Any Instrument
by dicta_contrion

Summary

Draco Malfoy wouldn't go back to England for anything less than an exceptional case. Being asked to figure out why Harry Potter can't control his magic might be exceptional enough to qualify.

Notes

Dear femmequixotic and noeon, it was an honour to write for you and, with your very inspiring likes and prompts, a lot of fun as well. In the midst of that very fun process things ran…um, a bit long? Please know that I know it can be hard to carve out reading time over the holidays and would never want that word count to be a source of stress, even if it takes some time to get through it. Your stories, together and individually, have given me so much joy on so many occasions and I only hope this will bring you some of the same. Thank you for all you do in this fandom; it wouldn’t be the same without you. Happy holidays!!

Massive, massive thanks go to my beta (words can’t describe the gratitude!) and pre-reader for incredibly insightful comments, as well as to the cheerleaders whose support made this possible and the incredible artists who have been inspired to draw some of these scenes!! And of course to the mods, for patience and understanding and for putting this fabulous fest together. It’s a pleasure to take part!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

If you are any wizard at all you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument. The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand.
- Garrick Ollivander, Shell Cottage, March 1998

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Draco was fast asleep when the call came.

He thought, at first, it might be his office, but his eyelids were leaden under the weight of last night’s whisky, and since the odds of his feeling beholden to scheduling reminders were slim on the best of days… well. He wasn’t especially moved.

Except it went on another minute, and another.

He thought of Chloé next, and winced. He’d left her in charge of three of his doctoral students, all of them elbow deep in dragon heartstring, wood samples, and anatomy models. She was the type to get so excited about a breakthrough that she’d eventually come through unannounced. Last time she’d had Luc in tow. They’d found Draco fast asleep halfway under a snoring Frenchman, and it still hadn’t stopped her from reporting her latest findings.

There weren’t many things he missed about England, but a firm sense of propriety about the hours at which one could use the Floo was among them.

It hadn’t been too terribly awkward—they were more amused than anything else—but the prospect of a repeat moved Draco towards wakefulness. Until he remembered that he’d left last night’s dance partner sticky-fingered in a bathroom cubicle, and there was nothing to walk in on. Draco congratulated himself on his foresight and pulled a pillow over his head.

Draco was determined to go back to sleep on that note. Except the sound of the Floo was bloody irritating. And sort of…off.

His eyes shot open when he recognised it as the crackling buzz of an international Floo call.

It wouldn’t be Mother, who had just returned from a fortnight in Tuscany, or Father, who had gone seven years with nothing more than a terse missive in the beak of his Siberian crane and showed no signs of changing course. Pansy and Greg didn’t pay their own rent, let alone make international calls, and Blaise and Millie only called when they were already in town.

It could be an unknown caller, he reasoned. Someone with the wrong Floo coordinates.

But calls from other parts of the continent didn’t crackle quite like that, and even after a decade the prospect of an unknown British caller didn’t do much to assuage Draco’s sudden-onset nerves.

Draco’s stomach turned, and he stretched to peer into the leaping flames. He couldn’t see anything clearly, but whoever it was didn’t show any signs of going away.
He grabbed his wand from the night stand drawer and his dressing gown from a chair, stuffing the former into the sleeve of the latter before crossing the room to crouch on the hearth.

A moment later, Millie’s features emerged from the flames. Draco’s stomach convulsed. On the one hand, it was Millie. On the other, it was Millie looking more severe, and more nervous, than he’d seen her since seventh year. On a third, he’d had much too much whisky, but he didn’t think that could account for Millie’s demeanour. It had to be an emergency.

“Doctor Malfoy,” she began.

Draco’s headache was so acute that he could feel his brow furrow. She went on before he could ask about her formality.

“We apologise for interrupting you at home.”

“We? Mill, what—”

She shook her head so minutely that Draco barely caught it. “However, the Minister needs to speak with you at your earliest possible convenience and directed his office to make contact by any means necessary. Will you meet with him?”

“Wh—?” Draco stopped short at another almost imperceptible shake of her head. He shook his own head in a tremendously counterproductive attempt to clear it. The Hangover Potion in the bedside drawer, he really needed to—

“Doctor Malfoy?”

He cleared his throat and glanced down at his bare chest, hoping it would be enough hint for Millie. “I am not able to speak to the Minister at present. May I ask what this concerns?”

“We are not at liberty to discuss the matter over unsecured communication channels.”

The cold of the hearthstone shot through Draco’s every bone. He couldn’t think of anything that would be so urgent and secretive without being a sign of trouble. He gripped the jamb for support, suddenly lightheaded as the blood drained from his face.

Millie’s eyes widened and Draco could see the wheels turning. She thinned her lips and spoke carefully. “I do believe I am at liberty to assure you that the matter does not concern…” she paused, frowned. “That the matter is not of any personal concern.”

Draco hesitated, trying to read between the lines without much success. He wouldn’t have had those last two drinks if he’d known he’d be solving puzzles first thing. “But you can’t tell me what this does concern?”

“No, Doctor Malfoy. Will you meet with the Minister?”

“I haven’t set foot on British soil in almost a decade. I don’t mean to start now.”

“Yes, Doctor Malfoy. The Minister is aware that you are living abroad. I am authorised to arrange his travel to Paris if you are willing to meet with him.”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up. Had it been anyone else on the line he would’ve tried for thoughtful, but Millie would recognise “dumbfounded” through his best attempts, so he didn’t make any.

The Minister was willing to travel to Paris. Specifically to meet with him. About something so top
secret it couldn’t be discussed over the Ministry’s most secure Floos.

He was curious.

“Doctor Malfoy?” His curiosity must’ve shown, if Millie’s hint of a smile was anything to go by.

He cleared his throat and rolled his eyes at it. “My schedule is booked today and I am overseeing a surgery on Wednesday. Is the Minister available Thursday at half noon?”

Millie was unimpressed. “If you’re certain that you don’t have any earlier availability.”

“I am.”

“Very well. The Minister will see you then. I will send an owl with details.”

“I will expect it.”

“Good day, Doctor Malfoy.”

The fire died down as soon as Millie ended the call. Draco stood and surveyed the room. He’d thrown back the sheets in his rush to the Floo and bed called out to him, but he knew he had no hope of falling back to sleep.

* * *

Draco’s distraction stayed with him all day. Instead of taking notes during Chloé’s morning update he scrawled a quick “M: Call me tonight. – D” on spare parchment and had one of his graduate students take it to the central Owlery. And that was before he dropped three different sample implants and walked into a lab bench.

It followed him home, too. He didn’t stop for a drink. He barely ate. He nearly stubbed a toe pacing in front of the hearth and was moments away from calling Millie and demanding answers when his fireplace leapt to life.

He was on the hearth and answering the call within seconds. She hadn’t even come wholly into focus before he opened with a sharp, “What the fuck, Mill?”

She cringed. “I know, I know. But I really can’t tell you anything yet.”

“Still?” He sat back, torn between shock and annoyance. “Even without the precious Minister standing over your shoulder.”

“He was in his office, one. Two, fuck off. Three, no. It’s confidential for good reason, and this connection is even less secure than the other.”

“You really aren’t going to tell me anything?”

“Nothing I haven’t already told you.”

“That, what, it’s ‘not of any personal concern’? What does that mean, exactly?”

She sighed. “You’re not going to Azkaban. Your mother isn’t going to Azkaban. Even if anyone could find your father he wouldn’t be going to Azkaban. No one is trying to send any of you to Azkaban, or put you on probation, or house arrest, or levy any more fines, or make you testify in any trials. None of you are in any legal trouble.”
“And non-legal trouble?”

“Draco.” Millie’s voice softened. “It’s not as though Shacklebolt can give you detention. He wants to meet with you. He has good reasons. Reasons that might be of interest to you. That’s all I can say.”

“What kind of reasons?”

“Oh, well now you’ve asked a dozen times, I can tell you everything. Got a quill?”

He ignored her attempt at humour. “Mill, I’ve been gone ten years and all of a sudden the Minister wants to arrange a short-notice international Portkey to have lunch with me. Wouldn’t you be concerned?”

She sighed again. “Knowing what you know, and don’t know, yes. Knowing what I know, no. I realise it’s not your forte, but you’ll just have to trust me.”

“Then I won’t tell you where lunch is, either.” Millie grinned. “See you Thursday.”

The Floo died down again and, with an eye towards bed, Draco decided it was best to end the day sooner than later.

* * *

Thursday was cold and spitting down with rain. Draco took a perverse satisfaction in bringing Britain’s Minister for Magic to Paris at the only time of year when it was less than compelling. Perhaps he’d decide they got enough of that at home and leave Paris, and Draco, alone forever.

Though maybe he’d think Paris in November was perfectly lovely or, coming from London, at least very normal.

Either way, the rain kept Draco from walking the ten minutes to Sola. He had been relying on the walk for a chance to clear his head, but at least—thanks in no small part to generations of Malfoys past—there wasn’t a Michelin-starred restaurant in Paris that didn’t have an Apparition point.

It didn’t mean he had to Apparate on time. He had things to do in the office. And points to prove.

Five minutes after he was meant to arrive, the maitre’d led Draco downstairs. It was quickly apparent that he needn’t have shown Draco to the table. The entire downstairs was conspicuously empty, with Shacklebolt’s shining head straight in front of him. To his left, Millicent’s blunt bob. To his right, with hair that was still unmistakable on such a humid day, Granger, whose presence was almost enough to make Draco turn tail, if only because he was loathe to join any sort of team that thought Granger might be persuasive.

Shacklebolt stood and extended a hand. “Mister Malfoy.”

Draco took it and met his eye. “Doctor Malfoy.”

“Oh, of course. Will you join us, Doctor Malfoy?”
Half a dozen quips hit the back of his teeth, and Draco barely ignored the urge to run. With a curt nod, he took the proffered seat.

“You know Ms Bulstrode, I believe? And Ms Granger?”

“I do.” He nodded to them each in turn. “Ms Bulstrode, Granger.”

Shacklebolt continued before his companions had a chance to speak, though Granger certainly looked eager. “Thank you for joining us.”

“I was given to believe it was of some importance.”

“It is.”

“Well, then?”

Shacklebolt folded his hands on the edge of the table. Granger coughed.

“Ah, Malfoy.” Shacklebolt flexed his fingers and knitted them back together. “We have not.”

“In which case I assume there is some business so pressing that it required an international Portkey for three.”

Draco leaned back in his seat and gestured Shacklebolt onwards.

“We have been following your work,”

Draco raised an eyebrow.

“Ms Granger, if you would?”

Draco raised the other.

Granger cleared her throat. “You’re aware, I’m sure, of the Department of Mysteries.”

Draco could practically see her biting back a comment about how he would’ve known, and how she would’ve known that he knew. It was a very good, if wholly unneeded, reminder of why he’d left England in the first place.

“We in the Department undertake a number of magical research projects as, again, you may be aware.”

Draco offered a slight nod.

“These run the gamut from relatively simple experiments with known charms to more complex and unusual subjects. It is an expansive research programme, bringing together many of the best magical researchers in Britain.”

Granger fell silent as footsteps echoed down the stairs. Neither Millie nor Shacklebolt uttered a
peep until the waitstaff cleared the room.

If not for Millie’s presence, and his certainty that she had forgiven him the less tactful parts of his early adolescence, Draco might’ve begun to suspect a high-level assassination.

Granger picked up as though they hadn’t spent the better part of three very long minutes in an awkwardly shared silence. “We have not yet, however, branched into your particular field.”

“I can see where that would be difficult when there aren’t any biomagicologists in the UK.”

“Indeed.” Granger pursed her lips. “And yet we have a project—a rather urgent project—that would benefit a great deal from exactly that expertise.”

“Oh?”

“Dr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt interjected, “before we continue, we must make you aware that this project is highly sensitive and requires the utmost secrecy. Absolute discretion is essential.”

Draco looked around the empty room. “The lunch arrangements did that job for you, I’d say.”

“No, Dr Malfoy. Publicly sharing the details of the case would put the lives of high-ranking Ministry officials at risk and create panic in the wizarding world. Unfortunately, you may not be able to fully grasp the gravity of the situation, or the importance of the project, without letting Ms Granger explain the specifics. I’m afraid we need to ask you to make an Unbreakable Vow.”

“Absolutely not.” Draco pushed back from the table, heart pounding.

Granger blanched. “Malfoy—”

“No. Never. No project could be interesting enough to justify that.”

Granger leaned forward urgently. “We can offer you resources, assistance, access to magical artefacts that—”

“Was there any ambiguity whatsoever in ‘No. Never.’? Need I repeat myself?”

“You don’t know what’s at stake!”

“No.” Draco stood. “But you do. You know whatever it is that’s at stake and you’ve already made clear that you have no way to address it. If you did, you certainly wouldn’t be here, would you?”

“Draco,” Millie said softly.

He turned to her with a curt bow. “Lovely to see you as always, Ms Bulstrode. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Draco,” she tried again, only to be interrupted.

“Mill, no.” Draco was rapidly losing what remained of his temper. “Absolutely not. You know why and you know better.”

“Exactly!” Granger interrupted, pushing up out of her seat. “She knows why and she knows what’s at stake and she came here with us!”

“Granger did leave out the bit about the Vow.” Millie shrugged at Draco.
He rolled his eyes.

Shacklebolt stood next. “Dr Malfoy, please understand—”

“Minister,” Draco bit out, ”I think I understand perfectly. You’re here because you need me, because I have an expertise that no one on your team has, and you need it badly enough that you were willing to come here and, not insignificantly, at least for Granger here, swallow your pride and ask me for something. If my observations are correct—and, Minister, they almost always are—you need me more than I need you.”

Granger’s words didn’t betray panic, but her voice was choked with it. “You don’t know the resources we have to offer!”

“And?” Draco met her eyes. “I know that I have a state of the art magi-medical facility. I know that I have my pick of cases and a dozen research assistants vying to maintain stasis charms for hours every time I’m involved in a surgery. I know that the Panthéon-Magique will grant me access to any of its magical artefacts and texts. I know that I have a beautiful home, a choice of beautiful eating establishments, and my choice of beautiful shops and museums, all of which welcome me with open arms. And I know that no one will interrupt my day to make thinly veiled allusions about mistakes I made as sixteen-year-old boy. I may not know about your resources, but I find that neither my work nor my personal life suffers for that.”

He turned his gaze on Shacklebolt. “I have no interest in knowing, if these are the terms.”

Draco waited five counts before he nodded and stepped away.

“Potter,” she added, as if there could have been any confusion.

“Potter discharged my life debt before the trials, in exchange for the one he owed my mother. Life debts all around, Granger. I don’t owe him a thing.”

“Dr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt interrupted, “perhaps now that Ms Granger has revealed that piece of information, you can understand our need for discretion.”

“I won’t work with anyone who doesn’t trust my judgement, including my ability to evaluate what parts of a case require discretion. If Ms Granger is suggesting that I would reveal information about a high-profile patient—about any patient—she knows less about my record than she might have suggested to you, Minister.”

“I don’t deal in the kind of ‘trust’ that requires Unbreakable Vows. You trust me, and I hear you out and decide whether I’m interested in the case, or you don’t and we leave before the seared
scallops.”

Draco watched Shacklebolt and Granger share an attempt at non-verbal communication, darting away just long enough to catch Millie’s very miniature nod of approval.

“Well?”

Granger gave Shacklebolt a look so pleading that Draco almost scoffed.

Shacklebolt nodded and turned from Granger back to Draco. “Absolute discretion, Dr Malfoy. On your word?”

“On my word.”

“Very well. Please have a seat.”

As if on cue, the waitstaff descended to clear their plates and deliver the next course. Draco settled himself slowly into his seat, holding Shacklebolt’s eye as the waitstaff worked around them.

The room remained silent for long seconds after the four of them were left alone.

“When you’re ready, Minister.”

Granger snorted and muttered something under her breath. It was enough to break Shacklebolt’s concentration. He turned towards Granger and lifted an expectant brow.

She swallowed and nodded, turning to face Draco. “The Elder Wand. You’re familiar.”

“More than most.”

She quickly schooled the start of a grimace into a professional mask. “Exactly.” She waited.

“Biomagicology, Potter, and the Elder Wand. Afraid I’m going to need a few more words here, Granger.”

“Right.” Her voice cracked. Granger cleared her throat and tried again. “Right. Harry, the Elder Wand, and biomagicology.”

Draco had never had Sola’s private lunch service before. He’d been hearing about the Iberico pork and parmesan foam for ages, though.

After what Granger and Shacklebolt had to say, he found that he couldn’t remember a single bite.

* * *

By the good graces of the Minister, Draco had Millie waiting at home for him after work, along with a thin dossier outlining the details of the case. He had insisted—interestingly, to Granger’s seeming approval—that he couldn’t decide on the spot. They’d given him 24 hours for an indication, and 72 for a final decision. Six had passed and he still hadn’t entirely wrapped his head around the news.

Millie, bless her, was trying to ease the way with Scotch and the sort of concise briefing that got one promoted to an assistant to the Minister. Though after the third glass, he was no longer sure if the two were complementary or at cross purposes.

He shook his head. “I still fail to understand why they did it.”
“If you’re asking me to explain Gryffindor logic, we may be a while.”

“What does it say in the file? They can write things down, can’t they?”

“Yes, though understanding them is a different matter.”

“Mill,” Draco groaned. “Please. I don’t know if I’ve just been handed the maddest or the best case of my career, but I do know it’s among the most inexplicable. Can you please, please read me the file again?”

Millie sighed and opened the folder. “Subject: Harry James Potter, born July—”

“The interesting bits.”

“Merlin’s sake, Draco. I gave you the interesting bits already. Do you want the boring bits in a funny voice?”

He tilted his head and moved to open his mouth.

“That was not an offer.”

He closed it again and collapsed back onto the Chesterfield.

“You have the pertinent details.”

“Rita Skeeter wrote her post-war ‘tell-all.’”

“Yes.”

“Between all the witnesses to the final battle who saw the Wand and all the stories of Potter popping out from under an invisibility cloak over the years, she reported that the Deathly Hallows were involved.”

“A broken clock is right twice a day.”

Draco lifted his head. “The stone?”

“Yes. Not public knowledge, but it’s in the files. Potter had it from Dumbledore. Sixth year, that’s what made his hand all…”

“Ah.”

“Yes.”

“Right.” Draco pinched the bridge of his nose and laid back. “So there was public confirmation, of sorts, that the Elder Wand was real.”

“Indeed.”

“And someone stole it.”

“Tried to. McGonagall had Dumbledore’s tomb heavily warded after the trials.”

“Well then, problem solved.”

“They kept trying. There were so many attempts it got distracting. Alarms going off, teachers apprehending common criminals at all hours.”
“Not the ideal backdrop to teaching.”

“No. And apparently Binns asked for such a large pay rise on account of it that the governors got involved.”

“Binns?” Draco raised his head again. “A pay rise? What for?”

Millie shrugged. “Something about principles established in the 1634 Nundu Incident?”

Draco shook his head and smacked it back against the leather. “So they stuck it in the Department of Mysteries, because obviously if Death Eaters and school children could get in, that’s the safest place for it.”

“And they wanted to experiment on it.”

Draco made a noise of unconcealed frustration. “Have they completely forgotten the difference between being a researcher and a fool?”

“Is there one?”

Without looking up he chucked a pillow in her direction. He heard her catch it. “But… what? They had no idea what they were doing and blew something up?”

“Close. It blew something up. A lot of things.”

“It? What—this is where it gets confusing. What do you mean, it?”

“The Wand.”

“The Wand blew things up.”

“Sparked at them a bit. Some levitation. One or two small explosions.”

“It’s an inanimate object.”

“Yes. And as we know, those never have personalities, especially the really legendary ones.”

“Touché. What was its problem, exactly?”

“Granger suggested—well, as far as they could figure out, it sort of… missed Potter.”

“It missed him?”

“It wants to be with its master. Granger noticed—oh, don’t make that noise, she’s a lot cleverer than you like to admit.”

Draco waved her on with a hand.

“She is,” Mill insisted. “Wandlore is her speciality. She apprenticed with Ollivander, who tries to hire her away at least monthly. Plus she’s the Unspeakable most familiar with it. So of course she was on the team handling the Wand. And she noticed that it picked up… traces, if you will. It responded to Potter’s magical energy, even in minute amounts. It would behave differently before and after she had lunch with him, even, as though it could sense his magic on her robes, even just in tiny little—”

“Traces.”
“Yes. And then, if it didn’t feel Potter’s magic for a while, it would misbehave more and more dramatically.”

“Did they have a falling out?”

“Potter and Granger?”

“Mmm.”

“What does that matter?” Mill sounded confused.

“It doesn’t.” Draco crossed his arms behind his head. “Just wondering how Potter managed to pry himself away from her and Weasley long enough for the Wand to notice.”

“He was on a mission in Romania. Dragon egg smuggling. A month or so.”

“Dragons,” Draco scoffed. “Of course he was. How glamorous.”

Millie hummed. “You said it, not me.”

Draco pretended to ignore her. “But all was not well when he returned.”

“No. It kept behaving more dramatically when it was separated from him, and after shorter periods of time.”

“So they decided the next logical step was to—?”

“No. And if you’re to seriously consider this case you will have to get over assuming that everything they do is wholly idiotic.”

“Why? I’m never wrong.”

“You’ve got at least one tattoo that says otherwise.” She chucked the pillow back at him, and when it landed on his face he was happy enough to leave it there.

“Anyway,” he said, voice muffled.

“You will be wrong if you don’t reconsider.”

“Anyway,” he repeated.

“Anyway. They tried having him visit it every day, but it became more and more agitated each time he left.”

“What about changing masters? Surely someone in the Department would’ve punched him in the face without too much reservation.”

“Draco,” Millie warned.

“The question stands. Why not make Granger its master?”

Mille sighed, and Draco heard papers rustling and the dossier closing. “They tried. She felt awful about it, especially when… well. There were multiple attempts. He let her disarm him, then she legitimately disarmed him. She hexed him, jinxed him. You might be pleased to know that she did, in fact, punch him in the face.”
Draco jolted upright, sending the pillow to the floor. “She did?”

“Yes,” Millie snorted. “Will you reconsider now?”

Draco grabbed the pillow, laid down, and stuffed it back over his eyes. “It would seem the logical answer is to just give him the bloody Wand.”

“For someone else, maybe. For Harry Potter, hero of the war and Head of Auror Field Operations? Every criminally minded wizard in a thousand mile radius came to try and draw him into some trap or another. And word spread. They arrested half a dozen Yakuza and two New York Muggle mobsters, who tried just because they had heard something about an ultimate weapon. And once they were all in England, they didn’t exactly all sit around enjoying strawberries and clotted cream. Crime was up twenty percent in the second quarter of the year. Wizarding and Muggle.”

“Have you considered France?”

“I quite like strawberries and clotted cream.”

“Fine, fine. And if Potter left the Wand at home…?”

“Towards the end his house elf picked it up whilst cleaning, wound up Imperiusing himself and, essentially, the Wand made him bring Potter home. He was in the middle of a stakeout.”

“Problematic.”

“Rather.”

“So they needed to find a way to keep the Wand holstered on Potter at all times, without anyone knowing about it.”

“And while convincing them all that the Wand had been destroyed.”

“Is there a reason they didn’t actually destroy it?”

“Would you destroy the Elder Wand? One third of the Deathly Hallows, priceless artefact in the study of wandlore, potential key to understanding the interaction between wands and natural magic?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“Is that your answer as a survivor of the Dark Lord, or as a scholar?”

Draco paused. “Two heartbeats.”

“He knew what it meant to Granger. Knew its potential usefulness.”

“So they destroyed a replica.”

“Yes. In the middle of a duel they had Weasley ‘trip’ into him. Potter pretended to fall with him and, voilà. Broken wand. Made sure the criminals they were chasing saw it and let word spread from there.”

“All’s well that ends well.”

“Crime is down 18%.”
“Thought it had been up 20.”

“The Yakuza invest heavily in Japanese whisky. Decided to try their hand at proper Scotch while they were in the neighbourhood. There are a few extracurriculars once in a while.”

“Cheers.” Draco raised his glass and waited for Millie to clink hers against it.

She didn’t. “Not quite.”

He lowered his glass. “Because Potter is an idiot.”

“Because they still had the Wand.”

“So they devised a brilliant solution.”

“They thought so at the time.”

“Merlin, Mill. Couldn’t have called me beforehand?”

“Wasn’t aware saving Harry Potter from himself was high on your to-do list.” She traced a fingertip around the edge of her glass. “And they only told me after the fact, once it became a problem. They really did think it would work.”

“But it didn’t.”

“No.”

“And now he’s a danger to himself and others.” He rested his glass against his forehead. “More of a danger to himself and others.”

“It sounds pretty terrible, honestly. And the whole thing is unprecedented. They’re out of options.”

“Except for me.”

“Except for you.”

Draco held out his glass again.

This time, Millie’s clink came, harder than he’d expected but all the more satisfying for the sound of crystal on crystal. “Cheers.”

* * *

Draco was both very, very over Scotch and a little bit under its thrall when he woke the next morning. A Hangover potion, a tall glass of water, and a cold shower did the trick. Trick enough for him to be dressed and on his way to the Floo while Millie still slept in the guest room.

Halfway through the living room he stopped, turned, and walked to the desk. He grabbed a piece of parchment and jotted a list of notes, affixing it to the mantel with a sticking charm.

At the top of the page, he’d written:

*Conditions*
Condition number seven had given Draco carte blanche to make his travel plans exclusively through the Minister’s office and without impediments or questions, in no small part because he didn’t want to face the noisy witches in the British Portkey office who, in the best case scenario, the one that didn’t involve name-calling and hexing, would, in the name of helpfulness but motivated entirely by jockeying for the best office gossip, ask why he didn’t want to arrive directly in his home, or travel to one of their offices and Floo through to the Manor.

The fact of the matter was—as he, being nothing if not self-aware, had quite accurately predicted whilst writing the list two weeks ago—that he wasn’t entirely ready to face the Manor. Certainly not to step out into the foyer and be in the middle of it all. If it had changed, he’d be forced to consider how long he had been away. If it hadn’t changed, he’d be immediately assailed by the sort of memories that were best confronted one at a time. It would still be better than going to the Ministry—condition number four had stipulated that he would never need to do that—but he at least needed to ease himself into it a bit.

So he found himself in the lane outside of the gates at 4pm exactly.

The gates were smaller than he remembered. Narrower, shorter. He extended a hand. The wards pricked against his skin but subsided once they recognised him, and in a matter of seconds it was just his palm against cold iron. He wrapped his fingers around a post and pushed. The hinges creaked, but they opened all the same.

He inhaled. Stepped past the posts, through the gates. Gravel crunched underfoot. It sounded strangely familiar. He knew that was preposterous; he’d walked on hundreds of gravel paths in dozens of estates and museums and gardens. There was no reason that the sound of French gravel should be any different to Wiltshire limestone.

No peacocks in sight, he noticed, and figured they must have made for the relative warmth of the stables. And the fountain had been drained already. Definitely a frost, then.

There was nothing left but to look at the house.

Just a house, Draco repeated to himself. “Just a house.”

It rose up before him, looming closer with each step, blocking the sun and taking up more and more of the sky as he approached.

“Just a house,” he repeated under his breath.

“Just a house,” again, as he climbed the broad stone stairs to the front door.

He raised a hand to the door, but hesitated. It was still his house; he didn’t need an elf’s invitation to enter his own foyer. He wavered, dropping his fist, then raised it again to grasp the iron ouroboros that served as a door knocker. He might not need an invitation, but there was nothing wrong with the hospitality that a proper entrance would bring. An elf to take his cloak, offer him a hot cup of tea, tell him how the unpacking was coming on. Before he could think thrice, he tightened his fingers and brought the ring down against the wood.
A telltale crack preceded the swing of the door. A leathery foot came into view, and the back of a wrinkled head.

“Master returns.” The elf, who had bowed so low her oversized nose brushed the stone, did not look up.

“Yes,” Draco drawled, reassured by what he found to be a fairly convincing imitation of nonchalance. “Master returns.” Unease still coiled in his chest, but the appearance of ease was deeply ingrained second nature. “You may stand...” he trailed off, failing to match this elf with a particular name.

The elf obeyed with no outward sign of dissatisfaction. “Prippa will take Master’s cloak if Master pleases. Master will find tea in the music room.”

“I didn’t request tea.”

Prippa seemed, at first, to ignore his comment, holding her tiny arms out for Draco’s cloak without remark, but he noticed a shakiness to her that was unusual for an elf. “Prippa has prepared tea for Master.”

Draco knew full well that an elf wouldn’t use resources from the house without permission. “All by yourself?”

Prippa squeezed the fabric of the cloak between her fingers. “Mistress Pansy is instructing Prippa to prepare tea for Master.”

Draco sized her up, hoping to get some measure of Pansy by proxy. “For a warm welcome?”

“Mistress Pansy and Prippa is wanting Master to feel welcome.”

“It is still, technically, my home,” Draco reminded her.

Prippa’s chin quavered. She looked down and noticed that she was squeezing the cloak, squeaked, and abruptly burst into hysterical tears. “Mistress is saying Master can take Prippa away from Mistress! Prippa does not want to leave her Mistress!”

“Prippa,” Draco tried to interrupt, to no avail.

“Prippa will make tea every day! And hang the cloaks and clean the floors! Prippa is a good elf!”

“Prippa!” Draco resorted to shouting, in part because he suspected there was no other way to be heard over her wailing.

It worked, at least in so far as she reduced her cries to muffled sobs.

“I have no intention of reassigning you. You’re perfectly welcome to keep on with Pansy.” He stepped back as she tried to rush forward and wrap herself around his legs. Keeping enough distance to look her sternly in the eye, he asked, “Why does Pansy think otherwise?”

“Mistress,” Prippa sobbed, “Mistress says Master is coming home and is making things change.
Mistress does not know if she will have to leave!"

Draco had sent her a letter to the contrary. He’d meant it to be reassuring. Apparently not, though he couldn’t be sure whether the melodrama came from the elf or from Pansy. “Why does she think that?”

“Prippa is telling Mistress about the witches and wizards coming in! And Mistress is seeing them too and is telling Prippa they do not like Mistress.”

Fair enough. But the Ministry types weren’t meant, and hadn’t wanted, to be seen. He sighed. “The music room, you said?”

Prippa nodded eagerly.

“Please see to my cloak. How far have you come with the rest of my things?”

“Galder is using the blue rooms for Master’s personal things and not young Master’s suite, but Prippa can be moving Master’s things if Master would prefer.”

“No, that’s correct. And my work?”

“Galder is clearing the scullery, Master, and all the elves is cleaning the library for Master.”

“Thank you. And—” Draco hesitated. “The rest?”

Prippa nodded seriously, her enormous eyes still threatening to run over. “Master’s guest is in the West Wing, sir. Lobsey is seeing to Master’s guest, even though he must walk many times a day, Master, sir.”

“Very well.” Draco let his eyes flicker shut for a moment. “I will visit in the morning. Are my rooms ready now?”

“Yes, Master.” Prippa tugged on one of her ears. “Excepting, Master’s tea…”


“Oh, yes, Master, sir, Mistress is very punctual, and very kind, Mistress is.”

“Punctual?” Draco attempted a smile. “Either she’s changed or you’re a very politic elf.”

Prippa stood up straight, her ears at attention, and gave a great snuffle to clear her nose. A moment later, the faint echo of stilettos made the change in demeanour wholly understandable. Prippa’s hysterics had been a welcome distraction, but when faced with the prospect of revisiting his past so literally Draco’s stomach dropped, and his toes curled in his brogues, seeking purchase for the sake of feeling grounded.

The footsteps grew louder and, with a snap, Prippa Vanished Draco’s cloak to parts unknown. Probably his wardrobe, Draco reminded himself. In the blue rooms. To which he could go at any time.

He imagined she’d enter the room shoe first, a heel in some outrageous colour followed by a shapely leg and some scandalous, fashionable robes. But she appeared all at once. Normally, as a human—a regular one, unembellished by imagination—would do. In plain black robes that fell to her knees and heels that, for all the racket, would’ve been more at home in a Hogwarts classroom than a nightclub. Her hair was just as he remembered it, a severe black bob that curled under her
jaw, but she looked older—ten years, at least—than the Pansy that had lived on in his memories.

She stopped barely halfway into the room and clasped her hands in front of her. “Hello.”

“Hello.” Draco nodded.

“Did Prippa tell you that tea is served in the music room?”

“Prippa did!” The elf interrupted, rushing across the room to bow deeply before her mistress.

Pansy looked down at her with a small smile. “Thank you, Prippa. I’ll call if I need you.”

The elf nodded, wide-eyed, and disappeared.

Draco swallowed, uncertain that his composure would match Pansy’s, and unsure of what to say.

She relieved him of the latter problem. “I was beginning to wondering whether the message had been waylaid or you’d got lost. It has been—how long, is it, since you’ve been here?”

“Ten years.” His voice was even. Unapologetic, even. And fittingly so, he reminded himself.

“I suppose a decade is long enough to forget the layout of one’s childhood home.” She waited for a response.

Half a dozen pretexts for passing on tea rose to Draco’s lips. None managed to advance beyond them.

“Come now, Greg is waiting.” Pansy turned on her heel and strode off without looking back.

Draco followed her into the dim main corridor that led down the East Wing, past a dozen dozing portraits, the doors to the ballroom, the drawing room, a trick staircase. She turned into the music room without giving him a second glance. He paused for a steadying breath before closing the distance and turning in after her.

It was a good choice of room. Draco didn’t know if Pansy remembered it had been one of his favourites, but there was good reason for that. It was a breath of fresh air, bright and open, the pianoforte set back in a sunny alcove, the ceilings so tall his lungs always felt larger when he walked in. That effect might’ve been curbed by the nagging feeling of impending doom, but the two seemed to balance out, leaving Draco with a great deal more equanimity than he’d imagined having in the face of these reunions.

He took in the mouldings, the curtains, the bust of Brutus Malfoy, right where they’d been on his last walk through the house, and just as pristine. Then he lowered his eyes to the sofas, set across from each other in the curve of the room’s bow windows.

Pansy had settled into the corner of one, looking at Draco expectantly, back straight and heels crossed primly at the ankles. Not a single strand of her hair seemed to have moved. On the opposite end of the sofa, Greg shifted his hulking frame, studying his thumbnails and hunching inwards as though to avoid entirely dwarfing the furniture.

Draco was frozen to his spot, just inside the doorway. The room was how he’d left it, but Pansy and Greg were not. Even as he stooped to meet the scale of the room, it was clear that Greg was squarer, taller and more muscular. It was a working man’s heft, the bulk of someone who used his body as a counterweight to things even larger than himself, not the doorway-blocking rotundness of a school bully. And Pansy… Draco couldn’t place the sense that she’d got smaller, sharper.
watchfulness she’d carried about her was different, the pointedness somehow less barbed. It wasn’t that he’d expected they would stay frozen in time, forever the seventeen year olds in need of refuge. Except, perhaps he had.

Pansy cleared her throat pointedly. “Regardless of how the French may do it, in England it is still customary to sit for tea.”

Draco blinked. “Of course.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Do excuse me, it’s been a long journey.”

“I’m afraid we wouldn’t know, would we, Gregory?”

Greg shook his head and picked at a nail. Draco wondered if he’d been wrong about her pointedness.

“Perhaps I should, then, beg your pardon on account of an exceptionally busy few weeks.”

“That is a considerably more familiar circumstance.”

Draco sank into the middle of the sofa across from them. “Greg.” He looked up, startled, and Draco caught his eye. “Good to see you.”

Greg looked at him a moment, though whether it was down to slowness or well-concealed scrutiny was another question altogether. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “You too.”

“Speaking of the last few weeks,” Pansy went on when neither Draco nor Greg managed anything else.

Draco looked away from Greg and towards her. “Yes?”

She lifted the teapot. “Tea?”

Draco inclined his head in affirmation.

“Milk, no sugar? Or has that changed too?”

“If you’ve something to say, Pansy, can we dispense with the passive aggressive tea preparation?”

She set down the teapot and lifted the milk, raising an eyebrow questioningly.

He shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“You really have changed.” She exchanged the milk for a saucer and teacup. “Your mother would be shocked. Unless the French have got to her, too?”

“It takes a fair sight more than milk to shock my mother.”

“Hmm.” Pansy replaced the saucer and poured the tea. “The French influence. Must be.”

“Pansy.”

She held out a cup and saucer with about as much emphasis as the china would permit.

Draco reached for a teaspoon, grasped the edge of the saucer, and leaned back against the sofa, stirring gently and resting an ankle on the opposite knee. “Why, and for what, exactly, are you trying to blame the French?”
“As I suspect you know, there have been hordes of Ministry officials trekking through the house all week. Aurors and Unspeakables, all of them. Millie says the East Wing is off limits, and Prippa has had some fairly alarming news about why that is. I can only hope this whole affair is a case of temporary insanity. Now,” she said, stirring her tea, “that can’t be down to your mother, or you’d have gone mad ages ago. The Unspeakables I’ve overheard talk about your technical abilities with a truly disturbing degree of reverence, so I doubt it’s your work. Process of elimination. It must be the French.”

“That would be the why. Is this accusation of temporary insanity the what?”

Greg shifted, curling his body towards an armrest and looking intently into the middle distance with his chin braced in a palm.

“Draco.” Pansy set her saucer down with enough insistence to rattle the whole set. “Even in your altered state, I can’t imagine it’s escaped your notice that Harry Potter has moved into your ancestral home.”

He paused. “It hasn’t. Though that particular detail was supposed to escape yours.”

“You know the Ministry has never paid enough attention to elves.”

“I didn’t know you did.”

She retrieved her saucer and looked down into her tea. “Ten years alone with them is rather a strong incentive.”

A heavy silence sat between them until Draco cleared his throat. “I’m sorry if the rest has been disruptive. I wrote a letter. My secretary was supposed to send you an owl as soon as it was decided and the Minister’s office had strict instructions to consult with you before finalising the plan for… well, for my workspace, officially, but I suppose you know it’s Potter’s accommodations, too.”

Pansy shook her head and gave an incredulous laugh. “Well that’s all right, then.”

“Pansy.” Draco, feeling far more wrong-footed than he thought he ought to, set his saucer on the edge of the table. “I can’t imagine it’s escaped your notice that this is still, as you’ve said, my ancestral home.”

Something scared flashed across Pansy’s features before they settled into a tight smile. “You made a promise.”

“Which I have kept, and intend to uphold.”

“With a few minor, trifling, inconsequential changes?”

“Which are part of a temporary disruption, and which do not interfere with your living arrangements.”

“For now. What else is going to change?”

Draco knit his brow. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She shook her head. “Besides which, what if it is disruptive? Did it never occur to you—it is all such a distant memory to you that you’ve completely forgotten—that the Ministry might not be entirely keen on respecting the wishes of a couple of ne’er do well former junior Death Eaters?”
That there might be things it’s unwise to tell the Ministry?”

“The Minister’s Office was required to consult you to ensure minimal disruption. In this case that means Millie, and Merlin knows you’ve never had a problem holding back with her.”

“I haven’t, and she understands that some things are best kept close to the chest.”

Draco’s concern was mounting. “What sorts of things?”

“You’ve been gone a long time, Draco.”

“What sorts of things, Pansy, are you doing that you can’t tell the Ministry about?”

Pansy’s mouth was half-open before Greg let out a long, heavy sigh. “‘S not illegal.”

They both turned to stare at him.

He sighed again and turned back to face them, crossing thick arms across his chest. He cast Pansy an apologetic shrug. “’S not.”

“Gregory,” she warned.

“Pans writes books.”

“Books?” Draco repeated.

“Enough, Gregory.”

“Yeah.” He ignored her. “Romance ones.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and leaned forward.

Pansy shook her head and buried her face in her hands. “Salazar’s sake,” she muttered. Then, looking up at Greg, “We call things ‘secrets’ for a reason, you know.”

“Better than him thinking you’re up to a potions ring or something.”

“Romance novels?” Draco interrupted.

“Big ones,” Greg confirmed. “You know, the Daisy Green ones. Get wrote up in the *Prophet* all the time.”

Draco looked between them in open shock. “You’re Daisy Green?”

With an exasperated sigh, Pansy looked up, glaring daggers at Greg. “I am Pansy Parkinson. But no one will buy a novel by Pansy Parkinson, will they? Daisy Green was Blaise’s idea.”

“Her agent,” Goyle added.

Draco whistled. “Smart man. That new one was at the top of *Le Voyant’s* bestseller list last summer.”

“Yes, well, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to hear that more people are in on it.”

“Pansy,” Draco said, relaxing back into the settee, “I don’t mean to be indelicate, but if you’re making the sort of money Daisy Green must be making, and this change in living arrangements is so untenable, surely there are other options available to you.”
“Oh, of course,” Pansy gushed, with the sort of saccharine overenthusiasm that Draco had long
known to take as a warning sign. “No one will give it a second thought if I, the recluse who once
tried to hand Harry Potter to the Dark Lord, show up out of nowhere after a decade with enough
cash to buy a few castles. And I’m sure they’ll be lining up to have me in the neighbourhood.”

“Blaise says she shouldn’t spend it in public,” Greg added. “Might raise questions.”

“Ah.” Draco reached for his saucer and leaned back again. “Well.” He took a long sip of tea.
“Again, I don’t mean to be indelicate, and I promise it doesn’t really cause temporary insanity—
might I suggest France? Or Switzerland? Italy? There are options abroad.”

Pansy flushed, and he could tell her voice was carefully controlled. “England is my home. I won’t
let them drive me out.”

Draco wasn’t entirely sure whether the comment was directed at him, but either way he had the
impression that none of the potential replies that came to mind would be met well.

To his surprise, Pansy offered him an out. “Besides which, I’m still not convinced about your so-
called sanity.”

“What was that about the reverence of dozens of muddy Ministry officials?”

“They’d revere a Crup if they thought it might help their vaunted saviour.” She winced, barely, but
visibly, and Draco wondered if it hadn’t come out harsher than she’d intended.

He tried for relative levity. “I appreciate your vote of confidence.”

“Oh, please.” She seemed to be struggling for sarcasm, though not quite hitting the mark. “You’ve
always been perfectly confident in your own brilliance.”

“And in yours, which is one of several reasons I made this promise in the first place.”

“And here I’d thought it was pity. Maybe regret on a generous day. Or the promise of some future
returns.”

Greg returned his full attention to his thumbnails, a flush rising on his neck.

Draco, trying to proceed with caution, spoke slowly. “You had nowhere to go after the trials. No
money, no opportunities. I had a Manor house with a full staff that was about to sit unused for
years on end, maybe forever. And you had, both of you, been friends. Pansy, I know we never
meant to make anything of it, but you and I were supposed to be betrothed, even. And Greg, you
were always there for me. Always. You were friends who risked your lives, or close enough, to try
to end that bloody war one way or another.” Angry momentum began to build in Draco’s chest, and
he struggled to stay calm in the face of it. “I don’t think wanting to ensure that you didn’t lose your
lives or good health in the aftermath was pity. I’d have called it friendship at the time. Still would,
even after a decade passed with nary a word from either of you, but perhaps that’s the French
influence as well. All those emotions, you know.”

Pansy was struggling too. “Is it friendship, then, to come along a decade later and upend that with
no warning? We have lives, you know, such as they are. Routines.”

“Routines that require use of the West Wing for things Millie couldn’t tell the Ministry about?”

“You think they’d care about ensuring my unhindered access to the library when it would put me
anywhere near their golden boy?”
“Potter’s not in the library.”

“Have you felt the void yet?”

“I’ve felt others, but someone required my undivided attention immediately upon arrival. I haven’t exactly had a chance to take the tour.”

“It’s awful. Like being suffocated. We can’t even walk past it.”

Goyle nodded his agreement at a cuticle. “Like being buried or summat.”

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can’t write anywhere else?”

“I can’t research anywhere else.”

“Research? For romance novels?”

“They have settings,” Pansy retorted. “Daisy Green would never get a detail wrong.”

“Right.” Draco sighed and crossed his arms. “Send the elves. I don’t know what’s got Prippa so enamoured with you, but I’m sure she’ll do it.”

“They’re scared to use their magic anywhere near the void, and that includes the hallway to the library. They walk there, no lightening charms, none of it. Asking her to do that with no help, sometimes several times a day, on top of her other duties?”

Draco sighed. “Make me a list when you need things. I’ll do it.”

Pansy looked at him, considering.

“Greg? Do you need anything from that side of the house?”

“No, thanks.” Greg shook his head.

“Not secretly writing spy novels alongside Pansy?”

He shook his head again.

“He’s a mover,” Pansy interjected.

“Pardon?”

“A mover,” she repeated. “A Muggle mover. When they get a new house he goes and moves their things from one to the other.”

“A mover?”

Greg shrugged. “’S nice, you know. Being strong and having it help someone.”

“Yes,” Draco agreed. “I can see how that would be the case.”

Greg shrugged again.

“A novelist and a mover. Will wonders never cease.” He shook his head and felt a wave of fatigue approaching.

“Since you’re intent on playing host to Harry Potter, I’d say not.”
“Fair enough.” Draco lifted his cup, drained it slowly, and set it down again. “Did you order tea without biscuits.”

“Sugar distracts you.”

“I’m 28.”

“Your point?” Pansy raised an eyebrow. On the other end of the sofa, Goyle smiled down at his hands.

“Then I suppose I’ll have to ask you to excuse me. I suspect the elves will be considerably more persuadable.”

“On your own head be it.”

Draco felt the unexpected beginning of a smile and moved to stand.

“Draco.”

He paused, still perched on the edge of the sofa.

“Not a word about any of this, please. The novels, the money, the library. They may be willing to make exceptions for you, world-renowned whatever it is you are, but for us—for me—the questions wouldn’t be pleasant.”

“No?”

“No,” Pansy insisted, and Greg’s sombre nod was just as telling.

“All right.” Draco hesitated. “What do they think you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Draco repeated.

“Nothing,” Pansy agreed. “We live here by your good graces, as, respectively, frivolous and stupid as ever, watching the grass grow and the roses bloom.”

“Interesting choice of cover.”

“Yes, well, they’ll believe it, you see.” Pansy replaced her frown with a thin smile. “And it got us the side of the house with the conservatory and the rose garden.”

“Right.” Draco ran a hand through his hair. “Not a word, then.”

She looked him in the eye, a certain amount of doubt clearly present, but she didn’t say anything.

“I really would like to see about those biscuits,” Draco said, “if you’ll excuse me.”

Pansy nodded and, after glancing over at her, Greg followed suit, though neither stood to see him out.

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Draco’s search for biscuits was quickly superseded by a search for bed. It was barely six o’clock in Paris. Usually he’d still be in his lab or his office or a meeting, not wandering the halls with the
agitated listlessness of an overtired child.

And yet.

The void was under his childhood bedroom. He’d become experienced enough in the course of his work to tolerate the lack of magic, but the thought of being deprived of magic unexpectedly if something went wrong, of waking in the middle of the night and feeling its absence, was not exactly appealing.

Nor would he have particularly wanted to return to his old room anyway.

He’d always liked the blue rooms, though. Had thought them adult, stately without being as stuffy as some of the others. And now, more like his own flat; blues, whites, oak and mahogany. Nothing that looked as though it ever could’ve belonged in the Slytherin common room.

The elves had hung his wardrobe, but he found himself more than half leaning on the door when he checked.

He perched on the edge of the bed. There was a tightness in his lower back and an ache at his temples, and he gave himself permission to lie down.
Draco moaned and rolled over to reach for his water. Instead of wrapping around cool glass, his hand collided with the sharp edge of an unfamiliar nightstand.

The previous day came back to him in a flash and he sat up stock straight, eyes flaring open, suddenly on the edge of hyperventilating.

He took the measure of the room. The blue rooms, yes, as he’d asked for. He had fallen asleep on top of the duvet, but his head was on a pillow and a light blanket covered his bottom half; the elves’ work, no doubt. Still in his clothes, but his shoes were gone. Curtains drawn, the weak beginnings of daylight peeking in at the edges. He let his eyes fall shut and took a steadying breath. He couldn’t have missed breakfast yet. Should even have time to review his notes. The thought did far more for him than any amount of deep breathing.

After a call to Galder, his morning routine moved rather more quickly than usual. The Manor’s elves had been the envy of every British landholding wizard, and for good reason. He’d forgotten.

He was at the round table in the conservatory, at Galder’s direction, by ten to eight, so many notes spread before him that the files dripped off the edges of the tabletop. Condition three had been a requisitioning of Potter’s complete medical records, nothing withheld or classified, and he’d read them twice, end to end, before setting foot on English soil.

His basic conclusion was clear: the Ministry’s plan had been, in his professional opinion, idiotic.

The details were lacking the same clarity.

Where Granger’s expertise was with wands, his was with magic and the body. His dissertation had been an exploration of magically sensitive implants as a tool for biomagical stabilisation in ill wizards. Or, as he’d come close to describing it in more than one odious grant application, sticking wand wood in sick wizards. But that, as the rather remarkable trajectory of his career would attest, worked. Inserting fortified slivers matching a wizard’s wand—a centimetre of willow or oak wrapped in part of a Veela hair or the single barb of a phoenix feather—along the proximal phalanx of the wand hand reduced the incidence of accidental magic by 98% in wizards with serious chronic illnesses affecting their magical abilities. It was so successful he’d been courted by, and turned down, dozens of corporations hoping it would be the key to popularising wandless magic.

In short, it worked. No matter the wand wood or the core, no matter the sourcing, no matter the illness. It worked.

Potter always did have to be the exception. Or Granger always did have to let her overconfidence get the best of her sense. Or maybe, he conceded whilst, very briefly, feeling more charitable, the Elder Wand was too particular to work with an implant. Or there was something else at play that had been mysteriously excluded from the official records even in their unexpurgated form.

Thus, a friendly chat over breakfast. “Chat” being the operative word.

Galder appeared just as the clock on the sidebar chimed eight, announcing “Mistresses Bulstrode and Granger, sir.”

Draco stood, nodded, and gestured for them to sit.
Millie, quite at ease, took the seat to his right. Granger, with noticeable stiffness, perched on the edge of the seat across from him, a frond from a hanging fern almost tangling in her hair.

“Will we be eating Potter’s records?” Millie leaned back and crossed her legs. “Or will you be clearing the table?”

Draco gave a wry laugh. “All other attempts to digest them have left me with more questions than answers. Perhaps we ought to try it.”

“Fine, but I take my parchment with raspberry jam.”

“Would you settle for marmalade if we had crumpets instead?”

“Don’t hoard your elf-made raspberry jam, darling. You’ve got plenty, and it’s unbecoming.”

“That’s very little incentive to give you crumpets, you realise.”

“I’ll take my chances. Though given what Hermione had to go through to collect all this, you might want to keep the butter knives on this end of the table.”

Granger shot her a dark look. Still, Millie’s comment did seem to put her more at ease.

“Fine then.” With a flick of his wand, Draco pulled the paperwork into a tidy pile. He tapped his wand against the edge of the table. Three place settings and a heaping plate of breakfast pastries appeared. “Granger, can we trust you with the cutlery?”

“I do have a wand, you know.”

“Yes, but if my face remembers correctly you’ve also got a soft spot for brute force.”

She flushed, but pressed her lips together firmly and forged onwards. “If you think I’ve gone to so much trouble to bring you back to England in order to settle old scores with flatware, you’re not as bright as advertised.”

“Ah, but I am as bright as advertised.”

“Then perhaps we can review your recommended treatment plan instead of making jokes about the silver.”

“We could, yes,” Draco agreed.

Millie reached for a scone and the jam.

“We could, but?” Granger prompted.

“We could, but frankly the details of the case don’t make enough sense for me to make an unqualified recommendation.”

“Where is the lack of clarity?”

“Much like the Doxy, it’s in the details.”

“We’ve given you all of our records.”

“Then it’s a question of what you left out of the records.”
“The records meet every Ministry standard.”

“Do they train you in evasion, or did you pick that up on your own?”

“You have the date of and notes from every medical appointment, every treatment plan we considered, the names of his doctors, surgical records, multiple accounts of the beginning and progression of the problem—”

“Yes,” Draco interrupted. “All of that is included. But other things should have been as well.”

“Like what, then?”

“The implant is never described. Neither its makeup nor its location. It should be fortified elder wood wrapped in Thestral hair. Is that correct?”

Granger paused, sharing a quick glance with Millie and then turning back to Draco. “It is elder wood and Thestral hair, yes.”

“Implanted alongside the proximal phalanges of Potter’s—he holds his wand with his right hand, is that correct?”

“He does.”

“Right.” Draco paused and leaned back in his seat. “Yet you’ve still managed not to answer the question.”

“Hermione.” Millie gave her a look that Draco couldn’t quite place.

“There were reasons to ask you to make an Unbreakable Vow, you know.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “I know about the Elder Wand. I’ve been master of the Elder Wand. I understand the importance of not advertising the Elder Wand’s whereabouts. And if we’re starting with Unbreakable Vows again, I’ll be perfectly happy to take my lunch in Paris.”

Millie spoke before Granger had a chance. “There’s no need for that.”

“Fine, then.” Draco nodded at her. “I do need to know more about the implant, however. I also need to know where the Elder Wand is being stored. To stabilise casting the implants work in a sort of collaboration with the caster’s wand, as you well know, so, particularly given the Wand’s record of misbehaviour, I imagine he must have it with him?”

“He does,” Granger agreed.

“In a manner of speaking,” Millie added.

“A manner of speaking?”

“It’s not in his hand,” Granger began.

“Wouldn’t fit,” Millie added.

“Wouldn’t fit?” Draco repeated. “The Wand wouldn’t fit, or the implant?” He didn’t remember Potter’s hands as particularly small, nor were the implants particularly large.

“Its not exactly…” Granger trailed off. “It’s… bigger than one of your implants.”
Draco blinked slowly. His stomach twisted as the pieces began to fall into place. “Are you telling me? Merlin. It’s not an implant, is it?”

“It is, technically speaking,” Granger said. “As it’s implanted in his body.”

Draco leaned back, incredulous. “It’s the whole bloody Wand, isn’t it? You put the entire sodding Wand in Harry Potter.”

Granger nodded once, tightly.

“Where?” Draco shook his head. “No. Tell me you didn’t put it in his sternum, did you? Or his spine?”

“No!” Granger paled. “Our teams do have some understanding of anatomy, for Merlin’s sake. The goal is not to keep him from being able to move.”

“Physical anatomy. You’re talking physical anatomy as though it exists in a vacuum! What about magical anatomy? Do you know what it would do to put that next to his spine? Align the Elder Wand with a central passage for transmission of magical impulses?”

“Well we didn’t, did we?” Granger defended. “It’s external to the right femoral shaft.”

“Implanted alongside, or in?”

“Alongside, under the iliotibial band.”

“How?”

“A series of Muggle femoral locking plates, arranged around the knots of the Wand and permanently charmed with micro-scale wizard space so there wouldn’t be any visible ridge or other sign of alteration if he were ever captured.”

“And why? Why there?”

“Er.” Momentary bashfulness flashed across Granger’s features. “It was long enough.”

“Oh.” Draco threw up his hands. “Well then. If it was long enough.”

“We considered many factors in consultation with our medical team, including future mobility, and concluded it was the best site after a good deal of research and planning.”

“Which, clearly, was all that was needed, as it’s turned out brilliantly.”

“There’s no need for that, Dr Malfoy. Obviously, we are well aware that the results have been less than ideal.”

“And you’ve called me in to rectify that without sharing the most basic information. How do you expect me to do my job, Granger, if you withhold key details?”

“Fine. Does it change your recommended treatment protocol?”

“Does it change—?” He spluttered. “Does it change the treatment protocol to know that you’ve gone and stuck the entire Elder Wand in Harry Potter’s thigh? This is completely uncharted territory, and you’ve gone ahead and tried to chart it with the most dangerous wand in existence. Yes, it changes my recommended treatment protocol.”
“Fine.” Granger was clearly struggling to ignore his frustration. “How so?”

“In every conceivable way.”


“Oh?” Draco sat back in his chair, hands folded on his stomach. “Sticking the Elder Wand inside of someone might cause a problem? I’m shocked, thoroughly shocked, to hear that that.”

“Draco,” Millie warned. “Must you?”

“Of course not,” he retorted, “but it does soothe the nerves.”

Millie sighed and leaned forward. “Then perhaps I’d better do this part as it is, technically speaking, more my department than Hermione’s.”

“Political interference on top of medical mismanagement? And it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“There was no mismanagement,” Granger bit out. “We worked within the constraints of this case to the best of our ability and, as you are clearly aware, the Elder Wand is a significant complicating factor.”

“There are politics, however,” Millie interjected before Draco could respond. “Rather a lot of them, actually.”

“Funny how you didn’t mention any of this until after I upended my entire life.”

“The Wizengamot’s schedule operates independently of the Minister’s office. We didn’t know about it at the time.”

Draco gave a heavy sigh. “About what?”

“There’s a bill proposed, meant to be an anti-discrimination act. It stalled after a first reading and we didn’t think it would amount to anything, but it’s picked up steam.”

“And?” Draco asked impatiently. “Sounds like the sort of thing your boss would love.”

“If it did what it says it does, maybe. Trouble is, the way it’s written, it requires registration of blood status.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and let out a low whistle.

“Yes, exactly. Alistair Flint’s sponsoring. Stayed far enough out of the war to get away with that sort of thing, but that doesn’t mean he’s unattached to the idea of blood status. Still a Flint, you know.” Millie quirked her mouth and shrugged. “He’s made the bill long enough that half the Wizengamot can’t stay awake for the entire reading, and he’s made it sound good enough – the Status, Ancestry, and Family Equality Act – that most won’t bother. Meanwhile, he’s set himself up to argue that the Ministry can’t protect Muggle-borns and half-bloods unless we know who they are. Says it’s too easy for people to plead ignorance even when they know full well that they’re refusing to hiring a Muggle-born, or what have you. So the only way to protect them is to require everyone to register their blood status, at the first sign of magic for purebloods and half-bloods raised in the wizarding world and at Hogwarts for everyone else. As you might imagine, the Minister is rather concerned about how such a law might be abused.”

Draco shook his head slowly. “I might, yes. Merlin. But what does this have to do with the
monumental task Granger’s just laid out for me?”

“Potter is an influential figure. He’s good with the Wizengamot. Persuasive. They’ll stay awake through his speech even if not through the reading and, frankly, a good number of them will do whatever he says. The MLE has said that his absence is the result of an ongoing mission to find and capture the remaining members of the Diagon Alley Yakuza. There aren’t any—all moved on to the whisky business. But if he’s not back—well, ‘back’—in time to speak at the hearing…” Millie trailed off, shrugging at Draco.

“You really mean to tell me there’s support for this.”

“Everyone is very eager to look progressive.”

“And nothing says ‘progressive’ like a blood-registration act sponsored by a Flint,” Draco drawled. From the corner of his eye Draco thought he saw a tiny smile on Granger’s face, and reminded himself that he was quite resolved to dislike her.

Millie threw up her hands and reclined. “Not everyone shared a house with a Flint. They’ve come out looking squeaky clean, and it’s a clever way to go about it. Your father couldn’t have thought of better.”

“My father didn’t specialise in bright ideas, push come to shove.”

“Yes, well. Point is, we’re on a timeline.”

“When is this hearing?”

“It’s passed through into the Report Stage. They haven’t scheduled the vote yet but, given Flint’s acumen and the level of public support, three weeks?”


“Yes.”

“There’s also—” Granger started and abruptly stopped again.

“Oh no, no. Out with it.”

“There’s also the charity balls. At the holiday season. A number of them rely on him rather heavily for ticket sales. It’s important to him that he should be able to go.”

“Also in three weeks?”

“They’ll start sooner, but most of them are after that, yes.”

“Three weeks to give you one magically stable Harry Potter with the Elder Wand stuck in his leg, or there’ll be Muggle-born genocide and starving orphans?”

“Well,” Granger began.

“And Crups,” Millie interrupted. “He’s got quite a soft spot for the animal charities. Something about seeing the big dogs running around? And there’s werewolf integration, Quidditch for underprivileged wizarding children, the Severus Snape Memorial Fund for potions research, the St. Mungo’s Benefactor’s Ball—”

“He’s invested in quite a few important causes,” Granger interrupted.
“Clearly,” Draco mused. “And he’s got the Elder Wand attached to his femur.”

Granger toyed with her napkin, still folded on her untouched plate. “We were rather hoping those things wouldn’t end up at cross-purposes.”

“There’s an article in the dossier about a trip to Diagon Alley wherein he blew up a case at Fortescue’s so spectacularly it ended in a dozen new flavours. The piece said he’d spotted a wanted suspect in line. Would I be correct in guessing that all of that was an early result of the implant? And you think such a result is not at cross-purposes with public appearances? Is that all correct?”

She grimaced. “Not exactly.”

“No? Details not all lining up?”

“He—” She sighed. “He blew out the shop front and started a fire in the back room.”

“Ah, right,” Draco mused. “Of course. How could I have forgotten?”

“I’m rather beginning to suspect you didn’t,” Granger muttered.

“No, I didn’t. Did you?”

“Certainly not.” She looked up, indignant.

“Then perhaps his wellbeing might be a higher-order priority than fundraising?”

“Fundraising is part of his wellbeing, Doctor Malfoy,” she spat. “You may be an expert in your field, but you aren’t his friend.”

“Friendship, is it? Everyone here seems to have the most interesting definitions of that word.” He pushed his plate away. “Seeing as he and I are, apparently, total strangers, perhaps introductions are in order?”

* * *

Passing into the void was as uncomfortable as Draco remembered, though he took to it far more easily than either Granger or Millie. St. Mungo’s didn’t allow them, but Sainte Jeanne d’Arc certainly did. Encouraged them, even, with a protected ward set aside for the magically unstable patients Draco worked with. It kept the staff and patients safer and let them use recreational space and stay in contact with family and friends, and Draco had become expert in creating the series of runes that would turn walls and doorways into magical barriers. After years of passing through them, it was more like having a foot fall asleep than any of that melodramatic business of suffocation and drowning. Though Millie, in particular, looked like she might beg to differ.

Draco had given Potter a bit of a wider berth than would usually be reserved for a single patient: a suite of rooms encompassing a sitting room, exam room, and private bedroom and en suite. He’d had the hallway outside included too. Better safe than sorry, and it gave visitors a chance to get their blanching and protestations over with outside of the patient’s view. And indeed, Millie looked less like a ghost and Granger less like she was about to give in to seasickness by the time they reached the door of the sitting room.

It took Draco a moment to spot Potter. In part because the room was, at Draco’s command, one of the larger ones. Twenty-foot ceilings, a beautiful, cream-coloured 30-foot Aubusson set over the parquet, floor to ceiling French windows draped in gold velvet, and an exit to the terrace gardens, though those were outside of the void. It was all meant to give Potter the illusion of sunlight and a
bit of space to move whilst in confinement. But it wasn’t just the size of the room; Draco saw Granger searching the room for him, too.

Potter was sitting, quite unassumingly, in a yellow bergère, with a book closed neatly in his lap, his index finger still marking his place. Between a white Aran jumper and not-quite-brown Muggle trousers, he was practically camouflaged into the room. He didn’t move until Granger approached him, her arms out and voice laden with worry, asking how he was, how he was feeling, what he needed. Potter shook his head, smiled, stood, and folded her into a hug, and Draco thought he could lip-read a few mumbled reassurances. At least, the general idea was clear.

Draco was still watching them when Potter let Granger go and turned to him, with a cordial smile that Draco was too startled to match.

“Thank you for seeing me, Dr Malfoy, and for your exceptional hospitality.”

“Yes, well.” Draco tried not to be left wrong-footed by Potter’s unexpectedly friendly greeting. “It’s more a matter of convenience, really.”

Potter laughed amiably. “Whatever the reason, please accept my gratitude.”

“Right.” Draco squinted at him. “How are you feeling today?”

“Well, thank you. And yourself?”

“That was a medical question, not a pleasantry.”

“Ah.” His smile fell off. “I’m sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“Don’t apologise, just answer the question.”

“I’m fine.”

Draco raised an eyebrow.

“Genuinely,” he added earnestly. “I’ve slept quite well. Your elves—” he gave Granger an apologetic look before continuing “—make an excellent breakfast. I’m feeling ready to get back in the field, really. But safety first, of course.”

“Yes, quite,” Draco said, trying to take him in all at once. “I’ve had the billiards room refitted for use as an examination space. I’d like to do a full physical, hear a bit more about your experience before and after the implant, perhaps conduct a few rudimentary tests. All inside the void for now.”

“Of course. Whatever you advise.”

“Right.”

“Is it just through there?” Potter smiled kindly, and a bit apologetically. “I’m afraid I did a bit of exploring when I first arrived.”

“It is, yes.”

“After you.” Potter waited patiently, his hands folded in front of him.

Draco squinted at Potter, then made for the room, with Potter, and Granger, and Millie on his heels.
The space was too big to be properly crowded, even with the full complement, and Draco had certainly conducted exams with observers before. If something about it rubbed him the wrong way, he put it down to the void.

The results of Potter’s physical were the picture of normality. Average blood pressure and heart rate, no fluid on the abdomen, no disparity between the strength or reflexes on his left and right sides, nothing unusual in the tongue, throat, ears, or eyes. No reports of soreness or tenderness. Well-developed musculature to support the spine, and excellent posture. No scarring at the surgical site; as Granger’s description had suggested, they’d concealed any sign of the Wand or its insertion. There was scarring on the sternum and a few other points on the arms and legs and, of course, on his forehead, but all had healed well and were consistent with his reported medical history. Potter was (though Draco found himself grudgingly loathe to put it in as many words) above average in every indicator of physical health.

He was also an exceptionally compliant patient. No evidence of the modesty that often cropped up during an examination, especially an initial exam, and especially with observers present. Potter obeyed every direction courteously and quickly.

His answers to Draco’s questions were just as good-natured.

“Did you experience any discomfort at the implant site?”

“Initially, when I woke up after the surgery, but—” he smiled at Granger, who was standing behind Draco “—the Unspeakables’ med team did a great job with pain management.”

“When did you notice your magic behaving abnormally?”

“It’s hard to say exactly, since the Wand had been acting up before the surgery.”

“But had your casting been reliable pre-implant?”

“More or less. Like I said, it’s hard to know what was the Wand.”

“More or less?” Draco turned to level Granger with a glare before bringing his attention back to Potter. “So there were magical outbursts before the surgery as well?”

Granger spoke before Potter had the chance. “Harry’s statistics for accuracy, reliability, and strength of casting are in the Auror Department’s top 1%.”

“Then whence ‘more or less’?”

“Just the vase.” Potter gave Granger a quelling look. “Just trying to be thorough, that’s all. Ron and Seamus and I were out drinking and got it in our heads to drop in on Hermione, see if we could convince her to join us—her and Millie, they were going over some report or other—and I broke a vase. Not even sure it was magic and not a bit of drunken clumsiness.”

“Went awfully far for a vase that just fell over,” Millie muttered.

Draco’s head snapped up. “Pardon?”

“It was on a high shelf,” Granger insisted.

“Oh?”

Granger frowned.
Millie shrugged. “Can’t say I’ve ever been drunkenly clumsy with something at eye level.”

“We didn’t worry about it at the time,” Potter interrupted. “Really, just trying to be as thorough as possible. Making sure your records are complete. You know how it goes, with paperwork.”

“Yes, I do.” Draco looked back to Potter. “I’m sure you do as well. Have you reviewed the accounts provided by the Department of Mysteries?”

“Yes.”

“Is anything inconsistent with your experience or missing from the records?”

“No.”

“Very well.” Draco pointed across the room. “Do you know how to use a Muggle treadmill?”

“Yes.”

“Your resting vitals are fine, but before we proceed further I need to know how your body, the purely physical systems, respond to activity. Please change into your training kit, set it to at least a moderate pace and walk or run, as you prefer, for an hour. I’ll return to check on you then.” He waited for Potter to nod his understanding. “Granger, Millie?”

He didn’t look back, but heard their footsteps follow him down the hall, past the end of the void, and into the library.

Draco didn’t slow down past the fireplace or the staircases. Not at Granger’s intake of breath or the slowing of her footsteps. Not until he was at the head of the long Mahogany table in the alcove under the balcony. He waited, in total silence, for Granger and Millie to take seats, Millie to his right and Granger beside her.

When he spoke, it was with the threat of imminent explosion. “If there are any more surprises, any more bits of information that you have seen fit to leave out, and you do not tell me what they are in the next five minutes, I will leave you, and this project, and this country, the instant—the very second—I find out.”

Granger shot Millie a worried look and opened her mouth to speak.

Draco beat her to it. “And let me be perfectly, perfectly clear. Any surprises. Any information. Not just the facts and figures of Potter’s medical records. Fundraisers, important bills, political context, interpersonal relationships. All of it.”

“Well,” Granger began. “There’s the bill, the SAFE Act–Status, Ancestry, and Family Equality?” She clarified. “The fundraisers. The cover story about the Yakuza. More generally, Harry is a very influential figure. The Minister prefers not to have him away on missions for too long even when there’s genuine need for his skill in the field. There is considerable internal pressure from the Minister’s Office to resolve this as quickly as possible. And on the Minister’s Office, from the MLE. There is also considerable interest in the results and their possible applications from the Department of Mysteries.”

“And?”

“And what?” Granger looked pained.

“His life, his job. This possible accidental magic. Everything.”
“He lives alone in a house he inherited. Wizarding, but in a Muggle neighbourhood. He spends time with friends from school, the Weasley family, and his godson. He has collegial relationships in the Auror department and enjoys lunches and pub nights with co-workers. He partners most frequently with Seamus, who prefers to stay close to London. But he and Ron like the long-term undercover work best, and they’ll do that as often as they’re able. He likes Quidditch but doesn’t have time to play very often. Hasn’t had a pet since the war. We’ve tried to convince him to get a new owl, but he won’t. Seemed more receptive to a cat or a Crup, but his hours aren’t really conducive to it. He cooks sometimes...” Granger trailed off, looking a bit at a loss for how to continue.

“No romantic life?”

“No at the moment. He was with Ginny Weasley for two years after she left Hogwarts. They split halfway through her first season with the Harpies on account of the distance. He saw Katie Bell for a few months the year after, then nothing for a while, then Maryam Safar, in Games and Sports, for a little over a year. It’s been two years since then, I think? Again, his work isn’t really conducive to it, and he won’t cut back, especially on the undercover work.”

“Hobbies? Club memberships?”

“See that you do. A complete one, detailing the extent of his involvement with each. And the magical flare-up he mentioned?”

“We really do think it was simple clumsiness. No one thought twice of it at the time.”

“And yet Millie, who saw it, suggests otherwise. Mill?”

Millie leaned back and crossed her arms over her ribs. “I was picking up files for the Minister’s morning briefing, stayed for a glass of wine, and then those three showed up. Potter was, granted, in the vicinity of the shelf, but there was glass all over the place. Much closer to an explosion than a fall.”

“Maybe it bounced,” Granger argued. “Or some of it got kicked.”

Millie shrugged. “Doubtful.”

“But,” Draco interjected, “can you say conclusively, one way or the other?”

“No,” Millie conceded. “But I don’t think he was wrong to mention it.”

“Fine. Any other incidents of unexplained magical outbursts from, near, in, related to him, in any way?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Granger.”

“He goes to a lot of big family events with children present. Of course there have been incidents of accidental magic near him, but it’s the children, and nothing out of the ordinary.”

Draco looked at her sceptically. “Anything else—anything at all, no matter how trivial it may seem, or how much you may not want to tell me—that I might want to know?”
Millie hummed. “I can’t think of anything Hermione hasn’t already covered. Highest priority, Minister’s office needs it resolved as soon as possible, internal politics, all of that. Oh,” she sat up, “the charity galas—the Minister cares about those too. Takes a strain off the budgeting process to have so much private revenue, and if that decreases, you can imagine the rest.”

Draco nodded, crossed his arms, and stared at Granger, still dissatisfied with her answers. “And, aside from the facts and politics?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Potter,” he said. “He’s… docile. Flat.” He snorted. “Uncharacteristically polite.”

Granger furrowed her brow and tilted her head, as if trying to physically turn over the question enough to make it comprehensible. It didn’t seem to work. She opened her mouth, closed it again, and her frown deepened.

“Granger. Did you ever think you’d see the day when Potter would do everything I say with nary a comment?”

“That’s a problem for you?” She asked, confused.

“It’s a very stark, very noticeable, as yet inexplicable contrast for me,” he answered.

“Maybe he’s grown up?” Granger offered. “He’s got a decade at the Ministry behind him. It’s not like we’re schoolchildren any more.” Her brow cleared, as if she was relieved by the neatness of the answer. “Besides which, you’re his doctor.” Her voice took on a hint of an accusatory note. “I wouldn’t think his willingness to have a professional relationship would be so off-putting.”

“Is that what it is?” Draco raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure what else you mean to suggest.”

“Nor I, which is why I was asking. You must admit it’s a significant change.”

“If you haven’t seen him since he was 18, maybe.”

Draco frowned. He wasn’t especially convinced by her answer, but he was convinced that he’d exhausted the usefulness of the particular line of questioning. “Fine then. I will check on Potter shortly. Tomorrow, I will take him out of the void—”

Granger moved to interrupt him, and he held up a hand to stop her.

“I will take him out of the void, repeatedly and, depending on the results, for increasing periods of time. I see that the Unspeakables haven’t—which is itself far less than ideal for his long-term prospects—but, more immediately, I can’t find a solution if I can’t observe the problem.”

Granger frowned and sat back, resigned. “Fine. We’ll come with you now. When should we meet you tomorrow?”

“You shouldn’t. Nor should you come with me now. I need autonomy and privacy to work. You’ll find that on the list of conditions you agreed to.”

“I have overseen Harry’s care from the very beginning.”

“And I will brief you on his progress as I see fit.”
“As you see fit?” An unmistakable note of panic tinged Granger’s voice. “I’m sorry, Dr Malfoy, but that really won’t work.”

“It’s not your decision to make.”

“Draco,” Millie interceded, in a considerably calmer tone, “Hermione’s right about this one. We’ve broken through so much red tape, got exceptions to so many regulations, there’s so much riding on this… we can’t just wait.”

Draco sighed. “Fine. Tomorrow afternoon. 4pm. Here. With no intervention or requests for information before then.”

“Done.” Millie nodded.

Granger looked at her beseechingly, then, after a long moment sans response, sighed, and nodded as well.

“Millie, call Galder to see you out. I have a patient to attend.”

* * *

Draco spent the better part of the next 20 minutes pacing in Potter’s sitting room, waiting for the hour to end. He walked into the exam room exactly 60 minutes, and not a second more, after he’d left Potter.

Potter was, as ordered, on the treadmill, jogging at a steady pace. He was flushed and sweating a bit, but not to any sort of abnormal degree.

He looked up with a friendly smile when Draco entered, though was visibly startled to see that he was alone.

“Where are,” he panted, “‘Mione and Mill?”

“Mill?” Draco mouthed. Then, at a proper volume, “They’ve gone back to the Ministry. They don’t need to be present for a second round of vitals. And you can stop now.”

“Oh.” Potter pressed a button to stop the machine, leaning forward to catch his breath.

“Hermione’s never missed one before. Thought she was lead?”

“Was, past tense.”

“Oh.” Potter frowned.

“If you’ve anything to say, you might as well get it out before we move any further.”

“No, no.” Potter looked up, cordiality firmly back in place. “I’m sorry. I was just surprised.”

“Really? Given that our rather storied past includes several attempts at serious injury on both sides, I wouldn’t be particularly surprised to hear that you have reservations about having me put in charge of your care.”

Potter straightened and faced him. He projected amiable, welcoming warmth to a degree Draco still found hard to swallow. “It’s been a long time. I don’t think you’d be here if you wanted me to come to harm or if you weren’t working for the best possible outcome. And even if I didn’t think that, I trust Hermione with my life and she says you’re the best at what you do, the Muggle-magical biology stuff. So, I’m glad you’re willing to work with me, and don’t see any need to
rehash the past.”

Draco squinted, half wondering if this polite, ‘professional’ version of Potter would dissolve into a Boggart upon closer scrutiny; he certainly found it all deeply disconcerting. “They’re not wrong about my expertise, but really, Potter. My family once tried to turn you over to Voldemort in this very house. And so on.”

“I know.”

Draco tried again. “If you have reservations about being seen without observers, you only need say so. I’m sure Granger will be more than happy to sit in.”

“I don’t.” He stepped off the treadmill lightly. “Just tell me what you need.”

As strange as he found Potter’s nonchalance, Draco didn’t especially relish discussing their past, and Potter didn’t seem to have any more of a telling reaction to any of it than Granger had. “Just your vitals again.”

“Okay.” He sat on the table, held out his arm for Draco’s blood pressure cuff and waited patiently as Draco listened to his heart and took his pulse and temperature.

With a final note, Draco closed the relevant file. “Any other questions for today?”

Potter hesitated.

“You might as well ask, Potter. You’re the one walking around with the Elder Wand in his leg.”

Potter smiled faintly. “I imagine you’ve already gone over the details of the treatment plan with Hermione and Millie?”

“Only through tomorrow.”

He looked genuinely startled at that. “Tomorrow?”

“As it happens, Granger left out several key pieces of information that significantly alter the plans I had in mind.”

Potter furrowed his brow. “She did?”

“She didn’t feel it was necessary to tell me in advance that you had the entire Wand implanted, as opposed to a conventional implant.”

“What’s—?” Potter paused, the lines in his forehead growing deeper. “What’s the difference between them? And why does it change things?”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up. “What’s the difference? Did they explain what the implants are meant to be? Give you any literature on the procedure?”

“Of course they did.” This time, his voice had a shade of defensiveness to it, which Draco found to be—perhaps perversely, he thought—something of a relief.

“But you don’t know what the difference is?”

“I suppose it’s unconventional because it’s the Elder Wand.”

“Yes, it is.”
“That’s the difference, then?”

“No, it isn’t.” Draco paused. “Schoolboy jokes aside, how’s your literacy? If I sent down scientific journal articles, would you be able to understand them?”

“Yes, I think so.” Potter shrugged, returning to total calm. “We worked on a potions case a while back and had to read a lot of journals for that.”

“Not quite the same, but let’s try it. I’ll have Lobsey bring them to you with dinner. See that you read them this evening.”

“Okay.”

Draco waited. “No other questions?”

“No, thank you.”

Draco, who remained oddly rattled by Potter’s general agreeableness, hesitated. “Are you not used to being told about your treatment plan?”

“We all have our areas of expertise.” Potter gave another bland smile. “It’s not as though I have the training to tell specialised Unspeakables about wandlore or surgical procedures. And,” a note of fierceness came into his voice, “I trust them. They’re very invested in making sure I get the best care.”

“They are.” Draco kept several choice comments to himself.

“Yes, they are.”

“I didn’t disagree. But I do take a different approach. Tomorrow morning I will meet you in your sitting room after breakfast. Nine o’clock, if that’s agreeable, and we’ll proceed from there.” He waited, again, for Potter to ask questions.

They never came. “All right,” Potter said. ”Thank you for letting me know. I’ll look forward to those articles.”

“Right.” Draco nodded, still struggling to pin down the uneasiness in his stomach. “Good afternoon, then.”

With another smile, Potter bid him good afternoon and saw him to the door.
Draco found himself, after another very sound night’s sleep and a perfectly respectable amount of elf-made raspberry jam, back in front of Potter’s sitting room door.

