locked out of heaven

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locked out of heaven

by drarryly (laeteaillard)

Summary

The one where Harry is going home when he finds a beaten up Draco holding something in an alley and cannot leave him behind.
Rain was pouring in fat, cold drops that ran trails down his spine, rivulets intruding his robes coming from his hair. Harry could have cast a modified Shield Charm to prevent it, but he could use the distraction. He had ran into Ginny when leaving Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes and the remnants of their last discussion had struck him in the face. They had been arguing so much lately that she had left Grimmauld Place with their newly-born son to go back to The Burrow, under Molly’s frown and Ron’s unabashed joy. Ron had never disguised his disgust about his little sister being shagged - Ginny’s own words - by his best friend. He could endure other guys having a relationship with her but Harry was yet not her ideal match, according to Ron. He, on the other hand, was fine with Hermione and their daughter, Rosie, so Harry wondered if he could relate to how hard it was being for him to be losing his teenage sweetheart. He knew he was losing her despite their mutual efforts, despite their beloved son, despite their unimaginable care. It was not a matter of loving someone else as it was of not loving each other anymore. He was sulking and walking, his pace quickening so he could reach the farther Apparition point. She hadn’t been with Albus that day, which meant he was probably at The Burrow. Their firstborn had been supposed to be named after Harry’s father and godfather, but the serene, stoic baby called for a sterner name, so they had moved on to the second choice and ended up with Albus Severus Potter. He was one year old now and Ginny usually exasperated herself over him, because he wouldn’t as much as utter a word or smile or anything but stare at walls and windows during the most of his day. Harry thought the baby’s lack of interest wasn’t something to be fretted over, so whenever he was free, he would pick him up and take him to Grimmauld Place to relieve Ginny. He loved that baby more than he could ever love another human being. Maybe he should stop by later. Between Teddy at Andromeda’s place and Albus at the Weasley’s, he missed his children a lot. He knew Molly thought he and Ginny were just going through a hard time and would make up sooner or later, so she liked that Harry would still care about his son.

The storm subsided a little right before Harry got to the Apparition point he was looking for. There were the usual stray cats by his side at the alley, one of them a huge black female that had been there for as long as he could remember, and, as was also usual, no one else around. They were currently fiddling with something on the ground, and Harry’s safety instincts and curiosity were greater than usual even for an Auror. Cats didn’t like rain enough to be feeding themselves under it and yet there they were, drenched and soaking, meowing to a bundle behind a dumpster. It took less than a minute for Harry to realize that the bundle was human. It was a half-naked man with scraps of clothing hanging from his chest and hips, beaten up to a bloody pulp that was barely breathing. Harry pushed the cats aside, kneeling beside the man and recognizing distinctive features in what little he could see of his face, hidden behind a curtain of blond hair, bruises and blood. He couldn’t yet be sure, but he was willing to bet a month’s payment that the man on the floor was Malfoy. Traces of a Shield Charm were vanishing and he had no forces to flick the wand and cast another, Harry knew it. When he touched Malfoy’s shoulder, he flinched and pressed a bundle of what looked like green robes closer. A soft whimper and some whining came from them, making Harry realize with a thump of his heart that Malfoy was holding a baby.

Slowly, he cast a Lightening Charm and lifted the half-conscious body from the floor, walking steadily to the Apparition point. Sodding war be damned, he was not going to leave a man and a child unprotected. It was in his job’s description, for fuck’s sake.

The wards recognized him as soon as he pushed them, allowing him bitterly in. Harry could feel the concern running through them like a gentle poking at his limbs and on the back of his head. The wards were not willing to have that guest in there, probably given Harry’s lack of good will towards anyone who bore the Dark Mark, but the house had learned to trust him in the past years and his
actions and intentions were no longer contradicted every single time. He lay the feather-light body on the nearest couch, concerned about both Draco’s health state and the child’s. He tugged at the green robes, trying to pick the baby up, but Malfoy’s hold on him was stronger than life.

“Malfoy, I am not going to hurt your child”, murmured Harry, touching the bare, bloodied arm. “I need to check on you and make sure you’re both ok.”

Draco moaned commandingly, to which the baby started to whine in thin, weak sounds that Harry could hardly recognize. Albus had never been one to whine and Rosie’s crying was always at the top of her lungs, just like her parents’ screaming. He had to make sure that the baby was ok but honestly, he was far more concerned with Draco’s obvious injuries. As an Auror, he had the means to take the baby away and could legally stupefy an uncooperative witness, although he had always hated doing so. The idea of ripping a baby from a father was especially disgusting to him, given that he had been taken from his own mother at approximately that age, if the baby’s size was to be an indication. He sighed when his admonishing made no progress towards granting him permission to tend to both the man and the child, and a brilliant idea popped in his mind. He kneeled on the floor and Floo-called Hermione. She had her hands full with Rosie, being that her dinner time, but she picked up the baby girl and resignedly began to nurse her. Harry had seen enough of it from Ginny and Hermione herself to be chill about that lapse of nudity. It was ultimately adorable to watch the cosiness with which the children would dwell in their mother’s love.

“Sorry, Harry, she’s with a cold and I can’t make her stay put.”

He brushed the apologies away, smiling at her. “Isn't Ron with you?”

She shook her head. “He had to go fix something on his last crime scene or whatever. He must be back in no time.”

“I see…”

“You were trying to reach him?” Her question was condescending, given that Harry didn’t seem prone to enlighten him on that matter.

“No, um… actually, I was trying to reach you.” He cleared her throat and Hermione frowned, immediately shoving her head inside the fireplace and trying to look past him. Harry felt the uncomfortable feeling of being pushed from the Floo. “I, ahm, I have a… Hm, I have a… guest? Of sorts?”

“Is that a person on your couch?” Hermione’s brows raised very high, very quickly. He knew that look very well.

“Yup. I need your help, ‘Mione, there’s a baby here and he won’t let go of it so I can tend to them and I am so not the person who should be doing this.”

“Why don’t you take him to St. Mungus?”

“You’ll see. Please.” He was already kneeling, so pleading didn’t feel like much of a push. “Albus’ things are here, Kreacher can keep Rosie entertained, you know he’s good with kids.”

Hermione had long since stopped trying to free Kreacher, especially when the house elf would tell her that Mistress Granger’s opinions were very nice and revolutionary but he was too old and battered an elf to care about them. That was true after all he had been through, so Hermione had dropped the subject and decided to leave the elf under Harry’s care. She nodded slowly at Harry’s request, not very enthusiastically ending the call. Harry moved away from the fireplace and soon
after, with a thud and a burst of green flames, Hermione set foot on Grimmauld Place. Kreacher showed up without being summoned, carefully picking baby Rosie - who was now dozing off - and offering to burp her and change her so she could sleep, to which Hermione profusely thanked him. That done, she looked at the body on couch. Her mouth fell open as it had always done every time she had seen anyone in distress.

“Harry.”

Her voice was heavy with so much intent that he found it difficult to understand whether she was talking about the state of the man on his couch or the man in his couch being who he was. He decided to go for the second.

“I know, I know, I swore I wouldn’t as much as look at him again, but he was in that alley and he had a child, Hermione; what was I supposed to do? Call an Auror?” He sighed. “I know that you still don’t like him and stuff, but he saved my life. He saved us, you know that, you know that I was able to do what I did because of a technicality of his doing.”

She shook her head, staring at Draco and the wailing baby. “I didn’t mean that, Harry. I mean… what happened to him?”

“I don’t know. Do you think you can take care of the baby while I find out? I’d ask Kreacher but I…”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t have to. Harry didn’t want to be alone with Draco right now and if someone could understand that, it was her. She nodded and kneeled beside the couch, reaching out soothingly to touch Draco’s hair. Harry knew she wasn’t imagining just how much her hands were trembling.

“Draco, hi.” He didn’t open his eyes, but the grasp on the baby softened. “You are safe here. You can let go of your baby so we can help you.”

Draco squeezed his eyes even more shut. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Hermione Granger, and we are at Harry Potter’s place. We have wards and no one is going to touch you here, we promise.”

“Mudblood.”

Harry had expected Hermione to get up and storm out of the room at the insult, but she merely grit her teeth and smiled. Harry knew she had taken worst insults from people and elves during her career, so she was growing tougher. Besides, the tone in which it had been spoken was a lot more like if Draco was meeting someone he could trust than like an actual insult. He seemed to be relieved, enough that tears ran from his closed eyelids. He started sobbing in a pained, erratic way, clutching the crying baby to his chest, smothering the noise. The kid tried to escape, to no success. Seeing that, Hermione caressed the child’s mop of blond hair.

“He needs to be fed and tended, and so do you. Can you give him to me? I’ll clean him up and bring him back to you as soon as he’s alright, ok?”

He didn’t verbally agree, but his hold loosened and Hermione scooped up the baby, checking on him quickly so she could tranquilize both guys. She left then, hiding herself in the study beside the living room, where Kreacher had already set everything for both Rosie and the baby. Harry turned his attention to Malfoy, examining him carefully. He was in an awfully bad state.

“Hermione is feeding your child, now.”
“Scorpius.”

“Scorpius. She’s with Scorpius.” He went to the back of the couch. “I have to clean you up and get rid of your clothes, so I can see all the damage. I am not a Healer and I can’t cope with barriers as well as they can.” Draco almost nodded, although it was obvious that the motion hurt him. “I also cannot prevent much of the pain. If you want to go to the hospital, you have to tell me now.” Silence greeted him. “Right. Do you want me to put you to sleep?”

It was the obvious wrong thing to say, because Draco went suddenly hysterical. He shook his head too violently, trying to move away from the couch and Harry’s presence and strangely incapable of doing so. Harry had to put his hand on his shoulders and press him against the pillows until his breath regained its pace. It was a hard task; even injured, Malfoy was strong enough to shove him away until Harry decided to unload almost his entire weight on him. Only then did he soothe.

“I am sorry. I won’t make anything you don’t want me to. I just want to help.”

When Draco finally obeyed, Harry begun to assess the damage made in his body. He had multiple fractures: both kneecaps, ankles, wrists, several ribs, right clavicle. Three of his left fingers were smashed beyond repair: they would require him to dismiss the bones before making them grow again. Someone had apparently bit off a chunk of his right ear; there were dozens of spell-flame burnings all the way down his back. Some of those had reached muscle tissue, as had some of the multiple dented cuts in semi-circular shapes that pointed to some kind of carnivore bite. His groins had rope burns, as deep and infected as the ones in his armpits and neck. It wasn’t until he reached his face, though, that the enormity of what the man had been through hit Harry. When he pushed Draco’s fair hair away from his face, a large, deep acid burn showed, complete with a trail that ran its way down his eyes to his cheeks. Harry gulped when he asked Draco to open his lash-less eyes and was confronted with white pupils surrounded by a grey iris tainted with too much red to be fruit of anything else but venom.

“They had a crossbred Chimaera.” Malfoy’s voice was too low, too raw, but it was a good sign that he could speak. “It was me or my son.”

Harry was too taken aback to do anything by himself, so he summoned Kreacher and asked the elf to hand him everything they had ready to use: potions, artefacts, portable spells. He did as asked, bringing all of their stocks downstairs. Harry stared from vial to flask, wondering where he should start. Like if he sensed what Harry was thinking, Draco whispered:

“Don’t bother with my eyes. You can’t fix them with any of the usual things. Maybe my ribs? They are bloody hurting. Also my knees. I lost track of the feeling around them several hours ago and I think something was pinched.”

“How do you know?” He picked up a flask of Nerve Soothing Lotion to spread on the major strain spots so he could move the bones. Repairing Draco’s ribs was definitely a priority. It was a miracle that nothing had been punctured by them.

“They would tell me.” Harry shuddered and felt his stomach twist. “They had schedules. They were very punctual.”

“Malfoy, who are they?” Draco shrugged his good shoulder, making a face at the painful spell being executed on his ribs. It was a finer, stronger spell than Episkey and was used to mend fractures which had been left to heal by themselves. Harry knew by his own experience that not every bone could be mended by an Episkey (cartilages were easier) and the longer since the fracture, the worse. Harry saw the way his hands clutched at the couch’s fabric, the broken fingers snapping and spreading in contorted ways that repulsed him. He’d do Draco’s ribs and make some changes before moving on.
He was scared to harm Malfoy, so he wasn’t even moving him. “Do you remember anything?”

“...No.”

His voice trailed off and he refused to speak any further. Harry didn’t push him. They’d have time to figure things out, given the state of his injuries. He focused on the spell instead, moulding his magic to wrap around the ribs and search for any shards of bone that could be lodged somewhere else. There were none, despite a nick on the fourth left rib, which meant that he had probably been cleaned from residues by whoever had tortured him. What kind of person would be so medieval trying to inflict pain to another human being when a simple Crucio was enough to drive anyone mad? Was it that important that Malfoy understood what pain was?

Harry didn’t notice when the day’s trouble became too much for Draco to bear. When he looked at the blonde again, he was sleeping like dead. Harry sighed and stretched his back, getting up to enlarge the couch, transfiguring it into a hospital bed (complete with tall removable rails) so he could clean him properly. Harry cast several cleaning spells, including a washing one. The cleaning made the thick layers of dry blood fall and vanish, leaving it to Harry to stitch Draco’s once immaculate skin. If he used a common spell, any remaining scars would be able to be disguised by an eventual Healer. The smaller cuts were glued together with a flesh-binding spell; the others had need for actual stitches, since they had been made by either spells or some creature - potentially the half-Chimaera, which made the skin refuse to be bound together by magic. There was a pomade made with bezoar and unicorn’s horn that would do to prevent the infections from spreading, but Harry might have to search for particular antidotes later.

He was finishing the stitches on Draco’s stomach when Hermione entered the room again. She was holding both babies in her arms and blushed furiously at the sight of Malfoy’s naked body being so intimately touched, despite Harry’s absolute clinical ways.

“What’s wrong?” He asked with fear, dreading to maybe have done something that would spread the harm on Malfoy’s being.

“Did you have to strip him bare?” Her eyes averted from him and Harry’s face flushed crimson.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize it.” He conjured a gauzy cloth to cover Draco’s private parts. “I’ve been patching him up. Several cuts went till the muscle, so I used some spells to have them find the fibres alright. Would you mind checking if they’re done right? I think I might be sick now.”

“You’re strained.” She spat the word like an insult. “Here, have the children, I’ll check if he’s stable and if he needs anything else immediately.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, sitting down in an armchair. Hermione sat both children on his lap, showing him how to handle both at once. They were sleeping soundly, flaming-red and unicorn-blond hair clashing against the deep red of Harry’s Auror robes. They were beautiful children, which made him miss Albus even more. He sighed and let out a minimal smile, feeling all of his limbs tremble with exhaustion. There had been a very long time since the last time he had to perform that many healing spells on someone. It was definitely not his area of expertise. A few Episkews never required much of him, but Harry had been working on the field long enough to know that they also did fairly little to help in the majority of cases. No wonder it was a children’s spell. Hermione ran her wand over Draco’s body, looking for straining spots in his muscles that would show a ill-made spell, but there were none. She lift the rails and left the injured man safely grounded in there before turning to Harry questioningly.

“Harry, we should take him to see a Mediwizard.”
“He does not want to be at a hospital and given the fact that this amount of damage could never have been unintentional, I think he’s right not to wish it.” Harry massaged his forehead, the white scar throbbing like it did lately whenever he got too tired. It was a remainder of his feats and he understood it was a matter of life preservation, given his job and predisposition to end up in dangerous situations. It was physical, though, not magical, and Harry thanked God daily for that. “If you are willing to help me, between Kreacher, Ron and the apothecaries we can heal him just fine.”

“I disagree, Harry. He’s stable now but he needs things we can’t provide him. It would take us forever to brew a Skele-Gro and he is severely dehydrated, so he cannot take some potions just yet. He’s going to need medical supervision at all times for days, maybe months. There are parts of his body that mended naturally in such crippling ways that we’d have to break them apart very thoroughly to put them back in place, and I don’t mean just bones: there are wronged muscles and nerves. He is deemed to such a painful experience while recovering that I don’t think he’ll make it at the rate we can do it.” She moved closer to Harry and took Rosie back before caressing his hand. “Do you know what happened to him already?”

“He was tortured.” Hermione shivered. “No, not with a Crucio. He was medievally tortured. Bone per bone.” Her mouth opened in a very round ‘oh’. “I cannot fathom a human being capable of doing so, but he said ‘they’, so he means more than just one person, I presume.” Hermione nodded quietly. “This is why I don’t want to expose him just yet, Hermione. Whoever did this to him wouldn’t let him stray without being able to track him down and my wards are strong enough to prevent or at least delay it.”

Seeing him like that, Hermione couldn’t restrain a smile. Harry frowned, clutching baby Scorpius closer. “What?”

“You still want to save all those you know, Harry, no matter what they did to you.” He almost shrugged. “It isn’t bad, you know. Just keep in mind that you need to be alive to rescue other people and no, Dumbledore and his post-mortem life-saving advices are not a valid argument.” She ruffled his hair like a mother. “Dress your guest and avoid moving him for today. Take a good night’s sleep, try to warm yourself up. Kreacher made us tea; maybe you should have some.” Harry nodded quietly. “I’ll go back to tell Ron we’re fine. I’ve left him a note but you know he’s a bit of a paranoid. Please, please, sleep, ok? Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you. See you tomorrow.”

Hermione flooed herself away with a flick of her wrist after entering the fireplace, Rosie safely tucked in her arms. Harry wondered why she hadn’t asked to take Scorpius with her, but he remembered her promise to Draco that she’d return his child. Looking at the situation analytically, he believed that it wouldn’t be safe to keep him with Scorpius, being the man as debilitated as he was. Harry asked Kreacher to pick up the boy instead, getting up to dress Malfoy in a loose nightgown that looked like something out of the nineteenth century. It was the best call, for it would cover him up without waistbands and low collars to nip at his injuries. He was incredibly thin but the view was that of a very handsome man. It was a notion he had entertained before, that of the Blacks being keen of lean lines and high cheeks, delicate wrists and marked waists, clean fingernails and strong, flat muscles. He could see the traces of that nobility in his own face if he looked carefully, suppressed by the beauty and glisten of his mother’s eyes and the unruliness and raven colour of his father’s hair. There it was, a nice bone structure no years of interbreeding could tamper with. In Draco, all pale and quiet, those characteristics were even more prominent. He could see that Scorpius would grow to develop those same features, as Albus wouldn’t, because of the Weasley’s blood, a pretty dominant one. In Kreacher’s arms, the baby moaned quietly. Harry hurried to pick him up, asking the elf for
that tea Hermione had mentioned. He turned the child so he could pay attention to both Malfoys at
the same time. It was promising to be a very long night.

With a swipe of his wand, he dragged the chair he’d been sat in closer, making it a little taller and
mutating it to accommodate his legs and the baby boy. He would be by Draco’s bed in case he
needed something, as he was very likely to, considering the state he was in. Harry had promised not
to sedate him, so it was possible that the pain would end up waking him. Slowly, Harry felt the kick
of the magic strain settle in, making his limbs numb. When Kreacher returned with the tea, Harry had
already fallen asleep.
Harry had to take a moment to reassess and understand what the source of the non-stop sound was. He frowned deep before noticing that his glasses were in disarray. His right arm was numb and the heavy weight on top of it was bright red and moving restlessly. He recalled the baby in time, holding him clumsily. The clock on the wall marked four o’clock in what was presumably the morning - the shades on the windows were drawn but Harry doubted a child would have slept till four in the afternoon. He switched the baby to his left arm, rocking him gently while he tried to remember what it that he hadn’t done was.

“He’s hungry.”

“Merlin almighty!”

Malfoy’s voice took him so much by surprise that Harry startled, making the baby in his lap jump and quiet. The man in bed didn’t move an inch. A quick look was enough to tell that Draco was wincing in pain and trying to keep it hidden although he was failing at it. Harry rubbed his eyes and stood up to take a more thorough look at Draco.

“You have to feed him or else he won’t stop.”

“I’m not that dumb on basic baby mechanics, you know.” Malfoy’s wincing became a clumsy grimace. “You look terrible.”

“Good thing I cannot check it out for myself then.” The humour was grim but he didn’t seem to be feeling bad about it, which amazed Harry in a certain way. “I cannot nurse him now, can I?”

Harry actually gasped. “Excuse me?”

“While I was imprisoned, I feared Scorpius would starve, so I asked to breastfeed him and they allowed me to perform a time-set Lactation Spell.” Draco looked miserable then. “But you have used stuff on me he cannot cope with.”

The implied suggestion hung on the air for what seemed to have been several minutes before Harry cleared his throat. He didn’t know how to reply. Saving a man’s life was one thing; nursing an infant he didn’t know about was a whole other matter. Surely enough someone could give him some breastmilk? He thought about Ginny, who would probably be feeding Albus by that time before discarding the thought quickly. She would freak out to know that Harry had a guest of that sort in his house and he refused to have to deal with anything that could come to jeopardize his relationship to Albus. The other obvious choice was Hermione, and he had to gather strength from depths of his guts to call a sleepless Kreacher to watch over the baby while he tried to reach Mrs Granger.

“Mrs Granger has left three baby bottles for baby Scorpius in the big metal cool box.” The elf refused to acknowledge the refrigerator by its true name. “Mrs Granger said Master Potter would need them and told Kreacher how to heat them for baby Scorpius.”

Not for the first and certainly not for the last time, Harry thanked Hermione’s practical skills. He asked for the baby bottle, trying to rock an again whining baby into quietness while he waited for the elf to fetch it. Draco whimpered when he tried to move to sit down and Harry had to hush him commandingly into stillness. He huffed before resettling in an uncomfortable but mainly painless half-sitting position.

“I want to hold my son. I miss him. You said you would give him back to me.”
“Malfoy.” He watched the other man swallow deep and decided to try a gentler tone. “Draco, your collarbone is broken, your fingers are beyond damaged. Any strain to them might cause you to be crippled or worse, maybe even drop the baby. Your adrenaline is low now and that mighty strength you may have felt in that alley is no longer of use to you. The pain you’d feel would make you sick to say the least.”

Draco’s lower lip trembled. “Harry, please.”

Harry didn’t know what threw him off balance the most, if his first name being spoken so painfully or the pleading tone of the request. He had never thought a Malfoy could beg and yet there it was, a scene he considered of utmost impossibility. Hearing his father’s voice in that hushed tone, Scorpius wailed for the first time. Harry winced at the sound and sighed relieved because Kreacher took that moment to reappear in the room with a warm bottle in his callused hands. Harry took it and thanked the elf before confronting Draco again.

“I’ll tell you what: I’m going to feed Scorpius and burp him and then you can hold him across your chest for some time before you go back to sleep. It’s four in the morning yet.”

Tears wet the lids of his closed eyes and Harry felt himself in the verge of panic. He wouldn’t stand Draco’s crying, of all things. “It’s my son we’re talking about. You don’t know, you don’t understand, I have to make sure, I have to, please.”

The cogs of Harry’s brain were spinning as fast as an active Sneakoscope. He couldn’t take a chance with Malfoy’s injuries but he feared that keeping the baby away would retard his recovery. Quietly, he put the bottle on the hospital bed’s mattress and lowered the rail. Draco clutched the sheets, anticipating, and let out a loud puff of breath when Harry sat by his side, the baby firm on his arms, cautiously close to Draco’s left shoulder so he could touch the boy with the less damaged hand. Harry gave the baby the bottle, watching for a speck of a moment while he began to suck at it as if his food had always come from there. Hermione’s doing, of course. He’d have to ask her so later. Clumsily managing the baby and the bottle with one hand, Harry took Malfoy’s right one and put it on the baby’s body. Draco’s chest heaved and succumbed to relief while his hand caressed his son, murmuring sweet words the baby, blue-grey eyes still able to see due to his father’s sacrifice, seemed to recognize. Worried about straining Draco’s injured shoulder, he moved to accommodate both the baby and the man closer to his chest. It wasn’t a comfortable position and Harry wasn’t yet completely able to forget that Draco had tried to hurt him in the past, but he was finding it very difficult to relate to that Malfoy when the Draco in front of him looked so broken and torn. Harry had seen the faded, scarred white Dark Mark and knew he hadn’t been mistaken, but right then he was resembling the scared Malfoy who had tried to save him from being presented to the Dark Lord much more than any other facet of any Draco he had ever met. He was musing about it when the baby started dozing off, so Harry made him stand and clapped his back until he burped, oblivious to the fact that he was still wearing his Auror robes until a trickle of milk tainted it. He swore in a hiss, which made Draco chuckle.

“It won’t stain, you know”, he said in a thin voice.

“Right.” Harry sounded unconvinced, but he let go. Still holding the baby, he wriggled out of his robes and transfigured his undergarments into pyjamas. Draco stayed quiet all through the movements, aware of them but still. “Are you hungry?”

Draco shook his head, which didn’t reassure the other man. Sighing, he placed the now sleeping baby in Draco’s lap, resting him against the linen-clad chest.

“Don’t drop him.” Even with his eyes closed, Draco raised a singed eyebrow, dismissing Harry’s concern. “I’m assuming chewing and swallowing will tire you faster, so I’ll fetch you something
The blonde nodded. Harry thought of adding something as to render the conversation less incomplete, but came up with a big ball of nothing, so he decided to leave it at that. Instead, he went to find the Reinvigorating potions Kreacher kept ready for him. It had been often that Harry had found himself in wicked situations and escaping death for an inch was pretty much enough to make his stomach refuse regular food for at least one meal. Kreacher had told him that the Blacks had recipes for a dozen of potions which could replace a meal if necessity showed, including one designed especially for those with illnesses, one for blood loss victims and another for breastfeeding women. The last one was not, of course, prepared ever since Ginny decided to leave Grimmauld Place, but if Draco would ever wish to nurse Scorpius again (and it was a concept that disturbed Harry to his guts), he would make do with that one. Right then, he chose the blood loss one, taking it to the man in bed to ask him to drink it. Draco had his eyes closed (as was now clear to Harry would be the standard) and his breath had evened, which gave room to a very lovely, although heart-breaking image. He kept the smile for himself and wondered, not for the last time, whether he had that much of a soft spot for babies. He knew he was a fool for them the moment little Teddy was first placed in his arms, but finding Malfoy endearing was a long way to go from there, so he probably shouldn’t discard the possibility. True story though, he pitied the man. Anyone would. Solemnly, he offered him the drink, unsure if he was awake. He happened to be so and took the vial with a smirk without disturbing the sleeping baby. The potion tasted vividly like radishes, lettuce and cucumber and had a sleepiness side effect that was slightly numbing but not incapacitating. When Draco gave him the vial back, Harry thought about taking the baby back to the chair with him, but the man looked so incredibly contented that Scorpius was back; Harry didn’t find the will to part them. He asked Draco to lie down again instead and used his newly-recovered magical strength (not at its best after so little sleep but still) to cast a modified Shield Charm that operated as a nerve-blocker, soothing the pain without incapacitating the person who was charmed. Shield Charms were one of his specialties and Harry was proud of having found almost every possible application for them. That one was particularly useful when the decent pain-controlling substances - which were always potions, never spells - were far from reach. It was dangerous too: since it wasn’t incapacitating as a nice analgesic potion would be, it allowed the patient to go over the top and harm their own body by forcing injured areas. He had used it very little in people besides himself.

Draco felt the charm kick in and frowned. Harry explained the general idea of the spell to him, making sure he understood he was not healed and therefore should not go out and about or he’d hurt himself more. Thankfully, Malfoy was a very quiet and conscious patient, which was a relief. Harry was not one to breathe in and out and forgive other people’s stupidities unless it could not be avoided. He had been much more tolerant when in school, but the Ministry had made him change it. Tolerant people never went very far it in there.

“Thank you.” Draco whispered the words so softly that Harry thought he had misheard them. “Very much.”

Harry cooled weakly at that. “Malfoy, are you alright?” Honestly, that much thankfulness and gentleness was getting at him in a very uncomfortable way. “You don’t... sound like you.”

The blonde chuckled in an obvious effort not to laugh while he was holding the child. It was a bitter, unsteady sound. Harry felt a spark of a shiver that didn’t fully realize itself trickle up his spine. Draco’s voice lowered and the tone was much more serious when he answered him.

“I have been tortured by people I don’t know for reasons I cannot recall. They almost killed my son a thousand times. I may not remember much but I still understand kindness when I see it.” The weak smirk showed again. “Besides, being a Malfoy didn’t get me very far while I was there, did it?” His voice faltered. Harry felt pity overcome him. “I don’t have to be hateful to be myself. I’m alright.”
“Broken to the bone, yeah, but alright.”

Draco smiled. “That would sum it up.” He sighed and held his breath for a moment, willing to wince but not feeling pain shoot up his body. He relaxed his body slowly so he could turn to Harry. For the first time, it was hard to read his intents just from his face and the Gryffindor wished he wouldn’t keep his eyes so thoroughly closed. “You’re aware it’s after four in the morning and we’re both awake and you have to work in just a couple of hours, right?”

Harry frowned and mused over that for a moment. “I don’t think I’m going to work.” He set back more relaxed. “You know, I haven’t taken leaves of absence ever since my boy’s first ultrasound. I’ve almost missed his delivery. I could barely stay home for him.”

Malfoy paused, disbelieving. “Potter, let’s be clear here because apparently my state is getting to you.” Harry stared at him thoughtfully, even though he couldn’t see it. “I am alive. I am not going to run away. I don’t know your place and I am really unwilling to face whatever might find me beyond your wards.”

“I’m not following”, said he with a frown in his voice almost as clear as the one in his face.

“I know. Which is why I have to tell you: you cannot skip work just because a former school foe showed up beaten to a pulp at your door with a baby on his lap. As you said yourself, you didn’t do it for your wife and new-born child. Don’t you think maybe you’re overreacting?”

“Malfoy, you’re sick and won’t go to a hospital. I’ve taken you in, I feel responsible.”

“Let Kreacher handle me. You do trust your house-elf, don’t you?” Harry munched on his lips for a moment. “I know you don’t trust me and I’m fine with it. Take my wand if you may. Give Kreacher restrictive orders. Call one of your friends to watch over me, maybe one who does not despise me to my spine, like… Do they even exist, by the way?” Harry shook his head and let out a weak, half-laughed “no”. “Oh well, let’s deal with that later.”

“You’re only talking that much because you’re not feeling pain.”

“And if I have to regret it in the morning light, so be it. But you have to get your perspective back, Potter. I am safe for now, so go to sleep and work later. I’m in no position to roll over and I won’t smother my own child while asleep.” A dark grin showed in his face. “Tie me up if you’d feel safer. It’s nothing I haven’t faced before.”

Those words felt like a punch to Harry’s stomach and he lost it.

“Don’t you think you’re taking it all a little too un-seriously? Malfoy, you’ve been tortured and it’s obvious you’ve also been obliviated and I am starting to believe a massive Confusion Spell has been cast on you too. I don’t even think you should be speaking at all.”

Draco shrugged and Harry wondered how much that would cost to his broken clavicle when the charm wore off. “If you want to feel awful because I am broken, fine, but I don’t have to.” His voice lowered even more, a whispered secrecy misting around them. Malfoy reached out and Harry instinctively held his hand. He felt something akin to the desperation of being by someone’s deathbed, although it was obviously not the case. Despite the damage, there was no indication that Draco was about to die - at least, not yet. “You’ve escaped far more life-threats than I did and you clearly didn’t learn your lesson, Potter. Being alive is what matters, and alive we are.” He smiled at the baby breathing on his chest. “Everything else is just else. Now sleep, for Salazar’s sake, and forget about me for a while.”
Harry tried his best to obey Draco’s will, but he couldn’t. Despite that, he got up at the appointed time, stretched and woke Kreacher to ask him to keep an eye in Malfoy. He could see that the elf was happier with another descendant of the Blacks to keep him company. Harry washed away the tension on his shoulders - he had remained in the same bed as Draco, in the precise same position as before, which bloody hurt - and put on new working robes. An outline of the day started to draw itself in his mind: first of all, he’d ask Shacklebolt not to be put in any field mission for the next month. He could allege that his marriage was going through a rough time - not a lie - and that he wanted to be closer to his children - not a lie either. Second, he’d go look for Tyra Parker-Smith, the Healer that took care of most of the occurrences inside the Department and on field. She commanded a special team of Mediwizards and could be of help: Harry needed Skele-Gro, potent pain-relief potions, any spell he could learn that would help him keep Draco afloat while he fussed with his body and the proper spells to do all the fussing. He should probably pick recipes for food he could give Draco without pushing him too far to eat and digest them too. After that, it was just a matter of time until work was over and he could get back to his guest. Maybe he could even cut an hour or two of it.

Malfoy was still sound asleep when he went back downstairs. Before leaving, he thought best to move the hospital bed somewhere else, so he asked Kreacher to clear the closest office available for them to move Master Malfoy in. The grumpy old elf almost beamed to know that Malfoy was staying. Harry didn’t mind it. He had learned to trust Kreacher and vice versa. They were in good terms. That said, he turned to check on Draco again. He had not moved, which meant he had been really tired. The baby was another subject, though. Scorpius was awake, eyes gleaming and all and it wasn’t even eight in the morning. He picked up the baby and felt Draco’s body tense.

“Shh, it’s me, it’s just me.” He lay a hand on Draco’s shoulder, adjusting the baby automatically as he did so. “I’ll feed him so you can sleep some more.” The man in bed relaxed again. “I’ll come back soon.”

He went to fix the baby a new bottle and was confronted with random, quiet babbling from him. That was unexpected. Albus was always quiet. Merlin, he missed his child! He added another thing to his list: go to The Burrow and beg, if needed, to have a few weeks with Albus. Andromeda was out of town with Teddy and he knew he would meet his godson as soon as he came back; he couldn’t go get him. Scorpius moved and argued restlessly for a moment, reclaiming his attention.

“Here you have it, you spoiled little brat.” He gave the baby the bottle. “You are a beautiful child, you know that? You remind me of my son. I’ll pick him up so you can socialize with someone too.” Scorpius looked at him as if he couldn’t understand what was being said, and maybe he couldn’t, but whatever. He was trying to soothe both the boy and himself and talking helped. “Your father is very, very hurt. I am trying to help him but I’m scared he’s worse than he looks like. I’m afraid to leave you with him too. I don’t know if when he wakes up the charm won’t have worn off and what will he do by himself if he’s in pain? How can he take care of you if he cannot even move?”

“Good thing you have friends then, isn’t it?”

Harry looked up to meet Hermione standing by the doorpost with an awkward-looking Ron holding Rosie by her side. He beamed at the sight of his friends, going to them and hugging them with one arm while trying not to squish Scorpius. Hermione patted his shoulder and Ron held the other, staring at him trustfully.

“Mione’s told me about all that. We can search for the bastard who did this to him, if you want. I’m off duty for the week but it doesn’t really matter when you know the right people.”

“Wait, what?” Harry looked from one friend to the other, letting the bottle slip from Scorpius lips.
The baby complained weakly and he got it back to place before sinking back into conversation. “You’re here to help?”

“Of course we are.” Ron shook him slightly. “Listen, mate, I know I didn’t approve of the way things worked out between Malfoy and us, but you’ve always said that he was the reason why Voldemort didn’t succeed in using his curses alright with you. You always felt bad about that Sectumsempra too.”

“We do have eyes, Harry.” Hermione smirked at him. “I’m not saying you want to be friends with him and I’m not insinuating you should but you’ve seen deeper than what he usually shows. You always have. It’s probably a good thing that he ended up at your feet and not someone else’s. I don’t think anyone else would be as kind as to bring home and tend to someone bearing the Dark Mark.”

“I’m not following”, said he, and thought soon after that this situation was becoming rather recurring in the past few hours. “I thought you hated him.”

“We don’t like him or anything, but even he doesn’t deserve what he’s been through. I mean, he did repent his actions.” He shrugged. “All in all, he’s harmless. He’s a bloody chicken in the end, you know.” Ron laughed, making Rosie laugh too and try to repeat the word. “He is, isn’t he, my girl?”

“I can listen to you alright from here. Just so you’re aware.” Draco showed up behind them wearing the exact same face he would in his school days, minus the open eyes, making Ron startle. Hermione’s and Harry’s eyes widened at the same time when they saw he had walked all the way to the kitchen and was currently putting all of his weight on his broken clavicle while leaning on the same doorpost Ron had been close to just before. Harry gave Scorpius to Ron in haste before holding Malfoy’s waist. Hermione cast a Lightening Charm at him and went down his unbroken arm to keep his weight afloat. “What do you lot think you’re doing?”

“You gormless arse, I told you to stay put and you said you would”, hissed Harry, staring at him reproachfully. Hermione mirrored his expression and Ron kept staring, disoriented. They knew Malfoy couldn’t see them but if he had any sensitivity, he’d know they were mad.

“You have my child. You said you’d be back soon and there was the noise and ash all over the floor and I thought… I thought…” Draco’s voice thinned and the defiant smirk that had brought him there failed. “I am sorry.”

“How do you there’s ash on the floor?” Bless Ron for being straightforward and asking coherent questions. Malfoy answered it with silence.

“You fell.” Harry wanted to slap him in the back of his head but he feared it would harm him further. Malfoy’s nightgown was dirty with black ash stripes and some dusty spots. “Draco, you crawled here?”

Hermione let out a disgruntled sigh. “How can we trust you not to kill yourself? How come you’re not withering in pain right now?”

“Draco, you crawled here?”

Hermione let out a disgruntled sigh. “How can we trust you not to kill yourself? How come you’re not withering in pain right now?”

Harry scratched the back of his head with his one free hand. “That would be my fault. Modified Shield Charm.”

The girl’s face became much less amused. “Harry. Seriously.”

“He wanted me to sleep”, murmured Draco quietly. No one seemed to be paying attention to Ron, who tried to juggle two babies who had now started to compete for a bottle. “Being tortured hurts and you know it.”
Hermione let out a sigh at that and shadows crossed her eyes. She nodded and relaxed her grip on Draco for a moment. Ron murmured something about Draco’s subtlety but Hermione shut him up with a hard glance. She asked them to take him back to the bed and lay him down; Kreacher showed up in the middle of their very slow walk - Draco refused to be carried like a baby once he was conscious - and told them the study was ready for Master Malfoy. Ron and Hermione exchanged a significant look at the willingness with which the elf had welcomed Malfoy, but refrained from commenting. Harry adjusted Draco back in bed and scolded him like he would do to a child. Ron didn’t fully understand, although Hermione’s smile was quite telling and they could be sure she would enlighten him later.

In the meantime, Scorpius and Rosie decided they need to be put down.

“Dow!” The baby girl was demanding and jumpy, and Ron let her go with a sigh and a ruffle to her still auburn hair. “Tan’yu.”

“Ron, you know you have to wait until she says things properly”, said Hermione in a tired voice. Rosie could speak already and very right for a one year old, but she was lazy and as long as people would understand her hypo-articulated attempts, she wouldn’t put any more effort to it.

“Ow!” Harry’s head went from Draco to his son like a whip. “Ooooow!!”

Scorpius was trying to wriggle himself out of Ron’s arms like a worm under a Rictusempra. He kept asking to be put down and Ron was about to give up - although the boy walked far less and slower than Rosie and therefore shouldn’t have been that keen of the floor - when Draco raised his voice. “Scorpius, don’t.”

The boy pouted angrily and his face became grumpy, but he stilled. Hermione chuckled. “This is magic! You have to teach me!”

“Believe me, you don’t want it.” He sighed. “You can put him down now, as long as he asks you nicely.”

It was fun to look at Ron staring at the baby as if it was some complicated Muggle piece of machinery. Scorpius calmed down slowly and his face softened. “Ow?”

Draco nodded and the boy met the floor with sheer glee. That gave them some time to get back to Draco once Hermione cast wards to prevent the children from injuring themselves or running around the house.

“Harry, you’re late”, said Draco all of a sudden.

“Harry?” Ron’s brows furrowed. “We’re first-naming people, then.”

“It’s a technique used to take people’s minds from the situation that caused them trauma in the first place”, said Hermione in her best know-it-all mode. “You relate to a different kind of intimacy and it helps you ground back.”

“I’m concluding, not questioning.” He kissed Hermione’s hair. “So, chap.” Draco frowned. “Yeah, you. We’re babysitting you so Harry can go to work. Is it alright with you?”

“Just fine, Weasel.”

Harry felt some uneasiness settling in his stomach. “Ron, seriously, I think I should stay and—”

“Trust us, Harry. He’ll be fine”, said Hermione.
“But I don’t—”

“Off you go, go on, go on.”

“Ron, come on—”

“Potter.” It was Draco’s turn to intervene and he did so as quiet and seriously as he had done with Scorpius, with a little way-too-familiar edge to it. “Just go. I survived you all for over seven years. I can take some days more.”

“You had not been blind back then. Plus, you had a wand.”

“Just go.”

Harry needed yet some urging to leave, but despite the concern for Draco being big, it was the look that Scorpius shot him before he went to the fireplace that truly broke his heart.
Harry collided with three different people on his way to Shacklebolt’s office. The imprint of Scorpius’ expression was embedded in him and he couldn’t shake it off. He had never seen a child stare at someone like that. He knew the baby was too young to understand or even acknowledge the fear of losing and yet Harry could swear that fear had been there. Damn it. Sod himself for taking Draco and his adorable, big-eyed son in. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have to ask his boss for office time nor drag his best friends to babysit their previous enemy - not that any of them would ever complain. That was his fault and his fault only, yes, it was. He’d cope with the consequences when they showed.

And did that happen fast. He entered Shacklebolt’s office after knocking and found the man frowning at a piece of paper. He looked up and greeted Harry happily, asking the same usual questions before asking what he could do for him.

“I was under the impression you were busy, sir.”

“Oh, that. Someone’s accusing the Malfoys of crossbreeding Chimaeras, but Lucius is in Azkaban, Narcissa is in Germany and Draco and his wife were not supposed to be anywhere near his property, so I’m finding it rather strange.” Harry tried his best to keep his face blank, but his insides stirred with the idea that someone would let the monster that co-habited a cellar with Draco loose anywhere. It was obvious to him that it was the same: how many crossbred Chimaeras would show up in close relation with the Malfoy name? “Do you know anything about it?”

“I know Malfoy Manor has wards that are almost unsurmountable and they are guarded against magical creatures of all kinds, so supposing there is a crossbred Chimaera in there, it wouldn’t leave.” Lie. Lie, lie, complete bollocks, that was what it was. He knew nothing about the wards of Malfoy Manor. Shacklebolt only nodded slowly, though.

“I wasn’t planning on engaging those wards but I believe we’ll have to check it out someday.”

“I can do it. Just let me figure out a way to go through the wards and I’ll see if the accusations are right. I won’t engage the beast in case it’s there, of course.”

Harry wanted to kick himself for offering. What was he thinking? The bloody monster had apparently almost got Malfoy killed; if he entered the Manor and found it, what were the odds that he’d get out alive even if he didn’t “engage the beast”? Being the Boy Who Lived did fairly little for his safety inside the Department, he had come to notice. His boss, though, seemed pleased with the idea.

“Thank you, Harry. You can take the file, then.” He gave him a thin file with a couple of pictures and a letter in it. “But let’s go back to business: what had you wanted to ask me?”

“I, ahm, sir… I need a license from field work. Except for this case, I can work on this one just fine”, he hurried to add. “I’m taking care of a friend’s child while she’s out of town and the poor kid’s sick, I cannot leave him alone.”

“Harry.” Shacklebolt’s voice was deep and calm. “No need to make up lies. I know your marriage is not going where you wanted it to and it’s ok to need a time to figure things out. It’s no shame.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Don’t mention it. Take the office hours but I don’t mind if you do them at home. Just don’t forget:
you report to me and I want this Malfoy case going places."

“Of course, sir.”

“Then pack what you need and talk to those you need and leave. We have plenty of good Aurors but you have only got one wife.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll be going now.”

Shacklebolt waved him off with a condescending smile. Harry felt sick to lie that boldly to his boss but there again, it had been his assumptions, right? Harry just hadn’t thought of clearing it up. He breathed deep, the file on his hand making him itch to read it. Oh, there was something very peculiar regarding Draco’s situation and he’d hex himself if it didn’t have anything to do with that letter. He took a look at the clock on the nearest wall. It was barely ten. Tyra would have her hands full with harvesting her morning herbs, an activity everyone inside the Ministry knew they shouldn’t meddle with. Resignedly, Harry took the file to his table and opened it. It would hardly do him any harm to know what was in it. He spread the photographs on the table and something inside him tingled. He took the pictures back into the file quietly. He didn’t want people to know what he had been assigned to, oh, he did not want that indeed. Using the inconspicuous Ministry file as a shield against curious eyes, he started the letter. A brief look into it showed it had been written in Flourish and Blotts’ Lie-Proof parchment with a common quill and regular, Hogwarts-standard ink. It bore no signature nor date and hardly any details: it said literally “Malfoy has a crossbred Chimaera in the Manor... and maybe more.” That looked cryptic, to say the least, and Harry folded the letter back again with a very serious bad feeling about it. He didn’t look at the pictures, merely tucking them further inside the file, along with the letter, and folding the file in half to put it inside the Spell-Proof pocket inside his robes. The last time he had felt that unease about anything written, he had ended up confronting a sixteen years-old Tom Riddle out of a bloody diary.

It was a matter of saying hellos and finishing the last reports on his recently closed cases until it was one o’clock and the herb harvesting should be over. Harry strode to Tyra’s room without a practiced speech, aware that saying nice words wouldn’t help him with the woman. The door was open, as it usually was, and he had a wand to his throat before he could close it after him.

“Shoot”, said Tyra in her smoothest voice.

“Help me.” She lowered her wand slowly, deciding he was not joking. “Tyra, I think I caught myself in a bloody fugly mess.”

“Sit down and we’ll see.”

Harry would not tell her the whole story, so he abbreviated it to a fellow Quidditch player who had been really hurt after falling off a broom. According to Harry, she had been breastfeeding and he was now hosting her and her very, terribly young twins who were, while they spoke, under the lasting effects of a powerful Sleep Concoction. Tyra had seen stranger scenarios, but the question was obvious: why hadn’t he sent her to a hospital? Harry said the girl had a history of abuse and would rather die before going anywhere near any place where she could be drugged. He said he had saved that girl from a very bad situation before and she trusted him completely, but only him, and he would be glad if she didn’t have to die or suffer in any way. He knew it was a low card, but he didn’t want to raise awareness to the fact that anyone close to matching Draco’s description was housed at his place - although Draco could, if they did some pushing, be related to some of the facts. Tyra nodded slowly.

“So, what are we talking about? Broken bones, sprains and some minor scars?”
“Actually, I think her bones are broken beyond repair. I’d know that, major falls while playing Quidditch. Skele-Gro was a friend of mine.”

“I’ll give you a bottle but I advise you to repair her every broken bone before giving it to her, or else she may end up with bones in unusual places. This we have here is a particular brew and won’t just go magically fixing everything, although it does cause much less pain. This said, don’t forget to remove the bones you wish to regrow before she drinks it. And keep her hydrated at all times: growing bones requires too much water.” She fussed about her cabinets to find the potion. “Can you find a vein?”

“My house-elf can”, said Harry with all the certainty he could muster. Hopefully, he wasn’t lying.

“Great. I’ll give you a self-refilling bag of saline and some needles. Change and sterilize the needles once every two days. Also, removing bones usually takes some nerves with them, so take this. And give it right after the bones are good. Call it Nerve-Gro if you might, but it’s a nameless potion that reactivates nervous terminations. Any cartilage or tendon will make do with Skele-Gro. Make sure you remove them carefully if they’re damaged. Oh, and under no circumstances can she breastfeed until she’s cleared of damage. Use a Lactation Spell on yourself if you absolutely need.”

“Alright.”

She put the potions and the bag on the table, alongside with pamphlets explaining the Lactation Spell and the Bone Removing one and stared at him. “Anything else?”

“Pain medication?”

She picked up a large vial. “Only until six hours before she takes Skele-Gro and twelve hours after she stops the bone-growing. Same with the nerves. Up to three drops and no more unless you want her in complete coma.” Harry nodded. “Are the scars traumatic or chemical?”

“Most are traumatic, yes. But I think she fell in a puddle of something, ahm…”

“Beast related. Probably acidic.” She picked up a very menacing instrument with a razor, a metal brush and a gel-coated piece that looked like a disassembled disposable razor. “This is what we use to remove those. Do you want to give it a try?”

Harry gulped. “Not really. She can go to a doctor for those.”

Harry knew there was no way Malfoy would agree to go to a doctor before he was out of danger, but that metal thing looked ready to take scraps of flesh away and he was not ready for that yet. Tyra nodded and put the instrument away before giving him some balms and lotions for the sprains and teaching him a simple spell to know if the patient was in pain and how much so he could dose the painkiller with an unbiased judgement. He was thanking her and about to leave her office when she called him back.

“Potter.” He stopped still on his tracks. “I am trusting you that this is not serious, but if it becomes so, for the love of Merlin, don’t let your friend suffer. You know where I live and you can reach me at any time.”

“I know. Thank you.”

With that, he left, making sure to clear up his desk and disguise the supplies he was taking before going to the Atrium and flooing straight home. He’d leave things there and check on Draco and Scorpius before going to The Burrow.
When he arrived, Ron was dozing off in a chair with both babies munching something carrot-like on his lap. For sure taking care of them all wasn’t that difficult a task? Rosie noticed him first, lifting her little arms and screaming “u’cle ‘Awy” before slipping from her father’s lap to embrace Harry’s shin. He caressed her hair and scooped her up, dropping the supplies on the nearest table. Scorpius was very interested in his carrot, but he looked at Harry happily and waved the carrot at him. Ron, suddenly awake, cursed softly and yawned.

“Hey, mate”, said he sleepily.

“Hey. Hard time with the kids?” Harry moved forward and picked Scorpius up too so his friend could stretch and get up.

“Hermione wanted them to eat, as in proper food.” Ron looked really displeased. “I had to feed one while Kreacher ran after the other because mister Ferret in there won’t eat anything and she’s worried about him so she wouldn’t help me.”

“Maybe he’s in pain?”

“Doubt it. Hermione has cast a two hours-long pain-relief spell that would make any pain run away screaming like a kicked puppy, and it was only about maybe an hour ago.”

Harry sighed. “Here, take Rosie. I’ll take Scorpius to see him and surrender Hermione so she can have lunch.”

“Thanks, mate.”

Ron took his daughter willingly and Harry switched Scorpius’ position so the boy could go on munching his carrot. He entered the study to see Hermione almost crying with exasperation. Seeing his father, Scorpius spat a mouthful of carrot-decorated “dada” and the woman beside the bed got up, a plate of a seemingly very nourishing soup on her hands.

“He won’t eat.” She sighed out all the air she had in her lungs. “What can I do?”

“You did enough. Let me try, ok?” She nodded, partially relieved. “Draco?” The man in bed stirred and turned his way. “Hey. I brought Scorpius to check on you.”

“Is he eating?”, asked he without preambles, being patted on the cheek by Scorpius when Harry lowered him a little so Draco could caress him.

“Very well, by the way. ‘Mione will help him finish his carrots and I’ll take her place with you, ok?”

Draco didn’t say anything, but Harry switched the baby for the plate of soup just the same. He told Hermione he had brought supplies and asked her to close the door, which she reluctantly did. Harry sat down on the bed, by Draco’s waist, and stared at him.

“Ok, what’s happening? You were not that full of issues when I offered you food last night. Are you hurting?” He shook his head violently and Harry hissed him into quietness. “I’d rather have you speaking than trying to ruin what’s left of your body. Is the soup cold? Hot? Disgusting?”

“It’s not that”, murmured he.

“Then what is it? There must be something wrong.”

Draco’s jaw clenched visibly. In daylight, Harry noticed a large bruise in it. He controlled his instinct to touch it. “Do you think they’re only pitying me?”
Harry deflated and put the soup aside, realizing with relief that Hermione, probably foreseeing the possibility of a tantrum, had spelled the plate not to drop or spill. He took Malfoy’s hands, both the good and the crippled one, and caressed them with his thumbs. There was no way to soothe him with warm looks and he knew the man deserved more than just words. His anguish seemed too real to be put aside.

“Maybe a little.” Malfoy’s lips trembled in sheer contempt. “Draco, don’t. Come on. You’ve been severely injured, it’s obvious people will pity you at some rate. It doesn’t mean they don’t respect you or don’t believe you’re worth taking care of.”

“I feel invalid.”

“Right now, you are.” Harry chuckled and Draco clutched at his hands. “But it’s only temporary and this is for your own good. In the meantime, profit from any and every help you can. They are here because they want to and they are helping because they want to. I didn’t call them here. They thought you worth helping, so let them help.”

He hesitated sullenly. “I don’t want to be fed like a baby. Even my son eats on his own.”

Harry sighed and pressed the bridge of his nose. “Your shoulder is not ok yet. Can’t I feed you? I don’t mind it and you know I don’t pity you. You are a strong, capable man who’s a little caught up in some awful shite that’s not your fault.”

Silence greeted them. After some instants, Draco seemed to recover from his mild lack of self-confidence; he nodded quietly and Harry picked up the plate again.

“What?”

“I hate being blind and not knowing anything, or anyone.” He sighed. “Can I at least know you?”

“What do you mean?”, asked Harry clueless.

“Let me touch your face so I can acknowledge you”, he said with a touch of obviousness in his voice. “I haven’t touched a human being other than my son for what seems to be ages. It’s so bloody hard to be in the dark. It’s so bloody hard to be alone.”

Harry felt his breath stutter while he sucked it in. He had known that feeling and wouldn’t let anyone fall for that, not ever. Living with the Dursleys had let him feeling like an outcast and he had never known what had been to be really loved in the first place. Malfoy had had the love and lost it. He gulped when the realization of his psychological suffering hit him. Then, nodding much to himself, he lowered his head the most he could and picked Malfoy’s less damaged hand to touch his face. He ran it quietly on his skin, outlining Harry’s face before raking it smoothly through his unruly hair. He did it so focused that Harry was becoming hyper-aware of each and every feature Draco touched. He felt embarrassed about his untamed hair, proud of the scar that didn’t hurt like hell every time he slept anymore, ashamed of his never-changing glasses. He took it nicely when Draco took them off and put them carefully aside, then began outlining his eyebrows, lowering his fingers with extreme caution to touch his lids and lashes, the bridge of his nose. Draco’s hand turned and the smooth back of his fingers traced the rest of his nose and one, then the other, cheekbone, down to one cheek and then the other, passing quietly on his chin. Harry’s heart skipped a beat and he found out he had not yet opened his eyes. Keep them closed, said an insistent voice in his head, keep them closed or you won’t make it, and it was right, he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t be able to cope with such tenderness if he stared at Draco, if he confronted that man. He forced a breath out very slowly and Draco cupped his
face with care, using just his thumb to trace, excruciatingly slow, the curve of Harry’s upper lip, then the lower lip, just to finish on the corner of his lips. Harry realized he had leaned on to the front when Draco’s forehead touched his. He whispered a “thank you” that reverberated inside Harry’s stomach and made him shiver. It was filled with raw appreciation and yet it had been said in such a deep, moving voice. They kept those positions for a moment and Harry didn’t realize he was expecting something. Eventually, they parted and he opened his eyes.

The smile on Draco’s face was heavenly. Yes, he was not the cool-featured, impeccable-skinned Malfoy anymore, but the authority and the magnetic attraction remained there. He was dragging Harry to himself and Harry was not noticing he was falling.

“I won’t fuss about the food anymore”, murmured Malfoy, too sensitive to disrupt the calm around him. Harry’s first will was to ruffle up and clear his throat, but Draco hadn’t done anything wrong. It was not ok to severe whatever connection he had built and punish him for being blind. He put his glasses back on, took a spoonful of the warm, thick soup and lifted it to Draco’s lips, trying hard not to focus on the eagerness with which they closed around the food, taking the soup in without a sound. It happened for some more spoonfuls before Draco took hold of Harry’s wrist very tight.

“Wait a moment, please.”

Harry frowned; his hand let go of the spoon in the plate and paused mid-air while Draco’s thumb snaked to his palm and the hold loosened. “What’s wrong?”

“Too long without food. Salazar, isn’t this uncomfortable.” He half-chuckled and changed the grip on Harry’s hand. “Sorry. I’m not fussing.”

“I believe you. How long has it been since the last time you ate?” Draco shrugged and winced a little, his hand clasping Harry’s tighter. Oh, that was a bad sign. “Are you in pain?”

“A little, yes.” Malfoy frowned and touched his right shoulder tentatively with his left hand. A painful current passed through his body. “Yes. This is definitely pain.”

“We have to fix your bones”, said Harry apologetically. “I can’t put the spell back.”

“Oh, I know. Nevermind it.” He hissed and relaxed back. His fingers traced curling patterns on Harry’s hand and he knew it was supposed to be soothing, but he wondered to whom. “I think you’d better leave the soup.” Harry acquiesced and Draco yawned. “I’m sleepy.”

“Eating more than we’re used to does that to us, yes. Talking as much as you do doesn’t help either.” Draco almost nodded. “Sleep. We’ll fix the rest of the fixable bones and remove those we cannot fix so the potion can regrow them.” Draco’s eyes fluttered when he let them keep closed naturally, instead of forcing them to be so the way he was now used to. For a moment, Harry asked himself why he didn’t let his eyes open. The next second, he had said the question aloud.

“But I’m hideous enough without them, now”, answered Draco in a tiny voice.

That statement hit him and left a bitter taste in his mouth. There were definitely more things wrong with Draco than he had cared to let show. Awkwardly, Harry sent the plate away, watching while it settled gently on the study’s desk, and pulled the rails of Draco’s bed up, resting against them and closing his eyes for a while. He just wanted to stay there until Malfoy slept so he would let him go and he could carry on fixing him. Of course he didn’t think his sleepless self would find that bed very comfortable, thank you very much, and make him slide to sleep in it, an arm recklessly thrown over Draco’s stomach and his hand still firm in his grip.

It was Hermione who shook him, her face torn between a wide smile and a deep frown. Harry
yawned at least three times before the words she was saying penetrated his brain.

“... very careful so we don’t disturb it. Maybe you should stay away from it.”

“Say it again”, said he, sitting up and disturbing his already messy hair further.

Hermione sighed and spoke very slow and clearly. “Ron ran a deep-spell check on Malfoy and he’s being tracked.”

“He what?!?” Harry’s legs collided with the rails in his attempt to jump out of the bed. Malfoy stirred by his side and he automatically put a hand on his arm to steady the man. He lowered his voice. “What are you talking about?”

Ron approached them. “The cracks in his bones?” Harry nodded. “They have signatures. Some very malicious ones and some others almost as pure as a eleven years-old’s.” Harry frowned, not understanding. How would someone as kind as a child be able to hurt a man like Draco? That didn’t make sense. “Pretty sure the white magic embedded in his bones is the well-intended work of a very poorly instructed Healer.”

“This is probably the reason why we didn’t feel anything on his ribs, because they had already been cleaned”, said Hermione, lowering the rails so Harry could get up - which he didn’t. “His clavicle is the next mendable bone and we wanted to start there, but if we do, we might tamper with the tracks left by the offenders.”

“And we’d lose them”, said Harry, distressed with the finding. His wards were superb but they were new; he had never seen bone-deep tracking spells work inside them but there again, he had never been a victim of them. “We’d also warn whoever is looking for him that he’s under care.”

Hermione nodded solemnly. “We are trying to run diagnosis to see if the tracks are reflective or not. If they are, you won’t be able to help us heal him. Not the way you did last night and definitely not with your own wand.”

“My signature’s too obvious.” Ron and Hermione nodded. “If this that’s happening to Malfoy has anything to do with the war, they will recognize me.”

“To kidnap Malfoy, they have to be very aware of what they are doing. It wouldn’t happen unless they knew very well what to do.”

Harry nodded slowly at Ron’s words, trying to list what little information they had already. Tracking spells, medieval torture, dark and light magic, crossbred Chimaeras, the suspicious letter to the Ministry. He understood why Malfoy had said “they”. There was no way a single wizard would be able to act in so many fronts. A Dark Arts master could never become a pure Healer. He let out a disgruntled sigh and felt Draco’s hand tug at his robes. He had moved so quietly in bed that Harry hadn’t noticed; his entire weight was on his broken clavicle and Harry adapted the way he was sitting to take some of that weight on his left thigh. Malfoy’s broken fingers tried a clumsy hold at his black slacks.

“Scorpius?” The murmur was really weak and Harry went cold. Ron signalled to a crib on the other wall of the study, close to the Floo-blocked fireplace, where Scorpius and Rosie had decided to take a nap not long ago.

“He’s sleeping, Draco”, said Harry, caressing his fingers like he would a baby’s, to see if he relaxed. It worked. “How’s the pain?”

He clenched his teeth. “Bearable.”
Harry didn’t have to use Tyra’s spell to know he was lying. He lowered his head to prevent the others from hearing - he didn’t want Draco to feel as helpless as he had earlier, not again.

“You don’t have to suffer in silence. We are not expecting you to emerge from all that happened to you unscathed. It’s alright to be in pain. It’s alright to cry from it and it’s alright to seek relief. You’re a bloody human being, Malfoy.” He felt a flaming hot tear touch his slacks and caressed Draco’s entwined blond hair with kindness. They were thin as a child’s and sweaty as if he were feverish. “We have discovered bad things about the way you have been tortured. They are tracking you through it.”

Malfoy’s lips trembled. “I didn’t know.”

“We know you didn’t. We are going to remove the tracks and try to find out who did this to you.”

“Harry.” There was was, the pleading voice again. The fragile side of Draco Malfoy he never thought he would see. “I feel like there are things inside my head. I felt that when I slept last night and again now. Every time I sleep, there are these things nipping at me. Heavy, dark things. Do you think you could take them away? I know the answer is in here, is in them.”

Harry turned to Hermione, who turned to Ron, who turned back at him. All three didn’t know. “We can try. But first we need you to recover from the physical side of the torture. I cannot help you unblock your mind if your body’s trying to cope with so much hurt and pain.”

Draco’s eyelids fluttered and a tiny, relieved smile showed in his cracked, pale lips. “I trust you.”

The Golden Trio switched concerned looks and a heavy silence hovered above them before Hermione handed Harry the self-refilling bag of saline. She quickly told him how to find a vein and how to pierce it. Harry did it with a mix of disgust and terror, afraid of hurting Draco further or causing some kind of catastrophe inside his body. Ron wouldn’t have it, though, so he promised Harry that he would find Malfoy’s bloody veins if Harry wasn’t doing that, which cleared the matter almost immediately. Bag firmly set by the side of the bed, Harry slipped out of it and, helped by Ron, moved Draco to a better position so they could start to assess, remove and, if Merlin would be merciful, identify the magical signatures and tracking spells.
They found nine different magical signatures in Draco’s body. All of them bore traces of dark magic but for two: Draco’s own, for the Lactation Spell was still active, and a very clean, very compassionate other that was the source of every little healing. Some of the dark ones didn’t have anything resembling a wand component - or so Ron said, for finding magical signatures had become his forte - which meant there were some powerful wizards involved. When Harry asked him if he had ever seen any of those signatures before, Ron seemed truly sad to say he thought he didn’t.

Removing the signatures was a slow, delicate process and Hermione decided it would be for the best if they did it one by one, as they didn’t know how capacitated they were for the job. They started with the clavicle: as the next mendable bone and bearing only two different signatures, just one of them with a concurrent Tracking Spell and none with a reflective component, it should be the safer bet for a trial. Ron was the one who would separate both magical signatures and Harry, being the most problematic helper, would take the inoffensive one. Hermione and Ron would cancel the Tracking Spell with a complicated charm that would make seem to the tracker that the spell had simply worn off, weakening it bit by bit over the space of thirty minutes. It made Harry the one who’d have to hold Draco tremendously quiet while they did it, or else they could end up affecting another eventual spell or breaking the weakened tracking spell, setting it loose inside or even outside Draco’s body. It was a lot like separating physical memories to put inside a Pensieve, Harry thought, while the others went to the other side of the bed, cautiously pushed far from the wall. Hermione conjured tall seats for them all. Being the one who’d have the less magical strain, it would be Harry’s responsibility to mend the bone after Hermione had disabled the Tracking Spell and Ron had divided the signatures.

The first thing Harry noticed when he paid attention to the procedure was that the magical currents inside Draco’s body had different levels of power and intensity. His own was very powerful but was weakened at the time, while the signatures were far less powerful and had a stronger hold to the points where the breaking of the bones and nerves had occurred. Ron used his wand and channeled some of the spell to his bare fingers to pull the signatures aparts, signaling to Harry that he should bottle up the one on his left. It was also a difficult process that needed to be done very patiently or they could break the signature and render it useless, but in the end Harry had a vial filled with a slightly glittering dark-grey substance that was a lot thicker and shorter than a Pensieve-able thought. Ron almost cheered and Hermione clapped her hands before she let go of Draco to put the vial away and exchanged places with Harry to start neutralizing the Tracking Spell. She had done that before when she saved enslaved house-elves, for the really evil masters rarely let an elf leave his home without a Tracking Spell. Harry’s hands closed around Draco’s wrists and he exercised a small pressure on them. Draco’s eyes fluttered and he winced.

“It will be alright”, Harry murmured quietly.

Little did he know how wrong he was. When Hermione’s wand let out a fine chain that looked like a
golden Devil’s Snare, Harry felt his body shudder and, the moment it trapped the Tracking Spell to suck away its life, Draco’s eyes shot open and he let out a single, high-pitched bone-cracking scream. Hermione gaped at Harry for a speck of a moment and shouted for Kreacher to shield the babies’ crib from rumour before Ron ordered Harry to pin Draco to the bed, which he did with his full body, for once not caring about worsening Draco’s injuries. He put his face to the pillow, right next to Draco’s head, and felt the way his breath forced itself away from him, in pained, wailed puffs. Hermione put a hand on the mattress to steady herself and the spell tightened. Draco tried to jerk up - impossible since Harry was heavier than him - and Harry felt a pang of pain when Draco sunk his teeth on his shoulder. The Auror robes were thick but didn’t match the sudden strength of Draco’s bite. He listened to the sounds he made when they became muffled and trembly and noticed the disgruntled half-smirk in Hermione’s face while she kept feeding the spell. Ron, by her side, had the knots of his fingers a sickly white and frowned in concentration with his eyes almost crossed to keep things apart. Beneath himself, Draco trembled.

“It’s almost over, it’s almost over”, said Harry to him in the most confident voice he could muster. He lowered his hand to Draco’s and squeezed it soothingly. He thought it unfair that someone would have to sit through thirty minutes of feeling something being drained and ripped from one’s body but after ten minutes, Hermione straightened up her spine and sighed tiredly. Ron made a flourish with his wand and bottled the other signature up while Harry stared at them without understanding. Draco was no longer biting him. “What happened?”

“We managed to shrink the Tracking Spell enough to part it from the magical signature,” Ron yawned. “We can count ourselves lucky this time. When we come across reflective ones, it’ll be trickier. We’re looking it up to see if there’s any potion to help us, or else the Tracking Spell will have to be completely deactivated before we’re able to remove the signature if we don’t want to show the tracker who we are and what we’re doing, but we’re done with this one.”

“We’ll let the magic rest for another twenty to thirty minutes and test him again”, said Hermione. “After that, you can repair his bone. In the meantime, I think we’ll take a nap.”

Harry nodded and waved weakly while his friends left the room. He was so lucky that Hermione and Ron knew what they were doing. As a battle-front Auror, Harry’s specialties were several, such as breaking wards and coercing wands, not to mention the actual attack and defence spells, but those were not very useful right then. When they found the culprits, it would be a different story.

His thoughts were drawn back to present when Draco let out a sudden puff of breath. He had quieted and Harry slid to the side, easing the pressure of his weight on him. “Is it over yet?”, murmured Draco. “I am sorry. It hurts a lot.”

“I know. I’ve noticed. I don’t think they knew it’d make you feel so bad.” Draco found the heart to chuckle. “What?”

“You were set aside to pin me to the bed, Potter. They knew alright.”

Harry paled. “I wouldn’t have let them do it like this had I known.”

“Which is precisely why they wouldn’t tell you about the pain. You need to do what needs to be done not just for me but for my child as well.” Draco turned to him, eyes lazily open. Harry felt the sudden urge to stare into them and touched his face. Malfoy shut his eyes and Harry felt like being shut out but none of them said anything about it. It felt like a he was invading Draco’s privacy to ask him about his eyes. “I gather you’ll try to learn something about what you’ve found?” Harry said a timid yes. “And after we’re done with it all?”

“You’re free to go, if you want. You can always wait until we find who did this to you.”
Draco nodded slowly and an awkward silence stilled the air between them. Harry was grateful when Hermione and Ron entered the room to see if the bone was alright to be mended. They looked exhausted and Hermione winced when Rosie woke up, asking for her father right away. By her side, Scorpius was dead quiet, staring at the commotion beside his father’s bed with interest. Hermione was thorough but quick to say everything was fine and Harry could repair the clavicle. The bone, being in a much less sensitive area and not being nipped, was an easier task that didn’t come near to draining Harry. His muscles were tired of holding Draco, yes, but his magical strength was just fine. Ron and Hermione, on the other hand, were beyond help. It was close to six o’clock already and Harry decided it’d be better if they just went away and rested as much as they could. Rosie didn’t seem to like this idea, which she promptly said, but Hermione asked her if she wanted to spend some time with granny. Rosie seemed to consider it before saying a wild ‘no!’ and running to hug Harry’s legs. Ron grunted.

“I can stay with her”, he said, shrugging both his shoulders. Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that didn’t trust him in the slightest. “I’m serious. I have Pepperup Potions and additivated Cheering Draughts. I can handle them very fine. You need a twelve-hours straight sleep to say the least and you know your mother will pester you all to know what you were doing, right, Ron?” He grumbled an affirmative answer. “I swear I’ll Floo to your place if anything serious, anything at all, happens to her.” Hermione didn’t seem convinced. “You know my wards are the best, Hermione. There’s no way she’s hurting herself.”

She sighed very deep. “Fine. But just for tonight.”

Harry grinned happily. “Of course.”

They said their goodbyes and Rosie kissed both parents on their cheeks before asking Harry to be put down again. The first thing she did was pressure the wards that kept her from the fireplace from where her parents had just disappeared, pouting when they didn’t give in.

“In!”, she demanded angrily.

“Not a chance, kid. Want me to get Albus to play with you and Scorpius?”

She clapped gleefully. “Abie! Wan Abie!”

“You have to stay quiet and you can’t say anything about your new friend to granny, alright?” She nodded gravely and Harry picked her up, floo-calling The Burrow. George was the one to answer.

“Hey, pal!” He waved cheerfully at him. “Wanna come over? Plenty awesome food down here.”

“Thanks, but not now. Is Ginny there? I’m babysitting Rosie so Ron and Hermione can get some alone time and I wondered if she could let me pick Albus earlier this week.”

George waved at someone and the next second Ginny was visible. She smiled warily at Harry, who scratched his head embarrassedly. “Hey, Ginny.”

“Hi, Harry. Why won’t you come over?”

“Rosie is in a time-out. She refuses to speak properly and Hermione doesn’t want her to be spoiled tonight.”

Ginny frowned, but nodded. “She’ll make this girl develop strangely.”

“Mommy no tangy!”, said a very angry Rosie, to which all three adults laughed.
“Of course she isn’t strange, my dear”, said Harry, placating the little beast. “Do you think Albus can come? She’s missing him and, sincerely, so am I. Please, Ginny.”

“Oh, sure.” She disappeared for a moment before returning with the quiet baby. “You know, Harry, he’s your son too. You don’t have to ask me so pleadingly to spend time with him. Just tell me you want to be with him. He surely likes it much better when he’s with you.”

Harry smiled at her. “Thanks, Ginny.”

He stepped into the fireplace with Rosie, heading straight to The Burrow, where he waved at everyone and Ginny handed him Albus and his things. They said goodbye with a kiss on their cheeks and Harry returned home very quickly. He knew Ginny would never say she resented having had Albus when her career had been at its top, nor that the boy reminded her of Harry so much it was disconcerting. In fact, he had been waiting for her to acknowledge that and understand it didn’t make her a worse mother, so they could settle the arrangements and he could let her go. He still liked her a lot, but she was suffering so much being attached to Harry like that he just wanted everything to end quick.

When they set foot home again, Kreacher showed up with a scowl at Harry and both babies. Albus was quick to retribute the look. “Master Draco says if Master Harry leaves him alone again, Master Draco is setting the house on fire.”

Harry laughed loud and listened to the infamous “git” Malfoy shouted through the half-ajar door. “I’ll keep it in mind, Kreacher. Now, can you fetch us all some dinner? A broth would be nice. There must be some rabbit in the fridge and don’t forget to add carrots. Scorpius is quite fond of them.”

The elf bowed slightly with a half-hearted “as you wish” and Disapparated to the kitchen with a loud crack. Harry went to the study and set the children he was currently holding on the floor. Albus looked at him for a moment and broke in a happy, delighted smile. He didn’t like the usual agitation of The Burrow and both his parents knew it.

“Are you hungry, Albus?”, asked Harry politely. That baby functioned in a different pace: cooing him and talking with him as if he were as little as he actually was usually made him close himself to any form of dialogue.

“Mmm ‘ungy.” He rubbed his little belly, which seemed to rumble. Rosie stared at him, scared, and ran awkwardly to where Scorpius was dancing, trying to get out of the crib. “Dago tummy.”

Harry went to save Scorpius from falling on his head and lowered him. The boy thanked him with a smile before Rosie called him to play with Albus’ building blocks with her. Harry turned back to his son, who was eyeing him patiently. “Sorry. Right, Kreacher is going to bring us food in no time, so we’ll calm the dragon inside your tummy. Meanwhile, I want you to meet someone.”

Draco, who had been quiet, just listening to the conversation in the room and half-smiling, composed himself. Harry levered Albus to his bed and placed him by his now mended shoulder. “Albus, this is Draco Malfoy. He is a friend of dad and you have to be respectful when talking to him. Draco, this is my son, Albus Potter.”

“Nice to meet you, Albus”, said Draco in a very formal tone. The boy appreciated it.

“Meechu”, repeated the baby very slowly, making the vowels sound twice their length. “Peeddy.” Harry smiled and Draco frowned.
“What?”, asked Malfoy, not comprehending the word.

“Dago peeddy”, said Albus carefully, solving how to pronounce the strange name by associating it to the already familiar “dragon”. “Mmm peeddy.”

Albus had decided to use “mmm” as an intensifier and neither Harry or Ginny knew where it had come from. It had been systematically used, Harry had noticed, to replace any word that meant anything ranging from “many” to “much”, including “more” or “really”.

“Potter, correct me if I’m mistaken, but is your son calling me pretty?”, Draco demanded to know, divided between laughter and a very deep frown.

“Well, can’t say he’s wrong, can we?” He smirked, knowing Draco wouldn’t see but somehow believing he would notice it. Inwards, he thanked his son profusely. Draco needed to know he was not that damaged and a child calling him pretty was a very nice start. “I’ll make sure the kids get acquainted alright and leave them to play before I’m back by your side. I want to change some things regarding the way you’re settled. You look miserable being so far from you child and now that your clavicle is alright and we know how to help you, keeping you closer must be safe.”

Draco smiled and thanked him with somewhat of a smirk, catching the glimpse of tease in his voice. Harry kneeled and let his son loose, watching his wobbly steps towards Rosie and Scorpius. He intervened when the baby frowned at the unknown child playing with his blocks. “This is Scorpius.”

“Copi!”, said Rosie, pointing straight at the blonde boy’s face. “Copi coo. Daco baby.”

“Very good, Rosie”, praised Harry, impressed at the girl’s logic. Unlike Albus, she had not been formally presented to Draco. “Are you all going to build something together?”

“Ogash!” Scorpius picked up a stone-like block and settled it on top of another as to prove a point.


“Papa”, he frowned and looked very serious in trying to mimic someone Harry later recognized as Draco. “Ogash ‘appy.”

“Daddy too!”, chimed Rosie, and Albus nodded, eyes wide. “Ogash?”

“I can show you some pictures of our time in Hogwarts after dinner if you’re curious. Now, I want you all to play nicely and don’t make too much noise. Draco’s feeling a little unwell and we should let him rest, ok?” The children all nodded - although Harry didn’t think they fully-understood what was said to them anyway - and he cast a ward-circle around them to prevent them from going far. “Thank you.”

When Harry got up and stretched, he turned to check on Malfoy. He was definitely impatient. Mentally, Harry listed the rest of his injuries: both kneecaps were strained, out of place and cracked useless, as were three fingers in his left hand - that he remembered; with a shock, he recalled his ankles and wrists were filled with smaller and microfractures too and was rendered amused by the amount of guts it must have taken Draco to act as if, apart from the fingers, his hands were alright. He scowled at him and shook his head. Arsehole.

“You should be trapped in this bed forever for not reminding me your ankles and wrists are ruined”, he growled. Draco winced. “Yeah, I remembered it alright, mister. Sit the fuck still while I’ll immobilize them so you can stop abusing them.”

Harry conjured fabric casts with rigid structures inside, making sure to pad them a lot before setting
them to Draco’s ankles and wrists. Then, he cast a cleaning spell on the man and changed his clothes with a wave of his hand - he could have asked Kreacher to do so, but it cost him nothing anyway. He brushed his hair with a spell and made him sit with another, the bag of saline repositioning itself automatically. He would assess the bruises and burnings when the children fell asleep - which, he thought surprised, would probably happen in there, since Harry was not, by any means, going to leave Draco alone. Thinking of that, he made changes to the positioning of the furniture inside the room: he put the children’s crib a little further away from the fireplace, changing the desk closer to it; Draco’s bed was replaced by a single bed he had in one of the unused bedrooms upstairs and he summoned another bed downstairs to be his. He placed them in an L-shape, the headboards operating as the corner, and levitated a grumpy Draco onto it. The big bookshelves were moved to the living-room, along with the hospital bed, now back to its old couch form. Finally, he placed a bedside table in the space between both headboards and enlarged the crib so the children could all fit in it, making the rails taller after Scorpius’ display of adventurous spirit.

“This is a regular bed you’re in. You’re closer to the ground, now, and I’m putting a climber by your side, which means Scorpius can climb onto it and you can keep the as close to him as you were before.” Draco acquiesced. “Also, I’m spelling the mattress and your pillows to respond to your commands - I gather you know geometric angles?” The way Malfoy’s left brow went up, Harry knew he had just avoided a snarl. “Great. You tell the angle and it’ll set. To avoid your child crashing your already fucked up ankles and kneecaps, I’m casting a permanent Shield Charm that will only make sure he won’t drop his weight onto them. Everything else is normal.”

“You have tended to people in my state before”, said Draco after a moment of contemplation. It was not a question. Harry cleared his throat embarrassedly.

“Ron had a very bad injury about two years ago and was in a bed for two months before he could set foot on the floor. I looked after him with Hermione.”

The subject was still a little sore and Harry was happy to see Draco had noticed. He smirked instead and changed the course of the conversation without preambles.

“Are you making any changes to the way you’re dressed anytime soon? Your robes taste like rotten leather.”

“Stop biting them, then”, said Harry teasingly.

Despite this, he summoned his preferred stay-at-home clothing - grey sweatpants, a faded red T-shirt and a zip-up navy blue hoodie. He decided on sneakers, given the fact that he would eventually have set the children loose on the house so they could unload their energies to sleep better. He turned to Draco.

“I’m casual now. Wanna taste these too?”

“Fucking prat.” Harry laughed briefly. “What have you dressed me in?”

“Another nineteenth century nightgown.” Draco seemed unpleased. “When your rope burns and bruises are better, I’ll give you proper pajamas.”

“Silk ones.”

“For a survivor, you’re being quite demanding, don’t you think?”

“I got out alive to enjoy life, Potter, not just let it pass me.” Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. “You should try the same.”
Harry was about to retort in a less than educated manner when Kreacher showed up with a loud crack, setting a small table with three tall chairs and a regular one out of thin air, close to Draco’s bed, and making food appear on top of it within the next second. “Food is served, Masters”, he said before vanishing again. To that phrase, Albus got up immediately.

“’Ungy!”, he said, staring intently at Harry. He chuckled and went to pick him up.

“Anyone else’s hungry?”, he asked to the remaining children. Both of them raised their hands, bouncing a little. “Fine, let’s settle you all.”

He put each child in a tall chair and gave each of them a spoon. He was willing to see what was going to come out of that arrangement. Sure the kids were not that difficult to handle. He adjusted himself so he could pay attention to the kids and feed Draco at the same time. It was a rabbit broth, complete with carrots, potatoes and tomatoes. When Harry picked a spoonful to see if the temperature was fine for the kids, it tasted faintly of something he used to eat when it was winter at Hogwarts, and he smiled. The children were quick to attack the plate with the spoon - except for Scorpius, who dropped the spoon and started picking the bigger pieces of carrot and potato to munch happily at them. Having solid food for once in quite some time was being a priceless experience for the boy. The kids were actually starving, Harry noticed when the meal became too quiet even for his initial hopes. Children had never been supposed to eat that behaved. He stared at them for a moment longer to make sure they weren’t about to wreck havoc and picked up Draco’s plate to help him. This time, he had far less objections about being assisted and finished his broth very eagerly. Harry ate his portion, helped the children finish theirs and cleaned them up before putting them back on the floor. Lassitude took over the grownups, but the kids were happily poking each other and playing a baby version of something akin to catch. There was a lot of screaming and laughter, and Harry was grinning wide. He loved those little people. Even Scorpius, after so little time, was growing inside his heart. Eventually, they sat, tired, and went back to the building blocks.

If Harry would be honest, the kids dynamics reminded him a lot of the trio he was part of in school. Albus, the smallest of the children (although he looked a few months older than Scorpius), was extremely smart, careful when speaking, witful and fair. He was usually quiet too but really easy to drag into dangerous games when in a group. Rosie was the obvious leader of the group and Ron had already said the girl looked like a feminine, young version of the Harry Potter he knew. She was much more extreme than him, though: she failed to even acknowledge any given rules and would pursue the things she wanted restlessly until she got them; her manners varied from a polite little lady to a downtown street kid, depending on what she wanted. She was the sassiest baby he had ever met and Hermione had once shared her apprehensions that she would end up being sorted to Slytherin if her slyness didn’t subside.

When it came to Scorpius, Harry saw a slightly fearful but really loyal kid, concerned with the others but with a knack for mischief. He was as effusive as any regular child, but there was a politeness and a calm to the way he used to show himself most of the time that was one hundred percent Malfoy and he commented that with Draco. He smiled proudly.

"Not every thing about my family is disgusting and evil”, he said, as if it should have been obvious. "This is all mine, this behavior. Astoria is an awesome mother but she believes children should not be heavily educated before they surpass the first growing steps."

"You mean forming coherent sentences, weaning and using the potty or something of sorts?"

"Yes. She thinks babies are too instinctive, and instinct always resurfaces, so it’s like flogging a dead horse."

"I agree with her."
"And yet the only reason why you don’t go bossing your child around is because his instincts are already far more civilised than those of babies his age.” Harry couldn't deny that. "I wonder if he misses Ast. Scorpius has never asked me where's his mother."

"Albus never asks about his mom too, even when I pick him up in the middle of the night. Maybe it's a phase," Draco acquiesced begrudgingly. "Are you missing her?"

Draco half-nodded. "Astoria and I got married because of blood and friendship. I like her terribly, but do I miss my wife? Not really. Do I miss Scorpius' mother? Most definitely. Do I miss my friend? Beyond measure. Astoria has kept me afloat when Father went to jail despite everyone he gave out and I owe her much. She agreed to have Scorpius much prior to her own wishes just because I thought a child would do me good."

"Where's your wife, Draco?", asked Harry quietly.

"I don't know. I don't remember. I don't know if they got to her. I just don't know and it kills me not to. She is one of the most caring, loving, patient people I've ever met. She'd have traded herself to keep us safe if she could."

Harry paused. “Are you scared for her?”

“I’d be a lunatic if I weren’t, wouldn’t I?” He didn’t try to smile. Harry knew the feeling. “Astoria is smart and she can sort herself out of most situations, but I don’t even know when it was the last time I saw her. I barely remember what I’ve been through and don’t know if what I can remember is real.”

“What do you remember, Draco?”, Harry plowed on.

He shrugged. “A dark room. I think it was dark. It was a room, not a cellar. We had a bed.” He gulped. “I don’t remember a bathroom or shower or clothes but I also don’t remember their absence. I remember a door. It clicked shut very slowly. And the floor, it was tiled and always wet. It’s the only water I remember.”

Harry felt a little nausea when his brain pieced Draco’s descriptions together to form a dire imprisonment and torture scene. He shook the thoughts away. “Do you remember people? Voices? Names of any kind? You said something about it before.”

Draco paled even further at that. “They would call me Lucius. Everyday, when I woke up, like a chorus. Just once. Then there was this woman. Rough, mechanical voice. She narrated what they were doing. Always from afar, it sounded. I don’t remember much of her words, though, except for the Chimaera and the threats to Scorp.”

“Do you remember when they took you? From where?” He shook his head. Harry’s shoulders sagged.

“I know it’s not much”, said Draco, “which is why I want you to enter my head. Find whatever’s lurking in here.” Harry let out a thoughtless “of course”. “And when will it happen?”

He hesitated. ‘Give me a few weeks.”

Draco looked like he was about to protest, but Scorpius’ voice stopped him. “Pa! Papa, ‘Ogash!”

“Indeed, they made it”, said Harry, staring at the construction amusedly. In the middle of the carpet stood a fairly well-made stone castle, complete with a dozen unstable towers to say the least. One of the shawls Kreacher was fond of draping over the desk’s chair was on the floor, representing water.
although its color was a vibrating shade of orange. Rosie caught him staring.

“No bu.” She frowned at the carpet and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Ugy.”

She was right, of course: the carpet was a moldy brown, deeply unflattering to their beautiful construction. With a wave of his wand, Harry turned the shawl a dark, glinting blue. The children all gawked at the spell, clapping and hopping gleefully to express their satisfaction over how pretty their building had become. The grownups smiled at them and Scorpius toddled to be picked up and set on his father’s bed.

“Papa, ‘Ogash!”, he demanded happily. His little fingers tried to open Draco’s stubbornly closed eyes and Harry’s heart shrunk when he noticed what Scorpius was asking and saw Draco wouldn’t budge. Malfoy didn’t look like he’d be able to dismiss his child’s request and Harry was acutely aware now that he had not explained anything to Scorpius. He couldn’t blame him. Keeping a child calm through a kidnap would not have been easier if said child knew their father was blind. Smiling faintly, trying to show a confidence he didn’t feel, Harry touched the boy’s shoulder. The other children started to walk slowly towards the bed when they sensed the change in the room’s mood.

“Your father cannot see your Hogwarts right now, Scorpius”, he said in the slowest, clearest voice he could muster.

The child frowned. “Papa no ‘Ogash?”

“Not right now, no, dear.” Harry caressed his hair and looked to the other children, who appeared worried. “You see, Draco has been hurt in the eyes and they are not working very well now, so he needs to keep them closed to help the hurt go away.”

Rosie looked shocked. “Daco no eysh?”, asked she, her little hands shooting up to cover her mouth.

“Not now”, tried Harry patiently. He felt the snaking of Draco’s hand beside him and held it immediately, away from the children’s eyes. “But he’s your father, Scorpius. He knows you even if he can’t see you, and he knows you’re here and alright.”

Apart from the hand that was squeezing Harry’s and trembling, Draco looked petrified in his place. His expectation was palpable. Scorpius was frowning, as was Albus. The littlest boy seemed to be really concentrating, ignoring everyone, until he came up with an idea.

“‘Ogash!”, he said, slowly letting a smile slip to his lips when he tried to lift a heavy, old Muggle camera Harry had stuffed in a corner of the study with other minor old belongings. It was a shy but proud smile. Harry summoned the camera and studied it carefully. Albus beamed. “Ogash!”

“This is an excellent idea, Albus. We’re taking a photo of your Hogwarts so Draco can see it when his eyes get better.” Harry asked Kreacher to bring their actual camera downstairs, which he did quickly. “I want you all to sit close to your masterpiece and smile.”

He helped the kids do as he told and snapped the picture. He would later develop it in the potion that would make it move and keep it. If Draco ever came to see again, he would like to have it, he guessed.

Things were calm after that. Harry eased Draco’s pain with a Soothing Spell and went about the house running after the kids. They played catch, hide and seek, tried to pull Kreacher’s ears and fought Harry to the ground; Draco would shout to incentivize them and laugh at their happiness, although he didn’t join them. It took Harry over two hours but eventually the children’s energies left them. He took them all to the study again and watched them climb tiredly on top of Draco. Scorpius
helped himself onto his father’s lap, Rosie sprawled on top of Malfoy’s thighs and Albus sat by his right side. Draco smiled at them and adjusted to make them more comfortable. All three children eyed Harry expectantly and he had to enlarge Draco’s bed a little further before he picked up an album to show them the promised pictures of Hogwarts. He had quite a few; most of them were of Ron and Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville. He told them names and places, talked about the Giant Squid and Quidditch, about Gryffindor’s Common Room and the dreaded Dungeons. Draco had quite a few disagreements regarding that particular point (and the Squid), which made the kids all the more interested. When Harry watched Scorpius laugh at his father’s tale, he felt a little embarrassed because the album for certain didn’t contain a picture of Malfoy. Even after the war, they hadn’t grown properly acquainted. Now that they had won and Draco had repented his primary loyalty, he wondered if he should maybe find one. Anyone, just so he could show them to Scorpius.

The kids fell asleep eventually, tired after the amusing day. Draco, who still clutched Scorpius awkwardly by his chest, was acting like a perfect mother hen. Harry excused himself slowly, saying he’d settle the babies’ crib, and picked the camera again. He silenced it before snapping a couple of shots of the four of them. Draco, not hearing anything from the far end of the room, frowned and called. Harry was quick to put the camera away and do what he was supposed to, picking the babies up one on one and lowering them to the crib after kissing their foreheads. They huddled closer like a bunch of kittens before giving in to sleep completely. Harry was beginning to feel tired, so he undressed Draco with a swype of his wand and stared at the wounds. The rope burns were really better by then: only small, fleshy stripes of his skin still showed, but there were no signs of infection of any kind. The bruises were yellowing and fading - except for the one on his cheek, which hadn’t been treated. Harry applied more balm to the wounds and lotion to the most strained spots; then he sat with Draco, redressed him and explained to him his general health state. Draco did not complain or try to know more that time, merely thanking him for the help. Harry thought it a great improvement on his posture, that was certain. He responded politely and got up to go to his own bed. They said their goodnights in silent, whispered voices, before Harry rolled in bed and simply fell asleep.
This time, Draco wasn’t the one to wake him up. The babies had been tended during the night, he found out when he stared at his clock. It was six in the morning and a tawry owl was flapping and butting its head against the study's large window, annoyed that no one was paying it the slightest attention. Harry rubbed his eyes and got up quickly, bringing the owl in and accepting the peck it gave him for his stalling. It had a note stuck to a leg and he yawned a couple of times before he opened it.

Harry,

We have been surprisingly called to work today. Ron’s team has some new intel on a new case and they want his opinion; I am to attend a meeting to review the Cooperation Agreement between wizards and house-elves. Unfortunately, it means you’ll have to babysit Rosie some more… I believe it won’t be a problem? If you’re alright with it, we can finish wrapping those things up and also solve some of our pending business with the Law Enforcement Department. Also, you can send any reports you may have for your boss through this owl and we’ll deliver it straight to him.

Let me know.

Hermione

Harry squinted at the letter, yawned again and sat by the desk to write a reply. Odd that Hermione would be called since she was enjoying a three-weeks vacation, but whatever. He had known her long enough to stop questioning her incapacity of letting go of work, whatever it was. It wasn't a bad thing, not at all; if it wasn't for her, he'd probably be stuck with a dying Malfoy on his couch. He grabbed a quill and scribbled his answer in quick lettering.

You may rest assured that your child’s in good hands. We are doing fine; the kids are still asleep and Kreacher fed them during the night, so they’ll sleep some more, I guess. Please tell Shacklebolt my reports aren’t ready yet but they will be as soon as possible. Dinner tonight? Nine o’clock? I'll try cooking something decent this time. Our children will be off to Dreamland by that time and we’ll have some peace.

Harry

He got up and went to the fridge, the owl perched on his right arm, to pick some rabbit leftover. The bird nipped his fingers thankfully and didn’t mind that he attached the letter to its leg while it was eating. He left the kitchen window open and put the kettle on to make him some tea. He hoped for a nice, quiet day.

His hopes soared and became reality as the day went on. The kids behaved just fine all through it, including the meals and baths. They asked for stories about the adults’ times in Hogwarts, which they were glad to share but for the end of the Triwizard Tournament on. Those events were not fit for children’s ears. Hermione had replied soon after lunch that they would join them for dinner and
Harry asked Kreacher to find him some pork while he cleaned what little they had disturbed of the house in the past few days. After that, he excused himself to try to work on the file Shacklebolt had given him, leaving the children to be mesmerized by Draco's marvelous abilities as a storyteller. He ran a thorough spell-check on the file about the Chimaera and asked Draco a few quiet questions about the beast when Scorpius began to tell his own story, making sure to leave out the fact that it was an Auror case now, to no success. He couldn’t remember its size or what it looked like, only that it had been announced as a crossbred Chimaera. Making Draco promise to literally scream if anything happened, he stole half an hour to go to the most warded place in the house - his bedroom - and make the wards reflective so no spell could enter nor leave the room. That done, he rummaged through the pictures, trying to understand what, exactly, they depicted; he could see something about the size of a small cow in a blurred focus inside a dark, empty place, a destruction path in the Malfoy Manor gardens and a footprint that looked goat-ish if the observer was willing to squint a little. So, no real evidence, so far. It was bad because it meant he would have to go inside the Manor to know it and, after his last experience there, Harry was not fond of the place.

He tried to squeeze something else from the pictures and the letter, but left it as soon as his head began to ache. He had had enough of headaches for a lifetime while Voldemort lived and he disliked them more than any regular human now. He sealed the folder within a protective chest made to keep things safe but from the person who had locked it and went back to Draco and the children. He was not surprised to find him dozing off with the kids sound asleep around him, since it was about time they settled for a nap. Harry smiled fondly at them - he had always had a soft spot for babies and having Rosie and Scorpius around was overwhelming. He picked them up one by one to put them in their crib and cast a Muffling Charm on it so the children wouldn't wake up with the noises from outside. When Harry went closer to him again, Draco held his wrist in a perfectly awake manner that startled him.

“Can I join you for dinner? I know you’re going to discuss me and if you are going to plot how to pluck my kidneys to sell them to Dark Apothecaries, I'd much appreciate being given a heads up on the matter.”

Despite having half-smiled, half-snorted at Draco's words, Harry actually had to think for a moment before saying yes. That meant they were supposed to eat in the study or should he move Draco’s bed to somewhere else?

“Can I leave the bed too?”, he asked as if reading Harry's mind.

Harry quirked an eyebrow up at the question and then, remembering Draco couldn't see him, he sighed very annoyed. “Of course you cannot, Malfoy. Are you insane? Your body is still pretty weak and it won’t fix the fractures if you go wandering around.”

“But it won’t fix the fractures anyway, you idiot!”, exploded Malfoy, looking angry for the first time. His hands had balled into fists and punched the bed with such force that Harry knew he must have broken something else then. “We are bloody wizards, Potter! If a fucking bone snaps and an Episkey can’t heal it, we make it vanish and grow another in its place!”

“It’s a hurtful procedure and highly risky if done in too many bones at once, as you know we’ll already have to because half of what they did to you is beyond regular repair.”

“You’ll already have to! Give me a godforsaken painkiller and let me walk, Potter. Playing sick and being pampered can look good on other people, but I have a child and, despite your best efforts to make me believe the contrary, am not dying nor invalid. I didn’t run from captivity to be held in a bloody bed!” He grit his teeth. “You have been gentle with me and kind to my son and I appreciate it beyond what’s been acceptable in my family for actual generations. I know you’re not imprisoning
me, I know you care, but can’t you stop pretending it’s normal for you to change your whole life because of a crippled man? Can you please stop acting as if looking after three children on your own isn’t tiring your Gryffindor arse? I can help about the house and the kids and you don’t fool me for a second: I know Granger and Weasel are spending that long in the Ministry because they are looking for clues because someone has to be here with me and you are the Chosen One yet again. I also know you have a file regarding my house under your care, and I’d appreciate if you wouldn’t let me in the dark or treat me like a child, since it’s obvious even to someone as thick as you have always been that I am not.”

Harry was blatantly appalled. “How the fuck do you know that much about what’s going on --”

“-- when I cannot even see? Kreacher kept an eye on you for me.” Harry saw red at that. It was involuntary, the sudden poking of hate and distrust in the back of his mind coming to the front to take up all of his view. “You said he was to look after my every need and I needed to know what you were hiding.”

“You sent my bloody house-elf to spy on me?” Harry took a ragged breath in, clenching his fists by his sides. His voice was venomous when he spoke again. “How grateful of you to do it. How fucking honest of you. How bloody, fucking, goddamn Slytherin of you to betray your host, the one creature in this world we live in who would ever take a spiteful former Death Eater and his Malfoy spawn into his own house believing they were alright, believing someone in that filthy family had changed, even if just the child, but how could he when his father cannot hold himself for the sake of his little boy? I bet he’ll grow up to be just like you, and isn’t it the marvelous thing you were all expecting?”

“DON’T BRING MY SON INTO THIS!”

Malfoy leapt out of the bed, not wincing once when his weight wavered on top of his injured legs. He marched swiftly to Harry and grabbed a fistful of his clothing with his good hand. Harry would have found it rather amusing to see a disheveled, flushed Malfoy in an old-fashioned nightgown trying to overpower him in any other given situation, but he was currently paying attention to the way Draco’s eyes, now a slit open and feral, shone literally red in anger. The surprise made him release his tension. In the crib, the babies stirred and moaned in displeasure despite the Muffling Charm, but Kreacher went to soothe them, muttering something about Harry disturbing the sick Master with his useless problems. Harry didn’t have the time to make him shut up before Draco carried on.

“I have not asked for your care or protection, Potter, and if you don’t want me here, I’m more than happy to leave. I am putting up with your useless trauma-control techniques only because of my son. I am without my wand only because of my son. The only reason I don’t punch you and finish breaking what’s left of me along with your bloody fucked up nose is because of my son, because he deserves more than me and he has no fault whatsoever that his father was idiotic enough to be kidnapped. He’s a child, Potter. If you want to hate me and call me a goddamn traitor, do it, but leave Scorpius out of it. I swear to Slytherin’s grave that if you ever say anything like that about my son ever again, it’ll be the last thing you’ll do.”

Harry found his guts and held Draco’s wrist in a firm, serious grip after a moment of sheer shock. Draco wanted to talk to him like that? He could do the same. “I will not tolerate you peeking from the shadows while you’re in my house, Malfoy. If you ever want to know about something again, you will come to me and ask me as the grown man and the guest you are.”

“You wouldn’t have told me, not while you treated me like I was a potted plant”, he said in a contemptuous tone.
“Perhaps.” Harry’s grip and his voice remained steady and stern, although his eyes had softened. “The next time I treat you in a way that’s displeasing to you, come talk to me before you decide I’m stubborn enough to be that inconsiderate of other people’s feelings.”

A moment slipped away and Harry felt, with eager relief, that Draco’s posture was softening at last. His shoulders lost the menacing hunching they had been twisted in and his breath evened after a very long, very trying sigh. Harry let go of Draco's wrist and waited for him to make the next move. A hard ball of rage still fumed inside his guts, but he knew Draco as a guest and would not treat him as anything less as long as he kept to the expected civility, which did not, and he would make sure he reinforced that idea, include manipulating a house-elf to spy on his host. Draco paused for longer than Harry thought he would before he sighed once more, very crossed that time.

“Does it mean I don’t have to be tied to that bed again?”, asked Draco with a hint of hope in his voice. Harry gnarled in frustration. Did that wanker absolutely have to be that stubborn?

“It means I'll apparently have to devise a lasting way to minimise the damage you make while walking and crouching or I'll spend the rest of my life mending your bones. It also means I'll get rid of more of your bones if you manage to disgrace them and it ultimately means you are under a serious risk of becoming crippled or die in an overload when we’re done with you.”

Draco sighed briefly and shut his eyes. “I’ll take the risk.”

“How Gryffindor of you”, said Harry, mocking him. Draco grit his teeth but didn’t answer. “Sit down while I cast the spells.”

The batch of spells included an obvious Lightening Spell, the modified Shield Charm he had used before (he had to be careful with that one when it came to its timing) and a set of Cushioning Spells that would absorb most of the impact of Draco’s walking, kneeling and leaning, to try and minimise the amount of new microfractures. He didn’t know how effective it all would be - and he did know that after they started fiddling with his bones again, Draco would have no use for them - but if it meant his own peace of mind for knowing he had done everything he could without having to resort to keeping Draco bound in bed with Body-Bind Spells, he was willing to try it. Draco sat quietly through them and felt the unnecessary roughness with which Harry charmed his limbs. When he finished and got to his feet, so did Draco. He held the wrist of Harry’s wand-hand.

“I regret nothing”, he said.

“I know. It’s infuriating.” Harry picked the wand with his other hand and put it away. He turned his right hand to clasp around Draco’s wrist. “I didn’t mean everything I said, Draco. I believe you are a changed man and I obviously don’t hold grudges against your son, but I have to be able to trust you if you’re staying here.”

“Do you want me to?”, he asked quietly, and there it was again, a shadow of the Draco he had brought home and not the snarky bastard he endured in the hopes of healing him.

“Frankly, I have no idea. You are a major disturbance, yes, but I worry about you and your son. I think the outside world will hardly be kind to you.” Harry set his other hand on Malfoy’s right shoulder. “So yes, you are staying until I’m sure you’re not under trouble and can fend for yourselves.”

“This is more than you’ve offered before”, said Draco. ”Does the next offer come with tea and scones?

“Stupid arse. I never said you had to leave once we were done with healing you, in case your
brilliant mind missed that. I am driven to catch who did this to you and having you here will give my mind the focus it needs, since I’d know you’re safe and not trying to be blown up with Scorpius beside you.”

“You do have a thing for hopeless cases, Potter. Have you ever considered treatment?”

Harry tried to sound annoyed, but smiled. “You’re not hopeless. It took you twenty-six years but look, you’re a changed man.”

“Prat.”

They let go of each other and Draco took some tentative steps when Harry reassured him there was nothing around for him to be hurt against, except the floor. It was strange to walk when your every move was cushioned and you weighed half your actual weight, but he found his way around those complications quickly. He patted himself self-consciously after having strode all over the study and Harry, who had just dismissed Kreacher and was watching the babies, heard him when he cleared his throat.

“I don’t suppose I’m to have dinner in a nightgown?” Harry snorted and flicked his wand, changing the nightgown for slacks and a shirt. Draco assessed the change and thanked him. “What color are these?”

“Light green shirt, black slacks.” Draco nodded. “You look good in them, actually.”

“Thank you. Now I have two Potters point-blank telling me I’m handsome. Is that even supposed to flatter me?” They laughed and Harry was glad that they’d returned to what he was beginning to think as their normal. “Do you want me to help with dinner?”

Harry stared at the nearest clock. It was about time he put the pork in the oven. “Are you going to be of any help since, well, you know—”

“Since I’m blind, you mean?” Draco merely smiled and Harry didn’t miss the mischievousness of it. “I have never been one to cook using my eyes primarily. Not even potion brewing is something I do based on my eyesight only.”

“If you poison someone, you’re out”, Harry said dubiously. When Draco solemnly swore he wouldn’t, Harry asked Kreacher to keep an eye on the children and tell them when they woke up. The elf looked thoroughly displeased. “What happened, Kreacher?”

“If Master Harry and Master Draco keep fighting, Kreacher is having trouble following two masters.”

“We won’t fight anymore”, promised Draco. Harry noticed he didn’t relieve Kreacher of his newly-found loyalty for him, but decided to give him another shot anyway. “You can look after the children and we are going to make dinner. If we need you, we will call you.”

On their way to the kitchen, Harry couldn't bite back a question. “Weren’t you raised with hundreds of house-elves or something?” Draco nodded. “Then how come you’re so polite and decent with them?”

“It’s easier to make a hippogriff follow you if you bow first.” Harry stared at him unbelieving. “Learned that one in my third year, if you remember it, and it has served me well on other fronts too.”

They fell silent and reached the kitchen, where Harry manhandled the pork into a nice, perfect
cylinder of raw meat while Draco gathered a large amount of spices and started pouring and sprinkling them inside a marble mortar. Harry didn’t know how he could be that fast in picking a spice, crushing it between his forefingers, sniffing it to identify it and decide the proportions based on tact only. For a moment, Harry stood there, staring mesmerized at him while he plucked garlic from its ropes, sniffed some rosemary and removed the leaves from the stem, barely touched some cumin before sprinkling it with the others.

“Do you have thyme?” Harry sunk back in reality and summoned some of the herb for him. “Thank you.”

Draco smashed the contents of the mortar and got the olive oil, testing it before pouring a generous amount inside the mortar. Nothing spilled and Harry couldn’t keep quiet.

“It’s impossible that you have never done this before”, he babbled.

“Cooking?” Draco raised a brow. “Father hated it when I entered the kitchen, so I did it in the dark with Frilly to keep me company. She was a blind elf, my mother’s personal favourite cook. My father hated her so much that he never spoke to her, so I didn’t need to worry. We used to cook in the dark so we didn't get caught.”

“Why cooking? Why not, I don’t know, alchemy or anything less… mundane?”

“Because I liked baked potatoes and Father forbade every elf of cooking me any. I never enjoyed the word ‘no’.”

“Didn’t change at all.”

Draco smirked but didn’t answer that. They sorted out the rest of the condiments and finished the pork, putting it to roast. Soon after, the children started throwing tantrums inside the study and both men rushed to them. Scorpius beamed when his father went to him and picked him up.

“Pa!”, he screamed, little fingers going straight to Draco’s hair and tugging at it. Draco smiled and kissed his forehead tentatively, while Harry picked Rosie and lectured her about wailing like that. In the crib, Albus waited patiently as he usually did when there were other kids around him.

They ended up playing with the babies until about seven o’clock, when they ate a snack and fed them their dinner. They finished the adults’ dinner and Kreacher set the table; when it was almost nine, Ron and Hermione showed up in the fireplace. They shrugged and patted the soot away before properly stepping into the room. Harry and Draco saluted them and were greeted back. Ron noticed that Draco was walking but a sign from Harry made him shut up; he would explain it later. They checked on the kids, who were all sleepy but still playing, and set a contingency around them. Kreacher served the dinner before he went to babysit them.

They ate in a silence broken by chitter-chatter and eventual talking about their school years. Hermione politely asked what had Malfoy turned out to be, to which he blandly answered he had become a Mediwizard specialized in underage accidental magic injuries. Harry’s mouth was agape when he said so, although Draco had continued to cut his meat with care. Ron looked as shocked as him, but he lacked Harry’s sensitivity.

“I didn’t think a Malfoy would work”, he said, surprised. Draco stopped what he was doing and set the cutlery down.

“I could try to make a living out of what my father left me, but after the many compensations and donations we had to do to soothe both the Ministry and the wizarding community, our fortune has
become somewhat depauperate. Mother takes some of it, of course, and Father will be out of jail soon, so we could use more money. Astoria is wealthy and her dowry was exquisite, I admit it, but if I wish to restore our financial stability and credibility so the next generations of Malfoys don’t have to work as commoners, sacrifices must be made.” He picked the cutlery again. “Besides, I have recently discovered I am rather fond of children.”

Ron wouldn’t shut up that easily. “Why didn’t you tell us you had a Healer training? It could have been helpful!”

“I severely doubt it, Weasel. You must remember I sometimes tend to children whose trackers are active. The moment you said I was being tracked, I knew I wouldn’t be of any help. I have never had to pull a tracker from anyone and replacing bones is enough of routine healing so that anybody with a couple of brain cells can make it.”

Ron resumed eating quite sulking. Hermione exchanged significant looks with Harry, but he shrugged his shoulders. He hadn’t had a clue. She subtly changed the subject, talking about her meeting in the Ministry and hinting at an encounter between her and Tillius Haworth, the head of the Main Archive of Magical Signatures. Draco sounded interested at the mention of the name, and it was with more than just a hint of amusement that he said the man had been in Voldemort’s to-kill list, although he was already too old to pose as a problem to anyone willing. To Ron, it only made him all the more reliable, an idea to which Draco and Harry had no objections. He said Shacklebolt was going to be in hold for the Malfoy Manor case and demanded explanations, which Harry promised he’d give after the dinner was over.

Dinner ended soon after that, and by dessert time the babies were already sound asleep on the floor. Ron and Hermione put them to the crib and they went to the living room for tea and the actual discussion. The ill-concealed harried look in Hermione’s face gave away that things were a little more difficult than they had envisioned at first, although she was trying to prove herself hopeful. Ron took the reins of the impending conversation as soon as he had a cup of tea in his hands.

“First things first, what about the Malfoy Manor case?”

Harry stared at his cup. “Someone sent a letter to the Ministry saying the Malfoys were raising crossbred Chimaeras in their property.”

“That’s ridiculous”, said Hermione, waving it off.

“And yet the burning in Draco’s eyes has been made by one of these animals, or so he recalls it”, said Harry. Draco merely nodded. “I would think them delusional too under normal circumstances, but this is not a normal circumstance. If someone is trying to incriminate Malfoy, I’ll have to look after it.” He sipped his tea. “And you?”

“I tracked Narcissa: she’s in Germany and corresponding with Malfoy senior every other day. No one has seen Astoria as of late, but I didn’t ask deep about this particular subject since I presume she could have sought refuge with her family and my asking would draw unwanted attention to us. I’ll try subtler methods.” He furrowed his brows. “None of the teams I asked had identified any kind of irregular activity related to Dark Arts, so whoever took the ferret was probably aware that we’re still looking for any remnants of performed dark magic.”

“So basically, you have nothing”, said Draco nonplussed.

“I can drop the case, ferret”, Ron snarled.

“I am merely stating. It is of my interest that you keep doing it, in case you’ve missed this point.”
Hermione chimed in when Ron was about to retort. “Boys, boys, don’t get started. I have something to add too.” She smiled mischievously and Harry thought that maybe he had been mistaken to think her hopes were not many. “I have spoken to some house-elves and they say the Malfoy staff seem to have deserted the Manor.” Draco was confused by that statement. “They might be in other places, or hiding somewhere or simply unwilling to contact the outer world, but the thing is: you house doesn’t look inhabited, Draco. I think it means Astoria is not there.” He nodded cautiously. “On the other hand, I have the keys to the M.A.M.S. now, so when we have another bunch of signatures we can go there and compare them.”

“The ones you took didn’t show results?”, asked Harry.

Ron shook his head. “We have updated signatures of everyone who has accepted the Peace Treaty of 99. Mine, Malfoy’s, Hermione’s, yours, they’re all there. You remember when we took those signatures, you were part of the task force.” Harry acquiesced briefly. “The fact that they’re not there can mean a couple of things: we missed some people upon registration, the wizards we’re looking for are not British…”

“Or there are still followers of the pre-war sociopathic doctrines wandering around”, Draco finished flatly.

“The highest probabilities rest on missing people upon registration”, stated Hermione, somewhat feebly.

“But normal people wouldn’t have tortured a man so thoroughly, it’s what you’re thinking of.” Malfoy’s attention went to his tea. “I would check the cells in Azkaban and the list of the dead in the war whose bodies were not found.”

“Those who didn’t like that the Ministry pardoned some Death Eaters, too”, added Harry in a blink. “As much as I hate that that sodding event is still fruitful in its repercussions, we have to consider the possibility.”

“We’ll know more once we have more of the magical signatures to go through.” Ron half-shrugged. “I’m particularly interested in that white one. That one is likely to be in the books.”

“When are we doing that again?”, asked Draco. Harry didn’t miss the way he trembled, just a little, very subtly, to say the words.

“Ron and I are finishing to brew a potion to keep us from magical strain, so we can do more bones in less time. I imagine it shall be ready by tomorrow afternoon.”

Draco didn’t look that excited but he nodded nevertheless. Harry felt the strange mix of pity and hope that follows the realization that someone cherished will undergo unavoidable suffering. He placed a hand to Malfoy’s shoulder and squeezed it gently. He retributed it with a mild touch to his hand and they dropped the subject in favor of more rewarding discussions. Ron and Draco soon became absorbed in a heated conversation about the merits of wand cores, so Hermione sat by Harry’s side and elbowed him discreetly. He turned his attention, which had been fully at Draco, to her, surprised.

"Why are you staring at him?", she asked, hiding her smile behind the border of her cup.

He didn't try to hide it. "He's a different man than I thought he would be. He's still harsh with words most of the time and sometimes I still want to punch him, but he's different."

"Are you telling me what happened so you reached this conclusion or I have to guess?" Harry told her briefly about the day he had with Malfoy, including the distinction he made between the two
sides of Draco, the arsehole and the smoother, more sensitive one. She looked amused but not surprised. "Children do have the power to change the way we approach the world."

Harry shook his head. "It's not just that." Hermione smirked and he sighed. "Have I made a mistake? Have I read Malfoy completely wrong all through these years? Has he always been like this and I was too blind, too prejudiced to see it?"

She snickered. "Supposing you mean his good part, I can tell you: hardly. Malfoy has been very well-raised to be a bratty, spoiled, prejudiced bully and he certainly took the most of it. He's just not a prat because of Merlin knows what miracle."

"Says the woman who described me as, and I quote, 'as thick as a brick wall'." She shrugged and poured herself some more tea. Harry was thick and just because he hadn't been wrong about Malfoy, it didn't mean he had become a better observer. "Is it possible I don't despise him anymore?"

Her shoulders sagged and she pulled on the look she used to show whenever she was about to break something obvious to him and Ron. "You haven't despised him for eight years, now."

"It's his fault Lupin and Tonks and Fred are dead."

"You can see it that way too, I suppose. It's also his fault we're not, you know that. You've forgiven him when he was on trial and you were allowed inside some of his mind and there's no reason why you should force yourself to think otherwise." She reached for his hand. "You spent months using his wand. It's hawthorn, unicorn hair. It wouldn't have obeyed you if you hated its master; you coerce wands for a living, you know that. It also wouldn't obey Malfoy if he had a mind set in the darkness only. Besides, you've seen his signature. I've never seen a Death Eater with a signature so white and you must remember I spent an entire year freeing and relocating their tracked and bound house-elves."

"Why are you making excuses for him?"

"I'm not, but soon enough you will. I'm just saying you need not worry with what we will think about you befriending him if you ever want to."

"What are you two plotting?"

Ron interrupted them, getting close to Hermione and kissing her in the cheek. By Harry's side, Malfoy was finishing his tea. Harry knew he wasn't supposed to blush but the heat crept up to his cheeks nonetheless. Hermione turned to him nonchalantly and sipped the rest of her tea.

"We were just thinking of incarcerating you and Draco hugged together."

Draco choked a little and Ron actually shivered. "For Merlin's beard, no."

"Mione, it's late. Let's pick Rosie and go home, yes? Tomorrow will be a full day."

His wife agreed with him.

"Will she be coming over tomorrow?", asked Draco hopefully, when Ron left to pick the girl.

"No, I'm sorry", said Hermione, and she looked sincere. "We're leaving her with Molly. Unlike Albus and Scorpius, if she as much as hears a scream, she goes wild."

Hermione didn’t see fit to mention that it was because she used to have constant nightmares about being tortured by Bellatrix for about six months after her daughter was born; nightmares where that
woman went after Rosie too. Draco would remain oblivious to that, of course, but Harry and Ron knew what she wasn’t saying.

"You could silence me”, said Draco eagerly. “I don't mind it."

Harry stared at him in such disbelief that it was a good thing that Draco couldn't see it. "No one is silencing you. I'm not having you being hurt without any means to release tension."

"Protective, aren't you?” Draco’s voice said he was internally rolling his eyes despite his stone-carved face. "If it wasn't for me, I'd still be in bed and unable to do anything to relieve my tension anyway, so what's the difference?"

"You were not getting hurt in bed”, he added obviously.

Draco smirked in a nasty way. "Well, that depends on who I'm sharing it with, doesn't it?"

"Well, with me--" He stopped himself when he noticed the innuendo. "You perverted git."

Hermione was laughing uncontrollably. Draco shrugged but Harry dropped the subject when he saw Ron returning with Rosie. The girl was heavily asleep and Ron had her against his chest. Hermione stopped laughing but was still smiling when he reached them.

"What's wrong?", he asked, frowning.

"Nothing", Hary said hurriedly.

"I'll tell you when we get home", she stage-whispered, much to Harry's mortification.

Hermione hugged Harry and kissed both guys goodbye before Harry could threaten her anyhow. Ron managed to wrap one of his arms clumsily around his friend and then, unexpectedly, held his hand out for Draco. He needed a moment and Harry's guidance to take it, and they shook hands amiably.

“It was a nice chat”, he conceded.

“Indeed”, said Draco. “We can continue it tomorrow, after you’re done ripping me apart.”


They flooed away and Harry collapsed back on the couch. He had dragged himself into something way too big by taking Draco in, he was positive of it. Draco flopped down by his side, grunting momentarily when a flicker of very dull pain assaulted him.

“You behaved well”, he said. Harry snarled at him, knowing where he was heading to. “You were civil and decent, and even made contributions to the conversation.”

“I wasn’t going to praise you, you know. You’re not a dog.” Draco laughed. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re a Healer?”

“Mediwizard. And you never asked.”

“What else are you hiding?”

“I’m an exceptional potion brewer, a somewhat gifted apprentice of alchemy, I breed albino peacocks just like my father, my worst spell ever is the Disarming one and I find being blind a nice experience of perception or lack thereof rather than a merely disabling one.”
Harry raised an eyebrow at that. “Anything you might have forgotten to mention?”

“I can give you full-access to the Manor when you’re ready to enter my mind, but I’m also a natural Occlumens, so you’d better brew some Veritaserum or be fine with shedding your inhibitions.”

Harry growled. “Now that’s just awesome. Is there anything you’re bad at?”

“Not complete pants, I guess. Everything I didn’t mention before can be considered things I’m bad at. I’m at most poor at defensive spells and I can make do with Transfiguration but it pains me enormously.”

Harry found the easiness of that conversation so absurd that he had to laugh.

“Is honesty a Slytherin trait I’m unaware of?”, he asked.

“No, but getting the best out of the situations is and I won’t have your best unless I’m truthful. I plan on letting you enter my mind anyway, so what good could hiding those things make?”

“I can be an unskilled Legilimens.”

Draco just snorted. “You question people under Veritaserum while snooping around inside their minds and don’t even flinch. I know that. Been there.”

Harry felt embarrassed. “Right.” He cleared his throat, pushing the thought of Draco’s trial to the back of his mind. “Fancy some sleep? You’d better recharge before tomorrow.”

He nodded and got up, stretching before walking towards what he thought was the study. Harry had to grab him by the shoulders and steer him in the right direction, but they both chuckled at that. Maybe Harry did keep him inside the study for too long. Once inside, Harry relieved Kreacher of his monotonous babysitting duties and Draco took the opportunity to ask the elf for some pajamas. Kreacher didn’t flinch at the thorough description he gave him of the desired fabrics and composition before Disapparating to somewhere in the house. Harry stopped in the middle of pulling his hoodie out, arms still tucked inside the clothing.

“I could have transfigured your clothes into those pajamas you wanted.”

Draco turned at him in a soft, relaxed posture. Even his eyes were not fluttering in the effort to be closed like they usually did, but remained closed as if he were sleeping. He was unbuttoning his shirt very carefully despite knowing it would be the last time he’d wear it: conjured clothing lasted very little indeed. They were already thin at the seams. Harry could only notice the pallor of Draco’s somewhat bruised skin under what little light came from the moon and the heavily starred sky outside. He seemed to be recovering alright, if the way his completion looked normal was an indication.

“I doubt that.”

“What?”

“That you’d be able to conjure silk. It’s a very difficult fabric to make up.” Harry tried to dismiss it, but Draco was adamant. “You wouldn’t make it and I am not wearing fake silk to bed. This would be unacceptable.”

Harry surrendered to his vehemence and was more than just a little surprised at Kreacher’s efficiency when the elf gave him a set of silk pajamas too. Draco was patient and waited until Harry had put the lotions and balms on his remainder bruises before he dressed himself. When Harry followed, he was
taken aback at the softness and coolness of the pajamas. When he said that, though, Draco did no more than grin.

It must have been less than fifteen minutes after they had gone to bed that he heard a whisper. He was thinking about the pictures in the Chimaera file and trying to find something about them when his name reached his ear. He turned and put his glasses back on so Draco came back into focus. All he could see was a slump on the other bed and a mop of pale hair.

“What’s wrong? Are you in pain? Has the spell worn off already?”

“I’m cold”, he murmured. Harry flicked his wand and set a warming spell to the room. He didn’t want to light the fire with the children in there. Draco shivered and coiled up, seemingly unaware of the spell. “Can I get my son?”

Harry frowned. “Of course you can. It’s your son.”

He sighed relievedly and walked to the crib slowly, barefoot, to pick Scorpius. The baby stirred a little but settled back to sleep quickly. Harry was a little concerned with how much Scorpius could sleep and how little noise he made when Rosie was not around to be an influence on him. Draco spent a moment more staring into the crib with his boy on his lap.

“What?”, asked Harry, beginning to feel concerned.

“Can Albus come too?”

Something with a hint of brokenness could be heard in Draco’s voice, and Harry did no rational thinking before getting up in a rush and picking Albus himself. The baby didn’t even move, quiet and stern even in his sleep. “Here, let me help you.”

Draco smiled faintly and thanked him. He managed to get Draco and the kids huddled in a comfortable cocoon, obviously guarded against every kind of accident or injury Harry could think of. For a moment, he thought how disturbing it would be to Draco’s sleep if the babies woke up hungry in the middle of the night, but he didn’t seem to mind. Harry was about to go back to bed when he heard that whisper again, even weaker this time. He knelt beside Draco’s bed. He didn’t know what was so urgent but Harry noticed that Draco was concerned and feeling really alone.

“Are you going to ask for me too?”, he said, half-jokingly.

But Draco didn’t answer, and the awkward silence weighed on him. What the hell was wrong with Malfoy? What were those eruptions of dependency and neediness? The idea of torture and the fear of loneliness made his stomach unsettle and he let go of it with very consciously. Did he even want to know? But his son was laying by Draco’s side and if Draco was getting nuts because of what he underwent, he’d very much like to know. That thought, he slipped under the covers, keeping the babies between them. Draco had a protective arm laced around them and his left, injured hand was the closest to Harry.

“What’s wrong, Draco?”, he tried, very quietly. “You’re not behaving like yourself.”

It looked like it had taken an hour before the thinner man let out an answer. He looked incredibly small, despite his tall, slender figure. Harry brought to mind the snob little boy who tried to befriend him and his reactions to that rejection. If Harry had to place a bet, he’d say refusing Draco right then was probably a very careless thing to do. “I am scared. I could die tomorrow. I never thought I’d feel that again after the Fiendfyre but I am really scared, Potter. If you don’t do that, I’ll be tracked and everyone here will be put to danger, but if you do, I may not recover. Not now and maybe not ever.
It's even worse today because it's not just me.”

“Hermione and Ron are very skilled, Draco. They will not let you die.”

“But if I do--”

“You won’t”, said Harry hurriedly.

“But if I do”, continued Draco stubbornly, “and you don’t find Astoria, can you… can you keep him?”

Harry’s look wavered from Malfoy’s face, torn in pain and fear, to Scorpius. He didn't need further references to know who he was talking about. There was only one person in the whole wide world that Draco seemed inclined to die for and, incredibly, it was no longer himself.

“You are not dying, Malfoy.”

“Harry.”

His arm tightened around the children and Harry caressed it soothingly. “I’ll raise him as my own.”

The relief with which those words were received was palpable. Draco even managed a half-smile, although the apprehension was still bubbling beneath his skin. Harry couldn't know what it was like, to fear so much for a child. Albus and Teddy were the most important people in his life and he would face any kind of danger for them, but the point was that he didn't actually have to. No one had ever threatened his kids. No one would ever go after the children of the Saviour unless they didn't mind a very painful death and for that, at least, Harry's fame had served him well. Malfoy didn't have that. Malfoy was a target for being who he was and that was it.

“Please raise him without the Gryffindor permissiveness.”

Harry chuckled. “You’re asking a lot.”

Draco smiled and thanked him honestly anyway. Harry thought about leaving the bed when Draco fell asleep but he couldn’t. He had made a commitment with that man and he would honour that. He had spent days sleeping beside Ron when he was hurt, soon after the war. He had held Hermione several nights when Ron was at work for a whole year before her nightmares spaced. He could very well endure sleeping beside Draco if it would make him feel safer in the end. It cost him nothing, after all. And maybe it was Hermione’s words, and maybe it was the way Draco was fearing for his child, and maybe it was just the way things were supposed to be, but he didn’t once ask himself why he was putting Draco in the same level of those he had always cared so much about.

That night, Harry had a dream. It didn’t have much to it: he was at the Ministry, registering magical signatures, when a woman showed up. She said nothing and he couldn’t picture her face, hidden as it was by a veil, but he knew she was important. It felt like reliving a memory, except a part of it was cast in the shadows. After what seemed to be hours of trying to take her magical signature, which kept changing, the woman screamed and fell to floor. When he went to uncover her face, it was Draco he saw, gasping for air with his grey eyes bleeding instead of crying. He sat in the bed and had to look beside him to make sure Draco and the children were alright. He must have spent about an hour just feeling their breaths and little whines, feeding the babies from the bottles Kreacher brought to him and making sure their sleep was peaceful. When he settled down to sleep some more, he huddled closer to the children and felt a little shudder when his hand met Draco’s covered torso. He didn't back down, choosing to sleep in that position from which he could feel if anything went wrong with any of them. He didn't know he was swearing to protect them too, right then, but if he
did, he would have done it anyway.

Harry would have enjoyed to confront a reality, the next day, in which he could make sure his late-night promises to Draco would have been kept easily. It never happened, though. When Hermione and Ron arrived, shortly after breakfast, it was with a three different flasks of potions Harry failed to recognize and alert, although sorrowful, faces. They saluted each other and as soon as Malfoy’s breath hitched a little, Kreacher was by his side. He asked the elf to make sure the kids were alright and gave both children what was an obvious goodbye kiss. Harry’s heart clenched at that and he was relieved to see he hadn’t been the only one. Scorpius babbled with his dad for a couple of minutes before accepting to be taken by Kreacher to the winter garden on the third floor. Harry reminded Kreacher to keep the babies away from the plants in the West part of the greenhouse and, for maybe the first time in eight years, the elf nodded without a hint of grumpiness to it. Hermione realized it too, for she arched an eyebrow and exchanged concerned looks with Harry, but they let it slip. Draco and Ron were back at the conversation they had interrupted the night before and she drew Harry to the side.

“Ron’s asked me to explain you the procedure.”

“Is there anything different from the last one?”

Hermione bit her lip and looked extremely uncomfortable before answering. Harry folded his arms warily.

“We are going to open the channels all at once and try to weaken the traces at different rates, but starting at the same time.”

“Won’t it make the trackers know we’re fiddling with the spells?”

She shook her head. “They won’t wear off at the same time, and if we can disable the reflective component, no one will know we tampered with them in the first place.” Harry nodded slowly. It didn’t seem like a good thing. “Ron devised a way to make the magical force-lines resurface, and we’ll need you to help us select things. Ron said you should convince Malfoy’s wand because if we do something wrong it won’t be straight relatable to you. We don’t think anyone has your signatures from the time you spent with his wand.”

“So it won’t hurt that much?”, he asked, hopeful. “I won’t have to hold him?”

Hermione paled a little. “It will hurt as much as a Crucio, I’m guessing. We’ll have to tie him up.”

Harry blanched immediately. His arms dropped to his sides and it took him a moment before he could speak again.

“Hermione, I am not letting you torture him.”

“We don’t have much time. Some of the tracking spells will take up to twenty-four hours to vanish completely.”

“Do it one by one, like we did before.”

“We can’t. It wears us off very quickly and we'd take weeks to go through everything. We don’t have that time.” She was exasperating. “You said it yourself, there are hints being sent to the Ministry. They are looking for him, Harry. The moment they realize you took the case, they’ll add two and two and realise the War Hero must have done one last saving. You are quite famous for having saved Draco from the Fiendfyre, you know that. If they start pushing at your wards collectively, I don’t know if we can disguise Draco’s being here.”
“If you put him under that much stress, he won’t make it.”

Her lips pursed for a moment and she looked crossed. “I told you he wouldn’t the first time I saw him and you took the chance. Don’t back down now.”

“I promised him he would survive it, Hermione. He was asking me whether I’d look after his son in case he died and I promised him he wouldn’t.”

She put a hand to his shoulder. “We’ll make everything we can to avoid it, but it’s all we can do.”

Her words were so final and so unsettling that Harry lost the ability to discuss. He said he’d talk to Draco but Hermione said Ron was already up to it. When they looked at them, Ron was tying the other man up with strong but soft fabric. Draco had undressed down to his undergarments and had goosebumps all over his skin. Harry heated the room some more, although he was convinced that his chill didn’t come from the room temperature. He went closer to the bed and took Draco’s right hand. The man in bed smiled faintly at him and acquiesced when Harry asked to borrow his wand. Harry knew he was being trusted and it hurt him further.

“Fight, Malfoy. If it comes to that, don’t let yourself die. We’ll be keeping you alright here, so don’t give up on your life.”

He nodded and eased back in bed so the men could finish restraining him. Harry felt pathetically bad for doing so. He stepped up to his friends only when Ron suggested they gagged Draco to avoid distractions. The Slytherin didn’t say a word, but his skin turned the colour of curdled milk and Harry was vehement to say he wouldn’t let it happen. He already felt hideous for tying a person who was about to undergo torture; he didn’t need to worsen it by silencing him as well.

The dreadful feeling did not abandon him when the procedure started. Hermione served the three of them a goblet of one of the potions and it was with unpleasant calm that Harry felt his perception of the world numbing. He didn’t feel his feet on the ground, although when he looked down there they were, firmly set and all. The sounds around him were muffled and slow, the light seemed to have diminished. He looked at Draco’s body and saw strings running up and down his limbs, treading carefully. He was offered another goblet and it was like breathing for the first time after a long time submerged: energy was suddenly rippling carefree through him. Hermione nodded once. Ron cast a charm that brought the net of remaining spells up and they all began to pull and pull those who were reflective from the others. Harry was vaguely aware that Draco was stirring restlessly beneath his hands and that it grew even more erratic when Ron dug his hand in the last flask of potion and started dying the spells with it. A quiet, low rumble was audible in the back of Harry’s head, but he couldn’t stop what he was doing, he thought, following Ron’s barely muttered instructions and starting to bottle magical signatures as soon as the reflective coat vanished from the spells. He didn’t notice that the sun was starting to set and didn’t notice when Hermione lit up the room; he didn’t notice when she started building what looked like a medium-sized Acromantula of golden threads. He had to finish what he was doing and his body was begging him to finish it soon already when holding on to the spells became hard, when keeping everything on the surface of Draco’s skin became too hard because he was tossing so much - why was he moving that much anyway? He was having a hard time thinking. He bottled another signature and would have gone back to what he was doing if he hadn’t caught sight of Draco’s face when he turned back. It was fogged, but he could see the sick pallor, the black gap of his open mouth, the red and grey of his glistening eyes.

Focus, said a voice to his head. Go back to what you were doing, leave him, he can do it.

“But he’s dying”, he said out loud, unheard by the others.

Leave him, the voice said, and he was about to when the golden spider went down and suddenly
Harry didn’t feel anything, didn’t see anything but pain, red, hot, boiling pain, shooting up from the
back of his eyes straight to his brain. The world regained contours and scents and colours and sound
when he flopped on the mattress, hands holding it tight enough to damage the bedcovers. He could
hear Draco’s scream and the voice in his head asking him to let go, for God’s sake, he had to let go,
but he wasn’t holding anything, he wasn’t, there was nothing there to let go of.

It was with blissful calm and utter abandon that he welcomed the dark when it poured on him,
getting rid of the pain and everything else around in the room.
The first sound that came to him was the quiet sucking of a baby being fed. It was with a relieved sigh and a smile that he greeted life once again, sitting up and patting at the bedside table. To his surprise, it was beside his bed and not behind it like it had been at the study. He picked up his glasses and was surprised to see he was in his own bedroom. By the chair on his left, Hermione was cooing Rosie, who was just finishing to be fed. She heard the stirring and her smile was like sunshine. She stop breastfeeding and held Rosie up so the baby could belch.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, looking genuinely concerned. Harry frowned.

“I’m fine. Guess I got overwhelmed.” He ruffled the hair on the back of his neck. It was hurting a little; maybe he had fallen on his head. “Is Draco ok? Did you finish it without me?” He squinted when he tried to look at what he knew would be a window. Light, that was definitely light, and damn it was bright. He shut the curtains with a careless wave of his hand, knocking a vase down with the movement. “Where are our children? Why am I up here? Where’s Ron?” He stopped asking questions when his eyes found Hermione’s. “‘Mione, what’s wrong?”

“You don’t... remember anything?”

“What’s there to remember?” Her voice wasn’t reassuring him. “What happened?”

“Harry,” said her quietly, “you were blacked out for three days.”

“No, I wasn’t.” He got up, looking for the magical calendar Luna had given him so he could tell Hermione was lying. “I just fainted. It’s happened before.”

“Harry.” The search became frantic when he noticed it wasn’t by his wardrobe. Where had he put the damn thing? “Harry.” He continued to ignore her. It was bright blue, how could he miss it? “HARRY JAMES POTTER, WILL YOU LISTEN TO ME!?”

Startled, he turned to her to see her eyes were rimmed with red. He swayed and squinted. On her lap, Rosie looked scared, and she patted the girl’s back while bouncing her up and down. Harry rushed to them and took Hermione in his arms. He rocked her gently and caressed her hair, waiting until she calmed down. He didn’t need the woman to cry, for Godric’s sake. It took her a couple of minutes, but she got back to herself eventually. Rosie was already impatient, and Hermione put her down. The baby went immediately to Harry’s legs and embraced them tight.

“U’cle Awy goo!” She beamed at him and he ruffled her hair, assuring her that yes, he was alright. “Awy pay?”

“I’ll talk to you mom for a moment, Rosie. I’ll play with you in no time.”

The girl resisted the thought but gave up eventually. When she sat down to play with Harry’s Triwizard miniature Hungarian Horntail, surprised that her mother wasn’t taking it from her hands, Hermione took a deep breath and stared at him. She was looking for words, so he decided to guide her through it.

“What happened to Draco, Hermione?” She shook her head and murmured something that made it understood that he was fine. “Ok, and what happened to me?”

She hesitated. “You collapsed. Somehow, Malfoy managed to share his toll with you. We don’t know how but we think your promise that he wouldn’t die turned out to be a binding one and in his
desperation he commanded you to fulfil it.”

Harry had to sit down. Binding promises were uncommon even in the magical world and they always, always meant something. Much similar to Unbreakable Vows, the main difference was that they were mostly involuntary and didn’t need active spellwork to function. His mind found it best to cling to another piece of information, though: Draco would continue alive, if the promise had been kept. That was a good thing, even if it had made him pass out for three days. He could take being passed out for three days if that was all it took. He’d have to look into binding promises to make sure.

“Is he awake?”

“Aren’t you worried about yourself?”

“Not really, no. I know I’m alright now and honestly, I’ve been through worse. How’s he, Hermione?”

She pursed her lips. “In a coma. His vitals are stable but we don’t know when he’s going to wake up. He will, though, and it should be soon. None of the spells told us there’s brain damage, so it’s most likely just exhaustion. We looked up in Mediwizardry books and they said it’s best to replace bones when a patient experiences a coma while the coma’s ongoing, because the body will have its physical strength renewed after that and it would help maintain the person’s health, so we did it. Don’t worry, we saw the pamphlet and your notes and Tyra’s on the subject. Ron applied the Nerve Restoring Potion about three hours ago and I deactivated the Lactation Spell. His body will be perfectly good in about six hours and his mind should wake up not long after, since we’re not giving him any sedatives or painkillers. You can go see him when the potion stops working; the vision of nervous terminations growing is disgusting to say the least.”

“And the kids?”

