes,” Harry says, and the smile in Draco’s eyes clamps tightly around his heart. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Draco murmurs against his lips, wrapping his hand around Harry’s desperate cock and jerking it in rhythm with the slow roll of his hips until they are both gasping and sweat-damp and Harry can’t hold on any longer.

With a wave of sensation that is almost too much, Harry comes with his hands over his face and every muscle in his body tensed to the point of pain. Draco whimpers softly, fingers sliding against Harry’s release.

“That was so…” he whispers, pushing into Harry with erratic strokes now. “You have no idea.”

“I do a bit,” Harry manages, taking his hands from his face to watch Draco orgasm, pale chest flushed and stomach muscles twitching.

He rests on his hands, breathing hard and gazing down at Harry. Harry stares back, content and open and completely shameless.

“I think this might be the best Christmas morning I’ve ever had.”

Draco laughs, and Harry feels the vibration deep inside. “It’s pretty high on my list, too.”

“Pretty high?” Harry demands, pretending offence but only managing to shudder when Draco pulls away and crawls up to lie beside him.

“Well, when I was six, I got my first broomstick,” he says. “That was an extremely good year.”

Harry snorts. “It’s good to know what I’m competing with, I suppose.”

“Know your enemy,” Draco says, nodding. “Do you want your present?”

“I think I do.”

“It’s downstairs in my coat. As soon as my legs are working again, we’ll go and get it.”

Harry nods, stretching out his legs and finding them pleasantly wobbly. He reaches for his glasses and something drops onto his pillow. The something starts plucking at his hair.

“Merry Christmas, Ken,” he sighs. “Also, stop that.”

“He’s enjoying himself,” Draco points out, and then turns horrified eyes on the chameleon. “How long has he been in here?”

“Oh, don’t think about that,” Harry says. “Or, if you want to, just imagine that there’s always a chameleon watching you. Eventually, you’ll get used to the idea.”

Draco gets up, shaking his head at both of them. “I am going for a shower. By myself. With no one watching.”
Harry wonders if he should tell him that a large spider has been living in the bathtub for several days and could well be getting its jollies from watching him shower, but he thinks better of it. After all, it’s Christmas day for spiders, too. In the end, he uses the bathroom on the next floor up to scrub himself and then wanders down to the kitchen, dressed in jeans, warm socks, and last year’s Weasley jumper. Draco appears as the kettle is boiling and smirks so hard that Harry hits him with a mild Stinging Hex.

“Laugh all you want, but you’ll probably be getting one of these today,” he says.

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “One with a sperm on it?”

“It’s not a sperm, it’s an axolotl. I had one in my display last year and Molly was really taken with it.”

“Obviously,” Draco says, and when Harry passes him his coffee, he heads straight for the back door with it.

“Where are you going?”

Draco pauses, door halfway open. “It’s my first drink of Christmas day. I’m taking it outside.”

Harry blinks. “Why?”

“Oh,” Draco says, sounding disappointed. “I suppose it must just be a Malfoy thing. Actually, it must just be a me-and-my-mother thing, because my father never bothered.”

Harry picks up his cup and joins him at the door, understanding now. “You mean it’s a tradition.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Well, in that case, let’s take our drinks outside,” Harry says firmly. “Do you want to borrow some shoes? It looks pretty icy out there.”

Draco peers into the garden, at Harry’s row of scuffed up shoes, and hesitates. Finally, he puts on a pair, Harry shoves his feet into his old trainers, and they step out into the garden.

“There’s a bench at the Manor, but this will do,” Draco says, pulling Harry down onto the cold stone step and resting his steaming cup on his knees.

“So, where did it start?” Harry asks. “Christmas coffee in the garden?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t remember not doing it. Mother always preferred champagne, but I’ve never been a fan,” Draco admits, wrinkling his nose. “I don’t think it matters what you have to drink. It’s just about a few quiet minutes before all the madness begins.”

