Summary

Draco’s good at playing the part that’s expected of him. Death Eater. Malfoy Heir. Bully. It’s all the same. He’s good at pretending; knows exactly what to say. But when his mask begins to slip, it’s green eyes that notice. Drarry. Harry/Draco.

Notes

Thank you for reading. Reviews are appreciated and CCs are more than welcomed. ~Wiggy
Draco Malfoy is staring straight ahead with a passive expression on his face. He's trying his best to keep from shaking, but he's finding it difficult under the circumstances. This is his final trial, and whatever the Wizengamot decide today will shape the rest of his life. The charges against him are severe, including being an active member of an illegal hate association and aiding and abetting in murder.

The room appointed for his final trial is dingy, dark and frigid. Everything about the space is bleak, from the lack of windows on the sweaty walls to the lonely, wooden chair that waits for the accused. Draco sits in it now, clenching his fists tightly over his lap, hoping to hide his shaking hands. He's already endured two weeks of this torture. What's the point of sitting through this when it's perfectly clear to everyone that he's guilty? His darkest secrets are exposed for the world to see, and the evidence against him is mounting and heavy.

"We now call our final witness to the stand."

Draco is momentarily relieved to learn that this is almost over, but his stomach lurches unpleasantly at the sight of Harry Potter walking past him, his hair disheveled and his robes a mess. Of course, why would he bother looking presentable for this? Draco almost laughs at his misfortune: he may be getting the kiss after all.

Potter doesn't even have the nerve to look in his direction as he takes his seat only a few feet away in the witness bench. He looks uneasily at the crowd in front of him, squinting as dozens of photographers take their money shot.

"For the record, can you please state your full name, age and address?" The Head Wizengamot member, Doge, begins.

Potter quickly scans the Wizengamot committee, seeming to recognize some of them. "My name is Harry Potter, I'm 17 years old and er… currently don't have a permanent address. I'm staying with my friend's family, the Weasleys."

As soon as Potter begins speaking, dozens of quills can be heard scratching furiously on parchment. Doge smiles reassuringly at Potter. "Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mr. Potter. I first want to ask, what is your relationship to Mr. Malfoy?"

"We were classmates at Hogwarts."

"Would you say you two were friends?"

"No - not at all," Potter says shortly. "We never got along."

"And why is that?"

"Well," he hesitates for a moment, "there was house rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor and it was rumoured his family had connections to Voldemort. But honestly, more than anything, Malfoy was a bully." Draco stares stonily at Potter, unable to believe what he's hearing. Is he trying to get him killed?
"Can you please elaborate?" Doge asks.

"Yeah. Malfoy was prejudiced against muggleborns. He gave some people a hard time at Hogwarts, like calling my friends ‘mudblood’ or ‘blood-traitor’ –" The crowd audibly gasps and a scatter of flashes erupt to document this moment. Draco can only hang his head and blankly stare down at his white knuckles, feeling the last rays of hope drain from him. _Potter wants him dead._ Harry Potter has the power to make it happen. “But -” Potter continues, and Draco looks up at him again, “even though he’s a git– that’s not way he’s here.”

“Quite right,” Doge says almost pleasantly. “Evidence suggests that Mr. Malfoy became a Death Eater when he was 16 years old. Did you ever personally see Mr. Malfoy's Dark Mark?"

"Yes, at the end of the sixth year."

"Did he show this to you?"

"No. He showed Albus Dumbledore on the night he died." Cue for another round of audible gasps and scattered flashes, but all Draco can do is slowly shakes his head in horror. Potter wasn't even there that night!

"Are you suggesting that Mr. Malfoy has a role in Albus Dumbledore's death?"

Potter seems to take a moment to gather his thoughts, before he unexpectedly glances at Draco. Draco digs his nails into his palms as he fights to keep his expression neutral. A cold, harsh truth washes over him: _I'm going to Azkaban_.

"No, he isn't capable," he says at last, shocking Draco, who lets out a shaken breath he didn’t realize he was holding in.

"How can you be so sure of that, Mr. Potter?"

"I -" Potter becomes visibly uncomfortable, "I already gave my account of what happened, but a lot of it is not public knowledge yet… do I have to say it again?" Draco frowns in confusion, clearly he’s been left uninformed.

"If you please, Mr. Potter, summarize what you have told the Aurors earlier."

"Alright. Well – the thing is – Dumbledore’s death wasn’t actually murder – _per se._” Draco stares as Potter incoherently stammers. Even Doge is looking at Potter as if he’s gone mad. All that can be heard at that moment are flashes and urgent quills.

“That’s… not a reasonable statement, Mr. Potter, considering the fact that Severus Snape cast the Killing Curse on Prof. Dumbledore. You saw this yourself.”

Potter nods in agreement, “Yes, I did. But Dumbledore was already dying-”

“So are you suggesting that Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape killed Prof. Dumbledore out of the goodness in their hearts?” Doge seems to be giving Potter a smile that’s both disbelieving and amused. _How cute_, Doge must be thinking, _our hero has such a gentle, trusting heart_.

Potter sighs loudly and Draco has no idea where he’s going with this. “Severus Snape was a spy for Dumbledore,” he blurs out at last. The whole room seems to spin in chaos; writers begin demanding more details, family members loudly object, and even Doge loses his composure. But to Draco, well…as shocking as that is to hear, it would explain a fair bit. Before Severus killed Dumbledore, Draco had suspected as much. But even after that night, there were those rare rare times when Draco felt
something didn’t add up – like when Severus knew just the right amount of information, or how his style of obedience was painted with purpose rather than loyalty. Perhaps only Draco could see the cracks in his mask because he was hiding himself.

“I have proof,” Potter says, dragging Draco out of his thoughts. “He was on our side the entire time. He fooled us all, especially me. But Dumbledore made sure of that, he needed Snape to be a convincing spy.”

“The Aurors have yet to confirm this, so I’m afraid I cannot allow this to sway our verdict in this case,” Doge says to the rest of the committee.

“But if it’s not murder, why should Malfoy be accused of it?” Potter interjects.

“Mr. Potter, please avoid speaking out of turn. It doesn’t change the fact that Draco Malfoy attempted to kill Albus Dumbledore on numerous occasions. There are several accounts of his failed attempts, in which his fellow classmates, friends of yours, were severely injured. Prof. Dumbledore was acutely aware of how dangerous this person is.” Doge points at Draco unnecessarily. “You mentioned in your report that Prof. Dumbledore forced you to hide on the night he was killed. He did this because he knew you would be in danger if you faced Draco Malfoy.”

Potter snorts, before he realizes how utterly inappropriate that reaction is and schools is expression to be serious. What a cocky, little shit. Potter sits up straighter in his chair before he replies, “no, Dumbledore was hiding me from the other Death Eaters. Dumbledore wasn't worried about Malfoy. He knew that Malfoy’s job was to kill him, but Malfoy couldn't do it. The problem with this is that Dumbledore had already planned out his death: it was the only way to secure Snape as a spy, keep Malfoy alive and give Voldemort a false sense of hope. All this, combined with the fact that he was already dying, made Dumbledore realize his apparent murder was the only move he had. So - he asked Snape to do it, since he knew Malfoy … didn't have it in him.” Potter turns to face Draco unexpectedly, his expression earnest, "I saw you lower your wand, and I knew then too."

Draco openly flinches at this, his mind trying to make sense of what Potter's saying. He remembers pointing his wand at Dumbledore's slouched chest, threatening to kill him. He remembers the fool trying to help him. I can help you, Draco -

"Mr. Potter, please refrain from speaking to the defendant!” Doge demands loudly before gathering thoughts, “Let’s assume you aren’t mistaken and everything you say is true. That means that Prof. Dumbledore knew about Draco Malfoy’s dilemma and did nothing to stop him from hurting others. Does that seem rational to you?"

"Prof. Dumbledore didn’t do anything in order to protect Malfoy, and also Snape’s secret. He knew that if Malfoy showed any hesitation, Voldemort would kill him.” A look of shock overcomes the Wizengamot committee, clearly this isn’t going as they had planned. Potter, who seems aware of their frustration, carries on relentlessly. "I don’t like Draco Malfoy, if anything I despise him, but that’s not good enough of a reason to punish him. Although I can’t trust him, I definitely can’t condemn him, because he… he’s also a victim of this war."

"- Thank you, Mr. Potter." Doge cuts Potter off sharply, needing him to stop talking. "I would like to take this time to call a recess. Mr. Potter, you are excused."

The room erupts in an incessant chatter as Potter gets up to leave. The reporters practically throw themselves at his feet as he begins to walk away. The confusion Draco feels makes his head heavy and his ears buzz noisily. Everything Potter has said weighs heavily on his chest, making it difficult to breathe. He looks to Potter for some explanation of what the fuck just happened, some clue as to what he must be thinking, but his steps are quick and desperate, needing to get away. As Draco
watches him, he feels this moment being seared into his memory: the slight tilt of Potter's face as he begins to look back at him, but as he hurries out of the courtroom, he never does.

Chapter 1: Into the Woods

Harry can’t quite believe that he’s back on the Hogwarts Express, heading for a final year of school. The ministry made it clear that he could graduate without his last credits, and that a position is available as an entry Auror if he wished for it. But Harry needs some time to get his bearings back. He still wants to be an Auror, but not straight away, not after everything that happened mere months ago.

"Harry? Are you listening? You've got that far away look again."

"Oh, sorry, Ginny. Just got lost in my thoughts."

"Do you think they'll allow us to share a dorm?" Ginny asks slyly. The Ministry made it a priority to repair the damages inflicted on Hogwarts during the final battle. New dorms were added to accommodate the students who are returning for an eight year.

"I doubt it," he replies with a smirk, "even if I am the Chosen One." Checking to see that no one is looking, Harry plants a quick kiss on Ginny's cheek.

She laughs and pushes him away playfully, "we'll just have to be sneaky, like normal teenagers."

He smiles, but it makes him wonder if anything in his life will ever be normal. Maybe things will settle down now that he's back at Hogwarts. The other students will quickly bore of seeing Harry Potter do every day, normal things. How exciting can it be to watch someone eat, walk or study, after all? "I think it's going to be okay" he says mostly to himself. Within just a few weeks, people will begin to forget what happened at Hogwarts. If he’s lucky, maybe he can too.

Harry is roughly pulled away from such thoughts when he feels the train begin to slow at an alarming pace. He can see everyone around him pause momentarily, listening to the harsh screeching sounds of the brakes. "We couldn't be there yet!" Neville exclaims while shoving Pig into his cage. Luna's eyes can be seen above her upside down book, looking intently outside the window. Turning his gaze, Harry can make out dark figures almost blending against the night. He stands up instinctively with his wand ready in hand. As the train streaks to a halt, commotion and loud voices are heard outside their compartment. What sounds like panic is heard, but it's too far away to distinguish what’s going on. Ron, who is closest to the compartment door, slowly opens it and peaks his head outside.

"Ron, wait!" Hermione says anxiously, her new edition of Hogwarts: A History forgotten. "I think they're inside."

Ron turns to look at Harry. With silent understanding, he nods at Harry's next words. "I think we should see if everything's okay. Ginny, maybe you could stay with Luna and watch the first years."

"I don't see why they can't lock up behind us." She stands up and takes her wand out. "If you're going, I am too."

"I need you to stay here with the first years," he explains a little more forcefully than he intends. That doesn’t persuade her, so he continues, "it's probably nothing anyway - Just for precaution. Please?"
She looks to Ron and Hermione with a pleading look; when nothing more is said, she sits back down grudgingly. "Okay, whatever you say."

Harry knows she’s upset, but he can't think of that right now. "We'll be quick," he says before leaving with Ron, Hermione and Neville.

They begin walking through the corridors, and the screaming that was heard only moments ago is gone, replaced by an eerie silence that makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. All the compartment doors to either side of him are closed shut, most likely locked. But he could see shadows under the cracks of the doors. No one seems to be speaking or moving. Why is everyone so afraid? Towards the end of one corridor there seems to be one compartment with its doors off its hinges, placed obscurely on the floor. But that isn't what makes Harry stop in his tracks. A familiar green light is spilling out from that compartment.

Before facing the room, Harry pauses to listen for any voices. Although he can't hear anything, he still raises a protective shield as he faces the compartment. What first catches his attention is the source of the green light. The window on the opposite end of the room is broken, and through it he can see the image of the mocking green skull against the dark sky, with a snake emerging from its mouth, seeming to slither ever closer. He hears someone gasps behind him. Everyone stares up at the Dark Mark, unable to move or speak. Finally, Neville takes a step into the room and casts a Lumos spell. Harry's attention is momentarily averted to a still body on the floor. He doesn't have time to see who the person is before he hears a blood-curdling scream coming from outside.

Without a second thought, he races to climb through the broken window. Stepping over the tracks, he barely acknowledges that glass is crunching under his shoes. Harry breaks into a run towards the edge of the woods. He can hear footsteps behind him, but he doesn't have the frame of mind to tell them to go back.

The forest begins to thicken as he goes deeper, making it nearly impossible for him to run through it without tripping. Slowing down his pace, he holds his breath to better listen to his surroundings, even as his heart thumps loudly in his ears. Whoever had left the train to follow him was no longer by his side. After another 10 minutes of stumbling between branches, he sees a source of light in the distance. Being mindful of every step, Harry edges closer to the light. He begins to hear low voices arguing amongst themselves.

"Rook, we need to go—"

"Not until we're called!"

Harry is now close enough to see two figures in long cloaks wearing dark masks, hovering over another person who is barely moving except for his uncontrolled twitching. Harry should have waited for one of his friends to catch up to him. Now he has to take down two wannabe Death Eaters by himself.

"Stupefy," he whispers, aiming his wand at the closer one.

While the jet of red light hits its mark, it also gives away Harry’s position to the second Death Eater, who twists his wand and shouts, "Ardere Oculus!"

Harry, not recognizing the spell, ducks out of the way. But his attempt is futile because several jets of white light emerge from the caster's wand in an array of directions. He puts his shield up at the last moment but one ray of white light penetrates it, hitting him. A blinding pain burns his eyes, making him crouch over even as he manages to put up another defence shield before a stunning spell hits him. Through burning tears, he open his eyes. The Death Eater must have sucked out all light source
from the space, leaving the forest eerily dark. But Harry can still hear hurried footsteps approaching him.

"Expelliarmus!" he casts before throwing his body against the Death Eater. They stumble towards the cold ground and Harry manages to put his whole weight on the man's torso. Taking an educated guess, Harry throws a punch where a face should be.

"ACK!" he hears the man gasps. Oops, he must have punched him in the throat. Well that works too.

Before the man can regain his composure, Harry stuns him. He'll bring him back to Hogwarts where they can question him properly. "Didn't you know?" he sardonically asks the still figure as he stands up. "Voldemort's dead."

Thinking the best course of action is to get the other student and himself back to the train as soon as possible, he casts an illumination spell in the direction of where he last saw the person lying on the ground. Nothing happens. "Lumos!" he says again with urgency. The spell has never backfired before. Was something wrong with his wand? "Lumos! Lumos!"

"Potter," - a muffled grunt.

"Who's there?"

There's silence for a moment, before the voice wheezes, "we need to go."

Relief washes over him as he realizes that he must be the student that the Death Eaters abducted. "Okay, just keep talking. I think something happened to my wand. Do you have one on you?"

"No."

"Lumos," he tries one last time.

"I can see you," the voice manages.

"What? How can you? Its pitch dark."

Harry can hear him coughing again. "If I can see you but you can't see me, what does that tell you?" he rasps.

Wait a moment, Harry knows that tone of needless sarcasm. "Malfoy!?"

"Yeah." Harry can hear the sound of leaves crunching as Malfoy lumbers nearer. "We need to go!" Malfoy urges behind a cough.

"But what do you mean … you can see?"

Malfoy is now standing in front of him by the sound of it. "You're blind, you git," he hoarsely whispers before grabbing Harry's wrist and apparating them both away from the forest.

When he arrives at Hogwarts, he first looks to the stars. More than the landscape itself, the stars tell Draco where he is. At Hogwarts, it always amazed him how close the sky looked. Sometimes he felt that if he could fly high enough, he could touch ether. Against the darkness, he begins to see the faint outline of the front gates of Hogwarts. "We're not far. Should take 10 minutes if we hurry," he says in his general direction. How did he manage to start the year like this? Taking a stroll with Harry-
bloody-Potter.

The silence between them thickens as the minutes pass by. Draco glances at Potter and scoffs in annoyance. The stupid prat has a stony expression and seems to be walking as if he's not momentarily blind. What could he expect, a little loss of vision to faze the Hero? Draco can't help but smirk when Potter swears angrily under his breath as he stumbles for a third time. "You're slowing us down," Draco drawls as he walks by him.

Once they're finally inside, Draco feels a little less tense. Maybe he's imagining it, but Potter looks less tense too. They continue walking silently in the same direction. It seems that the surest thing to do is to report what happened. When they approach the stairs leading to the Headmistress's office, Draco doesn't bother telling Potter to watch his step. Potter slams his foot against the bottom marble stairs, causing his whole upper body to fumble forward in a comical fashion, to which Draco can't help but snigger.

"Shut up!" Potter hisses to the empty space beside Draco. His face is flushed and his hands seem to have received most of the blow from his falls. "You could have said something, you prat."

"And you would have listened?" he replies with mock sweetness.

"What choice do I have?" Potter snaps. And without waiting for a response, he begins to stubbornly climb the stairs.

Potter knocks urgently on the door, not knowing that it's already ajar. "Thank goodness you're here! Please come in quickly." Prof. McGonagall ushers them in. "The train should be here any moment now, but I would like a full report before I see to the students."

As they take their seats, Draco waits for Potter to begin. But Potter pinches his lips together and glares vacantly in front of him. Taking the hint, Draco summarizes what happened as tonelessly as possible, "I felt the train stop and I heard yelling coming from outside. We then heard loud voices in the hallway, so they must have forced themselves in. Blaise had the foresight to lock our compartment, but whoever was on the train forced himself through the door, knocked it straight off its hinges. And then… One moment I was sitting there, the next moment my head breaks through glass. They must have hexed me out of the window, and that's when I blacked out. When I regained consciousness, I was laying in the forest and Potter was dueling one of them."

"Wait. Then who screamed?" Potter asks tersely.

"I did - when my head bashed through a window."

"No, in the forest. Before I caught up with you, I heard a scream."

"Don't know what to tell you, Potter. As I said I was knocked out." He glares at Potter's confused expression. Why is he always meddling?

Draco notices McGonagall's eyes looking at him inquisitively. She doesn't say anything for moment, seeming to wait for him to continue. When it's evident that he won't, she asks, "Other than that nasty cut on your head, are you sure you didn't experience any other injuries, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I'm sure," he replies coolly.

"Do you have any idea why you were a target?"

"No."
"Did you recognize your attackers?"

"No."

"Very well." She gives him a levelled look before turning to Potter. It's nauseating to see her expression change to something not unlike worry when she looks at him, "Mr. Potter, can you tell me what you remember?"

Potter's version of the events sounds so much more detailed than his, he muses. Draco is glad that he kept in the bit about the broken window, as it seems Potter had noticed the glass outside. But when Potter mentions hearing the scream, he holds in his breath, waiting for someone to question his story. He subconsciously presses his fists into his lap. He can still feel the effects of the curse pinching his nerves.

Pushing his knuckles into his right eye, Draco tries to suppress his growing headache. He doesn't know if he can take another second of Potter's whining. He lies back against his bed and wills himself to ignore him.

"Unfortunately only the caster can reverse the effects of the spell," Madame Pomfrey explains for the thirteenth time that hour.

"There has to be another way. You said yourself that there's nothing actually wrong with my eyes."

"I unfortunately don't have any answers. I'm in contact with a specialist about your situation, so we should have some more information soon. In the meanwhile, you should stay put."

"And how will that help? We have to find the person who did this and make him reverse the spell!"

Draco scoffs to no one in particular, still pressing his knuckles into his eyeballs.

"What now?" Potter snaps at him.

"How exactly would you find him? In case you missed to notice, Potter, you're bli–"

"I'm aware, thanks!" Exasperated, Potter stands up from his bed and makes a point to leave.

"No, Mr. Potter, you must stay in the wing!" Madame Pomfrey urges as she tries to put him back in bed.

At that moment, McGonagall opens the front door with Potter's sidekicks in tow.

"Harry!" Granger cries as she throws her arms around him. "I can't believe this!" The Weasel looks earnestly concerned, and seems at a loss of what to do.

"I'm fine, Hermione. It's only temporary."

Seeing them gather around him like a flock of sheep is more than Draco can bear. He sits up on his bed to close the curtains around him, unintentionally catching Weasley's eye.

"You!" He shouts at Draco "You're behind this! What filthy scheme are you up to now?" He makes a move towards Draco's bed, but is stopped by Madame Pomfrey and Granger.

"Mr. Weasley, please refrain yourself! If you cannot act civilly, I'll have to ask you to leave."
Weasley visibly takes in a deep breath and nods curtly, to which Draco only sniggers. It always amuses him how he can get under people’s skin without even trying. Weasley’s face flushes an ugly shade of red when he catches Draco's smug expression.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy, you're going to have to stay the night here so that Madame Pomfrey can keep a close watch on you, just so ensure there aren't any further complications," McGonagall states, sternly eyeing the Golden Boy.

Potter slumps back into his bed ungracefully, finally shutting up. Draco, who already predicted as much, shrugs as arrogantly as he can muster and closes his curtains around him pointedly.

Draco had already resigned to the fact that his life is unfair, unjust, and cold. All he knows is how to survive the cold and how to hide within it. He’s glad no one’s cares to visit him in the Hospital Wing, he’s glad for the curtains that shield him, and most definitely, he’s glad that the one person who could see the holes in his story is blinded by his hatred for Draco.

Harry can't help but feel relief when his friends leave close to Midnight. He knows he should feel grateful for their concern, but the reality of the situation is just too much to bear. He has only been in this state for the past few hours and he's already worn out. The effort of trying not to fall over every time he moves about has made his entire body stiff and weak. Even more exhausting is the effort of trying to stay calm, of not letting the never-ending darkness get to him.

He lets out a slow, silent breath. How did he let this happen? Why does he feel the need to save the day? It’s not like – it’s expected of him anymore. Everyone has been telling him he can relax now, that everything’s going to be easy from here on out.

Harry presses his pillow onto his face.

Stubbornly crushing the panic that's growing in his chest, he attempts to think logically about his priorities – but dammit he needs Hermione’s help with that because all he wants to do is run out of the Hospital Wing and find whoever did this to him – but not before punching Malfoy in the face.

Swallowing his impulses, Harry sits up and faces Malfoy's bed. He knows his best bet of finding any sort of lead is mere feet away.

Resigning to a sleepless night, Harry carefully steps onto the cold tiled floor. It's interesting how he never noticed that the floor of the Hospital Wing was tiled before. The marble feels like ice as he walks slowly to Malfoy's bed, his hands outstretched before him. He touches a light fabric that must be the drawn curtains. Pausing for a moment before opening them, he listens closely for any human sound. "Um… Malfoy?" he whispers to his general direction. There’s no response, of course.

Malfoy probably has the luxury of easy sleep. Should he wake him?

He then hears a whimper and his hand freezes in mid motion. He pulls his ear closer, moving the curtain a fraction, thinking maybe he misheard. Oh crap, is he crying? Listening closely, it doesn't seem like Malfoy's even awake. He can hear him tossing and turning in his sheets and one barely audible word: "N-No."

Before he understands what he’s doing, Harry rips the curtain open and urgently presses his hand onto the sleeping Slytherin's chest. He feels the other boy jolt awake and quite suddenly Malfoy is clawing Harry's hands off, hoarsely whispering, "What are you doing?!

Harry doesn't know. "I need to ask you some questions," he says without any emotion.
"Can't wait 'til morning?" Malfoy retorts rather aggressively, "you know, when the sun's up? Oh right, you can't tell the difference."

"Why were those Death Eaters after you?" Harry interrupts him.

There is a momentary silence before Malfoy replies carefully, "what makes you think they were after me?"

"You said as much to McGonagall, they were looking for you. What do they want with you?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Well, did they say anything about their plans? What do they want?"

"Potter," Malfoy sighs dramatically, "why would they disclose their 'master plans' to me?" Harry could practically hear the quotation marks.

"You were a Death Eater," he says coldly.

"Yes, note the past tense." Malfoy grits between his teeth, "now can you piss off and let me sleep? I really don't need your hero antics this early in the morning."

Something about Malfoy's snippety, dismissive tone makes Harry's unreasonably angry. He doesn't understand why, but Malfoy always has that effect on him, "I know you know something! It's no coincidence that Death Eaters stopped the train and came looking for you."

"I really don't know," Harry can hear something in his tone that sounds almost like a lie. "I'm going to ignore you now." He begins shifting in his covers and closing the curtains around him, but Harry's hand instinctively moves out to stop him.

"You must have recognized them, their faces or their voices? Who are they?" Harry presses.

"No idea."

"How is that possible?" Harry snaps.

"It's not like we had Death Eater tea-parties. Most often I couldn't tell who was behind the mask. I'm guessing they're not even registered with the Ministry."

"Meaning…"

"They don't exist." Malfoy says flatly.

Harry knows Malfoy is keeping something to himself, but he can't put his finger on it. Trying to swallow the frustration that is beginning to seep through, he chooses his next words with care.

"I just find it strange that their main concern was getting you."

At these words Malfoy snorts with disdain, "Because I'm not worthy of it? Because you were on the train?"

"No - I only meant -"

"That you're an arrogant prat who won't let me fucking sleep?"

Harry doesn't have a chance to retort. He can hear the heavy doors beginning to unlock at the other
end of the Hospital Wing. As quickly and carefully as he can manage, Harry runs back to his own bed. He comes upon it far sooner than he anticipated; tripping into his curtains and covers. (He can distantly hear someone snorting in the background.) Just as the doors open, Harry manages to pull the covers over himself. Someone seems to linger there, possibly watching for any signs of life. Harry, who feels like 11 years old again, pretends to be sound asleep. After the doors closes shut, he continues to listen for any other sounds, but find none for the rest of the night, not even the heavy breathing of another person sleeping.
Chapter Summary

Next time, I'll let you burn. - Harry

"This is hopeless," Harry can't help but whine to Ginny. "I need to see my wand moving to cast these spells properly." He rubs his eyes in exhaustion, missing the feel of his glasses. He must have lost them that night in the forest.

"Harry, you're so close - You just need a little more of a flick at the end." Ginny squeezes his hand gently, and he reciprocates by locking his fingers with hers, but quite suddenly he feels her lips against his and he jumps back slightly. He pushes her away, feeling embarrassed.

She doesn't say anything, but he can tell from the taste of the silence that he's hurt her. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's with me."

"It's okay; you're having a hard time." She sounds a little wary when she continues, "it's just, you've been like this since the summer – a little to yourself. Not just with me, but with Ron and Hermione too." She sounds dreadfully concerned.

"I just need some more time." He smiles in what he hopes is a reassuringly way, trying to hide the headache that's coming in waves.

"I know. I'll wait." She sounds strained as her hand slips away from his. "You want to try the spell again?"

Harry really doesn't want to but he also doesn't want to disappoint her. Sighing, he raises his arm to perform the spell, "Legere!" When nothing happens, he puts his wand down and glares back at the darkness.

"Maybe you'll have better luck tomorrow," she says hopefully. Harry nods for a response and continues to glare at the unjustness of it all. "Harry, do you want to take a walk with me outside? It's a cold, fall day - your favourite kind."

He's momentarily tempted, but the memory of walking around the grounds with Hermione and Ron last week, holding onto them to not fall over while feeling everyone shamelessly staring at him was too painful to repeat. "Thanks Ginny, but I'm kinda tired."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"It could be fun?"

"You go ahead," he says a little impatiently.

"Alright." She sounds cross with him and Harry can't blame her. "I'll check on you later," and not waiting for his response, she walks out of his dormitory, firmly closing the door behind her. Harry sighs as he lays back on his bed. How did he manage to piss her off so quickly? He's had a knack of
doing that lately.

It was infuriating to be surrounded by people who feel obligated to help him, pity him, or praise him. Everyone seems to go out of their way to make sure that he's *comfortable*. Harry, do you need help getting to the seat? Harry do you need help with your books? Harry, do you need me to pour you some juice? Harry, do you need help wiping your arse? No one could pass the chance to do something for him, to make him feel a little more helpless each time. Bit by bit, Harry was losing his mind. Is that why they spoke to him in that hushed voice? Y'know, the one reserved for people in their deathbeds?

Harry chucks his textbook at the wall in disgust.

But worse than all that: than his sudden dependance on others, his inability to learn new spells, or the gossip that circulates him – worst are the nightmares. Harry envies a simpler time when the nightmares were reserved to private nights and silencing charms around his bed. Now the days and nights hold no difference. When Harry isn't snapping at his friends or wallowing in self-pity, he's afraid. Every waking and sleeping moment is full of terrors: of cold eyes and cold bodies, of blazing fires and ruined castles, and then, the endless, endless darkness that threaten to consume him.

"Harry?" Hermione lightly taps his arm, jolting him out of his thoughts.

"Hey - Didn't hear you."

"We were calling for some time, mate..." Ron says with concern.

"Sorry, I must have dozed off." He can't quite remember when or how he left his dorm. From the sound of the fire crackling and the feel of the cushioned armchair, he must be in the common room. There doesn't seem to be anyone else with them.

"With your eyes open?" Ron asks.

"Huh?" he asks.

"Nevermind that," Hermione sighs. "I wanted to talk to you about the night you went blind." Harry tries not to flinch at the word but fails. "There must be something you missed? I'm sure if you told me once more-"

"Hermione," Harry rests his head back against the armchair lethargically, "I've told you everything I know."

"It's just, I've found close to nothing on the curse he used on you. I'm hitting dead ends, Harry."

"Maybe we're not focusing on the right things. Maybe we should try to find the person who did this instead of wasting our time reading every book in the library." Not that he had been doing much reading.

He feels her hand lightly squeeze his arm, and he has to fight the impulse to snatch his arm away. "We're only trying to help. It's unrealistic to go after a man without a name." she says.

"Or a face," Ron puts in.

He shakes his head stubbornly. "One of them was called Rook – maybe it's a nickname – we should get the Aurors to check again."

Harry can feel Hermione and Ron exchanging a look. Feeling slightly suffocated, he begins to get up
from the armchair.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asks with concern.

"I can't sit here anymore. I know you're both worried and trying to help, but I need to get away from all this. Just – going for a walk."

"We'll come with you!" Hermione makes a move to get up as well.

"No!" His face flushes in embarrassment. "No, just need to be on my own."

Hermione begins to argue, but Ron quietly shushes her. As he walks through the portrait hole, he can hear Ron faintly whispering, "He'll come around."

The things that fall into his awareness are now so diverse – things that had escaped his attention completely before: like how everyone has a unique walk and scent, or how a room changes when people notice he's there, or what people whisper when they think he can't possibly hear them. All of his senses are overcompensating, trying to make him feel whole again, but all he feels is overwhelmed.

Harry, who isn't focusing on where he's stepping, is abruptly shaken out of his thoughts as he trips over something sprawled across the floor. Cursing, he feels the floor with his hands until his fingers touch – a scarf? He travels his hands until they curl around a shape and he realizes quite suddenly that he's holding onto someone's arm.

His whole body reels back violently. He can feel the corners of his mind beginning to bend unpleasantly in panic. Did he just stumble over a corpse? Images flash in his head and he's back at the final battle: the castle is under attack and everyone is fighting or screaming or dying. Shaking his head abruptly, he wills himself to breathe calmly to better hear his surroundings. A moment passes by and all he can hear is his breath breaking the silence.

Urging on his Gryffindor courage, Harry kneels close to the person and places his hands on their chest. He senses the steady rhythm of a heartbeat against his fingers. He places his ear above the person's face and listens to their faint, shallow breath. Sighing with irrational relief that no one is dead, he realizes he needs to get them to the Hospital Wing immediately. When Harry stands up he levitates the person into the air and into his arms. He supports the limp body by bringing it close to his own and that's when he notices it, an autumn scent on a boy's cloak, mingled with a metallic, sharp smell that seems misplaced. Is he bleeding? He begins to walk a little more urgently, trying his best to remember the steps.

Harry spent the majority of his time this past week either alone in his room, or navigating through the castle by night. He had gotten rather good at knowing the layouts of certain corridors and rooms, as long as the furniture didn't move around drastically. He had been given a week to adjust to his new condition and surroundings, but that time was soon over. In a couple of days, he would start attending classes. A part of him didn't feel ready to face normal life yet, but if he was honest with himself, he had never felt ready.

Harry hears the man groan and begin to stir, which makes Harry carefully place him on the floor, bundling up his scarf under his head. "Can you hear me?" he asks quietly. He doesn't respond, perhaps he isn't conscious yet. But then Harry hears him groan and cold hands are suddenly pushing Harry away roughly, trying to get up. "Wait, I don't think it's wise to move," Harry urges. "You were out cold just now." Harry tries to gently ease the stranger's shoulders back down but he stops when the person overtly recoils at the contact.
He then shoves Harry aside and scrambles to his feet while letting out a dry, uneven laugh. Harry frowns slightly, really unsure of what's happening. Harry can hear him leaving the deserted corridor, scraping his hand against the walls to keep from stumbling over. "Was only trying to help!" Harry calls to his retrieving back. For a moment he considers running after him, but decides against it as he hears the sound of someone desperately trying to get away.

Today is hell.

Draco severely regrets his decision to not seek proper medical attention, but he can't bear trying to explain all this mess. More truthfully, he thought he'd be better by now, but they must have done a real number on him.

He puts his head in his hands, trying to ease the pounding in his head. Sitting in a stuffy Potions room while pretending to listen to Slughorn can't be helping much either. Maybe if he just closes his eyes for a minute… The door loudly slams open, causing Draco to jolt out of his pained exhaustion. When he turns to see who it is, his stomach lurches unpleasantly at the sight of Potter, who is rushing late and looking as unkempt as usual.

"Ah, Harry! I'm glad you've decided to join us today." Slughorn exclaims excitedly. "Please take an empty seat quickly." Draco looks around the overcrowded room of both seventh and eighth year students, and scowls in annoyance when he realizes that the only empty seat is next to his. How life hates him so.

Potter seems to linger uncomfortably at the door for a moment, his face beginning to flush. "Er... Sir..." he says, looking embarrassed.

"Oh yes! I'm sorry, Harry. Draco, can you please help him to his seat?"

Glaring furiously at Slughorn, Draco refuses to say anything as he reaches for Potter's knapsack and tugs him aggressively to the seat next to his. Potter sits down clumsily and snatches his knapsack out of Draco's reach, looking utterly miserable.

The lecture continues for another half hour, but Draco is beyond the point of pretending to listen. Every so often, he sneaks a glance at Potter. It's very eerie for Draco to see Potter so damn lifeless; his eyes glazed over, unblinking and staring into nothing. A pang of guilt kicks Draco in the stomach, but he buries it stubbornly. Looking away from Potter, he forces one single thought to resonate - Potter fucking had it coming.

"The people next to you will be your partner for the rest of the term..." Draco manages to hear. At these words he hangs his head in his hands again and almost laughs at the irony of the situation; his plan to avoid Potter all term had already failed. "Now please collect the ingredients you'll need for today's potion."

Potter doesn't make a move to get up, but Draco supposes he wouldn't be much help. When he returns three minutes later with the ingredients and tools in hand, he finds that Potter's no longer alone. Sitting next to him is his frizzy-haired, know-it-all sidekick.

It just keeps getting better. He places his materials down, trying to ignore the sounds of someone coddling the Golden Boy. "Harry, why didn't you wait for me this morning? We could have come together," Granger asks.

"Yeah... I left early to grab a bite."

"Oh." She sounds disappointed. "Well, how come you were late to class?"
From the corner of his eye, Draco can see Potter shrug.

There is an awkward pause in which Granger doesn't seem to know what to say next. Draco can't help but snigger under his breath as he begins to assort the ingredients. "I tried getting Slughorn to change partners, but there's this new policy that we have to sit with other housemates. Sorry, Harry..." She actually sounds apologetic, which only deepens Draco's smirk. "Do you have something to say, Malfoy?" She suddenly snaps, causing Potter to jump slightly.

"Not to a Mudblood," he drawls, refusing to give her the satisfaction of even looking at her.

"You really have no shame, do you? Not after Harry saved your worthless life?" At this, Malfoy opens his text and begins to read the instructions with care. "Or after he publicly defended you instead of denounce you for what you truly are -" Her shrill whispers are beginning to catch the attention of nearby students. "- a sorry excuse for a Death Eater."

"Hermione -" Potter tries to interject without success. Draco refuses to look at her, wills himself to not hear her. 'Dice the roots into even 1 cm cubes', he reads. Chop. Chop.

But she's relentless: "Did you really not feel some regret when Harry saved you a third time and came back blind for it?"

"No one asked him to!" Draco lashes out. He's now looking directly at her with fury in his eyes. He can see a flicker of shock in her features, followed by confusion. "I didn't fucking ask for him to save me. And I will never be grateful, not to Potter." He spits out the name like it's a curse. It takes him a moment to realize that he just lost his composure in front of the entire class. He didn't even notice he had knocked over his stool in his hasty attempt to tower over Granger.

Potter then turns to face Draco directly, his green eyes piercing into his with that sweet, familiar fire of resent. "Next time, I'll let you burn," he says coldly.

"What is the commotion?" Slughorn asks from the front of the class. "Hermione, please return to your seat." She glances uneasily at Potter as she leaves.

When Draco has his anger in check and is sure that no one is listening, he leans close towards Potter and whispers in a low, leveled voice, "No you won't. You're the hero." Draco catches a strange expression flicker through Potter's face, almost like a shocking revelation has just occurred to him.

Suddenly Potter turns away from him, his eyes appearing to hide a secret. "Pass me the Mortar and the Mistletoe berries," is all he says. Draco does so without comment, as he anxiously contemplates on what Potter could have discovered.

Should have taken the longer route back, Draco thinks regretfully as blood dribsbles down his nose and over his chin.

"Where's your father when you need him?" He hears Don Greenberg taunt as he throws another punch at Draco's stomach. Draco unsuccessfully tries to double over in pain, but the two Ravenclaws (who are this year's Beaters) are tightly clasping his arms behind his back. He bites down hard on his lip, refusing to cry out. Instead he lets out a dry, shaken laugh.

"You think this is funny, Malfoy?" Greenberg hisses into his face.

Draco manages to catch up with his breath. "It's hilarious that you need to have me pinned down to throw a blow. And quite frankly, you fight like a filthy Mudblood." Draco grins at him smugly, tasting blood between his teeth.
At these words, Greenberg takes his wand out and points it directly at Draco. "I'll never understand why they let you go. Everyone could see through your act – Everyone knows you don't belong here." He slashes his wand to tear away Draco's entire left sleeve. "The dark mark you were so proud to wear might be gone now, but you'll always be a Death Eater." He points his wand at Draco's forearm, pressing its tip into his flesh. "Don't forget that." At first his arm is only warm, but quite rapidly, the heat that is emerging from Greenberg's wand becomes unbearable. Draco lets out an agonizing scream when the flesh on his arm begins to blister open. Greenberg quickly removes his wand and says to Draco in a hollow voice. "That's what Voldemort did to my family, but only he didn't stop." He stares expectantly at Draco, possibly hoping for the Slytherin to respond with humility.

For a response, Draco spits blood squarely into his stupid face.

Greenberg lets out what sounds like a war cry and punches Draco across the head, making him see stars. Greenberg throws one, last blow to his stomach for good measure. Dazed and breathless, Draco finds himself roughly being forced to walk backwards. He attempts to struggle against their hold but it's futile. The two Ravenclaws that are holding his arms back in place quite suddenly push Draco into a small, dark room. He feels himself slam against the back wall of a dusty, broom compartment and the door shuts loudly in front of him.

Draco holds in his breath, listening closely to the sounds of them leaving. Once their footsteps can no longer be heard, Draco lets himself slide down against the wall lifelessly. He furiously pulls on the locks of his hair, urging himself not to cry. But the tears come anyway, and all he can do is bury his shame in his knees.
Cor Videt

Chapter Summary

Why do you act like you don't care, when you do? - Harry

Draco really should avoid eating in the Great Hall. Everyone seems to go out of their way to remind him that he's scum at best and nothing at worst. If he's not suffering the dirty looks, he's watching them pretend he doesn't exist. Every morning he thinks the same - that he'll just start eating in the bloody kitchens - but every morning he comes back.

"Ouch, who did that handiwork?" Blaise says as greeting when he sits. Blaise is about the only exception to the ‘everyone’ crowd.

"Greenberg. He thinks I'm solely responsible for every shitty thing that's ever happened in his sad, little life."

Blaise turns to glare at the Ravenclaw table, "what are you going to do about it?"

Draco smiles at the underlying question, 'how are you going to make them pay?'

"I have something in mind," he replied vaguely. Once upon a time, if someone had dared to mess with Draco Malfoy, they were either unhinged or Harry Potter. But now everyone wants a piece of him. Everyone wants to put him in his place. As he ponders on why he hasn’t executed his revenge yet, hundreds of owls sweep in from the high windows to deliver their posts. Draco instantly spots his black eagle owl amongst them, quite easily the largest and most impressive owl at the school. She lands on Draco's shoulder gracefully, her claws gently piercing into his cloak. "Hey girl, what you have?" he affectionately asks as he scratches under her chin.

He takes the letter from her and opens it anxiously, not bothering to hope for any good news:

Dearest Draco,

I apologize for not getting back to you sooner. With your father's trial and the Ministry's inspections, I haven't had a peaceful moment to myself. The Ministry has confiscated a few family heirlooms, many of which were meant to be passed down to you. As you can imagine I’m quite upset to see our home ripped to shreds by these… What's the word for people that do not understand the significance of their history? Neanderthals?

I'm getting off topic. I know you think that’s because I have bad news and I’m stalling. You are right as usual, Draco. Your father’s trial did not go well. Pleading guilty has reduced his sentence substantially, but the minimum sentence is 13 years. Our only saving grace is that he did not side with the Dark Lord during the Final Battle. I’m so grateful you're not going through this any longer. You’re still not safe, but you staying at Hogwarts soothes my worries.

I tried speaking to the Aurors again. They either do not care or are utterly incompetent. They refuse to see the direness of the situation. It seems we can’t rely on them. That may be for the best. It appears that we’re alone in this, so lightly we must tread.
When I can provide a safe passage home, I'll expect you to visit. For now, please do not leave the grounds. Please be careful and keep your head down (and your eyes open). And remember, trust no one.

With love,

Mother

Draco puts his letter down with a heavy heart. It doesn’t surprise him that the Ministry is making an example out of the Malfoy family, which means they are truly alone. Without the Ministry's help, Draco isn't sure how he’ll survive the year. He can’t imagine running from the Death Eaters for the rest of his life.

He looks over to Blaise, who’s received a letter of his own. "Anything noteworthy?" he asks in a bored voice.

Blaise looks at him uneasily, subtly trying to put his letter away. "Nothing really," he says guiltily. "For a Slytherin, you're an atrocious liar." Draco smirks as he casually plucks Blaise's letter out of his hands.

"Give that back, Draco!" Blaise demands as he unsuccessfully tries to retrieve the letter. Draco pushes him away with one hand, while catching phrases such as 'your obligation', 'stay away from Malfoy' and 'dishonourable name'.

Blaise finally snatches his letter back and folds it up possessively. "You can't just go around grabbing people's things!"

"What is that about?" Draco hisses at him. "Your family wants you to stay away from me?"

"Yes! After all that's happened, what did you expect?" Blaise asks quietly, unable to look at Draco directly in the eye.

If possible, Draco's mood sinks even lower, but he supposes he shouldn't be surprised. He never spoke to Blaise about the night the Death Eaters came on the train and knocked him out. Being associated with Draco Malfoy is not only dishonourable, it's dangerous.

"What are you going to tell them?"

"What they want to hear," Blaise says shortly.

Draco arches his left eyebrow up imploringly. "I didn't realize you were the compliant sort. I thought you were aiming to be your 'own man'." It's something that Blaise has always prided himself being.

"Well… it's actually my decision too. Being associated with you hurts my chances of getting a job with the Ministry." He at least has the grace to look at him now. "I'm sorry, but I think it's best if we don't speak… just until things cool down."

Draco stares hard at his only friend, willing him to take the words back. But all Blaise does is turn his back on him. He has the sudden urge to punch Blaise in the back of the head. Instead, Draco begins to eat his breakfast with forced calmness. Chewing mechanically on his toast, all he can tastes are ashes as he swallows the bitter taste of disappointment.

As he looks about himself, a disquieting sensation overcomes him. He feels like he isn't really there, like he doesn't quite exist. No one at all is paying him any mind, not even the usual glares. Everyone
is preoccupied with the start of the day and what it has to offer. The few Slytherins that remain are uniformly ignoring him. At the Ravenclaw table, he notices Greenberg bragging about his flying skills. Wasn't it just yesterday that Greenberg had beaten him to a pulp? He catches Loony Lovegood debating the existence of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. But he still remembers her held captive at the Manor for nearly a year.

Looking towards the Gryffindors is even more sickening. He remembers what the Carrows had made him do to so many of them, and worse of all to Neville Longbottom. Seeing Longbottom laughing now is more than Draco could bear. How could he so easily forget what Draco had done? How could he not want Draco dead? Draco's eyes trail over to Weasley next, who's currently looking over Granger’s shoulder at her timetables. He doesn’t understand why Weasley never confronted him about the poison back in sixth year.

And then there's Perfect Potter. Draco's scowl deepens as he takes in his general appearance; the lack of sleep in his hair, the stiffness in his posture and something like loss in his expression. He’s holding a letter protectively with both hands, seeming to debate if he should open it or not. Potter slightly shakes his head and stores the letter away, resolved to ‘read’ it in private later. It’s at this moment that Potter lifts his face and meets Draco's eyes.

Draco, in pure shock, almost chokes on his coffee. That Potter noticed him staring is nearly enough to make Draco avert his gaze hastily. But that's impossible; Potter can't notice a thing because he's blind. So Draco refuses to look away, even though the urge to do so increases as Potter seems to actually look right at him. Except – Draco tilts his head a bit - it’s not like before. He’s only ever seen resentment in those eyes, but looking hard now, he can't see any trace of that. Only green remains.

Draco knows he should look away, but he's held captive by an impossible thought. "You can see me," he whispers aloud. But then Potter averts his gaze and the vacant stare returns to his eyes. Draco continues shamelessly staring, hoping against hope that someone, even that blind bastard, noticed him. When Potter spills his scrambled eggs all over Granger, Draco ducks his head to hide his embarrassment. He realizes with an appalling clarify that he's losing his mind.

"Bloody unbelievable!" Ron exclaims loudly after hearing Hermione's account of what happened in Potion’s yesterday. "You would think that after everything, that maybe he would be less of a git, that he would show some gratitude for not being locked up or dead."

"Ron, not so loud. Madame Pince is starting to glare daggers at you," Hermione whispers.

"I just can't believe he doesn't feel at all guilty for what happened in the forest," Ron seethes.

"As much as I would love to blame Malfoy for my lack of sight, he wasn't the one who cursed me," Harry counters.

"You still put yourself at risk for him. The least he can do is kiss the ground you walk on."

"But I always put myself at risk," Harry flashes a smile to his friends. "I can be a bloody idiot sometimes."

"I won't disagree with you there," Hermione mutters as she turns a page in her textbook. "You know, this is the most you've said since we got back. Does this mean you're feeling a little better?"

"I dunno. I guess my first day back wasn't so bad." At Ron's amused scoff, Harry tries to explain, "Things have been really difficult since I got back. I haven't been able to do anything by myself, and
everyone's been acting so damned careful around me. It's a little suffocating, honestly."

"Oh, Harry! We didn't mean to -"

"No, Hermione, I'm not blaming you. I'm just saying that I was getting tired of feeling so -dependant. And in Potions yesterday, for the first time in a long while, I guess I kinda felt like my old self."

"A Malfoy-hater, through and through?" Ron asks.

"'Useful' is what I was going for." Harry replies in amusement.

"I wish you had mentioned all this sooner!" Hermione exclaims while slamming her book shut. "I'm sorry I didn’t realize I was acting so -"

"No, it's okay!" Harry can practically feel the guilt emanating from her. “Please don't worry about that. Let's just focus on the real issue – really – I’m okay, Hermione.” He awkwardly pats her back when she hugs him unexpectedly.

“Well, alright - we know that one of the Death Eaters was named Rook. The Ministry doesn't have any information on that name, so I'm thinking we have to look elsewhere; maybe ask an ex-Death Eater?” Harry attempts to ask nonchalantly.

"The only ex-Death Eater who isn't locked up is Malfoy, and you already tried talking to him,” Ron says flatly.

"Yes, and the more I think about it, the more I feel he's hiding something!" he begins to say, but is interrupted by a groan and an exasperated sigh. “What? I was right that other dozen times I said it!”

"Well, good luck getting anything out of him," Ron exclaims. "He's the last person who'd want to help you."

"I know, but what choice do I have?" Harry asks with a frown. Harry ducks his head in contemplation, his fingers absentely picking at the spine of his Potion textbook. "Sometimes I worry I’ll be stuck like this. I don’t – I can’t imagine it …I know it’s silly but-"

"It's not silly at all," Hermione says softly. She seems to hesitate with her next words. "Until we find Rook, there’s something I wanted to show you, something that could help in the meanwhile. It'll make this whole experience a little less ordeal." Hermione has been persistently asking Harry to try new things to help with his lack of sight. Harry tried being patient with these suggestions, but when she mentioned a muggle walking cane, he rudely dismissed the idea as being embarrassing and attention-seeking. The non-muggleborn students probably have never seen those things before and Harry wasn’t going to be the one to educate them.

Harry knows he exerts far too much effort on not being the center of attention. But after months of reporters interrogating him, fans stalking him and tabloids broadcasting all his activity, he feels justified in his desire for anonymity. "What is it?" he asks suspiciously, hoping for something subtle.

"It's a potion that acts like a compass, but more for your intentions! So instead of using your vision to navigate, you rely on your intuition to direct you."
"It wears out in time," she says hurriedly. “Do you want to give it a try?”

Harry shrugs. “Alright – doesn’t seem like it’d hurt.”

"Great! Here, you have to drink this." Hermione pulls out a small vial and places it in Harry's hand. "I made this for you yesterday. It's called Cor Videt, or more commonly known as Heart's Content. After you drink this, you have to say these words: Oculis videre non possum, cum videam mea cor."

"Sounds simple enough," he says with light sarcasm as he unscrews the vial and takes a hesitant sniff. "It smells sort of good, doesn't it?"

"It changes according to what's on your mind," Hermione says.

"What does it smell like?" Ron asks.

"Like leaves? Or the fall. Oh, and … something odd." It smells familiar but he can’t place it. Shrugging, he brings the vial to his lips and shoots the entire contents into his mouth. He's pleasantly surprised when it tastes like bitter tea.

"Oculis videre non possum, cum videam mea cor," Hermione reminds him.

Harry focuses on each word as he repeats the phrase with intention. But when he utters the last syllable, nothing seems to change. He expected some sort of tugging sensation or something, but all that he feels is restless. "I don't think this worked, Hermione."

"I'm sure it just takes some time."

"Maybe," Harry says doubtfully.

Sitting contentedly between his two friends, he listens to them discuss their classes and evening plans. He finds his thoughts floating away from him, and unconsciously begins to gather up his books, preparing to leave.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asks.

"I'm going to try to find Ginny. See you later!" Harry turns away to leave the library before he can think twice about why he just lied to his friends.

Harry's not sure where he's headed, but he feels a walk is the best thing to clear his head right now. The thought of going to the kitchens to grab a bite also seems tempting. But before he can turn the corner that leads to the stairway, he hears curt voices arguing.

"Harassing girls now? I must say that rather unimpressive," Harry hears a familiar drawl.

Another voice laughs in mock surprise, "have you come to fight me, Malfoy? We both know how that'll turn out. It would be smart of you to get out of my way."

"I guess I'm just as stupid as you then, because I'm not leaving." Harry is confused by this bold statement. Why would Malfoy purposely put himself in that predicament? Never before has Harry seen Malfoy look out for anyone but himself.

"Of course you would defend her; birds of a feather and all."
Malfoy's tone is now laced with frosty impatience, "are you always this dim-witted? Or are you just making a special effort today? This Hufflepuff could never be a Death Eater – it literally wasn’t allowed."

"I know exactly who she is! Her family-

At this point, Harry steps out to intervene, but that doesn't stop Malfoy from sneering coldly, "You know nothing. But I wouldn't expect anything less from a Mudblood."

Harry can hear Greenberg move towards Malfoy menacingly, his quick steps heavy with purpose. But before Greenberg can do something stupid, Harry calls him out, "just let it go! He's not worth it." He hears Greenberg hesitate now, breathing somewhat heavily. There is an awkward pause in which Harry idly stands by, waiting for something to happen. There wouldn't be much he could do if a fight did break out.

At last, Greenberg walks close to Malfoy and whispers to him in a low voice that Harry would not normally be able to hear, "the next time you see me, you’ll regret it." He steps away without another word.

When Harry is sure that he is out of earshot, he turns angrily towards Malfoy, "was that really necessary?"

"He backed off, didn't he?" He then turns towards the Hufflepuff girl and Harry is surprised to hear something like concern in his voice, "if he bothers you again, let me know…” But Malfoy's words begin to trail off as she walks towards Harry.

"How could I thank you?" asks a quiet, eager voice.

"Well, I didn't really do anything…” Harry says with embarrassment.

"You were so brave to defend me! I never would have expected you to - because - well, my aunt and uncle…” the girl's excitement quickly dies off at the mention of her family.

"Who were they?" he asks gently.

"The Lestranges," she says very quietly.

"Oh," Harry searches for words of encouragement, but he can't help but feel slightly uncomfortable. "It's too bad we don't get to choose our families."

"That's true. But at least my parents weren't involved."

"Astoria, don't you have classes to get to?" Malfoy asks curtly.

"Oh, yes! I'm already late. See you later, Draco." She then adds shyly, "you too, Harry."

Malfoy snorts and turns to leave the corridor in the opposite direction. "Typical," he mumbles under his breath.

"What is?" Harry falls in step with him.

"The only thing you did was remind him of my worthlessness. I was going to take a brutal beating, and not a single thank you! It's like I wasn't even there!"

"I think you definitely made yourself known, at the very least to Greenberg."
Malfoy laughs sourly at that, "the evil 'M' word works like a charm. It's quite pathetic how angry he gets every single time."

"I don't understand why you would purposely put yourself in that situation. You know perfectly well why that word is so hateful," Harry says coldly.

"Just a word, Potter."

"How can you even bear to say it, after everything that has happened?" Harry asks with forced calmness.

"Sometimes getting your opponent angry is your only defense."

Harry sighs in exasperation at that. "He doesn't have to be your 'opponent'. Maybe if you stopped calling him a Mudblood all the time, he would hate you a little less."

"Doubtful."

Harry is having a hard time keeping up with Malfoy's quick, long strides. Usually, this wouldn't be a problem, but now his pace is awkward from his careful movements. "Look, from what I've heard, he's been through a lot this past year -"

"Yes, yes, his family was murdered," Malfoy says dismissively.

"By Death Eaters!" The little control Harry had over his anger finally snaps. "By your family, and I wouldn't be surprised if you joined in on the fun!"

Malfoy stops so suddenly that Harry nearly crashes into him. He turns towards Harry directly, so that his words, that were so curt and so cold a moment ago, are now tumbling out of him uncontrollably, right into Harry's face. "Right again, Potter! I had so much fun burning villages and watching people die!" He lets out a boisterous, deranged laugh. "How I miss those glory days! If only you didn't put a stop to it all. I would still be basking in the torture and humiliation. Oh, but don't forget fear! There's nothing better than fearing for your life – nothing better than fearing for your god damned soul!"

Malfoy abruptly stops shouting, and from what Harry can tell, stops breathing. Harry is very aware of Malfoy being too close for comfort. He takes a hesitant step backwards, unsure of what to do with this horrible honesty. But then a flicker of something passes over his eyes, the same that he's seen once in the Great Hall, and all he can do is stare into darkness.

Malfoy begins to silently turn away from him, but Harry grabs his arm. He tries desperately to hold onto the shadow that he just saw. He knows instinctively that he can't let Malfoy leave, so he blurts out the first thing that comes to mind, "why do you act like you don't care, when you do?"

Maybe Malfoy is too horrified to realize what he’s saying, but for once he gives Harry a straight answer, "to keep the memories away." With that, he impatiently snatches his arm free and walks away briskly, leaving Harry standing alone in the middle of a corridor for a second time.

Sleep is not his friend. Sleep always makes him relive the fear, makes him remember.

Everything is on fire. Everyone is screaming. He wants it all to stop, but he's the reason it started. His throat is dry with ashes, but still he stands before them with his wand held out high and an incantation on his lips. He lives while they all die, but he cannot falter, not while his father is
watching. His father always told him that greatness does not come cheaply. But his father never told
him the ugliness of it all. His father never told him that the price was his soul.

Only the mask he wears protects him now. If the snake could see his face, surely he would know that
the boy doesn't belong, that he is only pretending. He has to pretend to love the smell of blood and
the bitter taste of guilt. He has to pretend to love their pain in order to survive. He hopes his mask
doesn't slip or he will surely die.

But maybe he isn't pretending anymore. He can't tell the difference between this misanthropy and his
self-loathing. He's worn the mask for so long that he can't take it off. He can't tell where the Death
Eater stops and the boy begins. Maybe the boy doesn't exist anymore. Maybe he’s already dead.
And it's this last thought that makes him quiver as the world tears itself apart.

Harry awakes with a name on his lips, but as he opens his eyes it's already gone. With one hand, he
reaches unconsciously for his glasses at the night stand, while simultaneously trying to rub the
darkness out of his eyes. He doesn't understand why it's so dark, even this early in the morning. And
then he remembers that he can't see.

He sits numbly on his bed, his hand still outstretched in mid-motion. How could he have forgotten?
That doesn't seem at all possible, until he realizes that he had been dreaming vividly. Harry tries to
recollect the dream that doesn't seem like his own. The flashes make little sense to him, but he
definitely remembers loss and defeat. A sense of dread begins to settle in Harry's stomach, the same
when something’s wrong. Without hesitation, Harry gets silently out of bed. The others are fast
asleep, which makes it very easy for Harry to sneak out unnoticed.

Once past the portrait hole, Harry allows his feet to lead the way and climb what seems like endless
stairs, until he realizes that there’s only one part of the castle that’s this high up. He’s avoided the
Astronomy Tower since Dumbledore died.

Walking away from the warmth of indoors, Harry can fully appreciate how cold it is outside. The
wind whistles around him, biting his face and flapping his cloak loudly.

"What are you doing here?" Malfoy calls out from in front of him, making Harry jump slightly.

"Needed some air," Harry replies awkwardly.

Malfoy doesn't say anything in turn, seeming to ignore him. Harry begins to turn back around to
leave, but a question escapes his lips, "why are you here? I would think that you'd avoid this place."
He wraps his robes around him tighter as the wind begins to pick up.

"I guess I like the view." Malfoy's tone is so far away.

"Oh." Harry's uneasiness intensified as silence falls between them.

"If you don't mind, Potter, I'd like to be alone," Malfoy says absently.

That's when Harry notices that Malfoy's voice isn't only coming from in front of him - it's also
coming from above him. The only landing Harry can remember being above ground level is the
ledge, the one in place so that people don't accidentally fall to their deaths. A gust of wind passes by
them and Harry hears Malfoy actually laugh.

"What are you doing?" Harry shrieks at his general direction.
"Not your concern. Go away."

"Come down from there! Are you crazy?!"

"Piss off, Potter. I'm enjoying the view!"

Harry's heart starts to beat unpleasingly fast. He quickly climbs onto the ledge, careful to stay low to the ground. "You'll kill yourself!"

"Just - Stop!" he says when Harry edges closer. "Don't take another step forward."

Something about his tone makes Harry stop in his tracks. "Okay!" He shoves his hand nervously through his hair, trying to keep his thoughts straight. "Why – What's so special about the view?"

"You can stop pretending to care."

"I do!" Harry insists.

Harry waits for him to explain, but all he hears is the wind urging Malfoy to jump.

Silence stretches between them again, and Harry’s tempted to just jump and grab him, but he’s afraid he might accidentally kill them both. "It's beautiful," Malfoy says at last, his voice barely above a whisper. "Being this close to it, it makes you feel above it all."

"Um, alright. But why come back here? This specific tower."

Harry isn't sure what he should say, but he knows he should keep him talking.

"I don't really know. Maybe I'm looking for something I lost when I killed the Old Man."

"But you didn’t!" Malfoy scoffs at that. "You may have planned for it, but you couldn't do it."

"You don't have to lie for my sake, Potter. I thought you were better than that."

"I'm not lying! Everything I said at the trial was true." Malfoy doesn't respond, so Harry hurriedly continues. "I know what I saw that night, even if you couldn't see it." Harry edges closer, extending his hand out for the Slytherin to take; knowing somehow how far is far enough. "If you let me, I’ll tell you what I saw." Malfoy doesn't make a move. "Come on, Malfoy, take my bloody hand!" he says a little desperately, his hand still outstretched.

"Well, if you're going to beg…” Harry finally feels a cool hand fall onto his hesitantly. Squeezing his hand, Harry makes sure he has a tight hold of him as he begins to pull Malfoy to safety. But a sudden gust of wind causes Malfoy to lose his balance and slip. Both of them scream as Malfoy falls over the edge, his weight pulling Harry inches closer to their doom.

Malfoy is dangling from one of Harry arms, holding onto his hand for dear life. "Pull me up!"

"I'm trying!" But if he stands up, Malfoy's weight might take them both over.

"Don’t let me go!" Malfoy yells.

"I won’t – but you need to climb!” Harry manages between breathes.

"Fuck! I'm going to die!" he cries out, "an ugly death!"

"Shut up! I’ve got you." Harry uses his back to pull up Malfoy's left side, so that Malfoy can get his elbow up on the ledge. "Push yourself up!"
Malfoy scrapes his shoes against the Astronomy tower, pushing himself up bit by bit. He finally manages to get one knee up, which safely allows Harry to pull Malfoy back all the way. They stumble backwards onto the cold ground and Malfoy falls on top of Harry, knocking the air out of his lungs.

Both of them struggle to breathe as they are temporarily paralyzed with shock. As the seconds pass, Harry becomes acutely aware of how odd this must look: Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy practically locked in an embrace, both breathless and sweaty, and Malfoy pinning Harry down with his weight.

"Er…" he mumbles into the Slytherin's face.

"You fucking idiot." Malfoy gasps in between breaths. "You could have killed me!"

"What?" Harry asks incredulously.

Malfoy rolls off Harry. "What is your problem, Potter?" he lashes out while attempting to get up gracefully.

"I was trying to save your life! You were - it seemed like you were-"

"Like I was going to jump?"

"Weren't you…?" Harry asks in a small voice.

"Potter, you need to talk to someone about your insatiable need to be the Hero." With that, Malfoy stands up and walks back into the warmth of the castle, leaving behind a very confused and horrified Gryffindor for a third time. It’s at this moment that Harry vows that he will never let Draco Malfoy walk away from him ever again.
The first day of fall comes and goes without any real notice. One morning at the end of September, a persistent rain descends upon Hogwarts that lasts for 13 days, making the air heavy and damp. Many Slytherins can be heard complaining about the conditions in the dungeons. All but one of course.

Draco scarcely speaks to anyone these days. After that night he nearly fell off the Astronomy Tower, he keeps to himself and avoids Harry Potter like a plague. He's already skipped two Potion classes (making up for the lost work on his own time), and avoids studying in the library or eating in the Great Hall. Besides attending his classes, he only leaves his room to fly after dark or to steal some food from the kitchens. He knows it's a bit overdone – it's not like the git's going to corner him at the Slytherin table – but he can't risk Potter sticking his nose where it doesn't belong.

He's grateful for the fact that no one notices his absence, or simple doesn't care. Life's simpler this way. Even so, Draco does acknowledge that life's a little lonely, if not completely dull. This attitude of keeping to himself does not bode well to last. One of Draco's many faults is that he enjoys the attention from others far too much, and although he will never admit it, he misses his friends.

He's following his Mother's advice to 'keep your head down', but when he starts carrying a conversation with his own reflection, he knows he must interrupt his solitude for the sake of his sanity, no matter how threatening or dull the company of others prove to be.

So after several weeks of keeping to himself, he decides to eat dinner in the Great Hall. His usual spot has already been taken and he finds himself sitting on one end by himself. It's odd, how he feels like a different creature amongst these people he's known for years. While he's preoccupied with thoughts of life and death, they're concerned with the usual canard. He can't help but roll his eyes when he overhears a Slytherin girl squeal at the possibility of being asked out. The high-pitched giggles that erupt from her are too much to bear after days of silence.

McGonagall thankfully interrupts Draco from chucking his spoon at the silly girl. "I am pleased to announce that we will be having a Halloween celebration this year." Cheers erupt from everyone, but Draco merely continues making little patterns in his mashed potatoes with the tip of his fork. "The Great Hall will be open to everyone at dinner, and parts of the school grounds will be open to sixth, seventh and eighth years. More information will be given to you by your prefects as the date approaches. That is all!"

An excited buzz fills the Great Hall immediately, which only results in Draco feeling more out of place. Deciding that he's had enough of being ignored for one day, he makes a move to get up, but someone squarely sits in the chair next to his. He's surprised to see a familiar face smiling at him pleasantly, if not a little absentely. Draco notices her wand sticking out behind her ear, half of it hidden in her long, blonde hair.

"Have you lost your way again, Loony?" he arches an eyebrow in a bored, superior manner.

"Hello to you too, Draco. I noticed you sitting here by yourself and I thought maybe you could use..."
some company," Lovegood says airily.

"I don't need your company!" Draco replies in an appalled tone.

"Of course you don't! Does gillyweed need the Blibbering Humdinger?"

"... Gesundheit?" Draco asks, because he has no idea what Lovegood just said. Lovegood smiles as she reaches for the peas in front of him. "What?" Draco says irritably, "I've never heard of this 'Blibbering Hamburger'."

Lovegood doubles over in laughter, clutching at the table for support. "Hum - dinger!" She manages to say.

"That's what I said," Draco replies, trying very hard not to let his lips curl in amusement.

"Oh Draco. My father would have had a heart attack if he heard you mistaking one of the most magical and purest creatures in existence for a cheap, muggle – although delicious - meal."

At the mention of her father, Draco looks away from her guiltily. He heard that Mr. Lovegood was almost driven insane trying to keep his daughter alive last year. He even betrayed Potter to protect her. He remembers how his aunt forced him to keep watch of the prisoners in the Malfoy Dungeons, with Luna amongst them. Aunt Bella must have known how much he hated it, because she asked him often, usually wearing an expression of spiteful glee.

He remembers how pitiful the prisoners looked as they clung to the rays of light that spilled from the high windows. But Luna never seemed to be bothered by the darkness. She would try to engage the other prisoners to talk with her, and when that failed, she would hum endlessly to herself. He scowls at the memory of her shabby clothes and half-starved look, and can't help but hate himself for being partly responsible.

"Your mind goes to dark places quickly, doesn't it?"

When he turns to look at her, he notices a small, almost sad smile. "What do you want, Lovegood?" he asks dryly.

"I never got a chance to thank you." He now stares at her hard, trying to catch any trace of insincerity in her features. "You weren't cruel. When the other Death Eaters were on guard, it was always unpleasant. But you only sat around brooding most of the time, similar to how you were just a moment ago."

"Maybe I was indifferent. Isn't that the worst form of cruelty?"

"Yes, but you weren't indifferent."

"And they say Ravenclaws are smart."

"You gave me an apple once. Remember that?"

"After I already bit it."

"You opened the window a few times."

"It was the only way I could stand the horrid stench down there."

"You never once told me to shut up!"
"It would have been futile."

Luna smiles at that. "True." Her eyes seem to wander away from his face as she reflects on what to say next. Draco doesn't understand how this little game even began, but he's sure he's winning.

At last, Luna has a response: "You were terrified." As soon as she says these words, her eyes light up slightly. She thinks she's won.

He smirks evily at her now. "Only for myself. I never gave you any thought."

"I don't believe that, but even if that were true, it still shows that you're human." She grins at him before drowning her peas in gravy, as if her vague response is all the proof that Draco needs in order to feel worthy of her thanks.

Draco turns towards his own plate as he contemplates her last argument. He doesn't really understand her point, but he's finding it very difficult to hide the unexpected smile that crept up on his face.

This particular Thursday morning feels much too cold and close to winter for the start of October. The sun hasn't risen yet, but this makes little difference to Harry. He was always the sort to sleep in and always risked being late for class. That isn't the case now, as he avoids getting ready or eating breakfast later with his friends. It's just too embarrassing how long it takes to get the simplest things done, so he aims to be the first one at the Great Hall.

By the time his friends meet him there, he's already done eating and cleaned up the juice he's knocked over.

"I'm looking forward to Potions today," Hermione yawns. "We're brewing the Wakefulness Potion."

"We're actually brewing?" Harry asks with dread.

"Yes, Professor Slughorn mentioned it last week. Why don't you partner with me and Samantha today? I'm sure he won't mind."

"I might have to. The last two classes were only manageable because there wasn't any brewing involved." Harry can't help but sigh. "Do you think Malfoy dropped the class?"

"Let's hope," Ron says in between bites, "that he did."

"Yeah," Harry says, not bothering to hide the gloominess in his voice. "Do you know if he's been missing other classes?"

"Harry, NO! Don't even go there!" Ron abruptly says. "The last thing you need is to get obsessed with Malfoy this year. Remember sixth year?"

"I wasn't obsessed! And anyway, I was right that he was up to something."

"Even so, it isn't a good idea to follow him around this year, not with him being all spiteful and you being all ... never mind. It's better if you just forget he exists," Ron says with enthusiasm.

"Ron's right. Even if you can take care of yourself, you have poor judgement when it comes to Malfoy." Then Hermione adds gravely, "Remember the end of sixth year – when you used Snape's curse on him?"

Harry bows his head slightly in shame, "you know I wouldn't have tried that spell if I knew what it did."
"I know. But when Malfoy is involved, you're not exactly rational."

"Okay, Okay. You don't have to worry. I don't think he's plotting anything evil. He's just going to get himself killed."

With his friends' worries soothed momentarily, Hermione and Ron begin discussing their plans for the Halloween Dance, but Harry's mind is elsewhere. When Malfoy didn't attend class for two weeks in a row, Harry feared the worse. He almost went to McGonagall to explain what happened at the Astronomy Tower. Wouldn't he be partly responsible if Malfoy seriously attempted to hurt himself? A part of Harry knows that the right thing to do would be to tell someone; at the very least Slughorn. But he can't help but wonder if he misunderstood the whole situation. Maybe Malfoy really did like the view. Harry snorts at that thought.

He knows that something's wrong with Malfoy. He just doesn't know why he should care, because he doesn't have a Hero Complex!

Harry and Hermione begin their descent to the dungeons for Potions. When Harry opens the door, he feels Hermione nudge him on his side, trying to tell him something. As he takes his seat, he catches a familiar tannin scent and his stomach does a nervous little flop. Malfoy's back.

Although Harry can't know for certain, he feels Malfoy's eyes fixed on him. He consciously takes out his parchment and enchanted note-taking quill, trying his best to appear normal and unfazed. He places his knapsack on the floor beside his chair and is unsure of what to do with his hands. Placing them on his lap seems most natural, and Harry can't help but wonder if his expression appears neutral as he faces the front of the class. He's never been so aware of himself before. Why is he acting like this?

At last, Slughorn asks the class to collect the necessary ingredients from the cupboard. Without thinking it through, Harry gets up to do so.

"Potter, maybe I should go?"

Harry shrugs for a response and walks away quickly, before Malfoy can say anything more.

At the cupboard, he realizes how stupid it is for him to have gone. How the hell is he going to know which ingredients are which? He picks up a random jar and sniffs the contents, sighing at how ridiculous he will feel when Malfoy laughs at him for going back empty-handed.

"We definitely don't need beetle eyes," Malfoy drawls directly behind him, causing Harry to jump slightly.

"You shouldn't creep up on people like that!"

"I was walking behind you the entire time."

"Then walk a little louder!" Harry snaps irrationally. This was the first time he didn't hear someone walking behind him and it's unsettling.

"But where's the fun in that?" Malfoy mischievously asks. Harry can practically see his stupid, smirking face.

"Can we just get the materials? Let's get this over with."

"Sure. You can get the Asphodal herbs."

"Ha Ha. You made your point -" Harry starts to say impatiently.
"Potter, your left hand is next to it. Just reach out." Harry glares at Malfoy while his hand clasps the cool jar. He takes it up to his nose and sniffs, smelling dry flowers. "The apple seeds are in the jaded jar at your eye level, and Doxy eggs are three jars to the left of that," Malfoy says somewhat absently as he begins to gather some other materials.

"If you say so," Harry says dryly, but in spite of himself, he can't help but feel somewhat grateful. Harry grabs the two jars and sniffs at them both, instantly regretting smelling the Doxy eggs.

At their desk, both boys stubbornly refuse to acknowledge each other as they chop, prepare and stir ingredients. Their silence is only interrupted by short commands from Malfoy, such as "dice this", "pass me the herbs" and "stir thrice not twice!" As a result, they are the first pair to finish their potion successfully. Harry tickles his chin with the tip of his feather quill, debating if he should continue ignoring Malfoy or break the silence. Boredom finally wins him over.

"So… where were you?" He asks as casually as he can muster.

"What?"

"The past two weeks, why did you miss class?"

"Felt a little under the weather," Malfoy replies curtly.

"Are you … feeling better?" he winces at how senseless the question sounds.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Harry frowns at Malfoy's rude tone. "I was thinking -"

"Potter, just stop talking."

Harry turns his face away and glares angrily into empty space. "Why do you have to be such a prat all the time? I just want to speak with you."

"Don't. Small talk is beneath me."

"Who says this is small talk? I want to know why you were at the Astronomy Tower that night. What were you doing?" Harry pointedly asks, patience be damned.

Malfoy lets out a long, dramatic sigh, "it doesn't concern you."

"So what if I was?" Malfoy coldly retorts. Harry is so unnerved by this statement, that he barely acknowledges Malfoy gathering up his belongings and getting ready to leave. Only when Malfoy quietly closes the back door behind him does Harry realize that he's gone. The same uneasiness he felt that night at the Astronomy Tower returns, only this time it's entangled with a sense of guilt that he should have said something. Any response would have been more appropriate than his silence, which surely may be mistaken for unfaltering indifference.

Harry puts his forehead down onto the cool desk, suddenly feeling wretched.

"Focus," Draco tells himself quietly, as he forces himself to read the same passage from his Arithmancy text once more. He must have read it about four times by now, without a single word registering in his brain:
Certain characteristics about a person can be brought to light by studying their name (please refer to the Review Chapter for more information.) Similarly, we can infer which characteristics are most prominent in incantations by looking at their phonetic structure.

Usually going to the most secluded corner in the library would help him focus, but he feels much too anxious. Stupid, nosy Potter. Why couldn't he just let it rest? Draco has no idea how much longer he could endure Potter's questions. The best course of action may be to make up some story to get Potter off his back, since avoiding him isn't a real solution. But if Draco's honest with himself, he isn't only avoiding Potter; he's avoiding a disturbing truth about himself.