Again, Potter was sitting quietly, reading, and gently put the book down and rose to shake Draco’s hand when he entered. Aside from pleasantries, and an odd tendency on Potter’s part to look past Draco’s shoulder as though waiting patiently for more people to arrive, he seemed perfectly content to wait for further instruction.

Which, Draco supposed, it was his job to provide. “We’re going for a walk.”

Potter gestured towards the bedroom door. “Shall I change?”

“No need. Just walking around the grounds.”

“Walking?” Potter repeated.

His voice had been almost less than polite, and Draco was inclined to push him further, see if he’d get anything that felt closer to an authentic reaction. “Yes. You use your feet. Similar to what you did yesterday, but a bit slower.”

“Around the grounds?”

“Yes. I know it’s England, but you are due at least a sporting chance at sunshine.”

“I—” Potter stopped and started again, plastering on a most collegial smile. No on authentic, then. “You’re the expert, and I will of course follow your recommendations, but is that safe? Hermione must have told you that my magic is rather unstable.”

“She did.”

Potter pressed his lips together.

“If you have any questions, you’re welcome to ask them.”

“No, no. That’s fine. I trust your advice.” Potter paused. “You’re certain it’s safe?”

“There are elves on the property, but they are aware we’ll be leaving the void and have been instructed to keep to the East Wing. The same is true of Pansy and Greg, who, I realise you may not have heard, live here.” Indeed, Potter looked surprised, though he hid it quickly. “There are a few animals in the stables; they are also out of range of any unexpected magical outbursts. It’s as safe as it can be.”

“What about you?”

“I have a wand and excellent reflexes. And frankly, I can’t make a truly useful assessment without seeing how you are outside of the void.”

“And no one else is joining us?”

“No.”

Potter frowned, but the line of his shoulders seemed to relax. “I suppose I’d better go along with it,
"You can refuse." Draco hesitated. "You do know that you can withdraw your consent at any time, yes?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Hermione told me that the first day. I don’t though. Withdraw my consent, I mean. A walk is fine."

"The closest exit is through those doors." Draco pointed to the back of the room.

"Oh. I thought those were decorative."

"Yes." He walked past Potter and had to lean his weight against 12 feet of oak to push one of them open. "But not solely." He rubbed his shoulder. "Those really do benefit from being opened by magic."

"Sorry." Potter did look genuinely apologetic.

Though for what, Draco wasn’t entirely sure; opening doors, even heavy ones, wasn’t exactly a serious inconvenience. Draco furrowed his brow. "No need."

"I’m the reason you can’t use magic."

"No. Granger’s overambitious experimentation is the reason I can’t use magic, and then only in these rooms. Though if it would make you feel better, I’d be perfectly happy to have her come all the way here every time I’d like the door opened."

Potter chuckled, though Draco felt it was strained. "No, don’t bother her. I suppose I can do it myself next time, if it bothers me so much." He stared through the door frame. "Do I just... walk out?"

"Unless you’ve got a better system in mind."

"Right. Lead the way."

Draco did, turning to watch Potter’s reaction to stepping over the threshold.

He shivered, colour draining from his face, and gave Draco a thin smile. "Bit cold."

"Cast a warming charm." Draco reached into his robes. Potter’s wand had been included with his files, and Draco retrieved it from his pocket, holding the handle out to Potter.

"No." Potter recoiled from the wand. "Let’s not risk it. Walking will help."

Draco didn’t argue, but he did continue to hold the wand out.

Potter held up his hands in a gesture of refusal. "Really. I’d rather not. Shall we?"

Draco hummed and put the wand away, contenting himself at some tiny sign of backbone from Potter in lieu of getting Potter to actually cast. "Fine." He turned down a slate path that would take them deep into the terrace gardens. "Did you read those articles?"

"Yes. Thank you for sending them."

"You’re welcome. Did they answer any of your questions?"
Behind them, a paving slab cracked in two loudly.

Potter jumped and rushed to examine it. “Damnit. I’m really sorry Malfoy. Dr Malfoy. This—I’m too unpredictable, I—”

“It’s fine.” Draco drew his own wand from his robes, where it rested next to Potter’s. “Reparo.”

The two sides of the stone drew back together seamlessly. Potter, crouched over it, ran his hand over the place where the crack had been.

“It’s no problem.” Draco gestured down the path and turned to walk. “The articles?”

“Yes.” Potter rushed to catch up. “Right. Er. Yes, they did answer quite a few of my questions, thank you.”

“You see the difference between your implant and the conventional ones I mentioned?”

“Yes.”

Draco wasn’t sure he would like the answer to his question, but he was sure he needed to ask. “Were you given the option of a conventional implant?”

Potter didn’t answer directly. “I’ve thought about that. I imagine it wasn’t an option.”

“Oh?” Draco raised an eyebrow, a bit thankful that Potter, with his apparent protectiveness where Granger and the Unspeakables were concerned, probably couldn’t see it. “Why not?”

“Well they had to hide the Elder Wand, didn’t they? It wasn’t like one of the cases in your article where someone needs help using their wand. Part of the problem is that no one can know this Wand still exists, and this way no one does.”

“Yes, I had thought about that too. Though I do want to note—perhaps it’s the researcher in me—that the common thread in those cases is that witches and wizards had trouble using their magic as a result of illness. The problem didn’t come from their wands, as is the case here, nor does a conventional implant fix a wand. The wand is secondary to how magic moves through the body. The implants, which usually are very small and implanted in a finger, create a sort of bridge between a witch’s or wizard’s magic and their wand so their magic is channeled as they see fit, rather than coming in uncontrolled outbursts. Those are very different scenarios to yours.”

“But if they’d just done an implant to try and get the Wand in line, what would they have done with the Elder Wand?”

“They could have holstered it to you discreetly and put it under concealment charms without putting it in you. They also might have given up trying to experiment on it. Kept it in the Department of Mysteries or taken a vault at Gringotts.”

“It would have kept acting up.”

“Maybe,” Draco conceded. “And they could have tried this more invasive implant if that came to pass. But there are less invasive options that might have worked.”

Potter shrugged. “Too late to know now.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to try that?”

Potter shrugged again and snapped a spike of a lavender plant off its stem. “In for a Knut, in for a
Galleon.”

“In for a minor outpatient procedure, in for a life-changing invasive surgery that requires spending your days in a magical void?”

Another shrug. “You said there are animals on the grounds?”

“Among other things I said, yes.”

“What sorts?”

In the name of professionalism, Draco tried to hide his incredulity. “Magical ones, mostly.”

“I’d heard there were peacocks.”

“Yes.” Draco resisted the urge to bring the conversation back around, if in no small part to see where Potter was going.

“Are they the same as Muggle peacocks, or can you breed magical peacocks?”

“Septimus Malfoy saw fit to try.”

“Did it work?”

“In that they can’t wander off the Manor grounds, and they lay patterned eggs.”

“Patterned eggs? What kind of patterns?”

“Depends on the bird. Polka dots, argyle. One tends towards pinstripes.”

“That sounds interesting.” Potter, having stripped the lavender of its flowers, dropped the stem at the base of a hedgerow. “Is it only magical animals?”

“No.” Draco sighed, trying to extend his patience with Potter’s proclivity for small talk. He reminded himself, rather sternly, that this was useful observational time. “There are non-magical animals as well.”

“Yeah? Like what? Livestock?”

“No. The Manor hasn’t operated as a livestock farm since the 18th century. Strays, mostly. Whatever is native to the area and isn’t scared off by the magical energy.”

Draco turned, leading them down a dozen slate steps that led from the raised gardens into the field beyond.

Potter followed behind with more questions, none of which were about his medical care. “So, mice and things?”

Draco barely repressed another sigh. “The ponds are stocked with perch and trout. There are beavers, newts, frogs. Birds of all sorts. Deer, foxes, stoats, voles, hedgehogs. Mice, as you say, though they tend to be scared off or eaten by the Hippogriffs. The occasional stray dog or cat, in addition to Crups and Kneazles. Galder mentioned a litter of kittens in the stables.”

To their left, the leaves of a Sycamore tree rushed to the ground at once, as though Summoned by the earth.
Potter did not dash to the site this time, but covered his mouth, horrified and frozen to the spot. It was at least half a minute before he moved, dropping his hand and turning to Draco with a mouthful of apologies.

Draco tried to forestall him with an outstretched palm, but to no avail.

“I’m so, so sorry. I told you.” Frustration tinged Potter’s voice. “And you can’t put those back with a spell, they’re just gone, dead, look at that, the tree, what if it killed the tree?”

“Let’s find out.” Draco walked towards it, leaving Potter gaping behind him.

His robes dragged in the pile of leaves, and he didn’t hear Potter follow behind him. He put a hand to the tree trunk, then drew his wand and cast a diagnostic charm. “Not dead,” he yelled over his shoulder.

He heard rustling behind him as Potter approached. “Not?”

“No. Not. It’s become dormant prematurely and, I will grant, a bit abruptly. But no permanent damage.”

“But in the spring…” Potter trailed off.

“It should leaf normally. No harm done.”

“Oh.”

Draco reached into his robes and pulled out Potter’s wand again. “Would you like to try the diagnostic for yourself? It’s an easy spell to learn.”

“No.” Potter shoved his hands in his pockets. “Think I’ve done enough.”

“As you prefer.” Draco looked at Potter carefully. He found only timidity. That certainly looked authentic, but it was no less mystifying. After a moment he returned both of their wands to his pocket. “Shall we walk, then?”

Potter nodded stiffly and followed as Draco turned back towards the field.

“Would you like to see the animals?”

“Considering what I just did to the tree, that doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

It wasn’t a no. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“And risk hurting the animals?”

“It’s very unlikely, especially with larger magical beasts.”

“Still.”

“It’s a bit chilly. Are you sure you don’t want to cast a warming charm?”

“We could go back to the house.”

Draco walked on, trying to catch a good look at Potter from the corner of his eye. When he saw the anxiety written across Potter’s face, he nodded and turned back towards the stairs, gesturing for Potter to follow. “Still, in the interim. My fingers wouldn’t object.”
“I’m sure you’re up to casting your own warming charms.”

“I am, yes.”

“Potter frowned. “If you need me to do magic, just say so.”

“It wasn’t part of the plan at this point, and I won’t compel you to do it if you’d rather not, but it would be helpful at some point.”

Potter’s frown deepened. They remained in silence as they reached and walked up the stairs, as they made their way through the winding slate paths of the garden, and were almost back to the steps before Potter spoke. “I don’t want to be unhelpful.”

“I am, yes.” Potter kept walking, pausing only when Potter didn’t follow.

“Okay.” Potter looked up at him and began to close the distance between them.

“Okay to casting magic?” Draco asked for clarification.

“Yeah. Like I said, I don’t want to be unhelpful or get in the way of your work.”

Draco was, once again, left perplexed by Potter’s acquiescence, especially to something he clearly didn’t relish the idea of. But Draco did need to know how Potter’s magic would behave when he tried to use it, and he was holding out Potter’s wand by the time Potter reached him. “Something simple is fine. A warming charm, Lumos, whatever you prefer.”

“Right.” Potter took the wand tentatively, barely gripping the shaft. “Right.”

“Whenever you’re ready.” Draco stood back to give him space.

“Right.” Potter inhaled and closed his eyes. He opened them again with an exhale, and focused his attention on the tip of his wand. “Lumos.”

A ball of light emerged from the tip of Potter’s wand. It was bright and round, and perfectly normal as far as Draco could tell. When Potter ended the spell, it receded back into the wood without incident.

Potter looked a bit queasy.

“What about something more advanced?” Draco asked “You’re known for your Patronus Charm. Would you try it?”

Potter looked properly green about the edges, but he didn’t object. He cast, and his famous stag emerged from his wand, cantered a wide circle around them, and disappeared through the trunk of a Maple tree on Draco’s right.

Draco did his best to hide his confusion. Potter’s abilities were far beyond what he had expected. “Right.” Draco broke off a spring of the yew hedgerow that grew at the border of the path to his left. “Wingardium Leviosa.”

The branch floated between them.

“Now, try ending my spell.”

Potter’s hand shook, but he raised it all the same. “Finite.”
The yew dropped to the slate.

“Thank you. That was very helpful.”

Potter rushed to hold his wand out to Draco before he spoke. “You’re welcome.”

Draco took it, dropping both of their wands into his robes and turning back towards the house. “We’ve accomplished a fair bit this morning, if you’d like the rest of the day to yourself.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Potter walked quickly and looked as though he was barely restraining his pace.

“There’s Quidditch on the WWN this afternoon, if you’d like to listen in the library. The Magpies are set to trounce Puddlemere.”

With a crack, one of the Manor’s giant black roof tiles broke free, sliding over the eaves and crashing to the ground. It splintered into dozens of pieces, a few falling inches from their feet.

Potter stared as if hypnotised.

Draco found he could relate. “Well.” He took a step back and used his wand to clear the pieces to one side of the path.

He looked over at Potter, who had not moved. “Potter?” He stepped closer, reaching out to shake his shoulder. “Potter.”


“Are you injured?”

“No.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes.” He blinked. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry. Merlin, Malfoy. I mean, Dr Malfoy. I’m so sorry. I’ll—Have the cost of the repair billed to my vault. Please. It’s the least I can do.”

“There’s no need for that. Our elves are experts at home repair.” He looked at Potter carefully, finding his frustration replaced with a certain amount of concern for the depth of Potter’s apologetic deference. It felt wrong. Much more so than Potter’s magic, which at least continued to be as impetuous as Potter himself had once been.

“But the void. Lobsey can’t use his magic in it.”

“The void is bounded by the walls of your rooms. Lobsey or any of the rest of them can get to the roof without trouble.”

“But it’s dangerous—”

Draco cut him off. “They’re house elves. They have plenty of protective magic. This is their forte. And frankly, they’d be offended if we brought in contractors.”

“Right.” Potter shook his head. “Of course. I’m so terribly sorry.”

“It’s no matter. Can you make it the rest of the way to the house?”
“Of course.” Potter started walking immediately, and stayed half a pace ahead of Draco the rest of the way there.

The numbing sensation of the void hit Draco as he followed Potter back into his sitting room, leveraging his weight to pull the door shut behind him.

By the time he turned around, Potter had sank onto a settee and buried his head in his hands.

Draco looked him over. “Shall I take it, then, that you don’t want to listen to the Quidditch?”

Potter looked up, trying to paste on yet another polite smile. “No, thank you.”

Draco nodded. “If you change your mind, you’re welcome to join me. I’ll be in the library, at the end of the hall.”

“Thank you, but I think I’ll stay in.”

“That’s fine. Would you like to know what’s planned for tomorrow?”

Potter, looking wan and overwhelmed, hesitated.

“I could have Lobsey bring a schedule with your dinner.”

“That would be fine.”

“Very well. Have a good afternoon.”

“Thank you. You as well.”

Draco nodded, saw himself out, and walked directly to the library.

* * *

He never turned on the Quidditch. He sat poring over the records again for hours. An untouched tray of sandwiches was replaced with a tea tray shortly before four o’clock.

Draco didn’t look up from his notes until Millie and Granger had taken their seats. He skipped greetings. “This doesn’t make sense.”

Millie reached for the tea and poured three cups. “Afraid you’ll have to be more specific.”

“There’s no pattern to the outbursts. They don’t happen at regular intervals or during particular activities. They do tend to be destructive, but always in reparable ways, and some are completely benign. There’s no correlation with time of day, foods ingested, level of physical stimulation, or setting. Or with Potter’s moods, which continue to be inexplicable. It doesn’t make sense. Any of it. Granger, why didn’t you try a conventional implant?”

She choked on a bite of scone.

“Quickly, Granger.”

She cleared her throat. “The problem was with the Wand, not with Harry’s magic, as was the case with your patients. The Wand was only unsafe when it was away from him, and we needed a way to keep it near him that was completely and reliably hidden from the public. No holsters or anything like that, anything that could be dislodged in a fight or detected in a fight, or if, Merlin forbid, he was captured. The Wand was satisfied being close to Harry, and his magic was stable.
There was no reason to think there would be this kind of adverse reaction.”

“And there were no other ways to address those concerns?” He looked at her sceptically and didn’t wait for an answer. “Why didn’t you try the less invasive procedure first?”

“The Elder Wand isn’t like any other.” She leaned forward, hands gripping the edge of the table. “What were we supposed to do, track Death down and ask him to make an extra bit?”

“The implants don’t need to, and usually don’t, come from the original wandmaker. You must have known that.”

“Yes, but we—I—had done enough research to have good reason to believe that this Wand might well be different, right down to its materials. And what if the implant, what if grounding it to Harry, gave it even more reach? What if it worked through him anyway, and was still angry about being kept away from him? And how would it have interacted with his own wand?”

“You might have asked an expert.”

She threw her hands up in exasperation. “It was a problem with a wand! We were solving a wandlore problem!”

“By attaching the entire Elder Wand to his femur.”

“We didn’t have a lot of choices. We had even fewer good ones.”

“And now you have fewer still.”

Granger paled. “What do you mean by that?”

“With the implant, Potter is dangerous and unpredictable outside of the void. There are, then, two basic options. Either we leave him in the void indefinitely or remove the Wand.”

“We can’t—” Granger struggled for words.

“Exactly. Neither option is tenable. And both will have deleterious effects on his magic in the long term.”

“What?” She blinked rapidly. “What do you mean?”

“You should’ve been in touch sooner.” Draco stood and began to pace. “We have work on this under review. The implants improve magical ability, as you know. A patient compared them to vision correction—the ability to see, so to speak, was there, but lacked clarity and focus.”

Granger watched him closely, but did not speak.

“To extend that metaphor: over time, the musculature around the eyes weakens. The wearer becomes more dependent on them than they would’ve been previously.”

“What are you saying?” She asked, voice strained.

“The comparison stuck in my head. Many of my patients had chronic illness, but some recovered. We gave those in the latter group the option of having the implant removed. Only a few were interested, but in all of those cases there was noticeable... we call it magical atrophy. Noticeable magical atrophy. They were no longer subject to unrestrained accidental magic, once the root cause of the instability was gone, but their ability to cast spells without the implant was diminished. They had become so used to the support of an extra conduit that their spellwork had less precision and
strength across the board.”

“What did you do?” Granger’s voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“The trial period was six months. There was no significant improvement in any of those cases and no reason to expect any. I gave them new implants and sent them on their way.”

“Magical atrophy,” she repeated.

“That’s door number two, removing the Wand. Then there’s door number one. Magical aversion. A patient spends so much time in a magical void that exposure to magical energy becomes overwhelming.”

“But they can still do magic when they leave?” Granger asked.

“Technically, yes, but they often choose not to. We see fewer cases of this now that the implants are becoming standard protocol. It was mostly an issue for patients who spent long periods of time in the void as a result of their magical outbursts. As,” he added, “Potter has. After leaving the hospital, either after their illness was resolved or after receiving an implant, many of them moved to predominantly Muggle areas. Switched to careers that keep them away from magic. Herbologists go to work in Muggle botanical gardens, that sort of thing.”

“Harry wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re not the first witch I’ve heard say that about a patient, and I doubt you’ll be the last.”

“Then either option might have lasting side effects.”

“Either option will have lasting side effects. Potter will either be less able or less inclined to use magic.”

“Then we take the Wand out as quickly as possible, before he develops atrophy.”

“If it had just gone in, perhaps.”

Granger dug her fingers into the tabletop. “What are you suggesting?”

“He did?” Granger interrupted. “You got him to do spellwork?”

Draco stopped and turned to her. “He hasn’t been?”

“He prefers to stay in the void. We offered, of course, but he wasn’t interested. He gave up his wand and it’s been in storage with his files. That’s how we were able to send it over.”

“Merlin.” Draco sank back into his chair. “When was the last time he cast a spell?”

“It’s in the records,” Granger answered. “But if I remember correctly it’s been at least a month.”

“Merlin,” Draco repeated. “The magic that he did today was perfectly serviceable, some of it advanced. Expecto Patronum, Lumos, Finite Incantatem. All at the level I would expect from a well-trained Auror. But if it’s been that long, he shouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“The Elder Wand?” Granger suggested.
Draco nodded. “It must be. It must be amplifying his magic. Not the way the implants do, but somehow. There’s evidence in the work under review to suggest that the presence of an implant may have some amplifying effect on magical ability. I can only imagine, with the Elder Wand….” He trailed off, trying to wrap his head around the implications.

“If we take the Wand out, then?”

“Magical atrophy will almost certainly set in all at once.”

“Can you be certain of that?”

“As certain as anyone could be while working in uncharted territory. Certain enough to advise against it. Strongly.”

“Then what do you advise?”

Draco sighed and leaned back. “Trying to find a pattern. More tests. Trying to get him out of the void and using his wand. I don’t have any answers for you beyond that.”
Chapter 5

After upending his life, moving to Paris, and learning to navigate academic politics, Draco had almost thought he could get used to anything. Lacking answers, and being without a firm plan for finding them, was testing that theory. Particularly since everything he’d been able to come up with overnight was proving fruitless.

Potter was on his 28th lap of the terrace gardens’ outer loop. He’d only broken a slight sweat. He was quite fit, and in excellent physical shape. Beyond not showing any signs of injury or illness, he ran with a surprising amount of grace and agility. Draco had expected him to be a heavy, utilitarian sort of runner, but Potter looked to be in some state between sanguine and blissful. He also had a very respectable mile time. And he had shown absolutely no signs of accidental magic.

Draco watched him through his 29th and 30th laps, before calling him to a stop. He took Potter’s pulse, had him take his top off so Draco could listen to his heart. All normal.

“If you’d like.”

Potter stopped moving immediately. “It’s fine. We can go back in. Do you have all the data you need?”

“Yes, but you can keep running if you like.” Draco tilted his head, taking in the colour on Potter’s cheeks. The glazed sort of contentment that had taken him over was already starting to fade.

“No.” Potter shook his head. “It’s fine. Do you need anything else?” He grabbed his shirt from where he’d dropped it on the slate and pulled it back over his head.

“A few magical diagnostics, if you don’t mind. For obvious reasons, we can’t conduct them in the void.”

“Okay.” Potter stood still and closed his eyes.

Draco began to cast. He checked Potter’s magical energy levels, looking for spikes or discontinuities as Potter cooled down. There were magical traces coming from the implant itself, but nothing unexpected.

“One more set.”

Potter nodded without otherwise moving.

This time, Draco cast a spell that went through Potter and declared the shrub behind him perfectly healthy. He went through spells to check a patient’s blood pressure and heart rate, which Draco found less reliable and, by way of patients’ reactions, less telling than the Muggle equivalents. Spells to check for Dragon Pox and Spattergroit.

Spells to give Draco time to think, more or less. His usual diagnostics weren’t proving fruitful. The records weren’t yielding any answers. The only hints he’d got were during their walk, and that hadn’t told him anything either, though it had been more interactive than the rest of the tests, and he wasn’t in any sort of position to be turning owls away before they’d delivered.
At last, he tucked his wand into his robes. “That’s all for the day. Shall we go inside?”

If Potter was unhappy about the suggestion, he didn’t show it. Just opened his eyes, nodded, and walked towards the open door to his sitting room.

“Potter.” Draco quickened his pace to catch up. “Join us for dinner tonight.”

Potter slowed. “I—Is that a medical order?”

“An order?” Draco furrowed his brow, wondering if that’s how they’d put it to him in the Department of Mysteries. “No. I don’t give orders. It’s a request I’d ask you to consider.”

“Why?”

“In part because I’d like to reduce the amount of time you spend in the void. There can be long-term complications and you’ve already spent over a month primarily or entirely in magic-free spaces, either at the Department of Mysteries or here.”

“Complications?” Potter didn’t look over, nor did he seem especially bothered.

“Long term effects for your ability to tolerate magical energy. You can become too accustomed to a lack of it and begin to find it uncomfortable.”

“Hmm. Nobody mentioned that.”

“I am increasingly unsurprised at that,” Draco said, honestly, if with a bit of after-the-fact concern about how Potter would take it. The only thing that seemed to inspire any hint of anger was his reflexive defensiveness of Granger and his team, even though they’d landed him here. “Though—and I’m as surprised as you might be to hear myself say this—in their defense, I’m not certain that they knew.”

“Oh. Well that makes sense, then.”

“Perhaps, but they ought to have known.”

Potter ignored the comment. “So, then, I need to go to dinner to get out of the void?”

“Would you rather not?”

“Whatever you think is best.”

Draco looked over at Potter. He still had colour from running, tiny beads of sweat were still drying along his hairline. But he didn’t look especially perturbed about the revelation that his doctors might have caused him long-term harm. It was disconcerting, even more deeply than his general, near-compulsive, dedication to amiability. “I’ve said it before, but you can ask questions if you’d like.”

“Thank you, but I don’t have any.”

“Really?” Draco stopped walking, unable to keep the incredulousness entirely out of his voice.

“Um.” Potter paused and turned to him. “Should I have? What’s for dinner?”

“You don’t have any questions? None whatsoever? About your condition, course of treatment, possible outcomes—none of it?”
"I asked some before the surgery."

"In case you hadn’t noticed, Potter, the people you might’ve asked before the surgery didn’t have enough information to properly answer your questions."

Potter shrugged. "I don’t have your level of expertise. It’s not like asking will help anything."

"Your own curiosity?"

"Like I said, I already asked."

Draco ran a hand through his hair. “Right. Well. Fine, then.” He started walking. “There’s Cornish hen, and some sort of tart for dessert.”

"Sounds good."

"I’m sure it will be.” Just inside the sitting room door, Potter paused, turning to look at Draco. "Will it be safe, my coming to dinner? If it’s just the void, I could eat alone somewhere. In the kitchens, or in the library, or out here.”

"Do you think I would invite you to do something unsafe?"

Potter frowned. “It’s just that my magic can be hard to predict.”

“I’m having dinner with Millicent and Granger. They’re both aware of your condition and have spent time with you regardless.”

"In the void, though.”

“Well, Granger asks after you often enough that we’d better trot you out, really, lest she think I’ve got you chained up in here. Besides which, as evidenced by this morning, your outbursts are so erratic that it’s entirely possible that nothing will happen.”

“I guess.”

“Seven on the dot, in the dining room. Shall I have Lobsey show you in?”

“Er.” Potter wrung his hands. “Yes, please, if it’s not a bother. I don’t know my way around.”

“It’s no problem.” Draco paused, trying, and still failing, to see through Potter’s politeness. “I’ll see you then.”

* * *

Punctuality was a Malfoy family virtue. From the moment Draco had learned to read a clock he was expected to arrive on time. “On time,” of course, meant that he was to time his arrivals to his best advantage in any given situation unless he was meant to time them to his parents’ best advantage. In the absence of his parents, and the case of dinner with Potter and his merry band of micromanagers, Draco entered the dining room at ten to seven to check place settings and take his seat.

He was glad he had come down early when he found seven place settings instead of the expected four.

“Galder,” he called.
The elf popped up behind him, and he clenched his fists to avoid startling like the Bloody Baron had just come through the table.

“Yes, Master Draco, sir?”

“There are seven place settings at this table.”

“Yes, Master Draco, sir. Master is correct.”

“Yes, well, I have mastered arithmetic.” He hurried on before the elf could interrupt with a course of self-flagellation and resolved, not for the first time, to avoid sarcasm in their presence. “Dinner is for four. Who are the other three?”

He turned to face Galder and saw the start of a tremble. “For Merlin’s sake, Galder, I’m not my father.”

“No! No, Master Draco is… is… is a scientist, and is much more handsome—”

“And much less vain. Which seven people are coming to dinner?”

“Master Draco, of course.” The elf shuffled towards the chair at the head of the table, preparing to pull it out for him. “And Mistresses Bulstode and Granger, and Master Potter, as Master directed. And then Mistress Pansy and Master Greg, they is always taking their dinner in the dining room. And when Mistress Bulstrode is eating with Mistress Pansy she is always bringing her—her friend, and so Galder set a place for him too.”

“Her friend?”

The door slid open and Pansy appeared, in formal dinner robes and with Greg trailing behind her. Shock slid over her face when she set eyes on the table and its many place settings, but she met Draco with a blindingly, and almost certainly artificially, bright smile. “Whose friend?”

“Mill’s.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Didn’t realise you’d be joining us.”

“We do live here.” Her smile faltered. “And, therefore, eat here.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Just because you take your meals in the library like a mannerless troll.” She was trying for a joke, but her voice was absent levity.

“Who’s to say I’m not a perfectly well-mannered troll?”

“As long as we’re agreed on the troll part.” She looked at the head of the table and her face went blank. Without comment, she took the seat immediately to the right, drew her wand, and filled her wineglass almost to the top. Greg slid in beside her with a quiet, and much more relaxed, smile for Draco.

Draco returned it and sat in the chair Galder had pulled out for him. He found himself suddenly grateful for Pansy’s chitchat; it was more overwhelming than he’d expected to find himself sitting at the head of this table.

As if on cue from some particularly benevolent deity—quite possibly one that his father had paid off while sitting in this very seat—the door slid open again, admitting Granger and Millie. Behind them, peeking over Mill’s head, Draco saw the unforgettable, unmistakable cheekbones of Blaise
“Evening.” Millie smiled, hooking her arm through Blaise’s. “You remember Blaise.”

“You as well.” Blaise took half a step back and looked him over. “It seemed we’d lost you to Paris permanently. Not that anyone could blame you for that, but we didn’t expect to see you this side of the channel.”

“No,” Pansy interrupted, leaning an elbow on the table. “We didn’t, did we? Not when running away to save one’s own backside is a grand Malfoy tradition. It’s the coming back that’s more mysterious.”

“Pansy.” Blaise and Millie warned her as one. Almost, Draco thought, as though they’d heard this before. He tried not to let it rankle.

An uncomfortable cough turned their collective attention back to Granger and, behind her, to Potter and Lobsey, both of whom bore a rather striking resemblance to startled deer.

“Lobsey is presenting Mister Harry Potter, sir.”

“Yes. Thank you.” Draco cleared his throat and turned towards the door. “Granger, Potter. As you can see, our numbers have unexpectedly increased. The more the merrier, I suppose. Please, have a seat.”

Granger, looking nervous, moved towards the table.

Potter, on the other hand, shuffled backwards towards the door. “Perhaps I should return to the library?”

“Your’s not really… er—” Potter fumbled for words until he settled on something politic. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re an invited guest, it’s hardly an intrusion.”

“Harry,” Granger added, “come, sit.”

“No, thank you.” Potter took another step back and shot Draco a pleading look. “I, um, I’m not feeling terribly well anyway, so—”

“Please,” Pansy snorted, wine glass in hand and already emptier than it had been. “We all know about your wonky magic. Sit. I highly doubt there’s anything you could throw at us that would be worse than… well. Sit.”

Potter turned confused, questioning eyes to Granger and Draco in turn.

“You know the walls have eyes, darling. Or in this case, the elves. Besides which, if you stop to
think about it for any length of time, setting up magical voids is a bit obvious.”

Draco looked to Millie and Granger, who were sharing a significant look of their own.

“Come now,” Pansy continued, raising her glass at Potter, “wouldn’t want word to get out that the
great Harry Potter is scared of breaking bread with Slytherins.”

“That will not happen.” Draco shot daggers at her.

She raised her chin. “Not if he sits down.”

“Pansy, any information you think you might have has to remain strictly confidential.”

She shrugged. “And who do you think I would tell, exactly?”

“I’m fairly certain you’ve just told Blaise,” Draco retorted.

“Actually,” Blaise interrupted, then stopped abruptly.

Millie squeezed his arm and picked up his unfinished sentence. “We have an arrangement.”

Draco’s stomach churned. He turned to Blaise. “Not a Vow?”

Blaise’s lips quirked. “Not an Unbreakable one. For better or worse, Millie’s far too creative for
that.”

“Given the particulars of my job, it got a bit hard to ensure he never heard anything.” She grinned.
“So we reached a compromise, involving very large, very unfortunately placed boils, should he
ever repeat anything.”

Draco grimaced in sympathetic pain.

Millie laughed a little. “Hermione was the inspiration, actually. Quite a clever charm.”

Pansy interrupted before Granger could reply, and spoke with not a little tension in her voice. “I do
hope you’re not suggesting that Greg and I can only live here under threat of boils.”

It killed any levity in the room quite effectively.

Draco spoke first. “I’m not, no. But you weren’t supposed to know any of that.”

“So?” She asked, draining her glass. “What other conditions do you have in mind?”

“I haven’t suggested any conditions. I insisted that the Ministry take me on my word. Will you
give us yours?”

Greg nodded solemnly. “Course.”

Pansy hesitated. “I’m still waiting for the loopholes.”

“There aren’t any.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I just have to tell you I won’t repeat anything?”

“To anyone or under any circumstances.”

“Fine,” She said. “Sit down, Potter, would you? I’m hungry.”
Before Draco could ask her for a more formal declaration, Potter spoke up. “I, uh, really think it would be best—”

Millie interrupted him. “Harry, really, don’t let Pansy stop you. She’s maybe half as quick with her wand as she is with her smart remarks. And we’d like to have dinner with you.”

“It’s not necessary, I can take a tray—”

“Harry, please.” It was Granger’s turn to interrupt, apparently. “It feels like ages, and we’ve been wanting you to, you know, get out more, and we do worry.”


“Wonderful!” Granger smiled and pulled out the chair next to hers.

“Please, have a seat,” Draco added. “Millie, Blaise, Granger. Do let’s begin.”

At his invitation, steaming bowls of soup appeared on their plates. Draco pulled in his chair and gestured for his guests to do the same.

They ate in silence for several minutes, save the occasional pointed slurp from Pansy, who was into her second glass and kept clicking her nails against the crystal nervously, and one accidental slurp from Greg. Draco watched Potter carefully, but Potter only had eyes for the French onion.

Draco set his spoon to rest once everyone was done and the bowls disappeared, to be replaced with a salad. Draco cleared his throat and turned to Blaise. “When will you be in Paris next? It would be nice to see more of you.”

Blaise shot Pansy an unambiguous warning look before turning to answer Draco’s question. “Not until the spring, I’m afraid. My work will keep me in the country.”

“I see. And you’re a literary agent?”

“I am, yes. Muggle and wizarding.”

“What sort of work do you handle?”

“Fiction, mostly romance.” He offered a wry smile. “They tell me I’ve got the right image for it.”

“As a literary agent?”

Blaise took a bite of spinach and chewed quite thoroughly before he answered. “Yes. Some of it has to do with the war.” He gave Pansy a sympathetic look. She drained her glass in response, and Blaise continued. “I stayed far enough out of it, I suppose, house affiliation aside. Some of it is the last name, more associated with scandal than anything else. Never knew that would be an advantage. Some of it—I” He ducked his head and sighed. “Some of it is to do with my looks, I’m told. As lovely as my clients may be—” He looked towards Pansy again, this time with a tiny smile, in response to which she refilled her glass “—some of them aren’t able to make public appearances. In those cases, when they need someone to serve as the public face of the project, they find mine useful.”

“Is that common?” Draco asked, and looked past him to get another glimpse of Potter, still focused on his plate.

“Not very. But it’s relevant to some of my larger clients. Daisy Green, for instance? Perhaps you’ve
“Did you hear of her?” He raised his eyebrows at Draco.

“Ah. Yes. Right.” He did not turn to look at Pansy. “I’m familiar. Her work is very successful.”

“Very good, too,” Blaise added.

The table lapsed into silence for a moment until Granger leaned forward, looking around Millie to Blaise. “Daisy Green, that’s quite a coup. She’s on the *Prophet’s* bestseller lists all the time.”

Pansy was unmistakably surprised.

“Yes,” Blaise said. “We’re very lucky to have her, and—”

“Have you read much Daisy Green, Granger?” Pansy interrupted.

“Not much.” The hint of a blush appeared along Granger’s cheekbones. “I took *Son of Snakes* last time I was on holiday. Wasn’t bad.”

“High praise. And did you have a favourite bit?”

Granger’s flush deepend. “Not really. Just a good beach read.”

“Hmm,” Pansy mused, taking another deep sip. “Personally, I love the bit where Antonio takes it up the arse.”

Granger choked on a piece of shredded beetroot. Potter leaned over to rub her back and seemed to be whispering expressions of concern.

“Is that quite necessary?” Millie asked Pansy.

“Since when are you so bashful?”

“Please.” Millie rolled her eyes. “I’m rather a bigger fan of these things than you are.”

“Taking it up the arse? I thought that was Draco’s department.”

Potter stopped abruptly, then resumed rubbing Granger’s back, even as she assured him she was fine.

Draco pretended not to notice Potter’s reaction, even as he found it hard to look away. “Taking or giving. Pansy, really. As much as you might enjoy attempts at shock value, it’s hardly effective when we all already knew that.”

“I don’t think Potter knew that. Did you, Potter?”

Potter froze, hand still on Granger’s back, then removed it and sat back in his chair, face carefully neutral and tone perfectly polite. “It’s none of my business.”

“Don’t you have a favourite Daisy Green novel?”

“Pansy.” It was Blaise’s turn to interrupt.

“Now, Blaise, you’re her agent. Surely it would be useful to know what the readers like. Especially such important ones”

“I don’t read much,” Potter said.
Draco watched him pick up his fork and turn his attention back to the salad. Draco was certain he’d found Potter reading every time he’d gone to see him.

“What a shame,” Pansy went on. “You might like them.”

Potter shrugged, keeping his eyes trained on his fork, and carefully speared a bit of goat’s cheese along with his greens.

“Or are you not one for the racier things in life?”

“Leave Potter alone, would you?” Draco said, his annoyance becoming apparent. “He’s our guest, Pansy.”

“He’s your guest, Draco.”

“Yes.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. “As are you. I do get to invite people to stay in my home. That is how these things generally work.”

Pansy’s jaw worked silently for a moment. When she spoke, it was slow and deliberate. “Ten years, Draco.” She pushed her chair back and stood. “You disappeared for ten years. You let us make this place our home, then you upend everything before you even set foot on English soil, expect us to go along with all of it—which, I might add, we do—and still you can’t help but remind us that we’re nothing but your guests, that the terms are entirely up to you, that you can—” her voice broke.

Draco’s attention was torn. Half of him was hypnotised by Pansy’s speech. Out of the corner of his eyes, the other half saw Potter cringing at his plate and wished that he had the time to observe his reaction. Instead, he stood to put an end to its cause. “Sit down, Pansy.”

“Because you’ve said so?” She retorted shakily. “Would you like a cartwheel, too?”

“Sit down, Pansy.”

“Pansy,” Blaise added, beseechingly. “Would you please? This is neither the time nor the place.” He tilted his head towards Granger and Potter.


“Pansy,” Draco added. “Unless you’d like to leave, please have a seat.”

She clenched her jaw and promptly dropped into her seat, arms crossed.

He followed suit, pulling his chair in quietly. “Do you intend to pout through the rest of the meal, or just the rest of the salad?”

She shook her head silently, refusing to answer, and stared down into her lap almost sadly.

Draco didn’t know quite what to make of her.

Then she plastered on the sort of obviously fake look of interest they’d all learned as children and turned towards their guests. “Granger, tell us what you do. I’m sure it will be boringly appropriate.”

Granger met her with a steady gaze. “I’m not at liberty to talk about it.”

Pansy laughed with a bit of a wobble and refilled her glass again. “Of course. Too important to be
"Yes?" He looked up from his fork, on which he’d balance one single leaf, as if to draw out the amount of time he could spend devoting his entire attention to his meal.

“What do you do?”

“Is this quite necessary?” Draco interrupted. “I’m fairly certain we all know this.”

Potter put his fork down on his plate. “It’s fine. I’m an Auror.”

“Glamorous.”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

Millie leaned forward and interjected before Pansy could pick up steam. “I’m assistant to the Minister, if anyone was wondering.”

“I move things,” Greg piped up. “When people are moving house. I move their things.”

“Do you?” Granger jumped in. “They must appreciate that. It’s quite a pain, moving house.”

Greg nodded. “They do.”

“Shall we move to the next?” Draco set his fork down to cue the change of course before anyone had a chance to answer. Potter’s fork disappeared from between his fingers.

“That sounds delightful.” Mille confirmed as perfectly roasted Cornish hens appeared on each plate, framed by vegetables.

Blaise asked Greg if it was a busy season for moving, and it served to split the table, to Draco’s relief. Pansy picked at her chicken in agitated silence. Millie let her arm brush against Blaise’s as she joined in his conversation with Greg. And at the end of the table, Granger was asking Potter a series of questions that left him looking a bit beleaguered. He leaned forward often to smile kindly or make his reassurance more emphatic, though she didn’t look wholly convinced. They were well into the course before he seemed to turn the tide. He said something that made her laugh and started asking her question after question, relaxing as the focus turned towards Granger and away from him.

The hen was quite good and Draco gave himself a minute or two to focus on that, until forks and knives around the table had been set down. Draco followed suit, and their dinner dishes were replaced with dessert plates bearing fruit tarts.

With a sigh and a smile, Blaise leaned back. “That was delicious, Draco. Not sure there’s even room for more.”

“I’ll pass your compliments on to the kitchen. Though the elves might be mortally offended if you don’t find room somewhere.”

Blaise laughed. “I’ll just have to do my best, I suppose.”

“A terrible hardship, I’m sure.”

“Speaking of hardships.” Millie leaned forward. “You remember we have a meeting tomorrow, yes?”
Draco sighed and set down his forkful of tart. “Yes. Nine?”

“Yes,” Millie confirmed. “Hermione, you’ve got it too?”

“Yes.”

“Where shall I direct the Minister?” Millie asked.

“The music room, I think. Will that do?”

Potter was following them as though they were passing a Quaffle back and forth.

“The Minister isn’t bothered about those sorts of things. Weasley, on the other hand…”

“Yes, well. Is it suitable for Weasley?”

“Ron’s coming? Here?” Potter interrupted, looking hopeful, and as though he could no longer hold the words in.

“Oh.” Granger’s brow creased and she turned to him. “Oh, no. I’m sorry, Harry. It’s Percy coming.”

“Oh. With Gawain?”

“Yes, to discuss… well, you know.”

Draco thought Potter looked like he had a few other questions on the tip of his tongue, but Granger turned back and continued on before Draco could get at them. “He’ll be fine, I’m sure. He’s not as stuffy as he seems.”

Millie laughed. “That’s not hard to achieve.”

“Who else is coming?” Potter interrupted again, rather to Draco’s surprise.

Granger’s as well, from the look on her face. She turned back to him. “Millie and Kingsley for the Minister’s office, Percy and Robards for the MLE, and then—” she hesitated, catching Pansy in the corner of her eye and remembering herself “—perhaps one or two more.” She rested a hand on Potter’s arm and turned away from him again. “Millie?”

“Not many more at this one. Someone will pass on whatever they need to know.”

“Right then.” She turned back to Potter, squeezed his arm, and let go, nudging him back towards his tart.

“Potter,” Draco said.

Potter looked up, startled.

“Did you have any other questions?”

He seemed to teeter on the brink of asking, going so far as to open his mouth before closing it again and shaking his head.

Granger was not so easily deterred. “Harry? Did you? I didn’t mean to cut you off.”

“No.” He frowned and speared a berry with his fork.
“Come off it, Granger.” Pansy broke her silent streak. “He’s said no. Do feel free to keep your buckteeth closed.”

Granger flushed but didn’t waver. “If it’s such good advice, you might feel free to take it.”

“Ooh.” Pansy grinned. “You have teeth. Interesting.”

Above them, the shades around half a dozen candles exploded off the chandelier, sending glass and hot wax flying.

“Protego!” Draco was out of his seat, wand in hand, only a second before Granger, who cast the same spell a moment later. Debris hit the shields and scattered to the corners of the room.

By the time they’d lowered their wands, Potter was out of his chair and backing towards the door. “I’m sorry. So—I’m very sorry. Like I said, not feeling well. I should go, shouldn’t have come, I’m—I’m sorry.”

His apologies were tinged with genuine panic, and he was through the door, his footsteps receding very quickly down the hallway, before any of them had got their wits about them.

Granger turned to run after him. Draco imagined a continuation of their earlier conversation, Potter dodging questions and trying ceaselessly to reassure her. He lifted his wand and shut the door. “Don’t.”

She turned to him, furious. “Don’t? He needs help, he’s upset.”

“Don’t.” Draco repeated, much surer of his conviction than of the reasons behind it.

“Don’t?! She spat. “Who are you to say?”

“The lead on his case. He’s volatile. These episodes upset him and he needs time to calm down.” He forced himself towards composure. “Please have a seat. Finish your tart.”

“Funnily enough, I haven’t got much of an appetite.” She glared.

“Would you like me to have Galder show you out?” He asked with a great deal of very forced politeness.

“I’d like to go check on Harry.”

“You’ll be here in the morning. I’ll have Lobsey check on him tonight and I’ll go see him in the morning. If he’d like a visitor, you can see him then.”

She looked towards the door, then back to Draco, and spoke through gritted teeth. “Then if you’ll excuse me, I can see myself out.”

“As you prefer.”

“Thank you for dinner.” She seemed equally determined to leave and to avoid burning any bridges, and stiffly nodded her thanks.

“You’re welcome.” He returned the nod, watched as she bid Millie, Blaise, and Greg goodnight and left the room, giving the door only marginally gentler treatment than Potter had.
A long moment’s silence hung over the room before Pansy crossed her arms and sighed.
“Gryffindors. Can’t even exit a room without making it an act of war.”

“Pansy?” Draco sighed. “Do shut up.”

She harrumphed, but obliged, and Draco ate the rest of his tart to the sound of small talk, with his eyes trained on the doorway.
Chapter 6

Potter, by way of Lobsey, declined Draco’s requests for visits after dinner. Each message was written with the sort of pained politeness Draco hadn’t known him capable of, and had, himself, long since lost patience for. “I appreciate your concern, but regret to say that I’m a bit under the weather.” “If you’re under the weather, all the more reason for a visit.” “Thank you for your thoughtfulness. I assure you that medical attention is not necessary. A bit of rest should do the trick.” And so on, until Lobsey started to look a little peaked with all the walking back and forth through the void.

If Draco gave up sooner than he might otherwise have done, it was because he was entirely preoccupied with the question of Potter’s outburst. Come morning, he declined a breakfast tray and returned to the dining room to assess the state of things.

The chandelier was in perfect condition. Pansy was not. Draco could practically see her hackles rise when he slid the door open.

“Morning,” she said coolly.

“Good morning,” Draco replied from just inside the doorway.

“I didn’t realise guests were allowed to demolish the place. That’s years of wasted opportunities. Unless you’re going to start threatening to kick him out, too?”

Draco blinked. “Congratulations. You’ve packed so much quasi-passive aggression into a single sentence I’m not even sure where to begin.”

She *hmphed* and stabbed an egg yolk.

He ignored the empty seat at the head of the table and pulled out the chair across from her. “I have no intention of kicking you out. Are you actually concerned?”

She set her fork down with unnecessary force. “You haven’t exactly made a point of emphasising hospitality to anyone but Potter.”

“You live here. I didn’t realise hospitality was required when I’m more the guest than you are.”

She *hmphed* again. “Are you? You’ve been perfectly clear that we’re all here on your terms.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Terms that have long included a promise that you and Greg can stay here. Have I ever made a point of breaking my promises?”

She scoffed and raised an eyebrow.

“To you,” he amended.

With a sigh, she leaned back and crossed her arms. “Not lately. But you haven’t made a point of doing anything with them. Leaving us to our own devices for a decade is promise-keeping by default.”

“Did you want a monthly reaffirmation?”

“Hardly,” she bit out. “But a bit of notice beyond some perfunctory letter from a secretary we’ve never heard of would’ve been nice before the Ministry started traipsing through. On top of
terrifying the ever loving daylights out of Greg, the sudden arrival of a coterie of Aurors doesn’t exactly suggest the maintenance of the status quo.”

“Fair.”

Pansy paused, looking quite thrown off.

Draco suppressed a smile.

“What did you say?”

Draco leaned back in his chair. “I said that’s fair. I should have sent a more detailed letter, and done it myself. In the rush of preparations I left it to my office staff and Millie and figured you’d be content to take Millie’s word, but I can see where a personal letter would have been more effective.”

“Yes. Well. It would have been.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Millie told me that you and Greg had taken up almost entirely in the West Wing and the Ministry had strict instructions not to disrupt anything on that half of the estate, which it looks like they’ve kept to, though if they haven’t, I’ll have a word. You’re welcome to stay there for as long as you like.”

“And the conditions?” She asked, voice still ripe with suspicion.

“What have they ever been?”

“A no-strings-attached arrangement with a Malfoy was always suspicious.”

“Would you like to draw up paperwork? I’ll sign.”

“I’m no less worried about what it would say.”

“Thus offering to let you write it. The terms could be as they have been: you and Greg can stay here free of rent, with full exclusive use of the grounds and elves unless the family or other guests are in residence, in which case you are each welcome to keep a suite of rooms and share usage of the house and grounds.”

“Why?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Now you know we’ve got jobs. Wasn’t that the point? Save us from the streets? Keep us out of filthy hovels until we were back on our feet? Which, as you were certainly quick to point out, I could be if I’d only give up what you clearly think is a foolish attachment to the country of my birth.”

“So, then?”

“The point was also to keep you safe.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I haven’t been in Paris just for the food. I’m not any keener than you are on taking a stroll down
Diagon Alley. You know none of this has been put to rest, really. Between Flint’s blood status bill and the Ministry’s politics and the number of unburied hatchets sure to be floating around in the general population… it’s all still with us. Some more than others,” he added. “Especially those of us who actually said or did anything, no matter our reasons. I doubt that Greg makes enough to live somewhere in the magical world that is secluded and secure enough to keep him safe from vigilantism. And if I’ve understood correctly, your income can’t become public knowledge, lest it raise questions. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“And, if we’re being entirely candid, we both know that you wouldn’t be happy with less than the lifestyle to which you’ve grown accustomed.”

“Don’t patronise me. We were raised with the same lifestyle, and if I remember the months before the trials correctly, the prospect of losing it didn’t sit especially well with you, either.”

“No, it didn’t,” he conceded.

“And what’s to say you won’t tell me to go enjoy the lifestyle to which I’ve grown accustomed in Siberia?”

“You’ve got the right cheekbones for those big fuzzy hats,” he tried for humour. It fell flat. “I was joking. No one should go to Siberia. My father might be there.” She didn’t move a muscle. No hint of a smile. “Pans. I’m not going to ask you to leave the house, much less the country. I might’ve wanted to leave, but that doesn’t mean I get to tell you too.”

“I won’t be your kept woman,” she snapped.

Draco’s eyebrows shot up and he couldn’t stop himself barking a laugh. “Pansy. As you re-established last night, that’s hardly my cup of tea.”

“Yes, because no gay pureblood has ever married for convenience, or the production of an heir.”

“And clearly, between the joint Muggle-magical degree and the out-and-proud top-of-the-gossip-columns gay fucking, I’m of the opinion that upholding pureblood tradition is the way forward.”

“We never know how our upbringings may revisit us as we age.”

“Bite your tongue. I will not be aging into Lucius. Nor am I old, thank you.”

She bit her tongue between her teeth, sticking it out at him in the process.

“Lovely.”

“I won’t produce your heir, Draco. Not for a place to live or anything else you might offer.”

“It would never have occurred to me to ask you to.”

“You weren’t back more than an hour before you raised the topic of our betrothal.”

“I did?” He was genuinely confused, but raised a hand to forestall her objection. “I might have mentioned it, I suppose, but I’m certain I didn’t ask. Nor will I, since you’ve mentioned it. It hasn’t planted any seed. So to speak.”

“And it better not.”
“You’ve gone from worrying about being kicked to worrying about being impregnated and kept here permanently in an awfully short window.”

“I’m a writer. Full of imagination.”

“As long as you realise it isn’t going to happen in reality.”

She pursed her lips. “If you don’t drive us out, there’s still Potter to worry about.”

“He’s not going to drive you out. It’s not his house or his choice to make.”

She picked up her fork and sliced into an egg white. “Haven’t heard from Prippa or Galder yet this morning, I take it?”

“No.” He frowned. “Should I have?”

“Might want to call for them.”

He gave her a look, but did as suggested.

Galder popped into the room looking thoroughly frantic, and with his tea towel dripping water on the floor.

“Master Draco.” He bowed, panting. “Mistress Pansy, we is still working, but we has elf magic, we is fixing everything now.”

“Fixing what?” Draco sat up in his seat.

Galder bowed deeply, which made it that much easier for him to twist his ears half into corkscrews. “Mistress Pansy and Master Greg, sir, they is having troubles in their rooms.”

He shot her a look, half expecting Galder to recount a tantrum. Would be out of character for Greg, but Pansy could put the fear of Salazar in anyone. “What kind of troubles?”

“They is iced over!!” Galder’s eyes grew to resemble saucers. “Last night they is going upstairs and they is finding icicles everywhere! They is finding frost on the beds and ice on the hearth and Mistress Pansy is finding the whole floor is ice! Mistress Pansy is very lucky she is not hurt, and Master Greg—” Galder’s lip quivered “—Master Greg is hurting his ankle!”

“Does he need medical attention?”

“No, Master Draco! Galder is fixing it, Master Greg is fixed and he is resting, Master Draco, sir.” His eyes grew impossibly larger. “Except Master Draco is the best, best of all, Master Draco can go see Master Greg, of course he can, yes!”

“I’m sure you handled it well, Galder. Is this why you’re soaking?”

“Oh!” Galder looked down at himself and jumped. “Master Draco! We is sorry!”

Draco drew his wand and cast drying and warming charms in quick succession. “Not to worry.”

Galder seemed to shiver into the warmth. Draco wondered aloud how long they’d been at it.

“Since Mistress and Master found it after dinner! First we is making up the grey rooms for Master Greg and the red rooms for Mistress Pansy, then we is melting the ices in tiny, tiny pieces.”
“I’m sure the floors appreciate it.”

“Yes, Master Draco! Galder is not allowing any damage to the house, oh, no. Never, never, never.” He let go of his ears and puffed his chest out a bit at that proclamation.

“Of course. I would expect no less.”

Through his weariness, Galder practically preened.

“Can you tell me, Galder, when the ice formed?”

Galder’s face fell “Galder is sorry, Master, Galder is not knowing. We is all in the kitchen during big dinners. Mistress Pansy and Master Greg is not having ice in their rooms before dinner and they is after, but Galder is not knowing when.”

“During dinner, though?”

“Yes, Master Draco.”

“Thank you Galder. That’s helpful.”

The elf looked up, surprised and grateful, and bowed deeply. “Master is good and kind.”

“With the ice, do you have the spare hands to spare to prepare tea for the music room?”

“Of course, Master Draco! We is elves!” And with that, a still-flustered Galder popped out of the room.

Draco leaned back in his seat and gave a low whistle. “Potter?”

“Potter,” Pansy agreed.

“Across the house.”

“Quite some range.”

“That’s almost unbelievable.”

“Only almost? Not entirely unbelievable?”

Draco shook his head. “No. Not entirely.”

“Are you going to tell us what’s actually going on?”

He shook his head again. “I can’t, Pans. Truly, I can’t.”

“Even if the Chosen One has taken to, quite literally, freezing us out of our beds?”

Draco found himself without an answer.

“What if we had been in them?”

“He’s in the void at night. He can’t do anything like that.”

“And if we were napping? Or existing? I can’t imagine it would be any more pleasant to be frozen in the conservatory or the morning room.”
“No, I imagine not.”

“You can see where this might present a problem? Not to mention inspire a bit of curiosity?”

“Of course, on both counts.” He massaged his temples a moment before he forced himself to look up. “I still can’t tell you why he’s here, and his leaving is not an option. But he only comes out of the void when we’re working together. I’ll have Lobsey or Galder let you know when we begin and end, if you’d like to go elsewhere or keep your wand at hand.”

“That’s not especially helpful.”

“It’s all I can offer at the moment. I’ll see what else I can find.”

“But you won’t consider having him leave.”

“I can hardly have him leave in this condition. Imagine the damage he could cause.”

She gave a half-laugh. “Draco Malfoy’s home for the displaced and damaged. Who would’ve thought?”

He didn’t quite have it in him to laugh, but he did appreciate the softness that crept in around her eyes.

* * *

By the time he reached the music room, Draco was rather more distracted than was advisable for any sort of politically sensitive meeting. Something about Potter’s newest (unintentional, he had to remind himself twice) show of power felt like an answer, but he couldn’t work out how, and he certainly wasn’t going to figure it out in a meeting with half the Ministry.

He forced himself to take half a dozen calming breaths before he opened the door. It didn’t do much. Especially when he was immediately confronted with the ginger glare that seemed to emanate from the back of Percy Weasley’s head.

At least, for all that being a Malfoy had turned out to be a bit of an albatross, the social training still came in rather handy.

The elves had arranged four settees around a central coffee table, and covered it in cakes and fruit and a full tea set. With, he noticed, the least fragile of the Malfoy china. He really needed to find some way to reward Galder that wouldn’t set him to prostrating himself to the point of inconvenience. Weasley sat with Robards on one settee. Head Unspeakable Croaker looked uncomfortably at ease on another, with Granger next to him. The Minister and Millie, notepad perched on her lap and quill in hand, took the third.

Draco took the last for his own, announcing himself by sitting dead centre. Small talk ground abruptly to a halt as soon as he did so. He poured himself a cup of tea.

“Dr Malfoy.” Millie was, predictably, first to break the silence. “Thank you for hosting us.”

“Not at all.”

“I believe introductions are in order.” Mill paused for a split second. Draco could see her scrambling to sort out rank, and loved her all the more when she continued. “Doctor Malfoy, I don’t believe you’ve had the pleasure of meeting Head Unspeakable Croaker or Head Auror Robards.”
“No, indeed.” He rose and shook hands with each in turn, getting a constipated-looking smile from Croaker and a grim smile from Robards on top of two aggressively firm handshakes.

“Of course, you know Mr Weasley and Ms Granger, and the Minister.”

“I do. Weasley, Granger. Minister.” He nodded at each.

“Very well then,” Mill announced to the room. “We’re here to discuss Mr Potter’s progress. Dr Malfoy is overseeing his care. Unspeakable Croaker and Unspeakable Granger were at the head of his last team. Auror Robards is the head of Mr Potter’s home department, and he and Mr Weasley are managing public inquiries about his whereabouts. The Minister’s Office is coordinating efforts and, given the nature of the case, the Minister is taking a personal interest in progress and outcomes. Dr Malfoy, would you start us off with an update on Mr Potter’s care?”

Draco cursed himself silently, set his cup in its saucer, and made a mental note to ask for an agenda in advance next time. “Of course. As you know, we have constructed a magical void in the East Wing. Mr Potter remains within the void most of the time, and, as predicted, and as previously noted by Unspeakables Croaker and Granger,” he nodded at them, “he does not pose a threat to himself or others as long as he remains there, though I do have concerns about the potential for long-term side effects. I am conducting a series of diagnostics, in and outside of the void, but so far nothing is conclusive. I will continue in that vein until I am able to determine the source of his unpredictability, at which point I will be able to develop a more comprehensive treatment plan.”

“That’s it?” Robards asked into the ensuing silence. “Running more tests? No disrespect, Dr Malfoy, but aren’t we bending over backwards here because you’re supposed to be the best?”

“I am the best.” Draco raised an eyebrow. “And I might have got a bit further with a complete report up front. As it stands, critical information was omitted from the set of reports I received before leaving Paris.” He took a sip. “Those oversights effectively misled me as to the nature of Potter’s implant and the goals of this rather experimental treatment plan. I have had to start from scratch.”

Croaker relaxed, but Robards leaned forward. “Was information about Auror Potter’s schedule of upcoming events also omitted from the official dossier?”

“Auror Robards, if anything has been made abundantly clear, it is the importance of Potter’s schedule.”

Robards gave Millie a quick nod of approval. She offered him a very thin smile in return.

Weasley jumped in next. It was a visible struggle for him to look at Draco, and he jutted his chin and lifted his nose in a seated imitation of a proud strut. “We are very glad to hear that, Dr Malfoy, as returning him to public life is top priority.”

“For whom?” Draco asked, seeking Weasley’s gaze.

“For all involved.” Weasley looked back at him, refusing to give.
Granger interrupted their impromptu staring contest. “Dr Malfoy, as I’ve explained, Harry’s attendance at these events is of the utmost importance. That’s true, as I suspect you are suggesting, for the charities that benefit from it, but it is also true for Harry himself. He’s deeply committed to supporting each cause, and would be distressed to miss the year’s biggest opportunity to support the magical community.”

“Not to mention, it’s getting harder and harder to put off the press,” Robards added.

“Though,” Weasley interjected, “we are, of course, fully capable of doing so.”

Draco smiled thinly. “I’m very glad to hear that, Mr Weasley, as it simply isn’t possible to rush this process beyond the measures we’re already taking.”

Robards beat Weasley to the punch this time. “What measures are those?”

“Daily diagnostics, magical exposure, interviews and examinations, extensive research, and frequent consultation with Ms Granger and Ms Bulstrode.”

“How much time do you spend with Potter?” Robards asked.

“Several hours each day.”

“Surely, you could be doing more than that.” Croaker’s name matched his voice nicely. “We worked with him twice daily, in the morning and afternoon, without incident. He can be seen more than a few hours a day. We know it for a fact.”

“What can be done and what should be done are not always the same thing,” Draco replied.

Robards’ voice grew ever so slightly louder. “Who does it serve to keep him cooped up doing nothing half the time when we could be working towards a solution?”

“Auror Robards.” Draco took a deep breath and set his cup and saucer on the edge of the table. “Do you have any medical training?”

“I’m trained in Emergency Medical Response and regularly briefed on the latest research on physical and magical conditioning.”

“No, then.”

Croaker was clearly affronted. “Asking for an outside consultation is not a sign of inadequacy.”

“I agree completely. Though I’ll confess my surprise at hearing that giving over the reins of the case still qualifies as a consultation.”

“Perhaps we could have come to a more collaborative agreement if not for the ridiculous list of conditions that Unspeakable Granger insisted we meet,” Croaker spat.

Draco reminded himself for a second time that he was determined not to start liking Granger.
“Regardless, you have met them. Autonomy was at the top of the list, and if I tell you that I am working with my patient once a day, I am working with my patient once a day.”

“Dr Malfoy.” Shacklebolt sat forward, his voice considerably calmer than, if just as authoritative as, Robards’ or Croaker’s. “You are, of course, correct. We are all concerned for Harry’s health and safety, and I suspect my colleagues are simply disappointed to hear that he has a longer road ahead than we had hoped. Though I will confess that I share their concerns about his schedule, particularly with regard to certain pending legislation in the Wizengamot.”

“If you want him to testify so badly, create a void in the Wizengamot.”

“We’ve considered the possibility, I assure you. The MLE and Department of Mysteries have both expressed concern that any visible sign of ill health might compromise Harry’s safety. In addition to those who took an interest in him recently, there are several former Death Eaters who might wish him harm. We simply can’t afford the risk.”

“Your choice, Minister. I will not clear him to leave the grounds, let alone testify, until we have considerably more information.”

Granger leaned forward tentatively. “Dr Malfoy, I don’t mean any disrespect either, but is that up to you? If Harry wants to leave?”

“Potter is not a prisoner here, but I would be professionally and ethically obligated to advise him that leaving the grounds could result in harm to himself and others. His magic is simply too unpredictable. And, especially after the amount of time he’s spent in one magical void or another, going to the Ministry, being surrounded by that many witches and wizards on top of the building’s own magic, is likely to be overwhelming. Dangerously so.”

“But sometimes he’s fine,” Granger insisted.

“Sometimes he’s fine. Sometimes he isn’t.” Draco felt his temper getting shorter. “Is the associated risk one you think he’d like to take?”

Granger frowned and sat back.

“Then we reconsider the alternatives,” Croaker said.

“Agreed.” Robards nodded his head firmly, and Weasley did the same a moment later.

“Thank you, Auror Robards,” Croaker continued “As I have said before, your department did a commendable job in convincing the public that the Wand has been destroyed. One of our reasons for keeping it intact was to facilitate further study, which Auror Potter was quite willing to cooperate with. If the implant isn’t working we can simply remove it and return it to the Department of Mysteries for research. And safekeeping,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

Granger grimaced. “Actually, Unspeakable Croaker, we ought to hear Dr Malfoy out on that.”

A third point for Granger. Draco was starting to hope she did something properly loathsome in the near future. “Granger.” He nodded, then looked to Robards, Croaker, and Shacklebolt in turn. “You can’t remove the implant.”

“The hell we can’t,” Croaker spluttered.

“If you want to reduce Potter to a Squib, certainly.”
“What?” Robards sat up straighter still. “What are you on about, Malfoy?”

“I’ve explained it to Granger and Bulstrode. They can brief you fully. Long story short, the implants—the real implants, which are much less powerful than, say, sticking the entire Elder Wand in someone’s thigh—create a sort of magical dependency. The body’s natural ability to direct and project magic adjusts to that and loses strength, rather like an unused muscle. Between his time in the void and the power of this particular… well, I hesitate to even call it an implant. Between his time in the void and the power of the Elder Wand, Potter will find magic overwhelming once he leaves the void, and his ability to perform it will be greatly reduced if the Wand is removed.”

“Why didn’t we know about this sooner?” Robards turned to Croaker, voice ripe with accusation.

“The results are still under review for publication.” Draco drew their attention back. “Should’ve called me sooner.”

Croaker started speaking almost before Draco had finished. “There is nothing in our own research or experimentation to support that.”

“The first of three papers has been accepted for this spring’s volume of the International Association for Magical Medicine.” He suppressed a smile when Croaker’s eyebrows rose, almost certainly against his will. “You’re welcome to review the results when they become available. You have my recommendation in the meantime.”

Shacklebolt interrupted Croaker’s seething before it could take shape. “Thank you, Dr Malfoy. That is most useful. I hope, though, that you can understand our interest in a speedy resolution, particularly if the magical void is contributing to ill effects. Is there anything you can do to accelerate the process?”

“No.”

Silence hung heavy over the cakes.

Shacklebolt was first to recover. “The charity events begin in earnest on the fifth of December. Is there any chance of finding a solution before then?”

“Realistically? No.”

“I see.” Shacklebolt sat back thoughtfully.


The Minister was the first to speak. “In that case, shall we schedule a next meeting? I’m sure we’d all like to stay up to date on the details of the case.”

“Certainly. Same time, next week?”

“Next week?” Robards balked.

“If that’s when you expect to have more news,” Shacklebolt interrupted. “Though if you find anything sooner, I would ask you to notify Ms Bulstrode so we can all stay in the loop.”

Draco nodded his assent and rose. “If that’s all, I’ll be off. And would, in what I’m sure is an
unexpected turn for all of us, advise you to seriously consider whether your priorities lie in Potter’s political expedience or his actual wellbeing.” He gave a curt nod, lingering for a split second when he caught Granger’s eye, and turned and left the room.

* * *

He may have bowed to Potter’s interest in avoiding an unplanned meeting the night before, but Draco was not prepared to let him out of their morning appointment. Still in high dudgeon, he walked directly across the Manor to Potter’s sitting room and let himself in without knocking.

Potter looked up, startled, from—Draco had known it—his book.

“You do read.”

“Pardon?” Potter blinked.

“You told Pansy you didn’t.”

“Oh. Right. I—um. The conversation was a bit heated. Seemed best to smooth things over a bit.”

“Do you do that with your bosses, too? They’re right pieces of work.”

“What?” He closed the book, looking concerned.

“I’ll give it to you, Potter,” Draco ranted, pacing the room. “You’ve either got the temperament of a doormat or the patience of a saint.”

“They’re not bad.”

Draco turned to him, incredulous. “Not bad? By what bloody standard?”

“You mean Gawain and Kingsley?”

“And Croaker. And Granger and Weasley. Percy, that Weasley.”

“They’re all very dedicated to their jobs,” Potter offered without pause, as though the additions didn’t make much difference to the very practiced-sounding explanation he offered Draco. “They care deeply about doing their best work and improving conditions in the wizarding world. They’re good people, Malfoy—Dr Malfoy. Truly, they are.”

“Everything you’ve said speaks to their competence, Potter. Which, A, is frankly laughable considering our current circumstances, and becomes more of a joke with every meeting. And, B, says nothing of their character.”

“I know them,” Potter insisted. “They’re good people.”

Draco turned and narrowed his eyes. “Did you know that their primary interest is in getting you up and running in time to go raise some money?”

Potter paused. Draco didn’t think he looked at all surprised. “They’re under a lot of pressure, you know.”

Draco threw up his hands. “Do you hear yourself? Making excuses upon excuses for a group of people who would rather see you turned into a Squib than skip charity season?”

“I’m sure they didn’t say that.”
“Are you?” Draco arched an eyebrow at him.

“Yes,” he answered firmly.

“Which is it then? Doormat or saint?”

Potter frowned. “Being empathetic and trying to see the best in people isn’t the same thing as being a doormat.”

“No,” Draco agreed. “I’m a little empathetic. You’re a doormat.”

Potter hesitated. “I disagree.”

“Of course you do. Whatever, Potter. Let’s go.”


Draco looked him over. He was nervous, unmistakably so. “You don’t want to?”

“Just a bit tired from last night,” he equivocated.

“You know what happened, then?”

“Hard to miss an exploding chandelier, isn’t it?” He answered, chagrined. “And it was very rude of me leave so abruptly, after. I would’ve helped with the cleanup—should’ve done, I know—just didn’t want to risk another incident. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t know.” Draco was astounded. “Merlin.”

Potter pulled the book towards him, pressing it against his ribs. “There was something else?”

“Pansy and Greg’s rooms were completely frozen. Unless Babbity Rabbity hopped through the wards and did it herself, I’d say so.”

“Frozen?” Potter barely managed the word.

“Frozen,” Draco confirmed. “Though the elves are taking care of it. Should be put to rights by lunchtime.”

“Godric,” Potter muttered. He cleared his throat. “I really don’t think I should leave the void.”

“That’s not a solution. Merlin, Potter, do you want to live like a Squib? You can’t possibly like it in here.”

Potter shrugged, and his voice cracked as he tried to speak at something closer to a normal volume. “I don’t mind it. It’s a nice break from…” He trailed off. “Things, I suppose. From worrying about accidentally freezing people.”

“You didn’t freeze anyone.” In a flash of realisation, it dawned on Draco that Potter had never actually hurt anyone. He filed it away for later.

“That was luck. I could’ve done real damage.”

“You know what will happen if you stay in the void. Long-term.”

“Maybe that’s okay. Better than hurting anyone.”
Draco gaped. “You’re mad. Give up magic?” It wasn’t the first time he’d heard a patient say it, but hearing it from Potter, of all people, ignited something in him, something outraged and disbelieving. “You wouldn’t care at all? Merlin.” He shook his head. “Merlin. Might as well take the Wand out and have done with it.”

“Is that what would happen if they took it out? I wouldn’t be able to do magic?”

“Probably, yes.” Draco watched for his reaction.

“Oh.” Potter looked down at the book. Opened the cover and closed it again.

“Oh? That’s it? ‘Oh?’”

Potter shrugged again, but looked up at him this time. “If it would keep people safe, isn’t it worth it? What was it all for, if not that? Keeping the people I love safe? If I’m the threat to them, if this is the way to do that… It’s no less worth it now than it was then.”

“You’re absolutely barking.” Draco’s incredulity was rapidly turning into rage. “Is there something in the water at the MLE, driving you all mad?”

“Look,” Potter’s voice took on a new resolve, “maybe it isn’t your priority, okay? But it is mine.”

“You’re not some evil threat to them!”

Potter shook his head. “Those things are never as simple as we want them to be. You, of all people, must know that.”

“I’d ask what that’s supposed to mean, but I strongly suspect you’re trying to change the topic.” He laughed. “Though, now you mention it, I do have some rather up close and personal experience with evil. You’re not it, Potter.”

“Intention isn’t everything. If the effects are dangerous…” He trailed off with a sigh. “If it would keep people safe and resolve the problem permanently, perhaps it’s worth considering. That’s all I’m saying.”

“And I, as someone who has seen the aftereffects, am telling you you’re wrong to even entertain the thought.”

“Is it your decision?”

Potter had asked the question so politely that Draco couldn’t tell whether or not it was sincere and decided to avoid it completely. “Give me the chance to find an alternative before you consider it.”

“I can’t promise not to think about it, but of course, you’re the lead on this.”

Again, Draco couldn’t tell whether, or how, he meant it, and ploughed on regardless. “You need to spend more time outside the void. For your immediate and long-term health and, apparently, your sanity.”

“No.”

“Yes. You do. Dinner was not the right venue, clearly. There were surprises and, frankly, Pansy has made all of us want to blow something up once or twice.”

“But the freezing—”
“We’ll try again, but in much more predictable circumstances. Surely, there are people you miss. All those people you want to keep safe.”


“Let’s have them here. In the terrace gardens—somewhere you know, somewhere you’ve spent time without incident. Only people you know, who you feel safe with, who will be willing to take the risk for you.”

“No—” Potter started to object.

“Who would it be?” If Potter was a doormat for Robards and Croaker, he could damn well be a doormat for Draco too. “The Weasleys?”

Potter pressed his lips together.

“That’s a yes, then. Granger. Who else? Finnigan and Weasley.” He looked to Potter, who was still pointedly blank. “Oh, hang it, I’ll get a list from Granger.”

“Dr Malfoy.” Potter’s voice was strained.

“They’re all war veterans, Potter. They can handle themselves, just as we did at dinner. And we can put up shields over the gardens in case it’s anything like the roof tile.”

“Perhaps we could do it in here,” Potter offered.

“No. Out of the void.”

“I really don’t think—”

“They call me an expert for a reason.”

Potter pressed his lips together.

“Increasing your magical exposure is a top priority.”

“I appreciate that, but I’d rather not. I understand your concern, but the risk is bigger than the benefit. Of course they’re all very capable, but that’s no reason to put them at risk.”

“Let’s let them decide that for themselves.”

Potter frowned.

Draco decided to consider Potter’s lack of more fervent objection a victory. “I’ll see to the details.” He continued on before Potter could object. “For now, I want you outside, running laps. Go change.”

With a frown, Potter set his book on the chair and went to do as told.
Chapter 7

The marquee was Draco’s idea. Thirty feet long, moored to the Manor, magically reinforced, and entirely capable of redirecting any wayward roofing.

Granger was Potter’s idea. The one thing he’d insisted on. Which was how Draco found himself spending the half hour before guests were meant to arrive watching her cast Protega Totalums and Fianto Duris from the house to the stairs, with a level of focus that Draco was still roundly determined not to admire. She was thorough, certainly. In the interest of being annoyed he reminded himself that she was, therefore, also quite time-consuming.

She lowered her wand with barely five minutes to spare. She also, without the spells to keep her focused, glowered quite pointedly at the house elves as they popped in and out with trays of petit fours and tea sandwiches. Draco refrained from pointing out that the elves were entirely necessary if her spells were going to take so long and asked, instead, if she’d like to join him in escorting Potter to the garden. Granger couldn’t conceal her wariness as she looked to the void, but she replaced it with firm determination and accepted his offer.

As usual, Potter was sitting in a bergère next to the windows, a book open in his lap. He had given up on any attempt to read, though. He worried the edge of the pages and stared into the middle distance, seemingly oblivious to both of them.

Granger approached him slowly, resting a hand on his shoulder when he didn’t respond to her footfalls. He jumped at that, and Draco didn’t miss the speed with which he plastered on a smile. “Hermione.” He reached up to, as far as Draco could tell, remove her hand, though he tempered the gesture with a squeeze. “Is it time?”

“Yes.” She returned the squeeze, keeping his hand in hers. “Are you ready?”

“The corners of Potter’s fake smile turned up. “As I’m going to be. You’re sure it’s safe?”

“I’ve cast all the spells myself and Dr Malfoy has secured the marquee. And it’s all just outside, so if you start to feel overwhelmed you can come back in.”

“That’s not advisable.”

They both turned, with matching frowns, to look at Draco.

“I realise it’s not what you want to hear, but the more exposure you can manage, the better off you’ll be in the long term. We’ve created absolutely the safest scenario possible. All of the guests are competent wizards who will have their wands at hand, there are physical and magical barriers ensuring that nothing magical or material gets in or out, and Pansy and Greg and the kitchens are under their own set of shields as a backstop. This is an ideal scenario, and I cannot urge you strongly enough to take advantage of it.”

Granger wavered, looking as though she might object on Potter’s behalf.

He nodded and rose before she had the chance. “I understand. Doctor’s orders.”

Faint sounds of laughter filtered through the doorway. Draco caught Potter’s eye. “That’s time.”

“Right.” Potter nodded.
Potter was barely through the door before he was surrounded by a layer of ginger so thick Draco had to take a step back. Weasley—Ron Weasley—was first to him, pulling Potter in and slapping his back with considerable force before he was pushed out of the way by Weasley mère, who wrapped Potter in a hug that would’ve been the envy of any python.

Weasley père went next, gripping Potter by the shoulders, holding him at arm’s length and then pulling him in. Then the girl Weasley, who was gentlest of all. Certainly when compared to the remaining twin, whose handshake exploded into a shower of spectral silver snakes, which were declared to be in honour of their host. The oldest one, with the earring, settled for a non-explosive handshake, but his wife seemed to be taking lessons from her mother-in-law, and punctuated a stranglehold of a hug with a kiss to each cheek.

Potter looked a bit shell-shocked, though not unhappy, per se. Draco squeezed his way around the mass of them, making for the tea and keeping his eyes trained on Potter.

Finnigan arrived next, with Thomas in tow and, it seemed, half of Potter’s Auror class. Lovegood was late, almost fashionably so, and was so quiet in comparison to the rest of them that Draco might’ve missed her if not for the replica of the solar system rotating around her head in place of a hat.

The first round of petit fours was decimated within half an hour. Draco was confident that Granger’s protests would never gain too much traction in the larger wizarding world when only elves could replace them so quickly. He did catch Ron Weasley giving her an apologetic, abashed smile as he snagged one off a still-moving tray before he turned back to Potter who was, for once, smiling in a way that looked genuine.

Aside from random observations—some of them unmissable, as when Finnigan and the Weasley twin set the edge of the marquee on fire with some sort of firework—Draco made sure to have his attention on Potter at all times.

To his only slightly smug satisfaction, the first hour was, at least as far as Potter’s magic was concerned, wholly uneventful, and he resolved that it would be safe to try a sandwich for himself.

He had a mouthful of egg and cress when the sound of grating stone was followed by a dangerous straining of the marquee’s fabric.

Potter threw himself forward, pushing Finnigan and Thomas behind him and reaching for his wand. He didn’t even seem to realise he’d come up empty at first, for being so focused on defending his friends.

The marquee bounced back, sending a roofing tile flying into the shields, which reduced it to dust.

“Wicked,” the Weasley twin declared.

Reluctantly, Potter turned back to Finnigan and asked about the case in question. Draco didn’t miss him looking back to the spot every so often. Or, with increasing frequency, scanning the crowd until he met Draco’s eye.

Soon enough, the Weasley matriarch took over, checking Potter for injury and fretting over his wellbeing until she snared the girl Weasley and pulled her into the conversation. At which point
she developed a mysterious cough and simply had to go for tea and leave the two of them alone. The girl rolled her eyes and made a joke. Ginny, she was called. It put Potter more at ease, anyway, and she soon roped Lovegood into the conversation and they made it through another hour without incident.