“They’re staying with us, although we’re mainly staying here. We thought about giving Albus back to Ginny but it would raise questioning and we wanted to avoid it. Ron’s asleep with Scorpius, now; I had to give the baby a Dreamless Sleep, for he kept patting Draco’s face and asking for him. Albus only left you about an hour ago, when Ron decided he had to sleep too. We’ve been taking turns to be with you and the kids because your vitals, unlike Malfoy’s, were fluctuating a lot and we couldn’t assess your brain right. And this is why I should probably let Ron have his way and smack you in the face, because you were too damn stupid to watch what you said in front of Malfoy.”

“I didn’t know it would become a binding promise, Hermione”, he said in the most obvious tone he could muster.

“No, but being a host and caring about Malfoy, you should have considered the idea of not making promises you cannot keep.”

He smirked wickedly. “Well, I did keep that one.” Hermione growled and shook her head. “I’m joking, I’m joking. I’m good now, Hermione. Starving and needing a shower, but I’m good.” He kissed her temple. “Thank you for your concern, but you can rest now.”

“No, I cannot! You have been shut down for three days! You will go to a hospital and get a check-up or I’ll make sure you need a Healer myself!”

“Hermione.” He held her at arm’s length and faced her calmly. “I am alright. I have been down for many more days when I took some cases and you know I can handle it.”
“You never fainted because of a promise,” she murmured, sounding really crossed.

“And I will pay attention to any signs that said promise is ongoing and tell you them. Meanwhile, you rest while I look after the kids. Did Kreacher make you lunch? What time is it?”

“Three in the afternoon. Kreacher will cook you something very pleurally, I presume. He was deeply concerned for your health.”

“He was?” Harry wasn’t buying it.

“He said it was very brave and very honourable of you to risk your life for the last grown member of the Blacks. He was deeply grateful.”

Harry let out a smile at that. Trust Kreacher to grow warm to someone because his Master’s life had been saved. He couldn’t even be angry at the elf for choosing Malfoy over him; given his history, he should be grateful that the elf hadn’t sworn complete allegiance to Draco the moment he stepped inside the house and left Harry to fend for himself. He decided to summon Kreacher and ask him for anything, any food at all that was more substantial than cheese sandwich or porridge. The elf bowed really low, his ears touching the floor, before he Disapparated. Hermione just shrugged, muttered an “I told you so” and excused herself to take a nap.

About two hours later, Harry was sitting on the floor of the spare room upstairs building an stable for Rosie’s vicious, although harmless, Abraxans miniatures. They had been a gift from George and both Harry and Hermione doubted they were as harmless as he claimed they were, so the girl was not supposed to play with them without supervision. He was startled when Kreacher showed up, again bowing deep, and said Mrs Andromeda Tonks was Floo-calling him. He asked him to stay with Rosie for a moment, scooped up the Abraxans and went downstairs to pick the call. Andromeda’s face was smiling at him from amidst the flames.

“Good afternoon, Andy,” he said, genuinely happy to see her. Beside her, a childish head showed up. “Hello, Teddy.”

“Hi, Prongs.” He grinned at him and despite the looks not matching much, he could see Tonks’ smile through it. “Can I go to your place?”

“Edward, it’s impolite to interrupt your grandmother when she’s making a call.”

“But you already said I can, why shouldn’t I ask him myself?”

Both grownups had to laugh at that. Andromeda ruffled her grandson’s already unruly hair and turned to face Harry. “I am sorry, Harry, but it’s a hopeless case, I’m afraid. I have to attend two charities and Teddy’s refusing to come.”

“You know he’s always welcome.”

“Of course I am, I live with you, duh.” The boy rolled his eyes.

“Technically, it’s shared custody, Teddy,” Harry said, and the boy rolled his eyes once again, growling. He then caught sight of Rosie’s Abraxans, still in Harry’s hand.

“Are those the Weasleys’ Wheezes Abraxans?!”

“Yes, but they’re Rosie’s, so you have to ask her if you can play with them.” He nodded fervently and Harry spared Andromeda another smile. “Send him over. I was missing him already.”
They made the final arrangements and five minutes later Teddy was stepping graciously out of the fireplace. He was a lanky nine years-old boy who was as dexterous with his surroundings as his mother had been, but could step out of a fireplace with a grace unmatched - and according to Andromeda, it was the only thing he could do gracefully that didn’t involve a wand. Harry couldn’t say much, being himself a pretty distracted person. Teddy was sporting a bright turquoise blue hair, tanned complexion and violet, almost purple, eyes. He had just begun to actively experiment with his appearance and Harry sometimes wondered whether he should have hidden his scattered Muggle and wizard comics. Certainly Andy wouldn’t have opposed, although she hardly cared about Teddy’s chosen looks. He looked like a colouring experiment out of a comics page most of the days lately, and he and Harry, as did the kids, loved it. He put the the Abraxans inside his pocket before hugging the boy, who hugged him back with thrice the energy.

“Had a nice time away from your grumpy old godfather?” he asked, steering the boy upstairs. He had a different wardrobe at each house, so he only carried a backpack with few essential items - such as his Beater bat and his giant pop up book on dragons, which he insisted were absolutely vital.

“Granny took me to Romania! I rode a dragon alone!”

“You did?” Harry doubted it to be true.

“Yes! Vicky was there too but I had to go in alone because she was afraid. She entered after me and we flew together.”

The boy’s speech accelerated to convolve the entire fortnight until they reached the top of the stairs. Harry asked him to drop the things in his room and go back to the spare room, because he needed to give Rosie her Abraxans back. Teddy agreed and ran to his room while Harry walked into the spare room. Besides Rosie, Scorpius was there too now, probably taken by Kreacher, looking partially distracted by the hay covering the stables. Harry had tried to convince Rosie that hay was unsuitable for Abraxans, but he doubted Merlin himself would have been able to make her change her mind. He took the Abraxans out of his pocket - just in time: the restless little beasts were about to make a mess out of it - and gave them back to the babies. Scorpius stared at the winged horses with such bedazzlement that Rosie patted his hand away quite violently when he reached out for them.

“Mine!,” she said, huddling the miniatures closer.

“Rosie, share,” said Harry commandingly. “Teddy is here and I don’t want you being mean.”

“Deddy!” She clapped her hands. Harry stood looking at her and she sighed, pouting. She picked one of the Abraxans - the smaller one, Harry noticed - and offered it to Scorpius, who took it with glee. “Baan Copi! Deddy?”

As if on cue, Teddy showed up on the doorpost.

“Where are the Abraxans?” he said, flushed. His room was far from the spare room and up a flight of stairs. Harry had been annoyed when he chose it at first, for it was the less warded and the farthest room in the house, before he realised the boy had keen eyes for stargazing and would then, of course, choose the only room with a skylight. Harry had strengthened the protections and set an intercom in Teddy’s room out of precaution.

“Deddy!” Rosie ran to him and hugged him. Teddy picked her up, smiling wide at the girl. He had lived around the Weasleys for so long that he knew how to hold a baby, change diapers and even bathe them. “Baan Copi,” she added very seriously, almost as if it had been stolen, forgetting that one of the winged creatures had actually stayed with her. She looked particularly upset that she had had to lend her toys: unlike Teddy, Rosie was a little more of a guarded child, her best friend being
Albus and Hermione not very keen on letting her on the Weasleys to be spoiled rotten when she went to pick her up.

Teddy was staring at the child with interest, making sense out of her words with refined skill. He didn’t understand Scorpius’ name, though.

“Copi? Who’s Copi?” He lowered the baby girl and only then he noticed the blonde little boy who was petting the wing of one of the Abraxans. He eyed Harry accusingly. “Where did this boy come from?”

“He’s the son of a friend of mine,” Harry said in a calm, monotone. He wanted to placate in Teddy what he knew would become displeasement very soon if he didn’t smother it. “His name’s Scorpius and he’s roughly the same age as Albus. He’s staying with us for indeterminate time and you have to be good to him too. Treat him like a brother.”

Teddy was now looking at Scorpius with undeterred suspicion. He went closer to the boy, raised locks of the blonde hair, squeezed the soft, thin arm clad in dark green sweaters, even sniffed him. Harry tried very hard not to laugh. Teddy was surprisingly proud of his werewolf heritage - although Harry had already explained him that it wasn’t genetically motivated - and therefore liked to impersonate one from time to time. He had licked Victoire once, when he was younger, much to the girl’s misfortune, and been lectured by Andromeda until his ears grew red and swollen, so he stopped that particular practice. Harry had never tested the boy, thoughtful as he was of Andromeda’s feelings, but he thought very likely he had a better sense of smell, indeed. No one had ever been able to hide any kind of food from Teddy Lupin, for example.

After about a minute, he sat on his heels with Scorpius already on his lap and eyed Harry very seriously. “Prongspawn, did you have an affair?”

Harry choked on air with the question. Rosie even stopped teaching Scorpius how to properly pet the Abraxan in his hand after that, concerned little eyes wondering if she should call someone to help her uncle. She decided against it and turned back to Scorpius when Harry restablished his breathing. “Do you know what an affair is?!” he all but hissed, red from coughing.

“Of course I do.” Teddy rolled his eyes, bouncing a little to make the baby in his lap laugh. “A witch in one of Granny’s parties said that someone had an affair. When I asked Granny, she said an affair is something grownups do sometimes that is their business only, and when I asked her why that lady was so upset if it wasn’t her affair, she said it was because the affair had produced a baby out of nowhere. Was this what happened to Scorpius? Was he produced by an affair? Because he is here out of nowhere.”

Harry laughed at his impeccable logic, crouching on the floor and shaking his head. He ruffled Teddy’s hair and admonished Rosie to keep her Abraxan away from the hay.

“I didn’t have an affair, Teddy,” he said at last. “Scorpius is the son of Draco Malfoy.”

“My cousin?” Harry nodded, seeing the excitement spread on Teddy’s face. He loved meeting relatives and yet had been granted so little chances to do so. “And where is he?”

“Sleeping. He got hurt and haven’t woken up yet, but he will very soon.”

“Oh.” He looked upset but it lasted only a moment. “So what, you have to babysit Scorpius.” Harry nodded once. “And Rosie.” And twice. “And there’s Albus too.” And thrice. “And me.” And yet a fourth time. “So it’s a day-care.”
“Teddy!”

“It is.” He sat down properly, crossing his legs, and let Scorpius loose. The blonde boy offered him the Abraxan he had been holding and he started playing with the babies. “I’ll help you babysit them, Prongspawn. You don’t have to worry.”

Teddy actually did take care of the babies, adoring the attention of his little audience. He had been telling a folktale about a wizard and a giant when Albus joined the babies, being followed by a rumpled Ron. Hermione was beside him, looking incredibly better. Her hair was combed back and tied up and she had taken a shower and changed her clothes. Ron had obviously washed his face and was beaming at his friend. They greeted Teddy, who gave them just the slightest bit of attention before resuming the story, and sat in a table Harry conjured for some tea and muffins. Kreacher was smart and gave the kids their own, plastic tray filled with sugary goods. While they - and the Abraxans - nipped the muffins and lemon cakes, Ron turned to Harry with a playful smile.

“Have you considered dropping your Auror career to be a babysitter?” he asked wickedly.

“You too? Teddy’s already said I run a daycare.”

“He’s not wrong, you know,” said Hermione, shrugging. “At least it’s a safe one.”

“Oh yes, at least that.” Well, some safety he could still provide, he wondered. His head went to Draco, lying in bed so quietly after all the hurt he had been through. Harry had had to escape to be granted a chance to see him during the afternoon and he had looked so pale and weak. They hadn’t been apart for over twelve hours yet, not since Harry was awake anyway, and he was already missing the bloody Slytherin.

“What’s wrong, Harry?”, asked Hermione. She laid her hand on top of his and smiled encouragingly.

“I’m worried about Draco, that’s all.”

“He will be fine, we promised you so,” said her with a pat to his fingers.

“I know. Guess I’m used to it. He’s annoying sometimes but it’s good to have him around.” He looked up to see both his friends staring at him with mocking, conspiratory smiles on their faces. He raised his hands in a surrender gesture and hurried to set the records straight. “Not that I like him or anything. That’s not it.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks and laughed. Harry scowled at them.

“Harry, we know you like him, you bloody arse,” said Ron. “I don’t like it that you do, but come on. You made a binding promise with him. An unintentional one. This is like marriage, mate.”

“Oh God, don’t get started,” he begged, making a face at the idea of being thoroughly mocked by his peers.

“I’ve told you before that we wouldn’t be mad if you decided to like him, Harry, and so we won’t.”

“I don’t like Malfoy, Hermione. I think,” he added after a moment’s consideration. “Well, I was supposed to care for him and make sure he recovered just fine, and you helped me with it to have it cleared now, so thank you very much. Speaking of recovery…”

“We removed every Tracking Spell,” said Ron at once, guessing what his question was going to be. “Malfoy’s completely clean and whole.”
“We didn’t do much about the magical signatures, though. We’ve been kind of busy, between checking on you and healing him.”

“We can sort them tonight and compare them when we can get to the Ministry,” Harry suggested, to which the others nodded. “Are they clear signatures?”

“We don’t know yet. We’d have to open them to make sure they’re not contaminated, of course, and maybe narrow it down. It’s pretty easy to do it, so it won’t take us long, but it would be suspicious if we had to do it in the middle of the Ministry.”

They decided to do it while the kids were still awake, for it was an easy, risk-free task. Examining magical signatures, as Ron said, was not a problem if they were not attached to a hex. Once removed from their original place, magical signatures could be read and manipulated by anyone, although planting them, for instance, was a whole different matter. Harry, who had already had to analyse them before, didn’t need any help, so Hermione was the one Ron chose to tutor that early night. They were working at different paces and Ron, being the most experienced one, was taking the darker ones, which were a little trickier to purify. Hermione, despite not taking the worst ones, was thorough enough to be slow-going. In the end, the one signature left was the white one, distinct enough from the others because of the unicorn-like glow it emitted. Staring at it, Harry started to remember his early training in Tracks and Signatures, that said the brightest signatures were the ones who had more love and care into them. The Auror who said that had also stated that the mark Lily Evans had left in Harry Potter had been the absolute brightest magical signature the wizarding world had ever seen, and could not be manipulated or contained because it had been too strong to be pulled away.

It was with fondness in his eyes that Harry picked up that last vial, pulling the signature and spreading it in his shielded part of the table. The smoke-like substance dispersed and gleamed in rosy, golden-freckled light under the invisible dome. A mother, he noted down on the paper he was using to try to narrow down the possibilities, a loving one. He tapped his wand to it and the light became bluish, spiralling downwards and falling flat at the table to become glimmering white. That meant sorrow and faith, and those were the last two emotions the person who added that signature had felt. Those were the traits that could be identified without comparison, and Harry was about to wrap it up when the signature began to change colours in an alarming pace, changing consistency and flicking from silver to red until it burst and resumed its initial colour and density. Harry didn’t need Ron’s assistance to know what it was: it was Blood Shield, and his own magical signature was filled with that. It ran in signatures of those who received and those who gave it, and Harry narrowed down every single signature he had ever been in touch with to try and find which one was that.

His breath caught when he remembered the dream. The veiled woman, the way her signature changed, the sudden appearance, fall and injury of Draco. The conversation he had with Draco just a few days earlier. She is one of the most caring, loving, patient people I’ve ever met. She’d have traded herself to keep us safe if she could. He looked at his friends and at the children trying to piece together a Chinese Fireball’s puzzle, but none of them seemed to have noticed what he had. It was merely a hunch, a possibility, something he could envision based on those little clues and an unsettling feeling in the base of his stomach. It was possible that the Blood Shield was older than Draco’s captivity but he wasn’t putting much faith to it. He had to be thorough and a little pessimistic I his line of work and it wouldn’t be different there. With his hand cold and more than slightly trembling, Harry added a single line to the scarcely written parchment: suspected to belong to Astoria Malfoy.
Harry had just finished feeding the babies, who were sleeping in his room, and was on his way to check on Teddy - he always did it at least once every night - when Kreacher showed up with a loud crack that reverberated through the walls. The elf bowed until his nose touched the floor and it was only Harry’s Auror instinct that avoided a collision mid-stair.

“Master Draco is awake, sir,” he said, beaming like Harry had never seen the grumpy, old elf do. It must be about six in the morning, he mused. Despite him not asking for it, Kreacher had taken upon himself the task to look after Draco and Harry, who had to deal with two babies and a grown child, welcomed the help without complaints. He did, however, spend the last couple of days alternating sleeping by Draco’s bed and with the babies at least three times a night. He was almost sleepless but Kreacher had been helping him stay whole with potions and babysitting. Harry knew it was worth it. He would go and check on Malfoy for hours, admire his sleeping figure and wonder when he had become so important, so much that his being in coma made Harry’s days so bloody dull. He could barely contain his excitement for the news.

“Thank you, Kreacher. You may sleep, now. I will look after him.”

Kreacher bowed again and Disapparated. Harry thought about Teddy, but his godson never had a problem during the night, so it could wait some more. He went to Draco’s room, the one right beside his own, and stopped on the doorpost for a moment. Draco was sitting on the bed, legs out of it, feet firmly set on the floor. He was downright naked and incredibly sweaty, blonde hair sticking to his neck, temples and forehead. Able to give him a long, thorough once-over for the first time since waking up, Harry turned the lights in the room on. The burning in his face had soothed a little, and the skin was no longer red and marked, but pale, slightly slashed. Harry could see that Hermione had been thoroughly through the lashes and eyebrows in the past couple of days, for there were no more signs of damage there. The skin of his cheeks was rosy and impeccable, so Harry could see some beard - Kreacher had always been adamant in keeping Draco’s look polished and clean, but he knew Ron had forbidden him to use any spells on Draco while he was recovering because the elf kept complaining about it, so Kreacher hadn’t been shaving Malfoy. There were no more bruises, misplaced or broken bones, and the piece that had been taken off his ear was back, looking as normal as ever. He was so like the Draco he had met, so lean lines and high authority, even dishevelled as he was, that Harry felt a weight lift off his chest.

He entered the room with quiet steps, but Draco’s attention whipped to him just the same.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, smiling and walking towards him. He plopped himself down on the bed and didn’t ignore the chance of tactile assessing, making sure that everything was in place. Draco turned his body to him, his breathing extremely relaxed while Harry traced both his temples, ears, cheekbones with almost clinical scrutiny and extensive consideration.

“A little dizzy,” he murmured back, letting his chin rise so Harry’s hands lowered down both sides of his neck and parted to reach out for his shoulders and collarbone. “Hungry, too. Kreacher said he could have food ready if we wanted him to but I should wait for you before eating it. I didn’t think you’d be awake. Are we back to pulling all-nighters, Potter?”

“Teddy came home, so between you, him and the babies, my sleep’s far lighter.” He assessed the integrity of skin, muscle and bones of Draco’s arms, brushing fingers against the Dark Mark without as much as noticing it but for the scar it was, stopping quietly when he reached his wrists to restart on his chest. “Your body seems to be alright at last.”
“Why don’t you use a spell to do what you’re doing?”

Harry’s hands froze on his rib cage. “Why? Is it disturbing you?” Draco shook his head and Harry’s heart soothed. He shrugged despite the fact that Malfoy wouldn’t really see it. “I’m from a less than exemplary Muggle household, I trust my hands to see damage my eyes can’t.”

“I’m familiar with the feeling,” he answered lightly, waving him off. “Feel free to continue. Being touched by someone is heavenly grounding when you’re unable to connect otherwise.”

“Now you’re embarrassing me,” he murmured, but didn’t stop trailing the path down Draco’s belly and hipbones. He got further up the bed to settle behind him and had Draco put his legs up so he could go on down his thighs, knees and calves. “It’s not that I don’t trust Hermione or Ron or Tyra, but I just… well.”

“You have to check them for yourself.” Draco relaxed to his chest and Harry felt his breath quiver. “I did that too. We learned in the Healing Course that people who have undergone abuse, violence or seen a fair share of it often stop trusting their eyes to make sure someone’s good. It’s easier to see if someone’s in pain or hurt and give them comfort and reassurance when you do it like this. You can feel when they flinch or wince, and you can feel it all through you so there’s no mistake.”

“I used to do it a lot for my friends after the war. That thing gave us all a hard time.” He gently let go of Draco’s ankles after finishing examining his feet and held his hands, being the most meticulous he could there. Draco had shivered during the examination, but had had no real adverse reaction. Harry let his forehead rest against the skin between Draco’s shoulder blades and smiled, honestly relieved. Both pairs of hands fell to Draco’s lap, resting on the sheets that were covering it. “Thank Merlin you’re alright. I was worried we would have missed something and you’d have to undergo more of that horrible thing.”

Draco caressed Harry’s hands with something strangely akin to fondness. “You all did your best and I’m grateful for that.” Surprisingly enough, he turned his head and planted a soft kiss on Harry’s cheek. He blushed crimson and found himself at a remarkable lack of words. “I’d advise against being so close, though. I haven’t bathed in what seems to be days and not even my otherwise perfect hygiene can self-maintain for that long.”

“I really don’t care.”

“But I do. You can come cuddle me properly after I’m clean and fed, Potter.” He chuckled and Harry snorted. “I am actually serious, incredibly as it seems,” he pondered, and Harry’s arms went to envelop him further despite his restrictions. Harry felt his stomach churn and the salty taste of Draco’s skin against his lips when he touched his right shoulder with them was not helping it stop. “I got used to you being someone I can touch and not have to feel ashamed for it. If you wouldn’t mind, and I’d say you consider the weight of this proposition right, I’d like you to share a bed with me.”

Harry was taken a little aback by the request, although his hold on Malfoy didn’t waver. He assumed Draco didn’t mean a sexual sharing, given their lack of acquaintance with each other. He had to wonder if maybe he hadn’t been under torture for longer than Harry imagined, though. If he didn’t touch anyone at all during incarceration, Harry doubted he was thinking clearly about that. God only knew that Harry, being separated from Ginny for over six months now, had his lines blurred on that matter. He remembered when he had had to cope with the aftermath of the war: he used to hold Ginny as if she was his lifeline, he hugged his friends every time he saw them, he showed up at The Burrow five, sometimes six times a week to be surrounded by warmth and love and care, because he didn’t think he could have made it without those. He had been looked after, helped people to get better, all while healing himself. Ron had confessed him he and Hermione had been utterly
dependent on each other for a couple of years after the war, especially because of their memories of Hermione’s torture and the hallucination Ron had been submitted to when recovering the locket.

“You mean sleep beside you, not with you,” Harry asked boldly, recriminating himself that he was still blushing.

“I don’t need to have sex now, no,” Draco answered in a clear but low voice. “I want company. I hardly ever had anything with Astoria but we slept beside each other every single night.” He shivered again. “I thought I wouldn’t want anyone touching me for all I’ve been through, but it’s different when you trust someone. After sleeping alone in the dark for so long, I don’t think I ever want to do that again.”

Harry sucked in a deep breath that came impregnated with Draco’s scent and nodded. He thought better to keep from mentioning the possibility of Astoria’s signature until Hermione had gone through it and made sure it was right. He hadn’t spared many thoughts as to what it had meant, afraid as he was that she was still there, wherever “there” was. He would have to break the news to Draco soon, supposing he was right, but he would be lying if he said he was eager to. He had just got him back and there was not a single cell of his body willing to leave him right then.

“Now that we’re done healing you, you can have your wand back,” he murmured to Draco, out of the blue, still holding him carefully in his arms. “I don’t need to worry about you misusing it to soothe your own pain anymore and I think you should practice spells while you’re blind. At least the most basic ones, I guess… Kreacher can give you it, he knows where it is.” Draco nodded. “You are also, of course, permitted everywhere in the house, except Teddy’s room.”

“Why not his room?”

“Because if you want to enter it, you’ll have to ask him. He’s eager to meet you and shan’t give you much trouble. Mind you, you’re his only unknown living relative, except for Narcissa.”

“Mother would have liked to meet him,” he said in a monotone. Harry frowned.

“We can set up a meeting place someday if she manifests her wish to.”

“I doubt it.” Draco sighed and straightened his back, patting Harry’s left arm with a quiet hand and turning to smile at him. “Come on, sod off. Have you wondered what would people think if they saw you in the bottom of your pyjamas and me as nature made me, sitting cuddling in bed?”

Harry let out a hearty laugh at the idea. “I’d pay to see Ron’s face if he was the one.”

“You’re impossible. Haven’t you grown up, Potter?”

“Shut up, Malfoy.” He bumped his shoulder against Draco’s shoulder blade and released him. “Jokes set aside, I’m fine with being your anchor in whatever way you might need me.”

“Here’s Saint Potter saving the world one fucked-up former Death Eater at a time.” Draco slipped out of bed, leaving the sheet behind. He stretched his entire body, flexing muscles and straightening out his long limbs. His body was truly remarkable, particularly now that it had been fixed and the scars were mostly a soothing white that could almost blend with it. “Are you going to be all touchy-feely with every single one of them?”

“I’m not saving anyone, moron,” he answered half-heartedly, eyes still slowing down Draco’s body a little more noticeably than he’d fancy. Well, no harm done in looking at the man he was sharing his house with. He was a beautiful specimen, it had always been consent in Hogwarts, and Harry liked what he saw.
Draco turned around with a smirk so dirty and genuine that Harry thought his mind had been read. His breath hitched and it was what the other needed to find him. He put both his hands beside Harry’s legs and hovered few inches above his face. Harry remained sitting and swallowed deep when Draco’s cheek touched his, making his mouth almost touch his ear.

“You have saved me, Potter,” he murmured huskily. “And for that, I am deeply grateful.”

Harry startled at the shiver that ran up his spine and the blood that shot down his groins. He pressed both his hands on Draco’s chest and pushed him away. Draco laughed.

“Don’t worry; this is a reaction I get a lot.”

“What reaction, you manipulative prat?” Harry got up and put some distance between them. He didn’t want Malfoy to know what was going on inside his pants.

“Compliment accepted.” Harry scowled. “All that’s being proved with your heating up and racing heart whenever I get too close is that you are uncomfortable, Potter. I’ve told you that already. It doesn’t mean you find me attractive or wanna jump my bones, like your conscious reactions make it look like.”

“Like you would ever let me let me.”

“I might.” Draco shrugged. “As you can see, small displays of post-torture fragility and messed up past aside, I am a perfectly healthy and quite warm-blooded snake.”

“Would you stop teasing me already?” he gnarled at him.

“Does it mean you can be teased?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t be such a git.”

Draco sighed and folded his arms. “I can do that, but I have a favour to ask you then,” he said solemnly. “I really want to take a bath.”

“A bath?” Draco nodded. “I can clean you if you are feeling that bad with being sweaty and stuff. I’m good at that and it will be very quick.”

“No, Potter, I need an actual bath. I want to sink in warm water with bloody bubbles and scrub my body until it shines red.”

“Red won’t suit you”, he replied jestingly.

“Come on. You do have a bathtub, don’t you?”

“I sure do. Do you mind me standing there to supervise? I know you’re alright but better safe than sorry.”

Draco scoffed. “You have seen me naked every day ever since I came here. You touched my entire body not ten minutes ago. If you want to tag along to make sure I don’t split my head open on the tiles despite the fact that I’ll be laying down and you have an over-solicitous house-elf, feel free.”

That set, Harry steered Malfoy to his suite’s bathroom. He turned the water on and helped Draco sink on the bathtub until only his head was visible above water. Harry sat on the marble border and looked distractedly at Draco as he found a sponge and began scrubbing himself really hard with it.

“Are you sure it doesn’t hurt?” asked Harry eventually, when Draco had done such force on his arm...
that the surroundings of the spot he was rubbing were flushed already. As an answer, he merely showed Harry what he had been attacking - the Dark Mark - and resumed what he was doing. He didn’t know what kind of a ritual that was, but the scar was far less visible and barely discernible now: anyone who had not known the mark of a Death Eater would see it as a different, very faded mark. “You know, you could try to remove it. We could try to find a spell and do it.”

“I know how to remove it,” he said, and frowned as if he didn’t understand why he had said so or how did he know it. “I will, eventually. When I’m done coping with my share of guilt for the war.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I didn’t know Malfoys to be stupid.”

“We’re honoured, despite Father’s ways. We may be cunning but we recognize a mistake we regret and I am recognizing mine.” He stopped trying to peel the Dark Mark off and moved on to the rest of his body. “You know, Potter, hard as it may seem to believe it, I never really sought to become a Death Eater. I believed Father’s words but as much as I hated most of the Muggleborns and Half-bloods and, really, just anyone that wasn’t me, I never intended to go raiding and killing them for fun. For a goal, if they were strangers, maybe, but just to mess around? Not bloody likely. Persecuting people inside Hogwarts is one thing; doing it in real life was not my first intention. It came to be for a while, of course; we learn how to do it. But it wasn’t at first.”

“Then why did you?” asked Harry, finally letting out the one question he had always intended to ask Malfoy. “Why did you join Voldemort if you didn’t want to?”

Draco didn’t hesitate. “Because I could. Voldemort made me the offer himself. I was young enough to be fine with saying yes. I believed some of his doctrines enough.” He let the sponge escape and float, hugging his knees. He seemed to be considering something. “He made sure I was cut to be what he wanted, whatever it was. I didn’t know why he wanted me, though, why right then. The courteous answer was that I was supposed to pay for my father’s mistakes when he went after you in the Department of Mysteries, but it was more than just that. He could still have gone after another boy, maybe someone older than I was, maybe even younger, though it’s despicable to say so, but there were other people to work from inside Hogwarts and fix that bloody cabinet if that was all he needed me for. People he would be able to control much more easily. I must have been strategic.”

“And how were you strategic?”

“I don’t know. We never got there. Maybe I wasn’t good enough for him after all.”

Harry acquiesced, producing a vague sound so Malfoy could catch it. It was strange that the first thing Draco had wanted to do after waking up would be taking a bath and scrubbing his Mark. Harry thought he might have had nightmares about that, but didn’t ask. It wouldn’t help him. Draco patted the water awkwardly and Harry offered him the sponge back. The mood had turned dark and he would cheer him up even if he had to start telling jokes. He had decided he didn’t like the way Malfoy became quiet when talking about his Death Eater days, especially comparing to how normally he usually behaved around Harry. That one conversation had been particularly tense and unfit for his return to life as a mainly whole man. Harry cleared his throat.

“How is this whole being blind thing now that the pain from the broken bones is gone?”

Not that surprisingly, Draco smiled. “I find the world much less oppressive now.” Harry laughed, amused. “I mean it. I can feel many things I didn’t before.”

“From touching only?” Harry said sceptically.

“Very nice response from someone who just had me cocooned in his arms to make sure I was whole,
Potter.” He scoffed and Harry blushed. “Here, let me show you. Be patient, it’s not easy and you tend to be thick.” He took Harry’s hand. “Now close your eyes and focus on me. Slide your fingers down my wrist, yes, like this. Don’t squeeze or I’ll hex you.”

Harry tried to do as he was told. He was impatient at first, but Draco admonished him to try until he sank in a deep, almost meditative state. He could feel Draco’s steady pulse, the softness of his skin, the relaxed way his muscles kept while in Harry’s hands. It was like touching him should always be, Harry wondered with a faint smile. He didn’t mind touching Draco like that at all. It was like reaching something else, somewhere deeper. He was placid, quiet, as if waiting. When Draco thought he was ready, he murmured the instructions.

“I want you to keep the hold and don’t tighten it. I’ll show you a couple of discernible primary emotions.”

“Ok”, said Harry, low to keep from disturbing the peace they shared. He waited for a moment, his heart racing slightly in anticipation.

“You’re not being tested, Potter, calm your shit”, said Draco with a small laughter. “Right. What am I feeling? Don’t pay attention to my voice, just my body.” There was a slight tightening of Draco’s fingers’ muscles. His pulse was quickening in a steady, slow pace, and his tendons were tight as violin chords. He could feel this tension going up his arms, although they were not rigid. Draco’s breath was paced and came out completely by his nose. “What is this, Potter?”

Harry frowned. “Anger. You’re angry.” His eyes shot open and he stared at Malfoy’s hand in amusement. “This is amazing!”

“Of course it is. It’s hard to say much from a hand only, but I’m able to tell fear from sadness, sadness from apathy, excitement from anger, anger from fear. It’s the common range that sets our extremities’ muscles. If I want more information, I need more of the person I’m reading. When you lean on me, I can tell if you’re slouching or alert and I can know when you become uncomfortable. Which, by the way, is a lot of the time when it’s me in the room.”

“Fuck off, Malfoy”, grunted Harry, narrowing his eyes at him. Draco laughed.

“Again, I’m merely stating things, Potter. No need to get so worked up. I know you have a thing for hopeless cases and I’m your bloody favourite now.”

Harry restrained the will to slap his head. “I remember why I used to hate you in school.”

Draco shrugged again. “Our intentions towards each other were clear and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

They started talking about their time in Hogwarts, laughing and discussing hard. Draco was adamant that he hadn’t started that game, that it had been Harry’s chivalrousness that set what could have been a friendship on fire even before it started. According to him, had Harry been a little more manipulative and a little less prima donna, they could have come to an arrangement of sorts. Harry had to say he doubted it would have lasted, since he would never have given up Ron and Hermione for the mighty Malfoy, to which Draco’s only response was “why, I put up with them very obediently, didn’t I”. Harry eventually retorted that he had only been that inoffensive at his place because he had been hurt and had happened to show up there, so it was not much of a guarantee that he would have done so before. Draco tried to say something against it but he couldn’t; there was something strangely missing in his words. Harry thought it could be a lasting effect of whatever Confusion Spell had been cast on him and decided they should drop the subject. Surprisingly enough, Draco accepted the idea with a single condition: he wanted Harry to scrub his back. Harry
tried to see a catch in the request, since Draco had lost the last argument, but failed to, so he took the sponge and did as he was bid. In the meantime, Draco hummed a strange, unknown song that sounded like a lullaby.

“What are you singing?” he asked.

“It’s called humming, Potter, not singing; would you pay attention in your surroundings for once?” Harry brushed his back particularly hard and Draco jerked to the front. Harry didn’t restrain a smug smile. “Old Malfoy lullaby. Scorpius likes it very much… I might sing him to sleep tonight.”

“He’s been missing you”, Harry said, dropping the sponge to pointedly massage Draco’s back where it had left a deep red streak. It was hot and tender to the touch and Harry felt the soothing urge to kiss it like he would if Albus had hurt himself.

“He’s not the only one.”

“You were in a coma.” Harry rolled his eyes. “You didn’t miss him in your sleep.”

“I didn’t mean me.” Draco touched Harry’s left hand, currently sitting on his wet shoulder, and patted it condescendingly. Harry wasn’t seeing it but he could feel that Draco was smiling that nasty, smug smile of his. “I am glad to be missed, Potter.”

“You weren’t,” he rushed to say.

“That’s ok. I’m fine with it. Be fine with it too, Potter.”

“Oh, sod off, Malfoy,” he said, pushing Draco a little. “I’ll go make us some food so you can have Kreacher as your valet. Finish your shower and ask him to help you get dressed. I’ve had enough of you nakedness for today.”

He got up, leaving the bathroom and heading down the stairs. His head was heavy with Malfoy’s presence. His fingers, numb and somehow a little too keen on reminding him that they had been on Draco’s skin not five minutes ago, folded and stretched to calm him down as he headed for the kitchen, thinking amusedly of Draco’s last statement. Not only Ron and Hermione but now even Draco himself knew how much Harry had missed him. He snorted and chuckled.

“Bloody Slytherin,” he murmured under his breath. Trust a Slytherin to always know where they stood, he mused quietly. And maybe, just maybe, a stand was what they needed then.
Harry had been stirring some porridge - his sleep was good as gone by then - when Draco slithered into the kitchen. He had literally scrubbed himself flushed and the pale skin was only now starting to go back to its original colour. His cheeks were rosy and he looked incredibly healthy, shaved and combed, his hair parted and dried, gleaming like a unicorn’s tail hair. He was wearing one of Harry’s blue long-sleeved T-shirts and lounging pants that made his slim figure even slimmer. He took small, tentative steps, since the place was unknown to him. Harry wondered if he should help him, his attention drawn to him like a magnet, but decided against it. Draco eventually found a stool, pushed it against a wall and climbed on top of it. Harry welcomed the silence that followed and turned back to the porridge. It was beginning to boil, the bubbles popping silently. It was only after some minutes that he realized Draco had been casting non-verbal Levitating Charms around the room. He picked up a fork from mid-air when it levitated in front of the pot and looked at him.

“What are you doing?” he asked, and saw Draco’s grip on the floating things waver. He cleared his throat and recomposed himself very steadily.

“Experimenting.”

“In a kitchen?” Harry moved further and started picking up the levitating cutlery. Godric almighty, he had spelled a lot of stuff. “Where there are knives and forks and boiling water and bloody fire for that instance?”

“I am trying to see how I can compensate my aim when there’s nothing to ground me to what I’m trying to spell.”

“What?”

Draco took in a deep breath that reminded Harry of Hermione. “For an example, I could Levitate Scorpius even without knowing where he is, because he’s very real to my mind and any spell I set would search for him. I could do it to myself too, but I probably wouldn’t get you or Weasel. I can levitate my sheets but not a teacup.”

“So you can surely spell things you have been in close contact with, but you go random with the others.” Draco acquiesced. “Well, it’s nice to know that, isn’t it?”

“Sort of. I’m useless to defend myself, though.”

“Nonsense. Shield Charms are easy to make even when you can’t see what’s coming after you, as the one around you when I first found you can state.”

“I don’t remember casting that.”

“There’s quite a lot of things you don’t remember, isn’t it?” He picked one last knife and went back to the porridge. “I think there might be something to increase your awareness… a potion, maybe. Hermione gave us something to drink that enabled me to sense magical currents but made my eyes and overall perception of visual reality useless. Maybe she has some left.”

“That would be nice.” His stomach grunted. “Can we eat already?”

“I’m finishing the porridge, calm down.”

Draco did his best to remain calm and composed but his grumbling stomach didn’t help. It growled
even louder as Harry served them both. Draco was finishing his second bowl of porridge and Harry had already charmed the dishes to do themselves when Teddy bounced happily into the kitchen with Albus and Scorpius in tow. Scorpius’ eyes gleamed and got tear-struck when he saw Draco.

“Pa!” He wriggled away from Teddy and half-ran, half-stumbled towards Draco. He proffered his arms and took the child, pressing him against his chest with such love that Harry had to look away. “Papa goo!”

“Yes, I am perfectly fine, my brave little scorpion.” He kissed the boy’s forehead and caressed his hair. Teddy had greeted Harry and given him Albus so he could fetch himself some breakfast. Albus was dead quiet, just observing those around him. “I’ve heard you’ve been good to Harry. I am very proud of you.” Scorpius got as ruffled as a praised bird. “Are you hungry?”

It was the time Albus decided to hold Harry’s face and speak to him. “Da, ungy,” he said, very seriously.

“I gathered you’d be. Porridge?”

Albus eyed the food suspiciously while Teddy, who had been serving himself, poured a portion in two other plates, one for each baby. Harry gave Draco one and sat by the table with Albus on his lap. Scorpius picked up the spoon, which Draco had just held to cast an Aiming Charm on it, and took a spoonful of the warm food, replenishing his cheeks with it and swallowing it happily. Albus poked at his plate with the spoon and took a brave bite. His answer had not been as effusive as Scorpius, but it had been better than Teddy’s, who had just got up to pour half a cup of sugar and ooze honey on his plate. Harry told him to stop before he ended the bottle and was ready to scold him for that, but the boy merely put his head down and started devouring the porridge, which weakened Harry’s decision.

“Prongspawn, when ya introduce us?” he said with his mouth full, pointing Draco with his spoon.

“Perhaps when you stop acting like a barbarian and eat decently, so I don’t have to worry about Draco being splattered with the food coming out of your mouth,” he answered, shooting an eyebrow up. Teddy swallowed and lowered his head.

“Sorry.” He looked back at him. “I’ll behave.”

“You’d better.” He turned to Draco, who had been restraining a smile at the conversation. “Draco, this is Teddy Lupin. Teddy, this is Draco Malfoy.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said happily. “What happened to your eyes?”

“Got myself on the wrong side of a Chimaera, thank you for asking.” He laughed and held out a hand. “Would you mind me touching your face?”

“Why is that?” He frowned.

“Blind people see in a way that’s a little different from yours,” Draco said calmly. “We see faces by piecing together what we feel in our hands.”

“Oh. Wait then.” He closed his eyes and changed his appearance to something that had a remarkable resemblance to Tonks when she was young. He kept Lupin’s eyebrows and chin, though, and Harry wondered how long had he been working on that face so that it became so close to his parents. His hair was still turquoise blue. “Ok, we can go now.”

He held Draco’s hand and placed it on his face. Draco examined it with careful fingers and said the
exact same thing Harry had noticed. It was strange to think about how observing Draco had been in their school years, if he could remember enough of Lupin’s face. Tonks had been his cousin too, if Harry still remembered the family tree, so it wasn’t that surprising that he could remember her; there were similarities between them and only now that he was facing him and Teddy together he had thought of it. His heart churned a little. Teddy smiled and went back to his sugary porridge.

“Thank you,” he said brightly. “I’ve been practicing to keep myself more natural. I want to show it to Granny for her birthday. I think she’ll like it.”

Teddy missed Harry’s face when he thought of the boy’s parents and the lump that weighed in his throat because of that memory. He grit his teeth and cleared his throat to call Kreacher and ask him to keep an eye on Albus, so he could leave the kitchen. He excused himself for the bathroom and closed the door behind him as soon as he entered it. He held the sink’s white porcelain until the knots of his fingers were even-coloured with it, feeling the sting of the tears he was holding. He would never say it to Teddy, but seeing him trying hard to keep his face natural enough so his parents’ features resurfaced was terribly endearing and downright painful. He knew the boy missed having parents, he knew he wanted a family and Harry had vowed to be that family, to be a good, caring, loving family to Teddy, instead of leaving him to be raised away. He believed in Andromeda’s deep love for the boy, obviously, and he knew Teddy’s situation was not the same as his had been, but still he tried hard to make sure no resemblances showed.

A tentative knock on the door made him straighten up. He sniffed and dried his eyes before asking who was it.

“It’s me,” came the low voice of Draco. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, sure, I’m just leaving,” he said dismissively.

“Yes, sure, I’m just leaving,” he said dismissively.

“Potter, I may be blind but I’m not deaf. Let me in.”

He unlocked the door and saw Draco enter and close it behind him. Harry grit his teeth once again and sniffed helplessly. Those fits were becoming less and less frequent, but they still came and he still felt like the hopeless teenager that had left the warpath. Draco moved a step closer, very slow, and opened his arms as wide as the small bathroom allowed him too.

“Come on,” he murmured. “Let’s make our agreement a two-hands way.”

Harry let himself be hugged like a child and hated his guts when a sob escaped his throat. It was so bloody warm and comfortable inside those arms, so understanding. Draco didn’t say a word, to which he was damn grateful, and kept raking his long, soft fingers through Harry’s hair, which became rather unsettling after a couple of minutes. Harry sighed deep and felt the embrace tighten.

“I’m alright,” he murmured, his voice just a tiny bit shaken now. “It’s just--” He puffed out a breath to stabilise himself. “They would have loved him so much, you know? And I… Don’t get me wrong, I love my child and my friends but if I could go back--”

He gulped and couldn’t move on. He had felt that every once in a while, the insidious, creeping idea that he could have sacrificed himself more and kept those he loved afloat. Draco sighed and pressed his lips tight together before answering to that.

“We cannot change the past, Potter. Believe me, I’ve tried.” Harry frowned and raised his head, trying to pick something out of Draco’s expression, but it was blank and his eyes were still shut. “Wishing you could go back, fantasizing about it, it will do you no good. Be happy that you’re alive, Potter, for Merlin’s sake, be happy that you survived, that you made it, that you’re making those
around you happy instead of giving them another grave to mourn on.” Harry kept his mouth shut and felt his heart pound heavily when Draco held his face and touched their foreheads. “I know I should not be taken into much account, but I am glad you made it. I bet Weasel and Granger wouldn’t have traded you too. I can swear on my grandfather’s grave that Albus couldn’t have asked for a better father. Endear those you have and endear yourself too, Potter, because this is why you’re alive.”

“How strange to hear such advice coming from you,” he whispered, lowering his eyes.

Draco smiled a little. “I have envied people and hated them, and I’ve loathed myself and promised to die.” He shook his head gently, forehead still touching Harry’s. “Nevermore. I have a son and a family and I will atone every one of my sins, but I will not let myself be caught dead by them.”

“How--?”

“Someday,” he promised, putting a finger to Harry’s lips to prevent the question. “Now wash your face. Granger and Weasel are here to see you and they sounded unhappy about something.”

“Did they say what it was about?”

“No, but if their voices were of any indication, they were not happy to see me up.”

Harry left the bathroom with Draco on tow after washing his face and trying to tap his hair to a less upright position. Kreacher handed him a T-shirt along the way and he didn’t bother to change his clothes. It was fucking seven in the morning and he wouldn’t get properly dressed even if the Ministry of Magic himself was paying him a visit. Draco could walk a lot faster now that he had a hand placed on Harry’s shoulder, so they reached the waiting room in no time. Ron was sitting on the couch and Hermione was pacing in front of the fireplace. She had brushed the soot away from her robes - but that she was wearing robes was a distinct signal that said trouble. Ron saw them first.

“Hey, mate, ferret,” he shouted. His voice was strangely downward and Harry frowned, halting abruptly. He felt the delicate pressure of Draco’s left hand, which had been in front of him exactly to avoid collisions, against his back.

“Ron, Hermione. What happened? Why are you here so early?”

“Thought we should stop by and talk to you about, you know, the last findings.”

“Or lack thereof,” added Hermione, sulking.

Ron held her hand and admonished her not to feel that bad about things she couldn’t control. Harry wasn’t feeling well about that: he knew from the look in their faces that none of what they tried to make was going right. His chest grew heavy. All in all, Harry wanted to be able to tell Draco that all was well and he could feel safe again. He wanted to tell him his house was alright and he didn’t need to worry about being harassed in there, that he and Scorpius could go on living their lives, that Astoria was with her family and would re-join them soon. Not having any responses made that far more difficult, not to say temerarious: Harry wasn’t going to warrant Draco something he knew wasn’t true. Still, he decided to let his friends talk. Draco, probably given his pureblood education, found it quite unsettling to have people discussing such matters without proper arrangements, which was why he asked Kreacher for tea and biscuits, made everyone sit down and only then let them say anything.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” said Hermione when the elf poured her a cup of herbal tea.

“Mrs Hermione is giving Kreacher thanks for Kreacher’s duties. This is not being right.”
“Now, Kreacher, don’t be mean,” said Draco, offering his cup so the elf could do the same for him. “She’s being polite. This is a good trait. Don’t sulk because she likes to thank when people do their jobs alright, it’s not fitting of an elf of your age.”

“Master Draco is having reason. Kreacher is not meaning to be rude.”

Ron, who had just wolfed down a handful of biscuits, in a clear showing that he hadn’t eaten before going to Harry’s place, gulped half of his tea. Draco, sitting in the armchair on which arm Harry was perched, held his teacup a tad more strongly. Harry noticed it and soothed his involuntary cringing with a mild brush of his hand, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by Hermione. She slid on the couch, adjusting in the curve of Ron’s arm, currently draped over the back of the couch, and looked more relaxed already.

“I have tried to contact people this morning to have access to records of magical signatures, but they are unwilling to let us get any of it.”

“Rules have changed, apparently,” said Ron, rolling his eyes. “Dawlish was very stubborn to tell her she couldn’t look if it wasn’t related to a case.”

“Well, but we do have the Chimaera case,” tried Harry, hand still carelessly brushing Draco’s. “Can’t we relate them?”

“You can, since it’s your case,” explained Hermione. “You’d have to report to Shacklebolt, ask one of us to be your proxy and once he gives us clearance, we can try to go through the signature in the M.A.M.S. again.”

“I thought you had the keys to the Archives,” said Draco, sipping his tea.

“They made me give them back and revoked my access.” She shook her head. “If I didn’t trust the Aurors in there, I’d say someone doesn’t want us to find out about these signatures.”

Ron and Harry exchanged a look, knowing that despite the clean-up that had been done inside the Ministry after Voldemort had taken over, they still couldn’t warrant that every wizard left in there was incorruptible. It was human not to need much to do something that went a little astray from one’s primary loyalty, and Harry knew Ron had never quite forgiven Dawlish, who had been knowingly under a Confundus and quite possibly an Imperius. Harry regarded Dawlish as only slightly stupid when it came to thinking of the orders given to him, which could be one of the few reasons why Kingsley kept him around. He did need someone to follow orders obediently, without questioning every single one of them, as Ron and Harry often did. Hermione knew nothing of her husband’s problem with Dawlish, however, which was for the best. She was full of theories sometimes and he didn’t want her to lose sleep over something so incredibly small. If all that took for them to get to the archives was relate the signatures to the Chimaera case, so Harry would, and he told them that.

“If you can write one of the signatures is a dark one, Potter, maybe they’ll let them have access to the Azkaban records too,” added Draco.

Harry was about to answer when Teddy erupted from the kitchen, shrieking with glee to see Ron and Hermione. Both of them loved Teddy quite a lot and had been present in his life ever since he was a baby; Teddy had missed them too. Hermione put her teacup aside to pick the lanky boy up and he sat on her lap, behaved as he usually wasn’t.

“Teddy, where are Albus and Scorpius?” Harry asked seriously. The boy blushed crimson to the tip of his hair.
“I forgot them in their chairs,” he said in a minimal voice. Ron laughed out loud, but Harry crossed his arms and didn’t look the slightest bit amused. Hermione and Draco were just waiting to see the outcome. “I am sorry. Should I take them?”

“Mister Teddy is forgetting Mister Teddy’s little brothers in the kitchen and Kreacher is finding little babies tied to the chairs.” Kreacher entered the room with the babies on his arms. “Kreacher thinks Mister Teddy is being really irresponsible.”

Teddy’s ears were almost purple, which made Harry smile. Draco asked Kreacher to put the babies down and Hermione cast the wards to keep them where the grownups could see them. From then on, it was them asking Teddy how his vacations with his grandmother had been and, when Ron found out they had been to the Romanian dragon reserve Charlie worked for, he asked about his brother too. Knowing they were not going to go any further in the urgent matters, Harry forced himself to relax. Beside him, Draco noticed it.

“We have been stopped by bureaucracy,” he sighed, clinking his teacup to the saucer on his hand the most quietly Harry had ever seen someone do. “Maybe we were hastening things.”

“I want to wrap this all up to release you, Draco. It’d do me good not to have bureaucracy biting at me.”

“Why, do I occupy that much space in your life, Potter? One single day now that I’m healthy and you already want me out of here?”

Harry flushed. “That’s not it and you know it.”

Draco chuckled. “I told you you saved my life already. You can stop now. Let things follow their course.”

Harry gnarled at that, but didn’t move out when, after he had given Kreacher his cup and saucer, Draco leaned on to him. It was quite comfortable to be trusted like that by someone he had thought his enemy for so long, he had to admit that. It did little to render things ordinary, but if he could have comfortable, that was alright already.

“Pa.” Draco hummed to show he was listening. “Pa, up.”

Draco scooped Scorpius off the ground and sat him on his legs. “What do you want, my little scorpion?”

“Awin,” he muttered unhappily, snuggling himself up closer to Draco’s chest. Harry touched the blonde mop of hair and was stared at with big bluish eyes. Scorpius moaned childishly.

“Copi tummy awin,” said Albus from the floor, standing and staring very seriously at the baby on Draco’s lap. Harry nodded, showing his son he understood him and seeing him go find a place in uncle Ron’s legs for himself, before Harry turned back to Scorpius. The baby was trying to pry Draco’s shirt open and, for some reason, that felt too intimate. Harry looked away hastily.

“Sorry, my boy, I can’t do this now,” Draco murmured fondly at the child. Harry tried not to pay attention, but it was impossible. “It’s over, I don’t have it anymore.”

Scorpius whined low, bothered by the idea that he couldn’t have his main source of food anymore. Draco excused himself and went to the kitchen with the kid, to try and make him some sweetened digestive tea. Ron took a look at his wristwatch and jerked up, Albus on his arms.

“We’d better get going too, mate,” he said, giving Albus back to Harry. As Hermione urged him to
the floor, Teddy pouted. “My days off are all over and Hermione has to pick Rosie up. They barely slept tonight and I’d like them to have some rest.”

They hugged each other, Teddy spending a long time embracing Hermione’s legs. She messed up the boy hair - now back to turquoise - and stared at Harry.

“Scorpius may be finding the food a little too much after so long on breastmilk only. Tell Draco he can feed him again if he feels like it.” Harry knew his cheeks were warming. “Don’t judge him, Harry,” she advised sternly. “This is the best for Scorpius and it’s great that Malfoy knows enough not to feel ashamed of doing so.”

It took Harry some time, after Ron and Hermione left, to make Teddy comply to go play outside so he could go look after Scorpius. Albus wrapped his arms around Harry’s neck and refused to be put down as Harry went to the kitchen. In there, Draco was trying to give Scorpius a bottle, but the baby was wailing timidly and pushing it away. When he noticed he was not alone anymore, he let out a tired sigh.

“He’s sick,” Draco said, putting the bottle down.

“Hermione said you’re clean. You can go back to breastfeeding him when you feel like he needs it.”

“Oh, thank Merlin.” Draco didn’t even wait before picking his wand up and setting the Lactation Spell back. Harry turned away to give them some privacy. “Right, my little scorpion, it’s all right. It won’t hurt every time, my boy.” Harry could hear the quiet sucking and Draco’s cooing didn’t make him feel less like a stranger prying on them. “I don’t mind you staring, Potter,” he said suddenly. “You lived with Muggles for so long that you think this unnatural, I get it.”

“That’s not true,” Harry said, turning on his heels and being faced with Scorpius attached to one of the pale nipples he had had his hand on earlier that same morning. It was weird. Draco hadn’t developed breasts or anything; in fact, his chest looked as plain and hard as it did before. Harry’s mind could not wrap around that newly-discovered functionality of a male wizard body, so he decided he wouldn’t bother trying. “It’s strange. A little. I mean, Albus barely ever needs Ginny’s milk nowadays, so…”

“Children, when sick or feeling unease, find comfort in routine rituals. Scorpius had never eaten proper food before coming here. His daily routine changed completely; it’s obvious he would feel it someday.”

Harry was still uncomfortable. “Right.”

“I can explain the mechanics of it to you someday, Potter, if you’re interested. But it’s probably a good thing that you know that it’s considered nice and even expected of a pureblood man to share the toll of breastfeeding a baby for the first two years after the child’s birth.”

“I thought that was why they had mothers.”

Draco snorted. “Typical Muggleborn. Despite what the society may think, we don’t enslave women. We certainly do not treat them as milk cows we can use to feed our heirs. A heir belongs, in name and blood, to his father; that said, why should we take no part in the raising of our babies? It’s us who need them, it’s us who usually want them the most. Giving birth is a traumatic experience and it’s our job as men to make sure our wives and lovers don’t suffer after it. It includes, why not, being the one to wake up in the middle of the night to breastfeed.”

“It does sound logical when you put it this way.”
“Of course it is. One alone doesn’t make a baby; one alone shouldn’t have to raise it.”

A slightly awkward silence accompanied them until Scorpius was done with his sucking. Draco asked Kreacher for a cloth and dabbed the baby’s mouth with it, letting the elf make him belch. Malfoy began to clean his swollen, deep pink nipple and Harry noticed Albus staring at him very focused. The baby’s attention went back to Harry, and he tapped his father’s chest in the search of something Harry understood a little too quickly.

“Da, ungy.”

That was a lie, because he had just eaten, but Harry understood that his limited vocabulary did not contain a proper word to ask for milk. Albus hardly ever asked for stuff, except food, and Harry had to admit he didn’t remember him asking for Ginny to feed him.

Malfoy, of course, heard him.

“You father doesn’t know how to do it, Albus,” he said, and the baby’s attention snapped to him. Draco smirked. “Give him to me, Potter.”

“But I won’t--”

“I assure you there’s absolutely nothing wrong in the milk I’m producing. Your child is safe.” Draco put his arms out and Albus offered to join him, which was really unexpected of him. Surprised, Harry let him. He noticed that Draco made sure to put him to his other nipple and Albus was quick to mouth it while his father merely stared at that, gobsmacked. Kreacher went to him and offered him Scorpius, who was quiet and curled up against Harry’s chest almost immediately. “Breastfeeding is one of the ways babies have to feel loved and secure, Potter. It’s very idiotic of you to suppose your child would stare at a baby he shares his house with being fed and not want the same.”

Harry’s ears were burning. “So what? You’re gonna let them suck at you anytime they want now? You’ll feed your child and mine and I’m supposed to find it bloody alright?”

Draco all but laughed at him. “You, Potter, are an obnoxious moron. Scorpius’ stomach ache will be gone in few hours tops, he won’t need milk all the time. He didn’t ask for it once before today, as you may have noticed. If Albus doesn’t see him sucking, he won’t want it too, unless he gets sick.” He lowered his head to place a kiss to Albus’ hair and Harry felt the strangest mix of rage and tenderness strike him. “You are a very smart boy, Al, very smart indeed. Don’t pay attention to your father’s lack of knowledge.”

Harry was tempted to reply, but Albus looked so cute and happy there, and Scorpius had stopped whining and complaining about his tummy, so he bit back his comment to sit on another chair, rocking Scorpius slightly. Beside him, Draco smirked smugly. Bastard. Still he had to admit that living with Malfoy was soon becoming a true life lesson.
“Prongspawn?”

Harry, who had been plucking mint leaves from the garden, looked up to see Teddy in bathing pants, wet from head to toe. It was a warm early-July day and Kreacher had conjured up a small pool, where Teddy and the babies had been splashing each other with water in a hyper domestic scene that had Harry’s head forget about the situation that had lead to it for several hours. Lunch was to be served in the gardens, according to Kreacher, so they were enjoying the light and warmth. Harry had stripped himself of his shirt and was wearing hiking shorts.

“What is it, Teddy?”

“Why isn’t cousin with us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t fancy the sun.” Harry doubted his words the moment they slipped out of his mouth. “Are you suggesting I go get him?”

“Why not? It’s a nice day. He needs something nice.”

Harry closed the bag of leaves and brushed his hands clean on his shorts before entering the house. It took him some time to find Draco, who was sitting inside the study, on top of the desk, sipping a cup of tea. He didn’t turn to demonstrate he knew Harry was there, but it didn’t off-put him.

“Teddy wants you to go out there with him. He says the day’s nice and you need something of that kind.”

Draco snorted. “I think he won’t be thrilled to have my scars shown around.”

“I think he’s a child who wants his cousin to be a part of his life after so long without people he could relate that closely to. I think he won’t mind.”

“Potter, are you purposefully daft or is it just when I’m around you?”

“You never showed yourself in the sunlight to anyone, actually. I don’t remember you diving in the lake or anything, particularly after Voldemort’s rise.” He knew Draco would be scowling at him, had he the will to open his eyes, which he right now didn’t. “Put this saucer down.”

“I don’t think so.” Harry waved the saucer and teacup dismissively with his wand. Draco frowned.

“Just what the fuck you think you’re doing, Potter?”

“Freeing you from yourself.” He pocketed his wand and walked towards Draco, holding the hem of that all-too-familiar T-shirt. It occurred to him that he had worn that through most of his life and it was strange that Malfoy, who fancied new and shiny stuff, silk and velvet, would choose that one. His hands were stopped by Draco’s sturdy grip. “I have seen them already. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Not under sunlight. Not paying enough attention.” Draco wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. “Not with children around.”

Harry waited until Draco’s grip relaxed to pull the T-shirt away. Malfoy gave out a startled cry and shoved him away, but Harry’s stand was firm and he didn’t budge. He gripped the edges of the desk and stared at him so intensely that he knew, he just knew Draco would know it.
“You are going outside. You are going to play with your son and your little cousin and my son. You are going to be an active part of those children’s life at all times, like a parent has to.”

“Two of those children do not belong to me.”

“But they chose you. Albus has never asked to be with anyone but me, not before you came along.”

“Maybe your son has the same Saviour complex you suffer of.”

“Draco. Malfoy.” He grit his teeth but didn’t answer. “That’s better. Now be a nice guest and go play in the bloody sun with your child cousin.”

He didn’t wait for Harry to move before slipping from the desk. Harry stood up straighter but still his face was a mere inch from Draco when he lowered his to talk to him.

“You are a ridiculously moronic prat.”

Harry smirked. “That I may be. But I’m also your host and you’re too much of a pureblood to go against manners and tell me to fuck off.”

Harry let him slip carefully away from the study, and he couldn’t help but to hear him snapping those two words at him before disappearing beyond the door frame. Well. Maybe Draco was not that much of a pureblood anymore.

He did think of it later that day. Draco had become a sight of his own under the burning summer sun. He had played in the water like he belonged there, manipulating the liquid with ample swishes of his wand. It was different, he said when Harry asked him how he could have such nice grasp on the liquid. It wouldn’t occur to him for yet some time that water was probably the only thing he would have been able to manipulate while imprisoned. Right then, though, Harry was merely enjoying the way Draco would pick up Scorpius and help him paddle the water, sitting as if he wasn’t disable, able to guide himself by the touch of the kids around him. It was impressive, he thought happily as he was brewing mint tea that afternoon, that the children were able to compensate his lack of vision with chatter and laughter, which he rapidly discerned and identified. Teddy liked the company of his cousin so much that when Draco admitted defeat after a quick water-fight and lay down to regain his breath, Teddy flopped down beside him, their arms barely touching. The babies were curling against each other for a nap, which brought Harry close to them to make them comfortable under a set of small apple trees. Staring at Draco, he could see every one of the scars from the incarceration, but it was the slashed set in the middle of his chest that struck him harder. He knew he had been the one to put it there and it made him feel awful. He had never apologised for that; somehow, he still didn’t think himself ready to do so.

“They are feeling better, cousin?” said Teddy out of the blue.

“I am, thank you for your concern.” The boy smiled sheepishly.

“Prongspawn likes sun when he’s miserable. I know you’re not like him but I knew I could make you laugh out here.”

“It was very well-thought of you, Teddy,” he conceded. A brief pause convolved them. “May I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you call Harry ‘Prongspawn’?”
Teddy almost attempted a shrug. “My father.”

Draco’s eyebrows furrowed so close together that they almost became one. “I beg your pardon?”

“My father used to have a group of friends and they had those nicknames. It was one of the first things I heard about him. Prongspawn’s dad was in it and they called him Prongs.”

Draco didn’t need any more hints to understand the nickname. His next words, though, caught Harry unguarded. “What was your father called?”

“Moony.”

Draco chuckled. “Appropriate. I suppose he must have felt better to have the moon related to something he liked and cared about.”

Teddy’s eyes lit up and he sprang up, sitting at once with a smile bigger than himself. “Prongspawn said that too!”

Harry could have sworn that Draco’s head had flicked to his side for the briefest of moments. “Did he?”

“Dad was a werewolf,” Teddy confided him in a whisper. “Mom loved him anyway. I think he was less afraid of the moon by the time he died. Maybe they are in peace with each other, now, he and the moon.”

Harry gritted his teeth, afraid of what Draco would say. He knew the Slytherin had had an awful, if any, relationship with Lupin.

On the fire, the kettle whistled.

“I think your father must have a place beside the moon. There’s a constellation with his name, did you know that?” Teddy let out a stupefied “no”. “It’s a southern one and we don’t see it from here, but it’s there. Maybe he comes up and shines in another constellation to take a look at you. The stars do move, you know. They communicate. They’re as alive as we are.”

Teddy coiled up, slipping silently into hope. “You think so?”

“I know he does. If I had a son as special and beautiful as you, I’d look after him.”

Teddy flopped back down and Harry notices, through hazy eyes, that the boy was smiling a little. It was a deeply heartfelt smile and Harry felt the compelling need to kiss Draco. It left as suddenly as it came, though, and Harry turned his attention back to the tea, honestly if quite unconsciously thankful that the world had brought Draco to their lives.

Later that night, Harry was helping Draco upstairs, Albus on his arms, Scorpius on Draco’s and Teddy at their heels. Teddy would usually go upstairs to his room, but this time he asked Harry to help them tuck the babies in, which none of them had anything against. They put the children in the crib and Teddy brought a chair for Draco, who sat down, thanking him, and put a hand to the crib’s rail.

“Are you singing to them?” asked Harry, staring fondly at him. Draco nodded and soon the same song Harry had heard him humming filled the air. It was a beautiful song that spoke of the coming to the sky of several stars. Harry wondered why that was a Malfoy and not a Black’s song, but kept it within him for the time being. There was a particularly beautiful piece about a man named Orpheu, and by the time Draco finished the song, Harry realized he was smiling like a bloody goof. He shook
his head and hauled Teddy, who was dozing off on the carpet, up, holding the boy as he straddled him with both arms and legs. “Let’s go up, Teddy; let’s sleep.”

“Cousin,” he called sleepily, and Draco got up to kiss his hair. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Of course, Teddy.” He reached out tentatively and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Harry had far too little trouble to tuck Teddy in: he was sleeping by the time he reached his room. Even asleep, he managed to keep his hair coloured. Harry admired that child, his strength, his love of life. He could be on the wait for him asking Draco more and more stuff as they grew closer and more acquainted; it was just like him to do so. Smiling outwards almost as much as he was smiling inwards, Harry turned off the lights and left his room, scuttling downstairs to his own. He entered it to find a disrobed Draco squirming into a pair of black silk boxers in the lamplight. He saluted Harry absentmindedly and tied the laces of the fancy underpants. Kreacher must have fetched them, for Harry didn’t even remember owning them. He walked towards his chest of drawers and pulled a white cotton tee and the bottoms of a summer pyjama, full-intending on wearing them. His eyes slithered down Draco’s chest, though, the pinkish nipples perked up as a shiver ran down that gloriously marked skin. He sighed.

“Here.” Harry offered him the T-shirt, rolling his eyes at him. “Dress it.”

“I’m not cold.”

“You’re nipples say otherwise.”

Harry was not prepared to see him smirk.

“Sweet of yours to notice it.”

He punched Draco on the shoulder, trying to find himself another shirt as the other dressed his favourite white one. He couldn’t remember the last time he had lent someone that shirt. It was bloody likely he never had. As he sighed, pulling a red, bleach-stained, threadbare pyjama top on, Draco walked to the bed. Harry had a queen-sized one whose linens had been changed that same day if the whiteness and crispness of the sheets was anything to go by. The navy blue quilt was folded by the end of the bed, and Harry couldn’t keep from noticing there was only one.

“Left or right?”

“Right,” Harry said pronto. Draco slipped quite quietly onto bed, sprawling momentarily in the middle of the mattress. Harry rolled his eyes. “Why did you bother asking again?”

“I dare you to find the edges of a bed without neither staring not touching them.” He wriggled to the left side, put both his arms behind his head and seemed to wait. Harry slid to sit beside him but Malfoy stopped him. “Brush your teeth.”

“What?”

Draco sighed. “Your teeth. You didn’t brush them.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Just go brush your bloody teeth, Potter.”
“Why do you care? We’re not a sodding couple!”

He didn’t bother saying anything else, but his stance was enough. Growling, mumbling and complaining, Harry did as bidden, making sure to brush his teeth as thoroughly as he could, purely out of spite. He went back to find him in the precise same position, quiet and slightly sleepy. This time he, when Harry slid onto the mattress, trying hard not to open his mouth and puff him a minty breath, said nothing. Harry pulled the light quilt, opened it, tried to assess whether they’d both fit beneath it and most of all, not quite consciously, if they should. The last time they did it, they had, but they had not been alone and Draco had not been in his prime. He sighed, shrugged it off and covered them both. Draco sighed. Harry did nothing, waiting in a slightly uncomfortable silence to see whether they’d have to effectively talk about sharing a bed.

“Potter.”

He supposed they would.

“Listen, this is awkward and that’s ok; just roll over and sleep.”

Draco, unlikely Harry thought he would, flopped on his belly, adjusting his right arm underneath the pillow for good measure. His left hand snaked across the bed and Harry jumped when it touched his shoulder, made him yelp and turn in bed, overly conscious.

“Potter.” Harry hummed instead of speaking. “You do realize that the whole purpose of facing the prospect of sharing a bed with you is so I can keep my discomfort at bay, which means you’ll have to get over letting me touch you or else I can’t ground decently, don’t you?”

“I do?”

“I was very explicit. Now settle down and lend me a limb.”

“Can’t I just lay close to you?”

“Unless you are willing to hold me as you do it, I don’t think so.”

Harry tried to argue, which did nothing to change Draco’s mind, slightly more embarrassed than he should be. There were details in their arrangements that, in the urge to make Draco comfortable, he had overlooked. He sighed and adjusted on his side, face to the left, eyes running up and down Draco’s face, searching for something other than the blasé expectancy. There wasn’t much. Their feet touched beneath the sheets, making Harry pull away immediately. Draco snorted.

“Pretty prickly, aren’t we?”, he said, chasing Harry’s foot with his. Draco’s limb was colder than his but not freezing, which did nothing to ease his sensitive and very little sexed-up body, particularly when Draco’s knee pushed up and tried to lodge between his stiffly closed legs. Harry was sure that was too close for comfort and almost kicked him away. “Right, if you won’t cooperate, I’m leaving.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“If we really must go there, the stupid one is you.”

“Sod off.” Harry didn’t know whether to blush or laugh. Stuck in the middle, he proffered a shy hand and closed his eyes.

It was late afternoon the next day when Harry got in touch with Hermione, asking her if she could give him the name of the potion she had used with them. She was glad to tell him, but when he said what he had it intended for, she was quick to send him a piece of parchment with an incantation
scribbled on it. It was an Awareness Charm, she found it nice to explain, but didn’t go much further because something showed up to call her attention. They closed the call and Harry got up, clutching the parchment tight on his hand. He went to the garden, where Draco was sprawled underneath the apple trees, naked from the waist up, small beads of water gleaming under the sunset pouring through the greenhouse-like panels. Kreacher was kneeling beside him, taking splinters and thorns from his left shoulder as Draco bit absentmindedly into a perfect green apple. When Harry settled beside them, the elf eyed him meanly.

“Master Potter should have put wards around the rosebushes.”

“I did, Kreacher, but they’re age-limited. I didn’t think any grownup would be stupid enough to stumble upon them.”

Draco raised his apple. “Cheers.”

Harry laughed and opened the parchment to cast the spell. He would have laughed at the way Draco paused midway into a bite, hadn’t Scorpius plopped down on his lap and pointed at his father.

“Papa awing.”

“I’m fine, Scorpius,” Draco stated, Vanishing the apple’s core. “Don’t do what I did.”

“Copi!” Albus’ voice was impatient. “Pay! Deddy pool!”

Scorpius seemed to be torn between staying with his hurting father and going into the pool with everyone else. It was Draco who urged him to go have fun, wincing as Kreacher pulled one last thorn from his shoulder. The elf looked at the scarred chest, shook his head with enough force for his ears to flap and at last stared back at Harry. He was all but happy with that, Harry could tell, but there was nothing he could do. He had bloody forgotten about the roses.

“Kreacher is taking Dittany from upstairs for the injuries.” Harry nodded. “Master Harry should help remove the rest of the splinters.”

Harry wasn’t fond of the idea of Kreacher giving him orders or even, as was the case, suggestions, much due to his fear that the elf would set against him like he had done to Sirius. He was trying to have the best of relationships with Kreacher and he usually succeeded, but for when Draco was hurt or in need. He stared at Draco’s chest, to the splinters stuck scarcely there. That he hadn’t fallen on his face was definitely a good thing, he considered, as he raised a hand slowly to his chest to try and pick a big splinter from one of the decorative fences Draco’s fall had ruined. His hand was stopped midway to its destination by a firm, precise grip.

“What was this spell you set on me?”

“Awareness Charm. Courtesy of Hermione.” He blinked stupidly at the pale hand around his wrist. “I can see it works quite fine.”

“Nice thought, Mr Obvious.”

“At least now you won’t fall around in the gardens anymore.”

Draco growled, making Harry giggle. By the pool, Teddy was shouting at the babies, pretending to be a sea monster. They had been lucky to have so much sun all through the weekend, something the kids agreed vehemently with and didn’t show any signs of ignoring any time soon. They were certainly enjoying it all. Draco, after realising none of the kids paid his scars the slightest attention, had grown fond of the garden, Harry noticed. He could identify most of the plants by their scents,
which reminded Harry of a dog. Teddy had been talking to his cousin about everything in the garden and explaining all he knew. Incredibly, Draco seemed to enjoy the little brat.

Harry’s attention whipped back to Draco when he felt his hand be *caressed* by him. He kept quiet, mouth slightly agape, unaware of what should be his reaction. He felt a shivering feeling run up his arm and his fingers spasmed on Draco’s hand.

“This spell is a good one,” said Draco, appraisingly. “Tell Granger I thank her a lot.”

“Tell her yourself, moron. She should come over someday this week.” He shook Draco’s hand away. “Now let me take these splinters away or Kreacher will have me deep-fried.”

“Be nice,” he drawled with a mischievous smirk plastered across his face. “I believe you won’t want to mark me too much.”

Harry laughed at his boldness. “Are you sure? After all, I’m a Gryffindor and you are a Slytherin git…”

“Gryffindor or not, you never struck me as the sadistic type.”

Harry’s cheeks grew warm. He knew he wasn’t bloody imagining things. He cleared his throat.

“Not my lover, Malfoy.”

Draco seemed to be quite surprised. “But we share a bed and you’re not with anyone else…”

Harry stared blankly at him to notice his façade had broken into an open grin. He rolled his eyes and pulled a splinter as briskly as he could. Draco hissed and spat him a curse. Harry ignored it.

“You’re a fucking disgrace,” said he.

“Who’s safe, sound and accompanied.” Draco reached out and held Harry’s chin, still grinning madly. It was nice that he was recovering, but did he have to torment him do prove so? He realised he had paused what he was doing when Draco’s thumb ghosted along his lower lip. “Works for me, Potter.”

“The splinters won’t remove themselves.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

“Yes, you are, you arsehole. Let go of my chin.”

“I like it.” Harry’s eyes blinked quickly, confused. “I like the feeling of it under my fingertips. I like it even better now. And there’s this.” His thumb did that again on his lips. “There’s nothing on your body as soft as this.”

“Are you done with trying to sweet-talk me into stopping to pull the splinters away?”

“It depends. Is it working?”

Harry rolled his eyes again and shook his head, wrenching free of Draco’s grip. He pulled another splinter, making Draco moan. The sound was pretty new now that his voice was renewed and with its full force. He swallowed.

“Fucking teaser,” Harry murmured, sighing.
Draco laughed out loud.
Late Monday brought with it a slightly ill-tempered letter from Shacklebolt asking for information about the Chimaera case. Harry had once promised to keep him updated, that he remembered, but a coma, a blind guest and three children had taken more tolls on him than he considered they would. He winced at the over-polite letter, sighed a couple of times, then pulled a quill and parchment to answer it. Kingsley had asked if he had seen the beast, if he had gone through the wards and if he’d need a team. Harry’s answers would be all negative, which was a bad thing from the perspective of case solving. Shacklebolt was going to be pretty pissed with that and Harry knew it. It was, however, in the slowly increasing pile of stuff he had no blipping control over, meaning he wouldn’t give it -- or else would try not to give it -- much thought.

“Whatcha doing?”

Teddy belly-dived on the mattress, crumpling the incredibly well-done bed Draco had set that morning to stare at his godfather. Harry smiled fondly at him. Having Draco around had made him a little bit jealous, but it was nice to know his first -- if not biological -- child still found it alright to come talk to him. He’d be utterly done in case he lost Teddy’s trust or love somehow. The failure would be too much, to see that beautiful child turning his back on him as he unknowingly had done to Sirius.

“Writing to my boss.”

“He’s a pain.”

Harry rapidly stifled a burst of laughter. “Teddy!”

“What? My not saying it doesn’t change it.”

“Is this what your cousin had been teaching you?”

“We’re more around Astronomy.” He smiled. “But Scorpius did learn a new word.”

“I don’t wanna know. Scorp ain’t none of my business.” Teddy half-lifted an eyebrow. “Fine. Fine, I like that cloned little blond brat.” The boy chuckled as Harry tried to come up with a passable answer for Kingsley, one that also conveyed his need for access to the Ministry’s records. It was a little hard. “So Draco’s been teaching you Astronomy?”

It was a good conversational topic, Harry noticed, since Teddy resumed his bouncing. He started scribbling something akin to a nice answer with a mildly apologetic plot that counted with the idea of the Manor’s wards being set with signatures, which would allow him to ask Ron and Hermione to go look into the MAMS and the Azkaban records for him; on the bed, Teddy began gesticulating erratically.

“He was telling me about granny’s constellation. He said there’s a star there called Alpheratz, which was the name of one of the Blacks many centuries ago. He said it is a binary system, which means it’s actually two stars.”

“He did?”

Teddy nodded. “He said it is the brightest mercury-manganese star and it is really rare.” The boy scratched the top of his head. “I don’t know what this bit about manganese means but he said mercury is the same as quicksilver.”
“Like the unicorn on your wall?” He acquiesced seriously. “That’s a lot of information.”

“It is. He said he’ll teach me how to find it as soon as he can see.”

Harry found Teddy’s high hopes endearing, but it was Draco’s remarkable memory that struck him the hardest. How much of an enthusiast for stuff that man was? He could cook, which was, if not surprising, at least unexpected, and knew quite a lot about plants. He was good at brewing, according to himself, and now, apparently, knew enough of Astronomy to, even blind, be able to excite a boy who had spent his every single night staring through his ceiling into the sky. Every time Harry considered it, he found another piece of information to add to a pretty portrait of a very skilled man. He smiled quietly, flourished his signature as best as he could on the bottom of the parchment and asked Kreacher to post it for him. Ever since Hedwig, there had never been an owl in Harry’s life. It was an inconvenient, to have to fetch or borrow an owl every time he needed one, but he had never again been ready to have a pet after her. Understanding as they were, his friends had never commented that idiosyncrasy. Teddy was, of course, a whole other matter.

“Why can’t we have our own owl, Prongspawn?” he asked for what could be the hundredth time.

Harry forced a smile.

“Because you should own the next owl in this household and I need you to be older before I can give you one.”

“It’s not very practical.”

“No, it’s not, but it’s all we have for today.”

Teddy was pushy, but that subject had been rehashed so many times before that he found it easier -- and overall best -- to let it go. He flopped quietly in bed.

“Why don’t you paint your ceiling, Prongspawn?”

“I barely spend any time in here at all, Teddy. Why should I bother?”

He shrugged. “It would look good, I guess. You know, for later, when you finally get your vacations or whatever.”

“I’ll think carefully of it,” he promised, getting up and stretching. “Where are your little brothers?”

“Playing with Kreacher.” He cringed and Harry chuckled. “We should probably rescue them.”

They found the babies wobbling in a very haphazard catch that was being supervised by the most ill-humoured house-elf in the whole wide universe. Draco, he noticed pronto, was not with them. Unwilling to ask of his whereabouts, Harry snatched Albus, who was running like crazy, looping around with him for a while. The baby smiled gleefully, happier than Harry had ever remembered him to be. By his shins, Scorpius was asking to be picked up, to which Harry happily obliged. Kreacher urged Teddy to keep an eye on the children so he could get some food ready for them. The boy ayed him in the best Scottish accent he could possibly make – Merlin only knew where he had gotten it from -- and sat down with what looked like a box of very fine pens to scribble something in a notebook Harry was sure he did not purchase for him.

“What is this, Teddy?”

“A Black book.” Harry blinked idiotically. “It’s sort of a Diary, only diaries are not this nice. You’re supposed to write down stuff you like and your thoughts on them. Cousin said everyone with Black blood can be given one by one of the closest descendants. Look, I have my name on it and all.”
Harry tried not to remember how awful his last altercation with a diary had been. “Draco gave it to you?” Teddy nodded. “How nice of him.”

“You don’t seem to like it,” said the boy, frowning.

“Diaries don’t much care about me.” He smiled. “Can I know what are the things you’ll be writing about?”

“Mom and dad, I guess, and granny and my little brothers too. You. Animal care. Stars. Cousin summoned his to show it to me and mine will be very much like it. We like most of the same stuff.”

Harry wanted to find out how the hell had Malfoy managed to summon something from outside his wards in the house (he was betting on it having something to do with the fact that the book was obviously some kind of heirloom-like, blood-tied thing), but Scorpius, who had been quiet until then, decided he would demand attention that instant and stuffed his hand in Harry’s mouth when he opened it to reply. His chubby limb tasted faintly of berries and Harry wondered where he had gotten it from. He pulled the small hand away, smiling at him.

“You cannot do this to people, Scorp.”

“Ungy, pa.”

“I am sure your father would come downstairs if he was hungry.”

He had the strange feeling of being scowled at, despite his inability to pinpoint where it came from. Disregarding it as unimportant, he carried on his conversation with Teddy for precise forty-two seconds before Albus called him to play with them. He put them down to get started on catch, which was the preferred game that day -- as it usually was -- leaving Teddy to write on his own. He was not supposed to move too much while playing, so to prevent ending the game too quickly. He was always caught and repeatedly shoved by the kids, who’d barely stop before catching anyone. He sat down eventually, panting from laughing and shouting, turning to talk to Draco about the kids and still not finding him there. It was weird that he hadn’t come down yet. He took hold of Teddy’s attention to ask where his cousin was.

“He’s upstairs; probably still in my bedroom.” He pursed his lips. “I broke my telescope again. He wanted to fix it but I guess he couldn’t make it, or he’d have already returned, right?”

“I suppose.” He leaned back for a moment. “I’ll go get him and fix your telescope.”

Teddy nodded. “Okay. I’ll keep the babies.”

Harry missed the way Teddy beamed at his back, somewhat mischievously, as he climbed the stairs to the third floor. He entered the room and was surprised by the moonlight pouring from the skylight. Teddy’s room was absurdly natural: he had plants in large pots, trees whose branches went up to touch the glass above, a magical fountain where tiny, quiet baby fairies played. The walls were decorated with panels of magical wildlife that ran and chased each other in the appropriate times of the day. On the wider wall, he had requested a clearing and a Quidditch pitch in the distance. The painted sky was bewitched to match the sky outside on the little part of the ceiling that didn’t show the actual one. Harry had tried to give the boy everything he wanted to and it wasn’t even that much, he had to agree. He was so used to that place, to the quiet chirping of the nestling birds on the walls and the rumour of the fountains that he didn’t mind the dusk: it was a natural thing and he could handle that amount of darkness alright.

He missed the person sitting on the floor beside Teddy’s bed until he tripped on their feet. Frowning,
he saw the milky-white skin of Draco’s torso. Harry’s lips pursed and he muttered an apology, trying
his best not to bother with the absolute helplessness the sitting man was emanating. He wasn’t
granted an answer, so he sat on the bed, conjured a focus of light and began repairing the
unassembled telescope. He had done it so many times now that he could probably repair it
blindfolded, but it was good to see what he was doing. The sharp clinking of metal and glass, the
quiet shuffling of the plants and the late whistling of a lost bird were the only sounds for several
minutes. Harry was uneasy and deeply conscious of the awkwardness of that silence: they had barely
seen each other for the entire afternoon, as Harry had taken the day to handle the Chimaera – to
barely any more success -- case while Draco played with the kids, and it was strange that the first
thing between them would be silence. Harry wanted to talk, but Draco seemed so absorbed in
himself that he couldn’t muster up his will to.

“Teddy showed me his room. He’s very good with descriptions,” said the quiet, familiar voice. Harry
felt the frosting apprehension in his heart melt. Oh, good. “Not even Father could give me a bedroom
this refined, and he tried.”

Harry smiled, winding a piece of the telescope up with a tiny wand movement.

“Teddy started bringing plants and every piece of fruit, or hatchling, or bug inside. It used to drive
Kreacher mad.” His smile widened at the memory. “I thought that giving him a room like this would
make him less adventurous.”

“Did it work?” The question came out strangely bright. Harry’s stomach fluttered.

“He’s no longer trying to grow oaks and cedars indoors and it’s been over six months since he last
brought a snake to sleep in his room, so yes.” Harry chuckled. “Although he does have a couple of
Bowtruckles hidden here somewhere. It was a gift from Luna and I think they got along just fine
with the environment.”

A brief silence followed.

“He looks like a very happy child,” Draco stated.

“I assume he is, despite everything.” Harry smiled faintly. “He surely remembers his parents, and he
loves them very dearly, but most of the time he forgets to mourn them. I think this is what they
wanted when they asked me to be his godfather, to make sure Teddy would grow up without
needing to cling on his parents to make through. I think they just wanted him to be happy and so I’m
trying.”

“I was right to ask you to look after my son in case I didn’t make it.”

That statement caught Harry by surprise. Draco said that with no remarks of pain or hardship, but
still it made Harry gulp. He had wondered about it soon after the fact but not much, although he did
admit to himself that the fact that Draco didn’t even try to ask him to contact his family was
doconcerting to say the least. He had taken Draco’s request as a mere gesture of trust, of goodwill
towards a host, but Draco had been fidgety about his family too when he spoke of his mother’s
possible will to meet Teddy, and even when he first bathed with Harry in the room, he didn’t sound
all too loving of the rest of the Malfoys. Harry stopped meddling with the telescope, finishing it with
a quiet *Reparo*. He slid from the bed, got up, stared at Draco and let go of his reservations towards
poking him about his past.

“Malfoy, why didn’t you ask me to take your son to your parents?”

The question came out a little muffled and impressively soft, but the tension in Draco’s arms around
his own knees had nothing of those qualities. He sighed and released some of that tension very pointedly. Harry took the sight in with some concern. Draco let his head back down against the frame of Teddy’s bed with such force that Harry had to consciously remind himself that he was no longer injured and could therefore do to his body what he thought fit. Harry didn’t move.

“I haven’t spoken to my parents in six years now.”

Harry blinked dumbly. “What?”

“Do you remember that night in the Astronomy tower?”

Harry’s heart weighed. “How couldn’t I?”

“The Dark Lord remembered it too. One day, not long before we entered Hogwarts, he came to me and asked if I was loyal to him. I said I was, and I was, Potter, you should never forget I was loyal to him. I would have killed you, had I the chance to, back then, because this is what pledging loyalty to him means. It means obedience.” Harry gulped. It was harder to think of that now that he saw more of what Draco was. Deep down inside, he still doubted it. He knew he shouldn’t. He knew he couldn’t have trusted Draco fully back then, but hell could bite him if he was caring. “He asked me what I could endure for him, and I said anything, for that’s what you’re supposed to say when he asks you something. He brought Father inside and asked him to tie me up. Mother followed. He said he needed me loyal as a puppy because he wanted me for bigger purposes, because I was to be of invaluable use to him should the need arise. He said he couldn’t have me divide my loyalty between him and my family.”

“Oh, God. He didn’t ask them to… to--”

“I was wandless. He even gave Father his wand back for that.” Draco snorted and smirked. His eyes filled with tears and Harry knew he was going to hate that story. “They tortured me for three days.” Harry felt his breath stop inside him and he had to lean on the nearest bookshelf so he stood upright. “A Cruciatatus Curse does very little when your body’s too tired to respond, so eventually they found my mind. I shut them out as much as I could, but there’s barely any shielding from His Lordship himself when you’re this close to let go of everything that holds you in one piece.” He raked a hand through his hair. “He saved me. He let me go saying I was a fine mind, saying he’d need me after the final battle, saying he needed to make sure I was loyal because I should survive. He said I was going to become so important that I’d have a place by his side at all times and my own personal guard.”

Harry had to choke back his disgust. The way Draco spoke, it looked like Voldemort had been about to take him as his consort. He thought he was going to be sick if he didn’t say anything. The mere thought of Malfoy being touched by Voldemort like Harry had been touching him made his stomach turn. He sat beside Malfoy.

“Draco… I am so sorry.”

“Why? It wasn’t your doing.” He was still smiling that broken, heartfelt smile. Oh, God. “I remember Father apologising every few minutes. Mother spoke to me for the first time after that to make sure I was alive when the battle ended. She never said she was sorry and I know she wasn’t. I know she doused the curse to shatter me and would have succeeded, had His Lordship not intervened. I forgave her, I swear I did, but I cannot forget it. I cannot forget the fact that she wasn’t under any Imperius, or being threatened. I know for a fact the Dark Lord never said anything about breaking me. She just did it. It just happened. It did what it was supposed to, it tore me from her and made me never want to fail Him again, but I did, didn’t I?”

It was too much. Harry took his hands in his. “Don’t do this. You did what you wanted to, what you
felt fit. You were stronger than he was. You still are.”

Harry held his hands tighter, brushing them for comfort and warmth. He had seen torture and been tortured himself, but he never achieved that degree of detachment. Hermione used to mask her utter displeasure with faces and voices, while he went straight to the point. Draco wasn’t anything like neither of them. It was not a matter of ignoring the discomfort as it was of not feeling it altogether. He couldn’t envision how deep the damage had to have been to leave such terrifying imprint but he knew the man beside him had been granted it. He wore the signs of being on the evil and losing side, like his skin. He had accepted being called a Death Eater and didn’t waver when suspicion crossed Harry’s voice. Maybe it was bravery. Maybe being tortured by his own kin, incarcerated for the sake of possibility and revenge, maybe that was what made him sure he could go on.

It wasn’t shocking that Draco chose to lean against him, to be held by him, although Harry had feared he wouldn’t because of the intimate aspect of the conversation. Despite that, Harry pulled him close, nesting Draco between his legs and embracing him. He was getting used to have someone who didn’t have to lean on him, even when broken, but chose to do it anyway. Draco was not clingy and he obviously didn’t make it to stir the hero inside Harry, although he often did so. He merely was, and what he was was more than enough. It did come with a churning on the base of Harry’s stomach and a fear of being shut out, though, the creeping idea and later action of kissing Draco’s soft, thin, uncut, miraculously untangled hair. He stilled after doing so, blaming it on that not that misplaced tenderness and empathy and ready to say so, but Draco’s weight against his chest was still there, still warm. Draco clutched his legs closer and it was with momentary surprise that Harry realised he could embrace him completely in that position, even with the height difference. It was so warm, so quiet, so comfortable around him. Harry knew they were bonding after something awful; he knew it and he still couldn’t bring himself to care. He was gravitating around Draco ever since he came and he knew, consciously, that it wasn’t supposed to happen, but that man was so goddamn strong and so incredibly kind now that he didn’t want to let go.

Draco suddenly chuckled. “If we’re going hold on to each other every time we tell a sad story, I’m afraid we’ll never let go.”

“I still don’t mind it, Draco.”

“Do you ever think of the reasons why you don’t?” he murmured quietly. It was getting really dark in the room and even the birds had stopped chirping, getting ready to sleep. There were no large mammals painted on Teddy’s room because their roar was unsettling to the boy. Harry had never welcomed that fact as he did then. “Do you ever consider it?”

“I was doing it again just now.”

Draco turned to him. Harry felt his face inching along his cheek and shuddered a little. “Have you come up with anything resembling an answer?”

“Not really. All I know is how fascinating you are and how much I like to be with you.”

Draco shook his head. “I think I mentioned you should be careful not to fall for me. Or something akin to it.”

Harry smiled, teasing him. “I could, you know? It’s not like we’re actively trying not to. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Draco scoffed and didn’t bother to grace it with an answer. He patted Harry’s thigh and exhaled before squirming from his embrace and crawling back to sit beside him. He turned to Harry -- it was
easier now that the Awareness Charm was in place, Harry presumed -- and his face was quite serious.

“What about you?”

“I what?”

“You once said you came from a less than exemplary Muggle household. What did they do to you?”

Harry frowned and hesitated like he always did when he thought about the Dursleys. He had learned to live with his everlasting fear of utter darkness and confinement and the paranoid need to have his valuable goods secure at all times, but it was a sore subject. As a child, he had thought that was simply what people did to those who didn’t truly belong to their families: locked them away and hoped for the best. It hadn’t been until after the Weasleys, Sirius and Hermione entered his life that he realized he had been a victim of child abuse. He had always deemed his chores necessary things that needed to be done and always recognized the Dursleys on their decency for taking him in, although he couldn’t stop himself from loathing the cupboard. It had grown a little better with time but looking back was painful. He didn’t much want to discuss that, but Malfoy had given him several insights about himself; it was only fair he’d do the same.

“They used to lock me up. I did a lot of accidental magic back then because my cousin would pick on me and every time I did it they’d underfeed me and keep me confined to my room.” Harry raised his knees and put his chin to them. Talking about it made him feel helpless. “Except my bedroom was a cupboard. When I was eleven and finally got a room out of their fear of my being a wizard, I was very little but already had to curl up like a ball if I wanted to sleep. Not that I did it a lot. Sleep, I mean. I only had a couple of hours to do my homework between cleaning and cooking, so I used my sleep hours to go through Math and Science. The subjects in Muggle school were not hard, but I needed to study.” Harry gulped. “I’ve always been nervous that if I failed school or if they had to be called to a PTA meeting because of my marks, I’d be starved to death. I’ve always believed that if they had to trouble themselves over me in any way, that would be the end of me.”

“Salazar almighty, Potter,” came the shocked voice of Draco. Harry shrugged.

“It was never actual fear, back then, I guess. It’s not like I dreaded the day I’d have a red mark or break a bloody salad plate when washing up, it’s just that I was so certain it couldn’t happen that I never let it, you know what I mean? I was an obedient child, I suppose. They were not fond of physical punishments, which I should probably count as something good, and I learned how to unlock my cupboard when I was six, so I used to steal food when they’d keep me grounded for too long. I didn’t think of it as something wrong back then; it was just something that happened. You know, some people had dogs who couldn’t enter the house and some others lived in cardboard boxes and others cleaned people’s houses to pay for a roof; I had a cupboard and chores and fairly little sleep and, you know, that was okay because at least I had a roof and I could study and I even had food and in the end I was certain I would be someone and be free and everything if I just tried hard enough.”

Malfoy had the presence of mind to breathe a couple of times to ease himself down before commenting. “You never struck me as a victim of child abuse.”

Harry chuckled bitterly. “We’re not always what we seem, are we?”

Malfoy didn’t know how to answer that. It was a little off-putting to have him at a loss for words. Draco was not one to let stuff go uncommented and he had just done it twice in a very short time span. It was a little unsettling when this time it was him who wrapped his arms around Harry. It was a timid gesture; not unpleasant, no, but unsettling. It was barely conscious a decision when he leaned
onto Draco, his head resting on his shoulder. He smiled at how comfortable it was and realised he had been applying that adjective to his interactions with Draco perhaps a little too much lately.

They were still half-clutching each other when Teddy almost blew the door to his room, calling Harry at the top of his lungs.

“Oy, Prongspawn!” He jumped in bed and bounced a couple of times before taking sight of the grownups sitting side by side on the floor. “What’s going on?”

“We’re talking, Teddy. What did you want?”

“Kreacher said dinner’s ready and we should go down.”

“Sure.” They broke apart and Harry – quite unnecessarily -- hoisted Draco up. “What are we having?”

“No clue. But we do have treacle tart for dessert.”

“I love that elf,” was Harry’s sighed, satisfied response, and they laughed as they went downstairs.

Later that night, as Harry was helping Draco button up a pyjama shirt under several protests from the blond man -- the Awareness Charm did little to help with finding the buttons’ cases, despite Malfoy’s unwillingness towards admitting it -- he decided to ask the question that had him bothering the entire day. He smoothed the fine fabric and brushed the thin hairs that got caught on the inside of the velvety collar out, satisfied with how soft they felt against his hands. Draco’s hair was quite like Scorpius’ and it was very hard not to rake his hand through it only because of how silky it felt. He felt the beginning of a tension settle between them and asked before it fully did.

“Why didn’t you come downstairs with Teddy?” Draco’s head tilted questioningly to the side.

“Earlier today, when he left with that fancy notebook of his to come check on me and so on so forth, why didn’t you come too? Why did you stay alone in his bedroom? I was worried about you.”

“Good to know someone worries about me,” he answered, managing to be at the same time fond and dry. Harry had to find out how the fuck he did that.

“Malfoy, I’m serious. Should I be worried?” He shook his head nonchalantly. “But what was it?”

“The sky.” Harry didn’t get it. “The sky, Potter, that bloody big blanket of blipping blue with shiny silver stars sprinkled on it.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Your thickness never ceases to amaze me.” He blinked his eyes open. The grey in them was pale and steely. “I miss the sky, Potter. These sodding eyes don’t make me able to see it and I am too much in love with my Black heritage not to miss it.”

“Is this why you were teaching Teddy about Astronomy?”

“He’s a curious kid. It’s a pleasure to talk to him about anything. He’s smart, and attentive, and he has a telescope. How come you gave a child a telescope and never spoke to him about the sky?”

“I’m not good in Astronomy.”

“Then what are you good at?” Harry scoffed, but didn’t answer. “I can remember most of it all by heart, but it’s not the same. You probably don’t understand it, you with your Gryffindor bravery and
your need to save the bloody world, maybe you just don’t realise there are other things too. There’s more than those who breathe and bleed to keep us company.”

And that he was deprived of. The phrase didn’t come but it also didn’t have to. Harry scanned his face for something to match the depth and honesty of his words; he found nothing.

“You know, I breathe and bleed and I know I’m not a blue blanket with stars or anything but I am glad to keep you company.”

“You’re not nearly as reassuring as the sky, Potter.”

“Why not? Because you don’t know me enough?” Harry held his face and smiled at him. “You have enough time to know me now.”

“You’re not as interesting either. I don’t know your anatomy like I know the sky’s, Potter. Be reasonable, you can’t put skies and people on the same level.”

“And yet you’re named after the constellation of the snake that guarded the most beautiful garden in the Greek mythology.”

“I thought you didn’t know Astronomy.”

“I said I’m not good at it. That’s different.”

Draco scoffed, held Harry’s hands and let their fingers intertwine. “We should sleep. And if you want to be so reassuring as to try to compete with the sky, Potter, you should try offering me more than just a calloused hand to hold on to while I sleep.”

Harry hit him on the shoulder and they argued about Draco’s teasing and Harry’s prickliness for several minutes, picking at each other like sodding teenagers, laughing like long-time friends. When they finally slept, Draco’s knee had rested between Harry’s legs and their hips were touching ever so slightly. He dreamt of stars and maps and reassurance, and the blossoming idea of giving back to Draco something he related so hard to.
“The waffles are over,” pouted Teddy, sometime into the breakfast. He stared from one grownup to the other, rolling his almond-shaped magenta eyes at their bloody inability to pay him any attention. The babies were a lost cause: they had been splashing syrup all over the place for the past five minutes, much to the men’s absolute lack of reaction. Teddy was finding it quite strange that his godfather would stare at his cousin, blush and avert his eyes, even though Draco was very blind, thank you very much. He growled as he slipped from the chair to grab some more waffle mix. Adults were way too complicated, if he was to be consulted. They never spoke what they felt like speaking, hardly ever did what they wanted to do and still they believed that children like Teddy himself would want to grow up and become like them.

So they wished.

He poured the mix on the maker and stole his godfather’s wand, currently on the table, to spell it on. It was nice to have more people around, he thought. It wasn’t many people, like in the Burrow, where babies and children more or less his age not only coexisted but fought for attention at literally all times, rendering hearing impossible and talking almost useless. Teddy liked noise and chatter as much as the child next door, but he didn’t like to have to be louder to be heard. He could turn his hair magenta, for God’s sake. He was the life of the party and the responsible one, which meant diverting the kids and taking care of them. He liked it, but when you have half a dozen babies and no parental supervision whatsoever, it could become tiring. With Scorpius there, he had earned another little brother to take care of, but it also meant another child to love him, not to mention Scorp came with a bonus: Cousin. Cousin was awesome. So, yeah, perhaps he couldn’t see, but he knew so much. He could recite the stars in every constellation the Blacks had ever named anyone after, including Bellatrix’s Orion. When Teddy asked him about Lupus, he had said he’d need to do some research, but he said he’d find out and tell him later. He was kind of hoping later would be today, but his godfather was acting like crazy and, really, it did very little to raise Teddy’s hopes that he’d have any decent time with his cousin anytime soon.

He also wanted to ask Cousin about the scars, but Prongspawn would have a fit if he ever did it in front of him, so he just didn’t ask anything at all. He knew the grownups would hide things from him in order to protect him, and he was fine with that, most of the time. When people were being hurt, hm, not that much. He hated that they’d think he couldn’t see it, but deep down inside, he knew they must have reasons. He didn’t like them and didn’t have to agree with them, but he had to trust his cousin and godfather knew what they were doing. It was a major exercise of faith, particularly because it came from a couple of people who denied themselves so much. He heard the soft blip of the waffles being ready, pulled them from the odd pan and doused them both brilliantly and profusely in syrup, a splash of each of the ones currently on the table. He gave Scorpius a bite, but didn’t even bother to do the same to Al - the boy had the weakest of all sweet teeth he’d ever seen, and that was to assume he had any, which was in itself a statement Teddy couldn’t free and simply make.

He was trying to say whether his godfather’s blushing was because of heat or embarrassment - the
latter was this close to winning - when Kreacher entered the room, a barn owl flapping lazily after him. It was a for-your-eyes-only letter that was, as was becoming recurring, addressed to Harry. Teddy eyed his godfather and the sudden silence on the table. When Harry finally dropped the neatly written parchment, the mood seemed to have changed on the table.

“Finally something good.” Harry sighed with relief and smiled at Draco. That Awareness Charm did wonders to his perception, and he smiled back.

“What is it?”

“Hermione’s getting access to MAMS again. She’ll run the signatures through it, while Ron’s finding the files on the Azkaban prisoners. I’ll have to stop by to grab the War related documents, though, because only the heads of the cases can have it.”

“The head sof the cases?” Draco’s left eyebrow quirked up.

“Fine, it’s because it’s me. Arse.”

“Kids on the table.” Teddy sniggered at that, stuffing his waffle inside his mouth. Grownups. “You know, since your memory is awful to say the least, I think I should remind you you’re supposed to go find a Chimaera inside my house someday.”

“Kids on the table!” That was too much; Teddy laughed out loud, startling them all. “Teddy, don’t scare your brothers.”

“Sorry, Prongspawn, but you two are so weird today.” He shrugged. “You can speak about your work around me, I won’t tell anyone.”

Harry shook his head. “Malfoy, do you mind if we discuss it later?” Draco’s nodding was so small it was barely noticeable. “Now, Teddy, why did you take my wand?”

The boy cringed and stuffed more waffle in his mouth.

“Ugh, you grownups are a mess.”

They laughed at that and the rest of the breakfast went by very lightly. When they were done, Teddy went upstairs to fetch a book to take to the gardens - the day was not at its best shape now but it was beautiful nevertheless - and Harry checked the babies diapers before setting them loose on the gardens too. Draco was alright with going enjoy another kind of sunny day — this time fully-clothed in a light grey tee and surprisingly well-fitted jeans — but he held Harry’s wrist by the entrance, before they settled inside the garden.

“I think we’ve postponed it enough.”

Harry stopped and looked up to see Draco bending over him, his mouth very close to his ear. He gulped. “What are you talking about?”

“You have to get inside my mind if you want to enter the Manor. I know you don’t want to and I’m not exactly excited about it either, but we should do it and it should be now.”

“The kids are here.”

“I’m not inviting you to have sex with me, Potter. They don’t even have to know.”

“But why?”
“Because,” he sighed impatiently, “it’s not going to be easy. I’m not a criminal of the sorts you’re used to. My mind will fight back even if I don’t ask it to. If we don’t try to accustom it to yours now, later will probably be too late.” Draco let go of Harry’s wrist, brushing the skin there slightly, almost tenderly. “This Awareness Charm will probably help.” His voice was just above a whisper now. “I can feel your entire body as if I could see it, and this feeling is really grounding. It’s an advantage, and we should use it.”

Harry’s skin was tingling where Draco’s fingers had just been, and he cleared his throat embarrassedly.

“Do you need tea to loosen you up?”

Draco smirked. “No, but I know you do, so as you please.”

If Harry was put off by it, he didn’t show it. He slipped into the gardens, going straight to the mini-stove to brew some strange, if fresh, sweet smelling mix of leaves. Teddy was sprawled on the floor, showing pictures of dragons and fire-breathing creatures from his pop-up that happened to produce actual non-burning fire. Beside him, the babies touched the fake reptiles and laughed delightedly. Scorpius was dangerously close to the book, blinking erratically and being delicately brushed aside by a careful Teddy. When Harry and Draco sat by the table, the children didn’t even waver. The tea got ready and Harry poured Draco a cup despite him not asking for it, their fingertips brushing, except this time a strange awkwardness rose from the touch. It hadn’t yet happened and Harry was not happy to notice it was happening then. He sipped his cup unhappily.

“Are we starting anytime soon?”

Harry raised his eyes shyly. Draco smirked.

“Scared, Potter?”

An honest grin spread along Harry’s face. “You wish.”

They put the cups down and Draco left his hand atop of the table. Harry knew he’d have to take it to be able to enter his mind, but it was too awkward. It hadn’t been difficult to touch other people while reading their minds, even when they were murderers, people covered in blood and other people’s suffering; Draco, on the other hand, had the excruciatingly painful addition of being a victim and moreover, tightly related to Harry. It was not something he could deny: if something happened to the man, he’d cry his eyes out as much as he would if it happened to any of the Weasleys. He didn’t know it was going to be worse once he was inside Draco’s mind. He had entered it once, but the blond man had been under Veritaserum and not being tortured for what could have been months; he wouldn’t give him Veritaserum knowing there were traumas lurking inside Draco’s mind. It was going to be traditional, unassisted Legilimency. He grabbed Draco’s hand and felt the spark of a physical connection settle between them. He had entered the contact already searching for Draco’s mind and maybe that was why the other frowned. Harry eased his eagerness and took a deep breath, prodding slowly towards Draco, who had opened his eyes and seemed, by the restlessness in them, to know what was going to happen. They locked eyes — once again, Harry thanked Hermione for the Awareness Charm — and the grip on both hands tightened. Harry prodded further, feeling the first beads of sweat erupting on his forehead. There was a thick black wall surrounding Malfoy’s mind in the most obnoxious way. There were no lights, no way to find anything whatsoever. Harry patted the wall in search of anything that resembled a notch or a crack, but the cold stone was glassy and smooth under his fingertips. Not bad for a first barrier, he thought, stretching his fingers and delimitating a reasonably big square with swift movements. It was imagination; he could overpower it if he defied it enough. He pushed the stone and listened to it clashing against something before splashing somewhere further from the wall. Great, there was water too. Harry sighed, blinked and
tried to squeeze his body through the square improvised entrance.

Next thing he knew he was sprawled on his back with Draco’s face right above his.


“Natural Occlumens. I literally kicked you out of my mind.”

“Shit.” He sat down, his head leaving Draco’s thighs. “Pretty nasty, that first wall of yours, huh?”

“That was my sixth wall, Potter. I disabled the others as we got prepared for it. You did manage to open a hole through it, though; these are good news.” His smile widened. “Let’s try again.”

Harry was nauseated and swayed like a windstruck twig, but Draco was a hundred percent certain he wanted to try again, so they did it.

Harry failed the next three times and the one following a somewhat stern lunch that had Teddy complaining about his godfather’s lack of empathy regarding the children. His head throbbed with the effort and he was positive he’d have to drink another pain-relieving potion if he sustained any hope of being able to sleep later. Draco had seemed un-swayed at first but he was a greenish oatmeal grey when he decided to take a shower, and Harry, despite his own brutally incapacitating pain, had to find enough strength to down a garlic-and-coffee tasting substance in order to go check on him when an hour passed and he had not yet done any movements as to go back to the room with him. He did, it was his defence, attempt to knock, but it was not answered whatsoever, which led to a trembling Alohomora. Draco was standing in the shower, resting his head on the tiles while water poured over him. He was panting and a faint scent of puke rose from the obviously recently cleaned floor. He opened the glass door to the shower and touched the his wet shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here, you’re shivering.”

“I’m going to be sick,” was the sole answer. Harry sighed.

“Here.” He took a flask of clear blue liquid from one of the several wall cabinets. “This will help.”

Draco snickered. “You think I haven’t tried it?”

“I think I don’t mind you throwing up all over the place but I’m not having you faint if I can walk you to a bed.”

“My, my, Potter, little eager, are we?”

“You’re green. Stop fucking with me and drink this.”

As a Legilimens, Harry had, more often than not and certainly much more than he’d wanted, encountered people who’d pose some resistance to his invasion of their minds. He had been given a powerful anti-nausea potion — courtesy of Tyra — to get him through the day when he had trials. He had used it after the trial of the Malfoys, when Draco has posed no resistance at all, which was something he had not an explanation for yet but he wondered whether he’d been as drugged as had seemed when Harry confronted him that time. In any way, his stocks had been supplied and, when he stopped needing that many flasks, brought home. He had found those potions particularly efficient against Ginny’s pregnancy sickness and was betting they’d do something for Malfoy too. He forced him to down the liquid by stepping into the shower, bothering to chuck out his shoes and socks only, to hold Malfoy upright against the tiles as he swallowed, since he refused very green and vehemently to sit down. He scanned Draco’s face until he saw the greenness fade a little, only then pulling him from the shower and half-carrying his dripping, slightly swaying body to bed. Draco sat there
gingerly and lowered his torso until his head rested between his knees.

“You can leave now, Potter.”

“You’re going to be sick.” Harry said, conjuring a bucket and hoping he wasn’t right. Half a minute later, he jumped back to avoid being hit by the watery goo. He shook his head, Vanished the mess, enlarged the bucket and sat by Draco’s side, rubbing his back like he’d seen Molly do to the kids when they got sick. Draco tried to swat his hand away, but soon realized he’d be too busy puking to make it. Harry rolled his eyes. “I did think you had taken it way too well.”

“Shut up.”

“Is your barrier trying to build up again?” Draco sighed instead of replying. “Yeah, I know how that feels. Remember it was Snape who taught me how to Occlude.” Draco choked back a grin. “Don’t worry, we have time. We don’t need to try any more today. I’m not willing to break you.”

Draco sucked in a deep breath and looked relieved when he didn’t throw up. Still he had his head low. “Try again.”

“Not a fucking chance.”

“Try.” He threw up again. “Salazar, Potter, do it!”

He felt the admonishing push of a mind trying to enter his and sighed. “Damn you, Malfoy.”

He relaxed and tried to recall the hole he had done in Draco’s barrier; it showed up considerably smaller, but it was good that it was still there. Draco flinched when he ploughed on, trying to pressure his mind through the hole, and Harry enveloped both his arms around the bony, broad shoulders. The wall’s resistance subsided with the touch and he gasped for air when he fell headfirst into water. Draco was shaking violently, now, holding himself together as Harry paddled the water, trying to see something in the absolute darkness. Unlike the outside, where the wall seemed to be lit and therefore all was visible, now he could only sense water, no matter where he went. Finally, when Draco’s shivering became worryingly close to triggering another round of puking, Harry pulled out, slowly, delicately, feeling dirty and sick himself. The room was warm and still the trembling didn’t ease. He pulled Draco closer, cuddling him against his chest and feeling, not without a pang of sympathy, when he coiled up completely against his side, fighting the nausea with excruciating willpower. Harry went back to rubbing his skin soothingly, tired beyond measure. It had been one wall. One single wall and both of them already felt fucked up like that.

Draco’s body had given up completely, scattered spasms shooting up every once in a while, when Albus entered the room very solemnly. Harry couldn’t really move, so he just greeted the boy effusively but low, as to try not to disturb Draco’s mild peace. It took him a moment to realize the baby was holding a bottle and another to see Teddy showing up at the door, holding Scorpius by the hand. Albus wobbled to the grownups and held out the bottle.

“Papa?”

Harry found it strange that the boy chose to use “papa”; he blinked and saw he was trying to give it to the man in Harry’s arms.

“Is this for Draco?” Albus nodded and Draco stirred in his arms. “Look, Malfoy, my child is calling you ‘papa’.”

“I cannot tell you how messed up it is,” he said, but he was smiling. He sighed and made a feeble attempt at getting up, settling for sitting instead. “Are you all ok?”
Teddy took it as a signal to come inside, Scorpius still held by his hand. He sat on the floor, crossed both legs and put both babies down with him. His nose scrunched up with the stench of the bucket in front of him, so Harry Vanished it. He deemed Malfoy was no longer risking being sick but he didn’t let go of him.

“Cousin, is Prongspawn hurting you?” Malfoy let out a mischievous smile.

“Terribly.”

“Prongspawn!”

“Draco!”

“I’m just kidding, you both.” He took a deep breath and disentangled from Harry. “I should probably continue my shower.”

“I’ll send Kreacher to be attending you.” Draco thanked him and got up, a little wobbly but determined. “The children will come to the gardens with me and we’ll have dinner there.”

“But we were there like five minutes ago,” Teddy protested, pouting very ungracefully. “We wanted to check on cousin, that’s all.”

“It’s nice that you’re concerned, but he’s fine.”

“Cousin.” The boy was dead serious. “You don’t have to let Prongspawn punish you. You did nothing wrong.”

“You are very brave to stand up for your beliefs, Teddy, but I’m afraid your faith might be misplaced this time. If anyone was getting hurt, it was your godfather.” He smiled at the assembled children. “I will re-join you in no time.”

Teddy didn’t seem to believe his cousin but he was distracted by Scorpius asking what seemed to be a full string of questions to him, while Albus kept eyeing the grownups. Harry watched as Draco disappeared through the bathroom door and got up, drying his clothes with a spell before urging the kids out of the room. He’d tell Kreacher to go up when he got to the garden, to allow Draco some privacy. He wondered if he felt as violated as Harry felt violent. It was hard to shake the feeling of him trembling in his arms, throwing up what little food had settled inside his stomach. If they were going to go through that every time they attempted that mind reading thing, maybe Harry should start thinking of alternative plans. He seriously doubted he would be able to keep pushing Draco like that and maintain their sanity.

Fortunately, he was proven wrong by Draco himself. They kept trying to break through the barriers in Draco’s mind; they were no longer walls — once Harry Vanished that wall, it became clear that he was granted access to the black pool without having to go through it again. It was their third day of trying and so far Harry had been granted the possibility of using magic inside Draco’s mind — which was useful but far less reassuring than it should have been under regular circumstances — and swam around the pool for long enough to know there was nothing to be seen or found on the surface. When he dove to look beneath the water, though, Draco had reacted so badly that he had been happy to have sent the children to bed before trying that. He had to put on a Muffling Charm and hold Draco very hard as he shook convulsively, biting his lips as to refrain from screaming. Harry was just beginning to swim underwater but it felt like forcing Draco’s mind to do something he not only didn’t think right but also felt nauseated about. He let go of the attempt — he had lost count by then — when Draco propped himself up to try and escape from his grip. Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes, downing another vial of pain-relieving potion without even bothering to check the
label. Draco gritted his teeth, sitting on the floor again when he thought it was safe.

“This is hopeless,” Harry stated unhappily.

“No, it’s not. But apparently we’re doing it wrong. I know you’re trying to search for me but I don’t feel it like it, and there’s no way you’re entering the Manor without finding me first.”

“I’ll try to devise a way, but seriously, we should probably sleep now. You’ve been having nightmares and you’re tired.”

That was true. Draco’s sleep had become restless ever since that first attempt, although he said over and over again that he didn’t recall the dreams he was having and couldn’t, therefore, tell Harry why they were so disturbing, although Harry didn’t buy that. Draco blinked long. He had been letting Harry see more of his eyes and for longer every time.

“Shower and bed?”

Harry acquiesced. When they returned to the room, ready to go to bed, was that Harry noticed the bruises his hold had left on Malfoy. Marks of fingers punctuated the skin of his shoulders, where they had dug deep into the skin. Harry was confronted with too much tenderness when he noticed them, taking a couple of moments to caress the injured skin as Draco settled to sleep. They had been talking less and less and the disturbing connection, feeble but always quick to build, between their minds was probably to blame for that. It was hard to talk a lot to someone you’re trying to force into contact.

“Potter, go to sleep.”

Harry startled at the order and bit his lower lip, hesitating. Well, why not?

“How do you feel about sleeping on your side?”

“Not particularly fond of it but whatever.” His naked shoulders tensed. “Why?”

“Come here.” Harry lay down and pulled Draco closer to him, until his back collided with Harry’s bare chest. Draco let out a muffled sound of surprise but didn’t move away. “Maybe this will help you keep the nightmares at bay.”

“Why? Because the Saviour is protecting me?”

“Because this is the best way I can think of to show you you’re not alone.” Harry sighed and buried his face in Draco’s pale hair. “Now sleep, Malfoy. We’ll think about your head in the morning.”

It didn’t take long for them to bend the resistance of Malfoy’s mind. It wasn’t even conscious, actually. Harry was deep into late morning sleep when everything turned dark, pitch black. His idyllic dream — something he would later recall as just a lot of trees and some drizzle — stumbled upon a pond and before he realized it he was diving into it. It was filled with cold water, and the low temperature bit into his skin like needles. His body cuddled closer to Draco’s in search of heat and it was welcomed inside the dream, protecting him from most of the piercing frost. He could feel his ears and fingers numbing, the warmth radiating from Draco’s chest too much to handle when his every inch of uncovered skin was growing cold as if with dread. There was something definitely ominous about those dark waters, although Harry’s half-asleep mind was finding it hard to understand what was it. He tried to lit up the dream, to no success; his arms tightened around Malfoy but he didn’t feel how tangled their bodies were becoming in bed. He felt his breath starting to falter, to be invaded by water, at the same time that someone tugged at his hair, pulling his head from the water that now tasted too hot and too bitter to be water, to allow him some breath. He could taste
blood in his mouth, could feel his eyes burning, could feel the cold, wet stone beneath his knees. A
dangerously manic cackle rose, too close to his ears, followed by a dozen people laughing out loud,
men and women, rejoicing in the spectacle like their lives depended on it. He was bound, hands and
feet, unable to smell anything but blood, unable to feel anything but pain, unable to be in control of
himself.

“Does it hurt you?” sing-songed a deep, honeyed, motherly voice that had him panicking. He tried to
speak to find out his mouth was hurting because it was gagged open with something that bit into the
sides of his lips. His attempt to say something derailed into bubbling sounds and more blood slipping
down his throat. Whoever that woman was, she kneeled on his calves, hugging him very dearly
while men sniggered and cracked whips around them. He coiled up to the sound, feeling tears roll
down his burned faces. “My poor, poor child, you have left me no choice… I am so sorry, Draco,
dear, so sorry.”

The name made Harry split from the persona in the dream and instinctively pull Draco closer to him.
He felt the broken, bruised body in his arms, the rope-clad wrists, and began to cut every leash,
crushing the spider-gag on his mouth in his eagerness to Vanish it, the splinters digging deep into the
skin of his hands, but it didn’t matter at all. He pulled his wand and swirled it to heal the bruises and
cuts in those pale, still hidden in the dark lips. He could see nothing, but he didn’t need to. His arms
tightened around Draco’s torso and he was flooded with relief when he hugged him back
desperately, weakly, yes, but mainly whole.

“I am here now,” he murmured to the blonde man shivering quietly and sobbing in his arms. “No
one can touch you here, no one can hurt you while I’m with you.”

“Promise me,” Draco tried, his voice faltering, “promise me they will never find me again, promise
me, you have to promise me.”

Harry lowered his face to Draco’s neck, pulling him closer and closer until they were intertwined,
until he felt his own warmth slip into Malfoy’s body. “I promise.”

It earned him a smile against his shoulder, a smile so sweet and so lovely that it splashed him like
cold water. Harry pulled out at once, his mind landing back in reality to find them sitting on bed, his
chest splayed shamelessly against Draco’s. He became aware of his scent, sweat mixed with
something earthy, slightly warm, comforting after the coldness of water and sharpness of blood; then
he noticed his face was burying in Draco’s neck and his breath was uneven, although it almost
synched with Draco’s half-panting. The rest of his body regained consciousness very slowly: his
neck was bent awkwardly, his shoulders were cramped and hurting, his arms tingled with the effect
of holding Draco, who was brushing his fingertips lightly against Harry’s back, pausing to rub
soothing circles between his shoulder blades. Their skins were sticking together, and Harry felt his
every muscle, every inch of skin down to his hipbones. Draco’s was digging hard in the concave of
Harry’s; their legs were numb and Harry knew he was pressing hard against Draco, receiving the
same bulging pressure in return. That one realization rushed forward, taking over his mind and
asking him to give Draco some room he was unwilling to provide. He tried to pull away, trembling
and still somewhat scared, but Draco’s arms tightened around his.

“Don’t,” he murmured roughly, his breath brushing against Harry’s ear.

“Draco—”

“Don’t,” he almost hissed in a very commanding tone. Harry stopped trying to leave and Draco
relaxed in front of and around him. Harry’s fingers carded Draco’s hair and his hands continued the
smooth movements on Harry’s back. Draco’s lips brushed Harry’s left temple and pressed lightly in a
search for intimacy that Harry felt awkward but necessary. With the remnants of the mental struggle
linking them plus the tender soreness of his entire, overused body, he let Draco have it his way. He probably shouldn’t have felt that good when he noticed a quiet brushing on the surface of his mind and realized that Draco was building a shallow, strong bond between them. Their breaths were leveling now and Harry only heard him whispering because his blood had stopped rushing at the proximity. “You pulled out too fast.”

“Sorry,” Harry murmured, and his voice came out muffled against Draco’s skin. It was strangely natural then that it would.

“Don’t ever leave someone’s mind that quick,” he advised, without any edge. “You almost took me with you.”

“Sorry. I needed to check out you were ok.”

Draco rested his head lightly against Harry’s. “Thank you for entering that dream. I hate it.”

“What was it? Was it real?” Draco took a deep, steadying breath and nodded very slowly. “Godric almighty.”

“I think I shut down some of the protections inside my mind to allow you in.”

“And it unleashed nightmares.” He let out a plain “yes”. “I think we should give each other a break.”

“Perhaps.” Draco said flatly. “You did find me. You did promise to protect me. I don’t think the Manor wards will kick you out after this, so mission accomplished.”

Harry smiled, relieved beyond measure, and maybe, just maybe, Draco did so too. They felt tired and worn out, and Harry never thanked the fact that it was summer and his room wasn’t chilly as much as he did then. He doubted he’d have any willpower to leave that position, pick a wand and cast Warming Charms or even pull a blanket around them. He doubted he’d ever want to let Draco far from the safety he could provide. It was too risky, to let him go. Harry had been victim of nightmares before, but they had always been about pain. People could handle pain, but that sadistic streak of Draco’s vivid, memory-based nightmares was too much.

“You can stretch the connection, now,” murmured Draco, after a moment. “Slowly.”

“I don’t mind you being inside me,” Harry assured him lazily. He didn’t. It was warm and comfortable and homey. The innuendo reached him a little too late. “Maybe I didn’t mean that?”

“Quite funny, Potter.” Draco’s voice was a little amused. “You should know you almost meant that, and it’s understandable. I won’t hold it against you.” Harry knew he was blushing but he wasn’t losing that battle. “It’s nice to know your charitable feelings are working but not strong enough as to prevent you from flirting.”

Harry touched Malfoy’s cheek with his. “I’m not the only one, am I? Your behaviour these past days is not at all immaculate.”

“Well, Malfoys do flirt more than what would be deemed commendable in our nowadays society.”

“Then don’t mind if I do,” teased Harry, brushing his lips ever-so-slightly down Draco’s naked neck.

“Potter.” Harry let out a distracted “huh?”. “Are you kissing my neck?”

“I’m touching you. I was under the impression I was supposed to since I almost pulled your mind from you, etcetera, etcetera.”
“Potter, I know it must be arousing for you to have found a way inside my mind,” you have no idea, Harry added mentally, “but even your narrow, half-witted mind must know that kissing a Death Eater’s body is indication of a problem.”

Harry scowled. “Could you possibly be more unpleasant?”

“I could hex you, I presume.”

“You wouldn’t. You’re happy to be here. I can feel you like it here.”

“Potter, you are crossing a line,” he muttered, his voice menacing.

“And, for your information, you oversensitive bastard, I haven’t yet kissed your body.” Harry rolled his eyes and pressed his lips properly on Draco’s neck, once, twice, slightly open-mouthed, just enough to taste it. It was good, the feeling of soft skin, that soft, lovely skin he had touched so impersonally before, now warm beneath his lips. It was arousing, it was enthralling, and maybe Harry was pushing luck by giving in to what was most certainly a secondary effect of having been accepted deep inside Draco’s mind and still being there somehow, and maybe he shouldn’t, but he had never met anyone who’d ever been able to make him feel like that. It was like having downed an entire flask of Liquid Luck and he felt untouchable, incredible, because Draco somehow, strangely, believed he was and his trust in Harry proved it so. It was an unmatching feeling Harry couldn’t consciously let go of. Before him, Draco shivered. “This was kissing. Nice, thorough kissing. Anything else I may have done were mere touches.”

“Why in Salazar’s name are you kissing me, Potter? Are you out of your sodding mind? Did I retain part of your faculties?”

“Fuck off, Malfoy.” He blushed slightly. He was still happy that he had succeeded and Draco was so obviously needing to be touched. He could feel it in the way his memory-self clung to Harry so easily, in the tight embrace of real-life Malfoy, in the awkward, timid poking against Harry’s groins. Harry was thankful and being trusted. They were trapped inside a bubble that contained themselves only and wasn’t that great? “How long has it been since the last time someone kissed you?”

“I can guarantee my captors did not have my romantic or sexual needs covered,” he said dryly. “I think I would have retained that memory.” Harry nodded quietly, nuzzling Draco’s neck as he did so. It was awkwardly inebriating. Draco shifted a little. “Potter, if you start whoring yourself out to me and forgetting the outside world every time you actually enter my mind —”

“— you will let me because you like it.”

Draco growled. “It’s hopeless to argue with you. You’re dumb from excitement.” Draco grit his teeth and Harry tilted his head to the side, unaware of Draco’s intentions. “Sorry for this.”

It was a moment and Harry felt his head hurt as if it had been slashed in the middle when Draco severed the connection between them. Harry scrambled out of bed, pressing his palms into his sockets to try to block some of the pain.

“What the fuck, Malfoy?!?” he yelled, regretting it the instant a brand new surge of illness struck him. He pushed it down out of free will.

“Your mind was Intertwining with mine, you moron.” He winced. Apparently, that hurt him as well. Good. Harry would probably punch him if he were the only one to go through that pain. “Your mind is not supposed to Intertwine with the mind of those you’re reading.”

“It usually doesn’t,” Harry replied acidly, “but it’s not my fault that you were luring me with
promises of intimacy. I know those sensations weren’t all mine.”

“If that’s your excuse, allow me to spell it out for you: you are a married heterosexual man. You are not supposed to be lured by some random bloke who has been away from people for too long to remember the bloody distinction between care and desire.”

Harry folded his arms and set his jaw. His throat felt dry and tight. “If you do believe yourself a random anything in my life, maybe it’s best we didn’t go forward.” Harry turned on his heels and rushed towards the door. “I’ll give Ron a call and we’ll devise a plan to enter the Manor. I presume he can enter it if I go with him?” Draco answered with a stiff “yes”. “Good. We’ll talk later.”

Not that he had a choice in the end.
Harry started downstairs fuming about what had just happened. Not because he was deeply upset about Draco’s rejection of intimacy — although he for some reason he couldn’t quite comprehend kind of was — but because he had sought it and couldn’t seem to find it in himself to regret it. He knew he had been feeling Draco right. He knew he wasn’t imagining the tenderness Draco’s mind was providing him. He paused and kicked the first step once, then twice, then in a rhythmic pounding that had his bare feet hurting like bloody hell. He collapsed sitting on the last steps, elbows on his knees and hands pushing his glasses up as they raked through his hair. Damn Malfoy with his interesting mind, snide remarks and beautiful figure. Damn him, his appeal and Harry’s will to content him, to have him healthy, laughing and happy. Damn Harry for still behaving like a bloody hero and damn Draco for letting him. He growled in frustration and thumped his head time and time again against the railings, feeling them quiver and honestly not caring about it. Maybe the bloody staircase could fall over him and stop his stupidity…

“Prongspawn, why are you trying to demolish the house?”

Teddy had Scorpius on his arms and Albus trailing quietly beside him, holding the hem of his shirt. He plopped down beside his godfather. Scorpius was restless but Teddy had a firm grip on him and didn’t let the boy escape. He wailed, a shrill, long sound, and Harry, who was picking Albus up, was surprised to see the way he stopped when Teddy scowled at him.

“Is he ok?”, asked Harry, noticing the baby’s pout.

“He wants Cousin, but you were not supposed to be disturbed, according to Kreacher, so he’s a bit hysterical I didn’t let him go there.” Teddy sighed tiredly. “So, is your trying to break the house down a consequence of whatever you and Cousin did while we were not watching you?”

“No, we just had an argument.” Harry kissed Albus’ head and inhaled the scent of his baby. It was soothing and it lifted his spirits a little. The hazy mix of anger and broken lust started to fade. Teddy was bouncing up and down to keep Scorpius distracted, but his eyes were pinned on Harry. The man sighed. “Can you keep an eye on him and Scorpius while I go talk to Ron?”

“Sure. Where is he?”

“In my bedroom.” Teddy nodded solemnly. He liked being trusted and Harry couldn’t blame him for that. God only knew he would have liked to be at least accounted for when he was nine. “He might not be in the best of moods.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” he said brightly, getting up and brushing Scorpius hand from his nose. “Say hi to uncle Ron for me, will you?”

Harry didn’t have time to prod him further or answer him for that matter before he was running upstairs to find his cousin, Scorpius bouncing gleefully and laughing on his arms. He sighed and looked at Albus, who was staring back at him with too much judgement in such small face. Harry’s lips scrunched in displeasure when he put up what could be taken as a failed attempt at folding his arms.

“Draco is safe, don’t look at me like this.”

“Copi. Deddy.” The boy was deadly serious.

“I cannot take them with me to talk to Ron.” Albus was not amused and didn’t look convinced. “It
will be quick, Al. Just keep quiet and stopping bloody scolding me.”

“Oody?”

Harry puffed out a grunted sigh. “Great.”

He didn’t know if the boy didn’t understand or didn’t care, but he kept on disapproving of his father long after they flooed to Prairieland Cottage, Ron and Hermione’s property. He landed on the hearth and, surprisingly enough, three pairs of eyes turned to stare at him. He brushed the soot from Albus’ hair and frowned at the people assembled there. In the beautiful, practical, modern, childproof living room sat his friends and Ginny. Harry could have fainted from happiness for not having taken Scorpius with him. Judging by the look in Ron’s face, he was thinking something along those lines too. He mustered a smile, tramping the shock and running plans in his mind to justify his visit. Ginny got up and went straight to him, to greet him and pick Albus. Harry didn’t actively know why but he was feeling restless and guilty towards her. Well. He actually knew why. Having been face to face, skin to skin with Malfoy did make him realize what they had almost initiated would be considered cheating even given the fact that Harry was barely married now (and was also instinctively reacting to Draco’s mind, which, he might add, was quite akin to dubious consent in his vocabulary). Albus put his hands around Harry’s neck and squirmed closer to him when Ginny tried to reach for him. She sighed and smiled, her eyes glinting in a face that was slightly chubbier than Harry remembered it. That was not unusual when it came to Albus. Maybe it was the fact that she usually had him for over half of the week but Albus rarely chose his mother over Harry.

“Sometimes it feels like Al is yours only.”

“He’s a bit indisposed. I think he’s tired.” The baby was all but glaring at him. Harry was afraid he was going to mutter something to his mother and get him screwed. “Teddy was playing with him until five minutes ago.”

Ginny smirked and giggled. She knew it wasn’t true. Albus loved Harry too much to want to return to his mother and she knew it, but didn’t say anything.

“And where’s Teddy, Harry?” Hermione asked, her eyes flicking from him to the fireplace. It sounded like a stupid question, because she must have known he was at home with Draco and Scorpius, but she raised an eyebrow and waited for the answer nevertheless.

“Home. Kreacher is with him.”

He was oblivious to her intentions and she rolled her eyes. “Harry,” said Hermione, “are you sure it’s a good idea to leave Teddy, whose father was a werewolf and mother, half-blood, alone with him?”

Ron muffled his laughter. Harry wasn’t getting it. Kreacher liked Teddy. They got along just fine. Hermione shot Ron a warning glance and glared at Harry as if he was being obtuse on purpose. Ginny was not understanding what was going on, but she very wisely refused to take part in it. Harry couldn’t stop himself from noticing she looked prettier then than she had ever cared to look for him. Somehow, it was merely a disappointing notion, not at all hurtful. He wanted it to mean more, that was certain, but all he could think of was that she had become prettier and happier without him, which was at same rates endearing and just plain sad.

“I have to speak to Ron about a case.”

Ron clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Next time you can Floo-call me, mate. We can discuss it at your place and leave the girls alone. They are discussing Ginny’s birthday and I was third-wheeling anyway.”
Harry nodded. He kissed Ginny’s cheeks tenderly while Ron spared Hermione a breath-taking minute-snog that made the others in the room slightly uncomfortable. Harry decided to ignore the pointed look Hermione shot him, its effect dulled by the crimson creeping up her cheeks. No good could come from having her over-analyse his worked-up self and his lack of intimacy towards Ginny without a proper conversation. It would eventually turn into trouble and trouble he wished to avoid. They flooed back to Grimmauld Place and Ron was greeted with utter, absolute silence. The house looked deserted and Harry was practically refusing to speak. Ron took a deep breath and plopped down on the nearest couch. He hadn’t been the one to search his mate after all. Kreacher showed up, brought them tea and scones and took Albus from the room before Harry finally looked at Ron.

“I think I’ll give up on him.”

Ron laughed loud and restlessly, shaking his head with wide movements. “Don’t you dare, mate. Hermione will fry your kidneys.” He patted the cushion by his side. “What happened?”

“I entered his mind.” Ron whistled and made a face that gave away just how dreadful he thought the experience must have been. Harry snorted. “During a dream. I was him for a moment, but in the end I became me again and found him alright.” That was an understatement, but Harry knew Ron and Hermione had no secrets and he didn’t want her to worry about him being trapped and having his mind-self tortured while impersonating someone else. “I have permission to enter the Manor now, according to him.”

Ron frowned. “Hm, mate, not trying to be deliberately thick here, but I thought it was a good thing. I thought we were waiting for it.”

Harry glared at him and folded his arms. He grit his teeth at the memory of being shut out of Malfoy’s head and took a couple steadying breaths before being able to utter something anyhow resembling a sentence.

“He accused me of Intertwining.” Ron’s brows shot up. “Exactly.”

“But you’re an expert. You know how dangerous it is when it’s an active Occlumens. It’s like feeding Buckbeak a ferret. No pun intended.”

“I didn’t fucking mean to. He was bloody luring me in. It’s like— I woke up and he was holding me. He built a connection because I apparently pulled out too fast and next thing I knew he felt so… needy. It was like he pushed all of his unattended desires into me, except they felt like mine.”

Ron blinked a couple of times. “You Intertwined.” Harry nodded sulkily. “With Malfoy.” He merely glared. “Ok, let me think it straight: you, Harry James Potter, an Auror with years of training, breached the defences of one of the best living Occlumens in the entire wizarding world and gave him the means to hook himself inside your mind and transmit his feelings and ideas to you in a way that might eventually act as strongly as an Imperius curse in case you do reach a certain level of intimacy, which, mind you, you already did the moment you caught yourself weaving a Binding Promise with him to save his blasted life.”

“Two.”

Ron blinked stupidly. “What?”

“Two Promises. I made one while I was inside his mind. It’s what granted me access, apparently.”

“Two. Two Binding Promises to keep your school nemesis alive and well. No wonder why you must have felt compelled to shag him.”
“No need to be so graphic. I feel stupid enough as it is.”

Ron rolled his eyes and gulped his tea with a distinctive glint in them. Harry was not pleased with that. Ron’s living with Hermione was making him far more perceptive; when his job was taken under consideration, he was becoming very sharp-minded and realising stuff so much easier than before. Harry waited for him to decide whether he’d laugh and was greeted by a pursed smile.

“Harry, you were supposed to know the effects of a Binding Promise to see if it’s still working, as you were supposed to know how easy it is to Intertwine with a good Occlumens you’re forced to live with.”

“I forgot that. It happened in a dream, for Gryffindor’s sake.” He sat down heavily. “It didn’t feel like he was compelling me, Ron. It was not even uncomfortable. I liked that he was hooked on me and Godric is a witness that I wouldn’t have stopped if he hadn’t severed the connection… What has he done to me?”