He truly believes he wouldn't have jumped. He's too much of a Slytherin for that. But he also knows how close he was to death that night, and hates the fact that he owes Potter his life again. More significant than that, he hates how welcoming that brush with death was. Although Draco doesn't want to die, it's strange that he only felt alive when the possibility nearly became a reality.

Draco shakes his head to clear his thoughts, willing himself to understand the words on the page. Finally after some time of struggling, he begins to read with intent. So when Potter suddenly drops his filthy knapsack on top of his textbook, he finds himself completely off guard. "What the hell, Potter?" he asks angrily.

"Are you alone right now?" Potter asks.

"What? How did you even know I was sitting here?!" Draco asks indignantly.

"You skipped Potions class these past two weeks because you were avoiding me. That's the truth, isn't it?" Potter asks bluntly.

"How could I possibly avoid you? For someone who's apparently blind, you always seem to know where I am."

"Why were you at the Tower that night?" Potter asks in a low voice.

"You clearly have a specific reason in mind, so why don't you tell me?"

"Just answer the question! I know what you're trying to do and it won't work this time." Potter hisses impatiently.

"Well, I was trying to read."

"You're trying to distract me from talking about that night."

"Can you keep your voice down? Or better yet, can you leave me alone?" Draco flusters. The more Potter speaks, the more agitated he becomes; already people are glancing in their general direction to see who's bothering their Hero.

"I'm not leaving until you admit that you were trying to… or at least... you were thinking of... you know..." Potter stammers ungracefully.

"Thinking of jumping off the Astronomy Tower to smear my brains against the school grounds?" Draco inputs helpfully, enjoying the way Potter squirms. "I told you, I was enjoying the view."

"Bullshit!" Potter says a little too loudly. Now people are turning to stare at them curiously. Draco's back stiffens when he sees Greenberg approaching them, his steps full of purpose.

"Fuck," he mutters under his breath, unconsciously reaching for his wand.
'What?' Potter begins, but he's interrupted by Greenberg's arrival.

"Is Malfoy giving you a hard time?" Greenberg asks Potter in what he probably thinks is a charming voice. Draco just scowls at him bitterly.

"No, I'm fine Don, thanks," Potter says without really acknowledging Greenberg.

"Because I can probably get him to talk." Greenberg stands directly beside Draco, smirking at him nastily. He then pokes his wand at Draco's arm, but Draco just slaps it away in a bored manner.

"Don, this is sort of between me and Malfoy," Potter says.

"I bet you it was his idea to lure you into the forest that night," Greenberg continues, oblivious to Potter's mood. "He's probably trying to be the next Dark Lord or something."

"Thank you for that refreshing point of view, but this is strictly a Death Eater and Hero sort of meeting," Draco says with belligerent politeness. "So fuck off."

"You showed too much mercy with this one, Harry. If I were you, I would have let him rot in Azkaban," Greenberg says, ignoring Draco. "The kiss would have been just right."

"Greenwood, can you please do me a favour and shut the fuck up about things that don't concern you?" Potter finally snaps.

Draco feels an unexpected swell of gratitude towards Potter and manages to smile innocently at Greenberg, whose mouth is hanging open in shock. "You heard the Golden Boy, skedaddle!" he says with glee. Draco sniggers under his breath as Greenberg storms away ungracefully, his expression half apologetic and half outraged. "Wow, I think you managed to get him off my back for a bit."

"What, he's still bothering you?"

"No." Draco says a little too quickly, "Potter, what do you want?"

Potter sighs, "I want to know why you were at the Astronomy Tower, standing on the ledge in the middle of a storm."

Draco can't think of why Potter is pretending to care, but he should try to get rid of him as soon as possible. "If you must know - I was high. Stupid, I know – but that's the truth."

Potter lifts his eyebrows in surprise, before he chews on his lower lip, appearing to think hard. "I don't believe you," he replies at last. He then begins to take his books out unceremoniously.

"What are you doing?" Draco asks in alarm.

"Going to study."

"Not here, you won't!"

"This is the only table that isn't full. I suspect it's because people hate you."

"But I hate you!" Draco says with emphasis.

"I hate you too, Malfoy," Harry distractedly responds, looking in his bag for a spare piece of parchment. Draco wrinkles up his nose in disgusts when Potter pulls out a stained piece of parchment that appears to be his History assignment.
Draco is tempted to gather his belongings and leave, but he catches Greenberg staring at him from across the library. Swallowing his pride, he lowers his eyes to his text and attempts to read again.

"So…" Potter begins to say. Draco looks up and narrows his eyes suspiciously. "What got you thinking about Dumbledore that night?" he says carefully, with his head tilted towards Draco's in interest.

Draco glances at Greenberg, who is still watching him intently, and then back to Potter who is waiting for a response. Deciding between the lesser of two evils, Draco gathers his things to leave. A few punches and burns cannot be worse than this.

"Where are you going?" Potter asks.

"Away from you. I'm not playing this game."

"Bloody hell, I just want to talk, Malfoy." Potter begins to gather his things too.

"That's never going to happen! We're enemies, remember?" He uncharacteristically doesn't rollup his parchment before shoving it into his bag and storming away. But as he leaves the library, Potter follows after him. Will it be terribly pathetic if he runs away from a blind man?

"But things are changing now," Potter says as he falls in step beside Draco.

Draco begins to walk a little faster. "Nothing ever changes, Potter!" Without fully understanding the urgency that he feels to get away, Draco breaks into a run through the corridors, needing to escape from it all. But amazingly, Potter keeps up. "Stop following me!"

"Stop running away!"

When Draco reaches one of the back doors that lead to the Quidditch pitch, Potter stops fully in his tracks. "Wait. I can't go out there."

"Good," is all that Draco says before he closes the door firmly behind him.
Harry, what were you doing with Malfoy? - Ron

Malfoy closed the heavy doors that lead to the Quidditch pitch several minutes ago, and still Harry stands rooted to the spot, stuck on indecision. On one hand, he had avoided going outside at all cost, where it's much too unpredictable and frankly, embarrassing to move. On the other hand, he had promised to himself that he wouldn't let Malfoy walk away from him again. With an exasperated sigh, Harry takes a cautious step forward, reaching for the door handle. It feels awfully cold in his hand as he pulls the stiff door open. The wind that caresses his face is cool and welcoming, but he doesn't dare step outside just yet. "I can do this," he says to himself, even as he feels his heart begin to beat in peril. He can't understand why he's so afraid to leave the castle, but it's time to get over it. Taking a Gryffindor step, he closes the oak doors behind him as he faces the wind head-on.

He's not sure where he's headed, but he has a sense that the spare broomsticks are close by. Walking carefully to not trip, he tightens his robes around himself, clearly not dressed for the cool weather. He comes across the small shack that holds the ancient broomsticks. The door is already ajar, which affirms his suspicions that Malfoy went to fly. He picks up a random broom and holds it over his right shoulder as he begins to walk towards the pitch. "Here goes nothing," he says to himself as he climbs onto the broom. He lifts up from the ground and lets out a yelp of joy. The feeling of control comes back to him effortlessly. With just the smallest of touch, he turns his broom in the direction he desires. He's still low against the ground, however, not daring to fly higher than just a few meters. But then he hears an unfamiliar laugh right above him. Without a second thought, he flies higher, enjoying the feeling of the wind in his hair and the cold numbing his hands.

He begins to fly towards the voice, but he’s distracted by a sound he's never heard before. It sounds like a high pitched, silvery hum. He tilts his head to listen more intently, and with a sense of old, familiar belonging, he realizes he can hear the flapping wings of the Snitch. Grinning, he swirls his broom to chase after it. With accuracy he's never experienced before, he can hear the snitch zigzagging to avoid being caught. Harry ignores all reason and logic as he dips into a dive, closing in on the Snitch. He can feel himself quickly dropping, coming closer to the ground. At the last second, the snitch switches directions; forcing Harry to do the same. He can faintly hear someone yelling in the background, but it doesn't matter. His hands enclose around the snitch, its wings at first resisting the hold, but finally they slow to curl around Harry's finders. All he can hear now is the sounds of the wind swirling around him and another person hastily flying towards him.

"How did you do that?" he hears Malfoy shout.

"I can hear its wings!"

"You HEARD it? Do you realize you almost killed yourself? You were inches away from ground!"

"I didn't know you cared!" he yells back at Malfoy, beaming as he releases the snitch in his direction. He hears Malfoy catch it easily.

As if some unspoken agreement has been made, they find themselves chasing after the snitch in friendly competition. Harry is surprised to realize that he hasn't flown in months. He can't believe the
elation in his chest and how much fun he's having. He never would have thought that the two of
them could ever be civil to each other, and to actually hear Malfoy laugh in a way that suggests he's
also enjoying himself is puzzling, if not a little disconcerting. For the time being, Malfoy seems to
have misplaced that rigid coldness he's always carrying around.

Inspired by this change, Harry turns to face him. "Malfoy, let's change it up a bit."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking that if I win, I get to ask you whatever I want and you have to answer honestly."

He hears Malfoy groan in exasperation. "I already know what you'll ask. What if I win?"

"I dunno. You'll ask me whatever you like."

"How about if I win, I get to ask you to do whatever I want, no questions."

"Well, it depends what it is…" Harry says wearily.

"I can't tell you because I don't know yet. But if it makes you feel any better, I won't hurt your
delicate Gryffindor pride."

"I'm sure you'll still find some way to humiliate me."

"Probably."

"So you'd save your Dare for later?" Harry asks, amused. "That is so unbelievably Slytherin."

Harry frowns while he contemplates his chances of winning, which aren't nearly as good as they were a
month ago. "This isn't exactly fair, you know, given I can't see."

"It was your proposal, Potter."

"I suppose," he resigns with a shrug and a stretch of his hand for Malfoy to shake. For a moment, he
doesn't think Malfoy will agree to it, but at last he feels a cool hand shaking his a little more firmly
than necessary.

Once inside, the warmth almost burns Harry's skin after flying in the cold for nearly an hour. The
rumbling in his stomach painfully reminds him of his hunger.

"That was a good game," Malfoy says much too cheerfully as he walks alongside Harry towards the
kitchens. "I didn't think I'd ever say this, but maybe you should rejoin the team this year."

"Wouldn't you like that - Slytherin would actually have a chance at winning."

"Maybe not. You nearly got the snitch that last time," and then Malfoy adds somewhat grudgingly,
"it was not completely unimpressive."

Harry smirks to himself. There's nothing quite like losing to Malfoy to make him a little less
insufferable. "Careful, Malfoy, that almost sounds like a compliment. What would your fellow
Slytherins think?"

"That I'm up to no good, planning some evil scheme to hand you over to the neo-Death Eaters, or
whatever."
"Are you up to no good?" Harry asks lightly.

"You obviously think I am," Malfoy responds vaguely.

"Wouldn't surprise me." Harry says lightly. Malfoy doesn't respond to that, and an uncomfortable silence begin to settle between them. They walk on a bit further, before Harry blurts out, "okay, okay, that was uncalled for. But you know, going around calling people 'Mudbloods' doesn't exactly do anything for your reputation." And trying hard to keep a straight face, he adds, "Or being a Malfoy, for that matter -"

"Potter," Malfoy interrupts him.

"Yes?"

"If you don't mind, I'm going to ignore you now." Malfoy says without missing a step.

Harry glares in Malfoy's general direction. "You're such a miserable prat."

"Better than being an arrogant git," he retorts.

"Son of a banshee."

"Blast ended skank."

"Twitchy, pale, ferret face," Harry mocks.

Malfoy chokes on his indignation. "Well, your hair is bloody ridiculous! And at least I don't have a disfiguring scar on my face." Then he says quietly under his breath, "I don't look like a ferret…"

Harry laughs in spite of himself. Who knew he would still be so sore after all these years? He can still remember the look of horror on Malfoy's face when he was changed back. With this amusing image in his mind's eye, Harry turns the corner into a corridor, still laughing. But his thoughts are interrupted by faint, muffled sounds coming from a classroom.

"Do you hear that?"

"Well, you're breathing awfully loud-"

"Shh!" Harry tilts his head in the direction of the noise. He can make out what sounds like someone moaning. "I think someone's hurt." He heads towards the classroom with Malfoy grudgingly in tow. "They're in here, I'm sure!"

"I don't hear anything," Malfoy says in his best bored voice.

Harry opens the door to the classroom, but the sounds he heard moments ago seem to have stopped. "You see anything?" he whispers.

"There's no one in here. It's just an abandoned classroom."

The noise came back again, still muffled but this time a little more audible. "It's coming from the right corner." He hears Malfoy walk towards the place in which he's pointing.

"It's just a closet," Malfoy says apprehensively. He can hear him getting a little closer, with Harry just behind now. He instinctively reaches for his wand when he hears a clear *thump* coming from the cupboard. "I heard that!" he hears Malfoy hiss.
"Open it!" he shrilly whispers.

"No!" he retorts. "That's just the sort of thing only a stupid Gryffindor would do."

"Don't be such a coward! Someone can be hurt in there!" Harry pushes Malfoy forward with one hand.

Malfoy sighs dramatically in resignation. "I hope you know that I hate you," he says before swinging the door open. All at once, three screams can be heard piercing the delicate silence that was there a moment ago.

"What?!" Harry yells, unsure of where he should point his wand, while Malfoy continues to yell in horror. He then hears what sounds like Malfoy violently slamming the door shut.

"Auuugh! My eyes!" Malfoy cries in utmost disgust.

"What is it?" Harry asks impatiently.

"They-" Malfoy seems to have lost his ability to speak, "they were - oh god!"

"Spit it out!"

"Weasel and Granger! Augh!"

"Oh." Harry did not expect that. "Oh!" Harry suddenly grabs Malfoy's arm (who seems to have doubled over in distress) and attempts to leave the classroom in a great hurry. Not only is it embarrassing for him to catch his friends doing-whatever-they-were-doing, but for Malfoy to have seen something is perfectly traumatizing. He pulls Malfoy roughly and ignores his whining as he urges him to move a little faster. But then the closet door opens and Ron and Hermione stumble out before he can leave.

"Harry?" he hears Ron ask in embarrassed bemusement. "What are you doing here? And - with him?"

"Nothing! We were just leaving," he says in rush, really hoping this awkward confrontation is not happening right now, with Malfoy in the mix.

"My eyes!" Malfoy shouts unnecessarily.

Harry decides that the best approach is to physically remove himself and Malfoy from this situation. So he covers Malfoy's mouth firmly with his hands and begins to drag him out of the classroom. It does not register with him how odd this may look. "I'll catch up with you later, yeah?" he struggles to say as Malfoy struggles to breathe.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaims with a mixture of shock and amusement. "It's fine, he didn't even see anything! You can let him go."

"Yes, please stop touching Malfoy. It's making me feel sick." Ron adds.

Harry slowly releases the Slytherin, who shrugs out his grasp violently. "Thank you for that!" he snarls at Harry. "And if anyone is going to be sick, it's me! I saw things that cannot be unseen. I may as well be blind now! But Granger you're right about one thing. I didn't see anything noteworthy in one particular department, if you know what I mean."

Harry refrains from rolling his eyes and wisely chooses to ignore that statement. "We didn't mean to
burst in like that. I just heard noises…” his words trail off as his face warms up.

"He means he heard you shagging," Malfoy adds unhelpfully.

"We weren't!" Hermione squeals in embarrassment, while Harry yells over everyone, "we didn't see anything!"

"What am I, a ghost?" Malfoy cuts in.

"He means no one important," Ron rudely responds.

Harry can feel Malfoy go rigid beside him, a retort on the tip of his tongue. "Malfoy, you should leave." Harry quickly says. "You're not exactly…er…not..."

"Wanted," Ron says with cold amusement.

"No, that's not what I meant!" Harry tries to explain.

"Look, I don't give a flying fuck so you don't have to explain anything to me," Malfoy coldly replies as he shrugs out of Harry's hands. It's only then that Harry realizes he had been grasping Malfoy's shoulders. Malfoy walks away without another word and doesn't bother to close the door behind him, as if to prove his point. Harry is confused by the faint disappointment he feels. He had hoped that Malfoy would wait for him to sneak into the kitchens, but that's ridiculous.

"Harry, what were you doing with Malfoy?" Ron asks for a second time, with a trace of concern and disgust.

Harry isn't sure what to say, so the truth seems simplest: "flying."

After reassuring Ron that he and Malfoy were definitely not "secret friends", and that Malfoy definitely (or most likely) was not colluding anything sinister, the awkward conversation that he had hoped to avoid happened. Hermione insisted that Harry share how he feels about his two best friends being "together". Looking back now, he may have said, "it's fine. I'm fine," a little too often.

The truth is, Harry is really happy for them. He can see that their relationship is blossoming (in ways that he would rather not think about), but a small part of him can't help but feel a little envious. Sitting now in the Common Room with his friends, he reflects on his own relationship. He and Ginny never speak about their future together the way Ron and Hermione do, or go on dates, or sneak around the castle, or snog in public. He supposes he's to blame for most of that. He must be the most wretched boyfriend in existence.

Maybe his thoughts are transparent on his face, because Ron leans towards him and says in a low voice, "Ginny's been asking for you these last few days. Is everything okay with you two?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, you don't spend a lot of time together. I think she's worried." "I've just been busy." Harry frowns at his own poor excuse. He hadn't noticed that it's been that long since they last spoke. "I'll talk to her."

Ron seems to pause before saying, "Harry, you're my best mate and all, but Ginny is my sister. Don't lead her on if you're not ready, after all that's happened."
"What do you mean?" Harry asks offensively.

"It just doesn't look like you two are even a couple. You barely talk to her, or spend time with her. You have to remember that she waited a year for you to come back, and I think she's still waiting."

Harry ducks his head in shame and crosses his arms defensively. "Who made you the expert of relationships?"

"It doesn't take a genius to see that she's barely in your thoughts these days."

"She is!"

"What Ron means to say is that your mind seems elsewhere," Hermione adds gently.

"There's just a lot going on right now. I didn't think this year would be so difficult; between relearning everything, to fighting off Death Eaters, and trying to stop M-" Harry cuts himself off abruptly. He was so close to saying 'trying to stop Malfoy from killing himself.' The thought momentarily stuns him; the reason for his unwarranted worry has never been so clear to him until this moment, when he nearly let it slip that he cares. He tries to shrug off this revelation as insignificant. It's perfectly normal that he's worried; he would have to be a psychopath if he didn't care that his classmate was suicidal. But the fact that he's genuinely concerned for Malfoy's well-being is very, very unsettling. He's at a loss as to what to do with this worry.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asks, concerned.

"I have to ask you something." He decides it's better to say something than to keep them completely in the dark. "If you suspected that someone was going to hurt themselves, would you confront them about it? Or say something to a Prof?"

"It depends how sure I was, and how seriously they would hurt themselves."

"I'm not sure at all, but I think it's serious."

"What happened?" Hermione asks.

"Who is it?" Ron asks sharply.

"I… er, can't say who. But it looked like they were trying to … commit suicide."

He hears Hermione gasps and suddenly Ron's clutching his arm tightly, "It's not Ginny, right Harry?" Ron asks in a shaky voice.

"No! Of course not," Harry replies in shock. He hears Ron sigh in relief, and it only briefly registers with Harry that this is a strange reaction.

"You have to tell us who it is," Hermione says.

"I can't - I'm sorry. I know for a fact that this person wouldn't want anyone to know. And maybe I'm over reacting. I could be taking this out of proportion! Just because I saw them standing at the edge of the Astronomy Tower doesn't mean they have a death wish, right?" The silence that follows isn't very reassuring to Harry. He sits there brooding for a minute, thinking hard on what he should do, or if he should do anything at all.

"I think you should talk to this person. Maybe you didn't see what you thought you did," Hermione says at last.
"You're right." He sighs. If only it was that easy.

Harry's fingertips lazily trail the brick walls as he walks towards the Great Hall for breakfast. There is nothing better than walking through the castle when it's empty. Being surrounded by so many people when he's in the corridors is something he despises. Only yesterday, three girls that he’s never spoken to before cornered him and asked him to be their dates to the Dance. His response was always the same; that he has a date. It was a little irritating when one girl claimed she didn't know he has a girlfriend.

"What kind of Hero doesn't have a girlfriend?" he jokes to no one. He then hears familiar steps behind him, coming towards him fast. "Ginny?" he calls out.

"Morning, Harry! I woke up earlier today and I thought you would enjoy some company," she says enthusiastically. Since talking to Ron a few nights ago, he had made a conscious effort to pay more attention to Ginny. She seems to have noticed, because her mood was much lighter.

"Of course," he smiles and deliberately takes her hand in his. He makes a move to continue walking, but she stays rooted to the spot.

"Stay a moment," she slyly says as she tugs on his arm to hug him. He laughs apprehensively as he wraps his arms around her because it seems the most appropriate thing to do. They stay in this embrace for a long time, with their faces very close to one another. For a few moments, all she does is stand there, as if waiting for something to happen.

She then gently runs her hands through his hair, her face inching closer to his. "What are you doing?" he blurts out, because he really doesn't know what's going on.

She drops her arms to her sides and steps back. "I'm not doing anything." It's evident by her tone that she's extremely hurt, but trying not to let it show. "I thought… we were having a moment."

She turns away and begins to walk in the direction of the Great Hall. He steps beside her in silence, not sure what to say. He knows he royally messed up, but he just couldn't connect to whatever she was feeling just then. "Ginny - I'm sorry."

"It's fine." The crack in her voice makes him wince.

At the Great Hall, Harry stacks his plate with eggs but barely touches them. It's evident that Ginny is trying to act normal, but her prolonged silence is too much to bear.

"Ginny, it just seemed like you were trying really hard to make me feel something, and I just didn't," he says after some time.

"I wasn't trying to do anything!" she snaps at him. "I thought we were both feeling that. It was such a beautiful moment for me. After so long, I finally had you back. We used to have moments like that all the time, and I just really missed it. For a moment, I thought everything would be okay." Her voice begins to fail her, so she stops talking for a moment, and Harry’s sure that she’s willing herself not to cry. "When I realized it was all in my head - that you felt nothing - it really hurt. How could you not feel anything?"

"I don't know," he says, ashamed. "Maybe I'm just having an off day?"

"You've been like that for a while," she replies.
He begins to reach out to her, but stops when he hears Ron and Hermione approaching them. "We'll talk soon," he says under his breath. Harry can only hope that she nodded.
A sort of routine finally settles in Harry's life. He wakes up early, has breakfast with Ginny, goes to class, eats lunch with Ron and Hermione, and studies in the library after his evening classes and dinner. He sometimes makes excuses to meet Malfoy at the Quidditch pitch, something only Ron and Hermione know about. Ginny isn't too keen on letting him go off by himself, but she never pesters him about it. He makes sure to spend time alone with her when he can.

It strikes him as odd that Malfoy should be involved in any part of his routine, but he has to admit that flying alongside the Slytherin is what he looks forward to the most. It's the one time he finds himself at ease: all his problems, and everyone's disabling concern and expectations, are momentarily forgotten.

As if reading his mind, Malfoy quietly asks him during Potions, "can you meet tonight?"

"Yeah," Harry responds a little too quickly, eager at the prospect of having something to look forward to. But then he remembers he had promised to spend time with Ginny, and his face falters. "Actually, no, I have this thing…" he trails off lamely.

"Alright, some other time," Malfoy says carelessly, making Harry feel a bit put-off that the eagerness is one-sided.

"What if I meet you right after dinner? I can squeeze it in?" It was Friday, after all. He could see Ginny a little later.

"I wouldn't want to keep you from your precious fanclub," Malfoy says in disgust.

But Harry just smirks, recognizing something almost like jealousy in Malfoy's tone. "It's good to keep them on their toes, how else will I maintain my Hero status?"

"Fine. Meet me at 8," Malfoy simply says. Harry is sure he's never seen Malfoy genuinely smile before, but at that moment he can almost hear it.

Harry contentedly reaches for the sun-dried rosemary and carefully pours two tablespoons into the mortar. Something about this arrangement should concern Harry, but as he silently crushes the herbs into a powder, he recognizes that this shift in his mood is a good change.

"Potter!" Malfoy suddenly snaps, causing him to jump. "You're not supposed to crush the rosemary like that! Here let me -" He hears Malfoy turn in his chair, his body leaning towards Harry impatiently.

"I've got it!" Harry snatches his hand away before Malfoy can touch the pestle. "Just tell me what to do."

"You're supposed to make circular motions. Just follow the instructions."
Harry tilts his head away from Malfoy subconsciously, trying his best to not look abashed. "Just tell me how to do it."

"It's hard to explain the motion. The instructions are clear. Use *Legere.*" Harry doesn't say anything in turn now, hoping that Malfoy will just let this go. "Come to think of it, I've never seen you open your text, *once.*" Harry pointedly stays silent, and resumes in his faulty crushing, trying to hide his face. "Potter. Please tell me you can *read.*"

"What's it to you?" Harry says as his face begins to go red.

"What's it to me?! I need an O in this course, and that's not going to happen if my partner can't even *read.* For fuck's sake, hasn't your entourage jumped at the opportunity to help you?"

Harry presses the pestle into the ceramic mortar angrily. "Does every sentence out of your mouth have to be an insult?" he snarls.

"Yes, you uncoordinated idiot."

"Then maybe it's best if you don't say anything!"

He hears Malfoy snigger rudely at that, which catches Harry off guard because he was sure they were going to have another row. "Look, why don't you show me how you're casting the spell. I might be able to help."

"Fine. Only to keep you quiet." Harry pulls out his wand and cracks open his textbook to a random page, already pursing his lips in disappointment. "*Legere,*" he says, staring intently at the spot where his text should be. Nothing happens.

"Your flick is a little off, but more than that, it's like you're expecting to see any moment now. Stop imagine the bloody words. The only way the spell will work is if you *know* you're blind."

"I definitely know I am," he snaps, irritated that Malfoy made him do this. "It's just - not forever."

"You have to accept that possibility. Until then, the spell won't work." Malfoy sounds cruelly sincere, unlike the false optimism that everyone else has been sprouting at him.

"Stupid spell." Harry closes his textbook aggressively, sick of trying. Then Harry frowns as something clicks in his head. "How do you know so much about it anyway?"

"Same thing happened to me when I was six. Was blind for a few months, on and off." He says this with such aloofness that it takes Harry a moment to digest the words.

When he does, his stomach sinks horribly. "What kind of a sick fuck would do this to a six year old?"

There's a pause in the conversion, and after a moment of silence, in which Harry is sure that he won't get an answer, he hears him whisper in a detached sort of way, "my father."

A chill goes down Harry's spine at the mention of Lucius Malfoy. His loathing for the man only deepens when he imagines a young and blind Draco Malfoy. This fact, of a father hurting his son, compounded with the other boy's fragile silence, makes Harry clench his fists tightly, his fingernails digging into his palm. "That is - awful -" is all that he can say. He had consciously avoided this line of conversation with Malfoy. It made him too angry; it's all too awful.

"It is, isn't it?" Malfoy asks quietly.
Harry just nods solemnly, and something like pain unexpectedly swirls with his anger. He isn't sure what he should say, what to make of this, so he changes the subject rather clumsily. "Maybe you can fix my flick technique then, since you seem to be the expert."

"Well, first try the spell on something that you actually want to read." He's relieved to hear his voice back to normal, all snobby and irritating. "Like… this!"

When Malfoy grabs Harry's textbook, he's momentarily confused, until he remembers that he left the letter in there. Remus's letter. "Don't you dare open that, Malfoy!"

In the small distance between them, he can almost hear the stupid prat smirk nastily. "Why are you carrying this around everywhere with you?" Malfoy slyly asks. "Is it from a secret lover? An invitation to be the next Minister?" He can hear Malfoy picking at the envelope's corner, as if meaning to open it. Harry leaps across the desk in an effort to take it back from him, but Malfoy, who is only a little taller than Harry, raises his arm out of reach, his letter just fingertips away. Harry struggles to get his letter back, trying to force Malfoy's arm down, but Malfoy is surprisingly strong and is successfully keeping him at bay. An idea springs into his mind, and he violently pokes Malfoy in the side. He's pleased when Malfoy involuntarily shrieks and doubles over in loud laughter. The sound of his laughter is still so foreign to Harry that he's a little shocked, but a slow grin spreads over his face.

He quickly takes his letter back, tucking it back safely into his textbook. It's at this point he realizes how quiet the room is, and how strange this scene must look to everyone there. What would he give to see their expressions right now? It's not everyday you see Draco Malfoy genuinely laugh.

Slughorn briskly approaches them, his tone half strict and half amused, "is there something you would like to share, Draco?"

"No, sir."

When Slughorn moves on to the next table, Harry turns towards Malfoy with glee. "The evil, slimy bastard is ticklish!"

"If you ever do that again I'll kill you," Malfoy flatly says, with no trace of laughter in his voice. He coughs again, changing the subject hastily, "so who's the letter from?"

Harry brushes his hand through his hair impatiently, unsure if he should say. But really, how could the truth hurt? "It's Remus Lupin's will."

"Oh. I didn't think he had anything to bequeath," he says slowly, sounding too close to a drawl. When Harry begins to turn away angrily, Malfoy grabs his sleeve and adds quickly, "I didn't mean it like that! He was a werewolf on the run, wasn't he? What could he have to pass down?"

"I - I don't know." Malfoy's quick gesture makes him feel strangely vulnerable, and he snatches his arm back possessively. "I didn't expect to receive anything. I thought it would all go to Teddy."

"His son... Did you know we're related?"

"Yeah, I knew… I'm his godfather." It dawns on Harry how strange it is that they're both connected to the same, broken family. Perhaps it's this fact that makes him feel like he can share his secret with Malfoy. "I haven't opened the letter because I don't want anyone else reading it for me. And since I can't read, as you so well put it, I'm stuck with my curiosity."

"I think that should be the first thing you read, when you're ready to do the spell."
"I'll never be ready." He sounds too bitter.

"That's the spirit!" Malfoy adds in light sarcasm. Harry half smiles as he begins to put his textbook away, but Malfoy grabs it out of his hands. Without further comment, Malfoy turns to the assigned page and begins to read out loud the instructions to Harry.

"I was just lucky," Harry says, his lips twitching in an effort not to smile. After several hours of flying, he's having a hard time getting the giddiness out of his step. Harry just won the last game and he's feeling pretty good about himself.

"Yeah, yeah. You're always 'just lucky'," Malfoy mimics bitterly.

"You are the sorest loser I have ever met." Harry smirks as he pushes his back against the door to get into the castle. It doesn't budge. He throws more of his weight into the push, but nothing happens. "What the hell?"

"You have to push it."

"I know that. I think we're locked out."

Malfoy huffs as he pushes Harry aside rudely to give it a try, without any success. "It must be after curfew. The doors all lock at midnight."

"It can't be that late!" Harry says, aghast. Ginny must have been waiting at least two hours. She'll be so furious with him.

"What is it that they say? 'Tempus Fugit'."

"Yeah time flies when you're-" having fun. Don't say that! "-flying." Harry finishes lamely.

Malfoy doesn't seem to be listening to him. "We can fly to one to the towers. I've done it before." Although Malfoy is trying his best to sound neutral now, Harry can tell that the idea agitates him, if not terrifies him.

Harry hesitates before saying anything, biting his lip thoughtfully. He knows there are a couple of passageways he can get to rather easily from Hogsmeade, but to let Malfoy know about even one is a definite risk. Risk of what? Harry frowns, trying to balance something in his mind. A year ago, it would have been a risk. But now that it's all over, what's the harm? Harry has no reason to trust him, but intuitively he knows that he should give him the opportunity to earn his trust. "I know another way," Harry says in spite of himself. "But it's a bit of a walk."

Without much ado, the pair of them head towards Hogsmeade in a slow and steady stroll, their broomsticks shouldered on opposite sides. It's very strange to be walking alongside Malfoy and not hate every moment of it. Harry remembers how only weeks ago, they had walked to Hogwarts together. Malfoy either pointedly ignored him or taunted him for stumbling. What has changed so drastically since then? But when he hears Malfoy laugh as he trips over a root, he feels like an utter fool for expecting anything to be different. He grits his teeth and is about to tell him off, but then Malfoy pulls him up by his arm.

"Stay on the path," he says with amusement as he turns Harry's shoulders inches towards the right, his hands firm but not unkind. Harry nods numbly, definitely not expecting that. They continue walking side by side, their free shoulders often bumping into each other.

"So how do you know about all these secret passages?" Malfoy asks, perhaps to kill the silence.
"My father and his friends found them when they were here at school. They made a map of the secret passageways, and it was passed down to me."

"That explains some."

"What do you mean?"

"You always had this uncanny ability of being at the right place at the right time. Now I know you had some help."

Harry grins at that. "But the one we're using today I only found out about last year when I was trying to sneak back into Hogwarts."

After a short pause, Malfoy asks, "why did you come back?"

Harry frowns. "Is that really a question? Didn't really have a choice, did I?" He doesn't mean to sound so high-strung, but it's a question he's never been asked before. Why.

"Right, because you're the bloody Hero, the Chosen One. Of course you didn't have a choice." The sarcasm is something Harry can do without, which Malfoy seems to become aware of quickly. "I wouldn't have come back. I would have kept running for the rest of my life, rather than let him kill me."

"I had to," Harry says a little curtly. What's unspoken is clear. Had to come back. Had to Kill Voldemort.

"You had to? You were an underage, unqualified wizard! It wasn't your responsibility."

"It actually was. I don't want to get into the details, but there was a prophecy. Apparently, only I could do it." It sounds absurd, even to Harry's own ears.

"A prophecy - Wow. Fate just happened to choose some kid, who need to take remedial classes, by the way, to defeat one of the most powerful dark wizards of the century."

"I never took remedial classes."

"That's not what Snape said."

"That was just a cover," Harry sighs in an exasperated manner. "Snape was tutoring me in Occlumency."

"I find that hard to believe, considering Snape couldn't stand your presence."

"He hated Voldemort more. And it never worked out. We didn't get along." He hopes Malfoy doesn't ask him any more questions about that awful experience.

"I still think it's ridiculous that you felt you didn't have a choice," Malfoy tactlessly says after some time.

"Malfoy, why did you let the Death Eaters into the school that night? It wasn't because you wanted to, it was because you felt you had no choice! What would Voldemort have done if you didn't cooperate?"

"He would have killed me, and then my family."

"Right. And if I didn't stop him, he would have killed a lot of people. I had to do something, or die
Harry can tell that Malfoy has something to say to that, perhaps a snide remark, but he stops himself short, holding in his words. They continue walking for a couple more minutes in silence, their differences so clear it stings. The git said so himself, he would have ran. Harry couldn't run away. So then why does he feel like he can relate to him?

When they arrive at the Hogs Head, the warmth of the pub is a welcoming change from the frosty October morning. "I didn't expect to see you anytime soon, my boy! Take a seat, get comfortable." Aberforth says graciously, much more than the last time he saw him. "I'm sorry to hear about the misfortunate accident, Potter - Brenda!" Aberforth calls to the bartender. "Drinks for the lads, on the house!"

"We really should be heading back to the castle-"

"Nonsense! Take advantage of your youth. I'm sure you could use a few drinks."

"Okay, maybe just one."

Within no time, Harry and Malfoy are sitting comfortably in a booth at the back of the pub, each with their second glass of beer in their hands. Harry takes a cautious sip and makes a face. "This one is a lot stronger, isn't it?"

"It's much darker, which I prefer. So… Aberforth Dumbledore seems quite fond of you," Malfoy says lazily, shifting back into his seat.

"He wasn't always. You should have seen him just before the final battle. He wasn't at all happy that I was following his brother's example - Thought I was a fool for coming back." Harry takes a large gulp from his beer, enjoying the sizzle in his throat. "Actually, he reminds me a little of you."

"Oh god. Had to resort to insults, did you?" Malfoy drawls before taking a swing from his beer as well.

"It's a compliment. He's very much into the whole "self-preservation" deal, but in the end, he did what had to be done." Harry takes another sip, becoming aware of how numb his lips feel and presses them together to get the feeling back into them. Harry's cup is feeling much lighter than he anticipated, but he doesn't really remember drinking that fast.

"He also likes you," Malfoy says with emphasis, and it takes Harry a moment to realize he's still talking about Aberforth. "That alone makes us very different people."

"I warmed up to him." Harry smiles secretly into his cup, liking the buzzing in his ears.

"And… the goats!" Malfoy whispers dramatically. "What is that about?"

"SHH!" he hushes. "Not so loud, you prat. They're just rumours." He grins as he raises his cup to his lips, but he's disappointed to realize that it's very much empty. "Oh no."

"Excuse me, waitress! You must be informed that Harry Potter does not have a drink."

"Malfoy, shut up!" Harry audibly whispers, trying not to laugh.

"He needs another, something a little stronger, perhaps?" Malfoy says again with an air of superiority.
"Whatever you say, hun," the waitress cheekily replies, as she places some glasses on the table.

Harry cautiously reaches out for a glass, not sure where they're placed, but suddenly he feels a cool hand gently grab his wrist, guiding him to grab a smaller glass. He closes his eyes against an unfamiliar fluttering in his chest, born from a mixture of nerves and joy, and he wonders where the hell that's coming from. "This one first," Malfoy says.

Groggily, Harry takes it in his hand. "I've never had a shot before," Harry admits with embarrassment.

"Of course not. You were too busy being good. Swing it back as quickly as you can and you won't even notice it."

Harry raises the shot glass to his lips slowly, careful not to spill any. He quickly shoots the drink into his mouth, grimacing. He swallows most of the drink, but he still sputters a little. "That's awful!" he exclaims. He doesn't even mind when Malfoy laughs at him, if anything, it makes him grin back. "Go on, you next."

"Cheers, Potter!" Malfoy takes his own shot quietly, gracefully.

"Did you just say my name in an evil voice?" Harry sniggers as a sudden warmth rushes to his head.

"Yes. But at least I'm not slurring my words together," Draco says much too proudly.

"So what, is this what you Slytherins do in your spare time? The Gryffindors only had butterbeer."

"No, no. This is a Malfoy thing. Father's quite fond of his drinks."

"Oh." Harry visibly winces at the mention of Lucius Malfoy, and can't help but shudder at the image of him drunk. "Sorry."

"I think you misunderstood. He wasn't an alcoholic or something, that'd be very stupid. You needed to have a clear head as a Death Eater..." Malfoy trails off uneasily.

Harry bites on his lips, not sure of how to respond to that. Maybe it's the alcohol talking, but he blurts out the first question that comes to mind, "did you really get the mark when you were 16?"

"Yeah, the summer before sixth year, it was my birthday honour." He hears Malfoy scowl at the memory. "I had very little warning, but I knew it was happening. No one said anything, but I could tell from my father's excitement and my mother's overbearing protectiveness that it was coming. And then, a few nights before my birthday, my father announced it. I was so - so fucking proud. I couldn't understand why my mother looked stricken. All I could think, stupidly, was that she was trying to keep me from my destiny, my glory." Malfoy, while telling Harry all of this, had sounded so far away, but he continues with heavy regret in his voice, "after it happened, she rarely spoke to me."

It's a little disconcerting how much Malfoy has just confessed to him, and he suspects he isn't as sober as he's pretending to be. More important than that, Harry's surprised by the fact that Narcissa Malfoy didn't want her son to be a Death Eater. But Harry checks himself, of course she wouldn't want that. What mother would want that for her son? A part of Harry feels guilty for having assumed the opposite. But then, he had grown up thinking the Malfoys were all monsters. "You know, I always thought you wanted to be a Death Eater when we were younger."

"I did. More than anything," he laughs bitterly.

"When did that change?" he asks, really wanting to know.
"I guess, things fell into perspective rather quickly. I ..." Malfoy grows quiet, and Harry leans forward, waiting. "When they marked me -" and he can hear Malfoy swallowing deeply. Then Harry understands, that Malfoy had changed early on, that maybe he stopped being a Death Eater the day he turned 16. And Harry lets the full impact of this knowledge burn into his mind: Malfoy never wanted it, not really. Not when his father burned his arm, not when he bowed before Voldemort, not when he tried to kill Dumbledore, not when he heard the screams of torture in his own home. After some time, Malfoy continues, in a voice that makes Harry's heart ache and something like light shimmer before his eyes, "I thought it was supposed to happen that way. It was all I ever wanted."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispers, afraid he'll scare away that light.

"What?" Malfoy is confused, as he should be because Harry is too.

How can he explain this ache he's feeling? "You were lied to all your life." From the one person who was supposed to protect you. "It must have been hard to realize that."

Malfoy leans back and scoffs in annoyance, and whatever trick of light that Harry had seen is gone. "I was an idiot. I fooled myself into thinking that I was chosen or something, but all You-Know-Who wanted was to punish my father through me."

Harry frowns again, realizing something. "You still can't say his name?"

"Of course I can," Malfoy responds much too casually. At Harry's expectant look, he taps the table in what seems like annoyance. "It's just not a very clever name, so I don't bother with it."

"I can't believe it, you still can't say the name."

"I can! I just don't want to," he snaps back, unnecessarily.

"Oh, if only I had won that dare. I'd dare you to say 'Voldemort'," Harry says wistfully.

"But from what I remember, you weren't after the dare, you were after the truth."

He's surprised Malfoy has brought this up on his own accord. "Which you still haven't given to me."

"Well, it's still none of your concern," Malfoy replies with acid sweetness. At Harry's silent disappointment, Malfoy continues reluctantly. "Look, Potter -" he hesitates with his words, "there's nothing to worry about, okay?"

Harry nods slowly, but realizes with horror what Malfoy is implying. "I'm not worried about you or anything!"

He hears Malfoy unexpectedly laugh at that, and Harry decides it's a sound he really likes. "You're clearly deluded then. Even with you despising me, your Hero Complex won't let this go, because you care. It's sickening to watch."

"You are so wrong," Harry says forcefully, trying to keep his words straight. "Firstly, I don't have a Hero Complex. I'm just a decent person who happens to be at the right place at the right time. And secondly, I don't despise you." Harry's words hang between them, all exposed and naked, and the meaning of them make him flush in embarrassment. "I still think you're a slimy git," he adds as clarification.

"I can relate. I still think you're a righteous bastard and I still loathe you - most of the time."

Harry smiles lazily into his cup, pleased with this little revelation. "I may not be able to make you say
his name," he says after some thought, "but you have to tell me something that makes Voldemort less terrifying."

"Well, I always suspected he couldn't breathe through his nose."

Harry snorts delightfully. "Did he ever wear shoes? 'Cause I never saw him with shoes on."

"No, I think he loved the feeling of muggle blood in between his toes."

Harry chokes violently on his beer. "That is just sick, Malfoy!"

"Too soon?" And Malfoy cruelly laughs with meaning. "I would be sorry, but your expression made it worth it." He chuckles nastily to himself. "To answer your question, he rarely wore shoes, and his feet were absolutely revolting, which these long, yellow chipped claws for toenails -" Malfoy makes a feigned gagging nose.

Harry chuckles again as he rests his jaw on his palm. "I can't believe you can talk about this now. I remember how terrified you were."

"Yeah." The hint of laughter that Harry heard in Malfoy's voice is gone now.

Shit. How does he get that laughter back? In a much more sombre tone, Malfoy asks, "Were you afraid?"

"Of course."

"You never seemed so."

"I never let it show." Then Harry vividly remembers the night he caught Malfoy crying in the bathroom, the same night he used Snape's spell on him. He bows his head to keep the memory from showing on his face.

"Sometimes, I'm still afraid," Malfoy admits quietly. From the pause that follows, Harry can tell that Malfoy regrets uttering his last words. Harry doesn't really know what to say to comfort him, or if he even should. He tries to imagine what Malfoy's face would look like right now. Would he look scared? Embarrassed? Sad? And then it happens again. He opens his eyes wide as he sees a flicker of a shadow move across his vision. This time it's dancing before him, pulsing sporadically. "Potter?" Malfoy nervously asks.

"What?" Harry whispers, trying very hard to not let the ghost of a shadow disappear.

Malfoy abruptly gets up from his chair, and like switching off the light, Harry is left in complete darkness again. "We should head back," Malfoy says in a strange voice, trying desperately to sound neutral.

Harry nods his assent, his brows furrowed together in confusion. He gets up a little too quickly and positively sways on the spot. A sense of vertigo overcomes him and he has to grip the head of the seat to keep from falling over, but that doesn't stop his body from slowly tilting to one side dangerously.

"Shit, Potter!" Malfoy laughs as he rushes to his side, placing his hands firmly on Potter's back. Harry feels himself go dizzy with warmth, which causes him to sway comically. "Who would have guessed that the-Boy-Who-Lived is such a lightweight."

"Can't be more drunk than you," Harry says lazily as they walk towards Arianna's portrait.

"I'm not."
"Then why are we not walking straight?"

"Believe it or not, it's very difficult to walk straight when you're leading a drunk, blind man."

"Then why are you laughing so much?" Harry can't help but pout; maybe Malfoy is laughing at him again.

"Because you're an adorable mess." Harry tries hard to attach meaning to those words, but quickly decides that trying not to stumble over his own two feet is a bigger priority at the moment.

Although the pathway to Hogwarts is tight enough so that Harry can use the walls for support, he is still burdened with the occasional dizzy spells. He's half leaning on Malfoy as he clumsily moves forward. He doesn't even care how stupid he'll feel later when he remembers holding onto Malfoy like this, and if he is honest with himself, it's not that bad.

"You know," Malfoy mumbles sleepily, "this isn't me being kind. I would just be skinned alive if you didn't get back in one piece."

"I don't think you pushing me around and laughing at me is considered 'kind'."

"Have it your way then." Malfoy breathes, making Harry shiver as he lets his arm fall away from him. He stumbles from the sudden lack of support.

"Ha, funny," he sarcastically replies, trying to hide his disappointment. They continue for a few more minutes in silence, and Harry has a strange suspicion that Malfoy is doing his best to not accidentally bump into him. It annoys him that he wants to keep his distance, as if nothing has changed between them. He frowns and tries to shorten that distance with his words. "About what you were saying earlier, about wanting that life and being proud, you just have to remind yourself you didn't know any better. You were just a kid."

"We were all just kids, Potter." He sounds aloof and bitter and Harry doesn't like it.

"It doesn't matter! You made the right choices when it counted."

"That's not true and you know it." Harry is about to object, but Malfoy cuts him off, "if the Dark Lord had asked me to give you up, I would have without any hesitation. I never cared about you or anyone else dying, and that's a fact. Stop trying to make it seem otherwise."

Harry's tired of hearing this same, old lie, tired of Malfoy running and pretending, tired of Malfoy not getting it and he's just so bloody tired, dammit! He stops in his tracks and spins around to face Malfoy, which causes him to sway again, but he regains his balance when he grasps Malfoy's arms tightly. He's aware of how warm his skin is, how quickly his heartbeat spikes up when Harry presses his fingers into his flesh. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you fucking care. If you didn't care then, you wouldn't be so torn up about it now! You feel guilty and it's not a bad thing, alright?"

Malfoy tries to interrupt, but Harry doesn't let him have a word in. He urgently needs him to shut up and understand. "And also - you did hesitate, only about a dozen times! You knew that was me that night at the Manor, I know you did. But you couldn't say so, you couldn't give me up. So just stop! Stop pretending you don't care. There's no one left to pretend to anymore. And if you're not pretending, then you're an idiot for thinking you're evil or whatever, because you're not!"

His own words are startling to himself, so he can only imagine how Malfoy must be taking them. Malfoy lets out a hot, impatient breath, his voice low and slow. "What makes you so sure?" Harry feels the question roughly brush against his face. But the words only prove to Harry that he's right, that Malfoy is an idiot and actually believes he's tainted. "You don't know anything, Potter. You
don't know what I've done!"

"I know enough. You refused to confirm my identity to Bellatrix. You stopped Crabbe from killing me in the Room of Requirements! But I think the moment I fully realized that you didn't want any part of this was the night Dumbledore died. You said he was at your mercy, and you lowered your wand, Malfoy." His last words come across as a plea.

Malfoy doesn't have a response to any of that, instead a deep and guttural growl escapes him as he shoves past Harry, his shoulder roughly pushing him out of the way. With his jaw clenched tightly shut, and the same dull pain in his chest, he follows after him. Harry wonders if Malfoy will ever understand, or if he will stubbornly refuse to see what Harry sees.

When they finally reach the Room or Requirements, Harry is dragging his feet behind him and nearly falling asleep at each step. Although the nausea is marginally less, an exhaustion that he hasn't felt since the last battle overcomes him. "There has to be bed here," he yawns. This is confirmed when he hears Malfoy collapse onto the bed and grunt into his pillow. Harry clumsily stumbles into the bed and closes his eyes, hoping that tonight he will have a dreamless sleep.
For far too long, Draco's nights only held fear. When his mind wasn't weighted down by all his past errors and regrets, he was drowning in his nightmares. It's not surprising that he shies away from the dark, where his dreams have abandoned him. He's forgotten the beauty of the night, how much freedom and peace he could feel.

So when he finds himself dreaming of warmth and grass-green, he clings to it desperately, wrapping himself in it like a blanket. He wants to hold onto this warmth a little longer, but he can feel his mind beginning to slip into reality. He doesn't want to go back to the world of the day. This place is safe. This place is his. When was the last time he was there? It's been too long.

Draco begrudgingly wakes up but refuses to open his eyes. He can see the light of early morning through his eyelids and feels a comfortable weight on his chest. He thinks back to the night before and his stomach does a little flop. The memories of all the things he had done and said come crashing, pressing against his drowsy mind.

He knows exactly where he is and who is sleeping beside him, but maybe if he doesn't open his eyes, it won't be so strange.

Slowly, he opens his eyes. He sees Potter fast asleep, his face half pressed into the pillow. He still looks odd without his glasses, like he's not quite Potter. Draco's never seen him look so peaceful before and he takes in all the details with care: the outstretched arm above his head, the curl of his fingers in a loose fist, the laboured, slow breath that rolls in and out of him, the unruly mess of his hair, sticking out in all impossible directions. Unconsciously, he moves a few strands out of Potter's eyes and can clearly make out the infamous scar he's always trying so hard to hide.

Draco slowly moves his hand away and becomes uncomfortably aware of how close Potter is to him right now, how warm he is. Something in his mind warns him that he shouldn't be here. He has to leave. He's not sure why, but he has to do it without waking Potter up. This may prove to be difficult considering that Potter has his arm slung over Draco's chest. Can't Potter even sleep normally? Why do all his limbs have to be entangled in absolutely everything?

As carefully as he can muster, he begins to shimmy towards the edge of the bed, sliding out from beneath Potter's arm. But this causes Potter to stir awake, groaning into his pillow lazily. He waits a moment, hoping he'll go back to sleep, but Potter grimaces and says, "What did you do to me?"

Shit. He's awake. "What?"

"My -" he yawns, "head is pounding." He then opens his eyes and half smiles at Draco and something warm stirs in his chest, but he squishes it away angrily before he can even realize its presence. The green in his eyes is something harder to forget because it feels so achingly familiar. "Maybe you are trying to kill me."
"If so, I'm terrible at it," he responds quietly, and forces himself to take in the other less flattering details. His lips curl into a slow smirk to notice his pupils dilated, his eyes red and his lips cracked with dehydration. "You're so hung over."

"That or I'm dying."

"You'll survive." A long sigh rolls out of Potter as he stretches, falling onto Draco's face, tickling his skin. Quite suddenly, a deep blush creeps up on Draco when he realizes Potter still has his arm curled over his chest. He clears his throat, trying not to sound so fucking awkward. "Potter, your arm?"

A flash of confusion passes over his features before he opens his eyes wide in horror. Potter snatches his arm back quickly, hugging it to his chest. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"It's okay." He's surprised that he actually means it, but the words embarrass him more than he could stand. "I have to go."

Potter opens his mouth as if to say something, but stops himself. He finally settles on asking Draco, "You'll fly tonight?"

"I think I'll be busy," Draco responds aloofly as he ties up his shoes. He hadn't realized he took them off last night.

"Alright, er…" Potter searches for something to say, beginning to get up himself. "So see you later?"

"Sure." Draco intentionally doesn't sound sincere. He begins walking towards the door on the left, the floorboards creaking audibly under his feet. Glaring at the floorboards now, he's tempted to just run out of there.

"Malfoy?" Potter calls out hesitantly.

He glances back to him, wanting more than anything to stay and not understanding why. Instead he reaches out to the doorknob. He manages to pull the door open a few inches without making any noise. Potter, whose clothes are in a state of disarray, has seated himself fully and become very still, as if listening for any movements. His gaze, although vacant of any recognition, is directly on Draco, rooting him to the spot. And then Potter does it again: his eyes seem to undoubtedly focus on him, not quite seeming him, but perhaps sensing that he's there.

"I know you're there," Potter barely whispers, and Draco can't stand the feeling growing in his chest. He looks away because it's easier not to feel, it's easier to leave. Without looking back, Draco closes the door behind him, not caring to be quiet.

There is nothing to suggest that Draco Malfoy has a hangover. His robes are creaseless, his hair is styles and he’s especially alert for so early on a Saturday morning. In truth, the Malfoy heir had snuck into his dorm only an hour ago and fervently destroyed all incriminating evidence. A careful observer would only suspect that something was amiss if she were taking note of Draco's coffee intake.

"I thought you loathed the coffee here," Luna pointed out.

"I do. It's horribly weak." Draco replies distractedly, his eyes watching the front entrance to the Great Hall with interest.
He’s trying his best to keep his thoughts from racing, but all he can do is replay last night's events repeatedly in his head. How could he have been so utterly moronic? What had influenced him to let his guard down? Oh right – the alcohol. He had said things that he’s never let himself admit before: about his father, about being a Death Eater, about his fear. And to add to his dismay, he had literally slept with the enemy! Well not literally. He would be having an entirely different sort of nervous breakdown if that had been the case.

He can't help but snigger under his breath at the thought of it - him and Scarhead. But then why is a blush creeping onto his face?

"This is your fourth cup." Luna says nonplussed.

"Mm? Oh, yes, it is," Draco replies, not really listening to her.

"Are you alright? You seem out of sorts."

"I'm fine."

"Well, okay... I was thinking of going for a walk around the lake today. You want to join me?" she asks in her dreamy manner.

Draco has already made up his mind that he must get rid of Potter somehow, before he gets the impression they're friends or something. A small part of him wonders if that would be so bad. Didn't he fantasize about being the best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived as a child? Yes, but that was before he learned what an arrogant assface the Boy Wonder could be. He can recall all the times Potter had embarrassed him, beaten him, cheated and lied or just simply got his way by being everything that Draco is not. Potter is so brave. Potter is so kind. Potter is always fucking right. Every moment he spends with Potter is a cruel reminder of -

"Draco?" Luna frowns.

"Yeah?" Draco replies, snapping out of his thoughts.

"I asked if you want you want to join me for a walk"

"Sure. Sounds fun." He looks towards the Gryffindor table to see that Granger and Weasley also haven't arrived as yet. Where the hell could they be?

"We can catch some mockingfairies. They like to celebrate the fall with a ceremonial dance," Luna continues airy.

"Mnhmm..." Draco briefly wonders if something is wrong. Could Potter be hurt? Or lost? A sinking feeling settles in his stomach when he thinks about how he had left a blind person in unfamiliar territory. Anything could have happened after he left ... But he's Harry Potter, he always figures it out.

Draco shifts in his chair uncomfortably; on one hand he could continue to find reasons to loathe him and stay put – or - he could quickly make sure that the idiot isn't stuck in the Room of Requirements. He supposes that a good compromise is to check on him and loathe him all the more for it. His mind set, he begins to get up from his seat when a burst of students flow in, with Potter in tow.

Scowling, he sits back down and drinks some more coffee. Of course Potter would bloody show up five minutes before breakfast is over. Taking in his general appearance, Potter frankly looks awful. Anyone would be able to tell that he had a late night. His hair is the worst it’s ever been and he's still wearing the same baggy clothes from yesterday. Draco sighs to himself; someone really needs to put
that wardrobe of his out of its misery.

Draco has not noticed that Luna had been intently watching him for the past few moments, so when he turns to her and sees her smiling mischievously, he is completely caught off guard, "What?" he asks uneasily.

"We can bring a certain dark-haired-someone along if you like," she says, trying her best not to laugh.

Draco’s heart skips a beat and he tries to not let his panic show when he asks, in a shriller voice than he intends, "why would you say that?"

"I've seen you two together!" Luna giggles. "It’s positively romantic-"

"Don't!" Draco interrupts, horrified. Is he that obvious? Not that there was anything to be obvious about! "That is disgusting! I'd literally rather die."

"Don't be melodramatic. I think you two make a cute couple."

Cruel words come to him effortlessly, and it's the first thing he resorts to when he's feeling cornered. "Luna, I like you, but you have to stop talking. You sound unhinged. People would think you're back to your old ways if they knew what you were saying."

Draco feels a little guilty when he catches a flicker of hurt in her features. But just as quickly as it appeared, the expression is gone and replaced by a knowing smile. "I see I hit a nerve. It must mean you really like her."

Her? Draco partially opens his mouth, his mind not understanding. There's a question on the tip of his tongue but he swallows it, realizing that letting her believe her misguided notions works to his advantage. "I ... don't think she feels that way," he says at last, a little too eager to change the direction of the conversation he thought they were having.

"What are you talking about? She's been trying to get your attention for the past two weeks. Of course you've chosen the strategy of ignoring her."

"Um..." Draco has no idea who Luna can be talking about, until she turns in her seat, beaming and waving to the sixth year Slytherin girls who had just arrived moments ago. All of them pointedly ignore Luna and look elsewhere, all but one.

"How are you, Astoria?" Luna yells over the Slytherin table. Many Slytherins turn to see what the commotion is, and Draco glares at their smirking, stupid faces. They are all waiting to see what Loony Luna will say.

"I'm well, Luna." Astoria shyly smiles back, trying her best to ignore all the people that are now looking at her. He notices one of her friends trying to shush her. "And you?"

"Swell!" Luna replies loudly. Draco has half a mind to burrow into his seat, but slouching is beneath him. It's not that he's embarrassed of Luna, but everyone is staring at him, as if he's the one shouting across the table. "Draco and I are going to take a walk around the lake to catch some mockingfairies." At this point Draco starts to discreetly pinch Luna's arm to make her shut up, but Luna, with her eyes tearing up in pain, is relentless. "Do you want to come along?"

Astoria is deaf to the sniggers around her. "Sure, if Draco doesn't mind." She turns to smile at him, her face flushed and eager.
"Of course not," Draco says a little more stiffly than he intends. He looks down pointedly at his plate, very interested in what the hell he's eating.

"Great!" Luna exclaims, beaming between the two of them.

"Great." Draco repeats under his breath, gulping down his watered-down coffee with a grimace.

There is a buzz of excitement in the air that can only be attributed to the Halloween feast. The Gryffindor Common Room is louder than usual, with everyone scrambling about to get ready.

Harry, who's seated in his usual spot by the fire, buries his face in his hands and groans. "I already told you I'm not going, Hermione."

"Because of Ginny?" Hermione asks.

"Maybe." No. Harry's avoiding someone else entirely.

"But she's going! Why should that stop you?"

"I don't think she wants me there tonight." Ginny had not said a word to him after she, Ron and Hermione found him walking towards the Great Hall that morning. She hadn't given him a chance to explain himself before she stormed off in the opposite direction. But what could he have said? 'I'm sorry I got drunk with Malfoy' seemed like a very poor excuse.

He had told Ron and Hermione as much as he was comfortable sharing, that they lost track of time and got locked out, that they had to look for an alternative way inside, that he had a couple of drinks and fell asleep in the Room of Requirement. He hadn't shared the fact that he and Malfoy had shared a bed. He felt that would not bode well at all.

His two friends made it perfectly clear that they strongly disapproved of Harry's behaviour, not so much of what he did, but who he did it with. Hermione insisted that Malfoy was a bad influence and Ron insisted that Malfoy isn't the sort of person you want to be drunk around. "He could have poisoned you!" Ron had said numerous times.

Ron hadn't said much to him after that, so what he says next surprises him: "Hermione's right, Harry. You should come with us." Harry has a deep suspicion that he was coerced by Hermione to say that.

"It's okay, Ron. I won't be much fun to be around."

"That's not true. We hardly ever see you now…” Ron trails off. Words were never his forte, but the sincerity is still there. "So come with us."

Harry smiles at his best mate, tilting his head innocently. "Maybe if you say please…” He's shocked to suddenly feel a pillow land squarely on his face.

"Ron!" Hermione objects with laughter.

"Alright, alright!" he throws his hands up in the air in mock defence. "I'll come." He hears Hermione squeal in delight and can't help but laugh. But a realization dawns on him, "I just… I don't have anything to wear."
It's eight in the evening and most of the students are entering the Great Hall for the Halloween feast. Harry and Ron, who are waiting for Hermione in the corridor just outside, can hear the other students' exclams of delight and awe beyond the heavy doors. They've been waiting for some time and Harry has to admit that Hermione is uncharacteristically late. "I can't believe it took us 15 minutes to get ready and it's taking her more than an hour! What is she doing?" Ron grumbles.

"Probably getting all dolled up for you," Harry teases. Harry can hear girls giggling as they pass by him, and although he can't confirm it, he feels like they're staring at him. He shifts uncomfortably where he stands, trying to ignore the feeling of being watched.

"I've been meaning to tell you something. I'm thinking of asking Hermione …" Ron begins to say, but is cut short by hurried footsteps.

"I'm sorry I'm late!" Hermione exclaims, breathless. "Samantha insisted putting makeup on me."

"Wow." Ron sounds pleasantly surprised. "You look really beautiful." Harry pouts to himself, regretting that he can't see Hermione wearing makeup.

"Thanks," Hermione beams. "You two look very dapper."

"Are you sure this isn't too dressy?" Harry asks for the fifth time. He's wearing the rich, green robes that he wore to the Ministry Commemoration in his name. They're a little too well-fitting for Harry's taste, and frankly a little too… expensive looking.

"Don't be silly! It suits you perfectly. When Ginny sees you she'll forget she's angry," Hermione beams.

Ron impatiently begins to walk towards the heavy doors. "Let's go in already, I'm starving."

Harry can tell that the Great Hall looks amazing from his friends' gushing. He tries not to feel sorry for himself for the fact that he can't fully experience this with them. Although he can't see the festive decor, he can definitely make out certain scents, of freshly carved Pumpkins, melting candle wax, and candlewood mixed with pine.

"We'll make sure to take some pictures. You'll be able to see them when you're better," Hermione points out hopefully.

"Thanks." Harry smiles, trying to keep his spirits light.

The food that is served is the best Harry has ever tasted at Hogwarts. He's thankful that Hermione and Ron are there to point out the various dishes; stuffed duck, wild rice and Greek potatoes, grilled Portobello mushrooms and spiced curries. He's full by the time he tries half the dishes, but still manages to find some space for dessert. His mouth waters when Hermione passes him a plate of warm, pumpkin pie and treacle tart, his favourite.

"So good," Ron audible moans next to him, his mouth completely stuffed.

By the time the plates are spotless and everyone has had their fair share, the younger students are yawning and restless in their seats. Professor McGonagall takes this chance to make an announcement, "let's give our thanks to the house elves that have worked especially hard on tonight's meal." A scatter of applause can be heard, mainly coming from the Gryffindor table. "You're welcome to stay until 10:30 in the Great hall, but I must ask that you head straight to your dormitories after this time. As for the sixth, seventh and eighth year students, a marquee has been placed in the Quidditch Pitch for your dance. Professors will routinely come to check in, so no shenanigans!" A few people snigger at that. "Please be responsible and have fun."
"Should we head out?" Hermione asks, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

"I'm probably going go to bed…" Harry begins to say.

"Harry Potter! You're coming to the dance and you're going to have fun!"

"But, I don't wanna," he whines as Hermione takes his arm and begins to drag him away.

This is a good song. The tempo is deep and steady and the female vocals are both haunting and sweet. It's too easy to dance to, not the sort of extravagant dance people sometimes partake in, but something much more subtle, like taking steps without moving your feet, slightly nodding your head every so often in agreement with the beat.

"You're pretty good," Astoria smiles, only slightly surprised.

"You're not so bad yourself." Draco smirks. "Do you know this band? I really like them."

"Little Dragon."

"Why have I never heard of them?"

"They're muggleborn, I'm sure. I think they even perform for muggles." She seems to relish the fact, as if that makes a difference in the quality of music.

"Oh." It's Draco's cue to be surprised, but he shrugs it off easily and twirls Astoria as the song reaches its crescendo. She gracefully turns on her feet, and Draco has to admit, she looks lovely doing it.

As pretty as the girl in front of him is, Draco's eyes wander to the right, to a lean dark figure sloping leisurely against a tree. He has his arms crossed and his chin tucked close to his chest, trying his best to blend into the background. But there's something about him that draws your attention and keeps you staring. Maybe it's his stance that holds both confidence and burden, or his piercing eyes that have seen too much, but Draco is enthralled. Someone else notices him and disrupts the deep reflection he is in. She takes his arm and drags him to the dance floor, and although he shakes his head, Draco can tell that he's smiling. When the figure steps into the clearing, Draco's confused because he knows this person he's never seen before. How could he have missed it? It's so blatantly clear it's ridiculous, but maybe that's why it's an epiphany: Harry Potter's fucking fit.

The rational part of his mind quakes, but Draco laughs when he sees Potter, who had been so reserved and lost in his thoughts a moment ago, break out into sporadic, wild movements which can barely resemble dancing. "What do you call that, the blind drunk?" he shouts in amusement over the small crowd that separates them.

He hadn't expected Potter to actually hear him, but these days Potter had impeccable hearing. "We can't all be graceful like you!" he shouts back.

"No, but you have something better." He says this quietly. A flicker of something passes over Potter's features, and Draco relishes in it. Potter becomes distracted when a few eager Hufflepuff girls surround him, asking him to dance. It's evident from his fidgety hands and frigid stance that he's horribly uncomfortable at the prospect.

Draco strides over to them, his face already set to that sneer everyone loves to hate, and in his most
menacing voice, he says, "Potter. We need to talk. Now." Their giggling stops immediately and they exchange a startled look. He icily stares at them until they slowly back away.

Potter looks amused when he looks back at him. "Very effective." He shifts onto his other foot, and Draco frowns to realize that Potter's uncomfortable around him.

"You're welcome." It's strange that he should volunteer himself to save Potter from discomfort, given that mere hours ago, he had sworn to avoid him as much as possible. But he knew that was an empty promise and he knew he had to pretend otherwise. The consequence is that now he doesn't know what to say, because too much has already been said.

Evidently, Potter feels the same. "Er… I think I'll go back to the castle. It's late anyway." He smiles tightly and nods his head once, briefly, at Draco. There's something about the gesture that pisses Draco off, because it's too polite and detached, and that's not the Potter he knows.

"I'll go with you," he says stubbornly.

"Really?" Potter asks too quickly.

"Not because I enjoy your company, Potter," Draco sneers just the right amount, but it still comes across as friendly to his ears. "I just happened to be tired." Potter doesn't say anything in turn, but Draco catches a hint of a smile and for now that's enough.

Outside the marquee and beyond the company of others, it's easier for Draco to sneak a look at Potter. He can't understand his reaction from earlier, because for the most part, Potter's the same. Sure, well-fitting robes suit him, but that hardly matters. The way he carries himself and the way his expressions change is the same it's always been. He has the same untamed hair and green eyes that he's always known. So why the hell does Potter look so good?

Potter turns to look at him sharply. "What?"

"What 'what'?" Draco practically snaps, his cheeks colouring in embarrassment.

"Were you staring at me?" he asks awkwardly, shifting on his feet again.

"You're not that interesting to look at, Potter," he drawls. Lie. Lie. Lie.

Potter's shoulders hunch slightly in defiance, but not from the insult. "I get this feeling sometimes, like I'm being watched. I'm usually right about it too."

"Well, I wasn't." Draco steels his stony expression away.

They continue walking back towards the castle in silence. What is happening to me? He has an idea but it's too horrifying to really consider. He's so preoccupied in his denial that he fails to notice that Potter has stopped walking beside him several moments ago. Looking back, he sees that his dark frame outlined in the moonlight, his face angled towards the forest, staring.

"Potter," Draco calls out impatiently, masking his unease. "What are you -" and then Potter does the last thing he would have suspected. He sprints head on towards the Forbidden Forest.

"Potter!" Draco calls out loudly, more urgent this time, but his shadow is already being submerged by the trees. If Draco doesn't follow him soon, he'll lose sight of him. "For fuck's sake!" Draco curses under his breath as he starts to sprint after him.

Draco pushes himself through the trees and he's instantly forced to slow down. There are twisted
roots at his feet and branches clawing at his cloak. His heart begins to race uncomfortably, not because he's out of breath, but a fear that he had momentarily forgotten is brutally brought back to life, weighing heavily in his chest. Draco looks around himself frantically for signs of Potter, but can't make him out in the thickness of the trees. "Where are you?" he hisses frantically, hating this bloody forest.

"Potter!" he calls out again, his brow beginning to sweat. He clenches his fists together to keep his hands from shaking. Maybe he should retreat and get some help, but he shakes his head sharply, quickly disregarding the notion. If Potter had not went after him when he was kidnapped at the start of the term, he would probably be dead. He has to do this. He has to move. With these thoughts in mind, Malfoy takes another heavy step forward, his breath hitching in his throat uncomfortably.

A darkness he hasn't seen in quite some time weighs around him. The thickness of the trees block the light from the stars and the castle, which all seem too far away now. "Lumos." His wand light doesn't travel far in this darkness. He continues onward, not sure if he's headed in the right direction. Every fibre of his being is telling him that he's being foolish and unSlytherin-like, that he's expected to go back, to be smart, to save himself. Maybe something of what Potter said to him stuck, because he's tired of fulfilling those expectations. For the first time, he doesn't run. He moves onward, cursing Potter with every step.

Then, through the thickness of the trees, a pure and white light strikes the darkness around him. Draco follows it cautiously, walking forward as quietly as he can muster. As if in a dream, the glow of soft light surrounds him, tickling his skin and enticing him to find its source. Unexpectedly, all his fears and worries melt away with every moment he bathes in this light. Even his shadow knows not to follow him as he steps into the clearing.

Before him is the most heavenly creature he has ever seen. Ghostly yet majestic in appearance, he doesn't understand why this creature doesn't have a name, or perhaps he cannot remember it. Draco watches from afar as the creature bows his head low to let a beautiful boy brush his fingers through his mane. His hoofs prod the grass contentedly and his tail flicks ever so gently. A big gold eye turns to Draco, watching warily. Draco, who wants to prove that he's worthy, turns his palms up to face the skies. The creature bows his head again, reassured that no harm will come.

Draco feels weightless as he moves closer, a sense of warm tranquility spilling into his soul. Nothing else exists except what's before him. But then something in the creature's attitude changes, his ears perk up and his stance becomes rigid. He blows through his nostrils and quickly turns away from them. Leaping into a run, the creature heads towards the opposite end of the clearing, his white coat shimmering as he pierces through the darkness with his gold horn.

The darkness settles around him once more, and Draco has to blink several times to adjust to it. He tries to grasp at the reality of what just happened, but only pieces of it seem to fall into place. He realizes that his hand is still outstretched and his mouth is wide open. Clearing his throat, he rubs his eyes with his hands and just stands there for a moment, not believing.

"Potter," he says at last.

"Yeah?" the darkness responds quietly.

"That was a bloody unicorn," he merely says.

"I know." Draco nods slowly. Of course he knew. What else could it be?

"We should head back," Draco says calmly.
"That's a good idea." Potter's voice sounds small and far away, but maybe Draco sounds the same, so he's not worried.

The walk back is much less frightening. He can barely remember why he was so afraid to begin with. In truth he can scarcely remember what happened before they saw the Unicorn. Did he come looking for it? It seems unlikely that Draco would agree to explore the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night. Draco detests forests. It may be more accurate to say that he's quite terrified of them, but who could blame him, after all the horrible things that have happened to him in various forests. Only a few months ago, he had been kidnapped. He unconsciously touches his neck when he remembers how he couldn't breathe, how he could only thrash and scream in terror.

Draco shakes his head sharply to clear his thoughts. The last thing he needs is to relive those memories. He continues walking onward, every step clearing the fog in his mind and helping him make sense of what just happened.

"How did you know where to find it?" Draco wonders out loud.

"I saw it," Potter says tonelessly.

"What?" Draco nearly falls over in astonishment. That seems like a crucial detail to ignore. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know."

"And now? Can you make out anything?" he hates how he almost sounds hopeful.

"No."

Draco chews on his lip nervously. It's not that he's expecting Potter to share his experience in detail, but for him to give him one word answers is definitely odd, unlike Potter. "Are you alright?" he asks quietly, wincing at how gentle he sounds.

"I'm fine," he absently responds. Draco frowns, but decides to leave Potter to his thoughts. There's no use pressing him here. He'll have time to ask him about it once they're back inside. Potter is a few feet ahead of him, treading ever so carefully over the roots and branches. Silently, Draco follows him, even though it should be the other way around. The trees are becoming less dense as they approach the edge of the forest, and it seems like the night is almost over.

When he hears Potter trip, he wordlessly steps forward to help him, his hand reaching to pull him up. "Don't -" Potter says in the same, strange voice.

Draco talks a step back, frowning in confusion, but something like concern is rising in his chest. He can just make out Potter fiddling with something, his hands moving frantically. "Potter?" Draco calls out uneasily.

When Potter doesn't respond, Draco narrows his eyes and moves close behind him. He seems to be alternating between shaking a large log, and caressing it with his fingertips. Draco, coldly snapping out of his trance, knows something is horribly wrong. "What are you doing?" he asks sharply, grabbing his shoulder.

Potter shrugs him off violently. "I can't …" he hears Potter take an agonizing breath, his voice shaking in a way it shouldn't. "I can't s-see."

His jaw clenched tight, Draco peers over Potter's shoulder to take a closer look. With a hollowing sense of dread, he makes out the silhouette of a very still and cold person, their eyes wide and
shining in the moonlight. Panic springs up in him and he steps away quickly, until his back is pressed up against a tree bark. All thoughts vanish from his mind and he can scarcely remember how to breathe. "This isn't happening."

But Potter isn't listening. His hands are running over the cold face and his green eyes are wide with fear. "I can't see. Who is it, Malfoy?" Draco can make out Potter visibly shaking, his fingertips clumsily trying to recognize a face, and some of the panic he feels starts to ebb away, because there's something else that's fighting for Draco's attention, fighting to get out and it's never been closer. "Malfoy?" It's the crack in his voice that has Draco stepping towards him again. He has to get him out of here. He has to keep him safe. Draco tries to grab his arm to pull him away, but Potter violently snatches his arm free. "Tell me!" Potter yells into his face. "Tell me it isn't Ron!"

"Come on, snap out of it!" Draco is desperately trying to yank him away but Potter is fighting him off like a mad man, clutching at this empty shell of a person.

"I can't see who it is!" Potter chokes out, his words strangling in his throat. "I'm blind."

