Turn

by Saras_Girl

Summary

One good turn always deserves another. Apparently.

Notes

This story contains some het, a lot of slash, some epilogue-friendly stuff and a lot of AU. It is vaguely inspired by the film ‘The Family Man’ but in reality, is a variation on a concept that is, quite frankly, well old. I implore you to just trust me and enjoy the story.
19th December 2017

Harry glares up through the windscreen of his borrowed SUV and makes eye contact with a shrunken, disapproving old woman half a second before the heel of his hand slams into the steering wheel and the horn blares loudly at the bus full of senior citizens that has just cut him up. It’s the third time something like this has happened since he pulled away from King’s Cross and he’s had enough.

“Learn to drive!” he complains pointlessly. The offending driver can’t hear him, he knows that, but the sour-faced old lady shakes her head and elbows her friends, tutting.

“Dad, calm down,” comes a voice from the magically-enlarged back seat.

Still fuming, Harry meets his daughter’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “I’m perfectly calm, Lily. I’m just a little bit fed up of buses thinking they can do whatever they feel like because they’re big. That’s all.”

Lily scrunches her nose up. “You need to untwist. Seriously.”

“Untwist,” he repeats under his breath. He looks away from her know-it-all expression and focuses instead on the reflection of his own eyes, just for a moment. He really doesn’t remember when he got those dark circles and crow’s feet. Where they came from, or what they want. Tearing his eyes back to the road, he catches one last glimpse of the bus’ elderly occupants—he doesn’t suppose they remember either.

Fuck, he’s tired. He’s never been very good at driving, either, but here he is, trundling along at sixty miles an hour with a pounding headache, a short temper, four children and Lily’s cat, who doesn’t seem capable of being parted from her. It doesn’t matter that he only borrowed the new (and heavily modified, much to Molly’s chagrin) car from Arthur because it’s his turn to get the kids from the station and that Lily could have quite easily stayed at home. No, because she’s horrified at the idea that she might miss something, especially something to do with Hogwarts.

So there she sits, cross-legged next to the window, holding a purring cat-ball on her lap and telling Harry to ‘untwist’ himself. He supposes he should feel fortunate that she’s not adding her voice to the nonsensical argument that’s currently raging between Al, Rose Weasley, and James. Harry pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs as the road in front of him swims momentarily. It’s a shame that ‘not wanting to know’ doesn’t lessen the pain in his skull.

“Err, that’s disgusting!” Rose cries, to scattered laughter from the back seat.

It’s not as though he isn’t pleased to see them; the winter term always feels like the longest, and he has missed James’ little acts of rebellion, Al’s strange questions, and the Siamese twin act with Rose that often leaves him puzzled over how many children he actually has. But... he wishes they could be pleased to see him in a quiet way. Just for a little while. Just until he can get the last of this day off his skin. And see what sort of mood Ginny is in.

Untwist, he intones gamely inside his head. Untwist.
“Anyway,” Al is saying to Rose, “Scorp says that now his mum and dad are getting divorced, he’s going to—”

“What?” Harry interrupts, turning around in his seat to look at his son so sharply that the car veers to the right and Lily jumps and grabs onto the arm rest. The cat, it seems, has secured itself by hooking sharp claws into her thigh. “Sorry, Lil.” He straightens up the car with some effort and instead regards Al in the mirror. “What was that about Mal... about Scorpius’ mum and dad?”

Al looks back, all green eyes and ink-smudged nose. “They’re getting divorced.”

“Scorpius told you that?” Harry presses, feeling unexpectedly jarred by the news.

“Yeah. But it’s in the paper, too... Oi, James. James! Let me borrow that a minute.” Al leans across Rose and tries to take the *Daily Prophet* behind which James has been hiding since the journey began.

James glowers. “No.”

“Just for two seconds!”

“No, Al, bugger off. I’m reading.”

“Language,” Harry murmurs absently. He hasn’t read the *Prophet* in forever, but he still finds himself craning his neck pointlessly, trying to see the printed pages James is hanging onto.

“You’re not reading, you’re perving on Reeda Rathbone!” Al crows.

James glares in the way only a teenage boy can as Lily and Rose set up a chorus of “James loves Reeda, James loves Reeda...” which makes Harry smile to himself despite the pounding in his head.

“You’re dead,” he mutters darkly, clutching more tightly onto the paper.

“James, stop being an arsekettle,” Al whines. Rose snickers approvingly.

“Language,” Harry sighs again, secretly amused at the creativity of the insult.

Lily sighs and then there’s a flurry of rustling paper and discontented protests from which emerges a smug looking Lily, a mildly ruffled James, clutching the pages with the pictures of the windswept captain of Puddlemere United, and a delighted Al, who is now riffling through the remaining pages, eyes narrowed.

“Here it is,” Al says, folding over the newspaper and balancing it on his drawn-up knees.

*Don’t sit like that in the car,* Harry thinks idly, but says nothing. Takes a deep breath.

“It is with regret that Draco and Astoria Malfoy (nee Greengrass) announce their separation after a marriage of fifteen years. The separation will be made formal in the New Year, and the couple’s only child, Scorpius, will remain at Malfoy Manor with his father,” Al reads, finishing with a flourish and an ‘I told you so’ smile.

“Poor Scorpius,” says Rose, holding out her hand and allowing Lily’s cat to lick it.
Al shrugs. “He’s always saying he never sees his mum anyway.”

“Isn’t he embarrassed?” Lily puts in. “You know, having it all over the paper?”

“He doesn’t really...” Al starts.

“... get embarrassed,” he and Rose advise as one. Lily lifts her eyebrows.

Divorced, Harry thinks, switching off from the noise in the back seat once more. Malfoys don’t get divorced, surely. It has been less than four months since he saw Malfoy again in the flesh after all those years, and now Harry can’t help wondering what he missed. It had been so startling to see him again, just standing on the platform with his lookalike son and his pointy wife, that he hadn’t paid attention to much else. Now he thinks about it, he doesn’t suppose Malfoy did look all that happy. But then, he never has, has he?

Harry doesn’t care what some of the more sensible voices in his head have to say, there’s nothing wrong with a bit of natural curiosity about the strange people in one’s life. Or the strange people who used to be in one’s life...

Harry jumps, startled by a series of frantic horn blasts from behind him, and realises that he’s slowed practically to a standstill in the middle of a dual carriageway. Horrified, he puts his foot down and makes apologetic hand gestures at the other cars as he scrubs at his heated face and wonders if this headache can possibly get any worse. It’s a good few seconds later that he realises he has let go of the steering wheel completely.

“Fucking Malfoy,” he mutters to himself as he corrects the swerve and holds on tight to the wheel.

As they drive into Ottery St Catchpole, everyone falls silent, just for a second or two, to look out of the windows and admire the glistening frosty coating on the road and the grass and the trees. He drives past Ron and Hermione’s cottage on the outskirts, past the cluster of village shops, the post office and the pub, the duck pond, Lily’s school—closed for Christmas—and finally pulls into his own driveway.

When he gets out of the car and stretches, he can see the Burrow in the distance. He inhales deeply and savours the smell of winter, the cool air, and the faintest hint of the smoke curling from Arthur and Molly’s crooked chimney. A faint ripple of a child’s laughter on the wind could be Hugo playing in the cold air with his grandma, but it’s soon buried in the bangs of car doors and the scraping and thumping of trunks. Somewhere to his left, Lily’s cat chirrups in protest at the sudden change of temperature.

“Right,” Harry calls, dragging the freezing air into his lungs and shaking himself into action. “Hang on for two seconds while I lighten your trunks.” He draws his wand and casts the spell on each in turn, as he does so, darting anxious glances at the paintwork of Arthur’s car—he knows better than to return it scratched twice in a row.

“Coats and shoes off, trunks upstairs,” Harry attempts, sighing. “Quietly? Quietish?”

“Cheers, Dad... race you upstairs... give me that back, James... ergh, what’s that? ... GIANT HIPPOGRIFF!” assaults his ears from several different angles and then he’s alone in the driveway.
The house smells cold and musty, as though it’s been empty all day, but he can hear Ginny in the kitchen. Kicking the door closed behind him, he heads toward the sound of clacking plates, pulling off his winter coat as he goes. He’s only barely aware of the pre-emptive intake of breath as he enters the kitchen and attempts to shake off his horrible day and tune out the clatters and raised voices of his children upstairs. With a soft sigh, he realises that he has forgotten to take Rose home.

It’s not the first time, either.

“Everyone in one piece?” she asks without turning around from the counter. Her work robes are flung over a kitchen chair as though she hasn’t been home for long.

“All four of them,” he admits, and it takes a moment for Ginny to catch his meaning.

“Again?”

“Afraid so.”

She swipes her long hair out of her face and then lets it go. “Head Auror and you’re incapable of bringing home the right number of children. What’s that about?”

“At work I have other people to do the counting for me,” Harry says, knowing she’s half-joking. But only half. “Old age?” he suggests instead when there’s no response.

Ginny laughs shortly and flicks her wand, sending a flurry of plates flying across the room and into a cupboard. Harry steps back as he always does, each time thinking they are certain to collide and shatter in mid air, but as usual, they stack themselves neatly and the cupboard door clicks shut. She starts on last night’s pans; Harry frowns.

“I said I’d do that,” he says softly.

Ginny looks up briefly, expressive eyes harassed. She shrugs awkwardly and Harry, who has been leaning against the worktop, stiffens slightly and presses his hands to the marble.

“It was a mess. It was annoying me. I thought you were supposed to have the afternoon off,” she says accusingly.

Harry winces. He was, but as usual, it hadn’t quite worked that way. It had taken him until almost three to fight his way out from under a mountain of paperwork and he had taken it right down to the wire with the drive into central London to meet the Hogwarts Express. The trouble with his job is that even though he’s ostensibly in charge of the department, everyone wants his help and he finds it almost impossible to say no.

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. Still, I don’t think they’ll be able to tell if the house is clean or not,” he says, quirking a small smile and hoping for the best.

“Don’t you?” she snaps, turning to look at him with hands on her hips, and just for a moment, she looks a lot like her mother. It’s not a bad thing, not really, but it makes his stomach ache to see it.

“I was joking,” he says, keeping his tone light and fishing around for a distraction. “Hey, did you hear about Malfoy?”

“Of course I did.” She fills the kettle and looks up at him, apparently placated. “It’s been flying
around the office all day. Even the goblins are talking about it.”

Harry snorts. “I forget that you work together sometimes.”

Ginny’s eyebrows lift into her hairline and her mouth twists. “No you don’t. And we do not work together. I work for Gringotts; he is an independent financial advisor. There’s some overlap, that’s all.”

Harry pauses, stung. He actually had forgotten this time. He might have mentioned Malfoy a few times since the first of September, but he hadn’t realised she was so tired of hearing it. That being said, he can understand tired. And perhaps her day has been as bad as his. There’s no use arguing in front of the children, even the ones that don’t belong to them.

“Al said that Scorpius didn’t seem too upset,” he says at last, closing his eyes and trying to work the kinks out of his neck.

“No?” Ginny hums thoughtfully as she pours hot water into six mugs and releases fragrant steam into the air. “Well, children are pretty resilient. Maybe it’s been coming for a while.”

Harry’s eyes snap open but the scene in front of him remains unchanged. “Hmm.”

Just then there’s a rumble and a clatter and the kitchen is full of children. They throw themselves on Ginny, making her smile in a way that lifts years off her face. In spite of her digs at Harry, she’s equally delighted to see Rose, who gets a hug and a “Wow, don’t you look tall!” along with everyone but Lily, who hoists her cat up over her shoulder and carries it to the kitchen table.

“What’s the matter, Dad?” she asks.

Harry’s heart twists. He swallows dryly as he looks away from the joyful pileup and down at his daughter. “Nothing, Lil. I’ve just got a bit of a headache.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Boys are noisy. I understand.”

Harry smiles, genuinely now. “Yeah. Except Frank,” he adds, ruffling the cat’s stripy head where it dangles over Lily’s shoulder.

“Frank is noisy sometimes,” Lily says darkly. “But at least he doesn’t argue with me or borrow my books and put them back in the wrong order.”

“Those are important things,” he agrees, thinking that just in this moment, he would settle for a relationship without arguing or egregious disordering of his possessions.

“Frank’s a good cuddler, too,” Lily adds.

Across the room, Ginny is still squashing James tightly against her and asking him what on earth he has done with his hair.

Harry gives himself an internal shake, leans down and, with some effort, sweeps both girl and cat into his arms. Lily giggles and Frank licks his earlobe with a raspy tongue. “So am I.”

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After returning Rose to her ‘other’ family and squeezing in a catch-up session with an equally frazzled Ron and Hermione, Harry returns the car to Arthur—scratch-free—and savours the walk home through the cold, crisp evening. The fresh air shifts his headache so effectively that he’s able to enjoy the squabbling and giggling and general camaraderie of dinner time. Granted, most of it is aimed further down the table where Ginny, Albus and Lily sit, but Harry sits back, crunches his roast potatoes and lets it flow over him like a balm.

Incredibly, everyone is in their bedroom before ten. Harry trails up the stairs, covering a yawn and turning out each light with a lazy flick of the wrist. He lets out all of his breath in a soft sigh as his bare feet sink into the thick carpet of the landing and he at last feels the stress start to leave his body.

He pauses at Lily’s bedroom. Her door is open, as always, and Harry smiles as he watches her sleeping, cuddling the stuffed fish he won for her at a fair when she was tiny, while Frank curls protectively at her feet.

James’ light is on but he’s snoring loudly. Harry contemplates casting a silent ‘nox’ for him, but remembers that, with teenagers, it’s best not to interfere.

He moves on to see that Al has left him a note, Spellotaped to the door, as he often does when he’s at home. It says:

*Dad – the wise man does not play leapfrog with the unicorn.*

Harry snorts, carefully unpeeling the note and slipping it into his pocket. He smiles and pushes open the door at the end of the landing. It closes softly behind him and he gravitates toward the bed, sitting down and sleepily undoing his buttons.

“Did you tell James he could put blue streaks in his hair?” Ginny demands around her toothbrush.

Frowning, Harry turns to look at his wife. She steps into the bedroom and wraps one arm around her flannel-clad torso. “Did you?”

“What? No!” Harry rubs his face, confused. Then, trying to keep his voice down, “What are you talking about?”

“The fact that my son looks like... like a... I don’t know, but he must have asked you!”

“Er, why?” Harry asks, fumbling at his cuffs and shaking his head at Ginny, who is still brushing her teeth furiously and starting to look as though she’s foaming at the mouth. Immediately, he pushes that thought out of his head before it starts to amuse him. In all seriousness, he hadn’t even noticed James’ hair until Ginny pointed it out.

“Because he likes you better than he likes me,” she says softly, ceasing her brushing.

“Are you serious?”

She pauses and wipes her mouth. Sighs. “Sometimes I think so.”

“Ginny, don’t be daft. He loves his mum.” Harry shrugs off his shirt and takes a step toward her. “And I didn’t know anything about it. To be honest, I didn’t even notice it in the car.” He reaches out, stomach in knots, and slips a hand around her waist. Tries to pull her to him, but she holds herself stiffly, resistant.
“Didn’t even notice,” she sighs, almost too softly for him to hear. “Too busy noticing everything else.”

Her eyes are tired and disappointed, and she allows herself to lean against Harry for a second or two. Her breath is hot against his bare skin and he slides his fingers through her hair... he’s always loved her hair. It feels like silk and smells like coconut, like twenty years, like a familiar embrace that doesn’t quite feel right any more.

“I’m just worn out,” he says against the top of her head. “Let’s get some sleep.”

It’s a plea, not a request. Not a suggestion. She says. Nods. Acquiesces.

When they climb into bed, Ginny immediately turns her back on him and curls into a tight ‘C’ shape to sleep. It’s nothing personal, he knows that. She always sleeps that way. He faintly remembers a time when they used to sleep in a sated tangle, arms and legs threaded together and faces close, but it hasn’t been like that for many, many years.

Exhausted, Harry flicks out the lights and punches his lumpy pillow into submission. In the darkness, he can see the Christmas lights from the village sparkling on the frost, and he smiles wearily before letting his eyes close.

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Someone’s crying.

Confused, Harry looks around for the sound and then pulls in his breath sharply. He knows this place. He’s been here many, many times before. It’s always the same.

“... I can’t do it... I can’t... it won’t work.”

Harry looks, even though he knows what he’ll see. It’s always the same. The fretting ghost and the anguished pale figure leaning on the sink. The boy. And he’s crying.

“... he says he’ll kill me.”

The words echo over and over until they become meaningless. He waits, frozen to the floor, knowing what’s coming next and yet being powerless to change a thing.

He turns, sees Harry, and the room tilts and blurs.

There’s crashing and yelling and water everywhere. There’s “Stop it! No! Stop!” but the curse that flies from his wand anyway—he feels it—can’t breathe—and then just blood. So much blood. Seeping through white cotton and making terrifying swirling patterns in the water.

“No,” he whispers over and over as though it’s the only word he can remember how to say.

Short, shallow breaths. Scrabbling fingers. A shattering moment of eye contact. Snape.

The room swirls sickeningly and Harry is creeping through a darkened corridor, barely breathing, fingers curled into the cloak in front of his face. Fingers that are stained with dried blood, nails bitten down to the quick. A flight of stairs and a light.
Something is wrong this time. Something is different. He steps toward the light and the world dissolves.

“Oh,” he gasps, jolting into consciousness. Heart pounding, he blinks in the darkness and focuses on Ginny’s concerned eyes as she leans over him, propped up on one elbow.

“You alright?”

Harry nods and rubs at his eyes. It’s not the first time he’s been back to that bathroom and he knows that he long ago wore out his wife’s patience for discussing it. He supposes he should have seen it coming tonight, not that it would have helped.

“Yeah,” he says eventually, eyes flicking to the bedside clock. It’s just after ten thirty—he can’t have been asleep all that long. He sighs, bracing himself for the cold as he rises. “I think I’ll just go for a quick walk... get some air,” he mumbles.

As he dresses, pulling on his abandoned clothes from the floor and wincing at the temperature of the fabric against his skin, he glances over at Ginny, who is watching him silently in the dark. Her face is caught somewhere between concern and exasperation. He thinks she wants to say something but after a moment she just curls back into herself and looks at the wall.

“Won’t be long,” Harry offers into the silence.

His night-time wandering years are well behind him, but the instincts come back in an instant, and he finds a quiet thrill in making it through the house without a sound. Grabbing a heavy coat and tucking a warm woollen scarf around his neck, he steps out into the night and lets the door close quietly behind him. The air bites at him as he starts to walk, but it smells and tastes delicious-cold-fragrant in the back of his throat and the clear, star-bright sky draws him down his driveway and into the village, head tipped back and hands stuffed in pockets.

The earlier frost has now settled in earnest and sparkles impossibly from every surface. The village glows jewel-like in the darkness and as Harry heads toward it, he can hardly stop himself from recalling that one Christmas he and Hermione had spent at Godric’s Hollow. He exhales slowly, breath curling in front of him, unsettled by a tangling of sadness, relief and nostalgia in the pit of his stomach.

He doesn’t suppose it will help to think about that too much. He doesn’t suppose that having nightmares about Draco bloody Malfoy does him much good, either, but knowing that is about as useful as a Cheering Charm against an Unforgivable.

As he approaches the village pub, the soft light and warm chatter spilling from within makes him painfully aware of just how fucking early he goes to bed these days. He doesn’t remember when that happened, either, but suspects it had something to do with having children. He has one hand on the stained glass of the door when he catches sight of movement out of the corner of his eye.

He turns.

Just on the other side of the road, a crooked old man is stepping off the pavement, lowering one unsteady foot and then the other onto the icy tarmac. He glances periodically between the road and the pub, as though willing his destination closer, and Harry hesitates, uncertain whether an offer of assistance will offend.
“Blast,” the man mutters, losing his balance; he teeters for a moment and then his legs shoot out from underneath him. Harry acts without thinking, casting a spell from inside his coat to slow the fall and dashing into the road to grab the man’s shoulders before he hits the unforgiving ground.

The old man grunts in surprise. Harry knows he is probably a Muggle and he knows that he probably shouldn’t have interfered, but it’s difficult to break the habit of a lifetime.

“Are you alright?” Harry asks, linking his arms under the man’s shoulders to hoist him to his feet. He’s astonishingly light, and it appears as though his scruffy oilskin coat makes up a good proportion of his weight. He smells like rotten leaves and smoke, and his beard grazes Harry’s chin as he looks up with eyes that are nearly opaque in the moonlight.

“Appears I am, young man,” he murmurs, a soft local accent colouring his words. “Thank you. Now ’elp me over the road so I can buy you a drink.”

Harry pauses, surprised, and from somewhere inside the tangle of beard, a mouth opens in a grin and reveals several glinting gold teeth.

This is all very strange, he thinks, but then... it has been one of those sorts of days.

Embrace the madness.

“Right you are, then,” he says gamely, taking careful steps toward the pavement and letting the old man lean heavily against his side. “I’ll have a pint with you.”

The man laughs. As he reaches the tiled vestibule of the pub, he turns and shakes his head at Harry. “Oh no, young man. It’s a gin night tonight!”

Harry blinks. Says nothing. The man pulls open the door with a creak, letting out a blast of warm, beery air that washes over Harry’s face. He inhales the comforting mixture of aromas and shrugs, following the man’s shuffling progress toward the bar.

The pub is bustling, alive with the chatter of Muggle villagers and one or two local faces he recognises from his own world—there’s Camille Roth, a sweet old lady who sells excellent home-made remedies and potions from her cottage on the riverbank, drinking sweet sherry and flirting outrageously with Eddie, the middle-aged barman. Over in the corner, apparently holding a conversation with his black Labrador, is Grady, the village curiosity. To Harry, he’s always been quite ordinary, if a little eccentric, with his purple frock coat and ever-present watercolours, but he supposes his definition of what’s ordinary has been skewed for a long time now.

Grady looks up from his conversation and waves so hard that his coat sleeve trails in his brandy. Harry returns his greeting across the room, pointedly looking away when he sees the tip of a wand emerge to separate cognac from velvet. He’s not on duty tonight, after all, and he doesn’t even want to think about just how horrified Jeremiah from Improper Use would be if he were here.

Because he’s not.

No one’s here that knows him apart from Grady and Mrs Roth... and half of those other softly-lit faces, now that he looks around. And the old man in the oilskin coat, wherever he is. Harry turns slowly on the spot, realising he’s been swimming around in his own world for some time now, and
there’s no sign of his new friend. He’s just beginning to think that perhaps this is for the best—he’s not sure how well his cosseted digestive system will deal with unexpected gin on a weeknight—when there’s a tap, or rather a prod—at his shoulder.

“Have you not found a table yet?” demands a softly chiding voice, and the man scrutinises him with unfocused pale eyes. “Come on, lad, come on.”

Harry reflects that no one has called him ‘lad’ in a very long time, and even though he knows it’s a relative term and nothing more, it makes him feel a little younger than his thirty-seven years. It makes him forget, momentarily, that he’s a man with three noisy children, a boring desk job and a dissatisfied wife.

He looks around quickly. Points. “There’s one over here,” he says, weaving through the laughing, clinking crowd at the bar and sliding into the empty settle by the fire. The wood is old and hard, fissured and weathered under his fingers, but the long cushion on the seat is soft enough for his tired bones. Leaning back, he unzips his coat and puts his feet up on the low table in front of him.

“Hmm,” the old man grunts approvingly, before slumping down next to Harry. The heavy glasses in his hands are so full that the simple action sends clear liquid sloshing over his coat. Harry cringes, but the old man doesn’t even seem to notice. “Your good ‘ealth,” he says, pushing one glass into Harry’s hand and raising the other in his own.

“Erm... good health,” Harry echoes, lifting his glass. It’s not even halfway to his mouth before the stench of neat alcohol floods his nostrils and makes his eyes sting. He pauses, swallowing nervously, but the oddly intense eyes are trained on his glass, watching Harry expectantly as he gulps at his own drink. Harry rests his head against the hard back of the settle and inhales, thoughtful.

The man can barely see or walk, and yet there’s a small part of Harry that is always suspicious of strangers, even these days when he hasn’t fought a war or caught a criminal in years. His head fills with questions. Who is he? What does he want? What good can come of drinking straight gin at this time of night?

And then another: *what kind of a paranoid, boring, old... arsekettle am I turning into?*

Amused in spite of himself, Harry allows himself a smile, takes a deep breath and an adventurous swallow.

“It’ll do you good, that,” advises the old man, and when Harry splutters, coughs and somehow manages to inhale gin through his nose, he cackles and pats Harry on the thigh with a gnarled hand.

“Really?” Harry says faintly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “What makes you say that?”

There’s another hearty gulp, and then: “It’s good for the misery, is gin.”

“What?”

“Misery, young man, I can tell from the way you was walkin’.” The grey hair and beard nod earnestly. “Full of it. And as me mother always said, rest her soul, ‘when you’re miserable as sin, crack out the gin’.”

Harry grins. “Never heard that one before.”
“Well, no matter. It’s still good advice. Drink up, son,” he says, tipping back his head and draining his glass.

Harry thinks he must be imagining the beginning of a warm, creeping languor in his veins and a rising sense of wellbeing, because even as he forces the rest of the alcohol down in an effort to keep up, he hasn’t really had all that... much...

... he examines the empty glass calmly. It’s a very large glass. He sighs. He’s not really used to this sort of thing any more—if he ever has been at all—but as the man takes his glass and hobbles to the bar, refusing Harry’s money or offers of help, he finds he’s not too worried about it any more.

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“How ’zactly does a miserable person walk, anyway?” Harry asks, cradling his third or possibly fourth gin on his knees and frowning.

“Like this,” says the man, screwing up his face and wobbling stiffly from side to side in his seat, sloshing yet more gin over his coat and Harry’s trousers.

Harry rubs vaguely at the wet spot and laughs. “Am not miserable... m’just... having a difficult day,” he says stoutly.

“Life is difficult,” opines his companion, and Harry nods.

“’Tis. ’Tis difficult. And things are surprising... you know... flash! Bang!” Harry says, waving his free hand around illustratively and marveling at the lights that seem to follow his fingers through the air.

“S’ a lot like fishin’, really,” comes the mumble from beside him, and Harry sighs, shaking his head so vigorously that it hurts.

“There’s nothing surprising about fishing.”

“That’s what you think,” the old man says mysteriously.

Harry wants to ask, he really does, but for some reason he finds himself saying: “I don’t mean... the fish sort of surprise. I mean... I don’t know what I mean.”

“I’m sure you do. Young men usually do.” The beard quivers and the old man coughs into his hand as he once again collects the empty glasses and leaves Harry alone.

He stretches out his legs, trying to warm his feet on the dying embers of the open fire that he has, very courteously, he thinks, allowed his companion to sit by. Exhaling slowly, he looks around the still-busy pub until the lights and the swirly carpet start to make him feel seasick. He’s not sure what time it is but for the life of him he can’t remember why that would matter anyway. His head is full of soft, gently waving pictures of fish, Lily and her cat, Ginny—a younger Ginny—laughing, sparkling frost and buses full of old biddies and Malfoy, Malfoy, Malfoy.

Harry startles, blinking. His mouth tastes sticky and dry but he still accepts the refreshed glass and raises it to his mouth.
For the misery. Apparently.

“Do you ever wonder if things would have been different... if you’d done something else?”

The old man shifts thoughtfully beside him, ancient coat and ancient bones creaking. “Depends on the things... ‘n’ the somethin’, I suppose.”

Harry fiddles with his cuffs and sighs. “There’s someone I could’ve helped... a long time ago. I’m always wondering if... if I’d helped... things’d been... you know,” Harry trails off, worn out by the effort of searching for the right words.

“Forgive m’rudeness,” mumbles the old man, squinting up at Harry. His eyes are positively milky now—like Aragog’s, Harry finds himself thinking. “But why didn’t you help when you ’ad the chance?”

Harry’s heart twists and he lets his shoulders lift and fall without a word.

“You do know,” the man grunts. “Drink your gin.”

“Scared,” Harry murmurs, more to himself than to anyone else. “I was scared.” He throws the rest of his drink down his throat just as the bell is rung for last orders.

“One more for the road?”

Harry laughs uneasily. “I really don’t think I should. Not unless I want to... um... fall down.”

“Suit yourself,” rasps the old man. “Maybe you’d ’elp me to my gate... it’s only one of them cottages across the road.”

“Albolutely,” Harry mumbles through thick, rubbery lips. “No problem.”

Very carefully, wary of the reliability of his own legs, he stands and manoeuvres through the pub, old man wobbling along behind him. When he opens the door, the cold air shocks him into immobility for a good few seconds, and when he starts to walk again, the world somehow feels as though it has tilted even further on its axis than before.

“Just over there, lad.” The old man points, grabbing Harry’s arm, and together they make a weaving, treacherous progress over the icy ground, huffing out hot streams of air and making soft, nonsensical conversation.

At the gate, the old man creaks open the catch and pauses, looking up at Harry with knitted eyebrows, as though coming to a momentous decision.

“You’re a good boy,” he says, still frowning.

“Thank you,” Harry mumbles, oddly touched.

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m going to do you a favour... but there are rules, y’understand?”

Harry tilts his head on one side, just to see if the statement makes more sense that way. “Hm?”

“Rules!” The tangled beard bristles in a sudden chilled breeze. “Rule number one—tell no one. Rule
number two—tell no one. Rule number three—send up red sparks if you need me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry protests.

“Don’t worry about it for now, eh?” The old man pats his arm and trundles away up his garden path, feeling his way along the door to find his keyhole. Harry watches in slightly blurry silence. “Go to bed, Harry.”

“Good idea,” Harry says to the night as the cottage door slams shut, leaving him alone.

He pulls up his collar, slides his hands into his pockets and starts back up the lane. When he lets himself back into the bedroom, undresses and creeps under the sheets, Ginny doesn’t even stir.

***~*~***

There’s that light again. The one at the top of the stairs. He takes a step, and another and another. Frightened pale eyes in the darkness.

No cloak now. “What the fuck are you doing here?” Fright turning swiftly to anger and then curiosity.

Sitting on a hard floor, and words that he’s straining so hard to hear.

A sound he’s never heard before—a brilliant sound—and then someone is calling him, and everything is dissolving.

***~*~***

Harry lies as flat as he can, not daring to open his eyes. He feels more disgusting than he remembers feeling in nearly twenty years. So much fucking **gin**. He can taste it in his throat, his mouth, coating his arid, stinging tongue.

“No,” he states firmly to what is definitely an empty bedroom, judging by his lazy groping of the sheets. “Just... no.”

Did he really spend the night drinking with a strange old man? Harry sighs and lifts his hands with some effort to rub at his eyes. All signs point to yes.

“Are you going to spend all day in bed feeling sorry for yourself, you lazy sod?”

Harry jumps. His eyes are still squeezed tightly closed but if he knows nothing else, he knows that is certainly not Ginny’s voice. Heart pounding, he bites the inside of his mouth and thinks fast—he definitely managed to get home last night, so **why** is there a strange man in his bedroom?

A man who is sighing and sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I can tell when you’re pretending to be asleep, you know,” he says, and he sounds as though he’s smiling. “I’ve had seventeen years of practise.”

Harry’s stomach flips over. Seizing the few strands of fortitude the hangover has left him, he scrambles into a sitting position and forces his eyes open. And blinks. And rubs at his face, wondering if it’s possible that he’s still asleep.
“Well, don’t you look healthy?” Draco Malfoy remarks from inches away.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Harry demands, bringing his knees up under his chin, feeling exposed but relieved that he’s wearing boxers. Horrified that he isn’t wearing anything else.

Malfoy raises an eyebrow but doesn’t seem at all ruffled. “There’s no need for that. I came back for my notes, that’s all. Whoever scheduled a meeting for nine o’clock in the morning this close to Christmas genuinely deserves to be thrown into an active fucking volcano.”

As he speaks, Harry takes a second to glance around the room and it is immediately obvious that this isn’t the bedroom he shares with Ginny. This bedroom is bigger and lighter and looks both familiar and all wrong at once. And it has Draco Malfoy in it.

A different Draco Malfoy, he’ll admit—he looks younger and happier than the man in the Prophet or the man at the train station—but Draco Malfoy nonetheless. Insides in knots, trying not to panic, Harry inhales deeply and decides to try again. The last response didn’t seem to make sense at all, and some part of him, a small part he calls reason, tells him that getting angry isn’t going to help here. If Draco Malfoy hasn’t, in fact, invaded his bedroom, then there’s something potentially very odd going on.

“I mean, where’s Ginny?” he attempts.

Malfoy frowns. “What?”

“Where’s Ginny?” he repeats, shifting position so that he can slide his feet to the ground, needing the solidity. “What the hell’s going on here, Malfoy?”

“Malfoy?” He smirks—at last an expression Harry recognises on his face. “Oh, I see...”

Suddenly there’s a hand on Harry’s bare thigh. A warm hand. Malfoy’s hand. And Malfoy himself is close enough to smell (clean, toothpaste-minty, citrusy) which is all kinds of wrong and the light in his eyes hammers the meaning through Harry’s brain hard enough to hurt. Swiftly, he scrambles out of reach and gets to his feet.

“Ah... seriously, er, Draco, where’s Ginny?”

Malfoy throws him a very strange look. “Ginevra is at her house, with her husband and child, I would hope.” He pauses, rising from the bed and running a thoughtful hand through his hair, which immediately flops back into his eyes.

“With her...?” Harry whispers, but is interrupted.

“You’re always so strange when you’ve had a drink... I’ll have to ask Blaise what he put in those cocktails.” Malfoy sighs and grabs Harry by the wrist, dragging him close and brushing a soft kiss across his mouth before he can react. “I’ll see you tonight.”

With that, he turns and stalks out of the room, long coat and striped scarf whipping behind him. Harry watches, motionless, hand rising slowly to graze his lips. He has no idea what is going on here, wherever here is, but it probably has something to do with gin.
Harry doesn’t know how long he stands there, frozen to the spot, but a blast of cold air from the open—dear god, why open?—window behind him brings him to his senses. Shivering, he turns and slams the window shut with unnecessary force. He gazes through the glass, sore eyes blinking slowly as the familiar scene outside slides into almost-focus. Hurriedly he grabs a pair of glasses that don’t feel quite right but seem to do the job, and stares out at a frost-covered Grimmauld Place.

Of course it is. The hedges and flowerbeds are neater than he remembers, the outfits of the scuttling residents brighter and more modern, but then it has been... Harry frowns and fishes about in his tangled mind for the memory... a good eighteen years since he sold this house and bought the cottage with Ginny. At least, he thought he did. Whatever he has or has not done fully appears to be up for grabs right now.

Taking a deep breath, he turns back to regard the rumpled bed. The bed which belongs to him and Draco Malfoy. Harry’s heart hammers and he looks away quickly, deciding that thinking about that right now might just make his head implode. Instead, he picks up his wand and stalks out into the hallway. He makes slow, cautious progress, wand held out before him; even though he knows that he’s unlikely to be assaulted by anything disturbing in what appears to be his own house, this morning is just proving beyond all doubt that anything can happen.

Somewhere outside, a gate creaks on its hinges and the faint sound in Harry’s ears stirs his sleeping memory until his head feels as though it’s full of swirling, sparkling feathers and he has to close his eyes against it and lean back on the cold wall.

“You’re a good boy.”

“I’m going to do you a favour... but there are rules... rules... tell no one!”

“Send up red sparks if you need me.”

Harry groans and slides to the floor, perching precariously in a crouch against the wall.

“That rotten old bugger,” he mutters to the empty hallway.

Sighing deeply, he opens one eye and focuses on the small brown spider which is making a valiant effort to scale a nearby banister. Distracted temporarily from his current problem, he keeps very still and watches the apparent battle between determined arachnid and polished wood.

“You can do it,” he murmurs, both eyes open now, willing on the little spider as it conquers another few inches of the slippery surface. He leans closer, weight on his hands on the cold floor, startled by a chunk of too-long hair that falls into his eyes and shaking it away. “Come on, then,” he urges.

As though spurred on by his encouragement, the spider attacks the final third of his vertical climb with erratic vigour, legs flailing with impressive speed.

“That’s it... oh, no,” Harry sighs, watching the spider lose its footing and slide untidily down the banister and onto the landing. It crouches there, defeated, and Harry can’t help but feel that the spider is blaming him. Habit of a lifetime, he supposes. He’s always been an easy person to blame because he doesn’t seem to mind as much as anyone else.

Finally, the spider scuttles closer and appears to inspect the next banister along. Harry smiles, and then startles at the characteristic whooshing sound issuing from downstairs.
Someone’s here. Someone has just walked out of the fireplace and into the kitchen, if his ears and his memory can be trusted. Pulse racing, Harry takes a firmer grip of his wand and leveres himself to his feet. On impulse, he carefully scoops up the spider and sets it atop the balustrade. As he sets off down the stairs to (well, quite possibly, anyway) meet his doom, the spider flings itself into empty air on a long string of silk. Harry’s eyes follow its dizzying progress and his stomach drops in empathy.

“Draco?” comes a loud, refined male voice from the kitchen, and Harry misses a step, just about avoiding a headlong trip down the stairs.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, certain that he used to have some balance. Then again, he supposes he used to have a lot of things and there’s just no telling what fresh hell is waiting around the next corner—or, more specifically, what fresh hell is waiting for him in the kitchen.

Finally, he finds himself outside the kitchen, listening as two voices—one male and one female—engage in a somewhat barbed exchange. He holds his breath.

“I told you it was a bad idea to turn up unannounced,” murmurs the woman. “I imagine he is at work.”

“You think everything is a bad idea,” the man snaps. “I have no idea why I married you.”

The woman laughs. “Be quiet, Lucius. No one wants to hear what you think.”

Harry’s eyes widen. Lucius Malfoy? Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Instinctively, he flattens himself against the wall, gasping at the temperature and suddenly very aware that he’s wearing boxers and nothing else. If there’s going to be a fight here, he’s going into it extremely underdressed.

As his fingers close around his wand, the words of that bearded old trickster swim once more in front of his eyes:

Send up red sparks if you need me.

Harry focuses as much as possible, tries to pretend there aren’t any Malfoys in his kitchen, and sends up a shower of red sparks.

Nothing happens.

Frowning, Harry tries again. And again. And again, until both stubbornness and patience are utterly worn out, and he realises he’s been had. It’s a dirty trick.

“Red sparks my arse,” he mutters.

“I don’t think you should touch that,” Narcissa Malfoy says darkly to her husband.

Harry sighs and rubs his face. This isn’t going away, that much is abundantly clear. He could try to Apparate out, but if the place is warded, it will be messy, and even if it isn’t, he’s practically naked. Best to face these things head on.

“Right then,” he tells the hallway, taking a breath and walking through the door.

And there he is. Lucius Malfoy, cane and all, is standing in the middle of a kitchen Harry hasn’t seen for almost twenty years. His eyes meet Harry’s and suddenly it’s as though the room is full of haughty, imposing aristocrat. Bastard, Death Eater, and Draco Malfoy’s father. And he’s singing.

“You’re the dragon, you’re to blame, you singed my heart with your wicked flame,” he rumbles,
gesturing with arm and cane like some kind of demented torch singer.

“Fuck me,” Harry whispers, unable to hold the words in.

“I think Draco has that covered, don’t you?” Lucius says, reverting to his previous stiff posture and raising an eyebrow. “And I suspect ‘hello’ is the word you’re scrabbling for.”

“Is it?” Harry says faintly, feeling the heat of embarrassment prickling his skin.

Lucius says nothing and his refined face remains inscrutable, but Narcissa’s mouth flickers at one corner and she folds her hands neatly in front of her before she speaks. “I think you may have forgotten your clothes.”

Harry groans inwardly and his toes curl against the tiles with the effort of staying still, brazening it out, and trying not to think about the fact that Lucius Malfoy can see his nipples. His hard nipples, at that. It’s fucking freezing in this kitchen.

“Erm, yes, sorry about that,” he says, mind racing. “I... er... do get a bit forgetful sometimes. Is there something I can help you with?”

“You don’t look well, Mr Potter,” Narcissa says. Her delicate brow wrinkles and Harry bites the inside of his mouth, exercising a self control he never knew he possessed. He’s only been here five minutes and he’s already sick of being told how awful he looks. It’s not that he’s a vain person, but really, he does have limits.

“I’m fine, thank you,” he lies, just as Lucius affects a bored sigh and chips in:

“Have you been drinking?”

A well-timed wave of nausea makes itself known in the pit of Harry’s stomach and he swallows repeatedly, beginning a silent mantra of I will not vomit on Lucius Malfoy... I will not vomit... I will not... that cloak looks expensive... I will not vomit...

“Not this morning,” Harry says weakly, and even in this delicate condition, some mischievous part of him wants to add ‘yet’.

“Terribly common thing, drinking to excess,” Lucius drawls, not quite meeting Harry’s eyes.

Beside him, Narcissa makes a soft sound of amusement. “Only the pot would know quite how to call out the kettle on his...” She pauses. “Unfortunate hue.”

Lucius scowls. Harry, delighted in spite of himself, seizes upon the opportunity to change the subject.

“So!” he says loudly, and both Malfoys turn back to him. “Would anyone like a cup of tea?”

Two blue eyes and two grey blink back at him and Harry’s own words reverberate mockingly inside his head.

Would anyone like a cup of tea?

A cup of tea?!

He’s standing here, practically naked, in the middle of godknowswhatthefuckisgoingon and when faced with two disturbingly blond interlopers, he offers them tea. Tea.
And, he muses, absently scratching at his hair, are these disturbing blond interlopers his in-laws? Of some description? Harry’s stomach flops over again and he makes the executive decision to stop thinking about that.

“He can’t hear you, Narcissa, he’s intoxicated,” Lucius is saying, and Harry snaps back to the situation at hand.

“I’m really not,” Harry promises, and on impulse coughs into his hand. “But perhaps I’d better get back to bed.”

“Hm.” Narcissa purses her lips, apparently assessing Harry’s performance. “Well, we only thought we would talk with Draco about the plans for next week.”

“Next week?”


“Ah. That,” Harry says, comforted to know—if nothing else—when he is. “I’m afraid Draco’s not here right now.”

“Is he still asleep?” Lucius demands. “It’s after nine, you know.”

Narcissa looks at the floor and makes an odd little noise.

“No,” Harry says triumphantly, feeling bizarrely pleased with himself. “He’s in a meeting!”

“A meeting,” Narcissa repeats, as though it’s an exotic new word. Lucius merely sighs.

“Yes, that’s right, and I shall ask him to call when he gets home,” Harry says hurriedly, feeling another cold wave of sickness rolling over him and deciding to shove them back into the fire from whence they came before something regrettable and messy happens. It’s definitely best not to focus on the fact that he’s essentially taking messages for Malfoy. “Good to see you both—Mr Malfoy, Mrs Malfoy.”

Harry steps back as the flames turn green.

“He smells like gin,” Lucius tells his wife a split-second before they disappear.

Rolling his eyes, Harry lifts his hand and attempts to check the smell of his breath. Five seconds later, he’s throwing up into the sink.

**~*~**

A very hot, very satisfying shower works like magic at separating Harry from his hangover, leaving behind only a mild headache and a raging thirst. He wanders, dripping, into the bedroom in search of clothing—he certainly doesn’t plan on exposing himself to anyone else today.

Making a conscious effort to suppress the sense of panic twisting in his chest, he throws himself into his task and throws open every one of the numerous wardrobe doors.

“Who the hell needs this many clothes?” he asks of the room. Reassuringly, there’s no response.

He sighs and starts rifling through shirts, sweaters, robes and trousers in a bewildering array of colours. The fabrics feel expensive and luxurious under his fingers, but there doesn’t seem to be
anything here that’s obviously his. Everything is neatly arranged by colour, and one closet seems to contain nothing but stripy garments. One thing’s for sure, his wardrobe at home looks nothing like this. In fact, he’s more of a ‘sling it over the back of a chair and hope for the best’ kind of man.

Overwhelmed, Harry takes a deep breath and launches himself—head and shoulders—into the nearest closet and rummages for his life. Heavy fabric closes in around him, and though the clean, spicy scent is comforting, there’s a very real part of him that is afraid of suffocating. Fortunately, his fingers close around soft, warm denim and, with a cry of triumph, he withdraws, hair ruffled and breathing hard.

“Normal person jeans,” he sighs happily, eyeing the neat rows of scary fitted trousers and fashionable... things with deep suspicion. These jeans are worn thin, frayed, with holes in the knees and they look as though they’ll be...

... oh, god, yes, so comfortable.

Very aware of the temperature outside, Harry plunges back into the wardrobe until he finds a soft red sweater and a long wool coat. It takes him a moment or two to close everything back up again, especially as two or three recalcitrant jackets keep making a determined effort to push their way into the act.

“Be good!” he remonstrates, eventually pulling his wand and locking the doors by magic.

As he walks past the full length mirror on the way of out the bedroom he stops and, for the first time, takes a moment to regard his reflection. The person staring back at him makes him catch his breath. It’s still him, there’s no doubt about that, but he looks better than he ever remembers looking in his life. This Harry has no dark circles or bags under his eyes and the crow’s feet he remembers are barely there—just enough to add a warm crinkle when he tries an experimental smile.

He was right, these glasses are different; they’re lighter and more stylish, and his hair is far longer than he remembers it, falling into his eyes at the front and messily grazing his collar at the back. Narcissa Malfoy was right, too—he does look a bit pale—and his chin is prickly with stubble, but he looks good.

Fascinated now, he turns to the side and inspects his profile. It seems that everything is where it should be, which is a relief, but he hadn’t imagined it in the shower—his comfortable little desk-job-belly is nowhere to be seen. Harry chews on his lip and admires the flat stomach he hasn’t seen for a good ten years. It’s not as though he’s ever been truly out of shape, but this is impressive.

“Like what you see?” says the mirror teasingly, and Harry makes a face.

“You shush,” he mumbles, letting his coat and sweater fall back into place.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he looks his mirror image in the eye. Time to figure out exactly where he is, why he is, and whether or not it’s permanent. Slowly, like a man walking to his own horrible death, he walks down the stairs, carefully avoiding the huge spider’s web in progress. Opting for caution, he walks a good few yards out into Grimmauld Place before attempting to Disapparate.

First of all, he has to get home. Hopefully, the rest will follow.

**~*~**

Seconds later, Harry creeps out from the small, empty courtyard behind the village pub and attempts to blend inconspicuously into the early morning shoppers; he threads his way through knots of
gossiping old ladies, pink-cheeked children with their mothers in tow, and several others wearing a slightly manic expression that Harry knows well—that of the last-minute Christmas shopper.

He recognises a number of them by sight, but something stops him, keeps his hands in his coat pockets and his eyes focused only on his target, just over the hill. Number forty-two, Willoughby Drive. Home, he thinks, quickening his pace and gulping down the wonderfully familiar-tasting cold air. It’s somehow softer here than in London, and he wishes he knew whether or not that was a good thing.

The driveway is iridescent with frost that makes Harry stumble more than once before he reaches the cottage. Scowling, he raises his hand to knock at the door and pauses, fingers inches from the wood. Wood that has been painted red, and not recently, either, Harry realises with a double-thump of his heart as he skates his fingers down the door and dislodges flakes of weathered red paint.

Swallowing hard, he steps back and tries to look into the window, searching in vain for something, anything, familiar, but the curtains are drawn. Something is very wrong, and though his wand hand twitches in its pocket, he fights to keep it still.

Well, you’re not going to achieve anything standing on the doorstep all morning, are you? his subconscious prods.

Harry sighs, trying to tuck his nose into his collar against the cold and shifting on the spot. He’s almost certain that he used to be more decisive than this. In fact, he suspects that Voldemort would have seized control of half the universe by now had the only person standing in his way been this Harry Potter. This ‘I’ll do it in a minute’, ‘no arguments in my office, please’, ‘I think I’m getting old’ Harry Potter.

“Voldemort can bite me,” he mutters darkly, and raps at the door. Hard.

There’s a scuffle and what sounds like the protesting cry of a small child, and then the door flies open.

“Can I help you?” asks a tired-looking woman with long dark hair and a struggling toddler on her hip.

“Erm... who are you?” Harry blurts before he can stop himself.

The woman frowns and when she speaks again, her tone is cool. “I live here. Are you selling something?”

“No, of course not, but this house—”

“Are you from the council again?” the woman interrupts, holding her child more tightly. “Have you got any ID?”

“No,” Harry says, and the woman sighs and goes to close the door in his face. “No!” he shouts, shooting out a hand to stop her and immediately regretting it when her dark eyes grow wide with fear. “I mean, no, I’m not from the council. This is going to sound crazy, but this is my house.”

Startled, she lets go of the door and stares at him. “I don’t think so. We’ve lived here for ten years... I mean, we haven’t paid off the mortgage yet but it’s definitely our house. I don’t even know who you are.”

Harry blinks. Even through the madness swirling in his head, the surprise of someone not knowing who he is still strikes him—and it would be pleasant if it weren’t so terrifying.
“Believe me, this is just as confusing for me,” Harry sighs, craning his neck to see past the woman and into the hallway, which is full of unfamiliar coats and boots and photographs of a dark-haired couple with their baby. Where are Lily’s drawings and Frank’s muddy pawprints? James’ hats and Al’s messages and Ginny’s weird little sets of tables? “Could I come in for a moment?”

The woman shakes her head fiercely. “No. I’d like you to leave now.”

Her voice is shaky but vehement and desperation twists in Harry’s gut. “Please,” he croaks. “Can you... can you tell me who lived here before you?”

The baby fusses and seems to stare accusingly at Harry. “An old lady,” the woman says at last. “We bought the house when she had to go into a home.”

“Oh,” Harry whispers. He believes her. He believes that this is her house and that she has no idea who he is, and he feels sick. “Oh,” he repeats.

“Listen... is there someone I can call for you?” the woman says after a moment, and her voice has changed again. Soft, careful, light, she continues: “Let me get you some help.”

Harry’s eyes snap to hers and there’s no mistaking the twist of pity there. He bristles.

“No thank you,” he says, hands clenching into fists in his pockets. “I’m not going mad, you know.”

And even though he’s not entirely convinced of that himself, he turns and stomps down the drive without waiting for a response. He’s so focused on not looking back at the house that he doesn’t notice the person in the lane until he’s almost tripped over him.

“Bugger, sorry!” Harry yelps, instinctively grabbing at the unfortunate soul’s velvet sleeves to shorten his slide on the icy ground. Purple velvet? Harry looks up. “Grady!”

“Good heavens!” the man cries, pale blue eyes wide with astonishment. “Harry Potter!”

“Er, yeah,” Harry admits, frowning and absently patting the dog that is nosing at his coat. “Listen, do you know where—?”

“Harry Potter himself, I can barely believe it!” Grady interrupts, beaming. “What an honour, sir, what a bloody honour it is!”

“Grady, what’re you on about?” Harry asks wearily, already wondering why he’s bothering.

“And he knows my name! Jumping jingleberries, Watson, what do you think of that?” he cries, looking away from Harry momentarily to address the Labrador, who barks lustily and then continues trying to push his wet nose into Harry’s pocket.

“You really don’t know me, do you?” Harry sighs.

Grady frowns as a particularly vicious blast of wind blows his greying hair out around his face like a silver mane. “Of course I know you, Mr Potter. Everybody knows you. You’re a hero! But I’ve never been lucky enough to see you in the village before—I suppose you’ve come to visit your good friends over at Hollybrush?” Grady pauses and leans in conspiratorially. “Forgive me for prying, but I do sometimes happen across Mrs Granger-Weasley and she’s always ever so kind to me.”

“Hermione,” Harry says softly and mostly to himself. Hermione and Ron. Hope sparks at the thought of his friends and he manages a smile for Grady. “Yes, that’s right, in fact I’m on my way over there now... probably late, too, so... better get going!”
“Leave Mr Potter alone now, Watson,” Grady advises and waves at Harry, beaming. “An absolute delight to meet you!”

Harry looks at the eager, oddly-dressed man and his dog and waves back, mind already at Ron and Hermione’s front door. “You too,” he manages. “Both of you.”

Grady is still waving furiously and, by the looks of it, talking to his dog, when Harry turns the corner, leaving the house that is not his behind and heading for a place where, he hopes, there will be answers.

**~*~**

This time the door flies open straight away and Harry finds himself face to face with Ginny, looking beautiful in a long, emerald green cardigan and jeans. One hand rests on the doorknob and the other holds an apple, over which she regards Harry and takes a huge, crunchy bite.

“Hlo,” she mumbles, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Confused, Harry scrubs at his hair. “Ginny... you don’t live here.”

“Yes, I know,” she says slowly, swallowing her bite of apple. “Neither do you.”

“I live in London,” Harry mumbles, trying to figure out what is so different about his wife but struggling to put his finger on it. “Apparently.”

“Yes, I know,” she repeats, lifting an eyebrow and flashing a puzzled smile. “So do I. What are we playing exactly?”

Taking another bite, she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and that’s it. The hair through which her aubergine-coloured nails are flicking is drastically shorter than usual. Ginny’s hair is, for want of a better word, trendy, somehow, and falls in choppy layers around her face. It’s startling, and the question escapes Harry’s mouth entirely without his permission.

“What happened to your hair?”

She pulls a face. “Charming. You said you liked it last week.”

“No, well, I mean—”

“Gin?” comes a familiar bellow from inside the house just before Hermione—a wonderfully normal-looking Hermione—appears in the hallway. “Are you flirting with the postman again? Oh... hello, Harry.”

Before he has time to respond, she is hustling him into the warm cottage, leaving Ginny to kick the door shut behind them. The kitchen smells, as it always does, like the cinnamon toast that Ron loves and the fresh coffee that keeps Hermione awake through long meetings at the Ministry and various duties for the ten thousand different PTA groups she belongs to. There’s a half-made glittery tomato costume draped over the nearest chair and Harry sighs gently, allowing himself to relax just a fraction.

“Harry’s being weird,” Ginny advises.

Hermione pokes him into a chair with frightening ease and rakes her eyes over him for several seconds. “You do look a bit odd. Have you been using that funny glue again?”
Harry blinks, unsure whether or not he should be offended. “What? No! Well... I don’t think so...”

“Maybe he’s having a mid-life crisis,” Ginny suggests helpfully. She sits down, carefully avoiding the tomato costume, and Hermione leans against the counter.

“He’s not that old, Gin,” Hermione says, flicking her wand in the general direction of the kettle.

“Yes, thank you, I’m only thirty-seven... aren’t I?” Harry quells the rising panic when both women shoot him an odd look. “And you’re older than me, Hermione, so if I’m going senile, there’s not much hope for you.”

Hermione snorts and hands him a steaming cup; he accepts it gratefully and wraps his cold-numbed hands around it.

“Alright,” she says delicately, “I’m putting an embargo on all age-related discussions in the kitchen. This is one area of life where I’d really prefer just not to think about it.”

“Can we talk about it in the living room, then?” Ginny begins, poking Harry with her foot, and then: “Oh, wow... did Draco let you out of the house in those jeans?”

Harry frowns, glancing down at the offending garment. “What’s wrong with them?”

Ginny shrugs. “Nothing, but as far as I’m aware you’re only allowed to wear them in your workshop. Feeling rebellious?”

Harry sighs and sits back in his chair. There isn’t one part of that sentence that he understands.

“Not especially,” he mumbles. His head is starting to hurt again.

“Sometimes I’m not sure how you put up with that man,” Hermione says, and Ginny gives her a look. “You know what I mean. I know you love him, but if Ron started making rules about my clothes, I’d hex him in the, erm, dangling parts.”

Ginny makes an odd sound that’s half giggle and half choking on a piece of apple. “I’d like to say good for you, ’Mione, but can we possibly not talk about my brother’s bits?”

“Seconded,” Harry says quickly, gulping down coffee.

“So,” Ginny says, still gasping a little, “not only are you wearing the forbidden jeans—” She wiggles her fingers dramatically, “—but you’re also here instead of in the ’shop. What’s going on?”

“Did you have an argument?” Hermione asks, eyebrows knitted in concern.

“Not as far as I know,” Harry mutters, scuffing his shoes on the floor and squirming inwardly as the memory of that unexpected goodbye kiss creeps, unbidden, into his mind. He’s painfully aware, too, that this Ginny isn’t his Ginny. Isn’t his wife. She’s more relaxed and more playful, and even though that should be a good thing, it hurts like a corkscrew to the chest. Harry breathes.

And then, from nowhere at all, several pieces that he’s deliberately been keeping in the air fall neatly into place and his mouth drops open a little.

“Oh, fuck, I’m gay!” he blurs out, cutting off Ginny midsentence.

She laughs. “Please tell me this hasn’t just occurred to you. Wait, of course it hasn’t... I vividly remember an extremely awkward conversation with you about it... let’s see, eighteen years ago?”
“Yes, we had one of those, too!” Hermione offers, eyes bright with amusement, and it becomes painfully apparent that they’re teasing him. Ganging up on him, in fact, for some past awkwardness that he doesn’t even remember. “Hermione, I think I like Draco... you know, in a liking sort of way,” she says, affecting a deeper voice and a puzzled expression.

Harry flushes horribly and scrubs at his face with one hand. His stomach is doing cartwheels and his mouth is so dry that he thinks he may never unstick his tongue from the roof of it. He’s gay. Surely he shouldn’t only be finding this out now, at his apparently advanced age. He’s gay, and he’s gay with Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, who apparently has some bizarre leverage over his fashion choices.

And Ginny’s... well, she’s here, but he has no idea beyond that. And as that thought reaches its natural conclusion, Harry stops breathing temporarily.

“What about Lily and James and Albus?” he manages at last.

Hermione slides into the chair next to him, and her dark eyes seem to flood his vision. “Your parents and Dumbledore are dead, Harry, you know that,” she says, voice rough with concern.

“No... I mean... the children. My children,” he whispers, as Ginny turns away and exchanges a glance with Hermione.

Instinctively, he slips a hand into his pocket for Al’s note and of course it’s not there... not just because these aren’t the right jeans, but because here there is no Al. There never was. Draco Malfoy has had seventeen years practise of watching him sleep. He’s never been married to Ginny at all. Feeling as though he’s been hit with something heavy, he closes his eyes. His insides turn to ice and he grips the edge of his chair hard.

“Harry?” someone is saying. “Do you want me to call Draco? What do you think will help, Gin?”

Tell no one, the man said. Tell no one. What the fuck am I going to do?

“Sleep and some industrial strength hangover potion, probably. I’m going to have Blaise killed,” Ginny is saying beside him, and he forces his eyes open. “No, you know what? I’m going to do it myself.”

“Has he been making his own wine again?” Hermione asks with a light shudder.

“No. He’s been making gin. In the bath.” Ginny rolls her eyes.

Hermione snorts. “Well, for all I say about Ron, he’s never done that... it’d be too close to cleaning it, I imagine.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry offers truthfully. With some effort, he pulls on a face that he hopes looks more reassuring.

“Poor Harry,” Ginny says, resting her head on his shoulder. Her hair tickles his nose and she smells nice, sweet, like some kind of flower, but not right. Not right at all.

**~*~**

By the time he leaves the cottage his head is in a spin. Hermione and Ginny, in a confusing blend of clucking and teasing, have sent him home, but he has no intention of returning to Grimmauld Place. Barely thinking, he ducks behind a hedge and Apparates, almost at random, into an alley in Muggle London.
Here, the streets are rain-slicked and the frost is almost nowhere to be seen, though determined patches can be seen here and there, clinging to kerbs and window ledges. Harry wanders through the crowds, allowing himself to be buffeted by people with far more purpose. At last, feeling as though he’s starting to bruise, he ducks into the nearest cafe. It’s warm, steam-filled and smells like fried food and wet coats. The chairs are made of bright orange plastic and are bolted to the floor, and Harry knows that nothing good is going to come out of that serving hatch, but it doesn’t matter.

“Hot chocolate, please,” he says at the counter without looking up. Perhaps the sugar will help.

“D’ya want whipped cream on that, young man?”

Harry’s head jerks up painfully. Blinks just to make sure.

“You!”

The bearded old man grins, revealing his glinting gold teeth. “Me. ‘Ow about chocolate sprinkles?”

“What are you doing here?” Harry demands, eyeing his tabard and the nametag that reads ‘Boris’.

“Playin’ ’opscotch with a dragon, what does it look like?” Boris wriggles bushy eyebrows.

“No, I mean... never mind that, anyway, what the hell have you done to me?” Harry hisses. He leans across the counter, both hands pressed to the sticky metal surface, and stares the meddlesome old bugger in the eyes.

“Don’t be like that, lad.” The milky eyes blink slowly. “Just givin’ you a little glimpse.”

“What?”

“A glimpse. Now, do you want this hot chocolate or not?”

Startled, Harry allows his fingers to slide back across the counter and stands upright. “I do, actually. I don’t think the whipped cream would be a very good idea, though,” he says, feeling his stomach turn at the thought.

“Right you are.” Boris taps haphazardly at the buttons on the till. “Five Sickles twenty.”

“Isn’t this a Muggle cafe?” Harry whispers, looking around.

“It is. That’s for me,” he says, holding out a wrinkled hand. “You don’t really think I work here, do you?”

Harry makes a small sound of disbelief. “I’m not paying you if you don’t work here! And anyway, I want an explanation.”

Boris smiles slowly. “For five Sickles twenty you can ’ave hot chocolate and one of those. At least, up to a point.”

For a moment, he and Harry stare at one another. The only sounds are the clinking of cutlery and the muffled shouts of the cooks behind the hatch, but the pressure inside Harry’s head soon ratchets up to breaking point.

“Fine.” He hands over the coins and stalks over to a corner table, feeling almost certain that he’s just been outmanoeuvred, but feeling equally certain that his only real option is to go with it.

Harry sits in an uncomfortable chair and silently accepts the huge mug of hot chocolate that Boris
places in front of him. He has discarded his tabard and now sits opposite Harry in his oilskin coat, a vast cup of tea clasped under his chin.

“It’s nice to see you again, young man,” he says, and there’s something like genuine affection in his tone that utterly confuses Harry.

“Well... good... I think. I need to know what you did.”

“I told you—it’s just a glimpse. You said you wanted to know what would ’appen if you did somethin’ different.” Boris sips his drink calmly, allowing rivulets of tea to flow down his beard unchecked. “An’ this is it.”

Harry’s heart hammers. “But... what did I do differently?”

Boris shrugs. “Only you know that, lad. Don’t tell me you didn’t see it?”

“See it?” Harry whispers, and then he remembers the dream. The bathroom, and then the light at the top of the staircase. Eyes and sheets and words... so many words that he couldn’t make out. Still can’t. “What happened in my dream really happened?”

Boris nods. “How’d you like it?”

“Like it?” Harry demands, stiffening in his seat. “How do I like it? My wife isn’t my wife, my children...” He swallows hard. “My children don’t exist and I’m gay with Draco Malfoy!”

It’s only when two old ladies turn around from their table at the other side of the cafe and tut at Harry that he realises how loud and indignant he has become. He smiles weakly at them.

“Well, you were right, then,” Boris says mildly. “Things are completely different.”

Harry drops his head into his hands and groans his exasperation into them. “I liked you a lot better when I was drunk,” he mumbles.

Boris’ laughter is loud and rumbly in the hush and Harry opens one eye and regards him through his fingers. “Shh. My head hurts.”

“So, what did you do, lad? Kill someone? Confess undyin’ love? See the world?”

Harry emerges from behind his hands and stares at the scratched formica table. “I saved him,” he whispers, and the realisation squeezes his heart in a raw, new place.

“So it would seem,” Boris agrees, creaking around in his chair.

“Is that all you’re going to say? Aren’t you going to help me... you know, fill in the blanks?” Harry appeals, feeling helpless.

“It’s all there if you only look, you know.” Boris inclines his head sagely.

“Great, that’s really enlightening.”

“I’m glad.”

“How long is this going to last?” Harry asks, gulping at his overly-sweet hot chocolate and trying not to feel defeated.

“Oh, as long as it takes,” Boris says matter-of-factly, inspecting the inside of his teacup as though
Harry isn’t even there.

Leaning back in his chair and allowing his arms to dangle, Harry sighs heavily. Frowns as a thought occurs to him. “Anyway, what the hell are you doing in...” He glances at the writing on the windows, “Fontayne’s Diner if you’re so good at messing with people’s lives?”

The milky eyes are impassive. “Just checkin’ up on you, that’s all.”

Harry doesn’t have an answer to that.

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By the time he forces himself to head back, it’s completely dark outside.

The walk back to Grimmauld Place is long, cold and just what Harry needs. Somehow, the icy wind that swipes through his hair, numbs his nostrils and sets his teeth on edge also manages to smooth down his panic until it no longer feels as though it might burst out of his ribcage and tear him apart. In fact, by the time number twelve looms into view, a detached sort of calm has settled over him. There’s no telling how long it will last this time, but just for now, the knowledge that his children are safe somewhere—that they are at all—will do.

This other part, though... this Malfoy part... well. Harry swallows hard, holds onto his courage and lets himself into the house. He can deal with that, he’s a... alright, he doesn’t know exactly what he’s supposed to be yet, but he’s a man and he’s a Gryffindor and he’s perfectly capable of coping with anything.

“I think I’ve got Fitzwilliam,” comes a shout from the kitchen—a shout that definitely belongs to a Malfoy, and Harry can only hope it’s not Lucius again.

Only one way to find out, he supposes, pleased at least that he’s properly covered up this time.

He steps into the kitchen. It’s just Malfoy. His Malfoy, or at least, Draco Malfoy. Harry frowns. “What?”

Malfoy looks up from where he’s writing furiously at the table, which is scattered with bits of parchment, quills, an empty stripy coffee mug and a strange little carved box.

“Fitzwilliam. I caught sight of him after my meeting and by some stroke of luck had a spare flask on me, so I did red-haired legitimate businessman,” Malfoy says, drawing down his eyebrows and affecting a strange accent, “and managed to get him to insinuate that he was definitely in the business of turning a blind eye or two for the right amount of Galleons.”

Harry stares for a moment, silenced by the odd little half-smile on Malfoy’s lips. He looks genuinely pleased, and Harry doesn’t think he’s ever seen anything so strange. Suddenly, though, recognition yanks at him, and not pleasantly.

“She? Head of Magical Law Enforcement Fitzwilliam?” he demands. It can’t be.

Malfoy nods slowly, smile fading into exasperation. “How many other Fitzwilliams have I been chasing for the last six months?”

I have no idea, Harry wants to say, but he searches frantically for more helpful words. “Yeah, sorry... it’s just sometimes hard to believe that someone like Franz... erm, someone like Fitzwilliam could be corrupt,” he says, voice rough with very real disbelief.
As Head of the Auror Office, he’s had many meetings with the Head of MLE, and even though the rational part of him knows that this him has probably never done any such thing, it still comes as a blow.

Unexpectedly, Malfoy smiles again. “Thanks.”

Harry blinks. “Er... you’re welcome?”

“Aren’t you in a strange little mood this evening?” Malfoy says, setting down his quill and folding his arms across his chest. He sighs. “I do take a special pride in exposing the unlikeliest of villains, you know that... oh, good grief. What on earth are you wearing?”

Redundantly, Harry glances down at his outfit. He remembers Ginny’s astonishment all too well, but opts to ignore it. “Clothes?” he attempts.

Malfoy snorts. “If you say so. I thought I threw those horrendous jeans out weeks ago,” he says, refined face a picture of disdain.

Something about that expression releases Harry from his stupor and he’s filled with maddening, prickly warmth as his brain helpfully reminds him that fucking hell, he really doesn’t like Malfoy very much. The fact that this Harry, this one here, seems to be existing in some kind of domestic bliss with the stuck-up twat is more than a little bit confusing.

“Well, you didn’t,” he offers, feeling petulant. “They were at the back of the wardrobe. And I wore them out. I went all the way to visit Hermione in them.”

Malfoy’s eyebrows shoot up. “Visiting Hermione? Did you even go to work today?”

“No.” Harry folds his arms too and meets flashing grey eyes in a surprisingly intense stare-off. He has the strangest feeling he’s about to be told off, and it’s been so long since anyone told him off that there’s an odd little part of him that’s looking forward to it.

“Lazy bastard Gryffindor,” Malfoy sighs. “If only we could all take a day off whenever we felt the slightest bit delicate.”

Harry resents the use of the word ‘slightest’, but doesn’t think there’s any use arguing the point. “Well, if your friends force-feed me cocktails...” he begins.

“Blaise is your friend, too,” Malfoy cuts in, looking almost wounded.

“When he makes gin in the bathtub, he’s all yours,” Harry mutters, momentarily terrified at how easy this is.

“Did he really?” Malfoy’s face is a curious mixture of horror and delight.

Harry nods. In the amused silence that follows, he shrugs off his coat and slumps into a chair at the table, idly trying to read Malfoy’s notes upside down. This Malfoy definitely isn’t a financial advisor, and whatever sort of investigator-type-character he is, it obviously agrees with him.

“That man is a horror,” Malfoy is mumbling, but Harry isn’t really listening. He’s noticing the way Malfoy’s hair falls into his eyes as he leans forward across the table on his elbows and laughs softly. He’s noticing the way that the fall of blond hair and the genuine smile soften his features to the point where he’s almost unrecognisable as the man on the platform in September. That Malfoy had looked stiff and stretched beyond his years, closed-faced and black-clad with hair slicked back so severely it had looked almost invisible.
That man had been, Harry supposes, a natural extension of the Malfoy he’d always known, but this man is a completely unknown quantity. His eyes are warm as he looks up and runs his bare foot up Harry’s calf under the table. Harry inhales sharply.

“That’s your turn to make dinner,” he says in such a low, rough tone that Harry feels as though he’s just been propositioned.

“Well, that’ll be interesting,” Harry mumbles, glancing around at the vaguely familiar kitchen and wondering how long it’s going to take him to find something edible amongst all those cupboards. “And what are you going to do, exactly?”

“Watch,” Malfoy says, gathering his parchments together in an odd order that Harry hasn’t a hope of understanding. He smirks. “Now take off those ghastly jeans. They’re upsetting me.”

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Harry makes it to the end of the evening with his sanity intact, which is more than he had hoped for. After dinner, he barely sees anything of Malfoy but the top of his head as he scribbles page after page of notes and chews on his bottom lip. From time to time, he looks up from his spot, curled in the armchair nearest the fire, and his eyes dart around the room as though he’s searching for something that isn’t there.

Conscious of trying to act as ‘normal’ as possible, Harry sprawls on the wonderfully comfortable worn leather sofa (the kind Ginny hates, he notes with interest) and pretends to read the newspaper. At least, he does until Malfoy’s eyes linger on him for a second longer than usual and he says:

“You do know that’s yesterday’s, don’t you? And you’ve already read it?”

Harry glances down at the paper, dismayed. “Are you sure?” he manages, trying to sound convincing.

Malfoy sighs and smiles at him indulgently as he resumes his writing. “Yes,” he says mildly. “Mostly because you spent a good ten minutes ranting about the restaurant reviews.”

“Oh.” Harry stares into the fire and attempts to recall a time when he has even bothered to read a restaurant review, never mind rant about one. “Yeah, that’s right, bloody restaurant reviewers,” he says, hoping his frown looks more contemptuous than confused. “Just thought I’d... er... read it again. Just to make sure.”

Malfoy makes an odd little sound but doesn’t bother to look up. “Sometimes I can’t help wondering if your leg wasn’t the only thing you injured during the war,” he murmurs drily.

Harry freezes. His fingers clench around the newspaper and his heart slams against his ribcage as he stares down at his legs. Legs that are now encased in expensive black fabric and that look absolutely fine to him. Something cold rakes over him and he has to fight hard against the desire to fuck Boris’ rules, grab Malfoy and demand to know what he’s talking about.

He wriggles his toes experimentally and rotates each knee and ankle in turn. Everything seems to be in working order, but the race of his pulse and the dryness of his throat tell him that Malfoy isn’t messing around and not only that, his careless words suggest that this is something they’ve been dealing with for a long time.

What’s wrong with me? he wonders silently, knowing, even in his horror, not to voice the question. Malfoy will certainly have an answer for him, and he doubts it will be one he’ll like.
“I think I’ll head to bed,” Malfoy says after what feels like a long time, startling Harry out of his reverie.

He looks up. “Hm?”

“I’m going to bed,” Malfoy repeats, unfolding himself from his chair and nudging Harry with his foot. “Are you coming? You really should if you’re to have any chance of making it into work tomorrow.”

Harry stares up at the raised eyebrow, the rumpled shirt, the quill balanced behind Malfoy’s ear. He opens his mouth to protest but the only thing that comes out is a huge, stretchy yawn, and Malfoy smirks. “I thought so.”

He turns and heads for the stairs, leaving Harry to slump back into the sofa and listen to his creaky footsteps tracking across the ceiling.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” he whispers to the empty room, suddenly very aware that he’s alone. He’s unaccustomed to such a quiet, civilised bedtime and it makes him ache. Summoning the last of his energy, he douses the flames in the grate with a flick of his wand and drags himself to his feet. There doesn’t seem to be any getting away from this sharing-a-bed thing, so he supposes he might as well get it over with.

He just wishes he felt as philosophical as he’s telling himself to be.

Malfoy is already sitting on the edge of the bed and undoing his cuffs when Harry braves the bedroom. With some effort, Harry does his best impression of ‘this is perfectly ordinary’ and lowers himself onto what seems to be his side of the bed. Unsure what to do now, as though the mundane routine of bedtime has been stolen from him by unseen hands, he listens to Malfoy’s soft, tuneless humming and examines the clock on his bedside. It’s strange—copper coloured with so many visible cogs and springs that he has to admit he’s confused. Still, the hands informing him that it’s twenty to midnight are shiny and wave gently back and forth as though to grab his attention.

“Your parents were here,” Harry says suddenly, and the humming stops. “This morning,” he adds.

“Oh, really? Did they have anything interesting to say for themselves?”

“They wanted to talk about Christmas,” Harry says, poking the clock and watching a puff of smoke emerge from the top. Surprised, he smiles.

Malfoy sighs heavily and shifts on the bed. “I have no idea why they bother, do you? Everyone knows we will be doing exactly the same buggering thing we do every fucking year, Merlin give me strength.”

“Should I expect more singing? Harry asks, turning around to regard Malfoy. He doesn’t really expect a response and he’s startled to hear Malfoy laugh and shake his head.

“More than likely. I never could figure out why the pair of you did that,” he admits.

Harry frowns. “Hm?”

“The Celestina Warbeck thing.” Malfoy stretches and starts to unbutton his shirt. Alarmed, Harry bites his tongue, but he doesn’t turn away. “Still, I certainly know better than to interfere with anything that suggests a civil relationship between the two of you. Don’t you remember what he did the first time I took you home to the Manor?”
Harry really doesn’t. “Mm,” he says absently, watching the crisp, white fabric slide from Malfoy’s shoulders and then dropping his eyes, suddenly uncomfortable. Even more so, which is saying something, he supposes.

There is silence for several minutes as Harry stares at his socks and listens to the swish and rustle of fabric as Malfoy undresses, wondering about injured legs and Christmas and Celestina Warbeck—the latter especially, for reasons passing understanding. He’s never really been a fan, and he can’t imagine Lucius Malfoy owns her greatest hits either.

“Something wrong?” Malfoy asks carefully, and there’s a hand brushing Harry’s shoulder.

You could say that, Harry thinks. “No, just tired,” he mumbles, and tries not to think about just how many times he has told that particular lie in the last few years.

With a sense of inevitability, he pulls his sweater over his head and kicks off his trousers and socks. He slides under the duvet and stares straight up at the ceiling, tightening his muscles against the shock of cold sheets against bare skin.

And there it is. He’s in bed with Draco Malfoy. Life certainly has a twisted sense of humour.

“Why is it so cold in here?” Malfoy grumbles very close to Harry’s ear, making all the hairs on his neck stand up and wave around in protest. Within seconds there is also a cold hand spread out on his belly, an icy foot pressed to his calf and the smell of clean man everywhere.


“Reasons won’t make me warm.”

“Shut up,” Harry mumbles, forcing himself to relax, which is somewhat of a challenge with a sudden mouthful of blond hair.

“I’ll shut you up in a minute,” Malfoy says threateningly into Harry’s neck.

Oh, good.

Inhaling deeply, Harry turns out the lights. He wonders if the pounding in his chest is as loud as it feels. Malfoy’s breathing is warm and regular against his skin, and, against all odds, is not entirely unpleasant. Harry turns his head carefully, gazing at the glowing hands of his clock and then out of the window at a clear sky full of stars, just like the one at home. Everything he’s always known himself to be is telling him to fight this, but something new—something interesting and vulnerable—is whispering to him, telling him that the sooner he does whatever it is Boris wants him to do, or learns whatever it is he wants him to learn, the sooner he will be able to go home.

“Clothes on the floor,” Malfoy murmurs.

“What?”

There’s no response.

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That light at the top of the stairs is becoming very familiar.

Harry moves toward it with purpose now, wanting, needing to find out more. Knowing he is there.
Pushing the door, heavy, carved wood, and then a wave of potion-spicy air.

Rustling sheets and caught breath. He knows, even though Harry is invisible.

“Malfoy?” Harry whispers, drawing close. “Draco?”

“Who’s there?” Grey eyes bright in the darkness. “Potter, is that you? Get away from me right this second!”

Look around. Heart tight with fear. Look around. His wand is on the bedside. Out of reach.

Creeping closer, tight, short breaths, and: “I just want to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” Pale in the moonlight, fingers clenched in the sheets, sitting upright in ill-fitting striped pyjamas. Small, pretending to be big.

“I gathered that much.” Drawing closer and allowing the cloak to slide down to his shoulders. “When you started throwing Unforgiveables at me.”

“I’ll start again if you don’t leave.” Almost a hiss. Lips twisted into a snarl.

“No, you won’t.” Summoning the wand from the bedside and hanging onto it tight. Cool, hard wood and shaking fingers. Bravery blown away into the darkness. “I’m sorry for what I did. But now you’re going to listen to me.”

“Fuck you, Potter.”


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“I’ve got to go,” murmurs a low voice next to Harry’s ear. His eyes snap open.

“Hm... Malfoy?”

“Malfoy again, eh?” The grey eyes are now inches from Harry’s as he leans over him, one hand either side of Harry’s head on the pillow. “I really wish I could stay and find out exactly what’s going on in your kinky little mind... believe me.” He sighs and runs a hand down Harry’s bare chest, skating fingertips over his abdomen and pressing a firm hand to Harry’s half-hard cock, which reacts with morning enthusiasm and quite without his permission, twitching into the caress and flooding his belly with inappropriate warmth.

“Oh,” he gasps, startled, and Malfoy presses harder, eyes intense.

“Now that’s just cruel... Potter,” he adds, quirking an eyebrow. “I’ve recently discovered that Mr Fitzwilliam likes to run in the park at some ridiculous hour of the morning, so...” he sighs regretfully and slides his fingers once more over Harry’s now-straining erection, making him grit his teeth. “I realise one must make sacrifices in the pursuit of truth, but really.”

Harry suppresses a whimper, torn evenly between the desire to pull away, leap off the bed and insist that Malfoy keeps his hands to himself, and the more primitive part of him that just wants, that demands attention and doesn’t really give a fuck about anything else.

“Yeah,” Harry manages, somewhat breathlessly. “So, will it be red-haired legitimate businessman again?”
Malfoy snorts. “Don’t you think he’d be a touch conspicuous in the park?”

“I’m not thinking much of anything with you doing that,” Harry says, feeling brave, distracted, and then suddenly horrified at his own words, at Malfoy’s smirk, and at the flush creeping over his chest and neck.

“Good to know I haven’t completely lost my touch.” Malfoy sighs and reclaims his hand. “I really do have to go now.”

Frustrated and confused, Harry squirms in place and nods. Malfoy leans down, slides his fingers into Harry’s hair and kisses him deeply, flicking his toothpaste-and-tea flavoured tongue into Harry’s mouth and making him gasp involuntarily. Somewhere in the midst of the madness and bewilderment swirling in his head, he’s conscious of the fact that he’s lying here, still and submissive, and allowing himself to be kissed.

That just won’t do. Screwing up his courage, he kisses back, grabbing a handful of Malfoy’s sweater and hoping for the best. He’s never kissed a man before in his life and it’s simultaneously terrifying and terrifyingly normal. Either way, his heart is hammering in his chest almost hard enough to distract him from the slash of hot guilt that lays him open as, from nowhere, Ginny leaps into his head. Both Ginnys, in fact: his wife—oh, god, his wife—and the brighter, happier one he met yesterday.

Sobered, he pulls away and avoids Malfoy’s eyes.

Breathing hard, Malfoy throws Harry an interesting half-smile and sits up reluctantly. “I really have to go. Don’t forget to go to work today.”

When the door closes behind him, Harry flops messily on the bed, arms and legs splayed. He stares at the ceiling.

“I just kissed Malfoy,” he whispers, licking his bottom lip and tasting mint.

“You certainly did,” the mirror offers, sounding amused.

Harry covers his eyes and groans. “I’m not afraid of damaging you. I’ve had plenty of bad luck already... I’m desensitised.”

He listens, but there’s nothing but an unimpressed ‘hmph!’ from the mirror, leaving Harry feeling alone once more, sprawled out across the wrinkled sheets with an aching erection that he’s half-scared to touch. As his eyes drift around the room, idly searching for a distraction, they fall upon a framed photograph on Malfoy’s chest of drawers.

Draco’s chest of drawers, he corrects himself resolutely. He really is going to have to get used to that before he inadvertently gets himself into some kinky sex game that he can’t get out of. As that thought slowly crystallises in his mind, he shivers and his neglected cock twitches. Horrified, Harry presses a quelling palm against it and reaches for the photograph.

He hates Malfoy, after all. Perhaps all of this is just a hallucination—his body’s way of telling him that it has been far too long since he last had sex.

Anyway.

Stretching onto his side, he looks at the silver-framed photograph, mouth turning dry.

It’s a photograph of him, a much younger him, standing almost silhouetted against a backdrop of
mountains and a vivid multi-coloured sunset. He’s wearing a fine green cardigan-type-garment, fitted jeans and a beaming, slightly sheepish, smile. It seems to be a windy day, and every now and then photo-Harry lifts a hand to swipe his hair out of his face. He looks happy, healthy, carefree, and Harry doesn’t remember anything about it.

He glances at a neat annotation in the corner of the photograph: Edinburgh, August 2002.

Harry chews his lip. He can’t recall exactly what he was doing in August 2002, but he knows he has never been to Edinburgh. Well, not in the life he remembers.

It’s all there if you only look, you know. That’s what Boris had said.

Suddenly suffused with a sense of purpose, Harry drops the photograph to the bed and jumps to his feet. Somewhere in this house, there has to be something that will help him to make sense of all this. Harry pulls open every drawer in the room in turn, rifling through the contents of each and moving onto the next. By the time he’s finished, breathless and disappointed, the room looks as though it has been ransacked by an enthusiastic burglar or a team of wayward pixies. And he’s found nothing.

He throws on some clothes and turns to leave the room. Hesitates. There’s a strange nagging sensation in his gut, one that doesn’t seem content to let him blithely abandon the mess he has made. Frowning, he hangs back in the doorway, drumming his fingers on the frame. The room really was very neat before he started... Harry sighs deeply, shakes his head and draws his wand, returning all of the spilled items to their proper places.

Then, pulling his sleeves down over his fingers against the cold, he jogs down the stairs. The spider’s web is looking quite imposing now, and Harry barely ducks in time as he hurries into the hallway and tries each room in turn, desperation turning to adrenaline in his veins.

In the living room he finds more photographs—several of himself and Malfoy... Draco... at various formal occasions, and Harry is relieved to see that his photo-self looks almost as uncomfortable in dress robes as he’s always been. Draco, however, is poised and elegant enough for both of them. There are also several snapshots of himself, Draco, Ginny, and... that handsome, dark-skinned man must be Blaise. Harry’s stomach flips over. He finds pictures of the four of them at the beach, at a party, and what looks like the kitchen in this very house.

Blaise Zabini, he thinks, attempting to dredge up some information—anything at all, really—on Ginny’s husband.

Fuck, that sounds weird.

Harry swallows hard, lowering himself into an armchair and rubbing at his face. Okay, so that line of thinking isn’t going to help this situation one little bit. Instead, he casts his mind back.

He’s... a Slytherin. He might have been one of Draco’s friends at school. He and his family left the country some time during the war, perhaps moved to France? Harry isn’t sure, but then he supposes it doesn’t matter either way. Nothing he knows seems to be applicable in this place, anyway.

Harry pulls himself out of the chair and tries to catch hold of his motivation once more. It’s maddeningly elusive still, but he manages to make it to the study, and it’s here that he strikes gold. Lined up on the bottom shelf nearest the fireplace are a series of leather-bound albums with dates stamped on them in gold.

With a shiver, Harry lights the fire in the grate and takes the first volume, dated 1998-1999. He settles himself on the hearth rug and breathes in the scent of wood polish and musty pages; it’s
comforting, and after a few seconds he opens the album in his lap.

It’s a scrapbook, not a photograph album. Harry smiles, surprised, and skates his fingers over the newspaper article pasted onto the first page—finally, something he remembers. It’s that terrible picture of himself, Hermione and Ron, taken some time in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts and plastered across the papers for weeks afterwards. Dirty, bleeding and exhausted, they lean against one another and stare off into the distance under the unimaginative headline: ‘Trio of Heroes—a well-earned rest for Potter, Granger and Weasley’.

Harry sighs gently, staring down at the relieved, distressed faces of his friends. Unexpectedly, his eyes sting with hot tears and he blinks them away, even though there’s no one here to chastise him for his display of weakness. As he does, he notices a comment written in spiky black script at the bottom of the page:

Your first day of freedom, Harry Potter. How does it feel?

And, next to the admittedly awful article:

The first, and definitely not the last, time I realised with some certainty that I could be a superior reporter with my eyes shut and one hand tied to a Blast-ended Skrewt.

Harry lifts an eyebrow. So, he’s a journalist. It isn’t quite the career one would imagine for a Malfoy, but perhaps it makes sense. Harry supposes that the disguises and persuasion and wheedling of information appeal tremendously to the Slytherin in Draco... and he strongly suspects that there is more than the average amount of Slytherin in Draco.

Turning the page, Harry finds an article about Draco, and another and another. Shifting position on the rug, Harry allows the flames to warm his back and devours every word.

... at great personal risk, this teenage Death Eater turned his back on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and found forgiveness in the form of the late Albus Dumbledore and redemption in his unexpected friendship with Harry Potter himself...

... in exchange for protection for his family, Malfoy supplied invaluable information about the activities of his former master to the group of skilled fighters known as the Order of the Phoenix...

... tremendous acts of bravery and atonement from one so young, proving, perhaps, that what once was, is not irreparable...

... Lucius Malfoy was today sentenced to five years in Azkaban for his role in the rise of You-Know-Who. Sources close to the Wizengamot suggest that Harry Potter’s testimony was instrumental in negotiating such a light sentence for the former Death Eater. Draco Malfoy, Potter’s former enemy and current close friend, was also in attendance but was unavailable for comment...

Harry turns the pages faster and faster, barely breathing. He finds serious articles about each of them as well as silly, pointless snapshots and items consisting of nothing but speculation about what they are doing or where they are going. Next to each and every one, he finds Draco’s running commentary.

Halfway through the book, he finds newspaper pictures of himself, Ron, Hermione and Draco accepting their honours after the war, and close-up shots of Harry’s Order of Merlin, first class, and Draco’s second.

And: So, you best me once again, Potter. It’s a good job you’re great in bed or else I mightn’t keep you around.
Harry flushes and chews at his nail awkwardly. He quickly turns the page, but the next one is even worse:

‘It’s official—Potter and Malfoy are an item! Exclusive pictures inside!’

Harry’s stomach flips as though this is the first time he is being confronted with this information; perhaps it’s seeing it in black and white in a national newspaper that makes it that little bit more shocking. Perhaps it’s finding out that he’s been outed by the Daily sodding Prophet nearly two decades ago and he’s only finding out about it now.

Oddly indignant, Harry snorts and flips faux-casually to the ‘exclusive photographs’—there’s no way they can be as bad as he’s imagining.

Somehow, they’re worse. Head full of salacious, caught-in-the-act style images, he’s braced even for partial nudity, but instead finds himself staring at an array of sweet, almost innocent photographs of a young couple spending a sunny afternoon together in the tiny square of garden at the back of number twelve. Someone has obviously poked a camera through the bushes and captured playful arguments, languid kisses and one particularly good shot of Harry, flat on his back on the grass, t-shirt riding up as he stretches out in the sun while Draco rests his head on his stomach and appears to be reading aloud from a tattered old book. They look happy together, there’s no escaping that.

The Dark Mark is starkly visible against his pale forearm, and so are several other small shapes that Harry cannot make out, just near the inside of the elbow. Draco makes no attempt to hide his scars with long sleeves and, in spite of himself, Harry’s respect for him rises a couple of notches. Everyone has scars, he supposes, and they often make good reminders. Reminders of what not to do.

A strange noise from down the hall makes Harry turn and lean over on one hand, trying pointlessly to see around corners, and ten seconds later his fire whooshes and Ginny’s head pops into view. Startled, Harry drops the heavy scrapbook on his foot and hisses in pain.

“Hi... Gin,” he manages, groaning and rubbing his injured toes.

She sighs. “You’ve forgotten about Maura, haven’t you?”

“Hmm... yes?” Harry replies honestly, hoping he can figure out who or what Maura is before Ginny decides to cart him off to St Mungo’s.

“Come on, Harry, you promised you’d take her this morning, I’ve got a full team meeting in ten minutes—we’ve got to discuss that horrible performance against Chudley last week and the head coach isn’t going to be there, so it’s all on me and I’m just a tiny bit stressed.” She stares beseeingly from the flames, making Harry feel rather remorseful, even though he can’t possibly be held responsible for something his other self has agreed to do.

“Where’s Blaise?” he ventures, pretty certain by now that Maura is either a child or an animal, and being all too aware that sometimes there is little difference between the two.

“At work.” Ginny gives him an odd look.

“Of course he is,” Harry says faintly. “I have to work, too, you know. Draco is insisting on it.”

Ginny snorts. “After yesterday, I’ll bet. Take her with you; you know she loves going to work with her Uncle Harry.”

Uncle Harry. The words swim around inside Harry’s head. Ginny and Blaise Zabini have a daughter, and she calls him Uncle Harry. He coughs, trying to loosen the tightness in his chest.
“Alright, well, send her through, then,” he says, trying to smile, and the relief on Ginny’s face is immense.

“Great. I’ll see you later, then. Maura, give Mummy a kiss.”

Harry watches anxiously as Ginny’s face disappears, the flames whoosh green, and then there is a small child hopping out of the fire and onto the hearthrug. Hurriedly, he closes the scrapbook and returns it to its shelf, out of the way of the small cloud of ash that the little girl seems to have brought in with her.

“What’re you doing in here, Uncle Harry?” she asks, and Harry just stares at her.

Maura Weasley—or perhaps Zabini—looks to be six or seven years old and strikingly resembles both of her parents. Her coffee-coloured skin and tightly curly dark hair obviously come from her father, but the bright brown eyes and dusting of freckles across her nose are all Ginny.

Harry blinks and tries with everything he has to focus. Answer the question.

“What were you expecting to find me?” he wonders aloud, which isn’t really answering the question, but at least he’s saying something instead of doing a fish impression at the poor child.

“You’re always in the kitchen,” she says, tilting her head on side as if to add, “silly.”

“Of course I am. Well, I was just doing some reading and trying to get warm,” he offers, frowning as he takes in her short red pinafore, long-sleeved t-shirt and spotted tights. He’s flooded with a confusing mixture of natural protectiveness toward the child and dull pain that she exists at all, and it’s a good few seconds before his paternal instinct kicks in and he continues: “We’re going out soon, don’t you have a coat?”

She nods, making her curly pigtails bob up and down. “I’ll get it.”

Harry watches, baffled, as Maura scuttles out of the room, footsteps ringing on the polished wood. A door opens and closes—he thinks the hallway closet—and then she’s back, clutching a red coat and struggling her way into it as she walks. Harry wonders what else of hers lives in his house.

“Is everything you own red?” he asks, amused.

She wrinkles her freckled nose and buttons up her coat. “It’s my favourite colour.”

“Mine too. What does your dad think of that?”

“Daddy doesn’t like colours,” she says with a weariness beyond her years.

Harry lifts an eyebrow but chooses not to comment.

“Are we going to work now?” she asks excitedly, and her smile is all Ginny’s, too.

Harry chews the inside of his mouth and considers his options. Or perhaps just his option, singular. He has to get to this mythical place of work one way or another, and right now, he doesn’t have a better idea than this:

“Maura, where does Uncle Harry work?”

**~*~**

Ten minutes later, Harry is being led—or quite possibly dragged—through a bustling Diagon Alley
by a surprisingly strong Maura. It has been several years since a child has demanded to hold his hand and while it’s rather nice to feel needed, he only wishes he was the one leading.

“Hello, Mr Potter,” says a middle-aged woman as she passes, smiling indulgently at Maura and struggling with a dog, an owl in a cage, and a bulging string bag full of groceries.

Harry has no idea who she is but manages to return her greeting before Maura’s warm little hand tightens around his and he has to turn away and fight down his urge to flag down the lady and ask her if she’d like some help.

“Come on, Uncle Harry! If we stop to talk to everyone, we’ll never get there,” Maura complains, barely making herself audible above the chatter and rumble of the crowds.

Puzzled, Harry quickens his step, but he has barely crossed another three feet of cobbles before a little boy in a bobble hat points at him and cries, “Look!” to his father, who is wearing a matching bobble hat.

“Don’t point, Isaac,” the man says, but he smiles broadly at Harry. “Good to see you, Mr Potter. And young Maura.”

At that point, young Maura halts in her relentless stride and turns, still hanging onto Harry’s hand. “Hello,” she says brightly.

“My wife loved it,” the man offers, beaming and rubbing his hands together against the cold. “It was exactly what she wanted... I don’t know how you do it!”

Thrown, Harry takes a deep breath of cold, fresh-tasting air and attempts to sound as gracious as possible. “That’s great, I’m really pleased to hear that.”

The man sighs regretfully. “I wish I could come to you for her Christmas present, too. Maybe next year!”

“Maybe next year,” Harry echoes, throwing the man a sympathetic—he hopes—smile.

When the man and his son say goodbye and set off on their way, so do Harry and Maura, threading through the shoppers and setting their feet down firmly against the slippery cobbles. By the time she slows and turns into a small courtyard, no less than ten people have called out to him, smiled and waved, or wanted to stop for a chat, and Harry is astonished.

It’s rare these days that anyone approaches him in public, and though he can’t remember the last time he shopped in Diagon Alley, he knows deep down that his tried and tested ‘leave me and my family the fuck alone’ face is the real reason that no one comes near. It hasn’t always been that way, but after a few too many intrusive articles and impolite interruptions, the defence mechanism has become second nature.

Or at least it had. Just five minutes in public has already demonstrated that, yet again, things are very different here. Sure, everyone knows him and everyone wants to say hello, but their questions and greetings are invariably polite—“Good morning, Mr Potter” and “Nice to see you, Mr Potter” and “Are you heading for the workshop, Mr Potter? I’d like to drop in later on and talk to you about an order”—and not only that, Harry finds that he doesn’t mind them at all. He doesn’t know what a lot of them are talking about, but he doesn’t mind.

Sadness falls over him like a veil, and he sighs into the frozen air, trudging along behind Maura but barely noticing where she’s taking him until they come to a stop in front of a wooden door set into an attractive, low-slung stone building.
So this is it.

“Please open the door, Uncle Harry,” Maura pleads, shivering dramatically. “I’m going to freeze to death!”

Her expression pulls a soft snort of laughter from Harry. Surprised at the sound, he looks up at the grey sky and forces a hand through his windblown hair, shaking away his unhelpful regret until it falls away around him.

“Right,” he mutters, examining the door with its heavy iron rivets and knocker. When he reaches out and skims the rough wood with his fingertips, a flare of protective magic shoots out and wraps tightly around his hand, weaving shimmering green tendrils through his fingers; a slightly uncomfortable tingle flies down his arm and then retreats before, seemingly-satisfied, the door clicks and swings open on creaky hinges.

Maura races past him into the building. Harry follows at a slower pace, turning in circles and taking in this large, open, sawdust-scented space that is apparently his place of work. The walls are rough, whitewashed and cool under Harry’s fingers, and the flagged floor is littered with wood shavings and intriguing-looking tools. In the middle of the room stand two huge workbenches and immediately above are a series of skylights which on a good day, Harry imagines, would flood the space with light; today, though, they reveal only the heavy clouds through a delicate sheen of frost.

Around the edges of the room, he finds wardrobes, bureaus, chests and dressers. Several unusual chairs sit haphazardly in a corner, and a half-finished glass-fronted bookcase sits next to the door. As he examines each piece, he’s consumed by a creeping fascination.

He made these?

He can’t have... they’re beautiful. They’re unusual and skilfully made and quirky. Harry looks down at his ordinary, bony, artless hands. It makes no sense; his brain is completely unable to reconcile his inept, graceless self with the craftsman to whom this workshop belongs. Boris must be having him on.

“I know you’re not my Uncle Harry,” Maura says suddenly. Harry spins around, heart pounding. She is sitting on the nearest workbench, legs dangling, and fixing him with an odd little smile.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not my Uncle Harry,” she repeats calmly. “You look like him, but you’re not. It’s okay, though. I won’t tell anyone.”

Rooted to the spot, Harry searches in vain for an appropriate response. He doesn’t understand. Ginny hasn’t noticed, Hermione hasn’t noticed... even Draco, who is apparently his... well, who knows him very well, hasn’t noticed. And yet this child, this bright, dark-skinned miniature Ginny, has seen right through him.

“Of course I’m your Uncle Harry,” he says, barely in a whisper.

Maura draws her feet up onto the work surface and crosses her legs so she can pick at her spotted tights. “It’s alright. I don’t know where you’ve come from but I know you’re only visiting.”

“Visiting,” he repeats. “Something like that.”

Maura nods sagely, and Harry takes a cautious step toward her, and then another, and then, for no reason that he can see, he finds himself in a heap on the cold stone, hands grazed and blood racing
with adrenaline.

“That happens sometimes,” Maura advises, and there’s a clatter as she jumps back down to the floor and comes to crouch beside Harry. “You have a bad leg. I bet you didn’t know that.”

Harry laughs bitterly and pulls himself into a sitting position, examining the scratches on his palms. Bizarrely, his leg feels absolutely fine, as though it hasn’t done any such thing as completely give way underneath him and cause him to crash his full weight into the floor.

“I’ve heard about it, but that was my first time... experiencing it,” he admits, giving up on the idea of trying to lie to Maura.

“You’ll be alright in a minute.” Kicking away some sawdust, Maura lowers herself to the floor next to him and wrinkles her nose. “It just makes you fall over sometimes. You usually swear more than that.”

Harry manages a smile. “I’ll remember that,” he says, and then swallows his next question. Even if she does know exactly what happened to him, he doesn’t really want to start interrogating a seven-year-old about a war she doesn’t ever remember. He doesn’t suppose it really matters anyway. Knowing why isn’t going to make it go away.

“Did I really make all these things?” he asks instead, glancing once more around the room.

“Yes,” Maura nods. “You make lots of lovely things.”

“I don’t know how to make things,” Harry says, slightly panicked. “The last bit of furniture I had anything to do with was a flat-pack dressing table when I was eight. And if I remember, I ars—erm, I didn’t do a very good job.”

“You say arse all the time,” Maura tells him with a small giggle. “I don’t know what flat-pack is but you always say you like wood ’cause it doesn’t answer back.”

Harry lifts an eyebrow. “I said that?”

Maura nods, pigtails swinging. Harry flexes his knee carefully. It’s fine. He sighs and pulls up his knees to his chest.

“Do I make them with magic?” he asks hopefully.

The freckled nose scrunches up as Maura thinks, and, as Harry watches, a weak ray of sunlight penetrates the cloud and picks out dark red strands in her hair.

“Mostly you hit the wood with those things,” she says, pointing at a wall rack full of tools, “and make this face.” She pauses and screws up her features, pressing her lips together in a hard line. “And you put them together, and then you use your wand for the fancy bits.”

Harry allows his lips to be tugged into a smile. “Do you mean things like that?” he asks, pointing to an oak dresser with gently moving fish carved into it.

“Mnhm. I like the fish,” Maura says, immediately and painfully reminding Harry of Lily. “Sometimes people come in and ask you for things and sometimes you just make what you want.” She points at something over his shoulder. “That one is for Uncle Draco, for Christmas. I think it’s nearly finished.”

Harry looks, trying to ignore his sudden bellyful of spiky anxiety, but it only intensifies when his
eyes fall upon a striking standard lamp made of mahogany and stained glass. The stalk has been carved, seemingly from a single piece of wood, into a smooth, curved shape that appears both strange and natural all at once, like something from the Forbidden Forest. He has to touch it.

He hauls himself to his feet and after a moment, Maura follows him and stands at the opposite side of the lamp, watching him with interest. Feeling as though he’s doing something he shouldn’t and doing it anyway, Harry slides his hand lightly over the curves that feel like silk and fit perfectly to his touch; then, growing bolder, he allows his palm to press tightly to the wood, sensing the grain now, until he reaches the glass shade.

“Should I?” he wonders, fingers closing around his wand.

Maura shrugs. “It’s your lamp.” She pauses. “I think you should.”

Something makes Harry glance down at her and she’s grinning up at him, eyes alight with eagerness. He’s unsure of whether or not he should be taking encouragement from a child who’s at least half Slytherin, but... fuck it, he’s going to do it anyway. He returns her smile and mumbles a spell to light the flame inside the lamp.

“Wow,” Maura whispers, and Harry can’t help but agree with her. Wow indeed.

The workshop is all at once filled with gently undulating light in every shade of green imaginable as the flames dance and illuminate the thin, stained-glass panels. At first glance, he had thought they were simply stripes, but now he sees that the myriad shards of coloured glass are more than that; they shift and fade and merge into one another over and over again.

A green-tinged Maura smiles delightedly up at the strange, nebulous shapes chasing one another across the ceiling. “You’re clever, see? Well, Uncle Harry is, but you know what I mean.” She drags her eyes away from the ceiling and looks around the lamp at Harry. “Do you want to know anything else?”

Harry sighs. Wonders how long she’s got. “What does Ginny... what do your parents do?”

“Daddy has a company that sells plants,” she says, “and Mummy’s a coach. You know, in Quidditch.”

“Quidditch?”

Maura scowls and nods. “Quidditch. I always say it wrong. And Uncle Draco writes stories about bad people to tell everyone that they’re bad.”

“Yeah,” Harry mumbles, gazing at the lamp that his other self made and scrubbing distractedly at his hair. “And I’m a gay carpenter. Cheers, Boris.”

“Who’s Boris?” Maura demands.

“Never mind.”
Harry lets himself back into the house and flops back against the door, utterly drained. Although there’s no denying that Maura is easily the most useful and straightforward person he has met in this bizarre place, she’s also seven years old and therefore exhausting.

Now that she’s back with her very grateful mother, Harry has, he hopes, a little bit of time and space to process what feels like a deluge of information. And, perhaps, when he’s done with that, figure out how to become a skilled carpenter in time to fulfil all of the ‘millions of orders’ Maura informs him he has waiting for him.

“Because, you know, that’ll be no problem,” Harry mutters darkly, rubbing at his cold face.

As he inhales, the scent of something warm and savoury and delicious catches his nostrils, and the grumble of his stomach reminds him that all he’s had to eat today is the leftover half of Maura’s ham and peanut butter sandwich at lunchtime. Which had been... interesting, to say the least. Perhaps Draco has made dinner, he muses, peeling himself off the door and taking a hopeful step into the hallway.

“Harry? Is that you?” comes a jagged voice from somewhere upstairs.

Sensing danger, he stops dead. “Yes?”

“What did you do up here?” The voice is louder now with an edge of something that is either fury or hysteria, and whichever it is sends Harry’s heart into an erratic, fearful rhythm.

“Nothing,” Harry calls back, mind racing. He already knows he’s in some sort of trouble and it is with trepidation that he crosses the creaking floor and starts to—very slowly—climb the staircase.

“The drawers,” Draco insists in an anguished whimper. “What in the name of buggery fuck did you do, Potter?” he demands, and every fibre of Harry’s being tells him that there is no promise of scary fun in his tone this time.

_The drawers_? “No, no, no,” Harry mutters to himself, grabbing the balustrade, ducking the spider’s web and dashing up the stairs to the bedroom. “I put everything back!”
Even though he knows it’s unlikely to help, Harry holds his breath as he pushes open the door.

“There you are,” Draco mutters, but he doesn’t look up from his task, which seems to involve kneeling in front of his chest of drawers, searching through the contents at an alarming rate and mumbling distractedly. There’s a strange agitation about him, some tension that pulls his body tight, and even though he cannot profess to know this man, not really, Harry knows that something is very wrong.

“Yeah, I’m here,” he offers, hand closing tightly around the cold doorknob. Biting his lip. “What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” Draco repeats, and his voice shakes with a sharp almost-laughter. “What’s the matter? I just wanted an envelope... that’s all... and this.” He breaks off, fingers wrapping around the edge of the large middle drawer, gripping hard. “Why would you? Just... why?”

“I... er...” Harry stares, unable to look away. Draco’s tension is contagious, and it ripples through him, wrapping around his chest and constricting his breathing. He can’t say he understands what has happened here, but he suspects he’s in the wrong. “I was looking for something.”

Draco’s fingers grip impossibly tighter and he turns to look at Harry, and his stomach clenches horribly as he is confronted with an expression he has seen only once before on this face—complete and utter anguish. The grey eyes are wide and bright with torment, eyebrows drawn down, hair sticking to his pale forehead, and he’s breathing hard. “You know... you know how wrong this is,” he rasps, releasing the drawer at last and dropping back to sit on his heels. He stares at the floor.

Harry hesitates, knowing he has to say something. Anything. “Yes... I know it’s wrong,” he attempts, “and whatever I broke, I’m really sorry—can I see?”

Draco glances up for just long enough to shoot him a scathing look and then resumes his sifting through the contents of the drawers. Sifting, touching, turning objects over again and again, lips moving soundlessly and eyes screwed tightly shut.

“Draco?”

“Everything is in the wrong place,” he whispers. “Everything. There are round things with square things. There are socks in my paper drawers.” He pauses and presses his fingertips against the topmost drawer. “There are six things in here,” he whispers with an alarming wobble in his voice.

“Oh,” Harry says at last, unable to find another single word. In silence, he gazes down at Draco, who seems to be once again checking and counting the contents of the drawers, tapping his fingers over socks and quills and parchments and candles, again and again, seemingly dissatisfied by what he finds but disinclined—perhaps unable—to stop.

The knowledge that nothing is hurt or broken somehow allows Harry to relax his death grip on the doorknob and step a little further into the room. Even as he does so, though, he’s tingling with alarm and something he could never have expected: concern. For Malfoy. For Draco, who is quite obviously distressed. Because there are six things, and square ones with circle ones.

Tentatively, Harry crouches down beside him. Bites his lip. “Come on, it’s okay. It doesn’t matter.”

Draco freezes, elbow deep in a drawer. “It doesn’t matter?” he whispers.
“Erm, well, you know what I mean,” Harry fumbles, already knowing that he’s said the wrong thing. “I mean that—”

“You mean that it doesn’t matter to you. You mean that you think I’m ridiculous. I know what you really think about me, Harry Potter,” Draco snaps, flopping onto the floor with his knees pulled up and his head in his hands. He’s shaking.

Something rusty and seldom-used creaks and twists inside Harry’s chest, making him reach out and wrap a hand around Draco’s wrist, trying to pull his fingers away from his face. Despite all he’s ever thought about this man, it’s not right that he should be so... small.

“I didn’t mean anything like that, Draco. I’ll put everything back, I promise.”

“No, no, no,” Draco hisses, yanking himself out of Harry’s grasp and out of his reach.

Stung, Harry sits back and wraps his arms around himself. Deep down, he knows with a heavy clarity that he has well and truly fucked this up—whatever this is—but he can’t resist the urge to just give it one more go.

“Draco?”

“I will do it myself. I made chilli for you; it’s probably ready by now,” Draco informs him without looking up.

Harry sighs and forces himself to rise, heavy with guilt and confusion.

“I’m really sorry,” he offers as he closes the door, but there is no response other than the creaking of drawers.

**~*~**

Draco doesn’t come downstairs for a long time. Harry goes into the kitchen and pokes at the chilli on the stove. It smells and looks absolutely wonderful but, riddled with guilt, he simply turns out the heat underneath it and heads into the living room, where he flops onto the leather sofa and stares up at the ceiling. He contemplates returning to the study and catching up with a few more years of Draco’s scrapbooks, but the thought that Draco might catch him at it is an effective deterrent.

Instead, he tries to wrap his mind around the last ten minutes. And it’s a challenge.

He has no idea why six things in one drawer is a disaster, and the troubling cohabitation of round things and square things doesn’t make much more sense.

Turning, counting, ordering.

Order. Harry squishes around on the sofa, trying to get comfortable, but it’s no good. A situation like this requires fuel, one way or another.

Mind still racing, he retrieves a bowl of chilli and a fork from the kitchen and collapses back onto the sofa with it. It’s excellent—sweet, spicy and rich—but he barely tastes it as he shovels forkful after forkful into his mouth and stares into the fire and puzzles.

This Draco is all about order, it seems. Harry imagines his closets and his stripes and his neatly-
labelled collection of scrapbooks documenting every year of their lives together. Harry wonders, chewing slowly, if his other self is a neat, orderly person, too. Probably not, he thinks after a moment, if the state of his workshop is anything to go by. And yet, from the look of the house, it seems that Harry’s ’shop is the only place that isn’t subject to Draco’s crazy rules.

Harry sighs, scraping the bottom of his bowl with his fork for the last of the sauce and wincing at the grating sound of metal on ceramic. And then it occurs to him.

Maybe his other self doesn’t mind.

Maybe it’s like the way that Hermione couldn’t care less about antique brooms, but she accommodates Ron’s vast and growing collection in their cottage with—mostly—good humour. Or, at least, she does where he comes from. And okay, it’s not exactly the same, but the point, he supposes, is that a relationship is made of acceptance.

A good relationship.

Harry drops his fork into his bowl and rubs his face, groaning.

It is not possible that he has a healthier relationship with an insane, envelope-counting Malfoy than he has with his actual wife. Surely it isn’t—and yet he still finds himself wondering just what either of them would accept for him.

“Perhaps it’s not Malfoy who’s insane,” he muses, shifting onto his back and folding his arms behind his head, allowing the supple leather to mould to his body. “Could be me.”

Comfortable at last, at least in the most basic sense, his eyes quickly grow heavy and he allows himself to drift, soothed by the crackling of the fire in the grate.

When he blinks awake, the fire has burned down almost all the way down and his neck is stiff and uncomfortable, which he supposes will teach him to sleep on the sofa at his age. Well, it might. Mouth dry, he slopes into the kitchen and stops.

Draco looks up, pan in one hand and loaded fork, halfway to his mouth, in the other. Harry hesitates, allowing this incongruous image to settle into place—Draco Malfoy is eating leftover chilli, straight out of the pan.

Harry tries a smile, and for a moment there’s a flash of vulnerability in the pale eyes, then it’s gone, and Draco lifts an eyebrow in challenge and conveys his forkful to his mouth.

“Is everything... in order now?” Harry asks carefully.

Draco swallows. “Yes.”

“I don’t think you’re ridiculous.”

“Is that so?” Draco murmurs, looking away from Harry to poke around in the pan with his fork. He’s still sharp around the edges and even though reason is suggesting that he shouldn’t care, Harry still wishes he were better at this.

“Yeah. I’ve just... I’m tired. I just fell asleep on the sofa,” Harry offers sheepishly.
“Tell me something new,” Draco snipes, but he meets Harry’s eyes at last.

“Er... your chilli was really good?”

“My chilli is extraordinary,” Draco says, spearing a kidney bean on his fork and scrutinising it.

Harry suppresses a smile. “Yeah. I really am sorry.”

Draco sighs heavily. “What were you looking for, anyway?”

Heart speeding, Harry thinks quickly, but fails to come up with anything plausible. “Nothing important.”

For long seconds, Draco says nothing. He chews on another mouthful of food and stares at an empty patch of air somewhere to Harry’s left.

“Do you really think it doesn’t matter?” he says at last.

“What I was looking for?” Harry says, frowning.

“No, you fucking twerp,” Draco snaps, clearly exasperated. “My stuff. The way... I am.”

“Oh.” Harry scrubs at his hair, feeling awkward. He barely even registers the insult, nor does he think that Draco really means it, but the question is a significant one. “Of course it matters. Shithead,” he adds impulsively.

Draco snorts and sets the pan down, turning slightly to hide a small smile that Harry sees anyway. Flooded with relief that he can’t explain, he hardly notices Draco crossing the room toward him until there are strong hands on his hips and soft lips on his neck, a mouth huffing warm breath across his skin and making him shiver.

“You’re one to talk,” he murmurs. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

As soon as he is out of sight, Harry drops back against the counter, feeling as though his whole weight is being supported by his hands.

He has no idea how he’s holding himself up.

**~*~**

This bed is so much more comfortable than the one he’s used to and the feather quilt and pillows create such a snug trap for body heat that it’s almost possible to forget the permanently open window. As he settles on his stomach and drifts slowly into sleep, he finds he doesn’t even mind the heat-seeking weight pressed against him and tucked into the small of his back.

“I’ve got to run,” something warm and lemon-scented murmurs against Harry’s ear.

He startles, but this time it only takes him a split second to reassemble his short-term memory and halt the impending panic in its tracks. Instead, he exhales heavily into his pillow and opens one eye to regard his copper clock. It’s obscenely early and the sky outside is still stubbornly dark.

“It’s night time,” he mumbles.
“It’s almost seven,” Draco corrects, sounding amused.

“It’s night time,” Harry repeats stubbornly. The last time he remembers leaving the house at such a ridiculous hour was years ago, when he was still working in the field. He sighs, fighting down a twinge of sadness—he doesn’t remember minding too much then.

“Yes, alright, no need to rub it in,” Draco says at last. “I have another date in the park with Mr Fitzwilliam.”

Gripped by a strange sensation, Harry opens both eyes now and stares at him. “A date?”

Draco’s eyes, silvery in the near-darkness, lift to the ceiling briefly. “Good grief, you should see your face. I am going to attempt to run around the park in circles in these horribly undignified clothes…”

He leans back slightly in his seated position on the bed so that Harry can see his stylish, if completely incongruous, black jogging outfit. Harry bites down on a smile. “Don’t you dare laugh, you... vile prune,” Draco reproves, and the hidden smile bursts into a gurgle of laughter.

Harry does his best to smother it in his pillow, but he knows his shoulders are shaking. He also knows Draco is glaring at him, and it’s some kind of wonderful.

“Vile prune?” he manages at last, breathless and grinning.

“You are a horror,” Draco pronounces, and the bed shifts as he gets to his feet. “I’m going now. Don’t even think about going without me tonight—I want to approve your outfit.”

“Approve my... what for?” Harry demands, attempting to turn onto his side and finding, with some alarm, that the heavy thing in the small of his back is still there. And more than that, it’s moving.

“What the fuck?” he gasps, reaching for his wand.

“For the annual Weasel bash, of course.” Draco reaches out and catches his wrist. “You’re awfully jumpy—it’s only Frank.”

Harry frowns and holds as still as he can when Draco releases his arm and gently pulls back the quilt. He only knows one Frank, and whatever this is does not feel at all like Lily’s cat.

“Well, don’t you look better?” Draco is saying. “He’s all shiny again. I told you he must be shedding his skin, didn’t I? No wonder he’s been hiding.”

Harry holds his breath, barely listening, as the heavy, smooth coils slip over his skin. There is a snake in his bed.

“What kind of a name for a snake is Frank?” he mutters, mostly to himself, as he braces himself against the mattress on his elbows and, with some effort, dislodges the snake so that he can sit up.

“You named him,” Draco points out. “He’s your snake. He never listens to me, and I doubt it’s only because he doesn’t understand a word I’m saying.” Throwing Harry a wry smile, he winds his stripy scarf more tightly around his neck and pets the displaced snake on the head. “Be good, Frankfurto. Be good, Harry.”

“I might,” Harry informs the door that Draco slams shut behind him. He sighs. Swipes his hair out of his eyes and scrambles into a cross-legged position, leaning forward so that he can get a proper look
at his unexpected bedmate. *Because, you know... he thinks, Malfoy wasn’t enough of an adjustment.*

The snake slides effortlessly across the quilt cover and drapes itself over Harry’s legs. It must be six feet long at the very least, and seems to weigh an absolute ton; not only that but Harry fancies it still looks disgruntled, and though he’s definitely not afraid of snakes, he thinks he would prefer to stay on the right side of something that could crush him to death if it felt like it.

“So... you’re Frank,” he offers, feeling supremely awkward.

The snake rests a blunt, wedge-shaped head atop its attractively patterned brown and khaki-coloured coils, flicks out a black forked tongue, and stares at Harry.

“Right, well...” Harry chews on his lip, just about controlling the urge to slap himself in the forehead. “That’s not going to work, is it?”

He drags in a deep breath and leans closer, elbows on his knees, gazing fixedly at Frank’s shiny black eyes and attempting to summon, from somewhere deep inside him, the instinctive command of a language that he hasn’t spoken for two decades.

“How’s that?” he asks, concentrating hard, but he knows immediately that he hasn’t been successful.

Frank merely tilts his head on one side as if to say ‘What on earth are you doing, making these strange noises?’

He tries again, focusing on the patterns, the sinuous movements, remembering the first time.

“Can you understand me now?”

Frank lifts his head and rises slowly upward until he’s almost eye-level with Harry. “Perhaps.”

“Where have you been?”

“Sleeping in the warm cupboard for many hours. Taking off my coat.”

Harry frowns, unsure whether or not he’s understanding everything correctly, but then again, it has been a long time since he has spoken to a snake.

“How long have you been here?”

“Many seasons. Will you not admire me?” The snake twists this way and that, allowing the morning sunlight to glance off his shiny, vibrant new scales.

Harry snorts. “Aren’t you vain?”

“Beautiful,” the snake demurs. “There is no denying it.”

Harry watches the flickering tongue, amused in spite of himself. “You are handsome, I’ll give you that,” he admits, and the snake almost seems to preen, basking in the flattery like a cat in a patch of sunlight. “But how long is many seasons?”

“Many,” Frank repeats. “Many seasons indeed. Was small, but food and warm floors made me big. Not small now, eh? Not small.”
“Er, no,” Harry manages, wondering how long it will be before he loses all feeling in his legs. Experimentally, he wriggles his toes—there seems to be some blood flow left, which is nice.

Many seasons, he muses. Apparently, snakes aren’t much bothered with accuracy. “You know hours but not years?” he asks.

“Yes, I have. An hour is a natural rhythm. Year is... not important here.” The snake draws close to Harry, close enough for the flickery black tongue to tickle his nose. “Have everything. Have everything and then... time is unimportant.”

Harry says nothing, allowing the words to seep into his veins and prickle over his skin. Were it so easy to have everything. To be so satisfied that time becomes irrelevant.

Just then, Frank’s tongue flickers against his nostril and he sneezes violently, all over the hand that doesn’t quite get there in time, and all over the handsome patterned head.

“That was unpleasant.”

Harry regards him, dignified face spotted with high-velocity phlegm. “Sorry.”

He reaches for his wand but the snake looks so alarmed that he changes tack abruptly and Accios a box of tissues from the dresser. Attempting, at least on the surface, to think about something other than how surreal this is, he dabs gently at Frank’s shiny, surprisingly warm head until it’s clean.

“Forgive me for asking so many questions, but my memory really is very bad,” Harry begins, laying it on as thickly as he knows how. He banishes the tissue and gazes at the snake earnestly.

“Know this,” Frank says, drawing back and resting on his coils once more, head pointed up toward Harry. “Not your fault, having such a little brain.”

“You’re one to talk,” Harry snaps back, wounded. He can’t help but think that starting the day by being insulted by a snake does not bode well for the rest of it. Still, he supposes that he should take any kind of Q and A where he can get it. “Look... no offence, but why would Draco want a snake? He didn’t exactly seem thrilled by that one in second year,” he adds, mostly to himself, remembering their farce of a duel and the discovery of his unusual ability.

“Second year is not my area,” Frank says, “but believe there was a demonstration... a show of fearlessness. Does not fear me... proves bravery, you see? Wants to appear courageous for you.”

Harry smiles and bites his lip.

“Wants also for you to have something to talk with. Not only the furniture. Do not know why you would converse with the furniture instead of me,” Frank adds, coiling himself tightly and relieving the pressure on Harry’s ankles.

“Maybe the furniture doesn’t talk back,” Harry offers, and then: “except the mirror. And I wish it wouldn’t.”

“Like the double-glass. Looking at myself is very satisfying,” Frank confides, and somehow, Harry isn’t all that surprised.
Apparently, looking at himself in the mirror isn’t Frank’s only pastime. He coils on the end of the bed and watches Harry—who has grudgingly opted to drag himself out of bed and venture into the workshop on his own this time—get dressed.

It’s quite an unsettling feeling, and Frank’s occasionally barbed comments about his coordination and hair and clothing choices aren’t exactly enriching the experience, but Harry doesn’t have the heart to tell the snake to bugger off. When he heads for the stairs, still squirming slightly in strange, skinny-fitting trousers, Frank drop-slides onto the floor and follows him, and when Harry buttons up his coat in the hallway, the blunt triangular head pokes around the living room door and regards him enquiringly.

“Where are you going?”

“To work.”

“When will you be home?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says truthfully, shoving his hands into his coat pockets. “What are you, my secretary?”

“Merely asking. Do not like surprises,” Frank confides, sliding an extra few inches into the hallway.

Harry laughs, a little bitterly. “You and me both. And yet here we are.” He rubs his face and reaches for the door handle. Relents. “I’ll be back before dark.”

“Will keep the house safe until then,” Frank says, drawing himself up importantly. “Fearsome.”

Harry smiles and lets himself out into the street, finds a place to Disapparate, and makes the jump to Diagon Alley. He supposes that it’s always good to have someone looking out for one’s interests, even if that someone is a narcissistic python.

This time, having a vague idea of his target location, he touches down mere paces from the low stone building, but his accuracy doesn’t stop him returning three enthusiastic waves and a bellowed, “How’s tha doin’ Mr Potter?” from across the street.

It’s strange, but by the time he crosses the cobbles and lets himself into the ’shop, he’s smiling.

As he wanders around, picking up discarded tools and returning them to their proper slots, he wonders if it’s possible that Draco is responsible for this respectful, friendly relationship with the public. He has media contacts, after all, and for all the years that Harry has hated him, there is no denying his skill for manipulation, for creating an image, for using any means available to turn a situation to his advantage.

He leans against one of his workbenches and tips his head back into the bright winter sunlight that streams in through the skylights. It isn’t as though he’s given it much thought until now, but he thinks that actually, he could get used to being ‘Mr Potter’. He could get used to being this relaxed, approachable person who appears to tolerate just about everyone and who comes to this light-filled, sawdust-scented little sanctuary and makes things with wood whenever he feels like it.

Mere days have passed since he last sat behind his big desk in his big office, but he already knows
beyond all doubt that he doesn’t miss it. Though once his burning childhood ambition, he hasn’t enjoyed being an Auror in a long, long time—not since excitement turned to stress and the thrill of a successful operation was replaced by meetings and appraisals and a permanent headache.

Although... Harry frowns mid-thought and shakes his head tentatively. Nothing happens. Struck by the lack of pain, he lets out a deep breath and tries again, bobbing his head back and forth until his hair flops into his eyes and his glasses slide down his nose. Deciding to stop before he manages to give himself a headache, Harry drags in another deep breath and revels in the absence of the tight little knot in his chest that he’s had for far longer than he cares to remember.