“Made you react, mate. You should probably have attended those basic Occlumency lessons at the Auror’s course, you know.” He took a deep breath. “Well, let me try to explain. It’s, how can I say it, it’s not unusual. He would hardly be able to do it to me because, no offence, but I cannot see what people find attractive about blokes and the only reason I care in the least about Malfoy is because you made a crusade out of finding whoever did this to him. I have no intrinsic desire nor genuine care for him.”

“Are you saying I wanted to do it?”

“I’m saying you allowed him to. Harry, let’s face it, you’re living together. You’re sharing the same bed. In the past weeks, your life has literally revolved around him. There is a possibility, and I don’t like it so don’t hex the messenger, that you’re growing fond of him.”

“Of Malfoy? Of Draco Malfoy?”

Ron shrugged. “This situation between you is the closest you’ve got, ever since you married, to going back to your old ways.”

Harry flushed. “What happened with Coote was a one-time thing.”

“I liked Ritchie. I’d rather have you two married than see you snogging my sister.”

Harry scoffed. “I loved Ginny, Ron. We’ve been a happy married couple, not mere snogging buddies.”

“Pay attention to the tense you’re using.” Harry sulked. “Stop fooling yourself. It’s no surprise your reaction was to grow closer to the ferret, instead of pushing him away. You have always liked men better.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yeah, because kissing Cho was fireworks.”

“Kissing your sister was.”

“After you tried Seamus, Kirke and Chambers.”

“We hardly went further than fumbling with each other.”
“And allowing Malfoy into your mind had absolutely no traces of desire involved too, right?”

“Why do I even come to you again?”

“Cause I’m your best mate.” He clapped Harry’s shoulder and smiled condescendingly. Harry wanted to wipe that smile off his face. “Mate, you had thought Malfoy nice before. You used to ogle him every once in a while. It’s no excuse to what he’s done to you, forcing you like that, but you’re not a hundred percent innocent too.”

Harry ran his hand up his face, disregarding his glasses and pushing them up too as he went. Ron laughed again.

“I am not seeking Malfoy, Ron, it just—” He hid his face in his hands. “Mate, it just bloody happened. It’s not like anything I’ve ever felt before. One should never be allowed that much intimacy with someone, especially when the second part of the agreement was slightly off their right mind to start with.”

“I can guarantee all that.” Ron shook him slightly by the shoulder. “But avoiding it won’t make it easier. Try to figure out what’s his and what’s yours in this thing. You will have to do it eventually.”

He leaned back on the couch, smirking. “Now, come on, let’s talk business. What do you actually need me for? You didn’t call me to babble about how Malfoy’s mind made you think he’s sexy enough to pull you to him. If you need sex tips, you know Hermione is the encyclopaedia of our trio.”

Harry tried to brush away the fact that his ears were hot as red iron and his cheeks seemed to be just that colour. Ron’s everlasting smirk told him he might not be doing it right. He cleared his throat.

“We need to enter the Manor. Malfoy said I can put us both inside. I’ll search for the Chimaera and any clues we can find and I want you to help me.”

“Sure deal,” Ron said pronto. “When are you going?”

“How about now? We should do it during the day, for we don’t know the Manor enough and going through it at night is not an enticing idea. Plus, I want to do something as soon as possible. There’s something creepy about this whole story.”

They devised a quiet plan to enter the Manor and how they would proceed once inside. They were to look for clues, obviously, and for the Chimaera, to imprison it, supposing it was not as dangerous as a pure-breed one, then see if the holding cells down the Malfoy’s dungeons had been used recently. They were believing the Chimaera, if existent, alive and inside the Manor, would pounce on them as soon as they entered and they’d have to take it out of the way rapidly. If not, they could go through the many rooms of the Manor first. The dungeons would not be filled, he hoped, so any traces they might find of them being occupied would be retrievable after they had handled the beast — supposing it was inside the place.

Their talk lasted for quite some time. Teddy and the babies all came downstairs at a certain point of it, asking the grownups to play with them and being granted the courtesy despite them still talking about work. Scorpius was bouncing to call Harry’s attention and it was the brightest of smiles that greeted him when the child stared at him and called him “Da”, exactly like Albus did. Teddy and Ron snickered at that and he knew it wouldn’t take five minutes after Ron arrived back home for Hermione to find out about that. He found out he could barely care. He liked that the boy liked him enough to recognize him as a parental figure. It was a little crazy indeed, but it was also beautiful and endearing.
Ron said his goodbyes when Hermione’s head popped on the fireplace to call him back home for lunch. They rechecked the plans briefly and confirmed the time and place. They were supposed to Apparate right outside of the Manor and go from there. Harry’s heart was leaping at the prospect of finally actively doing something. His spirits were lifted further when Ron pulled him to a warm, understanding embrace, and he closed his eyes to try to muster enough courage to be inside his house with only Malfoy as a grownup to keep him company.

“Tell him what happened, mate,” Ron whispered admonishingly. “He’s no bloody fool despite his ferret brain.” He smirked and held his friend at arms’ length. “He’ll understand and then you can go shag that idiotic moron if that’s what you want to do.”

“Ron—”

“Just do it, mate. Ginny already knows you’re not coming back. You let him inside you head. It’s going to happen eventually.”

“He doesn’t want me to.”

Ron laughed soundly. “We’ll see about that.”

He flooed away with that one remark floating in the air behind him. Even Ron was into it now. Shit. He was screwed after all, wasn’t he? He sighed and pressed his eye sockets with the heels of his hands. Damn it. They were not teenagers. They’d need to talk about that if they wanted to continue sharing a roof. He licked his lips, remembering how Malfoy had thought them soft the first time he touched them with the Awareness Charm still active. What was happening to them?

“Prongspawn, I think we should call Cousin for lunch.”

Harry sunk back into reality with an unheard ‘thud’. “Oh, right. Sure.”

“I can go.”

“Ahm… I’d rather you didn’t, Teddy. I want to apologize to him for the arguing and stuff.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “Call me if you need me.”

“I will, thank you.”

Harry entered his own room quietly after making sure that the babies were tended and clean, and that lunch was on its way. Draco had spelled a book on Southern constellations that belonged to Teddy to read out loud, and the mechanical, childish voice was narrating something about a giant red when he knocked on the doorpost. The spell stopped at once.

“Can I come in?”

“Your room, remember?” Draco rose an eyebrow.

“Right.” Harry cleared his throat. Talk about awkwardness. “Listen, about earlier—”

“It was my defences,” he stated flatly. “Like I said, I won’t hold it against you.”

“But—” It was hard not to sound insistent or dramatic. He didn’t even really know what the hell he wanted to say. He was not about to confess anything to Malfoy, obviously; if Ron thought talking to him would be enough to make everything clear, he was out of his mind. One does not simply say “maybe I liked what happened more than I should” to a guest. Still, he was entitled to know some of
the involved feelings. “Was it bad?”

Draco laughed. It was a hearty, deep laughter, not ironic or dipped in sarcasm. He sounded fun and amused, and Harry knew the warmth in the pit of his stomach was not imagined. Damn Malfoy.

“We didn’t *shag*, Potter. You’re not supposed to ask me if it was bad.”

He did have a point, but still.

“No, but what I mean is, hm, I have been attracted to men before.” And he felt blushed crimson now. How was that for someone trying to sound nonchalant? “So it was not all you.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do, do you think I’m stupid? Do you think I’d risk being punched by letting my mind use a luring defence on someone who couldn’t possibly be attracted to me? I only called you straight to make you realize that you were going too far.”

Harry paused for an instant. “You’re an arsehole. I shouldn’t have felt bad about what I did at all.”

“Wait.” Draco frowned. “No. *That’s* what you think was the problem? That you *kissed my neck*?”

Harry didn’t say a word. “Salazar Slytherin, Potter. I’m blind. The only way I can feel people the right way is when they touch me and you think I’m having a problem with a damn kiss?” He snorted. “You are a hero indeed, all eyes for the others and no self-preservation. No, Potter, I wasn’t grossed out by your kiss. You are rather skilful, if your performance makes you concerned. What I was trying to do was prevent you from being trapped inside my head. It’s called a luring defence for a reason. It’s called Intertwining for a reason. It’s said to be *bad* for a reason. Frankly, how little attention can someone pay to what is happening around them? You don’t bet an Occlumens mind, Potter. I can control some of my defences but some others have triggers I don’t remember putting up. It’s just not safe.”

“So what, you were protecting me?”

“Us. Keeping someone else inside my mind while trying to make sure this person doesn’t end soulless and empty is tiring as fuck.” Draco smiled. “The connection is gone. We just have to monitor it the next time we do it.”

“You do realize it happened while we were sleeping, right?”

“Your fault. If you could Occlude better, my mind wouldn’t be able to anchor on yours for help.”

“Good to know you seek me for help.”

“I didn’t. You offered.” Draco shrugged nonchalantly. “We can prevent it with Dreamless Sleep for a couple of days. Maybe sleep in separate beds.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be a drama queen. Just how bad can things inside your mind be?”

“Bad.” Draco got up and patted him on the shoulder. “I am usually very aware of everything that goes on inside my mind, Potter. I wouldn’t have survived the Dark Lord otherwise. But right now, I’m not sure if every barrier, protection, maze, pit, ravine, moat or whatever else is built in here was made by me and moreover, I cannot guarantee they were made *consciously*. I don’t know when one of us is going to touch something we shouldn’t in here and honestly? I’d rather trust you more before
letting you try to kill yourself inside my head.”

“Are you telling me you can feel what has been repressed in your mind?”

“Ever since you broke that wall, that lurking feeling from before is stronger. It spills, like a restraint being broken. I remember pieces now. Scents. Voices. Pain. I remember tastes and flesh, things I didn’t before. It’s all very ominous and very triggering and it’s fair to believe that carry on prodding my mind won’t help to keep those things put. All in all, that nightmare was not, I’m afraid, even the beginning.”

Harry nodded slowly. That was quite logical. They were trying to go deep inside Draco’s mind and of course whoever meddled with it wouldn’t have left plain, simple barriers to guard the memories, the clues. They might have overdone it and tried to wipe more of Draco’s memory than they should have, like Harry was sure they did, but Malfoy was too good. He wouldn’t have left everything he knew unprotected. Of course his mind would be a maze. Of course it would be fucking hard to penetrate.

“Triwizard maze,” Harry said. Draco didn’t seem to understand. “Lots of obstacles, but we need to move forward. Except this time I don’t think that reaching my goal will drag me face to face with a fucked up supremacist lunatic ready to torture me for the appreciation of his peers.”

“Being myself tortured in what seems to be quite similar a way to what you’re describing, I think it would be wiser, Potter, if we just accepted this is probably exactly what we are going to find.”

Harry didn’t want to think like that, although he didn’t have a choice. But he was worried. He was still worried. He was unhappy for being shut out, and confused because of Draco’s statements, but right then, he couldn’t but worry.

“Do you recognize any of the voices in the dream?”

Draco’s hand tightened on his shoulder. “No.”

Something in the way he said those words set an alarm inside Harry. He turned to face Draco and held him by the arm when he threatened to step back. “You’re lying. I don’t need connections to know that.” Draco set his jaw and Harry knew he wasn’t missing the way his lips trembled, just once, very shyly. “Talk to me.”

“Sure you don’t want to go back to the kissing thing?”

“Draco.” He held his face menacingly. “Talk to me.”

“It was a dream.”

“It was a memory. Don’t play stupid. Who did you recognize, Draco? Who was the person trying to burn us?” He tried to walk away but Harry held his face very steadily. “Don’t shut me out again. I can go looking for your every memory until I find that out. You said it yourself, I lack self-preservation instincts. I could go rogue inside your mind and die and don’t even care.” Draco’s jaw tightened further. “I didn’t want to use Veritaserum but I swear on my parents’ grave that I will if you don’t tell me who it was.”

“Later.” Draco put his hands on top of Harry’s. “I swear to you I will tell you later. I don’t want to give myself false hopes or dreads. I’m trying to pry on my own memories and as soon as I can confirm it, you will know.”

“I don’t like the sound of this plan.”
“You have to trust me.”

“No, I don’t. You tried to make me aroused by you.”

“Potter, please,” he drawled, smirking manically. “I don’t need to make you anything. I need to prevent you from it. It’s my neck that’s bruised.”

Harry couldn’t help but to take a glance at it. “That’s not true.”

“Close call. Do I taste that good that you couldn’t fathom to stop sucking at me?”

“Cocky bastard.” They chuckled and Harry let go of him. “I’m going to the Manor this afternoon.”

Draco nodded. “Any advice?”

“Stay away from the peacocks.”

The mood had lifted when they went downstairs for lunch and Harry was almost sure there were no hard feelings between them when he left to meet Ron in front of the gates to the Manor. Not that there should be any, according to Draco, but still. He had almost left it behind them when he saw his friend waving at him from a couple hundred meters before the gates. They met halfway, and Ron was quick to inform him the wards seemed to be in place, since he had been forced to retreat by a killer migraine when he tried to go closer to the gates. Harry decided to test the wards himself, alone, beaming relieved when he managed to touch the gates undisturbed. The cold iron warmed up quickly beneath his hands as he called Ron to join him, both guys pressing the ornate metal until it Vanished, unleashing the splendour of the gigantic heirloom on them. The Manor was impressively huge from the outside, which made Harry quiver with the thought of its internal immensity. Wizards’ properties were known to be far bigger on the inside than they seemed from the outside, Grimmauld Place was a perfect example. That someone had bothered to use that much stone to build what frankly looked like a Victorian movie set was just too much. (Ron would explain him, as they crossed the cobbled path between the hedged front gardens that were actually little cricket fields used to host open-air informal reunions, that the Manor was actually built, as he found out while trying to devise a way into it, which Harry didn’t even really know he tried to, in the 17th century, most precisely in 1658, under the supervision of Brutus Malfoy. It had been victim of an insurgence in the early 18th century and parts of it had had to be rebuilt, this time following the gothic architecture that had gone viral in the continent, and the renovations had been finished under Septimus’ care. According to Ron, it was Septimus’ wife, Nicole Travers, that decided the estate needed gardens and actual life, and it was her fault that the wards were so damn strong, because apparently she believed parties were to be hosted day and night all through the hunting months and was, Ron’s words, damn weak at wandwork, which accounted for every living Malfoy and, really, every-one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight to help protect the bloody stone monster. When Harry asked him why he had bothered to read all that, Ron muttered “Hermione” and they didn’t touch the subject any further.)

Like the gates, the front doors opened to them; unlike the gates, they didn’t Vanish, but, much to Ron’s dismay, didn’t creak either. Everything looked well-oiled, well-kept, if a little dusty: when they stepped into the foyer, it was to find a thick layer of dust on the floor. The vases, mirrors and coat-hangers, though, all seemed miraculously clean. They didn’t have to talk to each other to know how odd that was. The Manor lit up as soon as they stepped in, silently, efficiently, silvery light pouring on them as the door closed ominously behind their backs.

“Now,” said Ron, taking a combat position, side to side and almost back to back with Harry, “up or down?”

Harry scanned the floor, looking for traces. There was a slightly well-travelled path to their left, disappearing into a corridor that surely led to one too many rooms — Ron said the Manor was
known for having over eighteen of them, and that was just to say those people actually slept in. He showed it to his partner and received a nod as an answer, being followed as they moved as quietly as they could, as to try to listen to whatever movement they could. It was going to be a long search.

They found the first study after some wandering. The first three rooms they entered — drawing, music and dining room, in that order — showed to traces of being used whatsoever for weeks, maybe months. Harry tried not to get too prickly about that; surely there was a reason why they hadn’t opened those rooms in so long? He was trying to hope, but the Malfoys still had had house elves after the war; despite Draco’s excuse to work — excuse, yes, Harry didn’t believe for a fucking moment that they were broke enough to need their heir to work, for Godric’s sake — they must have kept all of their elves. Hermione had said they hadn’t stayed in the Manor, though, but she didn’t say when or why that happened. Weird. Maybe they had fled when their masters left? It would mean, Harry was wondering as he scanned a bookshelf piled up with small, crystal-like artefacts, that they had left by the time Draco had been captured, wouldn’t it?

“This is insane. I don’t know what half of these things are; how am I supposed to know what’s a clue and what’s paperweight?”

Harry smirked. “Bag anything you find suspicious.”

“This room reeks of Dark Magic, every damn grain of dust in here is suspicious.” He sighed, but picked up a little metal box, thin and long, that was too clean and too polished to have been left there. “Hey, do you think I should open it?”

“Draco only told us to be wary of the peacocks.”

“Haven’t seen any yet.” Ron ran a diagnosis charm on the box. “It seems to be clean. I’m opening it. If it kills us, I’m sorry.”

“Go on.”

It was nothing magical, in the end. Inside the box, three glass syringes of the same size were lined up. They had engraved letters on them; a dire calligraphy for an instrument so nice, Harry noticed, quite unprofessional to belong there. The letters were A, D and S, but only the first one seemed to have any resemblance of content. Ron sealed the box as evidence and pocketed it, still unaware of what that might mean. Harry found a book on Transfiguration that seemed at least two centuries old, opened on a page about fabrics; he didn’t think it to be actual evidence but it would be a nice reading and maybe they could pull something useful — fingerprints, signatures, spells — from it. He took another book from the desk, one on Astronomy, and another one on Animal Care — that one boldly opened in a page that had the drawing of a Chimaera, which did not reassure him — before being assaulted by an idea.

“What are you doing?” asked Ron as he went over the shelves.

“Poisons. There must be a book here on how to counter them. The Malfoys are skilled potioneers and I’d like to find a way to restore Draco’s vision.”

“I thought he was doing alright with the Awareness Charm,” said Ron distractedly, examining a golden key and pocketing it too.

“He is,” was Harry’s answer, as he flipped through the promising pages of a very well-kept volume. The succession of signatures on the first cover accounted for it having been to six different Malfoys before Draco took it for himself. He closed the book and pocketed it. “But I want him to see Scorpius’ growth. I think he’d like to heal.”
“Well, I would too.” Ron got up from where he had been crouching, analysing the dust beneath a liquor cabinet. “Can’t imagine how he’s handling being blind.”

“He doesn’t mind it much.” They opened the closest door to a sparsely furnished room. It smelled strongly of burned hair. “What the hell is this?”

The room had been automatically lit, like every other so far, but half of the lamps were broken and sparking, trying to light up like the others and failing. The scent was that of paddocks — Harry remembered the smell after spending so long helping Hagrid rebuild them after war — and singed hair, which was akin to the smell of Abraxan’s stables. The giant palominos wouldn’t fit in there, though, and there was, scarily enough, no smell of excrements in there. Harry doubted the room was being used — it was dead quiet — but Ron got his back anyway. He stepped inside, minding the sparking lamps and the mat of furry little things spread all over the floor.

“These are bodies,” Ron stated when he accidentally crushed a skull.

“Yes. Peacocks and little mammals.” Harry crouched on the floor, picking up one of the furry ones. “I think these are puppies.”

The small dead creature in his hands was like a feline cub, with partially grown paws that were not acknowledgeable, but the snake sticking out from where its tail should have been was not something he could disregard. There was something resembling deep cell deformity about that cub, something Ron agreed to be wicked in the least, but when Harry conjured a box to keep the dead, deformed little animal, he stopped him.

“Bloody hell, Harry, what are you doing?”

“It’s evidence.”

“It’s dead.”

“If this was all made by the Chimaera, I think we can’t beat it, so let’s take what we can.”

Ron took a moment to be convinced, but then he snooped around the room, choosing a dead cub for himself.

“Are those wings?” Harry asked when Ron put the puppy into the box.

“Apparently. Someone has to help us find out whose wings are these.”

“Hagrid. I wouldn’t trust anyone else.”

They preserved the carcass of a peacock with bite marks and some bloodied sheets, took some feathers and moved on to the next room. It was a dining room, impeccably clean and steaming with signatures. The overall scent was that of a surgery room: stale, underlying blood, ether, iodide. Ron scanned the room for signatures, going straight to the few, sparse dark ones; Harry kept seeing them lift and collapse, presenting themselves in a show of light. It was beautiful. There was a golden and brown set intertwining like vines around a column of green and silver, rising, bursting in a joyous yellow that actually giggled. It felt so familiar. Everything in that room felt so familiar. He got closer to the column of magical energy and recognized it pronto. He had to take it, and he did, preserving the remnants of the spell in a jar and tucking it away. There was more of that golden signature scattered here and there, some a little rosy, some brighter, some collapsing in blue. They were all white signatures, all untainted by dark magic or forbidden spells. Harry couldn’t help but to wonder whether they had been there for long and, in case they didn’t, what did it mean.
“All clear here,” said Ron after some time. “What are you bottling up?”

“Some white ones.” Harry tapped the lid on the bottle and tucked it away too.

“Oh, smart. We can compare with the one from Malfoy’s body.”

“I still feel it’s Astoria’s.” Ron sighed. “No, Ron, listen, I know it was hers. I don’t know how it changed so much but it’s hers.”

“Mate, I trust and believe you, but if we ask the Department of Mysteries to do deep-comparison, we’ll have to file a missing person’s report and all of our secrecy will be as good as gone.”

They had had that argument before, and Ron’s reasons were indeed good reasons, but Harry was not giving the subject up. He was getting up to move on to the next room when he heard the growl. Ron was quick to put a Protego around them at the same time that the beast pounced on them, missing Harry by half a centimetre. The impact was enough to crack the shield, and the creature fell, allowing them to take a split second of a look: it was huge, bigger than a Thestral, but far larger, width-wise. The lion mane was discernible, but quite unimportant since there were also actual, large, feathery wings to claim an observer’s attention. They recast the Shield — a double one this time — and started to run to where they had come from. The beast was quick on their heels but couldn’t fly, which was an advantage. The corridor was narrowed by furniture, and Harry was pushed forward, casting Shield Charm upon Shield Charm as to try to keep the creature away. He heard a pained gasp and a grunt when it pounced again, but couldn’t stop to see whether Ron had been severely injured; he urged Harry further and was still close, so Harry just kept going. They took the first staircase they could up and stumbled upon a second foyer, lined up with fireplaces. Ron took a handful of the Floo powder on the closest mantelpiece and threw it in, dragging Harry along and screaming “The Hog’s Head” before they could think of a place. Harry still had enough time to stare at the enormous, growling Chimaera once more before they were sucked up.
Ron’s shirt was soaked in blood by the time they finally reached the outer gate of the castle. The obvious choice would be for them to head straight to St Mungus but they didn’t believe the hospital would want to treat the injury without knowing its causes and the press would be all over the place when they realized that there was an actual Chimaera on the loose in Wiltshire. Since they were already going to the castle, they shot some Episkeys at the injury and walked up to their old school. It had been rebuilt and made over respecting some of the original foundations, but there were rooms they were never able to find again. One of the burnt towers refused to be fixed and was kept as both a monument on the dead and source on one of the new wards. Harry had lent days, weeks of his life to put up those new wards as had most of the people that had fought on their side. It had taken them all two whole years, but it had paid off.

As they strolled up the great lawn, they were assaulted by the scent of the blooming flowers from the Garden of Infants, a memorial to all of the Hogwards’ students killed in the war. Beside Lavender’s grave, a tall, broad-shouldered man was tending to the homonymous flowers, his hands filled with scented purple plants. He lifted his head and saluted them, dropping the flowers and cleaning his hands on his khakis, walking towards them in long strides.

“Hey, good to see you!” he shouted, coming to a halt when they caught up with him. “Where have you been lately?”

“Getting slashed somewhere,” Ron said, as Harry shot him yet another Episkey.

“Bloody hell!” said the other, noticing the red spreading on Ron’s shirt.

“Yeah, it’s starting to hurt.” He gritted his teeth.

“Ann is in; we can go after her.”

Neville reached out and scoured Ron’s shirt, leading them up a cobblestone path until they reached the first steps of a back door Harry didn’t recall. Ron probably didn’t too, if his look of confusion was something to go by, but when Neville pressed his palm onto the stone they understood that was probably a staff entrance. It was on the West Wing and in no time they reached the Infirmary. Hannah, who was a plump, sweet-faced woman, had a smile on at the sight of her husband. They embraced and kissed chastely before she looked at the dishevelled, a-little-too-pale — which in Ron’s case meant a freckles-only face and in Harry’s a sickly, greyish, absolutely unhealthy colour for any human being — figures.

“And what are you doing here?” Madam Pomfrey was slipping from the office she presumably now shared with Hannah and striding towards them like the furies would. Hannah let out a sideways glance, turned to her husband, inquisitorial, and Harry, having been victim of far too similar a glance time and time again when living with Ginny, pitied his friend.

“Poppy, Ron has had an altercation with something they are very vehemently refusing to name and needs your expertise.”

“We are not vehemently refusing anything.”

“You never really asked.” Ron began to shrug but abandoned the movement when blood trickled down his back again. “Oh, crap.”

“Language, Mr Weasley!” The Longbottoms exchanged a look. “Remove your shirt and let's see the
Ron was not keen on moving to take off his shirt, so Hannah moved forward, very professionally, and sliced it open. The bloodied cloth fell but she caught it before it reached the floor.

“Helga in Heaven, look at this.”

What Harry thought to be mere scratches, maybe as deep as a gash, were a triad of deep valleys down his friend’s back. The sight was slightly revolting and it seemed that the Episkeys had done absolutely nothing to help.

“It looks bad, mate. Actually, it looks awful.”

“Lay down, Mr Weasley,” ordered Madam Pomfrey, all business-like. “Neville, please go take more Dittany and a common antidote from Horace and close the door on your way out.” He did as bid. “Hannah, darling, put up the wards, I don’t want people to interrupt us.” She nodded. “As for you, Potter, towels, my potions’ trolley and an explanation.”

“I’m in no position to give you one.”

“Mr Potter, your colleague is bleeding in one of my beds and I refuse to treat him before a proper explanation is given.”

“You wouldn’t believe us.”

“I treated a centaur not thirty minutes ago. Try me.”

Harry was not willing to tell the woman about what lead to the injury, so he merely said they had been searching for clues in a suspect's house when something they didn't recognize pounced on them and decided to attack Ron. They managed to run away but since the case was under secrecy, they were not to go to St Mungus, for it would mean revealing stuff his office would find better left hidden. The woman tsked time and time again as she doused the injury in alcohol to start about the gashes, picking up a vial of a pitch black concoction and smearing it on the edges of the injury to prevent it from bleeding further and growing dry. It turned a pale pink in contact with the skin and Harry smelled something like churned meat that had him slightly sick.

"If you must throw up, Mr Potter, please do so outside."

"I'm ok," he said, as Hannah lent him a towel and instructed him to roll it and stuff it into Ron’s mouth. Harry felt weird about it — he really did not like to see people suffering, especially when gagged — but Ron obliged, almost happy to have something he could bite as another round of alcohol bit into his skin. "Do you want straps to hold on to, mate?"

"Already done," said Hannah as she gave Ron a couple of straps of linen and tied them to the bed.

It was a rather weird, raw scene. Madam Pomfrey took a curved little needle and started to sew the gashes in petit, crisscrossed points, not unlike Harry had had to do with the bites in Draco’s torso when he first arrived. The skin was being doused in another weird substance that gleamed green and was apparently made to prevent blood clots from forming. Hannah took another towel and started about cleaning the injuries, dabbing them with something that smelled strongly of iodide. Neville was quick to re-enter the room, a couple of bottles in his arms. He gave one to Pomfrey, who spread it generously on the already patched gash, and Hannah asked Harry to carry on with the iodide as she went to fetch a syringe. Harry didn’t see the needle but Ron squirmed when they stuck it into his arm with what was presumably the antidote.
All in all, it took them about forty minutes to make Ron’s back resemble human flesh again. Madam Pomfrey said he was to stay there, stretched and laid down, until the Dittany started intertwining the skin the stitches were holding together, which should take a couple of hours. She advised against any kind of strain even if absolutely necessary, which meant nothing but paperwork and meetings for him for at least a week. No running, no exercising, no holding babies. She signed a form to make sure Shacklebolt would hear of it but she trusted Harry to deliver it, since he apparently thought he should be the one to go talk to his boss first thing in the morning.

Given the circumstances, Harry knew he could go and talk to Hagrid alone, but he feared he wouldn’t be able to dig as deep as Ron would allow him to. He knew he was too tied to Draco to be as objective as he usually was and he knew he could end up asking for more than was acceptable for an interrogation.

"Neville," he said when Hannah left with Madam Pomfrey, "is Hagrid home?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Can we call him here? We need to talk to him about this case."

"I'll send him a message."

As Neville's patronus left, asking Hagrid to come to the Infirmary, Hannah entered the room, frowning at them.

"Who are you bringing here?"

"Hagrid. We need to question him about this beast." Harry tried to smile but it didn’t come through as sincerely as it should have. "I'm thinking this is not going to be a problem?"

"I'll put up an antibiotic spell all over Ron's back, so please, please, don't touch it."

"Sure deal."

There was some amiable chat about Hannah and Neville's marriage, their plans for life and so on. They told the guys they had just recently summed up the money and bought the Three Broomsticks, after Madam Rosmerta's departure to go live somewhere she was not to be pestered by teenagers anymore. They had put the pub through a particularly thorough makeover and were looking for help they could trust. They had started a Summer Program with the school, where orphaned or particularly poor wizards could go work there to earn some pocket money, and McGonagall had also established a scholarship program for those who excelled at their OWLs and NEWTs but were not able to pay for further education. It was sponsored by a pureblood family, but when Harry prodded him about it, Neville insisted the name of the donor was to remain hidden at all costs. It had been active for years now, and it made Harry realize how he had been away from Hogwarts lately.

The antibiotic spell had left a stale smell of sanitizer on its wake, one that was disrupted by Hagrid's appearance, that brought with it the scent of sun-dried fur, grass and smoke. The man was more than happy to see them, and Harry forgot all about his screwed up adult life when his friend hugged him. He was wearing plus size black trousers and a white shirt that had its sleeves rolled up and looked in need of washing. His hair was a tad more tamed, although the beard was still as bushy and gigantic as ever. His little beetle-like eyes were gleaming.

"Hullo, lil' mate." He held Harry at his arm’s length. "Long time no see you?"

"Work has been ridiculously demanding, Hagrid." He smiled at the man.
"Ay, I can relate ter that. Hullo, Ron."

"Hi, Hagrid."

"Nasty lil' thingie yeh got on yeh."

"Actually, Hagrid, this is one of the things we wanted to talk to you about."

"We will leave you alone," said Neville, holding Hannah's hand. "I have to go back to the Garden."

"Stop by when you feel like it," Harry invited, half-hugging his friend and placing a kiss to Hannah's cheek. "Same old place."

It took them a moment to find a chair where Hagrid could seat and remain safe, but the Infirmary was well-furnished. They brought up the Privacy charms but decided not to take on the case at once, instead giving Hagrid space to talk about his life in the past few months. He was enjoying the vacation from his last year of formal education. When Hogwarts was rebuilt, when the Malfoys testified about all the many things they had been compelled to do by the Dark Lord and more, the things they knew had been his fault, the accusations on Hagrid were lifted. With that, he earned himself a free pass to go back to school, a new wand and a lot of joy. No one feared the enormous man in class, he was treated as any other student and was particularly good in Astronomy, much to Sinistra’s surprise. He didn’t sleep in the Gryffindor Common Room due to his duties to Fang, now terribly old, and the new puppy in training, another black mastiff he called Second, but it was clear by the way his eyes glinted as he spoke that he was enjoying this chance. He had his wand on him at all times and was becoming accustomed to not having to wave an umbrella around anymore.

It was him who decided to bring on the serious matters. Harry and Ron exchanged looks and Harry began to pull the dead animals and carcasses from his pockets onto a large platter he kept hovering in the air. Hagrid frowned at the little deformed cubs, caressing them as if they hadn’t been dead for so long they were stiff and dry.

“S’mone’s doin’ harm ter these babies.” The huge fingers brushed delicately against the half-formed wing of the cub Ron had picked. “These ain’t no natural beasties. They’re crossbred.”

“Which is why we brought them to you,” said Ron, trying not to get his voice muffled by the pillow. “We need to know what and why and how. It’s an investigation and the life of a human being, or maybe even more than one can be at stake here.”

Hagrid analysed everything — the cubs, the feathers, the bite marks on the peacocks — before coming to a conclusion.

“It’s a hippogriff, ay.” Harry frowned. “Yeh see the claws? Chimaeras have no claws like these. Some can have feline paws but no’ bird-like ones. The wings’re diff’rent too. This kin’ o’ wing is o’ griffins an’ hippogriffs only, but griffins are too dumb. No one’d put a Chimaera an’ a griffin together, they’d kill each other.”

“How do you create a crossbred hippogriff-Chimaera, Hagrid?”

“Yeh ain’t s’pposed to. Chimaeras are vicious creatures. Females are the worse. Yeh ‘ave ter do it while they’re inside the mum.” His black eyes were crinkling now. “But yeh have to be mental. Mad ter the bones. No one tries an’thing with Chimaeras, they’re unstable. By breeding ‘em ter a hippogriff, if yeh lucky, yeh can ge’ a cub that’s not blood instinct only.”

“But why a Chimaera?” asked Ron. “Why not a dragon? A dragon can be tamed, it’s even easier.”
“Dragons are too big, too lazy. If yeh need a beast ter attack an’ be loyal, a hippogriff does that. The Chimaera has more power, more resources, and it’s resilient to genetic experiments, it is a mixed thingie after all. But this is s’methin’ from a crazy, crazy person. Only s’meeone very crazy indeed would try it.”

“But how is it done? How long does it take? The beast is alive, Hagrid. It’s full-grown and we think it’s being kept to be used as a weapon later.”

“Oh, my.”

Hagrid was very patient and even too thorough in explaining the process of interbreeding species. First of all, there was need of a male Chimaera and a female hippogriff, never the other way round. Female Chimaeras were known, according to him, for eating cubs they didn’t want, and anything weird coming out of itself would trigger the mother. The insemination required a lot of patience, for hippogriffs were very picky animals and refused to conceive when feeling trapped or unease. It had probably taken a human of very kind heart to convince the hippogriff to give birth to a spawn that wasn’t of its species. Hippogriffs did relate better with women and far better with mammals going through the same situation; the cubs they brought seemed to have been forced upon the hippogriff and she had aborted them as soon as possible. If a spawn actually succeeded to grow up and be healthy, it had probably taken about two years: one to win the beast’s trust and make it conceive, and another for the cub to be born and become adult.

“Two years is too much. It doesn’t fit.”

“Maybe, but it’s how long it takes.” Hagrid shook his head. “It’s terr’bly mean o’ a human ter crossbreed s’methin’ as gentle an’ loyal as a hippogriff with a blood-thirsty killer Chimaera. The mother hippogriff wouldn’t ‘ave survived.”

“We’re sorry to upset you, Hagrid,” said Ron, meaning it.

“Nay, I’ve seen worse. Don’t worry.”

“Is there a way to make the crossbred follow us out of where it is hiding?” asked Harry, thinking out loud. “It did attack us but I think it was a territory thing.”

“Bow ter it like a hippogriff. Maybe the brains are hippogriff. If so, yeh’ll be safe enough.”

Under promises of taking the beast to Hagrid in case they managed to capture it, or else convince it to join them, they chatted some more about the children and work, then said their goodbyes. Harry had yet another stop before going home, but since Ron could not follow him because of his injury, he went solo. The blood loss had made his friend sleepy. Hagrid walked with Harry, discussing nothing really important along the way, but when it was time for them to part, he came up with a question out of the blue.

“I know yeh weren't friends er an’thin’ o’ the sor’ but yeh didn’t happen ter see Malfoy aroun’, did yeh?”

Harry blanched, but kept his face normal. “Not really, why?”

“Yeh said stuff 'bout hippogriffs an’ I remember’d he’d grown acquainted ter some o’ mine. He joked ‘bout takin’ one into the Manor ter help control those bloody peacocks, but it’s been a lot now since I las’ heard o’ him.”

“How long?”
“Couple o’years. Said he was with his mum an’ couldn’t come as much as he did before, but then he stopped comin’ altogether. He was nice company, helped me with my Potion’s OWLs.” Hagrid shrugged his gigantic shoulders. “Anyway, if yeh meet him, my offer still stands.”

“I’ll let him know. Thank you for everything, Hagrid.”

There was something so off about that small piece of dialogue that Harry could not even put his finger to it. First of all, Hagrid, of all people? Just how redeemed Draco was? Hagrid was not one to be easily fooled by someone he had had trouble with, unless he wanted something too badly, and pass his OWLs probably didn’t fall into this category. Also, Harry didn’t know that Draco had been in close touch with anyone outside his work, and certainly not with his family. He had said before he had not spoken to his family in years now — six, if Harry was to be exact. There were two options for the information Hagrid had put on the table: it was either false, and in that case someone had probably faked this or Draco had not been as redeemed as he seemed to be for lying to someone as nice as Hagrid; or Draco’s memory of not speaking to his parents’ was screwed up, in which case the damage to his brain was probably deeper than it seemed, because there had been no faking the blankness and refusal of feeling he had displayed when telling Harry that tale. There was the time, too. A couple of years was too long. Even if Draco had pulled away from whatever deal he was doing, wouldn’t he cut said deal? It was not very characteristic of a Malfoy to let things go unsupervised. They were straight to the point when dealing with anything — Harry’s altercations with Draco were enough proof of it — and would never abandon something just like that.

Again, a couple of years was too long.

Decided not to think about it before he had enough time and privacy, he carried on to where he was supposed to go: the headmistress' office. McGonagall must have installed something on that gargoyle, because Harry didn’t have to say the password to be allowed in. She greeted him with smiles and tea, happy to see him whole, but her eyes said she knew he was going after something more than just mere conversation. They chatted amiably for some time until Harry mustered the guts to ask the little thing he didn’t know he was going to until Ron said they should probably head straight to the castle.

“I am here for a favour, actually,” he said, and was absolutely embarrassed when the words came out of his mouth. The headmistress merely signalled him to go on. “I’ve been trying to patch things up with some people and I’ve wondered whether you have any pictures or information on Malfoy?”

McGonagall sipped her tea very pointedly, which scared Harry a little. Trust that woman to make him feel like a fourteen years old boy sneaking out after curfew.

“I presume you have grown acquainted to some of Mr Malfoy’s contributions to the school, then?”

“What contributions?” Harry frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing.” She waved the subject off and relaxed further — if that stiff posture could be anyhow described as relaxed — into her chair. Behind her, Dumbledore’s portrait giggled. “I trust you not to misuse any information of Mr Malfoy, so yes, of course I can provide you some.”

She summoned a book that looked twice the size of her desk but floated delicately onto it, hovering above it as to not disturb the careful setting of the papers on top of it. Harry watched as she flipped the pages wandlessly, sipping her tea as if it was normal of former students to seek information about their previous arch-nemesis to “patch things up” with them.

“Does it mean the promise you made after the trial has been lifted?” she asked curiously.
“Not yet. But it will, I believe. I’ve changed; maybe he has changed too.”

“Oh, he has changed indeed,” said her, seeming to reach a page she liked, because she stared at it for a little longer. “I believe he has moved into Wiltshire about two, maybe three years ago, after his father’s arrest. You should be able to find him there.”

“I heard he had a child.”

“A child?” Her eyebrows went up slowly. “I believe I would know of any child of his, Mr Potter.”

“Right. That’s stupid of me to believe.” That didn’t sound right. If McGonagall didn’t know of Scorpius, something was really wrong, really fishy about that. “But he has become a Healer, hasn’t he?”

“Mediwizard. We used to call him to help with accidental magic with young Muggleborns.”

“And he went?”

“Of course he went. It was one of the purposes why he decided to join the health service.” She smiled condescendingly at him. “He was of value inside this school, Mr Potter. He was always helping out. It’s sad that his mother got sick and he had to abandon his profession to look after her. Dividing a life between Wiltshire and Berlin must be very tiring to him.”

Harry gulped. Both McGonagall, with her square glasses, and Dumbledore, with those piercing blue eyes, seemed to be looking for something in his reactions. He had had that feeling too many times in his life to ignore it. Shit.

“I will have to hope I can find him at home, then, I guess.”

“You will, won’t you?” She poured herself more tea. Harry had barely touched his. “Since you’re so eager to make amends with him.”

The flat tone of her voice made it understood he had been caught.

“Professor, is there any chance you have anything on him written in this book? Anything I can borrow? You know, to help me. I don’t want the old grudges to resurface.”

“Mr Malfoy has never spoken ill of you ever since he came here for the first time. You don’t have to worry about petty teenager antipathies.”

“Right.”

“But I will give you the pictures you want if, and only if, you tell me what is really going on.”

“There’s nothing going on.”

“Mr Potter, I may be old but I am not stupid. You could have tried to make amends with Mr Malfoy far before. Why now? Why in such weird circumstances, when you are bringing albino feathers and dead animals into my school?” Harry’s mouth was agape. “I know everything that happens in this castle. You cannot fool me.”

Behind her, Dumbledore winked at Harry. Oh, great. Of course. Paintings were not affected by the regular Privacy charms. Damn it. Oh, what a price to pay for some pictures. He wondered whether he should speak out loud about it, but if there was someone he trusted as much as his friends, that someone was McGonagall. He sighed.
“Draco got caught up in something I can’t really explain because I don’t know what it was. It seems like a part of his memory has been wiped out in a very amateur way and I am trying to help him get it back.”

That was close enough to the truth.

“And is he in Wiltshire?”

“No.” He felt his ears begin to burn. “He’s staying at my place.”

McGonagall merely nodded. “That’s kind of you.” She closed the book, a set of small squares of paper floating beside her, and sent it back to its place, wherever it was. “Please make sure you remember Hogwarts can always help you if you are in need.”

He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, relieved. “Thank you, Professor.”

“And don’t misuse his pictures,” she added as she gave him a stack of them.

“I promise I won’t.”

His mind was steaming with new information when he left McGonagall’s office, but he was very careful not to let them slip when, over an hour later, he delivered an injured Ron to Hermione and got scolded by her. She was upset and disappointed with them for not researching about the beast, but when Ron fed her titbits of information about the crossbreeding process, she seemed to calm down. In the end, Harry left Prairieland Cottage mainly unscathed.

It was night already when he finally stepped foot into 12, Grimmauld Place. The wards fluttered as he entered, reporting someone new inside the house, and he was quick to look for the potential intruder. It couldn’t be Hermione or Ron, because he had just left their house, and the wards were not reacting that way about Draco anymore.

It was a shock when he entered the living room to see Luna there, sitting with a baby dozing off by each of her sides, discussing Bowtruckles with Teddy... and Draco. She looked up at him when he stopped on his tracks.

“Hello, Harry.”
Harry felt his mouth dry and his breath waver. Draco must have felt it too, because he got up, meeting him halfway into the room. Luna restarted to talk to Teddy and despite the panic rising inside him, something in Harry was relieved that someone else knew. Someone civil. Someone he liked and cared about to whom that had to be unexpected — even if Luna was acting as if everything was perfectly plausible. Draco took him by the wrists, careful and gentle, in a slightly intimate way. He put his cheek to Harry’s and spoke to his ear.

“She’s under control. Don’t panic.” Harry knew his eyes were fluttering in gratefulness. Draco half-smirked. “But there might have been a misunderstanding of her part regarding our relationship.”

“Minimum price,” he said, giving his cheek a quick peck. Draco’s hands slipped down his wrists, palms and fingers, leaving him slowly. Harry turned to face Luna with a smile on his face and snaked his arm thankfully around Draco’s waist. It was so reassuring to have him there after so many discoveries, so much trouble. He hadn’t yet had time to process everything and he knew he’d only have time to when he sat down to plot everything. He believed it wasn’t his impression that Draco was also relieved to have him there. “Hi, Luna. How are you?”

“Very fine thanks.” She looked fine indeed, all bright eyes, dressed in beaten up jeans and a leather jacket, with rain boots with hopping little mushrooms on them. He knew she had come straight from the field, and also knew Kreacher had probably cleaned the fur and mud out of her. Being a magizoologist was cool, but not very hygienic. “It’s that time of the year again.”

“Oh, sure. Summer check-up.” He felt even more relieved, and Draco muffled a laughter on his shoulder. He was also a little off, or maybe just playing along. Harry didn’t have to be a genius to know what a “misunderstanding about their relationship” might mean.

“Yeah… Kreacher set me up in the usual room.” She caressed Teddy’s hair, trying to prevent the boy from rolling his eyes at that small talk. It didn’t work. Luna giggled. “Teddy said I could sleep in his room if I wanted to, but I think my sleep patterns might disturb him.”

“But I will show her David and Bowie,” the boy added, vehement.

Harry nodded and excused themselves, tightening his grip on Draco’s waist as Luna asked Teddy about the Bowtruckles. Draco moved half a centimetre closer to ease the pressure, and Harry’s nose was invaded by the scent of his hair. His instinct was to bury his face on it and the vehemence of that feeling startled him. It felt like still being connected to Draco and a simple, quick look at the blonde told him he noticed it — but when he tried to pull away, Harry didn’t let him. Not that time. Last time they connected, it was because Draco had needed it. If he was in search of comfort again, Harry was going to provide it. They moved to the side, a little hidden from the others. He took Draco’s hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing it gently.

“Is she upsetting you?” he murmured, knowing that reaction was not entirely his fault but not caring in the slightest.

“No, she’s nice. I am just a little tense about something I found out while you were gone.”

“About the woman in your dreams?” He nodded. Harry touched his face. “Do you want to talk
about it?"

“Not yet.” He put his hand on Harry’s, caressing it lightly. “But I’m glad you’re back.”

“I noticed it.”

“I am sorry I barged into your perception.” Harry felt it as he began to relax and the need to touch Draco receded to something manageable that he knew was his own free will. “I was waiting for you.”

“I’ve never been sorrier we don’t have bloody cellphones.”

“What?”

“Muggle stuff.” He sighed. His hand slid down Draco’s face, his neck, his chest. Godric almighty, it felt good to be home. “Can we go back in? I totally forgot my promises to Luna.”

“Your memory is as good as a troll’s, Potter.”

“Says the man that cannot remember weeks of his life.”

Draco chuckled and they went back to talk to the others. Harry asked about Kreacher and found out that the elf had gone fetch them Indian food, by Teddy’s request. Apparently, Andromeda had taught Teddy which Muggle restaurants in all Great Britain served the wizard community as well, something Harry didn’t know and Draco took in with curiosity. Having grown in a place where his — almost — every wish was tended to, he had never needed take-out food. Harry had always eaten Indian in Muggle London with Hermione and sometimes Ron — who wasn’t that fond of it — but never in the comfort of his own house without having to go all the way to a restaurant to get it. Since the elf wasn’t there, he and Draco took the babies to put them to bed. Luna had helped Draco and Teddy feed them and their dozing off was soon becoming sound sleep. Teddy and Luna went upstairs to see David and Bowie as they entered the babies’ room. Albus, who was in Draco’s lap, was holding on to his shirt, while Scorpius had tightened his hands around Harry’s locks. Harry stared at them, again feeling that tenderness he had yet to grow used to when it came to his child and his roommate. It made no sense to call Draco a guest anymore. It made no sense to call him anything short of an intimate friend anymore.

“Are you staring at me, Potter?” Draco asked as he detached Albus’ hands from his garment.

“Yes, I am.” He bumped his shoulder, doing the same with Scorpius’ little fingers. “You are much better than I imagined you’d ever be.”

“I don’t know where is this realization coming from but it’s not the reassuring kind.”

They put the babies to the crib and watched them as they curled on each other.

“I’ll explain someday. But let’s just say that you taking care of my son isn’t helping your bad boy image.”

Draco snorted. “This is not the place to be a bad boy, Potter. It’s children.”

“Then where is it?”

He lifted a suggestive eyebrow and slid his hand to Harry’s hip. Harry suppressed a laugh but joined the joke, putting an arm around Draco’s neck. “Well, I’d like to see your bad boy side someday.”
“Keep trying to arouse me and you just might.”

“I’m just joking, Malfoy.”

“No, Potter, you’re not.” He smiled gently but mischievously and reached out for Harry’s face. “And I’m glad you’re not. You’re helping me not have to ask for so much.”

“You do know you can ask for anything, right?”

“But I don’t have to. You already touch me all the time. You already feel when I’m upset. You don’t push me at all.”

“Why would I ever?”

“Because this is what other people do.”

“I’m not like other people.”

“I know that.”

“I must say I get a little concerned when you become all too thankful.”

“You’re probably right to be.”

“Draco, talk to me.”

“Later. I don’t want Teddy or Luna to barge into us. It’s… serious, Potter. Truly serious.”

Harry nodded, pulling him to a hug. They didn’t usually hug like that, open-hearted and front to front, but Harry could feel the peace and warmth flooding him as he relaxed into the embrace, allowing Harry to put his face to the crook of his neck. It lasted a couple of seconds before, just like Draco had envisioned, Teddy opened the door — rather quietly, since it was the babies’ room — and called them to go down, for Kreacher had come back already.

“I’m here for you,” he murmured as they disentangled. “Don’t ever forget that.”

“You will never let me.”

“Perks of being a friend of mine.”

Unlike the usual, Kreacher was determined not to eat the “odd spicy food”, and chose to cook himself something before going up to finish unpacking for Luna. The meal went on as expected: Teddy was the one to question Luna about her job and her new pets, the new creatures she found and whether any of them were rare. They found out she and Rolf had discovered a new type of a salamander that acted just like a phoenix, slithering into the fire when it got too old to re-hatch later. It was blue and yellow and they were excited to see more of its magical properties. When Draco, out of sheer curiosity, asked her where she had found it, she said the species was endogenous to the insides of a volcano. They ended up finding out the salamander was five meters long and probably an ancient relative of a dragon. She had brought an egg with her and it was Draco who managed to ease Teddy and convince him that a salamander that big would probably end up eating every single one of his pets. He didn’t yet have many, but since the animal was immortal and Teddy knew he’d never give up any of his animals, he considered the risk high enough.

It was terribly hard to send the boy to bed. Harry counted on Luna’s stories and Draco’s expertise to make him fall asleep on the couch. As Harry went to put him to bed, Luna and Draco exchanged
some more pleasantries and talked some more before she headed to her room. When Harry
descended the stairs, Draco was by the doorpost of their room, waiting for him. Tension was
beginning to build on him again, Harry could see it, so he went straight to him and took both his
hands.

“Let’s go in. You’ll take a shower to wash some of this tension and we can talk while you do that.”

“That eager to see me naked, Potter?”

“You talk more when you’re surrounded by water. You feel far more comfortable.”

Draco nodded. Harry smiled at him and guided him in before shutting the door behind them. Unlike
the usual, he locked it, knowing that whatever Draco had to tell him, it would be hard for him. As
Harry turned to check on him, Draco sat heavily on the bed. Apparently, they were not going to get
as far as to the shower.

“It was my mother.” Harry stopped breathing. Draco gritted his teeth. Unlike the other times, his
voice was not flat and dry. “In the dream. It was her.”

“Draco.”

“I can remember her clearly.” He hid his face on his hands, his body curling as if it wanted to
disappear. He looked incredibly young in that shirt that was far too large and yet too short for him.
He hadn’t realised the man had sought another piece of his clothing and for a fleeting moment Harry
wondered whether he should just measure him and go find him actual, decent clothing. It was not
like he couldn’t afford it. He moved closer to Draco, who was munching at his lips for words, and
sat by his side. “I’ve tried to seek anything else but all I see is her. I saw Astoria dining with me but
the only other person was her.”

“Was Scorpius there?”

“No. No, I can’t remember him.”

“Maybe this is from before, then. Scorpius is roughly one.” He could see the pieces of the memory
trying to find its ways inside Draco’s head, by the look on his face. It was not a pleasant feeling and
Harry knew how close he was to going in and saving him from himself. He slid his right arm around
his shoulders instead. He couldn’t rely on Legilimency for everything. It wasn’t healthy. “It could be
from whatever time you spent with her previously.”

“I know it wasn’t. I remember promising never to talk to her again. It was when I married Ast. I
remember marrying her. I remember my work, the people I worked with, I remember my friends, I
remember Father’s trial, I remember things. Old stuff. I know when they are from. My last viable
memory of Mother was that of the wedding… until last night.”

“Your mother would never have tortured you.”

“But she did, Potter. I told you so. She did it before and I am sure it was her this time. I know that
memory is real.”

Harry took Draco’s hand. He was shaking. He didn’t know how the Slytherin had managed to keep
that for himself for the entire day.

“We spoke to people. She was in Germany.”

“What do you know, I could have been there too!” He took his hand from Harry’s grip. He clutched
Draco closer.

“We are almost sure you weren’t.” He put the unwanted hand to his thigh. Draco swatted it away but Harry persisted. “We found the Chimaera at your place. There were books on how to care for them, and results of genetic experiments and tons of magical signatures.” He squeezed his thigh. “I think at least part of your confinement was in your own house.”

Draco blinked a couple of times. The amount of desperation was clear from how much his eyes, that were now open, glistened. “I would have felt the Manor.”

“Not if you were confused.” He didn’t know where this vehemence was coming from but he wouldn’t turn it down. “We have no idea of what happened yet, but it’s highly likely, don’t you think? Your mother never left Germany. Maybe someone tried to pass as her.”

“No one knew my mother that much to be able to mimic her exactly. I doubt Father would have known the difference.” His lips trembled. “It was her, Potter.”

“Please don’t trust this memory, Draco. You can’t do this to yourself.”

“It was her face. Her scent. Her voice. Her words. Potter, I’m not crazy.”

“I know. I believe you. But you have to believe me too. You have to give me time to investigate before you start building up even more hatred for those we know love you.” He placed a quick, reassuring kiss on his shoulder. “Let me talk to her. If I find something different, maybe we can break this memory into the truth.”

“What if this is the truth? What if my own mother threatened me? What if she threatened my son?”

His eyes were glistening with tears and when he closed them to stop them building up, Harry kissed both his eyelids. He needed Draco to trust him. He didn’t know why or how he knew it was odd but the woman who had threatened her own life to save her child would never have done all that to him. It didn’t make sense. Of everything he found out that day, that information was the one that didn’t fit the most.

“Then we’ll get through all of this.”

“We?”

“There’s no way I’m letting you leave. Not until this is all over. Not until you and Scorp and Astoria and your entire family are out of danger.”

“We’re not the wizarding world, Potter. You can’t just decide and save us.”

“I can,” he said, holding his face with one hand and turning it to him. They were facing each other, chest to chest, all too close for comfort but it didn’t matter.

“You cannot trap me here for that.”

“No.” His thumb caressed Draco’s cheekbone and he just knew. He wasn’t letting him go. “I am asking you to stay. I am asking you to stay because you trust me, because you believe I want what’s best for you, because you want me to help you heal.”

“Are you proposing to me?” he said, mocking, and Harry’s heart sunk in relief. He didn’t doubt he could kiss Draco out of it. He slid his hands down his neck and placed them on his shoulders, resting his forehead against his chest.
“You’re married already.” Harry chuckled. “Are you at least going to think about it?”

“There’s nothing to think about, Potter.” He smiled wanly. “You’re all I have. You’re the only person I can trust. You’re the only creature I believe wouldn’t harm me. Which is actually a statement of how incredibly moronic and incapable of harming anyone you are, let’s be clear.” He sighed and patted Harry’s back. “I am trusting you to help me find everything out and I will try not to collapse before we do.” Harry nodded. “Now let go of me, I’m going to have that shower we said I should.”

“Want me to rub your back?”

“I am taking a shower, not a bath. Are you stripping to join me or are we going to reprise you saving me from my own sickness?”

“It’s fair, isn’t it? After all, I see you naked all the time.”

“And why in Salazar’s name you think I’d be willing to have you naked around me, Potter?”

“Well, why not?” He got up to allow Draco to do the same. He proffered a hand and Draco took it pronto, to lever himself up. “I mean, if you want it, I promise I won’t get hard. Much.”

“Maybe I’m being a little too blunt but you really should find someone to shag, Potter.” He patted Harry’s face, condescending. “This time I am not luring you in and you’re whoring yourself out to me just the same.”

“You are a gorgeous man.”

“Oh, I know. It is difficult to resist me at all.”

“How can you go from shaking and hurting to smug and smirky so easily?”

“You can’t blame me for that.”

Draco smirked and slipped away into the bathroom. Harry didn’t want to say so but he was incredibly happy that the reaction had anything at all to do with him. He knew Draco was reassured by him. He could see it. It was amazing. He shook his head and let Draco take his shower unbothered. He did the same later, making sure to brush the living daylights out of himself, and laid down beside him.

“I made a deal and I’ll be sharing the room with Luna, starting tomorrow,” was what Draco said the second he pulled the quilt to cover them both.

“What?” He sat up pronto at that. His eyes went up and down Draco’s relaxed, close-eyed face, and a tad lower to where the first buttons of his pyjama’s shirt were open. He didn’t want him to leave.

“You need to be freed from my every day, every night presence. You should probably go back to work too.”

“Wait, I can stop joking around with you if that makes you uncomfortable.”

“That’s not it, Potter. Don’t be stupid... Well, not that you can help it, anyway.” Harry punched him on the shoulder and Draco laughed. “I’ll have a lot of nightmares now. You entered my head unconsciously once; I can’t let you do that again. We’ll do it knowingly next time, ok? And start debuilding walls from there.”
“You’ll suffer through them alone?”

“Dreamless Sleep.”

“If you’ll take a bloody potion, stay here with me.”

“I will take it if it gets too bad. I want to unleash these memories and you will hero yourself out to me every single time unless I leave this bed.”

Harry puffed out a frustrated sigh, much like an infant would do, and fell back onto his pillows. “I thought we were doing good.”

“You are a sodding child, Potter.” He laughed again. “I am not leaving your house. I promised you that. But let me fend for myself too. It’s important.” Harry munched his lips, knowing how pathetic he was being, but it was so nice to sleep beside Draco. It made him feel so good. He turned and enveloped the man by his side with one arm, making him embrace him by the shoulders. His head rested on Draco’s cotton-clad shoulder and he noticed the amusement that came before the chuckle. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to sleep.”

“On top of me?”

“I thought that was obvious.” He rubbed his face on Draco’s shirt, letting the scent of soap and Malfoy seep into his nose.

“I pity your wife. Does she know her husband goes around cuddling with men?”

“Yes. Well, not exactly. But she couldn’t care less.”

“How can you possibly know? I haven’t seen her around ever since I came here. How are you keeping her away?” Harry’s entire body stiffened. “Sore point? Are we having trouble in paradise, Potter? Something the newspapers didn’t yet find out about?” Harry didn’t bother moving. He didn’t want to talk about that. He didn’t want to go back to life. He didn’t want to face Shacklebolt or Ginny or his co-workers or the fact that he had to mount up a case against someone that so far could only be either Astoria or Narcissa Malfoy because they were the only people they knew about so far. He didn’t want to do any of those things, not the next day, not ever. He liked the bubble that was having to be with his children and Draco and only once in a while check on his other friends, friends he actually liked and cared so much about. He held Draco tighter and felt when his lips touched the black curls of his hair. “Should I ask what the fuck is going on inside your head?”

“No.”

“What the fuck is going on inside your head?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“You’ve promised to help me and are lying on top of me. I think maybe it should be of my concern, don’t you?”

“No.” He sighed the deepest of sighs. “Go to sleep, Malfoy.”

Draco shook his head, his pointy nose still on Harry’s hair. It made Harry’s heart flutter and the pressure inside him force itself out. He felt like bursting inside that ridiculous, blatant, idiotic, stupid, stupid, bloody stupid acceptance. Why? Why the fuck did Draco find it necessary to fucking reassure
him? Why did he do that? It was the second time already. He didn’t fucking have to.

“You know, Potter, one of the major changes I’ve been through was accepting that I may be a source of relief and not only fear and anxiety on people.” He hugged Harry’s shoulders and caressed the naked skin of his arm, all the way up to the sleeves of his tee. He was speaking to Harry’s hair and it was so good to be taken care of. He could barely remember the last time someone did it to him like that before Draco came along. “Do remember that, alright? Malfoys are not cold-blooded and we are capable of doing unspeakable things for those we truly care about.”

“Does that mean you truly care about me?”

Draco smiled. “So, so thick. It’s something rather worth of scientific investigation how you managed to notice a girl was actually paying attention to you.”

“Prick.” Harry breathed in and out a couple of times, then snaked his leg over Draco’s, feeling them spread to allow it in the middle. Next thing he knew, Draco had turned a little and was embracing him with both arms, keeping their bodies tight close together.

“When you come home tomorrow, I’ll be waiting for you,” he murmured, and Harry clutched a handful of his shirt on his hand. “Nothing has changed.”

“I am not afraid of changes,” he lied.

“Everyone is, Potter. Now stop being dumb and resisting this embrace. It’s very difficult to me, trying to soothe a moronic prat such as yourself, but if you break we’re both doomed. My child is doomed. And even though I know your wife might be a nice mother, your children will be unhappy to have to live with her only.”

Harry wished he had energy to reply, but he didn’t, so he let himself sink and enjoy that embrace. He had never liked their height difference that much before. They relived the nightmare that night, clutched close and with their limbs a little numb from the awkward position. Harry could see the blurry face of Narcissa, through eyes that were not yet completely blind. He could see the sharp cheekbones, the pale skin, the blonde hair. He could also see fierceness in her hazy eyes that didn’t seem to fit the woman he knew. He had seen that before. He had seen Sirius look at Pettigrew with that exact murder intent. Maybe it was a family trait, but he still didn’t believe it was Narcissa. It was just like him, to let go of the visual evidence to investigate the reasons beneath it all. When he reached the bottom of the question, if he still couldn’t refuse the evidence, then he’d bow to it. But only then and not a second before.

He had detached himself from Draco very delicately that morning, leaving a note to him on the Potions’ book, along with express instructions for him not to mind him, because he wasn’t going back home to have lunch. He had also apologised for having left him alone with the children and said there was a book on Astronomy he took from the Manor to keep Teddy entertained in case he got too worked up, but Draco was right. He needed to get back to his life. When he arrived at his office, he met Ron already there, with his right arm on a sling and two cups of steaming coffee on Harry’s desk. Harry raised the Privacy Charms and the wards, knowing that the other Aurors he shared the office with would be curious about the amount of stuff he dropped on his desk.

“Kingsley wants to talk to you,” Ron said, as he dropped his own findings on the desk too. “Take your coffee along, you’ll need it. I’ll guard these.”

In the end, what Kingsley wanted was to know what had happened in the Malfoy Manor. Ron had had to mention it because of the injury, but it was Harry who said they found evidence of experimentation but no actual living species inside the Manor. It granted him access to go search for
the Malfoys, every single one of them, and when Harry said he’d need more people to help him go through everything they found at the Manor, he understood. He was given free pass, a private priority office — closed rooms with magical signature encoded doors — and Ron’s help. His friend was actually happy to be taken from his team, which he left under Higgins’ competent hands, since he couldn’t go on the field with them. They moved the boxes and started cataloguing everything. Harry wrote about every little thing both Hagrid and McGonagall had told him, plus what Draco had informed him when he got home. Ron added that Hermione had managed to talk to some house-elves and found out they had begun to leave the Manor over a year before, maybe one year and a half. The only thing they said about that, though, was the Mistress had sent them away and said they were not to return while she was alive. Since they hadn’t been released and had no will to, Hermione couldn’t properly free them — they were safe, sound and being tended to, bore no signs of ill-treatment and didn’t want to be kept from returning to the Manor if the possibility ever arose.

“They said when the Master went back maybe they could go back to the house. Hermione thinks they’re talking about Malfoy Senior but his good behaviour trial was cancelled in the beginning of 2005.”

“I thought he was a model prisoner.”

“He tried to escape. The responsible Auror said he didn’t deny it, didn’t try to say no, and insisted. He should be out in a couple of years.”

What they had so far was hardly a nice, neat timeline. Ron confirmed the dates on Lucius’ prison (2003, after the corruption trials led by Kingsley and Hermione), his attempted escape in late 2004, three years before. They plotted the information McGonagall gave them, knowing that according to Hermione’s notes Narcissa had gone to Berlin in the beginning of 2004. If she had really gotten sick — Harry doubted it but he wanted to confirm it himself — they had roughly two, almost two and a half years they knew nothing of when it came to Draco’s life. Adding that to the information Hagrid had given them on the Chimaeras and that addendum on his formerly unknown relationship to Hogwarts and Hagrid, the situation wasn’t promising at all.

“I need to talk to Narcissa,” he said, getting up from the desk where parchment was scattered all over the place.

“Are you crazy? How do you intend on making her talk to you?”

“I do have her son, remember?”

He grabbed his Auror robes and left the Ministry, but not without paying Hermione a visit before he went. He got a phial of Veritaserum, Narcissa’s address and a nearby reference for long-distance apparition. She was living in a summer cottage near Castle Sanssouci in Potsdam, all Muggle-proofed and warded to the sky. When he tried to breach the wards, they repelled him, trying to make him remember something he had supposedly forgotten at home. He shook his head and decided he was going to try something else. His Patronus came out to deliver a message to Narcissa. He hoped the plain, simple “your son needs you” would be enough.

It was, in the end. She went down to meet him right behind the wards, still under their protection.

“Mr Potter.”

“Mrs Malfoy.” He bowed slightly. The woman was a Lady after all and he needed her to cooperate.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”
“I am here on behalf of your son.”

“My son has made quite clear he has no wish whatsoever of ever talking to me again.”

“Your son has undergone captivity and torture and has no one to turn to.”

“Your mouth delivers only lies.”

“Milady, I wouldn’t have come this far to lie. Draco is not coming to ask for your help and the reasons why he won’t might be better kept inside Privacy Charms and closed doors, if you won’t object.”

She hesitated, but lifted her chin and proffered a hand.

“I am your hostess and your actions shall be of respect and decency,” she said, and the words came out ceremoniously. It was an ancient pact of truce that prevented treason inside pureblood households.

Harry bowed again, knowing the part he was to play, and kissed her hand, just outside the wards. “As you wish.”

Once inside and being served tea in much the same way Draco did, Harry finally relaxed. The flat was pompous and nicely decorated in creamy colours, with silvery-gold details. Everything was terribly tasteful and clean; he didn’t doubt Narcissa had taken a couple of personal house-elves with her, but he didn’t see them. She drank her tea with the same poise and composure that Draco used, and it was much to her pleasure that Harry used what he had learned with him while there with her: his teacup barely clinked on the saucer when he decided to put it down and get to business. He fought his urge to bend forward and crossed his legs, one his ankle on top of a knee, trying not to occupy the entire back of the couch with his arm. Narcissa had her knees shut tight and her ankles crossed, and lowered the saucer to her lap with a gentle, fairy-like movement. She was hypnotic, and all of Harry’s assumptions about the Malfoys being the high-mannered ones shook a little. That woman looked as flawless as any human being or creature had ever had the right to be. Harry gulped, feeling like a child under the uncanny resemblance the woman bore to the amiable, kind face of Andromeda. She let her face soften when she realised he was truly not a threat, and smiled kindly at him. That smile was so like Draco’s that Harry wondered whether he should have taken the man with him. Everything was easier when he was around.

“I daresay, Mr Potter, I must apologise for the dreadful welcome you had into my summer household.”

“It was impolite of me to just show up at your door, Mrs Malfoy. I didn’t mean to disrespect you but I do have urgent matters to bring to your attention.”

“Let’s not waste time with old, overrated pleasantries, then.” She flicked her wand and Vanished her own teacup. “I believe something was spoken about my son.”

“Mrs Malfoy, there isn’t an easy way to put this so I’ll be brief and blunt. Draco has been taken under captivity and tortured in ways people are not supposed to be tortured in our world.” He saw her jaw tighten almost unnoticeably and her cheeks went a little paler than their usual, but she nodded curtly and he knew she believed him. “He has managed to escape and has been under my care for the past weeks.”

“I demand to see him.”

“It would do more harm than good, I’m afraid, milady.” Harry shook his head. “Whoever tortured
him used your face. He believes it was you. According to him, you have tortured him rather brutally before.”

“I did what was in my power and right to do to protect my son of a fate I am bound not to tell anything about.” Harry frowned. “I can assure you whatever I did to him was with his best interest at mind.”

“Then maybe you can help me here.” He took the Veritaserum. “I am bound by the ancient vow of hospitality. I cannot harm you. If you really didn’t do anything to him this time, allow me to give you some. I need the truth.”

“And why should I trust you want what’s best for my son?”

“Because he’s an amazing man. He has grown to become a man of unquestionable virtue and honour. He respects me, my household, my children. He is raising his son to be the son of a Lord. I trust him and he trusts me and if you don’t believe me, feel free to ask for whatever memory you want. I can provide you anything.”

Harry had to show her his memory of the night before, and despite his blushing and Narcissa’s wordless raising of eyebrows, she decided to believe him. She let Harry pour the drops into her mouth, obedient like a well-raised child, and sat tight on the tip of the armchair she had been using all through their meeting. Harry took a Self-Inking Quill and an old notebook from his robes and began scribbling.

“Tell me your name, age, occupation and immediate family.”

“I am Narcissa Black Malfoy, aged 51, daughter to Cygnus and Druella Black, sister to Andromeda Black Tonks and Bellatrix Black Lestrange. My husband is Lord Lucius Abraxas Malfoy and I have a son named Draco Lucius Malfoy, husband to Astoria Greengrass Malfoy.”

“What about your grandson?”

“I have not met any grandchildren of mine, despite your declarations of their existence.”

“When was the last time you spoke to your son and how?”

“February 22nd, 2004, through a letter.”

“Why?”

“Because I needed to vacate the Manor and he is the heir to it, so I wanted him to keep it while I was gone.”

“Why did you leave Wiltshire?”

“Because with my husband under arrest, my position was fragile inside the wizarding society. I feared for me, alone in there, and I knew Draco was not coming to keep me company. My son had not reasons to fear for himself so he could be inside the Manor.”

“Were you sick by then?”

“No.”

“Have you been sick ever since?”

“No.”
“When was the last time you actually saw your son and why?”

“May 23rd, 2001. He was getting married to Astoria. He was civil and gentle on her behalf, but made sure to clarify I was no longer welcomed in his life.”

“What about your husband’s trial? Did you see him there?”

“No. There were too many people.”

“But was he there?”

“According to my husband, yes.”

Harry was scribbling like crazy. His handwriting was almost impossible to read by now. “Did you tell the house-elves of the Manor to leave?”

“No.”

“Mrs Malfoy, did you torture your son about ten years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Did you torture him now?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know anyone who could’ve wanted to hurt him?”

“Yes.”

“Are they alive?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Are they the last followers of the Dark Lord?”

“Yes.”

“Every one of them or just a particular group?”

“Mainly the Inner Circle. They had unfinished business with our family.”

“Can you name them for me?”

“No.”

“Do you know their names?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re bound not to tell them, right?”

“Yes.”
Harry had to nod and decided to let go of that interrogation. He was ready to when a sudden question popped inside his mind. It was the nonchalant way Ron had used to speak of that, the lack of publicity it got.

“Do you know why your husband tried to escape Azkaban?”

Narcissa blinked once as if he was stupid.

“Because someone had to protect our son of the harm that was going to come upon him, and I am bound not to.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, there, folks! First of all, I'd like to thank every one of you who has taken the time to read, to comment and to keep me wanting to get this fanfiction done. It was due to your reception that I've made it this far and managed to write so much -- we're past 70k words already! This is huge for me, as this is the first drarry I wrote and ever since it began you've been making me happy with every kudo and hit and comment. It's delightful.

Well, we're getting close to Christmas and the end of the year, and also nearing my finals and last university deadlines (they're due the second week of January, actually) and since this fic has become bigger than I thought it would (fear not! It shall be finished!), I need a little holiday break. I'll keep writing, of course, but since I cannot promise you a chapter every ten days (roughly) like I've been doing, I am determining this fiction will be on vacation for a couple of weeks (I hate the word hiatus, it makes my spine chill). A new chapter will be uploaded in January 10th, and after that we'll be back at the regular pace.

Thank you all so much for this year. It has been an amazing one and I hope the next is so too! Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all of you!
Under regular circumstances, Harry would have been mortified to wake up that early on a Sunday. That the Ministry was open on Saturdays was expected — crimes and accidents didn’t wait for weekdays — but that he had volunteered for the morning shift on a Sunday was something he’d have to discuss with himself when and if he ever woke up for real. He had returned from Berlin after promising Narcissa he’d tell Draco she loved him and reassure him of her innocence. She wanted her son to be happy and that would only happen when they reached the bottom of that investigation. She also promised to go talk to Lucius to make him willing to trust him and Harry was only waiting for her “ok” to go on with that part of the investigation. He literally fell out of bed, scrambled to his feet and ditched the sheets in favour of jeans, T-shirt and shoes. He had left his Auror robes at the office. As he slipped from his bedroom, he decided to check on the babies. Scorpius was already up, sitting and playing with the mobile he had lowered to his mouth. Harry picked him up and the boy began babbling. He was becoming much more articulate with time, squinting less, walking better. It was heart-warming to see him growing and picking up with the other children. He checked and changed the boy’s diaper, changed his sleeping jumper into actual clothes — jeans’ shorts and a tee he spelled to read “my father will know about this”, all in such small size that he always felt weird when dressing the children. They were so little.

Unwilling to leave Scorpius alone with Kreacher — not that the elf would mind it —, he went to the guest room, prying the door open. In bed, Draco seemed to be spooning with Luna. Harry breathed his jealousy out and was ready to close the door when Draco rose from the pillow a little. “Hey,” he said, and Harry opened the door further. Draco covered Luna with a blanket, got up, ruffled his hair and patted it back into place before reaching Harry by the door. He closed it behind him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Sorry for waking you up.”

“I was up already. Luna is a block of ice. I was worried she’d freeze over the night.” He smiled and picked his son up. “Good morning, my little scorpion.”

“Pa, papa up Copi, poopoo.”

“I gather you’re ‘papa’ and he’s clean already.”

Harry messed the boy’s blonde hair with tenderness. “We should probably clarify who their parents are.”

“Nice advice from the man who told me he wanted me to be part of his son’s life.” He quirked an eyebrow up. “Hey, I know it’s Sunday but the Apothecary near Borgin & Burkes is open on weekends.”

“I’ll buy your list. Do you remember where I put the paper with your measurements?”
“By the mantelpiece in the living room. You said you didn’t want to forget it.”

“Oh, right.” He cleared his throat. “Listen, about yesterday—”

“Nothing to worry about. I’m fine. I believe what you’ve shown me, Potter.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk to her?”

“Not yet. I’m not ready.”

“Right.” They remained in an awkward silence for a moment. “Well, I must go. I shall be home for lunch.” Draco nodded. “Don’t let Teddy sleep in. And remember to ask Kreacher for the cauldrons. And try not to let Luna bother you, she’s having her blood taken today and it makes her dreadfully uneasy.”

“Potter.” He was giggling. “I know all of this.”

“Reinforcement never hurt.”

“Alright, alright.” He shook his head and pressed his cheek to Harry’s. “Have a nice day at work, darling.”

Harry laughed. “Please never say this again, you creepy bastard.”

“Keepy bata!” repeated Scorpius, and Draco tut-tutted.

“Look at what you’re teaching our children.”

“I can accept you as the keeper of their naivety while you’re here.”

“Get out, Potter.”

He did as he was told, stopping for a quick breakfast and flooing to the Ministry right after. The shift was in Accidental Magic and he was much less than thrilled. It was not as if the guys from Accidental loved him. In fact, if he would be that blunt, they hated his guts. Harry was one of the cases the bureaucracy freaks had learned to hate: sent to live with Muggle relatives instead of being sent to a magical orphanage or into a wizard family, the boy had never, before he went to Hogwarts, received a single note on all the accidental magic he so widely produced. Most of the people in the Section were new but the tales and the fame, as was still recurring, preceded him. There was a single creature in Accidental that truly spoke to him, and rather nicely: Millicent Bulstrode. She was the head of the Section and commanded those underneath her with iron fists. She had not been Kingsley’s — who was still Minister at the time — first choice for the post; in fact, she hadn’t even been in the top fifty, given her prior associations with Voldemort, but the moment the girl spoke to a six years old child who had put his house on fire to protect his mother, she had acquired all the trust she needed to be given an authority position. She was merciless in training her teams and had tightened the bonds with the Healers who helped the Ministry Squads. It was her he heard yelling when he stepped out of the elevator.

“I don’t care if you like it better, it’s our cases now and you’ll do as told, McAlister.”

“Right on, Mills,” the man drawled, jumping forward at the admonishing — and rather powerful — Stinging Hex the woman cast on his butt. “For Rowena’s brain, Milly!”

“Five minutes or I’ll rip your bones off.” She turned on her heels and smiled at the sight of Harry. “Hello, Potter. We’re having a most agitated morning in Skye, Hampshire and Surrey and I lack
personnel with skills to talk to a three years-old in shock.

“I can handle him.”

“Her. And thanks.” She signalled him to follow her. “My people are away and those morons from Laws and Coop are a disaster.”

“At least McAlister tries. What was he complaining about?”

“Oh, the usual. How since the Hogwarts’ teams were reduced we are overflowing with things to handle. It’s been two fucking years and they still don’t get used to it.”

Harry hadn’t thought of questioning her before, but right then, he saw a mine for further information. He just needed someone to tell him something else, anything, about either Draco or Astoria. That two years had been lost for them, he knew, but he wouldn’t stop searching.

“It was about that time that Malfoy retired, wasn’t it?”

Millicent raised an eyebrow. “Are you aware of what goes on in Accidental?”

Harry shrugged. “Kingsley was happy about the service and mentioned something.”

“Mmm.” She continued to walk steadily. “Yeah, he left and took a nice team with him, you know. Astoria was in it. She’s awesome with kids. Theo was there too, and he’s decided to marry Tracey after they stopped. Hell of a good people they were. They teamed up with some Huffs and wreaked havoc. But I’m actually glad Hogwarts still helps us. Wilhern is a pain and won’t give me more people.”

“The Minister could hear you speaking ill of him.”

“Fuck him. I’d pay my liver and eyeballs to have Shacklebolt back up there again.”

Harry laughed as they entered the elevator. “That bad, huh?”

“Well, while the Hogwarts’ teams were all up and functioning, we hardly got anything under two kilometres radius and four years old to take care of.”

“I wonder why they stopped,” Harry said, knowing that would be pushing the subject but hoping Millicent would be too absorbed in the file she was pulling from her robes to notice.

“Oh, I know Draco and Astoria needed to start a family, you know, for blood purposes and so on, so forth. Then his mother got sick and they decided to quit for a while to take the time to conceive.” She snorted. “Big ball of love and feelings, that one. Uptight and bullying people at school to melt down at the prospect of a baby. But since he and Ast never leave the Mansion anymore, I guess they still didn’t make it.”

“So they’re both self-incarcerated?”

“I can only presume.” She paused for them to take the Floo to a glamourous pub in an idyllic little village, but carried on as soon as Harry stepped out of the fireplace. Harry didn’t know how concerned she was for her friend’s sanity. “We cannot visit and I can’t use Ministry functions as an excuse because they’re wizards and etcetera. Daphne says she hasn’t seen her sister in ages, although Ast has been sending letters every once in a while saying they are trying different kinds of fertilization rituals and are not supposed to be apart for long so they don’t leave the house. She’s sent one about a week ago, I think. It’s the only reason why Daph hasn’t tried to murder Draco yet. It’s
creepy, if you want my opinion, that someone would go to such lengths to make a baby when there are hundreds out there waiting to be taken in… and that’s to think of the human ones. Don’t get me started on kittens.” Her marching resumed when she neared a white door in a string of white-doored houses. “Here we are.” She looked at the file again. “Her name’s Posey and she’s alternating between being in shock and panicking.”

Posey was a fearful, red-haired child that was waiting alone in a living room so wide and filled with doilies that Harry was instantly reminded of his own childhood at Mrs Figgs’ house. As Millicent went to talk to the legal guardians of the child — her parents were dead — to explain and question them, Harry kneeled on the fluffy cream rug before the sofa. The girl coiled up further.

“Hey. Are you Posey?” She nodded almost unnoticeably. “I’m Harry. Are you hurt?” She shook her head. “Good. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Harry filled the last lines on Posey’s report and stretched up. Almost one o’clock already. Draco was going to kill him. He put the sheets of parchment in a file and dropped it at Millicent’s desk. She nodded approvingly.

“Thanks, Potter. Lizzie and Gardner already arrived, so you can leave… unless you want to pay next Sunday’s shift already?”

“Sorry, Mills, but I said I’d be home for lunch and my kids are waiting for me.”

“Alright.” She eyed him with a grin. “Can I tell you something?” Harry nodded. “Don’t get me wrong, but I think you should stop seeing him.”

“Him who?”

“Draco. I can smell him from afar.”

“Millicent, please—”

“No one will hear a word from me and I really don’t care about your reasons. For all I know, they are work-related. But if they are going to have a baby and you don’t want to be dragged to the mess that is having a pureblood baby around you, it’s time you stop.” Harry nodded, trying not to blanch.

“But is he alright? He never writes.”

“He’s perfectly fine.” She smiled, relieved. “Thank you for not mentioning.”

She nodded him off, already leafing through Posey’s report. He left for home compulsively sniffing his cuffs and hems, but there didn’t seem to be anything off about them. As he arrived, he marched to the kitchen and stood in front of the sink, where Draco was washing some lettuce.

“Do I smell like you?”

Draco actually rolled his eyes. They were the colour of stormy skies that day, and open, for a change.

“No, Potter. You smell of clover and sweat and cheap leather like you always do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. What did you expect to smell like?”
“I don’t know. Grapefruit. Champagne. Two-thousand thread count Egyptian cotton sheets.”

Draco shoved him. “We can discuss your sudden paranoia later. Now, go change Albus and find a painkiller for Teddy, poor kid’s got a brutal headache and your potions have no label and all smell foul just the same.”

“Where’s Kreacher?”

“Minding the orchids.” He shoved him again, this time with his foot. “Go, Potter.”

Harry found Teddy collapsed in one of the armchairs of the study, with Albus and Scorpius poking the sleepy dragons in Teddy’s pop-up book. He kissed both boys on their cheeks, hugged them momentarily and went to Teddy’s side.

“How bad?”

“It’s a five,” he mumbled, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Maybe a six?”

Harry shook his head and summoned a phial filled with an amber liquid. “Here. I’ll take the babies and you should take a nap.”

“They’re not disturbing.”

“I know.” He watched as he downed the potion. “But you really should rest. This will put you out for some time.”

He settled the boy in the large armchair and took Albus in his arms. Scorpius gave him the book.

“Deddy?”

“He’s going to be alright, Al. Let’s go change and eat, ok?”

Teddy didn’t go have lunch with them, and by the time he went to check on him, he was still asleep. Scorpius asked to be picked up and it was with a smile that Harry obliged. Albus would rather sit on the couch. He summoned the picture album and showed the newest additions to the kids while Draco made himself some tea. He went back with a cup for Harry too, one he placed silently on the coffee table as he sat down in an armchair. The babies loved the pictures of Draco and got excited with the prospect of meeting the rest of the people portrayed there. It took Harry nothing to promise them they’d see aunt Pansy, uncle Theo and uncle Blaise next year. Draco merely smiled. As the children set to their nap, Harry got up, placing a kiss on their cheeks before walking towards Draco.

“Scoot.”

“It’s an armchair, Potter.”

Harry pushed him and sat down by his side. The chair self-adjusted and Draco rolled his eyes. “Why not.”

“Mills basically said I smell like you.”

“What? Of course you don’t.”

“I actually think I kind of do. A little.” He shrugged. “In a way, it does not surprise me. I haven’t changed the sheets since the last time we slept together.”

“Haven’t you bathed too?”
“She says I should stop seeing you. I think she suspects we’re having an affair.” He tilted his head. “Is it normal for your friends to think you could have an affair that easily?”

“With a man? Yes.” He sipped his tea. “Did you tell her I’m fine? Because if you didn’t, she’ll invade the Manor to come after me and it’ll ruin your investigation.”

“I did. Which reminds me I need to ask you a lot of things about the stuff I found out while talking to people at Hogwarts.”

“What you need to do is buy me clothes and my potions stuff.”

“Draco, come on, why are you avoiding—”

“Hello,” said the sweet, kind voice of Luna. She smiled as she re-entered the living room from the fireplace, half a dozen patches covering the marks that denounced the blood tests. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Draco put his cup on the centre table and got up to hold her by the hand. “Of course not.” He sat her on another armchair. “How are you feeling? Dizzy? Did they give you a blood replenishing?”

“I think it went mostly alright.” She closed her eyes. “How’s Teddy?”

“Sleeping. Harry found the medication.”

“Oh, good. Were you going out?”

Harry frowned at that. “What? No.”

“I heard about the clothes and the ingredients. You should have allowed Draco to bring a suitcase with him.”

Harry didn’t know how to answer that. “Well,” said Draco, and Harry had to bow to his acting skills, for the man was actually blushing, “we didn’t think I’d stay for so long.”

“Oh.” She smiled even wider. “It’s being hard taking things slow, isn’t it?” Draco nodded very briefly. “I understand. But you should take some time and talk about it. I can watch the children. It doesn’t seem right that you are living a family life and trying to stay apart at the same time. I mean, it’s obvious that you’re very fond of each other. There are futterwackens fluttering above your heads. They just flutter like that when there’s too much repressed feeling.”

It was already too bad that Luna had interrupted him when he was certain he’d be able to make Draco talk to him, and his patience was growing short by the moment. Harry knew he was beyond uncomfortable, and since Luna didn’t seem prone to forget about that, he decided to go upstairs with Draco reluctantly in tow, held by his hands, and at the end he almost shoved the blonde man inside their bedroom.

Their.

“Why so violent, Potter?” Draco jumped in bed and stretched. Harry could see the pale stripe of flesh that became visible under the hem of the button-up shirt, the blonde hair becoming dark down his navel. Was he even wearing underwear? “Merlin, I miss this mattress. And this pillow.” He took the pillow that used to be his and turned on his belly to bury his face in it. The black trousers, tight on his ass, claimed Harry’s attention. That was bordering the unacceptable. “Have you slept on it? It surely feels used.”
Harry cleared his throat. “Don’t get started, you scheming little shit. What was that all about downstairs?”

“Oh, I told Luna I needed to sleep with her because you and I were trying to take things slow to see if this is what we really want before diving into it headfirst. I mean, we do have children and it is very hard to keep my hands to myself when we are sharing a bed.”

“That’s not even— wait, what?”

“Well, I had to make something up! I couldn’t tell her about the nightmares, Potter.”

“Right.” He frowned. Draco was acting a bit too well. “But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about our discussion before she interrupted us. Why won’t you answer my questions?”

“Because they’re embarrassing.”

“You don’t mind dissecting our non-existent relationship to a friend of mine but you’re uncomfortable about simple questions?”

“Oh, they’re not fucking simple and they’re not something I wanted to out to everyone. I know what you’re going to ask. You want to know how I became what I am. Why I became a Mediwizard and why I was helping Hogwarts with the Muggleborns and why I was talking to Hagrid and trying to befriend Longbottom. You’ll ask about the considerable amount of my family’s fortune I’m spending to fund scholarships for those less fortunate.”

“You’re the sponsor to those scholarships?!”

Draco sighed. “I don’t want to talk about any of it. It feels like it happened a lifetime ago.”

Harry munched his lips but ended up sitting by his side. Malfoy surely looked like he wasn’t leaving his pillow and Harry couldn’t help but to think that at least this way his scent on the stern white case would be renewed. Harry did have a thing for scents and Draco’s was really affecting him as they grew closer. He smelled like something foreign and dead expensive, like being tossed on a bed with sheets too fine to be rumpled.

Oh, wow, maybe he should stop hiding behind his bound-to-divorce marriage and start taking another look on his feeling towards Malfoy. He took a deep breath and collapsed beside the other, pushing him to the side. He put his hands behind his head and stared at the still white ceiling.

“You were happy, weren’t you?” Draco hid his head on his pillow again. “Oh, come on. I know how that must have felt like. Finding something to do for yourself. Making amends. Getting married. I’ve been down the same path.”

“Except you have abandoned your wife.”

“I’m not seeing yours either,” he retorted before he could stop himself. It sounded terribly idiotic and selfish.

“Because I don’t know where she is.”

“But if you did, would you still— I mean—”

“You want to know the details of my marriage, Potter? I can give them all.” Harry didn’t say a word. “I know the rumours about me. That my marriage was a fake. That I don’t love my wife. That I never wanted to take a spouse. None of it is true.”
“Oh.”

“It’s true Astoria and I work far better as partners than as lovers, but I don’t love her any less for it. She doesn’t like sex or romance and it’s her right not to. We agreed on conceiving without it, and it was fine by me.”

“Is this how Scorpius was conceived?”

“I suppose. I already told you I don’t remember ever seeing him, so I can only hope he was kidnapped after me and I was imprisoned before he was born.”

“It could make sense, I guess. I mean, if Astoria had lost hope of seeing you again and could do it herself—”

Draco nodded. “She is amazing, you know.” His voice softened like he was talking about… the love of his life. Harry tried to ignore the pang of jealousy in the pit of his stomach. “We did marry out of convenience. Astoria needed to marry to have access to her trust fund, her shares of her family’s company and her own life. I needed a wife whose views clashed enough with my parents’ to allow me to do what I wanted to but not enough to have my father disown me.”

“You were lucky to find her.”

“She found me. And she’s well-versed on the universe I come from. She promised me an heir and the most perfect of all wives but she said I could have lovers if I felt like it. She said that I could divorce her if I ever fell in love with someone else.” He shrugged his shoulders. “She doesn’t care about building a family yet. She never wanted one, but Daphne is a shrew and if she takes control over her father’s whole company, she’ll burn it down. Doesn’t have a single entrepreneur cell in her body, that one.”

“I can relate to that,” Harry murmured very low.

“To what? No entrepreneurship?”

“A wife that doesn’t want to live a family life.”

Draco tilted his head questioningly, which was a little awkward given that they were still laid down. “Is this why Albus lives with you?”

Harry didn’t want to but eventually said “yes”. “I cannot say I didn’t know. Ginny never tried to fool me. Albus was planned, but she was so upset to have him that we continued to fall out after that. She wasn’t ready to have a son. She loves him, of course she does, but I’m more of a motherly type than she is and we… we are fine with that. I don’t understand how she can look at his little face and not wish to give up everything for him, but I won’t force her to be something she doesn’t want to be. She doesn’t need to be a mother to be happy, despite what her mother says, and I need children to be alive, so we are getting along. I think I’ll get Albus’ full custody. I think that if I ever re-married, she’d never reclaim him. It’ll be like he is her nephew.”

Draco kept silent for a moment.

“Wow.” He said at last. “We really are fools, drooling over babies only we wanted.” Harry shrugged. “Do you think you can save your marriage?”

“No.” Harry sighed and refrained from shrugging. “We are almost agreeing that we shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place.” He turned to face the side of Malfoy’s head. “I still like her. She’s still my friend. She is a part of me. But she’s just not— not my wife anymore. And someday we’ll
have to let each other go.”

Draco nodded slowly. “You would be worried about your wife even though you are not romantically involved with her if you hadn’t seen her for long, right?”

“Of course I would.” He raised his torso a little and stared at him. “But if it’s Astoria you’re concerned about, she’s definitely alive. Mills said Daphne still gets letters from her. Something about being away because you’re conceiving or whatever. Stories. It’s fishy but it proves she’s alive. I’ll go try to find her tomorrow.”

Draco held out his hand and took Harry’s. Their fingers intertwined and the jealousy Harry was feeling dimmed a little. “I know she’s alive.” He sighed. “It’s what happens when you marry under a pureblood ceremony. They say you can feel the parting of your spouse.”

“There’s a lot for me to learn about you and your world, Malfoy.”

He smiled faintly. “Yes, there is. But you’re smart. You’ll make it in time.”

Harry didn’t ask in time for what, but he trusted that Draco knew what he was talking about.

In the end, Harry went to the Knockturn Alley all alone. Finding the ingredients for Draco’s potions was terribly easy — despite the long, inquiring look the apothecary sent his way when he started to read Draco’s very precise instructions on how to pick unicorn tail hair (one by one, always those that feel like silk and shine in a painfully white silver) — but getting his clothes done wasn’t so. He found the store Draco spoke of, gave the measurements to the sole attendant — a dark-skinned, amiable man around his forties — and asked for a dozen shirts, trousers, slacks, underwear. He went as far as to ask for a hoodie, to which the shop owner wrinkled his nose, but didn’t say a word. When Harry went to sign the receipt and confirm the delivery of the packages — due in mere three days — he realised there were at least a dozen items more: turtlenecks, cashmere sweaters, vests, waistcoats and even a bloody silk summer pyjama.

“Oh, I know,” said the owner when he tried to argue. “It’s paid for already. He said he’d send an owl to tell me when he’d want it delivered but didn’t, so I presume you can do it for me too.”

He arrived home and went straight to find Draco. He was at Teddy’s room, lying in the magically enlarged bed with the boy cuddled in his arms. Panicking, he shook the other man slightly. He breathed deep and winked his eyes open despite his blindness. Out of habit, Harry presumed.

“I think the manager from that clothing shop of yours knows you’re with me.”

“Who, Mark?” He was whispering. “He’s the tailor. Of course he knows. He’s known my calligraphy for years; if you gave him the note like I told you to, he’d know it was mine.”

“Didn’t you think you could have mentioned that to me? How can you trust him?!”

Harry was a little unease with the amount of people that were finding out that he and Draco were in close touch: Ron, Hermione, Luna, McGonagall, Millicent and now even that tailor!

“Tailors and cobblers never blab. It’s a code, Potter. Now please go away, I took a little of Teddy’s headache for myself to relieve him and it’s being bloody painful.”

Harry had to take a look at Teddy before complying and leaving the room. That wasn’t so bad. Maybe not everyone was after Draco. Maybe it had been just some petty revenge, that kidnapping. Maybe the risks were low. They had received no threats. There was a chance.
Harry couldn’t bring himself to believe it for a second.

As he collapsed on the couch in the living room, Luna looked up from the building blocks she was playing with along with the babies and smiled that ethereal, fairy-like smile.

“He is nothing like you expected, is he?”, she asked gently.

“Not at all,” he murmured, and slipped to the floor to play with the babies. Albus gave him a tall ensemble and babble what seemed to be very precise instructions to make it even higher. Scorpius tossed a couple of blocks at his feet. Apparently, the babies were doing great even with the turmoil going on their parents’ lives for the past weeks. Trust children to be resilient. Luna discussed something very quickly with Scorp as Albus began the construction of yet another tower, stealing Harry’s blocks to do so. When the man realised it, he picked Albus up and tickled him mercilessly until the baby started to laugh. It was good. Being home, having the kids, having Luna. Having Draco. It was good. He wouldn’t have traded it for the world.

“But he’s also everything you want, isn’t he?” Harry started at the question and stared speechlessly at her for a moment. There was no mistaking her question. He bit his lips but didn’t say a word. She smiled nevertheless, placing a hand briefly on top of his. “Yeah, I knew he’d be. Me and dad, we knew it all the time. I told Hermione. She said I was being loony. But we the loonies know best, don’t we?”

They kept playing, and Harry stopped only to pick up the single, well-written note that Narcissa sent him, saying he could go talk to Lucius as soon as he wished to. That readiness was the confirmation he needed that the woman was not behind what happened to Draco. He kept the note to present it to Lucius in case it was necessary. He got Scorpius to change him, discarding the dirty diaper and examining the boy. He was putting up weight and his constant plays under the sun warranted him a skin colour a little less pale than his father’s — which was not a surprise, since his mother, for the little Harry recalled of Astoria, had dark skin not unlike his own. He was a beautiful kid and Harry knew he was loving him too much for the kid of a guest. Or potential something else. He wasn’t sure about what he thought of Draco yet.

He was leaving the study when he saw a little notebook he didn’t recall being his. It was dark green, bound in dragon hide and decorated with small drawings of snakes and slender dragons. There were a D and an M on it — Draco Malfoy, obviously — and Harry wondered if that was the Black book Teddy had talked about. Teddy’s was black, but of course Malfoy’s would be green. He walked out of the room with it and sat on the couch after putting Scorpius to the ground. Luna had gone to fetch them some food for a snack — Kreacher was still minding the orchids — and he began to leaf through the book. It was written in a small, fine, curly calligraphy that looked almost drawn, not quite written. He saw that there were dates and just a couple of words below each one; he pulled his wand and tapped one under the date of May, 2005, but the words vanished. Finding it odd, he went further, finding an entry from the day before, under the date of July 13th. The words unveiled in front of him and before he knew it he was reading them.

He is far gentler than he was at the trial. He cares too much more. I feel like his mind wants to get lost in mine, and it’s so dangerous. Astoria was right to tell me I should never allow people to read me. It’s like being physically dependent on him. I can never get close enough. That moronic prat is my lifesaver and I need to remember that.

“What are you doing?”

Harry closed the book with a snap. “Nothing.”

Luna tilted her head. “Ok. Want scones?”
“Sure.”

He tucked the Black book away and began parting scones to feed the babies and himself. Still he felt like he had committed a crime, and he knew he’d have to confess it eventually.

It was past 2 a.m. when Harry heard the kicks on his door. His mind turned on alert at once and he scurried to let whoever was out in, afraid that it might have been something about the children. Teddy looked alright when he went to sleep but he had been nauseated and pale for the best part of the day, and eaten fairly little. It was surprising when he saw the pale, mistakenly frail body of Luna holding Draco in her arms. The girl used to take baby dragons, huge eggs and giant salamanders out of holes and pits; she surely could handle Draco’s not that light body. The man was shivering and trembling, rolled up like a ball, his head tossing from one side to the other. Harry dropped his wand and took him from Luna’s arms, running to bed and sitting with him on his lap. He was cold as ice.

“Is it a nightmare?”

Luna nodded. “I can’t wake him up. He called you.”

It took him less than two minutes to find the opening in Draco’s mind and sink into the dream. It was dark, completely dark: no blurs, no colour, nothing but violent arms holding his shoulders and forcing him to kneel. He felt that bloody spider gag sinking its teeth in his lips, holding them open, too open, enough to hurt. He could feel saliva running down his chin, the trembling of his bound hands, held apart by a spreader, something that smelled distinctly of metal. He felt the teeth of the cuffs digging into the skin of his wrists, he heard when the gashes were healed so the points were kept in, not giving in a centimetre. There were no tears, nothing but burning, hot, searing pain on his face and down his back. A whip cracked above his head and then on his back with enough force to slash him open. Something growled in a corner, like a wounded animal. Harry pulled Draco’s real body closer and sunk deeper, giving up his control when something hard, thick and coated in soft, wrinkled tissue entered his/Draco’s mouth. He recognized the scent, the taste, and he tried to spit it off, to close his mouth, but it wouldn’t obey, it couldn’t, it was vital that he did what they told him to, and he felt that thing move in and out and heard the claps and cheers around him until it became so, so much, until Draco pleaded for that to be over, pleaded for help, for someone, because he couldn’t fight it, he wouldn’t fight it.

Harry felt his skin shiver as he cracked the gag once more, the taste of blood invading Draco’s mouth as he bit off a part of the penis sitting on his tongue. He took his wand and released Draco again, picking him up and cleaning him. He kissed the bruised wrists, the broken fingers — they were broken already —, the gashes on his shoulders and chest and healed him entirely, holding him with too much tenderness, shivering with how awful it was, caressing his blonde, matted hair until Draco stopped trembling. He raised his head and stared blankly at Harry, the blind eyes barely visible in a speck of light that was not memory anymore, that was dream, that was wish, that was want, and Merlin, he wanted him. He held his face — it’s just a dream, it’s nothing, it won’t mean anything — and kissed him slowly, feeling as the body in his arms began to relax, to breathe again, to react. They parted with eyes closed and touching foreheads, and soon Draco slipped out of sleep, panting like he had run a marathon. Harry opened his eyes slowly and saw Luna waiting by the end of the bed. She was smiling a little.

“He’s alright now, Luna. Thank you for bringing him here.”

“Anytime. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will, thank you.”
He saw her disappear through the door, his attention whipping back to Draco at once. He was still too pale and too cold, and his skin was sticky and sweaty. Harry lifted him and carried him to the bathroom, where he magically filled the tub with warm water and began washing the limp, worn out body. He felt the skin warming up beneath his fingers, the muscles beginning to react to his touch. It was a quick bath and Harry took him back to bed, drying him up along the way. He tried to dress him up but Draco refused it, clinging to him like a child. His eyes opened lazily as Harry rested on the header to keep him on his lap. He was calmer now. Harry felt his entire body pressed against him, felt it in ways he was not supposed to in that moment. He gulped.

“You are not going to sleep without either a Dreamless Sleep or me by your side, ever again.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” he mumbled. His voice was still terribly weak.

“You were under a fucking Imperius, Draco! They abused you! I am not letting you out of my bloody reach knowing they can find you in your dreams!”

“Potter—”

“It’s not under discussion,” he cut him harshly. Something hot burned on his eyes and he hugged him closer. When Draco’s hands tightened on his shirt, he softened the tone a little. Fucking idiot. “I know you want to spare me the suffering, but I want to go through these nightmares with you. You are—”

An index finger to his lips stopped his soon-to-be-a-stream of words. Draco closed his eyes and, as simply as he could possibly, pressed his lips against Harry’s. It was chaste, and polite, and just warm, but the Gryffindor froze in place. His limbs were tingling with his lack of reaction.

“I wasn’t going to discuss. I was going to thank you.”

Draco made no movements as to back off, and Harry held his face with the painful conscience that he was not supposed to kiss him back right there. Not when he was that fragile. It would be a dick move of his. That was not the dream. He was merely grateful. Gratefulness presented itself in several ways and Harry was going to enjoy it only when he knew it was serious.

“Will you please stop being that stubborn now?”

“Probably not.” He smiled faintly and Harry touched his lips with his thumb to avoid doing it with his own. “But you’re safe, and Salazar only knows how much I need ‘safe’ right now.”

Harry lay down and pulled Draco into his arms. That was better. They were tired and maybe a little too excited over the surges of adrenaline and trust but he knew that having Draco there was just better. Draco moved away a little so Harry could stare flatly at him. Gorgeous man, so important, so necessary. He’d save him every time and put up with every single one of his quirks every single fucking time to have him like that: trusting, smiling, naked against him.

Oh, he was too far gone already.

“Despite your thickness and your awful taste in clothing,” Harry muttered something about him wearing them nevertheless, which granted him a hand on his mouth, “I am beginning to understand why people are so keen on loving you.”

Harry chuckled and lightly bit the skin of the pale fingers to brush Draco’s hand away. “Does it mean I stand a chance?”, he mumbled sleepily.

Draco took a long breath and licked his lips distractedly before pressing them softly once again on
Harry’s. He smiled and didn’t say a word, but the tender, caring way they shared that pillow was worth at least a thousand of them.
Harry had a complicated night, slipping in and out of sleep to check on Draco every few hours. His mixed feelings — tenderness, love, arousal, trust — made it all the hardest to get any sleep. He kept staring at Draco’s body and wondering if he’d ever get to touch it like he wanted to. He looked at his mouth to ask himself whether Draco would ever let him kiss it like he meant it. He remembered the past weeks and wondered how he had managed to control himself so much. If anyone, anyone in the world had been half as attractive as Malfoy and flirting half as deliberately with him, he’d be snogging said person breathless right now. It was weird that it had taken a kiss from Draco for him to realise how bizarre things were between them, and now that he knew it, he didn’t think he’d be able to carry on with that. He couldn’t keep on flirting that nicely with Malfoy when he knew that his mind would be set on stripping him with his every snide remark. No, their relationship would have to change. Harry couldn’t go to work and come home to find a beautiful man lying on his bed and acting as if it was ok. He was attracted to him, goddamn it! He was jealous and growing fond of him. There was no way they could go on without addressing that subject.

He was tired and worn and fully dressed when the man beside him woke up, yawning carelessly with a poised hand on his mouth.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Draco got up slowly and stretched his beautiful, naked body until he felt comfortable again. That, for an example, was something he’d have to stop seeing first thing in the morning, in case Draco’s flirting was mere jokes. It was impossible for the blood not to shoot down his groins at that sight. “Are you going to work?”

“In a couple of minutes.” Draco nodded and walked towards the bathroom to pee and brush his teeth. Harry had already showered and even taken a cup of coffee that Kreacher had generously brought him when he woke up at five and couldn’t sleep again. He was slightly anxious.

“Yesterday’s nightmare was bad.”

He could hear the flush and the sound of a tap opening. “Nothing I hadn’t counted on.” He didn’t see Draco put toothpaste to his toothbrush but the next words were slightly muffled. “I mean, you kidnap someone, you torture them, why not have them play sick sexual games too?” He heard him spit and then more water running. When he opened the door again, Harry tried — uselessly — not to look south to the not so flaccid cock hanging there. He had had enough time during the night to think about literally everything and although he was not entirely pleased with the results of his musings, he’d have to act upon them. “I don’t mind. I know it felt awful in the dream but I’m alive and, really, being an Occlumens, the violation they did to my mind bothers me much more than anything they could have done to my body.”

Harry said nothing. The dream had been all about feelings and he knew he wouldn’t have stood them as easily. He liked sex. Maybe a tad too much, in that particular moment, but if he had been through that, he’d have a hard time connecting to someone ever again. He knew that. That Draco didn’t care was alien and yet, so like him. Trust a Malfoy to care about his family’s and his honour’s welfare better than his own body’s. If all it took for him to leave still breathing — and probably to keep Scorpius safe — was to submit to a couple of blowjobs, of course he would have. No one would ever have to know. His personal honour would never be brought out in open by those people, not unless they wanted to face Azkaban, and he’d never need to share whatever happened with anyone.

Except he did. He did and only then, with a naked Malfoy a couple of steps away, did Harry realise
the enormity of what they had been doing, the enormity of the commitment they had set.

Godric almighty.

He only looked up again when Draco’s legs entered his field of vision. The Slytherin bent over him and held his face. There was true tenderness in the gesture and Harry couldn’t take it anymore. If he was heading for a heartbreak, he had to know it right then. He needed to protect himself and the man in front of him.

“Thank you for last night. Really.”

Harry felt his heart sink. Now or never. “You kissed me last night. Twice.”

Draco smiled mischievously. “I know. Awesome taste, by the way, Potter.” Harry pursed his lips and waited for more. Draco hesitated. His hands left Harry’s face in a rush. Was that fear beneath the malice? “But I won’t do it again if you didn’t like it.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you saying, Potter?” he drawled, folding his arms. “I can’t spend a fucking night away from you without bordering a breakdown. Is it that bad that I felt like kissing you? Is it a crime? You did kiss me too, inside that dream.”

He got up too. Malfoy was still taller than him, but Harry was a little wider. If he touched him, his resolve would crumble. Draco could wrap him around his finger and trot along and he’d follow willingly. That couldn’t happen. It would be bad for both of them. They needed to do that the right way. They were not strangers passing on people on bars. They had their children in the middle of that mess, for fuck’s sake, and they had ignored that bloody tension and the need they felt for each other for way too long.

“Do you like me?” was what he was able to say, decided to set things right. Draco laughed heartily. He sounded sincere. It was the second time he laughed sounding that honest and open around him. Harry didn’t know he was counting. “Draco, I can’t flirt like this with you. I’m afraid I am too far gone to keep playing. If you’ll start to kiss me, I need to know what’s going on. For both of us and everyone else involved.”

Draco munched on his lips for a moment. Harry closed his eyes and asked heaven for some patience. Six billion people in the world and he was falling for the one that could make him go from alright to raging in 3.5 and from moody to loving in the turn of a single key. He rubbed his eyes under the glasses and finally took them off to collapse sitting on the edge of the bed again. Draco showed no signs of saying anything.

“Malfoy, I am not asking for a fucking speech. I just want to know if you actually want something else from me or if this is a game, because if this is just playing, we have to tune it down. The way it’s going, it’s not healthy for any of us.”

Draco lifted his eyebrows. “I thought you liked to be poked and pushed. You were never one to complain much during school.”

“Yes, but we were hexing each other in school, Draco, not sitting in each other’s laps after bad dreams and kissing. We’ve been flirting like crazy ever since you came here and I know you’ve been through a lot, and I know you need someone to touch and to ground you, and I’m fine with being that person, but flirting is different from actually acting upon it. If last night’s kiss was just a slip, some… thankfulness gone wrong, I think it’s fair you tell me. I am not refusing it, don’t get me
wrong. But I’m leaving a relationship that went down the drain basically because we never took the
time to sit down and see where we were going. I truly like you, Draco. I may be thick, but I don’t
make the same mistake twice.”

Draco seemed to consider for a moment, then leaned on the nearest wall. Harry could feel he liked
the way things had been exposed. One point and counting.

“Fine. It was thankfulness, but it went right where I wanted it to go.”

Harry couldn’t believe his ears. He put his glasses back on. “Are you serious?”

“You don’t flirt for weeks with someone you are absolutely not attracted to, Potter, in case your
straight-from-school marriage made you miss this point.” He scoffed. “I am married, I have a son,
and I don’t want to leave it all for you. I like the life I had before you.”

“Roger that.”

“But I will be kissing you when I feel like it and might even do more than that if I feel like it. Your
bloody fingers don’t seem to be able to leave my body and I already have to keep control of you
inside my mind, I won’t exhaust myself trying to keep control of you anywhere else.”

Harry tried not to laugh at the way it sounded exactly like a business deal. Well, what else could he
expect from a Malfoy? Eruptions of love and tenderness crowned with “I love you”s and rough, hot
“I finally found the man of my life” sex? No, he knew better. That was why he knew it could work,
because they were crazy and spontaneous and picked at each other but they were serious enough to
set boundaries.

“I have a question.” Draco waved him to go on. “Is it reciprocal?”

“You want to know whether you can press me against walls and snog me senseless?” Harry nodded
and agreed vehemently. “We have a guest and three children. Let’s try to keep inappropriate
behaviour inside these four walls, ok? With locked doors.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Draco lifted an eyebrow again. “If you take me by surprise, I might kick you in the balls.”

“Ugh.” Draco laughed. “Even so, it’s always a pleasure, making business with you, Malfoy.”

“Samewise.” He held out a hand and this time Harry took it firmly, shaking it a couple of times in a
reprise of what could have been their second encounter, had Harry not been so young and prickly
and had Draco not been so arrogant and snarky. Draco obviously recognized the symmetry, for he
smiled at him. “Now let’s take care of the house we live in.”

“I want my prerogative of a kiss now.”

Draco felt Harry getting even closer to him, so he raised a hand and stopped him, placing it steadily
on his chest. “Priorities, Potter. Breakfast, children, work, you know the drill.”

Harry looked down at the hand on his chest and pulled him closer by the wrist. “Fuck priorities.”

“If you kiss me now, I’ll bite your sodding tongue off,” he gnarled, as serious as death. “Priorities. I
won’t say it again.”

“Damn you, Malfoy.”
“You take care of the breakfast. I’ll see if the babies are awake to feed them.”

Draco disentangled from him and went to his drawers to find some trousers. Harry understood the message and left for the kitchen. Setting things up would apparently change nothing about them, except that now there was a tiny chance that he’d actually kiss Draco. Or, at least, that if he did it would be out of their own free agreement.

He went to try to get some work done after a messy breakfast with the babies. Draco denied him a kiss goodbye, shoving him into the fireplace and rolling his eyes at him. Harry was still stupid about their deal. It was deliciously smooth and fairly unexpected. He hadn’t yet had wildest dreams about Malfoy but if he ever had had, there would never be a moment in which they’d set up for an affair like that, plain and simply. But there again, it was Malfoy, and everybody knew Malfoys had their own ways.

Ron wasn’t there when Harry arrived, but there was a brand new pile of sheets with a post-it on top of them. Being the room a private one, only superiors could send direct mail when there was no one to receive them. Frowning, Harry went to read the note.

_Harry and Ron, I called a couple of favours in the DM and another in Regulation and Control and sent them samples on short notice. The results are in these files. I haven’t read them yet, but I’ll be back for lunch and we can discuss them then. — H.G._

The results were for-your-eyes-only and as Harry leafed through them, he saw what kind of favours she had called. The content analysis on the syringes had traces of blood, two of them in a quantity too small to be further tested, but the syringe with an “A” had blood from Astoria Greengrass (it was a bit odd that her name had not been updated on the system) and Harry extrapolated that to match the other syringes with Draco and Scorpius. He didn’t know why blood had been taken from them but thought that maybe he shouldn’t think all that much about it.

There was another file stamped with the seal from the Department of Mysteries, with the results of the one thing Ron said they couldn’t ask them: a deep-comparison that comprehended the signature in Draco’s body… and about fifty more. Deep-comparison reports were like measuring contents in potions: unless you knew precisely what you were looking for, there was no way you could read it. Signatures were not Harry’s forte, so he put it aside before his eyes began to cross with the little numbers and mixed letters. Ron would know what to look for, since he was the expert — and one of the very few the Ministry could count on.

The next file was on the creatures — the cubs and the peacocks. Harry had wondered if it had been wise to let Ron talk about the case with Hermione, but when he opened the file, the doubts all vanished. There was a full report on blood and venom and a permit to capture the beast, if any were found — Harry remembered very clearly that he had lied about it being dead to Shacklebolt and he wanted to keep everyone unaware of the crossbred’s existence. The venom was the analysis he wanted the most, for it meant something for Draco to counter. There were two, and the acidic one was that of the snake head. If — when — they got the beast, he could milk it for the venom, and that was good news.

When Ron arrived, Harry in the middle of a supposed-to-be-but-not-quite letter to Draco, to tell him Astoria had been with him, although they couldn’t know whether she had been captive or not. Ron saw the letter and frowned, putting a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Seriously? You’re going to tell your about-to-be-lover that his wife might have been his kidnapper through a letter?”

“Good morning to you too.” Harry picked up his coffee and took a blissful gulp. “Your wife gave us
an early Christmas present.”

“Really?” He quirked an eyebrow up when Harry pointed at the pile. The other brow joined the first when he saw the DM seal on the first file. “I can’t believe she went through with it.” He took the file on the signatures and sunk on the couch between the two desks, opening it reverentially. “Shut up.” He turned the first page and summoned a bright orange quill. It started to run along the paper, highlighting sequences that meant absolutely nothing to Harry.

“I gather this is something good?” He took more of his coffee.

“Yes. Oh, Merlin, yes.” He turned another page. “I’ll be here for a while. Please burn this letter to Malfoy. Even I know this is a tremendous lack of sensitivity.”

Harry hesitated but threw a mild Incendio at the letter. He wasn’t planning on delivering it anyway. He was just trying to sort things out in his head. With Narcissa out of the game, they only had Astoria in the scene. He had discarded her as a suspect the moment he saw that white signature, but what if it wasn’t so? Although, if the white signature was not hers, who’d have one so white and be around for Draco’s captivity? He sighed and took a look at his best friend. Ron was mesmerized about those numbers, highlighting and copying and extrapolating them in a way that would make a Muggle Physicist jealous. His hands moved swiftly in some simple, wordless, wandless spell Harry had never cared to learn during the lessons in the Aurors course because, really, it was only useful if you did understand more than basic magi-sig mechanics.

When Ron decided he’d specialise in MSM, both Harry and Hermione were shocked. The first books they found about MSM made it look like a sophisticated mix of Arithmancy and Muggle Rocket Science. The series of numbers and letters and colours (the amount of palettes one needed to know by heart was insurmountable) accounted for something so ridiculously hard that, despite being his best friends, neither he nor Hermione believed he would be able to get through with it. Ron didn’t back off, though. While Harry majored in both Traps and Counters and Interrogation and Prosecution, his friend was trapped with MSM. At some point, Hermione pointed out that she was worried he had decided to do so to keep his heart shielded from the worst of the war, since it had been just about four years since it had ended, and Harry promised to keep a keen eye on him. Then one day, Ron burst out of the fireplace into Harry’s living room, where he and Hermione were, with a shiny certificate on his hands. He was thin and worn, but his eyes had been so bright that Hermione ran to him and hugged him as if it was the first time she was seeing him in months — which was quite close to the truth.

According to Ron, there were only three skills one had to have to get through MSM: memory, logical thinking and ability to do fine small magic. His chess player brains had given him two of those, and his first wand, that hadn’t been cut out for him and therefore needed too much more practice to get going, forced him to develop the last one. Ron was still the only Auror under 30 that was just as capable doing simple but useful wordless and wandless magic as he was with the other kinds. His abilities and strategic brain, plus the degree in MSM, gave him the triad of a headed-to-success Auror career: a position as an Investigator, a team to run, and carte blanche. He only used the last one in its full extent in extreme cases, usually with clocks ticking and lives to be lost. Usually, he used it to drag Harry into whatever he was working on. Having directed his majors in categories that fell under street service and patrolling, it took Harry some time to be able to settle down and do more refined work. In fact, he had only let Ron convince him when Albus was born and he began to feel the decrease of stamina that came with a new-born baby that, although he never cried much, refused to sleep.

When the babies were born, both Albus and Rosie, Ron said he’d drop his job to be a manager at Weasley Wizard Wheezes with George. Sometimes, Harry believed he still might. Other times, as
was the case that day, he felt sorry for Rosie because apparently both her parents would keep on being workaholics.

Well, at least she had a lot of uncles to pamper her.

If they were honest, reports such as the one Hermione had provided them, with that huge amount of numbers and codes to read and match, were particularly rare, and Ron found them enthralling. His coffee was going cold and the lanky man didn’t even notice. Harry believed he could throw a party and blow up a wall in the office and still his friend wouldn’t lift his head from the papers. There were forty centimetres of parchment written already and that length was increasing with every swift move of Ron’s dismissive fingers. Sighing once again, Harry decided to finish his coffee before finding something else to dig his head on. It was only when he put his hands inside the pockets of his trousers that he found the note Narcissa had sent him. Yeah, that would certainly classify as “something else”.

“Hey, mate, I’ll go find a file, ok?”, he said out loud to Ron, who merely nodded and honestly didn’t even hear the words. Harry shook his head and went to the assignment list on the chart in front of Shacklebolt’s office. It was on short notice, so he’d have to count on the partners currently doing the Azkaban tasks to let him in. The names on the paper were Dawlish and Morrison. Dawlish was a pain in the ass and a serious observant of the rules, someone that wouldn’t disobey an order to save his own mother, but Morrison was nicer. She was older and had a daughter in Azkaban for mass-murder during the war — Clytemnestra or Cassandra, one of the many lovers Yaxley had taken to Voldemort’s side. She knew rules were made to be followed but she loathed bureaucracy, since it had been sheer bureaucracy that had kept her daughter free and allowed her to kill eleven children in the Sack of Hogsmeade. Morrison never spoke to her daughter again and every time someone asked about her, she was cold and assertive about her daughter’s guilt. Harry had always admired her strength.

He knew that Morrison would bend the visitation rules to him, as she did. She produced a loop in the book that made it look like Harry had requested that visit months ago. She winked at him as one of the guards of the prison — Robbins — dragged the limp, frail body of Lucius Malfoy and chained him to the stone chair in front of Harry.

“Do you need anything else, Auror Potter?”

“No, thank you, Robbins. I’ll turn the Shield Charms on, ok? So you don’t have to worry.”

Robbins nodded and checked as Harry did as he said he would. The soft buzz of the Shield Charms was a little unsettling during the first couple of minutes, but he’d get used to them. He always did. He summed up every bit of care for Draco and thankfulness for Narcissa to face the man sitting across the unbreakable glass table. Lucius Malfoy was thin, dressed in rags and obviously underfed, but his eyes were lucid and bright, and his hair, although weak and thin, was brushed and carefully braided, a long rope of white falling down to his waist. He was clean, nails included, and Harry understood at once that, having, as every inmate did, to choose between taking longer showers or having better meals, he’d taken the first. Even his teeth were well-kept, but a big cut was healing on the side of his face, obviously done by a spell and almost carelessly treated. As usual, that kind of carelessness made Harry angry. He shook his head mentally and proffered a hand. Lucius, although bound, took it, and his grip was everything but weak.

“Mr Potter.”

“Lord Malfoy.” Lucius’ eyes softened with the pleasantry. It was obvious his blood and wealth meant so little inside Azkaban that he was not accustomed to be called that anymore. “I believe a letter has come to your knowledge?”
“I cannot say I don’t understand my wife’s reasons.” The evasive answer to an already evasive question was what Harry needed to know his conversation was being written somewhere. It was part of the security, so in case any crucial information was thrown into the world through an Auror’s contact with an inmate, they were able to pinpoint who had done so. Otherwise, the recordings were to remain confidential, but Harry didn’t trust Dawlish or the Azkaban guards enough to risk anything. He didn’t think anything could stop whatever monitoring spell was on. “Mingling with the Saviour of our world can bring credibility back to our name.”

“It is both an honour and a pleasure to receive such a remarkable family into my dwellings, my lord.” Harry didn’t know how versed he was in both the etiquette and the wide range of meaning the phrases had, but he hoped Lucius had gotten the message that he had Draco secured.

“Don’t you dread the response of the Wizarding World once they find out you have decided to forgive a family this attached to the Dark Lord?”

“The Wizarding World has no business inside my household. I only allow family and friends in there. Obsessions, fanaticism and lickspittling must be left at the door.”

“Very well.” He saw the relief in the gray eyes and the relaxing of his posture. “Expect an invitation soon.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow up and saw the slight change in Lucius’ face. He didn’t know how he was doing that, but the man understood. The surprise was almost amused on his face and Harry had to hold his laughter. Communicating with prickly purebloods was a pain in the arse when he began, but after helping others Aurors to raid the supremacists Lucius himself had turned in, he had learned those very useful little tricks. Under layers and layers of politeness and fawning usually lay truths too shocking to be brought to surface. Lucius’ long fingers intertwined and he pressed his indexes to his lower lip, analysing Harry. He let him. That was going better than planned. Lucius already knew that Narcissa had spoken to Harry, that Draco was safe at Harry’s place and that he had been to the Manor, and yet anyone who hadn’t been paying a lot of attention would have found the conversation slightly off but hardly revealing. Especially those like Dawlish, who was not the sharpest tool in the shelf.

“Tell me, Lord Malfoy, how is your stay at our fabulous carcer? Have you been well-treated? You do seem remarkably well.”

“I shall not complain of my accommodations, although the sojourn is in fact lasting more than expected.”

“I see.” Harry licked his lower lip slowly, thinking of how to proceed. “It has come to my attention that a distinguished lord such as yourself has been part of an unexpected revolution. A mishap with former colleagues, I presume.”

“Indeed. Unlike you, my previous acquaintances find me toilsome to bear. I am less than esteemed in here in the present days.”

That was the breach he was expecting. He had to ask what he had heard about Draco, what fate he had to protect him from, what was so important as to be worth of more jail time. Narcissa had mentioned that as if it should have been obvious, and maybe if he made it about Lucius, there was a chance something useful could be taken from that conversation.

“A physical abuse, as I can see for the subtle disfiguration in your regal face.” Lucius nodded, more with his eyelids than with his head, despite knowing as well as Harry that the cut was a spell damage and probably made by an Auror. He restrained his will to see whether there were traces in the cut.
Not while being monitored. “Was it motivated by the list you sent us?”

“Oh, no. They are far too attached to their beliefs to harm me based on personal controversies. The defection, however, might have taken a bigger part in this play. I am the head of the distinguished House of Malfoy, and therefore respond to the other heads of Houses whenever something goes out of place with my family.”

Harry repeated the words to himself to keep them fresh. The amount of potential information was soaring.

“I presume your incapability of attending the needs and wishes of your former employer might have added some fuel to it.”

“It cannot be helped. We are all bound by vows. Some of them last longer than life.” Narcissa. The bounds she told him about. They were of that kind, he knew they were. “And do not let the Marks on our forearms fool you, Mr Potter. Our ties of kinship are just as tight as those of obedience, and I, when I permitted my House to go astray, broke the unspeakable ones.”

“I am beginning to believe your punishment might not be over with yet, if you are truly guilty of everything you are exposing, my lord.”

“Echoed my musings, Mr Potter. But being I the one upon whom guilt should be bestowed, it is both my duty and responsibility to suffer through it, don’t you agree?”

“You do realise it might end in an eventual demise of your part?”

He opened his arms as wide as the shackles allowed him to. “We live to die—” his head lowered a little and those grey eyes sunk like piercing needles inside Harry’s. He half expected his scar to hurt again. Very few people had ever looked at him like that and he knew precisely the last time he’d seen that maniac, self-satisfied face. Shit. “—don’t we, Mr Potter?” The last bit had been made in a drawl that felt like someone impersonating Snape, and Harry’s head felt like it had been just smashed against a wall. Lucius smiled beatifically. “And shall fortune shine upon us, there might be enough of a legacy for our souls and our kin to hold on to when we part.”

Harry pounded his head against the table of the corner booth in a small pizza place near the Buckingham Palace where he had reunited with Ron and Hermione for lunch. He had left Azkaban when Dawlish was going in, and had been forced to rehash the conversation he had had with Lucius — the one on the surface — a couple of times until his suspicion that he might be conniving with an inmate was dulled. Dawlish had teased him restlessly about how useless he was ever since Albus was born, given that he had enough time to pay respectful visits to fading aristocrats. Harry had had to grit his teeth not to fall into the trap, and in the end Morrison shoved Dawlish away and let him out. Now, he was trying to open his head under three layers of Privacy and Muffling Charms while Ron and Hermione exchanged aggravated looks.

“Harry, you really should stop. People might still stare at us.” He rested his right cheek on the warm table, staring at her dully. “Are you sure this was what he meant?”

“Yes.” He rolled his face until his forehead was back against the wood. “I’ve never seen someone impersonate that fucking psychopath like he did.”

Ron threw an ice cube at him. “Get up, mate. We’ll see that memory more carefully at the office.”

“D’wanna.”
“Spoiled brat. Come on, I have news.” Harry lifted his head just enough to put his chin on the table. “Godric Gryffindor, I had forgotten how much of a pain you are when you can’t crack a code. You look like you did during the Triwizard.” Harry glared at him. “Ok, news. Good news. I finished that report.”

Harry sat up straight and leaned forward. Hermione, beside Ron, stared at her husband in sheer surprise. “You finished it? But it had like six thousand pages!”

“I’m good, sweetie. I really am.” He pulled a couple of sheets from the inside pocket of his leather jacket. “These are the signatures. I ran the numbers through the database. Awfully outdated, the MAMS. I thought they were pristine but no. There are signatures that haven’t been refreshed in decades there, which is in itself quite suspicious, mark my words.” He tapped his finger at the first name of the list. “There were not many people, despite the fact that there were a lot of signatures. The green one is from Malfoy. It weakens and grows sorrowful as the kind of spell changes. There were some potion-related ones first, then he starts to come with a whole new monitoring set, something that’s only used in hospitals. I assume he did it to monitor Astoria’s pregnancy, but given the fact that he has been confused and everything Hagrid told us, maybe it wasn’t only her. Maybe he was helping to create the beast we saw, but I’ll only know for sure when we get it. They go back to some point around early 2005.” Harry wasn’t going to interrupt the stream of information, but it was always astonishing to see how much Ron could take from a line of little codes. “The golden, giggling thing is not a signature, it’s a diagnosis spell. It’s used to identify the sex of a baby. Boys glow gold, girls glow silver. Something about moon and sun and whatever; it’s an ancient spell. That thing was the spell used to diagnose Scorpius, I presume.”

He frowned and stopped for a moment. His brows were so furrowed that they looked like a caterpillar. Hermione was as impatient as Harry. “So?”

“Every other white signature we found in that room was Astoria’s.” Harry’s heart leapt. “It starts nice and even, though a little differently shaped, and it begins to get overflowed with love, then peaking with frustration, and in the end there’s just tenderness and sorrow. I found none with an active Blood Shield, but I think if we take samples of Malfoy’s and Scorpius’ signatures, they will show the same shield. Apart from that, one of the last signatures is over 90% similar to the one we found on Malfoy’s body.” Whoa, that was a lot of information. Harry frowned and opened his mouth, but Ron raised a shy finger. “One more thing. There were remnants of coalescing spells and some others that I know are pregnancy-related, but directed at the cubs. Logic says Astoria was the pure-hearted person to create those crossbred Chimaeras. The question the signatures did not answer was why.”

“Ok, I need a moment.” Harry scratched his head. “The three of them were inside the Manor.”

“Yes.”

“And the three were captive.”

“At some point, yes.”

“And Astoria got pregnant in there almost at the same time they began to try to create a fucking monster.”

“Yes.”

“Then somewhere along this timeline, Draco and Scorpius were taken apart for long enough that he didn’t remember Astoria being imprisoned with him. And that was after he was blind, too, because he never saw Scorpius’ face.”
“Does it fit the time?”

Ron hesitated. “I don’t know. The first diagnosis spell was from really early 2005.”

“Hagrid said hippogriffs conceive better when there’s someone going through the same situation. Astoria would have had to be pregnant when the cub that turned into the Chimaera we saw was born.”

“So, no, it doesn’t fit in if they tried a single impregnation at a time. There were probably more female hippogriffs carrying those crossbred babies. I mean, Scorpius is about one. We can cast a spell to tell us his birthday, but still he couldn’t have been conceived much before Albus.”

Hermione frowned. “Did any of the spells have a smell track?”

Harry stared at her, confuse. “A what?”

“Smell track. There’s an ancient spell, a runic one, that leaves a scent of sterility behind. It’s an abortion spell.” She sat on the edge of her chair. “There used to be spells that could only be performed by pregnant women in the beginning of a pregnancy. They are not alive anymore, but they were used to bless other women and lands for sowing, I guess. Since the Priestess that did it could not survive the drought of power that follows the delivery of a child, they had an abortion spell. It’s not very known, but if anyone would know about it, it would be a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. It’s the kind of thing their ancestors did.”

“Aborting children?” asked Harry, frowning.

“Taking care of their vassals.”

“There was one.” Ron pursed his lips. “So what, Astoria got pregnant, did the spell to the Chimaera, aborted the child, then decided to have another to grow up with a beast that huge?” He frowned. “No, no, it doesn’t make sense. If Draco was blinded by the Chimaera, wouldn’t it have to be a grown one already? Supposing Scorpius was born in the precise same date as Albus, it would mean they’d have to have the beast ready before mid-2006. Unless they started it in mid-2004, it would not be possible.”

“It can’t be, Narcissa left in early 2004 but Draco and Astoria didn’t vacate their previous house until October,” said Hermione.

Harry took a slice of pizza and munched at it absentmindedly. It was cold already. “And he did say it was the Chimaera, but the only true evidence I found of him being in touch with it was from a couple of weeks, max. It was a bite from the lion head, not the snake one; it would have gotten too infected to salvage him if it was from before.”

“Guys. A female alone won’t make a baby, remember? They would have needed a male chimaera. The venom could have been his. That is, supposing baby chimaeras don’t produce venom, which is something no one knows. It’s not like people have been raising chimaeras for fun and profit all through these years.” She reheated her pizza with a discreet spell. “I’ve studied the venom to help Draco with the antidote, and the snake’s head will only produce enough venom to do a damage as big as the one in his eyes when a chimaera is facing risk of dying, or if milked for weeks.”

“We have a lot of bodies to look for the next time we go there,” murmured Ron, stealing a slice of his wife’s pizza. His was gone for quite some time now. “Ok, as for the dark signatures, I am almost positive one of them came from Amycus Carrow. We got nowhere with others, which makes me prone to believe they are from new people.”
“But Amicus is dead.” Hermione stared blankly at Harry. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“He died during the transportation to Azkaban. That rider group from Hogsmeade destroyed the carriage. Every trace we found in there was his, and was definitely dead. Someone else took the case after that, we were doing trials.”

She closed her eyes. “I really want to believe someone found his body somewhere. I am so done with people rising from the dead.”

After Pettigrew, Tom Riddle and Voldemort himself, they were very wary of people who disappeared and whose bodies were never found. They did have a reason to.

“I’ll look for the files on his death, but let’s make a supposition exercise now. Let’s suppose he’s alive. I don’t think it’s likely he acted on it alone. He would have freed his sister and Alecto is still locked up. I checked.” Ron grabbed another slice of pizza. “How did they enter the Manor in the first place? And how did Amicus, of all people, manage to play Narcissa for her own son?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. And they’re cruel, but they’re cowards. None of the Carrows would ever come up with such an idea. It takes balls and they have none.” Harry rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses.

“Malfoy senior was focused on bonds and kinship. The Carrows were merely tolerated by the others. No Malfoy would be bound to one of them. In fact, I think they were barely a part of the Inner Circle, because let’s face it, Voldemort did treat them as pawns and sent them to Hogwarts the moment he could. He didn’t need someone remotely smart for that, just well-trained. This is something from someone smart.”

“What about Snape? You said Lucius spoke like Snape in the very end.” Hermione bit her lower lip.

“Yes, but Snape was bound to protect Draco. He can’t be a part of it. Not to mention, he actually is dead. I saw it, I checked it, I buried him, for Godric’s sake.”

“Still, he did protect the ferret once, mate. Remember? In that tower.”

“It keeps coming back to that tower,” he muttered, scratching his scar out of habit. “I can’t do this anymore, I need to cool down a little.”

“We get back on it tomorrow?” asked Hermione, hopeful.

“Tomorrow. And we’ll go to the Manor too.” He raised his glass. “I’ll bring the memories.”

“I’ll bring the booze.” Hermione glared at her husband. “If you think I’m going to sit through two interrogations with purebloods while a hundred percent lucid, you’re out of your mind.”

Harry chuckled at that and the scolding it earned his mate. They had to add the information about the Inner Circle, crack the codes in Lucius’ words and find out where the words of Draco’s parents’ met to build a hole, a gap in the stream of information. He thought he’d probably have to pay another visit to Narcissa too. Only then they’d have something solid to begin with. Not to mention they still had a bloody chimaera to capture.

Given the no-break that was lunch, it was actually nice when Harry returned to his office to find Luna waiting there. She was dressed in field clothes again, and he hugged her dearly. He had been so worried with Draco and so over his own head with that bloody case that he had failed to give her more attention. For a moment, he felt like a terrible friend.
“I’m leaving later. I’ll pick Rolf up at King’s Cross and we’ll go spend some time with dad before your birthday.”

“Oh, wow, I had forgotten.”

“I know.” She smiled brightly. “Thank goodness we didn’t.”

He stood in front of her for a moment longer. “Luna?”

“Mmm?”

“Would you mind not telling anyone that Draco’s with me?”

“I won’t tell. I know there’s something wrong and I trust you’ll look for us if you need us.”

“Thank you.”

“But you have to do something for me too.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t let him sleep alone. He’s too scared, Harry. He thinks he’s going crazy and he’s so afraid of letting you see it. He’s not used to need people like this and you’re the only person he trusts. Don’t leave him alone, please.”

“I won’t.” She smiled brightly. “Next time, I’ll find more time to spend with you.”

“Don’t worry, I understand. By the way, Draco’s good. He’s a nice catch.”

Harry scratched the back of his head. “Luna, about that…”

“I know you were not a couple when I got there. But after yesterday? You can’t kiss someone like that and pretend nothing happened.”

Harry knew he paused and his face must be looking very stupid right now. “I kissed him, you know, physically?”

She giggled. “I’ve never seen you kiss Ginny like that. I think you may have found something… and for once, your futterwackens are quite calm, today.”

Harry patted his hair to get rid of the alleged creatures. He smiled and hugged her again. “I miss you so much, Luna.” He held her even closer. Her innocence was a bloody balm in the havoc that was his days. “I’ll see you soon.”

It was only when she hugged Ron and promised to see him again, right before she departed, that Harry noticed his best friend had been in the room for the entire time. He closed his eyes in a search for patience and sat by his desk. There was no way he would leave unscathed. There was absolutely no way.

“Say it.”

Ron suppressed a smile. “Nothing.” Harry quirked an eyebrow at him. “I mean… Harry and Draco, sitting by a tree—”

“Oh, Godric, you’re hopeless.” He threw an inkwell at him, but Ron Vanished it wandlessly, laughing out loud. “Go write your report on those signatures.”
“Ok, boss.” He snorted another laugh and kept singsonging. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G—”

Harry threw another inkwell at him. It was going to be a long afternoon.
“You look like crap.”

Harry walked out of the fireplace without bothering to brush the soot away. He collapsed on the couch and closed his eyes, taking off his glasses and rubbing his temples tiredly. “You cannot see.”

“You still look like crap.”

It was late, already, and Harry had, for the first time ever since Draco had arrived (coma excluded), lost the bedtime for both his children. It had not been his fault: Shacklebolt asked him to go on pursue with Dawlish and he had had to do the interrogation on his own because the man was still pissed about him being able to enter Azkaban without his express permission. His head hurt and Harry felt like the Hogwarts Express had just ran him over. He had a major burn healing where an *Incendio Maxima* blasted some of his clothes, now properly balmed and bandaged, on his side, the one he was used to sleeping on. His eyes were dry of exhaustion and all he wanted was to fall asleep right then, right there. He didn’t want to break the news about Astoria’s captivity and Lucius and Amycus to Draco. He just wanted some peace and quiet and maybe a cup of tea.