Only an hour, though. Potter was talking to Ron Weasley this time, when the slate beneath them cracked into dozens of pieces. Weasley took it in his stride, crouching to repair it quickly. Potter looked quite ready to run back to the void. He settled for craning his neck frantically until he found Draco.

Draco shook his head firmly, mouthed, “No.”

Potter looked away, and didn’t look back again.

It was possible, between the various Weasleys cooing over him and elves appearing to repair the damage, that Potter was genuinely distracted, but Draco’s gut said otherwise. Potter was ignoring him intentionally.

It didn’t bother Draco, but it did intrigue him. Potter’s determination to avoid him was the sort of show of displeasure that Draco hadn’t seen that since Potter had arrived. And Potter in a snit was reassuringly familiar, compared to Potter the doormat diplomat.

And, anyway, it left him time for a cucumber and prawn sandwich and a teacake.

Things fell to pieces, rather literally, fifteen minutes later.

There was no warning or obvious sign, as far as Draco could remember after the fact. Potter was talking to Granger and Ron Weasley together and looked more or less at ease.

Then a pot of tea exploded so spectacularly that Draco first assumed the Weasley twin had dropped an explosive down the spout. The Weasley matriarch was scalded in the process, and as soon as Potter got wind of that two nearby benches splintered and crumbled to the ground.

Draco stayed well out of the havoc that ensued as Aurors and Weasleys scrambled over each other and the elves, trying to fix things and reassure each other and find Potter.

Potter, who was tugging on Draco’s sleeve and hissing something Draco couldn’t make out above the fray. He turned and pulled Potter towards the wall. “ Couldn’t hear you. What is it?”

“I have to go inside.”

Draco looked him over. His trembling shoulders and general pallor lent fairly irrefutable support to that claim.

Potter repeated himself, with more urgency. “I have to. Look at this. I have to. I can’t—I have to.”

Draco took another look at him and nodded, albeit reluctantly. “Go. I’ll make your excuses.”

Potter almost sagged with relief, nodded his thanks, and slipped back into the void more eagerly than Draco had ever seen anyone do.

He pulled himself to his full height and, with help of a light Sonorous, drew the crowd’s attention. “Thank you for your help. The elves will see to any property damage. Is anyone injured?” He looked to Weasley mère. The twin, standing next to her, answered that he’d dealt with quite a few burns in his line of work, and all was well. No one else stepped forward to report an accident.
“Excellent, thank you. I’m sorry to say that I’ve had to ask Mr Potter to return to his rooms.”

A mix of Weasleys and Aurors moved toward the void. Behind them, he saw that, at some point in the proceedings, a Japanese maple had dropped its leaves.

Draco forestalled them with an extended hand. “He will be perfectly fine, but needs his rest. I will pass on your good wishes. Please, take your time to enjoy the food and tea, with compliments, and thanks very much for coming.”

He turned towards the void, closing the door behind him as he entered. Potter was not in the sitting room, nor in the exam room.

Draco looked to his bedroom door, weighing the benefits and disadvantages of going in and interrupting Potter. So far it had been the only space that was uniquely Potter’s, and Draco was, for reasons he couldn’t quite place, not inclined to change that.

He knocked, but didn’t enter. Half a minute later, he knocked again. “Potter? All right in there?”

“Yes, fine.” The reply was rushed, but if Potter was in a state to give one, and back in the void, Draco wasn’t urgently concerned.

“Can I have Lobsey bring you anything?”

“No, thank you.”

Draco leaned against the doorframe. “Are you quite sure you’re all right?”

“Just a bit tired.”

“Please ring for Lobsey if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

“Everyone is fine, by the way.”

There was a pause. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good rest.”

* * *

Draco retreated to the library. He could hear the faint strains of lingering guests at first, but they’d died down completely by the time he had all of Potter’s files spread out on the table in front of him.

The day’s incidents were added to his running list. Time, place, event, outcome, what Potter had been doing at the time of the outburst and how he had reacted to it. He compared it with the records he’d received from the Department of Mysteries. For all the words they used, they didn’t actually give much information. Date, event, outcome. Speculation on what might have incited the Wand, but very little about Potter. He wondered how much Granger might remember.

Given what he had, and much to his displeasure, a pattern still eluded Draco. Potter had damaged things but not people, until the Weasley matriarch had been scalded. Incidental, but damage all the same. Incidents often occurred when Potter was talking to someone, but without knowing when exactly Potter had brought a localized ice storm to Pansy and Greg’s rooms, and without better records from the Unspeakables, Draco couldn’t know that it was always the case. Perhaps an issue
of fatigue? But Potter had cracked a tile within ten minutes of leaving the void during their first trip outdoors. And there were still no signs of an underlying magical or physical malady.

Draco sighed and dropped his head on to the files with a bang, and left it there until a loud pop signalled Galder’s arrival.

“Master Draco, sir?” The elf sounded tentative and just a bit afraid. Or perhaps concerned? Between Weasleys and Ministry types and the maddening puzzle of Potter’s condition, Draco was almost past being able to tell the difference.

He lifted his head. “Yes?”

“A letter is arriving for you, sir, from the Minister for Magic.”

Draco groaned and dropped his head back down, banging it twice against the table. When he lifted it again he found an unmistakably startled elf staring back at him.

“Is Master Draco wanting Galder to remove the letter?”

“No, no. Give it here.”

Galder shuffled forward, holding out a silver tray with the letter at its centre.

Draco lifted it and turned it over to see the Minster’s seal. “Thank you Galder. That will be all.”

The elf bowed deeply and left promptly.

Draco ran his thumb over the seal, half wishing it would prove unbreakable.

No such luck. The letter was as unfailingly polite as Shacklebolt always was, but the meaning was clear enough.

Dear Dr Malfoy,

Thank you for your kind hospitality this past week.

First, I write to assure you that you have our every confidence. Your investment in the case and your patient’s wellbeing is clear. That is an admirable quality in a researcher and a clinician. Your reminder of the ease with which our focus can drift away from the whole wizard is most welcome.

However, in the interest of seeing the larger picture, I would ask you to focus your attention, as well, on the other concerns raised during our meeting. If it is essential that we remember to care for the whole person, we must also see to his interests. In this case, those interests include a speedy resolution so that your patient may return to his usual affairs.

As I sat to write this letter, my secretary was kind enough to remind me of the date. December 5th is now little more than a week away. The other attendees at our meeting have since assured me that the alternative they proposed would be effective and efficient, resolving the problem and returning your patient to his daily activities. While the potential ramifications you mentioned would be substantial if realised, they also assure me that the procedure will be safe. They will write to your patient shortly with this proposal, and without an alternative we anticipate moving ahead with an eye towards completing recovery by the 5th of December.

I thank you, again, for your dedication and expertise, and I look forward to our next meeting.

Sincerely,
Draco dropped his head back to the table. “Fuck.”

* * *

Draco didn’t leave the library until well past ten. He’d Floo called Chloé to get the draft articles and ask for any new results and was as convinced as ever that taking the damn thing out would leave Potter even more magically impaired than he already was, probably permanently. He’d also done everything he could think of to find a pattern. Time of day, dates, number of days, anything. He’d given up when he got to reverse alphabetisation by name of person recording the incident.

He wandered towards the kitchens in something of a daze, exhausted and oversaturated, unable to completely stop running through the hundreds of tiny details that might, if he could figure out how to put them together correctly, yield an answer. He just needed the right book, or the right insight, some moment of genius.

Or, since none of that was forthcoming, he’d settle for a sandwich. Maybe he’d find inspiration in his breadcrumbs. It was, he chided himself, as good as anything else he had going.

The thought disappeared as soon as he opened the door to the kitchen.

Potter stood on one side of the marble island. Pansy was at the other. They were glaring daggers at each other, and Potter gripped the edge of the countertop so tightly his fingertips had gone white.

Millie and Blaise had pulled up stools and seemed to be watching with some fascination. Draco would’ve been annoyed, had he not been tempted to do the same.

He resisted the urge, in no small part because he was a bit captivated by Potter’s rage. Potter was seething, clenching his jaw and seeming to will himself, just barely, not to fly across the counter.

Pansy, without taking her eyes off Potter, was first to speak. “Draco. How nice of you to join our little party.”

“Is that what this is?”

“Mmm. Potter here was just explaining how I’m an evil tart. What else could it be?”

“Oh, Merlin.” Draco leaned against the doorway. “Must we? Really?”

“He’s the one with a problem.”


“No.” She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t think I will.”

“Pansy.”

She spun to face Draco. “Taking his side, are you? He hasn’t denied it, have you noticed?”

“There’s nothing to deny,” Potter spat, following her down the island. “You’re cruel, and you’re heartless, and you have no bloody right to talk about her like that.”

“Granger,” Blaise interjected.

Draco nodded. “Thanks.”
“Hermione,” Potter went on, “is a better witch than you could ever dream of being, you selfish, lazy—”


“It’s not heartless if it’s true. She’s done nothing to you. Nothing. And you sit across a table from her and make fun of her, and you come down here and talk about her like she’s nothing, like she didn’t help save the bloody wizarding world.”

“Please.” Pansy rolled her eyes. “She didn’t exactly—

“No. No,” Potter repeated. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking dare. What was your grand plan? Hand me over to Voldemort? Kill me yourself?”

Pansy hissed at the name. Even Mill and Blaise looked a bit taken aback, though Draco wasn’t sure whether it was at the name or the sentiment.


Pansy jutted her chin, and Draco knew Potter wouldn’t recognise it for the defensive gesture it was. “Well I was right, wasn’t I? You did have to die.”

“Yeah,” Potter laughed wildly. “I did, and I was willing to. I was willing to die for this world. Not lead a vigilante mob to try and save my own arse.”

Pansy’s fists clenched, and Draco could see her press into the countertop to steady herself. “I thought this was about Granger. Of course if it’s your character under discussion, who could ever compete with the perfect saviour, the Chosen One, the—”

“Sod off, you ungrateful bitch.”

Blaise sat up, looking surprised and just a bit impressed with Potter. Millie elbowed him.

“Oh, you wound me, Potter. No one’s ever called me that before. However will I survive?”

Potter snorted, a bitter sort of half-laugh that caught Draco off-guard. “Considering all the worthwhile people who’ve died? You know what, Parkinson?” Everything about him seemed to slow down as he looked her dead in the eye. “Compared to them? Compared to—” He stopped himself, as if denying her even the honour of hearing their names, or maybe unwilling to finish the insult.

He pushed himself off the island and shook his head again, never breaking her gaze. When she proved, in a rare turn of events, too stunned to reply, he turned for the door.

Draco had to press himself against the frame to let Potter pass, and still felt half-consumed by Potter’s anger. Potter radiated heat and moved with a kind of single-minded purpose that was so at odds with the patient he’d been treating that Draco did a double take to make sure it was really him.

It was, and then he was gone, his silhouette fading from view as he walked down the dim corridor.

Draco turned back to the kitchen. Pansy was gaping. Blaise and Millie had matching expressions of surprise. He took a step into the room. “What?”

Millie recovered first. “At least he didn’t blow anything up.”
Blaise snorted. “Sure about that? Have you checked Pansy’s head?”

That snapped Pansy out of it. “My head is fine.” She turned to Draco and crossed her arms. “He’s a right arsehole.”

Draco sighed. “What happened?”

“Nothing!”

“You said nothing? Nothing about Granger? No comment whatsoever?”

“Nothing actually offensive, unless you’ve all the thick skin of a tadpole.”

“Like, for instance?”

“It wasn’t even about Granger. I merely indicated, jokingly, as one does, some very small amount of surprise that Potter was capable of feeding himself without her assistance.”

They all three looked at her. Draco sighed. Millie shook her head. Blaise raised an eyebrow.

“What?” She huffed. “He can kill the Dark Lord but he can’t take a joke?”


She narrowed her eyes at him. “Apparently, I must. At least someone in this house has retained a sense of humour. Now, did you come down for food, or could Potter’s bellowing be heard upstairs?”

* * *

It was after a sandwich and two Scotches—and a very successful, fairly cathartic team effort to disprove Pansy’s theory about their collective humourlessness—that Draco sat straight up in bed.

He hadn’t. Nothing. The kitchen was entirely intact, as was everything in it, Pansy included. Draco had thought, in planning the tea party, that perhaps familiarity was a key, or safety. That had been a disaster, but when Potter was actually explosively angry, nothing.

Suddenly too jittery to sleep, Draco threw back the covers and began to pace.
He could barely wait until nine the next morning to talk to Potter. As always, Potter sat by the window with a book. But Draco saw him twitch as he approached, even though he didn’t look up from the text until Draco was practically looming over him.

When he did lift his head it was with clear hesititation, and the apology was out of his mouth before Draco had a chance to greet him. “I’m sorry about Parkinson. Pansy. It was rude of me.” He sighed and closed the book. “I’m happy to apologise. I should. It’s gracious of you to have me here, and I don’t mean to make your life more difficult.”

Draco gaped for a moment, fighting through the tiredness of a night spent devising new ideas to try to reconcile the quiet, apologetic man in front of him with the ball of rage that had walked past him the night before.

He couldn’t do it. “Never mind.” Draco waved a hand to dismiss it. “We’ve all gone a few rounds with her, and vice-versa. I recommend ignoring her sharper barbs and forgiving yourself the rest. Apologise if you’d like, but we have more pressing matters to worry about.”

It took Potter a solid ten seconds to recover himself. “We do?”

“We do. Change to run, please. I’d like to see you outside as soon as possible.”

After a quick stop in the exam room for his bag, Draco waited for Potter on the terrace. He was too impatient to even manage to take a seat on a newly reconstructed bench. Though it certainly didn’t feel like Potter was in a similar rush.

For all his focus, he almost missed Potter’s approach.

Potter, who still looked thoroughly tentative.

“Excellent. You’re here.”

“Er, yeah.” Potter scratched the back of his neck. “Should I start running?”

“No, not yet. First I’d like to redo our initial examinations.”

Potter shrank back. “Including casting?”

“Yes.” Draco reached into his robes and pulled out Potter’s wand.

Potter did not move to take it.

“The exact same spells as before.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I think… best not.”

“It’s not all the same to me.” Draco held out the handle of the wand. “You can, of course, decline to do anything I suggest, but if you’re willing it could be quite instructive.”

Potter took the wand, but wrapped his fingers around it so lightly Draco worried it might fall through them.

“All the same spells again. Lumos to start, a patronus, levitation, and then I’ll ask you to end a
spell of mine.”

Dubiously, Potter cast *Lumos*. It wasn’t quite as big as it had been, but the light was strong and steady until he ended the spell. The same was true of the others. His Patronus wasn’t quite as energetic, his levitation not as precise, but those were common symptoms of magical atrophy, and Draco would have expected them to be much more pronounced at this point. Otherwise, the spells all behaved properly.

Draco levitated a fallen leaf off the path. “Good. Now try ending my Wingardium.”

“*Finite.*”

Draco felt a tug at his magic, perhaps even more powerful than it had been last time, and the leaf fell to the floor.

“Excellent. Now, a test of endurance. Pick a leaf and levitate it, and we’ll see how long you’re able to hold it.” Draco pulled out his pocket watch.

Potter looked nervous but complied.

Draco waited, eyes on the second hand. Sixty seconds. Ninety. Two minutes, at which point Potter was at the average time for healthy adults. “Do you want to apologise to Pansy?”

“Huh?” Potter startled, but the leaf stayed where it was.

“You mentioned apologising to her. Do you actually want to? Or do you just think you should? I was under the impression that your comments were not entirely undeserved.”

Potter focused on the leaf. “No one should be spoken to like I spoke to her.”

“Ideally, no. But Granger is a good friend of yours, and Pansy hasn’t been especially flattering. Or basically decent, where she’s concerned.”

Potter didn’t reply.

“If you didn’t want to apologise, I—and Mill and Blaise, certainly, and I think most anyone—would understand. Considering—what was it she said about Granger’s teeth at dinner?”

Potter hadn’t looked up, and didn’t then. Though if he had, he would have seen one side of a Beech tree drop its remaining leaves.

Draco barely suppressed a victorious shout. “And certainly, given some of the things she said to you last night.”

“It’s not a problem.” Potter grit his teeth. The leaf didn’t so much as wobble. “I was out of line.”

Draco glanced at his watch. Three minutes. Beyond what he’d expect from a healthy adult wizard who was focused on the task. More focused than Potter currently was. “How does the spell feel?”

“Fine.”

“Good. You can stop whenever you’d like.”

Potter looked over his shoulder at Draco. “I can?”

“You can.”
Just like that, Potter sagged, dropping his arm and the leaf along with it. He held out his wand to Draco. “Thank you.”

“Sure you don’t want to keep it?”

Potter shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“If you want it back, please do let me know.” He took it and tucked it into his robes.

Potter nodded, but didn’t give any indication of interest in having his wand for a second longer than necessary. “Running?”

“Yes. The usual path, twenty laps.”

Draco watched him run. If this had been a first exam, and if he hadn’t noticed the Beech, Draco would’ve said Potter was in very good magical condition, and he was in excellent physical condition as well. Mostly, the running seemed to soothe him. He never had an outburst while he ran, and any time spent out of the void was to the good. Draco didn’t intervene, therefore, when Potter ran a 21st lap, or a 22nd.

At the 30th, Draco called him to a halt. Potter was breathing heavily and had a healthy flush, but otherwise showed no signs of strain. Disappointment at stopping, but not overexertion.

“That it?”

“Almost. I’d like to redo the initial physical exam as well.”

“Oh. Okay.” Potter turned towards the house.

“Outside of the void, if you will.”

“Oh.” Potter, still catching his breath, took a moment to catch on. “Out here?”

“If you’ll have a seat on the bench.”

Still caught up in the state of mind that seemed to come from running, Potter complied without objection.

Draco recast his diagnostic spells. Still no signs of illness, magical or Muggle. He cast standard medical spells. All normal. Save the explosions, Potter was hale and hearty.

“Right then, just the physical.”

“Okay. Yeah. What do you need?”

“Blood pressure and heart rate. For comparison to your previous. Shirt off, please.”

“My shirt?” Potter looked just a bit startled.

“I’d like to take your vitals outside of the void. There shouldn’t be a difference, but it’s better to be certain. Though if you’d rather go inside, that’s fine. And you can, of course, decline.”

“We’d still be out of the void, inside?”

“Yes. We could go to the library or the dining room.”
“It’s fine. Here’s fine.” Potter crossed his arms, hugging his ribs and squeezing his biceps.

“Would you like to cast a warming charm?”

“No, no that’s fine.”

Draco waited, wondering at Potter’s shift from unusually relaxed to uncommonly nervous.

“Oh.” Potter stammered. “Right.” He dropped his arms and inhaled before quickly peeling off his top and setting it next to him.

“Thank you. Rest your arm on the back of the bench, please.”

Potter did as he was told, and let Draco slip the cuff around his arm.

“120 over 80.” He removed the cuff and traded it for his stethoscope, rubbing it over his palm for warmth and bending over Potter to set the diaphragm against his chest. “Breathe deeply.”

Potter’s heart beat steadily, though a bit quickly. No hint of a murmur or arrhythmia.

“Okay.” Draco stepped back. “From the back. Would you turn, please?”

Potter propped his arm on the back of the bench and twisted.

Draco sat behind him and set the diaphragm against the top of his shoulder blade. Potter tensed beneath it. “I’m sorry if it’s cold. Should warm up in a moment. Please keep breathing deeply.”

Potter’s lungs sounded clear. His heart rate was still quicker than Draco would’ve liked.

“Keep going.” He moved to trace the other shoulder blade. There was nothing abnormal about Potter’s breathing, though he did feel warm to the touch.

Draco removed the stethoscope from his ears. “I’d like to take your temperature, if that’s all right.”

Potter didn’t look at Draco, but he did nod his assent.

Draco handed him the thermometer and returned the stethoscope to his bag. When he stood, he saw the source of that warmth: the outer seam on Potter’s left thigh was glowing red. As Draco watched in shock, it began to curl back on itself, issuing a wispy strand of smoke that quickly dissipated into the breeze. Potter was still looking away, and seemed to be unaware.

“Potter.”

His eyes opened and he looked up, mouth still clamped shut around the thermometer.

“I’m going to cast a spell on you now. Is that all right?”

Potter looked perplexed, but nodded.

Draco drew his wand and aimed it directly at the seam. “Aguamenti.” His wand produced the thinnest stream he could manage, dousing the nascent fire.

Potter jumped and issued a startled yelp, barely managing to keep the thermometer in place.


He stood looking at Potter, who had turned to inspect the seam, running his hand over it with no
small amount of confusion.

Draco watched him, until Potter turned to look at him. Draco couldn’t quite figure out his expression. In the interest of moving along, he decided to against pressing the point. “The thermometer, please?” He held out his hand.

Potter took it from his mouth and handed the clean end to Draco. “What—?”

“Very good.” Draco said, his mind turning things over too quickly for him to be able to answer anything Potter might come up. “Perfectly normal. That’s all for today, if you’d like to get dressed and go inside.”

Potter sat for another moment, looking at him. Draco hoped for Potter’s sake that he’d try to ask the question again, and hoped for his own sake that Potter wouldn’t. Perhaps predictably, Potter didn’t. Instead, he pulled his shirt on and stood. His face was carefully blank. “Is that all?”

“Yes.” Draco tried to sound more definite than he felt. He’d thought he was on to something. An answer, even. But if he’d been right about the trigger for Potter’s outbursts, this latest one certainly complicated matters.

“Okay.” Potter began walking towards the door.

Draco watched him go. He was halfway to the Manor when Draco remembered Shacklebolt’s letter. “Wait,” he called. “Potter. That’s not it.”

Potter stopped and turned.

Draco hurried to catch up. “Have you got any post this morning?”

“Not yet,” Potter answered.

“Good, I’m glad about that. You should receive some this afternoon. This might be an odd request, but I’d ask you not to read it until we’ve had a chance to speak.”

“Why?”

Draco was taken aback. Though, once again, in the reassuringly familiar sort of way he’d felt when Potter had resorted to ignoring him at the party, and he wasn’t sure what to do with that, other than move on. “Because of the contents. It contains medical advice that I’d ask you, at a minimum, to examine critically.”

Potter knit his brow. “You already know what’s in the letter?”

“I’m fairly certain I do, yes.”

“Then why can’t we discuss it now?”

“I.” Draco stopped. “I suppose we can. If you’d like to.”

“More than waiting for a letter that I’m then not allowed to open, full of medical advice I’m not supposed to take or, apparently, know about, even though you and whoever wrote it already do.”

“Yes. That’s very fair. Have a seat.” Draco pointed towards the bench.

“Can we go inside?” Potter gestured towards the Manor. “It’s a bit chilly when I’m not running.”
“You could cast a warming charm.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to go inside?”

“Not especially, for a wizard.”

“I’d rather not cast a charm.”

Draco studied his face for a hint of his intention, but Potter had completed his return to polite inscrutability. “Very well, then. Lead the way.”

Potter led him into the void, past two clusters of settees, and past his usual bergère. He settled into an identical chair at the next window. It had a mate on the other side of the window frame and Draco took it, torn between being frustrated by Potter’s determination to keep him at a distance and being glad of it.


“Yes. It will, I suspect, be co-signed by Robards and Croaker. Possibly Granger and Shacklebolt as well.”

“Okay.”

“They’re recommending that you have the Wand removed.”

“Okay.” Potter seemed entirely nonplussed.

“However, as I’ve mentioned before, removing the Wand would interfere with your ability to perform magic. Especially given the amount of time you’ve spent in isolation and the strength of the implant, I would expect a significant reduction in your ability to perform both job-specific tasks and daily spellwork. While they’re very focused on finding a quick resolution which, I grant, this would be, I cannot impress upon you strongly enough how high the costs would be.”

“But it would keep the people I love safe. I could see them again without worrying.”

“Perhaps,” Draco scrambled. “But perhaps not. If magic is overstimulating you would struggle with visiting magical homes and shops. Working at the Ministry would be difficult, if not impossible. And the loss of magical strength would make it difficult for you to compensate with magical interventions. Shield charms, for instance, or the creation of temporary voids.”

“But they could come see me.”

“They could, yes. But you would be largely separate from the magical world. It would change your entire life. You wouldn’t be able to return to work, would struggle to go to friends’ birthday parties or to attend holiday celebrations if they were held in magical spaces.”

Potter looked down into his lap, and away from Draco. “But I wouldn’t be doing all sorts of unpredictable things. That has to be for the best.”

“You would be very close to living as a squib. You might have to return to the Muggle world, at least in large part.”

Potter examined a fingernail. “They wouldn’t recommend this if that was true.”

“They don’t want to believe that it is. But I assure you, Potter, I absolutely guarantee, that they’re wrong. They haven’t seen all the research. I have.”
Potter drew a long breath and picked at the side of his nail. “I would be able to go to this round of balls and things though, right? And it would be over quickly?”

“Maybe. If you could tolerate that amount of magical stimulation, and with so much magical atrophy that you’d be a bit of a sitting duck. But never again. This one season in exchange for all the others? It can’t possibly be that important.”

Potter shrugged. “I’m very passionate about these causes.”

“So passionate you want to make sure you’re never able to go to another event again?”

Potter lifted one shoulder. “I’d find a way.”

“If you think so, you’re not hearing me. And what about your job? Your friends? I was under the impression that you considered the Weasleys something of a family. To never be able to join them for Christmas again?”

Potter’s voice was even. Quiet. “Keeping them safe is the most important thing.”

“You couldn’t very well keep them safe as a squib,” Draco argued.

“I could if I’m the thing they need to be protected from.”

“You aren’t!” Draco exploded out of his seat. “Do you hear yourself? You aren’t. You haven’t done anything wrong. The Unspeakables got overconfident about a highly experimental procedure that they never should’ve done in the first place.”

“It’s done now.” Potter stood too, though without any of Draco’s urgency. “If I’m the most dangerous thing to them now… If this will protect them, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Draco threw up his hands and crossed the room, pacing, trying to buy time or bring on inspiration or something to keep Potter from being so damned calm about the prospect of losing so bloody much.

He whirled on the spot when it hit him. “What about the Wand? It was acting up before it was implanted. Dangerously so, right? What do you think will happen when you have to leave the magical world altogether? You can’t take it with you, you won’t be able to defend it. But if it’s the Department of Mysteries and starts behaving erratically, that’s dangerous as well.”

“Or if I’m not really magical any more it won’t want me for a master, and Hermione or someone will be able to win it from me.”

Draco gaped. “You want to give up the Elder Wand, and all of your magical powers, and your job, and your friends. That’s not any sort of a problem for you.”

“No,” Potter corrected. “I’m not saying I think it would be easy. I just—I’ve paid higher prices to keep people safe before, and I’d do it again if that’s what it took.”

“But it doesn’t have to take that!” Draco could hear his voice getting louder, could feel his patience slipping.

“Not all of us care as much about power as you do.”

“This isn’t about that!” Draco yelled.

Potter flinched away. “There’s no other solution.”
“Yet! There’s no other solution yet! I need time, Potter. I have an idea, at least one, and I need time to figure it out. If you do this, there’s no going back.”

“I don’t think we have very much time, do we? The galas start on the 5th.”

“Fuck the galas.”

“The hearing will be scheduled soon, and that won’t be long after.”

“I’ve told Shacklebolt, and I’m telling you: there are other ways. If you want to speak, if they want you to testify, they can create a void in the courtroom. I’ll do it myself.”

“What do you care?”

Draco was stunned into speechlessness. A few charged feet hung between them. He couldn’t find the words for an answer, though the importance of doing so hit him harder than he would’ve thought.

At last, he cleared his throat and resorted to simple reason. “You’re my patient. I care about your wellbeing. As a researcher and a clinician, I am concerned with finding the best outcomes and correcting previous teams’ unethical lapses in experimental procedures.” He paused, looking again for the right words to explain why it all felt so urgent. “And frankly, Potter, I do believe I owe you one.”

He looked away. “It’s fine. Your mum made it up.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Potter. I don’t want to see you living as a Squib, exiled from the magical world. We wouldn’t even have the world we do without you, and you’d let yourself be removed from it that easily? What about what you want, or deserve? Shouldn’t you get to bloody well enjoy it?”

“Why?” Potter, bewildered, looked back to him.

“What?” Draco rasped, stunned.

“Nothing.” He leaned against the window, his back to Draco. “I’ll think about what you said, but without an alternative…”

“Give me time. I’ll find an alternative”

Potter sighed and traced the edge of the window frame with a finger. “How soon would they need to do the surgery, for me to go to whichever ball it is on the 5th?”

“How long was it last time?”

Potter shrugged. “A couple of days.”

“I don’t agree with this estimate, but they say it would be the same again.”

“So then the 2nd, to be safe.”

“I suppose so, yes.”

Potter pinched the curtain between his knuckles and let it drop again. “When I get the letter I’m going to tell them to schedule for the morning of the 2nd. If you have a solution before then… maybe. We’ll see.”
“Four days.”

Potter sighed. “Four days.”

“We’ll keep working together in the meantime.” Draco didn’t intend it as a question.

Potter shrugged. “Okay.”

“I will find an answer, Potter.”

He shrugged again. “Yeah. Okay. Though it’s okay if you don’t, too, you know.”

Draco gaped at the back of his head. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning. Nine o’clock.”

“Okay.”

Draco turned and left the room without being able to find another word.

* * *

As was quickly becoming routine, a panicked Draco made straight for the library. His notes were still arrayed across the table, and he set to reorganising them, as though that would yield an answer.

It couldn’t. He’d done it every way he knew how, and nothing was more compelling than the theory he’d come up with during his middle of the night pacing.

But if he was right that unexpressed emotions were driving Potter’s accidental magic, then for Potter to have set his seam on fire while Draco was working with him, touching him, might mean… Well. Nothing productive. Certainly nothing simple. And given Potter’s history, almost certainly incorrect.

Draco turned to books, then, instead of thinking any more about it. They had the advantage of offering familiarity. The feeling of parchment against his fingertips, the sound of pages turning. The promise that if he kept looking he might find the perfect bit of information, the key to this puzzle. It had happened before. Books on illnesses, on wandlore, on the history of magic. And the Manor had volumes he hadn’t seen in ages, let alone thought to check. There would be an answer there. There had to be.

He scoured the shelves in a panic and started flipping through volume upon volume as quickly as he could. He was still reading when Galder set a tea tray on the far end of the table, when Lobsey removed the untouched food again, when the sconces flared to life at sunset. He was so focused he almost missed the sound of heels approaching.

“Draco? Are you behind that stack of books?”

He sat up, blinking. “Hello?”

“Can I help you? I’m in the middle of something.”

“I sent a message and didn’t hear back. Need to settle on a time for the next meeting.”

“Fuck the next meeting.” Draco went back to his book.

“Is that am or pm?”
Draco scowled. “Do you know what they want to do to him?”

She sighed and pulled out the seat nearest his. “Yes.” She dropped into it. “And I’d guess we agree that it’s a shit choice. But it’s not ours to make.”

“The way they push him around, it’s hardly a choice at all.”

“Draco.” She reached out a hand and rested it on his arm. “Come on. I know you’re giving this everything, and I know you’d hate to be pre-empted before you find a solution, but…” she trailed off with a half-shrug and a resigned look.

“I’m going to solve this. I will not let some incompetents destroy his magic so that they can use him for some short-term political gain.”

“The SAFE Act isn’t as simple as that,” she reminded him, though thankfully with only the barest hint of reproach.

“And the balls?” He glared at her. “Very important galas? That’s what it comes down to. You know there’s a solution to the Wizengamot issue.”

“And you know there are problems with it.”

“The Ministry has an entire department devoted to public relations and you couldn’t find some sort of cover story? You’ll excuse me if I find that difficult to believe.”

She sighed. “Okay.” She sighed again. “Look, I come in peace, don’t shoot the messenger, et cetera.”

He huffed, but he felt his shoulders loosen. “I know. I do. It’s just… frustrating. To say the least.”

“I’m sure.”

“And what they want to do is unconscionable.”

“What they want to do. They haven’t done it yet. You still have time.”

“Right,” Draco laughed. “Four days.”

“I’m going to suggest something you won’t like.”

He laughed again. “Surprise, surprise.”

She slid the book out from under his hands. “I’m going to suggest that you step away. Take a break. Come back to this with fresh eyes.”

“And lose the time? When there’s barely any time left?”

“And be able to work more efficiently in the morning.”

“Mill.”

“Draco. You know there’s something to be said for that. And we’re going out tonight. Greg has an early job, but Pansy and Blaise and I. Come with us. Just for a few hours. Clear your head. You can be back here first thing in the morning. Tell Galder to bring you up a tray at 7, or 6. Whatever you need to do. We’ll get you home early. But come out.”
He sighed and looked at the stack of books, and his vision swam just a bit which, he supposed, proved her point. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”
Millie had always had good sense, and Draco knew it. She’d had the good sense to stay out of taking sides in the war, for one. And when that had made her the best situated out of the lot of them to get actual gainful employment when it was all over, she’d had the good sense to run with that, pretty much straight to the top. And on her way, she’d cultivated a clever, grounded wit that had been lurking in Pansy’s pretty, melodramatic shadow during their Hogwarts years. That was an end on its own, but she didn’t seem to mind particularly that Blaise had decided her candour and intelligence were far more alluring than the cleavage thrown his way at book release party after book release party. So, Draco realised, he probably shouldn’t have protested at all when she suggested they go out. It was, predictably, a good idea, and the time spent arguing was time wasted.

It felt really, unreasonably good to be out, and better still to be dancing. Between the insane rush to prepare for this case and the intensity of working on it, he hadn’t been properly out since the night before Millie called. An oversight on his part, surely, because this was better than he’d even remembered.

Blaise had picked the spot, a Muggle gay club in Brighton that was popular with the wizarding crowd and close enough to the beach to allow for discreet Apparition. It was clearly chosen with Draco in mind. He didn’t object.

Once convinced, he’d thrown on a t-shirt, his best Muggle jeans and an old leather jacket he’d picked up in le Marais fixed his hair, and been ready to go before the rest of them. Pansy had been last down, in a strapless leather dress that was as scandalous as it was gorgeous, even by Draco’s standards, and Blaise and Millie had Side-Alonged them to the beach.

Draco had been first through the door and muscle memory had taken over from there. The pulse of a good bass line shut off the more anxious parts of his brain straight away, and he let his instincts win out. There was immediate relief in the crush of other bodies against his own, in the reflexive desire to move with the beat.

It was almost an hour before he looked up. He saw Millie and Blaise first, entwined on the dance floor and so entranced with each other that when a shirtless, be-glittered bloke attempted to grind up behind Blaise, Blaise very sincerely apologised for bumping into the man. It left the poor bloke thoroughly flummoxed, and Draco laughing too hard to dance with any sort of finesse.

He scanned the room for Pansy and found her decorating the bar, martini in hand, and taking great pleasure in turning down would-be suitors. He’d left her in charge of his jacket and went over to nudge her off it and grab a few pounds for a Glenfiddich neat. He turned back once his drink was in hand, sliding in next to Pansy and joining her in looking out over the floor.

She elbowed him, certainly harder than was necessary, and leaned in to yell, “Why aren’t you dancing?”

“Why aren’t you?” he yelled back. “With that dress surely you could have your pick, if you’re so inclined.”

She laughed, a bit nervously, and took a long sip before she spoke. “Some of us are more interested in wearing clothes than taking them off.”

“You’ll break hearts.”
She laughed again, more heartily. “Hearts are not the relevant organ.”

“And the others?”

“Of no interest, darling.”

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. He hadn’t seen her laugh since he’d been back. She wasn’t relaxed, exactly, but something between them did feel more open than it had, enough so that he thought he might ask and escape unscathed. “None of them?”

“None of them,” she answered with the slightest tremor to her voice. “Ever.”

“Huh.” He nodded and looked at her. “Never. Okay.”

“You do understand what I’m saying?” She almost drained her glass in the next sip.

He did, though hearing it from her cleared up a few things. He turned back towards the floor. “Sure. Never it is, then.”

Her shoulders tensed. “I mean it, you know. Not who I am, as it turns out. Not on account of betrothals or heirs. Not for all the pureblood money in the world.”

“Got it.” He took a sip of his whisky.

She turned to face him. “You do?”

He grinned playfully at her. “Ma chère, with your eye for fashion, who am I to argue? Keep them on. The only thing I might ask for is your stylist’s name.”

She paused, set her glass on the bar, and hugged him, burying her nose in his shoulder and holding tight.

Something in his chest loosened. He was relieved, tremendously so. He didn’t want to marry her any more than she wanted to marry him, if for very different reasons, but after all they’d been through, he’d be twice damned if he did anything other than support her. Which, if the way he felt her shoulders relax in his arms was any indication, he might have managed.

After an eight count she wriggled free as quickly as she’d come in, leaving him just enough time to ruffle her hair.

“You arsehole,” she shrieked, batting his arm.

“You rang?” He grinned at her familiar indignation.

“We finish establishing the utter superiority of my fashion sense and you go and ruin it. Absolute arsehole.”

“Speaking of arseholes.” He set his drink down as she picked hers up. “Some of us do want to take our clothes off. Watch my jacket again, would you?”

“Didn’t realise my options were sex or security work.”

“Consider it a favour?”

Her glare didn’t have any bite. She pressed her lips together in mock disapproval, though he didn’t miss the way they turned up at the corners. “Suppose I owe you one or two. Go.”
He grinned and pushed off the bar.

“Any other clothing is entirely your responsibility!” She yelled after him. “And you’re buying the next drink!”

He gave her a thumbs up and backed into the crowd.

Against the far wall, Mill and Blaise were wrapped up in an amorous embrace that was, in the context, unusual only for its heterosexuality.

Which left the dance floor for Draco.

He was quite happy to dance on his own, moving with the rest of the crowd, pressing into hard chests and passing through muscled arms. And when one touch became more persistent than the rest, he was happy to lean into it. And when the heat of another body surrounding his own became too much on the dance floor, he turned around and discovered a man he’d be perfectly happy to take somewhere a little more private.

The feeling was obviously mutual. He gave Draco as thorough a once-over as proximity would allow and slipped a finger through Draco’s belt loops to pull him closer. Draco eyed the sign for the loos and ran a hand down his companion’s body, ready to pull him towards the hallway.

He paused when he felt something unusually hard and thin under through the denim and leaned back with a grin. If it felt like an age since he’d pulled, it had been half an eternity since he’d pulled another wizard, and the convenience was unbeatable. He had to lean in to be heard. One more in a list of things he’d found thoroughly unobjectionable this evening. The man smelled as good as he looked, and Draco nipped at his earlobe, eliciting a thoroughly delightful moan before he whispered, “Is that a wand or are you just happy to see me?”

The man froze, then forced out a chuckle. “Must be happy to see you.” He moved Draco’s hand away from his thigh as smoothly as he could.

Draco took control of their joined hands and ran them along his side, where his wand sat holstered close to his ribs. “Mutual.” He raised an eyebrow.

The next chuckle wasn’t forced. “Merlin’s tits.” He met Draco’s eyes. “Don’t get a lot of comments, with it strapped to your side like that?”

“Don’t get a lot of blowjobs in the toilets, strapped to your thigh like that?”

He licked his bottom lip. “Prefer to give than receive.”

“Lovely, as I’m perfectly delighted to receive.”

“Bogs or beaches?”

“Banging on the door or pebbles in your arse? Why either when we can Apparate?”

The other man hesitated. “I’m at a hostel.”

“No, Sydney.”

Draco grinned. “If that’s your only objection, I’ve got a Manor. Beach to Apparate?”
“Race you.”
“Jacket. Need it. Meet you at the door.”

The man nodded and moved into the crowd.

Draco found Pansy right where he’d left her and downed the half a martini she’d left sitting on the bar. “Clothes off time, darling. Jacket?”

“Putting them on just to take them off. It makes no sense, you realise?”

“I’ll argue the point after. Jacket?”

She sighed, but shifted to hand it to him. “Have fun, play safe.”

“Of course. Tell Mill?”

Pansy waved him off. “When they’re done fucking in public. If I last that long.”

“Thank you. Adore you.”
She scowled and offered her cheek. He kissed it and, with a grin, made for the door.

He wasn’t waiting more than a minute. They stumbled toward the beach together, stopping for a grope or two but otherwise determined and deliberate about their intended destination. Draco held out his arm as soon as they were out of view and Apparated them both to the foyer.

“Whoa.”

Galder popped into view before Draco’s not-quite-date could finish the thought. The elf bowed low. “Master returns, with guest.”

“Yes, Master returns. With guest. We won’t be needing any assistance, thank you.”

Galder bowed again and popped away.

“Posh.”

“Mmm. Afraid we’ll have to save the tour for later.” He started towards the stairs.

“What’d you say your name was?”

“I didn’t.” He grinned over his shoulder, ruled out the bedrooms, and led his guest downstairs. “Master will do.”

“Master? Taking me to the dungeons?” His voice faded a bit as he lagged behind Draco in the hallway. “Not really my scene.”

“No, no,” Draco laughed. “I had the dungeons filled in years ago. Thought I might offer you a drink.”

“Oh. Right then.” Footsteps picked up behind him. “What’ve you got?”

Draco pushed open the door to the kitchen and heard a series of pops as the elves took the cue to disappear. “What do you want?”

He lingered in the doorway, which earned him another press of chest against chest as… Sydney, he
figured would do. As Sydney slid past him.

He turned and followed Sydney towards the island. “Whisky? Vodka? Champagne?”

“Tempting.”

“What’s your pleasure?”

“Whisky’s a good second choice.” He ran a hand over the marble.

“And the first?” Draco leaned back against the ledge and slipped a finger into Sydney’s waistband. Sydney grinned up at him, and let Draco pull him over.

Draco slipped a finger under his chin. “The first?” He rolled his hips.

Sydney’s eyes fluttered shut. “Mmm.”

“Fresh out of mmm, I’m afraid. Whisky, or cock?”

With a grin, Sydney sank to his knees and unbuckled Draco’s belt.

If dancing had been a relief, this was a bloody revelation. Draco never forgot how good this was, but it was one thing to know it intellectually and another thing entirely to have wet lips sucking at the head of his cock, someone else’s hand wrapped around the shaft. He braced himself against the counter and ran a hand through Sydney’s hair, let himself thrust shallowly into his mouth. His eyes fluttered shut and he let his mind go blank.

He didn’t notice anything but the pull of a mouth around his prick until a glass slid across the counter and shattered against the floor. His eyes shot open and before he knew what he was seeing, he’d tightened his hold on Sydney’s hair and thrust forward, so Sydney couldn’t turn his head. “Don’t stop,” he rasped.

Sydney was as eager as he’d said he was and, it seemed, into hair-pulling. He hummed around Draco’s cock and went deeper.

Draco only managed to suppress a moan because he was staring straight into Potter’s eyes. Potter had flushed bright red and looked on the verge of panic. He opened his mouth to speak and Draco lifted his free hand from the counter to shush him.

“Mm, okay?” Sydney pulled back to ask.

“Yeah,” Draco answered, his voice gruff.

Sydney licked a stripe up his shaft and pulled off to murmur, “Don’t stop.”

“Hmm?” Draco barely heard him.

Potter look like he’d been Stupefied, save the rise and fall of his chest and occasional blinking as Draco held his gaze.

“Fuck my face,” Sydney whined, and bit at Draco’s hip.

The bite was enough to startle Draco into rolling his hips and pulling Sydney back onto his cock.
And Potter stood there, still as a sculpture, seemingly rooted to the spot, eyes still locked with Draco’s.

Draco’s attention was too divided to be ready for it when Sydney took him down to the base. His cock hit the tight muscles of Sydney’s throat and he bucked forward, hissing under his breath.

That startled Potter into action. He covered his eyes and mouthed “Sorry.” over and over again, and started to back slowly, as silently as he could, out of the room. When he had to uncover his eyes to make his way, Draco saw that he looked thoroughly mortified.

“No,” Draco mouthed back, shaking his head, trying to reassure Potter. “Sorry,” he mouthed, breaking into a whisper.

“Say something?” Sydney pulled his head back and Draco realised he was looking up, expectant.

“No, nothing.” He ran a hand through Sydney’s hair.

“All right?”

He made himself give an approving smile. “More than.” He ran a thumb over Sydney’s lower lip. “Your mouth… better things to do with it than talk, no?”

Sydney grinned and kissed the leaking tip of his prick before taking it back in his mouth.

When Draco looked back up, Potter was gone. “Fuck.”

Sydney brought a hand to his bollocks.

Draco shook his head and tried to relax back into it. “Yeah, that’s good.” He rocked into the waiting mouth and closed his eyes again. “Yeah.”

He inhaled and let it go again, and pushed the thought of Potter’s face out of his mind. Or tried to. The whole crushing weight of the case was back on his shoulders, and he couldn’t keep Potter’s shocked expression out of his head.

He stared down at Sydney. He’d been a good enough looking bloke at the club, and he wasn’t bad in the light of the kitchen either. Soft hair, soft mouth. It was good. This was good.

He kept his eyes trained on his cock and his partner’s mouth, watched as much as he felt Sydney hollow his cheeks and suck.

He inhaled and exhaled again. Not Potter. Not Potter. Sydney drew back and wrapped a hand around his base, bobbing up and down over the head with admirable fervour. He rolled Draco’s sac in his fingers and Draco could feel his bollocks getting tighter, could feel it coming. He focused on the man in front of him, saw him palming himself through his jeans and that—Draco always liked that, too. Merlin, but it felt good, it did, it really did, and he wanted it, needed to come, needed those few seconds of blank, blinding pleasures.

Draco heard a shuffle and his head snapped up. In the shadows past the door, a flash of movement, and to his right, a flare of heat. Torn between them, he looked to the door in time to see what he was sure were a pair of green eyes receding into thin air. But he didn’t hear any footsteps. Never had, he realised.

A tongue lapped at his bollocks and he moaned, leaning forward, tightening his fingers in shaggy brown hair. Sydney pulled back and then sank down on him one last time, hollowed his cheeks and
stroked the shaft and Draco was coming, coming down his throat and it all fell away, away, for one brilliant moment.

The sound of Sydney’s orgasmic grunts brought him out of it far too soon.

Done, Sydney collapsed against his thigh. Draco ran a hand through his hair, encouraging him to stay there until Draco could figure out what he had seen.

It was just behind him, to his right. A loaf of bread—or what had been a loaf of bread—was smouldering, turned into a lump of embers. It wasn’t threatening to go up—there was nothing left of it to catch on fire—but it had left a long scorch mark on the marble.

He felt Sydney pull back and shifted to block it from view.

“Fucking fantastic cock you’ve got there…” Sydney waited, expectant, for Draco to offer a name.

“Your mouth’s not so bad either.”

“Faint praise.”

Draco bit out a laugh, eyes flickering to the doorway. Nothing. “Did it sound faint when I was coming down your throat?”

“Sure as hell didn’t feel faint.”

Draco laughed again, grasping at the fleeting straws of post-orgasmic relaxation. “Agreed.” He tuckèd himself into his pants and zipped his jeans over them. “Must’ve been an O on your cocksucking NEWTs.”

Sydney stood. “H on my SLUGs, actually.”

“Top marks, is the point.”

“Glad you thought so.” Sydney grinned suggestively.

Draco crossed his legs and adjusted the cuff of his sleeve. “Yes. Well done.”

They stood there a moment, Draco still with a mind towards keeping the bread out of sight, and Sydney’s grin began to falter.

Draco uncrossed his legs and raised his eyebrows. “Still waiting on that whisky? Thought it was your second choice.”

“Ah. Right. Uh. Probably ought to be getting back, really. Mates’ll be wondering.”

“Too bad. Perhaps another time then. Galder!”

The elf appeared with such a sudden pop that Sydney jumped. Draco hid a smirk. “Galder, would you please show our guest to the Floo or foyer, as he prefers?”

“Yes, Master, of course, Master, as Master wishes.” Galder bowed, and Draco thanked his lucky stars for a perceptive elf. “Master’s guest will follow Galder, yes he will.” Galder tugged at Sydney’s jeans and started out of the room.

Sydney did a double take. “Right, uh, bye.”
“Enjoy your trip!” Draco waved, and stayed exactly where he was.

Galder led the way through the door and down the hallway, and Sydney followed, and Draco would’ve sworn he heard a third set of footsteps behind them.

* * *

He was still standing at the counter half an hour later, studying the embers, when Blaise and Millie stumbled in, giggling like they’d just snuck into the common room after curfew.

Draco looked up sharply. “Didn’t know you were coming back here.”

“Oh!” straightened, looking serious, and then dissolved into laughter. “Sorry. Sorry. We got a bit… Pansy Side-Alonged us back. Figure we could take the Floo back to mine, but Blaise was hungry and…”

Blaise shrugged.

Draco raised an eyebrow, though he didn’t look over at them. “Yes, but what for?”

“He lit a…thing on fire?” She looked confused, and then, “Oh! With his…” She waved a hand and then patted the outside of Blaise’s thigh.

“Yes. That.”

“How’s that coming?” She propped her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands.

Blaise groaned. “Work? There was going to be food.”

“Over there, love.” She waved him towards a fruit bowl. “Eat. I want to hear everything.”

Draco sighed. “I thought I had a theory, then I thought Potter completely bolloxed it, one way or another, and changed my mind, kept looking. Then he may have just un-bolloxed it, but by bolloxing up other things instead.”

“Lots of bollocks,” Blaise observed around a mouthful of pear.

“Charming. And true.”

“Theory? What theory?”

“You inspired it, actually.”

She grinned. “A genius and a muse. Brilliant.”

“Yes, well, I don’t think you meant to. But the other night, with Pansy, you pointed out that he hadn’t blown anything up. I’d assumed the problem was with the implant, or with his magic, or his health. But I’m starting to think it’s not any of those.”

“That’s a bit surprising, considering.”
“Yes, I agree. But there is a pattern. The times he’s done something—we were talking about his medical care and how no one at the Ministry told him anything the first time. The second was when we were talking about the animals on the property, and I mentioned Hippogriffs which, well. You know.”

Millie snorted. “I do.”

Blaise threw an arm around her shoulders. “We all do.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t quite be bothered to glare. “The third time we were talking about Quidditch which—”

“We know,” Blaise interrupted.

Draco did glare that time. “I was going to say, I overheard at the tea party that he likes Puddlemere because they’ve got Wood, and I’d said they were going to lose right before that incident. Then, obviously, the ice thing at some point during that dinner which, between talk of Daisy Green and Pansy going at Granger… understandable. And up till this morning, everything else was at the tea party. I couldn’t hear what he was saying or hearing when each incident happened but still, do you see?”

“Talking to people makes him blow things up?” Blaise asked

Millie laughed. “I know the feeling.”

“As does he, I think, but much more literally. And it’s not talking to people. It’s not every time he talks to someone. It’s when something upsets him, or gets under his skin somehow. When he’s outside of the void and running, completely focused on that, he’s perfectly fine. No incidents. And when he’s casting spells, straightforward, plain old casting with a wand, his precision and endurance are above average.”

“So it’s when he’s upset? That doesn’t make sense, if he got that mad at Pansy and didn’t destroy anything.”

“No, it doesn’t, and that’s exactly it. The thing is, he got really, properly upset at Pansy, didn’t he? ‘You ungrateful bitch,’ all of that. It’s been years since I’ve heard Potter say anything like that—well, obviously, but I get the impression that it’s been years since anyone has.”

Millie tilted her head thoughtfully. “Huh. He’s always very polite.”

“Never loses his temper? Kind to everyone? Always diplomatic?”

“Always. All of the above.”

“Yes,” Draco said, his eagerness beginning to build. “But when he’s not, he’s fine. Pissed off, and rightfully so, but not dangerous.”

“So, he needs to get angry more?”

“There’s more to it than that, but potentially, yes.”

“Is that the theory you changed your mind about?” Millie asked.

“I did, but…” He looked back to the ex-bread.

“But?” Blaise prompted, looking much more interested than he had been at first.
Draco sighed. “I got a letter from Kingsley yesterday, emphasising the urgency of the situation.”

“Sorry about that,” Millie said.

“You wrote it?”

“No, but I can imagine.”

“Ah. Well, thank you. Anyway, in the hope that something would click I redid all of the initial physical tests this morning, but outside of the void and without you and Granger there. Just the two of us.”

“And?”

“And the seam on his thigh, where it ran along the implant, started burning up. Turning to cinders. I couldn’t work out why. It was a very basic medical exam, nothing to inspire any sort of unusual response.”

“Okay. And then?”

“I figured it was bolloxed. An inconsistency disproving the pattern. Back to square one.”

“But he did it again?”

“He did.”

“In some way that explains this morning?”

Perhaps. But potentially a complicated way.”

Millie pulled out a stool and gestured for him to go on.

“Mill, in all the years you’ve known him, and Granger, and Shacklebolt—are you sure it’s just been what’s in the file?”

“What do you mean?”

“Weasley, Bell, Safar—that’s it?”

“Oh,” she mused. “That kind of thing. As far as I know, and if Granger said that’s all, I’d assume she’d know. But it’s not like he and I trade details.”

Blaise wrinkled his nose. “Thank Merlin for small favours.”

She bumped her shoulder into his without taking her attention away from Draco. “Why?”

“Tonight.”

She waited a moment. “Yes?”

“Did Pansy tell you I’d left?”

“Yes. With someone, apparently.”

“Right.”

“And?” She prompted.
“Well.” Draco poked the dying embers. “I didn’t especially want him to stay the night, so the bedrooms were out. Brought him down here and he was sucking me off when who should appear?”

“Oh.” She gasped. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. Balls deep in this bloke’s throat and Potter walks in for a late night snack. Which is, itself, a bit strange, don’t you think? For someone who has a designated house elf and swears up and down that he wants to stay in the void forever?”

“Back to the sex, please.”

“Pervert.”

“Seconding Millie. Back to the sex,” Blaise said.

“Perverts, plural.” Draco started pacing. “So, he turned bright red. I, being in the middle of getting some rather good head, shushed him. He was too shocked to leave and just sort of… stayed. Watching. Until he was shocked into moving.”

“What did you do that was so shocking?”

“Not the point. I looked down. As one does. Gave a few instructions. When I looked back up he was gone. Figured he’d left. But I would swear on Slytherin’s grave that I saw his eyes after that, and we all know about the cloak. When it was all said and done, this had turned to embers and left a rather nasty scorch mark on the counter.”

“He was watching.”

“I think so, yes. I thought I heard an extra set of footsteps when the bloke was leaving, too.”

“So the two times he’s burned things up…?”

“While I was touching his naked back and while he was watching me come down a man’s throat.”

Blaise whistled. “Quite the explosive theory. Pun intended.”

“Subtle,” Millie snorted, and leaned in to him affectionately.

“Agreed,” Draco concurred. “On both points.”

“So then Potter is…?” Millie asked.

“No idea,” Draco answered. “His file doesn’t suggest any history with men. And I didn’t think so after this morning, as I had no reason to think he’d have any sort of reaction to a physical exam, particularly one administered by a man. But after this…”

“Then is his sexuality at the root of the problem?”

“No,” Draco answered quickly. “No, certainly not. We don’t even know if there’s anything there. It could be that Potter was thinking of something upsetting this morning and was startled by what he saw this evening. More immediately, it confirms a larger pattern about, not just extreme emotion, but extreme repressed emotion. Things that have no way of getting out.”

“But then wouldn’t it have been an issue before the implant?”
Draco poked at the loaf of bread again and it began to crumble. He shot back. “The vase.”

“The vase?”

“Granger’s vase. The one you thought he didn’t bump into.”

“Oh.” She sat up straighter. “Yes. I did, didn’t I?”

“Do you still?”

“I still wouldn’t say conclusively either way. It’s possible.”

“If there was any of that, any at all, if the outbursts were already there in some form, driven by whatever he’s keeping bottled up, and the Elder Wand amplified them—” He stopped short. “It’s a bit mad-sounding, isn’t it? Reaching?”

“No,” Millie said. “I don’t think it is, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And if nothing else, it’s a better fit than anything else we’ve got.”

“Thanks very much for that vote of confidence.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, yes. But I can hardly consider it conclusive when it raises so many questions.”

“Doesn’t it also answer them?”

“Does it?”

Millie gave him a sceptical look. “I should say so. I realise you’re trying to avoid premature conclusions, but it doesn’t strike me that there’s a huge amount of ambiguity there.”

“Have to agree,” Blaise added. “Burning vaguely phallic objects? Disintegrating his own clothes? Potter’s subconscious is about as subtle as the rest of him.”

“Ugh.” Draco buried his head in his hands. “And you don’t see how, if Potter’s potentially unexplored sexuality comes into play, things get a bit more complicated?”

Blaise shrugged. “Discovery is a wonderful thing.”

“For someone who’s got a superweapon triggered by repressed feelings?”

“Ah.” Blaise reached for another pear and chewed thoughtfully. “You’ve got a point there.”

“Not to mention the ethical considerations. If his reactions to me are triggering outbursts I really shouldn’t continue on in my current capacity.”

“Wait.” Millie hopped off her seat. “Wait right there. Better a doctor who turns him on then a doctor who turns him into a Squib.”

“Two types of approach, causing two types of harm.”

“Do you intend to act on it?”
“I don’t,” he said quickly. Automatically, as he would with any patient.

She paused. He suddenly felt uncomfortably scrutinised. She hummed. “But you might if you weren’t his doctor.”

“He’s a fit, single wizard. If he were a stranger I met at a club, sure. But he isn’t. He’s my patient, and we have a rather colourful history to boot. Such a colourful history that I’d hesitate even if he weren’t my patient.”

“Fair enough.” She sounded convinced but kept watching him. “I suppose. But to give up his case would leave him even worse off.”

“A agreed.” Blaise took another bite.

Draco snorted. “Well that solves it then, as no one gives better ethical advice than a literary agent and a bureaucrat.”

Blaise shrugged. “Sold a book about ethics once. Couldn’t finish the thing. Drier than the Sahara. Did hold it though.”

“Proving my point quite well here Blaise.”

“The point is,” Millie interrupted, “you’ve got a theory.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ve got the best theory going at the moment and the only one that has a chance of keeping Potter’s magical abilities intact.”

“If this theory is right, and if there’s any way to broach it without making a mess of the situation, whether or not his sexual preferences are implicated. Which is not an especially encouraging state of affairs.”

“But you do have it.”

“I do.”

She shrugged and pointed for Blaise to hand her an apple. “Then the most important question is what you’ll do with it.”
Compared to the previous morning’s eagerness, Draco’s trepidation about going to see Potter was especially noticeable. He took an unusually long time over his breakfast tray, even though he managed all of a slice of toast and cup of tea. He spent a truly unnecessary amount of time dressing, particularly given that he wound up in work robes as always. He even found himself walking slowly, which he wanted to blame on a hangover even though he’d only had a drink and a half over the course of the night, which couldn’t explain why his feet felt leaden, or his stomach sour. That was all down to his intense desire to avoid Potter.

He still only managed to be two minutes late.

Potter, wearing the same Aran jumper and beige-brown trousers he’d worn at their first meeting, was in the seat he’d taken when they’d spoken the day before. It put distance between them, gave Draco somewhere to sit that was at a professional remove, which, in spite of his gratitude, left him with a sense of foreboding, and a bit of frustration. Potter was dreading this too. Potter wanted to put distance between them. Potter was going to continue to pretend that he was totally nonplussed by everything. Though this time, Draco couldn’t blame him. Not when he felt oddly weak in the knees about the whole thing, to the point of envying Potter his seat.

As Draco approached, Potter set his book down on the table next to the window, folding his hands in his lap and offering Draco a tight smile. “Dr Malfoy. Good morning.”

He sat in the chair opposite and forced himself to meet Potter’s eye. “Good morning.”

Potter looked out the window. “I got that letter you mentioned.”

“I responded this morning.”

“And?” Draco’s heart began to pound.

“I’ve authorised surgery for the 2nd.”

His chest emptied. He wouldn’t have been able to find enough air to sustain his objections even if he had the words for them.

“I appreciate the work you’ve done, but for a number of reasons I think it’s best to move forward. I’ve left a few days in case you’d like to continue your research for the benefit of other patients, and if it’s not too much of a bother I’d like to spare the Ministry the inconvenience of setting up a void for the next three days, but I’m sure they’ll accommodate the request if you’d rather have your house back.”

Overtaken by a wave of numbness, Draco was at a loss to respond.

“Again, I appreciate your assistance, and the inconvenience you’ve gone to, which I know has been considerable.”

Draco blinked.

“Dr Malfoy?”
He blinked again.

“Are you all right?”

Reaching into some reserves of strength, Draco forced himself to stand. “Walk with me.” He moved towards the door, fully aware of his stiltedness and unable to spare concern for anything other than putting one foot in front of the other.

Potter turned towards him to be heard, but didn’t follow. “No, thank you.”

“I won’t discuss this unless we go outside.”

“Is there any need for a discussion?”

“You won’t do it, then?”

“As much as I appreciate your concern…” Potter trailed off.

“Right.” Draco turned towards him. “You won’t do it.” Draco cursed his luck; of course Potter would stand up for himself now, of all times, when Draco was so close to finding something that might work.

“I don’t mean any disrespect,” Potter offered, the earnestness of his tone completely at odds with the blankness written across his face.

The question of respect hadn’t crossed Draco’s mind, but he’d use it all the same. “Then come outside and discuss this.”

“I’m not dressed for running.”

“Then don’t run.”

“It’s a bit chilly.”

“Cast a warming charm.”

Potter’s lips turned up in a faint approximation of a polite smile. “I’d prefer to stay inside, thank you.”

Draco ran a hand through his hair, pulling on the ends. “Picked a damn fine time to stop being a doormat.”

“I know you think I am, but I disagree. We have different interests. Different priorities. That’s all.”

“Yes, my priority is your health. Your priority is appeasing everyone and their second cousin thrice removed.”

“I don’t expect we’ll see eye to eye on this.”

“Not as long as you’re dead wrong.”

“I’m sorry you see it that way.”

“Are you?” Draco took a step towards him. “Are you really?”

“Of course.” Potter’s voice and face matched this time, both as bland as his stupid clothes.
“When was the last time you had a feeling?” Draco bit out, his missing words returning in a frustrated explosion. “Do you, even? Or is it gone, your legendary capacity for emotion? Was that like the Parseltongue? Killed along with your Horcrux? Eliminated when it ceased to be a tool of the greater good?”

Potter flinched, but the expression disappeared as quickly as it had shown up. “This has nothing to do with feelings. It’s a malfunctioning magical implant, which will be removed in three days time. As I said, if you’d rather I stay elsewhere, I’m sure the Ministry will be accommodating.”

Draco took another step, trying with all his might to see past Potter’s façade. “Nothing to do with feelings,” he repeated, searching for even the flicker of a reaction.

“No.” Potter’s blankness didn’t budge.

“Then why won’t you go outside?”

“You know why.” The tiniest hint of weariness tinged Potter’s voice, but it didn’t feel like a tell to Draco. It felt like an act.

He tried to catch Potter’s eye, but Potter avoided him. He never looked away from Draco, but always just slightly to the side of his eyes, or he fell short of meeting Draco’s gaze in favour of finding a focal point in the middle distance.

Draco’s blood surged, a wave of angry heat traveling through his chest with it. “You know, Potter, I think I do.”


“No. Not the implant.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Potter blinked.

“I’ll explain if you come outside,” Draco urged, hoping that he’d be able to get a reaction, that seeing some evidence of the connection might move Potter. “Get out of the void, just for a minute or two.”

Potter smiled his polite, false smile again. “Again, Dr Malfoy, I appreciate your concern. But as the decision’s been made, talking about it more just isn’t necessary.”

“Even if it could change the decision?”

“It won’t.”

Draco shook his head. “You’re making a mistake.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Of all the things I thought I’d never live to witness, Potter, seeing you reduced to a glorified potato would’ve been too unfathomable to even make the list.”

“I’m sorry you—”

Draco snorted. “Feel that way? Don’t bother.” He shook his head. “You’re making the biggest mistake of your life.”

“I disagree, and I look forward to resolving the issue.”

Draco took a step backwards, and then another. Potter made no move to follow him or halt his progress. Just kept looking towards him without ever looking at him, until his back hit the door and he slipped out of the room.

* * *

Draco was still fuming come dinner time. He’d spent another afternoon in the library, this time in search of anything on psychology. It turned out not to have been an interest of any contributor to the Malfoy library. Draco was not surprised that, for the hundreds of volumes full of spells to enhance one’s body or magic, there wasn’t a single book on the health of the mind or heart. It wasn’t exactly a Malfoy family strong suit, and they did like to play to their strengths.

He’d given up as the sun set and the lights came on, and spent the next two hours shelving books and organising his notes. Order. It was more productive than pacing, and sitting still was out of the question.

It did little for his mood, though. As evidenced by his dinner companions’ collective reaction to his entry. Millie’s raised eyebrow and Blaise’s cautious scrutiny, Pansy’s open interest and Greg’s furrowed brow were certainly fair game when he’d banged the door open, shoved back the chair at the head of the table, and dropped into it with a dejected grunt.

Conversation stopped. He felt the pressure of their eyes, curious and, at least in Millie’s case, still hopeful.

He grabbed his napkin and busied himself with draping it over his lap. He looked back up. They were all still watching him. “Oh, bugger off.”

Pansy and Mill shared a look. Somehow, Millie drew the short straw. “Bad day?”

He gripped his knife and fork and waited for his dinner to appear. “Bugger. Off.”

Mill shrugged at Pansy, who returned it and sliced into a parsnip.

“It’s simply unbelievable.” Draco slammed the silver back down on the table. “Unconscionable and un-fucking-believable.”

“Oh?” Millie tried again, her voice carefully even.

“He’s done it. Scheduled the thing—you know.”

“I heard, yes. That’s disappointing.”

“You—of course you did. Of course. Are you taking care of all the details, then? Walking him to the gallows?”

“No,” Draco spat, “just the quality of it.”

“His letter came across my desk. He doesn’t agree.”

Draco laughed bitterly. “Yes, he’s made that quite clear.”
“Isn’t it his choice, then?”

“Choice.” He laughed again. “What a word. As if anyone at this table is in a position to talk about choice.” He leaned back, surveying them all. “Maybe you, Millie. You avoided one, so you got to make others, and I suppose avoidance was its own choice. And Blaise, I suppose you never had the pretext of choice, did you? What was it, eight fathers? How many homes? But never the illusion of choice.” He turned to the other side of the table. “Pansy and Greg, on the other hand. You made choices. With a maniac breathing down your necks and your parents expecting obedience and your lives on the line. You chose, didn’t you? Freely, and exactly what you would’ve wanted? Choices.” He spat the word like it was a mouthful of leech juice. “Is that what those were?”

Pansy stared at him.

“Reckon so.” Greg spoke to his lap, and so quietly he could barely be heard. “Not good ones, but you don’t always get good ones.” He chanced a look up at Draco. “Thought you thought that too.”

Draco deflated, sinking down into his seat and focusing on aligning the end of his knife with the edge of the table.

Pansy reached out to give Greg’s arm a reassuring rub. She offered Draco a sympathetic look before she spoke, and her voice was carefully kind, but she didn’t offer any more quarter than Greg had. “I don’t like it any more than you do. But they were.”

Millie leaned forward, stiff with obvious caution. “You’re right, that I wasn’t in the same position you were. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d had Lucius for a father. Or,” she sighed, “maybe I do and I’d rather not dwell on it. Your situation was awful. All of ours were, even if in different ways. But that’s the thing of it, isn’t it? Terrible choices happen. We still make them. Even if we’d wish for more options, and even if we’d give anything to have a single better path.”

Draco shook his head and traced the pattern at the end of the silver. “This isn’t like that.”

“No?” Millie asked.

“No.” He slid the handle over the linens. “That was war. It’s not the same, and those choices…”

He shook his head again.

“What?” Millie prompted, with a skrewt-handler’s cautiousness.

“The choices we made,” he nodded his recognition at Greg and Pansy, “they were beyond our control. There were no other answers then. There are, now, and there could be more. I think he just doesn’t want to hear them.”

Millie reached across the table for his hand, but pulled back when he shook his head. “Not hearing them is his choice, too.”

“But the consequences!” He leaned forward miserably. “A life without magic, in exile from everything you know, everyone you love. If that can be avoided, to not even hear it… it can’t be what he’d choose.”

Pansy spoke, voice tight and eyes trained on Draco. “Some people choose exile from everything they know and almost everyone they love.”

He looked back at her. Blinked.

“She’s right,” Greg added. “Maybe he wants to get away, you know?”
There was a great deal that Draco wanted to say, and very little that he knew how to put to words.

“I thought about it,” Blaise said. “After the war. Figured it might be better. Get away from the expectations. Even if it meant going abroad. Even if it would’ve meant going to the Muggle world.”

“You didn’t, though.”

“No,” Blaise conceded, resting a hand on Millie’s knee. “And I’m happy that I didn’t. But if I had, and I hadn’t ever known what I was missing, I probably would’ve been happy with that, too.”

“But you still would’ve been a wizard.”

“I suppose. Might not have used it much, though.”

“But you would have had the option. If the Muggle power went out, or you broke a bone, or you contracted a magical illness, or you wanted something from across the room and didn’t want to get up. You wouldn’t have used a levitation charm? You would’ve spent eight weeks in a Muggle cast, not able to walk, or not able to write, instead of one Episkey?”

Blaise sighed. “No. I would use the spells.”

“To not have the option at all, that’s a very different thing.”

“You may be underestimating Potter’s friends,” Millie said. “If he needed an Episkey cast, they’d do it for him without a second thought.”

“How would they know he was injured? No Patronus, remember?”

“Granger has a mobile. I’m sure Potter would get one too, if he doesn’t already have one.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Draco insisted, his voice taking on a new edge. “You’ve been fighting this all along, Mill. How can you turn around and say it’s nothing?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying that he’s made the choice and it’s his to make. It’s not what I would choose, but I’m not him. Why are you—” she shook her head and started over. “It’s an upsetting thing, but I don’t quite understand why you’re this upset about it.”


The table fell into silence.

“Because it’s him?” Greg offered, at last.

Draco knit his brow. “Potter?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would that matter?”

He didn’t miss Millie and Pansy exchanging a look.

“Always has done,” Greg said. “Reckon it’d be like… well, like a Seeker without an opponent. Off balance.”

“I hadn’t seen Potter in a decade without thinking twice about it.”
“Doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.”

“I don’t think that’s it. Really, I don’t,” he insisted when Blaise joined in on the shared looks. “It’s more fundamental than that. I’ve been upset about other patients facing magical deprivation, and I imagine I will be again. It’s more than one person.”

Greg shrugged and sat back.

“It’s the most fundamental part of our world. To not be able to go to the shops or visit your friends. To never step foot on a Quidditch pitch or in a wizarding shop. Imagine giving all of that up. It would fundamentally change your whole life, your very identity. It did, before the implants. If you’d seen what I’d seen, seen what it meant to people to get that back, you wouldn’t think twice about it either.”

“He already can’t,” Greg muttered.

“What?”

“He already can’t,” Greg repeated, louder. “Can he? Isn’t that the problem? Can’t be around people, can’t go out anywhere. Couldn’t beforehand, either, for all the people trying to kill him.”

“But if we could fix it—that’s what I’m saying. I have a theory, and a theory might lead to a solution. He won’t hear it, even when it might give him all of that back.”

“Would it? If he’s still him?” Greg asked. “Maybe Pansy’s right. Sometimes someone just wants to go. Start over without being able to look back.”

“Conceptually, I understand the appeal.” He softened at Pansy’s raised eyebrow. “Obviously, I do. But it’s not… I don’t know what to say, other than that it’s not him. Not who he is.”

“So it is about him,” Pansy said.

“No,” Draco answered slowly and, he realised, reluctantly. “Not how you might mean it, anyway. It does feel especially wrong that he, of all people, who made the magical world safe, who kept it free—that he should have to go without. And I know, before you say it, that that’s not how choices work, or circumstances. Fairness doesn’t come into it. But it’s not just…”

“If I believed, truly, that he didn’t want to be here, didn’t want to be a part of the wizarding world any longer, I suspect I’d feel differently. I’d still support alternatives that give him the choice over those that don’t, but I’d feel differently. But I don’t.”

“You don’t believe that, or you don’t want to believe that?” Pansy asked.

“I don’t think so,” He insisted, struggling to explain himself. “Pans, when you were arguing—who was in the kitchen first?”

“He was, but why?”

“When I was in the kitchen, he came down on his own too.”

“Was he hungry? Doesn’t seem the type to ask an elf to get him anything in the middle of the night. Especially if it would put them out, with the void.”

“But he’s so insistent that he won’t leave his rooms to avoid hurting anyone.”

Pansy raised an eyebrow. “You think he’s lying because he went for a midnight snack?”
“When you put it that way it sounds a bit thin, but… What else is there to go on?”

Millie leaned forward, her voice turning gentle once again. “His word, Draco. He’s an adult. You might not like his decision or how he’s come to it, but it’s his to make.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“You might have to.”

Draco shook his head slowly. “I don’t think I can.”

“And if it’s a simple case of bad options?”

“Then we need time, Mill.” He looked at her pleadingly. “Time to come up with more of them.”

She shook her head at the implied question. “If he’s made a choice, there isn’t any.”

* * *

Draco didn’t manage to eat more than a few bites, and tiredness didn’t come any more easily than hunger. He lay awake as the little hand hit 12, and one, and two. He didn’t pace, didn’t toss or turn. But he couldn’t let go of his thoughts, or the possibility that they might yield some revelation.

At half two he turned back the covers and shuffled to the window. The moon was almost new and he could barely make out the grounds, though he knew the map off by heart. The terrace gardens, the field beyond. Orchards to the left and the stables to the right, paddocks behind them. He thought of taking a Thestral out, just for the change of pace.

He didn’t know how it would be possible not to miss things like that. If not the ride itself, the possibility of it. Of leaving the ground behind, wind in your face as you rode into the sky, hands buried in the coarseness of their manes, their flank shifting under your legs. The freedom of it, the entire world unfolding beneath you.

Even if it meant disputing Millie’s good sense, he especially couldn’t understand how Potter, of all people, wouldn’t miss that. Potter who was so infuriatingly natural on a broom, who befriended even the most arrogant of Hippogriffs on the first attempt. Who never looked as sure of himself, as at peace, as he did in the air. Even in the middle of a game. Even in the middle of Fiendfyre.

Draco pressed his forehead against the glass. There was so much to lose. Maybe Potter had lost sight of that? But it was all already lost if Potter’s decision was made and, for all intents and purposes, it was.

Draco had decided more than once before that when all was close to lost, drastic measures were entirely appropriate. Any means, after all.

He lifted his head from the pane, Summoned a chair, and sat to think.

* * *

They hadn’t reached an agreement about continuing to meet, but Draco rapped firmly on the door to Potter’s rooms at exactly 9am and, in case Potter had assumed he wouldn’t come, waited for Potter to grant him entry.

Draco stood in the hallway for a minute, then another. Potter opened the door looking flustered, the ends of his hair still wet. He stepped backwards at the sight of Draco, obviously surprised.
It wasn’t an invitation, but Draco wasn’t about to discard an opportunity. He slipped inside and shut the door behind him.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Potter said.

“I didn’t assume you were.”

“Oh.” Potter ran a hand through his hair. “Can I help you?”

“You can.”

“Oh,” Potter said again. “Okay.”

“A moment of your time?”

Potter shifted uneasily. “If it’s about what we discussed yesterday, I haven’t changed my mind.”

“I didn’t expect you had. Shall we?” Draco gestured to the seats by the window.

Potter looked as though he would like to say no but couldn’t work out how to. “Sure.”

Draco nodded his acknowledgement and crossed the room to take his seat. He waited until Potter had, albeit reluctantly, dropped into the chair across from him. “First, I’d like to apologise for my brusqueness yesterday. It was a regrettable lapse in professionalism and unbefitting either a clinician or a patient.”

“Er, right. Sure. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Second, I hope to explain my motivation, such as it was.”

“There’s no ne—”

“You see, I’ve been putting all of my considerable resources into this case, and just before you told me you’d decided to take another route, I discovered what I believe to be a significant breakthrough. A comprehensive theory that would explain your symptoms and present a viable alternative course of treatment.”

Potter eyed him warily.

“Speed is of the essence for you, I realise, and I freely admit that this is a less expeditious option, but you may find that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. At a minimum, professional obligation compels me to ensure that you are aware of all the alternatives before committing to a surgical option that is likely to have serious and lasting effects.”

“I’m not going to change my mind.”

Draco had anticipated that. “Would you, then, consider it as a favour, from one duty-bound professional to another, and for the sake of scientific research that could help those suffering from magical illnesses, to begin this course of treatment in the few days before you leave? It will only give us very preliminary data, but it would be helpful regardless.”

“Are you going to tell me what this theory is?”

Draco hesitated. “I can, but it’s not relevant to the course of treatment.”

Potter pressed his lips together. “And what is the course of treatment?”
“Very similar to what we’ve been doing.” Draco did not object to glossing over the theoretical portion, which he thought might predetermine Potter’s answer. “Walks on the grounds once a day for about an hour.”

“That’s it?”

“It is.”

“What’s that going to tell you?”

“A great deal about adjusting to magical exposure after time spent in the void.” It was true, if not the complete picture. But given what was at stake, and Potter’s strange, oft-maddening willingness to say no to Draco when he’d roll over for anyone else, Draco felt… well, any means, he reminded himself.

“Don’t you have lots of patients who could do that?”

“None who have had such a prolonged stay in a void, and with so few breaks.”

Potter still looked sceptical. “And the theory?”

“Well.” Draco shifted in his seat. “To be entirely candid, I’m fairly certain you’re not going to like it. And, as you’ve already made your choice, it’s not relevant, is it?”

Scepticism turned to a surprisingly thinly-veiled suspicion. “I’d still like to know.”

Draco was torn between frustration that Potter saved all of his questioning for these meetings, and that same strange satisfaction that came with seeing Potter stand up for himself, no matter how inconveniently. He took a deep breath, determined to take a page out of the Potter Book of Professionalism. “Bear in mind, if you will, that I’ve gone through all of your records. Read every incident report and witnessed quite a few myself.”

A flash of nervousness, bordering on panic, crossed Potter’s face.

Draco went on without mentioning the most recent of those incidents. “I’ve analysed those reports according to every scheme I can think of. This is the only one that accounts for everything.”

“And it is?”

“You are in excellent physical condition. Your magical precision and endurance is at or above the levels I’d expect from a healthy adult wizard. Compared to your training records, there’s relatively little variation in your physical and magical ability, pre- and post-implant. Certainly less than we’d expect to see given the amount of time you’ve spent away from magic. That strongly suggests that the implanted Elder Wand is working to supplement your own magical ability, which would otherwise be significantly atrophied. I would conclude, then, that the implant is not malfunctioning.”

“But you’ve seen—”

“Yes, I have. And I don’t believe that to be a sign that the implant isn’t working, but a symptom of the placement and nature of this particular implant. Instead of acting as a conduit to increase your magical control, as conventional implants do, the Elder Wand amplifies your magic more generally. In part that’s because it’s an entire wand rather than a conductive supplement, the effect of which is increased by its location. In part that’s because it’s the Elder Wand.”
“Okay…?”

“All witches and wizards experience instances of uncontrolled magic throughout their lifetimes. These are most frequent in childhood, when we haven’t yet learned how to control our magic. But they do occur in adults as well, usually in moments that are extreme in some way. Magic, as I’m sure you know, is driven in large part by our intention, the emotion behind a particular spell. For instance, the happiness needed to cast a Patronus, or the anger required to give force to Cruciatus. Spontaneous outbursts occur when we feel something so strongly that the intent exceeds the need for a wand. Otherwise, we must have a wand in hand to direct both the magic and the intentions behind it.