Unexpectedly affected, Harry bites down on a smile, closing his eyes against the harsh light and wrapping his fingers tightly around the edge of the workbench.

Just then, there’s a knock at the door and a softly-voiced enquiry.

“Excuse me, Mr Potter?”

Harry stirs himself. Glances around for something with which to look busy. “Come in,” he calls, grabbing a large hammer and then discarding it, not wanting to alarm his potential customer by waving it about inexpertly.

After a moment, a silver-haired gentleman of around sixty makes his way into the workshop, smiling at Harry and dotting down a walking stick every now and then.

“Oh, I’m so pleased to catch you!” he says, drawing level with Harry’s workbench and hooking his cane over the edge. “How are you keeping?”

“Ah... fine, thank you,” Harry manages. He stands up a little straighter and pastes on his ‘I am a professional and I can handle this’ expression. “How can I help you?”

“Oh... fine, thank you,” Harry manages. He stands up a little straighter and pastes on his ‘I am a professional and I can handle this’ expression. “How can I help you?”

“Oh, you are polite,” the old man sighs, eyes crinkling with pleasure. “Not like the young people these days.”

Harry cringes inwardly. The remark hits him in a sensitive spot he suspects is reserved for those hovering dangerously close to forty, but he tries to convince himself that the man—probably his customer—is trying to pay him a compliment.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, turning his smile up a notch.

“You’re welcome,” says the man, beaming up at Harry. “Now, about this little table we talked about last week...”

“Ah, yes, the little table,” Harry says, wishing for just the smallest clue about the little table, but at the same time full of the knowledge that the information he requires is locked away in the memory of his other self.

“Yes. For my daughter. Now, I’m sure you’re very busy in the run-up to Christmas—goodness knows I am, and I’m only an old buffer with nothing better to do than campaign for grandchildren—but, well, I’d like to ask a favour of you.” He leans forward, eyes crinkling hopefully.

“Yes,” Harry lies, “very busy, but... er, what kind of favour were you thinking of?”
The old man sighs. “I need it two weeks early. Genevieve has just thought to inform me that she is going to Australia for a month and will be away for her birthday. I’d like her to have it before she goes, if it’s possible—I’d be ever so grateful, Mr Potter.”

Anxious, Harry chews his lip and averts his eyes from the old man, whose earnest expression is prodding at his insides. Instead, he stares at the sawdust-strewn worktable and wonders. He supposes that when it comes down to it, he only really has two options. One—he can continue to lie, tell the old bugger he’s sick and hope to be safely back in his old life before the original little-table-completion-date rolls around, or two—he can take the initiative and have a go at it.

A bloody good go, at that. How hard can it be to make a little table?

“Right... Sir, I’ll certainly see what I can do,” he says before he can stop himself. Feeling a strange fizz of excitement, he reaches for a pencil and a scrap of parchment. “When will you want to pick it up?”

The old man beams, grabs his cane and clasps it tightly to his chest. “Cyril, please. Cyril Pepper. I’ll come about noon on the fourth, then? Oh, you are a wonderful man, Mr Potter. I don’t know how to thank you.” He pauses, thoughtful, and then triumphant. “I’ll bring you some more of my wife’s spinach cake, you really enjoyed that last time!”

Suppressing a gag at the thought, Harry nods. “Great,” he says weakly. “I’ll look forward to that.”

The old man leans to pat him on the arm before he takes his leave, shuffling and clacking over the stone floor.

“The fourth of what?” Harry calls suddenly, a spike of panic rising in his gut.

“January, of course!” the man replies without turning around. “Wonderful month, January... looking back and looking forward,” he continues, apparently to himself, waving his walking stick to one side and then the other as he disappears out of sight.

Harry stares after him and shoves his hands into his pockets. “Oh dear.”

**~*~**

A chaotic and somewhat panic-stricken search turns up a dog-eared notebook in which Harry finds Mr Pepper’s name, address, and specifications for the little table. Unfortunately, he can barely understand them, even though the words are clearly scrawled in his own handwriting.

*Beech gd. 1, 28” grad. spindle x 4, 12 x 12 flt w/ cr glass ‘tumbling vines’? inset 9 x 9.*


Harry leans against the workbench, reading his own cryptic instructions over and over again and sighing pointlessly into the empty room.

“How hard can it be to make a little table?” he mutters, mocking himself. He deserves to be mocked.

He squints at the book again, bringing the pages closer to his face just in case it will help. It doesn’t, but he supposes all is not lost. He knows it is to be made from beech with some long spindles—does he have to make those, too?—and a square foot of something with some kind of glass, tumbling
vines, and then god knows what.

And a hundred and fifty Galleons? For a table? Harry swallows hard. It’s ludicrous, he knows, but he has to admit that he is a little bit intimidated. By a table. By a tiny little table that hasn’t even been made yet. He is frightened by the idea of a table.

“Fuck this,” Harry snaps, forcing himself into action. Trying not to think about what his Ministry colleagues would say if they could see him, he ties on a rough, half-shredded green apron, dusts off his work surface and stalks over to the stash of wood in the corner.

Hands on hips, mouth set into a grim line, he surveys the shelves.

“Beech grade one,” he reads at last, triumphant. “That’ll be it.”

So far, so good. With some effort, Harry wraps his arms around what appears to be half a beech tree. It certainly feels like it, anyway, and after a moment he heaves it back into its place and draws his wand, opting instead to levitate the wood over to the workbench, where it lands with a soft thump and sends fine dust into Harry’s face.

The overriding question in his head is ‘Now what?!’ but Harry ignores it, choosing instead to cling to the hope—no, the knowledge—that he can do this.

Sucking in a long, fortifying breath, Harry reaches for a saw.

He. Can. Do. This.

**~*~**

He can’t do this.

Harry doesn’t know how long it takes for him to give up and lob his chisel into the wall, but it certainly feels like a long time. He watches it collide with a satisfying spang and then slumps to the cold stone floor, panting and resting his back against the worktable. Perspiring and aching all over, he examines his hands with horrified curiosity; his fingers are scratched and sore, his palms red-raw and full of splinters.

That’s not the worst thing, though. Nor is it the fact that the beautiful chunk of beech has not been transformed into anything even vaguely resembling a table. No, the worst thing is that it now looks like... Harry sighs and twists around to view the carnage. Like it’s been dropped from a great height and then chewed by hyperactive rodents. He suspects that his other self would kick his untalented arse if he were here, and he would be right to do so.

More worryingly, he has no idea what he’s going to say to poor old Mr Pepper, who seems to have boundless faith in his abilities. He supposes there’s always tomorrow... or perhaps the day after that. Worn out and damaged though he is, there’s an irritating grain of stubbornness inside him that will not let him give up just yet. Carefully, he straightens out his leg and drags up the fabric of his tight-fitting trousers so he can see the bruise that is starting to bloom on his knee.

Stupid thing seems to give out on him at the worst moments. He skates his hand over the bruise and winces, eyes flicking up to the particularly impressive gouge in the wood he had made as he fell.

“Definitely beyond repair,” he sighs, retrieving his wand and casting Evanesco. The mangled block
of wood disappears and he turns his attention to his knee, holding his breath and clearing up the
bruise. As an Auror in the field, an ability to heal simple injuries is essential, and even though it has
been a while, he thinks he does a pretty good job. No doubt a man who is accustomed to this
infuriating affliction could do it better, but no matter.

Harry yanks down his trouser leg, tucks himself more securely against the workbench, and, making
sure he is hidden from the door, sets about his afternoon task—removing twelve hundred beech
splinters from his hands.

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He Apparates into Grimmauld Place just as the sun is sinking below the horizon and, remembering
his promise to Frank, he feels rather pleased with himself despite the relative failure that has been his
workday.

Draco is nowhere to be seen on the ground floor or in the kitchen. Harry climbs the stairs slowly,
taking a moment to nod to the brown spider when he dangles from his web and into Harry’s face on
a long string of silk.

There’s no cooking smell today, he notices, stomach growling in protest as though to remind him that
yet again, he’s forgotten to feed it. He ignores its whining, instead focusing on the delicious-smelling
steam that is drifting along the landing from the bathroom. Harry follows it, hot citrus and spice,
unthinking, fingers skimming along the relief of embossed wallpaper, around the doorframe, and is
halfway into the haze of the bathroom before he even thinks to hesitate.

“Is that you, Harry?”

Breath catching, Harry’s eyes widen and he flattens himself to the cool tiles, suddenly very aware of
what he’s doing. Which is mostly watching Draco in the shower. Naked. Well, the back of him is, at
least, very much naked, and he can only imagine that the front of him is too.

Not that he is imagining it.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he croaks, watching the rivulets of water sluicing down Draco’s spine and over
his... Harry coughs. “Who else is it going to be? Fitzwilliam?”

Harry watches the shudder travel down from Draco’s shoulders. Watches him lift his hands and push
his fingers through hair that is soaked golden blond. Watches.

“Good grief, what a thought. No, I thought you might be a friendly axe murderer or something.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Harry whispers, mouth suddenly dry. He shouldn’t be watching this.

“I expect I’ll forgive you. Are you coming in?”

Harry’s stomach performs a little flip. “In... to... the shower? In there? With you?”

Draco’s laughter echoes in the small, tiled space. He turns to look over his shoulder, bracing one
hand against the glass, and throws Harry an odd little half smile. It’s crazy, he knows it is, but Harry
has never been so desperate to touch someone, just to see what they feel like under his fingers.

“Well, you can always get in the bath with Frank if you prefer. Either way, you need a wash before
we go out,” Draco says, looking Harry up and down and taking in his dirty clothes with distaste.

“Yeah, I... what?” Harry turns, puzzled, to see the roll-top bath, which contains a lot of water and a happily coiled Frank. Relieved to be able to tear his eyes away from Malfoy’s wet naked body, Harry steps closer and notices the tiny bubbles that flow to the surface of the water from the snake’s submerged nostrils. Intrigued, he dips his fingers into the water—it’s barely warm.

“You’re a strange one,” he offers, unsure whether or not Parseltongue travels well through water.

Frank merely flicks his tongue in response and continues to blow tiny bubbles. Harry watches them break the surface for a moment or two and then turns, heart racing, back to Draco, who has now turned all the way around to regard him with a curious expression. And that is what Harry focuses on. His expression. His face. The way his hair is dripping into his eyes. Perhaps the way the water from the shower is streaming down over his flat, pale stomach. But definitely not anything else.

“Well?” Draco prompts, and something in his voice lights in Harry the disturbingly strong urge to struggle out of his clothes and dive under the water. He shakes it away.

“Er, I think I’ll have a shower later,” he manages. “You look... you look like you’re pretty much finished. Done. Clean.”

“That will be the day,” Draco declares, sticking his head back under the water. “I’ll have a cup of tea, then. Blue stripes.”

Harry sighs. He supposes that even a wet, naked Malfoy is still a Malfoy.

Feeling uncooperative, he ignores the demand and heads into the bedroom to begin the search for an acceptable outfit for the evening.

**~*~**

“Oh... what about this green one? What the fuck can possibly be wrong with this green one?” Harry beseeches, holding up what feels like the millionth shirt for Draco’s approval.

He has showered—feeling distinctly uncomfortable the entire time, and not just because Frank decided to stick his head out of the bath and talk to him—and managed to find and put on a pair of trousers that Draco likes. They are dark grey and, of course, tight, sitting low on his hips and held up with such a frighteningly complicated fastener that Harry is a little worried about what will happen when he needs to use the bathroom later.

Still, he’s wearing them, and that is the main thing. Draco, looking completely polished and—Harry suspects, not that he knows about these things—extremely stylish in his dark fitted suit and silver-grey pinstripe shirt, is sitting on the edge of the bed and being exasperated. He’s very good at it. So good, in fact, that Harry is beginning to wonder why he’s putting up with it. With him. And then:

“Why are you so useless when it comes to colours? You’re supposed to be an artist.”

Harry frowns, turning to look at himself and the shirt in the mirror. Fortunately, it manages to keep its opinions to itself for once. “How does grey not go with green?”

Draco snorts. “Grey isn’t really a colour. Why do we have to go through this so often?”
“Because you enjoy it?” Harry suggests, discarding the green shirt.

“No. Well, maybe a little bit, but mostly because you are hopeless.” Draco pauses, and when he speaks again, there’s something curiously vulnerable in his tone that almost makes Harry stop his rummaging through the neat rows of shirts, but he thinks better of it. “And because there are rules about colours... just like there are rules about numbers.”

“Okay,” Harry says softly, drawing out a soft, dark blue shirt with strange three-quarter-length sleeves and metallic buttons. He’s often found that the best way to get a person to talk is to say very little—granted, his experience stems from interviewing criminals, but it’s worth a try.

“It’s not the same as numbers, really,” Draco says after a moment, and Harry smiles into the wardrobe. “There are good and bad numbers, and it’s as simple as that.”

“Like six,” Harry half-whispers, beginning to understand.

“Exactly. But with colours... it’s about the combinations. If you go out tonight in Slytherin colours...” Draco pauses and Harry can no longer control the desire to turn and look at him. His hands grip the bedclothes hard and the eyes that look up into Harry’s are anxious, so much so that he wants to reach out and touch him. He holds onto the shirt tightly, caught between concern for Draco—for this Draco, and apprehension for himself, for whatever the hell is happening to him.

“Something terrible will happen,” Draco finishes dully.

Harry chews on his lip. “I don’t think it will.”

Draco shakes his head, displacing his perfectly arranged hair. “Don’t. You don’t know. Just... don’t.”

“Sorry,” Harry mumbles, knowing that once again he has tripped over some unseen hazard and landed flat on his arse. He wonders with some trepidation just how many incomprehensible rules govern Draco’s life, and just how he is going to navigate them without either of them having a nervous breakdown. “I just... I don’t want you to have to worry,” he attempts.

He receives a weak half-smile from Draco in response. “You always say that. It’s never worked out very well when I’ve tried not to worry, has it?”

Harry sighs. “No. Okay. What about this one?” He holds up the dark blue shirt, hoping for the best.

“That’s mine,” Draco points out, relaxing and shaking his hair back into place. “But you can wear it. With the leather boots... don’t tuck it in, for fuck’s sake,” he admonishes as Harry attempts to put on the shirt.

He makes a face at the closet and goes to examine himself in the mirror. He looks fine, but then he would have looked fine in the green one and the white one and the patterned one and the paisley one, too. He had no idea that colours could be so complicated.

“Maura says that Blaise doesn’t like colours,” he says, thinking out loud.

Draco laughs shortly. “Well, she’s not wrong.” He pauses. “Or perhaps she is. I’ve always had the impression that he’d rather like to wear colours, but it’s difficult to forget something your mother has drilled into you like that.”
Harry stares at Draco’s reflection in the mirror, watching him flicking his wand lazily in a figure of eight over his shoelaces, watching them tie themselves obediently. “I suppose not,” he mumbles, none the wiser.

“Gentleman wear black, and only black,” Draco recites sourly, making a face. “We all had it, growing up. The problem Blaise has is that his mother went and died, and now it’s a lot more difficult to argue with her.”

“What do you think changed it for you?” Harry asks, inappropriately amused.

Draco smirks. “It was all part of my rebellion, wasn’t it?”

“That so?”

“You should know. You were part of it, too.” Draco meets Harry’s eyes in the mirror and, just for a moment, Harry can’t breathe. “Much to my father’s delight. Ready to go?”

Harry nods. He doesn’t think he’s ready at all, but it’s certainly going to be interesting.

**~*~**

“Welcome to the Weasley’s nineteenth annual Christmas party,” recites a disgruntled-looking gnome wearing a sparkly festive hat as Harry and Draco step into the back yard of the Burrow.

Harry stares down at the grumpy little creature who perches atop a tree-stump with his arms folded, looking anything but welcoming.

Draco laughs warmly. “Nineteen years and I don’t think I will ever get tired of that,” he says. “It takes gnome-control to a whole new level.”

Despite having participated in a fair few garden de-gnomings over the years, Harry can’t help but feel a sliver of sympathy for this put-upon specimen. “Isn’t it a bit... cruel?” he wonders.

“You sound like Hermione,” Draco advises, sliding an arm around Harry’s waist. “One night of work won’t kill him, will it? Anyway, if I remember rightly, you thought it was rather funny when I first came up with it.”

“Mm,” Harry mumbles, allowing himself to be pulled away from the gnome and toward the house. As they approach the familiar off-balance building, Harry forgets all about the not-very-welcome committee; the Burrow is sparkling in the darkness, every rafter and lintel and fence post draped with strings of tiny coloured lights that seem to wink and shimmer like fireflies.

Several rickety wooden tables at the back of the house are groaning with laughing, chattering people, faces lit by hovering balls of silver light. The huge wreath nailed to the back door flaps back and forth as the door opens and closes at regular intervals, revealing a kitchen full of people and wafting out a delicious spicy scent that makes Harry’s mouth water. The subtle glow of a skilled Warming Charm loops around the whole thing, making it so incredibly inviting that Harry barely notices when Draco laces their fingers together and pulls him toward the house.

Everything looks so beautifully messy and homely and he finds that his soul lifts a little just to be a part of it. This world seems designed to make him feel lost and inept, to make him miss his family so...
much that he’s raw with it, and to claw confusion into his very understanding of himself, but for some reason, he feels safe here. This is, after all, his first real family home, and no amount of Draco Malfoy-saving seems to have changed that.

“Hey!” Ginny calls, fighting her way out into the garden with several drinks bobbing precariously behind her. “You’re here!”

“Thank you, Ginevra, I hadn’t realised,” Draco says drily, but he finds a smile for her when she rolls her eyes and pokes out her tongue.

“Hi, Gin,” Harry greets her. She’s wearing a thin sparkly band in her hair, and several small flecks of silver seem to have migrated to her face, making her look almost ethereal in the moonlight.

She grins at him, leaning close for a peck on the cheek, and then bellows: “Maura! Come and get this, please!”

Harry resists the urge to rub at his ear. Draco does not. “Don’t you have an inside voice?”

Ginny snorts and ignores him, instead leaning down to hand a mug of what smells like hot apple juice to Maura, who has bounded up from nowhere, full of energy and dressed, again, almost entirely in red. She grins at Draco and gives Harry a knowing look. As she reaches up with both hands to take the mug from her mother, Harry attempts to impress upon her the importance of not blowing his cover—at least, he does as much as he possibly can without moving his lips or making a sound.

“Do you want one for Hugo?” Ginny asks, proffering another identical mug. “Carefully, okay?”

“Carefully,” Maura sings to herself, sauntering across the garden and disappearing into the crowd with two steaming mugs in her hands.

“Is Blaise around?” Draco asks. “I have a few follow-up questions about this bathtub full of gin.”

He grins, flashing impossibly white teeth in the darkness. Ginny makes a face. “He’s over there somewhere, talking shop with Nev. I can’t decide which is a worse topic of conversation for a party—homebrew or sodding plants.” She points wearily at one of the tables and Draco releases Harry’s hand with a quick squeeze and disappears.

“Neville’s here?” Harry asks, surprised and pleased. He has always regretted losing touch with Neville. It has never been a conscious decision, but when Nev moved into the city to be closer to his parents, and when Harry’s hours were suddenly filled with paperwork and childcare and, let’s face it, a dysfunctional marriage, there had just never seemed to be any time left.

“Of course.” Ginny’s eyes glow and her expression turns conspiratorial. “And as we’ve managed to pry him away from his experimental greenhouse, or whatever he calls it, for the evening, Blaise and I thought we’d have another go at setting him up.”

Harry blinks. “With who?” he asks, somehow feeling the need to whisper.

“Well,” she begins, leaning closer until the ends of her hair brush his face. “Don’t look now, but—”

“Auntie Ginny?” interrupts a familiar voice, making them both turn.

“Yeah?”
Rose gazes up at them, discomfort clear on her face. The first thing that strikes Harry is that she’s alone—he can’t remember the last time he saw her without Al, and she looks lost. He aches in sympathy, knowing that she feels the absence of her best friend even if she doesn’t know it. She’s clutching a large book, hugging it to her chest like a shield as she stands there amidst the chattering, laughing crowds.

“I can’t find my mum or my dad to ask,” she begins, large eyes serious. “But I have a lot of homework to do, so is it alright if I go upstairs and read my book now?”

Ginny and Harry exchange a look. “Don’t you want to stay at the party?” she attempts. “I know your mum said it was okay for you to stay up late tonight.”

“No thanks,” Rose says quietly.

“What are you reading?” Harry tries, wondering at this subdued new Rose. It’s as though without Al, she has become a carbon copy of her mother—her mother before she had some of her seriousness poked out of her by Harry and Ron, at that.

She brightens a little at the question. “It’s a compendium of magical creatures. It’s very interesting.”

“I bet it is. Did you know I once rode on the back of a dragon? And so did your mum and dad?”

Rose nods earnestly. “Yes. Uncle Draco likes that story,” she offers softly. “So... is it alright if I go now?”

Ginny sighs, nods, and ruffles her niece’s hair before watching her scramble into the house, holding tightly onto her book, and take off upstairs with impressive speed.

“Doesn’t she have any friends?” Harry asks impulsively.

Ginny sips her drink, thoughtful. “Not any living ones, no.”

“Poor kid.” Harry looks up at the house just in time to see a third floor window light up.

“I don’t think she’s unhappy as such, just... quiet.” Ginny frowns, distracted by the two remaining floating glasses which are clinking for attention next to her head. “Mum’s mulled mead—do you want one?”

Holding back a shudder, Harry shakes his head. Apart from feeling somewhat off alcohol at the moment, if he’s going to survive this night he’s going to need all his wits about him. “No thanks... I feel like I’m still recovering from the other night.”

Ginny grants him a sympathetic smile just before a wave of laughter and clinking glasses makes them both turn. At the far table, Draco, Blaise, Neville and several others Harry doesn’t recognise, are wasting no time in entering into the spirit of the party. Next to him, Ginny heaves a sigh that is half amused and half long-suffering and Harry wonders if he might be able to exploit this situation to his advantage after all—as long as he keeps a clearer head than Draco, there’s no telling how much information he’ll be able to extract. In theory.

Feeling brighter, Harry excuses himself and strides confidently into the house. Delighted to see that everything is much the same as he remembers it, he drifts around the kitchen, nodding and smiling to
people as they greet him. He recognises various Ministry employees and friends of the family amid the sea of red hair and freckles; he hasn’t seen so many Weasleys in one place, he realises, since Bill and Fleur’s wedding. Their family gatherings have always been smaller since the war, even for Ron and Hermione’s marriage, and his own and Ginny’s. Not that he blames them; it’s always felt too much like someone is missing.

He exhales slowly, pushing his sadness away and breathing in the festive atmosphere, allowing it to lift him.

“Harry!” cries a familiar woman’s voice and he turns.

“Hello, Molly,” he mumbles, voice muffled as he’s immediately enfolded into her warm, squashy embrace. Thrilled by the familiarity, he hugs her back, slouching to press his face into the soft shoulder that smells like baking and rose water. “It’s so good to see you,” he murmurs, then instantly flushes and hopes she doesn’t hear him.

No such luck. “Oh, it’s wonderful to see you, too, Harry dear. It’s been far too long,” she says, pulling back and peering up at Harry, bright-eyed and beaming.

Fighting to keep the confusion from his face, he forces out: “Yeah, it’s been... how long has it been?”

“Goodness, probably a month,” Molly says, releasing one of Harry’s arms to scratch at her head. Suddenly, her expression turns stern. “It’s no good, you know, having my children all scattered about like this... why don’t you and Draco get away from the city and have a look at one of these cottages? I know I’m always nagging you about it, Harry, but there’s three up for sale at the moment with lovely gardens and plenty of space for you to build yourself a little workshop...” She sighs, and her face softens, beseeching eyes turned up to Harry’s.

“Er,” Harry says, frantically trying to process her words. Hearing the words ‘you and Draco’ falling so easily from her mouth is astonishing enough, but learning that he’s apparently the subject of an ongoing campaign to move himself and his ex-Death Eater boyfriend nearer to the Burrow is just about enough to liquefy his brain. “Yeah,” he manages at last. “I’ll definitely have a chat with him about that.”

Molly smiles and pats his arm with surprising strength. “You’re a good boy, Harry. You should go and find Ron—he has some wonderful news,” she advises with a twinkle in her eye that makes Harry wonder for the first time if she’s been at the mulled mead, too. “Now, where is that awful man hiding himself?” she adds.


He watches her bustle through the crush in the kitchen and out through the back door, shaking his head slowly. He never thought he’d see the day that he’d be comforted to hear Molly’s incessant nagging, but in this place, it’s just one more constant in a sea of disconcerting unpredictability.

A particularly rousing chorus of Christmas carols from the wireless brings Harry back to his senses and, spotting a gap at the loaded kitchen table, he darts through and retrieves a glass of what he hopes is the nice, safe, spiced apple juice that the kids are drinking. Either way, it warms his hands deliciously and smells of Christmas, and that will do.

He finds Ron in the living room, perching on the arm of a battered chair and gesticulating
enthusiastically with a Butterbeer-clutching hand. Next to him, actually sitting in the chair, is
Hermione, feet tucked underneath her and cradling a glass of the dreaded mulled mead, and lounging
in various positions among the chaos of furniture and glittery decorations, are Charlie, Bill, and
Percy. In the split-second that he has to observe the scene before he is dragged into it, Harry is
relieved to see that the older Weasley children appear much the same, too.

“Harry, get your arse in here,” calls Charlie, springing to his feet and hustling Harry into the room
with a good-natured slap to the back that makes Harry splutter. Apparently, this Charlie has no idea
of his own strength, either.

“Nice to see you all,” he coughs, angling away from an attempted second slap and holding up a
hand. “I’m good.”

He turns to address Ron and immediately falls silent. Now he’s able to get a proper look at his friend,
the difference in him is startling; he can’t pin it down right away, but it’s enough to force his friendly
greeting back down his throat and freeze him to the spot.

Like his sister, he’s very much the same as before—red hair, puzzled blue eyes, long, lean frame—but his posture is straighter, more upright, and there’s something about this Ron in the smart blue
robes and slightly neater haircut... a subtle air of authority that Harry doesn’t recognise. It looks good
on him, and Hermione’s glow of pride as she looks as her husband tells him that he’s not the only
one to think so.

“You look... well,” Harry manages at last, cringing inside as soon as the words leave his mouth.

Ron frowns, puzzled, and then his face clears and he grins at Harry, looking much more like his old
self. “The robes, you mean? Can’t believe I actually let Draco help me choose them, but I think I
owe him a drink.” He pauses, eyeing Harry meaningfully.

Doing his best to play along, Harry lifts his eyebrows and allows a cautious smile to pull at his lips.
He sincerely hopes he isn’t expected to say anything, because if this is anything to do with the good
news Molly mentioned, he is clueless. Perhaps Hermione is pregnant again, he muses, and then
wonders, if that is the case, what Draco has been doing helping Ron to pick out robes. Quickly, he
decides that he doesn’t really want to go down that road, and fortunately is saved by Ron’s
announcement.

“I got the promotion!” he says, grinning at Harry. “You are now looking at the brand new head of
the Auror Department.”

Harry inhales sharply. “Wow, that’s... great,” he replies, forcing out the words of congratulation
against the instinctive twist of his gut that is insisting ‘that’s mine!’ Knowing full well that in his
other life—his real life, he supposes—Ron has been a Senior Auror with his own team for years and
years now; knowing that for those same years and years, Harry has envied him his hours in the field
and his variety and his paperwork-free evenings.

Knowing, realising, that the job makes him unhappy and frustrated, and yet it’s perfect for a strategist
like Ron. As he continues to stare at Ron, barely hearing his excited words, he allows himself to
accept the fact, finally, that his best friend has always been intimidated by his career progression,
always felt overshadowed, ever since the first day of Auror training.

But if I never became an Auror at all, whispers a little voice inside his head, if I never... if Draco
Malfoy persuaded me to make furniture...
“I never held you back,” he mutters under his breath, looking up to meet Ron’s eyes.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing,” Harry says, rising above the tangled feelings and finding a genuine smile for his friend. “That’s fantastic. Fucking fantastic. A toast to the new head of the Auror Department!”

He lifts his drink as Charlie, Bill, Percy, and Hermione echo his words, and he touches his glass to Ron’s bottle.

“Thanks, mate. Are you sure you’re alright?” Ron asks, voice low and concerned.

“Yeah, of course.”

“It’s just... I was going to owl you about it this morning, but I thought it’d be better if I told you myself, you know.” Ron stops, suddenly looking awkward. “You’ve always been dead supportive of me, but it’s not like I’ve forgotten that you always wanted...” he trails off and glances down at Harry’s knee.

A strange cold feeling settles in the pit of Harry’s stomach. That’s why. That’s why, isn’t it?

“You don’t need to worry about me... you daft bugger,” he adds, hating that he feels choked up and hot-eyed—this is Ron, for fuck’s sake. “I don’t envy you, I really don’t. It’s going to be fucking hard work,” he adds with a smile that he really means.

Ron’s grin lights up his whole face and he punches Harry lightly in the arm. “Yeah, but it also comes with its own office and secretary,” he points out, and he gets an approving nod from Percy.

“I think we’ve heard quite enough about your new secretary,” Hermione puts in, and for some reason, it’s Bill who gets the brunt of her exasperation.

Beside Harry, Ron swigs from his bottle and exudes good humour and pride. As one of the few people to truly know how much it means to Ron to measure up to his brothers, Harry catches hold of that pride and wraps it warmly around himself.

“I’m wondering whether to pick the young one with the shiny hair or the old one who makes her own biscuits,” Ron muses, leaning back against the wall next to Harry.

Harry laughs. “I’d go with the old one if you don’t want Hermione to do you some serious damage,” he advises. “I could really go for some biscuits right now, actually.”

“You’re probably right,” Ron sighs gloomily. “Have you not had anything to eat yet? Mum’ll go spare—she’s been cooking for about a week.”

An almost deafening rumble issues from Harry’s stomach and startles them both. “I’ll do that now, then, shall I?”

“Come and see my new office after Christmas,” Ron calls out as he steps out into the hallway. “It’s ages since I’ve seen you twice in one week!”

Will do, Harry thinks, closing the door behind him. If I’m still here. Seeing Ron or Hermione once a
week is unthinkable. It just doesn’t make sense. Still, Harry supposes he’s getting used to that.

“Harry, I heard you were lurking around here somewhere,” says a smooth male voice from somewhere behind him.

He turns, finding himself looking into vaguely familiar brown eyes. His mind races, sorting rapidly through names and faces in the hope that he makes a connection before this man has a chance to get offended.

“Anthony!” he blurs at last, delighted with himself. “Anthony Goldstein. How are you?”

The man smiles slowly. “Oh, not all that bad. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? I think the last time I saw you was at that big Ministry do in August,” he says, never taking his eyes away from Harry’s.

It’s a little intense, but Harry stands firm, determined to get through this exchange without making an idiot of himself. He does remember a big Ministry do in August but he also remembers not going to it.

“Yes, that’s right.” He smiles politely.

Anthony smiles back and takes a step closer, forcing Harry to look up a little to maintain eye contact. “And how is Draco?” he asks, disdain written all over his delicate features.

Harry bristles at his tone, and even though he has no idea why he should care, he does. Perhaps Goldstein’s contempt is just pushing his indiscriminate loyalty button, and if so, there’s not a whole lot he can do about it.

“He’s fine, thank you. Why do you ask?”

Goldstein’s next smile melts away the disdain from his face and he rakes a hand through dark blond waves, affecting sheepishness. “Well, I only wondered if you hadn’t grown tired of him yet,” he admits, leaning so close now that Harry can feel the heat emanating from his body.

“Excuse me?” Harry demands, leaning back but finding nothing but solid wall behind him. He’s suddenly very aware that they are alone in this hallway, and though the sounds of the party travel easily through the walls, all at once they feel very far away.

“I’m sorry, I know I’m being a little bold, but... well... I’ve had a few glasses of Firewhisky and I saw you come into the house, and I thought... I wanted to tell you that you look extraordinary tonight,” he finishes, reaching out to touch Harry’s fingers lightly.

He’s warm and he smells like mints and alcohol. Harry cringes, pulls his hand away and steps sideways, out of reach.

“Yeah, well. These are Draco’s clothes, actually,” he says, backing away and putting plenty of space between himself and Goldstein. “And no, I’m not tired of him, thank you,” he adds with feeling—feeling he didn’t know he had—and walks away without looking back.

Fucking hell. His memories of Goldstein from school are admittedly sparse and foggy with time, but he still doubts he could have been better prepared for that. He’s never been... well, leaned on, by another man before. Well, except Draco, and it’s quite possible that he’s getting used to that.
Sort of.

Rattled, he makes his way into the kitchen and is immediately waylaid by Hermione and a huge plate of food.

“Quick—start eating before Molly sees you!” she hisses, pushing the plate into his hands. “I’ve just heard her asking Arthur if he thinks you’ve lost weight.”

Seized by panic at the prospect of one of Molly’s food interventions, Harry scrambles to obey, almost forgetting all about Goldstein. Almost.

“Where’s Draco?” he mumbles, taking a large bite out of a chicken leg.

Hermione wrinkles her nose. “I said eat it, not spit it everywhere. He’s still in the garden.”

“Sorry.” He swallows and wipes his mouth. “It’s just that... you know that bloke, Anthony Goldstein?”

Something flickers in Hermione’s dark eyes, but she nods.

“I think he just tried to... erm... try it on with me,” he whispers, feeling silly.

Hermione doesn’t say anything for a long time, and Harry is just about to poke her with a breadstick when she sighs:

“You’ve finally noticed, then?”

Startled, Harry drops his breadstick weapon and stares at her. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“I mean that Anthony flirts with you any chance he gets. Look, I work with him, I know what a creep he is... it’s just that you’ve always seemed sort of... oblivious to it before,” Hermione says, crinkling up her nose guiltily.


“No, not really.”

“Hermione! We need a referee!” comes a sudden yell, cutting through the music and chatter with ease.

“In a minute!” she yells back without looking away from Harry, and a couple of cherry tomatoes fling themselves off his plate at the sound.

“He told me I looked extraordinary,” Harry mumbles, glancing down at his strange shirt and tight trousers.

Hermione’s lip curls in distaste. “He’s obviously feeling bold. And slimy.”

Harry stuffs a roast potato into his mouth and follows her out into the garden. “Are you saying I don’t look nice?” he asks, pretending offence.

“You look fabulous, darling!” declares someone with a deep, refined voice.
Amused, Harry attempts to swallow the half-chewed potato and looks around for the source of the voice. Finally, his eyes fall on Draco, who is gazing intently at something on the table, and next to him, Blaise Zabini. Grinning and displaying both rows of perfect teeth.

“Er, thanks,” Harry says, caution holding him back from finding a space at the busy table. Instead, he stands next to Hermione, poking silver light balls away from his head and attempting to work out exactly what the occupants of the table are doing that might require mediation.

“What do you want, gentlemen?” Hermione demands, hands on hips. “I’m almost certain that I have better things to do.”

“Oooo,” says Neville, as he looks through his empty glass at Hermione.

“We’re having a little gnome race,” Draco adds, looking up at last and smiling up at him, looking so vibrant and alive with excitement that something fluttery shifts inside Harry and he inhales sharply.

“Haven’t they suffered enough?” Harry asks vaguely, still staring at Draco and resuming his gnawing on the chicken leg.

“That’s right,” Hermione attempts, but her words are lost under the barrage of laughter from the table. And then: “You’re like children. Where’s Ginny? Get her to do it.”

“Here,” Ginny calls, waving a hand to reveal her position, sandwiched between two burly men and clutching a struggling gnome on her lap.

Hermione groans and folds her arms. “Ginny.”

“I’ll do it,” Harry offers, waving his chicken drumstick. For some reason, refereeing a gnome race seems to him more normal than anything else right now.

“Harry, the man who can!” Blaise cries, rising from the table and stuffing his gnome under his arm so that he can hug Harry firmly and clap him on the shoulder. He’s at least a head taller than Harry and is dressed with incredible elegance in a three-piece black suit and black shirt; together with his height, his smooth, dark skin and his handsome features, the adult Blaise Zabini is an imposing individual.

Harry is determined not to be intimidated, so he throws himself into what is at least his third hug of the evening, secretly impressed by Blaise’s solid stature and suit fabric.

“Well, a man who can referee a gnome race,” he says as they draw apart and Harry sees that the other competitors have also vacated the table and are standing in a little knot, pointing at the ground and arguing amongst themselves. He discards his plate and breathes in the cool night air, turning his eyes up to the stars as a smile creeps over his face. “Gin,” he says simply.

Blaise cringes, and in his peripheral vision, Harry notes with pleasure that the expression undermines his effortless presence quite considerably.

“Do your worst,” he advises wearily. “I’ve already heard all about it from M’lady.”

“I’m sure she’s done just fine on her own,” Harry says, too aware of Ginny’s ranting ability not to empathise. “I just wanted to make you feel guilty.”
“Guiltier,” Blaise corrects with a deep, rich, rumble of laughter that seems to echo around the garden. The gnome under his arm begins to kick violently and he encloses it in a large hand and holds it out at arms’ length, exchanging a smile with Harry.

“Come on!” someone shouts from the makeshift start line. “Let’s get going!”

“Hey, ref,” yells someone else, “Draco’s standing on my gnome!”

“Ginevra, move along. I do not wish to see your arse in my face—it’s off-putting.”

“Blaise!”

At his wife’s call, Blaise crosses the lawn in several long strides and swings her into his arms with what looks like the minimal effort. She squeals, surprised, and there’s a miniature struggle as she fights to hold onto both her gnome and Blaise’s, and then both are laughing into each other’s faces.

Harry watches, entranced, as he leans down to kiss her and she kisses back, soft, smile-edged, open-mouthed kisses, shameless and warm. Ginny’s dress flaps gently in the night breeze and she doesn’t even seem to notice when one of her silver pumps falls to the grass.

He thinks that he should be full of jealous rage, watching his wife kissing another man, and while there is a small prickle of righteous indignation twisting inside him, it is barely noticeable above the tide of sadness that washes through his chest, stinging his heart and rippling out to his fingertips.

He doesn’t think he’s ever kissed Ginny like that, and he wonders if it would have made a difference.

“Put her down, Blaise, you don’t know where she’s been!” shouts one of the big, burly men.

Grinning, they separate and Blaise sets her down on the grass. For a moment, she looks at her feet, baffled, and then shrugs and kicks off the other shoe, too.

“Shut up, Septimus, or I’ll tell everyone where you’ve been,” she threatens, smirking.

Harry lets out a long, controlled breath, scrubs at his face and steps up to the starting line.

“You okay?” Draco mouths, pale eyes concerned.

Another deep breath. And another. He nods. Draws his wand. “Gnomes at the ready!”

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As the racing stretches into an odd sort of tournament, Harry finds a bench far enough away from the action that he’s not being pelted with small stones, lumps of mud, and stray gnomes, and close enough that he can still intervene on the most blatant acts of sabotage.

Soon, Draco and Ginny are the last ones standing, and everyone else has taken a side, throwing themselves into defending their champions, in most cases with no regard for their fancy clothes. Ginny is still shoeless, Neville has a streak of mud across one cheek, and Blaise seems to be wearing a clump of moss like a hat.
“Take your places,” Harry calls, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands against the chill. There is no Warming Charm at work in this part of the garden, and so far he hasn’t felt inclined to cast his own. He hesitates for a moment, caught up in watching Draco and Ginny crouching at the start line with their gnomes, sleeves rolled up and faces set. He grins. “And... go!”

“It’s been ages since we had a good gnome race—can’t believe I missed it,” sighs the person who is lowering himself onto the bench beside Harry. “Couldn’t you persuade them to wait for us?”

“George!” Harry cries, turning to face the person he has so disappointed.

The perpetually cheeky face splits into a grin. “Nope. How many drinks have you had, exactly?” He reaches up and waggles his ears. “Do I look like I’m missing a lug to you?”

Harry looks, bewildered, head full of the yells and crashes of the gnome-racers behind him. He’s right... there are definitely two ears. The realisation slams him so hard that he thinks he might be sick, and hurriedly he claps a hand over his mouth, wrapping the other around the splintered wood of the bench.

“Fred?” he whispers through his fingers, heart thrashing in his chest.

“Who else?” Fred grins, and then one ginger eyebrow flattens in concern. “You really don’t look well.” He twists his mouth, deep in thought, and then brightens, slapping Harry on the thigh and getting to his feet. ‘I’m going to fetch you some of our new Hangover Potion—it’s called ‘Easy-No-Queasy’—good, eh? George says it’s a bit fierce yet, but I’m sure it’s fine. Stay right there,’” he instructs, pointing a finger at Harry and Disapparating before he has a chance to respond.

Instead, he sits there with his mouth open, staring at the spot recently vacated by a man he thought had been dead for nearly twenty years. He grips the bench tightly, struggling to push away this cold, creeping grey haze so that he can think straight.

Fred Weasley is alive.

And that’s... great, it’s... wonderful, but Harry feels as though he has been turned inside out.

“Fuck,” he mutters, rubbing his eyes. Somewhere across the garden, Ginny is celebrating, spinning around with her victorious gnome hugged to her chest, and Harry has to get out of here.

He jumps up and makes his way around the edge of the garden, forcing his way through bushes and stumbling over objects on the ground. Halfway around to the front of the house, his stupid, ridiculous knee gives out underneath him and he goes flying, landing heavily on hands and knees in a particularly swampy section of the garden, breath knocked out of him in a harsh burst.

“This really isn’t funny,” he snaps, picking himself up and not even bothering to clean the mud from his hands and no-doubt-expensive trousers. Scowling, he picks his way around to the front doorstep, which is bathed in soft yellow light and occupied only by an old man wearing a bobble hat and...

... an oilskin coat. For fuck’s sake.

Harry throws himself down onto the step and wipes his hands on his trousers. “What do you want, Boris? I’m not in the best of moods right now.”

“I can see that, young man,” Boris says mildly, twisting so that Harry can see one milky eye and one
huge, bristly eyebrow. He nods approvingly. “Now, don’t you look sharp?”

Harry snorts, looking at the mud clinging to the lines of his hands and then awkwardly pushing his hair out of his eyes with the back of his wrist. “I don’t think I trust your eyesight right now.”

Boris laughs and creaks on the step. “I see what I need to see, lad. Now what’s got you all wound up?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Harry whispers, voice tight with disbelief. He rests his elbows on his knees and threads both hands into his hair, half-believing that if he makes himself small enough, this whole mess will cease to be. “I’d like to see you cope with this and not have any questions.”

For a moment, Boris says nothing, and then: “What sort o’ questions?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Harry mutters, feeling all at once as though he’s treading a whisper-thin line between rage and hysteria, wavering and not quite coming down on either side. “Maybe questions like what the hell is wrong with my leg? How did it happen? Is that why I didn’t become an Auror, and is Ron successful because I’m not? Why does Ginny look happier with Blaise than she ever looked with me? Why is Fred... why is Fred here—alive?” he demands, stumbling over the words and forcing out, rough-voiced, a final question: “And what the fuck am I doing with Malfoy... with Draco?”

When he runs out of steam, he turns, breathing hard, and stares at Boris. The old man regards him impassively, apparently unstirred by Harry’s outpouring of emotion. Finally, he sighs and scratches at his beard. “I gave you a guide, what more d’ya want?”

Frowning, Harry drops his hands to his knees. In his clouded brain, it takes several seconds for realisation to swim to the surface. “A guide? You gave me a seven year old girl!”

Boris shrugs. “S’usually the way. We just take the person with the clearest sight... the cleanest soul, if you like. It’s nearly always a kid. Sometimes it’s someone a bit... y’know.” Boris looks at Harry meaningfully and waggles a finger in a circle next to his head.

“Why?”

“Easier that way, I suppose. Think about it,” Boris says, jabbing Harry in the ribs with an oilskin-clad elbow. Harry scowls. He doesn’t really feel much like thinking about it, and perhaps Boris can tell, because he continues: “Grown-ups tend to see things different, like... if you don’t act like you, they’ll just think there’s summat wrong with you, or think you’re unhappy.” He leans in closer, dropping his voice. “They won’t put it together that p’raps... you’re just not the you they know. Simple, really.”

“Right,” Harry whispers, unconvinced that he’s much the wiser, and very aware that the scheming old codger has managed not to answer a single one of his questions. “I can’t ask Maura about those things,” he points out.

“Why not?”

Harry groans, stretching out his legs and resting his head against the front door with a little too much force. “Because she’s seven.”

Boris nods. “Right you are. Trouble is, I can only do so much.” He knits his immense eyebrows,
leans back stiffly on the step and fumbles around inside his coat, finally withdrawing a very long, very tattered roll of parchment, which he holds up to his face, squinting. “As for your leg... looks like you were cursed in the war.” Boris glances up from his parchment. “Sorry to ’ear that, lad.”

“Er, thanks,” Harry manages, frowning and craning his neck to read over Boris’ shoulder, but all he can make out is a sea of strange symbols. “Why do you have all this written down?”

“I doubt your memory’ll be so ’ot when you’re my age, either,” the old man grumbles, scowling but not looking up.

Chastened, Harry falls silent. He waits, chewing his lip and rubbing his exposed forearms against the biting winter air.

“You wanted to save ’im,” Boris continues. “What you ’ave to remember is that everythin’ and everyone ’ere was affected when you saved ’im. Some places ’e were meant to be, ’e wasn’t, and some places ’e weren’t mean to be, ’e was. Everythin’ around you is the result of how you changed is life, and how ’e changed everythin’ around ’im.”

“Yeah,” Harry murmurs, looking not at Boris but out at the sparkling velvet sky. Exhaling slowly.

It’s strange, because it’s not really as though he’s hearing anything new, and yet Boris’ matter-of-fact explanation seems to still the swirling in Harry’s mind and clear the mist, at last allowing logic and reason to wake and begin piecing themselves together.

“So,” he says at last, “you’re saying that Fred is alive because of what I did? Because of Draco?”

Boris smiles. “Maybe.”

“And my leg...” Harry frowns, hand drifting automatically to his knee.

Boris rolls up his parchment and stuffs it carelessly back into his coat pocket. “As for what you’re doin’ with ’im...” Boris laughs breathlessly and hauls himself to his feet. “I’ll leave that to you to figure out, young man.”

Harry opens his mouth to argue, but Boris merely waves and Disapparates without waiting for a response. Drained, he sags back against the door, just in time for Maura to appear around the corner of the house and scuttle toward him, curly pigtails swinging.

“What are you still doing up?” Harry asks, full of sympathy for this poor child who has to guide his clueless, fumbling arse.

“Nothing much,” she says, looking down at him. “I think Mummy and Daddy have forgotten to tell me to go to bed. Are you alright? Uncle Draco is looking for you.”

“Yeah, I’m—Draco is looking for me?” Harry scrambles into an upright position and reaches for his wand, desperate to clean his hands and trousers before Draco sees him and kills him slowly and painfully.

“Yes, but I haven’t told him where you are,” Maura advises, apparently mesmerised by Harry’s frantic Cleaning Spells. “The old man was here, wasn’t he?”

Harry looks up, surprised. “Boris?”
Maura shrugs, pulling her red coat more tightly around herself. “He didn’t tell me his name. I met him on Wednesday. He said I should look after you.”

Strangely warmed, Harry smiles at her and gets to his feet. He’s as clean as he’s going to get; hopefully, Draco will be too many sheets to the wind to notice.

“I appreciate that,” he says, allowing her to take his hand and setting off in search of Draco. “I’ll try not to be too much trouble.”

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Taking all factors into consideration, Harry thinks his Apparation into the kitchen at number twelve is more than satisfactory. Draco does not seem to agree.

“Are you trying to make me vomit?” he demands, clinging to Harry and exhibiting none of his usual grace and balance as they skid as one across the kitchen tiles and into the wall. “Ow. Mind my head. I need that.”

“Can’t think what for,” Harry mutters, grabbing Draco around the waist and trying to pull them both upright. It’s a long moment before he realises that he’s pressing Draco into the wall and staring into his face from inches away.

He swallows hard as strong fingers curl into his shirt and grey eyes, opalescent in the moonlight, lock with his. While he’s far from completely leathered, Draco has consumed enough to flush his pale skin, set him slightly off-kilter and, apparently, make him prone to little outbreaks of what Harry can only describe as the giggles. And, from Harry’s more or less sober perspective, a drapey, giggly Draco Malfoy is a very disconcerting thing indeed.

One drink, that’s all he’s had, and he bloody well needed it after being confronted with Fred Weasley, back from the apparently-never-been-dead. He suspects that having the new formula hangover potion poured down his neck—this time with an equally eager George in attendance, too—has affected him more than that one mug of mulled mead.

“Powerful,” he had managed to cough when pressed for a verdict. In truth, he had felt, and to some extent still feels, as though he has been scoured and steamed from the inside.

And still, it had taken him several attempts to persuade Molly that he was fit to Apparate.

“Why does everyone always think I’m drunk?” he asks, hoping for a response this time. “Do you think I drink too much?”

Draco continues to stare at him for a moment, and then his lip twitches and he’s gone, laughing helplessly against Harry’s shoulder. “I don’t think you could if you tried,” he manages at last, tipping his head back against the wall and threading his fingers into Harry’s belt-loops.

“What do you mean?” Harry demands, feeling strangely wounded. As he attempts to fold his arms, he accidentally whacks Draco in the shoulder with a stray elbow. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“Balance me,” Draco requests, turning very still.

“What?”
“Balance me,” Draco insists, eyes flicking down to his shoulder and then back up to meet Harry’s, and the expression is so imploring and out of place that it stirs something inside Harry.

Something. He chews his lip thoughtfully for several seconds and then, on impulse, twists around and pokes his elbow into Draco’s other shoulder.

He smiles. It’s a tiny smile, but it’s so real and full of relief that Harry feels fantastically accomplished in a way he can’t explain.

“You’re useless at drinking, you know that,” Draco says suddenly, and it takes Harry a moment to realise that Draco is answering his question. “You don’t usually mind...” Draco frowns. “You don’t usually mind when people make fun of you for being such a terrible lightweight.”

“I don’t mind.” Harry says at last. He supposes he’s never been very good at taking in vast quantities of alcohol, but he’s never had anyone point it out to him before; the assessment stings a little, and he shakes it off with some effort. “I just don’t think it’s very nice.”

This time, Draco’s giggles are completely infectious. Caught up in his amusement, Harry allows the little bubbles of tension to pop inside him, closing his eyes and grinning, dropping his head to Draco’s shoulder and inhaling his warm, clean scent. Everything about this is ridiculous, but for some reason he doesn’t care; there’s a spreading warmth in his belly and a crackle in his chest and he feels—

“Fuck,” he gasps, breath sucked out of him by the unexpected Apparation.

He glances down at himself, relieved to see that his parts remain in their proper configuration after the ill-advised jump. Letting out a slow breath, he watches Draco’s unsteady progress around the bedroom as he drops soft light into the lamps with theatrical flicks of his wand.

“Thanks for that,” he mutters, dropping onto the edge of the bed.

“You’re all in one piece, aren’t you?” Draco says lightly, and Harry grumbles under his breath, even though he can’t really dispute that.

“Let’s hope so,” Harry says, just about resisting the urge to pull at his waistband and check. He sighs, pulls off his boots and socks, and then his restraint dissolves and he yanks at the stupidly intricate fastener on his stupidly tight trousers. Nothing happens.

His patience, never awe-inspiring at the best of times, snaps, and he draws his wand. Suspecting that even a very carefully-cast *Diffindo* would be... hazardous this close to his crotch, he’s just wondering whether he can just Vanish the fastener altogether when there’s a hand on his shoulder.

“Whatver it is you’re thinking about...” Draco pauses, apparently confused, and slides down onto the bed next to him. “Whatever it is, stop it. These were very expensive and I’ve no idea... none at all... why I always have to help you.”

“I...” Harry begins, and before he can summon another word, Draco is reaching over, head resting on his shoulder, and unfastening Harry’s trousers. Frozen, Harry holds his breath and bites the inside of his mouth when those fingers—Draco Malfoy’s fingers, for fuck’s sake, *again*—graze his cock through two layers of fabric and electricity shoots up his spine.
“Want help with the rest?” he enquires, fingers slipping under the waistband of Harry’s boxers.

He stares. Draco’s hair is once more falling into his eyes, but Harry can see enough to know that they are warm with promise and so much genuine, familiar desire that he is almost overwhelmed. The question, does he want Draco Malfoy to undress him, isn’t helping much, either.

Because... what if he does?

“Ginevra is a terrible cheat,” Draco says, startling him. Having apparently forgotten all about Harry, he is now leaning forward and examining his hands, which are, Harry notices for the first time, covered in scratches and little stripes of mud.

“Everybody was cheating,” Harry points out, jumping onto the change of topic with enthusiasm.

“I know that. She isn’t usually so good at it, though.”

Harry doesn’t really know what to say to that, so he wriggles out of his trousers and idly watches Draco in the soft light as he unbuttons his shirt and allows it to fall from his shoulders. The movement draws Harry’s eyes straight to the pale inner forearm and the faded Dark Mark. He has, until now, managed to avoid seeing Draco any more than he has to, and it’s almost a shock to finally see it, even though he has been under no illusions about what lay beneath all of those perfectly-pressed shirts and sweaters.

And yet. Surprise curls Harry’s hands around the quilt cover, fingers slipping over the ridges of embroidery and clenching textured softness into his fists. Something is different. He does not know everything about this Draco, and he doesn’t know why he continues to think he should.

There, directly above the Mark, barely an inch from the crease of the elbow, are four neatly-inked black letters:

**T U R N**

So caught up in this unexpected discovery, Harry is barely aware of releasing the quilt and reaching out to touch Draco; it isn’t until his fingers are sliding over the letters that he comes back to himself and catches his breath. Unable to look up and meet the eyes he knows are fixed upon him, he slides his hand down and threads his fingers through Draco’s on the bed.

He knows somehow, beyond all doubt, that this is significant. The trouble is, he has absolutely no idea what to do with it, or even where to start.

“I wondered if you might have been thinking about that night, too,” Draco says, and his voice is soft, cautious. “I always seem to end up thinking about it when we spend time with the Weasels.” He hesitates and tightens his fingers around Harry’s. “The forgiveness of some people... after everything... sometimes it still makes me feel small. That night changed everything... everything,” Draco sighs, and then, quite without warning, flops back onto the bed, pulling Harry down with him.

“Yeah.” Harry stares at the ceiling, feeling as though someone has stolen his words. “It was quite a night,” he attempts at last, hoping to anyone who is listening that Draco takes it as a cue to continue reminiscing.

A soft snort issues from beside him. “Was it really? From what I recall, once you finally shut up, you snored like an asthmatic troll the entire night under your bloody cloak, and then Pomfrey accidentally
kicked you in the morning. I had to distract her by pretending to be in horrible pain. You wouldn’t believe how tempting it was to let her get on with finding you.”

“I don’t think that would’ve been very nice, all things considered,” Harry says, knocked off balance by the abrupt change of tone but knowing it’s likely to be in his best interests to go with it. Besides, this man is proving near-impossible to predict at the best of times; he doesn’t suppose he should expect intoxication to alter that.

“I wasn’t feeling nice. I was feeling exhausted,” Draco says petulantly, turning his head to look at Harry and poking him in the ribs until he drags his eyes away from the ceiling. “You talked at me for hours.”

“I wanted to save you,” Harry rasps, mouth dry. He shifts onto his side and reclaims his hand with an unexpected twinge of regret, pulling it up to support his head.

Draco closes his eyes and Harry watches, hardly daring to breathe, as his expression shifts, soft light from the lamps casting shadows across his sharp cheekbones and under long, white-blond eyelashes. He is striking, there is no denying that. Now that Harry has forced himself to look, to see, he fears it will be nigh on impossible to stop.

“You did save me,” Draco says at last. His eyes remain closed and he stretches both arms out over his head, drawing Harry’s eyes down over his pale chest, lean torso, and the faint pink slashes of old scars that taint the otherwise flawless skin.

“I did this, though,” Harry whispers, throat tight, unable to take his eyes from the scars, the infliction of which he has relived for so many horrifying nights that he has lost count. He closes his eyes and he’s there—so much blood, so much fear, so much darkness.

When he forces his eyes open, Draco is mirroring his position, regarding him with confused grey eyes. “Good grief, Harry, what is this? ‘Insecurity about the past’ day?”

“No,” Harry says, blinking the hot sting from his eyes and forcing a scowl. “That’s next Thursday.”

Draco snorts and slips a thoughtless hand under his shirt. “I haven’t been angry about those for a long time, you know that. I know you didn’t know what that spell did—”

“I told you that...?” Harry murmurs before he can stop himself. The hand under his shirt is stroking absent patterns into his back and it’s not his fault that he’s distracted.

“Yes.” Draco looks at him askance. “I’d forgotten how terribly your memory reacts with alcohol. Anyway, and I don’t know why I’m bothering, you won’t remember any of this in the morning—”

“Bloody well better do,” Harry mumbles under his breath.

“Shh, I’m saying something very important,” Draco instructs, eyes intense, and just for a moment, it’s obvious how much he has had to drink tonight. And then it’s gone, and he is regarding Harry with clear exasperation. “The point is, who could blame you for trying it when some wanker was trying to Crucio you?”

Harry blinks. “You’re calling yourself a wanker?”

“No... well, yes, but not me now... the little me. The stupid child.”
“You weren’t stupid,” Harry says, surprising himself.

Draco laughs ruefully. “I’d rather believe I was stupid than believe I was evil. I don’t think evil is something you can grow out of.”

“No, I suppose not,” Harry says, surprisingly affected by the plain truth of this statement, and simultaneously astonished that he is, quite voluntarily, telling Malfoy that he’s right.

“You know,” Draco says, shifting closer and sliding one bare thigh between Harry’s, “I still find it extremely amusing that your nonsensical sleep mumbling was what really did it for me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry says, affecting sarcasm. Or at least he thinks that’s what he’s doing; there’s a mouth on his neck again and it’s extremely distracting.

Which it shouldn’t be, surely. Because he’s not attracted to Draco. Because he’s not attracted to men, his subconscious adds hastily. Well, not really. Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“I don’t understand you at all sometimes,” Draco mumbles into the crook of Harry’s neck, drawing up all the tiny hairs and making his skin tingle. “If I was so profound in my sleep, I dare say I’d be rather impressed with myself.”

“You’re always rather impressed with yourself,” Harry whispers, reaching out blindly and gripping Draco’s hip hard, digging fingernails into the warm flesh and letting his eyes close.

“Shut up,” Draco retorts, smiling against his skin. “I suppose you did also say ‘bring me the purple fish’, but I chose to believe that that message was meant for someone else.”

“I’ll bring you the purple fish in a minute,” Harry replies, even as he does so, knowing that he’s making no sense at all, but it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter because someone, perhaps him, is pulling their bodies close, snapping their hips together, and oh, god, he’s hard, and so is Draco, and when did that happen?

“Mmph,” Draco mumbles, wrapping an enthusiastic mouth around Harry’s earlobe and starting to yank his shirt up over his head at the same time. “Be quiet and come here.”

Snared in a hot, prickly rush of desire, Harry complies, gasping and pulling Draco tightly against him. He keeps his eyes closed, holding on to Draco, too conflicted and terrified to do anything but feel, breathe in, warm-strong-lemon-alcohol-friction all around him.

And then everything is still.

“Draco?” Harry opens one eye.

Draco pulls away from his neck and into a seated position. “I think I may be sick,” he announces.

With some effort, Harry scrambles up to sit on the end of the bed. He doesn’t look good. The attractive flush—the flush—has drained from his face and his hair is sticking to his forehead in damp strands.

“I think you could be right,” is all Harry can think of to say.
Draco groans, hauls himself up from the bed and staggers into the bathroom. When he is left alone in
the bedroom, Harry drops his head into his hands and expels a long, low sound of frustration into the
silence.

This is just... beyond insane. He’s sitting here, wearing nothing but underwear and a shirt dangling
from one shoulder, with a pounding, undeniable hard-on for a man who has just disappeared into the
bathroom to throw up. And the horrible thing is, he can’t decide if he’s relieved or disappointed by
the interruption. He had definitely been enjoying it this time, there’s no pretending otherwise.

“So, what does that mean?” he asks of the ceiling, shaking the blue shirt carelessly onto the floor and
crawling into bed.

Perhaps admitting to enjoying it is all he needs to do. That would be nice.

Fuck, he’s wound up. With a heavy sigh, he thumps the pillow and curls into a protective ball,
ignoring the sounds of running water from the bathroom and trying to concentrate on anything but
the heavy, pulsing sensation in his groin.

Surely... surely, if he were gay, he would know about it by now. It’s only logical.

Then again... it’s not as though it has even occurred to him to be attracted to anyone but Ginny for
more than twenty years—for his entire adult life, in fact. And he can’t say the idea horrifies him; it’s
just... a little startling. He doesn’t care whether people are gay or straight or neither. He’s just a
person, and so is Draco Malfoy and so is Ginny.

And, oh... Gin. She’s so happy here with Blaise, and why wouldn’t she be? He’s a big, handsome
man with a huge personality and the ability to pick her up and swing her around as though she’s
weightless. Harry doesn’t really know how to be that person, or even if he wants to.

He sighs. The bathroom door clicks open, and seconds later there is a rustle of covers and a cold,
slightly shaky Draco presses himself against Harry’s back without a word.

“Are you alright?” Harry whispers, flicking out the lamps.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Draco murmurs into the back of his neck, and without thinking, Harry
reaches for the hand on his waist and pulls Draco’s arm around him. “I shall not be sad when
Christmas is over.”

“Oh. I’d almost forgotten about Christmas,” Harry says truthfully, and somehow he hears Draco’s
smile in the darkness.

**~*~**

“Listen.”

“Make me.” A scowl that is becoming unfamiliar.

“You aren’t your father, Draco. You don’t need to try to be.”

“You know nothing about it.” Sitting up straight now, arms folded, pyjamas slipping over pale
hands. “You know nothing about what I have to do.”
Sadness, frustration, hopeful disbelief. “Do you really believe in all that?”

“I don’t believe in much of anything, Potter.”

Bitter laughter. “That’s crap. Everyone should believe in something.”

“Oh, really. And what do you believe in, hmm? Let me guess, all that clichéd old Gryffindor stuff about bravery and loyalty and doing the right thing?”

“What about truth?” A challenge, thrown into the darkness.

“What about it?”

Harry’s vision clouds over and for long moments he sees nothing and hears nothing, and then suddenly he is standing next to the bed, an observer only, listening to his own unconscious mumblings and watching a tense, pale hand scratching words onto a scrap of parchment with a tiny stub of pencil.

Take the unknown road now.
Chapter 4

Harry's nose itches.

Sleepily, he wrinkles it and frowns without opening his eyes, but when it soon becomes clear that the irritant is reluctant to be dislodged, he forces his eyes open.

"What do you want?" he asks wearily, blinking myopically at the small black eyes and the flickering tongue that continues to swipe across his nose, even though he's clearly awake now.

"You have so many smells," Frank replies. "Many people."

"Yeah... but couldn't you have maybe waited until I was awake to start licking me?" Harry complains, batting Frank's head away from his face until he retreats, disgruntled, onto Draco's empty pillow.

"Not licking," the snake says disdainfully. "Was merely keeping you company. Think you should be grateful for such a decorative companion."

Harry laughs, irritation dissolving into the cold air. "Of course. Do you happen to know the location of my other, er, decorative companion?"

Frank rests on his coils with such exasperation that Harry can't help thinking that he'd sigh and raise an eyebrow if it were possible. And if he had eyebrows.

"Downstairs, making more smells... " The black tongue flickers in demonstration. "Obviously."

Harry frowns, both at the statement itself and the barely-veiled insult, but when he sniffs at the air and detects fresh coffee, bacon, and toast amongst other mouth-watering scents, he understands.

Still, he thinks, dragging himself out of bed and searching for a pair of non-scary jeans, someone ought to teach that snake some manners.

Later.

For now, he needs food, caffeine and time to process, probably in that order, because despite definitely not being hungover, his head is full of whirling images, colours, snatches of sound and faint new memories that stir his heart and send him off balance at the same time.

"Take the unknown road now," he murmurs to his reflection as he pulls a long-sleeved t-shirt over his head, shoves on his glasses and ruffles at his messy hair. "Turn. And he did. He fucking did."

"What on earth are you wittering on about?" the mirror demands crossly. "And don't swear."

Harry stares at his own eyes, bright and confused, barely hearing the question. "I suppose the real question is—where's my purple fish?"

"Going without you," Frank advises from the bottom of the bed, and before Harry has time to respond, he's disappearing around the doorframe and heading for the stairs.
Harry sighs and follows him before the mirror offers any further opinions.

"I haven't got anything for you," Draco is saying, looking down at Frank's curiously-waving head and brandishing a spatula. "This bacon is very expensive and the toast would get stuck in your silly digestive system."

Harry leans against the counter and watches them both in silence. Frank is clearly on the scrounge, tilting his head this way and that and coiling himself attractively at Draco's feet, and Draco looks... Harry swallows dryly. Dressed simply but at no doubt terrifying expense in dark, fitted jeans and a soft green sweater, he radiates warmth and contentment, and his angular features are arranged into a genuine, clear-eyed smile that yanks at Harry quite without his permission.

"No dice, Frankfurto," he continues, poking playfully at the snake with his spatula. "Go and catch yourself something disgusting."

"You know he can't understand you, don't you?" Harry manages at last, voice scratchy.

Draco looks up, eyes warming further even as he lifts an eyebrow and says: "Oh, good. I was beginning to wonder if you'd expired in the night."

"Charming," Harry retorts, crossing his arms over his grumbling stomach. Despite his best efforts, he soon has to look away from Draco—the embarrassed, squirmy, 'what did we do?' feeling that had started building from the moment he entered the kitchen is now too much to bear, and he has to look at the floor, count the kitchen tiles, anything rather than burst into flames.

He has no idea why it's quite such a big deal... except that he does. And the most terrifying part of it—alternative universes and horrible embarrassment aside—is how normal it is beginning to feel.

"... and you know that very well," Draco is saying, now with his back to Harry as he assembles two breakfasts. "Anyway, I think he understands a lot more than he lets on."

"Hmm," Harry mumbles, pretending not to notice that Frank has coiled on an empty kitchen chair, concealing himself beneath the table as Draco hands Harry a delicious-smelling plate and pulls out the final empty chair for himself.

"Thanks," he adds, eagerly slicing into the perfectly-crisped bacon and arranging it on a piece of buttered toast. Ginny really hates it when he does that, and he's never been able to understand why. He looks up cautiously, but Draco, who has no doubt been brought up with perfect table manners and fine dining, says nothing. He merely crunches neatly on a toast triangle and watches Harry thoughtfully.

"So," he says, swallowing a mouthful and running his foot along Harry's calf under the table, "since you'll be at the 'shop all day, tending to the furniture-purchasing masses, I thought I'd go and deal with my mother."

Harry pauses, reaching for his coffee. "Er... what do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm being incredibly selfless and taking the flak for both of us." Draco frowns lightly and softens his voice: 'Why aren't you staying the night? Is that a grey hair? All I want for Christmas is a little grandchild, Draco...''' he says, giving his fork a fierce glance. And then in a passable imitation of his father, "how is the... wood trade, Mr Potter?"
Harry snorts. "Yeah. On second thoughts, I think I can do without that this morning."

"That's what I thought," Draco says, looking ever-so-slightly smug, and the expression is so reminiscent of his schoolboy self that Harry is immediately caught up in a tide of suspicion.

"Are you trying to butter me up for something?" he demands.

Draco sighs and wraps his hands around his coffee cup, eyes fixed on the table. "Not entirely."

"Meaning?"

Hunted grey eyes lift to meet his at last, and a sudden dread speeds Harry's heart.

*What the fuck now?* Is all he can think. *What the fuck have you done?*

"Draco?"

Another sigh. Fingers clinging onto that cup for dear life. And then: "Well, last night wasn't exactly my finest moment, was it?"

Puzzled, Harry sets down his bacon and toast and rubs his eyes under his glasses. "What?"

"You can stop pretending that you aren't disgusted with me," Draco snaps. "I can handle it."

"I'm not... do you mean because you, er... were ill?" Relieved, Harry manages a grim smile. "I've seen a lot worse, you know."

Draco's eyes, genuinely anxious, search out his across the table. "Oh, really? And where was that?"

"At wo—er, when I was at the Dursleys'," he amends quickly, doubting that his little workshop has seen a huge amount of vomit over the years. "Dudley was always throwing up everywhere, the greedy little bastard."

Draco shudders. "I thought perhaps you were angry."

"No," Harry says, voice softening. Wondering at this man's need for reassurance, wondering if, perhaps, reassurance is what he has needed all along, wondering if he is always the one to reassure.

Imagining that his other self doesn't mind. Suspecting that this one doesn't, either.

"Yes, well," Draco says briskly, picking up another toast triangle and seeming to shake his anxiety from his shoulders and onto the floor. "I always think it's rather bad form to start things without finishing them," he adds, and a new light flickers in his eyes, one that simultaneously terrifies and excites Harry.

"Mm," he manages, chewing on his lip and trying to catch his breath. Stupid Malfoy, sitting there and looking so... "How do you look so healthy, anyway?" he blurts.

Draco grins. "Easy-No-Queasy, of course. Fantastic stuff. Anyway," he says, ignoring Harry's groan and getting to his feet. "I need to go. You know how my mother is about punctuality. Merlin help us if we're late on Christmas Day. Part of me thinks she might actually have us disembowelled, just to make a point."
"Thanks for that," Harry mumbles, accepting his kiss in silence and watching Draco disappear into the flames of the kitchen fireplace.

Apparently aware that the coast is clear, Frank emerges from his hiding place and flicks his tongue over Draco's half-empty plate with interest. Harry watches him, amused, until Draco's last words drop into place with alarming clarity.

Christmas Day. With the Malfoys. And if today's Saturday...

... he has less than two days to find out... well, enough to keep his organs on the inside, by the sounds of it. He desperately hopes that Draco's words were figurative, but one never knows, especially when Malfoys are involved.

Reluctantly, he pushes his chair away from the table and sighs.

"I'm going to do some research," he announces. "Don't eat too many leftovers, I'm sure they're not good for you."

Frank says nothing, but as Harry folds the last of his bacon and toast into his mouth, grabs his coffee cup and makes for the study, he suspects he's being followed.

**~*~**

Almost an hour later, Harry is ready to give up. Apart from the fact that he's drawn a massive blank on the fact-finding front, he's starting to think he's late for work. It doesn't seem to matter that he's self-employed, or that he has no idea what kind of hours a Diagon Alley carpenter should work on a Saturday. Whichever way he decides to slice it, it's nearly half past ten and that has got to be pushing it.

He sits back on his heels once more and surveys the messy pile of scrapbooks on the rug. They've been interesting, there's no doubt about that. He's managed to find out that Ginny and Blaise have been married for seven years and together for more than ten, judging by some of the newspaper pictures of the two of them with Harry and Draco at various glittering functions.

He's learned that this Ron does indeed collect antique broomsticks and has featured in an extremely amusing series of Quibbler articles about them, and that here, with a successful playing career behind her, Ginny is a well-respected Quidditch coach. Harry finds several pictures of her from the Prophet sports pages, windswept and celebrating with her team-mates, complete with Draco's snippy little annotations, through which it is now possible to see the warmth and pride he feels for his friends.

He also finds a nice photograph of himself, Hermione and a tiny Rose, sitting on a wall at the seaside. All three of them have huge ice creams with flakes and Harry has a protective arm each around the little girl and the heavily-pregnant Hermione. She is radiant, beautiful, and Harry aches with missing her. Though, of course, they are still friends in this place, things are inevitably different when one couple has children and one does not. He sighs, looking at their relaxed, happy faces, and wonders about the whereabouts of Ron and Draco, until he catches sight of the note:

So... Weasley and I are finally working together for once, and you decide to abandon us on the hottest day of the year to swan around in Newquay. You deserved all the reporters you got, I assure you.
He also learns that a six-foot python, dangling from bookshelves and fireplaces and tables, is extremely distracting.

Unfortunately, he fails to learn anything useful about Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, and it's with an exasperated sigh that he returns the leather scrapbooks to their places—carefully and by hand this time—no one can say that he's not learning.

"What do you think, Frankfurto?" Harry asks of the snake, who is hanging upside down from the mantelpiece, exposing his shiny, iridescent belly.

"Many things."

"Great. I'm so glad we talked," Harry mutters, getting to his feet and stretching. As he turns to leave, his eyes are caught by the record player sitting neatly on a pretty little carved table that seems to be mocking him somehow—the table, not the record player; that might actually be a tiny bit useful. Or at least, the one he's certain he saw in the corner of his workshop might be.

"Like the dragon, you're to blame," he mumbles to himself, crossing the room quickly and rifling through the stack of records. Quite a selection, he thinks, some wizarding and some Muggle, but—he's all at once relieved and disappointed to note—absolutely no Celestina Warbeck.

And, for better or for worse, she is going to be the thing.

Wonderful.

**~*~**

Suffused with a new, strange sense of purpose, Harry makes his way to Diagon Alley, relying on his memory and the theory that some things just never change, in order to find what he's looking for. Surely it's still there; he's bought a thing or two for Ginny over the years, but mail order quickly became less of a hassle than dealing with Diagon Alley. But still, he hopes. Turns the corner, waves to yet another sweet little old lady, and—yes!

The place is much as he remembers it: a tiny, slightly shabby shop front with leaded windows and a swinging sign reading 'Richenda's Records' in scarlet and gold. The door opens with a bit of a push and a small, soft tinkling sound announces his arrival, causing one or two customers to look up momentarily from their browsing.

The bare boards still creak under Harry's feet and the place even smells exactly the same, of cardboard and wood and vinyl, and of the bundles of dried aromatic plants that decorate the walls. Church-silent, the shop is much bigger than it appears on the outside, and lit only by the glow of myriad tiny white lights on strings, and it takes Harry quite some time to locate the relevant section.

Bewildered, he stares with hands in coat pockets at 'Celestina Warbeck: Greatest Hits—including "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love" and "Dragon's Lair"', which seems fairly comprehensive, but then there's also 'Celestina's Forty Years of Love' and 'Veelas, Nymphs and Squibs: the ultimate collection'. Each sleeve carries a frighteningly lurid photograph of the ageing singer, wearing far too much makeup and posing with cats and harps and broomsticks.

In the end, he grabs a copy of each one he can see and creaks over to the counter.

"How are you this morning, Mr Potter?" asks a statuesque middle-aged lady behind the counter,
who, if memory serves (and it might not) is Richenda herself. Her glossy black curls are piled on top of her head as though in readiness for an impromptu dinner dance, and she radiates personality and bonhomie from every velvet-clad part of her. Harry has the impression that this version of himself is a regular customer and he smiles at her.

"Very well, thanks," he says, trying to hide his embarrassment as he places the three records on the counter.

Richenda smiles, wine-coloured lips curving in amusement. "I didn't know you were a fan."

"Er... I'm not. They're not for me," Harry lies pointlessly.

She holds his gaze for a split second before rich, warm laughter seems to reverberate around the room. No one looks up this time. "Do not be ashamed of your musical choices, Mr Potter, embrace them!" she declares, wrapping bejewelled fingers around the records and beaming at him.

Harry chews on his lip, thoughtful. "Well, you know, I'm sure there are plenty of people who love... Ms Warbeck," he says, glancing down at the beaming woman in the pictures and deciding impulsively to confide in Richenda, "but in my case, it's a matter of bonding with the in-laws, you know?"

Richenda's mouth twists into a grimace. "Terrible things, in-laws. I've been married to Alfonso for thirty-two years now, and his mother likes to remind him that there's still time for him to find the right girl," she says, expression turning sour for just a moment, but it is soon replaced by a rueful smile.

"She clearly doesn't know what she's talking about," Harry says, flashing her a smile and wondering why it's just always so easy with older ladies, however glamorous they are. That being said, he doubts Richenda has fifteen years on him, and it's a terrifying thought.

"You're rotten, Mr Potter. I hope you don't think you've a chance of a discount, flattery or none," she teases, raising a dark eyebrow.

Harry laughs. "I'd rather not have to pay for these, believe me. Or listen to them, for that matter, but I wasn't thinking of ripping you off."

"That's two Galleons, fifteen, for your sins," Richenda says, visibly amused as she takes Harry's money and reaches for a sheet of brown paper in which to wrap his purchases—just in case.

"Wish me luck," Harry says grimly as he pulls the door open.

"Oodles of it, Mr Potter," she calls, leaning on the counter. "And I hope your efforts are appreciated. Merry Christmas!"

Harry smiles, looking back into the shop one more time. "Merry Christmas."

When he turns to face the sparkling, snow-covered street, his eyes need a moment to adjust from the atmospheric gloom of Richenda's shop. Taking a deep, cold breath, he heads into the crowd and allows it to carry him toward his destination, carefully-wrapped paper package clutched tightly to his chest, hoping silently that no one will guess his shameful secret.

Once he's made it to the 'shop with his shame intact, he dusts off the record player and drops the needle onto 'Celestina Warbeck: Greatest Hits'. 
He slips off his coat, hangs it up and ties on his apron as he listens with some trepidation to the opening strings of the first song. He's determined, if nothing else, to have another go at the blasted little table today.

"A bad, bad man accursed my soul, but you walked in and made me whole," croons Celestina, and Harry groans. It's painful, but there doesn't seem to be any other way. He has just hours to learn enough to keep up with Lucius Malfoy, and just maybe, retain his dignity and his bollocks. Perhaps if he just thinks of it as an assignment. A task. A project.

A crash course, maybe.

"He fettered my heart with his spells and charms, but you swept me up into your heavenly arms," warbles Celestina.

"Oh, god," Harry mutters.

"Oh, yes, you did," she continues.

"Something about arms," Harry attempts, levitating another chunk of beech onto his table. "Oh, yes, you did."

"You're the curse-breaker, you broke me apart," Celestina bellows, making Harry jump. "You had me wanting, right from the start. And you claimed me, like only you can, take me gently, my curse-breakin' man."

Resting his hand on the rough surface of the wood, Harry turns to look at the record player in horror. Suddenly, the only thing he can think about is that Molly Weasley is a Celestina fan. Molly Weasley, the mother of a curse-breaker. He can only hope that Bill has never had to listen to his mother singing along to this particular song.

Still, disturbing images or no, he needs to learn the bloody thing.

"You're the curse-breaker, you broke me apart," he sings through gritted teeth, picking up his chisel and joining in with the second chorus.

***~*~***

By the time he has received his third surprise visitor (and not a knock in sight), Harry has a quick-draw Silencing Charm down to a fine art. Unfortunately, the first couple of attempts at shutting up Celestina have scratched the record so badly that he will, to his horror, have to return to Richenda's and purchase another unwanted copy of 'Celestina Warbeck: Greatest Hits'.

Fortunately, the next set of intruders is far more welcome. There's still no knocking, but the sound of approaching children is enough of a heads-up for Harry to silence the music, and when Hermione struggles through the door, laden with bags, he understands.

"Hi, Rose, Hugo," he says, smiling at the children as they follow their mother into the 'shop, bundled in coats and scarves and gloves. Rose, who is wearing a very fetching pair of fluffy earmuffs, returns his smile and darts curious glances at Little Table Mark Two. He doesn't blame her; it's not going well.
"Hi, Uncle Harry," Hugo pipes, running to give him a hug. Surprised and delighted, Harry hugs him back and tweaks the bobble on his hat.

"It's crazy out there," Hermione sighs, dropping her bags and shaking the snow out of her hair. "Anyone would think it was the weekend before Christmas," she adds with a quirked eyebrow, a fraction of a second before her face melts into an expression of horror. "That was a Dad joke, wasn't it?" she asks wearily.

"Definitely. Sorry."

Hermione smiles resignedly. "I think I've been spending too much time with Arthur this week. You should probably expect a visit from him, by the way," she advises, leaning down to rummage in one of her bags, dark curls falling into her face. "He's very excited about the new purchase."

"The new purchase? Ah, the new purchase. Yes," Harry mumbles, glancing hopelessly around at the shelves and boxes and stacks of wood.

"He said he was going to come over and see if you'd let him play with it," Rose says innocently, and when Hermione straightens up and swipes her hair out of her face, she's smirking.

"Well, as long as you're both careful," she says and her eyes glow as she hands Harry a steaming paper cup. "We thought you might be cold."

"Thank you." Harry accepts the cup, warming his hands and inhaling the rich scent. Impulsively, he adds: "Hermione, do you remember when we went to Newquay?"

Surprised, she stares at him for a moment. "When I was pregnant with Hugo? Yes, of course. Why?"

"No reason. I was looking at some photos this morning, that's all," he says, feeling silly.

"I remember that," Rose puts in, and Harry turns to look at her. "When we went to the seaside? You, me and Mum?"

"That's right. What do you remember?"

Rose frowns, deep in thought. "Really big ice creams." She smiles and her serious face is transformed. "We made a sandcastle... and some people took our picture and put it in the newspaper."

"Oh, no, I look huge in that photograph," Hermione grouses, folding her arms with some effort in her bulky coat.

"You look beautiful in that picture, 'Mione," Harry says stoutly, and she flushes. And sticks out her tongue.

"I don't remember," Hugo says, sounding utterly put out. Rose giggles.

"It was before you were born, that's why," Hermione explains, to her son's apparent disappointment. "Maybe we'll all go again one day," she placates.

Harry catches her questioning look and his heart thuds in approval, sadness, resolve. "Definitely."
"If I wasn't there," Hugo begins, gazing up at Harry, forehead creased, "where was I?"

"You were in Mum's tummy, silly," Rose supplies, apparently amused by the whole thing.

Hugo's frown deepens. "How did I get in there?" he demands of Harry.

"Erm..." Harry attempts, suddenly very aware that he has inadvertently pried open a can of worms, and if someone doesn't move quickly, there will be no getting it shut again.

Rose and her mother exchange a meaningful look, and Harry watches the little girl's face turn serious once more as she seems to realise just what she's started.

"I think we'd better be going, Harry," Hermione says, retrieving her bags with a resigned expression.

Even though he can't help but feel partly responsible for whatever uncomfortable convention his friend is now about to have with her son, Harry gives in to the urge that makes him stride across the floor and envelop Hermione in a tight hug before she braves the streets.

"Good to see you," he whispers.

"You too," she says, eyebrows drawn down in concern. "You'd tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Harry assures, and as the door slams shut behind her, he's not sure whether he's lying or not.

**~*~**

"Don't need no Stunning Spells, don't need no potions of love," Harry sings, chipping away at what he hopes is starting to look like a table-top, "don't need no cupid's arrows and the... fucking rest of the fucking line," he improvises, as, from behind him, Celestina warbles on.

Dissatisfied with his work, Harry steps back, wiping his hands on his apron. It's terrible. If possible, it might even be worse than his first attempt.

"It's your fault this isn't working, you horrible old bat," he mumbles into the instrumental section.

"Woah, oh-oh-ohhh," Celestina interrupts breathily.

"Shut up." Harry sighs. He's all too aware that his lack of skill isn't really anyone's fault, and he also knows that, in all likelihood, all his current efforts are futile. But he's not quite ready to be beaten by Lucius sodding Malfoy and a chunk of wood.

A knock at the door startles him, but he silences the music efficiently and even has time to draw a Disillusionment Charm over the mangled wood, just in case this is another customer hoping to collect their purchase. If so, he only hopes, nearly prays, that the purchase in question is both in plain sight and completed. So far, his other self has proved himself astonishingly organised on both fronts, but Harry is all too aware that he is flying by the seat of his bizarre designer jeans, and it could all fall apart at any moment.

The door creaks open and he holds his breath.
"Harry, I'm having a crisis," Ginny announces, pushing her way into the 'shop with a snow-dotted Maura at her side.

Relieved, Harry sags against the worktable and finds a smile for her. He'll happily take what looks very much like a childcare crisis over another customer with an incomprehensible request. The last shopping day before Christmas seems to have brought them all out. Perhaps, he thinks, brightening, Maura will be able to help.

"Join the club," he offers, flashing her a wry smile. "How can I help?"

Without a word, Maura hugs her mother around the waist and then runs to Harry to be lifted onto an empty worktable. Amused, he complies, admiring her corduroy trousers and new shiny shoes at her silent request.

"You're getting as vain as your father, young lady," Ginny sighs. "Anyway, sorry to spring this on you, Harry, but it's an emergency—please can you watch her for the afternoon?"

"Absolutely," he says, watching her face relax and taking in her smart black zip-up jersey, her navy and yellow Puddlemere team scarf and her bulging shoulder bag. "Work crisis, by any chance?"

"Oh, you're a lifesaver. McGann has gone down with Kneazle Pox, the match is at four, and we have to completely rehash all the plays with the reserve Seeker," Ginny says, looking harassed.

"Sounds like fun, Gin," Harry says, suppressing a smile. "I take it Blaise is working, too?"

Ginny rolls her eyes. "No, but she didn't want Daddy. Daddy is not feeling his best right now. Apparently, he's 'stinky and won't open both his eyes at once'," she explains, flicking a glance at Maura, who wrinkles her nose at the memory.

Harry snorts. "Apparently Easy-No-Queasy is the way forward, though I can't help feeling that Fred and George are just looking for easy victims to test it out on," he says, voice catching slightly at the feeling of Fred's name in his mouth. The 'Fred and George are'—it's been a long time.

"I'm not really feeling inclined to help him right now," Ginny says darkly. "He managed to kick me out of bed four times last night. Right, I'll have to go. Thanks again, Harry. Maura, behave yourself... if possible."

"Bye, Mummy," Maura calls, leaning precariously from the worktable to watch Ginny leave. "I hope you win!"

"Do you think she will?" Harry asks, wandering over to slam the door shut.

"Probably," Maura says, swinging her legs back and forth. "Seven out of the last ten matches won, six Snitches caught. The Magpies are on a losing streak. Mummy's team is stronger in inc... inclement? Um, bad weather than the Magpies. But her Seeker is sick. So I don't know, really."

"Right," Harry says softly, impressed. He hadn't expected such a detailed answer to his question, but then he supposes that Maura has grown up with Quidditch; she's a little expert. "Well, let's hope so, shall we?"

Maura nods. She turns to look around the room, shiny red button-shaped hair-bands glinting in the bright sunlight. "The big chest has gone! And the snake lamp! And the round wardrobe! All sorts of
"things," she exclaims, turning to face Harry, eyes sparkling.

"Yeah. People came to get them." He smiles conspiratorially at her. "I think I kept it together."

"That's good," she says seriously. "You're lucky that you already finished most of the Christmas things. You work really hard, except on Saturdays when we play games."

"What sort of—hang on, what do you mean *most of*? What haven't I finished?" Harry asks, panicked.

"That," she replies, pointing at the standard lamp, the one he has made for Draco.

"What else was I going to do with it?"

"I don't know," she admits, biting her lip guiltily. "I think you told me, but... I think that was the day the man came in with the big dog, and I can't remember."

"Ah, the big dog," Harry murmurs, even though he has no idea about the big dog, and even though Maura knows he has no idea about the big dog, too.

"Sorry," Maura says, picking at her coat buttons.

"It's not your fault. We'll figure something out," he says, hoping but not quite believing.

"Alright, Mr Potter," booms a large, bearded man, bursting through the door with a cursory knock and startling Harry and Maura. "How's it going? I've come for my sideboard."

"Er, great, thanks," Harry says, tipping his head back to make eye contact with this immense man who seems to fill all the available space in the workshop, barrel-shaped, beaming, and almost as tall as Hagrid, who would be banging his head on the skylights if he were here.

"Hello," Maura says, hopping down to the floor and smiling up at him. She clatters around the room, coat flapping behind her, while Harry and the huge man watch her. "Is it this one?" She points. "Or this one?"

"That's it, young lady," the man rumbles, creaking across the floor toward her and lifting the large mahogany and glass sideboard into his arms as though it were made of paper. "Lovely job, Mr Potter, now all I have to do is hide it from the wife until Monday!" He grins. "Here's what I owe you."

Harry accepts the weighty money bag, still feeling slightly bewildered. "Thank you."

"Have a lovely Christmas, the both of you!" he bellows as he manoeuvres carefully through the door that Maura holds open for him.

Harry shakes his head and gulps at his now-tepid coffee.

"Come on, Uncle Harry," Maura chides, staring up at him from the doorway. "Start acting normal, there are more people coming!"

**~*~**
As the afternoon wears on, Harry does his best impression of 'normal' and Maura, as predicted, 
makes herself very useful indeed, helping to locate each customer's order as they flock in to collect 
their custom-made Christmas gifts.

When Harry gives in and reluctantly reinstates Celestina, Maura is horrified.

"Grandma Molly likes this," she says, pulling a face. "It hurts my ears."

"Mine too," Harry admits. "But I have to learn it to impress Draco's dad."

"That doesn't make any sense," Maura complains, but she endures it with only a modicum of drama, 
and helpfully falls about laughing every time Harry sings along. By one o'clock, she's studying the 
sleeve notes and telling him where he's going wrong.

"It's 'fly me away on your broomstick, my love' not 'fly me away on your broomstick of love'," she 
insists, puzzled at Harry's laughter.

Extraordinarily relieved that no actual carpentry is required in spite of the rush, Harry's mind quickly 
turns to the one project from which there seems to be no escape.

"There's this other thing," he confesses to Maura during a brief lull, and her concerned expression 
makes him feel curiously as though he's the child in this situation. "I have to make a little table."

"What sort?"

Harry digs out the notebook and shows her the specifications. She shrugs.

"Spindles," she says with interest.

"Spindles," Harry agrees, perching next to her on the worktable. "So, you don't know what it's 
supposed to look like either?"

She shakes her head, lashing him with a bouncy pigtail. "Nope. Did you try making it?"

Harry nods.

"Can I see?"

"Not really. I already vanished the first one."

"It must have been very bad," she says, dark eyes wide.

Harry snorts. "You could say that. I tried again today, though." He flicks his wand and the 
Disillusionment Charm fades, revealing a pile of wood shavings and an uneven slab of beech. It's 
worse than he remembers.

"Oh," Maura manages, frowning. She tilts her head this way and that, as though trying to figure out 
exactly what she's looking at.

"I think we'll just get rid of this one, too," Harry mutters, flicking his wand and sighing.

"It wasn't that bad," Maura says, and Harry laughs softly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and
hugging her briefly for trying.

"It was. Maybe I just need to try a different approach."

He pulls his feet up onto the table and crosses his legs, copying Maura. Lifting both hands to scrub thoughtfully at his hair, he stares, unseeing, at the far wall and wonders. Breathes in the now-comforting scent of wood and varnish and pictures Mr Pepper’s table as clearly as he can in his mind. He knows it’s not all about this particular table, knows that there will be more, but somehow it feels as though, if he can just get this one right, everything else will be okay.

And perhaps... perhaps there is still hope. After all, he's turned matchsticks into needles and teapots into tortoises and plant pots into cats. Granted, that was years ago, and he doesn't have much call for regular Transfiguration these days, but he's certain it can't be all that difficult. In fact, as the idea becomes stronger and more compelling in his head, he wonders why on earth his other self chooses to do all his work by hand.

"Right," he says decisively, gripping his wand tightly and sliding back onto his feet. He collects another chunk of beech, trying hard not to think about the expensive materials he has already wasted.

Maura leans forward. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm not exactly sure yet," Harry admits. "Just... think of a table."

Harry narrows his eyes, points his wand at the wood, and attempts to focus all his magical strength into forcing one thing to turn into something else. Table, table, table. Spindles and twelve by twelve. It flows out of him, tingling down his arm, crackling through his fingers, his wand, through the air; he tastes static on his tongue as the wood shifts before his eyes—yes—heart speeding, he holds onto the cast as something decidedly table-like starts to take shape.

"Cool," Maura whispers from behind him, the sound drifting to his ears and spurring him on. He’s done it, he's... fucking hell, it definitely looks like a table.

Triumphant, Harry turns and grins at Maura. He hadn't really expected it to work, and from the astonished smile on her face, neither had she. Harry suspects he owes Minerva McGonagall a very large drink.

"Uncle Harry doesn't do it like that," Maura advises, "but I don't think it matters."

"Hopefully not," Harry agrees, eagerly stepping closer to the workbench to admire his creation. He reaches out a hand to touch one of the elegant spindles, and the moment his fingers connect with the wood, it all falls apart.

Quite literally, in fact. Harry watches the entire table, spindles, etched glass and all, crumble into dust in front of him. Horrified, he swipes his fingers through the fine brown powder, hoping pointlessly to find something solid among the dry remains scattered in mounds across his worktable, but there's nothing.

"Maybe that's why he doesn't do it like that," Maura says quietly, and Harry balls his dirty hands into fists and closes his eyes for a moment to avoid snapping at her.

"Maybe," he manages at last, through gritted teeth.
At that moment, the door creaks open. The ever-watchful part of Harry's subconscious rises above his frustration and disappointment and forces the spell that silences Celestina, who has been screeching helpfully throughout this whole debacle.

"Hello, Grandad."

"Hello, Maura. I like your shoes," says a very familiar voice.

Harry takes a deep breath, wipes his hands on his sides, smearing apron and jeans and not caring, before turning to face Arthur.

"Hi. I was told to expect you," he says, smiling. It's not Arthur's fault that not only is he useless at making tables, he can't Transfigure them either.

"Yes, yes. Has it arrived yet?" Arthur asks, almost rubbing his hands together in excitement.

Harry hesitates. He has no idea.

"I think it's over there, Grandad," Maura says, pointing to a large wooden crate in the far corner of the workshop.

"What is it?" Harry hisses out of the corner of his mouth.

Maura leans up on tiptoes to watch Arthur. "Um... you and Grandad... well, Uncle Harry and Grandad, wanted to learn how to blow glass out of a stick. I don't really know why."

"Me neither," Harry says, raising his eyebrows as Arthur cries out delightedly and starts to carefully float the crate over to Harry's workbench. Hurriedly, he grabs a rough cloth and wipes away the worst of the failed-table dust.

"Wonderful that it arrived before Christmas, isn't it?" he enthuses, eyes crinkling. He faces Harry over the crate. "You've still got time to have a go, haven't you?"

"Sure," Harry says, silently adding 'Why the fuck not? Might as well embrace the madness.'

"Great." Arthur exchanges a gleeful glance with Maura, who seems to have jumped on board with impressive alacrity. "Right, I've got the spells here," he says, pulling a bit of parchment out of the pocket of his duffle coat.

"Hmm?" Harry says vaguely.

"The spells for the different temperatures of the flames," Arthur explains. "It's a shame we can't do it with the three furnaces, you know, the proper Muggle way, but I suppose you're right that there's not enough space here, he says, looking around ruefully at the small workshop. "Still, maybe one day, eh?"

"Maybe." Harry takes a deep breath and, with Arthur's help, prises the lid from the crate and begins to unload carefully packed boxes containing rods and fragments of coloured and plain glass, several metal stands and unfamiliar tools, and a selection of slender clay pipes of various lengths. From the bottom of the crate, Harry lifts out a large iron object, rather like a very heavy saucepan, and drops it onto the worktop with some relief.
"Wonderful, isn't it?" Arthur beams.

"It's certainly something," Harry murmurs, poking around in the bottom of the box for instructions but finding nothing but packing beads and shredded paper. "Maybe we should try—"

"Come on then, my boy, let's melt some glass!" Arthur interrupts, clearing the workbench, and from his wand erupts a cascade of fire so intense that Harry has to leap backwards to keep his eyebrows intact. In doing so, he almost falls over Maura, who appears to have had the presence of mind to stand well back.

For a moment, Harry gazes through the flames at his surrogate father, taking in his lined face, messy red hair and excitable expression as he waits for Harry to make his move, and it's with a rush of delight that he realises that this relationship—his and Arthur's—is just the same as the one he knows. It's playful and warm, comforting and just a little bit bonkers.

He grins. "Right you are," he agrees, grabbing the iron pan and floating it into the flames.

"Maura, hand me the box of glass," Arthur mumbles, eyes fixed on the flames. "Good girl, thank you."

"Are you alright?" Harry asks, as Maura creeps back to his side and takes his hand.

"Yep," she says brightly, and when Harry glances at her, she's transfixed, mouth slightly open as the dancing flames reflect in wide, dark eyes.

When Arthur dumps the glass pieces into the pot, Maura squeezes Harry's hand and he squeezes back, breathing through the pang in his chest as he is reminded of Lily, who loves her Grandpa Weasley's experiments, too.

Lily, wherever she is, would love this. The colours and the scrape-sizzle-whoosh and the smell of hot metal and glass, the heat driving into them in waves. Soon, Maura and Arthur have shed their coats and Harry is swiping sweaty hair out of his face and blinking against the flames and the brilliant glow of the molten glass.

By the time Harry chooses a clay pipe and attempts, with Arthur's encouragement, to gather a blob of the lava-like glass on one end, he's hot, sticky, and utterly determined.

"Oh, good job!" Arthur declares, clearly dying to have a go. "Are you going to give it a blow?"

Harry bites his lip and draws down his eyebrows with the effort of suppressing the juvenile laughter bubbling up in his chest. He's thirty-seven, for crying out loud. And as such, he should definitely be capable of... er, giving it a blow. Unfortunately, his head is all at once full of images that make the bubble of laughter drop and sharpen into a twinge that yanks at the pit of his stomach.

He scowls, lifts the slender pipe to his mouth and steadily pushes his breath down the tube and into the glass; it swells, just a little, and he tries again.

"It's working!" Maura cries, shoes scuffling on the stone floor in her excitement.

"It's marvellous, isn't it?" Arthur mumbles from behind him. "One or two more and I think you'll be able to start turning it!"
Heartened, and not just by the fact that Arthur at least seems to have done some reading-up on the subject, Harry drags in a deep breath, holds the pipe steady, and then crashes to the floor.

The first sensation is one of shock, as his legs jerk out from underneath him, followed swiftly by pain, as his backside connects with the cold stone. The pipe, grasped grimly in his fingers, crashes down with him and the bulb of half-blown glass skitters across the table in slow motion.

"Careful, Maura," Arthur calls, and Harry is halfway to his feet in panic before he sees that there is no danger. "Are you alright, Harry?" he inquires, holding out a hand to help Harry rise fully to his feet.

Arthur shoves his wand back into his waistband and gazes at the immobilised piece of glass. Their first promising attempt now lies twisted, misshapen and somehow slightly blackened at the base of the iron pan, and he sighs gently.

"Sorry, Arthur," Harry says, feeling his disappointment and hating this ridiculous disability with fresh new bitterness.

"Don't apologise," he insists, patting Harry on the back. "I think we made a cracking start. Tell you what, Maura and I will go out and get some lunch, and when we come back..." Arthur grins, "it's my turn."

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When Maura returns clutching a half-eaten courgette and chocolate spread sandwich, Harry finally thinks he knows what happened to that last spinach cake. He installs her and her disgusting sandwich on the spare workbench, keeping her well out of harm's way while ensuring her a good view of proceedings, as he and Arthur clean up and prepare for another attempt.

Between them, they start up the flames again and the heat quickly fills the small space. Arthur gleefully takes the pipe and follows Harry's example, save for the ill-timed meeting with the floor, and after a few wobbles, produces an uneven, lopsided, but fully-formed bulb of glass. Astonished by this moderate success, and determined to secure it before it disappears, they cast the third spell, Lehro, together, and place the glass into the soft, green flames.

"Brilliant," Harry enthuses, wiping his damp forehead with the back of his hand, equal parts impressed and envious. "Well done."

Arthur grins. "It's good fun, isn't it? Molly thinks you're bonkers, by the way," he adds.

Harry lifts an eyebrow. "Just me?"

"She's known about me for a long time. What do you think, Maura?"

They both turn to look at the little girl, who has crept down from the worktable and is now looking up at them with wide eyes and a smudge of chocolate on her nose.

"It's pretty," she says, smiling at the licking green flames.

"It'll be prettier once we learn to do it properly," he says, ruffling her dark curls. "Come on, let's leave Uncle Harry alone to get his work done."
"Oh... really, there's no need," Harry attempts, dismayed at the thought of coping with the rest of the afternoon without his useful little friend.

Arthur puts on his coat, pulls a knitted hat out of the pocket and puts it on. "It's no problem. In fact..." He leans in conspiratorially, "I could do with a bit of help with some last minute shopping." He pauses, eyes suddenly hopeful. "You don't happen to know what Ginny would like for Christmas, do you?"

"I'm afraid not," Harry says, hoping that Draco has taken care of their responsibilities in that area.

"Ah, well." Arthur claps him on the shoulder again and holds his hand out for Maura's. "Come on, young lady, let's go and buy your mother something shiny and overpriced from that shop that hurts my head. She'll like that. Stick your head in over Christmas, Harry... maybe we can arrange to have another go?"

Harry nods, eyes flicking between their contrasting smiles, Arthur's expectant and Maura's apologetic.

"Okay, good luck," he calls, just before Arthur tugs the door closed behind them.

Finally alone, he sighs and allows himself a quiet moment before he forces himself to reinstate Celestina.

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"And you can throw me down into the dungeon, I'm not afraid, you see," Harry sings along as he saws away doggedly and yet another section of beech. "For the love that grows in my wounded heart is more potent than any key."

Thomp, goes the long section of wood as it tumbles onto the worktable. "Oh, yes it is," Harry adds.

"Ooh-ooh, whoa," Celestina warbles.

"And that as well," he mutters to himself, hating how quickly he's picking up the lyrics to these appalling songs, however useful they're going to be. He has a horrible feeling that once the words are lodged into his brain, it's going to take something drastic to shift them.

Still. It's not all bad. It's almost five o'clock and the stream of customers into the workshop has slowed almost to a standstill. He's lit the lamps, tidied away the glassblowing equipment for the day and has decided to have one more go at the sodding table before he has to give in and decide what to do with Draco's lamp. And then, of course, all he has to worry about is Christmas Day with the Malfoys.

Harry sighs, closing his eyes briefly and hanging onto his saw as though it's a lifeline.

"Free me from my chaaaaaains!" demands Celestina.

Harry forces his eyes open. "One ridiculous problem at a time, I think."

"We'll be together agaaaaain!"
"You and me, betwixt and between," Harry joins in reluctantly, drawing his wand and staring at the stick of beech, hoping for a miracle, or at least something resembling a spindle. "We'll cross the seas, and the forests of green, searching for a... Hippogriff in a waistcoat," he improvises, losing the end of the chorus.

"I didn't know you could sing," comes an amused voice from the doorway and Harry spins around, still with wand in hand. "Goodness, you're jumpy," Goldstein adds, amused, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

"I didn't hear you come in," Harry says coolly, lowering his wand to his side.

"Evidently." Goldstein smiles slowly and his eyes travel over Harry's body, taking in his dirty apron, his messy hair, his burned and scratched hands, all of it with an obvious pleasure that makes Harry want to throw his not-quite-spindle across the workshop at him.

"You could have knocked," Harry points out, not unpleasantly.

"Oh, Harry, must friends be so formal?"

Harry hesitates for a moment, all too aware that he could be in the wrong here—after all, this life has been his for less than a week, if it is his at all. In all likelihood, he's just looking after it. Keeping it warm. Trying to figure some things out.

But then Goldstein's smile turns into a smirk and it dissolves Harry's restraint. "Friends?" he repeats, lifting an eyebrow. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Through a sky of diamond dewdrops, my love," offers Celestina, and for the first time, Harry doesn't jump to silence her. He has the strangest feeling that right now, overwrought and clichéd though she may be, she's on his side.

Goldstein's dark eyes flash with anger, just for a split-second, but Harry catches it before he moulds his expression into one of ingratiation, and the interrogator, the observer in him, fires up with warm satisfaction. He can deal with this man.

"Harry, why so cruel? Surely I haven't done anything to offend you," Goldstein murmurs, sounding hurt. He steps away from the doorway and comes to lean casually against Harry's worktable, not-so-subtly displaying his lean, black-clad figure and pressing his height advantage over Harry. He hates that. He's always hated that.

"Look," Harry sighs, folding his arms across his apron and comforting himself with the thought that, yes, Goldstein might have three or four inches on his five feet ten and a bit, but Harry could probably knock him over without trying too hard. "What do you want? I'm closing up soon."

Goldstein licks nervously at his bottom lip. Harry scowls. Draco, he's noticed, does the same thing when he's anxious, and for some reason that he can't explain—some reason other than that he truly dislikes this adult Goldstein—it fills him with uncomfortable rage to see it on this slimy bastard.

"Well, I just thought we could finish our conversation," he says softly, and the smile is back, slightly sheepish this time. "I realise I was a little... ah, intoxicated, and perhaps wasn't making much sense."

Harry snorts softly. "No, I think I got the message."
Goldstein brightens. "So..." he begins, fixing Harry with intense eyes.

Resisting the urge to groan and rake his fingers through his hair, Harry stands firm, arms folded, posture solid, hoping fervently that his legs stay beneath him for the moment; the last thing he needs is for Goldstein to think he's some kind of damsel in distress.

"So, what? I wasn't tired of Draco yesterday but you thought I might be by now? The answer is no, and if you've any sense, you'll stop asking," he says quietly.

"People change, Harry," Goldstein murmurs, shifting position so that his expensive shoes crunch on the wood shavings; he jumps, causing Harry a ripple of silent amusement. "Do you know what everyone at the Ministry thinks of Malfoy? Him and his toxic, seditious little articles?"

Harry frowns, almost thrown by the change of tone. "Seditious?" he repeats, incredulous.

Goldstein's smile flickers back into life briefly. "Yes, it means—"

"I know what it means," Harry interrupts, forcing the words through gritted teeth. "I'm not stupid."

"Well, of course not," Goldstein stumbles, flushing. "But we do... ah, inhabit rather different worlds these days, and I... I want you to know that there's nothing wrong with that. There's certainly no need for you to settle with someone like Malfoy."

Harry exhales messily, losing his composure for the time it takes for him to scrub both hands through his hair, tip his head back to stare at the stars through the skylight and wonder just how he—or, indeed, his other self—has managed not to hex this prick in the balls.

"I'm not settling, Goldstein," he says at last, dropping his hands to his sides and forcing himself to make eye contact. "I certainly don't need your approval on my lifestyle choices, and I expect that the only people who are worried about Draco's... erm, seditious articles are the ones with something to hide."

"I don't think that's quite..." he begins, flustered and bright-eyed with indignation.

"Well, I do think, and I'm not daft enough to let you change my mind, whatever you might think about me. I don't know what world you've been living in for the last thirty years, Anthony, but when no one keeps an eye on the Ministry, bad things tend to happen. Who will guard the guards, and all that," Harry finishes, slightly breathless but certain that Hermione would be proud.

"Who will what?" Goldstein frowns.

Harry can't help himself; he smiles. "Nothing to worry about. A tip for you, though... if you're trying to impress someone, it's probably best not to imply they're thick."

"There's no need to be like that," Goldstein manages after a long silence, and the smirk has quite disappeared from his face. "I just thought you could... do better, that's all."

Harry snorts. "Have I ever given you the impression that I might be interested?" he demands, suddenly afraid that his other self has somehow encouraged this.

There is a long silence between them, into which Celestina chants and wails about her lost love.
"Well... I... you've never been quite so hostile before," Anthony mutters at last.

"So, no, then," Harry surmises, heart leaping with relief so intense that it's startling. "You really are clueless, aren't you?" he adds under his breath, knowing that the part of himself he is addressing is not present, but needing to do so regardless.

"Excuse me?"

Harry shakes his head. "Nothing. I really do have to close up in a minute, so do you think you could see yourself out?"

Goldstein takes a step back, posture rigid and long fingers curled into fists at his side. His eyes are quietly furious as he gives Harry a stiff nod and walks slowly to the door, as though he expects for Harry to change his mind and call him back at any moment.

"Have a wonderful Christmas, Harry," he says quietly, and then the door slams.

"Thank fuck for that," Harry mumbles, giving up on any further notion of working on the little table today and hoisting himself up onto the spare workbench. Much as he'd like to hope, he has a nagging feeling that he hasn't seen the last of Anthony Goldstein for the moment, but under the circumstances, a temporary respite will do. And, if nothing else, he has—in the words of Molly Weasley—sent him away with a flea in his ear.

Harry pulls a face and scratches at his ears at the thought. He leans back on his hands and gazes around at the chaos of his workshop, at the half-arsed fourth attempt at Mr Pepper's table, at the piles of wood shavings and scattered tools, at the box of glassblowing equipment and the soft, green glow of the slowly-cooling flames around Arthur's twisted bulb.

And, alright, he's not very good at this. He's doing the best he can with the talent and training—or lack thereof—that he has available, but he's not a natural. Whatever his shortcomings in the craftsman department, though, it's becoming increasingly obvious that he is vastly better at reading people than his other self. He has an understanding of expressions and tells, an awareness of motivations, an above-average level of suspicion, but most of that comes from almost twenty years as an Auror.

This Harry, he supposes, the one who lives here, the one who learned how to make furniture instead of learning how to chase down criminals, this Harry is the person he would have been without any of that training or experience. Harry chews his lip thoughtfully and plays with his shoelaces, wrapping them around his fingers. This Harry trusts people, takes them almost at face value. This Harry has been allowed to let his childhood and the war dissolve behind him. This Harry doesn't carry his past on his shoulders everywhere he goes.

This Harry is so contentedly oblivious that he hasn't noticed Anthony fucking Goldstein trying to slime all over him for god knows how long.

This Harry just is.

A wave of something hot and prickly rushes through Harry's sinuses and he gulps at the cold air, rubbing the knees of his jeans with the heels of his hands and throwing everything he has in front of the tide of sadness.

Good health.
Close friends.

Three beautiful, happy children—four, he supposes, picturing a mischievous, Al-flanked Rose.

Harry breathes. Wraps his fingers around the edge of the worktable, cold, hard, rough, and listens to the needle lifting from 'Veelas, Nymphs, and Squibs', then silence.

Finally, he lowers himself to the floor and makes his way over to the beautiful lamp that Maura has reliably informed him is 'nearly finished'. Pensive, he lights the flame and stands back, allowing the soft green shapes to fall across the walls, the floor, and his skin. Once again, he's astonished that any version of himself could create something so magnificent, and as he watches the glass stripes shifting and melting into one another, and reaches out a hand to smooth over the curved wooden stalk, he can't imagine that there's anything he could add to it that wouldn't ruin it, and not only because his skills leave a lot to be desired.

He hesitates only for a moment before making a decision.

"Sorry, mate," he says, addressing his absent other self as he extinguishes the flame and casts a Disillusionment Charm over the lamp. "This is just going to have to do."

Humming under his breath, he walks around and turns out all the lights. Then, seeing no other reasonable way—it will surely be crushed or snapped in the madness that is still Diagon Alley—he wraps his arms around the lamp, hopes for the best, and Apparates onto the pavement outside number twelve.

He has the front door wedged open with his foot and the lamp halfway into the hallway when Draco emerges from the kitchen, notepad in hand and quill tucked behind his ear, and demands:

"What the fuck are you doing?"

It's a fair question, Harry supposes. Even though it's dark in the hallway and he does do rather a good Disillusionment Charm, if he may say so himself, it's still fairly obvious that Harry is attempting to sneak something rather large into the house. And not all that smoothly, he has to admit. He's stubbed his toe on the base three times now, and Draco's interruption startles him and causes the glass shade to clonk him quite severely on the head.

"Nothing?" he tries, dragging the lamp another few feet. If he can just get it to the end of the hallway rug, he can kick the front door shut, and he's quite confident that every aspect of this operation will be greatly improved by not having an icy wind blowing up his bottom. "Argh, bastard!" he adds, managing a simultaneous clonk-stub and a thomp to the backside as the heavy oak door escapes from behind his foot and catapults himself, the lamp, and half of the rug into the hallway.

"Nothing, eh?" Draco repeats, lifting an eyebrow. "Well, I'll let you finish your nothing, and then you can come and not tell me all about it. It's your turn to make dinner, you know."

As he turns away, the corners of his mouth are twitching, and Harry doesn't think he imagines the sound of muffled laughter emanating from the kitchen just seconds later.

"Come on, you heavy sod," Harry grunts, dragging the lamp across the hallway. It is becoming apparent that the thing previously thought delicate is, in fact, more durable than its creator. When he finally gets it into a rarely-used parlour and removes the charm to examine it, he quickly sees that in
contrast to himself, there isn't a scratch on it.

He supposes that's a good thing, even as he rubs at the lump on his head and prods at the rapidly-forming bruise on his left buttock.

Reinstating the charm, he locks up the room and wanders into the kitchen, already wondering how well his cooking is going to go down. He's certainly capable, and he enjoys it when he's in the right mood, but cooking for a Malfoy might well be a whole new kettle of fish.

Still, he thinks, ignoring the occasional giggle from the man at the table and rummaging in the cupboards, Draco does make a mean chilli, so he can't be all about quail's eggs and filet mignon. It might actually be nice to cook for someone different. The children, with the occasional exception of James, who goes through phases of adventurousness, would always rather have chips, and Ginny is always too tired to really appreciate her food.

Just as he's pulling onions out of the cupboard, Harry notices the state of his hands and hurries to scrub them with hot water and soap before Draco notices. Something tells him that 'it's only a bit of wood dust' will not fly in this house.

"Spaghetti Bolognese?" Harry offers, drying his hands on a soft white tea-towel and surveying his ingredients.

"I don't think we have any spaghetti," Draco says without looking up from the photograph in his hands.

Harry goes rummaging again. "Hmm. Okay, well, twisty-round pasta Bolognese?"

Draco snorts. "It must be gourmet night." He throws down his photograph and picks up another one, and when Harry looks over his shoulder, he's smiling to himself. "Throw in some garlic bread and you're on."

"I think I can manage that," Harry mutters, selecting a sharp knife and beginning to work, allowing the regular rhythm of chopping and stirring to soothe away the last of the tension from his muscles, and to ease away the more bizarre elements of his day.

Behind him, Draco rustles and scribbles and mumbles to himself, and Harry is less surprised than he perhaps should be to find these noises comforting, too. As the room begins to fill with steam and the fragrant, savoury aroma of his pasta sauce, Harry stops thinking altogether and begins to absently hum, and then sing, under his breath.

"Through a sky of diamond dewdrops, my love; through the dark and forbidden forest, my love; through the ocean deep and... something, my love, until I find you again," he sings, poking at the pan of pasta with a wooden spoon.

"My father has a lot to answer for," Draco sighs, but Harry ignores him. He's actually enjoying having someone in the kitchen with him, even if it is a grumpy someone he never really asked for.

By the time he turns to set the two steaming plates on the table, Draco has managed to cover the entire surface with his scribbled notes and shiny photographs and assorted items. There are five empty coffee cups strewn around and a very long stripy scarf drapes, snakelike, over two of the empty chairs. Frank himself is nowhere to be seen, but then the table is quite crowded enough without him.
"You're going to have to move something," Harry says, and Draco finally looks up, blinking, as though he's just broken out of a trance.

"I feel like setting fire to the lot of it, to be honest," Draco says, scowling and neatly Summoning all his photographs and bits of parchment into his hands, allowing Harry to set down the plates and scrape up a chair. "Everyone at MLE is clamming up. I wouldn't be surprised if fucking Fitzwilliam has put the frighteners on the lot of them."

"Delightful man," Harry offers, spearing several pasta twists on his fork at once and conveying them to his mouth. "No help from the Auror department, then?" he asks, mildly curious.

Draco shakes his head, chewing slowly. "No," he says at last, "they were the worst of the lot. Who'd be a bloody Auror?" He sighs. Examines his fork. "This is nice," he says absently.

"I... er... thought about it, once," Harry ventures, feeling slightly stung even though he's fairly sure he doesn't want to be one any more, either. "You know, being an Auror."

Draco sets down his fork. "I know," he says quietly.

"I was just saying," Harry says, tasting the change in atmosphere and sensing he may have said the wrong thing. "I... it doesn't matter."

"Don't be ridiculous, of course it matters," Draco says sharply, looking up and meeting Harry's eyes with sudden fierceness. "I just didn't know you were thinking about it again. It's been a while."

Harry hesitates, caught in anxious grey eyes and a years-old connection that seems to reach out and wrap around him as though he's never been away, never let it go. He coughs dryly.

"Yeah... I suppose it was just hearing Ron's news... " Harry shrugs. "It's not a big deal."

"You're impossible," Draco sighs, pushing back his chair. "I'll make some tea, shall I?"

"Because that'll solve everything," Harry murmurs to himself, leaning back and folding his arms.

"You know it to be true, Potter," Draco says, assembling the tea paraphernalia and then turning and leaning against the marble counter. "Now come on, spit it out."

"I don't want to," Harry says petulantly.

Draco releases a light sigh. "I know you don't, but it's far better to say it than carry it around with you for days on end, isn't it?" He turns around to pour the hot water. "Not to mention turning into a complete nightmare to live with, all angst-ridden and such," he adds.

Intrigued and a little indignant, Harry gives in. At least it won't be the first time he and Draco have had this conversation, and it sounds as though it won't be the last.

"I was just wondering if I made the right decision—not becoming an Auror."

Draco passes him a hot cup and reclaims his seat, balancing his elbows on the table and holding his tea close to his face. "You did, Harry."
"But how can you say that for sure?" Harry presses.

"I can't say anything for sure," Draco admits, grey eyes serious, "but I do remember how long you agonised over it, and that has to count for something. I also remember how torn you were when that Ministry letter came—we're willing to overlook your injury, Mr Potter, we'd be delighted to accept you into our training programme," Draco recites scornfully, fingers gripping tightly around his stripy teacup. "Who exactly did they think they were, putting you in that position?"

"I don't know," Harry whispers, horrified at the idea that the Ministry, presumably because of his name alone, were prepared to risk lives by employing a person with an unpredictable injury in such a dangerous position; Draco's hatred of the Ministry is becoming ever more understandable. "They should have just said no."

"Harry, it wasn't a case of saying no, was it?" Draco argues. "They just sent their sneaky little offer, apropos of nothing, and expected you to carry it on your conscience. They are bad people, Harry, and you know I don't mean people like Weasley and Granger, I mean the ones in charge—every single one of them is either clueless or corrupt and you're better off out of it."

Do you really blame me for wondering 'what if'?" Harry asks, gulping at his tea.

Draco sighs. "No, of course not. Do you think I don't wonder what would have happened if you hadn't come up to the hospital wing that night?"

Harry's stomach flips. For a long moment, he stares into his cup, unable to make eye contact with Draco, with a Draco who is here in this moment with him because of that decision. A decision that, save for Boris, was never made. Fuck, his head is a mess.

"Mm," Harry murmurs. "I suppose that some days I just find it strange to be doing what I do. It's not quite what I planned."

Draco looses a hollow laugh. "You love your job, Harry, I know you do. I don't ever remember having a plan beyond impressing my father... although I did want to be a chocolate frog when I was little," he adds, nose wrinkling briefly as he remembers.

Harry grins. "I'm sure you would have been excellent at that."

"Shut up," Draco says, and then, quite unexpectedly, sets down his cup and reaches across the table for Harry's hand. He threads their fingers together and stares down at the table, tongue-tip flicking out over his bottom lip. "You don't really think you made a mistake, do you?"

Harry isn't entirely sure the question is a real one, but he answers it anyway. "No."

"Listen, because I don't care how this sounds, or how many times I have to say it—barely a day goes by when I don't think about what happened to you at the Manor that night, when I don't wish I was there with you instead of being 'kept safe' somewhere..." Draco pauses. "When I don't wish I could help, or make it disappear. But I can't."

Harry is silent, because the words are laced, soaked through, with meaning, and he is laid open by the rough edge to them that tells him Draco doesn't really want to mean them. Heartsore, he slides his thumb over the back of Draco's hand, soft skin and sharp knuckles. Just a pale, strong hand, tangled with his and trying to keep him afloat.
"I know," he says at last, forcing himself to look up.

Draco's eyes are bright. "Knowing is always a start." Without releasing Harry's hand, he picks up his fork and resumes eating. "You know, I think this actually tastes better cold."

Harry snorts. "I'm not sure how I should take that."

"Like a man," Draco advises.

**~*~**

Harry wakes the next morning with an odd sensation of compression. It only takes a moment's bleary-eyed investigation to ascertain the cause: in a quest for warmth, Frank has slithered under the sheets and blankets and coiled heavily on Harry's bare chest. Looking at the wide-open window, Harry can barely blame him, but it really is a miracle he hasn't suffocated.

"Move, you," he directs, prodding the snake.

"Sleeping," Frank says.

"You know, Draco won't remember to feed you if you crush me to death," Harry points out, starting to wheeze a little, only partly for effect.

"Such drama," the snake says, unwinding himself and turning his head to show Harry the small scrap of parchment that has been Spellotaped to his triangular head. "Do not approve of this. Do not."

Immediately reminded of Al and his notes, Harry chews on a sad smile and reaches out to carefully unpeel the tape from Frank's head. "Sorry about that," he says, dragging in a deep, grateful breath as the snake slides fully onto the mattress.

"Not a message service. Not a display board. Not for receiving the sticky notes!"

Amused, Harry strokes the shiny head as he reads his note.

Merry Christmas Eve, you lazy old bugger.

I have gone over to Zabology to speak to a man about a dog (well, to Blaise about your Christmas present, but Hermione assures me that it's a genuine euphemism) and I shall see you later on.

Please tell Frankfurto I'm sorry, but I really didn't know where else to stick it.

Be good.

D.

"I'll not be good if I feel like it," Harry announces to the room.

"Ooh, you're a young wag," says the mirror saucily.

"Thanks," he replies, flattered.
He grins, reflecting that the scale and variety of communication in this place really is incredible. Not only does Draco Malfoy talk to him, but so do strangers in the street and snakes and mirrors.

"Draco says he's sorry about making you feel like a notice board," he says, and Frank flicks his tongue, unimpressed.

"Careless striped human," he complains, disappearing under the sheets.

Harry watches him, half-amused and half-bewildered, and something in that curious mix of feelings reminds him sharply of his children, of James' blue hair and Al's insistence on keeping all of his food separate on his plate, and Lily's penchant for giving Frank the cat a bath. Aching, Harry punches his pillow and curls on his side, closing his eyes against this world and allowing himself to miss them.

Christmas Eve, he thinks, feeling the sharp edges of Draco's note against his palm. He and Ginny have always made it special for the children—she wanting to give them the family Christmases she grew up with, and Harry needing to give them the security and warmth he never had. And it had worked; by the time Al was born, those cozy, sparkly celebrations had replaced in Harry's mind the years of cold Dursley Christmases and that one bleak year spent on the run with Hermione.

By the time Lily was born, the family traditions had been firmly in place. The cup of tea left out for Santa (because, James said, grown-ups are always drinking tea) and the parsnips left out for the reindeer (because, Al later pointed out, they might be sick of carrots) and the insistence on staying up until midnight, even though no one but James, armed with caffeine and sugar, ever managed it.

He smiles at the memory, pressing his stinging eyes into his pillow because he feels stupid, even though there's no one here to judge him for his display of emotion. His children aren't here, but they're fine, they're okay, Boris has assured him of that, and while he's fully aware that Boris is a tricksy old boot, Harry trusts him on this one. But even though that's true...

... they're not here. Or he's not there. Whatever.

He should be wrapping last minute presents with Ginny and taking the children to the Burrow for dinner, tripping over animals and furniture and assorted Weasleys. Instead he's... well, he's still in bed at ten fifteen, according to his copper clock, and has no agenda besides being good.

Tomorrow is going to be a shiny, fancy, extravaganza of awkwardness at Malfoy Manor. Oh, joy.

Harry gives himself a mental slap and gets out of bed, stretching and gazing out of the window at the falling snow. Sighs. It will be fine. It will.