Harry nods. “Family?”

“Family, friends, lots of people with titles that my father wanted to impress. My mother hated all that, she still does,” Draco says, and then smiles. “She doesn’t have to deal with it any more, which is fortunate. Christmas day with Aunt Andromeda and Teddy is far more her speed.”
“Will there be poker?” Harry wonders out loud.

“Almost certainly. Teddy’s abilities give him rather a disadvantage, but she isn’t ready to give up on him yet.”

Harry smiles, picturing the three of them around the table with cards and mince pies. He gazes at his frosty garden, feeling peaceful, and when the sound of excitable children begins to drift from the neighbouring houses, he takes Draco’s hand and listens. He has no memories of thrilling childhood Christmases, and he can’t be sure what the future holds, but if and when he has a family of his own, there will be no fifty pence pieces or stiff networking parties for any of his children.

“Thank you,” Draco says suddenly, disappearing into the house and returning with two wrapped parcels.

“What for?”

“Understanding.”

“No problem. You know, my family has some traditions, too. Some of them are a bit… odd.”

“Such as?”

“Well, we always have to play charades after lunch, and you have to play, even if you’re five years old or drunk or new to the family,” Harry says, noting Draco’s look of mild alarm. “There’s a marble in the Christmas pudding instead of a sixpence… it’s Arthur’s and it’s lucky, so you don’t get to keep it, but if you do find it, you’re allowed to carve the turkey the following year. There are other things, but I’m thinking I should stop there.”

“That might be a good idea,” Draco says faintly. “Here. Open this.”

Harry takes the larger parcel and unwraps it to find a box containing four glass spheres. He picks one up and holds it to the sunlight. It gleams brightly but there doesn’t seem to be anything inside.

“They’re daylight orbs,” Draco explains. “You have to fill them up with sunlight, then you fix them with the spell on the side of the box, and they light any room with natural sunshine. I thought you could have them in your powder room, so you don’t spend hours in the dark when you’re working.”

“That’s brilliant,” Harry says, touched by the thought and already dying to try the orbs out. “Thank you. Hey, maybe everyone will stop going on about how pale I am every winter!”

“You never know,” Draco says, mouth tugged into a pleased little smile.

Harry sets the orb down with care. “I have something for you, but you can’t have it just yet. I know that sounds like an excuse, but it’s not. It’s just that you have to wait a bit longer.”

“Interesting,” Draco says, grey eyes warm with intrigue. “Alright. You should open this one, too.”

Relieved, Harry takes the second parcel and grins at the contents. “Chilli flakes. A half-empty jar of chilli flakes. Should I ask?”

Draco shrugs. “I thought you should look after them, so that the next time I make soup, it will be
edible.”

Harry laughs. “I promise to take good care of them.”

“And I promise to learn about the different spoons,” Draco says. “Shall we go inside?”

**~*~**

They are the last to arrive at the Burrow for lunch, partly because Draco has to go home to change his clothes, and partly because everyone else is, as usual, early. The entire ground floor of the house is buzzing with family members and their various preparatory tasks; there is a sparkling energy to the place and everyone wants to stop and exchange excitable hugs. In the kitchen, Molly is conducting the show, face flushed a delighted pink as she rustles roast potatoes in their trays, stirs gravies and sauces and directs her children around the room without needing to look at them.

Harry breathes in the spicy, savoury aromas and sighs with contentment. At his side, Draco hovers with a fancy bottle of whisky and an air of apprehension. Arthur soon spots them and relieves him of the bottle, thanking Draco and inspecting the label with a little whistle.

“I think we’d better save this for after the pudding,” he says, tucking it away in a cupboard and just about avoiding Hugo and Camille, who are sidling into the room with something hidden behind their backs.

“Hello, Uncle Harry,” Hugo says, eyes flitting around Harry’s person. “Where’s Ken?”