“You, however, are never without a wand, and an exceptionally powerful and temperamental wand at that. Granger and Croaker thought it would act like an implant. They were wrong. It’s a wand, and it acts like a wand. Implanted in your body, it responds to magical stimuli beyond those you consciously intend to project. But I don’t believe it’s malfunctioning.”

Potter’s breathing was just a bit shallower than usual, his voice a bit darker. “Are you saying that it’s doing things I want it to do?”

“But it destroys everything. And you are saying that. You’re saying that’s a reflection of how I feel.” Potter huffed and shook his head, trying for an incredulity that didn’t feel entirely real to Draco. “That’s completely mad. There is no subconscious level, or whatever, on which I’m angry at my friends, or roof tiles, or whatever you think it is.”

“I did say that you wouldn’t like it.”

“It’s not a question of liking or disliking. It’s wrong.”

“To borrow a phrase, I disagree.”

“Then you’re wrong, too,” Potter insisted, his voice growing darker still. “They’re my family. They’ve saved me a million times over. I owe them my life, my happiness. I would never wish them ill. The idea of it is… I don’t think I can even tell you how crazy this sounds.”

“It is possible to feel multiple things at once, you know.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m well aware, in spite of your doubts. Things like love, and appreciation, and caring. Not things like hoping they get scalded with hot tea.”

“Can you think of another pattern?”

“It’s not my area of expertise, is it? Doesn’t mean your theory is right.”

“If you’re so confident that it’s wrong, you won’t mind trying it.”

“If you think walking around a field is going to make me discover some deep-seated fear of cigars or tunnels or the Weasleys or something, you’re barking.”

Draco was surprised to feel a bit of relief at Potter’s attempts to joke it off. If he didn’t take it seriously, or was determined to pretend he didn’t, he wouldn’t seriously fight against it. It did, in the most Slytherin of ways, give Draco a great deal more latitude. “In which case, I imagine you
won’t object to going on a few walks in the interest of science.”

“That’s really all?”

“It is. And in addition to serving a larger purpose in the field, it’s likely to improve your surgical outcome if we start rebuilding your tolerance for magical exposure. It can only help.”

“You accept that I’m having the surgery, then.”

“I advise against it, vehemently and unequivocally. But it’s not my decision to make.”

Potter studied his face intently. “Fine then. I’ll go on a walk. Tomorrow.”

“That only gives us two days, which is barely sufficient for even an anecdotal report. This afternoon.”

Potter eyed his wristwatch. “After lunch, then. Say, two.”

Draco stood. “I appreciate it, as will many others.” He nodded. “Until this afternoon.”
Chapter 11

By two, Draco had managed half a sandwich and not much else. He thought about calling Granger and trying to convince her, which might well be the best way to convince Potter, but her position on the whole thing remained a bit mysterious. He thought about taking a walk of the grounds in advance of his meeting with Potter, which did at least set him to thinking about what he wanted it to accomplish. If Potter was worried about his destructive power, Draco had an inkling about what might change his mind. At least plant a seed of doubt.

Whether it was possible, between Potter’s emotional state and the Elder Wand’s attraction to chaos and death, was another story entirely. The best he could do, he figured, was to put Potter at ease and hope for the best.

Potter rose from his seat as soon as Draco entered, and greeted him with a nod. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon.” Draco returned the nod. “As I said this morning, we’ll be taking a walk on the grounds.”

“Yes, I recall.”

“Where would you like to go?”

Potter blinked twice before he spoke. “Anywhere is fine.”

“I can choose, if you’d prefer. However, I know you’ve made your decision and, as you’re aware, it may become difficult for you to spend time in magical spaces afterwards. This should help, but still, if there are any particular things you’d like to see or do, I would be pleased to offer that opportunity.”

Potter studied him, squinted as if trying to see through him. “You’re not going to fight me on this?”

“No.” Draco looked at him steadily, though he was still unable to catch Potter’s eye directly. “It’s your choice to make. I understand that.”

“But you don’t believe me when I say that anywhere is fine.”

Draco kept his voice even. “I do. Simply offering you the choice.”

“And if I’d rather stay in the void?”

“That’s your choice as well.” It would be, and Draco wouldn’t try to make him, but if that was a possibility he would try his theory another way. “And I’ll tell Lobsey to stop in around 10 tonight, if that works? There’s really no need for you to leave the void and go all the way to the kitchen just for a snack when we have a full staff on hand.” He paused. “Pansy mentioned you were there before she arrived, looking for something.”

Potter’s jaw clenched. “I didn’t want to inconvenience him. I imagine it takes a toll, coming into the void so frequently.”

“Elf magic isn’t as affected as ours. Though if you’d prefer, I can ask another elf to do it.”

A telling flush rose over Potter’s collar. “It isn’t necessary.”

“All right, then. As you say.”
Potter nodded tightly.

“Is there anywhere you’d prefer not to go?”

“No.”

“Well, then. Let’s start and see where the mood takes us, shall we?”

“Fine.”

“Do you want a coat?”

“I’ll be fine if we’re moving.”

Draco acquiesced with a nod and crossed the room to push the heavy door open. Potter followed him into the thin winter sunlight, but stayed a step behind. Draco began to walk, heading for the stairs at the other end of the terrace gardens. “If you don’t object, I’ll ask a series of questions every few minutes. How you’re feeling, that sort of thing.”

“That’s fine.”

“Thank you.”

They walked on. Draco felt Potter turn when they passed the Sycamore tree. It was exactly as it had been, leaves still piled around the dormant trunk, and the trees around it had taken on more or less the same appearance.

After ten minutes, Draco asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Do you feel fatigued?”

“No.”

“Magically, as well as physically?”

“No.”

“Any experience of achiness or pain?”

“No.”

“How is your vision?”

“Same as always.”

“Your hearing?”

“Fine.”

“Do you feel any tingling or numbness?”

“No.”

“Are you hot or cold, beyond what you would expect in this environment?”
“No.”

“Based on past experience, do you think you would be able to cast a spell right now?”

“If necessary.”

“Does that mean that you could but would rather not, or that you could but only in an emergency situation?”

“The first.”

“Have you ever had fresh apples?”

Reflexively, Potter looked over. “What?”

Draco offered a smile that he hoped looked friendly. “I was torn between the stables and the orchards. We’ll go to the left, if you don’t mind.”

Potter snorted and shook his head, but followed.

It was another five minutes’ walk to the orchard. Draco tried to slow his pace, and Potter drew up beside him as they walked. The longer they walked the more Potter’s breathing evened out and his shoulders relaxed.

The rows of trees slowly came into view. Most of them had dropped their leaves, but hints of red and orange clung to a branch here and there. The elves had raked the leaves around the base of each tree, leaving the centre of each aisle clear. Draco started down a row without preamble. He heard Potter’s footsteps behind him, though they were slower. He peeked to one side and saw Potter craning his neck, looking confused.

“There aren’t any apples,” Potter said at last.

“I was hoping there might be a few, but I suppose it’s a bit late.”

“They don’t last?”

“Apparently not.”

“Oh. They always have them in Tesco.”

Draco laughed, and felt Potter falter. He turned, and found Potter looking at him nervously. Draco blinked, the realisation making him feel like an arse. “You weren’t joking. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Potter tried, “I was. Obviously.”

“I’m sorry,” Draco repeated. “There’s no reason you’d know that. It’s not as though they cover agriculture at Hogwarts. Do they in Muggle school?”

Potter hesitated for a moment, but shook his head.

“Muggle shops they bring them in from other parts of the world.”

Potter hesitated. “Hogwarts had them too, though. And they have them in Hogsmeade. Apple crumble and things.”

“Magic,” Draco said. “Elves and Apparition. And shops and restaurants have contracts for magical
imports. Shipments by Portkey, things like that. And they store well into winter if they’re not left outdoors.”

“Oh. Right.” Potter fell silent and resumed walking effectively, Draco thought, ending the conversation.

Draco was about to start on the third round of questions when Potter spoke. “Where do yours go?”

“Hmm?” Draco searched for their last shared train of thought. “Our apples?”

“Do you sell them?”

“We used to. Not very many buyers these days.”

“For anything from the Malfoy estate.”

“Oh.” Potter frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“It was upsetting at first, but it was easier from Paris. Fewer reminders. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Yeah.” Potter’s voice had a hint of yearning to it. It made Draco nervous.

“I ought to look into it again,” Draco went on. “The elves do an excellent job of maintaining the trees. Perhaps a French buyer, though their rules for agricultural imports are a bit of a hassle.”

“But you do still grow apples?”

“Yes. We just don’t harvest them.”

“But then.” Potter looked up into the trees. “If you don’t… where are they? The actual apples?”

Draco slowed and pointed. “Look down.”

Potter did. He came to a stop, and Draco followed his lead. Potter squinted at the leaves to their right.

“These aren’t all leaves.” Draco crouched next to him and rustled the pile in front of him, pulling out a softened, browning apple. “This is a Roundway Magnum Bonum. Native to Wiltshire. Green and red flushed, quite crisp. When they're harvested they keep well, but they do this when they fall on the ground or into leaves, turn brown and get soft. It’s the moisture” He stood, holding the fruit out to Potter, who took it. “They start to ferment, too. Had a light harvest and a break in the paddock fence in the same year once and wound up with half a dozen drunk Thestrals.”

Potter looked like he was actively working to keep amusement at bay. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Wish I was.” Draco laughed. “Fortunately they’re docile drunks. But they love apples, and by this time of year, if you eat enough of the ones that have fallen… well.”

“Merlin. What does a drunk Thestral look like?”

Draco hesitated. “It was before sixth year. I couldn’t see them. Father had the elves corral them.”

Potter looked more upset on his behalf than Draco would’ve expected. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that up.”
Draco shook his head. “I won’t say it’s okay, lest you think I mean to downplay any of it. But it is okay that you mentioned it.”

Potter eyed him sceptically. “Is it? I don’t like it, especially.”

“Is it. For me, at least. But our positions during the war were quite different.”

Potter shrugged. He didn’t look away. “Not so different.”

“No?”

“No.” Potter turned the apple over in his hands, pressing his thumb into a tender spot. “Too bad about the apples. Was wondering what they’d taste like off the tree.”

“Were you?”

“Yeah.” Potter balanced it in the centre of his palm. “Don’t think I’ve ever had this kind of apple, either.”

Draco let his voice go soft, hoping to encourage Potter’s soft reflections. “You’d like to, though?”

“Yeah.” Potter smiled at the apple and turned it over again. “Though I guess I don’t know if they’re any good.”

“Taste a bit like pears.”

“Mmm. Funny for an apple.”

“Good for desserts. Sweet.”

“Must be.”

“Want to try one?”

He smiled. “Don’t want to end up wandering around like a drunk… you know.”

Draco matched his smile. “Not from one apple, you wouldn’t.”

“Do they still have their taste?”

“I bet, at least a bit.” He kept his voice warm and even, and hoped very much that it hid his nervousness. “Might help if you close your eyes and imagine.”

Potter laughed, a short huff. “Is that how fruit works?”

“No harm in trying.” Draco reached down for another Roundway. “I’ll do it too, if you like.”

“Pretend to taste pears in rotted apples?”

“Why not?”

Potter laughed again. “You first.”

Draco closed his eyes. He heard leaves rustling under Potter’s feet and a surprised sort of noise coming from his direction. He quirked one side of his mouth into a smile. “If you do it with me.”

“You’re serious?” Potter asked, sounding equal parts disbelieving and curious.
Draco shrugged, fighting sudden self-consciousness on top of his nerves, and repeated himself. “Why not?”

There was a long pause. “Okay.” He heard Potter shift. “I’m holding my apple.”

“Eyes closed?”

“Yeah.”

“Describe it back to me?”

“Red and green flushed. Crisp. Thick skin?”

“Fairly.”

“Okay. Thick skin. Juicy?”

“Not very.”

Potter took a deep breath and started again, his voice slow and even. “Red and green flushed. Thick skin. Crisp when you bite into them, not juicy, but a bit of give. Not too hard. And sweet, like a pear.”

“Mhm. Are you imagining the taste?”

“Yeah,” Potter breathed. “Do we eat them now?”

“We do.” Draco lifted his apple towards his mouth, but opened his eyes before he took a bite. His Roundway sat in his hands, as mottled and soft as it had been when he picked it up.

Potter, on the other hand, stood facing him, his hands wrapped around a perfect Roundway Magnum Bonum, and dozens more dotting the leaves around his feet. Draco held his breath as Potter bit into it.

Potter’s eyes flew open. He stared at the apple. Blinked, and blinked again. Opened his mouth, then shut his jaw with a snap. He turned his eyes to Draco imploring, flitting back to the apple to try, as best he could, to ask his question.

Draco held up his apple and shook his head.

Potter looked back down to his. “How?” His voice cracked halfway through the syllable.

“Do mine?” Draco asked, holding it out to him.

He looked to Draco’s apple disbelievingly, but held out a hand. Draco handed Potter his apple, and plucked Potter’s from between his fingers.

“Close your eyes.”

Potter obeyed.

“Describe it back to me?” Draco’s voice was soft, imploring rather than demanding.

Potter took a shallow breath, striving for calm but clearly excited by his discovery. “Sweet.” His voice was rough. “Like a pear. Crispy. Give, but not juicy. Red and green flushed. Thick skin.”

The apple transformed as he spoke, growing and turning colours, the skin over its soft patches
straining over ripe flesh. More of the apples on the ground between them turned too, vibrant greens and reds that were unmissable against the brown leaves. Potter didn’t open his eyes.


Potter shook his head and screwed his eyes shut.

“You did it.” Draco took a step closer.

Potter’s fingers tightened around the apple, his fingers feeling for indentations and his thumbs holding on for dear life.

Draco closed his hand over the apple, and Potter’s fingers in the process. “Feel it?”

Potter nodded frantically.

“Harry. Harry, look.”

His eyelids fluttered, but didn’t open.

Draco pulled it, gently, from his hands, and held it in front of his mouth. “Try it?”

Potter’s breath was shallow and Draco thought he saw wetness collecting in the corners of his eyes. “No,” he managed, barely even a whisper. “You.”

“Me?” Draco’s kept his voice soft on purpose, but his surprise was genuine. “You want me to try it?”

“It’s exactly how they taste. It could’ve been October, fresh off the branch. I swear to you, that’s exactly it.” He offered Potter back the apple he’d taken a bite of. “Try another?”

It took him a moment to reach for it tentatively. “Do you think it’s safe?”

“I do.”

Potter nodded. He stared at it in his hand, turning his wrist to see the bite mark on one side and the unblemished skin on the other. After a long examination, he lifted it to his mouth and took a bite so small Draco almost laughed, though he stopped himself.

Potter’s mouth moved slowly, seeming to roll the pulp over his tongue before he swallowed. He ventured another, larger bite. Draco watched his jaw work, watched the cautious pleasure on his face as he took a third, still larger bite. His eyelids fluttered closed, then open again. He dropped his hand. “It’s good.”

Draco did laugh then. “Yes. It is.”

“Did I? With the—?”
Draco nodded once.

Potter looked at the apple. Marvelled at it, really. “Do you think I could do another?”

“Look around you.”

“What?” Potter looked to the trees, then down, and his eyes grew wide when he spotted the dozens of perfect apples spread around them on the ground. “Did I?”

“You did. I’m certain you can do more.”

“Yes, there are, if we walk a bit further.”

Potter shoved the other into his pocket and grabbed the half-eaten one. Potter looked down the row, and for some reason Draco couldn’t place. He faltered. “I think I’d like to walk.”

Still hopeful, Draco pressed for clarification. “To the end of the orchard, or back to the house?”

“Back to the house, if that’s all right.”

He nodded, doing his best to hide any disappointment. “It is. Would you like to take any of the apples with you?”

Potter hesitated. “What will happen to them here?”

“They’ll start fermenting again, or I can ask the elves to collect them.” He paused, trying to feel for any meaning beneath the question. “You really are welcome to take them. As many as you’d like.”

Potter pursed his lips uncertainly, then bent to grab three or four, which he stuffed in his pockets. “Thank you.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll have the elves come get the rest, and you can have more if you’d like.”

“Thanks. Only, it’s a bit chilly…”

Draco smiled his understanding and they turned back, Potter trailing half a step behind Draco again at first, though they were walking abreast by the time the stairs to the terraces came into focus.

Something between them shifted as they came closer to the house. Potter sighed, and Draco saw him slip his hands into his pockets, feeling for the apples.

Draco cleared his throat. “How are you feeling?”

‘Kay.”

“Fatigued?”

“No,” Potter answered, sounding surprised. “Feel pretty awake, actually.”

“Physically? Magically?”

“Both, I guess. Maybe awake’s not the right word? Not tired, though. I feel okay.”

“Would you be able to cast a spell right now?”
“Yeah. I’m pretty sure.”

Draco’s heart leapt at the lack of qualification. “Any experience of achiness or pain?”

“No.”

“How is your vision?”

Potter half laughed. “No worse than usual.”

“How is your vision?”

Potter considered. “I don’t think so?”

“Can you say more?”

“I guess I feel kind of… different? It’s more… do you know the feeling before a storm, when it feels like there’s a lot of energy in the air?”

“I do.”

“It feels like that, I guess.”

“Is it a pleasant sensation, or an unpleasant sensation?”

“I don’t think it’s one or the other.” He frowned. “Sorry.”

“No, that’s quite all right. Are you warm or cold, beyond what you would expect for being outdoors for so long, or walking for so long?”

“No. Feels about right.”

“Anything else noteworthy?”

“It was Draco’s turn to laugh. “Aside from the obvious,” he agreed. That to him ‘the obvious’ included Potter’s talkativeness, he left unsaid.

“Um. I don’t think so. I guess I’ll let you know if I think of anything.”

“I would appreciate that.”

They crossed the path, approaching the doors.

“We’ll walk again tomorrow?” Potter asked.

“If you’re willing.”

Potter nodded. “Yeah. And this—you think this will be helpful? For your research?”

“I do, yes.”
“Okay.” He went to put a hand on the door but switched at the last moment, without seeming to notice, to rest on the stone wall of the Manor. Outside of the void, Draco noticed.

“Until then, Potter. And if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to say so.”

“Thank you.” Potter nodded, but didn’t move to leave.

Draco stood back, suppressing a smile that might have been unbecomingly, counterproductively victorious. “I’ll see you then.” He turned his back to Potter without waiting for him to re-enter the void, and took the path through the gardens on his way to the library.

* * *

Draco’s first order of business was to take copious notes. His second was to call Granger.

She wasn’t an easy woman to get hold of. Befitting an Unspeakable, but a pain in the arse regardless. The day when he spent hours on his hands and knees trying to reach Hermione Granger would’ve been unimaginable to a younger Draco, but desperate times, and such was the nature of the Floo network.

When he crossed into the second hour he began to wonder whether he shouldn’t have taken up a different branch of science. Could’ve made a mint on a more humane method of communication. It took Millie’s intervention to finally get Granger on the line, but the situation felt no less urgent than it had been at the start of the day.

“Dr Malfoy? Is there an emergency?” She was breathless, her bun thoroughly disheveled.

“Of sorts. Granger, I need more time.”

“What?” She knit her brow. “More time? We don’t dispense neo-Time Turners to the public, I’m —”

“No,” Draco interrupted. “Or, perhaps, if it comes to that. But more time with—” he looked at the Floo conspicuously and hoped Granger would get the hint “—the patient. More days. We’ve had a breakthrough but there’s only so much I can do with it in two days.”

“Everything’s already scheduled.” She pulled at a piece of hair. “He’s made the decision.”

“Move it.”

“Dr Malfoy, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, and I’m very interested to hear more about this breakthrough, but I won’t override the patient’s choice, especially when it involves denying requested, wanted medical care.”

“If you can even call it that. It’s brutality, what you’re planning.”

Her lips tightened. “I won’t deny that I’m worried about the side effects, but it’s what the patient wants. It’s his decision.”

Draco was two seconds from pulling out his hair. “And if he decided to jump off the Eiffel Tower, you’d let him do that too? Hold his hand on the way up?”

“That’s hardly the same th—”

“Listen to me,” he shouted. “He doesn’t know what he wants. He wants to please everyone, wants to keep the peace, wants to give up most everything to make this easier on all of you. Don’t let him
do that. You’re the only ones who can stop him, even make him wait.”

Granger frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“That much is evident. Listen, will you?”

She hesitated, then gave a firm nod.

Draco had rarely spoken so quickly. There was only so much he could say on the Floo, and he wasn’t about to share his speculation on all the particulars of Potter’s repressed feelings, but the outline of his theory poured out of him, as did the story of their walk. When he finished, Granger was almost as breathless as he was.

“That’s—that—” She shook her head. “That’s incredible. Unbelievable. Not,” she qualified when he moved to defend himself, “that I don’t believe it. But I never would have thought…”

“Obviously. But isn’t it worth considering, now that we know?”

“Yes. I have to agree that it is. But—” She slowed. “What would we be considering, exactly? Is there any precedent for a case like this? How would we proceed?”

“I will find a solution. I have ideas. But I need more time. It’s, what, 60 hours until the surgery? That’s not nearly enough. Not by a mile.”

“What would be?”

“Months,” he snorted, and shook his head to forestall her objection. “I know, I know. Not possible. As long as you can. A week, two weeks. Merlin, I would take a few extra days, if that’s all you can get me. But time, Granger. I need more time. He needs time.”

She nodded, hesitant. “I can’t make any promises. I just can’t. But I’ll think on it. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I come see him?”

It was Draco’s turn to hesitate. “Towards what end?”

“I—” She sighed. “To be entirely candid—” she gave him the hint of a glare “—I find parts of it hard to stomach. It’s not wholly out of character, of course, that he would care deeply about others and be motivated by that, but he’s seemed so certain. If it is as you say, I’d like to see him. To see if it’s true.” She shook her head. “Perhaps to apologise if it is.”

Draco wasn’t sure he entirely believed her, but he didn’t think it would be counterproductive. At worst, it would upset Potter enough to prove the theory more decisively. “Fine. Would breakfast work? I’ll have Lobsey ask him and bring you his response.”

“Of course. I’ll make it work.”

“Good. Work on the time, Granger.”

She nodded, looking even more harried than she had at the start, and signed off.
When he went to see Potter the next morning, Draco found Granger waiting for him at the end of the corridor. She was pale and fidgety, looking down at the floor and rocking back on her heels, clearly trying not to pace.

“Granger.”

She didn’t look up. “I went to see Harry.”

“As you requested.”

“He says it’s what he wants.”

“As he has been all along. Do you believe him?”

She stilled, and when she looked up her eyes were red, though dry. “I think I owe him an apology.”

Draco resisted the urge to gloat. Or sag against the wall in relief. He kept his voice as even as he could. “You agree with me, then.”

“I can see why you’re concerned.”

“That’s a bit ambiguous.”

She sighed. “He didn’t give a single reason that wasn’t about someone else.”

“You’re surprised.”

“I…” she paused. “Harry’s always been like that. Concerned with everyone else.”

“He always had to be.”

“Yes,” Granger agreed. “He did. I suppose I got so used to it I assumed that was who he was. But when I ask him how he feels about giving up Quidditch or never seeing his Patronus again and he talks about it as though it’s for some greater good—” she shuddered at the phrase “—those aren’t things he would willingly give up. I don’t believe that. It isn’t him.”

“Then?”

“I don’t mind saying I agree with you if it means doing what’s in his best interest.”

“Mm.” Draco decided against pointing out that she had, in fact, seemed to mind. “And you no longer think that what he says is what’s in his best interest?”

“In this case, no. When he doesn’t—can’t possibly—mean what he says.”

“What if he does?”

“I thought you wanted me to agree.”

“Not if it’s a fleeting reaction to an uncomfortable conversation, rather than a genuine conviction.”

“It isn’t.”
"You’ll work on getting more time, then?"

"I don’t know how," she sighed. "But yes. I will."

"Good. Right now that’s the most important thing."

"Can you tell me what you’re going to use it for, at least?"

"To remind him that he needs his magic. To convince him of my theory. To try and develop a treatment plan that won’t require surgery."

"You think he can keep the Wand in and still use magic? Without outbursts?"

"Yes."

"Based on your theory."

"Yes."

"How will that work?"

He sighed. "I’m now late to my appointment with him."

"You’re asking me to move mountains. Can you at least tell me why?"

He thought of Potter’s trips to the kitchen, of his almost-destroyed seam. "Beyond what I’ve told you, given the particulars, I’m not sure it’s mine to tell."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that for the time being you have to trust me, and trust him to tell you things as he’s ready to."

She looked dubious.

"If—when—I’m able to convince him of the theory, I will encourage him to tell you himself. Strongly encourage him. I’m not doing this to be perverse, Granger. I’ve got reasons. Just as I had reasons for asking for more time, just as I had reasons for arguing the point you’ve now come to agree with."

She frowned. "It would be a lot easier to sell this if I had something to sell."

"Leave that to me. Our next group meeting isn’t too far off." He frowned. "Unfortunately. Isn’t there something else you can use?"

"I suppose I’ll figure something out."

"Good. Do."

"I told you that I would."

"Okay then. Anything else?"

She started to shake her head, then paused. "You’ll tell me more, or have him tell me more, as soon as you can?"

"Yes."
“Okay.” She didn’t move from the spot. “Thank you. For bringing this to my attention.”

Draco nodded. “You’re welcome.”

She returned it and moved to walk towards the foyer.

“Granger.”

She turned.

“Thank you for being willing to see it.”

She gave him a weary smile. “Anything for Harry.”

He nodded and watched her walk away before heading towards Potter’s rooms.

Potter was waiting in his usual chair, though staring out the window instead of reading. He looked perturbed, and startled when Draco came in. He skipped greetings. “Did you see Hermione?”

Draco paused, but couldn’t see any harm in admitting it. “I did.”

“She seemed upset.”

“She did.” Draco walked to lean across the window frame opposite Potter’s chair. “Was your visit difficult?”

“Did you say something to her?”

“Something like what?”

“That you don’t think I really want to be doing this.”

Draco sighed. “Yes. I did.”

Potter’s voice took on an accusatory edge. “You said you respected my choice.”

“I respect your right to make the decision and I will not intervene through any official channels. You have, however, given permission for Granger and I to discuss your case with each other and a number of others. She seemed particularly concerned about the side effects. I told her that I had a theory that would avoid most of them and she was, perhaps understandably, curious about it. Sharing information with others on your team is not tantamount to disrespecting your decision.”

“What did you say to her? She thinks it’s all her fault.”

“Nothing that I haven’t told you. Less than, actually. I assumed you would want any discussion of your emotional life to remain confidential?”

Potter nodded once and waited for Draco to go on.

“In addition to discussing the broader points of the theory, I mentioned some concern that your treatment preference is motivated by your concern for others rather than by a genuine belief that this will be the best long-term resolution for you.”

Potter shook his head. “You really—” He inhaled slowly and exhaled again, looking as though he was fighting to stay calm. “It’s not Hermione’s fault.”
“I never said that it was.”

“Then where did she get the idea?”

“Have you asked her?”

“Of course I have.”

“Actually asked her, as opposed to reassuring her that it isn’t?”

Potter frowned. “Yes,” he said, though it sounded less certain. “Maybe it’s something you said earlier.”

“I’ve expressed scepticism—to put it mildly—about her methods since I first read the case file. While I certainly think that should give her pause, I doubt that it would take effect so suddenly, and after so long.”

Potter stood abruptly. “Whatever. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Your walk, you mean?”

Potter was already making for the door.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Draco followed.

Potter threw his weight into the great oak doors, his shoulder colliding with a painful-sounding thud.

“Potter! Merlin’s sake. Do you want me to look at that?”

“No,” Potter bit. “Let’s just go.” He walked quickly towards the field.

“Will you stop a minute?” Draco strode after him.

Potter stopped, but didn’t turn. “What is it?”

“This.” Draco pulled both of their wands from his robes and held Potter’s out to him. “If you’ll turn around.”

Potter did, and huffed. “More tests?”

“I’d like to test your magical levels, yes.”

“Not now.”

Draco couldn’t entirely hide his surprise at such an overt refusal. “On the way back then?”

“We’ll see.” Potter started walking again.

Draco hummed under his breath and followed in silence.

They were down the stairs and into the field before Potter spoke again. “If you actually believe in your crackpot theory, I can’t see why you’d think it was a good idea to hand me a wand when I’m so clearly brassed off.”

“If you were paying attention to my theory, you’d know that it’s an ideal time to hand you your wand.”
“Your theory is a load of dragon shit.”

“Rare, valuable and useful in medical poultices? Not that I was planning to use those but—”

“Sod off.”

Draco cleared his throat, as much to hide an appreciation for Potter’s frankness as to change the subject. “We’ll be walking towards the stables today.”

“Wasn’t that your backup plan for yesterday? Out of ideas already?” Potter sniped. “Good thing there’s only a day left.”

Draco laughed bitterly. “It’s beyond me that you can be so sanguine about the potential loss of your magic.”

“Clearly.”

“Explain it to me, then.”

“I’ve explained it to you a million times already.”

“Surely not more than a few thousand.”

“You’re not funny.”

“As you’re so fond of saying, I disagree.”

Potter snorted and shook his head.

“Obviously I’m failing to understand something. Explain it again.”

Potter shook his head again and kept walking.

“You won’t explain it, or you can’t explain it because it’s transparent nonsense?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“No.” Potter kept walking, picking up his pace to stay in front of Draco.

While Draco could keep up, Potter’s demeanour didn’t suggest an openness to conversation. They exchanged nothing more than a few one-sentence directions until they reached the stables.

Potter turned to him, his back to the door, his arms folded, and with a stubborn look the likes of which Draco hadn’t seen since their sixth year. “What are we supposed to do here? Got some rotting feed you want me to revive?”

“No.” Draco weighed his answer carefully. Potter’s obstinacy was wholly reassuring, and having his emotions so close to the surface made for a crucial opportunity. “Granger mentioned early on that you liked animals. We have some. That’s all.”

“How are they protected?”

“Pardon?”

“How are they protected? I won’t be responsible for killing anything if my magic starts
exploding.”

“You underestimate them. They’re magical animals. They’re highly aware and they have superb reflexes, magical and physical.”

“And the non-magical ones?”

“I’ll cast a shield first thing if anything happens.”

Potter started to object.

“You’ve seen me do it. You know I’m perfectly capable.”

Potter snorted and shook his head. “So, what? We walk around, stare at the animals? Petting zoo is your idea of a good outing?”

“You could ride them. You must miss flying.”

“No.”

“No you don’t miss it, or no you won’t do it?”

“No. Just, no.”

“Fine. Then you can help me tend to them.”

Potter snorted. “You take care of animals? Likely.”

“Not usually, but there’s a new litter of kittens, half-cat, half-Kneazle.” He thought he saw Potter’s brow soften, then firm up again. “I’m checking on them.”

“What do you care?”

“Their father must have been a Kneazle. Their mother is a cat. She may not be able to provide enough nourishment to support their magical growth, in which case we’d supplement her milk with store-bought Kneazle milk or dandelion root.”

Potter snorted. “So bloody obsessed with magic. More pureblood mania, is it? Nothing’s worth anything unless it’s got magic.”

Draco’s chest tightened defensively. “I’m a wizard. Being a pureblood has nothing to do with my feelings about that.”

“No? You weren’t the ones trying to run off everyone you thought had impure magic? Kill everyone who disagreed?”

“Some purebloods were.” Draco’s jaw tightened. “I was a 16 year old trying to save his parents’ lives. Now I am a renowned biomagicologist who has made the Muggle study of the body central to his research and practise.”

“To help wizards,” Potter challenged.

“In ways that we never would’ve discovered without taking Muggle contributions seriously on their own terms.” Draco tried to centre himself. “Their understanding of the nervous system far outpaces our own. Ditto their research on the conductivity of bones. I study Muggle science. I teach Muggle as well as magical students. And while we haven’t yet found a way to apply our
results to Muggle medicine, it’s because their bodies aren’t reliably receptive to magical ingredients. Charms research begins next spring.”

“You’re going to break the Statute of Secrecy? To help Muggles? Let me guess, you also lead a double life as a Hippogriff.”

Draco was stung. More deeply than he would’ve liked. “I didn’t realise you had so little faith in my abilities. But since you’ve asked, the French authorities are more reasonable about interactions with Muggles. It’s the British Ministry that’s got a problem with Muggles. Happy to Obliviate them, but never to help.”

Potter shook his head incredulously. “Unbelievable. Bloody unbelievable.”

“In a world where Harry Potter claims he’s perfectly content to never play Quidditch again, it’s hardly the strangest thing going.”


“Fine. I’m going to check on the kittens.” He turned toward the stables and opened the door. He didn’t hear Potter’s footsteps until he was past the second set of stalls.

Potter’s footsteps stalled again and Draco turned to see him staring in open awe at one of the horses.

“It’s an Arabian-Akhal Teke cross.”

Potter’s face darkened. “I don’t care.”

“The one next to it’s Arabian, across the way are two Sorraia Mustangs.”

“I don’t care.” Potter put his head down and started walking towards Draco.

“It’s fine if you do.”

“No.”

“We can go riding if you like.”

“No,” Potter said through gritted teeth, “thank you. I’ve already said.”

“It wouldn’t be a problem. The two on your left are Andalusians. The one beyond it and the three on the other side are Shire horses. Their line dates back to Brutus Malfoy’s early interest in using the grounds as a working farm.”

Potter didn’t respond.

Draco kept walking slowly, anxiety rising in his chest as they moved past the tack room to the next set of stables. If Draco was right that Potter’s second outburst had been down to the mention of Hippogriffs, this would be telling. They passed the feed room. Draco spoke to stop himself holding his breath.

“The first two on the right are domestic, bred in the Scottish Highlands. On the left there’s one Spanish and two Greek. Bit more colourful than the domestic breeds.” He thought he heard crackling, but didn’t turn around. “And at the end we have a Lappish Hippogriff, almost entirely white. Bred by Saami wizards. There’s some history of breeding Gryphons with reindeer instead of horses, so they’ve evolved antlers.” He began to turn slowly. “Quite rare, bit of a different
Potter was staring at the very first stall. Behind him, a stray bit of hay had burst into flames. He was too focused to notice, but Draco though that might’ve been question answered. Theory proven. He drew his wand and murmured a quiet “Aguamenti.”

He stowed his wand and took a tentative step forward. “Potter?”

Hearing his name pulled him out of his trance. He turned to Draco, shaking his head slowly, his eyes blazing. “You have Hippogriffs.”

“Yes. As I said.”

“You have fucking Hippogriffs.”

“Yes.” Draco’s heart pounded as he waited to see what Potter would do. “Two domestic, four foreign.”

“You.” Potter took a step towards him. “Did you have them all along?”

Draco tried to feign calm. “The practise of keeping them at the Manor also dates to Brutus Malfoy. So, since the mid-1600s. Not these particular ones, of course—”

He was almost relieved when Potter saved him from his rambling.

“When you were growing up.” Potter enunciated each word carefully. “You had them when you were growing up.”


“And you rode them. Knew how to care for them.”

“I never rode one as a child. They’re too temperamental for that.”

Potter stared right at him. “You knew that they were easily provoked. Temperamental. You knew that.”


“Buckbeak.” Potter’s breath was quick and shallow, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “You knew that before that class, with Hagrid and Buckbeak.”

“I did.”

“Are they just things to you? Property you can destroy as easily as you’d throw something in the rubbish? Do you even know their names?”

“Clockwise? Rushhook, Galetuft, Luotkkubiddo, Aichmiránýci, Plumagracia, and Domarpotro. All but Luotkkubiddo and Galetuft predate the war. I knew them as a child. I sign off on their care. I’ve made a point of checking on them since I’ve been back. I’ve ridden Rushhook and Plumagracia on occasion.”

“But you—You and your father. You had one sentenced to death.”

“No,” Draco said. “Or, yes. Father did. It was never my intention. But in spite of your personal fondness for him, Hagrid had no business teaching. He was a danger to his students.”
Potter’s nostrils flared. “And you knew just what to do to make him look like it.”

“I did, yes.”

“You’re a right bloody piece of work.”

“I was acting in the interest of safety.” It was partly true. His father had been annoyed about the whole affair since their owl had delivered that damned biting textbook, which had scared Draco more than he would’ve admitted at the time. But getting Hagrid sacked was Lucius’ mission far more than his own, and he had actually been injured in the process. Neither the first time nor the last it was written off as a necessary consequence of his father’s scheming.

“By provoking a Hippogriff even though you knew better? Faking an attack? Having him sentenced to death?” Potter advanced half a step with each question, colour beginning to rise over his collar.

“Yes. I placed my friends’ and housemates’ safety over the Hippogriff. Can you blame me if you think of it like that?”

Potter was clenching his fists. “Please,” he spat. “You would’ve killed an innocent animal just to get what you wanted.” He laughed, low and bitter. “You haven’t changed a bit, have you? All your talk of Muggle this and that. You’re the exact same spoiled, arrogant brat you were then.”

“I’m not,” Draco insisted, his chest growing tighter still as Potter went on.

“You think you know better than everyone else. Life and death in your hands. Is that why you became a doctor? The power of it? Deciding who lives? Who to save?”


“What, ‘I, Draco Malfoy, do pledge to become world famous by experimenting on people’?”

“That I may only enjoy life so long as I diminish the suffering of others. That I am never to play with life or death.” Draco shook his head. “You’ve had that responsibility, Potter. Life or death. Tell me that you wanted it. Tell me that anyone in their right mind would.”

“Whoever said you were in your right mind? Baiting Hippogriffs? Not a testament to sanity.”

“And if I told you I’d had direction? Told you it was a command from home?”

“You never were big on thinking for yourself, were you?”

Draco laughed. “Pot, kettle. Merlin, Potter. Listen to yourself. You’ve been taking orders so long you’ve forgotten how to do anything else.”

A vein in Potter’s forehead pulsed. “And you can’t imagine someone choosing to put other people first without it being an order!”

“As opposed to you? Willing to give up everything without so much as a second thought? Martyrdom for fun? Nothing better to do this weekend, might as well become a Squib?”

“You don’t even know that. Maybe I won’t become a Squib. I might be fine. You might be totally wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time!”

“I would know more if you’d let me do the damn tests!”
“Fuck your tests!”

Excitement stirred in Draco’s chest even as he narrowed his eyes. “Still holding a grudge, are you? You’ll sit through everyone else’s requirements, but doing the exact same thing when I’m asking is a bridge too far?”

“I’ve done every bloody thing you’ve asked!”

“You do every bloody thing everyone asks!” Draco was breathing hard, his pulse pounding.

“Yeah, because I give a damn about someone other than myself! Lots of someones! No wonder it’s such a mystery to you.”

“Of course!” Draco exclaimed. “It’s because you care so much. So much you want an excuse to never see them again.”

Potter looked about to boil over. “So much that I’d give up everything to keep them safe.”

Draco stepped back and huffed a laugh. “You admit it then. It’s everything. You’re giving up everything.”

Potter paused with his mouth open. His chest still heaved. He shook his head. “You think you’re so clever.”

“Don’t avoid the question.”

“There wasn’t any question.”

“There didn’t need to be. You said it. ‘I’d give up everything.’”

“‘To keep them safe.’”

“That’s not the only way to keep them safe.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m telling you, my theory is right. We have a root cause. We can treat that instead of removing the implant.”

“What, that I secretly hate my friends? It’s nonsense. Utter codswallop. Can’t treat something that isn’t there.”

“Then why haven’t you blown anything up?”

“What?” Potter snapped.

“Look around you, Potter. Nothing burning or iced over or shredding or cracked or exploding or splintering or dropping leaves. Not since you started yelling.”

Potter looked around frantically. “There,” he said, pointing at the bit of singed hay. “I did that, didn’t I?”

“When you were trying to keep it in. Just like last time. I mentioned Hippogriffs, you pretended to be fine, and you took the leaves off a tree. Stop trying to bottle it up and it stops exploding. It’s not Arithmancy.”
“No.” Potter shook his head. “That’s not evidence. That’s chance. Sometimes things happen, sometimes they don’t. That’s all. And it’s dangerous. I could hurt anyone, any time.”

“No,” Draco insisted. “You couldn’t. You haven’t. You haven’t hurt the animals. You haven’t hurt me, much as you might want to.”

“Is this why you brought me here?” Potter studied him. “It is, isn’t it? Try to get me angry? You’re twisted.”

“I’m right and you don’t want to admit it.”

“You’re dead wrong and you can’t stand to admit you can’t think of anything else.”

“I’m right and you can’t stand to admit that you want the Wand out anyway.”

Potter clenched his jaw. “Are we done here?”

“No.” Draco folded his arms.

“What the fuck, Malfoy. Are you serious?”

“I have tests left to conduct and there was something more to show you.”

“What, do you have Acromantulas down the other end?”

“No.”

“And if I don’t want to do the tests?”

“Though this seems to have been glossed over at the Department of Mysteries, you’re not required to do to everything anyone asks of you. You can refuse consent and I won’t do them.”

“You’re such a holier-than-thou hypocrite.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Shit all over the Department of Mysteries like you don’t want the exact same thing.”

“Yes,” Draco said in his driest voice. “I’ve just reminded you that you have the ability to refuse to consent to medical procedures so that I can make you do whatever I want.” He didn’t try to hide his eyeroll. “Because I think I’m so clever, probably.”

“Just do it,” Potter huffed. He held out his hand.

Draco didn’t waste time or breath. He handed Potter his wand. “Start with Lumos.”

Potter held out his wand and intoned the spell. A ball of light emerged from his wand, casting weak shadows over the back of the stalls. It flickered, and Draco saw Potter furrow his brow.

“That’s fine. Levitation.” He pointed to a bit of rope that was pooled between two stalls.

“*Wingardium Leviosa.*” The latch on the stall door rattled before the rope rose. Potter held it in the air. “Enough?” He bit the word out through a clenched jaw, which looked to Draco as though it was straining.

“Fine.” Draco levitated the rope. “End my spell.”
“Finite.”

He felt the tug of Potter’s magic against his own, but it wasn’t enough to end his spell.

Potter mumbled it again, barely moving his mouth. “Finite.” Draco let the spell drop and saw Potter’s shoulders relax as he did.

“Your Patronus.”

“And if I’m too bloody angry for that?”

“Try.”

“And if it spooks the animals?”

“It won’t.”

“Smug bastard,” Potter mumbled. “Expecto Patronum!” A silver wisp erupted from his wand and began to take shape before falling to the ground.

“Expecto Patronum,” Potter repeated, knitting his brow and straining to concentrate. Again, the beginning of a shield appeared but it wouldn’t solidify.

Potter assumed a dueling stance and tried again. “Expecto Patronum!” This time the outline of a stag appeared and took a few steps before it dissolved.

“That’s fine, Potter, thank you.”

Potter snorted. “Yeah, that was great. Set me up, make me furious, run your damn tests.”

“I tried to run them earlier and you wouldn’t have it. And anger should not decrease the strength of your intentional casting, as we have discussed on multiple occasions.”

“Or you’re trying to trick me into thinking I should do things your way.”

“If that’s what you think, send Lobsey to get me this afternoon or this evening, once you’re feeling more rested, and we’ll do them again.”

“Not likely.”

“Your call.” He turned and made his way across the stables, past the Hippogriffs and the turnoff to the aisle that housed the horses. He turned over his shoulder. “Follow me. I have something else to show you.”

Potter muttered something, but followed.

Draco took them back past the tack room, past the feed room, to the pair of foaling stalls at the far end of the stables.

“Quiet,” he murmured, before sliding the door back.

In one corner, half hidden under a pile of hay, a grey cat was curled around two kittens no larger than Draco’s palm. Another one lay across her side, and a fourth slept draped over its mother’s forehead.

Draco approached them quietly, willing his heart to slow, trying to ignore Potter’s presence at the
door. He slipped one from the curve of its mother’s body and lifted her for examination. She mewed plaintively and scrabbled at the sleeve of his robes.

“Shhhh,” he reassured, letting it settle on his arm. “Let’s have a look at you.”

Lifting his arm, and her along with it, he peeked into her ears and frowned. He rolled her over, brushing the downy fur on her stomach and shaking his head. “There, there.” He traced a thumb over her forehead and replaced her. She covered her face with a paw and pushed into her mother’s belly.

Draco backed out of the stall. He spoke for Potter’s benefit, but to himself. “Dirty ears… not grooming properly. Too thin, and small for the fourth week, especially half-Kneazle. Evidence of fleas.” He sighed, and turned to Potter. “Your lucky day. Someone less difficult is in need of care. I need to find an elf to prepare a supplement for them. I trust you can find your way back.”

He didn’t wait for Potter’s response before he turned down the aisle, past the tack room towards the horses, and through the exit.

Instead of going back to the house, he slipped around the edge of the barn. Between a Disillusionment Charm and the stall’s small windows, he was willing to take the chance.

By the time he’d arranged the necessary spellwork and made his way around the building, it was exactly as he’d hoped. Potter was kneeling in the hay, watching the kittens and, after a minute, he reached a tentative finger out to trace the line of their ribs. When they stretched into the touch, he smiled and settled back into the hay.

Draco exhaled. He leaned against the side of the stables, straining to hear Potter with the kittens, and breathed deeply until his heart rate settled and he was ready to make for the Manor.

* * *

An odd restlessness stayed with Draco all afternoon. He read, but never managed it for more than twenty minutes at a time. He reviewed his notes, but found them frustratingly sterile. He took tea and found it entirely tasteless. He sat through dinner with Pansy and Greg and had almost nothing to say, even though his mind was thoroughly agitated, searching for something he couldn’t put a finger on.

He tried to settle in to the library with a nightcap and come up with a plan. Potter’s test results were ominous, but they were also overdue. Potter should’ve shown signs of magical atrophy much sooner. His symptoms still weren’t as severe as they probably should have been, but any loss of ability so close to the surgery was inauspicious. And if that was Potter’s performance with the Elder Wand implanted, Draco could take a guess as to how he would fare without it.

On the other hand, he’d been perfectly able to light a fire. Wandlessly and wordlessly. Granted, without any awareness or control, but the raw magical ability was still there.

But with only one more full day, and no word from Granger, and staring down at a letter from Millie confirming his long-dreaded meeting with the Ministry types in the morning, Draco couldn’t imagine it would be enough. Not to convince Potter, or any of the rest of them. Not when they had a prize pony to trot out. Raise some money, give some speeches. He knew the routine all too well.

He gave up at half ten and made for his rooms. He passed Potter’s on the way, and paused. He didn’t want to go to bed with things as they were. Especially with one day left.

He knocked.
“Come in.” Potter’s voice was surprisingly friendly.

He opened the door and stepped into the room, glowing gold by the light of the sconces.

Potter sat cross-legged in the middle of the rug, surrounded by the cat and her kittens. He looked up, and the smile fell off his face. “Oh. I was expecting Lobsey.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

Potter’s maddening mask of politeness fell back into place. “Can I help you?”

“I came to say goodnight. I hope we can start tomorrow on a better note than we left today.”

“Thank you.” Absentmindedly, Potter scooped one of the kittens into his lap. It purred and butted his wrist.

“If there’s anything you’d like to do, please let me know. Or Lobsey, if you’d prefer, and he can relay the message.”

“Thank you,” Potter repeated.

“You brought the kittens in.”

Potter stilled. “One of the elves came to feed them and I asked for Galder. He said it was okay.”

“It is. Though hopefully they got rid of the fleas before you set them on the rug.”

“Yes.” He paused. “Or, I did it, I think.”

“Oh?”

Potter hummed noncommittally. He lifted an orange kitten and Draco noticed its ears were clean and its ribs were considerably less pronounced. Potter held it protectively to his chest. “Do you have plans for them?”

“Plans?”

“Do you sell them or something? Fancy pureblood kittens?”

Draco scoffed. “Hardly. They’re barn Kneazles, and half-Kneazles at that. They’ll live in the barns. Keep the horses company.”

“I’d be willing to pay,” Potter said, his voice resolved and his eyes still on the litter.

“For the kittens?”

“Yes.”

“No need. There will be more sooner or later.”

Potter looked up, startled. “Are you saying I can have them?”

“Yes. The cat wandered on to the property at some point. Both parents did, I think. She’s not ours. You might as well.”

“Oh.” Potter looked like he was biting down on a smile. “Okay.”
Draco watched him try to collect them in his lap. Some stayed. One scrambled up his arm. The mother cat set one on his knee and tried to groom it.

Potter looked up again, letting a bit of a smile through this time. “It is possible to enjoy things without magic, you know. To be fine without it.”

Draco’s heart sank. “Ah,” he began.

“You know. Love, care. The really important things. Those don’t depend on magic.” He ruffled the fur on one of the kitten’s hindquarters. “Kittens, chocolate, sunny days, hot tea. There’s a lot in the world that doesn’t come back to magic. And I figure, if you are right and I can’t go back to work, I’ll have the time to take care of them.”

“Potter—”

“It’s like you think it’s the end of the world, being without magic. But it isn’t. There’s still this.”

“Potter, stop.” Draco cringed when Potter looked up at him. “I spoke without thinking. I’m sorry.”

Potter pulled his hands away as if the kitten was suddenly burning hot. “You didn’t mean it.”

“I did. Do. But they’re half Kneazle.”

Potter didn’t say anything, but looked more and more crushed as the realisation hit. He hid his eyes, turning his focus to a grey kitten trying to attack his fingers.

“If your magical ability is compromised, your ability to care for them will be as well. They thrive on magical energy. They’re magical beasts. Without it they won’t grow to full size, won’t fill out properly. They’ll be more vulnerable to feline diseases of Muggle origin if you let them out.”

“They’re doing fine in the void,” Potter objected.

“For a matter of hours, yes. They’d likely be fine for several days, though at this stage of their development it seems unwise to test it.”

“You’re taking them now?” Potter looked up, alarmed, his eyes unusually shiny.

“No,” Draco insisted, trying to reassure. “But I’m afraid I spoke too soon about letting you have them. If you have to leave the magical world, or if your ability is seriously compromised, it’s not safe for any of you. It will harm them to be away from magic, and you won’t be able to care for or control a litter of half-Kneazle kittens without any magical ability, especially since they’re still half and half and not a more dilute combination of Kneazles and cats. Wizards aren’t even supposed to have full Kneazles, you know. Triple X classification. Half-Kneazles are considerably gentler, but it would be irresponsible to send them off with anyone whose magical ability is compromised or absent.”

“You still don’t know that it will be.” Potter had—without realising, Draco suspected—lifted the kitten he had previously pulled away from, and cradled it against his chest.

“Not with total certainty, no. My expertise is not in Divination. But I’m as sure I can be short of that. You must know that your tests this afternoon weren’t promising.”

“I was upset.”

“Then shall we try again?”
Potter shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m tired. Turning in soon.”

“Mmm.” Draco hoped his lack of comment would say enough.

Potter, still holding one kitten against his chest, began to move the others out of his lap. He looked up at Draco, though he still avoided eye contact. “There are Muggle kittens too, you know.”

“Yes.”

“I can get one of those.”

“You can.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Exhaustion hit Draco like a Bludger to the stomach. He could barely manage even a faint faux-smile. “Think about what you’d like to do tomorrow, then. Last day in the magical world.”

“You keep saying that…”

“You keep ignoring it.”

“Maybe I have more faith than you do.”

Draco shook his head, tiredness making it feel leaden. “You can’t keep beating the odds forever. That’s not a lack of faith. That’s…” He sighed. “It’s a different kind of faith, I suppose. Believing it’s important to protect someone from harm, rather than putting them in its way and trusting they’ll come through.”

Potter looked at him curiously. “You think it’s important to protect me from harm?”

Draco sighed. “I think the kittens will be fine overnight, if you’d like to keep them here.” He’d turned back towards the door when Potter’s question struck him. He spoke up to be sure Potter heard him. “And I wouldn’t have come back if I didn’t believe the other, too.”

He chanced a glance over his shoulder. Potter was still surrounded by the kittens, one of whom had scaled his jumper and found a perch on his shoulder. Potter and the kitten both watched Draco with an identical tilt to their heads.

“Good night, Potter.” Draco nodded, twisted the handle, and didn’t look back again.
Chapter 13

When he reached the bottom of the staircase the next morning, Draco looked longingly at the corridor towards Potter’s rooms. That was down to his continued unease, in part. Concern for his patient. But thoughts of the Ministry officials waiting in the music room did not inspire eagerness. Nor did the raised voices he could hear through the door.

He leaned his head against the doorframe and reminded himself it would be over soon enough. One way or another. On the bright side, if they were already yelling it wouldn’t be so noticeable if he joined in.

They must’ve taken the same seats, but Croaker, Weasley, and Granger had stood out of theirs and were pointing fingers, both figurative and literal, over the table. Shacklebolt and Millie watched with almost identically calm expressions, though Millie’s betrayed a hint of amusement. Robards had his head in his hands and was massaging his temples aggressively.

Leaving them to it, Draco crossed the room, ducked under Weasley’s emphatically gesturing arm, poured himself a cup of tea, and sat back on the empty settee he’d occupied last time. He nodded his greetings to Shacklebolt and Mill, who responded in kind but otherwise seemed resigned to waiting out the furour. His plans to do the same were scuppered when he caught on to what Granger was saying.

“Percy Weasley, that is absolute rubbish!” Her face was almost the colour of the Hogwarts Express and she looked so close to exploding that Draco began to wonder if he was about to see more accidental magic. “You know as well as anyone that we owe Harry more than we could ever, ever, even begin to hope to repay, and you won’t do it because the scheduling is ‘inconvenient’?”

Weasley responded in kind. “And since the day you boarded the Hogwarts Express you have been so preoccupied with blind idealism that it seems to have subsumed all space reserved for practicalities!”

“Do not speak to her that way!” Croaker wheezed. “I might remind you that as an Unspeakable she outranks you absolutely and unequivocally.”

Robards stood. He was clearly attempting to project serenity, but Draco didn’t miss his clenched jaw. “Before we pull out the charts and handbooks, I might remind you, Unspeakable Croaker, that we have a common purpose and it isn’t helped by useless posturing.”

“And I might remind you, Auror Robards, that it isn’t “useless posturing” when one part of the team is able to solve a problem, while the other’s chief objective is lying to the public.”

“We do NOT—” Weasley spluttered, though he had the good sense not to finish what would have been a blatant falsehood. “We have provided much-needed cover while you spend months lollygagging around and calling in former—”

“Don’t you dare,” Granger hissed. “You might not bear the mark, but you helped Fudge hide Voldemort’s return. How many deaths are on your hands?”

Percy went scarlet and fell into a spiral of, “I never”s and, “How dare you”s that left Granger fuming and Croaker and Robards unsure of how to proceed.

Draco decided his resolution to the contrary was officially a lost cause: he liked Granger. Or at
least had an increasingly ungrudging appreciation for her candour. Putting it that way was a bit more palatable.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat. “I might point out that our host has arrived. Please take your seats.”

All eyes turned to Draco. He raised his cup cheerfully and took a sip.

Croaker and Robards had the good grace to look embarrassed. Weasley, predictably, obeyed the letter of the Minister’s command but did not stop his muttering. Granger sank onto the edge of her seat, tense and ready to jump back out of it.

“Thank you,” Shacklebolt continued. “Ms Bulstrode, where were we?”

“Reviewing transport protocols in advance of Potter’s surgery, Minister.”

“Thank you. Dr Malfoy, are there any special precautions you would advise beyond the use of an armed guard?”

“Yes.”

“Would you please share your thoughts on the matter?”

Draco set his saucer on the edge of the table. “Don’t do it.”

Shacklebolt gave Draco the sort of piercing look that implied that he knew exactly what Draco was suggesting. The bags under his eyes suggested that he was too tired, too eager for a permanent resolution, to give up the possibility that he might be wrong about Draco’s intentions. “You recommend against an armed guard?”

“I recommend against the surgery.”

Croaker gasped. “Dr Malfoy, that is absolutely out of the question. Auror Potter has consented to the surgery, the arrangements are in place, and several teams are already assembled to conduct the operation and secure the Wand for future research. There is no question of whether we move forward, only of how.”

“I must agree,” Robards added. “Aside from needing Potter back in the field, inquiries from the press are increasingly aggressive. We can’t hold them off forever.”

Shacklebolt sighed. “Dr Malfoy, I’m afraid I must add my own agreement. Harry’s commitments are too important to him and to us. The SAFE Act alone has huge implications, and no one is as well-placed to speak against it.”

“Then accommodate him as he is.”

“Out of the question!” Weasley’s yammering resolved into indignance.

“Why?” Draco asked mildly.

“Impertinent,” Weasley muttered.

Robards spoke over Weasley before he could get any further. “As we have informed the Minister, and as the Minister told you directly at our last meeting, we believe it would create an untenable safety risk.”

“Why?”
He caught Granger’s sceptical look from across the table. “Why?” she mouthed.

Robards missed the interaction entirely. Draco struggled not to find that telling in a Head Auror, and tried to pay attention to what he said instead. “Auror Potter is a top priority target for all manner of criminals. Death Eaters who would still gladly take revenge, organised crime syndicates for whom his murder would be a status marker, petty criminals with something to prove, witches and wizards who mistakenly blame him for the loss of loved ones during the war—all of them pose a threat. And almost all of them are kept at bay solely by his reputation as the man who took down You-Know-Who. If he appears in public under our protection, if he shows signs of illness or any sort of magical weakness, he would lose the best protection he’s got.”

“And you are unable to protect him?” Draco raised his eyebrows, folded his arms, and waited for Robards to, hopefully, walk into it.

“Accusations are not necessary, Dr Malfoy. We pride ourselves in the strength of our Auror teams, and that is a well-placed sentiment. But even if Auror Potter were to accept a 24 hour guard, which I highly doubt—” Draco looked to Granger, who nodded her agreement “—we can’t guarantee that we would be able to overcome every threat, every time. If an entire wizarding gang were to descend on his home in the middle of the night with only a standard two-Auror team present, they’d be vastly outnumbered. We would gladly offer that level of security, but it would not be as strong as what he’s got now.”

“That’s very interesting, Auror Robards. You don’t believe that Potter would be safe under constant guard, but you do believe he’d be safe as a Squib.”

Robards opened his mouth and closed it again. “That—we have been assured that that is not a foregone conclusion.”

“Which Croaker is entirely wrong about.”

Croaker huffed, his face taken on shades of Granger’s

Draco ignored him. “His magical strength is already fading, and that’s with the Elder Wand. Removing it will be a disaster. I’d bet anything on it. He will be a Squib, or close enough to it. And if he is, and your Auror teams are, by your own admission, an imperfect solution, how long do you think he’ll have left once word gets out?”

Robards shifted uneasily. “Word doesn’t need to get out.”

“You can’t keep his whereabouts under wraps for another few weeks, but you can hide the fact that he’s lost all magical ability for the rest of his life?”

“Perhaps?” Robards did not sound especially sure.

“Certainly.” Weasley jumped in, full of bluster. “We’ll stage occasional fights in public view with others performing magic for him, similar to when we ‘broke’ the Elder Wand. The rest of the time he’ll be ‘on missions.’”

“There you go.” Robards looked relieved, as did Croaker.

“Which is all well and good until someone comes across him randomly at Tesco. Criminals shop too, you know.”

“That is a highly unlikely scenario.”
Draco rested an ankle on the opposite knee. “Do you remember, Auror Robards, when the French authorities caught Rookwood?”

“Of course.”

“A colleague of mine, Luc Reynard, had gone to Annecy for a holiday and wound up queuing behind him at a patisserie in Menthon-Saint-Bernard. He’d done a bit of research on the war for his work on curse-related scarring and recognised the face. Waited until Rookwood left the shop, cast an Incarcerous, end of. Consider Potter’s fame relative to Rookwood’s. How long do you think it would take for someone to notice him? For word to get out?”

Granger had paled.

“It’s hardly the same thing,” Robards blustered. “Rookwood was a wanted criminal. Auror Potter is a—”

“Wanted celebrity? Prize trophy?”

“Hero,” Robards finished. “Regardless of his magical status.”

“There’s more to him than that,” Granger insisted.

“I agree,” Draco said. “A change to his magical status would not detract from either his accomplishments or his character. The length and quality of his life, on the other hand…”

The sentiment sat heavy in the room.

Croaker spoke first. “Unless he’s perfectly fine, either immediately after the surgery or after a short rehabilitation.”

“Are you willing to take that risk?”

Again, they sat in silence, this time until Granger cleared her throat. “I’m not.”

She held firm as half a dozen sets of eyes focused on her. “I’m not,” she repeated. “I don’t believe the risk is worthwhile, or ethical.”

Croaker narrowed his eyes at her and a hint of malice shone through his tight smile. “What would you propose then, Unspeakable Granger?”

“I suggest—” Her voice quavered, and she set her jaw in firm resolve. “I suggest that we take Dr Malfoy’s advice and find some way to give Harry more time.”

There was a long moment’s silence before the room exploded. Weasley with indignant yammering about public appearances, Robards in an impassioned defense of his Aurors’ abilities, Croaker in a tirade about Wand-related research agendas, and Shacklebolt in an attempt to bring them to order.

When Granger blinked she closed her eyes for longer than could possibly have been necessary, but otherwise she held strong.

After a solid minute’s chaos, Millie set two fingers over her teeth and whistled.

The room turned to her, shocked into silence. Save Draco, who poured himself a second cup of tea.

Millie smiled politely. “The Minister was speaking.”
“Thank you, Ms Bulstrode.” Shacklebolt forged ahead before anyone else could regain their equanimity. “As I was saying, we gain nothing from speaking over each other. Ms Granger, your objection is noted. Dr Malfoy, would you please explain your alternative proposal in full?”

“Of course, Minister.” Draco set his spoon on the saucer. “I am pleased to report something of a breakthrough. It appears that the Wand is not malfunctioning, per se, or in need of removal.” Croaker turned his narrowed eyes on Draco, who ignored them completely.

“Rather,” Draco continued, “the critical factors are the nature of the Wand and its placement. To the first, as should not be surprising, the Elder Wand is exceptionally powerful. To the second, it was implanted alongside Potter’s femur, even though European witches and wizards are trained to conduct magic through the humerus, radius, and ulna, through the phalanges, and to their wands. And it does take training; until children learn to use their wands they are much more prone to accidental magic than adults are. But untrained conduits in the body have an equal capacity for the transmission of magical energy, even if they go unused.

“In short, Potter has the most powerful wand in the world implanted next to a conduit he’s not trained to use. It’s the power of the Elder Wand and Potter’s own ability crossed with the magical control of an untrained child. Under those circumstances it acts less like a wand than an amplifier. A Sonorous for his magic, if you will. Add in the Wand’s destructive tendencies and I do believe we have an answer.”

Granger was looking at him warily, but did not ask after the discrepancies between the story he’d just told and the one he had given her. He figured it was just as well that he had already resolved to like her.

“Are you saying,” Robards asked slowly, “what I think you’re saying?”

“That depends on what you think I’m saying.”

“That Auror Potter could yet harness the power of the Elder Wand.”

Croaker looked hungrier than a man within arm’s reach of an untouched tea tray had any right to look. “That his power could be like nothing we’ve ever seen.”

Granger looked as concerned as Draco felt, but if it would buy time… “Yes. That is a possibility.” At the hint of betrayal on Granger’s face, he added, “and it will secure his continued ability to live and work in the wizarding world, as well as his personal safety.”

“Merlin.” Robards leaned back. “An Auror with the power of the Elder Wand. The possibilities…”

“And for harnessing wandless magic,” Croaker added, a repulsively dreamy look on his face. “Or spell amplification. Salazar and Godric both.”

Draco was relieved to see Shacklebolt looking a bit less like a ravenous Acromantula.

It was Weasley, voice tinged with annoyance, who interrupted their collective reverie. “That does not solve the problem of Potter’s appearance at the upcoming hearing, nor does it address his interest in attending this season’s charitable events.”

“Who cares?” Croaker asked no one in particular. “Re-scheduling the surgery can’t be that difficult. And the rewards—” he paused and corrected himself. “The potential for innovation is almost unimaginable.”

Robards hummed. “I am considerably less concerned about ensuring safety in the immediate future
“if Potter’s safety will be secured in the long term.”

“It will be,” Draco asserted. He ignored Shacklebolt’s piercing gaze. “I’m certain of it.”

“In that case,” Robards said, “Weasley, what can you come up with by way of a cover story for the hearings?”

“Stop,” Draco interrupted. “Before we proceed, I need your commitment to this course of action.”

Robards hummed. “How much time do you need?”

“To train Potter in an entirely new system of casting, with the most powerful wand in the world?” He looked to Granger for assistance.

“Based on my research,” she piped up, “It would take several weeks at a minimum.”

Weasley shook his head. “That’s not just the hearing, that’s half the charity events.”

Draco answered coolly. “I would prefer several months, if that would better suit your needs.”

Weasley gawked.

“As I have said before,” Shacklebolt interrupted, “we appreciate your sense of urgency.”

“Thank you, Minister.”

“However, the need for expedition remains. The hearing is set for the 11th, which is barely two weeks from now. Harry is committed to charity events before then on the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 10th, and if he doesn’t appear there will be a loss of revenue, and they will undoubtedly turn to the Ministry to make up the difference. I have no interest in risking his health or long-term prospects, but Harry has always shown exceptional aptitude with a wand. Might we put off any firm decisions on timeline and reconvene in a week’s time?”

“We might.” Draco nodded. “But I doubt my forecast will be any different then. Even with Potter’s aptitude, he’s starting at a disadvantage thanks to his time in the void.”

“Still,” Shacklebolt persisted, “why don’t we meet then and see? Weasley, that should give you time to think through a few different scenarios. Robards, security, if you would. Croaker, Granger, you can adjust your research agenda. Will that suit?”

Everyone but Draco nodded.

“Very well then. A week.”

* * *

On one hand, Draco was extraordinarily relieved to have a week’s reprieve. On the other, he was not thrilled at having done it by lying baldfacedly to several of the most powerful wizards in the UK. And, occupied as he was with buying more time, he’d failed to give any real thought to what he’d say to Potter.

Potter, who stood from his chair and set his book down as soon as Draco entered. One of the Kneazle kittens crawled up to sit on his shoulder when he rose. “Good morning.”

Draco blinked. “Good morning.”
“I’ve thought about your question from yesterday, about whether there’s anything I’d like to do, and I’ve decided that I’d rather pass on the walk, if it’s all the same to you. I thought I might take this lot—” he reached up to ruffle the kitten’s fur “—to the gardens. I’ll be out of the void that way, and I don’t want them to come to any harm.”

“Right.” Draco’s mind spun, struggling to catch up.

“Great, then. Does it matter when I go?”

“Potter.” Draco shook his head clear. “There’s been a change of plans.”

His shoulders tensed and the kitten batted at his hair in reproach. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

Potter raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“Right.” Draco inhaled. “Surgery’s off.”

Potter’s face froze. “Pardon?”

“You’re not sure?”

“It was a meeting full of politicians. It’s a wonder anyone was clear on that much.”

Potter’s voice rose. “You said you wouldn’t interfere.”

“They all just sort of… agreed to it. Croaker decided it would be easy, and suddenly we had more time.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Potter’s words were tinged with panic. “There was a plan.”

“It was a shit plan.”

“It was my plan,” he insisted. “I made a decision.”

“The Ministry…” Draco sighed, at a loss for how to begin to explain the machinations he’d witnessed. Created.

“What? They overrode it?”

“Basically, yes.” Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you that surprised?”

Potter ignored him. “Why? Why did they do that? They wanted this.”

“Oh, Merlin.” Draco shook his head. “You might want to take a seat.”

He didn’t. “Tell me.”

Draco sighed and gestured towards a settee. When Potter shook his head Draco went on. “I have concerns, as you’re aware. Granger has some as well, as you are also aware. She was arguing with them when I arrived. I mentioned that there was an alternative course of treatment that wouldn’t require removing the Wand. Robards and Croaker started salivating over what a super wizard you
would be. Lo and behold, the clouds parted and there were options.”

“What? Super wizard?”

“You suggested that you did not want people to know about the role your emotions play in this situation. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” he scoffed. “Of course. Not exactly the kind of thing a person wants advertised.”

“Without discussing that portion of the theory, the closest accurate approximation I could give was something about conductivity. Retraining you to channel your magic to the Elder Wand through your femur. Which was not bad for coming up with something on the spot, and is probably possible, actually, but led them to the conclusion that you would be able to do wandless magic with the Elder Wand. With that sort of power. Croaker and Robards were a bit… excited about that.”

“Oh, fuck.” Potter’s face had fallen as he spoke. He lifted the kitten off his jumper and set it on the chair he’d abandoned. “Fuck. Fuck. No, Malfoy. Oh, fuck. They’re never going to let it go now.”

Draco was about to object when the force of Potter’s reaction stopped him. Instead he asked, “Let what go?”


“Stop.”


Draco followed him, unwilling to pass up the chance to get him outside of the void. “Won’t let what go?”

Potter was crossing the terrace garden in a hurry. He didn’t stop to let Draco catch up with him.

“Potter!”

He didn’t stop.

Draco drew his wand. “\textit{Immobulus! Impedimenta!}”

Potter tipped slowly forward. Draco just had time to catch him before his face collided with the stone.

Draco crouched beside Potter and turned him to lie on his back. Even without moving, Potter did a remarkable job of conveying murderous rage. “I’m sorry. I’m going to release you, but when we believe a patient may behave unpredictability, especially with uncontrolled magic…if you run I may have to do it again. Understood?”

He realised Potter had no way to respond and hoped it had stuck. “\textit{Finite Incantatem}.”

Potter relaxed against the ground reflexively, then shot up to his feet. “Fucking bastard.”

Draco looked up at him. “Preventing harm to the patient includes harm from the patient him or herself, and in your current state—clearly angry and determined to bottle it up—that’s where we were headed.”
“And harm to the doctor?” Potter challenged. “Where does that fall on the list?”

“If you’ll use your wand, I’ll hand it over now.”

“A punch to the nose would suffice, thanks.”

“I do believe you owe me one.” Draco tried to lighten the mood.

“No, that would be a broken nose.”

“Figured it would be a hard punch.”

“Don’t joke with me.”

“I’m not. What won’t they let go?”

Potter shook his head, pressed his lips together, and looked away.

“Serious, Potter? Are you five?”

“Serious, Malfoy? Are you still 11? So stuck in your own world you can’t see what’s right in front of you?”

“What?” Draco was thoroughly perplexed.

“Potter shot to his feet, looming over Draco. “You’re a lot of things, Malfoy, but you’re not an idiot. I’ll give you that. So think about it. Think about that meeting. What they said. The plans they were making.” He laughed, a bit madly. “Let me guess. ‘He’ll be our ultimate weapon!’ ‘He’ll single handedly save wizarding kind!’ ‘Let’s put him in a cage!’ ‘Let’s put him on the streets!’ ‘Let’s write down everything he’s ever said and sell it on street corners!’” Potter laughed bitterly. “Sound about right?”

“Yes. It sounds exactly right.”

“‘Let what go?’ What do you think? All of it. As long as I’ve got this, as long as I’ve got anything they want, they won’t stop. Not with me, not with anyone I love. Never.”

“You want it.” The words were out of his mouth before Draco could entirely register their significance. “You want the surgery.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“You—” He blinked, stunned. “No. You can’t.”

“I told you there were worse things than being without magic.”

Draco rose to stand. “It’s who you are.”

“Oh?” Potter laughed again, bitterness tinged with a hint madness. “Is it? Good of you to tell me who I am. So many people do, it gets a bit hard to keep track.”

“Maybe I know you better than most,” Draco said quietly.

“Maybe you’re an arrogant twat.”

“Maybe that, too.”
“You don’t get extra points for admitting it.”

“I wasn’t asking for any.”

“You’ve always been an arrogant twat.”

“And you’ve always been short-sighted and stubborn.”

“Sod off.”

Draco ignored him. “Like you’re being right now. Don’t like how the Ministry’s treating you? Leave. Leave your job. Leave the country. Leav—”

“Run away, you mean? Because it worked so well for you?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “If that’s what it takes. If you need to leave everything behind, all the expectations, to find out who you are. Yes. I won’t apologise for having done it. I’m not sorry.”

“How is that any different from what I’m doing?” Potter shouted, incensed.

“I never gave up who I was, or the ability to come back.”

“So you finally found a form of cowardice you can pass of as nobility.”

Draco blinked. It stung more than he would’ve liked it to. “Telling people what you want, going after what you want, doesn’t make you a coward.”

“Bit rich from someone who’s ignored everything I’ve said from day one.”

“Have I?” Draco asked, suddenly realising he was unsure of the answer.

“I want the surgery. I want this over with. The politics, all of it. I don’t care about the side effects if it means this whole damn thing is over. Do you know what it is to have the world eat at you in tiny, tiny increments? Use the people you love to get to you? It’s fucking torture, and I’d rather give up magic forever than live like that.”

“Do you hear yourself? Do I know what it’s like to have someone use the people you love to get to you?” It was Draco’s turn to laugh. “So eager to leave you’ve started forgetting already, have you? Or did you actually spend sixth year stalking me just to stare at my arse?”

Potter flushed at that, and Draco felt a twisting, visceral sort of satisfaction he hadn’t felt in years. “And what about that, Potter? Those other things you’re running from?” He smirked. “Or hiding from, as the case may be.”

“Fuck off.” Potter turned for the house.

“See, I do know you,” Draco called after him.

Potter stopped in his tracks, clenching and unclenching his fists as Draco spoke.

“Still stubborn. Myopic.” He began to walk, coming up behind Potter one slow step at a time. “Willing to cut off your nose to spite your face. Determined to play the martyr. Determined to be the martyr. You’d rather go to the slaughter than risk hurting someone’s feelings, but you’ve got no problem slicing someone open or watching their most intimate moments when you think you might get away with it.” He stepped into Potter’s shadow, so close he could feel the magic radiating off of him. “As long as you can say you didn’t know better. Didn’t know what the curse would do.
Didn’t know what the surgery would do.”

“I didn’t.” Potter interrupted.

“So much plausible deniability. It’s quite Slytherin of you.”

“I bet you mean that as a compliment.”

“Sometimes.”

“And what about you?” Potter turned to face him. “You did know. You knew exactly what that Hippogriff would do. What that necklace would do, and that mead, and that werewolf you let into the castle.”

“I didn’t kn—”

“You didn’t care. Tell me that’s any better.”

“Better?” He scoffed, meeting Potter’s eye. “For us? For anyone who wasn’t a Voldemort or a Dumbledore? There was alive and afraid and alone, or there was dead. There’s no room for better in a war. None of it was better. I did what I had to do, same as you.”

“It was never the same. You did it to kill people. I did it to save them.”

“Or it was never the same because my side was honest, and yours lied.”

“I’m pretty sure murder’s worse than lying.”

“Yes. But only one ends when the war’s over.”

“Unless you become a doctor. Plausible deniability?”

Even knowing from long experience and with total certainty that Potter was trying to get a rise out of him, Draco’s blood boiled. “Too far, Potter.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Potter stepped closer, his breath shallow and quick.

Even through the haze of his anger, this, between them, was too familiar for Draco to ignore. Potter wanted to fight, wanted Draco to throw the first punch. He almost laughed. “I’m not going to hit you.”

“Scared?”

“No.” He did laugh now, taking half a step back and spreading his arms. “Take your best shot. I won’t stop you.”

Potter faltered.

“You want me to throw first. I won’t.”

“You’re a coward.” Potter made up the half-step between them. “Always were.” He fisted Draco’s robes. “Full of excuses and accusations and fancy words, but when it counts? Nothing to back it up.”

“Yet here you are, champing at the bit to feel your knuckles hit my face, and you won’t do it—” he caught Potter’s eye “—you won’t touch me because you’re too afraid to admit that you want to.”
Draco could see Potter’s breath catch, could feel the heat of Potter’s hand through his robes. “I hit you first and it’s all self-defense. We all go on pretending Saint Potter only ever wants what’s safest.”

Potter twisted Draco’s robes in his hand. “You don’t know me.”

Draco stayed perfectly still, resisting the urge to pull back as the heat of Potter’s fist intensified. “Then prove me wrong. Do it.”

“No,” Potter spat. “No,” he said again, stepping back and dropping his fistful of fabric. He opened his mouth to say something else, but stopped short when Draco’s robes caught his eye. Draco was sure enough of what he’d felt to guess at what Potter was seeing. He watched Potter’s face change from shocked to horrified. Watched him take a step back, and then another, and then he turned and ran for the Manor, disappearing into his rooms and slamming the door behind him so firmly it must’ve taken his whole weight.

Draco looked down. The five points of Potter’s fingertips had burned through his robes and shirt, leaving his skin red and exposed to the winter air, and beginning to blister where Potter’s thumb had pressed against his chest.

* * *

Dittany was the obvious answer. If it came in the form of a hot, infused bath Draco was that much more grateful for it.

His robes were slung over the edge of the washbasin, the five scorch marks still visible as Draco sank neck-deep into the water. If he’d had any doubts about his theory, they were gone now. Lingering questions about the particulars of Potter’s feelings about him were much more persistent. Draco had been in a fight or two in his time—it was impossible to be a Death Eater, ex or current, without accruing some experience in that department—and he knew what fighting looked like. That heavy breathing, those dilated pupils. Potter had had that at first, but by the time he pulled Draco in it looked just different enough for Draco to wonder. Suspect, even. Potter’s lips had been flushed red, his hips very close to Draco’s own. That wasn’t a fighting stance.

Draco hadn’t been feeling the urge to fight either, and he hadn’t been trying to goad Potter with what he said; if being on his side of the war had had any sort of a silver lining it was in the strange honesty that came with that kind of naked hunger for power. He’d been surrounded by people who were driven by raw ambition, by pursuit of or aversion to pain and pleasure. It didn’t lend itself to subtlety. Even their machinations were a bit transparent, their motives too predictable to be really clandestine. And while he had never had the stomach to really take part—much to his detriment, once upon a time—it had destroyed any genuine desire to lie beyond what might be necessary from time to time. And any lingering prudishness. He knew that getting Potter worked up had ceased to be entirely clinical. He knew Potter was fit, knew that under different circumstances he’d take him home. But it wasn’t just that. Maybe Greg had been right, that seeing Potter with all the fight gone out of him left Draco feeling off balance. The way he’d felt standing so close to him, challenging him—that would seem to confirm. He liked it. It felt like home to him. Which he realised probably should’ve been an odd thought, but given his actual home, the forthright push-pull with Potter was a step in the right direction. The honesty there. The way he knew Potter. Even if Potter was loathe to admit it, and even if he wasn’t entirely keen on admitting the reverse.

He also knew that Potter was a wreck. And his patient. And, by all accounts except those seemingly put forth by Potter’s subconscious, straight.
Draco closed his eyes and let himself sink into the tub until the water came up to his chin. He ran a 
hand over the five tender points on his chest. The Dittany was already shrinking the blister that had 
formed over his second rib. He didn’t let his hand sink any lower. Didn’t need that confirmation to 
know exactly what his body thought of Potter.

But, he reminded himself, joys of adulthood: his cock didn’t have to run the show. And, Potter’s 
incorrect accusations of cowardice aside, he could leave if the whole thing got out of hand.

He relaxed against the edge of the tub, dangling his hands over the sides, and tried to figure out 
what to do next.
Chapter 14

Draco was used to waking up to a breakfast tray set at the foot of his bed or on the table beside his window and sometimes, if he’d asked to be woken by a specific time, accompanied by gentle chimes.