Seeking solace, he shuffles into the bathroom and turns on the shower as hot as he can stand it, allowing the almost-scalding water to pound his body and willing it to sluice away his sadness. He soaks his hair and withdraws, gasping and blinking through his dripping fringe at his luxurious marble bathroom. The one he shares with Draco Malfoy, who is creeping into his veins and confusing everything he is from the inside out.

He stares, allowing droplets of hot, clean water to slide down his throat. It's beautiful. Clean and shiny and, perhaps, just a little bit shallow.

**~*~**

Harry isn't sure what time it is when he hears Draco Floo into the kitchen. It's dark outside and he
has been lying motionless, starfish-like, across the bed for so long that he has almost forgotten about the hours passing. He has wandered around the house, flipped through scrapbooks, poked through drawers and flitted around the pantry, eating things out of packets, but he's been unable to shake the heavy, empty malaise that has settled around him.

He flops here now, gazing sightlessly at the darkened ceiling and absently stroking whichever part of Frank is sliding through his outstretched fingers at any particular moment as the snake idly explores the ruffled bed sheets.

The temperature of the bedroom, judging by his bare feet and his fingertips, feels barely above freezing, but he can't quite find it in himself to do anything about it. He sighs.

"He is imminent," Frank offers from somewhere very close to Harry's ear.

"I know," he replies, listening to the hiss of the kettle and the sound of Draco's boots on the kitchen tiles.

"As is my deadly revenge," the snake continues, and his meaningless threat tugs a weary smile from Harry's lips.

Draco footsteps are light and rapid on the steps, and then: "Bloody spider, keep to your own side of the stairs!" Seconds later, he's throwing open the door and flooding the bedroom with enough light from the landing to make Harry cringe.

"Was that entirely necessary?" he demands irritably, throwing an arm up over his eyes and dislodging Frank, who treats him to a couple of Parseltongue expletives before disappearing back under the sheets.

"What's the matter with you? Are you ill?" Draco frowns.

"No," Harry admits, and then falls silent, finding no more words to describe his mood.

Draco strides into the room, flicking light into the lamps, and bringing with him the unmistakeable scent of winter and the outdoors. He stands at the foot of the bed, looking down at Harry with narrowed eyes. His long, tan-coloured leather coat hangs open over his tight, faded-on-purpose jeans and his complicated sweater, and the long scarf with its multicoloured stripes loops twice around his neck and falls almost to his knees. His hair is wind-ruffled and hangs into his eyes, half-obscuring the exasperated stare that is pinning Harry into place.

"Then why aren't you ready?" Draco demands, eyeing Harry's outfit with distaste. "It's almost eight!"

"Ready for what?" Harry grumbles, pushing himself up onto his elbows. His head spins as he readjusts to being upright, and with one eye closed he twists to watch Draco as he stalks over to the wall of wardrobes and flings open each door as he passes.

"You're funny," Draco mutters, leaning into a closet and rummaging around. "You're very, very funny, Harry Potter. But if you make us late, I will have to hex you a little bit."

"I don't think I'd like that," Harry says absently, stretching luxuriously and then flopping back into his starfish shape, wondering whose party or function he'll be attending tonight. Whatever it is, there's a very high probability of uncomfortable clothing and strangers who aren't really.
"Behave, then," Draco instructs, throwing several heavy items of clothing onto the bed and walking back along the bank of wardrobes, tapping his fingers over each in rhythm, lips moving softly and eyes closed. The average observer might think he was doing magic, but Harry knows better. Knows that some things that seem strange are just as important as magic.

"I'm behaving," he murmurs, reluctant to break the hush.

Draco pauses, facing the window, and taps his fingers at his sides: once, twice, three, four, five times.

He turns, eyes clear. "Hurry up and get dressed, then, or all the good ones will be taken!"

"What?"

Draco's expression is one of pure exasperation. "The ones with the crazy stories!" He crosses the room, leans down to give Harry a cold, minty kiss, and stalks out of the room. "Come on!"

Harry watches him, bewildered, and then turns to look at the pile of clothing next to him. He frowns and sits up, lifting a hand to rub across lips that still tingle a little.

"Well, that's a surprise," he says softly, reaching out to pick up a long, black woollen coat with tiny green flecks, a thick, heavy sweater, two pairs of socks and a pair of solid leather boots that look as though they'll take several hours to lace up.

"What do you think, Frankfurto?" he asks, and then: "About this, in case you were wondering."

"This is a nice thing for sleeping on," he says, emerging from under the sheets and sliding over the dark blue jumper.

"Somehow, I think that will get me in more trouble," Harry sighs, shaking the snake from his sweater and pulling it over his head. He puts on the socks, slides his feet into the boots and stares at them for a moment or two before drawing his wand and lacing them up tightly, if not neatly. As he puts on the coat, which fits like a dream, he discovers a fringed cobalt-coloured scarf at the bottom of the pile and throws that on, too.

As he regards himself in the mirror, the fact that he looks, for want of a better word, co-ordinated, almost cancels out the frightening knowledge that he has just been dressed by Draco Malfoy. Again. And he has no idea why but he definitely looks ready for adversity.

"Harry! Good grief, are you knitting up there? Milking a cow? Birthing a child?"

"All of the above," Harry calls back, ducking the spider on the stairs and clattering into the hallway.

"Finally," Draco sighs, gazing at Harry from the front door, and although his foot is tapping with impatience, there's a slow smile pulling at his lips that makes Harry want to kiss him. Really, really want to. Breath caught in his chest, he closes the distance between them in three long steps, wraps his hands around Draco's leather-clad shoulders and leans in, closing his eyes and reaching for that soft, sharp, mocking mouth—not knowing why and just doing it anyway.

At the first achingly gentle brush of lips, Draco's hands slip inside Harry's coat and wrap around his hips. Terrified, Harry presses on, and Draco pushes him away with a soft huff of laughter.
"I don't think so. We have things to do," he reproves, grabbing Harry's hand and pulling him into the night.

**~*~**

The streets are brilliant, sparkling, crunchy underfoot as they make their way deeper into London and the air that swirls into Harry's lungs is almost painfully cold, but he savours it, holding onto it and blowing out twists of white breath into the darkness. As they cross into a Muggle area, the infrequent cars make slushy patterns in the roads and Draco points out the worst of the gaudy outdoor decorations with delight.

He wants to ask where they're going, but with some effort, he keeps his curiosity bubbling just under the surface and instead revels in the journey, relishing the opportunity and the time to just walk somewhere, anywhere. And thinking about kissing Draco. Or not quite kissing Draco, he supposes. He's not really sure exactly what happened, but whatever it was has taken up residence in his stomach and begun wriggling like some kind of wriggling thing.

"This snow isn't very cold, you know," he says vaguely, running his fingers along a powdery white shop windowsill as he passes.

"Snow isn't cold?" Draco laughs, poking Harry with his elbow. "It's a revelation."

"No, really," Harry insists, turning to display a palmful of the fine snow. "Look, it's—"

"Lovely and warm? Absolutely," Draco agrees, snatching the snow and stuffing it down the back of Harry's coat.

"I fucking hate you," Harry grumbles, shivering and attempting to shake the admittedly-still-quite-cold lump out onto the ground as they cross a quiet side road into a square containing a huge, brightly-lit Christmas tree.

"I know," Draco says with a small smile, "but stop swearing—that girl has ears like a bat."

"What girl?"

Draco points across the square to where Ginny, Blaise and Maura are standing, bundled up in coats, hats and scarves.

Harry grins, genuinely delighted to see all three of them, even if he is still mystified about what is happening here.

"You're late!" Ginny calls, catching sight of them. Draco gives Harry a look.

"Sorry," Harry says as they draw close. "It's my fault, I think."

"He was being difficult."

"I was being difficult," Harry admits.

Ginny smiles. "You're not the only one. **Someone** was supposed to be staying at her grandma's tonight," she says darkly, glancing at her husband, "but she has her daddy wrapped around her little
federora," Harry says, mock shocked.

Maura gazes up at him, large dark eyes puzzled. "What's a fedora?"

"It's a hat," Draco says, taking her red and white bobble hat and spinning it around on his hand. "Like this, see?" He draws his wand, narrows his eyes in concentration, and the hat shifts to form a handsome miniature fedora. Impressed, Harry wishes he could just ask Draco to make the little table for him; he's obviously the Transfiguration expert in the household.

Draco holds the hat out to Maura and she takes it delightedly and pulls it on over her unruly curls. "Like Indy!" she says, beaming.

"Who?" Draco inquires, frowning gently. Blaise laughs, and once again the sound seems a little too loud and too joyful for the setting.

"From Uncle Ron's moving pictures," she explains, humming a vaguely familiar tune and looking exasperated at the stupidity of adults.

Harry grins. "Never mind, Draco," he murmurs, and exchanges a knowing glance with Ginny that warms his chest and pokes at the wriggling thing in his stomach.

"Fine. Are they here yet?" he asks, trying to look around the vast Christmas tree.

"Yes, hence you being late," Ginny says, rolling her eyes good-naturedly.

"Fabulous chicken soup this year," Blaise puts in, rubbing his huge gloved hands together. "Sandwiches too, but it's all about the soup." He grins, white teeth blinding in the darkness.

"You're a horror," Ginny sighs. "The soup is not for you. Are you needy?"

"I might be," Blaise argues, looking appealingly at Harry. Unfortunately, Harry is unable to back him up, still having no clue what any of them are talking about.

"You're certainly not starving," Ginny laughs, prodding her husband's stomach, and Harry would have to agree that; he's certainly not a fat man, but neither has he missed any meals lately.

"I don't know why you're bothering," Draco sighs. "Blaise talking his way into tasting the soup is as much a tradition as the old man that flirts with Ginevra, and Harry falling over on the ice, and everyone running out of socks."

"Well said, my friend." Blaise straightens his daughter's hat and beams at Draco. "A man with a healthy respect for tradition is a man after my own heart. Shall we investigate?"

As the pieces start to fall into place, Harry's heart lifts and his astonishment stops him from holding back his smile, so it's a full-on grin that greets Blaise's invitation. "Let's do that."

**~*~**

"Hello, Draco! Harry—good to see you again! And who's this?" asks a short, middle-aged woman
with reddish-brown hair and a two-pointed knitted hat that makes her look a little like a slug. She is clutching a clipboard and standing next to the open back doors of a large transit van.

"Hello, Julia," Draco says, and indicating Maura, who has escaped from her parents and attached herself to Harry: "This is our niece, Maura... who had better behave because it is way past her bedtime."

"Lovely to meet you, Maura," says the woman called Julia, holding out her hand for a very serious shake. "I like your hat."

Maura smiles but says nothing as she shakes Julia's hand, suddenly shy.

"Where do you want us, Jules?" demands Blaise, appearing behind them with Ginny.

She glances at her clipboard, mouth pursed. "If you can start on King Street, and then Lambert, and then..."

Her voice fades away as Harry catches another conversation. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a tall man with a fleece and clipboard and a young woman with curly blonde hair and a worried expression.

"Don't worry, Seela, you're not going to be on your own. We'll pair you up with someone more experienced," the man explains. "The first thing is to let them know that the nearest shelter is open, tell them where it is, et cetera. But some of them don't want to move, so that's why we have the care packages. Food, socks, underwear, toiletries, that sort of thing."

"They don't want to move?" asks Seela, chewing her nails.

Harry gnaws on his lips in empathy, having been wondering the very same thing.

"People grow accustomed to all sorts of things, given long enough," the man says softly. "I'm sure you can imagine wanting to hang onto what you know... even if it is a shop doorway in December."

Harry thinks he can, actually, but he doesn't get to hear Seela's reaction because Maura is tugging at his hand and Julia-with-the-slug-hat is handing him a large canvas bag, which he takes. When he looks, Draco is holding one, too, and Maura, apparently over her shyness, is reaching out for her own and insisting that she's strong enough to carry it.

And then Blaise is ushering them out of the square, making a rude gesture to the man with the clipboard who yells after them, reminding him that, "the soup is for the clients, Zabini!" and Harry looks back as they turn the corner, looks back for Seela, his fellow feeding-the-homeless virgin, and hopes that they'll both be okay.

He hopes she has someone to look out for her like he and Maura have. Someone intimidating like Blaise, someone smart like Draco, and someone fierce like Ginny. It's a comforting feeling, not needing to be looked after, but being surrounded by those who can, and who would.

"Come on, Maura," Ginny calls. "It won't kill you to spend a bit of time with your actual parents."

Harry releases her, returns her wave, and quickens his pace to keep up with Draco, who is crunching away through the muddied snow, canvas bag swinging at his side and leather coat flying out behind him.
"Left or right?" he calls over his shoulder.

"Ah... left," Harry calls back, and Draco crosses onto the right side of the road, leaving him not quite alone.

Dragging in a deep breath, Harry looks slowly around the street. The orange streetlights don't do much to soften the darkness, only serving to make the snow and the cars and the shop-fronts appear dirtier and sadder than they are.

He walks slowly, kicking up the slush as he passes more boarded-up windows than he's ever seen in one place before, and it isn't long before he stops short and gazes down at a skinny young woman, wrapped in a sleeping bag and curled up in the doorway with a ragged cat on her knee and a hat pulled down over her stringy dark hair. She's not sleeping, but she doesn't seem to notice Harry until he speaks.

"Excuse me?" he whispers. Coughs.

Her head jerks up and she fixes him with narrowed dark eyes. "What?" she snaps, clutching at her cat with thin, dirty fingers. "I'm not moving! I keep telling you lot, I'm not moving!"

"No, I..." Harry holds out a hand. "What lot?"

"Pigs," she whispers, eyes flitting from side to side, searching. "Fuckin' pigs. Trying to take my baby." She cuddles the cat against her chest and it chirrups softly.

"I'm not a... police officer," Harry says, dropping down to her level and kneeling in the snow, ignoring the icy water that soaks through his jeans and reaching into his bag for one of the packages. "I just... I brought you something... some food and things. It's Christmas Eve."

"Is it?" she rasps, eyes darting to his for a moment, and then to the brown paper-wrapped package.

"Yeah." Harry swallows hard. "I promise there's nothing bad in this."

Still holding tightly onto the cat with one hand, she tentatively reaches out and takes it, drawing it onto her lap. "Is there something in here for Charlie?"

Harry drops his hands into his lap. "There's some chicken in the soup and I think some ham in the sandwiches... he might like that. My... my daughter has a cat, and ham's his favourite," he says, chest tightening.

The girl nods, and slowly, the cat turns its head and stares at him, ears twitching—one black and one white. "He likes you," she mumbles. "You have pretty eyes."

"Thanks." Harry smiles.

"Harry?" Draco's voice cuts through the crisp night air and he turns.

"I have to go. There's an address in the box if you change your mind." He bites back the automatic 'Merry Christmas' on his lips and gets to his feet, brushing ice crystals away from his clothing. "Take care."
As he makes his way up the street and away from her, feeling as though something significant has just happened to him, he doesn't think he imagines the faint, rusty miaow and the mumbled "Thanks."

**~*~**

By the time he has found Draco, helped to sort out a minor balancing crisis and distributed food packages to the homeless of (the very long) King Street, Harry is feeling a little more grounded. Each interaction is different—some want to talk, some seem angry and affronted to see him but grab the food anyway, and some are so small and vulnerable that Harry wants to forget this ultimately futile exercise and vanish their suffering with a wave of his wand.

And it doesn't matter how much he tells himself that it just doesn't work that way, the feeling remains.

He sighs and watches Draco approach an old lady with a collection of dirty old plastic bags. Turning away, he starts at the top of Lambert Lane and walks along the edge of the pavement, avoiding the slush which is now creeping up the legs of his jeans and trying to connect with the freezing cold wet patches on his knees.

He spots an old man huddled in the doorway of a greengrocer's shop and picks his way through the snow towards him, holding his bag tightly and trying to pick out a face between the oversized flat cap and the mass of beard.

"Hi," he says softly, tucking his coat around himself and crouching next to the step.

"Hello, young man," says the man with the beard, and Harry lets go of his bag so he can cover his face and groan out loud.

"Is there any place you aren't?" he mumbles.

The old man laughs. "Oh, yes. And plenty I'd rather be than this, believe me," he says, creaking around in his oilskin coat. "Glamorous job, this."

"And what job is that, exactly?"

"That's beside the point," Boris says. "Where's my soup?"

Harry lifts an eyebrow. "You can't have any. You're not a proper homeless person."

"I'm an old man. I'm willin' to swap it for information," he offers, grinning a hole in his beard.

Harry hesitates, but only for a second or two. "Fine." He rummages in the bag and hands Boris a carton of hot soup. Information, he muses. Information. The trouble is, there's so much he wants to ask and no real clue which answers are important and which aren't. "Why are we here?" he blurts eventually.

"It'll take someone a fair bit more important than me to answer that," Boris advises, slurping his soup.

Harry rolls his eyes. "Here," he emphasises, indicating the downward sweep of Lambert Lane, Draco's silhouette further down the road and the tiny shapes of Ginny and Blaise, carrying Maura on his shoulders, at the bottom of the hill. "Doing this. On Christmas Eve... Draco..." he dries up.
"You do ask some strange questions, lad, I'll give you that," Boris says, reaching into his pocket for his long piece of parchment. "Been doin' it for years, 'cordin' to what I 'ave down 'ere. Your idea, I think... why'd you think that was?" He looks up, milky eyes fixed on Harry with genuine curiosity.

"Because..." Harry frowns and rests one hand on the wall for balance, fingers slipping on the icy bricks. "Because I didn't want my life to be shallow," he says, shaking his head and biting on a smile. Gazing down at the floor and listening to the unexpected but wonderful sound of Draco's laughter in the distance.

"Why are you here?"

"Because I knew you'd be here," Boris says. "And I see you've given up on the red sparks."

"Very funny," Harry mutters, not failing to notice the twitch of his bristly eyebrows. "Everyone's a comedian." He pauses, frowning as strange little connections race across his mind. "My leg is spell-damaged because Draco wasn't at Malfoy Manor that night... right?" Boris doesn't answer, but Harry continues, leaning forward with the chill wind whipping through his hair. "Is Fred Weasley alive because he was somewhere? He was at the battle?"

Boris gazes wistfully into his empty soup carton. "That's a lot of information for a little bit of soup."

"You're not having any more," Harry says. "You can have a sandwich. Or a nice pair of socks."

"Never mind," Boris sighs, leaning forward creakily and meeting Harry's eyes. "The answer to your question is yes, young man, but it'll be the last you'll 'ave from me. I'll get myself in trouble. And besides, I think you'll find out more about your mister Malfoy by bein' with him than by pokin' around in the past, lookin' for answers to questions that don't matter any more."

Harry lets out his breath in a noisy rush. "Okay... okay." He nods. "But... just one more thing—please," he appeals, catching the old man's expression. "You can't surprise me like that again. Did everyone else—is everyone else who died... still dead?" he manages, finding himself uncertain what to hope for.

"Yes, lad," Boris says simply, and Harry closes his eyes.

"Who are you talking to?" Draco calls.

Harry stumbles to his feet and turns. Draco's scarf is almost trailing on the ground at one end and his hair is everywhere. "Just..." he twists to look at Boris, but the doorstep is empty. "No one."

"Uncle Harry!" comes a surprisingly loud voice. "Have you got any boxes left?"

"I think your services are required elsewhere," Draco says, smiling. The streetlights cast peculiar shadows over his pale skin and hair and over the snowflakes clinging to his coat; the effect is so striking that Harry has to drag his eyes away.

"Right." He stares at the slush in the road, feeling like a complete fucking idiot, a feeling that is becoming all too familiar.

"I'm going to find the parents," Draco says, smirking as he sets off down the hill.
"I've given all my boxes away," Maura declares skittering into sight with her fedora tilted at a rakish angle. "And Mummy says to ask you if you've fallen over yet. Have you?"

"No, not yet," Harry says, making a mental note to give Ginny a good Stinging Hex at the next available opportunity, and immediately feeling squirmy at the ease of his feelings toward her. The wriggling thing wriggles violently and he forces himself to ignore it. "You can share my boxes if you like," he offers.

"Daddy says there's always time," Maura says helpfully, taking his hand and starting to drag him along the street.

"That's reassuring," Harry sighs, taking in the gradient of Lambert Lane before him and deciding that right now would be a very good time to remain upright. If possible.

And he's well aware that staying on his feet is far from his biggest current problem. The thing is, had this kind of crisis occurred in his usual environment, in the world he's accustomed to, he would have people to talk to, to bounce ideas off, people to tell him whether or not he was going mad. He'd have a Hermione and a Ron who didn't think it was perfectly normal for him to be practically married to Draco Malfoy. Here, he has a cryptic old man who turns up whenever he bloody well feels like, and a little girl in an Indiana Jones hat.

Harry glances at her. She's skipping along at his side, looking around for people to help with bright eyes and showing no signs of tiredness, even though it's coming up for eleven o'clock.

"Maura?"

"Mm?"

Harry hesitates. Fuck it. "You know how I... well, Uncle Harry, loves Uncle Draco... like your mum loves your dad?"

She frowns, thoughtful. "Yes."

"You see, where I come from... I've only been in love with a lady. And, well, it isn't that I don't like him, but it's all a bit strange," he mumbles, suddenly feeling very silly again.

Maura sighs. "I can't help you."

"Sorry," Harry says, squeezing her hand. "It's not your problem. I just don't really have anyone to talk to."

"It's not that," she says, looking up at him and wrinkling her freckled nose. "It's just... I think boys are yucky." She shrugs. "No offence."

Harry laughs. "None taken. I suppose I'm on my own, then."

He can't say that he finds much encouragement in those words, but for now he supposes he'll just have to get on with it—their's soup to distribute.

**~*~**

The next hour whips by in a frenzy of activity and Harry barely notices how cold he is, even after the
inevitable fall, a nicely-timed confluence of temperamental leg and black ice which causes Ginny to laugh herself hoarse for as long as it takes Harry to draw his wand and drop her onto the ice beside him.

Maura, determinedly alert at her father's side, gasps dramatically, but Blaise hoots with laughter for a good minute before he pulls Ginny to her feet with an effortless jerk of his arms and hugs her roughly.

"I love you, I really do, but you thoroughly deserved that," he says, and she pretends to pout, shaking snow from her coat.

"Come on then, hop-along," Draco sighs, holding out his hand to Harry, who is still sitting on the cold ground, watching his not-wife and her family. He allows Draco to grip his hand tightly and haul him back to his feet and is instantly rewarded with a small, secret smile that cuts right through all of that weary exasperation. Harry smiles back, and the wriggling thing flails in approval.

Finally, they make their way back to the square to receive, each in turn, fierce hugs from the slug-hatted Julia, and to make promises for next year, and maybe sooner, before dispersing into the night—Ginny, Blaise and Maura heading in one direction, he and Draco heading in another. As they cross the square he sees Seela, standing at a bus stop and blowing on her fingers for warmth; she looks just how Harry feels, sad and humbled and lifted all at once. He waves at her and she smiles, waves back.

The snow is falling thickly now, and despite his fatigue and the iciness now creeping into his bones, Harry savours it, tipping back his head and catching snowflakes on his tongue. Beside him, Draco walks slowly along the kerb, nose pushed into the folds of his scarf and arms held out to the sides like an overdressed tightrope walker. Harry captures the image in his head, keeps it there, afraid that if he speaks to Draco, he will become aware of himself again.

In the end, Draco breaks the silence. "You know, the first time you made me do this, I thought you were insane. But there's something to be said for all this do-gooding, warm glow stuff," he says without looking at Harry. "It means I can do all the evil I want for the rest of the year."

Harry says nothing, glancing sidelong at him but the refined face is inscrutable. Or, at least, it is until one corner of the mouth quirks upward, and Harry snorts, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets to stop himself from reaching out and pushing Draco into the empty, slushy road.

"I'm not really sure what to do with you sometimes," Harry admits, shivering and picking up the pace as they at last turn into Grimmauld Place.

Draco laughs. "Impressive after all these years, isn't it?"

Harry supposes it is. He lets another snowflake dissolve on his tongue and inhales the tangy winter air, allowing it to chill his nose and throat, and catching on it the ring of distant church bells.

"Listen," he murmurs, slowing to a standstill. "Midnight."

Draco stops, too, turning in the middle of the deserted, sparkling street to face Harry. "So it is. We must have been very efficient tonight."

"We had extra help," Harry says, the words slipping out of his mouth without much thought because all he can think about is the warmth in Draco's eyes, the snowflakes clinging to the ends of his pale
hair, the cold flush to his skin, and just how close they are standing. The last of the chimes linger in
the air and then fade, and Harry is flooded with memories that ache and spread and wrap around
him, pinning him into the moment and making him breathless for this man who is so much more than
he ever expected.

"I know what you're thinking," Draco murmurs, somehow now close enough to warm Harry's lips
with his breath, and close enough that Harry can pick out each thread of the perfect snowflake
balanced on his left eyebrow.

"I highly doubt that," Harry says, tempted to laugh in spite of everything.

"I know you far too well, I'm afraid. You have that festive, sentimental, nostalgic look on your face,"
Draco sighs. "Come on," he says, stepping back, "let's go and get warm."

Harry swallows, feeling caught. Whatever this is and whatever it means, it has him, and he has to...
do something. He has to take the unknown road now.

"Draco," he whispers, and then abandons the rest of the sentence as he reaches out, threads both
hands into Draco's hair and kisses him, hard, before he can think of a reason why he shouldn't. As
their cold-numbed lips slide together, Draco's surprise melts into amusement, and his smile curves
warmly against Harry's mouth, muffling a soft sigh and grasping Harry's hips, pulling them tightly
together as the snow continues to ruffle against their skin.

Harry is in freefall, just hanging on and slipping his tongue against Draco's, impossibly hot and
somehow taking him apart from the inside in a terrifyingly new way. The only word he can
remember is yes, and it echoes around and around in his head as he kisses Draco until the biting cold
is a distant memory.

"Well, I'll admit that I didn't know you were going to do that," Draco murmurs, pulling back at last
and reinstating the cold with a nudge of his chilled nose against Harry's neck. "Was it the new coat?
Does the snow suit me? Or does all that altruism make you hot?"

Harry grins, regaining a little of his equilibrium. Not much, but enough to keep him upright for a few
more minutes.

"Shut up, Draco. And Merry Christmas."
“I don’t think sulking is going to help,” Harry says, perching on the edge of the kitchen table with his feet on a chair and his elbows resting on his knees.

Frank stares up at him from the hearth and then looks away pointedly.

Harry sighs. “If you’ll recall, it wasn’t me who said you couldn’t come.”

“You would not fight for me. You would so easily leave me all alone and celebrate in some other place,” Frank says wretchedly, resting his head on his coils. “Do not care for such abandonment.”

“I know,” Harry says wearily, at the same time fighting to control a smile. It’s a fair possibility that Frank the snake is the most dramatic entity he has ever had the pleasure of dealing with. “Believe me, I’d love to take you, if only for the look on Lucius Malfoy’s face, but you know how Draco is.”


“Bacon’s bad for you,” Harry says, adjusting the sleeves of his coat and wondering just what, exactly, Draco is still doing upstairs. Perhaps it’s best not to know, but, still, they’re going to be late.

“Does not stop you,” Frank points out.

“That’s true. But it doesn’t change the fact that you’re not allowed to come with us to the Manor.”

Frank slithers across the tiles and insinuates himself between the spindles of Harry’s chair, muscles rippling. “So cruel. So, so cruel. All alone, left to wither away, such a tragic and beautiful waste of life, such a—”

“Alright, alright, that’s enough,” Harry cuts in, getting down from the table and ducking into the pantry. When he emerges, bacon in hand, Frank’s tongue darts out, tasting the air with enthusiasm. Harry rolls several rashers into an easily-swallowable, snake-friendly lump and holds it out. “You can have this if you promise to stop being so melodramatic. I’ve got enough to worry about today without your help.”

“Delicious,” Frank says, head waving almost drunkenly from side to side.

“Promise,” Harry demands, holding the bacon out of reach and hoping that Draco doesn’t choose this exact moment to finally enter the kitchen. Because this moment, in which he’s using raw bacon to bribe a highly-strung python, he’d rather like to keep to himself.

Frank’s head nods vigorously and Harry allows him to snap the bacon into his wide-open mouth and then disappear under the table with it. He sighs, looking down at his slightly sticky fingers and heading to the sink to run them under the hot tap. Anxieties are already running high this morning, what with the impending Malfoy Day and the wearying prospect of heaving that fucking lamp through the Floo network with them, and even now that Frank has been neutralised, the possibility of being unpunctual looms large and ominous.

“Come on, Draco,” he mutters, perching once more on the kitchen table and all the while wondering whether or not it might be better for everyone—well, for him—if Draco just stays up there, tapping
walls or playing with his hair or whatever he’s doing. The memory of midnight is still glowing inside him with noisy intensity, and the wriggling thing, rather than being sated by the kiss, has been sent into overdrive. Fortunately... unfortunately, he thinks now, there hasn’t yet been a chance for things to become awkward.

Draco, of course, having no idea that anything so momentous had just occurred, much less that he had just kissed a confusedly turned-on, falling fast, supposedly-straight Harry Potter, had clattered into the house, carefully put away his clothes and dived under the sheets without a word. By the time Harry had managed to find the approved homes for all the different parts of his outfit, Draco had been curled on his side and breathing softly, stirring only to reach out for Harry and press their cold skin together.

And now... now, it’s two minutes to ten in the morning and the only words they have exchanged have been: “Good grief, must we?”, “Do you want some toast?” and “Please see to that snake before I have him stuffed and mounted.”

“Right, come on, let’s have done with it,” Draco sighs, striding into the kitchen with a large bag slung across his shoulders and a fancy-looking basket in his arms.

“Anybody would think you didn’t like your parents,” Harry says quietly, still unsure of the nature of Draco’s relationship with Lucius and Narcissa, and wishing someone would give him a clue.

Draco snorts. “You know very well that they’re better in small doses,” he says. “Very small doses. Don’t forget your... that,” he adds, indicating the shimmering patch of air by the fireplace where Harry’s lamp is hidden by a heavy duty Dis disillusionment Charm, ready for transport.

“Unlikely,” Harry says grimly.

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “Okay. So... clothes are matching, hair is... passable, anti-insult armour is on —I hope.”

Harry’s heart sinks a little more, and the possibility that today might be anything more enjoyable than an endurance exercise starts to fade away.

“Yeah.” He attempts a smile. “And if nothing else, I’ve always got Celestina.”

Draco’s mouth twitches and his eyes warm, just for a moment. The basket in his arms crackles as he adjusts his grip, drawing Harry’s eyes. He frowns.

“That’s what we’re giving them?” he asks, staring down at the selection of gifts in disbelief. There are several boxes of biscuits, some of which Harry has never heard of before, some beautifully wrapped cheeses and two bottles of oak-aged mead. It’s an extremely attractive gift, that much is evident, but he can’t quite believe he and Draco aren’t giving the Malfoys something more... extraordinary.

Draco closes his eyes briefly and manages to encapsulate pure exasperation in one soft sigh. “Please don’t tell me you want to swap it for the other one now. Because in case you hadn’t noticed, it’s Christmas day and the shops are closed.”

“No, I mean.... isn’t it kind of small?”

Draco laughs shortly. “So, you’ve managed to forget how much easier this whole debacle is since
“we stopped trying to impress them with our presents?”

“No, it’s just, erm, I thought you got the one with three bottles of mead,” he lies lamely, instantly regretting his careless words when Draco’s eyes sharpen.

“I wouldn’t buy three of anything,” he says irritably. “You know that.”

“Sorry, wasn’t thinking,” Harry mumbles. Bad numbers, he reminds himself.

“You’d better start or my father will eat you alive. Come on, we’re going to be late,” Draco says suddenly, and there’s a note of accusation in his voice that makes Harry scowl.

“I’ve been ready for ages,” he mutters under his breath, grabbing the lamp and following Draco into the flames.

He’s always hated Flooing.

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When Harry steps out of the Malfoys’ fireplace, he is suddenly grateful for his coat; the reception room is practically arctic. He just has time to look around, to take in the polished marble floor and the four vast oil paintings, one on each wall, before the door flies open, admitting a small female house-elf wearing a surprisingly clean, red linen pillowcase.

“Oh dear,” she cries, raising both long-fingered hands to her face. “Oh dear, oh dear. Master Malfoy, Mister Potter, Senka is being so very sorry. Senka had to be putting out a small fire in the kitchens, sirs,” she explains, batting at a slightly blackened patch of pillowcase and blinking huge blue eyes. “Please forgive, sirs.”

“It’s alright,” Harry says hurriedly, though tempering his instinct to leap to the elf’s defence. It doesn’t seem to matter how many years pass, or how Ron continues to tease Hermione about SPEW, one look at a house-elf and Harry’s mind is full of his friend, Dobby.

She stares at him and begins to hyperventilate.

“Take a breath, Senka, for goodness’ sake,” Draco says. Smiling, he adds: “It wouldn’t be Christmas without a little inferno, would it?”

Senka’s ears droop and she exhales loudly. “So kind,” she sighs. “Mister Malfoy will be cross.”

“Well, he might be,” Draco admits, unwinding his scarf and giving Senka an absent pat on the shoulder as he heads for the door, “but you know how he is. He gets terribly bored when he has nothing to carp about.”

Harry and Senka exchange glances before she scurries to the door, almost knocking Draco over in her haste to reach the handle first and yank it open for them.

“Thanks,” he mumbles, and her ears twitch in response. Her large eyes flick to the near-invisible lamp in Harry’s grasp, just for a moment.

“Mister Malfoy and Mistress Narcissa are being in the parlour, if sirs will follow Senka,” she says, startling Harry as she lets the door bang behind them and takes off down the corridor. “If Senka
hurries, perhaps they won’t smell the burning.” She looks briefly over her shoulder without slowing down. “It was a turkey fire,” she confides. “Too many combustibles in the stuffing. Senka told Bilby, but Bilby has problems with the listening.”

Harry snorts, feeling for the unfortunate Bilby, who is probably slaving away somewhere in the bowels of the house, and noting for the first time the slight Eastern European inflection to Senka’s rapid-fire words.

Beside Harry, Draco says nothing, but he seems amused. His eyes are bright and the gritty, ‘let’s just get this over with’ expression has softened considerably.

“Fortunately, we’s also having the goose,” Senka says. “Maybe no one will notice.”

Draco snorts. “I think you are more optimistic every time I see you.”

Senka laughs. It’s a strange sound—a sort of soft, bouncing lilt—and Harry is struck by the idea of a house-elf, any house-elf, being allowed to laugh inside Malfoy Manor. He smiles.

“Senka knows this is no flattery, Master Malfoy,” she says, and, continuing before Draco has a chance to reply: “All is set up, Senka hopes it is as nice as last year, but had so much trouble with the tinsels... they’s not always wanting to cooperate,” she says darkly, and then brightens. “Mister Potter’s gift is very beautiful, Senka is seeing it, of course.”

Harry glances at the heavy bugger and then at the back of Senka’s head, surprised. “Oh. Thank you.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “You didn’t even wrap it?” he murmurs, mock-offended.

Harry pokes out his tongue and continues to follow Senka through the maze of corridors. Having taken note of each turn and each memorable object—a suit of armour here, a painting of a spectacularly ugly woman there—he thinks that he could just about find his way back to the reception room if pressed, but it would be a challenge; the place is vast. The air is cold here, too, and the lack of festivity is striking, but if he strains he can just about smell roasting meat and spices coming from the lower floors where, no doubt, poor Bilby is hard at work.

Still, he has to admit that it is a beautiful house, and so much brighter and cleaner and generally well-kept than the last time he was here, not that that’s surprising, under the circumstances. Idly, he wonders if this Malfoy Manor was still the setting for the horrors hosted by its counterpart during the war. Some new horrors, of course, he already knows a little about, he thinks, glancing down at his leg and pushing away his prickling curiosity. Now is not the time.

“No, Master Malfoy, Bilby has not yet burned the roasted potatoes,” Senka is saying, causing Harry to smile at the carpet and remind himself that he really ought to be paying attention. “There is still time, but Senka has a back-up. A reserve of roasted potatoes. Senka is not going to be shown up this year. Oh dear, no. Reserve turkey next year, too, would be helpful,” she sighs, finally pausing to take a breath.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Draco assures, just as they come to a sudden stop in front of a heavy oak door, which, while just like all the others they have passed, appears to be their destination. Harry takes a breath.

Senka flings open the door and curseys briefly. “Mister Malfoy, Mistress, your guests are here.”
“Thank you, Senka,” Narcissa says softly, rising from an ornate chaise and joining her husband, who is standing importantly, straight-backed, in front of the fireplace, hands behind his back.

Harry finds himself noticing this time that every part of Lucius’ complicated, stiff formal outfit is black. Only a quarter-inch of pure white collar dares to disturb this gloomy accord, and the long, white-blond hair seems to gleam in the sharp morning light that floods the room. He cuts an intimidating figure, whether Harry wants to admit it or not, and as he stands there, one hand barely grazing Draco’s and the other hanging grimly onto his lamp, he has no idea what to expect.

At his side, Draco quietly removes his coat, eliciting a split-second eyebrow lift from his father as he reveals the smart but vivid aquamarine-coloured shirt and thin silver tie he has chosen to wear. The rebel, Harry thinks, continuing to stare at Lucius.

“Merry Christmas, Mother,” Draco says, and Narcissa smiles but says nothing, as though she, too, is waiting for something to happen.

And then it does. Lucius narrows his eyes, tilts his chin and bellows: “The magic in your eyes, my dear, bewitches me still!”

The combination of intense eye contact and amorous words is startling, and just for a moment, Harry is thrown utterly off balance, but he recovers himself quickly and flicks through the jumble of lyrics he has managed to commit to memory.

The magic in your eyes... drama... strings... bewitches me still... and...

“And the sparkle in your smile of which I never get my fill,” Harry returns triumphantly, and a little louder than he intends to.

One pale eyebrow twitches and Harry can barely restrain his victorious grin, but he manages it, hanging onto the stem of his lamp and determinedly not looking at Draco. Swelled by success, he throws out the first line that pops into his head:

“And you claimed me, like only you can.”

Lucius frowns. It’s just a split-second wrinkle of the brow, but Harry sees it, and, judging by her puzzled expression, Narcissa sees it, too. Beside him, Draco emits a small, soft sound of amusement and it suddenly occurs to Harry that perhaps he doesn’t usually return the challenge.

Well. He’s done it now, hasn’t he?

For long seconds there is silence, and Harry can just about hear the strident voice of Senka from the floor below, and the answering crashes and bangs from her clumsy colleague. And then Lucius clears his throat. Clasps and unclasps his hands behind his back.

“Take me gently, my curse-breakin’ man,” he sings, looking right into Harry’s eyes, and despite the alarming inference, Harry really does smile this time. And then Lucius’ eyebrows are crooked with defiance, and he’s breaking into song once more. “Whisper the words, no clash and no skirmish?”

“Bubbles of love in the poetry of Mermish,” Harry shoots back, accomplishment wild in his veins. It’s ridiculous and wonderful, and the tiny flickers of chagrin on Lucius Malfoy’s face are so rewarding that Harry almost forgets there is anyone else in the room. “Under the planets, aligned in
the sky?”

Lucius hesitates, closing his eyes briefly, as though steeling himself. “Making sweet, fierce love, you and I.”

“There’s a disturbing thought,” Draco murmurs, reminding Harry of his presence.

“He said, ‘I am your ruin, my heart painted black’,” Lucius rumbles, finally breaking out of his rigid stance and sweeping one arm out to the side.

Harry stares. Chews his lip. Rifles, again and again, through his bank of appalling lyrics, to no avail. Finally, suffused with a mixture of disappointment for running aground and horror for making it this far, he sighs and concedes.

“I’m afraid I don’t know that one.”

Lucius smiles expansively, displaying straight, white teeth. “You do not have her newest record, Mr Potter.”

“Erm... no, Richenda didn’t have it,” he mutters, mostly to himself.

“Of course not,” Lucius says. “It’s not available until the new year. Unless one knows the right people, of course.”

“Isn’t it fascinating how your definition of ‘the right people’ has altered over the years?” Narcissa offers from her chaise, and though her face remains impassive, Harry detects the delicate, wry humour in her voice, and he warms to her, just a little.

“As fascinating as the lines on your face, my dear,” Lucius snaps, looking stung. “They have seen some alteration over the years, too.”

“None of us are as young as we used to be, Lucius,” Narcissa says, gazing at him appraisingly. “Waistlines can be ever so telling, can’t they?”

Lucius bristles and holds himself very erect while Harry glances between them, intrigued, and feeling as though he’s accidentally privy to something he was never supposed to see—the human side of the Malfoys.

“Don’t start,” Draco sighs, and Harry turns to look at him. He runs an exasperated hand through his hair and gazes wearily at his parents. Lucius and Narcissa glance at one another and remain silent—but surely not—apologetic.

“Who would like a drink?” Narcissa offers, glancing around for a house-elf.

“At ten in the morning?” Lucius grouses, and then: “Mead, if you insist.”

“I’m not insisting anything,” Narcissa insists and snaps her fingers. “Senka!”

When she appears, still looking slightly singed, Harry is careful to ask for an apple juice, and even more careful to make sure he asks for it within Lucius’ earshot. Whatever it takes, he’s determined to prove to Mr Malfoy that he is not a drunk.
Lucius does not deign to comment on Harry’s choice of beverage, distracted as he appears to be by the scent of slightly... well-done food that Senka has brought in with her. He sniffs at the air and frowns.

“Why can I smell burning?”

Senka curtseys hurriedly and disappears without a word.

“Strange creature,” Lucius sighs, gazing first at the empty spot of rug from which Senka has just disappeared and then at Harry. “Still, I have never regretted investing in some foreign help. Very hard workers, the Russians,” he confides.

“Mm,” Harry manages, uncertain just what response is expected of him.

“He’s not interested in your sweeping generalisations, Father,” Draco says, steering Harry over to a surprisingly comfortable-looking sofa with a gentle hand on the small of his back. Harry allows himself to be guided, focusing his energies on dragging the sodding lamp with him and settling it into position at the edge of the sofa. Harry sinks down onto the cushions and wonders if he can persuade Draco to carry it back home; it is his lamp, after all.

“I am merely trying to educate him, Draco,” Lucius says coolly. “You needn’t worry about his head exploding; I doubt it is currently overburdened with information.”

Insulted, Harry bites down on the inside of his mouth with the effort of keeping his expression neutral. So, Lucius Malfoy thinks he’s stupid. He can’t say he’s surprised, but it stings all the same, and he wonders just how his other self puts up with what he suspects is a regular procession of insults and pointed insinuations from his might-as-well-be father-in-law.

“Stop it,” Draco says, just as Narcissa responds:

“Take heart, Mr Potter. At least you have youth on your side... to an extent.”

This time, Harry can’t help it. He laughs. Beside him, Draco shakes his head and snorts gently. Lucius sighs and examines his hands critically. Narcissa stares into the fireplace with an odd little smile on her lips. Already, this is easily the strangest Christmas Harry has ever experienced, and it’s not even lunchtime.

Senka reappears with the drinks and Harry sips gratefully at the apple juice which she has seen fit to warm and spice with delicious results.

“This is fantastic, thank you,” he says, ignoring Lucius’ disparaging noise. He imagines he isn’t supposed to thank the help, however efficient and Russian it is. Senka smiles brilliantly.

“Mister Malfoy, Mistress, Senka will bring the gifts now?”

Lucius nods in the affirmative and Draco stands, levering himself up with a hand on Harry’s thigh, and excuses himself.

“Oh, no, Master Malfoy,” she cries, hurrying after him. “Senka will fetch it, Senka will bring it!”

“It’s heavy, Senka,” Draco says calmly, distressing her further by reaching for the handle and opening the parlour door himself. “And besides, you don’t know where it is. I hid it.”
“Master Malfoy! Allow Senka to assist!” she cries, disappearing after him, and Harry can hear her anguished protests and Draco’s footsteps all the way down the corridor.

When the room is once more plunged into silence, Harry is seized by awkwardness, and in order not to make eye contact with either of the Malfoys, he glances around at his surroundings. The parlour is spacious, tastefully decorated in rich creams and golds, and dotted with luxurious sofas, chaises, armchairs, and beautiful tables and shelves in what he now recognises, with some pride, as cherry. It’s full of antiques and rugs that were probably made by Guatemalan goblins and cost more than he makes in a year as an Auror, but still—he can’t believe they’re going to open Christmas gifts in a room so painfully lacking in festivity.

He hadn’t expected a tinsel-decked tree or gaudy garlands, but there isn’t so much as a wreath or a sprig of holly in the entire room. It’s silly, he knows, but he aches for the mismatched baubles at the Burrow or the glittery, gluey stockings that Lily, Albus, and even James hang up at home. Even the fairly ascetic number twelve has a string of white lights and a shelf full of brightly-coloured Christmas cards.

“May I see it, Mr Potter?”

“Excuse me?” Harry looks up quickly and meets Narcissa’s eyes.

She gestures toward the lamp, and Harry realises he has once again wrapped his fingers around the smooth wooden stem without noticing it.

“Er, yeah,” he mumbles, caught off guard, dissolving the Disillusionment Charm with a flick of his wrist.

“How unusual,” Narcissa says. Harry looks at her sharply, but, for once, there seems to be no undertone to her words. She’s smiling.

“Thanks,” Harry says, allowing his other self a pat on the back.

Lucius clears his throat and hesitates, as though he knows his next words will cause him some discomfort. “That’s exquisite, Mr Potter—a rare show of taste. Where did you get it?”

As the words sink in, Harry becomes aware, via the delicious thrill in his chest, the enviable position in which he now finds himself. Lucius Malfoy has just accidentally given him a compliment. And yes, there’s a small part of him that’s insisting he has the situation all the wrong way up, and that the last person he should want to impress is an ex-Death Eater with a terrible attitude and a cruel streak a mile wide, but right here, in this strange place, it seems to be spouting nothing but irrelevancies.

“I made it, Mr Malfoy,” he says, catching slate grey eyes at exactly the right moment.

“Really?” he manages, genuinely startled. The pale eyebrows flicker, communicating an inner anguish to which this man would never admit. “I thought you made tables and such things.”

Harry smiles wryly, deciding not to share with Lucius the fact that tables are a bit of a sore point at the moment. “I make all sorts of things. Actually, we’ve been experimenting quite a lot with glass recently,” he offers, suddenly brightening at the memory. “We just bought some blowing pipes and we’re learning how to blow our own glass—it’s fascinating, actually.”
“We?” Narcissa enquires, tucking her curtain of pale hair behind her ear.

“Oh, Arthur Weasley and I. And little Maura, you know, Ginny and Blaise’s daughter,” Harry says. “She’s been helping me out during the school holidays when they have to work.”

At the mention of the Weasleys, Lucius wrinkles his nose and looks out of the window, but Narcissa smiles and leans closer, threading her fingers together. As she does so, Harry notices that, although her face has barely aged over the last twenty years, her hands betray her, a tangle of paper-wrinkled skin, bony fingers and opal-studded silver jewellery.

“Maura is a lovely girl,” she says, eyes wistful. “I haven’t seen her for such a long time, though. I really ought to owl Blaise. Is he well?”

“He’s fine,” he assures. “Just about the same as usual.”

To his astonishment, Narcissa laughs softly. “That is good to hear. I always felt he was a positive influence on Draco when they were both at school.”

Lucius snorts and Narcissa glances at him sharply. “Do you have something to add, Lucius?”

“No,” he says, almost sulkily.

“Don’t get married, Mr Potter,” Narcissa advises. “All men turn into their fathers eventually, and I needn’t expand on how that might end messily for you.”

Harry smiles. Against all his instincts, he’s starting to enjoy himself.

“Let us not begin to discuss your mother, then,” Lucius murmurs, still gazing out over the grounds, and then: “What on earth is Draco doing? And where did that blasted elf get to?”

“Senka is sorry, Mister Malfoy!” the elf cries, barrelling into the room, laden with gifts.

Draco, close behind her and carrying something large and unwieldy in his arms, stops short as his eyes are drawn to a spot somewhere to Harry’s left. Far too late, he remembers that he has forgotten to recast the charm to hide the lamp.

“Ah,” he attempts, and then sighs. Scrubs a hand through his hair. Shrugs. “I made you a lamp!” he says redundantly.

The split-second expression of surprise has melted from Draco’s face and he’s irritatingly composed as he rejoins the group and unloads his burden onto the vacant sofa. “Are you sure?” he asks.

Panic-stricken, Harry stops breathing as he scrambles for the right lie. “I really did,” he insists, face heating. “I made it in my workshop.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow, visibly amused. “I’m sure you did. I meant... are you sure it isn’t a lobster? Or a teacup? Or a set of carving knives?”

Harry sags and closes his eyes briefly. “You are a horrible person,” he mutters. “Merry Christmas.”

“He takes after his mother,” Lucius puts in.
Draco raises his eyes to the ceiling and ignores his father, stepping closer to the lamp and reaching out a curious hand to slide over the curves of the wood, just as Harry had done when he had first seen it. Silently, Harry draws his wand and flicks fire into the glass shade, lighting the lamp and standing back to admire the scale and intricacy of the patterns cast on to the walls of such a large space.

“That is extraordinary,” Draco murmurs, eyes flicking between the shifting patterns on the walls, the moving shards of green glass, and, finally, Harry. His sharp cheekbones are slightly flushed, his eyes bright, and his smile is unrestrained now—not weary or sardonic, but genuine, delighted, and utterly ruinous for Harry’s insides.

He swallows hard. “So, you like it.”

“You actually remembered that I said I needed a lamp for reading,” Draco says, opting not to answer the question. “Can you have it still as well?”

“Er...” Harry begins, but Draco already has his wand out and is tapping gently at the glass.

“Oh, lovely,” he enthuses, as the soft green shapes fall motionless and the room is filled with gentle, glowing light.

(Of course you can,” Harry says, feeling illogically impressed with himself. Quickly, though, as he basks in the pleasure on Draco’s face, misplaced pride melts into inadequacy. His other self clearly knows exactly what Draco wants; he can’t even remember to wrap a lamp, or keep it hidden until the proper time.

“Mm,” Draco hums softly, fingers tracing the smooth green glass. Harry holds his breath without knowing why. “Thank you,” he says at last, turning glowing eyes to Harry and then, before he has time for the surprise to register, draws Harry close, hands on his hips and lips against his cheek, the smell of warm citrus everywhere and the words repeated, “Thank you,” and “I love you,” against his skin.

Harry’s heart clenches almost painfully, his pulse jumps, and the wriggling thing attempts to turn his stomach inside out. Say something, hisses the lonely logical voice inside his head, but he’s frozen.

“We will still be here when you choose to remember us,” Lucius says acidly.

Startled and not a little embarrassed, but grateful for the distraction, Harry turns to face Mr Malfoy, who has moved to sit by his wife’s side on the chaise. Flushed, he forces an apologetic smile.

“And I trust you’ll be just as melodramatic, too,” Draco returns.

Narcissa blinks innocently, hands in her lap, but Lucius narrows his eyes at his son.

“A little respect wouldn’t go amiss, Draco,” he sighs. “Aren’t you going to give Mr Potter his...” He pauses, wrinkling his nose and indicating the silver-wrapped mass that takes up most of the sofa. “Well, that. It’s not a block of wood, is it, Draco?” he asks, attempting humour but still managing to sound disparaging.

Draco exhales heavily, flicks a long-suffering glance at Harry, and then lowers himself onto the arm of the sofa and gestures in silence toward the gift.
Puzzled, Harry squeezes himself into the last few inches of sofa and pulls gently at the wrappings, which he now realises are made of a soft, thin silver fabric that feels strong and slippery under his fingers and sparkles in the green light. When he reveals a huge pile of neatly-stacked branches, Draco’s exasperation becomes clear.

“Will you look at that, Narcissa?” Lucius mumbles.

“It isn’t a block,” she observes.

And she’s right, of course. What Harry is now confronted with is, in fact, a collection of smooth, honey-coloured branches, each around the width of his forearm and each with a slight curve starting halfway along the length. Instinctively, he lifts the topmost branch to his face and examines the grain, turns it over and over in his hands, inhales the unusually sweet smell of the wood.

He has no idea what it is, but he knows it’s special. He looks up. “They’re beautiful,” he says truthfully.

Draco smiles, tapping his fingers on the arm of the sofa in an anxious rhythm.

“They’re tree branches,” Lucius says, sounding scandalised.

“They’re Veneficus branches,” Draco corrects, eyes fixed on Harry. “Canadian Veneficus at that. I was told their magical properties are stronger than the European... I’m sorry it’s such a measly amount, but they’re damned difficult to get hold of in any quantity.”

The name rings a faint bell somewhere in the depths of Harry’s memory and he’s suddenly aware that these odd little sticks are very special indeed. And that Draco must have gone to some trouble to get them for him. Strangely overwhelmed, he takes a deep breath.

“Don’t apologise, they’re fantastic,” he says looking up to meet Draco’s eyes.

Draco shrugs lightly and swipes his hair out of his face, pretending nonchalance, but Harry knows better.

“Well, I know you’ve wanted to have a play with some for a long time. You would have had it last year, but there was a problem with the crop in Ontario. Something about Hoodoo beetles, apparently.”

Narcissa shudders lightly and glances down at her hands and clothes as though the mention of creepy-crawlies has sent them clambering all over her. “Goodness, Draco,” she says at last, suppressing her horror and setting her features, “how on earth did you lay your hands on Veneficus?”

He finds a smile for his mother. “A friend with his business in the field is always helpful,” he says. “And when things weren’t moving as they should, I plagued Blaise day and night until they did.”

“He’s a terribly successful boy, isn’t he?” Narcissa says approvingly.

“Do I not always say that it’s whom one knows that is important?” Lucius puts in, but his heart doesn’t seem to be in it.

Amused, Harry continues to admire the branches. Even without a true understanding of wood, he
can see that they are exquisite, and the mysterious magical properties almost seem to hum around them like an invisible, gently-pulsing energy field. He wouldn’t dare to sacrifice this gift at the altar of the Little Table, but he can’t help thinking that if he did, things would somehow, miraculously, work out beautifully.

“Thank you,” Harry manages at last, unsure whether he’s relieved or disappointed that Draco can’t reach him, separated as he is from Harry by the stack of Veneficus branches. He’d said ‘I love you’. Of course he had. Because he does love Harry. The other Harry, the one who makes him lamps and drags him out to feed the homeless. Harry sighs softly, squirmy with confusion. Draco, who has bent over to retrieve something from the floor, doesn’t notice.

“Here’s the traditional basket,” he says, rising briefly to pass their gift to Narcissa.

Surprisingly, her pale eyes light with enthusiasm as she examines the contents. “Cheese! Oh...” She frowns lightly, raising one package to her eyes to scrutinise it more closely. “Drunken Goat cheese. Draco, you find such strange things.”

“Harry chose that one, actually,” he says, dropping his voice to add—only for Harry to hear—“I believe you said it made you think of my father.”

The resulting visual that floods Harry’s mind is far too much for him, and he looses a loud squeak/snort that easily draws the attention of everyone in the room; even Lucius is distracted from his avid inspection of the label of a mead bottle.

“Is there something wrong, Mr Potter?” he demands.

“Excuse Senka,” interrupts a small voice. Harry’s insides flop with relief. “Would Sirs and Mistress like to come to the dining room now? Christmas lunch is being served very soon.”

Draco stretches and gets to his feet. He smiles at Harry. “Come on. Time for the main event.”

Something about those words is disconcerting, but Harry brushes it away as he gently covers his Veneficus and goes to follow Draco and Senka, who appear to be once again racing each other to the door.

It’s just a meal, after all.

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In contrast to the rest of the house, the Malfoys’ dining room is lavishly decorated; the table is draped in rich, dark red fabric and laid with glittering silverware; a huge tree, decorated with what looks like real, non-melting snow and groaning with sparkling baubles sits regally in one corner, and Bilby, under the watchful eye of Senka, seems to have produced enough festive food to feed a small country.

Harry, however, is struggling to pay much attention to his surroundings, entranced as he is by the Malfoys’ Christmas gift. Even the food on his plate is being neglected in favour of... that thing.

“What’s the matter?” Draco hisses, leaning along their side of the vast table and just about managing to graze Harry’s thigh with his fork.

Harry hesitates, assures himself that Lucius and Narcissa are still embroiled in their argument about
the proper serving temperature of a roast suckling pig, and replies without averting his eyes:

“I can’t not look at it.”

“The swan?”

“The swan,” Harry confirms, poking at the delicious food on his plate, shaking his head slowly.

“What about it?” Draco whispers.

Harry blinks repeatedly in the direction of the swan, but it stays put. He’s never seen anything like it in his life, this... *object* that sits on the edge of the table. Looking at him. When Senka and Bilby had produced it, at the click of Lucius’ fingers, in between the third course of melon and the current course of roast meats and vegetables, he had been completely baffled.

And though Draco seems unperturbed, even amused, Harry’s so far out of the picture that he doesn’t know if it’s a surrealist landscape or a naked lady.

Or a huge, slightly disturbing glass swan.

“What about it?” Draco repeats, leaning even closer.

“Sometimes I think about having your mouth sewn up in your sleep,” Narcissa says darkly.

“What the hell are we going to do with it?” Harry hisses.

“You’d better have a house-elf do it,” Lucius snaps. “You cannot sew a single stitch.”

Draco’s mouth twitches. “What do you mean? We’re going to put it in the Horrible Parlour with all the other Horrible Things, of course.”

Harry frowns, finding his eyes dragged inexorably back to the swan. “It’s so ugly.”

“Of course it’s ugly. They’re always ugly. Is there any reason why you expected it to be different this year?” Draco asks.

“This has to be the ugliest,” Harry mutters, eyeing the swan’s sinister glass face and trying to reconcile himself with the idea of an endless parade of grotesque Christmas gifts from the seemingly self-appointed King and Queen of good taste.

“You must be joking,” Draco says, disbelief strengthening his voice. “You think it’s uglier than the moose? The moose, the yard stick by which all ugliness is measured?”

Harry laughs into his linen napkin, trying not to look at Draco’s expression of genuine inquiry, but ultimately helpless to resist. Still grinning, he looks once again at the swan and resolves to find this collection of Horrible Things for himself as soon as possible.

“I concede. It’s not as bad as the moose.”

“Good. I was worried for a moment that there was something terribly amiss in the natural order of things,” Draco says, sliding a forkful of perfectly-roasted goose into his mouth and chewing it thoughtfully. “Maura will like it, I think. She likes that godawful duck we got two years ago. Strange
child."

_Maura_, Harry thinks suddenly, staring down at his plate. He’s almost certain that Draco and her real Uncle Harry wouldn’t have forgotten her at Christmas, but he’s also suddenly aware of how many times she’s rescued him, and is seized by an uncharacteristic desire to take her to Diagon Alley and buy her anything she wants.

“Aren’t you enjoying your goose, Mr Potter?” Narcissa inquires.

Harry looks up to find four Malfoy eyes staring at him from the other side of the table. It’s unnerving.

“No, I mean, yes, of course,” he stumbles, just about resisting the urge to saw manically at his meat and begin shovelling it into his mouth. Instead he fixes Narcissa with his calmest smile. “It’s all lovely.”

“Leave it, Narcissa,” Lucius advises, staring over his goblet at Harry with an odd mixture of pity and disdain to which Harry is becoming accustomed. “I think it’s a little late to address issues of taste, especially those with their roots in... unfortunate parenting.”

Furious, Harry sets down his knife and fork and opens his mouth to respond, but then there’s a hand on his knee, a murmured, “He doesn’t mean your actual parents, you know that,” and a sharp, quelling look from Narcissa Malfoy to her husband, and the room seems to fade to static.

“Those Muggles were abhorrent creatures,” Lucius mumbles, somewhat chastened.

“As far as I know, they still are,” Harry says a little too loudly, fighting the anger prickling under his skin. It’s not as though this is the first time Lucius has managed to insult him, but each one, along with the rich food and the swans and the constant sniping, adds to the pressure inside his head. He wants to take his Veneficus, the lamp, and Draco, who has somehow become his most steadfast ally in all this, and make a dash for it down the drive.

But he won’t.

Some air would be nice, though. Any air at all will do. Something seems to have sucked the dining room clear of it.

“Would you excuse me for a moment?” he says, laying his napkin beside his plate and rising from the table.

“Senka, bring the thread,” Narcissa snaps as he heads for the door.

“It isn’t my fault he’s so oversensitive,” Lucius mutters, and then Harry is out into the corridor, walking quickly and taking turns at random, hoping for the best even though he has no idea where he is heading.

Just when he thinks he’s completely lost, he walks out into an immense, marble-floored entrance hall dominated by an ornate curved staircase and a decorated tree even larger than the one in the dining room. Best of all, though, a pair of doors that, though closed and bolted, definitely lead to the fresh air he’s seeking.

He doesn’t stop to think before he’s blasting open the bolts with a swish of his wand and a series of heavy clicks, flinging the doors open, and missing his step as his leg gives way beneath him. For an
alarming few seconds he skids on the marble before he manages to grab an ornate doorknob and scramble to a stop, heart racing and palms slippery on the cold brass. Possibly the last thing he needs at this moment is to come to a sticky end at the front door of Malfoy sodding Manor. He supposes, like Blaise says, there’s always time.

Shaking out his leg, he steps out onto the portico and gulps at the freezing cold, winter-scented air. Leans against the nearest stone pillar and closes his eyes. They’re sore, a sure sign that he’s exhausted, and he feels old. Tired and old and overstuffed, even though he’s barely halfway through course four of a promised seven.

“Oh, no,” he groans, recalling Senka’s somewhat boastful description of the huge, brandy-soaked Christmas puddings that are her speciality.

He opens his eyes. The sun is dipping below the horizon now, flooding the grounds with liquid orange light, and Harry wonders just how long he has been sitting at that table. It’s beautiful here. Confusing and beautiful. He sighs.

“I thought you might need a drink.”

Harry turns to see Draco, eyebrow lifted in what appears to be concern, holding out a heavy glass tumbler half-filled with some brown liquid or other. Fuck it, he thinks, and takes it, swallowing down most of the fiery contents in one gulp.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning to stay out here all night... afternoon... whatever it is.” Harry frowns. “I really don’t have a clue any more. And this is the first drink.”

Draco smiles softly. He shrugs and takes the glass back from Harry, draining the contents and inspecting the bottom of the glass. “Sorry about my father. I know he’s...”

“Difficult?” Harry offers.

“Well, I was going to say ‘a bit of a shit’ but we can use your word.”

Harry laughs. “Thanks.”

“The crazy thing is, I don’t think he’s actually meant to offend you for years, but, well, the words just have a habit of coming out.” Draco leans against the wide pillar beside Harry, so that their shoulders touch. He sighs. “My mother is still trying to train him, of course, but I think we all know she’s fighting a losing battle.”

Harry raises his eyebrows at the sunset, feeling a little of the pressure inside his head drain away.

“She’s almost as bad. Why does she still call me Mr Potter?”

“She’s always called you Mr Potter,” Draco says. “She’s not going to change now. It isn’t done.”

“Change?”

“Not for Malfoys,” Draco says, linking their fingers together where they touch against the cold stone.

“I beg to differ,” Harry almost whispers, shivering as a sudden gust of wind rips at his face and hair. “Take the unknown road now.”
“A one-time event,” Draco mutters, an odd little smile flickering at the corner of his mouth. “I am an immoveable object.”

This time, when Harry kisses him, he doesn’t even think about it.

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Several minutes later, partially restored by Draco and a mouthful of excellent firewhisky, Harry returns to the table and resumes his fourth course with a little more enthusiasm. The Malfoys are still arguing, but no one has yet had their mouth sewn shut, which Harry takes as a good sign.

“Good grief,” Lucius says, apparently noticing their return at last. “What have you done to your hair?”

Harry instinctively reaches up to subdue his wind-ruffled mop and manages to streak it with gravy from the fork he has forgotten to put down. Lucius’ eyebrows flicker in mute distress.

“It’s a little... er, blustery outside,” he manages, immediately wanting to hex himself in the face.

“Blustery?” Draco mocks, voice low and face half hidden in his goblet.

“Shut up,” Harry whispers, kicking him under the table and delighting in the spark of mischief that lights in his belly.

Draco snorts and mumbles something that sounds a lot like ‘set the swan on you’.

“Senka, the tartlets, please,” calls Narcissa, and Harry’s roast goose disappears mid-slice.

Three more courses to go, he tells himself. And then... well, he’s not entirely sure what then.

“Are you sure you won’t stay the night, Draco?”

Harry keeps his eyes on the intricate little tartlet that has just appeared on his plate. He doesn’t need to look at Draco to imagine the expression on his face, and he can practically feel Draco gritting his teeth.

“No, thank you, Mother.”

“I really think you should.”

“I know. And I’d really like to go home.”

“I had Senka prepare your bedroom.”

“Thank you. I have a bedroom at home.” Draco pauses. “We have a bedroom at home.”

“Mr Potter is welcome to stay also.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Draco says drily, leaning back in his chair.

Narcissa sighs. “Don’t be like that, Draco.”
Harry listens in silence half wondering just what those round purple things in his tartlet could be, and half reflecting that—in his limited experience—it seems like all mothers are the same, really. Some are warmer or rougher or easier to understand, but they all want to protect their children, however old they grow, to fuss over them unnecessarily, to wish for more time.

“Sorry,” Draco says softly. “I don’t sleep well here, though, you know that. And neither does Harry.”

Harry inhales sharply, chews on his lip. Because things did happen here. They did.

“You would sleep perfectly well if you deigned to take the Sleeping Draughts I always offer,” Lucius puts in, eyes narrowed. “You would sleep here. You would sleep on a bloody broomstick.”

Something in his voice makes Harry look up; Senka is hurrying to fill Lucius’ goblet with mead, and Draco’s fingers are gripping the napkin in his lap tightly. Narcissa chews delicately on a mouthful of tartlet and gazes wearily out of the window as though she knows what is coming next and has absolutely no interest in it.

Draco’s voice is tight. “I’d rather not sleep at all.”

“When you have spent five years in Azkaban, Draco, talk to me again.”

“I think I’ll take your word for it,” Draco snaps, leaning forward and cutting savagely into his tartlet.

Caught up in the sudden tension, Harry’s eyes flit anxiously around the room and happen to meet Narcissa’s across the table. Her mouth twists ruefully as she shoots Harry a disenchanted but conspiratorial glance which he returns after a moment’s astonishment.

“You are—”

“That’s enough, Lucius,” Narcissa cuts in sweetly. “And please save some mead for the rest of us.”

Lucius scowls but falls silent, opting to push away his plate and stare into the bottom of his goblet.

“Are you okay?” Harry whispers, glancing sidelong at Draco, who is chewing slowly, knife and fork gripping in whitened hands.

Draco meets his eyes through an errant fall of hair, just as the remains of the tartlets disappear. Harry’s, too, fades into nothing, untouched and taking with it the mystery of the round purple things.

“Two more courses to go.”

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Finally, the plates disappear for the final time, leaving only the delicate cups full of rich, dark coffee that blazes a welcome, energising trail down Harry’s throat and out to his fingertips. Revived, he sips it slowly, leaning back to silently observe the conversation between Draco and his mother. Perhaps ‘conversation’ isn’t the right word for Narcissa’s not-so-subtle discourse on Oriana-from-her-lunch-circle’s new baby granddaughter.

“Mm,” says Draco.
“She’s a beautiful little girl,” Narcissa says wistfully.

“Mm,” says Draco.

“A child is a gift,” Narcissa adds.

“Mm,” says Draco, glancing wearily at his mother over the top of his coffee cup.

“Tick-tock, Mr Potter,” Lucius murmurs, grey eyes flashing humour in Harry’s direction.

He sighs inwardly, draining his cup. It’s just possible that they’re all completely insane.

When Lucius and Narcissa leave the table to follow a relieved-looking Senka into the parlour for drinks, Harry hangs back, walking slowly, and Draco falls easily into step at his side.

“You know, I was almost afraid she wasn’t going to mention my childless state this time,” he says, sounding amused.

“I’m sure you’d have dealt with the disappointment,” Harry offers, and there’s a light brush of fingers against his that makes him smile.

They turn into a wide, portrait-lined corridor with Lucius, Narcissa, and Senka way out in front, their conversation barely audible now, and Harry slows, eyes drawn to the nearest carved door. It’s just like all the others, heavy, ornate, and closed, but something makes him stop.

“Something the matter?”

“This room,” Harry mutters to himself, reaching out for the knob before he has time to think about it. His memory tugs at him painfully, replaying scenes he’d rather forget—that he has tried to forget, almost successfully, but as the door swings open with a slight creak, they rush in around him in a cold cascade, chilling him until he feels as though he might throw up.

The drawing room is much as he remembers it and nothing like he remembers it all at once. Gone are the scorch marks and broken furniture and echoes of boots on bare tile; the space is clean, opulent, and beautifully appointed just like all the others, but the imposing fireplace is present, the tall, thin windows, and the air of disuse that stagnates in Harry’s lungs.

“There really are far too many rooms in this house,” Draco sighs, looking over Harry’s shoulder. His warm breath lifts the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck and he shudders. “For two people, anyway.”

“Are you suggesting we move in?” Harry asks absently, grateful for the warmth at his back as he stands there, fighting the confusion tangling in his stomach. Even if it is the warmth of a person who was part of the horror that took place in this room, at least where he comes from. A person who couldn’t quite bring himself to identify Harry and his friends. Here. At least... where he comes from. Harry frowns and rubs at his face.

“Sorry, what?” he asks, realising he’s completely missed Draco’s answer.

“I said, we will move in with my parents over my dead body.”

Exhaling messily, Harry takes one more look around the room, forces a reassuring smile for Draco,
and stalks back out into the corridor. Lucius, Narcissa, and Senka are nowhere to be seen, but the strange compulsion that has seized him flattens any remaining concern for propriety.

As Draco follows him out of the drawing room and pulls the heavy door closed, Harry heads for the next door along, heart racing, and finds himself in a magnificent ballroom. This door is slightly stiff and he has to shove it hard to open it all the way. He releases the cold knob and walks slowly into the centre of the huge space, tipping back his head to admire the complicated moulded ceiling with its swirling patterns of gold and sparkling chandeliers.

“I’m surprised you want to be in here. You’ve never wanted to before.”

Harry drops his eyes and, in the mirrors that line the ballroom, sees Draco, hanging back by the door and staring at him.

“Why would you think that?” he asks without turning around, even though he thinks he knows why. Even though the confusion in his stomach twists and solidifies into a heavy ball at the words.

Draco makes an odd sound of surprise that echoes in the cavernous room, and he clicks across the floor to stand beside Harry with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Why would I think that?” he repeats, incredulous. “Possibly because it always struck me as perfectly rational that you would want to avoid a place in which my delightful aunt tortured you nearly to death and left you with a lifelong injury,” he snaps, eyes narrowed fiercely as he glares into the mirror immediately before him. “And yet here you are, staring at it like you’ve never seen it before. Forgive me my confusion.”

Harry swallows hard, hands clenching into fists against the hot prickle starting up behind his eyelids. Bellatrix Lestrange tortured him, not Hermione. In this very room. In a ballroom full of mirrors. He supposes she’d have enjoyed that.

He glances at Draco, wondering if his fury is aimed at Harry or his now deceased aunt. He hopes the latter, but if Harry knows anything it’s that it’s dangerous to assume anything.

“It just... felt different today,” he says at last.

Draco stares at him but says nothing, and for a gut-wrenching few seconds Harry fears the worst, that he has carelessly blown his cover. That Draco knows. And then he nods, slowly, as though he’s turning Harry’s strange behaviour over and over in his head, allowing it to settle in around him.

“Why?” he asks, voice soft.

“I don’t know,” Harry admits, jittery with relief. He looks around the room, avoiding his own reflection, and scrubs at his hair. “I don’t want to be afraid of a room. It’s just a room.”

“It’s a ballroom,” Draco says eventually, eyes downcast and lips twitching at the corners.

Harry frowns. “Yeah.”

“You have to dance in a ballroom,” Draco elaborates, lifting gleaming eyes to meet Harry’s in something a lot like challenge.

“I can’t dance,” Harry says, alarmed.
Draco grins, smoothing down his immaculate shirt and taking several steps closer to Harry.

“I know you can’t. That’s why I always dance with Ginevra at the Ministry balls.”

“Right,” Harry agrees, distracted by that surreal image. “It’s probably too late for me, then.”

“Nice try,” Draco murmurs, deftly catching Harry’s hand and placing it on his shoulder. “The hole in your argument, however—” Cool, slender fingers wrap around his other hand, “—is that the quality of the dancing isn’t what’s important here.”

“Oh, really?” Harry manages, inhaling sharply as his body is pulled flush against Draco’s and his nose, pressed suddenly into the angle of Draco’s jaw, is flooded with the scent of warm citrus and alcohol.

“Really. It’s about intention.”

“Intention?” Harry echoes,-startling slightly at the hand wrapping around his hip.

“Yes,” says Draco, smiling against his cheek. “The intention to at least attempt to fucking dance.”

Harry’s heart swoops, and he’s doomed, he knows it.

“I see,” he manages in slightly rough voice, “because otherwise the room would be offended?”

Draco laughs softly, hot breath and flickering eyelashes against Harry’s skin. “If it helps you to think of it that way. I just happen to think that one should inject at least some semblance of propriety into a situation...”

He breaks off midsentence as Harry snorts, dropping his head, grin first, onto Draco’s shoulder for a moment as he allows the irony of that statement to sink in. He wonders just how many propriety points he’s due for this situation—a ballroom in Voldemort’s old headquarters, an illicit-not-illicit embrace with an old enemy, an old, confused married man—married with children—coursing with desire and bewilderment, alive with it.

“You know what I mean, you absolute horror,” Draco murmurs, sliding his hand absent under Harry’s shirt, making him shiver. “It’s like that time I decided we absolutely had to have a morning room, even though you said that there was no point, because we’re always working or in bed in the mornings. You said that, but you helped me decorate it and bought all those sodding plants that would have expired long ago if you didn’t open the curtains every morning and remember to water them... even though you were right, and we never do spend any time in there. You know?”

“Not really,” Harry admits, tightening his grip on Draco’s shoulder and mentally making a note to seek out the morning room and the neglected plants as soon as he has a chance.

Draco sighs heavily. “Never mind. Just dance.”

Before Harry can respond, he is being pulled out into the middle of the floor, shoulders-to-hips pressed against Draco, the hand at his waist driving him gently as he awkwardly follows Draco’s graceful steps, realising he is being led and realising he doesn’t mind one bit, only wishing he could make his slides and turns look as effortless.
“This feels really strange without music,” he mumbles into Draco’s neck, lips brushing the stiff fabric of his collar. Forcing his eyes open to regard, over Draco’s shoulder, the strange spectacle they make pressed together, his dark hair against Draco’s light, his own anxious eyes and the peaceful little smile on the lips of his dancing partner, reflected a hundred times over in the sparkling mirror-lined walls. And then:

“Sing, then,” Draco instructs, straightening his posture and whisking Harry around in a circle with alarming ease. Now inches apart, Harry finds himself staring right into expectant grey eyes. Draco smiles. It’s a tiny smile, insignificant, even, but it shatters Harry, and the little voice that whispers, ‘Anything’ inside his head makes his heart race out of control.

“Okay, but...” Harry hesitates, searching his mind for a song that won’t make him look like a complete idiot; he’s no singer, anyway, he’s well aware of that, and the fact that his head is full of nothing but Celestina Warbeck lyrics cannot bode well. Draco lifts an eyebrow in inquiry and Harry throws reason and caution to the wind—once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor, he supposes.

“Take me away from this godforsaken place,” he begins, trying to hold his eye contact with Draco. It’s easier than he expects, perhaps because, in a way, it’s always been easy with Draco. He’s never had to try to impress him, or to keep his attention. Terrified and not, all at the same time, Harry continues, even when Draco grimaces and resumes leading him around the floor.

“You really couldn’t think of anything better than that?”

“I dream each night of your saving embrace,” Harry offers, shrugging and stepping on Draco’s foot.

“Oh, good grief.”

“The Dementors are calling from the sky above,” Harry sings, adding a touch of drama just to see Draco’s eyes flick to the ceiling. Seconds later, he’s being spun repeatedly along with Draco, placing his feet down frantically and without rhythm, just hoping to stay upright.

“Fly me away on your broomstick of love!” he manages breathlessly, spotting his error too late.

Draco snorts, catching Harry against his chest and burying a smile in his hair. “Oh, please tell me that’s the real lyric.”

Harry grins. “Sadly not. I thought it was an improvement, though.”

“And there I was, thinking those songs were beyond hope,” Draco says, pulling back from Harry’s shoulder to regard him with a wry smile; at the sight of it, the wriggling thing is back with a vengeance. “Alright, continue.”

“You want me to keep going? With the awful song?”

Draco sighs and draws him wonderfully, warmly close again. “Obviously. How else am I going to teach you a half-decent Veelan Waltz?”

“Obviously,” Harry mumbles, as though it is. He takes a deep breath, preparing for the next spin. “We’ll take to the sky in a cascade of stars, my love!”

Draco groans. “If you step into the turn with your left foot, you might stop crushing mine,” he advises.
If I just focus on how ridiculous this is, I might be alright, Harry thinks, before he nods and is lost in the whirl of mirrors, tiny lights and the heat of Draco’s body against his.

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“Shoulders down,” Draco says for what feels like the thousandth time, tapping his fingers admonishingly at Harry’s hip and leading him in a series of delicate little steps that he just can’t seem to master.

He can’t be sure how long they’ve been dancing—the combination of the vast, glittering space and Draco’s gentle commands is heady, alcoholic—but he’s hot and, to his surprise, on the edge of breathlessness. Ties have been loosened, shirts untucked, and sleeves rolled up; Draco’s hair falls into his eyes with every spin and Harry’s upper lip is salty with exertion. By now it is all too clear why Draco apparently opts to dance with Ginny whenever the need arises. Harry, sadly, is not a natural.

What he is, however, is stubborn, so he counterbalances his inability to produce a decent Veelan Waltz by treating Draco to every Celestina Warbeck song he can remember, by way of musical accompaniment.

“If you sing one more song about your tortured soul or your lost love,” Draco threatens as Harry finishes ‘Curse-breakin’ Man’ with a deliberate flourish, lifting Harry’s chin with his finger. “Stop looking at your feet, you’re supposed to be at least pretending to be graceful.”

“I thought it didn’t matter if I was any good,” Harry protests, and then: “If I sing one more of those songs you’ll do what?”

Draco’s eyes narrow in thought. “I’ll remind my father that we’re here.”

“Do you really think he’s forgotten?”

Draco corrects Harry’s posture, lips twitching ruefully. “I don’t know. With luck he’ll have forgotten what day it is by now.”

Harry glances down at his feet again, knowing better than to ask questions that don’t really need to be asked. And anyway, for all he knows, the two of them might disappear after dinner every Christmas, though there’s something in the intensity of Draco’s stare when he glances back up that suggests otherwise. Perhaps he’s not the only one who feels brand new.

“Let’s try again,” he says softly. “I promise not to look at my feet. Or sing.”

Draco smiles and exhales slowly, feathering cool breath across Harry’s damp skin. “Alright.”

This time, when they spin out into the middle of the floor, Harry concentrates as hard as he can on the movements, partly to prove that he can, and partly to drag at least a little of his focus away from the man he’s dancing with. Falling for, most probably. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Where are you going, exactly?” Draco murmurs, amused, pulling Harry’s hips tightly against his. The hint of arousal brushing against him makes his pulse jump, and he scrambles for words. Any words.
“I thought I was supposed to be... er, maintaining a space in hold, or something.”

Draco laughs. “Trust you to start listening now,” he says, slipping cool fingers over the sticky skin at the small of Harry’s back. “I’m giving up.”

“Oh,” says Harry, caught somewhere between relief and disappointment as they slow, not quite to a standstill, but to a languid circling at the edge of the floor. Then, as he lifts his hand from Draco’s shoulder to brush the pale strands of hair from his face, and Draco’s eyes meet his, warm and pewter-bright, a thrill of heat crashes through him, and he knows at once that it’s different this time. That there’s no escape.

“You’re a fucking terrible dancer, Harry Potter,” Draco sighs, and kisses him.

Harry isn’t sure exactly what he had planned to say, but the soft sigh of surprise that falls out of his mouth definitely isn’t it. For a moment, he fails to react, allowing Draco to take advantage of his parted lips and flick his tongue into his mouth, sending his stomach into freefall and sharpening the sigh into a quiet moan. Startled at the sound, Harry pulls himself together and kisses back, pulling his hand away from Draco’s and threading both into his hair, needing just a tiny bit of control, even if they are still circling slowly, and even if Draco’s tongue is stroking his and Draco’s hands are sliding inside the back of his trousers and Draco’s hips are pushing hot-firm-desperate against Harry’s growing erection.

Breath catching hard in his chest, he weaves his fingers more tightly into Draco’s hair and deepens the kiss, pulling gently at his lower lip with his teeth and reveling in the groan that means he isn’t the only one spiralling out of control. Still, with the fierce, messy mesh of their tongues, the fingernails scratching heat into his buttocks, the blood pooling and aching in his groin, he has no idea how he’s still standing up.

And then, of course, he’s not. He feels the support of his knee dissolving beneath him and the swoop in his chest that always precedes a fall, but this time, he doesn’t connect with the floor. Blinking and somewhat disoriented, he looks up at Draco, who has managed to catch him against his chest with his hands under his arms and a knee wedged between Harry’s. The position is precarious and slightly uncomfortable, dangling from his armpits with his cock throbbing painfully against his tightened trouser fabric, but there’s something about the calm expression on Draco’s flushed face that makes Harry think he is well-practised at this.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you did that on purpose,” he sighs, performing a complicated little twist that allows Harry to grab his hands and haul himself to his feet.

Harry glances down at his leg, which appears to be taking his weight once more, and exhales in a messy rush. “No, I’d rather not do it at all, to be honest.”

Draco taps his fingers against his thighs in an anxious rhythm only he understands. “I shouldn’t have said that. Not when...” He pauses, glancing at their surroundings. “I wasn’t thinking.”

Surprised by the ease of this almost-apology, Harry looks up. “It’s alright. Let’s just...”

“... find a nice flat surface?” Draco suggests, lips quirking into a dangerous smile.

Harry’s cock jerks inside his restrictive trousers and he swallows. “Like what?”

There’s a light shrug; Draco’s eyes flick to each corner of the room in turn, and then before Harry
He barely hears Draco’s amused, “Indeed, all these years you’ve been missing out on ballroom sex,” because there are fingers stroking his neck, sliding over his hammering pulse point, easing his shirt buttons out of their holes and pressing cool palms to his chest.

“Mm,” he manages, pulling at the bottom of Draco’s shirt, and trying to decide where to look—at the stunning contrast of aquamarine fabric against pale abdomen, at Draco’s fingers spread out across his chest, at bright grey eyes and flushed skin, at the pull of Draco’s erection against his trouser fabric... fabric that is warm and silky to the touch, firm under fingers that Harry seems to have no control over, reactive and delicious against the palm that pulls a low, stifled groan from Draco.

Spurred on, prickling with heat all over his skin, Harry leans in to fasten his mouth to Draco’s neck, submitting mindlessly when there’s a tug at his shirtsleeves and gasping when he’s pushed back against the mirror, bare skin against glass.

“What’s the matter?” Draco mumbles, dropping Harry’s shirt to the floor without even an attempt at folding it.

“Cold,” Harry manages. He yanks at Draco’s shirt until it slides from his shoulders, leaving the thin silver tie hanging loosely around his neck; Draco shifts obligingly, allowing him to slide the sleeves away, revealing pale, marked skin. Harry scrapes his fingers over the faded snake and skull, and traces the four neat letters that symbolise Draco’s redemption.

Take the unknown road now. Harry closes his eyes, feeling the tug of multiple tiny buttons at his fly. He wraps his hands around slender hips, fingers slipping on soft leather and warm skin, rests his forehead against Draco’s bare shoulder, inhaling citrus and fresh sweat. His heart is pounding, his blood racing in his veins, and he knows that no one is going to ask him if he really wants this, if he’s sure. As far as Draco is concerned, there’s nothing new here, except maybe a risky location, and the risk is nothing to the hardness pressing into Harry’s hands and the quickening breath against his neck.

The rapidly-fading rational section of his brain, though, remembers Lucius and Narcissa, and without opening his eyes he lifts his hand and aims a wandless spell at the doors, listening to the satisfying sound of heavy bolts dropping into place.

“What was that?”

“Locked it,” Harry manages, and just in time, too, he thinks, as his trousers and boxers are pulled down in a swish of fabric.

“Silencing Charm?”

“That’s probably a good idea, too,” Harry concedes. Distrustful of his wandless skills for this, he tugs Draco’s wand from his waistband without thinking, and casts what he hopes is an industrial-strength Silencio at the doors.

“Lovely,” Draco says, flashing Harry a smile. “Now, put that down.”
Harry is puzzled for a moment only, until Draco kisses him hard, leaving him breathless, naked, exposed, and drops to his knees, pinning Harry to the glass with one hand and wrapping the fingers of the other around his cock, making him shudder and groan. There’s a low hum of approval and then Harry is caught in a riptide of pleasure as he is taken into a hot, wet mouth and stroked by a flickering tongue. It’s been so long, so long, and already he is almost overwhelmed.

“Draco,” he rasps, screwing his eyes shut and splaying his damp hands against the glass.

Draco responds by taking him deeper, sliding his lips over the sensitised skin, following the path of his fist in a smooth, practised motion that sets Harry’s mind into overdrive, imagining the hundreds, maybe thousands of times he’s lost himself in Draco’s mouth. Flooded with images, a patchwork of sounds and smells and textures, he can’t stop himself from jerking his hips, wanting more, forcing his eyes open and staring down at the filthy, beautiful vision of that clever, smirking mouth sliding onto his cock, and when Draco slips a hand between Harry’s thighs, skating over his entrance and looking up at him with lust-darkened eyes, there’s no suppressing the harsh moan that rips out of him.

“The Silencing Charm was a wonderful invention,” Draco offers, pulling away abruptly and sitting back on his heels.

“I’m not usually noisy,” Harry says, embarrassed.

Rising up on his knees in order to kick off his shoes and wriggle fluidly out of his trousers, Draco snorts. “That’s a good one. You know very well you’re the noisiest I’ve ever heard, and I slept in the Slytherin dorms for six years.”

Harry stares, barely able to make sense of these words because Draco is sitting at his feet, every inch of pale skin on display as he leans back on one hand, slender legs spread, and hard, flushed cock against his belly. Mouth dry, Harry watches elegant fingers skate over the shaft and linger, gathering shiny fluid on their tips and making Harry’s cock ache and leak in sympathy.

He drops to the floor, kicking away the remnants of his clothing, and reaches for Draco. Ignoring the creaking of his knees on the hard wood, Harry pulls his hand away by the wrist and pins it to the floor with more force than he thinks he should, but he no longer cares. He just wants this; his mouth is tingling for it, the smell of another man’s arousal is wild in his nostrils, and he wants...

Harry licks his lips, closes his hand around the warm flesh and drops his head, allowing Draco’s cock to glide and leak against his tongue. The sound of Draco’s shaky inhalation shocks down Harry’s spine, and without thinking he reaches between his thighs and squeezes his own arousal, as though steadying himself. Yes.

This is crazy, he knows it is, and when the thought of Ginny flashes, unbidden, into his mind, even the guilt it spikes in his gut isn’t enough to stop him. To stop this.

Suddenly there’s a hand in his hair, pulling gently, and Harry lifts his head with some effort, breathing hard and trying to focus through off-kilter glasses.

“Mm?”

Draco stares at him, eyes unfocused. “What do you want?”

“You,” Harry pants, hoping it’s the right answer.
Draco lifts an eyebrow but says nothing until he’s sitting upright with Harry sprawled between his thighs, hair sticking to his face and chest flushed a beautiful, incongruously vulnerable pink. Stretching, he retrieves his wand.

“Accio,” he whispers, and his abandoned trousers fly towards him.

Harry chews his lip, still absently stroking his cock and watching Draco as he retrieves a small glass jar with an ornate silver lid. The implication, when it finally penetrates his lust-hazy brain, strikes hard. It isn’t as though it hasn’t occurred to him how this whole gay thing works; it’s not as though he’s never thought about it—in fact, he’s probably been thinking about it for years before he ended up here, at least on some level—but still. He’s going to be fucked. He’s never been harder.

Draco nudges him onto his back with a series of achingly gentle kisses that never quite satisfy, slipping between Harry’s thighs. He unscrews the jar, releasing the warm scent of cloves into the air, meets Harry’s eyes for a lingering few seconds, and then it’s all happening so fast that all Harry can do is hold on.

Slick, warm fingers, stroking his cock and circling his entrance, massaging and sliding inside, one moment burning a stretch that steals Harry’s breath, the next, massaging and caressing places, secret nerve endings that blaze pleasure all the way from his spine to his fingertips. On fire and vulnerable, he keeps his eyes closed and scrabbles for purchase at the shiny floor, arching helplessly into Draco’s touch.

“Fuck,” he groans, feeling his orgasm rising, “fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Hold on,” Draco admonishes, stilling his movements. Harry opens his eyes, and the chandelier-strewn ceiling seems to spin above him like some insane carnival ride.

“Hm?”

“Wait for me, you fucker,” he says, pulling his hands away and leaning over Harry until his hair brushes Harry’s forehead. “It’s hardly ballroom sex without... well, sex, is it?”

Something nudges Harry’s slicked opening, making him jump, but he laughs, startled and delighted by the genuine humour in Draco’s voice. It has never occurred to him that sex could be anything but serious, and it’s a revelation, the thrill of the discovery easily making up for the distressing amount of wasted time.

“Better hurry up then,” he says at last, gripping Draco’s arse and dragging him in tight. “You know, before I seize up. I’m old... I’m not used to a hard floor,” he teases.

Draco’s lips twitch. And then: “You know... now that you mention it, I think I have a better idea.”

Bewildered, Harry watches him scramble to his feet, cock hard and slick and strange silver tie flapping across his chest. He accepts the hand that’s held out to him, and within seconds finds himself face first against the mirrored wall, hands spread stickily over the glass as he attempts to support himself.

“This is your better idea?” he demands, trying to inject a note of scathing disdain into his voice but failing miserably. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway, he supposes, not when he’s panting and exposing himself shamelessly for Draco, staring at his own clouded eyes in the mirror and noticing
for the first time that he, too, is still wearing his dark grey silk tie; it brushes a peaked nipple as he shifts position and he inhales sharply, gazing at Draco in the reflection and fighting the useless thoughts of ‘if they could see me now...’

Draco shrugs, slipping an arm around his waist and pressing his hardness into Harry’s back.

“It would be a terrible shame to waste all these mirrors, don’t you think?” He kisses Harry’s neck and meets his eyes in the glass. “I know you don’t believe me, but you’re still extremely hot, and you should see... what?”

Horrified, Harry drops his eyes. He’s never been good with compliments and he’s suddenly very, very aware of his naked body, reflected as it is a hundred times over. It’s not as though he’s ever felt particularly unattractive, but Ginny’s always been a lights-out, under-the-covers kind of lover, and he’s always been very comfortable with that.

“You’re insane,” he says at last.

“I know,” Draco murmurs, and then he’s pushing inside Harry, holding him open with slippery fingers; he eases his way deeper and Harry, startled into silence by the sensation, stares at him in the mirror, watching his eyes flicker and close and his mouth fall open against Harry’s shoulder in a soundless groan.

Finally, Draco is able to press himself all the way along Harry’s back again and uses both hands to draw him firmly, all the way back onto his cock, urging a hot, deep penetration that makes Harry cry out.

“Oh,” he manages, watching Draco’s eyes open, darkened and desperate over his shoulder.

“I know,” Draco whispers, breath catching.

Harry swallows dryly and looks at himself in the mirror, at the toned, wiry lines of his body, the scattered dark hairs with the odd grey, the flushed skin of his cock, which slides against the glass, trailing sticky fluid, aching and heavy. Draco shifts slightly inside him and he holds his breath, suddenly half-terrified that he might break apart with this powerful fullness, even though he knows that this body can take it; this body wants it, almost as much as he does.

“We really should have more mirrors,” Draco sighs, leaning to cover Harry’s hand with his own against the glass; Harry threads their fingers together and holds on tightly as a slow, deep stroke starts up inside him, stealing his breath, with each slide out leaving him empty and each slide back dragging a low, primitive groan from his chest.

His hair plasters messily to his forehead and his glasses slip from his nose, clattering to the floor, but he barely notices; pushing back into each stroke, he gazes blurrily at his own eyes in the mirror, heart leaping over and over at the reality of what’s happening to him—Draco Malfoy is fucking him, and he likes it. Draco Malfoy is fucking him and he’s watching it happen, watching his cock jump in rhythm, watching the blood pooling in the nail-marks at his hip, watching the glass steam under his hot, panting breath. Watching them make something exhilarating and confusing and brilliant.

He knows it won’t last long, though; he won’t last, so close to the edge to begin with, and the searing newness of this feeling is pushing him quickly and relentlessly toward the edge. Clenching his toes against the smooth grain of the floor, he stretches, strains against the glass, wanting Draco deeper, harder, gripping around the cock inside him and wrapping his fingers tightly around his own, not
knowing whether he wants to delay the end or reach for it.

“Don’t stop,” Draco pleads in a harsh whisper. “I want to see you come.”

Harry whimpers and then hisses at the unexpected pain of Draco’s teeth sinking into his shoulder, but he complies. Keeping his eyes fixed on Draco’s, he picks up speed, pushing his cock into his fist and gritting his teeth as Draco responds by fucking him harder, faster, filling the cavernous room with the hot-dirty sounds of skin slapping against skin, harsh breath and mumbled, fractured demands: yes, there, please, fuck—harder, Draco, I...

“Draco, I...” Harry closes his eyes as he starts to lose it, but the burn at his shoulder compels them open, forcing him to watch himself cry out as a flood of sensation whips at his insides and he comes in powerful, shaky spurts over himself and the glass.

Before he has time to control his breathing, Draco is leaning close, tightening his fingers around Harry’s, pushing one, two, three... four long strokes and shuddering, emptying himself inside Harry with a low, cracked cry that makes Harry wonder if he has the energy to start all over again. His eyes seek out Harry’s in the mirror as he rests his chin on his shoulder and exhales untidily.

“I really need to sit down,” he says after a moment, and Harry is just relieved he didn’t say it first.

Disentangled and slightly less sticky due to a couple of half-arsed Cleaning Charms, they slump to the floor, backs against the mirror, and sprawl, sweat-damp and breathing hard.

Harry pulls his knees up to his chest and scrubs at his hair, not quite able to believe what he’s just done. He sighs and—moving with care—retrieves his glasses. And there it is: a small jar, lying innocently on its side next to one of Draco’s shoes.

“Draco?”

“Mm?”

“Any particular reason why you brought... well, that, to your parents’ house for Christmas?”

Draco smiles, fiddling with his silver tie. “Well, you never know, do you?”

Harry snorts. “I have absolutely no response to that.”

“You may well mock, but you have just been fucked in a ballroom.”

Harry chews his lip. “Hm.”

“And you have come on your tie,” Draco adds.

Harry looks. “So I have.”

“I bought you that tie,” Draco says darkly. “It’s French. Or rather, it was.”

“It’ll come out,” Harry says, examining the stain and resolutely ignoring just how surreal this conversation is. “I reckon it was worth it, anyway,” he muses, mostly to himself.

Draco stretches, brushing his bare shoulder against Harry’s. “Absolutely. It may even have been
better than that time in your workshop last year.”

“Ah, yeah. That.” Harry keeps his face impassive, trying not to think about the splinters.

“The splinters were horrendous,” Draco says. “That’ll teach me to let you bend me over a workbench, I suppose.”

Harry, who had been reaching for his trousers, almost chokes on his own tongue. “I suppose so,” he murmurs, pulling them on quickly before Draco notices that he’s getting hard again.

Draco watches him languidly for a moment, and then levers himself to his feet, stoops to collect his clothes, and begins to redress. He pauses for a moment to shoot a look of utter disdain at his dishevelled reflection, picking desultorily at his hair and smoothing creases from his shirt.

“Shall we?”

Harry looks up, horrified, from his attempt to clean his tie with his wand. “I’m not sure I can look your parents in the eye after that.”

Draco frowns. “You must think I’m some kind of sadist. I meant shall we go home?”

Relief courses through Harry, quickly followed by guilt. “We can’t just leave.”

“Every year,” Draco mutters, rubbing his face. He sighs. “You know how my father gets by the evening. We survived dinner—all seven courses—and nobody killed, maimed, or even threatened anyone. Now it’s time to escape with the remains of our sanity.”

The eyes that pin Harry to the spot are pleading and alight with something conspiratorial that he can’t resist.

“Let’s go home.”

Draco’s small, relieved smile is the last thing he sees before he’s caught in the spin of Apparation.

**~*~**

Harry fidgets, twisted uncomfortably in his sheets. Draco sprawls out peacefully next to him, breathing lightly, beautiful under the grey light of the early morning. Nothing to keep him awake. Harry closes his sore eyes, punches his pillow again and tries to settle. He’s exhausted, body aching in all kinds of new places, mind weary, fractious, afraid. He can still hear Lucius Malfoy’s darkly exasperated response to his sleeping troubles, and there’s a little part of him that would, right now, sell his soul for a bottle of Dreamless Sleep.

He sighs and kicks at the sheets.

“Must you?” Frank demands, uncoiling himself from around Harry’s feet.

“No one rattled your cage,” Harry snaps.

“There will be no cage,” Frank says acidly.

Harry listens to the thump as he drops to the floor and slithers out into the hallway in a sulk. He
listens to Draco’s gentle breathing, in and out, in and out, and finally, finally, falls into a fitful sleep.

**~*~**

There’s a light at the top of the stairs.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Darkness and the smell of healing potions.

“Listen. Listen.”

Desperation. And yet he’s been here so many times.

“I don’t believe in much of anything, Potter.”

Sitting on the floor, cloak folded softly on his knees. The sky outside the window fading to grey-blue, and the bed empty. Sheets thrown back. Pillows cold. He’s on the floor, too, opposite Harry and tucked between his own bed and the next.

“Why me, Potter?” Striped sleeves pulled down over fingers, eyes sharp, knees tucked up in defence and eyebrows everywhere.

“Maybe I believe you’re more than this.”

“Maybe you’re full of crap.”

Harry knows he’s smiling. “Maybe. But what have you got to lose?”

“Fuck you.” But the venom, at least, much of it, is gone.

“I have a question.”

A long-suffering sigh.

“Why the hell are you wearing those pyjamas?”

Flared nostrils. A glance downwards.

Haughty. “They’re Goyle’s, if you must know.”

Harry is amused, mouth twitching, laughing at him with genuine warmth for the first time ever.

“Do you often wear Goyle’s… um… nightclothes?” A pause. Exhaustion does terrible things to the self-control. “Does he wear yours? Is he wearing yours right now?”

“You are completely classless, Potter, as I have always suspected.” A cold expression, and then a grimace. A face that is every inch human: “I wish you hadn’t put that image in my head.” He stares down at his oversized cuffs. “I do like stripes, though.”

Laughter, first from Harry and then from both, inappropriate and gasp-hushed in the tomb silence of the hospital wing. Unreal. Just the two of them, sitting in a patch of moonlight and pretending for a
moment that the war doesn’t exist, talking about pyjamas in order to cement a connection so new and fragile that it feels dangerous to even think about it.

“I asked him to bring me some pyjamas. It didn’t seem to occur to him that I might want my own.”

Harry smiles. Carefully. Hopefully. “Stripes are good.”

**~*~**

Harry wakes to an empty bed and a cloudy sky. Still weary after his fretful sleep and vivid dreams, he considers pulling the quilt back over his head and trying for a couple more hours, but an exploratory prod at his copper clock provokes a troubling puff of red smoke and the news that it’s almost eleven.

He hauls himself out of bed, dresses for comfort in jeans and a warm, if slightly bizarre, green sweater and creeps down the stairs, noting the elaborate new web slung between the upper and lower banisters.

“Impressive,” he says, ducking as the spider swings low on a long thread of silk.

“Maybe, but how long before the stairs are impassable?”

Draco lifts a sardonic eyebrow from the bottom of the stairs and winds his long, stripy scarf around his neck.

_Stripes are good_, Harry’s own voice echoes inside his head.

“What are you going?”

“I thought I’d better nip back to the Manor and retrieve our gifts, apologise to my mother and hope that my father hasn’t used your Veneficus to stoke the fire in his study.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Harry asks, scrubbing at his messy hair and praying silently that Draco says no. “You know, to help with the lamp...”

Draco stares at him for a moment and then laughs. “I’ll see you later.” He shakes his head and turns away, stalking into the kitchen and disappearing, seconds later, into the fireplace.

As he rises slowly through the fog to full consciousness, Harry stares after him, heart thumping with approval and lips twisting into a lopsided smile. He holds onto the polished wooden bobble at the end of the balustrade and sighs.

“Terribly lonely, all alone, left to fend for myself,” Frank says, descending slowly from the landing and dangling in front of Harry’s face.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Harry scolds, weaving backwards out of the way of the flickering tongue and eventually opting to plonk himself down on the bottom step. “And anyway, you wouldn’t have liked it. Lots of tension and twiddly little food.”

“Abandoned, forlorn, solitary, lost without a soul...”

Harry rolls his eyes and then groans as Frank drops from the staircase and he suddenly finds himself
with a lapful of python.

“You missed me, then?” he teases, automatically reaching out both hands to catch the slippery coils before Frank slides to the floor in a heap.

“Merely your presence,” Frank says airily, head waving from side to side.

He laughs, stroking the shining scales absently. “We missed you, too, you histrionic sod.” He sighs, heart twisting. “I’ll miss you.”

“Going somewhere else?” Frank demands, fixing him with beady black eyes.

Harry swallows hard. Suddenly awash with fear, he has no words for Frank, because if he’s going to miss a self-obsessed snake when he leaves this place, how can he leave Draco behind? All reason is screaming that he can’t fall in love here; this world is ephemeral, temporary, and so is his part in it. He knows that Boris could reappear at any moment and steal it all away from him... return him to his children, and oh, god, he aches with missing them, but it’s just not that simple any more.

“No,” he lies, taking a deep breath. “I’m not going anywhere.”
Harry forces himself up from the step and rubs his face wearily. He drops his hands to his sides and closes his eyes, absentmindedly noticing the slide of Frank's coils around his ankles as he takes his leave of Harry's miniature crisis without a word. It takes a moment or two, but eventually, Harry is able to invoke his tried-and-tested 'stop thinking about this ridiculous situation and just get on with it' mantra; it has served him well for as long as he can remember, and now, when he opens his eyes to see the empty hallway, he is resolute.

He's here, there's nothing he can do about it right now, and as for Draco... Harry swallows hard. Never mind about Draco.

"Just get on with it," he mutters to himself, sloping into the kitchen and mechanically running through the process of coffee-making, then leaning back against the counter to wait as the kitchen fills with the bitter, comforting aroma. "Don't think about it—just get on with it."

Unfortunately, as much as Harry trusts in the advice that has seen him through countless surreal experiences at school, at home and at work, sometimes these things are easier said than done. Easier relived than forgotten. On a constant loop. A hot, close, thrilling, constant loop.

Like sex with Draco. With Malfoy.

Harry frowns, gripping his coffee cup hard. Okay, that doesn't help.

He gulps at the hot liquid, scalding his tongue and relishing the sting in his throat as he swallows; it seems to rouse the last sleeping section of his brain and send it into immediate overdrive as the caffeine hits his system in a rush. His darting eyes catch the blue flash of the bread wrapper poking out of the bread bin, no doubt from where he left it the day before. Knowing instinctively that the sight of it will drive Draco crazy, he shuffles across the tiles, cup in hand, to shove it out of view before he returns, and that is all it takes.

This bread is different—Draco usually... they usually have a seedy loaf that Harry's kids would never eat, wholemeal in a green wrapper. This one is plain, wrapped in blue paper, and Al's favourite for making messy jam sandwiches for himself and Rose, usually all of half an hour after they have scarfed down their dinner. Harry chews his lip.

It's the same bread he and Ginny have had delivered from Tansy Talbot's bakery—three loaves, twice a week when the kids are at home—for the last two decades. Harry doesn't know what's more pathetic: how boring he's allowed himself to become, or the fact that he's standing here, breadbin lid balanced on an outstretched finger, mooning over a loaf of sliced white.

Groaning softly, he lets the lid fall with a creak and a bang of wood on wood. It doesn't matter. Either way, he has just slept with another man—and it certainly doesn't help that he enjoyed it—and the crashing realisation that finally slams into his bewildered mind is that he has actually betrayed Ginny; there is no doubt about it now. Or is there? Harry drains his coffee and slumps into a chair at the table, distressed.

He wonders whether having extra-marital sex in an alternate reality counts as cheating? He wonders if it's even extra-marital if the person one is married to in one place is married to someone else in another, and is, in all likelihood, having plenty of—no doubt guilt free—extra-marital marital sex.
Harry's head hurts. He swears and lowers it to the table, pressing his forehead against the cool wood and staring at the grain at close range, trying to concentrate on anything but the feeling of guilt and confusion swirling sickeningly in his gut.

He has never wanted to be one of those people. Loyalty is just what he does; it is as much a part of him as his famous courage, his leap-before-you-look spontaneity, and his hatred of injustice. The rules were always so simple before, but now they've been stolen away and replaced by a tangle of codes and silent complications that he may never understand.

Some things are obvious, though, like the fact that the Ginny he has met here is happier and more alive than he has ever made her, and that their friendship feels natural and easy, almost as though it's the way things were supposed to be. Harry rests his head on his folded arms. He isn't sure if he truly believes in destiny, even after everything, but someone or something that's bigger than him seems to be making an interesting case. The image of his Ginny swims into his head, tired and disillusioned, and his heart contracts painfully.

He loves her.

He loves her, but.

Eyes stinging, Harry drags in a deep breath and allows the feeling to wash over him in agonising waves, fingernails digging into the tabletop and every muscle tensed as he tries, pointlessly, to protect himself.

"Sorry," he whispers finally, scrubbing at his eyes as salty tears collect at the corner of his mouth. "Sorry, Gin."

He wonders how many years she has thrown after loyalty, too. And then stops wondering, because it hurts, and it won't do any good.

Dragging in a shaky breath, he scrapes back his chair and stands, allowing his sore eyes to fix upon the first object they catch. The swan.

Harry smiles tightly and rounds the table, heaving the glass monstrosity into his arms. At least a search for the room of Horrible Things will keep him occupied for a while. In a somewhat ungainly fashion, Harry and the swan make it out into the hallway. He knows he has tried most of the ground floor doors before, but he checks them all anyway, just in case.

When he reaches the last door before the stairs, he sighs, looking sternly at the swan and contemplating the idea of carrying it to the first floor. The swan merely stares back glassily and unmoved. Harry turns the knob and pushes the heavy door open with his hip.

The room is dark, but Harry can see the light attempting to filter through the gaps in the heavy curtains, and he deposits the swan on a little round table and yanks them open, flooding the room with bright morning sunlight. For a second or two he stands, motionless, allowing the warmth to soothe his weary face, watching the thousands of suddenly visible dust motes floating through the air.

When he looks around, he sees that the room is beautifully appointed, decorated in pale green and cream, and filled with elegant mahogany furniture. There are plants on every available surface,
giving the impression that the chairs and tables and bookshelves have been set down in the middle of a slightly unruly botanical garden. It's wonderful. He loves it.

On the table nearest the window, Harry finds an empty coffee cup, a biscuit wrapper, and a small sketchbook containing several drawings of an intricately carved chest and a scribbled note reading: 'See about new Celestina record tomorrow, god help me'.

Harry snorts.

"So, this is your morning room," he murmurs, setting down the sketchbook and running his fingers gently through the trailing leaves of a gargantuan potted fern. The soil, when he touches it, is worryingly dry, and he suddenly remembers that the care of these plants is his responsibility.

Hurriedly, he looks around until he finds a metal watering can, fills it with a whispered 'Aguamenti' and sets to work rehydrating each plant in turn. He's never been much of a plant person, really, but there's a tremendous satisfaction to be found in watching the soil greedily absorbing the water and inhaling the fresh scent of damp earth. Soon, he is humming quietly under his breath, reaching up to water the plants in delicate silver baskets suspended from the ceiling, and his previous anguish begins to slip away. The sun warms the back of his neck and he smiles to himself.

It's not about Draco, anyway. Of course it's not.

"Where do you want this?"

Startled, Harry turns from his surreptitious polishing of a large fleshy leaf to see Draco in the doorway, eyes amused and arms full of Veneficus branches.

"Oh, er... I don't know." He shrugs and scratches at his forehead with his watering can-wielding arm. "Just stick them on the kitchen table and I'll take them to work with me tomorrow."

Draco's eyebrows shoot up. "I am not having a pile of dirty great sticks on my kitchen table."

"They're not dirty," Harry protests. "Anyway, you bought them."

"I know," Draco says darkly, and then his expression turns suddenly serene. "It's nice in here, isn't it?"

Harry stares, unable to prevent his stomach tightening at the sight of Draco's half smile.

It's definitely about Draco. At least a little bit.

"Mm," he manages, wiping his dirty hands on his jeans while Draco isn't looking.

"You were going to do the swan without me?" Draco demands, aghast, approaching the table and resting a proprietary hand on the swan's back.

"Of course not," Harry lies, setting down his watering can. "I just moved him in here so he wasn't in the way in the kitchen."

Draco smirks and dumps his armful of branches onto the table beside the swan. He lifts it carefully into his arms and gestures for Harry to follow. "Come on, then."
Grateful that he's been saved the trouble of both locating the Horrible Parlour and heaving the swan up the stairs, Harry traipses obediently out of the morning room and follows Draco up the stairs and along a seldom-used corridor.

Once inside the room, Harry flicks his wand to fling open the curtains and when the darkness is lifted, it is all he can do to suppress a gasp; from every shelf and sill and cabinet stare the sightless, beady eyes of myriad glass and porcelain and wooden creatures. Birds and rabbits and lions jostle for position with nymphs and sprites and, most bizarrely, a two-headed centaur. There's no denying that they are grotesque, but even as an unsettled shiver shoots down his spine, Harry is unaccountably amused by the idea of an entire room devoted to ugliness.

Harry quickly spots the moose, a vast, mottled green and blue thing, with terrifying, slightly crossed eyes and bulbous yellow antlers.

"You were right about the moose," he admits, glancing briefly at Draco. "It's definitely still the worst. I think I forgot how ugly it was."

"You must have," Draco says, and shudders.

Harry doesn't blame him. There's something in the moose's expression that suggests it wishes him ill. It's unnerving.

"Right, well, he needs a name," Draco says, wrestling the swan into a tiny space on an already crowded table. He stands back beside Harry and frowns, pensive.

Harry looks, too. "I don't know."

"It's your turn."

"Erm... Steve?" Harry stabs, attempting to avoid a duplicate name.

"Steve the swan?"

"Yes."

"That's awful," Draco says, mouth twitching. "I love it."

Harry smiles, catching his breath as Draco leans against him for a moment, warm and solid. When he pulls himself upright and heads back down the stairs, muttering about tea, Harry watches from the doorway of the room of Horrible Things, arms folded against his stupid feelings.

Out of the corner of his eye, something brightly coloured glints in the morning sun. He turns. The revolting moose is watching him, maybe even mocking him. He glares back and slams the door shut.

**~*~**

Over the next day or so, Harry wanders around the house, tentatively trying to feel out the post-Christmas routine of Draco and his other self, if any exists. He knows what he'd be doing at home, of course.

Every Boxing Day, Harry and his family have a standing invitation to Ron and Hermione's cottage for an evening of highly competitive Exploding Snap, their annual Gobstones tournament, and
several rounds of team-based 'Find that Auror' around the nook-and-cranny-filled cottage and huge
garden, with James, Hugo, and Lily playing against Al and Rose, while Ginny stands in the porch
and says she's cold, and Hermione keeps score and refuses to help even her own children because
"it's cheating!" Ron always makes his famous Christmas Stew, the only dish he claims he's capable of
cooking, full of mysterious secret ingredients, tradition, and dumplings the size of Bludgers.

There's always at least one argument and someone always ends up in tears or in a sulk, but it's
always forgotten by the end of the evening, when Ron puts on a Muggle film and they all crowd
around Hermione's huge, old, cleverly adapted television set to watch Indiana Jones or James Bond.
It has always amused Harry to know that Ron shares his taste in Christmas entertainment with
Harry's Uncle Vernon, even though he has never shared this with Ron for fear of mortally offending
him.

With all of this in mind, Harry doesn't know quite what to make of the situation in which he now
finds himself. Draco, after an extended, languid tea-drinking session, during which he had sprawled
on the sofa, feet in Harry's lap and head on the worn leather arm, complaining about nothing much in
particular, has now retreated to his armchair near the fire and disappeared under his usual avalanche
of notes and documents. His new lamp has been eagerly pressed into service, and Harry feels both
pleased and envious of his skilled other self to see it in use.

The soft green light flickers around the living room as darkness falls, and the silence, but for the
rustle of parchment, is becoming oppressive. Draco scowls, hair in his eyes and quill behind his ear,
and barely seems to notice Harry's restlessness as he buries himself in his work.

So, it's back to business as usual, then, Harry thinks, abandoning the *Prophet* crossword and getting
to his feet for another aimless wander around the house. He's thinking with eagerness of his
workshop, of creating something—of trying to create something—and of the challenge of learning
something new. Perhaps he can have another go with the glassblowing, he thinks with a surprising
little thrill in the pit of his stomach. He can't remember the last time he felt anything approaching
*excitement* about returning to work after a holiday.

He's halfway out into the hallway when Draco calls out to him.

"Are you going into work tomorrow?"

Harry turns, afraid for a split second that Draco can read his mind. "Yeah, why?"

Draco glances up, face and eyes tinted green in the lamplight. "Can you nip into Borteg's and pick
up the stuff I ordered for Sunday night? I don't know when I'm going to have time to get out of the
house," he sighs, indicating the stacks and rolls of parchment that seem to have multiplied during
their absence. "Please remind me of this the next time I say I want to investigate anything to do with
the sodding Ministry."

"Yeah," Harry says, stalling for time. The only Borteg's he can think of is a very high-end whisky
merchants right at the top of Diagon Alley. He frowns. "What's Sunday night?" he asks eventually.

Draco stares at him for a moment, eyes narrowed. He taps his fingers slowly, one, two, three, four,
five times on each of his chair arms. "You know, I'm beginning to think that homemade gin of
Blaise's did something to your memory," he muses.

Harry's stomach drops and he curls his fingers painfully around the doorframe. "What?"
"I actually think it has been worse than usual this week," Draco goes on, sweeping his hair out of his eyes and scrutinising Harry carefully. "I could put it down to age, of course..."

"I'm younger than you," Harry points out roughly. He has no idea if Draco is teasing him, criticising him, or genuinely suspicious of his behaviour, and he stares back, fearful and defiant.

"Oh, yes, all those weeks," Draco murmurs, sounding amused for a moment before something like concern flickers in his eyes and he sets down the piece of parchment he has been examining. "Are you sure you're alright? We can always have Blaise killed if need be."

Harry smiles weakly, relief sending adrenaline coursing through his veins. "I don't think that'll be necessary. I'm just a bit tired at the moment... not sleeping well, you know."

"I know that Christmas with my parents is... somewhat of a challenge for you," Draco says quietly, withdrawing the quill from behind his ear and fiddling with it on his lap.

"I've had worse," Harry admits, and means it. "I just..."

"I know you must miss them, Harry."

Harry's chest aches, and it takes a moment for him to realise that Draco is talking about his parents. Somehow, that realisation hurts even more.

"I don't really remember."

"I know. I also know that's not really how it works," Draco says, eyes bright; the tip of his tongue flicks out over his bottom lip in an anxious gesture. "I know you're under pressure, too. You don't complain nearly enough," he adds with a flicker of a smile.

Harry's soft laughter pulls at his chest. Heavy, he itches to cross the floor and throw himself at Draco's feet. He wants to feel careful fingers in his hair, strong hands on his shoulders, a warm mouth easing his restlessness away, but he grips the doorframe hard and sways slightly in place.

"What, so you can call me a drama queen? I don't think so. I think I'll just get an early night."

"You'd better," Draco says darkly, returning to his work. "I don't want you falling asleep on Sunday. On New Year's Eve. At the party we're having. Here in this house, where we live," he adds, sarcasm deepening with each word.

"Good night, Draco," Harry sighs, waiting until he turns away to roll his eyes.

It's good. It's all good. Just another social event at which he can embarrass himself.

"Don't forget to go to Borteg's!"

**~*~**

Harry doesn't forget to go to Borteg's. It would have been difficult, considering that when he wakes up alone in bed on Wednesday morning, he finds that Draco has left him no less than seven sticky notes reminding him to pick up the fucking whisky. There's one on the bedroom mirror, one on his toothbrush, one on the waistband of his favourite 'disgusting' work jeans, one on the kettle, one on his watering can in the morning room, and two on Frank, who slithers off into the airing cupboard in
a sulk as soon as Harry has read them. He thinks he has found them all—seven is a good number, from what he remembers—but anything is possible.

If he didn't know better, he'd be insulted at the blatant dig at his memory. Getting old, indeed.

The trip to the whisky merchants is greatly enriched by the presence of Maura, who climbs through the kitchen fireplace at nine-thirty, just as he's putting on his coat and scarf and preparing to leave.

"Sorry about this," she says, nose wrinkled apologetically. "I forgot that you didn't know I was coming today. And probably some other days as well," she adds, blinking up at Harry.

"It's alright," Harry says, fishing her coat out of the hallway cupboard and handing it to her. "Sometimes it's nice to have someone to talk to."

As soon as the words are out, he feels ridiculous, but Maura merely nods seriously and pulls her red hood up over her hair. "It's raining," she explains. "Mummy's team aren't going to be very happy with her. She has all kinds of new tictacs for them to try."

"Tictacs?" Harry repeats, amused.

"Mm." She peers out of the front door reluctantly as Harry opens it. "They're going to get very, very wet."

Harry stands behind her and gazes out at the sheeting grey rain, too. It's not really a day to be outside. "Come on—if we run to those trees really fast, we can Apparate before we get soaked," he says, holding out his hand to Maura and praying to anyone who may be listening to keep him on his feet, at least for the next few minutes. "One, two, three..."

**~*~**

"Well, hello, Mr Potter."

Harry throws his entire weight against the heavy oak door, trying to close it on the ferocious slash of rain and wind that threatens to suck him and Maura back out into the street. The strange, sepulchral voice rings out in the cramped, wood-panelled space of the shop, and as soon as the door clicks shut, he looks around for the source of it.

"Hello," he says uncertainly, gazing at the figure emerging from behind the counter, a man so tall and skeletal that he seems to move jerkily, unfolding himself with each step like a black-clad crane fly. His dark hair is streaked with silver, and hangs in a long, thin plait down his back.

"And how are you, young lady?" the man asks solicitously of Maura, turning large blue eyes down to her. She looks as though she wants to take a step back, maybe hide behind Harry's coat, but to her credit, she stays exactly where she is and slowly draws her hood down from her curly hair.

"I'm alright, thank you, mister," she whispers, and then man's thin mouth creases into a wide smile, making his pale face look somehow even more terrifying.

"Good, that's good," he intones gloomily, still smiling. "Have you come for your order, Mr Potter?" he asks, turning back to Harry and drawing out the word with funereal relish.

"Yes, please." Harry watches the man as he nods quickly and picks his way back behind the counter.
He folds down out of view and does not reappear for some time. Harry exchanges a sidelong glance with Maura, who shrugs, wide-eyed, and turns to examine the elaborate labels on some of the nearby bottles. "A lot of the other shops are closed today," Harry says, more to break the silence than anything else.

A soft rattle of laughter issues from behind the counter and then there's the flash of a pointed, crouching knee as the man shifts position. "Good whisky is a three hundred and sixty-five day a year business, Mr Potter. Or three hundred and sixty-six, as the vagaries of our calendar dictate," he booms.

"That's... certainly true," Harry manages, distracted as Maura tugs on his sleeve and indicates a row of unusual, bulbous bottles, each bearing a label with the words:

Borteg's Own

Veneficus-aged Single Malt Firewhisky

And an old-fashioned sepia-tinted picture of that peculiar man, the one who is now emerging, clinking, with a box in his arms, from behind the counter.

"He must be Mr Borteg himself," Harry mumbles, touching the label gently.

Maura nods. "What's a ven... venefficus?"

"Veneficus," Mr Borteg booms gloomily, clinking and jerking his way over to them with the box. "A very rare plant, young lady. Very rare indeed. Magical properties in the wood," he says, wrapping long, pale fingers around the nearest bottle and gazing rapturously into its depths, "give magical properties to the whisky. This, Mr Potter, is the best whisky money can buy."

If that's true, Harry thinks, he sounds very sad about it. "Sounds good to me. I don't suppose there's any of that in the box there?"

Mr Borteg laughs until his rail-thin body sways alarmingly and his long plait flips over his shoulder and into Harry's box. "Good lord, no. Mr Malfoy asked me for a selection for his New Year's Eve celebration. My selections are high quality, of course, but... appropriate."

"Right, of course," Harry says, hoping he's not making his ignorance too obvious. He knows as much about whisky as he knows about restaurants and carpentry—all subjects in which his other self is apparently expert.

"What sort of magical things does the wood do?" Maura asks Harry as the shop doorbell tinkles and Mr Borteg sets down Harry's box to attend to the new customer.

"I've got some at home," he says quietly. "I'll bring it to the 'shop one day and we can find out."

"You could make your own whisky in it," Maura suggests, peering into the box at the glinting rows of bottles.

"One thing at a time," Harry advises, ruffling her hair and going to pay Mr Borteg.

Pockets stripped of gold, Harry leaves the shop minutes later with the heavy box in his arms and Maura in tow. They walk quickly against the heavy rain until they reach the 'shop, where Harry
hurries to activate the protective charms that will allow them to open the door and pile inside. Once they are out of the downpour, the drumming of the rain against the skylights is a comforting sound, which, combined with a couple of Warming Charms and the light from the lamps creates a bright little haven for Harry and Maura.

They sit cross-legged, facing one another, atop the spare workbench, picking through the contents of the box with interest.

"This is the one Daddy likes," Maura says, lifting out a green-tinged bottle with a pen and ink drawing of a goose on the label. "Mummy says it's too expensive."

Harry snorts. "She's right. I don't think I've ever spent so much all in one go."

"Can I come to your party?" Maura doesn't look at him; she concentrates very hard on buckling and unbuckling her shoe.

"I don't know," Harry says. "I didn't even know I was having a party until last night. I don't want to get into trouble with your mum and dad... or Draco, for that matter. Do we have a lot of parties?"

"Quite a lot. You always have one for New Year."

"Do you come to them?"

Maura glances up at him, brown eyes large. "Sometimes. Not the New Year ones. Mummy says I wouldn't like it, anyway. I bet I would."

"Sorry, Maura, but I don't think I can argue with your mum," Harry says apologetically, feeling as though it's far from the first time he has said those words—it's not as though he's ever been a disciplinarian, even in his own family.

Maura pouts and sighs. "Boring. I'll have to go to Grandma's."

"Don't you like it there? I used to love going to the Burrow when I was little."

"Mm," she shrugs. "Maybe Grandma and Grandad will have a party with me. And Hugo," she adds, brightening.

"And Rose," Harry reminds her.

"Rose only likes reading a book," Maura says. "She's boring."

"That's not nice," Harry says, heartsore for poor Rose. "Maybe she's just a bit lonely. I know she's a bit older than you, but she might want to join in if you ask her nicely. She's very clever, you know, why don't you ask her to help you with something? I bet she'd help you plan a party, too."

"She won't want to help us," Maura says, screwing up her nose uncertainly.