“Here.” He opened his eyes to see a hazy cup being offered to him. He took it with a sighed “thanks”. “I put some painkiller in it and some Restoring Draught too. Drink it. It’ll make you feel better.”

“There’s nothing in here,” he murmured after he took a sip. “Those you said are bitter.”

“Well, your recipe is, but I told you I’m a good potioneer.” He sat on the couch by his side and curled up with a cup of tea for himself. “Al and Scorp are already asleep. Teddy said he’d wait for you but sleep conquered him about an hour ago. What took you so long to get home?”

“I was pursuing some guy. Don’t even know his crime.” The spiced up tea was beginning to wash away some of the pain and the tired tension, leaving a sliver of something soft in its wake. “Today was a long day.”

“So I thought. I had enough time to start the antidote.” With his hazy, glasses-less vision, he couldn’t see if Draco was truly smiling like his voice said he was. Still, Harry made an effort and stared, if a bit cross-eyed, at him. “The first dose shall be ready by tomorrow.”

Harry smiled and congratulated him weakly, but talking about the antidote made him remember the day’s discoveries, so he sighed to gather strength to pass them on. “Listen, Draco, I’ve found some other stuff—”

“Astoria is still alive. I haven’t felt anything.” He took a sip of his tea. “You are passing out already. Whatever you have to tell me can wait until tomorrow.”

“But it’s important.”

“And so is your health, you moronic arse. Come on, finish the tea and let’s go upstairs. I can smell burning salve and you should probably let me put some Dittany to whatever wound you got.”

Draco got up and flicked his teacup and saucer to the kitchen sink, where they landed undisturbed and silent. Harry didn’t have the strength in himself to discuss, so he let himself be guided upstairs and into a shower, dressed in his favourite summer pyjamas and laid in bed. Draco applied more balm and some sweet-scented mixture that had only a trace of Dittany, then wrapped the wound.
again and pulled Harry to sleep on his other side. Even Legilimency hadn’t left him that exhausted. It felt like his brain was failing to connect the thoughts, and at last he heard Draco chuckle.

“Stop fighting sleep, Potter. You’re just like your godson.” He kissed Harry’s jet-black hair and closed his eyes. Harry was so tired that he didn’t notice they had been open. “Tomorrow I want you to go to work later. We need to talk and I want the children to at least have breakfast with you.”

“I cannot get late.”

“Shhh, no discussing. Ministry’s regulation say that you have to have a break of at least eight hours between shifts and are allowed a minimum of one hour more for every extra one you spend at work. It’s almost midnight. I think your boss won’t mind you arriving at ten something instead of eight, but if he does, you can always just don’t show up.”

Harry chuckled. “It feels good to have someone taking care of me.”

“I thought so, Potter. Now shut up and sleep.”

Harry felt himself drift off to sleep with the vague understanding that maybe that thing between Malfoy and him was nicer than he thought it’d be. Going home to Draco was almost blissful and for the first time in a long time now he understood the concept of home. He had felt at home during his first years of marriage with Ginny — she had been every bit as careful as Draco, but it was different. He decided, before sleep fully overtook him, that he was better off with different.

He started around seven in the morning, worried when he noticed that the Self-Alarm Charm had been deactivated. He tried to get up but a firm hand to his stomach had him stopping at once. Draco was not sleeping, that was obvious because of the amount of force he was using to keep Harry in place, but he pretended very well. Harry smiled.

“You can get up to pee and/or brush your teeth before you come back to this bed so we can start this day again, this time without you acting as if the bloody house were on fire.”

Harry rolled his eyes, but relaxed back in bed. “Bossy arse.”

“Get used to it.” He took his hand from Harry’s body and got comfy on the quilt with a heavenly look on his face. “Feel better?”

“Yes.” Harry tried to move onto his wounded side and the harmed skin tingled a little. He cursed in a murmur. “Bloody spell.”

“Next time, build a better shield. You cannot possibly be that incompetent, Potter.”

“Last time I checked, you were bad at defensive spells.” Draco wrinkled his nose. “Boy, I’m glad we had no nightmares tonight.”

“I took a Dreamless Sleep. You were too wasted to be of any help if it did happen anyway.” Draco yawned, hiding it on his pillow. “Do you mind if we talk before going downstairs? I don’t want the children to listen.”

Harry forced himself to relax further, instead of tensing when he remembered the amount of things he had to tell Draco.

“Sure.” He closed his eyes. “Do you have any questions?”

“Have you found my wife?”
Harry shook his head. “Not yet. But we know she has been taken as a prisoner and it seems to have been at the same time you were.” He took a deep breath. “So far, we have found out that you were taken apart after she was pregnant. You seem to have monitored her entire pregnancy in that second dining room at your place.”

“The one beside the study from where you took that book?”

“You remember that?” Harry sat up, staring at him, hopeful.

Draco sniffed. “No. I remember where the book was. I don’t know why, actually.” He frowned as if focusing. “Potter, we hardly ever used that dining room. It was closer to Father’s study, which is still crowded with Dark Magic, and I can remember very clearly that Astoria didn’t like it.”

“Well, you were confused enough to do it. Like I said, you monitored her entire pregnancy. You knew you were expecting a baby boy.” He didn’t know how much he should say, but given the fact that they would still go on with Legilimency, the less barriers they built, the better. “You probably taught her how to abort your first child.”

“A moment of sanity, probably,” he murmured, almost to himself. To Harry, he said: “I doubt I would have liked the idea of having my wife pregnant while we were imprisoned. Who knows what some maniac could do to whatever child we brought up?”

Harry had considered that scenario, so he kept quiet for a moment. “Your wife also helped to create the crossbred chimaera.”

Draco sat up with such swiftness that he almost hit Harry with his shoulder. “That can’t be.”

“I told you what Hagrid said. It needs a pure-hearted someone.”

“But why would she create a monster to turn it against us later?” He saw his body coil the less a body could coil. “It wasn’t her, Potter. You cannot believe she would have tortured me like this.”

“No!” Harry looked at him, unbelieving that he’d as much as suggest so. Harry had been adamant in defending Astoria, except for a couple of hours when his head was too messed up. He knew she wasn’t guilty. She couldn’t possibly be. He took both of Draco’s hands and kissed his knuckles with tenderness. “We have tons of dark signatures. We have signatures no one was able to match yet. She was probably just—”

“Defending us.” Harry saw the veil that showed when Draco’s open eyes blinked. He felt that same need of when a nightmare was going on, and put an arm around Draco’s shoulder when an unleashed memory assaulted them.

“Go,” said the delicate, frail voice of a woman. “Take him and leave, Draco.”

“I can’t.” She was crying, and Harry recognized Astoria. “I’ll find you soon, I promise, I promise you, now please go.”

The next thing he recalled was a tiny hand on his free one and the sucking of Disapparition. Draco fell back from the memory into his body to find tears building shyly in his eyes. Harry didn’t know what to say. Why couldn’t Astoria go with him? Who had taken him away? What the hell had they just seen?

“I don’t know why she couldn’t come.”
“I know.” Harry put a hand on top of his. “But if she cannot leave for some reason, we will find this reason and free her from it, I promise you. Trust me, will you?” Draco gritted his teeth but nodded. “We found a signature that matches Amycus’. We are trying to see if it’s really him.”

“Wasn’t he dead?”

“You served a dead man for long enough to know the dead we meet don’t tend to remain dead for far too long.”

Draco nodded again. Then, he held Harry’s wrist with a tad too much force. “Potter.”

“What?”

“Amycus was not a part of the Inner Circle. It was a member of it who allowed him in.”

“Do you remember who was in the Inner Circle?”

“Yes.” He looked suspiciously like his mother, and Harry’s voice softened.

“But you cannot tell me, can you?”

He shook his head. “Unbreakable Vow. Even Father, when he gave you all those names, never specified who was in the Inner Circle. We can’t.”

“But Voldemort’s dead. Shouldn’t the Vow die with him?”

“The Vow only crumbles when the one that cast it dies.” He lowered his head, and Harry understood at once.

“Oh.”

“I am sorry.”

“No. No, don’t be.” He kissed Draco’s left temple gently. “I’d rather have you alive than know the names of those who actually knew what the Dark Lord did in his pyjamas.”

He laughed out loud, surprised with the statement. “Not much, I can assure you.” He sighed. “Anything else?”

“The venom. We found out that the acidic one is from the snake head, if it is of any help for you.”

“Do you have the specs on it?”

“In a folder by the desk. Feel free to go through it, but please, not around the kids.”

“I am not stupid, Potter. If the ones who did the analysis are good enough, I might be able to synthesize some to help make the antidote more powerful.”

“I knew you’d be able to.” He laughed. “There’s something else, too. I spoke to your father. He’s fine, and he’s given me a lot to think about.”

“Do you want to share?”

“Later.” He frowned. “You would be able to see a memory of mine, wouldn’t you?”

“Inside your head? I think so. I can still see in my dreams.”
Harry nodded slowly, thinking to himself. “Good…” He held Draco’s face. “I think I’ll skip work altogether.”

Draco shook his head. “You’re impossible.”

“Yes.” He gave Draco a quick peck and stumbled out of bed. “I’ll shower and then we can go have breakfast.”

“Hey, I wanted to shower!” Draco ran and stopped him in front of the bathroom. “You leave shampoo on the floor, you pig.”

Draco tried to push him away, and it was so nice, and it was so carefree, and Harry slipped into the bathroom alongside him and they stripped in a rush, competing to see who would finish first. Draco, pureblood and blind as he was, was still quicker (maybe it should be noted he was wearing less clothes) and Harry had to stop him before he closed the glass door on him of the shower.

“Potter, let me shower.”

“Let me wash you.” Draco scoffed. “The doors are closed. We need some relief and we don’t have much time.”

Draco rolled his eyes and Harry entered the shower with a smile on his face. Draco ignored him altogether, taking the sponge and pouring liquid soap on it. He made some bubbles but Harry shoved him under the main jet of pouring water and stole the sponge.

“Allow me.”

Draco hesitated for a speck of a moment, but decided to let him do it. Harry knew he needed time to digest the information — which he had taken rather gracefully, in fact — and why not help him? That burst of fun could look unexpected but what else should they do? They were not going to sulk and mourn something that had not even happened yet and upon which they had no control. Harry positioned himself behind Draco and began to brush his back, beginning on his shoulders and slowing carefully down. The water was hot but not scalding; yet, he could see the streaks showing on the pale skin. Godric almighty, he was gorgeous. Harry saw him begin to relax under the improvised massage, spreading his legs apart as Harry soaped them too, going up between them and on the crease of Draco’s white, firm ass. The Manor did have a lot of stairs, and so did Grimmauld Place. Beneath his touch, Draco squirmed.

“Too close for comfort, Potter.”

“Let me clean you. You can do it to me too if you want. To, I don’t know, keep in control.”

“Oh, you’d like that.”

“Like you’re liking it too.” He pushed Draco a little so that water began to run down his back. “You’re beautiful.”

“I know.”

Harry smiled at his smugness and kissed Draco’s shoulder before he could force himself to stop. Instead of questioning and pushing him, Draco just hummed. It’s good, isn’t it, he wanted to ask, but instead he pulled Draco out of under the showering water to allow him to carry on. He placed another kiss, this time between his shoulder blades, and lowered his lips to the middle of Draco’s spine, as his hands soaped his arms. Whatever contained tenderness they shared was now overflowing, as if last night had been a turning point. His restraints had been broken and he was
loving it. Those caresses, those kisses, they were not about the taste — something watery and fresh, given the circumstances — as much as it was about feeling him relax under his lips. Harry was trying his best to disregard the first shots of blood down his groins, so he turned Draco around and started from his feet this time. The sponge went up his shins and knees and thighs, and for a moment Harry wondered if he was actually doing that, but it was just a moment. He gathered foam in his hands and pressed, rubbing in gentle, delicate movements on Draco’s sack, peeking from his low position at the sudden change in his face. It looked like he was on the brink of self-control. Should he feel guilty for not feeling guilty at all?

“If you want me to stop, say it,” he said, low but firm, as his soaped hands went up to wrap gently around his cock. He saw Draco swallow, all that length of neck, and showered himself in imaginary cold water. They were not going that far. Harry could feel the penis engorging on his hand, excited with being manipulated for the first time in an apparently long time, and he cleaned it with movements a tad too slow to be merely practical, rinsing it clean. Breathing in deep, he took the sponge once again and continued the way up, taking just a moment to brush those pinkish nipples very delicately. He rinsed his hands and took more soap, this time building foam on his palms to work through the nodes and strains on Draco’s shoulders and neck. He knew he was building another kind of tension, but no one was telling him to stop.

When he finally ended, he pushed Draco under the water again.

“There. Feel better?”

“You, Potter,” he began, and his voice was hoarser than usual, “are a blatant arsehole.” He shook his head. “Goddamn teaser.”

“You were the first to tease. It’s not my fault.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Come here.” He pulled Harry closer, held his chin and kissed him on the lips, brief and not as chaste as his usual. “Because you were so thorough. Now let me wash my hair as you get cleaned.”

Harry acquiesced and rubbed his body with force to try to prevent the excitement from building up further. That was the problem with teasing someone he actually wanted to have: there was no hiding it. He was focused and purposefully rinsing the soap when he felt Draco’s long-fingered hand on his left shoulder, his thumb massaging the back of his neck in slow, small circles. Harry closed his eyes and forced himself to relax into the touch. He grunted when Draco rubbed a particularly sensitive spot.

“Has anyone ever told you these noises you make are of the unholy kind?” Harry nodded without really paying attention to what was being asked, and Draco shook his head. “I’ll make a life goal to bring these noises out of you.”

“Mmm, long-term commitment.”

It was Draco’s lips he felt on his just relaxed shoulder, it was his chest getting closer to his, it was his, the body heat behind him.

“We have never been this close, this naked and this conscious.” Harry had to laugh. Draco smirked. “You have a lot of self-control, Potter. I’m impressed.”

“What, you thought I’d abuse you because we have a deal?” Harry shivered when one of Draco’s hands slipped down his spine. “I am warning you, Malfy. I am controlled but I’m not made of ice.”
“Are you sure? Because you’re melting in my hands.”

Both of them laughed out loud at that ridiculous pick-up line. Harry closed his eyes and turned around. He understood Draco’s need. Things with their lives and the case might not be as promising as they thought, but they were going places and that did spark relief on them. It was reciprocal. It was good.

He only understood how good when Draco’s lips pressed on his with an intent that made it feel like the first, blissful time. He had been right in all of his guesses of how Draco’s lips would feel, thank you very much, but he had to yet add the peerless shockwave that was finally tasting them freely like that. He hadn’t realised how much he had been anticipating it, that something out of lust and desire. It took Draco a moment to push harder, but he wrapped his hands around Harry’s shoulders and it was him, good gracious Gryffindor, it was him who first swiped his tongue across Harry’s lips, breaching them open and sliding in gracefully. Harry tasted the dull sweetness of his mouth, the arousing warmth inside it. Draco actually purred when their tongues jostled, seeking dominance, and he put his weight into the kiss. Harry fought back, sliding one of his hands to Draco’s hair and tugging at it as the other lodged on his slender, naked waist, kneading it recklessly. Draco’s left hand went up Harry’s back as the other went down, pulling him closer and up, making Harry get on the tips of his toes to kiss him further. Draco nipped his lower lip and tugged at it with merciless teeth. He was breathing heavily and Harry was surprised to see that his pupils were blown wide. Apparently being blind had no correlation at all with that particular response.

Draco chuckled and they stood still, breathing each other’s air for a moment before Draco’s lips parted in a mischievous, guiltless smile. Harry blinked, stunned, and ignored the fact that any movement a little more south would probably make him gasp already. So much for trying not to be excited.

“I still need answers,” he stated, and Draco laughed. “I’m serious. Where have you been putting all of... this?”

Draco smiled kindly at him. “I may have orchestrated a restraint on the arousal you were building about me.”

Harry’s face fell and his excitement deflated. “You tampered with my mind?”

“Technically, I suggested it tuned it down and made a small detour.”

Harry stepped back. “You are an Occlumens. We are bound by a Binding Promise. You abused your power.”

“Before you get all ruffled up and storm out of that door, like you Gryffindors tend to do when things don’t go according to your plans, I want you to know you wouldn’t have been able to help me if every time you touched me your first reaction was to get as hard as a tree.” Harry folded his arms, trying to refuse his point. “But, as also seems to be recurring when it comes to you, you found a way around my efforts and proved me… not that right. After all, you kissed me because I needed it. You have been putting my needs above your own and it’s not the restraint talking. It never has been. I suggested your mind that you should tolerate me, but I didn’t have to, did I? You had suggested it yourself.”

“I said I liked you.”

“I kind of got a grasp on it when you put your tongue inside my mouth right after I spit off a piece of someone else’s cock. Even if it was a dream.”
“You do realise all you needed to do to make me not be aroused by you was to say ‘no’, right?”

“I know. But I have a hard time closing doors that early.” Harry rolled his eyes and shoved him, but Draco didn’t budge. “Us being here right now shows my point precisely. I took the restraints and detours off. We don’t need them. I don’t even think they really worked.”

“Of course they didn’t. They weren’t necessary, you moron, I had it covered. Sort of.” Harry took a deep breath. “But seriously, Malfoy, if we are going to do this, and boy, I want to do this, you are forbidden to tamper with my mind ever again.”

“Even if it is to prevent you from killing yourself?”

“I’ll take the bloody risk.” He shook his head. “You have to trust I know what’s best for me.”

“You married a Weasley.”

“Malfoy.”

“Fine. No mind works.”

“Good.” Harry smiled and pulled him back down to kiss him again. It was softer this time, thorough and calm, and it was so impressive that Draco would give in to what he felt so easily. Maybe his attempt of restraining Harry had turned the other way round. He felt him rinsing the last of foam from both their bodies and the tap closing. The lack of water pouring over them came with a quiet chill and the oblivion that follows the interruption of a loud, all-encompassing sound. It lasted forever. There was nothing to pay attention to, nothing but Draco’s hands and lips, nothing but their skins getting goose bumps and cooling as the heat began to concentrate on the stripes of flesh actually touching, nothing but the way Draco’s hand slipped down his body and found his throbbing erection. It was so good it should be forbidden.

It was Draco who listened to the pounding on the door. They split up and Harry sighed, unhappy.

“What is it?”

“Master Teddy wants both Masters downstairs for breakfast,” said Kreacher’s dry voice.

“We’ll be down in five, Kreacher.” He closed his eyes, breathed in deeply and exhaled, opening them. “Let’s go, lest he finds us.”

They stepped out of the shower, taking the big, white, fluffy towels and drying each other in vigorous, practical movements that wore their building erections off. Draco took boxers for both of them from a drawer as Harry picked up his best pair of jeans and offered his comfy lounge pants to Draco, who dressed them thankfully. Harry was about to give Draco a tee when he saw him pull on the navy blue hoodie over his naked chest. Harry rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and tried not to give much thought to the borderline way the hoodie’s hem touched the pants. Bloody giraffe. He huffed.

“How can you look gorgeous in a fucking lounge outfit that’s not even your size?” he asked, irritated. Draco laughed.

“Don’t be jealous,” he said as he pulled the sleeves up too, for they barely reached his wrists. “I am pretty sure you look almost passable in whatever aubergine-and-orange shirt you chose.”

“What colour do you think your clothes are?”
“Whatever colour they might be, no one outside this house will ever see me in them, so why bother?” Draco smirked. Harry rolled his eyes and opened the door. Draco was walking right beside him. “No mentioning anything to the kids?”

“Why would we ever?”

They went out of the room and downstairs. Kreacher had made eggs and bacon for breakfast and the scent reached both guys before they got to the kitchen. Harry couldn’t account for Draco, but he was starving. Teddy was standing impatiently by the door, his turquoise hair glistening and eyes a fiery crimson, frowning at them and tapping his little bare feet on the floor. Harry tried his best not to laugh, and was a little turned off when he realised Malfoy couldn’t see the scene. Teddy scolded them when they entered the kitchen, presenting them the babies, who were tied up to their tall chairs with elven magic. Albus was quiet and sulking, while Scorpius noticed his father and stopped squirming. He called Draco and it was only a moment before the boy was happy again. Harry assigned Draco a chair and went to sit between Teddy and Albus. He untied the baby, whose scowl was beginning to look permanent towards Harry. He thought his child might be mad at him and he was willing to give it up when he refused to be helped by Harry. After what could be the tenth spoonful of food splattering on the table, he gnarled. Draco, who had been feeding Scorpius and chatting amiably with Teddy, who was now not that crossed anymore, turned to them with a mix of smile and smirk that was equal parts understanding and infuriating.

“What?”, said Harry, impatient.

“You seem to be in need of some assistance there, Potter.”

“Don’t say it,” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Albus is scolding him,” explained Teddy helpfully. “Al hates it when Prongspawn doesn’t come home. He thinks you had an argument, Cousin, because you were here and Prongspawn wasn’t. He really hates people arguing.”

Draco frowned and Harry sighed. It was not the first time that Albus got mad at him for something of the kind. When Ginny had to tuck him in on her own while they were still sharing a roof, the boy became grumpy for a very long time until the grownups showed him nothing was wrong. Malfoy’s long, pale fingers intertwined and he rested his chin on them. Harry wanted him to open his eyes again, but he was still adamant with not letting the children see them. Harry folded his own arms and the children seemed to brace themselves for a confrontation they didn’t know would occur.

“Well, Potter, we seem to have left any previous arguing upstairs, didn’t we?” He smirked a dirty, unexpectedly sexy smile that barely kept Harry from groaning from the twitch it stirred down his groins. Bloody bastard. That was uncalled for. “Care to enlighten your son on the matter? I think he would benefit from a calm breakfast with both grownups not biting at each other’s throats.”

Harry gritted his teeth with the innuendo. Bloody, sodding, moronic bastard. He was playing with Harry’s early displays of affection, as Harry knew it would happen now that they were becoming blunter. Harry sighed and got up to post himself behind Draco’s chair. Teddy sniggered. Harry hugged Draco’s shoulders and put his face to his neck.

“In for the bite, Potter?” he whispered huskily, the teasing in his voice wavering a little.

“Don’t make it harder on me, Draco,” he replied, and unexpectedly pressed a kiss to his cheek. It was a theatrical, loud kiss that made Teddy burst in laughter. He was used to it, apparently. “We’re
ok, Al. See? We like each other.”

Draco pursed back a smirk and raised a hand to put it to Harry’s hair, caressing and messing it up. Harry blushed and excitement shot down his spine when Draco’s short nails scraped his scalp. Harry’s hands tightened on his shoulders and he could feel that the man in his arms was almost sneering. Bastard. He raised his eyes to meet Albus’ and the baby was smiling, so he let go of Draco, shuddering from head to toe when Draco’s nails ran down his neck before letting him go. Oh, Gryffindor, why he had whored himself out to Malfoy of all people? He squirmed back into his chair with dry lips and ragged breath, driving his attention stiffly to his plate. Teddy was explaining the tradition of Albus’ relationship-mending to Draco and Harry knew he couldn’t be paying that much of attention between tending to Scorpius’ food and making sure that his feet were always around Harry’s underneath the table — not that it felt deliberate, but everywhere Harry decided to rest his feet, it seemed Draco’s had reached it first. How the hell he did manage multitasking while teasing, Harry didn’t know. He was barely able to contain his blush while slicing Albus’ meat, and was ultimately lost in the conversation when Teddy turned to him with a question.

“Sorry, Teddy, what?”

“Are you going to work today? You arrived really late last night.”

“I have to, I’m sorry. But I’ll be home earlier.”

Teddy made him promise, and he did. Albus carried on with his breakfast now that the two grown-ups were back together and Harry had some time to play with the children — they tried a version of spot-the-star in an old, battered and incredibly outdated star map Kreacher found them. Draco spelled it to shine whenever Teddy got it right, and it was impressive how the babies liked it too. Teddy could tell facts about every star in the Scorpius constellation and was beginning to get a grasp on those in Draco. Apparently, he had been studying far more than Harry had anticipated. He was praising him when Hermione showed up in his living room, carrying Rose. The baby did a bubbling sound before Hermione could greet them and called Draco, stretching her little arms to him. The Slytherin caught her effortlessly.

“Oh, thank goodness.” Hermione placed a baby bag on the floor. “Draco, I know this is asking too much, and I know you already take care of three, but do you think you could watch her too? Last time she was at The Burrow, she went back home screaming like a banshee and Fleur cannot take her today, Louis’ sick…”

“Hermione.” Even Harry frowned at the kindness and simplicity with which he said her name. “It will be a pleasure. In fact, if you want, I can have her for as long as you need me to. I like her.”

“I will repay you somehow, I promise.”

Draco made a dismissive gesture with a very poised hand. “Just make sure Potter doesn’t end up killed.” She laughed. “Are you taking him now?”

“Harry? Yes, he’s late for us.”

She tried to pierce Harry with a look, then went to talk to Kreacher briefly — probably something about Rosie’s diet. Teddy picked up the baby in Draco’s lap — he missed his little cousin — and Draco turned to Harry.

“Will you please not mention our previous altercations to your friends?”

Harry pulled him closer by the pockets of the hoodie. “Too late for that. Ron knows, which means
Hermione knows too.”

“You’re transparent.”

“They tend to snoop. Without meaning to.”

Draco shook his head. “There’s no halfway with you, is there, Potter?”

“Guess not.” He took a fleeting glance around and kissed Draco briefly. “Have a nice day with the kids.”

“Stop treating me as if we were a couple.”

“But we are one, Malfoy.” He smirked. “I’ll be back at six.”

He left with Hermione before Draco could find an objection, and his heart seemed to be fluttering as they were practically spit out into the Atrium. It was Hermione who prevented them both from falling to the floor, and she folded her arms gracefully. Harry made a face.

“So.”

“Not you too.”

“I didn’t say anything. I’m not even really surprised.” She ruffled his hair and they went for an elevator. Luckily, they found an unoccupied one. “Is it serious?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you want it to be?”

“We’ve settled for it it’s been less than forty-eight hours. I don’t know anything.”

“Harry.”

The look she gave him showed him she thought he was being dumb on purpose. He lowered his head.

“I think he’d give me a chance, were he not married.” Hermione nodded slowly. “Don’t tell Ginny.”

“I won’t, but don’t you think you should?”

He thought about answering, but decided against it. What was going on between him and Draco only mattered to them, and what happened to Ginny and him was something he’d settle with Ginny and her only. He escaped the question by sliding from the elevator into his office, where Ron, as promised, held two very small bottles of a very green, very bright liquid and a bucket of popcorn the size of a bathing tin. A device Harry didn’t recognize was engineered on the wall across the door, painted white with a spell. Ron, who was oozing butter all over the popcorn, smiled at them and waved them in.

“I took this from McGonagall’s office. It’s something Dumbledore devised for the Order meetings and educating children on Modern History of Magic, but she said we could borrow it.”

“It’s a projector,” said Hermione, caressing the assorted amount of little lights and heavy-headed bolts. “Like those in the movie theatres.”

“You put the memory in the Pensieve, we put these,” he held out a pair of sticks that looked like
electrodes, “inside it and cover it all with a transmission spell.” He patted some spells into an earmuff and gave it to Harry. “Hermione said you call these headsones.”

“Headphones,” she corrected him.

“Or that. I think the sound will enter them alright.”

Harry didn’t question him; if someone could handle an extraordinary yet ridiculously complicated device engineered by Dumbledore, it was Ron. Harry sat down and took a handful of popcorn. “Here.” He floated a flask with a memory over to Ron while Hermione locked and sealed the door. “Let’s start with Narcissa.”

After five views of each memory, Harry felt like his brain was going to float away from his body. Hermione was the only one to remain absolutely sober: after the second view, Harry took the first glass of the green thing — “Norwegian Absynthe, mate, it makes your brain do unspeakable things,” has said Ron so brightly that it was impossible to refuse. He had to admit that his mind was able to make connections it would never do in its original state, but he wondered whether his left side would ever come to life again. Hermione shut the device down and turned on the lights. Harry and Ron were so far gone that they didn’t even blink at the sudden clarity.

“I’ll turn both of you in to Shacklebolt.” She rolled her eyes. “Come one, guys. Ideas.”

Discarded the too drunk ones, they ended up with a couple of useful things. They discarded Amycus altogether as the maker of the plan, which lead to him being either a distraction, a bait or a casualty. Whoever “rescued” him was known to him, which narrowed the suspects down to, basically, the Death Eaters and the Carrow family. Hermione had the list of the dead and imprisoned and the only ones to remain free were the Malfoys, the Crabbes, the Goyles and the Notts. Ron made a drunken promise to search for the Notts, but Harry cut him off by saying there was someone else they could use for it, and told them about Millicent. Ron had his doubts, but Hermione trusted her fiercely and that settled the matter. Harry was supposed to talk to her, while Ron and Hermione went after the other two. It was Hermione who spoke about the Unbreakable Vows and how they worked, and justified why she thought that might be what was hindering both Lucius and Narcissa.

“We already know that Draco bestowed one and kept them from saying who was in the Inner Circle, and we know, because we saw it in Narcissa’s mind during her trial, that she had a Vow with Snape to protect Draco. I think someone else, someone who knew about this fate that Narcissa is talking about, placed a Vow on her.”

“It does make sense. But who would know?”

“Nott was faithful,” Ron said with a frown. “And he was kin. Lucius’ sister was married to Nott’s brother.”

“Lucius has a sister?” tried Harry, his tongue thick.

“Had. She died when she was like, seventeen.” Ron squinted. “You know, Lucius is wrong.”

Hermione folded her arms. “What do you mean, wrong?”

“He’s not responsible for the Malfoys anymore.” His voice was coming out very slow, but clear. “The ferret is. Malfoy senior is imprisoned and the ferret is married. A married heir becomes responsible for the family when the patriarch is incapacitated.”
“This does sound like petty revenge, now,” said Harry. “Whatever pure-blood that knew it would go after the head of the family.”

“This might justify Amycus. Amycus likes revenge.”

“Doesn’t justify Narcissa. Is there any woman we could count on to impersonate her?”

“No.” Ron closed his eyes. “We have Bellatrix, but she’s so dead.”

“We did see Molly kill her.”

“I think—” Harry tried to get up and almost fell on his face. Hermione pushed him back to the chair. “I think Lucius was giving us hints about motives. Not culprits. I think the ‘who’s are not important. The ‘why’s are important.”

“And why is that?”

“Legacy. He said there might be a legacy. There’s something left.”

“Of what?”


“Maybe Voldemort. Maybe there’s a Horcrux left.”

“Nope.” Harry shook his head and felt his brain shaking with it. “He’s gone. Dead. Dead, dead, dead, dead.” He touched the scar on his forehead. “No itch, no Voldie.”

“But he said we live to die.” Hermione’s eyes widened. “What if the legacy is the doctrine? What if he taught someone to continue in case he failed?”

“He didn’t think he’d fail.” Ron, who looked like he was sleeping, scared them when he spoke. “He had the Wand.”

“The Wand that Draco was supposed to give back to him.”

“And he didn’t,” added Hermione in a haste.

“And everything failed because he didn’t.”

“But Voldemort didn’t know that,” said Ron stubbornly.

“But maybe someone else did.” Hermione was beaming. “Someone from the Inner Circle.” Both guys exchanged looks before staring at her. “Don’t you see? Someone made a back-up plan.”

“Draco said he was going to be important.” Harry felt lucid all of a sudden. “He knew about the plan. He must have. He must be the key to it.”

“Why would he be the key? And kind of a key?”

“Maybe whoever did it died in the war. Maybe they hid it in the Manor, and Draco didn’t want anyone to find it out.”

“So they jeopardized his wife.”

Hermione nodded to her husband, almost hopping. “But it wasn’t enough. Astoria was not going to
give in, she was helping Muggleborns, she would die alongside with Draco to prevent anything like Voldemort’s reign to return.”

“You don’t know that,” said Ron, sceptically.

“It’s called a theory,” said Harry, narrowing his eyes at him. “We need to find Astoria and we need to find what’s kept inside Draco’s memory.”

Ron shrugged. “Open the Manor to us.” He grabbed one last handful of popcorn. “You snoop through your posh boyfriend’s mind and I go through the Manor to find his consort with my beautiful wife.”


“And sober up,” added Hermione, glancing at the empty little bottles.

Harry nodded. “And sober up.”
Fluttering wings

“It’s a promise.”

Teddy clapped his hands and grinned from Harry to Draco. “Can Cousin come too?”

He hesitated. They were far closer to solving the case, but it was not yet over. Although two weeks from then...

“Of course I’ll go,” was Draco’s answer, and Teddy’s beaming increased. “I wouldn’t let your godfather trick you into buying a Firebolt. The Nimbus are far better.”

Harry tried not to look over-excited at the prospect, but he knew he was failing. They had gone to the Manor that day and found enough traces of magic to allow them to confirm it as the ultimate incarceration. They found Draco’s used clothing on the first floor, a cloth that had Scorpius’ blood all over — probably from his birth — beneath one of the cabinets in that room filled with signatures from the last time, and Astoria’s hair, that seemed to have been cut by herself if the angle and amount of hair were of any indication. It was fresh, and it lifted Harry’s and Draco’s spirits when they realized she must still be kept healthy. They found no more blood of hers or any indication that she was being tortured (Draco’s blood was all over the stairs to the kitchens, but Astoria’s wasn’t found). Harry did manage to find and take a very fancy, very beautiful star map from one of the cabinets — nothing related to the investigation per se, but he had an idea to make Draco’s days more fun and that would help him. They could not, however, move much further because the Manor didn’t allow them neither down the dungeons nor up the dormitories. According to Draco, it was a precaution his grandfather Abraxas had set up to contain Lucius’ sister, Clara, that was apparently very keen on distorting the pureblood customs to receive male guests (and sometimes female ones) in her chambers. He said it restraining a laugh, and Harry wondered just how many strange things had happened in Malfoy’s family. The permission to go further should be given when Harry was acknowledged as a member of the family, as would be the permission to go into the dungeons, another very secluded part of the Manor because several people had tried to break into it to free prisoners. He didn’t seem to neither endorse nor regret those things, but spoke of them as ancient history, so Harry didn’t give it much thought. Draco didn’t, of course, tell Harry how he was planning on let him move further into the Manor, but Harry had a very strong feeling that he’d find out soon enough.

Draco had finished the first batch of a series of potions and concoctions that would be used to reverse the situation on his eyes. The red was almost gone with the first two doses, and Harry arrived home to see him with his eyes open in front of the children for the first time. None of them was finding it any strange; Scorpius, in fact, was giggling so gleefully that Harry recognized the lovely, heart-warming giggle he’d heard from the diagnosis spell, confirming it then. The babies were fully awake when he got home, so Harry sat down to play with them and hear them for so long that before he noticed it was ten o’clock already. Even Teddy was late for bed, but they were having such a great time that they didn’t care. So now, they were putting him to bed after a hard time calming the babies down. They had dined with Ron and Hermione, who had gone to Harry’s to fetch Rosie (“She behaved like a little lady,” was what Malfoy told them) before heading back home.

“Prongspawn, you like Cousin, don’t you?” asked Teddy, sleepy.

“Of course I do, Teddy. He’s great.”

“You won’t let him leave, will you?”
Harry smiled fondly at him. “No, Teds, I won’t.”

He didn’t see Malfoy’s face inside the room, but he was definitely not amused when they left it. Harry hugged him by his waist with one arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“I told you I’m not giving my life up to have an affair with you.”

“I’m not asking you to.” He turned Draco against a wall and kissed him once, twice, thrice, until Draco got in enough of a mood to kiss him back. He was far fiercer than Harry, and it was just what he wanted. Harry felt his arms go around his waist, one of them sliding up to his back, the other, down to his arse. His jeans, the most comfortable pair he had, suddenly felt too rough, too thick. He wanted to feel Draco’s palm on his skin, but not in the teasing, tentative way they did in the shower. He pushed the Slytherin a little, staring at him, at his gorgeous, engorged lips, at that tip of tongue that wet them further and uselessly. “Sleep with me.”

Draco laughed and moved his hips against the front of Harry’s jeans, tut-tutting at the obvious finding. “You get ready real fast, Potter.”

He meant it as a reproach, but soon enough they were back at kissing and Harry repressed the smug joy inside him. Draco’s hand on his arse was firm and swift, and Harry felt it grabbing him strongly, pulling him up against him. Godric, they should be in their room… He pushed Draco, his arms still holding him close, and was delighted to see the Slytherin take the cue, walking with his body still glued to Harry’s as the Gryffindor led a careless way. They slipped into the room, closing the door behind them, and split up for a moment. Draco was a vision of his own, cheeks and lips flushed, wearing silk trousers that hid nothing, the borrowed button-up shirt only half-buttoned, his platinum blonde hair longer than Harry had ever seen it, but still combed, still meticulously in place. He watched in a marvel as the dexterous long-fingered hands began to slip slow and decidedly on the tiny buttons, plucking them from their cases as Harry’s discomfort grew bigger, while his jeans seemed to grow smaller. Draco was still close enough for Harry to hear when he chuckled and shrugged his shirt off, taking it before it could fall to the ground. Harry hastily removed his tee and tossed it away, doing the same to Draco’s. The man in front of him tsk-ed.

“Too eager, Potter.” He pulled him closer. “I’m not going anywhere.” His hand slid down Harry’s navel and into the hem of his jeans, and he hummed approvingly as he heard Harry gasp. “And apparently, neither are you.”

Harry tried to say something, but found himself at a loss for words. Draco’s lips caught his once again as he led them to the bed, slow and bruising, and he held both sides of Harry’s face and neck with something balanced between care and roughness. The kiss had nothing of the tentativeness of the first ones, and it allowed practically no movements from Harry, who felt his mouth be invaded and taken over by Draco, who had him sitting on bed and was kneeling on the mattress, bent above him. He felt as Draco tilted his head, grabbing it by his jet black hair and starting a path down his jaw, carelessly marking it with swift little bites that grew bolder and stronger as he went closer to his chest. Not used to such bold approach, he started when Draco’s thin, pointy nose brushed against his chest hair (unlike Draco, he had a noticeable, although not great, amount, all curled and incredibly soft) as his mouth continued south, painfully slow. Maybe Draco could use his blindness as an excuse for his thoroughness but Harry doubted it would be any different could he see. Part of him was hoping that he wouldn’t move a bit to the side, while another was almost crying so he would. To this last part’s rejoice and despite Harry being ridiculously pleading, he continued until he found Harry’s right nipple, wetting it in one long swipe of his tongue and extracting a moan from so deep inside Harry that even the Gryffindor started. Draco chuckled against that brown bud of skin and...
Harry tried to push him, a little half-heartedly, truth be told. Draco wasn’t taking any of that, and his
tongue and lips brushed and closed against his nipple with his every word.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Potter?” He raised one of his hands, which had been previously
sustaining him, to his other nipple, which was engorged and waiting. Draco couldn’t possibly know
just how sensitive Harry’s nipples were, but hell, he was acting like he did. Harry writhed a little
beneath him. “No, no, don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.”

Harry puffed out a giving up breath and felt the coolness of the room’s air when Draco’s mouth left
his nipple and went swiftly to the other. There was no scale to measure the amount of discomfort that
Harry was feeling from being hindered like that by his own jeans, and he didn’t try to hide it. His
hips bucked up, finding enough of Draco’s body to grind momentarily against, but the Slytherin tut-
tutted and moved a tad away from him. Harry whimpered and cursed, which prompted another
round of laughter from Malfoy. He left Harry’s nipples and kissed him once again.

“Tell me what you want from me,” he murmured in a rough, breathy voice. Harry was used to
asking, but it was hard to make a sentence leave his lips. He wanted Draco to be all over him, into
him, he wanted him to touch him whole. Draco was an even more powerful presence in bed than he
was daily, and he was still stunned by him. Malfoy smirked. “I’m moving away for good in five
seconds unless you use this delicious mouth of yours to tell me precisely what you want me to touch
and how.”

Harry felt that the threat was serious, and his teeth gritted before he took a deep breath and tightened
his grip on Draco’s perfectly round arse.

“I want your hand on my cock,” he whispered, strangely aware of the amount of arousal in his voice.
Draco nodded slowly. He was aroused himself, Harry had felt when he touched his pants. Still, he
did nothing in haste, nor showed any sign of being unable to bear it the way Harry did — no
whining, no panting, no whimpering. He was as poised and elegant during sex as he was during
afternoon tea. Unlike Harry, who was noisy enough to have his own wife complain about it.

Harry’s nipples were sore and tingling, his entire body hyperaware with their proximity. When
Harry’s trousers were popped open, the button exploding and flying across the room, it was so
sudden and his cock was so hard that it sprang up like a branch, tenting his boxers as much as the
fabric allowed it to. Draco’s hand slid to find the cotton, then his covered member, and Harry
couldn’t recall the last time he wanted someone to touch him that badly. Unashamedly, he brushed
Draco’s hand away and ripped his own pants off, finally releasing his cock from every restraint. He
knew how desperate he looked, but couldn’t bring himself to care. Malfoy was right: it had been a
while.

“Your eagerness is adorable, if a little unnerving.”

“Unnerving...?”

“You have a tendency to disregard other people’s instructions that borders insubordination.”

“Not the boss of me.”

Draco chuckled, and his body hovered over Harry’s as he pinned both his hands down above his
head with one of his own. “Try me.”

Harry knew that the hand around his wrists was proving a point more than actually restraining
anything — Harry was strong enough to wrench free from Draco’s one-handed grip with absolutely
no effort, but he wasn’t going to, not when that position allowed Draco to put his hand on his cock
and finally, finally move it about. He felt his breath hitch when those slightly cool fingers wrapped around the tip and he slid leisurely down, making him squirm and sigh. Draco was enjoying that a tad too much, Harry could tell, but he wasn’t going to be the one to tell him so. He bit his lower lip as Draco’s left hand began to pump him slowly, too slow. Harry carved his heels on the mattress and tried to move against his hand, to make him hasten its pace, but Draco stopped pumping and held the base of his cock hard, strangling his arousal for a moment.

“I told you to tell me what you want, and this is precisely what you’re going to do.”

Harry had never seen such a bossy side in any of his lovers, but he liked it. He gulped and closed his eyes to gather coherence.

“Faster,” he said, and felt the pang of arousal wrap around his cock as Draco relieved the pressure on it. “Move faster, Malfoy, or I’ll finish myself off.”

Draco laughed out loud. “I’d like to see you try.” Harry took the challenge out of spite, moving to leave his grip, and was impressed when he realised he couldn’t. Malfoy took his hand away from his wrists and slid it down his body until it reached his hips. Harry was still shocked. He hadn’t felt the spell. “I think you’ll want to ask for relief in a nicer way?”

He was playing absentmindedly with Harry’s cock, sliding his thumb rather roughly on the slightly moist slit, his other hand getting dangerously closer to Harry’s groins. Draco’s balance was amazing, and Harry knew he was fighting a lost battle.

“Wank me faster, Malfoy. Please.”

Draco obeyed pronto, and Harry felt bliss overcome him as he did it. The touch was quick and building, and it was not surprising when Draco propped one of Harry’s legs up and threw it over his shoulder. Harry didn’t wait to do the same with the other, and he felt the smooth, slippery silk of Draco’s trousers brush against the back of his thighs and his arse as the Slytherin adjusted to support the newly added weight.

“Take off your trousers,” Harry said, panting, without as much as thinking. He saw Draco lick his lips. “Please.”

He had never been that polite to anyone, but it was hard not to. It was Draco. For a moment, he firmly believed the man above him wouldn’t fulfil his wish, but he did, and Harry lifted his torso as much as he could to confirm his suspicions that the other man wore no pants underneath that silk. He slid further down in bed and pulled Draco closer with a nudge from his heels. It made Malfoy chuckle.

“What?”

Draco shook his head and said nothing as he sped up on Harry’s cock, sliding his hand down to his balls and further. He murmured some spell Harry half-understood and the Gryffindor felt as a finger ghosted across his arsehole. Oh, yes, he’d like that.

“Do you want me in?” Draco murmured, biting on Harry’s lower lip. Harry nodded a tad too quick for his own standards, but Draco didn’t reprehend him for that. Harry could feel his care, trying not to let his own cock brush against Harry, trying not to mingle in that. His pumping was oscillating and Harry could feel the orgasm building fast, his throat getting dry at the rate he panted.

“Let me touch you,” he asked, before his mind began to cloud over the upcoming climax.

“This, I can’t do.”
“Then touch us. Please.”

Draco seemed to consider for a moment, his hand on Harry’s cock slowing down to a brutally, agonizingly slow pace, and his finger circling and spreading lube on his entrance. If he didn’t decide soon, there would be no decisions left to make.

He felt Draco’s cock join his, straight and hard as a rod, and the position made his hips buck up further, his arse’s cheeks clench against each other. They trapped Draco’s finger, and it slid inside effortlessly, much to Draco’s evident surprise. He slipped it out and in again, and that thin, slippery invasion was not enough. Harry tossed around in bed and he thought he’d gone too far in his eagerness when the touch left his cock, but the next moment, the restraints on Harry’s wrists were gone.

“Finish us,” Draco murmured, and for the first time Harry noticed how rough and tense his voice was. Harry breathed out a “yes” and replaced Draco’s hand with his own, while one shot up to Draco’s shoulder to keep him from completely falling down on bed. Draco’s free hand went to Harry’s hip to shift him as he wished as his finger kept probing inside Harry, searching, painfully too little.

“More,” was Harry’s only word as he sped up, feeling his hips move against Draco’s hand and his thighs, and their cocks joined together, and that one finger was joined by another, another that went deeper in, and as they moved together, those fingers found that one spot, and Harry let out a loud gasp, his fingers digging deep on Draco’s pale skin, struggling to hold him despite the sweat, and oh, Godric almighty, he was coming—

He did so, spectacularly, in need for relief and believing he’d collapse in bed and dive in a haze, but Draco’s hand was demanding, moving from his hip to envelop his and keep him pumping his spent cock and Draco’s own still hard one, those fingers inside his butt striving for that spot once again, pulling a cry that was almost pain from him, and Harry felt as his orgasm was pumped out of him, till the last drop, till Draco followed, open-mouthed but soundlessly, holding on to Harry’s hip for dear life. Harry let his own cock slip away from his grasp as Draco’s fingers left his hole, but kept milking Draco’s until he half-panted a “stop” and slid Harry’s left leg from his shoulder (the right one had slipped somewhere amidst the groaning and moaning and coming). Draco collapsed on top of him, and Harry felt those slick fingers up his side, lube mixing with sweat, and he laughed. Draco had his eyes closed as he slipped to the side, resting his head on his own pillow.

“Why are you laughing, Potter?” he panted, and Harry, exhausted, giddy, smiley Harry pushed him to lay on his back as he toppled upon him.

“I’ve seen a Malfoy beg tonight.”

“Untrue.” Draco held his face strongly. “I merely asked.”

“Whatever pleases you,” he said, and placed a kiss on Draco’s dry, chapped lips. He thought he’d be too breathless to respond, but he wasn’t, and Harry let himself get lost in that kiss. They were both too far gone.

“This just in for you.”

Ron entered the room and startled Harry, who had been reminiscing last night’s events. Not only the sex had been good, but it had also made Draco’s mind much more pliant to his, and last night’s nightmare had been much easier to surpass. It was the first time that it had nothing to do with the
captive, but with the war itself: Harry didn’t know that Draco had been under sleep deprivation torture, or that Voldemort entered his mind when he was too exhausted to fight back after having his Dark Mark pressed by the Lord all through an entire night. When Draco explained the dream the next morning, he said that it was the usual: Voldemort would put him to sleep every night, then allow him ten minutes of sleep, wake him up by burning his Dark Mark with his cool, foul touch, and snoop about his mind for hours in search of walls and barriers that could hide treason. When Harry asked how come he never found anything, Draco answered that there had never been any hidden treason. He had never walled up a plan of betraying Voldemort, be that out of fear of anything else, and that was why he probed so much. He couldn’t believe that a Malfoy wouldn’t think of treason. Harry didn’t like the sound of that, but he understood. That was a different Draco. That Draco had nothing to lose and was proving himself. When he said that, though, Draco had laughed.

“I told you I never walled up any treason, Potter. It doesn’t mean I’ve never considered any.”

But Harry had been late, and Draco pulled him to a corner to kiss him breathless away from where any waking children could see them, so it wasn’t like he had asked much further. Still, he knew that dream had unleashed something, and he was going to find out what.

“What is this?” he asked Ron, as his mate continued to disassemble the machinery he had lent from Dumbledore. McGonagall was out helping Accidental and the portrait had guaranteed that the projector would not be necessary before the classes’ start, so Ron was not in a hurry.

“Letter. Shacklebolt said it came out labelled as Chimaera Case.”

Harry shrugged and began to open the letter just to see it be snatched out of his hand. He looked up to find Hermione standing beside him.

“Seriously? No scanning the letter?”

Harry made a face. “Forgot.”

“You are quite distracted today. Didn’t say anything about our interview with Goyle, nor spoke to Millicent about Nott… What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Draco and I had a nightmare about the war. He said he had considered betraying Voldemort, but he also told me before that he was so loyal that Voldemort had chosen him for something he never found out what was and I feel like I missed something.”

“Maybe it was Snape’s doing. Maybe he trained him. If someone could teach a person how to be a double agent, it would have been Snape. And he would certainly have covered his tracks. No one would ever know.”

“True.” He watched as Hermione scanned the letter and frowned. “What?”

“There’s something off about this. Do you mind if I open it?”

“Not at all.”

She left with the letter and Harry shuffled through the pockets of his robes. He had gotten there at nine, and it was barely noon but already he felt like going home. He found the Star Map and opened it on top of the table. Ron didn’t bother to ask what he was doing when Harry started to spell it out. They had gotten nothing from Goyle, Crabbe was nowhere to be found, Millicent had her hands full with Accidental and wouldn’t be able to talk to him before they sorted out an accidental animal farm in Nottingham. They couldn’t go to the Manor and Ron still had to take it slow because of the injury on his back, so no fighting the chimaera for them. There had been no contact from the kidnapper, but
for, potentially, the letter in Hermione’s hands, and they were expecting Tillius’ reports on the MAMS sudden depriving of information. Harry knew that the worst part of big cases was the wait, and waiting was all they could do for the next hours.

Hermione was adamant in telling them they should head to Harry’s place to have a further look on that letter. She also took with her a small box that she shoved onto Ron’s hands, and pushed Harry to the fireplace with so much force that he was stumbling to get inside it. Draco was surprised when the living room was invaded by the trio, but he composed himself and greeted them as the perfect host. A couple of instructions were enough to make Kreacher change the lunch plans to comprehend the newcomers, and he quickly provided Albus and Scorpius with some clothes — the babies were in diapers only, for the day was hot and stifling. Teddy was nowhere to be seen.

“Hello,” saluted Hermione, smiling wide at him. “Hope you don’t mind us coming over for lunch.”

“No, it’s… fine,” said Draco, as he seemed to consider something. “But we are just starting to arrange the meal. Do you consider you can afford the time?”

“Yeah, sure. We’re working here today.” Both Ron and Harry stared at her. “Oh, I didn’t mention. I told Shacklebolt we’d need to get some field work done, interrogate some people.”

Draco choked back a laugh. “In this case, be welcome. Am I to be of any assistance to you or can I leave to take care of my children already?”

Ron and Harry didn’t notice the pronoun, but Hermione did, and her smile was very telling. She’d have to interrogate Harry further on that matter. She knew enough of both Harry and, to a certain extent, Malfoy to know something was happening. Ron picked Scorpius up, as the baby was hopping in front of him, just waiting for that, and Albus went to his father’s arms.

“Actually, ferret, we have a theory we’d like to share with you. If you don’t mind.”

“You have a theory?” Draco clapped his hands and Kreacher showed up with a loud crack. “Would you please ask Teddy to mind the babies for a moment, Kreacher? We have business to tend to and they are not appropriate for children’s ears.”

Kreacher bowed so low that the top of his big head brushed the carpet. “My lord.”

Ron and Hermione switched a look, but Harry didn’t mind in the slightest. He was too busy trying to convince Albus to let go of him. “I promise I’ll play with you a lot today.”

“Boom!”

Draco pursed a smile. Harry, seeing that, frowned. “I don’t think you have a broom, Albus… do you?”

“Boom!”

“I might have promised Teddy we would get the babies their own brooms.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “You what?”

“They have baby-sized ones, all cushioned with spells and everything. I thought I could play with them while you teach Teddy your ‘moves’.” He quote-marked the air.
Harry chuckled and shook his head, then stared at Albus. “Fine. I’ll buy you a broom.”

“Copi?”

“And one for Scorpius too. But both of you have to be good boys and don’t disturb Teddy while he’s watching you.”

Albus clapped his tiny hands happily and mumbled something that sounded agreement-like before Kreacher took him by the hand, Scorpius holding his other, and left the room. Draco guided the guests to the study, where he and Harry turned to rearrange and enlarge the chairs. Ron was taking his robes off and finding a place to rest the little box, his body clouding any vision of Hermione, and Harry took that brief moment to steal a kiss from Draco, who scolded him with a single, pointed look—rather effectively this time, since his eyes were almost normal in appearance.

“Don’t be stupid,” he murmured, pushing Harry to sit in one of the armchairs. The Gryffindor patted the comfy section of cushion by his side, but Draco rolled his eyes and sat on the other. Hermione went to sit by Draco’s side, and Ron took Harry’s. Draco cleared his throat and intertwined his fingers. “Do you care to enlighten me as to what you want from me?”

Boldly, Hermione held his hand. “We need to know about your time with Voldemort. We need to know everything.”

Surprisingly enough, Draco caressed Hermione’s hand gently. “You have to be more specific. Although several of my remembrances seem to have found their way back inside my brain, I have not yet unveiled every memory of that time.”

“We think someone used you as back-up plan.” Draco’s attention switched slightly to Ron. “Long story short, we think you busted Voldemort’s plan.”

“That would be true.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Draco.” Harry’s voice was serious. “We need to know. We need to know who we’re dealing with. We need to find a hook in a story that’ll get us somewhere.”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t think it will be helpful, but if you want a story…” He closed his eyes. “I was in charge of killing Dumbledore.” They nodded. “Recovering the Elder Wand was not a part of the plan.”

“It wasn’t?” Hermione frowned.

“Do you think the Dark Lord would tell his plans to a mere soldier?” He shook his head. “No. I had to kill him and that was that. I had to fix the cabinet and kill Dumbledore, those were the only things in my task list. I did that, Father didn’t get killed, I escalated the ranks.”

“But?”

“Killing someone you know can be harder than it sounds like. Severus was… adamant that I should rely on him. I didn’t know why, at the time, but he told me it was going to be easier to kill Dumbledore if I disarmed him first. I told him my Expelliarmus is shitty at best, but he said it was the only way. He said I had to be quick. I didn’t understand and almost didn’t do it.”
"But you couldn’t kill Dumbledore."

"I had had chances. Several chances. That one was an ultimatum, because the Death Eaters were coming and we needed him to die before they got there and Bella did it herself. Severus said it was the important thing, to keep Bella away."

"Ok, so we know you didn’t kill Dumbledore, Snape did. What happened next?"

Even Ron was staring expectantly at him. Draco took a breath that almost felt like a shrug.

"Severus stopped talking to me for a very long time. Mother was strange too. Father apparently knew nothing about it."

"About what?" Ron was impatient.

"The Wand."

"You knew about the Wand?" asked Harry, shocked.

"Not at first. But the Lord asked for it, it was the first thing he asked for when we got back. So I decided to research it a little. I knew about wand’s loyalties, but I didn’t know how fast the Elder Wand changes its loyalty. When I found out, and that’s where the treason lies, I said nothing. I removed the memory and hid it away."

"Wait, then how— how can you remember now? We didn’t unlock that memory."

"I didn’t unlock it, Potter. I restored it. That’s what I meant to tell you today, before we got caught in minor altercations. That nightmare activated the memory I restored."

"You spelled it out of your brain." Hermione moved to face him almost entirely. "Harry, what did you take from the Manor, what did you give him?"


"I’m not following," said Ron, not liking that amount of secrecy.

"You wouldn’t let the contents of the memory be read by someone without you," said Hermione, her whole face lighting up. "You’d need someone you trusted to do it with you. Someone you loved. You devised a way to make this memory accessible only by you in company of someone you trusted, someone to release the spell so you could incorporate the memory again and activate it after.” He nodded. "You basically put a Fidelius on a book."

"Is that even possible?!" Harry was shocked.

"I didn’t know it was, but I had to find a way to keep that memory safe. It was my… bargain, in case I failed the trial. I told you, I had no walls to hide treason. Voldemort would have found any new walls inside my mind, that knowledge was not safe inside it."

"Who did the spell with you? A Fidelius Charm requires two people," said Hermione.

"Severus. He saw how upset I was and we locked the memory away together."

"No, but it doesn’t make sense.” Ron scratched his head. “Ok, you knew, but when everything
happened, about the wand’s loyalties and shit, you didn’t anymore.”

“My wand. My wand knew. My wand knew where my loyalty was.”

“And it wasn’t with Voldemort.”

“It was with Severus. Not you, Potter. Don’t be cocky.” He sighed. “Magic has a strange way of finding balance, you know. When you disarmed me, my wand switched loyalties because I had switched loyalties. Your loyalty and Severus’ loyalty were the same. I didn’t know that at the time. You didn’t too.”

Ron munched on his lips. “It does explain a lot, but not much about the case we have in our hands.”

Draco nodded slowly. “This sounds like motive, and although we do like motives, we need culprits too. I don’t think it was revenge.”

“No, it didn’t feel like revenge. I told you once, they were punctual. They had schedules. They snooped inside my mind. They were searching for something. No search was necessary to see I am a traitor.”

“We think you were a key to a back-up plan. This is why you were essential to them. We think you don’t know how you can be a key, but someone did. Someone captured you in search of something to open the possibility of the persistence of Voldemort’s legacy.” Hermione’s grip on his hand tightened. “Personally, I think one of your repressed memories might be it.”

“Sounds accurate, but we cannot move much faster with releasing them. A misstep might kill me, and that wouldn’t be helpful.” He leaned back on the armchair. “The easier way to prove your theory would be to send me back.”

“Not a chance,” said Harry at once.

“Good to know you care, but in anyway, until I have my wife secured, I’m not returning to the Manor.”

The trio nodded. An awkward silence lengthened between them, until it was pierced through by a bone-cracking shriek. Harry got up pronto, but Draco was quicker, blowing the door to the study open.

“Teddy!”

They found the boy bouncing up and down in one place, holding something like the most precious thing on Earth. Harry put a hand to Draco’s shoulder to ease him, and thought rather endearing that his heart rate was that high because of Teddy’s screaming.

“I see you found your gift,” said Ron, and the boy jumped up to his arms, shrieking again, gleefully. His litany of “thank you” was interrupted when Hermione ruffled his hair and he turned to show whatever he was holding. It looked like a ball of cotton or something equally fluffy, in a bright shade of gold. Harry thought it was a toy, so he was taken aback when it breathed.

“It’s a snidget!” Teddy said, freeing the bird, which started to move so quickly through the air that Harry felt dizzy. “And look!” He picked a silver whistle and blew it. The snidget paralysed mid-air and returned to Teddy’s raised wrist, flicking its wings to a halt and preening with a tiny, delicate metallic noise. “It’s trained!”

“I didn’t think they commercialized snidgets anymore, let alone that they could be trained,” Harry said bemusedly. “Where did you find it? Is it real?”
Teddy frowned and put the snidget closer to his chest. “It’s mine, Prongspawn. Don’t go seeking it, it breaks!”

Ron, Draco and Hermione laughed at that. Harry’s ears turned pink. “I wasn’t going to seek it, if you must know. I’m just curious.”

“One of the guys from Magical Games and Sports found some of them trapped in an illegal Living Quidditch pitch. He gave it to Regulation and Control but they were too domesticated to be set in the wild; grown birds hardly ever let go of training quick enough to be reinstated to the environment. There were three other birds but only this one survived.” Ron touched the bird’s head with extreme gentleness. “Since Teddy’s got a knack for animal care, we thought he might like it.”

“Like it? I love it! When Prongspawn gives me the broom he’s promised me, we can fly together!” He beamed at Harry and cooed at the bird.

“Can I touch it?” The question was Draco’s and Teddy nodded vehemently, jumping from Ron’s arms and allowing his cousin to pick the bird up and caress it. “It’s very light.”

“It is! I only know it’s on me because its claws are sharp!”

“I believe you should find it a large cage with a very close net made of something soft… Thread, green stems, maybe even silk if your godfather can give you any. It needs a lot of flying but it’s dangerous to leave it beside you at all times. It could escape or be caught unguarded by one of the babies.”

The remaining trio was left watching them, and Ron went closer to Harry to elbow him.

“Teddy really likes the ferret, doesn’t he?” He grinned. “Make sure he doesn’t kill the bird. Teddy would be mortified.”

“He won’t harm the bird. He’s very conscious of himself.”

“Someone has to be,” added Hermione, edging closer to them. “I thought you were not getting serious.”

Harry hesitated. “We’re not. It’s just… nice.”

“Harry.”

He lowered his head momentarily and Ron made a face at him. “You’re really sleeping with the ferret?”

“No!” Hermione stifled a laugh with her hand at that. “I mean…”

“Better than my sister, better than my sister,” he chanted, apparently trying not to picture both men in bed. Hermione shook her head.

“I wasn’t talking about sex. I’m talking about you making plans for your children.”

“We didn’t.”

“You’re doing it,” she said, very sure. “Buying brooms together? Him playing with the babies while you teach Teddy? His use of ‘my’ to refer to both your children and his?”

“Not to mention Kreacher adores him. And he’s minding the house. No one has ever minded Grimmauld Place.”
“You’re seeing things.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, still smiley. “We are seeing a lot of things.”

“It’s only natural that he seeks some normalcy when his wife is imprisoned and he has to take care of a baby while blind.” Harry shrugged. “I’m just that. Normalcy rope.”

Hermione lifted an eyebrow, unconvinced, but Harry’s mood had turned to a slightly sulking one, and she didn’t prod him any further. But when Kreacher called them for lunch and she saw Harry’s hand brush Draco’s, plus the smile it brought to his eyes, she couldn’t help but to root for them.
After lunch, Hermione and Ron filled Draco in on the full theory, and Harry showed Draco the memories of his conversations with his parents. He didn’t seem too excited at the prospect, but he did congratulate Harry on his ability of pureblood small talk. He also, very seriously, said that signalling the occurrence of an invitation rather than saying it out loud might be seen as a much more private affair, and that maybe Lucius’ amusement was a result of his inadvertent TMI-ing, but he overall agreed with his conclusions. Draco was pro talking to Snape’s portrait to see if he knew anything about a back-up plan on either keeping the doctrine or the Death Eaters alive. He names all of those who had any ties of kinship with the Malfoys, and the list accounted for several dead people, a couple of incarcerated ones and half a dozen whose exact location was unknown. What made him suspicious, though, was the way Lucius spoke. Draco had long since made peace with his father being incapable of showing how much he loved him by the ordinary means, and that desperation to get information through to Harry after acknowledging Draco’s safety was not done in the usual way.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry, watching as Albus splashed into the pool, making the snidget — Avalerion, as Draco and Teddy baptized it — chirp furiously at the sight of water.

Draco put his teacup down on the saucer. “Being with you is every protection I need. You’re powerful, a hero, well-connected. No one would possibly raid your place.” He took another sip of his tea. “So why did he carry on? My father may have washed off the genocidal streak, but he’s every bit as purist as he was before. He paid the gratitude debt when he helped you with the raids and interrogations. He doesn’t need to help you anymore.”

“Do you think he has an ulterior motive? Do you think he’s a part of the plan?” Hermione took a sour cherry scone from the plate in front of her. “I know Lucius isn’t stellar as a parent, but don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“I don’t think he’s a part of it, but I know he isn’t giving information this easily to keep me safe. He’s protecting something else.”

When they ruled out the back-up plan, whatever that was — that was entirely on Draco, since Ron, and even Harry, were true believers of the idea that Lucius might have wanted to endanger his son — there were still several things left to consider as worth protecting. The most obvious one was the Manor, and the remaining state, but according to Draco, the Manor was already protected by his not being there.

“Unless he thinks you might return,” said Ron with a shrug.

“I will return. Sooner rather than later if we can’t find this pervert.”

Harry refrained from commenting. It was the second time he spoke of going back, and he knew how little good it would do to confront Draco in that situation.

The meeting went on as they took a sample of both Draco’s and Scorpius’ signatures, confirmed Scorpius’ birthday (February 10th) and went over a sheer hundred hypothesis and hinders. Draco opened the letter while Ron left to get Rosie so she could play with the other kids. He traced the paper with his fingertips and frowned.

“This parchment is special.”

“I know,” said Hermione, “it’s very high quality. Dead expensive.” Draco shook his head.
“No, Potter, it’s special.” He pinched the envelope to rub at it too, frowning. “This is the parchment in which Voldemort used to write. I used to charm it for him, I know what it feels like. It’s heavy with spells and it seeks.”

“Seeks what?” asked Harry, truly curious.

“The person to whom it’s destined. It would find anyone back in his days, without an owl to carry it.” Draco shivered. “Why are you in possession of a letter written in Voldemort’s trademark parchment?”

“It went in as evidence in the chimaera case.” He frowned.

“It’s addressed to me. I can feel it is.” He sighed. “Come read it over my shoulder. I am absolutely sure you won’t be able to read it otherwise and I am too familiar with these kinds of spells to read it out loud. It is definitely a written spell.”

“How are you going to read it?”

“It’s meant to be read by me, remember? The letter itself will do the trick.”

Both Harry and Hermione did as he said. As Draco’s hand slipped down the letter, the writing appeared. The scratchy, slightly blotted calligraphy reeked of bad news. They took a deep breath and started to read, all three keeping his lips shut tight to avoid the temptation of murmuring. The thing about written spells was that they claimed to be read out loud. If one wasn’t careful, it was easy to activate it by merely reading it to oneself. The parchment was devoid of anything but the slightly lengthy poem in the middle of it:

\begin{verbatim}
Snake outta skull
Fair, poor and dull
Flying up high
Losing its hide
We will wait on
When flight’s done
Then we can find you
And we can wind you
Down to a place
With those of your race
Wherein your distrust
Your shardlings of luck
Will meet a nice friend
To scratch you an end
\end{verbatim}

Harry was shivering when he finished reading it. He had made it slowly, carefully. He didn’t want to
need to go through it again and, after years of memorizing things with Hermione, he thought he had got a nice enough grasp on it all to be able to tuck it safely away.

“They are after you,” stated Hermione, and she had blanched. Draco’s hand went up and rested on the faint scar on the inside of his own arm.

“It’s a Death Eater thing. They want me back to finish what they started. This is the first letter in what I’m sure are going to be three.”

Hermione sat back beside Draco. “Can you explain that to us?”

Draco nodded. “When one of us leaves the ranks, we need to be punished in a way. This spell was devised by me to hunt Karkaroff.” Harry’s eyes widened. “Severus helped me with the magic, but the words are all mine. Next thing in the process, we’d take someone Karkaroff loved or cared deeply about, torture and murder them. It would give him some time to rescue the person if he was smart enough not to read that second letter out loud. The third letter is an ultimatum.”

“What do you mean by ultimatum?”

“It’s Forced Apparition. When the letter went in contact with the Death Eater that was supposed to be retrieved, it would send it right back to the person who wrote it.”

“There’s no way you’re powerful enough to do it.”

“We were many. We figured out a way.”

“So they still need you,” tried Hermione, attempting not to look as shocked as she was.

“And they’re waiting.” Draco sighed. “They won’t harm anyone right now, but when the second letter comes, if we can’t prevent it from coming, we’ll have to be fast. They won’t search for someone else. They have Ast.”

“I think we should go back to the Manor and just search for Astoria. She’s in there.”

Draco shook his head. “You can’t. The Manor resists to being searched. If you go in without someone acknowledged by the guardian, it’ll change floorplans and staircases faster than Hogwarts, and you, Potter, only have permission for some rooms. If Astoria is not harmed, it won’t show you anything about her. Pain and disease can fast-disable some protections to allow Mediwizards in, or well-intended people. Otherwise, the wards don’t budge.” He traced the rim of his cup with a long, pale index finger. “If she were hurt, when you entered it, Potter, it would have guided you to her regardless.


“It’s alive. It’s linked to the ancestors, to their spirit. It actually lives and breathes and has conscience and can die.” Draco hesitated. “For someone to be in the Manor when you entered it—”

“They’d have to be kin. We know. We listed the kin,” said Ron, coming back with a gleeful Rosie running straight to her cousin in the pool. He sat down and took another scone (it was his fourth). “We’re thinking Nott, or Lestrange.”

“The Sacred are a clan, so they’re all kin, but only Father knows who’s allowed in.”

“He won’t say, will he?”

“..."
“I don’t think so. But if I had to bet, I’d say you have a seventy-five percent chance of finding something if you pursue those two.” Draco smiled, got up and banished the used china and silverware to the kitchen. “Well, although this has been fun, and although your company is rather interesting, I have to finish another dose of my potion. If you’ll excuse me.”

He proffered a hand to Hermione, who took it with a shy smile, and left the garden with her, polite and lax. She was to help him about the potion and the synthetic venom, but still Ron shook his head. It took Harry an instant to understand he was shaking it at him, not his wife.

“I cannot begin to wonder what in heaven’s bloody name made you want to shag Malfoy.”

“Sure you want to know?”

“Eeek, not, thanks.” He shuddered, then took another scone. They were rather good. It was probably something Draco had said to Kreacher that inspired the elf to cook something of that quality. “I am worried about this case. We’re running in circles. It’s different from the others. We have little evidence, tons of possible culprits and a very solid possible motive but we’re going nowhere. We have to wait. It’s a chess game, and as you might remember, I am not very fond of sacrificing others to make sure the match comes out ok.”

“Me neither, Ron, but we’re doing all we can. We have exhausted our brains and every possibility of immediate action. Unfortunately, we rely on me being able to meet the guardian of the Manor and be allowed in. It’s a roulette. It can happen today or in a month’s time. Draco said he’d warn me when the time was right. In the meantime, we’ll keep track of the letters, find who screwed up the MAMS and try to leave with the most of people unscathed. We cannot make miracles.”

Ron’s face was not the nicest it had been, but he understood, of course he did. After years of chasing people and prosecuting regular crimes, they had rarely stumbled upon such threaded operation, and never had to press a witness and a victim to go further, for that matter. More than that, and Ron would never say so because he valued his head and Harry was likely to bash it away if he said so at that instant, they had never been so intimately related to a case. Well, not “they”. Harry. Harry would have risked more to go after a civilian, were he not in love with said civilian’s husband. Ron didn’t believe the selfishness to be conscious, nor that Harry knew that was bloody love, and he would definitely deny both, but they were there and if Harry was too thick to see it, well, Ron was going to break the news just when absolutely necessary.

Harry played a lot with the kids before going to call Millicent. Rosie was so happy to be back with Scorp and Albus, and Teddy was exhilarated about the snidget. They played underwater catch and fought with toy wands that had an *Aguamenti* embedded in them; in the end, they were happy, tired and wet. Harry excused himself to change his clothes and go talk to Millicent. The door to the guest room was closed. Draco and Hermione had not yet come back.

Millicent was easy to convince. She knew that Nott had escaped his trial because of a bureaucratic loophole, and when Harry said he needed her to see what he was up to, she gladly obliged. She was having tea with a much refined Pansy, and Harry was not fast enough to escape the interrogation.

“Is it true that you and Draco are a deal, now?” The woman was grinning wildly.

“This is none of your sodding business, Parkinson,” said Millicent, pointing her wand swiftly at her. The woman choked on her tea. “Forgive my dearest friend, she had the sensitivity of a mountain troll on hallucinogen.”

“You were the one to tell me, Mills, you shitty piece of rotten leather.”
Millicent rolled her eyes. “I told you *not to worry* because Potter was keeping tabs on Draco. I uttered no bloody word regarding an affair.”

“Like you had to.” She shook her head. “Seriously, Potter. I am not an idiot. My best friend stops talking to me altogether and suddenly you are keeping tabs on him? I saw you around the Manor, you know. I’m an esteemed guest there. Don’t you try to fool me.”

Harry was about to thank Millicent and finish the call to go play with Scorpius, who was waiting for him beside a very annoyed Teddy who was trying to explain him that Prongspawn was working, when the voice boomed across the room and reached him.

“What shrieking cat are you entertaining for so bloody long, Potter?”

Pansy did shriek at the sound, and Harry had no time to step back before she kneeled and put her head inside the fireplace. Harry’s head was pushed back and landed violently on his neck, making him grunt. It was politely followed by a much aggravated Millicent.

“Draco, you sodding bastard!” Pansy pushed Harry further and before he noticed, there was a Pansy Parkinson covered in soot in his living room. Again, she was followed by Millicent, who was appalled and mortified. Harry’s eyes widened; the next moment, he saw Teddy pulling the child from the carpet and the loud crack of Kreacher Disapparating with them, probably back to the garden. Pansy didn’t seem to have noticed. He’d have to thank his godson later. She pulled Draco into a bear hug and slapped him in the back of his head as they disentangled. All the while, Bulstrode kept muttering apologies for her friend’s ghastly behaviour. “What are you doing inside this— shack?”

“ Asking Potter for some investment on the scholarship programs. It would definitely help to have the Saviour donating, even if just his time, to us.” He smiled at Harry, but he was worriedly scanning the room for anything that might suggest Draco’s living arrangements or Scorpius’ existence, and didn’t notice.

“Oh, the Atonement Initiative.” He nodded. “Well, you look amazing.”

Only when she said those words was that Harry looked up to Draco’s face. His scars were gone, his eyes were clear; his complexion was as pristine as it had been back at school, except for a little blonde stubble that gave him an air of relaxation and wisdom. Harry’s heart tugged at the view, and he had to hold onto the mantelpiece. Millicent saw it, but said nothing. His clothes were different too; he looked dashing in a two-piece grey suit, a very light blue shirt and a cerulean waistcoat. He put his hands in the pockets and was looking well at home and nonchalant enough to be almost unrecognizable.

“You must re-endorse the Initiative too, Pans.”

“Oh, sure, sure. Milly will do it for me too when she re-endorse hers.” She was beaming. “You’ve been missing for so long! I can’t believe you didn’t write me a single letter. I’m hurt.”

“I promised Astoria she would do all the outer world contact, and I keep my promises, my dear.” He kissed her hand like a lord. “Of course I missed you.”

“You’d better, Malfoy, or I’ll curse your perfect round arse off.” She laughed. Harry was afraid to interrupt it, and one look at Millicent was enough to ensure him he’d better wait. “So how’s your affair?”

“Obviously not happening, Parkinson.” Draco lifted an eyebrow in a way that meant as much as an eye-rolling.
“I told you,” said Millicent, elbowing her out of the way and hugging Draco too. He kissed her cheek.

“Astoria has conceived. I’m a proud father to be and we couldn’t possibly be happier.”

His eyes softened when he said so, and Harry’s heart tugged again, in a painful way. He looked sincere and earnest and so at ease. He looked like he missed his friends, too. Harry took a step back and leaned further onto the mantelpiece.

“Oh.” Pansy looked disappointed. Millicent took a handful of her clothing and twisted, obviously reaching skin too, because the woman yelped. “Well, congratulations anyway, then!”

“Thank you very much.” He smiled again. “Listen, Mills, thank you for helping with Nott. If we put him behind bars, Father is more likely to be set free soon.”

“No problem, Draco. We’re here to help. Snakes stick together.”

“Hey, I want to help too!” chimed in Pansy, folding her arms like a child.

“I was about to ask you for it.” His gaze became serious. “Could you use your very persuasive methods to keep people from looking for me and Ast, and please intercept the contacts they might try and send them to Mills’ address? She’ll know how to give them to me.”

“Wanting some more peace, yes?”

“Yes. And it would be delightful to have your expertise working for us again.”

She shook her head. “What is it that you ask with this mile that I don’t gladly do?” She bowed mockingly to him, but her face was serious. “I’ll take care of it immediately.”

Something in that conversation must have given out a sense of urgency, because Pansy saluted Harry absentmindedly and left. Millicent rolled her eyes, apologised for her once again and guaranteed Harry that she’d get Nott to justice. When she flooed away, Harry turned to face Draco. The Slytherin collapsed in an armchair, closing his eyes and waving to someone Harry couldn’t see.

“She’s gone, Hermione. Sit down and take a break.”

Right in front of Harry’s eyes, Hermione let her Disillusioning Spell fade. She stumbled close to Draco and crashed by his side, almost on top of him, as the armchair enlarged automatically. Bit by bit, Draco’s appearance began to go back to normal: the jeans showed, paired with one of Harry’s most expensive dress shirts; his face went back to the fading disarray of scars that Harry was so used to, his eyes regained the faintest of pinks. He put an arm around Hermione’s shoulders and, in a demonstration of thankfulness that would have shocked some of Draco’s previous schoolmates, he caressed her hair.

“Would any of you bother to explain what was all that?”

Harry sat on the coffee table, staring from one exhausted face to the other as they regained their breaths. Finally, Draco spoke.

“Long story short, I needed someone to help me glamour myself so I could come and talk to Pansy.”

“Oh, so now you trust her enough to do so?”

“Granger happens to be annoyingly smart and incredibly good with Charms and Transfiguration, in
case your years of friendship didn’t let you notice it.” Draco’s voice was sour. “She helped me with the venom and I asked her a favour, and she’s exhausted because of me, so don’t expect me to let her collapse and regain her strength on her own. Magical strain is a serious matter, Potter, so tone down your bloody jealousy because it’s entirely misplaced.”

Harry gritted his teeth. “So why did you need to talk to Pansy anyway? I wasn’t going to babble about us. I’m not a moron.”

“You could have, she wouldn’t have believed you anyway.” Harry huffed. “Well, Potter, we need clues, don’t we? And names too. So, while we adjusted the synthetic venom, me and Granger here, we approached a very particular subject, that of writing letters. As she would gladly tell you, were you not so focused on finishing this case before going through the appropriate means, people usually dispel magic into their writing every once in a while, particularly under stressful situations.”

“I know that.”

Hermione chuckled. “Well, so we’re going to intercept the letters, whatever letter that’s sent to the Manor. We should be able to find someone to guide us to something else and maybe show us where to look at, since our usual investigation methods are not going far.”

“But why Pansy?”

“Because she’s done it before, Potter. Post-war hate mail. People were deadly creative, back then. She never missed a single letter. Ah, Kreacher, thank you so much.”

Kreacher showed up carrying a couple of vials of Invigoration Draught, one of which Draco gave to Hermione. They clinked the vials and downed them all at once. It was not the best of tastes, licorous sweet and pineapple-ish, but it made them able to sit straighter. When Kreacher left to make tea — it was his answer to everything, much like Draco’s, by the way — Harry stared at the couple in front of him.

“Sure it’s going to work?”

“No.” Hermione half-shrugged. “But really, Harry, have we got anything to lose?”

“Jesus, where should start? Oh, Draco’s security? The unawareness of the people currently sitting inside the Manor? The secrecy of the entire bloody operation?!” Harry blew up, staring in disbelief from one to another. “You cannot go asking things to everyone because they look bloody friendly!”

“Now listen to me,” said Draco, and his voice was cold as ice. “You let your friends enter this mess. People I didn’t trust and with which I had no interest of growing acquainted, but I let you, and it’s done us good. I can trust my friends as much as you can trust yours.”

“They’re Slytherins. Ambition and cunning. You can never know.”

“I trust them, Potter. I won’t tell them what happened because they’d blow up the Manor to find whoever did this to me, because yes, we are ambitious and cunning but when we are bonded by trust, it takes death to tear us apart.” Draco paused to breathe. “You did as you’re used to. You think this is school, Potter? Where you came up with a couple of suspicions and half of half a dozen evidence and Granger puts it all together to save your sorry arse? You won’t find those people in the books, Potter. You won’t find them lurking in the shadows or using their real faces and names. They can be your co-workers. They can be a hobo in the street. There’s no limitation to what they can do if bringing Voldemort’s reign back is what they want to do, and you’d better begin to understand that maybe, just maybe, you being the Blast-ended Skrewt you tend to be and putting fire to everything to
see what’s underneath might not work this time. Just *maybe*, Potter, you should understand you might need a tad more help, from people who actually have a clue on how to deal with this kind of people without blowing their faces off.”

Hermione had been quiet for the entire lecture, her eyes set on the floor. Harry shook his head.

“For you and your wife’s wellbeing, Malfoy, I hope you know what you’re doing, because, seriously, right now I don’t know what to do with you and your sodding little intervention.”

He left the room with a quiet, steaming feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wished Draco had *told* him what he was up to before straight-up acting on it. Was that too much to ask? Hermione was the brains to most of what they did, but she was not in charge of that. She had nothing to lose. She already had her family. It was not like something was going to be ripped apart from her if that went wrong. It would be another supremacist maniac on the loose, and weren’t they used to taking them down already? But Harry didn’t want to lose Draco, or Scorpius, and he’d fight for them. They were family. Of sorts.

“Prongspawn?”

He was walking so fast that he missed Teddy at the bottom of the stairs. He was holding a chirping Avalerion and smiled at him.

“Teddy.” He went to the boy and, as he hardly ever did now, picked him up. Teddy wrapped his arms around his godfather’s neck and stared worriedly at him.

“You look mad. And sad. Did those ladies made you feel like this?”

“No, no, it’s just… Your cousin and I disagreed on something. He did something without asking me if I were okay with it, and it disappointed me. Grown-up nonsense.”

“You sound too upset for it to be that much of a nonsense.” As if agreeing, Avalerion chirped once.

“I know Cousin has trouble to understand what his chores are. He never remembers he doesn’t need to ask Kreacher to make me breakfast because I can cook on my own. He never remembers I know how to change Albus’ diapers. I think he’s used to doing everything on his own, and he is good at doing things, but now he doesn’t always have to, and I think he feels a little useless because of it.”

“He’s really restless, isn’t he?”

Teddy nodded vehemently. “He wants to do stuff, and maybe you should let him, Prongspawn. He thinks a lot before doing what he wants to do. He won’t break anything, or hurt anyone. Cousin is not like that.”

“I know he’s not, Teddy.” He kissed the boy’s forehead. “I hadn’t thought of it, but you’re right. I should probably talk to him.”

“He will forgive you, Prongspawn. No one stays mad at you for long.”

“When did you become so observant of people?” He chuckled, messing the boy’s hair under a deluge of furious chirping from Avalerion. Teddy merely shrugged.

Ron and Hermione left with Rosie after a delicious dinner cooked by a happy Draco and a babbling Teddy with the assistance of a fairly well-humoured Kreacher. They discarded several possibilities of how Draco could be a key: it was not a delayed Imperius, because they would have found the trigger
after so long snooping inside his mind; he was not a Horcrux, since, as Harry said, his scar didn’t hurt, so Voldemort must be truly dead (Hermione did point out that he was no longer a Horcrux and probably wouldn’t feel it, but they agreed that he wouldn’t have blown up like that if he did have another Horcrux somewhere); it was not an Unbreakable Vow, because Draco would know if that was case, and even if he couldn’t speak about it, he wouldn’t lead them on with a false problem when his family was at stake. They had an assortment of Necromancy rituals, not to mention other kinds, and Draco’s half-hearted and very sorry saying that there were only two people who knew enough of Necromancy among the Death Eaters: Amycus and Alecto Carrow.

“What about other rituals?” asked Hermione.

“I think, and I am not sure, so don’t hold me responsible for it, that it would be something my family did. My mother knows a lot of rituals. Black family’s heritage. You should know, Potter.”

“Sorry I didn’t investigate my family.”

“You should have.”

“Malfoy.” Ron put his coat on and started buttoning it up. “Bellatrix is both a Black and part of your family.”

His eyes glinted and he froze for a moment. “Yes. But isn’t she gone?”

“I told you before, Draco. The people we meet don’t tend to remain dead for long.”

Draco gritted his teeth and nodded. “Do as you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Ron, taking Rosie from the floor where she was picking up her Abraxans, and throwing Floo powder in the fireplace. “We will.”
Quite irresistible

Harry was again working on the chimaera report when Teddy showed up at his room, scampering like a baby deer.

“Prongspawn, can I borrow your wand?”

“What would you want it for?”

“To help Cousin with Ava’s cage. He’s conjuring silk but someone has to fixate it for him in places where it doesn’t disturb anyone.”

Harry could have wondered why Draco hadn’t asked him for help, but he hadn’t and Harry was too tired of conjectures to even bother. With a couple of safety instructions, he lent Teddy his wand, his head returning to the problem at hand once again. He could wrap the case already and just pretend there was nothing to do with the rest of it, although that would mean reopening it when and if something else came up in the Ministry about it. They were abusing their cases and asking for personal favours; sooner or later someone was going to notice it, someone was going to talk about something while having coffee with a co-worker, and then they’d have a lot of explanations to do. He ran his fingers through his hair and let his head fall on top of the just written parchment. He could feel the ink sticking to his forehead, and still couldn’t bring himself to bother. He was too old for that. He was too old to uncover secret conspiracies to bring dead people back to life. He was too old to fight evil on a daily basis. Not for the first time, Harry reconsidered his career choice. He had become an Auror because that was all he could do at the time. He had spent too much of his life fighting evil to see whether he could be any good at anything else.

He took the parchment delicately from his forehead, cleaned it and his face up and decided, once again, to let go. Usually, he wouldn’t guess that much before a case began to give him proper clues. That one was a bigger deal, though. It was like pursuing the philosopher’s stone, like finding Ginny in his second year. He knew that if they failed, not only Draco’s family would be affected. It was far larger than that, and he hadn’t dealt with “far larger” in much too long a time to remember how anxious and excited and terrified it made him.

He went down to the kitchen to make himself some tea — he’d go for a Calming Draught, but the only ones he had were too powerful and would probably put him to sleep the most restless of sleeps — and munch something, trying to think of something else. It was a funny feeling, trying to divert his head from the case when the case was living in his house and sleeping with him. He could almost forget that, at times. He could almost forget that Draco was not a witness, but a victim, that he wasn’t there with Harry because he wanted, but because he needed to, that the companionship and care they were living were not forever, but time-limited. He thought about the star map he had hidden away inside the bedroom. Draco was not one to snoop, and hadn’t found it yet. It was all done, now, all the spells, all the simulation. It had taken Harry every minute of free time he had to add them, one by one, to convince Kreacher to let him in on the Black family ways of teaching Astronomy. He remembered how much Draco missed the sky; that was the first purpose of it. Now, he thought the idea a little dull. A tad too little. Giving him a way to see the sky was not going to give him back the freedom of staring at it. It was not the same. Harry was too aware now that many things were not the same as reality.

He didn’t hear the footsteps that slithered into the kitchen, quiet and long, followed by the soft rustle of a silky bath robe. When he felt it all, he was almost expecting a snide remark or comment. His head fell, his chin almost touching his chest, bracing himself for it, but the poking never came. Instead, Harry felt a long arm embrace his waist as the body to which it belonged edged closer to
him, scenting of green apples and cleanliness.

“It’s time to put the babies to bed. I’ve bathed them already and Teddy’s having them dressed.”

The voice was soft and tender, which made Harry close his eyes. That was an example. That was not real. Draco Malfoy was not made of soft words and tenderness towards him. Again, he was reacting to Harry’s emotion to soothe him, just as he did to Scorpius, and Harry felt unworthy of it for reasons he could not explain.

“What’s wrong?” He felt the lips that touched his neck, that ghosted along his skin. “Are you mad at me for calling in Pansy’s help? I’m not going to apologise for that.”

“No, that was… that was not that bad an idea. She won’t babble, right?” Draco answered him with both vehemence and condescendence. “Then it’s fine. Next time, I’d like to know first.”

“I can’t promise you that, Potter.” Harry’s hands left the teacup and held the counter. “You are not keen on letting me help, are you?”

Caught in the act, Harry shook his head. “Guess I want to spare you.”

“Potter.” He moved a little and turned Harry to face him. His left hand went up and cupped Harry’s jaw. “I don’t need to be protected that much. You haven’t tried to enter my mind in a long time now. You have been holding back. Do you think I don’t feel it?” His open eyes didn’t move, as would be expected if they could see the scene in front of them, but they glinted with unmistakable fire. “I didn’t want to say it in front of your friends, but you know you can push further. I won’t break. You have answers, you have faces, you have means hid inside my head and you want to spare me, so you don’t go about them.” He slid a hand down to Harry’s arse. “Abuse me, Potter. I trust you. You won’t let me break.”

Harry didn’t trust his voice enough not to waver, so he pulled Draco’s face to his and smashed his lips against those thin, pale ones. How couldn’t he fear breaking him? How could he let him expose himself so much after all he’d been through? How in heaven’s name was that fair? He plunged forward inside Draco’s mouth, one of his hands sliding inside the robes to touch his chest. That was his, right now, that body, that man, and that man was dear to him. He didn’t want to sacrifice him, sacrifice them to get to the roots of that evil. He was so tired of sacrificing people he loved to find the evil. Clinging to Draco the most he could, trying without success to prevent his desperation from showing, he nipped Draco’s lower lip and kissed him again. The Slytherin tugged hastily at Harry’s trousers, opening them without a sound. He let them fall and puddle around Harry’s ankles, unable to reach the floor because he was still wearing his shoes. Draco pushed the teacup aside and levered Harry until his naked arse touched the cold marble of the counter. Not even the shock of coolness up his body was enough to make him stop kissing Draco, to make him stop feeling like he needed it to keep his feet on the ground. He was Harry’s anchor, now.

Draco’s swift hand found Harry’s cock with eased expertise. He found it half-hard, the excitement just beginning to build in a mind that was dealing with so much. Unfazed by it, he left to Harry the mission of guiding his mouth and put both hands to work on it. A part of Harry’s brain — a part that sounded much like Flitwick, truth be told — was trying to tell him that that was not the best way to deal with what he felt, but it began to sound muffled and weak as Draco’s lips left his to go up to his earlobe, sucking it, wetting it, the sound of Draco’s poised breath turning Harry on with every puff. Soon, the half-hardness was full-on hard, and Harry moaned as one of Draco’s hand left his cock to grab a handful of his hair.

“Th— the kids—” he half-stuttered, bucking his hips up to meet the rhythm of Draco’s hand.
“Privacy Charm,” was Draco’s immediate, business-like answer. Again, Harry hadn’t felt it being cast. It should render him uneasy, that he sometimes didn’t feel when Draco cast a spell, but not when he did it with a hand speeding up on Harry’s cock.

Harry let out a particularly loud groan when Draco bit his jaw, pulling the skin and lapping at it with his tongue to soothe what was obviously going to be a hickey. He mouthed the bruised skin again, then lowered his lips, marking him closer to his collar bone. Harry hissed and Draco tugged harder at him, both on his hair and his cock, and his hand’s speed increased further, dragging gasps that sounded painful out of Harry’s mouth, while he didn’t even seem to notice he was handjobbing Harry into incoherence. Yes, was all he could think of, yes, and faster, and fuck, and more. Draco’s hand did a mild, unexpected twist and Harry moved forward, to the border of the counter. Draco went even closer to him, his heat, his scent, his steadily engorging erection, all enveloping him in a myriad of senses at the same time that the pleasure peaked, and he let go of Draco’s hair to lean back on both his hands, ready to cry out his orgasm. Draco’s mouth found his, though, and Harry felt with a rush of pleasure when his shout was drained by the violence with which Draco kissed him, his tongue restlessly pulling Harry’s to jostle and play, tantalising as much as the hand that pumped him one last time and into the haze of coming. He felt as come spurted from him, his moans and gasps dragged into the wet, hot mouth of one hungry Malfoy. He was almost suffocating, his head squishy and light as if it had been turned into gillyweed, when Draco let go of him, fondling his cock with a couple of strokes before tucking it in again. He Scourgified both of them and kissed Harry once more, holding his face with both hands this time.

“Feel any better?” Harry nodded, lazily embracing him by his neck.

“Why…?”

“It’s rather exciting, having the Saviour moaning because I’m masturbating him… not to mention how pliant it makes you after.” Harry tried to find an answer to that, but it was true. He was dazed enough to agree with almost anything Draco could ask him. “Are you coherent enough to go say goodnight to our children?”

Harry sighed a tired but happy sigh. “Of course.” His eyes darted to Draco’s lower waist. “But you…?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll pay me back soon enough.” He swished his wand and his teeth gritted in what Harry was sure was a reaction to a rather painful spell. “Our children first. Then, Potter, you will enter my mind. And this time, you won’t hold back.”

That was neither an order nor a request, but a mere statement. Harry felt some of the weight trying to return to him, but it failed. He was going to do what Draco told him to. He’d tuck their children in, he’d enter his mind, he’d move on with the case. But he wouldn’t sink into desperation and remorse. It didn’t have to be like any of the other times. They could make it right this time, they could stop it before it happened. After all, Draco trusted him.

They found Albus and Scorpius giggling and running after Avalerion, who chimed and complained soundly, in their overalls, while Teddy sat on the floor, folded upon himself from laughing. The scene brought an immediate smile to his face, making him think, once again, of how much he’d hate to miss that. It seemed like they had been living together for so long, now; it was hard to conceive it hadn’t yet been a month. When Draco kneeled on the floor and called the babies, both of them went running towards him and hugged him with so much force that he puffed out the breath from his lungs.

“Hey, calm down, my boys.”
“Dada, Aba quii!” said Scorpius, pointing at the finally still bird.

“Mmm quii, dada, Copi uhm ta...” Albus did a dramatic pause with his tiny hands in the air to signalize Scorpius’ attempt at catching Avalerion. “Ca-boom.”

Draco laughed out loud at that. “You fell down?” Scorpius nodded seriously at him, hiding his face on his chest. “Are you hurt, my little scorpion?”

“Nnnn, goo.” The boy smiled wide, unaware that his father wasn’t seeing it. Draco was a whiz of the Awareness Charm, now, and it almost replaced his vision, though with the obvious lack of colour. He must have felt the smile, Harry wondered, because he kissed his son’s head rather tender and proudly.

“That’s awesome, my dear.” He clutched Albus closer to his chest. “You too, my sweet Albie, I’m proud of you for telling me that Scorpius here fell. You’re a good brother.”

Albus ruffled up at that, proud and smiley. Harry couldn’t help his heart from straining at Draco’s sweet and ordinary use of the word “brother” to refer to the children. It was easier, Harry supposed. Albus didn’t have many friends outside the family — not to say he didn’t have any — and since Teddy was called “brother” and lived under the same roof as him, maybe it was just obvious that Scorp would be “brother” too. Satisfied with his rationalisation, Harry helped Draco up, since the babies didn’t seem to want to leave him. Teddy blew the whistle and called Avalerion back, snuggling the fragile little bird into the breast pocket of his pyjamas. It settled there like in a nest. Teddy took an armchair for Harry and adjusted Draco’s as both grownups tuck the children in and lowered the rails on the right side on the crib. They all sat down, Teddy on top of Harry’s thighs, the grownups rubbing Albus’ and Scorpius’ bellies as they were too excited to sleep.

“Shouldn’t we just pick them up?” asked Harry after about twenty minutes of trying to calm them, to no success.

“Are you trying to raise thugs and delinquents, Potter?” Draco shook his head. “They will quieten in a couple more minutes.”

The babies began to calm down about ten minutes later, when Draco was finishing a story about his school days.

“I broke his nose, actually,” he was saying, the sound of his voice calming the babies and the story making Teddy giggle as quiet as he could.

“You stomped my nose, in fact,” Harry corrected, wasting a scowl on him.

“Same difference.” He waved his hand dismissively as Scorpius held his other one. “It all went well in the end. He ended up going to Hogwarts. It was a hell of a year for me.”

“You really hated each other when you were kids, didn’t you?” Teddy was amused by it.

“Well, your godfather was a pain to bear. Always breaking rules and getting away with it, always diminishing everyone who thought differently.”

“Me! You were despicable! Plus, you were my nemesis.”

“We were sixteen. We didn’t even understand what a nemesis was.”

Teddy was observing them like a cat following a plush fish on a rod with his crimson eyes. He was smiling at that. None of the grownups had ever spoken so freely about their altercations. They had
their own stories, about them and their friends, but hardly ever even mentioned they had been to the same school.

“I’m glad you are not enemies anymore,” said Teddy when they stopped arguing about their teenage knowledge of the world, or lack thereof. He was smiling wide at them, one slender finger caressing Avalerion’s head. “If you were, I wouldn’t have met you yet, Cousin.”

“I would have shown you to him eventually,” said Harry, and both Draco and Teddy laughed.

“Right, cutiepie.” Draco scoffed at him. “I think our ramblings made the babies pass out.”

Indeed, both Albus and Scorpius had drifted off to sleep. Teddy took them another full hour of talking about Hogwarts and Draco’s teasing of professor Sprout (Harry never knew of it) and Harry’s hate of Snape’s method and their relationships with the other schools of magic before his eyes closed. Draco took a drowsy Avalerion off his chest and put it, with Harry’s assistance, inside its cage. The bird cooed and snuggled up on a thin branch to sleep. The wood didn’t even waver.

Harry lingered by the doorpost for a moment while Draco caressed Teddy’s hair and murmured something he couldn’t understand, but sounded very endearing. He didn’t smile or talk while he closed the door, and the second they were out of the room, Harry turned to Draco.

“I think they liked it. Especially Teddy.”

“I think we shouldn’t talk that much about what we were at Hogwarts. If we end up babbling about something like that Sectumsempra, I think Teddy is never going to talk to you again.”

Harry took a deep breath. He didn’t want to talk about it. “All that about me being insufferable, you knew you were just as bad, don’t you?”

Uncharacteristically, Draco shrugged. “I never said otherwise.” He frowned. “Have you ever considered that if you had tried, we could have gotten along?”

“I don’t think so. You thought some pretty improper things, Draco, and you were an absolute tosser, too. All that thing on blood purity and peer pressure.”

“Oh, like you weren’t one as much as I was. Besides, you played friend to every single creature you met, but were you there for them? Wait a minute, I don’t think so. Where the bloody hell were you when Longbottom was crying behind the greenhouses because a couple of Ravenclaws were making fun of him? Oh, right, too busy with trying to find a godfather you supposed was a criminal. Mastermind, Potter, and a darn good friend.”

“Neville never complained of it.”

“Of course not, Potter, and that’s what you never fucking understood and what pissed me to my bloody bone. You were loved, Potter. People didn’t like or tolerated you, they absolutely worshipped you, enough so that they didn’t see how much you abused their friendship, and how much you only cared for them when they were useful. Longbottom grew a lot while you were away hunting Horcruxes. He met Hannah, and teamed up with your wife and Luna, and without you and the rest of the Golden Trio to overshadow them, they thrived. But they are too good and too loyal to see that sometimes you just didn’t fucking care about them. Or you honestly do believe that disappearing into the world and leaving three of your best friends, one of whom you turned out to marry, is the right way to handle a friendship?”

“I…”
“Didn’t know’ are the words you’re looking for, Potter. You had friends who liked you because of who you were, and it made me mad because they chose to dismiss your flaws. Seriously. I had to snake my way inside the heart of every bloody friend I made with a persistence you Gryffindors never believe a Slytherin could have, but I did. And still you don’t understand why you were so easy to hate, Potter.”

“You make me look awful.”

“You were awful. But you were also a teenager and, really, everyone thought you needed to be shielded and loved and tended to and hardly ever spoke against your whimsical, sassy creature.”

“Now you are making us look alike.”

“We were the same, Potter. Only you never noticed what you did, and not always deserved what you earned, for good or for bad, and I always noticed everything I did, and always deserved everything I got.”

“Prison musings?”

“Aren’t you better off by not knowing?” He patted Harry’s cheek and turned away to take off his robe. They had reached their bedroom and Harry was sitting on the mattress. He kicked off his shoes, undid his buttons and zipper, tossed his sweaty shirt in the general direction of the bathroom to see it be sucked into it. The piece of clothing disappeared with a “whoosh” that took a yelp off Harry.

“Amazing spell. Kreacher said he was willing to do it for a long time, now.”

“Stop making changes to my room, Malfoy.”

“Our room, in case you’ve forgotten.” Harry rolled his eyes and stared at him. He was stark naked, fussing about a drawer, the blond hair falling down his neck. It was almost reaching his shoulders.

“Your hair is really long.”

“Brilliant as always, Potter.”

“Why don’t you ask Kreacher to trim it for you? He can do it.”

“And end up with a hair like yours? I don’t think so.” Draco stopped looking for whatever he was trying to find and walked leisurely towards Harry. The Gryffindor tried his best to keep his hands to himself, but in the end they wandered up his flat belly. “We are out of clean pyjamas. In case you were wondering.”

“You use four changes of clothes every day. Someday they’d have to end.” Harry was entranced by the slow ascension of his fingers on that pale skin. He was painfully beautiful. His fingertips touched the chimaera bite on his side, tracing the gigantic, if a tad faded, scar with much too tenderness. “I am sorry I didn’t patch you up in finer stitches.”

“I am surprised you managed to patch me up at all.” He snorted. “You’re not the skilful kind.”

“Nope.” He got up, his hands treading up too. “But I did a fine job rehabilitating you.”

“Mostly true.” Draco held him by his wrists and walked away. “Bed, now.” Harry was taken a little by surprise, but did as he was told. Draco wriggled in bed with him, laying on his back and sighing deep. “You’ll enter my mind now. I think the path is the clearer it’ll get, and I need you to come onto
me with all you have.”

Harry nodded with a faint “yeah” and tried not to worry too much before they had even started. Slowly, the lights began to fade and dim, little by little until the room was enveloped in the most comprehending shadow. Draco had closed the heavy blackout curtains and for about five seconds, Harry’s utmost worry was how he was supposed to do anything in that absolute darkness, but Draco was not in a rush. He waited patiently for Harry to find his way about the bed and settle properly beside him.

“Does it have to be this dark?” Harry murmured, almost panicking. He still hated utter, complete darkness after all the time spent in his cupboard.

“No, but what we’ll do will be uncomfortable to you.”

“Why? Because I’ll need to touch you? Because I’ll need to caress you? Because I may have to lay on top of you?” Harry sniggered and tsk-ed, taking off his pants and kicking them to the floor as he did so. “I am a Legilimens, Malfoy. I know how to reinforce a bond.” Draco kept silent, but he flicked the lights on and Harry saw the blush on his face. Oh. So his comments did hit home. He hadn’t thought Draco would be uncomfortable too. Harry took his hand and squeezed it a little.

“That’s better. I like being able to see you. Remember, I am very, terribly fond of your body, Malfoy.”

Draco scoffed and sighed, as deep and slowly as if asking for patience. “You have to touch me and make sure I’m feeling it, at least until the connection sets in.”

Harry’s left brow lifted. “You mean, like, sexually? Because it does seem like you’re trying to talk me into doing you.”

“No, your ridiculous bundle of hormones. I’m not talking about sex. If I wanted the Saviour to fuck me, I’d ask him so,” he said snidely. “I’m no prude, as you obviously know by now. Just touch me and mean it. Nicely. Tenderly. Like you cared, not like you wanted to ride me. Try to reach me, it cannot be that difficult a concept for you. It’s not even that abstract.” He stretched his back and Harry could hear a quiet crack. “Touch me as if I were the most precious thing in your life and it might happen. Unfortunately for you, I know when people are disgusted by me, so do it right.”

“I cannot possibly imagine how could I be disgusted by you.” Draco shook his head. “You are beautiful and you are changed. Why shouldn’t I want to touch you?”

“You really are transparent.” He finally let out a chuckle. “Really, Potter, I can’t let you try more than once this time. You are going to go so bloody deep that if you pull out, that’s it. I’m dead. Completely, irrevocably dead.”

“Jesus Christ, Malfoy.”

“No one was supposed to go where I’m allowing you to. Don’t screw up, or I swear I’ll become a fucking ghost and haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“Binding Promise, my dear,” he said, rather mockingly. “I cannot allow you to die.”

“Git.”

“Tosser.”

“Just get this over with.”
He really hoped he was right, was everything Harry could think of as his hands splayed on the nearly hairless chest. A part of Harry’s mind was still thinking that his newly established relationship with Draco was a little strange. It was true: people were not supposed to be okay with touching people they spent half of their lives fighting and arguing with. In fact, they did it so much and so passionately that Harry sometimes wondered if Draco’s temper and complexion were not an odd inheritance from an early Malfoy mating with a Veela. It could certainly fit him much better than plain, human normality. He had touched Draco before, and he had wanted to feel him and reach out for him practically all the time ever since he re-entered Harry’s life, so putting motive, intention and action together wasn’t difficult at all.

It was different too. It was not about a desire; it was something deeper, something so much more intimate. He was afraid of going in that deep. He was already liking Draco too much; it was unwise to make it even stronger by putting effort into it. He kept his touch light, ghosting across pale skin, the golden, fine hair that covered Draco’s arms, his shoulders with the very timid, almost bashful little freckles from the French summers he liked to brag about in school, his rosy, soft nipples, pointing up from the tight skin that covered his lean, slightly defined chest muscles. He felt Draco’s heartbeat on his own tan fingertips, a soft “th-dump” that echoed inside Harry, and Harry’s heart complied, tried to synch with it. Draco was dead quiet, even as his skin tingled with what was probably the most intimate way he was being touched ever since being captured, sex included. Harry slid his hands to his belly, feeling the tangled net of scars pulling at parts of his skin, some fine, hot, tender to touch, and some rough, tendrilized ones that felt like thick cobwebs. The bruise balms and Healing Spells had done their part, but the damage had been big even before they got started. He kept going, down his navel, the path of dark blonde pubic hair starting right above the low waist of his silk pyjamas and disappearing beneath it. He was far thinner than Harry remembered him from their school years, his lean angles turned into sharp lines and rough edges, his hip bones sticking out in the most unnatural way even for someone that slender. He couldn’t hold back on the surge of compassion that happened upon him, that the unblemished, smooth skin he had sometimes envied when they left the Quidditch pitch had been torn to a point of no-return. He was beginning to brush the surface of what acknowledging it must have been to Draco and felt so dangerously, so pathetically prone to reassure him that it didn’t matter, that he was beautiful nonetheless, that the scars were just another way to prove his strength and remind himself and everyone who’d ever get to trace them that he was not only a survivor, but a fighter. He had had that will to soothe him before, and Harry knew he couldn’t stand sitting back and watching as someone who had been so important in making him what he was broke in tiny pieces by the force of stupid, pointless revenge and evil, dark plans. Although he had hardly ever thought of Draco as anything but a despicable, snob kid before he met him as a grown men, he had always believed in the changing power of second chances, of new beginnings, and he couldn’t — wouldn’t — let anyone take that chance from the man in front of him. He knew him now. Damn it, he liked him now. He was precious, indeed.

Draco’s hands slithered up Harry’s sides, his voice a soft murmur.

“No need to love me along the way, Potter.”

They were mere words, though, and if Harry could have helped it, he would have. But he was too far gone. He was not just emulating. He was feeling it, all that intimacy, all that tenderness. Unconsciously, Draco had struck that point. Harry felt compelled to stare into Draco’s eyes, which were waiting for him open, amenable, easy to search despite the obvious shadow of chemical blindness cast over them. They were keen on letting him in, on submitting to him, on trusting him.

“It’s my way of showing I care, Draco,” he whispered with a kind smile that bloomed across his face with so much ease that it was almost unreal. “I care. I really do.”

Harry felt as his feet touched the cool, dark water. He felt as Draco’s hands tightened on his skin, as
his face twisted in discomfort. He could see, in the bodily reality layered beneath the sudden
darkness, that Draco was making a conscious effort to keep his eyes open, to allow that window to
stay open. Suddenly, Harry realised they didn’t need it. He was with him. There was nothing he
couldn’t do. He closed his own eyes.

“You can close yours too, Draco. I’m here. I’m not going to leave.”

Harry dove face first into the water as Draco closed his eyes, and reality was overlaid by the
protections of his mind. He felt his physical body sinking deep into a meditative state, deep enough
so he lost track of every feeling of his skin, his limbs, his breath. It was amazing. It was like being
free. He had never been welcomed like that inside someone’s mind, and it was cold and dark and
horribly lonely and painful to his bodiless being but it was so good. He swam around until his
boxers got too wet; then he ditched them and swam some more. It was easy, so easy to forget
everything while he swam. It was so easy to just stay there, to feel the numbing pain dissolve into
nothingness as his feet froze from the leisurely paddling. He just needed to have Draco there with
him. With that, he’d be able to forget his worries and let go — maybe, forever.
Harry saw a blinding light and it froze him for an instant. When he came to his senses, he was engulfed by savage, deadly waters. Waves crashed upon him one after the other; he felt the burning inside his lungs as the water entered his nose and mouth. No, he couldn’t let himself be, he couldn’t surrender to that peace and quietness, he had a mission, he had to overcome that. He felt as the barriers and protections leaned upon him, trying to trap him as he paddled inside the viscous, dark, freezing waters, putting his focus in Draco’s face, to try and drag himself to him. He made it to the surface, but no further. He had to find him and it had to be quick, he knew it had to, because Draco, he realised with a spasm of terror, was trying his best to welcome him into his mind and if drowning an intruder while distracting them with that peace was the least his mind came up with, he didn’t want to see it in its maximum. His search became frantic and ruthless, his mind trying to pry that darkness open, looking for a face he could no longer envision despite the fact that it was right beneath him.

He felt, with that sudden glimpse of grab of reality, that his hands, his physical hands, were clenching against Draco’s skin. He relaxed them, took a deep breath and let himself surrender to the feeling of that skin, to the way it was scarred, trembling, warm. He let the realization of being touching Draco, from head to toe, sink into his perception, and it was with a gulf of breath that he submerged again and swam, held alive by that feeling until he stumbled upon a shore. It was dark, stony and pathless. A portal of sharp stone promised some less natural barriers and probably something built by Draco himself, so he got up and walked slowly, trying to find anything that resembled a clue, an advance. His feet dragged and his lungs hurt, and his head was on the verge of giving up. He gritted his teeth, which were chattering from the merciless climate, and shook his hands in a wandless spell for a portable fire. Thank goodness Draco’s mind allowed spells.

The fire had a nice side-effect: unlike the first barriers, that part of Draco’s mind allowed him to conjure light. He could see the tall walls of perfectly polished stone, the doors rattling and calling him side by side. He proffered a hand and touched the thick wood of a dark green one that opened without a sound. He held out his wand, prepared to fight whatever came out of it. His heart sunk and his mouth went suddenly dry when he recognized the people in there. Lying on the table, that one in the dining room with the signatures, Harry knew it was that one, Astoria took calming breaths while Draco, dressed in pyjamas and long gloves, urged her to push. The smell of sterility was almost as strong as the one of blood, which made Harry slightly sick. Sitting beside them, a newly born crossbred cub stared at everything with strangely worried eyes. A whip cracked somewhere behind it when it tried to move forward, to sniff closer to Astoria’s face.

“It’s ok, Kim, she’s fine,” said Draco’s absentminded voice as Astoria made one new, long push. “One more, Ast!”

Astoria pushed once more, and the slippery, wet sound went accompanied by a baby. At the same time, the feeling of the memory changed, from the overwhelming, ecstatic thrill of birthing to a shadowy revenge-like something, tinted with much more than just a hint of sadism. He couldn’t see but male hands snatching the baby from Draco’s arms before he could even stare at the child; at the same time, female hands downed in something gooey and greenish that Harry instantly recognized as chimaera venom pressed hard against Draco. He was tied, hands and feet, by an Incarcerous at the same time that someone held the cub, which was about to pounce on Draco’s attacker. Harry saw the animal bite the hand of his captor and listened to Astoria’s unearthly scream before the memory
faded and vanished, the door shutting him out and closing. Every single forearm shown had the Dark Mark, and the creepiest part was that, unlike Draco’s, the others were not even faded.

Harry tried not to pull out after seeing that. It was not like any of the memories Malfoy had shown him, be them through Legilimency or dreams. It made him terribly uneasy, but he needed to go on. As he went, a couple of other doors blew up or dissolved even though he was not touching them, so he hurried forward — realising that the doors were not what he was looking for, for it would have been too easy, he focused on moving in a somewhat straight line. His teeth were clenched even harder, the portable fire incapable of heating him much further. He tripped on something and fell on his face. It was a plate on the floor, carved in black stone with silver inscriptions. It was something old and runic, illegible to Harry, but it obviously had something to do with, as he saw when he lifted his eyes, the apparently shallow well in front of him. When he stared into the waters, everything else disappeared: the walls, the fire, the light, the feeling of earth beneath his feet. The still waters were luring him in, begging him to enter it. Harry tried to leave, but he couldn’t turn away or move back. It was as if he was glued to the spot, except that he could still lean into the well. It was murmuring his name now, showing scene after scene of his deepest desires. His selfish ones. He saw a much older Albus playing with a fairly tall Scorpius and a bunch of other kids, he saw him go to Draco and call him Father, saw him proffer a hand to Harry’s self. It was literally close enough to reach, too entrancing to let go of, so he touched it.

The instant he did it, he was into the well. He tried a Lumos, but that well was guarded; he frowned and, being cold, wet again, tired and quite probably hurt, screamed. The scenes were being replaced by his mundane reality: a wounded Draco being sent back to suffer under the hands of his captors, a pitiful Ginny telling him he should let go of Albus because he was no longer suited to take care of him, a frustrated Hermione asking him how could he be that stupid. They spoke in murmurs that echoed inside the well, that crowded over him, Draco’s serious voice saying how he wouldn’t be with him, Teddy screaming at him for letting his cousin go. He could no longer move and was quite certain that he would die, unable as he was to pull out from Draco’s mind because he could no longer feel Draco’s body beneath his, when a light shone below him.

Next thing he knew, he was stretched on the ground, the side of his face pressed to the cold, wet grass of the front-yard, right before the gates of Malfoy Manor. In front of him, two polished shoes peeked from under the hem of crimson robes. He rolled over and sat up, only to stare at a blond, heavily scarred wizard with outline features identical as Draco’s, hair as long as Lucius’ and a permanent snarl that seemed to have been carved there by the scars. The man did not present himself and his mere existence was unsettling enough to make Harry grit his teeth in an effort to continue inside Draco’s mind, although he knew his grip was weakening. The wizard had his arms folded, his left hand posed and set on top of his right arm. It was an old, mistakenly frail hand, blemished with dots to prove that he had witnessed the lives of a thousand suns, long-fingered and impossibly strong. A carved scar showed the head of a slender, snake-like dragon, its body disappearing into the sleeves of his robes. It was outlined in something like metallic ink, except it didn’t look like something that would wash off. Harry set his mind to finding Draco, to feel that touch on him again, desperate to move on and leave, and was answered with a cold, hard blow of magic to the side of his head. He wobbled and even stumbled, but kept standing and eventually stilled. His ears were ringing. The mysterious wizard folded his arms again in the strangely relaxed posture of someone who had been doing that for long and narrowed the lash-less slits that were his eyes at Harry. A cold shiver ran down his spine and he noticed when sheer dread began to creep up his body, spreading from the middle of his guts in a radial, slowly paralysing wave, much similar to the feeling he had had inside the well. He kept his mind set in the feeling of Draco, his quiet smiles and the deep fondness they inspired, setting his jaw and prodding forward with all he could. The wizard’s hold of the wards wavered and Harry managed to slip his search through for a speck of a moment, only to be hit thrice as hard when the wards were replaced, jolting him backward with a loud sound of something
breaking underneath him. He winced in pain when he tried to move and let out a sharp shout when his left leg caved under his weight. He muttered a half-hearted Episkey and felt the bone go back to its place, just to snap again with the force of another blow that sent him flying and landed him on a thorny bush of impossibly white roses. Harry’s eyes watered but he prodded on, muttering as he went and having Slashing Curses thrown at him. He could attack the man, but his resemblance with Draco begged him not to. He felt a sharp burn on his shoulder, the smell of singed hair, and stopped going on, almost losing consciousness from the pain spreading down his neck and up his cheek. If he fainted inside Draco’s mind, he wouldn’t be able to pull out. He would be trapped. He would be gone. It was then that a childish, powerful voice shouted and he recognized it.

“Pépé, stop!”

The scarred wizard turned back and retreated a little as a five years-old child slid into place beside him. Harry was breathing hard, gritting his teeth against the pain and failing miserably at healing himself. The pain was verging the unbearable, sinking into his skin and bones. The boy moved towards Harry and proffered him a hand. It was all slim fingers and pale skin, and Harry held it to be unsurprisingly enough to amaze him, by the warm feeling of Draco’s. The child smiled at him and his eyes softened.

“Harry Potter is with us.”

Harry grinned despite the pain, which was making him very dumb, very fast. “Did I make it?”

“You did,” the boy said.

Harry felt as the world of Draco’s mind shattered around him, then felt his own mind be sent forcefully back into his body. He almost wished it hadn’t, because the pain went with it, and he passed out from it before he could even say “Hello”.

About ten minutes later, Harry was woken up by a stinging pain crossing the skin of his neck. He jolted, landing with his weight full on top of Draco again. He felt and heard him draw a deep breath and sigh it out, trying to look unfazed by the pain it prompted. Heart racing, Harry relaxed again, feeling soft thumbs massage his burned skin. By his feet, Kreacher was mending his broken leg, snapping the bone into place with a spell that made Harry roar with pain.

“Shut up, you’ll wake up the kids,” said Draco, holding him still by the waist and shoulders. He snorted and shook his head. “Thank you, Kreacher. I’ll take it from here.”

“Master Potter should not go battling master Malfoy’s memories. Master Malfoy is knowing how to be protecting a mind for very long.”

“Do spare him some sympathy, Kreacher. He’s trying. He’s family, now.” Kreacher mumbled something. “You know he is, Kreacher. Don’t you dare refusing him.”

“Forgive Kreacher, master. Master Potter is being family for little time and Kreacher is still not liking master Malfoy’s lack of care about master Malfoy.”

“But he does care about me, Kreacher.” Draco softly stroke Harry’s waist, which was the most public display of affection he’d ever done towards Harry. It made the Gryffindor blush. Kreacher nodded solemnly and narrowed his eyes at them. “Please check if any of the children woke up with his screaming and then you can go back to bed, alright?”

Kreacher bowed and left the room, closing the door behind him as he went. Harry was still too
appalled to speak. What had been that? Why was Draco showing Kreacher, of all people, that they were a thing? Even the old, grumpy elf could not let that display go unnoticed.

“You, Potter, lack so much of self-preservation skills that it’s amazing that you’re still living.”

“What?” Harry moved slowly, feeling battered and hurt. Draco shushed him back into his previous position and continued to apply whatever balm it was on his skin. He didn’t need to look at himself to feel that whatever the man in crimson had done, it had affected his physical body to some degree.

“Why did you surrender to the water? It could have killed you. Literally.”

“It was nice and peaceful. Most of your defences are.”

“There is a reason for that, but I never thought you’d fall for it.” He cleaned his fingers on the sheets. “Don’t do it again, do you know how bloody painful it is to rescue you from my own mind when I’m barely sensing you inside it?”

“Sorry?”

“Salazar almighty.” He closed his eyes again. “Did you find something before you reached the well? I couldn’t feel you for a while. I couldn’t see you inside. It was all black and chaotic and unsettling.”

Harry frowned and felt his body go on alert. “You didn’t see the green door? Or the memory inside it?”

“No, what are you talking about?” Harry hesitated. “Potter. It’s my mind. Planted or not, I need to know what is in here. What was it?”

“You delivered Scorpius.”

“I did?” He swallowed and his lips trembled in an incipient smile. “So I’ve seen him.”

Harry didn’t answer, but there again, it was not a question. He cleared his throat and tried to move his just mended leg. It complained and hurt, and he gave it up the next instant. Knowing Kreacher, it would be fine by the morning, when the swelling receded completely.

“Why is your mind so guarded?” he asked instead.

“Because I’m an Occlumens, Potter. Give me at least the tiniest bit of credibility.” He summoned the quilt to cover them. “You were the first person to reach the well. Was it too bad?”

“It was downright awful. Who even does something that crafted? It felt like an Erised mirror and a boggart competing for attention inside my mind.” He rolled his eyes. “I thought that had been bad enough, but when I met Auror you, now that was what I’d call ‘bad’.”

Draco chuckled at his description. “That person is Grandfather Abraxas, not me, Potter. You are one of the first to be granted permission into the wards by him.”

“Someone else was granted it?”

“Besides my immediate family? Pansy.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, we could have asked her to open the Manor to us.”

“You are daft. Pansy cannot access the Manor in all of its entirety. Only our family can. The immediate, blood or marriage related ones.”
“Then why does she have the permission?”

“It’s her thing. She was supposed to marry me, according to my parents, and Abraxas was fond of her when he was alive.”

“Your family and Pansy’s know for that long?”

“We were born in the same week. We spent our entire lives together.”

“I didn’t imagine it. I always thought you were dating or something.”

“Salazar, no. Pans is house-elf crazy. She’s amazing but I’d dread my every day had I ever to live with her.”

“But if she doesn’t have the access, what makes you think I do?”

“I gave you it. I received you into my house. I allowed you into the family, you met the requirements.”

“Requirements?”

“Promised to care for me, slept with me, ate with me and lit a fire while I was close enough.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Ancient traditions. The Sacred Twenty-Eight is not a mere self-promoting, purity-enhancing denomination, Potter. There has been a time we were both sacred and the only powerful ones.” He lifted his eyebrows in a shrugging manner. “Ask Weasley. They have been excommunicated but they’re still a member.”

“Why can’t I ask you?”

“Because I’m not obligated to patiently guide you through pureblood history because you’re terribly, not to say annoyingly ignorant of your own bloody family line.”

Harry couldn’t help but to roll his eyes. It was not the most mature of all reactions but he was tired and unwilling to be pushed around. He decided to drop the subject in order to prevent a discussion. His head was just beginning to become light and airy; it was much like he was floating. Maybe flying. The feeling was nice, but there were very few contributions it could make to his coherent thinking.

“Does it mean I can enter anywhere in the Mansion now?” he asked dumbly.

“Yes, Potter, it does. Are you even listening?” He smiled at his daftness. “The house and its whereabouts must respond to you as they do to one of us the next time you enter the property, but it might take a couple of days. The wards and the Manor are symbiotic, not the same. Of course, if you try to use this power to harm anyone in the family, you’ll be murdered by the house itself.”

“You purebloods sure know how to protect yourselves.”

“This is recent. The house didn’t always fight back, but after the Dark Lord torturing people it cared for in there, it got fed up. There’s a dungeon downstairs that’s barely inside the wards, where he would take us so the Manor wouldn’t burn down with him inside it when he wanted to discipline us.” Draco’s voice was calm as if he was commenting about the weather, but the reminiscing, fading link between them made the quiet pang of all-too-familiar fear felt. Harry tried to get even closer to
Draco, any room between them vanishing as their skins glued together. He could feel all of him, from chest to toe, feel his blood running, the drumming of his heartbeat. It was insanely reassuring. “It’s like a bedroom, more or less. Pureblood dungeons usually are. I think. It’s hard to remember these things. It’s hard to remember the Manor sometimes.”

“Whoever messed your memory up didn’t seem to know what they were doing. The hallways and protections are a mess. I am almost sure I detonated a couple of them without even touching them.”

“It’s fine if you did it. I’ve been working on it too, so don’t blame yourself. I more or less know what you freed.”

Harry nodded and took a deep, sighing breath. Draco seemed to have steeled himself ever since they started with the mind reading. He no longer felt too fragile for too long; his limbs were not trembling and he was not sick, almost as if it had been a regular effort, not an overwhelming one. Nevertheless, Harry’s opinions continued the same: if Draco’s mind was that hard to enter when he was willing to be found and the Legilimens meant no harm, Harry didn’t want to face it while it defended itself properly. With a snarky smirk, he wondered that even Voldemort must have suffered inside Draco’s mind, and it gave him a new amount of fresh respect for the man he was pinning to the bed. If Draco had been able to make Voldemort feel any pain... The thought of the Dark Lord chasing the child Draco while paddling in freezing water or wandering around in the dark was too comical. He didn’t hold back a laugh.

“What?” asked Draco sleepily.

“Tell me your mind tortured Voldemort like it tried to torture me,” he said, resting his chin on Draco’s chest and staring at his face. His eyes were open and amusement flashed through them. Harry had once thought his eyes, after being that damaged, would show no more emotions but then there was Draco to prove him wrong once more. “Tell me you faced him as that little boy I met and kicked his arse.”

Draco hesitated before laughing the brightest of laughs. Harry’s heart warmed at that. “I may have done it a couple of times.” Harry joined his laughter. “That boy you saw was me in my grandfather’s mind. I guided you to it exactly like the Dark Lord asked me to guide him, except he didn’t pass the test.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, frowning and deeply curious.

“Grandfather Abraxas was the most empathetic person we knew of. His being dead didn’t change his ability. He didn’t let the Dark Lord go into the Manor for he knew he would endanger the family by doing so. That scarring in his body is the result of a lot of curses and hexes.”

“But your grandfather’s spirit didn’t budge.”

“No. The Lord had to stop before he Vanished Grandfather and erased the protections upon the Manor.”

Harry was grinning like a fool at the idea that the wimpy, easily scared, word-threatening, bark-and-no-bite Malfoy he knew was able to keep Voldemort from taking over his house. That boy had the mental strength to push him from his mind merely by allowing him in, and his mind fought Voldemort without thinking twice. It was deeply arousing that Draco was so powerful. It had been a long time since anyone stirred a desire such as that inside him and Harry tried but failed to be concerned. He could feel the way Draco was proud of having been able to dismiss Voldemort and live to tell the tale and he could feel how much that power was important to him. He could understand those feelings as his own and it was amazing, to taste those remaining shards of
connection, to relate to someone he thought so different from him. For some reason, that was winning him over so that Draco was able to feel it.

“You really are having fun with the thought,” he said, bemused.

“You have no idea.” He chuckled some more. “Voldemort was incapable of taking over a sixteen years-old mind. Him. The Dark Lord,” he said it with a mocking tone, “was incapable of submitting someone who was following him already.”

Draco’s expression grew sombre. “Don’t you think it worsens the fact that I joined him? I was one of the few who would have survived him if he tried to force me.”

“Well, Malfoy, we must remember shit happens.” He shrugged. “You were young and stupid. We’ve all been.”

“Honestly, Potter, I don’t understand your mind.”

“Good thing I’m the one entering yours, then.”

Draco could have answered that one, but chose not to. They slept like logs for hours and, when Harry woke him up by going down on him, he had already forgotten what he meant to say. It was hard to think when he was being dragged into a spiral of blissful oblivion by Harry’s ridiculously skilled mouth. When he thought of making him pay back, it was more with his hands, not his lips. As bloody Potter went, though, he was obviously not going to listen and wait, for the life of Salazar.

Draco was squirming and trying to do it very elegantly, Harry noted smugly. He was not going to reprimand him for that, obviously, but it was a sight he didn’t mind waking up to every day. Draco’s rumpled bed hair was messier than ever, his cheeks flustering as Harry licked and sucked, his legs folding, knees pointing up, hands tangling with the sheets. The quilt was gone and Harry saw, every once in a while, as he put up his hands as if he was going to ask him to either stop or go faster, looking both sheep and wolfish. Then, biting his lower lip and not producing a single sound but for a pained, suffocated gasp, he came, long and powerful. Harry swallowed what he could, and wiped his lips with his arm. Draco’s chest was rising and falling quickly as he panted, and Harry couldn’t help but to grin wide at that.

“Hide you sodding smile, arsehole.”

“Don’t think so.” Harry crawled on top of him again and kissed his jaw. “Good morning, family.”

“You are a sick, twisted creature.”

“You said it yourself.” His lips moved up until they reached Draco’s, and Harry smiled against them. “Bet you didn’t know I could do this.”

“I am not going to pry on your sex life, Potter. I’m not the slightest bit curious.”

Harry bit Draco’s bruised lower lip, making him hiss for a moment. “I’m going to the Manor soon. I had to do it in case I, you know, died.”

Draco had to laugh at that. Soon after, they were back at kissing, long and pleasurably. They exchanged places, Draco looming above Harry, pulling him close, his hands seemingly all over Harry’s body. The sheets were too wrinkled to be comfortable now, their bodies heating to the point of becoming insufferably hot. Harry slid his hands to Draco’s naked arse, digging his finger onto the pale skin, seeing little stars as he lost his balance and collided with him, his weight and heat arousing him so. Draco moved slightly against Harry’s groins, and he lost track of the kiss to favour a moan
that could have been heard in every corner of the house, were the door open. It was only when Harry darted a foggy glance to the door — he was not wearing his glasses — that he saw there was someone by the doorpost.

“Jesus!”

He pushed Draco away immediately, fussing around for his glasses. He put them on and Hermione’s open-mouthed figure became clear.

“Ahm…” He gulped.

“I knocked.” She still had her hand half-balled into a fist. “Lock the bloody door, will you? What if one of the kids saw you?”

She rolled her eyes and turned around, recovering from the shock for long enough to allow Harry to put on a tee and some boxers. Draco stretched in bed and didn’t move to cover himself, apparently too amused with the situation to care. Harry threw the quilt at him and slapped his thigh to prompt him to move, which he did without complaining.

“Good morning, Granger.”

“Morning, Draco.”

“Anything we can do for you?” he asked nonchalantly, smiling his most charming smile.

“Godric, Draco!” Harry blew up at his ease and lack of embarrassment, almost purple. “She saw us about to fuck, can’t your toff side give us a goddamn break?”

“Potter.” He smiled even wider. The git. “Hermione is a grown, married woman with a child. She knows what sex is.” He chuckled as Harry gasped, searching for words. “Come on in, dear. Grab a chair. I wouldn’t recommend the bed.”

Hermione did as told, much to Harry’s shock. “I have news to share. If you don’t mind me being here, of course. I can wait for you to finish it all in the living room.”

“No, no, do carry on, please.” Draco took his wand and Scourgified the sweat and remaining spilled fluids from his body. “Potter, sit your arse down. It’s my bun she saw. Would you please relax?” Reluctantly, Harry obeyed him. His crimsonness was beginning to recede. “What news are these?”

“We found out the MAMS have really been tampered with. Tillius ran a check on every single signature for the past years. It’s too much work, and sort of manual, so it did take long, but he found out. Most of the signatures are intact, but for a couple, which have been tampered. Yours, Draco, and Astoria’s, for an example. Narcissa’s. The signatures have been one thing for the past three years, but were a whole different kind before.”

“But we compared Draco’s signature.”

“But with the MAMS, Harry. We compared it with his own signature. We saw it inside his body.” Her brows furrowed. Harry couldn’t help but to remember how Ron had said that the MAMS were "terribly outdated" when he talked about Astoria's signature. “There are some signatures whose most recent information have been erased, but every tampered signature there is civilian. And I do mean civilian: except for you,” she pointed as Draco, “there are no Death Eaters, mostly Muggleborns or Half-Bloods. Tillius found it awkward, so he checked, and they all live in very small cities, cities where no one would go out of their own free will.”
“Obvious diverting.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “So we went after Azkaban’s records, and there are none. Nott’s, Crabbe’s, Carrow’s, every single one of their signatures are missing now. We are certain they are involved, but so far we have just Lucius’s signature intact. Even the signatures on dead Death Eaters are gone.”

“That’s insane, Hermione. Erasing them would take forever. That database is gigantic.”

“Which is why we think it was probably stacked away, not destroyed, but we don’t know who or how or where yet.”

“It’s an inside job,” said Draco, categorical.

“Draco, I know it’s the most obvious choice…”

Draco cut him. “No, Potter, it’s the only choice. Whoever tampered with them would have to know them very well. Look for people who have been in close touch with those databases, people who have been assigned too much maintenance or surveillance duty on Azkaban and wherever you keep the MAMS. If it’d take time, they’d need time.”

Hermione’s colour vanished.

“What’s wrong, ‘Mione?”

“Ron said the same thing. He said he knew who could have been, but I didn’t think— I mean, he suspects him, I’m not stupid, I know he hasn’t forgiven him—”

“‘Him’ who?” asked Draco.

“Dawlish,” was Harry’s answer. “Dawlish has been granted Azkaban duty for very long, and he’s failing his other duties as an Auror.” Harry started summoning his clothes from his wardrobe. Thank goodness his leg was fine, now. “Did Ron go after him, Hermione?”

“I think so.”

“You have to go.” Draco was deadly serious. “If Dawlish has anything to do with the people who tortured me, Weasel is probably about to die.”

Neither Harry nor Hermione needed any urging: they flooed to the Ministry without as much as saying goodbye the moment Harry was dressed. They split up when they reached the DMLE floor, Hermione going for Dawlish’s office and Harry following the path to the one he shared with Ron. He had time to hear an unmistakable Incarcerous before barging into the office to find Millicent, her hair tousled, pointing a deadly wand to Dawlish’s barely visible head. He was tied from his mouth down in large stripes of a silky material, trying to break free. She looked maniacal.

“You shitty piece of—”

“Millicent!” Harry shouted, scanning the room in search of Ron. “Keep him alive. Where’s Ron?”

“Behind the desk.”

She shot a Full Body Bind at Dawlish, just in case, and took his wand before following Harry to see how Ron was faring. He had a massive gash on his head and the larger of the chimaera’s claw injuries seemed to have re-opened, but his eyes were fluttering, trying to avoid the dripping blood. His arm was slashed right below the chunk he missed when he Splinched, the piece Hermione’s
Dittany could not recover. There were more slashes, most of them on his side and none looking very promising.

“Hey, Ron, can you hear me?” Harry kneeled beside him and wiped the blood from his eyes so he could open them. Ron smiled weakly.

“Yup.” He blinked a couple of times. “Knockback and a Slashing.”

“From behind,” added Millicent, her eyes narrowing at Dawlish’s petrified figure. “He entered after Weasley and sent him flying. Knocked his head on the desk and everything. I was coming to talk to you about Nott.”

“Thank goodness you did.” Ron’s eyes fluttered closed. “I’m gonna pass out.”

Harry didn’t even had time to panic when he said those words before Tyra entered the place, followed by a hurried and worried Hermione. Of course. Any harmful spell produced anywhere civilians were allowed inside the Ministry popped an alarm in Tyra’s office. She scurried past Harry, shooting questions at him while she put a stasis spell on Ron.

“It’s not that bad,” she said as she lifted him onto a stretcher. Hermione looked sick. “Really, it’s not. He dodged the second curse and his head looks fine. I’ll patch him up and he’ll be free after a couple of Sanenturs and a Blood Replenishing.”

Not that Harry and Hermione didn’t believe her, but they followed her to the Infirmary nevertheless. Millicent was levitating Dawlish, gritting her teeth and murmuring threats that chilled Harry’s spine as they went. For a Slytherin, that woman surely hated backstabbing. Absolutely no one of her threats involved Dawlish’s body’s full integrity, and, despite knowing it was not a nice side of his to show, Harry couldn’t help but to smile at that.

Chapter End Notes

I am terribly sorry for taking so long to update this. A horrid flu has come to strike me, and it affected the writing of my university essays, which meant the fic had to be put on hold for a moment until I could finish everything I couldn't while I was lost in a vaporub-tylenol haze. Thank you for sticking by and fear not, for this fic shall never be abandoned!
The trip to the Infirmary was superfluous, since Tyra sent them packing the second they reached it. One of her interns went to help her, and she locked the door without as much as bothering to say when they could come back. Hermione even found the nerve to insist that she was his wife (a fact she never said aloud at work), but Tyra didn’t budge. She promised through a closed door that she’d call them as soon as everything was over, reiterated that they should not fear and then ignored them altogether. Hermione huffed and puffed but gave up with a lack of grace that had her one inch from kicking Dawlish’s head probably off. She glared at the ultra-spelled man with anger in her eyes, her fingers clenching and unclenching as she wondered what to do with her hands. Sighing, Harry took one of them between his.

“It’s okay. He’ll be punished, just—don’t kill him, okay?”

“I’m fine, Harry.” She eyed the petrified man once again. “Just really angry. It’ll blow away.”

They held hands tighter and Millicent couldn’t help but to roll her eyes.

“Lovely, the two of you, but we have an Auror to charge for attempted murder here, remember?”

They both nodded, and Hermione’s hand slipped away from Harry’s.

“I’ll go with you. Harry, go do that thing with the house. I’ll call you when Tyra’s done.”

“On my own?”

“Here.” Millicent produced a small mirror out of her pocket. Harry’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Suppose you’re familiar with it?”