He was not used to waking up to the rattling of silver against silver as Prippa bounced nervously, holding the tray out and then pulling it back towards her. “Master Draco,” she whispered. “Master Draco?”

“Mmph.” He rolled over and took the pillow with him.

“Master Draco?” Prippa tried again, the contents of the tray audibly sliding to one side and then the other as she stepped forward and then tried to correct. “Mistress Pansy is saying Master Draco is needed, please!”

Master Draco had been in the middle of a very good dream about messy brown hair and broad, callused hands, and did not give much of a damn about what anyone wanted. He told Prippa as much.

“Mistress Pansy insists!” Prippa squeaked. “Mistress Pansy says Prippa is not to return without Master Draco, but Galder is telling Prippa to bring Master’s tray, but Mistress Pansy is saying Master Draco must come to the dining room for breakfast!” With her hands occupied, Draco could hear her stepping on her feet in punishment, the tray clattering every time.

Draco sighed into the pillow. “Fine.”

The silver banged around as she jumped in relief. “Thank you Master Draco, sir! Prippa will be telling Mistress Pansy!” She popped out of the room, tray and all. Draco wished he’d had the presence of mind to ask her to leave the tea.

* * *

Half an hour passed before Draco entered the dining room. He had not been particularly moved towards urgency, given the circumstances. He immediately searched the table for the teapot and landed, instead, on Pansy and Granger, glaring daggers at each other, and Millie, amusedly tearing the edge off a fresh croissant.

Draco ignored them all, poured himself a cup of tea, and sat at the head of the table. “I see we’re all off to a good morning, then.”

“Brilliant,” Pansy spat.

“Perfect,” Granger managed through gritted teeth.

“Amusing,” Millie offered. “Though I’m afraid Hermione and I are here on business.”

“Oh?”

“Do you recall the conversation we had last week? With Blaise, in the kitchens?”

“I do.”

“And the conversation where you shared your theory with Hermione?”
“Yes.”

“Were there any discrepancies between those conversations? That we might not have been aware of when trading notes?”

Draco, in the midst of enjoying a long and desperately needed mouthful of tea, almost choked when he realised what Millie knew and Granger didn’t.

He swallowed hard, tea scalding the back of his throat. “Shit.” He set the cup down. “Shit. Who else heard?”

“No one. Fortunately, as it’s the sort of item that has a way of making it into the gossip pages.”

“Right. Well. Small favours, then.”

When she spoke, Granger’s voice was strained. “Is there a reason you didn’t tell me?”

“Patient confidentiality.”

“I’m on his medical team. You have every right to disclose that information, and one might argue that I have a right to know it.”

“You’re also his close friend. And I have the right, technically speaking, to change the colour of Muggles’ rose bushes, or parade naked down the street at Beltane. The existence of a right does not compel one to exercise it.”

Pansy, in her eagerness to listen in, slid her elbow so far forward she knocked into her plate. Granger glared at her. She smiled back.

“Perhaps we should finish this conversation in private,” Granger suggested.

“Oh, no, don’t,” Pansy replied. “This is the most interesting breakfast we’ve had in ages.”

“This is sensitive, personal information about a patient—” Granger started.

“Really? Because it sounded like you were all just coming round to Potter’s queerness.”

Granger stared at her in open shock, while Draco and Millie raised matching eyebrows.

“Please. Even setting aside the relentlessly homoerotic mutual stalking of our school days, it’s obvious.” She scoffed at Granger’s pointed blankness and continued. “I tried to engage him in a discussion of gay erotica and he froze my bedroom. No one truly secure in their sexuality reacts like that.”

“Maybe he meant it to match your heart,” Granger spat.

“Oh, no, I have the icicles cleared from my heart regularly. And no offense, Granger, but I don’t think he’s quite that invested in protecting your ego from tooth-related offense.”

Granger narrowed her eyes and Draco saw her hand twitch as if it would like to be closing around a wand.

Draco thought it best to redirect. “Pansy, that would have been a useful observation to share at the time, don’t you think?”

“I was rather preoccupied with making sure you didn’t intend to turn me into your broodmare.”
Draco cast her an exasperated look, though didn’t try to hide the hint of fondness for her particular, very Pansy, descriptive flair.

“Besides which, darling, I really thought you’d figure it out yourself.” She smiled sweetly and reached for the tea.

“In any event,” Draco rolled his eyes and ploughed on, “we’re discussing sensitive, private information about a patient.”

Granger was back on task in an instant. “And you thought it best to hide this information.”

“I thought it best not to share this information with one of his oldest and dearest friends when he has not yet, at least to my knowledge, come to terms with it himself.”

“Do you think I would’ve reacted badly? Don’t you think it would’ve been helpful to know?”

“Don’t you think it should be his news to share? Besides which,” he went on, “if the good news is out, we need to talk practical steps.”

“Draco,” Millie warned, “Don’t.”

“There was another incident last night. It’s a necessary discussion.”

“What is she saying?” Granger looked between them anxiously.

“This information came to light in part because Potter reacted especially strongly in a moment when he happened to see me interacting sexually with another man, and has also had strong reactions in moments when he and I are touching.” Granger’s eyes widened comically. “In a professional capacity,” Draco corrected. “Or, last night, when he went to deck me and grabbed my robes.”

“He what?” Granger asked.

“It’s fine. He didn’t do it and I’m pleased to see him acting on his emotions. However, it’s clear that some aspects of working with me unsettle him. If it won’t do you permanent damage, Granger, I’d wager that there’s some attraction there. Millie dissuaded me from pursuing the issue at first, but especially after this last instance, I believe my resignation may be necessary.”

Millie sighed. “Can I dissuade you again?”

“Doubtful. It’s not the attraction itself that’s an issue. It happens from time to time, and we’re trained to handle it professionally. It’s that it may be detrimental to his progress, given the particulars of the case. Besides which—” he smiled gently, belying the hint of melancholy he felt “—I’ve got a life to get back to in Paris. Perhaps the time has come.”

“Wait,” Granger interrupted. She was unnerved, and started rattling through a list of questions. “What are you saying? You’re leaving? What about everything you told Croaker and Robards and the Minister yesterday? That you could fix it, that it was a question of training? Who else can do that? What do you expect will happen to him if you abandon the case?”

He was surprised, to say the least. “With all due respect, you know my theory. In its entirety, following your conversation with Millie. I assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that you realised I was, for lack of a more politic phrase, making it up, for the benefit of our larger goal.”

“But it makes sense. It makes sense that that would work, or help, or something. And delaying his
surgery, or cancelling it —that’s because you’re working with him, because they think you have a solution.”

“It’s because they think I can turn him into a superweapon, which I wouldn’t do even if I could. The rest is highly speculative.”

“But not impossible. It made sense when you said it. Croaker found it intriguing. It does seem to be in line with your research agenda, and with what I know about wands.”

“But it’s not necessarily possible, either. Honestly, Granger. Think about the theory. He doesn’t need a wandlore expert or a biomagicologist. He needs to work with a Mind Healer. Every indication points to repressed emotion as the root cause of his magical outbursts. If he isn’t bottling things up there won’t be any explosions.”

“How do we know that will fix it? Or that it’ll be a better fix, for that matter? With a Mind Healer he’d be looking at months of treatment, maybe years, and a lifetime of maintenance.”

“Merlin, but you’re all fixated on the quick fix. Yes, it likely will take months. Yes, it will likely require lifelong maintenance. Have you never treated a patient with an ongoing condition?”

“Of course, but our goal is to resolve those cases, not let them linger on.”

“And when that’s not possible?” Draco asked, resisting the tide of anger that swelled in his chest. “Do you give up? Offer them a quick AK?”

“Of course not!”

“I’m offering you a genuine solution. One that will require maintenance, yes, but a course of treatment that addresses the root cause and that might, given the nature of his condition, make Potter a fair sight happier in the long run, too.” His frustration swelled, as did his voice. “And you’d ignore that for an untested, superficial treatment that may or may not work? Is it that impossible for you to acknowledge that Potter didn’t make it through unscathed? That he’s ill? That your grand hero is in need of assistance? Does that make him less to you, or—”

“Of course not!” Granger yelled, shoving her chair back and rising to her feet. “Of course not! You think I don’t know that he has scars? I was there with him the whole time. I saw what it did to him. You think I want him to get a girlfriend or—or whatever, or a pet, or a hobby, any of it, for my own entertainment? Do you think there is anything I wouldn’t do to keep him safe?” The dangerous glimmer in her eye was just as convincing as the speech. “You don’t understand the Ministry, Doctor Malfoy. You have no idea the politics involved, the seeds that had to be planted before they would even meet with you, let alone hear your proposal. And now you’ve given them something to hang their hats on, what do you think happens if you leave?”

Millie stood quietly and went to slip an arm around Granger’s trembling shoulders, squeezing gently. “Granger’s right about the Ministry. Shacklebolt wants to do what’s best for Potter, but he’s under tremendous pressure from his supporters to keep tax rates low, and if the charities can’t get outside funding, the Minister’s office is in a jam. And he needs support from Croaker and Robards, who have their own interests… it’s not as easy as all that.”

Draco fought to assimilate their reminders. “You didn’t tell me about the tax bit. Or Croaker and Robards’ interests.”

Millie guided Granger back into her seat and pushed it in. “To be quite honest, I’d assumed you’d pick up on it. Given the family business.”
He looked at her disbelievingly. “After all I’ve done to pick up a distinctly different line of work?”

She shrugged apologetically. “Either way, here we are. I share Hermione’s concerns. If you leave, it throws things out of balance. There’s no way of knowing how the Gobstones would fall. If they’ll go back to the surgery, if they’ll bring in someone else to try to train him to use the Elder Wand, and Merlin only knows how that would go.”

“That doesn’t make it any more ethical for me to stay on.”

Millie looked at him sceptically. “Were you secretly the Hufflepuff prefect? We don’t always get the perfectly ethical choice. Remember? They’re not all good ones?” She leaned forward to make sure she had his attention. “Sometimes the compromise choice is the best we can do. And there are certainly things more dangerous than attraction.”

Draco leaned back in his seat. Millie did make sense, and Granger was, unfortunately, right that the complexities of Ministry politics kept popping up in newly obstructive ways. He didn’t want, for reasons both professional and surprisingly personal, to see Potter reduced to an experiment. Or turned into a superpowered Auror-cum-weapon. And he did know enough now to be certain that that wasn’t what Potter wanted, either, but that he was quite unlikely to say so.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and then sat up straight to reply. “I see your point.”

Millie smiled and Granger sagged, both in relief.

“But,” Draco continued, “He really does need to be working with a Mind Healer, and that’s not an area of expertise either of us have. I’ll only work with him concerning the potential for him to learn to use the implant, and nothing more. And that only provided that he’s seeing a Mind Healer as well, and that the Mind Healer takes the lead on Potter’s case.”

Granger leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table. “But you’ll work with him.”

“If he’ll agree to that course of action.”

Granger loosened her hold. “How soon do we need to find him a Mind Healer?”

“As soon as he’s consented to it. As soon as possible.”

“Fine. Good. Is there anyone you’d recommend?”

“I have a colleague who can suggest some names.”

“Okay. And…” Granger hesitated. “Do you feel it’s necessary to tell anyone else about this portion of his treatment?”

Draco rubbed his temples. He’d got used to the world of full disclosure, but the stakes were considerably lower in academe. Internal Review Boards aside, even his clinical trials weren’t so mired in politics. “As you’ve said, that portion of his treatment will need to go on for some time. Longer than I ever planned to stay. Won’t they suspect?”

“But at least at first,” Granger pled. “He’s very private. It might be the difference between him agreeing or not.”

Draco sighed. “Then we’ll cross the Ministry bridge when we come to it. This is a private home, where he can receive private treatment. No, I don’t think it’s necessary.”
Granger exhaled a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

He nodded.

Pansy grinned and propped her head on a hand. “Can I watch you tell him?”

Draco lobbed his napkin at her. “Absolutely not. And if I read so much as a syllable of this on Page Seven…” he trailed off warningly.

“You won’t. At least not from me.” She eyed Granger suspiciously.

Granger rolled her eyes.

Pansy *hmphed*. “One never knows.” She leaned back and folded her arms. “Besides which, I happen to think Mind Healing is perfectly respectable.”

They all turned to her, surprised. Draco couldn’t contain a snort. “Oh?”

She crossed her arms, looking highly offended. “Yes. Greg and I each paid someone to come in, confidentially, as soon as we could afford it. Made all the difference in the world. And if Potter doesn’t agree I’ll be perfectly happy to wait in the kitchens and yell at him some more.”

Strange bedfellows, Draco thought, came together in all sorts of ways.

* * *

It took some convincing to persuade Granger that he was better off talking to Potter alone. Draco almost regretted it when faced with the door to Potter’s rooms. While Draco had bathed and contemplated and fought and negotiated and moved forward, Potter had been sitting in his rooms, likely with nothing but the books, and the kittens if he still had them, for distraction after the way he’d run off the previous afternoon. Draco rested his head against the doorframe and steeled himself. He felt a wave of apprehension that he didn’t think was down to the void.

He knocked before opening the door. Potter, in his usual seat, looked up as he came closer, his face set in a carefully blank mask. He didn’t put down his book. As Draco got closer it looked less like he was trying to obscure his emotions and more like he was frozen to the spot.

Draco kept a careful distance. “Good morning.”

Potter nodded, barely, his eyes flicking to Draco’s chest as though he’d be able to see signs of damage through his robes.

“I had an impromptu meeting this morning,” Draco began. Potter started to look a little green. “Just with Granger and Millicent. I’m sorry I didn’t think to call for you.”

Potter watched him, and looked to be breathing a bit more easily, but still didn’t respond.

“Do you mind if I sit?”

Potter shook his head.

Draco lifted a chair and wrestled it across the rug, finally sitting down across from Potter. “I’d like to be quite candid, if that’s all right with you.”

Potter pressed his mouth into a thin line, then inhaled and closed his eyes, steeling himself. He met Draco’s gaze when he opened them again. “Were you injured?”
He was surprised by the directness of Potter’s question, and had no interest in playing coy about it. He just wasn’t sure how to answer without sending him for the hills. “Intensely concentrated high heat will inevitably cause some damage to the skin. In this case it was superficial: three small first degree burns and two additional very small burns with mild blistering. All treatable with a Dittany soak. The damage is almost entirely healed, and with another soak will be gone without scarring by tomorrow.”

“Dittany,” Potter repeated. “Did that work the other time? On the curse scars?”

Draco tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Potter, I really would like to discuss the meeting.”

“It didn’t, did it? If it had worked, you would just say so.”

Draco sighed and looked away. “Yes and no. Dittany lessened the appearance of the scars and prevented infection but, as is almost always the case with curse damage, it wasn’t possible to completely prevent scarring.”

“You have scars, then.”

“Yes, I do.”

Potter leaned forward earnestly, though he still didn’t quite look Draco in the eye. “I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t anything Draco had expected. Startled, he sat up straighter. “Oh. Thank you.”

Potter nodded uneasily.

“I appreciate it,” Draco added, trying to find his footing.

Potter nodded again and looked down.

“I’m afraid I wasn’t expecting that. I don’t mean to be brusque, but this meeting wound up being rather important, and I do want to keep you up to date.”

“Okay.” Potter studied his knee.

“Right. Well. As I said, Millicent and Granger came to see me. They had discovered a point of miscommunication in need of straightening out, and…” Draco sighed. “I’m afraid this is going to be an uncomfortable conversation for both of us. If you’ll forgive the informality, colloquialisms might prove useful here.”

“Sure.” Potter shrugged, looking a bit nervous again.

“Right. Thank you.” Draco took a breath. “The night you walked in on me getting head from that bloke— Potter’s head shot up “—I’d been out dancing with friends. Millie and Blaise came in after you’d left and noticed a loaf of bread that had turned to cinders while you were, I’m fairly certain, watching under your cloak. It was the same day that your seam had started to burn during your examination. Those incidents were part of a larger pattern that led to the development of my theory, but they represent a pattern of their own, which I think was confirmed last night.

“In short, you’re attracted to me.” Potter made to interrupt; Draco kept speaking, unwilling to stop once he’d got started. Unsure that it would be all that easy to start again. “I don’t know, nor am I asking you to tell me, whether you’ve experienced or acted on attraction to men before, nor do I care to put any labels on your sexuality. I don’t intend to use this information for any sort of personal gain, and even if I could share it widely, I would not. As you may have surmised, I prefer
men, and understand perfectly well that each person needs to come to their own conclusions in their own time. And while you’re welcome and, I expect, inclined to tell me this is a case of arrogance, I’m confident in my observations.”

“I don’t—”

“This leaves us with a practical problem. It’s not uncommon for patients to experience an attraction like this. That, in and of itself, need not be an issue. But it does seem to unsettle you, to incite the same outbursts we’re trying to control. In which case—that is, when resolving repressed emotions is central to your recovery, and when this is causing distress or getting in the way of healing—it’s not ethical for me to continue treating you.

“But—”

“However, the politics being what they are, Millicent and Granger feel strongly that my resignation might put you in harm’s way. The question of how your care would proceed is too unpredictable for any of our liking. I hope you’ll agree that keeping the Ministry at arm’s length might be desirable?”

Potter nodded. He still looked like he was biting back further comment.

“Do you also agree, at this point…” Draco wavered, searching for the right words. “After yesterday, and the other night, and the other correlations we’ve found between unrecognised emotions and magical outbursts—do you agree that that theory might hold water? And, if so, that it might provide useful guidance as to how we proceed?”

Potter sighed heavily and looked away. Then he nodded.

It took Draco a long, focused moment to repress a relieved, victorious whoop.

In the silence, Potter began to look even more uncertain than he already had, and Draco rushed to move on.

“In that case, and towards that end, we came to a tentative agreement, pending your approval. I will no longer be the lead on your case. In addition to the ethical concerns, and more importantly, really, a Mind Healer is better suited to determine where we go from here. I will contact a colleague for a list of Mind Healers with relevant expertise who can work with you on the fundamental cause of the issue. That can be done here, and privately, without informing Robards or Shacklebolt, or the Ministry more generally. You can, and should, select whichever of the Mind Healers on that list you feel to be most competent and trustworthy. You’re welcome to speak to or meet with all or some of them to figure that out. Once you’ve done that, he or she will work with you daily. You and I will continue to meet to…” Draco sighed. “Well, to see if there’s anything to all that stuff I made up to buy time with the Ministry. If you’re amenable, we’ll work on increasing your focus and control. As with our walks, time outside of the void and using magic will be broadly beneficial, but we will, in particular, be trying to see whether and how you can use the implanted Elder Wand. Again, we needn’t tell the Ministry. They’ll ask for reports, but I can put them off, at least for a while. The idea, with all of this, is to secure your ability to proceed privately with a more productive line of treatment. Is that agreeable?”

Potter blinked.

Draco waited.

Slowly, haltingly, Potter began to speak. “This still all depends on thinking your theory is right.
Right?"

“Yes.” Draco knit his brow. “I thought you agreed…?”

“I hear what you’re saying about the coincidences, but it just…it all depends on being secretly angry at the people I love.”

“Having repressed emotions towards or about them, which does include anger, but could also include sadness, or grief. Attraction.”

“I don’t have those kinds of feelings about them. I really don’t.”

“I find that hard to believe, seeing as you’re human.”

“But I love them.”

“And you think that can’t exist alongside anger or sadness? I promise you, it can. Everyone has feelings like that, even for the people we love.” He snorted. “Especially for the people we love. You’re a reasonably powerful wizard who was put in an unreasonable situation and did extraordinary things. You are not superhuman.”

Potter ignored what he’d said. “This all depends on me wanting to get better, too, doesn’t it? Wanting to be able to control the Elder Wand?”

“Yes to the former. And, I suppose so, yes, to the latter as well.”

“What about what I told you before? If I have all this power, other people will want to use it for something. Even if I just get back to where I was. Not getting better might be the only way to avoid that.”

“And what happens when you’re out in the world, essentially a Squib, and some former Death Eater happens upon you? They’ve got a wand and want revenge. What do you do then?”

Potter shrugged again.

“You want to leave so badly—” Draco’s throat threatened to close and he had to start over. “You want to leave so badly you’re willing to die for it?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Potter mumbled, rolling the hem of his jumper between thumb and forefinger.

“You do realise—” Draco stopped. “Do you realise? That you can say no? You can leave and stay a wizard?”

Potter shook his head. “It’s not that easy for me.”

The depth of Potter’s resignation was still thoroughly surreal. Draco scrambled for purchase. “No, I don’t believe it would be. But it’s possible.”

“The other way solves a lot more problems.”

“It creates twice as many. Some for you, some for the people you love.”

Potter sighed. “I really don’t want to hurt them.”

“I’m afraid you’ve reached a juncture where it’s unavoidable. Either you find a way to express
whatever it is you’ve been holding in, or you leave and risk being killed, or you, I don’t know, disappear into the Department of Mysteries, never to be seen again.” He wasn’t above the low blow. “I doubt Molly Weasley would be overjoyed about any of those.”

Potter’s strangled laugh was almost a sob. “Didn’t know you knew her name.”

“If I’m a bastard it’s by choice, Potter. Of course I know her name.”

He laughed again, and it sounded watery, but he looked up with clear eyes. “I don’t, you know. Like you.”

“I didn’t say you did.” Draco rushed to respond, to reassure them both that that was fine.

“You said I’m attracted to you.”

“Attraction and affection are hardly the same thing.”

Potter inclined his head. “Fair enough.”

A pause stretched between them. Draco failed to wait it out. “Well, then?”

“I don’t especially want to see a Mind Healer.”

“It won’t do you any harm.”

“Maybe there are some things it’s better not to think about.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never seen a Mind Healer.”

“And you have?” Potter asked, clearly dubious.

“Yes.” At Potter’s look of surprise, he went on. “As a professional requirement, at first. By choice afterwards. It was helpful. And you’ll have a list to choose from, of experts strictly bound by confidentiality agreements. If you don’t like one, you can switch. I’d bet a thousand Galleons it helps.”

“Yeah, but how many have you got?”

“More than a thousand,” Draco conceded. “But the point remains.”

“What does this wand stuff involve?”

“I’ll need to figure that out. Focusing exercises. Some casting. Spending time outside the void. A bit of experimenting, probably.”

“And if I hurt you again?”

“I suspect the chances of that will decrease once you start meeting with the Mind Healer. If not, I know the risks, and I’m good with a wand, if it comes to that.”

Potter studied him carefully. Draco tried not to flinch. “How often would we meet?”

“Once a day, for about an hour, if that’s all right with you.”

“When would I meet with the Mind Healer, if I did this?”

“Ideally, you would meet daily, at least at first. At a mutually agreeable time.”
“What makes you think I don’t want to give up magic?”

The change of topic left Draco off balance. He had to stop and consider. “Midnight snacks,” he admitted. “You say you don’t want to leave the void, but when there’s no one looking—” no one around to upset you, he added to himself “—you do. And the Kneazles. The way you were with the apples. I think you love magic, or you could do if you had the chance to use it for something other than war or work.”

“I do that,” Potter argued.

“Such as?”


“You don’t count laundry as work?”

Potter leaned back heavily and exhaled, knitting his hands in his lap. “Fine. Send your list.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After an hour on the Floo to Paris with mixed results, Draco decided he was well past clinging to stubbornness where Granger was concerned. Between them, they had profiles of half a dozen Mind Healers—all with background checks, daily availability, and a willingness to make house calls—ready with time enough to have Lobsey deliver it with Potter’s breakfast. Draco also enclosed a note encouraging him to write down any questions and to please advise as to a best time for their first meeting.

He found himself strangely nervous as he waited for the reply. He ate his own breakfast. He showered off the last of an improvised Dittany salve and declared himself healed. He went to dress and found it oddly perplexing. There was less need for formal robes if he wasn’t in charge of Potter’s care and he’d found, in the course of re-training his implant patients, that the range of motion Muggle clothes provided could be advantageous. He settled on grey wool trousers and a white button down with a navy jumper. Then he took the jumper off; he didn’t want a handprint burned through cashmere. Then he put it back on again, as there was no reason to expect Potter to touch him. He forced himself out of his room, even if it meant wandering the hallways.

That was where Lobsey found him, bearing a note from Potter that suggested 2pm. Draco accepted graciously, and tried to figure out what to do with the next four hours.

He ended up practically tied to his seat in the library, where he started sketching the beginnings of a plan. The theory made enough sense, but his implants were about helping redirect magical energy through the pathways witches and wizards were already used to using, not re-training them from scratch. But then, perhaps he was going down the wrong track, as Potter had been able to do magic with his hands, even if it wasn’t coming from them, so he was able to channel the Elder Wand somehow…

By 1:59pm he was outside Potter’s door, watching the seconds tick away on his pocket watch. He let himself in at exactly two, only to find Potter deep in conversation with a fatherly-looking man in his 40s. Potter looked up, saw Draco and, rather apologetically, told his visitor he’d lost track of time. They shook hands, and the man nodded at Draco and saw himself out.

“Mind Healer,” Potter said, as Draco watched the man leave.

Draco turned back. “Already?”

“You sent their profiles with breakfast. It’s not like I have that much else to do.”

“Granger contributed to the timing.”

“I’m not surprised. I asked Lobsey to send this one a letter and he was free to meet.” Potter shrugged. “I don’t really know how to pick. I liked him well enough.”

“That’s a start.”
“Better than the alternative,” Potter agreed. “Though explaining everything is a little tricky.”

“Once you’ve picked one we can send them the files.”

Potter hummed. “What if I asked you not to?”

“Why would you?” Draco asked, surprised.

“What if I wanted to work with someone from scratch? Without them having all this stuff about my personal life and medical history?”

Draco considered. “Your rather reluctant acceptance of it aside, I was under the impression that you thought my theory, which would be quite relevant to your work with a Mind Healer, was… I believe you called it a load of dragon dung?”

“Might have done.”

“And you plan to faithfully relay that theory and its importance to a Mind Healer?”

Potter frowned. “What if you brief him on the theory and leave the records out of it?”

“It’s that important to you? He or she is still going to know who you are. Might have read the books, all of it.”

“Yeah, but they probably know that might not all be true, you know? Records are different. If I read a suspect’s actual MLE records, I’d take that a lot more seriously than a Rita Skeeter tell-all.”

Everything Potter described was remarkably familiar to Draco, even if he wasn’t keen to admit it. “Comparing yourself to a suspect?”

“Thought you weren’t a Mind Healer.”

Draco laughed. “True.”

“Will you consider it?”

“I see your point. I’ll do it.”

Potter looked as surprised as he did pleased. “Oh. Right then. Thank you”

“You’re welcome.”

Potter was still looking at him as though he’d grown a second head. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Thank you, yes.” He moved out of Potter’s line of sight with uncomfortable urgency, and started speaking before Potter had made it all the way into his seat. “We need to discuss your training.”

“Discuss it? Not going to tell me what to do?”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Would you like me to?” He realised too late how that might’ve been taken and rushed to correct himself. “I thought you wanted more autonomy?”

“I’ve wanted a lot of things over the years. They don’t always pan out.”

“It’s your lucky day, then. Given the uniqueness of the case, I suspect it will have to be a collaborative endeavour.”
“I’ve been waiting for a lucky day. How novel.”

“No.”

“Good. As you know, I start from the assumption that you respond to strong emotional stimuli. The most obvious seem to be negative. Frustration, sadness, anger, anxiety—emotions that come easily and create destructive magic.”

“Yeah, I may have noticed.”

“But,” Draco continued, “we also know that your magic has creative force. The kittens, the apples—when you feel affection or want something badly and let yourself experience that, you have tremendous constructive, reparative ability. It’s possible that you’ve used this more than you realise; a falling roof tile or a frozen bedroom is much more obvious than a blossoming flower or a ripened piece of fruit. But you don’t know how to use it. I suggest we focus our attention there.”

“You want me to sit around wanting things really badly?” Potter said it, then rushed on as though it was his turn to realise how he might be construed. “When the other stuff is more effective? And easier to access?”

“If the purpose was to increase your raw power, yes. But I’m given to understand that that’s not what you want.”

“No.” Potter was emphatic. “Absolutely not.”

“Nor I. I don’t believe that’s a reasonable goal of medical treatment, or in your best interest. In which case we need to focus on control, which will come more easily with emotions you’re not in the habit of using as frequently.”

“Okay. Then what do we do?”

“I’m not entirely certain. We do things you like doing. Creative things. Creative magic. I strongly recommend choosing a Mind Healer as quickly as possible; they may be able to advise. I also recommend, just as strongly, that you spend more time outside the void. If you’d like, I could ask Galder to set the kittens up in the conservatory. They’d have access to magic and whatever passes for sunlight these days, and you could visit them indoors.”

“Yeah,” Potter nodded. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Good. For today, would you continue your research on Mind Healers and take a walk?”

Potter nodded. “Sure. An hour?”

“Please. I’ll also have Galder tell Lobsey to let you know when the kittens are settled, if you’d like to spend time in the conservatory this afternoon. Perhaps we can meet there and discuss next steps.”

“After my walk?”

Draco didn’t bother hiding his surprise. “So soon? I haven’t had a chance to prepare a programme yet.”

Potter shifted. “It’s the 3rd.”
Draco waited.

“The first charity thing is on the 5th. I know you’ve said this path will take longer, but the sooner I do this the sooner I’ll be ready, for some of them, even if not that one, and they do matter. I do want to do this. And the hearing, that’s in eight days.”

“The first event, on the 5th. What’s it for?”

Potter blinked rapidly. “What?”

“Which charity is it for?”

“Um. I would need to check my schedule. I… before all this, I had a secretary. He kept track. Think he still does, just sends the updates to Hermione.”

“You don’t know what it’s for.”

“I’m not great at dates. But it’s either for St. Mungo’s, or the Quidditch Fund, or the Potions thing, or Werewolves—”

“You don’t know what it’s for.”

“They’re all important.”

“Obviously.”

“They are,” Potter insisted.

“The odds of you being ready are infinitesimal. I can’t stop you going—you’re not a prisoner here—but it would come with all of the same dangers we’ve discussed, and might set you back as well. I’d also encourage you to think about how urgent it can be if you can’t remember what it’s actually for.” Draco raised an eyebrow. “I’ll leave you to your work, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

For once, he left feeling like the whole thing wasn’t destined for failure.

* * *

Potter’s note came after breakfast the next morning. He asked Draco if they could have their next meeting in the conservatory after lunch, and added that he’d picked a Mind Healer.

Draco wrote a quick reply, agreeing and thanking Potter for letting him know. And, while he was at it, he started writing down the list he’d been making in his head, of things he and Potter might try.

* * *

Free mornings were such a novelty that Draco wasn’t sure what to do with his. Before his mornings had been devoted to Potter’s care they’d been spent in his lab or office, bent over wood samples or parchment or the occasional computer, though once he discovered the solitaire feature he’d decided any advantages with regard to organising data and editing papers were outweighed by the focused simplicity of a good self-inking quill. Any potentially lazy mornings he could remember had been occupied with sleepy shags or hair of the dog. He didn’t like feeling at such a loose end. His fingers itched for something to do. He missed his work, and while the Manor library was perfectly respectable, it didn’t have his books, or his view of the Panthéon.

He went for a run. Showered. Delivered a load of books to Pansy and tried to engage her in
conversation, though she was so obviously preoccupied with writing that she refused to give him more than three words at a time. He Floo called Millie and asked if she’d like to have lunch, but she wasn’t free. Neither was Blaise. Greg was on a job. At least considering the options took up some amount of time.

And then there was his list. He’d started with the activities they usually used in post-op rehabilitation, but the Elder Wand supplemented Potter’s magical abilities to the point that he needed to do more than drill levitation or unlocking charms. And he wasn’t sure what exactly Potter wanted out of this, whether he needed the level of skill required for Auror work, or wanted a comparative decrease in magical ability that would justify leaving his position.

Knowing he had to ask didn’t make the time move any faster.

Noon arrived, and then one, and he figured it was safe to start walking to the conservatory, even if that meant, in the interest of caution, walking very slowly through the foyer and down the corridor past the music room and the morning room, and slowing down even more when the great glass doors to the conservatory came into view at the end of the hall.

Walking into it was like a breath of fresh air. Which was the purpose, he reminded himself. Aside from the table and chairs on one side of the entrance and a sitting area on the other, the room was devoted to plants, both those that couldn’t winter outside and those that wouldn’t tolerate English climates at any time of year. Ferns and vines hung from the joists. Potted plants crowded the corners. The glass ceiling let in whatever sunlight Wiltshire could conjure in December, and the warmth of the room relaxed Draco as soon as he entered.

He found Potter there already, surrounded by the litter and swinging a palm frond for them to chase.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “I won’t ask where you got that.”

Potter looked up guiltily. “Would you believe it if I told you that Lobsey was doing some pruning?”

“Er.” He set the stem on the tile. The kittens, still engaged in the chase, piled on to it. “Good thing you’ve got more?”

“Yes,” Draco agreed. “I do believe the estate will survive the loss. Though you may want to owl the Magical Menagerie for proper toys. Some types of plants are poisonous for them.”

Startled, Potter grabbed the frond away. Behind him, the plant it had come from rocketed out of its pot. It hit the skylights and crashed into the ground, scattering soil and bits of roots over the room and breaking off several branches, on which the Kittens pounced as soon as they’d finished taking in the spectacle.

Potter ran for the plant and grabbed it, stuffing it back into the pot and bending to scoop handfuls of dirt on top of its exposed roots.


He stopped and looked up, holding a mound of soil, a leaf dangling between his index and middle fingers.

Draco took out their wands and used his to lift the kittens out of harm’s way, resettling them on the
settee. “There’s a better way.”

He didn’t miss the hesitation written across Harry’s face, or the sudden tension in his arms. Harry surveyed the room and looked down at his hands. “I guess this won’t work.”

“No.” Draco held out the handle of Harry’s wand.

Harry dropped his handful into the pot, wiped his hands on his trousers, and reached, tentatively for the wand.

Draco resettled the kittens on the settee their mother had been occupying and cast a Repello around them. He turned to Harry. “Perhaps a Tergeo? Rather than Vanishing the soil, you might redirect it to the pot.”

Harry looked at his wand nervously. “And if it goes wrong?”

“I doubt it will. You’ve yet to have an accident while casting intentionally, as far as I’m aware.”


His spell was barely audible, and the lack of conviction showed. A few columns of dirt rose from the floor, and he was able to direct them to pot, but plenty remained scattered about the room.

He looked to Draco nervously. “Would you do it with me?”

It was Draco’s turn to hesitate. “I’d like to see what you’re able to do on your own.”

Harry grimaced. “I think you just have.”

It was, Draco thought, an interesting response from someone who’d claimed he’d be happy living as a Squib. “Would you try again, please?” At the look on his face, Draco amended, “Once more. And then I’ll join you.”

Harry nodded and concentrated on the tip of his wand. Again, he returned a few cups of soil to the pot, but most of it remained scattered around the room.

He turned to Draco. “I saw Dumbledore do a spell once, with Slughorn, that cleared up a whole destroyed room like it was nothing. Non-verbal though. Wish I knew what it was.”

“Reparo Maxima?” Draco offered.

“No idea.”

Draco hummed. “Worth a try. What do you remember?”

“Slughorn was on the run, staying in Muggle houses. He made it look like it had been attacked so —” Harry hesitated “—so no one else would do it. Door off the hinges, blood on the ceilings. Whole thing. And they cleared it up. Even got the blood back in the bottle.”

“Aside from the spell, how did they do that? Wand movements, anything noticeable about the colour of the spell or the way it worked?”

“No colour. They stood back to back, sort of one big sweeping motion.”

“It sounds like Reparo Maxima but that those two were both well-practised at non-verbal casting. Shall we try? One big sweeping motion, as you said?”
“Okay.” Harry tightened his grip on his wand.

Draco turned his back to Harry. “You take the right, I’ll take the left, and let’s turn as we cast.”

Harry’s face went from worried to resigned in a flash, and he came to stand with his back against Draco’s.

Draco could feel the heat of his shoulders, hitting just below his own. It wasn’t the same sensation that had left him burnt, but regular human warmth. He found it surprisingly grounding. “Ready?”

He felt Harry nod. “Yeah”

“Reparo Maxima.” They chanted it together, and Draco turned his focus to the room in front of him, rotating slowly and trying not to step on Harry’s heel as they drew the dirt and leaves off the floor and sent them through the air.

With a final flourish, Draco resettled the plant in the loose soil. The room was clean. “There.”

Harry’s breathing had evened out and he stared at the plant in astonishment.

Draco let himself look, for a moment, at Harry’s wide eyes and the tiny turn at the corner of his mouth. He dropped the Repello and watched one of the kittens roll off the settee and head for Harry’s ankle.

Harry’s smile turned into a grin as he pocketed his wand and lifted the kitten. “All safe,” he whispered to it, almost too quietly to be heard. When he turned to Draco, his face settled into a more professional version of a smile, though it had some quality to it that Draco hadn’t seen in many years, and didn’t think he’d ever seen directed towards him. “Thank you.” His smile faded. “I’m sorry it was necessary, but—”

“No permanent harm done.” He glanced quickly at the end of a wand handle sticking out of Harry’s pocket, and said nothing. “Shall we sit?”

Harry nodded and squeezed onto the settee with the kittens and their mother.

Draco took a chair opposite. “How are you feeling?”

“In general? Or after the magic?”

“Both.”

“Okay, I guess. Sorry about the plant.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t intend it maliciously and no damage was done. Do you feel fatigued?”

Harry sighed. “Yeah.”

“Magically? Physically?”

“Magically. And I guess—I don’t know if it’s physically? Just a little tired.”

“On a scale of 1-10, one being no fatigue and 10 being too fatigued to cast, where would you place your fatigue?”

“Um. I don’t really know? I could cast, but I don’t think I’d do it very well.”
“Okay. That’s fine. Do you feel any achiness or pain?”

Harry paused to think about it. “No.”

“Are you certain?”

“I feel tired, kind of heavy? But I don’t think it’s achiness.”

“How are your vision and hearing?”

“Okay.”

“Are you hot or cold, beyond what you would expect in this environment?”

Harry had to think about that one too. “No, I’m okay. I’m a bit warm but, is it a bit warm in here?”

Draco considered. “Yes, actually. I’ll have Galder see to it. Based on past experience—well, you said you would be able to cast now, but you don’t think the spell would be as effective as it might be. Is that correct?”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed.

“That sounds typical of magical deprivation. Would you be willing to practise the spells we’ve cast before that you’re able to do on your own? Lumos, Wingardium Leviosa, and Expecto Patronum?”

“Right now?” Harry looked weary.

“That’s not necessary. But three to five times per day each, whenever you’re feeling up to it. You can do one spell at a time or cycle through them, either way.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Hold them as long as you can, and as steadily as you can, but don’t let yourself reach the point where you experience physical discomfort or feel as though you would be unable to cast if needed.”

Harry nodded.

“I suspect we should wait on trying anything new. I have started work on a list, though. Would you like to discuss that?”

“Sure. That was the point, right?”

“It was, but if you’re too tired, we can meet later.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m not too tired to talk.”

“All right, then. I’ve focused on things that are meant to be creative or lighthearted, but if any of them don’t appeal we can eliminate them from the list. Some of them are single spells, like Aguamenti or Vinomenti—”

Harry tensed.

“Are those to be avoided?”

“Aguamenti. I had a thing… had to use it…” he struggled to finish the sentence.
“You don’t need to explain. That’s fine. Vinomenti?”

Harry shrugged. “If you want. Heard you have a whole cellar though.”

“Yes, well,” Draco smiled. “When you’re on the go, needs must.”

Harry relaxed. “Okay.”

“There are also atmospheric charms, or spells that produce flowers or decorative objects. And then we might try things that combine spells—for instance, hands-free catch. We can also attempt spells you already know well, like your Patronus, but work on producing them wandlessly, as we know that you can do wandless magic now, but the mechanism remains unclear.”

“That all sounds fine.”

“Given your fatigue, shall we plan on the same time every afternoon, and wait until tomorrow?”

* * *

Over the next few days the promise of a new routine made it easier for Draco to abide the blocks of empty time in his mornings. Harry met with the Mind Healer he’d chosen in the mornings, and with Draco in the afternoons. They’d tried conjuring charms and simple Transfiguration, and it had been rather a pleasure to watch Harry take in the sorts of simple, beautiful spells one didn’t usually have cause for. Draco had met with the Mind Healer, too, as promised, to give an overview of the theory and hear preliminary recommendations. But even as he grew used to the daily pattern, he always found himself relieved when the time came to move to the conservatory.

By the fourth afternoon he had come to expect that Harry would be waiting for him, but not to find him sitting on the floor across from Greg, who was dangling a piece of string over the kittens.

Draco cleared his throat. “Hello.”

They both looked up. Greg spoke first. “Hey. D’you see the kittens? Half-Kneazle. They’re brill.”

“I have, yes. I didn’t know you liked animals.”

“Hard not to like kittens.”

“Fair enough.” He nodded again. “Harry.”

“Hey.”

Greg rose. “Suppose I should leave you to it. Gotta go work out anyway.” He waved to them both and left.

Draco waited until he was out of earshot. “That was a surprise.”

“Yeah.” Harry shrugged. “But they’re great. Can’t really blame him.”

“No, I suppose not. Have you given them names?”

“Names?”

“To distinguish between them? Call them? Kneazles and blends are quite bright. Much more trainable than full-bred cats.”
“Yeah. But, I—if I.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not sure I should be the one to name them. If, you know. They’re still yours.”

“Oh.” Draco blinked. “Oh, I see. My only concern was that it would do them harm to live without magic.” He had to take a steadying breath before he went on. “So I suppose it’s a question of where you stand, now, whether you’re still considering living without magic.”

Harry picked up the piece of string and wrapped it around his finger, then loosened it again when one of the kittens started to bat at it. “If there’s a way for me not to be dangerous—”

“There is,” Draco interrupted.

“Then I probably wouldn’t do that,” Harry finished. “I’d stay.”

“In the void?” Draco asked.

“No. Out of it. With magic.”

Draco took a seat in the chair nearest Harry. “Are you certain?”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I think so. I… it still makes me nervous, but I suppose I see what you were saying, about magic.”

“If you’re staying, there’s no reason for them not to be yours.”

“Oh.” Harry looked up and smiled a smile that Draco was rapidly coming to enjoy. “That would be great.”

Draco shifted in his seat. He didn’t quite believe that his posture was responsible for the twisting in his gut, but just to be sure. “They’re yours to name, then.”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said, running his thumb over a grey one’s forehead. “When we’re not working.”

“Right. May I?” Draco gestured at the settee and, with Harry’s nod, settled the litter around their dozing mother and surrounded them with a Repello. “Have you ever used atmospheric charms?”

“Sure.” Harry looked up. “Warming, cooling, drying, that sort of thing?”

“Yes. And do you have a favourite season or type of weather?”

Harry quirked a brow. “Um. Spring, I guess. Early summer.”

“And is there a specific type of day? Can you describe it in brief?”

“Good Quidditch days, basically. Clear, not so cold your fingers freeze or so hot they sweat around the broom.”

“How are you feeling, in terms of magical fatigue?”

“Fine. I could cast.” He hesitated. “I realised I kept my wand again yesterday.”

“You did,” Draco agreed.

“You’re sure it isn’t dangerous for it to be in the void?”
“As I’ve said, it shouldn’t be. It won’t work, but its materials aren’t fundamentally changed.”

“So, then, it’s okay for me to have it?”

“Are you asking because you’re worried about damaging it?”

“Mostly.”

“I would have said something the first time you took it if I thought it was inappropriate or risky for you to have possession of your wand.”


“It’s often disconcerting after a period of not having or being able to use it,” Draco offered. He immediately wondered if he shouldn’t have. These moments, when one of them referenced the past, accidentally or not, were still tense between them, and he hadn’t meant to remind Harry of yet another one.

But, apparently, he had anyway. “Was it?” Harry asked tentatively. “For you? After the trials, when you got it back?”

“It was,” Draco answered. “I’d had my mother’s, so not as strange as I imagine it would be to come from not having one at all. But it was.”

Harry watched him carefully. He looked as though he was on the verge of apologising. Draco raised an eyebrow at him, mock-sternly.

Harry smiled at that. “Right. I can’t honestly say I’m sorry, can I? Not when it was so important. Or, um. When I’m not sorry.”

“No, best not,” Draco agreed.

“But I am sorry it had to come to that. And I wouldn’t wish that on you. Being wandless in a house with Voldemort.”

“Thank you,” Draco said. “And for what it’s worth, the strangeness fades.”

“Guess I’ll find out,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Draco agreed. “To wit, today we’ll focus on wandless casting.”

“Because of a particular spell? Or to try something harder?”

“Actually,” Draco replied, “wandless casting often becomes easier for, and is more common among, witches and wizards who have had to experience magical deprivation.”

Harry gave him a dubious look.

“It’s true. They’re aware of their magic in different ways, of how it sits in their bodies, of what it will and won’t do. They have to become attentive to their limits and abilities. They develop a different relationship with their magic and many of them become less dependent on a wand to conduct it. There’s been some interest in developing the implants for wandless magic, and it might work, even, but it’s only one part of the equation.”

“Huh. So, wandless magic?”
“You’ve already managed it quite a few times.”

“Not really. It’s the Elder Wand doing it.”

“You’re a unique case, yes. But in terms of retraining yourself…” He sighed. “Stop me if it all gets boringly technical, but essentially, children are more prone to accidental magic because they don’t know how to direct their casting. Magical schools teach us how to channel our magic so it behaves as we want it to. We do that by directing the magical energy through the bones in our casting arms, as bone is very magically conductive. That’s part of why Muggle science is instructive, and why the implants work.

“European wizards are trained to use the humerus, radius, and ulna as primary conduits.” He pointed at his own arm as he spoke. “Implanting an extension of their wand against the proximal phalanges—the biggest part of the finger—pulls unpredictable magic through to the wand, which is how people are used to channeling their magic for casting. Having the Elder Wand, of all things, implanted next to a bone in a different part of the body seems to amplify your magic rather dramatically. The conductivity of bone plays a role there too. Had they done a conventional implant in the first place, or along with it—perhaps a series of them—it might have worked in essentially the same way. But that wouldn’t have resulted in wandless casting. That either comes from intensive training, as with a wizard like Dumbledore, or in extreme situations, or as a result of magical deprivation and the increased magical and physical awareness that results from being exposed to magic during and after it.”

Harry looked like he’d got about half of that. “Basically, the magic you have to cast with is amplified by the Elder Wand, but wandless casting doesn’t happen because of it.”

“Before you experienced months of magical deprivation.”

“And blew a lot of things up.”

“Which we can explain. And which, frankly—” Draco sighed. “Off the record?”

Harry nodded.

“I can’t speculate in any official capacity because yours is the only case like this, but I have wondered if the Elder Wand is partially responsible for the strengths of your destructive outbursts, especially as compared to any creative outbursts we might have missed.”

Harry looked dumbfounded, and not for a lack of understanding. “Your theory is that it’s my feelings.”

“Yes, and I maintain that that’s the root cause and the most important factor to address. But I would imagine—I have observed—that you also have strong positive feelings for the people you care about.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I know.”
“So when it comes to blowing things up, there may be a third thing happening there. Wandless casting is one. The Elder Wand amplifying your magic is another. The Elder Wand potentially having amplified negative feelings more than positive ones is another, and one we can work to rectify.”

A heavy silence sat between them, though it felt less tense than others that had come before.

Eventually Draco broke it, sliding down to sit across from Harry. “That wasn’t the point. You were describing your ideal day.”

Harry half-laughed. “Yeah. I was.”

“What would you please do it again, as you described the apple in the orchard? With some detail, perhaps holding a picture in your mind?”

“I can try.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“Okay.” Harry let his lids fall shut. “Should I describe it like I did before?”

“Please.” Draco leaned back against the seat of the chair behind him and folded his hands. “And think about how the day makes you feel, as well.”

“Okay.” Harry said. “It’s June, probably. Sunny, but not too sunny.” He opened his eyes. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do you have an image in your head?”

“Yeah.” Harry scrubbed a hand through his hair. “But I don’t know how to say how it feels. It’s warm, it’s sunny, there’s a bit of a breeze. Wandless casting with the Daily Prophet’s weather pages.”

Draco couldn’t stop a sharp laugh. “I see your point. You do have a mental picture, though?”

“Yes, but that, even, it’s really only clear if I think of it as though I’m on my broom.”

“Do that, then. And are you letting yourself feel the things that go with that ideal day? Happiness, relaxation—whatever else?”

“Yeah, both of those,” Harry said. “And sort of open to the world? Having a sense of possibility?”

“Good. Great,” Draco said. “Last time the description seemed to focus you, but if it’s distracting now let’s try without. Close your eyes and think of it. Imagine really being there, and how you would feel.”

“Like casting a Patronus?”

“Sure.”

Harry nodded, inhaled, and closed his eyes.

“Remember to breathe.”

Harry laughed and nodded again.
Draco watched him fidget through the first minute. He dug his thumbnails into the pads of his fingers, wiggled his toes. After a time, his shoulders relaxed. One corner of his mouth turned up.

Under a cloudy sky, sunlight began to fill the room, emanating from the rafters. On the settee, the cat stirred opening one eye towards the ceiling. The room grew brighter, and she seemed to take it for morning. She stretched lazily and sat back to lick a paw.

Draco felt warmth accompanying the light. It was a gentle heat, and he relaxed into the chair behind him. Something rustled his hair, and a look at the palm tree confirmed that it was a breeze.

After, by Draco’s watch, ten minutes, the breeze picked up, and Harry’s breathing with it. The cat, looking quite disgruntled, hunkered into a corner of the settee, pulling her kittens in towards her. Draco tensed, preparing to intervene.

He didn’t need to; Harry’s eyes shot open and he sagged forward, panting.

“Tired.” Harry’s voice was ragged and small. “Did it work?”

“You didn’t feel it?”

Harry shook his head. “Felt like I was there, but was it…?”

“Yes,” Draco answered. “It was. Would you like water? A snack?”

Harry shook his head again. “Just tired.” He took a few deep breaths, regaining his composure. “I’ll be okay.”

“Any achiness? Could you cast if you had to?”

“No. I think so.”

“Okay.” Draco stood and held out a hand. “Let me help you to a chair?”

Harry nodded, took his hand, and moved to the empty half of the settee. He smiled gratefully. “Thanks. That was intense.”

“Too intense?”

Harry shook his head. “No. Just new.”

“Okay. Any symptoms other than fatigue?”

“No.”

Draco shifted his weight, feeling awkward looming over Harry. “I think it’s safe to say we’ve done a day’s work.”

Harry smiled, faint but genuine. “Yeah.”

“Same time tomorrow?”

“Would you stay a minute?”

Draco shifted again. “Of course. Are you feeling unwell?”
“No,” Harry reassured, “aside from the tiredness. I had a question, if you have a moment.”

“Okay.” Draco perched on the edge of a seat.

Harry straightened against the back of the settee and pulled a brown kitten into his lap. “I’ve been seeing the Mind Healer.”

Draco nodded.

“You met with him.”

“Yes.”

“He agrees with your theory, I think, but he also just thinks it’s a good idea to work through things. Say things I haven’t wanted to say.”

Draco’s stomach twisted. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I have sort of Mind Healer homework to do. I’m meant to practise with someone, telling them things I haven’t wanted to. Apparently trying to be more open will help things? Anyway, I was thinking of Hermione?”

Draco relaxed, awash in relief and the tiniest bit of disappointment. He nodded for Harry to go on.

“I know her pretty well and I don’t think she’d stop being friends with me or anything, so we talked it over and thought it was a good choice. If that makes sense?”

“It does, yes.”

“Good. That’s good.” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I was wondering—I’m still nervous about things going wrong. Like the plant today. It can still happen, and it might get emotional, and I’m worried I’ll accidentally hurt her. And I don’t know, if she’s upset or she’s worried about me, if she’d draw her wand to defend herself.”

“Okay…”

“I was wondering if you would agree to be there.”

Draco found himself speechless, and certainly surprised.

“I’m sorry if that’s too weird. I know you know her too, and you work together, and she’d have to agree to it too, though I think she would. It’s just that, if push came to shove, I don’t think you’d let anything happen. If I asked you to stun me if you needed to, or to put up a shield… you’d do that. You have done, anyway. So I thought…” He swallowed nervously, and Draco saw a white crescent where he’d dug his thumbnail into the back of the opposite hand.

“Okay.” Draco’s mouth answered before the rest of him had entirely caught up, but even in the few seconds’ silence that followed he didn’t find himself regretting it.

“Really?” Harry looked tremendously relieved.

“If we were very clear about the circumstances under which I was to take action or, hopefully, not, and it would enable your recovery, yes.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll send her a letter tonight. Are there better times for you?”

“I can be flexible.”

“Okay.” Harry ruffled his hair and dropped his hand. “Thank you. Really.”

“You’re welcome.” Another few seconds’ silence. Draco felt tension, but suspected it was him alone. “Are you sure you wouldn’t benefit from a drink or something to eat?”

“Maybe a cup of tea?”

“Of course.” Draco stood. “I’ll have some sent up.”

“Thank you. For that too.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll see you this time tomorrow unless I hear otherwise.” He moved for the door, unable to easily shake a discomfiture that settled in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

It's so @#$@Talfkkjdfsji incredible to see these scenes in color!! Check out apricat’s beautiful illustration of Harry and Draco's time in the conservatory here (and in an alternate color palette here) and please leave them some love!!
A note from Harry had arrived with Draco’s breakfast tray. He’d written that Granger was free in the afternoon, and asked whether Draco was still willing to come and where it would be best for them to meet. And even though he’d suggested the music room he had to remind himself of it when he left the library, schooling himself out of disappointment when he stopped in front of the music room instead of continuing to the conservatory.

Harry was pacing the room alone. The tea tray in the bow windows remained mostly untouched. It looked as though Harry had set a cup in its saucer and then had second thoughts about pouring.

He jumped when Draco closed the door behind him. “Hi.”

“Afternoon. How are you feeling?”


“I never would’ve guessed,” Draco drawled.

To his relief, Harry laughed. “Doing that well, am I?”

“All things considered, you’re doing remarkably well. I’d be a bit terrified to have a frank chat with Granger too.”

Before Harry could chide him, there was a knock at the door. Lobsey entered, with a very concerned-looking Granger in tow.

Draco gave Harry what he hoped was a steadying look and removed himself to the other end of the room. He had decided to make himself as scarce as one reasonably could while sharing an enclosed space and diligently watching for any signs of errant magic. That was his task, not eavesdropping.

Still, given that the parties involved were Gryffindors, watching them was almost as telling. Granger rushed to scoop Harry into a hug, which he returned, though with tense shoulders that belied the sentiment.

To her credit, Granger noticed and pulled back, searching his face. He started to look away and then seemed to steel himself, force himself to look back. He took her hand and squeezed it, and said something to her as he gestured towards the tea tray. She nodded, and when Harry turned away Draco saw anxiety overtake her features. Liking Granger was bad enough; empathising might be a bridge too far.

Harry perched on the edge of a settee. Granger looked between it and the one opposite and seemed to ask him where she should go. He shrugged. To her credit, again, she insisted, gently, that he tell her.

He pointed to the one across from him, and they sat.

What surprised Draco most about the conversation that followed was how little Granger spoke. Harry’s attempts were stilted at first. Painfully so. Draco saw her clench her jaw, dig her heels into the rug, bite down on her lip, at one point saw her actually sit on her hands. She clearly wanted to speak—to reassure him, to stop him from putting the weight of words behind whatever he was feeling—but, just as clearly, she restrained herself.
Draco was, very grudgingly, impressed.

As Granger waited, Harry grew more and more animated. He spoke quickly, insistently. Tearfully, which made Draco uncomfortable in all sorts of ways. He only heard snippets, when Harry grew emphatic—“never should’ve let you wear the Horcrux,” “you could’ve died in Godric’s Hollow, it was a stupid idea,” “I should’ve said goodbye before the Forbidden Forest,” “you wouldn’t have lost a whole year in Australia, trying to fix things with your parents if you hadn’t helped me”—but it was clear enough that Harry felt that he owed her something or that he had wronged her. Which, upon reflection, Draco thought shouldn’t have been surprising; somewhere along the way it had become Harry’s modus operandi. But it was still startling to hear apology upon apology. Fortunately, Granger seemed to think so too, seeing it laid out before her like that.

Harry still didn’t look particularly relieved.

Granger had leaned forward to underscore her points so frequently that she was barely still on the sofa when she was done. She seemed to realise it as she drew to a close, and slid back with an expression of teary, loving, relief, and a declaration that, “I love you no matter what, and don’t regret a damn thing.”

Harry fidgeted with the seam of his trousers.

Behind Harry, a crack began to run down the window, getting longer and wider as he sat in silence through Granger’s well-meaning onslaught.

Though he had been watching Harry throughout the conversation, Draco was surprised when Harry’s gaze flicked over to him. He looked almost pleading, and definitely hesitant. Draco gave him a nod, which he hoped would communicate, “you can do this,” rather than, “not my problem, get back to it.” All of which left Draco feeling as unsure as Harry looked.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them they were redder. Wetter. From what Draco could hear, his voice was shakier. As he moved back across the room, he heard the start of Harry’s answer. “It’s about the Wand.”

Granger moved to speak, and Draco was glad he resisted the urge to throttle her when, of her own volition, she sat all the way back, tucked her fingertips back under her legs, and waited for Harry to speak.
It took Harry a full minute, at least, to gather himself. He spoke even more quietly this time, and lapsed into silence often. The only time his voice rose was towards the end, when he choked on, “the Potions only do so much,” and, “because I didn’t want you to know how much it hurt.”

Draco froze, resisting the urge to edge closer. He’d suspected that Harry’s insistence that the Unspeakables’ surgical team had been caring was a gross exaggeration, but he didn’t find any comfort in having been right. He very much wished he hadn’t been.

Harry’s voice continued to rise and fall, and Granger leant forward to interrupt at, “the void’s bloody lonely, okay? And being without magic…” But she did lean back when Harry trailed off, seemingly as intent on hearing the rest of the sentence as Draco was.

It didn’t come. Instead, Harry sighed quietly and turned in on himself. Draco was surprised by his clarity when he spoke again, surprised that it was more than a whisper. “I never wanted to be their project,” Harry said. “I know it’s done now, but we should’ve thrown the damn Wand in the ocean, burnt it, put the Sword through it, anything that might’ve worked.” Draco had never thought he’d hear those things, even if they weren’t meant for him. He had to press his lips together to suppress a cheer and seriously considered sitting on his own fingers to keep from applauding.

Those declarations seemed to have taken it out of Harry, who slumped down and fell into a mumble. Draco couldn’t hear anything else, and Granger was making such a point of remaining nonjudgmentally impassive that he couldn’t get anything from her, either. Except, as Harry went on, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

He ended on a question—“Why didn’t you tell me everything? Did you think it would protect me?”—which she, apparently, couldn’t answer straight away. She rubbed at the damp inner corner of one eye.

Harry shifted nervously. Draco saw him try to focus his energy, to take deep breaths. Harry had to look away from Granger to do it, but Draco thought he wouldn’t have done a month ago. It was some sort of progress.

Granger leaned forward and said Harry’s name aloud, as a question.

He turned back.

“I’m sorry.” Even when inaudible, the shape of the words was unmistakable.

Harry shook his head and bent towards her, on the verge of offering reassurances.

She shook her head to stop him and repeated herself. Looked him straight in the eye and repeated herself again. Said something else that Draco couldn’t quite make out.

They both sat back, looking at each other in silence.

She spoke first. From what Draco could overhear, it was to elaborate on her apology, that yes, she had meant to protect him but that wasn’t any excuse, she should’ve known better, should have remembered how capable he was instead of getting caught up in her work. Harry tried to stop her more than once, to minimise, to explain away. To Draco’s great surprise, she didn’t let him. And for all that he looked perplexed, unsure of how to respond to her insistence, he didn’t look upset by it or, as she went on, as though there was anything he really wanted to say.

When she stopped, so did he. She repeated it again: “I’m sorry, Harry.”

He nodded, and Draco could make out what he said, too: “Okay.”
They sat, looking at each other. Almost simultaneously, the wind seemed to go out of their sails. They sagged back against their respective settees looking exhausted, if, Draco thought, strangely resolved. He couldn’t stop watching their mouths, turning back and forth as though watching them pass a Quaffle, waiting for one or the other to speak.

“They love you,” Granger said at last.

Harry half-laughed and rubbed his eyes. “I love you too.”

“Good,” she said, and then lean forward to murmur something Draco couldn’t make out.

Harry huffed another shaky laugh and nodded. She asked a question. He gestured to the untouched tea tray. She shook her head and said something and they both snickered.

Draco thought she tilted her head to gesture towards him as she followed with something more serious, and Harry got an uneasy sort of look. The combination set Draco on edge. Harry too; Draco saw the sconces flicker and gripped his wand. Then they stopped. Harry had interrupted her, shaking his head once firmly and asking a question—Draco heard, “if there’s anything to tell, can you trust me to do it when I’m ready?”—that gave her pause.

After a moment she nodded and Draco saw her say, “Okay.” She looked at Harry questioningly. “What else?” Draco thought he saw.

Harry huffed a laugh and said what looked like, “Not enough?” He caught her eye and held it, something passing between them that Draco couldn’t discern beyond knowing that it looked like familiarity and care.

She laughed, a bit tearily. “Enough. Unless there’s anything else you want to tell me now?”

He shook his head. “No. Not now.”

She nodded and stood. When she spoke it was, he thought intentionally, unambiguously loud enough for Draco to hear. “In that case, probably enough for one afternoon?”

Harry stood, walked around the table, and wrapped her in his arms. Draco thought he saw the hint of a sob as she gripped him back, and they stood like that for some time.

Draco found he couldn’t look away.

At last, Harry loosened his arms and she stepped back, smiling through tears. He reached onto the tea tray for a napkin and gave it to her to blot her eyes. She rubbed his arm and said something else, then stepped back.

Harry did as well, casting Draco a grateful smile as he did.

Draco stood and composed his face as Granger approached him. “Dr Malfoy. Thank you for having me.”

He nodded. “Of course. Would you like to stay for tea?”

“Thank you, but no.”

“I imagine you would prefer not to have an elf see you out?”

She quirked a smile. “True, if that’s all right.”
“I imagine you can find your way by now.”

“A right and on to the foyer.”

“Yes. If you get turned around, just yell for Lobsey.”

“All right. Thank you.” She turned to Harry and hugged him again. “Thank you, too.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, his voice gravelly and just loud enough to be heard.

“Oh, Harry.” She held his hands and stepped back. She looked very sad, and very sorry. “That feels a bit misplaced at the moment, even if I do know what you mean.”

“As long as you know.”

“I do.”

Harry nodded. She returned it, squeezed his hand, and then made for the door.

Draco and Harry were alone again.

Harry cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It isn’t.”

“Well, it’s not a problem, in any event.”

“Okay. But I’m sure you have other things you could be doing, and I doubt it was very interesting to sit here.”

Draco did not tell him that, in fact, it had been rather interesting. “I don’t mind. Truly.”

“It made a difference. Made it easier to say some of those things, knowing you’d step in if anything went wrong.”

“It did save my window, so I figure we’re even.”

“Right.” Harry snorted, looking away. “Thanks for that.”

Draco felt a wall go up between them, quickly followed by the urge to tear it down. “Harry.”

Startled, Harry looked back to him.

“I didn’t—” Draco hesitated, willing himself to be as honest as Harry had been. “Well. I did mean to make light of it, but not to belittle it. I do hope you realise that I support your recovery, and if you talk to Granger or whoever else again and you need that backing, I would—will—do it regardless of the windows, or anything else.”

Harry studied him for a long moment, and he resisted the urge to squirm. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He grasped for some way to move the conversation forward. “Do you think you will? Have more conversations like that?”

“The Mind Healer thinks it’s a good idea.”
“To talk to Granger again, or other people?”

“Both.” Harry hesitated. “I’ve been thinking a lot, lately.” His cheeks pinked and he looked down at the floor. “I might have more things to tell people soon. Or, another thing. Still figuring it out, I guess. But I might. Or, I think I will. Just figuring out what exactly it is, if that makes sense.”

Draco tried to keep his response as neutral as possible. “Okay.”

“Is it?” Harry said, his cheeks starting to resemble his house colours. Draco knew, instinctively, that if he paused to consider the question Harry would spook, but knew, too, that it contained dimensions he couldn’t quite grasp in the moment. He tried to keep his voice even and hope for the best. “Of course. It’s important for you to explore any feelings that might affect your magic. Your overall wellbeing, really.”

“Right, but I mean, if it were something more specific…” Harry coughed.

Draco, overwhelmed by the events of the last hour, was still grappling with the meaning of Harry’s question, the most obvious interpretation of which also seemed like the most improbable. He couldn’t quite cobble together his response in time.

“Nevermind,” Harry said. “It’s not—I—I don’t even know yet, and, anyway, I—if you have a moment, I—There’s something else I’d like to discuss.”

“Oh?” Draco felt more and more off balance with each exchange.

“Yes. If you have the time?”

“Certainly. Would you like to sit?”

“It’s not a long question. Sort of yes or no. Though if you’d like to…”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Okay.” Harry looked as flustered as Draco felt, but Draco didn’t find even a hint of relief in that. “It’s about the hearing.”

“Yes. Right.”

“Hermione and I wrote back and forth about it last night, with the scheduling for this, and they’ve set a time.”

“I hadn’t heard. When is it?”

“It’s in three days.”

“I see.” Draco hesitated. “Will you be going?”

“I do want to.” Harry stood up straighter. “I mean, I am.” He looked at Draco, waiting for a reaction.

“Will they be making any concessions to protect you, or are you expected to go in on your own?”

Harry sighed. “I know you think a lot of the events we’ve talked about are frivolous, but this is different. It isn’t. It’s important that I go.”
“I don’t think this is frivolous, but you haven’t answered the question.”

“No,” Harry said quietly. “Gawain said it would be dangerous, for me and for them, if anyone knew my magic wasn’t stable.”

“He said the same to me. It’s idiocy. There are a million ways to explain it, and what do they think will happen if you do have an episode of unreliable magic? Won’t that be rather noticeable?”

Harry paused as though he hadn’t thought of it. “Yeah, I guess it would. I don’t know, maybe they could just say that I was really passionate about the bill? And Hermione and Gawain will be there and they could try to cover things up, and Gawain said they might be able to explain an Auror guard if I want one.”

“I hope you said yes.”

“I said I might.”

“I hope you will say yes, then.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d come?”

“Me?” Draco’s heart stopped. “To the Ministry?”

“Yeah,” Harry went on. “To do the same thing you did today. Everyone else will be focused on the hearing, and you’re so quick at catching it that it’s almost like you know when it’s coming, and your reparative charms are strong. Besides which, today, knowing you were here and that you’d keep anything from happening, I felt—there were times when I think something might have happened, except that it calmed me down a bit, to know someone would stop it. That you’d stop it.”

Draco heard everything Harry said, though it sounded as though it was come through a fur-lined hood. The salient points arrived, but the idea of setting foot in the Ministry after he’d arranged the whole trip so he wouldn’t have to go anywhere near it… “I—” He swallowed. “It’s in three days?”

“Yes. In the afternoon.”

“Right. Well,” Draco scrambled, “let me check my schedule, and I’ll let you know tomorrow?”

“Your—?” Harry furrowed his brow.

Draco couldn’t blame him. It was a transparent excuse; his purpose for being in England was to work on Harry’s case, and he’d never had a conflict before, nor was there any reason he should have one now. He was grateful that Harry didn’t push it, but felt like he’d stepped in the proverbial dragon dung regardless. At least he didn’t want Harry to think he was wrong to ask. “I’m sorry I don’t have an answer for you straight away. I’m glad you’ve asked though.”

Harry looked only very minimally mollified. “If it’s a problem, you don’t have to. There’ll be other people there.”

“I appreciate your saying so. Thank you. I’ll let you know as soon as I’m able. Shall we practise, in the meantime?”

“I’m a bit tired, actually. I practised everything I’m meant to this morning and it was fine, but the conversation was a bit difficult and, well. Do you think we could wait until tomorrow? If you think it’s needed I’ll do what I can, of course, but—”
“No,” Draco said, “that’s fine.” He was a bit surprised to find that it was true. “Your progress has been steady. Remarkably so. A day shouldn’t make the critical difference.”

“Okay.” Harry relaxed. “Thank you. For that, and for all of this.”

“You’re welcome,” Draco answered. “Tomorrow, then. The usual time and place?”

Harry nodded.

Draco knew the time had come to leave, but his feet held him there a moment longer. Or perhaps it was the sudden awareness that he’d have a lot to consider once he left the room.

Either way. He shook himself free, nodded at Harry, and put one leaden foot after the next as he abandoned his plans for the library and made his way back to his rooms.

* * *

Draco’s composure was mostly restored by the next day. Or as restored as it could be when he’d decided to go to the Ministry, and had the prospect of it hanging over him. But it was too dangerous for Harry to go without a team who knew the full extent of the situation, and it wouldn’t be long, and Draco’s aversion to hypocrisy was even stronger than his aversion to the Ministry. If he could insist that Harry should face his demons and go, he couldn’t argue otherwise on his own behalf.

Even if he wanted to. Rather badly.

But the decision was made, he reminded himself. And he thought Harry would be glad of it. And in the meantime he could try to make the next few days a bit more pleasant for both of them. He started by asking Galder to bring him a Quaffle and sending Harry a note, asking to meet in the terrace gardens instead of the conservatory.

Shortly after two, he found Harry waiting for him on one of the benches along the garden path, wearing only a jumper, Muggle jeans, and trainers. Draco’s momentary concern dissolved into surprise when he came closer and felt the warmth of a heating charm.

It must’ve shown on his face, he thought, as Harry looked up at him a bit bashfully. “I know it’s not on the list of things to practise, but I thought, maybe…”

“No, it’s excellent. I’m very pleased that you’re trying new things. Besides which, it’s completely in line with the atmospheric charms we’ve already tried. Did you use a wand?”

Harry half-shrugged, as if to brush off the question. “No, just thought about it. It’s chilly, you know? Figured that was good motivation.”

“It is. That’s an excellent sign, Harry. Really.”

Harry smiled up at him. “Well, good. I’m glad you think so.”

“Don’t you think so?”

His smile wavered. “Yeah. It makes me nervous, but I see the utility.”

“Just the utility?”

The corners of Harry’s mouth quirked up. “I see where you’re going with this.”
“Well?”

“It was nice to be able to do it.”

“Hmm.” Draco thought that might be as much confirmation as he’d get. “Well, let’s keep on in the same vein.” He pulled the Quaffle from under his arm and held it out to Harry.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know that flying’s a good idea. It’s one thing to make mistakes on the ground, but in the air?”

“We’re not flying. Just throwing the ball around.”

“ Catch? We’re playing catch?”

“Magical catch,” Draco defended. “I’ll throw the ball up, you push it towards me, I’ll push it back. No hands allowed.”

“Just spells?”

“Just spells,” Draco confirmed. “With your wand, please, for this.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded and stood. “Down in the field?” It sounded just as much like a request as a suggestion. “So I don’t accidentally knock it into anything?”

“If you’d rather.”

“I would.”

They walked down to the field in comfortable silence. It had become cold enough at night that the grass crunched underfoot. Draco listened to that instead of thinking too much. That was one thing about living in Paris; he hadn’t been able to feel the seasons change like this. He’d grown used to knowing if snow was in the forecast by listening to the wireless, not by the sound of the grass or the smell in the air.

He stopped when they were well clear of the stairs. “All right?” he asked Harry.

“Yeah.”

Draco nodded, put twenty feet between them, and held the Quaffle out with one hand. He gripped his wand with the other to suspend it in mid-air. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Harry pulled his wand from his pocket and stepped back into a dueling stance. Draco wondered if he noticed or if it was pure habit. He wondered, too, if it meant he was about to see Harry’s competitive side, which made his heart race in a way that didn’t feel anything like fear or trepidation.

Harry nodded.

Draco let the ball drop.

“Repello!” Harry shouted, sending the ball careening towards Draco with remarkably good aim.

“Protego!” The ball bounced off the shield, but wasn’t as well-directed.

Harry compensated. “Accio! Wingardium Leviosa!” He had the ball suspended in front of him and held it there. He stopped to grin at Draco.
Draco grinned back. It distracted Harry enough for Draco to get in a Finite. The ball dropped and Draco caught it with a levitation charm. He held his concentration and moved his wand to send it shooting back towards Harry.

Harry’s Impedimenta slowed it and he regained control of the ball, and soon Draco lost all track of time. He was happily breathless, his limbs loose and warm from the exertion. Harry’s reflexes were unaffected, and he still had an eye for a moving target. It had been years since Draco had been so thoroughly forced out of his mind and into his magical instincts. But the ability was still there. Harry was breathless too, and grinning wildly, and he looked more carefree than Draco had seen him, maybe ever. It was a good look on him.

It felt like no time had passed before Harry’s volleys grew erratic. A little faster or slower than he probably would’ve intended, or a bit off course. But when Draco looked up, the sun had moved towards the horizon, enough to be noticeable. Instead of sending the ball back, he Summoned it and caught it in his hands.

Harry looked so disappointed he almost threw it back.

He checked his pocket watch instead. “It’s been over an hour.” He looked up, not trying to hide his surprise. “Well done.”

“Didn’t feel like it at all,” Harry panted. “Felt good.”

“That’s an excellent sign. Really excellent.”

“Can we keep going?”

Draco hesitated. “I want to be a bit conservative about your active use of magic, and it looked as though you were feeling some effects. Is that the case?”

Harry stopped to think. “Yeah, I think it is. A bit of fatigue. I didn’t notice until you mentioned it though. And I could keep casting, I’m sure of it.”

Draco smiled. “That’s all excellent. What if, instead of this, you went to the conservatory and tried atmospheric spells again? Changing the type of magic you’re doing, the type of focus you’re required to engage—that might be helpful. And it would be useful to know, too, how your magic reacts to wandless casting after focused use of your wand.”

“Mmm. That makes sense. It’s nice to be outdoors, though.”

“You could go for a run later, or we could do this again sometime.”

“Or both?”

“Or both.”

Harry inclined his head. “Okay, then. To the conservatory?”

“Yes.” Draco set the Quaffle down for the elves to retrieve later, and they began to walk in.

They were both silent, moving towards the void by force of habit, until they reached the steps to the gardens. Then Harry spoke out of nowhere. “It’s the 9th.”

“Yes.” To say that Draco had been watching the calendar carefully would be an understatement.

“The first event on my calendar was on the 5th.”
“Yes,” Draco repeated.

“I didn’t go.”

“I had been wondering if you would.”

From the corner of his eye, Draco saw Harry shake his head. “I wanted to. Part of me wanted to. But I guess when the time came, I just… I knew I shouldn’t.”

“You worried that you would get in some sort of trouble if you went?” Draco asked, concerned.

“No,” Harry said, and Draco’s relief went through to his toes. “I thought about how tired I’ve been after some of the times we’ve tried casting, and how I would be worried the whole time, and how my magic still isn’t entirely predictable, and it didn’t seem like a good idea. So I guess I just… didn’t go.”

“You make it sound very simple,” Draco observed.

Harry snorted. “Do I? It didn’t feel that way.”

“No?” Draco prompted.

“No,” Harry confirmed. “I thought about it right up until that evening. We practised that afternoon—it was the second time we tried conjuring charms in the conservatory—and I wondered if you remembered.”

“I did,” Draco said quietly.

“You didn’t say anything.”

“It’s not for me to say.”

“Kingsley sent me a note after we met. Cho, too—it was the one for kids to learn Quidditch, she’s in charge of that. Both hoping I’d be there.”

“But you didn’t go.”

“I didn’t.”

Draco tried to keep his focus; Harry had walked closer and the warmth from his heating charm lapped at Draco’s side. He had to work, too, not to let his excitement show, to keep any sort of judgment from affecting Harry’s progress. “Do you want to talk more about why?”

“I don’t quite know how to put it. It was a lot of different things. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, of course.” He looked over to Draco, who nodded his acknowledgement. Harry continued. “I didn’t want to make my health any worse. Things I’ve already said, I guess.”

Draco nodded again and pulled the door open for Harry who, Draco noticed, shivered and frowned as they entered the void, without seeming to realise it.

“And,” Harry continued, “I’d never skipped one before. I guess I thought I’d feel badly about it the whole night. And I did feel badly, I don’t want to make it sound like it was all fun or anything. I’m glad I was in the void. I was so nervous, something probably would’ve happened. But as it went on, it didn’t feel like I thought it would. It was just me, with a book, and a nice chair, and I didn’t want to risk leaving, but I asked Lobsey to bring some tea, and it was all pretty okay, I guess. Cosy.”
Still intent on reaching the conservatory, Draco held the door to the hallway for Harry. “It sounds like a very nice evening.”

“Yeah,” Harry mused, stepping into the hallway, his shoulders relaxing as he left the void. “It was. And the same thing with the others, too. I always thought I’d be miserable if I skipped one. Wracked with guilt, unable to do anything else, just thinking about the kids, or the Crups, or whatever. And I did think about them.” He lowered his voice, sounding a bit embarrassed. “I had Gringotts send over a bunch of Galleons.” After a second, he cleared his throat and went on. “I do still want to help. It just wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Even the Galleons part? You don’t think that’s, like, letting them run me into the poorhouse or something?”

“I don’t know about the condition of your vaults, but my understanding of your family history suggests that you won’t be living on Knockturn Alley because of a few donations, even substantial ones. Besides which, believe it or not, I don’t have anything against investing in social causes.” He felt Harry’s eyes on him. “If it’s meaningful to you, you should support it. I am just of the mind that you can do that without owing them your presence every time it’s demanded.”

Harry had been watching Draco and almost clipped the doorframe as they entered the corridor that led to the conservatory, and turned to look straight in front of him. “Yeah. I see your point.”

“I’m glad. I don’t want you to think I don’t support the causes themselves, so much as their approach, where you’re concerned.”

“You don’t? Want me to think that?”

“I may’ve had to go to the continent to do it, but I have got rather used to people not thinking of me as a heartless bastard.”

“I don’t think you are.”

“Yes, well.” Draco searched for something else to talk about, increasingly desperate to change the subject. The more he was in a position to talk about how he felt about Harry, or wanted Harry to feel about him, the less he was able to articulate it. “Have you heard anything more from Granger?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “She sent me a really nice note last night. Really nice. Felt a bit bad about it, honestly.” Before Draco could object, Harry raised a hand. “I talked about it this morning. With Mind Healer Barrett. I’m not—I understand why she did it and that it isn’t my fault or anything.”

“Good.” Draco turned to offer Harry a smile. “I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

They walked on. “I’ve been thinking as well,” Draco said.

“Oh?” Harry’s voice managed to rise between the start of the syllable and the end of it.

“And I’ve checked my schedule.”

“Ah.” Harry exhaled. “About the Ministry?”
“Yes.” Draco sighed. “To be entirely honest, I… haven’t especially wanted to go to the Ministry. I don’t have the fondest memories, nor do I expect a warm reception.”

“Oh—” Harry began.

“But,” Draco interrupted, “I don’t want to let that keep me from doing something I otherwise would. I’ll go with you.”

“You will?” The words rushed out of Harry in a wave of gratitude and relief.