Harry frowns. “He was on my shoulder…” He looks around the room. “And now he’s in the cracker box, of course he is.”

Draco retrieves the chameleon and gives him a stern look. “What did you want him for?”

“We have made him a hat!” Camille says, beaming.

She produces a soft hat made from red felt, with a fluffy white trim and bobble. Ken doesn’t resist as she places it on his head, and it fits over his casque perfectly. Camille turns to Hugo and they share an accomplished grin.

“It fits him really well,” Harry says, impressed.

“That’s because we measured him!” Camille confesses.

“It’s just like the one you made,” Hugo adds. “You know… in the fireworks.”

“Camille, what have you done to zat poor creature?” Fleur asks, rising from the table and peering at Ken with exasperation.

“He’s fine,” Harry promises. “If he didn’t want to wear it, he wouldn’t.”

“Go on,” she says, waving the children away. “Don’t make trouble. Draco, do you have a moment to talk about a painting?”

Draco glances at Harry in surprise, and then nods. “What sort of painting?”
Fleur gestures for him to join her at the table and Harry decides to leave them to it. When he has completed another round of the living room and kitchen, they are still talking, and when he passes by the table a little more closely, he is amused to realise that they are both speaking French.

“She’s so happy to have Bill home,” Hermione says, spelling the dust from several bottles of wine. “I don’t know how they do it, being apart so much.”

“Lies,” Ron laughs, catching her up in a hug. “You’d love to have me out of your hair for months at a time.”

“Would you, Mum?” Rose asks, looking up from her napkin folding.

“Of course not,” Hermione says firmly. “I wouldn’t mind an hour or two to myself once in a while, but that’s really a Healer problem, not a family one.”

“Harry, are you ready for these carrots?” Molly calls, just as George and Angelina crash into the kitchen with extra chairs and start scraping them up around the table.

Ken jumps ship in distaste, scuttling along the floor and out of sight. Harry isn’t worried; after all, none of this is new to Ken, and the person who had seemed most nervous about today is now laughing and sipping mulled wine while Fleur chats away to him and darts occasional happy glances at her husband. Harry takes the pan of carrots from Molly and leans against a spare bit of wall with it, chopping in the butter and black pepper with practised ease.

He lets the happy jumble of his family swirl around him and allows his mind to drift beyond the Burrow and the woods and the English countryside, to be pulled to Hagrid and Toast, Healer Roden, and the nurse with the lazy boyfriend. To Glenda, Selwyn, Jim and Lorna, and all the people who make it possible for him to leap around the country with his case and fill the night sky with sparks. He hopes they are safe and joyful, surrounded by the people who love them, and that even the strangest of his dates has found their own happiness. He suspects there’s a chance for Lewis, too, if he’s ready to learn a few harsh lessons about life.

Harry thinks he might have learned a few himself in recent weeks, and he’s not too proud to recognise that he’s been a complete and utter fool. Both he and Draco have made things far more difficult than they ever needed to be, and time has been wasted, but Harry isn’t going to waste another minute. As he watches Draco talking to Fleur and waving around Molly’s cruet for illustration, his mind and heart fill with possibility; the end of the holiday season is almost upon them, and with it comes the chance for nights in by crackling fires, afternoons tagging along to galleries and walks in the park to let Ken see the first new leaves on the trees.

It’s all there, ready for him to take, and when Draco turns around and gives him that secret little half smile, Harry knows he is going to grab it with both hands and never let it go.

“I hear an awful lot has happened to you while I’ve been away,” Bill says, leaning beside him and snapping his attention back to the room.

“I can tell you the official version if you want, but I’d like to know what you’ve heard,” Harry admits, and Bill laughs.

“According to Victoire, you joined a club for mad people, and then you were nearly murdered, and now you’re going to marry Draco Malfoy. How far off the mark is she?”
“Not as far as you’d think,” Harry says, glancing at Draco. “I think her version is a bit more exciting than the truth, but not nearly exaggerated enough for the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Well, you’re looking good on it,” Bill says, and Harry is about to ask him about his trip when Molly turns from the oven and calls for everyone to take their seats.

