With Great Yawns and Stretchings

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With Great Yawns and Stretchings

by sugar_screw

Summary

The coffee is very good. Really. And the cats are so cute. That's why Harry goes so often.

Notes

The second I saw this amazing prompt I knew I had to write it. Thank you to my girlfriend Alice and friend Thomas for beta-ing this and helping me shape it into a better story. And to my own obnoxious, sweet, old girl Foxy, whom I often had to shoo off my computer while working on this: there's a little piece of you in each of the cats in this story.

For Prompt #27.

See the end of the work for more notes.

A late summer breeze had blown dark gray clouds over Diagon Alley throughout the day. When Harry walks out of Gringotts and sees the steady rain he curses quietly. He's always been shit at the Impervius Charm and he forgot his umbrella. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighs. Of course. A
fitting end to this week. After Gringotts had received several terroristic threats, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has made it their highest priority case. Harry had practically begged to be part of the field division but Kingsley had nixed it.

“You've been doing too much field work, Harry,” Kingsley had said sternly without looking up from his paperwork. “All good Aurors need experience switching their skills.”

Harry had narrowed his eyes. He'd known for a fact that Kingsley had been to the Burrow for dinner recently and had probably heard Molly's concerns about him being “stressed” from field work. So, that means that while Ron and his team are analyzing handwriting samples and magical imprints and tracking leads throughout London, Harry is stationed in Gringotts for security.

It isn't that Harry *hates* interacting with goblins or anything. Relations between wizards and goblins are better than they've been in decades, politically at least. But working with goblins is never a pleasant experience. As Harry learned during the war with Griphook, many goblins are just kind of mean. It's exhausting and dull work, standing around all day while the goblins bark orders at you. And seeing as Ron's team still doesn't have any solid leads, it looks like it'll be more of the same next week.

Sighing again, Harry hurries down the bank steps, pulling his red Auror robes over his head. He's tempted to just Apparate straight home. But he knows if he does he'll be too tired to make much more than toast for dinner. *Be proactive in the face of exhaustion*, Hermione's chastising voice rings through his head. So, takeaway it is. A few blocks past Knockturn Alley, he turns left, down Diurn Alley. Immediately after the war, to stimulate the local economy, a new street with, new, empty buildings had been constructed. They'd filled up gradually over the past five years, vibrant, colorful little shops and restaurants that were like an injection of vitality for the whole of Diagon Alley. An Indian takeaway had just opened up a few weeks ago that he's been dying to try. A rainy Friday evening after a rough week seemed the perfect time.

The remaining stragglers in the street rush to get into a shop, towards the Leaky Cauldron, home, anywhere that isn't in the rain. Glancing up at the signs so he doesn't accidentally pass the restaurant, Harry nearly stumbles as something bumps hard against his shin. *What the hell?* He looks down to see a gray blur in the rain speed towards a trash bin, making a racket as it slinks between the bin and the brick wall of a building. The rain is picking up but Harry stops and turns towards the bin.

Moving closer, he sees the gray blur is actually a cowering cat. It's long fur is soaked around its face, making it look mangy and pathetic as it looks up at him with big amber eyes.

“And what are you doing out in this mess?” Harry says, crouching down. The cat pulls back further, scared. “Hey, it's okay.”

Harry puts one hand out tentatively for the cat to sniff. It doesn't seem like a stray; the wet fur clinging to its body doesn't reveal any ribs, no matted fur or wounds, and he can see a collar around it's neck. The thing looks well-cared for and horribly lost. After a long, distrustful moment that reminds Harry of bowing before a Hippogriff, the cat finally sniffs his hand. Determining his smells trustworthy, it butts its head against Harry's fingers.

“You nearly took me out back there, you know that?” Harry says, petting its head before gently picking it up. He expects it to squirm, try to escape but rather it shivers and curls against his chest. “Where do you live? If only you were a snake, you could tell me.”

Gently lifting the cat's head he grabs the silver medallion hanging from its collar. *Pepper. 18 Diurn Alley.* Looking around, Harry sees that the nearest building is 23. Not far, then. *Hey, lost cats aren't the MLE's responsibility,* the tired, hungry, cranky part of his brain snaps. But he just can't leave the poor thing in the rain now that it rubbed its sad head against his hand. He's never been particularly
fond of cats; most of his experiences with them have been neutral to bad. But they are quite cute and it's not like it's that out of the way. The rain is a full blown downpour now so he jogs from building to building, squinting at the numbers. Finally, he sees a metal “18” and hurries inside, not even looking at the sign.

Pulling his robes down and shaking his head free of rainwater, he looks around. He's never been in this shop before, thinks it might be new in fact. It's a large room full of lumpy couches and chairs, round wooden tables; to one side is a long counter with a glass front, full of little cakes and pastries and a chalkboard runs the length of the wall behind it. Harry has only a moment to take that in before a chorus of mews distracts him. He looks back towards the couches and chairs to see half a dozen cats sitting up, stretching and jumping down to walk towards him. Confused for a moment, he takes a step back, moving towards the counter.

“Oh, hush, all of you, I know we have a customer.”

Harry whips around at the voice coming from the back room, unintentionally squeezing the cat in his arms. It growls and bites his arm, hard.

“Ouch!” Harry jumps back as the cat springs from his arms to join its fellow felines on the floor. Holding his arm, Harry looks up again to see Draco Malfoy staring at him from behind the counter, brow furrowed. Draco Malfoy, with a small black cat cradled in his arms. Draco Malfoy in a Muggle sweater and jeans.

“Potter? What are you—?” Malfoy looks down at the wet cat, now primly cleaning its paw. He sighs and sets the black cat down on a round, velvet cushion on the counter. “Oh, Pepper, did you get out again?”

Harry watches in amazement as Malfoy comes around the counter and crouches down next to Pepper.

“You wretched beast,” he says softly, pointing his wand at the cat. Harry tenses for just a moment; the cat yowls in protest as magic warmth moves over its fur, drying it, but it's not hurt. “I hope a jaunt through the rain has taught you to finally stop running outside.”

Malfoy pats the now disgruntled cat once on the head before standing up straight and facing Harry. His features are carefully neutral as their eyes meet but Harry swears he can see the corner of Malfoy's mouth twitch. No wonder; Harry probably looks ridiculous, soaked through, windswept, and clutching his arm where Pepper bit him. Harry tries to think of literally anything to say as the silence stretches on between them. God, it's been six or seven years now since they last saw each other. Not since the trials.

“So,” Malfoy says slowly, taking a few steps back towards the counter. “Welcome to Cat's Brew Cafe.”

“Do you...own this place?” Harry asks finally.

He thinks Malfoy's gaze sharpens a little.

“Yes. Hard to believe?”

“No, I just...I just wasn't expecting to see you is all. I come down Diurn kind of often.”

Malfoy stares at him a moment longer, as though measuring the sincerity of his words.

“We've only been open about three weeks now. Business has been okay but not too busy. I'm
surprised you didn't know though. Granger's been in here a few times.”

“What?” Harry's eyes widen. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. She's brought that half-Kneazle of hers in, says she wants to socialize him or something. Unlikely, in my opinion, I've never seen a more unsociable beast.”

Harry looks down as another cat, a bright orange tabby, winds around his legs. He glances behind him to see most of the cats have returned to their spots on the couches and chairs. He shakes his head a little, wondering if he's somehow hallucinating. Malfoy owning a cat cafe is the last thing he'd ever expect. And Hermione knew about it and somehow failed to mention it.

“Do you want anything to drink?” Malfoy asks, going back behind the counter to stand near the cash register. One pale hand reaches out to stroke the head of the black cat now curled up on the cushion.

Harry knows that he's being rude by continuing to just stare but it's been a long day and he really is truly stunned.

“Er...no, I don't think so, I need to get going.”

Malfoy raises an eyebrow as he runs his fingers down the black cat's spine. It stretches its front legs out, claws flexing.

“On the house, since you brought home our little runaway.”

Harry glances out the window. The rain is showing no signs of stopping and his stomach is growling. But when will Malfoy ever offer him free coffee again?

“Okay, but can I get it to-go?”

“Certainly.” Malfoy smirks and leans forward against the counter. “What'll you have?”

“Er,” Harry looks over the neat, tidy script on the chalkboard. The orange tabby is still winding around his legs, mewling for his attention. “Just a small house brew, with a shot of caramel?”

“Cream and sugar?” Harry nods and Malfoy goes back towards the coffee urns. “You should pet Sandwich before you get a bite to the leg to match your arm.”

Harry scowls before looking down at the orange animal at his feet.

“Sandwich? What kind of name is that for a cat?” Harry asks before crouching down to scratch the cat’s neck. Sandwich purrs loudly, leaning into Harry's fingers.

“He came with that name. I assume a child named him.”

Harry stands up again, leaning forward a bit to watch as Malfoy pours caramel into the hot coffee. As he lays his hand against the counter, the black cat on the cushion stirs. Looking closer, Harry sees that what he initially thought was a kitten is actually a much older cat. The fur on its face is shot through with gray and it looks very sleepy. But she sniffs his hand cautiously. He hasn’t been surrounded by this many cats since his days being babysat by Mrs. Figg.

“What's this one called?”

“That's Solitaire,” Malfoy says, returning and setting the coffee cup in front of Harry. “Our old lady.”

Harry watches as Malfoy scratches behind Solitaire's ears before looking up again.
“Well, there you are. Thank you again for bringing Pepper back. Tell all your cat-loving friends about us.”

“Yeah, of course. Uh, thanks, it was...good to see you again?”

Malfoy narrows his eyes just a little, watching as Harry backs towards the door, careful not to step on Sandwich.

“You too, Potter. Do come again sometime.”

Once outside Harry stands under the building's awning and takes a deep breath. Did that actually just happen? Staring out at the still pouring rain, Harry sips the coffee, hardly able to believe he's willingly drinking something prepared for him by Draco Malfoy. But it's good, really good, in fact. The rich warmth gives him the energy to jog back out into the rain, towards the Indian restaurant. Once there, he orders takeaway for three; he's got a bone to pick with Hermione.

“So, something weird happened in Diurn Alley today.”

Harry had shown up with food at the perfect time, just as Ron and Hermione had been wondering what to do for dinner. They'd gotten most of the way through the meal talking of work and other things before Harry couldn't stand it anymore. They both look up at him.

“Did you know that Malfoy opened a cat cafe there?”

Ron's eyes widened but Harry watches as Hermione goes very still. When Ron notices him staring at Hermione he turns to look at her too.

“You knew?” Ron asks.

“Well...” She twists the stem of her wineglass nervously in her fingers, looking down at her mostly eaten palak paneer. “Yes, I've gone there a few times. I took Crookshanks to meet the other half-Kneazle there. His name is Chowder, he's such a sweet—!”

“Okay, but why didn't you tell me?” Harry interrupts, holding his hand up.

“What, that I get coffee with my cat?”

“Oh, come off it, Hermione!”

Her head snaps up and he instantly quells under her hard gaze.

“If you want to know the truth,” she says steadily. “I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be like this.”

“Like what?” Harry asks, scowling.

“You do get weird about Malfoy, mate,” Ron says thoughtfully, tipping back his chair.

Harry glares at him. _Traitor._

“I do not!”

“Remember when his engagement was announced in the Prophet? You didn't stop mentioning it for weeks,” Hermione says, standing to start clearing the dishes.
Harry opens his mouth, feeling heat rush to his cheeks.

“I may have mentioned it a few times...”

“Way more than a few.” Ron smiles, his chair thudding as he leans back down against the table. “You get obsessed over what he's up to. Just like sixth year.”

Harry closes his eyes for a moment. Ron still likes to needle him about that, to this day.

“He was up to something then, remember?”

“Yes, well, he's not up to something now,” Hermione says, coming back into the dining room. She sighs and looks at him with soft eyes. “I know you don't mean to, but I don't want you to...to bug him, to bug each other. He and I have talked a little bit and it seems like he's had a rough couple years. You two together are nothing but drama waiting to happen. That's why I didn't tell you.”

Harry sits back in his chair, feeling mutinous. He's a bloody adult, for Merlin's sake. He can handle knowing that Draco sodding Malfoy works in a cafe in Diagon Alley. He just would have liked to know, is all. That way it wouldn't have been such a shock seeing him out of nowhere. Harry thinks back to the last time they saw each other, right after the trials had ended. After a brief stint in Azkaban while awaiting his trial, he'd been much thinner, shadows under his eyes, all points and angles. Harry remembers watching Aurors escort him out of the courtroom and that was it.

The Draco Malfoy at Cat's Brew was so far from that, in his cozy Muggle sweater, surrounded by cats and warm coffee, that Harry still can't quite believe it. What on earth could have motivated Malfoy to pursue such a career? It's not like he needs the money, right? The Malfoys had to pay some hefty fines after the war but they were still one of the richest magical families in Europe. Harry kept thinking about it even after helping Hermione and Ron wash up and Apparating home.

Rain is still pounding away at the windows of Grimmauld Place when Harry collapses back into his favorite armchair by the fire, glass of wine in hand. Wind howls through the mostly empty rooms upstairs and he pulls a blanket onto his lap. He sighs, swirling the wine in the glass. Okay, so maybe he has a tendency to get too interested in matters of Draco Malfoy. Old habits die hard. Not this time though, he thinks, watching the flames dance in the grate, I do not care what Malfoy is up to with his cats.

You realize you're proving Hermione right, don't you?