"It's not Ron!" Draco doesn't know if this is true or not, but he's willing to lie to get him out of there. He turns his head sharply when he hears a branch snap behind him, as if something were moving only mere feet away. Peering into the darkness, he imagines a dark figure hiding in the shadows. Frantically, Draco raises his left arm, the light from his wand spilling in between the trees. Nothing. He scans for any sign of movements. Nothing. But why can't he shake the feeling he's being watched? Then he hears it again, the audible crunch of leaves and twigs snapping underneath someone's foot. Someone is there.

The fear in Draco's mind reels, threatening to consume him. He's momentarily paralyzed with it, making the choice before him easier to see. He can run from it and never look back, leave Potter behind and save himself. Or he can face it, use it. Maybe seeing the unicorn gave rise to some unknown courage, because the next moment Draco is kneeling down behind Potter, the wet earth cold on his knees. Draco has to try a different approach if he wants to get Potter out of here. He inches closer to him and gently begins to pull him away. "Come on," he urges, trying to keep his voice from wavering, but Potter refuses to budge. Draco squeezes his eyes shut and lets his forehead fall onto the back of Potter's neck, trying to swallow the fear that's gripping at his heart. "I need you to come with me," he tries again, letting his fumbling whispers catch in his hair. "Please, Harry."

At last, Potter numbly nods his head, his breathing already beginning to steady. Feeling a little more hopeful, Draco tightens his arms around Potter's chest and pulls him up, forcing him to stand. Without a second thought or glance back, Draco grips Potter's hand and lead them out of the shadows.
It's a crisp, cold afternoon and one figure can be seen sitting alone in the sunlight, a green scarf tightly bound around his neck. It's much too cold to be sitting by the lake, but it's one of the few spots he has refuge from the glares and skirting eyes. Draco's shoulders are hunched over and his head is bent low as he reads the front page of the Daily Prophet.

**STUDENT FOUND DEAD AT HOGWARTS**

Authorities are confirming that Blaise Zabini, age 18, was discovered dead on Sunday Nov. 1st at approximately 2am. He was discovered by none other than Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, who was on trial this past June for aiding and abetting in murder.

"And found innocent", he adds bitterly.

His father is currently on trial for illegal use of the unforgivables, involvement as a Death Eater, treason, espionage and murder.

Draco nearly chokes on his coffee. Treason? That charge was definitely new. He didn't know there was any evidence that his father was actively plotting the downfall of the Ministry. He supposes he shouldn't be surprised, but quickly becomes unnerved by the fact that the other charges do not faze him. Perhaps because they're all likely true.

Although post mortem reports have specified that the cause of death is an unintentional fall, and that homicide seems most improbable, many students fear that is not the case: "I find it suspicious that [Draco] Malfoy was in the Forbidden Forest to begin with, especially with Harry [Potter], who's quite vulnerable right now - " Donald Greenwood said to us in an exclusive interview. Greenberg, who is a witness in the Lucius Malfoy trials, happens to be a close friend of Harry Potter. "I think people forget how dangerous [Draco] Malfoy is, he was a Death Eater after all..."

Draco can't read anymore of this filth. He crumbles up the Daily Prophet aggressively and throws it away without looking.

"Ow," Potter utters in surprise, as the ball of lies bounce off his face.

"Sorry," Draco says without meaning. "Didn't see you."

"S'Okay. Can I sit?"

"You sure you want to risk being alone with me? I'm dangerous after all," Draco asks with icy sarcasm.

Potter sits down next to him wordlessly, tightening his red scarf around his neck before he wraps his
arms around his knees and hugs them in close to him. The dark circles under his eyes tell Draco he hasn't been sleeping well since he last saw him, and Draco understand that all too well. Potter turns towards him and in a gentle voice says, "I'm sorry about Blaise."

Draco clenches his jaw tightly as he nods once, stiffly. He stares straight ahead of him and avoids looking at Potter, fighting the burning sensation in his eyes. He's glad that Potter can't see his expression because he's sure he looks pathetic. Worse than being accused of murder is the fact that no one cares that he and Blaise were once friends. He still can't comprehend how only moments ago, he was alive. Yes, they weren't speaking, but that was by choice, and now he'll never have a chance to change that. Potter understands this. He's the only one who acknowledges Draco's regret, and for that he feels … grateful.

"About that night ..." he continues with evident discomfort, distracting Draco's thoughts. "I'm sorry I kind of lost it."

"Don't be," Draco says stiffly. He was hoping they would never speak of it. It was all too confusing to him to really care about right now. "Forget it."

"You have to understand, that's never happened before. I never lose control like that." Draco lifts one eyebrow skeptically, but doesn't say a word. Seeming to have felt his disbelief, Potter hastily clarifies, "I know I'm not the best example of control, but I've never lost it in the face of danger. How else could I have survived all these years?"

Draco shrugs. "Then what happened?"

"I don't know. I was in a sort of trance. When I saw the unicorn, like really saw it, I forgot I was blind. Then it was gone and the truth of that fact just really - hit me hard. I feel -I felt - that I would never see again." Potter huddles his knees in closer to himself, looking small. "I've been pretending this doesn't bother me, that I'll be fine like I always am, but what if this is it? What if I'm blind for the rest of my life?" He casts his face down, tucking his chin into his scarf.

The urge to say or do something to make Potter feel better momentarily makes him forget his own pain. But who is he fooling? Draco has such little practice in that art of comforting. He sighs as he edges closer to the Gryffindor, letting his right shoulder brush against his left. Draco doesn't have any words of kindness to offer, all he has is his honesty. "I don't know if you'll ever see again… But even if that's the case you'll still be you, Harry-bloody-Potter." He's pleased to see his lips twitch in amusement. "Who knows? Maybe a little stronger for it." It should perplex Draco that Potter is confiding in him and even more so that he wants to comfort him, but it doesn't. Something has shifted between them without him noticing.

"Stronger for it? I'd rather be happy," he says a way that is meant to sound casual, but it doesn't fool either of them.

"Happiness is overrated," Draco responds dryly.

"How would you know?" Potter smirks briefly, knowing full well that Draco doesn't know, but then the implication of his words sink in and make him wince, as if the thought of Draco not knowing happiness hurts him.

"I just know you would never be satisfied with mere happiness." He smirks back. "You're too concerned being other things, like being good. I always felt like happiness was beneath you."

He's glad to see that he's finally managed to make him smile, be it a small, unsure one. "Yeah, fuck being happy. You and I, we're above that - better than the rest."
"Well, speak for yourself. Everyone's convinced I'm less than scum." Draco mimics Potter's stance, wrapping his arms around his legs and tucking them in close as he looks absently into the lake. *Maybe they're right.*

It's now Potter's turn to bump his shoulder against Draco's playfully. "Everyone thinks a lot of things."

*And what do you think?* The question is on the tip of his tongue, but he holds himself back. He doesn't care what Potter thinks. Or maybe he's afraid to find out. Draco searches for something to say to distract his thoughts. "When you, erm… found Blaise, why were you touching his face?"

He sees Potter shift uncomfortably. "I heard that some blind people can recognize a face by touching it, like their hands can see. In my panic, I guess... I thought it would work."

"What did you … see?"

"Nothing. I've never done that before so it wouldn't have work. But I think there's some merit to it. There's this one quill I always use because it spills less than the others. I always manage to pick it out."

"I wouldn't be able to tell," Draco drawls. "Your hands are always covered in ink. It's damned disgraceful." He surprises himself when he snatches Potter's right hand. The gesture vividly reminds him of the last time he did that. Ignoring the swelling sensation in his chest, he turns his hand over, analyzing it against the harsh light of the day. "Ahah! I count exactly five inkblots. *Five*, Potter." His thumb runs over one dark splotch, and he's pleased to learn how rough and warm the skin is.

Potter nervously laughs and snatches his hand back. "How do I know you're telling the truth? I think you're a comfortable liar."

"Why thank you. I suppose you'll just have to trust me."

"Pfff. Like that'll ever happen." This sounds like sarcasm, which Draco is glad for. Then Potter does something strange, he lifts his hand to his nose and sniffs. "I see you have a point though."

"Is this another power of yours? Ability to smell disgrace?"

He likes the way Potter's face changes when he breaks out in genuine laughter. "More like an ability to smell absolutely anything. Ever since I became blind."

Draco absentely wonders if he has a distinctive smell, but a realization dawns on him, distracting him. "I've noticed something about you!" he says. "You've never used that word before - *blind*. Now you can't stop saying it."

"Really?" Potter asks. "I don't think so. Would have been impossible to not say it."

"No, it's true!" Draco says with enthusiasm, glad to know something about Potter that no one else does. "Maybe you're finally accepting the fact that you're not invincible. I think you should try the Legere spell. It might work now."

"Meh…" Potter whines in a lazy manner.

"Potter, indolence doesn't suit you. Here, I have spare ink and parchment." He begins to rummage his pockets, too damn excited for his own good.

"Maybe another time, Draco." Draco sharply turns his head towards him, his eyes wide with
astonishment. He looks for any signs of unease or embarrassment on his face, but it seems Potter hasn't noticed what he's just said. "That's just another thing I don't want to deal with right now," Potter continues absently, staring emptily into the lake. Draco tilts his head and continues to stare at Potter in slight horror. *Are we on first name basis?*

"Harry!" A voice calls out a few meters away.

Both Draco and *Potter* turn their heads towards the voice. "Damn," Draco mumbles, "your entourage found you."

"Who's with Ron?" Potter asks beside him, beginning to stand up.

"Only Granger and the girl Weasley," Draco bitterly says as he stands up himself, dusting his coat off.

"You mean my girlfriend?" Potter dryly asks, failing at keeping his lips from twitching. "Ginny."

"Is that what they call her?"

Potter doesn't have the time to retort because his friends have reached him, slightly out of breath and for some unknown reason, evidently upset.

"We've been looking everywhere for you -" Granger begins, her eyes scanning between him and Potter uneasily. Draco crosses his arms and icily glares at her.

"Why, is something wrong?" Potter asks nervously.

The girl Weasley shrieks, "Why are you with him?"

She points her finger accusingly at Draco, and he can't help but smirk cruelly. "Well, aren't you a black hole of need? Are you jealous that your Boy Wonder prefers to spend time with me?" He pointedly avoids looking at Potter, directing his words at her.

Weaslette takes an aggressive step towards him. "Shut up before I make you, Malfoy."

"Ginny, please!" Potter steps in between them, and he throws an impatient expression at Draco, "Try to be civil, Malfoy." Something hot and ugly pierces Draco's chest when Potter turns his attention away from him and places his hands on her shoulders without hesitation. "Why are you so upset?" he asks her, ignoring him completely.

"You don't know, do you?" she asks in a low voice.

"Know what?" Potter asks apprehensively.

"They found something else, about Blaise," Granger interjects. Draco leans forward, knowing that whatever she has to say won't be any good. "There's saying it wasn't an accident." She glances at Draco nervously, and Draco becomes acutely aware of how uncomfortable they all look, with Granger's cautious stance, Weasley's aggressive posture and his sister's overbearing protectiveness. With deep resentment, he understands their distress plainly. They think he did it.

"And..." She has the grace to look away from Draco. "They are suggesting that he was killed by a Death Eater."

"That's not possible! They said there were no signs of struggle." Potter says the words with conviction, but something in his expression looks like uncertainty, making Draco go cold.
"A spell that kills by accidental death was used. The Death Eater was trying to cover his tracks."

"How can they even know any of that?" Draco snaps at her.

Granger looks at him again, unsure if she should answer him or not. Before Granger can make up her mind, he finds himself face to face with Ginny Weasley again, her wild hair framing her spiteful face. "It seems you royally fucked up. Not only is there hard evidence that you killed him, but there's a witness!"

"What are you on about?" he asks slowly, caught between disbelief and rage.

"Everyone knows you killed Zabini. Did you think he was Harry? Is that it?" Draco's hand flexes for his wand and from the corner of his eye he sees her brother do the same.

"Ginny, stop!" Potter objects, pulling her away from him. "Don't be crazy. I was with Malfoy the entire time."

"You were with him the entire time?" she asks him, not expecting a confirmation.

Potter opens his mouth to respond, but his features become clouded with doubt. Draco knows they had been apart for some time, only because he was too busy looking for Potter. Potter unconsciously turns towards Draco with a puzzled expression, giving his thoughts away. *He think I did it.* Draco buries his clenched fists into his crossed arms to keep himself from hitting him. He swallows the bitter taste of betrayal, feeling like a fool for trusting Potter.

"See? He's dangerous, Harry!" she whispers urgently to him. Potter shakes his head but doesn't say anything.

"He's manipulating you and you're too blind to see it."

Draco doesn't have willpower to refrain from rolling his eyes. "For fuck's sake - I don't need this."

He begins to turn away from them, sick to his stomach, sick of fucking Potter, but Potter's voice stops him in his tracks, "wait." The two Weasleys are holding him back with a mix of tender and aggressive protectiveness. Only Granger is standing to the side, looking perplexed.

"What now?" he snaps defensively.

Potter is on the verge of saying something but he is holding back. *Stay. I know you didn't do it. I'll come with you.* Draco would welcome any of these responses, but all he hears is, "nothing."

Harry's annoyed.

Everyone's treating Malfoy like some sort of murderer intent on killing him. Ginny insists that she walk Harry to every class, meal and study session, while Ron won't pause to take a breath between his accusations and perpetual paranoia. Quite frankly, he's getting sick and tired of it all.

"How can you be so sure that he did it?" Harry asks Ron, trying to keep his frustration at bay. It's a late school night in the Gryffindor Common Room and his patience is starting to wane thin.

"Will it help if I list all the reasons? One. A Death Eater did it and he's a Death Eater!" Ron replies in exasperation.

"Was..." Harry says in a bored voice.
"Two. He was there when it happened!"

"So was I!"

"THREE-" Ron says loudly over Harry, "he and Zabini had a row. They stopped talking. Maybe they had a disagreement about what Malfoy is planning to do."

Harry runs his hand impatiently through his hair. "All during sixth year I was convinced Malfoy was up to something and you two didn't believe me. And now that I'm sure he's changed, you insist that he's trying to kill me!"

"I don't insist that," Hermione says quietly. Both Harry and Ron momentarily stop talking. Hermione had been strangely quiet during their heated discussions, and Harry took that to mean that she was siding with Ron. "It doesn't make any sense. If Malfoy really did want to kill Harry, I'm sure he wouldn't do it in a way that would make him look guilty."

"But he used that spell -" Ron begins to say.

"Malfoy would go out of his way to ensure that he's not connected to Harry's death. He would have made it look like someone else is covering their tracks, shifted the blame away from him. Also, Malfoy would make sure to never be alone with Harry, or at least to never be seen together. But you two don't seem to care much about that," she says the last part a little pointedly.

Harry doesn't understand why he's blushing, but quickly dismisses it. "Exactly. Malfoy isn't interested in anyone being killed."

"I can't vouch for that." Harry can hear a smile in her voice. "But what really is getting to me are the reports on Zabini. They just don't make any sense."

"They said a Death Eater did it." Ron says again, "What are the chances of another Death Eater being in that area at the same time? It has to be Malfoy."

"At first I thought the same thing… but…" she seems to be choosing her words with care. "As far as I could tell, the imprints from the Death Marks and the wands were the only ways the Ministry could be certain that a Death Eater had committed a given crime. After Voldemort died, all the Death Marks vanished. So the only way they can assume that a Death Eater killed Zabini is if a Death Eater's wand was used."

"Okay, so…" Harry tries to clarify. "Since the Marks don't exist anymore, it's harder to prove that a Death Eater did it. How could they link a Death Eater's wand to a crime?" Harry asks.

"It leaves a magical residue in the scene, kind of like a fingerprint. And Voldemort had a very unique print."

"Fine, the Dark Marks are out of the question, but not the wands," Ron confirms.

"Yes, a wand that was used by a Death Eater when Voldemort was still alive may still leave some residue."

"But Malfoy doesn't even use the same wand anymore!" Harry say triumphantly, remembering how he had taken his wand from Malfoy Manor and used it to defeat Voldemort. He briefly wonders what the Ministry did with Malfoy's wand.

"That's right. So this leaves us with two options. Either the Ministry is telling the truth, therefore Malfoy couldn't have done it because he couldn't leave any Death Eater residue. This means that
another Death Eater was at Hogwarts that night, or at least a Death Eater's wand was used. Or the Ministry isn't telling the truth and anyone could be a suspect, even Malfoy. So my question to you is, who do you mistrust more? Malfoy or the Ministry?"

"I don't know," Ron admits begrudgingly. "I don't trust either of them."

Harry's face breaks out into a wide grin, "Hermione, I could kiss your logic!" But it dawns on Harry that he does have an answer to Hermione's question. Without realizing it, his mistrust for Malfoy had disappeared. Normally Malfoy would be the last person he could trust, but that definitely wasn't the case anymore. And if he's learned anything it's that placing any trust in the Ministry is foolhardy. "Why would they leak false information?" he wonders out loud.

"Who knows," Hermione stifles a yawn. "They could be trying to cover something up, or trying to pin it on someone. Maybe it's for the simple fact that it's the easiest solution. It's what people want to hear."

"People do want a suspect, even if it's the same answer as always," Ron muses. "But even if the Ministry lied, that doesn't make Malfoy innocent."

"But it definitely doesn't make him guilty," Hermione adds with finality. "I'm off to bed. I'll see you two tomorrow."

"I'll come with you, I forgot … something in your dorm," Ron stammers. "Night, Harry." He hears Hermione giggle.

He chuckles and leans back contentedly. He should be off to bed himself, but he promised Ginny he would wait for her to finish her Astronomy lesson. Yawning vigorously, he settles into his armchair and closes his eyes.

When he opens them he can see again, but the colours are faded with a brush of grey. Looking about him, he can make out high ceilings covered with ostentatious paintings of angels and demons. Several candles are lit across a long hall, but all he feels is the frigid cold. He wraps his cloak tighter around himself and begins to walk to the other side of the hall. To his dismay he realizes that he's walking barefoot on black marble, so cold and dark it could be mistaken for an abyss of nothing. He walks on a little faster, the air stinging his lungs as he breathes in.

The end of the hallway forks into two passageways. On his right, a flight of ascending stairs turn sharply to the floor above him. On his left, he sees descending stairs winding quickly into darkness. Shivering, he begins to turn to his right, a little sick of darkness, but a voice from far away stops him. He's not sure if he even heard it, but if he did it came from the left. He stares into the darkness at the end of the stairs, an uneasiness settling within him.

Without understanding why, he knows he has to go left, down the stairs. The tug in his heart tells him there's something waiting for him there. As he begins to descend the darkness begins to pull him in, willing him to go further. He tries to hold onto any source of light, but he finds himself completely submerged in darkness and unable to see. Cautiously, he takes one step after another, holding onto the wall beside him for support.

Quite suddenly, his foot hits a flat surface in front of him. He stumbles from the shock of not being able to go any further. With outstretched hands, he begins to feel the cold wall in front of him, trying to find a way out. He sighs in relief when his hand finds a doorknob.

Beyond the door is a large, richly furnished room. Paintings are hung up along the walls and comfortable plush chairs are situated about. The side of the wall closest to him is entirely covered in
shelves of books. There's an empty fireplace with a writing desk mere feet away. The room almost
fools him, almost feels cozy, until his attention drifts to the very back of the room that's casts in
shadows. He can make out a small cell with black bars. Inside it there's a child whose hair is as fair
as the sun. He's curled over, visibly trembling, and he has his face buried into his knees. Harry
rushes towards the cell and tries to open the cell door, but it's locked.

"Hey," he calls out. "Are you hurt?" The boy doesn't move or answer, so Harry quickly looks
around the room for a key but he sees nothing. Maybe someone left a wand here. He walks quickly
to the desk, opening the small drawers, but they're all empty. Looking a little more closely, he notices
that the library is covered in cobwebs and that there are pieces of scattered parchment covered in
dust. He picks one up, blowing away the dusty surface, but the words on the page don't make any
sense to him. What catches his eye is a silver and green coat of arms, adorned with abstract snakes
and dragons. He traces the silver 'M' in the center of it, and realizes with dread where he is and who
is in that cell. Turning his attention back to the boy, he steps towards him quickly and crouches
down low. He must be no older than six. "Draco," he says, "can you hear me?"

Between the bars is a broken boy, his hair as fair as the sun. He lifts his silver eyes in astonishment,
his gaze devoid of any recognition. "Who are you?"

"It's me..." Harry begins to say, a chill running down his spine. "Harry."

"I don't know you," he says with suspicion, not quite looking at Harry. His small hands tightly
clench into fists. "Go away."

"Are you - can you see me?" Harry whispers, afraid to know the answer. The boy doesn't say
anything, but he doesn't have to; his blank stare says it all. Harry feels the beginning of a cold rage
burning inside of him as he grips the metal bars. "I'll get you out. You just have to get up."

The boy shakes his head, his eyes widening in fear. "I have to get out by myself."

"No one has to know I helped. I promise." He outstretches his right arm between the bars, trying his
best to reach Draco. "Come on, give me your hand."

"Promise?" his voice wavers in such a way that breaks Harry's heart.

"I do." A flicker of hope passes over his features as he blindly reaches out to take Harry's hand.

Harry can now make out a thin, gold chain around Draco's neck, something dangling from it. At
last, Harry grasps his cold fingers and begins to pull him closer to him. "What's that around your
neck? I'll just take it off -" he abruptly stops when Draco cries out in pain, his small frame twisting
horribly as his nails dig into Harry's hand. "Draco!" He tries to pull him close enough to get the
chain off of him, but his violent screams and thrashing only intensify. In his convulsion, his hand
slips out of Harry's. Harry violently shakes the bars as he watches him being tortured. "DRACO!"

He feels someone shake his shoulders roughly and when he opens his eyes he's blind again. "Harry,
wake up!" The memory of Draco's pain is so fresh it hurts to move. He gets up, a terrible sensation
weighing on his chest. "You said - Draco." Ginny says with a mixture of concern and resentment.

"I er... have to go." He begins to get up to find him, but Ginny pushes him back onto the sofa
swiftly.

"Stay."

"I can't."

"This is about Malfoy." It's not even a question.
"Yes! So what?" he snaps, tired of this conversation.

"Harry," she seems to be choosing her words carefully. "I don't know what's going on between you two, but I'm asking you to stay."

"I really have to go." He's wasting time!

"Then go," she says frigidly, "but don't expect me to wait for you."

"Ginny, I'm sorry," he mutters, not bothering to fully comprehend her meaning. He makes sure he has his wand as he rushes out of the Common Room, letting the painful tugging in his chest lead the way.
Is it really that difficult for you to trust me? - Harry

Is it strange that Harry always knows where to find Draco Malfoy?

It should concern him – how easy it is for him to find him. It should concern him that he knows his class schedule or that he can guess where the Slytherin is hiding depending on his mood. Draco flies often enough that the Quidditch pitch is his first guess, as long as there isn’t anything pressing due. But when the work starts to mount and Harry’s already planning to procrastinate, Draco can be found in a nook at the back of the library – stale coffee in hand and parchment scattered all over his desk.

He rarely eats in the Great Hall. Harry knows that when he does it's because he's having a good day, comparatively speaking. On his pensive days, when he’s quiet and to himself, Draco goes to be alone in that secluded spot by the lake. The Astronomy Tower is reserved for his most disruptive days; when the wind is howling and the whole castle seems to tremble - just like it did the night he let the Death Eater in.

It should concern Harry how well he knows Draco Malfoy but it doesn’t. He’s too preoccupied in finding him.

Tonight, he knows he won't find him in any of those places. He knows because something is wrong. Draco isn't where he's supposed to be. The twisting ache in his chest tells him so. Harry lets himself be led, his hands trailing along the walls for support. He’s running faster than he should be and the sense of foreboding is growing with each step.

Then he hears it: a broken breath, rattling as it fights to get into a pair of lungs. The horrific sound twists the knife in his chest, makes him rush towards Draco and crouch down low, his hands outstretched on the floor in searching. Reaching his chest, he carefully places his hands on him. "Draco?" His hands come away sticky and wet and his heart begins to pound erratically in his chest. "Fuck – what did they do to you?" He can smell the blood on him, so rich he can nearly taste it.

With trembling hands he casts a weightless charm on him, making it easier for Harry to lift him up, his arms under Draco's knees and upper back. “You'll be okay,” he promises, knowing full well that he can't hear him but needing to say it anyway. Soft strands of his hair tickle his arm and with a sudden surge of protectiveness, he pulls him in closer to his chest. "You'll be okay."

With Deja vu he remembers that this has happened before. Exactly two months ago he found him unconscious in an abandoned corridor. But he had woken up then. There wasn't so much blood. He didn't sound like this. It would be a relief for Malfoy to wake up and laugh bitterly at him, like he had done then, but he's unmoving, barely breathing and cold. Swallowing the panic swirling inside of him, Harry begins to walk quickly towards the Hospital Wing.
The first thing he’s aware of is the pain. He groans when it doesn’t subside - if anything it only grows with each breath. Opening his eyes, he's startled to see that he's in the infirmary in white clothes that aren’t his own, with a cast bound tightly around his chest. But stranger than all that is Potter curled up asleep in a chair beside him, his head bent uncomfortably over his shoulder. He immediately makes out the dark, red stains on Potter's shirt.

"Potter," he barely manages to croak. He clears his throat and tries again, "Potter." He says that a little too loudly, which results in him awakening with a start.

"Malfoy?" he asks with what seems like concern.

"Why am I in here?" Draco winces as he sits up straighter. "Or you, for that matter."

Shaking a hand through his hair, Potter immediately becomes alert and angry. He leans close to him, intruding Draco's personal space and forcing him to lean back. "I found you unconscious in some random corridor. What the hell happened?"

"I don't remember," he lies, knowing he doesn't sound convincing at all but liking the way Potter's eyes flash dangerously.

"You were a bloody mess. Barely breathing." He actually looks distressed over the memory, but Draco isn’t fooled. "Malfoy, this has to stop. Who did this to you?"

"I don't know." He says in a bored voice. He presses one hand into his own chest and winces at the touch. They really did a number on him.

"They could have killed you." Potter continues gravely, "Pomfrey found cracked ribs and a punctured lung. What did they do, beat you with bloody bricks?"

Draco remembers a boot colliding into his chest, and the gruesome sound of something cracking inside of him. "Don't be melodramatic," he simply says.

"Malfoy," Potter says with seriousness, his green eyes burning, "I know this isn't the first time this has happened. You need to tell me who did this!" Draco stays persistently silent, to which Potter adds in an exasperated voice, "I can help you."

"What makes you think I need your help?" Draco asks coldly.

"Is it really that difficult for you to trust me?" Potter snaps impatiently. A grimace comes over his face, and he takes a deep breath to calm himself. "In September, I found you. You remember? You were in a similar state but you regained consciousness. I know it was you."

Draco arches an eyebrow slowly. How the hell could Potter know it was him back then? "Okay, Potter. I'll be honest with you." It gives Draco some twisted satisfaction to see Potter's face light up in hope. "I know exactly what happened last night and the other night in question. But you know what? It's none of your fucking concern." He spits out the words at him, not quite sure why he feels so angry.

Potter's face hardens. "Why are you being like this?"

"I'm not being anything," he says icily, but the little sense of control he has over his voice is faltering. "You're just a nosy, backstabbing bastard!"

"I'm just trying to help you!" The warm breath of anger makes Draco draw back further, but there's no space to retreat to.
Feeling cornered, a low growl escapes his throat. "You can help by leaving."

"No. Too bloody bad. I'm not going to let you do what you always do, push people away because you're too cowardly to ask for help."

Draco digs his nails into his mattress, urging himself not to throw a punch at the self-righteous git. "Fuck. Off."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what happened! Or why you're acting like this," Potter exclaims stubbornly. "I thought that ... That we -"

"You thought what? That we're friends?" Draco cuts him off in disgust. "Why would I ever want that? You think I killed Blaise! You made that perfectly clear when your mates were around." At last, he admits it, and he can't deny that this hurts more than anything Greenberg could do to him.

But Potter's expression becomes incredulous, and Draco's bitterness takes a pause. "I don't think that at all! I've been telling them it couldn't be you."

"Please, spare me," Draco sneers, "You've been avoiding me. Afraid I'm going to kill you too?"

"Don't be ridiculous - I know you didn't do that." Potter lets out a crazed, exhausted laugh that assures Draco more than anything that Potter's telling the truth. "I thought you were avoiding me. I guess my friends have been keeping us apart."

Draco glares reproachfully at Potter. "The word is you're afraid to be alone with me."

"Obviously that's not the case." Then Potter smiles hesitantly at him and Draco is surprised how quickly his anger begins to dissolve. "Now are you going to tell me what happened? Since we've established you're not plotting my downfall."

"Well, I never said that," he mutters, to which Potter smirks. Draco continues in a low, petulant voice, "can't you just let this go?"

"No. You know me better than that." He scoffs in response and is about to say something snarky, like 'Always the Hero. You can't resist, can you?' but it dawns on him that Potter can't resist because he actually cares. Potter can't let this go because he's concerned for Draco's well-being, and it's a fact that doesn't distress him as it once would have. If anything, it's sort of nice. Potter cares.

"What are you planning to do if I tell you?" Draco asks carefully.

"Beat them to a bloody pulp, get them expelled, hire a hit man: the possibilities are endless."

He smirks at Potter's antics, but shakes his head. "You can't do anything."

"I can't promise that."

"Then I can't tell you."

"You can't let them get away with this!" Potter says forcefully.

"I'm touched," it sounds like sarcasm but it's not, "but it's not your call."

"Don't you want this to stop?" Another kind of concern passes over Potter's face, as if he suspects that Draco doesn't want it to end.

Sensing Potter's thoughts, he hurriedly answers, "Of course I do - I just want to deal with this on my
own.” It's the first lie he's told Potter today that sounds like the truth, but he doesn't want to think about why he's lying to begin with, or why he's letting this happen to him, again and again.

Potter sighs in resignation. "Fine, Malfoy, fine. It'll stay between us."

Draco unconsciously leans in towards him. The idea of confiding in someone, even Scarhead, is disturbingly comforting. He's unsure if he should say anything… but Potter gave him his word. This feels significant somehow – like he can trust him. "You know my father is on trial for various war crimes," he begins quickly, before he can doubt himself or Potter. "One of the charges is for arson of property." Draco grimaces because that sounds too politically correct. "A lot of muggleborns lost their homes, but there were some people that - that were killed." He stares intently at Potter's grim face, half expecting him to get up and leave. "I don't know the extent of my father's involvement, but Greenberg is convinced that my father killed his family."

"I heard he's standing as a witness on your father's trial," Potter confirms in a careful tone, but Draco can hear the buried rage in his voice. "He's the one who did this to you?"

Draco makes the mistake of nodding and stops. “Yeah - He thinks I should be facing the same charges.” He nervously stares at Potter, waiting for him to say something.

Potter's expression hardens. "Should you be?"

“Excuse me?"

Potter is relentless. “Were you involved?"

"I never killed anyone, if that's what you're implying," Draco replies.

"No, I mean, were you there?" The frankness in his voice makes Draco flinch.

Would one more lie hurt? He thinks it would, so he tells the truth as eloquently as he can. "Yes."

Something in Potter's face twists awfully, morphing into disgust. He didn't expect to see that expression again, and it's painful, unbearable. Averting his gaze quickly, he looks down at his hands and is shocked to see that they're shaking. He folds his hands together, clenching them tightly to make them stop. "They made me watch-" his voice sounds so fucking weak but he has to try to articulate what happened. He has to make him understand. "I wanted to warn them, to get them out of there, but... But I couldn't let him see -" my weakness. That's what his father called it. He clenches his jaw down tightly and suppresses the memories that are threatening to expose him. Weak. Murderer.

Draco stills when Potter unexpectedly takes his shaking hands in his own. They’re warm, unlike his. A part of him wants to snatch his hands away but he can’t.

Draco can't understand why this small gesture forces him to remember something other than his shame. For all the world, he can't understand why this feels alright, why - why it’s never happened before. He looks up at him, his green eyes burning, and impossibly his ache begins to melt away. Potter looks furious, but not at him. His rage is for the ones who have broken him. Draco's lips part in gratitude because he's sure no one has ever bothered to feel angry on his behalf. At last when he speaks, with lines of regret around his mouth, it's with a soft voice. "I'm sorry he did that to you." Draco doesn't know if he means Greenberg or his father, but it doesn't matter because another something flickers over Potter's face and Draco yearns to understand. "You didn't deserve that." Draco doesn't believe him, but for now the words are all he needs. He nods, greedily latching onto his every syllable. His gaze stills on Potter's mouth, hoping and waiting for him say something
more, needing to steal the words right out of him.

There is a bang from the hospital door swinging open and Draco jolts away from Harry in a panic, snatching his hands back. He grimaces from the effort of moving so quickly, but the discomfort is nothing compared to being caught holding hands with Harry-bloody-Potter. His heart begins to race unpleasantly at the realization of how close they were sitting together and … how intimate they must have looked. He blocks the image aggressively from his mind and puts on his practiced Draco Malfoy mask. McGonagall and Pomfrey step into the infirmary, heading straight towards him.

McGonagall's expression is grave when she stands in front of him. "I'm glad to see you're awake, Mr. Malfoy," she says as Pomfrey steps forward to examine him. He tries hard to ignore her pokes and prodding. "Please tell me what happened yesterday night."

Draco keeps his features neutral. "I was walking back to the dorm, and someone jumped me, but I don't remember anything after that."

She arches her eyebrow suspiciously in a way that would normally impress Draco, but right now it makes him feel uneasy. She then turns her attention to Potter. "And do you have anything to add, Mr. Potter?"

Potter inhales and holds his breath in for a moment, thinking. Draco glares at him, daring him to say a word. Potter then exhales with disappointment. "I don't." Draco has to suppress the urge to roll his eyes.

"So I take it the rumours that I'm hearing are not true," she continues rather severely, "that you inflicted Mr. Malfoy with these wounds."

"That's not true!" both Draco and Potter say in unison. Draco realizes his own error, he supposedly doesn't know anything. McGonagall must be thinking the same, because she's peering at Draco so inquisitively that he has to make a willful effort to now look away.

"Very well. Mr. Potter, I believe you're already late for class. You may go," she says, successfully dismissing him.

Harry picks up his belongings and begins to head out, but pauses at the door. "Glad you're ok, Malfoy," he says in his general direction, before closing the door quietly behind him.

Draco feels himself go pink when he notices the adults exchanging a glance of surprise. But it's quickly forgotten when she sighs and turns to Draco. "Now, Mr. Malfoy, what are we going to do with you?" Draco shifts uneasily, unsure of what to expect. "I've had several complaints from parents about your staying here. Many want you expelled. They're convinced that you're a danger to the other students. Of course, that's hogwash. You've already proven that you're not the homicidal sort." He recognizes her dry humour and smirks nervously. "But I am concerned for your safety. I have my suspicions that this has happened before." Draco tries to shrug off the gratefulness he feels for her solemn tone. "This is a serious crime. You were attacked on school property, the one place you should be safe. I can't let this continue."

He nods and tries to hide his disappointment because he's sure she means to kick him out, for his own good or some bullshit.

"I think it's best to separate you from the others, this way we can appear to be 'dealing with the issue' that some parents have raised, but in reality, we're keeping you safe. We can't have students murdering each other now, can we?"
He's too relieved to hear the jest in her voice. "No, we can't."

"We have a spare room on the Fourth Floor, near the prefect bathrooms. I think it should suit you well until the end of the year."

"I think that'll do," Draco replies, knowing that sounds smug.

"Good. When Madame Pomfrey releases you, please head to class. I expect you to keep your grades up."

"Yes, Professor," he says quietly, ducking his head to hide a smile. "Thank you."

Harry is straining to keep himself awake for another 45 minutes. He hasn't been getting much sleep, so it's not surprising he's nodding off during class. The only benefit of being blind is that he can close his eyes for long periods of time without it being too strange. When his breathing becomes deep and labored, he can count on Hermione to elbow him in the ribs.

While he's grateful that the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor isn't trying to kill him, he can't help but feel weary of his teaching style. The majority of the class consists of note taking and usually ends with memorizing defence incantations, many of which Harry already knows from Dumbledore's Army. Harry tries to suppress another yawn, but only succeeds in making his eyes water.

"I am literally bored to tears," he whispers to Ron, while he stretches his arm overhead.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. Come right up," Professor Evander says from the front of the class.

"Erm..." From the sound of Ron's snickering, he seems to have volunteered himself to something. "I was actually just stretching," he says lamely.

"Don't be shy! I'm sure you'll find this rather easy." He bites his lip nervously as he gets up from his seat. "Which one, in particular?" he asks, feeling foolish.

"Whichever one best suits your defence. I'll try hitting you with a spell, all you have to do is block it." Harry doesn't like the sound of this, "But Professor..." he hesitates on the words. I can't see. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Just try your best. Ready?" Harry gives him a stiff nod. "Pungo."

Harry recognizes the stinging curse. He tries to calculate how fast the spell is travelling to put his defence up in time, but he's too slow. He rubs his arm where the hex hits him, frowning dully at Evander.

"Good effort. But you need to stop trying to anticipate the spell, just be in the moment."

Harry grits his teeth in slight annoyance. What does that even mean? Nevertheless he raises his wand in ready. When he hears the next incantation, he knows to protect his feet, for the spell's purpose is to root him to the spot. Instinctively, he blocks the hex just in the nick of time, the air humming with low vibration.
"Very good, Mr. Potter! 10 points to Gryffindor."

Harry sits back down with a grin on his face, feeling rather pleased with himself. He didn't think even rudimentary dueling was possible without his sight. Ron pats him on his back, sharing his elation.

Feeling much more alert now, Harry tries his best to stay focused. It works for some time, and he finds himself paying attention until he wonders why some spell don't have a counter course, like the Blinding curse that he was cast with.

He frowns to remember Hermione's latest update on her hunt for the cure. No such luck yet. Harry's hope to solve this on his own is waning thin. All the sources confirm that only the caster can counter the spell, that or death. But Harry won't die like this. Harry can't bear the idea of living the rest of his life in darkness, never seeing the sun or stars again, never seeing his friend's faces or his own. He achingly misses the colours of everything, the reds and greens, the golds and silvers, and can't understand how he took it all for granted.

How did Draco deal with this when he was only six? His stomach does a little somersault and he squirms in his chair. Draco. Using his first name, even in his thoughts, is still strange to Harry. He doesn't know when it began, but he finds the name Draco slipping out when he least suspects it. But why shouldn't he use it? As much as Malfoy tries to convince him otherwise, he and Harry are... friends. There's no other word to describe everything that has happened, from their drunk night out to their endless Quidditch matches, from their disclosure of secrets to their fleeting, warm moments of comfort. Harry has told Draco things he's not told anyone, not even Ron and Hermione, about his fears and his doubts. Such things were always implied, but with Draco, he finds he wants to express them, that it's easy to.

There's something else that Harry can't deny: he feels protective of Draco Malfoy. When he found him bloodied and broken in the corridor, Harry went mad with worry. He'll be okay. He's okay - were the only thoughts that rang through his mind as he carried him to the Hospital Wing. This singular notion was the only thing that kept him from losing it like he had done in the Forest. He couldn't afford to lose his head because he couldn't afford to have the bastard stop breathing.

The strength of his relief when he heard that Malfoy was okay was shocking. In that moment he understood that he cares what happens to Draco Malfoy. And with that understanding came a promise. He vows to never let it happen again. Greenberg will never hurt him again.

"Please write twenty inches on the properties of these laws by next class. Class dismissed." Harry snaps out of his thoughts and guiltily gathers his belongings, trying to clear his thoughts of Draco when Evander calls his name. "Have a moment for a quick word?"

He turns back to his two friends and quickly whispers to them, "I'll meet you at lunch."

Evander walks towards Harry's desk and sits in the seat in front of him, facing Harry. "I have this impression that my lectures don't capture your attention," he says flatly.

Harry shakes his head, utterly appalled. "No, no, I just get a little sleepy sometimes."

"I understand. You must still have some rough nights after... After the war." Harry neither refutes nor confirms the statement, but he listens on apprehensively. "There are a few students with similar circumstances as yourself; they're having a hard time focusing in class, they're not submitting their work and frankly, they're falling behind. I'm sad to say that you're one of them."

He bites his lip guiltily. He already suspected that he wasn't doing well in class, but to be told so
directly is hard to hear.

"But I know you're bright, Harry. I don't need to look at your past grades to know that you have an affinity towards this subject. So I'm proposing a solution. I'm organizing an evening class for extra credits. It will touch upon the material we covered in class, only with a more applied approach. Would you be interested?"

"Yeah," Harry replies without hesitation. "I mean, I need to improve if I want to be an Auror. But I need to ask, what do you get out of it?" Harry couldn't help it, he had grown very suspicious of new Professors wanting to help him.

"I won't get fired for failing Harry Potter in Defence Against the Dark Art," he says flatly and Harry laughs.
Draco is staring at his reflection in the mirror. He never looked so bad in his life; covered in bruises and gashes, his skin deathly pale and his hair reaching past his shoulder, making him look uncannily like his father. Impatiently, he flicks his wand over his hair, cutting it just enough to stand his reflection.

But it doesn't help. The bags under his eyes make him look old and tired, and his eyes are red from lack of sleep. Draco spent one night in the hospital wing and thankfully his lung healed quickly, but he still has two cracked ribs, a bruised spleen and various cuts on his face. Rubbing healing ointment over his wounds, he ignores the lines of old, silver scars across his chest, knowing those scars will never heal.

He sighs and stiffly puts on his shirt, careful not to move more than necessary. His ribs should be completely healed soon, so there's only minimal pain now. As he awkwardly swings his tie around his neck, trying not to wince, he puts on a practice smirk. “I’m fine,” he says, nearly believing it.

All this hassle is nearly worth the trade-off. The room that McGonagall had assigned to him is far nicer than his old dorm, with its own bathroom and impressive furniture, even by his standards. But all this is nothing compared to the privacy he now has. Before, he’d have to sneak into his dorm to have as little interaction with the other Slytherins as possible, most notably Blaise. Of course… That was of course before –

He shakes his head and quickly leaves his room, letting himself admire the stoned phoenix guarding his door. She sits waiting above a large basin. Once prompted with the correct password, the phoenix will crumble to sand, filling the basin to the brim and exposing his door. Only he and Slughorn have access to the password, which he had already changed about five times already.

He changes the password once more for good measure, sniggering under his breath at the memory of Slughorn asking him to please keep a password for longer than five minutes.

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm incredibly indecisive."

"That's fine, my boy, but how do you expect someone of my age to keep up with you?"

He can’t quite believe that he’s voluntarily heading down to meet Potter for Advance DADA, which he must admit is not the wisest idea in his current state, but Potter insisted. Really. Yesterday during lunch he had marched straight up to the Slytherin table and practically commanded Draco to go.

Draco had agreed ungraciously, but if he’s honest, it didn’t take much persuasion from the Gryffindor. He should go, not only because he’s doing shit in that class anyway, but because a part of him misses duelling. He used to practice a lot with his father.

Upon arriving to the classroom that Potter had specified, Draco stops when he hears a hum of chatter.
coming from the other side of the door. From the sound of it, it seems at least a dozen people have shown up for this. This is a bad idea.

He begins to turn away, deciding it may be better to leave after all, but internally groans when he sees Potter and his friends talking amiably only several feet away. They stop when they see him, and Weasley barks, "What are you doing here?"

Good question. Draco doesn't actually know, he's about to tell him he'd rather be elsewhere, but Potter breaks out into a stupid grin and says, "hey, you made it." He looks relieved, even when Weasel walks off in a huff, rolling his eyes at his mate. Weasley slams the door to the classroom loudly as he enters.

Draco uneasily looks to Potter, awkwardly putting his hands into his pockets. "I said I would." He notices Granger giving Potter an odd look.

"Let's head in then," Potter says enthusiastically and walks up to the door. Without thinking, Draco swings the door open for him, knowing Potter may have a hard time finding the doorknob. Granger follows behind him, so he's stuck holding the door open for her as she watches him with narrow eyes. Draco sighs impatiently and follows suit, already imagining how unpleasant this will be.

When he enters, the room falls silent. Everyone stares at him and he scowls in turn. Why is he here again? With disappointment he sees Potter walking directly to them, and he's stuck looking all out of place by the door.

"Draco!" He turns his head to Luna's voice and is overtly relieved to see her sitting by herself at the back of the room, her wand tucked behind her left ear.

Trying to not appear too desperate, he heads to the back and drops unceremoniously in the seat next to her, momentarily forgetting his wounds. "Ow, that was stupid," he complains.

"You're still hurt," she observes. "Did you try tickling that feather under your chin?" She looks so earnest that Draco can't even tease her.

"No, I forgot but I'll try later." He changes the subject quickly. "So why are you here? I'm sure you're not behind in DADA."

"Harry invited me," she says as explanation.

He takes a quick look around the room, recognizing most of the people there as Potter's friends. "I see," he says warily. He seems to have walked right into the lion's den. A few people are glancing back at him nervously, while others are not bothering to mask their displeasure at him being here. He can hear snippets of what they're saying.

"Had it coming-"

"-Just like his father-"

"Why is he allowed -?"

"Trying to kill Harry-"

He bites down on his jaw to keep himself from saying something sarcastic or scathing. It's what they're expecting, afterall. Instead, he stares coldly at them until they look away.

"Draco, stop brooding, we have company."
He turns to see Longbottom approaching them with a sheepish smile, and Draco consciously devoids his face of any emotion, even as a horrible knot forms in his stomach.

"Hi Luna, Malföy. Didn't fancy seeing you two here." He sits beside Draco now, seeming unsure of how to act around him. Draco nods at him subtly and look towards the front of the class again. Sitting here, with Longbottom trying to make small talk, is absolute torture. Is Longbottom expecting Draco to duel with him? Because that isn't going to bloody happen.

After long minutes of Luna and Longbottom talking, with Draco making a poor effort to engage in their conversation, Professor Evander finally arrives. "Oh, great turnout. Okay, please put away your books. These sessions will be strictly practical in nature, so there won't be any need for them."

Enthusiastic murmuring is heard, and he sneaks a look at Potter, who's positively beaming. "Please pair up in twos. We'll first review basic counters."

He turns to look to Luna, but she's already facing Longbottom with her wand ready. Feeling a stab of betrayal, he shoots a glare to the back of her head and is unsure of what to do now, but at the sound of someone clearing her throat, he closes his eyes before slowly facing her with dread.

"Ready?" Granger simply asks.

"I - I need to go. I'm feeling sick. I can't stand looking at your face. I want to slap you in the face."

"Sure," he says, loathing this moment.

"Relax, I'll go easy on you," she says without humour.

He merely scowls as he draws his own wand out. "Ladies first."

"If you insist. Stupefy."

Draco blocks it easily enough. "Surely you can do better than that." He throws the curse back instantly, but Granger blocks it as well.

"Of course." He doesn't recognize the next spell she uses, but he sees a flash of light in front of his eyes, which distracts him from blocking the forceful hex that pushes roughly against his chest. He should know better than to underestimate Granger.

"You cheated," he drawls, trying to hide the sharp stab of pain it caused in his chest.

"Says the Slytherin." She flicks her wand, but Draco is ready this time. He blocks what looks like a stinging hex in the nick of time, and throws the same hex back at her. Granger doesn't quite block it, instead chooses to dodge the spell.

Draco is momentarily distracted by the sound of commotion coming from another corner of the room. He's appalled to see Potter on his back, violently shaking as he struggles to breathe and Draco begins to unconsciously move towards him. He feels another push against his back from an unexpected spell, but this time it knocks him into a wall, making him visibly wince and clutch at his chest.

"Oh, I forgot you were hurt!" Granger comes rushing towards him, but he holds up a hand in the air, his attention already elsewhere.

"I'm fine."

He's relieved to see Potter sitting up, with Evander crouched down next to him. Ernie Macmillan, who he was dueling with, is guiltily trying to explain himself, "he said to treat him like normal, so
y'know, I did! I didn't think -"

"That right you didn't think, you fucking twat," Draco snaps angrily. "Or you would know there's no counter to aeris immersum."

Every single person in the room turns to face him in shock. Even he can't believe his own outburst, and his scowl only intensifies as his face gets hot.

Evander, who helps Potter up, clears his throat tightly. "20 points from Slytherin for needlessly insulting another student. While Draco is correct in saying that there is no counter to that spell, this provides us with an excellent learning opportunity. When we aren't sure of which block to use, it is best to avoid the attack, as there may be no way to counter it. Okay, let's switch partners. Harry please pair with Draco."

Granger leaves without a word, but she glances back suspiciously at him, with a glint of something else in her expression. Draco briefly wonders why Evander would pair him with Potter, and suspects that he doesn't trust the likes of Ernie Macmillan to duel properly. Still in a foul mood, he doesn't say anything when Potter, who is looking far less enthusiastic, approaches him.

"You didn't have to do that," he says begrudgingly. "- Expelliarmus."

Draco blocks it without a thought. "Do what? - Stupefy."

Block. "Define me or whatever the hell that was. - Alarte Ascendare."

Block. "I wasn't defending you! - Incarcerous. I was pointing out how moronic he is." In Draco's frustration, he misses an incantation from Potter. The next moment, his tie comes undone and wraps tightly around his eyes, obscuring his vision. He tries to remove it, but Potter isn't lifting the spell. "Potter -" he begins to say in annoyance, but he's cut short when another spell skims past his ear, just missing his face. He abruptly stops moving, trying to listen to where Potter could be, but his ears are not in tune like his. He takes a couple of steps back, but this is a mistake. Potter figures out his location and casts the spell that roots his feet to the spot.

Draco has half a mind to start hexing blindly in all directions, but then he feels his feet unroot and the tie loosen from his face. Taking it off, he opens his eyes to see Potter smirking smugly. "I wasn't ready," he says dryly. "Round two?"

"If you're sure that's a good idea."

He scoffs. "Scared, Potter?"

A ghost of a smile licks his lips. "You wish." Potter casts a nonverbal hex at him, something Draco wasn't expecting.

Draco doesn't have a chance to block the red jet of light, so he dodges it just in time.

"Oh, so is that how you want to play?" he asks quietly, so that only Potter can hear. He begins to circle around him but Potter matches each of his steps. He silences his own feet and smirks. "How will you know where I am now?"

"There are other ways," he flicks his wand with another nonverbal in mind, but Draco recognizes it as the Stunning curse and blocks it. "You would be horrified if I told you."

"Indulge me. Expelliarmus."
"Well, your voice for one. You can't seem to shut up." Draco is about to object, but thinks better of it. Instead, he noiselessly walks around Potter, gleefully preparing to aim a nonverbal at his back.

"But even if you didn't speak…" Potter looks much too pleased with himself as he tilts his ear in Draco's general direction, "I can hear the rustle of your clothes. I can hear you breathing." He turns swiftly and shoots a tickling charm at Draco's arm.

Draco laughs in spite of himself, "how suggestive of you." He's not sure why he says it, but he's pleased to see how flustered Potter becomes by the statement. "I can silence all of that." Draco puts a silencing bubble around himself, sure now that Potter is stuck. Potter goes very still in his attempt to locate Draco, so Draco moves behind him, much closer than necessary. "Now what will you do?" he can't help but whisper close to his ear, enjoying himself far too much. He takes a quick step back as Potter turns to face him, his face flushed. Potter doesn't respond, instead he bites his lip in contemplation. Draco's smirk deepens and he steps directly in front of him and aims his wand for one last nonverbal spell.

"Ah, there you are." Somehow, Potter aims squarely at Draco's face, his wand beginning to move to complete the incantation. Draco beats him to it and casts his own silent incantation. Potter, who of course could not see that coming, yelps when the ropes bind tightly around him, making him utterly defenseless and Draco laughs spitefully. "Alright. Alright, you win this round." He struggles feebly against the ropes. "How am I supposed to defend myself against nonverbals anyway?"

"You should be fine. Most people can't do nonverbal." He smirks before continuing, "But that doesn't apply to Dark Lords – so you're probably screwed." He's pleased when Harry chuckles. "Where did you learn how to do them?" He took him years to learn only a handful of nonverbal spells.

"It's sort of a long story. One I don't mind sharing if you untie me." He cheekily smiles at him, trying to hide the awkwardness he feels in his current predicament.

"But I'm savouring this moment." He grins when he pokes Potter in the chest with the tip of his wand.

"You enjoy seeing me tied up?" Potter asks innocently, tilting his face at him.

"Yes, amongst other things." At Potter's astonished expression, Draco continues quickly, "to which I mean maimed, defeated - That sort of thing!"

"Oh, I see." And the git is laughing! But it doesn't hide his blush, if anything his laughter is making the warmth on his skin run deeper, run lower onto his neck and under his shirt where Draco's eyes can't follow. Draco's stomach flutters and he irritably removes the ropes, glowering at the idiot before him.

Refusing to acknowledge whatever line of thought Potter was on, he takes a deliberate step back, increasing the space between them. "What was the last thing that gave away my position?" he asks, because that's far more important than the way Potter's eyes shine in his embarrassed amusement.

His grin stills and falters just a little and Draco notices the way his hands fidget within his loose sleeves. "I'd rather not say."

"Your obvious discomfort is intriguing. Come to think of it, you have this uncanny ability of knowing where I am." He narrows his eyes suspiciously at Potter, watching the effect his words have on him. "Do you have a tracking spell on me or something?"
He's relieved when Potter scoffs at that notion. "I'm not that desperate for your company, Malfoy."
The statement sounds like sarcasm, which he's glad for.

"I dare you to tell me."

Potter chuckles, shaking his head. "That's not how Dares work. You have to win a Truth."

"Okay, fine. Meet me at the Quidditch pitch tomorrow night, actually no -" Draco remembers he shouldn't fly for at least a couple of days, "this Friday we'll play for it. If I win, you'll tell me your secret weapon."

"What if I win? Can I ask you about that night at the Tower?"

He blinks at him in disbelief, but he should have realized Potter will never let that go, no matter how many times he tries to reassure him. And maybe it's because he's feeling far too confident in his own skills or because he secretly wants to talk about it, but he agrees. "Fine. Deal."

Potter smirks in cocky confidence. "Deal." He stretches his hand out for Draco to shake, and Draco pauses for only a short moment before taking his hand firmly and shaking it. He briefly wonders why a handshake should make him smile like this, why it should matter at all.

Harry scrambles into the classroom as quietly as he can. He got carried away flying this morning and had to sprint to Potions, which already started. He didn't even have time to shower and he's still sticky from his exertion. His saving grace is that it's a brewing day, so he isn't interrupting Slughorn's lecture.

"You're late," he hears a familiar, cool voice say as he slips into his chair casually, trying not to look guilty.

"I lost track of time - thought I could sneak a quick fly in."

"Without me?" Malfoy asks in feigned astonishment.

"I managed." But just barely. Part of the reason he's late is because he had a hard time finding the back door. "Besides," he adds cheekily, "I'm never late to anything anymore, after I saved the world and all." He knows how much this sort of talk infuriates Draco, so naturally, he can't help it.

"According to the time, which you may be shocked to learn still applies to you, you're late. I had to start the potion on my own, again."

"Like that matters. You're always whining I don't do it right."

Malfoy chokes on Harry's audacity. "Malfoys do not whine!"

Harry snorts in amusement. "What other things do Malfoys not do?"

"They don't ask stupid questions. They don't run around all sweaty. They're never late."

Harry's laughs but stops abruptly when Hermione briskly walks up to his desk. "Why are you late?" she asks in a disapproving tone.

"See, even Granger agrees with me!" Draco triumphantly says.
"That's a first," she mumbles. "Harry, I was looking for you because I found something else about the curse."

He sits up a little straighter. "What?" Harry asks anxiously.

"Well… Maybe we should go somewhere more private?" she tries to ask discreetly.


"Oh, really?" she says, turning her attention fully on him, "You don't care? So how come you were the last person to check this out?" Harry jumps slightly when he hears the loud thump of a large textbook being dumped on his desk. "You've been hogging this for days, even after I recalled it!"

"I needed it for homework," he says dully.

"Please! It's not a coincidence that there's a whole section on the Blinding Curse in here. You were doing your own research and you didn't even bother telling Harry what you found."

"He never asked," Draco says shortly.

"Um. Hello? Harry is right here." Harry feels a little irritated that they're talking about him like this.

"It really would have been helpful if you just came forward," she says, ignoring Harry.

"Came - Came forward?" Draco repeats incredulously. "How would you expect that to happen exactly? 'Hello! We despise each other, but here is some useless information that can't help!' In what world does that make any sense?" he snaps.

"In the world where you want to help Harry!" She makes it sound like an accusation.

"Why you filthy -"

"Draco!" Harry tries to cut him off sharply.

"-plebeian." He finishes his statement with a snarl.

"-plebeian." He finishes his statement with a snarl.

Well that's not what he expected, and from Hermione's amused snort, she must think the same. But he realizes that Draco hasn't used the M word in a long time. He'll have to ask him about that later. Harry quickly cuts in before Hermione can retaliate, "Hermione, what did you find?"

"That you can see souls! That's why you were able to see the unicorn, which is basically a pure soul in manifestation." She says this with such rushed earnestness that Harry tries to decipher further meaning in her words, but frowns when he comes up short.

"Oh, but how … how does that help me?" he asks.

"Yeah, how does that help, Granger?" Draco repeats unnecessarily.

She sighs. "Not sure yet, but it's a lead."

"Thanks, Hermione," he smiles at her, trying to look convincingly pleased.

"Yeah, thanks! Are you done now? We have work to do." Harry is too preoccupied with Malfoy's use of 'we' to properly glare at his dismissiveness.

"He's all yours, Malfoy," she says with amusement before walking away.
Draco lets out an impatient huff and Harry shifts in his seat awkwardly, not understanding what Hermione finds so amusing. "I guess we should finish this up… what can I help with?"

"Dice this," Draco unceremoniously dumps what smells like roots in front of Harry, and then turns his attention back to the potion that's beginning to boil.

The classroom is hot and thick from all the fumes. Harry still feels sticky with sweat from earlier, but the potion isn't helping matters at all. So he takes off his robes, placing them carefully on his stool, before untucking his shirt and billowing it out in front of his chest. His hand reaches for the back of his neck and he realizes his hair is sticking to his skin.

"Oh, for fuck's sake -" Draco snaps in exasperation as Harry begins to loosen his tie.


"You were all sweaty!" Draco mutters in irritation, as a way to explain his behaviour. Harry turns his face away to hide a self-conscious smile.

In silence they work, until Harry is nearly done dicing and blurts out, "why did you take that book out?"

"I wanted to know why you saw that unicorn."

"And you didn't think to mention it?" He asks him, offering the bowl of diced roots. Draco's fingers accidentally brush against his hand and Harry almost drops the bowl in his surprise. Harry manages to grip the bowl securely and doesn't let it go.

"Don't you remember, Potter? Your lot kept me away." Draco tugs at the bowl again, but Harry still refuses to let go because he wants this touch, Draco's cool fingers over his warm ones, to last a fraction of a moment longer. He senses Draco going still, and he knows he's been caught. Harry holds in a breath, not daring to move.

Instead of pulling back, instead of ignoring or shaming him, Draco's fingertips slowly begin to caress his knuckles. The deliberate touch tickles and soothes and causes his heart to jump up to his throat. Something within him starts to melt, and he lets out a soft sigh. "Call me Harry," he says quietly, yet unexpectedly. "I mean -' he swallows, suddenly aware of his clumsiness, "if - if you want."

He's disappointed when cool fingertips leave the back of his hand, but then Draco firmly presses the bowl into his hand before letting go. "Alright," he hears him say in a low, amused drawl. "Harry, you did this wrong. Do it again." Without further comment, Draco turns away from him in his stool, but Harry still feels his gaze on him.

His lips twitch as he turns to cut a new batch of roots, still unsure of how to do it right but not really caring if he gets it wrong.

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The air is heavy with moist from yesterday's rain, but now that he's out of the dungeons he hardly minds. He had a good sleep and his chest feels perfectly back to normal. Also, today is Friday. Smiling to himself, Draco enters the Great Hall for breakfast and takes his usual seat beside Luna. He absently piles his plate with strawberry-jam covered toast, fluffy scramble eggs, and a few chips with tomatoes on the side. Oh, and a green apple, his favourite.
"You're having a good day," Luna says in her dreamy voice. "I can tell because you're eating."

He smiles gratefully at her before piling his fork with some eggs and notices that she's nearly done her meal. "Do you always sit at the Slytherin table, even when I'm not here?"

"Sure, the Slytherins are nice."

He's arches an eyebrow at that, surprised because he knows for a fact that the Slytherins aren't very kind to her, but he knows firsthand that some Ravenclaws are douchebags. He glances at their table, and scowls to see Greenberg there with his mates, laughing as if they didn't beat him nearly to death mere days ago. Actually, Greenberg hadn't bothered him much since the incident.

Unconsciously, his eyes travel to the Gryffindor table, and he frowns to notice that Po-Harry isn't there. Granger and Weasley are though, and they're sitting on either side of Ginny Weasley, who's wiping her eyes angrily with her sleeve. Granger is trying to comfort her, absentmindedly braiding her hair as he whispers to her in a low, levelled voice. Her brother looks angry, his arms crossed as he shoots expectant looks towards the Great Hall doors.

"Hey, Luna, what's the deal with Weasley?"

Luna looks up from the latest Quibbler edition, which is upside down, and follows his line of sight. "Oh, it's very sad. Harry and Ginny broke up last week," she says this regretfully, giving Weaslette a sympathetic look.

He frowns in confusion, taking a bite out of his apple and munching slowly. Why didn't Harry say anything the last few times they spoke? Just yesterday they had Potions together. Maybe he doesn't trust Draco with those sort of details. Inexplicably, Draco finds himself rather annoyed. Isn't that the sort of thing that should come up? Draco is always humiliating himself, spilling his deepest secrets, and Potter couldn't be bothered to update him on something as simple as his love life.

His thoughts are distracted by the arrival of the post. It doesn't surprise him that there's nothing for him. The only posts he receives now are from his Mother, and lately she's been quiet. He takes another bite out of his apple, contemplating Potter's love life and why he cares, but something in the air hums with tension and makes him sit up a little straighter. He becomes acutely aware of this change and looks around himself. Many people seem to be looking at him expectedly, as if waiting for him to react. They're whispering to each other, not bothering to hide their stares. His stomach drops when he notices all of them are holding the latest copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Hey, I just want to check something," he says absently, not bothering to wait for her response. With a sense of dread, he unties her paper and opens it quickly. His heart stops when he reads the large text on the cover page: *Lucius Malfoy found dead.*

What? His eyes scan the article in confusion. This can't be right. He catches phrases like "death by homicide", "several victims are being questioned", but shakes his head because he doesn't understand. This doesn't make any sense.

"Draco?" From the corner of his eye he sees Luna turn to him.

He's finding it difficult to read the words in front of him, and with a sense of detachment he realizes it's because his hands are shaking. But that hardly matters because the few words he manages to digest make no sense.

He senses Luna leaning in towards him, reading over his shoulder. "Oh, Draco…" she says softly, trying to tug the paper away from him." Come with me, we'll talk outside." The shock and sympathy
in her voice makes him angry. He snatches the paper from her grasp, trying to focus on the words, trying to understand.

In the back of his mind he notices unimportant things: the steady chatter around him growing louder, the sound of quick and urgent footsteps approaching him, Luna trying to talk to him. When he hears someone laugh he snaps his gaze to him because it's a sound that doesn't belong right now. He sees Greenberg with his own copy of the Daily Prophet, his amusement showing through his open mouth – fucking grinning. Everyone is now looking at him. They look confused because he looks so disbelieving. It's impossible! He wants to scream at them all. He would have known!

"Mr. Malfoy, please come see me in my office." McGonagall says behind him.

He shakes his head sharply and his limbs begin to move on their own accord. Before he knows what's happening, Draco drops the paper on his fresh plate of food, and turns his back on Luna and the Headmistress. He absently can hear his name being called out as he runs out of the Great Hall, the cruel, nosy faces of everyone swimming in front of his vision as he passes by them.

Only one thing is clear from his hurried footsteps: This can't be real. This can't be real.
All I know was what he taught me, alright? It's cruel and it's cold, but it's all I know. - Draco

He runs and runs without a thought, without control of where he's headed. He runs to get away from everything because nothing is real. *This can't be real.*

He doesn't think of slowing down as he turns the corner and crashes head first into none other than Potter, who stumbles back and drops his things. "Ow," Potter awkwardly laughs. He picks up his belongings and says in Draco's general direction, knowing that it's him without needing to ask. "Where were you headed to so fast?"

"I'm going to the library," Draco lies numbly, too preoccupied to help Potter. He begins to turn away.

"Before class? That's kinda odd." Potter tilts his head with a smile, completely unaware.

"Yeah - Need to pick something up." He had forgotten how easy it is to lie.

"I'll join you," he says in his carefree sort of way.

"No," At the look of confusion on Potter's face, he continues in a detached sort of way, not really hearing the words, "are you surprised I don't always want your constant company? I don't worship the ground you walk on, Potter." He says this so easily that it's crueler than sarcasm.

Instantaneously, Potter's expression is devoid of any amusement. He frowns at him, trying to mask his emotions. "Yeah, that's not normally how friendship works."

Yesterday those words would have made Draco clumsy in his attempt to tease Potter for his sentiment. It would make made him nervous because he couldn't deny the fact that it's true. But right now, he can't feel anything. He can't deal with this. "Please, whatever the fuck this is," he scoffs, making an impatient gesture between them, "it isn't friendship. This is just a way to pass the time in hell." He can't help it, the words spew out of him like poison, but it's all he can do. The cruel statement keeps him from feeling, keeps him safe and sane at this moment.

Potter crosses his arms with contempt, a stance that Draco knows all too well from their years of rivalry. "Malfoy, I don't know what's wrong, but you have to stop taking it out on me."

"Nothing is wrong," he seethes, "I'm just sick of you following me around like a lost puppy, sick of you needing my constant company." He sees the effect his venomous words have on Potter. A twist of betrayal shadows his features, and even though it's what Draco had intended, he turns his face away, angry with himself that he has to resort to this. Satisfied that Potter will leave him alone, he turns his back on him to leave.

But he hadn't anticipated on Potter getting *so* angry, so when he feels Potter squarely push him away,
he stumbles forward ungracefully. "Fine! Go! You coward."

Draco swirls to face him, a familiar spark of feeling burning viscerally under his skin. Every line on Potter's angry face warns Draco to back off, but he just doesn't care anymore. He's not running away. There's nowhere to run to! "I'm the coward?" He hisses, taking a step towards him. "You can't even go outside without holding my hand. Does everyone know, Potter?" He pushes him back hard. "How fucking scared you are?" He then twists his lips cruelly, unable to stop the foul words, "did Ginny know? Is that why she left you? Is that why everyone always leaves?"

The sudden impact of a fist striking his chin shouldn't be so surprising. But he stumbles again, clutching his chin in one hand as he stares at Potter in disbelief. From the look of it, Potter is shocked at his own outburst. "Draco -" he begins to say, but something in Draco snaps and he lunges at Potter with a strangled yell escaping him, all reason and composure be damned.

As they collide into each other, Draco barely registers his fist colliding into Potter's face. He barely feels Potter's attacks in the confusing swirl of swinging fists and scuffling feet, the fury between them only growing with each impact. Potter gets lucky and blindly lands a blow on Draco's neck, causing him to choke violently. Draco desperately pushes him away, trying to catch his breath, but his attempts are futile. Potter's wild with rage and hitting Draco anywhere he can make contact. All Draco can do to stop him is grab a hold of his collar and push him roughly back against the wall of the corridor. He presses his left hand into the tender skin of Potter's neck, making him gag. "Listen to me -"

Potter is struggling against his hold, one of his arms caught in between their chest awkwardly. "Fuck you!" With his free hand, Potter yanks Draco's hair, causing him to yelp in pain. He presses his hand further into Potter's neck to make him stop.

"Stop! Listen to me." Potter chokes against the pressure on his neck. It's only then that he stills his thrashing, seeming to realize that he's in a compromising position. Draco presses him into the wall forcefully, not letting him go, and swallows the pain that's threatening to burst his chest open. "You - You always know what's right." The raw voice that emerges from him doesn't sound like his own. Potter's scowl softens marginally into what seems like confusion. "All I know was what he taught me, alright? It's cruel and it's cold, but it's all I know. You understand?" Desperation taints his voice and Potter shakes his head slowly, his lips parting in something like concern. "He - he never beat me, never laid a fucking hand on me." He grimaces to admit this, "he was a good father, even if he was a twisted person. And even when, when -" his voice breaks and he takes in a rattling breath. A part of him acknowledges Potter's grip loosening in his hair, his other hand reaching up to grasp Draco's wrist gently. "- Even when he gave me to the Dark Lord, even when he taught me to kill, when he made me ugly and twisted like him, he was my father."

All of Potter's aggression has been swept away by Draco's words. Draco scarcely realizes he should take his hand off of Potter's neck, but the steady heartbeat is too comforting to let go. Potter exhales slowly, his breath tickling Draco's cheeks. "What's happened?" His green eyes are sparkling in in unbending concern, rooting Draco to the spot, refusing to let him run.

Draco closing his eyes tightly, his features distorting as the pain in his chest abruptly tightens, his mind on the brink of real understanding that his father is dead. "No," he says mostly to himself. "I can't." He inhales sharply, his whole being trembling with the effort to not fall apart. Potter doesn't say anything in turn, seeming to understand that Draco can't be pushed right now. He waits for him to continue, but Draco, he can't. "I can't do this."

Potter then does something he really did not expect, but Draco's surprised at how much he needed it for so long, wanted it all this time. Harry wraps his arms around Draco, pulling him into what can
only be a hug. He stiffens with fear, not understanding what to do in turn, and begins to squirm away in panic. But when Potter stubbornly pulls him in closer, one hand in his hair, the other on his back, urging Draco to rest against him, the little control he has over his emotions breaks. He collapses as all the fucking fear and loneliness that he's known for far too long escapes him in waves and he shudders against this warmth, this scent. He buries his face into his neck, for the first time not caring to muffle the strange sounds that are escaping him.

Within the mindless pain he feels something slowly emerge. Within their embrace, something within Draco shifts. At first, it falls into place hesitantly, afraid that it'll be swept away. But Draco doesn't dismiss it like he normally would. He keeps his eyes shut and lets it happen, lets it grow and engulf him and rush into his being in long, uneven breaths. It hurts, but in a way that it should. He inhales greedily, the sweet scent of soap and sun and just Harry imprinting his soul.

In his exhale, the rational part of him begins to stir awake. He opens his eyes wide when the reality of the situation hits him: *I'm crying on Potter*. It's too bizarre, too wrong and frankly mortifying for him to bear. He lets go of Potter as if he burns to the touch and lifts his face up apprehensively.

"It's okay. It's okay." Harry's face, mere inches from his own, looks sad. Sad for Draco. Potter still has his hand pressed against Draco's back, the other on the nape of his neck. Draco takes a quick step away, disentangling himself from him, not trusting himself to speak. "Tell me what's wrong?" Potter whispers. Looking around frantically for an exit, Draco stills when he notices a figure at the end of the corridor, her jaw slacked in shock, staring at them with wide eyes. *Oh, fuck.*

"Draco." He snaps his attention back to Potter, with his moist collar and pink cheeks, and can't help but want to touch him. He looks so inviting that Draco has to suppress a groan.

Horrified, he averts his gaze. "Weasley's here," he manages hoarsely. He turns to run before Potter can stop him.

"I can't do this." Draco can barely say the words, but Harry understands. He knows what it's like to have unbearable pain, pain that renders words meaningless. He can feel Draco's uneven breaths through his shaking figure and Harry aches for him. All he wants to do is make the pain go away. Within that same surge of protectiveness, within the same faded, white light against the darkness, Harry pulls him into a hug. Somehow, he knows this is the only appropriate response. He isn't surprised when Malfoy feebly struggles, but he won't let him go. He brings him in closer, pressing his face down, and when Draco's forehead touches his collar, all his fight and flight leaves him with a choking sound, so that all Draco can do is clutch at Harry's shirt and sob into his neck. A terrible knot forms in Harry's throat, so he combs his fingers through soft hair, willing this pain away.

At first Malfoy is gasping, grief strangling in his throat, but slowly, he begins to breathe a little more deeply, a little more slowly. Harry unconsciously matches each of his own breaths to Draco's, so when Draco's inhales becomes long and slow, Harry does the same and the scent of Draco makes him lightheaded.

He feels Draco tense suddenly. He lifts his face up, his hot breath rushing onto Harry's face. "It's okay. It's okay." He has to let him know that there's nothing wrong about what just happened, that he doesn't have to run. Harry swallows deeply and curls his fingers into the back of Draco's shirt, not wanting to let him go. But Draco senses this and steps back quickly.

The cold air between them, which is a painful contrast to the warmth they shared, reminds Harry that
he still doesn't know what's happened. He has an idea, but he prefers to hear it from Draco. "Tell me what's wrong?"

Harry can sense Draco's distraction and he's sure the Slytherin is looking for a way out. "Draco-"  
"Don't go." Harry's hands, which were so warm moments ago, are now cold as they press against the wall for support.

"Weasley's here." Harry stills and he's shocked he didn't notice another person nearby. He hears Malfoy taking a step away, and he pushes himself off the wall, ready to follow, not caring that he may not be able to keep up, not caring if Ron sees-

"Harry." But it isn't Ron. He pauses and guiltily turns to her, regretfully aware of Draco leaving.

"Hey, Ginny." He rubs the back of his neck, willing himself to approach her, and waits for her to say something, because he has no idea how to explain this.

"What's going on?"

He winces at how utterly shocked she sounds, but he hasn't even processed what just happened. "I er... He was upset."

"So you -" and she's laughs now and it's a disbelieving sound. "So you held him? Like that?"

"Hugged," he corrects unnecessarily.

"I can't believe this," she says after a pause. "But I knew... I knew it."

"What?"

"You and Malfoy..."

"No!" his cheeks flush and it's stupid that they should. "We're just friends." He's not sure why he needs to clarify the fact. "Like I said, he was really upset and ...Yeah." I bloody hugged Draco Malfoy, like that.

"Look, if you're gay it would explain a lot," she says without missing a beat.

"I'm - I'm not!" Harry's so shocked that he doesn't even bother asking her why she thinks that.

"Then why don't -?" she stops herself, but the question is heard. Why don't you want me? Harry grimaces and steps towards her, lost for words. His mind is still too muddled by her statement, by what has Draco so upset, that he can't properly comfort her. He awkwardly squeezes her arm and he's pleased to hear her snort incredulously. "I've been so angry at you. I knew this wasn't working out, but... when you preferred to spend time with him over me-"

"It's not like that!" he presses.

"I'm not an idiot, Harry! I know you were meeting him in secret, playing Quidditch or wanking or whatever."

"Ginny!" Harry's face is burning, but he's relieved to hear her snort spitefully.

After a moment, she sighs and says carefully, "it just made it worse; that you chose him over me."

"I didn't -"
"Harry. I see it, okay? Maybe you don't, but I do."

"No-" he says automatically, but something about what she's saying is making him feel faint. The hug they just shared was far more intimate than anything he's done with Ginny as of late. He can still feel his warmth lingering on him, the dizzying effects of being so close to him. He reaches out to the wall beside him for support, trying to catch his shallow breath.

"Yes," she says stubbornly, but more kindly now. "You have feelings for him."