Harry exhales slowly, staring at the little girl and feeling a 'parent' moment coming on.

"She might," he says, gently poking Maura's corduroy-clad knee. "It feels really nice to help someone. You like helping me, don't you? Looking after me so I don't make an idiot out of myself? Or... as much of an idiot out of myself as I could make on my own?" he tries, poking her again until
she smiles and looks up.

"Yeah," she says quietly.

"There you go, then. Okay. I'm going to give you some advice now, and I hope you'll be better at following it than I am," Harry says, leaning forward.

Maura leans forward, too, eyes wide, and for a moment he forgets that he's talking to a seven-year-old girl. Above them, the rain hammers against the glass and the sawdust-scented air is suddenly heavy with concentration.

"Never forget that there's generosity in receiving," he says gravely.

Maura frowns. "What does that mean?" she whispers.

Harry blinks. Chews his lip gently, shuffling the words around in his head. "It means that... you know how we agreed that it feels good to help someone?" Maura nods. "Well, when you let someone help you, you're letting them have that nice feeling. People always think they have to be the one doing the helping to be kind, but that's not true."

Maura purses her lips and draws her knees up under her chin. "That's clever."

"Thank you." Harry smiles. "Someone very smart told me that a long time ago."

"Who?"

"Your mother," Harry says, enjoying Maura's look of surprise and letting it smooth a balm over the sore memory of Ginny's stern words to him when, weeks after the end of the war, he had been struggling to hold everything together on his own. He had listened then, but not too many times since.

"Do you let people help you, then?" Maura asks, echoing his thoughts.

Harry hesitates, pulling his sleeves down over his fingers. This isn't the first time he's wished he were a better role model, but it is probably the most wistful he's ever been about following his own advice.

"Not really. I should, though," he admits at last.

Maura's smile is bright in the lamplight. "I won't tell anyone." She tips her head back and gazes at the skylight above her head. "It's stopped raining."

Harry looks with her, stretching. "So it has."

"Please can I have an ice cream?"

"In December?"

"Fortescue's is open, I looked on the way here," Maura advises, somewhat missing the point.

Harry smiles and shrugs, sliding off the table and holding out his arms to help Maura down. "Okay, but then I really have to do some work."
He supposes it's the least he can do.

**~*~**

Maura quickly becomes a fixture in the workshop over the next few days, as Ginny's and Blaise's post-Christmas work schedules appear to spiral out of control. It's usually Ginny who appears in the late afternoon to collect her daughter, bringing with her the sharp smell of winter and the familiar earthy scent of muddy grass and wet fabric that yanks Harry back to his schooldays with one whiff.

If the little girl is distressed by her parents' absence during the holidays, she doesn't show it. In fact, she seems more than happy to spend her days in the workshop, in the company of her not-quite Uncle Harry, observing from the relative comfort of the spare workbench, taking money from customers with a bewilderingly accomplished charm that is all her father, or assisting Harry with his increasingly confident glassblowing experiments.

"Do you miss your mum and dad when they're at work?" he asks her one afternoon, taking a piece of red glass from the box she's holding out.

"You've never asked me that before," she says plainly.

"Oh," he says, surprised. "Sorry." Puzzled, he turns his attention back to the sizzling iron dish in front of him, where the red glass is slowly melting into a shimmering blob. "Can you find me another red one, please? Just a small one," he adds, adjusting the flames with his wand.

"Little red one," Maura sings to herself, poking around in the clinking box with her finger. "Here — ow!"

Her sudden hiss of pain prickles at the back of Harry's neck and he turns quickly, just in time to see her set the box down and pull her hand up to her face to examine it, eyebrows drawn down in pain and irritation. She's bleeding.

"Come here," Harry insists, enclosing her slender wrist and inspecting the angry cut that slices right across the tip of her index finger. It's not too deep, but Harry reacts without thinking at the sight of the dark beads of blood welling into the wound, reaching for his wand and whispering an oft-used healing spell until the edges of the cut begin to knit back together, leaving a faint white scar.

"Oh," Maura manages, sounding startled. When Harry releases her hand, she stares at it for such a long time that he wonders if he's done something wrong.

"Are you alright?"

She looks up. "Yep. I cut myself all the time in here," she says casually. "So do you."

Trying to ignore that statement, Harry presses: "What's wrong, then? Does your Uncle Harry use a different healing spell? I know that one's a bit cold, but it's a good one."

Maura gives him an odd little smile. "Normally he just tells me to stick it in my mouth and suck it."

Harry blinks. "Really?"

"Mmhm. Saliva is a natural antiseptic," she says earnestly, and it only takes a split-second for Harry to realise that she is quoting, well, him.
And then his head is full of images, snapshots, of Lily falling out of a tree in the park, of Al's first broomstick crash, of the time a young Teddy tried to 'check' if baby James was magic. How he's always tried to let them make their own mistakes, but is still lurking in the background with a battery of healing spells up his sleeve for when they do. And protecting Maura, now, is as natural to him as breathing—apparently, being a parent really does change everything.

"What's the matter?" she asks suddenly, and Harry realises he's been staring at thin air.

"Nothing, I'm fine," he says, deciding that there are some things in this surreal situation that a seven-year-old, even a very smart one, shouldn't have to deal with. "So, I know about your mum's new tictacs, what's Dad doing that's keeping him so busy?"

"Re-struc-tring," she says carefully, opening her uninjured hand and offering Harry the piece of red glass he had almost forgotten asking for.

"Thanks. And what exactly does that mean?" he asks, genuinely quite clueless, having learned to switch off to business talk many, many years ago. It's a good thing he did, he thinks now, or he could've ended up somewhere really terrifying, like middle management in a drill company.

"It means that Daddy stays late at work a lot," she advises. "And then Uncle Nev comes over for dinner and they write big lists and then rip them up."

Harry laughs. "Sounds like fun. Is that what you want to do when you're older?"

Maura pulls a face and picks up the box again. "No. I'm going to play Quilditch, and make things out of glass—only red things—and... be Minister for Magic."

Biting down on a smile, Harry nods seriously. "You'll have to work hard at school to do all that."

"That's what Auntie 'Mione always says," Maura sighs, sifting, more carefully now, through the box of glass for red pieces.

Harry supposes it's reassuring to know that some things are always the same, wherever he is.

And even in a strange place like this, it seems that comfortable routines are capable of springing up with relative ease, given the right people and the right confluence of events. Maura, in need of a babysitter-slash-partner-in-crime, is the perfect foil for Harry, who is on an avoidance mission of dramatic proportions. The workshop provides a place where he can hide from Draco, and Maura seems more than happy to assist him in any activity he comes up with that distracts from further attempts at the little table.

The pick-up date may be looming closer and closer, but Harry is determinedly not thinking about it. The same way he is not thinking about the feeling of Draco's skin against his at night, every night, or the warm intensity of his kisses, or the way that, nine times out of ten, he'll have a quill tucked behind his ear before he puts his shirt on in the morning. The same way he squashes the little thrill he feels when he makes tea in the right stripy cup and Draco smiles at him so easily.

They are developing a routine, too. It's inevitable, as much as Harry tries to resist, and as the last days of the year slip away, there's a small, unsettling part of him that feels like he's always been here. He finds himself wandering Diagon Alley when it's his turn to cook dinner, nipping into interesting little delicatessens and grocers and looking for unusual ingredients to play with, secretly hoping to please
his receptive dining companion. Draco, for all his faults, will eat pretty much anything as long as it is properly cooked, and this is one quality of his that Harry is content to like.

Maura, on the other hand, who follows him from odd little shop to odder little shop like a talkative shadow, has some of the strangest eating habits Harry has ever experienced.

At lunchtime on Friday, they take advantage of the crisp, sunny weather and decamp to a low stone bench near the workshop, eating and watching the Diagon Alley shoppers, competing to point out the person with the silliest hat.

"There—it's got bells on it," Harry says, nudging Maura and folding the last piece of chicken sandwich into his mouth.

Maura grins, absent-mindedly dipping her sausage roll into her cup of fresh orange juice.

Harry cringes and swallows his mouthful of chicken and bread with some effort. "Are you going to eat that, or are you just playing with it?" he asks, sounding—to his horror—just like Molly Weasley.

"Eat it," Maura says, looking up with surprise. "Do you want some?"

"No, thanks."

"Uncle Harry usually tries things with me," she says, sounding disappointed.

"Really?" Harry chews his lip and gazes into huge, innocent brown eyes. He sighs. It might be okay... after all, he eats pork and apple, why not pork and orange...? Really, he should be encouraging such open-mindedness. "Okay."

Maura holds out the soggy, dripping sausage roll and he takes a large, decisive bite. The acidic taste of the orange hits his tongue first, quickly followed by the salty pork and the squash-slap of soaked puff pastry that slimes over the roof of his mouth and sticks to his teeth. It's disgusting. Truly, absolutely... he looks at Maura, aghast, and her face is expectant. Dragging in a deep breath through his nose, he tries to swallow it, but the sticky mess just does not want to go down. Horrified, he holds out his hand for the juice and gulps at it until he can force a swallow.

Nose wrinkling, he pokes his tongue at the pastry caught in his teeth. "Sorry, Maura, but that's horrible."

"Uncle Harry always says that, too," she says, grinning and reclaiming her juice. "Crocodile hat!" she adds, pointing.

"You're a horror," he mumbles, wondering what it will take to shift the feeling that something has died in his mouth.

When, later that afternoon, a pair of snowy owls swoop into the 'shop with the promised spinach cake from Mr Pepper, Maura is delighted.

"Oh, I love this!" she cries, sniffing at the cake and stroking the head of each owl in turn before they take off and disappear from view.

Harry, however, suddenly has a lead weight in his stomach that has nothing to do with spinach cake. Mr Pepper, who has sent him a disgusting cake with the best of intentions, is expecting a beautifully
crafted, one-of-a-kind table in less than a week, and Harry has... nothing. As he stands there, leaning against his workbench with his eyes closed, the guilt of those wasted days slams into him, and he wraps his fingers around the hard, cold edge of the bench, feeling terrible.

Since when did he become such an irresponsible prick? The sort of person who breaks his promises?

*You're not*, whispers a soft, cultured voice inside his head. *Because you're not going to do that.*

Trying not to think about that voice or, indeed, how it got there, Harry shakes his head and turns to Maura, who is peeling the brown paper away from the cake.

"Don't eat it all at once, you'll be sick. I'm going to make this table. Right now."

She says nothing, but watches him with wide eyes as he stomps over to the stores and levitates the second to last—second to last? Where does a person get a lump of beech over New Year?—piece of beech over to his workbench.

"D'you want any help?" Maura says softly, creeping around to the opposite side of his bench and leaning around the wood to make contact, large chunk of squishy green cake in her hands.

Harry sighs and gazes at the beech, half-hoping to stare it into submission.

"As dramatic as this sounds, Maura, I don't think anyone can help me," he admits.

She nods and retreats, climbing up onto the other worktable out of the way. "Uncle Harry could," she whispers.

Harry doesn't have a reply for that.

He ties on his apron, Summons as many tools as he can fit into his workspace, and takes a deep breath. He has to do this systematically. Logically. He has now learned plenty of ways *not* to make a table, so, in theory, he must be closer to the way of doing it properly.

He can deal with the glass... he thinks. It's just, well... everything else.

Feeling slightly sick, Harry grabs his tape measure and his saw, steadying his hands and his nerves as best he can and sets to work.

Sawing carefully, gripping the handle tightly, struggling to keep it straight, wood dust in his nostrils and every splinter and waver mocking him, measuring and re-measuring, rubbing at his damp forehead with the backs of gritty hands, ducking over and over to keep his pieces at eye-level as he fits them together, snatches of the carpentry books from the morning room running through his head like a constant mantra. He sands until his hands are raw and sore, not caring because these things in his hands finally, *finally* look like spindles, and it's a triumph.

In the background, he can hear the sporadic kicking of Maura's legs as she lounges on the spare bench, and the soft sound of her singing to herself, something that sounds suspiciously like *A Mermish Melody*. Fucking Celestina.

He barely hears her, though; he's in a blur, caught up in the repetitive movements and delicate adjustments, knowing he's learned something and flying with the knowledge that he's getting it right this time. Just maybe...
The sun has gone down by the time he steps back, sore and cramped, and he looks around, finally realising that he has been working in the dark.

"Sorry, Maura," he says, flicking light into the lamps with his wand. "You should have said something."

"You were concentrating," she says, pulling herself into a seated position and adjusting her pigtails.

Harry smiles wearily. "Well, I think I'm getting somewhere. What do you think?" he asks, turning expectantly to properly view the afternoon's work.

Maura makes an odd little sound but says nothing.

In the lamplight, Harry stares at his table, aghast.

It's as though he's looking at it for the first time. As though he's spent the last few hours working on something completely different... as though his table has been stealthily swapped by unseen hands. With this.

"What?" he manages, voice rough. Stomach dropping, he steps closer, and it's now obvious that what he has produced could scarcely be called a table at all. The spindles are bulky and uneven, the top is lopsided, the joints don't align properly, and the whole thing is covered in splinters which glint mockingly in the light. "I thought I was doing okay," he mumbles, lifting a hot, sore, hand to scrub at his hair.

"It's better than the last one," Maura says quietly, but Harry barely hears her.

The heavy disappointment in his veins is shifting, seething, into liquid fury at his own failure, at this ridiculous situation in which all of his skills are pointless, at Boris and at Draco and at Mr Pepper, who wants a fancy-arse table that Harry cannot give him. He has no idea why he ever even expected to be successful—he knows that everyone else expects him to excel in any situation he is dropped into, but he has always been well aware of his own shortcomings; his survival has often depended on it.

And yet this talent belongs, not to someone else, but to another version of himself. How can it be so fucking hard? Prickling all over, Harry stands motionless for a second or two before he viciously vanishes the mauled chunk of wood and, without really thinking, Summons the last piece of beech with such power that it almost misses the workbench; it skids along the edge and whips a nasty graze across Harry's upper arm as he steadies it, wincing.

"What are you going to do?" Maura asks, voice high-pitched with anxiety.

"I have no idea," Harry admits, feeling around for a large hammer and testing the weight of it in his hands. Through the static blaring in his ears, he hears himself say: "Don't worry," and then he gives in, raising the hammer high and swinging it at the beech with all the frustration he can muster. The blow tingles all the way up his arms and splinters off a satisfyingly large section of wood.

Blood racing, he hacks harder, swapping tools at random and pouring his inadequacy, rage and fear into this huge, pointless act of destruction. Teeth gritted, he carves and hacks andsears, gripping the rough, splintered wood with his bare hands, turning it this way and that and following the path of his fingers with the edge of a chisel, grabbing up his wand and casting blindly, instinctively, creating
small explosions and sparks that elicit delighted applause from a no-longer-frightened Maura.

"Put some glass in it," she suggests, bright-eyed and hugging a battered old gimlet to her chest in her excitement.

"Glass?" Harry manages, breathing hard and sweat-sticky as he glances at Maura, and then at the glassblowing tools behind her. "Hm."

Still in a haze, he fires up the makeshift furnaces and sets to work, taking the pieces from Maura as she passes them, trusting her selections. The smell of the glass, now familiar, is comforting, intoxicating, and Harry breathes it in, narrowing his eyes against the heat and the glare as he controls his breath and turns the pipe slowly, blowing a series of odd, nebulous shapes.

As they harden in the green flames, Harry and Maura watch the flickering colours in near silence, sitting side by side on the cold stone floor. When she rests her head against his shoulder, he puts his arm around her and hugs her lightly. She says nothing, but smiles at the flames.

The stars are well and truly out by the time they get to their feet and retrieve the glass bulbs; Harry knows that Ginny will be here before long, but he hopes silently for her to stay away, just for a little longer, just so that the two of them can finish their odd little project.

When Harry's leg gives way without warning, he drops two of the bulbs and they smash on the flags. Still slightly dazed, he sighs, picks himself up, and scoops the pieces into his hands. Maura, now that the flailing and hacking has ceased, climbs onto his workbench and watches him seal, mould, and charm the bulbs and shattered pieces into place.

"That's pretty," she pronounces, watching Harry trail little lights everywhere with his wand, and an odd sort of calm starts to drain through his body. Impulsively, he draws soft blue flames through each of the shimmering glass bulbs, sending gentle shadows flickering over the smooth grain of the wood and Maura's face.

"There," he says eventually, dropping his wand and leaning on the workbench, weight on his hands. His eyes are sore and dry, and he blinks with some effort to regard his creation. He's made a... something. A one of those.

"I like it," Maura says, sitting back on her heels and admiring the smooth curves of the wood, the odd, otherworldly carved lines and the sparkling points of light. It's sort of attractive if he turns his head on one side and squints, which can't be a good thing. And besides, it's completely pointless, and it definitely isn't a little table with tumbling vines and spindles.

"Sorry I'm late!" Ginny calls, seconds before the door flies open.

Harry takes one last look at the thing and throws a Disillusionment Charm over it. When Ginny and Maura have left, he removes the charm, sighs at the waste of perfectly good beech, and heaves it onto a dusty shelf, out of the way.

He'll think of something. He hopes.

**~*~**

"When were you planning on telling me that you're going to distil your own whisky?" Draco asks, apropos of nothing, as he pokes curiously at his dinner the following night.
Harry coughs, spluttering slightly on his tea, and tries to decipher the odd little half-smile that's pulling at Draco's lips. "Why would you think that?" he asks.

"Just a firecall from a little madam," Draco says, glancing up at Harry. "About ten minutes before you got home. It seems she wanted to just check that you hadn't changed your mind about inviting her to your party."

"Ah, that," Harry says, shaking his head. "Sorry."

"What I'd like to know," Draco continues, stabbing at a butterbean on his plate, "is how she got the impression that you are having a party. Tell me, have we ever hosted a gathering during which you have done anything more useful than lounging around looking decorative and making fun of me?"

Secretly rather relieved, Harry shrugs. He can certainly do that. "I didn't tell her anything like that. You know how children are; they come to their own conclusions."

"What's this?" he asks eventually, indicating his half-empty plate.

"Cassoulet. Do you like it?"

"No," Draco says, sliding another loaded forkful into his mouth. Harry watches with interest as his licks his bottom lip and decides, with some pleasure, that he's lying.

"Good. And the whisky thing?"

Draco smirks. "Search me. She seems to be under the impression that you're planning to turn your workshop into a distillery."

Amused, Harry attempts to explain about Mr Borteg and the very expensive firewhisky. Draco listens with his strange half-smile in place and carefully mops up the last of his sauce with a piece of crusty bread. When he's finished, he looks up at Harry with such bright, easy warmth that Harry falters mid-sentence, heart kicked into a rapid rhythm.

"... so, yeah, that's... that's it, really," he manages, dropping his eyes to his plate. This is ridiculous. He's a grown man. An old man, sometimes. And Draco, well... what's the use in hiding from him, in avoiding supposedly 'risky' situations, when he can bring Harry to a standstill by looking at him across the fucking dinner table?

Harry sighs. "Did you tell her she could come?"

Draco shakes his head. "While I suspect she would be better behaved than most of our adult guests, I really don't need another person to look after."

Harry, who can't remember the last adults-only party he attended, just nods thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll take the Veneficus in on Monday," he muses. "Try to make up for leaving her out of your boring grown-up party."

"Charming," Draco says, pushing away his empty plate and sighing with satisfaction. "Of course, you're insane to give up your recovery time. Anybody would think you were that child's father," he
adds carelessly.

Harry swallows hard, whispers, "Yeah."

**~*~**

As the last sixty minutes before the party tick away, Harry is in the study, surrounded by books on Herbology, carpentry, and everything in between, in an attempt to learn something about Veneficus and enjoy the silence while he can. Irrational though it may be, he's apprehensive about the coming evening, and the last thing he needs is for Draco to notice. Not that there's much chance of that at the moment, as he's been in the bathroom for—Harry glances at the clock—forty minutes now, and the shower is still hissing away.

He's toying with the idea of running upstairs and checking that Draco hasn't drowned or dissolved when he hears the voice. Frowning, he strains his ears, shifting position pointlessly on the hearthrug and leaning toward the door. It's a familiar voice, high-pitched and slightly frazzled, and the increasing volume clearly demands his attention. Curious, he marks his place in *Working with Weird Woods* and clatters down to the kitchen, following the voice to its source.

"Oh, there you are, Mister Potter!"

"Hello, Senka," Harry says, gazing in puzzlement at the elf's disembodied head in the flames. "What's wrong?"

The huge eyes blink anxiously. "Nothing is wrong, sir, but something will be if Senka doesn't bring the food through right away. Mister Malfoy will be returning from his walk in a very short time, and we's not needing to discuss the unpleasantness that would follow," she says darkly.

None the wiser, Harry nods vaguely and indicates for Senka to come through. Visibly relieved, she withdraws her face from the fireplace and, seconds later, steps into the kitchen, laden with so many great silver platters that Harry is all at once terrified she's going to drop them all and unable to look away.

"Do you need some help?" he asks faintly, still not quite able to believe that Draco borrows—more like poaches, he supposes—his parents' house-elf to cater his New Year's Eve party.

"So kind, sir, but not necessary," Senka says, and then there's a sharp crack and all the platters disappear, reappearing instantly in an orderly circle on the kitchen table.

"Impressive," Harry says, gazing over at the mounds of intricate canapés, cheeses and crackers, tiny pies and cakes. He's suddenly ravenous, salivating at the thought of sampling one of everything before Draco comes downstairs.

Senka laughs. "Sir says that every time. Bilby is sending his regards, Mister Potter, and he says that the lemon tart is even better this year. He says."

"Haven't you tried it?"

"Senka does not mess about with fruit," she says flatly. Harry hides a smile.

"Of course." And of course Draco filches Senka and Bilby's catering services for his own ends—he is a Malfoy, after all. Somehow, Harry had almost forgotten.
She nods solemnly, smoothing her long fingers over her pristine cream pillowcase. "Bilby will return tomorrow for the trays, very quiet, of course." She turns to leave.

"Do I... look alright?" Harry asks impulsively. He feels ridiculous as soon as the words are out of his mouth, but even more so when Senka turns back to him, eyes wide, and obediently looks him up and down.

And, momentary attack of insecurity aside, Harry is feeling pretty pleased with himself. He has dressed without instruction or approval from Draco, and he thinks he's done a fairly good job. He also thinks he may be getting used to all of this strange, fashionable stuff, too, and he's not sure whether or not he should be worried about that. He's never paid attention to his clothes before, but he's finding a new satisfaction in putting things together, experimenting, adding and taking away—it's like a puzzle, and he thinks he likes it. And not only that, putting on something other than old jeans or Auror robes makes him feel, dare he say it, younger.

Senka regards him, head on one side.

"Very smart, but sir's shirt is..." She pauses, holding up her hands illustratively off-balance, "... is not correct."

Frowning, Harry glances down at his finely striped black and grey shirt. She's right. In his eagerness to get dressed and get out of the way, he has managed to completely fuck up the buttons. So much for all that fashion confidence; apparently he can't even dress himself.

As he carelessly unbuttons his shirt to the chest so that he can correct his mistake, Senka turns away and bobs deferentially as she steps back into the fireplace. "Wonderful New Year to sir and Master Malfoy," she says, and disappears in a burst of green flames.

"You too," Harry says to the empty kitchen, fastening the last button and examining himself critically for further idiotic errors.

"Talking to yourself?" Draco inquires, breezing into the kitchen and bringing with him a delicious, warm, freshly-showered scent that makes Harry's skin tingle.

"No. Your ill-gotten food has arrived," Harry says, indicating the table.

Draco snorts. "For fuck's sake. What did she say to you this time?" he asks, stepping closer to the table and leaning over to examine the food with interest, giving Harry an equally interesting view of tight-fitting denim pulling across his arse and a sliver of pale back as his shirt rides up.

"What?"

Draco turns around with a miniature cauldron cake in his hand. "I said, what did she say to you? Senka? She's great but she does have an overdeveloped sense of the dramatic. Do you want one of these? I think they're new."

Startled, Harry accepts the offering. "She said she'd better get back before there was any unpleasantness," he says, deciding that Draco doesn't need to know about anything else the house-elf might have said.

"Fantastic," Draco says, grinning and helping himself to another little cauldron cake. "I can only
assume she's still thinking about that time my father caught her making stuff for us and ate the lot by
himself out of spite."

Harry laughs, delighted by the image. "I suppose so."

"I didn't bring you up to steal other people's servants, Draco!" he mocks, lowered voice and flashing
eyes at complete odds with his lazy, elegant slouch against the kitchen counter. "Think of all that
cleaning time lost! That silver doesn't polish itself, you know!"

Harry can't help it; he laughs himself breathless. Draco drops the cool expression and laughs with
him, shifting to lean against him, smile pressed into his neck and an arm around his waist.
Automatically, Harry rests a hand against his back, steadying him.

"You know," he mumbles into Draco's hair, "I think Arthur once confiscated some self-polishing
silver. Candlesticks, if I remember correctly."

For some reason, Draco seems to find this hilarious, and he's still leaning against Harry,
incapacitated, when the first guests arrive.

"What's the matter with him?" Ginny asks curiously, following Harry into the kitchen and hanging
her coat over a spare chair.

Draco snorts gently and ignores the comment, instead splashing Gargantuan Goose whisky into two
heavy glass tumblers and offering them to Ginny and Blaise.

"Something about your dad's self-polishing candlesticks," Harry says absently, and then that's it.

"I think we're going to need more Goose," Blaise declares, grinning broadly and filling the room
with a rumble of warm laughter. Suddenly, it feels like a party.

**~*~**

Over the next half an hour, Harry finds himself on door duty. Having had no real idea of the guest
list beforehand, he's relieved to open the door to Ron and Hermione, George, and Fred, who has his
arm around a pretty blonde woman named Jenny, who, from the look of the sparkling ring on her
finger, is his fiancée. Harry's stomach takes some time to stop twisting and flopping at the idea, but
Jenny is sweet and kind, Fred is happy, and George, who has turned up alone, seems to be relishing
the bachelor life. He can deal with that, he thinks.

The surprise comes a little later, when the nine of them have decamped to the living room and are
sitting, in various combinations, on the chairs, sofas, and the floor, cradling heavy glasses of Mr
Borteg's fancy whisky, talking and laughing and eating Senka's illicit canapés.

Everyone is dressed up, and Harry finds himself sitting back and enjoying another opportunity to see
his friends, especially Ginny and Hermione, sparkling and bright in their smart clothes, clearly
revelling in the adult company and the chance to be someone other than a parent for the night.

"Look at us, being all civilised," he says to Ginny.

She leans back next to him on the sofa and sighs contentedly. "Yeah." She tilts her head and looks at
him, shiny lips tugged into a smile. "Shame it won't last, eh?"
Harry shrugs, glancing lazily around the room. "I can't see it getting too wild, somehow."

A knock at the door makes everyone look up for a moment, but no one moves, least of all Draco, who is in the middle of a well-worn tirade about the evils of the Ministry. Jenny, who is sitting on an ottoman next to him, is nodding carefully and appears to be listening.

Harry sighs and gets up, taking his glass with him.

"It's probably just Nev," Ginny says, and he brightens, picking up the pace and clicking along the tiles to the front door. He wrenches it open.

"Hi," he says, smiling genuinely at Neville, who attempts a smile back but still looks about as worried as he used to when confronted with Snape.

"Sorry I'm... we're late," he mumbles, and then Harry sees it. It stands up from tying its shoelace and smiles greasily into Harry's face. Immediately, all the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Goldstein," he says stiffly. Surely Draco didn't invite him. Surely he didn't.

"Good to see you, Harry," Goldstein says, eyes gleaming. Beside him, Neville's face flushes and he stares down at his shoes. Harry is baffled and all his instincts are telling him not to let that prick into his house, but this isn't really his party and he can't just leave them on the doorstep all night. Especially Neville, who looks all kinds of guilty, just further deepening Harry's intrigue.

"Yeah," he manages, keeping his face neutral. "Come in." He steps back, allowing them to pass, and then slams the door behind him and leans on it.

"...and as we've managed to pry him away from his experimental greenhouse, or whatever he calls it, for the evening, Blaise and I thought we'd have another go at setting him up..."

Ginny, the interfering bugger, was trying to set him up with someone who was in attendance at the Weasleys' Christmas party. Oh, no. Harry closes his eyes and groans. Neville and Goldstein. No wonder he doesn't look happy.

Harry stalks back along the corridor and into the living room, just in time to see the murderous expression on Draco's face as Neville and Goldstein join the party. Unfortunately, he doesn't think he can do much about that right now. Instead, he catches Ginny's eye and beckons to her. Frowning, she sets down her glass, picks her way across the room, and follows him out into the hallway.

"What?"

"That's who you set Neville up with? Him? Are you mad?"

Ginny's eyes widen as she understands; she twists to look back into the living room and then turns back to Harry with her arms folded. "No!" she hisses. "I was trying to set him up with Derek from the team, and then Derek's mum died, and he didn't feel much like dating, and... well, this happened. Apparently." She sighs. "I had nothing to do with it, I promise."

"Oh," Harry says, the wind somewhat taken from his sails. "Then... what is he doing here?"

"I don't know," Ginny whispers, and then, narrowing her eyes: "Why would I do that to you, you
"Sorry," Harry says, realising his mistake. "So..."

"Harry, I'm so sorry," interrupts Neville, scuttling into the hallway. He still has his coat on and looks mortified. "It's my fault. He's with me."

For a second or two, there is silence but for the soft chatter from the living room, and Harry and Ginny exchange startled glances. Then they turn, as one, to Neville, demanding:

"Excuse me?"

"Nev, tell me you're joking."

"Unfortunately not," Neville sighs, meeting Harry's eyes apologetically. "I tried to get rid of him, but... well, it's sort of a long story."

"Good heavens, look at all these Weasleys!" Goldstein declares loudly from the living room, and there's something in his tone that makes Ginny bristle.

Seconds later, Draco appears in the hallway, pulling the door closed behind him and rounding on Ginny. "What is he doing here?" he demands, apparently jumping to the same erroneous conclusion as Harry.

"Nothing to do with me," Ginny says, holding her hands up and doing well, Harry thinks, not to step back from the irate expression on Draco's face.

"I brought him," Neville says miserably, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets. "I tried not to, but he's very persistent."

"That's certainly true," Harry agrees with feeling.

"I'm not following," Draco says, ire fading to exasperation. "All I know is that there is a man nobody likes in my living room, insulting my guests and showing me up by bringing his own whisky. Somebody please explain to me why this is happening before I go back in there and start pelting him with canapés."

"Drama, drama," Ginny murmurs, tucking her hair behind her ear and sharing a look of secret amusement with Harry.

Neville shifts uncomfortably on the spot and sighs. "Okay. About a week ago, just before Christmas, I was leaving work for the night and we literally bumped into each other... I nearly fell over him, actually, it was really embarrassing. But he wasn't annoyed... he asked me for a drink." Neville pauses, leaning against the wall and rubbing at his face, as though he'd rather not say another word.

Harry, however, is intrigued. And surprised, although, having never seen Neville with a partner, or even discussed matters romantic, he doesn't suppose he has any right to be. Still, he's absolutely certain that Nev can do better than Anthony Goldstein.

"And?" Ginny presses, poking Neville lightly with her foot.

"And I feel like a complete idiot about it now," he groans. "But at the time... I don't know, it was
Christmas, I was lonely. He said he'd always had a bit of a thing about me at school, and I didn't believe him at first, but then I thought... well, why not? He's a good-looking bloke; he was being really nice to me..." Neville flushes further and looks desperately at Harry, hair ruffled and eyes repentant.

"So you invited him along tonight," Harry says, catching his misery and feeling compelled to lessen it.

Neville nods. "The thing is... after that first day he wouldn't stop talking about you, and I realised that, well, he's just using me. Obviously," he finishes in a hoarse whisper, and Ginny rubs his arm briskly.

"Not 'obviously', Nev. Don't say that. Anthony's a slimy bastard, but there are plenty of non-slimy... er, un-bastards out there who would be lucky to have you," she says stoutly, and Harry nods.

"She's right," Draco says, "but seeing as you have clearly had that moment of realisation, why is he here?"

"He wouldn't take the hint," Nev sighs. He still looks defeated but he manages to find a smile for Ginny.

"Hints don't work with people like that," Harry advises, full of empathy. He can't say he's all that surprised, but he's horrified that anyone would take advantage of Neville’s good nature so callously. The Neville he knows is confident and accomplished in his work or within his circle of friends, but when it comes to personal matters, he's shy to the point of fragility, and it seems that this man is very much the same.

Draco sighs. "So, am I right in assuming that a well-placed 'fuck off, Goldstein' wasn't an option?"

Neville shoots him a hunted look. "No, Draco, we're not all you."

Ginny snorts. "That's you told."

"I really am sorry, Harry," Neville says.

"It's not your fault. I know what he's like." Harry smiles at his friend and Nev, looking hugely relieved, if still a little guilty, smiles back.

"Well," Draco says, folding his arms. "This is all very heart-warming, but what are we going to do with him now we've got him? Poison him? Feed him to Frank? Tell Hermione this little story and let her at him?"

Ginny rolls her eyes and loops her arm through Neville's. "Come on. Let's go back in."

Just then, the living room door flies open and Blaise strides through it, glass clutched in his massive hand.

"Why is everyone out in the hallway?" he asks, looking with interest between the four of them. "If this is the VIP area, I demand to be allowed in!"

The mock-haughtiness on his handsome face is so convincing that, had Harry not known better, he would have assumed that Blaise really was some kind of horrendous diva. As it is, he just laughs,
and the knot of tension created by Goldstein's unwanted arrival loosens almost all the way.

"Urgh, Fred! Put that away!" comes the bellow from the living room, and Harry and Draco exchange glances.

"Don't look at me," Harry mutters, as they return to the party. "My job is to look decorative, remember?"

**~*~**

An hour or so later, Harry isn't feeling particularly decorative. He has eaten far too many of Senka's canapés, including two slices of the lemon tart, and although he has nothing to compare it to, he has to admit that Bilby has outdone himself. Overfull, slightly on edge, and cradling his third drink (a firewhisky called 'Flanagan's Flame', which is delicious, but so hot that the glass is smoking copiously and a sweat has broken out on his forehead), he doesn't feel like doing much except lounging on the sofa between Hermione, who is spluttering gamely on her own glass of Flanagan's, and Ron, who is holding up a miniscule pork pie between his thumb and forefinger and admiring it.

"It's just so small," he says, for at least the fourth time.

The room is full of the sound of warm laughter, clinking glasses, and the semi-frequent calls of:

"Fred, people don't want to hear about that," from an exasperated Jenny,

And:

"Curious minds must know!" from Blaise, as Fred launches into story after story from his long-legged sprawl at his fiancée's feet.

"Can't silence a Weasley, Jennifer," George advises with faux-solemnity.

"Don't I know it," she says wryly, leaning over to ruffle Fred's hair.

"If you don't stop humming that tune, Ginevra, I shall have you removed," Draco says, lowering himself to the floor beside Ginny and Neville, who are picking from a plate of assorted snacks between them, and trying to politely ignore Goldstein, who is perching on the edge of an armchair and gazing at Harry with an intensity that makes his skin crawl.

"I can't help it, it was on the wireless at mum and dad's when we went to drop off Maura," she protests, stealing the last piece of smoked salmon and smirking at Neville. Harry watches her covertly, one ear on Ron's rhapsodizing, which has now moved on to the goldenness of the little pork pie—that's our new head of the Auror Department, he thinks affectionately—and he can't help smiling. She washes the salmon down with a healthy swig of Flanagan's and exhales a plume of aromatic smoke.

"I don't care," Draco says, waving the smoke away from his eyes with a careless hand. "I hear enough of that silly old cow from Harry and my father."

"You are hard done by, Draco," Neville says, looking much brighter now that he's several feet away from Goldstein.

Draco glares, but Harry can see that his heart isn't really in it. "Where Celestina Warbeck is
concerned, yes, I am tortured more than most."

"It's not that bad, Draco," Ginny insists. "Take me away from this godforsaken place," she sings, leaning close to Draco and directing the words into his horrified face.

"Stop it."

"Take me away from this godforsaken place!" she bellows, kicking up the volume several notches. Ginny isn't what Harry would call a terrible singer, but enthusiasm and alcohol are playing merry hell with her tuning. Draco grimaces. Harry, however, is transported back to the ballroom at Malfoy Manor with the kick of something hot and wriggly in the pit of his stomach.

"Ginevra."

"I dream each night..." She pauses, thinking. "Of... mm-hmm-mm-hmm-hmm-hmm..."

"Of your saving embrace," Harry supplies before he can stop himself.

Ginny laughs delightedly and turns to look at him, flicky hair swishing around her face. "That's it!"

Draco groans and leans back against the sofa, elbows resting on his knees, face a picture of dismal acceptance as Blaise, Fred and George pause in their conversations to watch.

"The Dementors are calling from the sky above," sings Ginny, gesturing for Harry to join her.

Something reckless prods at him; he drains his glass, wipes his heated face with the back of his hand, and nods to her.

"Fly me away on your broomstick of love!"

They finish the chorus together to enthusiastic applause from all corners of the room; even Goldstein, who has managed to turn up his nose at almost everything so far, manages several slow, quiet claps and a glance of smouldering approval in Harry's direction. Harry looks away in disgust, fixing his eyes instead on Draco, whose face is caught intriguingly between dismay and amusement. Unthinking, Harry leans over and slides his fingers into his hair, watching his smile flicker into reluctant life.

There's an odd little sound from Goldstein's chair; out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees him lean back and fold his arms. He's amazed that the unpleasant bastard is still here, really. Draco's duties as a host apparently take precedence over his personal feelings, something that both surprises and impresses Harry. He's been perfectly polite, if somewhat icy, to Goldstein, and everyone else is quietly ignoring him. A small part of Harry thinks that he should feel sorry for him, but it's just not happening. Not after the way he treated Neville.

Even Blaise, whose usual bonhomie allows him to get along with pretty much anyone, starts to give him a wide berth after only a few minutes of conversation, and he has no idea that Goldstein has treated his colleague with such disrespect. Yet.

"Well, thank goodness for that," Harry sighs, feeling the mood in the room lighten as Goldstein excuses himself to use the bathroom. He refills his glass and Hermione's from the nearest bottle and relaxation into the sofa cushions.
"I know. He's like a Dementor, isn't he?" she sighs.

"Yeah." Harry gazes gloomily into his glass. "The crazy thing is, if someone had spoken to me like I spoke to him the other day, I'd want to stay as far away from them as possible."

"And yet he's everywhere. It's as though telling him off has made him try harder. It's creepy."

"Want to know what I think?" Ron offers from his other side.

"All opinions are welcome," Harry sighs.

"You paid attention to him. People like him thrive on attention. Before last week, you hardly noticed him, but now..." Ron shrugs. "He's getting a reaction out of you, mate. That's where you always went wrong with Malfoy, wasn't it?" He pauses, freckled nose wrinkling. "But, er, that obviously had very different results. You know what I'm saying," he mumbles.

"Yeah," Harry says softly. "That actually makes sense."

"It does happen occasionally," Hermione says with a small smile. "Although, from what I remember, Ron, you were the one who usually overreacted to Draco in the past."

Ron scowls. "Don't ruin it. I was being sagelike."

Harry snorts. "Of course you were."

"Anyway," Hermione says, sipping her drink, "I have a bone to pick with you. I had to have a 'talk' with Hugo the other day and it's all your fault."

"My fault? If I recall, it was Rose who really opened the can of worms," Harry protests.

Hermione sighs and plays with her glass. "I know, but you're easier to blame."

"Charming. How was it?"

"Awful," she admits, shuddering lightly. "So many questions. How does the baby get in there, Mummy? Does it hurt? What if the baby doesn't want to come out? Is that how you and Daddy made me?" she mimics with a pained expression, and Harry laughs.

"You got off lightly," Ron says, grimacing. "He came to me afterwards and said, 'Daddy, I don't think my willy wants to do that!'"

Hermione giggles into her hand and Harry now laughs so hard that smoking firewhisky shoots painfully out of his nose.

"That's brilliant," he manages, spluttering slightly. He wants to sympathise, to say that he's heard all of those awkward questions before and then some, but he can't, and the realisation stings.

"Why is it always worst with the youngest?" Hermione muses. "I didn't mind so much with Rose, she's so... scientific, but Hugo... I told myself he'd just stay little forever and I'd never have to do it."

"I don't know," Harry says, and he doesn't. Perhaps it's just the way. He remembers Lily's horror at the realities of pregnancy and the fact that even to this day, she is insisting that there's no way she's
doing *that*.

"Yet another good reason why we only have a part-time child," Draco says, turning around and flashing Harry an electric smile.

"Don't you want children, Harry?" Goldstein puts in.

Harry, who has almost managed to put Goldstein out of his mind, swivels around to look at him, and Ron, Hermione and Draco all follow suit.

"I, erm..." Harry hesitates, having no clue as to the party line on this subject. Fortunately, Hermione leaps in and rescues him, as is her way.

"With all due respect, Anthony, I don't think that's any of your business," she says, and while her tone is pleasant, there's a warning in her eyes.

For a split second, Goldstein's face contorts into a scowl, and then it's gone, and he smiles ingratiatingly at Hermione.

"I didn't mean any harm." He affects a sheepish expression and angles his body toward Harry. "I just find it interesting that you have been in your... ah... relationship for so many years and you remain childless. You always struck me as the paternal type, Harry. I understand. I, too, am enthusiastic about fatherhood. Some people just aren't cut out for family life," he says innocently, and though he doesn't look at Draco, the implication is clear.

With Ron's advice ringing in his ears, Harry bites his tongue as he stares back at Goldstein, waiting for the tide of defensive fury to abate. *Don't give him anything.*

"I'm very happy as I am, thanks," he says at last, fingers gripping his glass tightly. "We're all different. Let's talk about something else."

"Did you bring those strange cards, Hermione?" Ron says suddenly.

"Ooh." She brightens and shoves her glass at Ron so that she can rifle through her huge leather bag with both hands. "Who wants to play a game?"

**~*~**

"Decisions, decisions," Blaise sighs, examining the sheaf of bright red cards in his hand. All eyes are on him, as the occupants of the room wait for him to make up his mind. The expectant silence is only broken by the occasional slurp of whisky or stifled giggle, and nearly everyone is now sitting on the rug, cross-legged or sprawled out, cards held protectively to their chests. Only Jenny, who is curled on the ottoman with her cards laid out in front of her, and Goldstein, who hasn't moved from his chair, remain off the floor.

Predictably, Goldstein is playing with the utmost reluctance, as though he's far too important to enjoy anything daft, and, equally predictably, he seems to lack a sense of humour of any kind.

"Any time this year, Blaise, which leaves you all of about... thirty-five minutes," Draco says, leaning up from his elegant slouch against Harry's side to cast a demonstrative *Tempus*.

Blaise makes a face at Draco through the shimmering numbers. "Don't get your knickers in a twist,"
he rumbles, shuffling the cards in his hands again and draining his smoking glass with a flourish. "Right then. Erotic strawberries... I see what you did there." He sets down a card with some ceremony. "Erotic owl pellets. I worry." And another. "Erotic saucepan, well, whatever does it for you. I have nothing to say about erotic Quidditch...

"I do like erotic Sorting Hat, I have to admit, and erotic Cornelius Fudge, although I can't say I ever personally found him very erotic when he was alive..."

"Right, but six feet under he's total wank material?" George suggests, grinning.

"It's the green bowler hat," Jenny puts in innocently, blinking large blue eyes.

"You see," Fred declares, waving a dramatic hand, "this is why I love you."

Harry joins in with the general cackling that breaks out around the room, simultaneously delighted that Fred, at least somewhere, has found his perfect match, and disappointed that he hasn't won the round. He thought Fudge would be an easy winner, on the disturbing factor alone.

"Now, I liked all of these," Blaise continues, placing them down one at a time on the rug in front of him. "Erotic Azkaban." He shoots a look at Ginny, who shrugs and smiles. "Erotic kittens... really?"
Beside Harry, Ron snorts into his glass. "And, considering this evening's entertainment, erotic Celestina Warbeck comes a close second..."

"Oh, Blaise," Draco mutters, scowling lightly. "I really thought you'd go for that."

"I would have, had it not been for the delicious erotic spattergroit," Blaise says with relish, laying down the final card to a whoop of triumph from Neville, who scrambles across the rug to grab the green card and add it to his stack.

"Nev, that's horrible," Hermione says, wrinkling her nose and trying not to join in as everyone else giggles. "Now I keep picturing Filch."

"Is that actually how he died?" Jenny asks, looking up. "I thought it was just a rumour."

"No, it's true," Goldstein says, speaking for the first time in several minutes. "My cousin Serena was a Healer at St Mungo's when he came in. She said it was horrible."

"Can't say I feel too sorry for him," George admits, sharing a nostalgic glance with Fred. "I know we gave him some trouble over the years, but he really was a rotten old bugger."

"Hear, hear," Fred says, clinking glasses clumsily with his brother.

"I always felt a bit sorry for him, you know, being a Squib," Harry says, taking ten red cards and distributing them.

"You're right, Harry," Goldstein says quickly. "It's bad form to make fun of the afflicted, after all."

Draco makes an odd little sound, and from the position of his eyebrows, lost somewhere beneath his hair, Harry surmises that this is somewhat of a departure for Goldstein. He can't say he's surprised.

"Why do you never invite me to your functions?" inquires a soft voice, and Harry follows everyone's startled glances until he sees Frank gliding sinuously around the door. "So many intriguing smells in

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"What's he saying?" Hermione asks, tucking her feet up out of the way so that Frank can slide by.

"He's put out because we're having a party without him," Harry says. "I never said you couldn't come. It's not my fault you were grumpy with me this morning."

"That sound is wicked creepy," George sighs enviously. "Wish I could do it."

"I don't really know what it sounds like," Harry says, shrugging. "In my head, it just sounds like me talking."

"My friend Tracy thinks it's sexy," Jenny offers.

Harry, who had chosen that moment to take a drink, splutters on his whisky and stares at her, while Draco pats his back lazily and smirks.

"If it's the same Tracy I'm thinking of, a Parseltongue fetish is the least of your worries," George says mysteriously, and the giggling in the room only increases.

"Is he laughing at me? Cruel, bright-headed human," Frank says, waving back and forth at George's feet. George, who is apparently used to this kind of treatment, just stares back at him with a calculating look on his face.

"He's not laughing at you," Harry says wearily. "Behave yourself and I'll find you something to eat."

Frank falls silent, flicking his tongue in the direction of the leftover canapés on Ginny's plate.

"Fifteen minutes to go!" Draco announces, returning from the kitchen with what looks like the fanciest whisky so far, other than Goldstein's bottle of Borteg's Own, which has been ignored on principle. "Time to start thinking of all those promises you're not going to keep."

"Aha, nearly celebration time," Fred declares with a glint in his eye. "Give me your napkin, Jen."

She obliges, and with a wave of his wand, there is a tiny, snake-sized party hat sitting on the palm of his hand. It has multicoloured spots and is covered in glitter. Fred picks it up carefully and attempts to demonstrate it in the direction of Frank; the snake rests on its coils and gazes up at him impassively.

"Fred, you can't do that!" Ginny protests, but there's an obvious note of curiosity in her voice and she doesn't bother to stop her brother as he reaches down and straps Frank into the little hat.

Astonishingly, and perhaps remembering the possible reward of behaving himself, Frank does not resist. When Fred withdraws, he glides across the rug and drapes himself across Draco's lap, eyes firmly fixed upon Harry.

"Bloody snake," Harry mutters, leaning over and grabbing a couple of meat-based treats from Ginny's plate.

"Will he really eat that?" Neville asks.

"Oh, yes," Draco says. "He'll eat anything with bacon in it, the greedy bugger." He pats Frank absently and Harry throws him a bacon-wrapped sausage, which he catches with sharp precision and
"Have been good. Have been ever so good," he insists, flicking out his tongue.

This, apparently, is too much for Goldstein, and he cringes away, shifting to the very edge of his seat and screwing up his blandly handsome face in disgust.

"What's the matter?" Harry asks him, immediately irritated. Maybe he's afraid, but something tells Harry that's not the case.

Goldstein says nothing, but his lip curls in Draco's direction.

"He won't bite you," Ron says, mumbling, "More's the pity" under his breath.

Goldstein coughs. "I am not afraid, Ron, I just think snakes are revolting. In fact," he continues, glaring daggers at Frank, "I can't believe you'd have one in the house, Draco. I certainly couldn't live with one."

Draco lifts an eyebrow. "Well, it's a good thing you don't live here, isn't it?"

Harry looks at Frank, who has coiled neatly in Draco's lap. He's perfectly still and silent, but his beady black eyes are bright with intelligence and Harry wonders if he can sense the atmosphere that he has inadvertently created. He turns to Goldstein, ready to defend his pet, but once again, Hermione beats him to it.

"They're actually very clean," she ventures. "And they're not at all slimy like you might think they are." She leans forward and strokes Frank's shining scales, to his obvious pleasure.

Goldstein laughs, the sound startling in the near-hush. "You haven't changed a bit since school, have you? Little Miss Know-it-All."

Hermione's face crumples slightly and she sits back as though she's been slapped.

"Hey," Ron says with a surprising, calm authority, leaning forward to address Goldstein. "Don't speak to her like that, please."

"I was only teasing," he insists, but no one's laughing.

"Well, I'd rather you didn't," Hermione says quietly, having recovered herself.

"Sorry," Goldstein says without feeling. "Anyway," he continues airily, grimacing at Frank, "they always make me think of You-Know-Who. He had a snake."

"You don't say," Neville says drily, flicking his eyes to Harry in mute apology, and for the first time in several minutes, Harry finds himself wanting to laugh.

"Well," he says, turning to Goldstein. "Frank is my snake, so you should probably direct your complaints at me."

Goldstein goes very quiet and delicately crosses one leg over the other.

"Two minutes, everyone!" Blaise bellows, effectively shattering the tension as everyone turns to
He stands, drawn up to his imposing full height, glass held aloft and clever dark eyes expectant. "Move your collective arses, before I do it for you!"

Eager to leave the awkwardness behind, Harry grins at Blaise and grabs his glass, using Draco's shoulder to lever himself unsteadily to his feet. Draco sighs, grabs his hand and the bottle of fancy whisky, and joins him. Slowly, the others unwind themselves from their pleasantly hazy sprawls and form a rough circle on the rug for the final moments of the year. Goldstein stands quietly between a resigned Neville and a bristling Ron and says nothing when Draco refills his glass.

"I will come home from work earlier and play with my daughter," Blaise declares.

Ginny smiles at him. "I will start reading again. Books that aren't about Quidditch. While you're home earlier and playing with our daughter," she adds.

"I will finally stop biting my nails," says Jenny, ruefully examining her chewed fingers.

"I will de-gnome Mum and Dad's garden at least once a month," Fred promises solemnly.

"I will organise my broomsticks and keep them like that," Ron says. "Promise, 'Mione."

Hermione laughs and Draco sighs, "I've heard that one before."

"I will find myself a nice woman, who is not mad," George declares, and there are emphatic nods all around the circle. Harry is intrigued.

"I will..." Neville hesitates, and then lifts his chin. "I will believe I'm... worth more," he says with some difficulty, face flushed.

Draco, who is next to him, grips his shoulder solemnly. "Too fucking right. I will swear less. Honestly."

Blaise catches Harry's eye across the circle and flashes him an infectious smirk as Ginny mumbles, "I'll believe that when I see it."

For a long moment there is silence, and then Goldstein coughs lightly and says something that sounds a lot like: "I will not give up on what I want", but nobody really hears him, because Draco flicks his wand and a huge, glimmering clock face appears in the centre of the circle.

"Ten seconds," calls Hermione, who has picked up Frank and looped him around her neck. He is still wearing his party hat. It rather suits him.

"... eight, seven, six..."
Harry startles as Draco links their fingers together at their sides and squeezes. Flicking him a sidelong glance, he struggles to control his daft smile as Draco licks his bottom lip and silently mouths, "Love you."

"... four, three, two..."

"Love you," Harry mouths back, heart pounding. Draco smiles and looks away, just as the clanging of bells fills the room and its occupants erupt into cheering and mingling choruses of "Happy New Year!"

Within seconds, Harry finds himself squashed between Ginny, who is grinning and kissing him on the cheek, and Blaise, who is squashing the air out of him and bellowing whisky-flavoured words of eternal friendship into his ear. They are soon joined by Fred, George, Jenny, and the others, as everyone attempts to meld into a tipsy, enthusiastic hug-ball while Frank, still be-hatted, winds around their feet and efficiently cleans up the remaining canapés.

**~*~**

It's coming up for two in the morning when Harry extracts himself from a spirited and somewhat nonsensical discussion about Hogwarts Quidditch, to which even Neville and Hermione have managed to add their reminiscences, despite never having played for their House team.

"What you're forgetting, Draco Malfoy," Jenny is saying as Harry steps out into the hallway, "is that without decent Chasers, you can still lose the match even if the Seeker does catch the Snitch. Always forgetting that, Seekers," she says severely.

"Let's not get started on Chasers," George groans, to a mixture of giggles and sympathetic noises.

"Hmm," Harry mumbles to himself, leaving them behind and making his way to the kitchen, one hand trailing along the embossed wallpaper of the hallway as he walks. Feeling a little fuzzy around the edges but otherwise okay, he sloshes water into a glass and unlocks the back door with a slash of his wand, then flings it open and leans against it, relishing the cool, damp air on his face.

He gulps at the water and smiles contentedly as the delicious coldness flows through his body and soothes his anxieties, leaving behind only the pleasant buzz of whisky and friendship and the space to be and laugh and mock without worrying about the quality of example he is setting.

"Take that back, Weasel!" cries Draco from the living room.

Harry shakes his head slowly and closes his eyes. Not even Goldstein can ruin his mood now.

"Your good 'ealth, lad."

At the sound of the familiar voice, Harry's eyes fly open and quickly fasten upon Boris, who is standing at the kitchen counter in his oilskin coat and helping himself to a generous measure of whisky. A second glance shows that it is Goldstein's own bottle; Harry deliberately pretends not to notice.

"What do you want?"

Boris creaks closer, beaming at Harry through his tangled beard. "Just wishin' you an 'appy New Year," he says. "You seem to be enjoyin' yourself."
Harry blinks, startled. "Yeah... I suppose I am. Have you been here long?"

"Long enough," Boris says enigmatically. He takes a healthy swig of his drink and then regards his glass with approval. "Good stuff, this. When your woman is frisky, it's because of the whisky," he advises, as though imparting some great wisdom.

Harry frowns, shifting against the door so that it creaks under his weight. "First of all, I don't have a woman any more... I think. And second of all, that's a pretty pessimistic view of ladies'... you know. You know," he repeats, waving his hand vaguely.

"Can't say I do, young man," Boris says, looking completely unconcerned. "My mother did say a lot o' things, though. Strange things. Still, shouldn't speak ill o' the dead, bless her soul."

Harry nods, bemused. "How are my children?" he asks quietly. "My... Ginny?"

"You'll find 'em exactly as you left, 'em, don't worry," Boris says, wiping his heavy sleeve across his mouth. "The point here is learnin'. New experiences..."

"Yeah, you could say that," Harry mutters, feeling himself flush and turning his face into the cool night air.

"Are you talking to yourself?" someone asks, someone with a crisp voice and none of Boris' broad, rolling tones.

Harry snaps into alertness, turning in place and taking in, all at once, the vacant spot where Boris had stood, his empty whisky glass on the counter, and the dark, lean figure of Goldstein in the doorway.

"What do you want?" he says for the second time in minutes, though his tone is sharp rather than exasperated now.

"I was concerned," Goldstein says smoothly. "You just got up and left, and no-one else seemed to even notice. Are you drinking my whisky?"

"Er, no," Harry says, glancing from his empty water glass to the freshly-open bottle of Borteg's Own on the counter. "I just—"

"It's alright, Harry. I brought it for you as well as myself. Like I'm always trying to tell you, I want you to experience the finest things. You deserve them, just as much as I do." He flashes a smile that makes Harry's stomach lurch in disgust, and sidles over to the door, picking up the bottle as he passes. "Allow me."

Harry pulls his glass away from the attempted refill. "I've had enough, thanks."

"Suit yourself," Goldstein murmurs. He leans against the doorframe and fixes Harry with sharp dark eyes; there is no sign of intoxication in his gaze and for some reason this makes Harry slightly nervous.

He wants to continue with his new policy of bland, polite disregard, to set down his glass and walk out of the room with a simple, "Excuse me", but something pins him to the spot.

There's a loud thomp from the room above and then a cascade of raucous laughter. For a moment,
both Harry and Goldstein raise their eyes to the ceiling.

"Everyone seems to be having a good time," Goldstein remarks. "Except you."

Harry snorts derisively, unable to help himself. "And you've come to remedy that, have you?"

"Is that what you want, Harry?" Goldstein's eyes glow. He licks his bottom lip and leans closer.

Harry scowls. "What exactly is it that you're trying to do here?" he demands, abandoning his politeness policy. "I'm not a cheat. I've never been one, and I'm not about to start now. I'm with Draco because I want to be with Draco."

Goldstein's lip curls at the mention of Draco's name but Harry presses on, gaining momentum now. He stands firm, every muscle tensed, fingers grasping his glass almost to shattering point.

"And yeah, it hasn't escaped my notice that you've got some kind of problem with him, but you know what? He is ten times the man you are, Goldstein. Ten times," he says roughly, staring into Goldstein's startled face, dragging harsh, cold air into his lungs. "He's clever and interesting and honest and funny and... he actually gives a flying fuck about me and what I want," Harry says, heart shrivelling in embarrassment as he realises he's talking more to himself than to Goldstein. He swallows hard. "Which is more than I can say for you. I don't want to be rude to you, believe it or not, but I'm losing my patience, so for the last time, back off."

Goldstein stares at him for a moment, face inches away, breathless.

"Harry," he whispers, leaning in close and kissing Harry hard.

Appalled, Harry freezes for a moment; Goldstein's lips are rough and sickly-sweet against his, his fingers are hard and grasping at Harry's sides, and every nerve ending in Harry's body is shrieking "Wrong! Wrong!" The water glass slips out of his loosened fingers and smashes on the floor; the sound yanks Harry out of his horrified stupor and he pushes Goldstein away with such force that he bangs his head on the doorframe.

Dazed, he rubs at the sore spot and blinks slowly. Then, recovering his smile, he reaches out once more, trying to grasp Harry's arms. "Look, Harry, I think you should..."

"I think you should leave," says a cold voice from the kitchen doorway.

Harry turns, sickened, to see Draco, illuminated in the light from the kitchen lamps, staring down Goldstein with his arms folded firmly across his chest.

"Draco," Harry rasps, struggling to find his voice. "Draco, it's not... I'm not..."

"I'm sorry it has to be like this, Draco," Goldstein says sadly, and Harry pulls away from him, disgusted, putting as much space between them as possible.

"There is no 'it!'" he shouts, losing the last thread of his temper. "Get it into your head!"

"Harry..."

"Everyone has been more than polite to you," Draco interrupts, and his voice is as cold as Harry has ever heard it. "But I think we've all had a bit too much of your company now. I will show you out."
For a moment, Goldstein looks as though he is going to argue, but finally he nods and follows Draco out of the room without a word. Left alone in the silent kitchen, Harry collapses into a kitchen chair and drops his head into his hands. A wave of cold nausea sweeps through him, his head pounds and his mouth tastes foreign and feels as though it doesn't belong to him. He shudders.

"Oi, who ate the last piece of cake?" someone, either Fred or George, demands from upstairs.

Finally, at the sound of Draco's footsteps on the tile, Harry looks up. His mouth is a thin line, his skin a sickly pallor with flushed streaks across his cheekbones, and his eyes are dangerously bright. He says nothing, but draws his wand and spells away the broken glass.

"Draco, listen..." He shakes his head stiffly. "We still have guests."

"What do you want to do?" Harry manages, stomach turning over. All he wants is a chance to explain himself, and he's not even getting that.

Draco sighs. "Return to the party." He turns on his heel and stalks out into the hallway. Harry stares into the darkness for a second or two, and then follows.

**~*~**

The party seems to be slowly winding down when they return, but it still feels like an age to Harry until their guests begin to stretch and yawn and make noises about leaving. He sits quietly in Goldstein's vacated armchair, smiling and making conversation when required, but having no real idea what he's talking about or to whom. All of his anger has evaporated, leaving behind only a cold numbness with a clawing undercurrent of desperation.

He needs Draco to know that nothing happened—it means something to him for Draco to know that, and the thing that really slaps Harry in the face is that it's not because he would never do such a thing, and it's not because of his sense of honour. It's because Draco Malfoy's smile hurts his heart perfectly, and because the new coldness in the grey eyes breaks him apart.

Draco's 'everything is fine' front is terrifyingly impressive. He reclines casually on the sofa beside Blaise, joins in with a belated chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne', and allows Frank to take up residence on his lap. As their guests begin to leave in twos and threes, Draco finds discarded coats, scarves and shoes and submits graciously to Ron's shoulder-slap, Blaise's bear hug and Hermione's slightly emotional kisses. He handwaves Neville's repeated apologies and instructs Jenny to make sure that Fred doesn't 'explode' anything when he gets home.

Harry rises from his chair as though lifted by unseen hands and fumbles his way through goodbye hugs and promises to catch up soon, all the while flicking glances at Draco. As he's talking quietly to Ginny, who is being pulled toward the fireplace by an eager Blaise, his eyes meet Harry's for the first time in over an hour, and the heat that Harry finds there shocks his heart. He inhales sharply and Draco looks away.

"Behave yourself, Ginevra," he says faintly.

"Doubtful," she calls back just before she follows her husband into the flames. "Start the year as you mean to go on, and all that!"
At last, the house is quiet. Harry casts his eyes around the disarrayed living room, idly wondering if tidying up some of the detritus would improve Draco's mood. Probably not.

"I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

Harry nods, chewing his lip and trying to bury his apprehension as he drags himself, heavy-limbed, up to the bedroom. Draco sits on the edge of the bed, and, though he hasn't bothered to light the lamps, his pale hair and sharp profile are easily visible in the moonlight. Behind him, the glowing hands of Harry's clock wave mockingly. It's twenty past three in the morning. Harry sighs and rubs his eyes behind his glasses.

"Fuck," Draco explodes suddenly. His calm exterior falls away in an instant and the air around Harry seems to crackle with static. "Fucking bastard!"

"I know how it looked, Draco, but nothing... well, he just jumped on me," Harry says, staring defiantly at Draco, somehow hoping to physically project his honesty out into the room. "He just doesn't seem to get the fucking message. I don't want... that," he stumbles, throat tight.

Draco laughs shortly. "You are such an idiot sometimes."

"Thanks," Harry mutters, hurt.

"Do you really think I don't know that?" Draco turns, pinning Harry with narrowed silvery eyes. "Do you actually think I believe that you'd let that prick anywhere near you voluntarily? I trust you with my life, you fucking... wanker," he snaps, pale fingers picking fitfully at the sheets.

"Oh," Harry whispers, feeling his knees starting to give way beneath him. He drops heavily onto the bed beside Draco. "Yeah... of course. I just..."

"You're nice to him and he slimes all over you. You're rude to him and he slimes all over you. What the fuck is wrong with him?" Draco demands.

"Maybe you should start the no-swearing thing tomorrow," Harry suggests, wanting the words back when Draco shoots him a sharp look. "What makes you think I was rude to him?"

"I heard you as I was coming down the stairs," Draco snaps. "And I heard what you said about me."

"Oh, well," Harry says, rubbing at the heated skin at the back of his neck and wishing his stomach would stop leaping and rolling, spurred on by a mixture of guilt and anticipation. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"I know that," Draco says softly, dropping his hands into his lap. "It's not the sort of thing you usually say to my face."

Aching, Harry twists on the bed and reaches out without thinking, tracing his fingertips along Draco's jawline and threading them into his hair, tugging gently and forcing eye contact.

"I should," he says recklessly. "I meant every word."

Draco's eyes widen. The nervous tip of a tongue flicks out. Hot breath soft against Harry's lips.
His mind unhelpfully supplies a repulsive sense-memory of Goldstein's kiss and he shakes it away, closing his eyes and pressing his mouth against Draco's. For a split-second, there's no response, and Harry thinks he has made a horrible mistake, but then there's a warm hand gripping his knee, a caught breath, and Draco is kissing back. His lips are soft, warm, firm; his tongue finds Harry's, and it's right.

Harry is on fire. Blazing with all of it: the heat of Draco's body as they arch closer together on the edge of the bed, the raw taste of whisky and the brackish tang of damp skin, the startling way that Draco's tiny shirt buttons seem to spring undone at his touch, revealing pale, marked skin that appears luminous in the moonlight. Barely breathing, Harry yanks his own shirt over his head, shivering as the delicate fabric skates over his skin. Draco leans close, brushing hot, damp kisses against every sensitive spot on Harry's neck, prickling intensity into forgotten nerve endings until he almost cries out; resisting, he lets his head fall back and holds on to Draco, biting his bottom lip until he tastes blood, coppery-salty on his tongue.

"So easy," Draco whispers, amused, but there's no disguising the rasp of arousal in his voice.

He pulls back just far enough to meet Harry's eyes and the glance they exchange is heavy with meaning. Without another word, they help each other to undress, shedding their remaining clothes into a tangle on the floor and crawling onto the bed, creasing and dragging the sheets beneath them in their impatience to press skin against skin, dig fingernails into flesh and slide their mouths together with such messy, heated neediness that Harry's cock fills and aches against Draco's belly.

Draco, equally hard, moans softly as Harry wraps a hand lazily around his erection, flinging himself on the will of his instincts. No hesitation this time. He knows what to do. He wants to do it. He wants Draco, Draco wants him, and it's as easy as flying.

It seems like no time at all before he's pushing Draco back against the pillows, where he falls without resistance, lounging gracefully and gazing up at Harry, eyes burning. Stretching indolently, he lets his hand drop to his abdomen and pushes his stiff, flushed cock into his fist slowly, allowing his other arm to rest amongst the sheets, exposing the faded Mark and the four inked letters. Harry doesn't know where to look. Gulping against his dry throat, he whispers a hoarse Summoning Charm and holds out his hand, hoping for the best.

His bedside drawer rattles but refuses to open. Frustrated, Harry tries again. Draco leans over with a sigh and pulls the drawer open.

"If you didn't stuff your drawers full of crap, that wouldn't happen," he advises, pitching a small bottle of oil in Harry's direction.

"Fuck off," Harry mutters, but he's smiling breathlessly and so is Draco, who arches his hips and stares right up into Harry's eyes as he strokes himself. Harry doesn't think he has ever seen anything so compelling.

"Harry," Draco says softly, and it's enough; he bends, flicking his tongue over the head of Draco's cock as he slicks his skin with sweet-scented oil and presses inside, first with slippery fingers—unable to suppress a groan at the heat that grasps around him, twisting, searching, stroking, until he makes Draco's eyes close and his cock jump—and then, finally, kneeling and leaning down to connect their mouths, thrilling at the strong legs around his waist, pushing, sinking, gasping inside, not stopping until he's surrounded, all the way, and Draco cries out; it's raw, primal, and the sound of it makes Harry shudder, dangerously close to the edge.
"This is yours," he whispers.

Draco’s eyes fly open. He says nothing, but his eyes never leave Harry’s as he grips his hips and encourages movement, demands it, lips curved into a faint smile. Harry’s heart swells; he smiles back—no fear. He begins to move, finding a rhythm in slow, deep strokes, leaning down to brush his mouth against Draco’s, breathing hard against his skin and dragging in the scent of citrus, sweat, alcohol, arousal with each push. Fingers grip his hips, his arse, almost painful, pulling him hot, dirty, close, ruining him; he supports himself on one hand, smearing oil across the sheets, the other stroking frantically over Draco’s slippery cock.

"Yes," Draco murmurs, over and over, leaning up to meet Harry, over and over until it’s a gasp, a moan, a litany, "Yes-yes-yes-yes-yes..."

And then he’s losing it in a barrage of expletives and a low groan, spilling all over Harry’s hand and tightening around him so powerfully that he’s only a stroke or two behind; he stares down helplessly at the flushed skin in the half-light, at the darkened, pleasure-hazed grey eyes as his release washes over him, taking him in a sharp rush and pulling a raw, uninhibited sound from his throat.

Fuck, I am noisy, he thinks fuzzily, dropping his head to Draco’s shoulder and allowing his breathing to fall back under control.

"Alright," Draco sighs, stroking Harry’s back absently. "I'll start my resolution tomorrow."

Harry smiles against his skin. "That’s probably a good idea." He heaves himself onto his elbows and flops onto his back beside Draco. The cold air from the open window makes his sticky skin tingle, but it’s not unpleasant, and besides, he doesn’t have the energy to do much about it.

When something brushes against his bare calf, though, he jumps reflexively and squints around in the dark; after a moment, a familiar blunt head comes to rest on his thigh.

"How long has he been in here?" he demands.

Draco smirks. "Who knows? He’s such a little pervert."

Harry isn’t sure what’s more horrifying—the fact that a snake has probably been listening in on him having sex, or the fact that Draco seems more amused than disturbed.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks Frank.

The snake flicks his tongue with relish. "Absorbing the pleasant atmosphere. Enjoying the interesting scents. Nothing unusual."

"Nothing unusual," he mutters to himself, shivering when Draco sends a Cleaning Spell his way.

"I think it went rather well, don’t you?" Draco says suddenly.

Harry stares. "What? Oh, you mean the party?"

"Obviously."

"Yeah, I think it did. Apart from Goldstein, who doesn’t seem capable of it, I think everyone had a good time."
"Yes, well," Draco says, scowling. "I'm not really too worried about his feelings, believe it or not."

Harry turns onto his side and brushes Draco's hair out of his eyes. "I know. I think it's pretty amazing how polite you were all evening," he admits.

"Years of training will out," Draco says with a touch of bitterness. "And anyway, I have my ways of coping."

Harry waits, intrigued.

"Every time he really wound me up, I went into the kitchen and reorganised one of the drawers."

Harry snorts; he can't help it. "And how many did you get through?"

"All of them," Draco admits. "By midnight I'd started on a second round. Of course, they were already organised, so I just took everything out, counted it, and put it all back in."

"I'm really sorry about him," Harry says, flooded with guilt as he imagines Draco frantically sorting through kitchen cupboards every time he had disappeared into the kitchen for 'supplies'. "I think telling him to bugger off has made him ten times worse."

Draco yawns. "It's not your fault. It's him. The way he looks at you is disgusting."

Harry grimaces, turning over and relishing the sensation of Draco's warmth pressed immediately along his back. "I wish he'd stopped at looking."

"I know. But I think we got him off you, didn't we?" Draco murmurs sleepily into Harry's neck.

Harry closes his eyes.

**~*~**

There's a light at the top of the stairs.

The sky outside is turning pink, orange, grey.

He rubs his eyes with a too-big stripy sleeve. Yawns.

Harry shifts on the floor opposite him. Sore and stiff-jointed. Resolute. "We need to talk to Dumbledore," he says. It feels as though he's said it many times already.

"Later. I want to sleep, and—can you stop that?"

"What?"

"That." Sharp grey eyes fixed on Harry's fingers, which he's brushing up and down the bedside table. "Stop it. Or at least balance yourself."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" Tired, confused, irritable. Curious.

"Balance." Pale fingers reaching to brush the table, hot breath against Harry's cheek as he leans.
Face full of concentration—brushing, one, two with the left hand and one, two with the right. "Otherwise, you're all uneven. Obviously."

Harry shivers. "That doesn't make sense. Since when did that make sense?"

"Since I was little. Don't you need to feel balanced?" Eyes huge... he's almost just eyes in the poor light. Shocking vulnerability. Harry thinks.

An admission. "I never really feel very balanced."

"Maybe that's why you're such a pain in the arse."

Harry scowls. "Shut up. Anyway, that's really rich coming from you."

"Yeah, well." Fingers picking at the hem of Harry's cloak. Fingers visible, and then not. Over and again. Five times in and five times out. "You'd be surprised how stuff that doesn't make sense can keep you going."

A long moment and a realisation of similarities, when everything is stripped away. A deep breath, and humility.

"No, I wouldn't."

A twitch of the lips that's almost a smile. A yawn. "Go to sleep, Potter."

**~*~**

Harry blinks stickily awake and looks at the copper clock on his bedside. The face is blurred beyond hope, so he sighs and pats clumsily around for his glasses, jams them onto his nose and sighs at the waving green hands.

"No," he says decisively, and the clock emits a puff of smoke, apparently of its own accord.

His head is surprisingly clear, but he feels as though he's barely slept, and his mouth seems to be full of sand. Unfortunately, he did promise Maura he would take the blasted Veneficus to the workshop today, and there's no way he's going to break a promise to a child because of a mild hangover. Not in this lifetime. Pulling a face at the calmly sleeping Draco, he drags himself out of bed and dashes for the shower, shielding his naked body ineffectually against the biting cold air.

He emerges from the house a short while later, clean, dressed, and with a bellyful of hot tea and toast. Wrapped up in his long wool coat with the Veneficus stuffed into a bag slung across his shoulders, he Apparates into Ottery St Catchpole and walks the rest of the way to the Burrow to collect Maura. The winding lane is once again sparkling with frost and the chill breeze is bracing enough to blow away the remnants of the night before.

Maura hugs Molly at the door and happily accepts an intriguing paper bag, which she clutches in her scarlet gloved hand as she skips along beside Harry.

"What've you got?" he asks.

"Lunch," Maura replies, swinging the bag at her side. "Grandma made me a marmalade sandwich."
"That sounds... alright, actually," Harry says, surprised.

Maura grins. "It has cucumber on it, too."

"You'll be eating that on your own, then."

"Grandma made one for you as well. I think it's roast pork." She wrinkles her nose. "Boring."

Harry smiles. He thinks he can cope with being boring in this case.

"Did you have a nice party?"

"Yeah," Harry says after a moment, tangling with a confusing mixture of emotions. "We did, thank you. How about you?"

Maura skips ahead, turning around to face Harry and bouncing along in front of him, practically bubbling over with excitement. "Brilliant. Rose taught me to play chess, and then me and Hugo and Rose made up a dance routine to Grandma's silly music, and then Grandad told us stories about when you and Uncle Ron and Uncle Fred and Uncle George and Aunt Hermione—" She pauses for breath and then rushes on, "were at Hogwarts, and then we roasted marshmallows on sticks and I stayed up until ten past eleven!"

"Wow," Harry says, catching her enthusiasm and reflecting her smile back to her. "That sounds great. I told you it'd be alright, didn't I?"

Maura rolls her eyes and spins around in the lane. "Grown-ups always say that."

**~*~**

The morning slips away quite without permission. Harry and Maura spend a pleasurable few hours examining the Veneficus, reading sections from 'Working with Weird Woods', and experimenting with small pieces which Harry has carefully sliced from the end of one of the branches. He's very aware that this stuff is valuable and that he shouldn't waste it, but really, someone as unskilled as himself probably shouldn't be touching it in the first place, and a little bit can't hurt. Besides, he's always felt that the best way to learn is to throw caution to the wind and have a go.

"Here," Harry says, sitting on the workbench and propping open 'Working with Weird Woods' on his lap. He passes Maura another tiny slice. "Try putting one in water."

Maura kneels up and carefully, precisely drops the wood into the large glass of water Harry has placed in the middle of the workbench. Nearby are the results of their earlier experiments: the charred piece that Harry has burned with his wand to produce extraordinary multicoloured smoke and the piece that Maura has applied to her marmalade and cucumber sandwich, which, to her delight (and Harry's chagrin—"Surely the world only needs one of those?) has provided her with two identical marmalade and cucumber sandwiches.

"Ooh, it's doing something," she exclaims.

Harry looks. It is indeed doing something. The bark is dissolving rapidly, sending up a slender stream of bubbles, and the water, now a clear, pale blue, is giving off white smoke that smells like cinnamon.
"What is it?" she asks, freckled nose twitching.

Harry consults the book. "Okay. Veneficus, when added to plain water, has the potential to create one of two useful solutions. If the liquid turns opaque, dark purple and intensely cold, you have *Confortego*, a Soothing Solution which can be used for treating allergies, skin problems, and the symptoms of diseases such as Kneazlepox and Newt Rash." He and Maura gaze at each other through the aromatic smoke. "I don't think it's that one."

"Me neither," Maura says. "What's Newt Rash?"

"No idea," Harry admits. "Right... if the liquid turns a transparent light blue with a pungent, spicy aroma and white smoke... that sounds more like it... then you have created *Artifex*, the artist's potion. Depending on the strength and quality of your Veneficus, this potion will enhance the creative skills of the drinker to a varying degree for approximately one hour at a time, assuming that the usual rules of volume/drinker are followed. Quality is dependent on crop, variety, and growing conditions... blah, blah, blah," Harry finishes, an odd little spark of hope igniting inside him.

There is a silence, and then Maura whispers, "Are you going to drink it?"

"I don't know. Do you think it'll help me make the table?"

Maura shrugs. "I thought you didn't have any wood left," she points out.

Harry sighs. "I don't. And anyway," he says, gazing morosely at the potion, "it says *enhance* the drinker's creative skills. I doubt that'll help me."

"What's enhance?"

"It means to improve. To make something better. So, if I don't have any skill to start with, drinking this isn't going to make me an artist," Harry says.

"Oh, well. It smells nice," Maura says brightly. Her smile is deeply sympathetic for a seven-year-old.

"There is that," Harry agrees, closing the book and picking up the sandwich Molly has made him. Unsurprisingly, it's delicious, which is more than he can say for the last piece of spinach cake that Maura is now devouring with enthusiasm. Mrs Pepper's spinach cake.

He finishes his sandwich in a thoughtful silence, and then turns to Maura, wiping his fingers on the tatty jeans he has yet to throw away, whatever he might have said last night.

"I can't make this table. I just can't do it."

Maura sucks green icing from her little finger. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think you should tell him," Maura says plainly, dark eyes serious.

Harry's stomach twists. "I think you're right," he sighs.

Reluctantly, he jumps down from the workbench and goes in search of a quill and parchment. When he locates his writing equipment amid the chaos, he returns to the bench and quickly decants the blue
potion into a bottle, corks it, and stacks it on a nearby shelf. Maura leans over and watches him as he takes a deep breath and starts to write.

_Dear Mr Pepper,_

_I regret to inform you that..._

Harry stops. Frowns. He's not the sort of person who delivers bad news in a letter.

He scrunches up the piece of parchment and smooths out a fresh one.

_Dear Mr Pepper,_

_I would be grateful if you would come to my workshop at your earliest convenience; I would like to discuss your order. I will be here during my usual working hours._

_Please also thank your wife for the spinach cake. My niece, in particular, - "That's me!" Maura cries in surprise – enjoyed it very much._

_Yours Sincerely,_

_Harry Potter._

"What will you say to him?" Maura asks, as she and Harry walk up to the Post Office and choose a suitable owl to deliver the letter.

"I don't know. I'll think of something."

"I have to go back to school tomorrow," Maura says, scowling deeply, though she brightens a little when Harry buys her a sparkling red hair-band from a witch with a cart on the side of the street.

"I think I'd rather go to school than sort this out," Harry admits. "Don't tell anyone I said that."

"Said what?" Maura asks vaguely, admiring her sparkly reflection in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

Harry nudges her away from the window and back toward the workshop. "Nothing."

**~*~**

On Tuesday morning, Harry walks into his workshop alone. It's a strange feeling; he's grown accustomed to Maura's presence and the place feels far too quiet without her. Not only does he miss her company and her interesting suggestions, but she has warned him that he's in for a flood of customers now that all the Christmas and New Year celebrations are out of the way. Fortunately, Harry has a plan. It's very much a temporary, makeshift sort of plan, but it will do for now.

Grimly, he locks the door behind him and casts a strong Silencing Charm so that even those customers determined enough to press their ears to the door will not hear a thing. All going to plan, Harry thinks, they will assume he is taking some time off, and bugger off again. Fighting down the swipe of guilt that accompanies these actions, knowing he could be damaging the business of his other self, he sighs and spells the door transparent from the inside. In theory, if Mr Pepper comes, Harry will see him in time.
He will come; all of Harry's instincts are telling him so. And even if he's incandescent with rage, it will surely be better than this gnawing anxiety and self-reproach.

As he waits, he flits around the workshop, picking things up and putting them down, pacing and playing all of his records, even the Celestina ones, in turn. Eventually, he takes a leaf out of Draco's book and slips into organisation mode. Starting at one end of the 'shop, he works methodically, sorting through the contents of his drawers and shelves, stacking everything neatly and wiping down the dusty surfaces with a nearly-clean rag.

By the time he's sweeping the floor clean of sawdust, he's filthy; despite his apron, his shirt sleeves are tinged grey with grime, and his fingernails are rough and blackened. He pauses to rub at his hot forehead with his wrist, glances at the door, and there he is—Mr Cyril Pepper is approaching the workshop at impressive speed for a little old man with a walking stick.

Hurriedly, Harry discards his broom, draws his wand and removes the enchantments just in time for Mr Pepper to knock smartly on the door and let himself in. Beaming at Harry, he closes the door behind himself and removes a plum-coloured bowler hat.

"Good afternoon, Mr Potter," he says, making speedy if unsteady progress toward Harry's workbench.

"Hello, Mr Pepper," Harry says weakly, suddenly feeling sick. "How are you?"

"Ah," Mr Pepper sighs, eyes crinkling warmly. "Not bad, Mr Potter, not bad at all. A little slow, of course, after the compulsory over-indulgence of the holidays, but I can't complain. Still alive, still in possession of all my own limbs!"

Harry smiles and grips the workbench with sore fingers. If he doesn't do it now, he isn't going to do it at all. He exhales slowly. "I'm really sorry about this, sir, but there's been a problem and... I'm afraid I haven't been able to complete your order."

The old man's face falls. "Oh... oh dear. Oh. What a shame," he murmurs, sounding so disappointed that Harry wants to take the words back, for all the good it would do.

"I'm so sorry," he repeats desperately. "I'm not going to make excuses, and can only apologise for letting you down at such short notice. I want to compensate you, of course... for your wasted time, apart from anything else." Harry reaches for the moneybag he has stashed on one of the lower shelves and pushes it across the rough surface. "Here's twice what you paid. I realise that's not going to get you a replacement for your daughter at such short notice, but if you like, I can get you a table from another supplier..." he trails off at Mr Pepper's raised hand.

"Please. There's no need. I will accept a refund, of course, but no more than I originally paid." He looks up at Harry, lined face radiating kindness. "Goodness, young man, you look as though you're going to cry. It isn't a matter of life and death, I assure you."

"But..." Harry swallows hard, still feeling terrible.

"I shan't pry, Mr Potter, but I know very well that you aren't the type of man to back out of an agreement without good reason," the old man says softly. "I hope that everything is alright with you and yours, and that, if there is anything I can do, you will not hesitate to ask."
Speechless, Harry rubs at his face, temporarily forgetting how filthy he is. "We're... thank you. We're going to be okay," he says at last, briefly wishing he could just confess everything to Mr Pepper and have done with it.

"I'm relieved to hear it." Mr Pepper hooks his cane over the edge of the workbench and looks around with interest. "It's a shame, though... she's such a fan of your work, Genevieve. It was going to be a surprise, you know. I suspect she'd love anything you had made."

"I really am sorry," Harry repeats, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Is that for sale?" Mr Pepper says suddenly, eyes fixed on something behind Harry.

He turns, puzzled. His record player? His teapot and spare mugs? Or...

"The thing? Er, the... er... sculpture?" Harry asks, glancing at Mr Pepper in disbelief.

"This, here, with all the lights," he says, nodding and gesturing at the thing with a wrinkled hand.

Moving as though on invisible castors, Harry goes to the shelf, picks up the thing and takes it over to the far workbench. Mind racing, he grabs the cleanest rag he can find and polishes up the glass bulbs and fragments until they glow and sparkle around the tiny, dancing flames. He runs his fingers over the curves of the beech, checking for rough patches, and, when he's satisfied, he upends the whole thing and impulsively scratches his initials into the base. He is still more than half convinced that Mr Pepper is playing a cruel joke on him as he places the thing in front of him and holds his breath. If he is, Harry supposes, there's every chance that he deserves it.

"Wonderful. How much?"

"Er..." Harry hesitates, attempting to work out the rough cost of the materials and finally forcing himself to say, uncertainly, "Fifty Galleons?"

Mr Pepper looks horrified. "Mr Potter, that's daylight robbery!" he cries.

"Sorry," Harry says quickly. "Thirty-five?"

"No, no..." Mr Pepper laughs now. "I meant that I'd be robbing you! I insist on eighty for your time alone, but I'm quite prepared to pay more. Who can put a price on art, after all?"

"Art?" Harry repeats faintly, staring at the thing with new eyes.

"Well, of course. Genevieve will be thrilled, I'm sure." Mr Pepper tears his eyes away from the solid, glimmering manifestation of Harry's frustration and peers up at him expectantly. "Does it have a name?"

**~*~**

Five minutes after Mr Pepper's departure, Harry is hurrying through the streets of Ottery St Catchpole, adrenaline and astonishment only fuelling his impulsiveness as he sprints through the park and emerges on the other side to the sound of children yelling and laughing in the schoolyard opposite. He slows, catching his breath, and approaches the playground at a more civilised pace. He doesn't care if looks daft (although he has, at least, remembered to remove his apron) because he has to tell someone, and no one but Maura will understand.
"Maura!" he calls, hanging onto the cold railings. "Maura Fedora!"

At the sound of his voice, five or six little knots of children turn to stare at him. He smiles nervously, trying to look like a person who is not mad, and eventually, they return to their games of hopscotch, pretending to be ponies, and zooming around the playground wearing their coats as capes. Maura breaks away from what looks to be a very serious discussion with Hugo Weasley and a little girl in a bright green hat. She dashes over to the railings and gazes up at Harry, wide-eyed.

"Hello," she says, breath wisping in the cold air.

"I just sold a piece of art! My first piece of art!" he tells her, grinning.

She frowns, puzzled. "Which art?"

"I sold the thing! The weird thing we made with the glass in it! For a hundred Galleons!"

Maura's mouth drops open and she blinks repeatedly, as though unable to comprehend such a huge amount of money. "Wow!"

"I know!" Harry agrees, practically effervescing with delight at having a success to share, and having someone to share it with.

"How did you—"

"Who is this, Maura?" demands a dinner lady, bustling over in a blue apron and a heavy coat.

"Just my Uncle Harry," she says, beaming up at Harry and the dinner lady in turn. "He's an artist."
Chapter 7

When the bell rings for the end of the school day, Harry is waiting impatiently at the gates, hopping up and down and shoving his hands as far into the pockets of his jeans as they will go; the afternoon is grey and bitter cold, but he knows better than to attempt any magic near a Muggle school. He's fairly certain that the dinner lady in the big coat already suspects he's some kind of deviant, even after Maura's introduction and a flash of his most disarming smile.

"Uncle Harry!" Maura cries, pelting out of the building with her hair bouncing behind her and a shiny red lunchbox flapping in her hand as she runs to join him. "You're still here!"

"Well, yeah," Harry admits, slightly embarrassed. "I mean, I haven't just been standing here the whole time. I had a walk around the park... fed the ducks... important stuff like that."

"You're funny," Maura observes, dark eyes sparkling. She weaves her free arm through the railings and dangles toward Harry at an odd angle.

"Thanks." Harry pauses, momentarily distracted by the cacophony all around him as dozens of children stream out of the school and flood the playground, pushing and yelling and squealing as far too many bodies try to squash through the gates at once. It doesn't seem as though much has changed since his own schooldays, though the brief whiff of nostalgia is quickly wiped away by the memory of Dudley's little gang and all of the 'lesser' mortals who suffered at their hands. He knows he wasn't the only one. He sighs.

"What's the matter?" Maura asks, pitching wildly to one side and having to twist practically upside down to meet Harry's eyes.

"Nothing," he says firmly. Something about Maura tells him that she wouldn't stand for any of that kind of nonsense, not for one moment, and it's comforting. "Do you want to come over to the 'shop?"

"Okay," she says, untangling herself from the railings and wiping her hands on her grey pleated skirt. "But you have to tell Grandma first. Oh, look—there she is." He turns to see Molly battling her way through the crowds with Hugo in tow. She is wrapped up against the chill in a vast, multicoloured knitted cardigan, a pair of sheepskin boots, and a sparkling beret with a peacock feather sticking out of it. Her face is pinked with cold and it lights up as she approaches Harry and hugs him roughly.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, smiling as she releases him.

Harry coughs. Injury-by-enthusiasm seems to be a common Weasley trait, whichever universe he might be in. "I was wondering if I could borrow Maura," he says.

"I'm helping," Maura supplies.

"Maura," Hugo whines, eyeing her with reproach. "We're s'posed to be looking for Wrackspurts."

"We will," she promises, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "I've got a fomfnble rbnle."
Hugo brightens. Harry and Molly exchange curious glances.

"Secretive children," she sighs, looking down at Maura and Hugo, who are exchanging significant glances of their own. "This is how it starts, Harry. One minute they're all sweetness and light, the next, they're letting off Dungbombs in their bedrooms. And then they're opening a joke shop." She sighs, shooting Harry a long-suffering smile and wrapping her cardigan more tightly around herself. "Still, it is a very successful joke shop."

"That it is," Harry agrees. He ruffles Maura's hair absently. "Anyway, this one's going to be Minister for Magic."

Molly laughs gently. "I can believe it, too. Come on, Hugo, I've been baking cakes this afternoon. You can help me ice them."

"Thanks, Molly. I'll let Gin know where she is," Harry calls as the little boy and his grandmother turn to leave.

"I'm going to ice a crocodile fighting a unicorn!" Hugo says, hanging onto Molly's hand.

Harry laughs but Maura sighs and shakes her head. "Boys are so silly sometimes. Unicorns don't fight."

"You're right," he says seriously. "Boys are very silly. That's why we need your help." He holds out his hand.

She sighs, taking it. "I know."

~*~*~*~

Five minutes later, Harry lets them into the workshop and lights the lamps; the sun is already beginning to set and the room is soon warmed by a soft, orange glow. Maura discards her coat and lunchbox and, with complete disregard for her school uniform, climbs onto her usual bench to watch Harry work. He thinks it may be the first time he's ever seen her not wearing red—the neat grey skirt, white shirt, and blue tie look very strange on her indeed.

"It's horrible, isn't it?" Maura says, glancing down at her uniform with disdain, and Harry realises he must have accidentally voiced his thoughts.

"No, it's not horrible. You look very grown up."

Maura blinks. "Oh."

Harry smiles to himself and assembles a collection of tools, several different flavours of wood, and his glass-blowing equipment. He lights the furnace flames with practised ease now, and sets everything out around him exactly the way he wants it. Virtually effervescing with excitement, he stands back from his workspace and takes a deep breath.

"So... I was really angry when I made the thing," he muses, tapping his fingers on the worktop.

"You were," Maura agrees, with feeling.

"Do you think I can only make art when I'm angry?" he asks, chewing his lip. He is, if he's honest,
rather afraid that unless he can recreate the previous circumstances exactly, he is doomed to fail. And yet... he doesn't have any desire to relive that feeling of complete and utter fury, frustration, and self-loathing. Once was enough, really.

"I don't know." Maura shrugs apologetically. "Sorry."

Harry sighs. "Well, I suppose there's only one way to find out." He stares down at his shiny tools, his stacks of beautiful wood and the many coloured pieces of glass shimmering in the flickering light from the green furnace fires. Suddenly, he feels awkward, as though he's a Muggle conjurer who has whipped his audience into a frenzy of anticipation and then cannot remember how to get the rabbit out of the hat. Bewildered, he rubs his face.

"I think you've got to just... do it," Maura advises. "You know, like when you've got to do a handstand in P.E. If you think about it too much, you go all stiff and you can't do it."

Harry glances up at her, guiltily amused by the poorly-concealed anguish on her face. It's a very long time since he's had to do P.E., and he's not sure he's ever been able to do a handstand, but he thinks he knows what she means.

He nods. "Okay then." Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes for a moment, thinking about 'he's an artist', and Mr Pepper's admiration of the thing, and Draco's eyes, just because, and when he opens his eyes again, he is filled with an oddly charged sort of calm. Without thinking, he picks up the nearest tool and the nearest piece of wood and sets to work.

**~*~**

As the sky darkens to an inky black with scattered stars, Harry works on, barely feeling his aching back or his raw, scratched hands as he creates a series of sculptures under the watchful eyes of Maura. He can't be sure exactly what he's making, but they are unusual things, and they are coming together more easily each time; his newly-discovered spellwork is becoming just as assured as his hands as he manipulates countless mysterious tools and smoothes sandpaper, friction-hot, over rough edges.

"Lusleevs," Maura mumbles as Harry finishes his third piece, a shimmering pile of oak and green glass.

Startled, Harry looks up. "What?"

"Looks like leaves," she repeats, pointing at the sculpture.

Harry steps back and looks, too. She's right. "Yeah," he says, grinning. "You don't have to be so quiet, you know. I want your opinion. I don't know what I'm doing, remember?"

"I like it. It looks like Autumn."

Harry's stomach performs a small flip of delight. He wipes his sore fingers on his apron and winces at the drag of rough fabric against raw, scraped skin. As he stretches, he gazes lazily around the room and pauses, thoughtful, when his eyes catch on the almost forgotten bottle of blue potion.

"I wonder..." he murmurs, walking slowly to the shelf, feeling every cramped muscle now. Carefully, he picks up the bottle, savouring the welcome feeling of cool glass against his skin.
"Are you going to drink it now?" Maura asks, practically vibrating with enthusiasm.

Harry uncorks the bottle, sniffing with interest at the cinnamon-scented smoke that immediately begins to escape. "You know, I think I will," he says, setting aside the leafy sculpture and wiping down his work surface. Just for... scientific purposes, of course."

"I don't really know what that means," Maura says, screwing up her freckled nose. "But you should do it anyway."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Harry says, and, in one long gulp, he swallows the potion. It tastes chalky and slightly sweet, coating his mouth and throat and sending a warm, tingling sensation all the way out to his fingertips.

"Is it nice?" Maura whispers, kneeling up on the workbench and craning her neck so far toward Harry in her excitement that she almost loses her balance.

"Mm," Harry mumbles, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You probably wouldn't like it."

Maura pokes out her tongue. Harry does, too.

Seconds later, he's lifted into a haze of colours—bleeding, blending colours and beautiful curving shapes; he can see ghostly images of his own hands before him, smoothing and cutting and shaping and casting; his fingers are light, extraordinarily deft, sketching out shapes that he doesn't even understand, but he hastens to follow, compelled, grasping at the grain of the wood and drawing his wand, over and over, hanging on to the scent of cinnamon in his nostrils and the sound of Maura's voice as she chats away to him, anchoring him, albeit weakly, to his own consciousness. This isn't like the time he let his anger run away with him—the emotion was his, it came from him; the control, ultimately, belonged to him. This, though, this has him, and there's nothing he can do.

When he finally steps away, he's shaking and his forehead is soaked with cold sweat.

"You've finished," Maura says, and he looks up at her.

"I think so," he manages, licking the taste of dried cinnamon from his lips. "That was very odd. I think I prefer being in control." He sighs and turns the sculpture around so that Maura can see it. "What do you think?"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "It looks funny."

Harry smiles wearily, leaning against the bench. Apparently, working under a creativity potion for an hour takes it out of a person. "Funny haha, or funny peculiar?"

"Funny like it's going to eat me," Maura says."

"That can't be good," Harry sighs, and flicks his wand to vanish it. "I think we'll do without the potion from now on."

"You don't need it," Maura says stoutly.

Harry grins; he can't help it. "I don't know about that. But I suppose we'll have to find something else to do with these," he says, indicating the remaining Veneficus branches, which are stacked on the
bottom shelf, carefully covered over with their silvery wrappings.

"You'd better, or I shall have to embarrass you horribly and tell you how much they cost," says a dry voice from the doorway. Harry turns to see Draco, all flickering half-smile and long, stripy scarf, leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded. Harry idly wonders if he makes a habit of listening in on the ends of people's conversations; there's certainly something about the dramatic entrance that he seems to relish.

"I didn't hear you come in," Harry says faintly.

"You never do," Draco says, shooting an exasperated look at Maura, who beams conspiratorially as though she had known that Draco was there all along. "I had a feeling you'd go straight for that potion."

"We made smoke and a sandwich first," Maura points out, and Harry wonders just whose side she is on.

Draco laughs softly. "All the important things," he agrees, stepping into the shop and bending to examine each of Harry's completed sculptures in turn. "I see you're in one of those creative phases."

Heart racing, Harry glances at Maura, who shrugs and watches Draco, too.

"Er... so it would seem," Harry manages at last.

"I like this," Draco says, trailing his fingertips carefully over the leaf-like sculpture and looking up at Harry, eyes bright and smile genuine.

"See," Maura whispers, somewhat smugly.

"Thanks," Harry says, and then, realising that he has never seen Draco in the workshop before, adds: "Is everything okay?"

Straightening up, Draco turns to him and frowns. "Yes. Or is that question code for 'what the f—er, Fever Fudge are you doing in here, Draco'?"

Harry snorts. "Careful," he murmurs, amused. "And no, I was just curious."

"That's one way of putting it. Anyway, it may have escaped your notice that it is nearly eight o'clock, but it has not escaped mine, especially as it's your turn to cook dinner," Draco says, attempting to look wounded and neglected, but the only result is a giggle from Maura. "Neither has it escaped Ginevra, who fire-called a few minutes ago, wondering if and when you're planning to return her child."

"I owled her ages ago!" Harry protests, determined not to seem like the sort of person who spirits away other people's children. As Draco's words fall properly into place, his eyes widen. "Is it really eight o'clock?"

"On Frankfurto's life, it is," Draco says, crossing his heart in a theatrical gesture.

"I bet Daddy's eaten my dinner," Maura sighs.

Harry gazes at her guiltily and helps her down from the workbench, lip caught between his teeth as
he thinks. "I'm sorry, Maura Fedora," he says at last. "Tell you what, I'll get you a chip sandwich from the Leaky on the way home."

Maura brightens. "Can I get mint sauce on it? And beetle bits?"

Harry wrinkles his nose but nods, turning away from Maura to hunt for a bit of parchment—he's just had an idea.


After a brief search, Harry finds a square of parchment that isn't too creased and smoothes his palms over it on the empty workbench until it is perfectly flat. Something about Draco's words... 'I see you're in one of those creative phases', something in the unsurprised amusement in his tone and the familiar interest in his eyes suggests that this making of... things, whilst brand new to Harry, isn't entirely without precedent. Which is interesting. And, he thinks, picking up a self-inking quill, potentially very, very good news indeed for someone who clearly cannot make furniture to save his life.

As Maura and Draco conduct an odd, giggle-punctuated conversation behind him, Harry writes a short note in green ink and his neatest script. When they all step out into the cobbled street, shivering and arguing about the proper choice of condiment for a chip sandwich, Harry rain-proofs the note with his wand and sticks it to the door of the workshop.

Until further notice, I will not be taking on commissions for items of furniture as I will be working on abstract pieces and hand-blown (Muggle method) glassware. Please come in and enquire/look around. Apologies for any inconvenience.

HP

**~*~**

Midway through Wednesday morning, Harry is humming absently to himself and shaping a long, shimmering bulb of turquoise glass with slow, careful turns of the copper pipe when a large, official-looking owl collides softly with his skylight and starts up a rhythmic pecking against the glass. Harry quickly casts a series of Freezing Charms to keep everything in place, wipes his hands on his apron, and opens the door, gesturing for the owl to come around.

Seconds later, the owl swoops into the 'shop and settles itself importantly on the spare workbench, extending its message-bearing leg toward Harry.

"Thanks," he says, taking it and offering the owl a leftover crust from his breakfast bacon sandwich.

He unrolls the message and smiles to himself. It's rather comforting to see that while the note has been written on luxurious, Ministry-seal-encrusted parchment, there are no airs and graces in the words of the new Head of the Auror Department, and his handwriting is still appalling.

Harry,

Fancy coming down to the Ministry and having a look at my new office? Got no meetings til one. Send Horatio back with your reply so that Marsha won't hold you up with a hundred security questions.
Harry reads and re-reads the short note several times, a strange tightness wrapping around his chest. The idea of going to the Ministry, to Auror HQ, no less, is oddly daunting, and it doesn't seem to matter how little sense it makes to feel that way. In reality—whatever that is—it has been less than a month since he last walked through those corridors as an overworked, exhausted person of some significance. It's no time at all, and yet he feels, already, as though he's a completely different person.

Exhaling slowly, Harry gathers himself and scribbles an affirmative reply to Ron before he can lose his nerve. He reattaches it to the owl and returns to his glassblowing, allowing Horatio enough of a head-start to put the apparently safety-conscious Marsha at her ease. When he's done, he places the finished piece into the green flames, pulls on his blue-flecked wool coat, and heads out into the crisp morning.

**~*~**

It takes Harry quite some time to make his way through the main Ministry building, up to Auror HQ and along the familiar panelled corridor to his old office—to Ron's office—to the office of the Head of the Auror Department, he settles at last. Like in Diagon Alley, everyone seems to want to greet him in the hallways, stop to chat in the busy Atrium, or hold up packed lifts to tell him how marvellous it is to see him at the Ministry again. By the time he steps into the small, beeswax-scented anteroom, Ron is waiting for him, hovering in the doorway of his private office and muttering under his breath to a severe-looking middle-aged lady who is seated behind a vast mahogany desk, nodding at regular intervals and tapping her quill against her chin.

"Mr Potter is here, sir," she says suddenly, sharp dark eyes fastening onto Harry.

"Thanks, Marsha, I can see that," Ron mumbles, grinning at Harry; he looks as though he can't decide whether to be amused, embarrassed, or proud, and ends up just looking as though he's about to throw up.

"You'll need a visitor's pass, Mr Potter," Marsha says briskly, rising from her desk and preparing a shiny silver badge with a flurry of wand-flicks and muttered incantations; within a matter of seconds it is attached firmly to the lapel of Harry's coat and winking in the lamplight with the engraved message:

*Harry Potter*

*Visitor to R.B. Weasley, Head of the Auror Department.*

*11.38am, 3rd January, 2018.*

*Security Clearance: basic/personal visit*

Harry releases the badge after absorbing the words and thanks Marsha. She's certainly efficient, and she has no idea that such low-level security clearance makes him want to laugh inside.

"Er, right, we'll be in my office, then," Ron says, gesturing to Harry, who follows him past the desk and through the door.

"Very good, Mr Weasley," she says, already looking through a sheaf of parchments.
"I see you went for biscuits over youthful good looks," Harry teases as he closes the door behind him.

Ron snorts. "As if I had a choice. They are good biscuits, though... d'you want one?"

Harry takes a bumpy oatmeal biscuit from the proffered plate and bites into it as he looks around the office he knows so well. It's like looking into his old life... except that it isn't quite. The desk is the same, as are the horrible velvet curtains that Harry has always hated; the filing cabinets—slightly dented—are still there, and the spell damage to the skirting boards near the door, which was there when Harry moved into the office, remains a comforting reminder that everyone loses their temper sometimes.

But Harry definitely never bought an orange rug with *Chudley Cannons 1698* emblazoned across it, and to his memory, his office never smelled so biscuity. Chewing thoughtfully on Marsha's admittedly delicious creation, Harry examines with interest the collection of photographs Spellotaped to the wall opposite the desk, and the blackboard with its multi-coloured, squiggling chalk lines.

"What do you think?" Ron asks, a note of nervousness in his voice. "It's a lot bigger than my last office... and I don't have to share any more. Obviously. It's a bit strange, really."

Harry dusts the crumbs off his fingers and absently watches them fall to the floor before he turns around to face Ron, who is now sitting on the edge of his desk and fixing Harry with anxious blue eyes. It's evident now, painfully so, that he is looking for Harry's approval, for the confirmation from his best friend that he's done well for himself. Harry gives himself a shake and fights through the tide of his confusion to find a smile for Ron.

"It's brilliant. You've got a nice big fireplace, too," he says, stepping over to the fire and warming his hands behind his back. "It gets really cold in here sometimes... I imagine," he adds quickly, but Ron doesn't seem to notice, and Harry directs his silent sigh of relief at the floor.

"Yeah, I've had the fire lit since I got here. Marsha's brilliant with it; I think she gets here about six in the morning to get everything sorted." He shoots Harry a conspiratorial look. "I'm not sure she ever goes to sleep."

Harry snorts. "Lucky you." He has had the same secretary for nearly ten years now, and he has always been nagged by the belief that she sees him as nothing more than a noisy, messy entity that creates unnecessary work for her.

Ron wrinkles his nose. "I don't know about that, mate. I get enough of that at home—it's like being surrounded by superwomen. Disturbing."

Harry laughs, discomfort dissolving at last. "Well, don't let her frighten you. Remember, you're the big boss now."

Ron shifts on the edge of the desk, gripping the smooth mahogany with large hands and looking, just for a moment, like the uncertain boy Harry met at the train station all those years ago. Just for a moment, and then the accomplished, successful father of two is back, lifting his head to grin at Harry and scrub his vivid hair out of his face with a brown sleeve. He deserves this. He's ready.

"You're going to be brilliant, you daft bugger," he says roughly, shoving his hands into his coat pockets.
"Yeah... yeah, of course," Ron says, nodding. "Thanks."

"I'm not flattering you. I mean it," Harry insists. "You will be."

"You'd have been better," Ron says, so quietly that Harry almost doesn't hear it, but there's no self-pity in his voice, no trace of bitterness. It's as though he's just stating a fact, albeit one with which Harry doesn't agree.

"I don't think I would," Harry sighs, and even as he does, his knee twinges and wobbles beneath him, but he manages to hold himself firm, needing to make Ron believe him.

"I know we don't really talk about this, Harry, but everyone knows that you would've—"

"Everybody knows bollocks, Ron. I chose a different path and I'm far happier with it than I would've been doing this job... this job was made for you. You're going to do it far better than I ever could have done, and I'm going to trundle around in my little workshop making weird things..."

"You're making weird arty stuff again?" Ron interrupts.

"Yeah, and that's... well, it's exactly how things should be," Harry says, the back of his throat prickling. "I know I'm not really the person to be giving advice, but... don't waste your time feeling insecure."

"Thanks, mate," Ron says at last, looking slightly startled. "You're... you know..." he mumbles, apparently unable to find the words, shrugging his shoulders in Harry's direction and going slightly pink. Harry can feel a Weasley shoulder-slap coming on. He braces himself and perches on the desk beside Ron. When the extra-strength, slightly violent approximation of 'You're my best friend, you are' hits him, he holds in his wince and just elbows Ron in the ribs.

"Watch it," Ron murmurs, reaching for another biscuit. "If Marsha finds out you're assaulting the Head of the Auror Department in his own office, she'll have your balls."

"I'm really scared," Harry deadpans, taking off his coat and re-attaching his silver visitor's pin to his shirt.

"You should be. Apparently she was some kind of duelling champion when she was younger," Ron says. "And she's scary when she's mad. You should have heard her yelling at that giant prick Goldstein when he tried to come in here without an appointment."

"When?" Harry asks, already on his guard at the mention of that giant prick Goldstein.

"Last week some time. He wanted my signature for some report or other. To be honest," Ron admits, leaning back on his hands and looking guiltily at the ceiling, "I did wait a bit longer than necessary to go and rescue him from her. I've never seen anybody look so white... I almost felt sorry for him. 'Course, that was before I found out about what he did to Neville."

"Yeah." Harry scowls. "Have you seen him since? Neville, I mean? Is he alright?"

"I haven't seen him, but Ginny and Blaise were round the other night and they said he was okay. Think his pride's a bit hurt... don't blame him, really. And he does feel a bit daft about falling for all the rubbish Goldstein spouted about fancying him at school."
Harry shakes his head. "It's not his fault. It's not as though any of the rest of us have never been taken in by someone."

"That's exactly what Ginny said to him," Ron sighs. "Trouble is, he's already convinced no one finds him... you know... attractive," he confides, lowering his voice as though he's uttering some kind of profanity. Glancing at Harry briefly, he adds: "If you ask me, his only problem is that he takes his job so seriously, he doesn't have time for... other stuff."

Harry blinks. He's astonished that Ron has a perspective on other people's relationships—or lack thereof—at all. "You're one to talk, bloody Head of the Auror Department!" he says at last.

Ron frowns and scuffs one untied shoe on his Chudley Cannons rug. "Hmm. Never mind that. I'm just saying... there's no need for him to be on his own. He's very... eligible."

"That's a Hermione word if I ever heard one," Harry laughs.

"I know plenty of words," Ron says, affecting a wounded tone. "I'm very important."

"How come you sound like a fishwife, then?" Harry asks.

Ron lifts a ginger eyebrow. "What's a fishwife?"

Harry frowns. "I don't know."

Ron snorts, meeting Harry's eyes, and there's a split-second of silence before both of them burst into confused, breathless laughter. Which is how Marsha finds them when she raps on the door some minutes later.

"Forgive me for interrupting, sir, but... oh. Is everything alright?" She stops short in the doorway, sharp dark eyes flicking between Harry and Ron, who are still sitting on the edge of the fancy desk and snickering like schoolboys.

"Fine, Marsha," Ron manages, wheezing slightly and getting to his feet. "We're good. Do you need something?"

Marsha's gaze lingers for a moment on Harry and he has the unpleasant sensation that, for reasons passing his understanding, he is being regarded with the utmost suspicion. Something about the expression on her face tickles him, and he looses a snort before he can control himself and look at the floor, mouth firmly closed.

"Hmm," she says, pursing her lips in obvious disapproval. "If you are sure. Mr Fitzwilliam would like to see you in his office, if you have a moment." She pauses. "Mr Fitzwilliam is the Head of Magical Law Enforcement," she adds, apparently for Harry's benefit.

"I know," Harry says faintly, resisting the temptation to ask if she knows how his early morning jogging is going.

"Thanks, Marsha," Ron says, rounding the desk and leafing through folders and bits of parchment. She makes a small sound of acknowledgment and then takes her leave. "Sorry about this, Harry. He's..." He lowers his voice, "he's seriously hard work at the moment. Thinks someone's following him." Ron rolls his eyes and Harry merely nods, knowing that Ron's new boss isn't as paranoid as he appears.
"I'd better get back to the 'shop, anyway," he says, sliding down onto his feet. "Weird things to make."

Ron grins. "It's good to see you. I've been dying to show off."

Harry pauses, wrapping his fingers around the doorknob and listening to the scratching of Marsha's quill in the next room. "You've every reason to. I'm pleased for you. I'll see you soon," he says, flashing a smile and pulling the door closed behind him. He sets the silver badge down on Marsha's desk as he passes, nodding politely to her and getting out into the hallway as quickly as possible.

The lift is empty, and Harry leans against the wall as he travels down toward the Atrium, exhaling slowly and closing his eyes. Ron clearly expects him to be envious, to resent the lost opportunity, but, try as he might to search for it, the feeling just... isn't. The flicker of emotion experienced at the sight of his office of over ten years belonging to someone else isn't enough. It isn't nearly enough.

Harry sighs. The lift jerks to a stop and the grille slides back. A calm female voice is announcing the level and nearby offices, but Harry isn't listening.

"Are you actually following me?" he demands, pushing off the wall to stand up straight.

"Of course not," Goldstein demurs, wrapping a pure white scarf around his neck and tucking it neatly into his coat. "I'm meeting a friend for lunch."

"You have friends?" Harry mutters, unable to stop himself.

"Of course." Goldstein's brow wrinkles in brief concern. "I take it that Draco is still unhappy with me regarding the other night."

Harry's eyebrows shoot up at the casual phrasing and weary tone. "He's more than unhappy, believe me, and so am I. What you did was... so fucking wrong that I don't even have a word for it. I'm not sure why I'm even talking to you right now... why am I doing that?" he mutters, trailing off into silence and slumping back against the wall, scrubbing restlessly at his hair.

"Perhaps you can't resist," Goldstein says softly. "I understand. You don't have to fight this, Harry."

Harry's eyes snap to him immediately. Chest tight with fury, he clenches his fingers into painful fists at his sides, itching to reach for his wand and barely hanging on to his control.

"I... oh, for fuck's sake. Are we speaking a completely different language here?"

Anthony laughs softly. "I don't know, are we?"

"All I want to say is leave me alone," Harry says, feeling like he's spelling out each word, fingers grazing his wand through the soft fabric of his coat.

"Atrium," announces the cheery voice as the lift shudders to a stop and Harry glances away from Goldstein to see five or six smartly-dressed Ministry employees waiting to board. He pulls the grille open and holds it open for them. In the inevitable rush of 'Hello, Mr Potter'-s and 'How do you do, Mr Potter'-s that follows, Goldstein slips away.

Harry stalks across the crowded Atrium, footsteps ringing out on the marble, heading for the nearest
safe Apparation Point with one thought circling his mind:

I should have hexed him while I had the chance.

***~*~***

"You definitely should not," Draco says later that night, when he has finally torn himself away from his work, completed his usual cycle of disgruntled mumbling and stretching and idle threats to give up investigative journalism and start an eel farm or a dance troupe or his own Quidditch team, and stomped up the stairs to the bedroom.

As Harry sprawls on the bed in his thin t-shirt and boxers and fills him in on the day's events, Draco flits around the room and performs his 'getting ready for bed' routine, the rhythm of which is now soothingly familiar to Harry. Shirt, folded neatly, dropped into the washing basket. Sweater, stroked into a smooth square under careful palms, dropped into the washing basket. A much appreciated shirtless interlude, in which Draco makes imperceptible adjustments to the closet doors and taps at the handles with his fingertips, up, then down the row of wardrobes, careful to balance each side.

It is at this point that he turns to look at Harry, one eyebrow raised, waiting for a response. Harry, who has been utterly caught up in watching the shift of light muscles under pale skin and the slide of blond hair across sharp cheekbones, has no idea what sort of response might be expected of him.

"Sorry, what?"

Draco sighs, meeting Harry's eyes for a moment's exasperation before he begins to unfasten the many complicated buttons on his trousers.

"I said, you definitely shouldn't have hexed that idiot Goldstein," he repeats. "I think your admittedly capricious self-control chose a rather useful moment to show itself."

Unsure quite whether or not he is being insulted, Harry tips his head back to glance at Draco, but his face, caught in concentration as he fiddles with the last of the buttons, gives nothing away.

"You never know," Harry sighs, pillowing his head on his arms and staring once more at the flickering patterns of lamplight on the ceiling, "it might've actually got through to him."

"Doubtful," Draco says. "And anyway, if I'd hexed him every time I wanted to over the last few months, I doubt he'd still be standing now."

Harry bites down on a smile as something warm leaps in his chest. "Which would be a great loss, I'm sure."

Draco laughs, lowering himself to sit on the end of the bed as he removes his trousers, socks, and boxers and folds them neatly. Placing them next to himself in a neat pile of black fabric, he runs a hand down Harry's side, lingering over the patch of bare skin just above his waistband.

"That depends on how you look at it, really. I doubt many people would miss him, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say you'd miss me if I had to spend the next twenty years in Azkaban... although, on the plus side, I'd finally be able to shut my father up on the 'you don't know what it's like' front, wouldn't I?" he adds thoughtfully, fingers tapping at Harry's hip in contemplation.

Harry twists to look up at his impressive profile. His brow is furrowed as though in genuine
consideration, and Harry pokes him in the side.

"Your optimism is terrifying, Malfoy," he murmurs.

There's a sharp intake of breath as Draco turns to meet his eyes, and the heat that flares there leaves Harry in no doubt that he—or at least some part of him—spoke deliberately. And he has no idea where it came from, but the warmth flooding his groin and the intent flush to Draco's pale skin are more than enough to persuade him to go with it.

"Strong words, Potter. Are you sure you know what they all mean?" he shoots back, voice low and dangerous. It's not exactly as he remembers it; the coldness of Draco's younger self is noticeably absent, but it still sends a thrill through Harry. Explanations are unnecessary; he knows what is expected of him here and his baser instincts crackle with it.

"I'm not afraid of you," he snaps, holding the eye contact and raising himself up on his elbows. Draco's fingers are no longer stroking his skin but splayed across his hip, pinning him with the minimum of effort. Harry knows he could move if he wanted to, but he can't bring himself to focus on anything beside the smirk, once familiar and now incongruous on Draco's lips and the blood rushing to his cock in heated, pounding anticipation.

Draco's laughter is cool, mocking, as he shakes his head and crawls sinuously across the bed, settling himself across Harry's thighs and leaning down close now, close enough for his hair to graze Harry's forehead. He shivers involuntarily, barely noticing that his wrists are being enclosed and held down firmly against the bed, barely caring, because Draco is hot and firm against his skin, he's already half hard and the fact that he's naked and Harry is sort-of dressed doesn't seem to matter at all—he's radiating power from every harsh angle, from the formidable slant of his eyebrows, from the elegant strength of the thighs gripping Harry, holding him, and from the heat-darkened grey eyes that bore down into his with pure challenge.

"You should be, Potter," he hisses, pressing Harry's wrists more firmly against the sheets. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Don't talk shit, Malfoy," Harry says, narrowing his eyes and throwing himself into this... role, he supposes. He's playing himself—yet another version of himself that he's never been. It's wonderfully, thrillingly easy to slip into, as though he's done it a thousand times before.

"What did you say to me?" Draco demands, tightening his grip.

"I said... fuck," Harry spits, as sharp fingernails cut into the soft skin of his forearms. "I said don't talk shit. Everyone knows that you can't back up the things you say. It's all bollocks."

"So, you think you know all about me, do you?" Draco demands, eyes aflame.

Harry smiles breathlessly, glancing at Draco's hard, flushed cock, pressed between them, just inches from his own. "Yeah. I think you want me."

"Fuck you, Potter," Draco rasps, shifting his hips and allowing their erections to slide roughly against each other, separated only by a layer of thin, damp fabric. Harry groans. Laughs.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Just for a split-second, the corner of Draco's smirk wavers and the man Harry has come to know is
"This doesn't mean I like you," he mutters, eyes intense with pure schoolboy disdain as he releases one of Harry's wrists, and, without warning or ceremony, slides his hand into Harry's boxers and wraps strong, cool fingers around his cock.

"I think you like me a little bit," Harry counters, gasping at the touch, hips jerking away from the sheets. Draco's strokes are firm, erratic, expertly inexpert, and he's burning up, staring up at those eyes and sinking into a haze of what if—what if their teenage selves had chosen a different outlet for their animosity? Would it have led to yet another future? And more to the point, would it have felt as fucking good as this?

"Whatever, Potter. You're mine," Draco says roughly, his smirk sharpening into a snarl as his fist flies over Harry's cock, dragging dry whimpers from deep in his throat, eyes flashing. Harry lifts his free hand with a half-formed intention of pulling Draco closer, overpowering him like the fierce Gryffindor he's supposed to be, but something in Draco's voice as he mutters, "Fuck, you're hot," yanks him open inside and before he has time to do anything, he's crying out and spilling, hot and fierce, into Draco's hand.

"Draco," he groans, forgetting himself. Not caring. He closes his eyes.

As he comes back to himself and blinks slowly up at Draco, he immediately registers the odd expression on the flushed, angular face. The Slytherin smirk has disappeared, and Draco's eyes are now narrowed in curious puzzlement.

"Well, you've never done that before," he says at last.

"Mm?" Harry says vaguely, partly because he's still feeling deliciously floaty, and partly because the less he says, the harder it is for him to get himself into trouble.

"Look at you," Draco sighs, releasing Harry's pinned wrist and lacing their fingers together. "I was just saying that this has to be a first... you just lying there being all... well-behaved. It's very strange."


Quite possibly he fails, because Draco just raises an eyebrow and reaches for his wand on the bedside. He casts a couple of absent-minded, tingling Cleaning Charms and then slides from Harry's thighs to curl on his side, head propped up on one hand.

"You don't usually do that when you're trying to be kinky, though," he muses.

"Trying to be kinky?" Harry demands, scandalised.

Draco smiles serenely. "You know what I mean." He pauses, features drawing into a frown as he looks at Harry. "You are you, aren't you?"

Harry's heart pounds, but he feigns confusion. "Excuse me?"

"How do I know you're not just someone Polyjuiced as Harry?" Draco continues, and although Harry knows that he can't be too worried—he's lying there naked and vulnerable, after all—he can't shake the feeling that Draco isn't completely joking.
Harry swallows hard. "You don't."

Draco stares. When he speaks, the words tumble out in a quite un-Draco-like rush. "What was I wearing that night?"

Jerked back to the war, the Order, his early days as an Auror, Harry's hesitation lasts for only a fraction of a second.

"Striped pyjamas," he says quickly. "Goyle's pyjamas."

Draco visibly relaxes. The anxiety that disappears from his eyes confirms Harry's suspicions, and he struggles to control his racing pulse, knowing how close he has been to blowing his cover.

Draco, meanwhile, smiles at the memory. "He always was an idiot."

"Yeah," Harry says, already searching for a way to fix his mistake. He's an Auror—or at least he was—he can think on his feet. Of course he can. He just has to make it look realistic. "Anyway," he adds, gazing evenly at Draco, "what about you? How do I know that you're you? If we're going to start throwing security questions around, then... when exactly was our first kiss?" he throws out, hoping his genuine curiosity isn't as obvious as it feels.

Draco snorts derisively. "What kind of security question is that? I could be Hermione or Ginevra or Weasley himself, for that matter—he certainly had an eyeful that night." He grimaces and curls further into himself, earlier arousal apparently forgotten.

Intrigued, Harry bites back a flurry of inquiries. "Just answer the bloody question."

"Fine," Draco sighs. "When exactly? I think it was about half past eleven at night... let's say eleven thirty-two, shall we? It was the Weasleys' third annual Christmas party, and I believe it was a Friday, but if you check your calendar and find that I'm wrong, feel free to kick me out onto the street," he finishes, directing a long-suffering glance at Harry and scrambling under the sheets, pulling them up under his chin and shivering.

"Just checking, no need for the attitude," Harry says drily, removing his remaining clothing with some effort and slumping into bed beside Draco; immediately, he finds himself draped and tangled with frozen, heat-seeking limbs. He sighs and says nothing.

"There's always a need when you're reminding me about getting caught kissing my supposed best friend behind a half-dead hydrangea bush in the Weasleys' back garden," Draco says huffily. "Not exactly an auspicious start to a relationship."

Harry grins, delighted by the reluctant warmth flickering in Draco's eyes and the fact that he is now able to click another piece of his past into place.

"I don't know, you're still here, aren't you?"

"So it would seem," Draco says, reflecting Harry's smile wearily back to him. He rests his head on Harry's shoulder and sighs. "I've been spending too much time with Fitzwilliam, I think. I'm apparently losing my mind... what's left of it."

"Age," Harry coughs, fully expecting the flick to the ribs that follows. "I almost forgot to tell you—"
he seems to have worked out that someone's following him."

Draco scowls. "I'm not following him. I'm carefully infiltrating his inner circle."

Harry just buries his face in the pillow and laughs.

**~*~**

The next few days pass without incident, and by mid-January, Harry is becoming comfortable in his new routine; he is wearing himself a smooth, contented little groove in which he can rattle along quite happily without feeling trapped, even for a moment. It's astonishingly liberating.

Crawling into bed satisfied and content rather than tense and exhausted allows him to sleep deeply and rise with relatively few complaints when his copper clock rings and smokes for attention in the mornings. Harry notices the restorative power of sleep in his vigorous appearance in the mirror, in his smooth skin and bright eyes, and in the wonderful absence of pounding head pain; he also wonders, in quieter moments, just how he has managed to push himself along for so many years without collapsing from exhaustion. He doesn't have to think too hard to come up with three good reasons, and fuck, he misses them.