Harry scowls as he turns down Diurn Alley. The cobblestone street is still slick from the previous night's storm and the sky is slate gray. It's like fall blew in overnight.

I am not. I just really want some more of that coffee.

It isn't entirely untrue. This morning as he'd sipped his own coffee (made from instant powder; he'd never gotten around to to buying a proper coffee maker) he'd remembered the coffee Malfoy had made him. The memory of that sweet, warm, rich coffee made what he was drinking taste exactly like what it was: hot brown tap water.

There aren't any other good coffee places in Diurn Alley. That's why I'm going.

Even with his rational reasoning in mind, Harry hesitates outside the door. In the overcast midday light he can now clearly see the wooden sign hanging above the door. The words Cat's Brew Cafe are burned into an arch above a round, cat peeking over the rim of a coffee mug. The same design is
etched into the large glass window. Peering through, Harry sees multiple cats wandering around but no one at the counter. Taking a deep breath, Harry pushes open the door.

A bell tinkles and all of the cats perk up. Harry recognizes Pepper and Sandwich as they trot towards him. As he kneels down to pet them, he tries to remember if any of Mrs. Figg's cats were as affectionate as these ones. Maybe it's because, as he found out much later, most of them were full or half-Kneazle. A few years back he'd had an unpleasant blast from the past when the Department for the Control of Magical Creatures called for Auror backup at Arabella Figg's residence. She was still on Privet Drive and had been busted for illegally trading Kneazles with an expired license. She'd begged to speak to Harry and he'd bent over backwards to smooth it all over; call it his thanks for her speaking at his trial when he was fifteen.

“Be out in just a second!”

Harry looks up at the unfamiliar voice; that's certainly not Malfoy. It's not out of the ordinary for more than one person to work in a shop you know, he chastises himself.

“No problem,” he calls, standing. Pepper mews in annoyance at no longer being the center of his attention.

He sees Solitaire curled up on her counter cushion. She raises her head in interest as he approaches, green eyes narrowing slightly. With her fur all puffed around her neck and chest like a mane, she looks quite regal. Harry pats her head gently and feels her small frame vibrating with purrs.

“Sorry about that!”

Harry looks up as a short, chubby girl comes from the back room before immediately starting to wash her hands. She looks Hogwarts-aged, round cheeks spattered with freckles, brown hair in a short pixie cut. She too is wearing Muggle attire, a pair of worn denim overalls over a tatty, green long-sleeve shirt. Harry sees a charming gap between her front teeth as she smiles widely at him.

“That's okay.” Harry smiles back, scratching Solitaire's ears.

“Name's Bridget. What can I get you, Mr. Potter?”

Harry gives her an appraising look. She hadn't done any of the things that usually indicate he's been recognized—no glance towards his forehead, slightly widened eyes, stiffened body language. He's fine-tuned to those subtle changes in how people treat him after so many years but she'd bypassed all of it. He instantly likes her.

“Small house brew, shot of caramel, please.”

“Cream and sugar?”

He nods and she rings him up.

“You've been here before?” she asks as she prepares the drink.

Harry gently extracts his feet from the two cats winding around his legs.

“How'd you guess?”

“Solitaire likes you. She doesn't let first-timers pet her like that.” She sets the coffee in front of him. “One sickle please.”
“Are you still at Hogwarts?” he asks, handing her the money.

“I graduated in June.” She puffs up a little with pride. “I’m here part-time while I’m apprenticing at St. Mungo’s.”

“Fantastic.” Harry smiles, sipping his coffee. Again, it’s perfect and not too hot like the coffee he always makes. “So...is your boss off on Saturday?”

Harry pushes away the image of Hermione’s smug face as Bridget scoffs.

“Draco take a day off? I’ve tried to make him but no dice.” She smiles again and leans forward against the counter. Harry doesn't like the knowing glint in her eye. “Why? Are you here to see him, Mr. Potter?”

“Oh, uh, no,” Harry stammers, again trying to step gingerly around Pepper, who’s now pawing at his leg for attention. “I was just wondering—”

“He always has brunch with a friend on Saturday. He should be back any minute!”

“No, no, that's—”

Too late. Just as Harry is turning towards the door, it swings open, jingling the bell and exciting the cats. Malfoy arches an eyebrow at the sight of him but Harry is distracted by who’s entering behind him.

“Luna!”

Her large, blue eyes light up. She rushes past Draco, bumping hard into his shoulder and earning a disgruntled look for it. Long blond hair swinging in a high ponytail, her multiple necklaces jingle like a Christmas bell, further exciting the cats, as she pulls him into a tight hug.

“Harry, I'm so happy you've found your way here! Isn't this the most relaxing place?”

Harry hasn't felt particularly relaxed at any point in this cafe but he gives her a wide smile regardless. In his periphery, he sees Malfoy move behind the counter, exchanging a quiet word with Bridget as he runs a long hand down Solitaire's back.

“It's...certainly an interesting place,” Harry says, sipping his coffee and looking away from Malfoy. “Coffee's good.”

“Draco's done so well, hasn't he?” Luna beams in Malfoy's direction and Harry can't help but smirk at the way he flushes pink and averts his eyes. Luna twines her fingers into Harry's and pulls him back toward the counter. Solitaire is sitting up on her cushion now, looking more alert than Harry's seen so far.

“Hello, my ancient girl,” Luna says, picking Solitaire up and holding her against her chest. She looks up at Harry as she begins swaying back and forth, as though dancing with the cat. “Do you have a favorite yet, Harry?”

Harry looks around at all the cats, alarmed. Malfoy looks up, eyes narrowed, flustering Harry further for some reason.

“Er, well,” Harry looks down as Pepper nudges his leg with her head, as if she knows Harry has been asked to choose. “I haven't...really properly met all of them yet.”
Luna grins and takes Harry's hand again, leading him towards the lumpy couch. A splinter of panic shoots through him; he hadn't intended to stay longer than it took to buy coffee. But now Luna is settling Solitaire on her lap in a way that says *we're here for a while*.

“They're all so lovely,” she says, stroking Solitaire's fur. “You already know Pepper? And Sandwich?”

Harry nods as Pepper hops onto his lap. Her amber eyes narrow and then slowly close, body vibrating with purrs as Harry scratches her neck. Luna runs a beringed finger down Solitaire's back. Smiling, she begins:

There's Chowder, the half-Kneazle. The biggest and hungriest of the bunch, mostly white with brown spots along his back. Aggressively affectionate, will try to steal food off your plate.

Olive, an aloof, hairless Sphynx, whose posture rivals cat-form McGonagall's. Spends most of her time perched in the highest spot she can find, surveying everything.

Cracker, a timid and sweet long-haired Persian. Picking her up is like holding a cloud. Follows the panels of sunlight across the floor all morning for the warmest naps.

And Calypso, a scruffy Tortie, who is a total mystery. She's missing her right hind leg and has a ruffled, anxious look. Skittish at first but is a closet lap cat.

"And of course, Solitaire, the oldest of them all.” Luna finishes with a flourish of her hand, looking up as Malfoy approaches with a cup on a saucer.

“Your decaf sludge, my love,” he says, picking up Solitaire as she takes the drink.

“Draco thinks decaffeinated coffee is pointless.” Luna grins at Harry as she brings her cup to her mouth.

“If not for you, I'd not have it in my shop.” Malfoy places Solitaire gently back on her cushion and turns towards them, leaning against the counter. “Can I get you anything else, Potter? Food, perhaps?”

“Oh, no, I've—”

“Oh, Harry, you must have the treacle tart; it's divine!” Luna says, shooing Cracker away so she can stand.

“Maybe another time,” Harry says firmly, getting to his feet as well. His skin is prickling uncomfortably under Malfoy's gaze and he knows he's overstayd his welcome.

“Can I expect you tomorrow?” Malfoy asks from his spot leaning against the counter.

There's a challenge in the lift of his eyebrow and the desire to meet it rises as swiftly and strongly in Harry's chest as it did when they were twelve.

“Perhaps,” Harry says, turning towards the door. “But probably not.”

Pepper mews as the bell tinkles and the door closes behind him.

Harry does not go to Cat's Brew on Sunday. He stays in and contemplates the upstairs rooms of Grimmauld Place, as he typically does on his days off. Wandering from room to room, brow
furrowed at their emptiness, their draftiness, and all the dust. Thinking about what he'd like to keep and what needs to be tossed. More ambitious plans enter his head—visions of demolished walls and stripped carpets, new furniture, fresh paint.

But they're all just plans. Hermione and Ron offer to help every time he mentions it and sometimes he even walks through furniture and hardware stores, tallying prices in his head. But it never starts.

“Too busy,” he sighs, as always, going back downstairs and thinking about how early he has to get up the next day.

He's too busy. Doesn't want to start projects he'll never finish. That's all.

Monday though, after a long day of being ordered around by the goblins, all Harry can think about is that damned coffee. Sweet and warm and rich. And it's overcast and cool, perfect coffee weather, right?

Cat's Brew is busier than Harry's seen it so far when he arrives. All the cats have a lap to cuddle on or a hand to rub against. The line is to the door. Anxiety grips him for a moment and he considers turning back before anyone recognizes him. Before he can though, Malfoy looks up from behind the counter, catching his eye.

His cheeks are flushed a deep pink, brow creased as he hurries to fill orders, working seamlessly with Bridget in a frantic coffee ballet. White-blond fringe falls down into his face as he works and he flicks his head, swiping it out of his eyes so he can give Harry a proper, if fleeting, smirk.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Potter!” he shouts over the loud hiss of the steamer. “Small coffee, shot of caramel?”

Harry flushes as the crowd turns toward him and openly stares. Closing his eyes and clenching his jaw, he forces a smile.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, if you please,” he calls back.

Malfoy smirks again and disappears behind the desserts cabinet. It's a long few minutes before Harry is at the counter. In the meantime, he has to make small talk; convince several people that they really don't need to give him their place in line; and give adequate attention to Pepper, who trotted over to him as soon as Malfoy called his name. It's calmed considerably by then and Malfoy sets a cup of warm coffee on the counter.

“Was that strictly necessary, Malfoy?” Harry mutters, handing him a sickle.

“You're good for business,” Malfoy says quietly. “Once it gets out that the Chosen One loves Cat's Brew they'll forget all about the nasty Death Eater who owns it.”

Harry scoffs. “Unbelievable. You used to accuse me of abusing my fame for attention.”

He expects Malfoy to bristle at the accusation of hypocrisy but instead a mean laugh wrinkles Malfoy's nose.

“Yes, well, times have changed and I need customers.”

“It seems quite busy all on its own.”

“Luna does a children's reading corner on Monday evenings.” Malfoy nods towards the far corner.
Harry hadn't noticed her before over the bustle of the crowd but now he sees her, large board book on her lap, one hand glittering with rings and bangles as she gesticulates wildly. A circle of children sit around her, many of whom have a grudgingly accepting cat clutched on their laps. The parents mill about, drinking coffee and talking.

“That's very nice. Is she like, a co-owner?” Harry asks, finally taking a drink of his coffee.

“No.” Malfoy traces his fingers back through his hair and out of his eyes. “She's just...very invested. She encouraged me to start this place and helped me find this building.”

“I didn't realize you two were...so close,” Harry says carefully.

Malfoy pierces him again with that scrutinizing gaze, scanning each word for a veiled meaning.

“Luna's been very good to me since the trials,” Malfoy says shortly before turning towards the desserts cabinet. “Here, for using you to drum up business.”

He sets a plate of treacle tart on the counter and spoons a dollop of clotted cream on the side. It looks delectable.

“You don't have to do that,” Harry says against his better judgment because he really wants to eat the damn thing.

“Nonsense,” Malfoy says sharply, waving his wand delicately over the tart to warm it. “Luna says it's your favorite. Besides I did quite enjoy watching you have to deal with the crowd.”

“Then you definitely owe me.”

Harry picks up the plate and nods his thanks. He can feel Malfoy's eyes on him as he moves through the cafe. Ignoring the heat prickling up his spine, Harry grabs a fork and settles himself on a worn pouf farther back from the circle of children and parents. Immediately, Pepper jumps onto his lap and starts kneading his leg. After the cat finally curls up into a comfortable position, Harry takes a bite of his hard-earned treacle tart. It is, as Luna said it would be, divine. Harry tries to eat it slow to savor it but it's too good and is gone in minutes. Setting the empty plate on a nearby coffee table, Harry washes it all down with the last of the caramel-sweet coffee. He sighs, and listens to the end of Luna's story. Maybe she's right, Harry thinks, running his fingers through Pepper's warm fur, it is kind of relaxing here.

It seems Malfoy is right about Harry's influence. The next few times he stops by Cat's Brew, it's just as busy as it had been on Luna's story night. He suffers through the small talk and occasional mortifying autograph request. Even at their busiest, Draco spares him a smirk and a wink, shoving treacle tarts, slices of pie, and decadent chocolates that Harry didn't ask or pay for across the counter with his coffee. More often than not Luna is there and as the weeks go by Harry sees other familiar faces.

Ginny stops by and makes goo-goo eyes at all the cats. She and Harry share a lovely if brief catch up over coffee before she just simply must leave before she goes and adopts all the cats.