He shakes his head but… It's hard to deny his protectiveness, his yearning for his company, his moments of joy when they accidentally touch. "No," he says with force, blocking that all out, "it's not like that. We're just friends.

He must look utterly pathetic, because his angry ex-girlfriend is now offering comfort. Ginny places a hand on his back and says in a quiet and serious tone, "Stop lying to yourself, Harry. I see the way you are with him. Just… think of how you feel around him."

The last few weeks flash before his eyes. With clarity, he can make out the Quidditch pitch, the hospital wing, Hogsmeade, potions class, the spot by the lake, the forest - all these memories are painted with the same feeling that nothing else matters but him. Harry will always seek him out, will always check to see if he's okay. If he isn't, Harry takes it upon himself to ease his pain because it hurts too much to do otherwise. And when Draco laughs it's a sound that heals him. "I …" Then there are those fleeting moments they both ignore, when they push and fight unnecessarily, when a casual touch lingers too long, or when they share the same space and breathe the same air. "No." He runs his hand through his hair, trying to clear his thoughts of an undeniable truth.

"You say no, but you're going to run after him, aren't you?" she asks with sad acceptance.

"Only because something is wrong!" he says quickly, but a deep confusion has settled within him. He can't deal with it right now - not in front of her. "Wait - do you know why he's so upset?" He winces, because he shouldn't be asking her this, but it's better than her asking him about his feelings.

"He didn't tell you?" she asks in disbelief. "He just found out his father was murdered… saw it in the morning post."

"Oh." He isn't sure what to feel about that, but then he remembers Draco's disbling grief. "That's awful."

"Is it?" Ginny asks.

"You know what I mean. Lucius had it coming, but for Draco to find out like this? It's awful." He can't imagine it. Why wasn't Draco informed beforehand?

"You're right," he's surprised to hear her say. "I hate the bastard, but no one deserves to find out like that, in front of everyone. I admit, I felt a little bad for him. A little. But that doesn't change my mind about him. I don't trust him, and I think you're being reckless." She's drags the conversation back to Harry's apparent feelings, but Harry pretends otherwise.

"He's not like his father."

"You don't know that. You don't know a lot of things, and you seem intent on ignoring that fact."

"I know him-" he begins.

"Has he told you anything about the Death Eaters back in September? He must know something.
Has he told you he refused to testify at his father's trial? What about what Greenberg said -?

"I don't want to hear about Greenberg-" Harry cuts her off angrily, surprising them both. But her other questions replay in his head and he knows she's right. Draco isn't telling him something out of fear. Harry knows he's in trouble, even if Draco pretends otherwise. "None of that matters. I trust him, alright?" he says with finality.

"Fine, Harry. You never listened to me before. Why should this be any different?" She sounds angry and disappointed, and Harry crosses his arms tightly to himself, looking away guiltily because she made the effort to talk to him and he messed it up again. He turns to leave, but pauses at her last words, "just be careful?" He offers her a small smile and nods.

Draco is lying in his bed, staring at the canopy above him. He's trying to make sense of what just happened, but none of it seems real. The person he is right now is drastically different from the person who woke up mere hours ago. His father is dead. Potter hugged him, and he didn't fight him off. He let it happen. His father is dead. None of it seems real.

Closing his eyes to keep himself from crying anymore, he tries to still his mind against the pain. A part of him thinks, guiltily, why should he grieve? He made Draco's life impossible, and in the last few years, hell. He always had ridiculous expectations and shaped him from an early age to be cold, calculating, and cruel. But he was still his father. In his own way, Lucius Malfoy loved his son. He did want the best for him. He wanted Draco to be strong and powerful, to be the best Malfoy to have ever lived. Draco tried so hard to live up to those expectations, but it's impossible when 'the best' is relative.

He should have seen it coming, really. Lucius Malfoy was hated by the whole wizarding world and everyone wanted him dead. He had done too many horrible things for this not to happen. Draco reminds himself for the thirteenth time that he was a piece of shit of a person, so why does this loss hurt so much? Does he even have the right to grieve him?

He lets his arm fall over his eyes, shielding the light away. There is a small comfort that he'd been latching onto. Potter. Harry. Whatever. He's trying to make sense of that. Usually an experience like that would have horrified him senseless. But now the memory of that moment dulls the pain he feels, and he lets himself be swept away with it: The feeling of Potter's hands on him. His warm chest pressed against Draco's. The steady beating of his heart. Fuck. His soft whispered concerns. His eyes that are so green. Draco's lips twitch to remember the state of his hair after their fight. He remembers clutching at Harry's untucked shirt in the midst of his rage and sorrow, but also something more.

A light tapping on the window drags him out of his sweet thoughts and he sees one of the Malfoy owls carrying a package. Finally. That must be his Mother. He rushes to let the bird in, and it flies gracefully to his desk. Draco affectionately scratches the top of his head before untying the parcel from his claw.

He knows something is amiss as soon as he opens it, because his Mother's pendant falls onto his lap. It's a simple thing, with a single rough diamond surrounded by a spiral of winding gold, but Draco always found it fascinating as a child and would fondly play with the gold chain.

When Draco was born, his grandmother Druella Black had placed the pendant around her daughter's neck and told her to never take it off, because as long as she wore it, Draco would be safe. The only way the pendant could come off is if she or Draco were dying or dead, or if she chose to take it off herself without someone forcing her. No spell, no potion, or force could remove the pendant. And
Draco knows she would never take it off.

Without needing to look at the letter, the message is clear. His mother is in danger. With his features set in cold understanding, he unrolls the small piece of parchment that's attached, and the implication of the words make him pale: *Come home.*

"It doesn't seem like he's in, Harry," Slughorn says a little impatiently beside him.

"Er, thanks, Professor. I'll just wait for him to get back." Harry had persuaded Slughorn to show him where Draco's room is by playing up his inability to navigate, but now the Professor seems to be waiting to steer him back to the main castle. "I'll be okay to get back."

"If you're sure. Goodnight."

"G'night..." Harry chews on his lower lips apprehensively and waits for his footsteps to fade out before turning back to the door.

He knocks loudly. "Draco," he calls out. "Are you in?" If he's there, he doesn't want to see Harry right now, which he can understand. Harry rests his forehead against the cool wood, unsure if he should say something or not. He had debated coming here, but his concern for Draco finally overshadowed the confusion and mortification that Ginny's words caused.

"I just want to know if you're okay," he says quietly, knowing that he won't be able to hear him if he's in. In a louder voice, he states, "I'll come back later."

He turns to leave, but the familiar scents of autumn leaves and a freshly polished broomstick stop him in his tracks and makes his stomach flop. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see the phoenix guarding my door becoming impatient." He hears Draco lift the silencing charm over his feet and Harry wonders why he needed it to begin with. Draco approaches the door and quietly says the password, "hamburger." Harry hears the sound of stone crumbling and a door unlocking, before Draco walks into his room.

Harry isn't sure if he should follow, but if Malfoy wanted to be alone, he would have made that perfectly clear. He walks through the door and closes it softly behind him. "Hamburger?" He stands near the door awkwardly, not sure where he should walk.

"Luna keeps raving about them." He hears Malfoy sigh and his mattress squeak as he sits on his bed. "I'd actually like to try one." He almost sounds sad.

"Never too late..." Harry takes an awkward step towards him, not enjoying how lost he feels in this new space.

"Five more steps and you're good," he offers.

Harry feels oddly nervous as he takes five cautious steps towards him, trying not to look too foolish. He yelps when Malfoy rudely grab the sleeve of his robes to force him to sit on the bed. "Why are you nervous?" Draco asks pointedly, sitting directly beside him.

"I'm not! Just new surroundings throw me off."

"I can give you a proper tour if you like."
"Thanks, I'm okay." He fiddles with the sleeves of his shirt. "Are you? -" he blurts out. "Okay, that is." He winces from how lame that sounds. Of course he isn't okay.

"I've been better," he says softly, but quickly changes the topic. "I was looking for you on the pitch. It's Friday, Potter."

"I thought you wouldn't want to go."

"I waited," he sounds annoyed, to which Harry can't help but smirk a bit.

"Well, you found me. Do you still want to go?"

"No."

A thick silence falls between them and Harry bites his lower lip nervously. He's unsure if he should say anything, but he knows to pretend that everything is alright is not possible. "Draco… I'm really sorry."

Draco shifts beside him, and Harry can't make out what that means. When he responds, it's in a voice that's far away, detached of any real emotion. "It's okay if you're not. I know who he was."

"No, that doesn't matter right now. He was your father." He gently bumps his shoulder against Draco's, and is pleased when Draco bumps back.

"Tell me something about him," Harry says suddenly, surprising himself. He doesn't actually care to learn about Lucius Malfoy, but he thinks it may help Draco to remember.

"You don't have to do this, Potter."

"Harry -" Harry reminds him, "and I know I don't, but I also know that you have the right to grieve your father, regardless of who he was."

Draco doesn't say anything for a moment, and perhaps he doesn't want to share, but at last he breaks the silence with a thick and low voice, "thanks, Harry." After a pause, he continues, "I guess, my summers traveling with him were good memories. He - he took me to see all these places; the Vampire Ruins, the Great Pyramids, the Stonehenge... beautiful places. He taught me all sorts of things." His tone becomes dry with contempt, "of course, most of what he taught me is illegal. He was a big fan of the Dark Arts..."

Harry wonders the extent of Draco's knowledge of the Dark Arts, but it feels rude to ask. Perhaps the question shows on his face because Draco continues, "I was always too afraid to properly submerge myself in that. My father though, he was definitely not shy with it. There are consequences for using that kind of magic, and I think he lived with them. I think it's the biggest reason he became that person, the Death Eater. I choose to believe that before all that, before You-Know-Who, he was a good man."

"What makes you think that?" Harry asks with genuine curiosity.

"Just from the stories I've heard from my -" he abruptly stops talking, the word stuck in his throat. "-my mother," he finishes in a pained voice. Harry has to stop himself from reaching out to him, so he clasps his hands together and doesn't say anything. He wonders why mentioning his Mother should be so painful. Maybe her grief cuts deeper than Draco's. "I know it's foolish to believe that." Draco sighs and flops back against the bed, his legs still dangling off to the side. "But I have to. If he was always like that, then what's stopping me from being just like him?"
"You're choices," Harry replies. He already knows Draco isn't like his father, but to hear him articulate his doubts is significant. It means that Draco's afraid to end up like him; it means he'll make better choices than his father did. The revelation causes something like pride to swell in his chest.

"Well, then I'm already fucked, aren't I? What's it say about me when I followed perfectly in his footsteps?"

"It means you made a mistake." He lies back into the bed as well, until he's resting on his left side, one arm tucked under his head as he faces Draco. "You saw the man your father became, and you don't want that for yourself. That's what matters now." He smiles as that familiar light glows softly in front of him, hesitant and trying to hide, but definitely there.

Draco mirrors his posture and lies on right side, facing Harry. "What is it that you see?" Draco asks suddenly, catching Harry off guard. "Not in the literal sense… but I get the feeling you can see something. I see it in your eyes sometimes and I see it now, like you're recognizing something…"

The soft glow in the darkness vibrates a little and he stares at it longingly, letting its familiar warmth wash over him. "It's this light. Well… no. It looks like light but doesn't behave like it. Kinda has mind of its own, or like…its own feelings." Harry smiles as it pulses. "I can tell when it's afraid by the way it tries to avoid my attention. Or when overwhelmed, it lashes out at me and I can almost feel it. And even though I know it's all in my head, I can't help but want to know it - to just reach out and touch-" It's so close to him now that Harry, as if possessed, reaches out to it and his fingertips fall on a warm, smooth cheek. He freezes and is about to snatch his hand back in embarrassment, but Draco leans into the touch and Harry forgets how to breathe.

Draco moves his cheek into Harry's right hand, his chin nestled into his palm. It feels so good to touch him that Harry forgets himself and lets his fingertips tickle over his skin, lets them trail down into the crevasse between his cheekbone and his closed eye. He can almost see the pale eyelashes as he brushes over them. His index fingertip explores the length of his slender nose. He can make out the shape of an elegant eyebrow. When he trails his hands over the side of Draco's face, he smiles to feel a short stubble.

He doesn't know how it's happened, but he finds himself delicately holding his chin, tilting Draco's face towards his as he exhales a ragged breath. His heart is stuck in his throat and he's sure Draco can hear it, just like Harry can hear Draco's breath becoming shallow when his thumb slowly trails over his lower lip.

Draco doesn't flinch or pull away, instead his lips part, just barely, and a soft sigh escapes him when Harry edges his face closer to his. Draco's breath warms Harry to the core and he surrenders into it. It should shock him when Draco's lips press into the bruise on his cheek, when Draco bumps his nose into Harry's, but nothing has ever felt so right and so good. Closing his eyes and giving into this kindness, his lips find Draco's and press into them gently as a slow breath rolls out his lungs.

He tastes like apple and something else that's entirely Draco, and fuck it all, it's intoxicating and Harry needs more of it. He opens his mouth and presses his lips closer into his, moaning when Draco does the same. His hands begin to wander, through soft hair and over the steady heartbeat along the side of his neck. He feels something cold and metallic, like a necklace around Draco's neck, and tugs at it with curiosity. Harry instantly regrets doing that because Draco breaks the kiss with a grimace.

"Don't." Malfoy breathes, as if in pain, and it makes Harry wince and his hands feel clumsy.

"Why?" He waits for him to elaborate, but he's not sure if he can face his disappointment or rejection.
"This is wrong." It sounds like regret and Harry takes his hands off of him quickly, the words stinging him.

"It's not," he simply says. Because when they were kissing, nothing in the world was wrong, and now that they've stopped, it feels like his heart is being crushed. "It isn't wrong."

"You don't understand. I can't -" Draco holds his words in, holding in a secret. "We just can't."

The rejection cuts through him sharply, it keeps him quiet as he sits up. The statement shouldn't hurt so much to hear, but it does and Harry can't bear it. Harry can't be here because every moment with him is now torture, now that he knows whatever he's feeling is one-sided and wrong. He feels like a fool for coming here, for wanting him. "I have to go." He makes a move to leave but Draco catches his wrist.

"No. Stay -" Draco says and Harry hides his face from him, closing his eyes because he can't stand hearing the regret in his voice. Draco feels bad for what's happened, and it makes Harry feel sick to his stomach.

"Why should I stay?" he asks, not bothering to face him.

Draco has nothing to say. Harry nods grimly in understanding and gets up to leave. He reaches the door and says without turning to face him, "let's forget this ever happened." He opens the door and pauses there, foolishly hoping that Draco will change his mind. He hopes that Draco will ask him to stay because he wants the same thing Harry wants. He hopes he'll realize it isn't fucking wrong. But nothing. With a heavy heart, he closes the door behind him.
In the Moonlight

Chapter Summary

Because you make me braver and how could that ever be wrong? - Draco

Draco watches him leave, their kiss still lingering on his lips. The moonlight spills into room, highlighting Harry's shadows as he walks away from him. Potter says something by the door but he doesn't it because his voice is too low, trying to mask his disappointment. He closes the door behind him and that's that. He'll never see him again.

Draco stares at the door.

Although he knows this is for the best he only feels regret. By the morning he'll be gone and spending his last evening with him is all he could have hoped for. He knows he'll never feel like this again. So why not? He sits up and plants his feet onto the cold floor, but he doesn't make a move to get up. Why not? Because he can't bear to say goodbye. Because he can't risk Harry knowing. Because he needs to go.

Perhaps his doomed tomorrow has made him honest for the first time in his life. Those same reasons that kept him silent as he watched Potter leave don't matter now that he's gone. They don't stop him from getting up and taking one step in front of the other. He can't deny that worse than saying goodbye is never saying anything at all. Worse than Harry knowing is Harry not knowing that he feels the same way. He can't bear it. He must let him go but he can't.

And so, all reason abandons him. All he's left with is the burning in his chest and the truth in his step that he wants Harry. It would have been forbidden once, but in this moonlight it's easy, it's right. It's crazy and undefinable and it has him rushing to swing the door open to go out and find him.

His breath hitches in his throat because there he is, facing him. Harry never left. Draco catches a grim expression before it's replaced with shock and reservation. Harry doesn't move or say a word and Draco realizes that he's waiting for an answer. Why should I stay? - He had asked. "Stay because I want you to."

Potter tilts his face in that adorable way, but his mouth is still set tight and he isn't making a move to come in. "And why do you want me to stay?"

"Because - Because I'm afraid." Sympathy caresses his features, but he's still defiant, he's still not moving to come in, the bastard. Draco knows fear isn't good enough; Potter's never been moved by it. He knows what is enough and in the light of day it would be impossible to say. But in this moonlight it's easy. "Because you make me braver and how could that ever be wrong?"

He watches the way Harry inhales slowly from the impact of those words. His lips part in surprise and his features soften. "I-" he stammers. Something sweet tugs at his lips, and that's enough for Draco to know that he understands.

Wordlessly, Draco closes the gap between them. He takes Harry's face firmly into his hands and pulls him into a kiss. Potter is momentarily still with shock, but the next instant he melts into Draco with eagerness and bittersweet relief. He wraps his arms around Draco - around the curve of his back
He begins to walk backwards into the room, pulling Harry in by his loose tie. His heart's pounding hard in his chest as he moves back to the bed. He can't help but smile between their kisses because this is what living must feel like. It's ironic that he should discover it on his last night alive.

He falls back into the bed, pulling Harry on top of him. His raven hair cascades around his face, kindness reflected in green eyes. The warmth inside Draco spreads to his skin when Harry leans down into him, closing the space between them. Draco bumps his nose playfully against his, searching for another kiss. They find and fall into each other; their bodies pressing together as hair tickles cheeks, feet kick off shoes and hands begin to explore.

When he sneaks his hand below his shirt, the other tugging on soft hair, Harry moans against him. Draco wants to hear *that* again and forever. So he lets Harry's lower lip slide out between his teeth as he moves his hips against his. Harry inhales sharply and demands another, rougher kiss. A low sound escapes Draco when a warm, wet tongue slides against his and it's dizzying to learn that he loves the way Harry tastes.

He lets himself give into this. What he's feeling right now takes such a hold he forgets about the rest. Nothing else matters, not their messy yesterday or bleak tomorrow, not the expectations, the failures or the shame, not Harry's disappointment when he wakes up tomorrow to find Draco gone.

"Goodbye." Harry turns towards the whisper. He's confused when he sees that they're at the top of the Astronomy Tower. Draco is standing at the ledge again and Harry, anxious to get him down, climbs up himself. He stands so close to him that their hands nearly touch.

Looking down at the darkness before them, a shiver runs through him. This abyss only holds loneliness inside. "Don't go," Harry says, not understanding his own request.

Draco offers a sad smile, but chooses to ignore the statement. "Remember how unafraid I was the last time you found me here? Death seemed welcoming then."

"And now?" Harry's hand twitches, wanting to grab his.

"Now I'm afraid. I don't want to die." The darkness looms ever closer and Harry suddenly feels afraid.

"You're safe here." With me.

Draco shakes his head, not looking at him now, his gaze focused ahead on nothingness. "I wish I could stay." It's his tone that has Harry reaching out to grab him, but Draco escapes his grasp and it's too late. Draco takes the last step off the edge of the Tower, and before Harry knows what's happening, Draco's falling. Harry screams and reaches out into the night, but he's already gone. The last thing he sees are wide, silver eyes piercing into his and Harry wake up with a jolt and a cry. "Draco?" His reaches out to find the space beside him empty.

Harry forces himself to take a deep breath, but his quickened pulse warns him something's wrong. A wave of dizziness passes over him when he sits up too quickly. With a twist in his stomach, he remembers last night. He remembers he and Draco - But he shakes his head to keep from thinking about it. "Draco?" he calls out again but he's met with silence. Draco isn't here.

Then he feels it, and he's surprised it's taken him so long to acknowledge the weight around his neck. His fingers trail over a necklace with an intricate design, and he recognizes it as the same one Draco
wore last night. The memory of feeling it against Draco's skin causes him to groan and plant his head into his hands. All the other details of what happened come rushing at him. He remembers the way Draco felt against him. He remembers the way he felt: the way he couldn't refuse him or stop kissing him or remember his own bloody name because nothing existed beyond them.

He kissed Draco. And it was … A blush creeps up to his face because it was the closest he's ever felt to anyone. The last thing he remembers is falling asleep beside him, Draco's whispers catching in his hair with a wish of goodnight. Last night none of it seemed strange, it was only right and natural, like it's happened before and should happen again. But now, sitting alone on Draco's bed in the sobering smell of morning, he feels out of place and confused.

Harry wonders for how long he's been sleeping and how long ago Draco left. He wonders how Draco will react to this, in denial or acceptance, with regret or eagerness. But then he turns the pendant over in his hands and the anxiety the dream had caused starts to ebb away. Harry doesn't know how to feel about last night, but he knows he doesn't want Draco to regret. He doesn't regret it. With this strange yet welcoming truth, he tucks pendant into his shirt, close to his heart.

November 15

Draco - where are you hiding? I'd like to give this back.

– Harry

Hermione knows something's up. She keeps making an effort to pull him aside to talk, which Harry has avoided so far. He knows that if she corners him, he won't be able to lie to her. But he doesn't think he can tell her the truth either; to admit what he's done or how he feels will make it all so real. That can't happen just yet, not until he talks to Draco.

Except that he can't because Draco's obviously avoiding him. Harry knows it's only been a couple of days since he last saw him but it feels like so much longer. It's strange that he can't find him now when before it was almost easy. He tried knocking on his door, but there's never a response. Harry also knows he hasn't been eating at the Great Hall and he's even been skipping classes.

Harry is beginning to feel anxious. Every moment that passes makes him less hopeful that - well, he doesn't let himself define what he feels or wants just yet. It's just driving him mad that he hasn't spoken to him since that night. But when he remembers his dream, his worry begins to take on a new form. By Tuesday morning, Harry's feeling desperate enough to do something about it. He knocks on Slughorn's door before breakfast, hoping Slughorn hasn't left for the Great Hall.

"Hello, Harry. What can I help you with?"

"Good morning -" He didn't actually plan out what he'd say, so the words come out rather awkwardly, "I er… I think Draco Malfoy's locked himself up in his room. He won't answer it when I knock and I just want to make sure nothing's wrong."

"Oh, no, he's fine! Well as fine as he could be under the circumstances. He left Hogwarts this past weekend."

"What?"

"He went back home," Slughorn clarifies.

"Oh." Harry feels like he's been punched in the gut. "When?"
"Very early Saturday morning. He woke me up to inform me that he's already spoken to the Headmistress."

"And - when is he coming back?"

"Oh, no, he isn't coming back. My understanding is that he dropped out. Why do you ask?"

"No - No reason." Harry turns on the spot and walks away without another word. He's vaguely aware of how odd he must look, to leave their conversation so abruptly. He walks to the Great Hall for breakfast in a haze. By the sound of it, it's still early enough to be nearly empty.

"There you are!" Hermione says as he approaches the Gryffindor table. He sits down gingerly and doesn't say anything as she begins to pile his plate. "Why have you been avoiding me, Harry?" He runs his hand through his hair and shrugs. "I know you're hiding something and I wish you could trust me with whatever it is. We've been friends for too long for you to… Harry, are you listening?"

She forces the plate in front of him and Harry can smell eggs and toast.

"Yeah, sorry." He plants his elbow on the table and rests his forehead onto his palm. He picks up his fork and tries not to let his hollowness show, but a part of him just doesn't care anymore.

"What's wrong?"

He shakes his head, and takes a mouthful of scrambled eggs to appear normal, but they're tasteless to him.

"You can talk to me. Is it about Ginny?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Is it about Malfoy?" The question makes him clutch his fork tightly, makes him unconsciously shift his face away from hers. He wonders how she could know, but if anyone could piece it together it'd be Hermione. He doesn't even bother saying anything, because he knows his silence is enough of a confirmation. "What's going on?" she asks.

What's going on is that there's suddenly a gaping hole in his chest and he's trying very hard to pretend it isn't there, but the truth of what Draco's done is unbearable. He left without saying goodbye. He left after we... Harry drops his fork and puts his stinging eyes into the palms of his hands. He hears Hermione shift closer to him and feels her rub his back with her hand. She's waiting for him to say something, but Harry isn't sure if he can, because to say it out loud would make it real.

He hasn't even allowed himself to properly define what he feels for him, but his absence hurts more than he could explain. "I'm such an idiot," he says instead. "I thought that he - I thought that we were friends."

"What did he do?" she asks with quiet urgency.

He shakes his head because he can't say. How could he explain that the reason for his pain is because Draco's gone? Harry's swallows the lump in his throat and he feels so fucking stupid.

Malfoy never belonged to him, never owed Harry a reason or notice. But he thought everything had changed after spending weeks together, after he opened the door and kissed him, after they fell asleep in each other's arms. Angrily, he takes off the pendant and drops it on the table.

He can hear Hermione pick it up and gasp softly. "This is his?" He nods. "It's very old... beautiful really. Why did he give this to you?" He shrugs. "Well, what did he say?"

"Nothing, he just left in the middle of the night without a word." In spite of his dismay, a blush still
creeps up on his face because he's just admitted to his friend that he had spent the night with Draco Malfoy.

"Oh." There's something like surprise in her tone, but not nearly as much as he would have guessed. Her next question doesn't carry the disgust or anger he thought he'd hear, instead she just sounds sad, "You two were involved?"

"No. I don't know." It was a possibility two mornings ago, when he woke up in his room with a promise around his neck, but now all that remains is the emptiness inside him where Draco used to be. "God, how did this happen?" He didn't even know how he felt until Ginny forced him to think about it, and then the next moment he was swept away by the smell, taste and feel of Draco Malfoy, by the strange and beautiful truth that he cares about him. "I don't understand how this happened."

He's startled to hear her chuckle sadly. "Harry, I hate to tell you that it's been happening for some time. When you two weren't fighting, you were downright flirting. It was pretty obvious-" she stops when Harry groans audibly, "but only to me! I knew something had changed between you two because I know you."

"Why didn't I know?"

"It's hard to admit difficult truths about ourselves sometimes. I mean, did you even know you're gay?"

"But I'm not... I've never felt like this -" He stops himself, not wanting to say anything more than that, but there it is, the truth raw and exposed. It makes him ache because now that he knows what he wants, he can't bear that it's gone. It sinks in and squeezes his heart and he can't deny it anymore. "I'm gay." Hermione lets out a breathy laugh and covers her mouth with her hand quickly. "How in the world is this funny?"

"I'm sorry," She forces her tone to be serious and Harry throws her a disapproving look. "You sometimes take a while to figure out the obvious."

"I can't be gay."

"Why? There's nothing wrong with."

"I know, okay? But... it's just another thing that I can't control complicating my life. I wanted normal, Hermione. I deserve it." And maybe that's why he thought he wanted Ginny for so long. He saw himself becoming a part of her family, marrying her and maybe one day having kids with her.

"It doesn't change anything. You like blokes, so what? You can still have the same things you've always wanted." Harry rubs his eyes with his palms, groaning in despair. "Harry, enough of that. It may not seem like it right now, but you're going to be okay. I know it's scary, but you're a Gryffindor, the best I know in fact. You are who you are, and you can't help who you l-"

"I don't," he says sharply.

There's a short pause, before she puts the pendant back around his neck. "You can't help who you want to spend your nights with."

The burden of the pendant around his neck lightens the burden of trying to pretend that he's okay. "Thanks, Hermione." He offers her a smile and asks without humour, "How long did it take you to realize you'd like to spend your nights with Ron?" He smirks when she swats his arm playfully.

"Too long. I was afraid to lose him as a friend." She sounds sympathetic, as if Harry knows what
that feels like and he wonders if that's the truth of it. Was their friendship ruined by their kiss? Did Draco regret it so much that he couldn't bear being around Harry? He doesn't have the answers. He doesn't know why he left, doesn't know how Draco feels about him, but the pendant gives him hope. He tucks it into his shirt, the cold chain burning comfortably against his skin. He has to hope that Draco wouldn't leave it for Harry if a part of him didn't feel the same way. "What are you going to tell Ron?" he hears her ask.

"I can't tell him this. You can't either!" He knows how unfair his request is, but he doesn't care.

"I can't lie to him."

"Hermione, please, he won't understand. He's already upset with me, but if he knew it was Draco, he'd never speak to me again."

"That's not true -"

"I can't risk him leaving me too," he says stubbornly, to which Hermione quiets and tentatively takes his hand in hers.

"He won't ever do that again, I know he won't." Harry doesn't say anything so she continues quietly, "I won't say anything, but you have to when you're ready." Harry nods gloomily, knowing that opportunity may never come if he never sees Draco Malfoy again.

November 17

Dear Draco,

You're a selfish piece of shit and I'm glad you left.

- H

November 18

I went to your room but of course you changed the password. Bastard. Ron isn't speaking to me, but I think it's for the best. This way I don't have to lie.

November 23

I dreamt of that night again, of the time I held you. But it always ends the same. You say goodbye and take the leap. I can never stop you.

Now I just sit idle and collect letters I'll never send. I just keep myself busy to keep from thinking of you.

It's been two weeks since he last saw Draco, but Harry's alright. He keeps himself busy to think of anything but Malfoy. He's been doing very well, focusing on his schoolwork and flying every night to the point of exhaustion so that he can't think at night before he sleeps, because if he thinks he might remember him and ache.

It's worse when he dreams. They start off with joy because he's holding and kissing Draco again.
Sometimes he can even see him and Harry's sure he's misremembering him because he's so fucking beautiful. Sometimes he lingers on a detail, like the angular curve of his collarbone, or his pales skin becoming warm under his lips, and he relished in it, prays the moment will never pass. But the dream always ends and he's back at the Astronomy Tower, watching Draco jump. He never can reach him in time.

It's been two weeks since he last saw Draco and Harry's miserable. He's not letting it show because he doesn't want anyone to know his secret: that he misses Draco Malfoy. Sometimes when he needs to confess his loneliness, he begins to write to him. He always stops himself though. It's too confusing to write to someone you're angry with but have no right to be.

He knows it. He does. That Draco wasn't his and he wasn't Draco's. Draco probably didn't even think anything of that night, didn't even realize it was wrong to leave without saying goodbye. He knows all this, but he can't help but feel bitter and used. Draco knew he was leaving and that's why he kissed him. He didn't have to deal with the consequences of the next day. He didn't have to deal with Harry's expectations or feelings. He just didn't care and that's the truth of it. This is what Harry tries not to think of most of all. Underneath his façade lies his anger and underneath that there's only pain: Draco didn't care about him.

Sometimes when he feels the pendant against his chest he hopes he's wrong. Maybe he missed something. Maybe Draco did say goodbye and Harry just didn't get it... Maybe the Slytherin feels the same way. But when he dreams of him leaping off the Tower, his hope slips away.

"Harry?" Ginny sits down beside him in the Common Room. It's quite late and everyone's off to bed but Harry doesn't bother because a storm kept him from flying, so all he has are his stupid thoughts.

"Mm?"

"Whatcha thinking?"

"Not much, just wish I could have flown today."

"You've been doing that a lot," she says conversationally. "I remember back in the summer, right after the war, all you did was fly or jog for hours at a time. Mum had to threaten you to come in to eat supper," she chuckles. "Remember?"

"Yeah, it helped with sleep." He says that without a thought and grimaces when she sighs.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

Why is he such a bloody open book? He puffs in annoyance, knowing he should keep his mouth shut because it's Ginny, his ex-girlfriend, but he can't keep it to himself anymore. "You were right, okay? About me. About how I feel."

"About being gay?" she clarifies.

"Yes."

"For Malfoy." He nods sharply. "And so... what happened - did you tell him or something?"

"Sort of -" Not in words, but the way he kissed him and touched him was clear enough. It's strange that he could almost admit this to her, when only weeks ago they were dating. "Why are you asking me about this?"

"Well to be honest, you look utterly miserable and it bothers me, which means I must be moving on.
"So how did you make a mess out of this?"

"I didn't! I don't know - I never intended - I went to check on him and we were talking and then suddenly we were kissing and-

"Oh, god," she sounds like she's going to be sick. "You kissed him?" He winces at her tone and rubs his eyes tiredly. He hasn't seen the white light in weeks, but he still finds himself searching for it, even though he knows it's pointless. "Sorry," she says begrudgingly, "I promise I'll try to be more impartial. So what happened after you kissed?"

"We um - kissed some more. And it was…" perfect. He keeps the word a secret, because that's only for him to know, "nice. Then he left and I haven't seen him since."

"He didn't say anything?"

"No."

"That's just bloody like him, isn't it? Once a coward, always a coward."

"Ginny," Harry whines, because he wants to chastise her but he knows she's trying her best to keep her hate for Draco Malfoy out of this conversation. "It's not like that." He has a hard time believing the words. "He had to leave. He kept trying to tell me, or not tell me, I don't know, but I knew something was wrong and I just ignored it."

"He still shouldn't have led you on if he knew he was leaving." He doesn't have a response to that because the angry part of him agrees. But the part of him that's hopeful thinks that maybe Draco didn't say anything because he couldn't. Maybe he was sworn to secrecy, or maybe he simply knew Harry wouldn't have let him leave. "Do Ron and Hermione know?" she asks him, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"Only Hermione. You can't-"

"Yeah I know, Ron would lose his shit, but only because it's Malfoy."

"I'm surprised you're not losing your shit."

"Remember Harry, I knew about it long before you did. I've already gone through the motions of being furious and crazy, so don't worry about me. What are you going to do now?"

"There's nothing I can do. Just get over it, I suppose."

She huffs. "You need closure."

"How can I do that exactly? It's not like I can just owl him." He's already tried with the curt message 'I have something of yours you forgot' but all the owls refused to fly when he gave them his instructions. Malfoy must have an anti-tracking spell on himself.

"Why don't you ask Luna if he left a message?"

"Luna?" he asks in surprise.

"She and Malfoy became friends of some sort."

"Oh." He already knows this, but he didn't think Draco would leave someone else a note, not when he didn't bother leaving one for Harry. "That's a good point." He can hear familiar footsteps approaching them and Harry shoulders stiffen with awkwardness.
Ron sits directly beside him and pointedly asks, "Are you two back on."

"No," they both respond quickly.

"Good," he says before settling in. Ginny senses that Ron wants a moment alone with Harry, something Harry isn't sure he's ready for. She squeezes his shoulder before leaving them.

"Ron -" Harry begins.

"You promised me you'd treat her with respect. She's my sister, Harry."

"She broke up with me, remember?"

"Yeah, but only after you were sneaking around seeing other people."

"That's not true!"

"Just tell me, did you cheat on her?"

"No! Never." He swallowed guiltily. Although it's true, he can't help but think of the other secret he's keeping. "We just didn't work out," he continues. "But we're okay now."

"That's good – 'cause how could I choose between you and my sister?"

"I never would expect you to," Harry says quietly. Harry doesn't think he can relate because Ron is his family. "When I first started dating her, I really thought she was the one. I never would have started anything if I didn't think that."

"I know that…" he grumbles. "I thought that too. You two were pretty good together… You sure you don't want to marry her?" he asks offhandedly?

Harry chuckles and it's easier to pretend he's okay. "Sorry – it's still a no."

"I'm sorry too," he mumbles, and Harry knows his apology is less to do with Ginny and more to do with his absence. Harry nods awkwardly in acknowledgement and he hears Ron clear his throat before changing the subject. "Do you want to fly tomorrow? Unless you're busy-" he says this with meaning, as if waiting for Harry to confess something, but he just can't.

"That sounds great. Maybe we could drag Hermione."

Ron snorts, "I've tried once. It was a disaster." Harry flashes a meek grin at him. Talking to Ron like this on a Friday night makes it a little easier to pretend. For the first time in days he almost believes he's fine, that nothing is missing and he isn't falling apart.

November 27

Apples and autumn leaves... that's all that's in my fucking head.
Harry, it's not your job to save everyone. - Ron

Harry's trying his best to block out Greenberg's voice, but he's loud and relentless. "-had it coming. Only wish I could have rubbed it into Malfoy's face." Stabbing his potatoes, he forces himself to clench down hard on his jaw. "Remember when he found out? Practically ran away crying," Greenberg laughs and a few other faceless idiots join in.

"The best bit was that he had no idea," he snorts. "You would think his mother would have told him, but she was probably already missing at the time." Harry starts a bit and frowns in confusion. What does he mean by Draco's mother missing?

"Still, he got off easy. After murdering Zabini-"

"There was no evidence -" He hears Luna begin to say.

Greenberg talks over her, not bothering to let her speak. "But no matter. They're all dead anyway – if what the Prophet says has any truth to it."

Harry turns in his seat sharply to face him, talking loudly over the crowd between them. "What makes you say that?" He's trying not to let it show, but he can hear the strain in his voice.

The space between them becomes silent as everyone stops talking to eavesdrop on their conversation. "His mother's been missing for nearly a month. And as far as anyone could tell, Malfoy hasn't been seen either."

"He went home," he says flatly.

"Did he? Because I heard talk that the Malfoy Manor is going to be overturned to the Ministry…" Greenberg responds slowly, confused by his questioning. "By this time, whoever got his Mother probably got him too."

"But -" That's impossible. Draco wouldn't leave if he was in serious trouble, would he? Then he remembers the way Draco could barely talk about his mother the night he left. Dread fills his lungs when he remembers how afraid he was, and Harry begins to wonder if he's had the wrong idea this entire time.

"Good riddance, right? The Malfoy name is better off dead," Greenberg says.

"Don't speak on my behalf."

"I wasn't, I'm just saying-"

"Then do everyone a favour and stop talking, because everything out of your mouth is utter bullshit." The temperature between them seems to drop drastically, and he can hear people whispering behind
"I forgot how quickly you go to his defence," Greenberg says after a pause, and then with amusement he adds, "How did he fool you?" He sounds so patronizing that Harry's hand twitches for his wand.

"Are you implying something?" Harry asks, just daring Greenberg to give him a reason to fight.

"No. I just know what he is, even if you've forgotten."

"You don't know anything."

"I know he's a Death Eater." he snarls.

"He isn't anymore!"

"He hurts people."

"That's rich coming from you." I know what you did to him.

Greenberg, who realizes that Harry knows, becomes defensive. "He killed people, Harry. He tortured people. I wouldn't be surprised if he got off -"

"Shut up." He doesn't raise his voice, but there must be something about the calmness in his command that makes Greenberg comply. Then he notices he's holding his wand in his hand and that it's pointed right at Greenberg. Dozens of spells are waiting to be uttered, but he quickly drops his wand arm and walks away, shame and fear making his steps hurried.

He hears a pair of light feet follow him and he realizes Luna is catching up to him. "You didn't know-" she says matter-of-factly, falling into step with him.

"About?"

"Draco's mother missing," she says in her vague sort of tone. "But that's odd, isn't it? He specifically told me he had to go to see her."

"He - He told you that?" He ignores the pang of jealousy he feels that Draco confided in Luna about these things. "But then... he must have known-" The dread creeps back in to realize that Draco knew his Mother was missing.

Harry remembers his fear – he had thought it was due to being with him. But the way he kissed Harry, a secret on the tip of his tongue, needing for forget and dull everything away – that should have been enough for him to realize something else was wrong. He's been so self-absorbed that he didn't see it until now. "He left to find her," he whispers.

"I think you're right," she replies conversationally.

"But why wouldn't he tell anyone? Why wouldn't he ask for help?"

"Maybe he felt he couldn't."

"Luna, this is going to sound strange but did he leave anything for me?"

"Yes." In shock, Harry abruptly stops walking when he makes out the sound of Luna rummaging through her bag. She then hands him a small parcel and he holds it protectively in both hands.
You had this the entire time?" he asks.

"Mmhmm. I was waiting for you to ask me about it."

"Why - Why wouldn't you just give it to me?" Harry asks, trying his best to keep his annoyance out of his voice. "It's been weeks, Luna!"

"He specifically said that I was only to give this to you if you asked for it. He said that if you didn't ask, then you didn't need it."

"That sounds just like him." Harry rips open the envelope. "Can you…” his feels foolish now. "Can you read this for me?” If Draco didn't want Luna to know what he had to say, he wouldn't have given the letter to her for safekeeping.

She takes the letter from him and begins to read out loud: "Learn Legere: This is the first dare you still owe and the last one I request."

"What? How could that be it? Did he say anything else to you?"

"He only told me he had to leave and he isn't coming back." Harry feels a stab in his chest to realize that Draco has probably done something incredibly stupid. He left to find his mother on his own, knowing full well that people are after him and he's in danger outside the school grounds. He was on the brink of telling Harry but always stopped himself. Why couldn't he trust Harry?

"Harry, don't be sad," Luna says unexpectedly. "It was always hard for Draco to be honest, but he left you his mother's pendant—"

"What?" Harry interrupts.

"You're wearing it around your neck. He showed it to me the night before he left."

He doesn't understand why this makes him bow his head and turn away from her, his mouth twisted in disappointment. He suspects it's because Draco left him a treasure in place of a goodbye.

It's cold but Harry knows the sun is out. His skin is warm even as he shivers and wraps his scarf around his neck more tightly. He's sitting at the point by the lake where Draco used to go to be alone. His thumb trails over the seal of the envelope of Remus' letter and he wonders why he should give Draco's pathetic note any consideration. He knows whatever answer he's looking for won't be in this letter, but he allows himself to hope that he's wrong.

It's silly that Draco's dare should hold this much influence over him. But it must mean something; that maybe a small part of Draco cared enough to ask Harry to try. Draco wanted him to try. With a sigh of resignation he opens the envelope and takes out several pieces of parchment. He takes out his wand and moves it in the air before tapping the first page and whispering, "legere." His surprise that the spell works is quickly forgotten, because he hears Remus's voice.

Dear Harry,

Today you called me a coward.

When I came home and saw how relieved Tonks was to have me back, I knew you were right. I let my fear rule me and couldn't come to terms with that on my own. I ran away and tried to mask
it as bravery. I’m ashamed and humbled, but mostly grateful to you for reminding me that the only thing we should fear is fear itself.

But that’s not the reason I’m writing to you. If I survive this war, you’ll never receive this. It means I’m lucky enough to raise Teddy and see you happy. It means that against all odds – I can live a normal life. I pray you won’t receive this, that I can tell you all this in person. But I can’t take that chance. Even though I’ll fight with everything I have, I’ll fight even harder to ensure this world is safe and good for Teddy and Tonks.

When the first war broke out it didn't seem real. None of us really understood the gravity of the situation. Our own innocence crippled us and we ignored the warning signs: the missing and dead, the corruption in the Ministry and the overall scent of paralyzing fear. Voldemort gained power much too quickly. I'm mentioning all this because this time it's different. This time we're all fighting for something more than ourselves and although there's still fear, we also have hope. We have you.

Before I get carried away, I need to ask you for a favour. If I'm gone can you tell Teddy our stories? Just like I'm about tell you. Sirius made me promise the same thing. He wanted you to know your father. It was unlike him to ask such things. You see, I had only known him to be brave and almost foolishly optimistic. He never considered his death or his friends' deaths as a real possibility. Azkaban had changed him dramatically, or maybe he had changed the night your parents died. But for the first time in my life I saw that Sirius was afraid. He wasn't afraid of dying. He was afraid for you.

So that night, a few weeks before he died, he made me promise to look out for you. He also made me promise to tell you your family's story. I swore that if anything should happen to him, I'll tell you all I know. This is me keeping my promise, as best as I can.

You were a happy family. Your parents loved you so, so much and it was obvious you were their pride and joy …

Something wet touches Harry's cheek and he brushes it away hastily, the letter still clutched in his nerveless fingers. He lets Remus' familiar voice fill his head and it stirs both joy and grief inside of him. It hurts to hear him, to learn of these old stories, but he doesn't miss a single word.

November 28

You'll be glad to learn I don't owe you a dare anymore. I read Remus' letter and I don't know why I was so scared. It was exactly what I needed. Hearing his voice was strange, painful at first, but the more I listened to him, the more it calmed me. Felt safe and familiar, I suppose.

He wrote about my mum and dad - a couple of stories about my godfather too. No one ever told me that Sirius lived with my dad during the summer breaks and after graduation. That explains a bit more why he was so keen on adopting me. The Blacks had disowned him and my father's family had given him a place to stay without any hesitation. Did your mother ever mention Sirius?

Draco - did you know? Is that why you left? I want to know and I feel so close to understanding what you were thinking, but … there's something just out of reach. It makes me hope that you didn't leave without a good reason, but then why wouldn't you just tell me? I would have
understood. I would have helped you.

I have to admit something. It's embarrassing. I also did the Legere on your note. I know what you'd say: 'Potter, that's just pathetic'. It is. I just wanted to hear your voice again and it's okay to admit that on here. You'll never see these letters. So there it is, I miss Draco Malfoy. It tortures and torments me that I crave you: your sarcasm, your love for apples, your willingness to laugh at me, the way you pretend not to stare at me, the way you pretend not to seek me out like I seek you. I miss you.

There's something about his walk that has people scattering out of the way. It's quick and full of purpose, if not a little deranged, and he wonders if this is what he looked like when he marched to his death only mere months ago. When he finally arrives to his room, he has a sudden urge to bang on the door, even though he knows no one will answer.

"Why did you change it?" he whispers roughly under his breath, pressing his hands on the door. He has to get in there. He's done waiting for a sign or clue. He's going to find out once and for all what happened to Malfoy.

He's been here a couple of time already, trying to guess the password, each guess more absurd than the last: Hamburger, Malfoy, Quidditch, Goodbye, Salazar, Pizza… He tried them all, knowing full well how unlikely it is he'll land on the right one, but the guessing game has become comforting in a twisted sort of way. What generally happens is that he'll sit by the door, his back leaning on the cold surface, while he mutters words under his breath. Usually after he tires he goes silent and closes his eyes. The memories of what happened on the other side of the door are always within reach.

But today he'll not idly sit by. His gut tells him something isn't right. The answer as to what that may be is in his room. He clenches his fist and pounds once, hard on the door. Not unlike the last time he was here, he stands awkwardly by the door, unsure of what he's doing. "Okay, Draco, what are you hiding?" he mutters under his breath.

He has to fight the urge to walk to what he knows. The ache in his chest pulses when he walks away from the bed, towards the side where the window and desk should be. The desk makes most sense. Maybe Draco left something there. He reaches towards it clumsily, and would have missed it completely if it weren't for his hands reaching out desperately in all directions. Feeling stupid, he knows he should have help with this, but he just can't explain his irrational belief that there's something here for him. He has no idea if that's true, and if it is, what should he be looking for? He opens the drawers, all of which are unlocked, and is disappointed to find them empty. The surface of the desk is also completely bare, but he doesn't lose hope just yet.

He spends what feels like hours searching the room slowly, his hands trailing over every nook and cranny. But Draco cleaned it out completely, and Harry kicks the desk when he realizes he must have done it before he saw Harry that night. He leans back onto the desk and he's forced to conclude there's nothing for him here. He must be delusional to think that Draco would leave behind an explanation just for him.

Harry runs his hand over the smooth surface of the desk absently, feeling the indents and bumps...
underneath his fingertips. Draco made sure to not leave a trace of his presence behind. It's as if he was never here. The memories of what happened in this room have never felt as far away as they do now, and Harry forces himself to swallow the resentment he feels. His fingertips trails along a notch absently as he wonders if he should leave, but then his hand freezes. The indent he had been feeling on the smooth surface seems much too straight and perfect to be accidental. He's sure no one could see the line with their naked eye, as he could barely feel it under his fingers. But it's definitely there. An irrational certainty thrills him as he begins to pick at the notch with his nails; Draco did leave him a message, he just didn't want it to be found.

Taking out his wand, he performs a few anti-concealment charms and smiles when something clicks open. His hand reaches into the compartment and he takes out another note and unfolds it before tapping it with his wand. "Legere."

Then all he hears is his voice:

You aren't meant to find this, and I didn't mean to write it. But I'm not brave or good like you. If I was stronger I'd have let you be. But the fear that I'll die and no one will remember who I was, or even care, is enough to shatter this crippled courage. So I write.

I write not for your sake, but so that I won't be forgotten. I write to live in a letter, even as I hope you never find this. I write because it's the only way I know how to be brave. I write to not glance back when the morning comes for me. If I glance back I -

I see you. You're here with me and all I want to do is stay. I do. But I can't and wish I could explain that you're better off this way.

Harry's insides seem to have gone numb. When he first heard Draco's voice, a painful joy gripped his heart. But as the meaning of the words sink in, he sits on the bed and all he feels is cold despair.

He smooths out the parchment, which he had unconsciously crumpled in his fist, and taps it with the tip of his wand once more. He tries his best to decipher any hidden meanings in his tone or in his words, but all Harry hears is his resignation. How is Harry supposed to help him with this? How does Malfoy expect Harry to find him? He doesn't, a little voice whispers in his head. Harry ruffles his hand through his hair, trying to brush the thought away, but it's impossible to misinterpret the note: He doesn't mean to come back. He doesn't mean to live.

His despair quickly twists into ugly rage and he shoves the letter into his pocket. His fear is freezing him from the inside and his thoughts are scattered and wild. How could Malfoy be so fucking selfish? In what world is it okay to disappear like that? To leave without a trace of an explanation behind. And when Harry does find this sorry excuse of a goodbye, it's only to tell him that's he's willingly meeting his death. How - how could he do that to him? Harry kicks the pillar of the canopy and it squeaks, but he doesn't even care if it comes falling down on him. The pain in his chest is burying itself deeper, threatening to shatter him. Draco might already be -

He springs up onto his feet to keep the thought away and begins to pace about the room in a deranged manner. He can't think about how long ago Draco wrote this note. He can't think about how he's untraceable, unreachable. He can't think about the fact that he hasn't seen him in weeks. He can't because it'll cripple him and then how is he supposed to find him?

That's right. Looking for Draco is the only thing that will soothe this senseless panic. He has to leave. Now. When he finds him, he can tell him exactly how selfish he is for leaving, how pathetic and empty his note is. He can tell him exactly what he's doing to Harry, how awful he is to make Harry feel this way! Sick and lightheaded and manic, he rushes out of the room with new purpose.
November 29

*Found your suicide note. Can't believe you – can't even write. I'm coming.*

Harry adds the note to the rest of his collection that's stashed in his Potions text. Moving quickly to his bed, he empties out his knapsack and precipitously begins to gather his crucial belongings, shoving them chaotically into his bag. He's sure Malfoy wouldn't have acted with such haste when he left. He would have planned everything out to the last detail, but Harry's already wasted too much time.

"What are you doing?" Ron asks him.

*Shit. He didn't hear him come in. I'm packing. I er… I'm leaving."

"Okay. Where are you going?"

He grimaces as he looks for some clean clothes. "I can't say."

"Were you even going to say anything?" Ron asks coldly.

"Yes! Of course, I'm just in a bit of a rush."

"This is about Malfoy." Harry stops packing and acknowledges the certainty in Ron's voice. "I saw you in the Great Hall earlier. Greenberg doesn't know what he's talking about."

Harry sighs. "But he's right! Malfoy could be dead or dying and no one else cares, so…"

*"Harry, it's not your job to save everyone."

"That's not what this is about-"

"Yes it is! I know you can't help being this way, not after everything that's happened. But this really isn't your concern."

"Ron, it is, okay? He's my friend." The truth in that fact makes Ron go silent. He's just admitted that he cares about Draco Malfoy in some form, and it hurts that it should be a secret. He almost wants to apologize for hiding the fact. "I'd do the same for you," is all he says as he zips up his bag. Maybe Ron's disgusts is enough of a reason to keep him off his back, but Harry's wrong.

"Fine. I'm coming with you."

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Two weeks earlier

Draco walks towards the first beams of sunrise that alight the sky. He tries not to think of what he's left behind, but the memories overcome him with each step: Harry's hands on his chest, his lips on his neck, his hips pressed against his. He shivers with want but doesn't stop walking. He's approaching the front entrance of his home. It's unusual to use this door, but he supposes, his last time coming home should be special.

*"Only the masters of the house can open this door," his mother explains to a very young Draco Malfoy. She runs her hands through his hair and guides him in. Draco glances up at his mother, and again he realizes she's the most beautiful person ever. She's even more beautiful than him. (He*
knows he's beautiful because everyone tells him so.)

"Why don't we use this door?" he asks her. He's never gone in this way before.

"Because it isn't proper, love. But today is special. Today we're keeping our doors open for our friends. Do you remember what today is?" He does but he shakes his head because he likes the way she says it. "It's your birthday."

"Will Father come?"

She glances at him, in both guilt and fondness. "Nothing would keep him."

Draco smiles at one of his oldest memories and swings the doors open, wincing at how much noise it makes in the eerie silence. He glances around the large hall and can make out its high painted ceiling, black polished marble floors, and the soft coloured light from the stain glass windows bouncing off the pillars. He seldom visited this part of the manor because it was always occupied. This is where the high-rising Ministry members or the other society savvy individuals were charmed and impressed, before they were led to less intimidating rooms. The message was always clear and received: you are now amongst kings. Seeing it empty now makes him think of lost empires.

He moves forward quickly, climbing up a long stairwell that leads straight to the bedroom chambers. He can't guess where the person who sent the letter is waiting, so his best bet is to head to his mother's room. When he notices the glowing, orange light beneath the door to a study room, he slows down his pace. His pulse spikes and he bites down his fear as he moves to open the door.

The room is sparse, with the curtains drawn. But what immediately captures his attention is a lean, tall figure at the end of the room. He’s staring into the fireplace and has his hand resting on a cane. His profile is so familiar that Draco pales as the man graciously turns towards him and fondly says, "Welcome home, Draco."

It's a face he knows so well because it looks so much like his own, a face he thought he'd never see again. "F- Father?"
"Welcome home, Draco."

Draco's vision shifts a few degrees as he stares at the man in front of him. He can't comprehend how he's there. He can't believe he's real because his grief is still so tangible. He bloody broke down because of it, but there he is, all amused and unapproachable. "F-Father?" A part of him tries to rationalize it. Perhaps he's the intruder, the one who is threatening his Mother. Perhaps he's using his dead father's face to gain Draco's trust, but he just knows that isn't the case. The expression on this man's face, the way he holds himself and seems to own the room, is all Lucius Malfoy.

His father chuckles and takes in his son's appearance with a sweeping gaze. Something around his mouth tightens in displeasure. "You need to shave."

Draco barely hears him. "How?" he breathes. How is he alive? How did he pull it off?

"Polyjuice Potion. Late Severus brewed a strain that has permanent effects. It's a little unsettling to think that there's a rotting corpse in Azkaban that looks like me." He says this so casually, as if it's the most mundane fact in the world.

"What?" Draco hears himself ask as if from a great distance. His father just openly admitted to killing a man.

"You should have known I had a plan of escape, Draco." When Draco doesn't reply and continues to stare in disbelief, Lucius adds with calm impatience, "Did you really think our friends would forget the cause?"

The word 'friends' is a cue; for the first time Draco notices the cloaked figures clinging to the shadows, their faces partially obscured by their hoods. They blend into the walls with ease, keeping to the darkest corners of the room. He suspects he's only just been allowed to notice their presence. He looks back to his Father. Horror starts to seep into his lungs when he remembers this familiar scene of hooded men in darkness. "The cause?" he whispers. His father has just admitted to murder, but this still isn't as terrifying as the implications of those two words. He knows those words well. He made a vow to a monster to offer everything he had for the sake of those unforgiving words.

"Yes. The cause. You made a promise, Draco." He says this as if Draco's five years old. Draco recoils because the delusions he has about who his Father is are beginning to crack. His father never killed anyone – not directly. His father doesn't really care about those politics, he just believed in those things to survive. He was seduced by dark magic – worse – the Dark Lord. But in the end, he had seen clearly, right? When he saw what the Dark Lord did to his family and his home, he saw the error of his ways… right?
"You haven't forgotten, have you? We promised to cleanse this world of filth. We promised to devote our lives to that cause." As Draco stares at him, he realizes he nearly did forget the type of man is father is. He convinced himself that even Lucius Malfoy could be redeemable. Looking at him now, he knows his father will never change. He believes in the value of blood, in the chaos that's prophesized to come. Lucius Malfoy believes in the fucking cause.

Draco takes a step back.

His father smiles and the door closes behind him. "I won't make the same mistakes as the Dark Lord. His obsession with Harry Potter."

"Where is my Mother?" he interrupts in a low voice. Even though that name doesn't seem to belong to the boy he kissed, hearing it now makes him feel stronger. All he wants more than anything is to get away from this madness and escape into emerald green. So why is he here? Why is he back in the clutches of another mad man? Because his Mother is missing.

His father arches an eyebrow at him. "She is safe."

Draco trembles with something hotter than fear. "You did take her. I should have known it was you. It was you – the whole time." Visions of landing on glass, of rope around his neck, of someone watching him in the shadows flicker before his eyes. "You - you had them kidnap me. You let them torture me!" Draco reaches for his wand. It flies out of his grasps and into his father's outstretched hand.

"That wouldn't have happened if you just cooperated."

"My apologies," Draco hisses low, trying his hide his fear. "Next time I'll be sure to not object when they put a noose around my neck."

His father's face sets into a stony expression that Draco knows all too well. "I was anxious to get you back. I knew that once you were back at that school, it would be difficult to get close to you. Your mother had been clever, making you go-

"Where is she?" Draco growls, something visceral churning inside of him, making it difficult for him to breath. "I swear, if you've hurt her-"

Draco takes a step back when his father lifts his wand and points it at Draco's face. "That you have the audacity to speak to me this way can only speak to the degree of your frustration. It's understandable that you're upset with me. But if you speak to me that way again I will cut out your tongue." Draco swallows. He knows it isn't an empty threat. His father points his wand to an armchair by the fire. "Take a seat."

He clenches his jaw tightly and hesitates a moment, watching his father. He has no choice but to walk to the armchair, studying the room in a sweeping glance. Although he can't make out their faces, he can tell that all of them have their gazes fixed on him. Crushing down his fear, he turns to face his father and asks, "Was taking my wand away necessary?"

His father chuckles. "Just a precaution." Lucius sits in a chair beside him, placing the cane on the coffee table in front of him. Draco notices that he's more reliant on it than he's ever been.

His father gives him an expectant look, so Draco asks in a careful tone, "are you going to tell me where she is?"

"I'm afraid it's not time."
"When can I see her?"

"When I say so," his father replies vaguely.

"I haven't heard from her in weeks."

"You aren't ready to see her yet."

Draco can feel his mask of control beginning to slip. "Ready in what way?"

"There are certain things you have to do first, and your Mother is a distraction."

A glare is threatening to show. "Distraction for the cause? That is-" fucking insane.

"Draco-" his father cuts him off swiftly, "I already told you that I will let you see your mother when the time is right. Please don't question me again. Frankly, your asperity is starting to irritate me."

Draco bites the inside of his mouth. He knows there's something dangerous in his father's tone and that if he isn't careful he'll regret it. "Just trust that your Mother is fine."

"But the pendant-" he begins to say in a low voice.

"Draco-" his father warns. Draco forcing himself to keep quiet. He looks to the fire and sees ashes swirling in orange and blue. He doesn't know what he's expected to do or say, so he waits for his father to continue.

Satisfied with his son's silence, he waves a house elf forward with a small glass on a tray. Draco refuses it with a shakes of his head. He glares when large, nervous eyes look to his father for instruction. "I hope you don't think I'd poison my only son." After a moment of silence, Draco stiffly takes the glass. "You're safe here, this is your home after all. Now drink up."

Draco's mouth twists nastily "What is it?"

"It'll calm your nerves."

"I am calm," he grits through his teeth.

From the corner of his eye, he sees his father point his wand at him. "No, you are not. I know you too well. You're trying very hard not to let it show, but you wish to hurt me." Draco doesn't say anything and his father sighs. "I thought you would have been relieved to see me." Draco doesn't take his eyes off the fire, doesn't turn to look at him because the relief he felt upon seeing him is gone. All he has now is fear and rage. "I thought you would have congratulated me. I thought you'd be more curious about our plans." There's a sneer in his tone, and Draco knows he should say something. Lie. Apologize. Cry or whatever, but he just holds the cup between two fingers and refuses to even look at his father. If he should look at him, he might do something stupid like let his anger show. He might tell him exactly how he feels, that he's a liar, that he's dangerous and insane. Worst of all, Draco may tell him that he would have forgiven it all - but not this. Not threatening his mother.

"I'm disappointed. You've forgotten who you are." His father pauses here to allow his son to speak, but Draco bites down on his tongue. "I don't think you ever truly cared about the cause. You dreaded those meetings and found any excuse to not go. When you thought no one was looking, you cried like a child. I had to cover for your mistakes, again and again, fore if the Dark Lord had seen your weakness as clearly as I saw it, he would have killed you. Worse still, the disgrace would have tarnished the family name."
"I'm sorry the idea of murder and torture didn't come as easily to me," he replies.

"Your sarcasm doesn't have any place here. Your apology should be sincere. It's disgusting how weak you are. How can you-" he drops his voice, as if abashed, "live with yourself?"

Draco's hand trembles from the force of gripping the flask. He forces his voice to stay calm. "Funny, when I think of you I find myself asking the same question."

"I'm not the one who lives in fear. I'm not the one who failed repeatedly and put his family in danger. You barely survived the war and I'm sure you would not have survived Azkaban. You're lucky the Potter boy took pity on you, or you'd most likely be dead."

Draco stands up quickly. "I don't need to hear this bullshit from you!"

"Draco!" Lucius warns.

"Why am I here?" he asks, raising his voice. "Why don't you let me be? Let me and Mother GO!"

"Sit down."

"NO!" Draco throws the cup into the fire and it erupts into small shards and red smoke. He knows he's lost control – he knows it's a mistake. He knows he should sit down and play the part, but he's so fucking tired of the role. He thought he was coming here to hand himself over to death, not to subject himself to his father's abuse and that same, soul-crushing lie. He isn't going to let it happen again. He isn't going to take another vow or wear another disfiguring mark. "I'm done taking orders from you. If you don't take me to her I'm leaving-"

He sees his father slash the air with his wand, his stony eyes fixed on Draco. Before he knows what's happening, his mouth is filling up with blood. He splutters and unconsciously claps his hand over his mouth as his blood begins to trickle down his chin. It's only then he realizes he can't seem to move his tongue. Although there's no pain, he knows there's something terribly wrong. Taking his hand away, Draco spits into it and begins to scream when he sees his own tongue resting in the middle of his palm.

"I warned you, Draco," his father says severely. Draco snaps his eyes onto him and the urge to attack, to tear and shred overcomes him, but before the thought can fully form, his whole body freezes and then there's nothing.

Draco's pretending to read a book. In reality, he's sneaking subtle looks out the window and trying to calculate the distance between the infirmary window and the grounds. It must be at least 30 feet. Without the help from his wand to soften the impact, the jump could severely hurt him. It's his best plan yet and it's a shitty one.

There's always someone watching him. A guard stands by his door with a blank stare, his eyes fixed ahead. Draco has already given up trying to talk to these men, but he's memorized the schedule of who's on duty to watch him. Four men change shifts every 6 hours, so by the third day he knows their faces well.

The only person he's spoken to in the last few days has been the nurse, who frequently checks on his progress but doesn't say much. It's been a few days since his father cut out his tongue and the regrowth is nearly complete. There's still pain, but it's dulled by the potions he's instructed to take. He notices that when he does take the potion, his thoughts begin to slow and he gets lost in a fog of apathy. He has a hard time remembering why he should be angry or why he's here to begin with. So he only takes them at night to get some drug induced sleep. The ordeal of growing back his tongue is
nearly over. He's already able to move it around almost fluidly and his speech is nearly back to normal. Although it's hard to judge when he's had so little practice speaking as of late.

He scowls when a house elf approaches his bed with another flask of the potion. Draco takes it from her wordlessly. Her ears turn pink and she says in her squeaky, little voice, "Your father awaits you for dinner, Master Draco."

Draco's chest constricts uncomfortably. He hasn't seen his father since the tongue-cutting incident and he doesn't know if he's ready yet. He's already adjusted to the idea that he has to play whatever sick part his father is expecting of him, at least until he finds his mother. Does he have to pretend to be the grateful son or the devote follower? The problem with this plan is that he's still unsure what his father actually wants from him. It's clear that Lucius is even more unhinged than the last time he saw him, which makes him unpredictable.

He takes his time changing into his new robes and leaves for dinner. It isn't surprising when a guard follows him down the hall, to which Draco rolls his eyes. "You do realize I used to live here, right? I think I can manage on my own."

Cold, blue eyes look at him with amusement, but otherwise the man has no response.

His father is already waiting in the dining hall, seated at the head of the table. He gives Draco a smile and gestures to the seat next to his. Draco silently takes it and tries not to stare at the knife displayed innocently on the table.

"Thank you, Rook. I can handle it from here." In surprise, Draco turns to look back at the man who's retreating, his eyes hidden by the fringe of brown hair. So he's the one who blinded Harry. He tries to memorize every detail of his profile so that he could seek him out later.

"Where do you find these freaks?" Draco wonders out loud.

"They find me. Please make an effort to be cordial. They're guest in our home." Lucius says this without force. He seems to be in a good mood. "How are you feeling?" his father asks as a house elf begins to serve him the first course.

"Peachy."

"Good." Lucius exclaims, blatantly ignoring the sarcasm. "You'll need your strength."

"And why is that, Father?" he asks, as he's expected to.

"Both your physical and magical training begin tomorrow. I'm not going to let you waste your time here like you were doing at that school. You'll start catching up on your course material and then quickly advance past it."

"How would you know how I spent my time at Hogwarts?" He picks at food before him, not feeling hungry.

His father gives him a meaningful smile. "I've had eyes on you for months." Draco's blood runs cold and he clutches tightly at his fork. Does that mean his father knows about Harry? Not that there's anything to know, except that they spent a lot of time together… oh fuck. "It was quite frustrating to learn you're not doing well in your courses. I gathered from the reports that you had certain distractions."

He knows. Draco feign ignorance. He takes a few slow bites before saying, "if you've been tailing me for months, why didn't you just take me sooner?"
"You know perfectly well how difficult it is to breech the school grounds. I believe we came close once, on Halloween-"

"Halloween?" Draco remembers that night clearly. It was the night he followed Harry into the Forbidden Forest. Someone had been watching him from the shadows, had been following him.

It was the same night Blaise had been killed. He remembers Harry finding him. Draco places his head in his hands. "You killed him."

"He was a traitor."

Draco itches to grab the knife but stops himself. He wills himself to stay still, to be smart, cold and calculating, just like his father taught him. Lucius stares at his son carefully as he savours his wine, and all Draco can do is shake his head to keep himself from saying something he'll regret.

"He was one of us," he says at last.

"He was a spy," Lucius replies. "He was keeping tabs on you for the Ministry."

That sounds insane but it doesn't even register with him. "He was my friend."

Lucius gives him a patient look. "I know you and Zabini had history, but he abandoned you when you needed his support." Draco wonders how he could know that Blaise had stopped speaking to him. "Perhaps he needed to keep to his distance in order to convince the Ministry… I'm not sure. It's only clear he wasn't a true ally."

Draco scowls down at his food. What would he have done if the roles were reversed and he had to keep tabs on Blaise? Would he have trusted Blaise enough to warn him, or would he have kept his distinct and watched him from afar? Whatever the case may be, Blaise didn't deserve what he got. He wishes now that Blaise had truly kept his distance.

"Which one of them killed him?" he asks.

His father sighs in exasperation. "Draco, don't fret about that. What's done is done. You'll have better friends now. Friends that won't rat you out to the Ministry." He smiles reassuringly and Draco's insides twists in a sickening way.

"Do you really think those people won't give us up the first chance they have?" He makes sure to emphasize the 'us' instead of the 'you'.

"They've all been tested and have proven their loyalty. Soon it'll be your turn."

"Father," he tries not to sound impatient, "you keep hinting that there's something I have to do but you're purposely being unclear. Just tell me what it is?" What are you expecting of me?

"You'll see in time. I have great plans for you."

"What plans?"

That same fondness is back, and it makes Draco almost forget that his father is mental. "I'm going to make you stronger."

His father didn't elaborate on what plans he has for Draco. Instead, he ended dinner with clear instructions. Draco must obey his father. Draco is free to wander the grounds on his own time, but he must not leave the premise. If Draco does everything that he's told and he doesn't give his father a
reason to be angry, then he'll see his Mother very soon. He must not ask about his Mother again.

That night Draco began searching for clues of his Mother's whereabouts. He finds discarded letters from the Ministry addressed to his Mother. He finds her belongings untouched, everything where it should be. He know this search is futile, that all evidence of what has happened to her has been carefully removed, but he needs to do this in order to keep his sanity. Searching for his Mother keeps his mind off of the pain in his mouth and the fear in his chest. It helps him forget the taste of his own blood.

Hours later he collapses with exhaustion into his Mother's favourite armchair. He leans his head back, staring dully at the grey ceiling, and closes his eyes. He doesn't even care that he forgot to take the numbing potion because he's so, so tired…

When he dreams of Harry, not of blood and hooded men, it feels like hope. They're walking towards the Quidditch pitch together, each of them balancing their brooms on their shoulders. Harry's laughing at something Draco's said and Draco has the urge to kiss him. But he shouldn't because they're someone watching. He turns to see who it is and jolts awake when someone slaps him on the face.

"You have a perfectly comfortable bed, and you chose a chair?" Rook asks him as he strides over to the curtains and throws them open. "Strange lad."

"What do you want?" Draco growls, even though a part of him is thrilled at his fortune. What are the chances that Rook approached him first? He thought he would have some difficulty finding him.

"First day of training." Rook throws a set of clean clothes at him. "Get dressed."

When he's done getting dressed, he opens the door to find Rook waiting for him with crossed arms. "Finally. You Malfoys take bloody forever to get ready."

Now that he's awake and alert, Draco properly takes in Rook's features. Rook can't be that much older than Draco, although he is a few inches taller. His default expression, both charming and cold, carefree and cruel, is frankly a little unsettling. "Why am I wearing this?" he tugs at the loose garment that's meant for jogging.

"We're running 20k."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"Nope. Your father says you're out of shape," Rook laughs. "Anytime you leave the grounds I have to join you. My job is to make sure you come back." He flashes a toothy grin at him. "By any means necessary."

"So you're my sitter. How impressive."

"Well – let's just say I have a reputation of getting the job done."

When they begin jogging, Draco doesn't have much trouble keeping a good pace. Rook tries to get him to talk but he just grunts vague responses. What's Rook's deal? Why is he so interested in what he has to say? Draco knows he can use this to his advantage. If he plays his cards right, he might find out more information about the blinding curse…

"Just hypothetically speaking, if I wanted to get away, I'd probably have to take you out first?" Draco asks him between breaths.
"Yes, you'd have to do that since I don't think you could outrun me. But you're not stupid. You know I hold all the power in this dynamic of ours, and I could easily kill you."

Draco snorts. "You can't kill me. My father wants me alive."

"Yes well, I'm sure he wouldn't object if I brought you back with missing limbs."

"Ahh, so you'd cut off my feet? But then you'd have to carry me back."

"It'd be worth it if I could find out how long it takes to regrow feet. I've always wondered. Weeks, I reckon. Hey, you're tongue completely better?"

"Yes," he replies shortly.

"We all had a bit of a laugh that night. Do you know what he has planned for you?"

"No idea. Why don't you enlighten me?"

"Oh mate, I would if I could. Top secret and all. Hey why are you slowing down? We only have 5k to go."

Draco is slowing down. He hasn't ran in months and to start with 20k was a bit overzealous. His chest is aching and his muscles are getting tired. When Rook makes a snide remark, he growls low in his stomach and strengthens his pace, ignoring Rook's cheerful exclamation.

"Gotta say, I'm surprised. You never ran back at Hogwarts. You just flew around all day with the Chosen One."

Draco grits his teeth and tries to not to let his nervousness show.

"What do you two talk about?" Rook asks.

"The usual: school, the war, being blinded by lunatics." He throws a meaningful glance at him.

Rook laughs heartily. "When I first saw him stumbling around like that, fuck I just laughed so hard. I had completely forgotten I did that. Poor chap."

"Why don't you take him out of his misery?"

Rook gives him a confused look. "Because it's funny, Draco. Who else could say they've slighted Harry Potter? But I suppose even fewer can say they've spent as much time with him as you have. Few can say they're close to him." Rook smirk at him and Draco has the urge to punch him in the face. "I saw you two together. You two were inseparable. You enjoyed each other's company. Really it was quite … adorable." Draco refuses to acknowledge Rook's words in any way. Instead he keeps his eyes fixed ahead and his laboured breathing steady. He can see the manor in the distance, the trail before him dense with trees and uneven ground. If he just focuses on his steps, he won't give Rook the satisfaction of acknowledging him.

Just when he thinks that Rook must have lost interest, he feels Rook approach him, running close to his side. Draco shudders when the man places his hand on his back and whispers close to his ear: "Don't worry, it can be our little secret."
Mantra of Secrets

Chapter Summary

I find it's best to avoid secrets. Sometimes we need to give people a chance. - Hermione

Draco sucks the air in between his teeth with a grimace when the curse hits him in the stomach. He feels the sharp sting of a fresh cut slice his skin and instinctively presses his hand over the wound. But a moment too late he realizes this is a mistake. His father takes this opportunity to disarm him.

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead. Again."

He tosses Draco's wand at him, which he catches easily enough given the circumstances. Holding on tightly to his wand, he tries to ignore the injuries his father has inflicted and stands in the correct position to begin another round. Why did he ever think this was fun as a child? Oh yes, that was before Lucius Malfoy bloody went mad.

He casts a silent stinging hex at his father but he blocks effortlessly. Draco then tries to disarm him but his father just shakes his head in unforgiving disapproval and a whispered *Protego*. His father casts another slicing curse at Draco that he blocks, but a second curse hits him on the arm. He can see blood seeping through the white cotton of his shirt.

Draco clenches his teeth in frustration before snapping, "If I could just rest-" Wordlessly, his father tries to cut his torso but Draco manages to block it. "Father-"

"Is this really the best you could do? *Parabilio.*"

Draco blocks the freezing charm. "I'm tired and I'm hungry," he says. "We've been at this for hours."

"*Crucio*," his father hisses.

Draco dodges it by leaping to the side and gives his father an incredulous. His father arches an eyebrow and Draco's expression turns hard. He throws an impact hex at his father, wanting him to feel the strength of his anger, but his father blocks it. Without thinking, he lashes out whatever spells comes to mind: "*diffindo, confringo, serpensorcia!*" His father blocks the first and dodges the second, which makes the drinks cabinet behind him explode into a ball of flame. But the snake that's emerges from Draco's wand lands at Lucius' feet and tries to strike at him. Lucius kicks the creatures back to Draco, directly onto his chest. Long, sharp teeth sink into the collar of his shirt and thankfully miss his skin. He shrieks and tries to rip the horrid thing off, but its body is quickly wrapping around Draco. "Get it off me!"

"Get it off yourself."

Draco snarls and even as coiled muscles begin to constrict around his upper chest, he twists the serpent's head between his hands. With a sickening snap, the creature disappears into a cloud of black smoke. Shakily, he looks up at his father to see him impatiently waiting for Draco to raise his wand arm for another duel. Draco's soaking with exhaustion, and he isn't sure how much longer he
can do this. He doesn't know how much more he can take his father berating him or his insatiable need to prove the degree of Draco's weakness. "This is pointless. I can't beat you."