Draco felt as though it hit him in the chest. The heaviness behind his sternum seemed to shrink. His stomach turned.

He was suddenly certain that it would be unwise to look at Harry. He kept his eyes ahead, walking into the conservatory. “I will, yes. The afternoon of the 11th?”

“Yes. At two. Robards wants to send an Auror guard to meet me here, if that’s all right. I was going to ask you about that anyway. They’d come at half one, so there’s time to get through the Ministry building to the courtroom.”

“That’s fine. Will I come with you all, or meet you there?”

“I’d like it if you came with us.” They’d stopped in the centre of the room, and Harry looked at him hopefully.

Draco’s heart sped up. He was, he thought, thoroughly doomed. “Then I will.”

“Great.” Harry smiled. “That’s really great. Really. A really big relief, and I’m really grateful, especially since you don’t really want to, I know it’s a big deal and I really do want you to know how much I appreciate it.”

“Harry.” Draco stopped him, and almost wished he hadn’t. Harry’s name felt strange in his mouth. He knew he hadn’t always used it, but it wasn’t so different from his surname. Softer, though. Less abrupt. It stuck between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, didn’t want to be spat out the way “Potter” had. “Harry” wanted to turn the corners of his mouth up, like a smile. It wanted to live behind his teeth, stay inside of him. “Harry” didn’t want to be pushed out. Pushed away.

“Harry,” he said again. “Remember: if I really didn’t want to, if it was truly too overwhelming or onerous to be worthwhile, I wouldn’t do it. I’ve told you all of this in the interest of explaining why I hesitated when you first asked. Not because I want you to feel indebted, which I don’t. I’ve made the decision freely. You’re welcome, and I’m glad to hear that it’s a relief, but you don’t owe me anything.”

It took Harry a conflicted-looking moment to compose a response. “Thank you. For saying that.”

“You’re welcome.”

The air between them felt fraught. Draco searched, again, for a new topic. “You met with Healer Barrett this morning?”

“Yes.” Harry looked as though he was struggling to relax.

“It’s going well? If you don’t mind my asking. It’s fine, of course, if you’d rather not talk about it.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t mind. It’s going well, I think. It’s hard to know what’s down to that, versus
spending more time outside of the void and working on my magic. But nothing's happened since I
talked to Hermione. And I have been spending much more time outside of the void. So clearly,
something’s working.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” Silence threatened to reign again and Draco pressed forward, grabbing
the first topic that came to hand. “And have you been able to talk more about the other things you
mentioned?”

Harry inhaled sharply.

Draco wanted to slap himself. He’d tried to put it out of his mind because what he thought Harry
might mean was too much to comprehend, quite. And then, stupidly, he’d gone and blocked it out
so thoroughly he’d forgotten what the question might imply. “Again, you, of course, don’t have to
answer that. It’s completely private, between you and your Healer, and you’ve no obligation to
share any information.” He felt like a first year, stumbling over his words in a search for some
right answer he didn’t yet know how to give.

Harry watched him, eyes wide, as he lurched along, and didn’t answer right away.

Draco was on the verge of changing the subject yet again when he spoke.

“No, it’s okay. I can—I’ve talked more about it, yeah.”

“The things you might need to say to Granger?”

Harry tried to meet his eye, but couldn’t seem to hold it. Not that Draco minded. Harry looked to
the floor. “Yeah. But not just her.”

Draco was eager to put an end to the conversation. “I’m glad you’ve been able to talk about it.”

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled. “Me too.”

“Well then, shall we—”

“I’m especially glad because it’s important to me.”

Draco stopped short. He reminded himself to close his mouth.

“The things I’m talking about with Mind Healer Barrett. I—There are some parts of my life that
hadn’t been working very well. Things that have always—That I’ve always wanted to be a big part
of my life. Finding someone to be with. That sort of thing.”

Draco nodded.

“And I think maybe I’ve been looking, not in the wrong places, but… that there are things I didn’t
consider, things I just never saw, or when I did see them they seemed lonely or dangerous or
something, but I’ve been thinking that maybe that’s wrong. Maybe I should. Consider them, I
mean. Consider that maybe what I’m looking for isn’t in the places I thought it would be. Or, I
guess I am already considering that. Does that make sense?” Harry looked up, searching Draco’s
face.

“Yes.” Draco wished he could retroactively take the tremor out of his voice. “I understand. That
can be quite a difficult thing to come to terms with.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. He paused, but didn’t look away. “Was it for you?”
Each cell in Draco’s veins felt like it came to a stop, replaced with a fuzzy numbness that made it hard to speak. To figure out what even to say. “I.” He cleared his throat. “In some ways. I don’t think... It was hard to sort it all out. During a war, you know.” A laugh bubbled up, low in his throat. “Of course you do. That made it hard to think about those things much at all.”

“Yeah. It did.”

“Yeah,” Draco repeated, beginning to gather himself. “It’s part of why I left, though. To be able to figure it out without the spectre of the war overhead. Maybe that means I already knew.”

“If only I’d have left the country,” Harry joked. Or sort of joked. Draco couldn’t tell how much he meant it.

“No,” Draco said, more sharply than he meant it. “You would’ve regretted it. Or, I think you would have,” he corrected himself. “These people mean too much to you. You couldn’t have just left.”

“You’re probably right. Might’ve made some things easier, though.”

“Might’ve yes. But not other things.”

“I guess it’s all’s well that ends well, if I’m figuring it out now.”

“Right. There you go. It hasn’t stopped you in the end. If you have figured it out?” It came out sounding like even more of a question than Draco meant it to.

“Yeah,” Harry breathed, his voice low. “I think I have.”

Draco held his stare this time, and didn’t look away. The tension between them had metamorphosed into something volatile. Which couldn’t be ideal for Harry’s magic, Draco thought. Even if that was, he knew, an excuse.

He looked away first, coughing to break the pressure of the room. “I’m glad for you.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, still searching for his eyes.

Draco nodded, looking at Harry, but avoiding his stare. “Shall we begin, then?”

Harry paused before he nodded. “Yeah. We can begin.”

“Imagine the ideal day?”

“Yes, please.” Draco looked down and saw one of the kittens rubbing up against Harry’s ankle.

“Okay.” Harry smiled at them. It seemed to relax him. “Guess I should sit?”

“Probably. Shall I put the kittens on the settee again?”

“Please.” Harry dropped to the floor and crossed his legs as Draco levitated them onto the settee.
and put up a shield.

Once he was done, and Harry saw that they were safe, Draco sat back against the chair as he had last time and watched Harry close his eyes. He seemed, again, to drift away, and the room grew warmer and sunlight seemed to emanate from the joints between the ceiling’s glass panels. And when it grew warmer than it had the last time, if the room felt humid and hot and closer to a tropical beach than a Scotland spring day, Draco didn’t think for a second that it was a sign of magic gone awry.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After leaving Harry with the kittens in the conservatory, Draco had cancelled his breakfast tray and got Millie on the Floo. He wanted to talk to her before the hearing. He was less surprised to find that Pansy was also there than he was to find that Greg wasn’t. He’d thought they had breakfast together most days, and said as much.

Pansy fixed him with a scrutinising gaze. “Gregory is in the conservatory, having breakfast with Potter.”

Draco hoped he succeeded at keeping his face impassive. “Ah. I suppose the elves can serve breakfast twice.”

“At least,” Pansy replied. “Thrice, even, when Potter’s in the void and you’re too lazy to get your arse out of bed.”

“Nothing wrong with enjoying a bit of luxury.”

“Fair enough.” She inclined her head to include Millie. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Business, I’m afraid,” Draco said. “At least in part. The SAFE Act hearing is tomorrow. I thought perhaps a full English would ply Millie into giving a bit of a briefing.”

Millie smiled and shook her head. “You realise you can just request a briefing. If I remember, it was one of your conditions.”

“Yes, well. I also enjoy your company.”

“Breakfast and flattery? You must be expecting a much more exciting briefing than I intend to give.”

“Because there’s nothing exciting to share, or because the rashers aren’t up to snuff?”

“The former. Some people might think that’s a good thing.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t. If it’s so boring, you won’t mind filling me in?”

“Quickly?” Pansy added hopefully.

Millie laughed. “Four Aurors will arrive at half one. Finnigan and Weasley—Ronald—volunteered for the job, then I think it’ll be Helen Goshawk and Ella Wilkins. Weasley—Percy—is working on a story to explain the guard. Robards is still saying no to anything more, and Shacklebolt says no to a closed court. Potter’s not as useful if the media aren’t aware he’s involved. Of course.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “Between us, Granger’s been on a bit of a tear.” She grinned. “It’s impressive. I wouldn’t bet on Shacklebolt winning that one.”

Draco smiled. Granger’s persuasive abilities were far less irritating when they were on the same
Millie waved a hand. "The usual, I’m sure. They’ve kept buzz going in the press about Potter being off on some grand secret mission. Perhaps this will be his grand return, flanked by... I don’t know. His retrieval team?" She shrugged. "He usually manages something half decent."

"Let me know if the details become any clearer?"

"The MLE isn’t generally keen on sharing, but if they do."

He rolled his eyes and nodded. "Fair enough." He took a scone. "Quick enough, Pans?"

"I suppose. Do we get to talk about my work next?"

"You might be able to help me with something, given your area of expertise."

"Personal or professional?" he deadpanned.

"Whichever you find more germane to the question."

Millie was openly intrigued, and Draco grinned at both of them. "Let’s have it."

"Blaise has suggested that it’s time for Daisy Green to cross over into the Muggle world. Given the subject matter, that may take a bit of adjusting. For instance, my current project, *The Gardener*. The Gardener takes a lover, of course. In this case the son of his employer. Très scandaleuse. The gardener has a number of resources at his disposal as they begin to explore the physical aspects of their relationship. It’s set in late summer. Courgette season." She raised an eyebrow.

"I see," Draco said, barely bothering to suppress a smile.

"A bit of wand-waving would suffice for a wizarding audience, but for Muggles?"

"Quite the quandary," Mill offered.

"Yes." Pansy looked quite solemn, then broke out in a grin. "So, Dr Malfoy. How would one safely insert and remove a courgette, without magic?"

He burst out laughing. "I’ve got some Muggle anatomy books if you’d like to borrow them."

"That would be lovely, thank you. But unless they’re very different to magical reference books, I doubt they’ll explain this particular issue."

"No, that would be an entirely different sort of book." He grinned, and set out to explain.

The ensuing conversation occupied them through the rest of the meal, which lasted rather longer than usual for all the laughing, particularly once Pansy called Prippa to request a range of cucurbits from the kitchen. Draco had found ways to occupy his mornings, now that they were free, but he hadn’t enjoyed one so much in... probably years, he thought.

He set a cucumber down next to the teapot with a satisfied sigh. "Clear?"

"Very," Pansy nodded seriously. Then caught Mill’s eye and they dissolved into snickers.
Draco smiled and waited, and was not expecting, once they had got it out of their system, Pansy to ask how his work was going.

“Well, thanks.”

Pansy raised an eyebrow. “That’s concise.”

“It’s confidential.” He shrugged.

“But it is going well?” Mill asked, looking both concerned and hesitant.

“It is. Very well, actually. Though I’d appreciate it if that didn’t get back to the Ministry.”

She nodded. “My lips are sealed.”

He studied her. Perhaps a bit too obviously.

“Really, Draco,” she admonished. “I would hope you know me better than that.”

“I do. Just a bit—”

“Protective?” Pansy piped up.

Draco frowned. “I suppose.”

Pansy hummed and leaned back in her seat. “Well, if you can’t talk about how he’s doing, tell us how you are.”

“Fine,” he answered. “It’s all going well, as I said.”

“That’s not really an answer, you realise.”

“Oh, sod off.”

Millie poured herself a fresh cup of tea. “It’s a good question. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Pansy sighed and shook her head. “‘Fine’ is a four letter word, darling.”

He laughed. “Would you like a longer one? ‘Satisfactory’? ‘Adequate’?”


He snorted and shook his head. “It’s a job, not a romance novel.”

“No?”

“No,” he confirmed. “It’s a working relationship with a tremendously complicated history.”

“Which is a very different answer than ‘because he smells like Troll bogies,’ I notice.”

“Vivid,” Draco laughed. “No, he doesn’t smell like Troll bogies.”

“You’ve thought about how he smells, then?”

“What happened to you sodding off?”
“After breakfast. I’ve got vegetables to write about. But I don’t think it’s so unreasonable to ask after a dear friend’s welfare.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. I’m fine. Truly. I suppose I haven’t sat back and thought about the rest.” He realised it was a lie as soon as he said it. He had thought a great deal about the rest, even if he’d kept it to the back of his mind. “I’m still immersed in the case,” he went on, scrambling for his own benefit much more than for either of his friends’. “But I suppose, if I do stop and think about it, that it’s going really very exceptionally well. We’ve established a programme that has been enormously beneficial, though I’d rather that not get back to the Ministry yet.”

Millie nodded.

“And given the progress he’s making I expect that he’ll be on to more of a maintenance programme soon. We’ve gone through almost everything I’ve planned, and his magic is much more stable than it was. It should be safe for him to return to his life soon.” Draco swallowed, and his chest felt suddenly tight around his throat. “And me to mine.”

“Really?” Pansy asked, her brow furrowed.

He offered her a gentle smile. “Yes, now I think about it. You’ll have the house back to yourself.”

She frowned.

Millie set her tea on the table. “That’s surprising.”

“It is, actually.” Draco half-laughed to cover his own reaction. “To me, too.”

“Will he be cleared to return to work soon, then?” Millie asked.

“I’m less certain of that,” Draco answered. “Probably not straightaway. And actually, Pans, maybe I’ve spoken too soon. Having the option of the void might continue to be advisable.”

Millie raised an eyebrow. “And the protection from prying Ministry eyes?”

“That too, yes.”

“But you’ll be going back to Paris?” Millie asked.

“He won’t need daily care for much longer. We skipped a day recently with no ill effects. He can manage much of what he has to do now on his own, or with other help.

“I may need to return fortnightly or monthly to make sure he hasn’t lost ground. Though I suppose a Healer here could do that.” He toyed with the hem of his napkin. “I was always here to oversee his case, which was always a temporary project. I have a lab to return to, and a home, patients, colleagues. My mother. It was never meant to be a permanent change.”

Millie nodded. Pansy didn’t say anything.

“I’ll stay for the hearing, of course. I’ve promised him I will. But after that, there’s really no need.”

Pansy frowned. Millie sighed.

“What?”

Millie smiled faintly. “I do believe we’ll miss you.”
Pansy didn’t smile at all. “Will it be another decade, then?”

“I’m not disappearing. Mill, you’ve visited before. And there’s the Floo. Both options I hope you’ll consider, Pansy.”

“I could say the same to you,” Pansy retorted.

“I’ll be back periodically at first. I’ve just said.”

“At first.” Pansy sighed.

He looked at her and at Mill and felt his heart twist in quite a different way than it did around Harry. It had been a change for all of them, his coming back. It made sense that it would be a change for him to leave again, but one he thought they’d all been expecting. Even if, he realised, he’d forgot about it somewhere along the way. “I’ll miss you too,” he blurted.

Pansy narrowed her eyes. “Will you?”

Mill didn’t say anything, but looked at him inquiringly.

“Yes,” he said slowly, the truth of it hitting him as he spoke. “I will.”

He leaned back in his seat. Half of his mind was racing on a loop: realising he’d miss them, that his work was almost over, that he had no more reason to stay, that he was not nearly as happy about that as he would’ve been when first facing down the Manor gates upon his return. The other half felt generally fuzzy, and as though it might like a nap.

“I will,” he repeated, looking at each of them in turn. “It’s been good to see more of you both.”


He pushed back from the table and tried to paste on an encouraging sort of face, even though neither of them looked at all convinced. He stood and set his napkin on the table. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some research ahead of me this morning.” He smiled at them both and started for the library. The muted sound of their whispering picked up before he had finished closing the door behind him.

* * *

Draco’s research agenda was wrecked by the morning’s revelations. He’d meant to look at another book on wandlore, but there wasn’t really need. Not when Harry’s implant was working, and Draco’s theory had panned out, and Harry was making rapid progress with Healer Barrett and in their afternoons together. He hadn’t had an issue in over a week, and the incident with the palm tree had been minor and easily fixed, largely by Harry himself. He was ready to start a transitional plan. Maybe past ready.

He turned his attention to that. Or tried to.

When the clock chimed one, Draco almost jumped out of his seat. He’d managed to stay in it through sheer force of will at first, and then by letting his mind wander, and then he’d considered, though disregarded, some of the more dubious spells that members of his doctoral cohort had used at exam times. But he’d never entirely settled in, and he was eager to get to the conservatory. To see Harry, if he was honest with himself.

Which he didn’t particularly want to be. He’d hoped getting up would clear his head, but the closer
he got to the conservatory, the more it weighed on him. Perhaps, he thought, it was enough to
acknowledge all of it. That Harry seemed to have feelings for him. That he had reactions to Harry
that were not purely professional, or purely platonic. That he’d got hard thinking about Harry in the
bath. And in his dreams. More than once. More than twice. That he liked the way Harry smelled.
That he was attracted to Harry, period. That he looked forward to seeing him. That he was
genuinely moved by things Harry said and did. That he admired Harry’s resilience and resolve,
once he’d started to rediscover the latter. And his willingness to be vulnerable, which wasn’t
something Draco had expected to see from him, or to admire in anyone. That he was invested in
Harry’s recovery and wellbeing and future in a way that he didn’t feel for his patients. But none of
that meant that he had to act on it. He could acknowledge it towards the opposite end, to take away
its potency. He was interested in Harry. End of.

But even if the interest was mutual, it was untenable. Draco was leaving. Harry was Harry, his
patient; and Harry Potter, Chosen One and Saviour; and Harry Potter, famous Auror; and Potter,
his schoolboy enemy. The history between them, and the drama that would explode around them,
made it untenable. Draco would return to France, to a life he’d finally been able to make to suit
himself, first and foremost. Harry would go back to being Harry Potter. There was a logical end to
all of it

The thought relaxed him. If it wasn’t something he was fighting, maybe there wouldn’t be
anything to think about. He could just let it go. He didn’t have to pretend not to be interested, or to
talk himself out of noticing Harry’s better qualities. He would acknowledge it and let it go.

* * *

When he entered the conservatory he was met with a sight that did, at last, succeed at knocking
thoughts of Harry out of the forefront of his mind: Greg, on the floor, doing press-ups with a litter
of half-Kneazle kittens on his back. Harry, grinning ear to ear, was counting for him.

“Eighty-eight, eighty-nine,” Harry counted, pausing to silently admonish a kitten who was about to
take flight. “Ninety-one, ninety-two.”

Draco was frozen in the doorway, not entirely able to process the scene. Then some very helpful
part of his brain whispered, at least you’re not thinking about Harry, which led him directly to
think about Harry, and kittens, and press-ups, and somehow nudity got thrown in the mix as well.

“Yeah!” Harry’s exclamation drew Draco out of his own head. He refocused on the two men in
front of him. Harry levitated the kittens off Greg’s back and resettled them on the settee, which
they promptly abandoned to run back towards him.

Greg sat back on his haunches. “Yeah?”

“Yeah!” Harry grinned. “One hundred, with the kittens. Well done!” He held up his hand and Greg
smacked his own into it, their palms clapping together.

“Not like they’re much of a weight,” Greg laughed, “but keeping them on there is a trick!”

“Looked pretty happy to me,” Harry replied, picking up a white one and holding it to his chest.

Draco spoke before he could talk himself out of it. “Have you named them?”

Harry and Greg both looked at him, the latter blushing.

Harry smiled softly. “Hey.”
Draco swallowed. “You named them ‘hey’?”

Harry chuckled. “No, not hey.”

“He named them though,” Greg piped in. He shrugged at Draco. “Figured a celebratory ride wasn’t out of line.”

“No, of course not,” Draco answered, smiling. Greg relaxed, the flush beginning to fade. “So what are they called?”

Harry pointed to them each in turn. “Marmalade, Coffee, Kipper, and Cream. And their mum is Lady Grey.”

“Merlin. Are you hungry? Has Lobsey been withholding breakfast?”

“It’s their colours!” Harry grinned a bit sheepishly. “And once we came up with the first two, there was a theme to uphold.”

“Kipper and Cream. Very creative.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Harry kept smiling, even as he narrowed his eyes in mock-suspicion.

“Do,” Draco said, smiling back.

Greg coughed, startling them both. “Well, expect it’s time to leave you to it. Harry,” he nodded. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. I was thinking we could try to get them to jump?”

Greg nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Earlier though?” Harry asked. “Noon?”

“Should be back by then. Lunch too?”

“Sure,” Harry said. “I’ll ask Lobsey.”

“Brill. Thanks.”

“No problem, Greg. See you then.” He waved.

Greg clapped Draco on the shoulder and made his exit.

It felt very, very quiet to Draco once he was gone. He made himself step into the room. “Glad to see you enjoying yourself.”

“Nice to be doing it,” Harry answered, with such earnestness it made Draco’s heart ache.

“I do like the names.”

“I’m glad.” Harry smiled. “Want to put them on the settee, or shall I?”

“Let me, so you can focus your energy on one thing at a time.”

“Not some new test? Seeing if I can do two things at once? Cast and chew gum?”
“Not a terrible idea.” Draco lifted the last kitten onto a cushion. “But no.”

“What’s on deck, then?”

“Orchideous. Are you familiar?”

“The flower one?” Harry said, incredulous.

Draco hummed and put the shield up.

“Like the Muggle magic trick?”

“The what?” Draco looked over, alarmed. “Muggle what?”

“It’s a thing Muggles do? They pretend they can do magic, but it’s, like, illusions? So they use a wand that’s got fake flowers in it. I didn’t think anyone used that seriously.”

“They are not fake flowers.”

“That’s what bothers you about that?”

“No, but that’s the most politic item on the list of things that bothers me about that.”

Harry’s mouth turned down at the corners, though he kept his tone lighthearted. “Still not interested in Muggles and magic in the same sentence?”

“No,” Draco scoffed. “Please. It’s cheap tricks and fake wands and I imagine very poor showmanship. And fake flowers. It sounds idiotic.”

“It is, but that’s kind of the point, I think?”

Draco raised both eyebrows.

“Hard to explain. But the real version?”

“Is a perfectly respectable spell. Have you ever done it before?”

“No,” Harry admitted. “After the Muggle version, seemed a little silly.”

“That’s fine. You’re familiar with the incantation?”

“Isn’t it just Orchideous?”

“It is.”

“So…” Harry knit his brow. “That’s it? You just want me to cast that spell? No offense, but it seems like a bit of a step backwards.”

“I’d usually agree with you,” Draco conceded. “But I’ll ask you to do it with a twist.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve focused on fairly powerful magic, and on magic that trades on positive emotions, as has been the plan. And we still will be, at least in part.” It was like watching walls come up as Harry realised what that meant, and Draco rushed to continue, to reassure him. “But you won’t always only feel those emotions, as you know, and making sure you’re prepared—”
“But I’m working on the others,” Harry interrupted. “With Healer Barrett.”

“I know, and that you’ve made progress there is obvious and very, very important. I think—I hope—you know I feel that way.”

“Then why deal with those things here, too? I’m already doing it.”

“Because in the course of daily life we all use magic while we’re feeling frustrated or angry. This is a chance—an intentionally controlled, safe chance—to see how those emotions affect the results of your casting.”

Harry squinted his eyes. “What do you have in mind?”

“Casting while you’re focusing on different emotions. It may be useful that you haven’t done it before, as it means you don’t have a preconceived picture of the end results. Your magic is controlled enough at this point that I expect you’ll complete the spell correctly each time, but it will show us whether and how your emotions change the end result.”

“You really think it’ll just produce different kinds of flowers?”

“Or variations in colour or scent. But I do expect it will be flowers each time, or at least plants.”

“Okay.” Harry still sounded sceptical. “You realise that category includes the Venomous Tentacula and the Mandrake?”

“Let’s aim for bouquets, shall we?”

Harry rolled his eyes, but there was a hint of a smile. “Easy for you to say.”

“I have enough faith to risk it without protective earmuffs, for what it’s worth.”

“From a Slytherin, I suppose that’s a vote of confidence.”

“From any sane person, more like. But there you go. Shall we sit?”

Harry slid to the floor and crossed his legs.

Draco took up his position against the chair. “I imagine this will be similar to our experiments with atmospheric charms. I’ll ask you to focus on a particular feeling. As much as possible, you should dwell in that feeling, let yourself experience it. And then, when you’re ready, cast.”

“Wandless or not?”

“Since you’re creating something, rather than producing a general atmosphere or conducting your energy towards a tangible thing, a wand might be easier, but either should work.”

Harry took out his wand. “All right. Can we start with something happier, please?”

“We can. Are you ready?”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes.

“Something that makes you happy. Focus on that happiness.”

Harry nodded again, and began to inhale and exhale slowly.
“You don’t need to have an image of the flowers, only a sense for the feeling itself. When you’re ready, focus that energy on the spell.”

Harry nodded once more and relaxed his shoulders.

Draco watched as a smile crept over Harry’s face. The corners of his lips turned up, his eyes moved beneath their lids, and he quirked his mouth as though suppressing a grin.

Several minutes passed before Harry lifted his wand. “Orchideous.”

A bouquet of pink roses grew from the tip of his wand, interspersed with Lily of the Valley, each stem dripping in tiny, perfect flowers. An ivory ribbon came last, tying itself in a perfect bow around the stems before it fell, in perfect order, the few inches to the floor.

Harry opened his eyes at the sound. “Whoa.”

“Well done.” Draco smiled, and Harry met it.

“I’d try that again.”


“Something else, I think? Just to see?”

“Right, then. Friendship?”

“Is that a feeling?” Harry asked, seeming, once again, to be on the defensive.

Draco inclined his head “Fair. Feelings associated with friendship, then? Affection, fondness, trust, closeness, loyalty.”

“Okay.” Harry frowned, but closed his eyes again and steadied his breathing to focus. “Orchideous.”

The flowers came slowly this time, one purple bud emerging from the tip of his wand followed by a green vine, and then another bud, this one blue. These moved towards Harry; he flinched when they first curled around his wrist, but stayed very still as they moved up his sleeve. When they came to a stop the vine broke with Harry’s wand and the buds unfurled all at once, bursting open and turning towards the weak rays of sun that made their way through the ceiling.

“Morning Glory,” Draco said.

Harry opened his eyes and stared down. “Wow.” He looked up. “Do I leave them? What do I—I don’t want to hurt them.”

“I doubt you will, but you can leave them if you’d rather.”

“I don’t want them to die, if they’re dependent on my magic.”

“Flowers that come from Orchideous will last when separated from the witch or wizard that created them. It shouldn’t do you any harm to keep them there, but it won’t do them any harm to be moved.”

“Okay.” Harry slipped a finger under the vine and started to loosen it, until it pooled on the tile beside him.
“Why don’t we try something that may be more complex. Strength?”


He closed his eyes and focused again. “Orchideous.” This time seven red points emerged from the tip of his wand, growing and expanding parallel to each other, their spiky petals knitting them together just as easily as they separated the individual stems. When they were done growing they dropped from Harry’s wand, this time held together by their own structure, rather than a ribbon.

Harry heard them drop and opened his eyes. He stared, confused. “What are those?”

“Ginger.”

“Any reason you would associate Ginger—or gingers, perhaps—with strength?”

“Oh.” Harry smiled. “Yeah.”

“Yes,” Draco drawled. “Shocking.”

Harry set them aside carefully.

“What’s next?”

Would you try something like anger? A different type of emotion, but still a relatively straightforward one.

“Not asking if I want to try, huh?”

“I’m fairly certain you don’t.”

“No, I don’t,” Harry confirmed. He sighed. “But I will. If you think it’s important.”

“Do you promise that if it looks like something dangerous, you’ll stop it?”

Draco drew his wand and gripped the handle. “I do, yes.”

“Okay.” Harry frowned and closed his eyes again. “Orchideous.” This time the frown didn’t disappear. His muscles tensed and his jaw began working. His fingers tensed around his wand, and he balled his free hand into a fist. The appearance of anger took him over faster and more entirely than the others had. These flowers shot from his wand, landing in a jumble of purple and red.

Harry’s eyes flew open. “What was it?” He asked even before he’d had a chance to look.

Draco used his wand to lift them, turning them in the air between the two of them. “Monkshood. And petunias?”

Harry grimaced. “Right. What’s next?”

“Grief? Do you think that would be manageable?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I’m sorry.”
Harry studied him, and Draco resisted the urge to squirm under his gaze. “It’s… Well, not okay, obviously. Not really okay. But I understand you asking.”

“Thanks.”

Harry nodded. “You’ll stop it again, if it needs stopping?”

“I will.”

Harry closed his eyes and focused again. He said the incantation, but otherwise his face barely moved. Draco wondered if he was so used to feeling it that grief no longer showed on his face. If it was so much of a constant that he’d become inured to it.

While the last flowers had shot from Harry’s wand, these emerged a petal at a time. One broad orange oval, and then another, and another, until the head of a daylily made itself clear. It grew away from the wand on a strong green stem, and another lily started to emerge, this one yellow. An orange, spotted tiger lily followed, and then a night blooming Casablanca lily. Last, so slowly Draco thought it might stick, came what looked at first to be a black calla lily, until it revealed itself as an unopened bud, already dead on the thinnest of the five stems. Still, it grew away from the tip of Harry’s wand with the others, their pedicels joining into one long stem, so they appeared to have grown from the same flower.

Harry was almost trembling by the time it dropped from the end of his wand, and he relaxed back, though refused to open his eyes for half a minute more. When he saw the flowers, he barked a wet laugh. “Lilies.”

Draco watched him, unsure of what to say.

Harry ran a thumb along the petals of the day lily. He dropped the same thumb to the nexus of the bud and the stem, looking on the verge of snapping it off. He stopped himself at the last minute, lips pressed together, and withdrew his hand. He looked at Draco. “Would you…” He waved his wand feebly.

Draco nodded and Vanished the stem.

“Thank you,” Harry half-whispered, his voice ragged.

“I’m sorry,” Draco said, willing more earnestness into his voice than he’d usually permit, though he didn’t find it especially difficult in this instance. “If you’d like to stop, we can.”

“No,” Harry said. “I don’t want to end like that.”

“Would you like to pick the next?”

“Not really,” Harry said. “If you don’t mind. I don’t know that I could pick well.”

“Okay. Peacefulness?”

“Not sure I could manage that right now.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Jealousy? In the same general vein but less intense, perhaps?”

“Something less… something kinder?”

“Forgiveness?” Draco offered.
Harry considered. “Okay. Yeah.” He paused. “What happens if it doesn’t work?”

“I’m not sure.” Draco answered honestly, if reluctantly. “A medley? Nothing? It shouldn’t be anything harmful, though. If it is, I’ll intervene.”

“Okay.” Harry looked at him, and sighed. “Okay.” He closed his eyes again. “Orchideous.” These came out stem first, neither as quickly as the petunias and monkshood nor as slowly as the lilies. A dozen thick stems expanded from the tip of Harry’s wand, widening to support thick leaves and tightly clustered buds in purple and white. The bottommost flowers folded down over themselves, weaving together to form a ribbon that bound the bunch before they replaced the Vanished lilies on the floor.

Hesitantly, Harry opened his eyes. “Huh.”

“Hyacinths.”

“Yeah.”

“May I?”

Harry nodded.

Draco lifted the bouquet and moved it aside. “Love?”

“Love?” Harry repeated.

“Do you want to try once more, with love?”

Harry, looking more tired than Draco would’ve liked, smiled faintly. “What kind of love?”

Draco studied him. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” Another faint smile.

“Magically?”

“No, actually. I guess that’s something.”

“Something, yes. If you’d rather stop, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s okay. And it is interesting. And love might be better.”

“You could pick any kind you like. Whatever comes to mind.”

“Familial, friendship?”

“Any kind.”

“Just think about love?”

“If you’d like to continue.”

“Yeah.” Harry closed his eyes. “Yeah.” As he focused, his chest swelled and his breathing slowed. “Orchideous.”

A dozen tiny, tightly sealed rosebuds grew from Harry’s wand. Stems followed, strong and thornless. The rosebuds began to swell, the leaves around them splitting apart to make room for
petals. They were faint at first, slivers of white that turned yellow as they opened. The petals multiplied, each new set pushing the others further away. As the flowers opened the edges of the petals began to turn to orange, which travelled towards the centre of each and began to darken from the colour of a satsuma to a brilliant cherry red to a deep scarlet. When each petal was completely saturated the flowers began to twist, the stems bending around each other until they were held together, and then separated from the wand, dropping in front of Harry’s feet.

Draco held his breath.

Harry opened his eyes, looked down, and flushed. The colour creeping over his cheeks threatened to match the flowers.

Draco tried, as best he could, to ignore the reaction. “Well done.”

Harry stared at the flowers.

“Beautiful casting,” Draco added, hoping that, if nothing else, Harry was too distracted to notice the nervousness in his voice.

“Thanks,” Harry answered robotically.

“No problem.”

“What do we do with all of these?” Harry didn’t look away from the flowers.

Draco couldn’t tell whether he was fascinated with them, or unwilling to look up. “Put them in water? Vanish them? Give them to people? Whatever you’d like.”

“Not a clue.”

“Why don’t we try one more?”

Harry’s head snapped up for the express purpose of looking at him like he ought to consider a trip to St Mungo’s.

“As a control. No particular emotion. Just try to produce any flowers you like.”

“Just to see what happens?”

“Yes,” Draco answered quickly. “Anything you’d like.”

“Okay.” Harry hesitated. He closed his eyes and barely took a few seconds to focus. “Orchideous.”

A bouquet shot from his wand, already tied. It was a medley of red tiger lilies and birds of paradise and red roses, surrounded by laurels that looked to be made from gold filigree. It was a mad combination that almost hit Draco in the chest as it sprung forth, but fell short to land across his legs.

Harry opened his eyes and spotted it. He looked up sheepishly. “Sorry?”

Draco picked it up and studied it. There was something distinctly familiar about it, though there shouldn’t have been, he thought. They weren’t all flowers Harry had already produced, the laurels were an odd touch. He turned it in front of him and it struck him. He lowered the bouquet to peer at Harry over it. “You made it in your bloody house colours.”

“Oh!” Harry sat up straighter. “So I did.” His mouth quirked. “Oops?”
“You’re not the least bit sorry.”

“No,” Harry admitted. “The least bit amused, though, if that counts for anything.”

Draco’s eye-rolling was betrayed by a smile. He collected the bouquets and set them in a pile on his lap, then shook his head at Harry. “I’ll figure out what to do with these, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, I would. Does that mean we’re done for the day?”

Draco stood, gathering the flowers in his arms. “Almost. There’s something I’d like to discuss, actually.”

“Is that meant to sound ominous?”

“It isn’t, no.”

“Okay.” Harry leaned back on his hands.

Draco took the cue, and perched on the edge of the seat, flowers back in his lap. “I had breakfast with Millie and Pansy this morning and they asked how it was going.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but didn’t interrupt.

“I didn’t go into any details, nothing about Healer Barrett or that larger plan. But I did say, truthfully, that you’ve made remarkable progress. I’ve asked Millie to keep it to herself, and she’s agreed, but I’ve realised it’s true. Your control is improved, you haven’t had a magical incident in over a week in spite of the amount of time you’re spending outside of the void and the amount of magic you’re doing. Your casting is accurate and powerful. Your work has been very effective.”

“That’s good. Right?”

“It is. And, with this, we’ve run through every exercise I had planned. We might do them all again, or come up with more, but there isn’t really a need for it. As far as control, as far as integrating the Elder Wand into your casting, you’re as improved as I’d expect. Maybe more so. Continuing the exercises on your own should suffice as long as you continue working with Healer Barrett.”

Harry leaned forward, pulling his knees up and resting his forearms on them. “What are you saying?”

Draco took a deep breath. “I’m saying, somewhat to my surprise, that I don’t think there’s any more work to be done here. You’ve done what’s needed. You can proceed on your own.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You should keep up daily exercises, and perhaps try running through the activities we’ve done together on your own. And you’re welcome to stay here. I’d encourage it, even, both so you have the void as a sort of insurance policy, especially if you’re concerned about the possibility of an incident occurring while you sleep, and so that the Ministry can remain unaware of the work you’re doing with Healer Barrett for as long as you’d like.”

Harry’s voice had a hard edge to it. “But?”

“But there’s no need for you and I to continue working together daily. I imagine I’ll still have to sign off on things with the Ministry, and I’m happy to keep up the pretense that I’m the lead on the case. I can plan to return monthly or fortnightly to assess your progress and meet with the Minister
and whoever else if you’d like. I’ll be available to discuss what’s feasible and advisable in terms of returning to your job, if you’d like to. That will give you a bit more time to sort out what you’d like to do next.”

“Plan to return?”

Draco squeezed the stems between his hands.

“You’re leaving?”

“I came to oversee your case.” He chanced a look at Harry. “I’ve done that. This was never meant to be a permanent move. I have a lab to manage, a home. I’ll stay for the hearing, of course. Of course. There’s no question of that.”

“That’s tomorrow.” The pitch of his voice went up just enough to give it a hint of panic.

“The hearing is, yes. I won’t leave directly after. Not the day of.”

“What, the day after?”

“I’ll start wrapping things up then, yes.”

Harry stared at him.

“I’ll be back to visit, as I said, and will do whatever’s necessary to keep the Ministry at a distance.”

Draco squeezed the stems again and felt something crack. In his lap, nestled on top of the morning glory, the roses had turned to ice.

Shocked, Draco whipped his eyes up to look at Harry, who took in the flowers, met Draco’s gaze straight on, and held it.

Without another word, Harry stood, turned, and left the room.

* * *

Once he’d gathered his wits, Draco called Galder to take the flowers. He thought about looking for Harry, but couldn’t figure out what he’d say if he did. He’d had dinner in the library, thinking Harry would know to find him there if he wanted to. And to avoid any further questions about how things were going.

Eventually he’d given up in favour of retreating to his sitting room with a fire, a book, and a few fingers of Lagavulin. Not that he could focus on the book, but turning pages was something to do.

He almost dropped the book when someone knocked on the door. “One moment,” he yelled, catching his breath and setting the book down on the end table. He wasn’t in the mood for Pansy’s prying or a late night visit from a guest. He didn’t want to consider the other possibility.

So of course it was Harry on the other side.

“Hi,” Draco managed.

“I was going for a snack. Wondered if you were hungry.”

“Thank you, I’m not.”

“You weren’t at dinner.”
“I took it in the library.”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Harry didn’t move to leave. “Sure you wouldn’t like a snack? Or the walk?”

“That determined to get me to the kitchen?”

“Not the kitchen, just thought…” Harry trailed off, looking newly uncertain.

“Right. Good. Because it’s not always as exciting as last time. The kitchen.”

Harry paled. “I didn’t—Godric, I didn’t mean—I mean—”

It took all of Draco’s restraint not to bang his head into the doorframe. “I’m sorry. Merlin. I didn’t think you did mean—Perhaps I do need the break.”

“Right.” Harry shifted. “Sorry. I can leave you to it.”

“It’s fine,” Draco said. “You don’t have to go. You shouldn’t, on my account. That was insensitive of me, and rude. I’m sorry.”

“No, not at all. It’s your space. I shouldn’t have interrupted.”

“No, no. I’m glad you felt you could.” He stepped aside. “Would you like to come in?”

Harry eyed the room nervously.

“Just having a drink,” Draco added. “In the sitting room.”

Harry relaxed. Barely, but enough that Draco saw it. “If it’s not an imposition?”

“No,” Draco stepped back for Harry to cross the threshold. “Please.” He closed the door behind Harry. “Something to drink?”

“Water, if you’ve got it?”

Draco busied himself with a pitcher on the sideboard. “Of course. Shall I call for food? I hear you’re in search of a snack.”

“Actually.” Harry stopped to accept the glass of water. He took a sip. “Thank you. Actually, I was looking for you.”

“Oh?” Draco focused on lifting his own glass.

“I’m sorry I reacted poorly to your news. I wanted to apologise.”

“Thank you, but it’s not necessary.”

Harry seemed to ignore him. “I value your advice very much, and I’ve got used to the time we spend together. Not in—I know that can sound lazy, as though I’m just used to it, but I’ve come to enjoy it as well. You’ve never asked me to lie to you, or be this person you want me to be. It’s meant a lot to me. It means a lot to me. I suppose I’m not thrilled that you’ll be leaving. But it wasn’t any excuse to be rude, and I understand that you’ve got a life to go back to, and I respect
“Thank you,” Draco said. He gripped the glass and took as slow a sip as he could get away with. “I appreciate that. And if I may be candid, I’ve enjoyed working with you for the same reasons. I haven’t had to lie to you, or hide things. Or, I have in the past, in the war, but not in ages. You value honesty. I think you did then, too, even if I never had the chance to know it. It’s meaningful, that. Not everyone does. And I hope you’ll keep being honest with me.”

“I’d like to think I can find better ways to do it than running out of the room.”

“In fairness, you didn’t run.”

Harry chuckled. “Thanks.” He took another long drink of water and looked for a place to set it down.

Draco supplied a coaster. “Would you like to sit?”

“I really don’t mean to interrupt.”

“I wasn’t doing anything that important.”

“What if I embarrass myself and run out of the room again?”

“It really was more of a brisk walk.”

Harry grimaced. “I didn’t just mean today.”

“Oh?” Draco perched on the arm of the settee. “In the gardens? After the…?” He trailed off and gestured at his chest.

“Merlin. That too.”

“How?”

Harry sighed and dropped on to the opposite end of the sofa. “The kitchen. Now you’ve brought it up—”

“Which I shouldn’t have done.”

“I do want to apologise. I was… surprised. I should’ve just left, though. There’s really no excuse.”

“I did get the impression,” Draco said, unsure of whether it was entirely mad or just a bit mad, “that there was a reason, though.”

Draco thought Harry flushed, though he couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the glow of the fire. The nervousness in Harry’s voice suggested the former. “There might have been, yes.”

Draco’s breath caught, and he put his glass to his lips to try to pass it off as a drink. It was the most straightforward admission he’d yet heard from Harry. He reminded himself that he’d already heard roundabout ones, though. And had already decided what to do, or not do.

Harry tried to laugh into the silence between them, though it came out strangled. “Plenty to discuss with Healer Barrett. Turns out to be a rather long list.”

“Whose isn’t?” Draco snorted and allowed himself another sip.
“Yeah, well. Some more than others.”

“We’re all works in progress though, aren’t we?”

Harry inclined his head. “I guess. But still. There’s a work in progress and then there’s, you know, an empty canvas and a few unopened tubes of paint.”

“Poetic.”

Harry laughed. “Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome.” They lapsed into silence. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re an empty canvas.”

“ Might be better if I was. Less to erase.”

“Did you just extend a metaphor?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Joke all you like. I’m not actually stupid.” He waited for Draco to laugh.

Draco didn’t. He looked into the fire. “I know.”

Several heartbeats passed before Harry responded. “Oh.”

“I mean it, about being works in progress. It’s true for everyone. Some more seriously than others, perhaps. But some are better painters, too.”

“That is one thing—on a very short list, I might add—of things I’ve never been accused of.”

“It’s a metaphor, Harry. I’m extending it.”

“Thanks—” Harry stopped short. “What am I supposed to call you?”

“Call me?”

“Not—I don’t mean to be rude. Dr Malfoy is fine. You started calling me Harry, and we stopped working together the same way we had been, so I haven’t been sure.”

“Oh. I didn’t—I’m sorry I didn’t think of that. Draco is fine. Or Malfoy, if you’d rather. Though it’s been ages since anyone’s called me that.”

“No, that’s fine. Draco.” He said it slowly, testing it out. “Draco.” He hummed. “It’s a bit strange. Not your name,” he rushed to add, “but saying it. Was it weird for you?”

“It was,” Draco admitted, and took another sip. “But ‘Potter’ had started to feel strange, too.”

“Yeah. I haven’t really known what to do.”

“I’m glad you asked.”

“Yeah. Well. Having made this conversation more awkward than I could’ve possibly imagined, it might be best if I go in search of that snack.”

Draco thought about offering to have something sent up again. It would keep Harry here, on his settee, in his rooms, in the firelight, making confessions. Confessions that he did not have to act on. Which might make his own withheld confessions feel that much less strange. Some part of him
knew it was unwise, that this was exactly the sort of moment that led to action.

Harry beat him to a conclusion. He stood. “Frankly, the elves will begin to wonder where I am.”

Giving in to one impulse, at least, Draco asked, “The late night snacks—were they about leaving the void?”

Harry nodded. “At first. In the process I trained myself to get hungry about three hours after dinner.”

“Funny how those things happen.” Draco stood to walk him out. “I’m glad you knocked.”

“I’m glad you answered.”

Draco opened the door. “You’re welcome. Any time.”

“Thanks.” Harry hesitated and then, in a rough imitation of Greg’s gesture, clapped Draco on the shoulder. “Thanks, Draco.”

With a smile, he turned and left.

Draco closed the door behind him and sagged against the frame. His skin was boiling where Harry had touched him, heat radiating down his arm and across his back. He scrabbled at the buttons on his shirt, tore it off as quickly as he could. He tried to touch it with his other hand and had to pull back. He forced himself to breathe and moved towards the en suite.

The mirror confirmed it: another burn. It hadn’t scorched his clothes this time, but gone straight through to his skin. It wasn’t blistering, but the skin was red and tender.

He sank deeper, making sure his shoulder was immersed. If he stayed in long enough, he wouldn’t have a mark tomorrow.

Ten minutes in, he reached for his wand and Summoned his whisky. His mind began to wander. He reviewed their conversation. Harry’s admission. His flush in the firelight. The roses. Harry’s reaction to Draco leaving, and the way Harry had left afterwards.

His own reactions. To Harry’s proximity on the settee. To having Harry is his rooms, his private space. To Harry’s displeasure with the idea that he might leave.

He wanted Harry. He absolutely wanted him. And Harry wanted him back.

Two days, maybe three, and he would be leaving.

Two days. He could do it in two days. A day for the hearing. A day to pack.

Two days. He repeated it to himself like a mantra. Two days.

He sank deeper into the tub, his mouth barely above water. Two days.

This time, he didn’t make himself keep his hands above water.
The wonderful anemonen has done the most gorgeous illustration, Orchideous, here and here on tumblr!! Please check it out and join me in flailing at her about how gorgeous it is!!
Every nerve in Draco’s body was on high alert as he waited to follow Harry into the Floo.

He was better rested than he’d expected. Even two long wanks hadn’t been enough to put thoughts of the Ministry out of his head. He’d tossed and turned and had a dreadful time falling asleep. Between dreams and the long process of calming down once they woke him, he hadn’t fared much better once he managed it. At three in the morning he’d cancelled his breakfast tray and told Galder not to wake him till noon.

It had the advantage of saving him a morning that probably would’ve been spent pacing. He managed to stay mostly asleep once the sun began to creep over the horizon. Once Galder woke him he had a quick soak to take the rest of the heat out of his shoulder. He put on formal robes. He barely managed toast and tea.

Which he was glad of, in retrospect. He doubted anything else would’ve stayed down.

Weasley, Finnigan, Goshawk, and Wilkins had been waiting in the foyer when he arrived at 1:30pm exactly. He imagined Finnigan and Weasley as he’d known them at school, or as he’d seen them at the tea party: boyish and chaotically boisterous. Instead, they stood at attention in front of the hearth, backs ramrod straight and mouths pressed into straight, silent lines. The four of them wore matching red formal uniforms, perfectly pressed, and stood equidistant from one another, with enough space between them for Harry to fit snugly in the centre of their formation. Draco was in the odd position of not knowing what to do with himself. This was his home, but he couldn’t exactly invite them in for tea. He wasn’t even certain he was allowed talk to them.

Nor would he have been able to, after Harry emerged in his own uniform half a minute later.

Draco goggled, lacking even the presence of mind to worry that Weasley and co. might notice.

It explained a lot. Harry was indisputably commanding. Goshawk and Wilkins stood up straighter—something Draco wouldn’t have thought possible—just because he’d entered the room. And it wasn’t that he was Harry Potter, celebrity Saviour; they knew him, had worked with him. It was him, something he emanated.

Harry shook hands with each of the four, sharing a wink with Finnigan and a long handshake with Weasley that seemed to be more of a silent conversation. When he stood back he thanked them for coming. He introduced Draco, who had the presence of mind to come stand next to him. He asked them to review protocol; Weasley announced that they would move through the atrium, take the lifts to Level Nine, and proceed down the stairs to Courtroom Ten, the rear entrance of which was reserved for their use. He asked them to include Draco in their formation, though “ask” might have been a bit of a reach, as there was no question that they’d refuse. Even if Weasley did wrinkle his nose at the suggestion.

They stepped through the Floo in order. Weasley first, then Goshawk. Harry followed only after extracting Draco’s promise that he’d follow right behind. He was searching for Harry when he stepped into the Ministry atrium and fell in line right behind him. Within moments, Wilkins stood behind him to the left, and Finnigan came last, to the right.

It couldn’t have been more than thirty seconds between Draco’s arrival and Finnigan’s, but it felt much longer to Draco. He hadn’t been back since the end of his trial, and had never meant to return if he could help it.
Walking behind Harry had the odd effect of obscuring the intent behind people's stares. He couldn't tell at first if people were gawking at him or at Harry. Or, for that matter, Harry Potter the war hero or Harry Potter who looked like he could take out half of Hogsmeade with a glance. But as they moved through the atrium, he became fairly certain when the stares came into focus, recognised the colour of his hair and the sharp line of his jaw as Malfoy and turned into sneers and threats… those were for him alone. He wished he could revert to his wartime autopilot, but it had been too long. He was too used to meeting stranger's eyes in greeting, even though there wasn't any sign of welcome in the ones he saw now. The few that didn't seem to notice who he was provided some relief, but those few who gave him smiles—dripping with obsequious, vulgar greed—were worst of all. He'd rather be cut openly than drooled over, and the whispers in the lift were nothing to the presumptuously knowing smirk Marcus Flint gave Draco as he came down the corridor outside the courtroom to hear his older brother speak.

He was barely breathing by the time they reached the courtroom door. Might've forgotten to if not for Finnigan's soft brogue, whispering, "Buck up, Malfoy. Harry needs you."

It certainly didn't help when Harry turned to him, a hint of softness at the centre of all that fire. "Gallery will be to your left. Hermione should be there, if you want someone you know to sit with. You'll watch for anything?"

Draco nodded.

"Even if it's some huge slab from the ceiling about to fall on someone you really dislike?"

He managed, albeit shakily, to flip Harry two fingers and give him some ghost of the Malfoy smirk.

"Good." Harry smiled. It faded as he reached for Draco's hand, flipping Draco's attempt at a shake to give him a soft squeeze. "Thank you."

Draco nodded.

Harry squeezed his hand again and dropped it, and his mask fell back into place. He nodded to Weasley, who drew his wand to open the door.

Weasley fell immediately into a defensive stance when the door didn't budge. "Fall back. Unexpected interference."

Finnigan and Wilkins turned, fencing Harry and Draco in and pressing them together in the centre of the formation.

"Beginning second attempt. Goshawk, prepare to support."

She took a duelist’s stance. "Supporting, sir."

Weasley cast an Alohamora that rattled the doors but did not open them. Keeping his wand trained on the doors, he gave an order over his shoulder. "Goshawk, attempt Alohamora."

Goshawk traded positions with Weasley and managed to shake the doors, but she did not succeed at opening them. "Unsuccessful," she reported.

Next to Draco, Harry frowned and edged closer. The whole thing felt off to Draco; he'd laid magical traps and witnessed many more. They wouldn't be trying to keep Harry out of the room unless they meant to stop him speaking altogether which, given the energy that had gone into getting him there and ensuring a media presence, would've been surprising and obvious.
"Return to formation," Weasley commanded. He turned to the group. "Position is strategically sound in case of incident. Will communicate to Robards for instruction on how to proceed securely."

Draco raised his hand. "If I may? A suggestion?"

Weasley hesitated. "Yes?"

"Would you try a revealing spell?" His heart sped up. "There's another possibility."

Weasley scrutinised him, then glanced to Harry, who nodded. Weasley returned it, and cast. "Revelio."

Nothing appeared. There was no trace of magic on or in the doors.


“Granger,” Draco replied. He turned to Weasley. “Would you please try, or allow me to try, opening the doors manually?”

Weasley considered. “Explain your proposal.”

“The Ministry insisted it would be impossible to take the measures that would be safest, which would have included a magical void. I believe they may have found a way, in which case the door may be acting as a boundary to the void, and would therefore be unresponsive to spells. We would still be able to open it by hand.”

Wilkins piped up, concerned. “If this void exists, will we be able to use protective magic once we enter?”

“No,” Draco answered. “Not if it’s big enough that you’re in it, anyway. But it would effectively protect from magical attacks.”

“Muggle attacks?” Wilkins asked. “Knives, thrown objects?”

“Are a risk, but would require a very public attack from a member of the Wizengamot.”

Wilkins nodded. “Low risk scenario.”

“Agreed,” Weasley said. “Harry? How would you like to proceed?”

“I support Dr Malfoy’s proposal and suggest proceeding manually.”

“Time?”

“Two exactly, sir,” Goshawk answered.

Weasley nodded. “Accepted. Goshawk, Wilkins, Finnigan, remain on alert. In case of attack, remove the targets from the vicinity.” When his team nodded, Weasley moved toward the door and pushed. It opened easily. Noise spilled into the entryway. Weasley nodded to Goshawk, who opened the opposite door.

The bustle of the Wizengamot fell to a low hum. Draco saw Harry waver, but as soon as Weasley
moved forward Harry was behind him, as commanding as Draco had ever seen him.

To their credit, Weasley and Goshawk barely flinched when they entered the void. Draco moved towards the gallery on the left, as instructed, where he saw Granger and Millie seated together in the fifth row, behind more press than he’d expected. Magical energy surged around him as he climbed the stairs to join them.

He didn’t miss the whispers from the press when they saw him, though he did his best to look as though he had.

He slid in next to Granger, trying to focus on the present and not to let the feel of the cold wood against his back draw him into memories of the last time he’d sat in these seats. “You did it,” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes. Took till the last minute.”

“What’s the story?”

“Later,” she said quietly, keeping her eyes trained on the centre of the room. Under the cover of the seatback in front of her, she pointed to the press.

Draco dropped his hand and turned it in a circle to indicate the gallery and the Wizengamot’s benches. “Not everything?”

She shook her head. “Couldn’t. Tried. But…” She frowned.

“Thank you,” he said.

She looked up, startled. “For…?” she gestured towards Harry.

“For.”

She sized him up and nodded. “Of course.”

He nodded in return.

Millie leaned over to shush them. She made a point of catching Draco’s eye. “Watch this.”

He nodded.

Below them, Harry had moved to stand in front of the chair reserved for the accused. His guard stood at equal intervals around the room, their backs pressed to the tall wooden panels that separated the benches from the floor. They stood stock still, but their uniforms made them unmissable, and between them they had a view of every corner of the room.

Between Shacklebolt and Robards, a tiny, wizened witch stood and cleared her throat. “As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot I, Griselda Marchbanks, CDMG, APMO, fdBB, call this session to order, that the Status, Ancestry, and Family Equality Act be read a third time proceeding expert testimony. Recognising Honourable Warlock Alistair Flint.

Flint rose in his seat and unrolled a scroll of parchment so long it hit the floor. Draco rolled his eyes and sat back to listen. It was about what he’d been given to expect: a great deal of rhetoric about protection, dressing up a bill that would’ve done the Dark Lord proud. Draco watched the Members. Several eye rolls, a few yawns, at least one surreptitious flask, and much more rapt attention than Draco would’ve liked to see. To his right, Draco saw Millie taking notes on them all,
working them into columns.

When Flint yielded some fifteen minutes later, Marchbanks rose and announced special testimony from Harry, describing him as, “an expert whose duties to the Ministry made him unavailable for open public comment at the time of the second reading,” and called a voice vote to yield the floor. The ayes were overwhelming, though Draco noticed Flint and a few others keep their mouths firmly shut.

Harry, who had not moved from his spot, nodded his acknowledgement.

Before he could begin, Flint rose. “Would the honourable guest care to have a seat?”

“I wasn’t aware I was being interrogated, Alistair.” He sounded almost amused.

“You might find it more comfortable.”

“How considerate of you,” Harry answered smoothly. “And yet, the things some find considerate, others find… uncomfortable. Which is—thank you, Warlock Flint—a perfect segue to our topic.

“The SAFE Act is proposed in service of a noble goal: to protect those witches and wizards whose presence in the magical world has been threatened by their blood status. You are all, of course, familiar with the circumstances surrounding those events.” Draco saw Harry turn towards Flint, then two women Draco recognised as cousins of Rosier and Travers. He recognised them with slight nods, but his purpose was clear, and the execution of it all, in Draco’s estimation, rather brilliant.

“In our lifetimes, we have seen witches and wizards denied their wands, expelled from their jobs and homes, and separated from their families. All of this based solely on accusations that their blood was, by some standard, insufficiently pure. These proceedings took no account of their magical ability. They were held without recourse to the Hogwarts Book of Acceptance, which has, indisputably and for centuries, recorded the names of magical people at their first sign of magic. In some cases they touched those who did have—” Harry raised his hands to draw quotes in the air “—‘pure’ blood status, but who had fallen out of political favour or who were unable to provide proof of lineage that the Muggle-born Registration Commission found sufficient.

Harry surveyed the room. “How could any just society not want to make amends for these unjust acts? Who would we be if we did not, as is written in this bill, ‘protect the most vulnerable’? I have no quarrel with the stated purpose of the bill. Who could?

“That is why I supported the MbRC Reparations Act of 2000. That is why my fellow Aurors and I devote ourselves to protecting the security of wizarding Britain.” On the bench, Robards gave a single, approving nod. “That is why I cannot, in good conscience, support the SAFE Act.”

Draco half expected gasps from the members. They didn’t come. Perhaps because, save the bill’s most fervent supporters, the Wizengamot appeared to hang on Harry’s every word. Draco couldn’t particularly blame them. He was hard to look away from.

“Some argue that any means are defensible in the pursuit of a virtuous end, as though our virtue only matters as it’s recorded in our histories or our legends. I say that virtue is something we must practise every day if we wish to be assured that our actions match our intentions. That we ought to be—that we are—measured by how we act as much as by what we hope to achieve. We must defend our means as well as our ends. And in this instance, the proposed means are indefensible.

“The noble Warlock who proposes this measure would ask every member of our world to register
their blood status with the Ministry immediately. I ask you, honourable Members, how much faster the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters might have worked, had that information been public record. How many more orphans would we have in our midst? How many more widows?

I ask you, also, to consider the means by which this law is to be enacted after the initial drive to register. Imagine, if you will, your own Sorting.” He laughed softly and shared a smile with Susan Bones. “Several among your number will remember mine. I certainly do. Sitting on the Great Lake as the castle loomed into view. Entering those doors for the first time—how huge they seemed then!” He laughed again and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I could hardly imagine them opening or closing at the time.

“Do you remember, as I do, the wonder of the Entrance Hall? A thousand floating candles, the Grand Staircase unfolding before you?” Many of the members were smiling and nodding, and he smiled back, surveying the crowd. “Do you remember the first time you saw that staircase move?” He chuckled, and was matched by voices from the press gallery and the bench. “I didn’t know how I would ever find my way.

“And then to enter the Great Hall.” He sighed, a bit dreamily. “To become part of one of four great houses, to join a lineage that has bound us together for a millennia? The honour of that!”

Warlocks across the bench nodded. A few shouted their agreement.

Harry’s voice grew sombre. “Now imagine, if you will, another step in that journey. A table waiting outside the Great Hall, where you are asked to tell someone the names of your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. Imagine, as an 11-year-old child, stunned by the beauty of the castle, being told that before you may enter—before you can become a part of this wondrous thing you have just discovered—you must tell the Ministry about your mother and father, their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers before them, that all of this will be recorded in the Ministry’s records.

“I imagine this, most honourable Warlocks.” Harry paused as though to collect himself. “And imagine the fear that would have overwhelmed me. How insignificant I would have felt, to learn that my place in our world was predetermined by people who I had never known, whose names I did not know. What does it mean, to a child, to learn that before being a member of this magical community, or a student at Hogwarts, or a member of their house, they are the product of their ancestry?

“What will it mean for a child, to be tried for proof of their blood status before they even enter the Great Hall?

“What will it mean for our world, to raise a generation that is taught that their blood status is who they are? That it is not their intention—not their virtue—that determines their ends or the means they use to reach them, but the unalterable fact of their blood?

“You may be tempted to believe that this is a poor approach to a worthy cause. Again, I would ask you to distinguish between our means and our ends.

“Our end is to protect each other. To rebuild a magical Britain where we are as one. What role does blood have to play in that pursuit?

“Does our blood predict our skill? Does it determine our morality? Our intelligence? The contribution we make? What we give of ourselves in service to the whole?” Harry lowered his head, turning away from the press, and Draco, could see a bittersweet smile cross his face before he looked back to the Wizengamot.
“A very wise man once told me that it is our choices that make us who we truly are.” A witch in the third row sniffled. “That same man showed me, time and again, how much our choices matter.

“What could be less of a choice than blood?” He waited, as though half-expecting an answer. As though he wanted every member to be composing one.

“I have had the privilege of knowing many great witches and wizards in my time. Magical people who have made immense contributions to the arts and sciences, who have advanced our magical knowledge, who have worked tirelessly to improve the conditions of our world, who have spent lives in service to others as teachers and Healers and Aurors. Who have laid down their lives that we might live more peacefully, even in their absence.”

Draco saw more than one member dabbing at their eyes. But as long as Harry went on, he found he couldn’t summon a cynical reaction. Their tears were genuine, as was the tight knot that Draco realised had taken root in his chest.

“Their greatness lies in the choices they made. Just as our aspirations to greatness—to justice, to virtue—lie in the choice you make today.” He bowed his head to them, and silenced reigned.

Just as Flint seemed set to retort, Harry raised his head and stood tall and proud, meeting Flint’s eye, and then other members’, reaching Marchbanks. His voice was as confident as ever it had been, but so quiet that the members had to lean forward to hear his last enjoined: “Choose greatness. Most of all, choose goodness.”

He bowed and took a half step back, yielding the floor.

Draco had never seen a room of politicians look so genuinely moved. Or so genuine, period. Or so silent, for that matter. But Harry’s presence held them in a sort of thrall.

Flint shifted as though to rise, but he seemed to think better of it once he got a look at his cohort.

The Chief Warlock was, fittingly, the first to break the silence, and she did it by calling a vote. “Fellow Warlocks, I thank you for your superb contributions to this debate. The time has come to test the opinion of the Wizengamot. The question is that the Status, Ancestry, and Family Equality Act be agreed to. As many as are of that opinion will say Aye.”

Flint and a handful of others faltered halfway through their attempt at a unified voice, which came out sounding more akin to a wheeze.

“To the contrary say Nay.”

A rousing chorus came from the bench in such a wave that Draco thought he might smell their collective breath across the room.

“As we have no other business for today, clear the bench.”

The Wizengamot rose from their seats, save Flint and the Travers cousin, who slouched down looking a bit like they’d been forced to eat the bottom of a box of Bertie Botts’. Several Members embraced. An older wizard reached discreetly into his robes for a second handkerchief.

Draco resisted the urge to rush to Harry’s side. It was made easier by his own surprise at that instinct, and easier still by having very little idea as to what he would say once he got there. And easiest of all when the press, taking advantage of a distracted Wizengamot, rushed the floor. Draco’s stomach sank, and he grabbed Granger’s arm to get her attention.
Harry’s guard was around him in an instant, holding the scrum at bay, but it was too late to keep them out of the void. Several of the reporters looked as though they were about to be sick, and more than one camera hit the tile. A few of the heartier ones put their hands up as though feeling for the boundaries of their magic.

Before they could recover the pursuit of Harry, Weasley whispered something in his ear and commanded his guard to change formation. They formed a triangle around Harry, with Finnigan and Goshawk just behind him and to the side, Wilkins in front, and Weasley in front of her.

Weasley stepped forward, arms extended, pushing the corps back with the combination of his limbs and an air of authority that Draco had to admit was rather effective and perhaps a bit intimidating.

“Witches and wizards of the press,” Weasley began. “As several of you have just observed first hand, Auror Potter is under the protection of a magical void. We strongly advise you to ask your questions from the press gallery.”

Looking queasy, the corps did as they were told.

A witch Draco didn’t recognise raised her hand. Weasley signaled for her question. “Why is Auror Potter in a void? Aren’t they usually reserved for dangerous cases?”

“As many of you have guessed,” Weasley smiled gently at their eager shifting, “Auror Potter has returned from a deep cover mission, the details of which we are not yet cleared to share on account of ongoing security concerns. Auror Potter’s team was completely successful in achieving their mission, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is happy to report that we expect to see crime in magical communities return to the historic lows of the 2003-2005 period.

“However, in the course of their duties this team retrieved a dangerous magical artefact. Auror Potter’s experience and magical ability made him the best candidate for safely transporting this item, which is unstable and may react to magical traces in the vicinity.”

Several members of the press stopped leaning over the bench.

“Given his commitment to public life, Auror Potter was unwilling to miss these hearings, nor could—or would—he neglect the importance of safely moving this object to its eventual home in the Department of Mysteries’ secure vaults. A team from the Department of Mysteries worked tirelessly to create this void so that Auror Potter might be in attendance, whilst also ensuring the absolute safety of the Press and the Wizengamot.”

A young wizard pushed to the front. “What is this artefact?”

Weasley smiled gracefully. “We are not at liberty to say. Thank you for your question.”

Weasley pointed to another reporter, a weathered older wizard who looked unimpressed with the whole affair and still slightly green around the gills. “Is this to do with the Elder Wand and the rash of crime relate to its whereabouts?”

“As you know—” Weasley winced, and a chuckle went through the corps “—the Elder Wand splintered during the pursuit of several armed and dangerous suspects. Happily, the suspects were apprehended. Since the destruction of the Wand, the Aurors have been working to resolve any criminal activity related to pursuit of the Wand. With the resolution of this mission we strongly believe that we have achieved that goal.”

Impressed murmurs came from the corps.
Draco was startled out of his attention to them when Millie grabbed his arm and pushed him towards the rear entrance. Draco looked to Granger, who stood quietly to get out of the way. Draco stood with her, leaning in to ask, “Harry?”

She nodded. “Safe with Ron. I’ll stay until the press clears so there’s someone out of the void.”

He thanked her for the second time in one day. She didn’t look any less surprised, though it was cut short by Millie’s insistence that he move.

She pulled her wand as soon as she had him out of the room and into a damp back corridor he’d never seen before. “*Muffliato.*”

“What?”

“Spell. No one will be able to hear what we say.”

Draco stopped and looked around. “There’s no one here.”

“One never knows. Walk with me.”

“Did you know Weasley was such a good liar?”

“Yes. Makes him trustworthy, in this case. One of many reasons he’s always on Potter duty. The Minister wants to see you.”

“The Minister?” Draco asked, still trying to piece together the events of the last hour. “Did you know Potter…. did that? Could do that?”

“Tall, bald-headed fellow, perpetually exhausted?” Mille asked “And yes, I did know he could do that. Explains a few things about why they’re all over him, don’t you think?”

“A bloody lot of things.”

She hummed her agreement.

“Why the Minister?”

“And Croaker and Robards,” she added, rushing him along. “I’m to get you to the Minister’s office before the press comes after you.”

He stopped short. “Are they trying to hide me?”

“Interesting question from a man who would only enter the country if he never had to leave his ancestral estate. And from a man who just spent an hour behind the Ministry press corps. No, they’re not trying to hide you. They do, however, want to talk to you about Potter’s progress when the prying eyes are occupied elsewhere.”

“Why?”

She turned to him apologetically. “You’re not going to like it. It’s about his progress.”

“Oh, Merlin.”

“Exactly.”

“Fuck.”
“Yes.”

“Is the sneak attack on purpose?”

“With Croaker and Robards involved? Almost certainly.”

“Why now?” He asked, meaning only to cast some of his distress into the ether.

“Probably thought you’d come around to seeing things their way after that.” Millie gave him a pointed look. “But they don’t know anything beyond what’s in the official reports, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Oh, Merlin’s bloody balls, Mill. I—No, it absolutely isn’t. I’m sorry if you thought otherwise.”

“Partly. I’ll take your word for it, though.”

“As I take yours.”

She stopped in front of an unmarked door and gave him a genuine, if fleeting, smile. Then she pushed it open and led them into the Minister’s waiting room. She slipped behind the desk, and into an astonishingly good imitation of naïve, innocent boredom. She looked every bit the office secretary, fed up with office tedium. It was remarkable, Draco thought.

“Go on in,” she droned, picking up a copy of Witch Weekly. “They’re waiting for you.”

He stared at her.

She winked and tilted her head towards the door.

He shook his head slowly, gave her a fond smile, and entered.

The smile vanished immediately. Shacklebolt sat in his desk chair, massaging his temples. Croaker and Robards were perched on opposite corners of his desk, clearly awaiting Draco’s arrival.

Robards stood first. “Dr Malfoy.” He held out a hand, which Draco shook perfunctorily. “Good to see you.”

Croaker slid off his corner. “It’s been too long,” he added without extending a hand, for which Draco was grateful.

“It has,” Robards reiterated, and Draco realised it was more threat than pleasantry.

He forced himself to shove the last 24 hours aside and slid into a mask of pure professionalism. “Time flies when you’re working tirelessly.”

Robards smiled at that. “And how is the work coming?”

“Very well,” Draco answered, a bit coolly.

They both waited for him to go on, while Shacklebolt leaned back in his chair looking like he’d rather be elsewhere.

Draco didn’t budge.

Eventually, Robards asked. “Care to elaborate on that point?”
Draco barely—just barely—resisted saying no. Instead he said, “Certainly, Auror Robards. Potter shows remarkable improvement in terms of power. He is able to cast stronger and stronger spells, and to sustain them for longer. We are beginning to explore the possibility of wandless casting as well.”

Robards looked like he was about to start drooling.

“However,” Draco warned, “his control is still a serious issue. The outbursts have continued, and while they haven’t yet, those could also become stronger. He can’t effectively use his magic until he’s able to control it. We will need to continue working and, though I’m sorry to say it and I’m sure you’re sorry to hear it, it may take some time to resolve the issue. Control is much harder to manage than pure power, especially given Potter’s circumstances. But he certainly can’t do his job effectively until it’s addressed.”

“That’s… disappointing,” Croaker said.

“Yes. But it continues to be promising, even if we need more time to realise that promise.”

“How do you propose that we best accomplish that?” Robards asked.

“For the time being, we’ll continue as we have been. Daily training, along with an extensive complement of physical and magical exercises for Potter. I will report fortnightly. Preferably by owl, though we can meet as needed.”

“You could report weekly and meet fortnightly,” Robards suggested.

“I could, but they’d be awfully redundant reports. Magical progress comes slowly. I’d hate to waste your time like that.”

Robards frowned, seemingly failing to find a workaround.

Shacklebolt sat up in his chair. “Is there any chance of Auror Potter making a return to public life? We’re entering the height of charity season.”

“I’m his physician, not his social director.”

“Should I consult with his secretary, then?”

“You might try consulting with him,” Draco retorted. He realised it was a misstep as soon as Croaker and Robards shared a distinctly pleased look.

In the course of some nonverbal form of conversation, the two decided that Robards should speak. “Dr Malfoy, has this case exceeded your capacities? We can return it to the Department of Mysteries if you’d prefer to focus your attention on your other projects.”

Draco barely avoided pointing out that “it” was not, in fact, an “it,” but a “him.” It couldn’t be his priority. He laughed. “Absolutely not.” He threw in a chuckle. “You confuse the lack of a fast result for the lack of a competent result. A problem you share with your colleague?” He raised an eyebrow.

Robards flushed red.

Draco continued before Robards could form words, or get Croaker to do it for him. “I’d like to speak with the Minister.”
Shacklebolt tensed.

“I see no need for that,” Croaker objected.

“We disagree about that, then,” Draco answered. “Minister?”

Shacklebolt sighed. “Gawain, John—do you have any more questions for Dr Malfoy?”

They both looked affronted. This time Croaker spoke. “Many, but he seems unable to answer them satisfactorily.”

Shacklebolt made an attempt at a conciliatory smile, though it looked decidedly strained. “Let’s see what Dr Malfoy and I can work out, shall we?”

Croaker and Robards looked distinctly dissatisfied, but seemed unwilling to challenge Shacklebolt directly. Robards took a turn: “We’ll look forward to hearing from you afterwards.”

Shacklebolt nodded. “Look for my memo.”

The two cleared the room in a huff, leaving Draco across the desk from Shacklebolt.

The Minister gestured for him to have a seat. He tipped a bowl forward. “Peppermint?”

“Pardon?”

“Would you like a peppermint? Word has it they’re soothing.”

“Do you find that to be the case?” Draco shook his head to refuse the offer.

“No.” Shacklebolt popped one in his mouth. “But they’re an excellent pretense for listening more and talking less.”

Draco leaned back and rested an ankle on the opposite knee. “What is it that you want?”

“What I want? You’re the one who just asked for a solo meeting.”

“True, but that was the question I had in mind. I assume the answer isn’t ‘peppermints,’ especially if they’re not all they’re cracked up to be.”

Shacklebolt huffed a laugh and sat back. “No, it isn’t peppermints. Though most days I wish it was.”

“What is it actually?”

“That’s a complicated question.”

“Fine, then. What’s your investment in Potter’s treatment? Are you after the magical superweapon? The political pawn? What is it?”

“Dr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt sighed, “I have known Harry since he was in school. I have fought by his side and, in so doing, seen him turned into all of those things, for all sorts of purposes. Somewhere along the line, believe it or not, I grew fond.”

“You’re telling me you have a genuine investment in his wellbeing.”

“I am.”
Draco shook his head slowly. “Yet every time I see you, it’s with requests for an update on when he can start raising money again.”

“You grew up in a political family of sorts, no?”

Draco narrowed his eyes and refused to answer.

“Fair enough,” Shacklebolt said into his silence. “But surely you understand that there are tradeoffs. I may want to protect Harry. I may want that very badly. But how to do that when it means refusing war orphans whose Quidditch league is cancelled due to lack of funding?”

“How is it your refusal if a private charity fails to meet their fundraising goals?”

“Who do you think they come to when they need to make up the difference?”

“Is the problem turning down orphans, or publicly turning down orphans?”

“Both, and the, I think very genuine, distress Harry feels when he can’t help.”

“You mentioned my… political family.”

Shacklebolt inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“If I learned any lesson, beyond avoiding sadistic overlords, it’s that anything can be bought.”

“What are you implying?” Shacklebolt asked sharply.

“Potter has sent Galleons to at least one of the charities whose events he skipped. He may do it with the others, I don’t know. Given his tendency to undervalue his impact, there may yet be deficits.”

“Your point?”

“If you could be assured that none of those charities will rely on Ministry funding in the new year, that all of their fundraising goals will be met this season, would you support his recovery? His proper, gradual, time-consuming recovery?”

Shacklebolt considered him for a long moment. “I would, yes.”

“That includes advocating for him with Croaker and Robards. Insisting that they give him the time and space he needs to master the implant. And insisting that they accept fortnightly reports and stop nosing around with veiled threats directed towards either of us.”

“You do understand that my advocacy is not a guarantee of anything with those two?”

“I had surmised as much, yes. But you are the Minister of Magic, even if they’d rather forget it.”

“They would. I cannot promise a perfect result. I can, however, give you my word that, if not for the possibility of daily headlines on underfed Crups, I would be able to advocate more openly for the terms of Harry’s rehabilitation.”

“Would be able to, or would?”

“I would. And would ask Ms Bulstrode for her assistance towards those ends, if that’s any reassurance.”
Draco examined him.

“Are you going to let me in on this grand plan of yours, Dr Malfoy?”

Draco reached into his robes and pulled out a card. He slid it across the Minister’s desk.

“Your card?”

Draco stood. “Send them to me.”

Shacklebolt looked up, startled. “Dr Malfoy, do you understand the sums involved?”

Draco laughed, genuinely this time. “Minister. What scion of, as you so diplomatically put it, a political family doesn’t know the costs involved?”

“Thousands upon thousands of Galleons.”

“I’ll pay it.”

Shacklebolt stared. “Why?”

“Many reasons. And now, as a bonus, seeing if a politician can actually stand on principle.”

Shacklebolt squinted at him, as if trying to discern whether he was actually a mirage.

“Have we reached an agreement?”

Shacklebolt stood and held out his hand. “We have.”

Draco took it. “Hope your principles won’t be too rusty, Minister. I’ll be watching for owls.”

He left the office with a very loaded wink for Millie and a much lighter heart.

* * *

The lightness in Draco’s step didn’t last. Even with his meeting, he arrived at the Manor before Harry did. He asked Galder to let him know when Harry arrived, and Draco was relieved when he did, but he came with Granger and his Auror guard in tow and Draco was disinclined to interrupt.

Particularly because, with the hearing behind them and Harry’s time and privacy secured, the main task that lay before Draco was packing.

He procrastinated with the sort of Potter-esque obstinacy he hadn’t exercised since Hogwarts. There was a nap, a bath. He sorted through his robes to see what needed to be pressed, even though it would all probably need to be re-pressed after it was unpacked, and Fallie would be just as attentive to every hem and seam as Galder was. He took dinner in his room, asking Galder to relay his regrets and plead exhaustion on his behalf to whoever was in the dining room.

He poured another few fingers of Lagavulin. Tried to read more of his book.

At ten, he began to think he might attempt sleep. Finding the will to get up was not as easily done as it was thought. He thought about sleeping on the settee, and might’ve done if there wasn’t a knock on the door.

It might be Pansy or Mill, and Draco would be happy to see either of them. Or Greg, or Blaise. Or Galder, though he wouldn’t have knocked.
Harry, on the other hand, he was not entirely prepared for. But there he stood, running a hand through his hair nervously and looking up at Draco through his lashes, so handsome Draco wanted to close the door just so he wouldn’t have to stare the impossibility of it all in the face quite so literally.

He didn’t close the door.

Harry dropped his hand. “Sorry to make a habit of it. You weren’t at dinner.”

“No,” Draco found himself apologising. “A bit tired.”

“Yeah. Know how that goes. Heard you had a meeting with Kingsley and Gawain and John?”

“I did, yes.”

“Is that why you’re so tired?”

Draco chuckled. Or started to; it turned into a sigh halfway through. “Would you like to come in?”

“Yeah.” Harry perked up. “Thanks.”

Draco stood aside. “Drink?”

“Whatever you’re having. Tell me about the meeting?”


“Neat.”

Draco lifted the bottle and began to pour. “It wasn’t bad, actually.” He held out the glass. “I think you have as much time as you need.”

Harry stared.

Draco walked over and handed him his Scotch. “Alright there, Potter?”

Harry took the glass. “Do I want to know how you managed that?”

Draco laughed, in earnest this time. “Probably not. Did you know you had Warlocks crying?”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed. “It’s a… thing.”

“Your hidden powers of oratory?”

“I think you overestimate my oral powers.”

“Do I?” Draco arched a brow and raised his glass to cheers.

“Merlin,” Harry mumbled.

“I hear he could also bring politicians to tears.”

“Maybe instead of working on wandless magic I should focus on that.”

“From where I sat, there’s no need.”
Harry took a hefty sip.