Harry hurries over to her with the carrots. She takes them, waves away his pointless offers of help and stares at him until he takes his place at the table between Draco and Rose. When the food arrives, the room falls almost completely silent as everyone takes their first bites of succulent meat and stuffing and buttered vegetables. The ham is outstanding, as is the beef, but the turkey, while delicious, has been carved by Percy and the slices are jaggedy pieces of varying thickness. At the other end of the table, Ron shakes his head at his brother and Percy, in an unusual display of levity, flicks a pea at him.

“I saw that,” Molly says, holding out a cracker to Charlie. “Merry Christmas, love.”

Charlie yanks hard but Molly gains the majority of the cracker, spilling a golden bowler hat and a set of collapsible knitting needles onto the tablecloth. Harry pulls crackers with both Rose and Draco, managing to win nothing but feeling accomplished when he persuades Draco to put on his purple fascinator. Molly finds herself with an extra hat and a little silver pen, which she gives to Harry. He puts on the tricorn hat but immediately loses the pen, and when he ducks under the table to look for it, he laughs.

Ken, who is still wearing his festive hat, is trundling around everyone’s feet and amassing a pile of pilfered objects, including Harry’s pen, a silver hair slide, and several forks. Harry takes the slide, allowing Ken to keep the forks for now.

“Has anyone lost this?”

Audrey frowns and pats her hair. “That’s mine, thank you.”

“I don’t suppose Ken’s being naughty, is he?” Ginny asks, reaching for the gravy.

“Of course he’s not, he’s sitting on my feet,” Molly says, and she might as well add ‘he wouldn’t do such a thing’.

Harry knows better, of course, but decides to keep his mouth shut for now. Draco glances at him and they share a secret flicker of eyebrows that Harry suspects, at least on his end, looks a bit like he’s having a fit.

“When’s your next big event, Harry?” Arthur asks, and for the first time in weeks, he actually has to think about it.

“New Year’s Eve, and then I’ve got nothing until Burns Night. It’ll be strange not to be so busy.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to pass the time,” Charlie says, and Arthur smiles into his glass.

“What does that mean?” Rose asks, fork halfway to her mouth.

“It means that Harry has lots of friends and hobbies and he won’t be bored,” Hermione says.

“I don’t believe you,” Rose says, but she eats her piece of turkey and is quickly distracted when
Bill shows her how the tip of his thumb is now wonky from an ancient curse.

“Does anyone want some more ham?” Molly asks, and almost everyone at the table responds in the affirmative.

“I will actually pop,” Draco whispers to Harry. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to eat pudding on top of all this, with or without a marble.”

“You’ll get a break,” Harry promises. “And if that doesn’t work, Ron or Ginny will eat it for you when Molly’s not looking. I don’t think either one of them ever gets full.”

“Hey,” Ron protests. “I was full once.”

“You were full on stag night,” Serghei says. “I remember. All that you can eat curry buffet. I thought that you would vomit, but you did not. Then we had ice cream.”

“Oh, Ron,” Molly sighs, but she still puts two extra slices of ham on his plate.

“I could eat him under the table,” Ginny says blithely.


“We are not having an eating competition,” Molly says.

“Not with that attitude,” Charlie mumbles.

Molly sighs. “Behave, all of you. It’s Christmas. Nobody is going to eat until they’re sick. You can all finish your ham and then go and sit in the living room while I make a pot of tea.”

“Oh, yes, time for charades,” Arthur says, fishing a marker pen from his pocket. “I’ll go and set up the board.”

“Why do we need a board?” Draco asks, as he and Harry walk through to the living room along with the others.

“How else is he going to record the points?” Percy says, squashing himself onto a sofa next to Harry, Draco, and Ginny.

“Points?”