Dean and Seamus come on a slow, rainy afternoon and have a long conversation with Malfoy about what cat ownership really means and how he manages all of them. Then they ask Harry if he thinks they'd make good cat dads. Of course they would. Dean falls in love with Olive and insists they're coming back for her soon.
He finds Hermione there on a bright, chilly Saturday morning in early October, sitting on the floor with Crookshanks and Chowder. She looks more soft and relaxed than he's seen in some time, sipping what he knows is strong black coffee. She's so absorbed in “socializing” her beloved Crookshanks that she doesn’t even notice him buy his coffee from an amused Malfoy. She looks up as he sits opposite her, and her expression immediately becomes tight and worried.

“Oh, Harry! You're...here!”

Harry smiles easily and leans back on one hand, making room for Pepper on his lap.

“I am.”

“Do you...come often?” She asks carefully, glancing sideways at the counter where Malfoy is helping another customer.

“I do, in fact.” Harry can't help but laugh at the mini-spasm of panic on her face. “Hermione, it's really okay. I like the cats and I love the coffee. Malfoy and I aren't bugging each other. He says I'm good for business.”

She looks a little offended at that and he laughs again.

“Alright, fine, I'm trusting you on this.” She looks back at the two half-Kneazles and her face relaxes. “Oh, Harry, look at him. He's never been so happy around another animal before. Isn't it so sweet?”

It certainly is. Chowder and Crookshanks aren't doing anything but sleeping but they're curled up around each other in a way that is painfully adorable.

“I should charge you extra for using Chowder to civilize your savage,” Malfoy says from the counter, leafing lazily through *Witch Weekly*.

Hermione smiles and a fondness seems to pass between her and Malfoy. Harry smirks behind his coffee; he's not the only one who's been coming here a little too often, he's sure. It starts to pick up around midday and Hermione invites Harry over for lunch. Just before they leave, Hermione carries Crookshanks to the counter where Malfoy, despite himself, pats his matted head. Crookshanks purrs loudly.

“Mate, I don't know how to tell you this but...all of your robes are kind of completely covered in cat hair.”

Harry looks up from his desk at Ron, who's reclining on the office sofa, eating an apple. The past few days he's been temporarily relieved of goblin duty to update the report he's ignored for a month. He had almost forgotten how small and stuffy his office is. He looks down at his rust-colored robes.

“Are they?” He shrugs and returns to his report. “I'll take them to be laundered this weekend.”

“Not like it'll help, all the time you spend in there.” Ron says, a knowing smirk on his face. “Hermione was dead on about you.”

“Have you been there yet? The coffee is so good. That's why I go there. The cat's are nice too,” Harry says without looking up from his report.

“Listen,” Ron says and he's got his serious voice on. “If you like it there, okay. Fine. I don't get it but
Harry looks at Ron for a long moment before smiling softly.

“Thanks, Ron.”

Ron nods solemnly before cracking a grin.

“So long as I can take the piss over you being a crazy cat person now.”

Harry rolls his eyes and returns to his report, snickering.

“Good to see you hard at work, Auror Weasley.”

Harry’s snicker turns into a snort as Ron scrambles to his feet, apple tumbling from his hand. Kingsley stands in the open doorway of Harry's office, thick folder in hand, one amused eyebrow arched.

“Er, uh, sorry, Minister, sorry,” Ron says, stooping awkwardly to grab his apple. “I'll, uh, get back to my office.”

Harry tries and fails to suppress a smile as Ron scampers through the door and down the hall. Kingsley smiles indulgently as well.

“Yes, Minister?”

“Auror Potter, you've been on duty at Gringotts for quite some time now. Your presence there is invaluable but I know it isn't your preferred position on this case. Auror Weasley's team has been making excellent progress but I believe if you wanted to be permanently removed from your station, you'd be an asset to the field team.”

Harry has been hoping for weeks that Kingsley would come to him with an offer like this but the elation he expects isn't there. Quite the contrary, his stomach drops and there's a bubble of panic in his chest. He's begun to spend his lunch hours at Cat's Brew and the idea of not being a short walk away makes him uneasy.

“Well, who would replace me?”

“I don't know yet. I'm sure we can find a qualified candidate.”

Harry chews his lip for a long moment.

“I actually think I'd like to stay on a bit longer.” Kingsley's eyes widen in surprise. Harry rushes to explain himself: “I mean, I think I'm really starting to understand what you said before. About learning other types of skills. Besides I think the goblins are growing on me.”

That is patently false. But Harry holds Kingsley's gaze, hoping he'll buy it. The deep, skeptical crease in his brow implies he won't but after a moment his face clears.

“I'm glad you took that to heart, Auror Potter. I'm happy to keep you where you are for now.”

Harry sighs a breath of relief and nods as the Minister leaves. *What are you doing? You hate every second you spend in that bank.* Harry scowls and stares at his report for a long while, though he doesn't take in a word of what he's written. Tries to figure out if he's made a mistake. After awhile, his head starts to throb so he calls it a night. *I'll figure all this out later. I just need time to think.*
Harry doesn't really take time to think on it more. When he starts to let himself think about why he turned down the field position to be closer to Cat's Brew he gets this weird, hot prickling all over his body. It's like an emotional rash and he can't stand it. So he chalks it up to impulsiveness. But he does stop going to the cafe for a bit. *I don't need to go there every day. Besides, I'm busy*, he tells himself, which wasn't necessarily untrue but had also never stopped him before. *Maybe I do need to concentrate on whatever skills being in this bank all day can teach me.* Hermione and Ron both comment on his “mood” throughout the week and ask what’s wrong.

“Nothing. I'm just tired, I guess. The goblins are very demanding,” he says over dinner.

“I wish Kingsley would assign someone else. Haven't you been there long enough?”

Harry makes a noncommittal noise as he takes an unusually long drink of his wine. He hopes Hermione doesn't notice the red of his cheeks.

“It's okay. I mean, from the sounds of it your team is gonna crack this any day now.”

Having properly deflected the topic off of himself, Harry slowly finishes his meal as Ron delves into the finer details of the case. Harry's mind strays and he finds himself wondering how Malfoy and the cats are doing. A strange guilt sears in his belly. What if Pepper misses him? What if she's sad? Harry tries to hide the sudden strong concern from his face but is secretly relieved when Ron and Hermione want to turn in early. Looking at his watch as he walks to the Apparition point in their yard, he realizes Cat's Brew isn't quite closed yet. Stopping to think for a split second, he turns and disappears.

Many of the businesses on Diurn being owned by younger people explains why half of them are still open at ten on a Thursday night. Diagon Alley falls asleep by eight most nights, maybe nine on the weekends. Harry is pleased to see the storefront of Cat's Brew is still alight. He tries the door and finds it open. The bell rings but no cats rush forward to greet him. He looks around curiously but the only furry creature he sees is Solitaire on her usual cushion.

“Sorry, I was just cleaning up,” Draco says, wiping his hands on a dish cloth as he comes from the back room. “What can I get—oh!”

Draco stops short and looks at Harry in quiet surprise. For some reason, Harry feels suddenly bashful. Which literally makes no sense, it's a coffee shop, for Merlin's sake. He shakes it off and smiles.

“I'm sorry, I know it's late.”

Draco seems to pull himself together too. He leans against the counter, mouth quirking into a playful smirk.

“It's fine. We're not closed yet. What can I get you?”

“Okay, then why are you here?”

“Well, I haven't stopped by in awhile and I was just... wondering how Pepper's doing.”
“Pining for you,” Draco says dramatically and guilt shifts in Harry's stomach.

“Really?”

“Well, kind of. The cats certainly have missed you. We thought you'd grown bored with us.”

Draco's tone tapers off into something less playful, something very near sincere, for just a moment. But then he clears his throat and stands up straight.

“Do you want to see them?”

“Yes! Where are they?”

“They don't stay out on the main floor overnight. They have a room in the back.” He walks past the desserts display and gestures for Harry to follow him down a short hallway. “There's all kinds of regulations about keeping their litter and food separate from where people sit and eat.”

They stop at a door with a large cat flap and a sign reading “Cats and Employees Only.” Draco takes out a ring of keys and unlocks it. The room is very large, almost as big as the cafe floor. There are shelves running along all the walls, tall, many branched cat trees, toys of all kinds covering the floor. The farthest wall has a line of litter boxes while the wall closest to the door has a line of food bowls and one large water fountain. The cats are curled up on the trees and cushions, many of them asleep but several perk up at the open door. Harry sees Pepper laying next to Calypso on a large cushion and walks gingerly towards them, not wanting to disturb this sacred cat space.

Harry kneels and gently runs his fingers over Pepper's side. She stretches contentedly and turns over, showing her stomach and purring so loudly he's sure it'll wake the other cats. Harry feels even worse for staying away so long, especially because just petting Pepper makes him feel very good. After a long moment he stands and turns back to Draco. He stops short. Draco's giving him an odd look, as though he's properly looking at Harry for the first time. There's something soft and warm in his eyes. But then he moves to let Harry through and it's gone. After locking the door, they return to the cafe floor. Draco looks at the cat face-shaped clock over the door. Nearly 10:30pm.

“I'm going to close up now, I think. It's been dead the past hour.”

“Okay, I can head out—”

“You can stay if you like.”

Harry can't miss the deliberate, measured way Draco says this, facing away from him. But Harry also can't stop the little leap of joy in his stomach.

“Really? I wouldn't...be in the way or anything?”

Draco looks at him and that strange tension leaves his shoulders.

“Of course not.”

“I can help you clean up.”

“Not necessary.” Draco bolts the door shut. “I've done most of it already. Do you want some coffee cake? It won't be good tomorrow.”

Harry nods and sits on the squishy couch. There's a certain feeling of naughtiness being in a shop after closing time that the childish part of him finds thrilling and he can't stop smiling.
“You know,” Draco says as he cuts a large slice of cake, “if you really like Pepper all that much, you can adopt her. All these cats are adoptable.”

The thought had never occurred to Harry. He knows these aren't all just Draco's cats even though that's how he often thinks of them. For a brief moment, he envisions what it would be like to have Pepper at Grimmauld Place. Cuddled up with him in his favorite chair before the fire. It feels nice for a second. But then he remembers how empty and cold most of the house is and it doesn't feel good anymore.

“Oh, no. I'm...too busy for a pet,” Harry says, accepting the plate Draco holds out to him.

“Pfft, what do you have going on that's so bloody important,” Draco scoffs as he pulls a chair out from a table and sits across from Harry. He crosses his legs and pushes his hair out of his face, eyes closed for a moment. He looks tired; Harry wonders if it was a busy day. “You’re here all the time anyway. Or you were anyway.”

Again there's just a touch of sincerity there and Draco sounds almost sad. Harry smiles wickedly through his bite of cake and swallows.

“Draco, did you miss me?”

Draco looks properly offended and sits up straight.

“I most certainly did not. Like I said, the cats pined for you. And when they pine, they're a nuisance.”

A sudden, low rasping mewl startles both of them. Harry looks past Draco as he turns towards the counter. Solitaire is sitting upright, staring at both of them with wide, luminous eyes.

“What?” Draco demands, standing. “It's true. You're all more trouble than you're worth.”

Solitaire makes the same gravely whine as Draco comes closer and picks her up.

“I've never heard her make that sound before!” Harry says.

“She knows I'm criticizing the cats.” Draco returns to his seat across from Harry, settling Solitaire on his lap. “She's mouthy.”

“Can she...walk? I've only ever seen you or Luna carry her.”

“She can walk but she's got pretty severe arthritis in her hips so it hurts if she does too much,” Draco says as he runs his fingers down her back. “I mean, she’s almost twenty. It's just easier to carry her when she wants to go somewhere. She's not terribly interested in going far anyway. Wherever there's food and someone who'll pet her.”

“Does she stay in the back with the other cats at night?” Harry asks, setting his now-empty plate on the coffee table.

“No. She's got a lot of medications and special food she needs so she stays upstairs with me.”

“Do the other cats get jealous?”

Draco laughs and rubs his forehead.

“I don't think so. I complain about them but they're a very relaxed bunch. Some cats require much more attention or have lots of psychological issues and things like that. You know, they've been
abused or they’re very sick or just have more difficult personalities. I’d love to be able to take those
types of cats in but there's just not enough space or staff. Seven is already a lot and it's just me and
Bridget.”

Harry leans forward to pat Solitaire’s head, looking up at Draco.

“Can't you hire on more people?”

“Not really. I don't even pay myself sometimes to make sure Bridget gets her wages. Business has
been picking up, in no small part thanks to you, but it'll be awhile before I'm able to even think about
hiring on more staff. Let alone a bigger location.”

Harry sits back, thinking. Draco Malfoy has personified magical wealth for as long as Harry has
been part of the wizarding world so it never occurred to him that this place might be his honest to
goodness livelihood. Harry wonders if it would be tactless to ask if his parents could lend him
money. Before he can decide, Draco continues.

“It was hard enough to get this place. It’s a pain in the arse to open a business like this under the best
of circumstances, with all the regulations, never mind being a former Death Eater. I think some of
them were convinced I wanted the cats for Dark Magical sacrifices or some such rubbish.”

Draco laughs softly and closes his eyes again, resting his chin against his hand. His white hair falls
down into his face. It's longer than it was during their school years, long enough to get into his way
but not quite enough to be tied back. But Harry thinks it suits him, really. Draco reaches up to move
his hair out of his eyes and the sleeve of his sweater falls a bit. For just a split second, Harry sees the
dark edge of the Mark.