“You know,” Draco mused, dropping onto the settee, “I can’t remember the last time I saw, or did, so much lying in one day. It’s exhausting.”

“Tell me about it.” Harry took the opposite end.

“It’s no wonder you’ve had a few things bottled up.”

Harry looked at him strangely. “I’m not sure whether that was a compliment.”

“A statement of newfound understanding, perhaps.”

“You still want to bring out the ten Sickle words after all that lying?”

“What better practise is there for all those ten Sickle words? Lying—dissembling?—is damn near impossible without them.”

Harry laughed. “Cheers.”

Draco barely let the silence settle before he pursued the topic. “It really was exhausting, though. I don’t know how you’ve managed it for so long. I thought academia was quite bad enough, but politics?”

“Six of one, the way Hermione tells it.”

“Perhaps,” Draco mused, “but the stakes are so much higher. You know, I think Shacklebolt genuinely wants to help? But it’s impossible with Robards and Croaker yapping at his heels.”

“They’re not all—” Harry stopped halfway through.

Draco waited. “All right?”

Harry sighed. “I’m not supposed to lie at all. Mind Healer’s orders.”

“Bit late for that today, don’t you think?”

“All the ‘honourable’s and ‘noble’s?”

“Mmm.”

“Yeah, well. Yeah. I’m glad the void was there. Doesn’t mean I should do more of it though. And it’s technically true, that they’re not all bad. I think actually they’re all kind of in the same position. I don’t know John as well, but Gawain… he really does want to do right by his Aurors, wants to keep people safe. But he’s got his own Robards and Croaker. It’s never ending.”

“Sycophants all the way down.”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “All the way.”

“Why do you want to go back, then?”

Harry stared into his drink for so long Draco almost asked again. “I’m not sure I do.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure I do,” Harry repeated.
Draco leaned forward. “You’re serious?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “I’ve been thinking about it. I’m not sure that I don’t, though. There’s a lot that I like, and a lot of people I like, and a lot of ways to make the difference. Don’t like the odds of changing things from the outside.”

“Until you get your own Robards and Croaker.”

“You mean Delwin and Smith?”

“Already?”

“Deputy Head, therefore.”

“Merlin.” Draco took a hefty sip of his own drink.

“Salazar, even.”

“And Godric, too.” Draco paused to watch Harry’s mouth bend into a smile and relax again. “What would you do if you left? Have you given it any thought?”

“Sort of. Healer Barrett asked me to make a list, just put everything on it I could think of that sounded at all appealing.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmmm,” Harry agreed. “Yeah.” He took a tiny sip. Hesitated. “He’s been asking me to think about that a lot. What I want.”

“Oh?” Draco’s fingers felt like they were tingling. He couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the day’s exertion, or the Scotch. But he wouldn’t have bet on either.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“And?” Draco prompted. He hoped his tone was neutral. He hoped just as fervently that it wasn’t.

Harry turned towards him. “Apparently it’s meant to be good for me to be as honest and direct as possible. Avoid all that bottling up.”

“That sounds wise.”

“Does it?” Harry looked up from his glass.

The intensity of it hit Draco square in the chest. He swallowed against a thundering lump in his chest. He tried to sound even. Calm. “It does.”

Harry didn’t look away. “Right.”

“Right,” Draco repeated, feeling like his eardrums might burst for all the blood pounding past them.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what I want,” Harry repeated. “Some things that it’s been difficult to realise. Not because I don’t think they’re true or I’m uncertain of them. I am. Certain of them, I mean. More because they were unexpected. I didn’t know what to do with them.” He half-laughed. “I’m not sure I do.”
“Them?”

“Merlin,” Harry mumbled. He set his glass down. “You know, you’re tired. I’m tired. I shouldn’t have come barging in here like this.”

“It’s fine.”

Harry wiped his palms on the knees of his jeans. “It’s not very polite, and I really did only mean to ask about your meeting. Not to drink your Scotch and unburden my… whatever.” He made to stand.

Draco snapped forward and grabbed his knee.

Harry stared down at Draco’s hand and swallowed visibly.

Slowly, as if making sure he wouldn’t startle, Draco withdrew his hand. “It’s fine,” he said again, this time making no attempt to conceal the roughness in his voice. “Tell me?”

Draco knew his younger self would’ve hated that it came out as a question. His older self didn’t care as long as it was answered.

“Things I want,” Harry murmured. He was still looking at the spot where Draco had touched his knee. “I want to be honest. I want to get outside more. I want to play Quidditch again, even if it’s just for fun.” He started to fall into a rhythm. “I want to travel. I want to make Marmalade and Kipper and Cream and Coffee happy, and their mum, too. I want to fall in love. I want to go to the World Cup. I want to go running every day. I want to ride a Hippogriff. I want you.”

Draco froze. He knew with total certainty that he needed to move. Needed to say something. Needed to put his hand back on Harry’s knee, or remind him that he was leaving in two days’ time, or both. Needed to give him a Hippogriff. He couldn’t. Couldn’t so much as wiggle a toe.

Harry turned his head just far enough to see the shock written on Draco’s face and stood immediately. “Shit. Shit, I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make things awkward, and I think I misread some things, but I shouldn’t have—”

Draco stood and Harry stopped talking. Draco swallowed, and just managed to lift a hand, to gesture to the space between them. “May I?”

Uneasily, Harry nodded. “Yes, but you don’t—I didn’t—You don’t need to.”

“I know,” Draco rasped. He took half a step forward. “I know. I don’t have to.”

“No. You don’t have to.”

“You said you didn’t—you were attracted, but not… you didn’t like like, it was attraction, only that. Do you mean…?”

“Yeah, I—I mean, I am attracted. I’m definitely… yeah. But I also… I do, like like. I don’t… I want you. But, I just… It was important to tell you. But you don’t have to… you know. Anything.”

Draco took a deep breath. For all the one-night stands, the short-lived relationships, the friends with benefits, the boyfriend here or there, he’d never had to say it. He had said versions of it. Plenty of times, in plenty of ways. But not this. This way, that wasn’t, “I want your tight arse,” or, “I want you on your knees,” or the words, unqualified, but slurred drunkenly against the coarse brick of an alley wall. It was neither a command nor a request, but a statement of fact, and one that
would leave him feeling far more naked than any of the others had.

“I don’t have to,” Draco said again. He looked at Harry, saw his pulse pounding in his throat, the shallowness of his breathing.

“No, you don’t,” Harry agreed, quiet but unequivocal.

“But I want to.”

“You—?”

“Want to. I want to.” Draco blinked to clear his head. “I want you.”

Harry hesitated. “Because of today? At the Ministry? Because of that?”

“No,” Draco breathed. “Merlin, no.”

Harry let out a breath he must’ve been holding. “Okay.” He breathed. In and out. “Okay. But then… before?”

“Yeah. Before.” And Draco didn’t even know how long before anymore. Since he noticed that Harry was fit, or knew far more than he’d ever let on, or that his magic felt like springtime. “And still.”

“You… you want to?”

“Yes,” Draco breathed, coming a step closer. He reached out a hand and hooked his index finger around Harry’s. “But I have to—”

What he had to was lost, erased completely when Harry leaned forward and rested his forehead against Draco’s and whispered, “Can I?”

“Yeah.” Draco nodded once. He saw Harry’s lids drop, closed his own, and waited.

And then it came, the warmth of lips against his own. A hint of roughness at the corner of Harry’s mouth, fitting for December. The softening of his lips as they moved against Draco’s. The electric pins and needles that travelled down his arms as Harry stepped forward again and pressed their chests together. The feeling of Harry’s waist as Draco hooked an arm around him and pulled him closer still. Maybe Draco shouldn’t have been surprised that Harry was good at this, but inasmuch as he retained any ability to think, he was blown off his bloody feet.

Harry pulled back, breathless. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” Draco slid his free hand to the nape of Harry’s neck. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry exhaled, and pressed into Draco again.

And Merlin, but it was electric. Warm and strong and all-consuming, and Draco didn’t know how long it was, exactly, before he felt Harry’s hands at the front of his robes. “Can I?”

The word was on his tongue, pressing against his teeth, when Draco realised he couldn’t say yes. “Fuck,” he said instead. He rested his forehead against Harry’s, unwilling or unable to open his eyes. “Fuck, I want you to.”

“Okay,” Harry whispered, fingers pinching a clasp.
Draco dropped a hand to hold Harry’s wrist. “Harry.”

Harry stilled, his breath still coming quickly, but suddenly ragged in a different way. Slowly, cautiously, he freed his wrist from the loose circle of Draco’s fingers and stepped back. “What?”

Without Harry there, Draco had no excuse to avoid opening his eyes and raising his head, only to find the heartbreakingly injured look on Harry’s face. And he was probably about to make it worse. “I’m leaving.”

Draco had expected some reaction. There was none. Nothing. “Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry choked out. “Yeah.” His eyes snapped into focus. “Heard you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Harry looked at him. “So you don’t… You don’t want to.”

“Merlin, no. I mean,” he scrambled, as Harry’s face twisted, “yes, I want to very much. Very much. But I’m leaving, and you’ve never—You’ve never, right? With a man, at all?”

“No.”

“And I can’t, if I don’t know that you know that it can’t be… I’m leaving the day after tomorrow. It can’t be more than that, and if you want more than that, if you need more time than that to figure this out with someone else. I don’t—I couldn’t, or I wouldn’t want to live with it, with knowing you felt like I left you.”

“And if I felt like that either way?”

Draco’s heart twisted to match the pain writ across Harry’s features. He thought it probably showed. He hoped it did. That Harry would know that.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “That wasn’t fair.”

He guessed it did show. “It was honest. I’d rather that.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You won’t reconsider.”

“My home, my work… I have a life in Paris. This was never meant to be… all of this. I have commitments, I’ve said I’m going back.”

“Even though this is all of this?”

“Yes,” Draco said simply.

Harry took half a step back and Draco missed the warmth of him immediately. Harry gave him a long, searching look, and then appeared to deflate. “I need to think. You’re right. I need to think about it.”

“Okay.” Draco tried to keep his voice even, if only because he didn’t want it to be Harry’s deciding factor. And he had the feeling he’d be free to break down soon enough.
“Will you be here? If I do?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Draco said. “Or Galder will know. I’ll survey the grounds tomorrow, but otherwise I’ll be here. Packing,” he added, as if he hadn’t hurt himself enough for one evening. “But here.”

“Right. Packing.” Harry repeated the word and seemed a bit dazed by it. His eyes flicked to Draco’s lips and away again, and Draco didn’t know if he was thinking of kissing, or imagining those words coming out again. Leaving. Packing. I want you.

“My feelings won’t change, if you decide.”

“About leaving or about me?”

Draco felt trapped at wandpoint, but there was only one honest answer. “Both.”

“Okay.” He held Draco’s gaze. “Okay.” He broke it, and walked to the door, pausing, just barely, at the handle before proceeding through the door.

Draco looked at the settee and knew that if he collapsed into it he wouldn’t get back up till morning.

He dragged himself into the bedroom and fell, fully clothed, onto the duvet. He buried his face in the pillows and tried to will the world away.
It felt a lot like end of term. Knee deep in robes, tripping over his trunk, popping out of his bedroom for input from Pansy… it all felt so familiar. And through it all, Draco moved about his rooms in a haze. He’d taken things out and put them back many times over without accomplishing anything. At last, for something to do, he’d pulled a row of his work robes out of the wardrobe and set to work trying to fold them.

It was not an ideal plan. He didn’t actually know how to fold a robe, and while Pansy was happy to show him, they agreed his newfound knowledge should probably remain theoretical.

And it wasn’t just the robes. He’d never packed his own things beyond laying them out for elves; he wasn’t even sure why he felt the need to do it himself now. He certainly wasn’t being effective. And Pansy’s colour commentary, amusing as it was, was doing much more for his sense of déjà vu than the state of his clothes.

He was glad of her company, though. He’d been on tenterhooks for going on twenty hours, thinking every noise might be Harry coming to knock on his door. He’d begun to wonder, and then begun to go a bit mad wondering, if Harry might not come at all. If absence would be his answer, and Draco would never see him again outside of a perfunctory evaluation, if that. He’d reassured himself that if Harry didn’t come it was for good reason. Good reasons for both of them; Draco didn’t want to compromise Harry’s wellbeing, nor did he want a partner who wasn’t fully aware of what was on offer.

It was just that he’d reached a point of reassuring himself out loud, and Pansy’s presence made him feel less destined to become one of those portraits that earned eternal exile to the attic.

She also had a way of changing the subject, and it was a bloody enormous relief to discuss the management of the Manor and the proper care of wool. Since she’d arrived he’d made it through almost two whole hours without jumping at every sound, between their conversation and the reassurance that came with knowing that every stray click was Pansy’s nails on the table or her heels on the parquet or the ice in her glass resettling.

She’d made him go, item by item, through plans for the estate in his absence and the paperwork his solicitor had sent to officially secure a place for her and Greg. She’d made him hang all of the robes back up for the elves to handle, including the ones he was wearing, leaving him feeling underdressed, if a bit more relaxed, in Muggle trousers and a button-down. And, over his protestations that he should at least try packing for himself, she poured him a drink.

“But why?” she asked, holding out a whisky.

“Because,” he pouted.

“The wool didn’t do anything to you.” She raised an eyebrow. “And mauling it won’t solve any problems. Make any particular houseguests appear.”

He scowled. “Maybe I like doing things the old fashioned way.”

“Oh, darling.” Scotch still in her hand, she steered him towards the settee and handed him the tumbler as he sat. “You’re a Malfoy. The old-fashioned way involves appearing at an estate without telling the elves you’re coming and then ironing their fingers when they haven’t got your entire wardrobe pressed and waiting.”
He glared over the edge of his glass and took a sip.

“You could reinstate that,” she mused, taking the other end of the settee and draping her arm across the back, “though burnt elf fingers would be counterproductive to having them extend the Hippogriff stables. Not that it’s my priority, granted, but I’m afraid you’ll have to pick one or the other.”

“Pass on the elves,” he said. “I’d rather the Hippogriffs, and burnt elf fingers smell awful. Terrible idea, even as that sort of thing goes.”

“And Potter?” she prodded.

Draco’s shoulders tensed. He hoped she hadn’t noticed. “What about him?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is he a terrible idea?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She gave him the sort of sympathetic look that only she or Mill, or Blaise or Greg on a very generous day, could get away with. “Right. That’s why you can barely sit still. I haven’t seen you wait this impatiently for anything since your Nimbus 2001.”

“How is it that you think you know everything?”

“I don’t, but the elves do. And I believe in high thread counts, even when it comes to tea towels. They adore me for it.”

He laughed, albeit grudgingly.

“And he came to breakfast this morning looking just as wrecked as you do.”

“He what?” Draco sat up. “He what?”

“Ignoring insults to your vanity? I’ll take that as a confirmation.”

Draco ignored the remark. “You didn’t mention.”

“Why would I, when you’ve not mentioned him at all? In between opening and closing his dossier a million times.”

Draco scowled at the stack of papers that rested on the end table. It hadn’t been more than a few dozen times, and that was a matter of tying up loose ends. “What did he say?”

“‘Pass the cream, please.’” She rolled her eyes at his expression. “And very little other than that, about you or anything else.”

“Why would he bother going, then?”

Pansy raised an eyebrow and waited.

“Fine. I want to know. Will you stop making that face and tell me?”

“Maybe he bothered going because he hoped you’d be there,” Pansy offered.

“I told him I’d be here.” Draco grumbled.
“Have you considered that it might be a bit difficult for him to work up the nerve?”

“Since when are you the expert?”

“Draco,” she warned. “Watch yourself. And please disabuse yourself of the mistaken notion that observers of certain human behaviours are less knowledgeable than the participants. In my experience, it’s generally the opposite.”

He sank into his seat and crossed his arms.

She leaned forward and brushed his hair back into place. “Your scowl hasn’t changed at all.”

“Fine, then.” He ignored the last. “What did you observe?”

“He certainly hadn’t slept well or much. He was as agitated as you are. He was very ill at ease—between you and me, if Galder hadn’t been on the edge of a conniption, I suspect he would’ve brought a kitten to the table. And the only thing he did ask, beyond the bare pleasantries, was whether anyone else would be joining us.”

Draco frowned. “That’s it?”

“It is. Though it’s not nothing, is it?”

Draco shrugged. “It’s not much.”

“No, but if he’s as on edge as he looked….” Pansy leaned back and squeezed his hand. “You know he might not come, love?”

“Yeah,” Draco mumbled.

“What are you going to do if he doesn’t?”

“Leave. Same as I would if he did.”

“So it’s the difference of how you spend one night, then?”

He nodded tightly.

“Should be easy to brush off then, no? In the grand scheme of a life?”

“Should be,” he agreed.

“And yet?”

He sighed heavily and slouched further into the cushions. “And yet.”

“And you’re determined to leave? Don’t want to give it a bit more time, see what happens?”

“I have a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor Monday morning.”

“That avoids the question nicely.”

“Yes, I’m determined to leave. I’ve been here longer than I meant to be already. I have a career and a home. A research agenda to pursue. Colleagues. Friends. Students to direct. Mother; I do miss her.” He ran a hand through his hair. “And even if I did stay, what of it? I can’t be the person here that I am in Paris. I miss walking through the city. Going out to eat. He and I could never do that
together.”

“What about the Muggle world?”

“What if we hide it from everyone of consequence, you mean?”

“No. I mean what if you go out to friends’ homes and Muggle restaurants and give Diagon Alley a bit of a berth.”

“I won’t hide. Nor will I ask him to.”

“But you’d ask him to give up on whatever it is that’s going on between you.”

“These things fade.” Draco shrugged. “Eventually.”

Two raps on the door cut off Pansy’s response. Draco sat up straight, and stared warily at the door.

She leaned forward gently and rubbed his arm. “Shall I get it?”

“I—” He scrambled for an answer. “Yes. No. It might not be him.”

“Whoever it is, best not keep them waiting.” She stood and held out her hands, helping him to his feet.

Another knock, this one barely audible, resonated against the wood, and they both moved for the door. She stilled with her fingers wrapped around the handle. “You don’t actually look a wreck,” she whispered.

“Door?”

She lifted her hand and braced her fingers against the wood. “Draco?”

“We’re being rude,” he murmured, eyes on the door.

She moved to catch his eye. “If he makes you happy, we’d all support it.”

He softened at that. “Thank you.”

She nodded and answered him at a normal volume. “Of course,” she said, as she twisted the handle and pulled the door open.

Harry was on the other side, looking tired but, to Draco’s eyes, very good indeed, in Muggle jeans and a wool jumper. His hands were folded neatly in front of him, knuckles almost white from the effort of keeping them there. Draco could relate.

Harry stepped back, obviously surprised at seeing Pansy and Draco together at the door. “Hi.”

“Potter.” Pansy nodded.

Draco worked on remembering what words were, and how to use them in ways distinguishable from self-immolation.

“Parkinson,” Harry replied warily, clearly uncertain of what he was seeing.

“Good timing, we were just finishing some paperwork.” She stepped over the threshold. “I hear you’ll be staying a while. If you’d ever like to join me and Gregory for dinner, please do.”
It took Harry a moment to process the invitation. “Thank you.” He paused. “I will.”

She nodded. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

They stood on opposite sides of the doorway until the sound of her heels receded down the hallway.

Draco recovered first, if only because he had years of pureblood training to fall back on. “Please, come in.”

Harry nodded and stepped over the threshold just far enough for Draco to close the door. He turned to find himself barely a hand’s breadth from Harry and took a step back. “I’m sorry.”

“No need.”

“I didn’t want to assume.”

“You aren’t.”

Draco inhaled far more sharply then he’d meant to and had to force himself to let the breath go. “What do you mean?”

Nervously, Harry shifted his weight to one side. “Could we sit?”

“Of course,” Draco rushed to answer. “Please.”

“Right.” Harry’s eyes went back and forth between the chairs and the sofa. He shifted his weight to the other side. “Right,” he repeated. He walked past the chairs and sat, very tentatively, on the settee.

Draco, feeling as nervous as Harry looked, stepped over Harry’s legs to take the other end. There was plenty of space between them, he reasoned, and he didn’t want Harry to think him distant. He shifted, and shifted again, trying to get comfortable.

From the corner of his eye, Draco saw Harry studying the rug. He didn’t stop once Draco was settled.

Draco tried to find something to say. It all felt wrong. He wanted to know what Harry had decided, but asking felt uncomfortably brazen. He wanted to give Harry plausible deniability. Wanted it for himself, too. But asking what brought Harry to see him would be too intentionally naïve, probably to an off-putting degree. And if having to articulate that would spook Harry out of saying anything else... Draco wasn’t willing to risk that. Besides which, he was fairly certain they both knew what Harry was there to discuss.

Scanning the room a bit desperately, he fell on something of a solution, or at least a distraction. “Scotch?”

Harry whipped his head over, looking startled. “Pardon?”

“Er.” Draco couldn’t quite remember. Harry’s eyes were so green. And Draco’s stomach was so stubbornly lodged in his throat that he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get the words out. He wanted Harry. Merlin. He wanted to hear a particular answer. Wanted it very much.

He swallowed and forced himself to try again. “Would you like a Scotch?”

“Oh,” Harry exhaled. Had he been holding his breath, Draco wondered? “No, thank you. Bit tired.
Afraid it might put me to sleep.”

“Not sleeping well?”

Harry shrugged and looked down at his hands. “Are you asking in a professional capacity?”

“No.” It came out more vehemently than Draco had intended, though he wanted to make sure there wasn’t any question about it. “Our last meeting, aside from anything needed to give you cover with the Ministry, was the day before yesterday. Your case is in Healer Barrett’s hands. I’m not in charge of your case any more.”

“Thus the leaving,” Harry said.

That wasn’t what he’d meant to convey, but… “Yes.”

“Right.” Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes, effectively hiding his face.

Draco tried to backtrack. “I was asking out of general concern.”

“Right,” Harry said again, half-laughing into his palms. “My sleep.”

“And I was wondering, I suppose, what’s kept you up.”

Without moving his hands, Harry looked over. Scepticism was written all over his face. “Really? Was there any ambiguity?”

“I… perhaps. It could’ve been any number of things…” he trailed off with a swirling hand gesture meant to indicate that he was well aware of a whole universe of things Harry might’ve stayed up thinking about that had nothing to do with him.

Harry dropped his hands and sat back, looking straight ahead into the fire. “It wasn’t.”

After a long moment, Draco managed, “Oh.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

Draco took a deep breath. “And?”

Harry’s mouth turned up into a faint smile.

Before Harry could speak, Draco rushed on, feeling suddenly compelled to make clear every warring emotion he’d spent the last day sitting with. “Before you say anything, I want you to know that whatever you’ve decided, I’ll respect it entirely. It’s a difficult position to be in, I know, to discover things about yourself you might not have realised. Doing it properly, whatever that means to you, is important. Non-negotiably so. And I realise, too, that the situation is further complicated by our working relationship, not to mention our history, and that it may be too much to overcome, particularly when I’m leaving so soon and you have this personal journey ahead of you for which you might, quite reasonably, want a partner. And so, all that to say, if the answer is no, whatever your reasons, you’ll hear no objection from me. You’ll have nothing but my support.”

He faltered on the last words. He meant them, meant them very deeply. But he hadn’t meant them to be funny, and Harry was smiling. He tried, not entirely successfully, to keep any petulance out of his voice. “What is it?”

“You want me to say yes.” Harry’s smile, small as it was, infused his voice. “You’re trying to prepare yourself in case I don’t.”
Draco frowned. “I want you to feel comfortable.”

“I do, remember? That you’re on that list of people—very short list of people—who I don’t have to lie to, or bend over to please?”

Draco bit his tongue. He was nervous enough that any sort of innuendo about bending over and pleasing was more likely than usual to come out of his mouth, even if to disastrous effect. He nodded.

“And,” Harry took a deep breath. “Also, I’m not going to say no.” He glanced over at Draco very quickly, then back to his hands.

Draco’s chest felt weightless. All of him did, in a way. Not that he felt light or free, but that he felt untethered. Unable to tell his up from down.

He must have been stuck like that a while, he realised, when Harry, staring intently at his thumbnail, asked, very nervously, whether Draco had heard him.

It was enough to shake him out of it. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, of course. I… You’re sure?”

Still staring down, Harry quirked his mouth into a wry smile. “Didn’t think you’d take this much convincing.”

“I’m—” He tried. “Sorry. Just… thought about it.”

“And not much else, since yesterday.”

“It’s not nothing, you realise. Not that it has to be a production, but… you’re sure? Really certain?”

“Yes,” Harry said again, this time chancing a longer look in Draco’s direction.

“Right.” Draco said. His body had begun to come back to earth, but the weight of it all felt unfamiliar now.

“Are you—?” Harry paused. “Have you changed your mind?”


“Are you?” Harry, having survived his last foray into looking at Draco, turned to face him.

“Yes,” Draco answered, looking in Harry’s direction, if not yet able to meet his eyes. “I am, actually.”

“You seemed so sure yesterday.”

“Of what I wanted and the reasons not to. Not that you would want to.”

“I thought a lot about it,” Harry admitted. “Including the reasons not to. It’s just… All of the things I said before, they’re true. And I think the things you said are, as well.”

“Yes,” Draco interjected.

“Good,” Harry said. “I’m glad. And when I thought about it…” He took a deep breath, as if preparing himself. “When I thought about it, I realised that… I’ve been very lucky, to have relationships with people who I trusted, who… well. I guess I’ll just say that things were good, in
all sorts of ways.”

Draco was relieved that Harry didn’t feel the need to elaborate on the point.

“And they were good because of that trust. I didn’t think they were going to sell me out or spread rumours, and that made room for everything else that came after. And it’s taken me a long time, a really long time, to realise this about myself. That—” he took a breath “—that I’m attracted to men as well. But I still— I am, attracted to men, and everything being what it is, it’ll probably be a big deal when I come out and word gets around. But people knowing won’t make it any easier for me to find someone I can feel about the way I feel about you, or trust the way that I trust you.”

Draco goggled. One kiss with a man and Harry was planning to come out. It was so typical of him, so blindly Gryffindorish, that Draco could’ve kissed him then and there if he wasn’t so set on hearing the rest of what Harry had to say.

“I can’t say that it’s ideal that you’re leaving tomorrow, or that I wish you weren’t.” He gave Draco a half smile. “If that isn’t too strange for me to say.”

Silently, Draco shook his head no.

“I’m glad,” Harry said, tilting his head back against the sofa and looking at the ceiling thoughtfully. “And I suppose the thing is, really, that I might’ve been surprised at this point if it actually was strange. Because you don’t lie to me, or treat me like I’m going to break, or keep me on a pedestal. That hasn’t been easy to find and, like I said, I don’t think it’ll be any easier to find now.”

As much as he understood, all too well, what Harry meant about the problems of notoriety and the difficulty of finding someone worthwhile, Draco’s heart still hurt to hear him say it.

“Even if it’s just one night, it is my first night, with a man. I’d like that to be with someone—well.” His cheeks pinked. “Someone I’m attracted to. Someone I want to be with. But also,” he rushed on, “someone I trust, who treats me like an equal. I don’t know when I’ll have that chance again. And I’d rather know, I think, what it’s like. What it’s like when it’s good, which, I do think—” He sat up straight and looked at Draco. “I do think it would be good. Do you think…?”

“Yes,” Draco said, surprised by his own hoarseness.

“Good.” Harry let out a breath. “Good. Right. So… that’s why I’m sure.”

“You’re sure,” Draco repeated back, hoping that feeling the words in his mouth would make them as real as he wanted them to be.

“Yeah,” Harry said. He was breathing easier now than he had been at any point in the conversation. “Yeah, I am.” He waited.

Draco took stock of himself. Limbs, all there, if still a bit fuzzy. Chest warm and heavy, as though it wanted to pull the rest of him forward, towards Harry. Head champagne-light and running it over and over again: Harry talking about trust, and wanting, and Draco, all at once. The rest of his body… He wanted Harry just as much Harry had said he wanted Draco. “Right. So.”

“So?” Harry bit his lip nervously.

“So,” Draco replied. He paused. “I’m not sure how to…”

“Oh?” Harry looked confused, and then not a little amused. “I thought you did know how to?
Wasn’t that part of the point? Learning the ropes?”

The jibe punched through Draco’s daze. He pursed his lips. “Very funny.”

“We all have our talents,” Harry replied, mock-seriously.

Beginning to feel more secure in his return to terra firma, Draco quirked an eyebrow. “Yes, we do. Some of them more immediately useful than others.”

He saw Harry swallow. “Useful?”

“Very.”

“I thought you didn’t know how…?”

Draco half-laughed. “Turns out, that starting us out bit, you did.” He let the corners of his mouth turn up. “What else do you know how to do?”

“Fly,” Harry said, a touch of nervousness colouring his voice. “Give speeches.” He turned so he was facing Draco now. “Make sandwiches.”

“Sandwiches?” Draco asked. He grinned. “Is that what you were doing in the kitchen? Making sandwiches?”

“Um.” The flush on Harry’s cheeks deepened. “Not in the end, no.”

Draco slid closer. “Got distracted?”

“Yeah,” Harry answered, keeping his composure more successfully than Draco would’ve thought. “There were other things going on.”

“Things you’ve thought about?” Draco asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wondered what they would be like?” He slid closer still.

“Yes.” Harry swallowed again.

Draco stood and held out a hand. “Would you like to find out?”

Harry looked at his hand, and up to him, and for one moment Draco was gripped with a long-buried fear, that Harry wouldn’t take his hand, would leave him standing there unmet. Then warm skin slid over his fingers and across his palm. He held his breath.

Harry wrapped his fingers around the sides of Draco’s hand, steadying himself as he stood. He met Draco’s eyes straight on. “Yeah. Yeah, I would.”

Draco’s smile only wavered when he saw Harry falter.

“And you— Before… anything I just need to be sure. You want to? Not because you feel like you should or it’s the right thing to do for someone new to all this?”

“Harry.” Draco twined their fingers together and looked him in the eye. He hoped that said it all, but, he thought, just in case, “That’s not it at all. I want you.” He laughed, an unusually reedy, nervous sort of sound. “I can promise you it’s not that I feel like I should. If anything, the opposite.
Not,” he went on at Harry’s frown, “that I would do it if it felt like it was wrong for any reason. But you… The way I feel about you, it’s not…” He paused. “When has it ever been that rational? It hasn’t started now, all of a sudden.” He blew out his cheeks. “I’m doing a crap job of this, aren’t I? But the point is, no, it’s not anything like that. I want to. Want you.”

Harry nodded. “Okay.”

“What?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. So… do we…?” He gestured towards the door to the bedroom.

Draco thought he should remember to write Pansy a thank you for making him put everything away. He might not have made it to the bedroom in one piece whilst holding Harry’s hand and the prospect of everything in front of them at the front of his mind. And he was glad not to bring Harry to a bed with robes stacked a dozen deep. It was strange enough to be taking Harry to bed at all, without having to figure out how to clear it.

But he made it—they made it—and Draco found himself standing at the foot of the bed, Harry’s hand in his, pulling him closer, until they were toe to toe.

Harry leaned forward speculatively, and Draco raised a thumb, brushed it over his cheek, and followed it with a kiss, just under his cheekbone.

Harry exhaled a quiet, “Oh.”

Draco shrugged. “Thought you—Thought it might make a difference.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathed. “It—I’m glad you said.”

“Right. Good. Me too then.”

Harry smiled at him nervously. “So how do we—? Do we—?” He gestured towards the bed.

“Would you know what to do if you were with a woman?”

Uneasily, Harry nodded. “But I don’t know if it’s the same.”

“Some parts. Any of the parts where you do what feels right, I’d still advise.”

Harry laughed, then, once and still with a trace of unease, but much diminished. “Just… anything?”

“Well,” Draco joked, “it’s generally good etiquette to ask before you stick anything anywhere.”

“And here I’ve been gagging to stick my finger in your ear.”

“Definitely ask before you try anything of the sort,” Draco retorted, mock-indignant.

“Draco?” Harry asked, suddenly serious.
Draco sobered at his tone. “Yes?”

Harry stepped closer, so Draco could feel the heat of his chest. “I don’t really want to stick my finger in your ear.”

“No?” Draco asked, half-laughing, and took half a step forward so their hips were as close together as the rest of them. “They’re great ears.”

“I’m sure.” Harry inhaled and tilted his head, tentatively ducking in to nip at Draco’s earlobe.

The heat of Harry’s breath on his neck sent shivers down Draco’s spine.

“Okay?” Harry asked.

Draco felt the question more than he heard it. He nodded, and tilted his head, opening his neck to Harry by way of agreement.

Harry took the hint, and pressed a kiss to the spot just under his jaw, and another below that, and then another.

Draco pulled back just far enough to catch Harry’s bottom lip, pressing in for another kiss. Harry hummed against him and returned it, working his mouth against Draco’s.

With Harry pressed firmly against him, Draco brought his fingers to Harry’s neck, feeling the fine hair there, thick and unexpectedly soft beneath his fingers. He ran his fingers over it and felt Harry arch back into his hand, even as his hips pressed forward.

Through Harry’s jeans, Draco could feel the outline of his growing erection. He had to bite down a moan when he realised what he was feeling pressed against his hip. More than words, more than Harry’s heated looks or his magic, it made the whole thing real, almost terrifyingly so.

Harry was there, in his bedroom, wanting him.

He didn’t fully grasp how taken he was, how overwhelmed with it all, until Harry leaned back, and Draco realised he’d stopped moving.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, brow furrowed.

Draco blinked, trying to clear his head. “Yes,” he said. “More than. Just a bit overwhelmed, actually.”

“Overwhelmed?”

“It’s a lot, don’t you think? The two of us, here?”

“Too much?” Harry took half a step back.

Without Harry’s body against his, it felt to Draco like the temperature in the room had dropped. He reached for Harry immediately. “No.” Draco caught his belt loop and stepped forward to close the distance. “Not at all. For you?”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

Draco moved his hand from Harry’s belt, sliding it up under his jumper. “Now?”

“No.” Harry bit his bottom lip and shook his head again.
Bringing his other hand to Harry’s other side, Draco tugged on the hem of Harry’s jumper and looked at him questioningly.

He was almost surprised—almost, but not quite—when Harry took it in his own hands and pulled it off, balling it in his hands between them.

Draco wanted to stare. Wanted to stare endlessly, at the coarse hair that ran down the centre of Harry’s chest, at the dark nipples, stark against his pale skin and already hard. But Harry’s jumper was in the way of the view and, he realised, Harry was squeezing it in his hands as if he wasn’t sure what to do with it. Draco took it from him and threw it at the foot of the bed.

Harry relaxed at that, which was surprising; that he would want that sort of guidance. That something as simple as a jumper could make him nervous. Draco’s heart ached, and it swelled, and he wasn’t sure what to do except trace his fingers over the faint line of Harry’s ribcage, down to his waist and up again, over his sternum, one thumb settling in his clavicle while his fingers ran over Harry’s neck, over the base of his jaw, his pounding jugular. Harry turned his head, looking down between them.

Then Draco felt a tug on his own shirt. Harry worked it free from his waistband. Draco could see, now, Harry’s chest rising and falling with each quick breath. Harry rolled the bottom button of Draco’s shirt between his fingers and looked up for permission. Nodding, Draco moved his own hands to the top button, slipping it through the hole and moving to the next, and Harry worked from the bottom. They met in the middle, Draco’s hand covering Harry’s to slide the last button through.

Draco let his arms drop, then. He stood in front of Harry, arms at his sides.

With a shaky breath, Harry slid his hands up Draco’s torso, parting the halves of Draco’s shirt in the process and pushing it off him and onto the floor. Harry’s hands were so warm; Draco felt like he should’ve shivered at the touch, but he was melting into it instead. Draco caught Harry’s mouth again. He wanted to kiss Harry for its own sake and, in equal measure, to have more reason to feel their skin pressed together.

The incredible heat of Harry’s body made it feel to Draco as though he was immersed in every sensation, every touch or brush of lips. The rest of the room, with its cold winter air, was the ocean to their island. To step back—to step off—would’ve been like jumping into icy water, would’ve been suffocating and chilling, and nothing Draco wanted to do.

He moved his hands to Harry’s waistband, to the top of his flies, and fumbled to slip the button free without moving too far away. Pressed together as they were, he could feel the outline of Harry’s cock under his knuckles. He didn’t bother, didn’t want to bother, with holding back. He turned his hand, slid his fingers over the bulge.

Harry shuddered and leaned in to him, wrapping an arm around Draco’s neck and resting his forehead on the opposite shoulder. Draco felt Harry’s breath coming in pants against him, felt him nodding his approval.

Again, Draco ran his hand over it. Harry canted his hips to make it easier, and Draco felt his fingers dig into the skin above Draco’s shoulder blade. He rubbed again, and felt Harry tense, holding his breath as Draco pressed harder, moved his hand more firmly from Harry’s waistband, over his flies, to the juncture of his thighs.

Heat suddenly flared from Harry’s fingertips. Without thinking, Draco hissed and flinched away from the touch.
When he looked up, Harry was staring at him, horror written across his face. Mouth open, he shook his head wordlessly and took a step back.

In the same second, Draco craned his neck to look and reached out for Harry. He just managed to grab his hand before he stepped entirely out of reach. “Wait.”

Harry took another half step back before he did.

Draco lifted his free hand to feel at the spot. It was warm, but it wasn’t painful any longer. He didn’t feel a burn. Keeping Harry’s hand in his own, he rotated to show Harry his shoulder blade. “Do you see anything?”

When Harry didn’t answer, he turned back. “Harry?”

Harry shook his head.

“You didn’t see anything? It doesn’t feel like a burn.”

“No,” Harry managed.

“Harry,” Draco ducked his head to try to catch Harry’s eye. He was intensely relieved when he was able. “Harry, it’s okay. It was just a momentary thing. No damage. And even if there had been, a bit of Dittany and it would’ve been fine.”

“But…” Harry’s eyes flicked to the web of scars on Draco’s chest. He looked at them pointedly and back to Draco. “What if you don’t know that? What if it could’ve been worse?”

“This isn’t a curse,” Draco insisted, brows knit in concern. “This isn’t going to do that kind of damage.”

Harry stepped back again, and Draco felt the tension in their arms as the distance between them grew. “What if it does?”

“It hasn’t. It won’t.”

Harry shook his head.

“Trust me, remember? I wouldn’t lie to you. At all, and especially about this.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Harry said, blinking. As he seemed to come back to himself, Draco could see him moving further away. “Even if it’s not permanent.”

“I don’t think you will.”

“I just did,” Harry objected, a note of panicked petulance making its way into his voice.

“Barely.” He reached back with his free hand. There was nothing more than the slightest hint of lingering warmth. “Not at all. And we know the way around it, if you’re worried.”

“No,” Harry argued. “For spells, and for anger. Not for this.”

Draco stepped forward, trying to make up the space between them. He wanted Harry’s skin next to his again. Didn’t think it would burn. Part of him didn’t care if it did, except that it would upset Harry. “It’s all the same thing. What were you feeling, when it happened?”

“Feeling?” Harry asked weakly.
Yeah.” Draco ventured another step towards him, close enough now that their arms fell between them. The warmth of Harry’s forearm against his own was a pleasant reminder of that closeness. It didn’t feel dangerous in the least. “Feeling.”

“You know.” Harry flushed. “I was… It felt good. I was wanting, I guess. Didn’t think it was especially subtle.”

“I don’t think that should be different from anything else. The only danger is in holding it back. If you don’t—if you tell me whatever it is you’re feeling, or show me—it shouldn’t be any problem at all.”

“If I tell you?”

“Or show me,” Draco repeated. “Just… don’t restrain your responses, whatever they are.”

“That’s not dangerous at all,” Harry muttered.

It took Draco a moment to understand, then he snorted once. “Fair. But…” He sighed. “But worth it?”

“No. Or yes, but only incidentally. To have this.” He twined his fingers between Harry’s and squeezed. “To do this, together.”

He could only withstand so much waiting for an answer. “Might be better anyway,” he added. “Would be better.”

Harry looked down at their joined hands. Trepidation was written across his face. “Would you do it, too?”

Draco blinked, then, laughed softly. “I tend to anyway.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “You—?”

“As you likely would’ve found out, yes. Hardly seems the time for holding back.”

Harry looked at him, just looked, and Draco resisted the urge to squirm, or to argue. “Guess that makes sense,” Harry said, finally. “And you will?”

“Yes,” Draco affirmed. “I want to.”


Draco ventured another step forward and brought his free hand to rest on Harry’s side. When Harry didn’t pull back, he leaned forward. He could feel Harry’s breath, quick and shallow, under his hand, and the intake when he pressed his mouth to Harry’s, and the moment he stopped breathing altogether before he exhaled and returned the kiss, pressing his lips to Draco’s and then opening his mouth. Draco pulled him in, kissed him harder. Felt Harry’s breath relax into deep, slow inhales and exhales that matched their kissing. He could feel Harry’s back relax too, and his stomach, could feel him leaning into Draco again.

Draco slid his mouth off of Harry’s and kissed across his jaw. He turned them as he went, so Harry stood between him and the bed, and nipped his earlobe before pulling back to whisper, “Those
things you wanted to find out about?"
“Yeah?” Harry breathed.
“Still want to?”
Harry exhaled shakily. “Yeah.” He ran a hand down Draco’s arm.

Draco slid a hand under the back Harry’s waistband, running his fingers between the denim and Harry’s skin until they were at Harry’s flies. He took hold of the zip and pulled.

The denim parted enough so that, when he looked down, Draco could see Harry’s erection through his pants, the contours of his glans visible though white cotton. His mouth watered. “Merlin.”

Entranced, he dropped a hand to trace the outline of it. Harry hissed at his touch and Draco looked up, startled, for signs of pain or fear. But Harry didn’t look afraid. He was biting his lip and panting, and looked full to exploding.

“Tell me,” Draco murmured, moving closer to mouth at Harry’s jaw. “Tell me what it is.”

“Feels good,” Harry managed.
“Yeah?”
“Mmm,” Harry confirmed. With a shuddering breath he moved his hand onto Draco’s and slid it back to his cock. “Really good.”

“More?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded and hooked his thumbs into his waistband. He looked to Draco as though for permission.

Draco wanted to laugh. Not mockingly, not at all, but in wonder at the idea that Harry could still have any doubt about the intensity of Draco’s attraction, or that he might think he needed Draco’s permission, or might be waiting for it.

Instead of laughing, he put his hands over Harry’s and nodded. Together, they moved his pants and trousers over his hips.

Draco stopped when Harry’s cock was revealed, hard and red, jutting up from thick brown curls. His hand moved towards it, over the soft skin stretched over Harry’s hipbone, to the edge of his hair.

Harry let his clothes drop, toed off his shoes and socks, and stepped back.

Draco followed him without a second thought. He ran his hand up Harry’s leg, tracing gently over the line of muscle that hid the Wand from view, over his hip, up his side, still not touching his prick, not yet. He looked up, first, to see Harry biting his lip and watching Draco carefully.

Draco was startled by the intensity of it, the raw vulnerability written on Harry’s face. “Gorgeous,” he said, sliding his hand up around Harry’s waist.

Harry let out a breath.

“I want you.” He kissed his way across Harry’s clavicle. “Can I?”
Shakily, Harry hooked a finger over Draco’s belt. “Would you? Before?”

“Take them off?”

“Yeah. I want—” Harry took a deep breath. “I want to see you.”

“Yes,” Draco answered, his voice raspier, shakier, than he’d intended. “Of course.”

He’d been so focused on Harry that, while Draco had noticed his own reactions, he hadn’t focused on them, and he realised he was achingly hard. And he was surprised to feel his stomach fluttering as he lowered his own waistband. He didn’t know what Harry would make of it, of being confronted with the reality of another man’s body, an erection other than his own. Some people panicked and Draco felt, with nauseating certainty, that he’d be a bit destroyed if Harry recoiled or ran.

But Harry was watching intently, without any hint of fear or trepidation. Draco renewed his grip, and Harry licked his lower lip, pulling it between his teeth and watching, still watching.

Draco let his pants and trousers drop, and followed Harry in stepping out of his shoes and socks so they were standing, facing each other, naked.

“About those things,” Draco said.

“Things?” Harry asked. His eyes were glazed, roaming Draco’s body.

“That you’d been thinking about.” Draco was emboldened. “May I?”

“Fuck, yes,” Harry answered. Then blinked, surprised at his own answer.

Draco didn’t let him temper it. “Good.” He stepped forward. “I want to taste you.”

Harry whimpered behind closed lips.

“Lie back for me?”

Harry nodded, though it took him another moment to move. He perched on the foot of the bed, then slid over it, pushing himself back to the centre of the duvet.

Draco followed, knee on the mattress, crawling over the foot board and up the bed until he was sitting back on his calves in front of Harry, close enough that he could reach out and run a hand over the muscle of Harry’s thighs.

Harry whimpered again.

“Tell me?” Draco asked.

“Feels good,” Harry said. “Really good.”

Starting at the knee, Draco ran his hands over Harry’s inner thighs, digging his thumbs in, massaging as he moved further and further up his leg. “Still?” He asked, fingers close enough that if he reached out he could brush Harry’s bollocks.

“Yes,” Harry managed, and then, “Please.”

“Merlin,” Draco mumbled, his pulse thundering in his ears. “Please…?”
“Touch me.” Harry swallowed. “Or what you said before, about the kitchen—” He stopped himself. “I want you to suck me.”

The words went right to Draco’s prick. “Lie back?”

Harry nodded, extending his legs. He leaned back on his elbows. “I want to see you.”

“Okay,” Draco nodded. He slid a knee in between Harry’s, and then the other. “Watch me.”

He braced his shaking hands on the tops of Harry’s legs and leaned forward to kiss the inside of Harry’s thigh.

Harry bucked up and whined.

Again, Draco kissed him, sucking the skin into his mouth for the second it took for Harry to moan and reach down to grip Draco’s shoulder.

“Please,” Harry said again.

His cock twitched against the air, and Draco wanted it in his mouth, wanted to taste it, suck it. Draco moved, his breath ghosting over it. It jerked again, straining for touch, and Draco’s own erection reacted in kind. He bent closer, urged on by Harry’s nails digging into him, and pressed a kiss to the bottom of it.

Harry sucked in a breath, seeming to freeze. “Please,” he whispered again.

“Yeah,” Draco breathed, and even that got a reaction, as Harry lifted his hips in search of Draco’s lips.

Draco obliged. He kissed the head of Harry’s prick, sliding his lips, and Harry’s foreskin, down the glans to take the head of his cock in his mouth.

At Harry’s moan, Draco sank down further, taking him in until he was at the back of Draco’s throat, his thighs straining with the effort of staying still. Draco pulled off again, moving his hands to Harry’s hips, holding him to the bed, and kissing his way up the underside of Harry’s shaft before taking him down again. He worked towards a rhythm, hollowing his cheeks to take in every hint of salt as precome began to leak from Harry’s prick, bobbing his head slowly, and then faster.

He let everything slip away but the sound of Harry’s gasps, and the taste of him, and the warm arch of Harry’s hipbones under his thumbs. He had no sense of time, or of anything save this, until Harry moved his hand to Draco’s face, caressing his cheek and then running fingers through Draco’s hair.

Draco hummed in recognition, but wasn’t dissuaded until Harry pulled harder and rasped his name. “Draco, I’m gonna…” he trailed off with a gasp. It was followed by an outraged sigh as Draco pulled off.

Blood pounded in his ears. His mouth felt full and warm, his limbs light. His prick was leaking, just as Harry’s was. He knew he was close too. Closer than he wanted to be. And if he was going to come, and come soon, he wanted it to be everything it could be for Harry.

Draco forced himself to sit back. He couldn’t help—didn’t want to help—himself running a hand up Harry’s thigh, though. His eyes continued on, moving up Harry’s body until he saw red, bitten lips, and a look of such wanting it almost knocked whatever breath he had out of him.
“Want you to,” he said. “Want to make you come.” He moved a hand towards Harry’s cock and thought better of it only when he saw how quickly Harry moved towards it, how close he really was.

Draco closed his eyes. It was the only way he had any hope of thinking clearly. “Fuck me,” he said.

“What?” Harry’s voice was hoarse and hungry.

“I want to feel you fucking me.”

“Fuck,” Harry managed, the word almost slurred. He struggled up to sitting.

Draco grinned and opened his eyes. “If you want.”

“Yes,” Harry said. His eyes were glazed. “Yes, I want. Fuck, Draco, I want. But…” he trailed off nervously.

“But?” Draco’s blood froze.

“I thought… I don’t know if you do this…” Harry exhaled shakily. “I don’t even know how to ask, apparently. Just,” he tried, “what I was saying before, about trust, and wanting to know what this was like with a man, and I don’t think you’d hurt me, I think you’d make it good, so, if we, or would you— Could we do it the other way around?”

Draco blinked once, and again, and shook his head once to clear it. “Of course. You… That’s what you want?”

Harry nodded. “If that’s okay.”

Draco nodded slowly, Harry’s request still rattling around in his head. “Yes. Very.” He reached for Harry’s face and his eyes felt tight when Harry pressed his cheek into Draco’s hand. “I’ll make it good.”

Harry turned to kiss his palm. “I know.”

Draco trailed his hand over Harry’s shoulder, down his arm. “It’ll be easiest if you’re on your knees, but if you’d rather a different way…”

“I want to be able to see you.”

“Right.” Draco took a shuddering breath. “You’ll tell me if anything hurts at all?”


“Please,” Draco said. “However’s comfortable.” He watched Harry lie back, his stomach rising and falling rapidly. He reached for the bedside drawer, returning with a bottle of lubricant.

He was aware, as he moved, of Harry’s breath ghosting over his nipples, of Harry’s erection almost brushing against his own. Draco bent to kiss him again, and then moved to kneel between his legs. He opened the cap.

Harry stopped him with a hand on his wrist. “You’ll tell me too?”

Draco knit his brow. “Tell you what?”

“If I hurt you. If I burn you again. Anything like that.”
“Of course,” Draco said. “If you want, but that was so minor...”

“I do want. I—” Harry shook his head. “I didn’t think...” He turned his head, hiding it.

Draco sat back, concerned. “Harry? What?”

Harry laughed, his face still turned towards the bedside. “I don’t want to mess it up. I never...I didn’t think I’d have this again.”


“You thought you’d never...?”

“Yeah.” Harry looked away, his eyes on the ceiling.

“Did you want that? Was it like the other things, wanting to be rid of them?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I just didn’t think there would be any way.”

“Merlin.” Draco tucked a finger under his chin, but Harry refused to look up. “Harry.” Draco tried again.

This time, Harry did look at him, with wet eyes and a self-deprecating smile. Draco’s heart ached.

“Harry,” he said again, “I want you. I’m not afraid of your magic.” He half-laughed. “I’m certainly not afraid of you.”

“No?”

“Never,” Draco said, trying to walk the line between levity and painful honesty. He sobered at the possibility that Harry might take it as a joke. “Never, Harry. I want you and I’m not afraid.”

Harry took a shaky breath and looked at Draco with the kind of wonder Draco had never imagined being on the receiving end of. He hadn’t been convinced that kind of thing was real. Harry asked again, “You’re sure?”

Draco laughed in earnest this time. “For Merlin’s sake, I’m bloody well sure, and if you don’t start to believe me in the next thirty seconds I’ll...” He trailed off, waiting impatiently.

“You’ll what?” Harry quirked an eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” Draco conceded. “But I’ve spent the last day wondering if I’d ever get to be here, and I’m hard enough to cut glass and it’s all I can do not to suck your cock down so far that you completely lose the ability to speak, let alone doubt, so if you wouldn’t mind...”

Shocked, Harry laughed and relaxed against the pillows. “When you put it that way.”

Draco popped the cap on the lubricant. “Compelling?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“Raise your knees for me?”
Harry obliged slowly, putting his feet flat on the bed.

“Good.” Draco traced a hand along his thigh, feeling the trace of a tremor there. He pulled away and coated his fingers. He took Harry in hand, stroking him, thrilling when Harry bit his lip and rolled his hips into it.

Draco loosened his grip, then trailed his hand lower, over Harry’s balls and the soft hair below them, and lower still, over the crease of his arse.

Harry opened his legs wider.

Draco leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Harry’s knee and settling against it as he slipped his hand into the crevice of Harry’s arse. He felt Harry tighten as soon as his fingertip made contact, and rubbed his leg in an attempt to soothe. “Do you want to stop?”

Harry took a deep breath, in and out, and shook his head. “No. I’m ready. Just… slow?”

“Course.” Draco pressed the tip of his finger through the tight ring of muscle. “Okay?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

Draco slid further in, to the second knuckle, past it. Out again, and in. Harry didn’t move, either in pleasure or pain, aside from the quick rise and fall of his chest. “Still okay?”

“Yes,” Harry breathed. “More?”

“You sure?”

Harry laughed. “If you don’t start to believe me in the next thirty seconds…”

Draco shook his head jokingly, and he added a second finger to the first. He saw a wince cross Harry’s face and paused, wondering whether to ask again, regardless of Harry’s protestations. But it passed, and was replaced with steadier breathing, and a smile when he saw Draco hesitate.

“Still sure,” Harry said.

Draco’s lips quirked into a smile. “Will you still be sure if I move?”

“I’ll tell you if I’m not.”

Draco withdrew his fingers almost to the fingertips and pressed forward again. Harry gasped, but he smiled shakily. Beads of sweat were starting to gather on his stomach as he tensed around Draco’s fingers, and Harry’s eyes fluttered shut.

Draco began to work towards a rhythm. He watched Harry still, but let himself feel the tight heat around his fingers. His cock jerked at the feeling, at the thought of being inside of it.

Harry’s tension began to ease. Draco saw his body relax, bit by bit, his shoulders falling into the pillows, his hips beginning to move in time with Draco’s hands.

When he was confident that Harry was okay, he pushed in as deep as he’d gone and crooked his fingers upwards, feeling for—

“Fuck.” Harry bucked, lifting his hips off the bed and towards Draco’s hand. His eyes flew open, searching wildly for Draco’s. “What—?”
“How’s that?”

“Fuck,” Harry repeated. “Yeah, what—” he was cut off again as Draco pulled out and pushed in again.

“Prostate,” Draco said. “Feels good?”

Harry nodded, his eyes beginning to glaze, his stomach tensing again as he started to move against Draco’s hand. “More?” He asked. “Can you?”

Draco’s cock twitched. He nodded, and removed his hand.

He leaned forward braced one arm at Harry’s side. “Pull your knees up? Might help to put them around me?”

He felt the warmth of Harry’s heel against his arse. “Like that?”

“Perfect.” He dropped his hand between them and ran a finger over Harry’s hole. “Merlin, I want you.”

“Want you too,” Harry breathed. “Want to feel you.”

Draco reached for the lubricant again and slicked his cock. “Gonna be inside you.”

Harry whimpered. “Please.” He dug his heels in, pulling Draco closer to him.

Draco wrapped a hand around his prick and bit down on his lip to stop a moan as he guided himself towards Harry. He wanted to focus, wanted to be able to hear Harry’s reactions, but he couldn’t help it when the head of his prick passed that tight ring of muscle. He shuddered and moaned, and Harry answered in kind. He dropped his other arm to brace himself and slowly pulled back out, almost all the way, and slowly pressed in again.

Harry breathed quickly below him and tilted his hips, rocking back and forth in search of more.

Draco rolled his hips, angling himself in hopes of hitting Harry’s prostate again.

Beneath him, Harry gasped and threw an arm around his neck, pulling him closer. “Yeah,” he breathed.

Again, Draco rolled his hips, and Harry inhaled, nodding. “That feels…”

Draco bent forward and dropped to his elbows. Harry inhaled sharply when Draco’s stomach trapped his cock between them. Experimentally, Draco rolled his hips again, and Harry’s moan resonated through him.

“Good?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded vehemently. “So good.” Breathing heavily, he struggled to speak. “And you…? Good?”

“Fuck, Harry,” Draco answered. “Yes. So Good. You feel so good.”

Harry smiled, a blown out grin, and tightened his arm around Draco’s shoulders. “More.”

“More,” Draco repeated, feeling his cock jerk inside of Harry. “Yeah.” He pulled back and drove in harder, rolling his hips, trapping Harry’s cock between them.
Harry jerked his hips, urging Draco in deeper, trying to set a pace of his own. Draco was glad to match him.

He felt himself getting closer, could feel the tightness in his balls, the heat gathering at the base of his spine. “Touch yourself?”

Harry slipped a hand between them, biting down on his lip when he began to stroke.

Draco looked down between them and almost came on the spot, at the sight Harry’s hand around his prick, Harry’s hips moving against Draco’s.

“Tell me,” Draco whispered. “Tell me when you’re close.”

“Close,” Harry panted, “Close now, so fucking close. Harder?”

A shaky moan gathered in Draco’s chest. He pulled out and thrust back in, harder this time.

Harry’s knees dug into his sides. “More.”

“Fuck.” Draco steeled himself, hands and knees braced against the mattress. A drop of sweat dripped from his brow. “You feel,” he gasped, “so fucking good.”

“More,” Harry repeated. “Want to come with you inside me.”

Draco groaned, deep and guttural. He kept thrusting, rocking into Harry’s body faster and harder and feeling Harry’s thighs tighten around him.

“So close,” Harry whispered. “Don’t stop.”

“No,” Draco shook his head furiously. He bent to press his mouth to Harry’s shoulder, to his clavicle, to his jaw, to his mouth. Harry’s tongue worked against his in concert with their hips.

“Gonna come,” Harry murmured into his mouth. “Want to come with you.”

Draco groaned and nodded.

Harry gripped the back of Draco’s neck and pulled him into another searing kiss. “Come inside me.”

“Please,” Harry gasped. “Please come.”

“Fuck,” Draco gasped, electric heat gathering in his bollocks. “Fuck, I’m going to—”

“Yes,” Harry urged, and it was the last thing Draco heard before he came, vision blurring till it was down to Harry beneath him, the rich red of his lips and the green of his eyes and the naked want written across his face.

Draco felt Harry tighten his legs around Draco’s back and pull him closer. He still moved his hips, slower and shallower, until he was spent and sagged over Harry, breathless.

He pulled out and shifted, replacing Harry’s hand with his own and leaning forward to kiss him. He felt Harry whimper into his mouth, felt Harry thrust up into the circle of his fingers, warm and velvety soft and hard to throbbing. “Come for me, Harry,” he whispered. “Come on my hand.”
Harry arched silently, closing his eyes and coming, his mouth open as he gasped with his release.

He fell back onto the bed a moment later. Draco knew it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but it felt so much longer. Felt long enough to be sure that he’d remember it forever, Harry’s mouth slack with pleasure as he spilled over Draco’s fingers. That he’d remember this, Harry’s skin against the duvet, the line of his eyelashes against his cheeks, the soft rise and fall of his chest, and the way his hands searched for Draco automatically. The way Harry curled into him, his head against Draco’s shoulder.

Draco didn’t realise straight away that their breathing had lined up so that their bodies moved together even after the fact, or that when he started to fall asleep it was because he was surrounded with a gentle warmth that emanated from Harry’s body without ever becoming dangerous. He didn’t realise they were falling asleep at all until he felt Harry jerk.

Draco shifted and nudged him. “Harry?”

“Mmm?”

“Still practising wandless spells?”

“Mmm.” Harry nodded slowly against Draco’s chest.

“Get rid of the wet spot?”

Harry, much to Draco’s amused astonishment, giggled. He screwed his eyes shut. “Ready?”

“I hope so,” Draco said, trying not to be concerned about Harry’s amusement.

“Is there a spell for this?” Harry asked without opening his eyes.

“Could try a cleaning spell,” Draco suggested.

“Hmmm.” Harry wrinkled his nose and furrowed his brow playfully.

Draco felt a wave of warmth travel over him. It relaxed his shoulders and ended at his toes, and when it had passed he took stock, and the duvet was dry. “Nice,” he said, hoping his very genuine appreciation came through. “Now, shall we get under them?”

“Yeah?” Harry asked, relaxing his face and blinking up at Draco. “And, yeah,” he said, in reference to the sheets.

“Brilliant,” Draco answered, lifting the top sheet for them both. He settled back when Harry followed and wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

Minutes later, he felt Harry jerk again, and this time Draco followed him into sleep.

* * *

Draco was up with the sunrise. He’d managed a few sound hours of sleep, thanks entirely to Harry’s warm weight on top of him, and then next to him. Once he’d stirred, though, he wasn’t able to go back.

Instead, he watched Harry. Watched the dark lines of his lashes flutter against his cheeks while he dreamt. Watched how the arch of his spine moved while he lay on his stomach, breathing deeply and evenly in sleep. He watched the lines of muscle in his shoulders every time he shifted at all. His mouth, when he licked his lips or hummed or, once, mumbled some slurred string of
nonsensical words. It sounded like a question; one Draco couldn’t make out, let alone answer.

He hadn’t scheduled a Portkey; the Ministry wasn’t to know, yet, that he was gone. But he’d scheduled his day around a multi-stop Apparition starting at 8am, to make sure he had enough time to recover, if needed.

He wondered, briefly, very briefly, what would happen if he stayed. If he put it off a few hours, or a few days. But he had his meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, and he meant to see if Mother was free for dinner, and he’d told everyone he was going, made all of his decisions based on that.

He looked down at Harry, hair on one side sticking up in every direction and on the other matted against Draco’s chest. He felt a pull. To stay, to keep holding him. But he’d been in a similar place before. He made a similar decision. He could acknowledge it, feel it, and still move forward. On.

But he wouldn’t be a man who let Harry wake up to an empty bed. Not after everything.

Draco shifted, sat up, meaning to slide out from under Harry and dress before waking him, but the movement was enough to make him stir. He sat up groggily. “Hmm?”

“It’s okay,” Draco whispered. “Just getting dressed. You can go back to sleep.” It was a poor effort, and as soon as it was out Draco realised he’d probably known that.

Harry’s eyes shot open. “Fuck.” He blinked. “Fuck.” He looked up, and his sleepy unguardedness destroyed any possibility of guile. He looked panicked. A bit afraid, even. “You’re leaving.”

Draco hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Fuck.” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Last night.”

Draco smiled, but he could feel the sadness on his face as well as he could feel it in his chest.

“Was incredible. You’re incredible.”

Harry didn’t look like he had any idea what to make of that.

“I hope,” Draco tried, not especially pleased to find nervousness fighting sadness for chest territory, “that it was okay for you, as well.”

Harry blinked and sagged back onto an elbow. “Yeah.” He carded his hair again. Looked at Draco. “Yeah, that was—” His eyes shone. “Everything I wanted.”

Draco’s heart ached. “You were perfect.” He reached out a hand for Harry’s cheek and Harry let him, turning his head at the last minute to kiss Draco’s palm. It felt like it shot through his arm, carried through his ulna and radius and humerus, straight to his heart. Magic in reverse.

Harry watched him pull away. He could feel Harry’s gaze on his back as he climbed out of bed, as he picked his clothes up off the floor and slipped them back on.

Once dressed, he turned back. “You can stay in bed, if you like. You don’t need to go.”

Harry shrugged. Fiddled with the sheets.

“Actually, if you’d like you can stay longer.”

Harry looked up, perplexed.

“I don’t mean here,” Draco rushed to amend. “Or it doesn’t have to be here. But you slept outside
of the void without any incident. You might want to try it again. Could have Kipper and company with you at night. Try somewhere new. Anywhere you like. It doesn’t have to be here.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “Thanks. That’s… I’ll think about that. Good to know.”

Draco nodded. “You should make yourself at home.”

Harry tried to smile, but it was forced. “Don’t think it’ll be quite the same without you. But thank you.”

Harry turned to hug his knees, pulling the sheets around him in the process.

Draco found he wasn’t ready yet to look away. “For what it’s worth,” he said, “I’ll miss you.”

The look on Harry’s face—sceptical and sad and disbelieving and hopeful all at once—was too much to tolerate. Draco looked away. Went to the wardrobe and pulled out a robe just for something to do with himself.

He looked back after he’d shrugged it on. Harry had rested his chin on his knees and was watching Draco, eyes wet, but otherwise trying for impassivity.

He knew he probably shouldn’t, but Draco crossed back to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress, turning to Harry. He brought a hand to Harry’s face, lifted it towards him, and bent forward.

At the last moment he thought he could get away with it, he pulled back. He could still taste Harry on his tongue, and that was hard enough without the feel of Harry’s stubble on his lips. He settled for running his thumb along the line of Harry’s jaw, dropping it when he reached the point just under the centre of Harry’s bottom lip. “Be safe,” he said. “Take care. And I guess I’ll see you, for the Ministry stuff.”

“Yeah.” Harry frowned. “We’ll see.”

Draco’s brow furrowed. He wanted to ask what Harry meant, but felt very certain that he didn’t have the right.

“Thank you,” Draco said. “For everything.”

“You too.” Harry looked up at him then, looked him in the eye and held it.

Draco broke away first. He didn’t bother trying to smile. Not when Harry would see through it, or when he wasn’t sure he could manage it. Not when part of him wanted to climb back into bed.

* * *

One of the benefits of living—staying, Draco reminded himself—at Malfoy Manor was that even after so many years he knew it like the back of his hand.

He didn’t remember the walk to the foyer, but he wound up there anyway. Galder was waiting, and did him the not-so-small mercy of not asking any questions, instead declaring that he would send on Master’s things and tell Mistress Pansy and Master Greg that he had left and sent best wishes, and that Galder was at his service at any time.

Draco nodded his thanks and waited for the pop, as Galder left.

Alone, he took a long look around the foyer, and prepared to Apparate.
He thought, first, of that beach in Brighton. His feet shifted on the pebbles as he struggled to get his footing. The wind, cold and salty and quick, was like a slap to the face. Once he was steady, he went again.

Next, he crossed the Channel. Chapelle Notre-Dame du Salut had an Apparition point where the roof of the nave had been torn off in storm. He felt exhaustion mounting and thought he might walk a moment, but the smell of sea air was still too strong, the salt too eager to settle in his lungs, and it was just two more jumps.

Once to Rouen, where he landed in a wood tucked behind a track on Route de Darnétal, and then once more. He closed his eyes, pictured his flat, and felt himself squeezed and transported.

He opened his eyes in his living room. It wasn’t even half eight and, for the difference in latitude, still dark. It all looked exactly how he’d left it, save a ten foot Nordman fir in the corner. He’d ordered it in late autumn and the elves must have set it up. He’d always reserved decorating it for himself and Mother, though, so it sat there, empty and unlit.

He walked through room after room. There were clean and well appointed, and if they felt at all foreign he reminded himself that that was how they always felt when he came back from a trip. How they’d felt after he’d been to Sicily with Mother, or after he’d gone skiing with Luc’s family at Chamonix, and it would pass.

It would pass.
Chapter 20

The tree did get decorated, with fairies and glass bulbs charmed to play the better of the family memories. Mother came over to help, and Draco went to her for the holiday. It meant he was with her when the Siberian Crane bearing Father’s customary holiday message arrived, a square of parchment reading “Happy Christmas – LM” that left them both silent for the long minutes before Draco decided to repurpose it as kindling. The elves made rack of lamb, and mother and son each had a second piece of the bûche de Noël and a third glass of champagne, and when Draco stumbled onto the hearth afterwards, he was especially glad of the tree. It felt warmer, coming home to that. Besides which the fairies seemed to have taken pity on him this year, putting aside their usual quarrelling in favour of keeping to themselves. It made for an unusually symmetrical tree, and meant the one bulb Draco had charmed specially and hung in the back corner was always well-lit, enough so that even in the middle of the night he could see the two figures in it, and the dozens of apples on the ground around them turning from brown to green and red, and back again.

It stayed until Epiphany. Draco hadn’t been as ready as he’d expected to wake up the morning of the 7th and find it all packed away, even though it always was.

But then, he’d planned for it. It was only a few days until classes started, and he was meant to make a trip to the Manor in between. Millie sent all British Ministry correspondence to the Manor, and Pansy sent it on to Draco, and the letters from Croaker and Robards had become more insistent. He’d been able to put them off once with a report, sent the week before Christmas and probably shelved in the rush before the holidays, but now they wanted him in person, and he’d agreed. He was to Apparate early morning on the 8th, meet with them that afternoon, and return home that same evening, or the next morning. Depending on whether he felt up to all that Apparition and, he would admit to himself, whether there were other pulls towards a longer stay at the Manor. Classes started the following Monday, but he didn’t really have to be back until Sunday evening, depending on how it all went.

He didn’t see Harry. Not at breakfast with Pansy and Greg and Blaise and Millie, though they seemed surprised by his absence. Not at the meeting, which was so full of hot air Draco almost forgot it was January and was, therefore, more of the same; delay, deny, tantalise, promise, and extract more time. At least Shacklebolt—who had sent Draco a tally of charitable demands in the low five figures just after New Year’s Eve and found them all funded by the next close of business —was keeping his word, arguing for Harry’s recovery even as Croaker and Robards grew more, and more openly, frustrated with it. And while that might’ve been enough to make him long for his quiet flat and his quiet office, it wasn’t enough to keep him from walking the gardens, or visiting the stables, or examining the boundaries of the void, or checking the condition of the plants in the conservatory.

He returned to Paris that night, exhausted from the travel but quite certain that he wouldn’t sleep a wink in the Manor, and more than a little reluctant to ask about the availability of the blue rooms.

Draco didn’t see Harry on any of his other trips, either, though his friends seemed less and less surprised by that and Granger always avoided the topic if he raised it.

His Apparition became quite a bit stronger, at least.

And there were his projects. His doctoral students and their projects. Chloé’s new obsession with kelpie hair as a neutral core for the implants. She felt it had been overlooked as contemporary wandmakers fixated on making wands more powerful. Heartstring or unicorn hair or phoenix feather or Veela hair would do that, of course, but they made the wands more temperamental,
harder to match. And her research was impressive. The results were particularly striking in ill children who hadn’t yet been matched with a wand; they could learn to cast early with the implant if it was a good match, and implants based on their parents’ wands had been moderately successful, but what had been deemed weakness in kelpie hair translated to a sort of mellowness. Kelpie hair implants were more willing to work with the patient, especially those who didn’t have experience.

Draco was equal parts impressed and jealous, and in the world of academia the latter was an excellent incentive to revive his own research. It felt like ages ago since he’d left his students with instructions to pursue the question of whether wand wood or cores alone would have a similar effect, in hopes of producing even slimmer implants. It wasn’t a bad question, but it wasn’t what he wanted to think about. He left them to it and started poring over his case notes from Harry. He wanted to know more about the connection between magical deprivation and wandless magic. He wanted to understand whether and how implants would work elsewhere in the body. He wanted a better understanding of magical bone conductivity, and how witches and wizards were trained to cast in parts of the world where wandless magic was common, or where potions or ceremonies, rather than charms, were the centre of magical life. He thought about travelling. Seeing if Mahoutokoro or Uagadou would take him on for a year or two as a visitor.

He spent two days looking into it in earnest after Granger called. It was a quick call, straight to the point. Croaker had begun to suspect that Harry wasn’t making as much progress as reported. She’d spoken with Harry and they’d decided on a change of plan. They wouldn’t need Draco to continue making his trips, though they both appreciated it very much and any outstanding bills should be directed to, etc. He lost interest after that, as well as all ability to focus. All he really heard was that Harry was gone. And he was happy for him. Truly. And proud of what they’d accomplished. He hadn’t always thought Harry would reach that point, and it was a wonderful thing. An achievement to be proud of. And he told himself at first that his introductory letter to the Headmistress at Uagadou was in the interest of racking up more of those. Until he thought, for a hundredth time, about the intensity of Harry’s eyes and his declarations of honesty, and admitted to himself that, while the question and the prospect of travel both intrigued him, they weren’t the only motivators.

Then, thankfully, blessedly, springtime came to Paris.

Draco woke one day in mid-April to find that the sun was already up, and he was beginning to sweat under two down quilts. One his way to work, he noticed that daffodil leaves had pushed through the earth, and a few buds were beginning to swell.

A week later they had bloomed. Then the magnolias were leafing, their flowers’ fuzzy green covers given way to pink and white flowers that left the air smelling sweet and fresh, and every breath Draco took felt like spring. The apple trees followed, and the ladybirds returned with enough of a vengeance that when Draco left his office windows open he’d often find their red spotted shells clustered in a corner of the sill or, occasionally, trekking across his notes. They were good luck, he’d once been told, and it felt like it.

The warmer weather lured his colleagues out of their offices, too. Luc took to stopping by mid-morning for Draco’s company on a walk. They traded ideas, discussed their more difficult students. Chloé brought her daughters to work, and Draco spent an afternoon showing them how different wands could produce different results, much to their delight, though Chloé wouldn’t let them try Orchideous until they were officially enrolled at Beauxbatons. And the office next to Draco’s, which had been empty when he left, had been filled by a postgraduate researcher called Julien, who delighted in yelling questions through the window at Draco, which he did not especially enjoy, and in convincing Draco to give him a tour of gay Parisian nightclubs, which he enjoyed much more.

It felt good. It all felt very, very good, to be moving again, to be free to walk down the Rue Saint-
Jacques with Luc in the morning, or to leave his office when restlessness struck mid-afternoon and go further, turning down the Quai de Montebello to stare at Notre-Dame across the Seine. He felt more relaxed than he had in ages.

His work was coming along too. Uagadou didn’t take visitors—about which Draco was a bit relieved once spring was in full bloom—but Madame Sissoko made introductions for Draco among the community of Malian expatriate wizards in Paris. Whereas Draco came to Muggle science through and for his magical research, Professor Traoré had done the reverse, and the combination of her work on nervous disorders, including their relationship to magical deprivation, was a perfect match for Draco’s own. It was a ten-minute walk from Draco’s office to the École Normale Supérieure, and long brainstorming lunches with Amina became at least a weekly ritual.

He’d skipped it just once, when Millie and Blaise dragged Pansy and Greg along with them on a trip for his birthday, all of them staying at Draco’s, which quickly began to feel quite a lot like an older, drunker, funnier version of the Slytherin common room. Pansy had come close to making up for a decade’s worth of missed shopping opportunities, given the chance to use her royalties for once. Greg had visited every museum and walked more miles that Draco could keep track of. Millie and Blaise had wandered the city drinking more than their share of coffee and wine and looking disgustingly in love all the while, and Draco could’ve bought Pansy yet one more pair of shoes for every quick-witted jibe that left them all laughing. He’d only wished it was longer, and his flat felt woefully empty in their wake.

Add in weekly dinners with Mother and the occasional night out with friends, and Draco was almost too busy by mid-summer. He’d reluctantly had to give up the idea of getting a Kneazle kitten when he wasn’t home enough to properly care for it. He’d even had to fight to carve out an afternoon alone in his flat to focus on the latest clinical reports without interruption. He was due to take on a next round of implantation surgeries himself. The biggest obstacle to making the procedure common was a shortage of qualified Healers, andremedying that shortage was, therefore, of highest priority. It was just a question of picking patients whose cases would be instructive.

He was two hours in, thoroughly immersed in the case of a Muggle-born witch whose double exposure to chickenpox and dragon pox had led to a drug-resistant, magically debilitating case of Shingles, and thinking of calling Amina in, when the Floo went off.

Halfway to the Floo, he realised it was an international call. It was probably Pansy, reminding him again to clear a few days for the Paris Haute Couture Autumn/Winter shows, or Greg, who had done the blueprints for the stables expansion and was on to design a proper standalone greenhouse for the grounds, and liked to consult. And he hadn’t exactly warned them not to call.

He wasn’t surprised when it was Millie, instead, even if it was the middle of the day. He was much more surprised—and instantly a bit queasy—when she spoke.

“Doctor Malfoy,” she began.

“Oh, hell, Mill.” He wasn’t prepared for anything to do with the Ministry.

“We apologise for interrupting you at home.”

“And yet.” It didn’t seem urgent, and the pit of worry in his stomach gave way to annoyance.
Safe in the Floo, she rolled her eyes, though her voice stayed entirely professional. “However, Ministry personnel need to speak with you at your earliest possible convenience, and I have been asked to make contact with you as quickly as possible. When are you free to meet?”

“If it’s those arseholes in Mysteries and MLE, you can tell them to sit on a Skrewt.”

“Unfortunately, they won’t be able to join you.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Shacklebolt?”

“However, I am assured that the matter is pressing. When are you free to meet?”

“He’s going to have to drag his arse to Paris if he wants anything.”

“I have been authorised to arrange travel to Paris if you are willing to meet.”

“And if I’m not?”

“We in the Minister’s Office would strongly encourage you to seriously consider this meeting.”

“You’re not even on a secure Floo. How interesting can it be?”

She lowered her voice. “Draco. Come on.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s Thursday. I’m in surgery Monday through Wednesday for the next three weeks and have all the usual business to attend to on top of that. It really isn’t a particularly convenient time.”

“Again, we in the Minister’s Office would strongly encourage you to seriously consider this meeting.”

“Bugger.” Draco ran a hand through his hair. “Fine. Can it wait for the 3rd, so I’m not elbows-deep in entrails?”

“From hand surgeries?” Millie let slip, modelling the very height of sarcasm.


“The 26th?”

“Yes, if we must. Do I get to pick the restaurant this time?”

“I’ve been asked to recommend L’Arpège, if that suits?” She raised an eyebrow.

Draco huffed. “It’s out of the way.”

“Word is it’s about to get its third star.”

“Fine.” Draco huffed again. “But only because there’s an Apparition point.”

“Very well. Shall we say half noon on Friday the 26th at L’Arpège?”

“If we must.”

“Thank you. I’ll send an owl with the details as the date approaches.”

“Send it to my office, would you?”
As you prefer. Thank you, Doctor Malfoy.”

“Bye, Mill. Love to Blaise.”

She winked, and broke the connection.

He rocked back and stood, grabbing the discarded file on his way back to the sofa, wondering what Shacklebolt wanted this time and, depending on how it went, how he’d look wearing a Bouillabaisse.

* * *

The Apparition point at L’Arpège was tucked between the kitchen and the toilets, and it didn’t put Draco in the best mood to begin with. None of it did. He’d had to cut short a meeting to make it, even after accounting for the ten minutes he wanted to keep Shacklebolt waiting, and it would’ve been a beautiful day for a walk if the restaurant weren’t quite so far from his office. And he wasn’t even sure why he’d agreed, save that Mill had asked and he got to put lunch at L’Arpège on the Ministry’s tab. He might have had some grudging sympathy for the Minister, but that didn’t extend to an interest in working with him on some other mad project that required upturning his life to, what? Save the Ministry from itself? The no was on his tongue before he’d even set foot in the dining room.

As before, he was shown to the private dining room, which at least served the purpose of piquing his interest. If they’d gone to such lengths it might at least be interesting. Still a no, but an interesting no.

Then the maitre’d held open the door, and the breath went out of him.

Harry was sitting at a table for two in the centre of the room. He looked startled, as though he had just looked up when the door opened, and Draco saw him slide his knife back into place and drop his hand into his lap.

The maitre’d brought a hand to Draco’s back. “Sir?” he asked, concerned.

“Oui,” Draco replied, taking a step forward.

“Ça va?”

“Ça va.” Draco answered automatically and stepped far enough into the room for the maitre’d to close the door. Which, with a look between the two of them, he did.

Harry cleared his throat. “Hi.”

“Hello.”

“Hey.” Harry looked almost as frozen as Draco felt, though he didn’t have the disadvantage of surprise.