“It’s tradition,” Harry whispers, and Draco nods, gazing around the packed room.

Every last seat has been occupied, many by more people that they were designed to hold, and several others have spilled over onto cushions and rugs; Victoire is sitting by the fire and seems to be wearing Ken as a hat. He seems quite happy with the situation, and Harry relaxes, letting his thigh rest against Draco’s. As soon as everyone has a cup of tea in their hand, the game begins. Arthur divides the room into two teams, and Hugo volunteers to take the first turn. He imitates a bowtruckle with such accuracy that Hermione guesses correctly within seconds, and Harry’s team is soon one-nil down.

Molly is next, singing her heart out in mime and stirring an imaginary cauldron with such vigour that Ginny is almost in tears. Harry knows the answer—in fact, he’s pretty sure all of them do,
because Molly chooses the same song every year—but no one says a word until she’s swooning
crossly around the room and fanning her face.

“Oh… is it ‘A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love’?” Bill asks at last, and Molly sags.

“Yes! I don’t know why it took you so long to get it.”

Sticking with Hugo’s animal theme, Camille rolls around on the floor until her team manages to
guess, not only that she is a cat, but a pink cat with stripes. Lucy then demands a turn, and is so
enthusiastic in her impression of an elephant that she forgets to be silent. Arthur’s syllable-by-
syllable rendering of ‘Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle’ takes so long that the room has descended
into helpless giggling by the time George finally stabs at the correct answer.

Harry attempts to convey ‘The Unspeakable Department’ by creeping around, ducking behind
chairs with his wand and pressing his finger to his lips, but his efforts are lost on his team, all of
whom seem to be guessing the names of different birds.

“It’s not an animal,” Harry tries, and Arthur shushes him. “No,” he mouths, shaking his head, and
then flaps his arms. “Not a bird.”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to mime words,” Draco says, clearly enjoying himself. “Is it an
avocet?”

Eventually, Harry gives in and concedes the lost point. “It was clearly the Unspeakable
Department.”

“Then why were you doing a beak?” Ginny asks.

“It wasn’t a beak! It was silence… you know… zipping your lips… unspeakable?” Harry sighs.

“It did look like a beak,” Molly says helpfully, watching Angelina mime opening a book and then
bare her teeth. “Ooh, ooh… ‘Dog Rose’!”

“Mum, you’re on our team,” Ginny sighs. “Stop helping them.”

“Sorry,” Molly says, drawing a finger across her lips.

“Oh, look, a beak,” Draco murmurs. Harry elbows him in the ribs.

“Come on, then, Draco,” Arthur says. “It’s your turn.”

Draco stiffens slightly and then gets to his feet. “Alright.”

He opens his hands like a book and then points at himself.


Draco nods.

“I don’t think you should be allowed to nod,” Percy says, but no one is listening.

Draco raises his hands and forms a point on the top of his head.
“It’s a hat!” Rose cries.

“A pointy hat… Professor McGonagall!” Ron tries.

“She’s not a character in a book,” Hermione points out.

Draco wiggles his fingers from his chin, clearly creating a beard.

“Ooh, Great Uncle Herbert,” Molly says, and then frowns. “He’s not in a book either.”

Bill grins. “Not yet.”

“Is the character a wizard?” Hermione asks, and then: “Sorry.”

Draco gives a little nod and makes the beard longer. He sketches a stick and leans on it.

“Is it the wizard from that book about the people who get turned inside out?” Ginny asks.

“That’s not very nice,” Molly chides. She glances at the children. “People don’t get turned inside out.”

“Is it Gandalf the Grey?” Harry asks suddenly, and Draco grins.

“Gandalf the who?” Charlie says, and Ron sighs.

“No Muggle stuff, it’s cheating.”

“JRR Tolkien was not a Muggle,” Percy says, regarding his brother with a touch of despair.

“Wasn’t he?” Draco asks.