But he's here now, and, hanging hard onto Boris' promise, he throws himself into his work, experimenting wildly and pouring his jumble of emotions into odd sculpture after odd sculpture: he finds a weird little spell for the Veneficus in one of the books in the morning room and makes a series of small pieces that give off massive amounts of heat with a simple wand-flick; he makes a delicate combination of thin, curly oak pieces and vivid orange glass that reminds him of Lily, and a huge, multi-coloured glass bowl that is misshapen, feels like confusion, and sells for an obscene amount of Galleons just hours after completion. Puzzled but pleased, he sets to work making a whole series of them, each larger than the last.

He still doesn't think of himself as any kind of artist, and he discards as many pieces as he displays for sale, but as long as he switches off and doesn't worry about trying to impress anyone, he finds it comes naturally. So naturally, in fact, that he feels slightly sore that nobody from his old life has ever encouraged him to try something creative. Still, he can't help but feel he's finding his place.

On a quiet Friday afternoon, he sticks up a 'Back Soon!' sign and heads for Richenda's, where he spends an enjoyable half hour browsing the various sections and picking out an armful of new records for the workshop.

"You look well, Mr Potter!" she booms, jewelled earrings dangling as she leans over to take Harry's purchases. "Something of a departure from your last selection," she adds, arching one dark eyebrow.

Harry grins sheepishly. "Well, these ones are for me. Pleasure rather than business, if you like."

"Yes, of course, I remember now." She leans still closer, wrapping her fingers around his stack of records, crimson nails tapping on the shiny cardboard. "How did it go, Mr Potter? I must know!"

"I think it worked," Harry says thoughtfully, breathing in the heavy scent of dried flowers and vinyl and recalling his extraordinary duet with Lucius. "I could've done better, but you know how in-laws are."

"Oh, yes," Richenda agrees gloomily. "Well, I hope you enjoy these better. Perhaps they will be inspirational... I've heard you're branching out again, Mr Potter—glass, is it?"
Harry takes his heavy string-handled bag and blinks, mildly surprised. "Er, yeah... I didn't realise you knew about that."

Richenda laughs, shaking her glossy black hair. "Anyone who is anyone knows about it, I assure you."

Embarrassed, Harry scrubs at his hair and gestures toward the door. "Well, that's... hmm... I'd better get back to it, then. Thanks for these," he says hurriedly, holding up the bag and waving as he pulls open the door and steps out into the wintry sunshine of Diagon Alley.

"Goodbye, Mr Potter!" she calls after him.

He shakes his head and clatters over the cobbles to the 'shop. When he gets there, he finds an unfamiliar owl waiting, perching on the low wall and hopping territorially back and forth as a large ginger and white cat tries to curl up on the wall in a patch of sunlight. Harry watches for a moment, amused, as the cat flattens its ears and attempts to defend its position but, with a forceful hoot, the owl goes to nip it on the nose and it leaps down from the wall, hissing, and disappears behind the flapping sandwich board for the Dragondale Deli.

"Well, that was impressive," Harry says, sitting carefully beside the owl.

It hoots and puffs up its feathers before holding out its leg for Harry to take the message.

"Thank you," he says, unrolling the parchment. "I haven't got anything for you, I'm afraid, but...

Before Harry can finish his sentence, though, the owl has spread its wings and taken off. Bemused, Harry watches until it is no more than a brown dot in the distance, and then turns to the letter.

Dear Mr Potter,

My name is Larson Clearwater and I am the primary feature writer for the Arts and Culture section of the Daily Prophet. I would like to put together an article about you and your work, particularly your new abstract pieces and glassware. As such, would it be possible to come to your workshop some time this week to conduct an interview and take some photographs?

Please let me know when you have an opening; I understand that your schedule must be very busy indeed.

Yours in gratitude,

L. Clearwater.

"Arts and Culture?" Harry mutters incredulously. "Me? That's ridiculous."

"Oww," says the ginger cat, sticking its head out from the middle of the sandwich board and glancing twitchily around, possibly for the belligerent owl.

"Well, you tell them that," he sighs, looking at the letter again, just in case it might have changed somehow.

The cat flicks its tail and blinks large green eyes at Harry. Apparently, it has no more to say on the
subject. Harry shoves Mr Clearwater's letter into the bag with his records and gets to his feet. He heads for the 'shop, stretching out his sore arm muscles and preparing for an afternoon of hard work.

Draco will have an opinion, no doubt.

As it turns out, when Draco reluctantly releases the death grip on his teacup to squint at the letter, he merely laughs, passes it back to Harry and says, "I was beginning to worry—you haven't been in the *Prophet* for almost two months."

Harry accepts the letter back and slumps onto the worn leather sofa, pulling his feet up onto the cushions and wrapping the crisp parchment around his fingers as he thinks. Finally, unable to think of a reason why not, Harry writes his acceptance, advising Mr Clearwater that a Saturday would be best. After all, if he's going to do this weird, weird thing, he's going to need help.

Help arrives just before nine o'clock on the following Saturday morning, in the form of a vividly-dressed Maura, who practically bounces out of the fireplace to meet him.

"Come on, Uncle Harry, we're going to be late!"

Ginny, stepping out onto the hearthrug behind her daughter, rolls her eyes. "Calm down, madam, before you make yourself sick. Or explode." She turns to Harry, hitching her huge bag up on her shoulder. "I've heard nothing but 'we're going to be in the paper' since last week. And it's all your fault," she says, flashing Harry a wry smile.

"Sorry. It's all part of my strategy—the more time they spend taking pictures of her, the less time they have to ask me stupid questions."

Ginny laughs. "If only all strategies were so foolproof. Maybe then I'd have some confidence about beating the Harpies today. Or even just not getting trashed by them, to be honest," she admits, sighing.

"You have a home-ground advantage, Mummy," Maura pipes up. "And your Seeker is better than their Seeker."

Ginny grins at Harry and drops to her knees to hug her daughter tightly. "Thank you. Keep thinking good thoughts. And don't get in Uncle Harry's way, okay?" She straightens up, ruffling Maura's hair. "I'll pick her up after the match."

"We're going for ice cream," Maura informs Harry. "Me and Mummy and Daddy."

"Chocolate and candlewax? Fudge and carrot? Lamb and strawberry?" Harry teases.

Maura pulls a face. "You are very silly sometimes," she says gravely, and behind her, her mother barely manages to conceal her amusement. Harry sets his hands on his hips and lifts an eyebrow.

"I'm going to go," Ginny says loudly, pointing at the fireplace and patting her bag. "Players to go, places to yell at... erm, motivate... or something," she stumbles, almost dropping her Floo powder and giggling her way into the green flames.

Harry and Maura exchange glances.

"Do you really think I'm silly?" he asks after a moment.
Maura blinks large dark eyes up at him. "A bit."

"Is that a bad thing?" he asks, aware that this is the real question, the one he's been wondering about.

She frowns and her freckled nose wrinkles in confusion. "No," she says slowly, as though it's obvious.

Harry smiles. "Good. Shall we go and get our pictures taken?"

***~*~***

"Do you like my dress?" Maura asks some time later as she and Harry sit side by side on a workbench in the much-cleaner-than-usual workshop, waiting for Mr Clearwater to arrive.

Harry looks, taking in the inevitably scarlet garment with its pretty buttoned collar and embroidered ring of snails around the bottom of the skirt. "Very fancy," he pronounces. "Do you like mine?"

Maura laughs. "You're not wearing a dress! But I like your jumper," she admits, reaching out to stroke the soft, jade green wool of Harry's sleeve.

"Thank you. It's Uncle Draco's. He seemed to think it was the best colour to wear for having my photograph taken," he confides, mouth twitching at the memory of Draco's last words before he had dashed out for some kind of meeting: *Not that I care, of course, but you should wear this one or this one*, followed by a tiny smirk and a careless clatter of hangers and heavy fabric on top of Harry's sleepy form before he had stalked out of the room in a whisk of leather and stripes.

"Oh," Maura says, puzzled. She glances down at her dress again, kicking out the skirt so that it swishes around her knees. "Daddy got this for me. Mummy was not very happy at all," she says darkly.

Harry chews his lip. "Why not?"

"It came from Twilfitt's," Maura says, a meaningful look in her dark eyes.

"You've lost me," Harry says. "Sorry."

"That means it was very expensive," she informs him.

"Ah, of course," Harry says. And then: "I thought your dad didn't like colours."

Maura looks up from where she has been brushing an invisible speck from her dress. "He doesn't like them for him. He likes them for me." She shrugs.

"That's because he loves you," he says, gripping the cold edge of the bench hard. Maura frowns lightly. "Just trust me."

"Okay," Maura says, almost in a whisper, and then there's a knock at the door.

"Ready?" Harry slides to his feet and flattens his hair pointlessly.

"Yep."
"I suppose I should let them in, then," Harry says, barely resisting the urge to spell the door transparent and get a good look at the interlopers in advance. Difficult though it is to break his years-old distrustful habit, especially when it comes to reporters, Harry finds a smile and reaches for the door handle. Things are different here. This man isn't going bite him, especially with a child present.

Maura leans forward eagerly on the bench, completely unaware that she's functioning as a safety device for a grown man. "Go on," she whispers.

"Alright," he mutters, pulling a face at the door for a satisfying fraction of a second before reinstating the smile and pulling the handle. "Hello, Mr Clearwater."

The man on the doorstep grins at him, showing bright white teeth in a tanned, slightly lined face. "How does it go, Mr Potter, how does it go?" he inquires, almost bellowing into Harry's face, the delivery somewhat at odds with his frightfully refined accent.

"It, er... certainly goes," Harry manages, stepping back and allowing Mr Clearwater into the workshop, followed by a vast, pink-skinned mountain of a man whom Harry had somehow failed to notice until he had moved.

Now, he trundles slowly around the 'shop without a word, cradling his camera against his chest and sweeping the space with curious blue eyes that are just visible underneath a messy blond thatch of hair. Maura watches him, apparently fascinated, from her perch atop the workbench.

"Don't mind Karlo, Mr Potter, he's just getting a feel for the place. The light, and such," Mr Clearwater calls, removing his heavy winter cloak to reveal a natty three-piece suit in tweed. He throws the cloak over one arm and removes a copper pocket watch from his waistcoat. Squints at it through square, wire-rimmed glasses that are not dissimilar to Harry's, and sighs. "Time marches on! Karlo, must you?"

Wondering just when he's expected to get a word in, Harry turns to see the gargantuan photographer standing precariously on a workbench and poking at the skylight above with a sausage-like finger. He's not worried; those benches seem to be pretty solid, after all, but Mr Clearwater's face is a picture of exasperation.

"Leave Mr Potter's windows alone!" he cries.

"Good light in here," Karlo opines in a soft voice. He glances at Harry before he climbs down. "Sorry."

"No problem," Harry shrugs. "If you're going to take my picture, it might as well be in good light."

"Indeed, indeed!" Mr Clearwater agrees, striding into the pool of morning sunshine and tipping his head back into it until his salt-and-pepper hair sparkles. "Wonderful. Oh, hello!" he says suddenly, grinning at Maura. "What a fantastically spiffy dress."

"Thanks," Maura says, beaming.

"Sorry," Harry jumps in hastily, "Mr Clearwater, Mr Karlo, this is my niece, Maura. My little muse."

Karlo makes an indistinct noise and nods his huge head in recognition.
"Hello, Maura," Mr Clearwater says gravely, shaking her hand. "Just Karlo, though, and you really needn't call me Mr Clearwater; Lars is fine."

"As is Harry," Harry adds quickly.

"So we all know each other!" Mr Clearwater declares, grinning again. "Lovely. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Harry, I must admit. Ever since Penny told me that she ran into you at one of those Ministry functions not long ago."

Harry hesitates, chewing his lip as he thinks. Penny. Of course. Penelope Clearwater, Percy's Hogwarts girlfriend, is this springy individual's daughter. Better say something. "It's lovely to meet you, too," he says, crossing his fingers behind his back and hoping that flattery really will get him anywhere. "Penelope said some wonderful things about you. She's very proud."

Mr Clearwater laughs. "Ah, if only children could say such things to our faces."

Harry smiles, feeling a dull twinge in his chest as he thinks immediately of James, who would probably rather set fire to himself than give Harry a direct compliment.

"True. But children always mean their compliments, which is nice on the odd occasion that we get them," Harry says at last, startled by his own candour. Astonished, in fact, but there's something very genuine about Mr Clearwater—Lars—that's twisting all his views on the press out of shape.

"Oh, well put," he enthuses, beaming and touching Harry lightly on the elbow. "Mind if I take that down? No? Ah, now, where is it?" he mumbles, dipping into each of his many pockets in turn, extracting a handkerchief, his wand, his pocket watch, which he stares at for a moment, before stuffing it back into his waistcoat and re-emerging, triumphant, with a sleek silver notebook and matching pencil.

Harry's surprise must be clear on his face, because Lars laughs raucously as he flips open the notebook and begins to scribble, hand moving across the page at a terrific rate.

"None of that Quick Quotes nonsense here, Harry. Karlo and I like to do things the old fashioned way, you see. We've been working together for many a year, haven't we, Karlo?"

"Yes," says Karlo, without looking up from where he is setting up his camera, watched with rapt curiosity by Maura.

"He doesn't say much," Lars advises, gently chewing on the end of his pencil.

"I hadn't noticed," Harry says drily, suppressing a smile. He thinks he may be starting to enjoy himself.

"I suspect I've enough words for the both of us," Lars confesses. "It's rather exciting to be investigating the art world at last—I've spent twenty-seven years with the Prophet, almost all of them in Food and Drink." He sighs and shrugs tweedy shoulders. "Time for someone else to review those restaurants."

"I'm afraid I'm not very exciting," Harry says. "But a change is always good."

"Oh, it is, Harry. Although the reviewing game isn't without its charms," Lars muses, fixing Harry with a conspiratorial eye. "Have you tried the Flailing Lizard on Carnaby Street? Muggle place, of a
fashion—owned by a witch and her husband... Muggle, very nice, though, lovely chap. It's all very wizard-friendly and they've a glorious oriental menu..." He stops, shaking his head and grinning at Harry. "Sorry about that—occupational hazard! Shall we get on?"

Over the next two hours, Harry answers—or, at least, attempts to answer—a mountain of questions from the seemingly tireless Lars, who, despite being at least twenty years Harry's senior, bubbles over with an infectious energy that sweeps Harry along well past the usual point of 'fuck this, I need a coffee break'. The questions range from the undemanding ("What's your favourite sort of wood to work with these days, Harry?") to the intricate ("What does your work mean to you? Is this change of style indicative of some shift in another area of your life?") and everything in between.

Karlo, meanwhile, lumbers around in the background, barely making a sound as he repositions his equipment and clicks away, mumbling short but gently-voiced replies to Maura's incessant inquiries. Taken though she is with this quiet giant of a man, she does remember her pledge to protect Harry from the scary reporter at regular intervals, and slips away from Karlo's side to insinuate herself between Harry and Mr Clearwater, throwing in her opinion as often as she can.

"So, you must be Harry's very valuable assistant," Lars says at last, looking down warmly at her from his seat on top of one of the workbenches. Harry has tried to persuade him to sit in the perfectly decent wooden chair he has dragged out and cleaned for this very occasion, but Lars won't hear of it. So they sit, opposite one another but some eight feet apart, legs dangling and faces bathed in sunlight as Harry mumbles and gesticulates and slowly begins to talk about his work with confidence—it is, at last, his work, and not that belonging to his other self, and it makes all the difference in the world.

"I am," Maura says, flashing her most charming smile. "When I'm not at school."

"I see," Lars nods, scribbling. "And which school is that? I don't want to leave anything out."

"Ottery St Catchpole Primary. But I'm going to go to Hogwarts," she adds hurriedly, blinking big eyes up at Lars as though daring him to contradict her. Harry turns away to hide his smile, just in time to hear the click-flash of Karlo's camera.

"Good one, that," he mumbles.

"I think what a lot of people would like to know, especially with all these marvellous abstract pieces, is what inspires your work?" Lars says, and when Harry turns back to look at him, he's scrutinising his pocket watch again. Perhaps it's a nervous tic. Harry wonders what Draco would have to say about it.

"What inspires me?" Harry repeats, playing for time and picking at the hem of his—Draco's—jumper. He doesn't know how to answer that. He just makes things; there isn't all that much thinking involved. But perhaps that's the point. He screws up his anxiety and grips the edge of the bench, cold fingers pressing against pitted wood. "Anything. Everything. The weather... the seasons... my—a child, a friend, a feeling; frustration's a good one," he admits, urged on by the warm crinkling around Lars' eyes. "Anything that gets the blood going, really. I don't set out with a particular plan in mind; I just set everything up and let go."

"I imagine that's a real thrill compared to the absolute precision that's required to create one of your usual pieces," Lars says effusively, volume increasing with enthusiasm and silver pencil almost flying out of his hand as he waves it around.

"Yeah," Harry laughs. "It's definitely a very different feeling. And it's important to take chances, I
think. In work... and life. It's so easy to get stuck, let things pass you by..." Harry coughs. "By which I mean that it's important to try new stuff."

"Risk!" cries Lars, grinning. "Risk is the juice of life!"

"Well, exactly," Harry stumbles, face heating.

"How about some shots of you and your glorious risky pieces?" Lars suggests, hopping down from the workbench and tucking away his notebook and pencil. "And Miss Maura, of course."

"Mn?" Maura looks up from where she's crouching beside Karlo, who is showing her a whole rainbow of different coloured lenses. "I like that one," she whispers, pointing.

"Come on, Maura Fedora," Harry says, beckoning to her. "Let's pose next to the weird stuff."

"Splendid!" Lars chivvies them into position, referring to his watch along the way. "Why don't we have the artist and his assistant behind this beautiful glass bowl? What do you think, Karlo?"

"Yes," says Karlo, drawing down his big blond eyebrows in concentration. And then, in the longest sentence Harry has so far heard him utter, he adds: "Fine piece of glass, that, Mr Potter."

"Thanks," Harry says, unexpectedly touched.

"Wonderful," Lars murmurs, standing out of the way and clutching his pocket watch in both hands.

Maura giggles and holds on to Harry's arm. He drags in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of sawdust and wax and the cooling glass from his earlier demonstration, the citrus freshness of Draco that somehow clings to his jumper, and the roasting onions and baking bread from the deli across the cobbles. It's a tiny perfect moment, and he wants to hold onto it, smoke between his fingers; his smile stretches wide and genuine as he puts his arm around Maura and squeezes.

"Keep still," grunts Karlo.

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Lars leaves Harry with a firm handshake, clasping Harry's hand between both of his warm, dry palms and grinning earnestly into Harry's face, while Karlo nods politely and gives Maura a pat on the shoulder that, despite clearly being executed with care, sends Maura stumbling across the stone flags with the sheer force of it. This does nothing to dampen Maura's admiration of the man, however, and she just glows with delight as the two of them stand in the doorway and wave goodbye to the men from the Daily Prophet.

Harry is informed that the article should appear in the paper the following weekend. As it turns out, he is beaten to the press by Draco, whose Fitzwilliam exposé is finally submitted on the last Thursday in January, ready to scorch Friday's front pages and shake the foundations of the wizarding political community.

"I'm not happy with it," Draco sighs, folding the morning edition savagely and dropping it onto the kitchen table. He leans back precariously in his chair and taps his fingers against his green and white striped tea cup. "There was so much more I could've had on him, I know I could, but he was starting to suspect, and... well, people like Fitzwilliam have very few scruples when it comes to eliminating evidence." He shoots Harry a significant look, which Harry does his best to return without seeming
as though he's experiencing some kind of facial spasm. "I didn't have much of a choice. It's not as strong as I'd have liked, though."

"You did right," Harry says, reaching for the newspaper and opening it out on his lap. "You had to run with what you had."

"Publish or perish," Draco shrugs, draining his cup and setting it down.

Harry nods. He reaches for a buttered toast triangle and crunches it thoughtfully as he reads.

On the same day that he spoke in front of the Wizengamot, the Minister for Magic, and a watching crowd of hundreds, announcing strict new policies on the operation of the Auror Department for his 'Clear, Safe, Strong' scheme, Franz Fitzwilliam had clandestine face-to-face meetings with two underground groups, including the Slovenian 'Požar Riba', one of the organisations featured prominently on Fitzwilliam's infamous 2015 'Danger List'.

Harry examines several grainy but unmistakeable photographs of Fitzwilliam, his one-time, somewhere-boss, deep in conversation with several different groups of men, some of whom, Harry is horrified to note, he recognises from his field days as very dangerous individuals indeed. He stares, suffused with hot pride for Draco, who he knows has risked far more than his safety to take these pictures. To collect this information and write these words.

"He's fucked," he says, tearing his eyes away from the paper and looking up at Draco. "There'll be an official investigation now, and he'll lose his job... at the very least."

"Good grief, let's hope so. I like to think that I can still cause a bit of a stir."

"I don't think you'll ever lose that ability. You were probably born with it."

"I'm not denying that it's the Malfoy way, but I think you're responsible for my obsession with truth these days," Draco says, returning his chair legs to the floor and biting decisively into a toast triangle stolen from Harry's plate.

Harry says nothing but smiles, recalling those heated words and bright eyes in the dark that are almost real memories now.

"You know," Draco confides, pushing back his black knitted sleeve and examining the harsh letters and lines against his pale skin. "Even after all these years, I like to think that every bastard I investigate is another couple of dance steps on Voldemort's grave," he says, eyes narrowing contemptuously as the name leaves his lips.

Harry's heart slams against his ribcage, swelling with approval, and he allows himself a fraction of a second to enjoy the startled widening of Draco's eyes as he abandons the paper, wipes his buttery fingers on his jeans, hauls Draco to his feet and kisses him hard.

**~*~**

By the time the Saturday *Prophet* arrives, all anyone can talk about is Draco's article. Fitzwilliam himself seems to have evaporated completely, only helping to lend further weight to the veracity of Draco's words, and the Ministry Spokeswizard is falling over himself in his efforts to assure the public that a thorough investigation has already begun.
Lars' article, tucked away in the Arts and Culture section, is somewhat overshadowed, but Harry doesn't mind in the least. He's bursting with pride for Draco and has absolutely no interest in being the centre of attention. Draco, however, is far happier to see Harry in print, and seems to forget about all of his dissatisfaction with his own work when he flips to the relevant section and sees Karlo's big colour photographs. Harry looks with him, chin on his shoulder, and he's impressed. The man of few words is, as he should have known, an artist in his own right.

Harry has never particularly enjoyed having his photograph taken, and neither has he ever relished the results, but these pictures are something else; full of warmth, genuine smiles and beautiful, vivid colours, they light up the double-page spread and breathe further life into Lars' effervescent, praise-filled words.

"Why is there always one of you trying to look sultry?" Draco murmurs, mouth twitching at one corner.

Harry snorts. "Which one?"

Draco taps a pale finger against a shot of Harry during his glass-blowing demonstration. Granted, there's a lot of smoke and fire, and his eyes are narrowed against the heat as he turns the pipe slowly—it is quite a dramatic picture, but there's no way on this earth that he was, or is, or would ever try to look sultry, for crying out loud.

"I'm concentrating!" he protests.

"Concentrating on arousing your middle-aged fanbase," Draco mutters, smirking widely now.

"Fuck off," Harry says, stretching out on the creaky sofa and nudging Draco with his knee.

"Language," Draco says airily, examining a picture of Maura, grinning and kneeling beside the Lily sculpture, which is almost as big as her.

"I didn't promise not to swear," Harry points out. "She looks great, doesn't she?"

Draco nods. "I think this one's rather good of both of you, actually." He indicates the largest photograph, right under the banner "Harry Potter Takes a Turn'.

Harry watches his photo-self wrap an arm around photo-Maura as they both stand behind the huge, multi-coloured glass bowl. For a moment, they stand neatly, smiling, the image of good behaviour, before they both grin up at each other and dissolve into laughter.

"That's brilliant," he says, wanting to reach out and take the photograph. Keep it with him. He makes a mental note to buy his own copy as soon as he gets to Diagon Alley. This one, after all, is Draco's, and Harry suspects that it is only a matter of time before it makes its way into the album marked '2018'.

"When I heard that this talented and unusual artist was making one of his periodical returns to his roots, eschewing his usual elaborately carved furniture and delving into the abstract, I had to get involved. Potter responded to my owl with impressive swiftness and invited me to his Diagon Alley workshop for a morning, so, last Saturday, that is exactly what the ever faithful Karlo and I did. Truly, Mr Potter, 37, and his wonderful assistant, Maura Zabini-Weasley, 7, are enchanting individuals," Draco reads, one eyebrow arched in amusement. "You've got this Clearwater character wrapped around your little finger, haven't you?" He pauses. Frowns. "Clearwater... Clearwater...
isn't he the Food and Drink bloke?"

"He was," Harry agrees, glancing at Lars' beaming by-line picture. "He's very excited to be trying something new, what can I say? Nice man, actually."

"I urge Potter-fans and art-lovers alike to get in on this phase while it lasts—take yourself down to Diagon Alley and get your hands on something strange and beautiful for your home. And while you're there, why not drop into the Dragondale Deli next door, where you can sample the best pumpkin sourdough this side of the Thames," Draco says, reading a section from the end of the article. "He's not forgotten he's a food writer, then."

"No. He gave me a tip, actually," Harry says, stretching and following Draco as he tucks the newspaper under his arm and heads for the study.

"Excellent," Draco calls, stalking along the ground floor hallway and out of sight around a corner. "We're celebrating with Ginevra and Blaise tonight, and it's your turn to pick a restaurant."

*Thank goodness for Lars*, Harry thinks, picking up his pace to catch up with Draco. As he crosses the tiled entrance hall, though, his knee, well-behaved for several days now, flicks out from beneath him and pitches him, hands and good knee first, into the hard floor.

"Fuck's sake," he mutters, catching his breath and wincing slightly. Feeling his bones creak.

Slowly, he picks himself up, balancing with one hand on the cool wall and flexing his knee with care.

"Are you alright?" Draco says, emerging from the study with the '2018' album dangling at his side.

"Stupid knee," Harry grumbles, and Draco's nose wrinkles sympathetically. He fiddles with the quill in his hand and then stows it away behind his ear.

"Cup of tea, then? And then I have to add my thoughts." He indicates the album. "Very important thoughts. Grave, serious thoughts of great consequence..." he mutters, taking off down the corridor toward the kitchen without waiting for a response.

Harry hangs back for a moment, hypnotised by the movements of the stairwell spider as it scuttles between several of the upper banisters, stringing a new outpost for its already imposing web.

"Good for you," Harry murmurs, taking a few backward steps before he heads down to the kitchen to rescue his cup of tea from Draco. He likes spiders, and this one—like himself, he supposes—has come a long way.

When he reaches the kitchen he finds Arthur's head in the fire.

"Wonderful article, Harry," he enthuses. "Any chance of coming round to have another go with the glass?"

"Absolutely," Harry says, turning neatly and swiping his cup out of Draco's hand just as it touches his lips. "Make yourself another one, you cheeky... er, Slytherin," he finishes, remembering Arthur. "Anyway, yes, please do come over but I think we'd better leave it 'til next weekend—I have a feeling that today might be a bit busier than usual."
By mid-morning, Harry knows he had been right to be cautious. Lars' article has attracted the customers in their droves, filling the 'shop with an interesting mixture of potential buyers, curious Prophet readers, and groups of ladies, some old enough to be Harry's grandmother, who seem content just to watch him work and chatter delightedly over his sculptures in little knots. He leaves the workshop, exhausted, at six-thirty, and hurries back to number twelve to wash away the day and find something Draco-suitable to wear for dinner.

Mindful of the colour combination rules, at least as far as he understands them, Harry lingers in front of the open wardrobes for several minutes, pretending he doesn't hear Draco's impatient muttering from the bathroom, or the hissing of spray bottles and squeak of cloths that lets him know that Draco is cleaning something as he waits.

"If you get bleach on your new trousers, I won't be accepting the blame," Harry calls, pushing Frank out of the way so that he can unhook a dark red shirt from the rail and examine it.

"Not all of us feel the need to fling fluids everywhere when we clean," Draco says, stepping into the bathroom doorway, cloth held well clear of his immaculate outfit.

Harry pulls a face at Draco in the mirror and shrugs into the red shirt. "Not all of us are terminally smug."

"How you wound me. Try my brown jacket with that shirt," Draco suggests, pointing. "No, not that one. The one with Frankfurto's head in the breast pocket."

"Obviously."

**~*~**

The night is crisp and beautiful as Harry, Draco, Ginny and Blaise make their unhurried way through London to the Flailing Lizard, talking and laughing under a velvety deep blue sky. Ginny's spindly high heels clack along the pavement as she keeps impressive pace with her taller companions and Blaise's rumbling laughter carries on cool air that's heavy with woodsmoke and the mingled savoury aromas of the restaurants they pass. Relaxed and warm-tired, Harry scuffs along beside Ginny and makes no effort to defend himself as Blaise now takes on the mantle of teasing him about his 'sultry' photograph in the Prophet.

"He's just jealous that he couldn't look sultry if he tried," Ginny opines, tucking her arm through Harry's as they walk.

"Of course. I'm a man of a thousand expressions."

"Perhaps I should've married you instead," Ginny muses mock-thoughtfully, just as a light gust of wind whips her floral-scented hair against his face. His heart clenches.

"Yeah," he mumbles, throat dry. "I wonder what that would've been like."

Ginny laughs. It's a great laugh. "Terrible, I imagine... oh, no."

"What?" Harry frowns, following her eyes, and then there it is. Of course it is. It's everywhere.

Goldstein, dressed in black from head to toe, is heading up the pavement toward them. He is still at least a hundred yards away, but Ginny's sharp eyes have allowed Harry to observe him in secret for a
moment or two, and that is quite long enough for him to notice the slender, dark-haired man at Goldstein's side, one arm slung around his waist as they walk.

Blaise and Draco, heavily embroiled as they are in a discussion that involves a lot of head shaking and hand waving, have not yet noticed, but Harry and Ginny slow almost to a standstill as Goldstein and his companion approach.

"I hate to say this, Harry, but he looks—"

"Quite a lot like me?" Harry mutters, squinting at the man's worn jeans and scruffy hair.

"Oh, that's weird," Ginny breathes.

"What's the hold up?" Draco demands, finally detecting the break in proceedings; he and Blaise have finished their conversation and ground to a halt behind Harry and Ginny.

"It's that ridiculous man, look," Blaise cries, jabbing Draco in the ribs with a vast elbow. "And he appears to have a Harry-a-like. How very odd."

Draco sighs and covers his eyes for a fraction of a second in exasperation. "As usual, Blaise, your summarising talents are second to none."

"We're not just going to stand here, are we?" Ginny asks, wrapping her coat more tightly around herself and shifting her feet on the pavement. "I'm starving, and to be honest, it's going to take something much more interesting than him to keep me away from my dinner."

"I'm with Ginevra," Draco says, flicking a glance at Goldstein and his friend as they cross a quiet side road, apparently unaware of the discussion taking place further down the street. "Ever the classy lady."

Ginny snorts. "Cheers, Draco. Shall we move on, then? Satay chicken?" she says, wiggling her fingers. "Pad Thai? Crispy noodles with—"

"Never mind, I think he's seen you," Blaise interrupts.

"Bugger it," Ginny mutters.

"He might not have seen us if we hadn't been standing here having a mothers' meeting," Draco says, not unreasonably.

"What's a mother's meeting?" Blaise wants to know.

Draco shrugs, tucking his face into his scarf. "No idea."

Attempting to block them all out, Harry turns away, just in time to see Goldstein's eyes lock with his. He immediately disentangles himself from the dark-haired man (who, on closer inspection, Harry thinks is younger and much better looking than himself) and shoves him neatly onto his own side of the pavement in one swift movement. Without breaking eye contact, he flattens an invisible crease out of his jacket and turns up his smile several notches.

Harry watches, mouth slightly open, and it's several seconds before he is able to drag his eyes away from Goldstein and focus on the rejected young man, who is standing on the edge of the kerb,
flicking large, distressed eyes between Harry and Goldstein and running a hand fitfully through his hair. Heart hammering, Harry wants to hex Goldstein's arse into the gutter, shake this man's hand and tell him to get out while he can, that he can do so much better. He doesn't need to know the man to know that.

As it is, he just stands there as though he's caught in Devil's Snare, unable to look away from the startled young man, vaguely hearing the shuffling of feet and creaking of coats behind him as Draco, Ginny and Blaise look on in anxious silence.

"Harry," Goldstein says at last, breaking the hush, "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Still feeling somewhat dazed, Harry looks at him. "Here? Here on the pavement, right next to this streetlight?" he demands, flinging out an arm in demonstration, already feeling his nerves starting to fray. "Are you sure? Because you definitely seem to have a talent for turning up wherever I happen to be! Why is that?"

"Harry, really, there's no need to get yourself tied in knots," Goldstein says smoothly.

"Can't say I have any interest in your advice," Harry retorts. "Especially not now I've seen how you treat your dates."

When he glances pointedly at the dark-haired young man, Goldstein's eyes follow for a moment and then narrow dismissively. "It's nothing like that, Harry. It's nothing."

The man makes an indistinct sound and shakes his head slowly, as though trying to work out just why he is still standing there.

"You're incredible," Harry mutters, glaring at Goldstein. "And not in the good way."

"Come on, Harry, let's go," Ginny says softly, laying a gentle hand on his back.


The words alone would have been enough, but there's something in his tone, something so fucking contemptuous, that sets Harry's insides alight with rage. Within seconds, he has drawn his wand and taken several steps closer to Goldstein.

"Enough! What do I have to fucking do?" he yells, breath ripped out in rags, wand held inches from Goldstein's face in a steady hand.

The dark-haired man takes an instinctive step back into the road, but Harry barely notices.

Goldstein stares back, eyes blank and breath coming quickly now.

Harry drops his voice. "Leave him alone. Leave us alone. Do you understand?"

"Harry," Goldstein whispers, and Harry closes his eyes, gripping his wand tightly. He's not sure exactly what he's going to do now, but his self-control is dissolving fast.

He jumps at the firm hand on his shoulder.
"He's not worth a second more of your time, Harry," comes Blaise's deep voice from behind him. "Or yours, young man," he adds, and Harry opens his eyes just in time to see the reluctant agreement on the face of the man in the road; he sighs roughly and casts a brief but promising scowl in Goldstein's direction, and then Blaise is steering Harry away, around the two men and along the pavement, one powerful arm wrapped around his shoulder.

He doesn't look back, and even as they round the next corner with Draco and Ginny clattering along behind them, whispering furiously, his ire is starting to fade away. It is replaced by a hot, humming irritation that skitters through his veins and makes him stomp rather than walk, hands stuffed into pockets and head buzzing.

"I wouldn't have done him any serious damage, you know," he tells Blaise when he finally releases him. "Just a little hex. Just a tiny little one."

Blaise snorts. "I'm sure it would have been very satisfying to witness, too, but you'd only have felt horribly guilt-ridden about it in the morning—I know what you're like."

"I don't care. It would've been worth it," Harry sighs. "I feel like it's all my own fault anyway—you know, the way he is."

"You really do take responsibility for some ridiculous things," Blaise says, staring down at him from his great height and looking utterly baffled.

"No, really," Harry insists. "If I hadn't finally noticed what he was doing and called him out on it, would he have started behaving like... well... that?"

Blaise purses his lips thoughtfully. "I don't know. I do know, however, that you are in no way responsible for someone else's mental disturbance." He pauses, glancing behind himself. "Look at Draco—total frog-box material. Not your fault."

Harry laughs. He doesn't want to spend the whole night thinking about Anthony Goldstein. Ideally, he doesn't want to spend any further time thinking about Anthony Goldstein. Taking a deep breath, he twists around and catches Draco's eye.

"Stop that, Ginevra," he says, shaking his head and smiling at Harry. He's beautiful.

***~*~***

"These noodles are amazing," Ginny mumbles, holding her chopsticks at an angle and sucking several of the spicy strands into her mouth.

"I wouldn't know," Blaise says, lifting a dark eyebrow. "You didn't leave me any."

"You exaggerate. Anyway, you knew I was hungry," she points out, grinning and licking a spot of sauce from her bottom lip.

"I'm sure you won't starve, Blaise," Draco says, reaching for the last fishcake and casting a mock-disapproving glance at his friend's abdomen.

Blaise laughs. "I'm equally sure you won't ever stop holding your chopsticks like a quill," he shoots back, whipping out a surprisingly swift hand and stealing the fishcake from Draco; it's in his mouth before Draco even has time to protest, and, inevitably, when he does, it's because of the slight to his
table manners and not the pilfered food.

He stares at his chopstick grip and then scowls at Blaise; his eyes are narrowed and his eyebrows drawn down, but there is no malevolence there at all, just the kind of good-humoured, pointless umbrage that results from a combination of good friends, rice wine, laughter, and far too much food. The Flailing Lizard, full of dangling paper lanterns, tanks of exotic fish, and secret magical touches, like the tables that subtly adjust themselves to perfectly fit each party of diners, has so far been a roaring success.

"There is nothing wrong with the way I hold my chopsticks. If you're determined to pick on someone, why not pick on Harry—he's useless."

"Oh, thanks," Harry says, poking Draco's arm with the fork he picked up in defeat somewhere in the middle of the meal. He's never been great with chopsticks, and sees no need whatsoever to suffer for the sake of appearances.

"Poor Harry," Ginny mutters, picking up a dropped something from the tablecloth and holding it out to him like a consolation prize. "Noodle?"

"Mine," Blaise declares, sweeping the noodle into his mouth and then turning to Draco. "And no, because Harry knows his limitations. Harry doesn't have delusions of grandeur."

Harry laughs, partly at Blaise's accusation and partly at the horrified expression on Draco's face. Without thinking, he drapes his arm around Draco and presses a rough kiss to his cheek, savouring the familiar sharp scent of his skin and the faint drag of stubble against his lips, feeling the pull of Draco's smile and closing his eyes for a second, allowing himself to love being in love. It's easy.

"Don't mind him, Draco," Ginny puts in as the waitress comes over and begins to collect their empty plates and dishes. "When we're at home, he eats Cockroach Cluster in the bath."

"Gin!" Blaise exclaims, mouth dropping open theatrically.

The waitress makes a heroic attempt to hide her giggles but her shoulders are shaking as she walks away from the table, arms stacked with dishes.

"What is it with you and the bathtub?" Harry asks, already questioning the wisdom of the inquiry. He folds his arms on the table and leans on them, fixing Blaise with a curious eye.

"The bathtub is a wonderful place, Harry," Blaise rumbles, picking up the bottle of rice wine and refreshing each of the others' glasses, then sets it down.

"Oh, good grief, not this again," Draco sighs, reaching for the bottle and sloshing clear liquid into Blaise's glass.

"This indeed," Blaise confirms gravely, but Harry doesn't get to discover the nature of this because the waitress appears once more at the edge of the table. She sets down a small plate and then hesitates, eyes flitting anxiously between the four of them and slender, black-nail-polished fingers repeatedly clicking a pen at her side.

"Was everything alright for you?" she asks, trying not to look at Blaise. Harry doesn't blame her.

"It was lovely, especially the noodles," Ginny says, tucking her hair behind her ear and beaming up
at the waitress. "I don't suppose I can leave my husband here?"

The waitress blinks. "No, madam. We don't have a bath here. I'm sorry," she says, and disappears out of sight behind a fish tank before anyone has a chance to respond.

At the table, it is only a matter of seconds before Draco, Harry and Ginny burst into snickers and giggles. Blaise, who is still pretending to be offended and doing a rather poor job, reaches for the plate and distributes the fortune cookies.

Harry takes his, snaps the crunchy shell and extracts his slip of paper. "When walking the road less travelled, watch out for unexpected bears."

"It is very difficult to find a cat in a darkened room, especially if it's not there," Ginny reads. "Well, that's good to know."

Draco coughs. "Inflated heads gather cobwebs from humble ceilings."

Blaise hoots with laughter. "That is a personal message for you, my friend." He ignores Draco's rude hand gesture and peers at his own slip of paper. "Your wife is dying to give you a foot-rub... really?" he murmurs, turning to Ginny.

"Keep dreaming," Ginny says, smirking. "I have better things to rub than your feet."

"I'm going to have nightmares," Draco complains, draining his small glass and peering into it. "What does it really say?"

"It says: 'your patience will be rewarded.' Perhaps with a foot-rub," he adds hopefully.

"You're a horrible man, but I love you," Ginny declares, crunching into her fortune cookie.

Harry snorts. He chews off one corner of his cookie and washes it down with rice wine. Across the table, Blaise dispatches his own in two large bites. Draco, however, is poking at the halves of his cookie with suspicion.

Ginny sighs. "Draco, if you don't eat it, it won't come true."

"Well then, it's not very good magic, is it?" Draco frowns. "And anyway, I don't want my head to gather cobwebs."

"Never mind that," Harry puts in. "It's fortune cookie magic. It's confusing and mystical."

Draco's lips twist into something that looks very much like a pout. "It doesn't taste very nice."

"Eat it," Blaise intones, widening his eyes until the bright whites are visible all around his dark irises.

"I don't want to."

"It tastes fine. In fact, it doesn't really taste of anything," Ginny says.

"Yes, because that's a real selling point. Anyway, it does; it tastes like hard toast with sugar on it."

Ginny gasps. "Ooh, toast! We haven't toasted yet!"
"Does this mean I don't have to eat the vile thing?" Draco asks hopefully.

"Draco, just eat it. I'm sure you've had worse things in your mouth," Harry sighs, reaching for the bill as the glasses are refilled once more.

Ginny leans across the table to slap Harry's palm, grinning; Draco rolls his eyes and stuffs one half of the fortune cookie into his mouth.

"Good boy," Blaise announces.

Draco grimaces as he swallows. "Why am I your friend again?"

"Because we love you!" Blaise sings, flashing a huge white smile and holding up his tiny glass. "To Draco: investigator supreme, defender of truth, scourge of the corrupt!"

Draco snorts, but lifts his glass to clink with the others'. Harry secretly thinks he looks rather pleased.

"To Draco!"

"And to Harry, for appearing in the paper and turning on thousands of grandmothers with his smouldering good looks," Ginny adds, laughing into her glass and exchanging grins with Draco.

"To Harry's smouldering good looks!" Blaise bellows.

Harry drains his glass and decides not to turn around and find out how many people are looking. After a minute or two, he rises somewhat unsteadily from the table and heads for the bar to pay, gazing at the darting fish all around him as he moves through the restaurant.

"Hi," he says, smiling at the young waitress and then glancing downwards to rummage through the contents of his pockets. "I'd like to pay for our table..." He looks up and the waitress has disappeared. "Enjoying yourself?" he sighs, examining Boris' neat white shirt and his black apron emblazoned with a sparkling bronze lizard.

"Don't mind a bit of variety, young man, you know that." Boris rests his large, age-thickened hands on the dark marble and fixes Harry with his milky eyes. "We've all got to try things."

"Yeah," Harry agrees, smiling. He slips his hands into his pockets and fidgets with the fold of paper money in his left and the Galleons and Sickles in his right.

"An' we've got to know when we've seen all we can," Boris continues. "When it's time to go."

Harry stares at him, insides turning cold. "What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm sayin', lad," Boris says, voice a little softer than usual.

Harry glances back across the restaurant to the table where Draco, Ginny and Blaise are laughing and finishing off the bottle of rice wine. He feels sick. Lightheaded, heart racing, he forces himself to look back at Boris.

He swallows dryly. "I have to leave?"
"This was only a glimpse, son. A glimpse is temporary by definition."

Harry grips the edge of the bar. "Yeah, I... I know. I know that, it's just..." He takes a deep breath, attempting, with limited success, to pull himself under control. "When?" he manages.

"You'll be home by the mornin'."

Feeling himself drop, Harry leans on the bar and scrubs at his hair. "Tomorrow? You can't!"

"You thought you'd never settle 'ere, didn't you?" Boris says softly. "Couldn' figure out what you were doin' with 'im. Come a long way, I'd say."

Harry looks up. "Is that all you've got to say? That I've come a long way? You put me here, you left me here, and now I'm in love with him," he says fiercely, eyes stinging as he glares at the old man. "Did you hear that? I love him! And now that's it? Now?"

For a moment, Boris says nothing. Frozen, Harry listens to the harsh sound of his own breathing and the clinking and murmuring of the restaurant behind him.

Boris rubs an unhurried hand across his vast beard. "I've no desire to see you upset, young man. This was about seein' what could've been... an' the rules state that when you've seen that—which you quite clearly 'ave—then the glimpse has run its course, you understand?"

"No," Harry snaps. "I'm not ready! I'm not... I'm just not..." His voice fades away to a rasp and he rubs his eyes before pushing himself upright with both hands flat against the marble. "My kids—are my kids okay?"

Boris nods, and the tears prickling in Harry's eyes spill over unchecked for a moment before he swipes them away with the back of his hand.

"They'll never know you were gone," Boris says, and Harry is astonished to be handed a clean linen napkin from a stack on the bar.

"Thanks." He wipes roughly at his eyes and takes a shaky breath. James, Al, and Lily. And his Ginny—the other Ginny. Harry looks back at the table again, heart aching with confusion. This Gin, the fun, happy, satisfied version, is making a napkin hat and arranging it on her husband's head.

"What am I going to do?"

Boris shakes his head, sending his whiskers swaying. "Only you know that."

"You're incredibly unhelpful sometimes, you know?"

"It's not my job to tell you what you want, young man," Boris says.

"What is your job, exactly?"

"You ought to get back to your table," the old man says, neatly ignoring the question, as Harry had half-expected he would. "This one's on me."

Harry laughs, a little hysterically. "So, you're completely messing with my mind and my emotions and my fucking everything, but you're going to buy me dinner? Brilliant. Yeah... brilliant," he
mumbles, turning his back on Boris and forcing himself to walk back to the table. Incredibly tempted though he is to dash for the bathroom and Apparate to somewhere safe, somewhere silent, he doesn't want to waste a single second of his time with these people.

"Everything alright?" Draco asks, passing Harry his jacket as they all start to gather their things and leave the table.

"Yeah, of course," Harry lies. He looks at the floor as he pulls on his jacket, collecting himself, and when he meets Draco's eyes again, he's smiling.

"It's the fortune cookie," Ginny deadpans. "It's poisoning him."

"You'll be sorry if that's true," Draco says, resting a gentle hand on Harry's lower back as they weave their way out of the restaurant and out onto the street.

The air is bitter now and the four of them wrap their coats and scarves securely around themselves, making slow, meandering progress through the city. Full of food and pleasantly intoxicated, Ginny, Draco, and Blaise strike up an effortless conversation within seconds, but Harry barely hears them. It's all he can do to remember to breathe, to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Because he's leaving. In a few hours, all of this will be over, and not one of these people—not Ginny, not Blaise, and not even Draco—will even remember he was here. They'll have their own Harry back, his talented other self. The man who can make beautiful lamps and ornate wardrobes and little tables. The man who deals adeptly with the press and is respected and loved by the public. The man who really saved Draco Malfoy.

Draco deserves that man.

The trouble is, as much as Harry believes that to be true, it doesn't soften the twist of pain inside him that tightens every time he thinks about letting this go. The thought of having his children back, of hugging them and laughing with them and listening to them argue—that thought yanks him back hard in the other direction, creating a bubble of anticipation in his chest almost too sweet to handle. He has never been so confused in his life.

Draco's cold fingers thread through his and grip tightly; Harry's heart swells, hot and sore.

"I bet Maura's still awake," Ginny says. "Mum always lets her stay up late. She was never so bloody liberal when I was little."

"If I thought my mother would be a better babysitter, I would suggest her," Blaise offers. "Unfortunately, she's dead."

Maura, Harry thinks. Something cold drops through him. His bright, quirky little guide belongs in this world. She doesn't exist where he's going, and it seems senseless somehow.

"Harry? Hellooo?"

"Leave him alone, he's contemplating the meaning of life," Blaise says, grabbing Ginny and lifting her off her feet. She squeals. "The complexities of our very existence!"

"I highly doubt that, Blaise. Look at the way his eyes are glazed over—he's thinking about his bed," Draco laughs.
Harry says nothing.

**~*~**

As soon as they enter the house, Draco heads for the stairs. Harry hangs back, watching him out of sight; after a minute or so, he hears the sound of running water that indicates the start of Draco's nightly bathroom routine. Knowing he has at least five minutes before Draco might come looking for him, wondering about a cup of tea, he dashes into the living room and kneels at the coffee table with parchment and quill, heart racing. He sits there, quill poised, lip caught between his teeth, feeling stupid and inarticulate; he has no idea what to write. But he has to write something. The truth of the matter is that Maura Zabini-Weasley, aged seven, is the only person who knows the truth about his visit—the only person who knows that anything has been different over the past few weeks.

He wants to see her and thank her and supply her with more spinach cake than she could ever eat, but that's not going to happen. It's nearly eleven o'clock at night, and this will have to do.

Dear Maura, he writes. Takes a deep breath. Keep it simple. He doesn't really remember how well he could read when he was seven, but Maura is terrifyingly smart, and she never once tripped over Celestina's sleeve notes, so he hopes she'll be okay.

I'm writing to you because I have to go home very soon. I'm afraid I won't see you again, but tomorrow you'll have your proper Uncle Harry back and you probably won't remember any of this, but I wanted to say goodbye. Thank you for everything you've done for me—you've been wonderful. I'm sure you'll grow up to be a beautiful, amazing woman.

I really loved being your Uncle Harry.

Xx

Feeling heavy, Harry folds up the letter and seeks out Draco's owl. He leans out of the window as it takes flight into the night sky, allowing the cold wind to ruffle his hair and cool his skin.

"Tea-blue-stripy?" Draco calls hopefully down the stairs.

Harry sighs and smiles. In the kitchen, he flips through the Prophet he bought in Diagon Alley, eyes lingering on the photograph of himself and Maura behind the big glass bowl. He stares at it, fingers tapping against the countertop, and by the time the kettle starts to whistle, he is holding down the page and carefully tearing out the picture. Flooded with illogical guilt, he folds it up and stuffs it into his pocket, makes the tea and carries it upstairs.

Draco, propped up lazily on his elbow in bed, lights up at the sight of the steaming cup.

"Sometimes you really are wonderful," he sighs, taking his tea and inhaling the steam with a rapturous expression.

"No one can wiggle a teabag like me," Harry agrees, sinking down onto the bed and kicking off his shoes. "It's a highly underrated skill."

From behind him comes a soft snort, and then the gentle sighs and slurps of the happy, near-horizontal tea drinker. Harry rests his elbows on his knees and stares at the rug, wishing, just for a moment, that he could sink into the colourful fibres and disappear out of sight. Not that disappearing
is really going to help anyone. According to Boris, it's not quite time for disappearing yet.

"Must you sit there with all your clothes on?" Draco demands sleepily. "You're making the room look untidy."

Harry covers his mouth as he catches the yawn in Draco's voice. He doesn't feel much like sleeping, but it has been a long day, and there is a naked Draco in his bed. For the last time. Harry closes his eyes.

"I was just thinking, but don't worry, I've stopped now," he says.

"That's a relief," Draco mumbles, and there's a rustle of fabric as he cocoons himself in the sheets; when Harry turns around, only his face, ruffled hair, and one hand are visible in the sea of white cotton. Harry's chest aches.

"I love you," he whispers, barely aware of the words until Draco smiles drowsily, grey eyes warm, and returns them.

"Love you, too, you daft bugger. Come to bed."

Harry obeys without another word, fingers slipping on his buttons and fasteners but hands sure as they distribute the components of his outfit to their proper places around the room. Finally, he slides beneath the sheets and doesn't even flinch when Draco wraps around him, all icy-limbed and lemon-spice-rice-wine-scented and hot-mouthed against Harry's skin. Harry breathes him in, holds him protectively, desperately, and tries not to panic.

Tries.

The nagging guilt he has suffered since the first twinge of feeling for Draco now seems as irrelevant as the past—this is his man, and he loves him, quirks, oddities and complications included. He loves the expressive eyes and the dry wit, the obsessive nature and the love for stripes. The drive to make up for the mistakes he made as a young man and those four neatly-inked letters—T.U.R.N.—that remind him... remind them that change is always possible.

And maybe it is, Harry thinks vaguely, a flicker of an idea igniting in the back of his mind.

"I'm not really tired," Draco murmurs, lifting his head and resting his chin on Harry's chest. Sighing gently, he inspects Harry at close range from under a swathe of dishevelled blond hair before frowning and pulling Harry's glasses from his nose. "'M'young and vigorous. And dynamic." He yawns widely into Harry's chest and then blinks up at him, looking slightly startled.

"I know," Harry says gravely, sliding a hand around the back of Draco's neck and pulling their mouths together in a slow, lazy kiss that seems to go on for a very long time without really going anywhere at all. Draco's fingers curl around his shoulder as Harry urges his mouth open and pushes the kiss languidly deeper, tracing, caressing, exploring; Harry is all at once saturated with warmth and stabbed by the knowledge of just what he is losing.

Draco pulls away, eyes closed and mouth kiss-grazed, and settles back into Harry's neck.

"Goodnight," he whispers, yawning again.

"'Night," Harry says, listening as his breathing grows soft and even. He's gone, and Harry has
nothing to do but watch him sleep.

He watches Draco's pale hair glimmering in the flickering lamp-light. Squints at the photographs on the dresser. Stares at the shadows that chase across the ceiling. The restlessness writhing in his stomach intensifies with every minute that passes, and when Draco shifts in his sleep and rolls away onto his side, Harry only hesitates for a moment before slipping quietly out of bed. Wrapping himself in a long, green robe, he tiptoes down the stairs; something pulls him into the study and over to the shelf where the leather-bound albums are kept. He stacks a selection of the heavy volumes in his arms and heaves them upstairs, ducking the nocturnally industrious spider as he goes.

He's not really sure what he's doing; all he knows is that he has to focus on something before he loses his mind completely. Settling in a chair near the window, he puts out the lamps and flicks through the albums by the light of his wand, allowing the soft sound of Draco's breathing to soothe his splintered nerves. He looks at picture after picture and reads article after article, determined to keep his eyes open at all costs; illogical though he knows it is, he can't help feeling that maybe, if he doesn't go to sleep, Boris will be unable to spirit him away; he'll have more time to find a solution to this mess... just maybe.

By the early hours of the morning, though, Harry is starting to flag. He is halfway through his third stack of albums and sipping feverishly at his second mug of strong coffee as he reads. The caffeine, while doing nothing for his heavy limbs and sore eyes, is causing him to fidget and jump in his chair every time Draco shifts or mumbles in his sleep. When Frank slides out of the darkness and onto his lap, Harry startles so violently that he almost dumps his steaming hot coffee all over the snake's head.

"What are you doing?" Frank inquires, twisting away from Harry's mug and flicking his tongue out over a photograph of Harry and Draco buying sandwiches in Diagon Alley.

"Reading. What are you doing, trying to frighten me to death?" Harry demands, setting the mug down at his feet and out of harm's way.

"Heard you. Heard you up and down the stairs, making all the creaking noises. It's very late, you know," Frank advises, coiling neatly on Harry's lap and completely obscuring the album.

"Yes, thank you." Harry rubs his eyes. "I thought you weren't interested in hours."

"No. But can see the darkness, and can see that the other is sleeping. Not stupid, you know. Not unobservant."

Frank's small black eyes glitter and he twists his head away from Harry, apparently wounded. Harry scrambles to correct his mistake, resting a careful hand on the smooth coils.

"Of course you're not, I know that. I was just curious. It's probably best to ignore me."

"You are tired."

"No, I'm fine," Harry insists pointlessly; he doubts the yawn that follows will translate into Parseltongue, but there is no concealing the telltale facial expression from Frank.

"You are tired. What is it that you wait for? Have you quarrelled with the other?" Frank asks, rising slowly to bring himself eye-level with Harry.

"No," Harry says. "No. I'm just not ready to go to sleep."
"Beg to differ," Frank replies, settling himself across the folds of Harry's robe, resting his warm, smooth head against the bare skin of Harry's chest. Soon, he, too, is snoozing. Harry traces his decorative patterns with his finger, glancing between the snake and the man in the bed with weary eyes. Carefully, he closes the album in his lap and reaches for the one marked '2018', reading Draco's handwritten comments over and over.

Smoke, fire, and long pipes—the seduction tools of an ageing Gryffindor artist.

Let the record show that this is your first interview with Mr Clearwater, who seems extremely taken with you. Flattery is a wonderful thing, Harry, but I'm prepared to wager that I'm far more useful in the bedroom.

It would be ruinous for my image if this got out, but this is a picture of my two favourite people in the world.

Harry smiles. He can stay awake. He only needs to close his eyes for a second.

**~*~**

There's a light at the top of the stairs.
Chapter 8

There’s that strange sound again.

He had heard it some minutes before and had decided it must have been a part of his dream, but now it’s back. Unwilling to open his eyes at what feels like a very unsociable hour, he merely groans and clamps his pillow down over his head as the unwelcome squelching sound continues to issue from somewhere close to his left ear.

"Draco," he mumbles through a yawn, "what the fuck are you doing?"

When there’s no response after a second or two, Harry lets go of his pillow and stretches out an arm, patting the cold sheets with sleepy fingers. He’s alone.

Squelch, squelch, squelch, thrrrrp, goes the noise. Irritated and confused, Harry's eyes snap open and he props himself up on one elbow to see a vibrating, shiny red tomato staring back at him. Quite literally, in fact; this tomato has a single beady eye which is regarding him with reproach.

It always does that when he doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning, he thinks, and then his stomach drops through his body, leaving him empty and yet quite sure that he's going to vomit. Barely breathing, he reaches over and whacks the tomato with his palm, cutting it off mid-squelch, then flops onto his back and covers his face with his hands. He doesn't care that he's behaving like a child who doesn't want to be found; he feels like one.

That obnoxious tomato alarm clock was a gift from Al for his last birthday. It goes off at six o'clock every weekday morning so that Harry can drag himself to the office, slog through his paperwork, and have a hope of leaving at a semi-reasonable hour. Heart hammering, Harry looks through the gaps in his fingers at the pitch black sky outside the window. At the clothes thrown on the chair at his bedside, and at the quilt that Molly Weasley made for his and Ginny's twelfth wedding anniversary.

He's back. He thinks. At least, he thinks he knows where he is, but when is fully up for grabs.

"Fucking Boris," he mutters to the ceiling, rubbing his eyes and wondering just what exactly he's supposed to do now. He's been trying so hard not to think about leaving his new life behind that he hasn't allowed himself to consider what he's going to do once the meddling old bugger has quite finished fucking about with him.

And now he's here, in this bedroom that doesn't really feel like his any more, waking up in the middle of the night to spend more time doing a job he hates. And Draco is... oh, god, Draco. Harry closes his eyes again and bites his lip as something tears inside him. His stomach, now apparently back with him, rolls over and over until his eyes are stinging and his mouth is filled with saliva.

This can't be right, he tells himself over and over again. This can't be right.

Overwhelmed, he takes a deep breath, clamps a hand over his mouth and rolls off the edge of the bed and onto his feet in a messy, painful heap. He reaches the bathroom just in time.

**~*~**
Some minutes later, he drags himself to his feet, flushes away the evidence of his loss of control, and shuffles across the cold tiles to the sink, where he splashes his face with water and stares in mute horror at his tired, haggard appearance. His hair is messy, but not in the deliberate, careful way to which he has become accustomed, the way that takes years from his face. It's just everywhere, like he doesn't give a fuck; he needs a shave badly and his eyes are heavy and shadowed.

He wonders if this is what he's always looked like, and how he never noticed. Looks are far from everything, he knows that, but the man staring back at him, as he sighs and grips the edge of the sink, looks sad.

Finding that he can't keep the thought of 'What would Draco say?' out of his head, he turns away from the mirror; the cold, sharp avalanche of emotions and what-nows threatening to race down and bury him is more than he can take right now. He swallows hard, forcing the persistent nausea down, bringing his breathing under control. He's here now, he's... home, he supposes, even though something discordant jars in his chest at the thought, and right now, if he has to stuff all of this crazy into a box and lock it up until he's ready, then that's what he'll have to do.

He's probably dealt with worse, he concedes, stumbling back into the bedroom and searching for clean clothes. Worse, but this may well be the strangest idiotic situation that's ever been flung in his direction. Finally he pulls on the trousers he finds on the bedside chair. They're confusingly easy to fasten—just one button and one zip—and he smiles for a second at the memory of his old-new wardrobe, and then stops, because it hurts. He finds a shirt and a jumper, throws them on and then gazes down at himself, sighing.

Everything is old and boring. All the clothes are serviceable, of course, but the knees of his trousers are baggy and slightly worn, his shirt is an inoffensive shade of sludge, and his jumper makes him look like an old man. Frowning, he flicks through his wardrobe, heart sinking heavy and sore as he finds nothing but tatty, boring, drab, shapeless, brown—where did all of this brown come from? His work robes are brown, of course—he pulls a set from the nearest hanger and throws it over his shoulder—but he can't help but wonder when he started dressing to match them.

He leans against the closet door and listens to the sound of the silent house. Wonders if he dares to hope that the children are home from school, that he hasn't missed their Christmas, that Ginny hasn't descended into madness, thinking her husband disappeared in the night. That, just perhaps, no one ever knew he was gone.

Of course, there's only one way to find out, but just in that moment, he's terrified.

"No, I was on the moon with Frank!" comes a strident, if sleepy, cry from down the hall, and Harry's chest aches at the sound of his little girl's voice.

"Lily," he whispers, peeling himself away from the wardrobe and hurrying to her as quickly as he can, mouth tugged into an uncontrollable smile.

As soon as he steps into her bedroom he knows, somehow, that Boris had not lied when he said that Harry would find his family as he left them. Lily, curled on her side, arms wrapped around her stuffed fish, is frowning lightly as she sleeps, apparently engaged in some kind of dream disagreement.

Frank the cat, curled in the space behind her knees, blinks sleepily at Harry before tucking his head back into his side. They are both bathed in the soft light from the landing and look so peaceful that Harry can barely breathe for the relief of having them back.
"They weren't upside down when I got here," Lily declares, freckled nose wrinkling and looking, just for a second, so very like Maura.

Harry crouches beside her bed and gently strokes her vivid hair from her face. "I missed you, beautiful girl," he whispers, and presses a soft kiss to her forehead.

"Don't be daft, Dad," she mumbles. "I was only on the moon for a minute."

Harry grins and levers himself to his feet. As he turns away, he catches sight of the calendar on Lily's desk. It is covered with moving pictures of cats and kittens and big black crosses, as Lily has apparently been counting down the days until Christmas. The last day to be marked off is the nineteenth of December.

Harry closes his eyes as confusion, grief, and relief fight for dominance inside him.

He hasn't missed anything. He'll take that.

Al is sleeping flat on his back, snoring lustily, when Harry slips into his bedroom. He has kicked away all of his covers, and, though he seems to be sleeping peacefully, Harry can't quite resist picking up the sheets and blankets and depositing them carefully over his son. Al doesn't stir.

"Missed you, too," Harry says softly, tugging a book out from under Al's head and setting it on his bedside table. "Dragon-Breeding for Pleasure and Profit. Oh, good."

Amused, Harry lets himself into James' room. Though James (somehow) appears to be sleeping deeply, the room is so violently ablaze with magical light that Harry has to shield his eyes. It really is far too early in the morning for all this, he sighs inwardly, dimming the light with a flick of his wand and gazing down at his eldest child with a mixture of exasperation and affection.

"Yes, I even missed you," he laughs softly. Not daring to risk the wrath of a sleep-deprived teenager, he instead perches on the edge of James' cluttered desk and watches him for a moment. Without his perpetual scowl, he looks younger and almost innocent... apart from the bright blue streaks that are shot right through his dark hair. Harry has no idea how he could have missed them before. He thinks perhaps he had given up noticing things.

James twitches and snarls in his sleep, and Harry decides to take his leave. No doubt Ginny has left for work already, so perhaps he has time for a cup of coffee in relative peace before he heads for the office. Because there has never been any question in his mind of not going to work. Work is what he does, even when he doesn't like it, and when in doubt... well, then work is an even better idea. Plus, he has his own office and he knows rakes of good locking spells. Better to sit in there and let his head explode than do it here with the children watching.

As he walks into the kitchen, he stops short. Ginny is sitting at the table, reading a magazine and crunching a piece of toast.

"You're here," he says pointlessly.

She looks up. "Yeah. I decided to have breakfast at home today. All the decent canteen staff at work are off for Christmas, and I'd rather not risk food poisoning."

"Right." Harry stares at her, unable to put together a complete sentence, because she, too, looks even
wearier than he remembered, and a shadow of the spirited woman she once was, and could have been.

"You look like you've seen a Dementor," she says, abandoning her piece of toast and frowning up at him.

"No, I just..." Harry's throat dries as she stands up and approaches him, features creased in concern. Before he can think about what he's doing, he's grabbing her and hugging her tightly, all at once flooded with feeling for her, twenty years' worth of affection and support and friendship, the guilt of the past six weeks, and the confusion and fear and pure relief of holding her again, dragging in the coconut scent of her hair and closing his eyes.

He can feel her puzzlement even as she wraps her arms around him and returns the hug, but it takes him a long time to let go. In the midst of all of this, she is an anchor, and he doesn't remember the last time he was so pleased to see her.

"Harry," she says, soft-voiced, pulling back and looking up at him, eyebrows knitted. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just... bad dreams," he improvises.

Ginny sighs, and Harry watches some of the concern fade from her eyes. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised—we were only talking about Malfoy yesterday."

Something in her tone makes Harry bristle, but he fights it down and shrugs. "Yeah. It doesn't matter, anyway. I'm fine, just a bit... tired," he mutters, extricating himself from Ginny and scrubbing at his face, feeling suddenly awkward. "I'd better get going. See you tonight."

He turns and heads for the door, barely able to resist the urge to run out of the house as fast as he can.

"Bye, then," Ginny calls uncertainly after him, just before he slams the door.

**~*~**

"You are earlier than usual, Mr Potter," remarks Harry's secretary as he lets himself into the anteroom that leads to his office. Her tone is flatly neutral, but there's something in her expression that makes Harry certain she is being judged for some reason. She frowns, continuing before he has a chance to reply: "Surely you didn't walk all the way here with your robes slung over your shoulder like a brace of pheasant?"

Harry blinks. Smiles. He hadn't thought it possible, but he has missed this abrasive woman. Her grey-streaked black hair and lips pressed together in perpetual disapproval have always put him in mind of a particularly severe Minerva McGonagall, but now he finds himself reminded of Draco.

"I did, Helga. You should pray for my soul." He shakes out his robes and pulls them over his head.

"Lost causes aren't really my area," she advises, regarding him with a prickling air of impatience.
"Come and get your messages before they crumble into dust from sitting here unanswered for so long."

"Is the drama necessary?" Harry asks mildly, crossing the room and taking the sheaf of parchment from Helga's outstretched hand.

She says nothing, but her sharp look sends Harry into his office without another word. He emerges again just minutes later, having spelled and dispelled a battery of locking and privacy charms, realising that he has forgotten the most important instruction of all.

"Can you try and keep the interruptions to a minimum? I'm working on something important and I really need to think."

Helga does not turn around but Harry sees her posture stiffen; he waits for a response, trying to remember why he puts up with her at all.

"I'll see what I can do—no promises, mind. I'm not a gatekeeper, you know," she says at last.

Harry sighs. "Thanks."

He flops into his desk chair and swivels slowly from side to side, allowing his eyes to travel over the familiar worn landscape of his office. Everything is where it should be (though the room seems a little dull without the orange splash of Ron's Chudley Cannons rug) but it couldn't feel more wrong. The chair is creaky and comfortable, moulded to his shape over the years, but his Auror robes feel stiff and heavy after working in nothing but tatty jeans and thin t-shirts. As he scowls at the mountain of paperwork on his desk, his fingers itch for his glassblowing pipes; if nothing else, he could use them to sweep the unwanted parchments to the floor and out of sight.

But he doesn't have them. He has a tedious, responsible job and a cantankerous secretary, and he's not sure if that's any better than having nothing at all. Groaning softly, he rolls his chair up to the desk and drops his forehead to the cool wood. He could have gone on for years, decades, for the rest of his life, never truly comprehending his dissatisfaction with his life; he could have taken the headaches and the arguments and the disturbed sleep, knowing—believing—he had drawn his lot and that was all there was to it. He was alright. Ish.

Harry folds his arms on the desk and rests his head on top. Not now, though. Not now that he has seen, experienced, felt, tasted everything he never thought to imagine that Draco Malfoy could offer him. And even though he spent the majority of the glimpse trying not to rationalise the chemistry and warmth of their relationship, it has begun to make sense regardless. No one else has ever or could ever capture his attention like Draco. It's always been Draco.

"I never stopped thinking about you," he mumbles, keeping his sore eyes closed against the flood of terrifying, idiotic realisation sweeping through him and tying up all those recurring dreams, 'healthy' Malfoy-curiosity and nagging thoughts of 'what if?' into a neat little parcel of wow, you're stupid, Harry Potter.

And now he's painfully in love with a man who might not even exist. Harry has no idea if the Draco who cooked for him and reassured him and fucked him in his parents' ballroom is even real. Perhaps he was just a figment of Harry's subconscious, brought to life by Boris in order to provide Harry with some kind of nervous breakdown. Then again, Maura often talked of the 'other' Uncle Harry, the one she knew before he turned up, so it makes sense that the 'other' Draco exists, too. Somewhere.
Head banging, Harry exhales slowly and attempts to gather himself. The ache inside him isn't going anywhere, and he has no idea what he's going to do about it, so he supposes he might as well try to do something useful. He peels off a sticky note reading 'To approve' from the top report in a stack, leans back in his chair and stares at the words, lip caught in his teeth.

"Auror Department Annual Training Budget," he mumbles, starting to swivel once more. "That sounds exciting." He discards the report and looks at the next one. "Two person teams versus larger units – an investigation of strategic efficiency in the Auror Department." He frowns, flipping through the report with increasing bewilderment until the columns of numbers and diagrams begin to blur across the page. He's not sure he knows how to do this any more.

Disoriented, he abandons the reports and picks up his messages.

**MLE meeting time changed to 4pm Friday, FF's office.**

  - **Calendula.**

Calendula is Fitzwilliam's secretary; he remembers that much. Oh, good. Harry frowns, wondering for the first time if this Franz Fitzwilliam really is as virtuous as he seems. Still, he supposes that his boss' integrity is far from the top of his list of priorities.

*Can you call me back when you've a minute? This goblin situation is getting out of hand and I think we need to get together and thrash it out.*

  - **Max Evertree.**

Harry reads the message three times before he has to admit that he can't remember who Max Evertree is and he hasn't a bloody clue about the goblin situation.

One more, he thinks. One more and he will find one that makes sense.

*Harry – I could really do with a few minutes of your time this afternoon; we're having a bit of a drama with some of the union contracts. If you can make it down to the third after lunch, I promise to buy you a proper cup of coffee (as opposed to that swill you're served at Auror HQ).*

  - **HJG.**

Hermione, he thinks, mouth tugged into a smile. He's halfway out of his chair before he remembers—or, at least, he thinks he remembers—that Goldstein works alongside Hermione, and he is quite possibly the last person Harry wants to see right now. That is, of course, if the glimpse is to be believed. He's not about to risk it. Instead, he slumps back into his chair and allows his mind to drift.

Unsurprisingly, it settles on Draco, and he lets it stay there. He wonders what the other Draco—the one he remembers from school—is doing. How he's doing. **Who he's doing**, his brain supplies helpfully, and he scowls. Try as he might to fully separate the man he loves from the man he saw on the railway platform, it seems to be a near impossible task, and as he sits there, leaning back until he's at heavy risk of toppling over backwards and hitting his head on the fireplace, curiosity about that dignified, severe man grows inside him, twisting new shoots around his confusion and grief and setting his mind racing.

Eventually, he jumps to his feet, not quite losing his balance, and takes down the spells from the door.
"Helga?" he attempts, poking out his head.

She turns in her chair, fixing him with cold black eyes. "Yes, Mr Potter?"

"Erm... do you think you could get me a copy of yesterday's *Prophet*?"

"*Yesterday's* Prophet?" she repeats, one dark eyebrow lifting a fraction.

"Yes, please. If you can," Harry amends, hanging onto the doorframe and attempting a smile.

Helga merely stares at him until he retreats back into his office, and returns, defeated, to his messages. The stack is quite sizeable, and he's barely halfway through it when there's a knock at the door.

He looks up. "Yes?"

Astonished, he watches as Helga stalks into the office bearing a folded newspaper and a steaming mug. She places both on his desk and then steps back to regard him, arms folded.

"Is that for me?" he asks, indicating the tea, because if it is, it is the first unrequested drink she has brought him in almost ten years.

"You are not well, Mr Potter," she says, somehow still managing to sound as though she is scolding him. "I took the liberty of strengthening your tea with a drop or two of Vitalitus. I didn't make it, don't worry—" She holds up the tiny bottle, "—I keep it in my handbag for emergencies."

"Er... right. Thanks." Harry really doesn't know what to do with this sharp-edged kindness and it's doing nothing good for the unsettling feeling that none of this is real.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" she demands, and something in her expression dares Harry to say no.

He sighs. "A Stunning Spell would be nice. Put me out of my misery."

The thin mouth twists and something dangerously like amusement flickers in the black eyes.

"I'd love to, Mr Potter, but I suspect I would lose my job, and then my cat would starve. I shall... *discourage* anyone who doesn't seem to be in desperate need of your attention."

"Anyone who isn't dying, then?" he wonders, and her perpetual frown is back. Harry cringes inwardly. How quickly he has forgotten that no one here has a sense of humour, least of all him... or, at least, the him that he once was.

"That's a little harsh, Mr Potter," she says, pausing at the door. "If they're on fire or have lost a limb, I shall let them pass."

Harry smiles and unfolds his *Prophet*. When she closes the door behind her, he doesn't bother with the locking spells. He flips through the newspaper until he finds the small article Al had read to him on the drive home not-yesterday. Now he re-reads the words to himself, leaning on his desk on folded arms, eyes flicking to the small black and white photograph of the family.
It is with regret that Draco and Astoria Malfoy (nee Greengrass) announce their separation after a marriage of fifteen years. The separation will be made formal in the New Year, and the couple's only child, Scorpius, will remain at Malfoy Manor with his father.

Harry sighs. Scorpius, looking out of the photograph from between his mother and father, resembles an eleven-year-old Draco so much that Harry is momentarily yanked back in time, head full of the confident little boy and his clumsy attempt to be the famous Harry Potter's friend. The only thing that prevents Scorpius from being the exact image of his father is the cautious, full-lipped smile that he seems to have inherited from his mother.

Astoria Malfoy is elegant, poised, and handsome rather than beautiful; her features are not delicate but striking, all sweeping brows and dark, cascading waves and steady, careful eyes gazing, unblinking, into the camera. If Harry is honest, he feels a little intimidated by her.

Draco, though, stares fixedly ahead, posture rigid and upright, and his expression is heavy with sadness. Harry wonders when the picture was taken, whether the stiffness is indicative of a family at splintering point or whether it's always been this way for this Draco. Harry wonders, though he tries to stop himself, if this Draco has ever been happy. Harry studies the photo-Draco until his eyes begin to hurt and his insides are leaden, painful, as though they belong to someone else.

While recognisable as the Draco he has come to know, to need, to want, this man is solemn beyond his years, wearing his severe hairstyle and sharp black suit with a refined, weary gravity that makes Harry want to reach into the photograph and shake him, to ruffle his hair and make him smile. Scrabbling to rein in his spiralling panic, he forces himself to consider just how different two versions of the same man can possibly be.

As different as an exhausted Auror with three children and a reluctantly stylish gay carpenter, his subconscious provides helpfully. Harry sighs, chewing on his bottom lip and trying to catch the eye of the staid photo-Draco, persevering even when it becomes clear that it is an exercise in futility; the man in the photograph seems to want nothing to do with him.

"Stop trying to look at me!" Draco's irritated voice echoes in his head. He closes his eyes and he's there.

"What on earth is your problem?" Leaning up on his elbow in bed, Harry cranes his neck and tries to catch a glimpse of Draco, who is cocooned in the blankets with only a wisp of hair and a pale nose protruding.

"You," Draco snaps, attempting to elbow Harry through the bed-clothes. "Desist!"

Harry snorts. "I will not. What is it—have you grown an extra head?"

The sound that escapes Draco sounds suspiciously like a whimper. "How did you know?"

Baffled, Harry drops back against the bed and frowns at the ceiling. "Please come out," he says eventually, trying to hide his anxiety that—however unlikely it might be—Draco has suffered some terrible disfigurement during the night. Stranger things have happened. He turns onto his side, gazing at the mound of linen that contains Draco. "I'm sure it's... not that bad."

"Easy for you to say," Draco whispers, emerging slowly and turning to Harry, all big eyes and plaintive scowl. "Look at it!"
"At wha—" Harry begins, before thinking better of it and scrutinising Draco’s face in silence. And, finally, there it is: an angry red spot, staring angrily back at him from the otherwise flawless skin of Draco’s chin. It’s relatively small, but something in Draco’s expression tells Harry that saying so would not end well for him. "Ah, yes. Well... it’s... certainly... there, isn’t it?"

"I feel better already," Draco snaps. "Have you considered going into counselling?"

"Yes," Harry says gravely, leaning forward and—ignoring his protests—kissing Draco softly. "I am a model of sensitivity."

"You're no fucking help, that's what you are," Draco grumbles, lifting a hand to press cautiously at the spot. "I have a meeting today, you know. An important one. And will anyone be listening to my presentation of interesting and important observations? No. They'll be staring at this... this **supplementary skull** that's sprouting out of my face without permission!"


In hindsight, Harry considers it an achievement that he manages to contain his laughter for as long as he does. The expression of pure outrage on the refined face is just too much for him. Seconds later, he buries his face in his pillow and shakes with laughter until his stomach and face hurt, ignoring the indignant huffs and pokes-in-the-ribs from the man next to him.

"Have you quite finished?" Draco demands at last.

Still cackling breathlessly, Harry shakes his head and rolls over to look the fearsome carbuncle in the eye. He presses his lips together, struggling hard for control. "Absolutely. All good. Fine."

"I'm far too old for this," Draco says, narrowing his eyes sulkily. "I'm nearly forty, for crying out loud. How is anyone going to take me seriously with this... **pustule**..."

"Okay, okay," Harry interrupts, jumping in before Draco can start his not-at-all-hilarious catastrophising again. He grabs his wand. "Shall I hex it off for you?"

Draco's eyebrow flickers in mild alarm, and then he shrugs. "Go on, then. It can't exactly look any worse."

A sudden clatter followed by a muffled oath from Helga's office startles Harry and he blinks, looking down once more at the newspaper photograph, a smile tugging at his lips. Draco had been very late for that meeting. He hadn't seemed to mind too much.

Just as quickly as the easy warmth of that memory washes over Harry, the cold reality swipes back through him, turning his mouth dry and his skin icy; his fingers don't seem his own as they slide, sweat-damp, over the edge of the photograph, smudging the black and white face of Astoria Malfoy until it becomes unrecognisable, and suddenly all he can see is Ginny. Her clever, tired dark eyes, her beautiful bright hair, and her lips twisted in the familiar moue of frustration.

She's his wife. The mother of his children. The person who has been by his side for the entirety of his adult life, and the person who deserves better than this. She deserves better than disappointment and exhaustion and sniping for no reason other than that two people who were once in love have found themselves in one of those 'for the kids' marriages. Even worse, now he has at last allowed him to think about it, is that they have never discussed it. Not one word has passed between them about their relationship, or lack thereof, and as Harry's grief pours out of him, hot and bitter, he presses his hands to his face and hates himself for letting it happen. For saying nothing, and for keeping her trapped in unfulfilled, numb, not-quite-misery with him for years.
And now, instead of sitting down and talking to her like a grown-up, he has managed to step into an alternate dimension and fall for her probably least favourite colleague. Harry sighs heavily for what feels like the hundredth time this morning.

"Why not?" he demands of his office. "Who do I think I am, expecting any of this to make sense?"

A paperweight throws itself off the desk at the sound of his voice, and Harry watches, resigned, as a flurry of memos fling themselves after it.

Surely, he has to tell her something. He doesn't know exactly what is the right thing to do, and he doubts that there exists a set of rules for a situation quite as bizarre as this, but he knows that things cannot go on as they are. As they have been. He has trundled along all this time, telling himself that putting up and shutting up was the best thing for Ginny and the children, and that was good enough for him. But it's not. It's not good enough for Lily, Al, and James to have two miserable parents, and after a taste of what could have been, it's not good enough for Harry, either.

Fuck.

"Oh, fuck," Harry says out loud, feeling the weight of the decision that has come together almost without his knowledge. He thinks he should feel shocked, horrified, but actually, the realisation that he is going to end his marriage fills him with a new sort of calm. He exhales slowly and leans back in his creaky chair, pushing his hands into his pockets.

Immediately, he registers the sharp edges of parchment against his fingertips. Frowning, he withdraws a folded piece from each pocket and opens them out in his lap. The smaller of the two, scrawled in Al's somewhat haphazard handwriting, reads:

Dad – the wise man does not play leapfrog with the unicorn.

Al's note is exactly where Harry left it, just as he had been promised. The other thing is more mysterious, and Harry hardly dares look at it. When he does, though, his stomach flips sharply. It's a clipping from the Daily Prophet—the carefully torn-out photograph of Harry and Maura standing behind the multicoloured glass bowl and grinning at each other.

"Maura," he whispers, already missing his little shadow.

Knowing that he shouldn't have this photograph at all—perhaps Boris has made a mistake, which isn't all that reassuring when he thinks about it—just makes the discovery all the more bittersweet. Harry stares at their beaming faces for as long as he can stand, and then he fishes out a huge, leather-bound copy of The Auror Code of Conduct: Eleventh Edition, hides the photograph carefully inside, and stows both away in his desk drawer.

Helga manages to keep the bureaucrats from the door until mid-afternoon, when she lets herself into Harry's office with a brief knock and a roast beef sandwich. Harry's stomach growls in approval as he looks up from the Strategic Efficiency report (which still doesn't make much sense, and he's not sure it ever did). He hasn't eaten in a long time, whichever universe's last meal he is counting from.

"There is a man here to see you, Mr Potter," Helga says, passing him the sandwich and watching him beadily until he takes a bite.

"Oh, that's lovely, thanks," he enthuses, wiping mustard from his chin. And then: "What sort of a
man? Is he on fire?"

Helga smirks. "No. But he has a very large beard and a wooden leg, and he seems very anxious to see you."

"Boris?" Harry splutters, almost dropping his sandwich.

"I believe that is what he called himself," Helga sniffs. "It was rather difficult to interpret his accent."

Harry isn't sure how he feels about seeing Boris again, but there's something brilliantly amusing about his secretary's curled lip and folded arms, and he smiles. "Go on, then, send him in. And thanks for the sandwich."

Helga nods and turns to leave. "Remember to chew, Mr Potter. And don't get used to it."

Harry wouldn't dare. Resignedly, he watches the door, ignoring Helga's advice and stuffing as much of the sandwich into his mouth as he can without choking; who knows when he will remember to feed himself again.

"Hello, young man," Boris calls, letting himself into the office and making unsteady progress across the floor toward the desk. Harry wipes his mouth and flicks his wand to conjure a chair for the old man, spitefully making it a hard wooden one without a cushion—let him sit on his creaky old bones, he thinks mutinously as Boris lowers himself onto the chair, arranging the folds of his vast oilskin coat around himself.

"I didn't know you had a wooden leg," Harry mumbles, having no idea what else to say.

"Well, it's not exactly the most excitin' topic of conversation, now, is it?" Boris says, wiggling his huge eyebrows. When Harry says nothing, he sighs and pulls up his trouser leg, revealing a pitted spindle that disappears into his worn old boot; he takes a pencil from Harry's desk and taps on it several times, as though to prove its genuineness.

"Yes, very nice," Harry says weakly, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. Boris lets his trouser leg fall and mirrors Harry's posture, regarding him impassively. "So, what do you want with me today?"

"I thought you might 'ave some follow-up questions."

Harry stares, distracted for a moment by the incongruity of the phrase 'follow-up questions' emerging from that scruffy, bristle-matted mouth, and then he snaps.

"You thought I might have questions? Really? Like... what the hell did you think you were doing to me? What exactly was I supposed to learn, except for how it feels to completely lose my mind? Or that, actually, I want to leave my wife, and now there's nothing in this world that's going to allow me to forget that?" Harry pauses, fingernails digging into the leather arms of his chair, knowing he's being rude—or worse, unreasonable—but driven on by Boris' calm expression. "Or... you know... because I've been thinking—if I was there, where was the other Harry? Was he with my children? Will he remember it? Will they? Is Draco... is he..." Harry falls silent, throat prickling. He shakes his head and stares at the floor.

"Calm down, lad," Boris says softly.
Harry snorts. "Right. I don't know why I didn't think of that."

"I know this must be confusin' for you," Boris continues, shifting about in his chair so violently that it groans under his slight weight. "But I suggest you trust me when I say that too many answers won't do you any good, lad. Some things I know, and a lot more I don't, but the less shared with you, the more power for the mysteries of the universe, you see."

"I really don't," Harry sighs, rubbing a hand across his pounding forehead. "And the mysteries of the universe can bugger off, as far as I'm concerned. I've had enough of them."

Boris laughs, and Harry looks up, startled, to see his delighted grin. "You know, young man, sometimes I feel the same way. But what I can say is this: this was a learnin' experience for you, not for anyone else. What happened... happened for you, and you only. But I promise..." Boris leans forward and fixes Harry with his milky eyes, "...no family members, friends, or former enemies were 'armed during the makin' of this glimpse."

The old man's grin widens, and Harry is irritated to feel a smile tugging at his own lips.

"So, you've come to explain nothing at all," he sighs, fighting the smile away.

"I've come to explain why explainin' is unnecessary," Boris offers. "An' to check that you're in one piece, so to speak." He scrutinises Harry's weary appearance and emits a thoughtful sound. "You looked 'ealthier in the other place, I 'ave to admit."

"Thanks," Harry says drily, picking at his heavy brown sleeves.

"Can't be 'elped," Boris sighs, scratching at his beard with stubby fingers. "I seem to recall I looked young once, too... not an 'andsome devil like you, of course, but still... and sometimes I think I were born a whiskery old bugger. Tricksy old besom, is time."

"Yeah," Harry agrees, suddenly vehement. "Apparently so."

Boris nods vaguely, apparently caught up in his moment of nostalgia. At last, he blinks.

"Right," he asserts, reaching inside his coat and dragging out a creased sheaf of parchment, which he drops with an unceremonious thomp onto Harry's desk. "Mind if I borrow your pencil?" he asks, picking it up without waiting for a response and starting to scribble away, face very close to the desk and beard spreading out everywhere.

"What now?"

"Nothin' to worry about, lad, just a few routine questions," Boris mumbles without looking up.

Harry's eyebrows disappear under his fringe. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It's important to have a record of the quality of the experience," Boris says vaguely, scratching at his beard and frowning at the topmost piece of parchment. "So, question one: would you rate your enjoyment of the glimpse as (a) very enjoyable (b) somewhat enjoyable (c) unpleasant (d) horrific or (e) Dementor?"

"I had no idea the glimpse business was so rife with bureaucracy," Harry mutters, resisting the urge to leap out of his chair and into the fireplace, leaving Boris to fudge the questionnaire by himself.
"And anyway," he adds, "Dementor isn't an adjective."

"You'd be surprised, young man," Boris says grimly. "And I'm just asking the questions, I didn't write 'em."

"Well, that's reassuring," Harry says under his breath; feeling Boris' eyes on him, he adds: "A."

Boris grunts his approval and Harry watches him scratch at the parchment, head spinning. He's still angry, but he doesn't suppose that his anger—justified or otherwise—is going to improve his situation. And more than that, he suspects that even Boris' survey will be a more diverting use of his time than any of the reports on his desk.

"Question two: would you rate your Glimpse Management Operative as (a) very helpful (b) occasionally useful (c) pointless (d) chocolate teapot or (e) dangerously incompetent?"

Harry laughs. "I'm afraid that'll have to be an 'occasionally useful'," he admits, amused to note Boris' wounded expression as he notes down the answer. "No offence meant, Boris, but you spent most of your time telling me why you couldn't tell me things and then disappearing. It was fairly disconcerting, actually."

"I've 'eard worse, young man," Boris advises, chewing on the end of Harry's pencil. "Question three..."

Harry lounges in his chair, swinging slowly from side to side and answering a long series of increasingly bizarre questions with even more bizarre answers. As they enter the second hour of interrogation, Harry finds himself choosing the response 'c) squidlike' to a question about sleeping patterns, merely because the thought amuses him and the idea that any answer could make his life stranger at this point is just ludicrous.

As Boris scribbles away, tongue poking out from between the bristles in concentration, Harry wonders if he should confess that he still has the photograph from the newspaper. It doesn't take too long for him to dismiss the prickling of his conscience and decide to keep his mouth firmly shut and his one piece of proof that Maura existed safely in his desk drawer.

Finally, the old man stops, stretches, and stuffs the parchment back into his coat.

"I'll be off, then, lad. Certain you'll 'ave things to do... things to think over... it's usually the way." He sighs and heaves himself to his feet, nodding at Harry with an odd sort of finality that makes him want to leap up from behind his desk and shake the frail old man until answers fall out.

"Er—that's it?" he manages, standing awkwardly.

"That's it. And, er..." Boris frowns, one hand on the door handle, and Harry thinks he catches a sheepish expression behind the beard. "If you could keep it to yourself about the picture, I'd appreciate it. I... er... wasn't really s'posed to do that."

Harry smiles. "Thank you," he says, and this time he really means it.

Boris nods and grasps the handle stiffly, opening the door with some effort. "About your wife, lad," he rasps, just audibly enough for Helga to pause in her quill-scratching.

Panicked, Harry throws out a silent privacy charm. "Yes?"
"You said you realised you wanted to leave her, didn't you?" he goes on, bestowing a grave, almost fatherly expression upon Harry. "Forgive my boldness, young man, but... I think you already knew that."

Harry sits down heavily, chest aching, and doesn't say a word as the old man nods once more, shuffles out of the office and closes the door behind him. Boris is right, and he hates it. He hates it because it leaves him with no one to blame, because it means that he's even more of an idiot than he first thought, and because his remaining excuses for doing nothing are dissolving before his eyes. Pulling off his glasses, he rubs at his weary face and tries to think.

*What would Hermione do? Apart from not getting into this situation in the first place, of course.*

Harry pushes away the unhelpful thought and rolls his eyes.

Make a list. She would make a list, and that's exactly what she'd tell him to do if she were here. And, Harry thinks grimly, shoving his glasses back onto his nose and locating pencil and parchment, there's no way she's going to be dragged into this, too, so the voice inside his head that sounds a lot like her will have to suffice.

He taps the pencil against his chin as he thinks, registers the damp, chewed-by-Boris texture, and flicks it away across the room. Grimacing, he finds a self-inking quill that looks a lot like the one Draco—his Draco, at least—likes to keep behind his ear. Harry sighs.

Strengthens his resolve.

Writes.

*What do I tell Ginny?*

He chews his lip.

*HOW do I tell Ginny?*

*This isn't working any more.*

*I'm not in love with you.*

*I want you to be happy.*

*I can't make you happy.*

*I'm in love with someone else.*

*I've spent six weeks in an alternative universe with Draco Malfoy.*

*I had sex with Draco Malfoy. Lots of it.*

*I'm in love with Draco Malfoy.*

*I'm leaving you and...* Harry stops and exhales slowly. No 'and'. He's not leaving Ginny for Draco; he's... leaving Ginny. Draco is another kettle of fish entirely, especially the severe, mysterious Draco
with the family and the black clothes.

_Tell the truth_, he writes, pressing down so hard with the quill that the tip almost gives way. _Tell the truth, Harry Potter._

And he can picture himself, standing in the kitchen of the house where they made a family together, telling Ginny everything he has done, letting it all spill out until there are no more secrets left, and he feels sick.

Will it help her to know?

The truth is always best, isn’t it?

Or perhaps it isn’t. Telling her everything would assuage his guilt, that’s for certain; it would also devastate her. That’s if she believes any of it, of course. Gin’s an open-minded woman, but she’s also admirably down to earth, and it’s not beyond the realms of possibility that she’d hear Harry’s heartfelt confession, frown at him for a moment, and then ask him if he was having some kind of funny turn.

Harry rotates slowly on his chair, list clutched on his lap, and stares into the fireplace at the licking flames. Much as he wants it all out, to purge himself of guilt and confusion, he has the creeping feeling that to do so would amount to nothing more than further selfishness.

_You deserve more_, he writes, pulling his feet up beneath him and resting the parchment on his thigh.

_I’ve been thinking._

_We need to talk._

He stops, re-reading the clichéd old words and wanting to hex himself in the face. With a sigh, he drops the list onto his desk and incinerates it with a violent flick of his wand. For a moment, he sits motionless, watching the soft grey smoke curling into the air, and then he pushes his chair back and stalks out of his office. It’s barely after four, but he doesn’t care.

"I take it I'm to cancel your five-thirty meeting, then?" Helga calls.

Harry halts, halfway across her office, and turns to see her sitting primly in her chair, nursing a delicate china cup in one hand as the other fiddles absent-mindedly with her rosary.

"Er... yes, please. You were right; I'm not very well after all. I think I'm going to go straight home and get some rest," Harry says, feeling as though a detention must surely be imminent.

"Hmm," Helga sniffs. "I'm hardly surprised you're sickening for something considering the company you keep. That man was terribly unsavoury, you know. I doubt that coat had been washed in the last five years. Perhaps you ought to... take an inventory of your associates. Especially if you want to become Minister for Magic one day."

Harry frowns, more bewildered than ever. "Thanks, Helga; I'll... er, keep that in mind."

Seeing the arched eyebrow and deciding to run with it, Harry excuses himself and hurries to the lift, looking at the floor and affecting deep concentration all the way down and across the Atrium, just in case anyone decides to attempt conversation. As he steps into the nearest available fireplace, relief courses through him, and he knows just one thing for certain:
He does not want to be Minister for Magic one day.

**~*~**

Harry steps out of his fireplace and is immediately the focus of four curious eyes. Oddly startled by the sight of his children, he brushes the flecks of ash from his robes and attempts to cover his discomfort with a smile. The living room is bathed in the glow of countless strings of coloured lights, rich with the scent of pine needles and deliciously warm, but Harry feels awkward, as though he doesn't belong.

"Hi," he forces out, knowing that avoidance isn't going to make the task of resettling here any easier.

"Hi, Dad," Lily says, peering over the top of a large book; from behind its pages, a striped grey tail flicks in lazy greeting. "You're home early."

"My meeting was cancelled," he says, and it's not really a lie. "What are you doing?"

"What she's always doing," James mutters, and Harry glances at his studiedly sullen expression as he lowers himself onto the arm of Lily's chair.

"Hello, James," he says, affecting a little wave and secretly delighting in his son's eye-roll. He's missed it. "What're you up to, Lil?"

"Frank and I are reading about the Black Death," she advises, showing the book to Harry and scratching Frank's ears. Harry can't help wondering what the other Frank would have to say about that. Something, no doubt. He has yet to find a subject on which the snake does not have an opinion. Frank the cat, meanwhile, just yawns and stretches out a paw to touch a gruesome-looking diagram.

"Very festive," Harry says, all at once baffled and suffused with affection for his daughter.

Lily wrinkles her nose. "We've got to do a project on it over the holidays."

"Both of you?" Harry asks, unable to help himself. Frank flicks his ears importantly.

"Dad."

"Alright, I'm just saying... you might be missing an opportunity. I think Frankfurto would be an excellent project partner."

"Frankfurto?" Lily giggles.

Harry shrugs, warmed by his daughter's laughter. He points. "Look, rats and pestilence and horrible sores – all his favourite things."

Lily pulls a face and, from somewhere behind Harry, comes the sound of James muttering to himself.

"They're not sores, they're buboes," Lily says gravely, looking up at him from under her fringe.

"Well, that makes all the difference," Harry agrees, and for no reason that he can see, he suddenly misses Draco so much that it's painful. He exhales carefully and pulls himself together with some effort. "Where's Al?"
"Where do you think?" James sighs from his perch on the window-seat, and Harry twists around on the chair arm to shoot him a quelling look, but something in James' out-of-uniform appearance strikes him somewhere amusing and he immediately forgets all about being stern. Dressed in faded jeans and a white t-shirt, James is sitting on a cushion embroidered by his grandmother, long legs drawn up and arms folded lazily on top; his blue-streaked hair is teased into an almost-quiff, and his lip curls as he stares moodily at Harry.

"Who do you think you are, James Dean?" he demands, suppressing a smile.

James' brow creases in confusion. "Who?"

"Rebel without a clue," Harry mutters, thinking of the old films Uncle Vernon used to watch on Sunday afternoons whenever there was a hosepipe ban in force.

"Rebel Without a Cause," Lily corrects, giggling, and now both James and Harry look confused. "Mrs Harbottle says he's a legend. Or he was. He's dead now. Didn't you have Mrs Harbottle in year six, James? She's brought in a picture of him for our inspiration wall."

Harry says nothing. He hasn't the faintest idea what an inspiration wall might be.

James snorts. "No. I had that woman with the blue hair."

"She's Headmistress now," Lily informs her brother, and, in an impressive display of sibling civility, James nods seriously before he turns to stare out into the darkness once more.

"It's nice to have you home so early," Lily says, turning back to her book and flipping idly through the pages. "Are you going to have dinner with us, or do you have to go back out?"

Harry stares down at her, heart tight. Boris is right; he does have a lot of things to think about.

"No, Lil. I'm here now."

She smiles, radiating contentment that is momentarily potent enough to wrap around Harry. When she finds her page and begins to read, lips pursed in concentration, Harry twists, arms resting on the squishy back of her chair, and gazes wearily at his son's brooding profile. He wishes he could say that he was never such a sullen, melodramatic pain in the arse, but he has an uncomfortable suspicion that his teenage self was all that and more.

James sighs heavily and draws his finger through the condensation on the glass, making a squeaky, squiggly path through which the stars blink brightly.

"Everything alright?" Harry tries, without much hope of contact.

"Fine," James grunts, wiping out the squiggle with the flat of his hand.

Harry hates that word. 'Fine' can mean a whole variety of things; almost anything, in fact, except for 'okay', 'satisfactory', or 'yes, thank you, I'm actually feeling quite alright'. Frustrated, he stares through the clear patch of glass until the darkness starts to swim and the room fades behind him.

He's gazing at a blackboard, at the artfully-chalked words:
Soup of the Day – sweet potato and chive

Speciality Breads – black pepper twist, spicy cardamom flatbread, multi-grain bagels

Swap your ordinary (but delicious!) chips for parsnip chips at no extra cost!

Ask your waitress about our selection of Artisan Roast coffees

"Why would anyone want to eat parsnips instead of chips?" Ginny is asking at his side, voice lowered.

Harry turns to answer her and notices the waitress, who is standing just feet away in an uninterested slouch as she writes down Draco's order. "No idea," he says, meeting her eyes and noting with a jolt to his stomach that her eyes and skin are just as luminous in his memory as they were some time in January, when the four of them had met for lunch in that delicious-smelling cafe.

"We're out of parsnips," the waitress says flatly. Harry and Ginny exchange glances.

"Portents of doom!" booms Blaise, taking no care to keep his voice down. The waitress, who can be no more than sixteen, looks at him askance for a moment and then raises her eyes to the ceiling.

"You're out of parsnips," Draco repeats, drawing out each word and staring up at the girl from his seat, arms folded and eyes narrowed. Harry knows that look; he knows it very well. He thinks the little madam would do well to apologise and disappear back into the kitchen post haste, but part of him is curious to see what will happen next.

"Er... yeah," says the waitress, and her expression clearly conveys her belief that Draco is a special kind of stupid. "As in... there aren't any left. The kitchen is totally parsnipless."

Harry snorts, and it's almost worth the sharp look and kick under the table that he receives from Draco.

Catching the sound, the girl turns heavily made-up eyes on Harry. Taps her pencil against her notepad. "I don't think he gets it. Am I not saying it right?"

This time Blaise laughs—first, a low rumble-snort semi-concealed in his napkin, broad shoulders shaking, and then he loses his composure and cackles delightedly, throwing back his head and filling the small, steamy cafe with the sound of his amusement. He pokes Ginny in the ribs and that's all it takes; she turns away from Harry and giggles helplessly. Across the table, Draco sighs and gazes crossly at Harry, who knows better than to join in with the frivolity.

Instead, he taps thoughtful fingers on the shiny tabletop and looks up at the waitress. "Erm... I don't think it's that he doesn't understand you. I think he's taking exception to your attitude."

"Excuse me?" the girl demands, thin-pencilled eyebrows disappearing into her long fringe.

Harry sighs, unable to decide whether he's amused or exasperated. "He wants you to be a little bit more polite," he rephrases gently. "Maybe you could say 'we're out of parsnips, I'm sorry' or something like that."

"It's not my fault," she says defensively, crossing her arms and straightening up.
"I know," Harry sighs. Next to him, Ginny and Blaise are leaning against one another, trying—with limited success—to control their giggles. "You could try smiling," he suggests, attempting a weak grin in her direction, already certain that he's fighting a pointless battle.

The girl blinks. Whips around to stare reproachfully at Draco. "Well, forgive me, but you didn't smile either!" she says, apparently wounded.

"I don't work here!" Draco retorts. "And, to be perfectly honest, neither should you."

For what feels like a long time, there is silence at the table; even Ginny and Blaise manage to stifle their laughter. The chatter of the other diners, the rattles and hisses from the kitchen, and the raspy singing of the busker in the street outside fill Harry's ears as he looks from the waitress to Draco and back again. She holds his steely eye contact for what Harry feels is an impressively long time, but when she looks away, her eyes are shimmering with tears.

A glance around the table tells Harry that none of his dining companions are going to be of any use here. He supposes that this Ginny has a few years left before she has to deal with any truly stroppy behaviour from Maura.

"Listen," he says, leaning forward to catch the girl's attention. "He didn't mean to upset you. But he's right that you need to behave like a professional when you're working—I mean... I'm no kind of expert on this, believe me, but wouldn't you enjoy your job more if you didn't have to argue with people?"

"I don't normally have to," she mutters, writing—or, Harry suspects, pretending to write—on her notepad so that she doesn't have to look at him. "Yeah, I suppose," she concedes after a moment, and it looks as though it costs her to do so.

"There are plenty more where he came from, I assure you," Blaise puts in helpfully, grinning, and she flicks a glance at him, flushes, and resumes her scribbling.

"Right. Okay. Sorry," she mumbles, determinedly not looking at Draco. "I'll put a note on the board."

"Good idea," Ginny says faintly.

The waitress bites her lip, frowns, and then scurries away, pushing her hair out of her face as she winds her way through the tables and launches into a frenzied conversation with the older woman behind the counter.

"You're far too soft," Draco sighs, folding his arms on the table and regarding Harry with resigned tolerance. "But... I suppose it's best not to make girls cry. Especially when they're preparing one's food."

"I'm really glad this has been a learning experience for you, Draco," Harry says, shaking his head and fighting a smile.

Ginny's face is a picture of confusion. "How the hell did you do that?"

Practise, Harry thinks grimly. He shrugs. "Some people expect you to be confrontational and being nice really throws them. It's always worth a try."
"Wise words," Blaise declares. He flashes a sparkling grin across the crowded cafe, which is immediately followed by a metallic crash. Harry looks around just in time to see the surly waitress crouching and scrambling to retrieve her tray.

"Blaise," Ginny reproves, mouth twitching at the corners. "Don't be a dirty old man."

"Take that back! I am in the prime of life!"

"You're too old to be flirting with teenagers," Ginny says, resting her head on his shoulder, eyes bright with amusement. "Sorry."

Blaise heaves a sigh so dramatic that Draco's napkin skitters off the edge of the table. He bends to retrieve it and emerges, nose wrinkled in distaste.

"I hate teenagers," he says with feeling. "They're all horrible. No exceptions."

"You'd know," Ginny prods, grinning.

"We were all impressively obnoxious in our own little ways," Draco says, before conceding gracefully with a small smile that squeezes Harry's heart: "I may have been more obnoxious than most. Which makes me an expert."

"If you say so. I think you have to sort of... speak their language," Ginny muses.

Blaise's eyes grow wide. "Oh, good grief, no. Don't do that."

Intrigued, Harry leans forward in his chair. "Why not?"

"Because if you're anything like me, you'll make a complete tit of yourself. I was looking after Melina—you know, Aurelia's daughter—the other week..."

"Oh, yeah. I remember now," Ginny says, smirking. She pats her husband on the arm consolingly.

"First I asked her how it was dangling for her..." Blaise groans and covers his face momentarily with a huge hand. "And then when she was getting aerated about something or other, I suggest she 'unravel herself', which she found hilarious."

"Why would you do that?" Draco asks, puzzled.

"It's something they say... something like that, anyway. I was attempting to be cool," Blaise sighs. "Of course, she wasted no time in telling everyone in sight how horribly out of touch her uncle is."

"Untwist," Harry says, head full of Lily's voice. "You're supposed to untwist. I have no idea about the dangling thing."

"Where do you learn these bizarre things?" Draco demands.

Harry jumps, gritting his teeth as he registers the sudden sharp pain of pointed claws digging into his thigh. He blinks, coming back to himself, and looks down. The bustling cafe has dissolved, and Frank the cat is curling on his lap, using his claws to anchor himself. He stares up at Harry, sensing his tension, and lets out a plaintive miaow.
"Claws in," Harry reproves, sliding his fingers between Frank's paws and the rough fabric of his robes and prising the two apart with care.

"Hmm?" James says, turning his head a fraction and quirking an eyebrow. "Did you say something?"

Harry looks at his son and smiles softly, all at once bristling with warmth for the daft bugger.

"Yeah. What have you done to your hair?"

James' scowl deepens and at Harry's side, Lily stifles a splutter of amusement. Reaching into his depleted reserves of self control, Harry resists glancing at her and instead attempts to fix James with his most patient expression.

"I dyed it," James says slowly, not needing to add the 'obviously' that glints in his eyes.

Harry pushes out a long breath. "Alright. That was a silly question," he concedes, and James' flicker of astonishment lights a thrill of triumph inside him. "What I mean is... maybe you shouldn't have done it without asking your mum first. She's quite upset about it, you know."

James lowers his eyes and pulls his knees more tightly to his chest, tucking in his chin and curling into the smallest space possible. "She doesn't get it," he mutters.

"Get what?"

"Being different. We don't all want to conform, you know," James says, voice sharp with accusation.

Harry suspects the comment is designed to wound, but instead he is flooded with warm nostalgia for his own moments of pointless rebellion and the fierce, Bat Bogey Hex-flinging Ginny that existed well before James was born.

"I think you'd be surprised," he says at last, smiling at James until his scowl softens into confusion. "Your mother had her moments."

James snorts, but the hardness has left his eyes as he regards Harry over the top of his folded arms.

"It's not like I got my tongue pierced or anything," he grouses.

Harry blinks. "Were you planning to?"

"No, Dad," James says, rolling his eyes. "But Teddy's got his done, and his hair's magenta."

"Teddy changes his hair colour ever five minutes," Harry points out, trying to keep the surprise from his voice. He wonders if Andromeda knows about the hole in her grandson's tongue. He doubts it. "And anyway, he's of age and he lives in Paris."

"I know," James says moodily. "He sent me a picture of his new girlfriend. She's called Renée."

"She's French," Lily puts in, sounding amused.

"I think he could've figured that out, Lil," James sighs.
Harry looks wearily between them and scrubs a hand through his hair. "So... are you saying that you've dyed your hair blue because Teddy's got a French girlfriend?"

For a second or two, James continues to glower exasperatedly from the window seat, and then something astonishing happens. He laughs. He might be trying to hide it in the crook of his elbow, and he might be trying to stop, but it's no use because Harry has seen it and Lily has seen it, and so has whoever has just stepped out of the fireplace behind them. James groans, but a smile lingers around the corners of his mouth, and Harry decides to accept the small victory.

"Hi, Mum," Lily says. Harry's heart speeds and he hesitates before turning to see Ginny emerging from the fireplace with Al in tow. "James is being weird," she adds cheerfully, and returns to her book.

"Ah. Everything's in order, then?" Ginny says, finding a weary smile for her son. She shrugs off her outer robe, scrapes her curtain of heavy hair over one shoulder and startles as, to Harry's almost-amusement, she appears to notice him for the first time. "You're home early."

Her tone is neither accusing nor overjoyed; it's just flat. She nods briefly to acknowledge his cancelled-meeting explanation, and then excuses herself to the kitchen. Harry gazes after her for several seconds, attempting to extricate some kind of sense from the oddly numb mass of emotion that has taken up residence in his chest.

It's no good.

"Who ate all the bread?" Ginny calls over the crashing of cupboards and the whistling of the kettle.

The living room is pin-drop silent but for the soft sound of Frank's rhythmic purring as he kneads Lily's thighs with his paws. James frowns lightly and begins a very thorough examination of his nails.

"No idea," Harry calls back, enjoying James' poorly-concealed surprise. He pulls himself upright and heads into the kitchen, where Ginny is leaning against the counter and eating pickles out of the jar. With her fingers. Harry lifts an eyebrow.

"Don't tell on me to the kids," she whispers, shooting Harry a conspiratorial glance and offering him the pickle jar. "James ate all the bread, didn't he?" she adds, looking mutinous.

Harry smiles, struck by a painful rush of affection for this woman and the knowledge that he can't pretend, not now that he knows what he does.

"If I tell on him, I'll have to tell on you," he says roughly. Swallows hard.

Ginny sighs, seeming to consider this for a moment. At last she finishes her pickle with a decisive crunch, screws the top back onto the jar and abandons it on the counter. She licks her fingers.

"Alright. I can deal with that." Narrowing her eyes, she stares at him across ten feet of space that feels like more. "You look like you've had a bad day. I'm pretty tired, but if you want to rant while you're making me a cup of tea, I'm all ears."

Harry exhales carefully, forcing himself to break the eye contact. He crosses the kitchen, lifts the kettle and turns his back on Ginny, allowing the last of the steam to curl around his face.
"Gin, if I knew where to start, I would."

There's a sharp intake of breath behind him, followed by a creak as she settles herself on the kitchen table. "Wherever you like," she says, and there's something in her soft tone that makes Harry's fingers curl tightly around the handle of the kettle. "Or I could guess. Did Helga try to poison you?"

"Not today." Harry pours the tea and chews his lip thoughtfully, recalling Helga's pinched kindness.

"MLE meeting go badly?"

"What?" Frowning, Harry pokes at the teabags, watching the infusion darken. "Oh. No. It's been moved to Friday."

"Hasn't it already been moved once?"

"I can't remember," Harry says honestly. Stomach in knots, he turns around, passes one cup to Ginny and clutches onto his own as though it's a lifeline. He takes a deep breath.

"Mum!" Al sings, skidding into the room at speed and using the edge of the table to bring himself to a halt. "Mother!"

"Yes, son?" Ginny deadpans. Harry watches her sip her tea, apparently unperturbed by the interruption. **Why would she be?** he scolds himself silently. As far as she is concerned, everything is fine. At least, as fine as it usually is.

"What's for dinner? I'm **starving.**"

Ginny looks at her son. Reaches out and ruffles his hair. Accios the pickle jar from the counter.

"Ask your dad."

**~*~**

Frazzled though he may be, Harry has no issue with making dinner for the family. It does, however, take him a moment to remember that he is no longer cooking for Draco and therefore cannot throw anything he feels like into the pot, or experiment wildly with unusual herbs and spices, and still expect appreciative noises and clean plates. At last, after a search of the cupboards with Al, Lily and Frank under his feet, making suggestions, asking for snacks and demanding meaty chunks in jelly—in various combinations—Harry settles on a nice, safe spaghetti Bolognese.

The first meal he made for Draco, he thinks, pushing away an odd little pang and slicing viciously at a large onion. Draco isn't here any more. Not his Draco.

After a relatively civilised meal, the children decamp to the living room and Harry, without a better idea, follows them, struggling as he does to remember what he used to do in the evenings before all of this.

"Haven't you got any work to do tonight?" Al enquires, throwing him a curious glance when he settles himself on the floor at the foot of the Christmas tree and obligingly holds onto the loose end of the shiny red ribbon that Lily is curling with scissors.

"Thanks, Dad," she murmurs, lips pursed in concentration.
"No," Harry tells Al. "I left it all at the office."

Al's green eyes widen. He sighs. "I wish I had somewhere to leave my homework."

Harry smiles. He leans back on his free hand, enjoying the fresh smell of the tree and the soft hum of carols from the wireless, and, astonishingly, just above that, the tentative sound of James and Ginny having a conversation. A conversation that their expressions suggest is about something other than James' hair or James' clothes or James' grades.

"I wonder what they're talking about," he murmurs, mostly to himself.

"Quidditch," Lily says, taking the red ribbon back from him and standing on tiptoe to dangle it from one of the upper branches before dropping back to the floor and handing him a second ribbon, this time green. "James asked if he could have a new broom. I stopped listening for a bit, but now she's telling him about winning a match against Slytherin."

"You've got ears like a bat, Lil," Al says, impressed. He picks up a ribbon of his own and copies Lily, only to slip halfway along and stab himself in the hand. "I bet this is easier with magic," he huffs.

"I'd rather you didn't blow yourself up... or worse, set the tree on fire," Harry advises. His wand hand makes an instinctive twitch toward Al, but he resists, instead scrutinising the small scratch. He'll live. "Suck it," he says instead. "Saliva is a natural antiseptic."

Al raises his eyebrows but complies, raising the heel of his hand to his mouth.

"Erghh!" Lily says, wrinkling her nose. Al laughs against his hand and sucks harder on purpose.

"Nice one, Mum!" James cries, and then he coughs lightly and amends: "I mean, yeah, that was pretty impressive, I suppose."

In an attempt to hide her astonishment, Ginny turns away and meets Harry's eyes over the back of the sofa. She shoots him a 'well, that's interesting' look that is familiar enough to draw a small smile from him. It really is no good.

He has to tell her.

**~*~**

As he sits on the edge of the bed, poking his tomato clock until it says, "ten thirty-four, ten thirty-four, ten thirty-four" over and over again, Harry thinks it can wait. The telling her part.

"Ten thirty-four," says the clock, and Harry slaps it into silence. He just wants to go to sleep.

He just wants a lot of things, he supposes, and not all of them are possible. But that's fine, he tells himself. That's fine—do you know why? Because you're a grown up. You're a man who's old enough to realise that you can't have everything. So, in short, get a fucking grip.

Powered by pure stubbornness, he stomps into the bathroom and brushes his teeth so hard that he spits blood-tinted foam back into the sink. He stares at it for a moment, running his tongue around the sore inside of his mouth, tasting mint and copper, before lowering his head and swilling out his
mouth with icy water straight from the tap. Then, shuddering, he splashes his face and allows himself a second or two to regard his dripping, fuzzy reflection in the mirror.

At the sound of Ginny's approaching footsteps, Harry wipes his face with the back of his hand and retrieves his glasses from their perch on the collar of his t-shirt, shoving them back onto his nose so that he doesn't fall over her on the way back to the bedroom. When he gets there, having passed her in mutual silence in the doorway, he falls back onto the bed and props himself up on his elbows. Bare feet dangling almost to the floor and head tilted back, he closes his eyes.

"I sincerely hope you aren't planning on coming to bed wearing those."

Harry glances down at his thin drawstring trousers and then up at Draco, who is standing at the foot of the bed with his arms folded, wearing a quill behind his ear and nothing else.

"What's wrong with them?"

"What's right with them?" Draco snipes, grey eyes narrowed in disdain. "I'm willing to overlook the boxer shorts from time to time, but really... those things just catch the cracker."

Harry frowns, baffled—first at the offending trousers, and then at Draco. And finally it makes sense. He laughs. "I think the phrase you're looking for is 'takes the biscuit'. My trousers take the biscuit. And... I'm taking them off now."

"Harry, have you gone deaf?"

Harry's head snaps up and he opens his eyes to see Ginny, not Draco, standing at the end of the bed. She is knotting the belt of her turquoise robe and gazing down at him with her head on one side; oddly, she doesn't seem irritated, and even more oddly, that fact makes Harry want to cry.

"Sorry, Gin," he manages at last. "I was in my own little world."

Ginny nods vaguely and sits down on the edge of the bed next to Harry's feet. She lifts her hand to tuck several long strands of hair behind her ear, opens her mouth to speak and then hesitates, brow creased and mouth twisted into a sad little smile.

"That's the second time tonight," she says at last.

"What?" Harry asks. Anxious, he scrambles up into a sitting position beside her and glances sideways at her solemn profile.

"The second time you've called me 'Gin'. You haven't called me that in a long time."

Harry's heart speeds unpleasantly. He hadn't even noticed. "I'm sorry."

She laughs, light and sad. Looks out of the window. "No, I just... Harry, you've been so far away from me."

The raw truth of those words hits Harry like a slap to the face and, inexplicably, he wants to laugh. He resists, suddenly terrified by the realisation that he has no idea what to feel any more. Or what to say.

"I'm sorry," he tries again, partly because he needs to say it, and partly in the hope that it will be the
right answer this time.

Ginny sighs and turns to him, eyes large and bright with tears. "What are you apologising for?"

"Like I said, I don't even know where to start," he says. It hurts to see her in pain. He had somehow forgotten how much.

"Try," she whispers, dragging in a ragged breath and twisting her fingers in her lap. "Try, Harry, because you're not the only one... you're not the only one who knows something's ... not right any more," she says. "I'm not stupid." Her eyes hold Harry's: fearful, defiant, beautiful. Something inside him curls up into a tight ball and screams in pain.

"I know you're not, Gin," he mumbles, reaching out to her. Pulling back his hand and clenching it into the sheets. "I know you're not. I know." Aching all over, he stares at her, breath short and eyes hot; he lets them fall closed and leans slowly, closing the small distance between them and resting his forehead against hers. The skin pressing against his is cool, as are the strong, slender fingers that slide-rustle across the sheets and wrap around his.

Hot with guilt, he barely knows what he's doing as he dips his head, faintly startled by the softness of the skin that brushes over his, falling blindly against her lips and kissing her with a dark, glittering hope that doing so will take all of the jagged, messy shards inside him and somehow put them back together.

Ginny twists her free hand into his t-shirt, clinging to him even as she huffs a soft sound of confusion into his mouth, kissing back, matching his desperation and tasting like tea and toothpaste and everything he knows. He slides his fingers through her silky hair and kisses her harder, stinging with loving her but not like this, hating that her mouth doesn't seem to fit perfectly against his like it once did, thinking about the mouth he wants and forcing himself not to think about it until those broken shards threaten to rip him apart.

Mouths sliding together, they share hot, unsteady breaths; Ginny's fingers slide under the hem of his t-shirt, nails dragging lightly, and he freezes.

No, he says, turning cold as his senses return to him in a rush. No.

Nothing happens, and it takes him a moment to realise that he hasn't spoken aloud. He opens his eyes, pulling back and wrapping both hands around her shoulders, holding her gently at arm's length.

"I can't. I'm sorry... I just can't."

She gapes at him, face flushed and eyes wide, all at once looking so young in the soft light that for a fleeting moment Harry wants to hug her and tell her to forget it all; everything is fine; he's just had a long day. Then her expression shifts, becomes resolute. She folds her arms.

"You need to tell me what's going on in your head, Harry. Right now. This isn't fair."

Harry nods. "I know. I know, I know, he repeats silently. But he doesn't know anything at all. He doesn't know how to say these words. Whatever these words might be. Whatever they are, he hadn't expected to say them yet, but they are tumbling out of his mouth and he is letting them.

"I keep having this dream," he says suddenly.
Ginny looks an awful lot less surprised than he thinks she should. "The one about Malfoy?"

"Er... no," he improvises, "a different one. And... everything is really different. For everyone. You and I never got married. We're both with different people. And I... the person I... in the dream I'm gay, Gin," he says all in a rush, wanting the words out, even though the admission is half-arsed and faintly ridiculous.

"Okay." Her face is pale now, but her voice is even and she has dropped her hands into her lap and tucked one foot up underneath herself on the bed; she looks almost relaxed. "But you can't tell me that our marriage isn't working because you have a recurring gay dream... which, by the way, isn't all that surprising."

"What?" Harry demands. Derailed, he stares at her, prickling heat all over.

"I've always wondered," Ginny says, shrugging and treating him to an odd half-smile. "I've had a long time to wonder. But that's not what this is about, is it?" she presses, smile turning sad.

"I... is it not?" Harry asks. He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. Scrubs at his hair with both hands. "Since I've... been having the dreams," he attempts when there's no response from Ginny, "I've been thinking, and... I don't know, I'm finding it harder to ignore how unhappy we're making each other... because we are, aren't we?" he says, throat aching as he forces himself to turn his head and look at her.

Ginny's face is obscured by her hair as she looks down at her hands, but there's no disguising the tremor in her voice as she says, "I didn't think it would be like this."

"Neither did I," he admits. "But he we are. You know, this conversation wasn't supposed to go quite like this, either," he sighs, looking back down at the rug.

Ginny laughs shortly. "I didn't really think we'd be having it at all."

"Tonight?"

"Ever."

Resting his head in his hands, Harry lets out a long sigh that leaves him sore. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry that you don't love me any more," she says matter-of-factly.

Harry's heart twists violently; he squeezes his eyes shut, but several fat tears slide out and splash against his glasses. "Gin, I do love you."

"Not like this," she whispers, pain evident. "Not like you used to."

"No," he says at last, and the sound seems to echo in the near-silent room, mocking him. Frozen in place, he feels the mattress dip beneath Ginny's weight as she shifts and draws in a long, uneven breath.

"Wow," she whispers, trying to hide a sob behind an awkward laugh. "It really fucking hurts to hear that."

Harry lifts his head from his hands, stung into action by the out-of-character harsh language and the
confusing sentiment. "Didn't you expect it to?" he wonders. The "I'm sorry" falls from his mouth before he can stop it; Ginny sniffs and rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, I expected it to. I think I'd convinced myself that expecting it would soften the blow, somehow. Stupid, really," she sighs, affecting nonchalance that has no chance of fooling Harry.

"It's not stupid," Harry says forcefully, grabbing her shoulder and compelling eye contact. He needs her to believe this—to believe him—because suddenly, in the midst of this raw fucking snarl of hurt that has opened up around them both, he can see what's important, what's vital, and he holds on to it hard, swallowing around his pain and blinking his sore eyes until she slides back into focus in front of him.

"I don't want to hurt you, Gin. I know I already have, and I want it to stop. I don't think it matters what I do now, or what you do, because I don't think we can make this right." He pauses, voice catching, chest sore.

Ginny's dark eyes swim with tears but she doesn't look away. "I used to think you could fix anything." She lets out a rueful laugh, forcing a smile that doesn't stop a sob from escaping.

"Gin..."

"Don't worry, I've managed to disabuse myself of that notion over the years," she says.

Harry almost smiles. "That's a relief." He exhales slowly, trying to push all of the anguish from his body in one long breath. "I wish I could fix it."

Ginny shakes her head and flops back onto the bed; for a moment, her hands cover her face, and then she pushes her fingers back through her hair and gazes up at Harry, face tear-streaked but determined. "I don't."

Harry stares down at her, feeling all at once relieved and as though he has been hexed viciously in the stomach. "You don't love me either," he says, unsure whether or not he means it as a question.

"Don't be an idiot," she sighs. "I love you more than anything, except for my children. You're their father, Harry—we made them together." Ginny takes a deep breath, wipes away her tears with the back of her hand, and pulls herself upright again. "I love you so much that I can let you go," she whispers, and Harry falls apart a little because it's right, and it hurts so much.