“Yes.” It was a beautiful piece, made of silver, with a distinct frame of something Harry could almost swear was platinum. He breathed “Millicent” onto its shiny surface and saw the woman pick up a pearl-trimmed counterpart. Her face was reflected so beautifully that it was shocking. Millicent was not particularly beautiful, physically speaking, but the mirror showed her character and it made her look astonishing. “It works.”

“It’s been in the family forever. You break it, your balls go into a jar in my office.”

“Fully noted.”

Harry didn’t insist to go with Dawlish because he didn’t think he’d be able to charge him and wait. He was only now beginning to understand how quickly everything had escalated. It was the second time already that Ron had been hurt because of the case, and both times too quick. It was obvious to Harry that they were right in arresting Dawlish; apparently, they should have trusted Ron’s guts a bit better. He left the Ministry quietly, heading first to Diagon Alley and then to the alley where he had found Draco. He had forgotten to analyse the scene after picking Draco up. There was nothing physical there anymore, and no traces of dark magic either. The cats were there, eyeing him as if they knew him. Eventually, Harry nodded curtly and spoke to the one closer to him.

“Good morning, Professor.”

The cat turned swift and elegantly into the appointed Headmistress of Hogwarts. Instead of fleeing, the other cats continued to stare at them.
“Shoo, off with the lot of you,” said the woman, her emerald-green robes billowing while she shooed them. Reluctantly, the cats left. “Good morning, Mr Potter.”

“Are you on a mission?”

“I’m monitoring Posey Pevensie. She has been to a Mediwizard not far from here. Her parents are old and worried that she might have to fend for herself in a world she does not understand if they pass away, so they are trying to accustom her to magic. Ms Bulstrode asked me to be around to offer them guidance and help if necessary, since she’s apparently prone to… accidents. Much like you, I daresay, Mr Potter.”

“I’ve been with her. She’s a sweet kid.”

“Yes, she is.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “And you? What are you doing here?”

“Investigating. Possible abduction.”

“I hope my wandering has not tainted your crime scene.”

“No really.” He cleared his throat. He didn’t want to continue in the subject, for it would certainly lead to questions about Draco and his patching thing up with him, all these things he’d very much like to avoid. “I must be going then.”

“Mr Potter.”

Too late.

“Yes?”

“Is anything happening with Mr Malfoy?”

That was not quite the question he had expected, though, and Harry’s shoulders relaxed. “No, why?”

“Because I found myself on the receiving end of a lovely written letter asking me to withhold any contact with him because he’s focusing on his family.”

_Pansy_, Harry though, irritated. “Oh, yes, I’ve received it too. Millicent said Astoria’s with child or something.”

“I see.” She pierced through his eyes with a look that could belong to a hawk’s face. Harry knew he had perhaps said too much. Paired with his inadvertent saying of Malfoy’s parenthood the last time he had been with the professor, that casual comment gave away, to someone that smart, that he knew far more than what he was letting on. “You should go to Hogwarts more often, Mr Potter.”

“Ma’am?”

“Good day, Mr Potter.”

Harry had time for half a wave before the woman left, disappearing into thin air. He shook his head, his thoughts rattling inside of his brains. McGonagall always looked like she knew more than she could possibly, and although Harry didn’t hate that fact, it made him uneasy. It had gotten worse after she became headmistress, and he wondered if being like that was a requirement to take the position or if it developed because of it. Whatever the case, he didn’t plan on becoming acquainted enough with the situation to find out.

Slightly disappointed because of his failed incursion into the alley, Harry Apparated to the Manor,
arriving almost gracefully about five hundred metres from the gates. Now that he knew it better, the building didn’t look that terrifying. It was almost beautiful, in fact. It was obviously uncared for, but still, its beauty now showed, and Harry thought it was probably because of the new ward arrangements. Technically, he’d only notice if the Manor was accepting him after going in and looking for Astoria, and he was not reassured by it. The building being sentient meant it could have a temper, and if Abraxas’ reaction was anything to go by, even though Draco was sure Harry had been accepted in the family, there was a chance that the Manor was not going to be pleased about him.

As usual, the wards didn’t throw him away, allowing him nicely in. There didn’t seem to be any difference so far. He went up to the rooms, managing to reach the corridor, but when he turned towards a door, he heard it locking as soon as his hand touched the doorknob. It was a bedroom; Harry pressed his ear against the wood, but there was nothing to hear on the other side. Still, he fished and Extensible Ear out of his pocket (it was old and battered now, but still working) to slide it under the door. Nothing: no breathing, no crying, no shuffling. It was completely deserted.

Harry tried that same approach with every single bedroom door on that floor; they all locked when he touched them and none had occupants. The doors were never-ending, and not one wielded under his touch. Giving up, Harry went back, wondering whether the path to the stairs was really that short. Maybe he had taken so long analysing the doors that he didn’t notice the corridor was not that long — and it didn’t sound plausible, he knew that, but they were wizards and there was more about magic than Harry had ever cared to know.

The rooms they had searched before had no changes of any sort, so he wasted no time in them. The wards should allow him downstairs now, and downstairs was probably where a certain chimaera lived. It had not been on the ground floor and not anywhere near the bedrooms too, which meant it could only be downstairs, outside or dead (although this last possibility didn’t eliminate the first two).

After seeing what he had in Draco’s head, Harry was much more prone to see the beast as more than just something trying to rip him to shreds. It looked like a guardian of sorts, concerned about Astoria, being tranquilized by Draco. Instead of trying to find the chimaera because he was certain it would be harming Astoria, now he thought it might be guarding her. The motives were becoming harder and harder to pinpoint, but Harry wasn’t going to give up.

He went downstairs to find a deserted kitchen reeking of something disgusting in a way it hadn’t been the last time they had gone there. Searching for the source, he reached a wooden, plain door that would probably be a pantry. The stench of rotten meat was strong enough to have Harry covering his nose once he entered it. He stepped on something that snapped beneath his feet like a mouse’s skull might. Opting for not knowing, he closed his eyes and said, loud and clear:

“I need to go down.”

It was short of an order, and the Manor’s reluctance could be felt, ringing through him as unmistakably as a shrill tweet. Still, a square section of the pantry floor lowered and converted into stone steps that led down. Breathing in — not too deep, given the stench —, Harry moved towards it. His wand did a very poor job of illuminating the way down, but thankfully there were bewitched torches on the long corridor where he arrived. If the house upstairs had been strangely quiet, that part down there was completely dead. There was a faint odour of ammonia and sulphur, but the terrible stench of rotten meat had remained mainly up. The walls were humid to the touch from their middle down and after ten minutes of walking among fancy doors decorated with golden filigrees he was skating through ankle-deep water. Harry cursed his stupid shoes and used an *Impervius* on them before they got too ruined. He opened a couple of the doors, revealing the fanciest cellars he had ever seen. They were as sumptuous as his common bedroom in Gryffindor Tower had seemed the first time he entered it, nothing like the place where they had been held in custody in 1998.
Sure that Astoria was not there, Harry closed the door to the third room he had opened and went further downstairs, to a second underground floor of dungeons. This time, the place felt like actual dungeons. The water was up to his chest now, blocked by another and stronger *Impervius*, and didn’t look like it was a plumbing situation. It did not seem to trespass to under the doors, so Harry tentatively opened one. There was a barrier blocking it, and Harry might have been impressed by it if he didn’t recognize the array of glass bottles filled with green liquid. They were small and stocked with a precision that made Harry’s stomach churn. Chimaera venom. It was green to one side, deep red on the other, allowing him to presume that the red-filled bottles were blood or something. There were other stuff sacked on the floor, but Harry didn’t want to look at it. He took a couple of phials as evidence and some more to send to Hogwarts — he knew how precious and dangerous that venom and that blood were —, then raised his wand and blew up the entirety of the contents in the room. The acrid smell of acidic burns rose and made his eyes water, but he didn’t regret it. He wouldn’t allow anyone else to go through what Draco had, even if it meant delaying the case.

He continued to walk, testing doors that wielded under his touch, opening pliant and amenably, allowing him to snoop around without problems. Further down the corridor, he tripped on something underwater, the feeling around him becoming more and more oppressive. Frowning, Harry touched the closest wall, yelping inwardly when it Vanished. Blinking rapidly, he stared into it, feeling the wards pushing him back, begging him not to go in. There it was, the stone table, the basin where he knew Draco — he — had been drowned and tortured, the same stone floor. There were several spider and ball gags lined up on the wall, whips and iron bars, separators and cuffs, shackles and knives. Had Harry not seen what those things had done to Draco, he might have thought it to be merely a sadomasochism cellar — which, given the bed to one of the sides and the barely touched glass cabinet filled with medicine, potions and balms, was probably the right thing. It was still inside the wards, Harry could feel it, but the Manor’s vehemence in keeping him out was too hard to fight. Frustrated, he took a look at the two doors that were the last ones in that corridor. Gritting his teeth, knowing what he’d find in there, he took a step forward…

… And fell flat on his face in the Manor’s backyard.

The feeling was quite similar to the one of being flattened to the floor by one of Abraxas’ spells, except he was not hurt that time. Blinking forcefully, he sat down and checked his head and recently mended leg. Shit. What the fuck had he done wrong? The house was being ill-tempered sometimes and not quite pliant on the upper floors, but it hadn’t yet kicked him out. He stored that information in an “ask later” box, taking in his surroundings for the first time. It was beautiful. Definitely not as beautiful as the front garden, but beautiful nonetheless. He presumed he was right on top of the cellar he wanted to investigate, given his rough measurement of the wards. He suspected that the cell was that one Draco had told him about, the one where he was tortured by the Dark Lord. Walking, he noticed when the kind of ward changed, from the quiet, all-encompassing barrier made by Abraxas’ spirit to a feral, hot one. He was supposed to know enough of ward-breaking and even tried to pass through it, to no success. The ward seemed to be even stronger than the one around the Manor, despite his knowing that it was probably not possible. Another information to store.

He was sighing and thinking of roaming around when he felt a hand fall delicately on his shoulder. Wand in hand, he flipped and stared at his possible foe. Inwardly, he grunted. It was Pansy.

“Hello, Potter. Nice day to go for a walk around the Manor, isn’t it?”

She smiled an innocent smile that didn’t reach her eyes, which were burning in something too akin to rage to be safe. Harry swallowed.

“Draco asked me to come by,” he lied to her face, shrugging for good measure.
“Funny, because Draco has assured me, when I contacted him, that he wasn’t going to be here for the day.” Harry blinked. “Now, what about we stop lying to each other and put some truths on the table?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. By the way, why are you even here?”

She smiled condescendingly this time. “I’m spelling the house, like Draco asked me to.”

Her long nails ghosted up his arm, clenching on him with just enough force to suggest a threat. Harry didn’t like it, but his respect for Draco made him stay put and refrain from defending himself.

“Oh, right. I met with people saying they received your letters. Very unsubtle of yours.”

“It’s my thing, Potter. I know perfectly well what I’m doing.” The nails dug further on Harry’s robes, itching on his skin. “What about you? Try to be honest.”

“Would you mind letting me go?” he tried rather gently.

“I would, actually.” Harry’s grip on his wand tightened and Pansy tut-tutted. “You won’t want to do this. I’m warded.”

“I can dispel a Shield Charm. Won’t even hurt you for it.”

“I’m not wearing a Shield Charm, Potter. I’m wearing a ward. You cannot just dispel it.” Her eyes began to search his, driving Harry into a situation he didn’t want to face. “You know, Potter, Draco’s a very nice guy. He sometimes… hides stuff to prevent that others get hurt by things he did.”

“I’m not following.”

“I am positive you are.” The girl stretched her arms, her beautiful, straight black hair cascading down her back when she shook her head in a mimicking of a morning stretch. Her almond eyes were serious and inquiring when she stared at him again. “Wards are a funny thing. Sometimes they talk. And you know what they didn’t say?” Harry swallowed again. “That Draco left this house recently. But we both know he did, don’t we? After all, wasn’t he at your place?”

“Maybe the wards are wrong.”

“Wards don’t lie to me, Potter. But they do seem to believe you, Granger and Weasley have been here before.”

“You’re hallucinating.”

“Let me tell you a very short story. Once upon a time, there was a little girl who liked Draco Malfoy a tad too much. One day, his grandfather decided to allow her permanently into the wards of his Manor. What he didn’t know was that the little girl would grow up to become so close to those wards that she’d be able to see them in ways no one else could.”

“Now I’m really not following.”

“Salazar Slytherin, you’re demented.” She looked appalled. “Don’t you know anything on purebloods?”

“I’m not a pureblood, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Mmm.” Pansy looked downright disappointed. “I gather neither Draco nor Weasley have ever spoken to you about what it means to be a pureblood, right?”
“Why would they?”

“Because, sweet Potter of mine, in case you haven’t noticed, you are sitting your sorry arse on a pureblood lap and not knowing how to dance accordingly.”

Harry felt his face go red in an instant. “What?”

“What are you doing with Draco, Potter?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar. Why are you here?”

“Just visiting.”

“Draco’s not here. Why would you visit?”

“Parkinson, please. It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not. I’m not dumb. There’s something off with the Manor, these wards are all over the place, Narcissa’s in Berlin, Astoria doesn’t see her sister for ages, and now you’re taking a stroll down the Manor yards?” She scoffed. “No, Potter, it’s not complicated. It’s fucking damn simple and I think you should spill. I will find out what’s happening, whether you help me or not.”

“Please, please, I’m begging you, stay away from this. It’s none of your business.”

“It’s my best friend you’re talking about.”

“You have to trust me, Parkinson.”

“I have no reason to, and if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’ll begin this search myself.”

Harry sighed. They couldn’t afford to have Parkinson sniffing around. That woman would end up risking something, saying something, doing something that would expose all of them. Unlike his friends, Draco’s could not be asked to wait, could not be said half-truths. Her stance showed him she was not going to give up.

“I’m waiting.”

“He’s being chased. He’s staying at my place.”

Pansy’s left eyebrow rose up high. “In that shack?”

“Parkinson, don’t.” He rubbed at his temples. “I’m trying to find a clue about his stalker so I can arrest them and return him to the Manor.”

“And Astoria?”

“Perfectly safe.” As far as Harry knew, it was not a lie. The Manor had forbidden him to reach her and Draco hadn’t felt anything through the marriage bond, so she must be safe. “Just not willing to see anyone.”

Pansy stared him up and down a couple of times. “I know you’re not telling me everything. I’m trying to decide if I should push you for more.”

“I don’t know much more. I know it’s bad and he needs protection and he didn’t want to worry
“Mmm.” She let him go, Harry’s skin tingling and bruising as she did so. “I’ll finish what I’m doing. You go do your thing and come back right after. I’m not done with you.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that I may be done with you?”

“I told you what I’m going to do if I’m not satisfied. I have a hint that you won’t want me to.”

Harry could probably putting her on lock up for obstruction of justice or just punch her in the face, were he not aware of how ridiculous it was to be ruffled up because of something a Slytherin had said to him. It was harder than it looked like, because he was short of angry on Draco for allowing her in. He didn’t fully understand why they should bring more people into it. Why couldn’t Hermione set whatever magic Draco had asked Pansy to? Why couldn’t they just fucking stop letting people in? Wasn’t that thing risky enough already? He rolled his eyes at the sight of Pansy’s bottom swaying as she walked around the yard in impossibly high heels that didn’t sink in the grass as if she owned the place, then sighed and continue to do his search. Since he was there already, why not look for some other things, such as the likely bodies of female hippogriffs they were supposed to have impregnated to generate a single decent cub? Yeah, that would take his mind off the other problems at hand.

Harry tried to steer away from Pansy as he set up the diagnosis spell and adjusted its ray. It was not fine magic, any level one raider learned how to do that, but it was a pain to sustain for long periods of time, so Harry poured more of his power into it in order to allow him to spread the range and ray further. He was hoping no magical strain would hit him before he was done, although he couldn’t bet on it. The spell started to buzz around him, willing for something to detect. It was pulling him strongly towards what had been the supply shack, but made a wild turn when he was close to Narcissa’s rosebushes.

Draco had once explained, as they told Teddy and the babies a couple of stories, that it was traditional that Malfoys raised albinos — animals, plants, anything. Lucius raised peacocks, like his father and grandfather, and Narcissa liked cultivating flowers, so she had white roses, narcissus and wisterias. The thing about that tradition was that they had to care for whatever they raised with their own hands. Draco had told them he didn’t like peacocks very much, although he did take care of them and even raised them. When Teddy asked him what he’d raise if he could choose, he said he would probably continue with the bloody birds but wanted a creature of might and wonder, and now, staring at the bright white roses, Harry thought he might as well keep the sodding crossbred that was hiding inside his house and start from there.

A thin, terribly white peacock left the bushes as Harry edged closer to the roses — the same kind of the ones he saw and fell upon when being attacked by Abraxas. The bird stared at him smugly, walking away with its head up high. Frowning at the too Malfoy bird, he went closer to the bushes. The earth around them was fluffy, as if it had been moved recently, and he could see that some of the lower branches of the bushes were broken or snapped. The flowers looked too vibrant, too shiny for plants that were not receiving any kind of treatment — Harry knew (because of course Hermione had nagged him about it when they did their last Herbology exam on soils and magical crops and that kind of knowledge didn’t want to leave his brain) that Wiltshire’s soil was not good for sowing on top of the hills, because it was chalky, poor and mostly dry. Without proper care, those flowers should not be that lovely.

Harry hesitated, but decided to pick up a shovel and, trying to avoid magical strain, reduced the radius of the spell and began to dig. He was careful to dig out the bushes and put a stasis spell on them before actually getting to the soil, pulling out layer after layer of something so fluffy and so
dark that it had to have been fertilized. As the digging grew deeper, though, his hands gaining
blisters as he put away mounds of dirt, he started to uncover white little pieces of very small shards
that lead to bigger shards that eventually became actual bones. Harry recognized several hippogriff
skulls and a large, not to say monstrous carnivore one. The teeth didn’t match the memory he had of
the bite on Draco’s torso: that one was far larger. He packed the skulls and was ready to call off the
detection spell when it pulled him literally into the hole. Harry expected to fall onto more bones, but
was instead graced with a fall on top of a glassy, transparent surface. He blinked once, pressing his
lids closed with force to allow him to reset his view after the fall and put his hands on the glass to get
up. He looked down to do it, and couldn’t stop an involuntarily scream that was sharp, deep and
short, because Rodolphus Lestrange was into the casket.

And he was staring at him.

When Harry’s sudden drawing of his wand inspired no reaction from the man beneath him, Harry
decided to search for vitals. There were none. Rodolphus was lying on stark white satin sheets, fully
naked and looking very alive. His lips were a pale pink and his cheeks still held a faint blush
underneath the stubble, his hair was combed and tied with a black ribbon that peeked from under his
head. There was nothing blue, nothing rotten, nothing smelly. His black eyes glistened with
impossible moisture, and the Dark Mark on his forearm was visible, red and shiny. But that was not
the strangest thing. On his chest, carved there by a sharp knife or very nicely done spell, was a ritual
circle.

For once, Harry regretted never paying attention to anything people told him about rituals. There
were letters he recognized in the border right inside it — an “M” and an “I”, for an example — and
four more, all disposed on the edges of a hexagon carefully carved into the circle and threaded with
lines to design triangles. There were three things he recognized as runes there too, runes he knew he
should know — he had Hermione Granger as his best friend, for Godric’s sake —, but didn’t. It was
all cauterized but for one rune, the one that looked like a “D”. It was a large circle, and the process of
drawing it must have been painful, but Rodolphus didn’t look like he had died in pain. He was
almost smiling, which made Harry feel everything even creepier.

Harry levitated the casket to the side of the pile of dirt and planted the rosebushes back with magic,
which allowed the strain to take over him. He scrambled away from the casket slowly to sit and
recompose, panting because of the strain and slightly light-headed from the adrenaline rush. He heard
the peerless sound of high heels on floorboard — high heels on floorboard? — and looked up to see
Pansy walking on top of a self-placing path of wood that unveiled in front of her. Oh. Harry let his
head drop on top of his arms and tried not to feel too sick.

“What do you think you’re doing to Cissy’s roses?” She was scandalised, Harry could see when he
looked at her, to see that the roses had been moved. “And your glasses. Honestly, Potter.”

Much like Hermione, she took them off his face and cast a Reparo on them before returning them to
him. Harry had not even noticed they were bent. Sighing, the woman went to inspect the bushes —
and dangerously close to the casket lying beside them.

“Pansy, don’t—!”

But it was too late. She stared at the glass thing and turned slowly to him, raising her wand easy and

“I’m in the middle of something.”

“Pack your something, send it away, blow it up — I don’t care.” Her eyes narrowed. “You can
either come with me or stay trapped inside these wards forever.”
Harry could not know if she was telling the truth, but was too tired to discuss. He proposed they left the casket somewhere safe before it, and Pansy petulant answered that there was no safer place than her own house. She even offered to ward the bloody thing so they could Apparate without breaking or damaging it somehow. Harry was worried, but chose not to show it. Showing weakness in front of a Slytherin was never a smart move and he had already decided he’d have to cave in a little so she would leave the case alone.

They Apparated to a very fancy Victorian house in the middle of Bidford on Avon. A Muggle village could be seen a couple of kilometres down the river, but the land in front of Harry was obviously in possession of a magician, because he could feel the wards giving room to their master. The gardens were filled to the top with pansies, bluebells, daisies, tulips and primroses, and a couple of small girls were playing in front of a very well-guarded fountain that glistened under the midmorning sun. The girls looked at her when she walked in, smiling happily and running towards the newcomers with wobbly footing. Harry barely had time to conceal the casket before they reached them.

They were absolutely identical but for their dresses and the flowers on their hairs: one of them was wearing a crown of something that looked a little like bluebells that matched her light blue satin dress and the other had yellow primroses braided in her hair and wore a dress of the same colour. They both had almond brown hair that shimmered under the sun and should be about three years old, with Pansy’s almond-shaped eyes in a greenish colour and the same sleek kind of hair she had, the same poise and an open smile Harry had no clue where it could have come from.

“Mommy!” The girl in yellow jumped at her and Pansy caught her and swirled her around before kissing her cheek, putting her on the floor and picking up the other one to kiss her too. “We miss you!”

“I missed you too, my darlings.” She held the girls’ hands, one on each of hers. “This man is Harry Potter. I have to talk to him today. Do you mind playing a little bit more?”

The girls turned to Harry, frowning. Godric Gryffindor, they were hypnotizing. He felt like putting a bubble around them just to make sure nothing would ever harm them. “I’m Prim,” said the one in yellow.

“I’m Del,” said the other, and they both held their hands at him. Harry shook them, smiling a little. “Are you going to stay?”

“Stay? No, no, I’m not going to stay, we’ll just have tea.” He eyed Pansy, but she made a signal that clearly meant “later”. “You are beautiful.”

“Like flowers,” said Prim, smiling at him. “Like mom.”

Harry was having a hard time associating Pansy with the kids. She never seemed to be the motherly type, let alone motherly enough to keep two kids and no husband — Harry knew that if there had been a Mr Parkinson, he should have known. The girls spoke to their mother for a while and then went back to where they were playing beside a house elf that wore a flowery, stern clean pillowcase and was teaching them to plant tulip bulbs. When they were safely away again, Harry stared at her in shock.

“You’re a mother?”

“Yes.” She rolled her eyes. “Close your mouth, Potter, it’s not elegant to look this dumb.” Harry did it at once. “Primrose and Delphine. Twins, as you might have noticed. They’re going to be three next month. Huge party: you can come. Bring your children.”
Harry frowned as he continued to accompany her as she walked towards the front gate.

“Where’s your husband?” he asked, dumbfounded, even though he knew the answer already.

Pansy stared icily at him. “Do I look like I need a husband to you, Potter?” Conceding it would be smarter to keep his mouth shut, he just shook his head. He was in Pansy’s domain, weak, in need of sugar and water and carrying a corpse; he definitely should not poke the viper. “Smart boy. Their father is in the house. You’ll meet him.”

They climbed the short staircase to the front door, Harry almost fainting from levitating the Disillusioned casket. A terribly solicitous butler showed up at the moment they stepped into the house. He bowed, raising his torso elegantly and smiling affably at them. Pansy looked delighted. It was unusual for a magician to have a human servant or employee inside his own household, especially if said employee was also magical. The girl unbuttoned her coat and stepped out of it, letting it pool at her feet. The butler took a step aside as she walked forward, unzipping her dress and letting it fall behind her too. She was wearing a translucent underdress in wine red lace and nothing else but for her stilettos, and Harry had to concede that, despite her horrible manners towards him, she was gorgeous as fuck. Her long hair swayed as she walked, and a delicate hand moved up to wave at the butler. It must be a code, because the man bowed and manually picked up her clothing, sending them to some other place then with the help of a wand.

Then, the man turned completely to him and Harry felt his groins twitch.

He was dazzlingly beautiful. His hair was the golden colour of almonds, a bit darker, and his eyes a delicate yellowish-green. He had full lips, Nubian nose and a broad smile with teeth so white they seemed impossible. He wore the butler outfit with care and composure, his white gloves clean and fitting of his long fingers. He had broad shoulders, narrow waist and thighs so obviously strong they looked indecent in that uniform. He bowed to Harry and he felt his throat dry.

“Mr Potter, I presume.” Even his voice was delicious to hear, soft and low, the kind that one could hear for hours whispering in one’s ears. “I’m Dianthus, Ms Parkinson’s butler. How can I be of any help?”

“Ahm…” He cleared his throat as the man took a step closer. He even smelted good. “Tea?”

“Of course.” He made a movement with his hand and the strain Harry felt for levitating the casket faded as the man took hold of it. “I will take care of your luggage.”

“I’d really rather—”

“Mr Potter.” His eyes pierced through Harry’s and he had to grit his teeth to stop himself from dwelling on the rush of lust that surged upon him. “I will take care of your luggage. Now, please, go upstairs, second door to the left. Ms Parkinson will be waiting for you and I will be serving you shortly.”

Harry didn’t have time or presence of mind to say anything. Gryffindor, what was happening to him?! Was he always that dumb when strained? Maybe he was, actually. It had been magical strain that made him sleep beside Draco when he first arrived, and look where that had put him. Rubbing his eyes under his glasses, he tried to shush his dick before going upstairs to face whatever Pansy had prepared for him.

The woman received him in the private room before her bedchambers. Right after he sat down, Dianthus showed up with tea, scones and a vial of something Harry could not identify. The man winked at him on his way out and Harry felt his cock stir. Across the delicate coffee table, Pansy
snorted.

“What?”

“Wipe your mouth. You’re drooling.”

He knew he was reddening. “I am— No, I’m not. I’m nothing.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Dianthus has this effect on people. Unique kind of a Veela, don’t you think?”

“He’s a Veela?” Harry almost sighed out of relief. He thought his body was just going wild. Manuals said only females showed Veela traits, but that man had obviously opened a whole new category just for himself.

“Yes.” Pansy picked up her teacup and took a sip. “Dianthus is my consort, the father of my girls. Selective hermaphroditism is what they call it. Tremendously rare that a Veela would rather be seen as male than female, but I’ve been lucky.”

Oh, well, that did explain a lot about the mesmerizing beauty of the kids and the instinct of protection that had happened upon him when meeting them. Pansy was already gorgeous; with a father like that, it was actually admirable that Harry hadn’t fallen to their feet and promised to protect them for life.

“You live an unusual life.”

“I know.” She lowered her cup and gestured towards the vial. “It’s an Invigorating. You should drink it.” Harry narrowed his eyes at the vial and tested it before drinking it, just to make sure it wasn’t Veritaserum or something of the sort — it wasn’t. The pineapple-ish taste was all there.

Serious, she carried on. “Potter, I’m going to be honest with you. Draco would never let his wife forbid him of mailing me. He would never go to a prospective donor’s place to ask for funds. He would never resort to the kind of magic I can do just to keep curious people at bay.”

“Listen, Parkinson, I understand your point, but I really cannot tell you much.”

“Potter, Draco has been in my life for as long as I can remember. He’s like a brother to me. The war almost took him from me and I thought I would never have to undergo that again. Yet, here we are, in an alternate universe in which you, his school nemesis, know more about what’s going on than the one person he’s ever had to count on.”

“It’s complicated. It’s dangerous. Not to mention it’s actually classified. I don’t want to drag more people into this. We rely on secrecy to keep him safe and it’s becoming impossible to control this information he seems so prone to let all his friends know about.”

She let the silence drag for a moment. “Is he fucking you?”

“What?” He swallowed hard.

“He is, isn’t he?” She relaxed her back onto the chair’s. “This is why you won’t tell me. You don’t trust me. I tried to sell you out once and you don’t trust me with something about my best friend.”

“It was in the middle of a war. Sorry I still think that was a dick move of yours.”

“I love Draco more than you could ever understand, Potter. Whatever is going on with him, you can trust me with it. I can help you. You saw me today. You don’t know what I’m capable of. No one
knows but Draco. But if you tell me…” She sighed. “If you tell me what’s going on, I swear you won’t regret having me by your side.”

“Like you so wisely said, I don’t trust you.”

“Draco does. And you trust him, don’t you?”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is the same. I can see by the look in your eyes that you’re scared. That you care too much about him. You’re transparent.” Again, that word. How could those Slytherins see past him so clearly? “I can help you. Trust me.”

“Why don’t you ask Draco yourself?”

“Because I know that if this is as big as it seems, I’ll have to do some things he would never let me. Don’t get me wrong; the moment you walk out of this door, I’ll find someone who tells me, Potter. The precise moment. And if I don’t like their words, I’ll take Draco with me and all this affair of yours? It will all be over. I’m the only one who could make him stop something he wants to do and I will use this power if you don’t spill.”

Harry felt his stomach grow cold. He knew a lost battle when he saw one. He could never trick Pansy. That woman knew, she just knew there was something off and would never cool down. Dreading the possibility of someone sabotaging the case and his incipient whatever with Draco, he nodded slowly and pulled the mirror from his pocket. If he was going to let a Slytherin in on that situation, he’d need backup.
Pansy was staring from Harry to Hermione’s face in the mirror, much like Millicent was doing. They had decided to come mainly clean with the Slytherins, and now there were very few things they didn’t know, such as the dreams — not even Hermione knew about those, — and the incipient relationship between him and Draco — that Pansy had already tried to reveal but he wouldn’t confirm. The girls were by Ron’s bed, waiting for him to wake up — well, Hermione had been, and Millicent had arrived after Harry’s call. He looked mainly fine, his head already spell-glued together, his hair and face clear of blood and residue. Apart from the paleness, one could say he was fine, just sleeping.

“Let me see if I understood clearly: you rescued Draco from an alley, didn’t hand him over to his family or friends but instead decided to heal and rehab him yourself, more or less adopted his son and are currently going after his wife who might or might not be inside a part of the Manor no one can reach.”

“Yes.” When said out loud, it was actually rather unlikely, not to say plain stupid. “And now you know and secrecy is going down the drain, yay.”

Harry faked a mild victory dance, narrowing his eyes at Pansy. The woman in undergarments merely rolled hers.

“I think you could use some help.” All three of them stared at Millicent, whose forehead was wrinkled and eyes, narrowed in deep thought. “It’s not that you’re incapable. It’s just that you don’t know much.”

“I don’t really see how you can help, Mills,” tried Harry patiently. “I mean, thank you so much for going after Nott and risking yourself in the process, and thank you for saving Ron’s arse, but I don’t think you should be allowed deeper in.”

“He does have a point, Bulstrode,” added Hermione, although her face contradicted her. “We are risking a lot. This is much bigger than our average cases and it’s reckless to allow other people to be at risk when it’s not necessary. For starters, it’s a clandestine case. We have been using Ministerial assets and resources for personal interest and it could mean suspension at any time. Not to mention there is actual harm coming our way.” Her hands clasped tighter on Ron’s. “It’s unnecessary to convolve more of you.”

Pansy shook her head. “You forget that Draco is our friend. It’s by mere chance that he ended up around you and not us. We would never leave him alone.”

“It didn’t seem like it.”

“I can explain,” she said, for the first time sounding the slightest bit defensive. “You shouldn’t throw us away based on situations you don’t know.”

“Enlighten me.”

“If you let us in.”

“Parkinson, I understand you want to help, but honestly, wanting is not enough. We have things we need to do and solve and we don’t have enough time to go through every tiny detail of it all with you.”
“Let us sit through this meeting,” asked Millicent, much more willing to compromise than Pansy. “If we cannot be of any help, we’ll drop the demands.” Harry noticed Pansy’s eyes narrowing at the bulkier woman. “We might still want to check on Draco, though. He’s our friend.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged concerned looks. Even if the women didn’t continue along with them, they’d still be briefed about too many circumstances and still pose a danger to the secrecy of the investigation. They were bound to be caught sooner or later: no one would have more reasons to tell on them than Dawlish and the man was going to be prosecuted some time. He’d sing everything he knew like a nightingale. Nevertheless, they believed they could postpone it to a moment when they’d already have enough of a case to present as classified and urgent to Shacklebolt and could guarantee Astoria’s safety. They couldn’t, though, be certain of the information Pansy and Millicent could contribute with. After all, they had lived with the Malfoys for the best part of their lives and could know more about them than any of them, except maybe Draco, who couldn’t remember a part of his life. Hermione nodded with her eyes more than with her head, and it was Harry’s the task of saying it out loud.

“This meeting. We get to decide what can be called valuable information.” Both Slytherin women nodded. “You should start with Nott, then, Mills.”

She sighed. “He’s nowhere to be seen.” She shrugged. “I spoke to Theo. He’s back in town, currently living at his father’s place with Tracey. Says he hasn’t seen the man in months.”

“Any possible clue?”

“Must be in England. Theo has a tracker on him to signal whenever he leaves the country.”

“It means he’s probably in the middle of it. Disappearing but not leaving?”

“It’s risky to suppose so this vehemently. We have no proof.”

“Nott is the only person I’ve ever seen be allowed without restrictions in the upper floors of the Manor,” said Pansy, shaking her beautiful head. “He swore to his brother he’d never sleep with Clara.”

“Swore?” asked Harry, raising a brow.

“Pureblood swearing is very, very powerful,” Millicent explained. “It’s about trust. Most of what purebloods do is about trust.”

“Fine, so he’d be allowed upstairs. Does it make any difference?”

“Maybe.” Millicent shrugged. “You have the information; you should put all this together.”

Harry nodded. So they knew there were Nott, Amycus and Dawlish in the middle of it already. It wasn’t a nice prospect. Speaking of which…

“Hermione, what happened to Dawlish?”

“Millicent packed him away.”

“Away?”

“To my house,” said the Slytherin, smiling coyly. “I figured we should not allow him in front of the Wizengamot when this case is obviously this much of a threat to everybody’s jobs.”
“You can be prosecuted for false imprisonment.”

“Not if he doesn’t remember it,” said Hermione sheepishly, glancing at the woman beside her.

“Hermione, what are both of you doing?” His hands were grabbing the mirror with enough force to make it tremble.

“Isn’t it obvious? You made this secrecy thing so contagious that they’re keeping your secret. Knowing Millicent as I do, Dawlish won’t wake up unless you go make him.”

“I cannot decide whether this is good or bad.”

“You don’t have to.” Hermione took a look at Ron and caressed his hand when he took a deep breath. “I take full responsibility.”

The look in Hermione’s eyes made it clear to him why she was doing it, and it was not for the case. Harry didn’t know what they were thinking, or if that was just damage control, but he wouldn’t tell them off on that. It was for the best that Dawlish wouldn’t open his mouth in front of Shacklebolt and threaten to send them all to the Wizengamot, where they’d be prosecuted for sure. Even his accusations against Dawlish would be so little that the man would probably face no jail time, given that they couldn’t link him to anything yet.

Harry was about to ask them about something else to divert the attention when Ron coughed so hard it made him sit up. Hermione practically shut out everyone else to focus on him, filling a cup with a tap of her wand and a whispered *Aguamenti*. Ron drank it avidly, his mouth desert dry after all the potions and draughts Tyra had literally forced him to down. Pansy used the interruption to get up, murmuring something about Prim and Delphine with Dianthus, who bowed and smiled, giving up his butler façade for a kiss. Harry turned his eyes back to the mirror. It was bad enough that the man was a Veela and Pansy was in less than underwear, he didn’t have to witness their intimate moments too. Millicent’s face stared solo back at him.

“I’m giving Weasley and Granger a bit of privacy. I think she might cry.” She snorted. “Is Pans being an arse? Really, Potter, she means well. She worries too much, but the last time Draco pushed her away, Voldemort recruited him.”

“They seemed to be very cosy on the train right after he was marked.”

“And he blew her off the next day. Their friendship became sore. She had to wait for him every day. Forgive her rudeness. I’m sure you too have something from your past that plagues you and you’d like to forget.”

“I don’t understand why she has decided to be such a nice friend all of a sudden.”

“Ask her.”

“I also don’t know what she was doing in the Manor.”

“Ask her.” She shook her head and they remained silent for a very long moment. “Look, Weasley’s asking for us. Get Pans back. You made a promise.”

“I’m here, Bulstrode. Stop badmouthing me.” The underdressed woman sat down again. Harry could see she had a chamber robe on now. Being in lingerie must be cold. “Glad to see you’re whole, Weasley.”

“Can’t say the same,” he said with a shrug as she sat down. “Mione’s briefed me on everything. I
think you might have questions?"

“I do,” said Harry at once. “Why did you go after Dawlish on your fucking on?”

Ron rubbed his eyes with both fists. He was having trouble focusing on the mirror. “He was escaping. Saw me fiddling with Bellatrix’s death reports; I think he was going to destroy something in those archives.”

He explained how he had bribed a guard to change shifts with him, allowing him to go through the death reports from the war. They had been produced every time a body was found and buried, describing details of the person and death. Ron’s findings were not optimistic, though.

“Bellatrix was one of the three people who could only be recognised based on how they had died. Her body was too destroyed to provide actual identification.”

They all exchanged looks. That was not good.

“Who were the others?” asked Millicent.

“Simmers, the Auror, and Yaxley. Mother testified Bellatrix’s death, Lucius Malfoy ID-ed Simmers and Flitwick, Yaxley.”

It was Harry’s turn to become livid. Pansy crossed her arms, as if everything was amusing her. She was unhappy and tense, in fact, but a lady never tells and a Slytherin never shows.

“I need to show you something I found this morning. Parkinson, is there a way your butler can give me my package back?”

“Ask him, be my guest.”

Harry took the bell towards which she was gesturing — crystal, small and obviously magical — and Dianthus appeared in no time. He had Prim in his arms and Del by his legs and was waiting for orders. Harry almost forgot his intent and asked him to leave the children in the room. On the mirror, he could hear Hermione’s and Ron’s startled gasps. They hadn’t seen them yet. He wondered, for the briefest of moments, whether the most brilliant witch he knew would be enthralled by Dianthus too.

“Mimi!” The girls shrieked when they saw Millicent’s face on the mirror, but didn’t move away from their father. Delphine pouted. “Miss you.”

“I miss you too, my beautiful little girls. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“Pinky-pomise?” Dianthus helped Primrose when she tried to stick out her tiny finger.

“Pinky-promise.” The woman on the mirror smiled with her pinkie up. “Now Aunt Mimi’s got work to do.”

“Ok.” The girl jumped from her father’s arms and held her sister’s hand after landing softly on the floor. “Buh-bye.”

Had the humour in the room been lighter, Harry could have tried jesting about how Millicent — the same Millicent that barely ever tolerated a nickname — was called by her nieces. Dianthus waited until they left and bowed to Harry, still smiling. The Gryffindor asked for the casket, which was efficiently brought to him. He could hear a couple of gasps and deep breaths as the mirror travelled down the casket. When he stared back at them, he saw Hermione scribbling on a piece of parchment.
She was outlining the circle and the runes in it, so Harry showed everything to her again. When she said she was done, she was frowning.

“I’ve never seen such a circle. It’s intricate and pointless. It makes no sense to me.”

Pansy half-snorted a laugh. “Really? There was a dead man in your friend’s guest’s backyard and you’re focusing on the circle?”

“Draco said his family did the rituals. Something about Black heritage, and this is a ritual circle.” Harry shook his head. “I don’t want to believe she might be behind it.”

Hermione studied the circle in her hands. “It would fit. She’s kin. Knows enough about Narcissa to impersonate her. Could convince Rodolphus to do anything. Knows ritual circles.”

“It’s hurried of us to say so.” Millicent kept the mirror floating with a steady wand. “But we should definitely not discard it.”

“When have you entered our Sherlock Holmes circle?” Hermione frowned at him. “I read the books you buy me, you know.”

“You do?”

“Always the tone of surprise.” Ron shook his head. “Anyway, we have dead people who might not be dead, a ritual circle we don’t understand and…?”

“Oh.” Harry deflated.

“What?” said Pansy, unable to identify his reaction.

“I was assessing the Manor this morning but the wards—”

Pansy’s smirk happened slow and meaningfully. “So how did the house reject you?”

For some reason, it was embarrassing to discuss it in front of Pansy, but she was obviously not going anywhere. He cleared his throat. “I couldn’t enter the bedrooms or some of the dungeon cells.”

“And should you be able to?” asked Hermione, not understanding. “I thought you were going to roam the yards.”

“Ahm…” He scratched the back of his neck. “Draco let me in.”

“In?” Pansy was suddenly dangerously close. “Translate. In where?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged concerned looks. Harry took a deep breath before continuing. That woman was threatening him and he did not like that in the slightest.

“Inside his head. Where Abraxas allows people inside the Manor.” He tried to sound nonchalant, but it was impossible to forget the path to that place and how much that had both hurt and been rewarding. “According to him, I’m now family. It should allow me in.”

“There might be a delay,” said Millicent.

“No.” Pansy was smirking again. Harry didn’t like it. “The wards know him way too well. What else did Draco tell you, Potter?”

Slowly, too self-consciously, he told them everything Draco had said about Harry’s permissions.
When he mentioned Abraxas’ attempt to keep Clara chaste and pure — which had already been commented that same day —, Pansy muffled a laugh. When he got to the bit about eating sleeping and promising, that tradition Draco had talked about, the one that made them family, Ron literally choked on laughter. Harry didn’t understand. Beside him, Pansy was positively breathless. Hermione shrugged, but Millicent had a smile on.

“What?” asked Harry when they seemed to be breathing again.

“Harry,” Ron choked out, “you tried to marry Malfoy?”

“What?!” Harry and Hermione shrieked in unison.

“Ancient traditions. If you make a promise to take care of someone, then sleeps, eats and does something cosy and nice with this person, by ancient law you’re married.”

Harry went pale. “It doesn’t work anymore, does it?”

“Of course not, you moronic arse,” chimed in Pansy, rolling her eyes.

“But it does leave a mark,” Millicent continued. “An indelible one. You tried to access chambers in which Draco and Astoria might have lived.”

“And you’re a lover. A lover with very clear intentions. You are precisely what Abraxas didn’t want upstairs.”

Pansy was still smiling, but Harry was not convinced.

“Then why didn’t the Manor allow me inside the dangerous part?”

Ron laughed. “Because you’re family. Hurting you might hurt the Ferret.”

Millicent nodded. “It’s against the rules.”

It sounded like they were mocking and mobbing against him, but Harry gritted his teeth and sucked it up.

“So I’m family enough to be protected but not enough to enter a bedroom?” Ron, Millicent and Pansy shrugged. “How can you know that?”

“Pureblood,” they said together. Ron carried on. “There are things we must learn.”

“Were you planning on sharing any of those things, Ronald Weasley?” Hermione’s voice was cold as ice. Her husband gulped.

“If you asked. It’s not exactly interesting. And we don’t go around parading all of this.”

Millicent shook her head, looking slightly distressed. “We’ve been persecuted in the past for making deviated use of magic,” she explained. “Warding, compelling, even marrying. It’s a matter of survival to keep people poorly informed.”

Hermione seemed to be steaming up for an argument, so Harry decided to get back on topic.

“What about being kicked out? Were the wards supposed to do that too?” All four frowned at him. “I was kicked out by some wards. Hot, feral ones. I’ve never felt a ward like that before.”

Hermione shook her head and stared at him as if he was supposed to know that already. “This kind
of wards doesn’t exist, Harry.”

“In fact,” Pansy interrupted, now sitting on the armrest of Harry’s chair, one long arm draped on the back of it, her long legs crossed and visible from under the slit of her robe. That skin was so ridiculously untainted that Harry’s primary reaction would be to touch it, were they in any other situation and was she anything but the killer viper she was. Maybe Pansy was a risk to society, after all, “it does. It’s a beast ward. Hardly anyone uses it anymore. It’s easy to get through.”

“Well, I couldn’t.”

“Do you even know how to?” Pansy tapped the top of his head condescendingly. “I thought you wouldn’t. So allow the professionals to take care of it for you.”

Ron straightened his back. “How do you know that? It’s not exactly written in any defence compendium.”

Pansy stared at him for a moment, then back at Harry. Victory was written across her face and Harry wondered how much leading she had been doing so that they arrived precisely where she wanted them. Millicent, by Hermione’s side, looked terribly innocent.

“Can we be a part of it?” the woman in robe asked, her voice sweet and unquestionable. “Of your plan? Of the saving of our friend?”

Harry looked at Hermione for support, but her lips scrunched up and she shook her head the tiniest bit to show she didn’t know what to do. Ron wasn’t helpful either. If Hermione said what Harry had felt was fake, could he possibly believe what Pansy would tell him? Could that be real? Was it worth the risk? He massaged his temples slowly. What the hell. They had a hostage inside Millicent’s house, a dead man in a casket and a blind one at Harry’s place. It couldn’t possibly become any worse. They were screwed anyway.

“Will you put us through the wards?”

“Of course I will,” she said, obvious.


“It’s my thing.” She smirked like a pixie. Harry closed his eyes and tried to ask for strength not to kill the woman. Incredibly, though, Ron seemed to understand. His eyebrows rose.

“Your thing is wards?” Pansy lifted a brow swiftly to confirm it. Ron whistled. “Bloody hell. You could be locked up for it.”

“Which is precisely why it is spell-bound. If you go around talking, you might just drop dead.”

Hermione folded her arms. “Any explanation for the non-purebloods in the room?”

Ron took her hand and caressed it. “Look, you can’t mention it to anyone. Any of you.” Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry nodded avidly. “Our ‘things’ are our family heirlooms.”

“Heirlooms?”

“A set of abilities that have been perfected and are now transmitted down generations. It’s been awhile since anyone with the ability to polish heirlooms was born outside pureblood lineages.”

“The last thirty were set in the Sacred Wizarding Families. They are now twenty-eight, for we didn’t
see the heirlooms be transmitted down the others. They might be lost or dormant.” Pansy stared
pointed and analytically at Harry. “Weasley must have one.”

Harry. It’s a family secret. It’s been created inside our family, perfected and channelled by my great-
grandfather and his father and cannot be written but by the bearer of the heirloom.”

“Which is not you,” Harry deduced correctly.

“Nope. It’s George. I asked him when Hermione said how blind the Ferret was. It’s… tricky to
control, our heirloom. And dangerous if misused.”

“They tend to be,” said Millicent, looking slightly disturbed.

“So, Parkinson, yours is—?”

“Barriers. I can identify wards and protections, mould them, transform them, and create them better
than nearly everyone.” She waved her hand, dismissing it as unimportant. “I was building a
replicating coat to duplicate every letter that enters or leaves the Manor and send the replicas to
Milly’s place.”

Suddenly everything became clear to Harry and the others. How she could feel who had been in the
Manor, how she knew a beast ward when she felt one, why Draco had called her. If the woman
could do that so effortlessly, of course she’d be the perfect first choice. Of course there would be
things only she knew.

“But why not telling any of it to people?” Harry asked, rather naïvely. “What’s the matter with being
special? Many people are.”

“You tell me,” said Pansy, raising her chin. It looked like that subject should inspire fear. “You are
powerful beyond measure. Didn’t people ever fear you? Want you dead? Try to neutralize your
power?” Harry kept silent. “We don’t abuse our heirlooms, it’s the only rule we actually must follow.
Milly has already said we’ve been persecuted in the past. Don’t you think that maybe doing
something extraordinarily well had something to do with it?” Harry’s lips pursed, and both Ron and
Millicent nodded almost imperceptibly. “I think you are misunderstanding what we have. It’s not a
superpower. It’s something much more akin to an ability. A very specific kind of cleverness. You
can call it a predisposition. It’s like dancing or playing an instrument. It needs training, reinforcement,
and it’s painful, because once you’re chosen, you cannot back down. It’s a pull. You dream about it,
you hurt when you’re away from it for too long. You know the feeling. Everyone in the Wizarding
World knows you could not do magic when with the Muggles; didn’t that make you feel empty?”

“I don’t think it’s the same.”

“But it is,” Millicent answered, sighing. “The Sacred Twenty-Eight are not all purebloods.” The
Golden Trio were appalled. “It’s more of a genetic thing. You marry to try to keep the heirlooms
alive. My biological mother is a Muggleborn, because my father was the heir but my mother was
magically sterile. She couldn’t give birth to a magically apt child, just squibs.”

By Harry’s side, Pansy looked desolate, but confirmed it. “The heirloom is even more important than
blood status. The only Sacred who are fully pureblood, from beginning to end of the family tree we
know, are us, the Weasleys, the Notts, the Lestranges, the Blacks and, of course, one of the first
ones. The Malfoys. Of course we never mention it. As long as the myth is alive, we’re safe.”

“But how does it happen? Why is it blood-related? It cannot possibly be genetic. Even magic has not
been proved to be genetic yet.”

“We don’t know, Granger,” Pansy drawled, very like Draco. “All we know is that it has begun far before Europe became what it is and that heirs develop it once they’re chosen if they’re magical. Every family has a problem to choose who will receive the training. Some families can train more than one person, in different branches, like the Blacks. Some can choose one branch to carry the lineage but it can be given to a blood or pureblood-marriage relative if no able descendants are found, like mine. Some have curses attached, some can only bear one child, some need at least three, some can’t choose before the heir turns eighteen. There are particulars we don’t always know. It’s not precise.”

“It sounds mystical,” Hermione said, sceptic.

“Hermione,” Ron tried, kissing her hand and begging her to understand, “it’s magic. We can determine emotions through magical signatures. It’d be just as easy to embed skills in blood. Especially in the old times, when no one gave a damn about not allowing too much power to run loose.”

For the first time, Harry considered what was being said to him in a much larger scale. They had spent most of their lives in Hogwarts learning about goblins’ rebellions and treaties, a few titbits about ancient history, such as Merlin’s life, but some subjects were absolutely taboo. Purebloods were one of them. The discovery of magic was another. And they didn’t have a subject to learn how Muggles could be born magical, or if magical humans were a different race, a subspecies or merely highly sensitive creatures who tuned into a different nature every once in a while and were able to conduct it through focused will. It pained Harry, and even more so Hermione, that the Wizarding World didn’t care in the slightest about finding any of that out, that secrecy was so endemic to them. Professors in Muggle schools used to say that History was written by the perspective of the winners and that facts could be twisted and even provoked to hide other, more terrible ones; he had never considered that wizards would do it too, but it was being proved to him just then and there.

And both he and Hermione seemed to be the only ones finding it any strange.

Hermione folded her arms and remained silent. The mood had become heavy, so Harry tried to lighten it by satisfying mere curiosity.

“Millicent, does your family have an heirloom too?”

She nodded, and for the first time seemed to be perfectly happy. “Empathy. That’s how I get by at work.” She smiled. “We are non-discriminating. Anyone willing to tie themselves to us and practice can do so. That’s why my family adopts so many children, comparing to the other Sacred.”

“Your heirloom is not a blood thing?” Ron asked, surprised.

She giggled. “Not completely. Of course, those with the blood tend to learn faster and better, and of course, you can only be granted access to it by a blood-related member, and cannot transmit it to your heirs unless you’re one of us, but it’s one of the few that can be truly taught.” Millicent looked proud, and Pansy stared at her friend with tenderness in her eyes. “Most of us become Mediwizards. It’s easy for us.”

That declaration lifted the tension in the rooms. Well, maybe not all purebloods were supremacist and snob to Pansy’s extent. Millicent sounded very happy to be able to share something with other people. Of course, she was not pureblood in blood, but had been raised just like any other of them. Same rules, same needs, and yet she was so different. Could that mean that Draco could actually be the man he presented in his place, and not just some stone-carved mask of hatred and disgust? His
heart fluttered a bit.

“Did Draco receive an heirloom?”

The question was Hermione’s, and Pansy frowned.

“I suppose. He’s the only heir after all. We don’t know what it is, though. One of the dangerous ones, we suppose.”

She closed her eyes. “This is what Lucius was protecting when he spoke to you, Harry.” Finally, she looked relieved and calm. “The heirloom. Being the Malfoys actually purebloods and famous for only having one child, it has to be him. Maybe someone who knows what it is needs it, and Lucius knows.”

“Do you think Draco would tell us what it is?” tried Harry, staring at Pansy.

She exchanged looks with Millicent and made a doubtful face. “If he can.”

Ron, who was already in pain from trying to focus the mirror, collapsed back on his pillows. He was beyond pale, almost slightly green.

“I think Tyra gave me something spoiled to drink.” He turned to the side of his bed, his greenness worsening, and Millicent hopped up, turning the mirror from him.

“Okay, I think we all had too much excitement for one morning, right? I’ll shut it down.”

“Wait!” The mirror focused Hermione, leaving Ron out of sight. “Harry, will you hide Lestrange?”

“I will,” said Pansy pronto. “Good wards.”

“Well, I’ll keep Dawlish hooked up and we can continue later,” added Millicent. “Now off, off, all of you. Weasley here looks like a drunken train wreck and little miss brain could use some rest too.”

“I’ll return the mirror as soon as possible, Millicent!” shouted Harry as she began to turn it off. He had enough time to see her wave it off before all disappeared and he was again staring at his and, this time, Pansy’s reflection. The woman was practically breathing on him. Harry looked at her. “Are you happy, now?”

“Delighted,” she said, and really seemed so. One of her delicate hands slid down his neck and shoulder, sending shivers up his body in a very bad way. She pulled her wand out before he could answer her properly. She sat astride on the casket with an unnecessarily gymnastic movement and lay on top of it. Harry got up to push her, but she murmured something and raised a palm to him.

“What the—”

“Shut up, Potter, I’m listening.” She remained silent for a couple of seconds, then murmured something else — it sounded suspiciously archaic — and slid off the casket gracefully. “Ward-based stasis spell. We cut off the ward, we kill the spell. Supposing he’s been dead for over a week, the body will be at least slightly deteriorated, and that’s to suppose they haven’t set up an Incendio or something to destroy it if someone opens it.”
Harry thought he’d find it more impressive; in fact, it sounded a lot like what Ron did with magical signatures. It was incredibly useful, though: Pansy could help any spell through the ward without breaking it, and it allowed them to find out when he had died, which was about a month before, meaning he wasn’t dead for as long as the skulls that shared his grave suggested. They both agreed on ritual death and made an effort to liquefy some of his blood to look for traces of potions. The unburnt rune showed that the ritual had not been completed, despite the vessel being dead. There were no traces of discernible signatures anywhere.

Pansy helped Harry cork the samples and promised she’d go back to the Manor to find out what kind of a beast ward that one was, and then send him a letter. Given that efficiency and professionalism, Harry’s conscience was not that heavy when he left the body with her and went to the Ministry to check on his friend. Ron was asleep, fairly less green and definitely less open. He was barely bruised, but it hurt Harry a bit to see he had been stitched again on his back. Hermione was dozing off by his bed and he didn’t want to wake her up, so he asked Tyra to tell them he had stopped by.

“Potter.” He looked back at her. “Am I supposed to pretend nothing happened?”

Harry lowered his eyes. It was a lot to ask. “If you could.”

“I’m a Healer, Potter, not an Auror. Until you harm someone, my lips are sealed.”

“Thank you,” he said, and felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Finally, one less thing to worry about.
When he finally arrived home, Harry was hungry and exhausted. It was around dinner time, Shacklebolt had threatened him with a suspension if he didn’t close the bloody case in two weeks with a full report and the hearing of whomever had made those allegations in case they were false, he had bumped into Percy on his way out and almost been forced to accept an invitation to have dinner at the Burrow soon. Morris had asked about Dawlish and Harry had seen himself promising to cover for him as man in duty in guarding a prisoner to their hearing before the Wizengamot just to get the woman off him. Geremy, one of Ron’s team’s best Aurors, asked him to sign a couple of permits for analysis, which meant reading reports and asking tons of questions. It had been a nightmare on his tired body. He slipped off the fireplace like a benzocaine-d zombie, but his senses switched back to alert mode when he saw Draco hugging Teddy’s shoulders, while Albus and Scorpius patted the boy’s knees gently. Draco heard him approaching him and sighed silent but deeply. Harry’s heart clenched in fear. He sat on the coffee table and took one of Teddy’s hands in his.

“Teddy? Teds, my dear, what happened?”

“David—” His voice caught. He was crying and his plain, mousy-brown hair showed his sorrow like nothing else. “He— He— gone—”

Only then did Harry notice that the boy was clutching a very thin but long box with his free hand. It looked like a wand’s box, which confirmed Harry’s deduction of Teddy’s stuttered speech.

“I am sorry, Teddy.” He sat by his other side and snaked a hand across the boy’s back. He was shaking. “I am so very sorry.”

“He— He wasn’t— sick, he just— he slept.” His big brown eyes were overflowing and his father’s features won the battle for control when he didn’t have any: Teddy looked precisely like Remus. It didn’t make things any easier. “And he wasn’t waking up—” He sobbed. “I thought he was fine,” was all he could muster before going back to crying his heart out.

Draco pulled the boy close and caressed his hair with delicacy. “We are going to give him to a tree.” Harry nodded with a faint “of course”. “You must come.”

“I will.” He kissed Teddy’s hair. “I’ll be beside you all the time.”

Draco’s swift touch on his hand was louder than any thank you that could have been said.

The funeral was a particularly small service that consisted only of them, Bowie, Ava and Kreacher. They decided to keep it in the family, although Harry doubted their abilities to calm the child. Teddy’s voice continued to catch as he tried to convene a speech, David’s rigid, grey-ish body showing, lay in soft linen inside the wand box. When Luna had brought them to Teddy, she had been very non-descriptive about their age — probably because it was very hard that their ages could be pinpointed —, but Harry was sure that she never meant any of them to die that early. It had been seven years only. Harry was counting on Ava to die sooner than them. They looked attached to the tree they had given them, and happy — considering a bowtruckle acknowledged happiness. Given the circumstances, Draco placed the frail little body on top of the tree and Harry found himself in charge of the bowtruckle’s eulogy. Maybe it was a ridiculous thing, crying over a creature whose biggest display of affection was towards trees, a creature with whom nobody sane could possibly
become attached to, but it was Teddy’s first loss and Harry knew the feeling too well to dismiss it in any way. Even Kreacher was emotional, holding Albus’ and Scorpius’ hands as the ceremony carried. When the bowtruckle was out of sight, Scorpius became fidgety and started to cry, so Draco picked him up to calm him down. Albus didn’t seem distressed, so Harry used his arms to embrace Teddy with the most caring and understanding way he could muster. Ava was as quiet as the wind and Bowie, of course, didn’t fully understand what was going on.

They left David up Teddy’s favourite raspberry tree. When they re-entered the house, Kreacher went to the kitchen to finish the last touches of their meal and Draco and Harry sat on the couch for a moment, waiting to see if Teddy would erupt in another round of crying. Eventually, the boy stood up, promising he was fine, and went to help Kreacher with setting the table. Draco shook his head.

“What a day.”


Draco sighed and answered a tired “later” before getting up and urging everyone to eat. Teddy didn’t want to, but both grownups steadily forced him to swallow spoonful after spoonful of soup. Scorpius looked slightly down too, which made Draco’s attention divide between them. Harry was conscious that Albus was not being pampered in that situation and, not for the first and definitely not for the last time, thanked Heaven for the analytical maturity of his son. He was trying very diligently to eat without splattering food, picking up the bits of chicken with his little hands and tearing them apart in a very contained mess he insisted on cleaning on his onesies. Harry smiled at him when Teddy finally gave up fighting his godfather and saw the baby smiling an incomplete, chicken-filled smile back at him. Godric, he loved that boy.

When Teddy finished his bowl, they tried to go to the living room and watch some Muggle cartoon movie to see if Teddy cheered up or at least reacted a little. The boy laid his head on Harry’s lap, his feet tucked between Draco’s back and the back of the couch, watching as superheroes exploded things and planted aerodynamically vague punches on bad guys. Harry was caressing his hair with one hand, the other holding a quiet Albus who was drawing with fibre-tip pens. Draco had Scorpius on his lap and, when the movie was about halfway through, he summoned a quilt to cover Teddy’s legs and put them up his lap, to share it with Scorpius, who was starting and squealing to see the colours changing on the screen. A couple of minutes later, Draco rested his head on Harry’s shoulder and closed his eyes. Harry turned his face to stare at his blond hair.

“You’re bony,” Draco complained, trying to find a better position.

“I’m sorry?” He smiled and kissed Malfoy’s hair. “Are you tired? You can sleep, I’ll tuck them in.”

“No, it’s all right.”

They didn’t talk further because Scorpius’ eyes opened wide and even Teddy startled with an explosion. Albus edged closer to Harry, who embraced him tight with one arm and ruffled his dark hair.

“Boom!” Scorpius was excited, which led to him patting Teddy’s leg. “Etty, boom!”

Something about that made something snap inside Teddy. The boy laughed a teary laugh, half-relief, half-sadness, and sat up to pick Scorpius. Albus stared at him, and he called him too. He hugged his little brothers with still teary eyes, then sighed deep and turned to Harry, then to Draco.

“Thank you, Prongspawn, Cousin.”
“You’re welcome. We’ll always be here for you, Teddy,” said Draco, hugging his shoulders. “Always.”

Harry looked at them with pride and tenderness in his eyes. Always.

Although Teddy was still really upset when it was time to sleep, he at least looked less shocked. Harry made a bubble-shield around Ava and Bowie, to allow Teddy to sleep with them. He asked for Bucky, his plush hippogriff with which he had not slept ever since he was four, too before Harry and Draco told him stories about pirates and lords and explorers. The babies were with them, so when Draco got up to give Scorpius something he barely mumbled, Harry didn’t bother. Teddy took a while to finally fall asleep, but sounded almost safe when he did. Setting a monitoring charm on him, Harry went to the babies’ room with Albus already yawning in his arms. He saw Draco tucking Scorpius in, a bottle of something that looked like tea in his free hand. Harry put Albus beside the baby in the crib.

“Is he alright?”

“It’s a cold.” Draco looked concerned. “He’s never been sick before.”

Harry was pained to see him that worried, so he hugged him from behind. “Do you want to sleep here?”

Draco shook his head. “What good would that make? I’d be tired and restless if he needed me. Besides, it’s a cold, not some pneumonia, and I’ve done all I could for him.” He set a monitoring charm on the crib. “He’ll be fine in the morning.”

“But still you worry.” Harry kissed his neck. “He’s part of you, Draco. You’ll always worry.”

“I know. It’s tiring.” He laughed briefly. “Even more now that I have three of them.” Harry hugged him tighter. “Don’t overreact, Potter. I am merely stating a fact. You can’t leave kids under my watch and act all surprised when I say I’m getting fond of them. Teddy is my cousin and I’d certainly protect Al if he needed me to.”

“I’d do the same to Scorp,” Harry mumbled before he could stop himself. Draco’s smile was cocky and mischievous.

“I never doubted you would.”

Harry’s will was to wipe the smugness from his face, so he kissed him hard. Draco pushed him and moved out of the room, gesturing him to follow in a very commanding gesture. Outside, they closed the door and Harry kissed him again.

“So soon after a funeral,” Draco teased him when the split for air.

“No time to lose.” Harry was still excited from the day, from having met with Dianthus, from being called a lover. He pushed Draco down the corridor until they entered the bedroom, when they parted and Draco sat in bed. Harry spelled the door locked and kissed him once more, nipping his lower lip. They broke the kisses to breathe, and Draco closed his eyes. Abruptly, Harry paused for a moment and frowned. There was a question he needed to ask to soothe his curiosity and he remembered it now. It was the worst time to ask it, but he was afraid he never would if not right then. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Yes, by all means.”

The Gryffindor tried to form a coherent sentence out of the fragments inside his head.
“Where have you learned to handle… well.”

“Death?” Harry nodded. He didn’t want to say he didn’t think Draco would have had many opportunities to face a loved one’s death, but it was implied. “My own experience.” He looked up and Harry could see a sad smile on him. It was laced with care and bittersweetness, but still it was the saddest Harry had ever seen on him. “I had a sister.”

Harry couldn’t stop his jaw from dropping the slightest bit. A sister?

“Your father had one too.” Draco confirmed. “Then all we know about Malfoys never giving birth to girls—?”

Draco shook his head. “Heavy bull. Malfoys usually have sisters. They just never last.”

Harry pursed his lips. He didn’t know if he should push, but he wanted to understand why Draco had never spoken about that. “What was she like?”

“Beautiful.” Draco’s face lit up. “Truly beautiful. Really dear to me. She liked sweets, always stole mine. I’ve never had a single entire box of chocolates to myself ever since she found out they were edible.”

“What was her name?”

“Wisteria.” Oh. The amount of that flower in Narcissa’s garden began to make sense. “I chose the name. Mother was very tired for a couple of months and Father didn’t want to name her after his family’s tradition. I like my mother’s name and wanted my sister to have one as beautiful as hers. So I tried a flower.”

Draco didn’t look that sad anymore, as if the feeling had been fleeting, and Harry wanted to know more but decided to draw a line there. He wasn’t going to ask.

Draco answered him anyway.

“I was three when she was born, eight when she left. Father chose me as heir on August 1st and she died on August 5th. It was her birthday.”

Harry’s hand slipped up his arm. “Do you miss her?”

“Yes. I still cry on her birthday.” He smiled and almost laughed. “Father still cries on Clara’s. It’s the only moment I’ve ever seen him cry. Malfoys are not emotional but you have never seen us lose any of our kind.”

Harry had to suppress a laugh. Draco smirked.

“Her death… was it related to your heirloom?” Draco’s face frowned and he folded his arms.

“I won’t even ask how you know.”

“I met Parkinson in the Manor. She forced herself into our group.” Draco restrained a laugh. “I’ve learned a lot about purebloods.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. It looks like I’m enough of a family member to deserve protection but apparently too much of a lover to go everywhere.”
“Oh.” Draco didn’t look happy. “I see.”

“You could have warned me.”

“I didn’t know.” A soft blush crept up his cheeks, but his looks defied Harry to mention it. “I thought it wouldn’t act upon me. I’m a male heir. We do have privileges.”

“Stuck up bastard.” Harry shook his head lightly, incapable of restraining a smile. They were silent for a moment and Draco started when Harry slithered a hand behind his back and up until his hair. “Should I apologise for leaving in such a rush this morning?”

“Gryffindor.” The word was said in a tone that could mean absolutely anything, from a compliment to an offence, and was hardly an answer to Harry’s question. Harry decided he didn’t want to decide about that. “How’s Weasley?”

“Probably home now. He was fine. Millicent was there, she stopped Dawlish.” Harry’s fingers found a particularly tied up knot on the base of Draco’s neck and he heard the blonde man moan. He smirked and settled slightly behind him. “Don’t make sounds like this, Malfoy; I might end up undressing you.”

“I’ll stop if you let go of my neck.” Harry ignored him and he sighed another moan. Godric, that was an improper moment. “It’s been a rushed day. I didn’t sleep much, and my head hurts like hell and now David’s dead and Scorpius is sick and you still haven’t brought my wife back…”

Harry kissed his shoulder. “Would it make you feel better if I told you she’s definitely safe? The Manor didn’t allow me close to her, so she has to be, right?” Draco nodded reluctantly. “I know she’s in there. The Manor would have no reason to guard anything from me unless one of you was still there.” He smiled, proud of himself, when Draco’s left brown rose. “See, I pay attention.”

Draco scoffed. “Right, smartarse, and how do you plan to secure her further?”

“Pansy.” He leaned his chin on Draco’s shoulder.

“You asked Pansy a favour she’s willing to do?” Draco’s voice was heavy with disbelief.

“Couldn’t see any other way.” He shifted his head, talking with his mouth close to Draco’s neck. “She makes me uneasy.”

“She makes everybody uneasy.” Draco slid a hand to Harry’s hair and smirked. “I presume then she showed you what she can do?”

“Told me. It’s preposterous.” He nuzzled Draco’s neck, breathing in the complex scent of fanciness he always seemed to exhale. “She’s a danger to the universe.”

“Slytherins usually are,” he murmured softly. “Can’t stay away, can you?”

“I really, really love your neck.” As if to reinforce it, he bit the skin delicately. He didn’t want to mark him. Yet. “You never told me what you can do.”

“Ah, I’m afraid I don’t know.” There was a smile in his voice, but a hint of disappointment too. “Father wouldn’t tell me. Sometimes I think I’ve learned it without knowing; sometimes I just think we don’t even have an heirloom anymore and all this is just a façade.”

Harry mouthed Draco’s skin again, lapping it with his tongue. The grip on his black locks tightened. “We think he’s protecting the heirloom.”
“Wouldn’t surprise me.” He tilted his head. “Salazar, Potter, be nice with my shirt, it’s new.”

“Oh, is it?” He moved back to take a look. Yes, the dress shirt was definitely new, for it fitted him perfectly. It was a stunning, pearly white, a crisp and carefully pressed fabric that was just the size of him, not tight enough to be indecent or loose enough to be sloppy. “You look gorgeous in it.” Harry slipped his hand under the shirt’s hem. “But I bet you’d be even better off it.”

His hand trailed up Draco’s belly, pulling him closer. The Slytherin needed nothing to give in, turning to bring Harry’s face closer and kiss him. They kissed slowly, sloppily, hands wandering, excitement building bit by bit. Soon Draco’s lips became shallow, tempting, biting Harry’s lips first with lips and then with teeth. Harry wasn’t meaning to be tempted like that: he plunged forward and trespassed the barrier of Draco’s lips with his tongue, whimpering the most elegantly someone could when he allowed him to play for the briefest of moments before rounding his lips and sucking on Harry’s tongue until it popped from his mouth with an obscene noise. His smirk was defiant, which prompted Harry’s will to wipe it off with another kiss. Draco’s hand was on his waist, then on his chest, on his hair, pulling him closer and conducting him masterfully, all at once and never enough. Harry gave up control to unbutton his own shirt, unbuckle his belt; he kicked off his shoes and kneeled properly in bed, one free hand popping Draco’s last button open. Draco slapped his hand away and undressed himself so swiftly that Harry could barely see it.

The next moment, they had picked up exactly where they had left off that early morning. Draco’s naked bun was facing up, his engorging cock sometimes touching Harry’s so briefly, so little. They wrestled for control for a couple of minutes, and even though Harry knew he was stronger than Malfoy, he couldn’t deny his commanding, perfectly assertive manners. Draco was sitting on the small of his back, sweaty, flushed enough to be sensible on his skin, holding his arms back, his wrists firm in his hands.

“Fucker,” Harry couldn’t help but to spit, wriggling against the sheets for friction. He was getting hard steadily, not unlike the man above him. Draco’s hold of his wrists loosened and he saw him fumble around the bed for his trousers to pick up his wand. The cleaning spell combined with a set of protective ones was enough of a demonstration of intention, and Harry hid his face on the pillow. “Fuck.”

Draco released his arms altogether, leaning to keep his body closer to Harry’s, his lips trailing up his shoulder to his ear. He nibbled at his earlobe, one hand sliding up to Harry’s hair to keep him in place. “I intend to, thank you.”

Harry shivered with the thought. It had been so long. He somehow thought he should probably convey that to Draco, but hell could bite him if he would give him the pleasure of treating him like some virgin boy. Still, it was hard not to give in when he began to bite a path down Harry’s back, bite with force, to mark and make his muscles tighten. He could feel Draco’s slim, strong body slide on top of his as he did so, taller than him, his thighs holding Harry’s, his straight prick going down and further until Harry couldn’t feel him on his skin anymore, and he moaned out of disapproval.

“I am always impressed at how quick you can get this hard,” Draco said, barely above a whisper, pulling Harry slightly up just to keep him from humping the mattress. “Are you always like this?”

Draco’s kisses slid down his right buttocks, thighs, going even further down, tickling behind his knee in a way that would normally prompt laughter out of him, but right now just made Harry’s frustration spark up, because he was waiting and fuck, waiting hurt. He edged closer to the mattress, but one rather loud spell modelled what felt like a cushioned barrier that stopped him from lowering his hips further. The tip of Harry’s cock was half an inch above the mattress, enough so that every movement of Draco in bed allowed the sheets to touch it.
“What the fuck— Malfoy—”

“You’ll feel it soon,” was his promise. Draco’s lips ghosted up his buttocks again and Harry’s heart stammered when a tongue accompanied them. It slid up, moistening, letting Draco suck as it went. Wanting that, Harry spread his legs, his beautifully toned arse opening up to Draco. He felt as he blew some air on that warm region, cooling it before his tongue began circling wide around it, tightening the circles until they were just on that wrinkled skin.

“Malfoy—”

“Mmm?” He slid his tongue inside Harry, hardening it to go in, the tip lapping at him and straining his cock. If Draco could see, he’d know Harry was trying not to leak, trying to control himself. Still, when Draco’s tongue went deeper in, he moaned loud, stirring Draco’s erection too. Harry took hold of Draco’s wand and set a quick, simple lubrication spell. Draco tsk-ed. “Naughty Potter, yes?”

“God, Malfoy, fuck—”

“Soon, Potter.” He edged a hand to Harry’s cock and strangled his erection for a moment, while his fingers probed around Harry’s hole for more lube. “Here, let’s try this first.”

Harry felt as Draco’s fingers slipped inside him, two at once, the discomfort making him arch his back for a speck of a moment, but still it was so little. Draco parted them, his other hand steady on Harry’s cock, stopping him from feeling enough of that invasion. They were panting, mouths dry; Draco slid another finger inside him and gave him time to get used to it, sliding his other hand a couple of times up and down on his cock, making Harry relax further, his body growing accepting of that. Harry mewled when Draco brushed his prostate, rather inadvertently.

“Please— I’ve never waited—”

“Everybody just gives the Golden Boy all he wants…” Draco tut-tutted. “Put your hands up on the wall.”

Relieved, finally released from his almost self-imposed position, Harry palmed the wall, feeling whatever had been holding his hip Vanish. Draco slipped his fingers away from him and held him by the waist, mouthing his shoulder. His left hand went to guide his cock, the tip burying the tiniest of centimetres inside Harry. He then slid his deft fingers up and touched Harry’s perked nipples. Harry was like a force of Nature, impossible to stop, impossible to control in his search for pleasure, and he rolled his hips, burying Draco further inside with a barely concealed “fuck”. Draco cursed too, which made Harry smile. Too much of a Malfoy to say how that was affecting him too, he was. Slowly, tentatively, Draco went until he was fully sheathed inside Harry, whose eyes fluttered with that amazing feeling. He probably should never say it out loud, but he had missed it. When Harry was comfortable, he rolled his hips again and Draco began pounding inside him, slowly at first, then faster and faster. One of his hands went back to Harry’s cock, doing him in the same pace as his thrusts, thumbing his tip, slowing every once in a while.

“Potter—” Draco moaned, burying his face against his shoulder.

Harry’s head fell back on Draco’s shoulder, his back arching to allow him, Draco’s chest glued to his. Draco put his right hand on top of Harry’s, his fingers intertwining, and the movements grew erratic, mismatched, a rush to achieve the end, to peak. They moved like waves, trying not to detach, not to let any air between their bodies, but it was so hard when every thrust sent sparks up Harry’s spine and made Draco pant in delight. They found a slightly awkward angle that made Draco’s ramming go against Harry’s sweet spot, nearly making the Gryffindor come undone from gasping and moaning. He arched further, his free arm going around Draco’s waist, barely holding him but
begging, imploring that he’d go faster. The Slytherin obeyed easily, pounding shallow and fast inside him until a shiver ran down Harry’s body and he came, gasping, choking on air and saliva, his arse contracting around Draco’s cock so hard that the other couldn’t stop himself from following suit.

They crumbled in bed, exhausted and sweaty, Draco still inside him, their hands still interlaced. Harry’s eyes were fluttering and striving to remain open, his body still spasming a little from the heaven-sent orgasm. He had no words to describe how much he had been anticipating that, nor how good it turned out to be, but they didn’t need it. Draco licked a short path up Harry’s neck, kissing him behind his ear.

“I fucked the Saviour of the Wizarding World,” he purred, moving inside harry to prove a point before slipping out of him.

“Mmm...” Harry sighed. “The Saviour thanks such thorough fuck and begs it to be repeated.”

Draco laughed soundly at that and nipped Harry’s earlobe. “Tell the Saviour it shall be repeated many times.”

They laughed and breathed until the dizziness left them with sole sleepiness. They disentangled, Draco going for a shower in which he forbade Harry’s company. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, Harry remembered something. Stealthily, he dug out the star map and put it on his bedside table. When Draco left the shower, he kissed him quickly and took a light-speed one himself. He didn’t want to miss his face. Somehow, he knew Draco would like it much more now. He left the bathroom to see the Slytherin holding the rolled parchment, a freshly made bed with clean, crisp white sheets, and a curious frown in Draco’s forehead.

“What is this?” he asked, touching the parchment with care.

“A gift.” Harry put some pyjama bottoms on. Draco had chosen his new summer silk ones. “Sit down.”

Draco sat in bed and Harry cast a gentle *Finite Incantatem* on him. Draco’s face fell and he became even paler.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a threatening voice. His fists balled on the bedcovers, dropping the parchment, and he immediately closed his eyes.

“Why did you close your eyes?”

“Because the antidotes are working and I can see some light already, you idiot. It disturbs me when the Awareness Charm is off.” He took a deep breath. “Can I put the charm back on?”

“No, Malfoy. Be a nice boy and be brave.” Draco folded his arms, but Harry tapped them with the map. “Take it. It’s yours.”

Reluctantly, he took the roll. “Feels old,” he said, caressing it again.

“It is. Big, too. I chose not to shrink it.”

Sitting further up in bed, Draco wriggled under the bedcovers and unrolled the heavy, wrinkled parchment as Harry took his place beside him under their quilt. Harry held it open as best as he could while Draco’s fingers moved to its border, the upper left one, sliding gently along the heavily marked parchment. He found a line and followed it gently. When it came to an end, Harry saw Draco’s breath hitch. His lips parted and, as he retraced the constellation, opened in an astonished smile. He looked to beautiful, so childish, so innocent.
“How…?” He was amazed, caressing the dots and lines as the night sky unfolded inside his blind eyes.

“A couple of spells. Teddy helped me to find them and Kreacher taught me how to spell the map. Which is yours, by the way. I stole it—borrowed it—from your place.” He smiled. “It’s my memories. I made an effort.”

“Potter, I—” he tried, but no words came out.

“Don’t mind any of it. It’s just a present.” He shrugged. “I thought you’d enjoy it.”

Harry wasn’t saying how much he had worked on it, every spare moment, every sliver of night. He had tried to make his effort invisible, and supposed he had achieved his intents, but that was to consider that Draco didn’t know how hard something of the sort would have been—which, although he’d never tell Harry, he did. Harry was about to ask Draco if he had actually liked it when his pale hand landed softly on top of his.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Draco’s fingers went to another constellation and then back to the first they had touched. “Is this your favourite?”

“Pardon?” He said that with a slightly French accent, but Harry liked it.

“The constellation. You keep coming back to it.”

Draco’s smile softened. “Yes. It’s Lyra.”

“It’s beside you.”

“So now you understand Astronomy?”

“Enough not to be so thoroughly outsmarted by my godson.” Harry slid a finger on Draco’s stars, closing his eyes for a moment to share that experience. “But I still know less than you.”

“Of course.” Draco snickered. “Care for a quick lesson?”

They could not pinpoint how long they actually spent talking about stars, all the tiredness and sleep vanishing as they did it, but Harry revelled in the passion with which Draco spoke to the point of being mesmerized. He would have been a great professor. It was all there, the need to be specific, but only going further when asked, the knowledge of science and myths—he could even pronounce some of the names in what he called a rudimentary Arabic and an incipient Mandarin. They continued to talk long after the map was rolled again, and if Draco had any reservations about Harry falling asleep on his arm, practically draped around him, he didn’t show it.

It seemed to Harry that he had slept for maybe five minutes before the monitoring charm shook him awake. He rubbed his face with his palm and unlocked the door, knowing what was going to happen. As he thought, not a minute later Teddy was entering their room, his plush hippogriff in one hand, Ava nestled in his hair and Bowie clenching his arm. Harry sat up, waking Draco from his too light sleep in the process, and called him closer.

“Hey, Teds,” the Gryffindor said, smiling and yawning. By his side, Draco was sitting too.

“Hi.” The boy looked scared, and Harry waited for an instant. Thankfully, Draco was faster.
“Do you want to sleep here? Today was a bad day for all of us.”

The boy didn’t hesitate before nodding, and Harry and Draco allowed him in the middle. The animals rearranged on themselves, Harry summoned another pillow for his godson and both he and Draco hugged him close. Harry kissed his head, gentle. That was why they were there. That’s why they were family. Ava chirped sleepily and Teddy even managed to smile before sleep caught him again. Harry slipped his hand up Draco’s arm in a silent thanking and was fast asleep, feeling much better, right after.

Even though that night had been atypical, it was highly unusual that Harry would wake up in the middle of it after having relaxed himself into bonelessness and set a Self-Alarm Charm, but awake he was and it wasn’t even morning yet. It took him some fumbling to find his glasses and put them on. With a yawn he realized he had been woken up by an urgent Kreacher, who was poking him very intently, trying his best not to wake Teddy, who was still curled by his side. Draco wasn’t there, which meant that Scorpius had probably needed him during the night. The elf whispered that he had to come with him immediately and it was so out of the ordinary that Harry didn’t think twice. He took his wand and Kreacher Apparated them downstairs quietly, which made Harry’s half-asleep brain wonder if the usual loud crack was merely a way of stating to the Masters that the elves were in the room. In the living room, on top of the coffee table, there was a rectangular shaped, neatly folded piece of the same heavy parchment that contained the binding curse from that day. The second letter. The folding was a bit unusual, allowing the reader to see the last line of the letter inside while still unopened. Kreacher had folded his old, creaky arms and was staring at the supposed-to-be letter in what could only be described as the personification of disgust.

The parchment read three words folded like that: a big “boo” written in larger letters in the middle of it and “guess who” in smaller ones, on the right corner. Harry remembered Draco’s words and Hermione’s advices and decided he wouldn’t read any of it out loud. He asked Kreacher how it had been brought and the elf said it had just popped on the coffee table not five minutes ago. There were no harmful spells on it — Harry would have to ask Malfoy which was the seeking spell he had embedded on the parchment so he could put it in his report, supposing there would be one, because it was undetectable — and there were people he very much cared about upstairs, so, against his best judgement, he opened it in the living room, keeping his lips completely shut. The calligraphy was the same scratchy thing of the threat to Draco.
Harry felt his hands and stomach get cold.

“Godric Gryffindor.”

Chapter End Notes

I honestly just split the chapter to make it easier to read (I have very strong feelings about posting +10k chapters in long fics). Oh, I apologise for the delay, it’s been happening lately. I’m trying my best here, but real life sometimes wins the battle. Anyway, in case you want to check it out, there is a tumblr for my fiction now, @bydrarryly, and you can find the folded letter and the transcription of the poem there too, among other stuff. See you (hopefully) soon!
Harry had just finished reading the letter when Kreacher appeared inside the room with a black, arrogant owl beside him. The bird didn’t wait for him to remove the letter from its leg, instead picking at the emerald green ribbon that held it in place and flying away hastily the next moment. It was barely a note, written hurriedly and almost unintelligible. It took Harry a full minute to decipher it.

"Potter, we got the letter. We’re going to calm Draco down. Pans says you must find a large, ferocious beast and win its trust to reach through the ward. Call us when you find her. — M."

He didn’t need to make any effort to find out who was “her”. He folded the note again and put it inside his pocket along with the other letter. He left Kreacher in charge of everything, told him not to let Master Draco know, allowed the Floo to connect to Millicent and Pansy and took a handful of Floo powder and launched it on the fireplace. He stepped into the flames almost before they had turned green, his feet burning a little on the cooling coals, and shouted “Prairieland Cottage”. He stumbled upon Ron’s couch and went running to the corridor that would lead to Ron and Hermione’s bedroom at the same time Ron appeared by its door, wand up and ready. Blessed Auror instincts. He barely stopped to a halt before colliding with his friend.

“Ron, we gotta go.”

“Harry, calm the fuck down, mate!” He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. Hermione was tying her chamber robes and leaving her bedroom with an all-too-scared look on her face. “What happened?”

“This.” He gave them the letter and Hermione scanned it quickly. Ron hadn’t got to the middle of it when Hermione folded it again and stared at Harry with sheer dread in her eyes. “They are going to kill her.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look that said a thousand things Harry didn’t understand before they scattered. She dodged into the next room as Ron went to and fro their room, emerging with a bunch of his spare robes. Harry hadn’t noticed he was in his pyjamas, so he thanked him and changed into black slacks and thick, spell-covered black robes that were a replica of the ones Ron was finishing fastening. Hermione came back with Rosie and an all-too-familiar purse that rattled with flasks and vials while he was putting his borrowed boots on.

“You boys go to the Manor. If you think stealth is not important, try the Floo. I’ll go watch over Draco and the kids.”

Harry grabbed her by her wrist before she threw the Floo powder in the flames. “Call Tyra.”

“Harry—”

“Call her. We’ll need her, Hermione, I know we will.”
“What do I say?”

“That we’re going on a mission to rescue a potentially dying civilian who has been tortured and she should come prepared.” She nodded. “By the way, Pansy will be there.”

Hermione nodded again, surprisingly fine with the statement, and flooed away to Grimmauld Place. Ron finished fastening the cuffs of the protective cloak and stared at him. “What if we don’t need her?”

“I’ll apologize to my bones and blood.”

Ron nodded curtly and they stepped into green flames together, screaming “Malfoy Manor” in unison.

Landing was not a big problem and both guys went straight into Auror mode. Harry took a moment to try and find out where they were. It looked like an entrance hall, although it was located on what was presumably the second floor. There were stairs going up by their right and down by their left. A single look was enough for Ron to understand where they were going. They muffled their footsteps with a charm and ran down the stairs, Harry’s mind reaching for the wards and that response the Manor was supposed to give him. It was not an easy task, he realized when he tripped on his own feet while trying to focus on it. Ron eventually grabbed him by his arm and they stopped to a halt at the bottom of the stairs.

“What way now, map?”

Harry didn’t even growl at the jest, focused that he was in trying to feel the enormity of the house around him. It was dark as a pit despite their lit wands and he wanted to turn on the lights, but he knew — somehow, strangely, peripherally — that he’d lose touch with the Manor if he did so. He closed his eyes as hard as he could, finally and for a brief speck of a moment understanding that maybe Malfoy kept his eyes closed because while they were closed one could think the darkness was voluntary, and searched the tall walls for something, anything, for a presence, for literally whatever it might give him. He could feel the old, fine wallpaper on his fingertips all around him although he wasn’t touching it and it was not right, it was not the right feeling. Forcing himself to breathe, he allowed his concern about Draco and Astoria and Scorpius to flood the front of his mind and he felt it when the Manor touched it.

It was like showering in freezing water. He could feel the plea run through his body like an electrical discharge. It took him about a second to understand the growling and the screaming as projections of something much more sombre, and he was dangerously close to never wanting to open his eyes again when Ron shook him by his shoulder.

“Mate.”

Harry opened his eyes to see a long, long corridor dismantling all around him. With a quick glance to his partner, he began to run. The house was so intent on leading them to Astoria that it was like running across an open field. Literally: walls disappeared, lowered, built portals and gave way to them. When they reached the pantry, Ron’s morning stomach gave up and he got sick just outside the stair-based corridor. Harry had to admit he was so focused on understanding the Manor’s unspoken words that he barely smelt anything. The plea came as a muffled sound that clearly denoted its desperation, but apparently only Harry could hear it and it numbed his senses. At the same time, there was a non-dismissible cry of danger that begged Harry not to go down. It was intense and overpowering, almost as much as the plea, and Harry’s will faltered. By his side, Ron wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
“Mate? We’re running out of time.”

Like if setting a spell, those words made a soft click sound and a low tickling unleash in the back of their minds. Harry sucked some air in, focusing back on Astoria. The Manor whimpered when he commanded it to show the way, but the stairs showed up.

The water was colder that day, slightly swamp-ish. He only thought of casting an Impervius once they reached the next staircase ― but it was no longer necessary. The water was parted down in the dungeons, swirling and amplifying light as they passed by the large, thick walls of contained liquid. Harry was pushing forward, trying his best not to set off anything that would send him away. Ron was shielding his back, ready to stun whatever came their way despite his fresh injuries. Harry was too focused to even remember them now. He was facing forward, feeling danger approaching until, swift and powerful, there was a roar.

Harry didn’t need to see the beast to feel it crashing before him. Ron’s instinctive Protego was good but not enough to save them when the water closed their way out and the crossbred flung a paw straight to Harry’s chest. He felt the connection with the Manor slipping away and held on to it with all his strength, gritting his teeth and all but forgetting the feeling of a heavy paw pressing his ribcage with enough force to break his bones. The Protego was cushioning most of the pressure, but Harry was of no help at all since he had to focus on Astoria if he wanted the walls of water to remain up. A whole minute was spent in shocking silence and immobility, except for the occasional growling of the crossbred, which was eying Ron with rather blatant animosity. Harry was paling hard with the effort to ignore the beast on top of him, completely unmoving. The crossbred’s claws poked his chest and it flapped its wings slowly, as if preparing to attack Ron too.

Then, Ron took an abnormally long breath and bowed as deep as his newly-stitched back allowed.

Feeling the claws dig deeper into his skin, pushing the shield with it until it snapped, Harry frowned, considering for an instant that his friend might have just gone mental to trust a sodding bloodthirsty, vicious creature to guard any possible resemblance with Buckbeak’s beautiful, imposing species. The beast’s eyes didn’t show any remnant of mercy or care, but Ron trusted Hagrid enough to believe him. As he slowly, carefully stood back up, Harry turned his mind back to the wavering connection. Godric, that was hard.

The crossbred’s bow was almost imperceptible and no release of any kind was as much as indicated by its stance.

Ron suppressed a grin. “Mr Chimaera, sir, would you mind releasing my friend? We are aware that this is your territory we’re invading but we’re looking for someone. We believe she might be hurt.”

Incredible as literally everything for the past five minutes or so, the beast raised a reluctant paw and allowed Harry to roll away, retrieve the wand he hadn’t realise had fallen from his hand and go post himself beside Ron before it ruffled up and tried to push past them. Harry held his ground instinctively.

“Let it pass.”

“Are you fucking insane? Parkinson said we need it!”

Ron’s words had taken him by surprise. His friend seemed to be mesmerized by the creature, which, Harry had to admit, looked pretty huge and regal even in the scarcely lit room: its lion mane was sleek and golden-white, its wings had been well and thoroughly groomed, its serpent tail was glistening, the scales iridescent under the torch-glow. The eagle-like claws had once again retracted into its agile feet and it seemed to have no problem with the water it was stepping on. Nevertheless, it
was a vicious, bloodthirsty animal and Hagrid was not the best to judge it otherwise.

“Harry, its brains are hippogriff. It thinks.” Ron shook his head. “It knows what it’s doing.”

Knowing better than to fight Ron when he decided on something, he allowed the beast to set between them. It was much easier to believe it a guardian and not just a dangerous animal when it was not in sight. The half-chimaera lowered its head and patted the ground angrily. Harry stared at it warily, but Ron touched its lion mane, entwining his hand in it. The animal stared at Harry and growled, to which the Gryffindor mirrored his friend.

They followed it down a path that seemed to be growing slightly larger every few metres, just like the last time. When Harry saw the doors, the same ones he hadn’t been able to trespass before, he braced himself for the collision with the ground, but it never came. The beast slammed the door open and they heard a startled squeak right before the overwhelming odour of blood and ammonia reached their nostrils. Ron gained a greenish, sickly colour but didn’t throw up again, although he did signal Harry to move first. Harry made it further in and was able to stand about two seconds of the suffocating, clinging, humid smell before he shut down his nose with a spell. He was beginning to feel it on the tip of his tongue and his reasonably empty stomach was not taking it well. The chimaera went to a corner and flopped down like an exhausted cat, curling around something bundled up in supposed-to-be white linens. Kneeling by the side of them was an incredibly thin house-elf and Harry felt his knees weaken. The sheets were dyed red and black and gleamed when he strengthened the Lumos he was holding. The water beneath them was reddish and it moved when Ron approached them.

“Mate, is she under this?”

Harry shivered from head to toe, his head suddenly filled with a thousand images he knew weren’t his imagination. Too much blood, too much screaming, too much sobbing and crying and pain, so much pain. It was like the Manor had decided to share its grief and Harry didn’t want it. “I cannot do this, Ron.”

Ron nodded. Since he had far less personal involvement with the case, he pulled the sheets on the count of three. Harry had to brace himself not to finally throw up. The woman underneath wore a pale blue nightgown drenched in blood, ripped in the middle. A weak force-field was being held in place and Harry noticed it was entering the gash in the clothes. Ron lifted the fabric and Harry sucked in a deep, gasped breath. Ron’s voice faltered.

“Merlin almighty.”

There was a matted knot of veins and tissue held together by the force-field. They stopped for a fleeting moment before reality overcame them, urging them to look for her pulse — weak, terribly weak —, the source of the spell — the house-elf kneeling beside her — and the possibility of moving her through Apparition or Floo — none. She was above the water, on a kind of pallet that was probably supposed to serve as a nest to the chimaera; that the beast has decided to share it was subject for another moment entirely. Harry was elected to stare at her face, recognizing her immediately. He thanked every deity known to man that she had her eyes closed and hadn’t been, apparently, submitted to the same practices Draco had endured. Ron sighed when Harry confirmed the identity and started to build-up a threaded litter, something more cushioned than a paddock but strapped the same way, where they’d put her to move her body. Ron had been far better in first aid than Harry was ever going to become, so he waited for his call before levitating Astoria onto the litter. They strapped her and the force-field wavered a little. The elf whimpered.

“What’s your name?” Ron asked smoothly.
“Frilly, sir.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Frilly. Draco’s favourite elf. Of course he’d ask her to take care of his family. Ron took her by her round waist. “Can you keep doing what you’re doing while we move her?”

The elf nodded vehemently, blinking her very opaque, very blind eyes several times. Ron sat her on the litter too, the field instantly growing a tad stronger. The poor house-elf wore a filthy pillowcase that was decorated with tiny snitches, if the faded fluttering pattern was to be of any indication; she reminded Harry of Dobby and his teeth clenched with the memory. The chimaera made no movements to get up, which made Harry uneasy.

It was Ron who made him realise why.

“How?” Ron gulped and his eyes went to a pale little bloodied thing lying on the floor. Harry’s eyes widened and he picked it up. It was alive; barely breathing, but alive, covered in Chimaera fur and plumage. The beast looked up with glistening eyes. Harry couldn’t believe that it had been looking after it. “Harry, is this a baby?”

Harry needed a glimpse of a second to reorganise his own thoughts. “Yes.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. The baby was cold, apparently asleep. “Mighty Chim here looked after it.”

He Scourgified the baby and looked from it to its mother. The chord was still on. It had been chewed cut by the beast, apparently. The chimaera looked at him and got up, staring at the baby with a pain Harry had only once seen in animal eyes. He half-expected the beast to cry. “We have to bring Astoria upstairs. She won’t make it through Apparition or Floo but we cannot help her in here. No one else can come this deep into the Manor.”

They were not surprised when the chimaera found it good to follow them upstairs. The baby against Harry’s chest did not cry or produce any kind of sound for that matter, which would have been far more concerning were he not the father of a particularly quiet child. He was far more preoccupied with Astoria’s injuries and the obvious indication that she’d have to undergo a massive surgery. Harry suspected the delivery had not been conducted by someone capable this time, to his modest surprise. Scorpius’ birth was clean and almost normal, allowing her to heal perfectly before they tried again. Why they would was the question Harry could not and didn’t even want to answer. Draco had been vehement while protecting Scorpius inside captivity; why would he completely ignore the existence of what was quite obviously his second child? He dared brush the thought that maybe he didn’t know, but shut it out when it became quite clear that he’d be the one to break him the news — again.

They stilled when they reached the first floor, where the hearth was still raging, and Frilly lead them into a room. Harry let Ron handle Astoria as he kneeled in front of the fireplace and flooed his head to his house. He watched as Hermione leapt up the couch where she had been sitting. Beside her, Tyra waited, quietly put, wearing a white garment, her tight curls gathered and strapped together in the most functional way he’d ever seen her using. Rosie was nowhere to be seen.

“He!” Hermione kneeled with worry on her face like a theatrical mask. “Be quick!”

He didn’t have the time to, though. Walking into the room with a very pleading Pansy begging him to wait, Draco showed up, not only awake but also furious.

“Potter,” he said in the steadiest, most threatening voice he’d ever heard, “where the bloody fuck are you?”
“Away. Please don’t be a problem.” He had counted on Kreacher to keep his master occupied. It wouldn’t be until much later that he’d find out that Draco had threatened him enough to make him punish himself while telling.

“You’re at the Manor.” It was not a question.

“Hermione, take him down.”

“Potter, talk to me!” It was desperation in his voice, something that went shrill when Hermione held up her wand. “Don’t you dare!”

“I can’t!”

“Someone stun him!”

The shout paralysed everyone in the room but Millicent, who nodded once she stared deep into Harry’s flaming, desperate eyes. Draco was fighting a useless battle and he knew it once Harry called Tyra over and Millicent raised her wand. He half-heard her apologise when Tyra knelt in front of him.

“What do you have?”

Harry waited for Millicent’s signal to carry on. He was talking very low but he knew Draco, of all people, would hear him anyway unless he was down. He doubted anyone else was listening to the conversation, though. “C-section gone bad. Mother and child barely alive. Blood loss and malnutrition, possible infection. Holding on by elven magic.”

“Unlock the Floo. I’ll need a team.”

Harry gave her precise instructions and stepped away from the hearth. The baby in his arms was finally growing warm. He huddled it closer and stepped away to allow Tyra in. It took her about two minutes to call everyone and appear inside the Manor, but when they did, it was a ready-to-business approach. A dark-haired man took the baby from him and urged him inside the sparsely furnished bedroom where Astoria was lying. Ron was finishing the diagnosis spells and Tyra went straight to him, asking a whirlwind of questions Harry could barely understand. When the minute of intensive talk ended, Tyra looked at the team, shook her head and started clogging the room with every kind of impermeable, antibiotic and protective spell. The air was saturated and sizzling with magic and Harry was afraid of being unintentionally struck, so he stood behind the doctors, just observing them. The chimaera had very consciously remained outside.

“We’ll operate her now, Potter,” said Tyra, turning to stare for a moment at him. “She’s lost too much blood and the damage to the tissues is too much for us to wait.” Harry nodded. “I’d rather have you stay with the baby.”

Under regular circumstances, it would have pained Harry a little, to be put aside that easily, but years at being an Auror had made him very practical and perfectly capable of discerning whether he’d be of any help. Tyra brought only five people along; in the end, someone would have to help with the baby. He went to relieve one of the doctors currently tending to the baby and the dark-haired man gave it back to Harry.

“It’s a girl. She’s mainly healthy despite everything; I’ll hook her on an IV and we’ll hydrate and feed her. When and if her mother produces milk, she has to be breastfed.” Harry sighed, relieved, staring at the bundle — someone had wrapped her in a clean blanket — and the baby’s fluttering eyelids tenderly. The Healer let him. “It’s a miracle she’s alive. She’s malnourished but the birth has
been twenty-four hours ago. The chord has been chewed and she’s slightly hypothermal but there are no infections.” He produced an IV out of thin air and adjusted it on the girl, taping it to be still. The bag was spelled to hover above her and he filled it slowly with swishes of his wand and a couple of potions. “We’re giving her a solution to complete her lung development and some preventive antibiotics. She’s premature. Don’t take the IV off her.” Harry nodded. “I presume you don’t know her name?”

“I do, in fact,” he lied. The Healer quirked an eyebrow up. “I know both her parents. We were looking for her. Secretly.”

Harry didn’t talk further, and the Healer prodded him not. He went to help Tyra with Astoria and Harry decided to look for Ron. he had thought he’d be helping Tyra — Ron did know a lot of healing routines — but he wasn’t; Harry left the room and almost tripped on the chimaera, which was lying in front of the door. Ron was sitting cross-legged beside it, patting its lion mane distractedly. Frilly was sleeping, her wrinkled head lay on top of Ron’s thighs. His face was set and stern, but his eyes rose to meet Harry’s and relief flooded him when he saw the baby. Harry sat down beside him, leaning on the beast that didn’t bother to acknowledge it. Ron’s eyes became apologetic. They didn’t need to talk about that, if he didn’t want to. Nobody should have to witness suffering after the war, because it didn’t allow them to forget. Nothing seemed to change unless they tried to forget, anyway. The (half) hippogriff, the house elf, both of them waiting for a woman they couldn’t help and didn’t know if would make it, Malfoy Manor itself. He felt seventeen, cuddling a quiet body and hoping for the best while the weight of his every decision began to pile up on top of him.

Ron looked up at him again after a moment, his face slightly pale. Not even Tyra’s best blood replenishing could work as well as rest for him. Harry promised himself he’d stop dragging his friend along now and give him some peace.

“Is the baby alright?” He gestured at the tiny girl in Harry’s arms.

“Apparently fine. They are probably going to take her to a hospital for a check-up, but there are vitamins and glucose in her saline and they gave her some antibiotics too. They’re worried about her lungs.” He summed up some courage. “I decided to call her Lyra.”

Ron raised an eyebrow to him. “I don’t think that’s your job, mate.”

“I cannot keep her without a name.”

“Well, of course not, but that’s why she has parents.” Harry stared at him as if Ron had suddenly grown a second head. “Mate, you’re going to give her to the ferret, right?”

Harry sighed. “I don’t know. She’s so small and so fragile now and —” He couldn’t say it out loud. Not holding her as he was. Ron’s eyes hardened on him.

“Whether she lives or dies, it’s Malfloy’s responsibility. As much as I’d love to see his ferret face cracking in surprise, he does deserve to know about her.”

“And I will tell him once she’s out of risk.”

He couldn’t say what had propelled him to that choice, but something about the pain Draco had showed in talking about his sister begged him to keep that family guarded for a moment longer. He’d have to talk to Parkinson, to set some stuff straight, to research about heirlooms. He didn’t want to give Draco a baby girl he’d have to sacrifice for the sake of whatever it was Malfloy could do. It didn’t seem to be something they could choose not to do. Something about Lucius’ said reaction on
Clara’s death told him that. The relative urgency with which he disposed of little Wisteria too. There was something very bad regarding that thing, whatever it was. He couldn’t give Draco one more thing to hurt him. Not like that. Beside him, Ron opened his mouth but chose not to pick up that fight right then. For Harry, who had never met his parents, to choose to keep a child from their family, there must be a reason. Still, he was worried about his friend’s sanity and would nag him some other moment.

“He won’t forgive you. Ever.”

Harry hid how hard that statement pierced through him. “I’ll take the risk.”

Ron refrained from commenting that lately they had been taking far too many risks, but Harry heard one last indistinct mumble from him. It was difficult to stop Harry too whenever he had his mind set on something, though, and nothing Ron could have said would have changed his decision anyway.

It was Tyra who called them in once they were done with Draco’s wife. Astoria was pale, being given saline, blood and several shots inside a very small cannula up her left arm. She looked thin and bony, definitely unhealthy even now that she was clean. Harry stepped closer to her bed, holding Lyra closer to his own chest like an overprotective hen. Ron had picked up Frilly and was giving her tired, fragile old body to a doctor.

“She’s stable,” the woman said about Lyra’s mother. “And unfortunately this is all I can guarantee. She’s in sepsis, a widespread infection. We had to cut off a lot of tissue and perform an emergency hysterectomy.”

“But will she live?” Ron asked when Harry didn’t look prone to it. “Will she make it?”

“Only time will tell. If the antibiotics can hold her alive for the next seventy-two hours, we can begin thinking about the rest.”

“What rest?”

“Her spine is gravely damaged and her brain seems to have been deprived of oxygen for some time. We’ll keep her in coma until we can assess the damage properly.”

“But do you think she’ll make it?” insisted Ron, glancing at Harry, who still had not spoken a single word and seemed too focused on the baby he was holding. “Do you think she’ll wake up?”

“We can only hope, Weasley.”

They took them to St. Mungus.

When Tyra said Astoria would need round the clock supervision until she woke up, Ron let out a pained grunt. Keeping anyone related to a case inside a very public hospital was tricky business. He suggested they took her to Hogwarts instead, but Tyra was adamant that she would not survive Floo transportation and only doctors were capable of side-along Apparition with wounded people without leaving anything of said people behind. Harry needed a moment to agree, but he did trust Tyra.

Ron’s mood was downright awful when they got there. He went inside with them, but barely. As soon as Tyra assigned Astoria’s room, he patted Harry on the shoulder.

“I should go back and search that room. Chim will help me in. I also have to report to my wife, she must be worried.”
“I’m staying,” Harry answered needlessly.

“I know you are.” Ron shook his head. “Anything you want from the world outside?”

“Ron…”

“I won’t tell the ferret. It’s not my decision to make. But I will tell Hermione and what she does with it is none of my business.”

“Ron, please.”

“Mate, listen to me. Malfoy is your lover. Not your husband, not even your boyfriend. You’re shagging while he’s around and the moment he isn’t anymore, you will be the one to hurt and to live with the weight of every one of these tiny, stupid decision you’re making. He’s part of your life now and you can control some of it while he’s with you but who knows how long this will last.”

“That’s not what worries me.”

“But it worries me.” He took a deep breath. “You like him a lot and as much as I don’t, I understand how important he is becoming to you. If he gets too pissed at you, who do you think will pine over the other?”

“I said I take the risk.”

Ron threw his hands up in surrender. “Do as you wish.”

He left the room without as much as looking back. Harry didn’t have much time to consider his words any further because Tyra chose that moment to urge him inside the Auror’s treatment room. It took a signature from her and another from him for the room to be cleared for Astoria. The rest of the team was there, waiting in line. Astoria was surrounded by flashing and beeping and Harry, who was rather familiar with all that after having witnessed Ginny giving birth to Al and most of Rosie’s and Louis’ labour (both Bill and Ron had been inconveniently away during the first hours of their wives’ long and exhausting childbirth), just nodded at the woman. She was indeed stable. The man who had helped them with Lyra sat down across the only table in the sparsely furnished room. Tyra nodded and Harry sat across from him.

“Mr Potter, my name is Phineas Goldstein. I’m an expert in postpartum and perinatal care. Doctor Parker-Smith asked me to stay with the patients since she cannot be absent from her post at the Ministry for that long.” Harry glanced at Tyra, but the woman gestured him to continue listening. “As you must have understood by now, we are a very discreet team. My co-workers won’t be a bother for anyone. In case it makes you feel safer about the protection of these victims, we will all subject to a carefully executed Memory Spell that clears the minutiae of this morning: the patients’ faces, their names, their locations. I presume that you, as an Auror, know someone capable.”

“Yes, sir.”

“As the appointed doctor, I’m afraid you will have to trust my discretion while the worst of her care is ongoing. Later, I will of course submit to that same spell.” Harry didn’t like to trust someone he had barely just met, but the man was kind and serious, and he liked that combo. “Doctor Parker-Smith will come and surrender me whenever she can so I can sleep and go about my private life. No one else, no matter how decent they look, is allowed in here. You are allowed to spend the night if you want.”

“I’d like to stay until she’s cleared of danger, sir.”
Phineas tsk-ed. “Not your smartest move, Mr Potter. Looking after someone in coma can be very tiring. Growing affectionate to a child you won’t be able to keep later is also a very traumatic experience.”

“I owe them that.” He stared at the bundle in his arms. “This little girl’s father is an amazing person and I need to protect her and her mother while he’s not around.”

Phineas and Tyra exchanged concerned looks. He turned to him even more serious than before. “Very well. You can stay if, and only if, every single one of our medical recommendations is followed. If we say you have to sleep, you sleep. If we order you to eat, you eat. If we say you must go home and rest, you go home and rest. Am I making myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good.” He got up. “Give me the baby.”

Harry obeyed him at once. He didn’t want to risk having to leave so soon.

“Call your charmer now,” said Tyra, serious as death. “The team will wait in the next room.”

Harry waited for further instructions for an instant. The Floo he had to use was the one in Phineas’ office: small, hardly used and very secluded. Pushing some of the clutter carelessly thrown around it — it was obvious it was hardly ever even lit —, he took some dusty Floo powder and eventually was able to complete a call to his place. Ron and Hermione were nowhere to be seen, but Pansy was lying on the couch, flipping the glossy, speedy pages of a Witch’s Weekly lazily, as if skipping time. Her eyes barely rose to meet Harry’s.

“You were supposed to call when you found her,” she said, flipping another page.

“Emergencies can’t be put on hold because I need to make a superfluous call, Parkinson.”

“We’re going four-syllables today, yes? No need to be so posh.”

“Cut the crap. Where’s Hermione?”

“How am I supposed to know? Weasley arrived here and snatched her away.” She smirked, eyes still on the magazine. “Afraid they’ll celebrate being alive at your carpet? I must say anything would be an improvement from this.”

“Parkinson, can you call her for me?”

“And traumatise myself with the view? Very unlikely. I thought you were some sort of a Patronus whiz. Why can’t just do your trick?” She blinked slowly, a perfect viper as she spoke. “After all, I think we’re not enough of a team now that you have used us, are we?”

For a moment, Harry considered, actually, vehemently did consider dismissing Pansy, but she still knew more about heirlooms than he’d even find out on his own and if Ron decided not to help him — and given that the heirloom he would research would mean keeping Lyra away from her father for longer, he was very sure he wouldn’t —, she’d be his only hope. Breathing deeply, he exhaled a pained sigh.

“Astoria needed to undergo surgery. I asked you to put Draco down because we don’t know if she’ll live. I need Hermione to fiddle with the team’s memories.”

“Booooring.”
“But true. Please, Parkinson. You said you’d cooperate.”

She huffed and got up with another of her unnecessarily gymnastic movements. “Fine. Wait up.”

“Not going anywhere.”

“And you will meet me this week. Tomorrow is good.”

“Very unlikely,” he said, purposefully mimicking her.

“I’m not asking.”

Harry pressed the bridge of his nose from under his glasses but didn’t retort. Fucking Slytherins. As soon as the stilettos crossed the room, he closed his eyes. Bringing Parkinson in had probably been an awful idea. The woman was going to end up being the end of them. It was obvious she knew much more than she was letting on and that she felt something towards Draco that could threaten the entire operation if it wasn’t controlled. If pureblood friendships were always like that, he’d never cross one again.

Hermione entered the room with firm steps while he was daydreaming, gazing rather frustrated at him. She looked anxious and unhappy and Ron’s stance didn’t help Harry’s case. Millicent was by her other side, a rapid-healing gash on her exposed arm. They had (unlike Pansy) changed from pyjamas into civilian clothes.

He decided to ignore every stern, hard look directed at him.

“Hermione, can you tamper with the doctors’ minds? We need them to forget names, faces, places.”

She nodded. “Millicent’s coming with me. It’s faster when it’s two.”

“Great. Come over, I’ll keep the Floo open for you.”

They didn’t need any urging. Millicent put her head inside the fireplace, pushing Harry back, while Hermione and Ron exchanged a couple of words. The Slytherin landed hard on her knees and got up quickly, staring once at Harry. He felt himself dim the slightest bit.

“Draco is asleep. I sedated him. Your godson woke up and is sleeping by his side now. Your house-elf almost pulled my wand-arm off and Draco’s son, whom you hadn’t told us existed inside your actual house, is getting worse. Weasley already knows and is staying with him.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Potter. You don’t know what you’re fiddling with. You won’t be thanking me once Draco wakes up.”

She left the room, very well-versed in the hospital floor plan. Being head of a Department had some advantages. Harry was still processing what he couldn’t decide if was a threat or an advice when Hermione left the Floo, landing softly on all fours and getting up much more slowly than the other woman. She looked wary and puffy, now that he was staring properly. He didn’t want to believe it but could bet she had cried. Seeing her so close, Harry’s heart leapt and before he knew or could control it, he was hugging her rather desperately. It broke her façade, and she hugged him back, if a bit stiffly.

“Harry, what have you done?” she whispered, closing her eyes.
But Harry just held her close for a moment longer, trying to recompose himself. Feeling she was not going any further right then, Hermione asked about the team she and Millicent were supposed to partially Obliviate and left Harry to watch over a sleeping Lyra. He didn’t dare looking at Astoria. He felt in debt with the woman. It wasn’t rational, not really, but he felt like he should have done for her. He should have searched harder. Known more. But it was too cozy and homey to have Draco beside him and most of the time he wasn’t much concerned. He had believed in ancient bonds and caring houses, and he should know by now those were not always enough. It had been a long time now since he felt actually responsible for someone’s life, but of course it would be different with Malfoy and his family. When hadn’t it been? Everything went rogue when it came to them.

A soft knock about fifteen minutes later called him to the door. He went to open it, under Phineas analytic look, to see Hermione standing alone in front of him.

“Millicent went with Tyra to find something for her arm.” Harry nodded. “Can we talk?”

Harry glanced at Phineas, but the doctor, surprisingly perceptive, got up from the desk where he was organizing Astoria’s treatment. “I’ll leave you alone. You know where to find me, Mr Potter. Ms Granger.”

“Thank you, Doctor Goldstein.” Hermione half-smiled at him. “We won’t disturb them.”

“It’s an exception and only for a couple of minutes,” he said to Harry, looking very much like a brown-eyed Dumbledore with the way he gazed inside his eyes. “No one is allowed in here, Mr Potter.”

“Yes, sir.”

He closed the door after Hermione entered, and she sighed once they were partially alone. Harry kept staring at her, incapable of starting that conversation.

“I presume you’ll be staying with them?” Hermione asked, but she already knew the answer.

“Yes. Just until they’re cleared of danger.”

“Right.” She twisted her hands once, to mask her nervousness. Harry felt himself sweating. “Do you want to give Al back to Ginny? Return Teddy to Andromeda?”

“No. I… If there’s no other way, but I think… It won’t be good. People will be suspicious.”

“Okay.” She sighed once more. “Then I need you to tell Kreacher he needs to obey us until you return. Ron and I think it’s best if we move into your house for the time being. If Andy calls, we’ll say you’re out on a mission.”

“Thank you.”

“Pansy says she wants to stay. With Draco. She’ll be moving in too.”

“Hermione, you cannot possibly believe I’ll have Pansy Parkinson staying at my place.”

“She’s the only one who can take care of your wards while you’re away. Besides, if we don’t let her stay, she’s going to take Draco and Scorpius with her. You know she will. It’s your choice.”

Harry pressed his temples hard. “Fine.”

“Good. Also, Ron will take the chimaera to Hagrid once he’s done at the Manor. Frilly will be taken
to Hannah. She can handle house-elves very well.” Harry nodded once more. “I’ll pack some clothes for you while you’re here. I’ll deliver them after lunch, once we all have slept a little.” Another nod from him. “And about what Ron told me…”

“You won’t tell Draco, will you?”

“I will. It’s a mistake you’re making, Harry, and one does not need to be smart to know it.”

“You don’t understand. The girls, the women in his family, they just don’t make it. Letting him know he has a baby girl is probably telling him he’ll have to see her die really soon.” He didn’t want to use the word “sacrifice”. It was too personal. The secret was not his to share and he couldn’t force the words out of his mouth. It was not even something he knew for sure, just a hint based on Draco’s telling of Wisteria, of Ron’s story about Clara.

“Harry, people have been dying for quite long now. It’s not our job to keep it from happening. This is not war we’re talking about.”

“Give me a week. I promise you I will tell him in a week. I just need to… sort things out. To make sure. To run tests and make sure she’s his daughter, like, in blood, and make sure whether she will live. Then I promise I’ll tell him. In front of you if you want me to.”

Hermione sighed in that very frustrated way that said she was going to give him a chance despite knowing it was probably very stupid of her to let something she disapproved so strongly of continue to happen for so long. “One week and not a day longer.”

“Thank you.” She bit her lower lip and rushed forward to hug him. He hugged her back, finally feeling the slightest bit relieved.

“Promise me you’ll be okay when this blows up, Harry.”

“I will. It’s all going to be okay now. It’s going to be fine. I promise you. This is getting to an end.”

She held him closer for a while yet before waving goodbye. She must have knocked on Phineas’ office on her way out, because the doctor showed up shortly after she left.

“Mr Potter.”

“Doctor Goldstein.”

“There’s a spare bed behind those curtains. The hospital lent me some pyjamas too. Take a shower if you may, but go to sleep. I’ll wake you up on my way out.”

Knowing better than to argue, Harry answered a flat “yes, sir” and did as he was told. All was going to be well. He didn’t know how yet, but he needed to believe it would.
Phineas was faithful to his word and woke Harry up when he was leaving for lunch. Astoria had already received her shots and her saline was filled; when the doctor insisted they should try giving Lyra some milk, though, was that the Gryffindor felt himself wake up properly. It took a little convincing, but Harry managed to receive permission to breastfeed her himself. It couldn’t be hard, he figured, despite Phineas’ bemused look. It was just a spell, and when Draco had used it, he hadn’t felt uncomfortable at all. When Phineas wrote him express instructions about the spell, he paled a little. It wasn’t that easy. He had to clean himself very thoroughly — an actual shower, scalding hot, paired with a moisturizing, antibiotic cream he sprayed from an apparently never-ending bottle —, cut his nails shorter than usual — his skin tingled with it — and dry and comb his hair as best as he could. He found himself some hospital surgical garment (coat and trousers) and changed into them, careful to leave the front open before picking Lyra up. The baby stirred and mewled, but when Harry finally applied the spell, she latched onto his nipple hungrily. It was the weirdest sensation he’d ever experienced on that bud of skin: he felt sensitive, uncomfortable, bruising. He tried rocking the child and it soothed her sucking a little; later, he’d find his nipple hot and tender to touch, dry, still leaking a little.

He was in the middle of it when he heard a knock on the door that was followed by Tyra’s entrance. She smiled at him.

“Is she hungry?”

“Very.” Harry winced when Lyra sucked harder at his nipple. “Hurts a bit.”

“Try not using the same breast every turn. It’ll pain you less. I’ll find you some pomade too, it’ll help.” He thanked her as she went about Astoria, giving her another shot and assessing her temperature, brain activity and blood pressure. “You have a visitor.”

“I can’t leave and no one else is allowed in here.”

Tyra understood what was not being said and went outside again, returning soon after with a bag of clothing she sterilized with a spell before giving it to him. “I told her you were busy. She asked you not to forget about your house-elf.”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see Hermione as much as it was that he didn’t want her to see him breastfeeding Lyra. He was afraid she wasn’t going to find it very promising. He didn’t want her to rush him into guilt and into telling Draco something he was probably not able to cope with yet.

Which made it all the more surprising when the person who came up demanding that he acted upon it soon wasn’t her at all.

His afternoon with Lyra and her mother was rather uneventful but for a note from Pansy asking the
meeting to be held at the hospital’s café. His short, dry answer was a simple “ok” that would probably haunt him during their conversation and be deemed the epitome of impoliteness. Astoria was reacting well to the antibiotics, and Phineas and Tyra were worried about the amount of medicine in her bloodstream, so they were developing a schedule to hook her in and out of the deep sedation in order to allow her to drink some potions to hold the damage to her liver and heart. Tyra said that her heart was weak, a genetic, yet recessive condition, so they didn’t want to risk anything. Lyra was maturing very, terribly slowly, but apparently, accordingly; after the first times, breastfeeding became easier and Tyra’s pomades did help numb the soreness. Night had come and gone and in the early morning, they took Lyra for testing. He took the time to go about Kreacher, but the elf reacted badly to being lent and Harry wondered whether he’d follow the orders at all.

Lyra showed up later, heavily sedated, and was put inside a small shatterproof glass chamber filled to the brim with warming and stasis spells. Her bag of medicine had been taken away. When Harry asked what the fuck had happened, Phineas was quick to explain that lung maturation was a cyclic process and her bag would be put again when the time was good, which would probably be during the evening, and in the meantime she was to be warmed and protected and flooded with oxygen to prevent her lungs from collapsing. The doctor was clear and secure, but still Harry didn’t like that news. Anxiety and worry peaking over the baby, it was rather unsurprising that he reacted so badly and fumed so much when lunchtime arrived and he went to the café to meet the nosy, obnoxious Pansy Parkinson. She was there, of course, in ultra-high stilettos, a very short coat and a long-sleeved dress so miniscule that the lace around her thighs was visible when she crossed her legs. But it was the person beside her that made him forget how to breathe.

Because sitting by her was Draco Malfoy.

And he looked anything but pleased.

If Harry was to be honest, he also looked gorgeous. He was very well-dressed in deep green robes lined with silver, unpolished buttons and cuffs to prevent shining too much, a charcoal, perfectly fit three-piece suit with a stern white shirt too well-pressed not to be a professional’s job. His hair was combed, gleaming unicorn-like under the café’s white illumination, tied behind his neck, low enough to look negligent for those with untrained eyes, by a charcoal velvet ribbon. His grey eyes bore into Harry’s with such intent that he feared he had been healed overnight.

Harry found a moment to feel a little underdressed before walking a straight line towards them. Pansy got up with a smile as mischievous as it was poisonous and held him by the shoulders to kiss the air close to both his cheeks. The Gryffindor was half-expecting fangs to pierce into his skin, but all the woman did was whisper a well-concealed “behave” from under a very effusive “darling”. Not for the first time, he wondered how much of what Pansy did was not laced with ulterior motives of any kind. She gestured to the chair in front of Draco and smiled even wider when Harry sat down.

“Now we’re finally here together,” she began, viper-y, dangerously, “and before you get your knickers in a twist, Potter, allow me to say security precautions have all been taken care of. You are warded, in a secluded area, and both Millicent and Blaise,” she pointed discreetly at a green-haired woman and a two-stone man in opposite directions in the café, “are holding an outer world glamour, so your faces are not discernible. Granger, very reluctantly, I must admit, said we should wait for your Privacy Charm, so if you may.”

She actually stopped to allow him to spell the section around them, which Harry did, albeit a tad disgusted. He couldn’t believe that woman had had the nerve to let Draco out of the house, to expose him. The only place safe for him was under layers and layers of strong wards, where no one would find him or Scorpius ever again. As if reading his mind, she continued, still dripping poison.
“Of course my warding will grant you plenty of privacy on its own, but better safe than sorry.” She took a glance at Draco, who was still focused on Harry. “Now, everything we just did is perfectly legal, if the tiniest bit on the borderline side of it.” She kissed Draco on the cheek, sisterly. “But I’m afraid I must leave you to yourselves; Draco is dying to have a chat with you, Potty. Be civil.”

“Sure you don’t absolutely need to stay?” Harry asked, also venomous. That bitterness was overcoming him easily.

“Oh, no, darling. I can find out anything I want from your conversation should the need arise.” She winked at Harry, looking like a mischievous little child. It was unsettling. “It would be nicer if said need never did arise, though.”

With that vague statement, Pansy got up and left them, and the wards around them gleamed for a moment when she went beyond them. Dumbstruck, Harry turned to Draco. He had a roll of questions to ask — why he had come, how he had escaped his house, wasn’t he afraid of being caught —, but the Slytherin was faster.

“How bad is her state?”

For a moment, all blood drained from Harry’s face as he wondered how the fuck could he have found out about Lyra once none of Harry’s friends would have told him after promising they wouldn’t. He gaped like a goldfish at the man before him for what could have literally been any amount of time, from a quarter of a second to half an entire year. Draco closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, much more delicately than anyone else Harry knew.

“Potter.” Harry’s attention, which had never gone too far, returned with its full force at him. “My wife’s life is endangered. How so?”

Flooding with partial and cold relief, he cleared his throat. “She’s responding to antibiotics, but very feverish. She had some… lesion to her internal organs and had to be submitted to an emergency procedure.” Draco nodded, his jaw tight. “The Mediwizards say we’ll have to wait.”

He snorted. “That’s apparently all we can ever say.”

Harry didn’t know what to answer to that, so he didn’t. Shaking his shoulders once, he tapped the small menu in front of him and ordered some light lunch, not feeling particularly hungry despite it being three in the afternoon but unwilling to let the silence become any more uncomfortable. He wrote “Auror’s trauma room” in the blank space at the bottom of the pristine white parchment (obviously enchanted) that appeared in front of him, so the owner of the café knew where to send the bill. Draco remained unfazed all through his arrangements, waiting patiently.

Harry couldn’t wait anymore.

“Are you alright?” he asked, wishing that he could hold Draco’s hand. Somehow, though, he believed it wouldn’t be the best call to make right then.

“Let’s see.” He tapped his lower lip with a precise index finger, leaning further on the chair. “I wake up in the middle of the night after one, having one of the best shags I’ve ever had, and two, letting my lover’s godchild nestle between us to sleep his trauma away, to look after my son, who’s passing out from a fever only Salazar knows where it came from. I then spend half of the night half-awake to monitor him until, shortly before dawn, an excruciating pain in my heart and wand arm actually resonates inside me, promising me my wife is going to die.” Harry felt himself shrinking. “Then, when I finally manage to gather enough of my breath to be back to the world of the living myself, I literally crawl like a bloody Skrewt to the room I share with a lover that, surprise, surprise, is no
longer in there and has left an unattended grieving child, in the middle of a nightmare, no less, behind.”

“I’m so—”

He raised a quiet, warning hand. “By the time said child is no longer contorting in dread, there has already been a breach in the Manor’s wards and when I finally find the man responsible for it, through Floo, and a mere glimpse of it, he asks one of my friends, who I didn’t even know was there, to stun me. Just to be safe, she also decides to sedate me, and therefore I have had no news, good or bad, no support of any kind and no choice of my own for about, say, an entire day?” Harry cringed at the contempt in his voice. “You didn’t even tell them to allow me to monitor our children. I woke up this morning with Teddy’s scream. Scorpius was being forced to swallow an anti-fever potion. Albus was crying.”

Harry gritted his teeth and exhaled hard. Shit. He hadn’t remembered the children at all.

“I was desperate. I had no time to explain.”

“Well, you do now. Tell me what was so urgent and so classified that you’d risk what little trust we built and my son’s life to keep safe.” Harry lowered his head. “Nothing? Ah, the sound of idiocy.” Draco clicked his tongue just as the plates with their food appeared. “And here I thought we were improving.”

“I am not going to justify my actions to you,” Harry said, holding his composure as much as he could.

“Of course you won’t. They don’t hold in daylight.” Draco unfolded his napkin gracefully and put it on his lap. His voice was sickeningly sweet, almost like honey. Harry hated it. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Reluctantly, unwilling, Harry mimicked, with far less grace, Draco’s movements, picking his fork up as if it could bite. He didn’t understand anything anymore. He didn’t understand his own guilt, or Draco’s blatant animosity. Yes, he had messed up, but it was not as if the children had been left unattended. He was sure Hermione would have taken care of Albus and Scorpius and Ron was monitoring him, and surely Pansy wouldn’t have let Teddy cry his heart out — she was a mother, after all, and had seemed to be a nice one — not to mention she would never allow anything bad to happen to someone Draco cared as much as he did for Teddy. Rationally speaking, he had no reasons to feel that betrayed and Harry had no reasons to feel that bad. Besides, if all Draco wanted was to prod him and guilt him into talking about Astoria’s state, why was he still here? There was nothing else he could do for his wife. He was a currently blind Healer — Mediwizard, his brain corrected him automatically — who had not been trained for that particular kind of situation. He was emotionally invested. He had no business there.

“You are indeed thinking too loud,” Draco said nonchalantly, and Harry stilled. “Would you mind doing so lower or slower, so I can either ignore or understand it?”

Harry took a deep breath. “Why are you here?”

Draco’s voice was obvious and dry. “To hear about Astoria, of course.”

“No, Draco. You could have owled me for that. I mean, why the guerrilla meets DOM operation, why risking yourself, why leaving our kids, why coming out when you don’t even know who your enemies are. Why bring the entire Slytherin House along. That’s the question.”
Draco dabbed at his mouth with the napkin, then lowered his hands, stretching one on top of the table to touch Harry’s left one, currently balled into a fist. The gesture would have looked caring and loving to anyone, the gentle caress, the delicate way with which Draco rested the other elbow on top of the table and laid his head on the palm of his free hand. Harry wasn’t buying any of it. His entire body poured anger through the pores.

“I will not have you hide things from me, Potter,” he said, again in that sickeningly sweet voice. “If I need to shock you into telling me, so be it.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” Harry said, out of habit. He usually didn’t anyway. Not always. Just that once.

Draco smirked, but it wasn’t a playful smirk. It was dark, borderline mean. “It’s probably interesting you remember one can only keep something from a Slytherin for as long as we allow it.”

He turned Harry’s hand, tracing his slightly sweaty palm with a very pale, very thin index finger. Harry felt his stomach churn, but when the finger rose to his wrist, he was assaulted by another kind of emotion altogether, growing much lower. Fuck inappropriate times.

“You had secured my wife and instead of telling me she was at risk, which you knew I would have already felt, you shut me out. That’s very unlike you, stunning someone because they’re concerned. I am not an animal. If you had said ‘give me a moment’, ‘things are crappy’ or whatever, I might have waited. I wouldn’t have liked, but I would have waited.” Draco raised their hands, bringing Harry’s closer to his lips, brushing his already tantalized wrist with them. So soft but so cold. “Instead,” he continued with his every word breezing along Harry’s skin, “you flipped into panic in a way I have never seen. It’s obviously not Astoria, because you are a horrible liar and your description of her state was very bluntly put. So it must be something else.”

Harry let go of the fork he hadn’t recalled he was still holding and pinched the bridge of his nose to try and regain some coherent thought. His will was to pull his hand from Draco’s grip but he knew it would be the wrong thing to do. They were paddling in dangerous waters there and he didn’t want the animosity to win them over. “Sometimes you remind me so fucking much of Hermione,” he settled with saying.

Surprisingly, Draco seemed to take it as a compliment of sorts. His voice was cold as winter when he spoke, though, with a rough edge that tickled Harry’s awareness. He lowered Harry’s hand but didn’t release it.

“I have trusted you in all this far more than you’ve trusted me. I don’t like being in disadvantage, Potter. It does not suit me. So before I stop feeling merciful and decent and decide to haul my friends to mob the truth out of you, I think you should consider spilling it.”

Harry tried his best not to swallow hard. That bloody swiftness and that manipulation were so known to him. Malfoy was still the same when the stakes were high. Seductive, pushing, dangerous. It had been the same when Harry had badmouthed Scorpius. Fuck.

“It’s unfit of a Malfoy to physically threaten people,” Harry couldn’t help but to snicker, trying to make Draco unveil whatever he was up to.

It worked. Draco scoffed, his breath brushing Harry’s skin. “I wasn’t planning on getting any more physical than this. What I mean is that I’ve worked in this hospital and I am Astoria’s husband by right and law. Who do you think the Mediwizards will be more likely to pick, ethically speaking? Being the Saviour won’t trump that.”
Harry had not noticed how close they were getting. The chairs must be enchanted, because at no
moment had he heard them scraping along the floor. Draco’s knees were almost touching his, his
body was close enough for him to feel its heat. Godric, that wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that his own
body would want Draco’s in such situation, that seeing him all dressed up and serious made him
want to bring him closer and kiss the air out of his lungs, that knowing he was awake and alive and
there, trying, would bring such relief to his mind. It wasn’t right. It was clouding his judgement so
badly that it would make him do something deeply unadvisable unless they stopped it.

“If you could do it, you would have already done it,” Harry murmured, staring at him. He couldn’t
believe Malfoy would go through with the threat, but the truth was he couldn’t really know. The
truth was he couldn’t really think.

Draco’s brow furrowed and he snorted. “Haven’t you ever heard of gratitude?” He shook his head.
“You’re not enough of an uncultured peasant to think I’d disregard all you’ve been doing for my
family because you’re withdrawing information.” Harry didn’t want to say that was exactly what his
coming to the hospital seemed to mean for him. “I am a businessman, a Malfoy and a Slytherin.
Right now, I’m conducting this relationship as business, for you have not yet given me any other
choice.” Again, he touched Harry’s wrist with his lips, only this time he actually kissed the skin.
Harry shivered. Bloody Slytherin. “Prove me wrong, Potter. Give me more than you already have.
Talk to me. Tell me what happened and why you’re so intent on keeping me in the dark.”

“I can’t tell you,” he croaked, the conscience of being in a public place with an audience willing him
to stop Draco’s touch. He didn’t. “I swear I am just protecting you.”

Draco tsk-ed and smirked. It was still dangerous, but it was also enthralling. He raised his other hand
and brought Harry’s face closer to his. “I swear that if you don’t tell me everything that happened
right now, soon there will be no one for you to protect.”

“Draco—” He had to remain strong, and firm, and clear-minded. He couldn’t be thrown into that
rollercoaster of emotions to dissolve in a puddle at Draco’s feet because of a couple well-put words,
a handful of conflicting emotions and that stupid series of perfectly aimed touches. “There’s so much 
—”

“Tell me, Potter,” he demanded, his voice low, still treacherous, but so thrilling. “From scratch. I can
handle everything. I want to.”

No, you don’t, he thought with the last coherent part of his mind. You don’t but I can’t lose you
either. He inhaled deeply and moved a tad forward, pressing his lips against Draco’s for the briefest
of moments. He could kiss the lust out of his own body and kiss the questions out of Draco’s brain,
but it would be postponing. He didn’t want Draco to show up again at the hospital, to threaten
himself with such exposure. He had to save him and to do that, he’d need to compromise.

“Fine.” He could feel Draco’s victorious smile against his own lips. He kissed them again. “I’ll tell
you. But please, don’t come over again.”

“I am not making promises.” Draco kissed him once again and reclined back on his chair. “Now I
think you have a tale to tell.”

Harry sighed a couple of times but when it began, he decided he’d go through with it. He wasn’t
telling him about Lyra, no — that would still be too risky. Instead, he started from scratch, sparing no
details on the letter or its arrival, promising he still had it tucked somewhere inside his pyjamas. He
was delicate to talk about the effectiveness of Pansy’s wards and how Millicent had sent him a note
about the beast ward and how to trump it. He didn’t brush over recruiting Ron, telling Hermione or
asking her to put Tyra in stand-by. Harry even mentioned he had had to borrow Ron’s robes because
he wasn’t wearing decent clothes, such was his desperation. He thought he saw a small smile begin to form rather fondly on Draco’s mouth at that.

Harry was also one hundred percent true to everything that had happened once they set foot on the Manor, all the floor plan changes, the feelings, the screaming. He spoke of the chimaera, how it had been guarding the dungeons, how the water was parted to let them through. Draco interrupted him to ask for details about the chimaera, nodding every once in a while as Harry described the animal as thoroughly as he could. He went back to talking about the water, the wavering connection with the Manor, all the times the house had begged him not to go downstairs. It was difficult to revisit those recent memories; it was as if the house hadn’t yet stopped screaming and pleading him. He said that too, and found out he hated it.

Draco sucked a ragged breath in when Harry got to Astoria, to how protective of her the chimaera was, to Frilly, to how the poor elf was holding her bloodied body. Again, Draco interrupted, asking him if they had taken care of Frilly, and Harry assured him they were doing it, assured him the elf would be fine. He generalized Astoria’s injuries in order to prevent Draco from thinking about a C-section, and was this close to getting to the Floo call and over with it all when Draco raised a slow hand.

“Where was she?” he asked, still slowly. “How was she like?”

“In a very bad state. I don’t—I don’t remember much about the cell, Draco, you have to believe me. There was a pallet for the chimaera, I suppose, and water up to my ankles. She was bleeding so much. Her nightgown was almost black from the blood.” He didn’t want to be over-descriptive, but Draco nodded him to carry on. “It was far into the Manor. Very far. Further than the cell where they tortured you in the dreams we share.” Harry pursed his lips. “She was so small and so **powerless**.”

Without previous notice, a tear fell from Draco’s left eye as he repeated the word slowly. “Powerless,” he said, once, and twice; his eyes glazed over and he pressed them with the heels of his hand. His face paled further and he leaned his head forward, body beginning to tremble, erratically, spasmodically. Harry held his wrist firmly. It was like a nightmare. Shit.