"Of course not, but that isn’t the point.” Draco wipes the sweat on his forehead with the back of his arm but doesn't take his eyes off of his father, who is now leaning against the cane significantly more. "The point is you can do better, and still you're holding back."

"I'm trying my best," he grits through his teeth, pressing his hand against the wound on his stomach.

"It's not good enough," he father merely states.

"You've already said as much – nothing I do will ever be enough."

"Stop being melodramatic," Lucius sneers. "This isn't about your capabilities. This is about your effort and perseverance, which are both lacking. Again."

With effort, Draco holds in a scathing remark. He raises his aching arm to the ready position, a curse already on the tip of his tongue, but his father disarms him easily. With an impatient huff, Lucius tosses Draco's wand back to him.

"We will stay here until you are able to hold onto your wand. Again."

Draco barely makes a move but his father manages to disarm him again. He growls in the back of his throat when his father tosses it back to him.

"Again!"

Draco aims a cutting curse onto his father's cane, which is the quickest motion he could muster right now. The spell hits it before Lucius can block it in time. The cane splinters apart and forces Lucius to clutch at his leg. Draco takes this opportunity to disarm his father. He sees his wand fly up into the air and he moves to catch it. Only when he's clutching both wands firmly does he look at his father. He's relieved to see that he isn't angry. "When you're facing someone more experienced than yourself, find their weakness. Target it," he says, holding his hand out for Draco to give him back his wand.

Draco stares down at his hand. Will he ever have a chance like this one? His father is defenceless and he only has to overthrow one guard inside the room. He doesn’t dare sneak a glance at the Death Eater to his right. Instead he takes a wary step towards his father, a curse on the tip of his tongue.

"Next week I will teach you how to hide your weaknesses" his father says, his hand still outstretched.

Draco holds him back his wand because he knows there's no chance he can overthrow dozens of Death Eaters on his way out. He knows the smartest thing to do is to wait, so see what his father has planned for him. When he steps away from his father, he asks in a low voice, "May I please go?"

"You are dismissed."

Draco turns on the spot and wordlessly exits the room.

Draco holds in a groan as he carefully strips off his blood-stained shirt. He grimaces when he sees the dried blood on his stomach, sealing the recent wound. Removing the rest of his clothes, he
doesn't bother cleaning them up from the floor before he steps into the tub.

The water is hot enough to sting, but it's definitely the one thing his aching muscles crave right now. Slowly, he lets himself melt into it and can immediately feel the tickling effect of the healing concoctions that are mixed into the water. He absently scrubs away the dried blood on his skin, watching red swirl into clear water before turning it pink. He closes his eyes. Without a thought, he sinks his head back into the water, over his ears, face and nose.

Away from suspicious eyes, or worse, his father's disapproving ones, he remembers that he's more than an ex-Death Eater or the Malfoy heir. He reminds himself that he isn't the prodigal son who's come home. He isn't the weapon his father is sculpting him to be. He has to remind himself this is just an act. He knows the role well because he was once excited to play the part.

Draco won't let them see who he really is. He buries his secrets deeper with every hour he pretends he's someone else. He chooses to forget and he only dares to remember in rare moments like these; in hot, pink and sticky seas or in the green he aches for when he dreams.

And when he dares to remember, he recites each forgotten secrets inside the safety of his own mind: This isn't his home. Home is a place he never appreciated, for its lessons and lakes and tall towers. All his memories of growing up here seem to belong to another Draco, an innocent and naive boy, one who never understood the meaning of consequences. Now he knows the things you say or do or even think can affect people. They can hurt people.

That's his other secret: Draco doesn't belong here for the very reason that he cares. He cares about not hurting others. It's why he couldn't kill Dumbledore or give Potter up. It's sickening to admit but it's the truth, and he can't live a life pretending otherwise. It's always been the case, even though his father tried to smother it out of him. He was taught to be cold and calculating, which he's so good at, but he's so much more – he cares. It hurts that no one expects that of him. There's no one to teach him how to cope with this helpless, disabling feeling.

It's his last secret that is hardest to face. In these quiet moments he remembers Harry and misses him. He remembers who he is when he's with him and he knows he's never been more honest in his life. Isn't that what home should feel like? Complete acceptance from the one he cares for? He cares what Harry thinks of him, what Harry feels for him because he feels something for Harry.

Thinking of Harry makes him ache in a safe way. Thinking of him makes caring a little less scary. In fact, caring becomes easier than breathing when he remembers him. He sits up quickly and take a greedy gulp of air, a smile tugging at his lips, but jolts when he hears a voice interrupt his silent mantra of secrets: "You nearly hit the three minute mark. Impressive."

"What are you doing here?" Draco snarls, rubbing the water out of his eyes. "Get out!"

Rook chuckles and walks towards him. Draco sits up straighter and doesn't bother covering himself. He places his arms on the tubs and glares at Rook, not letting him see his nervousness. With a smile, Rook sits on the edge of the tub and smiles down at him. "Your father instructed I check on you."

"You can tell him I'm bathing." His tone is dismissive, making it clear he's not wanted, but Rook isn't taking the hint.

"I can see that." His eyes trail down to Draco's bare chest and lower, lingering there, making Draco's stomach churn to nausea.

"What the fuck do you want?"
Rook smirks at him, letting a tense silence settle between them. "Isn't it obvious?" Draco just stares at him with narrowed eyes, his face remaining impassive even as his pulse quickens uncomfortably. "I'd like us to be friends."

Draco doesn't say anything, doesn't dare to move in case Rook misreads that as interest. Rook leans into the tub and Draco fights the urge to inch away. He watches warily as Rook trails his fingers over the surface of the still water. "I know the only reason you've entertained my presence is because of Potter-"

"Not that again," he drawls.

"Stop. I already told you, I know. Anyone could see it if they just looked. But my point is, I have a proposition which I think you'll find interesting. I'm willing to take the blinding curse off in exchange for your friendship." He smiles at him then.

Draco's lip twists into a sneer as his insides twist unpleasantly. "What does that entail, exactly?"

Rook stands up, nearly grinning. "You already know. Think about it." He gives Draco a sweeping look before he turns to leave. "Oh, I almost forgot, your father expects you not to be late for dinner." He departs with a sly glance at Draco before closing the bathroom door.

Draco shudders and waits to be sure that Rook is gone before moving. He stands up with a sigh under his breath, no longer feeling like taking a bath.

Harry can hear Ron’s determined step as he begins to gather his supplies. "There's no way I'm letting you go to the Malfoy Manor alone," he says.

"This is something I have to do by myself." Harry begins to reply.

"How exactly? I'm sorry to be blunt, mate, but you're bloody blind! You need my help."

"I'm not defenceless."

"I know that. But you also aren't stupid. You know I'm right."

"But - why? It's not like you care what happens to Malfoy."

"You're right I don't." He stops rummaging through his bag, taking a moment to search for the right words. "Remember when we fought last year when we were hunting for Horcruxes? And I left." Harry nods uncomfortably. He and Ron had an implied truce never to speak of that again. "As soon as I left, I knew I made a mistake. Not because you were right, but because I never thought I'd be that person – y'know - The one who turns his back on his friend when he needs him most."

"Ron-" Harry tries to interject.

"My point it - I made a promise to never let that happen again - So - I'm coming, alright?"

Harry knows he can't stop him and that he shouldn't. Ron's right. He can't do this alone. "Okay."

Harry offers a weak smile. "What will we tell Hermione?"

"Tell me what?" Hermione asks by the doorway.

"Harry is going on a mission to rescue Malfoy and he needs our help," Ron says with amusement.
Harry can tell the two of them are exchanging a look. "You make it sound ridiculous! D-Malfoy hasn't been seen in weeks and his Mother is missing. I know something's wrong." It sounds farfetched even to his own ears.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione says empathetically.

"I already told him it's not his problem, but you know…" Ron trails off.

Harry's face warms up because Hermione knows the extent of his feelings for Draco. He turns away from Ron so he doesn't see his face and flatly states, "Hermione, I think you should stay. Exams are just around the corner."

"I'm already ready for them," she says dismissively. "But Harry, I just don't know what you expect you'll accomplish. Maybe this is a job for the Ministry-"

"The Ministry doesn't care what happens to the Malfoys. If anything, it would be in their interest if they - disappeared!"

"I'm sure if you said something-"

"Hermione, I need to go. I just-" He searches for an explanation and comes short. "I know I have to find him. I feel it. I think it's the effects of the Cor Videt-"

"It's not the Cor Videt. It's just you." Hermione's voice catches and Harry frowns.

"What is it?" he asks

He can tell she's deliberating and having a hard time admitting something. "Harry, I'm so sorry… I just thought you needed a confidence boost. It was really, really difficult to see how down you were."

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"The Cor Videt I gave you wasn't real," she whispers.

"That can't be true. I feel it all the time."

"No. I didn't add the active ingredient. I knew that you just needed to think you were getting it."

"Why wouldn't you just give him the real thing?" Ron asks in disbelief.

"It's highly addictive and has some very bad effects." She turns back to Harry. "I gave you a placebo… I just wanted you to remember your own intuition. You don't need a potion to know what you should do next, Harry. You're the most intuitive person I know."

"But-" Harry shakes his head lightly. "Why are you telling me this now?" he asks.

"Because I know how reckless you can be! I just want you to be careful. I want you to have a plan."

He doesn't understand how his own intuition could have led him to Draco that first time at the Tower. If he hadn't woken up that night and strolled to that exact spot, would Draco be alive? Could his own intuition have led him to Draco almost effortlessly all those times after that? Then there are the dreams he can barely remember and the flickers of light he sees. It's doesn't make sense that it's all in his head.

Even so, right now, he can't think of that. He's racing against time and he has a feeling that if he
doesn't leave soon, it'll be too late.

In a small voice, Hermione says, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

With a shake of his head, he picks up his knapsack and says, "It’s alright. Just make it up to me with a plan?"

Hermione convinced Harry to wait twenty minutes while she gathered supplies and met with McGonagall to explain their absence. None of them know how long this will take and it’s best not to have people worrying about their absence.

Hermione's plan is to apparate to Grovely Woods, which is within walking distance to the Malfoy Manor, but far enough that they're safe from being seen.

After a faint pop and a brief moment of suspension, Harry finds himself landing on uneven ground of wet leaves. He could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders bumping into his. The air is cold and musky with a tannin scent of rich wood and fallen leaves, reminding him of Draco. Harry bites his lip to hide a smile as wind sweeps through his hair.

With Hermione's instruction, they begin to tread carefully. Harry uses a stick to feel the ground before him so he has a better sense of where to step. It's a slow ordeal and he knows it'd be 10 times easier with sight, but he doesn't complain because each step closer to the Manor is closer to him.

"Why didn't we just apparate at the gates?" Ron wonders while munching on a sandwich. Hermione had wisely brought dinner.

Hermione guides Harry away from a mud spot wordlessly. "We don't know who could be waiting. If Harry's right, which I suspect he is, then Malfoy isn't there on his own accord. Oh sorry, Harry." Harry trips over a root and nearly falls over, but Hermione keeps him upright.

"Yeah, but this path is too uneven for Harry," Ron says.

"I'm alright, Ron. We'll be at the edge of the woods in no time, right?" Harry says Hermione.

"About ten minutes. From there we'll decide what the best route to the Manor is," she responds.

Harry nods absently, trying to concentrate on where he's stepping.

"Did you know this is where the Handsel sisters were killed?" Hermione asks them after a few minutes.

"Who are they?" Both Ron and Harry ask.

"Honestly, how did you two pass History? They were healers back in the 1700s that tried to cure smallpox in muggles. They didn't realize they couldn't help the muggles and hundreds of them died. What's worse is that the sisters were accused by the surviving muggles of inflicting the disease. They ultimately killed for being witches."

"Oh I remember that. Wasn't one of them betrothed to a Malfoy?" Ron asks.

"That’s right." She chuckles a little sadly. “The Malfoys were very powerful members of society at the time. After this happened, they helped enforce the statute of wizarding secrecy."

"Do you think it'll always be that way?" Ron asks. "That we have to live in secret?"

"I think so," Harry says. "Sometimes the safest thing to do is to keep a secret."
"I find it's best to avoid secrets. Sometimes we need to give people a chance." Hermione says this
with meaning. Harry suspects she's hinting at something only Harry understands. He doesn't reply
and continues to feel the ground in front of him with his stick.

"If we go through the gardens there's less of a chance of being seen," Ron whispers. They're out
of the woods now, leaning against a solid stone wall that separates the back of the property from the
fields and wilderness they just came from. "We can climb the wall and hide."

"Wait, let me check for alarms," Hermione says. Harry hears her muttering and once again wonders
how he could have done this without her. "They have a couple set in place, but it should be safe as
long as we don't use our wands past this point, or steal."

"They have an anti-theft alarm set in place?" Ron snorts. “Typical.”

"I imagine they must have had hundreds of theft attempts over the centuries."

"Hermione, how will we get in if we can't use magic?" Harry asks.

"I'm afraid that's where you take over, Harry."

Harry smirks and faces the stone wall. He rubs his hands together to warm them quickly before he
jumps up to grab the edge of the wall. With the help of his shoes scraping against the stone, he jumps
up just enough to throw his right arm over the top. Slowly, he raises the rest of his body and climbs
onto the wall.

"Hermione, you next." Harry reaches his hands down for her to grab. "Ron, help her up." Hermione
struggles to climb the wall, but with their help she manages. "Ron?" Harry offers his hands which he
takes and climbs easily enough.

Ron is the first to jump off the wall. The jump, which once would have been easier for Harry to do,
is significantly harder than the climb because he can't predict where he'll fall. Ron catches Hermione
and whispers, "Harry, hurry up."

Tucking in his feet, Harry jumps off and is surprised when Ron catches his arm.

He can hear Hermione gasp and turns to her nervously, "It's so beautiful," she whispers.

"I can't believe someone lives here," Ron mumbles.

"What do you see?" Harry asks, annoyed.

"The garden, it's lovely," Hermione breathes.

"Well, later we can ask Draco for a bloody tour. Ron, lead the way." He notices the slip of his name
but can't be bothered to care right now. He's too nervous and perhaps Ron feels the same way,
because he doesn't comment on it. Ron keeps them hidden in the shadows of bushes and statues
while they sneak their way ever closer to the back doors.

After checking the doors and windows, which are all locked, Harry turns to them and says with quiet
urgency, "I have an idea, which you won't like." He ignores Ron's groan and Hermione's sigh and
begins to tell them his plan.
Draco has never felt more tired in his life than he has in these last two weeks. Every waking moment is accounted for. When he isn't training or learning, he's obeying his father's every word. He wakes early to either run with Rook or do combat training with another, much quieter Death Eater. The middle of the day is filled with lessons on his course material and healing spells. The days end with dueling practice followed by a long, uncomfortable dinner. Several times a week his father coaches him in the Dark Arts, and it's these days that are hardest on Draco.

"Repeat after me: *vita exprimendum,*" his father says carefully.

Draco repeats the words, knowing their meaning but trying not to fully understand their consequence.

"Don't forget that the elbow should be raised at the start," his father reminds him. He made Draco practice the wand technique early. "Now cast the spell." He gestures to a cage that holds a small, yellow bird. It quivers as it edges as far away from them as possible, its small beak chattering silently.

Draco raises his wand and aims it at the canary. How fetching.

"Do it now," his father insists.

He wonders if the bird can sense Draco's intentions. Sending the pain below, he utters the curse: "*vita exprimendum.*"

The bird chirps once, in shock, and Draco watches as it struggles against the invisible force that squeezes his lungs. In his will to breath, to live, his wings spread out in odd, sharp angles. But with one last twitch, he stops fighting.

Draco numbly swallows. He looks to his father, who nods with a hint of approval. "You have a natural gift." If possible, this makes Draco feel even more ill, but he nods to show he's grateful for the compliment, even as his insides churn.

When the lesson is over Draco calmly leaves and walks towards one of the guest lavatories. As soon as he hears the soft click of the door closing he runs to the toilet and launches his face over it, his hands grasping at it as his insides turn on him and he retches his lunch.

"Ahh," he groans, needing to fucking get a hold of himself. "Fuck, fuck." He shouldn't care this much about a fucking bird. Fuck. Why does he care so much?

He gulps in a breath and rubs his exhausted eyes. It's not just the bird. Yes, he feels ashamed to have killed the creature without any sort of reason other than to please his father. That in itself is awful, but Draco has done worse wearing a similar mask. No, no. It's the Dark Magic his father has made him learn these last couple of weeks. It's tainting him. He can feel it coursing through his veins, even as his body is still fighting its effects. He's trying not to want it, to not become addicted to the sweet surge of power it gives him. Draco trembles as he stands over the sink, turning the tap on to wash his mouth; to rid of the bitter taste of shame.

Looking into the mirror, he locks eyes with silver and watches as they darken. Fixing his hair, he watches his expression becoming impassive.

When he leaves to go to his room, he stills to sense someone watching from the depths of a long corridor.

"I know you're there," he says in a drawl.
Rook steps away from the shadows with a hop in his step. "I have something you want." He walks up to Draco.

"What could that be?" Draco frowns and unconsciously leans back as Rook invades his personal space.

"Well, I'm not supposed to say." He almost looks regretful except for the excited glint in his eye. When Draco scoffs and begins to turn away impatiently, Rook puts his arm out to block his path, leaning now against the wall. "Aren't you curious?"

Draco fights the urge to punch him in the face, instead he scowls and crosses his arms. "Of course. But I have a feeling you aren’t willing to face my father’s wrath – so why bother?"

"Well, if you could make it worth my while…" He smiles down at Draco and places his free hand on his chest, his fingers playing with a button on his shirt, "I wouldn't mind breaking my vows just this once."

"Don't touch me," Draco says.

"Or what?" Rook asks, leaning his face closer into Draco's.

Draco pushes him back violently with a snarl, "Listen, you fucker." He grabs the collar of his shirt and hisses close to his face, "I could get away with killing you. Do you think my father would punish me? Do you think anyone would miss you? No. So don't give me a reason for wanting you dead."

Rook chuckles in surprise. "I like this side of you!"

Draco releases him quickly and steps away. "Stay away from me." He turns to get away from him.

"Does your father know you're a poof?" Rook says to his back. Draco stops in his tracks and turns to look at him suspiciously. "I wonder what he would say if he found out the sole Malfoy heir fancies blokes, well at least one in particular."

Draco arches a brow. "Why would he believe you?"

"He knows how well I know you. He was the one who assigned me to watch you at Hogwarts."

Draco turns his whole body slowly to face him, a realization dawning on him. "No one else was assigned to watch me?"

"Just me." Rook smiles now and cocks his head for Draco to follow him.

Draco does, because he now knows who killed Blaise. With a real reason, he follows him silently. He watches his back, willing self-restraint. The only thing holding him back from attacking Rook is the fact that he’s taking him to the dungeons. Draco's pulse skips unpleasantly as they continue to descend. He knows he shouldn't hope that he's taking him to his mother. He knows this is most likely a trap, but what if it isn't?

They stop in front of a door that leads to one of the cells and Rook unlocks it. "Open it," Rook says, stepping out of the way.

Draco opens the door wide and stops abruptly at its frame when he sees Potter in a cell, holding onto the black bars for support. Draco takes in the pain written on his face and his green eyes widening in astonishment.
“Draco?” he asks, still blind but impossibly recognizing him.
Chapter Summary

Evil? That's awfully naive of you. - Lucius

At the sight of him, Draco's chest constricts uncomfortably as he takes in a tight breath.

"Draco?" Potter asks from within the cell, his body leaning forward as he holds onto the bars.

Draco notices the way he's favouring one side and how he's trying to hold in a grimace. It's evident he's in pain. He turns to stare hard at Rook, who he should have guessed would have no qualms about beating up a blind man. Draco's expression only hardens into outward passivity when he catches amusement in his eyes.

Rook smiles and flickers his wand between him and Harry. "Don't be rude, Draco. Say hello."

Draco merely shrugs, feigning indifference. "Why did you take me here, Rook?" Although he sounds convincingly apathetic he knows Harry should catch the name and realize his capturer is the one who blinded him. "What's this got to do with me?"

Rook gives him a knowing smile before shaking his head with a chuckle. "You're pretty convincing. I could see how you fooled the Dark Lord."

"Convincing of what, exactly?" Draco asks, crossing his arms.

"The Dark Lord never showed mercy to traitors. If he has seen through your act - how you didn’t give a shit about any of it, how you were merely pretending - He would have killed you for it." Draco doesn’t respond, his expression made out of stone. "You’re a superb liar, so good it's second nature. It's the only reason you're alive today."

"Or it’s all in your head."

"I've watched you for a long time and I know when you're lying and when you're afraid." Rook smiles at him again. "Like right now."

Draco casually looks to the side to hide the fact that it's true: his pulse skips and his thoughts race quickly. He's afraid for Harry and needs to get him out. Pretending to not care is pointless, because as deranged as Rook is he's right about Draco. Draco scowls as he wonders in frustration how the fuck he let it show.

Rook smiles broadly and jerks his head to Potter. "You fucked up." Draco allows himself to look at Harry, who's looking both apprehensive and alert, both the victim and the hero, and Draco's stomach flutters even now. Harry looks exactly as he last remembers: his awful clothes, his ruffled hair, his stubborn eyes - But there's something different that he nearly missed. "He's wearing your Mother’s pendant. You gave it to him before you left." Rook can barely contain his smugness because this is what gives Draco away, more than anything.
Draco purposely looks between Rook and Harry as he quickly reassess the situation. He knows there’s no point pretending he doesn’t care. Rook won’t be fooled. So he’ll just have to use Rook’s weaknesses against him… which he has an inkling of what that is. Hoping he isn't making a mistake, Draco walks up to Harry and asks in a low voice, "Why the hell are you here?"

Harry, who had been keenly listening, jumps slightly to be addressed so unexpectedly. He visibly swallowing and he can only pray that Potter doesn't say or do anything stupid. "I heard about your Mother - I... I came to help."

Draco scoffs, but not unkindly. "You bloody hero." He He Hhhmakes sure to angle himself away from Rook, to only give Harry his attention. “I think you’re testing your luck, Potter.” He lowers his voice, stepping closer. “You shouldn’t have come-”

“And miss all the fun? Unlikely.” Harry smile a little and Draco nearly does, just for him

Rook takes an impatient step towards them, not liking the fact that he's being ignored. Draco internally smirks. "Seeing the two of you again - it's quite touching.” He smiles in a way that doesn't reach his eyes. “But time is running out. Draco, I’ll make this clear. Say yes to my offer-”

“Your offer?” Draco asks. He knows what Rook wants and he has to pretend to give it to him. He has to pretend he'll do anything to get Potter out. Instead of apathy, Draco has to wear the mask of quiet desperation.

Rook gives him an impatient look, stepping closer to him. “Say yes and Harry is set free.”

Draco feigns ignorance as he warily searches the way Rook’s eyes rake over his frame and he takes a step back. "You're fucking sick."

"Maybe - but I always get what I want." Rook continues to approach him and Draco edges away, making sure to get closer to Harry’s cell. "Personally, I think it's a fair deal-"

“It's not happening,” Draco snarls.

"What other choice do you have?" Rook's so close to Draco now that he can see his dilated pupils, the blue in his eyes shrinking away. "I'll let Potter go and no one will ever know he was here, in exchange for…” Rook tugs at Draco's shirt as the words trail into a whisper, "having you."

"I told you not to touch me," Draco says and he ignores the way Harry goes rigid beside him.

"Or else?" Rook asks him, just as he had done earlier. He tilts his face close to Draco's, still faintly smirking as he places his hand on his torso. "You need me to save him. If he finds out Potter's here, he’ll kill him. You know it’s true. I know you don't want that to happen."

“Draco,” Harry calls out and he makes sure Rook sees him glance at Harry. "Why didn't you tell him yet?” he asks. Rook has just admitted that he hasn't told his father anything and he doesn't understand why. He's confused why Rook would risk disobeying his father like this.

"It would have been impossible to get Potter out if he knew - he'd make sure to keep him here. But what he doesn't know won't hurt him… This way we both get what we want -” Rook begins to tug at his shirt, drawing closer to him.

Draco shrugs him off violently and pushes him back. "Stop – I didn’t agree.” Draco’s stalling, waiting for Rook to slip up, but he didn’t expect Rook to advance here, in front of Harry.

Rook exhales loudly and his wand flicks impatiently in his hand. "I’ll tell you what I know about
your Mother’s whereabouts.”

“What do you mean, ‘what you know’?” Draco steps quickly to him, ignoring Rook suddenly pointing his wand against his throat. "Where is she? Tell me!"

"After you agree to the terms, Draco," Rook says patiently.

Draco goes hot with anger and nearly reaches to grab his wand out of his hand. He knows this would be a mistake and his opportunity would be lost. So swallowing the bitter taste of hate, he asks tightly, "What would I have to do, exactly?"

"Anything I wanted," Rook replies.

"Don't!" Harry shakes the bars, his knuckles becoming ghost white from how tightly he's holding onto them. "Don't you fucking dare, Draco!"

Draco chooses to ignore Harry, which he notices pleases Rook. "You have to let him go first."

"No -" both Rook and Harry say.

"Then no deal," he says with a shrug.

Rook gives him an inquisitive look and closes the gap between them. He grabs a lock of Draco’s hair and pulling his head back, jabbing his wand against his exposed throat. "I have a feeling you're bluffing," he says in a low voice. He begins to travels his wand down over his shirt, magically opening it. Draco pulls away in revulsion, wincing when Rook pulls his hair. "Stop it." Rook says close to his face, leaning his lips down onto Draco's.

"Don't fucking touch him."

They both turn their heads to look at Harry.

Draco stills to see that face again, the same one that defeated a Dark Lord. He’s shocked that he’d almost forgotten how intimidating Potter can be: his every muscle ready, his green eyes ablaze and an invisible aura radiating from him, his magic humming in the air.

Draco catches a look of apprehension from Rook, but he shakes his head and chuckles. "Try to stop me, Chosen One. _Silenco_."

Draco isn't surprised when Harry dodges the spell effortlessly. He's seen first-hand how sharp his reflexes are. Rook casts another but Potter sidesteps it, rushing to the lock of his cell. He places his hand on it, and an audible _click_ is heard.

Rook turns away from Draco to hastily point his wand at Harry. “I dare you to-!” In his distraction, Draco takes this opportunity to punch Rook in the stomach and twists his wand arm behind his back. Draco bends his arm awkwardly, nearly breaking it. The satisfying sound of Rook howling in pain is followed by the clatter of a wand falling to the floor.

Draco picks up his wand and presses it into his back. “You killed him, didn't you?”

“Killed who?” Rook asks in amusement. Draco hits him with an impact curse and Rook gasps in an impaled sort of way. “Oh – Zabini?!” he laughs and Draco bends his arms more severely, twisting his laughter into a cry.

“I should kill you,” he says in a low voice, fighting the urge to just say it – just say it-
“Draco – stun him!” Harry says, rushing close to him.

"Even Potter knows you can’t," Rook says through a grimace.

"You underestimated how much I want you dead."

"You couldn't live with yourself if you tried," Rook laughs again and Draco pushes him to the ground.

“You’re wrong.” He swings his foot into Rooks stomach as he tries to get away.

Draco remembers his friend and kicks him in the chest. He remember Harry finding him, Harry stumbling around blindly, and Rook fucking *laughing*. Crouching low, he bends over Rook to punch the smug look off of his face. Rook struggles to get away, laughing as Draco swings his fist at him again and again. He remembers every lingering touch and greedy look, he remembers every threat and jeer and how he always *laughed*. He remembers his helplessness, all the ways he had to pretend-

Someone pulls him off and he fights to keep hurting. "Stop it! Draco!"

Harry places himself between him and Rook and Draco yells, “He’s a MURDERER!”

“So will you be if you don’t STOP!” Harry places his hands on his shoulders, squeezing them hard to keep him back. He nearly pushes him off until he notices his expression. He's doing that thing again, seeing him when he possibly can't. "That's not you!"

When Draco nods tightly, Harry hesitantly lets him go. Draco sidesteps him to approach Rook, his face a swollen mess of red and blue. Blood is spilling over his chin and one of his eyes is closed shut, but still he manages to ask, "Is that the best you have?"

Draco points his wand at him and says, "*Imperio.*"

"What are you doing?" Harry asks loudly. "You don't have to-

"It's the only way, Harry," Draco says.

"It's not-" Harry begins.

"We don't have time to do it your way! Now shut up, I need to focus-" he says this in a rush - panic creeping into his voice. Being connected to someone under the Imperius Curse is like having a foggy window into their mind. Frankly, Rook's mind makes him feel nauseous: he never knew the extent to Rook's madness. But he's also stronger than Draco gave him credit for. He's fighting Draco off with an unhinged will, so much that Draco's control over him is nearly slipping away.

Draco locks eyes with Rook's expressionless ones, and says in a careful, soothing tone, "I want you to listen to me carefully. You will stay still. You won't do anything I don't ask. I'm going to hand you this wand and I want you to only cast the spells that I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Draco -" Harry says warily, "this isn't right."

"Are you going to follow my orders?" Draco asks Rook.

"Y- Yes."

"Don’t fight me. I'm not going to hurt you, not as long as you do what I say." Potter frown but he
could care less. The idiot got them into this mess… but Draco reminds himself that's not quite true. Draco was the one to come here in the first place, with no plan better than dying. Draco was the one who left Harry clues, hoping he'd follow. Draco holds in a sigh. "First - Where is my mother?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me, did you lie to me earlier when you said you had information?"

"No."

"So what do you know?" he asks impatiently. "Tell me everything!"

"All I know is that she's hidden with family."

Draco frowns, because that could be a dozen places. He's sure he'll be able to find her now, as soon as he gets out of here alive.

"Alright, now reverse the effects of the Blinding Curse you put on Harry."

Harry's mouth goes dry and he stands still, afraid to hope that it'll be this easy. He's half expecting Rook to fight off Draco's control and curse them both, but Draco really has a handle on this - more than Harry's comfortable admitting right now.

"Revertetur conspectu," Rook begins, and Harry eyes widen because he recognizes the counter spell. He stills in anticipation, not quite believing this is happening. Then he feels something press into his eyes and he gasps, because what started as a stinging sensation has escalated to a burning one. Harry has to press his palms over his eyes to not cry out, to rub the pain away, but it's only seeping further into his head. He vaguely hears Draco stun Rook, who falls to the floor with a thud, but Harry could care less because his eyeballs must be on fire.

He feels Draco approach him quickly and Harry rasps, "Something's wrong!" He tries to open his eyes but all he sees is white and the pain in his retinas intensify. "It's too bright-" He hears Draco dull the lights in the room, but Harry's eyes are shut tight now, tears welling.

He jolts when he feels Draco take his face into his hands and peer carefully into his eyes. "This is normal - I think - actually I don't remember it hurting this much - or at all. Shit! I don't know!" Draco rambles.

"Draco!" Harry protests weakly, "that isn't helping!" In truth, Draco's horrible attempt to reassure him is helping, or maybe it's due to the fact of being this close to him again, but the pain is beginning to recede. He blinks a few times and is shocked to see the brightness of vision beginning to make sense.

"Anything yet?" Draco asks.

Harry forces himself to keep his eyes open for longer than a moment and although there's pain, he can make out the hazy shape of Draco. "Yeah…" he says in awe. He blinks some more to adjust to his new found vision and the pieces start to fall in place: platinum hair that catches the low light, furrowed eyebrows fixed in concern, silver eyes specked with amber, watching Harry intently. Harry catches a flicker of a hopeful smile and a slow grin begins to spread over his face. He shamelessly stares as he memorizes all the details and idiosyncrasies that make up Draco Malfoy. "I can see you."
Harry's rewarded with the sight of Draco laughing, and not the lopsided, sarcastic one he's used to, but one that lights up his whole face and makes his eyes kind. "The-boy-who-could-see," he teases, even as he searches Harry's eyes for any sign of distress. "How's your vision?"

"Blurry-" he says absently. He's distracted by how awfully close Draco is to him right now. When he was blind, he always spoke to Draco this close, merely feet away. All his senses except for his vision got used to this change, but now Harry can see just how much their relationship has changed. This proximity would have been uncomfortable once, if not downright threatening. Now he has no desire to step away. No - maybe moving in a little closer would be just right.

Harry smiles when Draco goes pink under his stare. God, was he always this stupidly good looking? Harry can make out the dip of Draco's adam's apple as he nervously swallows and let's go of Harry's face rather quickly. He breaks eye contact and looks away. "You need glasses," he says as he searches his pockets distractedly. Draco finds a quill and an eyebrow quirks in contemplation, before he flicks his wand in a graceful motion to transform it to a pair of lenses. "It's bizarre that I got so used to you without them," Draco whispers before placing the frames carefully onto Harry's face. Harry blinks, letting his vision adjust, and he can't help but continue to stare. "How's that?" Draco asks.

"Perfect," Harry says and Draco fight back a smile. He notices that Draco's shirt is unbuttoned and Harry goes hot with anger. Rook must have - Shaking his head, Harry reaches out to button up Draco's shirt with a frown. He realizes how odd this gesture is, but it wasn't something he could do before so he doesn't care. "Draco, were you really going to let him?"

"No! I just had to distract him. I couldn't see any other way to get his guard down-" Draco stops talking when Harry steps close to him and pulls him into a tight hug. Out of sheer habit, Draco initially stills but then he melts into Harry's arms with a chuckle. He hugs him back, his arms around his shoulders and neck. "You sodding Gryffindor. Why did you come for me? You have no idea-"

"I came because you're a piece of shit." Harry says. "I found the note. It sounded like…" he pulls back to give Draco a searching look, "like you were going to-" he can't even fucking say it. Draco grimaces slightly. "I wasn't thinking straight… But neither were you! We need to get you out of here."

Harry's response dies on the tip of his tongue when he notices a figure in the hallway staring at them, just outside the door. He freezes in shock when he sees who it is, but… it's not possible. Draco immediately senses someone's behind them and begins to spin around to face him, but Harry can already make out a red jet of light heading towards Draco's back, so he spins them both on the spot to shield Draco from the curse and it hits him instead.

Instantly, he feels his nerves set on fire and his mind shrieks. Everything is burning forever and there’s no escape. Reality slips away from him when it doesn’t stop. It's only when Harry forgets his own name that the screams escape him. He can’t breathe anymore but protective hands remind him to be strong. The only thing keeping him grounded is someone holding him up, even as his body convulses and spasms beyond his control.

He chokes on his own breath when it stops and he nearly blacks out from relief. He slacks against Draco and fights to keep his limbs from twitching. Draco struggles to hold him up as he snarls at his father, "I'll fucking kill you!"

"Is that the attitude you wish you have? Well then --Crucio."
When he regains consciousness, it's with a stifled groan. His entire body feels stiff with pain, and worse, he can’t stop twitching. He wonders how long he endured the torture to have such a lasting effect.

Harry's tied up awkwardly to a chair. He tests the ropes but he can tell they're magically binding by the way they tighten when he squirms. Blinking slowly, Harry looks around the room and his insides twists to notice Lucius Malfoy sitting on an armchair with a drink in his hand. He's staring at Harry with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. Silently, Lucius gets up to walks over to a fireplace. Within its blue flames a boiling cauldron sits. Lucius wrinkles his nose at the acidic scent that's coming from the black concoction. "How do you manage to always be trouble?" he asks Harry without looking up, stirring counter clockwise.

Harry merely gives him a bored look. "How do you manage to always be evil?"

"Evil? That's awfully naive of you."

"What would you call torturing your own son?"

"Classical conditioning - and in case you needed reminding, I tortured you.” He offers Harry a polite smile. “It was rather impressive how long I had to wait to get a scream out of you." Harry doesn't say anything because he doesn't remember screaming.

He sharply turns his head when he hears the door open and Draco stiffly walks in with Rook in tow, his wand pointed at his back.

"Everything ready?" Lucius asks Rook, who nods solemnly. Rook turns to leave the room, but Lucius stops him. "No, stay." Rook nods graciously and forces Draco to step closer to his father. Draco isn't even looking at Lucius, he's looking at Harry with clear concern. Harry offers him a tight smile.

"Draco," his father starts, getting his attention. "Let’s have a talk, shall we?" he says as he gestures to the armchairs.

Draco doesn’t move. "Let him go. I'll do anything you ask-"

"Of course you will, but I don’t need your consent."

"He has nothing to do with this!"

"He does now. You made that choice."

Draco swallows and looks anxiously around the room, as if searching for a solution. "Father, please-"

With a look of disgust he flicks his wand at Draco and hisses, "Imperio." Harry clenches his jaw in dread as a vacant expression fills Draco's eyes.

"Malfoys do not beg, Draco," he says with tired patience. He peers at the cauldron again and decides to stir twice, nodding in satisfaction. Without turning to look at him, he continues speaking while he carefully scoops up some of the dark liquid: "It’s disappointing… but your behaviour does not surprise me anymore. This is why we must do it this way." He gestures for Draco to come to him, which Draco does without argument. Rook stays close to Draco, keeping a careful eye on him.
"Drink this, Draco." He gives Draco the flask, which he swallows in one gulp. "Here, sit with me while we wait."

Draco sits and stares emptily at his father. Seeing the two of them side by side is surreal to Harry. They look so alike except for the fact that Lucius is older and keeps the fashion of longer hair. More than that, Harry's feelings towards the two of them couldn't be more opposite. "Draco, what's going on with you and Potter?" His father starts, making Harry shift uneasily.

"He's my friend," Draco responds in a hollow voice.

Lucius smirks and he asks in a soft voice, "Did you forget what he’s done to this family?" Lucius doesn't let his son answer. “I suppose family means little to you when you've made yourself a new friend.” His voice drips dangerously, and Harry's insides twists uncomfortably. "Is that the case? Did you abandon your family?" His voice drips dangerously, and Harry's insides twists uncomfortably. "Is that the case? Did you abandon your family?"

Draco opens his mouth to answer, hesitating. "No," he says at last. “Family comes first.” He sounds like he's reciting the words.

Lucius nods and hands Draco a long, sharp blade, handle first. “Prove it.” When Draco takes the knife, Harry’s pulse quickens and he sits up a little stranger. “Kill Harry Potter.” Draco flinches, nearly dropping the knife. “No, Draco." Harry can see that Draco is trembling in his efforts to regain control. "Stop resisting. The quicker you do it the less it'll hurt.” Lucius looks to Harry and Harry's fear sharpens to notice the deranged glint in his eye.

Draco squeezes the handle of the knife and positions it correctly in his palm. He then vacantly looks at Harry. "Draco…” Harry says. He begins to walks slowly towards Harry, his eyes fixed on him, expressionless. "Draco!" Harry calls him out, squirming in the chair even as the ropes bind tighter. "Listen to me -" he says quickly. "You can fight him. You have a choice."

He's relieved to see him pause in his stride and slowly blink before the vacantness in his expression returns.

He closes in on Harry. "Draco," Harry pleads. "You don't want to hurt me. I know you don't-" Draco's kneels in front of him so that he's at Harry's eye level and Harry can see a flicker of pain pass over his face.

"Draco, remember how he snubbed at your offer of friendship?" Rook whispers close behind him. "Since then, you were marked as everything he’s not - afraid, weak and wrong." Draco raises his arm back behind him, the knife in his hand.

"No!" Harry says with force. "You're not. I wish I realized that sooner!"

Rook chuckles. "He pretends like he didn’t wait until after the war to notice you. He couldn’t risk it before because he knows what you are." Rook says into Draco's ear, "Unworthy."

"That's not true!" Harry rushes to say, because Draco is moving the knife dangerously close to his chest. "That’s not true. You were always in my head. I – I wanted to know you. Draco- listen to me-
"

"You wanted him dead," Lucius says. “He has the scars to prove it.” Harry grimaces to remember the curse that nearly killed Draco in sixth year.

Draco seems to remember too, because he flinches and presses the tip of the knife into Harry's chest with force, making him inhale sharply. He waits a moment for the pain to come, but with dizzying relief he realizes that something hard is shielding him from the point of the knife. "Her pendant," he
breathe. "You left it for me. You must remember why! The night you left…" He's mentioning that night for Draco's sake, but he can't help but remember: the way Draco pressed his lips into his and how Harry kissed him back, the feeling of falling into each other and the feeling of warm skin and hot breaths and cool fingertips.

Harry's eyes wander down to lips and he nearly forgets where he is. He leans into him, their faces mere inches apart. "When you left I…" He wants to tell him and he can't. But maybe Draco understands because he blinks slowly and something stirs behind his eyes. He blinks again and Harry feels his stare gain intention.

The next moment happens in a blur. Draco grabs Rook and presses the blade threateningly against his neck while meeting his father's gaze. "Let Harry go-" he orders, "or I'll kill him."

Lucius quickly gets over the surprise of Draco resisting his Imperius Curse and he gives him an approving look. "Be my guest."

"What?" Rook yells. "Lucius, please!" He struggles against Draco's hold, but Lucius quickly casts a stunning hex on him. Rook falls to the floor and Draco takes a panicked step back, pointing the knife at Lucius now.

"I have no use for disobedience," Lucius says to Draco. "So it makes no difference to me who you chose to kill. Will it be dear Harry or Rook?" Draco's hands tremble violently and he looks back at Harry in fear. Harry already knows he can't do it. It's not in him. His father seems to come to the same conclusion. With a sigh, he whispers, "Imperio," and Draco trembles to stay in control, but the emptiness returns to his eyes. "Make a decision." Draco hesitates and Lucius says in a clear, commanding voice, "You must kill Potter or Rook now."

Draco kneels over Rook's stunned form. "Draco, don't!" Harry pleads, hoping against hope - He violently winces when Draco plunges the knife into Rook's stomach in one quick motion. Draco lets go of the knife and Harry can make out the handle sticking out of a still torso. Harry feels a wave of nausea overcome him as a pool of blood spreads onto the floor, reaching the corners of Draco's left shoe. "No…"

Lucius beckon Draco over and Harry's insides twists again. "Bring the knife." Harry continues looking on with detached horror. Harry swallows the sudden urge to be sick when Draco takes the knife out of Rook's still body. He walks over to his father with his expression devoid of all emotion.

"Stand still," Lucius instructs as he takes the bloodied knife from Draco's hands. "We're almost done, Draco," he says quietly and Harry's insides spasm. Lucius dips the bloodied knife into the cauldron and stirs. Then he glances at Harry and points his wand. "Accio pendant." The pendant flies off of his neck and into his free hand. He drops it into the cauldron before casting it out magically and putting it aside. Something like fear flickers over Lucius' face as he turns the knife over in his hands. He then points it straight at his son and Harry shakes his head.

"No!" Harry twists against the ropes and the binds only tighten "Lucius! Stop!" Lucius isn't moving and Harry tries to reason with him. "He's your son, Lucius. Whatever you're doing - it won't work-it'll just hurt him. Don't!"

But Lucius is deaf to Harry's words. He stares at his son and says quietly, "Please remember I do this because I love you."

Harry violently shakes his head in panic now, knowing full well what happens next. "Lucius, listen to me! You don't have to-"
When he sees Lucius plunge the knife into Draco, the same spot where Rook was stabbed, Harry convulses as if the knife has cut through his own flesh. He screams and violently shakes in his chair. Draco cries out and falls to his knees, but Lucius just holds him close, keeping the knife firmly in place. "The worse is almost over," he says in a reassuring tone and Harry trembles in shock.

"How - How could you?" He fights harder to be set free, to help Draco, but the ropes only constrict further against his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Harry sees Draco grimace in pain and attempt to clutch at the wound, even as his eyes are devoid of real awareness. His father lays him on the floor carefully, watching the life drain out of him. "No - HELP HIM! He's your son!"

Lucius expression twists but he ignores Harry.

"If you don't help him he's going to die!" When Lucius doesn’t reply, Harry growls in a low voice, "I'll kill you. I'll fucking kill you!" He watches as Draco's blood begins to pool around him and his breath begins to shallow. "No, no. Draco!" He chokes on the name, his whole being shaking with shock and his vision blurring. In desperation, he turns his attention back to Lucius. "Please. Please, help him."

Lucius kneels down low and whispers an incantation.

As if from a great distance, Harry sees a familiar light shine brighter than anything he's ever seen, momentarily blinding him again. He has to shut his eyes and look away, but the next moment it's gone and when he opens his eyes, Lucius is gone too. Harry feels the ropes unwind against him and he falls to the floor, too weak to stand.

He crawls over to Draco, who's so still and so pale against the dark pool of blood that surrounds him. "Draco!" he calls him out as he nears him. With trembling hands, Harry gentle shakes his shoulders. "D-Draco?" His eyes are closed. He’s not breathing. He's not responding. Harry shakes his head quickly, sweeping soft hair back as he leans over him. "Wake up - Please – Draco.”
Draco wipes away his eyes with the back of his sleeve, feeling stupid for crying in front of his father - again.

Lucius sighs and kneels down at young Draco's eye-level. "What's happened?"

"I was -" He bites his lip to keep it from trembling. "I just wanted to scare it, but it stopped moving."

"Draco, you're not explaining yourself very well," Lucius says with forced patience.

Draco angrily rubs his eyes, wishing once more that he was like him. "There was a bird, outside my window. I threw my ball at it - and it-" Draco’s face crumples under his father’s gaze. "It fell from the tree. It’s not moving."

“I see.” His father gives him a sympathetic smile. "It’s hard to learn that life is fragile, isn’t it?"

When Draco nods tightly, Lucius stands up and places a heavy hand on his shoulder. “How strange that it takes strength to take life away."

Draco peers at his father through his tears. “It was an accident.”

Lucius smiles again, seeming to ignore that statement. “Don’t worry - it gets easier with time.”

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Dec 12

Dear Draco,

It's strange to think that classes end tomorrow. Everyone's getting ready to leave but I've decided to stay. Maybe catch up on some work. You made it on the front page again - Not that I care about the sorta thing, but I know you do, you Narcissist. I'll save the paper for you.

-Harry

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Dec 15

Dear Draco,
Everyone’s officially gone! Which means I don't have to sneak in here anymore. Tomorrow a Healer from St. Mungo's is coming to check on you, fucking finally. Seeing you like this is really getting to me.

Oh- The House Elf just came in with food! I've requested green apples - tempted?

-Harry

Dec 24

Dear Draco,

I think we're the only two left in the castle. Even Pomfrey left. Even Hagrid. It shouldn’t surprise me… people have families to see on Christmas.

At first I didn't mind - it was actually rather nice to be on my own. But now it's just too quiet and I find myself saying things out loud just to break the silence. I'm starting to look a little mad.

Draco, do me a favour and don’t let this one be a quiet one. Let's fly around all day, and then maybe get drunk afterwards. I have loads to tell you. So, come on, do this for me?

-H

Dec 28

Draco -

I'm pretty tired. I didn't really sleep much. You had a really rough night - the worst I've seen. It was awful. You just … wouldn't stop screaming. You looked like you were being tortured. We tried everything for hours, but nothing helped. What’s tormenting you this way?

You'd be relieved - or horrified - to learn I figured out how to make the screaming stop. You calm down when I comb my fingers through your hair. Yup, that's utterly gay of you. Me too, I guess. Pomfrey caught me a couple of times... It's kinda - awkward doing that in front of her. I'm afraid both our reputations are at stake, so please don’t let it happen again.

Dec 31

Draco… Please … open your eyes.

Everything about this scene is wrong. A pale light creeps through the window, signaling a new day, and it should matter to Harry because he's missed the sunrise more than he cares to remember, but it's
all wrong. It's too bright, too white - the colour of forlorn. It's insensitive to what's before him: his pale hair a mess, his eyes closed and his lips dry. He's too still, too quiet and too cold. None of it seems to belong to the Draco he knows.

Draco lies in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts, and if Harry didn't know any better, he'd say he looks peacefully asleep. But it's been weeks since they got back from the Malfoy Manor, and Draco won't wake up. No one knows why, but he's trapped in a deep, restless sleep. When Draco dreams, his eyes move frantically behind closed eyelids and sometimes he cries out in pain. In such moments Harry whispers to him, even if he's sure the words land on deaf ears. But when Draco begins to scream, a chilling, blood-curdling scream that can only reflect whatever nightmares he's facing, all Harry can do is clutch his hand and run his fingers through his hair.

Healers are at a loss of what's happening to Draco because there's nothing actually wrong with him-Draco just can't wake up. He's not in a coma, they've all stated as much. They've all reassured him that he should wake up at any moment, yet each passing day Harry has a harder time fending off his hopelessness.

All of Draco's physical wounds healed quickly, including the knife wound inflicted from his father. And in a surprising turn of events, the Ministry concluded that Draco had no fault in what happened at the Manor. He won't be charged for murder. Draco won't believe his luck when Harry tells him.

The new term is set to begin within a few days and students are already coming back from the break. Ron tried to persuade him to stay with his family over the break, but Harry couldn't bear the thought of Draco waking up alone and confused. So he told Ron he was seeing Teddy over the holidays – it was the only reasonable lie he could think of.

With a sigh, he closes the textbook on his lap and sets it aside. He checks quickly to see that they're alone, as he's done so many times recently, and absentmindedly reaches out to fix his hair, combing his fingers through it. "I should use a comb," he whispers. "But I don't own one... I'm sure you'd find that hilarious." Touching his hair like this soothes Harry as well as Draco. Harry can almost fool himself into believing that they're just waking up together after that first night. Remembering it now, he momentarily forgets his ache. "Draco – wake up."

A hand hesitantly falls onto Harry's shoulder and he looks up, startled. He can make out Hermione's concerned face. Harry snatches his hand back and he's glad it's only Hermione that's caught him. "You're back!" he says happily. He stands up to give her a hug. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," she smiles before looking down at Draco with a pained expression. "Any news?"

"Nothing." His eyes travel back to Draco and Harry as an urge to draw the curtains around him. He's sure Draco wouldn't appreciate people seeing him like this. "None of the waking concoctions had any effect. Did you have any luck figuring out what Lucius was trying to do?"

She shakes her head sadly. "I couldn’t find any record of the Potion he used. Whatever it is... It's rare."

Harry nods and sits back on the chair in front of Draco, picking up the heavy textbook. "I suppose we'll just have to wait."

"Harry, Ron's on his way - I think we should meet him at the gates."

Harry shrugs, not really in the mood for a stroll.
"What are you going to tell him when he asks you about your break?"

Harry makes a face but doesn't look at her, "I dunno."

She hesitates, and Harry just knows she’s giving him *that* look. "The truth isn't so awful, Harry."

"Which truth? That I’m waiting for Draco Malfoy to wake up? Or that this is all my fault - That he's stuck in his nightmares because of me?" He shakes his head to keep the image out, but he catches a glimpse of Draco bloodied and broken on the dungeon floor.

"That's *wasn’t* your fault!" she begins.

"It was my plan!" he says over her voice. She gives him a pained expression, not knowing what to say because it’s true. It was Harry’s idea to go there in the first place. It was his idea to follow Rook. He was lucky that Ron and Hermione didn’t get caught. "How did I manage to do that - again? Why would you ever trust my judgement?"

"We had no way of knowing how serious it all was. If we had known, we would have called the Ministry sooner. Please stop blaming yourself! He's going to be fine. He's going to wake up. The healers have said so!"

When Harry doesn't say anything, she sighs and tugs at his arm, "Come on, Harry. You really need to talk to Ron. He isn't angry - just explain to him- just tell him why this is so important -"

"I can't - I can't tell him." Harry says in exasperation, running a hand helplessly through his hair. "He won't get it!"

Hermione yanks at his arm and Harry scrambles out of his chair in surprise. "Then *you* lie to him. I'm not going to do it for you." She marches him to the door and roughly pushes him out of the Hospital Wing, "Go! I'll watch Malfoy for however long it takes, but you're going."

"Hermione-" he begins to protest, but she slams the Hospital Wing door in his face. He rattles the door handle and realizes she's locked it from the inside. "You can't make me!"

Harry shivers and grouchily tucks his hands into his pockets as soon as he steps outside. He regrets not grabbing his scarf before Hermione kicked him out. It's snowing heavily, making each of his footsteps disappear into the fresh sheet of white behind him, nearly as untouched as the ground before him.

It's surprising how quickly he got used to having his sight back. At first, everything felt like a miracle: seeing Ron and Hermione again and how casual they've become with their affection. Seeing the Malfoy Manor in the light of day was distracting, from its high ceilings and rich furnishings to its tall towers and onyx gates. In the forest, he remembers first seeing the tall trees that surrounded him, shielding him from the sun. He remembers looking up high above himself, being able to make out blue skies hiding behind the tangle of branches and dried leaves.

What stopped Harry in his tracks was the beauty of seeing Hogwarts again. He remembers seeing the gates from a distance, and beyond them, the castle. He remembers looking down at Draco then, who laid cold and limp in his arms.

The little elation he allowed himself to feel was quickly swept away by a chill and a short, anxious breath, because Draco didn't seem to be breathing. He remembers his shock of seeing his own breath
form into a white puff against the cold, but nothing coming from Draco. He remembers laying him down on the cold ground, urging Hermione to help him, and his shattering relief when she managed to stabilize him just in time.

Harry breathes out slowly now, watching the breath escape out of him in a long, warm cloud as he watches the gates. He's grateful when Ron and Ginny appear with a faint pop, even if he's caught them in the middle of an argument. "-wrong with him?" Ron finishes saying before he noticed his sister shaking her head in a quick and tight manner.

Ginny turns to face him with a smile. "Harry!" She swings the gate open and hugs him tightly.

"How was the break? How's everyone?" he asks, glad to see them both.

"Good! They all missed you of course. Here-" she pushes one parcel towards him with a sly grin, "just a little something."

Ron throws him another parcel, which he catches easily. "From Mum - she expects a letter from you soon. I have something else for you, but I'll show you inside - out of the snow."

The three of them talk easily enough - but when they reach the front entrance, Ron and Ginny begin to head to the Gryffindor Common Room. He stops in his tracks and gestures to the opposite direction. "Actually - um - Hermione's expecting us in the Hospital Wing."

"Really?" Ron asks. "You didn't tell me she was here! Why is she - oh-" Ron glances away awkwardly. "Sorry, I should have asked sooner, how's Malfoy?"

"Still asleep," he tries to sound casual, but from the look Ginny is giving him he isn't fooling anyone. "Er - we should probably relieve her. She just got back herself."

"Okay, I'll meet up with you guys later then," Ginny says quickly. Harry can understand why she doesn't want to see Draco, but he can't help but feel annoyed as she turns away without another word and hurries to the Common Room.

Ron and Harry fall into step with each other, and while their conversation is light enough, there's something off about it. It's as if they're each holding back on saying something and don't know how to broach the topic. Harry can't possibly see how Hermione could be right: even mentioning Draco makes Ron terribly uncomfortable. How will he take the fact that Harry has feelings for him?

Finally, after minutes of stiff, small talk they arrive at the Hospital Wing and Ron eagerly opens the unlocked door. Ron and Hermione greet each other enthusiastically, embracing each other after two weeks of being apart. He notices the way Ron nervously glances at Draco's bed and Harry can't help but walk up to his bed and close the curtains.

"So - nothing's changed?" Ron asks.

"Nope-" Harry says, wishing he didn't bring him up again. "Er - you two must be hungry. Why don't you grab a bite? I'll meet you soon."

"Why don't you come with us?" Ron asks him hopefully.

"I can't - not until Pomfrey gets back."

"Come on - what's the worst that can happen? He'll wake up?" he jokes. Harry offers him a tight smile and Hermione slaps Ron slightly on the arm. "What?" he exclaims.
"Honestly!" Hermione throws her hands in the air in defeat and turns on the spot to leave, not before throwing Harry a dirty look.

Ron glances back at the door and looks like his only wish is to get away. "I should -" He gestures awkwardly towards the door. Harry nods quickly, and Ron takes a step to follow her, but not before he turns to look at Harry. "If you need help – if he… just let me know, okay? I get that things are different now."

Harry nods appreciatively, feeling guilty. "Thanks, Ron. Happy New Year." Ron nods and closes the door behind him. Only then, does Harry fall back into the armchair and throw his hands over his face. "Oh and by the way, I'm gay and fancy Draco-bloody-Malfoy." He groans and presses his palms into his eyes, a headache forming in the back of his head. Why is this so hard for him to do? Oh yes - because Ron loathes Draco - and he doesn't even blame him for it. But he's clearly making an effort, he probably already knows! Ron isn't stupid. He'll figure it out if he hasn't already. Really, what's the worst that could happen if he tells Ron? Would he be livid? Disgusted? Would he refuse to speak to him? Harry doesn't know if he could cope with that. Ron's the only family he has left. He can't afford to lose him, and by default, the rest of the Weasleys and eventually Hermione.

But what if he's not giving Ron enough credit? Sure, Ron's stubborn and holds grudges, but he's loyal and strangely sensitive. Most importantly, he's Harry's friend. Harry should just trust him. He's sure Ron won't even care… Harry stifles a yawn, leaning back against the chair - Ron'll probably just shrug it off like it's nothing… Who knows, he might even be okay with it. Maybe invite Draco over for dinner - Christmas even! Harry can see it now: Molly gives Draco a green sweater. Draco makes muggle jokes. The Weasleys laugh. They tease him for being Slytherin. George pulls a prank on him - And Draco's happy to be there - with Harry… Everything's okay.

Except it isn't.

When he turns around he sees that Draco is staring at him from the edge of the woods, and Harry starts in shock. "What are you doing here?" he asks as he rushes towards him. Draco's pale face and his white shirt starkly contrast against the dark trees behind him.

"I was waiting for you," Draco says and he gestures for Harry to follow with a jerk of his chin. "I was afraid you'd never come."

Harry follows him without question, curiosity far outweighing the uneasiness that creeping up on him. "Where are we going? I thought you were afraid of the woods."

"Not anymore," Draco says casually. "You'll find I'm not afraid of anything now." Draco walks deeper between the trees, his eyes scanning the ground. At last, something shines in front of him and he crouches down low to move sodden leaves with his bare hands. Harry watches as Draco's fingers unearth something that's buried in the frozen ground. When he stands, his Mother's pendant, which he had given to Harry, is dangling from his muddied, left hand.

"How did you -?" he begins to ask but stops when he sees Draco turn to him with bright, wide eyes. Harry takes a hurried step towards him. "What is it?" Draco doesn't reply. Instead, he lifts the pendant over Harry's head and tucks it carefully into his shirt. "Draco?" Harry asks.

"You're meant to keep this safe," he says, his eyes greyer than the skies above them. "Keep it close to your heart."

Harry feels the pendant warmly pulse against his skin. "I will."

"No one can take it. Not even me," Draco urges.
"But it's yours-" Harry says with confusion.

*Draco cuts him off. "I'm going to try to get it back. I'll fool you. I'll hurt you. But you can't let me have it - Promise me you won't let me have it."

"I don't understand."

"Promise me, Harry! Please!"

*Something like panic flickers over Draco's face and Harry's hand instinctively reaches out to him. "I promise."

Draco smiles in relief and places his hand on Harry's chest, right on top of the pendant that hides in his shirt, "Don't forget. Don't let me go." Just as the words leave Draco's mouth -Harry awakes with a start. He blinks rapidly and is heart leaps into his throat when he sees that Draco Malfoy is sitting up on his bed, gazing at him.

"Draco?" he asks feebly, not quite believing what he's seeing.

____________________

Something tears at the core. Something breaks and an agony is born, tainting all he’s ever known. Something screams, ripping away from the fabric of who he is. He's shattering. Pieces are falling. Bit by bit, he's nothing but the absence.

Then it's done. All the pieces that make up Draco Malfoy fall hastily into place. Is some of it lost? Something feels off. He can't grasp what that is but he doesn't care. With a strangled breath, he already knows he's better off this way.

Draco opens his eyes and quickly disregards the-something-that-is-missing. He blearily takes in his surroundings and his eyes quickly become adjusted to the light. He can make out the hospital wing with its empty beds, clean sheets tucked over him and Potter fast asleep in a chair beside him, glasses already askew. He blinks away the blurriness and his world sways to readjust itself. Taking another thirsty gulp of air, Draco sits up with a lightening sense of Deja-vu: this scene is too familiar for comfort.

"Potter," he croaks, grimacing at how dry his voice sounds. When he doesn't stir, Draco throws his pillow at him.

With a startled jump, Potter jolts awake and his eyes quickly focus on Draco. Although fearful relief twists his features, he doesn’t make a move. "Draco?"

"What the *fuck* happened?"

"You're awake!" Potter scrambles off the chair frantically. "I can't believe this!"

He leans in close to Draco and reaches out to touch him, but Draco throws his arm out to keep Potter at a distance, his hand firmly on his chest. "Urgh, why are you looking at me like that?"

"You were out for weeks!" he says with wide, bright eyes that scan his face. Against his better judgment, Draco's glad that Potter can see, even if it makes him feel strangely vulnerable. "Do you remember anything? How do you feel? Do you need Pomfrey?" Potter asks without a pause. He then stands up quickly, frantically looking about the room for assistance.
"I'm fine!" Draco reassures him. 'Fine' is an understatement, he actually feels great. He swings his legs out from beneath the covers, looking around for his socks. "Can you please tell me what happened? The last thing I remember is threatening to kill Rook." He frowns because at the time it was an empty threat; there was no way he could have done it. Now Draco doesn't understand why it was so impossible then.

Potter's face quickly becomes bleak, his relief momentarily stilled. "You don't remember anything?" Potter sits down on his bed now, a little too close to Draco for comfort.

Draco shakes his head impatiently. "Obviously it's bad, by your expression."

Potter bites down on his lower lip, anxiously looking at him. "Maybe I should get Pomfrey first-"

"Potter-" he sees the way the git winces. "Just spit it out."

"Your father casted the Imperius on you." Something within Draco uncoils aggressively, he clenches his fist to keep them from shaking. "He made you – He forced you to kill - He said it was your choice but-" Potter shakes his head quicky, briefly closing his eyes. “It was between me and Rook-"

"I killed Rook?" he clarifies.

"Yes." Potter clenches his jaw tightly, looking at Draco apprehensively. "Just - it isn't your fault, alright? You didn't have a choice." Potter begins to move his hand towards his and Draco casually moves it away, running his hand through his hair distractedly.

Confusion begins to creep into Draco because if he's honest with himself, he can't be bothered to care. Rook had it coming and he doesn't feel at all bad about it. "Mmm... alright. How did we escape?" Potter gives him an incredulous look. "What?" he asks.

"Just - I wasn't expecting..." Draco narrows his eyes at him and he hesitates. “I mean - You killed someone, Draco."

"Well, better him than us, right?" Draco asks in an attempt for humour, but Potter's gives him a calculating look as he continues to stare at him. Draco realizes his response isn't appropriate. Shouldn't he be crying or something? "I'm just - I think I'm just in shock. I need some time to let it sink in." He's relieved to see Potter nod his head slowly, giving him a sympathetic look. "So - what happened next?"

Potter grimaces here, the memory making him look faint. "Then Lucius - he stabbed you."

A spark of anger flares again, and he has to scoff to keep his features somewhat neutral. "He tried to kill me? Unbelievable." His f– no - Lucius is always trying to get the best of him. Lucius is the type to get his strength from making others weak. A part of Draco wonders why he doesn’t feel more betrayed, but maybe he just knows better now.

"I don't know what he was trying to do, and we still don't know if you're completely okay. I really should get Pomfrey-"

"I really feel fine," he says hurriedly. "And I still don't know how I got here?"

"After that happened, everything's a blur. The Ministry came and there was a lot of fighting, but for the most part, the Death Eaters escaped." Harry looks regretful as he continues, "only a couple were captured, your father not included."

"How did the Ministry know?"
"Ron and Hermione realized we would need help getting you out - so they alerted the Ministry just in time."

Draco frowns at him. "But that means the Ministry took the Manor." It's a statement, not a question.

"I'm sorry, it was the only way! I'm sure you can work something out later-"

Draco gives Potter a cold look. "Don't be daft. They've been looking for an excuse to take it for months. My father being alive and evil probably works in their favour."

"It's only until they capture him. They have to monitor who comes and goes for now. But after all this mess, you'll get it back. It belongs to your family."

Draco smirks at him and shakes his head. "What world do you live in that's so just? They won't give it back to me."

"If it comes down to it, I'll help you get it back." Harry leans into him and Draco quirks his eyebrow, watching him silently. Potter squirm with evident discomfort. "Draco - you sure you're okay? You seem… off."

"I actually feel really good," Draco says against his better judgement.

Potter leans back quickly and crosses his arms. Draco doesn't like the strange look he's giving him. "Okay well - I'll just-" He gets up from his seat stiffly. "Pomfrey should check on you."

Draco nods absently, a faint smile on his face. He has a feeling that he'll have to work a lot harder to convince Potter that everything is as it should be.

Harry glances back at Draco who's still sitting on the bed, with Pomfrey just finishing her checks. "You seem perfectly fine -" she says absently, and Harry shuts the door the Hospital Wing with a soft click. He walks towards the Gryffindor Common Room, trying to fight this uneasiness he feels.

His steps falls in rhyme of something feels off. He knows better than to ignore this unsettling churning in his stomach. Draco seems too nonchalant about everything: killing Rook, his father stabbing him and then losing the Manor. Harry almost stumbles over feet when he realizes that Draco didn't even ask about his Mother! Not that Harry had any news on that, but after weeks of being unconscious, wouldn't that be something he would wonder?

Stepping through the portrait hole, he's greeted by the sight of Ron and Hermione curled up in an armchair in front of the fire, Hermione's head resting on his shoulder and Ron's arm swung around her. A pang of jealousy hits him to realize he'll never be that casual or comfortable with his own displays of public affection.

Hermione looks up at him and he quickly neutralizes his expression as he walks towards them both. "Guess what? He's awake!" he says with real enthusiasm.

Hermione sits up straighter with a wide smile, "Oh, I'm so glad! See Harry, you were all worried."

"Yeah, it's a relief," he smiles and sits on the couch next to them. "Everyone kept trying to reassure me of it, but after days of hearing the same thing over and over again - it just sounded like a lie, y'know?"
Hermione nods sympathetically and Ron offers him a smile. "So he's okay?" he asks.

"Yeah - everything's good," he says quickly. Harry frowns when his two best friends exchange a glance.

"Are you sure -?" Ron asks him after a pause. "You sound weird."

Harry nods even as that same feeling of unease seeps back in. He feels Hermione giving him a searching look and he sighs, "It's really nothing." He doesn't want them to have any further reasons for mistrusting Draco. "He was just in shock or something - Didn't seem to really appreciate the scope of what's happened."

"Oh, well that's understandable. He probably needs some time," Hermione says. "Does he know what his father was trying to do?"

"He doesn't remember anything."

"Poor bloke," Harry's surprised to hear Ron mutter. "I can't imagine waking up to all that."

"Me neither," Harry says quietly. A comfortable silence falls between them, and Harry leans back into the sofa as he stares into the roaring fire, lost in thought. Even as he contemplates on the strange feelings that something is amiss, he can't help but smile to himself. Draco is awake. All the colours have shifted back to their correct hue. Draco didn't look so pale and the light in the room didn't seem so bright anymore. Everything, all at once, felt real again. Now that Draco's better everything's okay - except - Harry unconsciously reaches for the pendant that's tucked underneath his shirt. Except it isn't.
Whispers

Chapter Summary

Scared, Potter? - Draco

Harry collapses onto his bed with a groan.

Most of the students have returned. Between everyone arriving and the impromptu party in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry hasn’t had a chance to himself. Finally getting away, he tells himself he’s too tired to really enjoy their company. But that's not actually true - there's a reason he doesn't spend much time with anyone beyond the select few. People who aren't used to being in the presence of ‘Harry Potter’ act strange around him. If it isn't the unwelcomed looks of wonderstruck or reverence, it's the shamelessly personal questions they ask.

Turning onto his side, he wonders why he hasn’t seen Draco today. He’s seen him every day for the past few weeks. Now that he’s awake, he should be anxious to see him, but instead…

Harry wonders how he’s coping. Harry wonders what he’s feeling… Are things different between them now? Harry has no clue where they stand. A part of him is afraid to find out.

He makes sure to close his curtains before he takes out his invisibility cloak from under his pillow. Unfolding it, he lets Draco’s pendant slip out onto his lap. He runs his fingers over its intricate design, noticing how warm it is to the touch. In an impulse, Harry swings it over his head, contentedly tucking it into his shirt. His plan was to give this back to Draco when he woke up - a gift of some sort - but now he has this irrational urge to hold onto it. It’s strange that he hasn’t told Draco that he has it yet.

Harry rolls onto his back, sighing as he stares up at his canopy. His eyes are heavy but he doesn’t dare close his eyes. If he does, he knows what he’ll see. Instead, he focuses on the weight of the pendant on his chest, how warm and heavy it feels. If he pays close enough attention, he can almost feel it pulse against his skin. Somehow, wearing it makes him calm - makes him forget the images that fight to intrude his mind.

A tapping on his window startles him, and when he opens his bed curtains, he sees a large, dark owl impatiently waiting just outside. He recognizes him as Draco’s owl, but he’s never actually seen him this close before. Rushing to let the poor creature in, he swings the window open.

The owl swoops onto his bed and ruffles his feathers to shake off the fresh fall of snow. "You have something for me?" he asks as he sits next to him. He takes the tied parcel from his claw and scratches under his chin. "You're a beautiful boy, aren't ya?"

The creature nips harshly at his hand and he winces. "Ouch, what was that for?" The owl gives him an unwavering stare before ruffling his feathers in offence. Harry sticks his tongue out at him before turning his attention to the small rolled-up parchment. Something like a smile tugs at his lips as he read the note:
Jan 3.

Did I wake you? Of course not – you’re probably getting plastered with your fans. Didn't think to invite me, Scarhead? I won't pretend to care but I'm bored so you can come and meet me at the Tower when you're done. I can't sleep, surprise there, so let's go somewhere.

p.s. Wiggy's acting odd. Give her some treats or something from me.

Draco~

"Oh, you're a she!" he says to the Wiggy, who bobs her head with a low clatter of chirps. It's a sound Harry misses.

He goes to Ron's deskside and opens the first drawer. He must have some scraps of owl treats in here somewhere. He rummages through the mess and stops abruptly when his fingers close around a small, royal blue box. With surprise, he picks it up and glances over his shoulder at the door before he carefully opens it. Inside lies a delicate looking ring with a cluster of small diamonds that sit on a thin, gold band - an engagement ring. One side of his mouth quirks up in a sad smile. He's glad for them, really, but it's a shock that Ron didn't mention anything to him. If Harry were in his shoes, he probably wouldn't be able to resist showing him. He puts the ring back and tries to place the box exactly where he found it, even though he knows Ron won't notice if it's slightly out of place. He spots some owl treats beneath the scatter of abandoned parchment and goes to sit on his bed again, holding his hand out for Wiggy.

Her beak tickles against his palms and with his free hand he scratches the top of her head. She chirps in gratitude, her large eyes blinking slowly.

"It's my fault he hasn't told me," he says to her, and she tilts her head at him. "I haven't been a great friend." Harry continues to scratch between her feathers, a gesture that would have made Hedwig melt.

Hermione's right - he has to try fixing things with Ron. Being honest with him would be a good start. With a tired sigh he realizes that this week will be the week he may lose a friend. If Ron forces him to make a choice, Harry knows what he'll choose, but he tries hard not to think about what that means.

"Do you want to come with me to meet Draco?" he asks Wiggy, who has been moving comfortably closer to him, but she ruffles her feathers and before Harry can think twice of it, she spreads her wings and swoops out of the open window.

He sees his familiar, dark silhouette against the falling snow, sitting by the edge of the Tower. Harry's heart hiccups uncomfortably and he rushes towards him. Draco senses him there and turns his upper body around to face him, even as his legs swing and dangle over the edge. "Finally!"

"What are you doing?" he asks in alarm.

"Waiting for you - took you long enough!"

"Draco! Can you please come down from there? It's really making me nervous."

Draco offers him a chilling smile. "Stop fretting - I really am enjoying the view. Where's your
"What?" Harry asks in confusion, seeing Draco's broom next to him.

"Your broom! I said I wanted to go somewhere."

"I didn't think you meant flying off the Tower! I thought we'd go to Hogsmeade or something."

"No," Draco says solemnly. "I want a hamburger."

Harry blinks at him slowly and Draco stares back, impatience making his eyes narrow. "A burger?" Harry asks weakly, only to make sure he's hearing him right.

"Yeah - stop looking at me like that. Every single person in the bloody world has tried one and I wasn't allowed because it wasn't proper. I'm just - I'm done following those absurd rules. I'm going to do whatever the hell I want and if you want to join me, perfect, if not, go back to your stupid party and leave me alone." He huffs and stares at Harry with calm coldness, even as his face twitches and Harry can make out a hidden layer of desperation.

Harry lightly nods and walks towards him, knowing that there's no point arguing with him when he's like this. "I'll come with you." Draco flashes him a quick smirk before he stands up, turning his back to the skies behind him and Harry hurriedly grabs his hand to pull him down. "Can you please be careful?" he hisses, yanking him down hard. "You're being extremely reckless." Draco just shrugs easily enough and Harry turns away annoyed. He picks up Draco's broom, placing his legs on either side and then jerks his head for Draco to get on.

"I call it being spontaneous," he hears Draco mutter as he swings his leg over and wraps his arms around Harry's chest. "Don't you know I'm spontaneous?"

"Of course you are-" he says tightly, trying to ignore the sudden flip-flop in his stomach. Draco edges closer and Harry sits up straighter. He does his best to ignore Draco's hands pressed into his shirt and his breath tickling the back of his neck - but a familiar tightness in his trousers has him leaping up into the air without a second thought.

"I wasn't ready!" he hears Draco complain. "I'm all lopsided!"

"Stop squirming!" Harry hisses, "For fuck's sake."

"Why did I let you ride anyway? It's my broom!"

"You need your strength, Draco. You haven't moved in a few weeks, remember?" Harry falls silent, trying to keep both of them steady on the broom as snow swirls around them and into his hair. He can make out the frosty grounds before them, the shimmering white hills of snow making him feel like he's coasting above the clouds. He feels rather than hears Draco laugh against his back and his arms tighten around Harry as he drops down sharply to descend, and Harry can't help but speed up until -

They land clumsily, both laughing. Harry plants his feet into the ground to keep them from stumbling, but Draco still manages to gracefully swing himself off and give Harry an amused why-are-you-so-hopeless look. Draco runs his fingertips through his hair, shaking away the snow. Harry's eyes follow the quick motions of Draco's hands as they continue brushing away the snow from his dark robes, before he straightens them out effortlessly. He takes out his wand and with an easy flick of his wrist he shrinks down his broom. "Where to now?" he asks, oblivious to Harry's stare.

Harry blinks. "Erm - How should I know? This is your mad plan."
"Harry-" and Harry perks up at that, "I literally have never set foot in a muggle community before. Why do you think I asked you to come?"

"For the pleasure of my company?"

"Hardly." The pretty bastard smirks again.

Harry's lips quirk and he runs his hand through his own hair, trying to shake off the snow and the fatigue that hangs on him, but both seep in a little deeper. He's surprised when Draco wordlessly points his wand at him to cast a drying charm. "You know, this snow isn't going to stop anytime soon. Maybe we should try another time," Harry offers, but Draco merely shakes his head, smiling slightly as he steps closer to him. Harry ducks his own smile. "Alright - at this hour - a pub maybe?"