Words seem out of reach. Instead, he wraps his arms around her and buries his face in her hair, shaking as they cling to one another, gulping at sweet, coconut-scented air and allowing her hot tears to trickle down his neck and inside his collar. He closes his eyes and thinks of Lily, Al, and James, peacefully unaware that anything of significance has occurred. Of Draco, both the one who briefly belonged to him, and the one who is probably sitting in his manor, wearing black and, perhaps, wondering just where his own marriage veered off course.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" Ginny says, breaking the silence. At least, that's what Harry thinks she says; her voice is muffled by his shoulder.

"What?"

"Do you want a cup of tea?" she repeats, pulling away and scrubbing at her blotchy face.
He frowns. "Er... I don't know."

"Well, I'm having one," Ginny announces. She stands, stretches and gathers her heavy hair in one hand, shifting the weight of it as she works the kinks out of her neck. When she looks at Harry again, her expression is oddly calm. "It's a serious decision, of course."

"Not like ending a marriage," Harry says, because she doesn't. She quirks a rueful little smile, but wraps her arms around herself as though the words might shatter her fragile new armour and bring the tears rushing back.

"Exactly," she says softly, and then turns and walks out into the hallway. She doesn't bother to light the lamps and quickly disappears into the darkness. After a moment, Harry scrambles from the bed and follows her down the stairs, carpet prickling against his bare feet, cautious breaths loud in his ears.

He hesitates at the kitchen door, listening to the sounds of kettle and cups and spoons and wondering just what he's supposed to do now. There's no going back, that much is obvious, and the speed at which his life is turning itself inside out is making his head spin. Craving fresh air, he turns his back on the soft yellow light that spills from the kitchen and instead makes his way to the front door and out into the night. The air is sharp and bitterly cold against his skin; it ruffles his thin t-shirt, slices through his hair and stings his sore, damp cheeks. He tips his head back, welcoming it, until a violent shiver grips him and reminds him that it's December and he's hardly dressed for the elements.

Lowering himself onto the cool step, he pulls his bare feet up onto the edge, tucking his knees into his chest, and sweeps his hand in a large arc, palm out, until the entire doorway is encircled by an invisible ring of warmth. In theory. In reality, it's a little patchy, but it'll have to do; his wand is upstairs and he's exhausted.

When a steaming cup is handed to him, he accepts it in silence, and Ginny sits on the step beside him, pulling the front door closed behind her. For a moment, Harry watches her in his peripheral vision as she blows gently on her tea and stretches out her bare legs, examining the chipped silver polish on her toenails, before he leans back against the solid support of the door and gazes down the driveway at the glittering, frost-coated village that has been his world for the best part of two decades.

His stomach flips; whether in apprehension or in relief, he doesn't know, but either way, this part of his life is over. All over bar the shouting, of which there has been none.

Harry sighs. "What should we do now?"

"I don't know," Ginny admits, resting her cup on her knee. "I don't think anyone ever does, really."

Harry gulps at his tea, registering the extra sugar with an inward wince but saying nothing, instead allowing the hot liquid to soothe his twisting insides. Shes right, he thinks, exhaling a warm, white plume of breath that highlights the inconsistencies of his Warming Charm. There are no strategies or tictacs for this. Nobody is going to tell him how best to handle the situation, and, while that may well be a good thing, because he doubts he's in the mood to listen to advice, he suddenly feels very alone.

Ginny's thigh brushes against his as she shifts position next to him and he looks up. Her skin glows softly in the silvery moonlight, and he is struck by how beautiful she is. Though not as youthful and vibrant as her other self, this Ginny—his Ginny—has aged with grace. There are lines, but they are
faint, indicative of struggles and hard work and three separate sets of sleepless nights. There are grey hairs, but many, many more are a rich, flaming red that makes her stand out wherever she goes. She is clever, quick-witted and fiercely loyal, just like the girl he fell in love with, and, probably, just like the girl that Blaise Zabini fell in love with.

"You're brilliant," he says impulsively.

Ginny glances at him. "Don't tell me you're changing your mind."

"No," Harry hesitates. The minute flicker in her eyes suggests she's teasing, but he doesn't trust himself to interpret her any more. "Would it matter if I did?"

She shakes her head, staring down into her cup and gripping it in both hands. "No. If you think this is all you deciding to walk out on me, you're kidding yourself. And so would I be if I decided to play the wounded victim. This..." She gestures between them, avoiding his eyes, "... this hasn't been working for a long time."

"I know," Harry mumbles, letting go of his denial and hoping the night breeze will carry it away. "Although, to be fair, I'm the one saying that I think I want... something different," he adds, shifting uncomfortably on the hard stone. Not just because of the hard stone.

Ginny sighs. "Something different is sort of comforting, actually. I think it would've hurt more if you'd wanted another woman instead of me... even if I knew we shouldn't be married to each other any more. Don't worry, I don't expect it to make sense," she adds, draining her cup and setting it down on the step with a soft clank-scrape.

"It does make sense," Harry says, surprising himself. "I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to... figure things out."

"Don't," she says firmly, wrapping her arms around her knees and looking up at him. "It hasn't all been bad, has it?"

"No," Harry says quickly. "No, of course not. It hasn't been bad, Gin, it's just..."

"Yeah, I know." The sharp challenge in her eyes fades and she leans against him for a moment.

"I want you to find someone better. Someone who makes you happy," he whispers. Closing his eyes, he pictures Blaise lifting Ginny and swinging her around in the Weasleys' garden, laughing together over their fortune cookies at the Flailing Lizard, and teasing each other mercilessly as they distribute soup on Christmas Eve, bundled up in coats and scarves, Maura in tow—he concentrates on their energy, their chemistry, their smiles, until it doesn't hurt quite as much.

"I think I need to be on my own for a while," she says at last. "See how that feels."

"Yeah," Harry rasps, gripping his cup so tightly with the effort of not thinking about Draco that it cracks. He watches the fissure travel along the shiny red ceramic until it reaches the rim of the cup and stops abruptly. "That sounds sensible," he says, in a voice that sounds nothing like his own.

Ginny reaches over, takes the damaged cup from him and examines it, eyebrows drawn down in contemplation. "Who is it, then?" she asks calmly.

Harry freezes. "You're asking me to recommend someone for you?" he says, trying to inject a note of
incredulity into his voice.

"No, you daft bugger," she scolds, voice catching again. "Who makes you happy? Who do you keep dreaming about?" With a searching stare that pins Harry to the cold step, she insists: "There is someone, isn't there?"

"I'm not cheating on you," he says, and the words stick in his throat; technically, he knows he is telling the truth but technicalities are for the weak, the slippery, the deceitful. He also knows that the discomfort is his to carry, not Ginny's.

"That's not what I said." Ginny extends a cautious hand beyond the cover of the Warming Charm and skates it along the ground, gathering powdery snow on her fingertips. "I want to know what's in your head."

Harry copies her, leaning to one side and scooping snow into his cupped hands. Pensive, he lets it fall from one hand into the other; it's astonishingly light and soothing against his fingers, turning them damp and numb. Beside him, Ginny sighs, and he knows he has to say something. Unfortunately, he suspects that what's in his head can only make things worse.

"How will that help?" he says in the end, and compresses the snow into a hard plaque between his palms.

"It won't." She shrugs and flashes him a tight smile. "I'm curious."

"Curiosity can be dangerous," he says weakly.

Ginny snorts. "You're one to talk. Is it someone I know?" she says suddenly, eyes bright as she wipes her dripping fingers on her robe. "It's someone I know, isn't it?"

Harry drops his head back against the door and turns his eyes to her in mute appeal. "Gin."

"Harry."

"It's the middle of the night. We're sitting outside in the snow, having this insanely calm conversation about ending our marriage. Do you really want to make this any weirder?"

"Why not? I've got nothing to lose," she says, voice brittle. She tucks her arm through Harry's, making him jump; seconds later, she turns to him, eyes wide. "It really is Malfoy, isn't it?"

Harry's heart slams against his ribs and then drops through his body and all he can do is stare back at her. "Nothing's happened," he mumbles.

"You're in love with Malfoy?" she says, and it's not really a question. Harry just tries to breathe. "Draco fucking Malfoy. Oh, Harry..." she murmurs, and then seems to lose it altogether, pressing her face into his shoulder and shaking against him.

Alarmed, Harry stares at her, listening to the odd, heart-rending sound of her anguish.

It takes him a good few seconds to realise that she's not crying. She's laughing, and he's confused. It's a hot, shuddering laugh/sob that wracks her whole body, and when she finally lifts her head, her face is caught midway between real, hard amusement and soft, muted sadness.
"What's so funny about that?" he asks before he can stop himself.

Ginny snorts, covers her face with her hands, and laughs breathlessly. Harry lobbs his snow plaque at her and it shatters in her hair; she laughs even harder and shakes her head vigorously, sending lumps of ice flying everywhere.

"Oh... what's not so funny about it?" she gasps, still giggling as she drops back against the door and closes her eyes.

"Charming," Harry grumbles. He doesn't suppose he has much right to be hurt, and he's not—not really. He's baffled, but he's used to that.

Ginny grins wearily and then opens her eyes. "I keep thinking, any minute now I'm going to wake up and wonder what the hell all this was about," she confides.

"I know exactly what you mean," Harry agrees, stifling a yawn.

"When did we get so old?" Ginny mumbles, catching it and lifting a hand to her mouth.

Harry shrugs, an automatic "I don't know" on his lips, but he catches it before it can escape. "We're not. At least, we don't have to be."

"Hmm," Ginny muses, picking fragments of ice out of her hair. "Maybe we make each other old."

"Don't say that," Harry whispers, heart-sore. Even though she's probably right.

"Well, we'll see," she says. "I have to say, though, from what I've seen of Malfoy recently, he's not doing any better. He looked terrible the last time he was at Gringotts."

Harry aches. "He didn't look too happy at King's Cross in September, either," he offers. "That was the last time I saw him."

Ginny lifts an eyebrow. "You know... if I didn't know better, I'd say you were having a mid-life crisis."

"Maybe I am." Harry shivers; the Warming Charm is fading, but he can't be bothered to do anything more than glare at it. He tucks himself into a smaller space and rubs his arms.

"You could be, but I doubt you've forgotten about Malfoy for more than five minutes at a time since you met, so..." She shrugs.

Harry scowls at the ground, prickling with indignation. "Aren't you upset?" Ginny catches her breath, and he immediately regrets biting. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"Of course I'm bloody upset," she snaps, picking up another handful of snow and savagely squashing it into a ball. "I just don't think being bitter will make me feel any better... or help you... or be good for the kids. And... and despite all of this mess, I just want us all to be okay."

Sobered, Harry nods. "So do I."

"Do you think that's possible?"
Harry draws in a deep breath, sensing the significance of the question. "Yes," he says after a moment, the word coming out a little too loud in an attempt to sound decisive. "I think we will. I have no idea what I'm going to say to them, but I'll think of something."

"I'd start with Al, he already thinks the Malfoys are the best thing since glow-in-the-dark cereal." Ginny draws back her arm and flings her snowball into the street, where it splatters against a stop sign with impressive accuracy. "Did you read his last letter from school? Scorpius Malfoy this, and Scorpius Malfoy that..."

"No, I didn't," Harry admits. Frowns. "But that's not what I meant. I meant that I don't know what I'm going to tell them about you and me."

"I wasn't planning on making you do it on your own," Ginny says, looking at her hands and frowning.

"I know," Harry lies, hiding his relief with some effort. He pretends intense interest in a nearby patch of ice, and when he turns back to Ginny, she is holding out her wedding ring on the palm of her hand and staring at him, face set. Harry winces, and she blinks, pained, biting her lower lip but holding firm.

It's been coming, and for far longer than he wants to admit—Draco or no Draco—but fuck, it still hurts like nothing he's ever experienced. Nothing.

He takes the ring and wraps his shaking fingers around it. With a shuddering breath, he twists his own silver band until it loosens, slips it off and hands it to Ginny. She takes it without a word and leans against him, pushing his ring onto her thumb and lacing her hand through his. Uncertain, he squeezes her fingers and kisses the top of her head. She squeezes back, hard enough to hurt, and he rests his chin there, following her eyes to stare out at the stars.

Finally, the spinning inside his head begins to slow, allowing his thoughts to clear and separate. Which isn't necessarily a good thing.

"Oh, god," he mutters against Ginny's hair. "Ron's going to kill me."

"You should give him some credit."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He feels Ginny's shoulders lift in a deep sigh. "Everyone always expects him to fly off the handle about everything and it's not fair. I know he's done some stupid things in his time, but so have you, and no one ever says 'I don't want to tell Harry, he'll be completely unreasonable'," she complains. "He wants what's best for you as well as me, you know."

"I know," Harry says, chastened. "But you're his sister. His little sister at that," he adds, knowing that she hates that, and, sure enough, there is a small sound of discontent from below.

"You're his best friend," Ginny points out.

"I know. And I didn't really want to be the person who broke his sister's heart," Harry says heavily.

Ginny sniffs. "Well, I'm afraid that was the risk you took when you married me."
"Gin, I'm s—"

"Harry."

"Yeah?"

"Be quiet for a minute."

Harry is quiet. He stays quiet until they both pull their breathing under control, and he is quiet as they rise, by mutual tacit consent, and step back into the house. He is quiet as he follows Ginny up the stairs, relishing the heat and the soft carpet, and he is quiet as he creeps along the landing past the children's bedrooms.

He is not quiet enough. Lily's door creaks open and a sleep-tousled head sticks out.

"What's happening?" she mumbles, blinking slowly up at her mother.

"Nothing, Lil—why don't you go back to bed? Me and your dad are going to bed now," Ginny says.

"I heard the front door," Lily protests, yawning.

"Ah... we were just sorting out some... secret stuff, you know," Harry improvises, shooting Lily a meaningful look and kicking Ginny lightly in the ankle until she, too, puts on a conspiratorial expression.

A sleepy smile spreads across Lily's face. "Christmas presents?" she whispers.

"If you go back to bed," Harry shrugs. "Perhaps."

Lily rubs her eyes. "Okay, Dad. 'Night, Mum," she mumbles, giving each of them a haphazard but warm hug and stumbling back into her bedroom.

Harry watches her door for a moment, just to make sure, and then traipses into the bedroom that, for the moment, he still shares with Ginny. Cold and exhausted, he flops straight onto the bed and pulls the sheets around himself. Part of him wonders if he should be doing the decent thing and offering to sleep on the sofa, but he can't bring himself to move, and Ginny doesn't seem to mind. She crawls into bed, still wrapped in her robe, and tucks her icy feet underneath him. He suspects that at one time, before all of this, the idea of sharing a bed with his soon-to-be ex-wife would have been a strange one, but right now it somehow feels like the most natural thing in the world, and he holds onto it.

"You're a brilliant dad, you know," she says suddenly.

Harry doubts he deserves a compliment at this point but it warms him all the same. "Thank you. So are you." He frowns. "Or something."

Ginny snorts. "Thanks, I think."

Harry stares pointlessly into the darkness, trying to imagine just how strange this Christmas is going to be. Until this morning he thought he'd missed it completely, and now the whole thing has been whisked away from him again. Closing his sore eyes, he exhales heavily and twists Ginny's ring in his fingers. He doesn't want to miss it. Not again.
"Gin?" he tries, heart in his throat.

"Mm?"

Harry hesitates for a moment too long; her exasperation is almost palpable.

"I really need to sleep, Harry. My brain is shutting down. We can talk in the morning, I promise."

"Yeah... it's just... what do you think about hanging on until after Christmas?" he says, hating the weakness in his voice. "Just a little bit more... time."

"This isn't going to go away," Ginny whispers.

"No, it isn't." Harry agrees, strength suddenly pouring into him. He turns onto his side, seeking out her eyes, just visible in the gloom. "It'll still be here in the New Year."

Ginny sighs. "I could live without the guilt of ruining my children's Christmas, I have to admit."

"I think we both could."

"This is all a very weird dream," Ginny yawns, turning her back on him. "But just in case it's not, you'd better have this back."

Harry closes his fingers around the cold metal, uncertain how he feels about unexpectedly having it back in his possession. He puts it on anyway, safe in the knowledge that, if nothing else, doing so buys him almost two more weeks with his children before everything is blown wide open.

"Just for now," he says, reaching for Ginny's hand and sliding her ring back onto her finger.

She lets him. "You always were a terrible procrastinator," she mumbles, and just for a second, she sounds a lot like Draco. The memory of him fills Harry's senses as he punches his pillow, settles down, and wraps an arm around his wife's waist. All he can do is hope that his other self is back where he belongs, and that, eventually, the rest will follow.
Chapter 9

Harry wakes before the tomato.

Feeling somewhat triumphant, he stretches out a hand and prods it into the 'off' position, ignoring the eye that swivels to follow him as he rolls over and gazes silently at Ginny, who is sleeping lightly beside him. Or so he thinks.

"What's the matter?" she mumbles, shifting and almost disappearing behind a curtain of hair.

Harry squints at her in the near-darkness. "Nothing," he whispers, staring at her, and it takes him a moment to realise that, actually, it isn't too far from the truth. Which is weird. His whole world has essentially been pulled apart, and yet he feels rested, and yesterday's headache has dissolved.

Ginny stretches and shuffles into a seated position. "You look relieved," she says softly.

Harry bites his lip and casts guilty eyes down to the bed clothes. "It's not the only thing I'm feeling, believe me."

"It makes quite a nice change to hear anything about how you're feeling," Ginny says drily.

"Isn't it a bit early in the morning for sly digs?" Harry complains, turning away to hide his awkwardness in making a show of putting on his glasses and lowering his feet to the icy floor.

"Probably," she sighs after a moment. "I'm sorry, Harry. I feel like I woke up and suddenly didn't know how to talk to you any more. I know that sounds stupid."

Harry takes a deep breath, trying to loosen the knots in his throat. "No, it doesn't."

There's a rustle of sheets behind him as Ginny crawls out of bed. "What do you suggest?"

"What do I suggest? To be honest, Gin, I'm still astonished that you haven't torn a strip off me, but if you're sure... I think we should talk to each other like good friends."

Ginny makes a rough little sound. "You've been my best friend for a long time."

"I suppose you can manage that, then," Harry says, twisting around to meet her eyes.

Her smile is a little wobbly, but genuine. "I suppose I can."

"Good. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," Harry says, all in a rush, not caring how it sounds.

"It isn't as easy as that to get rid of me," Ginny advises. "However," she says, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek and then getting to her feet, "I do have to go to work. Thursday morning meetings wait for no man... or goblin."

Harry watches her disappear into the bathroom, wondering if he also has a meeting this morning. One for which he is, in all likelihood, completely unprepared. It's surprisingly difficult to care. Idly, he picks up his tomato clock and is floating it in lazy circles around his head when Ginny stalks back into the bedroom, robe flapping, bringing a wave of fresh, floral-scented steam with her. Draco's
shower steam always smells like lemons, his mind supplies, along with the shockingly vivid memory of Draco's water-slicked bare skin and his invitations for Harry to join him.

Concentration slipping, he loses his grip on the spell and the tomato clock falls, bounces off his forehead with a painful clonk and rolls away across the bed with a single cry of 'six twenty-eight' that startles Ginny, causing her to stop buttoning up her shirt and turn to fix Harry with an inquiring look.

"What are you doing?"

Harry scowls and rubs at the sore spot on his head. "I have no idea. Carry on."

When Ginny finally leaves for work, hair shiny and robes pressed, with a brief hug that both pains and fortifies Harry, he prises himself from the bed and gazes gloomily at the sea of brown that is his wardrobe. Irritably, he chooses a sweater and trousers that look a little newer than the rest and stands in front of the mirror, gazing at his reflection with growing dissatisfaction. As he stuffs his wand into his waistband, though, he has an idea. Possibly not a very good one, but an idea nonetheless.

Eyes narrowed in concentration, he draws his wand along the soft wool of his sweater, concentrating on both the unfamiliar Transfiguration and the image of one of the nicest garments belonging to his other self, a sea-green cashmere thing with a strange folded over neck and little zips at the bottom. Encouraged by the tightening of the sweater around his torso and the lightening of the sludgy brown fibres, Harry flicks his wand, closes his eyes, and decides to trust his instincts.

Next, he goes for the trousers, attempting simply to make them black (because black goes with everything—he's certain he has heard Draco say that at least five times) and a little more fitted. Quietly confident—because how difficult can it be, after all?—Harry holds onto the spell until the trouser fabric pulls at his hips, and then lowers his wand and opens his eyes.

"Oh, no."

The man staring back at him from the glass looks ridiculous. Harry can't be sure where exactly he has gone wrong, but somewhere during the process, he has managed to create a style disaster. His sweater, far from being bluish-green and trendy, is the colour of a particularly obnoxious lime and so tight that when he lifts despairing hands to rake through his hair, the fabric rides up to expose his abdomen and then rips under both arms.

Harry lets out a sound that is part whimper and part snort of self-deprecating laughter.

If Draco could see him now, he'd... well, it's probably a good thing Draco cannot see him now, that's all Harry knows. Because the trousers... oh, fucking hell, the trousers. Far from being fashionably fitted, they stretch so tightly around his buttocks and crotch that absolutely nothing is left to the imagination. Harry suspects that right now, each individual bollock could be spied from space, and that's more than anyone needs to see of him. Conversely, from the knee down, the once uniformly baggy trousers have widened into some of the most obscene flares Harry has ever seen, and he has seen pictures of his dad in the seventies. He gives each leg in turn an experimental shake, and the excess of not-quite-brown, not-quite-black fabric flaps around his ankles.

He sighs, and then freezes at the sound of a stifled giggle. Very slowly, he turns, and realises with a thrill of horror that he has forgotten to close the bedroom door. Green eyes bore into his from beneath a mop of sleep-ruffled hair as Harry's pyjama-clad son looks him up and down and laughs and laughs and laughs.
"What are you doing up?" Harry grumbles, crossing his arms self-consciously over his chest.

"Bathroom," Al pants, cackling in earnest now. It's only a matter of time before James and Lily are roused to come and laugh at his outfit, too. "What've you got on, Dad?"

"I'll have you know," Harry says, drawing himself to his full height and attempting to channel a Draco-like level of icy nonchalance, "that this is an extremely... you know what, never mind what I've got on. Go back to bed."

Al snorts. "Right, Dad," he mumbles, shaking his head slowly as he slopes off to his bedroom.

Harry sighs. Alright, so he hasn't done the most elegant job with his outfit, but he doesn't think there's any need to laugh quite so hard. Slightly wounded, he strips off, banishes the offending garments and returns to his wardrobe. After a few moments' rummaging, he finds an un-butchered sweater and pair of trousers and resolves to go shopping after Christmas, even if he does hate the experience with every fibre of his being. If he's going to stop acting and feeling like an old man, he needs to stop dressing like one, too.

**~*~**

Opting not to fuel Helga's disparagement this morning, he throws on his robes before he leaves the house, and when he strides into the office a few minutes later, she barely raises an eyebrow.

"Your messages, Mr Potter," she says, holding out the sheaf of parchment without looking up from her *Daily Prophet* crossword.

He takes them, heads for his office door, and hesitates.

In that room lies sanctuary of a sort, but also reports and memos and other things, the very thought of which threatens to reinstate his headache. Suddenly he can't face it. He feels anxious and tender-raw and he doesn't need strategy and paperwork. He needs to see a friend.

Decisively, he stuffs the messages into his robe pocket and turns to Helga.

"I'm going out."

"Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, but didn't you just arrive?" she says acidly.

Harry resists the temptation to pull a childish face at her. "I have a meeting with someone from the Goblin Liaison Office," he says, not quite resisting the temptation to fold his arms.

Helga blinks. "That's not in the diary."

"I know. I don't tell you everything, you know."

There's a familiar clacking sound as Helga leans forward and lifts an eyebrow. "Oh?"

The sound chills Harry and he takes a step back, but maintains eye contact. "Yes. Indeed. Hm." Harry pauses, frowning. "Never mind that. I'm going now."

Feeling like even more of an idiot than usual, Harry turns his back on her and stalks out into the corridor. In the lift, he presses his forehead against the wall, relishing the coolness of the metal, the
fact that he's alone and the proximity of his office to Hermione Granger-Weasley's. At some point, he hopes, his brain will start working again. Unfortunately, he has no idea when that will be.

By the time he reaches the Goblin Liaison Office, he is light with the prospect of seeing the real Hermione for the first time in weeks. He is right outside her personal office before he remembers about Anthony Goldstein, but then the door is flying open and it's too late.

"Oh, hello, Auror Potter," says a vaguely familiar young woman with curly hair and an armful of scrolls. She smiles up at him and attempts to hold open the door with an elbow and a foot. "Have you come to see Ms Granger-Weasley? She's not in a very good mood at the moment," the woman adds in an undertone, shooting Harry a conspiratorial look.

"Union contracts?" Harry guesses.

The woman nods. She gathers her scrolls more securely and moves out so that Harry can take the weight of the door. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Harry murmurs, listening as her footsteps recede. He'd almost forgotten that some people at work are nice to him; Helga makes it too easy.

"Harry? Is that you?"

He pushes the door open and has to suppress a grin at what he sees. Hermione is sitting behind her desk but is almost completely hidden from view by a stack of multicoloured files, at least seven coffee cups, and a glittery tomato costume. Goldstein is nowhere to be seen.

"Nice tomato," he offers, clicking the door closed behind him.

"Oh, don't get me started on that," Hermione groans, wheeling her chair over the carpet so that Harry can see her harassed face. "Since when did the Nativity include sparkly tomatoes? And, more to the point, why did my son only show me the letter on Tuesday, giving me approximately five minutes to make his costume? I'm... I'm not even very good at sewing!" she wails, and Harry does smile at her now; he can't help it.

"I don't know, 'Mione," he says, finding a few square inches of desk and perching on it. He pokes at the costume cautiously, sending glitter showering to the floor. Alarmed, he withdraws his hand and stuffs it into his pocket. "It's... well, it's the best one of those I've ever seen," he says truthfully.

She laughs and the tension dissolves from her face. "Thanks. Where were you yesterday, anyway? Didn't you get my memo?"

"I'm sorry. I was buried in messages and I completely forgot. Is the offer of coffee still good?"

Hermione eyes the stack of files wearily. "If you can help me with these negotiations, I will buy you as many cups of coffee as you can drink."

Harry smiles, just full of warmth to see his friend again, even if he knows there's no way he can talk to her about the mess inside his head. Not yet, anyway. He leans across the desk to accept the quill she is holding out, getting gold glitter all over his robes and not caring.

"Deal."
After two hours of brainstorming and drafting and redrafting that feels like much longer, Harry has almost managed to forget about Ginny and Draco and everything that goes with them. In addition, his wrist hurts from scribbling down Hermione's rapid-fire thoughts, and the words 'goblin', 'representation' and 'therefore' have lost all meaning. When Hermione finishes re-reading their work and rolls up the parchment for safekeeping, he can barely contain his relief.

"I don't know how you do this all day, Hermione, I really don't."

She gazes at him across the desk, brow creased. "Drafting negotiations or dealing with goblins?"

"Paperwork," he clarifies, eyeing the desk piled high in the otherwise pin-neat office.

Hermione laughs. "I quite like it usually," she confesses, getting to her feet and shrugging into a smart plum coloured coat. "It appeals to my need for order. And anyway, you do at least as much as me; you never stop complaining about it." Harry opens his mouth to protest but she shakes her head, smiling, and heads for the door. "Come on. I've found this great little place."

"Same old Hermione," he mumbles under his breath, following her and hiding a smile.

"I heard that," she advises.

Harry says nothing, just follows her down to the Atrium and out into the crisp, cool morning. As they saunter through streets packed with last-minute Christmas shoppers, side by side in a comfortable silence, Harry wonders whether or not he should be in a meeting, or if he should have at least told Helga where he was going, but he flattens the flicker of conscience almost as quickly as it appears. He is the bloody Head of the bloody Auror Department, and he can go wherever he likes. It's been the longest time since he abused his position even a little bit.

Hermione glances at him, apparently amused, and Harry wonders if the childish little 'So there!' in his head is written all over his face. She directs an odd little half-smile at the ground and tucks her arm through his.

Probably, then.

"Mum!" comes the stage whisper of a small child from the other side of the street. Harry looks, trying not to make it obvious, and sees a little boy of six or seven, bundled up in stripy knitwear, hanging onto his mother's arm and gazing at Harry with wide dark eyes. "Is that Harry Potter, Mum? Is it? Is it?"

The woman bites her lip. Shoots anxious glances at Harry and then Hermione, who has now slowed almost to a standstill and is watching the scene with interest.

"Don't stare, Leon," she says, grabbing his hand and attempting to pull him along the pavement.

Harry heart clenches. He smiles at the little boy and adds an awkward-but-friendly wave without thinking about it. It only takes a moment for the child to grin and wave back so furiously that his arm is in danger of becoming detached. The pure, open delight on his face slams into Harry, and he is lifted higher still as the woman seems to shake herself, throws him a grateful smile and mouths a 'thank you' as she steers her son back into the crowds.

As they resume normal walking speed, Harry holds onto the smile.
"Are you feeling alright?" Hermione asks, elbowing him lightly, and shame steals back into his veins. He's forgotten his defences. His strategies for keeping people away. He's left them in that other place along with his exhaustion, his sanity, and the dull, unhappy person he had accidentally become before all of this.

"Yep," he manages, throat dry.

Hermione lifts an eyebrow but says nothing. Instead, she steers him around a corner and into a cobbled backstreet where the crowd is sparser and the cold air is rich with the aromas of coffee and fresh bread. Harry breathes in deeply, already feeling some of his dissatisfaction slipping away.

"Gah," Hermione yelps, grabbing his arm painfully hard as she loses her footing on the icy cobbles.

Without thinking, Harry twists around and catches her around the waist, steadying her before she crashes to the ground. She rests her head against his chest and sighs, mouth twitching at the corners, windblown curls everywhere.

"Well, that was graceful." She lifts her eyes to meet his and pulls herself carefully upright.

Harry grins, releasing her. "I've seen worse. I'm always falling over."

Hermione throws him an odd look and then turns away, holding her arms out at her sides and setting her feet down carefully on the sparkling cobbles. "You're being oddly self-deprecating today. Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"Yeah, it's my..." Harry stops, staring down at his legs and turning cold. This knee was never damaged by Bellatrix Lestrange in the Malfoy's ballroom. Because Hermione... Harry drags in a deep breath, letting the cold air crash into his lungs. Here he doesn't need to worry about crashing to the floor at all the most inopportune moments, does he? In fact, since he returned, there has been a complete absence of falling down at inopportune moments. He can't help feel that he should be more relieved about that.

"Come on," Hermione calls from the door of a cafe some way up the street, and when Harry looks, there's an immediate thrill of recognition. He's been here before. Shaking himself, he catches up to her and follows her into the steam-filled cafe.

"The coffee here is fantastic," she says.

I know, he thinks. And the waitresses here are sulky.

"Better had be," he says instead, pulling up a chair at a corner table. "I think I've earned it."

Within seconds, the sullen-faced waitress has sloped over from the counter and is standing beside their table, tapping her pen against her notepad and regarding them with such an expression of world-weary ennui on her young face that Harry is almost impressed.

"What can I get you?" she asks, barely keeping the sigh out of her voice.

"Large black coffee, please," Harry says brightly, baring his teeth at her in a friendly smile that makes her eyes widen in astonishment. She just about manages to catch her pen before it tumbles out of her loosened grip and escapes.
"Er," says the waitress, eyes large and puzzled. "We've got three featured coffees this week... erm... a Sumatran Mandheling, a Monsoon Malabar, and a Brazilian Bruzzi. I think," she adds in a small voice, suddenly looking very much like the vulnerable teenager Draco had reduced to tears.

"I don't know," he says, folding his arms on the shiny tabletop. "Why don't you choose for me?"

"Right," she says after a moment, blinking repeatedly and knitting her thin eyebrows together as though she has no idea what to do with Harry.

He has to admit, he's enjoying himself.

"I'll have a medium cappuccino, please," Hermione says faintly, and both Harry and the waitress turn to look at her. "Do you two know each other?"

"No," Harry says, a little too quickly.

"Er, no," the waitress confirms, every shred of her attitude back in place as she regards Hermione.

"Well... alright then," Hermione murmurs, tucking an errant curl behind her ear and turning back to Harry, eyes narrowed in contemplation.

The waitress rolls her eyes and turns away, and Harry watches her until she disappears out of view.

"Fangirls," Hermione sighs.

Harry kicks her lightly under the table. "Hardly."

"Well, I don't know. Don't think it's escaped me that you're behaving oddly."

Harry's heart speeds unpleasantly. "What do you mean by that?"

Hermione sighs, dropping her hands into her lap and picking at her coat sleeves. "You're jumpy. And you're being... sociable with members of the public. If I'm honest, Harry, it's a little bit strange."

"Is this because I waved at that little boy?" Harry asks, attempting to sound as incredulous as he can.

"It's because I've known you for twenty-six years, and I know when you're trying to avoid talking about something," she says sharply, dark eyes boring into Harry's with such intensity, such intuition, that he's tempted to tell her everything, to hug her tightly and beg for her advice, but knows that as far as she is aware, they saw each other less than two days ago, and the only rational thing he can do right now is to pretend that everything is fine.

The waitress chooses that moment to bring over their coffee, and Harry busies himself with adding brown sugar from a paper packet and stirring noisily for as long as he can get away with.

"Harry. Communication is good. It won't hurt you," Hermione says stridently; when he meets her eyes, though, something in her seems to soften. "It's just me. You know you can tell me if something's wrong... is it James?"

Already forming his defence, Harry frowns, puzzled by the non-sequitur. "What? No—why would you say that?"
Hermione shrugs. She sips her cappuccino and wipes foam from her top lip with a paper napkin. "He's a teenager. And Al told me that he's dyed his hair blue. Just a hunch."

"Ah, that," Harry sighs, wrapping his fingers around his cup and allowing the heat to flow into his body. "It isn't all of his hair, if that makes a difference."

"Oh, all the difference in the world," Hermione says, lips twitching into a half smile. "Alright, then, it's not James, who, by the way reminds me an awful lot of you as a teenager—" Hermione pauses for long enough to mirror Harry's grimace mockingly back at him. "So, what's bothering you?"

Harry rubs his face and rests his chin on his hand. He hates lying to Hermione, but to tell the whole truth wouldn't be fair to Ginny, and the words that he needs stick in his throat. "I'm just run down, 'Mione. I'm tired," he says, and at least that part is true. As he speaks, a yawn rises obligingly and he covers it with a negligent hand.

Hermione catches it and shakes herself, setting down her coffee cup and turning stern eyes on Harry.

"Don't," she pleads. "I can't sleep until that bloody tomato is finished."

"Why don't you just use magic to make it?" he asks as the thought occurs to him.

Hermione bites her lip and ducks her head, suddenly sheepish. "Don't ask me that."

Harry is intrigued, and, more than that, he's happy to pursue any topic that takes the focus away from himself. "Hermione, why don't you just use magic to make it?"

She picks up her spoon and twiddles it distractedly in her fingers. "Because Hugo sedalthothrumsrmakinthersproply."

"Excuse me?" Harry prods.

Hermione lifts her head and makes defiant eye contact, cheeks ever-so-slightly flushed. "Because," she says quietly, "Hugo said that all the other mums were making their costumes properly. And I can do that. I can," she insists, trying not to smile as Harry snorts with laughter at the wonderfully well-meaning, slightly illogical, so very Hermione admission.

Being with her is a miniature escape, a well-timed little reminder that even the most level-headed of his friends are capable of the faintly ridiculous. He's not alone.

"You're mad," he says, smile stretching wide.

"Probably," Hermione sighs. "Oh, well. It happens to the best of us. I'm not going to push you to talk to me, you know," she says, turning serious. "As long as you know I'm always here for you."

"I know," he says softly. At a loss for what else to say, he gulps at his rapidly-cooling coffee. It's delicious, smooth and bittersweet—the miserable waitress has chosen well.

For a minute or two, neither of them says a word. The cafe is midweek morning quiet and Harry can hear the two waitresses gossiping about a celebrity break-up as they wipe the counter and stack teacups and arrange exotic-looking bread rolls in a basket.

"They were like... a perfect couple," says the young waitress. "I can't believe it."
"Perfect couple my arse," her older colleague snorts. "There's no such thing, mark my words."

Harry sighs and drains his cup.

"Have you finished your Christmas shopping?" Hermione says suddenly.

"What do you think?" Harry says, lifting an eyebrow.

"If you were organised, you might be dangerous," she sighs. "I was thinking of getting Ron a bigger shed in the garden for his brooms," she says with a weary edge to her voice. "What do you think?"

"Doesn't he keep his brooms in the house these days?"

"The shed is for his overflow brooms," Hermione says faintly. She closes her eyes, rests her chin on her hand and laughs.

"Good grief," Harry murmurs, wondering—only for a split second—where on earth he has picked up that expression. His heart twinges and he forces himself to ignore it. "Yes, I think he'd like that... although I also happen to know that he's been angling for some Chudley-Cannon-orange seat-covers for his car."

Hermione wrinkles her nose. "Noted."

Pensive, Harry reaches for a sugar packet, slowly rips the paper and tips the granules into a tiny pile on the tabletop. "Did you..." Harry hesitates, pushing the sugar crystals around with the tip of his finger. "Did you always imagine that our lives would turn out like this?"

"I don't know," Hermione says carefully after a moment. "I hoped."

Harry looks up to meet hopelessly sincere brown eyes. "So, you're happy."

"Most of the time," Hermione says, and it's so obvious that she means it that Harry aches. "I've got Ron and my children and you... and my job. They're all a little bit frustrating at times, but therein lies the challenge, I suppose. I think I'd probably be bored if everything was perfect."

"That's very true," Harry manages. His mouth is disgustingly dry but his cup is empty.

"What did you imagine?" she asks, concern striking a little line between her eyebrows.

"Everything I have," he says, trying to swallow down the guilt that lashes from his chest into his throat when he thinks about Gin and her sad, calm resignation. "I imagined that Gin and I would have a family and that I'd become an Auror." He forces a smile. "I was just wondering."

"Are you happy?" Hermione asks.

Harry feels sick. Gathering all the fortitude he possesses in order to maintain the eye contact, he draws in a deep breath and presses his fingertips against the scattered sugar granules, allowing the sharp crystals to prick his skin.

"Yeah, of course. I think I just need to make a few changes," he says after a moment.
Hermione's eyebrows shoot up. "What kind of changes?"

Harry quirks a small smile, still fighting down a persistent wave of nausea. "You'll see."

Glancing at the clock, Hermione sighs, rummages in her coat pocket and drops several coins into her empty saucer. "I have to go back to work, I'm afraid. It's a bit early but... do you think you're having a mid-life crisis?"

"Shut up," Harry says. Both witty and articulate, his subconscious observes.

"Well, that's me told," Hermione laughs, getting to her feet.

Harry seals his mouth shut before he can say anything else idiotic or incriminating and follows her out into the winter sunshine. It's almost midday. He wonders if Helga has sent out a search party yet.

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As it turns out, Helga greets Harry with a "Good afternoon, Mr Potter" that is positively dripping with sarcasm and then spends the next few minutes watching him beadily as he fetches himself a glass of water and makes coffee for her with a lingering feeling of guilt. She takes it, swapping the cup for another seven messages and informs Harry pointedly that he has a very important meeting in half an hour.

"Right," Harry says, gulping at the cold water and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Helga shudders. "And is that all I have on this afternoon?"

"Is that all?" she repeats, apparently horrified. "You are being asked to sit in on a strategy meeting between the Minister for Magic and the Muggle Prime Minister and you are asking if that's all? Mr Potter, have you had a blow to the head?"

Helga is all but frothing at the mouth now, but Harry finds himself unmoved. He gazes at her over the top of his glass for a moment and then speaks in what he hopes is an even but still professional tone.

"I'm fine, Helga. I'm a little bit tired, and your concern for my health recently is much appreciated. I certainly didn't mean to be... dismissive about the meeting," he says, while frantically trying to remember the agenda and whether or not he's going to be expected to say anything. "What I meant to ask was how much time has been scheduled for the meeting, because I have some errands to run this afternoon."

Helga's dark eyes glitter and she looks more McGonagall-esque than ever. "Further errands?"

Harry nods, flashing her an expectant smile. Her startled expression only leads him to wonder just how long she has been in charge and how long he has failed to stand up to her. After a moment of blinking and muffled clicking, she pulls the heavy diary toward her and runs her finger down the page marked 'Thursday 21st'.

"Twelve thirty until three thirty," she says. "Provisionally speaking."

Harry groans inwardly. "Fantastic. How does my hair look?"

"Like it always does. Like you've been rolling around in a field," Helga sniffs, clawing back a shred
"Well, then, I'm ready for anything," Harry declares, pushing his performance up to eleven just for the sheer enjoyment of Helga's bemused expression. "I think I'll go down there now, make sure I'm nice and early—what do you think? Have you got anything to eat?"

Helga opens her mouth and closes it again, reaches behind herself without looking away from Harry and, after a moment, retrieves a shiny green apple from a desk drawer.

"Brilliant," he declares, accepting the apple and taking a huge bite. "S'yoolater," he mumbles through his mouthful, and takes his leave of Helga before she can get a word in.

Despite his best intentions, he is alone in the vast conference room for barely as long as it takes him to polish off Helga's apple; he has just drawn his wand to get rid of the core when the door creaks open. Hurriedly, he sends it flying through the air and thwapping neatly into the waste paper basket in the corner and stands up just in time to see Kingsley Shacklebolt stride into the room. Huge and intimidating in robes of blood red, he exudes authority and gravitas but still finds a sly smile for Harry as he sweeps past and takes his seat at the head of the table.

Harry smiles back and holds out his hand to greet the Muggle Prime Minister. She is followed by Franz Fitzwilliam, who appears to be barely suppressing his boredom, and a nervous-looking young man carrying a quill and a stack of folders.

"You must be the Head of the Auror Department," says the dark-haired woman, clasping his hand in a firm grip. She doesn't smile, but her green eyes are warm.

No, I'm just Harry Potter, he insists silently. I'm just confused. I'm just a man who doesn't love his wife any more. The address just doesn't seem to fit. He's never felt more disconnected from his job.

"Yes, I'm Harry Potter," he says at last, hoping his hesitation has gone unnoticed. "A pleasure to meet you, Ms Harman."

She nods, releasing his hand, and Harry smiles at her, secretly rather impressed with himself that—all things considered—he has managed to remember her name.

It's a good start.

Unfortunately, by the time the water has been poured and the usual niceties observed, Harry finds his attention drifting. He is seated next to the Under-Secretary, who is so conscientious in his efforts to record every word spoken that he doesn't spare Harry a single glance, and, given that simply being present seems to be the extent of Harry's role in this meeting, there is very little to hold his interest. As the words of his colleagues fade to a low, meaningless hum, Harry observes the open posture and slightly anxious mannerisms of the Prime Minister and the dark expression of his boss as Kingsley speaks, and wonders if he's ever found the content of these sessions diverting. He can't remember.

Surely he must have enjoyed all of this at one time. He wants to believe that's true, but the uncomfortable wriggle in his gut forces him to admit that he hasn't really felt like an Auror since he came out of the field. And he knows, despite his frequent protests to the contrary, that he's not fit for that any more; age and fatherhood have softened him beyond repair.

He exhales slowly, lacing his hands together on the glossy mahogany table and gazing down at his blurry, distorted reflection.
"If we could turn to page thirteen, paragraph four, I'd like to draw your attention to the statement regarding the conduct of magical persons in non-magical situations which have been exempted from the most recent amendment of the Statute of Secrecy," Kingsley says.

His deep, rumbling voice shatters Harry's malaise and he flips to the relevant page before his inattention is detected. All of a sudden he misses his bright, sawdust-scented workshop so violently that he has to close his eyes. When he opens them again, the glaring white page with its tiny, cramped black letters is still there, Kingsley is still talking, and Harry has to focus.

**~*~**

It's after four by the time chairs are scraped back and goodbye handshakes are exchanged, and as soon as Harry is out of sight of the others, he bolts for the Atrium, practically leaps into the nearest fireplace and emerges into the dark, smoky interior of the Leaky Cauldron. It's not his usual style; in fact, he can't remember the last time he went shopping in Diagon Alley, but Hermione's words have stuck with him, and, actually, he doesn't want Gin to have to choose all the Christmas gifts on her own.

He nods to Tom the barman and makes his way out into the street. None of this is making much sense, but he doesn't know what he can do other than allowing it to take him where it will. The air is biting cold and night has fallen already, plunging the world into darkness as thick as a winter cloak. When he steps through the brick archway into the street, he catches his breath.

Diagon Alley is alive with chatter, laughter, ringing footsteps on cobbles; stallholders are trying to make themselves heard above the merry, piping music that fills the street. The scene is glittering with strings of multicoloured lights, gently-swinging lanterns and the real fairies that flutter and glow around the branches of Christmas trees for sale. As Harry walks slowly into the river of shoppers, the festival atmosphere wraps around him and lifts the weight of his afternoon away.

*Draco would like this,* he thinks, breathing in the warm scent of spices and cider, not even flinching as a group of teenage girls brush past him, looking back and giggling amongst themselves. Instead, he plunges his hands into his robe pockets in search of gold to fritter away, but turns up nothing more than two Sickles, a handful of Knuts, and a purple, flower-shaped button that can only belong to Lily.

Pasting on his 'let me through, I'm on serious Auror business' face, Harry fights his way through the crowds and reaches the top of the Gringotts staircase, breathing hard and slightly warm despite the nip in the air. As he clicks across the marble floor, secures himself a goblin and rattles along the underground track to his vault, his mind is so occupied with hoping that he doesn't run into Ginny and get quizzed about why he's not at work that he's completely thrown when he steps back into the lobby, pockets heavy with gold, and the first thing he sees is a retreating blond figure, black robes whipping behind him as he stalks, in a terribly familiar fashion, out of sight around a corner.

Harry's heart stutters painfully, and just for a second he thinks it might stop.

"Is there anything else you need, Mr Potter?" enquires his goblin guide.

"No, thanks," Harry says faintly. He stuffs his hands into his laden pockets and walks as quickly as he can back out into the night. The real Draco Malfoy suddenly seems like a rather intimidating prospect.
Shaking his head, Harry hurries down the steps and drifts back into the seething crowd. He allows it to carry him, extricating himself whenever he sees something of interest. Although the usual shops are still open, many of them festooned with lights themselves, the stalls draw him in, catching his eyes with trays of shiny things, tables full of bizarre foods he has never seen before, and stallholders in festive, brightly-coloured robes and hats, all vying for his attention and shouting over one another in their efforts to make a sale.

Harry ends up sampling two different types of mulled cider, four unusual cheeses and something crunchy that he can't quite identify (and doesn't, in truth, really want to) just to be polite. He buys a large slice of Drunken Goat cheese in honour of Lucius bloody Malfoy, and spends the next half hour humming Celestina Warbeck songs under his breath. He buys sparkly things for Lily, disgusting things for Al—including, but not limited to, a small eyeball that the vendor assures him will roll around the floor, spinning around and inspecting things, if left to its own devices—and an elf-made leather jacket for James that smells wonderful enough to tempt Harry to keep it, until he reminds himself that he has resolved not to dress like an idiot any more.

As the wind picks up, sending the lanterns swinging and the stallholders scrambling for their protective charms, Harry pulls out of the crowd and almost falls over a toothless old woman with a rack of long woollen scarves and bobble hats. Impulsively, he hands over five Sickles for a green and blue scarf and winds it around his neck.

"Warm, that, innit, love?" mumbles the old woman, treating him to a gummy grin.

Harry agrees that the scarf is indeed very warm and drifts on, picking up animated catnip mice for Frank, a case of limited edition whiskies for Ron (Borteg's 'curious flavours' range) and a handmade necklace of dull silver and colourful beads that he knows will look beautiful on Ginny, because her other self wears one almost exactly like it.

For Hermione, of course, it has to be a book, so Harry reluctantly abandons the midwinter carnival of the market and heads into Flourish and Blotts. He finds the perfect book for her in no time, and allows himself to be drawn toward the arts and crafts section, excitement bubbling inside him as he runs his finger along the spines of familiar titles: Working With Weird Woods, Your Muse and You: an Artist's View, Craftsmen: artistic or afflicted?, The Glassblower's Guide... Harry chews on his lip for a moment and then sweeps all four into his arms and stomps off to pay for them before he can stop himself.

He emerges, weighed down with paper bags, and is just contemplating another hot cinnamon swirl when he sees her. She is buying a sandwich from a man with a delicious-smelling but slightly grotesque pig on a spit some fifty feet away from Harry, and he calls out to her.

"Jenny!"

She turns, looking around for who is calling her name, face puzzled. It's dark and Harry is obscured by a constant stream of people; no wonder she can't see him. Gathering his bags more securely, he dashes across the cobbles and pitches up next to her. The expected flicker of recognition does not come, and Harry's insides turn cold. She doesn't know him. Of course she fucking doesn't.

"Er... yes, Auror?" she says uncertainly, glancing at his robes and putting a protective arm around the child at her side. Harry hadn't even noticed her. "It's alright, Allie, we aren't in trouble. Are we?"

"No! Of course not," he says hurriedly, glancing down at the little girl and assuming his most trustworthy expression. She blinks and moves closer to her mother. "I'm sorry. I thought you were
"Someone else named Jenny?" she asks in a soft voice, as though she doesn't believe Harry and is a little worried about him all at once.

"Yeah." He swallows hard, fighting to breathe against the numb horror that is spreading inside his ribcage. "Bit of a coincidence, I suppose. Sorry to bother you," he manages, nodding politely to her and walking as quickly in the opposite direction as he can.

Ridiculous. That's what he is. He has managed to retreat so far into a pleasant little bubble of unreality that he has almost managed to forget that the glimpse wasn't real. Jenny doesn't know him at all. She's never met him. She's not Fred Weasley's fiancée. Because Fred Weasley is dead.

Harry just keeps walking and is mildly surprised when he finds himself back outside the wall entrance to the Leaky. He turns and looks back at the twinkling lights for a moment, and then spells his way back into the pub, walks into the fireplace and straight back out into the Ministry Atrium, legs unsteady and hair full of ash. He fucking hates Flooing.

The corridors are quiet, Harry suspects because anyone with any sense has bugged off home already. Helga, of course, never leaves the office for the day until she's certain Harry no longer needs her, and as he shifts his shopping bags awkwardly and pushes open the door, a little spike of guilt makes itself known in the pit of his stomach.

She doesn't look up when he stomps and rustles into the room, or even when he drops a bag of jingling decorations and has to spend a minute or two chasing them around the floor. He stuffs the last one back into the bag and heads for his office, pausing at the edge of her desk.

"You can go home if you want, Helga."

"I have letters to write, Mr Potter," she says, continuing to scratch away with her quill. "Right," Harry says softly, watching her for a moment and trying to imagine how it must feel to have one's usually compliant, downtrodden boss suddenly begin answering back and otherwise behaving like a madman. Impulsively, he reaches into one of his bags, withdraws a red and green striped candy cane and places it on the edge of her desk, next to her teacup, then disappears into his office before she can loudly mock his peace offering.

He sinks into his creaky chair, bags all around him, and carefully withdraws the illicit books. They're hardback and beautiful and full of vivid coloured photographs and intriguing diagrams, so different from his dry, black and white MLE-issued texts that he can't quite stop himself opening them all out on his desk at once, flicking through the pages and, for the very first time, understanding Hermione's enthusiastic assertion that "a new book is the best smell in the world".

Feeling oddly furtive, as though looking at glassblowing books in a Ministry office is in some way depraved, Harry flips through his new purchases. He's hardback and beautiful and full of vivid coloured photographs and intriguing diagrams, so different from his dry, black and white MLE-issued texts that he can't quite stop himself opening them all out on his desk at once, flicking through the pages and, for the very first time, understanding Hermione's enthusiastic assertion that "a new book is the best smell in the world".

Feeling oddly furtive, as though looking at glassblowing books in a Ministry office is in some way depraved, Harry flips through his new purchases. He loses himself in the glossy photographs and examines pictures of myriad tools he has owned and used, learning the proper names of many of them for the first time. He sighs, fingers splayed over a double-page spread of a silver-haired man carving an intricate relief into the legs of a large, ornate mahogany chair; as he watches, the man in the photograph narrows his eyes in concentration and examines his work, blowing the dust away and running calloused fingers over the smooth curves of the wood.

He wants to be that person again. The trouble is... he never really was that person. He was just filling in for a little while. He's a bureaucrat, not a craftsman. He can't even make a little table.
Suddenly irritable, Harry drops his face into his hands and exhales in a messy rush. It's all just a bit fucking much. He's had enough.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," he mumbles to himself. "Go home and see your children."

Black as his mood is, the pull of home is strong and, after taking a few seconds to regulate his breathing, Harry gathers up the books, hides them in his desk drawer beside the photograph of Maura, and collects his bags in preparation to leave the office for the night. For Christmas, in fact. Barring some major disaster, Harry doesn't have to return for almost a week. He's unsure how he feels about that, but he's not about to volunteer to work the holidays.

He locks his door behind him and turns to Helga, who is sitting behind her desk with her coat on, sucking primly on the candy cane. Harry smiles; he can't help it.

"Well, Merry Christmas, Helga."

"Merry Christmas, Mr Potter," she says. Her tongue flicks out to swipe minty sugar from her bottom lip and she drops her eyes for a moment as though considering something. When she lifts her black eyes to Harry again, her face is set. "I don't suppose I can persuade to attend Midnight Mass this year?"

Harry smiles with indulgence borne of many, many similar requests over the years. "You never know, Helga. This year might be the year."

She sighs. "I have definitely heard that one before." She stands up and puts on a black hat with knitted flowers on the brim. "I will, however, put in a good word for you."

"I appreciate that," Harry says, and he means it. Lifted, he holds open the door for Helga and they travel down in the lift in an almost companionable silence. He decides to Apparate home, holding tightly onto his shopping bags as he makes the jump to a quiet part of Willoughby Drive. As he approaches the house, he can see Ginny moving around in the brightly-lit bedroom and Lily in the window seat, apparently attempting to teach Frank to play cards. He draws in a deep breath, tasting the sharp frosty air, and goes to join them.

**~*~**

Determined to wring every last drop out of the next few days, Harry does his utmost to push his sadness, his anxiety over the future, and his fear of the unknown quantity that is this universe's Draco to the back of his mind.

He plays with Lily and Frank in the frozen back garden, helps (watches) Al and Rose make biscuits containing every ingredient they can lay their hands on, whilst answering their questions about dragons, Basilisks and other dangerous creatures as honestly as he can. He suspects that Al has inherited his leap-before-you-look brand of curiosity, and realises now that perhaps it's best to take a leaf out of Dumbledore's book and arm him with as much information as he can. When he's not required, he leans back precariously in his chair and revels in their energy and chatter about Hogwarts. He finds himself watching Rose as she flicks dough at Al with bright eyes and obvious confidence, and the little tear in his heart inflicted by her lonely counterpart heals almost all the way.

Predictably, James makes himself scarce, eschewing his parents' and siblings' company in favour of visiting friends, holing up in his bedroom, and stalking around the village, looking moody. Quietly
amused, Harry opts to leave him to it, and barely resists the urge to perform a victory dance when James accepts Friday night babysitting duty with relatively good grace, allowing Harry and Ginny to spend the evening at Ron and Hermione's dinner table, putting away herby chicken casserole, fresh bread, and good red wine.

It's surprisingly easy to pretend that everything is normal, partly because it sort of feels like it is. This Ron may lack a little of the confidence of his more successful other self, but he's warm and full of humour and it's fantastic to have him back. Ginny, clearly drawing comfort from her brother and best friend, looks more relaxed in the flickering candlelight than Harry has seen her in years. Even Hermione, who keep shooting him concerned glances when no one else is looking, seems to be enjoying herself. The affection that he feels for all of them swells inside him and chases away his uncertainty, at least for the time being, and that's good enough for him. These people may have slipped back to once-a-week friends in the glimpse, but he's not going to let that happen here.

Saturday morning is bright, crisp and dry. Harry dresses in his scruffiest jeans, wraps his new scarf around his neck and heads out to a rarely-used meadow behind the Burrow, broomsticks under his arm, Al at his side. Lily and Ginny, some way behind them, are conducting a whispered conversation, and Frank leaps and scuttles along the path on the end of a long, silvery lead, keeping pace with James, who is stomping through the long grasses with his hands jammed in his pockets.

"Why've you got all this time to spend with us, anyway? Have you been fired?"

"James!" Al gasps, scandalised. And then: "Have you?"

"No, I have not," Harry says firmly. "I'm just taking a bit of extra time off while you lot are on holiday from school. Is that alright?"

Al nods, tossing their makeshift Quaffle into the air and catching it. "I think it's good. Rose says you can go insane if you work too hard."

Harry glances at James, who is now stepping awkwardly so as not to trip over Frank.

"Yeah, it's okay, I suppose."

Harry smiles to himself. It's always nice to feel wanted. He scrambles over the fence into the meadow and sets about putting up an elaborate series of charms to keep their activities hidden. He doesn't think the Muggle residents of Ottery St Catchpole are quite ready for the spectacle of children on flying broomsticks.

Ginny and Lily elect to stay on the ground, arranging themselves under a tree with a flask of hot chocolate, but James and Al mount their brooms and kick off into the air with no hesitation. After a moment or two, Harry follows them.

It's been far too long since he last flew. The wind slices through his hair as he takes off; his heart races as he swoops into the air, a split-second of anxiety before instinct takes over and he's spiralling into the clear sky, angling the handle of his broom upwards, circling higher and higher. Within seconds the cold air numbs his face and he can barely feel the daft, exhilarated grin that stretches his mouth wide. The scent of frozen earth wild in his nostrils, he pushes himself higher and faster, allowing the rushing wind to cleanse him, to lift him, and to fill him with the fragile new belief that all things are possible.

Levelling out, he hovers and gazes down at the tiny figures on the ground below, just about able to
pick out the vivid splashes of red hair and the glitter of Frank's harness in the sun as he chases wind-whipped leaf skeletons across the frosty grass and attacks them with his hind legs, making sure they are good and dead.

"Heads up, Dad!" bellows Al, and Harry turns just in time to see the ball hurtling toward him.

He catches it against his chest, tries to hide the fact that the force of Al's throw has knocked the breath out of him, and looks around for James.

"Call yourself a Quidditch champion?" James yells, reclining casually on his broom some fifty feet below Harry.

Harry sighs. This means war.

When the three of them return to the ground twenty minutes later, frozen, flushed, and breathing hard, Harry can barely feel his feet, fingers or backside, and he has to admit that while he has hung onto more of his flying skills than he expected, he is no match for the raw energy and enthusiasm of youth.

Actually, he thinks he's okay with that. Al seems delighted to have played a game with his usually workaholic dad, and even James is grinning and teasing him and generally forgetting to be disdainful. Harry accepts a deliciously hot mug of chocolate from Ginny, allowing a curious Frank to climb onto his lap and sniff his jumper and scarf all over as he gulps at the warming liquid.

He realises with a pang of sadness that this—a Saturday morning in a frozen meadow—is the best, most natural time he has spent with his family in years. In a few days' time it will all be over. Catching Ginny's eyes over the top of his cup, he wonders if it's the end of their marriage that has made this possible. If it's only the end of something that no longer works that has made them relaxed enough to enjoy the time they have left. To appreciate their children and hang on to the friendship that is still there, even after everything.

"You were really good, Dad," Lily says.

Harry snaps back to attention. "Er, thanks," he manages. "I hope I was better than that when I played at school, though."

"Were you better than Mum?" James asks, clearly trying to set a cat amongst the pixies.

"I've got more sense than to answer that," Harry says.

Ginny snorts.

"Mum?" Lily presses.

Ginny hesitates, rolling her empty cup between her palms. "I'm going to be diplomatic and say that we were both useful players, but... I think your dad was probably the star."

"I don't know about that," Harry says. "You were versatile. I only ever played one position."

"There's only one way to find out," James says, reaching for two brooms and looking between Harry and Ginny, an unholy smirk on his face, stray hairs escaping his quiff and waving around in the breeze.
Harry flicks an enquiring glance in Ginny's direction, intrigued by the challenge.

"Come on, Mum!" Al implores. "Please?"

For long seconds, Ginny says nothing. Then she sets down her cup, gets to her feet and holds out a hand to James for a broom. Al and Lily cheer.

"Right then, Potter," she mutters, turning away from him to mount her broom.

Harry inhales sharply, watching her long hair whipping in the wind and wondering if she had deliberately sought to remind him of Draco. When she looks over her shoulder and flashes him an odd little smile, he's almost certain she had.

"I'm so out of practice," she sighs.

Harry clears his mind of flapping green robes and blond hair as he jumps onto his broom.

"You're not old yet, remember?" he calls, taking off into the air with the ball under his arm.

Seconds later, Ginny streaks past Harry, lifting a hand to wave mockingly at him. From the ground comes the laughter of his children, and it spurs Harry on. Flattening himself to his broom, he shoots off after his soon-to-be ex-wife and secures his grip on the makeshift Quaffle; all of a sudden, none of it feels weird at all—he just wants to take her down.

"Go on, Dad!" Lily cries as Harry swings around to Ginny's right and pelts the ball at her with as much force as he can muster. She wobbles slightly as it smacks her in the side, but quickly recovers, plunging into an impressive dive to catch the ball and effectively destroying the last vestiges of Harry's guilt, along with his sense of fair play.

He swoops underneath her and she laughs, taking off at speed in the opposite direction. By the time he manages to grab the Quaffle back from her, he's slightly dizzy and his glasses have begun to steam up. Not only that, but he's now certain—had he ever wondered—that he would never have made a Chaser. The sound of his children's shouts and cries of encouragement from below (Lily seems to be cheering for him, Al for his mum, and James appears to be loudly critiquing everything he sees) spurs Harry on to engage Ginny in contests of speed, diving and feinting which buoy his confidence enough for him to snatch the ball from her and make off with it into the nearby wood.

The argument over who actually won the flying competition rages on between James, Lily, and Al as the five of them walk home. Harry walks a little way behind them, relishing the sun on his face, with Frank pulling on his harness at one side of him, and Ginny at the other.

"Do you think they're wondering why we aren't getting at each other?" she asks softly.

Harry chews his lip and watches Al and Lily giggling and trying to trip one another up. "Maybe. But they seem happy, don't they?"

Ginny nods but doesn't reply. She tucks her hands into her pockets and kicks up stones.

"We've been sleepwalking, haven't we?" she says eventually.

A sidelong glance reveals the brightness of her eyes. Harry swallows painfully. "Yeah. I really am
"I told you to stop apologising to me," she says, voice catching. "I'm not a victim. We're both adults
and we both chose to ignore what has happening."

"Doom!" cries Al, throwing a theatrical hand to his forehead and staggering around on the path.
When Harry looks at Ginny again, her eyes are still misty, but she's smiling.

"Yeah, well, I've come to realise that ignoring things isn't the best policy," he admits. "It's only taken
me thirty-seven years."

"Here's another lesson for you," Ginny offers. "Regretting the past gets you nowhere in the future.
That one's for free."

"You're a wise woman," Harry says.

"I'll probably get another one this year. Maybe it'll be useful."

Harry laughs. It doesn't hurt as much as he expects it to. He hugs her.

**~*~**

By the time Sunday evening comes around, Harry has managed to almost completely immerse
himself in the ritual of a family Christmas. He and Ginny spend the latter part of the afternoon
barricaded in their bedroom, wrapping presents and trying not to succumb to the tangle of paper,
ribbons, and Spellotape which has taken over the floor. The door is firmly closed and charmed to
keep away curious eyes, but the muffled sound of James' incomprehensible music still manages to
filter under the door, and Harry catches Ginny bobbing her head along with the beat more than once
as she encloses gifts in shiny paper.

The sky outside is dark when Harry drops his last present onto the pile, peels a stray bit of tape from
the back of his hand and stretches.

"We're going to be late," Ginny says, mending a small rip in some wrapping paper with her wand.

"You say that every year," Harry points out, yawning.

"And every year, we are late."

Harry scoops up a ball of crumpled paper and lobs it in the direction of his tomato clock. He does
rather miss its smoke-belching copper counterpart, but there's something oddly charming about the
eye that swivels to peer at him as it announces: "Five twenty."

"We've got ages," he insists, leaning against the foot of the bed and scrubbing at his hair.

"Five twenty," says the tomato.

"We've got ten minutes," Ginny sighs, surveying the chaos that surrounds them. "We're going to
have to Floo."

Knowing that she's right and there is no point arguing, Harry nods wearily and picks his way across
the carpet to the wardrobe to look for something suitable to wear for Molly's traditional Christmas Eve dinner.

Draco wouldn't make me Floo, he thinks mutinously, pulling a somewhat scratchy red jumper over his head. He ruffles his hair and inspects his reflection in the mirror, suppressing a grin as he realises how wrong he is. Of course Draco would. Especially if they were late. And, no doubt, he'd make a complete drama out of it, too.

"Your jumper's on backwards," Ginny says as she passes him on her way to the wardrobe.

"Five twenty," says the tomato.

**~*~**

They are five minutes late to the Burrow, and Ginny is a little smug.

Fortunately for Harry, who knows he would be taking the blame, Molly is stuck in the kitchen, caught up in what Arthur informs them is a 'gravy catastrophe', and therefore distracted. When she finally emerges, flustered and wearing a magenta apron that clashes violently with her hair (these days dyed an even more vibrant red than ever), she descends upon the family with open arms.

"Wonderful to see you, Harry," she murmurs, squeezing him tightly. "How are you?"

"Fine... good, thanks," he manages, flooded with guilt. He forces a smile as he looks down at her warm, open face, knowing she will be hurt terribly when everything comes to light.

"It's no good, you know, having my children all scattered about like this..." someone whispers in the back of his memory. The other Molly. "Why don't you and Draco get away from the city and have a look at one of these cottages?"

"You look tired, Harry. Are you getting enough sleep?"

He knows it will do no good to hope just yet.

"Probably not. I'm hoping to catch it up over the holidays, though," he assures her.

"Leave Harry alone, Mum," Ginny says. "What's for dinner?"

"I'm starving," Al puts in.

Harry follows Arthur into the living room, where nearly every Weasley relative and in-law has gathered. All the available seats are occupied, some by more than one person at once, and the room is thick with red-haired men, women, and children, milling around under the gaudy lights and brilliantly mismatched decorations.

"Have I showed you my CD player, Harry?" Arthur asks, pale eyes glowing.

Amused by his enthusiasm, Harry gravely examines the new addition to Arthur's collection, accepts a drink and a slap on the shoulder from Bill and waves across the room at Ron, who is receiving some sort of spirited lecture from Charlie's partner, Serghei. As Harry perches on the arm of a sofa, a small, fluffy dog emerges from the fray and jumps onto his lap. He strokes its head absently, picking up the strains of a familiar song, just audible above the rumble of voices.
"You're the curse-breaker, you broke me apart; you had me wanting, right from the start..."

Eyes widening in horror, Harry looks around the room for Bill; finally, he spots him, leaning against the windowsill and laughing with Hermione, apparently oblivious. Which is a relief of sorts. Still, it's rather disturbing to realise that Celestina Warbeck really is everywhere.

Dinner is a loud, unruly, delicious experience, and is everything Harry has come to expect. Molly presides over the meal with her usual bustling delight and instructions for everyone to eat more. Harry, suddenly finding himself ravenous, helps himself to some of everything, adding fragrant pools of the rescued gravy to his plate at regular intervals. He knows that there is a good possibility that this is his last Christmas Eve Weasley Dinner, and he wants to soak up every last drop of it. Looking around at the faces of his adopted family, he just hopes that, in time, they will forgive him.

That's what families do, after all.

His eyes linger on George. He is not sitting alone—Rose is on one side of him, and Fleur on the other—but the absence of Fred is almost as striking as it had been during those first few dark months. Catching him looking, George shoots Harry a curious glance across the table. Harry pushes away the memory of his encounter with Jenny and finds a smile and a shrug for George, who grins and stuffs a whole baby carrot into his mouth in one go.

As always, it takes a good half an hour to actually leave, and by the time they make it out onto the path, Lily is so weary that Harry lets her ride piggyback, arms looped around his neck. She's a comforting warm weight against his back as they crunch along in the dark.

"Did you see how long Serghei's hair is now?" Ginny says, crossing her arms for warmth. "I thought Mum was going to attack him with a pair of scissors."

Harry yawns. "I think she's learned her lesson about hair interventions by now," he says.

"I think his hair's cool," Al offers.

"Unfortunately, Al, I think you've inherited my mop, so it'll probably always look exactly like it does now," Harry says.

"Bah," Al declares, and takes off down the path toward the house.

Once inside, the kettle goes on, and the most important part of the festive ritual gets underway. Harry watches, initially, from the periphery, marvelling at how smoothly everyone takes up their roles, and that the whole thing is conducted in near-silence. Ginny and Al disappear into the kitchen and return with a cup of tea—to which James solemnly adds two sugar cubes—and a handful of parsnips, which are laid carefully on a tin tray near the fire. Harry is so caught up in observing that he almost forgets his part—applying the Warming Charm to the teacup—and has to be prodded into it by Lily, who then scuttles over to the tree and fetches the stockings for hanging on the fireplace.

All three are extremely threadbare, having been made by each of the children in Mrs Cardle's reception class at the village school. James', the oldest and tattiest of all, has a hole in the toe, and the much-loved teacher's glittery letters now spell out 'JAM' thanks to ten Christmases-worth of filling to bursting point with Fizzing Whizzbees and chocolate Galleons and the tiny model broomsticks that he still (secretly) collects.
Al's is a little grubby; there are chocolate stains on most of the felt stars, but Mrs Cardle's carefully applied letters remain, and both of his unusual forenames take up most of the front of the stocking. Harry vividly recalls a young Al pointing out that Miss could have saved a lot of glitter if she'd just gone with the two-letter version of his name.

Lily's is, somehow, almost as pristine as the day she brought it home, though it now features the words 'and Frank' in silver ink and Ginny's neat handwriting. Just in case Lily's furry shadow might somehow be forgotten on Christmas Eve.

With everything in its place, everyone settles on the largest sofa in a comfortable, drowsy silence; even Al is too tired to make a noise. By half past eleven, all three children are drifting, despite their best efforts, and Ginny's eyelids are beginning to droop.

"Time for bed," Harry mumbles, poking James with his foot and receiving a glare in return.

Yawning, Ginny stumbles to her feet and chivvies Lily, Al, and James up the stairs. She peers into the darkness after them, making sure they are out of earshot, and then turns to Harry. "I'm going up, too. It's your turn to do the stockings."

Light with weariness, Harry waits in his comfortable sprawl until she has turned away, and then sticks his tongue out at her retreating back. With some effort, he unpeels himself from the sofa and retrieves the box of stocking gifts from their hiding place at the back of the hallway cupboard, tucked up in the folds of his invisibility cloak. Once he has distributed the little presents (making sure that Lily and Frank get the silver-wrapped things, Al the green and James the red) he filches a candy cane from the tree and gnaws on it thoughtfully, thinking of Helga and smiling to himself.

Tired though he is, Harry doesn't feel quite ready to get into bed with Ginny and attempt sleep. Contemplative, he wanders around the room and crunches the peppermint candy until it splinters in his mouth and sticks his teeth together. When, at last, he comes to a decision, he doesn't allow himself time to question it—he suspects it's a little too late in life for him to try dialling down his spontaneity, and he likes to think that sometimes it serves him rather well.

He scribbles a note for Ginny—just in case—throws on his coat and scarf, and leaves the house. It hasn't escaped his notice that he seems to be making a habit of wandering off at odd hours, and he can't be sure what that means. All he knows is that the glittering, frostbitten night is calling out to him, and he has neither the energy nor the inclination to resist. He also knows that what he's doing doesn't make an awful lot of sense, but right now, that doesn't seem to matter.

Take the unknown road now. He can do that.

Taking a deep breath, he concentrates on his destination—or at least, what he hopes is his destination; he's relying on second hand memory, after all—he closes his eyes and Disapparates. When he opens his eyes, he can see the large stone building, lit up in the darkness, just a couple of hundred yards down Cadogan Street, which isn't at all bad, he thinks. He is just rearranging his scarf and missing terribly the blue-flecked wool coat that kept him far warmer than the ancient, slightly moth-eaten thing he's currently wearing when his attention is caught by a flicker of movement along a nearby street, and he turns.

What he sees sends a jolt of warmth through him so unexpected that his fingers slip on his coat buttons. Two figures in bobble hats are making careful progress down the icy street, both carrying familiar-looking canvas bags. After a moment or two, both stop at an occupied doorway; one drops into a crouch and rummages for hot soup and a paper-wrapped package while the other strikes up a
conversation, nodding seriously every now and then, handing over a leaflet from a coat pocket.

He watches them for a moment, fighting the ridiculous urge to dash up the street, separate one of the do-gooders from their bag and hand out the packages himself. He's ashamed of that fact that he has never even thought of helping the less fortunate at Christmas when his other self has been out there doing it for years. Alright, so he donates to various charities (any good cause that asks, according to Ginny) but it's only money. It's not as though he really needs it.

He sighs. Closes his eyes briefly.

"What are you angsting about?" Draco demands, hoisting his canvas bag over his shoulder and turning sharp grey eyes on Harry.

"I'm not angsting," Harry lies. "I'm thinking."

Draco snorts. "I can tell the difference, you know. I've known you for long enough."

"You keep telling yourself that," Harry mutters, crunching along past empty shop doorways and following Draco to their next assigned street. In truth, he probably has been angsting; he keeps thinking about how much Lily would enjoy this. He's not sure about the others, but his youngest child has Little Miss Philanthropist written all the way through her like seaside rock. When she's not taking part in sponsored silences and swims and stand-on-one-leg-athons, she's organising her own charity drives and pressing her classmates into action, raising money for anything fluffy, sick, injured or disadvantaged.

"Harry Potter, if you don't stop looking so sorry for yourself, I'm going to leave you at home next year," Draco declares, face utterly deadpan.

Harry's eyebrows shoot up. "Are you serious?" he demands.

Draco laughs until the cold air is filled with the sound. "No, you idiot," he says, slinging his arm around Harry's waist. "That's what you said to me the very first time we did this, remember? Such cruelty."

"'Scuse me, mate?"

Harry blinks. The two people with canvas bags—both men, he realises, now he can actually see them—are standing in front of him. Both have young, friendly, cold-pinked faces and are looking at him expectantly.

"Sorry, yes?" he forces out, trying to look ordinary and not at all like a man who has stopped in the middle of a London street to daydream.

"Got the time, please? My watch's stopped," explains the shorter of the two men with an apologetic smile.

Harry checks his watch. "It's ten to midnight." Anxious, he glances over his shoulder at the church. He thinks he can already hear the carols. "Sorry, lads, I'm going to be late," he calls, taking off across the road and heading for St Mary's.

Having no idea of the etiquette of church services, Harry tiptoes inside, smiles at anyone who makes eye contact with him, takes an order of service sheet from a beaming old lady and hopes for the best.
All the pews are stuffed full, but he's quite relieved to find a place to stand at the back, well out of the way. The air is colder here than it is outside, and Harry is glad of his coat and scarf as he and the rest of the congregation let out their breath in white clouds. Still, the air smells wonderful: a mixture of the rich, damp aroma that comes only with old stone buildings and reminds him of Hogwarts, and the soft burn of the candles that flicker from the altar and fill the vast space with gently-moving shadows.

After a quick scan of the pews, he easily picks out Helga; he'd recognise that rigid posture anywhere. She's sitting three rows from the front, wrapped in coat, scarf and gloves, gripping her service sheet tightly but gazing straight ahead as she sings along with the carols, apparently word perfect.

Harry smiles and busies himself with his own paper leaflet. He attempts to join in with the singing, having no excuse not to participate with the words right in front of him. When the priests and altar boys and girls file in and the service begins for real, though, he falls silent and soaks up the atmosphere, breathing in the heavy scent of the incense and listening to the soft chanting in Latin, the calls from the altar and the murmured responses of the congregation.

He knows that Helga invites him here for the good of his soul, and he's never been much convinced about the existence of an all-powerful god, but here in this place tonight, there is hope in the air, and he can only trust that a little piece of it will stick with him when he leaves. He finds the ritual of the service so soothing that he leans against a stone pillar and just breathes it all in; when the elderly man next to him suddenly sticks out his hand and booms, "Peace be with you!" Harry startles, hesitates for a moment, and then returns the greeting and the handshake, bewildered.

"Peace be with you, sir," someone offers from behind him; he turns and shakes hands with a smiling teenage girl. Seconds later, he is prodded lightly in the back and twists around to realise that everyone standing behind him also wants to shake hands. Harry takes a deep breath and jumps in.

By the time all the handshaking has been completed, the service is almost over. Harry watches the Communion with interest, leaning back against his pillar and wondering just what Draco would make of this. And how hard Ginny would laugh if she knew where he was.

"So, is finding Jesus part of your mid-life crisis?" says the Hermione in his head.

"I'm not finding anyone," he mumbles to himself. "I just wanted to see what it was like." The old man on Harry's right looks at him askance. He closes his mouth.

As the pews begin to empty, Harry makes his way carefully through the crowds and hangs around in the vestibule, waiting for Helga. She spots him immediately. Astonished, she fights her way over to his side and stands there looking up at him with her mouth slightly open.

"Cat got your tongue?" he says gently.

"Mr Potter! What on earth are you doing here?" she splutters.

Harry laughs. "Well, you've only been haranguing me to come for the last ten years. I thought it was a beautiful service, actually."

"You were in there?" she cries, glancing back into the church. "The whole time?"

Harry scrubs at his hair, a little sheepish. "Well, I was a few minutes late, but you wouldn't expect anything less from me, I suppose."
Helga’s mouth curves into a small smile and her black eyes sparkle. ”I’d love to know what’s got into you, Mr Potter. Whatever it is, I dare say it’s doing you some good,” she pronounces.

Harry flushes and chews his lip. ”I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says evenly.

”I highly doubt that,” Helga says, arching a disdainful eyebrow. She holds out a gloved hand and the smile is back. ”Peace be with you, Mr Potter.”

As Harry clasps her hand and returns the greeting, he’s suddenly very aware of all the years he has spent thinking she doesn’t like him. For once, he’s quite happy to be wrong.

*~*~*~*~*

Ginny is either sleeping or pretending to be when Harry slips back into the bedroom, eyes heavy and shivering all over. He crawls into bed, squashes the lumps out of his pillow and drifts quickly into sleep.

There’s a light at the top of the stairs.

”Listen.”

”Make me.”


”I don’t believe in much of anything, Potter.”

”What about truth?”

Words lost in the darkness. A moment of clarity, shared, finally.

”Time to wake up, you lazy bugger.” Draco’s voice. Harry forces his eyes open.

”Hm?”

”We’re going to be late for my parents if you sleep any later, and we all know that cannot end well.”

”Oh... fucking hell,” Harry mumbles blearily. ”Is it Christmas day?”

Draco smirks. ”It’s a shame for you. Isn’t it, Frankfurto? Isn’t it?” He stares down at the snake with the most earnest expression Harry has ever seen on his face, but Frank merely flicks out his tongue and slithers up to rest his head on Harry’s drawn-up knees.

”This one makes no sense,” he advises Harry. ”Never has done.”

Draco scowls. Pokes Frank, who ignores him.

”It’s not his fault. He has other talents... probably.”

”What are you saying about me to that snake?” Draco demands, arms folded.

Harry smiles and pets Frank’s shiny head. ”Nothing that isn’t true.”
"Often wonder what it is for," the snake muses, little black eyes glinting.

"That's not very nice, Frank," Harry says. The words feel spongy and muffled in his mouth.

Someone laughs, and it's not Draco. Disoriented, Harry opens one eye.

"Gin?"

"Obviously," she says, perching on the edge of the bed and peering down at him in the muted light of the sunrise. "Does the cat talk in your dreams?

"Er, yeah. Sometimes," he mutters, rubbing his eyes and attempting to ground himself. He's here, at home. At Willoughby Drive with Ginny and the children. Of course he is.

"Merry Christmas," Ginny says softly, mouth twisting into a tight little smile. She fiddles with the belt of her robe and stares down at the bed clothes. "This is going to be strange."

Harry scrambles across the bed until he is sitting beside her and laces his fingers through hers.

"It's going to be okay," he says, and the belief in those words, wherever it comes from, is so powerful that when she looks up and meets his eyes, he's almost certain that she believes them, too.

A cautious knock at the door is followed by Al's hopeful voice. "Are you up yet? Can we go downstairs? It's eight o'clock!"

"Just about," Ginny mutters under her breath. "Go and stick the kettle on, Al. We'll be down in a minute."

There's a small celebratory sound from the landing and then the clatter of Al's footsteps as he makes his way down the stairs with more enthusiasm than grace.

Harry and Ginny exchange glances, dress in a contemplative silence and head downstairs to the kitchen, where they find Al, Lily, and Frank gathered around the kettle, ludicrously bright-eyed for the hour, and James, lounging in a kitchen chair, bed-headed and feigning indifference.

Harry takes a second or two to absorb the odd little scene, to fold it up and lock it away for later, then he coughs lightly. All four turn to him. "So, has he been?" he teases.

"Dad," James groans, making a face.

"James," Harry mimics, mirroring the disdainful expression back to his son and throwing himself, as best he can, into his last family Christmas.

**~*~**

By the time the presents have been opened and the turkey has been eaten, Harry is beginning to feel overwhelmed. He knows it's completely unhelpful but his mind keeps insisting on throwing up comparisons of everything from the gift-opening process (loud and unrestrainedly joyful) to the food preparation (everyone pitching in to produce something imperfect but delicious), weighing them against his experience of Christmas at the Malfoys'. He can say with some certainty that he doesn't miss one little part of that stiff, formal ordeal, but he does miss Draco. He really fucking misses
Draco.

Still, knowing he has no option but to force himself to relax, Harry pulls himself together. He steers well clear of the firewhisky that he would usually enjoy on Christmas day, because the last thing he needs is another prod in the direction of maudlin, but he joins in with the after dinner games, eats too many chocolates, and listens to his children's arguments with irrational affection.

Watching them is bittersweet, because they have no idea what is about to happen to their family. Harry tells himself that it's best to let them believe that nothing has changed, just for a little longer, but he's not sure any more. Perhaps all they are doing is making things harder.

When he glances at Ginny, which is frequently, she somehow manages to look both on the edge of tears and hugely relieved all at once. Harry thinks he knows how she feels. It's as though a weight has been lifted, and whilst he's glad to no longer have to carry it, he aches with missing the familiar burden. Dragging in a deep breath, he picks up his glass and heads to the kitchen for a refill, making it only two or three steps before tripping over something on the floor and just about rescuing himself from a concussion on the corner of the fireplace.

"Al, come and pick up this eye before someone breaks their neck!"

"Sorry," Al mumbles, mouth full of Cockroach Cluster. He scrambles across the rug on hands and knees and stuffs the eye, still whirring and spinning, into his pocket.

Curled in an armchair, Ginny shakes her head slowly. She doesn't look at Harry or open her mouth but she doesn't need to; her expression clearly conveys 'you bought the blasted thing, you idiot' and Harry doesn't have a leg to stand on. He doesn't mind too much, though; his last minute gifts are a hit.

He has already observed James—through a not-quite-closed-enough bedroom door—posing in front of the mirror in his new leather jacket, pulling such theatrically moody faces at himself that Harry had to stifle his laughter behind his hand for fear of giving away his position. Lily has spent much of the afternoon draped in colourful, glittery accessories, and Ginny is wearing her new necklace. As he had predicted, it suits her perfectly, and, every now and then, she glances down to where the polished beads lie against her chest, a strange little smile tugging at her lips as though she can't quite believe Harry's thoughtfulness. Several years'-worth of panic-bought silk scarves and pot plants will do that to a person, he supposes, finally meeting Ginny's eyes with belated remorse.

"I've been a terrible husband," he mouths, looking down at her, glass gripped tightly in his fingers.

"Not all the time," she says softly, eyes warm and shimmering. Smiling properly now.

"Mum, I can't find a towel," Lily announces, appearing in the doorway with a dripping Frank over her shoulder.

The cat miaows plaintively and digs sharp claws into Lily's skin, as though daring her to forget about his plight. Harry can't help thinking of the other Frank, who so enjoyed the water that he'd have gladly taken the disgruntled cat's place. That said, Harry isn't sure how Lily would feel about bathing a six-foot python. Al, on the other hand...

"Cats don't like water, Lil," James offers, ruffling both cat and owner on the head as he heads for the stairs, perhaps for another posing session. Lily scowls and Frank swipes at James as he passes, but even Harry can tell that his heart isn't really in it.
"Cats who don't like water shouldn't roll around in other people's chalk pastel dust," Lily retorts. "He looked like a whiskery Puffskein."

"Oww," says Frank, blinking big green eyes pitifully.

"Did you look in the airing cupboard?" Ginny offers, yawning.

Lily wrinkles her nose. "There's a big spider in there. Frank is frightened."

"I'm sure Frank is," Ginny murmurs, making no move to leave her chair.

"I suppose it's up to me, then," Harry says. As he stashes his glass on the mantelpiece and edges past the sodden cat to reach the stairs, he's tempted to just draw his wand and hit Frank with a Drying Charm—or, at least, he is until he remembers what happened the last time he tried that. Those panic-driven scratches took weeks to heal properly. He'll just go and get a towel.

After finding a cat-sized towel in the airing cupboard and offering festive greetings to the large black house spider within, Harry emerges onto the landing, only to walk straight into James.

"Sorry, Dad," he mumbles, stepping back and examining the half-eaten mince pie in his hand with unusual intensity.

"Wasn't looking where I was going," Harry admits, holding up the towel by way of explanation. He hesitates. James doesn't look up, and a taut, uncomfortable silence stretches out between them. "Is everything alright?" Harry manages after several long seconds.

James bites his lip. Rests one hand on the balustrade. "Dad?"

Harry's fingers tighten around the old towel with such force that the worn fabric squeaks unpleasantly against his fingernails. "Yeah?"

James looks up, and it all at once hits Harry how grown-up he looks. Clear-eyed, strong-jawed, at least an inch taller than his father now, he's almost a man. Some sentimentality that he thinks he can blame on Christmas makes Harry want to bound across the landing and hug James tightly, but he doubts James will like that, so he stays put.

"James?"

He opens his mouth and then closes it again. "Thanks for the jacket, Dad," he mumbles, stuffing the rest of the mince pie into his mouth. What happens next leaves Harry speechless. James lets go of the balustrade and catches Harry up in an awkward mixture of hug and manly backslap. Before he has chance to react, James has disappeared back into his bedroom.

"Dad, did you find a towel?" Lily calls anxiously up the stairs.

"Oww," says Frank, clearly unimpressed.

Harry stares down at the towel as though it is some sort of foreign object. Ah, yes. "Coming!"
Ron and Hermione's Boxing Day soiree is wonderfully distracting and Harry manages to get through almost the entire evening without giving headspace to Boris, Draco, or his marriage. In truth, the cottage is so full of children and food and the spirit of serious competition that it's difficult to think of anything much besides whether or not his disguise (Transfiguring his clothes into a rhododendron bush) is better than Ron's (shrinking himself down and hiding among the gnomes), or where his next bowl of Christmas stew is coming from.

The fact that everything is much the same as usual insulates Harry against the confusion that exists outside of this little group and these little traditions. Rose, still her sparky old self, he's delighted to note, greets them at the door, breathless and grinning, with tinsel in her hair.

As they pile into the cottage, Al is already showing off his eye.

"Cool," she breathes, taking it from him and watching it spinning around. After a second or two, she leans in and whispers something to Al, of which Harry only catches, "... want to see?"

Al grins and throws a "See you later, Dad!" over his shoulder as they thunder up the stairs and out of sight, giggling.

When Lily falls in the garden and scrapes her knee so badly that, despite Harry's best efforts at healing and Ginny's best efforts at distraction, she is on the edge of tears, Ron allows her to choose the film for the evening.

Which is how Harry finds himself watching 'Rebel Without a Cause' while squashed into an armchair with new-James-Dean-devotee Lily at his side and Hugo draped across his feet, accidentally kicking Harry in the shins every time things get exciting. Al and Rose are watching avidly from a large ottoman, all but taking notes on new-old ways to create havoc; James somehow finds himself sharing a sofa with Hermione, who glances between him and the actors on the screen with far more amusement than Harry suspects is advisable. Ginny and Ron, taking turns in an armchair on the edge of the crush, are immediately nominated as snack-fetchers and drink-refillers, and disappear into the kitchen every now and then, returning with pumpkin juice and hot buttered popcorn.

Everyone eats and drinks until there's a good chance they will burst, as is customary at any Weasley-run event, and by the time the film is over, Harry is seriously considering Apparating right out of his chair and into bed, bugger the rest of them. He doesn't, of course, but the walk home seems long and uncomfortable. He thinks he will be rather relieved to get back to work, if only to ensure he doesn't eat himself to death.

He still isn't hungry when the tomato wakes him for work the following morning. Ginny has the morning off and has been relishing the prospect of an extra lie-in, so he leaves her sleeping and creeps out of the house without breakfast. The Ministry Atrium is quiet and the hallways even quieter, but he doesn't realise just how ridiculously early he is until he walks into the office and Helga isn't there yet. Despairing of himself, Harry locks himself in his private office and throws himself into answering his mountain of memos, determined to draw something useful, however small, from his restless disorientation.

When he looks up some time later, wrist cramped and fingers sporting several paper cuts, the calendar on his desk catches his eye. Wednesday the twenty-seventh. He's been back here just a week. It feels like longer.

He is so absorbed in his paperwork that he jumps when Helga raps on his office door.
"Come in," he calls, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses and absently sticking his quill behind his ear.

Helga hurries in and closes the door behind her. "Auror Weasley is here to see you," she says, and then, lowering her voice, adds: "He doesn't look very well."

Harry folds his arms atop his stack of parchment and leans forward to address Helga. "Just when did you become so fascinated with everyone's health?"

Helga merely snorts, but there's a glitter of humour in her eyes. "I'll send him in, then?"

"If you don't mind."

She retreats into the main office, and, moments later Ron appears. Harry draws in a sharp breath. He looks terrible. Ron has always been pale, but right now his skin is almost grey, freckles standing out in shocking relief against the pallor. He leans against Harry's door until it clicks shut and then allows the solid wood to take his weight as he stares, hollow-eyed, into the room. Even slouched, Ron is still strikingly tall, but at the same time, he looks smaller than Harry has ever seen him.

He leaps to his feet and rounds the desk, alarmed. "What's the matter?"

Ron blinks. "You and Ginny are splitting up," he rasps.

Harry's heart stutters, and just for a moment, the floor seems to tip beneath him. "What?" is all he can manage, even though clarification is the last thing he needs.

"I know," he says, scrubbing at his fringe with his robe sleeve. "I know about you and Ginny."

Feeling unsteady, Harry lowers himself onto his desk, sending quills and memos flying everywhere and barely noticing. "How?"

"I brought biscuits," Ron says suddenly, staring at the crumpled paper bag in his hand as though seeing it for the first time. "I think I'd better sit down."

"Yeah," Harry murmurs, nodding vaguely and conjuring a chair for Ron next to the desk. He watches his friend cross the floor and sink into the seat, then takes the proffered bag of biscuits, heart pounding. "Thanks."

Ron takes a deep breath, appears to compose himself, and meets Harry's eyes. "Gin told me last night... while everyone was watching the film."

Harry stares, hurt and confused. He lifts a hand with the vague intention of raking it through his hair. Lets it drop. Shakes his head. She agreed. She agreed to wait until after Christmas. He realises that their discussion was about keeping things together for the children, but he'd thought... he feels oddly like he's been punched in the gut. Not only that, but he has no idea how to interpret Ron's fretful disposition. He doesn't seem angry, but Harry knows better than to assume anything these days.

"I can't believe this," he says at last. "I was just sitting there watching James Dean having a scrap while she was in the kitchen, just..."

"It wasn't like that," Ron interrupts, sounding stronger now, more like himself. "It's not her fault,
mate, I promise."

The blue eyes that burn into his are miserably sincere. Harry relents. "What happened?"

"I caught her crying in the kitchen. I asked her what was wrong... at first she wouldn't tell me, and then..." Ron lifts his shoulders in an awkward shrug. "She said she couldn't lie to her big brother."

Harry winces, pretending not to notice the catch in Ron's voice. His fresh feelings of betrayal begin to fade, leaving only a dull weight in the pit of his stomach. "We weren't trying to keep it from you. I just thought it'd be better if we dealt with things after Christmas and everything was out of the way. I'm not sure it was the best idea I've ever had, but..." Harry sighs. "I just wanted to make things easier for them."

"I just can't fucking believe it," Ron says, exhaling heavily and sprawling in his chair as though he's forgotten how to use his spine. "I mean... how long have you been pretending to be happy? Ginny wouldn't tell me much."

On hearing this, a little of the heaviness inside him disappears. For a moment, he considers glossing over the truth, telling Ron that this was a quick, clean decision and omitting the fact that the split was a long time coming. He quickly abandons the idea. Ron is his best friend, and he deserves to know more than half a story.

"Officially, for about a week. Really? I don't know. Years, I think. We're good friends, but that's not enough." Harry wraps his hands around the edge of his desk and looks at the floor. "Not any more."

"Don't you love her?" Ron says abruptly.

Harry looks up sharply. Fiercely. "Of course I love her."

"But you're not happy."

"No."

Ron leans across the desk and pulls a huge biscuit from the bag. "Double chocolate," he says absently, taking a huge bite and chewing thoughtfully. In the midst of everything, Harry finds himself impressed by Ron's faith in the ability of food to solve almost any problem. "I knew things weren't perfect, you know," he admits after a moment's chewing.

"Really?"

Catching Harry's surprise, Ron nods, a small smile flickering around the corners of his lips. "Yeah. Even me, eh? Wasn't hard to notice that you were both fed up, but... this is just... to be honest, I always thought you'd work it out, whatever it was. I never imagined you not being together."

Ron falls silent and looks away from Harry, instead opting to make another dent in his biscuit.

Caught midway between grief and exasperation, Harry takes the quill from behind his ear and fiddles with it, immediately thinking of Draco and really wishing he wouldn't. It isn't exactly a helpful direction for his mind to take at this minute. If he's really, really honest—just inside his head—he's cautiously relieved that Ron doesn't seem to want to knock him out, whatever Ginny might have to say on the subject. He probably deserves it, one way or another.
"If I thought there was a way to work things out, Ron, I would," he says. "I know this sounds like a crappy old cliché, but... I think we've just grown apart. I want her to be happy."

"What about you?" Ron asks, cutting right to the troublesome part of the whole equation. "Do you want you to be happy?"

"Yeah, of course. Eventually," Harry says.

"What is it that you want? To make you happy?" Ron presses, and a tiny part of Harry that feels a lot like Draco wants to stuff his mouth with biscuits until he stops asking questions.

The whole truth, he reminds himself. Well, at least most of it.

"Well..."

"Because, you know—I know this sounds ridiculous, but this whole thing is kind of ridiculous when you think about it, isn't it?" Ron shifts in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and gazing up at Harry, horror struck. "All I've been able to think about since last night, apart from when I've been trying to figure out what the bloody hell went wrong with you and Ginny, is... what happens if Hermione suddenly decides that some other thing makes her happier than I do?"

Harry allows himself a moment to extract the question from the tangle of words. The idea of Ron or Hermione ever finding another person more content to put up with their quirks is a faintly ridiculous one, Harry thinks, but it wouldn't be such a bad thing for them to appreciate each other a little more. Not that he's one to talk, but it's always easier to rationally analyse someone else's relationship.

"I don't think that's going to happen, Ron. You and Hermione were made for each other."

Ron smiles, and Harry knows that smile. It's the smile that makes it obvious to anyone who cares to notice that Auror Ronald Weasley loves his wife at least as much as he did... well, not quite the day he met her, but not long afterwards.

"That's what I thought about you and Gin," he admits, as the corners of the smile turn sad.

Harry shakes his head. "No. We're different. We love each other but Hermione would do anything for you."

"What if it's me?" Ron says suddenly, eyes widening. He slumps back into his chair with a groan. "What if whatever happened to you happens to me? Hermione reckons you're going through a midlife crisis, you know."

"I've heard," Harry sighs. "What happened to me is not going to happen to you, Ron," he promises.

"How do you know that?" Ron taps anxiously at his chair arms with long, freckled fingers, and it occurs to Harry that he hasn't seen his best friend so agitated for a very long time. Nor has he ever imagined the two of them having such an emotionally candid conversation; perhaps Ginny was right after all.

Harry frowns and tightens sweat-slippery fingers around the edge of his desk for support, wondering just how to answer that question in a way that will reassure Ron without giving him a heart attack.

He lets out a long, careful breath. "How do I know that? Because I'm fairly sure that you aren't about
to realise you're gay any time soon. That's why."

Ron gapes. "You're not serious."

Harry shrugs and lifts one corner of his mouth in a self-conscious half smile. "It's not the only reason things went wrong for us, but I think it's a pretty important one."

"But... I mean... are you sure?"

It takes all of Harry's self control not to squirm and fidget on the desk as his subconscious helpfully bombards him with images of ballrooms and showers and fragrant oil in softly-lit bedrooms. He coughs.

"Yes."

"But you've been with Ginny for..." Ron frowns. "I mean, I'm not... it's just... are you sure?"

Harry almost laughs this time. "I'm sure. You're right... maybe labels aren't all that helpful. I just... just trust me, okay?"


"You never know. I know that would make Hermione happy."

Ron snorts. "So... Ginny knows about this, then?"

"Yes."

"Was she upset?"

"She wasn't surprised," Harry admits.

"I've always been a bit rubbish at picking stuff like this up," Ron sighs, reaching for another biscuit. "Everyone knew about Charlie before me. I think I had to actually see him kissing Serghei when he thought no one was looking to believe it. Fucking hell," Ron mumbles, biting into his biscuit and shaking his head slowly. "You're like Charlie!"

Harry raises an eyebrow. "I think Charlie is a lot cooler than me."

"Meh, Charlie's cooler than everyone," Ron says through a mouthful of crumbs. "What are you going to tell Mum and Dad?"

Harry suppresses a shiver. "Nothing yet. I'll deal with that when the time comes. I'm concentrating on what I'm going to tell the kids right now."

"Kids are resilient," Ron offers, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "The only reason I mention Mum and Dad is... well, I don't think there's ever been a divorce in our family. It's sort of a matter of pride with them."

Harry sighs. Preoccupied, he takes a biscuit from the bag and bites into it, savouring the sweetness of the chocolate and the heavy, sticky texture that gives way to his teeth and sticks to the roof of his
mouth. "Great. I'll look forward to that, then." He pulls a face at the rug. "Thanks for the warning, though. What did Hermione say?"

"She doesn't know yet," Ron says, and Harry is flooded with warm gratitude. He knows how much it must have cost Ron to keep such a huge secret from his wife, even for a few hours.

"Thanks," he whispers, and Ron shrugs, suddenly awkward. "You can tell her, if you want. I don't really want you to have to keep it yourself for another week. Just... it stays with you two, okay? The last thing we need is for one of the kids to hear some sordid rumour before we get chance to sit down with them."

Ron nods, and for a minute or two the office is silent, save for the crunching of biscuits and the relieved, slightly quickened breathing of two men who have talked about their feelings and survived. Finally, Ron wipes his chocolatey hands on his robes and looks at Harry.

"Do you need somewhere to stay?"

**~*~**

After Ron has departed (reluctantly, following a memo that flies right out of Harry's fireplace to remind him that his presence is required at a team meeting down the hall), Harry swivels around in his chair in slow circles, wondering if he has, in fact, shot himself in the arse by insisting that he'll be fine and refusing, as gratefully as possible, Ron's offer of his spare room as a temporary bolthole. Now that the office is quiet once more and he has the space and the last biscuit to help him think, he concedes that sometimes he is obstinate in declining help just because it comes naturally, not because it makes sense, and it quickly becomes obvious that this is one of those occasions.

The fact that Ron hadn't pushed the point suggests that he knows Harry just about as well as anyone, and this realisation makes Harry smile wryly at the ceiling as he continues to rotate.

It's the best option he has, at least for the moment. Harry knows that he will be the one to leave the family home, both from the brief discussions he and Ginny have managed in the privacy of their bedroom over the last few evenings, and the simple fact that he is the one who spends less time with the children, works longer hours and, in truth, feels responsible for the whole thing, despite Ginny's frequent assertions to the contrary. The chance to start again is equal parts exciting and terrifying, but he knows it's not quite time for that yet.

Ginny will probably be astonished to hear that he wants to make an announcement to the press, but he's ready to take control. Better that than give some opportunistic photographer the chance to snap him viewing houses in London and splash it all over the gossip pages. The press aren't going away, after all; they're probably always going to be interested in him, and perhaps, if he starts playing the game a little instead of being so combative, they stop being quite so rabid. He isn't naive enough to believe that he'll ever be treated with the friendly respect that he received in the glimpse, but a shift in that direction would certainly be appreciated.

Harry sighs and lowers his feet to the floor, using his rubber-soled boots against the rug to slow his spin. He leans on the desk, feeling dizzy, and lowers his face to the surface, inhaling the mingled aromas of wood polish and ink and parchment. He'll owl Ron later. It'll be fine.

When Harry gets home, the ground floor is completely devoid of children. Puzzled, he peers into each room in turn, but finds no sign of life other than a weary-looking Ginny, leaning against the
kitchen counter and cradling a cup of aromatic tea close to her face.

"Where are they all?" he says at last, stripping off his robes and seating himself on the edge of the kitchen table in jeans and bobbly jumper.

"Upstairs," she says, blowing the steam away from her cup. "Doing the homework that they've all suddenly remembered they have to have finished in a few days."

Harry nods, understanding at once. "I remember it well." He is just wondering how to tell her about Ron's visit to the office when she says:

"You'll never guess who my new business client is."

Thrown off course, Harry frowns. Blinks. "Celestina Warbeck?"

Ginny's freckled nose wrinkles in distaste. "No, thank goodness. It's a company called Zabology, and it's run by—"

"Blaise Zabini," Harry finishes faintly.

"How did you know that?"

With an odd squiggly feeling in his stomach, Harry scrambles for a lie. "Er, I saw something about him in the paper. Have you met him yet?"

Ginny shakes her head, looking mutinous. "No, but from what I can remember, he was a pretentious tosspot," she grouses. "One of Malfoy's cronies, wasn't he?"

Harry stares at her as a wave of calm sweeps over him. He smiles. "You should give him a chance."

Ginny snorts into her mug. "Do you know something I don't?"

"I just think we're all old enough for second attempts at treating each other like human beings," Harry says, already wondering about the non-glimpse Blaise Zabini, how he is and what he's like, and deciding instantly that, one way or another, he must find out.

"Well, we shall see about that," Ginny says. "How was your day?"

"Ron came to see me," Harry blurts before he can stop himself.

Ginny blanches. Stiffly, she sets her cup down on the counter and presses both hands against her face. "Oh... shit, I'm sorry, Harry."

"I know."

"He knew I was upset and he just kept asking... and he hugged me, and I just couldn't..." Ginny trails into silence. After a moment, she takes a deep, ragged breath and drops her hands from her face, wrapping her arms around herself for protection.

"I'm not angry, Gin. It was probably unrealistic to think we could keep it all in when everyone's so close."
She sighs, scuffing her socked feet against the kitchen tiles. "Maybe you should be."

"What, angry?"

"Yeah. I keep having this crazy thought that maybe all this would be easier if we just started yelling like we're supposed to," she admits.

Harry leans back, grasping the edge of the table to anchor his weight, and looks up at the ceiling, hoping to somehow pluck reason out of the air. "I don't think that's true, somehow," he offers.

They both startle as James' music begins to pound obnoxiously from the floor above. "Turn it down!" Ginny yells, drawing her wand and aiming a transparency spell at the ceiling. There is some muffled cursing followed by a marked reduction in the volume of the music. Ginny's wand clatters on the marble worktop as she drops it and sighs. "Neither do I, but it's difficult to know one way or another at the moment, isn't it?"

Harry has to agree that it is. He has faith that things will get easier, if only because the thought that they might not makes him want to crawl into his closet and hide among his old man jumpers until all of this has been forgotten about. And that's not really an option for a thirty-seven-year old Gryffindor father of three, so... faith it is.

He thinks Helga would be proud.

**~*~**

Over the next few days, Hermione makes herself such a fixture in his office that Harry wonders quite how she's managing to get any work done at all. When he finds out that she's been turning up at Gringotts for lunches and post-work coffees with Ginny, he almost begins to genuinely fear for the future of goblin-human relations. Almost—it's still Hermione, after all. He finds himself amused and touched by her insistence on dividing her time equally between himself and Ginny, just in case either of them might think for a moment that she was taking sides. As if she would. Hermione has—quite literally—made a career out of diplomacy.

"Ms Granger-Weasley is here again," Helga announces, sounding somewhat bored by the sixth or seventh similar announcement in the space of two days. "Is there something the matter with her?"

"I knew there was something going on," she says, so frequently that by Friday afternoon, Harry has taken to keeping a tally on a scrap of parchment hidden beneath his perpetual memo mountain. She has also developed a fondness for not-really questions like: "How many times do I have to remind you that you can't do everything on your own, Harry?" and "Did you really think we wouldn't want to help you after everything we've been through together?"

Harry knows that she has a point, and he also knows that Hermione is hiding behind scolding him because she's worried and she cares and because scolding comes naturally to her. He pretends exasperation because that's just his role in the way things are and have always been, but beneath it all, he's grateful for her—for both of them. Knowing that there are at least two people willing to take some of the weight for a while makes everything just a little bit easier.

On Friday afternoon, Hermione brings information that improves Harry's mood even further.

"Hello, Helga," she calls brightly, moments before the door to Harry's office swings open and Hermione admits herself without asking permission from the gatekeeper. The fact that Helga doesn't
say a word speaks volumes; apparently, where Hermione is concerned, she has given up.

Hermione flops into the spare chair, which has been so heavily used over the last few days that Harry has decided to just leave it there. She passes him a paper cup full of coffee so rich-smelling that Harry groans softly, holding the cup under his nose and allowing the aroma to awaken his weary senses.

"Thank you," he sighs, reluctantly setting down the cup and waiting for the coffee to cool.

"You're welcome," Hermione says, helping herself to a jam tart from the box left by Ron at the end of his morning visit. "I have good news. Well, not for Great Aunt Mildred, but it is for you."

Harry frowns, puzzled. "Nope," he says after a moment. "You're going to have to explain it to me. Small words, please; I'm tired."

Hermione nods, pulling her feet up onto the chair. "Well." She licks strawberry jam from the back of her hand. "I just finished a firecall with Molly—I wanted to check that she could still look after the kids tomorrow night so we can go to that dinner party Ron's godawful partner is having." She pauses, rolling her eyes. Harry is still confused. "Anyway, she was running around like a headless chicken trying to pack and make arrangements for the next couple of weeks. Apparently, Great Aunt Mildred has come down with a terrible case of Kneazle Pox and is insisting that Molly and Arthur go down to Cornwall and look after her," she finishes triumphantly, fixing expectant eyes on Harry.

Hardly daring to believe his good fortune, Harry stares back at her. "So... they're going to be away for a while?"

"Yes."

"Both of them?"

Hermione nods. "That's what she said. Apparently, she's very demanding."

Harry smiles slowly, revelling in the spread of cautious relief through his veins. He feels guilty for delighting in an old woman's misfortune, but he has met Great Aunt Mildred and he doubts a Hippogriff could take her down, much less a case of Kneazle Pox, and she may have just bought him a couple of weeks' grace.

"That is absolutely great news, 'Mione, thank you," he sighs, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe by the time they get home, I'll have figured out what to say to them."

"I don't think it'll be as bad as you're imagining," Hermione says gently, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Harry finds a smile for his bearer-of-good-news. "Let's hope not."

**~*~**

New Year's Eve is a quiet affair, for which Harry is grateful after a somewhat chaotic Saturday night full of children and a bewildering array of noises. He had, to Ron's delight and Hermione's dismay, invited Rose and Hugo over for the evening, allowing their parents to attend the godawful dinner party as planned. Now, as Harry stands in the kitchen with bits of paper stuck to his hands and clothing, the house is calm and near-silent. James is staying with a school friend whose name Harry
can't recall, but whose nose ring had made him appreciate his son's restraint for the first time; Al is at Ron and Hermione's cottage, probably running riot with Rose for the second night in a row, and Lily... Lily has been working hard. She and Harry have spent most of the evening at the kitchen table, adding the important artistic touches to her Black Death project. Having been allowed to stay up, she had pronounced the work completed just after eleven o'clock, joined Harry in a celebratory mug of hot chocolate, and trundled off to bed, sleepy but satisfied.

Ginny comes and leans on the kitchen door frame as Harry is walking around the table, gathering up the debris of their artwork. He can't say he has helped all that much, mostly just the colouring-in of various lurid illustrations and the gluing of bits of paper to other bits of paper according to her careful instructions, but she had seemed to appreciate the help, and the time with her dad. The smell of glue and paper and pencil-sharpenings is wonderfully evocative, and with it comes the comforting memory of primary school art lessons and the realisation that perhaps he has always enjoyed being creative.

He smiles easily at Ginny as he slots pencil crayons back into the tin in their proper places, resisting the urge to shove them anywhere they will fit and clicking them back in colour order to form a shiny wooden rainbow.

"You've got glitter on your nose," Ginny says at last.

Harry frowns. He doesn't remember using any glitter, but he lifts a hand to his nose, rubs lightly, and it comes away sparkling. "I have no idea."

"I tucked Lily in."

Harry smiles gratefully. "Did you manage to convince her to go to sleep?"

Ginny nods, pulling her sleeves down over her fingers and wrapping her arms around herself. "Eventually. She was worried about you having to tidy up by yourself."

"Well, as you can see, I've coped admirably." Harry indicates the neat stacks of paper and the hovering sheets that are still drying several inches above the table.

"I'm impressed," she says. Her eyes glow softly in the dim light and she lets out a gentle sigh. "You know what they say about what you're doing at the New Year, don't you?"

Harry stops what he's doing, holding his breath as though knowing something unpleasant is coming. When he exhales, the sound seems deafening in his own head. "Yeah... but it's not like you to be superstitious."

Ginny slants an odd smile in his direction. "I know. I suppose it just seems a little bit too close to home this year."

Harry catches his breath and looks down at the table for a moment. "I suppose so."

"My mum is, you know. Superstitious. She always used to say that whatever you're doing at the stroke of midnight is what you'll be doing for the rest of the year."

Harry raises an eyebrow. "What if you're sleeping? Or on the toilet?"

Ginny rolls her eyes. "I don't think you're supposed to take it quite so literally."
"Sorry," Harry mumbles, mouth twisting in a rueful smile. "I'll stop attempting to lighten the situation with humour; I'm clearly not very good at it."

Ginny smiles, too, looking very much like she's trying to stop herself. "That sounds like a good idea," she whispers, and something in her tone wrenches his heart. *This is real*, adds his subconscious, as though he needs to be reminded.

"Tea?" he offers, for want of a better idea.

"Thanks," Ginny says, and then there is silence.

Harry absorbs himself in the familiar ritual, pouring and brewing and stirring, wondering vaguely what Draco would think about his mismatched old cups, none of them stripy. Ginny takes her tea and disappears into the garden with it. He watches her for a moment through the kitchen window, happy to respect her unspoken desire to spend the last of the old year apart, even though it feels strange and unsettling. When she settles herself on the rickety bench and casts a shimmering *Tempus* charm, Harry turns away and heads up the stairs.

He checks on Lily as he passes, finding her sleeping peacefully with Frank stretched out at her side. On Al's door he finds a note, placed so far above his eye-line that he hasn't noticed it before now.

*Dad – don't forget to make a New Year's resolution. Mine is to eat less brocolli broccoli broccoli.*

Harry laughs and slips the note into his pocket. In the bedroom, he sits on the end of the bed, picking at the dried glue on his hands and remembering the ritual of the resolution circle, the promises spoken out loud. There might not be anyone here to witness his words, but, as Harry stares at his hazy reflection in the mirror, he thinks perhaps that doesn't matter.

"Accio," he murmurs, holding out his hand for the tomato clock.

"Eleven forty-six," it informs him.

"I will..." He hesitates. Chews his lip. "I will be a better father."

Bright green eyes stare out of the mirror at him. Mocking him. This is fucking hard. It's easy to promise something that doesn't really matter, but he supposes that's the point.

"I will appreciate my friends, because they put up with a lot."

He sighs and closes his eyes, dropping his hastily-constructed barriers until the ache inside him overflows, making his eyes sting and his heart hurt.

"I will take the unknown road. I will find Draco Malfoy."

**~*~**

"How are we supposed to do this?" Ginny asks, flopping onto the bed beside Harry, who is lying flat on his back, sprawling sideways across the sheets, fully dressed. With James and Al now home, Harry and Ginny are hiding in their bedroom, procrastinating.

"I don't know. But someone once told me that his parents took him out for his favourite dinner to tell
him they were getting a divorce, and he could never eat it again. So... we should probably try to avoid that."

Ginny shoots him a sidelong glance. "Was that Dean Thomas, by any chance?"

"Ah. You heard the same story."

"Yeah. And I remember thinking at the time that people were crazy to get divorced. I mean, no one in our family seems to ever split up..." She lapses into silence, looking as though she wants to cover her face with her hands and disappear completely.

"I know," Harry says faintly.

"Sorry," she mumbles, resting her head against his shoulder. "You've probably heard it over and over, haven't you?"

"It's come up once or twice this week," Harry admits.

"I thought so. I also kind of thought I would've come up with some sort of strategy by now."

Harry takes a deep, fortifying breath, pulls himself upright and holds out a hand to Ginny.

"Come on."

She blinks up at him anxiously. "What?"

He grabs her hand and pulls her up. "Strategies are very much overrated. The more you think about it, the more you'll worry about it. Let's just do it, okay?"

Ginny rests her hands on her thighs and lets out a long, controlled breath. "Okay."

Five minutes later, Harry has assembled the family around the kitchen table, where they sit, clutching hot drinks and wondering what exactly they should do next. Lily looks apprehensively between Harry and Ginny, a stripy ball of fur vibrating gently on her lap, while James and Al exchange glances.

"What's going on?" James says at last, the impatience in his voice not quite masking the unease.

"Er..." Ginny begins, and then dries up.

Harry jumps in. "Your mum and I need to talk to you about something."

Al's eyes go wide. "Has someone died?" he asks in hushed tones.

Harry tries very hard not to smile. "No, Al. No one's died."

"Oh," Al says, and it's difficult to tell if he's relieved or disappointed. Strange child.

"Anyway..." Harry hesitates, knowing there is no going back after this and hovering on the edge, gathering his nerve. "Your mum and I... we've been talking, and... we both love you all very much, but..." Harry falters, catching the light of understanding in his oldest son's eyes and forcing himself to continue, to finish it. "We're splitting up."
Lily catches her breath and clutches Frank tightly to her. While Al's eyes flick to Ginny, searching for confirmation, James never looks away from Harry.

"I'm sorry," Ginny says, barely above a whisper. "But it's going to be okay—we're not angry with each other; we're still going to be friends. Just because we're not together doesn't mean we're not a family," she insists, voice growing stronger now. "It's not you, it's just us—our marriage—it's just not working any more."

Briefly, Harry squeezes her hand under the table. He says nothing, wanting to give them space to absorb the information and to react. When the silence stretches out into minutes, though, it takes all of his restraint not to break it. He concentrates on his breathing, on the drip of the tap into the sink, and, eventually, James speaks.

"I know."

"You know what?" Ginny asks, sounding puzzled.

James glances at Al, who bites his bottom lip and shrugs. "That you haven't been happy."

Harry doesn't have time to be startled before Al jumps in. "We've known for months," he says helpfully, and James kicks him none-too-subtly under the table.

Ginny turns to Harry, face a mask of helpless astonishment. "Now what?" she mouths.

"I have no idea," he murmurs, eyes flitting between his children. "What makes you say that, James?"

"I'm not stupid, Dad. I can tell when you're unhappy. You hardly talk to each other any more, except for the last few days, which is... weird," he says, frowning.

"I know you're not stupid... I didn't realise," Harry says, raking both hands through his hair and attempting to ground himself.

"I tried to talk to you the other night, but..." James shrugs, apparently taking refuge in awkwardness.

Heavy with guilt, Harry nods. He knows James is telling the truth, and now it seems ridiculous that he hadn't pushed him to talk at the time.

"So... you two have been talking about this?" Ginny asks.

"Yeah. We were worried about you," Al says stoutly.

Harry shoots him a small smile. "You too, Lil?"

She nods, just as James is saying, "Of course not!" and then, "Al!"

Al blinks. "What?"

"You told her!" James hisses, appalled.

"Why shouldn't he tell me?" Lily demands hotly, fixing James with a fierce stare.
"You're too young," James mumbles, folding his arms and looking away from his sister. Harry, watching the argument unfold with morbid fascination, doesn't really blame him; she has learned that glare from her mother, and many a stronger man than either of them has quailed at the sight of it over the years.

Lily bristles. "I am ten years old, James. I'm not a baby!"

"She's not, you know. She already knew something was up," Al points out.

"Whose side are you on, exactly?" James snaps, and Al shrugs, falling silent.

"I don't think anyone should be taking sides," Harry says, and all eyes are on him. "Er, right, so... I have to admit, this isn't really going the way I expected it to, but never mind. Does anyone... want to ask anything?" he tries.

"Are we going to move house?" Lily inquires, eyes large and appealing.

"No," Ginny says. "You, Al, and James are going to stay here with me... if that's what you want," she adds, growing uncertain.

Al chews on his thumbnail. "Where are you going to go, Dad?"

"I don't know, yet," he admits. "Not far, don't worry. I'm going to stay with Ron and Hermione for a little while."

"Can we come and stay with you sometimes?" Lily asks tearfully, clutching Frank as though he's keeping her afloat. He doesn't seem to notice; in fact, he doesn't even seem to stir in his sleep.

Harry swallows hard, heartbroken to think that Lily even imagines he might leave her behind and not look back. "Of course you can, Lil. And Frank. All of you can. I'll make sure I find a house with plenty of bedrooms."

"I think it'll be okay to stay with Mum, then," Lily pronounces seriously. Ginny smiles.

"Me too," Al says, unexpectedly putting his arm around his sister in a show of solidarity.

"Why don't you want to be together any more?" James says suddenly, shattering the fragile calm.

"We aren't happy any more," Ginny says, picking at her teacup. "We care about each other and we've realised we'd be happier if we weren't together."

James regards his mother evenly. "I don't believe you. Did one of you have an affair?"

"Hey," Harry warns. "Don't speak to your mother like that."

James snorts. "Why not?"

"Because she loves you and this is hard for her and we didn't bring you up to throw accusations around like that," he snaps, meeting his son's eyes. Seeing them widen at his harsh tone, he makes an effort to slow his breathing and unclench his fingers; he doesn't know where the flash of anger has sprung from, but it's not going to do any good here.
"I know," James mutters, eyes downcast. "I just want to know the truth."

"It is the truth," Ginny says. She's protecting him, and he doesn't know whether he wants to hug her or shake her.

"It is the truth," Harry agrees, heart pounding. "But there is more to it."

Ginny inhales sharply. She turns. "You don't have to," she whispers.

"I think I'd like the start the New Year being honest," he says, and he is so fortified by these words that he manages the difficult ones almost without hesitation. "I've learned a lot about myself recently, and one of the things that I've learned is that I'm... erm, I'm more interested in men than women."

"You like boys?" Lily asks, nose wrinkled in contemplation.

Harry nods. "I suppose that's about the size of it, yeah."

"They smell, do you know?" she adds.

Harry smiles, even as a small part of him aches violently for Maura. "I'll keep that in mind."

"That's not true," Al says, all eyebrows and indignation. "I smell brilliant."

"Not when you've been out playing Quidditch, you don't," Ginny mumbles into her cup.

"Uncle Charlie's gay, isn't he?" Al muses, ignoring his mother. "He's done alright for himself."

Ginny snorts, and the only thing keeping Harry's face straight is the fact that James—the unknown quantity, the one whose reaction worries him most—has not said a word.

Ever inquisitive, Al keeps him occupied with questions like: "Didn't you know you were gay before?", "Does this mean you're going to grow your hair long?" and "Aren't you a bit old for all that anyway?"

Ginny scrapes back her chair to allow an emotional Lily to perch on her lap, squashing Frank between them as she loops her arms around her mother's neck and holds on tight, no longer caring about whether or not she looks grown up.

Eventually, James folds his arms on the table and gazes at Harry. He opens his mouth to speak and Harry holds his breath.

"Doesn't make any difference to me, Dad, but—what's Grandma going to say?"

Bewildered, Harry stares at James. He doesn't know quite what to say to that, but there's a small bubble of relief growing rapidly in his chest and he almost smiles as he says:

"Thanks for your support, James—we'll worry about Grandma when she comes back from Cornwall, shall we?"

"That reminds me," Ginny says, resting her chin on the top of Lily's head. "I know it's not very nice, but we need you to keep this to yourselves for a week or two, just until we sort everything out with the newspaper."
"Why?" asks Al.

"Because otherwise they'll write things that aren't true and everyone will be upset," Ginny says darkly. "Especially Grandma."

"I can't even tell Rose?" Al gasps, clutching theatrically at the edge of the table.

"You can tell Rose, of course you can," Harry says, as though it's obvious.

Al wriggles in his chair, relieved. Harry drags in a long, deep breath and glances around at his family, taking inventory. Ginny, wiped out but relieved, is cradling a sad but resilient Lily and an ever stoic Frank. Al is possibly more curious than ever, and James, now apparently satisfied, is leaning back in his chair, watching over the whole scene with a calm acceptance that is way beyond his years.

Harry is still in one piece, and that is quite enough to be going on with.

James stretches, tips his chair too far and only just recovers his balance in time. Like a cat that has just fallen from a piece of furniture, he adjusts his position and glances around to check that no one has seen anything. Harry hides a smile.

"Dad?" he says after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"Put the kettle on."

**~*~**

On the evening of the first of January, Harry throws his work robes, a selection of his old man clothes, and his tomato clock into a bag, hugs his children, assuring them that he'll see them very soon, and moves into Ron and Hermione's spare bedroom. He only takes what he needs for now, reluctant to drag out the process or to let Ginny know that he has noticed her tears. That night, he lies awake, unable to sleep in the unfamiliar-smelling bedroom with no one by his side for the first time in years, thinking about James' question and trying to imagine what his parents would have to say about the situation. There's no way of knowing, of course, but the hazy memory of his mother's warm eyes and his father's small, encouraging smile is soothing, wrapping around him until he drifts gratefully into unconsciousness.

On the third of January, he and Ginny see James and Al back onto the Hogwarts Express. When the train has pulled out of sight, he scans the platform, seeking out blond hair and black clothes, but draws a blank.

"He's in Edinburgh," Ginny sighs, heading back toward the main station. "Probably took Scorpius straight to school himself this year."

"I wasn't—" Harry insists, more out of habit than anything else.

"Harry."

"Sorry."
"I'm going back to work." She touches his arm, eyes appealing. "Look after yourself."

Harry does his best. He gets as much sleep as he can, he goes to work, he attends meetings, and he remembers to eat, even though he feels less than comfortable invading someone else's breakfast table every morning; Hermione watches him, hawklike, pushing extra toast and bacon under his nose and monitoring his mood carefully, while Ron chats to no one in particular about the day ahead. It doesn't seem to matter how welcome they try to make him feel, he's still an intruder and he's still floating in limbo—married but not married, effectively homeless, and still thinking about Draco Malfoy far more than is helpful.

On the first Saturday of the year, Harry leaves the village behind and travels to Hogwarts, where, from what he has gathered from James' complaints, the last planned Quidditch game of the Autumn term is taking place, somewhat later than scheduled due to adverse weather conditions. The new rules, also according to James, state that matches are now to be called off at the slightest coating of frost on the broomstick handles; remembering the heavy snowfall throughout December and his son's penchant for exaggeration, Harry doubts that it's quite as simple as that, but there's a little part of him that feels slightly aggrieved—he's fairly sure that Dumbledore would have sent them up there in a fucking blizzard during his own Hogwarts days. Still, he does rather prefer to have James in one piece.