He expects a jolt of surprise. Or maybe even long dormant anger. There's none. He knows the Mark
is there, he always knew. He knows this is Draco Malfoy, former Death Eater. Who took the Mark
and brought Death Eaters to Hogwarts. Who nearly killed Ron and Katie Bell. Who lied straight to
his father's face about Harry's identity. Who now makes good coffee and sits quietly and touches
Luna's hair softly when she walks by and argues playfully with the cats, whom he loves, with his
hair too long and sweaters stretched and soft from overwear.

_They're the same person._ Inexplicably Harry remembers Draco's hard grip around his waist and it's
like he's back in the Fiendfyre. Something painful clenches tight around Harry's heart and he thinks
it's time to go. He stands, hoping he looks normal even though he feels very strange.

"I should go. Work tomorrow."

Draco stands as well, settling Solitaire over his shoulder like a baby about to be burped. It’s such a
tender motion; the painful thing tightens in Harry’s chest. He follows Draco to the door.

"Don't keep Pepper waiting so long next time," Draco says as he unbolts and opens the door.

Harry looks at him for a long moment, part of him badly wanting to bring up their shared experience
of near-death. For a moment he's scared that if he opens his mouth, he won't be able to stop himself
from asking. _Do you think about it too? Do you remember the heat? Do you ever dream about it?_

Finally, he forces the urge down. He smiles and reaches out to pet Solitaire, nestled close to Draco's
face.

"I won't."
And he doesn't. Even when, at the end of the following week, the Gringotts case finally breaks. The removal from Diagon Alley that Harry so impulsively avoided happens anyway. He's back in the office and still finds himself at Cat's Brew quite a lot. He's there when Dean comes back near the end of October to finally adopt Olive. And so is Luna, who gets quite teary saying goodbye to the haughty cat. Harry thinks Draco might also be more emotional about it than he lets on because the second Dean leaves, he disappears into the back for quite some time.

"Well, now we've got an extra costume," Bridget says, as she places Olive's name tag in a box full of paperwork. "Not that I think Olive would have ever agreed to anything as demeaning as a Halloween collar."

"Oh, you're right," Luna says, wiping her eyes. "Well, that's okay. Now that there's space, we can take in another cat. Where's the list?"

"Draco keeps it in the back. He's gonna need help, you know how much he hates choosing."

Luna nods sadly, picking through the box of Halloween decorations she'd set on an empty table. Cat's Brew is hosting a special event for Halloween night that she's been planning and decorating for all month. The cats have been in a tizzy chasing the miniature fake bats that sweep through the room every few minutes. And they all have their own costume collar. Harry is almost disgusted with himself for how adorable he finds Pepper in her orange jester collar.

"Harry, maybe you can help Draco?" Bridget says, smiling widely as she leans against the counter. Harry narrows his eyes. Over the weeks he's found that Bridget is a sweet, energetic, extremely clever girl with a bad habit of trying to get he and Draco alone together. He's not sure what she's playing at but it's a game she rather enjoys.

"Help him with what?"

"To pick a new cat for the cafe. We've got a wait list of eligible cats. He's probably poring over it right now. You should help him!"

"That's a great idea!" Luna says as she pulls orange and black skull-shaped metallic garland from the box. "Harry, you spend a lot of time here and you're actually good at making decisions unlike all of us."

Harry gives her a skeptical look, toying with his nearly empty coffee cup. He's also a little sad about Olive leaving and doesn't know how helpful he'd actually be. But Luna and Bridget are both giving him bright, imploring looks.

"Well...okay, I guess," he says, standing and walking cautiously towards the counter.

"Go on back, he won't mind," Bridget says and Harry really doesn't like the satisfied look in her eye.

"You're sure?"

She nods confidently. Hesitating only a moment, Harry goes into the back room. It's smaller than the cat's room and the cafe floor and feels even smaller because it's full of stacked cardboard boxes that create a kind of terrifying, cramped labyrinth. Looking a little closer, Harry sees the boxes are various appliances, bags of coffee, torn up cushions, and stacks of paperwork. Straight ahead he can see a door that leads to an employee bathroom. Turning, he walks carefully past all the boxes and looks around the corner. There a long desk is pushed up against the wall, also piled up with papers, books, and quills. Draco sits with his back to Harry, looking over a long list as Bridget predicted.
"Hey."

Draco turns in his chair, surprised.

"What are you doing back here?"

"Bridget told...suggested that I help you pick a new cat for the cafe."

Draco scoffs.

"The little brat." He moves his chair over to make room. "Well, come on then."

Harry moves closer and takes the long scroll of parchment Draco holds out to him.

"This process is just agonizing," Draco says, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. "How am I supposed to choose?"

"Where do these cats come from?" Harry asks, sitting on the desk as he looks over the list.

"Local shelters. People looking to rehome their pets. All over, really."

"Well," Harry says. "I guess you can immediately rule out any that are too sick or have serious behavioral problems."

Draco looks very distressed at this and sighs. Guilt shifts in Harry's chest and he mentally curses Bridget for putting this responsibility on him.

"Yes, I've already marked those ones off. Oh, I really hate this."

"How about I just choose one. Just right now, real quick. Get it over with?"

Draco chews his lip for a long moment before nodding. Turning, Harry sets the parchment on the table and presses his fingertip against it. He closes his eyes. The parchment is thick and pulpy under his finger as he runs it up and down the list several times before finally coming to a stop. He opens his eyes and they both lean over the list:

Momo, female calico, 8 years, 3 months. Friendly, sweet, older cat looking for permanent or temporary home asap. Please contact by Floo or owl at...

"Well, what do you think?" Harry asks. He can see Draco's eyes traveling up the list, looking at other names so he picks it up, out of sight. Draco sighs again.

"She sounds perfect. I'll contact them tonight." Draco stands and stretches. He still looks a little sad but Harry thinks most of the tension has left his shoulders. "Thank you, Harry. I hate making these choices, they just make me feel terrible. You know, what if one of those other cats needs the spot more and I just don't know it?"

Harry nods and rolls the parchment up.

"I understand. But it's done now, so try to put it out of your mind. You got Olive a new forever home and that's great. Try to focus on that instead."

"That's true," Draco says as they move through the box maze. "Though I will miss her. Hell of an attitude on that one."

"She's the one most like you. Arrogant, antisocial. A real bitch."

Draco swats him lightly on the shoulder as they leave the back room. Luna has finished her...
October moves fast after that. Before Harry even has time to think, Halloween is upon them. He arrives at Cat's Brew around mid-day with Luna to help with last-minute decor and wrangling the cats into their costumes. The shop's been closed all day so Bridget and Draco can hole up in the kitchen, baking and icing miniscule cakes and tarts with agonizing delicacy. Harry gets only a moment to see this sugary process before he is swiftly told to "get the hell out so I can concentrate" by Draco. Up until then Harry had no idea all the baked goods were made in-house.

"Where on earth did Draco learn to bake like that?" Harry asks Luna as they sit on the floor of the cat's room, trying to lure Calypso near the sunflower petal collar with her favorite treats.

"Oh, here and there," Luna says airily, her hand held out to Calypso. "When we lived together, he would cook a lot. Then he started baking and got really into it. He enjoys how precise it is. Leveling off flour, getting that perfect measurement, stirring just so. Bit like potions."

Finally, Calypso lurks forward and puts her face in the circle of the the collar where the treats are placed. She barely notices when they quickly pull it up and over, nestling it loosely around her neck. She makes an adorable sunflower.

"I didn't know you lived together?" Harry says, rummaging around for another collar. He pulls out a princess pink tulle collar with sequins. Obviously Cracker's.

"Oh, yes, for a few years," Luna says standing and pulling Cracker down from one of the high shelves beneath a window. "After Draco and Astoria called it off."

She says all of this as if it's insignificant so Harry drops it even though he's burning with curiosity. He pulls out another collar and calls Momo over to him.

That night is the busiest Cat's Brew has ever had. Harry is delighted to see most of his friends there; he was sure he'd bored them to death talking about it over the past few weeks. Dean and Seamus bring Olive to visit in a very regal looking golden collar. Hermione and Ginny even manage to drag Ron along, Crookshanks in tow. Parents bring their children, whose trick-or-treat bags are stuffed to bursting with candies and the tiny baked goods wrapped in delicate orange polka dotted paper tied with black ribbon.

Draco and Bridget work the crowd like pros in their matching dead barista costumes, schmoozing and serving hot chocolate and cider effortlessly. Harry and Luna hop in to help several times. Draco gives him a wink as they pass at one point and Harry can see sweat beading through his white and black skull makeup. But the cats, all in their ridiculous collars, are the real stars of the night. Wound up as they are with all the people and all the magically moving decorations, they keep the crowd entertained all night.

It starts to thin out near ten, when many of the children start to yawn and cry from sleepiness. Harry sees Ron, Ginny, and Hermione out and the cool fall air feels good against his face.

"You were definitely right about the food and drinks here, mate," Ron says clapping him on the shoulder. "Top notch stuff."

Harry smiles and lets himself be hugged by Ginny and Hermione before they all take off. Back inside, he looks around for Draco or Bridget.

"Potter."
He jumps at the voice, one he hasn't heard in many years. But there she is, Pansy Parkinson in all her hard-faced glory. He must have missed her when the crowd was so thick earlier. She's taller than he remembers, or maybe it's the spiky shoes on her feet. He's not certain what her costume is, some kind of haute couture zombie maybe? But she looks like she's been poured into the dress and he certainly appreciates her dedication to limited mobility for the sake of fashion.

"Pansy Parkinson?" he asks unnecessarily to buy time because he's still a little stunned to see her. "Wow, you look great!"

She smirks at that and there's just a little edge of softness to her that wasn't there when they were younger.

"Well, I had to see it to believe it. Draco told me that you were coming here a lot. That you two are friends now."

"Er, yeah." Harry moves back from her a little, eyeing an empty table. "I really like the coffee here."

She narrows her dark green eyes.

"Is that all?"

"Er, well," he pulls out a chair and sits, gesturing for her to do so as well. She does, posture rigid, legs tightly crossed. "I like the cats too."

"Hm. You know, you haven't changed at all, Potter."

Harry gives her a questioning look. She rolls her eyes.

"I mean, you're quite fit now obviously. Long hair suits you, makes you look wild." She winks and Harry instantly flushes. "But you're still an oblivious fool. All full of emotion with no idea what it is or what it means."

Harry draws back, confused. He's about to ask her what the hell she's on about when a small voice rings through the crowd.

"Mummy, mummy!"

A young girl, no more than four, comes running up to the table. She's dressed in a gauzy butterfly costume and is the spitting image of Pansy, just smaller and with more pudge. She slams into Pansy's thigh and beams up at her.

"What is it, darling?" Pansy says, smoothing the girl's hair back from her face. Harry can hardly believe that warm voice is coming from Pansy.

"Draco said that I have the best costume of all!"

"Well, of course, you look beautiful." Pansy looks up and meets Harry's eyes defiantly. "Potter, this is my daughter, Violet."

Harry smiles at the little girl. Displaying a shyness she most certainly did not inherit from her mother, she moves closer to Pansy, only giving a small smile and wave.

"Hello, Violet. It's nice to meet you."

"Are you Harry Potter?" she says quietly and Harry leans closer to whisper conspiratorially.
"Yes, I am."

Her eyes, green as her mother's, widen.

"You have such pretty hair. I didn't know heroes could have pretty hair."

Harry laughs and Pansy smiles as well.

"Go find your godfather and tell him we're leaving soon," she says and Violet speeds off. They're quiet for a moment.

"She's lovely," Harry says, and he means it.

"She is," Pansy says softly.

"I didn't know."

"Well, it's not like you and I are old chums, are we?" She uncrosses her legs and then recrosses them the opposite way.

"Why don't you ever come here?" Harry asks.

"I don't really like Diagon Alley." Pansy snaps. "Draco may have won favor since you've decided to be his best friend but people have long memories, Potter. I'm the girl who tried to sell the Chosen One to Voldemort. That's what they remember."

Harry looks down at the table. He hasn't thought of that in years.

"They can call me a traitor bitch all day if they want but I don't want my daughter exposed to it."

"I'm...I'm sor--"

"Save it," she says, standing and pulling her dress down over her thighs. "Nice seeing you."

Harry watches her cross the room to where Violet has Draco by the hand. The two embrace and Pansy whispers something in Draco's ear. Harry quickly averts his eyes as they look towards him. He's certain they're talking about him and he feels a prickling unease creep up his neck. Standing, he hurries back outside into the cool, refreshing air.

He stays there for a while, bidding goodbye as people leave. The clouds move, revealing a white moon that lights up the entire street. He's starting to feel chilly when Draco comes out with Pansy and her daughter.

“Oh, Harry,” Draco says warmly; he’s flush from the success of the evening, smiling widely. Harry smiles back, his unease at Pansy’s coldness subsiding. “I’m glad you met my goddaughter. Isn’t she a lovely butterfly?”

“Yes,” Harry says, crouching down to be eye level with Violet. She’s a little less shy this time, though she doesn’t let go of her mother's long-nailed hand. “I hope you had fun tonight. Did you like the cats?”

“Oh, yes!” She nods enthusiastically, tugging on Pansy’s arm. “I want mummy to let me bring home the big fluffy princess!”

“Her name is Cracker,” Harry says; he glances at Pansy but chooses to ignore her warning look. “And I’m sure she'd love to live with you.”
“See, mummy, I told you!”

Harry stands and meets Pansy’s cool gaze. He’s not sure but he thinks he sees just a hint of approval in her eyes.

“We’ll see, darling. Come on, mummy’s freezing.”