“Who’s Gandolf the gay?” Angelina asks, bewildered.

“Well,” Arthur says, raising his voice. “I think he’s someone that Draco and Percy can tell us all about later. Now, whose turn is it next?”

Audrey gets to her feet with a determined expression, and Harry looks at Arthur’s scoreboard. There is no hope for his team, even if they play until midnight, but he’s not feeling competitive at all. When the winners are finally announced, he just watches them celebrate from his comfortable position at Draco’s side, and when the sun begins to melt into pink and orange beyond the window, he hauls himself up and sidles over to Arthur.

“How long until the pudding’s ready?” he whispers.

“I’m not sure, Harry. Is everything alright?”

Harry leads him into the kitchen and puts his coat on, showing Arthur the glowing shells in his pocket. “I want to give Draco his Christmas present. It shouldn’t take long.”

Arthur smiles and pats him on the arm. “I’ll make sure you have time. I’ll do my John Wayne impression if needs be.”
“Thank you,” Harry says, suddenly wishing he could be in two places at once. “I don’t suppose you could ask Draco to meet me at the back door?”

Arthur winks and disappears back into the living room. Seconds later, Draco enters the kitchen. He looks around as though he’s about to be caught doing something he shouldn’t.

“What’s happening?”

“Put your coat on,” Harry says. “I want to show you something.”

“Won’t we get into trouble?” he asks, but shrugs into his coat anyway.

Harry laughs, opening the door and pulling him out into the frosty air by the hand. They walk slowly through the garden and into the woods as the sun slips below the horizon, every breath wisping against the darkening sky. When they reach a softly trickling stream, Harry stops. He inhales the bitter scent of cold earth and waits. It’s not quite dark enough yet, and for this, the moment has to be perfect. Draco gazes at the rippling water and squeezes his hand. Harry squeezes back and lets go, stepping back from the edge of the stream and crouching to set out his little line of shells.

“I knew you were up to something last night,” Draco says. “I felt you get up.”

Harry looks up. “I thought I’d got away with that.”

Draco smiles. “Sorry.”

“This isn’t much, but…” Harry stops. He draws his wand, casts, and the sky above the trees is strewn with shimmering sparks.

The stars themselves are simple, filled only with clean lines in bright silver, but Harry manipulates the showers of light with his wand, bending them into coffee cups and paintbrushes and spools of film. He concentrates hard, desperate to represent everything that is Draco and to make it all sparkle just like he does. He doesn’t dare to look away from the sky, and when the miniature display ends with the two of them, rendered in silver light, watching an even more miniature display, he just stares at the trees. He is frozen to the spot with no idea what to do next, and when Draco pulls him to his feet, he stumbles.

“I didn’t know what to get you,” he says, and Draco’s eyes are as silver-bright as an explosion of magnesium. “I don’t know anything about art yet but I’m willing to learn….”

“This is art, you idiot,” Draco murmurs, taking Harry’s face in his hands and kissing him. “You are an artist. It was incredible. Thank you.”

Harry kisses him back, fingers pressed against his coat. When he hears footsteps in the distance, he doesn’t stop, not until he hears Fleur’s voice among the trees.

“You’d better come back if you want to find ze marble,” she calls. “Ken is looking for you. Also, ze fireworks were very beautiful.”

“We’re on our way,” Draco replies, but he doesn’t look away from Harry for a moment.
Fleur’s crunching footsteps fade away, and then the back door opens and Harry can hear the laughter of his family before there’s a slam, and then silence. He rests his forehead against Draco’s and smiles, stinging all over with the warmth of loving, and being loved.

“We should go back,” Draco says, pressing one last kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth before threading their fingers together and gently pulling him back to the house.

High above the Burrow, the stars blink in the velvet night, catching Harry’s eye one last time as he opens the back door.

“I don’t want the marble,” Draco whispers, and Harry laughs.

He thinks he might be ready for some Christmas pudding.

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