Even if James himself is extremely hacked off by the whole thing.

"Oh, brilliant," he'd groaned on hearing that Harry was planning to attend the game. "The first time you come and watch me play in ages and we'll get flattened because we haven't had enough time to train."

Harry had tried pointing out that the Slytherin team would have exactly the same disadvantage, but had quickly realised that there's little point trying to reason with a wound up Gryffindor Beater, even one with blue streaks in his hair.

When he gets to the pitch, almost all of the stands are full of students and teachers, all chanting and clapping as the two teams make their way out onto the grass. Hurriedly, Harry wraps his old house scarf around his neck and races up the creaky steps of the nearest empty stand. Slightly out of breath, he emerges into the morning sunshine at the top and realises that the stand isn't quite as empty as he'd first thought.

The man turns around at the sound of Harry's footsteps, sending his heart crashing against his ribs and his fingernails cutting into his palms. He has absolutely no idea what to say.

Draco lifts an eyebrow. "What do you want, Potter? I'm trying to watch the match."

"I... er..." Harry clears his throat, both relieved and offended when Draco turns back to the pitch. Harry hears the whistle and the whoosh of the wind around the players as they rise into the air. With those eyes focused elsewhere, he finds some words at last. "I just want to watch, too. James is playing."

"I know," Draco says drily. "He's hard to miss."

Bristling, Harry takes a few steps into the rickety wooden box and forces himself to remember that this Draco has had a very different life from the one in the glimpse, all because of something Harry himself did or did not do. He takes a deep breath—wood, earth, lemons—and pushes his irritation
away. It would be so easy to start an argument, and he supposes that's the point—it's always been easy to argue with this man, and that's not what he wants any more.

Instead, he shoves his hands into his pockets and watches Draco. His absorption in the game is fascinating to observe; so much so that Harry almost forgets to speak.

"Is Scorpius playing?" he asks at last.

"He's a first year," Draco says quietly. And then, with a touch of bitterness: "I think those kinds of exceptions were only made for you."

"That was a long time ago."

"It certainly feels like it," Draco says without looking around.

Harry says nothing, just watches the hem of the long black coat whipping around Draco's calves in the breeze that slants in from the pitch and the determined flicker of the charcoal grey scarf tucked in around his neck. He rests his hands on the barrier of the stand and allows himself to lean just a fraction, though his posture is still straighter than Harry's best efforts, and Harry doesn't know why he's surprised to notice that Draco isn't wearing a wedding ring. He looks at his own bare ring finger and swallows hard. He's been wearing it, just until everything is out in the open, but something had made him leave it on his bedside this morning.

"I'm sorry about your marriage," he says softly.

Draco snorts. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"I didn't come here for a fight, Potter," he says, sounding weary.

Harry joins him at the barrier, just in time for James to swoop past on the tail of a speeding Bludger. "Neither did I. I came to watch my son play Quidditch."

Suspicious grey eyes flick to his for a fraction of a second, and then back to the game, just in time to see the Slytherin Keeper dive left instead of right and allow Gryffindor the first goal of the game. He winces, looking at Harry again as though holding him personally responsible for the slip-up. Harry ignores the implication, instead taking the opportunity to study the pale face. He looks tired, and even up close, his severe hairstyle makes him look as though he's going bald, but he's still beautiful. Still striking, even without his colours and stripes, and even if that frown is permanent. Harry doubts it is, but he's not about to test that theory just yet.

Uncertain, he ignores the presence of the man next to him and focuses on the game. From what he can see, James' fears were unfounded; the Gryffindor team are skilful, tight, and disciplined, streaking about the pitch in blurs of scarlet and gold. Unfortunately for James, though, the Slytherins are just as capable, and the two well-matched teams make for an exciting game. Several minutes in, James coasts past their stand, bat held loosely as he takes a moment to catch his breath, and almost falls off his broom at the sight of his father and Mr Malfoy standing quietly side by side.

"Alright, Dad," he calls, recovering himself, waving his bat in greeting and taking off into a sudden spiralling dive, black and blue hair flapping behind him.
"I think that was for your benefit," Draco observes.

Harry smiles. "I expect so."

"He didn't expect to see me, did he?"

"Do you blame him?"

"I don't know what you're trying to suggest, Potter, but I am always here. I haven't missed a game in years," Draco says, tapping his fingers on the wooden barrier. One, two, three, four, five with the left, and one, two, three, four, five with the right, Harry counts automatically.

"I didn't know that," he admits.

Draco's mouth twitches into an almost-smile as Slytherin score a goal. "You don't know everything."

Harry sighs, exasperated. "I know that," he mumbles, rubbing at the uneven surface of the wood with his thumb. "I just imagined you'd go and watch a professional team play these days."

"You imagined?" Draco repeats, shooting him a sharp look. Harry shrugs, feeling a flush creeping up the back of his neck. "I like it here, if you must know. I'm a school governor."

"Oh," Harry says. He has no idea how to respond to that.

"Good grief, have I managed to shut you up?" Draco murmurs, eyes still on the pitch. Though heavy with sarcasm, there is no edge to his tone, and Harry catches his first glimpse of his Draco underneath the stiff, frosty exterior.

"I think you'll have to try harder than that," Harry says.

"Are you planning to be here often?" Draco demands, tapping his fingers again. "I usually have this stand all to myself."

"How do you manage that?"

"The students don't like it. They think it smells funny."

Puzzled, Harry sniffs at the air. He can't detect anything untoward. "I can't smell anything."

Draco smirks. "Of course you can't. It only ever takes a couple of Dungbombs before the first game of the year. They soon learn to stay away."

"You are extremely unsociable," Harry observes. Oddly, it's not a criticism; he's just struck by how solitary this man is, how many barriers he must have constructed to conceal the warmth that Harry knows, he knows, is beneath.

"That's a new one," Draco says, unruffled. "Have you been talking to my ex-wife?"

"No. I really am sorry about that," Harry tries.

"That's interesting. Why do you care all of a sudden?"
Harry hesitates. "I just do, alright? I wouldn't wish that experience on anyone... however much of a cock they might have been to me in the past."

"I think you'll find that—"

"Alright, we were both cocks. Better?"

Draco laughs but still doesn't look at Harry. "Much."

"Am I allowed to be sorry now?" Harry asks, knowing he's pushing it. Needing to.

"Don't bother. Astoria and I have been separated for a long time—nearly two years. We wanted to wait until Scorpius went away to school to start all of that messy legal business, but these things rarely go to plan. I'm still waiting for it to be finalised."

Astonished, Harry watches the Slytherin Chasers and attempts to pull together a coherent response. They streak past the stand in formation, the two on the outside carefully guarding the one in the centre as she swoops toward the Gryffindor goal hoops, Quaffle under her arm, and as Harry watches her put it neatly past the Keeper in red, he can't help feeling that things are starting to go his way.

Deciding it will be politic to hide his glee from Draco, he says, "It must've been difficult to live together for all that time."

"Not really. You could probably walk around for days in the Manor without seeing anyone," Draco says carelessly.

Harry heaves a sigh and scrubs at his hair. He's infuriating. Of course he is. It's not as though he ever expected any of this to be simple, but it's easy to remember why this haughty, scornful idiot has always driven him to near-madness.

"Why are you so difficult to talk to?" he asks without expecting a response, just letting the question hang in the air.

Draco snorts, leaning precariously over the barrier to watch the two Seekers diving for the Snitch and almost colliding. Shaking his head, he straightens up, to the immense relief of Harry, who had been seconds away from reaching out and grabbing the back of his coat.

"Maybe I'm confused about why you suddenly seem to want to be my friend," he offers.

"I'm just being polite," Harry says weakly, just about resisting the temptation to hex himself in the face.

"I think fucking not."

"We're sort of in the same boat," he says before he can think better of it. "Ginny and I are splitting up."

Draco's eyes snap to his, sharp and searching. "You're lying."

"Why would I do that?" Harry demands, wounded.
"It would have been in the paper, Potter; I'm not that naive." Draco turns his attention back to the game.

"We haven't announced it yet," Harry admits. "It'll be common knowledge in a week or so."

Draco blinks. His fingers tighten around the barrier and as he turns to Harry once more, the wind whips a strand of his hair free of its severe, slicked down style; he stands there, quite unaware, and Harry rather inappropriately wants to smile.

"Maybe I'm missing something, but are you mad? Why on earth would you tell me that?"

"Maybe I don't have anything to lose," he admits. "Everything is changing."

Draco turns away from the barrier at last and folds his arms across his chest. "And now you trust me? I don't know why I'm surprised that you're not making sense. You never have."

"You don't mean that," Harry murmurs. He turns, heart racing, and rests his arms on the barrier, looking out just in time to see James whacking a Bludger into the Slytherin Seeker, which knocks him off course and allows the Gryffindor Seeker to capture the Snitch. The stands erupt into cheers and applause, and even Draco is clapping politely beside him.

Harry joins in, wondering if what he's just done is brilliant or idiotic. It's usually impossible to tell until long after it's too late. Perhaps, though, it will be a test. A dangerous test, he supposes, but there's nothing much he can do about that now. If Draco goes public with the information, it will hurt, but he will know that this man isn't the Draco he is hoping for; he is too embittered and too far removed from the man in the glimpse to ever bring himself to love Harry Potter. If he doesn't, then just maybe, despite the austere appearance and the maze of protective walls, his Draco is in there somewhere.

"I'm sorry about your marriage, Potter," he says, pausing at the top of the stairs.

Harry nods, granting him a small, grateful smile. "Thanks."

Draco turns and heads down the spiral staircase, long coat flapping behind him. Harry watches him go until his knees turn to water and he scrambles to lower himself onto a hard wooden bench before he ends up on the floor. He leans against the wall, heart hammering unpleasantly, wondering if he's really planning to put himself through this all over again.

"Dad!" James yells, swooping into view and hovering just outside the box.

Harry takes a deep breath and goes to congratulate his son.

The next part is up to Draco.
Harry thinks this may just be the quietest the kitchen at the Burrow has ever been. Granted, he has been witness to many painful, hushed scenes here during the war years, but this silence is something different; it stretches between the four people sitting around the table, so heavy that Harry barely dares to breathe.

Beside him, Ginny bites her lip and flicks anxious eyes between her parents. He can't quite extinguish his guilt at letting her do most of the talking, but judging by the matching expressions of shock on Molly's and Arthur's faces, he knows they made the right decision. Ginny is diplomatic, perceptive and careful when it comes to the emotional stuff, and he is... well... not.

That said, he has developed a talent for reading expressions over the years, and is all too aware that the Weasleys are surprised and distressed by the news, even if he has no idea which—if any—words will help. Both faces are pale and lined, appearing older than usual, and though he knows that some of that tension has been caused by Great Aunt Mildred and her outlandish demands, that knowledge fails to mitigate his remorse. They have only been home for a couple of days. Harry had wanted to give them longer to recover from getting the old bat, as Molly calls her, back on her feet, but Ginny has somehow managed to talk him into 'getting it over with'; she has sent Lily off to Ron and Hermione's and squeezed his hand at regular intervals all the way up the winding path to the Burrow, as though trying to convince him that everything will be fine.

Which is how he has found himself sitting at Molly's kitchen table on a cold evening in mid-January, waiting for someone to bloody say something. There's a lot to be said for 'getting it over with', he thinks mutinously, staring into his empty coffee cup, but he is beginning to feel like he could still be sitting here this time next month, waiting for Molly to stop gaping at them with watery eyes and actually find some words. Any words will do at this point; he'd rather be yelled at and chased out of the house with a broom than endure another minute of this...

"Oh, Ginny," she whispers at last, tears finally overflowing as she gazes at her daughter. "Oh, Ginny, you can't be splitting up. You can't..." her voice trails off and she looks at her husband in desperation.

Arthur coughs and attempts to gather himself. "Have you thought this through?" he manages, putting a comforting arm around Molly's shoulders. He looks appealingly at Harry.

"We've done a lot of thinking," Harry assures, voice scratchy from underuse. "And a lot of talking. This is what's best for both of us. And the children."

"Oh!" Molly wails, bringing a wrinkled hand to her mouth. "They're just babies. Do they know about this?"

"They're pretty grown up, Mum," Ginny says, reaching for her mother's hand and finding a small smile for her that hurts Harry's heart. "They understand that it's better for Harry and I to be apart."

"How can it be?" Molly demands, gripping Ginny's hand so tightly that Harry catches a flicker of pain in her eyes. "I don't understand... either of you... this has come from nowhere. You just need some time, that's all."

Her eyes flash such anguish into Harry as she turns to look at him that all he wants to do is round the
table and hug her to him, breathe in the familiar scent that has made him feel safe for almost as long as he can remember, and tell her that none of this is really happening. She's Ginny's mother; these are Ginny's parents, Ginny's family, but in all the ways that are important, they are his, too. Molly is his, and Arthur and Ron and George and all of them. If this goes wrong, he's not just losing his in-laws; he's losing the only proper family he has ever known.

Terrified, he pastes on what he hopes is a comforting smile and slides his arm briefly around Ginny's shoulders.

"It's been coming for a long time, Molly. I wish I could say that wasn't the case, but neither of us want to lie to you. We aren't angry at each other—it isn't anyone's fault. We still want to be friends."

Molly sniffs, draws a flowery handkerchief from her pocket, and starts mopping at her face with it.

"Oh, but... I just can't imagine you not together," she says, words muffled by the fabric. "There hasn't been a divorce in our family since—"

"I know, Mum," Ginny jumps in, presumably before Harry has chance to roll his eyes. "I'm really sorry to disappoint you," she adds, lowering her gaze, and the guilt that has been rolling around in Harry's stomach sharpens and stabs him between the ribs.

"I'm sorry, too," he says quietly.

Molly says nothing, instead disappearing behind her handkerchief and a cascade of soft, hiccupy sobs. Ginny lets out a small sound of distress and abandons her seat to comfort her; she kneels on the floor and wraps her arms around her mother, whispering to her and making a valiant but futile effort to contain her own tears.

Harry doesn't know where to look.

"Why don't we have a chat?" Arthur says suddenly. Harry's eyes snap to his. "You know, man to man."

Oh, god, yes, Harry thinks, nodding gratefully and scraping back his chair. He follows Arthur out of the back door, through the overgrown garden and into his shed. He can't remember when he was last here, but it's much the same as it has always been, and something about that, in the midst of the upheaval, is rather reassuring.

Inhaling the dry, musty air, Harry walks past a rack of tangled computer cables, lamp flexes and electric Christmas lights, ducks just in time to avoid an unravelling length of bright orange hosepipe as it slithers and crashes to the floor, and finally finds Arthur, perching on the edge of a dusty table and running his fingers over the glass plate of a beaten-up photocopier. The expression of affection on the old man's face is so earnest that Harry almost smiles.

Instead, he sits carefully on top of an ancient television set and waits. Arthur obviously has something to say to him, and he is more than willing to hear it.

At last, he sighs, abandons the photocopier and turns to Harry, brow creased and hands in his lap. Knowing how much he hates confrontation, Harry has to bite the inside of his mouth to prevent himself from leaping in and starting the conversation for Arthur.

"Harry," he says at last. Hesitates. "Harry... you're an adult now with a family of your own, and
believe me, the last thing I want to do is talk down to you."

"I know that," Harry says, dragging his gaze up from where he's been watching a shiny beetle scuttling across the floor, and meeting Arthur's pale eyes.

"Good. Because I want to ask you... I want you to think about whether you've really tried to work things out, or if you're giving up because you're going through a rough patch."

Startled, Harry says nothing for a moment. "Erm, it's not really as simple as that," he says, recovering himself. He sighs. "Things have been bad for quite a long time, and we've both realised that we aren't getting what we need from being together. And we never will, he adds silently, drawing a veil over the ever-present image of Draco in his head.

Arthur laces his fingers together and regards Harry with a pained expression; he's uncomfortable, but determined, and in any other situation, Harry would be impressed with his fortitude.

"You know, if Molly and I had thrown in the towel the first time things got difficult, Ron and Ginny would never have been born," he says, pausing to allow Harry to absorb his words. "You have to work at a marriage, Harry. It's a commitment for life, you know?"

"I know," Harry says, struggling to keep a lid on his frustration but needing to, because this man means so ridiculously well; he always does. "And I love Ginny, but—"

"Isn't that enough?" Arthur cuts in, voice so soft that Harry feels sick. There's nothing but bewilderment and concern on his face, even as he regards the man who is walking away from his youngest child. His only daughter. His little girl.

"No," Harry says at last, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. It's no good. He's going to have to say it. Again. Harry takes a deep breath and reminds himself that although he is becoming weary of explaining his recent personal revelation to people, this is still Arthur's first time he hearing it, and he deserves to hear it properly.

"Whatever it is, can't it be fixed?" Arthur asks, and Harry forces himself to meet his eyes. "Anything you need, Harry, anything at all—we can help. We're your family."

Breath catching in his chest, Harry forces the air out in a painful exhalation and shakes his head. "I really appreciate that. But we're just not the same people any more. And... I'm in love with someone else."

"What?" Arthur says faintly, and Harry just stares back at him, horrified with himself. He isn't exactly sure where that came from, but he wishes he could put it back in there.

"Er, yeah... I didn't really mean for it to come out like that," he admits, heart racing in a horrible, messy rhythm. He has no idea what he was thinking, coming out here. Right now he would trade this dark, cramped, expectant silence for ten sobbing Molly Weasleys, but that doesn't seem to be an option.

"You're... you're involved with someone else?" Arthur demands, brow furrowed in confusion.

Harry shakes his head, wrapping his fingers around the edge of his perch, clinging to the sharp edges of wood and the curve of glass as he holds eye contact with the man who has always treated him as a son.
"No," he says, feeling the line between truth and lies blurring into non-existence. "Nothing's happened."

"Then... Harry... does it really have to come between you and Ginny?" Arthur tries, but the strength is fading from his voice and now he just sounds sad.

"Yes. Because it's a man. I'm in love with another man, and I think that maybe I have been for a long time."

"Oh," Arthur croaks. "Oh." He lifts a hand and rubs vaguely at his face. His eyes, wide with shock, never leave Harry.

Half afraid that Arthur might be about to have a heart attack, Harry gets to his feet and crosses the cluttered floor, resting his hand on a wool-clad shoulder.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Arthur looks up, blinks, and seems to shake himself.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, Harry... you needn't look at me like I'm going to explode," he says, shuffling along the table so that Harry can sink down next to him.

Harry shrugs and scrapes his shoe through the dust on the floor. "You looked like you might for a moment."

Arthur says nothing for a long time, just resting his hands on his thighs and staring intently at the fallen hosepipe as though utterly puzzled to see it on the floor.

"It's not the first time I've heard something like that," he says at last. "Though I can't say I ever expected to hear it from you."

"Charlie," Harry murmurs, lips twitching into a small smile without his permission.

"We were the only ones to be surprised, Molly and I," he says wistfully.

"Actually, that's not true," Harry says, recalling a recent conversation with another of the Weasley men. "Ron was surprised, too. Very surprised."

Hearing Arthur's smile, Harry lets out a long, careful breath, but he still doesn't dare to look at him as they sit, squashed together, side by side on the rickety old table that creaks under their combined weight with every tiny movement. He wonders how Ginny is getting on in the kitchen.

"You know... forgive me, Harry, but I have to ask you this—you're sure it's not just a passing... fancy? That you're reaching a certain point in your life? Because it's natural to, er, question things," Arthur says, voice fading to a mumble, and, when Harry sneaks a sidelong glance at him, his face is flushed crimson.

"Don't worry, everyone else seems to think I'm having a midlife crisis, too," he sighs. "But no, that's definitely not what this is." Harry frowns, suddenly unable to cleanse his mind of the idea of a forty-something Arthur questioning his sexuality, even if he's fairly certain that was not what he meant.
"Ginny knows about this, doesn't she?"

Harry nods. "Of course."

"It was... difficult for Charlie. You know, at first," Arthur says, thoughtful. "He struggled with it. Are you... struggling?"

Touched, Harry swallows hard. Lets his eyes fall closed for a moment. This man is still the steady, accepting father figure he has always been—despite everything. He's incredible.

"No, I think I've already done my struggling," he admits, allowing himself to catch Arthur's eye at last. Contrary to all his fears, there is nothing but concern and love etched across the pale, lined face.

"That's good, because I doubt these next few weeks are going to be easy."

"I know. But Gin's a strong woman. She's going to be okay," Harry insists.

Arthur smiles slowly. "I know that. I'm not worried about her. I'm worried about you."

Startled, and slightly stung, Harry sits up a little straighter. "I'll be fine," he says, just about resisting the urge to add: 'I'm strong, too!'

"I think you will," Arthur concedes after a moment's consideration. "Just be careful. It's one thing running around after Death Eaters and quite another throwing your heart after some daft lad who probably doesn't deserve it." He shrugs awkwardly and closes his mouth, as though ashamed of the odd little moment of candour.

"Thanks," Harry says in an almost-whisper, and falls silent. He has no idea what else to say; the conversation has taken a rather unexpected turn, and he hasn't had to defend himself nearly as much as he had been prepared to.

"I'm just saying," Arthur continues, scratching his head and fixing Harry with a significant look. "I don't want you to give up on your marriage—that's the truth. But if there's really no way you can make things work, all I want is to see you happy and safe, Harry. Ginny is my daughter, and she means the world to me, but so do you. We haven't been here for you all these years just to turn our backs when you need us. Your parents... they were good people, son, and I hate to think what they'd say if we only treated you as one of our own when it suited us."

Harry chest tightens, stealing all of the words he thought he might say, and all he can do is throw his arm around Arthur and embrace him roughly, stung with relief when surprisingly strong hands come up to clutch at his back, grazing rough wool against the skin of his neck and filling his nostrils with the scent of woodsly aftershave and baking. He holds on for long seconds, allowing his fear and tension to pour out of him and evaporate into the stuffy atmosphere of the shed.

"Thank you," Harry mumbles as they pull apart, both pretending not to notice the telltale shimmer in the other's eyes.

"I can talk to Molly if you like," Arthur offers. "She'll probably take it easier from me, won't have to keep stopping to cry, and such."

Harry chews his lip. The offer is tempting, but something stubborn and irritating inside him is insisting that he be a grown-up and deal with this himself.
"I don't know..."

"Let me help you," Arthur says, seeming to sense his reluctance. "Please."

"Are you sure?"

Arthur smiles grimly. "I've known Molly for nearly sixty years; believe me, I'm the one to handle this. It's the idea of a divorce that's upsetting her, apart from the idea that you're both heartbroken and never to be happy again. Hers is the dramatic side of the family," he confides with a weary little sigh. "As for the rest, well, she's been through it once before. Look at her now, she's practically adopted Serghei."

Harry takes a deep breath and gets to his feet. "Okay. If you're sure."

Arthur nods, and Harry takes his leave, picking his way through the shed, back across the garden and into the house, where he finds Ginny and Molly, sitting side by side at the table, nursing cups of tea in silence. Impulsively, he swoops down on Molly and hugs her, whispering a final "I'm sorry" and a hopeful "See you soon" against her tear-stained cheek before exchanging glances with Ginny and Disapparating on the spot. As he touches down in Ron and Hermione's back garden, he realises that Arthur never once asked him for the name of the man with whom he had fallen in love.

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Ten minutes later, Ginny appears on the frozen grass and makes her way over to Harry, hands in pockets. With a soft sigh, she lowers herself onto the back step beside him.

"How's she doing?" Harry asks.

"Well, she's not crying any more. I decided to absent myself when Dad came in and started muttering about Charlie."

"About that..." Harry drops his head onto his arms for a moment and then looks up at her, mouth twisting into a rueful smile. "It all just sort of came out."

Ginny snorts. "Yeah, there's been a lot of that lately, hasn't there?"

Harry groans softly, feeling the back of his neck heat despite the bitterly cold air.

Ginny nudges his knee with her own. "She'll be alright, I think. Just give her some time to get over the shock of the first divorce in the family for twelve billion years. Looks like Dad's going to help her with that, anyway."

"I hope so." Harry sighs. "Though I don't feel as though I deserve for them to be so understanding."

"It isn't about what you deserve," Ginny says, eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "It's about them wanting to look after both of us—they're your family, too." She frowns and looks away over Hermione's neat flower beds. "Which is a bit weird now that I think about it."

Harry shakes his head and envelops her in a warm, coconut-scented, one-armed hug, pressing his smile against her soft hair. "Don't," he advises.
She leans against him for a moment. "Have you—" She breaks off and they both turn at the sound of Lily's shrieks and giggles of protest from somewhere inside the cottage: "Uncle Ron, put me down!"

Ginny shakes her head. "Have you done the announcement?"

Harry reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of parchment, which she takes from him, holding it close to her face in the poor light and scanning the words with narrowed eyes.

"Sounds good," she says at last, folding it carefully and handing it back to him. "It's strange, you know... once upon a time you'd have rather turned up to work naked than volunteered information to the *Prophet*. Everything really is changing."

"Well, hiding hasn't been working all that well for me, to be honest. I doubt it's going to get any better when they get wind of all this—which they will, whether I tell them or not," Harry says.

"I know," Ginny says. "It's not a criticism. It hasn't always been easy to watch every word that comes out of my mouth in public, you know."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbles, dragging in a cool, deep breath and expelling his guilt into the air.

"Don't," she whispers, and then there's silence, but for the rustling of the trees in the wind.

Harry listens, still wrestling with the stark and thrilling fact that Draco Malfoy has kept the potentially explosive news of Harry's divorce to himself. He's had well over a week to do it, plenty of time, but Harry has combed through the newspapers every morning since their meeting at the Quidditch game, and come up with nothing. As he turns the folded parchment over and over in his hands, the tangle of anticipation and terror inside him crackles and burns brighter with cautious hope for this universe's Draco.

"I'd better go and get Lily before Ron gets her too riled up to sleep," Ginny says at last, resting hands on her knees and levering herself upright.

"Okay." Harry offers her a weary smile as she goes for the door. "I'll owl this in the morning. And... Gin?"

She pauses and looks down at him. "Yeah?"

"They'll want to talk to you—you should do as many interviews as you want," he says firmly.

Ginny shoots him a small, amused smile. "If I think of anything to say to them, which I doubt. Still, I suppose it's a novelty to have the option. Goodnight, Harry."

She pushes the door open, releasing a brief pool of light from the kitchen, the sounds of a giggly argument and the warm, herby aroma of sausages, and then she's gone, and Harry is left in darkness, clutching his bit of parchment and waiting.

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Two days later, the morning *Prophet* runs with 'Harry and Ginny Potter in Shock Split' on the front page, and everyone in the wizarding world—at least, everyone who can read, and everyone who knows someone who can read—knows about the split.

Harry can't say he's surprised that the news has made the headlines, but he still feels a little irritated when he thinks of the Malfoys' discreet little notice in the back of the paper, compared to this article which somehow manages to take up half of the front page. Their official statement is in there somewhere, but Harry has to search to find it amongst the speculation and not-quite-accurate details about their family life. None of it is particularly offensive, but Harry rolls his eyes at the suggestion that Ginny has left Harry because he has been holding back her 'illustrious Gringotts career', and the idea that the split is nothing but a publicity stunt, designed to 'boost the Harry Potter brand'.

Buried mid-column are the words that Harry had agonised over, had sat up all night writing, screwing up sheet after sheet of parchment and resisting the urge to throw things only because Hugo was sleeping in the next room.

*It is with regret that Harry and Ginevra Potter (nee Weasley) announce that they are beginning divorce proceedings. The decision to separate was mutual and amicable and the couple remain on friendly terms. James, Albus Severus, and Lily Potter will remain at the family home at Willoughby Drive, Ottery St Catchpole, with their mother, but will also spend time with their father, who is looking for a property in London.*

Reading the words now, at an oddly silent breakfast table, Harry sighs. He'd been fairly satisfied at the time, but now the words seem stilted and awkward. Still, he supposes no one will be concentrating on his dry little statement when they have the rest of the article to absorb. The picture the editors have chosen isn't a bad one; it's a shot of the whole family at Luna's wedding a couple of years ago. Everyone is dressed in bright colours, as requested, and even Harry is smiling, but now his anxiety, his restlessness, is so obvious, and Ginny just looks pale and weary.

"Well," Hermione says at last, setting down her copy of the *Prophet* and looking at Harry. "I think it could have been a lot worse."

"I agree," Ron says vehemently. He picks up his so-far-untouched bacon sandwich and takes a large, relieved bite. "To be honest, I thought they were going to write a load of lies, say Ginny'd been having an affair or something."

Harry glances between them, seeing the flicker of worry in Ron's eyes and Hermione's barely concealed fretting as she waits for his verdict.

"You're right," he says. "It could be a lot worse."

Hermione almost seems to deflate with relief at his words, and reaches for the teapot, avoiding Harry's eyes, as though attempting to convince him that she'd never been concerned at all.

"Uncle Harry?" pipes up Hugo, who has been picking through his cereal with silent absorption since the *Prophet* owls arrived.

"Mm?"

The little boy looks up at Harry with curious round eyes. "Are you going to live with us forever?"

"Er, no," he says, heart twisting as Hugo's face drops in disappointment. "But I'll still visit. You know, like I used to."

Hugo scowls and resumes his poking around in his cereal bowl.
Ron gazes at Harry over the top of his sandwich, obviously amused. Harry pulls a face at him.

"I think it's time to start looking for my own place."

~*~*

Harry spends the rest of the week sifting through the details of properties for sale in London, weighing up the advantages and drawbacks of Muggle and wizarding areas and making list upon list as he sits at Ron and Hermione's kitchen table, sprawls across the Weasley-made quilt that covers his temporary bed, and hides in his office behind his memo mountain, trying to avoid the openly curious stares of his Ministry colleagues and taking refuge in Helga's wonderfully consistent disinterest in his personal life and sharp-tongued observations about the state of his health.

In between list-making and the usual tide of meetings, Harry finds time to meet with Ginny, drink more coffee than he should, and complete their side of the paperwork which will make their separation official and permanent. At lunchtime on Friday, they walk out of the imposing legal building into bright, crisp sunshine, not quite divorced but knowing it's only a document away now. It's a strange, disconnected feeling, squinting at Ginny in the sunlight and realising that in a week or two, when the last of the paperwork comes through, it will all be over. Still, he thinks of Draco and his pained expression when he'd explained that he was still waiting for things to be finalised, and knows it's better this way.

On Saturday morning, Harry gathers up his lists, dresses warmly, and collects Lily. He's been looking forward to spending some time with her, especially now that the boys are back at school, and he knows that she's anxious about the idea of her dad moving too far away; he also knows that it's time for him to move out of Ron and Hermione's spare room, and the idea of killing several figurative birds with one stone is appealing.

She's uncertain at first but slowly gains enthusiasm as she and Harry follow the estate agents around a variety of houses, inspecting the small, neat gardens of those on the outskirts of London, and hanging curiously over the railings of the balconies of those in the centre, watching the traffic with interest. For a girl who has never lived anywhere but sleepy Ottery St Catchpole, the city is new and thrilling, and Harry relishes Lily's excitement, allowing her to tug the list from his hands and pull him along the street to the next property, even if she doesn't really know where she's going, and even though she is definitely going the wrong way.

It doesn't matter. Suddenly, all he's concerned about is making sure that she knows she has a place in his life, wherever he lives and whoever he lives with.

"This one has a swing!" she enthuses, dashing in from the garden of a large suburban semi and almost barrelling straight into the very nice but painfully young man who has been explaining to Harry exactly why it's so important to have a modern fitted kitchen.

"Great," Harry says, amused. He extracts a bitten pen from his coat pocket and adds: 'pros: has swing' to his list.

"Got a nice big garden, this one," the man agrees, apparently pleased. "Lots of room for patio furniture, barbecues, having a kickabout, you know."

"A kick-about of what?" Lily asks, puzzled.

"I mean a game of football," the man explains, sketching a little mime for Lily's benefit.
Lily glances up at Harry, and then at the estate agent. "Well, we don't play football, we play—"

"Shall we have a look upstairs, then?" Harry interrupts, dropping a hand to Lily's shoulder and delivering a light squeeze. She blinks and then flashes her most charming smile at the young estate agent.

"I'm going to go and look for my room!" she announces, taking off at speed.

They follow her at a more sedate pace, and Harry is barely listening as the patter starts up again. Lily has chosen 'her' bedroom in every house they have viewed so far, and he is happy to let her. There will be room for all of his children, of course, but it's only Lily who is still willing to admit that she needs her dad, and he's bloody well going to be there for her.

"Ooh, skylights!"

"All double-glazed," the young man offers. "Weather-proofed frames."

Pro: skylights, Harry writes. He ignores the rest. It doesn't seem important.

By mid-afternoon, they have visited almost all of the houses on Harry's list; Lily is starting to flag, and she's not alone. Harry buys them each a cone of chips from a cafe full of blue-haired old women and they find a place to sit. Lily pulls her feet up onto the bench, tucks her cone into her lap and squeezes a sachet of ketchup over her chips with great concentration.

"So, what did you think?" Harry asks, biting into a chip and relishing the explosion of too-hot potato, salt, vinegar and grease on his tongue.

"About the houses?"

Harry nods. "Yeah. And you've got tomato sauce on your nose."

Lily pokes out her tongue and swipes away the ketchup with ease. "The tall house. The one with all the bathrooms."

"The townhouse?" Harry asks, surprised. There had barely been any garden there at all. "Why?"

"You liked that one best," Lily says simply.

Harry smiles, elbowing her in the side. "I want to know which one you liked best."

Lily shrugs. "I liked them all, apart from the one that smelled funny. Can I have the attic room?"

"You can have whatever room you want, Lil."

Harry ruffles her hair and dabs a chip into her ketchup. His daughter is perceptive, he'll give her that—he had liked the townhouse best. Tall and narrow, it had wound upwards on rickety staircases over four floors, from a basement kitchen to a tiny, neglected roof garden; the decor was plain and slightly shabby, and according to the brutally honest lady who had shown them around, it hadn't been lived in for a long time. She had seemed fairly startled that anyone wanted to view it at all, but Harry had loved it.
He knows why, too, even though he doesn't want to admit it. He likes it because it reminds him of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and he's not sure how he feels about that, or even what he should be feeling. Even though the sensible voice in his head is insisting that this move should be a step forward, not a step back, the pull toward the characterful old house is intense.

"I did like it," he admits at last.

Lily licks her fingers. "I know. You had this daft smile on your face for nearly the whole time we were in there."

Harry grins, embarrassed. "Great, thanks for saying nothing and letting me make an idiot of myself."

"It's not my job to stop you making an idiot of yourself," Lily advises him.

"Isn't it? Whose job is it, then?"

Lily wrinkles her nose. "I don't know. I think maybe it was Mum's, so... I suppose you have to do it for yourself now."

Anxious, Harry shoots her a sidelong glance, but there's no trace of distress on her face; she's peering into the depths of her cone and fishing for chip fragments, apparently unconcerned. Harry breathes.

"I liked it because it reminded me of a house I lived in for a while when I was younger," he says, deciding that she's old enough and smart enough to have at least part of the truth.

Lily gazes up at him, surprised. "Before you met Mum?"

"No. I met your mum was I was eleven; this was later. It was during the war—it wasn't the nicest place back then and it was a pretty difficult time for everyone." Harry pauses, frowning as he folds his empty polystyrene chip cone with a crack. "I suppose it seems silly to be attached to it. It used to belong to Sirius Black, remember I told you about him?"

Lily nods gravely. "Well, then, it's not silly."

_You don't know the half of it_, Harry thinks, finding a smile for his daughter.

"Okay," he says. "The townhouse it is."

"Can we paint it purple?"

Harry lifts an eyebrow. "All of it? Don't you think that'll be a bit much?"

"Dad. I meant my room," Lily says, just for a moment managing to look deeply disparaging.

"Ah, okay. I don't see why not. When the sale goes through, which I think it will, because it doesn't look like anyone else wants to buy it, you can come over and help me decorate."

Lily smiles and stretches out, letting her arms and legs flop groundwards like a starfish.

"Mum says it's good that you're getting your own place," she says.

"I think it's good, too." Harry hesitates, but in the end has to ask. "How is your mum?"
Lily closes her eyes and doesn't say a word for several seconds. "She's okay."

"Really?" Harry prods.

Lily opens one eye. "Yeah. She's sad sometimes, but when I asked her... she said she was sad before a lot of the time, and that was worse. I don't really know why."

Harry knows why. He nods, swallowing down the curious mixture of relief and shame that rises up in his throat. "I want her to be happy, you know."

"I know," Lily says, still regarding him carefully with one brown eye. "She is sometimes. It's just weird that everyone went away at once, and now it's just me and Mum in the house. Sometimes it's good, though—last night we made fairy cakes and put cucumbers on our eyes."

Harry smiles. "At the same time?"

"Dad, you're not funny."

"Sorry."

"I miss you, though," she says, and now both eyes are open and pinning Harry to the spot, making him ache.

"I miss you, too, Lil," he rasps, taking a chance and holding out his arm for her.

After a moment, she shuffles closer on the bench and tucks herself against his side, pressing her face into his coat and hugging him tightly.

"Have you fallen out with Grandma and Grandad?" she asks eventually, voice muffled by the heavy wool of Harry's ancient overcoat.

"No, why would you say that?"

"I went to their house after school the other night, and I must've walked quicker than usual because they didn't realise I was there at first. I heard them talking, and Grandma said she wanted to call you and Grandad said she should leave it until the dust had come down, whatever that means."

"Settled," Harry murmurs distractedly.

"What?"

"Until the dust has settled, it's an expression. It means... when something big has happened, like if there's been an explosion, and you wait for everything to settle down so that you can see where you are, and figure out what to do," Harry explains, knowing he's making a hash of it.

Lily nods her understanding, eyes narrowed. "So... who exploded?"

Harry bites down a smile. "Your grandma, I suppose, but don't tell her I said that."

"James said she'd be upset," Lily muses. "I suppose he must be right about some things."
"I suppose so," Harry agrees. "She was upset, but don't worry. It'll be okay. If she wants to talk to me, then that must be a good sign."

Lily gazes at the ground, apparently unconvinced.

"Look," he says, wrapping his hands around her shoulders and holding her at arm's length, forcing eye contact. "I'm not going to let this break us up. You and me, and James and Al, and Grandma and Grandad, even me and your mum—we're a family, and families stick together, no matter what."

Lily stares at him, eyes large, and bites on her bottom lip. "Do you promise?"

Harry promises, and all the uncertainty in the world doesn't stop him from meaning it.

**~*~**

Feeling cautiously optimistic, both about the prospect of his new home and a conciliatory meeting with his surrogate mother, Harry presses on with his work, hangs fast onto the strings of his responsibilities, tries to avoid making a nuisance of himself in his friends' home, and even manages to find a civil word or two for the reporters who have now taken to leaping out at him from behind bushes and accosting him outside the Ministry. He suspects that word of the recent drop in his hostility levels has spread amongst them like scrofungulus, and now they're everywhere.

The odd thing, though, is that, while the frequent questions are a mild irritant, Harry can't seem to muster the all-consuming rage for the opportunistic buggers that used to come so easily. He's just not as angry these days, he supposes, and that must be a good thing.

When he returns from work on a cold, dark Wednesday night, rain-splattered and head full of bewildering columns of numbers, he walks into a silent, empty cottage. Puzzled but too tired to give it much thought, he picks up the post from the mat and trudges toward the kitchen, opening the letter addressed to him as he goes, the thought of hot tea encouraging him to continue putting one foot in front of the other.

"I got the house," he mumbles to himself, lips twitching into a weary smile as he scans the words, fingers grasping the thick, heavy paper in delight, terror, and triumph in equal measure.

Sagging slightly, he leans against the half-open kitchen door, trails across the tiles, dumps all the letters on the worktop and reaches for the kettle. Idly, he wonders who left the lights on; Hermione will do her nut if she finds out.

"That's wonderful news, Harry," someone says, and he nearly drops the kettle.

He whips around, water sloshing heavily inside the copper pot, and meets the nervous eyes of Molly Weasley, who is sitting at the table with her hands folded in her lap, as though she's been waiting for him.

He lets out his breath in a rush and immediately feels like an idiot. "You scared me to death," he admits. "I don't know what kind of an Auror that makes me."

"A tired one, by the looks of you," Molly says. "Why don't you come and sit down?"

Harry hesitates for a second or two before reluctantly relinquishing the kettle and depositing his weary body in the chair opposite Molly's. "Where is everyone?"
"Back at the Burrow. I told Arthur he could buy supper for everyone from that new chips and fish shop in the village," Molly says, an indulgent glimmer in her eyes.

Harry smiles. Takes a deep breath. "So... how are you doing?"

"Actually, that's what I came to ask you," Molly says softly. "I hope you can forgive me for leaving it so long."

Her hands, freckled and crepey, twist in her lap as she regards him, making him uncomfortably aware of her frailty, however hard she tries to hide it with her no-nonsense maternal stare and the stoic set of her shoulders that the passing of time has done nothing to diminish. Even as she smiles at him, he can see the shame pulling at the corners of her mouth and something inside him tugs painfully in response.

"I don't need to forgive you," he says roughly. "You're allowed to be upset."

"You're a good boy, Harry," she says, reaching across the table and squeezing his wrist. "You know... it's difficult for a mother to realise that she has missed something so important. I couldn't... I still can't believe that I didn't realise you were both so unhappy."

Harry sighs. "I know. But... if it's any comfort, I don't think we knew, either. We were just... sleepwalking," he says, remembering Ginny's description and realising that it's the most accurate one he has. Molly's face creases with sadness and Harry grabs her hand. "It's going to be okay," he insists.

"Arthur and I talked about what you said," she says. "You know, in the shed."

Harry swallows hard. "Yes, I thought you might've."

"And I just want to say that it makes no difference to me. None at all," she says fiercely, leaning across the table toward him, eyes blazing.

Taken aback by the sudden vehemence, Harry just nods, unable to form a coherent response.

"I love you, Harry," she continues, barely blinking, and if Harry weren't so entrenched in the gravity of it all, he would probably find it amusing to witness this little old woman staring holes into him and offering words of love from between clenched teeth.

"I know," Harry manages at last. "I love you, too."

"Good. So you know that I won't abandon you, disown you, or... what was it?" She drops her eyes for a second or two and, to Harry's growing bemusement, rummages in the pockets of her multicoloured cardigan and extracts a battered piece of parchment. She retrieves her reading glasses from the top of her head and puts them on to scan the words. "Ah, yes. 'Promise that you will not abandon, disown, or psychologically torture my father. He loves you and he can't help it if he's queer. Which is an okay word to use, don't worry, I asked a friend of mine who knows about these things.'"

Unable to decide whether to laugh, cringe, or hide his face in his hands, Harry manages a decent approximation of all three.
"Oh, god," he mumbles, snorting inelegantly and looking at Molly from between his fingers. "What is that?"

Molly folds the parchment and gives him an odd little smile. "That is a letter from James, which I received this morning. Well, some of it, anyway. There's plenty more, but that was the part that jumped out at me."

"Oh..." Harry bites his tongue just in time to stop himself from swearing. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he meant well, he was probably—"

"Trying to look after his dad?" Molly supplies, tilting her head to regard Harry.

"Yeah. Look, I'll write back to him and tell him that he shouldn't speak to you like that," he says, dropping his hands back to the table. Secretly, he rather wants to hug James and raise his pocket money, but he suspects this is one of those 'act like a responsible dad' moments.

"No need," Molly says, tucking the letter back into her pocket. "I've already written to him and told him that, seeing as I have no intention of doing any of those things, he could stop worrying and start studying." She smiles then, and Harry can do nothing but smile with her.

Relieved and drained, Harry rests his chin on one hand and lets his gaze drift indolently around the kitchen. The soft light makes the scrubbed pine table glow, and the sound of the rain slapping against the windows wraps Harry in such a sensation of warmth and safety that he can almost forget that his boots are waterlogged, his robes are damp, and his brain seems to be pounding against the inside of his skull.

"Why do these conversations always seem to take place at kitchen tables?" he muses, covering a yawn.

"Because the kitchen is the heart of the house," Molly says. "Why do you think we always had Order meetings in the kitchen in the old days?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Harry admits, and Molly's expression is suddenly one of good-natured reproach. Harry has never been happier to see it.

"I know Ginny knows more about this than she's telling me," she says, putting Harry on the spot once more. "About this man."

Harry looks down at the table, stomach roiling. "There's nothing to worry about, Molly. Nothing's happened. I think it's best to... deal with one thing at a time right now."

Molly makes a small sound of dissatisfaction. "Charlie was afraid to talk to me at first," she says, almost in a whisper, and Harry looks up. "I don't want you to be afraid to talk to me."

For a brief moment, she looks terrified, and then, just as quickly, it's gone, concealed behind the usual cheerful, expectant smile.

"I'm not," he reassures. "I promise."

Molly stares at him for several seconds before heaving herself out of her chair, apparently satisfied. "Shall we have a cup of tea?"
Harry nods gratefully. "Brilliant. Can I have a look at that letter?"

**~*~**

Lightened by Molly's visit and fortified by a huge, warming supper at the Burrow with Lily and her grandparents the next night, Harry finds that the rest of the week trundles by quite nicely; he flies through his memos, signs off on everything that takes his fancy, and alarms Helga by dragging a chair up to her desk and chatting to her as he eats his lunch. The certain knowledge that he's not about to lose his family and that he will be able to move into his house in a week or so cuts a sharp, glittering stripe through his guilt and apprehension, and he's beginning to feel as though he can deal with anything.

Anything, it seems, except shopping for clothes.

Having put it off for as long as possible, Harry finally caves on Saturday morning after catching sight of himself in the spare room's full-length mirror and realising that he can no longer in good conscience allow himself to walk around dressed like a sixty-something librarian. He heads into London, without a scrap of a plan this time, and spends an enjoyable hour or two procrastinating wildly, wandering in and out of little furniture shops and putting aside tables and sofas and beautiful tapestry rugs for his new house. With Molly's advice in mind, he spends an obscene amount on a big, old solid oak kitchen table and matching chairs, and then, oddly excited to be choosing his own furniture for the first time ever, he gathers lamps and little cupboards and a whole new set of shiny red cookware.

He solicits the help of an enthusiastic young salesgirl at Bedknobs and Blankets who seems delighted to help Harry choose new linen, quilts, and a fantastic wrought iron bed frame with a permanent Charm-Chilled mattress, which, she tells him, is, "awesome, honestly, sir, I've got one at home."

Reluctantly, and many, many Galleons lighter, Harry steps back out into Diagon Alley and starts on the far less agreeable task of buying himself a decent wardrobe. He could have done with Lily's honesty and eye for colour, but she is ice skating with her friends from school, so he's on his own. He supposes she can come over to the cottage tomorrow and laugh at his efforts, but it's not really the same.

Bewildered, he walks from one brightly-lit shop to the next, hoping for something to jump out at him, but it doesn't seem quite as simple as that; the fancier the shop, the less stuff there is in it, and the more the smartly-dressed salespeople gaze at him with curious, doubtful eyes, as though they know he doesn't belong. He has spent a good ten minutes flicking through a rack of patterned shirts and frowning when one of them approaches him, coughs lightly and waits.

Harry looks up. This one is older than the others, older than him, even, and he relaxes a fraction.

"Can I help you?" he says, voice soft and careful.

Harry sighs. "Honestly, I've no idea."

The man's lips barely move, but his pale blue eyes sparkle. "If you tell me what you're looking for, I may be able to find it for you," he offers.

Harry chews his lip and thinks. Stares down at the rack of loud printed garments and knows they're not him. Not either of the hims, in fact. What he's looking for, he realises, is some sort of compromise between the high fashion wardrobe of his other self and the part of him that likes comfortable, worn
jeans with holes in them. He imagines Draco leaning over his shoulder and heaving a dramatic sigh.

"And this is why you don't buy your own clothes. You have no idea what you're doing."

Caught between longing and the desire to stand on the imaginary Draco's foot, Harry looks up at the man who is offering to rescue him and smiles.

"I don't like these shirts," he declares, wrapping his hand around the cool metal rail. "If that helps."

"It's a start, sir," the man says delicately.

"Good." Harry looks at him hard, trying to assess his reaction to the honesty that is about to emerge. "I just don't want to look old any more."

The man's eyes gleam. "Come with me."

**~*~**

Over the next hour or so, Harry tries on what feels like everything single item in his size on the shop floor, quickly surrendering to the superior knowledge of the man with the sparkling eyes, who appears at regular intervals to pass him another stack of shirts, trousers and sweaters and then waits patiently for him to emerge from his velvet-curtained cubicle. After the first few outfits, Harry's self-conscious awkwardness starts to fade, and he presents himself openly for approval, staring thoughtfully at his reflection in the many gleaming mirrors as the salesman flits around him, straightening a lapel here and smoothing down a shirt front there, flicking ties and scarves around Harry's neck and then frowning and whisking them away for reasons which are a mystery to Harry.

"Turn around, Mr Potter, just so that we can see how that coat moves with you," he instructs.

Nonplussed, Harry obeys, thinking that this coat—a calf-length woollen overcoat, which is at least the fourth in a succession of similar garments that he has tried—moves with him just fine. Even so, he knows all too well that he knows less than nothing about this stuff. His attempts to dress himself over the years have, he now sees, been woefully inadequate, and in the absence of Draco, his best option is to trust this man. He's quite possibly the politest individual Harry has ever met, and though he has never once asked for Harry's measurements, every item, without exception, that he has offered has fit him perfectly. Harry is reluctantly impressed.

"Very good," the man murmurs, tapping long fingers against his face in contemplation. "Try the jade cashmere with those trousers, perhaps?"

Harry ducks into his cubicle and rummages through his pile of sweaters, attempting to decide between two fine-knit jumpers in almost identical shades of blue-green.

"Why are you so useless when it comes to colours?" Draco's voice echoes in his head, making him close his eyes and drag in a deep, steadying breath. "You're supposed to be an artist."

Harry shakes himself, turns around and waves both sweaters at the man. "Which one of these is jade green? They both look the same to me."

The pale eyes gleam and the smallest twitch of a smile graces the man's lips as he indicates the garment in Harry's left hand. "That is why I am here," he says evenly.
Harry grins, ducks back behind the curtain and exchanges the heavy coat and fitted shirt for the gloriously soft sweater, resolutely tucking in the price tag before he can catch sight of it.

"Right then, what d'you think of this?" he asks, striding out into the room with the mirrors and presenting himself, straight-backed, arms held out for inspection. At this point, it really doesn't matter if he looks like a tit. There's no one here but the two of them, and he's bloody well determined to do this properly... if he does, perhaps he won't have to do it again for a long time.

"Mr Potter, I do believe that is your colour," the man says, eyes darting from Harry to his reflection as he smoothes an invisible crease from a sleeve and nods slowly.

"Really?" Harry scrubs at his hair, uncertain.

"Yes. Look at your face—it looks alive," the man says.

Harry follows his gaze, pleasant surprise flickering inside him as he realises that the man is right. The deep, vivid colour makes his skin look healthy, his teeth whiter and his eyes bright green and sparkling behind his glasses; it's incredible. All those years he has wasted wearing sludgy colours seem to fall away, and the man who stares back at him from the mirror looks so much like his other self, the man from the glimpse, that it's all Harry can do to tear his attention back to the salesman, who is hovering behind him, expectant, with eyebrows raised.

"Yeah," he manages at last. "You're right."

The man inclines his head gracefully. "I'm glad you agree."

"I suppose I'd better have it, then," Harry says.

"Very good. Though... I think we still have some way to go."

"I know, I know," Harry assures, grinning and heading back into the cubicle. "I'm quite aware that you haven't finished with me. What's next?"

**~*~**

By the time Harry finally lets himself into the cottage, laden with bags, and having spent more money than his conscience wants to acknowledge, darkness has fallen thickly and there is a savage nip in the air. Grateful for the fire that he can feel even before he fights his way into the living room, he sniffs at the soft aroma of tea and wonders if there is someone around from whom he should hide his purchases. In the end, though, he just flops into an armchair next to the fireplace and dumps his bags at his feet. Through half-closed eyes, he regards his tatty old jeans and scuffed boots. He wonders if he'll miss them.

"Harry, is that you?" Hermione calls from the kitchen. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Hermione, I would sell one of my kidneys for a cup of tea," he sighs, closing his eyes.

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that," she laughs, the creaking of the ancient floorboards announcing her arrival in the living room. "I'm just boiling the kettle again, so—oh, my... have you been shopping?"

Harry opens his eyes and tilts back his head, regarding her over the back of his chair at a twisty,
almost-upside-down angle. "Absolutely not."

"Really. What's in all these bags, then?" Hermione asks, folding her arms and fixing Harry with a knowing grin.

"Er... toys for poor children," Harry improvises.

Hermione snorts and steps around the chair, crosses the rug, and settles herself in front of the fire, within easy reach of Harry's bags. Sighing, he twists back around and attempts a stern glare, but it doesn't stick for even a second; the amusement on her face tells him that much.

Suddenly, her eyebrows shoot up and she leans forward on her hands to get a better look at him.

"Have you had your eyebrows cut, too?"

Harry rakes his fingers through his hair uncertainly. "Not much," he mumbles, all at once very aware of himself. Hermione's intense, calculating gaze isn't helping, either. "I was in there for ages for the amount of hair she actually cut off," he complains. "She said it's on-purpose messy instead of haven't-got-a-clue messy, whatever that means."

"I can't believe it," Hermione says, sitting back on her heels and shaking her head.

"Me neither. I have to put stuff on it," Harry divulges, fishing a small, shiny red tin from his pocket and throwing it to Hermione, who catches it neatly and examines it.

"Smells nice," she says, screwing the lid back into place. "And it looks good, really—I'm just a bit startled."

"No, really?" Harry grins.

Hermione sticks out her tongue and lob the tin at Harry's chest with more force than necessary, scowling when he catches it in one hand.

"I think it's good... you've never really made the most of yourself," she says.

Unsure whether or not to be offended, Harry lifts an eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

Hermione flushes, but when she looks at the floor, her eyes fall upon the bags. "So, what did you buy?" she demands, looking up, all traces of embarrassment gone.

"Just a few things."

"Show me," she wheedles, swaying slightly from side to side like a python scrounging for bacon.

Harry hesitates.

"Ron and Hugo are upstairs, you know," she says casually.

"Doing what?"

"Pretending to be submarines, the last I heard, but I'm sure I could persuade them to come downstairs if Uncle Harry was putting on a fashion show..."
"Okay, okay," Harry interrupts hastily. He has no desire to model his new wardrobe for Ron, who always does an appalling job of covering up his amusement, or Hugo, who is at that painfully honest stage, and is unlikely to hold back if he thinks his Uncle Harry looks like a troll in drag, though probably not in so many words. If he's honest, he's quite worried about wearing some of them in front of anyone, despite what the smiley-eyed salesman might have said.

"Fantastic," Hermione says, sitting back on the rug, face lit up in a triumphant smile.

Harry sighs and reaches for the first bag, extracting a pair of tailored charcoal-coloured trousers with a pointlessly fiendish fastener. "I'm not putting them on," he says.

"I don't need you to. I have an imagination," she advises him, reaching out and running the heavy fabric between her fingers approvingly. "Very smart."

Relieved, Harry puts them aside and shows her several more pairs of trousers and three pairs of fitted, terrifyingly expensive jeans: one dark, one light, and one with ripped patches and bleach splashes that the man in the shop had informed him were 'the thing to be wearing right now'.

"Now, these I would like to see you in," Hermione says, holding up the fashionable jeans and gazing at them with something like envy. "You're a brave man."

Harry snorts. "Well, we'll see about that if I ever actually put them on."

He rifles through the remaining bags and finds the jade green sweater, holds it up to his face and raises an expectant eyebrow.

"Ooh, that's lovely. I'm beginning to think you had help with this."

Harry drops the sweater into his lap and shoots her a withering glance. "Of course I did. If I was on my own, I would have come home with even more brown crap." He fishes out another knitted thing, this one in a rich dark red. "What about this one?"

"I like it."

"And this?" A black shirt with dull silver buttons.

"Very classy."

"This?" A dark blue t-shirt with unusual white stitching and a ragged, frayed hem.

"Harry, I have a feeling that is incredibly trendy," Hermione says, smiling.

"Behave. And this one?"

"Er... interesting?" Hermione hedges, nose wrinkling at the sight of the garment Harry is holding up.

He gazes at it, feeling now more than ever that the otherwise astute salesman has made a strange mistake with this one. It's just very... orange. And no one needs that many zips, especially when none of them seem to do anything except get in the way.

"Bit much?"
Hermione laughs. "Just a smidge."

Harry grins and tosses the bizarre orange creation (that the salesman had assured him would make him look 'right on trend') into the nearest bag. "Ah, well. One out of what feels like several hundred isn't too bad for a failure rate."

"I think that's your midlife crisis shirt," she says, ducking out of the way as Harry tries to swipe at her with a bag full of t-shirts.

"I think you promised me a cup of tea," he points out, flopping back into the chair.

She gets to her feet, still giggling, and pats his knee as she makes her way back into the kitchen.

"Periscope up!" yells Hugo, followed seconds later by an almighty clatter, a splash, and the sound of Ron making what seems to be whale noises.

Remembering Hermione's warning, Harry gathers his bags and stuffs them into the cupboard in the spare bedroom. Then, with a strange, jittery feeling of relief, he piles anything brown, old, or shapeless into a heap on the floor, hanging onto just one scruffy pair of jeans—the ones he's wearing, just because—he draws his wand and banishes the lot.

**~*~**

After dinner, which he cooks, in an attempt to give Hermione a night off, Harry retreats into the spare bedroom and tries on all of his new clothes again, turning this way and that in front of the mirror and trying to remember the salesman's advice about what goes with what. When he's reassured himself that he doesn't look like the male equivalent of mutton-dressed-as-lamb, he flops back onto the bed and listens to the soft rumble of his friends' conversation as it filters underneath his door.

"I've put Hugo to bed," Ron says, clomping heavily across the living room floorboards. "Do you want to—"

"Ron, keep your voice down," Hermione hisses. "You'll wake Harry."

"He won't be asleep," Ron insists, dropping his volume a fraction. "It's only half past eight!"

"He said he was going to his room and he looked really tired," Hermione insists, and Harry can just picture her crossing her arms and fixing Ron with her most formidable stare.

Somewhat affronted, Harry raises himself up on his elbows and stares once more at his reflection—he doesn't look all that bad. In fact, he thinks he looks healthier and more alert than he has in months. He drops back onto the bed and rolls his eyes at the ceiling. He's probably spent more time looking in the mirror today than he has in his entire adult life up until this point, which is a little bit worrying.

"... doesn't need mothering, 'Mione," Ron is saying, a little more loudly now.

"Oh, and you'd know, would you?" Hermione snaps hotly.

Hands on her hips now, Harry thinks. Eyes narrowed, nostrils flared, cheeks flushed.
He groans and throws a Silencing Charm at the door, then folds his arms over his face. The last thing he wants to do is stir up pointless arguments between his best friends; his move-in day for the new house cannot come quickly enough. They’ve been wonderful—accepting him into their home without question, folding him into their family life as though he’s always been there, and never once asking when he's planning to leave—but he suspects that they're reaching the point when they’re just being polite. They need some space, and he needs to be around some people who won't feel the need to tread on eggshells around him.

Suddenly heavy with an exhaustion borne of frustration and too much shopping, Harry kicks his piles of clothes onto the floor, wriggles out of his shirt and trousers and slides under the covers. He doesn't care that it's half past eight on a Saturday night. He's going to fucking sleep, and tomorrow he's going out.

**~*~**

He wakes just as the sun is coming up, feeling refreshed and energised, and opts to exploit the fact that Lily is an early riser, and Ginny, by nature—therefore at weekends—is not. He owls her a quick message, in which he reminds her to write a note for her mother, grabs juice and the cheese muffins left over from last night's dinner, and sets out to meet her.

As he climbs the small hill at the end of Willoughby Drive, shoes slipping on the dewy grass, Lily peers down at him from the top and laughs. Her hair flaps in the wind like a pennant, seeming to glitter in the muted pinks and golds of the sunrise, and, just for a moment, she looks frighteningly grown up.

"Come on, Dad!" she calls, holding out a hand to yank him over the last few feet of the climb. He stands at the summit, breathing in the exhilarating smells of winter, wet earth and frosty grass.

"Did you leave your mum a note?" he asks, poking the tip of his wand out of his sleeve so that he can apply a surreptitious drying charm to the grass. "I don't want her waking up and panicking."

"Of course," Lily says, dropping to the ground and crossing her legs. She looks up at him, eyes anxious. "Is everything okay?"

Harry smiles and lowers himself to sit beside her, wondering what Draco would have to say about people who sit on the grass in their new, expensive trousers. He has a good idea.

"Yes. I just wanted to have breakfast with my best girl," he says, producing the muffins and apple juice with a flourish. "Is that a crime?"

Lily giggles, and there's a small part of Harry that strongly suspects that she thinks her dad is a bit of an idiot. Oddly, he doesn't mind all that much.

"No," she says, rolling her eyes and accepting her share of the food. Taking a huge bite of cheese muffin, she sighs happily and gazes out over the sleeping valley. Harry watches her, swallowing a mouthful of icy cold juice and relishing the waves of contentment that come up to roll over him.

"Did you have fun yesterday?" he asks after a moment.

Lily grins. "Yeah, it was brilliant. Jeanette taught me how to do a jump. I fell over quite a lot, but I'm getting it!"
"Very impressive," Harry says, returning her grin.

"Thanks. Maybe you and me can go one day," she says, flicking him a hopeful glance.

"Ice skating?" he clarifies, secretly unnerved by the idea.

"Yeah. If you want to, I mean." Lily pauses, chewing on her lip for a moment. "It's been really nice doing stuff with you," she says in an almost-whisper. "Before you and Mum split up... you never had time."

She flushes and falls silent, tearing a huge chunk out of her muffin and stuffing it into her mouth as though trying to prevent herself from saying anything else. Harry's heart swells and aches and he twists his fingers into the cold grass with the effort of keeping in the apologies that he knows are useless.

"Absolutely, I'll give it a go," he says at last. "I'll probably fall on my arse after ten seconds," he adds, hoping to make her smile, and it works. "It's been nice doing stuff with you, too. Eat your breakfast."

**~*~**

Harry can't help smiling to himself as he slip-slides down the hill and heads back to the cottage, mentally replaying Lily's flattering review of his outfit. Apparently, he looks "pretty cool, Dad", which is a first, and more than good enough for him. Still dead set on clearing off for the day and giving Ron and Hermione the chance to do... well, whatever it is they do when he's not around, he creeps back through the hushed house, grabs his work robes, and heads back out before Hermione can hear him and ask him if he wants a bowl of porridge.

The Ministry is relatively quiet, but there are still enough people scurrying around to make the place feel alive, and to remind Harry that, although he doesn't work weekends any more, there are plenty who do. He collects a couple of sympathetic nods and four somewhat staggered variations on "Good morning, Mr Potter, is everything alright?" as he makes his way to his office, and is amused enough to smile and assure his colleagues that yes, he has come to work on a Sunday, and no, they needn't worry that the world is crumbling into dust.

His office is oddly barren without Helga, and he finds himself wondering what she does with herself at the weekends. Even she has something better to do than sit at her desk on a bright Sunday morning, he thinks, and immediately buries the realisation under a pile of anything he can find before it can ruin his good mood.

Leaving the office door wide open—more because he can than anything else—he drops into his chair and eyes his memo mountain without enthusiasm. It seems to have increased in size since Friday afternoon, so much so that Harry wonders idly if the little purple buggers are breeding. Resignedly he reaches for his quill and makes a start.

Five minutes later, he has abandoned his task in favour of turning slowly in his chair, arms dangling at his sides, staring at the ceiling and feeling inconveniently turned on. It's all very well trying to be productive and a good friend and all of that admittedly important stuff, but it's no good if he can't shift the memory of Draco unhelpfully-hot-right-now Malfoy from his mind.

"Harry," he rasps, breathing harsh, eyes burning desperation as strong, sweat-damp fingers scrape and grasp at Harry's back, urging him, demanding him. "Hurry up, Blaise'll be here in a minute,
Suddenly, the eyes flashing fire into his aren't those of the Draco sprawling in wanton disarray across the sofa at number twelve, but the ones belonging to the frosty, black-clad man at the Quidditch match, the man who says, "What do you want, Potter?" and makes Harry's insides tie themselves in knots.

Harry groans, wrapping his hands around the arms of his chair. For some reason he can't stop himself from smiling, but he's doing his best to ignore the growing hardness beneath his robes, because even if he hasn't been doing the most sterling job over the last few weeks, he does draw the line at wanking in the office. Apart from anything else, it just seems sad.

One thing is becoming abundantly clear in the midst of all this madness. That man has taken up permanent residence in his head, both versions of him and a confusing amalgamation of the two, one with harsh words and a warm smile, and he has neither of them, but he wants so much that it's painful, and now that he's alone, he seems incapable of thinking of anything else. It's all very well having Lily or Ron or Hermione or a stylish clothing salesman to distract him, but he knows that even the most resilient of his defences are unlikely to hold up for much longer.

He suspects that he shouldn't be leaping straight into... well, anything, but especially this, after the end of his marriage, but the need to know, to find out about this Draco, is infinitely stronger than any of the rational voices in his head. Despite his words to Molly about taking things one step at a time, the idea of waiting is becoming more intolerable with each minute that passes.

Harry throws his feet up onto the desk and leans back in his chair, drawing in and releasing a slow, calming breath. He needs a plan, or if not, at least some semblance of an idea of how he's going to go about this.

"The most powerful tool you can give your enemy is a lack of preparation," he mumbles, automatically pulling up the words from the Auror Code of Conduct, despite not having read it in years. "But he's not your enemy, you idiot. Think like a normal person."

"Erm... are you talking to me?" comes a reedy little voice.

Harry jumps slightly and peers out into the corridor through the one door he has deliberately left open, and the other, which he has apparently left open by accident. A little man with a long, white beard and thick, horn-rimmed glasses is standing in the outer doorway and gazing enquiringly at Harry.

"No, sorry, I was just... thinking out loud," he admits, taking his feet off the desk and attempting to look professional, even though it is probably far too late.

"Ah, not to worry; I was just passing," the man says. He turns to go and then pauses, granting Harry a crooked smile. "It is better to think out loud than to never think at all."

With that, he nods at Harry and bobbles off down the corridor. Harry buries his smile in his hands, strangely fortified by the unsolicited advice. After a moment, he folds his arms, chews on his lip, and considers his options.

He could wait. He knows that Draco will be at the next Quidditch match, Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff, and that will be an easy starting point for a conversation. That said, the match isn't taking place for almost a month, according to James, who has now begun to owl Harry with all manner of... oh, fuck yes... I don't know about you, but I wasn't planning to include him."
Quidditch-related news, and a month is a very long time. At least, it seems like a very long time right now.

For a minute or two, he toys with the idea of casually hanging around outside Gringotts, where he would have a strong chance of running into Draco accidentally-on-purpose, but quickly discounts it when the sensible part of his brain reminds him that not only does Ginny work there, too, but acting like a crazy stalker is unlikely to be the smoothest first move, all things considered.

Frustrated that he seems to be back to square one already, Harry pushes off with his foot into a savage spin, bracing himself against the inevitable dizziness and moodily contemplating Draco's Sunday morning; he's probably rattling around in his manor, where people can walk around for days and not see each other.

Harry skids to a stop, friction heating the sole of his shoe as it drags against the rug. Heart speeding, he jumps to his feet and hurries, somewhat unsteadily, down to the Atrium.

**~*~**

The air in the lane is cool, but the almost-midday sun shimmers over the parts of the grounds Harry can see, draping a gauzy curtain over the lush lawns and the distant manor house. It's all quite beautiful, and is barely recognisable as the stark, run-down property he remembers from the war.

Shaking away the unhelpful memories, he peers through the ornate, hand-forged gates, taking care not to touch them until he has ascertained that they are not hexed to send a shock down his arm or turn him into a fieldmouse. Through the haze, he catches sight of a group of peacocks; he counts ten of them clustered around the edge of an elaborate water feature, watching and squawking with apparent delight as the fountain shoots jets of shimmering water twenty feet into the air. As he watches in silence, one of the birds turns to look at him, tiny black eyes gleaming with intelligence.

Irrationally struck by the feeling that he's under suspicion, Harry looks away and instead focuses his attention on the gates, expertly feeling out the wards, crouching to run a careful hand just fractions of an inch from the metal, sensing the hum of protective magic and noting with interest that the 'keep the fuck out'-type spells he has been expecting are completely absent here. In fact, the security is very ordinary, and he knows he could dismantle it in a matter of seconds, but he doesn't want to. Because, alright, it's probably more than a little unhinged to turn up at Draco's home without an invitation, and he'll be the first to admit that he can't really count logic as a friend right now, but there's impulsiveness and there's breaking and entering. Harry scrubs vaguely at his hair and casts his eyes around for some sort of bell or summoning device, but draws a blank.

It's almost as though these people don't want visitors, supplies a little voice in his head.

Harry ignores it and scowls. He knows—somewhere deep down and well-hidden—that he's being stubborn and reckless and all kinds of other rash Gryffindor things, but it's near impossible to care when he misses Draco so fiercely. He also knows that the Draco who lives at the other end of this drive is, in essence, a different man, but he has to try. Better to make a complete fool of himself than spend the rest of his life wondering.

"Stop that," someone says reproachfully, then there's a flutter of feathers and one of the peacocks scuttles out of a flowerbed and past the gates before disappearing into a bush. Harry cranes his neck, hoping to locate the source of the voice. It's soft, female, refined—familiar.
"Hello?" he calls hopefully.

For a moment there is no response, and then a tall figure emerges from the mist, walking across the lawn toward the gates. The woman is wearing smart, dark trousers, a long cardigan and carrying a flat, rush-woven basket full of flowers over one arm; her large floppy hat obscures her face from Harry's view, but the long, loose blonde hair is a dead giveaway. Even so, Harry can barely believe that the woman approaching him with trowel in hand and elegant, loose strides is Narcissa Malfoy.

As she draws close, Harry realises that the disparities between this woman and her counterpart in the glimpse are not restricted to their attire. This Narcissa seems older and more worn than the acerbic, taut-faced matriarch that had given Harry a hideous glass swan for Christmas, and for some reason, Harry is more intimidated than ever.

"Auror?" she enquires, pale blue eyes fastened upon the uniform Harry has forgotten to remove. "Is something wrong?"

"No, Mrs Malfoy, I just—"

She looks up, meeting his eyes at last. "Oh! Auror Potter!" She pauses. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I... I've come to talk to Draco, if he's around," Harry manages, putting everything he has into keeping his hands at his sides and resisting the urge to shrug like an awkward teenager.

"I see. Is he expecting you?" she asks, shooting out a hand to secure her hat as a particularly tenacious gust of wind rattles through the bushes and snatches at her hair. Her refined, cut-glass accent is the same as ever, but the words lack the bite that Harry has come to expect—the question is just that—a question—and she gazes at him expectantly, tucking her trowel into her basket and reaching for her wand.

"Probably not," Harry admits, and this time, nothing in the world can stop him reaching up and scrubbing at the back of his hair.

"Draco told me that he saw you at Hogwarts recently," Narcissa says matter-of-factly, wand dangling at her side, rolling back and forth between pale, slender fingers.

"Ah, did he?" Harry mumbles, skin heating. "I went to see my son play—he's a Beater on the Gryffindor team—played a good game, actually, I'm very... proud of him," he finishes quietly, realising that he's waffling, and uncertain whether or not the light of amusement in Narcissa's eyes bodes well for him.

"I'm very proud of my son, too," she says evenly, tapping at the gates with her wand and standing back as they swing open for Harry to pass.

"Thank you," he says, stepping inside and waiting as she performs an intricate little locking procedure. When she sets off up the drive, he hastens to follow, taking a moment or two to match his stride to hers and opting to keep his mouth firmly shut—he's inside now, and already being treated with much more politeness than he has allowed himself to expect; all he has to do is not fuck it up.

He can do it. The grounds are a more than adequate distraction, full of darting creatures, beautifully kept lawns, and splashes of vivid flowers that Harry suspects have had a bit of a helping hand to be flourishing in the middle of winter. The air is cold and sharp with the fragrance of fresh soil, as well as something bitter and sophisticated that whips into his nostrils from Narcissa's hair and clothes.
"I believe Draco is in his study," she says as they reach a bend in the drive and the house looms into view once more. "I dare say he will be surprised to see you, Auror."

*I dare say he will*, Harry agrees silently. Instead, he says, "You don't need to call me Auror, Mrs Malfoy. I'm not on duty."

Narcissa casts him a measured sidelong glance. "I was merely trying to be polite," she says, letting out a little sigh that seems to convey mystification rather than disapproval. "As, I imagine, were you. How do you prefer to be addressed?"

Harry hesitates for several seconds, continuing to crunch along beside her in the gravel. None of this is really going as he had expected, but he can adapt. He thinks.

"Just Harry is fine," he offers eventually.

"As you wish." She rummages in her basket and retrieves a small, gleaming pair of secateurs, and Harry stops, fascinated, as she bends to snip a cutting from an odd, spiky plant that has seen fit to grow at the edge of the drive, several yards from the nearest flower bed. She examines it with interest and tucks it into her basket with what looks like a stasis charm of some kind. "It has been strange to watch so many of the old formalities disappear," she confides, gazing at Harry and drawing herself upright. "But change is the nature of things. Progress is often confusing." She grants him a barely-there little twist of a smile, and Harry wonders just what happened to the cold, tight-lipped woman he remembers.

"I'm not a huge fan of change, either, Mrs Malfoy," he says, the surprise making him candid. "But sometimes it's for the best."

Narcissa lifts an eyebrow and stalks away across the lawn. Harry doesn't know what else to do but follow her; for all he knows there's no getting into the house without her. When he catches up with her, she's peering into a flower bed full of gently swaying white and pink blooms.

"Do you think these azaleas have gone over?" she asks suddenly, holding onto her hat once more and glancing up at Harry.

"Er... I don't know too much about plants, I'm sorry," he says, but looks obligingly into the flower bed anyway.

Narcissa sighs and stows away her secateurs. "I suppose I ought to give them another day or two."

Relieved, Harry nods vigorously as though his approval actually counts for something in this bizarre situation.

"Your grounds are beautiful," he says impulsively, remembering that with Hermione, another unexpectedly keen gardener, a compliment on her hydrangeas or her flowering hedgerow will get him out of almost any sticky situation. And, even though the idea of fitting Hermione and Narcissa Malfoy into the same little box is absurd, Harry decides to trust his gut and hope for the best.

The pale eyes warm almost imperceptibly and the delicate lines around them crease in approval as she nods and heads back to the driveway. "Thank you. I find gardening very therapeutic."

"Do you do all of this yourself?" he asks, pressing his advantage.
"All of the interesting parts," she says. "We have groundsmen to deal with the grass and prune the trees and such. Are you interesting in gardening, Harry?" she asks politely, all at once seeming like a visiting dignitary rather than the wife of a Death Eater who hasn't seen him for almost twenty years.

Harry fumbles for an answer, eventually settling on the truth. "Not really, but I appreciate nice things as much as the next person."

"I wondered if perhaps you were trying to ingratiate yourself with me in some way," she muses, continuing to gaze steadily ahead as they approach the house.

"Why would I do that?" Harry asks faintly, attempting not to panic.

"I don't know." She glances at him, face inscrutable but eyes alight with interest. "It's intriguing, though, is it not?"

Harry says nothing. He has no idea what to do with this woman, but he has a sinking feeling that she knows exactly what to do with him. And there's nothing he can do but go along with it if he ever wants to talk to Draco.

"I was sorry to hear about your family situation."

Harry catches his breath, startled by the tactful description of his divorce. "Thank you. I think it was for the best, though."

Narcissa shoots him a sharp look as they climb the stone stairs and enter a grand portico. She pulls open a heavy oak door and pauses. "That is not for me to judge, Mr Potter. Harry." Clicking her fingers, she adds, "Bilby will show you to Draco's study."

A very familiar house-elf appears in the entrance hall with a loud crack and gazes up at Harry with huge round eyes. Biting down on the pull of recognition that makes Harry want to wave and inquire after Senka, he thanks Mrs Malfoy for her help and follows Bilby down a series of corridors.

"Master Draco's study, sir," the elf announces, and disappears before Harry even has time to thank him.

Barely breathing, Harry knocks at the door and waits.

"Come in," Draco calls, sounding distracted. Harry steels himself, turns the handle, and pushes the door open to find Draco sitting at a vast, mahogany desk, leafing through bits of parchment and frowning. "Did you manage to settle him down?"

Harry hangs onto the door handle, pressing cool metal against his skin and casting around desperately for a good way to let Draco know that, in all likelihood, that question had been meant for someone else.

"Er, no," he says before he can stop himself.

Draco's eyes snap to his and narrow immediately. He flattens both hands to the desk as though preparing to spring to his feet, but he doesn't reach for his wand, and Harry clings to that fact as he moves away from the door, gently closes it behind him and waits for Draco to say something.
"How the fuck did you get in here?" he demands, incredulity pushing the aggression out of his voice.

"Your mother let me in. We walked up the drive together."

"Why on earth would she do that?" He eyes Harry's robes with suspicion. "Did you tell her I was in some kind of trouble?"

"No." Harry shrugs. "She saw me at the gate, and I said I wanted to talk to you. Apparently she decided to trust me... which is to her credit. I'm very trustworthy," he adds, flashing what he hopes is a charming smile and then immediately wanting to cover his face with his hands.

Draco sighs and seems to sag, loosening his alert posture and leaning back heavily in his chair.

"I wish I could say I was surprised by that," he mutters. "What do you want from me, exactly?"

"Just to talk," Harry says, watching pale eyebrows draw together in bewilderment and equally pale fingers tap in a perfectly balanced rhythm against carved wooden chair arms.

"Forgive me my suspicion, Potter, but I find it hard to believe that you are so hard-pressed for conversational partners that you would turn up uninvited to the home of someone you have never really liked on a Sunday afternoon."

Harry sighs. "Can I sit down?"

Draco grants him a look of weary exasperation and then flicks out a negligent hand to indicate an overstuffed leather chair that sits next to the unlit fireplace, several feet from the desk. With a cautious twist of triumph, Harry crosses the floor and lowers himself into the chair, which is fantastically comfortable and immediately moulds itself to his shape.

"Has it occurred to you that I'm here because I actually want to talk to you, not because I haven't got anyone else to talk to?" he asks, making bold eye contact and relishing the way the silvery eyes widen the tiniest fraction at his words.

"Honestly?"

"If that's possible."

"Bugger off, Potter. No. It did not occur to me. I have no idea why."

Harry smiles, grabbing at the little stab of petulance that penetrates the cool, jaded exterior.

"Well, I'm here now, and you haven't even tried to throw me out, so you might as well give it a go," Harry points out, words somewhat muffled as he yanks his heavy brown robes over his head and then folds them messily on his lap.

Draco blinks, momentarily lost for words. "What on earth have you got on?"

Harry glances down at his tailored black trousers and silver-grey buttoned-sweater-cardigan thing. "Clothes?" he attempts.

Draco snorts. "It's odd, isn't it? I think this is the first time I've ever seen you wearing something that fits you properly."
Harry gazes back at him calmly, biting down on his embarrassment. If he hadn't been so focused on peeling off his robes and trying to appear relaxed, it might have occurred to him that not only was Draco going to notice his new clothes, but he was going to have something to say about them. Draco's eyes are everywhere, and though Harry is pretty sure he is assessing the cut of his new trousers, the quality of the cashmere, and other such things that only he understands, the wriggling sensation in the pit of his stomach fires up immediately as he remembers those eyes raking over him with other things in mind. He remembers those eyes dark with lust and feels naked, even though he's far from it.

When Draco looks up again, Harry swallows dryly and shrugs. "What? Is there something the matter with my clothes?"

"No, bizarrely enough," Draco says with an almost disappointed sigh. "Although you seem to have neglected to button your fly."

Horrified, Harry glances down at his trousers, only to find that all the buttons are neatly fastened, and when he looks up slowly, Draco is smirking. Harry scowls, heart hammering, wishing he could kick the smug idiot in the shin. And then kiss him.

"Thanks for that."

"You're welcome. I thoroughly enjoyed the look on your face."

"I can tell," Harry says drily. "Now aren't you glad I came here? Who would you have to torture otherwise?"

Draco shrugs negligently. "I don't know, I do enjoy hiding things from Bilby occasionally... but actually, I think he enjoys that. It certainly keeps him out of my father's way."

Harry nods, wondering if this Lucius Malfoy has mellowed in his attitude toward house-elves over the years. He can't help but doubt that anything has changed much since his appalling mistreatment of Dobby, and Bilby's jumpy behaviour has so far done nothing to disabuse him of that notion.

Draco arches an eyebrow, and Harry realises he's been staring and saying nothing, which is always a good start. "You're a humanitarian," he says eventually, mouth twitching.

"Goodness, that would have been a compliment if you'd've meant it," Draco murmurs.

"I don't think you're ready for real compliments," Harry says, grinning. "Maybe next time. We'll work up to it."

"You're planning to do this again?" Draco asks, and though his eyes are wide, Harry knows him well enough to deduce from his posture that his surprise is entirely feigned.

Harry leans back in his chair. "You seem like you need a friend."

Draco makes an odd little sound and rakes a hand through his neat hair, ruffling it slightly. "Good grief. Are you going to burst into song? Please give me plenty of warning so that I can stun myself."

Amused, Harry allows a tiny smile to break free. "You're avoiding the subject."
"Do you blame me?"

"No. You might be surprised to know that I think you're a decent human being," Harry says rashly.

"I assure you I'm not."

"You're a pain in the arse, Draco. That's what you are."

Draco crosses his arms over his chest and stares at Harry. "Excuse me?"

Harry's stomach tightens, and he makes a concerted effort to edge the other Draco out of his mind; if he's going to achieve anything more than making a complete idiot of himself, he needs to concentrate on the man in front of him.

"How would you prefer to be addressed?" he asks, realising too late that he's borrowed the expression from Narcissa Malfoy. Cross with himself, he forges on with a little more challenge than is probably advisable. "By your last name like we're still at school?"

Draco sighs. "Fine. Despite the fact that you are just as uncouth as you were when we were at school, I think we're both a bit too old for that. I certainly feel like it."

Harry smiles. "You aren't old yet."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Draco advises him. Shivering suddenly, he rises from his chair and slips past Harry to examine the fireplace, one black-clad arm grazing Harry's shoulder as he passes.

"I'm not trying to flatter you," Harry says, and it's the truth, though he thinks he would give it a try if he believed it might help.

"No, of course not, you're trying to talk to me," Draco murmurs, still with his back to Harry as he pokes around in the grate and produces a series of clinking sounds. "Perhaps I'm not in a talking mood."

Harry twists around to watch him leaning over and shaking his head. "Alright then. I'll start."

"I feel like I'm in therapy," Draco complains, finally slashing his wand through the air and lighting the fire. The room quickly fills with the warm, comforting scent of magic and smouldering wood.

"And yet you haven't asked me to stop," Harry points out.

Draco stares into the fire for a moment and then returns to his chair, depositing his wand on his desk.

"Yes, well. I'm bored."

Harry rolls his eyes, secretly encouraged. "I'm divorced," he offers.

"Already?" Draco demands, a note of irritation in his voice.

"Yeah. I got the last papers a few days ago."

Draco picks moodily at his sleeve. "I'm still waiting for mine."
Harry wrinkles his nose in commiseration. "What's taking so long?" he asks, not really expecting an answer.

"The last I heard, Astoria's lawyer was trying to dig up some sort of dirt on me so that she could drain me of half the contents of my vault and the last of self esteem." He meets Harry's eyes for a fraction of a section, just long enough for him to see the bitterness simmering below the surface.

"I'm sorry," Harry says, grasping the arms of his chair to prevent himself from mimicking Draco's finger-tapping; he doubts that would be well-received. "I got the impression it was all pretty amicable between the two of you."

"Between the two of us, yes. Between me and that avaricious legal harpy... well, let's just say that it's a testament to my self control and my mother's reasonable streak that we haven't come to blows." Draco releases a short, controlled breath, but his agitation flares out around him in an invisible corona, charging the air and sending tingling currents over Harry's skin.

Harry doesn't know why he does it, but before he can stop himself, he's sitting up in his chair and prodding at what is clearly a sore point. "What sort of dirt?"

Draco eyes him sharply, then sighs, seeming to lose heart. "Nothing that's true. I think she'd like to suggest I'd had a string of affairs or something equally sordid. Astoria's a smart woman; I'm sure she could sink me if she wanted to. I don't think she will, but every time that awful woman comes up with something, it drags the whole thing out a little bit more."

Intrigued by Draco's words and astonished by the weary honesty, Harry says nothing for a good few seconds. He wonders if Draco has decided, after years of bitter rivalry, that he wants to confide in Harry, or if he's just tired of letting it swim around in his head and doesn't have anyone else to talk to. Perhaps he's drunk, Harry muses idly. Or has had a blow to the head. Anything's possible.

"Sounds like a nightmare," he says. "Wouldn't it be easier to just give her what she wants?"

Draco's mouth twists into a sour little smile. "Astoria is independently wealthy. She doesn't want my money any more than I want hers. She just doesn't want to come out of this looking weak."

"I suppose I can understand that," Harry says evenly, closing his mind to the part of him that is protesting violently at the very idea that Draco is suffering like this for the sake of misplaced pride. "So, what's the lawyer's angle?"

Draco's smile is almost—almost—genuine as he replies: "She's working for a percentage."

Harry sighs. "Women are strange."

Draco laughs, and the dry sound reawakens the squirmy feelings in Harry's stomach. "I'll drink to that. In fact..." He pauses, fixing Harry with a speculative glance, then clicks his fingers. Less than a second later, Bilby appears next to Harry's chair and jumps at the sight of him.

"Yes, Master Draco?"

"Fetch the Borteg's and two glasses, please," Draco says, and though it is an instruction rather than a request, the politeness does not escape Harry's notice. Nor does Draco's apparent predilection for insanely expensive firewhisky.
"Bilby is bringing it straight away," the elf says, sketching a strange little bow and disappearing.

"He might be a little while," Draco advises, stretching lightly. "I think that bottle was one of the things I hid the last time I was in the kitchen."

Harry grins, flooded with a fresh new wave of warmth for this man. "And that is a perfect example of why you need some assistance with occupying your time."

"Fuck you, Harry Potter," Draco says, refined accent and stifled yawn taking much of the edge from the words. "I have plenty to do with my time, especially when Scorpius is at home."

"I bet you miss him," Harry says, and, noting Draco's defensive expression, adds, "I miss mine when they go back to school. And I miss Lily now that I don't see her every day."

"Are you really living in the Weasleys' cellar?"

Harry rolls his eyes. "Their spare bedroom, actually, and only for another week or so. Where did you hear that?"

"Gringotts. It's more of a gossip mill than Hogwarts; the goblins hate it." He shrugs, and then, in a soft voice, admits: "And yes, I do miss my son. We're rather close."

As Harry tempers a smile, Bilby reappears with the bottle and two heavy cut crystal glasses, which he places on the edge of Draco's desk.

"Did you find it alright?" Draco asks solicitously, leaning forward to gaze at the elf.

"We was finding it in the vegetable box," Bilby advises him, blinking earnestly. "Behind a cabbage."

"What sort of cabbage?" Harry asks, thinking out loud.

Bilby turns to him, lacing his spindly fingers together and granting Harry a deferent nod, as though the question is a perfectly logical one. "It was a Savoy cabbage, sir."

"Thanks," he says, trying not to laugh. "It's important to know these things."

Draco glances at him, eyes bright, and dismisses the elf with a mumbled "thank you" and a careless wave of his hand. "You're enjoying yourself," he accuses, pouring a generous measure of whisky into each glass and handing Harry's over with a brush of fingertips that makes him catch his breath.

"Thanks." Harry inhales the spicy smoke that has begun to curl from the surface of the liquid. "Yeah, I am enjoying myself. It's one of the new things I'm trying out these days."

"Enjoying yourself is a new thing?" Draco says, affecting disdain.

"Well, not completely, but I'm trying to do it a lot more often," Harry says. "Anyway, that's rich coming from you, you miserable bastard."

For long seconds there is silence, during which Harry longs for the ability to stuff his careless insult back into his mouth, and then Draco bursts into laughter. He's surprised, that much is obvious, but the sound is warm and startlingly unguarded. Before long, Harry is laughing, too, and it's a wonderful feeling.
"No one has spoken to me like that in a very long time," Draco sighs, grinning behind his glass.

"Have you missed me?" Harry asks innocently.

"Like a hole in the head," Draco says, pulling himself together for long enough to lean over and touch his glass to Harry's.

Harry nods and raises his glass without a word. He reclines in his squishy chair and takes an appreciative sip. It is immediately obvious why Borteg's Own is the most expensive firewhisky on the market; the stuff is incredible, managing to be smooth, smoky and delicately spiced all at once, with a fiery kick to the back of the throat that is startling but not at all unpleasant.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you have ridiculously expensive taste," he says, blowing a gentle stream of smoke into the air and watching it drift toward the ceiling in the winter sunshine.

Draco lifts an eyebrow. "And what would you know about high end firewhisky?"

"Enough," Harry says, grinning. "That Mr Borteg's an odd bloke, isn't he?"

If anything, Draco's eyebrow manages to climb further up his face. "Oh, yes, he's a very strange man. My mother likes him; she says he's an eccentric."

"I'm not arguing with that," Harry says, beginning to like this Narcissa Malfoy even more.

Draco sets his glass down on the desk. "I'm still not entirely sure what you're up to," he admits.

Harry shrugs. "No hidden agenda, I promise."


"I try to be," Harry says. "Do you know what else is interesting?"

"The mysteries of the universe? Celestina Warbeck's popularity? The reason you're here?"

"Yes. But no. The fact that you didn't tell anyone what I told you at the Quidditch game."

Draco frowns. "Who was I going to tell? The press?"

Harry says nothing. Draco narrows his eyes and pins him with a pointed stare, but Harry doesn't miss the flash of hurt and it lifts him for a second or two before the guilt seeps in.

"Is that what you thought I'd do?" Draco asks quietly.

Harry shrugs. "I didn't know."

Draco sighs heavily. "I suppose my history is against me on that front."

"People change," Harry offers.

Draco looks away from him as he drains his glass. "Do you really think so?"
"I know so."

"You're a sickening optimist," Draco says, lip curling slightly. "Still."

"Well, alright, some things don't change," Harry concedes. "But, well, look at your mother. She's nothing like the way I remember her."

Draco snorts. "Sorry, Potter. We'll try harder to appeal to your sense of nostalgia in future."

Exasperated, Harry swallows the last of his firewhisky and sets the glass down on the stone surround of the fireplace. "Harry," he corrects. "And that's not what I meant. I was just trying to make a point."

"And what exactly was it?"

Harry rakes agitated fingers through his hair and shoots Draco a withering look. "That sometimes people change."

Draco taps his fingers and gazes steadily at Harry as though peering right inside him and weighing up the integrity of what he finds. When he speaks, his words are careful and measured. "Yes, well, you'd be different, too, if you'd had to look after someone like my father for nearly twenty years."

"Your father's ill?" Harry asks quietly, more jarred by the idea than he thinks he should be.


"Okay," Harry concedes, stamping on the urge to say, 'Well, you brought it up' and instead casting around for more conciliatory words. "What I said about your mother, though—I didn't mean any harm. She was very friendly to me, and I suppose I was just surprised."

The grey eyes are unemotional but Draco's voice is tinged with intrigue as he asks: "Did she talk to you about the gardens?"

"A little bit," Harry says. "She asked me if I thought her azaleas were dying."

Draco smiles faintly. "She must be very interested in you. What did you tell her?"

Mystified, Harry shrugs. "I told her I didn't know much about flowers."

"That's a shame. Neither do I, but it doesn't excuse me from azalea watch."

Harry has no idea how to respond to that, so he doesn't, shifting instead in his seat so that he catches the warmth from the fire more effectively, and stretching out a lazy hand toward the flames.

"So, why did you break it off with Ginevra?"

Harry's eyes snap to Draco, who is lounging elegantly in his chair, one foot crossed over the opposite knee and features arranged in an expression of sly curiosity. The brutal thump of his heart against his ribcage steals his breath for a moment before he forces himself to answer the unexpected question. Sort of. "What makes you think it was me who ended things?"

Draco's mouth twists. "Just a hunch."

"I know so."

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Draco's mouth twists. "Just a hunch."
"Oh, really?" is all Harry can muster and he hates the way this man can play with his emotions, even without knowing it.

"Yes. There's always someone who really makes the call, however stubbornly both parties may insist that everything was mutual and harmonious and lovely," Draco says, eyes flashing uncomfortable understanding into Harry's. "I was the one who pulled the plug in the end, and I suspect that you were, too."

Harry exhales slowly, allowing the growing flicker of hope in his chest to warm him. "Were you? We can talk about that if you want."

Draco snorts. "You were the one who wanted to talk. Tell me why little miss perfect stopped being good enough for you. I'm intrigued."

"Don't talk about her like that," Harry snaps, almost certain that the sharp edges are for show, and yet unable to stop the anger flaring, just a little bit. "She's a good person."

"I know she is, Potter," Draco sighs. "Harry. I know she doesn't like to admit to working with me, but we are practically colleagues. She's terrifyingly decent, just like you are."

"Oh," Harry says softly. Wrong-footed and vulnerable, he sits up straighter, wanting to make himself seem large and impressive, because he certainly doesn't feel it.

"I won't pretend I'm not interested in what went wrong, though," Draco goes on. "From the outside you appeared to be a perfect family. People are always shocked when they find out that things aren't so perfect underneath."

"Which people?"


Harry makes a face. "I don't know why any of those people are interested in my marriage."

"You really don't, do you?" Draco says, eyes searching Harry's face.

"Nope."

Draco grants him a rueful little smile. "You never were very good at being famous."

"No, not really. You'd have loved it, would you?"

"Maybe when I was an idiotic teenager," Draco admits. "But I like the fact that most people don't really pay any attention to me these days. I've come to appreciate the peace and quiet."

Harry smiles, holding out his glass when Draco proffers the bottle. "You don't want to change places, then?"

Draco arches a pale eyebrow and fills his own glass without a word.

"We weren't in love any more," Harry says at last, having tried out several explanations in his head and realised that, at this stage, anything approaching the truth will send Draco running for the hills.
"Being in love to start with is somewhat of an advantage," Draco offers, tracing a finger through the drifting smoke from his firewhisky.

The implication jolts Harry, and he shakes his head. "Why, then?"

Draco lifts his hand and rubs distractedly at his temple, dislodging a sizeable swathe of hair, which flops and dangles into his face. He doesn't seem to notice. "Why? All the usual reasons. Money, tradition, reputation. You won't be surprised to hear that finding a pureblood family willing to marry into ours was almost impossible after the war. Of the few we found, Astoria was the only one who was smart enough not to drive me insane and stable enough that I wasn't going to worry about being murdered in the night."

"Fucking hell," Harry says without thinking.

Draco laughs shortly. "Indeed."

"So you never..."

"Loved her? No. Not like that. Which is why my story isn't interesting."

"I'm not sure mine is, either," Harry admits. "I just... suddenly realised that I wasn't living and I hadn't been for a long time. It turned out that I wasn't the only one who felt that way."

Draco's eyes are dubious, but he seems to accept Harry's explanation for the moment. "So, how exactly do you plan to start living?"

Harry gazes at the floor, biting down on a smile, and when he looks up, Draco is watching him expectantly, eyebrows raised. "I'm not exactly sure. It's a work in progress."

Draco says nothing, and they finish their second drinks in an almost comfortable silence. When Draco sets his glass down and turns his chair back to his desk, Harry rises, sensing his cue to leave; he's reluctant to outstay his welcome, even though the visit has been... surprisingly successful.

"Well, this has been interesting, but you're going to need to find yourself someone else to talk to, because I have work to do," Draco says, shuffling through papers and folders.

"Do you like your job?" Harry asks impulsively as he reaches for the door handle.

"Don't be ridiculous. No one likes their job."

"Right," Harry says, sadness tugging at his insides. As he turns to go, though, he catches a glimpse of the contents of some of those 'work' folders. Their contents are distinctly unfinancial in nature—photographs of well-known public figures and pages of scribbled notes. He raises an eyebrow and nods to Draco. "Thanks for having me," he says, almost automatically.

Draco says nothing, but when Harry glances at him one last time as the door closes, he's tapping his fingers on the desk and almost smiling.

**~*~**

When he arrives back at the cottage, he finds his friends in the garden. Hermione and Hugo are
throwing a ball around and giggling at some unknown joke, while Ron watches from the back step and quietly demolishes a slice of apple pie. Both look rested and content, to Harry's immense relief, and he quickly finds himself drawn into the game, which continues until Hugo is quite blatantly covering yawns and the sun is dipping below the horizon.

He wakes easily the next morning and takes advantage of the deserted kitchen to brew some decent coffee, throw together some breakfast and flip through the *Prophet* before work. He splutters on the bitter liquid when he reaches page four and finds multiple images of himself staring back at him and looking thoroughly bewildered, as though they have no idea what they're doing in the photographs at all. The small article that accompanies them can be summed up as: 'Look! Harry Potter has been shopping!' and he reads it several times, snorting his amusement into the cold air of the empty kitchen.

"Mr Giles Hargreaves, of Hargreaves and Co. Men's Outfitters, looked after Harry during his unusual shopping spree," Harry reads to no one in particular. "When asked for news of Mr Potter, he simply said: 'Mr Potter is a very accomplished man and we are delighted to have his custom'."

Harry grins. So, the sparkly-eyed salesman has a name. And his own fancy clothes shop, apparently. He should have known. Less of a surprise is that fact that Mr Giles Hargreaves is an unspeakably discreet individual, and it's rather refreshing to realise that not only is it far from the end of the world to appear in the gossip columns, but that, actually, not everyone wants to sell him out.

And, he thinks, as he pulls on his robes and makes his way to the office, Draco Malfoy just may be one of those of those trustworthy few. Caustic, guarded, and bitter, yes—but trustworthy. Harry believes that now, and it's an exhilarating thought.

The next day, unable to rein it in any longer, Harry scratches out a quick message and sends it off with one of the Ministry owls before he can change his mind. It's a light, casual, undemanding sort of message... he thinks. It's a message that says, *hey, I'm just dashing off a quick note, not too worried about whether you respond, just saying hi...* he thinks.

He thinks it's fine. Mostly. There's only a little part of him that's saying, *oh, fuck, oh, fuck, oh fucking bastard hell*.

When, by Sunday night, he hasn't received a response, that little part of him has begun to shout and dance around, as though trying to hammer into his frazzled brain that he is useless, and now, worst of all, he's needy.

And yet, something, something dangerous, the part of him that occasionally wants to step in front of buses to see what will happen, rises up and compels him to write a second letter. Just a nice, casual... oh, fuck it. Hermione finds him sitting by the window, paralysed by horror as the owl swoops out of view, taking with it his last chance of not looking like an utter cock.

"What's the matter?" she asks, brow creased in concern. She touches his shoulder gently.

Despondent, he turns to her, trying to summon the words to explain his situation with having to actually explain it. "I think I'm losing the plot," he sighs.

"Oh. In a... properly going insane sort of way, or a really bad day sort of way?" she tries, her face the picture of delicate curiosity.

Harry looses a hollow laugh. "Somewhere in between, I think."
She nods. "Alright. That's it. We're going out."

"Where?" Harry asks, but before he knows what is happening, Hermione is hauling him to his feet, dragging him into the hallway and directing him to put on his coat. Startled, he obeys, taking a few steps back when she bellows up the stairs for Ron, who appears after a moment, looking dazed, and is also ordered into his jacket and hat.

"What's going on?" Ron demands as Hermione shrugs into her own coat and prods him out into the chilly evening air. "Is Hugo still at my mum's?"

"Yes," she replies, locking the door and tucking an arm through each of theirs as they crunch their way down to the road. The relentless drizzle that has plagued the entire weekend slaps against Harry's face as he walks and he scowls. "And we're going out for a bit; everyone's gone a bit stir-crazy, and Harry's apparently about to lose his marbles completely."

"Are you?" Ron demands, ducking around Hermione to meet Harry's eyes.

"More than likely."

"Sorry, mate," Ron commiserates.

The soft, glowing lights of the village pub soon loom into view, making Harry feel oddly nostalgic. This is, of course, the place where his life changed forever.

"Right," Hermione announces as they step into the warm, beery atmosphere and shake the rain from their coats and hair. "I'll get the first round. You find somewhere to sit."

Harry and Ron exchange glances. It doesn't seem prudent to defy Hermione right at this moment, so they seek out a little round table in the corner and sit down. Sunday nights are quiet, and Harry easily picks out Grady and Watson in their usual spot, apparently absorbed in conversation. Hermione carefully sets down three pints of beer and releases several shiny packets of snacks from between her teeth.

The sight seems to tickle Ron and he grins; something about his best friend's bright, open smile tips Harry over the edge, too, and before Hermione can even sit down, they are both laughing uncontrollably. She watches, baffled, for a moment, and then dissolves into giggles, too, dropping onto her stool and leaning heavily against the rickety table. It's been far too long since they've laughed together like this, and Harry is grateful for the reprieve.

"I have no idea what that was about," Hermione says, still breathless, after a minute or two. "But here's to Harry's new house!" She lifts her pint glass and then takes a long gulp at the brown liquid.

"Absolutely," Ron says. "You sure you don't want any help moving in? I can probably still get tomorrow off if I say it's a family emergency or something."

"Thanks, Ron, but I'll be fine. I'll probably be calling you in some decorating-related panic before long so you might as well save yourself for then," Harry advises.

"Why would you imagine I know anything about decorating?" Ron mumbles, ripping into a packet of obnoxiously fishy snacks.
Harry shrugs and slurps at his pint. "You can hold a paintbrush, can't you?"

"I don't know, mate. You might want to call in a professional."

"I'm happy to help, Harry," Hermione says. "I can take time off, too, now that we've finally hit a break in those union negotiations."

"Bloody goblins," Ron mutters into his glass.

"I wouldn't have a job if it weren't for those bloody goblins, you know," Hermione points out.

"I know, but then you could get a really exciting job and have loads of stories to tell me." Ron throws a fishy snack into the air, catches it in his mouth, and grins.

Hermione rolls her eyes and then crosses her arms, defensive. "I have stories."

"I'm sure you do, 'Mione," Harry says stoutly.

Ron snorts. "Oh, yeah, those ones about four-hour meetings are nearly too thrilling."

"I hear things," she says with a mysterious expression as she lifts her glass to her mouth.

"Go on," Harry presses. Gossip will take his mind off Draco. Possibly.

"I've heard that Franz Fitzwilliam is a crook. I've heard that he's making dodgy deals with secret organisations and making sure MLE turns a blind eye to their activities."

"In return for what?" Harry asks, gripping the edge of the table.

"I don't know exactly. Money, I expect," Hermione says. "I'm sure they have plenty of it to throw around, the horrible Muggle-hating buggers. And apparently he's holding his meetings in some really weird places—Muggle places, right under their noses. So, there's a story for you," she finishes triumphantly.

Harry's heart pounds. If the glimpse can be trusted, it's far more than a story.

Ron shakes his head. "There's always someone who wants to stir the pot, cause a bit of trouble. I know Fitzwilliam's been a bit of a maverick in his time but he's a good man."

"I don't know." Hermione shrugs her shoulders. "Could just be a rumour, you know how gossip flies around over there. Seemed a bit odd, though."

"So what exactly did you hear?" Harry pushes, leaning forward on his crossed arms.

"Just what I told you. It's been flying around in bits and pieces for a few weeks now, but I doubt there's anything in it, Harry." Awkward, Hermione stares into her drink as though the beer foam is suddenly of great interest to her. "Just trying to make the point that my job isn't without its thrills."

"I was only teasing you," Ron says, nudging Hermione with his elbow. "You don't need to have an exciting job. You're exciting enough all by yourself."

Harry smiles and absorbs himself in the riddle printed on his beer mat as Hermione sniffs and allows
Ron to press a loud kiss to her cheek. He crunches on a crisp and ponders.

"You look deep in thought," Hermione says after a moment.

"Hmm. What has a head, a tail, is brown, and has no legs?"

"An unfortunate dog?" Ron offers.

Harry snorts. "What about a tadpole?" he muses.

Ron drains his glass. "Are tadpoles brown?"

"I'm not sure," Harry frowns. "Let's say yes."

Hermione laughs and takes the crisps back from Harry. "It's a penny," she says.

Harry turns over the mat for the answer. "You're right. Obviously. That's quite clever... a head and tails. Well done, 'Mione."

"Nope. I don't get it," Ron sighs. "Clearly, I'm an idiot."

"A penny, see," Hermione says, rummaging in her trouser pocket and coming up with a handful of change. She flicks the shiny brown penny across the table at Ron. "You're not an idiot. One side is heads, the other tails. 'Heads' is obvious, but I don't know why we call the other side 'tails'. One of those strange things, I suppose."

Ron examines the tiny coin, holding it between thumb and forefinger. "A Muggle penny. Well, that's cheating," he announces, dropping it back into Hermione's hand and getting to his feet. "Who wants another drink?"

**~*~**

Early the next morning, making sure to leave the spare bedroom that has been his temporary home as immaculate as he found it, Harry buttons up his new coat, hoists his bag full of shrunken-down boxes over his shoulder, and leaves for London. In spite of the overcast sky and heavy rain, Harry's mood is buoyant, and he makes light work of the Apparation and subsequent dash through the downpour to reach his new house.

He finds the estate agent on his front step, sheltering her hair from the slanting rain with a leather briefcase.

"It's all yours, Mr Potter," she says, handing over the keys and the last of the paperwork. "God, what an awful day."

Harry grins. He thinks it's going to be rather a good one, actually.

He thanks her, shakes her hand, and lets himself into the house. In the pin-drop silence, all he can hear is his own breathing as he wanders into the large, open hallway and looks up, following the rise of the winding staircase with his eyes until he feels slightly unsteady. The place smells musty and forgotten, and everything is coated with a layer of dust, but he can see past that. The structure is sound, the original tiles and floorboards beautiful, and he thinks he will enjoy scrubbing and painting and making the place his own.
After scouting around for a place to hang his coat—the wooden knob at the end of the staircase will have to do for now; it's clean enough after Harry has wiped it with the sleeve of his old sweater—he clatters down to the kitchen, throws the windows wide open and rummages in his bag. At last, he finds what he is looking for and restores it to its proper size with a flick of his wand. The box Hermione had pushed into his hands as he left the cottage now sits on his dusty counter top, quite unremarkable but for the word 'ESSENTIALS' written across the topmost flap in large, neat capitals.

Harry opens the box and laughs. He unpacks a tiny travel kettle, teabags, sugar, a little carton of milk, a packet of chocolate biscuits and a selection of menus for local takeaway restaurants. At the bottom of the box, underneath a bright red mug and a spoon is an odd, squishy packet containing something soft and green, across which is emblazoned the legend: '24-hour armchair! Comfort on the move! Just add water!'

Grinning, Harry eyes the sink and wonders if he might just have time for a drink before his furniture starts to arrive. Having only taken two days' leave from work, he is putting his faith in the employees of those Diagon Alley furniture shops to actually turn up with his purchases during this small window of time. It's only eight thirty in the morning; he supposes that all he can do is wait.

Five minutes later, Harry is sitting in the middle of what will soon be his living room with a cup of tea in one hand and a biscuit in the other, listening to the beating of the rain on his lovely sash window and resolving to buy Hermione a present as soon as he can. Perhaps a book she doesn't already have, if such a thing exists. The rehydrated chair is surprisingly comfortable, if a little old-lady-ish in design; it has a soft, velvety finish and excellent back support.

When the first delivery man knocks at the door, Harry leaps out of his chair and greets him with enthusiasm, offering to help with the manoeuvring of the gigantic dining table and apparently endless chairs, but the second—bearing his bed and a selection of matching items—appears while he is down in the kitchen with the table-and-chairs man, and even as Harry is dashing up the stairs to meet him, the third arrives.

"Got some lamps for you, Mr Potter," he says cheerfully, nodding to delivery man number two and swiping rain-soaked curls out of his face.

"Nice lamps, them," the second man approves in a broad West-country accent.

"Thanks," Harry says faintly. "Come in."

As he turns, the gate creaks open again. "Mr Potter?" asks a young woman with a blonde ponytail and a little trolley piled with boxes. "Delivery of some paint?"

Suddenly wishing he could just leave them all on the doorstep and finish his cup of tea in peace, Harry sighs. At least they're here, he tells himself. That's the main thing.

"Alright," he tries again, stepping back so that the doorway is clear. "Everyone in, and we'll take it from there."

Over the next few hours, Harry barely has time to think, let alone stop. Despite the freezing weather, his thin sweater is sticking to him and his hands are hot and sore from lifting, pushing, and carrying countless items of furniture. By the time the lady from the kitchen shop arrives with his shiny new cookware, he's starting to think that he might have gone a little bit mad. Still, by late afternoon, he thinks that, at the very least, everything is roughly in the right room, and the deliveries have slowed.
to a manageable trickle.

Gazing wistfully at his green chair, Harry turns to the wall of his living room and starts to scrape away the nineteen-seventies-style orange and brown wallpaper. He is all too aware of the mammoth cleaning task that lies ahead, and tempting though it is to leave everything else until tomorrow, he persuades himself to carry on with the promise of hot food.

Exhausted and sore, Harry finishes the wallpaper stripping by nightfall, and traipses down to the imaginatively-named 'Pizza Pizza' to retrieve his reward. It's hot, greasy, and to Harry, right at that moment, the best thing he's ever tasted. Reluctant to spread dust and grime all over his new furniture, he sprawls in his squishy green chair and lights a fire in the grate. He feels strangely alone without the knowledge that his friends are only a firecall away, and resolves to connect the place up to the Floo Network as soon as he returns to the Ministry.

Fortified by the intake of cheese and carbohydrates, Harry works later into the night, singing absently to himself as he rips down revolting wallpaper, yanks up shabby carpets, and, with a little bit of magical help, scours the yellow-brown stains from the ceilings, all the while definitely not thinking about Draco and those fucking letters. Finally, too tired to think about showering and putting on new bed linen, he collapses into the temporary chair, still fully dressed, and falls asleep.

The temporary nature of the chair in question is brought back to Harry with a sharp thump as he finds himself dropped onto the bare floorboards the next morning.

"What the fuck...?" he mumbles, blinking stickily and rubbing at his face.

The chair has vanished. Twenty-four hour fucking chair.

Grumbling, Harry heads down to the kitchen and makes a cup of tea, which he drinks sitting on the (very permanent) counter top and admiring his vast new table. The cool breeze sweeping in from the back yard smells wonderful, and has already seen off the scent of disuse that had shrouded the basement room just hours before, leaving a warm aroma of wood, tea, and shredded wallpaper. It's beginning to smell like home.

**~*~**

Harry is startled to open the door to Ginny at around four o'clock that afternoon, but she's smiling and carrying a pot plant, and Lily is at her side, and he has, at last, had a shower and changed, so it's alright.

She steps into the hallway, eyes sweeping the staircase and the high, moulded ceiling, while Lily peeps into all the ground floor rooms in turn before running to Harry and hugging him around the middle.

"Dad, you've done loads already!" she cries, grinning.

"Thank you." He slings an arm around her shoulders. "Looks better, doesn't it?"

"Yeah! You got rid of the horrid wallpaper."

Ginny lifts an eyebrow.

"It really was horrible," Harry tells her.
"I believe you. I brought you a plant," she says, handing over the pot. "Every new house needs a plant."

"Thanks," Harry says, meeting her eyes and ignoring the sadness that tugs at his chest. "How are you doing?"

Her smile is fragile but genuine. "I'm okay, Harry. You don't need to worry about me."

"I'll always worry about you," he says, and next to him Lily seems to stiffen. "We're friends. That's just the way it goes for me." Lily exhales slowly and leans against him.

"Alright. I think I can deal with that," she says, and her next smile lights up her face. "This place is going to be amazing, isn't it? Like a nice version of—"

"Grimmauld Place?" Harry supplies.

Ginny nods. "If I'd known, I'd have brought you a portrait instead." She glances at Lily, who has wandered away to examine an ornate doorknob. "Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness!" she whispers, eyes theatrically wide.

"Oh, yes," Harry says, grinning. "I've been missing her."

"Thought so."

Harry gazes at her for a moment, at her neat work robes and her heavy hair pinned carefully back from her face, her clear eyes and relaxed posture, and feels a little more of the hot guilt inside him dissolving into nothing.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" he offers. "I'm all set up."

"I'd love one, but I haven't really finished work yet; I took a late lunch so I could bring Lily over. She's really excited about all this, you know," she adds, dropping her voice. She doesn't say 'don't let her down' but she doesn't need to.

"Well, I appreciate it," he says, smiling and holding on to his plant as she kisses Lily on the forehead and Disapparates.

Left to their own devices, Harry and Lily exchange gleeful glances.

"What do you want to do first?" he asks.

Lily beams. "Paint."

"Painting it is," Harry says, finding a temporary spot for his plant and heading for the stairs, Lily bouncing along behind him. "You said you wanted to paint your room black, didn't you?"

"Dad," Lily reproves, managing a sigh and a giggle at once. And then, thoughtful: "I bet James would like a black bedroom, though."

Harry imagines he would, too. Once upstairs, he does a not-terrible job of Transfiguring a dust sheet into an overall for Lily so that she doesn't splatter her pristine school uniform with purple paint, and
then they set to work. Harry performs Celestina Warbeck numbers until his daughter is helpless with laughter and he somehow manages to get paint in his eye. Lily, in between painting and giggling, teaches him a variety of lateral thinking puzzles—Mrs Harbottle has apparently been setting one each day as a challenge for the class, and Lily is of the opinion that knowing them will help Harry to find a man.

"When you're ready, of course," she adds, shooting him a stern look, which is somewhat undermined by the fact that she has a long purple smudge across her nose. "I think it's quite important that you seem clever."

Harry laughs. "You don't think I'm clever?"

Lily sighs. "Yes, but you have to make sure people can tell you're clever. You know."

Amused, Harry nods solemnly and tucks the advice away for later.

When everything that can be covered in purple paint has been covered in purple paint, Harry and Lily clean themselves up in the huge second floor bathroom, scrubbing at their faces with flannels and splashing violet-coloured water everywhere. At Harry's suggestion, Lily takes photographs of the remaining bedrooms so that James and Al can decide where they want to sleep, too.

"I think James'll like this one," Lily opines, lining up an extra-careful shot of an oddly-shaped room with several large mirrors embedded into the walls. "He likes to look at himself."

Harry snorts. She certainly seems to have the measure of her brother.

"And," she says, a minute or two later, "I think Al will like this one, because it has big windows."

"Big windows are good," Harry agrees.

"He likes light," she advises him, striding across the bare boards to snap a picture of the room from another angle.

On impulse, Harry hugs her. "Are you okay, Dad?" she mumbles against his chest.

He is.

Ginny returns for Lily after a few hours and diplomatically says nothing about the crispy streaks of purple in her hair; Harry has managed to spell away the little spots on her skin and clothing but the paint in his daughter's hair has refused to budge.

Alone once more in the silent house, he fits sheets and pillowcases for his new bed, and starts to unpack the boxes he has brought from home. From his old home. It's a meagre collection of belongings; he hadn't wanted to take anything from Ginny or the children that he didn't really need, or that didn't belong to him. He unloads stacks and stacks of books and records onto his new shelves, carefully hangs his invisibility cloak in his new wardrobe, and tears open a box marked 'BATHROOM', which contains toiletries, his spare shaving kit, and a couple of towels. Sighing, he carries the box into the hallway and pauses. Something is moving in there.

Poking aside a hand towel, he peers into the box. A second or two later, something large and black scuttles over his shaving brush and perches atop a bottle of cologne, appearing to stare up at him with calm interest.
Harry smiles. The airing cupboard spider has come with him. It's been sitting in the box all this time, living on fuck knows what, and waiting. Delighted for reasons he can't understand, he sets down the box, scoops up the spider, and installs it carefully on the second floor staircase, tipping his hand so that the spider can cling to the nearest banister.

"I know you're a bathroom spider, strictly speaking, but I think you'll like it here," he says, and, with the feeling that everything really is going to be alright, he returns to his room and crawls into bed.

**~*~**

"I see your time off has done you some good, Mr Potter," Helga observes as she passes him his messages the next morning.

Harry smiles. "Was that a compliment?"

"With faith, all things are possible," she advises him, reaching for her quill. "How is the new house?"

"Not bad at all, actually. There's still a fair bit of decorating to be done, but I'm pretty pleased with it so far. I got this new fancy mattress," he confides. "Best night's sleep I've had in years."

Helga lifts a dark eyebrow. "I could not be more delighted to hear that, Mr Potter."

Shaking his head, Harry heads for his office.

"You have a meeting at ten about the revised rules for the transportation of magical devices in non-magical areas," she calls, just before the door closes.

"Can't wait," he mutters, dropping into his chair and shifting in place, attempting to find a comfortable position in his heavy robes. It's a slightly warmer day today, and the fabric feels scratchy where it touches his skin and restrictive everywhere else.

He's reading his memos when the owl flies into the room. Puzzled, he leans over his desk just in time to see Helga's bony hand yanking the door closed behind it, having seemingly just allowed the owl to swoop through the office unchecked. Bizarre woman.

Realising he has read the last twenty or so messages on complete autopilot and will have to read them all over again, he sighs and sweeps the lot into a messy pile. He takes the roll of parchment and fishes out a few broken biscuit bits to entertain the owl while he reads.

Al's somewhat chaotic handwriting is a nice surprise, and he is quite happy to abandon his memo mountain for news of life at Hogwarts.

**Hi Dad,**

_Hope you're enjoying your new house. Lily has sent me a picture of her bedroom. It's a bit purple if you ask me, but I like it. She said you got paint all over you and she didn't get any on her. I liked the room she picked for me, too, especially the windows. I hope you're not feeling to lonley in the house on your own. I have written to Mum as well and she is okay. Sorry if this is a bit messy but I'm writing this in bed and the pillos are a bit lumpy. Almost forgot, Rose says hello. We have been joining loads of different clubs this term, just to see if they're any good. Rose is rubbish at gobstons, but Scorpius is brilliant._
Lily says you had some time off from work to do up the house. Where can I apply? I would much rather do decorateing than herbology. Professor Sprout dispairs of me. She didn't say that but I can tell. Anyway, it's alright for you – I bet your job is dead exciting. I hope I have a job like that when I'm older, but James says he reckons I'll end up in the kitchen with the houselves. He's got a bloody cheek, Dad, he told me he never got an 'O' in Potions and I got one last week!

Anyway, I digress. Scorpius says I do that a lot. I hope you are well and hope to see you at the next Quidditch match. Don't forget! Ravenclaw v Hufflepuff!

Lots of love,

Albus Severus Potter

Harry stares down at the letter, aching inside. Al looks up to him, thinks his job is exciting. What kind of a role model is he, exactly?

"No one likes their job, do they?" he mumbles, Draco's careless remark filling his head.

But that's not quite true, is it? The Draco in the glimpse loved his job, and so did the other Ginny. They both spent plenty of time grousing, but they cared about what they did and wouldn't have swapped their careers for anything, especially not for the dry desk jobs they have settled for here. And his other self... Harry sighs, glancing down at the drawer where he knows his glassblowing books are hiding. His other self was brave and adventurous and alive with creativity. He would never have stood for meetings about reviewing the decisions made in other meetings.

"Mr Potter?" Helga calls, knocking sharply on the office door. "You're going to be late."

Harry closes his eyes. Feeling defeated, he slips Al's letter into his pocket, grabs his quill and hopefully the right folder, and slopes off to the meeting room. He thinks, at this point, he'd be quite happy to trade places with Al. He'd even sit through double Potions.

With Snape.

**~*~**

Harry emerges from his transportation meeting and makes it seven or eight paces down the corridor before Jeremiah from Improper Use materialises and drags him back into the conference room because "we might as well, while it's free, Harry, and I've been meaning to pick your brain about a potential area of overlap between our departments..." Harry acquiesces, keeping his professional front in place, even though he's kicking and screaming inside.

By the time he makes it back to his office, it's almost three o'clock and he's tired, hungry and inching toward the end of his tether. Helga, perhaps sensing his mood, says nothing as he stalks through her room to his own office and kicks the door shut behind him. He sits heavily and scowls at his memo mountain, his stack of papers and publications to be approved, and his scribbled list of upcoming meetings.

He hasn't missed any of it. He doesn't care about any of it.

And the thing is, even through the heavy shroud of his discontent, he can see that the person doing this job—this important job—needs to care. It needs to mean something. He thinks it meant
Breathing rapidly, Harry opens the drawer and takes out the books and the newspaper clipping. He unfolds Al's letter and reads it again, devours the colourful pictures of the smoke and metal and brightly-coloured glass, spreads his fingers out over the rough newsprint and hurts with missing Maura. He just sits there, transfixed, until the thought crystallises in his mind, and when it does, the force of it almost knocks him off his chair.

*What the actual fuck am I doing?*

*I'm not that person,* he thinks, slumping back in his chair and digging his fingers into the armrests. *I'm not the person who belongs in the glimpse. But that doesn't mean that I have to be this person.*

And alright, he can't make tables. Maybe he'll never be able to make tables. But he can blow glass, at least a little bit, and he can make art that people are willing to pay for. Taking all that into account, he finds himself wondering just what would be crazier—leaving all this behind for something risky, or staying because it's easier. It's not as though he needs the money; it's never been about that. If he's honest, he's struggling to remember what it is all about, and that has to be a bad sign.

In the end, that is enough for Harry. And this isn't.

Quietly, he clears out his desk, retrieving his personal items and shrinking them down until he can slip the lot into his pockets.

"Just going to have a word with Fitzwilliam," he tells Helga, who nods and continues scratching away with her quill.

The carpet seems thicker along the corridor to Fitzwilliam's office and the air tastes crisp and conditioned. As Harry lets himself into an anteroom similar to the one in his own office, he takes a deep breath and throws himself at the mercy of his impulsive courage.

"Good afternoon, Mr Potter," murmurs the young auburn-haired secretary, waving him through after a brief hushed exchange with Fitzwilliam through a crack in his office door.

"Thanks, Calendula," he says, forcing a smile, and then he's in.

Franz Fitzwilliam closes the file he is reading and looks up at Harry expectantly. He's a large man, imposingly built, with a mane of iron grey hair and a strong, chiselled jaw. Harry remembers being intimidated by him at one time, but as he stands here now, all he can think of is the fact that he's quite possibly a dodgy bastard. Perhaps someone will find out one way or another, but it's not going to be him.

"Spit it out, Auror Potter. I've got a meeting in half an hour," he says good-naturedly, gazing up at Harry with pale green pebble-like eyes.

Harry nods. "Right. I'm resigning."

Fitzwilliam blinks, apparently lost for words. At last, he pulls himself together and indicates the empty seat opposite his own. Harry perches on the edge of the chair and waits for a response.

"You're resigning."
"Yes."

"For pity's sake man, you can't be serious," Fitzwilliam insists, drawing heavy brows together in consternation.

"Completely serious, I'm afraid," Harry says, keeping his voice steady even though he is almost bubbling over with adrenaline and the not-unfamiliar feeling of what-the-fuck-are-you-doing-exactly.

"You can't just leave."

Harry ignores the vaguely menacing tone and gazes back at him blandly, folding his hands in his lap and remembering to breathe. "Actually, according to my contract, my only obligation is to find and train a replacement, and I'm more than willing to do that."