Harry’s reservations all fell away and he reached towards him to grip at his other wrist and pull him closer. His pulse was fast and frantic, racing in a desperate, telling way. Harry looked up and around and saw Pansy getting up to yell at him; he shook his head firmly. Making a scene would do them no good. Her walking slowed and he turned back to Malfoy.

“Draco, can you hear me?” A soft nod was the only response he got. “Is it your head?”

Another nod. Oh, shit. There would be no nice, inconspicuous way of doing it. He got up and took Draco’s shaking body in his arms, much to Pansy and the others’ surprise. Blaise and Millicent rose gracefully, glamours wearing off in a subtle way that didn’t even stir the people around them, rushing like professionals and restructuring the outer world glamour as they went. Pansy reached Draco, whose head was beginning to loll about, as Harry was making for the exit.

“What happened?” She asked, urgent and struggling not to punch Harry in the face.

“It’s his mind.” Harry moved towards the elevators, mildly amazed that whatever was the glamour the Slytherins had thrown at him, it seemed to work to keep people both away and not noticing them. He thought for a moment about Phineas’ warning, taking a glance at his entourage. It was not a smart move of his, but Draco’s consciousness was fading and he was not going to leave him alone. He could bet that not even with the restrictions would Phineas’ allow someone in his state to go untreated.
They left the elevator and entered Astoria’s room in a hurry. Tyra had set sterilizing spells by the door and a dozen monitoring ones around the room, probably needing to be absent for a moment only, and they didn’t need to fumble much to put Draco in bed. It was only when Blaise sucked a breath in that Harry remembered:

Lyra was not concealed.

He had enough time to convene a desperate look before Pansy began to bark orders at the same time she flicked her wand and isolated all the rumour so Harry could concentrate on the task at hand. He could see the others, but not hear them — the Slytherins and the girls. With a mouthed “thank you”, he turned back to Draco, who was now tossing in bed. He was feverish, so Harry deprived him of his outer clothing — robes, suit, waistcoat, shoes, socks. His skin was beginning to soak in sweat, his shirt growing translucent. Harry leaned down closer to him, brushing his lips against his. They were dry and chapped.

“Can I enter?” he asked, hoping that Draco would still respond, but he was not lucky. Fretting, knowing he shouldn’t, knowing how unhappy Draco still was with him, knowing it would be too painful and a major bad idea, he opened the connection that had been closed for some time now. It was shut tight, needing him to apply too much force to stretch it open, to hold Draco forcefully, to impose on him. The feeling was that of diving in boiling water when he finally made it: his skin tingled, burned, his fingers were becoming less and less sensitive with every second he spent in there, his eyes watered with pain. He had to swim, to go down, to find the breach.

Someone proffered a soft hand to him and he took it without staring at whoever it was. He felt long nails digging deep into the skin of his palm while he was hoisted up and out of the water, his skin relishing the cold wind for a moment before the burning feeling spread again. Only then did he look up to stare at the person holding him. She was all Narcissa, but for the manic glint in her eyes. That did not belong in the face of the woman who had spoken to him about Draco, the woman who had risked herself for her son. That glint was dreadful.

“Come, come, my sweet beloved, come.” She ushered him forward, but his hand hurt too much for him to understand where the fuck he was going. He was sure he was bleeding by now; he could feel blood cooling in his hands. “Oh, what a treat you’ll have, she’s truly beautiful, my darling, you did it so nice, picking her, she’s so, so strong. Oh, she’ll produce a fine, the finest of all children.” Her smile widened and Harry was taken by sheer panic. He looked down to his hand to see it pale, agonizingly pale, and spotted with gash-like burns. That was not his hand. “Pity we could not let you see.”

Harry froze. That was bad. That memory was worse than the one in Draco’s dreams and he couldn’t yet say why. He wanted to leave Draco’s body, to snatch his hand free from that grip, but the corridor was getting wider and the looming feeling of doom, strengthening.

That memory was not Draco’s. But it was filled with his memory too and there wasn’t a way out. The beautiful blonde in front of him cackled; Harry’s blood froze further. When the walking finally stopped, they were in front of the door guarded by the chimaera. When the door opened, the cellar was beautifully clean, with pearly-grey walls, a small dining table for two, and a king-size bed with silver and black sheets. It was dry, full of a shimmering, pure white light, but Harry’s eyes were focusing on the almost two dozen silhouettes wearing black all over the place. They were in varied states of lounging: some had hoods on, some wore waistcoats, and others were in shirtsleeves and casual trousers. Most of the faces were not discernible, but Harry saw a couple anyway: Rodolphus, very much alive and drinking gin by a corner; Amycus, a silver hand protruding from his wrist, a mild silvery glow seen through the fabric of his pants; Dawlish, looking uncomfortable and slightly nauseated, pulling at his shirt’s collar; two identical young women chatting amiably, a lady who
reminded Harry of someone he had once met although he couldn’t quite say whom. Sitting on the lap of one of the twins was Scorpius. Harry felt his breath falter. He was so very young, so frail. He tried to make a move towards the boy, but it was impossible: he could watch, not interact. It wasn’t a dream.

“Your son is watching,” Narcissa’s voice was gleeful. “I mean, he won’t watch, watch. Little Flora said it would hurt him later and we do not want to hurt him, Draco, do we? We need him for posterity. But you do know what else we need, don’t you?” She stared at the bed, where a woman he knew was Astoria was waiting. Fuck. “We need the cycle to complete, don’t you think we do?” She chuckled viciously. “It’s all your father’s fault, really. Hiding secrets… how are we supposed to know what we really have to do when we don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle?”

Scared, panicking, forefeeling what was about to happen, Harry tried to leave the memory. He did not want to be a part of it to feel what was about to happen, to be thrust upon Astoria and forced to have intercourse. He also didn’t want Draco to, but that was not a Pensieve and he couldn’t pull out of it either. He was pushed towards the bed to see Astoria kneeling there, wrists bound in front of her, knees slightly open, ankles held apart by the same spreader they had once used on Draco. Her face was composed and stern, more Malfoy than a Malfoy’s, and she uttered no words when Draco tripped, obviously blind as a bat, and nearly tripped on the furniture. By his side, Narcissa giggled and clapped her hands like a child.

“Oh, oh, it’ll be delicious to watch!” She kissed Draco’s cheek and Harry could feel the touch that revolted his stomach. “I know you cannot see, but I’ll keep this memory for later. I’ll give this one a good trigger-word, don’t worry.” She started unbuttoning his shirt. “Isn’t he handsome, Astoria? One hundred percent pureblood. So tall and fine and so, so proud.” She lifted Harry’s chin as a seller might to a horse they were willing to see bought. “Astoria, I’m talking to you.” Her voice became dangerously low and a steel cord snapped across Astoria’s left thigh, apparently out of nowhere. It wasn’t magic; Harry didn’t hear or feel anything being conjured. The woman in bed winced and let out a ragged breath as the flesh tore open. She was wearing that nightgown, the same she had been wearing when they rescued her, only it was clean and whole this time. Harry shuddered inwards.

“He’s handsome.” Astoria’s eyes glinted and softened. Her hands twitched as if to rise and touch him, touch Draco, her eyes so full of love, of care, and Draco’s heart faltered at her voice as Harry’s tightened at that look. Dealing with his and his host’s emotions at the same time wasn’t trivial. “Will you untie me now, Mother?” She was staring blandly at fake Narcissa. “I want to touch my husband.”

“Oh, you see…” “Narcissa” chuckled, feigning embarrassment in a much theatrical way to be considered. “We are expecting quite a show tonight. You know we have to watch to secure that all goes according to plan.” Astoria continued to stare at her. “We cannot risk having you unbound. You are very dangerous when you’re loose.” Her hands lowered to Draco’s body, running along the path of deep, semi-circular shaped bites he had seen when he had arrived at Grimmauld Place. Harry felt the touch on his own skin, repulsive and cold. It did not reach the bite mark he had stitched, though, and Harry wondered whether Draco already had that one. “You’re too necessary to be doing this kind of stuff.”

The long nails’ hand slid to Harry’s/Draco’s pants, undoing them too. Draco shuddered; on the sidelines, Scorpius sniffled, rapidly shushed by one of the twins. Harry could see his little body, but his face was turned away from him. Good. At least that was good.

“Mother, please.” It was Draco’s begging this time. “She loves me. She won’t hinder anything, please. You don’t need to force her.”
“Oh, I do. You have already killed an unborn child of this lineage, Draco. I will not allow you to kill
another, and if this means I have to have your wife bound and son under wandpoint, this is precisely
what I’ll do.” Harry felt as the clothes finished to Vanish and all attention turned to them. Her face
was serious. Astoria’s was blank. Draco’s heart was close to fail him. “Imperio.”

The stiffness that surged upon Harry’s host was swift and all-encompassing; he was helpless, he
couldn’t fight it. Draco wasn’t much fighting it, allowing the black binds of the curse to wound him
up, to bind his wrists and legs and wrap up around his deeply reluctant cock. In front of him, Astoria
sighed and lay down. The voice in Draco’s/Harry’s ear was sweet as honey.

“Fuck her.”

“Mother, please—”

“No, Draco, we already discussed this. You don’t want to do this and we need this done.”

Harry’s urge to throw up was restrained only by Draco’s pursed lips. Another “fuck her” had him
kneeling in bed. By the side-lines, Scorpius all but giggled, blissfully oblivious to what was going on
only metres away from him. Looking around (it was so weird that he could do it since he was
apparently, somehow trapped inside Draco’s body in a crippling manner and could do nothing to
stop him or change anything), he could see that every single pair of eyes in the room was focused on
them, every pair but for Flora’s — supposing that was the woman “Narcissa” had talked about. She
was one of the twins and her attention was entirely focused on the baby on her lap. Harry tried to
close his eyes but it didn’t stop the images. Orders were barked and whispered and he felt as his cock
twitched to life after someone forced him to drink an Arousing Draught. He felt it warming up his
body, dizzing him quickly, allowing the Imperius Curse to compel him to the beautiful woman in
front of him in a way he didn’t know where it came from. Harry couldn’t fathom the idea of hurting
her and, apparently, neither could Draco; still, the feeling was building, the need to obey, to just
go.

It was disgusting: he knew Astoria didn’t like sex; the mere thought of going through was enough to
make him sick, so terribly sick. He could feel Draco’s despair seeping through his brain, balancing
his own but making it settle at a much higher level.

But that was not a dream and there was nothing he could change.

He cringed when a poke from a wand urged him to kneel in bed, to line up with Astoria, to force her
upper body down. More swishes of wand: Astoria’s bound wrists were pulled above her head and
trapped through a metallic hoop on the headboard.

“We don’t have all day,” the other twin said in singsong, her morbidly pale hand sliding rather
menacingly on Scorpius’ back. The gesture was lost on Draco, to which the threat in her voice must
have been enough, but not on Harry. Still, he thought he saw Flora pull the boy closer. “Your son is
growing very restless. We do not like restless children, as you very well know.”

Something emerged inside Harry’s mind: the day when Rosie and Scorp wanted to be put down, the
calm and stern way with which Draco had silenced his son, Hermione’s tired chuckle. Draco had
said she wouldn’t want to know how he managed that, and now Harry thought he had an idea of the
reason why. Under him, Astoria took the deepest of all breaths, bracing herself for the worst. She
was about to be raped for the amusement of sick, twisted people who seemed to believe it was too
important indeed that she suffered through it. It was clear to Harry that she was being punished as
much as Draco was being tortured, but why? For damaging his body?

A glimpse of black took over the dream, the forms losing edge, growing grey and blurry as Draco’s
chest grew closer to hers and his mouth approached her skin. That bit of the memory was all Draco,
Harry knew it was.
“Do it,” Astoria said, gently, a soft smile in her voice. She moved her ankles up, trapping Draco’s under the spreader, kissing his cheek with resignation and affection. “I love you both so much, Draco.” She kissed him lightly on the lips; it was not a passionate kiss, but it was tender nevertheless. “Come on. I forgive you, my beloved, I forgive it all.”

“I am so sorry,” came Draco’s shaking, trembling voice, as his left hand descended along her body, coming back up with the fold of the nightgown around his fingers. “Ast, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry…”

He was choking on his apologies; the memory trembled and returned to Technicolor when Draco thrusted forward. Harry braced himself all through it. He didn’t want to feel any pleasure; he shoved it down, the ripples of Arousing Draught-induced pleasure reverberating in his groin with every thrust, with every moan they ordered out of him. He obeyed and obeyed and made a spectacle out of it for fear of leaving her, Harry knew. He could only imagine how hard it was — all he felt was sick. On the sides of the bed, everyone cheered and clapped at every tear Draco shed, at every hard thrust, at every time Astoria gritted her teeth and swallowed hard. They laughed as Draco begged them to stop, as he mumbled “I’m sorry” until the words were engraved in the air. They cheered and whistled loud when a sharp order disrupted the air and he came inside his wife; Rodolphus pushed his hips away to confirm something and flicked his wand at the lower part of her body, from knees to belly-button. He then nodded to “Narcissa” as Astoria’s body flopped motionless in bed.

“Well done, my son,” she congratulated, running her hands and nails along his sweaty scalp. Harry was too shocked and too tired of fighting the unease to shiver. “Very, very well done.”

“Mother, please—” he begged, clutching Astoria’s limp body closer. His despair was felt inside Harry, although he couldn’t react. He just wanted to leave. “Please, let me take care of her.” She continued to stroke his hair, shaking her head. Harry wanted to scream. The silence might have given him the answer he needed. “Mother, please!”

He was this close to crying now, his entire body shivering and trembling and collapsing.

“Stop it, Draco.” The urge to stop came and washed over him. He was still Imperiused. “You will not ask for it again.”

“Mistress—” It was Flora’s voice this time.

“No, Flora.” She was final. “If you ever ask anyone to see your wife again,” she spoke to Draco, “your son will be replaced. I am positive little Astoria will be giving birth in no time and who knows, we might have twins. Shake things up a little.”

Caving in was a desperate but necessary measure and doing it shattered everything around them. It was like breathing for the first time in life; Harry lay down sprawled on top of Draco, breathing hard, trembling from head to toe. He was sweaty, hurting, still too sick for comfort, slightly deaf and blind to everyone around him. His limbs were weak and cramping, his heart racing like a Firebolt.

Beneath him, Draco was crying.

Harry didn’t even think, pulling him up and cradling him to his chest, cooing him gently, planting soft kisses on his forehead.

“It’s ok, Draco, it’s fine, I’m here, they can’t touch you, they cannot touch any of you,” he murmured, holding his face and kissing him hard on the lips to try to bring him out of shock. Draco held his wrists when they parted, tears falling softly on Harry’s fingers. He was so sorry. He couldn’t even think about the memory without wanting to throw up; he couldn’t know what it was to know it.
was one’s own fault.

“I did that,” he everything but sobbed, trembling all over. “I can’t—”

“They did it to you, Draco, it wasn’t you. I know you, you wouldn’t, you couldn’t, you love her.”

“You cannot possibly—”

“I can, I was there, I was within you.” He kissed Draco again; the tip of his nose, his eyelids, cheeks, lips again, trying to bring him even closer. “It was not you. They had your son. There was nothing you could do. Astoria knew it, Draco, God, she knew it, she forgave you, my dear.”

Draco’s tears kept running silently as Harry tried to whisper him into tranquillity. He was so shaky, so cold, and so pale. His hands slipped from Harry’s wrists and landed on his thighs, crumpling the fabric of his hospital garment. He was still processing everything, Harry knew it; it was much too hard a blow to whisk away. He summoned a blanket from a cabinet on the wall and covered Draco’s shoulders with it. The trembling eased the slightest bit, his hands relaxed a little. His head slumped on Harry’s shoulder, his forehead stickier than Harry’s own, sticking to his skin messily, cold and frowned.

“They wanted us to volunteer other children. How could I?”

It wasn’t a question and Harry didn’t answer it. He raked his hands through Draco’s damp hair, pressing a quiet kiss on his temple.

“Do you want me to erase it?” He knew he wouldn’t, but right then, he’d do anything to save him from that pain, from that hurt. Harry knew he’d suffer through it for too long, for longer than anyone would deem commendable or even healthy. “I can wipe everything away.”

“It won’t help my wife, I’m afraid.” There was no humour in his voice. “I am so tired, Harry.”

His name slipped by Harry’s perception, concerned as he was. “Sleep,” he whispered lightly, rubbing at his blanket-cladded back gently. “I have a phial of Dreamless Sleep in here. Do you want me to pick it up for you?”

The proof of how shattered Draco was was that he didn’t even frown at the taste. Soon, he was asleep in Harry’s tight, tender embrace; the Gryffindor Scourgified him and changed his clothes with swishes of his wand, folding them on top of the posh robes that had already been cast aside. He clutched Draco’s body against his chest until the Slytherin was breathing evenly. Only then did he get up and turn around.

Pansy had pulled a chair and was straddling it, staring at them intently. Blaise had his legs crossed, sitting in another chair with his fingers interlaced resting on his lower belly. Harry had absolutely forgotten they were there.

“Blaise, darling, would you mind finding Millicent and bringing her back?”

Blaise’s eyes were fixed on Harry. “Oh, I would, my beloved.” He smirked slowly. “I have as many questions as you do, Pansy. Milly is doing just fine out there.” His voice became condescending as he spoke to Harry now. “She’s stalling the doctors. She’s deeply concerned with her arm.”

“Blaise…”

“I don’t mind it.” Harry sighed. “I don’t even think I care anymore.”
Harry slumped on the remaining chair, leaning his head back down and giving up. He was doomed anyway. Inside the warm chamber, Lyra mewed. He got up, re-sterilizing himself along the way to caress the baby, but a note on top of the glass chamber slowed him down. It read: “Use a Warming Charm if you need to breastfeeding her. DO NOT run diagnosis spells.” Harry placed the note back, cast a warming charm on himself and pulled Lyra up, latching her onto his nipple with practised ease, but rather tiredly. She began to suck slowly, her tiny hands curling on the very clean but still very curly hair on the middle of Harry’s chest, the path he didn’t need to shave. Godric, he adored her so already. Staring at her made him want to cry.

“Potter,” Pansy’s voice sounded close to him and her fine hand touched his shoulder with such delicacy that it startled him. “I know it sucks. Can we please discuss what’s going on here?”

Harry didn’t really want to, but he nodded and sat down again. Both Blaise and Pansy sat closer to him, none of them finding the least bit strange that he was breastfeeding a child he didn’t give birth to. For the first time, Pansy seemed to be at a loss for words. Blaise, thought, didn’t share her apprehension.

“You and Draco, then?” Harry closed his eyes. “Quite a feat, I must say.”

The tone made Harry’s blood boil. “Are you fishing for confirmations, Zabini?”

“Reasons, maybe.” He quirked an eyebrow up. “Are there any?”

“Try to keep Malfoy inside your house without ending up tangled in bed with him,” came the acidic reply. “I’m sure both you and him would be climbing up the walls in a couple of weeks.”

“We could become tangled up on the walls too.” He shrugged nonchalantly, eyes darting to Lyra, followed by a swift gesture. “And this?”

“Is a child.” Harry’s features were stern, but a shadow of smile tinged his lips anyway.

“Mock me not, Potter,” said Blaise, staring at him with a murderous look. “Is it charity?”

“It’s concern.”

“True concern?” Blaise scoffed in a very Malfoy-ish way, only about ten times worse. “It looks like an excuse. Appropriation. Kidnapping, even.”

“Parkinson, if you don’t control your minion, we’ll be over with this right this instant!” Harry all but yelled in frustration.

Pansy chuckled. “He’s not my minion, Potter. Alas, I’m afraid you just had the pleasure of an encounter with the most jealous of Draco’s exes, not to mention the one who preoccupies over him the most.” She wasn’t mocking him, despite her obvious tone. “I am preoccupied too. I am actually concerned you might be putting too much effort in something too small.” She adjusted the lace of her thighs. “I am also afraid you might be misleading yourself in your attempts to keep Draco unharmed and therefore arranging it all to much greater damage when it comes to it.” She looked at the small bundle cradled in Harry’s arms. “Is it the reason why you blocked him out?”

“It’s a girl.” His statement made no difference whatsoever in Pansy’s face, which prompted an explanation out of him. “There’s a curse upon his family, isn’t there? A reason why the girls never thrive.”

Pansy pursed her lips, analysing. “I don’t know. We are not privy in details about familiar matters
that aren’t ours.”

“He doesn’t know it either.” Harry stared at Lyra’s little face, gritting his teeth. “Could we possibly take her from him? Tie her with blood to someone else? Change her fate?”

Blaise and Pansy exchanged concerned, deeply troubled looks. “Potter, you cannot take a child from its family out of sheer will.” Blaise explained things as if Harry was five. “It would need a blood ritual. No man alive knows a blood ritual that doesn’t require dark magic. You cannot possibly be suggesting you want to intersperse a child’s blood with dark magic.”

Blaise was staring at him as if fearing he somehow would. He wanted to save Lyra, not sacrifice her. Finally, Harry shook his head.

“No. Of course not.”

Harry remained silent for a moment, trying hard not to show how upset he was that he hadn’t yet found a way to save Lyra. As Pansy fairly notably pointed out, he didn’t even know whether the so-called “curse” wasn’t just Malfoy folklore; maybe something to cover killing for inheritance purposes. Merlin knew how power-driven Malfoys were, and she wouldn’t put it past them a tradition to murder family members to secure what was theirs. Harry shook his head, told her Draco wasn’t like that, but her resolve was unshaken: Lucius had made that choice for his son and Lucius never kept tracks of his shenanigans, for there were plenty.

More silence ensued; Blaise was the one to cut through it after Harry had put Lyra back, checked on Draco and sat down again. He felt like a nurse. It wasn’t bad, no; just unexpected. He was used to harming people to save others, which made the change all the most overwhelming and deeply felt.

“Are you planning on doing anything at all with him?” He lifted a swift eyebrow. “Sedating him forever, maybe? I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Somehow, the Gryffindor knew he should feel more affronted, but didn’t. “I will tell him,” he assured them. “I am just looking for answers in the meantime.”

“You know, if she dies and he finds out you’ve kept her from him, you can wave your relationship a well-deserved goodbye.”

“Shé’s not going to die!” Harry hissed, getting up with the last drops of his strength. Boy, he needed to sleep. “Why are you all pushing me? First Ron, then Hermione and now you! You don’t even have anything to do with us!”

Blaise rose to voice a sharp reply but Pansy lifted a hand to silence him. Sulking, the man got up swift, graceful and effortlessly, and Harry’s brain wondered if it was all pureblood manners or if Slytherins practised those movements in front of the mirror in their spare time. Blaise excused himself and, instead of flying out of the room, went close to Draco’s bed, plopping down on a chair and staring at his sleeping face to prevent murdering Harry. When Pansy got up, though, Harry wondered if he wouldn’t have done better with Blaise.

“Now you listen to me, you little piece of Gryffindor shit.” Harry felt his arms tighten with the cutting insult. “While you are obsessed with playing babysitter to a baby you cannot really help and a woman you don’t even really like, you’ve thrust upon us the mission of finding out everything and fixing this mess our friend’s in. But we are not the Saviour of the Wizarding World, Potter. You are withdrawing information from everyone, you are keeping us in the dark, you are cutting our choices. Continue to do so and there’s a chance you’ll leave this hospital to know you’re no longer in charge of this investigation in any way.”
“You need me. I’m the only one who can breach through the things in Draco’s mind.”

“His mind?” Blaise snorted, baring his teeth like a wolf. “Potter, he has access to his own mind, if you have not yet understood that, and we have a shitload of sedatives stacked everywhere. I am sure we can control him if something goes askew.”

“Salazar almighty, Granger and Weasley were right.” She shook her head. “Potter, I know Dumbledore messed up with your head rather heavily, but let us tell you something: loving someone is not an excuse to fuck with them.” Harry felt himself pale. Pansy snorted elegantly. “Really, you think anyone, Draco included, is unaware of what goes on between you? You’re falling harder than a first-year Muggleborn in Hooch’s class.” Harry licked his lips, his mouth dry. No, they were wrong. “Millicent is talking to the doctors. Granger asked her to. They will expel you from this room soon enough.”

“They can’t—”

“They can. Weasley is coming over here to take over your shift.”

Harry felt betrayed and dirty all of a sudden. “What?”

“We made a deal after Draco’s panic attack this morning. He and Granger are going to take over now.” She shushed his half-hearted reply with a poised hand. “Your obsession is blinding you. You have more urgent matters in other places.”

By Draco’s bed, Blaise smirked and caressed Harry’s lover’s blond hair, laying a soft kiss on his pale forehead, his lips lingering for a moment longer on that beautiful skin. The contrast between them was sharper than it was with Harry, not to mention they were both dazzlingly beautiful, poised the same way even during Malfoy’s sleep. Jealousy was eating him whole, battling the betrayal and making him dizzy. Was Draco a matter…?

“Go change your clothes. The Apparition window will open in…” She pulled a pocket watch from her short coat. “Five minutes.” Harry tried to protest weakly, still taken aback, but Pansy’s claws pinched his forearm in a crippling grip. “We are trying to save all of you, Potter. You and Draco and the kids and this ridiculous love affair of yours.” His lips curled in disgust at the way everything he and Draco had built had been summarized. “Do as I say.”

When Pansy released him, Harry could see they were looking victorious and she was more than just a little relieved. Their faces turned grave when Tyra and Phineas entered the room with Millicent by their side, Phineas raging mad with his attitude of not calling actual Mediwizards to handle the situation, Tyra shaking her head in disappointed frustration. Phineas was mid-scold when Ron stepped in with a crack and paused to clap a hand on Harry’s shoulder, conveying an apology, an order and a sliver of hope all in one gesture. Harry hadn’t yet processed what was going on, being pushed and pulled as Pansy gathered Draco’s belongings and he found himself hindered, incapable of saying goodbye to the baby.

Harry didn’t even have time to change his clothes before being sucked away.
He slipped out of sleep as the warmth of sunlight spread along his legs. He could feel the heaviness of a blanket he knew it hadn’t been his call to throw upon himself, but Salazar could bite him if he recalled whose had been. Last night had been just as bad as every other ever since Potter had returned, and sure, Draco wanted to ignore it all but it was very hard to let someone one cares about draw themselves from one’s life. He faintly wondered, every once in a while, whether it had been his fault. He honestly didn’t know. He was positive that Potter would have wanted to talk about the memory, to make sure he was ok — instead, he was left behind between a pampering Pansy, an objective Weasley and the heavily disgruntling presence of Blaise. Hermione showed up whenever she could, but lately she had been struggling to stop herself from talking every time they were in the same room, and in the end Draco decided she shouldn’t force herself to be with him when it so obviously pained her. She came around every other time anyway.

To say the truth, it pained him too, being with himself. The night after the memory had been the worst. He had woken up in the middle of a nightmare shortly before dawn after having slept through the entire afternoon and the evening. The potion Potter had given him was effective, but not long-term. He had felt the memory again, punctuated by the strong reassurances of both Astoria and the man he was currently sleeping with. It was bizarre to say the least. He felt dirty and guilty, but also victimized and powerless. It was a brand new branch of emotions he didn’t have the baggage to cope with on his own. Above all, he knew he should have been stronger, but what choice did he have? He wasn’t a Gryffindor, he was not going to wank his mind off trying to ponder the “what if”’s and the apologies. What he knew was that he had failed his wife, the only person who had believed him entirely after the disgraceful events of that bloody May.

Pansy and Hermione had been important in that beginning of a healing. They went through the memory he retold oh-so-slowly, pulling names and faces and stands from him. They critically analysed every movement, every possibility, coming up with them and overruling them one after the other, logical and definitively. He watched and re-watched it, picked his own emotions apart, felt his wife and the ambience, all in search of an alternative. It the end, there had been none, and Hermione and Pansy had sneaked him out to personally apologise to Astoria. He had spent nearly an hour monitoring her, making sure she was whole, making sure she wasn’t really harmed by what he had done. It eased him, made him able to classify that as torture, not actual sex, made him find some peace, relieve the guilt.

Potter, on the other hand, was a very difficult matter, as he found out by Sunday night, when he finally caught him awake after waking up in the middle of the night. They had been avoiding each other and that was ridiculous, but effective in building tension and a veil of distrust.

“Are you awake?”

The voice had been Potter’s, coming from the desk where a lamp had been lit, if the telling light was to be of any indicator. He could pinpoint his voice quite clearly, even without the Awareness Charm. He had put the spell back on anyway. Seeing lights and colours was becoming far too much for his brain without the spell to mediate everything.

“Nightmare.”

“Right.”

“What are you doing?”
“Nothing. Just thinking.”

The scratch of a quill on parchment had said otherwise, and it had made Draco’s insides burn a little. He had woken up from a similar request for trust that had led to a disastrous finding a mere couple of days ago and was already being silenced again. It had been a conscious effort to kill the rage within him.

“Do you regret taking me in already?”

He had gotten up, walking steadily forward, wearing the façade he knew Potter disapproved so much of. It had been like being back in control and he had needed it like the air then.

“Why would I?”

The answer had sounded genuine, as much as one could hope it to be. Draco had leaned on the desk, folding his arms and nodding silently. He appreciated the sincerity but was not entirely happy about the way they were behaving around each other.

“You are avoiding me.” Potter had shrugged. “Do you regret lying to me?”

That had been the true question, the real reason beneath the stilted conversation. It had served the purposes of a test, although Draco should have known beforehand how poorly Gryffindors performed in them.

“I did what I had to do.”

So no, no regrets, which also had meant no capacity of discerning how painful and how treacherous his sudden, unthoughtful decision had been. He had taken a deep yet muted breath through his nose, forcing the disgust down like his father had always taught him to do.

“You sentenced me to oblivion. Had I not gone to that hospital, I would still be in the dark.”

He had felt the rippling waves emanating from Potter twist in a shake of his ridiculously tousled head. He could even tell that his eyes were closed, from that angle. The spell covered the basics but also revealed a lot more than just ample, all-noticeable movements — like the sudden tightening of Potter’s jaw and the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

“You shouldn’t have gone there.”

“You shouldn’t have lied,” had been the easy, quick answer.

“I was trying to protect you from harm!” Finally, the quill was dropped, and Draco had been faintly aware that his purpose wasn’t pissing Potter off. Right then though, he had settled for what he could get and any reaction would serve him better than no reaction at all. “I am trying to save you and you’re the only person who doesn’t seem to understand it!”

Draco’s eyes had been piercing and disgusted. It was hard to find out he was just another project for the Saviour’s good karma when, for him, there was so much more at stake there. Not only regarding Potter, for that matter, but also his entire family, his son, his wife, his entire life. It was disheartening.

“Nearly everyone I know wants to save me.” The words had hurt in their way out, but Draco had suffocated the feeling stiffly. “Pansy, my parents, you, Hermione… even Weasley wants me to live.”

“Is this a bad thing, Malfoy? Should we let you die?”
He had shaken his head and gritted his teeth. Potter’s obliviousness was a pain in more than one sense. “I don’t need to be saved, Potter. I have saved myself a long time ago.”

“Then what the bloody fuck do you need? I swear I sometimes don’t understand you!”

“I need you to trust me.”

Potter had rubbed his temples and sighed tiredly, quill altogether forgotten on top of the table. “We do trust you, Draco. It’s just… this whole thing is so complicated. It would be best if you didn’t get involved.”

“When are you going to understand that I already am involved and you are the one who does not belong in the middle of this?” He had felt a stirring of pride in knowing he could still make Harry shrink. Good. He needed that feeling. He needed to feel like himself again. “If you don’t want me around, then I guess I just won’t be. I can fare just as well on my own.”

“What?” He had been able to hear the echo come and go inside the room, drifting into Potter’s brain with uncanny difficulty as he started to gather a couple of his most personal belongings — his wand, his Black book, his chamber robe. Everything else would be easy and delightedly handled by Kreacher. “Draco, what are you doing?”

He had shrugged on his robe and remained unfazed. “You have a guest room.”

“Draco, please, don’t do this.” He had taken Draco’s hand in his and turned as pleading as a human being had the right to be. He had even gotten up to hold him, to pull him close. Draco succumbed. What else was he supposed to do anyway? Potter had the right to fight for his lover. It didn’t mean it’d change anything, but his pathetic attempts would be worth witnessing. “Don’t shut me out again.”

“Well, that seems to be your job, Potter.” He had remained still when Potter grabbed at his waist and caressed him, nuzzling at his jaw with everlasting need. The man was insatiable…! It was fun to see how his body had such power over the hero, enough so that he’d rather plead than let him go. He doubted that Potter even knew how addicted he was becoming to him, how much he needed the Slytherin. Well, he could do worse than showing him. “I will stay until I recover my vision. After that, you don’t have to see me ever again.”

“I want to keep seeing you, Malfoy, please.” Well, maybe he did acknowledge it already. Potter had kissed him hard, tongue swiping over Draco’s lips, probing them open. Draco had let him, allowing him just enough to tease, to instil further reactions. Potter was so different, so addictive, so much of a presence. He wasn’t someone Draco felt attracted to: he was the only one in years. He was incomparable. It was a nightmare not to be able to reach out and revel in the comforting touch of is mind. It made him feel slightly empty. “I’m begging you, please, please, don’t leave me. Don’t leave us. Please, I need you.”

“No, Potter, you need a victim. You need a damsel in distress.” He had kissed him rather tenderly this time, trying not to succumb to Potter’s clinging. It was hard, very, terribly hard. He didn’t want to forsake what they had, for it was nice and hot and cosy, but he couldn’t keep having blows thrown at his pride like that. He needed to keep himself whole for his wife, and his son, and his family, and himself. He couldn’t be a powerless git; he couldn’t rely on others like he had so far. “You need someone to save, and I won’t be that person.”

“What do you want to be?” Draco’s hands had been on Potter’s face, cupping his jaw and touching his cheeks. “How can I convince you to stay?”
“Trust me.” He had felt Potter gritting his teeth under his hands, but he’d need far more to make him back away. “Be honest to me.”

“You will hate me, you will hate me so much—”

“Maybe.” Potter hadn’t moved away and neither had he. Draco had licked his lips and plunged forward, sucking Potter’s lower lip lightly, reacting low and soundly when Potter pulled his hip against his. He had felt Potter’s skin, hot and pliant, his body caving under the proximity to Draco’s own. The Awareness Charm had made everything a gazillion times more sensitive. “But then again, I’m asking for trust.”

“Ron said we should never trust a Slytherin,” Potter had replied, obviously stalling.

“Is a Slytherin all that I am to you, Potter?” He had known how low that was, but being low wasn’t beneath him. He could go lower. He could go rock bottom. He had no qualms regarding a descent to the depths of malice if it would grant him what he wanted. And he wanted the truth.

“You know it’s not.” Potter had shaken his head, his breath hitching when Draco pushed him to sit on the desk. That position was much known to them and Draco could feel his body thrumming when Potter’s recognized it. That was peerless. He didn’t feel fear and malice like he had under that Imperio, that disgust. No, he was controlled enough to perceive the difference. It was crystal clear to him.

“Then trust me,” he had said, ordered even. His hand had slipped down to run teasing lines up Potter’s thigh. He had known it was short of blackmail — who was he kidding, it was sheer blackmail — and had not given a damn. He had felt the twitching of Potter’s muscles, the strain pooling inside his boxers. The memory alone was delightful, if a bit frustrating. He had heard the moan when his fingers had drifted along the seams around what had been rapidly becoming a consistent bulge.

“Draco, please—” Potter had been positively squirming under his touch, all but bucking up on his hand, lacing his legs around Draco’s strong, half-naked thighs.

“Trust me.” Draco had edged closer, trying hard not to sneer at the feeling of Potter’s paused, hot panting. It was hard to resist him when he was so willing.

“Draco—” Potter had taken his tantalizing hand and shoved it rather ungraciously inside his pants, moaning slowly and writhing beneath Draco’s nearly stilled fingers.

“Do you trust me, Potter?” Draco had kissed that spot beneath his ear, slowing kisses down his neck. He was growing accustomed to Potter’s taste and it would have been far too easy to give in to his wishes, for they were his too. Still, priorities were priorities and he was too tired to stop now and pursue them later. “Can you stop trying to save me?”

“Draco, please, I’m begging you—”

“I don’t want you to beg. I want you to trust me.”

“I want you to fuck me.”

Draco had felt the stirring in his own groins at that blunt statement, but he shouldn’t succumb. He could not succumb. Slowly, feeling slightly sick and very, very horny, he pulled away from the pliant, warm body in his grasp, tangled all over him. Bloody idiot. Why couldn’t he just say what Draco suspected already? No, the Saviour had to protect him, had to keep him safe. Had to keep him in the dark so he wouldn’t do anything stupid, so he wouldn’t make the wrong choice, or risk
himself. The thought had (and still) irked Draco to no end, deflating his growing erection as he fastened the belt of this robe, shaking his head graciously.

“I’ll fuck you when you learn to trust me.”

“Draco…”

“I cannot do this to someone who hesitates on being honest with me.”

He had picked up his pillow, thrown their quilt around his own shoulders and left the room in calculated strides that smothered the anger rising in his guts till there had only been frustration and an all-encompassing, sad exhaustion.

Potter had not followed.

Draco had given plenty of consideration to how hurt he had felt that morning, after leaving their room. He wasn’t stupid enough to believe he had kept himself unchanged after everything that had happened upon him. The kidnapping, the torture, the oblivion, it all had culminated in growing fondness and care towards those who had been there to support him afterwards: Potter, Hermione, the babies. He even felt grateful to Weasley for jumping in and showing maturity far above what Draco would have considered possible for the likes of him. He was revelling in teaching Teddy, in meeting and getting to know his little cousin, and he’d be lying if he denied that he cared about Albus as if he were his own. The quiet baby was a relief in his chaotic perception, always calm, always settled and ready to smile. He was smart, too. Despite his own efforts not to become too attached to kids he would never be granted permission to keep, he had found himself in the middle of choosing Black names for them all. Teddy had insisted to be given the name Therium, the Ancient name by which the Greeks acknowledged what modern Astronomy called the constellation of Lupus, which was written in his Black book already, and they had taken Albus to find a name for himself, so he’d already have one when his time to receive a Black book came around. The child had beamed when they reached Aldebaran, and so it had stuck.

Draco had stopped them when they decided Potter also needed a Black name. That was not the children’s decision to make.

All things considered, he had gathered a family of kinds. Having parted ways with his mother and still incapable of stifling the idea that she was behind his sufferings, despite conscious thought banishing the mere suggestion, he had no one, for his father didn’t once reach out for him after his imprisonment. With Astoria away and only Scorpius bound by blood to him, it had been a surprise to find shelter inside Potter’s dwellings. Meeting his own friends again had also been ground-shaking. Still, he had once again begun to understand the pride Malfoys before him had taken in their families. He had once again pulled himself back together under and to fulfil the vows and bonds of relentless trust and every-string-attached companionship that came with his Slytherin peers — people who knew him far better than any well-intended Gryffindor. In fact, even the Gryffindors were beginning to understand the importance of trust in any relationship with Draco, and were falling into place around him rather effortlessly.

So why couldn’t Potter do the same?

Draco had never been keen on throwing trust all over the place. No Slytherin could ever be deemed guilty of such sin ever since their little kind had been born. But Potter was not just anyone. Potter had demanded that Draco trust him, and it had come with a clear underlining, in which Draco was concerned: trust was given when it was earned. And Draco couldn’t possibly fathom to trust someone from the outside who wouldn’t trust him completely.
That had been the road to their impasse. Potter had left for work early every day after the hospital episode, even before their discussion, and returned home when Draco had been fast asleep somewhere between the first o’clock in the morning and dawn. He had given Draco unspoken permission to deal the children as he saw fit. In fact, he had given Draco sheer freedom simply by pretending not to care for him anymore. Draco had accepted it gracefully.

Throwing the blanket aside, Draco rose from the armchair, stretching as much as the soreness in his limbs allowed him to. Transfiguration had never been one of his strongest points and he had not deemed adequate to squeeze a bed inside the cramped room the babies shared. Sighing, he released his muscles from strain and stepped closer to the crib, pushing the Charm delicately forward. A brief moment of panic took him when he didn’t feel the warmth and contours of the sleeping babies, soothed right after by the bright, fairy-like voice of the woman who was becoming one of his favourite people alive.

“I took them downstairs for breakfast. They wake up awfully early, don’t they?”

He heard the muffled footsteps as much as he felt Luna enter the bubble of rippling awareness around him. She was wearing a dress, which meant she hadn’t been working before heading there. In her arms, the babies stirred. Scorpius, babbling endlessly, asked to be put down and ran, wobbly, towards his father, while Albus smiled wide and asked to be picked up with a delighted “pa”. Draco obliged pronto.

“You look very tired,” Luna said, blunt and delicate as always, her voice heavy with an emotion he could not discern. By his shin, Scorpius was receiving a hair-ruffling that Lucius would have counted as particularly inappropriate — but he was Draco’s son and denying him affection was not going to happen in any near future. The baby was hot, still feverish, being treated with antibiotics after a brief, uplifting yet tentatively hopeful visit from Phineas. They still couldn’t find out what was wrong with him. “Did you have nightmares again?”

Reaching out for her hand, Draco squeezed her fingers gently. “I am alright, Luna.”

She nodded, but even Draco’s blindness couldn’t hide her disbelief. That was the thing about Luna, though. She understood his need to keep quiet and handle things by himself better than anyone.

“Harry has left already.” Draco limited himself to a nod. “Pansy is on guard duty. Blaise is waiting you for breakfast. Ron is surrendering Hermione at the hospital.”

“Have they sent back any news about Astoria?”

Luna shook her delicate head. “Millicent didn’t come back yesterday. We have to wait until Hermione arrives. Oh, and Teddy Floo-called earlier, said he’ll come home late. Apparently, Victoire is trying new hairstyles and he’s the judge.”

“Right,” he said, smiling at the prospect. Teddy seemed to really like the girl, and it was nice that he had friends whose ages were a little closer to his. Draco held Albus closer, kissing his smooth forehead as the baby played with the tresses of his blond, soft hair. Scorpius was climbing the chair, which demanded an impromptu but precise Cushioning Charm from Draco’s wand. “Are the rooms working?”

“Yes.” She smiled that same ethereal smile, brightening the world with a single gesture. Salazar, that girl had to be some sort of siren. “Rolf said he never had a room this big.”

“Well, I suppose he didn’t, what with his never-ending camping.” Draco shook his head in blatant distaste. As usual, Luna didn’t seem to notice it.
“I think that room will change his thoughts about us having permanent residence somewhere.” She chuckled lightly. “Come on. Breakfast awaits and you should probably eat.”

“I’m not particularly hungry, Luna.”

“Oh.” Her fingers squeezed his this time. “Do you want me to ask Blaise to go away?”

It was awkward how Luna could refer to the unstoppable, suffocating presence of the Zabinis’ firstborn simply as “Blaise”. He had been surrounding Draco, telling him time and time again that he had something to show him, something he had to see. He had called it “proof of betrayal” not once. Only Draco did not want to hear it from him. For, stupid as it was, that secret, the secret he was too suspicious of already, thank you very much, could only be revealed by Potter. If someone else did it, it’d stomp nails on the coffin of their whatever it was. It was the one proof of trust he had demanded. And if Malfoys were rarely known by their faith in other people, well, there was always a valid exception to be made when situations demanded it.

Luna, perceptive as she was, had obviously noticed Draco’s aversion to one of his all-time best friends, although, due to that same characteristic, she didn’t say a word about it. Draco found it in himself to shake his head and her loving support with it.

“I believe Zabini is a subject I’ll have no choice but to tend to now.” He closed his eyes for a moment. He had to gather himself. Blaise was a good listener and an even better reader of people. He had to be fine or he’d risk oversharing. Luna’s hand had not left his. “Would you please pick up Scorpius for me?” She nodded, taking the child firmly in her arms. Draco felt the baby fighting against her grasp and touched his little shoulder. “Scorp, don’t.” The baby wailed out loud. The sound was piercing and irritating and it sent Draco over an edge on which he didn’t know he was dangling. “Salazar, Scorpius, would you please stop?!”

The sudden, yet mild raise in his father’s voice turned the ear-piercing wail into a wave of small, muffled sobs. In his arms, Albus had let go of his hair and was pushing from him, delicate but persistently. Giving up, Draco put him down to see him wobbling towards Luna, who had her arms full with a very red, very sad Scorpius. Breathing deeply for patience and calm, Draco took his son, caressing his blond locks with undeterred care.

“I am sorry, my boy, my little scorpion.” He kissed his forehead gently. He was still hot. “I am not very well, my boy. Please forgive me.”

It took Draco five minutes to calm Scorpius down and finally meet Blaise downstairs. He could feel his ex-boyfriend slouching gracefully on the couch — in fact, he could only assume his gracefulness, but Blaise was even posher than himself and thoroughly incapable of doing anything in an undignified way. Draco heard the soft pat on the heavily stuffed seat beside him, taking a split second to try and think whether that was a good idea. At last, Blaise erased his apprehensions by prodding the one sore spot that could nudge Draco into doing things he didn’t think advisable.

“Are you honestly so disrespectful of customs now that you’re living with a Gryffindor, my friend?”

Draco sneered and shook his head. “I’d tell you to go be a sod elsewhere, Zabini, but experience tells me you’d find it rather pleasant.”

“Experience has its worth.” Draco could feel the rush of blood pounding through Blaise’s body when he sat by his side. Excitement, he realised. Even arousal, perhaps. Salazar knew their parting had had absolutely nothing to do with bed issues — it was almost entirely about Draco’s hiding of his Death Eater affiliation, in fact. Not that Blaise cared, mind you, but it’s hard to be in a relationship when half of what you have to say is unspeakable. Draco had terminated it swift and
ruthlessly, and if Blaise had not yet found another man he liked nearly as much, it was not Draco’s business anymore. “You know how much I still care for you, don’t you, Draco?”

Nothing in his posture gave away any feeling behind the statement, despite the truth in the words. Draco relented and turned his body, resting his right knee on the couch, his right elbow on the back of the padded piece of furniture and his head on the back of a very poised hand. His looks were amused in fake surprise.

“Oh, do you?”

Blaise shook his head when Draco’s white teeth worried his own lips smoothly. That seductive, uncalled for reaction was a diversion Blaise was quite familiar with. It had plagued their relationship for nearly an entire year. He’d give up if Draco asked him to. But it was Draco’s decision and no one could make it but him. “You don’t want to hear anything of what I have to say.”

“You are still smarter than advisable, I can see,” he drawled, barely keeping the condescendence out of his voice. “Despite my appreciation for your remarkable observatory skills, my friend, I fear it is not your place to deliver such earth-shaking news.”

“So you are aware of it.” The smirk was in his voice as much as it was in his face. He should have known, but how would he?

“I have certain… suspicions of my own. Alas, you do not have what I require to enlighten me on the matter.”

Blaise scoffed. “Which means I am not the guy you’re shagging right now.” Draco grinned wildly. “I do respect your decisions, Malfoy, as you know I’ll always do. But do you really believe this… affair will last at all after so many displays of distrust?”

It was a question Draco had asked himself more often than not these past days, to no avail. His free hand went to Blaise’s face, patting it annoyingly.

“Luckily, it is none of your business, right?”

Blaise caught him by the wrist and kissed his fingers tenderly. Draco could not see it, but he knew how obscene the look in his eyes would have made the gesture. He had seen it plenty before. “He’s not even here. He doesn’t even care.”

That stung far more than Draco wished it had. Calm, collected, pretending it didn’t, he relaxed into Blaise’s touch. “It still doesn’t make it any of your business.”

That stung far more than Draco wished it had. Calm, collected, pretending it didn’t, he relaxed into Blaise’s touch. “It still doesn’t make it any of your business.”

Blaise laughed heartily at that. “No, I’m afraid it doesn’t.” Slowly, he touched the finger where Draco’s wedding band should be. “You’re not wearing it.”

“I haven’t brought it with me.”

“As if you needed to.” Blaise rubbed the unmarked skin with delicacy. The disadvantage in being blind, Draco was just beginning to realise, resided solely on when your peers were controlled, self-absorbed Slytherins. It was harder to read their bodies even with the Awareness Charm focused on accounting for every micro movement they made. “You like him, do you not, Malfoy? You like that he’s powerful and willing to submit to you. You like that he’s cheating on his wife to be with you. You love how blind you are making him.”

“You know me too well for your own good, Zabini. I may have to black you out to keep you from spilling my secrets around.” There was nonchalance in his voice and Blaise picked up on it far too
quickly. It was unnerving to talk to someone like him.

“You do realise he loves you.”

Draco smirked. “He’s the Saviour of the Wizarding World, Blaise. He loves everyone. I am merely a special case of love and sex combined.”

“Is it sourness over a lover what I’m picking under your tone, Malfoy?” Draco rolled his eyes. “Go get him, Draco. Bribe him into being whatever you want from him. If anyone can bend the Saviour at their own will, it’s you.”

“Your trust in my skills is remarkable.”

“I have my own agenda.” Draco frowned with interest. “I dislike him profoundly.” Blaise smirked. Draco could feel it. “Find a way to send me a picture of his naked, debauched self when you finally melt him into it so I can blackmail him later.”

“Oh, of course.” Draco smiled beatifically at him. “It will be a pleasure.”

“That I can bet on.”

Relieved, Draco fell into conversation with his former lover rather easily. It was the easiest, most sincere conversation he had had in days, actually, with the exception of those he shared with Luna. Both men had their breakfast over sneers and nudging and vile questions that required no answers, not really. Blaise was a marvellous company when he was in a good mood — when he wasn’t trying to save anyone. He sucked at saving people even worse than he sucked at French, and Draco relayed that information to him in an even tone.

“E tu non sai nemmeno un cazzo che sia dell’italiano, e ci siamo noi due ancora qui.” Draco nearly growled. It wasn’t his fault that he had never seen the need to learn Italian. He would have blamed it on his mother, but thinking about her hurt. “Lo sai benissimo che i francesi mica mi piacciono, fanciullo mio.”

“I recognize that last word. Or words. Don’t use it. Them. The last time you did, you finished that speech in my bed.” They both laughed. “Do you mind translating?”

“Oh, you know, just the usual honest French-bashing.” He waved it away. Draco believed him. “I think your Floo is in use.”

He was right, of course. Less than half a minute later, Hermione stumbled upon the kitchen, the slumping of her shoulders revealing a dire need of sleep. Draco got up, and he and Blaise helped her sit down and gave her breakfast. She thanked them, but the way her hands twisted spoke a thousand words. Uncomfortable didn’t even begin to cover it.

Five minutes, a piece of toast and half a cup of tea later, she threw up all over the kitchen’s floor.

Blaise couldn’t help the disgust from showing in his face, blatant and quick to harden. Still, he Vanished the mess. Draco thanked him, and he put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Draco was holding Hermione’s in an attempt of keeping her stable. She was waving him away, but he wouldn’t budge.

“Do you want me to find one of those anti-nausea potions?” Blaise offered, willing to give them some privacy.

“Yes, please.” Draco caressed Hermione’s bushy hair gently. “There are vials of it inside the cabinet
in Potter’s bathroom.” Blaise nodded and left the room. Draco’s attention flipped to Hermione and he took his wand, running a diagnosis spell and a bunch of others she was already used to by now. His heartbeat went back to normal when the heartbeats the spell detected resounded clear and healthy around the room. “Hermione…”

“I am fine, Draco. You don’t need to worry about me.” She smiled, putting up a façade that was completely wasted on Draco. “Your wife’s situation has somewhat improved. Doctor Goldstein says there are actual chances she will wake up, now.”

“That’s… good.” He felt a wave of relief flooding him, despite the careful wording of Hermione’s news being an indication that things were not yet really fine. “Salazar, that’s definitely good.”

“I know.” She put a hand on top of his, still on her shoulder. “How are your eyes? I was thinking you should go and see her.”

“Potter wouldn’t like it.”

“Harry can’t lock you up here and act like you had no business outside.” She shook her head. “So?”

“They are… good, too. The venom is making wonders. If the improvement rate continues, I believe I’ll have a myopia of about five diopters by the day after tomorrow. I am waiting for today’s dose to confirm this prediction.” He knew she was running out of important questions and would start with the meaningless, rhetorical ones. He wouldn’t let her. “Granger, can we talk about your condition?”

She folded her arms. “I am fine.”

“As a Mediwizard, I can guarantee you are actually anything but.” She shook her head, and Blaise entered the room, giving Draco the vial. “Thank you, Blaise.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll go check on some administrative issues back at the company now, but the Floo’s open as usual.” Draco nodded. “Get well, Granger. I’m counting on you to be this ferret’s brains.”

She laughed. “No need to worry, Zabini. I’ll be fine.”

Hermione Granger was in fact not the slightest bit fine. Having Draco switch to Mediwizard mode around her was one proof of that.

The fact that she couldn’t lift her head off the toilet for the past five minutes was definitely another.

Draco had tried to feed her the anti-nausea potion, to no avail at all. Her insistence in saying it would pass was ridiculous and unfounded, but she was still hoping Malfoy wouldn’t realise it.

Of course she’d been hoping wrong. When she left the bathroom and walked over to the study to sit down for a moment, Draco was already in there, waiting for her. He was by the window, standing, rolling his wand around in his left hand rather airily. For a moment, she wondered whether she could escape the confrontation.

“Sit down so I can examine you.”

Cringing with all her might, Hermione sat in the armchair she had more or less claimed as hers now that Harry barely stayed home. Her sickness had eased for the first time in the past hour and a half and she was unwilling to threaten the delicate balance she had reached within herself by engaging in
open confrontation. Hermione tried to remain calm as Draco’s wand hovered above her limp body. It was hard to stay there and let him handle magic that precisely around her. The Slytherin had a pull of authority she could not deny. He lowered his wand once in a delicate wisp of white magic and shook his head.

“You’re four months pregnant.” He rose the wand again and twirled it around her frame. “Finite Incantatem.”

“No!” It was a loud shriek that would have resonated weren’t the walls in the study heavily padded with soundproof and muffling charms. Hermione refrained from standing up all-too quickly in the last moment, but her intentions were clear enough to have Draco raise his chin defiantly. Her eyes filled with tears but Draco remained adamant. His wand did another swift and smooth motion before he tucked it away again. “Why did you do this? This spell takes forever to hold! Ginny needed an entire day to teach me!”

“This spell is damaging to early pregnancies, Granger.” He turned around to unveil the cauldron he was keeping behind a painting he didn’t really know what it portrayed. The potion was almost as strong as it would get now.

She shook her head in perfect denial. He caught the movement in the awareness bubble. Absentmindedly, Draco took the vial of chimaera venom Hermione had given him — he knew Potter had taken it from the Manor when he went to rescue Astoria, although no one would confirm it. He remembered the feeling of the vial. They were all the same. They were his. The vials he used for his ingredients, the ones he had hand-picked and kept stashed under his bed at the Manor. No one knew about them but him. He no longer had to wonder how much they had asked him to go fetch them. He remembered most of it all now. He could recognize the people involved after seeing them through his mother’s eyes. Tipping the venom slowly into the cauldron, he felt Hermione folding her arms.

“It’s four months already.”

“It’s early till you’re seven and your baby stands a chance should premature birth occur.” His voice was detached, professional, holding no signs of friendly concern whatsoever. It was not his job to be her friend. In fact, he was not being paid to save her baby, either, but he had made a vow he intended to keep until he was officially relieved from his duties as a Mediwizard.

“Draco, please.” Hermione got up slowly, the full weight of her pregnancy, unleashed by the absence of the spell, pinning her down for a moment longer. She was so tired and still couldn’t bring herself to understand. How damaging. “You don’t know what it’ll be like.”

“I certainly do not have to.” He poured a thermostat charm on the bubbling potion, casting another couple of spells on top of it then. “Risking the life of an unborn child so you can keep your deceit in place is very un-Gryffindor of you.”

She stopped short of the potion. It was probably toxic, as most potions were while in the making, for the baby. “Not all of us must be defined by the houses we were at.”

“May I — uncharacteristically, might I add — ,” he said with a careless finger up, “ask you why is it of such importance that your lawfully wedded husband knows nothing of this child?”

If he was expecting any kind of resistance from her, he was met with none. That was a relief after everything Potter had put him through.

“He said we shouldn’t have another. Rosie’s birth was… it was awful. Both of us almost died. He
was terrified.” Hermione was shaking her head slowly.

“I see,” he continued to stir the potion, nonplussed.

“But it’s not his child, only. What about what I want?”

“Indeed.”

“He cannot forbid me from having a baby if I want one, it would be ridiculous.”

“Of course.”

“He’d want to ground me. I’m not a prisoner.”

Finally, he decided her rant was taking a wrong proportion. It was not like he wanted to help as much as that he needed to, after everything she had done for him. It was his honour at stake.

“Granger, there is one thing I’ve learned with my rather successful, kidnapping apart, marriage to Astoria: some secrets are too big to be kept.” She pursed her lips, definitely crossed. “As a Slytherin, I would never forgive her for putting herself at risk and keeping myself at bay. It’s one or the other.”

“Ron is no Slytherin,” she countered pronto.

“Mind you, he’s not. But, as you so vehemently said, not all of us must be defined by the house we were at.” He took his dose after a mild cooling spell the moment the thermostat indicated 100°C, the awful taste recognisable in the cringing and hardening of his jaw. Salazar, that tasted like hippogriff piss no matter how many doses one took. It was short of disgusting. Willing his face back into full impassivity, he continued. “You know what to do.”

“I can’t.”

“Then I’m afraid I’ll be seeing you all alone by Scorpius’ next birthday.” He cast a stasis spell on the potion and stashed it away again. The next dose was in about three hours only, when the venom inside the cauldron would have lost its properties and he’d need to add some more to the mixture.

“You know what? You’re not helping.”

“I never pledged I would.”

Draco sat down in front of the chair she had been occupying just before, flicking his wand towards the Astronomy book he was so keen on. Teddy would be returning today and he’d need to have a new lesson ready, lest the boy grew restless and let the apocalypse begin. In fact, he much wanted his kids, but he could feel the pregnancy of a silence even better without his eyes to blind him; he would not let it carry. He would play with his children in the afternoon. He had to teach Albus how to swing a bat if he wanted the boy to have half a chance at whatever team he got himself landed on for being Potter’s firstborn. It would be embarrassing to the boy if he couldn’t perform well. People would surely leave him alone faster if he proved to be just what they expected and threw in his own quirks and obsessions along the way. It wouldn’t happen for a long time, but eventually, it might, and Draco would have felt like failing the child if he didn’t prepare it for the blow. Scorpius was being prepared for that ever since he was born.

“Do you think…” She sat down once more. Her words were raspy when they finally took him from his musing and absent-minded reading. Learning to read with his fingers had been the nicest development of a skill; Teddy’s finding of a transcription spell that could turn the pages into braille had been a delicious surprise. His fingers stilled on the page, marking the letter upon which they had
stopped and he raised his head to show he was listening. Draco could bet Granger was on the verge of crying. “You think... he loves me enough to understand?”

Draco gave the matter a second of actual considering before answering. “I don’t know, Hermione. I cannot say the kind of love I share with Astoria resounds like the one you share with your husband.”

“What about Harry?”

Draco stilled the slightest bit, almost frowning. “What about him?”

“If it were you, do you think he’d understand?”

“You mean, in case we were an actual loving couple and he somehow missed the longest of all known fertility rituals used to grant a womb to a man so we can bear children without medical risks?”

“You know what I mean.” She sounded huffed.

“I admit it is a notion I have not yet entertained.”

“But do you think he would?”

“It’s different situations. I really couldn’t possibly say.”

Hermione nodded a couple of times, mulling over his words. Draco returned to his reading, seemingly unfazed. It was her decision. All he could do was show her what she’d be losing by choosing the wrong path. Eventually, she got up again, excusing herself and planning on resting. Before she left the room, though, her hand rested on Draco’s shoulder and squeezed it gently.

“You know, Draco…” She smiled kindly. He could feel the kindness in every one of her gestures now. It was slightly off-putting. Not even is mother had ever been so kind to him. “Harry loves you. He’s too stubborn to say it, but he does. He’d forgive anything you could do.”

“We have been in a truce for little more than a month, Granger. Don’t you think it’s too soon for him to love me any more than he loves every living creature in the wizarding world?”

“Harry falls in love bit by bit. Your resilience, your changing sides, your strength… it all adds up to him.”

He scoffed. “It happened a very long time ago.”

“He doesn’t really care.” Motherly, she kissed Draco’s temple. Somehow, he didn’t think of pushing her away. Had Pansy tried the same, he’d threaten her with snogging in a way that’d have her spitting and cursing for the week. “Give him a chance. He’ll prove it to you. He’ll surprise you. He always does.”

She had barely taken a step before he held her wrist. “It doesn’t change our agreement.”

Hermione nodded. “I know it doesn’t. But you should consider telling him.”

“He’s never home.” Draco felt the bittersweet smirk bloom without warning on the corner of his own lips as he let go of her. “It’s the best thing to do.”

“It might be, but is it the right one?”

“It’s the best.” He nodded to himself more than to her. “Right doesn’t really matter just now.”
REPORT OF INVESTIGATION OF HEINOUS CRIME

Responsible Auror: Harry James Potter.

Personnel involved: disclosable upon request.

Known victims: three. Identities disclosable upon request and witness protection warding and privacy program.

Known witnesses: existent. Identities disclosable upon request and witness protection warding and privacy program.

Supervisor to be informed: Kingsley Shacklebolt (HD).

Is the report being sent while the investigation is ongoing? Yes.

WARNING: Reports of ongoing, non-authorized investigations (ONAIs) will be submitted to Internal Affairs for evaluation of legitimacy and urgency. ONAIs deemed unnecessary shall proceed to legal prosecution and eventual criminal charges. Non-reported ONAIs will result in imprisonment of the Responsible Auror and liberation of eventual convicts.

NOTE: Authorization for investigation shall be attached to this report. Eventual bill of reasons can be attached as well.

List of attached documents, authorizations and bills:

- Authorization for investigation (AI);
- Bill of reasons;
- Notice of unexpected, eventful development of non-heinous or regular crime (UED-NHR);
- List of addresses of public places involved in the investigation (APP);
- Report of investigation of abuse (RIA) with initial medical report for Victim #1 (MR1-V1) and Victim #2 (MR1-V2);
- Note of Involvement of Known Practitioners of Dark Arts (NI-KPDA);
- Report of closure and unexpected, eventful development for case 469.003.973-06/DMLE-AO/IUMO;
- Report of Magical Signatures, signed by Auror R. Weasley (Magi-sig Report);
- Report for DNA analysis and blood relationship — Anonymous version (RDNAA);
- Reports for evidences S1-S5, M1-M3 and L1-L2;
- For-your-eyes-only file.

Case number: 800.456.009-11/DMLE-AO-ID.

Beginning date: June 27th, 2007.

In the afternoon of June 27th, present year, the Responsible Auror, hereafter called RA, found a victim of physical assault (V1) in an alley close to The Leaky Cauldron (see APP). An unharmed, underage victim (V2) was with them. V1 was under a series of potent diverting and protective spells,
unconscious and apparently fallen under a Stunning Spell. Given the urgency (see Bill of reasons) and the familiarity of the RA with V1, plus widespread known information about V1’s need for privacy and the fact that the incident has taken place outside working hours, the case, which had not been evaluated as potentially heinous, drifting towards potential family abuse, was handled accordingly.

V1 was submitted to diagnosis spells and competent first aid (see RIA). They have been poorly Obliviated and Confunded due to reasons yet to be fully understood (more information disclosable upon request). Unlike V2, who was unharmed and perfectly healthy (see RIA/MR1-V2), V1 presented a total of 46 bone fractures, 15 disrupted ligaments, severe memory loss and an abundance of tracking spells. Medical authorities, magi-sig experts and legal aid were employed in nursing V1 back to health, under confidentiality agreements and/or blind advice. V1 was unwilling to press charges on domestic abuse as soon as they were lucid, given their lack of memory, and the case was not pushed into formality given said circumstances.

With the aid of Medical authorities, V1’s sanity began to be recovered. It was found that they had been held in house arrest for an estimated time of 730 days, hindered from communication with the outer world whatsoever. They were submitted to physical torture, Unforgivable Curses and illegal unaided mind-meddling. Being rescued, they declared not remembering the time spent in captivity. Information regarding times and dates have been gathered from third parties (identities disclosable upon request).

The case, being closed, was not brought to the supervisor’s attention, although a proper report is attached, given the repercussions of it.

On June 28th, present year, the RA was given, by the Head of Department, permission to trade patrol for office hours for an undetermined time. The number of the last case assigned to the RA was 469.003.973-06/DMLE-AO/IUMO. The case was dispatched to the HD due to complications regarding potential perpetrators (see NI-KPDA) and given to the RA for investigation and closure. Aliased “Chimaera Case” (CC), it was an informal claim made about the illegal breeding of mixed-race (crossbred) chimaeras by a family of KPDA. Said family is currently on the privacy and monitoring list of the DMLE. Further information is attached to the CC’s closure and UED report.

The present case had been opened as a result of unexpected, eventful development of non-heinous/regular case regarding CC. In investigating CC, it was established a connection between it and the present case, as exposed below.

As so happens, V1 was forced, with the help of a similarly affected/harassed third party (V3) whose identity shall be preserved due to medical reasons, to engage in illegal creature breeding, therefore creating the beast reported seen in CC’s original claim. Massive amounts of Confusion Spells and Imperius Curse are known to have been used for that. The creature, a hippogriff-chimaera hybrid named Chim, is under custody, being treated and taken care of by Hogwarts’ Care of Magical Creatures professor and long-time collaborator with the DMLE, Rubeus Hagrid. The circumstances of the finding of the beast are classified and have not been disclosed to him.

Upon close scrutiny of the captivity place (location disclosable upon request), several objects, traces, animal bodies and magical signatures have been found. Regarding the bodies found inside the building, please check CC’s closure and UED report. For magical signatures, please read the attached Magi-sig Report.

The objects found are listed below:

- 1 (one) golden Gringotts key (evidence S1);
- 1 (one) small silver box with three glass syringes (evidence M1);
• 1 (one) book on Transfiguration (evidence M1);
• 1 (one) Astronomy book (evidence M2);
• 1 (one) book on Animal Care (evidence M3);
• 1 (one) large stripe of cloth stained with blood (evidence L1);
• Human hair (evidence S3);
• V1’s articles of clothing (evidence L2);
• 1 (one) vial of chimaera’s ophidic venom (evidence S4);
• 1 (one) vial of chimaera blood (evidence S5).

It was established that the syringes contained remnants of blood of the three known victims (via DNA tests — see RDNAA; identitary results disclosable upon request). All three victims have been found alive, despite V1 and V3 being in need of medical attention. The hair and the blood found on the cloth are known to belong to V3 and V2, respectively. Blood of V1 has been found scattered inside the captivity site.

The books found have probably been used for consultation during the breeding of the hybrid, including transfiguring fabric to improve its resistance (see evidence report for E-L1).

The key is of a Gringotts vault in which are kept rare potion ingredients (see list at evidence report for E-S1) and small family heirlooms of the victims’ family. Evidence suggests it has been depleted of ingredients such as unicorn blood, gold dust and scales of Thestral spawn (see copy of the vault’s content inventory, handwritten by the owner, and visual evidence of its content by the time RA visited it, attached to evidence report for E-S1).

No fingerprints or magical signatures have been found on these objects, apart from the victims’.

Free-willed Legilimency was performed by the RA on V1 upon their request. Several memories, both complete and not, have been found, both free and trapped, inside V1’s mind. Those memories have been keys in finding V3 and identifying possible perpetrators or accomplices. It was also what prompted another incursion at the captivity site, which revealed the bodies of a large, male chimaera and several female hippogriffs.

It was also found, during that incursion, the body of a known, convicted, wanted former Death Eater (identity disclosable upon request). The body is under custody, being analysed by competent authorities in warding and necropsy. Blood tests say there has been no use of potions, venoms or drugs of any kind around the time of death. Preliminary results report their death as a result of a mishap during a ritual of unknown purposes. The ritual circle used could not be identified inside the Ministry’s archives, nor in any of the customary rhunic companions. It has proceeded through alternate channels to experts around the globe, although it seems to be a custom-made circle.

Mind evidence also strongly suggests the involvement of Death Eaters presumed dead (identities attached in for-your-eyes-only folder). Profiling indicates presumed dead Death Eater Bellatrix Isla Lestrange, née Black, as the planner and main perpetrator behind this crime. It was found the involvement of at least one Auror, currently active, named Harold Lasher Dawlish. He was arrested for attacking a fellow Auror and shall undergo questioning with the aid of Veritaserum, in order to disclose further information.

As reported by Harry J. Potter

Harry raised his head when the door opened, revealing a wrecked Ron. He plopped on the room’s couch, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. Something that looked suspiciously like vomit stained the front of his Auror robes, although he seemed almost blissfully unaware of it. Harry had declined to participate in Dawlish’s interrogation, knowing that he’d probably murder him had he been compelled to go. After what seemed to be an insufferable amount of time and a quick nap, Ron
finally sighed, took off his robes, bagged them as evidence and stared at his mate.

“He’s gone,” he said, sealing the bag and throwing it on the desk. “Died foaming while he sang. Bulstrode will report, I’m knackered.”

“Have you found out who’s Flora?”

“No. We never got as far as actually questioning him thoroughly. Whatever the spell upon him was, it reacted almost as soon as he chugged that Veritaserum.”

“Did he say something useful at all, then?”

“Mostly confirmed what we knew already. He did say though that the contact was made through Caligula Crabbe.”

“Vincent’s father.” Ron nodded. “He hasn’t been seen in years.”

“Yes, and Dawlish’s gurgling suggests it wasn’t actually him, but someone Polyjuicing as him. It was Macedonia Crabbe inside that room, though. That he confirmed.”

“I knew I remembered her. She’s her son all over.” He shook his head. “Has she shown up?”

“Not yet. Geremy is setting surveillance on their house, but we’re not hopeful.” Ron helped himself to some brandy, slouching back on the couch with the drink gripped tight in his hand. “Done that report?”

“Yes.” Harry spell-dried and rolled the parchment. “I thought better to leave out the details, including the bit about the house-elves.”

“I can’t believe Astoria has sent all their elves into hiding.”

“I can’t believe Malfoy found his brains for long enough to free Frilly. You didn’t see how attached he is to that elf.”

It was true, though. Ron had been talking to Draco daily now that his memories were coming back. They found out he had given Astoria permission to handle the house-elves even before they were imprisoned; talking to Frilly had provided the information about her requesting the elves to go into hiding and don’t show up before she or Draco called them back. Frilly was supposed to be the one to reach them when the time to leave the safe house came.

“Master has freed Frilly, sir,” Ron had mimicked the rough-voiced old elf. According to him, Frilly wore a pair of silk underpants beneath the pillowcase and posed as an useless old elf at Malfoy’s service to keep an eye on Astoria. It had been the elf who had Disapparated with Draco and Scorpius. She was blind as a young manticore, and far smarter. Ron said she was helping Malfoy with the kids and the minding of the house, not to mention filling the gaps in Draco’s memory with everything she could remember. Soon, Ron had warned him, they wouldn’t be able to stop Draco anymore.

Harry had to trust Ron’s words, since he had not seen Draco after their last discussion. His (former?) lover had taken hold of the nursery and their children; incapable of talking to him about it or telling him no, Harry had no option but to allow him. That morning, when he was leaving for work, Teddy had already been awake, sitting by the fireplace in the sitting room in an obvious attempt at catching him. Harry would have missed him, hadn’t he stood up and called him.

“What are you doing walking around at this ungodly hour, Teds?”
“Cousin is leaving, isn’t he?” Harry had flinched at those words. Teddy had sniffed. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that the boy had been crying. “He already told me.”

Harry had crouched before him and enveloped him in a warm hug. “Listen, Teddy, he loves you a lot—”

“I know he does, so why won’t he stay?” His big violet eyes had glistened with sadness. “Was it a fight? Can’t you say you’re sorry and ask him to stay?”

Harry’s guilt had almost overridden all of his other functions, and it was by a speck of a moment that he didn’t promise his godson he would do so right away. He didn’t know where he and Draco stood and approaching him delicately, like he would an animal, would be safer.

“I’ll do my best, Teds, but we don’t own him. He’s free to go if he wants to.”

The boy had proffered his pinkie. “Promise you’ll do your best?”

He had taken the boy’s finger and nodded sincerely. “I promise I will.”

He had never thought he’d lie to Teddy, but he had had no choice then. He wanted to talk to Draco, but the opportunity had not yet presented itself and they had to move on with the case lest Shacklebolt forced them to resign. Pansy had not been lying or overreacting when she said there were more pressing matters awaiting his attention — his boss had been — still was — one of them. Her words still resounded clearly if he closed his eyes, spoken when he had arrived home from the hospital after the Slytherins’ intervention.

“Shacklebolt wants to see you. Now.”

The threat was real; Shacklebolt’s request, demanding. He had barely had time to sleep; that he also did not have time to meet Draco was but a pleasurable side-effect. Pansy looked like she wanted to murder him for leaving her friend in the dark but, much to Harry’s amazement, she refrained from it even when he was particularly obtuse. Apparently, she had been worried about their relationship, even if, mostly and especially, only on Draco’s behalf. She hardly left Harry alone for long enough for him to forget she had been all but sharing his room with Draco and him. It wasn’t once that he had gone to check on Draco and seen him sleeping beside her, resting his head on her shoulder, her lap. It was like their time at Hogwarts; he tried not to be raging mad when it happened. Once, she asked him to trade places with her, but he had denied himself the pleasure. More than rage towards her, he was experiencing profound self-loathing. Millicent and Ron were the ones to talk to Harry about Lyra and Astoria whenever they had new intel and, although Harry was still breastfeeding the child and seeing both patients quite often, he still couldn’t believe they’d make it so easily. Incapable of being optimistic, he refrained from discussing it with Draco. A despicable little voice kept telling him there was a possibility Draco knew something already; Zabini had been conveniently posted inside Grimmauld Place and ready to spill it out to Draco. He refused to believe this possibility (probability, really) with all his might.

“—gonna tell him?”

He was kicked back from his thoughts. “What?”

“Shacklebolt. Tell him it’s the Malfoys?”

“He will know. I believe he will understand.” Harry stretched and took his robes, picking up the report he had just finished and tucking it inside them. “Millicent asked me for help with one of her cases. I’ll go over to Accidental to see whether she’s there yet.”
“She’s reporting.”

“Not Millicent, mate. The case.” Realisation dawned upon Ron and he nodded slowly. “Take a nap, will you? I’ll close the door. We can leave for lunch once I get back.”

Ron gave him a two-handed thumbs up and stretched on the couch. Harry took his wand and locked the door with a simple but effective spell — no safety was too much safety now they knew Ministry people might be involved. He strode swiftly and powerfully up towards Shacklebolt’s office, paying attention to any sign of children wandering around there. He went around distributing signatures on reports and authorizations, spoke to Geremy’s second-in-command about the surveillance plan for the Crabbe’s residence, nodded sympathetically at the newcomers, fresh from training and already being scolded by Morrison. When he finally reached his boss’ office, it felt like the report was weighing inside his pocket. He knocked briefly but didn’t wait for an answer to come in; he had a chance to see a glimpse of expensive green robes threaded with silver and a wisp of pale blond hair, plus a long-fingered, perfectly manicured, delicate hand before the woman vanished through the door which led to the Ministry’s upper storeys.

“Who was that?” he asked without bothering to pay his boss the slightest respect, terribly conscious that he had already seen clothes like those and hands like those in Draco’s mind. His instinct was telling him to run after that woman immediately.

“A mother filing a missing person’s report for her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren.” Shacklebolt shook his head. “She said they were under treatment for post-war trauma and one day, they simply disappeared from their property.”

Fuck. Harry sprinted forward, running through the door just enough to reach the corridor before Shacklebolt’s voice called — no, threatened — him back.

“We are good friends, Auror Potter, but it doesn’t give you the right to barge into my office and leave me hanging,” said Kingsley, standing behind his desk, the second Harry was back inside the office. “It would be wise of yours not to test my patience.”

“Sir, I apologise, but you must tell me who was that woman.”

“Why, are you planning on taking this case?” He sat back down.

“She was Narcissa Malfoy, wasn’t she?” Shacklebolt leaned back on his chair.

“And how on Earth would you possibly know that? Did you see her?”

Harry didn’t have the time to make a thoughtful, nice decision. He had two ways: hide the report and tell nothing to Shacklebolt, risking not only his and everybody else’s job and the investigation but also the conviction of everyone they caught for the crime, or be honest and hope that he’d listen.

He set a strong, fizzling Privacy Spell around them. “Kingsley, listen.” His boss was staring at him with mild surprise written across his eyebrows. “That woman is not Narcissa Malfoy. I’ve seen the real Narcissa not a month ago. She’s the one who confided me she hasn’t seen her own son in years.”

“You’re walking a thin line here, Harry.”

“I know.” He took the report and gave it hesitantly to Shacklebolt. “Most of what you need to know could be written, and it’s here. Everything else, you should stop by my place and ask me about when we are not in such public place.”
“Is this the report for CC?” Harry nodded. “Took you too long.”

“It changed. Please, I’m begging you, don’t give out any information about anything you read here or anything any of us tells you about any of the Malfoys.” Shacklebolt frowned. “Can you trust me in this?”

Brief seconds of contemplation and expectation ran around the clock as Kingsley twirled the report, staring intently at it. Harry’s heart was in his throat. His wand was ready for a swift Body-Bind Spell that would hold his boss in place until Hermione or someone more competent could come Obliviate him in case he decided he wouldn’t. He’d never have dared of hurting Shacklebolt, but he couldn’t consciously put Draco in a dangerous situation given the Binding Promises they still had between them. He was supposed to protect him, and if the Promise couldn’t keep Draco from wanting to hurt himself if he ever did, at least it could force Harry to think straight and protect him at all costs.

“I shouldn’t, given your behaviour these past weeks.” Harry’s grip on his wand tightened. “But I will. No information about any of the Malfoys will be as much as whispered by me.”

Harry’s posture relaxed to an almost slump. He felt like giggling. “Can I continue to use Ministerial structures to solve this?” Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow and let out a stiff “yes”. “Can I borrow a couple of people, too?”

“You have already made an entire plan behind my back, you rascal.” Harry had the presence of mind to look sheepish about it. His hand was rubbing the hair on the back of his neck before he noticed it. “Fine, do it. I’m giving you carte blanche. Anyone and anything you need, for however long you need them, at any cost it might present. Full support from the Auror Division and unrestricted access to any intel you might want, both from the Ministry and any convicts.”

“I don’t need all that, sir. Just a couple o’ agents and some archives.”

“Harry, off-the-record here. This is not something as meek as an investigation of the Malfoys’ ill-doings, is it? It’s a conspiracy.”

“I shouldn’t name it like this yet, sir.” He felt goose bumps run on his skin. “But yes. We think it is.”

“We?”

“Ron and Hermione are helping me on this one, sir.”

Kingsley shook his head. “McGonagall was right. Whenever something really big happens, it’s always you three.”

“Sir?”

“Solve this, Potter.” Shacklebolt took a small sheet of parchment and scribbled a name and his signature on it. Literally white, it was Harry’s carte blanche permit. He gave it to him. “And count on me if you need something.”

Harry knew he was being dismissed, so he merely thanked his boss, disabled the Privacy Spell and left the room. His strides were not that confident anymore; a part of him still wanted to go around looking for the fake Narcissa, but he knew she wouldn’t even be there anymore and, even if she was, there was no guarantee it would have been the one they were after. The designer of that plan had several people under their command and forcing an innocent person to go there wouldn’t have been difficult. No, he’d follow the leads, not his own, preposterous whims.

At last, Harry headed to Accidental to find Posey crouching beside an armchair at the officer’s
lounge. Her strawberry blonde hair was as unmistakable as a Weasley’s despite being several shades
darker and far less bright. She wore jeans jumpers and looked positively terrified to be there. Her
eyes lit up when she saw Harry, though, and next thing he knew, there was a very small body
colliding with his legs. He kneeled to talk to the girl, smiling sweetly at her.

“Good to see you again, Posey.” She nodded and hugged him, hiding her teary face on the crook of
his neck. “There, there, what went wrong, my darling? Do you feel alright?”

She shook her head but did nothing towards any motion, so Harry picked her up. Dumbstruck,
McAllister approached them and held out a photograph. It was moving, showing the collapsing to
the ground of a man he recognised as Posey’s elderly legal guardian.

“She likes you?” McAllister was wide-eyed. “Rowena’s brains, she likes no one.”

“She’s seen me before.” He caressed the child’s hair. “What happened?”

“Her guardian had a heart-attack. Our people are trying to contact her other guardian — the man’s
wife, I suppose.” Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “No success so far.”

“Where is he?”

“Royal London.” He eyed the girl pityingly. “We don’t know where to take her to while we do it.”

“You were not planning to leave her here, alone in a room full of grown people she doesn’t know,
were you?” Harry felt his blood boil. “I should report you to Millicent. Honestly.”

He turned on his heels swiftly, the girl held firmly in his arms. “Arsehole,” he heard McAllister
mumble at his back. Sighing, he started to the elevator, shaking his head at the inadequacy of some
of those in Accidental. People with no abilities to handle children should never end up there.
Millicent was right: she was in dire need of new people, and not even just because the Malfoy team
was retired for the time being. Some of those who worked with her would be better off somewhere
else indeed.

“Hawwy.” Posey’s voice was but a whisper.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“It hu’ts.” She sniffed, rubbing her little forehead.

Harry had time to realise her knees and elbows were violently bruised underneath the jeans, and her
head had a small bump. That wasn’t good. She had probably been in her guardian’s arms when it
happened. The elevator’s doors opened when he was aiming the first Episkey, and through slid
Hermione. She looked like she had been crying, but Harry already had a woman (even if she was a
tiny one) to take care of; he wouldn’t vouch for another so soon.

“Shacklebolt said you’d be up here.” She sniffed too. “Hopkirk needs a permit from you to clear
Hopkins.” Oh, yes, he remembered that one. Hopkins had been targeted with a bone-crushing curse;
his skeleton turned to dust in front of Harry, Geremy and Morrison about six months before. It was a
miracle that he was even alive. He wouldn’t be able to come back on duty before another year or so,
but in the meantime, he could already be home, apparently. “Can you come?”

“I’m sort of busy here?” He gestured towards the child he was healing. Posey was staring at
Hermione with outspoken curiosity in her eyes.

“Who is she?” Hermione’s voice sounded threatening.
"A case. Her guardian is ill and she has no one to take care of her while we find her other guardian.”
The woman did not look appeased. “What? I didn’t kidnap her!”

Posey was observing that strange exchange curiously. Funny things, grown-ups, she had always thought so. Always so loud, they were.

“She hit her head.” Hermione pointed to the last bruise Harry was about to heal. “She needs to go to a hospital.”

“It’s a bump.”

“It could be a concussion. It’s hard to know with children.”

There was no discussing it; Harry would never risk Posey’s safety because he didn’t want to go to St. Mungus when with company. He let himself be led by Hermione towards the Floo, defeated, and further, into the Auror ward. Clarissa Hopkirk (Mafalda Hopkirk’s youngest sister) was already waiting for him. She was a short, plump, stern woman that on a quick glance reminded him vaguely of Hannah, just far less nice. She shook his hand professionally — his left one, since Posey was clinging to him again and unwilling to let go.

“I’ll take her to Phineas,” said Hermione, smiling lightly. “Meet us there?”

Reluctantly, Harry let go of the child. “Of course.”

It took him about half an hour to go through Hopkins’ release forms and procedure; when he finally dispatched the man for in-home recovery, he had more or less believed Hermione and Posey would have been ready already. When he reached Phineas’ office, though, they were not there; questioning a nurse provided for the news of one Posey Pevensie being admitted in a room for 24h observation. He went over to find her in the paediatric ward with Hermione sitting on a chair beside her. She smiled when Harry entered the room, but it was sad and bitter.

“She has a minor oedema. It’s external and it’s being drained; the doctors just wanted to keep track of the procedure.”

“Is she sedated?”

“Just tired. Had a full day, I suppose. They said it’s okay if she sleeps, there doesn’t seem to have been any brain damage.” Harry nodded and sat down beside her. “I’m pregnant.”

“I know. Ron told me last night. Congratulations?”

He really didn’t know whether to congratulate her. When Ron had barged into his room, waking him up at once by plopping beside him, his eyes had been rimmed with vibrant red, his face bloated and blushed. He had twisted his hands half a thousand times and begged Harry for help. He was terrified that he may be forced to lose his wife, to choose between them like the Medi wizards had said could have happened when Rosie was born. He hadn’t said much, but he did cry a lot. In the end, Harry had lent him half of the bed and even picked up his mate’s clothes for the next day to avoid him having to run into Hermione. It wasn’t surprising that Ron was so tired, after a night of indulging in despair and hopelessness.

Right in front of him, Hermione laughed humorlessly.

“T think you shouldn’t congratulate us yet.” She took a deep breath. “Ron is really… upset.”

“Upset isn’t the right word. Devastated would suit him better.”
She flinched. “I know.”

“Are you scared?” he asked thoughtfully.

“Of carrying the pregnancy on? Not really.”

“Of losing him.” She flinched further. “Are you scared that he might leave you?”

“I’m giving him some time to think about it.” She smiled sadly. “I don’t think I want to face him and know the answer just yet.”

Harry nodded, understanding that feeling. He would be terrified, were he in a similar situation. But it was an unfounded fear and he told her so.

“Ron loves you. He won’t abandon you. Trust me, Hermione; you’re in this together. You just don’t know it yet.”

Hermione acquiesced but didn’t seem entirely trusting of Harry’s words. He wouldn’t be too before he saw his best mate and asked him directly, but Ron had fought a lot to stay with Hermione, during the war and especially after that; he wouldn’t let her go that easily. In fact, Harry doubted he would under any circumstances. The point was that Ron was hurt and lost, unknowing of how he should be feeling and whether feeling like he felt was either the expected reaction or not even that. He believed Hermione should be feeling more or less the same. She looked devastated too, under that mask of nonchalant propriety.

“This situation,” she said after a moment of contemplation, “had me thinking about you and… and Draco. Whether he’ll forgive you if you never tell him.”

Harry sighed deeply. “Hermione, this isn’t about me. I didn’t spend months hiding a potentially high-risk pregnancy I never intended to tell my husband about.”

“But it’s the same, isn’t it?” She stared at him dryly. He knew the remark had been uncalled for, but hey, hers had been so too. “Tell me, Harry, will the only way you’ll tell him be the death of them both?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“You can talk,” she admonished him. “Posey won’t hear it, I’ve soundproofed her crib.”

“Please!” He raised his fists, opening and closing them a couple of times. “Please, shut up, Hermione.”

“You have to face it too.”

“Shut up, please,” he begged, leaving the room in long strides.

“It’s your mistake, you can’t write it off as if it were nothing!” She got up, going after him insistently. “Look at what something of the sort is doing to me and Ron!”

“Shut up!” he yelled at the top of his lungs as the door closed behind her. A couple of nurses shushed them immediately. Swiftly, Harry raised a Muffliato around them, too conscious of the tempest that was approaching them.

“You’re just so scared!” She threw the words at him like a hex. “You’re ridiculous to think you can hide them from him anymore. He’s married through ancient bonds; do you really think you can keep
something this big from him?!”

“Well, I’m managing quite well so far, ain’t I?”

“You’re blind! And an idiot!” She looked about to throw something at him. “Bonds are not dismissable like that, they won’t lie to him!”

“This would spare me trouble of coming clean then, right?” Harry shook his shoulders, looking nonplussed. Inside, he felt rage climb his bones, paired with icy-cold fear, intertwined with everlasting guilt. Hermione had been around him for long enough to know which buttons to push and Godric, she did push them mercilessly.

Breathing in to calm down, Hermione shook her head. Her eyes were pitying him when they rose to meet his again.

“Harry.” She put her hand on his shoulder, caressing it gently. “I’m telling you all this because I really think Draco already knows. Not that he suspects, only, but that he’s found out already.”

“How would he?” Harry slapped her hand away out of reflex. His face looked torn between hurt and rage. “Have you told him?”

“Of course not!” She was outraged. “But I’ve heard Pansy talking to Millicent yesterday evening, and apparently Blaise wanted to tell him but he said it wasn’t his secret to tell… He knows something, and he’s not stupid.”

Harry could see why she was so desperate. It wasn’t like Draco at all, to stop himself from profiting from information someone was willing to give him. It was an idea Harry wouldn’t have entertained. Still, if he was telling Blaise he didn’t want to know, it could only mean he either already did or didn’t think it important. Given the amount of times they had discussed his wife and the high probability of it being related to her, Harry didn’t think it was the second option.

“You should tell him now, Harry. Before he stops waiting for it. He is… He’s giving you a chance to show him you trust him. He believes you are giving up on him.”

That was enough. Harry’s shoulders slumped and he collapsed on the chair in the middle of the waiting hallway. His head was on his hands before he could stop himself.

“We were a fling, Hermione. We found his wife now. He’s going back to her as I knew he would.”

He managed a poorly built smile. “I don’t know if I have the strength to fight for this relationship and if I tell him, it will be as if I do.”

“His marriage to Astoria is flimsy at best.” She was frustrated, Harry could tell. He didn’t know why his relationship with Draco was so important to those people, even if they were his friends, but apparently no one, not even fucking Pansy Parkinson wanted it to end. But Harry wasn’t dumb and he didn’t want to make things harder for Draco, too. He had a family himself. He’d hate to be torn between them. “He said he wouldn’t give up on his life; it doesn’t mean you’ll get dumped when she gets better. He likes you, Harry. He’s been giving you chances like he has never done before. I spoke to Pansy, I know what I’m talking about.”

He shook his head. “We don’t even talk anymore.”

“And whose fault is that?” Hermione held him by his shoulders and shook him slightly. “Harry, it’s not right, you know it’s not. When he went to apologise to Astoria, Pansy and I, we had to hide his daughter from him. It’s not right to keep a parent unknowing of a child of his own. Believe me, it took me some time to understand it but now I do.”
“You are still oblivious.” He sighed. “I shouldn’t be the one to tell him. It should be someone who knows how to do it. Someone with skills, someone who can walk him through it all, someone who hasn’t spent nights close to crying because they sometimes can’t find enough hope to continue. It has to be someone else. Otherwise, it won’t be fair to him.”

“Do you think it will be fair if she dies?”

“DON’T TALK ABOUT IT!” Harry got up at once, his fists balled at his sides. “She will not die, Hermione!”

“Then what are you so afraid of?!” Her words crossed the air and slapped his face with so much force he was thrown out of balance. Inside his chest, his heart shrunk. “You know there’s a chance she won’t make it. You know it. Do you really want his only memory of his child to be one of her cold little body, or you won’t allow him even that much?”

“I forbid you to say another word about it!” Godric, it hurt to even think about it. It was suffocating.

“But it can happen!” Hermione stepped closer to him again, holding his forearm and forcing him to breathe again. “Allow him to know her. Show him that you care about her, that you’re worried. Allow him to worry too. You are attaching yourself to her already. Why won’t you let him do the same?”

“I wanna tell him. But can’t face him now. I don’t know how.”

“We can send him a memory. It’s how you solve things, right? Due to his blindness?” Harry nodded shortly. His face was so torn that Hermione couldn’t keep herself away; she hugged him intensely. Harry’s arms wrapped around her waist the next second. “Trust him to be a grown man, Harry. I know he will be.”

“What if he’s not? What if he blames me? What if he doesn’t believe me?”

“There’s a moment when we need to let go of people and trust them to make their own decisions. Trust them to make the best out of what they have.” He shook his head, unwilling to risk it. “Let go of him. If he cares about you as much as I think he does, he will come back. Just trust him to.”

In the end, it was all coming back to that one word: trust. Harry always trusted people would come back to him, until they stopped returning. Sirius, Remus, Tonks, Moody, Fred, his parents, Dumbledore, Dobby… Even Hedwig. They were a string of those he cared deeply about and had to see taken from him for one reason or another. He was about to finish losing Ginny. Soon Teddy would be going to Hogwarts. He didn’t want to take Draco further in to see him leave like so many people before him. It wasn’t fair. Telling him about Lyra now, it wouldn’t just be honest, it would be calling for a truce. He didn’t want to patch things up to see them fall apart just a couple of weeks later. He… he loved Draco. If he was going to leave, wouldn’t it be easier to let it happen like it was already happening?

“He won’t abandon you, you know.” Hermione tightened her hug. “Not if you’re true to him.”

“You cannot possibly know it.” He buried his face on the crook of her neck. “I need him, Hermione. I cannot stand to let him go.”

“Then fight for him. Draco has been left out by everyone in his life, Harry. What he needs right now is not someone who’ll save him, it’s someone who’ll be beside him and fight for him and fight alongside him. He needs someone who wants him, flaws and everything.”

“I do want him!”
“I know. But I’m not the one who should be listening to it, am I?”

Harry had to think for a long time before giving in and accepting Hermione’s suggestion. No, he decided in the end, he wouldn’t let Draco go without a fight, out of fear or shame. Hermione was right, he couldn’t let them end so easily. He wasn’t giving up on them. He would tell him, give him time, and pursue him. If Draco decided he couldn’t face Harry anymore, then they could begin again, apart from each other. But that would be Draco’s decision. It was time he stopped being afraid and let Draco make his decisions himself.

It was almost trembling, almost fearful that Harry let himself be gently nudged towards Lyra’s room. Tyra was inside it; she smiled kindly at Harry and Hermione, then continued to take notes for a moment longer.

“Are you here to breastfeed?” she asked, putting the file aside.

“Yes.” Harry started to strip, any embarrassment long lost between him and Tyra since she had probably seen him in varied stages of undress more often than people Harry slept with, now. Being Healer to the Auror Corps wasn’t an easy task. “How are they?”

“Astoria is doing well. She’s no longer needing sedatives and her scars are all healed. Her consciousness has not yet come back, but I think we can allow ourselves to be mildly hopeful one day it will.”

“And Lyra?” Harry stretched his arms open for the sterilizing spells coming out of Tyra’s wand. They were sufficing for now.

Tyra sighed. “She’s breathing today, but she had a collapse last night, right after you left.” She glanced at the chamber inside which the baby moved restlessly, half-naked, her little arms punctuated by pinches of access needles. She looked fine, but couldn’t appearances be deceiving? “Her results came today, and I’m glad to inform she’s magical. A perfect little witch. We can begin overlapping treatments for her lungs.”

“Will they work?” Harry cast a Warming Charm on his chest, then softened his chest hairs and brushed them away from his nipples before activating the Lactation Spell.

“Only time will tell.” She put her hands inside her pockets. “I’ll see other patients now.”

“Thank you so much, Tyra. I know you shouldn’t even be here.”

“You have carte blanche, don’t you, Potter?” She shrugged. She didn’t know it; it was merely a supposition, given the havoc Harry had been wreaking and his sense of responsibility. “I’m personnel, I’m getting paid, I’m doing my job. No harm done.”

That said, she left the room in swift, silent strides. Hermione, who had remained quiet all the while, finished sterilizing herself but didn’t put her wand away.

“How do you want to do it?” she asked, practical but worried.

“I’ll just… speak. Are you sure you can record it?”

“It’s a memory, Harry. It doesn’t need recording.” She sat down, waiting patiently. “Whenever you feel like it.”

It was awkward, talking to someone who wasn’t there about something so sensitive, but if there was someone he could rely upon to seal this memory later and don’t go around spreading it, it was
Hermione. She was judgemental and not always kind, but she understood the importance of it. It was embarrassing, that he couldn’t deny. Still, he summoned enough courage to stutter a couple of tentative sentences about how bizarre that was before finally sighing and beginning what he was sure would be a sappy, cliché speech, but truthful nevertheless.

“Well… Hey, huh, Draco. I have never done this before so do, huh, do forgive me if something looks remarkably askew. I am… huh, I am sending this memory through Hermione, I hope you’re not going to Vanish it as soon as it reaches you.”

Hermione nodded slowly to make him breathe. He was doing well. He could do that.

“I have, huh, a secret? Of sorts? Something I want you to know.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I have… some explaining to do too.”

Harry cleared his throat and turned away, bending slightly to pick up the agitated baby. Lyra kicked and slapped, but didn’t scream. She was amazing. She was… He took a deep breath and turned around again.

“First of all, you have a daughter, a beautiful one.” He looked at Lyra, touching her cheek with tenderness as she found his nipple. The baby was hungry, which had to be a good sign, right? “This is her. I call her Lyra. It suits her, she’s small and looks so much like you, except for the hair. But of course, it’s just some name. I’m the only one who calls her by a name. Everyone believes having no name is better than being named by someone other than one’s parents, so…”

Hermione frowned at that bitterness in Harry’s voice, but didn’t comment on it. She couldn’t make him stop now. If she did, they’d never get that over with.

“I… have been taking care of her for the past days. I’m breastfeeding her and tucking her in, helping Phineas with her medicine and literally anything else they need. The doctors don’t know she’s yours. This is why I have been coming home so late. She requires a lot of attention.” He gritted his teeth. He had to be honest. “I was… not certain of how to break it to you. My original plan was to give her back to you when she was healed and ready to go home, but it’s been over seventy-two hours already and there is no prospect of it happening yet, so Hermione convinced me to believe you are strong enough to handle the truth.

“She has a lung condition that is not very promising. We are trying to mature her lungs but some days she responds just fine and others she falls back again. Sometimes she doesn’t even need the chamber, and some other times they pierce her with needles and drain fluid from her lungs and give her an assortment of stuff I don’t even know what they are for. It’s not a pretty sight. She’s so small and I am…” There was no amount of gritting teeth that could prevent the hurt from showing, the sorrow from glassing over his eyes. “I am terrified she might not make it. I am trying to be hopeful but it’s so, so hard. It’s selfish of me to even admit it. You do deserve the truth, though, and you’re much better fitted to handle it than me right now.” Harry took another deep breath. “I am trying to save her. I am looking for clues as to what’s her lung condition and whether it has anything to do with whatever it is upon your family that makes girls unable to live long lives, but I have not yet come to any conclusions. In a way, I try to save her to save you, too.”

It was while he spoke that he realised the truth in everything everyone had been telling him for the past days. He should probably kick himself for it, but wouldn’t. Feeling slightly lighter, he scoffed.

“But you don’t need to be saved, do you? Hermione mentioned you might have known of her already. I wonder whether the pureblood ceremony made you feel Astoria’s pain in giving birth, whether you could know what it was. Anyway, I’m telling the truth now.
“I will inform Phineas that you’re the other parent and you will be allowed to visit. Maybe spend the night, if you want. I will answer any question you might have tonight. I’ll try to reach you at home and at the hospital if you’re not there, and if you’re not anywhere or if you raise wards, I’ll understand the message and I will leave you alone.

“Before I stop talking, though, I want to thank you. I want to thank you for taking care of the children. For taking care of me. For putting up with my saviour complex and the way I treated you like a child so many times. You are stronger than I am. You are strong like Lyra. And I am sorry for not realising it before. I am sorry for lying to you. I am sorry for denying you the only thing you asked of me, this trust, the truth. I really thought I was protecting you from some greater harm. I tend to do so to those I truly care about. It’s who I am. I can’t not protect people. I hope you understand.”

At last, he sighed really deep and, as if coming back from a trance, he smiled as brightly as he could.

“So, well. This it it. Please don’t murder me in my sleep and… thank you. For allowing me a chance to be forgiven.”

He lowered his head to check on the baby and Hermione flicked her wand, pulling the memory out and bottling it inside a small flask. It was too intimate to be re-lived by her. She nodded when she was done, so Harry sighed deeply, slouching onto the chair.

“You did well,” she said, too confident.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” He closed his eyes. “We need to go grab Ron for lunch. I promised I’d wake him up to eat.”

Hermione hugged herself, smiling sadly, her confidence disappeared at once. “I need to stay. For Posey.”

Harry didn’t have to search her eyes to notice she was definitely lying, but he chose not to push her. It was too fragile a situation already and he trusted his friends; when time was right for them again, they’d get back together and talk it all out until all matters were settled. Ron and Hermione did not have the happiest marriage he knew of (that title was perennially in Luna’s and Rolf’s hands), although it was not the worst he’d ever seen (that would have been his, most unfortunately). They fought more often than not and argued loudly whenever they could; their love still remained, though, somehow. Harry really did believe the vows of “till death do us part” they had inserted in the ceremony — a concession made given Hermione’s parents’ views of traditional weddings, void of danger since it was not a pureblood marriage and the vow was one of trust and will, not of binding. (Molly had said her grandparents’ wedding ceremony had counted with something along those lines and they had never been able to divorce, since there was no breaking a pureblood wedding vow based on premises so clear).

They would make it.

“Please eat something.” She nodded dismissively. “I mean it, Hermione. Eat something or else I’ll Apparate you to your in-laws.”

“Our in-laws. They’re yours too.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Fine, I will eat, ok? I’ll take a Floo to Grimmauld Place as soon as I can find a nurse for that child. Draco is probably cooking today, since Frilly’s coming home for good.”

The idea of going to have lunch with Draco and everyone else was tempting, but Harry was too concerned about his reaction and he knew Hermione would feed him the memory as soon as he made room for her. He wondered whether Legilimency was dangerous to pregnant women; oh, well,
Draco was a Mediwizard, he would know. Instead, he decided to turn around and let her walk away, but his mouth had other plans.

“How is… he?” He regretted saying the words as soon as they left his mouth, but there was nothing to be done now.

“Coping. His eyes are becoming healthier by the day. He’s been bonding with the children, Luna loves him, Kreacher loves him, everyone there loves him. He’s been teaching Teddy all kinds of stuff and he’s…”

“What?”

“He’s being more present a father for Albus than you.” Harry gritted his teeth to pretend it didn’t hurt. It didn’t work. “I’m not judging.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Maybe I am, a little.” She kissed him on the cheek. “But you will have your answer soon enough and anyway… it’s about time you stop using work and Draco’s daughter as excuses not to face the fact that you love him and don’t want him to leave.”

“He just might.”

“You can’t be sure. Don’t be so pessimistic.” She caressed his shoulder lightly. “Let’s stick to the plan to give him the chance to make a decision, alright?”

Harry took another deep breath before nodding silently. By his chest, Lyra’s sucking had diminished and was now mere reflex as the baby doze off in his arms. Carefully, he put her inside the chamber again, kissing her little forehead. They left the room and Tyra re-entered it, nodding politely at them while doing it. They walked in silence until they reached the Floo, from where Harry would depart. He hugged his friend tight for a moment.

“If he forgives me, I will never walk away again, Hermione. I will fight for him no matter what.”

She found the heart to chuckle. “I know.”

He left in a haze of green flames, showing up at the Atrium after a brief yet thoughtful trip. He was so focused on not feeling that he didn’t notice he had stepped smoothly out of the fireplace, in a fashion he hardly ever managed. The door to his office was still closed, but the wards had been disturbed and he picked up his wand as soon as he noticed it. Great. One more thing he did not need: intruders. The diagnosis spell didn’t reach through the closed door, which meant he’d have to burst it open and remain calm and collected. Internally counting to three, he did just that. When he stepped in, though, the man standing at his wandpoint, sitting on his desk chair and delicately sipping a cup of strong coffee if the scent was anything to go by, was Zabini.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the time it took me to post! RL getting in the way, as usual. Part 2 shall come soon!
“Greetings, Potter.” The Slytherin looked all too pleased with himself when he sipped his coffee again. On the couch, Ron was rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands determinedly, trying to vanish the last bits of sleep from his face. He was a mess: red-rimmed eyes, drool drying on his chin, hair in disastrous disarray. Zabini did not seem to be bothered by any of it. “I expected you would show up soon enough.”

“He’s just arrived.” Ron failed to stifle a yawn. “Said he’s got intel.”

“We are going for lunch right now,” replied Harry, gesturing for his friend to clean up. “Can’t it wait until we have returned, Zabini?”

“Well, it does depend. How much further do you want Draco to be involved?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about.”

Delicately, gracefully, Blaise pulled a folder from his robes, extending it to Harry in an outdated manner. He was so posh it made Harry want to punch him in the nose. Picking it up rather angrily, Harry opened it before being told to say so.

“Dear Merlin, Draco did say you were far too hasty for your own good, but I had not dimensioned how much.”

“What the bloody hell do you want, you twat?”

Zabini put his cup aside. “I have been informed you have been looking for a certain woman named Flora?” Harry’s hands froze. “Is my intelligence at odds with reality?”

“What about that woman?” asked Ron, clean and up, edging closer to his friend. “How do you know about her?”

“Well, as it seems, you are not the only ones conducting investigations off the book.” Zabini twirled his hand around, indicating the folder with far many more flourishes than ever deemed necessary. “Draco has asked me to search for the lady. According to him, something about her felt off. Human, you might say. It was not something he had been expecting inside a torture spectacle.”

“Why has he resorted to you?” Blaise shrugged in a way that clearly meant he knew of Draco’s reasons but wouldn’t mention them. “What is this?”

“I have found her, obviously. Unlike you, we do not have qualms about involving far more people into the greater scheme of things to achieve higher ends, since a Slytherin’s ulterior motives are always a mystery to those around them. When Draco described her to me, I had a suspicion she might have been sister to a girl I once hooked up with.” Blaise crossed his legs, his thighs tensing and un-tensing in a teasing way. The bastard was goddamn handsome and he wore his charm and sex appeal like his own skin. “She was a Slytherin, one year below us, had a twin sister and has been met by you, Potter, during your sixth year, in an occasion I am certain you’d rather erase from your mind.”

Blaise uttered no more words; Harry understood he’d have to think and recall. He had had many uncomfortable situations during sixth year, but very few had been of gathering, particularly with Slytherin students. The only moment other than the feasts he could possibly think of was those blasted Slug Club parties. Thinking about them, there were twins there: two skinny, unnoticeable
girls who remained quiet for most of the time. In fact, he could only recall one of them ever speaking, but her voice was plain and ordinary and had not been worthy of notice from Harry. Still, the eyes of the quiet one had been the surprise. He had never seen a Slytherin with eyes so gentle, but even her eyes had vanished from his mind when the war began to rage through.

“I remember her. From the Slug Club.” Blaise raised his cup as if toasting his discovery. “But she’s different. Very different.”

“Oh, of course she is. I believe it was Severus who helped her change some facial features so she wouldn’t be readily recognized.”

“When in want of information about a Slytherin student, who would you ever think of coming across to?” Blaise chuckled. “He was a mentor to many of us. According to him, the girl is named Flora Regina Macmillan. She was intended to go to Hufflepuff, but asked to be put in Slytherin due to her connection to her twin sister. Married to one Ernest Macmillan after escaping the hands of her rather unpleasant relatives. In fact, she has left them so readily that she has been able to make a living right here in this Ministry. As an Unspeakable, no less.”

“How could Snape know all that?”

“I have just said she has no more family whatsoever, haven’t I? Who do you think she turned to before her husband appeared in her life?”

“But who the hell was she related to? For a Slytherin to disown her family like that, they must be sodding losers to begin with.”

“Funnily enough, her parents have been killed in a raid during the First War and her guard has been passed on to her uncle, on her father’s side. I believe both of you are familiar with the name of Amycus Alexander Carrow?”

Silence befell upon them like a slab of concrete. Dizzy, feeling sick, Harry had to grab the nearest piece of furniture to avoid crumbling to the ground. They had a Carrow in the Ministerial ranks. A Carrow had held Scorpius while the other rooted for Draco in that bizarre, hideous torture. They could be in danger right at that instant. It was Ron who recovered first.

“How dangerous is she?” Harry wanted to slam the wooden chair he was holding onto his friend’s face.

“And how am I supposed to know?” Zabini slurred in a way that conveyed that yes, he did know. He finished his coffee and Vanished the cup. “If you do want to see for yourselves, though, my family is attempting to seal a deal with the Macmillans for a property leasing in Exeter. She is likely to attend an afternoon meeting should I call upon her to. Macmillan is a ruthless negotiator, but he is in Libya vouching for importation of rare species of something and could not be forced to attend any meeting in the meantime. If his wife is anything like Severus has described, she will come to me, even if just to avoid displeasing me and ruining her husband’s deal.”

Ron frowned and munched on that thought for a moment. It was as neutral a ground as they could possibly wish for: Zabini’s property would be warded with anti-Apparition wards and most likely some fancy, nondescript Dark methods of keeping people from hurting the host and any other guests. It was a good chance; if the woman was an Unspeakable, it meant she was trusted and relied upon by so many it was impossible to lie to all of them without sacrificing one’s personality entirely. She must be an incredible actress or else she really did not want to bear the Carrow surname, and indeed
walked away from it. Either way, that was their best chance to find out: with Zabini’s deal off the table or Macmillan’s return, their chances to corner her would be minimum, since no one in the Department had access to the Unspeakables.

“We’ll come for her.”

Blaise visibly shuddered. “Oh please, don’t. That would be a performance I wouldn’t dream of seeing in my wildest nightmares.”

The double-entendre took a moment to sink in the Gryffindors’ brains, but when it did, both went vermillion. “Sodding git,” said Ron, narrowing his eyes at the Slytherin. “When should we meet?”

“I’ll owl you the address and Apparition coordinates as soon as I have her with me.” Blaise got up, shaking the creases off his obscenely expensive robes. “I suppose you wouldn’t allow Draco to come with us?”

“No,” said Harry, vehement. “But you can notify him of it and if he insists, I’m not the one who’ll hinder him.” Both Blaise and Ron stared in shock at him; in his best mate’s case, it was blatant and wide-eyed, while Zabini’s smirk’s faltering was the only indication of the Slytherin’s surprise. “Tell him I don’t advise it, though, will you? I don’t know how much he remembers but hearing her voice or feeling her presence might be harmful, medically speaking.”

“Look at you, having actual reasons to prevent someone from doing something potentially harmful.” Zabini grinned. “Non ti preoccupare, Salvatore,” he said nonchalantly. “I believe Draco will find somewhere else to be by the time Flora comes to me.”

With those words, the Slytherin departed, leaving Harry and Ron on their own in the quiet office. Ron came up with an uncontained yawn, then stretched again. “So, we gonna grab that lunch or not?”

They went, of course. Too tired of dealing with wizards and their politics and prickliness, both of them decided they should adventure further into the Muggle world. They found a small restaurant that served meat pie and stuffed mushrooms, not to mention a beautiful, mouth-watering treacle tart as dessert. He and Ron ate the first bites in companionable silence, before a woman bearing an uncanny resemblance to Hermione came inside, holding a small girl by the hand. Harry tried to keep his mate’s attention on him with sudden comments on the Chudley Cannons’ game last week, but it was an unfruitful effort. Ron noticed the woman at once and his face fell; once again, he looked hurt and damaged. Harry cringed inwardly; Ron’s words didn’t leave him time to react any more, though.

“She’s going to keep it, you know.” He laughed, but it came out humourless and dry. “She said she did it on purpose.”

“I’m sorry, mate.” And he was sorry indeed. Unlike Ginny, Ron wanted kids. Hermione had been categorical in saying she wouldn’t have a child before stabilizing her career, but as soon as she did and her mind was better, she had indulged in a very well taken care of pregnancy that had resulted in Rosie — and the dreadful near-death experience that had Ron crying in genuine despair for hours, non-stop.

“She thinks I’m selfish.” He shook his head. “I want another child. I’d have plenty of them, as many as I could possibly afford, but the risk is too high. I cannot risk the woman I love for the sake of someone I’ve never seen.”

“I understand you, mate, but it’s done now.” Harry’s mind was flooded by the images of Hermione’s slumped shoulders, her pain, her hurt. “Do you intend to let her handle it on her own?”
“Merlin’s beard, Harry, of course not!” He looked furious all of a sudden. “It’s my fault as much as hers! There are several contraceptive methods and I should have used one too. I should have listened to her when she asked for a child; who knows, we could have adopted one, made a blood rite to make it our blood heir and everything.”

“You know no one can stop Hermione when she’s measured the risks and decided to take a chance.” Ron nodded, sighing deep then. “Is she under medical accompaniment?”

“Sort of. Malfoy has diagnosed her. He convinced her to tell me and seek professional guidance.” Harry nodded slowly. Trust Draco to make her see outside of her little box. It made more sense now that she had almost dragged him to clear things up with him; if she was indebted to him given the illumination he gave her, she would require herself to illuminate him too. “I can’t believe I owe that bastard something.”

“Given that you’ve been helping him so far and have been victim to quite a few scars in the meantime, I believe he’d find that debt already paid for.” Harry couldn’t help the smile on his face. “Are you two good?”

“Me and the ferret?” Ron arched an eyebrow.

“No, you prat, you and ‘Mione.”

Ron sighed again. “We will be when she decides she wants to see me again. I think she’s blowing it all out of proportion, you know? It’s bad, and I’m not happy, and I’m disappointed at her disregard for her own life, but we’re together in this, mate. She’s my wife. This is not just some archaic title. She’s my companion for life and I’m hers and I won’t allow her to deal with anything on her own because I wasn’t there.”

Relief flooded through Harry even quicker at that. His best mate had become an extraordinary man in the end. He was much more mature than Harry himself most of times. He had never considered his marriage to Ginny like that — but there again, their love had been different from the start.

The rest of meal passed amidst light conversation and some delighted cussing after mouthfuls of warm tart. They paid for it — Harry dealt the foreign currency Ron still hadn’t gotten a grab on —, heading to Diagon Alley to wait for Blaise’s owl. Ron’s nose was pressed against the glass of Quidditch Quality Supplies in less than a minute; even Harry, who had not really mounted a broom in months now, had to admit the new Cleansweep XVIII was a sight to behold. Made in walnut with a leather-cherry grip, it came with a special Cushioning Spell with a variance of anti-collision charms that Harry had heard Muggleborns call airbag charms. The outer bristles were softened-and-hardened bamboo, to keep the conformation for longer; the inner ones were traditional but fairly little used naywood (a species of coastal tree bred specifically for broom-making purposes and really difficult to grow) with five-layered brake charms and hypersensitivity to turns up. It was light, delicate but sturdy and decidedly top of line. It was the most expensive blasted thing inside the store, although it was probably worth every knut.

“Do you think they’d let me hold it?” asked Ron as they entered the store.

“Use the Hero of the Wizarding World card.” Harry shrugged.

Ron seemed to consider it for a moment but the next he was already going for it. He came back less than half a minute later with the broom in hand, caressing its handle with a feather-like touch.

“It’s gorgeous.”
Seeing it so close, Harry felt the pull towards it. The carved grip begged him to touch it, to hold it; Godric, he missed flying. Ron reverently let him touch it, careful not to drop it although it was probably so covered in anti-theft and fall-preventing spells that no one could make any harm to it.

“It reminds me… are you coming for Ginny’s birthday?”

Harry frowned. “Of course.”

“Oh, good. Mother wanted me to ask you since, you know, you’re not showing up at our place anymore.” He pursed his lips. “I think she misses you.”

“I miss her too.” Harry felt a weight crash upon him. “I’ll visit when this whole thing is over.”

“Even if Ginny’s there?”

“Ron, I don’t loathe your sister or anything. We’re just going through a falling out. There will probably be a divorce, too, but that’s that. We will be good.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a huge, careful owl that looked so heinously posh it could only be Blaise’s. Harry took the letter and Ron went to return the broom to the salesperson who had given it to him, under profuse thanks and dozens of smiles. Next thing they knew, they were climbing up a cobbled path to a gigantic, two-storey Victorian house nested in the middle of a property as huge as a small village. They didn’t have to pierce through wards, nor knock at the door; a house-elf came to escort them as soon as they were within the property.

“Méliador, at your service, sirs.” The elf bowed as low as he could without snapping in two. His speech was much more similar to those of butlers than to those of other elves. He Apparated them inside the house smoothly, without as much as a pull. It was disorienting. “Master Blaise is waiting for you. Can I take your coats?”

Wide-eyed at the enormity of the mansion, Harry and Ron allowed him to. A second elf called Margherita went to escort them to the proper interior of Casa Zabini, as it was named. Tasteful, balanced between tradition and modernity, the house could be cover to an interior design issue of Witch Weekly. They passed a ballroom, two libraries, two studies and a couple more rooms whose finalities Harry had no idea of before reaching the drawing room, where Blaise sat, elegant but relaxed, on an armchair that looked regal and absolutely comfortable. In front of him, smiling gently and being perfectly adorable, there was Flora. She looked much more composed than she had been at the memory, but her features, her hair, the way she held the cup — it was all so incredibly the same. Rage boiled inside Harry’s veins, and were Ron’s hand not on his shoulder while his wand flooded Harry with a Pacifying Spell, he would have jumped on her throat and slaughtered her like a bloody werewolf. Instead, he heard Margherita’s voice introducing them.

“Mr Weasley and Mr Potter are here to see you, master Zabini.” She curtsied, holding the hems of her white tablecloth delicately, and nudged them in with a smile. Blaise stood and spread his arms open.

“Please, do sit down, gentlemen.” He gestured towards two unoccupied armchairs. Flora stood too, curtsying calmly, a wan smile on her face. “This is Flora Macmillan, Ernest’s wife.”

Harry couldn’t look at her without feeling anger pouring through his pores, so Ron went first. He bowed and took her hand like a lord, which drew a small sigh of surprise from Zabini.

“Ronald Weasley, madam.” He kissed her knuckles lightly. “And this is Harry Potter.” He nearly pushed his friend towards her; his bow was stiff and his kiss, too brief, but he followed protocol like
he was being forced to. There was something in that room that was preventing him to be anything but polite towards the lady once he was near her. “We are acquaintances of Mr Zabini; do you mind if we share your tea?”

“Oh, no, not at all!” She flushed, her skin gaining a delicate, lovely rosy colour. Her black eyes were slightly scared, Harry could see it, but she was every bit a blasted pureblood. She wouldn’t run from a host and their guests. “We were just chatting about minor things. Are you sure you don’t need me to exit the room?”

“Of course not, Flora, don’t rush yourself when it is not necessary.” Blaise smiled kindly at her. Bastard. It was clear that Blaise trusted her. “Now, you were talking about your sister?”

“Oh. Yes.” She lowered her head. “I believe she has rekindled the flame of her relationship with our aunt and uncle. She has paid aunt Alecto several visits for the past months and I am terribly worried about her.”

“Alecto Carrow?” What Harry intended to be threatening came out sweet and polite, almost thoughtful. His confusion was visible the next second, but Ron’s subtle shake of his head stopped him from commenting. Later, Ron would name the spell surrounding them for him: Truce Enchantment. It wasn’t different from the one at Narcissa’s summer household.

“Yes, sir. She is an awful person but she’s blood, and Merlin knows my sister cannot sever blood ties. Never could.” She sniffed. “I am afraid I won’t be able to save her this time.”

“Why don’t you tell us what’s going on?” asked Ron, so gentle it was nearly a caress. Flora stared at him for a moment before tilting her head elegantly to the side. “I am positive you know we are Aurors, madam. We have faced several situations like this, of people we care about who treaded a path too close to darkness to be of any profit.”

“Is this why they are here?” Flora looked at Blaise with what looked suspiciously like tears on the corners of her eyes.

“You looked in need of help last time I met you, my dear, and it has come to my attention that Hestia has taken part in torturing someone I care deeply about.” The boldness of that statement would have sent anyone raging panicking, but Flora was not just anyone, as Harry would soon find out. She wasn’t an Unspeakable for nothing. “They are handling Draco’s case. Do you want to tell us what has happened?”

She broke down crying in half an instant. “I never meant to— She was being so mean and I— He was a child— I couldn’t let them—”

In an instant, Blaise was beside the woman, handing her a handkerchief and embracing her shoulders. Harry was shocked with the speed with which she was letting her tongue loose. No one guilty of anything could be that willing to blurt out a confession.

“There, there, my dear, there’s nothing to fear.” Zabini looked up as if defyng any of them to contradict him. “Just tell us what happened. We know your sister is involved, we know Amycus is free, we know the Crabbe family is a part of it.” Harry exchanged looks with Ron, but his face testified that he had not said anything to the Slytherin. Harry’s heart sank when he realised that the only person who could possibly know so much was Draco, and it must mean he remembered almost everything now. He felt slightly sick for not having been and still not being there to help him through it all. “But we don’t know why, and we don’t know who.”

She needed a couple of moments to calm down, but when she did, the truth came spilling out. Harry
was appointed as the interrogator, a role that should have been easier, were he confident of what he was doing and his suspicions on the woman. In fact, Flora was so willing to talk that she asked him whether he’d rather use Legilimency or Veritaserum — Harry always had it on him nowadays, just in case. Blaise was who forced him to believe her without those measures, and so she began.

“My sister… she has not forgiven the Wizarding World for pushing us aside and alienating our family. It’s not really dangerous, since she’s whimsical and wan at best, but she found more people like her and she won’t stop until it ends.”

“How did she find them?”

“Uncle Amycus sent her a letter. He said the followers of the Dark Lord were once again restless and she could avenge everything the others had done to her if she went to Malfoy Manor in January. When she came to me begging me to accompany her, I didn’t want to. I told her she should let go, but she said if I didn’t come with her, she’d let go of me. It’s not enough, living completely apart from her. I’d always be missing a part of me.”

“So she threatened you and you went with her,” added Harry, nodding lightly.

Flora shook her head in despair. “I didn’t want to. When I heard there would be children involved too, though…” Her breath faltered. “I have children of my own. I couldn’t let innocents be involved.” Harry muttered a soft “of course” to keep her talking. “I didn’t understand it at first. I saw Narcissa pampering Draco, laughing with him, with Astoria, being nice to them. For several days, I thought my sister was insane and hallucinating; still, whenever I asked Narcissa to leave, she told me we were not bothering anyone and therefore should not have to leave. I could go to work and spend the evenings I wanted wherever I wanted; I was not imprisoned. There was no difference from that and my regular life.”

“And that’s how you stayed.”

Flora acquiesced briefly. “It started somewhere around March, I think. Nobody was permitted to go upstairs anymore. We were given quarters in the holding cells of the Manor. The elves started to vanish, one by one, until one day Draco called for them and there was none but the old one.”

“Frilly? A blind one?”

“Yes. Draco was fond of her. I tried to understand what was going on, but it was too out of the ordinary. They would close down entire halls to allow people to work in there. One day, they brought in a chimaera.” Blaise’s lips pursed tight at that. Harry and Ron only nodded. “It was gigantic. There were fifteen witches and wizards containing it. Fifteen. My sister was among them. They asked me to go in and help, so I did. Dawlish and Crabbe and Nott and my uncle and Farrow were there. I haven’t seen the faces of the others.”

“Fifteen people is not enough a number to handle a chimaera. Do you know how they made it?”

“It was a male, they’re smaller and slightly less vicious. Besides, my uncle has an… ability with animals.” She shook her head. “Hestia has it too. They were cooing at the thing and subsiding it while the others put in decent reins. When they were done, they called me to milk the venom out of it.”

“Milk it out?”

“Apparently, chimaeras stock up on venom, but are very slow to produce it. It took me twelve hours to drain its purse. When I did it, the Malfoys appeared out of nowhere. Narcissa gave the beast
something and it caved. It was when they brought the first hippogriff.”

“How many were they?”

“Seven. The last one finally kept the spawns.”

“Spawns?”

“There were three. The mother tried to kill them before she died.”

“We only found one of them. The albino one.”

“They were all albino. Narcissa killed the older one. Too chimaera for her liking, I think.” Flora seemed genuinely disturbed at that. “They killed the male chimaera too. Drained its blood like cranberry juice.”

“It’s ok, Flora, you’re doing well. You’re doing very well.” Blaise caressed her shoulders again, soothing, when she looked like she would crumble again. “Where is the other spawn?”

“I don’t know. It was a gentle thing, small and kind like a kitten. It was a female, all white, blue-eyes. She didn’t even have a venom purse, Amicus checked her. I never saw her again.”

“The one who remained, was it Chim?” She nodded. “Is he bad?”

“He’s a guardian.” She sighed. “He’s attached to the Manor and to Draco and Astoria. I don’t think She knew that. I never told her. My sister never cared about bonds, she cannot pinpoint them, and apparently nobody else there can or wants to.”

“But you can.”

“I’ve learned with Milly.” She was crying again now. “I’m bad at magic, it has… restrictions on me. I cannot destroy or kill things, I cannot unbalance the world around me like every other magician. I cannot make things float just by waving a wand or make them stop falling because I wanted them to when gravity says no, I have to respect the will of the thing. Milly taught me how to look for powers and forces through empathy so I could channel magic and pass my exams.”

“You cannot hurt people?” She shook her head. “Not at all?”

“I’m not like my sister, Mr Potter.” Her proud chin went up. “I make a living in re-establishing the natural order, not corrupting it like all of you.”

“You said Chim was a guardian?” Ron interrupted them before she became angry. Magic was a sensitive matter, apparently. She breathed out and seemed to calm down again. “Can you explain it somehow?”

“He was supposed to keep the door to Draco’s and Astoria’s cells. After the mother hippogriff’s conceiving, Astoria aborted. Narcissa was certain it was Draco’s work; she forbade everyone to go near them and kept them in holding cells with locks and everything. The farce was gone. There was always someone around Astoria, there was always someone inside Draco’s cell. He tried to kill himself once; it was when I was designated to take care of him.”

“You were his guard?”

“Sort of. He had someone to talk to and endured the next months. Draco isn’t dumb. He understood they needed him and heard some people saying that they had to treat him well because if he died,
they would have to let go of the plan.” Harry nodded silently, understanding. “He told me how worried he was about Astoria and I… I disabled the barriers so they could at least be together for some time. Until the baby was born, you know?” Her stifled, sparse sobs became more audible. “They never let him see the baby’s face. They sent him to the cell with Draco and every day there was someone to threaten him, to threaten Scorpius. Astoria went mad. She became apathetic and didn’t want to eat, so they locked what they did to Scorpius and Draco somewhere deep in her mind.”

“Wouldn’t it have been more merciful to kill them?”

“They couldn’t. They need the lineage.”

“The Malfoy lineage?”

Flora nodded. “I don’t know what the Malfoys can do, I really don’t, but it’s what they want. They plan to resurrect someone, even though it shouldn’t be possible, and they need the Malfoys for that. Narcissa said the lineage only completes when there’s a girl. She said there has to be a girl born and she has to breathe once and it’s enough to complete the spell and allow the rest of it.” The woman was sobbing now. “They didn’t even take the baby out of her womb! They left them to die!”

“Flora. Flora, darling, she’s alive, they’re both alive, calm down, please. You didn’t kill them, they’re alive.” Blaise kissed the top of her head as the woman clung to his suit, wetting his perfectly pressed shirt with unstopping tears. That side of Zabini was one no one saw often, but the girl had been a Slytherin and acquainted to him; maybe circumstances allowed it. Still, Harry thought it strange.

“Are you insane? Why are you telling her that? She could go and report them!”

Ron put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I don’t think she will, mate. She’s being honest. She’s terrified.” He stared at the woman convulsing in sobs before them. “Mrs Macmillan, do you know how did Malfoy escape captivity?”

She sniffed. “Yes.” She took a handkerchief from Margherita’s hand (the elf was quick to show and fast to leave), dabbing it at her eyes before crumpling it in her hands. “I helped him out. Frilly was around there all the time, but the cells are tricky and they’d need a cover-up. She knocked me down with untraceable elven magic, robbed my keys and Draco’s wand, took him and Scorpius and left.”

“Why did it take so long?” Harry didn’t know if he really wanted to hear about that, but it was hard not to pursue information when it was being so willingly given. “Why didn’t you pull that stunt sooner?”

“I didn’t have Draco’s wand. It was with Astoria. Narcissa was upset that Draco wouldn’t obey her anymore, so she asked Harold and Clement to force him to. But they’re dumb, they couldn’t get through to him and in the end he was too hurt to be left to heal by himself. Astoria and I were called inside to heal him; she had to take Scorpius with her, Draco was too badly injured…” She shook her beautiful head. “She gave me his wand then. Harold and Clement came again, and once more; sometimes Narcissa would come with them. Draco and Astoria were afraid that the link with the property would rather obey Narcissa’s orders than Astoria’s, were Draco to leave the Manor; it was Frilly who convinced them that was not the real Narcissa. Astoria was weak and pregnant, she couldn’t Appарат. The last time they beat him up, she had already given Draco Scorpius and begged him to go. He used his last forces to go after her, but I believe Frilly had her way and saved them somehow. I was blacked out, I don’t know the finer details.”

It explained why an alley, why not a hospital. Frilly was designated to take care of the family;
without Draco there, there was a chance Astoria would have been harmed. There had probably been attractive spells around Draco too, then, which justified the cats all around him when Harry found him. So many cats close to an Apparition point would definitely call someone’s attention.

Harry stared at the woman once more. The subtle balance she had showed for the past minutes was threatening to break soon; he put on his most sympathetic look to stare at her. “Tell me, the woman Frilly insists wasn’t Narcissa… Is she Bellatrix Lestrange?”

She shook her head violently; for a moment, Harry felt himself deflate. Her words gave him hope, though.

“I cannot think of anyone else who would go to such lengths for anything if not her. But I haven’t seen her. No one but Macedonia has access to her apart from official gatherings.” At last, she broke down, crying like a child. “I am so sorry, I’m a mess…”

“No, Flora, it’s ok, it’s fine, really; you went well, you went very well.” Ron conjured a blanket to throw on her shoulders. “Your husband’s in Libya, isn’t he?” She nodded. “Who knows that?”

“Me. The three of you. His father, I think.”

“Anyone else?” She shook her head. “Good. Good, that’s good. Is he going to stay away for long? Like, over a month?” She nodded again. “That’s, that’s awesome, it really is. Listen, you’re an Unspeakable and a witness now. I’ll find you an emergency portkey and you’ll go to your husband and you’re not coming back without him, ok?” She nodded once more. “Can your sister find you through your connection?”

“I don’t think so. She never could. It doesn’t develop late in people, as far as I know.”

“Ok, that’s good too. I’ll find the key and meet you at your place, can I have your address?” She wrote it with a wisp of magic on a spare piece of parchment and Ron pocketed it. “I want you to go pack a bag with everything you cannot live without, everything that’s precious to you and your husband and anything that could lead to you. Do you think you can do that?”

She mumbled a half-hearted “yes”. “I’ll go with her,” said Blaise, steady and calm. “It will be faster in two.”

Ron nodded and bowed to them. “Thank you for your hospitality.” The phrase was ceremonial and uncannily Malfoy; Harry wondered if being in touch with another pureblood had really rekindled the flame of tradition inside Ron or it was just something he had never had much use for before all that came to happen. Either way, he was behaving impeccably; soon, the Weasley name would no longer be disregarded so easily. “Harry?”

“Yes, right.” He bowed too. “Please send my best regards to your husband, ma’am. I wish we will have further and lighter opportunities to meet in the future.”

Flora curtsied with a kind, small smile on her face. “So we shall.” Blaise proffered his right hand and she took it delicately. “I am most grateful to your kindness, sirs.”

“Please take care,” Harry couldn’t help but to utter as she left, still under the Truce Enchantment around the room. When the woman and Blaise were no longer anywhere in his field of vision, he turned to Ron. “Are you sure we could out her of any accusations like that? She’s not within the Program. We can’t vouch for her safety out there.”

“She’ll do just fine.” He sighed. “I’ll make sure to include her when I ask for the portkey. Shacklebolt must have already read your report and we’d do well to make him work some more.”
Slowly, Margherita entered the room, conducting them towards Méliador, who then showed them the way out. The elves were charming and endearing, but slightly creepy, and Harry was happy to leave them. As soon as they were out of the perimeter, Ron clapped his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Go home and let me handle it. Talk to your lover. Play with your children, mate. You’re working like you’re sentenced to it.”

The fear for Draco’s reaction seeped through his skin like venom. He gulped discreetly. Ron had a lot to think about already. “Sure. Good luck. Send a Patronus if you need me.”

“I will. See ya.”

He stared at Ron’s sweeping figure for far too many moments before spinning around and Disapparating home to fight his own battles.
Far gone

Hermione was worried. Incredible, deeply worried. Draco was staring at her with absolutely no known expression on his face, apparently dead, or petrified. She could almost bet he was downright angry. Probably really angry. Right, he was angry as shit. She usually didn’t like those words but there was no saying how much anger those thinned lips, white where they pressed against each other with so much force, could contain. The grey eyes were the colour of steel, devoid of any softness they once had or any strangeness the venom could grant them. Of course there wasn’t anything strange about them: they were healed. Well, almost. Draco already knew his vision would never be the same, but he could see through a pair of Harry’s spare glasses — the frame was too heavy on his face, but he found out he liked it. It gave him a posh, hipster air that fitted his noblesse well.

Those eyes were still as stone now.

“Draco?” Hermione shook him slightly, finally deciding he had been quiet for too long.

“Right.” He cleared his throat. Were those **tears** in his eyes? “Have you seen my daughter?”

“Yes. She’s fine, Draco, she’s fine.”

“Don’t lie to me, Granger.” His tone was even but it unleashed a strike of magic that broke one of the bookshelves in the study in half. Hermione cowered, impressed and a tad bit scared. What was that? “She’s bound to die. I want to know how long I have with her.”

“She’s not stable but it’s like Harry said, she’s reacting.” Hearing Harry’s name made him close his eyes and sigh. He didn’t open them again. “I personally believe she will leave the hospital.”

He had to snort at that. What good would her personal beliefs do when it was his daughter’s life at stake? He sighed again. How had he had another child? Why hadn’t Astoria let her go? He had told her, he had mentioned how unfortunate the children in his family were. She knew how to force an abortion if needed. He knew when it had happened, of course. The dates, the timing, it amounted to that fateful day in which those creeps had forced him upon her.

Frilly showed up during the silence with a tea cup for him. Draco thanked the blind elf with all his heart, appreciating her motherly caress.

“Why is this happening to me, Frilly?” he murmured to her, staring at the wrinkled little former servant with defeat written across his brows. “I promised I wouldn’t test my children, I promised I wouldn’t allow them to suffer.”

“Master Malfoy’s family is a tough family, master,” she whispered back, patting his hand gently. “It is you who must turn this for the better, master. Frilly knows Master Malfoy can do this. Frilly knows Frilly’s master won’t let anyone perish along the way.” She smiled a semi-toothless grin. “Frilly believes in Master Malfoy, master. And Frilly always knows best, right?” She caressed his hand again. “Now master should drink this tea. It’s good tea. Frilly makes all the good tea.”

“Thank you, Frilly,” Draco spoke in barely any voice. “I’ll call you when I need you again.”

“Frilly lives for Master Malfoy, master.” She bowed her head instead of curtsying or bowing completely; it was a sign of respect, not of submission. Then, she left the room, leaving Draco and Hermione alone together again.

They had no more words to exchange, so Hermione remained silent as Draco downed the tea, sip by
sip. It was luck, really, that someone found fit to interrupt them before the silence became suffocating enough to kill.

“Draco!” The voice was familiar and Hermione never thought she’d be so glad to hear the peerless sound of Parkinson’s stupidly high heels marching, running on the floor. She threw herself onto Draco like he wasn’t someone who had just made spell-proof mahogany split in half. But there again, maybe she hadn’t seen the disgrace lying in front of her. “I am so sorry.”

Too poised to be hysterical, he laughed. “Right.”

“I promise I am. But it will be alright.”

“It’s not going to be alright, Parkinson.” The surname wasn’t mocking; he was pushing her with words instead of doing it with his hands. Understanding, she stood in front of him, staring at him like he was insane. Maybe she wasn’t wrong. “But would you sate my curiosity… How have you had the courage… the nerve to lie to me? I could expect anything from Potter, really, it doesn’t even surprise me anymore that his bloody head can’t leave his arse for long enough to clean the shit from his stupid glasses, but you?” He shook his head and Hermione, who had seen disappointment from many people she cared about, never once wondered she’d feel so distraught after seeing it in Draco’s eyes. It felt like her bones were becoming sawdust and she felt the threat of tears overcome her. Stupid hormones.

“Draco, you knew it,” Pansy tried, folding her arms. It was a sight to behold, a stand-off between those two. Pansy must be hurt, but hell, she wasn’t showing it. “You knew it was a baby. You’re not an idiot.”

“I thought she had been pregnant, yes.” Draco said the words like no more than a conclusion, and it was the lack of passion in them that allowed the force of the reality to hit the women. “I thought she had lost another child.” Hermione felt her mouth open and closed her eyes in sadness. “I’ve taken our first from her. Pansy, I’d be fine if she had been through an abortion, but… hide a child from me? Hide a little girl from me?” He raked his hands through his hair, the first real sign of despair he had presented so far, but his voice remained low and even. “Have you even considered— after Wis and Clara— Have you even—?”