"Lead the way." Draco holds out his hand for him to take, and Harry tries not to look too pleased when he clasps it tightly in his own.

They apparate into a dark alley and Draco feels Potter lose his balance, stumbling into him. Draco chuckles as he straightens him up, glad that Harry can't see his expression.

Harry straightens up in embarrassment, something like envy mocking his tone. "You make it look so easy."

"That's because it is."

"Now with all this snow," he says in a low voice, already beginning to move towards the main street. He sighs, ruffling his hair again. "Come on," Potter says, stepping out of the alleyway.

Draco steps out into the clearing and tries to mask his surprise, which he's sure that Harry catches. Scowling, he decides he has to work on not being such a bloody-open book around him.

Draco looks around himself in all directions, taking in all the strange details of the things he wasn't allowed to learn about his whole life. He walks past tall light posts and parked automobiles, which look so different from the pictures he's snuck a look at from the textbooks at Hogwarts' library. He jumps when he hears a piercing, metallic bell ring close to him, shrilling and unforgiving, and can't help but nervously turn to Harry for an explanation. Draco isn't even annoyed to see him laughing.

"Don't worry - just a car alarm." Draco nods, pretending to know what that means.

What Draco notices most is how perpendicular everything is. The wizarding shops seem to have no sense of uniformity, some roofs slopping and some structures leaning precariously over the others. It's not the case here. Even the roads are straight and smooth, not the winding, cobblestone ones he knows.

The snow is still falling steadily, softening the sound of their footsteps. Most of the muggles appear to be inside, giving the streets a quiet stillness. Only whispers dare travel in this silence.

They try various pubs, many of which look the same to Draco. He waits while Harry asks about the infamous burger. Standing idly by, he watches people drinking and laughing, but few of them eating. From listening to Harry, it seems a chef is needed to cook the damned thing. This makes Draco feel a little more hopeful about this whole rebellion of his.

With no luck, they continue to wander aimlessly in silence. While Harry is too busy pretending he isn't watching Draco, Draco's too preoccupied with his thoughts to say anything. It's odd - that this
whole, intricate world exists and he knows nothing about it. It's unsettling. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he can't help but feel utterly out of place and out of touch. Draco feels the tug of his thoughts getting darker, as they did earlier when he was left alone.

Not wanting to lose himself, he whispers, "Part of the reason I wanted you to come-" Draco actively ignoring the flickering florescent signs on the window they walk by, "was because we have a lot to talk about." Draco tries not to smile at how enthusiastically Harry nods, but he stays silent, waiting. "You left in hurry earlier… I didn't get to ask if you've heard anything about my mother.” Draco knows that Potter will suspect something's off if he doesn't ask.

"No, nothing." He looks apologetic. "What's the plan to find her?"

"Plan? I don't have one yet." The thought of formulating some plan to find her never occurred to him - which is strange, isn't it? But thankfully he sees another pub across the street. "Let's try there."

Draco begins to cross the street, but Potter tugs at the back of his cloak and says close to him, "Look both ways before crossing. It's a rule."

Once inside, Draco begins to take out his wand out to dry himself off again, out of habit, but stops mid-motion. When Harry asks the bartender about the hamburgers, Draco sees his relief more than hears it. Finally, good gracious, finally they've stumbled upon a pub that serves the bloody 'burger'. Harry wisely asks to be seated in the far corner, in a black leathery booth away from most of the muggles that are avidly watching the picture box by the bar. What's that called again? Oh yes, the tevelision - and Draco's momentarily distracted by the display of miniature muggles playing something like a Quidditch game on the ground. He can't help but snort.

He catches Harry's eye, who's watching him with amusement and delight. But still, underneath that, there's that same trace of concern he had back in the Hospital Wing. Draco looks away quickly, wondering if Harry suspects that something's off.

"I need the loo." He quickly stands up. "I'll be back." Harry's concern deepens but he nods, getting up too. "Potter - I'd rather do this alone. I think I can manage."

"I know that," he snaps, sitting back down. Good – He can deal with frustration. Not, not - this other stuff that comes creeping back when he's with him.

He leaves without a glance, needing to get his thoughts straight. He tries to walk across the bar casually, not caring that he's getting some stares, but trying his best to not bump into anyone. He comes across a door that has a small figure of a man on it and wonders absently if many muggles are illiterate. Pushing through the door he goes straight to the sink, turning the tap to cold to wash his face.

Draco inhales slowly, trying to makes sense of what the fuck is happening to him.

There's no use denying that Lucius did something to him. Draco can feel it. He's different. He's trying to fight it off, trying his fucking best to deny the change. But pieces of who he is are gone: unattainable or incomprehensible. Except - he catches his eyes in the mirror - except when he's with Harry. With Harry, it's evident he's lacking something because a part of him misses it. A part of him remembers and emphasizes with that Draco. He doesn't want to let that Draco go - even though it's painful to be him- because he has enough sense to know this isn't normal, that Lucius has tainted him in some way. He looks away from his reflection, his eyes darker than he remembers them to be.

He's trying to hold onto the fragments that feel like fleeting whispers, trying to uphold the expectations of who he is - or is it of who he was? Being with Harry helps. The fragments don't feel
like old memories. They feel as real as the water he splashes on his face.

It’s when he’s alone that he notices the change. He notices it doesn’t bother him; it’s seductively liberating. Nothing holds him back: not his guilt or shame or empathy. And then - his thoughts turn on him, seeming to belong to another. His mind twists beyond his control, into a direction that once would have terrified him. It didn’t today. For the first time in his life, sitting alone in the hospital wing, he felt strong. He felt so much better and clearer, without the clutter of emotion holding him hostage.

He wonders for the thirteenth time why's bothering holding on to these … pieces - why doesn't he just let it all go? And he realizes that if Harry didn't care, he would have. It's shocking that his lack of fear is the only thing that scares him. He has to remind himself, again and again, that this isn't normal. Lucius did this to him.

Even as he reminds himself, he's tempted to not give a shit. Let it all go. Be free. Be strong – No! He has to remind himself! This isn't who he is. Harry knows who he is. Harry can see it, somehow, that Draco's broken -

A bearded man in jeans and a plaid shirt walks in suddenly, breaking Draco out of his thoughts - and he gives Draco a curious look. "Alright, mate?"

"Yeah." He turns the tap off and wipes his face. Leaving quickly, he tries to compose himself. He can't lose his shit here, not in front of these muggles, not in front of Harry. If Harry knew … he shakes his head, each step closer to Harry a better reminder of what he’s lost. All he has to do is sit beside him and breathe. He silently slides in beside him in the wretched booth, feeling as if the very space is closing in on him.

This setting is too loud and unfamiliar for him to deal with right now. The very light of the room doesn't make any sense: it's too even and steady and the shadows it casts are too linear. Draco already misses the orange tinge of candlelight that's soothing, that dances as someone walks by or flutters when it burns out, not like this fake light that merely pretends to burn. He shifts in his chair, not sure what to do with himself or how to even act. This is deranged. What is he doing here? He doesn't belong here -

He feels Harry lightly brush his hand and pulls away unconsciously, not trusting how much he needs that touch. "You okay?" Harry asks.

Draco barely shakes his head. "This was a mistake. We should go."

"No - I think you need this - look she's coming with our drinks. It's alright." Draco glares at his reassuring tone.

The waitress places a bottle of scotch down on the table next to two glasses that appear to have crushed ice in them. Draco raises an eyebrow at Harry imploringly.

"Like I said, I think you need this." He smiles sheepishly.

"What will you be having to eat?" she asks Draco.

"A hamburger -" he says automatically. "Please."

"With chips?"

"Sure."
"What do you want on your burger?"

Draco gives her a blank stare before turning to Harry for assistance.

"Er - he'll have everything," Harry jumps in. "Wait, do you like raw onions?" he asks Draco.

"Raw?" Draco asks, unsure if he's had raw onions before.

The waitress gives him a strange look. "We can fry them up if you like."

"Sure," he says, trying not to make a face.

"Great. I'll er... have the same order." Harry says quickly and Draco's glad to see the waitress giving him an odd look too.

"Alright," she says, "should be ready in 15."

"Thank you," Harry mutters before sighing dramatically and cracking open the scotch. He pours some for Draco and himself before shooting the drink back with a cough and a grimace. "Ugh. Stronger than I realized." Draco hides a smile. Instead he takes a shot of his own drink, liking the immediate burn he feels in his empty stomach. He probably shouldn't be drinking after his diet of fluids for the past couple of weeks, but oh well.

Harry pours them another glass, seeming to be on the mission on getting them sloshed. He raises his glass towards Draco. "Cheers to being alive?"

"I'll drink to that." Their glasses clink and they settle back in comfortable silence.

Until Potter opens his mouth of course. "So what should we do about your Mother?"

"I don't know," Draco says quietly. He's avoiding this topic because he knows he doesn't feel as worried as he should. "Rook said she was with family, but the only family I know that's alive is - well -"

"Andromeda!"

"Yeah - but that seems very unlikely."

"Unless she's under Lucius' control?" Harry asks enthusiastically, and Draco tries very hard to latch onto that feeling. "This is a real lead. You need to talk to her."

"How do you think that scene will play out, exactly? 'Hello, Aunt Andromeda! This is your Death Eater nephew-""

"Ex-Death Eater," Harry says into his glass.

"Whatever. 'This is your nephew whom you’ve never met. Did my lunatic father - oh he’s not dead, by the way - happen to force you to hide my Mother here against your will?' Actually – that sounds like a decent letter," Draco adds as an afterthought.

"What? No! We have to go there in person - sometime this week - just in case she really is under some influence."

"Fine – sounds like a plan," he says dismissively.

Potter frowns and sips his drink. He bites on his lip, trying to hold in a question before he blurts out,
"Why do you seem so unconcerned?"

Several excuses filter through his mind and he knows each lie won't do, so Draco opts for half-truths. "I was worried - but that was before - everything that happened. As far as I know now, she could be dead. Why do I want to know that? Or feel that? Isn't it easier not to?"

"Maybe, but if something does happen while you do nothing to try to prevent it, you won't be able to live with yourself."

"How can you be so sure?" Draco asks, taking note of the way Harry's looking at him, right now. *You could be completely wrong about me, Potter.*

Harry offers him a strange, timid smile, "I just know, okay?" Draco looks down, busies himself with another drink, unsure of what to say to that.

The waitress approaches them a moment later with two warm plates, and Harry bites back a smirk at Draco's incredulous look. When she leaves, Draco turns to Harry. "This is it?" On one side there is a handful of greasy chips, but on the other side sits a rather stuffed looking bun. "I thought it would look a little less… unhealthy." Draco glares when Potter snorts. "Hey, wait! Let me have yours - it's prettier." Harry rolls his eyes but wordlessly switches the plates. Draco picks up his utensils, unsure of where to begin. He pokes at his hamburger with the tip of his fork and lets it sink into the bun slowly, holding his knife ready.

"Oh dear god - What are you doing?" Harry asks.

"I'm eating my hamburger." Draco frowns.

"No. No, Draco - You're supposed to eat it with your hands!" Harry demonstrates by picking his up.

Draco snorts with indignation. "The very fact that I'm even eating a muggle meal is - is- senseless enough! I'm not going to resort to behaving like a savage."

"But that's the point! You poncy lunatic!"

"Not happening, Potter," Draco says stonily, even as Harry giggles around his burger.

He doesn't like the way Harry mischievously grins, leaning his elbow on the table like some plebeian. "You wanna bet?"

Draco glares at him suspiciously. "Maybe I do. You would lose and have to owe me - bigtime." He resumes in stabbing his hamburger meal with the tip of his fork while his knife saws away one side. Satisfied, he puts the slice into mouth and chews slowly, letting his taste buds become accustomed to the strange texture and flavour. "Oh, that's only a little horrid."

Harry's wearing a very amused and incredulous expression, which he quickly changes to a sly grin as he picks up his hamburger and takes a massive bites out of it, the sauce spilling all over his fingers before falling onto the plate below. He then closes his eyes and groans, "Mm, so good." Right before he swallows his mouthful he sucks the sauce off his pinky finger.

"You're revolting-" Draco says in a low voice with narrowed eyes, watching Harry's eyes light up as he takes another bite of his hamburger.

"I haven't had a hamburger in years-" Harry's thumb swipes some sauce of the plate before he cleanly licks it off. "Mm-Mm!"
Draco gives him a disgusted look before he neatly cuts another piece of his burger and chews it slowly. He begrudgingly watches Harry devour his in an unrestrained and sensual sort of way. He looks back at his own traitorous meal, which he decides doesn't nearly look as tasty as Harry's. "I think yours is better than mine."

Potter snorts in between chews, "You wanna try?" He holds out his half eaten thing, which looks like a sorry mess, and Draco is tempted to rudely refuse, but the ketchup on Harry's chin has him nodding and leaning in for a bite instead.

Harry, the git, moves his hand away from him with a twinkle in his eye, "a proper bite, Draco. Not a lame, little posh one. You have to commit to being a savage."

Draco rolls his eyes before he takes Harry's hand and brings the burger to his mouth. He closes his eyes and takes a huge bite, much too large for him to properly keep his mouth closed while he chews! Draco whimpers as he tries to bite around it and it's here that Potter loses all composure. He clutches his stomach with his free hand and leans over himself and closer to Draco with a rush of laughter. "You're going to choke!" He gasps, "You fool!"

Smiling only makes it harder to chew, dammit! When he's done he leans in with a smirk, still holding onto Harry's food-smitten hand. He takes a reasonable bite this time before he licks some sauce off of Harry's palm. "Mm - thanks," he mutters contentedly, because he's managed to get the bastard to stop laughing.

Potter stills, his eyes flickering between Draco and the last bite in his hand. Draco also looks at his hand and they both reach for it at the same time. But all Harry has to do is move his hand away and shove the last bite in his mouth. Harry's cheeks warm with a fresh smile as he smugly wipes his hand clean with a napkin. "Good, right?" he asks with a grin.

Draco nods and leans in to wipe the ketchup off his chin with the side of his thumb. Harry's lips part in surprise when Draco sucks the side of his thumb clean. "Not bad."

Harry's cheeks colour and his eyes flicker down to Draco's lips. When he realizes that Draco’s caught him staring at his mouth, he stills and visibly swallows. He looks at him now, almost nervous, green locking on grey. Draco doesn't dare look away, not for anything in the world. They stare at each other and barely breathe - until Harry unconsciously bites his lower lip.

"Scared, Potter?" Draco whispers.

In response, Harry leans into him.

Draco's heart thumps hard against his ribs. He finds that he's falling into him. Nearly against his will, he closes his eyes before their foreheads touch. They both inhale slowly, both still unsure, then the familiar scent of Harry fills his lungs. Tentatively, he brushes his nose against his, and Harry tilts his face so that their lips meet. And in this kiss, Draco forgets everything but this feeling that he loves - loves this.

Harry's the first to pull away, just enough to say, "You wish."
With Harry’s arm swung heavily around his neck, Draco holds onto him tightly, keeping him from falling as they make their way down the stairs from the Astronomy Tower. The journey is long and laborious; and by the time Draco reaches the landing, sweat is running down his back and snow is melting in his shoes.

He half drags, half leads the Chosen One through a long corridor. "Come on," he pushes his shoulder under his arm. "Help me out, Potter." Harry grunts and Draco rolls his eyes. "You're such a great help," he says to him, even though his eyes are closed.

"Mm," Harry grunts again. Draco glares at him and repositions himself to keep Harry upright, but every step seems to cost them both. "Jussotired," Harry mumbles, blinking slowly now. "Let’s just …" He lets his head fall down onto Draco’s chest.

"Oh… there you go again." Draco continues dragging him, but it's becoming difficult to walk straight. After a minute of this nonsense, he says in a loud whisper, "Harry!" Harry jerks his head up, blinking rapidly. "We're almost there. Honestly - Why are you so bloody tired?"

"Haven't slept in ages," he mumbles, at least he's carrying some of his own weight now.

"Really? Why's that?"

"Just – y’know-" Draco can tell that Harry is losing focus again, his feet getting heavy with every step. "The nightmares."

"Nightmares… still?"

"Since we got back."

"Oh… What's it you see?" he asks, trying to keep him talking.

"You dying."

Draco starts at that. "That's-that's what you see when you close your eyes?” he confirms quietly.

"So much blood." Harry seems to unconsciously cling to him. "But you're okay now," Harry says in a breath as he places his face firmly into Draco's neck and slumps against him in defeat. Draco instinctively pulls Harry in closer; his arm tight around him and his chin angling over his cheek. He holds onto his sleeping form in both alarm and amusement.

“I'm here now, Scarhead.” Draco tilts his face against his, brushing his lips over his cheek. He smiles in spite of himself and kisses his cheek, wondering if he’ll remember any of this tomorrow.
When they continue moving on, Draco’s eyes narrow against the dark as he tries to decide on the quickest route back to his room. He pokes Harry hard in the side and Harry snaps his head up with feigned alertness. "I'm awake!"

"Sure you are," Draco drawls.

Deciding on left, he doesn’t take more than three steps before he stops fully in his tracks. He hears faint footsteps from the end of the hallway. He freezes, not needing to get caught out of curfew with a drunk Harry Potter. Without much help from Potter, Draco silently moves them to a spot behind the nearest statue. He leans far back onto the cool wall and pulls Harry in as close as possible, glaring when Harry snuggles into him contentedly. Sodding prat.

It’s no use. The light footsteps approach them as quietly as she can muster, but before he can think of an appropriate excuse as to why Harry Potter is asleep on top of him, the light from a wand is shining on the spot behind the statue, revealing them both.

"I can’t believe this," the girl says in a shrill whisper. Draco squints against the light, not recognizing who she is because her face is in shadows.

"Alright - you caught us," he hisses. "Can you please dim your bloody wand?"

"What's wrong with him?" She steps forward as she lowers her wand. Draco can just make out the stern, worried face of Granger. Of fucking course, who else would it be?

"He's asleep," he says flatly.

"Asleep?" she asks in belief. "What did you do to him?"

"I drugged him so I could take him to my room and seduce him."

Granger pauses for a moment, staring at Draco in all seriousness and he stares right back at her. "I can't even tell if you're joking!" she hisses.

Draco snickers and impatiently kicks Potter's foot, leaning further into the wall for support. "Wake up, Potter - you're getting heavy."

Harry shoots his head up from his shoulder and mumbles, "god, Draco, I already told you I'm awake! Oh…" Harry notices they're leaning against a wall and smirks. He inches closer to him. "Why are we hiding here?" he coyly whispers. He plants an awkward kiss on Draco's chin, missing his mouth altogether.

"Harry!" Hermione squeaks.

Draco snorts when Harry jolts in his arms, immediately losing his venery. "Hermione…! What - what are you doing here?" He regretfully pushes away from Draco and turns to her. Harry runs both of his hands over his face, trying to rub the sleepiness out of his eyes.

"I could ask you the same! We've been looking everywhere for you. You are SO lucky Ron didn't take this route! Do you know the time? We have class tomorrow! You're being utterly irresponsible-" she says in a rush.

"Irresponsible?" Draco cuts her off with an arched eyebrow, really not comprehending how Potter deals with someone so shrill. "I think Potter can leave when he wants to - he is a big boy now."

"That isn't the point! It's three in the morning and I was asleep - Ron sent me a note, all worried he
was missing. But I knew he was with you," she whispered accusingly at Draco. She then turns to glare at Harry. "And I couldn't say anything to Ron because you - you're ridiculous!"

Harry has the grace to look ashamed, shuffling his feet as he searches for the right words, "I didn't think I'd be gone so long… I don't even remember getting back into the castle." He turns to Draco sharply. "You carried me down the whole way?"

"Yes, you prat. You can't even hold your liquor."

"That is not why- " Harry begins.

"Harry James Potter, please tell me you're not intoxicated right now," she cuts off.

"Only a little!" he replies a little too loudly. Both Draco and Granger shush him and he turns to Draco, flustered. "That is not why I fell asleep! I'm just really, really tried."

"It's okay. I don't mind hauling your useless arse down endless stairs." He smirks.

Granger makes an exasperated noise and grabs Harry's arm, who's grinning foolishly at Draco. "Come on, before Ron comes this way. Honestly." She begins storming away, pulling at Harry's sleeve, but not before she turns her face to shoot one last glare over her shoulder. "You too, Draco - off to bed."

Draco's left staring after them. He can make out Harry's quiet whining as his friend drags him away, and he has to swallow an unexpected smile. It's not like he finds Granger's antics amusing or anything. Still, he watches after them longer than he should. He sees Harry unwrap his scarf from around his neck. As he passes a large window the light from the moon catches the nape of his neck and Draco frowns. There shining gold and swinging secretly from Harry's neck is his Mother's pendant.

Harry's stomach rumbles and he wishes he had the sense to wake up earlier to sneak in a bite. Not only did he miss breakfast, but also his entire first period. If he doesn't hurry, he'd be late for Herbology as well.

He tucks in his shirt messily into his trousers as he scrambled to the direction of the greenhouse. His tie remains untied and swings lazily around his collar. He tries his best to tie it up as he jogs, but his efforts are a waste. A door to his left swings open and someone grab him by his knapsack and pulls him into the room. It barely registers to him what's happening before Draco grabs Harry by his loose tie and pulls him into a kiss.

"Oomph," he manages, as his hands go up in surprise and he loses his footing. He stumbles into Draco, who leans back against a desk for support. Draco's hands then move to grab the scruff of Harry's shirt, demanding his attention.

The kiss starts off as an awkward hello but quickly turns into a messy I-fucking-missed-you. Harry looses himself in it, in the way he forgets where he is and the way his breath catches. In the way Draco’s fingers brush through his hair as his thumbs swipe the side of his neck - the way Draco’s tongue brushes against his in a dizzying manner.

Harry pulls him in closer, his own hands clutching at his back. Draco’s cool fingers move past his collar and into his shirt, caressing his skin as if in searching. Harry shivers when Draco breaks their kiss to lower his mouth onto his throat, searching now with his lips. Harry can only curl his hands
against the back of Draco's shirt, closing his eyes and tilting his face for him. Draco trails his lips along his skin, past his Adam's apple, and there he finds a crevice and stops to suck on the spot, making Harry feel lightheaded. "Why -" Draco whispers, his breath making the wet spot cold, "why weren't you at breakfast?"

"Overslept," he mumbles, before grabbing Draco's face, needing to kiss him again. It's a sloppy one because Harry's hands begin to trail down to the front of Draco's shirt. He can feel his tie neatly done up around the collar and Harry tugs at it in satisfaction, loving the way it loosens before him. When he opens the first buttons, his fingers clumsily working, he catches a glimpse of fair skin and a soft rolling mess thrums in his belly, making him lean into Draco. Needing to taste him. He places his mouth over the base of his throat, right above the collarbone. He smiles as the slightly salty and bitter taste of his cologne. "Your skin - it's not even fair." His lips trail down further onto his chest. He continues opening his shirt and pale, short chest hair tickles his lips. Draco sighs low in his throat, blindly running his hands through Harry's hair. It's all so shockingly good that Harry nearly misses to notice the harsh, silver lines drawn rudely on Draco's perfect chest.

Harry stills and he feels Draco shift with unease. "What?" Draco frowns.

Harry inches his face back and continues staring at his chest in dismay. With distance, he can clearly see how they catch the light like lightning. The long jaded lines run diagonally across his whole torso, and Harry vividly remembers the invisible sword slicing Draco up - the curse uttered from his lips.

The image of Draco falling to the floor, with his blood splattering and seeping through his shirt, makes Harry take a step back, feeling ill. It's too similar to what happened at the manor - except - he was responsible. "I didn't…" He did. He nearly killed him and there are the scars to prove it.

Draco looks haughtily at him and says in an even tone, "Come on, that happened years ago." Harry frowns at him with a light shake of his head and takes his hands off of him. Draco sighs and casually reaches out for his hand. "It's not a big deal."

"It is. I did that!" Harry slips his hand free from Draco's and shakes his head again before turning away from him.

Draco lips purse as he begins to self-consciously button up his shirt. "I should have known you'd react this way- with your Gryffindor sensibilities and all."

"I never even spoke to you about it," Harry starts to say weakly. "I never told you how sor-"

"Shut up." Draco cuts him off impatiently. "You aren't apologizing."

"I have to!"

"No, Potter," he says sternly and Harry looks at him with confusion. "I remember exactly how it went down, alright? I casted the Crucius on you-"

"No you didn't," Harry says darkly. "I didn't give you the chance."

"It doesn't matter! I still tried."

"That does not justify this, Draco!" Harry says heatedly, gesturing wildly towards his chest. "I nearly killed you - because I was stupid enough to use a curse I knew nothing about." Disbelief flitters over features and Harry catches it before Draco can mask his expression completely. “Draco – I didn’t know that it would do that.”
"Then how did you come across it?"

"I found Snape's old Potions textbook - long story there - but there was a note in there to use this curse for enemies."

Harry immediately regrets saying this because Draco's expression shifts as an old, cold mask replaces it. Most unsettling is the change in his eyes – the grey no longer a shade he knows.

"For enemies," he repeats. "Like Voldemort?"

"No - that's not what I meant." Harry doesn't have the time to appreciate the fact that Draco's saying that name now with ease, because Draco smirks at him so unexpectedly that he flinches.

His eyes flash like metal, the greyness in them much too dark and much too sharp, ready to cut as he fixes his gaze on Harry. "How could you not know what it did? Are you not a wizard? Do you not spend hours learning Latin like the rest of us?"

"Like I said - it was a stupid mistake. I'm s-"

"You don't have to lie to me," he cuts him off casually, shrugging his shoulder. "You knew exactly what you were doing. I know I deserved it."

"No, Draco-" Harry closes the gap between them and reaches out to touch him but Draco sways back, keeping his distance from Harry.

"Yes, Harry." His teeth show though a chilling smile. Draco's back straightens and stiffens and his lip curls in twisted comprehension. "The truth became apparent when nothing happened." He watches Harry carefully, his eyes trailing his every move.

Harry fights back a shiver. There's something too unemotional in the way Draco's looking at him, a detachment he can't quite fathom. The tone of his voice is so different from the warmth Harry's grown to love. The contrast between his current, unforgiving demeanor, and how he was only a moment ago is so sharp that Harry fights the urge to step away. Draco's like a shadow of himself and all that's left is logic and apathy.

"What do you mean?" Harry asks, not understanding.

Draco tilts his face, regarding him with a curious, calculating look. "It's okay if you nearly kill the son of a Death Eater - he won't be missed." Harry's heart skips unpleasantly and all he can do is shake his head. "It's okay if Harry Potter's the one to do it because he's our saviour - our hero. That's why you got away with it, Harry. The truth of the matter is no one cares if Draco Malfoy dies - he matters to no one. The truth is that you're everything and I'm nothing."

"No-" he closes the space between them urgently, places his hands on Draco's chest. "You don't really believe that, do you?" Draco's silence makes Harry rub desperately at his skin, edging himself even closer to him. "I know it wasn't fair - I did get away with it. You're right, it's because I'm Harry Potter. But it doesn't mean you're nothing. You aren't nothing," he repeats, and Draco gives him a beseeching look, his posture beginning to bend. "You must know that I'm sorry… that I care. You must know you matter to me."

Harry's words seem to penetrate the ice in Draco's stare. Draco slowly blinks a few times and his eyes lock with Harry's, the frost melting away. He gives him such a searching and hopeful look that Harry cups his chin in one hand and places a light kiss on his lips. "You don't deserve these scars, Draco. You deserve -" he trails his fingers absently over the sharp lines that he can barely feel under his fingertips, "kindness."
Draco melts into the kiss with a slight nod, his hands floating up to sneak back into his hair. Harry feels him relax against him, leaving all those dark thoughts behind. He smiles into the kiss, before he opens the last few buttons of Draco's shirt.

Hogwarts is buried in snow. As a result, little news reaches the castle these days and the gossip within circulates and bounces off the walls, its echoes even reaching Harry. Not that there's much to talk about; no howlers or Quidditch games or annual defeats of Dark Lords, so it's only natural that the current scandals are of silly affairs. Sitting at the Great Hall for breakfast, Harry tries his best to ignore the tittle-tattle, but even he can't help but tune in to the ones concerning him - or rather his love life.

The rumour has it that Harry Potter is seeing someone - and it gives Harry a funny swirling feeling in his stomach to realize that it's true. But the guesses as to who this person is are quite troubling, from Hermione or Luna, or even people he's never met. Harry's surprised to hear one girl suggest that it's someone from Slytherin - she once saw him leave the Gryffindor Common Room with a Slytherin scarf sticking out from his knapsack - she swears. But no one pays her any mind because she's a first year and Harry smugly bites his toast.

He slyly glances around himself, hoping to god that no one is paying him any mind, and he sneaks a look at the Slytherin Table. He settles his chin over his knuckle and allows himself to partake in one of his favourite past times: watching Draco Malfoy.

Draco's so much fun to look at. His white-blond hair is parted stylishly, so that a fringe of it falls over his left brow in a look-but-don't-touch sorta way. Harry smirks to remember how prissy Draco initially gets when Harry messes it up when they snog, but it always ends the same: Draco threatens to hurt him if he touches his hair, which is practically an invitation, so Harry does. Then Draco pretends to fight him off, trying not to laugh, trying to pretend he doesn't love it.

Harry tilts his face over his knuckle, a sly smile on his lips. He knows Draco's hair isn't the reason he stares. He enjoys watching his haughty and graceful demeanor, his expressions change from a smirk to a hidden smile, and then there's his stupidly-beautiful face, angular and calculating for now - until the sharp lines soften beneath Harry's kisses. He watches the way he moves, his every act fluid and in time with what he's doing. Draco is so naturally aware of himself, so acutely aware of how to captivate Harry's attention. It's like, his every motion, his every shadow of his profile is meant to draw Harry's eye to him: to the hard angles of his face painted in light and shadow, to the point of his chin and the spread of his collar, to the inviting, silver lines of his tie. All of this is there to frame what's important.

Draco notices him staring and turns to look at him. Harry swallows, his face warming as Draco faintly smirks with that evil glint in his eye. Draco, the git, then brings a strawberry to his mouth and chews off the fruit slowly, his eyes fixated on Harry. Harry looks away quickly, his face as pink as the strawberry juice on Draco's lips, and he flexes his hand and shifts in his seat. He reaches out for some juice and throws a glare at Draco's direction, who's openly laughing at him.

He's so annoyingly pretty when he laughs.

"Harry?" Harry snaps his eyes to Ginny guiltily, hoping she doesn't notice where he's looking but she seems to be caught up in her own excitement. She bounces down into the seat next to him. "Have you thought of what I asked?"

"Um…?"
"About being seeker again!" she reminds him a little hotly. This year, Ginny had been appointed captain of the Quidditch team, which Harry had to decline at the start of last term when he went blind. They also had to find a new seeker for the team. That hurt more than he cares to admit.

"Are you sure Robins won't mind?" he asks.

"Are you kidding? She's been begging me to ask you - she's not bad, actually." Ginny casts a guilty look over her shoulder at their fellow classmate. "But she's fully aware that Hufflepuff's going to win the House Cup unless…" She flashes him a grin, "- we have a miracle of some sort?"

He can't deny that the idea of being on a team again is thrilling. He does miss Quidditch. His mind made up, he smiles and nods to her. "Alright - I'm in."

Ginny squeals and throws her arms around Harry appreciatively, which makes Harry glance nervously at Draco, who's staring at them stonily. Ginny quickly relieves him of her hug and rushes to Robin's side. Harry nervously chews his bottom lip when he notices Draco's gaze following Ginny.

The pair of them are momentarily distracted when Luna, who's sitting next to Draco, spills hot tea onto her shirt and all over her books. The other Slytherins laugh openly at her, but Draco merely turns away from her in annoyance. This very act makes Harry lean back in his seat with a slight frown. This act, which seems insignificant, causes a familiar tickling in his gut - one that warns him something's off. Harry notices Draco's sneer as he leaves, flicking off some of the spilled tea from his coat. Draco doesn't even bother to glance back at Luna as he walks away.

Draco glances at the clock and calculates that there's only four minutes left until McGonagall excuses them, which is lucky for him because he doesn't know how much longer he can sit here pretending everything's fine. He needs to find Harry as soon as he leaves… Something isn't right.

Draco's having a hard time controlling his impulses.

If he sees Harry every so often, he can somehow manage it and he doesn't stop to think why. The burden of pretending he's himself isn't so heavy when he's with him. But all it takes are days of being apart or a trigger, and he begins to slip away. Like smoke in the wind, he's having a hard time holding onto Draco Malfoy. Who is he and why does he matter? He wonders why he doesn't care his Mother's missing. Wasn't that something important just days ago? He ponders on what killing must actually feel like. It's strange he shouldn't know, given the fact that he's a murderer. Sometimes he catches himself fantasizing about hurting the people who've crossed him. Why shouldn't he teach Greenberg a lesson? What's stopping him from hunting down Lucius and stabbing him in the throat?

He holds his impulses in check, clenching his jaw down and trying not to think of her with Harry. How much he'd like to make her disappear… He replays the image in his head, of Harry looking at him, Harry squirming and blushing for him, and all of that swept away by the eager look from a certain Weaslette. He remembers how she tucked her long, red hair behind her ear, how she looked at him pleadingly, and how Harry didn't do anything to make it clear that he isn't interested. Fucking, stupid, Potter and that fucking bitch.

The quill in his hand snaps in half from the pressure he's applying to it and the Hufflepuff girl that's forced to sit beside him jumps in her seat before she glances at him uneasily. He turns to face her with a cold look, which makes her look straight ahead and ignore the little, deep growl that escapes him. She twists her hands uncomfortably on her lap and that only makes him smirk.
It's strange that sometimes it's easier to pretend he's himself, like a ghost of the old Draco is whispering in his ear, reminding him of who he is. But sometimes, even when he's with Harry, all he hears are his impulses. In these moments, it's impossible to hide. It's infuriating that Harry can see exactly when this happens - he can read Draco like a book. He's made an effort to school his expressions, but he's out of practice. He wonders if spending so much time with Harry when he was blind has weakened his defences. Harry can tell exactly what Draco thinks, feels or wants… Really, it's embarrassing how honest and vulnerable he is when he's with him.

Then there's the pendant. Draco wonders why Harry's hiding it. He's not worn it since that night, but Draco always checks to see if it's on him, just in case. Why is this a secret?

At long last the class is excused and Draco is the first to rush through the door. They're meeting in the library, away from prying eyes at a secluded spot that's almost too cold for comfort. He doesn't even mind the cold draft from the window because he enjoys sneaking glances at Harry while he studies. Harry stills stains his hand with blotches of ink and his penmanship is pretty atrocious. Still, he's fond of the swirly, messy way he writes down his 'notes' but to Draco look more like chicken scratches. Sometimes he catches Harry watching him, and he can't deny he needs to see that expression again. Right now.

When he sees Harry at the end of the corridor, he's surrounded by a small group of Gryffindors. Draco stills, unsure if he should risk it, but he needs to feel a sense of control again. So stealing Harry's attention away, Draco discreetly throws a stinging hex at his arm. He sees Potter wince and turn to look at him. With a sharp jerk of his head, he instructs him to follow.

Harry gets away easily enough and he follows Draco into a secluded corridor. When Harry catches up to him, Draco places his hands in his pockets, keeping his wild emotions in check.

"What is it?" Harry asks, closing in on him with a frown. "We have to be careful not to get caught."

"Caught doing what? Talking?" He shrugs in irritation.

Harry sighs and gives him a regretful look. "I know this sucks, but I promise it'll just be until I tell Ron."

"Why don't you just get it over with?" he asks with impatience.

"I will - and then -" Harry steps close to him, giving him that smile, "then we can't stop hiding."

There it is - that look again. He sees Harry's lips part and head tilt just a fraction as he greedily takes in the details. Draco's noticed this habit of his - a tendency to memorize rather than stare. It's like, Harry can't get enough of the details, and it makes Draco feel wanted. Draco notices Harry's eyes fixated on his lips and he smirks. He leans back against the wall, cocking his chin as his head rests lazily on the hard surface. "What are you staring at?"

Potter's eyes snap up to meet his, and for a moment he holds the gaze, but then just as quickly looks away, his face warming. Draco tries not to grin. "Everything? I was blind for four months-"

"Oh, is that all? Could have sworn it was just me," He presses his hands against the cool wall behind him, enjoying the way Harry straightened his posture and crosses his arms with a defiant look. "That maybe you like what you see," he says.

Harry shrugs with a shoulder, a slight smirk on his face. "I know for a fact you stare at me too."
Draco steps away from the wall, purposely intruding Harry's personal space, but the stubborn Gryffindors doesn't budge an inch - if anything he holds his place with a loud exhale. Draco arches an eyebrow and inches closer, their faces only inches apart, but still Harry doesn't step away. "Everyone stares at Harry Potter," he says in a quiet voice. He notices the way his words make his dark eyelashes flutter.

"Not the way you do."

He slyly grins. "Don't flatter yourself-" but he's caught off guard by Harry pushing him hard against the wall and crushing his lips onto his in a bruising kiss. He inhales sharply through his nose as Harry untucks Draco's' shirt in one hasty motion and slides his hands onto his bare skin.

Draco greedily runs his hands through Harry's hair, closing his eyes as the familiar swell of nervous excitement hums in his belly. Unexpectedly, Draco brushes his hips against Harry's and a captivating little moan vibrates in between their lips. Harry then pushes against him and fuck, something hard presses against his thigh. Harry yanks him closer, his hands pressed against Draco's lower back, and Draco wraps his arms tightly around his neck.

They fall into this space again - where time can't follow - and he loves the feeling of the rest of the world blurring away into it-doesn't-fucking-matter as Harry's tongue pushes into his mouth and he tastes delicious, or as Harry begins to creep his fingertips underneath the tight space between his waist and trousers. Draco curls his hands further into hair, not wanting to let him go, needing this to last forever.

"Harry-" someone cuts in and the sense of time catches up with him in a rush. Harry turns his face away from his in a whiplash, his lips and cheeks pink and his eyes wide as he stares at his best mate in shock. Frozen to the spot, he doesn't seem to have the sense to disentangle himself from Draco.

Draco wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, trying his damnedest to hide his smirk but failing horribly. "Perfect timing, Weasel."
"Harry-" Ron says in a strained voice.

Harry jolts and his stomach turns on him as he turns to stare at his friend in horror. He unconsciously holds onto Draco more tightly, not realizing that isn't the most appropriate response. The three of them are rooted to the spot, all staring and silent, until Draco says, his voice cracking with amusement, "perfect timing, Weasel." Harry shoots him a pointed look; Draco has the uncanny ability of exacerbating any bad situation.

Something awful twitches on Ron's face and he wordlessly turns on the spot, his shoulders stiff and his hands clenched to his side. Harry pushes away from Draco and says, "Wait! Ron!" - But Ron doesn't even glance back as he begins to walk away quickly.

Harry fumbles with the buttons of his shirt before carelessly tucking it in. He begins to quickly trot after Ron, but Draco is beside him in an instant, catching his sleeve. "Just let him be-

"No, Draco," Harry snaps, pulling his arm away. "I have to fix this, if you haven't already fucked things up beyond repair."

"How is this my fault?" Draco asks incredulously, stepping in front of Harry and stopping him in his tracks. "You attacked me, if I remember correctly."

"That - that's not the point! You know exactly what to say to get him riled up. You know he hates it when you call him 'Weasel'!"

"I was just breaking the ice. No one was moving or talking-"

"And you thought that was the best approach," Harry says hotly. He sidesteps Draco and begins to hurry after Ron.

Draco falls in step with him easily. "You can't leave!" he says. "Not yet-"

"I need to talk to him, Draco," Harry says with impatience.

Draco falls back and Harry catches the way he anxiously glances to the side, chewing on his lower lip. With a guilty pang, Harry turns to look at him. "Look, when we see each other next, we'll continue where we left off." He gives him a knowing smile. "How's that sound?"

Draco hides a smirk. "Fine," he says in his best bored voice. Draco takes a quick step towards Harry and grabs his head to peck his cheek rather aggressively. Harry laughs and pushes him away, but Draco's already headed off in the opposite direction.

Turning his attention back to Ron, he begins to head to the direction he left. Harry takes a sharp left at the end of the corridor, just as Ron had done. In this part of the castle, Ron's likely headed to the library to find Hermione.
A few minutes later and slightly out of breath, Harry's catches sight of the pair of them just outside
the library doors: Ron is pacing and ranting to Hermione while she's trying her best to calm him
down.

"Ron!" he calls out.

Ron turns to face him calmly, even though his eyes bulge at the sight of Harry. Harry walks up to
him apprehensively and winces when Ron blurs out, "you're snogging Malfoy."

"Ron, please keep your voice down," he glances around them and is relieved to see that the corridor
is empty. "Let's - Let's talk-"

"YOU'RE SNOGGING MALFOY!" He yells, horrified.

Harry doesn't know what to say, so he nods his head once, sharply, trying not to grimace as Ron
blinks and stares at Harry like he's grown a second head.

From the corner of his eye, Harry sees a young Hufflepuff girl approaching them to enter the library
and Ron turns to her so sharply she flinches. "You!" The girl looks around herself in shock, unsure
of why the Golden Trio is addressing her so. Ron then points to Harry accusingly and begins to ask,
"did you know he's snogging-"

"RON!" Both he and Hermione object, and Harry grabs Ron's arm to roughly drag him away, while
Hermione places her hand firmly over his mouth. "Stop freaking out!" he states as hurries to shove
Ron out of there with Hermione's help. Only a few paces away, Ron seems to gain control of his
senses and shake free from their grasp. Harry performs a quick silencing bubble around the three of
them, making sure he won't be overheard before blurring out, "I didn't want you to find out like this!"

"This can't be happening," Ron states in disbelief. When he's met with silence, he continues, "I've
known you for eight years. For bloody's sake - We're best mates! So how - how is it -" he pauses
here, making sure to articulate his next words, "You're snogging Malfoy?"

Harry nods.

"But - Harry, he's MALFOY!"

"I know."

"You're not even gay!" Ron points out suddenly.

"Actually…" Harry trails off.

"How could you keep this from us? Do you not trust us?" Ron asks hotly, and Harry avoids looking
at Hermione but she begins twisting her fingers in distress. She looks guiltily at Ron and opens her
mouth to say something, but it hangs open in her uncertainty.

It dawns on Ron that she already knows. It's clear by the redness in his ears spreading to his neck.
He looks between his girlfriend and his best mate and betrayal seeps into his voice, "of course you
told her," he says to Harry, and then to Hermione, "of course you already know."

"I made her not say anything!" Harry cuts in, not at all liking the way Hermione's eyes are beginning
to brighten. "She kept insisting I say something and I was going to, I swear, but-"

"But I caught you instead,” he says with disgusts, shaking his head quickly to rid of the image in his
mind.
A sudden spark of rage makes Harry snap, "That's why I didn't tell you. That fucking tone!"

"Well, I'm sorry if I can barely stomach how you were practically begging him to fuck you," Ron seethes.

"Ron!" Hermione objects. "Stop it! That isn't helping!"

"Don't start with that, Hermione. You always know what's best and it's goddamn annoying."

"Leave her out of it!" Harry hisses. "You're pissed off at me, remember? Because of what? I took the time to know him? Or is it because I'm gay? Please clarify to me what's so disgusting to you."

"It's because he's Malfoy, you prat! I could care less that you're gay. Sure, it's a shock, and I'm the last one to know - again! But-"

"I didn't even know until recently!" Harry replies.

Ron raises his voice over him. "But that's not the point! Did you forget everything he's done? He's Malfoy!" he repeats, as if Harry's forgotten.

"I know who he is, Ron-"

"Really?" Ron asks in feign disbelief. "You didn't forget that time he let the Death Eaters into the school and Greyback started eating Bill?"

"He never wanted anyone to get hurt! It's not all as simple as-"

"It's like you don't even care! Did you forget about Katie Bell? She was in the hospital for weeks because of him! I won't even bother mentioning how he nearly poisoned me - but how about Hermione? Does the word 'Mudblood' ring any bells?"

"I remember all of that and so does he," Harry tries to explain. "He's different from what we thought."

Ron turns his face away in a snarl, as if he can't stand looking at Harry anymore. "He isn't, Harry. It's not like he's apologized for any of it. He's the same, old Malfoy - smart enough to know that shagging the Boy-Who-Lived will work in his favour."

"Because I know him! He didn't want that life."

"Please, Harry! Wake up. He knew what he was doing when he became a Death Eater. He's one of them - the people responsible for your parents, for Sirius and Remus and Tonks and FRED!" Ron shouts out the last name, one he hasn't said since the funeral, and it breaks in the air, the pieces hanging between them like shadows.

Harry looks down at his feet, wanting to reach out and comfort Ron, but he reminds himself that Draco didn't kill Fred. Harry knows that whatever he has to say won't change Ron's mind. Whatever argument he has, it will be overshadowed by Ron's grief.

"I don't understand -" he says after a pause, "why did you - not mind when I spoke to him, if you
"I did mind. I just didn't say anything because I thought it was a phase; that you needed something to fix." Ron sighs, the fight in him spent. "I didn't realize - I thought you were just being a good guy. But it's clear you're not with him because you're kind, you're with him because -" Ron says, his lip curling. "You like him."

Harry feels the sting of his words but he sets his expression hard. "You're being a child."

"You're being a fool," Ron responds sourly.

Ron begins to leave but Hermione attempts to stop him. "Please just hear him out," she pleads.

"You'll be able to talk more freely once I leave," he says flatly and she winces. "I'll just be in the way." Ron leaves and no one tries to stop him this time. Harry turns to look at Hermione, but she avoids his eye as she wipes her cheek with the back of her sleeve.

Rumour has it that the Golden Trio, the very one that defeated Voldemort, is in pieces. No one knows why but it's evident that they haven't spoken in nearly two days. Reasons for this separation seem to wildly swing between "Potter's banging Granger", which makes Draco throw up a little in his mouth and "Potter's banging Weasley - Ronald Weasley", which makes Draco snort his coffee through his nose. That's fucking ridiculous, that is.

Even though these speculations are wildly entertaining, they don't bode well with Draco. Uncrunching his fist, he opens up a crushed note that he's twice read over. He knows he won't get anything more from it, but that doesn't stop him from reading it again:

**Dear Draco,**

*It's weird that this is my first letter to you. I tried to get Wiggy to deliver this but I think she's sick. She just flat-out refused to fly.*

*You've probably figured out from what's being said that Ron didn't take the news well at all. I'm surprised he hasn't told anyone about us yet, but I think it's only a matter of time before he explodes - unless I fix this somehow. I have a plan, but I have to wait until Ron calms down enough to listen. A few days should do it. In the meantime, I think it's best if we just spend time apart - just until things cool down.*

*Draco, don't freak out. I know you're freaking out. If you're sitting in the Great Hall when you read this, I can see you pretending not to care, which is your way of freaking out. I want you to know that I'm still going to snog you senseless, just after this mess. I'll see you at the end of the week - maybe we can stop by your Aunt's - after lunch at Hogsmeade?*  

**With Kindness-or-whatever,**

-Harry

Draco re-crumbles the note in his hand and exhales sharply through his nose, refusing to look up to where he knows a pair of green eyes are watching him. He won't give him the satisfaction. Stupid, stupid Potter. Left with no alternative, Draco knows what he has to do next, even if it costs him. Draco gets up quickly, smoothing out his robes as he leaves the Great Hall to head to the Owlery to
visit Wiggy, who he knows isn't sick.

"A few days," he scoffs under his breath as he climbs up the stone stairwell. Harry isn't allowed to cut him off because Draco needs him. He's aware of how sick that sounds, but without Harry, Draco becomes someone else, someone he shouldn't be but is fighting to be free. It's quite disturbing to admit, but without Harry he loses control over his thoughts, and by extension, loses that part of himself that's he's finding more difficult to connect to with each passing day. Without Harry, Draco becomes a shadow of himself. In a matter of speaking, he dies.

Draco won't last a few days.

Draco can't leave it to the fate of one of Harry's inspired plans, which have a reputation of going awry. So naturally, Draco has a plan of his own. Slytherins are known to be better than Gryffindors at that sort of thing anyway. Draco knows that the only way he can get Harry back is if Harry amends things with his mates. Is it ironic that an ex-Death Eater is scheming to get the Golden Trio back together?

He knows he's the problem and the quickest solution is to make Granger and Weasley realize he's not 'evil'. Draco's confident he can convince them of that; he's a pretty good actor. He knows he has to talk to them separately to increase his chances of persuading them, so he first starts with reason. Reason is his forte, and it won't take him long to convince her of his good intentions. He sends a note to Granger that asks her to meet him by the lake sometime today.

The next one will be much more difficult to deal with because Draco can't resist playing with emotions. It's amusing how his words can cause such a shift: and people like Ronald Weasley are so easy to trigger. Weasley's the epitome of emotion; always getting red in the face and ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Sending a second owl to R. Weasley, Draco wonders if he's lost his marbles.

Still, he smiles to himself, because dear intuition should come running back to him. He walks to the end of the owlery and approaches Wiggy, who's watching him with yellow, wary eyes. "Hi, Wiggy - are you feeling any better, or are you still being a bitch?" It's not the most appropriate way to greet her, but that's exactly how he feels and he's having a hard time keeping it all in check. Dammit, he needs to see Potter soon.

She ruffles her feathers and gives him a stony expression, not gracing him with her usual low chatter.

"Jadwiga-" he says in a low voice, "I know you know - but I'm wondering why it's a problem. It's not like I'd hurt you." She doesn't make a move and his impatience makes him lash out, "unless you gave me a reason to."

With a steely glare, she spreads her wings and jumps off from her nest, floating down gracefully onto his shoulder. He smiles at her, trying to scratch under her beak, but she tilts her face away from his hand. "Send this to Harry," he says in irritation.

She holds out her claw, waiting for him to get it over and done with, and as soon as he ties the small parcel securely in place, she leaps off his shoulder and swoops out the window.

"It seems that she knows better than to trust you," someone says behind him.

He whips around, his wand already in his hand, and Ginny Weasley arches an eyebrow almost impressively. "Don't hurt yourself there."

"Spying on me now?" he asks, even as he stashes his wand away.

"Please - I have better things to do." She turns away to look for an owl and seems to come across a
favourite. Playing with the creature, it's evident she's blatantly ignoring him.
"I have a favour to ask you-" he says unexpectedly.
"That's-" she gives him an odd look, "fucking ridiculous."
"It's not - it's actually rather simple. I'd like you to stay away from Harry." Even to himself, his voice sounds off: a little too calm and in control.
She stares at him before she scoffs in an amused sort of way. "You're a real piece of work, Malfoy."
"And you're a trollop, but why are we stating the obvious?"
She lets out an exasperated sigh as she rolls her eyes, "Look here, Malfoy. I just want to send my owl in peace. I'm not going to 'do you any favours' as you put it - or fight with you - Harry's my friend and you'll just have to deal."
"A little bird told me something rather interesting" he says over her voice, tired of hearing her. "Something along the lines of…" he smirks cruelly, "you losing a certain cherry back in the fall."
She looks at him darkly. "And that is your concern because-?"
"I just find it curious," he continues, "that this came to be when you were dating Harry. But how can that be? Everyone knows Harry is still - y'know- innocent. A little digging and the details of who and when are pretty obvious. I'm surprised Harry doesn't know."
She doesn't make a move and he almost admires how in control she is over her expression, until the fear in her voice betrays her. "You're going to tell him."
It didn't sound like a question, but Draco shakes his head for her benefit. "You're secret's safe with me. Just stay away from him."
"So - you're threatening me?" Her fingers clutch tightly at the letter that she had neatly rolled up before coming here.
"No - I'm motivating you to make the right decision." He smiles and walks away from her, leaving the owlery feeling much too good about himself.

Granger's already waiting for him, of course, because she never does anything half-assed. He should have foreseen this and it's a small slip up on Draco's part. He was supposed to be the one waiting for her.

When Draco's close enough he stops and nods tightly. "Granger."
"Malfoy-" she mumbles as greeting, tucking her chin into her scarf as loose strands of hair swirl around her face. "It's cold - why are we here?"
"Let's take a walk," he says, gesturing to the path around the lake.
Granger gives him a funny look before she looks back at the castle, trying to calculate if this is worth her time. Draco's sure she'll join him; she wants this fight to end just as much as he does. At last she nods and begins to walk along the path. Draco falls in step with her and is acutely aware of how strange this is: ex-Death Eater and Muggleborn walking silently side by side, both hating being here,
but needing to be.

Looking ahead to keep focused, he waits for her to say something. He won't break the silence. After long seconds of no one saying anything, she finally asks, "what did you want to tell me?"

"I know why Weasley's so angry," he says. "Why the idea of me and Harry together is difficult for him to accept."

"Oh, please - enlighten me," she says in light sarcasm.

"It's because Harry's good and I'm not," he replies casually. She glances at him but Draco purposely looks away from her, keeping his eyes ahead. "At least, that's what everyone believes. It's understandable - after everything that's happened. But everyone's wrong."

"Everyone except you?" she slyly asks.

"Everyone except Harry. It wouldn't be the first time he's right and no one believes him."

Truthfully, Draco isn't sure if Harry's right or wrong to trust him, but she doesn't have to know that. He just needs her to realize that she could be wrong. He needs her to doubt herself just enough to listen. He watches her, the effects of his words making her quiet, until her concentration is interrupted by a slight frown. "Harry isn't always right," she says, "and frankly, your word doesn't hold much weight."

"I know - that's why I'm willing to prove it."

"How will you do that?" she asks lightly, not expecting a real answer.

"Well - that's where you come in. Surely, I shouldn't be the one deciding how to prove my worthiness."

"Worthiness? I wouldn't dream to ask that of you. I just want to ensure you're not messing with Harry and that - oh yes- you're not secretly a homicidal Death Eater."

"Fair enough. So what do you propose?"

She stops in her tracks and lingers on the spot as she begins rummaging through a tacky, beaded bag and pulls out a small, purple vial. "Veritaserum," she says flatly, holding out the truth serum for him to take.

"You've come prepared," he observes as he takes the small vial from her. This couldn't be any more ideal. He was planning on hinting at this himself, but he should have suspected that Granger would come to this conclusion on her own.

"When you said you wanted to talk, I knew it'd be pointless if I couldn't believe a word you said. Three drops should do it," she instructs.

Draco unscrews the bottle and leaning his head back, he squirts three sugary drops onto his tongue. They tingle as he swallows and he instantly begins to feel its effects on him. His mind loosens and stretches until the very space seems to vibrate. Time seems to drag unpleasantly until it suddenly doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is this warm, fuzzy fog that feels like now.

"What is your name?" he hears her ask as if from a distance.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," he replies easily.
"Did you get the Dark Mark when you were 16?"

"Yes." Draco blinks, knowing he has to focus on the questions if he has any chance in pulling this off.

"Are you secretly a Death Eater at this moment?"

"No."

"Are you in alliance with your father or any other Death Eater?"

"No." Easy. There's no benefit to join others.

"Did you kill Albus Dumbledore?"

"No."

"Did you want to?"

"No." He didn't want to be the one responsible, even if he had to do it.

"Did you kill Rook?"

"Yes," he replies with a frown, because it's a fact even though he doesn't remember.

"Did you want to?" she asks the same question.

"No," he says, and it's true because at the time, he really didn't want to kill him. But she didn't ask if he'd want to today, or if he fantasizes about doing it.

"Do you know what your father was trying to do that last night at the Manor - to you?" she asks.

Draco's impulse is to say 'No', but it's not the truth. "Y-yes," he says, unable to stop the word from forming and being uttered.

"What was that ritual for, Malfoy?" she asks sharply.

"He wanted to make me stronger, to take away my weaknesses."

"Well - did you succeed? Did he change you?"

He chokes on a laugh, trying to hide the pain from the serum. He has to focus on the no. "He made me confused." That's still not close enough to the truth, so the words spill out of him, "Took something from me." No, no - he's saying too much, getting to close to the real problem.

"What did he take, Malfoy?" she asks sharply.

"I don't know. Pieces of -" he chokes here, the words strangling in his throat.

"Pieces of - what?" she urges.

"Of - I don't know!" he repeats and it's the truth, so why isn't that response sufficient for the serum? He tries to think of a word that could describe it, but every word feels like a lie. "Of what?" He asks himself, aware that Granger's giving him an apprehensive look. "I don't know. Of -" He chokes again; the words are unreachable.

"Stop! Don't worry about answering that!" she rushes to say as Draco clutches at his own throat and
struggles to breathe. She sighs when he takes in a large gulp of air. "Is there something preventing you from telling me?"

"No - it's impossible to answer that question," he replies.

She frowns at him. "That reaction means you know something, just on a different level. Either subconsciously or someone's put a barrier - but you know something you don't know." She continues looking at him with a puzzled, searching look. "Can you remember anything about the ritual? Any detail."

Draco does and he's glad he doesn't have to filter the truth. "When I broke free from Lucius' Imperius - the knowledge that I didn't hurt Harry, that I couldn't, gave me hope that we'd survive. But then Lucius asked me to choose between Harry and Rook-"

"I didn't realize," he hears her say in a low voice. "It was for the ritual. He needed you to kill for the ritual!"

"-And I didn't fight it anymore. I let him control me." The words are escaping him in fragments. "I let the curse kill for me, since I couldn't do it on my own." Although they're very much the truth, he's only just realized the implications of these words. He indirectly let Rook die by not putting up a fight.

"Why?"

"To keep Harry safe."

Surprise flickers over her face, before she gives him a sympathetic look. "That's understandable."

He'd like to roll his eyes, but instead he patiently waits for her to continue with her sloppy interrogation. He could sense more than hear Granger's hesitation in her next question. "Do you regret becoming a Death Eater?"

"Yes."

"When did that happen - your regret?" she seems to lose a bit of her fierceness when she doesn't already know the answer to her own question.

Draco focuses on the feeling of regret and it's attached to so many memories that don't seem to belong to him. "When I was marked - when I bowed to the Dark Lord for the first time - when I looked over and saw Lucius bowing too - when Voldemort used Lucius' wand on me - when Severus brought Burbage in and I recognized her - when I was on duty to guard her cell - when she started pleading - when he killed her - when it ate her - when I tried to kill Dumbledore - when I failed and Katie Bell screamed-"

"Okay! S-stop, Malfoy." She seems to have gone a little queasy and Draco knows he'd laugh if he weren't stuck in this fog.

Granger sighs, trying to think of other crucial questions. She only has a couple of minutes left before the effects wear-out completely. "Are you hurting Harry in any way?" she asks.

"Yes," he responds, but he knows she doesn't mean the hurt he's thinking of - he's just stalling for a little more time.

"What?" she asks sharply through the haze. "How are you hurting him?"

"When we kiss, I sometimes tug his hair too hard and when I taste his skin I suck until-"
"Stop, stop, stop, please oh god, stop!"

Draco stops talking, secretly smirking.

"What I mean is, are you trying to kill him, maim him, capture him, trick him or break his heart in anyway?" She asks as she ticks them off her fingers.

"No," he responds almost impatiently. Why would he? Harry's his reason to keep fighting.

She gives him a strange look and stares a moment before asking, "Do you care about him?"

"Yes," he replies easily enough. That's why he's here, isn't it? Except that-

"Oh! That's good." She doesn't smile, but her eyes light up, unable to hide her delight. "Well, if you aren't up to anything and you actually like Harry, I suppose… I don't have a real objection other than the fact that I don't like you." Draco doesn't say anything because he doesn't sense a question in that confession. "If there's anything else you'd like to say, now's a good time."

Finally. This is why he's here - he knows he has to swallow his pride and do this. It's the only way he'll gain some of her trust. "I never said I was sorry for everything I put you through. I know I went out of my way to humiliate you, but that was because I was afraid of what you represented - disgrace and eventual chaos in our world. But when I was forced to hurt people in ways that nothing could fix, ways I couldn't take back, I realized we were the problem, not people like you. I felt wrong; what I knew as the truth was a lie because they screamed and bled and died just like me." He stumbles out of the fog, his mind clearly rapidly. "So - that's why I'm sorry," he finishes with a lie, because right now he couldn't care less, Draco merely needed her to hear an apology. He thought carefully over these words, making sure everything he said was the truth - a reflection of his older self. He just got lucky with the timing of his last statement.

When he stops talking, she closes her mouth, trying to hide her shock. She nods slightly as she gives him a hopeful look. "I accept your-" she begins.

"I take it back," he cuts her off. She blinks at him. "My apology."

"You can't take back your apology!" she says incredulously.

"I can. The effects are gone and I can say whatever the hell I want. I take it back! Consider it never said! Can you stop smiling? It makes it difficult to hate you."

Granger hides a chuckle, her mittens covering her mouth as she begins walking along the path, and Draco knows he's got her. Check.

Draco's sitting on a windowsill, the light of dawn shining through the pane and spilling onto one side of his face. He's watching the Gryffindor Team play on the pitch. He's waiting for Ronald Weasley to hurry the fuck up already, so he can confront him about being horribly ill-mannered by refusing to meet Draco. He wrote to him days ago, but the bastard never bothered getting back.

With a crunch, Draco bites into his green apple and its juice spills onto his fingers, making them irritably sticky.

*Why are you bothering? Why don't you just stop caring* - Draco shakes his head tightly, trying to ignore that persistent voice, but within the last few days it's become indistinguishable from his own.
He reminds himself of the 'Why'. He's doing this because he's not going to let Lucius change him. It would be like letting him win. But there's other reasons... he just can't think of them now... but they're there. Is he doing it for Harry? Why else would he go through these lengths to talk to his friends, to make them trust him? It has to be for Harry, but he's having a hard time understanding why that is.

Draco turns his face away from the window when he hears a group of students approaching him. Three Ravenclaws appear from around the corner and stop when they notice him sitting by himself. Draco smirks in greeting.

"Malfoy, haven't seen you in a while," Greenberg says with a mirrored smirk.

"I was starting to think you forgot about me – made me feel a little left out." Draco offers him a chilling smile before he bites his apple again. Crunch.

"How could you think we'd forget you?" Greenberg says amiably. "If anything, we've missed you. We've been making plans for you."

"Care to share? I'm not fond of secrets." Draco absently wonders how long it would take to break Greenberg's arm, and then how long it'd take to hear him beg. He should find out.

"There's a match tomorrow – we thought it'd be fun to tie you to a post tonight and leave you there for everyone to see your naked, snivelling arse in the morning. What do you think?"

Draco makes a bored face. "That's not very elegant. What happened to the usual stuff? Like the burns? They were always fun."

"Malfoy-" Greenberg grins, his teeth sharply white, "those things are implied - of course we'll do the usual." As if on cue, the two henchmen that remind him far too much of Vincent and Gregory, begin to approach Draco with their wands raised, but Draco flicks his wand and silently stuns them, watching them fall ungracefully to the floor with amusement.

"Wow, that was far too easy," he muses, before he places his half-eaten apple down and jumps gracefully from the windowsill. "But it doesn't really surprise me. I never defended myself before, never stopped what you did from happening. Always let you get away with it." He aims his wand at Greenberg's throat.

"Oh, is that the case?" Greenberg scoffs, even as he tightens his hold on his wand and casts a wary glance to his fallen companions. "Tell me, what makes today so different?"

Draco smirks. "I no longer care that my family murdered yours."

Greenberg snarls and throws his fist at him, but Draco had expected that reaction. He side-steps him, grabs his wrist and strikes his palm right behind his elbow while pulling his arm out straight - Crunch - and his elbow successfully shatters. Greenberg tries to fall to his knees with a cry, but Draco holds his arm tightly in place while he tries to steady his breath, the adrenaline in his veins making all the details a little too sharp.

"If you could enlighten me," he says over him, still holding his arm awkwardly in place. Draco twists his arm and Greenberg yells out in pain. "Why didn't I stop you all those times? You must know."

Draco twists his arm again and Greenberg crumbles under the pain, swearing loudly as he fights to stay upright.

"You think you're the only one who's had it in for me? No, everyone wants to put 'Draco Malfoy' in
his place. But I only ever let you near me... Aren't you curious as to why?" When Greenberg doesn't respond, Draco continues, "I knew you wouldn't hesitate to cross that line: kick me to the ground, burn me until I bubbled, knock me out and hope I never wake - you wouldn't stop. You enjoyed it. That’s what separates you from the rest. That's why I picked you…" He twists his arm behind his back once more. “Because you're broken like me."

"Let go!" Greenberg seems to visibly shrink under the weight of his words, or perhaps it's due to Draco tightening his hold on his broken arm. Greenberg inhales deeply through his nose, his face contorts in rage and fear, which only makes Draco want to keep going.

"It's admirably how much you wanted to hurt me –but I understand it now," Draco admits and he sharply angles his arm in an awkward direction.

"Stop! Please-" Greenberg cuts in, his features twisting as he forces himself to breathe through the pain. Draco doesn't say anything when he lets go of his arm, instead he watches with curiosity as Greenberg nearly falls over in relief and instinctively cradles his arm close to himself. Draco, who isn't really aware of what he's doing, steps close to him and places his hands on his throat.

Greenberg stumbles away from him, his fear undisguised now in his wide eyes as his injury prevents him from pushing the Slytherin away. "I never - asked you to stop." Draco spits out with effort as he presses his hands into his throat and Greenberg panics, his eyes bulging and his hands now scratching Draco's wrists. "You knew I wanted to hurt - I knew you wanted to hurt me. That arrangement – was good while it lasted."

"N-no," Greenberg barely manages, kicking against him.

The more Greenberg struggles, the further Draco pushes him to the ground with his hands around his throat: until Greenberg is struggling to kneel upright, until Greenberg on his side, his legs giving out under him - until he's sprawled on the floor and Draco is bent over him, his arms locked and his face contorted. But Draco watches this all in fascination, even when his hands cramp and his breath becomes unsteady, his eyes frantically catch all the details, needing to take it all in.

Greenberg's legs are twitching and his eyes are beginning to glaze over but Draco can't stop. He needs to know what happens next – after his pulse fades away and he stops fighting – what happens to Draco? The pendulum begins to swing and he finds himself not the same as before. No, this is better. This sense of empowerment, this is how he's supposed to be. Draco knows that this control he has over someone's life - this is strength. It's rooted in the way Greenberg's hands begins to slacken, in the way his pupils begin to dilate, and how his heart begins to slow and slow and slow and-

Something hard hits him over the head and Draco stumbles back. His vision flickers before him until he blinks the stars away and he can make out Harry bent over Greenberg, trying to revive him while he aims his wand directly at Draco.
Let Me Go

Chapter Summary

I'm terrified of the dark thing that sleeps within me. - Draco

Draco looks down at the wand that's pointed straight at him, which is so close that if he wished he could snatch it out of Harry's grasp. The only thing that's stopping him from doing so is the way that Harry's looking at him.

"What have you done?" Harry asks in a pained voice, his features twisted.

Draco opens his mouth to explain, but what's in front of him doesn't make sense with what he was feeling only a moment ago. He looks between Harry and Greenberg, whose mouth is gaped open and lying unconscious on the floor, and he has to take a step back. His breath, which was already short and heavy, is now stuck in his throat. Harry's wand doesn't move an inch, even as he slaps Greenberg on the face with his free hand. "Come on- Fuck. Wake up!" Harry mutters, hitting Greenberg more urgently on his cheek.

When Greenberg gasps, his eyes snapping open, Harry sighs in relief. Draco wishes that could reassure him, but the sound of Greenberg sucking in a rattled breath rings through his head in a dizzying effect. As he raises his arms to hold onto his head, he notices the desperate scratches along his arms and wrists and stumbles back. "I didn't!" he says to no one, increasing the distance between what has been done and what he now feels, needing to get away from both.

"Draco -" He looks up and green, flaming eyes catch him. "Don't leave."

Draco doesn't think it's a request, but he doesn't care. He turns to be anywhere but here, but nearly falls over when Harry enchants his feet to the ground.

"Let me go, Harry," he says with forced calm, trying to hide the fucking agony after days of nothing. It's like suffocating - like he's drowning in something heavy and turbulent - like a storm is brewing inside him and he won't be able to stop what happens if Harry's caught in the eye of it. This unwelcomed state is so discordant to the fact that he nearly killed someone and could care less. If anything, he wishes Potter didn't stop him. "I need to go!" he says more urgently, afraid his thoughts will betray him.

Harry doesn't listen, of fucking course. He's distracted by his insatiable need to be the hero. After he revives the other two Ravenclaws - which Draco completely forgot about - Harry urges them to leave hurriedly, all the while keeping an eye on Draco.

Draco steels his attention away from the pathetic scene of the three of them lumbering away and gestures at the wand still aimed at him. "Is that necessary?" Draco drawls. "He got away- thanks to the-boy-who-intervened."

Something like dismay tremors over Harry's face. "What is wrong with you?"

The question makes Draco flinch, but he covers it up with a bitter chuckle. "Oh, my apologies - Was
I supposed to let him butcher me up like always?"

"That was not self-defence! You were killing him."

So what? The thought is so shocking he clamps down hard on his jaw to keep it a secret. In his silence, Harry lowers his wand and steps closer to him with searching eyes. This act alone makes Draco feel out of control: his breathing is too shallow and his hands are shaking and his thoughts are not his own. He holds his hand out to keep him at a distance. With great effort, he swallows hard to keep it all in check. "Stop - Don't come any closer."

Harry stops and continues staring at him with concern, chewing on his lower lip now. "What's going on? I know - something's wrong." That simple truth makes Draco shudder, and the large pane window, where his half-eaten apple waits, creaks and shakes with the force of Draco's chaos, his control on the brink of abandoning him. Harry glances at the window in surprise, knowing that Draco's causing it. "Draco, calm down."

His hand reaches out to touch him but Draco recoils. "Just leave me alone!"

"I can't - not until you explain-" The loud smash of the window splintering cut off the rest of his words, and glass shards rain down on them. Harry instinctively turns away from it before he crouches low to protect himself. In the chaos, the spell lifts from Draco's feet and he staggers back before he runs and runs and runs.

It's a chilly morning and Harry's shivering because he isn't under his covers. Frowning, he blindly tries to pull them on top of himself, but they're stuck under something heavy. He rolls onto his other side to see what it is, and for the briefest of moments, he's pleasantly surprised to see Draco lying next to him, fast asleep. He chuckles, "When did you…?"

But when he lifts the covers from him, all mirth and sleepiness is abandoned when he catches the details: the knife in his chest, the white shirt stained red, the dark, sticky pool that surrounds him, and then his eyes; open and unblinking, the colour of glass.

"No-" He leans closer in quiet terror, shaking him, but he's cold to the touch. Everything begins to shudder around him, so that reality begins to collapse into darkness, until he's choking in it, until -

Harry chokes on a sob and opens his eyes.

He sighs to realize it was just a dream - an awful dream. He twists himself in his covers and he's glad to see Draco lying next to him, smiling sadly at him. "Nightmare?" Draco whispers, his eyes as light as evening snow.

"Yeah … felt so real. So cold." Harry reaches to clutch Draco's arm.

As Harry begins to caress his skin, Draco watches the motion of Harry's hand with something almost like regret. "And how does this feel?" he asks.

"Warm." His fingertips run along the smooth skin of his arm, tracing the spot where the Dark Mark used to be. "Good."

Draco pulls his arm free from Harry with a grimace and shifts to lay flat on his back, looking solemnly up at the canopy above them.
"What's wrong?" Harry whispers, edging closer.

Even though Draco is staring blankly ahead, his gaze looks inward, and his hands begin to tremble on their own accord. "I'm terrified of the dark thing that sleeps within me," he confesses in a quiet voice and Harry catches the slow, strained breath that escapes him. "It looms nearer. It'll take over until I'm gone - until I'm only a dream. I'm terrified I'm slipping away and I'll take you down with me. As much as I'm trying - I'm terrified it's not enough. That I don't have it in me. That you can't count on me. That I'm going to hurt you." When Draco blinks his eyes are wet. He turns to look at him again, and Harry can see the defeat that quivers there. "So you have to let me go."

"No!" Harry grabs him again, even as some invisible force begins to pull him away from Draco. The darkness is claiming him, yet all he can do is will himself to not let go. "I won't!"

Harry awakes with a jolt and a promise echoing in his head. Turning over onto his other side, he's almost surprised to see the long stretch of white covers in front of him. He groggily stares at the empty space, trying to recall his dream to explain the sense of longing he has; a warmth that runs so deep it won't allow him to ever let go of - what?

Harry looks down at the pendant swung around his neck, and he absently cups it in one hand and swipes his thumb over the intricate gold. It's a reflex he's developed as of late, and he vaguely wonders why touching the pendant should make him feel safer.

With a tired sigh, he throws himself out of bed and stumbles around to dress quickly, altogether forgetting the pendant around his neck. He leaves his dorm with his shoe barely on and ignores the eager early-birds in the Common Room. Stepping through the portrait, he only has one thought in mind: He has to talk to Draco as soon as possible. If he's lucky, he can catch him before breakfast and confront him about everything that's happened.

He already regrets waiting until morning to talk to Draco, but after spending all night healing the cuts on his back and explaining the accidental magic to Pomphrey and McGonagall, he was in sour mood – which isn't the best way to approach Draco when he's losing his bloody, fucking mind. After some much needed and butchered sleep, Harry feels ready to face him. Draco won't slip away this time.

Standing in front of his door, Harry doesn't hesitate to knock loudly. "Are you in there?" he calls out. When he's met with silence, Harry shoves his hand at his hair in irritation. He quickly checks to see if anyone is in fact inside the room, but the location spell confirms it's empty. Cursing under his breath, he wishes he had the sense to check the Marauder’s Map before he left his dorm. Draco must have already left for breakfast, which means Harry won't have a chance to talk to him privately until after their first class together.

He contemplates what would happen if he just walks up to him in the Great Hall in front of everyone, but this thought is interrupted by the sound of two girls whispering from around the corner.

"How can you possibly defend him?" Ginny whispers angrily.

"Because I know him," Luna says in a soft, airy voice. "I've noticed for some time that he hasn’t been himself."

"Maybe his true colours are finally showing and he's making a fool of you." Ginny hisses under her breath.

"It's a possibility, but not very likely. It's too great of a coincidence that all the awful things he's done
have happened within the last few days, after waking up from a coma induced by his father."

Ginny sighs loudly and Harry finds himself leaning in closer, trying to catch their hushed tones. "Even if you're right, and whatever - his father fucked him up - that doesn't excuse how he is! He's threatening me!"

"I'm sorry he's doing that, Ginny. And I will help you keep your secret - but if you stand by the argument that what his father did to him shouldn't excuse his behaviour, then I could condemn you for everything that happened when you opened the Chamber of Secrets."

Ginny chokes on her indignation before replying hotly, "That isn't the same! There isn't a piece of Voldemort's soul controlling him!"

"Precisely!" Luna says eagerly, needing Ginny to catch her train of thought. "We should be asking ourselves -"

"SHH!" Ginny interrupts and Harry steps away from them quietly, heading back to the same corridor from which he came from.

He takes an alternative route to class, his feet racing faster than his thoughts. Harry can't deny the truth of Luna's words but he's afraid to know what threat Draco has over Ginny. He wonders what else Draco has done, and with a sense of foreboding, he breaks into a run to find him.

When he opens the door to the stuffy Potions class, it creaks loudly on its hinges. Although the lecture hasn't begun as yet, most students are already seated. He notices Draco in his usual spot, his posture stiff and angled straight towards the front of the class.