Draco kisses Pansy’s cheek and lifts Violet into a hug before handing her over to her mother. The crack of their Apparition sounds unnaturally loud in the empty street.

“All gone?” Harry asks, turning back to Draco.

“Just Bridget and Luna in there. It was a great night, wasn’t it?” Draco says as they head back inside.

Harry nods and sits at the end of the couch where Luna is sprawled. She looks exhausted and elated, smiling sleepily. Solitaire, all decked out in a big black collar with a spider web design, sits primly on her stomach. Harry pats her tiny head. Bridget has feet up on a table, eating leftover candy, still in full costume. The place is a mess, the cats are all tuckered out, and Draco looks very pleased. Harry watches quietly as he wets a towel and starts to rub the paint off his face.

As Harry watches Draco’s long fingers moving, he remembers what Pansy had said. *Is that all?* What does that mean? Harry feels that same prickling unease and pushes it out of his mind.

“I think it’s time to put all these kittens to bed,” Draco says after successfully removing most of the paint.

They all pull their tired bodies up and work together to remove the collars and herd the cats into the back room, giving them full food bowls and many pets before Draco closes the door. A few swishes of their wands and the cafe floor is back to rights again as well. Bridget pats Draco on the shoulder and takes her leave, yawning loudly. Luna pulls Draco into a tired hug that lingers for quite a while.

“This was so nice, Draco. Everything is going so well for this place and I’m so happy.”

Draco smiles a tired, crooked smile. Harry decides to go as well; he doesn’t want to be alone with Draco after Luna leaves. He feels a little guilty for that since Draco is feeling so good and accomplished. *I’m just tired*, he thinks, waving goodbye to Draco as he follows Luna out the door. *I need some good sleep.*

Harry sleeps okay but even after a few days he isn’t able to shake off the strange unease that overtook him at the Halloween party. November brings harder, colder air and all Harry wants to do is curl up on the couch at Cat’s Brew with Pepper and a hot cup of coffee. Which he does often. One slow, ugly afternoon when it’s just Harry and Draco in the shop, Harry finally thinks he’s figured out this particular emotional rash.

“Draco, do you...” he hesitates; they don’t talk about these things really. He considers Draco a friend now and doesn’t want to jeopardize it by talking about the past. But Harry is certain this feeling of anxiety won’t leave him until he does.

“Finish your sentence please,” Draco says brusquely from behind a copy of *Witch Weekly*. He gets recipe ideas for the shop from the publication, according to Bridget.

“Do you...resent me over things that...happened. Back then?”
Draco lowers the magazine slightly to squint suspiciously at him.

“If I did do you think I’d let you in my shop this often?”

“Don’t answer my question with another question,” Harry says irritably.

Draco sets the magazine down, brow furrowed.

“No, I don’t resent you,” he says, walking from behind the counter. He pulls out the chair from the table closest to the couch and sits across from Harry, as he often does. Crosses his legs, as always. Continues to scowl at Harry. “Why are you asking me this?”

Harry looks away, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“I don’t know. I guess...well, at the party Pansy said something—”

Draco scoffs and rolls his eyes.

“Ugh, I figured she had something to do with this. Listen.” Draco leans forward slightly in his chair, long fingers laced over his knee. “Pansy is one of my closest and dearest friends. She’s also one of pettiest, meanest people on the planet. People have been very unkind to her over the years and she’s held it against you. That doesn’t mean *I do too.*”

“There are things you could hold against me.”

“Same for you. I nearly killed Weasley.”

“That was an accident.” Harry mutters.

“And so was this,” Draco says placing his hand over his chest. Harry stares at those long, pale fingers splayed over a gray jumper. He knows that, below it, a thin scar bisects Draco’s torso. A scar that Harry put there. “It’s over, Harry.”

Harry drops his eyes.

“Unless it’s not for you,” Draco says, sitting back in his chair. His manner becomes noticeably stiffer. “Do you resent me?”

“No!” Harry says quickly, meeting Draco’s hard gaze. After a long moment, his grey eyes warm a bit. “No, I don’t. It’s just. There’s so much there, you know? Between us, in our past.”

“I know that, I’m not an idiot,” Draco snaps. “We were children. We were dumb. You less than I, it’s true. But we were stupid kids. I, personally, am not interested in being a stupid child anymore.”

The bell rings as a customer enters and Draco stands, returning to the counter. Harry scratches Pepper’s neck, occasionally glancing up to watch Draco interact with customers. He turns over Draco’s words in his head. And very slowly, the tight ball of unease begins to unclench in his stomach.

He concentrates on the feel of Pepper’s soft fur under his fingers as he focuses on clearing the anxiety from his mind and body. *It’s fine. It’s okay.* And Harry realizes that somewhere along the way, he began to trust Draco Malfoy at his word. He believes him when he says he no longer resents Harry.

Feeling better than he has in days, he sets a disgruntled Pepper aside and gets up to leave. The few customers that had been in for a small midday rush have cleared out and it’s just the two of them
again. Draco eyes him wearily behind his folded-back magazine.

“Heading out then?” he asks nonchalantly.

“Yes,” Harry says, reaching out to pet a heavily sleeping Solitaire. She’s been knackered since the Halloween party. “I’m sorry I was being weird earlier.”

“It’s fine,” Draco says, refusing to put the magazine down. “You are a strange person and at this point I’m used to it.”

Harry knows it’s meant to be an insult but the very idea of someone being used to, and implicitly okay with, Harry’s strangeness sparks a warmth in him. Draco finally lowers *Witch Weekly* and gives Harry a scrutinizing look.

“How do you look so tired when you’ve just been here all day?” Draco’s tone is mocking but his brow is creased with concern.

“I don’t know. Work, I guess. This new assignment is exhausting.”

“Here.” Draco reaches under the counter and pulls out a bag of the chocolate covered espresso beans he knows Harry favors. “Keep yourself awake out there.”

“How much?” Harry says feebly as Draco presses the bag into his hands. Draco gives him a pointed look.

“Shut up and get out of my shop, you prat.”

Harry laughs. It really is okay.

But it doesn’t stay okay for very long. A few weeks later, Harry is at Ron and Hermione’s flat for dinner. Hermione finally adopted Chowder and she wants to celebrate. She’s so giddy about the new addition to the family that they get expensive takeout to go with their expensive wine.

“Harry, is Malfoy planning any big to-dos at the shop for the holidays?” Ron asks, leaning back in his chair after the meal’s done.

“I’m not sure yet. I think Luna wants to plan something. The Halloween party was such a big hit.”

Harry smiles behind his wine glass. “Now who’s the crazy cat person?”

Ron’s chair hits the ground with a thump as Hermione laughs, picking up their empty plates.

“I am not!” he says, scowling. Then he grins. “I just loved those little cakes. Don’t tell mum but they were as good as hers.”

There’s a sudden quiet tapping sound in the distance.

“I think it’s an owl,” Hermione says, cocking her head to listen. “Sounds like it’s coming from the kitchen. Oh, no,” she says as Ron moves to stand. “I’m heading there anyway, I’ll get it.”

They watch her leave, plates balanced in her hands.

“Bit late for an owl,” Ron says looking at his watch. “Probably some shite from work that could have waited until tomorrow.”
“Harry, it’s for you,” Hermione says as she comes back into the dining room, a small scroll in her hand. She looks anxious and Harry tries not to mirror the feeling, despite the swoop of his stomach. Owls this late can only mean trouble. Harry sets his wine down and takes the proffered message. The note is short, the familiar tidy script slightly shaky.

*Solitaire died. She wasn't in pain or anything. Just in her sleep. I wanted to let you know before you came by and asked where she was.*

*I hate this.*

Harry stands without thinking, gripping the parchment tightly.

“What is it?” Hermione asks, alarmed.

“I have to go.”

Hermione and Ron exchange startled looks.

“What happened, mate?” Ron asks.

He hesitates. For a split second, it feels too personal to tell them. But that's ridiculous; they know Solitaire too. “Solitaire died.”

Hermione gasps, a hand over her mouth.

“I just want to go make sure everything is okay there. I'm sorry to rush out, dinner was great. My treat next time?”

Quickly clapping Ron on the back and kissing Hermione's cheek he heads towards the door.

“Give Draco our condolences!” Hermione calls as he hurries into the backyard and Apparates.

Clouds blot the moon over Diurn Alley. The only light come from the flats above the shops and some of the shopfront signs that are charmed to be lit all night. The cafe is dark but Harry knocks on the door anyway. After a moment he hears shuffling but it doesn't seem to be coming from inside the shop.

“Harry?”

Startled, Harry squints. Draco's white hair gleams in the dark as he peers through a narrow door next to the storefront window. *How could I have never noticed it before? Must be under a concealment charm.*

“Draco!” Harry rushes forward before faltering at the confused look on Draco's face. “Uh, er...hi.”

Harry hears a chain lock slide and the door opens fully. Once inside the small foyer, Harry closes the door behind him. It's a very tight, dark foyer; a single sconce flickers dimly above them and they're close enough that Harry can hear Draco's breathing. Draco looks at him in confusion for another moment and Harry is suddenly overwhelmed with embarrassment. Draco lowers his head and silence stretches between them.

“You didn't have to come, I just wanted to let you know.”

“I wanted to come,” Harry says quickly. Draco keeps his head down. Harry is seized with the sudden sense that he's made a mistake. “I'm sorry, I can go, if you want to be alone—”
“No.” Draco looks up and his features are soft. “Stay.”

Harry nods and follows Draco as he turns and goes up the stairwell. Harry knew that moving into the storefront flat meant Draco had taken a downsize from the multi-roomed extravaganza of the manor but he hadn't realized it was a studio flat. Despite being one room, a tall, long bookshelf directly to their right juts out to the middle of the room, bisecting it. The main sitting area takes up a majority of the whole space: a big, lumpy cracked leather couch with a long chaise at one end in front of a coffee table and a fireplace. A plush area rug under all of it. Soft music—Harry recognizes the evening jazz program that follows Lee's Quidditch round-up—plays from a battered wireless on the mantle. Draco goes towards the far right corner of the room where there is a kitchenette.

“No, whatever you're having,” Harry says, moving farther into the room.

“Let's have something strong then, shall we?” he says, pulling a tall, frosted bottle from the ice box.

Glass tinkles as Draco takes two tumblers from the cupboard and sets to work. Harry takes a closer look at the flat. It's downright cozy, which shouldn't be too surprising given Draco's propensity for large, wool sweaters. All the rugs and fabrics are flat, warm tones; all the woods dark. Glancing behind him, Harry sees that a gauzy eggplant curtain runs from the end of the bookshelf to the opposite wall. It must be concealing a bed tucked snugly against the wall.

The flat is dim, the only light a fire crackling in the grate, throwing warm light over the table and couch. Harry finally notices the oddly-shaped box on the coffee table. In any other circumstance he'd think it was an overlarge hat box but seeing it here his stomach clenches. Solitaire must be in there, atop her special round cushion. He wonders if, were he to lift the lid, she would look just like she were sleeping? He doesn't want to think about it. He looks away as Draco crosses from the kitchenette, holding out a glass of some concoction that's deep red at the top and black at the bottom.

Once Harry takes it, Draco sits, pulling his bare feet up onto the couch, balancing his own drink on his knee. The firelight glints in his eyes and Harry can see how red the waterlines are.

Carefully, as though worried he'll startle Draco, Harry sits as well. He sips his drink—it's very strong and tastes how he images a campfire might—and tries to relax. *It's just Draco. He's sad but it's just Draco*. They're silent for a long while, just watching the fire.

“I'm sorry,” Harry says finally. “What...what happened?”

Draco closes his eyes for a moment, placing a hand against his forehead.

“I was—” his voice hitches and he coughs. “I went down to check on the others. You know how Solitaire sleeps up here?”

Harry nods.

“And she had been sleeping a lot, like a lot, recently but I didn't think there was anything wrong. She slept all day at the cafe and then woke up for a little bit when I brought her up at close. But then went right back to sleep. So, I went to check on the others downstairs about an hour ago and when I came back I was gonna give her dinner. And...I kept calling her, waiting for her to wake up and come over to me, I was calling her name but she didn't wake up. And I went over to her and touched her head and she...she was gone.”

Draco takes a shuddering breath and throws back his drink, finishing it in two swallows. Harry looks
into the fire, blinking away the burn behind his eyes. Solitaire was so old and feeble, he knew it's silly to feel so shocked. She was just a normal cat after all, had already far exceeded their average lifespan. But there was something so mysterious and regal about her, maybe he thought some secret magic would make her live forever. Ancient one Luna always called her. It did feel as though she'd been here longer than all of them, knew things they never could. Harry finishes his drink as well and turns back to Draco.

“I'm sorry,” he says again. He realizes then that he has no idea how to console someone over a pet's death. Things were far too hectic when Hedwig died; condolences were just kind of forgotten. Don't think about Hedwig unless you really want to start bawling. “She was such a good cat.”

“I just feel so bad that I was never able to find her a forever home.”

“Bollocks,” Harry says softly; he moves just little closer. “I know all the cats are technically adoptable but Solitaire was your cat.”

Draco looks up at him. His eyes are wet and round, more open and vulnerable than Harry's ever seen. Don't fuck this up, Potter.

“If someone had come into the cafe and asked to adopt her do you really think you could have given her up?”

Draco continues to pierce him with that same intense gaze for another long moment before he looks back at the fire. Just a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

“No. I think you're right.”

Draco sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

“I don't know what to do now. I hate the idea of just Vanishing her. But I don't have a yard or anything.”