“Harry promised me he would tell! We didn’t think she’d make it,” tried Hermione, even though she knew it was in vain.

“It doesn’t matter. Can’t you see it doesn’t matter?” He closed his eyes for a moment, shook his head and forced his body to calm down. It was like seeing the birth of a statue out of white marble. “When can I visit?”

“After five,” said Hermione, trying to make it sound like he had been asking about the weather. It didn’t work. Her voice was full of feeling, one of which was becoming rapidly clear as crystal, distilled anger towards Harry. “Phineas will have given you clearance by then.”

“Great.” He stared from one to the other for a long, long moment. “Granger, please, don’t mention what just happened to Potter. Kreacher will fix the bookshelf and I don’t need Potter’s apologies at the moment, so I better not see him for now, is it clear?” She nodded. Like there was anything else she could do. Nodding too, he turned to Pansy. “Parkinson, you’re a disgrace but you’re my useful, personal disgrace. You’ll ward me.”

“Of course.”

“Meet me here at four forty-five and not a second later.”
“Right.”

She didn’t try to argue; for the first time, Pansy was dead quiet, every swift retort well hidden inside her. Draco approved of it. There was nothing she could say right now that would help in any way. Draco was not even furious: he was frustrated, disappointed, but above everything, he felt hurt. It wasn’t an emotion he experienced often, and it made him want to erase the past month from his mind. He had never felt so weak, so fragile. What right did Potter have, to lie to him like that? He had believed him. He had believed his words when he said he was safe and he would be taken care of. That was not what he had bargained for.

“Papa?”

Albus’ voice took him from his reverie. He had gotten up and walked away from the study without even realising it, his eyes again closed. Being in the dark felt, ironically, like second nature to him now, but he opened his eyes to the sound of the childish voice. The boy was standing in front of him, dressed in a hideous red tee and khaki shorts, his little feet bare and chubby. He had a book in his hands and right behind him, trembling, obviously still feverish, holding onto Albus’ little shoulder, there was Scorpius, smiling weakly at his father. All the hatred and frustration slipped from his mind when he kneeled and took both babies in his arms. They were about eighteen months now; they were big boys, his big boys. Somehow, it made him proud to see it. He would never grow tired of seeing them and he had no shame in telling they were his main motivation to regain his vision. Every time he stared at them, his eyes welled up in the most un-Malfoy way, but it was… seeing Scorpius was always like the first time. He had spent hours staring at his blonde hair that morning, when the lenses and the potion finally made him able to see something. Sometimes things were out of focus, and he had to rest his eyes often, but seeing him…

“Papa eysh?” Albus touched Draco’s glasses with hands that had obviously been dipped in food not long before. Draco’s vision became even worse.

“Yes, my little Aldie.” The boy giggled like he had taken to do whenever Draco called him by his Black name. Aldebaran was a strong one. He kissed the boy’s hair and inhaled his baby scent as if it was a Calming Infusion. Then, he kissed Scorpius’ hair too. Yes, still feverish. He mumbled a quick cleaning spell to get rid of the grease on his borrowed glasses. “And how are you, my little scorpion?”

“Awi,” he mumbled, patting his own head weakly. The medicine Phineas had given him had been working but it wasn’t nearly enough. Seeing him like that was heart-wrenching; Draco was this close to throwing their safety away and search for better care for the boy himself. He’d have to take Scorpius with him when he went to the hospital. They couldn’t treat him at home anymore; he’d end up blowing everything to cure him if he tried. Then, the boy seemed to see the book in Albus’ hand and his little face brightened up. “‘Ogash!”

Draco was slightly confused, and it was Teddy who helped him. His little cousin was a sight too. Draco knew it was forcing, and that it didn’t help him much, and that eventually he’d need to spend an entire day taking pain-relieving potions and resting his just-healed eyes, but he couldn’t care less. The turquoise hair with the golden, ruffled up snidget sleeping nestled on top of it was impossible to mistake, as was the strawberry-blondie of the girl Teddy took by her hand. Victoire had shown up in the fireplace beside Teddy that morning when he went to “pick up his dragon book he had forgotten at the Burrow” and, much unlike Draco would have expected from a Weasley, she had greeted him properly, curtsying and all, and sworn she wouldn’t say a word about him to anyone else. Apparently, those terms had been negotiated with Teddy himself.

“It’s our photo album, Cousin!” He grinned and hopped the last steps, landing swiftly and prompting
a startled little cry and a muffled but tender “soi” that Teddy obviously didn’t understand. Draco laughed at Victoire’s natural French. “Sorry, Vy.” He patted her delicate hand gently. “We have some new pictures. It’s a family album, but, well, maybe you haven’t seen some?”

Teddy looked like he sometimes did when he was planning something, so Draco let himself be led by the children. There was no space on the couch for them all, so they literally nested on the fluffy carpet Frilly had cleaned and put on the sitting room. Victoire, small, quiet, kind, smiled at Draco.

“Can I sit here?” she pointed at the spot beside him. “I’ve never seen it.”

“Of course you can.” He scooted a bit, paying attention on the babies, who were trampling each other for his other side, while she sat down. When he finally managed to sit Albus by his side and Scorpius on his lap, Teddy was bouncing impatiently with the album in his hands. “Teddy, sit down. The album will not disappear.”

“You should call me Therium when you order something or I won’t do it!” He pouted, staring at Draco in mock anger. “We made a deal!”

“Fine, Therium. Now please, sit down.” The boy obeyed; being the only one to have seen the album, he sat in front of Draco and opened it so the pictures faced the others. The first one was of a man and a woman Draco didn’t know, dancing slowly in the middle of a cobbled square. “Are these… your godfather’s parents?”

“Yes!” Teddy pointed at the woman, with her flaming hair, a much prettier shade than the Weasleys’ but just as vibrant. “This is Lily, his mother,” he said, pointing then to the man holding her, with his haphazard hair and stupid glasses, “and this is his father, James. He was friends with dad.”

Somehow, despite not yet being able to think of Potter without wanting to punch him in the face, Draco felt a bit of sympathy for him. At least he still had his parents. It hadn’t made his path any easier, but he couldn’t imagine what he would have been without Lucius and Narcissa, even if they had hurt him in the end. Teddy flipped the page, landing on two pictures. The one of the right was of four teenage boys, all laughing at what appeared to be a joke the smaller, chubby, blond one was telling. Teddy’s eyes turned softer then.

“These are the Marauders.” He smiled wanly. Draco didn’t miss the way Victoire’s hand slipped on his, squeezing it tenderly. Scorpius, seeing the people in the picture laughing, laughed too. The sound was weak, but Draco’s heart welled up with joy all the same. Teddy pointed to the guy with glasses, the one Draco knew already. “James, Harry’s dad, was Prongs. This one telling the joke is Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail.” Draco was taken aback. The boy in the picture looked young and kind, not at all the man he had met with that name. For the first time, he wondered what kind of rotten bargain the Dark Lord had offered that chubby Gryffindor so he’d pair up with him. “This is Sirius. They called him Padfoot.” The teen kid in the middle was insufferably beautiful, with wavy pitch black hair and generous, delighted, mischievous eyes. “He’s your cousin too, right?”

“Yes, he was.” Draco tried not to remember the days his mother had spent retreated from her family as the news of her cousin’s death sunk. Narcissa had never spoken about him, not in many words, and Draco had always been sure she just liked Sirius’ deceased brother, Regulus, but her reaction had surprised him. Pushing it aside inside his head, he pointed to the last man. “And this is your father.” Teddy nodded, not trusting his own voice above a whispered “yeah”. Victoire’s grip shook but remained. “Moony.” Teddy nodded again, silent this time. “They look like they were great friends.”

“They’re all dead now.” Teddy blinked quickly, trying not to cry. Draco put a hand on his shoulder. “I think they would have been fun to have around.”
Not knowing what else to say, Draco assured him that yes, they would have. Before the silence became too deep, though, Albus patted the picture on the left, and Draco recognised it.

“Oh, this is…”

“Severus.” Draco cut Teddy’s line, caressing the lines of the stupidly young face of his own deceased godfather. He was sitting beside a much younger version of Potter’s mother, both in school uniforms, cooking something that looked dangerous in a cauldron that had probably been exploded before. Severus was laughing, that pursed little thing he did, except it was clear as day. The girl looked happy to be there too. “They were friends?”

“Until he associated with the wrong people.” Teddy nodded slowly. “Prongspawn says Severus was despicable, but he made him grow-up and face things. Besides, according to his aunt… Severus was Lily’s only true friend. She never found another.”

Draco didn’t seem fit to say she had been Severus’ only friend too, but perhaps Teddy knew it already. Albus, staring intently at the picture, looked up at Draco with questioning eyes.

“Mama?”

He shook his head slightly and smiled at the boy. “No, not your mama, no, Aldie. I think your mum will show up later.”

And she did, as did all the Weasleys and their significant others and children. Teddy was excited to point at a picture of Charlie Weasley, standing beside a Christmas tree and patting the back of a very young Teddy who held the same dragon book he was so fond of. So it had been a gift from him. Beside the red-haired, built-up Gryffindor, a thinner but still muscled man held him by his waist, obviously infatuated with his Weasley boyfriend. Teddy presented the man as Thomas Grimassi, a Canadian dragon-tamer that apparently had fallen for Charlie. Well, with so many children, at least one would have been gay, Draco thought, evaluating Thomas. And the bastard had good taste too. Who’d have imagined.

They passed by pictures of Harry’s wedding, of Bill’s wedding, of Albus’ and Rosie’s births, of reunions among the Golden Trio. Teddy knew the stories and told them like he had been there; it was delightful. Victoire had a sharp sense of humour too, and she made comments that made Teddy flush and Draco laugh. The next page held a surprise to which Draco wasn’t ready, though. There were two young women holding a very young boy with blonde hair. The older one had dark hair and they were definitely sisters. The boy was, somehow, Draco. The blond woman was his mother.

“How…?” He couldn’t say it. He had never seen that picture. His mother had kept very few pictures of her older sister and certainly none was that one. “Where did this come from?”

“Granny had it. I asked her to give it to me.” Teddy looked incredibly proud of his doing. “This is your mum, right?” Draco nodded; the look of sheer delight on his mother’s face made him speechless. “Granny said she liked her sister. She said you were a pretty baby too. And she said I could meet you if I wanted to.”

“She doesn’t… know?”

“That I know you already? Oh, no, Prongspawn said we shouldn’t tell her about it. He said you should do it if you ever felt like it. He said we can’t choose to push someone into a family.” Teddy frowned. “Or something like it.”

Draco decided not to ask his next question — why Potter had allowed a picture of his baby self in his
family album —, choosing instead to let Teddy go on as he passed by his grandmother’s pictures, his grandfather’s, his mum. Draco spoke to him a lot when he stopped on one of Nymphadora’s pictures, one where she was reading something that looked like a textbook to Lupin. Teddy wanted to skip it, but Draco didn’t let him; in the end, there was barely any hurt in the boy’s eyes, and he looked relieved to have company while staring at the face of those two people he had never met.

A couple of pages later, finally, Draco was rendered completely dumbstruck.

“It’s you,” Teddy said, pointing at the picture. “See? It’s you and aunt Pansy and uncle Blaise and Theodore and Tracey and...”

“Gregory and... Vincent.” Draco shook his head. “Is this some joke?”

“Nope. Prongspawn said he was going to put this in here, he promised it to the babies.”

“But this is a family album, Teddy.”

“Ahm… duh.” He flipped the page. “This is one of my favourites.”

It was a picture of them, taken by Hermione, or maybe Luna, probably. Draco and Teddy had fallen asleep while looking for stars and Harry laughed as the babies stole their cookies. Albus, Scorpius and even Rosie were there. He didn’t really remember that day, but he could see something peerless in Potter’s eyes, and he didn’t like it. He missed the story, focused as he was in not allowing that look to seep into his, and turned to the picture on the left. It was of him, too, but he was still broken. Too broken. He hadn’t seen a picture of himself before healing yet.

“I didn’t know you existed when this one was taken.” Teddy’s voice took him from the dark place he was dwelling in. “Prongspawn said it was the first time he understood how much you had been through and how much you loved Scorp.” The Draco in the picture had three children on top of him, Scorp, Albus and Rosie, and looked perfectly fine with them, despite his own brokenness. “I think this was the first he put in here.”

Teddy continued through the pictures, but Draco couldn’t focus anymore. Just what did Potter think he was doing? This was… that last picture had been far before their relationship became what it was. Had been. It wasn’t right.

When the album finally closed, Albus took Scorpius by the hand and plopped with him a little away from the others, still on the rug. Draco gave them building blocks and Frilly showed up not long after with chocolate chip cookies for everyone and oatmeal and raisins ones for Albus. The boys were famished, but Draco felt his stomach uneasy. Victoire, still by his side, didn’t attack the goodies either. Determined to avoid the feeling building inside him until there was a time and place to deal with it, the Slytherin decided to engage in further conversation with Teddy.

“After seeing all of these, I have to say… Your grandmother looks very nice.”

“She is,” he tried to say, his mouth full. Feeling the difficulty, he swallowed. “Granny is amazing. She likes parties too much, though, and I don’t, because people keep staring at me. I think it’s the hair, but she says she doesn’t mind it, so I keep it.”

“I see... Is there a reason why you aren’t living with her? I mean, of course your godfather loves you, but she does too, and you have barely been with her for this past month.”

“Oh, I can’t live with her all the time,” answered him, looking appalled by the mere thought.

“Why not? Doesn’t she have a room for you and everything? Is she that busy?” Draco was truly
interested now. The vehemence of the boy wasn’t there not long before.

“No, but…” He lowered his voice until it sounded like a secret. “I can’t leave Prongspawn. He can’t do anything on his own. He’s a safety risk for himself when we’re not around.” Draco, who didn’t expect that, let out a disbelieving laugh. “I’m serious. He… he’s smart, but not very. And not about the right things. He keeps trying to be good for everyone and he thinks… I sometimes don’t know what he’s thinking! He’s very annoying and very dangerous to himself.”

“That, he is.”

Teddy nodded several times. He was certain of what he was saying, and Draco wondered whether Potter had ever tried listening to his godson. Teddy was much more observant than people gave him credit for; his advices were of quality, embedded with honesty and genuine care. He didn’t dwell much in that thought, though, because thinking about Potter made him hot with anger and frustration and he didn’t want it boiling again.

“Cousin.” Draco made a small sound to say he was listening. They had been quiet for a while now. “Do you really have to leave?”

Draco sighed. There wasn’t a day in which Teddy didn’t ask that. Sometimes more than once. It was a battle he couldn’t win. The boy would pester him until the day came, if it did. Right now, Draco was almost sure it would. He kept silent for a moment before giving up.


“I’m not crying,” he protested, sniffing before any treacherous tear could drip. He breathed deep and stared at Draco, serious. “We won’t pull you from the album. Even if you ask us to.”

That loyalty was something Draco hadn’t expected. “You won’t?”

“No. Never.” Teddy nodded as if reassuring himself. “You will always be our family.”

“My, thank you,” he said sincerely. “It’s an honour.”

Maybe it wasn’t *that much* of an honour to be in Potter’s family, but it certainly was to belong to a family with those children. Albus was helping Scorpius with the piling up of the blocks, since the sick boy was weak and couldn’t push enough to make them fit. He babbled and even half-hummed, half-sang to keep his little brother distracted from the never-ending discomfort and the dull pain of the fever. Draco wanted to go there and play with them; Albus saw it and spoke to him in a tone that was at once admonishing and tranquilizing, ending the sentence with something that clearly stated that he shouldn’t move before their masterpiece was ready. Laughing, feeling lighter, Draco obliged, but his eyes continued to drift to the babies every once in a while.

“Cousin.” Draco stared at him again. This time, Teddy munched on the question for so long it made him worry. “Do you love Prongspawn?”

Had Draco been drinking something, he might have choked. Right then, though, he managed to just frown deeply and needed but a moment to hide the confusion.

“What kind of question is that, Teddy?”

“Well, do you?” he insisted, evading Draco’s objection.

“I…” Draco shook his head. There was no use in lying to him. “Teddy, love is something grown-ups don’t really know how it works. It’s too complicated to explain.”
“Do you or do you not?” his magenta eyes became slits and his jaw was clenching.

“I don’t know, Teddy,” Draco gave up. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“You should think about it then!” The urgency made Draco startle. “I heard aunt Mione talking to aunt Pansy. They said you do.”

“They are often wrong, my child.”

“So you don’t love him?” Teddy kneeled and came closer, finally letting go of Victoire’s hand. They had been holding hands ever since the picture of Teddy’s father. The girl was forcibly, politely refraining from joining the conversation, but she was definitely interested. “Is it because he’s stupid sometimes? You don’t like it that he snores? I can put a pillow on his mouth, he doesn’t snore when I do that.”

“Teddy, there’s nothing wrong with him.” That was a lie. There were several things wrong with Potter; given parchment and quill, he wouldn’t be able to list them all before twilight. He wouldn’t tell Teddy that, though. “I just don’t know if I… love him. Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“But you kissed.” Draco used up all of his Slytherin composure not to let his eyes widen. “I saw you kissing. And you hug when you sleep together. It’s what Victoire’s parents do.” Now Teddy’s eyes were welling up for good. “And they love each other. That’s why they’re together. So why… why…”

Draco gave up any pretence of stiffness and pulled the child into his arms, hugging him tight. Now he was beginning to understand what that was about.

“Oh, Teddy…”

“Why can’t… you need… I…”

“Teddy, your godfather is…”

“He’s dumb sometimes, I know he is, but he’s trying.” The boy sobbed and sniffed. “He never smiled anymore and then he did again when you showed up. You made him happy, Cousin.” Teddy’s eyes were accusing. “You were happy too.”

Was he? “Your godfather did something that hurt me a lot.”

“You broke his nose.” Draco had to laugh at the boy’s logic.

“No, Teddy, he hurt me in another way.” He held the boy tighter and caressed his turquoise hair slowly. “He tried to keep me away from someone I love a lot.”

Teddy sighed against Draco’s chest. “He does that.”

“What?” Draco frowned and pushed the boy a little bit to stare at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“Prongspawn says… you can only be really hurt by those you really love. So sometimes he tries to spare people the hurt.” He nodded as if hearing the words again. Then suddenly, his expression brightened up. “You love him.”

It wasn’t a question anymore. Draco opened his mouth and closed it again, letting the boy hop from his lap. He was excited, happy for finding the answer to his question. Draco tried to retain his attention, but he ignored his callings, instead blurtting out phrases so quickly to Victoire that the
Slytherin couldn’t follow them. At last, Victoire stopped chuckling with him and shoved him, so he had to pay attention to his cousin.

“Can you go pick up my black coat upstairs?” Draco asked to keep him busy and stop him from going on and on about his apparent love for Potter. The boy nodded, truly happy. “And my pocket watch?” Another nod. “Thank you.”

“Vy, come with me!” He picked up Victoire’s hand, but the girl shook her fair head and smiled sweetly at him.

“I want to talk to your cousin, Teds.” Teddy looked suspicious, but he shrugged and went away. Alone with a Victoire that was staring at him, Draco felt even more uneasy. The beauty of the child was hypnotic and he didn’t like it very much. According to Potter’s calculation, she had too little Veela blood to have their powers, but Draco doubted Potter’s calculations very much. “You can close your eyes.”

Too tired to discuss or even wonder how she knew it was hard for him, Draco did. The quietness and comfort of blindness greeted him like an old friend, and he put the Awareness Charm back just in case. Maybe he should keep his eyes closed until he went to the hospital. It sure felt safer.

“You have to forgive Teddy,” she said, overly polite. “He really does think you’re a family.”

“And you don’t?” Draco asked.

She giggled. “Oh, no. You are a family.”

“Enlighten me: is this a problem?”

“Maybe.” She spoke like Pansy used to when she was her age. It wasn’t a good sign. “It depends on what you’ll do with it.”

Draco didn’t answer. She was fishing; Salazar knew how many times he had fallen for words like those when talking to Pansy, and he wouldn’t do it again. Being a Weasley, that girl would probably be landed in Gryffindor, but she could be a nice Slytherin if she kept growing up like that. The girl’s stare on him didn’t waver, her stiffness a proof of it. At last, she moved to sit on her ankles and take Draco by the wrist. It was an unusual movement, to say the least. Later, he’d find out it was the way Teddy tranquilised her whenever they had to suffer through something they disliked.

“They are a good family, Mr Malfoy. And what Teddy said is true: uncle Harry makes a living off hurting those he love, is what my mother said.” Draco could feel that same charisma and delicacy in her voice as Fleur’s. That shouldn’t be genetic, so it must have been taught to her. “You don’t have to stay. I know Teddy’s pressuring you and asking so much it will probably make you think again, but you don’t have to. Uncle Harry is very difficult. Aunt Ginny didn’t make it with him. No one can live with him for long. Even our family is not as warm with him as before.”

“As much as I love Teddy, Victoire, I don’t think I can stay for him,” said Draco, short and precise.

She nodded. “I’ll try to make him see it.” She let go of his wrist and got up. “You know… he thought you were the one.”

“Who thought what?” He opened his eyes, adjusting the intensity of the Awareness Charm.

“Teddy. He thought you were the one who would save his godfather. Something about love conquering all, I guess. He read it somewhere.” She chuckled, a tinkling, light sound. “He’s such a child sometimes.”
Those were her last words before she went upstairs to help Teddy find Draco’s stuff. When the children came back, after an obvious stop to change their clothes, Draco had already changed Scorpius, dressed him and Albus in warm clothes and prepared a bag for the babies. Albus was by his hand, babbling excitedly for being allowed out of the house, and Scorpius had just taken another phial of anti-fever potion, which made him sleepy. Hermione was nowhere to be seen, but Pansy was waiting beside the blond Slytherin, dressed in a long, light coat and significantly shorter heels. She looked less femme fatale, but it was just for show: she was going there as a ward-mistress and should make her best to slip by unnoticed, but it didn’t mean she was letting her guard down.

Teddy handed Draco the coat as Pansy took Scorpius from him so he could dress it.

“Thank you, Teddy,” he said, picking the watch the boy extended to him. “Why have you changed your clothes?”

“We’re coming with you,” the boy answered brightly.

“We’re going to a hospital. It won’t be nice and fun. There are sick people there.”

“I know.” Teddy smiled just the same. “But I want to spend time with you. Pretty please?”

Draco shook his head at his puppy eyes, but allowed the children to come along. They took the Floo, guided by Pansy, who flooed with Albus, while Draco took Scorpius and Teddy and Victoire side-alonged. Draco felt a small spark of contentment in thinking that Potter would be mortified when he realised how much Albus liked Pansy, of all people.

Pansy led them to the ward where Millicent was setting guard. She had a little girl dressed in a hospital gown by her hand and was about to enter Astoria’s room when she saw the pack of people treading closer.

“Good afternoon, my friend,” she said, nodding to Draco. “Pans.” She had a smirk plastered on her face and it reeked of malice. Something between those two was horribly askew, but Draco wasn’t going to ask. “Good thing you’re here. Do you mind looking after Posey for a moment while I go take a wee?”

The adults didn’t have a chance to answer, because Teddy let go of Victoire’s hand and snatched Posey’s from Millicent’s grip, grinning at the younger child. “Hello. I’m Teddy.” The child stared at him andblinked several times. When Teddy kneeled before her, she tucked both her hands in his hair, tugged and, apparently satisfied, glued to him like a baby Bowtruckle. “Maybe she likes me?”

Millicent smiled at the boy and, with a hopeful clap on Draco’s shoulder, went on down the corridor. Draco, with Scorpius in his arms, took a deep breath.

“You’ll be fine,” Pansy said, kissing his fabric-clad shoulder with much more tenderness than she had the right to show. “She’s yours. Go for it.”

She stayed outside to ward the place and Draco, feeling worried, gulping slightly, followed by every one of his children, finally went in to meet his little girl.

It was still bright out there when Harry arrived back home. It was not that the day had been stressful; it had just felt longer than most nowadays. He had stopped by the Ministry to gather some of his belongings and leave a note to Shacklebolt to say there had been developments on the case; then he had gone to the hospital to check on Posey, who was being tended to by Millicent. Bulstrode told him they found the wife of her guardian, but the prospect on the man’s health was not very bright
and they should consider foster care for her as soon as the situation stabilised. If it ever came to that, of course Harry would offer his house. Magical orphanages were a rarity and there was none left in Britain; sending her to France or Russia would be too shocking for a mind so young. He made a pact with Millicent over that and moved on to Astoria and Lyra’s room. When he arrived there, though, he couldn’t enter it; there were wards all over the room, powerful, thick ones. A knock on the door accounted for Pansy leaving with a pleased, dangerous smile on her face.

“Now you made it, Potter,” she said, all teeth and venom. “May I suggest you come back later?”

“He doesn’t want to see me?” he asked, angry at his own voice for sounding so fucking pathetic. “Is he mad at me?”

“What do you think?” She shook her beautiful head and touched his face with a paralyzingly seductive hand. Her fingers caressed his nicely trimmed beard with something too dangerous to be tender and too tender to be dangerous. “Don’t you all need time to think about all this?”

“Don’t touch me,” he said, leaping out of the static reverie and holding her wrist tight.

“Stop me if you dare, Potter,” she purred, slipping her wrist out of his grasp and giggling like a bloody maniac. “You don’t own me. You can’t boss me around. There’s nothing you can do for me and nothing I want from you. What power do you have over me?” Harry felt the words stinging like a hex. “That’s right. None. You, your Saviour complex, your prickly righteousness… none of these have room in my life and you won’t control me using them.”

He felt his hand twitch closer to his wand, but didn’t pick it up. It was instinct when he was confronted, just that. “I could make you talk right to me, you know,” he said dryly.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said the calm, collected voice of Blaise right behind him. Apparently, things with Flora hadn’t taken much to solve. There were two wands pointed at his temples; the one on his left side was Theodore’s. The once scrawny kid was a lanky, graceful man now, quiet and stern-eyed. By his side, a woman who could only be Tracey Davis had her arms folded, standing up with her legs apart, in an obvious guardian stance. “This is Draco’s decision, Potter. Won’t you respect that?”

“I want to,” he replied truthfully. His hand had instinctively flown to his wand when he found himself surrounded. “But how can I be sure you’re not ganging up against me and stopping us from meeting against his will? It sounds like something Parkinson would do.”

Pansy chuckled and stretched like a feline, blinking slowly, entrancing. “You can’t be sure. Isn’t it wonderful not to know?”

Harry’s grip on his wand threatened to break the wood. Beside him, Tracey was moving forward, swift like a snake.

“Pansy, don’t harass him. Draco said he didn’t want to meet him now, not ever again.” She held her friend’s delicate hands and squeezed them companionably. “I know you’re upset, Pans, but let’s not antagonize him so much.” Tracey then posted herself beside her husband and smiled rather kindly at Harry. “Do you trust him?”

The question disarmed Harry’s defences; his arms fell and his combative stance faltered. That’s right. He had made a decision to respect whatever Draco wanted, and, like Tracey’s words denounced, the Slytherin inside that room wouldn’t have been forced to do anything he didn’t want by a group of his most loyal followers. Taking a deep breath, he pocketed his wand again, choosing to extend his trust to the other Slytherins.
“I do.”

Tracey gave him a very careful once-over, the kind smile still on her face. “Good to know.”

Theo and Blaise lowered their wands too, taking relaxed stances when Harry turned around to look at them. Blaise was smirking but Theo’s face was unreadable.

“Parkinson,” came the voice from inside the room. Harry’s heart gave a small leap at that and the brightness that came from the room when Pansy opened a smidge of it.

“I believe we are done for today,” she said, curtsying to him in obvious dismissal. The other three Slytherins followed her lead, bowing and curtsying, but Harry stopped them before they all entered the room.

“Pansy.” The woman stared at him questioningly. “Will you tell him I stopped by? And that if he ever wants to talk about it or see me again, I’ll be waiting?”

She eyed him intensely like he was a particularly disgusting thing that had decided to take haven on the sole of her most expensive shoe. Harry endured the look with his chin held high enough to be proud but not enough to be petulant.

“Didn’t you say you’d take the message if he warded the place?”

“Please?”

At last, she shook her shoulders.

“Why not.”

“Thank you.”

“Whatever, Potter. This isn’t for you.”

She hoarded her minions into the room, leaving Harry outside, feeling rather stupid but strangely hopeful. Yes, he would trust Draco. It was the best thing to do. He’d wait too.

He was almost happy for having gone to the hospital when he entered his house, the front door creaking under the weight he put on the doorknob. Kreacher and Frilly were waiting for him; both elves bowed, but only Frilly smiled.

“Master Draco is at the hospital with Master Scorpius. He said he’s not coming back tonight.”

“Thank you, Frilly,” he answered, feeling the empty house almost immediately. “Is there anyone at home?”

“Mr and Mrs Scamander are out celebrating something. They are not supposed to be back before morning either. Mr Weasley said he’ll be at work and Ms Granger brought your children back here but now she is at her home tending to her own child and her kneazle.” Her voice was rough, yes, but gentler than Kreacher’s, without the sadistic streak Harry hadn’t been able to rid his elf of. “Ms Parkinson, Ms Bulstrode and Mr Zabini aren’t staying today too.”

Harry frowned. It meant there was no one at home, but…

“Where are Teddy and Albus?” he asked, growing worried all of a sudden. Kreacher’s satisfied smile didn’t ease his worries the slightest.
“With me.” Harry turned around to see Ginny looking slightly chubby on what looked like oversized robes and really radiant, with Albus in her arms. Teddy was holding a bit of a distance from her. “I didn’t know you had turned your house into a hostel.”

“Ginny, I can explain—”

“I never doubted you could.” She kissed Albus’ forehead and the baby cuddled with her, uncharacteristically. “Let’s talk, Harry. It’s about time we do.”
Harry felt himself being led to the kitchen, where a supper, most likely made by the elves, since Ginny hated cooking, awaited. She put Albus on his tall chair; Teddy made sure to sit between Harry and the baby. He usually didn’t dislike Ginny, but ever since Draco had come along, the boy was becoming more and more attached to him. He hadn’t asked to go to Andromeda’s once, nor did he wish to take strolls around most of his favourite places, lest he came home to find his cousin gone for good. He’d like to be able to tell his godson Draco would come back home and he therefore needed not worry, but he had just begun trying to patch things up with the Slytherin and couldn’t assure Teddy of such thing.

At least Ginny didn’t look overly concerned. She sat down slowly, her Seeker-like gracefulness diminished but not extinguished. Kreacher served her with a mean smile; Frilly seemed to be waiting for something.

“I didn’t know you had a new elf, Harry.”

“I don’t,” Harry answered stiffly.

“Frilly is a free elf, ma’am,” she said, and she looked so much like Dobby then. “Frilly is helping Harry Potter as a favour to Frilly’s old master.”

“Is that so?” Ginny stared intently at him, looking worried. “Making deals with purebloods, Harry? Was it because of work?”

“Sort of, but not only.” He stuffed a forkful of meat pie in his mouth and chewed slowly. Uncharacteristically, he actually swallowed the food before speaking again. “But it’s cool, you don’t have to worry.”

“Well, let’s say you’re not the kind to make people not worry.” She giggled. They ate some more in a pregnant silence. Then she spoke again. “Do you need help with this case?”

“No, not yet... Perhaps later?” He swallowed a gulp of wine. Ginny didn’t seem too enthusiastic. There were unsaid things between them and the dinner dragged for longer than it should as they pretended there weren’t. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Perfectly fine.” She gave Albus a spoonful of potatoes after he gave his cutlery up, which had him giggling and making joyful little noises like the baby he was. Ginny loved that child, that much was certain. It was the longest she had been without him and Harry wondered whether she missed him. “I’m seeing someone.”

Harry tried to pretend it didn’t make him gasp and choke, but it was a fruitless effort when he had to ask Kreacher for a spell to clear his airways. The elf looked slightly upset for having to save his master, but he obeyed anyway. Ginny stirred the worst in that elf, being who she was, daughter to a Weasley and all, and Kreacher had never been anything more than strictly subservient around her. He wasn’t even respectful towards the woman. Ginny didn’t seem to mind, as she had never; Kreacher hadn’t even been a sore point during their marriage, for that instance.

“That’s… good for you,” Harry managed with tears in his eyes. His throat felt raw and hurt.

“Oh, Harry, there’s no need to cry!” She mocked him with a smile, but it was gentle, not completely mean. “It’s just some man who made a contract with the Harpies.”
He frowned. “You’re in touch with them again?”

“Mm-hm,” she let out, eating some of the meat and tapping her fork pensively on her lips for a moment, while she chewed. She ate slowly, unlike Harry, who was done with his plate already and was tending to Albus. “I’ll go back to training after Christmas.”


“It is, isn’t it?” She chuckled like a child. Albus, staring at her, mimicked his mother. “They contacted me. Apparently, the last chaser they had was a mess and they had to expel her.” Ginny shook her head, disbelieving of the lack of professionalism. “Annie said I could come back, no strings attached. Stay for a while, see if I still want to fly. She said they’re looking for people who can do the strong feints and coordinate the chasers and, well, I may be old for the heavy play, but I’m good at that.”

Seeing her speaking about her age prompted a pang of guilt inside Harry. It had been him. He was the reason why she wasn’t flying anymore. He had seen the end of his marriage coming, just around the corner, and instead of sucking it up and relieving the woman he loved — everyday less like a woman and more like a friend —, he had begged her to fulfil the promises they had made when they got married. Carrying on with Albus’ pregnancy had forced her to be on the ground for nearly a year and lined the nails on the coffin of their relationship. She had forgiven him, of course she had, but he hadn’t forgiven himself. Seeing her without that spark of joy and excitement in her eyes, that thing only flying gave her, it had been too much. They had been on hiatus for a while, then tried again — a week apart from everyone, on an island, giving each other a brilliant time and indulging in luxury, good food, great weather, nice sex. It hadn’t fixed them as a couple, like nothing could have, but it had made them less bitter around each other. Their last discussion had been about Molly’s will of having them back together as a couple, an idea to which Harry didn’t object, but Ginny couldn’t even hear of it without going cuckoo. Her mother was a problem, probably the worst they had to face in the wake of their relationship.

Regardless, they had decided to let life take its course and indeed, it was taking it.

“So are you… moving to Holyhead?” Harry managed to ask after several minutes of talk to Al and feeling the darting of Teddy’s gaze on him. The thought of his wife leaving made Harry’s insides twist in a tight knot.

“I’ll have to. I can’t Floo daily at those odds hours. I’m not that young anymore, Harry.” She munched some more, finished her plate and pushed it aside, turning to help Albus. “And Apparating will kill me after the training. It’ll be better if I just stay there.”

“No, it wasn’t right. It wasn’t right, because they had never discussed Albus’ custody, and apparently the thought hadn’t even crossed Ginny’s mind. Harry wondered how could they make it work. It was the first time he was taking enough decent hours at work to be able to be with his boy, and that was only possible because Draco was there to help him. Before Draco, Albus spent nearly every day with Ginny; Harry saw him on weekends or whenever he was free and he didn’t want to go back to that. That last week, spent half at work, half at the hospital, had been awful enough already. He couldn’t have his son away at Holyhead. That was in Wales! It was another country! His tongue itched to question her about it, but the hesitation won, the silence dragged and the moment passed them by. Night had fallen outside the house and the elves lit everything up, unnoticed.

“Prongspawn’s seeing someone too.”
Harry’s inner battle vanished front his mind as those words slipped, carelessly, nonchalantly, plopping like little dungbombs on the table. Teddy’s food was all still in his plate, pushed aside and smashed but none of it eaten.

“Are you?” asked Ginny, frowning but looking amused.

“Of course not!” Harry hurried to counter, surprised.

“Yes, he is.” Teddy looked at Harry in confusion.

“Edward, I am not seeing anyone.”

The quiet agreement for discretion slipped by Teddy’s perception. Frowning, looking outraged, Teddy stood up, his mouth hanging open.

“How can you say that?!” He banged his fists on the table. “He’s lying! He’s lying, In-inny, he’s lying!”

His desperation was shown in the way he used that old nickname, a trace of his childhood. He had tried to look all grown-up when he was about seven and started calling Ginny “auntie”. Reverting to that name was proof of how much he needed her to know that — Harry just didn’t know why.

“Teddy, stop this tantrum,” Harry warned him, serious.

“I’m telling the truth! How can you do this to me? How can you do this to us?!” Teddy turned to Ginny, his eyes frantic. “He’s seeing a man, he’s living with him, I can prove it to you, he’s my c—”

The boy’s speech was cut by a sharp Silencing Spell that made him suck his breath in. Harry was up, obviously furious, when Teddy stared at him, outraged tears in his eyes. Behind him, though, it was Frilly who stood, a crooked hand held up.

“Frilly thinks it’s time for little master to go brush little master’s teeth.” The boy stared from one to the other, but Harry was dumbstruck. “Frilly will allow little master to talk when little master is calm and ready to bed.”

“Frilly, I didn’t ask you to silence Teddy,” Harry said, confused.

“Frilly likes Mr Master, but Frilly is a free elf, sir. Frilly will do as it pleases Frilly.” She gestured Teddy to leave the table. “Little master’s cousin said little master should obey.”

Teddy only had one cousin. As he gave up, still steaming, and stepped down from the chair, Frilly bowed to the adults and left with him following close behind her. Ginny stared at Harry, disbelieving.

“Deddy?” asked Albus, really confused.

“We’ll go see him, Al,” said Ginny, picking the baby up. “But first, mum needs to talk to your father.”

“Kreacher will bathe master baby,” said the elf, grinning maniacally. “Master and mistress can go talk. Kreacher will bring master baby when master and mistress call.”

“There’s no need for—” Harry begun, but Ginny’s voice was polite and sharp when it cut his speech.

“Thank you, Kreacher. You are a good elf.”
This time, Kreacher bowed before picking Albus from her lap. Harry should have sensed then that something was wrong. “Kreacher lives to serve, mistress.”

Harry was particularly unhappy about the coup the elves had just made happen inside the house. It didn’t help in the slightest, if Ginny’s face was anything to go by. She looked worried and disturbed by what she had witnessed, which was never a good impression to remain on her. Ginny might not be the best of mothers, but it didn’t mean she’d vouch for anything people did to the children she knew.

“Do you care to explain me what has just happened here?”

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He wanted to stall. He honestly did. Breathing deeply, he opened the hidden cabinet beside the fireplace and took a crystal bottle of firewhiskey and two glasses. Ginny shook her head minutely, but waited peacefully.

At last, Harry downed the amber liquid in his glass and leaned on the fireplace. Ginny was a couple of steps away from him, also standing.

“I had an affair with a certain man. Teddy grew attached to him, but I don’t think it’s going to last much longer, you see. We had an argument and he hasn’t seen me since.”

“Oh.” Ginny folded her arms. “Why did you bring him here? I thought you were keen on protecting the kids from such emotional responses.”

“I didn’t really have a choice, Ginny. I swear I didn’t.” She quirked an eyebrow up. “He was a… witness. To a crime. The Protection Program was not protective enough for him, so I took him under my wing and it sort of… happened.”

She searched him up and down with careful eyes, narrowing them at last. “It’s still happening, isn’t it?” Harry shrugged. He didn’t really know the answer to that. He supposed they were still happening, but until Draco made it clear, he couldn’t be sure. “Have you shagged?”

“Yes.” There was no use in lying to her. Ginny was smarter than that. “A couple of times.”

“Is it recent?” Harry frowned. That questionnaire didn’t seem like her usual approach.

“Yes,” he answered nevertheless. “Two weeks, I guess. Maybe a tad bit more.”

“Funny thing that Teddy has grown attached to someone in such short period, isn’t it?” Harry shrugged again. He didn’t want to go into so many details. “Was this man someone he knew?”

Harry hesitated. “Sort of.”

“Do I know him, Harry?” He lowered his head. “Harry. Do I know him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” She smirked. “Good, good. Then I’m bound to meet him some time, right?” Harry flinched. He didn’t want to think about it. Ginny would for certain dislike his choice of a lover, right? “What about this: show me yours and I’ll show you mine?”

“I won’t get you riled up for something that might not even really come to be, Gin.” He took a deep breath and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll go upstairs to talk to Teddy, ok? I’d be very happy if you could help me with Al for tonight.”
“Of course,” she said, but her voice showed she hadn’t forgotten their conversation. The subject would come up again eventually. Harry would have to brace himself for that.

He didn’t even glance back as he hopped up the stairs, going straight to Teddy’s room. The sound of stuff clunking and crashed reached him before he had even opened the door. He heard a scream; Frilly had removed the Silencing Spell. Apprehensive, Harry hesitated, standing by the door as the sound of paper being torn echoed and amplified inside the room. Kicks, more screaming, a loud “thunk” followed by Avalerion’s rapid and enraged chirping. He opened a smidge of the door and Bowie climbed up his leg, hiding, frightened, beneath his shirt’s collar.

“Teddy?” Harry tried, not daring to open the door further.

“Go away!” The boy tossed something heavy — a book, probably — on the door, nearly slamming it on Harry’s fingers.

“Teddy, let me in.”

“I hate you! I don’t wanna see you!” Harry heard the sound of a latch falling into place as the key inside the room turned. Locked doors couldn’t keep him away, but Teddy’s moods were effective at that. “Go away!”

Harry couldn’t leave him to suffer on his own, it was against his nature. Breathing in and out a couple of times, he waited until the rustling of commotion eased inside the room before prying the door open once more. The well-oiled hinges made no noise, so he got a glimpse of Teddy, kneeling over the star map he used to practice the lessons Draco taught him, clutching at the parchment with whitened fingers.

Slowly, Harry crouched beside him, touching his right shoulder awkwardly. The boy refused the contact, focused as he was on the map, on the telescope in his hands. There was something fragile about seeing Teddy quiet and still like that. He wasn’t actually nearly as calm as that and Harry knew he was still upset about what had happened downstairs. He was a child. He was not required to forgive and forget. He fed his apprehensions, adorned his fears. In that aspect, Teddy could be very much like Lupin had been, brave on the outside but trembling and self-doubting on the inside. It was his the mission to make him understand none of that was his fault.

“I’m not mad at you for telling Ginny about me and Draco.”

Teddy stared at him in utter disbelief. “I was telling the truth. You can’t get mad at me for telling the truth.”

“Like I said, I’m not.” Teddy’s eyes were rimmed pink, and Harry didn’t doubt he’d cry. “You can come downstairs with us again if you like.”

“I don’t want her here!” He stood up in a graceless, stumbling movement, telescope still in his hand. “She’ll ruin everything!”

“Edward, you’re not making any sense. Ginny is my friend, your aunt; she was nearly a mother to you. How could she ruin anything?”

“She’ll make him go!” Teddy finally slammed the telescope on the wall, right near Ava’s cage. The snidget chirped indignantly and Harry was left with the feeling that he had been this close to being hit with the object. “He’s going to go if you don’t choose him, Prongspawn.”

“Teddy, I’m not going back to Ginny.”
“But you’re not going back to him either!” The boy’s bottom lip began to tremble. “You lied to me. You don’t even wanna keep him.”

Wiping his eyes with his fists, Teddy pulled out his rucksack and began tossing stuff into it. He put his book there, the useless remnants of his telescope, his plush hippogriff.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to be with you anymore,” he murmured, adding his Black book to the sack. “I’m tired of you, Prongspawn.”

“It’s night already, where do you think you’re going, you crazy kid?”

“I’m not crazy!” Teddy slammed the rucksack back on the bed. “I’m angry! I’m scared! Everything’s a mess! Everyone’s leaving!”

“Nobody’s leaving!” Harry tried to get closer to him, but he stepped back.

“Cousin is!”

“Well, then he’s a moron.”

“And you too! The day he leaves, you will stop coming home again. You will leave me alone, by myself, every day, for hours and hours and hours and never see me again.”

“Teddy, I have a job, I have to spend part of my days away from you. This is why we have our family, your grandmother, your uncles—”

“Well, but they don’t stay, do they?” he asked bitterly, nearly disgusted. “You pushed In-inny away and we haven’t seen the rest of our family in weeks. I had to drag Vy through the Floo with me because you won’t invite her over even though you know I like her. Cousin is the only one who cares if I’m happy and you pushed him away too.”

“That’s not fair. I care about your happiness more than anyone else.”

“But you never stay, Prongspawn. You care about me from afar.” He shook his head, suddenly so small and so hurt. “I want to be with people who want me enough to stay with me.” A new wave of tears washed over his eyes, pooling and sliding down his face smoothly. “Everyone in that album, Prongspawn. Everyone has left or else doesn’t care about me enough to be with me for too long. Nobody cares that I’m hurt. Nobody cares that I’m old enough to be upset that people don’t want me.”

“Teddy, I want you. You’re my godson, you’re my child. I’m here with you.”

“Well, if you’re miserable here, you have other people in the family. I’d like you to be happy here, but if you want to be with someone else, I can’t stop you.”

“If I go to someone else, you won’t make everything right again.” He stared into Harry’s eyes as if he couldn’t believe how stupid his godfather was. “You make all the wrong choices when there’s no one to look after you. You let good things go.”
Harry was silent for a moment. Teddy, tired and confused, lay down on his bed and curled upon himself, as if in search of self-protection. Harry caressed his arm briefly.

“Is this why you had a fit at the dining table?” Teddy didn’t answer. “Do you think that by telling Ginny I’m dating you cousin, we can keep her away and make him stay?” The boy half shrugged. “Teddy.”

“I have to try,” he whispered in a small voice.

“Teddy, your cousin might leave me, but he won’t leave you. Good grievance, boy, I won’t forbid him to come around. I won’t forbid you to go meet him, maybe even spend the night at his place. And I’m sure your grandmother won’t either.” Sighing, finally beginning to understand the extent of the damage, of his insecurities, Harry lay down beside him and hugged him tight. “Teddy, even if Draco and I never speak to each other again, we will still be with you, son. You are much more important than any fight, than any feeling he and I can have for each other. You and Al and Scorp, you are the most important people in our lives, Teddy. We can’t leave you, for there is no life for us without you.”

“I don’t want him to leave. I like you better when he’s around. You talk to us and you take your meals with us and you play and tuck us in.” Tears still streamed down his face.

“I promise you I won’t let my job stop me from doing these things anymore, Teddy. Not like it has so far.” Harry had been considering that, in fact, ever since Draco appeared in their lives, and even harder for the past hour or so, ever since Ginny told him about moving to Holyhead. If he wanted a chance to be with his kids, he’d have to find another job. He wasn’t a carefree young lad anymore. He had to think about their welfare first. If Teddy felt like he had to fix things for him, it meant there was something he was doing wrong. Teddy was a child. He had the right to be a child. He had the right to be young and careless and selfish and Harry refused to take it from him. Even if it meant living off his heritage and working at stupid hours. “Can you trust me in this? Can you believe I’ll make an effort?” Teddy hesitated for a very long time but, at last he nodded awkwardly. Harry kissed his hair tenderly.

“He’s so upset without you, Prongspawn.”

“I know. I feel the same.” He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. There was a slight threat of tears in his own eyes for the briefest of moments. “I won’t let you down, Teds. I swear I won’t.”

And this time he wouldn’t.

Teddy took a while to fall asleep, and Harry spent almost an hour to take care of the mess and tranquilize the Bowtruckle that wouldn’t move from his clothes enough so it would go to its sleeping tree. He fed Ava and Bowie, since it was one of the chores Teddy had overlooked because of his breakdown, repaired the telescope, turned off the lights but didn’t close the door. He wanted Teddy to feel welcome to reach him if he needed to. Frilly was waiting for him outside the boy’s room; Harry asked her to give him some food when he woke up but didn’t mention the Silencing Spell. That part he’d have to clear with Draco.

When he finally reached the living room, Harry had nearly forgotten Ginny was there. She got up to receive him as he stumbled, tired but determined, into the room. He fell in her arms for a brief hug, then sat down on the couch. Ginny took her place beside him, pulling his head delicately to rest on her shoulder.

“Asleep. I think I haven’t given him enough attention, Ginny. I think I have lost the knack for kids.”

She chuckled. “Nonsense, Harry. You’re a good godfather.”

“I think I’ll quit my job when I’m done with this case I’m working on. Maybe I’ll take up Millicent’s ever-present offer and head up to Accidental. Its hours aren’t always fixed but I can take the nightmare shift and be home by six in the morning a couple of days a week. Plus, Millicent wouldn’t let me overwork, not like Shacklebolt lets me. She can’t risk us being snappish around the kids.”

“Harry, you don’t have to guilt yourself into changing jobs because a child’s making you feel guilty.” Ginny sounded severe. “Teddy is a grown boy, he doesn’t need attention all the time.”

“But I have been giving him none, Ginny. That’s the problem.” He shook his head. “I have been relying on other people’s help and it’s not right. I made a vow to look after him. It’s my promise to keep, you know?” He closed his eyes and buried his face on her neck. “Besides, I’ve been considering this for a while and I want to. They’re fascinating, Ginny. Teddy and Al and S—” He stopped himself before the name slipped out of his mouth. Harry snuggled closer to his wife’s body and felt her arms around him. “I want to know and to look after my children, Ginny. I want to do it all the time and if I’ll need to change jobs to do it, so be it.”

She shook her head but chuckled anyway. He smiled wanly. “It sounds so mean of me to ask you what I meant to ask you now.”

“Why?” He caressed one of her hands with the tip of his fingers. “What was it?”

“Do you still remember the promise we made in our honeymoon?” There was a smile in her voice.

“The one about the babies?” She nodded. “Hell yes, of course I do.”

“I should imagine you would, since you’re worked up about kids enough to change your life for the ones you have already.” Harry felt the tiniest bit embarrassed, but it was brief. “You will even actually be home for them.”

“I will.” He sat up straighter and took both her hands in his. “I am sorry for not even trying to be home while there was still something to be done about us.”

“Oh, Harry, there has never been anything to be done about us.” She shook her red head delicately. “We were just convenient. My childhood superstar idol and your best friend’s little sister. We were novel material. It doesn’t work like that in the real world.”

“We had a great kid, though.”

“That, we did. We’re good at that.” He chuckled and she leaned on his chest, sighing. “I still want to fulfil that promise. Are you willing?”

“To have more children?” She nodded. Harry didn’t understand the catch. There was something off; wasn’t she going to Holyhead by the end of the year? Wasn’t she going to practice and so on so forth? Why would she risk it with being impregnated again, and by a man that wasn’t even the one she was currently sleeping with? “Would that be wise, Ginny? Don’t you think our lives are enough of a mess as they are, already?”

Ginny shrugged and lay down, staring at the ceiling. “Well, think about a hypothetical scenario, then. One in which I wasn’t going to Holyhead right now but, say, in about a year. One in which the man I am currently dating has not yet expressed his will to have kids either right now or ever. One in which we’d be divorced, of course, but the babies would still be yours.”
Harry decided to fall for her play. Smiling, he lay beside her, feeling the couch enlarge a little to accommodate them both. Bless Kreacher for all those self-resizing spells. “We’d have two, right?” She nodded. “Preferentially, a boy and a girl, but not that it matters.” He lifted an eyebrow and eyed her breasts, her waist and hips before looking back into her eyes. “Would we have to have sex to conceive?”

“I don’t know. Would you want it?” She wasn’t teasing at all; the red-haired woman was merely curious. Harry shrugged.

“You are a pretty nice shag, Gin.” She laughed and punched him on his shoulder. “What? I have never seen a woman do that twisty thing with her—”

“Alright! Alright. We could have sex, if you wanted to.”

“We’d be supposing, of course, that your boyfriend wouldn’t maim me for being in bed with you.”

“He’s not my boyfriend but yes, let’s stick to your supposition.”

“And you’d still go to Holyhead eventually?” Ginny nodded. “Right. Very specific scenario, isn’t it?”

“It has to have some resemblance to reality or else it’s not even enough of a call.” She tapped her lips with a slender index finger. Part of him missed those small gestures, that simple complicity. “You’d have to be there for the birth, obviously. Pushing a babe through is bloody awful.”

“I’d be there, of course.” He contemplated the situation for a moment longer. “But you would let me share custody then? Of all three of them?”

Ginny remained silent for a moment. “Maybe you should just keep them. I’m not a good mom.”

“Nonsense,” he said automatically. There was no bitterness or sadness in her voice, but Harry felt a tinge of unhappiness around them anyway.

“No, Harry. I’m not a good mom. And part of the reason why I still want to have children with you is that… I don’t think I’ll ever have them with anyone else.”

“Ginny…”

“It’s not as sad as it sounds like.” She took his hand and kissed his fingers. “But it’s… you’re the man I chose to be the father of my children. You’ll always be. There won’t be someone else to be in this particular position.” She let go of his hand and he caressed her soft, pliant body. Godric, he still loved that woman. He didn’t desire her, in any way, but he still loved her. “And I think someday I might… want to meet them. Be part of their life. When I’m older and I hope, wiser.”

“I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to.”

She laughed and pulled him for a brief, passionless peck. “Does it mean you would have more kids with me, then?” Harry chuckled and nodded, staring back at the ceiling. “Are you sure Malfoy won’t mind?”

Harry’s vision became a sudden blur. It was like he had been deprived of his glasses, but he could feel the weight of the frame on the bridge of his nose; a stupid touch was enough to reassure him they were where they were supposed to be. Ginny didn’t move, didn’t sit up; she was quiet, waiting for an answer. All Harry could do was stutter.
“How...?”

“Kreacher. Apparently, you forgot to tell him he wasn’t supposed to tell anyone.” Harry passed all of his days with Malfoy in his head, taking a closer look on the details surrounding Kreacher. No, he hadn’t told him to keep quiet. He had had no reasons to. After all, it had been months since Ginny or any of the Weasleys, apart from Ron, had entered Grimmauld Place. “I’ve known for days now. He found fit to tell me last time he went to pick up Albus’ clothes at the Burrow. I drilled Malfoy’s name from him and the fact that he has a son staying here too. Plus a few more information.” That must have been about a week ago, maybe almost two. That was probably why she was so calm about it. Ginny did have a temper but those weeks had given her enough time to digest the situation. “I have asked Hermione about it and she confirmed it.”

“She said she’d let me tell you.”

“She never said a word, Harry. She didn’t need to. She went blank when I asked about him.” Ginny closed her eyes. “I know now he’s the one you brought into your house and I’m almost one hundred percent sure he’s the case you can’t seem to put down, plus he’s Teddy’s cousin, which would justify your godson being so attached to him even though it’s barely been a month.”

“You should have been a detective, Gin.”

“I’d make the others starve.” She kept silent for a moment. “But, really. Talk to me about it. Tell me the story. I want to know. I want to understand how you’ve fallen amidst your school nemesis’ sheets.”

“Technically, he fell on mine.” Harry blushed slightly at the confession and the woman smirked. “You can’t accuse me of fraternizing with the enemy and take the kids away or lock me up in an institution.”

“Godric almighty, Harry, you’re shagging Malfoy, not his father. It’s not as crazy as you obviously think it is.”

Harry hesitated, and then he didn’t anymore. What was the point in lying to her? The words went pouring out of his mouth with vivid details under Ginny’s lovely stare. She nodded and hummed whenever she found it fit, and questioned some minor things, but she waited until he finished it — until he spoke of Lyra, of the potential break-up. Only then did she shake her head and, without a warning, punched him hard on the ribs. The blow was strong enough to have him flinching and gasping. It would bruise for sure.

“What was that for?!”

“Preparation. Malfoy will do you worse, you can rest assured of it.”

“Wow. You’re teaming up with him already.”

“I’m not. I don’t even like him and I don’t really think I will, not now, not ever.” Harry felt a pang of hurt when she said that, so earnestly. “Still, Albus looks fine, and Teddy seems to adore him. And you’re miserable because you’re an idiot; it doesn’t seem to be his doings.”

“What is this? You’re approving of him?”

“No, I’m not approving of anyone. I’m just not condemning. I’m neutral. I’m the Denmark Ministry of Magic.” Harry laughed at her vehemence. “So when you said you have help... he’s the one who’s been taking care of our kids, right?”
“He’s been very kind to them. He’s actually… quite fond of Al.” He rested his head on his hand, gazing at nothing while designing circular patterns on her slightly chubby stomach. Quitting Quidditch had taken a toll on her. “And I like his kids, Gin. I love them.”

“You’ve always been a sucker for kids.” She shook her head, closed her eyes and enjoyed the gentle caress. “You could have bent to Voldemort if he had offered you one.”

“Maybe not.” They both laughed. He looked at her and laid his face on her shoulder. “Will you stay the night? It’s late already. Your mum won’t be pleased to see you coming home alone and Merlin forbid she will pester you any further.”

She caressed his stubble tenderly, then kissed his forehead, right above the scar she had traced with her lips so many times before. Those days were long gone now, but they had been happy.

“I can stay, since you’re asking so gently.” She breathed deep and hugged him, feeling part of his weight rest on top of her as he made himself comfortable. “You’re a mess, Harry.”

“I know.” They both laughed. He looked at her and laid his face on her shoulder. “I’ll fix it, Gin. I’ll be better.”

“You’re good enough, my beloved.” Ginny kissed his hair and closed her eyes. “You just forget it sometimes.”

They decided to go back to their former room, the one Harry now lived alone in, after Draco’s (temporary, he still hoped) departure. He lent her a T-shirt, carefully avoiding mussing up Draco’s silk lounge pants, the only item of his lover that still remained in his drawer. Harry swept his fingers over the smooth fabric, considering the thought of putting it on. Sighing, resolute, he closed the drawer.

“It must still fit you.” Ginny took the tee.

“Thank you,” she said, putting it on the bed and unbuttoning her light dress. Harry stared at her, remembering the curves of her soft body with tenderness. He could have loved her again that same way. He knew he could. It would have been so damn easy. So damn easier. “Stop staring.”

“You’re still beautiful, Gin.” He smiled and kissed her cheek. “And I’m glad you don’t hate me.”

“I couldn’t possibly. A bad marriage is not enough to tarnish our friendship, my dumb soon to be ex-husband.” She shrugged off her dress, revealing her truly round body as the glamour wore off with it. Over his shoulder, as he tossed his own shirt aside and opened the buttons of his trousers, Harry frowned at her waistline, at the way her slim hips looked larger. He moved forward, trousers still half-hugging his hips, and turned her around delicately. She laughed when his eyes widened in amazement and he stared from her belly to her face time and time again. “You are so blind it kills me inside,” she said, holding his hands and putting them on her stretched skin. “I think that trip did save us in the end.”

“Is it healthy? Are you okay?” He fell on his knees and kissed her stomach gently.

“Aren’t you gonna ask whether I’m sure of who’s the father?” She caressed his hair while he dwelled in that feeling.

“You have a flare for the dramatic, Ginevra Weasley, but you couldn’t possibly have become enough of a shrew to taunt me with another man’s child.”

“Children. They’re twins. A boy and a girl.” Ginny sat down, the full weight of the pregnancy tiring her after the long day. Holding the glamour in place was difficult, but as she’d explain to him later, it was a necessary measure, given their situation with her mother and the rest of the family. Harry’s
answer to that would be a question about her sex life during pregnancy that would earn him a punch and a blown raspberry. “They’re due in August.”

“Do they have names already?”

“Of course they do.” Ginny restrained herself from rolling her eyes. “James and Lily. Like we planned.”

Harry was mesmerized. The hypothetical scenario was not in the least hypothetical. He’d have kids. James and Lily would be born after all, like he and Ginny had planned. It didn’t matter that they’d be divorcing as soon as the sun came up in the sky; they had kept their promises to each other. He would support her in whatever she chose to do next and she’d allow him the family he had never had. Beaming, Harry lapsed for a moment, lost in the realisation that he’d need to tell Draco they’d soon have new babies at home, that Lyra wouldn’t have to be raised alone when she finally left the hospital — because right then he couldn’t afford to doubt she would; in that moment, Harry couldn’t doubt anything. He had tensed to move and call him when his happy haze blurred and he remembered: he wasn’t talking to Draco yet. Closing his eyes, Harry pressed his forehead gently against Ginny’s belly, bracing himself. His soon-to-be ex-wife had just told him she was expecting twins, his twins, and his only coherent thought was that Draco would love them. Pushing it aside, he stared at her from where he knelt.

“You, Gin, are the most amazing creature the universe has ever made.”

“Thank you, I’m aware of it.” She put on the shirt, enlarging it to fit her new body. “I wasn’t being nice when we made the suppositions, Harry. I want you there when they’re born even if I have to tie you to a bloody chair and have a guard keep you there. I won’t go through that alone.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good.” She stretched in bed and Harry fell beside her, caressing her protuberant tummy with gentle fingers, his thoughts still a little astray. Then, as if she could read them, she lowered her voice to a wispy murmur. “You should bring Malfoy if he still wants you.”

“Should I?” Harry frowned, truly confuse.

“Oh, Harry, you didn’t see how you spoke of him. I honestly hope you’ll settle things between you, or I don’t know if you’ll get over him, really.” She was smiling, pitying him, but Harry’s attention was focused on her words. Even Ginny could see how much he needed Draco. It was preoccupying. He had never needed anyone that badly. “And, well, I know you. If he stays, he’ll have to stay for good, because you won’t have anything less. He might as well know his brand new children.”

“Would you… really?” Ginny shrugged with one shoulder. Harry felt tears pooling in his eyes. “I think I’m in love with you again, Gin.”

She laughed and hugged his shoulders, bringing him closer. She didn’t have to answer that. They were bound by ties stronger than marriage right then, and those none of them would sever. It was a nice feeling, one Harry enjoyed far more than he would have months before. It felt right.

Next morning didn’t feel quite as right as last night. Harry woke up with the insistent pounding on his door, which immediately startled him. Kreacher didn’t knock and the door was closed, not locked, so it wasn’t Teddy. He scrambled to sit on the bed, rubbing his eyes and delivering a pasty “coming” as he put his glasses on. Ginny was shuffling, awaking slowly, by his side. Remembering last night, he smiled wide and pressed a soft kiss on her bare temple, the wisps of red hair tickling his nose.
“Don’t bother waking up, my dear.”

“I’m already awake,” she blurted out, an obvious lie. He chuckled and was about to retort when the pounding began again, heavier this time. “Go,” she said, pushing him out of the bed.

Harry obeyed, shrugging off the fact that he was in his underwear. Anyone willing to wake him up at that insane hour — a quick Tempus showed him it was six-thirty in the morning — should have to put up with a bit of naked skin and morning arousal even if just to learn. He didn’t take the time to see that approach as something surprisingly Slytherin of his.

“I’m coming!” he said, louder this time, and opened the door at once. In front of him, Pansy gave him a thorough once-over, stopping rather approvingly over the length of his half-awake cock. The lack of clothing seemed obscene all of a sudden. Harry shifted uncomfortably and held the door with one hand as Pansy looked into the room, taking in the red-haired girl sprawled, contented, exhausted on his sheets. “Parkinson,” he tried to shift her attention once again.

“I see you’re quick in finding replacements.” She sneered and moved a step closer. Her half-naked body — honestly, the woman was as gorgeous as a Daemon rose and just as poisonous, but it didn’t mean she had to parade her curves around in see-through gowns and scramble male heads at will — was nearly flush against his but Harry couldn’t budge much. Moving a step back would be the same as inviting her in and Harry didn’t like what she could say if she got a really good look at Ginny, heavily pregnant as she was.

“Parkinson, take a shortcut. I’m busy.”

“I can see that.” She lowered her hand to his wand, and Harry felt her power climbing up the wood and permeating into his fingertips. Pansy was powerful. Not as much as he, or Draco, but she was a force to be reckoned with and she wasn’t happy with him. The touch edged closer to his wrist and Harry, in stone-cold composure, allowed her. “I wasn’t coming, you know. I don’t really think you should know that right now, but…”

“Parkinson, I’m warning you.” He felt his own magic sizzle, competing with hers, flame against venom.

“Alright, alright. Your friend Weasley thought it fit to pay Lucius a visit, with Shacklebolt. I’ve been asked to pick you up.”

“Well, I’ll get dressed then. You can wait for me outside.” Harry’s hold on the door tightened a bit. “Are you finished?”

“I’m not even started, Potter.” He expected the hard, maniac smile that showed her pleasure like so few things could. Instead, he was met with dark eyes, a cool face, set in marble. “They went to Lucius’ cell already.”

“I can meet them there, I have the credentials. Are you done now?”

Her grip on his wrist had her claws sinking in his skin, so sharp and so precise that they drew blood. Harry didn’t understand why she did it until the words slid softly from her mouth.

“There has been an attack, you stupid moron. It blew up half of Azkaban’s west wing. With your unarmed friends still inside it.”
Harry didn’t really know how he arrived at Azkaban. The ground floor was a mess of heaped corpses, injured men and women and debris. The west wing of Azkaban was where they stored the worst and most wanted prisoners — those accused of crimes against Muggles or children, dysfunctional sociopaths and renowned killers: everybody who couldn’t be trusted enough to receive civilian visitors, those who were too lucid to be put in isolation. Lucius had a cell there to protect him from the other inmates, most of them accomplices in tax frauds and swindling that Lucius had stricken from a gigantic list in order to reduce his sentence. No one had proof it had been him, but the deal had been on the table for ages. People knew.

Nearly stumbling on a piece of a wall, Harry followed Pansy’s practical, stupidly high-heeled footsteps that echoed and amplified in sounding ripples all around them. Harry could see the faces of several co-workers he knew, both sprawled on the floor or lightly injured, fluttering about with several Medimagicians in tow. There was Gary Higgins, from Ron’s team, whose forehead was bloodied from a blow to his right temple; Justine Liang, whose robes were being cut to assess damage; Hillary Demostenes, crouching beside a very pale Ian Grapely that tried very hard to down some potion. There were prisoners too: Felix Sothey, the man accused of murdering three shop owners at the Diagon Alley and convicted of other two murders; Demetria Wallis, the former head of a human traffic operation on northern Ireland; Gareth Lurkis, a torturer of Muggleborn children. Most convicts were really injured; some were dead. The Aurors were in slightly better shape, given that they had probably been further from the blast.

Harry couldn’t really think that much that clearly now. He continued following, dodging wreckage and ruins until his feet dragged on a path he knew well. He had been the last one to visit Lucius before his friends, or so he thought. The path had been cleared by magic but there were still six Aurors moving people from there. He saw as Tyra covered Shacklebolt’s unmoving body with a stasis spell, keeping his limbs still under it. Harry’s mind became foggy, useless; he couldn’t understand the meaning of any of that. At last, Pansy halted to a stop, turned around and took him by his shoulders.

“You have to be strong.” It was the first time he noticed something akin to kindness on that face and it was so, so weird that it should happen now. “Do you hear me, Potter? You can’t panic. He’s counting on you. He’s counting on you, Potter.”

Harry shivered but nodded, his head feeling full of sloshing liquid. On the floor, three Medimagicians kneeled beside someone, from whom just a mop of red hair could be seen. He pushed himself a step forward, and another, and another; when he stood right next to Ron’s mutilated body, he nearly threw up. His friend was limp, with bloodied clothes and limbs splayed in every available direction, not many of them natural. His face was fine but for a small bruise on his forehead; he looked asleep. Harry saw the Medimagicians screaming things like internal damage and hemorrhage and spinal clamping and nudging spells into him but he couldn’t process any of that, he couldn’t…

What had he done?

Harry felt his body stumble back, disoriented. He collided with someone and felt the swift rise of hands grasping his arms, right below his shoulders, his deltoids clenching in an instinctive, defensive will to face whoever was behind him.

“Potter.” He heard the voice seeping inside his brain like an anesthetic needle. The grip on his skin tightened and Harry felt his heartbeat stop. “Potter, breathe.”
“I— I can’t—”

“Breathe.” He felt the long-fingered hands slipping down his arms and closing around him in a loose embrace of expensive fabric and slim wrists. The shaved face touched his, nearly forcing him to fit close to that body he had missed so much. “Breathe.” He gasped and his breath stuttered, but he finally took a large intake of breath and felt the trembling start from the bottom of his feet. “He tried to protect your boss and my father.”

Harry had the stupid, embarrassing feeling that he could cry in those arms. Conscious of it, he turned around to see Draco looking pityingly at him.

“I am sorry, Potter.” Draco buried one of his hands on Harry’s especially disarrayed hair, patting his back a bit awkwardly. “I can’t say I know how you’re feeling now.”

He couldn’t say it either. He didn’t know how he was still standing. He doubted he would be if Draco wasn’t keeping him like that.

“You’re shaking.” Harry felt like snorting. It was obvious. “Potter, look at me.” He pushed Harry a bit but his grip on Draco’s shirt was now so strong he didn’t budge. Harry felt himself waver when Draco’s hands touched his face, held his jaw and forced his face up. His hands slipped to Harry’s shoulders again. “Potter. It’s not your fault.” Harry held Draco’s arms with enough strength to break them. He knew that desperation, but it was different when it was him. “I’m here for you. You did the same for me, Potter, and I don’t let favours hang.”

“Don’t do this.” He felt the words biting into him.

“It’s only obvious I help you.” Draco put one of his hands on his neck and slid it up slowly, caressed his cheek with his thumb and Harry felt bitter. “Weasley saved my father’s life.”

“Don’t—” Harry bit his tongue and felt the coppery taste invade his mouth. He had bitten too hard. Harry let his head down and shook Draco’s hand from his face, but it failed. His head was spinning, his vision swam. Hermione. She didn’t know. They wouldn’t have told her. Oh Merlin. And Molly. He couldn’t be responsible for the death of another of her sons. “I’m gonna be sick.”

Draco sighed and pinched the bridge of his aristocratic nose for a moment before swinging his arm back and slapping Harry’s face with enough force to feel like a punch. Harry startled and jumped back, surprised that his knees didn’t budge under his weight and his head went back in place for a moment. Next, he felt anger rising, not unlike when he was fifteen, and felt strong arms holding him as he roared, directing his unhinged frustration towards Draco.

“Theo, there’s no need to hold him.”

“He will murder you if I don’t, Abe.” Theo had snuck behind them like a shadow and Harry struggled in his arms. The Gryffindor hadn’t noticed him there before.

“Let him go. He’s not dangerous.”

Harry felt that statement as something undermining, and growled back. “How can you know?”

“You could have killed me so many times already, Potter.” Draco nodded again and Theo’s arms released Harry. “You’re not murderous right now. You’re just human. And trust me, humanity hurts the most.”

Harry stared at him for a while, avoiding locking eyes with him. Draco knew him too well. Sick, nauseated, he used his strength to keep himself upright. Then, Draco was back, too close, close
enough to touch but still not touching him. His voice lowered to a whisper.

“You can’t crumble right here, Potter. They need you. He needs you. You can’t do it here. Not when they have no one left standing to lead them.”

Harry took a glance at the man on the floor, that had apparently been stabilised and was being hoisted up onto a paddock that hovered right after. His best friend. He couldn’t leave him. It shouldn’t have happened. He felt the panic rising and threatening to take over him again. Draco delicately held his face and turned it to face him once more.

“My best friend, my brother’s dying.” Harry almost spat, feeling sick again. “I don’t have to be a hero.”

“No, you don’t.” Draco nearly smirked, but he was conscious of the situation and refrained from it. He was compassionate and polite enough. “But you are. And this is why I called for you. Right now, they need a hero once again.”

Harry didn’t want Draco to be right, but of course the bloody Slytherin was. When the responsibility began to settle inside them, Draco moved away for a moment to guide his father to the hospital ward and Harry went along with Ron. It was so strange. His friend looked fine, with all of his injuries covered by a greenish sheet. Harry half-expected him to wake up and laugh at his own situation or grimace at the pain in his forehead. He could almost hear a joke about a scar to pair with Harry’s. But, of course, not of it happened. He was unconscious and the Medimagicians stopped Harry before he could enter the surgery room at St. Mungus, telling him no one was allowed and they would contact the family when they were done. Harry nearly hexed them, but Theo, who was a dark, silent shadow behind him, put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. Harry was about to retort and fight when he saw the woman coming for him.

“Potter.” Tyra came down the hospital’s hallway, looking slightly disheveled. Apparently, she would go into surgery with the other Medimagicians, since she knew Ron’s past injuries well. “I cannot contact Weasley’s wife. Someone has to tell her.”

Hermione. Harry blanched once more at the thought. He couldn’t be the one to do it. He couldn’t tell Hermione her husband was massively injured. He couldn’t tell her he knew nothing. It couldn’t be him. He didn’t know how to do it. She was pregnant, what if it shocked her too hard, what if it hurt her too much? What if it hurt the baby she was so keen on having? He wasn’t delicate enough to do it. He wasn’t clear-headed enough to do it right then.

“I’ll do it.” Draco extricated himself from the half-ajar door on their left, staring at Tyra like he was her peer. Harry looked at him, questioning, when he brushed his hand on Harry’s for the briefest of moments. “I am a Mediwizard. Allow me to do my job.”

Nobody commented on Draco’s declaration. Harry felt his body shake a bit in relief, but Draco didn’t stare at him so he could thank him. Tyra went away with the blond Slytherin, giving him instructions, and Harry was steered, by Theo’s hand, towards the exit.

“I don’t need a guide, Nott.” Harry shook him off. Theo remained close to him as he went to the Floo and followed him as he entered the maze-like series of encoded fireplaces and paths that led to Azkaban. When Harry arrived at the crumbling place, he turned around to send him away, but a subtle shake of Theo’s head stopped him. Instead, he asked. “Are you going to follow me for too long?”

“Until we can assess you’re not the target, Mr Potter.”
Harry frowned. “We?”

“We.”

The heavy way he used to say that simple word gave him up. Nott must be an Unspeakable. A high-rank one, if he was the one select to guard him. Nodding, understanding, Harry braced himself to what he was about to see. To the people he’d have to command through their and his own hurt, through the bodies of their peers, through havoc and pain. Ron was Shacklebolt’s second in command. Justine was the third. There was no line after her, so it had to be him.

It was always him in the end.

Harry wiped his face once more. The strain taking hold of his muscles and magical core was depleting his energy at alarming rates. Most of the walls were up again and security had been doubled in the east wing as all of the uninjured inmates had to be transferred as they awaited the repairs.

There hadn’t been many transfers.

Harry could be sitting by Shacklebolt’s desk, scanning rolls and rolls of reports, but he realised he’d be more useful on the field with the Aurors available. The Minister was pushing them, pressing them for solutions and speeches and Harry was this close to telling the man to fuck the hell off. They were bloody mourning. People should give them a rest. They were still counting the dead and injured; the Medimagicians had required the entire Auror ward in St. Mungus and Draco and Millicent were out, supervising the transfer of Astoria, Lyra and Lucius, alongside with those too injured to help but not enough to need intensive care, to Hogwarts, where Hannah, Phineas and a couple of Healers awaited. McGonagall offered the castle’s Hospital Wing in case they needed it for the most stable cases, and Neville was working with two expert botanists, Slughorn and three of the Ministry’s best potion masters to produce large quantities of blood replenishing potions and wound and burning salves, while McGonagall and Flitwick created portable flesh-binding spells to help the Medimagicians. Harry knew the Ministry would never see what happened in terms of a disaster, since the most injured people were inmates, but that was what it was: a disaster. A carnage.

He had heard about Hermione from Draco, a quick note sent by an agile owl stating she was holding herself together and was by Ron’s side. There were no news on his friend’s state, apart from him undergoing another surgery; truthfully, with coordinating the entire operation, Harry had had little time to think about him, which was, in many ways, a relief. He’d feel the shock and pressure settling when he stopped, if he did. Rolf had been kind and informed him that Teddy was back at Andromeda’s before going hunting Billywigs for some of the potions. Rosie and Albus were staying at the Burrow, led by Luna, under Ginny’s supervision. Scorpius’ fever had worsened during Lyra’s removal and he was at Hogwarts, being taken care of alongside his sister. Everything in their lives was on hold as they tried to figure out what had happened.

The unmistakable sound of heels clicking on the stone floor had him looking up from the last pile of debris they were Vanishing and remoulding to rebuild the last walls. Pansy came along with Tracey, who had McAllister firmly held by her side. Harry still didn’t know where that woman stood inside the Ministry, if she did. He had never seen the name of Tracey Davis anywhere but with the Malfoy team and that should be gone by now. Maybe she just had enough connections in there to move about freely. Maybe they were all so desperate they didn’t even care about protocols anymore.

“Parkinson, Davis, McAllister.” All three nodded to him. “Any news?”
“We think we know what might have happened.” Tracey was gentle when she nudged McAllister to speak. The man stumbled on his words. “Tell him. This secrecy has caused too much trouble already.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “McAllister, is there something I should know about?”

McAllister cleared his throat and had the decency to look embarrassed. Pansy folded her arms. When the man didn’t say anything at once, she rolled her eyes.

“He built a bomb inside a high-security facility.”

That loosened his tongue. As Harry’s eyes widened in shock, McAllister spluttered.

“It wasn’t me! I’m being framed!”

Harry tried to see past the haze of rage for seeing the man responsible for nearly (Godric, he hoped for a nearly) killing his best friend and his boss. McAllister sighed, shook his head. Tracey thought it was a good moment to walk away and be helpful elsewhere. Without the gentle part of their unusual group, the man spoke.

“We are trying to disassemble a network of child traffic. They use underage kids as minions, knowing the Ministry won’t but slap them on the hand if something goes askew. We’ve already brought in the head of the operation, but we haven’t found all of the children. We don’t know how many of them are even alive, so we thought we might intercept the mail flow. Security here is not as tight as it once was, Potter. We can’t keep them all settled when we don’t even have the personnel for the basic patrolling.”

Harry nodded for him to continue.

“We put up a replicating coat on the wards around the prison. It worked, I swear. We found a batch of the kids. There are more.”

Pansy sniffed as if refraining from reproaching a child that attempted to perform a high-level spell without proper training.

“The thing is, the spell that’s been active for the past couple of weeks was not a replicating coat. It was a blasting spell. They are very similar.” Pansy eyed McAllister as she would a dead, rotten niffler. “This moron put it up and didn't think to check it.”

“Dawlish was checking it for me. He was part of the operation. He was on guard duty almost every day.” McAllister nearly shrugged. Nearly. Had he done that, Harry would have punched him right on his nose. “It’s not my fault if the system fails us. It’s not my fault if owls are needed in here, if there are kinds of dark magic we can’t prevent because we don’t know them operating in here.”

“McAllister, Dawlish was not your superior. He couldn't have given you permission.”

“The Minister gave us permission.” He spoke to Harry as if he was a brainless donkey. “Organized crime has risen to an alarming rate ever since Shacklebolt stepped down from his position as Minister. Wilhern is stumbling.”

“He didn't want Shacklebolt to steal his catch.” Pansy smirked, as Harry felt realisation dawn upon himself. That demented, parchment-face hypocrite. “Did Bulstrode know?”

“No. Wilhern gave the commands to Dawlish and he shared them with me.” McAllister rose his chin. “I was following orders, Potter. I can't be blamed for that.”
“You can be blamed for not supervising spells under your command.” Harry gritted his teeth. He turned around. “Nott.”

“Yes, Potter?”

“Call Flandres from the Patrol. I need him to guard someone.”

“I won’t be incarcerated for following orders!”

“You will be incarcerated on the suspicion of treason,” Harry bellowed, dragging everyone's attention to them, “and you will keep the fuck quiet unless you want me to find a west-winger partner to share your cell.” He narrowed his eyes. “Are we clear?”

“You'll regret this, Potter. When Wilhern knows what you're doing here, he'll come for you.”

“Good. It will spare me the trouble of going for him.”

They waited until Flandres came up from patrol duty and took McAllister away. Tracey had not returned yet. With Pansy by his side, Harry dropped sitting on the remnants of the nearest wall.

“Balls,” she said, standing in front of him. Her smile was predatory. “Willing to be accused of a coup against the Ministry again?”

“You don't think McAllister did it.” Harry looked up to her beautiful, venomous features. The woman was a Medusa.

“Not knowingly.” She leaned forward, touching Harry’s shoulders with both hands. “He's a small fish. And he's too loyal to his function in here. He might have been seduced, yes, but he wouldn't risk letting the criminals they put behind bars go. Milly told me he's been aiming for a transfer to the Auror Corps for years. He's good. He knows he will go soon. Maybe the Minister said he'd put in a good word.” Pansy’s hands travelled up to his neck, brushing, delicate. He could almost see why people thought her sexy even after knowing her. Almost. “Dawlish has altered the spell. I don't know who detonated it yet, but I will find out.”

“How can you know?”

“Wards.” She chuckled and leaned towards his ear, the grip on his neck tensing the tiniest bit as she climbed the low wall, putting a knee on each side of Harry’s hip and towering over him. “I know you're fucking your ex-wife,” she whispered, her breath hot and humid against his skin. He willed himself not to react.

“I am not.”

“I know what I saw, Potter, and I'm done lying to him for you.”

“I'm not sleeping with her. I can swear on Veritaserum, Parkinson. I wouldn't cheat on Draco.”

She stilled for a moment. “I may take upon this promise someday, Potter.” She stared at him and then, in a swift, dominant movement done entirely to disturb him, licked his cheek. “Hurt my friend again and you'll need a handful of eternities to find all the bits of your body.” She climbed off his lap, smirking like an evil goddess, walking backwards with her hands behind her back like a playful child. “We'll talk later. I have a couple of bastards to interrogate.”

She stepped out of his field of vision to gang up some other people she willed to have interrogated. Pansy was decidedly a demon in heels, but she was useful for those kinds of errands. There was not
Draco shrugged. “They fit.” Harry shook his head. His heart felt a bit lighter, for the shortest, briefest of moments. “You're blind as a Blast-Ended Skrewt.”

"Nice thought coming from someone who has actually been blinded.” They lifted a couple of rocks more. “Why aren't you at Hogwarts?”

“Out of surgery. Granger is with him again, of course. They're waiting for the sedation to wear off before he goes into surgery again.”

“Did he...” Harry hated that his voice was so pleading, but he had to know.

“What didn’t.” Draco shook his head. “They're redoing his organs, most of his bones. He can’t move, he doesn’t spasm, he has no reflexes. His brain seems to be working and his magical core was hurt, but not extinguished.” Harry nodded slowly, gritting his teeth against the pain. “He’s tough stuff, Potter. He’ll make it.”

Draco went closer and brushed his shoulder against Harry’s. It was comforting, in an odd way. They were almost silent again, murmuring spells and changing rocks. When the silence became too loud, Harry spoke up.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“Yes.” Harry pursed his lips. “You had no right to do it.”

“I can see that now.” He hung his head. “I am sorry, Draco. I really am. There's nothing else I can do but to apologise and hope you know I mean it.”

“I can think of a few things.” But Draco wasn't smiling and Harry knew it was not a joke. “Pansy says you're still sleeping with your wife.”

“I'm not.”
“I don’t care. She’s your wife. I might have slept with mine, were she awake and willing.” Finally, a small, truthful smile graced Draco’s lips. “You lied to me.”

“I am—”

“Not about that. You said I wouldn’t have to change my life to have an affair with you.” Draco turned to him and stared into his eyes. “It’s all head over heels now.”

“I can’t force you to carry on with it, Draco. I want to, but I can’t.”

“Oh, you’re such a sappy arse. Always overreacting, Potter. You made kidnapping my child a much bigger damage than it actually is, you make me sleeping with you the biggest problem on the horizon. You act as if lying made you a fucker, instantly.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Oh, no, it does.” Draco looked serious. “But I am not a stranger to lies, Potter.”

“I repent what I did.”

“I can see that.” Draco shook his head. “Do I have any other children you hid from me or is Lyra the only one?”

“You’re calling her Lyra too.”

“I like the name.”

“You like the constellation. She was there in that song about Orpheus. It sounded good.”

“I registered her. Lyra Aster Malfoy.” Harry couldn't stop his smile. One good news among all that chaos. “You haven't answered me.”

Harry lowered his wand. The wall was almost ready as they looked at each other under the soft light of the dimming sunset. Harry had missed it. Draco’s face, the way his lips looked on the verge of a smirk, the glint of his unicorn-blond hair. His eyes like cloudy skies. His mere presence.

“Ginny came to me to say she's pregnant.”

“Congratulations.” Draco smirked. “Shall I anticipate a baby shower?”

“You act like you don't care but you're smiling, you goof.”

“I'm most definitely not. I doubt any other Weasley spawn could come out as nice as Albus so I won't get my hopes up.” The smirk never left his face though. “I understand you have been breastfeeding Lyra?”

Harry felt his throat tighten. He missed her. “Yes.”

“Care to come with me when we’re done here? The treatment for my eyes uses too much poison and —”

“Draco, don’t.” Harry pressed his index finger against his pale lips, feeling his own heart swell like an overfed Puffskein. “It would be an honour.”

Draco rolled his eyes and snorted. “Sappy arse.”
They stopped to check on Ron before going to Hogwarts to see the remaining Malfoys. Hermione had her eyes puffy and rimmed red, but she didn’t refuse food or rest. She told them about Ron’s injuries: he had broken several bones and punctured some organs; they had to remove his spleen and a butchered part of his liver, and he was with his lung function in 50% and his kidneys had almost stopped. They were trying to recover the organs, instead of going for a transplant — he’d have to be moved to a Muggle hospital if he needed one and there were no guaranties that he’s survive it without magical containment with his magic core like it was. There had been impact in his peripheral nervous system and spine, but they couldn’t assess how much before he awoke. Harry honestly wanted to flee the room, embarrassed, hurt, guilty. There was a thick wisp of magic forming a tube entering his mouth, some well-placed spells to filter toxins that produced small bags filled with a pale blood-speckled liquid, a cannula up his arm to feed him fluids and nutrients, to which time-spelled medications were added rhythmically. He was so pale, his freckles standing out like dark dots in his face. Harry thought he felt himself sob.

“I am sorry, Hermione,” he choked out. His voice was thick, pasty; it didn’t want to leave his mouth.

“Harry, it’s not always your fault, you know.” She took his hand, speaking through the tears that continued to flow. “There’s evil in the world. It crosses our paths sometimes. You didn’t bring it to us.”

“Technically, I did,” Draco said, hanging his head a bit. Hermione took his hand too, for the first time leaving Ron’s.

“Ron is a strong man. He’s rightful and he loves you, Harry. He even cares about you, Draco.” She shook her head, but the smile was still there. “He wouldn’t blame you for any of this, so please don’t blame yourselves.”

She even tried to talk to them for a while longer, but her eyes kept going back to Ron and, after some time, Draco managed to convince Harry with not-that-subtle looks that it was time to go. She squeezed their hands one last time and said she was glad they were in speaking terms again, but, by the time Harry and Draco turned at the door to wave one last goodbye, she had already forgotten all about them.

Apparition had not been allowed in Hogwarts, even with the incident; Harry was inclined to Apparate to Hogsmeade and walk from there, but Draco had a better idea. He Apparated them to the back door of Quidditch Quality Supplies — already closed at the time — and, hooded, keeping Harry partially out of sight, negotiated two brooms that were obviously stocked for far too long by the modicum of fifteen galleons, that Harry slipped into his white hand without a moment’s hesitation. The shop owner went back in, closed the back door and pretended that nothing had happened. Draco weighed the brooms, caressing their wooden handles, seeing how they floated beside them. At last, he gave Harry one of them.

“You’ll like it,” he promised. Harry, still not quite himself after seeing Ron so injured and Hermione crying so easily, merely nodded.

He did, though, take hold of Draco’s arm when he took off his borrowed glasses and pocketed them under a careful preservation spell.

“What are you doing?”

“You have to trust me, Potter,” he said, leaning closer and removing Harry’s glasses as well. His vision became foggy, completely useless in the night. Then, Draco said an incantation Harry recognised and he felt, just felt, as his limbs began to tingle, his fingertips feeling the air beneath them. “I said Malfoys pay their debts. You need this. I believe you’ll find it… liberating.”
Without any further explanation, Draco repeated the incantation and, with a shuffle of fabric and air currents, his presence disappeared from Harry’s side. Disoriented, blinking in an ineffective will to retrieve his vision, Harry tried to mount his broom, awkwardly, feeling slightly sick. The ground felt like mud under his feet, the cobbled path undulating under the soles of his shoes as if it was alive. He could feel the brushing of the breeze like minuscule slaps and tickles all over his body; his Auror robes felt heavy, constricting. His sickness came up, enhanced with the smells of rubbish, the faint stink of sewer, the stale odours of protective spells.

“If you don’t breath, you’ll die.” Draco’s voice was above him, but not so much. Harry raised a finger to tell him off but as his mouth opened, he threw up on the ground. He could feel the smell rising, the goo spreading, reaching for his shoes. Instinctively, he jumped aside. Draco tsked. “So sensitive.” He cleaned the mess with a cool spell, then pointed — Harry could feel it — his wand to Harry’s face. The spell left the minty taste of something akin to Muggle toothpaste behind and ridded him of the cool sweat running down his spine. “Mount your broom. You’re wasting time. If you don’t lose some of this tension, you’ll be back at that bad place you were before.”

Guided by Draco’s snarky instructions and his wobbly feeling of the ground underneath him, Harry finally mounted properly, sunk his feet among the cobbles and pushed — and, just like that, it was all gone.

There was nothing but the wind as he soared, up, high, higher. He could hear the chuckle beside him; it was followed by Draco’s presence right next to him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Draco shook his head — shook his head! — and ordered him to “feel it”. So Harry did.

Away from the enhanced stench of the night streets, all he could smell was air, moisture, the eventual glimpse of ozone when a timid lightning cracked. They must be high up; Draco was twirling and looping beside, around, above him. Harry could hear the wind, feel the currents tickling his boot-clad feet. He felt every wisp of moving air that touched his hair, lifting strands in different paces, playing with it. He felt the humidity clinging to the bare patches of skin in his body, felt it weighing on his robes as they rolled away because of the impermeability spells, as they entered a low cloud. If he wasn’t sure it would be too much, he could almost swear he could feel the light of the moon and stars shining on him.

As they flew, confidence grew inside him. Before he knew it, he was pressing his broom forward, feeling the way the wood fit against his body, willing to be pushed, to move, to give all it could. It was different from flying with a purpose, with a clock ticking along. Bloody hell, it was different from flying at all. Being on a broom always made him feel free and alive, but he had never felt that alive. He raced Draco for nearly an hour, up to a decided, stupidly impossible to pinpoint spot in the sky. Then, for the first time in days, he laughed, he screamed. He felt light; it didn’t matter that Draco was laughing, mocking him, calling him names. Whenever he heard that laughter, all he felt was giddy happiness, thick gratitude.

When they were about fifteen minutes from Hogwarts, Draco used a guidance spell that took hold of their brooms and slowed the ride to a companionable, tranquil pace. They were side by side; Harry felt their knees brushing every once in a while. When the brooms edged closer and Harry’s thigh was flush against the soft — so soft — fabric of Draco’s trousers, Draco didn’t move away. Harry could feel the heat radiating from him, the faint scent of sweat and that something expensive he endeared so much, with a hint of green apple that was probably a new shampoo. Maybe a gift from Pansy. Maybe he had eaten an apple when Harry wasn’t looking. For the briefest of moments, high on adrenaline, Harry wondered if in case he did, his mouth would taste like apples too.

“You’re pushing me,” Draco said, conversationally, with a hint of annoyance in his voice.
“What?” Harry thought it was about his leg, but Draco was relaxed beside him, not seeming uncomfortable at all.

“Your mind. It’s willing to come in.”

“Oh.” Harry knew he was blushing; with the spell in place, he could feel the heat going up his ears, like the lick of flames. “Sorry.”

Draco didn’t say anything, though, as the brooms began their descent. Their feet touched the floor without the sudden impact of a miscalculated landing, and Draco slipped from his broom with grace and balance. Harry, unused to being blind on the ground, wobbled; Draco gripped him by his arm and steadied him, not pushing him away when he held the Slytherin’s shoulder to will his head to find balance again. When it did, Harry rose his eyes, incapable of seeing through the blur but knowing, feeling the difference of pressure in the air, tracking the way Draco breathed and blinked without needing his eyes.

“Thank you.”

Draco snickered. “Sure.”

Harry was given his glasses back. With the spell terminated, the world regained its vibrant colours, but lost part of it wonder. Draco was wearing his borrowed glasses again; he shrunk their brooms, dried and cleaned them and called Frilly. As they waited for her, Harry noticed his heart was pulsing like it should again and his stomach was fine. He felt better.

They didn’t talk as the elf showed up and guided them through the gates and into the castle, leading the way to the Infirmary with sure steps despite her blindness. There were several beds occupied with people sleeping, just a couple looking truly injured. Madam Pomfrey and another Mediwitch Harry had never seen before were helping a man as he swallowed a potion and fell back into sleep. It was Phineas who noticed them coming in.

“Ah, Mr Malfoy. Mr Potter.”

“Doctor Goldstein.” It was Draco who said it. Harry merely nodded. “How are they?”

“Scorpius’ fever is gone for now, I’m happy to say. He did refuse eating, though. We are tempted to give him breastmilk, maybe he’ll want it.” Draco nodded, despite knowing he couldn’t offer himself to do it. “Lyra is breathing much better right now. It’s been a steady rhythm for the past three hours; it’s a sound improvement.” Beside him, Harry smiled wide. Good news. Someone had to give them good news. He felt relieved knowing the kids were at least a bit better. “Astoria is cleared of risk, physically speaking. There are damages to her magic core and their effects still remain to be assessed, but it shouldn’t be enough to endanger her life.”

They spoke a while longer; when Phineas stopped, Madam Pomfrey talked to them about the treatments and helped Harry prepare to feed the children. It was him who asked to feed Scorpius first, while Draco sat beside Astoria and took her hand in his. With the baby latched onto his nipple — he sucked much softer than Lyra —, he cooed and encouraged him, watching those blue eyes blink and blink, for the first time in days not full of tears. He loved that boy. He missed him. Godric, he missed him. Seeing Scorpius made him miss Albus; he wished that they’d fix everything so he could go home and pick up his baby boy.

Draco spoke to Astoria as if she could not only listen, but reply to him. Harry knew fairly little about the connection purebloods had when they married through ancient bonds, although he inferred it was strong enough to reassure Draco of her state. The woman was beautiful; not that classic beauty of
Renaissance art, but something thicker, stronger, with sure lines and careless confidence. In fact, her nose was too bulbous at the tip and her mouth, too large; she had arched eyebrows that would look malicious in anyone else. Still, when it was all put together, she was beautiful nonetheless. Harry knew he saw her a bit through Draco’s eyes, but it didn’t disturb him that he knew Draco found her beautiful. It was the way things were.

Scorpius babbled for a long time after Harry made him burp and sat him on Draco’s lap so he could clean up and pick up Lyra. Breastfeeding wasn’t nearly as weird now. But for a few tugs, he could almost forget what he was doing. Scorpius was telling some sort of story, to which Draco nodded and said “oohs” and “aahs”.

“You should sit down. It’s been a long day, Mr Potter.”

Harry thanked as Madam Pomfrey pushed a chair towards him, allowing him to sit on it before pushing it forward a tad more, until it was side by side with Draco’s. Seeing that his audience was now larger, Scorpius’ telling became elaborate, with sound effects and heaps of delighted laughter. Courteous, Phineas rose a Muffling Charm around them, satisfied with the children’s behaviours. Lyra still curled her fingers on his chest hair, in synch with her sucking. When Scorpius’ story ended with a bang that made them all laugh, Draco hugged him and heard him chuckle.

“Dada!”

“My brave little scorpion,” he said, truly happy that his boy seemed healthier. “Come here, you should sleep, my boy.”

“Lala!” He moved on Draco’s lap, trying to get closer to Harry. “Lala!”

“You’re very smart, Scorp.” Harry inched closer to them, allowing Scorpius come close enough to tug at Lyra’s curly hair. “No, Scorp. Careful,” he added, unhooking the strand from his fingers. “She’s tiny.”

The boy nodded solemnly and looked for her little hand. For a moment, it looked like he might be comparing his hand and hers, for some unknown reason. Neither Harry or Draco stopped him. At last, when Lyra’s sucking became a feeble thing, Scorpius stretched his arms to Harry.

“Take him. I’ll change Lyra and put her to sleep.”

Harry nodded as Draco squeezed his shoulder and moved away with the baby girl. Scorpius was clean, dressed in a fluffy green pyjama with an embroidered “S” — Harry could bet it was the work of a diligent house elf. Maybe it had even been Frilly’s. He was learning not to doubt the powers of that elf.

“I missed you, Scorp.” Harry murmured as the boy coiled up in his arms. “You’re such a precious boy. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.”

The boy mumbled a sleepy “pa” and ordered a song with a tuneless hum; nearly incapable on that subject, Harry retrieved a rendition of a song from his early childhood. It was a good song. The Dursleys had had an appreciation for it, so, for the length of that song — miraculous three minutes and fifty-six seconds —, they would simply forget that Harry existed and leave him be. He grew up to find the song beautiful, its lyrics, endearing and the peace it brought, peerless. It was still a personal — cheesy, corny, Hermione always told him — favourite. He couldn’t really sing, so he was almost reciting it, and was so absorbed that he didn’t feel Draco approaching him.

“You are a horrid singer, Potter.” But he smirked, making Harry feel embarrassed. It wasn’t a
Draco hesitated; looking around, Harry could still feel the charm in place. Everyone was asleep, but for the Mediwitch, who was on the night shift and looked utterly uninterested in them.

“They are stronger than you could possibly imagine.”

Harry took the words to his heart, since they sounded slightly pricking. Decided to erase the discomfort lingering underneath their interactions, either with exploding or suffocating it, he spoke.

“I thought you wouldn’t forgive me.” Harry looked up at him for a speck of a moment. Draco had picked up on the topic pronto. “I thought I’d hurt you too much.”

“You did.” Draco didn’t believe in embellishing truths he was going to say anyway. Not for Potter. Potter couldn’t see any beauty in it. He needed the crude, straightforward wording to feel secure. “It was a dick move of yours. But the shock… the shock is what pushes people away.” He shook his blond head. “I am no Gryffindor. I need time to think things through. To assess damage, to… account for pros and cons. I can’t be rushed into deciding.”

Harry looked at Lyra to avoid Draco’s healed eyes. “And?”

“I decided at last.” He came closer and caressed Lyra’s face. The chamber was open, given that she was breathing normally. “Phineas told me about her state. I can’t agree with what you did but I can understand, Potter. I would have intervened if I knew and it could have been catastrophic.” When Harry stared at him with confused eyes, Draco explained further. “Phineas said you fed her your magic alongside the milk. My magical core is strong, too, I could have done that, if I wasn’t being treated with so many potions. She wouldn’t be able to undergo some of the treatments without that and probably wouldn’t have survived for so long.” He sighed. “In the end, it was lucky that you found her and helped her.”

Harry frowned. He didn’t know about that. Phineas had never mentioned such thing. “Are you telling me actually I saved your child?”

“Yes, Potter. And I hope it’s the last time you have to.” One of Draco’s hands brushed Harry’s waist, enveloped him loosely. He felt heat pooling where Draco touched him. “I— Well, I—”

“‘Thank you’ is just two syllables,” he interrupted, cheeky.

“Don’t push it, Potter.” Draco slid his hand away a little, but Harry held it before it left his body. No. They were going places right then and he wouldn’t interrupt it.

“Don’t go.” He tilted his head up and to the side, feeling Draco's soft hair tickling his face as he did it. The proximity made him want to kiss Draco. Maybe the smooth motion that brought them closer was equal parts them both. He didn’t know. “Please.”

“That needy?” Draco’s fingers dug on Harry’s waist, curling under Harry’s hand. It was so safe.

“I’m better when I’m with you.” Draco raised his chin the tiniest bit, smug. “And I think you don’t
dislike what you are when you’re with me either.”

Draco stared at him for a long moment; at last, he laughed. Harry smiled, turning back to the babies not to be infected by that laughter. Draco’s hair tickled him further when he tilted his head, nearly touching Harry’s. His voice lowered to a whisper in Harry’s ear.

“I like you better when you’re this bold.”

Harry felt a boulder the size of a dragon lift off his chest.

“Draco—”

“Don’t make me regret this, Potter.” He gave him a quick peck on the lips. Caught by surprise, Harry couldn’t keep the dumb look off his face. Draco, of course, smirked at that. “No more lying.”

Harry entwined his fingers with Draco’s by his waist. “No more lying.”

It was late at night when Harry and Draco finally arrived at Shacklebolt’s office, dead tired from the day. Harry needed to pick up the last reports on the dead and injured, the updated body count. Next morning would need an official statement, some mourning notes. Obituaries. Files and proceedings for insurance for those who died or were hurt too badly. It was Millicent who brought it. It was a long piece of parchment, separated between inmates, staff and — the worst part — civilians. Of course. The visiting area was affected too.

“Do you want me to do this for you?” she offered, despite being pale and obviously drained of energy.

“No, Mills, but thank you anyway. Are the repairs over?”

“Yes. Pansy is supervising the rising of barriers, disguised as Canbury. Lost the heels and everything.” Harry smiled a bit. Canbury was a short woman that was wicked in battle, but very far from the prototypical sexy female Pansy seemed to favour. It must be hard for her. “I had to leave Posey at Hogwarts, so if you don’t need me anymore, I’ll go and get her now.” Harry nodded, dismissive. “Owl me if you need me.”

“Thank you, Millicent.”

“Anytime.”

They saw her leave the office in tired strides, leaving them with the parchment to stare at. Harry gritted his teeth.

“It’s not going to leave the room, you know.” Draco went closer to him, proffering his hand. “Give it to me. Allow me to.”

“I feel like it’s my duty and I can’t fulfil it.” Draco quirked an eyebrow up. It nearly disappeared into the frame of his glasses.

“You can stop being the hero now, Potter. It’s just us. I know you’re weaker than you admit.”

Harry could have fought him on that, but he didn’t. He was weaker than people considered him, that was for sure. He didn’t want to look at the names. He didn’t want to know which of the ones he saw were never going to wake up.
“We lost eighty-three inmates.” Harry cringed inwardly. “Mostly heinous crimes but two convicted of swindling were being visited and didn’t make it.” Draco’s eyes scurried over the pages. “Some were not from the blast, but from physical attacks from other inmates. The report says they will probably never be caught. Alecto Carrow, Daniel Fourier, Jezebel Jones and Clytemnestra Morrison are missing.”

He was expecting those names. Ever since Dawlish’s involvement was brought up, Harry had half-known they would release some of the inmates. All four were known associates of Voldemort. He didn’t know how they had escaped, but it couldn’t have been hard with the mess Azkaban was under. Voldemort had freed people before. It wasn’t impossible to be done again. He hated that he couldn’t find out where the fuck those people were, couldn’t stop them. Raids and raids were being organised to search former-Death Eaters’ houses and properties, but they were so far from obvious. They were used to being both preys and predators, and they were waiting, gaining strength, to pounce on them when they wouldn’t lose.

Seeing that Harry wouldn’t go any further than a tired nod of his head, Draco went on.

“A civilian was injured badly, but he’ll survive. The others are fine.” That was good. At least the civilians were spared. “We lost forty of our people.” Harry found it slightly endearing that he counted the Ministry’s officers as “their” people. “Mostly Aurors but there are Medimagicians and other staff too, people from the kitchens and janitors.”

“Well?”

“I’m fine,” he said, despite the tears that rolled silently, angrily, pausedly. “Please continue.”

“Liang, Justine.” He closed his eyes at her. She was one of the most promising Aurors that had ever set foot inside that Ministry. He was sure she would have made it.

Her name was followed by Ezequiel Lopez, the boy who had just taken his license to use powerful attack spells and was going to apply for Ron’s team. Louise Matthews. Ingo Moya. Felicity Morrison, the guard that was always paired with Dawlish in Azkaban duty, Clytemnestra’s mother and one of the best people Harry knew. Yago Nulps. Pauline Oaken. Wesley Orchard. Nelson Palmer. Ulysses Peters. Carmindy Poulter. Elspeth Roth, the most focused spell-breaker they had. Jason Rothschild, who wrote the inmates memoirs in his free time. Xavier Santana, from whom no inmate ever attempted to escape. Oliver Scanper, who had just been promoted and had a sick mother to look after.
There was a pause. Draco looked slightly paler. It was hard for him too. Some of those people were the ones who helped testify for him. He knew Amelia helped Lucius, giving him food herself even when he refused to partake in the inmates’ meals, and wrote about his situation to his wife and son, despite never receiving an answer from the latest. Cillian had been Draco’s senior Slytherin at Hogwarts. Carmindy had been one of the Hufflepuffs in his team of Healers.

“Potter, I don’t think—”

Harry knew what was to come. He had known for the best part of the day, now. But he needed to be sure.

“There’s a name missing. You only said thirty-nine.”

Draco, seeing the resignation in his eyes, acquiesced.

“Shacklebolt, Kingsley.”

The dam broke, letting a small sob slip between his lips. They had been apart for the past months, but Kingsley was one of those people he could always count on. It had been him who had advocated for Harry’s incorporation to the Auror corps when nearly everyone agreed that those who fought should undergo psychological evaluation and full therapy before being reinstated to society. It was him who helped Harry as he grew up inside the Ministry, who made sure he was eating and not training too hard, and that he was running the drills and taking things seriously. Kingsley had given him leave to mourn Remus and Tonks and followed him to their graves to pay his sentiments alongside him. He was a presence that should never have been wiped out.

Harry let out another wet, choked sob.

“I know he was your friend.”

Draco stood in front of him, barely discernible through Harry’s teary eyes. He took Harry’s glasses off his wet face, but the Gryffindor shook his head when Draco opened his arms in a clear invitation. With a small sigh, Draco stepped further closer, enveloping Harry in a hug that was much stronger than the one they shared that first time in the bathroom, about Remus and Tonks, or the one just hours before, with Ron’s unconscious body beside them. Harry hugged Draco by his waist, feeling his body shake with poorly restrained sobs and tears like a child, the weight of the day summing up and finally overflowing. Draco was tense; his jaw clenched and unclenched, trembled. In fact, he was trembling. It was with a speck of tender surprise that Harry felt a single tear drip from above him, falling on his face and running alongside his. Of course. Shacklebolt had presided the Malfoy trials. It was him who had sought justice for them, even when the most conservative factions inside the Wizengamot wanted to disregard Harry’s opinion and throw them all in Azkaban. It had been a series of one-man crusades that, Harry knew, and he didn’t know how he knew it, Draco had never had the chance to recognise Shacklebolt for, let alone thank him.

Malfoys should always pay their debts. That nick in his pride was going to chase him for the rest of his life and leak its sorrow when prodded. But inside, deep inside, Harry knew Draco had shed that tear for the man Kingsley had been. Because they shouldn’t be at war anymore, and fair men shouldn’t keep on dying. Not like that anyway.

It took quite some time for Harry’s sobs to stop and Draco’s embrace to go slightly slacker. Harry pushed him away gently, turning around before he could say anything and going towards Shacklebolt’s desk, putting his glasses back on. The plaque on it made his throat close.

“Not today.” Draco took him by his wrist, pulling him.
“I have to— the letters and— they need—”

“It’s all going to be here in the morning, Potter.” He tightened his grip when Harry threatened to break free. “I am not willing to watch you forcing yourself to be alright.”

“I’ll be fine, Draco.”

“You will. But not today.” He tilted Harry’s head up. “You can be strong in the morning. You told me that, remember? Profit from any and every help you can, weakling.” Gracefully, Draco kissed him, a mere sealing of their lips. “Be selfish sometimes, Potter.”

“I can—”

“No more lying, remember?” Harry took a deep breath and nodded slowly. Draco smirked, but it was a delicate thing. “That’s better, my stupidly righteous Gryffindor. Now let’s go home.”
Draco stopped before Grimmauld Place with uncontainable disdain in his eyes. Well, at least he supposed one of those was Grimmauld Place. Potter took a step back from where he stood, between two identical houses in front of a severely dilapidated one and placed his left hand on Draco’s.

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever entered this house formally.” Draco raised a poised, perfectly arched eyebrow at him and the answer was beyond clear. “I had a chat with the wards. You can come and go through the doors and fireplaces without needing Pansy to persuade them, now.”

Draco frowned at the building he had grown used to call “home” by now. It was a two-storey house that looked somewhere between unkempt and uncared for. There were dark vines climbing up the front, which had apparently been left with just half a layer of paint. The windows looked dirty and dusty from the outside, covered with curtains whose fabric Draco sworn he had never touched while inside the place. By its looks only, Draco wouldn’t normally much know whether he’d want to be accepted in there. But it was his house now and he enjoyed, proudly, to be taken in. So at last, looking back to Potter, he spoke politely.

“I am thankful for that.”

Seeing his discomfort come and go and guessing right at the reasons for it, Potter kissed his shoulder. “I made most of the glamours Vanish, but it’s impossible to get rid of them all.” He squeezed Draco’s hand gently. “Anyway, it’s keyed to you too now. It makes no sense to lock you up anymore.”

Potter didn’t let go of his hand for a second as he entered the house, pulling him along. Draco knew the feeling. Holding onto anything was better than letting reality catch up on you when you’re afraid of its consequences. It would have to be done eventually, but postponing it was not that deranged a crime. They needed a moment of calm before the storm and the past month had not afforded them any. They’d have to sink their teeth in the hours ahead of them to build up strength—and Salazar knew what else—for the week.

All of that meant Potter was reluctant when Draco slipped his hand from his, brushing his fingers rather tenderly before cutting the contact. He knew Potter would take some time to settle back into his old self and, although that wasn’t the most Malfoy of all approaches, Draco decided he’d help him, if for no other reason, because he was helping them. The least debts to pay, the best. That he was concerned about him was just some bonus detail.

“I’ll make us some tea. You should bathe and come down. You haven’t had the time to truly relax yet.”

Potter obeyed him, numb and weak. Now, safe inside somewhere he knew few people had access to, he seemed to become smaller, quieter. Even the small smiles from outside were forgotten when they entered the place. It was worrying. Potter was never that weak. Treading lightly, Draco went to the
kitchen and was surprised with a small pop.

“Welcome home, Master.”

“It’s good to be back, Kreacher.” Draco waved his wand to boil the water. “I need you to go upstairs and change the sheets. Exchange Potter’s bath towel too. Also, press my silk pyjamas and clean whatever it is Potter’s wearing to bed.”

“Of course, Master.”

“We don’t need anything else. After you’re through with this, you can retire for the day.”

“Master, Kreacher has heard of the attack. Kreacher has made a restoring soup and is being honoured if Masters eat it.”

“We will, Kreacher. Good job.”

The elf went out, probably to fulfil Draco’s orders. The tea brewed slowly, but nicely; Draco added a couple of drops of Steadying Tonic to both mugs and put them on a tray. Potter had not yet come out of the bathroom when he reached the bedroom, so Draco went in, seeing the steam dissipating around his glasses, but still thick inside the room.

Inside the box, Potter had his forehead against the tiles and back to Draco. The water ran down his back like a waterfall, pooling around his feet before going down the drain. That expanse of tanned skin was bruised in some spots, scarred in several others. When calling his name didn’t make him turn around, Draco opened the door. The cooler wind touched Potter’s back like a slap, but the shiver was so soft it was barely there.


“It’s killing me.” He pressed his palms against his eyes. He looked in pain alright, which was never a state you want your lover in—well, not unless in very particular situations, and that one wasn’t one of them.

“Tsk.” Draco sighed deeply and undressed slowly to his underwear, folding his clothes pristinely and putting them on top of the toilet’s lid. “You are making this harder than it has to be.”

“I keep thinking…”

“They’re not coming back, Potter.” Draco stepped into the shower, touching Potter’s shoulders with both his hands. The water was insufferably hot and even though the steam didn’t touch his glasses, it was difficult to see. “You can keep coming back to this feeling all the time and it still won’t bring them back.”

“I have to do something.”

“You have to save yourself.” Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes, enhancing his perception of the man before him slowly. He didn’t need a charm for that particular instance anymore. He was synched to Potter enough not to. “Don’t fight me.”

It was his only warning before opening his own mind to Potter’s, before luring him in like that first time. It was a cheap trick, something Severus would have had a fit were he to find him using it to provide solace for another human being, but he was too tired of the day to try anything more complex. He felt his barriers submit to his own will, falling one after the other in a shameless, compulsion-like invitation. Weakened and in distress, Potter fell into his mind and arms like a broken
man seeking redemption; he was a messy mass of red and blue and trembling as he sank, deep and at once. The feeling was that of a kick of a bad drug; Draco gritted his teeth and slid his hands to grapple at the wet tiles. Potter’s body was breathing quickly and hotly underneath him.

“Shh…” Draco put his forehead against Potter’s back, waving the water still with a careless display of wandless magic. “Breathe, Potter. Swim with me.”

Having someone whacking and thrashing about inside his head was probably the hardest thing Draco had ever had to endure. Potter wasn’t a nice, quiet presence; he was a train wreck, a physical impossibility with a hint of disaster. He wouldn’t still, wouldn’t keep quiet for the love of himself. Calming him down was like quieting a clueless new-born. Draco understood the need for tranquilization. He had been on the receiving end of it more often than not, by the woman he had decided to marry. Coping was not an ability humans were born with and developing it relayed on having someone to guide you through it and receive you on the other end if the intention was to remain somehow whole in the process.

Draco didn’t much mind being that person anymore. Not to Potter anyway.

At last the quivering body beneath his breathed properly, a shaky breath that felt like rebirth. Potter detached from the tiles gently, eyes and head still fuzzy. He turned in Draco’s almost embrace, held his face. Then, confused and thankful, he plunged forward, invading Draco’s perception and mouth at once, in a distinctly dominant way. Draco fought back, twirling his tongue around Potter’s, gluing their bodies together and moving patiently to suffocate the neediness pouring from his heartbroken lover.

There was no more blue; all around him, things were fire and light, but not quite Fiendfyre and horror. It was warmth reminiscing of those that rescued him from his dreams, the kind he had learned to associate with the man moaning against his body. They kissed for a long, long time, hands moving over skin, through hair—slow, then fast, then slow once more. Snogging a man whose mind was deep-seated inside his own was an exhilarating experience, especially when the sorrow had melted away into that frantic, lustful despair. Potter had no qualms regarding the sounds he made; he purred into the kiss, pulling Draco closer and closer still. Slowly, Draco licked his swollen lips before delving inside his mouth once more. Potter put his hands down, slipping them to Draco’s fabric-clad bum. The need for comfort slowed down further and finally dissolved into desire, plain, simple desire. Draco nearly slipped when Potter hopped and crossed his ankles behind Draco’s back, hard and leaking on his stomach.

“Salazar, Potter.” Draco felt, more than the body underneath his fingers, the images running, swirling inside his head. Potter was assaulting him with half-complete visions and sounds so enticing they actually hurt. He understood that too, building pain and hurt into another kind of feeling, something that could be solved, that could actually peak and relieve—anger, lust, hunger. Blaise had been on the receiving end of some of Draco’s attempts; he recalled them alright. There was no way to slow Potter down now; conscious of his choice, Draco countered the images with his own, perfectly honeyed and built for his own pleasure. He was imaginative enough. “Stay with me, my stupid Gryffindor, bear with me here.”

Draco moaned as Potter’s lips spread open in quiet invitation, the lust shaping up to take the contours of them in that same position, only in that vision, Draco’s cock had been fully sheathed inside Potter’s arse. It was something so free, so careless; the will to do it was almost unbearable.

“Draco, please,” Potter whined, exposing his neck and allowing Draco’s face to rest lightly against his skin. “I need—I have to—”

“You will, you will.” Draco slid his hand between Potter’s cheeks, but they were too tightly closed
together; the tension was too loud inside him to allow him the relaxation needed to go forward. The awkward angle allowed no movements from him on Potter’s cock, nor the slippery bodies gave much room for any proper rutting; the heaviness of his prick against Draco’s stomach was tantalising, wet, calling him but, that was it. Tension was building on Draco’s back and shoulders too, for Potter was not a light burden. He was taut in need for liberation of some, any kind; it was impossible to move him without hurting at least one of them. Gentle, Draco decided to pull Potter’s release out of him as he could. “Here, Potter, come for me.”

“I am— trying—” Draco saw the trembling of his jaw, the way he bit his lip with enough force to draw blood.

So he unleashed. He allowed his memories, his fantasies to first drip-drop then flood into the link between them. Potter, tight and wanton, spreading his cheeks open and moaning as Draco buried inside him; the pressure along his cock as it entered and left him, easing and building again in a rhythm too slow to relieve him, the pent up frustration of having to wait, to sit as Potter contracted and pumped him in search of his own pleasure. Soon he received formed images, his own self towering over Potter, pounding into him hard and thick, hitting deep inside him, substantial bolts of pleasure shooting up Potter’s spine in tandem with his own. The scent of Potter’s skin, the feeling of his toned arse right next to his cock, the trance-like sensation running between them; it was like a powerful wet dream, a disgruntling, long one. He heard Potter’s moans picking up, his panting hastening; Draco’s mouth latched onto the exposed tanned skin before him, lapping at his pulse point in an attempt to keep grounded as Potter soared and soared and peaked, spurting on him in warm, sticky jolts and frail, wavering pants.

His own heartbeat was frantic and strong as Potter’s boneless body slipped, holding in place by Draco’s. Surprised, alarmed, Draco touched the come dripping down his body, and then Potter’s spent cock. It twitched beneath his fingers, answering lovely to the touch. He had never been able to establish a link strong enough to make another man come untouched. It wasn’t a trivial feat; holding a connection when aroused was hard, especially with so little symmetry between situations. He could have made him come fast if connected mind and body with him, but that had not been the case. Blinking stupidly, Potter kissed him again, the taste of blood lingering when his tongue left Draco’s mouth.

“Of course it would be you,” Draco murmured, shaking his head.

“What?” Potter blinked those stupid green eyes again, and Draco wanted to kick himself for finding them nearly adorable. He looked heaven-sent like that, flustered, with big, bright eyes, wet hair pointing everywhere, naked on the inside as much as on the outside, bared to Draco’s perusal in any way it might happen. So trusting, so fucking innocent. A cloud of worry shadowed his features for a moment. “Draco?”

“Are you feeling better?” Draco held his chin up and kissed him gently once more. Fuck. Of all the people in the whole damned world. Potter nodded slowly, a small smile on his lips. “Good. I made you some tea. If the charm held as it’s supposed to, it’ll still be hot. Take whatever cup you’d like and get dressed. I’ll shower too and meet you in a moment.”

Potter agreed, cleaned and rinsed quickly and left the shower. With his arousal subdued by what had just happened, Draco brushed his skin until it tingled, hot and nearly burnt. His eyes, which were closed so far during the process, darted to the Dark Mark fading on his skin. He had thought that would be enough to keep him apart from the “good boys”. He thought he was safe from those Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs and their love of helping and making good and glorious deeds.

How wrong he had been.
The skin around the mark was flaking, making the red mix with the redness of his own derma, freckled with small blood pinpoints underneath it. It looked like some bad allergy, which irked him, especially right then. With Shacklebolt dead, with Laurent and Poul tier dead, he lost people who worked in his absolution, legal and spiritually. Being a Malfoy, he knew how little he was supposed to care, but it was hard to live by the ancient laws of the families when he hasn’t been with his family in years and was married to someone who only took from them whatever she wanted and was having an affair with a man who disregarded them completely. And that same bloody man was the bastard that had woken up something he had only heard of in sodding shady books Severus once lent him to *scar* him.

He left the shower, put on a concealment glamour for his Mark and towelled his body efficiently as he walked into the room. Potter was there, in faded jeans and a tee that had seen better days maybe about a decade earlier. His pyjamas were where Draco had asked Kreacher to leave them, but Potter’s sleeping clothes were nowhere to be seen, so they probably amounted to that shabby T-shirt only, since he obviously didn’t sleep in jeans. Shaking his head, Draco put on his pyjamas, watching Potter sipping his tea with both his knees up and chin almost touching them. His feet wore mismatched socks and he was hot when Draco’s rapid cooling hand touched the back of his neck.

“Luna?” he asked, eyeing the socks intently.


Frowning, Draco followed his reasoning and found its source. The thread linking them was still there, strong as steel and thick as a tree. He hadn’t felt Potter’s presence as an invasion when he quieted; it was disturbing to know there was someone he wasn’t fully aware of inside him.

“What is it, Potter?” He gave him an onceover, tilting his head to the side afterwards. Even staring at Potter hurt him less than staring at anyone or anything else did. Bloody connection.

“Do you want me to pull out?” Potter’s glasses were fogging, unlike Draco’s (because their new owner was smart enough to add a couple of useful spells to them but their old owner apparently wasn’t).

“I severely doubt you could.” There was no double entendre, but Potter blushed nevertheless. “It’s fine, Potter. It’s not like your brain thinks enough to disturb me.” Potter elbowed him on his thigh, the only spot he could reach. “Finish your tea. I still have to feed you before I can sedate you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Is it a challenge?” Draco smirked at the wave of relief that flooded their brief interaction. Nonchalant, he took his cup and sipped from it, the tonic restoring the feeling of his muscles. The bothersome shake went away with the subsequent sips. “Come with me. You’ll pass out if you don’t eat and I won’t drag your body upstairs unless it’s to keep me from being accused of being the murderer.”

The threat passed Potter by for a moment; he then got up, clutching his cup, and stopped Draco dead on his tracks.

“What is it, Potter?” He gave him an onceover, tilting his head to the side afterwards. Even staring at Potter hurt him less than staring at anyone or anything else did. *Bloody* connection.

“Are we Intertwined?” he asked bluntly, chin perking up, eyes shining like emeralds. Was that man even a true Auror? How could he not *feel* it? “Malfoy, come on.”

“Use your brain.”

“You said I don’t have one.”
“I said it’s not used very often. So do it now if you can recall how.”

With that, Draco went downstairs to fiddle with the food. Nearly half a minute later, Potter followed, still inside his perception, still deep into him.

They were sitting on the couch after finishing an entire pot of Kreacher’s soup, and Potter put his head on Draco’s lap after turning some music on. Draco quirked both his eyebrows at him, but his stupid Gryffindor was adamant that he’d have to hear that. Closing his eyes, Draco caved as the first chords of The Police’s “Every Breath You Take” filled the room. The song was nothing he had ever heard before, meaning, it wasn’t overly frilled or too quick; it felt Muggle all over. Potter classified it as a ballad, which was, apparently, an entire gender of Muggle music dedicated to make people feel like under the effects of a badly brew Amortentia. Potter, of course, punched his shin when he dared to comment on that.

The song that followed had a slower start but picked up the pace in much a similar way, except that the chorus was higher and much more upbeat. Surprised once more, Draco realised he didn’t much dislike Potter’s choice of music. At least it had understandable lyrics and felt somewhat competent. Saying it to Potter was again proven to be the wrong thing, awarding him another punch, harder than the first.

“Will you punch me every time I as much as utter an opinion?”

“If they’re distasteful.” Potter made a face, but Draco sighed and rested his head on the back of the couch again, eyes once more closed. “I can feel you like it.”

“‘Like’ is too strong a word.” But Draco’s objection was half-arsed to say the least, given that Potter had just lifted the hem of his shirt and planted a sickeningly sweet kiss on his skin, heated by the contact with his lover’s. “Don’t do this.”

“I like your scent.”

“What about my taste?” Draco peeked to see him swiping his tongue along his own lips.

“It’s perfect.” Sleepy, nearly childlike, Potter turned and hid his face on Draco’s lower belly. That Gryffindor was hot all over, but his cheeks were hotter when they touched Draco’s skin. Embarrassment? Maybe. The link sure didn’t rule that out. “When did you learn how to…?”

“My mother.” He raked his hand in between Potter’s locks. It was easier to see where he was going with his questions when they literally flashed inside Draco’s mind before leaving Potter’s lips. “After Wis died, she had a hard time coping. Father couldn’t help her, so I did.”

“I never took you for…” Potter made a gesture that convolved everything that had happened between them for the day. “You look so cold and impenetrable.”

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“You’re right about both.” Draco slipped his hand again and caressed Potter’s tresses for a while longer. “But that, of course, depends on who I am with.”

Potter purred low, relaxing further into the touch. “You won’t shut me out if I fall asleep, will you?”

Draco opened his eyes and took another glance at that face. He could feel the connection, sitting like a lazy cat between them, waiting to be poked. Cautious, Draco did, feeling from the tip of his toes to the lobes of his ears the tingling that passed through his and Potter’s bodies, making the man on his lap moan something pleased, satisfied. Compelled, Draco bent forward and licked his lips before
kissing him. Fuck. It was hard as hell trying not to touch him.

“Do you think I would?”

“I trust you won’t.”

And asleep he fell, snoring whisper-like on Draco’s lap. The Slytherin restarted that same side of the vinyl record; when heard for the second time, that first song felt better. He felt he was smiling before drifting away and sleeping too. When he woke up, night was high. The first feeling was the lack of a head on his lap; the second, silken sheets around him. Instinctively, like he would for Scorp or Lyr or Ast, he searched for the bond between Potter and him, recalling only after nearly a full minute that he was no longer blind or wandless. Sitting up, he put on his glasses and peered around the room. The next movement close to him was Potter’s, obviously. He sunk on his knees on the bed, and then slithered near Draco.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” he whispered, sliding under the covers with him. Potter was in his boxers and tee; his body was hot and solid against Draco’s. It calmed his heartbeat quicker than he deemed possible, and Draco knew he was doomed. “You didn’t look comfortable on the couch.”

“You could have poked me.” Draco stifled a yawn and fell back in bed. “What time is it?”

“One in the morning.” Potter hugged his chest. It was like falling into a furnace’s embrace. “I had to get rid of the jeans.”

Draco couldn’t stop his smirk upon hearing that. “Did you really? Why? Were you planning to harass me in my sleep, Potter?”

“Sod off.” He rolled his eyes and sighed. “I woke up because it was too hot. I can’t sleep anymore.”

“Not my problem, rest assured of it.” But Draco made no move to turn around and fall asleep again, since Potter’s heat was strong enough to keep him awake too. Bored, thankful for the mild darkness, he probed the connection. Still there, still tingly and alive. Beside him, Potter startled with a small whimper. “What?”

“Don’t touch it,” he asked, fingers digging into Draco’s sides. “It makes me feel… weird inside.”

Draco paused for a moment, but cackled nevertheless. Potter sat up and pushed him; Draco didn’t budge. Seemingly irritated, he sat astride on top of Draco’s stomach, the sheets between them.

“Stop laughing at me.”

“Yeah, right.” Draco dried his eyes, brushing away one or two tears of laughter. “Potter, you are so unaware of the world you belong to.”

“And whose fault is that?” he retorted sullenly.

“Yours, of course.” Draco ignored Potter’s look. There was so much he’d have to teach him. “Come here. Kiss me.”

Impressively, Potter blushed with the request. Draco didn’t even think he had been too blunt; it was a point he wanted to prove. But Potter, being as he was, hesitated before complying. The kiss, when it finally came, started slow, calm; Potter barely pressed against him. Draco touched the connection and felt Potter’s mouth open above his, his weight shifting to his hands on Draco’s shoulders. He smirked; it was unavoidable. Taunting, the Slytherin opened his mouth too, pulling Potter’s bum up and backward, sitting him lower on his body. He jolted when he reached the pressure point on
Draco’s lazy, half-awake body. Draco closed his lips around Potter’s bottom one, suckling it into his mouth for a brief while. This time, when Draco touched the connection, Potter hummed into the kiss, pushing forward with mouth and hips.

“No, no, no, Potter.” He parted, shook his head and held the heavy-lidded face in front of him. “Relax.”

“It— Godric, it’s so—”

“I know.” Draco licked his lips, ran his fingers up his ribs underneath his tee. “It’s the same for me. Feel past it, Potter.”

“Why is it so hot?”

“Because you are in need. You are always in need.” Draco snorted. It had to be Potter. He couldn’t have Intertwined with his wife, for an example. Or even some random bloke on the street. Damn, he’d even settle for Parkinson or Zabini. But of course not; of course it would be Potter. What would be of the world if it didn’t revolve around the Golden Boy anyway? Shaking his head, he sighed and pulled Potter for a peck. “Salazar, you’re a pit. Filling you will use all of me.”

“Filling me?” Potter’s confused face was, indeed, bordering on adorable—that is, if it wasn’t Potter’s. It was like one of his first pet snakes, those big bright eyes and the way he tilted his head to the side. Pity they had all died so young.

“Clingy, obsessive, fucked up bastard.” Draco ran his thumb on Potter’s bottom lip. “We Intertwine when there’s imbalance in a deep connection. Like osmosis. Our minds like the chaos but they try to reach their equilibrium.” Potter was truly frowning now, although he seemed to understand. “Occlumens hold things inside. Legilimens let go of them so they can pick up other people’s.” He shook his head. “As much as I hate it, and damn, I hate it, Potter, I apparently seem to complete you. And you somehow complete me.”

“It can’t be. I’m not even a good Legilimens.” He blinked a couple of times. “I just do that ‘cause I’m around all the time.”

“Will you bloody believe me or not?” Dráco’s voice had not risen at all. He let go of Potter and raked his hands through his own hair. It wasn’t desperation; he just needed to release Potter or else he’d kiss him again. “It doesn’t just happen, Potter. If it did, I would know a way of turning it off.”

“Wait.” Potter sat back, staring at him in shock and confusion. “Are you telling me you cannot make it go away?”

“There is a way, of course. But it’s permanent.” Potter tilted his head again, this time like a bloody dog. So innocent. “We are Intertwining for good, my stupid Gryffindor. It won’t go away unless we sever it,” Dráco stated, nonchalant, “and your reactions are too funny for me to want to sever it.”

“Arse.”

“A beautiful one.” Dráco turned aside and let him slide back onto the mattress. Potter blinked those doe-like eyes at him and smirked instead of nagging him. “I am not comfortable with closing some doors so early.”

“You said that before.”

“I’m a very constant man.” Sleep threatened him once more but it was a faint, meek thing; Dráco’s attempt of not yawning made him tear up. “It’ll feel like sex for a while but it’s not forever. It all
comes from the same core, really. After you become used to it, you won’t even notice it’s there.”

Potter snuggled up against him anyway. He was cooling but very slowly, his body, flush against Draco’s, still a bit too needy. In fact, Draco’s own body was too light up to sleep as well. “Will you turn down sex every time now we’re bound?”

Draco’s smile was so mean it was scary. “You offer it so nicely, I couldn’t possibly.”

Potter lifted the hem of Draco’s top, his rough fingertips brushing the soft skin it revealed in complete devotion. It was good to be touched like that, it couldn’t be denied. Potter’s lips trailed a path up his jaw until they reached Draco’s earlobe.

“I understand what you say but I’m still horny,” he whispered.

“Sleep and it will pass,” Draco answered, mean. He brushed the back of his hand on Potter’s waist, feeling him shiver. It was a lie. It wouldn’t pass. Potter had reacted with his whole self to the connection and settled a pace for it that would have to be subdued before they could begin to think of anything else. It was not something they could leave unfinished.

“You don’t feel it?” Potter looked put off; Draco smirked, took his hand and lowered it on his body. The feeling made Potter gasp breathily. “Oh.”

“I really think we should sleep, though, Potter. This week will not be easy on us.”

Potter held his face and teased him with his mouth as he spoke. “I know. But I need you anyway.” He grinned, mischievous. “We can sleep when we’re done.”

He gave Draco no time to deny his advances; he smiled into the kiss, stripped from his tee and underwear so quick it had to be magic, pulled Draco on top of him. Draco steadied himself with both hands on the mattress, his body pressing on Potter’s all the way down to his shins through the silk. The man beneath him was trembling inside his skin, strumming like a chord. He gritted his teeth when Draco pulled away to kiss his jaw, his neck, his shoulder. His skin was salty and scarred under Draco’s lips, colliding with the softness like a spell.

“It feels like you’re kissing me from the inside,” he murmured, throwing an arm over his eyes. Draco couldn’t tell him the truth, tell him he was doing just that. It was too corny.

“Yes?” Draco kneeled, took off his own shirt and bent forward, brushing Potter’s arm with his fingertips before claping his wrist with them and pulling that toned arm from his face. “Don’t cover your face and don’t close your eyes. I want you to watch it.”

Nudged, Potter leaned against the headboard, feeling the escapee tresses of Draco’s hair tickle his face when they kissed again, sloppy and open-mouthed. Biting down on Potter’s lip, Draco went back to what he wanted to. He peppered kisses down Potter’s body, purposefully avoiding his most erogenous areas by a speck of an inch. He breathed over a nipple, but never licked it; he brushed his lips on his lower belly but never kissed it. He was glad to have regained his vision, even if the glasses were a little annoying right then, because it allowed him to see Potter’s strong face converted into something so soft, so pliant, so innocent. His full lips were just a smidge open, his eyelids fluttered in the effort not to close and hide those eyes, green and wide and glinting through the lenses. He wasn’t lying; he was horny indeed.

Satisfied with that knowledge, Draco caressed his thighs and gently raised Potter’s knees, keeping them apart despite Potter’s will to close them. With one hand strongly set on keeping his right leg in place, Draco continued to distribute kisses on his skin, suckling at it from knee to groin. Potter
gasped when Draco sucked so close to his cock, and he sat up to brush Draco’s hair away from his
over half-mast and still growing erection. He stopped Potter’s hands with a touch.

“You can’t hurry things, my stupid Gryffindor.”

“But you’re torturing me,” he breathed, panting when a whip from Draco’s head tantalised his lower
body. Even if he wasn’t in full arousal yet, he soon would be, for the feeling on his body was
enhanced, doubled, tripled. In that mood, any touch could be considered torture.

“I most surely am.” Draco smirked and held his chin, pulling him down as far as he would go before
sealing their lips together. “And you will rejoice in it.” He pushed Potter back to his previous
position, stopping his motions altogether. He stroked his cock fondly until it pert up, inviting. When a
single drop of pre-come blossomed from the tip, Draco smirked at him. “You’re leaking.”

It was not his imagination: Potter blushed at it. Unexpected. “I—I know.”

“Hm.” He raised a slow finger and nearly caressed the tip of Potter’s cock, gathering the small,
perfectly round drop. Deliberately, eyes locked with Potter’s, he put out his tongue, just a bit, and
passed his finger on it, cleaning the drop in one movement. “Hm.”

Potter’s entire body twitched, his erection increasingly powerful. His wide eyes widened further, in
anticipation of something Draco knew what it was and knew he wouldn’t give him. When no word
was uttered, the heaviness of the silence collapsed as Potter whispered.

“So?”

Draco tilted his head to the side, copying his previous behaviour. “So what?”

“The—” He hesitated, but didn’t blush this time. “The taste.”

“What about it?” It was fun to watch him struggle with words in such instinctive state; the feeling in
Draco’s mind was that of heat and need. It echoed and rippled through his body; oh, he wasn’t
immune to that man, not at all.

“Is it good?” There was no shyness, but sheer curiosity.

Instead of answering, Draco repeated that same slow procedure; this time, though, he leaned forward
and lifted his finger to Potter’s mouth, right before his lips. Heart racing, arousal peaking, he relished
when Potter opened his mouth and, without grabbing his hand, licked his finger eagerly. He then
closed his lips around Draco’s finger, moaning as his tongue swirled around it, pressing it on,
pleasing; he sucked at it, with just the right intensity, until the finger came out clean. His eyes never
left Draco’s, despite their closeness, and the Slytherin licked his lips, dazed by the act. Potter blinked,
freed him from the trance; smirking, Draco drawled.

“Do you like it?”

Without a hint of embarrassment, Potter nodded. “Yes.” Then, boldly. “And you do too.”

Draco would have laughed, were that boldness displayed by anyone else. With him, though, it
inspired something much akin to pride in his chest. Damn Potter. Ogling the body in bed for a
moment, Draco raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t close your eyes.”

Then he slipped down in bed, levelling his face with Potter’s cock, hearing him gasp as his breath
puffed on it. His hands twitched among the sheets; with a sudden glimpse of desire, Draco took them and placed them one in each side of Potter’s body, watching the fingers trying to clasp the skin of his bronze thighs.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Potter, unless you want me to stop.”

Potter nodded vigorously. The tension in the air was thick and moist; when Draco sniffed the skin in front of him, it gave out a musky but clean scent, strangely inviting. It made him want it, want it for real, for his partner’s pleasure more than his own—which was strange enough an occasion in his sex life. So, conscious of Potter’s eyes on him, he licked the tip of his engorged prick gently. Potter actually shuddered before him—how long since the last time…?—and let out a muffled pant. Always gentle, not for the sake of niceness, but of teasing, Draco continued to lick, from the bottom to the top, flicking his tongue on Potter’s foreskin when he realised how boneless it made him. He could feel the tension pouring from Potter’s body, his lower belly taut, and his fingertips pale.

“If I mouth it,” Draco asked slowly, sucking its tip for a moment, hearing him whimper, “will you come?”

Draco felt the frantic thrashing inside his mind quiet down as Potter consciously probed the link, tense and wanton. The words slipped from his mouth as gravel, rough, stilted. “Would you let me?”