Harry anxiously begins to walk towards him, but he's distracted by Hermione rushing to his side. He leans back in surprise to notice her current state: her hair falling out of a loose bun, so that strands frame her frantic eyes, and her clothes are unusually wrinkled, as if she's pulled a manic, research-orientated, all-nighter. "Um - what you've been up to?" He asks suspiciously, because after years of being her best friend, Harry knows the signs well and can say with confidence that she probably has a breakthrough she's dying to share.

"I've been looking for you!" she whispers shrilly. "I need to talk to you."

Harry momentarily wonders if this means they're on speaking terms again. "Okay - that's great - but can it wait until-?"

"No! It's urgent," she says, before glancing nervously at Draco's back. "But not here, of course."

She begins to drag Harry back towards the door to leave the classroom, but Slughorn clears his throat and says, "Please take your seats." Slughorn eyes Hermione and Harry with irritation, who are the only two left standing. Although Hermione lingers for a moment and stares at the door, her respect for authority wins her over and she silently heads to her seat. Harry frowns when he notices the way she anxiously looks at Draco as she passes by him.

When he places his things down on his desk, his hands working mechanically, he watches Draco from the corner of his eye. Harry can make out his green tie high on his collar and his hair combed expertly. He catches a glimpse of Draco's dispassionate, almost bored expression as he pretends to listen to Slughorn's lecture with a quill ready in hand. Really, he looks the same, except for the fact that he's obviously ignoring Harry.

"So you're not talking to me?" Harry whispers to him.
"I'm listening to the lecture," he replies curtly, his eyes fixated at the front.

Harry sighs, and writes on a little piece of parchment:

**You're not even taking notes, you git. Stop avoiding me. Tell me what happened.**

He slips the parchment to Draco, who reads it but doesn't make a move to reply.

Harry doesn't have the patience for this, so he reaches to grab his arm, but Draco recoils from the touch so quickly he can't hide the spasm of pain that passes his eyes. "Tell me what's wrong!" Harry pleads.

"**Nothing!**" he hisses back.

"Then please explain to me how you nearly killed him!"

"But I didn't!"

"Because I stopped you!"

He looks at Harry, his face devoid of any emotion. "I didn't need you to. I don't need anything from you." He steels his gaze away and grinds out, "if anything - This thing we have going on - whatever it is - I think it's ... done."

Harry stares at him, trying to catch a lie in his tone, any hint of amusement on his face, but the fucking bastard is serious. He scoffs in disbelief. "**This thing?** You can't even say it! We're dating, you obscene fuck."

"Well, I never agreed to that. I only wanted your undivided attention," Draco replies.

"And now you could care less?" he asks a little too loudly.

"Harry and Draco - you're being quite disrespectful," Slughorn says sharply, causing Harry to jolt in his seat.

"Er - sorry, sir," Harry mumbles as he looks about them anxiously to see if anyone's overheard anything. No one seems to be paying them any mind, except Hermione, who fixates her gaze on Draco in warning.

When Slughorn continues his lecture, Harry lifts a subtle silencing bubble around him and Draco.

"What's changed between now and a few days ago?" he asks stubbornly.

Draco smirks a bit to himself, "Everything."

"How specific of you."

"I don't know what to tell you, Potter. I guess I get bored of people easily."

He says it so nonchalantly Harry has to replay the words over in his head. When their meaning sinks in, he clenches his fists and has to look anywhere but at Draco. "Fuck you."

Draco's lips quirk in amusement. "You'd like that."

Harry has to remind himself this is a defence mechanism; Draco Malfoy is very good at keeping people away when he most desperately needs them. So swallowing the worst of his anger, he says, "we're not talking about you and me. We're talking about you and Greenberg."
"Correct. It has nothing to do with you."

"It does - if I have to stop you."

"Oh dear, is that a threat?"

"No! Don't you understand that I'm trying to help you? I know you're not yourself!"

"What do you want to hear?!!" Draco suddenly snaps as the quill he was holding snaps between his fingers. "That it won't happen again? Well, it won't! I wouldn't make the same mistake twice."

Harry stares at him. "I want to hear that you're sorry – that you can't stand what happened and you're going to make it right. I want to know you feel bad and it was a mistake. But it's like you don't even care!" Draco clenches his jaw and exhales loudly as Harry edges closer to him. "Ever since you woke up, I've found myself wondering if ... If your father succeeded. If he changed you." Draco's mask slips and Harry catches a layer of despair hidden there. Draco shakes his head tightly, trying to deny the inescapable truth, but his hands tremble and his hair falls over his eyes. "I should have known from the start – after Rook – I should have seen that he did something to you."

Draco abruptly gets up from his seat to leave and when Harry grasps his arm, he snatches his arm free. "Don't - Let me go!"

"Draco-" Harry stands up as well but Draco pushes him back roughly.

Even though no one can hear their exchange, a few people turn in their seats to stare at them because Slughorn has stopped his lecture mid-sentence and is looking at them with confused irritation. "Is there a problem?" he asks.

"I'm not feeling well, sir. May I be excused?" Draco replies, but to Harry's dismay, the silencing spell is still in place and Slughorn can't hear anything he's just said.

Slughorn's mouth sets in a straight, tight line. "It's evident that you two have some matters to discuss. Please do so outside where you won't disrupt my class." Slughorn gestures towards the door behind them, successfully dismissing them.

Draco gives Slughorn a levelled look before he shoves his stool back and heads out of the classroom, closing the door loudly behind him. Harry has the sense to lift the silencing spell and mumble an apology. He haphazardly tries to pack his belongings, but decides to abandon them and run after Draco, closing the door behind him with a soft thud. "Draco," he calls out to his retreating back.

"Stay away from me!" he says sharply, his feet moving quickly to create some distance between them.

"Just fucking stop for a second!" he easily catches up to him.

When he captures Draco's elbow in his hand, Draco spins to face him. "Oh, Harry. Sweet, trusting, Harry. Do you know what I feel when you touch me? When you're near me?"

Harry's so startled by the question, he numbly shakes his head.

"Unjustified, unbearable regret. But I can do better than regret - better than this longing." He steps closer to him, his eyes watching. "Longing to be good, to be kind – things I'll never be."

"That's not true."
"Do you know why I nearly killed Greenberg? Because I could. Because it was easy." His shadowed gaze trails down to Harry's neck and he tilts his face to recognize the pendant there. With his hand already outstretched, Draco takes a step closer to him but Harry steps away from him quickly. This reaction only makes Draco crookedly smirk.

"You're not yourself – you need help!" Harry rushes to say.

"I'm afraid I've never felt more like myself, Harry. I'm afraid there's nothing to fix." With that same menacing twist of his lips, he stalks ever closer and it takes all of Harry's willpower to not reach for his wand. Instead he backs himself up to a wall, nearly stumbling over his own feet. "I know it's terribly tragic that the Hero should want someone like me - tainted, broken, defeated - but it's what you like best in me." When he's in front of Harry, Draco presses both of his hands into Harry's shoulders, trapping him there. "But have you forgotten, that I'm not very nice? Shall I remind you?" With that, he leans in to kiss Harry.

Harry tries to shove Draco off of him, but Draco only presses himself against him further, the length of his body firm and lean. So Harry turns his face away to not kiss him, and Draco responds by trailing his lips below Harry's ear, the tip of his tongue as warm as his hot breath. Harry feebly struggles to push him off, but Draco's hand in his hair is distracting, as well as the other one that slides down past his stomach. It's only when fingers are fumbling with his belt buckle does he snap his eyes open. "Stop!" He pushes against the Slytherin, but Draco roots his feet to the ground. "Draco - let me go." He's caught off guard by a cool hand shoving its way beneath his clothes and wrapping around his cock. He's so shocked by this invasion that he shrinks back against the cold wall. "I don't -"

"But you do." Draco moves his hand against the length of him and despite everything, he feels himself hardening. Harry wants to shake his head or fights him off, instead he closes his eyes and holds in a groan, even as he involuntarily bucks against Draco's hand. He's so out of control, so utterly betrayed by his own body, that he can't help but let it happen.


When Harry dares to look into his eyes he shudders, for although he looks and smells and feels like Draco, he can't recognize the person in front of him. "Stop!" He begins to resist against him again, which only makes Draco's hand move faster. Harry hits the back of his head against the wall in his attempt to stop it from happening, but his muscles tighten and spasm, and with a feeble whimper he lets it all go.

As Harry inhales sharply to steady his breath, he hears Draco darkly chuckle. Harry shoves him away roughly, keeping him at arm's length.

Draco doesn't resist the distance now, instead he stares at Harry expectedly. When Harry's sure he isn't going to cry, he says, "I want you to go."

A cruel smirk breaks out onto his face, "That's it, then? It's done?"

Not trusting himself to speak, he nods.

"You still have something of mine." Without warning, Draco reaches to grab the pendant, but Harry pries his hands off.
"Don't touch me!" he snarls.

"Why are you holding on to it? Why is it so important?"

Harry doesn't bother replying, instead he reaches for his wand, a motion that doesn't go unnoticed. "I want you to go," he says in a strained voice.

"I will after you give it to me," Draco replies.

Harry rolls his wand between his fingers and nervously watches Draco. "No."

They both wait for the other one to make a move first, the tension between them thickening as they stare at each other in silence. At last, Draco's hand flexes for his wand and before Harry can disarm him, Draco stills and his eyes close. Harry barely registers what's happening when Draco begins to tumble down and Harry steps towards him to catch him in his arms.

He looks wildly around himself and is relieved to see Hermione standing a few paces away with her wand held out and her eyes wide. "I know what's wrong with Malfoy," she says.
"I know what's wrong with Malfoy," Hermione says.

Harry turns to look at her. Draco's slumped in his arms: his face pressed into his shirt and his limbs heavy and awkward. His arms are tight around his chest, holding Draco up, but Harry kneels down quickly to place him down. He's finding it hard to touch him right now and he doesn't want to let it show. He swallows his anguish and asks in a low voice, "what is it?"

"I can't tell you here." Hermione looks anxiously around them. "Class will end soon."

Harry stays bent over Draco, making a show to pocket Draco's wand when in fact he's discreetly buckling up his trousers with shaking fingers. "Just tell me," he says distractedly, doing his best to pretend everything isn't fucked up.

"Trust me, we should move him first." Hermione walks the few paces towards him, but he doesn't make a move to stand up. Rather, he stares grimly at the ground, the corner of his eye catching the image of Draco unconscious on the ground. His eyes trail to Draco's hand and he vividly remembers where it had been a moment ago. "You okay?" Hermione asks as if from a distance.

He looks up at her and she's looking down at him with a mix of confusion and concern. "Yeah -" he jerks himself up to her level, but still manages to avoid her eye.

Hermione frowns and unconsciously reaches to grasp his arm, but Harry shrugs away from her. "Are you sure you're alright? Did something happen?" she whispers urgently.

Harry shakes his head tightly, even as something inside him begins to bubble over. He swallows again before crossing his arms tightly to himself. "Tell me what's wrong with him."

But Hermione's eyes flicker down to the state of Harry's clothes and the bite on Harry's neck, before she glances down to Draco and back to Harry's face. Her face pales when Harry grimaces. "What did he-?"

"Don't-" he says through gritted teeth, "-Just tell me – please. I need to know."

Hermione must hear the plea in his voice because dismay touches her features. She still nods tightly and has the sense to lift a subtle silencing bubble around their heads. "Alright," she begins to pull out his invisibility cloak hurriedly from her bag. "Let me at least hide him - I have to," she urges when Harry exhales impatiently and watches her unfold the fluid, silvery silk.

"Why do you have it?" he asks as she fans out the cloak over Draco. "Wait - how-"

"Last night, I asked Ron to get it from you. I thought it'd encourage the two of you to talk… I didn't think he'd take it without asking you," she says apologetically.
"Oh." He didn't know that Hermione and Ron were already speaking, but he's too preoccupied to care right now. "Why did you need it?"

"We were working late in the library. I stumbled upon something - I had to confirm if it was true." She looks at him fearfully.

"What did you discover?" he asks.

Her eyebrows knit together as she whispers, "it's not good."

Harry waits for her to continue, but she seems to be struggling with her choice of words. "Hermione…" he begins impatiently.

Hermione inhales slowly before she says, "the simple fact is that Malfoy has a Horcrux."

That last word is so unexpected that Harry blinks at her. "What? Do you mean Lucius-?"

"No, Draco has one. His father made him create-"

"No," Harry shakes his head and dryly chuckles. "No - That's not true. You're not telling me that he's missing a piece of his soul!" He looks steadily at her, even as a twisting sensation begins to make him feel nauseous.

"I am," she replies quietly, glancing regretfully at the invisible form beside them. "It's true-"

"There's no way!" he blurts out, making her flinch. Bile singes the back of his throat and he swallows deeply. "You're wrong."

"I wish I were - But it all fits, Harry! The potion his father used on him had the properties of a poison, but the damage just wasn't obvious – there is something wrong with him. His father did change him." Harry tries to interrupt her, but she won't let him have a word in. "Then there's the fact that the death and blood of an enemy was required for the ritual – it's why Lucius forced Draco to kill Rook. And - and lastly – he nearly died! Draco had to 'greet death but not shake his hand' in order to complete the ritual."

"What are you talking about?" he asks in exasperation.

"It's a direct quote from the "Secrets of the Darkest Arts"! Unfortunately after a year of studying Horcruxes I know the ritual well. I just didn't want to believe it – I didn't think it could be forced upon you! But his father manages it somehow- turned him into a raging psychopath." She gestures wildly to Draco's invisible form, "by – by splitting his soul." Hermione's eyes inexplicably travel to the pendant around his neck.

Harry's insides fill with ice and he unconsciously shields the pendant with his hand. Hermione notices the gesture with a sad smile. "You've been carrying it around this entire time."

"No! It's impossible-"

"It isn't," she mutters.

"But it is, obviously! Even if it was true-" he points to her.

"Which it is," she says with a wince.

"Which is isn't!" he snaps. He takes a deep breath. "How am I bloody dating him – or almost dating him-" They actually haven't had that talk yet…but it was implied! "That's – not important. How
could I not notice he's missing a piece of his soul? I would know."

"But didn't you? You've mentioned he's different."

"No – not like that – not like Voldemort! I would have seen it straight away. It would be obvious - especially to me! And it's not like his he looks any different. Every time Voldemort created a Horcrux, it physically changed him."

"You haven't noticed anything physically different?" Hermione asks doubtfully. "It always leaves a trace, like their hair or eye colour changing..."

Harry looks away, trying not to grimace. He remembers Draco's eyes the night he got his sight back. They were silver specked with amber and so very warm. But the memory feels like a dream now, because Draco's eyes are the colour of dark ice. Harry must have imagined anything different.

"Hermione, it can't be true – I would have noticed," he says stubbornly.

"And you did," she says as her eyes linger on the pendant. "When he's with you, for whatever reason, he's a little closer to his old self. Maybe because you're guarding that piece of his soul - I don't know. But recently, even being near you doesn't hide the fact that he's-"

"I can't listen to this." Harry begins to turn away from her, because the implications of what will happen if she's right are too horrific. They won't be able to help him. Draco won't get better, no, he'll only get worse. He'll slip away from Harry - become a shadow of himself. He'll be someone who values power above all else, someone who will not let anything get in his way, not his family, his name, or even Harry. Draco will become someone Harry can't trust. He’ll always have to watch him. Worse of all, Draco will become someone Harry may have to stop.

Already a few paces away, Hermione's voice stops him. "I can prove it."

He looks at her, and the part of him that can't deny that it's all true forces him to pause. He doesn't know if he can face the reality of it – of Draco's soul broken to pieces - but he knows he can't walk away. It's just not in him. He nods at her solemnly, his eyes fixed on her wand as she raises it and points at his chest.

"Trust me, Harry. It'll only last a moment." He notices the regret in her eyes when she says the incantation: "Ardere Oculus."

"Hermione, don't!" He raises his arms over his head, but the last thing he sees are jets of white light shooting towards him. When he's suddenly surrounded by darkness, a nightmare he'd sooner forget, he stumbles away from her. "Why would you do that?" he cries out.

"Look at it!" she urges.

Harry looks down and stops abruptly when he sees it. There, close to his chest, is a flaming ball of silver light. There, penetrating the darkness, is this beautiful fire. Harry picks it up and although he can't see, he recognizes the familiar pattern of winding gold against his fingers. He knows the intricate details well because for countless nights he's fallen asleep holding the pendant exactly like he is now: in quiet wonder.

It's strange; what held him captive all this time was something he couldn't see. But looking at it now, it's obvious he's missed this, for it's the same light he grew to love in darkness. Nothing is as familiar to him as the way it swirls in mischief. When he clutches it in his hand, he feels the same warmth that lingers on him when he wakes from silver dreams. The feeling of being close to it: It's the same as when they first kissed, the same as when he first could see and all he cared to see was Draco. It hurts.
To be near it. Just as it hurts to be near Draco.

With an aching heart, Harry knows it's true. He's guarding a piece of his soul.

Draco gasps and sits up suddenly in confusion. He has the sensation of being brought back to awareness too quickly, completely unlike awakening. He's come to associate that unsettling feeling with being revived from a stunning curse.

He blinks around at his surroundings, from the white linens of an unfamiliar bed, to the humble study space that sits under a barred window. Frowning, he looks to the other side of the room and his stomach lurches unpleasantly at the sight before him. Hermione Granger is watching him warily with a steady wand aimed at him, while Ronald Weasley is holding up a tray of food with a hard expression on his face.

Weasley's red hair partially obscures his eyes as he walks towards Draco, to which he unconsciously reaches for his wand but to his dismay he finds that it's gone. So all Draco can do is stonily glare as Weasley places the sad tray of food down on the desk beside his bed. Weasley turns back to Granger silently, but not before he glances smugly at him. A sort of detached panic twists inside Draco. He watches Weasley stand next to Granger, her wand still steadily aimed.

The clarity of the situation comes crashing down on him. They mean to keep him here.

An eyebrow quirks and he asks in a drawl, "So where's the piss bucket?"

"You'll obviously have access to a washroom. We'll come by at least three times a day-" Granger begins.

"Maybe less," Weasley cuts in.

Draco snorts in disbelief. "As generous as that is, this arrangement doesn't really persuade me to stay," he says.

Granger exhales loudly while Weasley crosses his arms and scowls. "Would you prefer the dungeons? You could be far worse off so I wouldn't complain," he says.

Draco smirks widely at him. "You've stunned me. Left me in that state for who knows how long. Then you've taken my wand and abducted me. You're holding me against my will - and apparently," he wrinkles his nose at the red apple on the tray, "You're trying to poison me!"

Weasley rolls her eyes and Granger shakes her head in offence. "It's food – I promise you." Draco glares suspiciously at her, wondering how she found out he's allergic to red apples. "Although you may not believe it, we're not trying to hurt you! We're trying to-" but Draco stands up abruptly from where he's sits.

"Please tell me you're trying to help me. That's exactly the hero-complex-bullshit I want to hear right now," he says as he strides over to them in long, purposeful steps, needing to only grab one wand to gain the upper hand.

"Wait - Malfoy!" She holds her palm out for him to stop but he's too preoccupied on closing the distance between them. "Stop!"

He doesn't heed her warning and walks into an invisible wall only a couple of feet in front of from
them. A surge of charging energy pulses through his outreached hand and up his arm and he takes a startled step back. He's tries to shake off the feeling, but his flesh is tingling and his muscles spasming. "You fucking mudblood," he hisses at her as he tries to squeeze his hand closed.

Weasley begins to walk towards him aggressively, his fist already clenched tight. But Granger reaches for him and closes her fingers briefly around his wrist. At her touch, Weasley regretfully stops his advance. Instead he points his finger aggressively at Draco. "You will not say that word."

"Or you'll do what, exactly?"

Weasley retaliates with a warning twitch of his wand, but not before Granger steps close to him and whispers something that Draco can't catch. He sees Weasley initially protest, but then he deflates with a begrudging nod. Granger steps away from him to face Draco again.

"The barrier is a precaution," she says. "We can't risk you attacking one of us." Draco notices Weasley begin to leave. He swings a large, oak door open and throws one last warning glare at Draco, before he leaves the room and the door closes heavily behind him. "It stops right before the door," Granger states as if nothing's happened. She points to the spot where the barrier begins by the window.

He takes a small step towards her. "This isn't right."

With amusement, he catches a guilty frown before she steps closer to him. She's careful to stay on the right side of the barrier. "You're right - what we're doing isn't ideal - but you know why you're here. You're dangerous."

"Did Harry say that?" he asks quietly.

"Harry says you're a danger to yourself," she scoffs sadly. "He won't admit you're dangerous to everyone, especially him."

"If I'm so dangerous, why are you here in his place?" Draco asks innocently before he smirks. "He's scared to be alone with me?"

"No," Granger says. "I asked him to keep away. I don't trust you with him."

"He can handle-"

"You have a Horcrux," she interrupts. "Did you know that?" The sharp turn in their conversation makes the question sound like nonsense until he repeats the last word under his breath. He stares at her in shock, recognizing that word from years ago, but never suspecting - He shakes his head at her slowly, feeling strange to finally know what's happening to him, and he catches a quick look of sympathy. "I suspected it was done without your consent," she says quietly, but when she speaks again, her voice is hard. "You being a victim of this -"

"I'm not a victim of anything."

She sighs. "You having no choice in this doesn't change the fact that you're dangerous. I've been studying Horcruxes and their effects ever since I first learned of their existence - All accounts have similar profiles. The victim becomes the abuser. They take their revenge on anyone that's ever crossed them. The thirst to be better, to be whole, consumes them - until they hurt the people closest to them… until there's no one's left."

"Am I so dangerous that the Saviour can't risk being alone with me?" Draco smirks. "You expect I'll hurt him-"
"You've already hurt him," she says gravely.

Draco laughs, a rich and offbeat sort of laugh. "That was just a little fun."

She surprises him by stepping right up to him, the ends of her hair jolting as they skirt over the barrier. "Anyway in which you force control over someone else is considered abuse. What kind of man abuses the ones he cares for?" she asks. "A broken man."

Draco rolls his eyes. "All sorts of people control the ones they love – it’s fucking human nature."

"It’s stunted human nature."

"Somehow I don’t agree – Don’t expect me to feel bad for anything."

"I'm not expecting anything from you. I'm trying to make you understand the gravity of the situation. You nearly killed someone, and then you hurt Harry."

"Is that what he said?" Draco asks. "Is that the real reason he won't see me?"

"No - I've already told you, I'm keeping him away. The last thing he needs is you trying to hurt him."

"Spare me - Harry isn't a victim," Draco sneers.

"If you believe that then you don't know him," she replies.

Draco frowns because she's right. Harry is a victim of war. Harry is victim of nightmares, similar to the ones Draco used to have. But the nightmares are now gone and he doesn't worry about his past transgressions. He's free of the burden of caring between right and wrong. Harry doesn’t have this freedom. Harry is a victim of guilt and shame… If only he could spare him.

"The largest collection of texts on Horcruxes is at the Malfoy Manor," Granger states, cutting through his introspection. “Have you ever seen it?”

Draco laughs. "Even if I have, why would I ever tell you?"

Granger narrows her eyes at him. “Where did you see the collection? Lucius must have hidden it well-”

"Boring. Next question?" He knows what she’s trying to do, but he also knows that Granger isn’t a skilled Legillmens. So why is she trying to make him remember…? It doesn’t matter because after years of hiding his thoughts from Voldemort, Draco has a knack for keeping his secrets out of mind.

"You have to realize it's stupid for you to remain this way. Throughout history, people with Horcrux generally have two paths before them: being killed or falling off the face of the earth."

"You've only heard the horror stories - when it goes terribly wrong. But the truth is…” He recalls some of the words he was never meant to see. "A Horcrux makes one invulnerable."

"You need vulnerability to live in this world. Do you really want to be dead in a few months or some recluse who can’t ever show his face for the crimes he's committed? And I know you don't care right now, but if you were yourself, you'd be disgusted with what you've done."

Draco scoffs here. "You have an interesting perspective of my previous character. But it doesn't matter who I was before - I'm perfectly content the way I am now."

"Harry won't let it-"
"Sweet, trusting, Harry. It's always back to Harry. What is he going to do if I refuse to go back? Kill me?"

"It won't come to that. We have other ways of making you cooperate."

"Oh! What a twist - The Gryffindor princess has some bite. Are you going to be actively in charge of the torture or are you bringing in a professional?"

Granger shakes her head lightly, before turning on her heel and picking up her bag by the door. He watches as she digs for something and pulls out a gold coin. She tosses it to Draco, who catches it easily. "When you need something, or heaven forbid, you're ready to talk, rub the coin and we'll come. It's activated to work only three times a day - so choose wisely."

"You're already leaving?" He asks as she zips up her bag. "Is this supposed to make me feel unsettled?" He chuckles and turns away from her as she swings open the door.

"We don't have to torture you to get you to talk, Malfoy." Draco doesn't bother glancing her way as she closes the door behind her.

He walks out of the portal hole, looking back to see Ron and Hermione sitting on in the armchairs closest to the smallest fireplace; the same one where they always have their 'meetings' as such. They've just thought of a plan to help Draco and it's risky. In the meantime, Harry can't see him. He knows it's for the best; he shouldn't face him until he's ready. But he can't help but feel a stab of resentment towards his two friends. After all, they have each other.

He's walking towards the Headmistress's office, letting his feet lead the way as his thoughts wander. He knows the wisest thing to do is wait – but patience isn't his virtue. If he faced him now, he would hold his own. Harry tries hard not to remember the last time he faced Draco.

The gargoyles guarding the Headmistress's office leap out of the way, and a winding stone staircase is revealed to Harry. He climbs them quickly, before knocking on her door. He can make out her footsteps as she approaches. When she swings it open, she greets him with a nod. "Hello, Harry, please take a seat," she gestures to the spot in front of her desk.

He nods gingerly and walks to where she's pointing. He plops down into the spot ungraciously. "Er..." he begins, "– what's this about?"

"Unfortunately, several complaints. First, you've been missing classes." She gives him an inquisitive look over the frame of her half-moon spectacles. "You've fallen behind on your schoolwork. Have you even started your applications?"

He blinks at her. Applications for what? "Um-"

"Applications for any post-graduation internships or placements – isn't this the reason you came back?"

"Yes – of course – I just-" He isn't sure what to say, but she continues relentlessly.

"And it has come to my attention that Draco Malfoy has been absent since last Friday. Prof. Slughorn has informed me of a notice of Mr. Malfoy leaving due to a family crisis. It's only curious that he didn't come to see my directly with such news."
Harry swallows. He thought the letter had been convincing enough. "He's not – very considerate about that kinda stuff, but he mentioned the same to me before he left."

He whips his head up when he hears a smooth drawl. "Look how he lies." Harry stares at the portrait of Severus Snape, who's looking down at him from the length of his nose. "What are you hiding, Potter?"

McGonagall pinches the space between her eyes and sighs. "What are you and Mr. Malfoy up to?" she asks, echoing Snape's question.

His face flushes but he has the sense to not look away. "Nothing – we're not," he sighs and shifts uneasily in his seat. It's not that he's such an awful liar, it's just hard to lie when he wants to tell the truth. "I-" He rubs the nape of his neck, suddenly feeling very tired. He didn't sleep a wink last night. "I'm helping him. He's a mess right now – I just don't know how. He-" Fuck, what is he doing? He practiced last night in his head – what he'd say. He'd convince them not to worry, that he had it under control. But in truth Harry has no idea what he's doing.

Draco's locked up in a tower and Harry's guarding a piece of his soul.

"Potter- spit it out," Snape says with slow impatience.

He bites the inside of his mouth, fully aware of their eyes on him. With a quiet and steady voice, he says, "I was up all night thinking of what to say to you. I wanted to convince you it'll be fine, that he's coming back soon, but – I just don't know. The truth is, I may need to go away myself for a bit."

"I see." She leans back in contemplation, if not a trace of concern. "This is serious then. Is it like last year?"

He was hunting Horcruxes last year, but now he's trying to repair one. "No - No one’s going to get hurt. I mean - I won't let it happen." He has to stop talking before he says too much.

"Is there's a chance that that could happen?" she asks.

He hesitates before nodding his head.

"Have you reached out to the Ministry? You do realize that you don't have to do this by yourself anymore, right?"

"I know." He offers her a weak smile to hide the lie. "If I need your help I'll let you know."

"I trust your judgement. I always have."

"Makes you both fools," a dark voice mutters from above them.

Draco's sitting on his desk, a surprising number of books and parchment piled around him after only a week of being held captive. He rolls up his finished Potions essay before placing it down and rubs his eyes with his palms. It can't be very late because the sun has just started to set, but he's so tired of being stuck here that he may fall asleep where he sits.

Boredom. That's what this is. Other than sleep, all he does is read and study. The only advantage of being a prisoner for nearly a week is that he's forced to catch up with his school work, even if it's only a distraction that keeps him from jumping out the window in sheer boredom. He once didn't
mind that kind of work, but now it feels tedious when the real things he wants to learn are out of reach – things you can’t learn at Hogwarts. Draco’s come to a point that he no longer cares about finishing the term. When he gets out of here, he’ll leave the school altogether and never come back. Being forced in solitude with his thoughts has made him realize he doesn't belong here anymore. He realizes he doesn't care enough to pretend he's like everyone else.

Even though this decision of his is comforting, and he keeps himself busy with his studies or fantasies of grand revenge, the boredom sometimes gets to him. In such moments, when he can’t stand it any longer, he rubs the gold coin and waits. It should disturb him that he’d rather have the company of Granger and Tweedledum than none at all, but he justifies that messing with them is more interesting than staring out the window.

So with a gold coin fisted in one hand, he wonders who will come today. No matter how long the visit, be it a bathroom break or another interrogation, he always tries to have some fun with them. With Granger, it’s a challenge to get under her skin and he was almost successful once. Apparently Granger has a soft spot for house elves. But usually he ends up bantering with her in an almost civilized manner. His charm isn't wasted on Weasley, whose visits range from solid silence to violent rows. On these days, Weasley leaves in a huff and no one comes to see him afterwards, no matter how much he rubs the ruddy coin.

Draco is sealing his Potion essay with wax when the door crashes open. Without needing to look up, he knows its Weasley. He could tell from the way he dumps himself into the chair that he’s not happy to be here today, which makes Draco smirk down at the drying scroll. It doesn't take long to get under his skin when he's already in a foul mood. His patience snaps as soon as Draco opens his mouth.

He feels Weasley's eyes on him as he settles into his armchair at opposite end of the room. "What do you want?" he asks curtly.

Looking up, he sees Weasley open to a random page in the *Quidditch Weekly*. "Granger was supposed to bring my Arithmancy textbook."

"Oh, yeah." Weasley takes the large text out of his bag and places it on the floor, before he kicks it over to Draco's side of the room. Draco rolls his eyes and stands up to get it.

"Granger would chastise you for that."

"Well, she's not here."

"Where is she?" Draco asks innocently as Weasley turns a page.

"What's it to you?" he replies without looking up.

"Just that she's been here these last few days - I thought for sure I'd seen the last of you." Draco offers him a smile.

"Well - she's busy." "Doing what?"

"I don't know!" He snaps, irritated by these questions. "It's not your fucking business, so just shut up."

"Are you being your usual rude self or do you honestly not know?" Weasley blatantly ignores the question, but Draco only continues staring at him with amusement. "I wouldn't be surprised if you
didn't know. She's really something - that Granger." He catches the way ginger's hand twitches, a reflex he's had far too often as of late.

"Don't talk to me about Hermione," he grits through his teeth. "Why don't you pretend I'm not here?"

"Like everyone else 'pretends'? It must be hard to be constantly overshadowed by your best mate and your girlfriend."

Weasley just shakes his head impatiently, turning a page in his magazine.

"Does anyone bother to ask, what does 'Ron Weasley' think? What does he want?"

"Let me guess; you're going to tell me what I want," he mutters.

Draco smiles broadly at him. "You want to put me in my place. You want to be the hero, for a change."

"I'd actually be content with you faced down in a ditch somewhere." Weasley offers him a light smirk before looking back down.

"You obviously don't care what happens to me, so why are you helping them? Why are you putting up with me?"

"You're right - I don't care what happens to you. But Harry does. If it were up to me, the Aurors would be interrogating you."

"But the problem is - it's not up to you. It never is." Draco knows he's hit a nerve from the way Weasley turns the page a little too aggressively. "But that still doesn't answer why," he continues. "Is it because of Harry?" He's glad to see Weasley finally look at him with sharp, blue eyes. "You two weren't speaking before - and now you're back to your rightful place: always a few steps behind the Chosen One. Are you just trying to stay on his good side?" Dracot tilts his head a bit, examining him with calculating eyes. "No, that's not quite it. Not this time. This is about her."

Something twists in Weasley's face, letting Draco know he's hit the spot. "It must be hard to live up to her expectations." Weasley stares at him, his jaw clenched. "But you never cease in trying - do you? All you want to do is impress her, but it's never enough."

"You know nothing about me – or Hermione."

"I know you can't offer her what she deserves. She's the brightest witch of our generation - she can do anything she wants after graduation - go anywhere she wants. Do you really think she'll stay at the Burrow? Most likely, she'll study at a top program. She'll have a place in the city. She'll be surrounded by people who share and appreciate her intellect. And only after a little while… She'll be too busy to see you. She'll cancel a date here, go out with new friends there... They'll be days in which you don't hear from her. And before long, you'll realize you're only holding her back."

Draco laughs when Weasley whips out his wand. "Another word - I dare you."

"Or what? Are you going to hurt me?" Draco mocks in a high-pitched voice.

"All I have to do is keep you quiet."

"But then how am I going to tell you what you so desperately need?"

"You'll never going to tell us."
"That's a possibility - just as probable as her leaving you when she finds someone who could please her."

"Shut up!" Weasley snaps, standing to his feet. "Just shut up about Hermione."

"Weasley - I feel for you," Draco raises his hands up in the air in a friendly gesture. "It's hard to be with someone who's better than you."

"Hermione is not -" he cuts himself off, knowing the next words are a lie.

"It's the same with me and Harry-" This is possibly a mistake because he sees Weasley's face contort with disgust. "I mean - no one is as good as Harry. It's almost ridiculous to compare myself to him."

The surprise on Weasley's face makes him continue: "It's the same with you. You need to impress her. Save the day. Move in together. Get her to love you. After flowers and chocolate-covered cherries," his smirk only deepens, "you'll bend her over the kitchen counter and-"

Weasley marches up to him, past the point of the barrier, and swings his fist squarely at Draco's face. He dodges the punch and desperately reaches for the wand in his hand, his fingers closing around it, but Draco snatches his hand back with a curse. Looking down at his hand, he sees the red lines from where the wand burned him. Someone had wisely placed a protection charm on the wand, so that only the owner can yield it.

He exhales impatiently as Weasley points his wand at him again. "Silenci."

"Wait! Wait." He steadies his breath and stands up straight as he regards him.

"The next words out of your mouth better be where we can find-"

"Unfortunately my answer to that is still 'fuck you.' - BUT!" He raises his hands again, really not liking the idea of Weasley taking away his ability to speak. "But - if I speak to Harry-"

Weasley looks up to the ceiling, his patience already wearing thin. "I've already explained this to you-!"

"I am not helping you step inside the Manor. There's literally nothing I could gain from doing that."

"Except your freedom."

"That's where you're horribly wrong, but I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"You don't seem to understand this situation!" Weasley says heatedly as he gestures about the room. "You're not leaving until Harry helps you or until Harry tires of you and gives you to the Ministry - as he should. For whatever fucking reason, he doesn't want to do that. He thinks it would be a mistake. But if he can't help you, then you're leaving him with no choice. So the way I see it, either co-operate with us, or cooperate with the Aurors."

"So if I don't co-operate, Harry's going to tell the Ministry I have a Horcrux?" He asks in disbelief. "They won't believe that."

"If Harry Potter says you're dangerous, no one will doubt it. If he says there's a threat of you becoming the next Dark Lord – guess where you’ll be spending the rest of your days?"

Azkaban. Draco turns away from Weasley, his hand aching too much to make a fist. "He has no right to keep me here. He has no right to ask me to help him when he can't even talk to my face. If he wants me to bargain for my freedom, he has to come and talk to me."
"Fine," Weasley says and Draco looks at him with surprise. The redhead is already retreating from the room.

Looking out the window, Draco can make out the last rays of the sun setting. It's been hours since Weasley left, and Draco's giving up hope that he'll actually see The Chosen One tonight. He doesn't understand why that notion should thrill him. Maybe seeing a new face is just another way to pass the time - but he knows it's more than that. He's almost... anxious to see him.

He tries to imagine Harry stepping through the door. What will he do? Will he be angry and defensive? Will he be scared of Draco? Maybe he'll do that thing with his hair, run his hand subconsciously through it and mess it up more than it already is. Over the years of watching him, Draco's come to learn how close to the edge the Boy-Who-Lived is by the speed in which his hand shoves through his hair. Harry only does that when feeling overwhelmed.

At first, such an obvious display of vulnerability used to irritate the hell out of Draco. How can someone of his stature be so comfortable wearing his heart on his sleeve? If anyone bothered to watch him the way Draco does, they'd know exactly when to rescue him, or in Draco's case, when to push him over. But now he looks forward to that ridiculous gesture of his. If he catches it, it's like an invitation from Harry to reduce him to a state of violence or angry words, to which Draco can never refuse.

When he hears the lock of the door unclick, his stomach lurches and he knows that it's him. He watches Harry walk into the room, the door shutting quietly behind him.

"Hi, Draco," Harry says softly and Draco merely stares. Harry lifts his hand into his hair, guiltily glancing about the room, and Draco realizes that he's missed him.
Otherside

Chapter Summary

When you wake up, it’s going to fucking hurt. -Harry

His hand is frozen on the doorknob as he stares at the door.

It shouldn't be this hard to face him, it shouldn't be this hard to help him... but there's a dull ache inside that won't go away, not since he saw the Horcrux with his own eyes. The truth is, Harry has no idea how to help him. That doesn't mean he won't try. It just means that he's fighting to keep a hopelessness at bay.

He opens the door, trying to not make a sound, and he catches a glimpse of Draco sitting on his desk, his face turned away as he stares out the window.

The door creaks as Harry pushes it open, and a platinum blond head turns to look at him. Harry feels his eyes burn into him as he closes the door, his angular face now half obscured in shadow. His expression doesn't change one bit as Harry lingers by the door, unsure where to go.

"Hi, Draco," Harry regards him quietly as he absently tugs at his hair.

Draco faintly smirks. "Come to grace me with your presence at last?"

Harry ignores the question. Instead he looks about the room, from the cluttered desk on which he sits, to the unmade bed. There's a pile of books and robes on the floor - but beyond that the room is sparse and unwelcoming. With a jaded inhale, he begins to walk up to the barrier that Hermione had pointed out to him, dragging a chair behind him. "How are you holding up?"

Draco's smirk only deepens as he watches Harry with careful eyes. "Better now that you're here… you've been avoiding me."

"I've been busy-" he mutters as he sets the chair in the middle of the room. It doesn't feel right to sit down just yet. "Are you - comfortable?"

"I appreciate the window - but it gets cold at night."

Harry pulls out his wand and casts a heating charm over Draco's covers, and then his pulse skips a beat when Draco gracefultly hops off the desk and begins to walk towards him, dragging his own chair behind him. He notices his bare feet pale on the hardwood floor, his wrinkled clothes and untidy hair; all of these details making him look strangely vulnerable. He stops by the barrier, exactly in front of Harry. If he wanted to, Harry could reach out and touch him. He's glad that Draco can't do the same. When Draco takes his seat, his expression both amused and reserved, Harry notices the bags under his eyes. "You must know I hate that you're in here, but-"

"You must know that this is wrong," Draco interrupts.

"I know," he replies, avoiding his eye now. "But to not do anything is far worse."
Draco nods casually, as if letting him off the hook, before he unexpectedly asks, "Did you miss me?" Even though here's a grudging curve of his lips where a smile should be, Harry can almost hear sincerity in his tone.

For a response, Harry takes his own seat and absently casts a warming charm on Draco's feet. "Draco -" Harry begins with what he hopes is a steady voice. "You know why I'm here - just tell me what I need to know-"

Draco scoffs and shifts in his chair to give him his full attention. Harry notices the way he sways closer to the barrier, as if testing it. "We both know I won't help you with that."

"Then we're at an impasse," Harry says. "You know what will happen next."

"Not exactly. I think I can persuade you otherwise."

"How's that?" He asks doubtfully.

Draco looks down at his hands, and Harry notices the red burn mark there. He fights back the urge to reach out and grab his hand, but that notion alone makes his pulse spike. Hermione will just have to heal him later.

When he looks back at Harry, there's determination there. "We can make a deal. A vow, even. I won't cross the line if you let me go -"

"No, that's not good enough."

"If I failed to hold up to my end of the bargain, I'll fully expect you to take me down. But I can be smarter than … I can control this," he finishes.

"Draco," Harry sighs. "You don't actually think I'll leave you like this."

Draco gives him a reproachful look. "What happened with Greenberg - with you-"

Harry shifts with discomfort. "You can't guarantee it won't happen again-" he cuts him off.

"It won't - I'll go. I'll leave Hogwarts."

"No." Draco steadily watches him and Harry's stomach flutters uncomfortable. "You're not going anywhere."

"So you're going to keep me here forever? Do you understand that I'd literally rather jump out the window than stay here any longer?"

"It's good that the window's barred then," he says with forced optimism.

Draco rolls his eyes and crosses his arms tightly. "It won't happen again. If you trust me-"

"I don't!" Harry replies. "That's the problem - I can't trust you. You can't guarantee it won't happen again, not when - when you enjoyed it! I doubt if you can even control it."

"I never said I enjoyed it."

"You didn't have to. When I caught you with Greenberg - I could see it -" Harry swallows, because he remembers the same thirst for power in his eyes the last time he saw him. Instead of denying it, Draco exhales impatiently and looks away from him.
The silence between them stretches, until Draco says casually, still not looking at him. "You don't understand. I can't go back."

"When you wake up, you can explain it to me." Draco unconsciously clenches his injured hand into a fist and winces. Harry sighs to himself, knowing he's utterly daft when he says, "let me heal that..."

"Fuck you. I don't need your help," Draco growls. "I don't need you."

Maybe he's right, but that doesn't stop Harry from taking his wand out and casting a cooling charm on his hand. "I don't care - I'm here to stay."

"At least have the courtesy to indulge me in what you plan to do with me," Draco sneers.

"I have a potential lead," he replies. He knows what he has to do, but it feel so wrong he can't bring himself to just get it over and done with. Instead, he fiddles with his wand and tries to summon the courage.

Draco notices his unease with an arched brow. "Who is it?"

"You - actually."

If that unsettles Draco, he doesn't let it show. Instead he raises his arms to cross his hands behind his head. "It must be rather nasty if you're stalling this much - but you've always been good at doing the job no one else wants-"

"I have to. I can't - let you stay like this."

"I understand," Draco says without humour. "You're a rare type, what the stories call a Hero." He smiles lightly then and Harry nearly forgets that he's not himself. "You literally can't stand by and do nothing. But that doesn't mean you don't enjoy this."

Harry frowns. "You think I enjoy any of this?"

Draco chuckles. "As much as you want to admit otherwise, you enjoy the fight. It's why you need me." He smiles twists unpleasantly. "Now that Voldemort's gone, you know it's true. Without something to fight for, someone to fight against, what are you, really?"

Harry leans back in slight surprise by the nature the question. "I'm just me – I-" he shakes his head tightly, trying to not let the question echo in his head as it's done before. "This is who I am – right here – isn't that enough?"

"Is it?" Before Harry can reply Draco continues. "Tell me, what did it feel like when you killed him?"

He felt relieved. Exhausted. Hollow. "I wasn't considering my feelings at the time."

"So then, afterwards? The days that followed, did you celebrate with the rest of the world?"

Harry hesitates before he shakes his head.

Draco nods in understanding. "Let me guess: You slept most of the day. But when the nightmares came, you fled until you nearly fell off your broom. Still, that couldn't distract you from the fact that you're not like anyone else. You've killed someone, and sure - it had to happen - but then you wonder why don't you feel worse about it? In your relief to be alive, you wonder, who you are. You
wonder, what's the fucking point? Why does anyone need Harry Potter?"

The words ring true, but Harry's already come to terms with the fact that it's okay not to be needed… so then… why can't he stop? "You're wrong," he says. "Yes, I was relieved. The war ended and the world could be safe again. I could finally live a normal life! Just that I felt - I felt -"

"What?"

He looks him squarely in the eye. "Regret."

Draco stares back at him and laughs. "You are so disgustingly good. Regret for killing him?"

"No - I don't know. Maybe regret for -" he swallows, unsure if he should say. "For that piece of his soul that lived in me." His hands twist on his lap as he realizes he's never admitted this before - barely even to himself. "It was attached to me my entire life. So then, when it was gone…"

"You missed it."

"Yes," Harry confesses quietly. "I've wondered… if that - space where his soul used to be – am I supposed to fill it with something else? Or just be content… like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like there's this void. Like I'm not complete." Draco's eyes widen a fraction. Perhaps he can relate. "I know it was unnatural to be attached to it… but it became a part of me, you know? Did you know I can't speak Parseltongue anymore?"

Draco shakes his head for his benefit and continues to watch him.

Noticing his curious gaze, shame begins to seep into his belly. "It's not like – um – like it still bothers me. I've barely thought of any of this since the summer." He hasn't noticed the void since he came back to Hogwarts. Since he started spending time with Draco.

"Wow." Draco leans back into his seat. "The Saviour misses the Dark Lord."

Harry smiles in a lopsided sort of way. "I never said that."

"You admitted as much, and I get it. Your whole life, that piece of his soul was a part of you… But it's not the same for me, Harry. I don't miss being my old self, no matter how much you try to convince me otherwise. The truth is, I like me better this way."

"Don't say that." It hurts to just hear it.

"Why? I'm free of pain. I don't even have nightmares anymore. For the first time in years, I don't feel so ashamed of myself. I like who I am now. Isn't that a good thing? Don't you want me to be happy?" he asks.

"I do. But - not this way."

"Why not?" Draco leans back into him, so close he nearly brushes the barrier.

"Because - it isn't right!"

"According to who? To you - what if I chose -?"

"If you were yourself-" Harry cuts in.
"How could you be so sure? You can't make this decision for me."

"I'm not! I know you wouldn't want this. You wanted so much more-"

"I don't want to miserable anymore. I don't want to be weak-"

"You're weak now," he says gravely. "Running away from pain - from a real choice. This isn't you!"

"It is! I actually have a chance at being happy."

"Happiness is overrated," Harry says flatly, echoing the words from long ago. "You and I - we're above that."

"No - no we're not. That was just a lie we told ourselves to survive the mistake called life – but I've found something better," Draco says. "You need to stop trying to fix me – that won't make you feel whole."

"This isn't about me, Draco! It's true, I can't bear to see you this way, but this is about you deserving more than what your father is forcing on you. You deserve a real choice and a real life – not this - deluded, watered down version-!"

"This version may not be enough for the Chosen One-" he begins sardonically.

"Don't you get it? You, Draco Malfoy, you're more than enough. That's why I'm fighting to keep you."

Draco's lips part in surprise and for a moment, he looks like his old self. But then he gives Harry a levelled look and scowls. "Don't try to feed me that bullshit, Potter." Harry tries to interject but Draco doesn't let him have a word in. "You've proven time and time again that I'm worth less than you. Even Greenberg-"

"I can't defend you in nearly killing him!" Harry yells.

"That's not what I meant!" Draco angles his face away and looks to the window, trying to organize his thoughts. "You found out months ago that he was beating me and you didn't do anything to stop it."

"You asked me to not get involved!"

"Since when do you listen to me?" Draco retorts. He looks back to Harry with watchful eyes. "You let him hurt me because you felt I deserved it."

"No, Draco -"

"What other reason? Give me one fucking good reason why you let it happen. YOU, who can't stand by if someone laughs at your mates, you let Greenberg beat me and burn and humiliate me."

Harry shakes his head quickly. "I didn't – you made me promise!" When Draco leans away from him in a bored manner, Harry rushes his next words. "I didn't want to think about the possibility that you weren't going to stop him on your own. I wanted to give you the chance to sort this out! But I swore to myself – I wasn't going to let him hurt you again."

"And yet - you let it happen. You let me punish myself through him. Did you ever stop to wonder why I - I didn't put it to an end?" When Harry nods Draco nearly smirks. "I thought I deserved it," Draco says in a low voice. "I wanted to be punished. That's the person I was. And everyday that
passed by and you didn't say anything, didn't stop it, only confirmed to me that you thought the same; that I'm less than scum - had it coming-"

"I never thought that."

"It doesn't matter if that's true. I still believed it - that's who I was. I can't be that person anymore."

Harry bows his head low, the weight on his shoulders only getting heavier with every word from Draco. "I-" What can he say? That he'll protect him now, against himself? That he'll change his mind when he heals him? "I'm sorry I didn't protect you." He slides his foot on the floor, the barrier tickling his toes as he crosses the line and gentles pokes Draco's foot with the tip of his shoe. "But … I'm trying to… now."

Draco moves his foot back, tucking it close to him. "You're a fool, Harry Potter."

"I know." He lifts his wand and points it to Draco. "Legilimens."

Harry strikes before Draco has a chance to retort, before he can summon any force of resistance. The room around them spins, and the space between them melt away as images of his life flicker before his eyes, the vivid scenes racing and making him feel nauseous. He realizes they all have a theme; Harry's looking for a specific memory - one in the Malfoy Manor.

He's six years old, and his father has just lifted the blinding curse. He should feel overjoyed to have his sight back, but all he feels is confusion, fear and hatred. At least, he didn't fail him this time… He's ten and flying around the gardens with Blaise, who has a hard time keeping up but doesn't seem to mind… He's twelve and spending Christmas alone with Wiggy in his room… It's his fourteenth birthday and everyone who's anyone is at the Manor. They're celebrating him, but he's restricted from parts of his home for the first time in his life… He stabs at the Daily Prophet, which has Potter's face plastered on it. It's his fault his father is in Azkaban… His Aunt Bella is clutching his face between her cold fingers and telling him to obey… He's holding the mask in his hands. He closes his eyes as he places it on his face… He shouldn't be here. His father made it clear but his father isn't here. He wants to know what curse Potter used on him, when he comes across…

No, his voice says inside his head. You can't see. I won't let you!

He tries to put up his defences, the same ones he used when he wore the mask, but Harry's not letting go. He's fighting to hold onto the image, mentally clutching at the scene, even as Draco fights to get him out of his head.

Draco's at a disadvantage by not having his wand, but after years of hiding his fear from his father and later Voldemort, Draco's developed a skill for Occlumency. He knows what to do, and this alone allows him to keep calm. Focusing inward, he begins to clear his mind and bury his emotions. In their absence, he feels Harry's overwhelming desperation. He's clutching at a memory Draco doesn't wish to share, so all Draco can do is tunnel down on Harry's feelings. He pushes against them, and even though it costs him to hold on, it hurts, he doesn't shy away.

Draco can use his pain against him. He latches onto that numbing ache in Harry and almost chokes on it. How is it possible to feels so much? Harry's well versed in pain - but he still doesn't know how to block it. So all Draco has to do is dig deeper, twist it even further, until Harry lets him go.

Harry cries out and twists in his seat.
The tables turn and now Harry's memories are on display. There's little Harry can do to stop him. As his memories flicker before his eyes, Draco's notices they're all tainted with the pain he exposed. Why is there so much of it?

Stop it, he hears a voice say that's not his own. But Draco can't. Sirius Black is falling beyond a veil. No. Dumbledore is falling from the Tower. Harry cries over Dobby's lifeless form that cradled in his arms. Cedric is laying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him. With shock, he sees himself laying in a pool of his own blood, with a knife sticking out of his chest. Stop, Draco!

A part of him knows this isn't right. Draco should pull away, but he's both fascinated and horrified by this pain. He slows down the memories, and stops on one that confuses him. A scrawny and dirty boy is hiding in a cupboard. No - No, no! There are cobwebs on the low ceiling, some of which are already in his hair, but he doesn't seem to notice. If anything, he looks almost at peace as he plays with a small, green figurine. He marches it across the floor, imagining a grand adventure.

Draco looks around the small space in confusion. He notices a scrap of paper in which he can make out the words, "my name is Harry." With shock, he realizes this is him too - a much younger and skinny version of Harry. But why is he hiding in here? Why is he laying on a filthy, yellow pillow and why are his clothes hanging off of him like rags?

A loud bang makes this young Harry jolt. "BOY! Are you ready to apologize to Dudley?" a shrill voice asks from outside the small door.

Harry quickly hides the figurine in his pillowcase and runs his hand through his hair nervously, almost compulsively. When the door crashes open, he flinches and walks to the small frame and meets a blond women by the stairs of what appears to be a muggle home.

"So what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I…" Harry curls in his toes and looks down, his small shoulders slouched over. Draco edges closer to Harry, somehow feeling the need to stay close to him. "I don't know what happened. He had my glasses and I was trying to get them back and suddenly…” Harry grimaces when she snatches the glasses of his face and snaps them in half, before she shoves them in his hands and drags him back into the cupboard.

"I will not tolerate any of your - freakishness, do you hear me?" Please – stop.

"Wait - I'm sorry!" he cries as she pushes him in into the cupboard and slams the door. With a click, it locks from the outside. "Aunt Petunia!" Stop, Stop, Draco! Harry bangs on the door and it echoes in Draco's head. "Please let me out! I haven't eaten in days!"

"STOP IT!" Harry screams and shoves Draco out of his head, back into his own.

Draco groans and leans back into his seat, letting his bearings come into focus slowly. When he opens his eyes, he sees Harry bent over his lap, his eyes closed tightly as he massages his temple and tries to steady his breath.

There's a pressure behind his eyes that reaches into his skull, making it difficult for him to open his eyes. He should leave now - get something to relieve the migraine, but he just needs a moment for the room to stop spinning.

"Harry -"
The sudden sound in the still silence makes him wince. "Shut up," he grits between his teeth. "I don't want to talk about it."

"This is your own fault," Draco says with impatient. "You're not a trained Legilmens."

"How is this -?" He breathes in sharply and it doesn't surprise him when that hurts. "You targeted my worst memories! The deeper you got into my head, the more you pushed me away - until I couldn't fight you off!" His voice breaks, so he quiets his next words with a grimace. "I couldn't - I couldn't fight you off. You kept fucking pushing until I - I couldn't even say no." He swallows, trying to keep his thoughts separate from his nightmares. "I couldn't let you go! You knew that and you kept pushing."

Draco's eyes are clear as they regard Harry, and he's sure Draco's hearing him. But then with a twitch of his lips, he says, "No - you wouldn't let me go. There's a difference - and that difference is the best move I have."

"I'm not standing by, even if it means you'll take us both over." Harry shakes his head and immediately regrets doing so because his vision pulses. He rises from his seat to leave and unexpectedly sways on the spot. From the corner of his eye, he sees Draco reach out to him, momentarily forgetting about the barrier. When Draco flinches and draws back, he has to force himself not to care.

"If you leave now you'll pass out," he states impassively.

"And why should that matter to you?"

"It doesn't."

Harry scoffs and turns to leave, but he moves a bit too quickly and his vision sways in sharp angles. He reaches for the door, but it's still too far away.

"Idiot," Draco mumbles and Harry strangely finds comfort in that. He begins to move slowly to the door, his hands trailing along the wall beside him, when Draco audibly sighs.

"That memory - that was your home?"

"Really don't want to talk about it with you," Harry says with a pinched expression.

"Why did they lock you up?" he asks icily.

Harry finally reaches the door and pauses long enough for the room to stop spinning. He stands up a little straighter, even as his vision flickers in and out of focus. "Usually after some form of accidental magic on my part."

"They sound like savages." After a pause, Draco continues, "Was that your room?"

"Yes."

"The cupboard under the stairs," he says in a strange voice.

Harry tucks his chin close to his chest and averts his gaze from the doorknob long enough to glance at Draco. There's something predatory about his expression and it makes Harry feel sick. "No one knows." His voice sounds too close to the one from the memory. "So - Keep this to yourself."

Draco snorts. "It would make quite a story: 'The Chosen One: About a boy who was abused by his
muggle relatives, but he was so good and so kind that he had no ill will towards them. (Even though they deserved to die.) So when the day came, the decision to save, rather than hate, was an easy one. And he'll always be remembered as our victimized hero."

"Is that an elaborate threat?" he whispers.

Draco shrugs. "Probably."

Harry offers Draco a dark smile, "When you wake up, it's going to fucking hurt."

Draco mirrors his smile. "Oh, Harry – you still believe that's going to happen?"

"It's going to happen – and you'll hate yourself for everything you've done." Draco lightly nods and Harry tilts his head in confusion. Draco's fully aware of this fact. When he wake – everything he's done will haunt him. He knows the surest way to that is to hurt Harry. "Why are you sabotaging yourself?" he asks.

Draco takes a few steps along the barrier. He stands close to Harry, just on the otherside. "Because I'd rather be dead than be that person again. If that means I have to ruin you to ruin him."

"If you ruin him – you ruin yourself! You're going to feel this."

"Only if I wake up. The choice is yours, not mine. But if you force me to wake up, like you said, it's going to fucking hurt – and what will stop me from jumping off the tower then?"

"I will."

Draco smiles. "If that's a risk you want to take, be my guest. But I know if I wake up, I won't be able to bear it: the things I've done to you." His eyes trail over Harry's form. "The things I've yet to do."

"Draco," Harry closes his eyes and presses his palm against the side of his head. He lets the words escape him, unfiltered. "I'm going to wake you up – then I'm going to help you through it. It's going to happen, so stop hurting me!"

"I will if you stop trying to destroy me," he replies.

Harry steels his gaze away with a dispassionate glare and moves to open the door. He still needs to hold up his head with one hand - for his worst memories are raw and jumbled in his head. When he swings it open, the door creaks loudly, making him wince. "I won't come back until I have a solution-"

"You're making a mistake. Don't do this!" Draco tries once more with force. Harry almost hears the plea in his next words: "Don't go-"

But Harry talks over him, trying to block him out. "The next time I see you-"

"Why don't you just let me go?"

"Because I love you!"

Harry grimaces and looks down at the floor, biting his lip hard between his teeth. He's unsure if he should risk a glance in his direction. His heart skips when he sees Draco shift from the corner of his eye. But before Draco can use this against him, or worse, mock him, Harry walks out of the room and closes the door.

He only manages to walk a few paces before he stumbles. He places his head in his hands to
swallow back a cry, but it chokes him. The ache rises up to his throat and he's drowning in it. He trembles with the effort to keep still and quiet as he turns to face the wall, leaning into it for support with both hands flat.

His palms resting against the wall feel the motion before he hears it. Movement - just on the otherside. He opens his eyes wide and stares at the parchment-coloured wall that stretches before him, listening to the silence between his aching breaths. The wall is cool and he can feel bumps of old paint beneath his fingers, but nothing beyond. Closing his eyes again, he leans against the cool surface to soothe his pulsing temple. He listens hard, imagining the Draco he knew only in darkness standing on the otherside.

When he hears a long sigh and the floorboards creak from within the room, he lets himself faintly smile. Draco's there, leaning against the same wall, unaware that Harry yearns for him.

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**February 12th**

**Dear Draco,**

*I haven't written to you in some time… There wasn't a need I guess. But right now, pretending to talk to you through a letter is kinder than facing you again.*

*I have to stop myself from wondering if you ever cared or if you're just manipulating me into believing that. Instead, I remind myself of the fact that you fool people into hating you, not loving you. It'd be easier to hate you. I can't hate you- or won't - the different doesn't matter to me. I know who you are. You weren't a dream. You were so real. The realest person I've ever known. If you saw this you'd use this against me somehow… I know that's not your fault. But it's still hard not to feel so betrayed. I'm sorry – I'm trying not to feel this way.*

*I don't know why I do this to myself. I think it's supposed to be therapeutic or something, but it always leaves me feeling a bit tortured. The reason I wanted to write to you was to tell you that I got the memory I needed. I didn't want to tell you in person… It feels strange taking a memory you didn't want to share. I guess - I feel guilty. You'd find that amusing if I told you, so that's why writing it down is enough for now.*

*Hermione and I stumbled upon a clue as to who could help us with the Horcrux. It's a dangerous lead - but like you said - I'm good at the job no one wants. I'm leaving tonight and will only come back with some answers. Hopefully the next time we speak you don't have to be on the otherside of some barrier. I'm anxious for that…*

**Foolishly,**

*-Harry*

---

From the amber light that spills into the room, Harry can tell that this memory was from early morning, at the first signs of dawn. Draco is sitting on his bed, crouched over to tie up his boots. When he's done, he picks up his broomstick to shoulder it and quietly leaves his room. He makes sure to not make a sound as he moves swiftly down a long, stoned stairwell, the paintings of his
ancestors still snoring in their frames. Harry glances about himself in amazement, noticing the high ceilings painted with angel and demons, to the marble banister under his hand as he lands on the main foyer. He scans the various ornaments and furnishing that have been gathered over centuries. But he barely has time to appreciate them because Draco's racing away, towards another room. Harry watches Draco's face relax into an easy smile as he approaches a door that leads to the back garden.

"You've already seen this one," Hermione calls out to him as if from a distance. "We've seen all of them…"

Harry pulls himself away, lifting his face from the basin that holds Draco's memories. His face and hair come away wet and slopping all over the floor. "I know. It's just a nice one."

She smiles a little sadly at him. "Are you ready to go? Ron's waiting in the Common Room."

"He's excited to go, isn't he?" He wipes his face and hair with a spare towel, but already the liquid from the pensieve is drying off.

"Yes - I think it'll be a good opportunity for the two of you to smooth things over."

He nods as he throws on his travelling robes before sitting on his bed to tie up his shoes. "It's why I asked him to come and for you to stay. You don't mind, right?"

"Not at all - but there is just one thing." She holds out her palm for him. "You should give me pendant." He instinctively sways back from her, but she grabs his arm tightly. "It'll be safe with me. Wearing it where you're going isn't a good idea."

He knows she's right, but parting with the pendant is difficult. With a sigh, he picks it up and lifts it over his head. "Just, keep it safe," he needlessly reminds her as he places it in hand. Her fingers close around it and she pockets it in the front pocket of her shirt with a nod.
Draco's half asleep when the door creaks open. He sits up in his bed, blinking away his restlessness as he stifles a yawn. He's caught off guard when a blonde, not the usual dark wave of hair or hay of ginger steps through the door.

"Hello, Draco," Luna says as if nothing is out of the norm.

"Hello, Luna," he replies, noticing her wand innocently tucked behind her ear. She examines the room with curiosity... and Draco straightens up a bit, wondering why she's here. Is there a chance she has no idea what's going on?

"You're glad to see me," she says with a smile.

"It's nice to see a familiar face. What brings you here?" He's hoping that she stumbled upon his room by accident. He's hoping he can use this to his advantage.

"I was looking for a spare room. I have a presentation tomorrow morning and I wanted to rehearse it. I find it helps to practice it out loud. And for some curious reason, the rooms on this side of the castle are always unoccupied. Don't you find that? They're great for when you want to be alone, especially for talking out loud to yourself. Your voice just echoes-"

"You can practice with me, if you like," he cuts off her rambling to keep in his snide remark. He tries not to grimace as her eyes linger over his scattered clothes, books and dishes - particularly on his side of the room. It's so obvious that he's living here. "You may have noticed I've been away..." he explains.

She gives him that same, vague smile and for the life of him he doesn't know what it means. Does she really not know what's going on? "We all need some time off every now and then, but I'm surprised you chose to stay in the castle."

"I didn't have much choice," he replies carefully, and it's her sympathetic look that makes him think she believes him. She doesn't know why he's really here. Draco tries hard to not let his excitement show. He purposely averts his gaze to the floor, knowing how it'll look. "I didn't really have anywhere else to go," he says in a low voice. "But I'm coming back soon - with exams and applications around the corner."

"I'm sorry you can't go back home." When she regards him carefully, he looks back at her with curiosity. "What are you applying to?" she says.

"Healer," he lies. It's something his old self could have said. At her blank stare, he continues a little irritated, "I know that sounds farfetched-"

"No - You'd make a great Healer. You have excellent eye-and-hand coordination skills and a
sensitivity to other's pain. But you also like telling people what to do, so you should aim to be the
Head Healer," she states. She then gasps, "or an Auror!"

Draco snorts and rolls his eyes. "You do remember that my name is Malfoy, right?"

"It would be a challenge. But when you make it in spite of your name, you'll know it's because you
deserve it."

Draco stares at her, trying to figure out if she knows. She must. Why else would she give him this
speech? "Did Harry send you?" he asks with narrowed eyes.

"Harry?" she asks, confused. "Are you and Harry fighting again? Is that why he left?"

"Wait - Harry's already gone?" he stands up now, taking a few steps towards her "Did he say when
he's coming back?"

"No, but whatever he's doing, he looks very determined."

"I've seen that look before," Draco mutters darkly. Harry must have a lead, but from where?

"Yes, I imagine everyone has." She shifts her bag over her shoulder and begins to turn away. "I
should go practice now - Hope to see you at Breakfast tomorrow."

"Wait-" Draco nearly walks into the barrier to stop her.

He moves his hand back just in time to not get shocked, but she sees the gesture and gives him a

"Do you think you can help me with something before you leave?"

Her face relaxes into a smile again. "Of course-" she begins to walk towards him and Draco's pulse
quickens. "What is it?"

"I've burnt my hand," he shows her the red mark on his palm and she's already extending her wand
out, her eyes fixed on the burnt.

"Why didn't you heal it already?" she asks as she walks past the barrier.

He hides his elation with a shrug. "I'm shit at self-healing-"

She stands in front of him now, taking his hand in hers. "Then maybe you should reconsider being a
Healer, afterall."

He feels the tip of her wand moving over his palm, tickling his skin. He watches as the ugly red dash
begins to shrink within itself, until only a small mark is left behind.

"Impressive –" He's smirking, flexing his hand. "Thank you." She nods and begins to step back but
he snatches her wrist.

Luna tilts her head to look at him as she tries to tug her arm away, her features twisting in confusion.
"Draco - What are you doing?"

Knockturn Alley by night is unrecognizable. Harry's only ever seen it during the day, when the
streets were desolate and the shops were closed. Now he sees that the place comes to life after dusk.
Suspicious characters hustle past him and Ron, often glancing in their direction as if they know that
they don't belong here. Harry's not sure what gives them away, as they've disguised their faces with feature-altering charms, but he suspects it has something to do with their purposeful pace.

The sooner they get out of here, the better. He's not sure what would be worse; running into Death Eaters or the press. Regardless, he can't afford to be recognized - not with what he must do tonight.

Although they've been travelling for some time the pair of them have barely spoken a word to each other. Harry searches for something to say to break the silence. "I told Draco I wasn't coming back until-"

"Why would you tell him that? Now he'll get more desperate to leave," Ron says as he keeps his eyes ahead. "Poor Hermione."

"She can handle him," he replies.

Ron doesn't acknowledge that. Harry holds in a sigh, at a loss of how to close the distance between them. Even though they've implicitly agreed upon a truce to work together, they're still not really talking, not about their fight or the fact that Harry's with Draco. Somehow they can still discuss the Horcrux and their plans to deal with it at length. This manner of compartmentalizing is something new to Harry, but he suspects this is what growing up feels like.

The truth is that Harry appreciates Ron's willingness to help, given how much he loathes Draco.

When Harry couldn't deny the reality of Draco's situation- when he saw the Horcrux for himself - he fell apart. He doesn't remember how or when. All he remembers is sitting on his bed, staring at the pendant, when Ron burst his curtains open and forced him to stand up.

"Hermione told me everything." Ron's face swims into his vision and Harry blinks, trying to escape his grasp but Ron won't let go. "So - What's the plan?" Harry looks at Ron in confusion, before he notices Hermione standing behind Ron, anxiously looking at Harry. "What do we do next?" Ron asks.

"Next?" Harry echoes. He has no idea how much time has passed since discovering the Horcrux. Hermione told him to go lie down, that she could handle Draco herself, but she must have asked Ron for help instead.

"Harry," Ron calls out his name sternly. "Listen to me. You're going to find a way to help him, but only if you do something. You need to focus, alright?" Harry nods, letting his words sink in as he shrugs apologetically out of Ron's grasp. "Where can we look for some answers?" he repeats.

He looks between his two friends, dread seeping further into his bones. "I have no idea."

"Who would then?" Ron urges.

"The person who did this to him - Lucius Malfoy," he snarls out the name like it's poison.

He's shocked when Ron's eyes light up in hope. "And who knows Lucius Malfoy well? Has access to his secrets?"

Harry remembers that conversation well - the first one since they fought. It's strange that Ron was just there, demanding that Harry do something - and that was reason enough for Harry to try.

From the corner of his eye, he notices Ron trying to cover his neck more securely with his scarf. "You nervous?" he asks as he unconsciously reaches for the pendant to do the same. He's
disappointed to remember that it's gone.

"I'm be mad if I weren't - please tell me you are."

"Of course. I know this plan is mental," Harry imitates Ron's voice with the last word.

"So why are we doing this again?" Ron asks.

"So that Draco doesn't turn into the next Dark Lord," he replies.

"Yes, by why are we doing this? The Aurors could easily deal-"

Harry groans. "Ron, you know what will happen. They'll just lock him up!"

"He's already locked up."

"They won't make an effort for a Malfoy. They won't care."


"Yeah - I do." Harry massages the back of his neck, hoping he doesn't sound as awkward as he feels.

Ron nods and looks away. Harry assumes that's the extent of that conversation, but Ron continues after a pause, "I could tell right away. I - could see it on your face, when you…" he makes a face.

"When you were with him. Your feelings were obvious."

"Oh… sorry?" What the hell is he supposed to say to that?

Ron shakes his head impatiently. "What I'm trying to say is that I've never seen you look like that before! It was hard to accept it was because of him. But then I saw how miserable you were at the thought of..." Ron shakes his head tightly again, still not comprehending why. "Either there's something wrong with you - which is still possible - or - or I simply don't know … him." Harry looks at Ron in surprise, his ears pink and his face angled away, not quite looking at Harry. His expression is both solemn and regretful.

Harry tries hard not to grin. "Thanks, Ron."

Ron coughs, embarrassed. "Maybe Malfoy has a cousin? It'd save us loads of trouble."

Harry rolls his eyes but laughs. "It's not too late to turn back-" he begins.

"Shut up. I'm not going to change my mind now."

"If you insist," he replies with a lopsided smile. "But don't blame me if you get bitten."

Ron gives him an exasperated look before he tightens his scarf even more. "What's the name of the guy we're looking for again?"

"Lestat." Harry thinks back to the memory of Draco sneaking into his father's study and rummaging through his letters - searching for something. They never find out if Draco found what he was looking for because Hermione paused the memory and shrieked, pointing at a letter Draco just discarded.

The note was addressed to Lucius, elegantly handwritten and signed by Lestat. After revisiting that
memory countless times, the words are seared into Harry's mind: *I have Helga's Cup. Meet me at Cruor's tonight. Password - 'ut moreretur'.* The mention of Helga's Cup is what got their attention. It's one of Voldemort's horcruxes that they destroyed.

"So all we know about this 'Lestat' fellow is that he collects Horcruxes and likes to meet Death Eaters at Cruor's. You realize he's probably a-" Ron falls silent as a hooded figure with a cane wobbles by.

"I know," Harry replies queasily. "But what other leads do we have?"

When Ron exhaled his cheeks puff up slightly. "Mental."

Draco's standing by the edge of the barrier, his eyes closed as he tilts his ear to listen carefully for the low hum of magic that ripples over Luna's wand. He's scanning the barrier - looking for a crack - any indication of a weakness - but Granger's wall is impressive. It's like she's done this hundreds of times.

"Why are you really in here?" Luna interrupts from the corner of his room. She's much too calm, given that her hands and feet are tied up and Draco's already warned her to stay quiet. Draco throws her a glare, but this doesn't faze her. "Have you done something?" she tries instead.

"Luna, please. I need silence for this to work-"

"I thought I felt something as I approached you," she says conversationally. "It felt very similar to-"

"Luna - shut up!"

She grows silent and stares off into the distance, almost looking reproachful. He realizes then that he's never told her to shut up before. He smirks to himself, grateful he has no problem telling her now.

Draco turns back to the task at hand, already refocusing on the low hum but he stops short when he hears Granger's footsteps outside the room. He sprints to Luna's side and forces her to stand in front of him. She tries to get away from him but he holds onto her arm tightly and she cries out, "DON'T COME IN! DRACO'S LOST HIS MMph-!"

He shushes her with a firm hand over her mouth, staring at the door that creaks open. No one walks through it.

Scowling down at Luna, he moves his hand so that he could press the wand against her throat. "Luna doesn't mean that," he says loudly through a smile. "She would very much-" he twists her arm and Luna cries out- "like it if you come in."

Granger steps in quietly with a raised wand.

Draco smirks. "Hello Granger - lovely evening, isn't it? Look who came to visit."

Granger lips pinch together as her wand hand twitches. She warily looks at his hostage. "Malfoy - let her go and we can talk-"

"Actually, I was thinking you could let me go, and no one gets hurt. How does that sound?"

"You know that's not an option!" she shrilly whispers, her eyes flickering between Luna and him.

He arches an eyebrow and digs the wand deeper into Luna's throat, who winces and tries to edge away, but his hold over her arm prevents her from getting far. "Do you think I'll hesitate, Granger?"
"Draco," Luna croaks. "I'm worried about you-"

"You're worried about me?" he asks in astonishment. "Consider your current predicament, Luna."

She seems to seriously think it over. "I still think you're in far worse position - you're clearly not yourself-"

"For fuck's sake - silencio," he hisses, the air around him humming in his frustration.

"Draco-" Granger says, stupidly thinking the use of his given will make a difference. "I know you want to leave. And you know I don't want anyone to get hurt - So let's talk?"

He chuckles and taps the wand against Luna's throat. "You know - you're right - we should make the effort to be civilized. I'm willing to negotiate." He's amused when Granger nods tightly. "I'm giving you two minutes to put the barrier down. If you don't - I'll cut her throat-"

Granger glares at him furiously. "How is that negotiation?"

"It's the Malfoy way. So, what is your response? You have a minute and a 50 seconds."

Granger edges closer to the barrier, her free hand shooting up in warning. "Harry already left-"

"Yes, he's gone off being a hero again."

"He found a memory of yours- a note to your father from Lestat," she says urgently.

Draco ignores the sudden knot in his stomach. "One minute," he states.

"How is that-?" she begins.

"And counting!"

"He's going to Cruor's! So if you leave now - this risk he's taking - it'll be for nothing!"

"30 second, Granger. Mind you, the adrenaline could be making me count a little fast in my head. So, stop wasting time and start negotiating-"

"Don't you care?" she pleads. "Just trust him, if you can't trust anyone else-"

"10… 9…"

Hermione's eyes open wide and she starts moving frantically around the barrier, working furiously to get it down.

"4… 3…"

"Stop! It's done!" she exclaims. The air vibrates when the wall falls and she immediately points her wand back on him. "Now - please, just think this through for a moment."

He barely hears her because he's cautiously walking towards the barrier, still holding onto Luna while pointing the wand at her throat.