“I have a yard.”

Eyebrows raising, Draco turns a little on the couch to face Harry. For just a moment, Harry is distracted with how the shadows cast by the firelight play over his cheekbones. Swallowing hard, Harry continues.

“It's pretty big too. If you...if you want. She can...rest there.”

For a second Harry thinks he has fucked this up. Draco closes his eyes and buries his face in his knees. His shoulders shake and Harry realizes that he's crying.

“I'm sorry!” Harry unthinkingly puts a hand on Draco's back. “We don't have to.”

“No, no,” Draco says thickly, lifting his head and wiping his eyes. “That's just such a nice way to say it. Could we really do that?”

“Sure, of course.” Harry becomes aware of how warm Draco's body is beneath his hand. “Do you want to go now?”

“No. I'm not ready yet.” Draco's voice wavers dangerously and he stands. Harry's palm feels cool against the open air. “I need another drink. Want to help?”

Harry stands and follows Draco towards the fridge. He helps mostly by watching Draco mix liquors,
seltzer, and bitters. He wonders, as he has many times before, when Draco became so skilled at making beverages. Harry watches his deft fingers slice lemons into fine slivers. *He was always good at potions. Maybe this is similar.*

“Did I ever tell you how I came to own Solitaire?” Draco asks as they return to the couch.

Harry shakes his head, sitting to face Draco, cross-legged. Draco leans back against the arm of the couch, one leg stretched along the chaise, the other drawn up. Again, he balances his drink on his knee. It's a little overwhelming seeing him so casual. In his own home, bare-foot, in loose night clothes. As relaxed as someone who just lost a beloved pet could be.

“It was...hm, about two years after the trials, I think. I'd been staying with Luna for awhile. How she tolerated me I'll never know; I was moody and sad and stayed holed up in my room in her cottage most of the time. But once a week, she would force me into a social outing. I remember it was summer, unreasonably warm, even in the evening. We were leaving some new tofu restaurant in Muggle London. We were arm-in-arm, it was late."

"All of a sudden we hear a racket down a back alley. Someone is yelling, there's some crashing, like something's been thrown hard into a bin. And then it's quiet. We peer around the corner and all we see is a little shivering bundle near a trash bin. Luna hurries forward and picks it up. Calls me over. She pulls the cloth away and there's Solitaire. She was even smaller then, trembling terribly, could barely open her eyes. As we're looking at this pathetic little creature, a door nearby slams open and a tall, red-faced man looks out. 'What are you doing? Get out of here! You want that useless mangy beast, take it and get!' We ran. We never found out what that building was or why that man threw her out."

“She was malnourished and weak. I mean, it was a few years ago but she was still pretty old then. We didn't know if she would make it. But we took her to a Muggle vet, she got some vaccinations and they recommended a strict high-protein diet, a slew of medicines, and lots of love and rest. Luna was working long hours in the day so I was in charge of her care. We spent every day together. And...I know this is silly but it's like. Taking care of Solitaire made me start taking care of myself. I started to get better too.”

Harry swallows hard against the lump in his throat. Draco looks down at his drink, blinking rapidly.

“I don't think that's silly at all.”

Draco looks up and smiles, wiping beneath his eyes.

“Thanks.” He sighs heavily. “Let's talk about something else for a little bit, yes? No pets. Tell me something about you. Something I don't know.”

The night and the drinks wear on. After a while Harry is able to forget about the box sitting on the table and the task that they are slowly building themselves up to. Draco says that he wants to burn up all his remaining liquor in increasingly creative ways and Harry will be his guinea pig. They down flaming shooters, luridly colored liqueurs, and one exceptionally sweet concoction with slowly-dissolving rock candy at the bottom.

“Were you and Luna ever...a thing?” Harry asks, sunk back against the couch cushions. In some dim part of his brain he knows he'll regret all this liquor later but for now all he feels is a heavy calm in his limbs. Who cares about some faraway hangover when right now Draco is looking at him and laughing and *not crying.*

“Ahaa, no. We're very close, too close probably. We've shared a bed and kissed far more than
people who aren't romantically involved probably do normally.”

Harry laughs and nods.

“Luna likes to kiss.”

“Luna likes to kiss a lot.” Draco finishes his drink and stands, wobbling only a little. “But no. Luna isn't really my type.”

“Not into other blondes?”

“Not into women.”

Harry sits up a little straighter, watching Draco walk towards the kitchenette.

“Oh.”

Draco glances back over his shoulder as he pours the last of a bottle of gin over ice. Drink brings the meanness back into his eyes, that glittering malice that Harry knew so well throughout their years at Hogwarts.

“Come now, you're not uncomfortable are you?” He's teasing but there's a real edge of anxiety beneath it. “You must know some gay people? I mean, you know Luna, the most bisexual woman on earth.”


Draco looks up properly from his drink preparation and Harry thinks that drunkenness kinda suits him. Lids drooping over those glinting, darkened eyes and rather than stumbling like most people do he just seems more sinuous than normal, like he's slowly dancing through the air around him.

“Is that so?”

Surely if Draco weren't drunk he wouldn't look Harry up and down like that. At least not so blatantly. Harry flushes deeply and nods, before taking a hasty gulp of his drink.

“And how has that juicy morsel stayed out of the papers?”

“It's not too hard when you don't date.”

Draco plops back down onto the couch. He stretches his legs out toward Harry rather than along the chaise; his toes just graze Harry's knee. “Why is that?”

Harry shrugs.

“Is that why you and Ginevra broke up?”

“No.” Harry finishes his drink, feeling quite warm. “I didn't know then. It...took me awhile. You know, to figure things out.”

Draco nods, circling one finger lazily around the lip of his glass.

“What about Astoria? Weren't you two engaged?”

“My father's idea.” Draco crosses his ankles. “Astoria is a good friend. Her family remained neutral through both wars. He thought it would be...rehabilitative for me. Socially. We went along with it at
first. Put the announcement in the Prophet. Then one night we got good and drunk—just like you and I are now—and really talked about it. What it would mean. Sex and children and everything. I realized I was terrified.”

Draco’s eyes glimmer with firelight as he gazes at some long past memories. Harry's hand itches to reach out and touch him.

“So, we called it off. My father still hasn't forgiven me. We haven't spoken since.”

“Is that why you lived with Luna?”

Draco nods and kicks back the rest of his drink. They're quiet for a long while, staring into the waning fire as the wireless plays on, soft, faraway. Finally, Draco stands and sets his empty glass on the table.

“Oh okay.” He brushes his front off. “Let's do this thing before I pass out.”

Harry stands as well, stumbling a bit. Draco reaches out to place steadying hands on his shoulders. Harry is too warm and slightly dizzy as he puts his hands over Draco’s. The fire has burned down so low that it's hard to see much (being completely pissed doesn't help). Draco steps closer. Much closer than Harry thinks he would if it weren't quite so dark and they weren't quite so drunk.

“Alright?” Draco says softly.

Harry nods and steps back. Realizes he's holding his breath. Releases it.

“Are you sure you're ready?” he asks.

Draco nods or at least the movement of his white hair in the dark indicates a nod. Despite that, he doesn't pick up the box that holds Solitaire. Shaking his head clear, Harry gently lifts it. It's very light and magically sealed. He holds it close to his chest. Behind him, there's the tiniest of sniffles.

“It's okay,” he says, turning back towards Draco and holding out his hand. “Let's go.”

Draco's hand is cool against Harry's too-warm palm. The crack of Apparition echoes through the dark flat.

They reappear directly in Harry's backyard, both tripping forward. Harry hurries to steady himself without dropping Solitaire's box.

“That probably wasn't one of my better ideas,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose as a wave of nausea passes over him.

“Apparating while drunk, Auror Potter, for shame.” Draco smirks, pulling his hand from Harry’s.

It's very early dawn. The inky black of night sky bleeds down towards the horizon, turning deep purple before merging into a fuzzy line of pale pink. The cold fall air is so crisp against Harry's bare face and hands he almost feels sober. It's very quiet in the garden, all noise from the London streets deadened by Grimmauld Place's magical atmosphere.

“I didn't realize you lived in the Black ancestral home,” Draco says, squinting through the dark at the house.

“I inherited it from Sirius. You've been here before?”

“A few times, as a child.”
They're still for a long moment, surveying the yard. Unlike the inside of his home, Harry has taken great lengths to make the yard beautiful. Hundreds of hours ripping out weeds, dead trees and shrubs, hostile magical flora and fauna. He still has lofty plans for a small pond, full of brightly colored fish. For now though, he's content with his flowers, stone paths, and multiple trellises lining the fences covered in all manner of climbing ivies, magical and otherwise.

“Where,” Draco’s voice cracks and he pauses. Takes a breath. “Um. Where should we put her?”

Harry walks slowly towards the fence where two trellises form an arch, covered in morning glories.

“Here?” Harry turns to look at Draco. It's getting lighter; Harry can see the dark smears of fatigue under Draco's eyes as evaluates the spot. Without thinking, Harry reaches out and touches the back of Draco's hand. Closing his eyes, Draco nods. Very carefully setting Solitaire down, Harry steps back and raises his wand.

“I prefer to do these types of things the Muggle way but the ground's gotten a little too hard and I'm a little too drunk.”

A watery laugh escapes Draco, a frail sound that pierces Harry's heart.

“Together?”

Draco nods and wipes his eyes with the back of his sleeve. The gesture makes Harry wonder, for just a moment, what Draco was like as a child. But then he raises his wand as well, face resolute, and Harry focuses. It's impressive, given their advanced state of sleeplessness and inebriation, how they manage to create a perfectly circular hole beneath the morning glories. Draco leans down to pick up Solitaire's box and Harry steps away, crouching to examine the mound of dirt they unearthed. He hears Draco talking, very softly, punctuated by shuddering breaths. He's not sure what Draco’s last words to his favorite cat are but he's not drunk or insensitive enough to ask.


Harry stands up straight and turns back. Together they levitate enough dirt to fill the hole above and around Solitaire's box until it's just a soft mound. Harry looks around and summons a smooth, large, nearly flat rock towards them.

"It's nothing fancy," Harry says, brushing dirt off the stone with his sleeve.

"It'll be perfect. May I?" Draco says, kneeling down.

"Of course."

Harry watches the sky slowly get brighter--pink blooming into a dusty orange--as Draco uses his wand to carve out Solitaire's gravemarker. His eyes burn from exhaustion and he’s finally starting to feel the beginnings of a headache behind his eyes.

"Okay, it's done."

Harry turns back and looks over Draco's shoulder as he places the rock atop Solitaire's grave.

_Solitaire_

_Arise from sleep, old cat,
And with great yawns and stretchings..._
Harry's chest tightens and he puts his arm around Draco's shoulders. It's bright enough now for Harry to see that he's openly crying, rubbing one eye with his sleeve. They stand for a long, quiet moment, shivering in the early dawn.

"Tea?"

Draco nods and they walk slowly inside, Harry's arm still around Draco's shoulders.

They drink hot, strong tea and Harry insists on making a big pan of eggs. Draco resists, saying the cats need feeding but Harry isn't having it. He shoots an owl off to Bridget, asking if she'd be kind enough to pop in on the cats to give them breakfast. Draco had already given her the news about Solitaire the night before, telling her the shop would be closed the next day. As they're chewing their eggs the owl returns with her brief affirmative: Of course. Please take care of Draco.

"Do you wanna kip here?" Harry asks as he finishes his tea. He's so tired at this point he can barely keep his eyes open and he can see that Draco is no better.

"Sure," Draco says, one hand over his eyes. He's only eaten half his eggs but Harry tosses it all into the sink anyway. He'll deal with it later. They both shuffle upstairs towards the living room. Harry lays several blankets and pillows on the bigger couch for Draco.

He shoves a couple aspirin into Draco's hand as he sits on the couch. It's a mark of how tired Draco must be that he only scowls a little bit at the unfamiliar Muggle drug before just swallowing it with a gulp of water. Harry sets a second glass of water on the coffee table near the smaller couch. He also pulls a rubbish bin within arms reach of both of them. Just in case. Finally, he collapses into the other couch and spells all the curtains shut. Through the dark, he sees the shape of Draco, burrowed under many blankets. The deep, steady sound of Draco's breathing is the last thing he remembers before falling asleep.

He sleeps hard and long and doesn't feel refreshed at all when he wakes. Eyes gummy, limbs stiff from being perfectly still for so long, it takes him awhile to will himself up. He sits up slowly, back aching, knees popping, head throbbing. Ugh, this is the worst hangover I've ever had. He stares blearily at his watch for a solid minute before he finally understands that it's just past three in the afternoon. He chugs the tepid glass of water on his coffee table. That helps a little. Standing experimentally, he's pleased that there's no dizziness.

Looking at the other couch, he's not surprised to find it empty. Draco has neatly folded all the blankets and stacked them in a prim little pile. There's a note laying atop them. Harry grabs and holds it close to his aching eyes.

Harry,

Thank you for last night. Liquor and sympathy was exactly what I needed to get through all this. It means a lot to me that Solitaire has such a lovely place to rest. If you're in any state for it, come by for coffee later. If not, I'll see you soon.

-Draco

Despite the fact that every single part of Harry feels like it's been individually kicked around and then reassembled into a bundle of aches and pains, there's a little bloom of warmth in his chest. He doubts he'll make it for coffee today but the prospect of "soon" is comforting. Rubbing his eyes, he moves towards the fire, trying to locate the Floo powder. He needs hangover potion and just a bit of
henpecking. Hermione's the one to call.