Grinning, Draco caressed Potter’s cock with his fingertips. “No.” Then he kissed the length throbbing in front of him. “Can you hold it?”

Without a thought, Potter nodded, desperate for that touch. Draco could feel the fantasies rolling inside his mind; he wanted it badly. It was hard to understand what was his and what was Potter’s; as his mouth engulfed, inch by inch, the prick of his lover, his hands caressed Potter’s still, tense fingers, the poorly haired skin of his thighs. He tasted different from his other lovers, his other boyfriends. It was good and intense. The skin of Potter’s cock was so soft it begged to be licked, to be sucked, to be adored. And Draco, who liked his men quiet, trimmed and obedient, felt his personal choices vanish as he fell into the pleasure flooding Potter’s mind and the conscience that it was him, more than anyone, who did it to him.

“It hurts—” Potter stuttered, biting his lower lip and nearly banging his head on the wall. Draco sucked his cock from root to tip once and licked the slit thoroughly before raising his chin, his lips close to that dark, wet skin as he spoke.

“Don’t fight it.” He nuzzled his member with the tip of his nose, lips brushing it, completely caught in that outburst of feeling. Salazar, and it tasted so good. “Feel the pleasure, my dense, brave, brave Gryffindor. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It’s too—much.” Potter’s fingers interlaced with his. His pain was denial and restraint; he’d have to let go of it or else they’d have to stop. Draco wouldn’t hurt him like that. “I’ll drown.”

“Then drown.” Draco turned his hand and raised his body a bit to lock eyes with Potter. The calm rippling through him was weird, given that it came from that tumultuous feeling of desire and need and arousal. Severus had told him, had explained it to him; as the Occlumens, he would be the one to absorb it, to calm it and turn it into something they would find useful and great. Draco had loathed the idea, but with Potter sweating and trembling in want beneath him, he couldn’t fathom to remember why. “It’s just pleasure, Potter. It’s me. Give me the satisfaction of knowing I’ll make you come harder than anyone before me.” He put his lips back around the head of Potter’s cock, then sucked and moaned. Potter shivered, shook, trembled as the moan rippled into his body. Draco did it again, felt the self-imposed restraints of his Gryffindor crumbling. “Yes, like this,” he purred, encouraging. “Just like this.”
The salt on his tongue made Draco stop and caress Potter’s groins with his lips, with his tongue. He wanted in, he needed in. His wand was away somewhere far from his hand; it was joyful when Potter cleaned himself and handed Draco a bottle of clear fluid. He squirted it on his fingers and slipped one on his buttcrack, making a teensy mess out of it. Before him, he saw Potter’s lips spread in a small but genuine smile. The tenderness embedded in it was almost unbearable; to wipe it away, he moved forward, fingers working around his lover’s hole as he kissed him on the same speed on his ministrations. Potter answered to the kiss with pant-like breaths and complete surrender, moaning inside his mouth when Draco’s fingertips breached his hole. He wasn’t just leaking, anymore; he was oozing, the barriers in the contact the only thing preventing him from coming. Tired of watching him fight, Draco finally ridded himself of his trousers, coated his own cock in lube and brushed his prick on Potter’s crease. Potter immediately pushed down, but he escaped it and sat cross-legged on the mattress. When Potter realised and glared at him, debauched, panting, he patted his lap.

“It’s you who need to surrender, Potter,” he declared, simply. “The choice is yours.”

“Malfoy, please—” He pulled his legs up, offering his arse to him. It was hard not to move, not to take him and finish it. That beautiful, nearly hairless hole, open for him and only for him. His own cock was painfully hard and desperate for that tightness, but if Potter resisted the link, they’d be stuck on that ill-paved road forever. “Don’t make me—”

“But I have to.” Draco was nearly sweet, devilishly sweet as he said it. “I can fill you so good, my Gryffindor. You’ll love it.”

Potter’s hesitation didn’t last at all. He kneeled, crawled and put his arms around Draco’s neck. His breath and words were laced with incoherence and desire. Draco would have been the same, were he unaware of what was going on.

“No one ever—” He lined his arse with Draco’s cock. “Malfoy, I need this so,” and his hole was breached by the tip of Draco’s prick with a suffering moan, “so,” and Draco held Potter’s cheeks as they spread open and further down on him, “so,” with an emphasis that made his insides shiver, “much—”

Draco’s path to Heaven was paved in the blissful way with which Potter’s arsehole hugged his cock, tight and hot, insufferably hot like everything between them. He swallowed him whole, unstretched, trembling. It was hard not to flip him in bed and fuck him. It would always be, Draco guessed, as Potter’s pants became a symphony in his ear. He would always like it too much. But he also knew no other fuck would ever satisfy him nearly as much the moment Potter’s strong thighs pressed his and he went up, slowing down on him with his mouth open and breath shaky. When he reached the bottom again, he stared into Draco’s eyes and smiled, licked his lips, licked Draco’s. The Slytherin raised one of his hands and held his face dearly. Potter purred at the touch like a kitten.

“So beautiful,” he muttered, the stickiness of their sweat tying their bodies together. “Allow yourself the pleasure, Potter. Allow us.”

Defiant, Potter did it, repeating the motion even slower. Coherent thought had left him already; it was leaving Draco too. He felt their skins at once, the shivering arousal coming from one to the other, the strain on Potter’s muscles, the discomfort on his own lower back, the painful yet delicious stretch of Potter’s hole, the tightness leaving and devouring his own cock, the brushing on Potter’s prostate—it was fucking and being fucked, all at once. The feeling was overwhelming. Adding to it, Draco slipped his still slightly slick fingers on Potter’s cock, throwing him off-balance for a while. His hips moved awkwardly to collide with Potter’s, his mouth latched onto his bronze skin to taste him further. He moaned as Potter tugged at his hair, guiding his mouth to his left nipple. The bud was hard before Draco even started teasing it, licking it, sucking at it in ways that elicited gasps and soft
praise from Potter. His hand on Potter’s cock was prompted to go faster, harder, and that stupidly strong Gryffindor was pulling him in with his arse, with his free hand, that held Draco’s bum and forced it up, in synch with his frantic rhythm.

“Can you come first?” was the shy question, said so naturally, so needlessly. Draco knew he’d come first the moment he entered Potter—and he did, bouncing off the mattress to fuck his beautiful lover as his arse sucked every bit of come from his cock. The shock of Draco’s pleasure—stars, coldness, the curling of his toes—made Potter tremble and hold onto the Slytherin body, pushing his own pleasure down with a strength Draco thought honestly impossible. His heart throbbed inside his ribcage, begging him for air and rest. Draco would give it none; he wouldn’t even allow himself to come down just yet. He lay back and slithered, keeping Potter still in place, forcing him to brace himself on the mattress with both arms. He shifted as quick as his boneless body allowed him, sitting, hugging Potter’s bum, latching his mouth on that dripping hole and sucking—hard, at once. Potter jolted, cried and, when Draco’s tongue entered him to lick him clean, came hard, surprised and, finally, unrestrained. He trembled until his arms gave in and he collapsed face first on the bed, lying close to the trail he left on the sheets. Grinning, satisfied and strangely calm, Draco lay beside him and pulled him for a chaste, breathless kiss to which Potter complied before lying, in a haze so high it fogged his brain, in his arms. Savouring his lover’s orgasm as his own, Draco revelled in the feeling.

Silence accompanied them for few minutes, broken by Draco’s delicate probing of the connection. Potter purred in his embrace, hiding his face on Draco’s sweaty neck.

“How do you feel?” he asked, entwining his fingers with Potter’s wet tresses. He didn’t need to ask, but he wanted to.

“Mmm.” Potter was still hot, wet, and boneless; he doubted any of them would be anyhow apt to leave the bed before noon, even if they had to. A smirk graced Potter’s lips and echoed on Draco’s skin. “Fucked.”

“Good.”

He should have cleaned them, and he should have changed the sheets and let go of Potter’s clingy embrace; he did none of these things. All he managed was to throw the duvet over them. For the first time in months, years, Draco truly felt whole, powerful, nearly invincible. He didn’t know it yet, but he’d come to fight to preserve that feeling—come what may.
As promised, Draco let go of Harry the next morning (late morning; they were so spent earlier that they couldn’t even give it a try before) to allow him to go to work. Harry refused to bring him along; as he showered to remove the solid scent of sex and come from his skin and hair, Draco sunk in the bathtub, looking cranky and tight but entirely lovely. They chatted, rather easily in fact, as they went about their morning routine. Draco explained a bit more about the side effects of Intertwining as Harry rinsed his own hair and peed in the shower (please don’t get hurt or else I’ll murder you, for pain travels the link; don’t wank at work despite the faint arousal that might still linger for the day because I don’t need you panting inside my head; don’t call me too hard or I might have to answer and you won’t like it). After that, Harry asked if they were officially a couple through a mouthful of foamy toothpaste, causing Draco, who was rinsing his mouth with mouthwash, to splatter the greenish thing all over the washbasin, laughing, and shake his head intently but without really answering him. Harry managed to steal a long, filthy kiss from Draco’s mint-and-alcohol-flavoured mouth before they parted: Harry to the Ministry, to assess the aftermath of chaos, Draco to St. Mungus, to offer his sound expertise in whatever was needed.

The first thing Harry noticed when he entered the Ministry were the black banisters hanging from the high ceilings. The second was a long line of people asking for information at the only reception desk. There were richly dressed people and those whose fingers twisted shabby hats. Harry didn’t need much to understand those were the families of the deceased — staff and inmates alike.

“We’ll have to help them all,” said a delicate little voice by his side. “But there isn’t much we can do for them right now.” There was a sigh. “Still, I’ll ask Myron and Thorne to help at the desk.” Harry stared at the tiny woman by his side. She was a petite young brunette dressed in thick black robes, her hair up in a practical bun. She had bright eyes, big and brown, and her delicate hand extended in an offer for Harry’s. “Irina Samzi. I am—I was—Shacklebolt’s secretary.”

“He always spoke dearly of you,” Harry admitted, taking her tiny hand in his. They had crossed paths before, but never for long. “I am sorry for your loss.”

She reacted slightly: a twitch of her nostrils, a small trembling of her lips. Her eyes were expressive and lovely, though they showed strength far after her years—she was just twenty.

“Thank you, sir.” She pulled a small folder file from her inner robes and lent it to Harry. “He had a plan.”

The declaration shocked Harry to his bones. A plan? Could Shacklebolt maybe know he was in danger? Could he know what was about to happen?

“Kingsley always saw his position inside the Ministry as something transitory and very risky. It was his choice to be prepared for the worst.” She nudged him to keep the file closed as they walked on, far from the curb of desperate parents, children, siblings. Irina was quick, smartly wearing flat ballet slippers tied around her ankles instead of the heels secretaries seemed to prefer. They walked to the High-Rank’s lifts, currently empty. “He dictated me these reports. He said that if anything ever happened to him, you should have them. His every suspicion and operation is in here.”

Harry stared once more at that little young woman. Why her? How had Kingsley known he could trust her? He dictated his reports. How did he know she wouldn’t babble? Kingsley was against
Unbreakable Vows. He liked to trust people, but he wasn’t quick to it. His eyes wandered for a moment on her face, her robes, and then, small, discreet, nearly not there, they found the glimpse of a small blue diamond around her right ring finger. She raised her chin again as if defying him to comment on it. Harry didn’t. It wasn’t his life to judge. She relaxed.

“He keyed his office to you too. I have to guide you through some of his archives and help you settle.”

“Settle?” Harry frowned.

“You’re Head of the Auror Office now, sir. Until Mr Weasley recovers, if he ever does.”

Taking a deep breath, Harry nodded. “I knew it would be me.”

“It’s always you, sir.” She managed a smile. “And maybe it’s for the best.”

At the end of the day, it was decided the funerals would be scheduled to last two days, starting next morning. It was awkward how something that big had the means to turn any petty emotions into background noise. He understood Pansy’s practical ways, nearly growled when she said they had diagnosed that Morrison had detonated the spell. Some of the staff confirmed that she had been inside Clytemnestra’s cell and she had company; Harry supposed those were the ones who had helped the former Death Eaters’s escape and Morrison was attempting to stop them. When he told Pansy this, she said the debris had suggested the chain reaction was caused by the nearly simultaneous detonation of several trigger spells, so even if Morrison had been responsible for the destruction of her daughter’s cell, she couldn’t have been responsible for the entire chaos. Saying so to her son was incredibly liberating.

Right before the first funeral, Harry was officially empowered as Head of the Auror Office. The Minister wouldn’t look him in the eye all through the ceremony, and he wasn’t the only one to notice it. Standing beside him right after, while people cried over dozens and dozens of cold human bodies as he and the rest of the official party indulged in champagne with restoring draughts after a rather sleepless night, Irina whispered.

“You should be careful. Wilhern is not someone who can be underestimated and he surely hates you.”

“What do you mean?” Harry leaned closer to her, trying his best to look sorrowful instead of suspicious.

“You’re just like Kingsley.” Irina shook her head. “Wilhern is driven by power and the need to make others powerless. He never looked eye to eye with Kingsley. He centralises power in a helpless obsession for keeping his seat.”

“This is very serious. We had a minister like that before.”

“I remember. I wasn’t that young back then.” Irina leaned against a pillar to avoid a crying woman intent on finding her son’s casket. She wobbled, and Harry secured her arm to prevent her bubbly water from spilling. “Thank you, sir.”

“Are you alright?”

She nodded briefly. “Slightly dizzy. I should probably eat.”
“Want me to get you something?” He asked, concerned. “Have you not eaten yet?”

“Oh, no, I did. It’s all good, believe me.” She flashed him a powerful, restoring smile. Still, Harry didn’t want to let her go yet. Irina had been awake with him for the past day and night; they had barely taken a nap on the couch, shoulder to shoulder, right after a late-night letter from Draco explaining that Luna had taken Teddy and Victoire for a stroll. Irina was probably more than just dizzy: she was exhausted, which meant Harry wouldn’t leave her by herself so soon.

Harry had Irina’s arm enlaced with his and chatted absentmindedly with an elder wizard he vaguely recognised as one of their ward experts when someone called him.

“How?” He froze when Draco’s voice reached him. The man, probably uneasy to be so close to Draco, apologised, bowed respectfully and left, leaving Harry to stare at his lover. He was bloody stunning in a charcoal suit with discreet cufflinks, walking the place with the precise balance between sorrow and sureness. It had to be from his Mediwizard days. They hadn’t seen each other the day before, and he smirked a bit for his lover, before his eyes fell on Irina. Then he blinked slowly and Harry didn’t miss the knowledge that passed through them. Slowly, he let go of her arm as if under an order. “Irina.” Ignoring Harry altogether, he took her hands and squeezed them lightly. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, uncle.” She lowered her head, hiding her face from view. For the first time, she looked her years. “For how long…?”

“I’ve just found out this morning. One of the nurses told me.” Irina shook her head. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. He was a good man. Your mother would be proud.”

“I’ve ruined any and every prospect of a good marriage. She would be devastated.”

“Your idiotic grandfather will. Luckily, he doesn’t own you.”

Draco stopped a waiter and took his time selecting an appetiser and prodding the faint connection between him and Harry to make sure all was well. The command behind it was clear as daylight, so Harry stepped away. They could talk about Draco’s bizarre family tree later.

He had walked about ten meters before he met Parkinson, wearing black from head to toes, with barely any glimpse of skin showing between the silken velvet and the tight lace, convoluted in an apparently simple long-sleeved, tall-necked floor-length dress. She was still beautiful, but a tiny spark seemed to have disappeared from her eyes. For the first time, among those people he had never seen and after the tiredness of the night, it felt like a funeral.

“Parkinson?” Harry tried hesitantly.

“Hello, Potter.” Her eyes darted to a secluded corner of the room. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Of course not. Has Draco asked you to come?”

“I didn’t even know he’d be here.” She continued to walk towards that corner, and Harry followed her because, strangely, she was the only person who didn’t seem to measure and judge him inside that room. They were walking towards a luxury casket, ornate with copper and ebony but obviously enchanted to incinerate the remains inside it and itself after burial. It was how expensive caskets were made, to prevent gravediggers from pillaging the bodies inside them. “We came for them.”

Around the casket, Dianthus, dressed in impeccable black, gripped its edge with one hand while Primrose — the small golden topaz earrings gave her in — held him by the other. Beside them, a charming young man of about sixteen had Delphine in his arms, and the tears rolling down his face...
didn’t stop when he noticed he was being observed. But that was not the worst part. With them were several people who had been wanted for years now; he saw Thelonius Gulliver, the man who had aided Thicknesse during his reign of terror, with his head bowed beside a respectfully dressed Macedonia Crabbe, who held hands with her husband and stood behind a teenager that looked just like Vincent Crabbe. Katherine Loote, one of the potionmakers they had lost to the Dark side, weeped on Ignatius Nott’s shoulder while the man spoke absentmindedly with his younger brother, Theo’s father. A couple who held a remarkable similarity to the Carrow siblings was laying roses on top of the casket, and Narcissa — the fake one, Harry could feel it — kissed the lips of the dead man amidst the silken bedding. There were other people, either hooded or not, piling up around the dead.

Harry’s skin prickled and the moved for his wand.

“You can’t,” Pansy told him, and her voice was a spell when she said those words. “Dianthus’s parents were soldiers of the Dark Lord. These people are here to pay their respects.”

“Parkinson, not even you can be that much of a pureblood.”

“There are laws, Potter,” she snapped, eying him with disdain. “This is my in-laws’s funeral and I will not raise wards against you here.”

“They are a step away!” he hissed, looking at her in search of some, any will.

“Yes, and if we disrespect the truce of the dead, it gives them the right to do the same, Potter. Are you even fit to fight, with eyes that red and such an empty stomach? Are the other Aurors? Tell me, do you want another carnage? With children and elders who have lost so much already? I don’t.” Her words had the force of a blow. “They are guests. They can’t attack unless we attack them first. Are you willing to take the risk?”

Harry cursed under his breath. She was right. Damn it. “I’ll behave.”

“I never doubted you would.”

Not blowing up the faces of those criminals was one of the hardest things Harry had to do in years. He felt like throwing up whenever “Narcissa”’s crazy eyes focussed on him, whenever Ignatius offered him a (never accepted) glass of champagne. The only people in actual sorrow there, a familial, personal kind of it, were those Pansy protected like a viper. She had a way of doing so without offending the others, which was remarkable, really. Harry saluted Dianthus, feeling the soft warmth of his big hand enveloping his in thankfulness. His small smile was kind and sad, enthralling in a Veela way, and Harry noticed he wasn’t happy with the company.

It was tough to stay put.

Harry had nearly given up being there when a soft hand slithered up his neck and took hold of his hair gently. Soothing came like warm tea and treacle tart, invading him slowly, all-encompassing. Draco’s thin lips brushed his ear and he shivered as he spoke.

“You were giving off bad vibes,” he explained, focussed entirely on him. It felt so good. The situation was forgotten for a brief moment while Harry enveloped his waist with an arm, relieved.

Until Draco raised his eyes to the crowd around the casket and his blood left his body at once.

Harry’s reaction was as immediate and instinctive as the cruelly contained anger that surged inside his lover. He threw himself in front of Draco, forcing his face down, locking eyes with him as he desperately reached, unknowing of what he did, for the connection that lay between them. Draco took his time, but at last his eyes stopped searching and rested on Harry’s. The turbulence inside him
“I didn’t know.”

Harry nodded and caressed his jaw. “Neither did I.” He stepped away, unwilling to give those monsters any more ammunition. “Shacklebolt’s funeral isn’t until tonight. The Minister seems to have everything under control and he surely wishes I wasn’t here.” Draco nodded with his eyelids to the unspoken proposition. Harry turned around, bowed respectfully, kissed both children on her cheeks, shook hands with Dianthus and the other young man and at last, slowly, bent forward to place a mild kiss on Pansy’s cheek. “I’ll take Draco with me now.” She took his hand and squeezed it just enough for her nails to brush his skin. “I’ll let you know if we need you.”

After Draco’s ceremonious, nearly automatic bow, they searched for Irina’s face in the crowd — Harry had to let her know — but a waiter stopped him with a note that said she was not feeling well and had retired for the afternoon. Of course Harry knew where to find her should he need her, but that was not yet the case, so he let her be. He had a pressing matter to take care of right now and no time to waste.

“She’s not my mother.”

Those words fell like glass in the silence of Harry’s brand new office. Shacklebolt’s nameplate was still up and he didn’t feel like throwing it away any day soon. Draco had been sitting on the opposite side of couch, quiet and thoughtful for the past hour, so having him react was a welcomed relief. Harry edged closer to him and nudged the warm cup of valerian tea towards his hands until he took it. Draco sipped the tea without seeming to mind the taste or the fact that it had been reheated a few dozen times by then.

“Mother hated Dianthus’s parents. She wouldn’t have been there.” His eyes searched Harry’s swiftly. “It wasn’t her.”

“I told you it hadn’t been.”

“You’ve been mistaken before.”

“Not that mistaken.” He leaned back on the couch. “Shit, what a disaster.”

“Is the Saviour upset?”

“You have just witnessed that all of your torturers are alive and seemingly very well so, yeah, let’s start with upset.” He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath the glasses. “Godric, I wanna go back there and camp before that hall’s doors until they leave.”

“It would be careless and idiotic to do so.” Draco sipped again and this time he turned around to face Harry with a scowl that denounced he had, alas, finally found the tea’s unrefined taste. “Did you piss in my cup?”

“Shut up.”

“Heathen.” He finally leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “Living with you made me forget what we’re up against.”

“I didn’t.”
“I’m not a fighter, Potter.” He stared at Harry, brushing his wrist lightly with his fingertips. “I’m manipulative. Deceitful. Coward, even. Not a fighter.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean it’s time to stop fighting and maybe do things our way.” Draco got up and brushed unexisting soot from his shoulders. “Continue to do your job. Pay attention to what happens at the Ministry. Without Weasley and Bulstrode, we hardly have anyone there. Employ whatever spies you need; Zabini can help you choose them.”

“Like he helped you find Flora?”

“I will not apologise for making a Slytherin search for another Slytherin. Especially when she’s an Unspeakable and you, my idiot lover, have no bloody one you can resort to inside that office.”

“I have plenty of people to help me.”

“Name one.” Harry’s mind blanked. Draco snickered. “See? You might know people, but you can’t count on them. Zabini can count on every bloody soul he’s ever known in his sodding life. He’s a people whisperer. He’d do much better at hunting. And he’s a perfect spy.”

“Why do you want them? Why can’t it be me? It should be me hunting them all.”

“You hunt like a crap’s pup. Deaf myrtlemice in a three thousand mile range can hear you move.” Draco shook his head. “Leave the hunting to me. Use your ability to make the world bend at your will and give me the intel I need to do so.”

“You’re sick and still hurt, and—”

Draco’s movements were so swift that Harry stumbled before he felt his face pressed against the arm of the couch. Heart thumping, he tried to turn around, but Draco’s grip was ridiculously strong.

“It’s been a month.” He slipped his hand down Harry’s back, releasing his right arm. “I’m slightly vision impaired, but I don’t need my eyes to do what I need to do.” He dismounted from Harry and straightened his own clothes again. “You should be raising awareness. Making those who fought with you aware that there’s a conspiracy going on. Lie if you must. We’ll need support. You didn’t recognise the people I did.”

“I recognised nearly everyone.”

“You recognised glamours and enchantments. The ranks of those who tortured me are filling up with people who can turn anyone to their side, by either speech or force.”

“How do you know it? How can you possibly know it?”

“Because I’ve been one of them, Potter. Don’t you ever forget that.” He kissed his lover briefly on the lips. “And reunite a group of people you can trust for an Internal Affairs Provisional Office. There might be your people involved.”

“Why can’t Bulstrode be of any help?” he asked, bringing back that piece of information. She was always useful at that stuff.

“Orphans.” Harry stared unblinkingly at him. “You would be flabbergasted at the amount of children living in provisional homes whose now dead criminal parents mean there’s no more child support coming in.”
“They’re throwing out orphans?” Harry’s blood boiled in anger.

“It might be different in your world, Potter, but where I come from, children are expected to become perfect copies of their parents. Very few people have the faith or the patience to see whether this is the right thing to expect.” He sneered. “Don’t you remember how long it took for me to stop seeing eye-to-eye with my father’s beliefs? Haven’t you been pushed by everyone to become as brave as your father, as smart as your mother, as gallant as your godfather?”

Harry knew there wasn’t an answer to that. Muggleborns and half-bloods could be more or less trusting of their children, but anyone of pureblood lineage or whose parents were a tiny bit more close-minded wouldn’t stand a chance. They needed people like Bulstrode to fight for them.

“What will happen to them?”

“We don’t know. It’s been forever since there has been a mass of orphaned children. And our Minister is not exactly immune to those beliefs too.”

Wilhern was a pureblood of a side lineage. His family was not among the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but no one could trace back his origins and throw it in his face that he was lying. He had come from the North with a family tree engraved with Averys, Selwyns, Rowles and Flints. It was widely known — or believed — that pureblood women never married into less than pureblood families. He brought with him a competence for leading with an iron fist and very little tolerance. If the Minister still had every decision in his hand, rumours said they would be living under Martial Law now.

“Fine. I won’t bother Bulstrode, then. Just let her know she can come to me for help.” Draco nodded. “Can I trust Irina? You seem to know her.”

“She’s the granddaughter of Ignatius Nott.” Harry had imagined something of the sort when she called Draco uncle. Still, granddaughter to a Nott was not a good thing. “She hates him. And she was your boss’s fiancée. I don’t think she’s a risk.”

They discussed names and possibilities for a while longer as the time for the next set of funerals approached. They would veil the dead staff next, with Shacklebolt’s burial late the next morning. It would be a long night and they agreed that Draco wouldn’t need to sit through any of it. Lyra and Scorpius were nearly healed now and they’d soon be discharged. Besides, his father had not yet woken up, which made him uncomfortable and worried, despite his best efforts to hide it. As the cherry on top, he told Harry that word had gotten out — probably by Frilly, he hated to admit it — that his father had been threatened and Narcissa, the real one, would be coming back soon. Draco wouldn’t say he wasn’t ready, but he didn’t need to. His apprehension was clear as daylight through the soft link between them.

“I know you know it but your mother loves you.”

“Now does she?” He shrugged. Harry scowled at him. “People have messed up pretty badly in the name of love. I am sorry that I don’t think such word obliterates what she did to me.”

“You should ask her about the battle.” Draco raised an eyebrow. “I know you’ve been told she was looking for you. Ask her how.”

“You seem to know it. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s not my tale to tell.” He took Draco’s face in his hands and kissed him once and twice, spreading his tight lips open slowly and recovering strength from it. “We should go home. The wards have been touched; I think we have visitors.”
They had enough time on their way up to the Atrium to decide how they’d deal with the babies when they came back along. Harry would talk to Ginny and Fleur to keep them if they could and Draco would, gently and calmly, ask Teddy to go back to Andromeda’s while they set the board for their next moves. They agreed that children should be spared as much as possible, even though they’d been children when they were first branded with the aliases that would define their lives. If they could spare their kids the same fate, they would.

Soon after their feet touched the living room floor, Luna came through the door, holding Teddy and Victoire by their hands. They had mud up to their hairs and glowed like the sun. On Teddy’s hair, Avalerion looked exhausted, his little eyelids trembling, and Bowie, in Victoire’s delicate hand, had gripped the girl’s index finger and slept soundly. When Draco had told him the night prior she’d taken them out for a stroll, Harry hadn’t thought they’d be so long, but it had apparently been the right thing to do. The children looked tired and worn, and happy.

Teddy collapsed standing on his side and snuggled against Harry’s smart clothes.

“Hello, Prongspawn.” He yawned. “We camped.”

“I can see that.” He wondered what Luna had told him or done to him to make his bitterness towards Harry stop. Teddy had been under her attentive, ever-ready care ever since the chaos began; she seemed to handle the kid better than anyone. Harry sat down with the boy close to him and turned to her as Teddy’s breathing evened. He had barely been awake. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem.” She dislodged Bowie from Victoire’s hand, allowing the girl to sit beside Teddy and fall asleep on top of him as Luna saluted Draco and described the camping in a couple of words. It had been lots of fun, if her word was enough proof. She couldn’t stop smiling. “They need to sleep a lot, now. Can I leave them here?”

“Of course.” Draco smiled gently at her. “Were they too much work?”

“They are never too much work. Teddy helped me catalogue another species of firebug and Victoire’s so sweet she can actually lure them.” She stroked the sleeping Bowtruckle. “I’ll put him up on the tree where you put David to rest.”

“Why?” Harry was alarmed by that. Those Bowtruckles had a tree. It wasn’t that one. “Is he ok?”

“Does a firebug steam?” She chuckled. “I sense something good is going to come of it this time.”

With that, she left the room, leaving the kids behind. Before he was even called, Kreacher showed up, bowing respectfully. Harry thought it was an amazing sense of duty that didn’t really match his natural self, other than an attention to Teddy and Victoire that he had not even once in his lifetime displayed, and he opened his mouth to compliment him, but Kreacher spoke first.

“Masters.” He lifted his head. His mouth was frowned in shaky distaste. It was nearly obvious he was just refraining because Draco was there. “Madam Tonks is here.”

Panic rose inside Harry and the now familiar need to hide Draco rose with it like bile. Draco, on the other hand, lifted his chin and nodded gently to the sour elf.

“Allow her inside, Kreacher. I’ll meet her at the garden upstairs.” When Kreacher bowed and left, Harry took hold of Draco’s wrist. “Let me go, Potter. I’m not your pet. You cannot order me to stay.”

He wrenched free from his grip, eyed the kids and cleaned them with a shy, delicate spell. Then, he left the room, striding like a lord to meet one of his own. Harry sighed. He had to make an effort in
remembering that Draco was alright now. He could fight his own battles and he could call him when it was needed. They had to build confidence in each other’s actions after all.

So, contrary to all of his wants, contrary to his every whim, he let Draco do that on his own. He sat there and stared at the ceiling and stroked Teddy’s hair and exchanged glances with Luna when she came back and sat down beside him. He talked to her about her life and her father’s birthday, to which he had invited no one but her and Rolf in order to formally give them ownership of The Quibbler. He told her about the funeral and how things were at the Ministry and his fear of keeping Shacklebolt’s position. She counseled him to tell Teddy the truth and to pay a tad more attention to those who cared about him.

“Are the lovebirds comfortable?” Draco smirked by the door. He looked unscathed, but Harry had to fight the urge to get up and check on him. “Aunt Dromeda says she can keep Teddy for as long as we need. She said she misses him.”

“Oh, great.” Harry smiled at him. “Was she surprised?”

“Definitely. The poor woman couldn’t restrain her tears.” Draco shook his head the tiniest bit and leaned to brush Victoire’s hair from her sleeping face. Harry didn’t, but Luna noticed his eyes gleamed a little. “I’ll go back to Hogwarts as soon as they wake up and I can send them to Aunt Dromeda.”

“Alright. I’ll go to the hospital, check on Ron and Hermione.” Draco acquiesced. “Send me a message if you need me.”

“I’ll be fine, Potter.” He kissed him briefly. “Now go. The clock’s ticking.”

Indeed, it was. As he freshened his clothes and set up for another Floo travel, Harry felt Luna’s arm curl around his. He could have asked something, but years had taught him that woman didn’t do a single thing without a purpose, and a good one. With a small smile, he let her tag along, arm in arm, as they travelled and walked down the hospital aisles to Ron’s safe bedroom. Hermione was by his bedside, as usual, dressed in loose jeans and a rumpled T-shirt, with her hair piled up on top of her head. Her eyes skewed over Ministerial documents and her husband’s health transcripts seemingly nonstop. In bed, Ron was the same: yellowish, with tubes and bags surrounding him. Harry had to close his eyes for an instant and take a deep breath.

“Knock, knock,” Harry said as he showed his face, Luna right behind him. “Can we come in?”

“Sure,” she said, getting up and stretching. Her fingers slipped protectively over Ron’s arm unconsciously. “Hello.”

“Hello.” Luna smiled brightly, handing her a package of something squishy. “Frujelly muffins. Do you still like them?”

“Oh God, yes, I’ve been craving these for days now.” Hermione took one of the squiggly jelly-like mini-cakes and ate half of it in one go. The thingie shivered and whined before stopping so it could keep the already eaten half company. Despite Harry’s aversion to the pastry, he had to admit he wouldn’t mind giving Hermione a bucketful of them if they made her smile like that. Looking appeased, she waved a couple of chair closer with a weak spell. Harry raised an eyebrow at that. “Too much magic interferes with the stability charms. But none sterilises the place and makes mapping signs difficult.” She shook her head. “We learned a lot from Muggles but still, hard materials are much more trustworthy than magic.”

“Why can’t we borrow them?”
“They prevent the mapping of Magic. We tried to coat them in it but it still doesn’t work.” She shrugged. “He is better, though. His magical core is intact, and his brain functions seem to be alright.” Her face darkened as someone entered the room. They all saluted Hannah, who showed up, followed by Neville, to whom they chatted a bit, and began changing Ron’s bandages with her husband’s and Hermione’s help. Staff was probably still short at the hospital, then.

Hermione paused.

“He’ll need a liver transplant,” she stated, her hands full of bandages she discarded in a bin. “I think it will be in Royal London.”

Luna sat down first. “Are you scared?”

“Shouldn’t I be? Surgeries are rare among wizards.”

“Thompson had a few. And Michaelson and McCoy and Sevenj.”

“None of those were internal, Harry. Ron was hurt too much; the damage is too big. Spells can’t get enough of a grasp to work. His cells aren’t healing as they were supposed to.”

“I don’t understand. It was physical damage. I’ve seen worst things healing with magic. Snape saved Draco’s life, for Godric’s sake!”

Hermione’s face clouded over; she exchanged look with Hannah and they both shook their heads. Harry didn’t really understand. Powerful healing spells and concoctions were literally what Medimagicians and Healers did best. They were good. Harry had come back from the dead. How hard could it be to restore a liver?

“I think I understand.” Luna’s soft, fairy-like voice filled the uncomfortable silence between them. “It wasn’t the debris falling on him, it was Dark Magic.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t know how could someone use Dark Magic inside Azkaban but still, I hammered a Sectumsempra into Draco’s chest. How much Darker can a spell be?”

“But the spellmaker was nearby to set a countercurse, and quickly.” Hermione added, snappily. “Ron was beneath that shit for nearly an hour.”

That she said a bad word was enough proof of the gravity of the situation.

“Organ tissue is harder to heal. Dark Magic when it settles, what’s affected by it, it’s never the same anymore,” said Hannah, splashing something that smelled bitter over Ron’s bare stomach.

Luna took something fluffy and bird-like from her pocket and chewed its head off. Licorice-cotton-candy Sweet Flinch, Harry recognized it once its head stopped singing. George had invented that. “Is Ron aware of it?”

“He hasn’t woken up for long enough to discuss it. But as his wife…”

She needn’t say no more. If she okay’ed the operation, it could be done.

“Have you found a donor?”

Hermione recoiled as if slapped. “It’s complicated.”

“How complicated?”
“There is no known way to measure magical compatibility,” Hannah disclosed, without any preambles. Around them, everything was tense. Neville looked tired and worn and they could hear the clinking of phials inside his pockets. “It’s difficult to know whether the kind of magic will be alike or opposite Ron’s. It’s not like Muggles do with blood. And magical cores of pureblood wizards are hard to predict.”

“Are you saying that… even if we find someone compatible to donate, there’s a chance it will compromise his magic?” Harry stared from one woman to the other. Hermione nodded.

“We don’t know where magic comes from. We can detect whether a magical core is functioning but it’s not… physical. It’s not an organ in itself. We cannot shield it from interference if something wants to interfere with it. And we know magic and Muggle stuff don’t always work together.” She pursed her lips. “Even if we can make the surgery work, meddling like a Muggle inside Ron’s body might turn him into a Squib.”

“You can’t know that. It’s no common procedure. How can you make such assumptions?”

“Because other wizards have been through invasive Muggle surgeries. Do you know why no one mentions that? Because they don’t come back. They become Muggles, in the end, whenever they manage to survive. It’s just easier.”

“Hermione, calm down.” Hannah put a hand on her shoulder. From apparently nowhere, Neville made up a tiny phial and handed it to his wife. “We have discussed it already. We are trying to find alternatives.”

Hermione settled down again as she took the contents of the phial, but the look in her eyes was clear enough. There were no alternatives. Harry had hardly thought of a limit to magic, although there certainly should be one, and he didn’t like witnessing it right now.

“I think you should go,” Hannah asked delicately. Neville, who had not as much as uttered a word so far, nodded. The next moment, Harry and Luna had been ushered out of the room with barely any goodbye.

It was a while before someone broke the silence.

“You have to forgive her… it’s not easy.”

Harry looked at Neville pensively. “I didn’t know Hannah was here.”

“She comes by every once in while. The Medimagicians here can’t force Hermione to eat and stuff and Hannah reminds her of the baby and so on so forth.” Neville shrugged. “I’ve been working with some Master Potioneers in Calming Draughts that don’t bother her pregnancy, with exogenous species. She’s reacting well to them. Bit too focussed on stuff, maybe. Common side-effect.”

“You were unusually quiet in there,” added Luna, although her face said she already knew the reason for that behaviour.

“Ah, I’m tired as a nesting Devil’s Snare.” He laughed. “And Hermione is not very pro-talking lately. She snaps less when we don’t try to meddle.”

“I’m worried about her,” Harry confessed. “She should go back home and let someone else stay by him.”

“Oh well. It probably won’t happen.” Neville shook his head. “But I’ll let you know if something new occurs. Hannah likes discussing medical cases with me.” He sounded as if he couldn’t fathom a
reason why it should be fun to discuss medical cases with any living being, an opinion Harry
endorsed heartily. “Do you wanna come back to Hogwarts with me? Snape asked to talk to you.
Scared the shit outta me popping in my bedroom’s Ghinaceae painting.”

The idea of talking to his former Potions Master made him shiver.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I have a ceremony to attend.” Harry sounded truly apologetic. And indeed he
was, deep down. “I’m also sorry that you’re in the middle of it. All of you. I am truly sorry.”

“Nah.” Neville smiled. “Get me a Gyaradae Pipistrellum in a couple of months and we’re even.”

“Deal.” They shook hands and after some more conversation, Neville went away smiling brightly.
When he was gone, Luna giggled, then laughed. “What?”

“It’s Saltwater Bat-fish Vine, you know.” She nudged him forward and sat down by the counter in
the hospital’s café. Harry sat across from her. He hadn’t realised she was leading them there. “The
plant.”

“I’m not familiar with that.”

“I know.” Luna had spent a long time travelling with Neville before she met Rolf and Neville settled
with Hannah. They were a perfect team, a Magibotanist and a Magizoologist. They still took
vacations to work together sometimes. “They live intertwined in salt-encrusted bags of air inside
underwater caves.”

“And how the hell am I supposed to get one?”

Luna signalled to the waiter. “I can lend you a Scavenger Fishling. They cover in them to mate.”
Harry didn’t think that would help at all, but Luna didn’t seem to notice his face anyway. Instead,
she looked at him as if he was truly an interesting specimen. “Hurry up and choose your food. We
have but a couple of hours before the funerals.”

Harry wondered if he should ask whether she’d come along, but oh well. What was the need to state
the obvious among friends anyway? Shaking his head, he asked for grilled cheese and tea for starters
and prepared to talk to Luna until the time to leave came along. He didn’t want to go. But he was the
boss now, and those were his people. There were too many hands he’d need to hold tonight, too
many tears to help dry, for his people. He would never let them down.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, my semester's nearly over! Thank goodness! I apologise profoundly for being
unable to post before; this is the longest I've taken to write a chapter of this fic and I
could barely sleep outta worry. I'll try my best to recover the schedule, people. Thank
you for reading, and for the lovely comments, and for the neverending patience!
As he would have wanted, Shacklebolt’s body wasn’t raised, up in marble slabs, surrounded by flowers and candles. It was just a casket among other thirty-nine caskets. Something simple, made of rich brown wood, indistinguishable from the others. A last honour shared between him and those he had fought with. A platinum nameplate with the forty names beautifully engraved on it awaited in the middle of the room, surrounded by tiger lilies and auburn lavender, flowers elected to crown the new DMLE crest. There was one of each for each of the deceased.

The room was silent as a tomb the moment Harry walked in. Luna, beside him dressed in starry deep blue, looked at the faces assembled as if she hoped to find someone. Harry didn’t know who she was looking for; with a swish of her robes, she turned around and nudged his ribs with a pointy elbow.

“They’re looking for you,” she said, rather lightly for such dreadful occasion. Harry followed her gaze to a bunch of red-haired people hunching together close to a small family dressed in white brocade. Among the orange, a pale blonde head shone brighter than everyone else’s, and she spotted him first.

“’Arry!”

Only Fleur could shout soft and low like that. She barely disturbed those around her, and the grieving people who were just a tiny bit further couldn’t even listen to it. Luna took Harry’s seemingly dead hand and strolled over to the family, dragging him along. Oh dear Lord.

Before Harry reached the group, George moved forward and grasped his shoulder, seemingly in grievance. The subtle movement dislodged Luna’s hand from his for a moment.

“Can we talk after this?” he whispered, his face turned away from his parents.

“Sure,” Harry answered, taken by surprise. “Remind me later.”

He nodded, stepped away. Fleur hugged him as soon as he was in arms’ reach; she was trembling. Behind her, Bill was pale and tired, not unlike his father, who extended a wrinkly hand that Harry grasped delicately. Arthur had left the war older than seven children had made him, but it was the first time in years Harry could actually see that age in his face. The kind smiles had vanished, replaced by a frown that did not belong there.

“I’ve seen the nameplates,” said a male voice to break the silence. “It was a nice one.”

Harry looked around to meet Charlie, expertly dressed in formal robes that could barely restrain his tamer physique. There was a new scar healing on his cheek. Occupational hazard, he’d always said.

“Thom didn’t come with you?” asked Luna, soft and sweet like good liquorice.

“He’s home. He didn’t know anyone here, and his father just passed away, so he’d rather not come.”

“My condolences,” said Harry, who hadn’t known of Mr. Grimassi’s death. “Is he alright?”

“Thom’s a strong one.” Charlie smiled at him. “Toire, Dom and Louis are with him, and the rest of the kids too. I think it’s the first time he’s ever been alone with so many children.”

“And Angelina?” asked Luna, still attempting to break the ice.
“Angie’s down with a flu.” George shook his head, but he grinned proudly. “You can take the broom from under the woman but you can’t take the woman off the broom.”

They laughed mildly at that, before Percy came along with Audrey, both stiff and awkward but truly sorry. They still didn’t mingle in the family as much as the rest of the Weasleys, but the hard feelings were long gone. Then, from afar, running like a petite red-haired cannonball, Ginny tossed herself in Harry’s arms, hugging him steadily.

“Hey,” he said, holding her when she didn’t move to let go. “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you,” she whispered back. “You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“It’s a bit of a blow.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’ll recover.”

“Like we had a choice.”

Ginny had just finished leaving Harry’s embrace when Molly replaced her, going on and on about how thin and weary Harry was. He placated her admonishment with carefully worded phrases and hardly any proper comment, lest something about Draco left his lips. They vehemently skirted the subject of Ron’s injuries, ignoring the absence of the youngest male Weasley like it was taboo. It was Arthur who cleared that they had been outdoing themselves in finding stuff for Molly to do so she wouldn’t worry herself blue about her hospitalised child. With Angie sick and Thom recovering from a death in the family, and now with Shacklebolt’s funeral, they were succeeding, albeit barely.

“Potter.”

He would have guessed the person from the looks in the Weasleys’ faces, even if he didn’t promptly recognise the voice. As if that wasn’t enough, the fine hand rested on his shoulder like it belonged there, despite never having been allowed there formally. Luna giggled as Harry turned away and acquiesced.

“Zabini.”

A quick glance showed him only four people were not prone to shove the Slytherin away, besides him and Luna: Charlie, whose aesthetic-driven eyes had obviously caught what a lovely specimen that bastard was, Audrey, whose face was curious because it really hardly showed contempt, Fleur, who couldn’t hate a survivor unless they had done her family direct harm, and Ginny, who had long since put the grudges about some of the less problematic Slytherins aside.

Arthur cleared his throat.

“Mr Weasley, what a pleasure.” Zabini stepped forward and bowed respectfully, then grasped Arthur’s hand softly and shook it. “I am very sorry for your losses. Given your brilliant career at the Ministry, I am positive several of these people were your friends.”

Taken aback by all that loveliness, Arthur blinked. “Thank you, lad.” His eyes searched Harry’s, but the Gryffindor nodded as to guarantee him all was well and Zabini wasn’t mocking him in such dire hour. Which he wasn’t, much to Harry’s own surprise. “Mr Zabini?”

“Please, sir, call me Blaise.” Surprise roused the Weasleys, which prompted Zabini to go one by one, shaking hands and smiling like a redeemed Niffler to win them over. Harry had watched that kind of effect before — Zabini had earned Ron’s trust, somehow — but it was ridiculous and preoccupying to see how much Draco’s reading of his friend rang true. In five minutes the bastard had turned scrunched up faces into tranquil, although not yet quite appreciative ones. “I apologise for interrupting this undoubtedly sorrowful moment. The Minister has been reported as absent—”
“That bastard isn’t coming?” Harry cut him off, seriously mad at stupid Wilhern. Around him, he heard Molly’s surprised gasp and saw the blatant disapproval in the way both Percy and Fleur shook their heads. Arthur fumed.

Blaise smiled apologetically. It was fake and ironic, though, despising of the absent man, and Ginny joined Charlie and Audrey when they giggled out loud.

“Your secretary asked me to find you.” At that, they excused themselves and started walking. “She’s settling up the arrangements so you can pay the first homage.”

Harry blanched. “—what?”

Blaise smirked. Not vipery like Pansy, or that strange mix of pleased and spiteful that Draco managed so well. He truly seemed to find it funny. “Didn’t they tell you? It comes with the position. Highest rank under the Minister, etcetera. I’ll ask Nina to give you some brochures.”

“Zabini, I can’t speak at my mentor’s funeral. I’m not… a speaker.”

“Well, technically, if there’s a language and a use for it, you are.” He brushed non-existing soot from Harry’s shoulders. “Nina provided a speech. She seems to think you can read.”

“Zabini.”

“If you can finish reading a formal speech when mourning your friends and comrades, I’ll fart fireworks for a week. Big, dragon-like Weasley ones.”

“Classy.” But Harry didn’t say anything else, for Irina came towards him, sober and lovely and strong in a black sheath dress with a heavy velveteen cloak. She had a parchment rolled neatly in her hands. “Irina.”

“Sir.” She nodded to him, and wordlessly to Blaise. “We have to open the memorial service. It’s short notice, but there’s no one else to do the honours.”

Harry didn’t absolutely want to go up in a podium and tell grieving people how sorry they were about something they didn’t even know yet how it happened, or offer them the protocol sum the Ministry had always given people who had died in service. He wanted his peers to feel free and safe to mourn in peace, and warrant them they would find the reason behind that tragedy, and help them in any way they needed, and he wanted to mean it all. So, with a small sigh and a feeble smile, he politely ignored the parchment in Irina’s hands to favour moving forward, casting a Sonorus on himself along the way. There was no one else to do that for him.

“My friends,” he said, and his voice carried to every corner of the room, silencing murmurs as it passed them, “we are here tonight to say our last goodbyes to some of the best people we’ve ever met.” Wide, glistening eyes stared at him; he wouldn’t be discouraged. “I know, like many of us, how much it hurts to lose those dear to us, so I won’t babble about how they’d want us to hang in there, and not to suffer. You have the right to feel bad, and wronged, and to despise me and this bloody organization I right now represent because we couldn’t protect them. I know I do.”

Whispers spread slowly, crying and encouraging and sometimes in denial and fury. Harry took a deep breath and moved on. “Rest assured that I’ll make sure those who did this pay, even if it costs my life.” He saw Molly’s hand shoot up to cover her mouth; beside her, Charlie, Bill and Ginny nodded, reassuring. “And if you need anything, come knock at my door. If the Minister doesn’t have the balls to stand in front of you and hear you out, I want you all to know I will.” Harry’s eye caught sight of Scanper’s mother, disoriented, seeking support in her son-in-law. Elton Ferris couldn’t lift his
head from his wife’s casket. Around Lopez’s, a dozen children tried to wake up their older brother. He felt his throat tighten. “They will never be forgotten.”

Harry didn’t thank them, for thanking didn’t seem to be what to look after in those people. Their forgiveness, maybe, even though it wasn’t all his fault.

Except maybe it was.

He wobbled down the stairs to the podium, resting his weight heavily in whatever pillar was closest to him. He saw Irina nod in approval of his speech, and Blaise mimicked a firework failing to take flight; it made him smile.

“They won’t blame you, you know.”

That light voice could only mean Luna; he opened his eyes to see her standing in front of him. She had a glass of something that reeked of strong alcohol. Harry downed it without a second glance, the firewhiskey carving his oesophagus where it touched it.

“They don’t have to.”

“Draco said you’d try to be a martyr.” She sipped her champagne slowly. “I didn’t know he’d be so right. But maybe it’s expected, right? After what you’ve been through together.”

“Is it that noticeable?”

“Yeah.” She extended a hand to grasp his. “They believe in you. They’ll look for you if they need you.”

“Good. I meant what I said.” A waiter moved closer and Harry deprived his tray of another glass of firewhiskey, which he gulped in one go. “I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s life for us, mortals.” Luna looked up, at the enchanted ceiling. There were so many stars up there, so much light. “You can cry, you know. If you want to. You’re only just human.”

“Thanks, Luna, but I’ve cried enough. It’s time I stop putting my grief first and start drying other people’s tears, now.”

He extricated himself from the pillar and squared his shoulders for a night of tears and condolences. If he had looked back, he’d have seen Luna smiling at him from the rim of her flûte.

The burials started at midnight. Some of the deceased were Muggleborns; their bodies were cremated according to their families’ request, and Orchard’s mother and Boone’s partner asked to bury them in their families’ burial sites. Most pureblood families had their own site too, but it wasn’t customary of non-purebloods to do so. Except in cases when the families asked otherwise, staff killed in action was buried together, as the band of brothers they acted out to be.

Harry helped in every burial. He rolled up his sleeves and excavated the traditional five centimetres that had to be done by hand by those who were sorry and capable — sometimes with the help of the deceased’s family, sometimes with his peers. Few people remained after that, and when it was Shackleton’s turn, Harry came back to a deserted room. It should be around five in morning, already; the mist around the ceremony room was heavy and twinkling under the moon. Harry knew some people were still around, probably taking draughts and cleaning up after so long awake. Still, when Harry looked at Kingsley’s casket, he felt like he had, for the first time in the last couple of
days, some privacy.

“It’s just you and me now, old man.” He tapped the sides of the casket, watching the unmovining, unstirring figure inside it. “You went down in a hell of a spectacle, didn’t you?” Silence was the only answer he got; tired, Harry slumped to the floor, not caring about being rumpled. He was covered in dirt and that was okay right now. “I wish you had survived, man. You were the only one reliable in that hell of a place.” He leaned his head back on one of the thick legs of the table in which the casket lay. “I’m really lost, King. You have no idea of how much we needed you. Still do, in fact. I mean, you went away and left a fiancée behind, man, and she’s hurting. We all are. We’d never have thought you’d ever put yourself in danger again. I don’t even know why you went there. Ron could have handled it. You didn’t have to risk yourself, you know. You didn’t. You should have stayed back, safe and sound, ’cause you’re worth so much more than whatever that was.”

He lurched forward, resting his forehead on his knees. Not having any tears left to cry made his heart shrink inside his chest. He was aware of life and that people died and he was getting over it, but the pain. It could take him whole by surprise, just to prove it was still there.

Harry barely moved when someone else jaggedly made their way down to sit beside him. He didn’t want to disturb another person’s sorrow. It was only when tight arms surrounded him by his waist and a head of bushy hair tickled his face that comfort befell upon him. Her hand took his, squeezed it, and for a moment she cried the tears he no longer had.

When she stopped crying, Harry raised his head and touched hers with it.

“Who’s with Ron?”

“Phineas.” Hermione hugged him closer. “I couldn’t let you go through this alone.”

“You’d have had a reason.”

“No reason is good enough if it means enhancing a friend’s suffering.” She kept quiet for a moment longer, then stood gingerly up. She was worn and tired, but she proffered her hand and helped him up. “Come on. Some people have come to carry Kingsley’s casket.”

Looking around, the average count must be of at least twenty people. By the far corner of the room, Parkinson and McGonagall were raising a wall of powerful wards, and when Harry looked around he understood why. Everyone remaining of the Order of the Phoenix was there. Everyone. Mrs. Figg leaned on Doge, who was not so much younger but handled her light weight well. She was old, far older than any of the wizards in the room, it showed in her wrinkles and her particularly dishevelled hair, but her big eyes were still curious and vigilant. Jones came arm in arm with Podmore (who rumours said had decided to keep her as his wife after all the brutality of his recovery from the fairly strong Imperius Curse set on him) and Mundungus Fletcher coiled from stealing an emblazoned goblet after a side look from Hagrid, whose gigantic hands held a massive chain that ended, surprisingly, in Buckbeak/Witherwings’ collar. The beast strode majestically forward and bowed, allowing Harry to pet him and later embrace his sturdy neck.

“We couldn’a ‘ave ‘im leave without a fair goodbye, eh?” Hagrid pulled Harry into the most bizarrely huge bear hug he’d ever received. His furry coat had been replaced, and the smart, black one he wore was much softer, though still quite fluffy. “We’re all sorry for yeh. Bucky wouldn’t stay, so I had to bring ‘im along. Liked Kingsley, this one. Chim wanted to come, he and Bucky here are best mates, but ah…”

“A chimera would frighten people, Hagrid,” said Hermione delicately.
“Ay, that’s what McGonagall said.” He didn’t sound convinced, which was heart-warming to
witness. “I’m carrying the casket tonite. Bucky mighta help with the burial itself.”

“Thank you for being here, Hagrid. I know he’d value it a lot.”

“Good man, Kingsley. Decent man.”

“I’m glad you came too, Hagrid,” pointed Hermione, surrendering to a hug too.

“Yeh all can always count on yer big ol’ friend ‘ere.”

Harry had never doubted that. Leaving Hermione to be comforted by Hagrid’s brute but deftly caring
embrace, he strode to check on the others. They were all sorry and more than one looked ill. Several
cried. It felt and looked like a funeral.

A couple of steps more and he bumped into Parkinson.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I’m leaving, no harm done.” She raised an eyebrow at the assembled people in there. “Quite a gang
you’ve got.”

“They’re Shacklebolt’s friends.” And after a moment of thinking. “Mine too.”

Pansy smirked as unpleasantly as she could, but the effect was lost on the sincerity in her voice.

“Nice job.”

Harry couldn’t pressure her to ask why she was there, since she stepped out of the ward and
Disapparated into the night. Instead, he was pulled back to reality by Charlie’s callused hand
brushing his neck.

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

“Dad’s been looking funny at you both here so I thought I’d come here and save you.”

“Parkinson is not a risk.”

“From my father.” He frowned. “Quite frankly, I can’t understand how you can remain at less than a
kilometre distance from her. You do remember she tried to sell you out, don’t you?”

“She wanted out alive. We all did.”

“We wouldn’t have done what she did.”

“No. But we were the enemy and there was no place for us in the society Voldemort wanted to
build. She would have hers.”

“You’re too forgiving, mate.”

“Forgetting doesn’t mean forgetting. She’s on probation.”

“Right.” He chuckled and patted Harry’s neck. The old camaraderie was still there. With him, and
with everybody else. It was like the old times.
Smalltalk and politeness had their time for a while. People spoke around the casket, said sweet and funny things about Kingsley (McGonagall had her lips pursed while retelling a story of how he had grown a tail during a mission and refused to remove it until it started hurting because it was useful, and Irina talked about his love of hiking and Quidditch and mint rats), laughed and mourned side by side. Then the moment dragged, the goodbyes began to fall from people’s lips, and it was time.

Despite the obvious fact that Hagrid could do it on his own, they chose ten people to carry Shacklebolt’s casket. Harry wasn’t among them, because he would dig. Irina, right beside him, took swift deep breaths and held her composure. She, like Harry, hadn’t cried there, enduring everything like the strong woman she was.

Those who carried the casket — Mundungus, Arthur, Bill, Fleur, Jones, Higgins, Diggle, Aberforth and, surprisingly, Mrs Figg, heavily aided by Hagrid — held it up as Harry picked a shovel and presented himself beside the grave. Like an obedient team, Irina and Hermione joined them.

“You really don’t have to,” he tried, but Irina shook her head and grabbed the shovel tighter. When Harry stared at Hermione, a single look was enough to shut him up. Then, there was Doge, and Neville, and Charlie, and they started digging. There was more to dig, about twenty centimetres, and they dug it like penitents. Then they laid Kingsley down and Irina poured the first handful of soil and a pink tulip. And she finally cried.

The Weasleys were the last ones to leave, when morning was already greeting them and everything else was clear. McGonagall disabled the wards — alone; Pansy hadn’t returned and the other few people who could help her, like Hermione, had already left —, asked Harry to tell her in case he needed anything. Harry feared she wanted to ask him something, but Hagrid had drunk a barrel of something alcoholic or poisonous (or maybe both), probably brought by George to dissipate the ghosts of pain and guilt, to sink his sorrow and she had to help Buckbeak take his master back to Hogwarts’ safe grounds. Harry offered to help, but his former teacher sensibly thought best that he left with the Weasleys. Still, Harry had to stop by Grimmauld Place to pick up a folder and send a message back to the Ministry, giving the Aurors the patrol schedules and ensuring those who had worked too closely with Shacklebolt took the two-days leave the death of an immediate supervisor or partner allowed them. That included Irina, but Blaise, being Blaise, said he’d take care of her, and Harry couldn’t say anything in contrary.

George was the one to greet him when he arrived at The Burrow. Most of the formal robes were off the Weasley bodies; Fleur took a nap on the couch, while Molly, with her hair poorly tied back, kept Louis from waking up his mother. Bill was nowhere to be seen, but Victoire and Dominique sat on the floor with his wand, so he couldn’t be too far. Close to them, Fred and Albus quarrelled over a bright pink crayon that left the entire house smelling of raspberry and was probably a Weasley Wizard Wheezes variety of edible crayon. Indeed, while Harry disposed of his outer coat and shook the last of the early morning mist from his hair, Fred won the battle and nipped away a chunk of the material, smiling victoriously.

“I just need to know…” George’s voice was really low, and it broke through his contemplation of the kids. “Is my brother going to live?”

Harry didn’t promptly understand the question, but given the havoc, it was obvious they wouldn’t have many more chances to talk. He noticed George hadn’t even taken the coat off; he was probably going home to check on Angelina. When Harry’s confusion didn’t develop into anything brighter, he asked him to follow him and opened a secluded drawer underneath a side table Harry could swear he had never noticed before. And apparently, as George checked around to see if anyone was looking,
neither did the other occupants of the house. From deep inside there, after a bizarre spell in a language Harry didn’t recognise, he pulled the Weasley clock. Fred’s arm of the clock had been carefully removed, and buried with him; instead, it was Ron’s arm which grasped all the attention. It was stopped, firmly and irrevocably, on “mortal danger”.

Harry felt his mouth go dry.

“We’ve taken it down so mom doesn’t have to see it. It turned this way yesterday… no, the night of the day before, and it hasn’t moved ever since. Come on.”

Harry looked around once more, but, apart from Victoire, who looked absentmindedly at them, as if considering something that had nothing to do with reality, no one else seemed to care about them.

“He might have to be submitted to a Muggle surgery, and since we can’t measure magical compatibility, he’s risking a lot. It’s a bloody, messy thing and there are no guarantees.” George nodded, as if he had expected something of the sort. “Don’t tell Hermione I told you. She doesn’t need any more people pressuring her.”

“What are the odds?”

“It’s impossible to say, apparently. But would you risk his life?”

“His life’s already at risk. What’s left to lose, mate?” He took another look at the clock and shoved it into his cloak’s pocket. “I think I have to stop by somewhere.”

He barely said his goodbyes, and left Harry with the lingering thought that maybe he had said too much. But they were all family anyway. Certain things couldn’t be kept secret forever, and Hermione was already keeping too much.

Harry went back to the room where the kids sat, sighing inaudibly. Something warmed in his pocket; when he moved to touch it, he realised he still had Millicent’s two-way mirror. Her face was pale and weary when she begged him to help her with Posey’s paperwork (they were preparing her for adoption, given that her guardian’s condition wasn’t improving). He agreed, of course, and said once more that if needed, the child could be fostered by him for however long it was necessary. Only then Harry looked back at the kids. Upon seeing his father staring at him, Albus stopped trying to pull the remnants of the crayon from the carpet (George had taken Fred with him) and wobbled to ask to be picked up. Harry obliged almost instantly, but not even his son could have his undivided attention when Victoire kept following him with her gaze, no matter how innocent that gaze seemed.

“Pa.” Albus held his face and stared seriously at him. “Papa Dago?”

“Soon enough, my boy.” He didn’t want to linger on the subject, lest Molly came back from wherever she had disappeared to. “We’ll see him soon.”

“He’s been asking for him all the time,” Ginny said, showing up from behind Harry. “Are you sure he’s forgiven you?”

“We talked.” Harry noticed that Victoire ushered everyone out of the room to give them privacy. Only Fleur stayed, and she slept too peacefully to be a risk. “I am sorry for taking so long.”

“It’s been three days, Harry. He’s my son, it doesn’t matter how awful a mother I am.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

He fumbled with his formal light cloak for a moment and pulled out a file with the divorce papers.
Ginny stared gobsmacked at him, but was quick to hide them underneath her plush robe.

“I wasn’t expecting you’d even think about them, given everything.” Harry shrugged. “Oh, Harry.”

She hugged him again, just to be sure, maybe to lend him some of her strength. They had always understood each other better with hugs than with anything else. Harry hoped that Molly wouldn’t choose that moment to pass by and decide that was reconciliation, although he didn’t care much anymore. Ginny wanted to handle her mother, and Harry offered her his support 24/7, whenever she felt like it. Someday, probably after the babies were born, they’d break the news. Not while Ron was in danger, though.

“Harry!” Arthur’s tired voice whispered its way to him, careful not to wake Fleur up. “Ginny, come over. There’s breakfast.”

They parted quietly, nodded at each other. Ginny took a small detour to gather the children, and Harry sat across from her by the table, with Albus on his lap. The normalcy of that one meal, it didn’t matter how twisted things had been a second before, gave him a waft of new air, and he breathed like a new man.

Harry felt like a Flobberworm ran over by a forty-wagon train when he returned with Albus to Hogwarts to check on Draco and the kids. They had earned themselves a private room, where all the Malfoys stayed at night. Both children were awake, although silent, huddled in soft covers and, in Scorpius’ case, chewing on a toy, but Draco was sound asleep. Harry put Albus beside them, watching in sheer delight when he wriggled to get close to Draco, even if it did mean getting kicked by Lyra every once in a while. He got rid of his formal robes, cleaned up briefly, stepped into his pyjamas and squirmed in bed behind Draco. He stirred a bit and turned around just enough to more or less recognise Harry, then turned back and fit his warm body in the curve of his lover’s.

“It’s morning,” he complained, sleepy. “You’re cold.”

“I am sorry.” He kissed the soft spot below Draco’s ear. “The kids are awake.”

“They’re fine; I just changed and fed them.”

“I brought Al back. He missed you.”

“I missed him too.” Draco sounded true, though really somnolent, and he wrapped his fingers around Harry’s. “How did it go?”

“We’ll survive it.” He took off his glasses and hid his face on the curve of Draco’s pale neck. “Go back to sleep. I have a day off today.”

Draco didn’t answer him, but he dozed off again quite quickly. Harry did so too, exhausted and feeling safe so close to the man he so acutely endeared. He did dream, despite not remembering of what when he woke up, hours later. The children wore different clothes and Lyra’s little head was tucked in a wool cap; someone had bathed and changed them, and probably fed them, for they were dozing off already, which meant it was probably mid-afternoon, nap time. Harry felt a little guilty for not watching them, but he had been too dead to world. Draco was still asleep (Madam Pomfrey would later reveal he had had even less sleep than Harry these past days, troubling himself as he did with all the injured people to treat and look after and discharge), his stern face softened in a wan, pleased little smile that gave his face the grace and radiance of a unicorn.

“It’s as endearing as it is disgusting.”
Harry’s stomach clunked when the voice reached him. It was like physical pain, and really deep, where there was no light left to shine on anything, a bit of relief. He turned around slowly, patting his unruly hair and smoothing his pyjama top, but Lucius’ graceful hand kept his efforts short. He was sitting in bed, buttoning the collar of a dark grey shirt Harry had never seen before, already dressed in what might have been pyjama pants, only Harry wouldn’t be caught dead wearing anything that expensive to bed.

“It’s good that you’re awake, sir.” Harry bowed just the ceremonious amount. Lucius returned it with a curt nod. “Any pain?”

“The one of seeing my beloved son entangled with the Saviour of the Wizarding World.”

Harry couldn’t keep the cheek away from his voice. “I meant pains we can do something about.” Lucius’ stare was a lot like a roll of eyes. “Do you want me to wake him up? To check on you?”

Lucius brushed the idea off like a particularly obnoxious Billywig. “I must speak with you privately first.”

“Me, sir?”

“Yes, you, Potter. Do not play the demented fool; despite my never ending hope, I must admit it doesn’t suit you.” Even after the accident, Lucius was still as polite as ever. Without the restraints of being monitored, he had to tolerate Harry, not pretend to like him. Even so, Harry thought he had felt the stings a little less venomous. “I suppose a formal thanking is expected. For your saving of my life.”

“It wasn’t me, sir. The one who saved you is at the hospital; as soon as he’s fine, I’ll let you know.”

“Give me the number of his room. I will send him the proper floral arrangement to reward such meaningful prowess.”

“He might be unconscious for quite some time yet, sir.”

“Non-withering flowers it will be, then.”

Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or be pissed off about that comment, but he decided on a subdued form of the former. Lucius looked at him, silent and reproachful; Harry cleared his throat and conjured a curtain to occlude Draco and the children from view when his nose made a distasteful curve. The bloody man didn’t look scathed at all—even his long blond hair looked better than the last time Harry had seen him. Bastard.

“Take a seat, Mr Potter.” Suspicious, Harry obeyed, falling back on a comfortable chair close to his bed, much to Lucius’ distaste. Harry could see the machinery inside that brain hoping for a chance to get away from that brand new life debt. His life was already indebted to many. “I assume you would like to discover what your friends and I discussed while they were at the cell with me.”

“If you may,” he answered politely. Lucius nodded. Back to civility. “But first, I must know why they had to meet you at your cell and what happened in there.”

Lucius sighed as if those were happenings of extreme unimportance. Still, he spoke of them. Shacklebolt had asked to see him without any supervision, claiming they would cut a new deal, a confidential one. Instead, Ron and Kingsley had shown up in civilian clothes, unarmed as the protocol demanded, and invited him to chat. They hadn’t been talking for much more than five minutes when a hooded person that looked remarkably like Dawlish—Lucius knew his name; the man was not only a former pawn but one of his most assiduous antagonists—showed up and aimed
something at the ceiling. His cell, on the top of the building, began to crumble; someone pushed him under the thick stone bed, pushed someone or something else along and shouted a prowess of wandless magic at the precise moment the barriers around Azkaban shivered. Maybe there had been a Dilacerating Curse, he couldn’t pinpoint it. He didn’t remember anything after that due to the feeling of suffocation that came with having something heavy and unmoving carving a hole into his chest by sheer pressure. That was Shacklebolt, Harry understood. He had probably been hurt by debris and Ron had tried to help him. The bed could barely fit a single person underneath it; a man of Kingsley size, paired even with someone as skinny as Lucius Malfoy, would have left no room for Ron, making him an easy target to any spell or falling clutter.

That explained a lot, and it helped nothing. If anything, it made sure those people had a significant supply of Polyjuice; he wrote a mental note to send for suppliers, to try to find anyone who would sell any of the ingredients to anyone. It was a cold clue, probably damned to give nothing back, but it was a course of action. Maybe he should let Draco, the Master Potioneer of them, handle it. Or maybe—finally—have that talk with Snape.

“Mr Potter, shall we discuss the matters at hand or will my time be better applied in my well-deserved sleep?”

“I apologise, sir. Please, do continue.”

“Very well.” He crossed his legs so precisely perpendicular that it looked like a geometry example. His hands rested on his lap with the same precision and poise, a decidedly equilateral triangle angled at the elbows. Draco did that same thing, but in him it looked pretty, not dangerous. Most of the time. “Your… friend,” Harry noticed the gigantic hesitation that preceded the word; Lucius was a pest, but he knew how to count his numbers, and he was in disadvantage there, “is under the impression that my family is undergoing pursue.” Lucius eyes snickered. It was unnerving. “Which I can guarantee did not and shall not happen.”

“Sir, your son had been kidnapped and tortured. He’s been forced to procreate like a beast. I believe you should give this matter more serious consideration.”

“Malfoys are not pursued.” Harry could see the shadow of a fire in his eyes, the remnants of a long lost pride that clung to him like old robes, still there, reeking of naphthalene. A snake. A serpent ready to attack. The predator, never the prey. Lucius would never admit to be a target. That line of questioning was lost on him. He could be evasive and admit that people didn’t like him, or else wanted him dead, but he would never be less than a predator. Not even when his fangs were long gone. “They want to replicate our bloodline. A task in which several of us have indulged willingly. Our blood has to carry on, it’s our duty as purebloods.”

Harry grabbed the information he didn’t say. “They want your heirloom.”

Lucius scoffed. “Ms Parkinson should have learned by now. What a stupid idea to let a child understand the means of the world.”

“Well, it was her who helped us save your daughter-in-law.” His lips crisped at the mention of Astoria, and Harry only then noticed how he had ignored her existence so far. “Sir, we suspect your heirloom will be used in ways of a rebuilding of Voldemort’s empire.”

“It should not be possible.”

“That it should not doesn’t mean it cannot. We have to know what it is so we can counter it.”

“Like I told your allies, they might want it, but they do not really know why they do.” It sounded like
a riddle, and it pissed Harry off. Still, he kept quiet, seething, as Lucius remained silent for a moment and two and three. “Draco is hardly of any use. He has no formal learning of it. Just its and bits from here and there. Narcissa was adamant we needed a new guardian before he developed anything. He doesn’t know how to access his heirloom yet.”

“I can believe this, since he didn’t yet, but what is it?” Lucius shook his head minutely, barely disrupting the order of his white hair. Harry got up, ready to curse him or just slap the truth from that stupid, pale face. “Sir, we can’t fight what we don’t know!”

“He can’t say it, Potter.”

The snarl was so familiar that it made Harry turn around quickly, expecting to see Snape standing behind him. In a way, he was. He had taken hold of a stone carefully laid in the middle of the painting, examining it under a close look. There were landscapes all around them; it must not have been hard to sneak on them.

“Severus, my adored friend.”

Snape’s mouth’s corner lifted in a disgruntling way.

“No need to fake, Lucius. Your shouting of my ‘betrayals’ has reached sane ears. Even if they’re painted.” He put the stone in his pocket then came forward, nearly leaving the painting. He stood—the visible part of him, that was—as tall as in real life. “So, is Black’s demented cousin at work once more?”

“Bella is dead, Severus,” Lucius adverted, eyeing him like he could maim the painting. There was a lot of water under that bridge, apparently.

Snape’s painted eyes were as sharp as the real one’s. Anyone would have coiled under their gaze, and it made Harry think how brave Neville was to endure Snape’s presence whenever he showed up looking for him.

“She’s as dead as me.” He snickered. “But as you wish, my blind friend.” Instead of arguing, he turned to Harry, looking straight at him. “You, Potter. We absolutely must talk. Come to my office.”

Harry looked at the curtain that separated his lover and children, hesitating like the ones behind it anchored him there. “I don’t think—”

“My office, Potter. Now.”

Painting or no painting, Harry found out he didn’t want to pay to see what Snape could do. Bidding Lucius farewell and thanking him for his time, he left the room.
Snape absolutely did not lead his path back to his office, so the experience of descending to it felt a bit like his fifth year Occlumency lessons—which was not how he wanted to feel after such week. Paintings followed him in awe, terror, with whispers and lowering of lamplights. Those halls had not been rebuilt, had not been subject to parties, or any scrutiny; they knew the Saviour from early, uninteresting school years, if at all. It didn’t much amuse Harry, though. When paintings stopped and stared, you could just as well give up any pretence of anonymity for life. He was thankful when he finally reached Snape’s office, not so surprisingly open for him. Behind his unscathed desk and apparent heaps of parchment in need for grading, Snape awaited, as stern and dark as always. It was an unkind way of saluting the Saviour and somehow noticing that was much better than acknowledging the looks people who had known him less gave him. Snape knew of his past, his stupidity, his sassy arrogance. The man before him was a portrait, but hell if Snape wouldn’t have made all he could to make sure it was the fuck like him.

“Professor,” Harry said, instead of going straight to the point.

“Apparently for the rest of eternity, I suppose.” Harry smirked. His fear of Snape had turned into respect somewhere along the way and he could be sure his old master hated it.

“It would be disappointing to lead a life without your guidance, sir.” The glint in the painting’s eyes told him he’d have been slapped on the back of his head, were Snape in flesh. “How are you faring?”

“Abysmal, not that it concerns you.” Snape didn’t sit. He put his hands behind his back and stared levelly at him. “It took you long enough to come back, Potter.” When standing on the edge of the painting, he stood as tall as in real life. It was bizarre: whoever painted him could have been a photographer. His painting was much better than most in the castle, detailed with an almost perfect replica of his quarters. There was even a half-ajar door that led to what looked like a bedroom. The painting took up an entire wall; it sure was spacious. Harry couldn’t help but to wonder how much that must have costed. “Did you lose something in my painting, Mr Potter?”

Harry looked up at him. “I was admiring it, sir. It’s a nice painting.”

The corner of Snape’s lips rose a bit. “Indeed. The perks of being friends with a Malfoy.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We’ll arrive at that point.”

“Oh. Well, anyway it’s a very accurate painting.”

“It’s been painted for over thirty years. It should be.”

Thirty years. That was too long, too much. The painting must have been updated quite literally all the time. It sure explained why it was so much more precise than the others: very few young people had
their portraits painted, because it required, of the artist, an eye for the future, for repaint a grown
man over a youngster polluted the canvas and screwed the magic woven into it. Whoever had done it
had been good enough to master Snape’s physique and manners precisely. Even the twitches and the
whooshing cape when he turned around were there.

“Sit down.” Portrait Snape’s patience was not, unfortunately, improved, when compared to his real
one’s.

“I’m fine standing, Severus.” Snape’s sure steps towards the desk faltered the smallest bit; he turned
around and narrowed his eyes.

“Well, I am most surely not. Sit down or leave, Potter.”

Complying condescendingly, he did. Snape stared at him for a moment longer; when Harry’s
stomach rumbled, he scoffed.

“Winky!” The elf Apparated at once, bowing profoundly. “Bring my guest some food. Whatever
you’re cooking for the staff’s dinner is fine.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and vanished.

“Does she obey you all the time?”

“She’s a dutiful elf. I rather need her when there are no students to cram up my office.”

A brief explanation about how McGonagall found fit that he entered the tutoring program Neville
and Hannah had envisioned followed, and Harry tried hard not to shudder at the prospect of a first-
year kid wishing to become a Potions Master putting up with Snape’s impossible behaviour.
Although, apparently he suffered more than the students. Being a painting probably meant he could
be as sour as he wanted and still, never be a threat. That was a good thing, for Harry knew better
than to expect that Severus Snape would be any less than the bastard he was. Some quirks couldn’t
be helped, and Snape’s biggest was being a gigantic prick. Oh, there was no getting anyone wrong.
Harry respected Snape, out of what he saw and understood about his old master, but he would
always be straight and tell people how bad it could be to be on that old bat’s bad side.

Said bat took another five minutes after the meal was served so Harry would start eating, and only
then he did decide to speak.

“I believe you know by now everyone you want to question is under a Vow.” Harry spluttered his
potatoes all over the place. Snape tsked, but seemingly his office was now self-cleaning. Well, if
children helped him, it should be. “I did most of them, Potter. Draco was coerced to do a couple, and
minor Vows were Bella’s area of expertise. There are maybe two, three perhaps, Death Eaters who
can talk about what happened.”

“What? Who are they?”

“Do not speak with your mouth full, you uneducated creature. And do not interrupt me; did it look
like what I had to say was over?”

“No, sir.” Harry said, though Snape’s grasp for control now made him want to laugh instead of burst
in distaste. “I apologise.”

“Very well. One of them is myself, of course — do eat, Potter, your stomach’s upsetting me.” Harry
obeyed him pronto. The food was truly good, indeed. He had nearly forgotten how bloody awesome
Hogwarts’ cooking was. “I do believe Bellatrix wasn’t forced to comply to the Vow either. And
there is, of course, Clytemnestra Morrison.”

“Morrison’s daughter? The insane one?”

“She’s as insane as you and I. She might be a murderer but, she’s the only woman the Dark Lord took to bed openly.” Harry couldn’t help the scandalised look on his own face. *Took to bed?* “Oh, please. Do not insult my presence by revealing yourself as one of those fanatics who believed the Lord’s drive for power made him incapable of understanding earthly needs. He was a good strategist and indeed didn’t have much time to dispose of; still, even Salazar found hours in his day to fall for a nice lady.” Voldemort had a sex life? Somehow, that fact was far too bizarre to be digested. “Potter. Keep your food inside your mouth. I can see it and it’s an awful view.” Harry chewed some more and swallowed his mouthful of pie. “Besides, Clytemnestra actually found him appealing. I have no doubts she traded sex for her strategies.” Well, that made a tad more sense. Still, having Voldemort respond to them was kinda horrifying. “Before you ask me, as all of you Gryffindors apparently do, no, he does not have a child and no, this has nothing to do with a rise of his own blood through lineage. Rack up your brain for some intelligence, if you may. That amount of forbidden rituals and potions killed his seed. Fortunately.”

“So… if he didn’t plan on an heir, are you saying Voldemort actually liked being with Morrison’s daughter? Are you serious about it?”

“The Dark Lord liked nothing but himself. He merely appreciated her, like he appreciated Bella and I. Bella was never anything but devoted to the Lord; even so, she somehow adored Rodolphus. And faithfulness is important to the Lestranges, and the Lestranges were useful to the Lord.” He ruffled through the papers on the desk; weirdly, the ones in the real desk changed places accordingly. Just how good was that painting? “No, Clytemnestra was valuable because she could pluck information out of anyone. She had a smart brain for strategy and an insufferably detailed mind for inconveniences. She could spot them far before they happened.”

“Clytemnestra escaped Azkaban three days ago,” Harry added after a heartbeat and his swallowing of a forkful of bacon.

“I am aware of it.” Snape gestured triumphantly towards an envelope now at the top of the table. Its seal was broken, and he didn’t say a word when Harry took it and opened it. There, in a handwriting fancier than Draco’s best, there was a short letter.

*Dear Severus,*

*You might be interested in knowing I’m free once more. Mother is dead. I know you kind of are too, but you can help, right? You’ve always been so helpful. And I know your painting is oh-so-smart. You’re in it like a big bold armour, aren’t you? Oh, I so wish to see it! I’m looking forward to showing up. Not that I wish to leave. It’s all so pretty in here. I have good clothes now and sis is so lovely!*

*While I don’t go back to talk to you in person, do you mind taking a glance at our circle? To see if it’s wrong? Or perhaps you could lend us a hand in getting young Master Malfoy back? They used all of my tracking spells on him and now there’s nothing left. I can’t believe someone disabled them and no one noticed. They are so incompetent. Sis has killed a bunch of them and now we’re recruiting once again. Oh, it’s so troublesome. You are going to help, right? You know you have to, if he asks you. We really really need him, Sev. Come on.*

*Yours truly,*

*Cly—*
Harry finished reading and rose an eyebrow to Snape.

“Sev?”

“She’s always been overly informal.”

“She sounds delusional.”

“She isn’t. And she’s right.”

“Who’s the ‘he’ they need?”

“Draco, obviously. She said it right, if they can convince Draco, I cannot disobey him openly.”

“Is it a Vow?”

“Nothing as shallow.”

“And who is her ‘sis’?”

“It’s impossible to say. She called many women ‘sis’.”

Snape made a tiny hand gesture so Harry peeked inside the envelope to find a neatly folded piece of parchment, which he opened slowly. There, the circle he had seen on Lestrange’s chest stared back at him.

“I know this. I’ve seen it on someone.”

“Was that someone dead?”

“Yes. It was Lestrange.”

“Tsk.” Snape didn’t bother to look upset. “Everybody told him his stupid unconditional love for Bella would have him killed, despite her bizarre care.” He shook his head theatrically, his hair barely moving. “Which of the runes didn’t activate?”

“What?”

“Salazar. Next time, bring Granger with you. At least she knows what everything is.” He paused for a moment. “Which of the symbols in the circle on Rodolphus chest wasn’t burned to a black, ugly crisp?”

“Nothing was black, but most of the runes were healed.”

“Cauterised.”

“Yes. Except for that ‘D’ thing.”

“D? D?” Harry nodded, and Snape’s glare could curdle fresh milk. “You mean this?”

The thing he wrote on a painted sheet of parchment was a pointy D, indeed. When Harry nodded, he raised his eyebrows.

“This is thurisaz. A rune. It represents tendency for change in one of the readings we follow.” He tapped the rune once more with a steady finger. “Are you sure it was the only raw one?”

“I am not stupid, Severus. I do recognise cauterised wounds.” He chewed some more. “It was the
only one.”

“They are too close,” he mumbled, mostly for himself.

“I can see they are,” Harry added, rather impolitely. Snape nearly murdered him with a glance. “There have been so many people knowing more than I working on this case, I don’t even care ‘bout manners anymore.” He shrugged. “Either come clear or I’ll thank you for the dinner and bugger off.”

“You’re a villain.” Snape’s mouth curled in distaste. He sighed perceptively. “Phineas. Phineas, you sleepy bastard, where are you?”

For a moment, Harry expected to see Goldstein showing up. Of course, though, that Snape meant Hogwarts’ former headmaster and known sleeper Phineas Nigellus Black. He showed up almost quickly, although his face was anything but pleased.

“Severus. What an honour to be summoned by you.”

“Stop the gibberish, Phineas. I have a task for you. A circle.”

“A circle?” The painting’s eyes glistened in sudden interest. “Is it custom?”

“I believe so. One of your great-granddaughter’s projects, if I recall it alright.” Harry stared wordlessly at the exchange. Snape, as if only then noticing him, scoffed. “You have sent the circle to specialists, right. Ms Parkinson thought I should know. As it is, though, Phineas is the best specialist.”

“Why didn’t she give it to him then?” Harry’s first instinct was to blame Parkinson, but asking first would do no harm.

“I do not answer to petty requests from mere former students, oh heavensent saviour of the world.” Phineas said the words like they were acid, far from a compliment. Harry felt wrong at once. “Severus?”

Swiftly, Snape passed him a replica of the circle. Harry could catch a glimpse that showed him thurisaz was circled. They spoke to each other in hushed, urgent tones; Phineas scribbled like a madman. Harry had never seen any of the sleepy headmasters so excited. Meanwhile, he tapped the desk a bit, accepted a lovely treacle tart Winky dutifully sent up the moment his plate was clean, complete with a massive amount of vanilla gelato. It was nice and cold in contrast with the tart; Harry surely didn’t mind waiting like that. He was helping himself to a second cup of herbal tea when Phineas finally rose up to his mighty height and smirked at him.

“Oh, little saviour, what a mess you put yourself in.”

“It’s enough, Phineas. It’s your lineage at stake too.”

Phineas shrugged with his eyebrow. “We are used to being on the winning side. Whoever wins, my blood will find its lawful glory. I’m fine with that.”

That said, Phineas excused himself from the painting and disappeared. Snape closed his eyes for a moment.

“I do hope no one remembers that bastard.”

“He won’t help the other side, will he?”
“Like he says, it’s a win-win for the Black family. He’ll do whatever pleases him most. Luckily, his painting is a tad more limited than mine. It should buy us time.”

“Well, then what was it he said? If we’re running out of time, I need to know.”

“This is a reincarnation circle.” Harry nodded. He expected something of the sort. “A good one.” That part he didn’t expect as much. “It’s the work of a Black. Probably something Bellatrix designed at her best; she had plenty of projects regarding circles and I remember something like this one. It’s impeccable. There’s not a single flaw on it. Here, I must explain it to you, and you must give it to Granger or someone who understands runes to find a weak spot. Phineas point-blank told me he will not give us this tip so easily.” Harry rested his cup, intent on paying the most attention possible. He didn’t want to miss a detail; if necessary, he was willing to give Hermione that memory. “Very well.”

He saw how hard it was for Snape not to corrupt the circle and how intently he drew it on the blackboard he pulled to the front of the painting. It was like a lecture once more, only the lives of those he loved were apparently at stake this time.

“This circle is a simple alchemic display devoid of material purposes.” Harry frowned, but didn’t interrupt. Hermione could break it up to him later. “The circles used in making things appear ‘out of thin air’ are generally squared in fourths, since more points of intercalation are needed to act as poles of magical stability. This one isn’t bound to create anything. You see? It’s basically triangles, with shallow thin-lined half-circles. This is a circle for specific purposes that should act with something very powerful behind it to control it.” He glanced at Harry. “Potter, do you understand what I am saying? Should I even try to make this science approachable?”

“I apologise, sir,” he replied automatically. “You mean… it’s not a ritual like the one at Riddle senior’s tomb. It shouldn’t generate anything.”

“That it correct,” he said with genuine relief. “It’s all you really need to know.” Harry felt vaguely offended by that. “The runes on the outer circle are what we call determinants. They reflect the intentions of the conjurers and the relationship they have with whatever they are trying to make. Each set of three, since this is a triangular-based circle, determines the strength of the solitary intention, or the base, as old people called it. The bases are the big runes inside the small full circles.” Harry nodded. As Snape pointed at them, it was fairly easy to follow. “The bases are the core of the circle, what truly says what it is about.”

“So those three runes were what screamed reincarnation?”

“No, Potter. They shouted ‘revolution’. If it was this simple, Phineas would not have been necessary, don’t you think?” Harry saw the underlying logic on that. Damn it. That was why he never tried Ancient Runes at school. What a pain to understand them. “Of course, Phineas uses the Black reading, which is said to descend from Kevin himself. The second Merlin,” he added wryly. “In anyway, the conjunction is what gives us the answer, obviously. Where were we? Ah.

“The three runes beneath the three half-circles are stabilisers. They are supporting runes that need to be fed all throughout the ritual to keep the magic flooding into the circle. The other three, those directly beneath the base runes, catalysts. They are the ones who truly feed magic into the base and activate them.” Snape pointed at the D-like rune. “This is the last spot to activate. It means energy flowed from the rune at its left and ran the full circle before trying to activate this last one.”

“Clockwise.”

“Clockwise. Clockwise movements mean affirmative actions. Confirmation. Lack of restraints.” Harry could see that. Most non-lethal positive charms and spells had either a rising or clockwise
motion. “These on the outer circle, are hagalaz, the crisis that shall be solved, ansuz, communication, perthro, the prescience, ehwaz, a good change, berkano, regeneration, and isa, the challenge. You already know thurisaz, and these are dagaz, transformation, and uruz, the wise leader’s rune.”

“This circle sounds too positive to be Voldemort’s resurrection circle,” said Harry, sceptical. “All the talk about change and future and renovation.”

“Reincarnation. Not resurrection. The circle is a reflection of the conjurer first and the object last. Willpower is a strong thing, Potter, or do you really believe your magic was strong enough to destroy the Lord?” Harry fell silent. He knew it hadn’t been all him. He and Ron and Hermione and even McGonagall had already dissected that. “Hagalaz, ansuz and perthro determine dagaz. Perthro, ehwaz and berkano, uruz. And thurisaz is determined by berkano, isa and hagalaz.” He touched the H-like rune, hagalaz. “This one was the first entry point, meaning they intended to disturb the order of the universe, but seeking its true harmony.”

“They are blood supremacists. What does it mean for them?”

“Exactly what it meant to the Lord. Do not interrupt me.” He cleared his throat. “Dagaz is a mandatory base in a conversion circle. It has to be activated first. Joining the crisis and the prescience, the need to know and the thrill of controlling the future, they could activate it just fine. According to Phineas, they must have chosen ansuz to make communication with the channels they wanted to open easier.”

“Which channels?”

“To the outer world, obviously. It is, after all, a reincarnation circle. Stupid boy.”

“Reincarnation of what? Voldemort died soulless.”

Snape closed his eyes for patience once.

“He died shattered. Every soul is, as is every body and every element, part of the balance of the Universe. It cannot be destroyed so simply. If they have the power to build such circle and make it functional, retrieving the Lord’s soul would be hard, but not impossible.” Harry looked like he’d interrupt once more, but Snape raised a hand and continued. “Uruz must have been easy to activate. It’s the shout for a leader, and if they were all Death Eaters, they all knew who that leader must be. They must have flooded berkano too much, even, for their need for the renewal and the future they envisioned must have soared after the war. And at last, there was a catch when they tried to channel magic through isa.” Harry’s eyebrows furrowed together. “Its placing is amazingly accurate, if Phineas is to be trusted, which he is. Placing the challenge to feed the change is almost proverbially obvious. But the change was apparently supposed to be inside, or else they could have used dagaz once more. There is nothing that forbids a circle to be composed of repeated runes. Simple circles for minor purposes are actually repetitions of a single rune.” Harry was under the impression that last bit wasn’t quite for him. “A cauterised circle means the channels couldn’t stay open for long enough, Potter. That’s why they didn’t burn Rodolphus. Magic ran through the lines too quickly.”

“And how does one solve it?”

“Drawing bigger lines.”

They would expand the circle. Godric, it was so obvious. The moment they realised they just needed more space, there would be no stopping them. Nothing could be easier than finding large spaces to perform a bloody ritual; Britain was bursting with them, secluded and easily trespassable places used to host Quidditch championships and gigantic open-air parties and fairs for wizardkind.
“If they draw a bigger circle, they will need far more people. That’s why Clytemnestra said they were recruiting once more.” Severus, who had sat down by his desk and rested his nearly non-existent lips on the sides of his joined index fingers, nodded with his eyes. “I thought alchemy was an extinct science.”

“It’s rare in its deepest functions,” Snape said evasively. “Ritual circles are based on it though, and they are far too common.”

“How do they know how to make such circle? I know Blacks are supposed to be good at them, but you said they needed a powerful something to help with such circle.”

“Or someone.” When that didn’t ring any bells, Snape became outwardly furious with him. His eyes were mere slits when his worst slithering voice crept up Harry’s spine. “You are a gigantic mound of absolutely nothing useful, Potter. Use you bloody brains, they are not in your head just to stuff it!”

Harry’s immediate reaction was to stiffen up. He would have reached for the wand, were he a little younger. “Where were them, you stupid cub?”

“The Manor,” Harry said with his chin up. Snape wasn’t a threat. And he looked truly upset. The Crucios coming out of his eyes triggered an immediate response. “Draco.” He didn’t notice the discreetly rising eyebrow. “That’s why they need Draco. He’s the one who’s supposed to make the circle work.” He also hadn’t noticed he had gotten up, and now his legs carried him around the room in long, defiant strides as he thought, mostly out loud. “But he isn’t even too powerful. He is powerful, I mean. But if they needed someone powerful, there are easier wizards to capture. Wizards who aren’t being monitored by the Ministry.”

Snape couldn’t restrain himself. “For someone who claims to know so much about heirlooms, you are a troll.”

“Draco’s heirloom isn’t being obscenely powerful!” he yelled at last. The room felt eerily silent after that. Snape didn’t as much as seem to have been yelled at. “I wish he was, sometimes, but he isn’t. He wouldn’t have to learn to be powerful. He would have to control it. And his heirloom is supposed to be learned.”

“No one will teach him,” Snape said vehemently, cold as ice. “While he doesn’t learn it, he cannot discuss it. And even when he does, not many people will hear him.”

“How do you even know it?” The way Snape raised his eyebrows revealed the truth. “You know. You know what his heirloom is.”

“Of course I know, Potter. Someone has to.”

“Tell me. Tell me now.”

“And what makes you think you can stand it, Potter?”

“Are you insane? I defeated Voldemort. I can stand anything.”

“You killed the shadow of a man loathed by all who lived.” His eyes were stony. “Is it enough to harden your heart as much as knowing this will require?”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“To know what we’re hiding, Potter, there’s a promise you must make.”

“What promise?”
“I cannot tell you.”

“You can’t tell me anything!”

“I can tell you everything.” Snape sounded far too serious. “But I cannot do it for free. Knowing about the heirloom means making sure its requirements are fulfilled.”

Harry seethed and chilled for a moment. He shouldn’t be… considering it, should he? But he knew he was; that was the last stone he hadn’t turned in that investigation and in… well, in his relationship with Draco. It was a big tent of shadow above them. The seduction of the truth was too much to resist.

“I won’t have to… to hurt Draco, right? Like… maim him or kill him.”

“Of course not, Potter. Lucius has perfect control over his heirloom and he is obviously whole. Minus a caring heart for anyone outside his family, but he never really had that.”

Harry could have laughed hysterically at that. He felt on the verge of a big decision. He didn’t know why, but he felt it.

“I promise,” he said at last.

“Are you positive? It’s a deal. Once it’s sealed, there will be consequences for breaking it.”

“I’ve made so many promises ever since this started, I hardly think one more might break me.”

Snape eyed him for a moment after that. Whatever he read in Harry’s eyes, it was enough to settle matters for him.

“Very well.” Snape shuffled on a cabinet, nonchalant and stern. When Harry didn’t move, he raised an eyebrow. “If you may.”

“Oh. Right.” Harry crossed the tidy room to the cabinet, opening it soundlessly. It was a tiny thing with wooden heavy doors and big metal handles, two small shelves and not much inside it. There were small objects and leather-bound books, most of them pretty black and pretty thin. “What do I need to get?”

“Raise your hand.” Harry did as bidden. “Now repeat after me. I, say your name—”

“I, Harry James Potter—”

“—promise to ensure the discretion and protection—”

“—promise to ensure the discretion and protection—”

“—of the Malfoy heirloom and heritage and all issues related to them.”

“—of the Malfoy heirloom and heritage and all issues related to them.” Harry waited half a heartbeat. “Is that all? Can we talk now?”

“Wait, you insolent brat.”

Another heartbeat passed. And another. And another. “There’s nothing.”

“It’s deciding, idiot. Keep your bloody hand where it is.”
Harry lost count of the seconds and, as they faded, of the minutes that ensued. His arm felt heavy and tingling, and he wanted more than nearly anything to stretch his fingers just to see if the dull pain of muscle stress would ease. But he would never give Snape the pleasure of watching him fail. Even with all the water under the bridge, certain rivalries never faded.

Finally, when Harry’s hand was close to sliding a single centimetre down, something on the shelf gleamed a silvery, misty, memory-like shimmer. It slithered right onto Harry’s extended hand and weighed on it. He retrieved the small journal, reading its cover silently. “Guiding the Guardian: a guide to the gore and glitters of guarding a great gift”.

“What is this?”


“It’s locked,” he said, turning the book around over and over.

“Don’t you say.”

Harry wondered if being a painting had made his former teacher even worse. He pulled at the corners of the book and it didn’t budge. Eyeing Snape sideways, he insisted, nearly tearing apart the bloody book. Finally, he remembered he was a wizard, pulled his wand out and tapped the cover. It still didn’t magically flew open, but something clicked — and Harry knew it could be opened at last. As he lifted the cover, unraveling the old pages, something bizarrely familiar happened: on the first page, beneath a series of names that ended with Snape’s, ink poured from the page, forming his name as delicately as Tom Riddle’s diary. He stared at Snape, disbelieving. His old master merely raised an eyebrow and urged him on.

The bloody book was blank.

“It’s empty. All this and there’s nothing here.” Harry put the book down, finally sitting back on the chair. “Now can you please tell me what is going on?”

Snape glimpsed at the book and, apparently, whatever he saw was what he wanted to see, because his posture relaxed the tiniest bit and he nodded.

“Very well. What do you need to know first?”

“Is Bellatrix dead?” Snape didn’t answer pronto, and Harry decided to intervene before he could. “No charades. I need a clear answer. You’re not under any Vow, she died after you did.”

Snape barely nodded his approval of Harry’s reasoning; in a clear, resonant voice, he answered him.

“Bellatrix cannot die. She’s the Lord’s backup plan.”

“Like a Horcrux?”

“Of course not like a Horcrux, you idiot.” Severus rolled his eyes. “She’s the most resilient of his soldiers. The Lord gave her the mission to bring him back in case he died, and linked his life to hers. That means, before you open your mouth to interrupt me, that given a proper treatment and maybe a ritual, Bella shall exchange her life for the Lord’s.”

“I saw Bellatrix die under Molly’s wand.”

“Then why are you asking me anything?” He scoffed. “It was obviously someone else. Maybe someone… crazed because of grief and willing to avenge someone they loved? Bellatrix was away
from the castle that night. She was in Gales, looking for this book.” He nodded to the manual on the

table. “The Lord was clear he didn’t want her around the battle.”

“So she had a doppelganger.”

“More likely a copy. Polyjuice, maybe a glamour. In the heat of the battle, you wouldn’t have
noticed.”

“But her actions. Bellatrix isn’t easy to fake.”

“Proxy possession. A fine kind of Legilimency. It takes a blood rite and a Imperius, but it isn’t
impossible. Not for a Black.”

Harry sighed. “Magic wasn’t that dark a thing when I was young.”

“You were around better people when you were younger. Children and devoted members of the
light side. You never needed to know.”

“Are they invincible, Severus?” Harry felt weak and tired. “Are they stronger than us?”

“Yes.” Snape didn’t bat an eye to answer. “They are stronger. But they’re fewer and we are
learning.”

“When will this end?”

“It won’t. We can stop the Lord’s reign once more, but there’s always going to be something to fight.
Darkness is appealing. It offers possibilities light cannot envision and cannot fulfil.”

“Like resurrection. And immortality.”

“There are no such things as resurrection and immortality. What they might achieve is a feeble kind
of reincarnation, I’ve told you so. Reincarnation can be dealt with as a simple transmutation.”

“Simple transmutation. Right. One of the endless possibilities of the dark side?”

“Of a sort.”

He said no more. Silently, on top of the table, the book flipped a couple of pages. Slowly, Snape’s
attention focused on it; Harry, oblivious, didn’t understand. When at last he decided to follow his old
Master’s eyes, the book wasn’t so blank anymore. Lines upon lines of text written in flourished
letters, complete with small drawings in a plethora of colours, developed onto the pages.

“If the book is willing to teach you, don’t mind me if I won’t.” Snape patted his cloak. “I must
absolutely meet Mr Longbottom’s paintings to restock my cabinets. I expect you to have read it all
when I come back.”

With a silent turning of his heels, he disappeared from the painting, leaving Harry behind. Curious,
incapable of finding a reason why he shouldn’t—well, there were plenty reasons why he shouldn’t,
but still—, Harry took the book and read the title of the brand new section. Force and Field
Alchemy. He stammered. Alchemy? Like Flamel and the Philosopher’s Stone?

Only it wasn’t quite like that, he realised. As the book so diligently explained, there were two major
kinds of Alchemy: transformational and transmutational. While Transformational Alchemy—Mind
and Matter Alchemy—could create new stuff from a round zero—actually increase the concentration
of matter in the world, to a certain extent and with several consequences—, Transmutational
Alchemy could only mould it. “Only”. Apparently, it wasn’t a common gift nevertheless; and obviously, that was Malfoy’s bloody heirloom.

Alchemy. That blond bastard couldn’t be just exceptionally good in reading ancient runes. He had to have a powerful, nearly impossible to control gift.

Harry learned a couple of things about Draco’s heirloom right then. It was capable of mostly anything that could replace things of same substance, or consume things to create others while abiding to preservation laws. Big ones; nothing as clean as transfiguration or as quick as a charm. Transmutational Alchemy was a task to change great things, not mundane ones. Unlike transfiguration, transmutation changed whatever it touched; transmutated things could not be turned back to what they were, and unless the same forces that made it anew decided to, it would stay like that forever. There was no compulsion in whatever transmutation changed to come back to what it was. It broke the laws of magic and balance, and should be used rather carefully.

Transmutation wasn’t an easy task; it didn’t suddenly grow and develop like some other heirlooms. Practice made perfect; apprentices were supposed to deal potions before they dealt anything else, and they should excel at both transfiguration and charms. They were also supposed to be composed at all times—tight-butted, Ron would have said—and to pay attention to the forces operating around them, since those were what they used to do their hocus pocus. It surely shed some light on the Malfoys, although Harry wasn’t dumb enough to believe their stiffness was from the heirloom alone.

It was also very difficult to contain. Alchemy had always been related to secrecy; one of its pillars resided in the proverbial “never mention it”. That was what the Guardians were for. A secret, when there’s no one who can give it out, is a feeble thing. For it to be demanding, it needed two people—one to own the secret and another who would have to keep it secret. Based on two people, it could succeed. The Guardians were also supposed to help the alchemist in whatever was necessary, and only they could disclose the heirloom. They were the keepers of the secret, they should be those to talk about it. One Guardian couldn’t serve two alchemists, and only a Guardian could choose another.

Guardians were also stupidly resilient souls, as long as their alchemist lived. They had to live on, and ancient magic made it so. That explained why Snape’s portrait was so much better than everyone else’s. He was Lucius’s guardian, after all.

Harry moved on slowly, trying to understand the most he could, since he didn’t quite know how to activate the book again if its wording vanished. There were its and bits about limiting the alchemist’s power, and about the ancient book—the drawing was unmistakably that of the potions’ book Harry took from the Manor, which helped a lot in connecting the heirloom to the crime—, and about never letting go of the one you were supposed to protect.

There was also a part about prices and earnings. It was the smallest section of the book, and it explained the heirloom part and, as all heirlooms had, the curses and blesses attached to it. Having Transmutational Alchemy as a heirloom was source of wealth and power, when used correctly, and of pride and respect, if the alchemist didn’t bend to temptation. It wasn’t anything like having a Philosopher’s Stone, Harry reckoned, but the Malfoys were apparently alright anyway. An alchemist who could pair up with someone with a penchant for rituals could fulfil the maximum width of their power; one who decided to join someone powerful would be able to go the greatest lengths. Range and intensity, basically. There was a list of other encouraged unions, and Harry wondered if every Malfoy wedding had been made based on that list. He wouldn’t be surprised.

At the very end of the section, a small warning disclosed that the flourishing of the heirloom should be preceded by a couple of things the heirloom itself would warrant, and one it could, but shouldn’t.
The family of the heir would always only have two children, and one would always be a boy, the older one, and the other a girl, the younger. That would fulfil the requisites and allow the magic to seep in. What the heirloom could warrant, but it was written it absolutely shouldn’t, was that the youngest child born in the family of the heirs should die before the age of eighteen. And right below it, like a last-minute footnote, it said it was expected that the Guardian did it.

“You killed Wisteria.”

Snape barely had time to step into his painting before the accusation was thrown at him in a disbelieving, odd voice. Taking off his cloak and the array of bags and phials from inside it, he seemed completely unfazed.

“Of course.”

“She was five.” Harry couldn’t believe his ears. “Five. She was practically a toddler.”

“She was a child and I did what I had to.”

“You killed Draco’s sister!”

“I spared her the suffering!” Harry stepped back, dumbstruck. Snape wasn’t one to shout. “I see you have reached the part where they expose the prices.”

“But you said—you said—”

“You won’t kill Draco, or maim him.” Snape sat down, took a bottle of pale amber liquor and gestured for Harry to sit too. He poured two glasses, one of which showed up in front of Harry. “Drink. You might need it.” Harry obeyed, albeit unwillingly. “I do believe you’re familiarised with Clara?”

“Lucius’s sister?” Snape nodded. “Yes. But what does it have to do with anything?”

“Allow me to tell you her tale. Clara was the life of Abraxas, and of his wife Morgana, and of Lucius too. She was the Wittiest, greatest, prettiest young woman to ever touch the Earth. As the heirloom predicts, she was the younger child. The Malfoys fell out with their Guardian when he said they’d have to kill her.” Snape took another sip. Had he known Clara? It looked like he had. And it looked like he might have been slightly infatuated by her too. Not that Harry would ever ask. “When she turned sixteen, they married her off to a Nott. Ignatius Nott. He was a bit older than her, I can’t precise how much, but he wanted, needed a wife and fell, like hundreds of people before him, under her grace.

“Clara didn’t love her husband, but she liked him enough. They became a good couple; before she was seventeen, she had given birth to a young boy named Fergus. She was happy to be a mother, and Lucius was the child’s godfather, and when the Guardian came next year to remember the Malfoys she wasn’t supposed to be alive, well, you could probably imagine what happened. The truth is, they were confident that since she was married and with a baby and had erased the Malfoy name, she would be safe. Abraxas was sure she wouldn’t be taken. And they rejoiced when she became pregnant again and the baby inside her was to be named Ewing.

“She didn’t survive its birth. In the morning of her eighteenth birthday, she woke up in labour. It never really ended. When they took Ewing out, she had died in pain, with fire in her veins from all the stasis spells which fought her destiny. Dreadful death. Ewing lasted a day; Fergus died the other. Then it seemed to spread, like the plague. Morgana got sick and died in a matter of hours, and
Abraxas’s mother. Then the women in Morgana’s family, and Ignatius’s mother and grandmother and aunt. Luckily he had only brothers, and the Notts are a patriarchal family, or he might have murdered the entire Malfoy lineage for revenge. In less than a week, every woman married to a Malfoy or anyhow related to Clara was put to rest.”

“Draco never mentioned it.”

“Draco doesn’t know. Lucius never knew how to tell him.” Snape finished his glass; Harry had barely sipped his, but having something to hold was a good thing. “Lucius presented me to the Guardian, and I was accepted. He liked it that I was good in so many things, and so pragmatic. When he married Narcissa, I was the one to make sure she knew of the curse, and we decided on five years. Rumour has it that the longer you wait, the harder the death. Wisteria died peacefully, in her sleep, with her mother’s voice guiding her out of this realm. She never suffered a thing.”

Harry finally put his barely touched glass down. “I won’t decide it on my own.”

Snape’s eyes were slits when they focused on him. He peered at Harry’s face for a while; only after he found himself satisfied with whatever he saw there did he agree. “The decision of what and when and how to tell him is yours.”

Harry rubbed his temples and they remained silent for nearly five minutes. The soft rustling of Snape’s bags and plant leaves was all that filled the air between them; Harry took the book and turned it around and around, thinking of things he could do. There was no preventing that fate, that was the saying of that history. But he wasn’t one to give up, and maybe he couldn’t find a way out yet, but one day he would. He had faith he would.

“If you do not need me anymore, please excuse yourself, Potter.” Snape seemed to be completely absorbed in what he did, his voice calm and stingy.

“I have another question.” Snape raised tired eyes at him. Rehashing the past was never easy. “How would transmutation work to bring Voldemort back?”

Snape pursed his lips. “Probably they’d exchange a living soul for his. It’s what I’d have done.”

“Whose soul?”

“I cannot say. Only the alchemist and the ritualist together can agree on such decision.” Snape corked another phial. “I do not reckon it would matter too much.”

Harry waited a heartbeat or two. “Bella is the ritualist.”

“As she should be. That circle has her sharp nails all over it.”

“But how did she find out? You didn’t tell her.”

“She’s a ritualist. Divination circles are like leviosas to her. Of course she cannot find out the core things, but she’s not dumb, and she does come from an ancient, noble family. Piecing it all together must have taken time, but not so much that it was impossible.” With a simple spell, he cleaned up his desk and stashed the new ingredients neatly inside a cabinet. “I have made too many efforts to make sure Draco could stand on his own when I was gone and his father was depleted of his forces. I might torture you in the afterlife in case you let my hard work go to waste.”

“I will not, sir.” Those words felt final, but none moved. As an afterthought, Harry added. “Albus is doing great, by the way.”
Snape didn’t move or made anything different, but his eyes acquired a slightly—only slightly—softer look. “That’s... fortunate.”

“Yes, I know.”

Harry’s proud glint and smirk were interrupted by a voice behind him.

“Know what?”

Draco slid into place behind him, resting his forehead on his shoulder. His mussed hair smelled like green apples and Hogwarts’s laundry softener. Smiling fondly, absolutely engrossed in Draco’s presence, Harry took his hand and squeezed it.

“We were talking about the kids.”

Draco looked up at Harry, then at Snape. “Good to see you again, godfather.”

“You saw me just this morning, Draco,” said Snape admonishingly. “I believe it’s unnecessary that I ask why are you leaning so heavily on Mr Potter?”

“I hope you won’t think ill of me.” Harry felt vaguely offended by that comment, but Snape snorted and dismissed it with a hand gesture.

“There are worse people to take as lover than one who can actually have your back.” If he noticed the sentence’s innuendo, he didn’t show it. When Draco smiled slowly and squeezed Harry’s hand back, though, he continued. “Or to Intertwine with, apparently. You learned nothing of what I told you, Draco.”

“I’ll be fine, Severus. He’s definitely got my back.”

Severus tsked and shooed them off at once. Draco giggled a bit and leaned on Harry on his way out, looking barely awake, entirely delicious.

“I haven’t got your back,” Harry added after a moment or two, matter-of-factly. Draco exploded in laughter, stopping him by the corner to the main floor.

“Yet. Let’s discuss it later.” He kissed Harry’s lips, brought him closer. Harry indulged himself and the other, happy to be around his lover. The weight of the revelations was stony in his stomach and mind, but Draco’s carelessness took the edge off them with every small touch, every sharp nibbling. “Do you mind if we go somewhere else? Somewhere… private?”

Harry, whose body was beginning to heat and whose mind begged for relief and comfort, felt really close to saying yes. Instead, he asked him something else entirely.

“Shouldn’t we stay close to the kids? They might wake up and need something.”

Draco’s eyes went sombre at once, colouring themselves a cloudy grey. “I don’t think we have to worry about it.”

“No? Why not?”

He drew a deep breath and leaned heavily on his arms, pressed to the wall against which he had been squashing Harry just a second before.

“My mother is here.”
Harry had to go back to that room alone. Draco had absolutely refused to follow him, and deemed strictly necessary that the children were taken away from reaching range of his mother. When Harry asked him if he believed she’d be able to hurt them, he automatically said he didn’t. It more or less set the pace: Draco was not afraid she’d hurt them, he was afraid she’d hurt him. Of course he’d never admit it out loud. And of course Harry knew he needed to, if he ever wanted to heal.

Narcissa played happily with all three children on top of Lucius’s bed as Harry entered the room. The Malfoy patriarch stared adoringly at his wife, a bony hand locked on her shoulder, keeping her close. She wore green robes of something too silky to be formal but beautiful and tasteful nevertheless; she didn’t seem to mind in the slightest that Scorpius’s hand would taint them afterwards. Even Lucius, now reunited with someone who inspired him to something much akin to love—there was no other way to describe the bizarrely blatant fondness he had for her—found the will to at least give one of the babies a chance, and had Lyra’s hand wrapped around his finger.

Harry wondered if he should interrupt, but his primary loyalty was to his lover and he’d never be forgiven if he wouldn’t do something there. He cleared his throat and walked with firm strides to the bed. In front of it, he bowed slightly to the lady, as was proper, and she returned him a flimsy replica of it, as was also proper. Lucius nodded to him, acknowledging his right to be there, and all was seemingly well.

For some reason, Harry didn’t think to question them about what they were doing with the babies. There were other questions to be asked and other declarations to be aired out. He started with a simple one.

“I’m his guardian now.”

That was a chance he begrudgingly needed to take; the book, now resting in his pocket after Snape’s permission, hadn’t said a word about letting the other family members know. They waited for a heartbeat; when nothing happened, Narcissa put Scorpius down beside Albus and stared at Harry.

“You didn’t have the right to make that claim,” she stated, but her eyes showed nothing.

“I was the only one willing.” Harry asked for permission with a swift eyebrow, and it was granted with barely a literal blink. He sat down in front of them and rose the armchair so they’d all be at the same eye level. “Snape has told me everything. Including the fact you never told Draco anything.”

“It’s not our function,” Lucius said, a shrug in his voice that his perfect poise didn’t show. He was defensive, hand now wrapping Lyra’s in earnest. It was oddly endearing to see him holding her for courage. “Are you aware that even when Draco decides to go back to his wife, you’ll still need to see him all the time, and make sure he’s thriving?” He hesitated the slightest bit. “Are you aware you’ll have to force him to let you murder his only daughter, lest her existence kills his mother and wife?”

Harry hoped to find a solution for that, but he didn’t have one now, so he nodded. “I am aware.”

“Can you do it?” Narcissa’s eyes searched his intently. “Can you torture the heart and mind of someone you love to make sure whatever’s left keeps afloat?”
Harry wanted to say “yes”, but that went against everything he believed in. He kept quiet, and Narcissa’s disappointment was a mixture of grief and relief. Lucius shook his head, his fair hair undulating like silver mist. The toll that heirloom had taken in their family was visible, blatant even to foreigners. In bed, Albus looked from one grown-up to the other and stood wobbling, only to collapse on Narcissa’s side, holding her arm in an awkward hug. Scorpius obviously didn’t understand anything; he sniffled at the silence and whimpered at the mood that filled the room. The kid was too sensitive to be in such stifling environment.

“Oh no, dear, come here.” Harry took him in his arms and tucked his blond head in the curve of his neck. “It’s okay, Scorp, it’s okay.” The baby was too far gone to retreat without welling up, so Harry let him soak his clothes a bit. “Shh, dad’s here, my boy, it’s okay. Calm down, yes? You’re too good a boy to whine like this, huh?” He rocked the baby until he quieted down and began breathing regularly again. Then, he sat the boy on his lap so he could face his grandparents.

None of which had said a word so far, by the way.

“‘Dad’?”

The question was Lucius’s. Harry held his chin up and defied him to say anything as he answered.

“The persecution you claim never existed nearly made an orphan of your grandson.” He shook his head in disgust. “I am his father as much as your son. I’ve taken care of him ever since he showed up in my life. I love him like he’s my flesh and blood, so you can scowl all you want and still, he’s mine.”

Lucius reacted the slightest way, putting his chin higher than Harry’s—for he was taller. “He’s our heir.” He took Narcissa’s hand, forcing Albus to sit on the woman’s lap. “Even if Draco will never allow it, he has a place to withstand. It cannot be prevented.”

It wasn’t a threat, but a statement. Harry felt at a loss for words. They had never discussed Scorpius’s fate as a heir; tucked in their little bubble, he and Draco had nearly forgotten they had more people in their lives to justify their actions to.

“I know nothing of it,” Harry stated at last.

“But I do.”

The low, murderously voice that filled the room belonged to the last person any of them thought would show up. Draco had dressed in casual robes, washed and combed his hair; the glasses he pushed up on his face as he walked gave him the air of confidence his now usual squinting would never have allowed. He walked over to where the others were all reunited and stopped beside Harry’s armchair. Scorpius’s loud and cheery “pa” was ignored as Draco bowed to a perfect ninety degrees, probably pulling at every single scar in his body.

“Father,” he greeted solemnly as he got up. “Mother.” His left hand rested on Harry’s nape, a secret plea for strength that was also meant as a challenge. That was the proverbial family portrait, just like any one would see in a pureblood house. Taking that simple step, Draco had at once recognised Harry as family, as a parent to his heir, and as a lover. Lucius went livid, but Narcissa didn’t seem to mind at all. “I cannot say it’s a pleasure to endure such family reunion.”

“Then why bother to come at all?” Lucius’s snarky remark was borderline evil. “You disown your family. You mate with a lion. You forsake your child the fate it has.” He looked down, at the baby whose hand he still held, then back at Draco. His words were acid, but his face was tired and disappointed. “Tell me, my son. What did we do to deserve such hate?”
A moment of breath swept through the room and Draco shook his head minutely.

“It’s not hate that I feel.” Draco said the words in a voice unexpectedly soft. When his father waited for more, though, it never came. Not from Draco anyway.

“It’s hurt.” Draco’s stare at Harry was a deeply wounded one. The statement sent his lover reeling, and Harry reached out to take Draco’s hand and kiss it delicately, pulling him close to him. When Draco was close enough, Harry whispered. “Please let me.”

“Don’t fight my battles for me,” he warned, sour and hurt.

“I’m fighting them with you.” His hand released Draco’s and went up to rest on Draco’s chest, moving along the well-known path of his Sectumsempra scar. “I always have. I always will.” He searched Draco’s eyes in earnest, begging for permission. “Please. We both need this.”

Draco gritted his teeth and nodded briskly. Harry let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding and gestured a chair to come closer, so they’d all be sitting.

“He’s not mine in blood,” Draco said, and Harry knew it was just to spite Narcissa. The need to hurt back was strong and dominant; it would be a long talk.

“He’s yours in heart.” Narcissa held up her chin, exactly like her son, and shrugged. “I’ll take it. I’ll take anything from you.”

Harry could feel Draco fuming; to keep his hands busy, he handed him Scorpius. Draco took the baby like a waft of fresh air, smelling the childish scent and forcing his loathing down. In a whim, Harry moulded the armchairs together into one; his body pressed along Draco’s side down to the knee, lending him physical strength as their connection opened like a slash between them. Its flow was strong and familiar, but it reeked of conflict. Draco might have allowed the conversation, but it didn’t mean he wanted it.

“I think it’s time we’re honest to each other.” Lucius and Narcissa were confused. Harry pushed on. “About the past. About the war, and the allegiance you pleaded, and what it did to you. You have never talked.”

“There is no need to,” Lucius stated, proud but weak. “We followed the path that should have brought us glory. It didn’t. It might have disrupted my family, I’ll concede to this, but to nothing else.”

“Father.” Respect was in full bloom in Draco’s voice. It was like he couldn’t turn it off. “I beg to differ. That allegiance took away any pride there was in being one of us. Our name has been forsaken, degraded, diminished to a point of no return. It’s cost our family the trust we had in each other and the trust others had in us. Eventually, it depleted our relationship from the very bases of true kinship, and now we are in ruins.” Draco shook his head. “It's immature to think otherwise.”

“You have been immature to let such stupidity push you away from your family,” Lucius admonished him strongly. “We have raised you to be better than the whiny brat you seem fit to be and yet, you ignore our efforts.”

“You haven't raised me—"  

“We are your parents and we did raise you the best we could!”

No one expected Narcissa’s voice to be so clear. Draco eyed her with hurt and loathing in his eyes; it killed Harry a little to see it.
“You may not believe it and you may choose to continue an ignorant fool but you never knew the trials we surpassed for you. You are an insolent, ungrateful son, Draco. Your partner, whom we nearly killed and proudly so, has forgiven us for taking care of you. We will not apologise for having done that.”

“You nearly erased me.” Draco was close to murdering her with a look. “I’m a full-grown Occlumens, Mother. I know what you tried to do.”

“Then you are mature enough to know why I did so.” All three Malfoys had their chins raised. Harry could hear the soft, stirring breaths of the babies, so he cuddled Scorpius closer and moved towards Albus and Lyra, but Narcissa side-eyed him into stillness. “After all, Draco, you have children of your own.”

Harry felt dislocated, but someone had to help them out of that bad, awkward place. If that meant playing dumb like he so often did along his Slytherin peers, so be it.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t get it. Can someone explain me what’s going on?”

Narcissa looked nearly pleased to stir her son to do so. “Tell him, Draco. It’s your hurt after all.”

“The Lord would never kill me.” He looked at Harry, seemingly undisturbed. Under his skin, though, his heart throbbed. Admitting it was painful and humiliating. “He’d make me mad, at most. He was nearly there, actually. When Mother was called to torture me, there was a way that’d madden me into the soldier the Lord needed and another that would strip me of anything he might want from me—and maybe more.”

“She tried to spare you the suffering of being a soldier.”

“And nearly made a Frank Longbottom out of me.” The blunt comparison struck Harry hard. Neville’s parents were out of the hospital now, but still as bad as always. Neville had put them inside a neat country house where fifteen freed and reliable house elves took care of them alongside three nurses and a weekly visit from a Mediwizard. It was supposed to help them build themselves up again, even if they’d never be who they had been; six years had passed and still not much had happened. Draco smirked. “You see why I cannot trust her? She’d rather have my empty shell instead of my mad being.”

Harry stared at him, holding Scorpius like a lifeline. No. He couldn’t fathom that Narcissa would break her son like that. She must have known what she was doing. Harry was good in reading people, he didn’t get that one wrong. He turned to her.

“Did you know it could happen?”

“Yes.” She was honest and clear. “It was a slight, but real chance.”

“And still you did that?”

“Draco would have failed his next mission. It would have broken him in itself.”

“What mission?” Draco’s eyes were curious too. Apparently, that part was unknown to him.

“You were supposed to lure Potter into the Lord’s arms. He’d be tortured, poked, stripped bare. Then he’d be forced to kill, time after another, until the Lord was bored. Then you would torture him into death.” Narcissa tilted her head to the side. “Have you never wondered why you didn’t go through a proper initiation? He was to be that for you. And killing someone, the only person that could free you, killing him would have been the last drop for you.”
“I didn’t care for him at the time. I could have done it.” Draco instinctively held Harry’s hand. His words were harsh, but Harry was not the issue there. “I was strong, Mother.”

“You were trying to save us, my son.” She regally shook her head. “The only person who went through an initiation like that and survived was Bella, and we both know she’s lacking. You were not.” She smiled feebly. “I’d rather have you alive and insane or hating me than see you breaking in front of me. I already lost a child to keep this family afloat, Draco. There’s no way I’d lose another.”

Draco pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He sighed.

“I need to think.”

Ignoring everyone in the room, he took Scorpius and Lyra and left through the open door. Harry sighed deeply. Excusing himself, he asked for Albus back. Narcissa gave him up easily this time.

“Thank you.” Harry stilled at the words. “Even if he never speaks to me again. Please take care of him for me, Mr Potter. He needs someone who will.”

“I will, milady.” He bowed the slightest, ceremonial bit. “Please make yourselves comfortable. I will arrange for Astoria to be transferred back to my place; this room will be yours for the time being.” Narcissa acquiesced politely. “Lord Malfoy.”

He was excused and left the room too. He didn’t want to go after Draco; he needed space and he knew where to find Harry. While he had two babies under his wing, Draco would never do anything stupid. And he would come back. He always did.

Albus was already asleep in his crib and Harry added the finishing touches on Astoria for her comfort when Draco entered the guest room and embraced him from behind, burying his face in Harry’s neck. Harry didn’t move at first; when Draco finally sighed and began breathing like a human being again, he turned around to face him.

“The babies?”

“In their cribs. I sent a letter to Goldstein; he’s aware of it.”

“Good.” Harry touched Draco’s thin hair and pulled him in for a deep kiss. “I’m with you, Malfoy. I’ll stand by you in whatever you need to do next.”

“You’d better.”

Harry smirked.

“Always.”

When morning came, it brought along very familiar voices. Harry thought he might be dreaming; he sat up and rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t. Pinpointing the voices, he walked sleepily through a set of already open doors towards the kitchen. There, sitting among cups of strong tea, an impeccably dressed Draco Malfoy and a flustered Ginny Weasley discussed in heated tones. Around them, in tall chairs and a baby seat, Albus, Scorpius and Lyra ate their breakfast, seemingly disregarding the grown-ups.

“I told you it’s not my fault, I shouldn’t apologise.”
“You know your father never will,” she hissed threateningly. “Be the nice snake, Malfoy.”

“Hardly.” He sipped from his cup. “Why don’t you cut to the chase and blurt out what you’re in here for anyway?”

Ginny flushed crimson. “I must speak to Harry.”

“Oh, must you?” Draco gestured to the living room absentmindedly. “He must be sleeping in our room. Suit yourself.”

Ginny couldn’t help the snort and the mild laugh that followed it. “You don't call him in the morning?”

“He’s insufferable sometimes. I cannot possibly be forced to cope with his simple-mindedness and stubbornness at all times. It’d deprive me of neural functions quicker than headbanging a wall.”

“Shit, I gotta tease him about this. Even his lover can't stand him.”

“Like I said, suit yourself. I do not mind the slightest.”

Harry couldn’t help but to gape at that strange exchange; half-heartedly upset, he showed up inside the kitchen. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, my clumsy lover.” Draco didn’t care to lift his eyes from the tea he gave Albus to talk to him. “Have you had a nice night? I do hope the awkward way we passed out didn't leave you hurting.”

Ginny looked positively giddy at the exchange. “You let him tease you like this?”

“Like I have a choice.”

Ginny laughed openly now. “Oh, Harry, and here I thought you were in it for something better, not the same tease-fest you always endure.”

“He’s a hurting little jerk.” Harry plopped down in one of the chairs, talking about Draco’s undoubtable loss with his parents. He cringed a little to sit down, his backside still tender. “Sore loser.”

“Now, who’s the sore one here?” Draco put Albus’s cup down without a clink. “Weasley seems to have a message to relay to you. Must we leave the lovey-doves alone?”

“We’re not a couple anymore, Malfoy. You can chill your blonde head.”

“Thank you for the thoughtful enlightenment, Weasley.”

But his stance eased a little and Harry, despite the overall tiredness caused by that Slytherin bastard, smiled. Ginny noticed it and laughed again. Realising what drove her into laughing fits, Harry cleared his throat and served himself of some tea.

“So, Ginny, what can I do for you?”

“Come with me, I have a surprise for you.”

“Really?” Harry hated surprises, and Ginny knew it, which made it all tons more annoying. “Must I absolutely?”
“Of course, you moron.” Harry didn’t miss Scorpius repeating the word. “You.” She turned to Draco. “Come along too. Bring the kids. Nobody will mind them. Or you.”

“You must be joking.”

“I’m not. Come on, get dressed and let’s go. We’re late already. People will be up my arse in no time unless I bring you there soon.”

Resistance tried to tackle them, but Ginny’s insistence won the battle. The five of them bathed, changed, made themselves presentable. The kids were thrilled and bouncing, foreseeing excitement as they entered the Floo to what should be The Burrow but ended up being something else entirely. It looked like a big park, complete with Muggle-like bouncing castles, a lake and several patches of picnic towels. It was downright deserted, and for a moment Harry wondered if that was what it looked like. He held Draco’s hand tight for a moment and looked around once more.

“Pa! Pa, pay!” Scorpius struggled from Harry’s grasp and ran—or kind of—towards the nearest playground.

“Scorpius, don’t run!” Harry breathed out and spurred after him, picking him up and turning him around in a playful spin. “Stop escaping me, you little rascal.”

The next thing he knew, a loud shout of “surprise” tinted the air, and people slipped from their Disillusionment Charms in waves. Harry was shocked into stillness, enraptured like a Niffler with something shiny. Behind him, Draco and Ginny laughed open-heartedly. Apparently, not only had his lover known of the party, but also had helped keeping it secret.

“Oh, Harry, Neville, congratulations on your birthdays!”

Harry looked back at Ginny’s voice, gobsmacked, to see Neville hand in hand with a giggling Hannah. He looked as stupid as Harry felt, probably too caught up in life to even remember there should have been a birthday celebration about a week before. He walked towards Harry and clapped his hand on his shoulder, saluting him brief yet effusively.

“Surprise party, huh?” Neville shook his head. “I should have known.”

“We’ve been played, man. Openly.” Harry grinned at the other, though his insides were only just beginning to un-churn after the surprise. “Happy birthday, Nev. Thank you for everything.”

“You too, mate. I'm glad you survived for another year.”

“Guess I’m not the brainless Saviour anymore.”

Neville laughed in a sound roar. “Guess not.”

Soon Harry and Neville were separated by heaps of arms willing to drape around them in every possible manner. He got warm hugs from Ginny and Hannah and breath-taking ones from Molly and Madame Maxime (Hagrid’s sweet company for the day). He was clapped on shoulders and back by nearly every man present—Mundungus, Higgins, Percy, Dianthus—and bear-hugged by Hagrid. He got a sound butt slap from Blaise and a wet, devilish kiss that hit too close to home from Pansy. He was propped up in Thomas’s back and fell from it into Charlie’s open arms. He was kissed and hugged and painted in cotton candy and sugary lollipops by every child there was—and there were many.

Ok, Harry didn't like surprises, but that one wasn't that bad.
He had barely gotten enough room to breathe and was only beginning to wonder how had all those Slytherins entered that place without derailing everything into wand-waving when the massive block of people opened up like the Red Sea. Fluctuating on a steady and very padded chair guided by Hermione, Ron threaded a slow path towards his friend.

And he was awake.

Harry couldn't stop the glittering tears from forming but he kept them from rolling down his cheeks and detained his own body before he could do something hilariously extreme, if embarrassingly cheesy, like kneeling down before his friend.

“Got old while I rotted away in that bed, eh?”

“You got yourself some wrinkles too, right there.”

“Nonsense. My wife tells me I'm handsome. She never lies.”

“Never ever,” Hermione added, smiling like sunshine. She hugged Harry tight and kissed his cheek to congratulate him. “I'll find us some punch. Don't roam around, Weasley.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smirked. Harry still couldn't believe it. When had that happened? Seeing him talking and moving, albeit a bit jerkily, was a birthday present in itself. Bloody hell, it was a life present in itself. Harry grinned like a maniac, which made Ron laugh and shake his head.

“You know, the doctors said I should just enjoy normalcy while it lasts.” Harry stared at him blankly, disoriented. “They're gonna put me through a Muggle surgery, mate. It'll probably be on Wednesday. My liver is mainly gone and they didn't find a way to find me a magical one.”

“And Kingsley's…?” It hurt to think of his mentor as an organ repository instead of a living man but he had openly been a donor and proudly so.

“They tried something smaller, a couple of scellis if I'm not mistaken.”

“You mean cells.”

“That. It didn't work. High rejection rate.”

“I am truly sorry, mate.”

He looked around, to his child playing and his pregnant wife warmly talking to his still disbelieving mother. “Me too. But I'd rather be a Squib than give them up, Harry. There's nothing I wouldn't do for them. Even if it kills me, I have to try.”

Harry nodded solemnly. “I know.”

“If it goes sour—” he started, but Harry nodded and stopped him.

“They are my family too, Ron. Nothing will happen to them.”

Ron acquiesced, his eyes roaming around and falling about two metres away, where Teddy stood, staring at him. The boy's features were schooled into stillness and they couldn't understand whether he had heard anything, but he didn't look like he had. The boy moved forward, smiling at Ron before hugging his arm.

“Watcha doing?” he asked, beaming at his uncle.
“Trying to find a way to feed you to a dragon without your grandmother finding out,” said Ron, ruffling the boy's turquoise hair.

“Oooh, I want it!” He jumped aside and looked up at Harry. “Can I be eaten by a dragon? It would be fun. I've never seen a dragon from the inside."

“Teds, it wouldn't be wise.”

“Nothing ever is.”

“He means you'd get yourself killed, Therium.” Malfoy's voice was crystal clear. He approached them like a shadow; he had Lyra in his arms and looked absolutely stunning. “There's no magic to allow you to go inside a dragon and come back safe. It digests food like you and I, you see.”

“Bummer.” Teddy kicked a pebble before looking up again, bright and defiant. “We can go ask uncle Thom if he knows a way!”

Draco rolled his eyes uncharacteristically and let himself be pulled by the bouncy kid. Harry laughed out loud, and the Slytherin could still hear it after moving towards Thom, dragged by one very focussed Lupin.

“Uncle Thom!” The boy ran and jumped on the burly man, who caught him out of sheer reflexes. “Do you know the insides of a dragon?”

The man frowned and opened his mouth to answer, probably honestly, but Draco shook his head minutely, mouthing a sound “no”.

“I'm afraid not, pal. Sorry.” Teddy shrivelled down like a dried fruit, which made Thom's eyes widen. “But I can show you a water-dragon giving birth next month. They keep their eggs inside them and they hatch in the mother's bag.”


“I had no reason whatsoever to think otherwise, Therium.”

“Therium?” Thom looked confused, but the boy was eager to explain that name.

“It's my Black name! It's a constellation!” He squirmed and Thom put him down. He stared seriously at the men. “Now I'll go meet my auntie. I have to talk to her.”

They both laughed a bit after the boy dispatched himself, the ease dispersed between them. Aware of the silence and the discomfort it ensued, Draco moved Lyra so he could hold out a hand.

“I don't believe we've been properly introduced. Draco Malfoy.”

“Thomas Grimassi. I'm Charlie's hubb.”

“Teddy told me about you.” They shook hands in strong, firm grips. Something on Thom's eyes seemed to appease after that. “I'm here on behalf of the bespectacled birthday boy.”

Thom raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Fancy him much, do you?”

“As much as you fancy your man, I suppose.”

“Oh, man, that's loads.” Thom laughed heartily, his gorgeous features becoming even nicer. The man was a Greek god. “Lovers?”
“Yes.” What was that? Reassurance of some sort? A will to mark Potter as his? Draco wasn’t sure, but Thom’s presence made him every bit as possessive as he usually tried to appear not to be. “Do you know him well?”

“Well enough. He's got a tushie to make heads turn, you see. And an appendage to match.” Draco raised an eyebrow, happy that Lyra couldn't understand what was said. “We kept him for a whole summer. He's mouth-watering, but so off-limits.”

“Off-limits?”

“Brother-in-law is too close a relationship for me. Besides, I'm not sure Charlie would enjoy it. He likes it better when he can watch it and Harry is a prude.”

That was not one of the words Draco would use to refer to Potter, but he let it slide due to lack of will to detail their relationship. He couldn't pinpoint whether Thom was messing with him either. Instead, he changed Lyra's position once more (she wasn't heavy, but she was far too soft and unsteady), which seemed to catch Thomas's attention.

“How old is your kid?”


Thomas chuckled.

“What is it with your family and star-related names?”

“My mother's called Narcissa.”

“And one look around the family tree told me she's basically the only flower up there.”

Draco knew he meant the Blacks, since the only flower in his Malfoy side was Wisteria. It was true, they did have tendencies. The dead girls in the Malfoy branch always had something to do with clarity and light, like Lucia, Clara, Bianca. The Blacks were constellation-related for their best part. That was not a tendency in other families as much as in them. Until then, Draco had never wondered why – but it was curious anyway.

“So, do you and the tamer have any kids of your own?” Draco was good on conversational matters, and the way Thom’s look softened to the point of sadness made him frown.

“Not yet. He claims our lifestyle is not fit for a baby.”

“And you don’t agree.”

“No lifestyle is fit for a baby, but babies are still around, which must mean then that any lifestyle will do.” Thomas shrugged. “He thinks we work too much, he fears we won’t be able to love a toddler as much as it’ll deserve. But I know him. He would love to have a child to take care of. It would be hell until we settled, but he would love every minute of it.”

Draco sort of wished he could say something against that but, truth was he loved his babies more than anything. He’d do anything for them and he couldn’t tire of how loved they made him feel. Even with the problems, work, his imprisonment... they were little blessings he adored. So, instead of arguing, he nodded.

“Do you want to hold her?” he blurted out, to which Thomas’s eyes shone bright.
Draco helped him take the baby, advising about supporting her head and reassuring him that she had an antigravity spell on her clothes, so there were no risks of falling to death. Thomas was nearly fifteen centimetres taller than him and almost twice his width, a bulky mass of muscle that his clothes could barely contain, but the way he held Lyra spoke of tenderness and adoration. A gentle giant, he’d say.

“Like Hagrid,” whispered Potter, right behind him. Unstartled, Draco felt the subtle hand slipping on his and squeezed it. “Are you alright?”

“Mostly fine, my uneducated birthday boy.” He squinted at Thom, but the man was lost to Lyra’s twitching fingers. “Do I look that dumb whenever I hold her?”

Potter laughed out loud. “You couldn’t look dumb if you tried.”

“Good,” he said with a smirk. “It wouldn’t be fit for a Malfoy.”

And despite having his discussion with his parents still fresh in his mind, and not having forgiven them entirely, Draco knew there were some things his family engraved in him he would never be able to escape. Right now, though, they didn’t seem that bad anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I want to say I truly am sorry for taking so long to update this. I was a bit out of touch with this universe ever since I started working full-time so it was hard to pick up the pieces of the story to avoid messing it up. It's much clearer for me now, though! Which means I'll probably write faster and so on. For all of your support through all the ups and downs here, thank you so very much! For your kind comments and tips too, you are amazing, all of you <3

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