Draco looked at him and looked at him. His eyes were the same. His hair was tamer, though probably for it being midday at a restaurant rather than in the middle of a walk around the grounds or a game of magical catch or first thing in the morning. Draco looked so long Harry began to squirm, shifting to one side, crossing and uncrossing his legs.

It jarred Draco enough to prompt speech, at least. “I expected the Minister.”
“Er, yeah.” Harry said. “He’s not—I asked Millie to set up the meeting.”

“Since when does she work for you?” Draco asked, feeling irritated on her behalf.

“She doesn’t. It was a favour.”

Draco’s Millie-related irritation changed course abruptly. “Oh? Is that so?”

“Sort of a going away present.”

“For whom, exactly?”

“Would you like to have a seat?” Harry gestured to the empty chair across from him. “Please?”

“I’m—” Draco thought of half a dozen objects. They all died in his throat. He wanted to. As much as he didn’t want to want to. He compelled himself to move forward, though his legs felt strangely loose, as if they might fall out from under him.

Harry stood and rushed to pull Draco’s chair out.

Draco couldn’t help looking at him like he’d gone a bit mad, but he took it and let Harry push it in.

Harry settled across from him. Or tried to. He couldn’t entirely sit still. Draco wanted to grab his hand just to stop him playing with the silver. Or needed to stop him playing with the silver without grabbing his hand, because he wouldn’t want to let go once he had.

“Long time,” Draco started.

“Er, yeah.” Harry bit his lip nervously. “I had to… There were reasons.”

“You needn’t explain,” Draco said, calling upon all of the pureblood training in imperiousness that he could still muster. At least it was familiar, some sort of a way to move forward without falling apart. “We had an understanding, and neither of us was obligated to the other.”

“I—Yeah, that’s true, I know. But I don’t think—I hope you don’t think—that that’s how I felt.”

“It’s none of my concern.”

“Is that how you feel about it now?”

“It’s been half a year. Who’s to say I feel anything about it at all?”

“Can I tell you anyway?”

“I see no need,” Draco answered. He lifted a menu. Hid behind it, really.

“I’ve ordered already,” Harry said.

Dammit. “Taken the liberty, have you?” Draco drawled from behind his menu, racking his brain for some other way out. “How bold of you.”

“Oh.” Harry’s voice cracked. “I didn’t mean—I didn’t mean it like that. I just got us both the chef’s tasting menu. They recommended it. Said it was the best option. The freshest, you know. But if you’d rather something else, that’s fine, I’ll go get them and we can start over.”

Draco closed his eyes for a long moment, trying, against everything he felt, to remain totally,
implacably cool. He dropped his menu on the table. “It’s fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Over with?” Harry’s face fell. He struggled to right it. “I—if you don’t want to be here, you can leave.”

“Didn’t realise I needed your permission.”

“You don’t,” Harry insisted. “Of course you don’t. Bugger.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ve already cocked this up.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and waited.

Harry set his hands on the edge of the table and looked Draco right in the eye. “I’d like to tell you why I didn’t see you, and I’d like to tell you what’s happened since I last did. If it bothers you that I asked Millie to schedule, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you’d see me otherwise.”

Draco pressed his lips into a firm line.

“I’m going to start talking,” Harry said. “If you’d like to change the meal, or leave, please tell me.”

Draco crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. The tasting menu sounded perfectly fine. More than. And he wanted to hear it. But letting Harry know that…

“Okay,” Harry said. “The last time I saw you, you were leaving. You left. Which—” he held up his palms in surrender before Draco could speak “—I knew you were going to do. You told me what it was, and I had my choice to make, and I made it, and I’d make the same choice again.”

The words echoed in Draco’s ears. *I’d make the same choice again. I’d make the same choice again.* By the time he’d caught up, Harry’d moved on.

“—because of that honesty. You were always honest, and I was always honest with you, and to you, at least as much as I knew how to be. As much as I could be. I was still figuring things out. But when it came to being honest with other people, you—when I thought about it, after you left, I hadn’t realised how much I was relying on you for that, to do it for me. Merlin, I wanted to see you. I wanted to see you so badly I practically had to tie myself to a chair. I wanted you to save me some more, I think. I wanted you to go to the Ministry and buy me more time, get me away from all of that. And I couldn’t let that be how things were between us. I don’t think either of us could’ve stood that for very long. But I knew that if I saw you, the temptation would be there. And I had to do it for myself.

“So that’s what I’ve been doing ever since. That’s—” He stopped. Took a deep breath. “That’s what I meant about a going away present. I’m leaving the Ministry.”

Draco felt like the floor had fallen out from under him. “What?”

“I’m leaving the Ministry,” Harry repeated.

“Wha—*How*?”

“I—” Harry laughed and looked down at his plate. “Shortest long story you can imagine, basically?”

“What—” Draco started again, when the door opened.

He stopped as the waiter came in bearing plates of vegetable tartlets. It was, as an added benefit,
another moment in which he could get away with watching Harry, who was preoccupied with watching their server.

When the door closed again, leaving them alone, Harry turned back.

Draco was still watching him. “Tell me, then.”

“What?”

“The shortest long story I can imagine.”

“Oh, right. Well. I quit.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. He had to consciously remind himself to close it. “What? You… What?” He shook his head. “You’ll excuse me, I hope, if I have a hard time imagining it happening as plainly as you’ve said it.”

“Um. Sort of?” Harry bit into a tartlet.

Draco followed suit, and tried not to moan around it. Wholly different topic, that would’ve been. He swallowed. “Care to expand?”

“I kept getting better, and better. You—Oh, Merlin, you’re going to enjoy this, I bet. Ready?”

Draco nodded.

“You were right. Your theory was right.”

Draco hummed and took another bite of tartlet to keep from gloating.

“Working with Healer Barrett… it was good in a lot of ways. And it’s not like it’s the sort of thing that can ever be—I’m not sure ‘cured’ would even be the right word. But managed. And it made all the difference, that you realised that, figured out what to do about it. I—” He sounded choked up, and Draco was a bit grateful that he continued on in a different vein. “Anyway, I kept getting closer to being back to where I had been before, and Gawain and John kept poking around, asking questions about it, wanting to see what I could do. And I realised either I would have to pretend to be sicker than I was, or I’d have to own up to being able to do wandless magic that…well, I kept practising and I’d guess it’s good enough now that they would’ve wanted to make something of it.” He sighed. “As always.

“And both of those options, when I thought about them, and talked to Hermione about them, and then Ron, too, and, if this isn’t too many surprises for one meal, Pansy—”

A bit of broccoli went down the wrong pipe at that, and Draco started coughing.

“She’s just really straightforward!” Harry explained quickly, as though it would clear Draco’s airways. “And I’m supposed to be honest, and we started having dinner sometimes.”

Draco waved a hand for him to stop, and took a long sip of water. “Fine,” he coughed. “It’s fine.” He cleared his throat. “Surprising, but I understand the unique charm of Pansy Parkinson. That was actually a bit of food down the wrong way.”

“Oh, Merlin.” Harry covered his face with a hand. He dropped it again. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You were talking to Pansy?”
“Right. Yeah. Among others. And I realised both of those options were basically pretty crap. That there was no way to win. And by then it was March, and there was really no good way out of it except busting through the wall, so to speak. Fortunately,” he smiled, “that’s one of those things I’m good at.”

“So you just… quit?” Draco asked, still disbelieving.

“I needed a plan first. To avoid getting sucked back in, and to keep it from being a scandal. Pansy pointed that one out, actually. That if I left they’d just smear me in the papers.

“So I started a new foundation. Which might sound mad, I know, when I was already up to my ears in them, but there wasn’t one for this.”

“I didn’t know that was possible.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Harry chuckled. “But it was sort of in front of me. All of the cases we handled that were really to do with the war and all the ways it messed people up. And working with Healer Barrett. And working with you. I hadn’t known that there was anything more to magic than just pointing and casting, you know? But that was wrong. And we saw a lot of cases, actually, that were related. People getting in fights, drunk and disorderlies, violence at home, kids getting scared and causing damage with their magic. Just all the time. And they were the worst cases, because there was nothing you could do. Part of why I liked the away cases so much. Dragon egg smugglers, that’s straightforward enough. But all this stuff, the post-war trauma stuff, that’s—what do you do with that? With people who love each other or want to be good, who don’t really have criminal instincts, but they’re so angry, or scared, and they can’t contain it, or their magic can’t, and there are all sorts of damage done. And the Aurors are a plaster, when it needs a lot more than that.

“So it got to the point where I probably could have been cleared to go back. Not necessarily because I was ready, but because they had reasons for wanting to clear me. And the thing is.” He paused. “I don’t really like this bit.” He folded and unfolded his napkin in his lap, and Draco watched him, and already he wanted to reach across the table and take his hands, pull him close and congratulate him. Throw him a bloody parade or something.

“The thing is,” Harry said, starting again. “I’m a lot better, but I still get tired after a while. I skipped a few days of the exercises once, and it got harder to control it all, just in maybe half a week. And I still see Healer Barrett, and I still can’t really lie. Which, if you’re going to do any sort of undercover work, you have to.”

“If you’re going to do any sort of Ministry work you have to,” Draco mumbled.

“Yeah, that too. And I really can’t. I want to sometimes. Believe me.” He exhaled, half-sigh, half-laugh. “Sometimes I really want to. It would be so much easier to come here and tell you something less than this. But it’s still sensitive. My magic. Healer Barrett thinks it might stay that way. And it’s okay if it’s something little, you know? If I have to tell someone they look nice when they don’t, and I don’t really care. But people I do care about, things I care about… I really can’t risk keeping things in. Lying about them.”

“People and things you care about,” Draco repeated tentatively. His heart felt like it was beating much too quickly.

“Yeah. Both.” Harry looked at him for what felt like a very long moment before he went on. “And around those big things, I can’t risk it. I can’t lie about who I am, or who I care about. Who I love. What I want. And if I went back I would’ve had to lie all the time. To do the kind of work I like
best, the undercover stuff. To be there at all. It was too much. And if the other option was staying in the void forever, just staying in those few rooms, maybe going to the conservatory or the gardens once in a while, but pretending to be sick the rest of my life. Or letting them take it out and being without magic altogether… I don’t know if they even would’ve agreed to that any more, after they bought in to what you said."

Draco frowned and started to apologise.

Harry stopped him before he could. “It’s not you. That’s only about them. That they believed it so easily and wanted it so badly.” He sat back. “But they did. So I could only figure out one way out.”

“The foundation?”

“The foundation. Haven’t given it a public name yet, but I have a solicitor for it and she’s filed the paperwork to start things. And that’s what I’ll do. It’s something I can do, for one, and keep my magic without having to use it in ways I don’t want to. And it’s something I want to do, too. And it has the benefit of being something that the Ministry can’t really go after me for, you know? Wouldn’t look to good if the press went after me for this.”

“That’s… ingenious,” Draco granted.

“It is something I really want to do, now I’ve thought of it. I’m excited for it.” He paused. “But it does have those benefits, too.

“And then, about three weeks ago, I walked into Gawain’s office, told him about it, and gave notice.”

“How did that go?”

“About as well as you’d imagine.” Harry chuckled. “Matched his robes, basically.”

“And Shacklebolt?”

Harry inclined his head. “Said he was sorry to see me go and I should know I’d always have a place there. But you know? I don’t think he wants me back. Weirdly, I think he might’ve been kind of jealous. Or envious, maybe? Like he wished he could do that too.”

The door opened again, and they sat in silence as their plates were replaced with an arugula salad. Draco was a bit grateful for the reprieve this time. It was a lot to make sense of. He thought back on his own conversation with the Minister, too, and picked up where they’d left off when the door closed behind their server. “I don’t think you’re wrong about that.”

“About Kingsley?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “Though actually, about all of it.”

“Really?” Harry looked up, hope suddenly blazing in his features. “You think it sounds good?”

“Yes.” Draco paused to think more about it. “I do. I think it’s savvy, and I think it makes sense, and it sounds a lot like you, actually. To want to fight for something on your own terms.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I guess—Yeah. I hadn’t thought about it quite like that.”

Draco shrugged. “Well, then, for what it’s worth.”

“Yeah.” Harry paused, rested his fork on the edge of his plate. “Does it make sense, why I couldn’t
see you?”

Draco hadn’t been expecting that. He wasn’t entirely sure of what to say. “When you explain it, it does. But it’s also true, what I said before. Neither of us was under any obligation”

Harry nodded slowly. He picked up his fork, then put it down again. “Is that really how you felt? Truly? That morning when you were leaving?”

Carefully, Draco set down his own fork. “No. It wasn’t.”

“Past tense.”

“Past tense, yes.” Draco sighed. “I don’t know about the present. I haven’t seen you in six months.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” Harry asked, all in a rush as if he’d been holding it in.

Draco’s mouth quirked, and he gave Harry what he hoped was a relatively gentle smile. “Did you really not ask Pansy or Millie about that?”

The very tops of Harry’s cheekbones flushed just a bit pink. “Might’ve done. But they might not know, for one thing. And it’s just not the same as asking.”

“No,” Draco said.

Harry knit his brow. “No…?”

“No, it’s not the same thing. And no, I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Oh.” Harry’s shoulders relaxed. Draco hadn’t even realised he’d been holding them together. “I’d still like to… Well. It’s—there are two things, and I’m not sure if, together, they make things more or less complicated. But I’d like to say both, if that’s all right.”

“It is.”

The server appeared again. Draco, for the first time in many years, was on the verge of cursing the number of courses involved in a meal. Except that it let him gather his thoughts.

A hazelnut soup took the place of his salad, and this time he waited when the door closed.

“So, two things,” Harry said, suddenly more nervous than he had been just a minute before. “This charity… It’s going to have a research division. Figuring out how to treat people whose magic is out of control in some way. Figuring out what they need, why they’re using magic violently, whether consciously or not. A lot of that will be led by Mind Healers, but there’ll be some cases that are about magic in the body. There have already been some in the news, about people who can’t explain why they’ve cast certain spells, especially children. And some cases where it seems like magic is reacting to neurochemical or hormonal conditions. We don’t even know exactly what the source is, some of the time. But we need someone to run it who knows about magic and medicine, and who’s willing to think creatively about how those things work together. So, one thing is wondering if you might be interested in running that.”

Surprised was an understatement. Draco was at a loss.

Harry waited a moment, and then seemed to falter. At the prospect of losing his nerve, he went on. “The other thing is, if you said yes, you’d—or, you could—be back in England. With me. Not that
that will be persuasive, or that I expect that. But if you did, I’d really like—” He sighed. “Sometimes I really wish I didn’t have to deal with this magic thing all the time, you know? Could just have five minutes off to be…” He sighed. “Whatever. I’d really like to see what could happen between us.”

Draco still didn’t have an answer. He had even less of one than he’d had before. He took a bite of his soup.

“Is that too much? You don’t have to tell me now,” Harry tried.

Draco set his spoon down. “I don’t think I can tell you now.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “That’s fine. I understand. If you have any questions about it—about any of it—and you want to ask them…”

“Thank you.”

Draco looked at Harry, and at Harry looking back at him, and didn’t know how long it would take to begin to know what his questions even were. He did know he still wanted to reach across the table and take Harry’s hand. And some part of him wanted to reach across the table and take more than that. He took a deep breath. Exhaled. “How many more courses are there?”

Harry quirked his mouth, looking properly embarrassed now. “Twelve.”

Draco laughed. “Twelve? Twelve more?”

“Yes,” Harry answered, a bit miserably. “It was the way to try everything. Make sure there was something you liked.”

There is, Draco thought. “Well,” he said. “It’s been six months? Seven? Surely, with all of that, there’s twelve more courses worth of stories you can tell.”

“Yeah, though it’s been six months, maybe seven, where I’ve really wanted to hear about you, too. Tell you mine if you tell me yours?”

Draco found that agreeable.

* * *

Lunch lasted, and lasted, and Draco had work left to do afterwards. But even after several hours of reviewing patient files and a long, unusually roundabout walk home, Draco’s head was still spinning.

Harry wanted him. Harry still wanted him. Harry wanted to work with him. Harry wanted him to move back to England. Harry wanted him to move back to England to see if there was something more between them. Harry wanted to be with him, properly be with him. Or try it.

He made it back to his flat partially through force of habit. And though it wasn’t habit, something similarly instinctual drove him to the Floo. He knelt on the heart and called for Millie and Blaise’s.

She answered almost immediately, and not with hello. “I’ve been wondering if you’d call. Are you a little mad, very mad, or Umbridge?”

Draco blinked. Laughed. “None of the above.”

“Really?” She looked at him sceptically.
“Really,” he said truthfully. “But did you know what he was going to ask?”

She hesitated. “I had some guesses. But no, I didn’t know. Don’t know.”

“What were your guesses?”

“He asked about you, you know. Pretty regularly. Not often, but that felt almost like he didn’t want anyone to know how often he wanted to ask. Every time he thought it had been long enough. And when he quit, he came out of the Minister’s office looking as though he was on cloud nine. The Minister told me what had happened, of course, and next time I visited Pansy I asked—half-joking—what he’d like as a going away present, and… well. He asked me to set an appointment with you because he wanted to see you and didn’t know that you’d be willing. So I guessed he was going to ask you where you stood, with whatever it was that was going on between you.”

“Whatever it was.” Draco sighed. “He did, sort of. Also asked me if I’d like a job at this new foundation of his.”

Millie’s eyebrows shot up. “He did?”

“Yes. Why the reaction?”

“They’re very sought after at the moment. There’s no one else who has the same fundraising ability or political influence. That was the whole problem, wasn’t it? So for him to set out on his own—everyone thinks it’s going to be a force.”

“Do you?”

“I do, yes. You’ve seen him. Don’t you?”

He didn’t have to consider. “Yes, I do. But whether it’s a force I want to be a part of…” He sighed. “I like my work. Some days—more days than most people, I think—I love my work. To give that up?”


“And there was more.”

“Oh?”

“About the ‘whatever it was that was going on’ between us. He wants to try it. Properly try it.”

“Ah,” Millie asked, gentling her voice. “And you? Do you want to?”

“Merlin help me, Mill. I do.”

“And your Parisian life of hedonistic luxury?”

He snorted. “Haven’t pulled since I’ve been back. No interest.”

“You go out all the time, though.”

“Drinking, dancing, blowing off steam. Anything more? Oh, Salazar and Helga both. I just don’t bloody want to. It’s maddening.”

“You know, Draco. I hesitate to say this, but… he’s not the only one who misses you. All of us would be glad to see you back more. Which doesn’t mean it’s the right thing for you to do, but it is
to say you wouldn’t be doing it just for him. You wound up having something of a life here again. It doesn’t diminish your life there, or make it less compelling, or an easier choice. But it is here. We do miss you.”

“Oh, Mill. Cut my heart out why don’t you?”

“Sorry,” she said, sounding like she actually meant it a bit. “But as long as the larger topic’s out there. You know it’s serious when both Pansy and Greg manage to articulate a feeling in cogent, mature, reasonable terms, let alone the same one. And yet.”

He laughed. “My kingdom for a Pensieve.”

“Really. It was a sight.”

He sighed and shifted on the hearth. “I wish it was an answer, too.”

“Well, what do you need to know to decide? More about the job? More about how he feels, or what’s there between you?”

“All of the above. But I don’t even know where to start, or how to start, or when to start.”

“Do you think Potter can give you some of those answers?”

“More than anyone else can, but I’ll be shocked if he’s not already taken a Portkey back to London.”

She grinned. “Would you be? When I was in charge of his travel arrangements?”

“Mill,” he warned. “Don’t joke with me. Are you?”

“Oh, darling. About this?” She shook her head. “Grab a quill. I’ve got a hotel address for you.”
Draco had to cross the Seine to get to the Rue de Rivoli, and he didn’t entirely trust himself to Apparate. So he walked, checking every few steps for the scrap of parchment stuffed in the pocket of his trousers, even though he knew where he was going. It wasn’t that he needed the address, or that he couldn’t ask the front desk if he forgot the room number, but that it was the only proof he had, for thirty long minutes, that this was more than wishful thinking. And even then, he had to steel himself for the possibility that Harry had Apparated away, or gone out for the night on his own, or… something else that would keep him away. At some point in the midst of all those hopeful trips to the Manor, he’d stopped being able to hope without reminding himself of how unlikely the whole thing was. Even now, when Harry had come specifically to find him, even with an explanation for past disappointments rattling around in his head.

He crossed the Pont Royal, skirted the Jardin des Tuileries, and ducked under the covered pavement across the street. He walked past arch after identical arch, so focused on what might happen once he arrived that he almost missed his destination. He supposed he could consider it an advantage of Muggle porters over elves; they were tall enough to notice while distracted.

And there, to his right, were the green, gold-lettered signs of the Meurice. He balled the parchment in his fist. An executive suite, Mill had said, on the fourth floor. He checked again in the lift. 426.

He ran a hand over the wainscoting as he walked. 421, 422. He followed the signs until he found it. 426.

He knocked, and heard movement inside straight away. The door opened almost immediately.

And there was Harry, looking nervous and a bit frantic, his breath catching when he saw Draco. He leaned against the door heavily, looking queasy and grateful, and Draco had to stop himself, again, from leaning in to kiss him.

Except, he realised, he didn’t. He wanted Harry, and Harry had been perfectly clear about wanting him back, and there was no reason at all that he couldn’t just do it. So he did. Stepped forward and hooked an arm around Harry’s waist and watched him go wide-eyed and then breathless as he pulled him closer, and though he couldn’t be certain afterwards, he thought Harry might actually have kissed him first.

It was better than Draco remembered. More confident. He felt Harry wanting him. Emboldened, he pressed forward and deepened the kiss, and Harry returned that too, all hands and tongues and warmth, that incredible warmth.

When Harry pulled back it was just to pull Draco into the room and kick the door shut behind him. But with the sound of the lock clicking in to place, a laden, uncertain silence fell between them. Harry took a step closer, then half a step back again.

Draco smoothed his jumper. Ran a hand through his hair. “That was…” He shook his head, hoping Harry could see what he felt. That little hint of awe. He laughed. “Fantastic, and not why I came.”

Harry bit his lip. “Not sure how to take that.”

“You could invite me in?”

“I—Yeah, I could, and I want to—I will—but, what is it I’m inviting you in for?”
“Does the answer change the invitation?”

“Not that it exists. Whether it’s for the bedroom, though…”

“Right. Yes.”

Harry carded his hair. “Do you want it to be for the bedroom?”

Draco laughed. “Couldn’t you tell?” He saw Harry’s eyes dart to his trousers. “But that still isn’t why I came. Could we talk?” He added, “In the sitting room?”

“Oh, Merlin. That sounds ominous.”

“I don’t know that it is. But it’s not a conversation I’ll want to have after… well.”

“After well,” Harry repeated. “Right. Okay. Sitting room it is.” He stood aside and gestured to the settee and the two bergères perpendicular to it, almost identical to the one he’d favoured at the Manor.

Draco took one of the chairs. He didn’t miss the disappointed quirk to Harry's mouth, and added, “Just so I’m not distracted.”

Harry looked sceptical still, and took the corner of the settee closest to Draco’s chair.

“You asked what you were inviting me in for,” Draco began.

Harry nodded.

“You left me with a lot to think about this afternoon. And I couldn’t stop thinking about it. But I didn’t know enough to make any decisions, and Mill suggested, quite rightly, that asking you might be the best way forward.”

“Is that how you knew where I was?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “Though for what it’s worth, I’ve already been cross at her once today.”

“I’m not cross.” He laughed once and gestured around the room. “Does this seem like the kind of place I’d book for myself? When she offered to take care of all that, I was sort of hoping. Or at least, it didn’t seem like a bad idea to have a mutual friend who could tell you where I was.”

“Clever girl, Mill.”

“She really is,” Harry smiled. “But I doubt that answers any of your questions.”

“No,” Draco agreed. “Though I don’t know that there are clear answers. About the job, perhaps, though I imagine that’s clearer, and should tell you upfront that the odds of my leaving the University permanently are not high. But more about what there is between us. I can’t say I haven’t thought about it, or that I wasn’t disappointed not to ever see you when I was in England. I assumed—correctly, I suppose, though for different reasons than you’ve laid out—that you didn’t want to see me, and that was the end of that.”

“No!” Harry interrupted. “Fuck. No, that’s—I can see why you thought that, but it’s not what I meant at all.”

“I understand that,” Draco said, intending something between reassurance and placation. “What I’m saying, though, is that it’s a lot to digest all at once.”
“Did you think it was nothing, during all that time?” Harry asked, with a hint of despair in his voice.

“I didn’t think it had been nothing. I did think it had been just that one night. That that was part of how you’d made the decision—by squaring yourself to a one-off and avoiding anything that could’ve muddied the waters.”

“No,” Harry said again. “That wasn’t—”

“Harry, I know,” Draco interrupted. “I’m not saying it’s nothing. That it was nothing then, or is now. I wouldn’t be here if I thought that. I’m saying that we don’t quite know what it is.”

“Okay.” Harry frowned. “What is it that you want to know?”

“This is where you may not be able to answer any questions. I wouldn’t be able to. It’s not so much about anything we could say, I think, but about figuring out what our relationship would be outside of a very specific context. There are things I can think I know—what it would be like to go on a walk with you, or have tea with you, or sleep with you. But I don’t know what it would be like to go out for a drink with you, or to a show, or the shops. Those sorts of everyday things. I don’t expect that they’d be bad, but neither of us can know, and that makes it awfully tricky to make any sort of decision. Don’t you think?”

“Isn’t finding all of that out part of the point?”

“If you lived down the block, maybe. But as it is, if you’re asking me to think about rearranging my life in such a significant way, I’d like to be more intentional about it.”

“That doesn’t sound very good.”

Draco grimaced. “It doesn’t, does it? That’s not how I meant it. Let me try again?”

“Yes, please do.”

“Think of it this way: I’m asking you on a date.”

“A date.”

“A date,” Draco said again. “I’m asking you to come out with me tonight.”

“On a date?” The corner of Harry’s mouth quirked into a smile.

“Yes.”

“A date,” Harry repeated.

“Have you been hexed? There are other words.”

“No,” Harry laughed. “To the hexing. Yes to the date.”

“Oh.” Draco sat up. “Well, excellent.”

Harry grinned.

“Have you had dinner yet? I know it’s late.”

“Er, I haven’t, but I haven’t actually managed to get hungry yet, after lunch.”
“Fair.” Draco hadn’t either. He’d eaten a day-old cookie from one of the doctoral students around five and quickly realised meals were not yet possible. “Drinks?”

“Think I could manage that.”

“I know a place,” Draco said. “How do you feel about Apparating?”

“Fine if you’ll take me, but do I need to change?” Harry stood and held out his arms. Draco used the opportunity to look him over rather shamelessly. Jeans, but dress shoes. A jumper, and a shirt on underneath. The same body he still imagined moving under his hands.

“No,” Draco said. “You’re fine as you are.” He held out his arm, pulling Harry closer before they Side-Alonged.

They reappeared in a tiny garden. Harry didn’t make any move to step away from Draco, but Draco saw him look up at the thin stone building in something between shock and confusion. For all that it looked sedate, music pounded through the masonry and the grass under their feet.

“What is this?” Harry asked. “Where are we?”

“Le Marais, at the Coeur de Dragon.”

“Which is?”

“A bar.” Draco tugged him towards an unmarked door tucked behind a lush vine.

“A bar or a club?”

Harry stepped through, took his hand and led him straight to the bar. “What’s your drink?”

“Lager? Whatever you’re having?”

Draco leaned over and shouted down the bar, and waited for the bartender to return with two glasses. He handed Harry a pint and held his Scotch up to cheers.

Harry clinked, but almost missed it, distracted by the scene around them.

Draco smiled. As much as he prided himself on his poker face, he’d been flabbergasted his first time, too.

Harry’s eyes followed a man in breeches, trainers, and a leather jacket as he weaved across the dance floor, found his much more stylishly dressed date, and kissed him soundly before handing over a cocktail.

Harry blinked. Draco had to lean in to hear his questions. “Is that—? With a—? And they’re—?”

“Wizard, Muggle, gay?” Draco offered, shouting about the crowd.

Harry nodded slowly and took a long pull from his beer.

“Yes on all counts. Little of everything, remember?”

“When you said everything...?”
“Muggle and wizarding, gay and straight, yes.”

“How is that possible?” Harry yelled.

“Tell you after?” Draco offered. “Somewhere quieter?” He took a drink.

“’Kay,” Harry shouted back. “But what do we do here?”

Draco raised his glass again. “Cheers,” he said, and threw it back, with mental apologies to the Jameson family. He sat it on the bar. “Fancy a dance?”

“Oh, Godric.” Harry cringed. “Do you remember the Yule Ball? Or, don’t tell me. I’m hoping nobody does.”

“No such luck, I’m afraid.” Draco heard the note of gleefulness in his voice and didn’t do much to stop it. “I remember it well.”

“Cause you were staring at me probably,” Harry grumbled.

“Almost definitely,” Draco agreed. “Either way, I remember it well. But I bet anyone would be a better dancer when not under that much scrutiny. Or after exiting adolescence.”

“They’re your toes to risk.”

“That they are. But we’re Wizards, remember? What’s an Episky between—” he paused. “Between us. Unless you’re planning to curse them off?”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Definitely not.” He took another swig of his lager, draining it more than halfway. “If you’re sure.”

Draco reached for Harry’s hand. “Yes.”

Harry set his pint on the bar and let himself be pulled towards the dance floor. He was awkward at first, moving too tentatively to look at ease.

Draco pulled him closer, resting his forearms on either side of Harry’s neck and moving his hips in time with the music, hoping Harry might feel more at ease following. It worked, to an extent. He wasn’t able to move with the beat, quite, but he did respond to Draco’s body, did let himself relax into Draco. It wasn’t anything flashy or impressive—they wouldn’t be taking home any awards—but it felt good to Draco. Very good, to move together, to see Harry’s limbs loosen, to feel his hands trail up Draco’s sides and to his neck.

And as they danced to another song, and then another, he saw Harry look around the room, at the other men and women dancing with their dates, of the same gender or not. Draco saw him observe it, wonder at it. Smile at it. And it felt very, very good to be pulled in for a kiss, right there in the middle of the dance floor. When Draco pulled back, down to surprise more than anything else, he was grinning. Which was enough to inspire the same from Harry. They stood there, wrapped around each other, lips warm, in the middle of the floor. If Draco couldn’t quite believe it was real, it was only because it had been impossible, for so long, to think he’d ever have anything close to it.

Harry kissed him again, and Draco leaned into his ear to ask, “Want to get out of here?”

“Yes,” Harry whispered, his breath warm against Draco’s ear. “Out the back?”

“Let’s walk?”
With Harry’s face still in the crook of his neck, Draco felt his nod more than he heard his mumbled agreement.

Draco took his hand and led him through the crowd, off the dance floor, past booths full of poorly disguised wizards, and Muggles dressed so fashionably they might have been mistaken for poorly disguised wizards, and quite a few people who couldn’t be discerned as one or the other.

Harry looked dazed as they spilled on to the pavement. He craned his neck to look back at it, then forward, then back again. “That was incredible. How is that even possible?”

“Which part?” Draco asked, grinning.

“All of it? The… everything.”

Draco took his hand and stated walking. “The neighbourhood, for one.” He pulled Harry out of the way of two women, intertwined and walking backwards in search of a wall. “Case in point. Not an uncommon thing.”

“But the mix of people… the other kind of mix?”

“It’s a different country,” Draco said, steering them towards the Pont d’Arcole. He stopped at the foot of the bridge. “Your hotel’s on this side,” he said. “About a mile that way.”

“What’s over the bridge?”

“Most of the universities. Les Jardins du Luxembourg.” He hesitated. “My flat. And we can always make a loop, come back here, or walk the Quai de Conti back towards the Meurice.”

“Let’s cross,” Harry said, and nudged him forward. “Is your university one of the ones over there?”

“Yes, though it’s not anywhere I’d recommend stopping on a Friday night out in Paris.”

“Can’t say I’d want to stop at my office either.”

“Exactly. Though the gardens are lovely, if you’d like a more scenic walk.”

“Sure,” Harry said.

They walked over the bridge in silence, Draco’s hand warmed considerably by Harry’s fingers, by his thumb rubbing absentmindedly, almost habitually, over the outside of Draco’s own.

When they stepped onto the Rue Lagrange, Harry spoke again. “What did you mean, about it being a different country? How so?”

“The French Ministry is much more relaxed about secrecy.”

“But it’s an International Treaty. The International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy.”

“And different countries interpret the letter of it differently. As I understand it, the French Ministry and the French Muggle government have a better relationship than their British equivalents. The Muggles have said for years that they don’t really care if you’re a wizard so long as you’re properly French, or making some attempt to be. Which comes with its own problems, but also isn’t how it’s been in England, even nominally. Awful as the… well, I don’t know that it’s really accurate to call him a man, is it?” Draco mused. “Awful as Voldemort was, he succeeded at making us all afraid of one another, and of Muggles. Even people who rejected his ideas about Muggle-wizard relations were scared enough of him—” Draco sighed “—and, of course, his
followers, that getting to know Muggles beyond those Muggle-borns who came to Hogwarts—who were unavoidable, basically—was not the done thing. Whereas without that, here, there’s been a lot more intermarriage, and wizard-Muggle marriages and relationships that last. As opposed to a Muggle having a magical child with a wizard and panicking, and running, and being Obliviated or forced to take an Unbreakable Vow not to tell anyone. And at some point French wizards realised it was harder for anyone to speak out against them when they knew they had wizard neighbours or daughters- and sons-in-law or grandchildren or friends. Not exactly the British approach.”


“I didn’t understand how damaging British wizarding isolationism is until I left. If I’d known then what I know now.” He stopped and sighed. “That’s a dangerous road to go down.”

They walked along in silence for another half block, crossing the Boulevard Saint-Germain to the Rue Saint-Jacques.

Harry picked up where Draco had left it. “You’d do things differently?”

“And how. I’d do almost everything differently.”

“Almost?” Harry prompted.

“Almost,” Draco confirmed. “Not Pansy and Greg and Millie and Blaise. Not Crabbe, either, or Theo or Daphne. They were good friends, no matter how it looked from the outside. And particular things about how my life went. I’m glad I played Quidditch, that I was a prefect. I’m glad I did my Potions NEWT. That worked out exceptionally well in the end. And there are plenty of other things. I’d like to think there were good things about me then, even if the obvious looms large. And about my life. I don’t regret it all. But I would change parts of it.” He sighed again. “You can imagine which ones. And I did change them, as soon as I could.”

“Do you ever think about coming back? Have you really never?”

“I can tell you honestly, I never had until you asked.”

“Does that mean you’re thinking about it now?”

Rather than answering, Draco took Harry’s arm and held it, stopping at the Western corner of the Rue Saint-Jacques and the Rue Soufflot.

“There,” Draco nodded across the street. “That’s my where my office is.”

He watched Harry look the building over, its old stone façade, cream-coloured stone wrapping around the corner and down the Rue Soufflot to the Panthéon.

“We’re all over there,” he pointed, “on the right, if you’re looking straight on, towards the back.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes.” Draco smiled. “It is. We do surgeries off-site, at Sainte Jeanne d’Arc, but most of the daily work happens here. Shall we?”

Harry took a last, intent look before he nodded and let Draco lead him further down the Rue Saint-Jacques.

“The hospital is mixed, too. It’s primarily magical, but wizards are allowed to have Muggle
visitors. It’s behind a shop front, like St Mungo’s, but there’s a Muggle-friendly entrance in what
looks like a loading dock.”

“Which St Mungo’s definitely doesn’t have.”

“No,” Draco agreed. “Unfortunately, there are a lot of things St Mungo’s doesn’t have.”

“Like?”

“Like policies permitting the construction of magical voids and wards for long-term treatment of
magically unstable patients. And considerable resources devoted to biomagical research while—as
you, unfortunately, know quite well—there’s nowhere in the UK doing this kind of work, or setting
aside resources for it.” As he spoke, Draco’s stomach sank with the weight of his realisation. With
its irrefutability.

“What if this foundation became that place?”

“Harry.” Draco squeezed his hand and tried to smile at him, though it felt mostly like a tactic to
diminish the blow. “I appreciate that, truly, I do. But that’s not what you want to do, or what your
foundation is meant to be about. And even if it were, this kind of work relies on there being
patients to see and a community of scholars to work with. There’s no institutional infrastructure to
support that in England. It’s not about money. One of the few things, but there you go. It’s about
the entire British approach to magical medicine. If they took Muggle science seriously, they might
have to take Muggles seriously, and that would upend far too many things to be palatable.”

“That doesn’t sound especially promising.”

“I’m sorry—really, very genuinely sorry—to agree.”

“You won’t take the job, then?”

Draco could hear the disappointment in Harry’s voice and it almost gave him pause. Almost. But
there was no way to give that much up without resenting it, and, when it came down to it, he loved
what he did. “No.”

Harry sighed. “Right.”

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry about that.”

Harry tried to smile. Draco appreciated the effort, even if it didn’t really work. “It’s okay,” Harry
said. “I see your point. All of it. You’re right that we don’t have that, and it makes sense that you
need it.” His exhaled shakily. “I don’t want you to give any of that up.”

“Thank you,” Draco said quietly.

They walked on. Draco led them down the Rue Royer-Collard, to the locked gates of the Jardins
du Luxembourg. He inclined his head. “Want to go through?”

“They’re closed,” Harry pointed out.

“We’re wizards. And in a wizard-friendly city. If you do want to.”

“What, just a quick charm?” The question was sceptical, but Harry’s tone was all curiosity.

Draco raised one shoulder. “Your wand or mine? Or none?”
“You’re really serious? Even if there are cameras?”

Draco quirked his lips. “Mine, then.” He drew his wand from its holster. “Alohamora.” The lock clicked open and Draco pushed the gate open just far enough for them to slip through, then closed it again.

“Wow.”

“At the charms work or the daring?”

“Bit of both. You’re really not worried about cameras? The gendarme? Mobs with pitchforks?”

“I’m really not.”

“Not at all?”

“No.” Draco lifted his arms to stretch his shoulders in the empty expanse of the garden path. “You should try it.” He dropped his arms, and his stomach went along with it. Huh.

“And risk an international incident? ‘War Hero Turned Petty Vandal Breaks Into Historical Gardens, Steals Priceless Statue.’ Best not.”

“You’re stealing a priceless statue? That’s a twist.”

Harry huffed a laugh. “No, but what’s that got to do with the headline?”


“Sounds like heaven.”

Draco’s heart beat a tattoo against his ribs. “It’s not bad.”

They walked on past the pond, its fountain turned off for the night, and up to the terrace gardens. They were halfway to the carousel when Harry broke the silence. “I don’t know if I want to ask where this leaves things between us.”

“I don’t know if I want you to,” Draco answered.

The darkened carousel emerged from between the trees without warning.

Draco pointed. “We could try that too, if you like.”

Harry smiled, but shook his head.

Draco knew the Rue Guynemer loomed ahead, even if they couldn’t yet see it for the trees. Gravel crunched underfoot, two sets of steps, side by side, and Draco realised he hadn’t noticed it earlier. It didn’t sound out of place to him at all, unaccustomed as he was to making this walk with company.

Harry’s steps slowed when the path broadened and the gate came into view before them.

Draco’s heart sank. “We can keep walking.”

Harry nodded.

Draco cast another Alohomara, practically under his breath, and pulled the gate back so they could
slip through.

Harry turned his head side to side. “Where are we?”

“The Intersection of the Rue Guynemer and the Rue de Fleurus.”

“But, what’s here?”

“Streets. My flat, if you want to walk me home. Or we turn right and on to the Rue Bonaparte, if you’d like to walk back to the hotel, with company or without. Or there’s Apparition. There are cafés, too, though they’ll be closed by now, and a few bars that won’t be.”

“I’ll walk you, if that’s all right.”

“Sure. That would be nice.”

And it was, in its way, Draco thought, even if he couldn’t shake the weight of uncertain silence. He broke it two blocks in. “I don’t know that we’ve ever spent this much time together without talking. Or some variation thereof.”

“Huh.”

“I feel as though I should insult you for old time’s sake.”

Harry laughed shallowly. “Promise, there’s no need. Unless you particularly want to?”

“I don’t.”

“When did that stop being surprising?”

Draco smiled at him. “I missed you, you know.”

“I missed you, too.” Harry smiled, but kept walking too far away for Draco to easily take his hand.

“In the garden, when I said I wasn’t sure I wanted you to ask?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant it. But I think maybe we’d better.”

“Yeah.” Harry wrapped his arms around himself, burying his fingers under his arms, as if from the cold. “I think so too.”

“The job and the rest of it—how closely are those things tied for you?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Not because they have anything to do with each other, but because it didn’t sound like it was about the job so much as the country.”

“Does it change the way you feel?”

Harry shook his head.

“Me neither.”

“I thought you weren’t sure?”

“No. But the thing is, I’ve spent how many hours with you today? A fifteen-course lunch, drinks,
dancing, a very long walk, a bit of light vandalism. And I’m not ready to see you go.”

Harry sounded heartened by that. Braver. “I’m not really ready to go.”

“If I’m in Paris and you’re in London... How much does the distance matter to you?”

“It’s not so simple, unfortunately. My magic... It didn’t come up while I was in the void, for obvious reasons, but Healer Barrett still doesn’t think it’s wise for me to Apparate if I can help it, and never to unfamiliar places or more than once at a go or for very long distances or when I’m physically or magically exhausted. He’s worried, as am I, about what happens if something goes wrong while I’m Apparating or on a Portkey or in the Floo. Not that it’s likely, but that, moving so quickly and covering so much ground, if it did happen, there could be a lot of damage.”

Draco stopped and turned to him, confused. “How did you get here?”

“Eurostar. St. Pancras to Gare du Nord, two and a half hours.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“Not very wizardly, is it? After all that.”

“I’m just surprised. It sounds smart. And I’d bet it’s more comfortable than Apparition.”

“Filch’s chains are probably more comfortable than Apparition.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “I would’ve been perfectly happy going another decade without thinking about that.”

“Sorry.” Draco saw the hint of a smile flit across Harry’s face. “Though, not the point.”

“No, I suppose not. That’s a lot of travel.”

Harry shrugged. “Not the end of the world.”

“I can Apparate.”

“I wouldn’t want it all to fall on you.”

They rounded the corner to Draco’s street. “It wouldn’t have to, depending on how you feel about the train.”

“There’s no candy trolley, but it’s not so bad.”

“What if you brought your own? There are some superb chocolatiers in Paris.”

Harry did smile this time. “Are you really suggesting this?”

“I think I am, yes.”

“You think?”

“I think that if you’re amenable I’ll put in a standing order with Debauve et Gallais. They’re excellent, and on the way from my flat to Gare du Nord.”

“Your flat?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Draco answered, heart picking up speed again.
“Um, should I—I should probably see it, don’t you think? If I’m going to be staying there.”

“Probably. See if it’s more to your taste than the Meurice?”

“Is there that much difference?”

Draco stopped walking and nudged him, faux-indignantly. “Much less gilding, and fewer chandeliers.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“You could if you came up.” Draco’s pulse pounded in his ears.

“Up?” Harry craned his neck.

“In, first.” Draco pointed through the archway to a stone paved courtyard. “Then up.”

Harry hesitated. “Are you certain?”

“And if it does work? If it works and there’s still the distance?”

Draco sighed. “I don’t know, to be entirely honest. There are a lot of factors. It’s not even possible to know, I don’t think. If that uncertainty is too much for you, I’ll understand.”

“I don’t love it,” Harry admitted.

Draco held his breath.

“But everything I said before, that night. That’s all still true. And I don’t expect that comes around very often.”

“No,” Draco said on an exhale. “I don’t think it does. So, then?”

“I like truffles, and the ones with nougat,” Harry said.

Draco blinked twice, a smile beginning to tug at the corners of his mouth.

“Not the ones with that syrupy fruit stuff in them, though, and no coconut.”

“No coconut,” Draco repeated, biting his lip to keep from grinning. He feigned seriousness. “I’ll tell them.”

“Do.” Harry’s lips twitched, and he broke out into a grin. Draco followed suit, and there they stood, beaming.

Draco tried—without much success, or all that much effort—to school his features. “There’s no coconut in my flat.”

“No?”

Harry burst out laughing. “That is the strangest pick-up line I’ve ever got, I think.”
Draco put on a disgruntled scowl. “I’ll forgive that only because it’s still a superlative.” His smile had retaken his face by the end of the sentence.

“I would come up to your flat even if there were coconut.”

“Strong words.”

“Maybe.” Harry lifted his shoulders. “Is that what you want to focus on when I’ve said I’ll come up to your flat?”

Draco’s smile was gone in an instant. “No.” He stepped forward and pulled at the hem of Harry’s jumper. “Definitely not.”

They were kissing before they reached the first landing. Hell, it had been a struggle to make it through the front door. Draco didn’t even try for his keys; he grabbed the handle of his wand in its holster and cast an Alohamora through his shirt, and they practically fell through the doorway once he got it open.

The stumbling gave Harry half a chance to take in the apartment, which netted Draco a, “Whoa,” and a, “You know this looks a lot like your rooms at the Manor?” Which was fair enough, and had been intentional, but was of very little concern to Draco when Harry was leaning on his mantel, jumper already rucked up around his waist.

He pulled Harry too him by the tails of his shirt and kissed him again, hard. “I know. Tour?”

“Mmm.” Harry hummed into his mouth.

“Kitchen.” Draco pointed behind him and kissed Harry’s jaw. “Bathroom.” He rotated his arm further back and moved to Harry’s earlobe. “Other rooms.” He waved vaguely around, then gave Harry’s shirt another tug. “Bedroom?”

“Bedroom,” Harry agreed, following Draco’s lead and shedding his jumper along the way.

They managed to halfway fall through that door, too, Draco toeing off his shoes and socks after stumbling over them, and pinning Harry to the wall beside the open door. “Want you,” he said into Harry’s clavicle. “Want to touch you.”

“Yes,” Harry managed, arching his neck, not caring when his head hit the plaster behind him with a thud. He scrambled at his buttons, pulling them free, stepping on his own heels to get barefoot. Then he turned to Draco. “You too,” he said, hands sliding under Draco’s shirt. “Touch you.”

“Please,” Draco said. “Merlin,” he breathed, running his hands over Harry’s skin, holding him close to trace the line of his shoulder blades. He dropped his hands and traced the line of Harry’s ribs to his nipples and pinched. Harry arched into him.

His mouth watered, and he dropped to flick his tongue over one. Harry’s attempts to undo his buttons became clumsier as he laved it, and stopped altogether when he sucked it into his mouth. “Fuck,” Harry muttered, breath shallow and quick. He pushed Draco back and kissed him hard as he moved them back towards the bed, one step, then another, until Draco’s calves were pinned to the bed frame.

Draco wrapped an arm around Harry and pulled him in, tipping them back so they fell, Harry’s weight on top of him. Harry scrambled for balance, bracing one knee on the edge of the mattress and the other against the frame, which left him kneeling over Draco.
Draco felt the warmth of his fingertips through his shirt as Harry pulled at his buttons carelessly, but it didn’t burn. Not when he got the last button open, or when he splayed his hands over Draco’s chest and pushed the shirt off his chest entirely, or when Draco arched into a hand that tweaked his nipple.

He gasped when Harry tugged on his belt, but if Harry noticed—which, from his smile, Draco thought he had—he wasn’t deterred. He pulled it open and made quick work of Draco’s flies. He tugged. “Up?”

Draco lifted his hips and felt Harry’s knuckles brush his hips as he was relieved of pants and trousers in one go. He fell back on the bed and shrugged his shirt off, and lay back, naked, his cock hard and entirely on display.

He didn’t feel so entirely naked, though, until Harry stopped to look at him, really look at him. His hands followed his eyes, tracking the line of Draco’s hips, his ribs, the silver scars that mapped the space between his nipples, the soft divot at his sternum.

Then, trailing his hands back down to Draco’s knees, Harry dropped to his knees at the edge of the bed and planted the softest kiss Draco could remember on the inside of his thigh.

He whimpered. Couldn’t help it. And then the first kiss was followed by another, and another. He propped himself up on his elbows, determined to ask if Harry was certain, but the look on Harry’s face didn’t leave any room for ambiguity. He looked ravenous. Draco almost felt faint, blood pounding in his chest and through his thighs and filling his cock, and what he could make sense of was mostly want. He wanted Harry’s mouth on him, and Harry’s hands, and he wanted them so badly there was barely space left for breathing.

There was a moment, just one, when Harry hesitated. Draco saw him look up through hooded eyes, his mouth half open and so close to Draco’s shaft that Draco could feel the heat of his breath, and he faltered.

Draco shot a hand down to cup his face. “Want you,” he said. “Want to feel your mouth.”

Harry bit his lip and looked from Draco’s cock to his eyes again, and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Please,” Draco said.

“I haven’t…”

“Don’t care. Just want you.”

“You sure? You’ll tell me if anything…?”

“Yes,” Draco breathed. “Always yes.” He moved his hand from Harry’s jaw to his cock and wrapped his fingers around it. He stroked the shaft slowly, once, twice, pushing his foreskin back and watching Harry’s eyes follow his hand. He let go and reached out again, crooking a finger under Harry’s chin and drawing him up so their eyes met. “Please.”

Harry licked his bottom lip and nodded. He kept his eyes pinned to Draco’s as he leaned forward and lowered his head.

Draco’s moan was guttural, a visceral, raw thing that resonated through him before he could stop it. But at the look of pleasure on Harry’s face, at the moan that vibrated through his cock, he knew he would never try to stop it again. Harry’s lips were softer than silk, warmer than Draco’s hand,
and his tongue slid over Draco’s head and down his shaft leaving a trail of sparks in its wake.

He reached out for Harry, twining his fingers through his hair, running them through again and
again. And then Harry pulled off and opened his mouth wider, and Harry took him in all at once,
and Draco missed it for arching back, groaning, panting as Harry worked up a rhythm.

He could’ve come just from that, he was sure, and then he felt one of Harry’s hands slide up his
thigh, to the crease of his arse, and up, a finger tracing up his balls and finally wrapping around his
shaft. Draco whined, low in his throat, and canted his hips for more.

Harry’s hand and mouth collided, unused to working in concert. He felt Harry slow down, try to
figure out. “Don’t stop,” he pleaded. “That’s good, that’s so good.”

Harry’s lips curved into a smile around his prick and Harry started moving faster again. Draco’s
balls felt so tight, and he could feel his orgasm gathering. He ran a hand through Harry’s hair
again. “Stop,” he managed, barely. “Gonna come, stop.”

“Why?” Harry pulled off, his fingers still wrapped loosely around the shaft.

Draco struggled up to his elbows. His cock twitched in Harry’s hand when he saw that Harry had
undone his own flies, had wrapped a hand around himself and was working his prick slowly.
Draco’s breath stuttered. “Merlin, fuck.” He swallowed. “Cause if you don’t, I’m gonna come in
your mouth.”

“Do it,” Harry said.

“Don’t want to come yet,” Draco panted. “Want more of you. Want to feel you.”

“I like how you taste.”

“Fuck,” Draco dropped his head back.

“Let me make you come?”

Draco covered his eyes with a hand and nodded.

Harry moved more deliberately this time, running his tongue through the drops of precome
gathering at Draco’s tip, slowly over the underside of Draco’s shaft, hollowing his cheeks around
the glans and beginning to bob his head again, moving faster this time, his hand moving with his
mouth so all Draco felt was pleasure shooting through him.

He dropped his hand to Harry’s hair again. “Sure?” He panted. “I’m gonna…”

Harry hummed around him, and it tipped him over the precipice. His thighs tensed. Pleasure
swelled and then exploded through him until he was crying out, calling Harry’s name and gasping
for breath. Harry kept moving, warm and wet around him, until Draco pulled away.

Fighting the heavy satiation in his limbs, he struggled up and tugged, pulling Harry towards him,
onto the bed and onto his back.

Harry’s jeans and pants were pushed down around his prick, which jutted, swollen and purple,
from the v of his flies. Draco rolled onto his side and ran a finger over it and it jerked in the air,
seeking more.

He looked down at Harry, whose mouth was flushed beautifully red, and asked, “What do you
“What do you want?”

The air rushed out of Harry’s chest in an instant. He was speechless. He shook his head and tried to lift a shoulder.

Draco leaned forward, kissed his bottom lip. “Anything.”

Harry swallowed. “Touch me?”

Draco nodded, bringing his finger back to Harry’s prick, and adding another, and another, until he was working his fist up the length of his shaft. Harry bit his lip and whimpered when Draco picked up speed.

“Beautiful,” fell out of Draco’s mouth unbidden, and, “Perfect,” and, “Want you.” Harry whimpered at each endearment, arching his hips to meet Draco’s hand.

He nodded when Draco loosened his grip in order to move faster. “Yeah,” he whispered, forcing his eyes open, seeking out Draco’s. “That’s—yeah.” He panted. “Want to come.”

“Yes.” Draco leaned forward to kiss him again. “Come for me. Please, come for me.”

“Mmmm,” Harry answered, bucking his hips into Draco’s fist.

“Come for me,” Draco whispered again. “Want to feel you come.” He bent to press a kiss to Harry’s mouth and felt a moan against his lips, felt Harry arch again, felt him spill over Draco’s fingers. He gripped the sheets, his eyes fluttering shut and his mouth half-open, until he relaxed, suddenly and utterly.

A minute might’ve passed before he opened his eyes. Draco watched him, committing him to memory. The flush on his skin, the way his bottom lip swelled, the dark brown colour of his nipples, the quivering in his thighs as they relaxed in the aftermath.

“Fuck,” Harry managed, drawing a sudden exhale and opening his eyes. “Fuck,” he said again, this time more vehemently. “That was…”

Draco grinned. “That was.”

“Yeah?” Harry bit his lip questioningly.


“So,” Harry ventured, “if we were to do that again? Or something like it?”

“Bloody hell.” Draco rubbed a hand over his face. “Yes.”

“Excellent,” Harry bit his lip and gave Draco an impish smile. “Still new to that, you know. Probably could use some practise.”

Draco reached out for his hand. “A demonstration might not go amiss either.”

Beside him, he heard Harry’s breath catch. “Might not, no.” Harry twined their fingers together and held on.

They lay there, hearts slowing, breath evening out, until an edge of anxiety crept into Draco’s satiation. “Do you think,” he began, “in spite of your very luxe hotel room, you might stay the night?”
“Yes.” Harry answered without even a pause. He hesitated after, though. “Do you think, what was there before, what we felt—is it still there?”

Draco’s breath caught in his throat, and would’ve sworn the room got quieter. “Yeah.” He tried to will his heart back towards some more normal rate. Time and a half, maybe, instead of double. “I do.”

The mattress shifted under him as Harry rolled onto an elbow to look at him. “You feel it?”

Draco watched him for any hint of where the line of questioning might be going. There was none. But he didn’t believe—didn’t feel—that Harry would be setting him up for anything. It felt like it would be fine to admit it. “Yes.” He waited a beat. “Do you?”

Harry nodded, slowly at first, then again, more firmly. “Yeah, I do. I really—everything about that was, just…” He trailed off and ran a hand through his hair. “I want to do that again. All of that. And more. Everything. I want everything with you, in a way I haven’t in a very long time.”

Draco reached up to push Harry’s fringe off his forehead. “Is that a good thing?”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. “Yeah.”

Draco smoothed the line of his hair, and dropped his hand to Harry’s arm. “But? And?”

“I wouldn’t have said so a year ago.”

“No.” Thoughts of what could have been hit Draco with the force of a Bludger. “You would’ve had the Wand out half a year by now, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Draco ran his hand over Harry’s skin, still running hot, like the Mediterranean sun or a fireplace at Christmas. He looked towards his hand, away from Harry’s eyes, to ask his question. Had to. “Do you ever wish you had?”

“In the first few weeks of trying to do it the other way. First month, maybe. Never since then.”

“And the wanting? Are you okay with that? A year’s not all that long.”

Harry rested his hand on Draco’s chest, five warm points surrounding his heart. “Depends on what you do with it.”

Draco looked up at him again. “And the next one? What do you plan to do with it?”

At that Harry grinned, and all Draco knew was the press of Harry’s body against his own.

* * *

Sunlight was creeping up the walls by the time Draco stirred. He arched his back, stretching, and joy stole over him when he felt Harry beside him. The late hours of the night and the early ones of the morning came back in a rush, and he felt exceptionally alive for someone who’d not managed much more than a glorified nap. Or, perhaps a bit punch-drunk down to the same lack of sleep. Either way.

He’d opened the windows before they’d fallen asleep, to air out the smell of sex and cool them down, and pigeons chirruped and sparrows twittered in the courtyard below, and for once, Draco found it charming.
He turned, wincing a bit at another reminder of the early morning, and nudged Harry, who groaned and threw an arm over his eyes.

“Mmph.” Harry mumbled. Then he stilled. “Draco?”

“Ouai. Comment ça va?”

“Oh, lord.” He buried his head in a pillow. Draco could barely make out what he said through the pillow, though it might’ve been for the best. “Errr, parlez Anglais?”

“Yes, but with prejudice when you ask without bothering to conjugate.”

He turned his head but kept his eyes shut. “I’ve been learning French for four hours, and spent two of them asleep.”

“When you put it that way.”

“Mmm.” Harry groped for Draco and one corner of his mouth quirked into a smile when he found, and draped his arm over, Draco’s waist. “Thanks.”

Draco smoothed Harry’s hair back, curling it back around the shell of his ear. “Welcome.”

“Don’t wanna get up.”

“Your train,” Draco said, his heart deflating ever so slightly with each syllable.

“Ugh.” Harry turned his head back into the pillow. “Right.”

“Do you still want to get breakfast before?”

“What time is it?”

“Ten to seven. Train’s at half nine.”

“Dumb,” Harry said.

“Mmm,” Draco agreed. “Why don’t I think that was Millie’s idea?”

“Wasn’t.” He pushed himself to sitting. “Don’t usually stay up all night.”

“Coffee will help.”

“Right.” Harry ran a hand through the bird’s nest of his hair. “Coffee.”

“Shower quickly and we’ll have time for croissants and a walk.”

“Things? At the hotel?”

Draco hesitated. “I can get them, if you’d like. Have them for you next time.”

“Yeah?”

Draco nodded.

“Perfect.” Harry’s smile was overtaken by a yawn. “Right. Walk.”
By the time they made it out of the flat, Harry was more interested in the croissants than the walk. They agreed to combine them. They stopped into a boulangerie, which Harry sleepily declared the best-smelling place in the world, on the way to the Boulevard Saint-German and left with a bag of pastries. Then a detour for truffles at Debauve et Gallais, as promised, followed by a quick, furtive stop into a Starbucks for coffee to go, which Draco insisted be last on their mini-tour so he wouldn’t have to bring a Starbucks cup into a proper French establishment.

By the time the sun was getting warm, they were on to the Quai de la Tournelle. Coffee and croissants were between them on the embankment, the trees providing a measure of shade.

Harry took a deep breath and stretched his arms overhead. Draco resisted the urge to reach out and run a hand over the line of hair that was revealed between his jumper and his jeans, but was distracted enough to miss the first half of a declaration that end with “chocolates for Millie.”

“Hmm?” Draco looked up.

“Distracted?” Harry grinned. “I was saying, I should probably save the chocolates for Millie. Thank her for setting up lunch.”

“If that’s how you’re thinking, we should stop for a case of wine.”

“Or we could save that for next time,” Harry volunteered.

“We could.” Draco looped an ankle around Harry’s.

“You were right that it’s nice here. Haven’t been out like last night in ages. Even before all the, you know, the bit with the thing.”

“I do remember something about that, yes. How long has it been?”

“Depends. Which part?”

“All of it. Drinks, dancing, walk through the city.”

“A year, two years. Never, unless you count being on the run once near Tottenham Court Road.”

“Never?”

“Too dangerous,” Harry explained, running his thumb back and forth over a crevice in the stone. “Couldn’t even really go school shopping without a guard.”

“You were alone the first time I saw you.”

Harry looked over, surprised. “You remember that? At Madam Malkins?”

Draco nodded, but didn’t interrupt lest they get sidetracked.

It worked. Harry sighed, and went on. “I was with Hagrid, actually, he’d just gone to run an errand.” He amended, “Get me an owl, actually. And that was before Quirrell, when there wasn’t any sign that Voldemort was back.

“And then things kept getting worse, and then once the war was over, I couldn’t go out without the press following or someone noticing, and then… I’m not sure. But no, I don’t think ever.”

Draco turned to him, leaning an elbow on the embankment. “But you liked it?”
“Yeah,” Harry said. “It was… I can’t say it was better than I thought, because I’d never been able to give it much thought, if I’m honest. But it was nice, being out like that. Just… out. Able to go wherever without looking for photographers or worrying about being mobbed. I’d do it again, if you wanted to.” He held up his coffee and gestured at the river. “I guess we are, actually.” He grinned. “Still nice.”

“Harry,” Draco began, his pulse starting to flutter at the base of his neck. “I have a question for you. A couple of them, actually. And a thought.”

“Okay?”

“You’ve left the Aurors, yes? Resigned from the Ministry entirely?”

“Yes.” He furrowed his brow.

“And you’re starting this foundation.”

“Right.”

Draco took a breath and leaned into the embankment, using the rough stone at his elbow to anchor his nerves. “Is that something you have to do from London?”

Harry tilted his head, confused.

“You’ve got a solicitor handling the paperwork, right?”

“Yes…”

“And you’re hiring people for the key initiatives?”

“I am,” Harry answered, looking as though the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

“You’ll be the head of it, and I’m sure they’ll want you back for fundraising and meetings, and you’d be on the Floo a fair bit. But do you need to be based there?”

“As opposed to being based here?”

“Well, yes.”

Harry inhaled deeply and blew out his cheeks on the exhale. “That’s… Wow.”

“I’m not asking you to make a decision right now, and I know I don’t know the ins and outs. But what if, instead of living there and travelling here, and vice-versa for me, you lived here and travelled there?”

Harry looked out over the water and took a long sip of his coffee. “The foundation isn’t the only thing there. You know that, right?”


Harry nodded, and caught the edge of his cup between his teeth.

“But you’ve also felt so trapped in England that you thought about leaving the magical world entirely. That you wanted to run. That you wanted to sign up for every long term undercover mission that took you away from that all. And as much as it’s made out to be a sort of quitting, I’m
not sure it’s even really running away if you’re doing it to have a life you couldn’t have otherwise. If you’re running towards something. Not me, necessarily, or anything between us, but a life where you didn’t have to hide.”

Harry set his cup down. “I’m not sure what that would even be like. I don’t think I’ve ever really been apart from the war. Trying that now… I’m not sure I can imagine what that would look like. What that life would be.”

“Is that a strike against finding out?”

“Merlin. I don’t know. I hadn’t thought of it. England is home. I’ve never planned to leave.”

“Never planned to? Or never would?”

Harry followed a long sip with a long breath. “Never planned to. I don’t know about the other.”

“Early thoughts?”

“Not really.” Harry put his cup down and leaned on the embankment. “I did like walking last night. And that bar, and the idea of it, being able to be out in public with another man—with you—and not having such a divide between the two worlds. Just about as soon as you said it, I liked the idea of being here again. But moving… Where did this come from?”

“Last night, I think, while we were walking. You said it sounded like heaven. It didn’t all click at that moment, but it sounds like it might be what you want. A fresh start. Why not have that all the time? Which isn’t to say there isn’t probably some selfish motivation lurking; I’m not averse to the idea of seeing you more than two or three times a month, and I’d like you to know my friends here better than you’d be able to if we were visiting back and forth. But that isn’t—I’m fairly certain—part of why I’m raising it.”

“Not averse, huh? Very romantic.” Harry smiled wryly at the water below.

“Is romance what you’re looking for?”

“No,” Harry sighed. “Or not only. I suppose it might feel simpler if it was, though. Everything else is stickier. Is it better to leave, or to stay and fight to be who I want to be, where I want to be?”

“I can’t answer that for you, if you’re actually asking.”

“No. Rhetorical.”

Draco nodded, and turned from Harry to the water, so they were standing side by side. Draco took a croissant from the bag and broke it in half, offering one to Harry.

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

Harry took a bite and, at the sound of a tiny moan, Draco ducked his head to hide a quick grin. “Holy hell, that’s good.”

“You should try the coffee somewhere real next time. There’s a café near my flat—well, several, but a favourite one, if you’d want to.”

“Yeah, definitely.” Harry took another bite and hummed his satisfaction.
When he finished his half, Harry slipped his arm through Draco’s and reached his other hand into the bag. They stood like that, side by side on the embankment, until the coffee was gone and the croissants devoured.

When the bag was balled up between them, devoid even of the last substantial crumbs, Harry looked at his watch and sighed. “Almost nine.”

“How do you feel about Side-Alonging me to Gare du Nord? Not that familiar yet, and tired, to boot.”

“Course.” Draco leaned his head in and rested it against Harry’s, then turned just enough to press a kiss to his cheekbone.

Harry pulled back, surprised and pleased.

Draco smiled. “Want to work your wandless magic on the rubbish?”

“Seriously? Right here, in the middle of the morning?”

“Worth trying.”

“Let’s work up to that. There was a bin across the street.”

“Fine,” Draco groused, letting go of Harry so he could gather their cups. “There’s an alley back that way anyway, we can Apparate from there.”

He followed Harry to the bin and then led the way toward the alley. They were hidden behind a skip, about to leave, when Draco stopped him again. “Paris, living here – you’ll think about it?”

“I will,” Harry promised, “I’ll think about it.”

With a pop, they disappeared.
Draco had one hand on the stem of a champagne flute and both eyes on Gawain Robards.

Robards sat at the next table over, front row, with a direct line to the podium. He was clenching his jaw so tightly Draco thought it might pop. To his right, the Minister and Mrs Shacklebolt listened with polite attention. Next to them Millie and Blaise were, entirely by design, in Draco’s sightline, and when he looked from Robards’ flushing neck to Millie she gave him a quick wink. “Well done,” it said.

Draco agreed.

The elves had built the stage at one long end of the Manor’s ballroom. Even Galder had seemed a bit nervous at first, about reopening the room and holding a public event at the Manor for the first time in well over a decade. Happily, his nervousness had fuelled productive overcompensation, and he’d had the rest of the elves working tirelessly in the days leading up to the gala. The room was cleaned top to bottom and then some. Floor pointed and polished, mouldings repainted, each pane on the French doors and windows re-glazed, new heating charms around the entrances, and a dancefloor laid down behind the twenty perfectly appointed tables arranged in front of the stage. They’d decorated beautifully, too. The Christmas fairies had been reassigned for the night and sent to line the ceilings and sit in the floral arrangements. The stage was edged with garlands, and a few low spotlights that illuminated the podium.

In the glow of those lights, Harry was finishing his speech. “In our first full year of operation, we’ve provided counselling to dozens of survivors of the Voldemort War, demand is only growing. Our pre-trial intervention programmes have helped reduce the recurrence of spousal and child abuse, as well as decreasing instances of substance abuse and related infractions. If nothing else, we might ask you to give tonight because we’re all enjoying a drunk-and-disorderly-free Diagon Alley.” He laughed lightly, and the audience followed.

“But there is something else, of course. We at the Trauma Resource Centre strive to change the way members of the British wizarding community see one another, the ways we’re able to care for one another.” He smiled humbly at the crowd. “It may be easy to see one person or a group of people as the symbols of the war, to pretend it only happened to witches and wizards who were on the front lines. That’s not entirely true, though, is it? All of us, on both sides of the war, whether in the middle of the fight or sitting at home hoping desperately for words of missing friends and family… we all fought a battle of some sort, and we all bear the scars for it. When we acknowledge that, when we share that weight with one another instead of carrying it alone, we can begin a type of healing that isn’t otherwise possible.

“That’s why, in the next year, we hope to expand our community support initiatives. We want to go beyond the services we can provide at our centres in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. We hope to open a service centre in Manchester by the end of the summer; to supply counsellors at Hogwarts for children who have been affected by growing up with survivors or who have survived other types of trauma; to be able to provide in-home support for individuals and families who are struggling; and to expand our policy initiative, working hand-in-hand with the Ministry to create laws that account for the widespread incidence of post-traumatic stress in wizarding Britain, and to provide opportunities for recreation and community-building. And if you happen, as I am—” he grinned at the rapt crowd “—to be a fan of Kneazles and Crups, you may be interested to know that we’re also working with Hogsmeade Animal Rescue to start a companion animal programme.”

“But none of that is possible without your support, and that’s what brings us here tonight. There are
envelopes on your tables, which I or Hermione Granger, our Director of Operations, will be more than happy to take—” the crowd tittered, and Harry grinned at them sheepishly “—and we’ll be opening the silent auction after dessert. Please, enjoy drinks and dessert and stick around for music from Donaghan Tremlett and the Night Owls. And thank you very much for joining us this evening!”

He stepped back and bowed slightly, and the room erupted into applause. Even Robards was forced to clap, albeit feebly, and Draco saw more than a few hands at the neighbouring tables reach for the golden envelopes that sat under their place cards. A string quartet picked up from beside the stage. Harry waved again and made for the stairs.

Draco’s champagne sloshed in its glass when Pansy nudged his shoulder. “That was well done.”

“Remarkably,” Pansy agreed. “And well done you, too.”

“Don’t tease, Pans. He writes his own speeches.”

“I know that,” she slapped his arm playfully. “I meant the choice of partner. And the event, while we’re at it.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Though it was really the elves. You were right about the thread counts. I’m thinking of introducing them to flannel, too.”

She laughed. “A small army of elves with multiple high-quality fabrics to choose from? You’d be a force to reckon with. More than you already are.”

He laughed and then said, “Thank you, too.”

She raised an eyebrow. “The silent auction? It’s just a few autographed books.”

“For coming.”

“Ah.” Her smile faltered, though she sat up straighter and jutted her chin proudly. “Yes, well. Bit harder to resist arguments for coming out of hiding when it only involves walking downstairs. And no one’s hexed me yet.”

“If they try it there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Might be worth it to see you wreak vengeance.”

“I will only point out that it would be extraordinarily easy for the elves to sneak a Puking Pastille into someone’s dessert.” He thought of Robards again.

“Force to be reckoned with, I’m telling you.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand, but his eyes had started to stray to Harry, who moved through the makeshift receiving line that had gathered at the foot of stage.

Harry handled the crowd gracefully, accepting envelopes with broad smiles and earnest thanks. He shook hands and smiled and laughed at jokes, though Draco didn’t miss the hint of relief when Granger came to join him.

Pansy leaned over to whisper into Draco’s ear. “You can go join him, you know.”
“I know,” he said. “He’ll let me know when he’s ready.” He turned back to her and, over her shoulder, saw Blaise and Millie rise from their table. “Meanwhile, more champagne before they bring out dessert?”

“It is rather good,” she conceded, standing by way of answer.

Blaise clapped him on the shoulder before they reached the bar. “Good show.”

“Thank you,” Draco said. “Though I’ve really just provided the venue.”

“No small thing,” Blaise insisted. “It continues to be exceptionally lovely. And with an exceptionally well-stocked bar. Shall we?” He held out an arm to Pansy, who took it with an exaggerated bow, leaving Draco and Millie to follow them into the line.

Draco stepped closer to Millie, bowing his head conspiratorially. “How was tonight’s Robards-watch?”

She almost giggled. “I thought his jugular was going to explode at the bit about Ministry policies.”

“Damn.” Draco snorted. “I was watching his jaw and missed it entirely.”

“Did you miss the flush, too?”

“How could I? Looked like early stages of Scrofungulus.”

Millie mock-shuddered, then tilted her head as though reconsidering. “Actually… I suppose a woman can hope, can’t she?”

“Still giving you trouble, then?”

“He is fond of a tantrum. Nothing compared to the coup in the Department of Mysteries after Granger left, I’ll grant. But I thought we were going to have to call the Aurors when the Minister told him we want to cut back MLE’s Research and Development budget to create a charity fund. On top of losing his would-be Super-Auror? Got to be a bit much for him.”

“What happens, exactly, if you call the Aurors on the Head Auror?”

“Good question. He didn’t seem keen on finding out when I offered.”

He whistled, low under his breath. “Nicely done.”

She grinned. “You as well. This is a raving success.”

“We’ll see how it tallies up at the end of the night.”

“Darling, I don’t know how they do it in Paris, but when that many people reach for their envelopes that quickly?” She raised her eyebrows.

He nodded his concession. “Fair enough, but it’s not the only measure of success, especially when it comes to political cooperation.” He paused. “I don’t suppose the Minister reached for his envelope?”

“He can’t, at a public event. But word on the street is that Mrs Shacklebolt is a huge Daisy Green fan and will be bidding competitively. Plus—” Draco felt her hand dip in and out of his robe pocket “—he may have given me leave to take care of it out of the public view.”
“I could hug you.”

“Only if you want to risk losing our place in line.”

Pansy and Blaise stepped aside in front of them, clearing a space at the bar. Draco ordered a glass of champagne. Beside him, Millie ordered three.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Is the evening that trying already?”

She laughed. “Neither that trying nor about to become that much more interesting. Only one is for me. One is for the elves to take to Greg, even if he’s not the gala type, and one is for you to take to Harry.” She held a flute out to him. “He’s starting to get a little peaky from all the attention.”

As they turned away from the bar Draco glanced over the crowd, with its smattering of familiar faces and the unmissable sea of ginger at the Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes table. But Draco’s eyes were drawn to Harry almost immediately, and he suspected he wasn’t the only one for whom that was true. Harry managed to radiate a calm, charismatic confidence in these situations that drew people toward him in droves. But to someone who knew him, his smile looked a bit worn. He saw Harry’s eyes flit towards him for a split second and then, as Draco watched, Harry itched the side of his neck and pulled on his earlobe.

He smiled at Millie and accepted the glass. “Excellent thought, thank you. If you’ll excuse me?”

At her nod, he began to cross the room. Some people still cut him openly, and he felt the weight of their sneers, stirring the urge to react or leave. But he was resolved not to give in to it, or them. His priorities were elsewhere.

He slipped in beside Harry, who was gushing over an elderly witch whose granddaughter was apparently well on the way to single-handedly revolutionising the role of the Beater.

Draco thrust the champagne flute between the two of them. “I’m so sorry to interrupt,” he said, with a smile for the witch. “Especially when Harry looks so intrigued, but I’m afraid there’s a bit of a hiccup with dessert and we need him in the kitchens.”

“Oh, goodness.” The witch gasped in an exaggerated show of concern. “Is everything quite all right?”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Draco reassured. He leaned in as if sharing an important secret. “You see, the tortes were meant to have Chocolate Frog toppers, and several of them have made a run for it. The elves are beside themselves.”

She barked a laugh and then promptly clapped her hand over her mouth. “Don’t mean to make light! Of course, Harry, you must.”

Harry nodded graciously and took the flute from Draco. “Thank you, Adaire. I hope we’ll see you again at the summer do!”

“Of course,” she grinned, grasping his hand. “Wouldn’t miss it. You know, the work you’re doing —”

Draco cleared his throat and put his hand at the small of Harry’s back.

She dropped Harry’s hand and stepped back sheepishly. “—is very commendable,” she finished. “Best of luck with it. And the frogs.”
Harry grinned and thanked her, and let Draco guide him away.

Draco felt Harry relax as Draco steered him past the tables and around the dance floor. With a quick look behind them, Draco unlocked one of the French doors at the back of the room and slipped out, with Harry close on his heels.

Draco heard, before he even had time to turn and see, Harry’s sigh of relief as they stepped out onto the Terrace Gardens. The chill in the air and the utter silence of a winter night were an instant relief to Draco, and Harry looked as though the same was true for him.

Harry reached for his hand. “Thank you. I was beginning to get a bit shaky in there.”

“I saw the signal.” Draco twined their fingers together and started walking down a garden path. “How are you feeling?”

Harry leaned over to set his champagne flute on the arm of a bench as they walked past. “Tired. Not awful, but Merlin there’s a lot of lying at these things.”

“Adaire’s granddaughter isn’t the next Gwenog Jones?”

“No idea. Her granddaughter’s a third year Ravenclaw.”

Draco laughed. “Right. And her grandson’s a first year who’s updated Wolfsbane?”

“That’s about the long and short of it.” Harry sighed. “It begins to wear. I can feel it starting to build. Even if the individual stories don’t matter, so many of them at once, and having to be the person who listens and pretends to believe and love it all… It’s a lot.”

“It’s remarkable that you can do it for so long, magical outbursts or not.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, “but I’ll still be glad to get back.”

“Same.” The moon was just beginning to wane, and there was enough light to reflect off Draco’s champagne as he took a sip. “And you’re sure you want to make the trip tomorrow when we’ll be back for Christmas in a fortnight?”

“Yes. I’ll have to sign some thank you notes before we go, but if you’ll Side-Along me to St. Pancras we can catch the train at 4:43 and be back in time for dinner.”

“Of course I’ll Apparate us, but I meant to ask if you’d rather stay here. Spend time with the Weasleys before Christmas.”

Harry hummed deliberatively. “No, I think not. I want to visit them at Christmas, of course. But I’d like to be with you for the end of term. Make sure you sleep, see the kittens. And we’ve got dinner with Chloé and Amina next week, don’t we?”

“We do, yes, and I can’t say the rest sounds unappealing, but I can manage if you’d rather have the time in England.”

“No, I want to. And really,” Harry went on, “I’ll need a break after this.”

“It has been… a bit hectic.”

“Tell me about it.” Harry laughed. “It’s possible that I’m excited for a break, in addition to needing one.”
“After three weeks, it’s possible that I’m looking forward to the Eurostar just to have two hours to spend alone together.”

“Alone with a carriage full of other people.”

“We are still wizards,” Draco argued. “A quick Muffliato and we can talk all we like.”

“After we cross to the French side, maybe.”

“Fine, but as soon as.”

“Fine,” Harry laughed. “But only because I’ve missed your company so much.”

Draco grinned and squeezed his hand.

They walked further into the garden, over the slate paths, through the hedgerows, past the Japanese maple, which had come back strong and still held a few of its leaves. Draco pulled Harry towards the stairs looking out into the field and set his half-empty flute on the balustrade.

Harry stopped him before they could descend onto the grass below. “I can’t be gone too long,”

“Another minute, though. You do need the rest.”

“I know,” Harry sighed.

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry and turned them towards the house. The ballroom was a beacon against the night, seeming to light the whole side of the house.

“Quite something, what you’ve managed to put together,” Draco murmured.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I’m proud of it.”

“As you should be.”

“It’s good, to have done something I’m proud of on my own terms.”

“Makes all the difference in the world,” Draco agreed.

“Thank you for letting us use the ballroom. And for being here.”

“Happy to, and I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Draco answered honestly. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s cheek. “Is that your way of saying we’ve got to go back in?”

Harry sighed, his breath rising in a white column that disappeared into the night. He relaxed into Draco’s arms. “Another minute.”

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Comments are ♥ here or on Livejournal or on tumblr.

Massive, tremendous, overjoyed thanks to anemonen for the gorgeous illustration of the Orchideous scene in Chapter 17 (here and here!!) and apricat for the beautiful drawings of
Draco and Harry's conservatory talks (here and here)!!! If you haven't seen them yet, please do go give them a look! You won't be sorry!

I haven't had a chance (yet!) to sit down and respond to your incredibly kind, encouraging, flail-inducing comments (partly because I'm working on new fic!!) but please know that I read and treasure and squee over every one of them. Possibly more than once. Okay, definitely more than once. ♥♥♥

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