The mood is gloomy at Cat's Brew for a while after that. Draco spends more time in the back room than normal and Luna is inconsolable. Regular customers ask if Solitaire has been adopted and they're all struck with the same shock Harry experienced when Draco says she's died. They all offer kind words and Draco strains to say thank you each time.

Even the cats seem sad at the passing of their old friend. Cracker in particular takes to jumping up on the counter and sniffing where Solitaire's cushion once was. Every time she looks up them, her fluffy cloud face confused. Draco can't bear this and Harry and Bridget are tasked with removing her each time.

Harry drinks more coffee than he ever has in his life with how often he's at the shop. He can barely concentrate at work. Ron and Hermione ask him if he's okay and he says yes, even though he thinks it's a lie. On Sunday afternoons, Draco closes the shop early and he, Harry, Luna, and Bridget sit in Grimmauld Place's garden. They cast strong Warming Charms, drink hot cider, and reminisce about Solitaire. Harry, having known her the shortest amount of time, mostly listens. It's a strange, long grieving process. Harry didn't think he'd ever feel the loss of a pet as deeply as he felt Hedwig's. He wishes he'd been right.

But November winds its way towards December and things become easier. Draco finally lets Harry choose another cat from the list to take Solitaire's place. Sugarcube, a large, pure-white long-haired Persian. Very lazy, 90% fluff, partial to children. He takes well to the other cats. Luna pulls out a huge box full of holiday decorations and starts planning a Christmas event. She even laughs several times as they pin garland around the window frame. Solitaire's absence is still strongly felt but just a little less painful.

Harry thinks work will get better as time wears on as well but it doesn't. He tells himself it isn’t a big deal until it is a big deal. One week before the Cat’s Brew holiday party, Harry botches a routine illegal potions ring bust. No one is badly hurt but everyone is a little scuffed up and their main perp got away. Kingsley chews him out for a long time as they’re all being patched up by a mediwizard on the scene before stalking away in a huff. Ron eyes him curiously, cradling a bandaged hand.

“Harry, seriously. I don’t want to bang on about it but what’s going on with you? We’ve done this kinda thing dozens of times.”

Harry is silent for a long time, watching the young mediwizard run a healing spell over his sprained ankle. He wonders briefly if the boy knows Bridget. *What did happen? How could I forget something as basic as checking every corner of a room before giving the all clear?*

Harry opens his mouth to give his excuse.

*I’m tired. I’m worn down. I feel like I’m wandering around in a haze most days at work. I toss and turn all night, dreading sunrise. I miss a cat that wasn’t even my pet.* He looks at Ron, his oldest and dearest friend.

“I’m...not sure. I just...I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Ron shakes his head and claps Harry’s shoulder with his non-injured hand.

“It’s alright, mate. It happens. You know, I don’t wanna even suggest it but...maybe Mum was right. Maybe fieldwork is stressing you out.”

Harry is quiet for another long moment. The young mediwizard finishes and Harry nods his thanks.
“Yeah,” he says finally. “Maybe.”

Draco doesn’t quite make a fuss when Harry tells him about the disastrous potions bust. But there’s a rigidness in his jaw that indicates he’s only just managing to hold back a telling off. Harry figures he must really look pathetic about the whole affair if Draco is trying not to make him feel worse.

“Was everyone okay?” Bridget asks as she levitates Christmas baubles with Luna. It’s exactly one week before Christmas, the day of the holiday party. Again they’ve shut the whole place down to get it ready for the evening.

“Yeah, nothing too bad. Mediwizard patched us right up. Maybe you know him? Young, dark hair. Serious bloke.”

Bridget tilts her head, thinking. Harry wants to keep the conversation light because Draco is still giving him a sharp look and he’s just not in the mood for a lecture. He moves quickly to join the girls in decorating the massive tree that’s been erected in the corner of the shop. He nods attentively as Bridget talks about Clifton, the boy she thinks may have healed Harry’s team. Apparently he’s a real arsehole. Draco doesn’t bring it up again and before they know it, it’s nearly time. Harry is scrambling to arrange shiny green and red ribbons around the cat’s collars right up until the moment the doors open.

Harry would have thought it impossible for more people to be jammed into the cafe than at Halloween but he was wrong. It’s an absolute mob and Harry notices that there’s a greater number of what Draco calls “upper crust wankers.” Every time they cross paths, Draco whispers more names of people he recognizes from fancy to-dos his family had in his childhood, astounded they’re in his shop. Harry isn’t though. Since the success of the Halloween party, the 

Thankfully, most of the crowd is full of loved ones, regulars and genuine cat-loving well-wishers. The cats run themselves in dizzying circles trying to find a way to attack the tinsel covered tree, seeking any crack in the magical boundary protecting it. Violet has forgotten all her previous shyness, tailing Harry’s every step for most of the night. He keeps her busy by letting her and the other children stuff the cat’s stockings, which line the front of the counter, with toy mice and catnip. It’s convenient really, as it gives Pansy ample time to arrange adoption plans for Cracker. As the crowd thins out, Pansy gives Harry a sharp look, one that clearly says this is your fault. But Harry will gladly accept responsibility for this.

“She’s going to come pick Cracker up the day before Christmas,” Draco says later after everyone has cleared out. They’re still tidying up. Most of the cats have already wandered into the cat room, worn out from another big, successful night. Sandwich lays on a couch, chewing lazily on the ribbon he’s wrangled from his collar. Luna sits cross-legged on the floor, a violently-purring Cracker wrapped in her arms. Her entire face is obscured by fur as she snuggles Cracker close to her for possibly the last time. She only sniffs a little bit though as she and Bridget head out.

“Do you want the last piece of treacle tart?” Draco asks after they lock up the cats.

Harry glances as the clock. It’s nearly midnight. He shouldn’t. But he doesn’t really want to go home.

“Sure. Could I have a little bit of decaf with it?”
Draco wrinkles his nose distastefully but nods. Harry watches him prepare the coffee. As he’s done what feels like hundreds of times before. He looks around, feeling lazy and sleepy and content. The cats successfully decimated the tree and strings of fallen lights lay along the floor among piles of silver tinsel, casting a warm glow throughout the room. Harry looks back up at Draco.

And something breaks in his chest. Unexpected but strong. He feels winded. Closing his eyes for a moment, he takes a deep breath. He looks back at Draco, still making the coffee, pouring carelessly measured caramel into the cup. The same thing he was doing a second ago. But it looks different now.

“Draco.”

“Yeah?” He looks up as he comes around the counter, holding out the mug and plate. Harry stares at him and doesn’t take either.

“You really like your job don’t you?”

Draco squints for a moment before smiling.

“Yes, of course. Here.” He holds the food out again. Harry doesn’t even notice it.

“But, like, you really like it.”

Brow furrowed now, Draco sets the cup and plate on the coffee table and sits next to Harry.

“Yes, I do. The customers are annoying, Bridget is a brat, Luna is too emotional, and the cats are a pain in my arse. But this is exactly where I want to be.”

Harry stares a moment longer before looking down at his hands in his lap.

“What's wrong with you all of a sudden?”

“I think I just realized that I hate my job.”

Draco sits up a little at that. Harry continues staring at his hands like he can't believe they're attached to his wrists.

“Like, I think I really hate it.” Finally he looks up, eyes wide.

Draco bites the side of his lip, unsure how to respond. A little nervous laugh escapes him.

“Well, you could always quit and work here.”

“Could I?”

The hope in Harry’s voice sends a trill of fear through Draco. He stands up and now it’s his turn to look at Harry as if he's never seen him before.

“Are you actually an idiot, Potter?” It comes out much more vehemently than he means it to. “You're on the fast-track to become the youngest Head Auror in two bloody centuries and you want to give that up to work here? With a former Death Eater and a pack of mad cats?”

“I don't know, Draco! I thought that…being exhausted all the time and dreading waking up every single morning was just how everyone felt. I thought it was normal but seeing you here I know it's not. I feel good when I'm here.”
Draco laughs in disbelief.

“As a customer! You’ve never done a day of barista work, it *sucks*! It’s hard on your body, and hot in the summer, and customers treat you like shit! You like it here because it’s a nice cafe with cute animals and a foolish owner who keeps giving you free shit!”

“I thought you said you liked your job. Now it sucks?” Harry fires back, standing as well.

“No, I do like it, I’m just trying to explain to you that it’s not….easy or anything. It’s not glamorous or nice work.”

“And being an Auror is?”

“Oh, come off it!” Draco’s yelling now. “Your job is dangerous and hard but it’s obviously more respected by our society than working in a bloody coffee shop!”

“What does respect matter if I’m not happy!”

Draco puts his hands up, eyes closed.

“I don’t want us to shout.”

“Okay.” Harry sits back down and takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I know that this is all out of nowhere.”

Draco opens his eyes and looks at Harry with such concern that he aches.

“Don’t you think you should, I don’t know,” Draco sits down again, closer to Harry than before. “Talk your friends about this?”

“Aren’t you my friend?”

“Well, yes. But I mean, Granger and Weasley know you better than I do.”

“You’re right.” Harry leans back against the couch, covering his eyes with one hand. “Maybe that’s why I don’t want to talk to them. They’ll think I’m being mad and rash and try to talk me out of it.”

“Out of what?”

“Quitting my job.”

Draco’s eyes widen as Harry sits up with a resolute look on his face.

“Did you ever think that maybe your friends would say you’re being rash because you *are*?” Draco scowls. “I mean, you realize you hate your job and then two seconds later you decide you’re going to *quit*. You think there aren’t days that I hate this place?”

“This isn’t just one day or even a couple of days, Draco. I’ve been unhappy for a long time but I never had the words for it. Not until I started spending more time here. With the cats. With you.” He looks at Draco with determined eyes.

Draco’s breath hitches for just a moment. Harry is far too close to him.

“Remember how you told me you wished you could expand this place? Find another location, a bigger place where you could take in more cats in need?”
“Well, yes but...what on earth are you even thinking?”

“Draco, I have a whole bloody house that I don't use most of!”

Draco stands again and walks quickly towards the door, unbolting it. He pulls it open and glares at Harry.

“Okay, that's enough. You've really upset me now and you need to leave.”

“Draco, I didn't mean to upset you—!”

“But you have, so you need to go. I need to clean up properly anyway,” Draco says firmly.

Harry takes him in, standing rigidly, jaw clenched, eyes dark and guarded. His hand is clenched so tightly around the door handle the knuckles are taut. Harry stands slowly and makes his way to the door. As he passes over the threshold, Draco's hand on his arm turns him back. They're just inches from one another. Draco's face is soft with concern again.

“Harry,” he says softly. “Please, sleep on it. Talk to Granger. Don't go in there tomorrow and give your resignation to Shacklebolt. Please.”

Harry looks down at the pale hand gripping his elbow.

“Okay,” he says, meeting Draco's eyes again. “I promise.”

Draco pulls away, looking relieved. Harry is certain he hears the word “idiot” muttered as the door closes and locks behind him. He smiles and turns on the spot, Apparating directly into his sitting room.

Harry doesn't sleep on it. But he does think it over, a lot, pacing through the house all night. He owls Hermione a little past midnight. He drinks a glass of wine. He owls Kingsley's office at 2:30. Not to resign, he'll keep that promise. But to take a personal day for the first time in his entire career with the DMLE. He paces more. Makes tea around 4 am. He goes upstairs and stares at a wall that separates two rooms. Two rooms he's certain would make an excellent space for a cattery if they were one room. He blasts the wall away at 5:18 am. He sits at the kitchen table, covered in bits of plaster, at 5:30 am. Has another cup of tea. Hermione's voice rings from the sitting room at 6 o'clock on the dot and he scrambles upstairs.

“Harry, what on earth happened to you?” Hermione's head asks from the fireplace. She looks fresh and alert, although the unpinned curls falling around her eyes tell Harry she hasn't been up long. He sees his own reflection in an antique mirror above the mantel. The dust that's settled in his hair makes him look twenty years older and his eyes are hollow. “I've only just seen your owl. Can I come through.”

“Please.”

She disappears. A moment later, the green fire roars to life and Hermione steps through the fireplace. She's still in her dressing gown and the crease in her brow is deeper than he's seen in a long time.

“Harry, what's going on? You don't want to be an Auror anymore?”

Now that Hermione is here all of the manic energy that kept him pacing all night drains out of him. He sinks into his armchair, head in his hands. Hermione kneels in front of him.
“Harry, please, you're scaring me.”

“I'm scaring myself,” he says, raising his head to look at her. She takes one of his hands in both of hers. “I don't know. I don't know what's happened. I was just having coffee with Draco after the party and watching him and I just...realized that the idea of leaving there, going to bed, and getting up to another day as an Auror made me feel so miserable. And I realized that that's the exact feeling I have every single night before I go to sleep. I'm...so unhappy, Hermione.”

“Oh, Harry,” she says gently, patting his hand. “I had no idea.”

“I didn't either, not really. But seeing Draco at the cafe, seeing him really love what he does. I don't know, it just woke something up.”

Hermione is quiet for a suspiciously long moment.

“What are you thinking, Hermione?”

“You spend so much time there, Harry.”

“We've talked about this.”

“I know! I don't think it's bad. I'm glad that, for once, I was wrong. But...”

“But what?”

“Well, Harry, do you think this has less to do with seeing someone who likes their job and seeing...Draco liking his job? That it might have more to do with him than anything else?”