"You said you would let her go!" Granger says.

Draco chuckles when he passes the point where the barrier used to be, already tasting freedom. "I
When they arrive at the pub, Harry wonders if this is the right place. The walls from outside are cracked with age, and the sign that reads "Cruor's" is lopsided, swinging in the wind. Harry peers through the dust-covered windows and can make out the bartender wiping a glass with a dirty rag.

He and Ron exchange a look before entering. What's inside is just as underwhelming, with the scatter of empty tables and stained stools by the bar. Harry looks around in bemusement. They walk up to the bar, the soles of their shoes sticking noisily to the floor. When two dirty glasses land in front of them with a loud *clink*, the bartender with wispy white hair gives Ron a steady look. "What are you having?"

Ron declines with a shake of his head. "We're looking for someone-"

"There's no one here but me," the bartender states, as if it weren't obvious.

Ron gives him an inquisitive look. "Right. We know the password… *Ut moreretur,*" he says.

The old man grunts and throws his towel over his shoulder. He gestures for them to follow with a jerk of his chin. He walks past an unused kitchen and leads them to a long, barely dimmed corridor that's adorned with a black and white pattern on the walls. Harry immediately notices the way the walls shimmer as he walk by. Looking more closely, he realizes that the painted, floral print is enchanted to move as he passes by. He moves his hand over one spot and watches in amazement as a black rose blooms.

"Let me guess - friend of yours got into some trouble," the bartender says and Harry looks up to see him watching him. "You're here to save him."

"What makes you say that?" Harry asks.

"That's the only reason someone like you would be here - that or you have a death wish." Harry stares at the bartender as he knocks on the wall at the end of the corridor, and the floral pattern bends and twists until the vines and petals form a passageway.

The bartender is already leaving when Ron calls out, "wait - how do we get back?"

"The same way you go in," he mutters, not bothering to glance back.

Draco begins to edge towards the door, a sly grin on his face. "Granger, this was *so* much fun, but I must be heading out-"

"Malfòy, don't! Just listen - Harry-"

"I don't fucking care!" he cries out, almost at the door. It's hard to be efficient when he's dragging a hostage. "None of it matters to me. He's not my responsibility, and I'm not-"

"He gave me the pendant!" she exclaims over his voice.

Draco stops in his tracks, leaning against the frame with a sigh. "Why would you tell me that, Granger?"

Granger pauses a moment, choosing her words carefully. "I don't want anyone to get hurt. If you let Luna go, I'll tell you where it is."
Luna struggles against his grasp, but he holds onto her securely, thinking. Is getting the pendant worth risking his freedom? He could just leave. But… Draco knows that if Harry has it, he won't stop until he finds Draco. If anything, having the pendant may help Harry find him faster. It would be foolish to leave it behind.

"Where is it?" he asks, letting go of Luna. She edges away from him with a pointed look, massaging her arm. Draco laughs when Granger takes it out from her front pocket and wordlessly tosses it to him, her wand still fixed on him. "I underestimated you, Granger." He gives her an appreciative nod before swinging the pendant around his neck. He's begins to turn away when Granger calls out.

"You won't hurt Harry anymore?"

"As long as he stays out of my way - but even I can't predict what I'll do if he tries to find me-" His words are cut off when the pendant shrinks dangerously around his throat.

He tries to pry it off with his fingers, but this only makes it tighten around his neck until he can no longer breathe. He stumbles to the floor, his vision flickering in and out of focus as he struggles for a single breath. The last thing he sees is a single jet of red light shooting towards him.

The lounge, fashioned for both comfort and sophistication, is a little stuffy for Harry's taste. The space is windowless, giving it a dungeon feeling, but air is warm and heavy with scented smoke. Harry and Ron are seated in a secluded corner away from the others, on cushioned seats that are much too close to the floor.

They're terribly out of place, but no one else seems to notice. Everyone seems to be focused on themselves. Getting high or drunk, this is the place where politicians and criminals mingle. Apparently, Cruor's has a reputation for not asking any questions.

"Are they muggles?" Ron mutters under his breath. He's eyeing a pair of beautiful women dancing with each other, their clothes much more revealing than what witches tend to wear.

Harry looks around at the others, and it seems there's a strange mix of muggles and wizards interacting. "Seems so..." He looks about with a critical eye, trying to spot anyone with unusual eyes. "Any sign of one?"

"Nothing…" Ron sighs. They've been here for some time now. "I'm gonna ask the bartender if she knows of this 'Lestat'."

Harry nods absently as Ron gets up to leave. Harry's gaze wanders about the room, trying to spot anything unusual. Every so often, he glances to Ron, who seems to be chatting with the bartender. When he looks away, his eyes land on a small group of people not too far from him. They're circled around each other on cushions seats, passing a pipe between them. They merely look like two young couples getting high, but something about them makes Harry's gaze linger.

One of them - a blond in a leather jacket - catches him staring and Harry glances away, trying to look casual. When he feels enough time has passed he looks back to them, but the man is still staring at Harry, watching intently. The stranger smiles briefly before shifting his attention back to his companions.

Frowning, Harry keeps a careful eye on them. He can't put his finger on it, but there's just something unusual about them: more than their muggle clothes or how ridiculously attractive they are. The man who caught him staring suddenly smiles and almost turns to look at him, as if he knows Harry's watching.
The other man with dark hair takes the pipe and lights under it, inhaling deeply. Harry straightens slightly, feeling like he's witnessing something he shouldn't. In fascination, he watches as the man exhales the puff of white smoke and his body slowly arches back until it grace fully lands in the cushions behind him, his jaw slacked in ecstasy.

Harry's face colours and he looks away. He's always avoided drugs and to be suddenly surrounded by it is uncomfortable.

When he glances to the group again, he sees that the leather-jacket man is moving towards him with a smile on his lips. Harry forces himself to look relaxed, even as his hand twitches for his wand.

The man stands over him, looking down. "Are you lost?" he asks in an accent Harry can't place.

Harry shakes his head. "I'm good, thanks."

He then kneels in front of Harry, his hands lose over his knees. He regards Harry with blazing eyes, nearly as light as Draco's used to be.

"Mind if I sit?" he gestures next to him and Harry begrudgingly nods. Harry keeps his expression neutral, even as he unconsciously shifts in his seat.

The stranger sits close to him, leaning into Harry's personal space. "You don't seem like you belong here," he says. Harry attempts to look dismissive, like he's heard that before, but the man shakes his head. "You know it's true." Harry looks down at his hands, unsure of why he feels so vulnerable under his stare. "Don't you?" When he glances up at him again, he sees his smile has twisted playfully.

Harry smiles tightly in turn, taking in the other details he somehow missed before: How pale and smooth his skin is, how his teeth nearly show when he speaks, and then those eyes that burn in the dark - how they see what they shouldn't see. Harry's heart skips a beat. "I'm fine- just waiting for my friend." He turns to point out Ron, but Harry can't spot him where he last saw him.

He scans the room for red hair but stops when he hears the creature chuckle. As if drawn to the sound, Harry turns to look at him.

The creature reaches out for his wrist and presses his cold fingers onto his skin. He tucks his head to hide a smile before whispering, "Your pulse is racing. You're scared." Harry's unease deepens but he can't look away. He can't move, even though he knows he should. "You needn't be," the creature continues, running his fingers over the veins on his wrist. "You're heart's too pure. I wouldn't dare hurt you, Harry Potter."

Hearing his name is like lifting a fog. He blinks, his thought clearing as he forcefully tugs his arm free from his grasp. "Who are you?" he leans away to create some space between them.

The creature laughs, his long pointed teeth showing. "The one you seek, of course," he replies, gesturing extravagantly to himself.

"How did you know-?"

"That you were coming?" Lestat cuts him off. "Don't waste your breath with such questions. Time isn't on your side. Your enemies will soon know you are here, so quickly tell me what you're willing to offer in exchange for my secrets."

Harry ignores the warning shiver down his spine. "I can pay you."
Lestat scoffs in an amused sort of way. "I have no need for that." His eyes trail down to Harry's neck. "There is one thing you can give."

Harry swallows deeply but doesn't flinch. He already expected as much. "You want a taste."

"Yes - The blood of a hero - a wizard one at that. Must be as sweet as honey." Lestat leans close to Harry again, who unconsciously reaches for his wand. Harry winces when a shattering force grips his hand and he tries to pull it free, but the creature doesn't let him go. "You're reflexes are sharp for a mortal, but still no match to my own," he whispers close to his ear.

"I won't take my wand out..." Harry says in a steady voice, even though his brain is shouting at him to get away. "But don't - not the neck."

Lestat chuckles and leans back again, loosening his grip on Harry's hand but still not letting it go. "You don't want this. But you'll do it for him." He moves Harry's hand close to his mouth, his burning eyes questioning, waiting for permission.

Harry nods. He doesn't take his eyes off the creature as he bows his blond head to kiss Harry's hand. "I can only imagine what it must be like - to find someone at long last-" He kisses Harry's hand again, his cool lips lingering on his skin, "Then he's taken from you. Becomes unrecognizable." Harry's stomach drops low when Lestat turns his hand over to examine the veins on his wrists. "You can't trust him. You can't be with him. But you love him all the same." His smile is bittersweet before he opens his mouth and sinks his teeth into his flesh.
"You've memorized the words?" Lestat asks. Feeling lightheaded, Harry briskly nods. He flexes his right hand as he examines the two puncture wounds on his palm. They're smaller than he anticipated. Lestat hands him a small vial and says, "He must drink this."

Bringing the vial close to his eyes, he swirls the thin, clear liquid. Lestat explained to him that the ritual requires a strong and organic healing property, which is why Phoenix Tears works best. But Harry wonders why the vampire had this on hand to begin with. It's not like it he would ever need it. Although he pockets the vial gratefully, he can't help but turn over the question in his head. Why does he-?

Lestat shakes his head with a light smile, his light eyes unblinking. "That's a tale for another time." He stands up, looking down at Harry patiently. "I feel compelled to warn you - They have eyes on you."

Harry stands up too quickly as he looks around himself in alarm. Blood rushes to his head and he must wait a moment for the room to stop spinning. Lestat took much more than a taste, but it was still a small price to pay. Harry examines the crowd again, looking to spot the signature red of Ron's hair. He begins to feel anxious to not find him anywhere. "Can you help me-" but when Harry turns to towards the vampire, he's already gone.

Then from the corner of his eye, he sees them coming; white masks hidden beneath draping hoods.

Draco winces, holding in a groan. He's first aware of how stiff the muscles are around his neck, to the point that it hurts to even swallow. He doesn't open his eyes just yet, but he knows from the stale smell of unwashed coffee mugs, to the lumpy mattress that holds his weight, that he's lying on the same bed – still stuck in his personal hell.

Draco nearly escaped. He was so close - he was at the fucking door. But his own soul betrayed him.

"Malfoy," Granger calls out from the opposite end of the room, likely behind the safety of a new barrier. "How do you feel?"

He doesn't bother replying. He doesn't bother moving at all.

"We got it off before it did too much harm. Sorry it came to that," she says.

"You knew that would happen," he replies. He coughs, surprised how raw his voice sounds. When he sits up and faces her, absently feeling along the raw line where the Horcrux tried to squeeze the life out of him, he holds a steady glare. "Clever - I didn't even consider a Horcrux could do that."

She nods for his sake. "It has a will of its own. I had a feeling it wants you to stay."
"Evidently." If it wasn't for the fact that his Horcrux keeps him immortal, he would have destroyed it by now.

"I wasn't going to let anything drastic happen, if that's any consolation."

Draco smiles coldly at her. "When I get out of here I'm going to hurt you, you realize that, don't you?" He stands up, faintly smirking now. There's just something about her stance, her chin tucked out and her arms crossed defiantly, that makes him irrationally angry.

"All the more reason to help Harry succeeds," she replies coolly.

Draco scoffs here. "You let him to go that place- to meet a known vampire. You've sent Harry to his death." He looks away from her in disgust as he walks the few paces to his cluttered desk, loose parchments and dirty dishes toppled over its surface. He grips the back of the chair with both hands as he scowls down at the mess. He's so fucking sick of it all. "You were supposed to protect him-"

"Careful, Malfoy. That almost sounds like concern."

"Of course it is! I know what happens to me if the Saviour dies." Within these constraining walls it's easy to imagine: Azkaban. His soul, or what's left of it, kissed away. His hands twist over the chair, the wood almost warm on his cool skin.

"Harry is fine-"

"You don't know that!" he snaps, picking up the chair and swinging it across the room.

Granger moves out of the way, but it catches her leg and she topples over with a startled yelp. "Have you finally gone mad?" she yells, massaging her foot as she hobbles onto the other.

"Probably." His eyes stay trained on her as he picks up a random object from his desk and flings it across the room at her face. He watches with detached sense of amusement as a plate bounces off her quick, enchanted shield and smashes to pieces onto the floor.

"Stop. You're being ridiculous!"

He turns his attention to another fucking plate - fucking everywhere! They couldn't even give him a House Elf? He's in mid motion of picking one up when the door crashes open and Weasley stumbles through, red faced and panting.

The state of the room, from the chair on its side and the shards of glass at Granger's feet, barely seems to register with him as he rushes to Granger's side.

"Ron!" Granger cries. "What-?"

"They – took –him," he manages to say.

"They got Harry?" she asks in shock, her eyes wide. He nods fiercely and she clutches his arm. "Who? How?"

"It's like they were waiting for us!" he rushes to say. "The moment I turned my back-"

Draco laughs bitterly, ignoring the horrible twisting sensation in his gut. "You let him out of your sight? Even for a second? Did your mother drop you on your soft, ginger head?!"

With a twist of his face, Ron starts to lumber towards him, his steps heavy and resolute, but reason holds him back with a quick touch on his arm. "Ron, don't let him distract you. Please, focus!" She
looks at him steadily, even as her next words sound shrill. "What happened?"

Weasley stares hard at Draco with clenched fists and a stubborn jaw. He bites down hard before looking away and exhaling loudly. "They took him," he repeats.

"Who did?" she insists.

The shadows on Weasley's face lengthen when he glances at Draco again. "His lot."

"You mean - Lucius Malfoy?" Granger gasps. "What does he want with Harry? Unless he means to ... " She looks faintly at Draco. " - Make a trade?"

Weasley shrugs and Draco unconsciously approaches the barrier. "How did you get away?" he asks Weasley curtly.

"Why should it concern you?" Granger asks pointedly, at the same time Weasley crosses his arms and stonily glares at him.

"They came out of nowhere, but you still had time to escape?" he hisses, walking straight up to the wretched barrier now, its aura almost stinging his skin.

Weasley ignores the question. "Malfoy, you have to take us to the Lestrange's summer house."

Shock momentarily makes Draco quiet. Not many people know about that place. Draco knows it well because not only was it a safehouse for Death Eaters during the war, but before his fourth year it was where his family used to spend several weeks every summer. Not many people know this place exists, and fewer people know it's linked to Lestrange property. "How do you know about that place?"

"It's where they took him! And if you don't help us, I'll take you to the Ministry myself."

Draco shakes his head impatiently. "Weasley, help me connect the dots. How do you know all this? How did you really escape?"

Granger turns to look at Ron with a questioning frown and he quickly averts his gaze. "I have a source-"

"Why didn't you say anything?" Granger cuts in.

"Who is it?" Draco asks. "Someone who has access to this information can't possibly be trusted."

"Like you?" Weasley asks.

"Exactly," he replies.

Weasley sighs. "He wasn't one of yours, okay? But he saved my life - That's how I got out. He told me that they've taken Harry to Lestrange's old property – that we must hurry. He said that you know the way there-

"This doesn't sound like an obvious trap." Draco rolls his eyes.

"He said you would say that." Weasley retorts.

Granger shakes her head, in anger or exasperation, Draco cannot tell. "Well - what choice do we have? We're wasting time!" Without further comment, she begins to remove the barrier once more.
Harry tightens his abdomen muscles when the next blow hits, but it's no use. He feels the full impact of a fist crushing into his diaphragm, knocking the breath out of him. He tries to stagger forward with a groan, but one of the Death Eaters is holding his arms behind his back, forcing him to stand.

The last thing Harry remembers is looking for Ron and his panic when he couldn't find him. The moments between then and now are completely wiped from his memory. He has no idea how he got here. Did he even leave Cruor's? Were they on his trail the entire time? With sinking dread, Harry wonders how long he's been held captive here.

Looking around the room, he can't recognize anything worth noting. Not that he would trust his sight right now - the bastards took his glasses.

Harry squints, trying to make out any details that could help him figure out where he is, but everything's a blur. All he can make out is the dark, polished furniture and hardwood floors, to the hazy, maroon pattern on the wallpaper that's only interrupted by a white door.

It stands behind the Death Eater who's repeating the same questions. Harry tries to look past the masked man to see if door's ajar, but he leers menacingly close to him. "It's simple. All we want to know is what you did with the pendant," the Death Eater says.

Harry lets his eyes wander to a point past his face, refusing to acknowledge him as he stares at the ugly shade of maroon. He forces himself not to cry out when a blow lands on his side, leaving him weary and breathless. When the white door opens and a third Death Eater walks in, his face obscured in the shadow of his hood, Harry tries not to feel hopeless.

He notices the subtle way the other two Death Eaters stand up straighter when this person enters the room. From the air of superiority that he carries, he seems to be the one in charge. He walks towards Harry in even strides, his boots unnaturally light against the hardwood floor. He doesn't speak, waiting for someone else to break the silence.

"At this rate, he'll never talk. If I can try the Cruciatus Curse again-" the one who was beating him begins to say.

"No," the one in charge replies with impatience bordering on dullness. "He's resistant to that as well - I have a better way." He leans close to Harry and takes his face between two gloved fingers, forcing Harry to look at him. Harry regards the mask beneath the hood scornfully, trying to lean away from the sudden scent of leather, but the Death Eater holds his face firmly in his hand and brings up a vial up to his lips. Harry resists, struggling to turn his face away or loosen the binds on his wrists. When that fails, he clenches his jaw stubbornly, refusing to open his mouth. "Potum," the Death Eater whispers and Harry finds he can no longer keep his jaw clenched. He tries to angle his face away, but the Death Eater holds on tightly.

The Death Eater forces a few drops from the vial into his mouth, and Harry has no choice but to swallow. Harry's face gets hot with anger and he spits at him, his saliva red on the porcelain mask. But the damage is done. All it takes is a few drops of Veritaserum for it to be effective.

The Death Eater behind him nudges him hard for his insolence, but his leader is unfazed. He chuckles quietly before he steps away with a handkerchief – wiping the spot like some tosser. "Give it a minute and he'll tell us everything."

A moment passes in silence, with Harry's unease uncoiling in his chest like a snake. He doesn't see a way out of this. He'll tell them everything and nothing can be done.
"What is your name?" the Death Eater who gave him Veritaseum begins.

Harry opens his mouth to reply, but he's surprised he doesn't feel compelled to answer. He closes his mouth shut and clenches his jaw, staring at the Death Eater.

"He's fighting the effects," the Death Eater states to the other two who are watching intently. "In a moment… he won't be able to keep quiet and he'll tell us where to find it." Turning his attention back to Harry, the Death Eater repeats his question. "What is your name?"

"Harry James Potter," Harry responds quickly, quietly, as if it's against his will. He knows the Veritaserum is faulty because he still can lie. But he must make them think otherwise. If he plays his cards right - he might get out of this alive.

He can almost hear the Death Eater smirks behind the mask. "See? No one can fight this - So, Potter, where's the pendant?"

Harry feigns hesitation before he replies through his teeth. "12 Grimmauld Place."

The other two Death Eater hoot in excitement. "The old Phoenix headquarters!"

"Lucius will definitely reward us for this-"

The leader quiets the other two with a raised hand. In their silence, he continues, "Potter - would they-" he gestures in the direction of the other two, ".-be able to get in?"

Of course they would. The House of Black was abandoned after the war and Harry didn't even think to lock it up. He should have fixed it up by now, as it'll be his home after Hogwarts, but he hasn't had the will to go back. So yes - they can bloody get in - but should he tell them that?

He nods stiffly, knowing his chances of escape will improve if one or two of them leave. Hopefully the prick in charge will leave as well.

The prick in charge chuckles. "Where exactly did you hide the pendant?"

"Top drawer in the desk in the drawing room," he impulsively lies, remembering that Regulus Black had hid a Horcrux there once.

The Death Eater holding his arms back laughs the other one turns to his superior in excitement. "It's just there- waiting-"

"We could get it before Lucius arrives," the one behind him says, his tone pinched with eagerness.

"To have both Potter and the Horcrux? Lucius's be quite pleased," the third Death Eater agrees.

Harry suspects his is the only opinion that counts. "Alright, I'll stay here and watch him while you two fetch the pendant. Be here before Lucius arrives."

The other two nod and rush to leave, their wands already in their hands. When their footsteps can be heard clambering down a staircase, Harry realizes they can't apparate within the house. He'll have to remember that if he gets the chance to escape.

Harry frowns at the remaining Death Eater, who begins to pace the room. If Harry didn't know any better, he'd say he looks nervous. When the front door closes downstairs, signalling that the other two have left, he sighs and turns to Harry.

"Just you and me," Harry says.
The Death Eater stills at that, before regaining his composure and saying quietly, "You catch on quick - Clever to make them leave. It's a bit of a walk before they can apparate, which buys us some time." Harry watches in astonishment as he unties his hands with a flick of his wand and pulls out Harry's glasses from within his cloak. He hands them over to Harry in an outstretched hand.

"What?" Harry asks, confused, even as he takes the glasses from him and shoves them onto his face.

"Who do you think brewed that batch of Veritaserum?" the stranger asks in a low voice.

"So you-" Harry blinks around at the room, everything coming into focus too quickly. He watches the figure step away carefully, approaching the door. "Wait - Who are you?"

"Don't waste time asking stupid questions. Your friends will be here soon. Go downstairs and use the kitchen door. Head towards the trees," the Death Eater says this before tossing his wand to Harry. Harry catches it instinctively, even as he stares in confusion as the Death Eater walks out of the room. He leaves with a swish of his cloak as he turns into the corridor.

Harry rubs his wrists and follows him with a frown. Standing under the doorframe, he peers out into the dark hallway and sees the stranger walk into another room on his left. But on his right, he sees the winding stairs that leads to his freedom. He should leave - he shouldn't question his fortune.

Harry turns left, his hand tightly gripping his wand. Although Harry can't possibly know him, something about this person seems awfully familiar. He's older than Harry, by the sureness in his step, but he's somehow quieter than he ought to be.

When he steps into the room, his eyes widen with shock at the sight before him.

The light that spills into the room through the large, paned windows makes the space glow in pale amber. He sees Narcissa Malfoy lying on a bed, her blonde hair spilling over the pillow under her back. She looks to be asleep. The Death Eater sits next to her on the bed, his mask gone but his face hidden by the angle of his hood. He's holding one of her hands.

Harry edges closer, the floorboards creaking under his feet. The Death Eater almost turns to him, but stops in mid motion, his face still obscured by his hood. His head is slightly bowed and shoulders hunched in a way that almost feels like deja vu. "I thought I could save her too," he says. Harry watches the man place her hand over her stomach. With shaking fingers, he covers her face with a white sheet.

He rises now, discreetly enchanting a mask onto his face before he turns towards Harry and walks past him to the door. Harry shakes his head and walks to Narcissa's side. "She - she can't be..."

"There's nothing we can do for her now - but you're still in danger," he says over his shoulder, not looking back. Harry watches him disappear and he can hear his light footsteps as they travel down the corridor. They pause by the stairs, waiting for Harry to follow. Harry turns to look back at the still form hiding under the linen sheets. He can make out the peak of her fine nose from under the covers, and hair nearly as fair as Draco's poking out from the side. He takes a step back, willing himself to walk away.

The trail that leads to the summer house is winding and unkempt. Draco ducks between the trees, keeping his feet on the path. If he ignores the fact that Weasley has his wand pointed at his back and every so often he sends a stinging curse his way, he can almost pretend he's the old Draco Malfoy - the one before the war.
Draco knows this trail well. For as long as he can remember he and his family stayed at this place in
the summer. The property was hidden from the Ministry, handed down to the Malfoys after the
Lestranges were sent to Azkaban.

Every summer, the three of them would spend a week or so away from the Manor. It was the time he
looked forward to the most – those weeks away from the rest of the world. He remembers how the
days were long and hot, and how a cool, welcoming breeze swept from the lake. He remembers how
he felt when they stayed here, like they were a normal family. His father wasn't a criminal. His
mother didn't carry the burden of family secrets. And Draco was innocent, unmarked and unaware.

Draco remembers wondering about his convicted Aunt and Uncle staying here. Did they ever spend
their summer days here, pretending they're normal? Or did they only come here when their mark
burned - when they were called to wear a mask?

After Draco was marked it became clear to him that those weeks in the summer were forever gone.
The place of his innocence was tainted, used to shield the acts of terrible men. Each time he was
called here, he buried the memories of his childhood further away. Forget the patio where his mother
read a book – that became his guarding post. Forget the kitchen where his father used to cook –
someone was just tortured there. Forget the lake where he learned how to swim because that's where
someone drowned. Forget the swing that hung from the oak tree, where his feet used to kick and
swing for higher. If he wore the mask just right, his could avoid kicking and swinging from that same
tree.

"Move along, Malfoy," Ron states flatly, a stinging hex lazily hitting Draco in the arm.

He grimaces, but refused to rub the spot. He won't give him the satisfaction. "Only if you say
please."

Weasley marches up to him and aims his wand at his throat. "Fucking move, Malfoy," he repeats.

Draco smirks. "Where did you learn such manners, Weasley? I imagine your mother, with the whole
litter of you, just didn't have the time to teach you how to say-" Weasley catches his collar with one
fist and Draco laughs, "-please." Weasley rolls his fist back into the air but freezes in mid motion
when he hears Granger's indignant sigh.

"Really, Ronald," she says as she trots pass them, her nose in a map. "We don't have time for that."
She folds it up, moving more quickly past them.

Weasley drops his raised fist, almost embarrassed, but he glares at Draco's next expression. "What?"
he snaps.

Draco spitefully smiles. "You're so whipped."

Weasley rolls his eyes and roughly shoves him to move again, which only makes Draco snigger
under his breath and make an audible whipping sound.

They reach the edge of the trees, close enough to see a large, Victorian house beyond the gate.
Behind it a lake shimmers as the first rays of sunrise hit.

The three of them stay within the thickness of the trees, blending into the wilderness as they examine
the perimeters of the house. There doesn't seem to be anyone around.

"What else did you 'source' say?" Draco asks.

"To watch the gate - that Harry will be there," Weasley replies.
"What? How could he know-?" just as the question leaves his mouth, two figures emerge from the back of the house. Draco crouches low and is grateful when the other two do the same. He squints at the pair of them, unable to tell from this distance... but he thinks the one limping could be Harry.

"That has to be him-" Granger says.

"But who's that next to him?" Weasley replies.

Draco peers at the figure next to him, cloaked in black and hooded. There's something familiar about him he can't place, but one thing is certain: "He's a Death Eater."

Weaselby begins to stand up quickly, but thankfully Granger catches his arm and keeps him low.
"Careful, Ron!"

"Harry needs our help!" he says to her.

Draco refrains from rolling his eyes. "There could be others - and it'd be very unwise to be seen by a Death Eater, you dumb fuck."

"We can't just sit here and wait for your father to show up - this may be our best shot. I'm going in-" He begins to get up again but Draco forces him to stay down by roughly pulling the back of his cloak.

"Here me out, Ronald." He stresses the name to get his attention, to stall. "What if you're just walking into a bloody trap? Your source could be one of them-"

"I'll take my chances, Malfoy." Weasley yanks himself free from Draco and stands up.

"Fucking idiot," he mutters.

"Fucking coward," Weasley retorts.

"Shh!" Granger shushes them, vaguely gesturing for them to shut up. "Look, I think... Harry's armed."

Draco looks more closely and notices the way Harry's walking alongside the Death Eater. The way he's favouring one side means he's injured. But he's moving quickly with his wand arm raised in ready. It's not aimed anywhere near the hooded stranger. Draco sits up a little straighter when he catches them exchange a few words.

"What the hell?" he whispers.

"Wait - that's him - my source!" Weasley stands up and walks quickly towards the gates, completely forgetting about Granger and him.

Draco, crouched low with Granger next to him, glances at her in confusion. She shrugs and aims her wand at him. "Come on, let's go say hi to Harry."

He doesn't even blink when he reaches blindly behind him for something solid and comes across a large stone. He picks it up and smashes it against Granger's head, watching her fall without a care.

Harry can't get the image out of his head. The motion of black leathered gloves moving the sheet over her rested face – as if she's merely sleeping. He swallows hard, at a loss of how he's going to
face Draco.

How can she be dead? How does the stranger know her? None of it makes sense. He doesn't even know where he is or why this person is helping him. Glancing at him now, he tries his best to figure out what's so familiar, but the answers evade him. He frowns, unable to stop staring even as he moves quickly towards the gates.

"Why did you obliviate me?" Harry asks when the silence becomes too much.

The Death Eater who isn't one continues walking silently beside him, his eyes trained ahead. "Why does it matter?" he replies.

Harry glares at him. "There's something you don't want me to remember. I want my memories back."

He's silent for a moment, before he says, "It doesn't concern you."

"Bullshit," Harry mutters, peering at the mask. "Why are you hiding? Who are you?"

His questions remain ignored. Instead the spy peers past the gate towards the forest. "I see your friends," he says.

Harry turns to see Ron emerging quickly from within the trees. His face is split into a grin and his hair's flying away from his face as he sprints towards the gates.

Harry runs to meet him, relieved that this is nearly over, but something behind Ron catches his attention. A short distance away, within the shaded wilderness of the trees, he sees Hermione turn her wand onto Draco. Harry blinks and the next moment Draco is swinging a large rock against Hermione's temple.

"No!" he screams as Hermione crumbles to the ground. Draco raises the stone up high but Harry shouts his name. "Draco!"

Draco looks up at him, his chest tight with an inhale and the large stone balanced over his head. He offers Harry a chilling smile as he drops the stone to the ground. He takes something from Hermione before he sprints towards the thickening trees.

Harry doesn't even remember opening the gate. The distance between him and Hermione is a blur, barely registered. When he stands over her, his heart racing, Ron's already there checking her pulse. "She's okay -" he says gruffly. "Just out."

"Fuck - I can't believe-" his hands flying to his hair.

"I can! He's dangerous!" Ron yells before he checks her pockets. "He took her wand and the pendant!" He looks up at Harry with red-rimmed eyes, his freckles standing out starkly against his pale face. "You can't let him get away."

Harry stands up straighter, nodding. He shakes off the image of Hermione lying on the ground, blood matting in her hair, and turns to the direction where Draco disappeared.
I'll always fight you, Harry - Draco

The sun is rising beyond the trees, casting long, foreboding shadows everywhere he looks. Harry moves swiftly on his feet, careful to avoid uneven ground and twisted roots. He's barely breathing, ignoring the pain in his side as he moves quicker to catch Draco. He can't let him escape. If Draco reaches the spot where he can apparate, Harry is sure he'll be impossible to trace.

A red jet of light slices towards him and Harry snaps his attention to the direction of where it came from. His pulse skips a beat at the sight of platinum hair hidden between the leaves, moving quickly away. Draco's merely a few steps away now - nearly in reach. He catches Draco glance over his shoulder at him. Harry knows he's desperate when he throws the blinding curse his way.

There's no use trying to avoid it. He plants his feet in solid ground as the spell hits him squarely in the eyes. With darkness settling around him, he swallows his sense of betrayal.

Harry listens closely for Draco's next move. He can hear twigs snapping under careful steps and a quiet chuckle circling around him. Harry follows his movements, his wand humming in his hand. The sounds of the forest, from the rustling leaves to the anxious beating of wings above him, are all beyond his focus. He may be blind, but all he cares to see is Draco.

It doesn't surprise him how easy this comes to him now. How many times did he cast the spell in solitude? How many times did he swear it was his last? When he just wanted one last look - one more before he had to face him - He welcomed the darkness just to see it. As he sees it now; the silver flame of his soul calling out to him a short distance away, tucked in Draco's cloak. Although it's painful to it see again, he nearly smiles as he begins to move towards it.

But Draco is careful to keep the distance between them. Harry blocks a cutting curse aimed at his torso. "Please - listen to me-" he begins. Rather than utter his own attack, Harry takes a step in his direction. Three curses are thrown at Harry in quick succession. Still moving forward, Harry blocks the first two incantations easily, but the third one disarms his wand.

He sees that Draco's been practicing.

Harry hesitates for only a second, before he continues walking towards the spot where Draco stands. "I don't want to fight you." He stops moving forward when he feels the tip of a wand against his chest. He's just a few feet in front of him now and utterly defenceless. "Are you going to fight me?" he asks.

He feels Draco edge close to him, the point of his wand still digging into his chest. He's surprised when Draco lifts the blinding curse and is standing in front of him. He barely has time to really look at him before Draco grabs a lock of his hair and leans in close. "I'll always fight you, Harry," he says before he closes the space between them with a bruising kiss.
Harry pulls away from the kiss violently and shoves Draco away. "Stop it!" he snarls and Draco laughs. Frustration makes him push Draco back hard, cornering him against a tree.

Draco looks like a mess; his face flushed from running and shadows bruising under his cold, amused eyes. "I'll admit it, I've miss this," Draco says as he leans against the tree, regards him with a wicked smile.

With a stony expression set, he steps closer to him, careful to not let him escape. "Draco - I have to tell you something."

Draco smirks at him, before he arches an eyebrow. "What could that possibly be?" he asks in hushed, playful tones.

"Draco," he says his name roughly, needing him stop. He almost reaches out to touch him, but thinks better of it. Instead he hovers close to him, struggling to find the right words. "I saw her - your mother-" Draco goes rigid and gives him a warning look; daring him to continue. Harry clenches his jaw and can't help but avert his gaze. Staring down at Draco's shirt, he remembers the linen sheet pulling up above her face, how she merely looked to be asleep. "She's-"

"Don't," Draco cuts him off in a low voice.

Harry dares to meet his gaze again, and something twist in his throat. "I'm sorry-"

Draco steps away from the tree and leans aggressively close to Harry. "Stop talking," Draco says. "Just stop."

To keep him at arm's length, he holds him back by his shoulders. He swallows deeply, even as he continues to hold his gaze. It's impossible to face him, even harder to even tell him, but he must. "She's g-" For a moment Harry forgets that Draco isn't himself, so when Draco punches him in the stomach, he feels like an idiot.

He falls to his knees, gasping for breath. Draco then tries to kick him in the side. But Harry anticipates his attack; he grabs his leg and pulls him roughly to the ground. He tries to crawl over him, tries to push him down, but Draco kicks him in the chest. They're both fighting for dominance now, both trying to pin the other down. It's a blur of swinging fists and stifled curses as they roll around in twigs and mud. They clutch at each other, snatching desperately at each other's clothes. A blow lands on his side, where the Death Eater hit him earlier, and he can't help but flinch in pain. Draco takes this opportunity to flip Harry onto his back, crushing him into the cold earth as he presses his arm against his throat.

The ground is wet under him and he shivers as the coldness seeps through his clothes and onto his skin. But he ignores this sinking weariness as he tries to catch his breath, "I saw her - in the house-"

"I told you to shut up!" Draco hisses as he presses his arm against his throat.

"We were too late." He clutches at Draco's arm, ready to grab him should he run. "She's dead."

Draco only shakes his head, looking through him, and Harry's thumb trails the spot where the mark used to be.

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Draco knows before he hears the words. He knows from how bright his eyes burn under dirt-smudged lenses, how Harry's lower lip trembles in his effort not to cry. But somehow hearing the
words makes it real. She's dead. The words echo in his head, and for a moment nothing feels different because he can't quite believe it.

"She's dead," Draco repeats in a hollow voice. Harry nods grimly, watching him warily. Draco leans away from Harry, who clutches at his arm to keep him close. "I need to go-" he says.

"No-" Harry begins.

"I need to find him - kill him-"

He tries to stand but Harry won't let him go. Harry's holding onto his arm stubbornly, his eyes piercing. "Wait, please-"

He cuts his words sharply with a shove, pushing him back to the ground. "Don't!"

"I know what this feels like! I know how much you want to-"

Harry stops talking when Draco’s clenched fist begins to pound the ground beside his face repeatedly. Harry flinches, but keeps his gaze on him nonetheless. Draco leans close to his face and says, "I don't care what you have to say, do you understand? I don't care."

"I think you do,” he replies quietly - still stubbornly.

Draco laughs sourly and presses his hand into his throat. If the bastard needs proof that he's nothing to him, so be it. Harry's eyes widen in startlement, but he only squeezes Draco's arm and holds his gaze. Draco throws his weight into it, grateful when the Gryffindor finally begins to struggle. When Harry gasps for a breath, choking under him, Draco doesn't care.

He didn't care about finding her. He didn't care about saving her... He doesn't care. Draco doesn't care so why is he shaking? Why are his arms trembling as he suffocates him? Why does it feel like everything is wrong - like nothing will ever be right? "He killed her," he rasps. Harry only clings onto him, his green eyes so fucking bright it hurts to look at them. He bows his head low as he pushes further, making it impossible for him to breathe. "I'm going to kill him."

Harry tries to protest, tries to shove Draco off. "No-"

For a response, Draco clasps his free hand over his mouth so he won't speak. "I have to," he whispers and Harry gags. Harry fights to push Draco off, but Draco shakes his head with a hollow laugh as he forces the life out of him. "It's going to happen - you can't stop me." Harry's hitting his arm, urging him to let go. He's kicks under him, struggling for breath, and Draco finds himself closing his eyes tightly. He can feel Harry's pulse quickening against his own, so closely matched it's hard to tell them apart.

Harry doesn't matter. He's just in the way. He's nothing to him. "You're nothing!" he says through gritted teeth. Although Harry's strength is leaving him, he's still clutching Draco's arm. The closer he gets to his last moment the more Draco struggles to hold him down. But he must because Harry will never stop hunting him. Harry won't let him go, so he must do this. He must so why is he shaking? Draco doesn't care so why can't he breathe? I can do this - I can I can I can I CAN'-

He chokes on a defeated sound and pulls himself off Harry. Harry rolls onto his side and begins to cough violently, even as he blindly reaches for Draco. Draco stumbles to get away, avoiding his outstretched hand. He staggers onto his feet, needing to get as far from him as possible. It's unbearable to be near him- to hear him fight for every breath.

Draco turns away to never look back. He knows Harry will try to follow – now he has a chance to
get away. He staggers forward, not understanding, when he catches a figure watching from the corner of his eye. He turns to see Lucius Malfoy casually aiming his wand on him.

Draco stops in his tracks, momentarily stunned. Then he laughs in an exhausted sort of way. "You're exactly who I wanted to see." It's not a lie. Before he disappears, he'd like to set things right. Hell - He'll probably enjoy killing him.

Draco bends low to pick up a discarded wand, even as Lucius flicks his wand threateningly onto Harry. "Do I have to kill the boy for you, Draco?" Lucius asks, disapproval dripping in his tone. Draco only laughs because he's absolutely mad. "You must know he's holding you back – one last weakness."

Nothing this man says matters to him anymore. He picks up the wand and raises it onto Lucius Malfoy as he raises to his feet, ready to finish this. Draco begins to edge slowly towards him, for the first time appreciating his sense of immortality. "I'm going to kill you. If I should fail, I'll come back and try again."

"Take another step and he's dead."

Draco exhales loudly and smirks. "How does it come so naturally to you? Tell me, did you hesitate when you killed her?"

In this rare moment, he sees Lucius Malfoy still with vulnerability. His expression doesn't change, nor does his general demeanor - but the long pause that follows the question is burdened with grief. He stares at his son a moment too long, as if trying to find answers there. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Draco shakes his head because it doesn't matter. Nothing's going to stop him from righting the wrong. This has to be done for the sake of his memory. This has to be done so that he can walk away. He'll kill off the last remaining family of Draco Malfoy. He'll kill off his very name, disappear to become no one. He steps towards Lucius, refusing to be distracted by others arriving on scene, or by Harry standing on his feet, or even by the flick of Lucius' wand as he utters a curse. But when a dark light emits, he can't help but follow its trail back to Harry.

Harry looks around anxiously for his wand and notices two figures hiding behind some bushes. He stills, avoids looking at the spot altogether to not give them away. It seems that Ron and the stranger who helped him have caught up with them. Harry can't bring himself to feel relieved because Lucius has a wand pointed right at him. From experience, he knows that Malfoys tend not to bluff with their threats.

He gets onto his feet, ready to dodge out of the way at any moment, and nearly misses the subtle flick of Lucius’s wand. He doesn't have a chance to dodge the violet jet of light headed his way, for Draco steps right into its path – right between him and death.

Harry feels the full impact of the curse as it hits Draco and he stumbles towards him. Draco falls and Harry's already there to catch him. "Draco!" Harry clutches at him in shock. As they fall to the ground, he shakes his head in denial. He can dimly make out Ron and the spy going after Lucius, spells being fired in all directions. But it's all forgotten when he leans away from Draco to look at him. The world tilts and his hands begin to scatter in panic.

Draco's choking on his own blood. Red streams have already escaped from the corners of his mouth.
as he drowns in it. He's choking, hands clawing at the earth as he fights for a breath. "No, no no-" Harry gently presses him down to keep him still. "Just - don't move!" Harry stares aghast as he begins to work quickly. He takes out the vial of phoenix tears from his pocket. Not trusting his fingers right now, he bites off the lid with his teeth. Carefully, he steadies Draco's head in one hand and leans the vial towards his lips. "You're okay - come on." When Draco coughs and splutters, red dripping over his chin, he tries again and pours some clear liquid into his mouth. He moves quickly to find the pendant on Draco.

Harry isn't aware of what's happening around him. He doesn't care that Lucius could kill him any moment. Somewhere beyond his focus he realizes people are shouting and fighting, but nothing matters but Draco. He moves through the motions rhythmically, relying on his basic survival instincts to make sure the nightmare won't come true.

Draco splutters, his eyes wide, and Harry pulls out the warm pendant from its hiding place to place it on his chest. Draco shudders and tries to speak, but the words are drowned. "Shh - don't." The pendant is fisted in his right hand, pressed against Draco's chest, while he tries to support Draco with one arm. He stares into grey eyes as the words tumble out of him. "Quaerite defuit et mutare consilium. Audi quid dicat-"

"You and me," Draco croaks, fighting to hold his gaze, his eyes becoming unfocused and far away. "Could have been-

"Look at me." But Draco's gaze seems to drift away, past his face and beyond the trees. Harry stares and shakes his head and tries to speak, but he's suddenly aware that Draco is no longer choking. Draco isn't breathing. He doesn't think of what that means. He holds onto him tighter, the words now leaving in an aching breath. "Sana quod fuit. Quaerite defuit in aethere, vel in corde..." Draco isn't moving. Draco isn't breathing. "Audi quid dicat." He doesn't dare shake him. He isn't - He's okay - "Please -" He buries his face into his chest, forcing out ancient words on a broken breath - sobbing broken words to bring him back.

The words are his only hope, his last resort. Their meaning sinking in, he realizes he's known them since he saw the silver flame of his soul.

Seek the missing pieces,
From aether and to heart.
Bring back what is broken.
Mend what is apart.
Seek the missing pieces,
To change the fate's design.
Hear what I have spoken.
Heal what once was mine.
There is no pain, so why is Harry crying? Draco tries to tell him it's okay, but copper fills his mouth and he struggles to speak. Draco swallows blood, but more comes to drown him away. He realizes then that all they have is now. "You and me -" were never meant to be. If he could change fate - If he didn't choose the wrong side - If there wasn't a war - if and when - in another life – they - "Could have been-" But blood drowns his words away and all they have is now.

"Look at me." Harry's face edges closer, streaked in pain. He wants to tell him not to be afraid. He wants to tell him he feels the same. He wants to tell him that it's better this way. They could have been - it would have been -

He fights to keep his eyes on emerald green, but his vision shifts out of focus, so that he catches sky above him, past the trees. He finds himself falling into the space between the leaves, into the warm amber light that's meant for now. He stares into it until it's all he sees, until it's all he knows and could ever be. Until he’s free.

*His name is Draco Malfoy. He's handsome, intelligent and ambitious. He's born with all the privileges in the world. He's proud, yet so easily offended. He's superficial, searching for all the wrong things to make him happy. He finds pleasure in being right and meeting expectations. He collects titles: the Malfoy heir, the Slytherin Prince, the Bully, the Death Eater. Everyone wants a piece of him, benefit from the shadow of a person that he is.*

He's make believe and life's a game. He's good at pretending; knows exactly what to say. He has all the answers. He enjoys playing the parts until he realizes they're all him, it's all real. All the things he says and does define him.

*He starts to see who he really is and he rejects it. He has to live the lie to keep them safe. He has to live the lie because it's all he knows. He’s already tainted. He struggles with the façade and yearn for release. In his confusion, he tries to make sense of this pain. He clings to anything that helps him confirm who he is. He denies the contradictions. He fools himself into believing none of it matters. He loves to laugh, if only to mask his pain. He's cruel because he deserves to be hated.*

He can do no wrong yet he feels so wrong. He can only fail in doing what is asked of him. He can't take back the things he does. He can't pretend he doesn't care. He forgets how to act, each moment burdened by the consequences. He's sure they see right through him.

*When his masks slips, it's green eyes that notice.*

*It's undeniable - He's at war with himself. It's what's hardest to accept. He doesn't know which self is real. Is he real, or is he already gone? He loses himself so easily. He numbs the pain, eases it with cruelty and laughter - anything that helps him forget. But the pain is endless. He can't ignore it. He can't hide. The pain creeps back in. It ruins everything he knows is a lie but wants to believe otherwise. He tries to forget, desperately tries to mask his pain away. He pretends until he becomes nothing but the mask. He pretends until he doesn't know the truth from the lie.*

*But there’s something in that shade of green that reminds him.*

*He doesn't have the strength to fight anymore. He's aware and it hurts so much. He's drowning in his regret. He's sorry, yet he doesn't know how to be sorry.*

*He's falling until someone offers his hand. He's only brave when he takes it.*

*It hurts until he understands it's supposed to. Only pain makes life worth living. The pain is his ally, not his oppressor. The pain reminds him of who he is. The pain is the struggle to be real. To laugh without needing to forget. To cry without shame. He allows himself to be a terribly wounded mess.*
He abandons his guise of nothing – frees himself from the lie.

He doesn't pretend with him: He isn't corrupt. He isn't vile. He isn't broken. He likes who he is through his eyes. He's real. He's flawed. He's selfish and caring and insecure and possibly in love.

He's living. It's nice - with him. It feels like breathing again. It feels like dawn after dusk. But it isn't meant to be. They stand on opposite sides of history. His past haunts him. His name breaks him. The blood stains his hands. He can't take any of it back. He's ruined. He's lost. It's time to let go - to forget and never look back. To cease the pain.

But he can't.

"Stay with me."

When he takes his first breath, the air stinging his lungs and the pain sharp in his every limb, he feels Harry go still. Harry, who's clutching him tight, his face bent low over his chest, slowly lifts green eyes onto him.

"Hi, Scarhead-" is all he can think to say.

Harry's relief is so sharp it's crippling to watch. He sits up straighter and laughs in a broken sort of way, moving a hand across his eyes. Draco leans up to him quickly. "Don't - don't cry." He can't be the one to make him cry.

"It's just--" Harry burst into quiet laughter, his shoulder shaking. "I thought you were-" His words fail him and he inhales a jaded breath. He clenches his mouth tightly and regards him with bright eyes. "But you're okay-" A dry huff of breath escapes him that almost turns into a laugh, but it dies when he subtly glances down at the pendant in his hand. "… Right?"

Draco attempts at a smile he doesn't quite find. Instead he sits up to meet him and takes his hand. When Draco brings it up to his lips, kissing the puncture wounds on his palm, Harry's shoulders begin to tremble again. He then turns his hand over and uncurls his fist to take the pendant from him. Harry inhales sharply when Draco places it around his neck. "Thank you for keeping this safe."

Harry lets out a tight breath that's half a laugh, half a sob and tugs the back of his hair in astonishment. "It really is you." Draco nods again, finding a real smile for him, and Harry pulls him into a tight embrace.

Draco freezes because he didn't expect this to be so easy. Harry can't forgive- not until he makes it up to him. He sways into him, nearly gives into him, but pulls back at the last moment and edges away. His shoulders hunch forward and he bends his face low to hide his eyes. "Wait - I -" His gaze wanders down to his own hands, noticing the dirt under his fingernails. He hesitates, knowing his words aren't enough but needing to say them anyway. "I don't know how to - I -" The words are lodged in his throat, caught in his regret. "I'm sorry - for everything."

He's looking down at the ground when Harry takes his chin and lifts his face. Draco has no choice but to look at him. "It wasn't your fault," he replies. He swipes his thumb along his jawline, content in believing that. Draco lightly shakes his head because he's wrong. But when Harry moves his hand to rub the side of his neck, his fingers sliding into his hair, he nearly closes his eyes. He nearly believes it too. "There's nothing to forgive." Draco smiles sadly back at him before he buries his face below Harry's collar, forehead pressed against his shoulder. Harry pulls him in closer, as if to reassure himself that Draco won't disappear again. "It's okay - you're okay."

Draco's face falters because the truth is he isn't okay and Harry knows it. He has so much to account
for and he doesn't know where to begin. Some things can never be undone, can never be set right. He'll never forget what he's done, but there's hope for forgiveness. Harry's forgiven him, after all.

He sighs, relaxing into him. At least there's one thing he can set straight at this very moment. "Harry?"

"Hm?"

"You know I love you, right?"

There's only a brief pause, but not for hesitation.

"Love you too, Draco."
The nightmares come in pieces.

*Flames. Burning homes. The crackling and hissing of fire roaring in his ears – echoing in a disorientating way. The air is hot and heavy – searing his lungs - hurts to breathe -*

Draco gasps and turns on the tap, splashing water onto his face. It's just another nightmare. It isn't real. He wills himself to look up at the mirror.

*His arm burns in calling. When he looks down, pulling up his sleeve, there on pale skin a snake slithers out of a skull, ever so slowly towards him.*

He pales, grasping the porcelain sink with both hands as they begin to tremble. He can barely see his reflection. He's beginning to feel faint – he's beginning to-

*Someone's watching him. Past the smoke, he can vaguely make out the white mask beneath a hood. A knife is held in his hand, scarlet drops dripping from its blade.*

Draco stumbles to get away from him but he can't. The flames are catching and there's nowhere to run. But the Death Eater doesn't move, he only points to a spot beyond, his knife jutting towards a fallen figure on debris.

*He sees her instantly. She's clutching at her chest as red spills between her pale fingers. He runs to her, falls next to her. "Mother!" She tries to look at him, but her gaze is unfixed. She struggles to speak; the words drowning in the crackling of flames. "Mum, I'm here," he groans, grasping her hand. She sees him then – and then stops. Her stare into nothing looks through him as her hand goes limp in his.*

Draco wakes up on cool tiles, drenched in sweat and trembling. He doesn't even cover his face when he begins to cry; grateful for darkness.

Harry holds a plate a food close to him, not intending to touch it. He looks around the Malfoy Hall, scanning between the guests for platinum, blond hair.

Luna's blonde head distracts him, and he stills when he sees who she's speaking with.

Pansy Parkinson, wearing a formal, black dress, is nodding politely at something Luna is saying. He shouldn't be surprised to see her here – she and Draco were close once - but it's still uncomfortable. The last time he saw her she made it perfectly clear whose side she was on: "Fucking Voldemort's," he mutters under his breath. Sensing his glare, she suddenly looks up at him and waves in a slow, deliberate way, a small smirk on her face.

He turns away from her in annoyance and catches sight of Ron and Hermione heading to the gardens. When he catches up to them, he hears bits of their conversation. "Remember the last time we were here?" Hermione is asking him quietly.
Ron notices him just then. "Hey – how's Malfoy holding up?" He discreetly takes a pastry from Harry's plate.

Harry frowns. "He's alright… his nightmares aren't getting any better." Draco started taking Dreamless Sleep Potion when they returned to Hogwarts, but Harry suspects that he's become immune to it. When Draco isn't keeping himself busy, burying in schoolwork or flying with Harry to the point of exhaustion, he wanders the grounds until morning. He does his best to avoid sleep, for when he closes his eyes all he sees are broken bones and blood and last breaths, of unbearable guilt that burns him.

"And… you two are alright?" She asks quietly, making sure that no one else hears.

Harry looks at her in surprise, unsure of how to answer that. Since they've returned, Draco's been understandably to himself… He doesn't want to be around anyone except Harry. Except that when he's with Harry, he keeps himself at a distance. He actively avoids touching him. A first Harry thought he was imagining this, but it became clear when Harry tried to pull him in and Draco, laughing, pushed away with a panic in his eyes. It was clear then, that Draco doesn't want to be close to him. Harry holds in a sigh, keeping his disappointment a secret. "Yeah - Things are just hard for him right now."

Ron takes another pastry and says, "So you still haven't snogged, huh?" Ron bites the pastry and offers half to Hermione, who shakes her head dully.

Harry's face falters. "I think he feels guilty after-" he stops himself just in time. He hasn't told his friends what Draco did to him moments before Hermione stunned him. "After everything." He catches Hermione's quick, inquisitive look but he pretends to be distracted by a peacock strutting by.

"That's understandable. He did go all psycho – ow!" Hermione glares at Ron after landing a blow on his arm. "He was a psycho!"

"For heaven's sake, Ronald," Hermione protests.

Ron shrugs in exasperation. "I'm not saying it was his fault, but he did a lot of shit. And he hasn't exactly apologized," he mumbles under his breath.

"I know." Harry sighs. "He does feel bad, y'know. He just… he doesn't know how to approach you. I think it would help if he didn't think you hated him. Maybe if you actually called him 'Draco'…?"

"Augh – that's asking a bit much." Ron attempts to take the bloody sandwich from his plate but Harry dodges his hand.

"I'll give you one bite of this sandwich if you just say his name."

The familiar creak of his door, the sound of his boots over the hardwood floor, the way his bed sinks beneath his weight, all of this welcomes Draco Malfoy back home.

Except none of it feels familiar. It feels like he's floating through someone else's memories; everything blurry around the edges, like he's not quite here. Like this isn't the house he grew up in, or the room he slept in as a child. Like he never fell asleep under this canopy that's enchanted to imitate the skies above. Looking now, all he sees are puffy, white clouds floating in a piercing, blue skies.

He doesn't think of all the things that have happened here. He doesn't think of everyone that has
passed through these walls… he only thinks of how he's the last one. He's the rightful heir, the last of the Malfoy lineage. The Manor will be passed down to him on his eighteenth birthday – but alas - In a few short days the Ministry will take it away. Harry says he'll get it back but he knows better. Draco Malfoy, by all definition, is homeless.

His family cared for and managed this property for twenty generations. This is a fact he was expected to know from an early age. What does it say about him that he's the last of the line and the first to lose the Malfoy Manor? Today is his last day here. Today he's supposed to say goodbye to the only life he's ever known. He closes his eyes, the sinking feeling of regret pressing him to the bed. He could drown in it, in all his regrets, in all his excuses, in all the ways he could have been better - all the things he could have done. He lets himself not move for a while – sinking deeper - nearly giving in. Wouldn't it be nice to give in? For just a little? To not struggle, not care, not fight for every moment. To sleep. To not even dream as he plunges into sweet, empty slumber.

A knock on the door startles him out of his thoughts, making him sit up quickly on his bed. He combs his fingers through his hair hastily, hoping he doesn't look as shitty as he feels.

Harry pokes his head through the door, his hair all a disarray and expression solemn. "There you are-" he says as greeting. He closes the door behind him and approaches him with a sad plate of food. "I er… got you something to eat - but-

Draco takes it and blinks once. "Got hungry on the way up?" he asks, noticing the singular, aggressive bite mark in his sandwich.

Harry offers him a guilty smile. "There's much better stuff being served downstairs. You wanna come down and check?"

Draco gives him a contemplative look. "No."

Harry watches him as he runs his hand messily through his hair. Placing the plate down on the corner of the bed, he lingers a moment by Draco's feet. When he sits beside him, he exhales slowly. "I know this is really hard but you should come down. Maybe – read that speech you've prepared?" He's talking about her eulogy. Draco has one prepared. "It would help… to say goodbye." He was supposed to say it earlier, before the food was served, but his throat closed up during the burial and he's sure the words will catch if he tries to speak.

He avoids Harry's gaze now when he says, "Maybe you can read it for me."

"Draco-

"I can't. I just can't. It'd be like a lie… Like I was there for her. Like I fucking deserve to say something. I should have – I could have-" He presses his clenched fists into his lap, denying a tremor. "I could have saved her."

"You don't know that."

"It's my fault-"

"No, it is not." Harry stresses. "What could you have done that wouldn't have put you in danger?"

"I didn't even try!" he snaps. When Harry touches his back he stands up quickly, needing the space. Draco walks to the window, folds his arms tightly as he scowls at the blue sky.

Sympathy makes Harry's voice quiet. "You weren't yourself – you can't blame yourself for that." He gets up to stand next to him, keeping a bit of distance now. "Draco – what happened - You can't
change any of it. You can only do your best now. So…” Harry offers out his hand for him to take. “Come on. You'd hate yourself if you didn't do this. Trust me.”

Draco tries to swallow the lump in his throat as he takes Harry's hand, letting himself be dragged away.

Their feet echo in the long and lonely corridors of the Malfoy Manor. The endless portraits of former Malfoys look down at them with mixed looks of outrage and indifference. Harry can make out hints of Draco's features in his ancestors, of fleeting expressions he's grown to know so well. Harry trails his hand lazily over the old paint of the corridors, feeling the bumps under his fingertips as he walks alongside Draco. Turning to glance at him, he catches Draco staring.

"What?"

"What were you thinking?"

Of this house. Of all the things Draco must have lived. Of Draco growing up here - every corner reminding him of a legacy, of his significance. "Just - what it must have been like – to have all this…” Harry gestures vaguely about him, unable to find the words. "More than you being filthy rich, but being a Malfoy, y'know?" Draco raises an eyebrow. "You probably know more about your family history than anyone. Like – who else can talk to their ancestors on a regular basis?"

Draco shrugs. "They all seemed like a bunch of crazy narcissists to me."

"Yeah, well - That's besides the point." He smiles when he catches Draco's lips twitch. "It's just kinda nice. It reminds you that they all lived once. They walked through these corridors too..." Harry begins to feel silly when Draco's expression changes to bemusement. He's not explaining himself very well. He wishes he knew more about his family, wishes he could trace back his lineage, walk the same corridors of his ancestors. "It's just – you know exactly where you come from. They all lived- had to survive – for you to be here today. You're literally an embodiment of what they achieved - of all their hopes and dreams."

Draco gives him a sidelong glance, his silver gaze nearly stopping Harry in his tracks. "I think I know what you mean," he says earnestly. He then cocks his chin to point out the next portrait in their path. "This was my great, great, grandmother. She often brags about bathing in muggleborn blood," he says this matter-of-factly.

Harry looks at him in horror, before he notices the way Draco's face twitches in amusement. "You're an absolute prat," he replies.

Draco chuckles and Harry savours it. "It's why you love me."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," he replies automatically, nodding his head slowly as practiced.

Another random person he doesn't know. Why are these people even here? It's not like they were around when his family needed them most – but a small voice in his head reminds him it isn't their
fault. His family isolated themselves by the very standards they held, by the very things that happened within these walls. So, he shakes all their hands and holds a polite and solemn expression when he thanks them.

Raising a glass to his lips, he takes a sip to appear normal.

"I hope that's your first," a cool, feminine voice says behind him. He almost smiles as he turns to face her. "I only ever knew you as a lightweight."

Pansy Parkinson looks how he remembers her: the same resting-bitch face that she mastered back when she was eleven and the same black hair tucked behind her ears. Only she's grown it out since he last saw her and her face is pinched, as if she's trying hard not to let something show.

"Pansy -" he says quietly. "It takes a funeral to see you?"

Pansy doesn't even bother saying anything before she wraps her arms around him and pulls him into a tight hug. Hugging her back, it's shocking how he's missed her. "Draco - I couldn't believe it."

Draco pats her back, swallowing the lump growing in his throat. "I'm so sorry," she says.

He nods and she steps back, clutching his arm. He takes another purposeful sip from his drink. "I didn't think you'd come."

She frowns at him and begins to tug at his arm, pulling him away from the crowd. "Come – we need to talk."

"I can't - I'm supposed to-"

"Hush. Your boyfriend has it covered."

He looks at her quickly. "How did you-"

"It's obvious. Dating Potter!" She's taking him up the stairs, away from the crowd. As they ascend, he realizes she's taking him to a favourite spot of theirs: the West Balcony. "I know you've always had a crush on The Chosen One but what the hell?"

He glares at her. "How many times have I told you that I didn't-?"

"I nearly pissed myself from laughter when I found out."

"How did you even find out?" he asks her, watching as she fumbles through her purse, searching for – ahh, of course.

She takes out a joint and lights it up. "I have a source," she mumbles around the spliff before she takes a long, slow drag, letting the smoke settle in her lungs. When she exhales it's a long line of smoke out to the darkening sky.

She offers him the joint and he hesitates. Normally it wouldn't be a big deal, but he hasn't in months and people are still downstairs and he doesn't think Harry would approave and fuck it - he can't bear another moment of this shitty day so why not?

He takes the joint from her, ignoring the stab of guilt he feels, and holds it between his fingers. Draco straightens to inhale just one breath – and then on impulse another. He wonders how long it's been when he feels the sting in his lungs. He lets the smoke settle and leans forward, already beginning to feel the space around him echo. He closes his eyes and time seems to slow and stretch around him. Beginning to feel lightheaded, he lets out a smooth, long breath of white smoke. He lets it float away
into that damned, blissful sky.

He offers the joint back to her. A silence falls between them that is almost uncomfortable. He avoids looking at her, keeping his expression impassive, when he asks, "Where have you been?"

She takes the spliff from him. "France."

"Lovely."

The tension between them thickens as smoke escapes within a sigh. "I did offer to take you- if you remember."

"It was tempting – but you know I couldn't." At her snort he says defensively, "I had things to do. Not everyone can afford to not give a fuck like some."

She scoffs, his words not having the anticipated effect. "Look, I get it – you had things to sort out. But I couldn't stick around. When everyone knows you as the-bitch-who-wanted-to-kill-the-boy-who-lived, you don't have many options. How's that going for you, by the way? Being on the Golden Boy's good graces."

She's digging. He smirks and swirls the drink in his hand. "Why should I tell you?" Tilting his face back, he chugs the rest of his drink, the warmth of firewhisky burning in his chest and sinking into his empty stomach. He leans forward onto the balcony, already beginning to feel more than relaxed. "You've been gone too long," he admits.

"I'm-" she doesn't ever apologize- it's not her way. "I'm a piece of shit – you already know that."

"What are you not telling me?" The quick glimpse of shock is nearly impossible to catch – but he knows her too well. He watches in amusement as she gives him her practiced 'I don't know what you're talking about' face. It's almost convincing but she isn't blinking, only giving the impression of sincerity. "You know far too much for someone who's been away for a year." He smirks wickedly at her evident discomfort. "What is dear Pansy hiding?"

"I've been back for months, alright?" She flicks the joint and ashes fall to the ground. "I ran out of funds. Been staying with family. That's not nearly as scandalous as to what you've been up to."

He loves how impatient she's becoming. She's dying to know what happened, how this thing between him and Harry is even possible. "What do you think I've been upto?"

She smiles slyly now. "In some insane world – you and Potter are an item."

"That pretty much sums it up."

"What are you not telling me?" The quick glimpse of shock is nearly impossible to catch – but he knows her too well. He watches in amusement as she gives him her practiced 'I don't know what you're talking about' face. It's almost convincing but she isn't blinking, only giving the impression of sincerity. "You know far too much for someone who's been away for a year." He smirks wickedly at her evident discomfort. "What is dear Pansy hiding?"

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"You shagging him?"

Draco grins slyly at her. "That's none of your concern."

"I'll take that as a no. So you're like – inlove with him?"

He arches an eyebrow at that. The Pansy he knows doesn't talk about such things. She doesn't believe in love. To mention it is a joke. So now he can't help but smile and say, "I guess so - Is it obvious?"
When the doors to the balcony open suddenly, he jolts and stands up straighter. Harry, Luna, Ron and Hermione step awkwardly into the balcony. Some of Ronald's drink sloshes onto the floor.

Both Pansy and Hermione snort and then look at each other in horror. Luna on the other hand, walks up to Pansy and as if continuing in mid-sentence, carries on a conversation with her. If Pansy is surprised she doesn't let it show, but he and Harry exchange a 'what-the-fuck' glance.

Harry smiles as he walks to stands next to Draco on the balcony. He stands close enough so that their hands nearly touch on the railing, but still he feels too far away. It's strange, how Draco wants him closer and further away at the same time. Harry leans into the balcony, his hands twisting the railings. "Your speech was beautiful," he says to him.

His hand twitches nearer to Harry's. "Thanks."

Out of the corner of his eye he notices the others, how Pansy's stance is rigid and confident, but she's fiddling with the joint between her fingers, a nervous tick. When he catches Hermione staring at him and Harry, she offers a light smile before looking away. Ronald is looking between Luna and Pansy in confusion, before he glares at her joint and says. "Parkinson, are you going to share that or not?"

To the Weasel's credit, Pansy looks surprised. She smirks and passes it wordlessly to him. Hermione, who doesn't seem bothered by her boyfriend's request, only looks shocked when Pansy asks her if she still holds the title for 'top nerd at Hogwarts.'

Weas- Ronald laughs and says "yes, obviously, she's the top of her class."

"How surprising…" Draco catches Pansy's light sarcasm but she drops it quickly. "But good for you - really."

It surprises him, that Pansy can (almost) be civil to the people she hated most in school. It's even more surprising that they're indulging her and not turning away. It's a strange thing to witness – this group of people mingling, almost tolerating each other's presence. He can still sense some of Hermione's reservation and Ronald's general impatience, even a little bit of fear from Pansy, but the fact that they're trying makes him feel grateful.

"Did you know Draco's had a crush on Potter since he was eleven?" Pansy asks loudly, to which Hermione laughs delightfully.

Harry stills, before turning to look at him.

Draco glares at Pansy, refusing to look at Harry. "I did not have a crush on Potter - ow!" Harry pokes him hard and he deflates a bit. "I mean – I didn't have a crush on Harry." He can't help but smile just a bit.

"Oh my god, just snog already," Pansy exclaims.

"Please do not! I mean – not in my face," Ron groans.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hermione interjects. "Everyone wants to see Harry and Draco kiss." Luna nods, while everyone else turn to look at Hermione in shock. She straightens up indignantly. "I only mean – as a supportive friend."

Ronald gives her a suspicious look and Pansy laughs. The air seems to warm between them, making Draco feel lighter for the first time in days.

After some time, it's Luna who breaks the almost comfortable setting, her blue eyes intently on him.
"Did you really die?" she asks. Ronald coughs and Pansy ogles at her in disbelief. Hermione has the grace to look away in embarrassment.

But Draco merely chuckles. "Yeah – I suppose so."

"What was it like?" Luna asks, to which Pansy throws her a glare.

"Don't be daft - Draco doesn't want to-" 

"It was painless- effortless really," he replies without thinking. 

No one knows what to say to that. It's uncomfortable to associate those words with death – especially today. Harry then adds in a quiet voice, "it's quicker and easier than falling asleep." Draco nearly takes Harry's hand then, nearly forgets he isn't supposed to.

Luna nods thoughtfully and Pansy gives him a strange look.

Several drinks and embarrassing stories later, after his friends have apparated away, only Harry remains. They stay on the balcony, silently watching the skies before them.

"How you feel?" As soon as Harry asks, he winces. They both know the answer to that.

Draco shrugs lightly, his eyes fixed on the setting sun. Draco waits for the pain to disappear with the last rays of light, but as his eyes begin to grow heavy, he knows he'll fall asleep thinking of her. She's in every memory attached to this place: her graceful walk across the grounds, the way she lit the room with her quick wit and charm, or when she worried, as she did so often in the end, how she'd speak decisively, hiding her worst fears far better than him.

Now he can only see her absence, only hear the silence that creates. The overwhelming truth – that she's gone- feels like an open wound in his chest. "All I want to do is forget. Just sleep – forever." His face twists until he's sure it's cracked in half. The pain spills through and Draco angles his face away from Harry.

Harry wraps an arm around him, pulling him close to kiss the side of his head. Draco's too tired to shy away from his touch. Or maybe tonight, he's allowing himself to have this. "You can sleep – but not forever. I'd miss you if it were forever."

They both spot the snitch at the same time. When they both move instinctively to catch it, Draco matches his speed, so close to him that their shoulder nearly touch. Draco bumps his shoulder into his, which only makes Harry shove back harder, trying to get him off the trail. But at this precise moment the snitch chooses to dip at a severe angle, giving Draco the advantage. Draco moves quickly after it.

The snitch now accelerates to the ground, plunging itself low so that the pair of them are rushing head first after it. The Quidditch pitch is meeting them fast and Draco still has a slight advantage. Yet the snitch doesn't change its course, even when the ground seems to come rushing at them. Draco flips himself up to avoid colliding into it. Harry vaguely hears him shout above him when he doesn't do the same.

His fingertips graze over the ground when he closes his hand around the snitch. He barely has enough time to get himself up - but of course he manages so. The end of his broom catches on the pitch, causing him to nearly crash. He flies out and lands clumsily on his feet, laughing as the pebbles
scatter around his boots.

Draco lands next to him and snaps, "You fucking idiot. You could have killed yourself!"

Harry smiles at him. "It's nice to know you care." He tries not to look smug as he shows him the snitch fisted in his right hand.

Draco's expression doesn't change one bit. "I'm serious. That was really close." He looks up at the sky then, his expression made of stone. "It looks like rain - let's continue tomorrow-" he says tersely.

He turns to leave and Harry catches his arm. "We've only just started… Are you actually angry?"

Even as he says this, the first drops of rain begin to fall around them, some hitting his face. He glances up himself, making out the tumultuous clouds above them.

Draco takes his arm away possessively. "I'm not angry," Draco say lightly. "It's just annoying – slightly infuriating - how reckless you are." He begins to walk away.

Balancing the firebolt on his shoulder, he peers at Draco through wet lenses. "Let's grab a drink at Hogsmeade - you can yell at me then."

Draco laughs dryly. "Tempting - but I have work to do."

Harry steps in front of him, keeping him from going any further. "It's Friday - you can take a break."

"I don't think so, Harry." He sidesteps him to walk away.

"We could study in the library then." He knows Draco will have another excuse not to. Draco's been full of excuses as of late. But Draco's not looking back to see if Harry's following. "I mean - if you want me there."

Draco stops in his tracks and turns to look at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing - forget it." They're properly getting wet now, the rain beginning to fall hard. He's grateful for it, hoping it hides his disappointment. He steps beside Draco in resentful silence, but Draco isn't moving anymore.

Draco shakes his head once, suddenly looking contrite. "Look - I'm sorry I've been so-" Harry peers at him. Even through the rain he can see memories stirring in silver. "I just… I remember-" The words catch in his throat and he scowls at himself. Harry doesn't say anything, only waits for him to continue. But Draco sways away from him, his eyes not quite meeting his.

"What do you remember?" he presses.

Draco opens his mouth but closes it quickly.

Harry edges towards him. "What?"

"I remember you telling me to stop - it plays over in my head."

"That wasn't your fault."

"I raped you!" Harry's stomach drops at the word. "Every time we touch I remember." Draco avoids his gaze again, and Harry can see his features darkening. Harry tries to step towards him but Draco edges away. "When you're too close..." He swallows. "I'm just giving you some space, alright?"

"I don't want space!" Harry says, not letting him leave. "I want." He doesn't need to say it. They
both know it. But Harry's misses him so much it hurts. Draco tries to shrug him off but Harry catches his arm tightly.

"What do you want?" Draco asks.

He looks back at Draco, taking in his hesitation. Yet below his fear lies something that has Harry edging close to him, memorizing him; the rain cascading off his chin, his lips parted in waiting, and then those eyes - specks of amber painted on silver – regarding him intently - making a warmth rush to Harry's skin. "I want you-" he begins.

Draco doesn't let him finish. He pulls Harry in by the front of his robes into a greedy kiss that tastes of rain.

Draco stops at the bottom of the stairs, his hand loosely in Harry's. Harry looks back at him, already a step above him, with a questioning look.

"This is a bad idea… you should go on without me."

Harry tugs at his hand. "Come on, it'll be fine."

Draco follows him stiffly up the stairs to a door with some sort of screen in it. "What if…?" He swallows. "-She wants nothing to do with me?"

"She does, I'm sure." Harry opens the first door, the ugly one with the screen, before he knocks on the white wooden door.

Draco already feels his palms begin to sweat, and upon hearing footsteps, he squeezes Harry's hand before letting it go, wiping it against his trousers to get the dampness off.

When the door swings open, he recognizes her immediately. She looks like his mother except with brown hair and more wrinkles around her eyes. She smiles at them both, but her eyes linger on Draco.

"Hello, Andromeda," Harry says as he hands her a small bouquet of lilies. "Thank you for inviting us."

Her face lights up as she takes the flowers. "You shouldn't have…" Her gaze lands on Draco again and he gives her a fixed, polite smile. "I'm glad you came," she says to him.

Draco thrusts his hand out, grateful his voice is steady when he says, "it's nice to see you again, Aunt Andromeda." They've met once before – at the funeral. "I'm excited to meet Teddy."

She's far more expressive than his mother, as evident by her fleeting surprise as she takes his hand and shakes it. The handshake is awkward and Draco wonders if it was a mistake, until she pulls him in with a brief, "oh, come here…" She steps outside to give him a tight hug.

Draco stills, giving Harry a panicked look. But he's smiling at him and Draco lets himself relax. He moves his arms around her shoulders and hugs her back. When she doesn't let go, he finds himself imagining this is how his mother would have hugged him if he had seen her one last time.

She steps back with a cheerful smile, even as her eyes are shining. Harry steps in to give her his own hug and Draco's shocked to see her wipe her damp eyes.
"You must think I'm silly," she says, as she gestures for them to follow her inside. "It's just…" she gives Draco an affectionate smile. "You remind me strongly of Narcissa." Draco swallows the lump in his throat and manages to smile back. "Come in already! It's smoldering out here."

When she walks in, Harry is first to follow. Draco walks through the doorway and feels protective charms tickle his skin. She's already leading Harry to another room for tea. The distant sounds of a toddler can be heard coming from within.

But he's distracted by the collection of both muggle and wizard photos alike, hung up on the walls on either side of him. Most of these people he doesn't know – but he does recognize his late cousin with her bubble-gum pink hair. And then an old one – faded by the years – catches his eye. Three young girls sit in a garden wearing white dresses and fancy, funny hats. The youngest of the three, a blonde, is being tickled by her sisters.

"Are you coming?" Harry asks quietly, waiting for him at the end of the hall.

He looks at him and nods. With a smile, he closes the door behind him.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who's taken the time to read this, but I especially want to address all reviewers. Your kind words encourage me to keep writing. That's truly a gift, so thank you.

Also, Book 2 is happening!!! I'm excited, are you?!

Wiggy~

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!