Harry squints.

“What do you mean?”

Hermione sighs and stands, pulling the sash around her gown tighter.

“Harry. Don't you think you might...be interested in Draco? More than in a friendly way?”

Harry squints harder. Hermione throws her hands up in frustration.

“You've got a huge bloody crush on him, Harry!”

Harry flies to his feet.

“I have not!”

“Oh, come on! You're in there every single day! You talk about him all the time! Help him plan all these events! And I'd bet all the gold in Gringotts that he's got one on you too! Who does he give free treats and drinks to? Who does he let stay in the cafe after it closes? His beloved cat is buried in your backyard! Surely you can't both be so bloody oblivious!”

Harry stares at her for another moment, trying to articulate how wrong she is. Before he can, Draco's face blooms in his mind. His hair hanging over his forehead, slightly damp with sweat, cheeks flushed from the heat of the steamer. Flicking his head just-so to clear his eyes. The angle of his delicate wrist as he measures and pours. That one overlarge blue sweater he favors that hangs loosely around his neck, revealing the curves and points of his collarbone.

“We're...just friends,” is all he can come up with.
Hermione scoffs and crosses her arms.

“And Ron and I were just friends for six years.”

Harry shakes his head clear.

“That's totally different! You and Ron were ridiculous all through school.”

Perhaps that wasn't the right thing to say.

“Oh, don't you even, Harry Potter! As if you and Draco don't have a long, long history of being absolutely ridiculous about one another! You in particular, Mr. Stalker.”

Blush shoots up Harry's neck.

“Hermione, I thought you were gonna help me, not yell at me!”

Hermione takes a steadying breath, closing her eyes. When she opens them, they're softer.

“I'm sorry, Harry. I don't mean to be harsh but I just don't want you to do something you'll regret. I don't want you to quit your job—a job that you've worked really hard for!—because you think you want to work in a cat cafe if the reality is that you just...want more time with Draco. And don't know how to make that happen.”

Harry sits again. His eyes are burning terribly and every limb feels too heavy. Hermione comes closer and places a warm hand on his shoulder.

“I just want you to really think about this for a little while longer. I know you've been up all night. You need to sleep, wake up, eat something, and really think about how you feel about your job. And Draco.”

The door to Draco’s flat had remained visible to Harry ever since the night Solitaire died. Just like that night, it’s a little later than normal for a social call. But nothing about them has ever quite been normal and it’s not likely to start now. Harry knocks three times and waits. Chews his lip nervously. He hasn’t been back to the cafe since the night of the party and he’s not certain Draco will be pleased to see him. Or if he’s even home. It is Christmas, after all.

But after a few moments, Harry hears footsteps coming down the stairs. A second later, the door opens a few inches. Draco always answers a door like he expects a monster on the other side.

“Harry?” He opens the door wider. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you busy? Can I come in?”

“Well…” Draco hesitates a moment. “Sure. Of course.”

Harry follows him up the dark, narrow stairway. The flat is the same but brighter with the addition of multiple strings of holiday lights around the perimeter of the ceiling. Harry smiles at a small Christmas tree in the middle of the fireplace mantle. Draco gestures for Harry to sit as he goes towards the kitchenette. All of this is quite familiar.

“What can I get you?”

“Whatever you’re having as long as it's not too strong.”
Harry sits and takes a steadying breath. Draco hands him a mug of warm cider and sits as well. He doesn’t stretch along the chaise as he did when they were drunk. Rather he sits upright next to Harry. Their thighs almost touch. They sit in silence for awhile, sipping their drinks while the wireless plays Christmas music. It’s all quite cozy save for the tension between them. Draco is stiff and Harry keeps fidgeting.

“I wanted to say happy Christmas. You know, properly, before the day had ended,” Harry says finally, turning towards Draco.

Draco softens a bit.

“That’s very nice, Harry. But I get the distinct impression that that’s not the only reason you came over.”

Harry smiles despite himself. He sets his mug on the coffee table.

“You’re right. But it’s still true. I hope you’ve had a nice holiday.”

“I have. I spent it with Luna, as usual. Pansy and Greg joined us for dinner. Violet was showered with more presents than any four-year-old needs. She cried with joy when Pansy brought Cracker out.”

Harry grins.

“That sounds positively sedate after the day I’ve spent with the Weasleys.”

There’s another long silence. Draco toys with the hem of his sweater. It’s frayed there. A nervous habit.

“I also wanted to tell you that I did what you said,” Harry says and Draco looks up. “I didn’t quit my job and I talked to Hermione.”

“Good. And?”

“And then I had to go to sleep for awhile. Get my head back on straight. I took a few days off. Then I talked to Hermione again. And I talked to Ron too. You know, Ron, he always kinda fell by the wayside in school. Cause of me, I think. It’s a stupidly big shadow to walk in, mine is. But as we’ve gotten older, it was always him who was really good at this Auror thing. Strategic thinker. Chess player.”

Harry can see from Draco’s expression that his rambling isn’t making sense so he takes another deep breath.

“So, you know, his input was really important to me. About this. Because when I leave the DMLE it’ll be with the strongest recommendation that Ron Weasley be considered for Head Auror.”

Draco inhales sharply through his nose and his jaw clenches.

“You’re still going to do it then?” he asks.

Harry nods.

“I’ve told Kingsley I’ll finish out the year and then I’m done.”

“Harry, I--”
“No, listen. I did think about it. A lot. And I realized that I definitely do not want to be an Auror anymore. But you were right too. I don’t think I want to work in a coffee shop.”

Some of the anxiety leaves Draco’s face.

“But I do think...I really think that I want to help cats.”

The firelight reflecting in Draco’s pale eyes makes him look otherworldly as he gazes at Harry in wide-eyed confusion.

“What?”

“Yeah. You know the list?”

Draco nods.

“You haven’t noticed that it’s not in the back office anymore?”

Draco shakes his head; he’s biting his lip.

“I have it. I took it after we picked Truffles to replace Chowder. It seemed to make you so sad, just looking at it. I didn’t want you to feel that way. But then I started to feel that way. I started to look at it a lot and think about the cats on that list who had nowhere to go, whose time was limited. And it made me feel so sick. Draco, I really want to make a place where more cats can come and stay as long as they need to. With you.”

Draco is trembling and Harry wants to put a calming hand on his shoulder. He resists though, waiting for Draco to respond.

“Harry, that’s...what about money? What about space? It’s impossible.”

“I have both of those things in abundance. We can keep Bridget on at the cafe and I’ve already looked into hiring an on-site vet for more sickly cats and--”

Draco reaches out and grabs Harry tightly by the wrist, pulling him closer. He’s still shaking.

“Why are you so bloody stupid, Potter?”

Draco’s mouth against his is much harder than he’d imagined it’d be but maybe it’s just that they’re both shaking terribly. Harry tangles his hands into Draco’s too-long hair and pulls him closer. Harry doesn’t realize they’re falling until his back hits the couch. Draco’s weight atop him is warm; it feels safe. They separate then, breathless, eyes wide.

“You know,” Harry says, running his fingers across Draco’s hairline to move the fringe that’s fallen forward. “I had a whole second part of my speech, all about this thing. The us part.”

Draco smiles and presses his forehead against Harry’s. His hair falls again, like feathers against Harry’s cheek.

“Shut up.”

Harry does. This kiss is softer. And longer. Outside, it’s begun to snow.

“I’m so bloody nervous, I can barely stand it.”
“I can tell. You’ve changed your outfit about eight times.”

“I don’t want to look like I dress myself in the dark like some people.”

Harry laughs and stands, stretching. Pepper stretches as well, mewing softly as she relaxes in a patch of sunlight on the end of their bed. Harry runs his fingers through her warm fur before moving to stand behind Draco as he rearranges the neckline of his jumper in front of the full length mirror. He laces his arms around Draco’s narrow waist and places his chin on his shoulder. They meet eyes in the mirror. For just a moment Draco’s annoyed scowl softens.

“It’s really going to be fine,” Harry insists.

“You have no way of knowing that. What if no one comes?”

Harry rolls his eyes and stands up straight, tucking an errant strand of hair behind Draco’s ear. They’ve had this conversation several times just today. Harry goes to their closet to pull out his own clothes.

“They will.”

Draco continues to look annoyed at Harry’s positivity.

“Where’s my blue belt? I can’t find anything in this massive room. I miss my little flat.”

They’ve had this conversation too and it’s an outright lie. But Harry’s found that sometimes Draco is happiest when he’s complaining.

“Yes, but I think Bridget is quite happy there so I don’t think you’ll be moving back in any time soon.”

“Be quiet. Go shower, you look like a nightmare. And I’ve set a ribbon on the sink for your hair, please use it.”

Harry smiles and goes into the bathroom. It’s much brighter in here than it used to be. That was one of the first things he’d done in the beginning of the year; made all the windows of Grimmauld Place bigger. Every room is now flooded with light.

Everything about Grimmauld Place is different now. It had taken nearly half a year, getting everything up to code to house so many cats, having inspection after inspection, knocking down walls, throwing things away. That was the hardest part really. They’d left Sirius’s room for last and it’d taken several days for Harry to go through all his things.

Once it’d been empty, Draco had sat with Harry in the middle of the bare floor and held his hand. They’d sat there until the sun went down. Pepper had nosed the door open and circled them cautiously before curling herself in Harry’s lap. In the dark, Harry told Draco about how Sirius and Crookshanks had been such good friends. How he hopes Sirius would be happy with what Harry’s doing with his ancestral home. Draco had kissed his hand and his mouth was impossibly warm against Harry’s cold skin.

But then it’d been empty. A gutted house, ready to be something new.

It’s late May now, the very edge of summer. They couldn’t have picked a more beautiful day for Cat’s Coven, as Grimmauld Place is now named, to be opened to the public. Harry’s backyard is in full bloom, fragrant and welcoming. After showering and dressing, Harry finds Draco in the garden, running the same diagnostic spells he’s been running all week.
The wards had to be completely changed to make Cat’s Coven open to the public. This made all of Harry’s friends nervous and after many arguments he’d agreed to have several charmed alarms that run directly to the Ministry, specifically Ron’s office, placed over the property. Just in case. People had been popping in and out of Cat’s Coven all week and yet Draco was still casting spells to be sure.

“Hey,” Harry says, putting his hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Will you relax? Everything is fine.”

Draco takes a deep breath and puts his wand away. Harry smiles and kisses his forehead. Hands entwined, they stand in front of Solitaire’s grave. Bluebells have bloomed all around the stone. They stand in silence. Draco’s hand tightens around Harry’s.

A pop behind them pulls them away from Solitaire. Luna has come early, as promised. It all moves very fast then as people start arriving. Friends first, Apparating in. And then the bell starts to ring. Draco’s hand only trembles a little as he leads people through the house to the backyard where the food and beverages sit on a long table. Within the hour, the backyard and house are full of people. Friends, family, cat lovers, and those curious about Harry Potter’s new, strange career.

Harry happily talks about the construction to the house, introduces his new staff, discusses the cats they’ll be taking in. In moments where everything gets a little too overwhelming, he hides himself in the corner where Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Luna have staked out a safe spot. But he only needs to a few times. Harry and Draco cross paths several times as they work the crowd; Draco winks each time and Harry feels a surge of pride watching him. The sun is getting lower in the sky and the breeze cools. People will likely start heading out soon.

They do, slowly. A tenacious journalist insists on just one more photograph for the morning Prophet, this time with Pepper on Harry’s shoulder. Finally, once the sun is low enough that they’ve lost all useful light, Luna sees the man out. Harry and Draco find themselves alone in the back garden. Paper cups, bits of streamer, and other debris litter the ground but they’ll deal with it later. Harry lowers himself into one of the wrought iron garden chairs as Draco disappears inside. It’s just light enough in the early dusk to see Pepper’s gray form slinking through the garden, on the hunt. A cricket chirps nearby. He’s not long for this world if Pepper has her way.

“Here,” Draco says, sitting opposite him in the other garden chair. He sets two steaming mugs on the small table between them. Harry’s favorite, clay red with the chipped handle. Draco’s delicate china white with thin blue stripes. It had been a few months of living together before Harry had noticed that, despite all the fancy, delicious things Draco can do to coffee, he just drinks his black. No cream, no sugar.

“Thank you.” Harry takes a few satisfying sips before reaching out and touching the back of Draco’s hand. “Feel better?”

Fireflies hang low over the garden. They watch as Pepper springs from rock to rock, trying to capture one.

“About what?” Draco says, crossing his legs and tucking his hair behind his ear.

“About today. Now that it’s over.”

Draco smiles, resting his chin against his hand.

“Yes. I suppose you want me to say that you were right.”

“I would never expect you to do something so painful.”
Draco laughs softly as Pepper hops into his lap.

“You know, even in the moments when I wasn’t convincing myself that it would be a total nightmare I didn’t expect nearly as much press to show up. That’s the power of you, though. I should be used to it.”

“It’s a curse.” Harry reaches out to scratch under Pepper’s chin. “It was all pretty positive though. I don’t think there’ll be any ‘evil Death Eater slips love potion into Savior’s coffee’ pieces running tomorrow.”

“They’ve probably got those out of their system by now. Still, it was an unexpected change.”

Harry laughs.

“Yeah. Just like so much else.”

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End Notes

The haiku on Solitaire’s grave is by Kobayashi Issa. Thank you so much for reading! =^_^=

All comments are extremely welcome either here or on Livejournal.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!