Fitzwilliam says nothing for a long time. His expression is almost impassive, but Harry can just about detect the flickers of panic, dismay and reluctant acceptance of the facts as they flash across the angular face. When he focuses on Harry once more, the flickers have died away and he steeples his fingers serenely as he speaks.

"Auror Potter, the department, and, indeed, the Ministry, is very fortunate to have you. Losing your years of experience, your expertise, and—I'll be frank—your reputation, will be a considerable blow. The Minister himself, I'm sure, will be very disappointed to see you go."

"Yes," Harry concedes. "He probably will. But the Minister is an old friend and he will understand."

"I see." Fitzwilliam closes his eyes briefly. "Auror Potter... it pains me to say this, and I hope you don't think badly of me, but is there perhaps an issue we can resolve here? Hours, workload... a new secretary? Pay?" he tries, obviously hesitant.

"No," Harry says quickly. "It's not about that. And Helga stays. I absolutely insist."

"Fine. Pray tell, then, what is so important that you're willing to sabotage your career for it?" he demands, and though Harry doesn't really want to tell this man about his plans, his curiosity is satisfying.

"I'm making some changes in my life," Harry says simply.

"So I've heard," Fitzwilliam offers.

Harry bristles but sets his face and focuses on the thought that he'll be out of here soon enough.

"Yes, well, I don't want to be an Auror any more. And I think someone who has passion for the job should have it. Which is why I'm recommending Ron Weasley," Harry says. "And if you don't have any objections, I'll start training him as soon as possible."

Fitzwilliam coughs. Gazes warily at Harry. "Auror Weasley is a strong choice. He's due a promotion. But... there must be something we can offer to convince you to stay."

"I'm sorry, my mind is made up," Harry says, stomach flipping violently. "I've cleared my desk. I'll be back in the morning to go through the groundwork with Auror Weasley." Unable to sit still for another moment, he stands, shakes hands with a startled Fitzwilliam and heads for the door.
"Auror Potter, do owl me if you change your mind..."

"Thanks." He meets the pale green eyes for his last time as an Auror. "I won't, though."

"Nice to see you, Mr Potter."

"You too, Calendula. Have a nice afternoon."

As he walks back through the corridors, carpet seeming to thin back down to standard levels as he goes, he realises that though Fitzwilliam is—was—technically his superior, there is no doubt about who had held all the cards in that office, and it hadn't been the Head of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry reaches his office and pauses for a moment, watching Helga, who is still scribbling away.

"Hi, Helga."

She looks up. "Hello, Mr Potter."

He crosses the rug reluctantly and sits on the edge of her desk. This already feels vastly more difficult than the conversation with Fitzwilliam, and he's suddenly struck by just how far he and Helga have come. He's going to miss her.

"I'm leaving."

"Now?" She glances at the clock, bemused. "It's a little early for that, Mr Potter!"

Harry hides a smile. "I know. I mean I'm leaving this job. I resigned."

She stares at him, mouth slightly open. Out comes the rosary. "But... but what will you do?"

Harry lets the smile out. "I'm going to make glass, Helga."

She frowns. "Why?"

"Because I want to. Don't worry, I've insisted that you stay on. My replacement will need someone to pray for his soul and keep him organised, too."

"Your replacement... oh, good heavens. I don't mean to pry, Mr Potter, but—"

Feeling oddly light, Harry laughs. "Pry away, Helga."

She blinks. "Is this because of your family problems?"

"No. This is because I'm tired of sitting behind a desk and I want to escape from this office before I get too old to care," he says.

"Oh, dear," she sighs, clicking away with the little beads. "You'll never get to be Minister for Magic by making glass."

Harry shakes his head and wraps his fingers around the end of the desk. "I don't want to be Minister for Magic. I want to make things. Interesting things. Beautiful things."
Helga's thin mouth twists as though she cannot comprehend such a desire. "You would have made a wonderful Minister, Mr Potter."

Harry laughs. "You don't have to call me Mr Potter any more. And no, I don't think I would've, but thank you anyway. I appreciate the thought."

Helga sighs. "I'll bet Mr Fitzwilliam was terribly upset."

"He wasn't too impressed, I'll give you that. But he'll be alright," Harry assures her.

"I don't know what to say," Helga admits.

"That'll be a first," Harry says.

She scowls, little black eyes glittering. "Who am I to be working with, then?"

"Ron Weasley. I'll make sure he's well behaved."

"Oh, yes, the noisy young man," Helga muses, and Harry pretends he doesn't hear the increased speed of the rosary-clacking under the desk.

Harry laughs. "I'm sure you'll have him whipped into shape in no time."

Helga's lips twist into an almost-smile. "Jesus loves you, Harry Potter," she says at last.

"Thanks, Helga. I'll miss you." Harry gets to his feet and shoves his hands into his pockets in an effort to suppress his instinct, which is to hug her.

"You'll see me tomorrow," she points out, eyebrow flickering.

He opens the door. "I will. What am I going to do without you?"

**~*~**

Harry isn't entirely sure how he ends up in Diagon Alley. It could be the fact that when he walks out of the Ministry, he just doesn't feel like going home, or it could simply be the fact that he's still running on impulse and lets his mind wander a little as he Disapparates. Either way, here he is, blinking in the bright afternoon sunshine, heavy robes slung over one shoulder as he relishes the delicious breeze that flutters down the alley.

He allows the stream of shoppers to catch him and wanders along, idly wondering if anyone is taking his picture now, for a staggering 'Harry Potter walks around in public' exposé.

*Let them snap*, he thinks. He doesn't give a fuck.

When the vicious growl of his stomach reminds him that he's ravenous, he follows his nose to the source of that fantastic aroma of fresh bread, and is just about to push open the door of the Dragondale Deli when he sees it.

His workshop.

It sits, just yards across the cobbles, and Harry's delight at seeing it is all but dashed away as he takes
in the sad, disused condition of the little building. His heart is wrenched painfully as he approaches what was once—or is somewhere—his workshop, but he can't stop himself from peering through the dust-caked windows, sighing at the skylights which are so dirty that they barely let any light pass into the building. It's almost empty, from what he can see, containing nothing but a few crates, some scraps of parchment and several spiders.

No one is even using it. Harry glances back at the deli and then stares through the grimy windows once more, trying to see it as he remembers it. After a moment, he shrinks down his robes, stuffs them into his back pocket, and walks into the little deli. When he reaches the counter, he orders a roast beef sandwich from a young, spiky-haired man and drums his fingers on the granite surface. Chews his lip. Hesitates. And then:

"This building here, is it yours?" he points across the cobbles.

The lad frowns, puzzled, and pauses in his wrapping of Harry's sandwich to look up at him. "No, sir, I only work here on a Wednesday. I can't afford a building."

Harry looks quickly down at his hands, shaking with silent laughter. "Right, okay, thanks."

There's an exasperated sigh, and then an attractive dark-haired woman emerges from the back room. She is wearing the same embroidered purple shirt as the confused young man, and has apparently overheard their exchange.

"One of your friends using the brain cell today, Darius?" she asks, and the young man pulls a rather rude face at her before smiling beatifically at Harry and handing him his sandwich. "It's alright," she confides to Harry, "he's my brother. You wanted to know about the storeroom?"

Harry wants to protest at the dismissive title for his lovely little workshop, but it's not her fault.

"Yes. Do you know who it belongs to?"

"Why, out of interest?" the woman asks, weaving around her brother to lean on the counter.

Harry drags in a deep breath. "I want to buy it."

The woman's dark eyes widen in astonishment. "Oh, sh... goodness, I didn't expect you to say that."

"What did you expect me to say?" Harry asks, intrigued.

"Oh, I don't know—just, you're an Auror, aren't you? I thought maybe someone had broken into it."

*I'm not really an Auror any more,* he thinks, but manages to hang onto his self-restraint.

"No, nothing like that. So, do you know who owns it?"

"My dad," she says.

"Can I speak to him?"

The woman and the boy called Darius exchange glances. "He's Greek. He doesn't speak very much English."
Harry's heart sinks. "Please," he appeals, fixing her with his most charming smile.

It seems to work. She disappears and returns a minute or two later with a tiny elderly man, who scrunches up his little eyes and scrutinises Harry with grizzled interest.

"Papa," says the woman, grasping her father's shoulder. "This man wants to buy the storeroom."

Harry gazes down at the little man who is the only thing standing between him and his workshop. Suddenly he wishes he had left his Auror robes on, just for a little longer.

"Why you want?" the man rasps. "Is no good. Too damp for store grains."

"I don't want to store grain in it," Harry explains. "I want to make it into a workshop... er, a place to make glass," he amends, catching the old man's confused expression.

"Make glass?" the man repeats. He looks at his daughter and indicates the plate glass window at the front of the shop with a wrinkled hand. "Glass?"

"Er, yeah," Harry says. "But not windows. Art."

The old man's face crinkles in bewilderment, and before his daughter can attempt to translate, Darius, who has been chopping salad vegetables without a word, suddenly launches into a string of rapid-fire Greek. The old man listens, nodding along as his son waves a bread knife around demonstratively.

"Ah, yes, yes," he says at last. "Strange man, want buy this building."

Harry supposes he is a strange man, but he can deal with that. He also supposes that this little bit of madness is heading straight for the gossip columns, but he doesn't care. He needs his workshop back.

"I'll give you anything you want for it," he offers. "Name your price."

The woman murmurs something to her father, and he waves her away, grinning at Harry.

"This I know, Kari," he says. "You Harry Potter? My son says you Harry Potter." He squints.

"Er, yeah," Harry says. "Does that make a difference?"

The little man leans almost right over the counter to get a better look at Harry, and then mumbles to his daughter. She nods, smiling and flushing.

"My dad says he bought the storeroom for five hundred Galleons. He says..." She pauses, glancing at her brother, who looks extremely amused. "He says that he'll sell it to you for three hundred if you have your picture taken with us."

Harry laughs. "That sounds very reasonable."

Half an hour later, Harry emerges from the deli with a set of keys, a workshop, and three new neighbours. Still humming with the thrill of his impetuous decisions, he finds himself a bench and devours the huge, complimentary piece of pantespani, which Kari has assured him is the best cake he will ever eat. She's not wrong, he thinks, licking orange syrup from his fingers.

Contented, he restores 'The Glassblower's Guide' and settles on his bench, truly enjoying the
photographs and illustrations for the first time. Now, anything is possible.

**~*~**

He has just finished dinner (sausage and mash, eaten awkwardly with one hand as he holds his book clear of rogue drops of gravy) when Ron and Hermione arrive. He opens the door to them with his stomach in knots, but his friends greet him with smiles and compliments on the location of the house, neither of them looking as though they have heard any shocking news today. Harry isn't sure if that's better or worse than a chorus of 'what the hell have you done?'s because now he has to tell them himself.

"Nice place," Ron approves, pacing around the hallway with his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks. You up for some painting?" Harry asks hopefully.

Ron laughs. "I came prepared," he says, whipping a roller from his coat pocket and waving it about. "Dad gave it to me—weird, isn't it?"

Hermione snorts. "I've got something for you, Harry," she says, flashing him a mysterious smile, and for the first time he notices the large straw bag over her shoulder. "Enjoy your painting," she calls, taking off up the stairs, hair and bag bouncing behind her.

"There she goes, selling etiquette for good intentions," Ron intones, voice sombre.

Harry turns questioning eyes on his best friend. "And since when were you an expert on etiquette?" he laughs.

"I'm not. It's just something her mum says," Ron admits.

"Ah. Well, not to worry, I've known her long enough to trust her if she wants to go exploring," Harry says. He slings an arm around Ron's shoulders and steers him toward the stairs that lead down to the kitchen. "Come on, I've saved all the best painting jobs for you."

"Be gentle with me," Ron groans. "I've been out in the field all day, my back's killing me from crouching down, hiding from idiots."

"You haven't been in the office all day?" Harry asks cautiously.

Ron shakes his head, stepping out into the kitchen. His nose twitches. "Not since this morning... have you had sausages?"

"I may have. I also may have left four in that very pot," Harry says, indicating the shiny red casserole containing the leftovers. "Which can be yours if you help me paint this kitchen."

Ron's eyebrows disappear under his fringe. "You don't have to bribe me, you know..." He shrugs. "But it does help. Where do we start?"

**~*~**

Hermione appears in the kitchen an hour or so later, flushed and bright-eyed, and sits cross-legged on the dust-sheet-covered table, waiting for Harry and Ron to finish the first coat of off-white paint. The kitchen looks bigger and brighter already, but Harry hasn't yet managed to say a word to his friends
about walking out on the Ministry; for some reason, the words keep sticking in his throat.

"Right," Hermione announces, the second Harry and Ron lower their rollers. "Come on." She leaps from the table and gestures for them to follow her, which they do, knowing what's best for them by now. Baffled, Harry jogs up his staircase after her, listening to Ron clomping along behind him and mumbling to himself, until finally they emerge onto the roof terrace and all becomes clear.

Hermione has transformed the tiny, neglected space into a sparkling, beautiful outdoor grotto. The clutter and dead plants left by the previous owners have been swept away, and Harry's new wrought iron table and chairs now take pride of place in the midst of ceramic pots and wooden boxes full of vibrant, green plants, vivid flowers, and minute, glittering magical lights.

He grins at Hermione, who is clutching her empty straw bag and grinning back.

"My housewarming gift," she explains.

"It's fantastic," he says, hugging her tightly, scratchy bag and all. "Thank you."

"Did you get the flowers I chose?" Ron whispers to Hermione as Harry releases her.

"Yes," she laughs. "Our housewarming gift, I should say. Ron chose all these ones," she says, pointing to a series of rough wooden boxes filled with flowers. "Gladiolus for strength of character, peony for healing, zinnia for friendship." She smiles. "And these are from me." She indicates another box, and Harry recognises the flowers immediately; Narcissa Malfoy has some just like them. "Azaleas. Of course, the traditional meaning is 'temperance'." She wrinkles her nose. "But... it also means 'take care of yourself for me', so... call it a gentle reminder."

Harry suspects that falling in love is making him somewhat sappy, because he can barely resist hugging Hermione again. As it is, he slaps Ron on the shoulder and swallows the daft lump in his throat.

"You're brilliant, both of you," he rasps, lowering himself into a chair and gazing out over the city. "Shit, I haven't even made you a cup of tea or anything!"

Ron laughs, slumping into the chair next to him. "You're obsessed with tea, mate. You're worse than my mum."

Harry shoots him a sidelong glance. The cold wind lifts Ron's heavy fringe from his forehead, revealing a smudge of white vinyl silk. He wonders if getting covered in paint is a family trait.

"I can do better than that," Hermione announces, producing a flask from god-knows-where and pouring out three mugs of hot chocolate.

"Oh, nice," Harry breathes, wrapping his hands around his cup. "Thank you."

"Truly, we are old," Ron says, and for a while the only sounds are the muffled rattles and blares of distant traffic and the satisfied slurping of three hot chocolate drinkers.

Finally, Harry sets his mug down on the table with a clank. "So. Today I quit my job and bought a workshop in Diagon Alley."

Hermione and Ron burst into laughter so appreciative that Hermione has to be slapped on the back
several times to stop her from choking on a marshmallow.

"I'm serious," he says, once she has her breath back.

Ron shakes his head. "Don't be daft... you haven't?"

"I have. And I've recommended you for the position." Harry pauses, taking in Ron's stunned expression. "Actually, you've pretty much got the job, unless you murder someone in the next twelve hours or so."

"Harry, you... you actually are serious, aren't you?" Hermione says quietly, threading her fingers through Ron's and squeezing. "Breathe, Ron."

"Why?" Ron manages, regaining his lung function at last.

"Because I don't want to do it any more. I haven't for a long time. I know you'll think I'm crazy, but I want to make things. I want to go to work every day and enjoy myself. I want to play with wood and glass and wear jeans to the office. It's not the right job for me any more, Ron, but it is the right job for you. You deserve it."

"You want to make things?" Hermione asks, eyes searching. "I didn't know you could make things."

Her tone is genuinely curious rather than derisive, and Harry finds a smile for her as he shrugs. "Neither did I until recently. Look, perhaps it is all part of some midlife crisis, but maybe I've actually figured out what I want to do with myself. And you know... if it's all a disaster, we can sit here and have a laugh about it in six months' time, and I'll try something else."

"You've just got an answer for everything, haven't you?" Hermione says faintly.

Harry grins and downs the rest of his hot chocolate. "I've done a lot of thinking."

"Seriously, though, Harry," Ron says, brow furrowed, "I appreciate you recommending me, I really do, but are you sure you want to just chuck everything in?"

"I've already done it. Handed in my notice. I'll be coming in to help you settle in, and then that's it."

"Mate," Ron insists, expression torn. Harry knows how much he wants the job, but he also knows that Ron never expected to get it this way. "The thing is... you're probably feeling a bit... you know, not yourself at the moment..."

"Don't worry. This is nothing to do with me and Ginny. I promise you, I've wanted to do it for a long time, and I know you'll be a hundred times better at it than I ever was. It's time for me to step aside."

"Harry... bloody hell. Me, head of the Auror Department!" He turns to Hermione as though seeking confirmation that he's not hallucinating. "I can't believe it."

"No more full days in the field," Harry reminds him with a smile. "And you'll believe it tomorrow, when you've got Helga grilling you and trying to convert you to Catholicism."

Hermione, who has been gazing at him with wide, startled eyes, seems to snap out of her reverie.

"Harry, I think you're mad," she announces. "And I think you're brilliant."
With that, she flings herself out of her seat, wraps her arms around him, and squeezes until he can barely breathe.

"Your office is massive, isn't it?" Ron asks, grinning.

**~*~**

Unsurprisingly, Thursday's Prophet runs with 'Potter Quits the Ministry' as its front page headline.

Harry scans the article over Helga's shoulder as she and Ron attempt to get to know one another the next morning. It's going better than he could have expected, but he still has a feeling that there's going to be an considerable transitional period, and he's fine with that. The pressure has all at once been lifted, and he's happy to spend as much time helping Ron to find his feet as is necessary.

Leaving them alone for a minute or two, he nips off to the bathroom, and when he returns, the owl is just sitting there on top of his ex filing cabinet, staring at him as though he has done something unspeakably offensive. The bugger manages to chew on his fingertip for a moment as he wrests the parchment from its leg, but then he has it, and he sucks his finger irritably as he reads.

Just three words and no signature, but he doesn't need one.

*Are you insane?*

Every hair on the back of Harry's neck stands up and he grins, grateful that he has his back to Ron and Helga. Quickly, he grabs a quill and adds his own message.

*Probably. Meet me for coffee at the cafe on Vine Street tomorrow, and I'll tell you all about it. 2-ish?*

He attaches the scroll to the grumpy owl's leg and watches it take flight, clipping Ron as it swoops carelessly past him and out into the corridor.

"Alright, mate?"

Harry nods. He thinks he's alright. He may have just asked out Draco Malfoy—sort of—even though he hasn't even been responding to his non-asking-out type messages... but he's alright.

Ten minutes later, though, in the middle of an explanation of signing off on documents, the owl returns with:

*Fine, but you're paying.*

Harry apologises to Ron and sends back: *Cheapskate.*

Draco's final message reads simply: *Wanker.*

Harry smiles, shoos the owl out of the office before it bites him again, and returns to the matter at hand.
“D’you want a refill, love?”

Harry looks up from his ever-so-casual flipping through the pages of the *Daily Prophet* to see the older waitress hovering at his table with a stack of empty plates in one hand and several dirty cups clutched in the other. Her bright, friendly eyes flick from Harry’s empty mug to his face as she waits for a response.

Harry sighs as he nods and holds out his mug. “Thanks.” He can’t quite believe he’s been here long enough to need a refill, especially when he tried so hard to be just a little bit late. As it was, despite his best efforts, he still managed to reach the cafe with five minutes to spare. And now he’s waiting for Draco. Of course he is.

He finds a smile for the waitress when she returns with his cup. It’s not her fault that he’s awkward and idiotic and too wound up to think straight. It doesn’t seem to matter that there’s nothing more to this than coffee with a man who thinks he’s insane; he’s nervous.

“Fuck’s sake,” he mutters, slumping back in his chair and watching the sulky waitress as she sweeps up crumbs and bits of soggy biscuit from beneath the table where a young family have been sitting. She’s starting to feel like an old friend. Harry suppresses the urge to sketch a little wave in her direction and instead watches her more amiable counterpart bustling around behind the counter and humming to herself.

When the bell above the door clangs, Harry forces himself not to look. He blows on his coffee (casually, of course), heart leaping when there’s a creak and a sigh and a wave of cold, citrus-scented air washing over him.

“You’re late,” he says, fighting a smile.

“Yes, well, some of us haven’t packed in our jobs,” Draco points out. “Yet.”

Harry looks now, meeting harassed grey eyes and inhaling carefully at the sharp jolt of pleasure that spirals through his chest. “I take it you’re having a bad day.”

Draco’s mouth flickers at one corner. “There are very few good days in the finance industry.”

“Get out of it, then,” Harry says carelessly.

Draco’s rough bark of laughter is startling and unexpected, making the approaching waitress jump slightly and direct a withering glance at the side of his head. Harry casts covert glances around for her colleague, but she seems to have disappeared, leaving them to their fate. He wonders how this Draco will react to her individual brand of customer service.

He doesn’t have to wait long to find out.

“Can I take your order?” she says, regarding Draco with disinterest and tapping her pen against her notepad.

Draco, who has been quietly absorbed in folding his coat over his lap, lifts his head at the sound of
her voice and levels a cool glance in her direction. “You could sound more enthusiastic about it.”

The girl sighs and looks at Harry, as though to enquire exactly who this man is and why Harry has seen fit to bring him here. Amused, he shrugs, and she rolls her eyes.

“Specials today are on the board behind you,” she says. “I can recommend the garlic soup, it’s very... nice.” She pauses, dark eyes trained on Draco. “Will that do, or would you like me to do a little dance?”

Harry chews on his lip and watches Draco, idly wondering if he should throw up a Shield Charm in front of the girl, just in case.

And then Draco snorts. And smiles.

“That won’t be necessary, but don’t let me stop you.” He picks up his coat and deposits it with care on the nearest empty chair, then crosses one leg over the other and settles himself, straight-backed, and regards Harry. “Just coffee, please. Large. Cream. Sugar. Whatever else it comes with.”

“Er... right,” the waitress mumbles, somewhat deflated.

“I told you—no one likes their job,” Draco says, fixing Harry with a surprisingly satisfied smile.

Astonished, Harry nods mutely, scrambling to get his thoughts in order. Against all logic, the presence of the grumpy waitress seems to have improved Draco’s mood; it’s as though he feels a sort of frustrated kinship with her that his more fulfilled other self could never have understood.

“Apparently not. This doesn’t look like a bad place to work, though,” he says, thinking out loud as he glances around at the shiny little tables, the steady but undemanding flow of customers, and the warm, bright colours.

“Don’t tell me you gave up being head of the Auror Department to serve coffee?” Draco demands, horror-struck. “Because if you did, I’ll... oh, good grief, is that why you brought me here? Are you trying to drag me into your madness, too? I have never worn an apron, Potter, and I’m not about to start now.”

Somewhere, buried beneath the rant, is a little glimmer of real panic and Harry seizes it, allowing himself to relax just a little.

“Harry,” he corrects, “and no, I’m not trying to trap you into a life of cafe-based servitude.” He pauses to return the look Draco sends his way, feeling brilliantly childish. “You’re going to have to trust me a bit more than that.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

Harry just smiles. The waitress takes that moment to arrive and hand Draco his coffee with an impressive look of disdain. As he takes it and inspects it thoroughly, Harry watches him in speculative silence, taking in the pristine black shirt, trousers and waistcoat, the neat hair that makes his fingers itch, the narrowed grey eyes and the long, pale fingers turning a sugar cube over and over as though searching for undetectable flaws. He’s tighter, more rigid, more cautious than the other Draco, but he’s also intriguing and painfully beautiful. Harry throws down half of his second coffee in one gulp. It’s going cold.
“Alright then,” Draco says at last, apparently satisfied with his coffee and its accompaniments. “If you aren’t trying to recruit me, why here?”

“Why not?” Harry shrugs. The truth is, he’s become rather attached to this place, but he’s not about to admit that to Draco.

One pale eyebrow flickers. “I’m beginning to remember why we didn’t used to get along.”

“Yeah. And I think we came to the agreement that we were both cocks back then,” Harry points out.

Draco attempts to hide a smile behind his coffee cup. “I say a lot of things when I’m watching Quidditch. It’s very distracting.”

“Oh, so you remember, then?” Harry grins.

“I don’t know what’s more disturbing—the fact that I’ve seen you three times in as many weeks or that I’m starting to get used to you,” Draco admits.

Heart thumping in approval, Harry smiles. “Maybe you’re just becoming more tolerant with age,” he suggests, and Draco’s eyes narrow. “Sore subject?” he asks. “We’re all getting older, you know.”

“Yes, thank you. I was reminded quite effectively of that fact when I sent my son off to Hogwarts last September. Apparently he’s old enough, though I find it hard to believe. Were we really so small?” he wonders, dropping almost beseeching eyes to his coffee.

Harry laughs. “Yeah, I think we were, but I know what you mean. I’ve got two of them there now, and Lily’ll be off before I know it; she can’t wait.” He falls silent, struck by the simple candour of the words—it’s as though he has forgotten to add the barbs and insults that have always been a part of the way they have spoken to each other, and it feels good. And strange.

“Three children. I always thought you were a little bit mad. What do you suppose I should do with this?” Draco says, frowning at the pink wafer biscuit that he is holding carefully between thumb and forefinger as though it might explode.

“I didn’t get one of those,” Harry says, indignant despite the fact that pink wafer biscuits don’t really go with coffee at all. It’s not the point.

“You can have it,” Draco offers, regarding the wafer with deep suspicion. “It doesn’t look natural.”

Harry snorts. “It’s a biscuit. Just eat it.”

Draco sniffs at the pink wafer, brow furrowed, and Harry struggles to contain his smile. He twists in his seat, looking around for the moody waitress, eventually locating her near the door. She stops cleaning the glass panels and gazes at him with something approaching interest.

“Where’s mine?” he mouths silently.

She purses her lips and shrugs before returning to her work. Harry sighs and turns his attention back to Draco, noticing for the first time the warm, herby scent of the window-cleaning solution. It’s the same one he’s been using at the new house, and its presence is oddly comforting. As, for some reason, is the flightiness of the young waitress’ attentions—first Blaise, then Harry, and now Draco seems to be her favourite customer. He can live with that, especially if it means he can continue to
enjoy Draco’s wonderfully bemused expressions.

“It’s not a biscuit,” Draco insists, holding it up to his face and examining the layers. “Biscuits are hard... and... brown.” He frowns. “I rather like the stripy middle, though.”

Harry’s heart leaps at the tiny connection, insignificant and wonderful as it falls into place.

“Stop being biscuit-ist. Just eat the bloody thing,” Harry instructs. “You should be honoured that she’s chosen to bestow pink wafers upon you.”

Draco snorts. “Offerings from the moody bint. I suppose I should at least give it a go.” With the expression of one who is walking unarmed into a Triwizard task, Draco bites into the wafer and chews tentatively.

Harry watches, strangely suspense-ridden for a man watching another man attempting to eat a little pink wafer biscuit. “Well?”

For a moment or two, Draco’s face is impassive, and then it crumples into an expression of repulsion so intense that Harry laughs out loud. Draco glares at him, chewing hurriedly and swallowing before drinking deeply from his cup. Harry suspects that only his impeccable manners prevent him from spitting the remnants into a paper napkin.

“Why on earth did you let me eat that?” he demands, dropping the remaining half onto his saucer.

“I thought you might enjoy it,” Harry says innocently. “I definitely didn’t expect that reaction.”

“It tastes like sawdust... and glue... sugary glue... in fact, bugger it. That biscuit is probably what death tastes like,” Draco says, wrinking his nose.

“That... really is good to know,” Harry says solemnly, gripping his cup almost to splintering point with the effort of not reaching over and claiming the rest of the biscuit for himself.

Draco sighs and regards Harry carefully, as though he’s some sort of curious specimen. “This is completely surreal,” he says, and then brightens. “So, aren’t you going to tell me exactly what you were thinking on Wednesday?”

Relieved to be back on familiar ground, Harry smiles. “You think I’m mad, don’t you?”

“A little bit, yes.”

“I can cope with that. I was thinking that it was time for a change,” he says simply.

Draco crosses his arms and leans back in his chair until it creaks, eyes incredulous. “You were bored of being Head Auror? You were bored of occupying arguably the second most senior position in the entire Ministry?”

“I didn’t say ‘bored’,” Harry points out. “But... yeah, I suppose that’s part of it. I’m sick of sitting behind a desk; it makes me feel old... and pointless. My kids never saw me—and they were just used to that. I suddenly realised that I had no good reason to put up with it any more. I don’t think any amount of seniority is worth wasting my life away doing something I don’t want to do.” Harry hesitates. Chews his lip. “Do you?”
Draco wraps his hands around his upper arms, fingers tightening in a subtle but familiar pattern—each in turn: little finger to thumb, one, two, three, four, five with the left and then with the right—Harry watches the tiny ritual, allowing it to calm him along with Draco.

“No,” he says at last, voice tight. “Not any more. I do think you’re mad, though. You’re giving up a huge amount of security. Doesn’t that bother you?”

Harry smiles, leaning back and mirroring Draco’s posture. “No. Security can get to the point where it’s suffocating, at least for me. I need a challenge. You remember that about me, I’m sure.”

Draco’s eyes flicker. “That’s right—you were always mad, weren’t you?”

The combination of lightness and exasperation in his voice lifts Harry, and his smile widens entirely without his permission. “Probably. I’d rather be mad than boring, though, and I think I might’ve been heading that way these last few years,” he admits.

Draco’s brow furrows and, just for a second, a flash of melancholy grips his features; just as quickly, though, it’s gone, and the grey eyes are once more fixed upon Harry with now familiar calm interest.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” he says, fingers tightening in rhythm once again. “So, what are you going to do now that you’ve escaped from behind your desk? Lie on your back and watch the leaves change?”

Harry laughs. “What?”

Draco gazes out of the window, mouth twisted in what can only be embarrassment. He says nothing for several seconds, and Harry is content to wait, watching the play of the weakening afternoon sunshine across sharp features and pale hair.

“I have no idea,” he says at last, turning back to Harry with a rueful smile. “It’s just something my mother says. I had no idea I’d picked it up.”

“It’s quite a nice thought, really,” Harry muses, partly because he really does think so and partly because just in that moment, he really doesn’t want to mock Draco. He seems almost too fragile. “But no, I don’t think so.”

“Don’t tell me you have a plan?”

“You actually think I’d walk out of my job without one?” Harry teases.

Draco just looks at him. It’s a look that Harry has seen hundreds of times before, and he almost feels as though he could sink through the floor with the relief of seeing it on the face of this Draco, here in this cafe on a Friday afternoon in February.

“Forgive me, Harry, but you’ve never struck me as a planner.”

Harry grins. “I bet you are, aren’t you? I bet you’re a planning fiend.”

Draco quirks an incredulous eyebrow. “I am a financial advisor. What do you think?”

Harry stalls, examining his empty coffee cup and waving it hopefully in the direction of the grumpy waitress, catching her eye and baring his teeth in an appealing smile.
“I don’t think you are a financial advisor,” he says, as the girl shakes her head and weaves her way over to the table to collect their cups. “Not really, anyway.”

“What are you trying to suggest, exactly?” Draco demands, just as the waitress says:

“Same again?” and “Well, you’re not getting another biscuit.”

“Yes, please,” Harry says. “And I’ll have a biscuit if there’s one going. I always eat my biscuits.”

“Coffee,” Draco says. “And that wasn’t a biscuit. Or, if it was, there was something wrong with it. Do you really think I’m making it up? I’m not; you can ask your ex-wife.”

“What?” the waitress asks, bemused.

“Don’t mind him,” Harry advises. “He’s talking to me. Mostly.”

“I’m talking to both of you!” Draco insists, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table, eyes flitting between Harry and the waitress with obvious frustration.

The waitress exhales messily, lifting her heavy fringe from her forehead. “I’m going to leave you to it,” she says, shaking her head and taking their cups back to the counter.

“What are you trying to suggest, exactly?” Draco demands, just as the waitress says:

“No, I meant—”

“Because I do realise that it’s hardly the career anyone imagined for me—least of all me—but I’m doing it, and I’m rather bloody good at it, too, and if—”

“Draco,” Harry interrupts, and this time he falls silent, regarding Harry with ‘there is something clearly very wrong with you’ written all over his face. “I’m not trying to cast any aspersions; I’m just trying to say—not very well...” He pauses, changing tack: “Look, you said it yourself—it wasn’t what you imagined for yourself, sitting around and talking about money all day.”

Draco’s expression turns indulgent. “Is that what you think I do?”

Harry wrinkles his nose. He has never cared or understood much about money, much less the financial world, but this is the first time his lack of knowledge has made him feel inadequate.

“No!” he challenges, opting to brazen it out.

Draco accepts his fresh cup of coffee from the waitress with a soft ‘thank you’ but he doesn’t look at her, even when she releases a heavy sigh and puts a custard cream on Harry’s saucer. The grey eyes, glowing with amusement, never leave Harry.

“I suppose it is,” he murmurs. “It really is horrendously fucking dull.”

Harry bites down on a triumphant smile. “I’ve got a biscuit,” he says, holding it up for Draco to see.

Draco adds cream and sugar cubes to his coffee with impressive viciousness. “I’ve got a job,” he counters, and Harry, who had been contemplating handing over the custard cream in an attempt to
make up for the pink wafer disaster, now discards that idea and consumes the whole thing in two bites.

“You’ve got a boring job,” he mumbles through a mouthful of biscuit.

“Ah, the self-righteousness of the newly unemployed,” Draco sighs, inhaling the steam from his coffee and gazing disdainfully at Harry until he finishes chewing.

“Don’t you think you could let me enjoy it for just a little bit?” Harry appeals, grinning. “A bit of tolerance, one divorced man to another?”

Draco snorts. “I don’t know about that. Anyway, I’m not divorced yet.”

Harry screws up his nose in sympathy. “How’s that going?”

“Nowhere. The harpy is managing to sink to new lows, though—she tried to go behind my back and get to my mother the other day. Astoria was furious when she found out.” Draco scowls and makes minute adjustments to his silver cufflinks. “Part of me thinks it will be marvellous if she just sacks the rotten shrew, but then, of course, the whole horrifying process will start all over again.”

Harry winces. “I suppose if the end is in sight...”

“It’s hard to know. I doubt Astoria even knows herself... unfortunately, she has a pathological loathing of confrontation, so she probably won’t ask, either.” Draco sighs bitterly, and then seems to gather himself. “As I said, I’m not divorced yet, and until then, I maintain that you are the unhinged one of the two of us.”

Harry sips his drink, savouring the hot sting of the ceramic against his lower lip and the rich bitterness of the coffee. “That may be so,” he concedes. “But not because I don’t want to sit behind a desk any more.”

“You actually are trying to recruit me, aren’t you?” Draco murmurs, pretending to look around for traps or men with nets or whatever else might be going on inside his head. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t invite me for coffee without an ulterior motive.”

“Shut up,” Harry sighs, settling his cup into his saucer with a clank. “I’m just... saying. Something. Oh, fuck knows. When you were younger... what did you want to be when you grew up?”

“Alive,” Draco says drily.

Harry’s heart quickens; he exhales slowly. “Okay, I should have expected that.”

Draco arches an eyebrow. “I wanted to be head of the Auror Department.”

“No you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t,” Draco agrees. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“You are hard work,” Harry opines, and Draco merely blinks. And he is, but Harry doesn’t really mind.

“I have absolutely no sympathy for you,” Draco says, picking up stray sugar granules on one finger
and then reaching several inches across the table to repeat the process with his other hand.

*Balance me,* Harry thinks. He chews his lip in contemplation. “And why’s that?”

“Because,” Draco murmurs, eyes on his task, “you have known me for a long time. You should know what to expect. Any complications thereafter...” He pauses, frowns, dusts off his hands and looks up at Harry with an odd little smile, “are entirely your responsibility.”

“You sound like a book,” Harry advises, mouth tugging into a reciprocal smile. “So, do you want to hear about my workshop or not?”

Draco slides his fingertips into his hair and worries it slightly, eyes puzzled. “Your *workshop*?”

His confusion wraps around Harry like a warm blanket and he leans across the table on his crossed arms, glowing with satisfaction. “Yep. Well, it’s not a workshop yet, but it will be—this little building on Diagon Alley next to the Dragondale Deli; it used to belong to this mad Greek family, and they were just using it to store stuff...” he trails off, realising he’s waffling.

“You’re going to paint?” Draco asks.

“No, I’d be useless at that. I’m going to blow glass.”

“You know how to blow glass?” Draco says faintly, reaching for his cup and examining it as though the secret to Harry’s madness lies within.

“I do,” Harry confirms, puffed up with pride. “I’m not exactly an expert, but I have a good feeling about it.”

Draco sets down his cup and regards Harry with undisguised bemusement. “Only you could stake an entire career change on a good feeling.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“It was an observation.”

“I see. Would you like to come and observe my new workshop? Lots of crates, lots of spiders,” he teases, enjoying Draco’s expression. “Lots of cleaning to be done...”

“Appealing though that sounds, I have to be in Portsmouth in a few minutes,” Draco says, glancing at his watch and reaching for his coat. “That ‘work’ thing, you remember?”

Harry just pulls a face. For some reason that he can’t identify, his heart is beating a celebratory rhythm, and he feels as though nothing in the world could upset him right now.

“I’m trying to forget,” he says at last, reaching (still casually) for the newspaper once more. “Enjoy yourself.”

Draco snorts. With definite reluctance, he stands, shakes out his coat, and slips his arms into it. For a moment, he stands there, gazing down at Harry, expression indecipherable.

“It’s been interesting. And I still think you’re insane, but thank you for the coffee. But not the biscuit,” he adds, frowning.
Harry grins. “No pink biscuits next time. I promise.”

Draco takes a breath. Harry forgets to exhale. “Is it true that Gryffindors always keep their promises?”

Harry laughs, more out of relief than anything else. “See you soon, Draco.”

One eyebrow lift, nod to the waitress, bell clang and door slam later, Harry is alone at the table.

“One on your own again?” comes the not-quite-as-bored-as-usual voice.

Harry opens the Prophet and stares at the Quidditch scores. “Yep.”

“Do you want some more coffee?”

Harry hesitates, thinking of the afternoon of cleaning ahead of him. He holds out his cup.

“Yes please.”

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Eventually, after the third attempted reading of the newspaper, Harry abandons it, takes the empty cups to the counter and pays the older waitress, who smiles sweetly at him and tells him to have a nice evening. Harry thanks her with a wry smile, knowing that the activities he has planned for the next few hours aren’t going to provide him with the most fun he has ever had. Still, they are necessary—he has Lily for the day tomorrow, and he wants to show her a clean, bright, workshop-in-progress, not a dusty old storeroom.

With that in mind, he strides quickly toward Diagon Alley, relishing the brisk air that whips through his hair and sends his scarf streaming out behind him, allowing it to lift away the part of him that wants nothing more than to sprawl on a bench and think about Draco’s hands or his eyes or his surprising array of expressions. For now, at least, he needs to focus.

When he reaches the workshop, he fishes out his key and lifts a hand to greet Kari, who is waving a spatula at him through the open window. He smiles, shakes his head, and lets himself into the building.

“Where the hell to start?” he mumbles, scrubbing at his hair and turning in a slow circle, taking in the dirt and the wreaths of cobwebs and the abandoned sacks and crates on the floor. It’s dark. Too fucking dark.

Right.

Harry strips off his coat and scarf and hangs them carefully over the edge of the nearest crate, then rolls up his sleeves and looks around for something resembling a cloth.

“Bugger.”

Cursing his lack of preparation, Harry heads back out into the late afternoon sunshine. He returns five minutes later with a handful of soft cloths, a scrubbing brush, and a bucket of hot water and pine-scented cleaning fluid, courtesy of Kari, and a confusing lecture on the proper (Greek) way to
clean windows from her father.

He leaves the door open, hoping to cleanse the musty smell from the workshop, and attacks the biggest window, first from the outside, clutching a cloth and plunging his hand into the bucket, barely caring about the scalding temperature of the water. Wringing it out roughly, he slaps the wet cloth against the pane, inhaling the fragrant steam and rubbing furiously at the dirty glass until every last scrap of grime has been washed away.

His hair is beginning to stick to his forehead by the time he swills out his cloth in the bucket and heads inside, but he presses on, scrubbing and wiping at the glass until its transparency is restored. Gratified, he stops for a moment and gazes out onto Diagon Alley, catching his breath before he attempts to clean the two skylights. For long seconds, he stares up at the ceiling, wand hand twitching at his belt, but in the end, he shakes off the temptation and reaches for his bucket. He has the strangest feeling that the little old man is watching him, just to make sure he’s doing everything properly.

It takes the best part of an hour, a very creaky ladder and nerves of steel to get both skylights sparkling, inside and out, and by the time Harry has both feet back on solid stone, he’s worn out and soaked in scummy warm water, but there’s absolutely no doubt that he has done a proper job.

“Bloody windows,” he mutters, lowering himself to the cold floor in a cross-legged sprawl. He draws his wand and applies a rough Drying Charm to his clothes before opting to make the task a little easier and vanishing the mess of crates and sacks with one satisfying flick of the wrist.

Dusk is turning to darkness as he works his way around the edges of the rooms, carefully removing the old, ragged cobwebs. He leaves the occupied ones in place and acquaints himself with each of his new spiders, and then swabs down the walls and sweeps and scrubs at the floor until, by the time he is ready to drop, the little workshop is spotless.

Harry leans on his broom and surveys the neat rows of empty shelves, ready to be filled with strange and fantastic things. He’s aching and sticky and covered in dust, but he doesn’t care—it feels like it belongs to him again.

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“This is so much better than your office,” Lily enthuses, turning in circles on the stone floor. The bright morning sun glances off the sequins in her knitted hat and scatters tiny circles of light across the bare walls.

Harry watches her from the door, smiling. “I think so, too.”

She turns to him, face alight with approval. “It’s got skylights!”

“Of course. I’m going to need lots of light for this.”

Lily nods seriously. “You’re definitely not going back to being an Auror, are you?”

“No,” Harry says, anxiety rising despite having already had this conversation just days ago, without major incident. “No, Lil, I’m not going back. If you’re worried about it—”

“I’m not worried, Dad,” she interrupts. “I was just checking. I like it that you’re happier now, and... maybe you’ll have more time to do stuff.”
Harry smiles, letting his unease slip away. “What kind of stuff?” he teases.

Lily pulls a face. “Fun stuff.”

“Right. Well, maybe you’ll have to help me with that; it’s been a while.”

Lily folds her arms and sighs. “Oh, Dad, we’ve got such a lot of work to do.”

Her expression is so grave that Harry tries his level best to swallow the laughter bubbling up in his chest, but when she shakes her head and sighs, he loses the battle, loosing an inelegant snort and laughing breathlessly until Lily’s frown begins to waver.

“I don’t know what you’re laughing at,” she giggles, “this is very serious.”

“I know, I know,” Harry murmurs, schooling his features into a solemn mask. “What do you suggest?”

Lily blinks. “Well, I thought we could go to the pet shop... and then the ice cream parlour. And then you can choose if you want.”

“Thanks,” Harry says, amused. “Ice cream I can do, but what will poor Frank think about you going to the pet shop? He’ll think you’re looking for a replacement!”

“No,” Lily insists, looking scandalised. “I’d never do that! I just like to look at the Puffskeins and lizards and things, but Mum doesn’t like going in there because she thinks I’ll talk her into bringing something home.”

“I see, and how do I know you’re not going to try that with me?” Harry challenges, eyeing his daughter sternly and thinking about the cat that is probably wreaking havoc on his house as they speak.

“No, Dad, I just want to look,” she says, eyes wide. “I promise.”

Harry chews on his lip in contemplation. Here it begins. He wonders if it has just occurred to Lily that her leverage for manipulating her dad has increased several hundredfold in the last few weeks. She’s a very smart girl, but she’s also a very kind girl, and he optimistically tells himself that it’ll be fine. He just has to be on the lookout for the occasional batting of eyelashes and coveting of lizards.

“Well...” he muses.

“Please?” she wheedles.

Harry folds, just as he knew he would. Sorry, Gin, he says silently as he locks up the workshop and he and Lily head out into the Saturday morning crowds.

The Magical Menagerie is just as he remembers it from his visit with Ron and Hermione all those years ago. The first thing that hits him is the earthy, dusty, slightly damp smell of more animals than he can identify, closely followed by the amazing racket put up by squeaking rats, sombre ravens, wailing cats, and the constant low rumble of a large collection of toads in one corner. As he turns to examine a cage full of pure white rabbits, he almost collides with a vast green snail which is climbing slowly up the nearest wall.
“Ah!” he gasps, startled, and the snail’s antennae swivel slowly in his direction.

“Ah!” it mimics in an odd, high-pitched tone, and disappears into its shell.

Behind him, Lily giggles. “Stop frightening things, Dad,” she whispers.

“That’s not to worry, sir—those snails are very dramatic,” advises a gravelly voice and Harry turns to see a bearded man of about his own age, leaning on the counter and poking a similar snail with his finger; this one seems to have attached itself to the till and is making a strange rattling noise as it crawls over the keys. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Thanks, but we’re just looking,” Harry says firmly.

Lily glances up from her rapt inspection of cage full of Pygmy Puffs and grins. “Just looking,” she echoes.

Harry and the bearded man exchange glances, and he wonders just how many persuasive children he has at home. And, indeed, how many strange animals they have convinced him to take in. Feeling suddenly fortunate that he doesn’t work in a pet shop, Harry follows Lily around the store. The place is small but so packed with tanks and cages and boxes (not to mention the array of creatures that appear to have free run of the shop) that it somehow feels as though there will never be enough time to see everything.

“Look at these stripy guinea pigs,” Harry says, nudging Lily.

She smiles and gently presses her fingers against the cage. “They’re like humbugs.”

“What do you think Frank would feel about these?”

“Frank’s pretty lazy,” Lily says, laughing softly as one of the guinea pigs sniffs at her fingertip. “He’d probably just try to give it a wash.”

“Probably,” Harry concedes, thoughts drawn to the other Frank, who he doubts would regard a guinea pig as anything beyond a tasty snack. He really does miss him.

“Charlotte Ross says it’s my fault you and Mum split up,” Lily says suddenly.

Harry’s heart hurts as he flicks a sidelong glance at his daughter. She doesn’t look at him, instead focusing a little too hard on the tangle of stripy fur in front of her.

“Charlotte Ross doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” He frowns. “Who’s Charlotte Ross?”

“A girl in my class.”

“I should know that,” Harry sighs, mostly to himself. “When was this?”

“Last week. Her mum’s on the PTA and they were talking about it—”

“They talk about people’s divorces at PTA meetings?” Harry interrupts, aghast.

“I’ve never been to one,” Lily says, meeting his eyes at last. “But I suppose so. Charlotte said it’s
always the kids’ fault. And especially the youngest, because they take all the parents’ attention and that’s why they fall out and that’s why they get divorced.”

“Oh, Lily,” Harry sighs.

“Oh, Lily!” cries a Mynah bird from atop a nearby cage.

“You shush,” Harry reproaches. “And, Lil... you know that’s not true, don’t you?”

She shrugs, delicately fishing out a piece of carrot from the bottom of the cage and holding it out to the nearest guinea pig. “I know you said it’s because you and Mum weren’t happy, but she just kept going on about it.” Lily sighs, scrunching up her freckled nose. “She’s in my maths group, so I couldn’t even get away from her.”

Filled with a probably inappropriate level of ire, Harry closes his eyes briefly and draws in a serene breath. It’s probably not the kid’s fault, though he wouldn’t mind five minutes alone with her mother.

“I’m sorry you had to listen to that, Lil, but I assure you—Charlotte Ross is talking complete rubbish. Your mum and I split up because of us, not because of you. If she knew how brilliant you were, she wouldn’t dare,” Harry pauses to nudge Lily with his elbow. “She’s talking out of her arse.”

Lily snorts, even though she looks as though she’s trying not to. “I’m not brilliant.”

“I’m afraid you are,” Harry says with the utmost seriousness, slinging an arm around his daughter’s shoulders. “And I have the final word.”

Lily makes a thoughtful little sound and leans into him. “I’ve seen her say things before... to people who’ve parents have split up. I didn’t really get how nasty it was until now. I should’ve said something to her.”

Heart lifted, Harry hugs her tighter. “Maybe you will next time.”

“Yeah.” Lily smiles grimly and then brightens. “Jeanette put a note on her back when she wasn’t looking.”

“What did it say?”

Lily giggles guiltily. “I pick my nose and eat it.”

Harry laughs. “I think Jeanette sounds like a good friend. And I think the other girl is silly and selfish and doesn’t understand how things are. You should feel sorry for her. Her parents obviously haven’t taught her any manners.”

“That’s not what Mum said,” Lily says darkly.

“Oh?”

“She wanted to talk to Mrs Harbottle about it. And Aunt Hermione said that Jeanette is a bad influence, but I’m not sure if she really meant it.”

“Your Aunt Hermione would know all about that,” Harry murmurs, and Lily glances up at him, puzzled. “Never mind. Shall we have a look at these lizards?”
“Okay.” Lily nods and relinquishes the bars of the guinea pig cage, turning and picking her way across the cluttered floor toward the warm hum of the charms encircling the reptile section. As he follows her, the air all at once becomes alive with the susurrant words of a hundred snakes engaged in lazy conversation with their tank-mates.

“Is it time?”

“That is not the way to do it...”

“She is sleeping.”

“She is always sleeping.”

“Who is watching?”

“That food is mine, flat-head.”

“Dislike it so very much when the water runs out.”

Harry seeks out the source of the final mournful voice and draws his wand, casting a muffled Aguamenti and watching with satisfaction as clear water fills the huge stone bowl in a tank several feet across the shop floor. Its occupant, a heavy black snake with iridescent scales, flicks its tongue eagerly and slides into the water in a tangled heap.

“Al wants a lizard, you know,” Lily says, tilting her head as the vast, shimmering iguana-like creature in the tank in front of her does the same. “Or a dragon.”

“Yes, I thought he might,” Harry mumbles, distracted by a rather heated exchange between two brightly-coloured King snakes over the best sleeping spot. He thinks there’s plenty of space for both of them on the hot stone they both seem to want so much, but decides it’s best not to interfere.

“Dad? Dad?” Lily tries. Harry shakes himself, and then she is at his side, eyes wide. “Are they talking to you?”

“No. They’re talking to each other,” Harry says. “I doubt they’re the slightest bit interested in what we’re doing. Snakes can be a bit like that.”

“Oh. I thought you liked snakes,” Lily says, voice uncertain.

“I do. Doesn’t mean they can’t be a bit... say-urath-sah,” Harry attempts, unable to locate the English equivalent for the word that somehow describes the best and worst qualities of serpents.

Lily bites on a ragged thumbnail and looks, just for a moment, very much like her mother. “What does that mean?”

Harry sighs. “It’s not very easy to explain. It’s just a word for... how snakes are.”

Contemplative, Lily crouches and peers through the glass at a slender tangle of red and green stripes.

“Can you teach me?”

“Parseltongue? I doubt it, Lil, I barely know how I can speak it myself, sorry. But I can translate if
you like,” he offers, dropping to his knees beside her.

“There’s a lot of them in there,” she murmurs, fingers pressed to the glass with the utmost care.

“They’re just babies,” Harry says, squinting to separate the snarl of heads and tails and flickery little tongues. “I’m sure the man will move them to different tanks when they’re bigger.”

“Ask them how old they are,” Lily requests.

Harry scrubs at his face, hiding a grin behind his hand. He has a feeling that Lily isn’t going to get a straight answer to her question, but he asks it anyway.

The response is an indecipherable confusion of soft hisses. Harry waits, and, after almost a full minute, his patience is rewarded. One small, patterned head rises above the rest like a periscope and fixes Harry with tiny beady eyes. A forked tongue darts in and out as the little snake slides to the front of the tank and sways gently from side to side.

“Hello. That is a strange question.”

Harry grins. “She says that’s a strange question. They’re not really too bothered with time,” he tells her. “But we can ask someone who works here,” he suggests, twisting around to glance at the bearded man, who is examining a ferret’s ear through a strange, whirring monocle.

“Oh!” Lily says, gazing delightedly at the little snake. “I’m sorry. How do you know it’s a girl?”

“She sounds like a girl,” Harry offers, for want of a more concrete explanation.

“Ask her what her name is?”

Harry obliges, shifting on the cold floor as he waits for a response. It’s already obvious that this snake is rather different from Frank. Whether the eagerness and near-constant movement are due to youth or personality is unclear, but Harry is intrigued.

“She says they call her... it’s difficult to say exactly, but it means something like... little river... little ribbon of water? Something like that.”

Lily beams. “That’s lovely.”

Harry conveys the message to the snake, who turns herself almost all the way upside down to reply. He laughs. “She says the glittering one is very kind.” He nudges Lily. “I think she means you.”

Lily adjusts her sparkly hat and flushes. “Do you think her brothers and sisters don’t like talking? Can we ask her that?”

Harry does, and then he asks the little snake every question Lily can think of, because he’s having a fantastic time and it doesn’t matter that his knees are killing him or that he has a sneaking feeling that the Mynah bird has dropped something disagreeable down the back of his coat.

He has lost track of time altogether when the bearded man appears to feed the lizards, and jumps slightly at the sound of his voice.
“Have I to start charging you rent?” he jokes, scraping the nearest tank lid back to dump in crickets and other assorted treats from a big bag.

Lily looks up at him with an apologetic smile. “Sorry. Me and my dad were talking to the snakes.”

The man laughs, continuing with his task. “Get much out of them, did you?”

“Lots,” Lily says earnestly. “This one’s really chatty.”

The bearded man frowns, turning slowly to follow Lily’s pointing finger. His bristly eyebrows shoot up as he takes in the energetically weaving little snake on the other side of the glass.

“Really? Did you? That’s...” the man falls silent as he catches sight of Harry and stares as though seeing him properly for the first time. “Mr Potter! I almost didn’t recognise you! I can’t say I ever expected to see you in here... it’s a lovely surprise, though,” he enthuses, face lit with genuine pleasure as he crumples up his bag and peers down at Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry says, astonished to find yet another person in this reality who is polite and friendly and respectful. With astonishment comes shame, but Harry shakes it away with some effort. “You’ve got some lovely things in here. Some of them have got a lot to say for themselves.”

“Yes, we—oh, bloody hell, Colin,” the man sighs, eyeing the back of Harry’s coat and confirming his suspicions. “He does that on purpose, I’m sure,” the man despairs of the Mynah, who has now made himself scarce. “Sorry about that, I’ll just whip it away for you.” A cool sensation slides briefly over Harry’s left shoulder-blade and then disappears. “Can I interest you in one of those?” He points. “Unique variety of corn snake. About six weeks old. Bred them myself,” he adds proudly as Harry and Lily finally get to their feet and brush themselves off.

Harry swallows against the pang of longing that carves through him. The idea of a little companion, small enough to carry in a pocket or around a wrist, and smart enough to hold a conversation, is extremely alluring. But he did not come in here to buy a snake.

“They’re beautiful,” he says, regretful. “But we’re just looking.”

“Dad,” Lily whispers, tugging at his sleeve. “Dad, I think you should get one. It’ll be good for you to have someone to talk to—I don’t want you to be lonely.”

Harry drops his eyes to the floor and rakes an awkward hand through his hair, thrown off balance by his daughter’s frank concern. Embarrassed, he lifts his chin and smiles at the bearded man.

“I’m not lonely,” he assurs.

“I’m sure you’re not,” the man says gravely, but Harry can tell that he is trying not to smile.

Lily sighs. “Are we getting a snake or not?”

**~*~**

Less than half an hour later, Harry and Lily are back at the house, occupying opposite ends of the sofa and sharing a large tub of Fortescue’s chocolate-cherry-crunch as they mull over their latest purchase: ‘Unusual Names and their Meanings’.
The tiny snake coils neatly around Harry’s wrist as he reads, resting her head against his watch strap and flicking out her tongue to taste the air of her new home, while Frank, visibly unnerved, watches from Lily’s end of the sofa with wide eyes and whisking tail. Absently, Lily pats his head and digs her spoon into the ice cream, tucking her feet beneath her and glowing with the accomplishment of someone who has, against the odds, managed to get her own way.

Harry is trying not to think too hard about that part.

If he’s totally honest, he’s rather excited, and he’s not about to let the prospect of what everyone else might say ruin it for him. Without taking his eyes from the page, he scoops a spoonful of ice cream into his mouth and hums contentedly, savouring the bitter sweetness of cherries and dark chocolate on his tongue and the crackle of cereal crumbs between his teeth.

“That smells cold,” the snake offers, apparently curious. “A strange thing to eat.”

Harry licks his spoon. “I don’t think you’d like it.”

“No, thank you.” She tucks herself into his sleeve until only the very tip of her snout protrudes.

“Here,” Harry says, handing the book to Lily. “You have a look. I’ve just been looking for names that have something to do with water. I thought we should try to match her proper name as closely as we can.”

Lily takes the heavy book and holds it open on her lap. Harry watches the concentration furrow her brow until his attention is caught by Frank, who has begun a tentative slink along the side of the sofa. Uncertain of his intentions, Harry readies a hand to push the cat away, but as he draws within a foot or so of the little snake, the forked tongue shoots out inquisitively and the cat shoots under the sofa, where he crouches and lets out tiny plaintive noises.

“Frank’s afraid,” he says, and Lily sighs.

“Poor Frank. I don’t think he’s ever seen a snake before.”

“Maybe they’ll get used to each other,” Harry says hopefully.


Harry chews his lip and considers his mostly hidden new friend. “I’m not sure that’s quite right.”


“Well, maybe it shouldn’t be too complicated,” Harry offers. “She’s only a little snake.”

“She’ll get bigger, though, won’t she?”

“Not very. Not like—er, not like a python or a boa,” Harry improvises, just in time to prevent himself from utterly confusing his daughter by apparently comparing his snake to her cat.

“Such a warm place,” the snake enthuses suddenly, wriggling sinuously against Harry’s forearm. “A warm place for me. How wonderful.”
Harry smiles. The gratitude makes a rather nice change.

“What does she say?” Lily asks, mouth full of ice cream.

“She’s nice and warm.”

Lily smiles and continues to flip through the book. Suddenly, her eyebrows draw together. “Didn’t you already have a name book? From when you had us?”

Harry shakes his head, reaching for more ice cream. “No. We didn’t need one; we already knew what we were going to call you.”

“But what if we’d not looked like those names? What if I’d not looked like a Lily?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “You just did. You looked so much like your grandmother – my mother – and you still do. Though,” he adds, gazing at his daughter, “you look an awful lot like your mother as well.”

Lily looks down at the pages and smiles. And then: “Didn’t Mum want to choose any of the names?”

“She did. We both agreed on all your names.”

“Oh.” Lily presses her lips together in consideration. “But... I mean... James and me are named after your mum and dad, and Al is named after those two teachers.” She glances at him uncertainly.

Harry sucks in a breath, unsure of where this is going. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Didn’t she want to call one of us after someone in her family?”

Harry’s stomach twists uncomfortably and he avoids Lily’s eyes, instead gazing down at his hands, where the little snake is weaving around his thumbs in a shock of graceful colour that is almost enough to distract him from his daughter’s question. A fair question, at that, and just another of those things that he hasn’t ever allowed himself to think about too hard. He’s not sure he knows how to answer it without revealing himself to be utterly self-centred.

“I don’t think it’s that she didn’t want to, Lil,” he says carefully. “I think it’s just that we’d lost a lot of people and we wanted to remember them. Like my parents, and Albus Dumbledore, and Severus Snape, and Sirius...”

Lily digs a whole cherry out of the tub as she thinks. “That Luna lady’s alive,” she says thoughtfully. “We went to her wedding, I remember, it was really weird and cool.”

“Yeah,” Harry concedes, a tiny smile escaping and breaking the surface of his self-reproach. “She’s very, very much alive. I think that’s why we chose her name. It’s important to remember the living as well as the dead.”

“What about Mum’s brother?” Lily says suddenly. “Uncle George had a twin, didn’t he?”

Throat tightening, Harry nods. “Yes, he did. Your Uncle Fred.”

“What was he like?” Lily asks, curling her fingers over the edges of the book and staring at Harry. Her eyes are so wide and penetrating that Harry is powerless to do anything but answer her.
“He was brilliant. He and your Uncle George were like this double act... they used to finish each other’s sentences, and come up with these insane schemes together. You never really knew what was going to happen when they were around, but it was always interesting.”

Lily smiles. “I bet Uncle George misses him a lot,” she says softly.

Harry nods, eyes hot. “We all miss him, but I think Uncle George misses him more than anybody.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to James or Al,” Lily says, and then: “Don’t tell them I said that, will you?”

“I won’t,” Harry says solemnly, still mired in the guilt thrown up by Lily’s original question. The thing is, he hadn’t forced her; Gin had always known how much those names meant to him, and she’d never even tried to suggest anything different. And he’d gone along with it, knowing that she had losses of her own to commemorate, family members and friends to honour. Had she been so desperate to please him that she had become invisible? Had he been so damaged and egocentric that he’d let her?

He sighs, lifting a hand to rub at his eyes beneath his glasses. There isn’t a lot he can do for his twenty-something self now, but he supposes it never hurts to recognise past transgressions. To feel them, and to atone for them by attempting, where possible, to be less of a selfish dick in future.

Pensive, he strokes the head of the little snake and listens to the scrabbling sounds of Frank’s claws on the wooden floorboards as he scuttles around under the sofa. Lily licks chocolate sauce from her spoon and gazes at him calmly.

“I’m glad I’ve got an alive name, Dad.”

Harry smiles. “Good.”

She returns to the book, and for several minutes there is silence as she flicks through the pages.

“I think this might be it,” she says eventually, finger tapping against the paper. “‘Misu’ – it’s Native American and it means ‘ripples in the water’. That’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Harry agrees, thinking that it suits the energetic little snake rather well, and, apart from anything else, he thinks it’s time for someone else to choose a name. Even Lily’s cat’s name came from him. It’s definitely her turn. “I think that’s the one.”


The snake rises into the air and waves slowly back and forth, following the movements of Lily’s fingers as though able to understand her perfectly.

“What do you think?” he asks. “What do you think, little Misu?”

“Lovely, lovely. Shall we eat now?”

Harry snorts. It would seem that she and Frank—at least, the serpentine version—have something in common after all. He wonders if Misu likes bacon.
Misu, as it turns out, likes everything. She flicks out her tongue in approval for chicken, sausages, tinned tuna fish, roast beef, and even the garlic mushrooms from Harry and Lily’s dinner, though she settles quite happily for the miniscule dead mouse supplied by the man from the Magical Menagerie. Her boundless optimism is not limited to food, either—the little snake enthuses endlessly to Harry about the warmth of the house, the exciting variety of smells, the staircase spider, and the small tank he has placed on his bedside for her, “just until you’re a little bit bigger, and then you can sleep wherever you like”.

“Goodnight,” she says, coiling into a neat spiral under her Warming Charm. “Goodnight to you, and goodnight to the small glittering one, and goodnight to the beautiful spider, and goodnight to the frightened cat.”

“Goodnight, Misu,” Harry murmurs, turning out the lights and wondering just what he has managed to get himself into.

By Monday morning, one thing is very clear. The thing into which he has managed to get himself is a very noisy thing indeed, and not just during daylight hours, because Misu talks in her sleep.

Most of the time, the words that escape when she is unconscious do not make a lot of sense, but Harry finds there is something disconcerting about stirring awake at three o’clock in the morning to a snake’s sleepy insistence that ‘it is time for the pointed one’. Still, he suspects he will get used to it.

After a shower and a quick breakfast and caffeine fix, he installs Misu on his wrist and heads out to the Ministry to check that Ron and Helga remain intact after spending most of Friday afternoon alone together.

“Wicked,” Ron breathes, dropping a good twenty years and all sense of Head Auror gravitas at the sight of Misu. “He’s brilliant.”

“She’s a girl,” Harry advises, perching on the edge of Helga’s unoccupied desk and extending his arm toward Ron. “Ron, meet Misu.”

“Brilliant,” Ron grins. “Oh, wow... Mum’s going to do her nut.”

“I didn’t know she didn’t like snakes,” Harry says, watching Misu’s tongue flickering over the back of Ron’s freckled hand.

“It’s not that, it’s just... well, she already thinks you’ve gone a bit mad, doesn’t she? Suddenly buying a snake probably isn’t going to make her think differently,” Ron points out, still grinning.

“I suppose not,” Harry concedes. “Just more fuel for the midlife crisis rumours, eh?”

Ron shrugs, momentarily distracted as Misu allows him to stroke her iridescent belly. “Sorry, mate.”

“I’ll cope. It’s not my fault, anyway. Lily wanted to go to the pet shop.”

Ron winces. “In that case, maybe you were lucky. It’s just a snake—you could’ve come home with a Narwhal.”

“A what?”
“Rose’s latest obsession,” Ron explains, showing Misu a ginger biscuit and laughing when she attempts to curl herself around it and tug it away from him. “And Al’s as well, if I know those two.”

“I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough then,” Harry sighs, and then: “I’d watch that if you want to keep it; she’ll eat anything except ice cream and she’s stronger than she looks.”

Amused, Ron reclaims his biscuit, dunking it into his tea and shoving the whole thing into his mouth at once. “She’s got good taste,” he mumbles.

“That’s not good for you,” Harry advises as Misu winds sulkily through his fingers.

“Is it good for him?” she asks, and there’s no sarcasm in her voice, only curiosity.

“Probably not, but he’s big enough and ugly enough to decide that for himself.”

Misu laughs, and it’s a rather brilliant sound.

“Are you talking about me?” Ron demands, eyes narrowed.

“Why does everyone always think that?” Harry deflects. “Anyway,” he continues, dropping his voice even though they are alone in the office, “how’s it going with Helga?”

“Alright,” Ron says, nodding. “She’s a bit fierce, but she certainly gets the job done.”

“I’ve got a few more bits of things to go through with you, but you know all the important stuff now,” Harry admits, batting Misu away from his cup of tea. “Any problems, though... you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Yes,” Ron assures, as though it’s the thousandth time he has done so, and it’s not all that much of an exaggeration, but Harry is determined to do this properly. “Stop worrying, You’re a good teacher, and I’ve got Helga, who seems to know everything about the job anyway. Even Fitzwilliam’s been down a couple of times to make sure I’m alright.”

Harry nods, biting the inside of his mouth at the mention of Fitzwilliam’s name. “Mm. Good.”

“You’re coming to this insane dinner Mum’s doing tonight, aren’t you?” Ron asks, appearing not to notice Harry’s grimace. “Apparently we have to celebrate my new job with every single Weasley she can possibly assemble in one place at one time.”

“Of course I’m coming,” Harry says. “She said—”

“She has every reason to be proud of you, Mr Weasley,” Helga interrupts, stalking into the office and seating herself behind her desk. “This is a very important job.”

“Yeah, I... thanks, Helga,” Ron mumbles, flushing slightly. “It’s nice that she’s proud, it’s just a bit overwhelming sometimes, you know?”

Harry, who does know, flashes his friend a sympathetic smile, at the same time looking forward to being right in the middle of it, feeding into Molly’s enthusiasm and delightedly helping her to embarrass Ron as much as is humanly possible.
“I don’t know, Mr Weasley, my mother has never been remotely impressed by anything I have done,” Helga says briskly, batting Harry off the edge of her desk with a wooden ruler. “Get your behind off my diary, Mr Potter.”

Amused at the new shift in her loyalties, Harry obeys, stepping back to face her with Misu cradled to his chest. Waiting.

“For the love of all that is holy,” Helga cries, reaching for her rosary, “tell me there is not a snake in my office.”

**~*~**

Just after midday, Harry leaves the Ministry. Lifted by the time spent with his old friends and grateful to be able to walk away from the stifling bureaucracy and into the sunny afternoon, he smiles as he weaves his way along Diagon Alley, and when his stomach grumbles at the savoury aroma of fresh bread, he puts off his afternoon plans and diverts to the Dragondale.

He isn’t surprised to see a queue, but he is surprised to see a tall blond man in a long black coat at the head of it, and he laughs, genuine pleasure spiking in his chest.

“Turkey salad on brown, please.” Draco turns at the sound, hard expression softening just a fraction when he sees Harry. “You really are everywhere, aren’t you?”

“Hi, Harry!” Kari calls from behind the counter and he waves sheepishly at her. “Do you want any cakes or pastries with that?” she asks Draco as she expertly throws together his sandwich. “We’ve got a really nice—”

“No,” Draco interrupts, glancing back at her for a split second. “Thank you. Just the sandwich.”

Harry squeezes himself toward the front of the crowded deli, smiling apologetically at the people in the queue, most of whom seem torn between ‘Ooh, it’s Harry Potter!’ and ‘He’s pushing in, he is!’

“Still not sure about accepting sweet things from strange women?” he teases, and Draco, apparently remembering the pink biscuit, scowls.

“Who are you calling strange?” Kari demands good-naturedly. “Two Sickles twenty-five, please, sir.”

Draco shoots bewildered glances between her and Harry as he exchanges several coins for his lunch and moves away from the counter, much to the relief of the old witch behind him in the queue, who immediately shuffles forward and launches into a description of a particular olive that is ‘just murder’ to find at this time of year.

“I’m just over there,” Harry says, pointing at his workshop through the side window.

“Yes, I—good grief, what is that?” Grey eyes widen in surprise and then narrow to focus on Misu, who has fallen asleep in a loose ring around Harry’s wrist, head tucked through her tail for security.

“This is Misu,” Harry says, flattening himself against the wall to make room for a round little witch with a huge basket marked ‘Quality Quidditch Supplies’. “My daughter decided I needed a pet, and I’m not all that good at saying no to her at the moment.”
Draco’s mouth twists ruefully, even as he sighs: “Manipulated by a ten-year-old,” and shakes his head.

Harry snorts. “And I’m sure you’re an immoveable object when it comes to your son.”

“Obviously. Listen, I’d love to continue getting in the way of everyone here so that I can talk to you, but I have a terribly dull meeting in a few minutes, and I’d actually like to try eating lunch today,” he says, holding up his sandwich, and though he clearly means his words to be scathing and sarcastic, Harry isn’t quite convinced.

“Alright then,” he concedes, chewing on his lip. “What time do you finish?”

Draco’s surprise lasts approximately half a second, and then the familiar veil of weary harassment descends back over his features. “I’ll be out by four. I’ll meet you in the moody bint cafe.”

Harry opens his mouth to respond, but Draco lingers long enough only to grant Harry a brief nod and then he’s sweeping out of the deli and into the street, long coat swishing behind him. Harry directs his smile at the floor and rubs vaguely at the back of his neck. He’s not entirely sure what just happened, but it has to be a step in the right direction.

“Everything alright, Harry?”

He looks up at the sound of Kari’s voice, startled to see that the queue has now mostly dispersed and the shop is quiet but for the soft humming of a purple-robed old man who is leaning on the counter, waiting for his cup of coffee.

“Er, yeah. Fine. All good,” he assures, feeling slightly off balance.

“Did you want something to eat?” she asks slowly, as though talking to a mad person.

Harry blinks. Suddenly he’s not hungry. “No thanks.”

Kari leans on the counter, dark eyebrows raised. “Did you need something else? Hot water? A sponge?”

Harry recovers himself and pulls a face at her. “Not today, thanks.” He heads for the door and pulls it open.

“So, why did you come in?”

“That’s a good question,” Harry says. He grins at Kari and lets the door slam behind him as he crosses the cobbles to his workshop, compiling a mental list of useful things he can do before four o’clock.

**~*~**

“So, how was Portsmouth?” Harry asks, sipping his coffee some hours later.

Draco adds sugar to his tea and wrinkles his nose. “Wet.”

“Is that all?”
“No, but it’s about the most interesting thing I have to say about it,” he admits. “The Gringotts clients are always, without exception, so dreary that I’m tempted to remove my own eye to have something to play with,” Draco says matter-of-factly, the eyes in question filled with such despondency that Harry can’t hold back his laughter.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” he manages, drawing an odd look from Draco. “And I can’t say I’m shocked that you prefer working for yourself.”

Draco shrugs. “Some of us aren’t built to take direction.”

Harry snorts. “Come on, then,” he tries again, resting his chin on one hand. “Tell me what you really wanted to do. Take a risk on me.”

Draco’s eyes grow intense. He sits forward and adjusts his pristine cuffs, one after the other, and then repeats the action, just to be sure. “Harry,” he says gravely, “I wanted to be a Hippogriff trainer.”

Harry stares back for a moment too long, caught up, and then cuffs Draco on the arm before he can stop himself, mumbling, “Fuck off, you did not.”

Draco blinks, subtly examining his forearm for damage. Quietly horrified at himself, Harry says nothing, wondering if any of Draco’s other friends have ever hit him and lived. It wasn’t hard by any stretch of the imagination, nothing compared to the friendly whacks Harry receives from various Weasleys on a regular basis, but still.

“Did you just hit me?” Draco enquires, grey eyes inscrutable.

“Only a little bit,” Harry says, hanging onto his control as an inexplicable and unhelpful lick of amusement makes itself known amid his dismay.

“And now you’re laughing at me?”

“Absolutely not,” Harry splutters, averting his eyes and giggling like a loon into his hand until he’s breathless. “Sorry,” he manages at last, forcing himself to look up.

Draco is sipping his tea, eyes bright. “I think there is something wrong with you.”

“Definitely.” Harry says, reaching out and tapping Draco’s other arm as he allows the remains of his sanity to float away with the sudden need to keep things balanced.

“Will you desist?” Draco snaps, though there’s no bite to his voice as he draws both arms back toward himself and crosses them on the table top.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbles, and is about to leave it at that when something inside him—something wicked and impetuous—presses him to add: “I noticed that you like to be balanced.”

Draco pales. His fingers grip in sequence—one, two, three, four, five—around his upper arms as he stares at Harry. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

Heart pounding, Harry stares back, attempting to wrestle the infuriating thing back into its box before it can do any more damage. “I just meant that I noticed... that thing you do...” He points weakly at Draco’s hands, which still instantly. “Don’t... I mean... I didn’t mean to make you self-conscious about it—it isn’t noticeable, not really—it’s just that... someone I used to know did the same thing...”
er, a similar thing... so I... noticed. That’s all. Don’t worry, I’m just going to kill myself with this spoon now,” Harry sighs, picking up the spoon from his saucer and covering his eyes.

For long seconds, there is silence at the table, and all Harry can hear is his own breathing and the muffled voice of the moody waitress as she recites an order back to another customer. Then the spoon is being tugged out of his hand and Draco is kicking him lightly under the table.

“That won’t be necessary,” he says, setting the spoon down, and when Harry allows himself to meet Draco’s eyes, the cautious curiosity he finds there startles him.

“Such eyes, this other,” Misu says, apparently noticing Draco for the first time.

“Yeah, I know,” Harry replies without looking at her. “He’s beautiful.”

“It is important to have beautiful things around you,” she says, flicking out her tongue.

Harry can’t argue with that.

Draco frowns. “I honestly don’t know what to think about you, Potter.”

“Harry,” Harry corrects automatically, stroking Misu’s head.

“Yes, and that as well,” Draco agrees, waving a distracted hand. “Sitting there talking to a snake as though it’s the most ordinary thing in the world, and noticing things... noticing...” Draco pauses, looking oddly vulnerable. “You never struck me as particularly observant before.”

Harry shrugs. “I’m not, really. Observant, I mean. And I made my peace with talking to snakes quite a few years ago... remember?”

Draco tempers a strange little smile. “Oh, yes.” He pauses, meeting Harry’s eyes with a brittle sort of resolve. “Anyway, it’s nothing.”

“I know,” Harry says softly, even though he knows that’s not true.

“Balance is healthy,” Draco insists, addressing the remark to his cup rather than to Harry.

“I know,” Harry repeats, trying to lighten his tone. “It’s not something I’m very good at.”

Draco makes a small, weak sound of amusement. “You sound like my mother,” he says carelessly. “Before her therapy.”

Harry hesitates, wanting so much to ask but all too aware that Draco’s parents don’t seem to be his favourite topic of conversation. Still, he has brought up the subject this time, hasn’t he?

“I didn’t realise she’d been in therapy,” he says carefully.

Draco nods, gazing at the table. “She saw a Mind Healer for years. After my father came home from Azkaban, things were very difficult for her.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, partly because he is, and partly because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“It’s not your fault,” Draco says, looking up sharply, and something in his expression twists Harry’s
insides with shame; knowing for a fact, as he does, that his intervention would have meant a happier future for all the Malfoys means that Harry can barely look at Draco now. Instead, he shrugs and stares down at his hands, where Misu is twisting gleefully, oblivious to it all.

“It’s no one’s fault but his own,” Draco continues, eyes hard. “We all did some horrible things during the war, but my father did more than most. Azkaban really messed him up. His sanity was pretty fragile to begin with, but by the time that place had finished with him, his mind was ruined.”

Harry swallows hard against the sudden wave of sickness that rises up inside him. “I’m really s—” he begins without thinking, and stops himself. “That’s awful, Draco,” he says at last.

Draco shrugs one shoulder. “Some would say he deserved it.”

“I’m not sure anyone deserves that,” Harry says. “Your mother looks after him?” he asks, suddenly remembering Draco’s earlier words.

“Yes.”

Harry takes a deep breath and shifts in his creaky chair, thinking of the serene, philosophical Narcissa Malfoy and her azaleas, and wondering just what horrors she has to endure from the man who was once her husband.

“I’m sorry she has to put up with that. And I’m sorry you do.”

“It’s not all that bad these days,” Draco says, looking up. “He sleeps a lot, and he doesn’t really recognise me most of the time.”

_Sounds pretty bad to me_, Harry thinks, but he doubts that saying so will help.

“He saves most of his difficult moments for my mother,” Draco says. “And then she just disappears into the grounds for a few hours. It was the Mind Healer’s idea—taking up gardening.”

“It seems to agree with her,” Harry says softly, and Draco’s answering smile tells him more about his relationship with his mother than any words could.

“She says she has found her place,” he confides, eyes warm on Harry’s for the longest time yet before the guards rattle back down.

“I’m glad,” Harry says, and he means it.

**~*~**

Ron’s celebration meal is chaotic, delicious, and extremely noisy. Ron hadn’t been exaggerating about his mother’s mammoth guest list, and she has succeeded in gathering so many Weasleys that the Burrow is full to overflowing with enthusiastic red-headed people carrying homemade gifts of food and wine for the newly appointed Head of the Auror Department. Harry and Hermione—both honorary Weasleys, but still capable of being overwhelmed by their energy en masse—watch from one end of the living room as relative after relative descends on Ron with their kisses and backslaps and parcels. Even Great Aunt Mildred is present, apparently recovered, and, according to Molly, more demanding than ever.

“Hello, Misu,” Hermione murmurs, stroking the little snake’s head as she peeps out from inside
Harry’s sleeve. “Hello. What will Grandma Molly think of you, I wonder?”

What indeed, Harry wonders, watching Molly as she nods and chats to a grizzled old man with a spectacular copper-coloured moustache; she’s beaming with pride, eyes bright and hands clutched to her chest.

“Are you alright?” he asks, glancing down at Misu. “All these people?”

“All these people are so exciting!” she says, poking her head between his index and middle fingers.

Harry wonders what it would be like to borrow that kind of optimism, just for a little while. As it turns out, though, he doesn’t need it. Molly is astonishingly enchanted with Misu. Lily, who is seated between Harry and her grandmother at the dinner table, finds it endlessly amusing to have Molly continuously leaning around her to ask questions about the little snake, or pat her gently on the head, or offer her delicious—if unhealthy—scraps from her plate.

“There you are, darling,” she croons, holding out a bit of roast pheasant on a wrinkled finger, creasing her eyes in a smile as Misu takes it, and turning away before Harry sighs and tugs the chunk of meat out of Misu’s mouth.

“Too big for you,” he says softly, trying not to alarm his fellow diners.

“This one is nice, too,” Misu says, twisting to look at Molly upside down.

“Nice,” Harry mumbles to himself, “and a little bit merry.”

“Mum! Your glass is empty!” George declares in a tone of mock horror, immediately plying the mead bottle and confirming Harry’s suspicions.

When Hugo is excused and drags Lily off into the garden on some mysterious mission, Ginny leans in from Harry’s other side.

“How’re you doing, crazy man?” she asks, resting her arm on the back of Hugo’s empty chair and swilling her wine around her glass absent-mindedly.

“Not bad at all,” Harry says, warmed to see her calm, comfortable expression. “I take it Lily’s been keeping you up to date with everything.”

Ginny smiles wryly. “Oh, she likes to make sure that I don’t miss anything.”

Harry sips his blackcurrant wine and returns the smile with an apologetic tilt. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m interested. And anyway, it’s been pretty entertaining so far,” she admits, smile turning playful.

Harry laughs. “I see how it must look, but I’m going to go out on a limb and say I know what I’m doing.”

Ginny laughs, too, lifting her free hand and playing with the beaded necklace Harry gave her for Christmas. “If anyone does, Harry, it’s you,” she says, and Harry is reaching out to give her hand a quick squeeze before he really knows what he’s doing.
“I thought you two had split up.”

As one, they turn to see the source of the familiar puzzled voice.

“We have, Percy,” Ginny sighs, shooting her brother a look that is pure sisterly exasperation.

“Oh.” Percy frowns, adjusting his glasses and shifting uncomfortably on the spot. Harry finds a small smile for him; he’s not a bad bloke, really, but he certainly hasn’t learned any tact over the last couple of decades. “I just thought... well... I thought perhaps you’d changed your minds.”

“No,” Ginny says firmly over the top of her glass. “Definitely not.”

“I think we just get on better when we’re not together,” Harry says baldly, looking up at Percy as he hovers behind their chairs, but not missing Gin’s smothered snort of amusement. He suspects it’s Percy’s startled expression that’s tickling her, but sometimes it’s difficult to tell with Ginny, even after all these years.

“Right. Well, I’ll just go and continue to the...er...” Percy points vaguely in the direction of the hallway and excuses himself without another word.

Harry grins, inhaling the mingled scents of wine, roast meats, and everyone’s best robes. “I’ve missed tormenting Percy. We don’t see nearly enough of him.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ginny says. “If he didn’t have red hair and Dad’s nose, I’d think Mum’d brought home the wrong baby.”

Harry snorts. “She’ll hear you.”

“She will not,” Ginny says, leaning to one side and shaking her head. Harry twists around to see Molly giggling and leaning on Arthur’s shoulder, face flushed and glass held high. “She’s off her tree.”

Harry can’t really argue with what is right in front of him. “She’s proud,” he says diplomatically.

“Yeah, as proud as a newt,” Ginny laughs. “So, anyway,” she says, pointing her glass at him and narrowing her eyes, businesslike. “How’s Malfoy?”

Startled, Harry splutters on his mouthful of wine. “What d’you mean?” he manages, attempting a discreet cough and succeeding only in snorting wine into his nose.

“I’m not stupid, Harry,” she says more kindly than he deserves.

“I know. I just sometimes forget how you seem to know everything.”

Ginny smiles with one corner of her mouth and strokes Misu with a careful finger. “I don’t know anything, but I’ve known you for a long time, and I’d be very, very surprised if you hadn’t made some sort of impulsive move on this Malfoy thing yet.”

“He’s not a thing, Gin,” Harry says before he can stop himself.

“You’re not funny,” she murmurs, but her eyes are warm on his and his gut aches, just a little.
“I’m hilarious. And he’s... fine. He’s fine,” Harry rasps, throat suddenly dry.

Ginny gazes at him for long seconds. “You really have got it bad, haven’t you?”

Harry glances back at the table, anxious, but no one is paying them any attention, and why would they, when everyone else appears to be competing to tell the most embarrassing story about Ron, who is covering his flame-red face and groaning at the head of the table.

“We’ve been out for coffee a few times, that’s all,” he mumbles.

Ginny’s eyebrows shoot up. “Did you see him this afternoon?”

“Why?”

“Harry, don’t be a pain. I’m trying to be understanding.”

Harry smiles, refilling both of their glasses. “Sorry. Yes, I did. Can I ask why now?”

“I saw him sitting on the wall outside Gringotts. Eating a sandwich.” Ginny frowns. “It was the strangest thing—he almost looked... happy.”

**~*~**

Over the next few days, Harry finds himself developing a routine. The tomato clock wakes him every morning at seven thirty (a much more reasonable hour, he thinks) with a barrage of squelching noises and a beady stare. Harry stretches and yawns and stares right back, missing Al and idly wondering if he could teach the tomato to spew out coloured smoke.

He showers, dresses in comfortable but not brown clothes, stuffs coffee and toast into his mouth while skimming the Daily Prophet, retrieves Misu from her bedside tank, and heads for his workshop. It’s all terribly civilised, and he likes it. He likes walking the cobbles of Diagon Alley when most of the shops are still preparing to open and the smell of fresh bread and ground coffee is just beginning to permeate the cool air. He likes the peace and the chance to chat with the morning-joyful Misu in his sleeve or his pocket or sticking out of his collar, and he likes the way that some of the shop-workers and early morning coffee-seekers have started to nod and smile at him in the street, as though seeing Harry Potter on the way to his workshop is a perfectly common occurrence.

Most of all, though, Harry is enjoying the chance to appoint his workspace according to his own specifications. His other self had some great ideas, he thinks, but he also spent a lot of his time carving insanely intricate bits of furniture, and this Harry has absolutely no intention of doing the same. He spreads out on the stone floor with huge rolls of parchment, sketching out plans while Misu tangles happily in the patch of sun from the skylight above and makes ‘helpful’ suggestions about what should go where.

Captivated by the idea of a workshop designed purely for glassblowing and sculpture, Harry screws up his original, somewhat conservative schematics and starts again, pencilling in three huge furnaces, several specially designed cooling racks, space for his tools and materials, and two whole walls of shelving for books, records, and finished pieces. He ignores the part of himself that’s insisting that he doesn’t really know what he’s doing, because he’s beginning to have faith that another part of him does, and that’s enough for now. He’s never minded flying by the seat of his pants, and if he can do it in the glimpse, with everyone watching and expecting, then he can do it here.
With a little help from his quickly growing library of glassblowing books, he places owl orders with a variety of companies, much to the surprise of the salesmen and women, most of whom respond with a personal visit to the 'shop and a burning curiosity as to why Harry Potter is spending several thousand Galleons on specialist art equipment.

“We just wanted to confirm your order,” explains the wide-eyed young representative of Montague’s Muggle-Style Furnaces. “It’s standard procedure with the larger items, Mr Potter.”

Harry doesn’t really believe her, but he also doesn’t really mind. As more and more items arrive, Harry spends his mornings arranging and rearranging, putting up shelves and deciding on the perfect spots for his two new work tables. On Thursday morning, he goes to see Richenda, who is as wonderfully flamboyant as ever and sells Harry a brand new record player and a stack of albums (including ‘Veelas, Nymphs and Squibs’, just because).

“I must say, Mr Potter, what a fabulously eclectic selection,” she declares, crimson-painted lips parting in a dazzling smile. “It truly is tremendous to see you here again.”

Harry smiles. “You remember? It must’ve been...”

“Fifteen years,” Richenda says, polished nails clacking as she expertly wraps Harry’s purchases in brown paper and then slides them into a string-handled bag. “Do you know—I remember every customer I have ever had.” She beams at Harry. “Though some are more memorable than others!”

Harry feels himself flush every time he recalls her words, but it’s worth it, because he likes to sing while he works, even though he’s not very good at it. He sings while he arranges new books on his shelves, while he unpacks order after thrilling order of brightly coloured glass and copper pipes, and he sings while he fires up his new furnaces and gets it wrong over and over before he gets it right, staggering back from the heat, sleeves scorched and face smudged with smoke, much to Kari’s amusement when she knocks lightly at the half-open door and lets herself in.

“You’ve got something on your face,” she says drily.

Harry turns to her, wiping his forearm through the mess he’s made with his own dodgy spellwork. “You think?”

She smirks. “You look a bit like Darius does when he’s in one of his ‘baths are a tool of the institution’ phases.”

“I had no idea Darius was so multifaceted,” Harry grins.

“That’s one way of putting it. I brought pantespani,” she offers, holding up a small paper bag.

Harry’s stomach rumbles in approval, and he is once again grateful for his food-providing neighbours. With Kari’s family next door, he knows he will never go hungry, even when he does forget to feed himself. Kari knocks on the workshop door every day and brings cake and fresh bread and other treats straight out of the oven. He’s never entirely sure if she does so because she worries about him herself or because her father continues to watch him from the upstairs window, fretting about the mad man who tries to make glass in his old storeroom. Either way, he’s not complaining, even if Kari refuses his offers of payment with a quelling glare that could put Hermione to shame.

On Saturday morning, Harry and Lily are examining a new shipment—assorted chunks of birch and mahogany—when the knock at the door comes.
“Good morning,” Kari says brightly, stepping into the workshop with a big white box in her hands. “I saw you had a visitor, so I brought extra.”

Lily blinks, startled. “Hello,” she says at last.

Kari smiles. “Hi.”

“Lil, this is Kari from next door—she... er, she feeds me,” he admits, rubbing the back of his neck, suddenly awkward. “Kari, this is my daughter, Lily.”

Kari tucks the box against her hip and shakes Lily’s hand gravely. Lily sits up straighter, crossing her legs neatly where they dangle from the worktable, and shakes back, practically glowing with delight at being treated like an adult by a stranger.

“How’s your dad been blowing himself up today?” Kari asks.

Lily chews on her bottom lip. “Not yet.”

“There’s still time,” Kari advises, granting Lily a mysterious look.

“Er, I am here, you know!” Harry puts in.

Lily and Kari merely exchange glances. When Kari is safely out of the door and back inside the deli, though, Lily turns to Harry, face serious.

“Dad?”

Harry prises open the box and savours the sharply sweet scent of honey. “Yeah?”

“Have you changed your mind? About... liking boys?”

Harry laughs. “No, Lil. What makes you say that?”

“Just... she was a nice lady... and she was really pretty.” Lily shrugs and gazes at the door.

Harry’s heart skips painfully. “I see,” he says softly, abandoning the box of treats and jumping up onto the table next to his daughter. “Kari’s a lovely girl... lady,” he amends as Lily shoots him a disapproving little look. “But it isn’t like that. And I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Oh,” Lily says, eyebrows knitted.

“Are you disappointed?” Harry asks, uncertain that he wants to hear the answer.

Lily’s face clears and she shakes her head. “No, Dad. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t confused.”

Relieved, Harry laughs and hugs her, then reaches for the box. “Come on. I need you to help me eat this baklava.”

“Will help, too,” Misu offers, poking her head out of Lily’s cardigan pocket.
“You can wait until we get home and have something proper,” Harry says, words somewhat mangled by his mouthful of nuts and pastry.

Misu waits, not altogether patiently, and when they get back to the house, Harry keeps to his word and provides a nutritious, if not particularly exciting, mouse. As she devours her meal, Harry and Lily collapse onto the sofa, Frank curling on Lily’s lap as she tells Harry about her latest school project.

“We’re doing about smallpox and whooping cough and TB,” she says with relish.

Harry frowns. “Why do you seem to learn about nothing but diseases?”

Lily rolls her eyes. “That’s just history. And science. And we do other things, but it’s boring talking about maths and comprehension questions.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that,” Harry says, “but—Lil—look!” he hisses, gesturing carefully toward her lap.

She looks, mouth curving into a smile, and lifts her eyes back to Harry’s. “Wow.”

“Wow indeed,” Harry mutters.

On top of Frank’s stripy head, curled into the tiniest red and green coil, is Misu. Both are fast asleep.

**~*~**

Harry spends most of his weekday afternoons at the Ministry with Ron, embroiled in training, which by now mostly consists of lounging in the spare chair, answering the occasional question, re-explaining some of the more unnecessarily complicated procedures connected with managing the Auror Department, and gnawing contentedly on Ron’s near-constant supply of fantastic biscuits. He spares a thought or two for his waistline, but it seems that, despite Ron and Kari’s best efforts, he is actually getting leaner, and, thanks to all that scrubbing and decorating and walking everywhere, he is starting to feel fitter, too.

By the second week of training, Harry has been appointed chief coffee-maker and Helga-distracter, and by the third week, he is both relieved and disappointed to realise that Ron no longer needs him at all. At least, not here, in this office which definitely isn’t Harry’s any more, with the Chudley Cannons rug and the permanent smell of baked goods, just like the one in the glimpse. On that final Friday, Harry goes for a businesslike ‘well done, mate’ handshake at the door, which lasts only seconds before Ron is pulling him into a vigorous hug, one hand grasping at the fabric of his coat and the other slapping his back so violently that Harry suspects there will be a bruise.

“Thanks,” he mumbles into Harry’s collar.

“Welcome,” Harry mumbles back, releasing Ron and stepping back, grinning.

“Is someone dying?” Helga enquires, looking up from her desk.

Harry pulls a face at her, because he can.

Ron laughs and says, “Not today, Helga.”
Back at the ’shop, Harry leans against his worktable, tips his head back into the late afternoon sunshine, and lets go of the Ministry, that last nagging little bit of his old life. Pushing out a long, slow exhalation, he smiles.

“What will we do now?” Misu asks, emerging from Harry’s collar and looping over his left ear.

Harry pushes off the table, lights his furnaces—expertly now—and reaches for a box of green glass.

“We’re going to make things.”

**~*~**

As February draws to a close, Harry’s rituals settle into place until he is calmer than he has ever been before. He makes strange, colourful, curious-looking objects, mixing glass, wood, and magic to create glimmering, amorphous representations of whatever happens to be occupying his head at the time. After a letter from Al, he makes a smooth, round bulb of glass studded with little green lights; by the fading light of a beautiful sunset, he blends red, orange, and golden yellow glass over a curving piece of oak until it seems to glow all on its own, and when he runs into Draco at the Dragondale or sweeping through Diagon Alley, the resulting pieces tend toward the sharp-edged and silvery, and are, like the man himself, Harry has to admit, starkly beautiful.

The man he is now meeting on a regular basis at what he calls ‘the Moody Bint Cafe’ is sharper, more caustic and more defensive than the man Harry came to know in the glimpse, but with each cup of coffee and casual insult, Harry finds himself liking this man just as much. He’s different in many ways, but he’s still Draco. He’s his own person, shaped by his life, his experiences, by fatherhood and by marriage and by a job he doesn’t love, just like Harry. And beneath the cutting remarks and the scowls, he’s clever and funny and he sees through Harry without even seeming to try. With this Draco, Harry feels naked. Vulnerable. And this Draco has no idea that Harry is helplessly in love with him, but it doesn’t seem to matter.

It’s an odd sensation. He likes it.

As he races up the steps to the top of the rickety wooden stand on a freezing cold Saturday morning, he just hopes that Draco will be there. They haven’t arranged to meet here as such, but the game has been mentioned in passing, and he finds it hard to believe that Draco would miss it, even though Slytherin aren’t playing. Neither is James, and yet here Harry is, though he decides, as he emerges at the top of the stand, only slightly out of breath, that he isn’t going to think about that too much.

At the sound of his footsteps, Draco turns, coat flying and eyes narrowed.

“Where the hell have you been?”

Harry blinks. “Nowhere,” he says, handing over a steaming paper cup. “I just ran into McGonagall on the way down from the castle, and she wanted to catch up a bit.”


Secretly delighted, Harry warms his hands on his paper cup and joins Draco at the front of the stand, gazing down at the empty pitch. He hides a smile. He’s not even late.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, leaning out and dragging the smell of the cold grass deep into his lungs.
“Yes, well.” Draco folds his arms on the barrier. He frowns. “Where’s the snake?”

“Here,” Harry says, undoing the top two buttons of his coat to reveal a tangle of sleeping Misu in his inside pocket. “I don’t think she’s interested in Quidditch.”

Draco grants him a tiny smile and then looks out over the pitch. “Ah. Pick a side, then.”

“What?”

“Pick a side,” Draco insists, gesturing at the two teams as they walk onto the pitch. “It’s no fun if you don’t care who wins.”

“And there was me thinking you were a Quidditch purist. You mean it’s not all about the form?” Harry teases, grinning.

“Shut up. And you’re taking too long, so I’m having Hufflepuff.”

Harry almost chokes on his coffee. “You? Seriously?”

Draco gives him a withering look. “Do you see that girl, there?” He points to a small, olive-skinned player in canary yellow robes, dark curly hair tied up in a ponytail.

“Yeah?”

“That’s Frances Mullender. She is the best Seeker Hogwarts has seen since... well, you, so they say. She’s already being scouted by several professional teams and she’s only a fourth year.”

Harry blinks, startled, watching the girl as she tightens her gloves and laughs with one of her teammates. “That’s insider information,” he complains. “It’s not fair.”

Draco snorts. “It’s nothing of the sort. The current commentator is quite enamoured with her. Mentions it at every other game, just in case we’ve forgotten.”


Draco nods, sipping his coffee. “They’ll be your best chance. They’ve something like an eighty-five percent accuracy rate with a Bludger, and there’s a lot of power behind those bats.”

“Oh, really?” Harry says, amused. “So there’s a chance for me, then?”

“Absolutely.” Draco says, just as the whistle blows and the players rise into the air. “Loser buys coffee at the Moody.”

Harry leans back slightly as the first of several high-speed Bludgers whizzes past the stand. “Deal.”

As the match progresses, it becomes clear that just about anything could happen, and Harry is quickly enthralled. He watches the Ravenclaw Chasers—unmistakably the stronger players—sent whirling off course by the energetic efforts of the Hufflepuff Beaters, who are then in turn set upon with precision strikes from the bats of the two huge boys in flapping blue robes. When Harry tears his eyes away from the buzz of colour in the centre of the pitch, he’s watching the two Seekers as they switch between slow, watchful circling and flurries of darting activity. After ten minutes, he has
almost forgotten that he’s standing right next to Draco, until he speaks.

“I wanted to be a journalist,” he says, shifting slightly and brushing his arm against Harry’s.

Harry turns to him, unsurprised by the content of the admission but astonished to be finally hearing it, offered up voluntarily. “What, like Rita Skeeter?” he says lightly.

“No,” Draco murmurs, eyebrows drawn down. “Well, maybe, when I was very little. I was a silly child and I liked the idea of having my name in the newspaper every day.”

Harry hides a smile as the Snitch pelts past the barrier, closely followed by a blur of yellow and blue.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know,” Draco says defensively, wrapping his hands around the barrier and leaning out to follow the progress of the Seekers. “Bugger, it’s disappeared again.”

“So, what stopped you?” Harry presses.

Draco sighs. “Do you really think anyone would want to read a serious exposé written by someone like me? Do you think anyone would believe a word I had to say?”

“Why not? They believed Rita Skeeter,” Harry points out.

“Oh, well, that’s terribly reassuring,” Draco says with a dry smile.

Harry laughs, relishing the press of warm, coat-clad arm against his own as Draco leans next to him again. “Sorry. But seriously, why not? People believe you when you tell them what to do with their money, don’t they?”

“Of course they do. I’m an expert.”

“You’re a pain, that’s what you are,” Harry mutters, mouth tugging into a reluctant smile. “I’m sure you’d be an excellent investigator, if that’s what you set your mind to. You’ve always been annoyingly tenacious like that.”

“I’m sure there was a compliment in there somewhere.”

“I told you we’d work up to them.”

Draco snorts and leans out to observe a brief skirmish between two Chasers, sending a brief waft of citrusy air across Harry’s nostrils and making him shiver. He watches Draco, thinking about his success in the glimpse, and his folder of intriguing photographs, and feels hopeful.

His chosen team is beaten, just as Draco predicted. The Ravenclaw players are strong, but their Seeker is no match for Frances Mullender, who grabs the Snitch out of the air just feet from their stand, pulling out of a tumbling dive with her bright robes flying behind her. As Harry joins in with the roar of applause, she turns on her broom and grins at him before swooping off to join her teammates, and he laughs delightedly.

“Even the best amateur Seeker in the country wants to show off for you,” Draco observes, sounding equal parts amused and incredulous. “It must be very interesting being you.”
Harry says nothing, just follows him down the stairs and out onto the grounds, where the other stands are beginning to empty, covering the grass with laughing, chattering students, wrapped in light cloaks and house colours. As he and Draco make their way back toward the castle, two simultaneous shouts of “Dad!” fly in from different directions. He turns, just as Al sprints across the lawn toward him, followed, at a slightly more sedate pace, by James. Beside Harry, Draco stops, too, unable to walk away without making his discomfort obvious.

“Hi, Dad! It was a brilliant game, wasn’t it?” Al beams. “Hello, Mr Malfoy!”

“Hello,” Draco says, tone pleasant but eyes cautious. “Is my son around anywhere?”

Al looks around, chaotic hair waving in the breeze. “Oh, he’s around somewhere; he was sitting next to me all the way through the game...” He twists around, standing on tip toes to scan the crowd. “I don’t know, sorry. He and Rose were arguing about something—it’s alright, though; she’s just mad because Ravenclaw lost.” He looks up at Draco with an appealing smile.

“They played well,” Draco offers seriously. “She has nothing to be ashamed of.”

“How’s it going, Dad?” James asks, drawing level with them at last.

“Fine, thank you.” Harry gazes at his son, whose hair is now streaked with purple, and smiles. “Sent any letters to your grandmother recently?”

James rolls his eyes and shoves his hands into the pockets of his overlong sweater. “No, Dad. Bought any snakes recently?”

Harry hesitates, and he thinks he hears Draco (who is listening to a somewhat garbled account of Al, Rose and Scorpius’ latest adventures at Gobstones Club) stifle a snort of laughter.

“Who told you about Misu?”

“Lily,” James admits. “Can I see?”

Harry is a little reluctant to disturb Misu’s sleep, but he doesn’t see James too often during term time, so he slips a careful hand into his coat pocket and draws her out. Sleep-warm and drowsy, Misu writhes indolently on Harry’s palm and goes easily to James when he holds out his hand for her.

“He is cold,” she complains, but quickly finds a way into his sleeve.

“She’s awesome,” James says, genuinely impressed. After a moment, he looks up at Harry, brows knitted. “Are you having a midlife crisis, Dad?”

This time, Draco definitely does laugh, and Harry definitely does elbow him in the ribs.

**~*~**

That night, Lily spreads a tartan blanket on the living room floor so that she, Harry, Frank, and Misu can have what she calls a ‘carpet picnic’, and entreats Harry to make fondue, because Mrs Harbottle has been telling the class tales from the seventies, and it is, apparently, ‘the best thing ever’. Harry’s not sure about that, but he cobbles one together, and by the time Lily has changed into her pyjamas and fluffy slippers, he has produced a passable pot of molten cheese and a vast array of
accompaniments.

“Brilliant,” Lily enthuses, taking a fork and settling cross-legged on the blanket. “Ergh, what’s in there?” She points at one of the many bowls grouped around the fondue pot.

Harry lowers himself to the floor opposite her. “Pickled onions,” he says sheepishly. “Cheese and onion? Sort of? No?”

Lily wrinkles her nose but spears one on her fork anyway, bravely plunging it into the cheese and then into her mouth. “It’s quite nice, actually.”

Harry smiles, thinking of Maura and wondering what she would like with her cheese. Probably beetle bits. In their absence, though, he and Lily dip chunks of bread, little tomatoes, new potatoes, crackers, cold sausages, and anything else they can find, until their forks are scraping the bottom of the pot and Lily declares the experiment a resounding success.

Full to bursting, she flops onto her back on the blanket and Harry carries the bowls and pots down to the kitchen, feeling warm and accomplished. As he waits for the kettle to boil, he reflects that he’s been more of a dad this year than perhaps he’s ever been, and that realisation comes with a sharp, sweet sort of sadness. He hasn’t been a bad father, he knows that, but it’s taken the separation and the glimpse and Boris and even Draco to make him realise that he loves being a dad. He spares a thought for his other self, who never had the chance to find out, and heads back up to Lily with two mugs of hot chocolate and a glowing feeling of gratitude.

He finds Lily curled on her side, clutching her stuffed fish and scanning the *Daily Prophet*.

“Anything exciting in there?”

Lily wrinkles her nose. “Not really. You’ve been in the paper a lot, though,” she says.

“Yeah, I know,” Harry sighs, settling next to her and leaning against the sofa. While he’s no longer making the front page, the speculative little articles have barely stopped since Harry left Willoughby Drive. He hardly notices them any more, but it seems that the same cannot be said for Lily, and he suddenly remembers that she had expected Scorpius to be embarrassed when his parents’ divorce was made public. He pokes her until she looks away from the paper and takes her hot chocolate. “Lil?”

“Yeah?” She blinks, brown eyes glowing golden in the firelight.

“Does it bother you that they write about me and your mum?”

“They don’t write about Mum,” she says, stroking Frank as he pads by and throws himself onto his back in front of Harry, who rubs his belly idly while Misu dangles from his collar. “Well, they did a little bit when you first split up, but not any more. But it doesn’t bother me.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods. “The things they write about you are a bit silly, aren’t they? But it’s kind of cool seeing the pictures,” she admits, resting her chin on the fish and grinning. “You always look embarrassed, though.”

Harry laughs, relieved. “I don’t really like having my picture taken.”
“You should. You look really smart now.”

“I looked a mess before, did I?” Harry teases, shaking Frank’s claws out of his hand.

Lily groans. “No. But now you look fashionable and stuff.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, isn’t there?”

“Yep.” Lily sips her hot chocolate thoughtfully. “Charlotte Ross got in trouble this week, you know.”

“Oh?” *That’ll teach you to mess with my daughter,* he thinks with satisfaction.

“She cheated on her maths test.”

“From you?” Harry demands, scandalised.

Lily shakes her head. “No. She’s still mean, though. I bet she wouldn’t be mean to me if she knew my dad was famous,” she muses.

“I bet she wouldn’t be mean to you if she knew you were a witch,” Harry points out, and Lily flushes and grins.

*Dad.*

Harry shrugs and ruffles her hair. “So, I don’t even embarrass you. What kind of a father am I?”

“A nice one. Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Lily hugs her fish tightly and gazes up at him. “Are you and Mr Malfoy friends now?”

Harry’s heart speeds. “Yeah, I think we are.”

“Oh.” Lily chews her lip thoughtfully. “Is he nice?”

Stifling the little bubble of amusement in his chest, Harry nods slowly. “Of course he’s nice.”

“Al says he’s nice. Al said Mr Malfoy gave him some tips for playing Gobstones,” Lily says.

“Al doesn’t hang about, does he?” Harry murmurs, mostly to himself. The little bugger must have dashed off a letter to his sister practically the moment he and Draco had left.

“He knows I don’t like to miss out on anything,” Lily says mysteriously, and looks into her mug. “Have we got any marshmallows?”

**~*~**

Harry is more than a little bit thankful for Lily’s blithe tolerance of his notoriety on Monday, when he opens the *Prophet* to find a large photograph of himself and Draco at Hogwarts under the headline:
‘Old Rivalries Set to Rest?’ Amused, Harry crunches on his buttered toast and stares at the figures in the photograph. They lean on the barrier of the stand, side by side, elbows almost touching as they both gaze toward the same spot in the distance; Photo-Draco’s fingers flicker around the edge of the barrier and Photo-Harry’s hair whips about in an invisible breeze. There is no real article to speak of, just a few lines of vague speculation about what appears to be a rather unconventional friendship.

“Page two,” Harry says, retrieving Misu from the butter dish. “Good, eh?”

“Uncertain,” Misu replies. “Why must they always take pictures?”

Harry doesn’t have an answer to that. When he walks into the Moody late on Friday afternoon, however, Draco provides him with the most compelling argument yet.

“Ah, there you are,” he says, kicking out Harry’s chair impatiently and closing the leather-bound file in front of him. “I got you a coffee.”

Harry lifts an eyebrow but sits, brushing the worst of the sawdust from his jeans and reaching for the still-steaming cup. “So you did,” he agrees, taking a huge, too-hot swig of coffee and sighing contentedly as the bittersweet liquid warms his insides. “Thank you. What’s the emergency?”

“The rotten shrew has thrown in the towel,” Draco announces, baring his teeth in the most unguarded expression of triumph that Harry has ever seen on his face.

Harry leans forward on his elbows. “Astoria’s lawyer, you mean?”

“The very same. I received an owl from Astoria this afternoon—apparently I’m to expect the final papers for signing before the weekend is out. What do you think of that?” Draco says, eyes bright with challenge.

“That’s brilliant!” Harry grins. “What the hell happened?”

“This,” Draco says simply, extracting a scrap of paper from his folder and holding it up for Harry to see. It’s a page from the *Prophet*. It’s page two from Monday’s *Prophet*.

Harry catches his breath. “Yeah... you’ve lost me.”

“Astonishing. If I were to keep count—”

“Get on with it, Draco.”

Draco sighs, then abandons the piece of newspaper and crosses his arms on the tabletop. “Apparently—and don’t ask me for the logic on this, because as far as I’m concerned, that woman operates in a horrible little world of her own—but apparently she saw this photograph and became convinced that her quest to muddy my reputation and clean out my vault was no longer viable.”

Harry frowns. “And why is that?”

Draco’s mouth curves into a seraphic smile. “Because as far as she is concerned, you are untouchable. And now, by association, so am I,” he pronounces with a theatrical little gesture that Harry finds completely charming.

“You’re kidding.”
“I assure you, I’m not. Of course, it’s not quite as simple as that, but essentially, the truth is that you have somehow saved my divorce,” Draco says, shaking his head in disbelief. “I genuinely have no idea what to think of the world any more.”

Harry laughs. “I think you should just go with it,” he advises, sipping his coffee. “Strange and wonderful things can happen when you stop worrying about what does and doesn’t make sense.”

Draco ruffles a careless hand through his hair, looking up at Harry through a swathe of escaped blond strands. For a second or two, his eyes convey only bemusement, but then he’s smiling, and Harry is smiling with him, and he is Harry’s Draco, blindingly so, and the realisation hits Harry so hard that he suddenly has no idea where to look. He blinks and stares down into his coffee.

“I’d better get going,” Draco says, draining his cup and reaching for his coat. “I have to go and tell my mother the news; she’ll be delighted.” He glances up at the clock and grimaces. “It’s her bridge night, so I haven’t got long.”

“Your mother plays bridge?” Harry asks, smirking.

“Please don’t get me started on that,” Draco sighs. “I’ll owl you,” he adds, and whips out of the door with characteristic swiftness, smile still playing around the corners of his mouth.

“What’s up with him?” asks the waitress, stopping by the table to collect Draco’s empty cup and saucer.

Harry slides his cup over and allows her to refill it. “He’s happy. You should try it.”

The waitress rolls her eyes, but Harry doesn’t think he imagines the flicker of a reluctant smile as she turns away. Leaning back in his chair, he catches sight of the sleek, leather-bound folder, sitting abandoned at the edge of the table. Harry reaches out and pulls it toward him, relishing the softness of the leather beneath his fingers and fighting hard against the instinctive curiosity that is demanding he open the folder and look through the contents. He’s not going to do that, because the contents are Draco’s, and he really fucking wants Draco to trust him.

Fingers itching, Harry shakes his head and crosses his arms atop the folder, using almost his full weight to squash the unrest of his inquisitiveness.

No.

Still, he thinks, what if Draco needs this folder? What if it’s an essential, indispensible, critical folder that he can’t do without? Harry chews his lip pensively and drums his fingers against the leather.

“You are distressed,” Misu says, threading her way through a belt loop.

“I’m alright, don’t worry,” Harry replies, dropping his voice, but the waitress shoots him an odd look from the counter anyway. Impulsively, he leaves a couple of Sickles on the table, nods to her and leaves the cafe, Misu at his waist and Draco’s folder under one arm.

At the gates of the Manor, Harry encounters a small gaggle of ladies, all well into their sixties and all beautifully dressed in silk robes and neat little coats. Opting to save time, Harry ducks behind a bush before he is spotted and casts a quick Notice-Me-Not charm, then, when the gates swing open, he tacks himself to the back of the little group and trundles up the drive, feeling rather pleased with
himself.

When the members of Narcissa’s bridge club—they must be—disappear into the west wing of the house, Harry makes his way along the opposite corridor, seeking out Draco’s study. At the third turn, raised voices ring out across the panelled hallway. Harry slows.

“The chattering monkeys are here! They know all about you, Draco!” someone cries in a shaky, refined voice that is all too familiar.

Holding his breath, Harry turns the corner, and the sight that greets him is both disturbing and unsurprising. Draco is standing in the doorway of his study, one hand wrapped protectively around the handle, while at the other side of the corridor, wasted and unkempt, weaving slightly from side to side as though unable to stop moving, is Lucius Malfoy.

“I think you should go back to your rooms,” Draco says calmly. “Does Mother know you’re wandering around?”

“She doesn’t care, Draco,” he hisses, gesturing wildly with a wooden cane that seems far too plain for him. “She’s brought those women over to talk about me—and you, Draco,” he insists. “They all know why you couldn’t keep your wife—everyone knows.” Lucius laughs, and it’s a hollow, wrenching sound that, combined with Draco’s audible intake of breath, makes Harry want to creep away down the corridor and out of the house, but his feet seem to be stuck to the floor and all he can do is watch.

“Dad,” Draco appeals, voice stretched thin. “Just go back to your rooms. I’ll call Bilby and he can take you—”

“I do not take orders from you,” Lucius hisses, stepping closer, and managing to look extremely intimidating for an ageing man in a velvet dressing gown. He wipes spittle from his mouth with an embroidered handkerchief and glares down at his son, pressing his negligible height advantage. “You are a disgrace, and everyone knows it—do you have any idea what sort of damage you are doing to my reputation?”

Harry digs his fingernails into the leather folder in his arms and grits his teeth against the fury coursing through his veins, but Draco is unmoved. The almost imperceptible tightening of his fingers around the handle is the only outward sign of his discomfiture, followed, as Harry watches, by the brush of his other hand against the wood of the door frame, but his eyes never leave his father’s.

“I think you ruined your own reputation when you started torturing Muggles, don’t you?” he says calmly, and there’s something in his voice that makes Harry suspect that there’s nothing new about this conversation.

“How dare you?” Lucius whispers, voice soft and dangerous as he pats at his robe pockets, and Harry reaches instinctively for his wand, just in case.

“I don’t know,” Draco says wearily. “Are you going to try to hex me now?”

Lucius steps right into his son’s personal space, eyes wild. “Did you take my wand?” he demands, raising his cane to press against Draco’s cheek with each word. “You know, if you’d had a few more hexes when you were a boy, perhaps you wouldn’t have turned out to be such—a—hideous—disappointment.”
Harry bristles, fingers tightening around his wand. It’s only the knowledge that Draco would absolutely kill him that prevents him from incapacitating Lucius with a simple flick of the wrist. He doesn’t give a flying fuck if he’s mentally damaged; he’s way out of order and the urge to protect Draco burns so fiercely that it obliterates all logic in its path.

“Well, it’s always nice to hear that,” Draco murmurs, never looking away from his father. “No, I did not take your wand. Is there any particular reason why you are so disenchanted with me today?”

“You have some nerve, boy,” Lucius hisses, stubbled jaw clenched tight. “We gave you everything — every chance to forge a lifestyle befitting your lineage. All you had to do... all you had to do,” he repeats, throwing each staccato syllable into Draco’s face with an unnerving tightrope-balance of lucidity and derangement, “all you had to do, Draco, was forget your... inconvenient little deviance, but you could not do it—because you are weak!” Lucius spits, cane pressing into Draco’s neck.

Pinned to the spot beneath his charm, Harry inhales sharply. The implication slams into him like a hail of Bludgers, pounding him with a confusing mixture of relief and rage that makes him want to slump to the floor and bring the heavy folder into decisive contact with his forehead.

“I’m not going to argue with you about this,” Draco says, gritting his teeth. “Just... step... back.”

Lucius leans in impossibly closer, dropping his voice to a harsh whisper that rakes unpleasantly down Harry’s spine. “She always knew you were nothing but a sodomite.”

A fraction of a second later, Draco’s wand is drawn and Lucius finds himself pushed firmly but not roughly against the opposite wall, eyes hazy and lips drawn back in a bloodless smile. With a sharp crack, Bilby appears in the corridor between father and son.

“Mister Malfoy... Master Draco!” he wails, glancing anxiously between them, and then cries out in surprise and pain as Lucius’ cane shoots out and catches him behind the knees, knocking him to the ground with an audible thump.

Harry finally allows himself to slump against the wall, lifting a hand to his face and rubbing at his heated skin.

“Dad, stop it,” Draco says dully. Sheathing his wand, he picks up the startled elf and bends to whisper to him: “Fetch the calming potion—the blue one—and tell my mother that he’s had a turn.”

As Bilby disappears, Lucius seems to crumble. Right before Harry’s eyes, the unhinged fury dissolves into nothing and the tall, angular figure turns small and beseeching. The hard grey eyes soften until they are so like Draco’s that Harry’s chest aches, and the pale hand not clutching the cane reaches out, trembling, across the expanse of corridor.

“Draco,” he whispers, “dear Draco—I only want to talk to you.”

“Yeah,” Draco sighs, gazing at his father with an indecipherable expression that only serves to hammer home the knowledge that Harry has inadvertently intruded on something sadder and more bewildering than he could ever have imagined.

“You look so unhappy, Draco,” Lucius murmurs, shuffling back into the centre of the corridor. Draco doesn’t stop him.

Grey eyes flicker and Draco nods stiffly. “I’m fine, Dad.”
The informal address only seems to make Draco’s lie harder to hear. Harry waits, biting down on his bottom lip until he tastes blood, coppery-salty in his mouth. Eventually, Bilby reappears with the potion, which the now frighteningly compliant Lucius drinks without argument; he follows the house-elf away down the corridor, leaning heavily on his cane and glancing back every few steps at his son. Draco remains motionless and upright until the small figure and the unsteady one disappear out of view, and then he slumps against the doorframe and presses both hands to his face, looking suddenly so vulnerable that Harry can barely stand it.

He can’t just step out of the shadows and admit to having witnessed the whole exchange; that much is obvious. Harry supposes he can owl the folder, though it’s heavy enough to necessitate a trip to the post office, he thinks, weighing it in his hands and wondering distractedly just how many birds will be needed to—

“What the...?” Harry jumps as something—someone—walks into him at speed. “Harry?”

“Fuck,” Harry mumbles, furious with himself. He dispels the charm and forces himself to meet Draco’s eyes. “Sorry.”

“How long have you been here?” Draco’s voice is cool but real fear flickers across his face.

“Not too long,” Harry hedges. He holds out the folder. “You left this at the cafe... I thought it might be important so I brought it back.”

For several seconds, Draco stares at his forgotten possession as though he doesn’t recognise it, and then takes it from Harry and holds it against his chest like a shield. “I see. And is there any particular reason why you were lurking around in my house, hiding under a spell? Standing in corridors, listening to other people’s conversations?”

Harry scrubs at his hair, thoroughly ashamed of himself. “I didn’t mean to listen to anything, I really didn’t... I know this doesn’t look good, and I’m not sure if I’d believe me, but I used the spell so that your mum’s bridge-ladies didn’t notice me on the way up the drive, and then I forgot to... get rid of it,” he finishes weakly, already certain from Draco’s expression that he isn’t having any of it.

“You were spying on me.”

Horrified, Harry only just manages to stop himself from taking an ill-advised step forward. “No! Draco, I really wasn’t... when I came around this corner, you and your father were already arguing, and I just sort of...” ...panicked, froze up, went very still and not very Gryffindor? his brain supplies, but he lets the end of the sentence go in favour of a vague, apologetic hand gesture.

“You just sort of decided to stay and listen,” Draco says coldly. “I see. Well, now you’ve witnessed my father’s crumbling sanity for yourself. No doubt you’ll have something to say about it?”

Harry swallows dryly. “No, I... this wasn’t intentional, Draco, it really wasn’t. What could I possibly have to say to that? I understand why you played it down, I—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just that... when you mentioned your dad before, you made it sound like it wasn’t that much of a big deal, but I get it... I understand why you wouldn’t want to spend much time thinking about how nasty it was,” Harry finishes quietly, knowing immediately that he’s chosen the wrong words and
utterly fucked it up.

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Draco demands.

Harry lets out a long, careful breath. “Just that I understand that he must be difficult to deal with.”

Draco’s eyes flash dangerously. “Because he’s so nasty?” he says quietly.

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry attempts but the guards are up and he knows it’s no good. Not that it will stop him from trying.

“He is damaged, Potter. He’s hurt. He doesn’t know what he’s saying when he’s saying it, and he definitely doesn’t remember it afterwards. When he’s not insulting me or winding up my mother, he’s like a confused child... or worse,” Draco says, knuckles turning white from their death grip on the folder. “I don’t know if I should be surprised or not that you of all people are so judgemental.”

Harry scowls, sympathy prickling into indignation. “I’m not judging him, but if we’re going down that road, I think you were the one berating him for things he’s done in the past. I’d have thought that you of all people would want to let people move on from their mistakes.”

Draco looses a small, sharp sound of disbelief. “You are unbelievable.”

“You’d know all about that,” Harry snaps, making no sense and not caring.

Draco’s eyes gleam, stoking Harry’s fury and ensuring that he is painfully and inconveniently aroused. For an unhelpful split second, he wonders if he could shatter this argument by shoving Draco up against the wall and kissing him hard.

“Fuck you.”

Harry laughs. “Yeah, you’d like that,” he mumbles to himself, staring at the floor and attempting to come up with a response that doesn’t make him sound like a fourteen-year-old.

Draco gets there first. “Excuse me? If you’re referring to what my father said, then—”

Harry looks up, face heating. “No, I bloody wasn’t, you defensive fucking prat! I don’t care if you’re gay! I can’t say I’m all that surprised, but I don’t care! I doubt your father even cares, it’s probably just another thing he can give you a hard time about,” Harry rants, rapidly losing the thread of his argument but ploughing on regardless. “You got married, you reproduced, and now, if you want to be gay then you should bloody well get on with it!”

Draco stares at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly open, and oh, god, he’s so fucking buttoned up, and all Harry wants to do is unbutton him.

Finally, he frowns and appears to shake off Harry’s tirade. “This isn’t about me. It’s about my father, and whatever you heard or saw, I will do my best for him because we are family, and that is what families do.”

“I know how families work, Draco.”

“Oh, really?” Draco snipes. “Because as far as I’m aware—”
“Look,” Harry interrupts, folding his arms defensively, “Arthur Weasley mightn’t have been there when I was born, but he would never call me a hideous disappointment.”

Draco glares. “Well, perhaps he should have.”

“Fine. I see.” Stung, Harry swings around and stalks away from Draco, hurrying through corridor after corridor without really seeing where he is going, until eventually he emerges into the entrance hall. There is, thankfully, no sign of Lucius, Bilby, Narcissa or any of her lady-friends as Harry stomps his way down the drive and Apparates away, livid with himself and the lot of them.

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Reluctant to return to his silent, empty house, Harry jumps to Diagon Alley and walks slowly through the Friday evening crowds, head down and hands stuffed into his coat pockets. Surrounded by warm laughter and the mingled scents of hot food, perfume, and smoke, he feels more and more wretched with every step, and cannot even bring himself to answer Misu’s increasingly anxious enquiries.

He lets himself into the workshop and kicks the door closed behind him, shutting out the twinkling lights and happy chatter. Muttering darkly to himself, he slams a record onto the player and fires balls of light into five little green lamps that he made just last week and hung from the rafters. The small space glows in shades of emerald and jade and the needle drops onto a crackly recording of an angry, thrashing song that matches his mood. Fully aware that he’s behaving like a stroppy teenager and struggling to care, Harry paces the stone floor, back and forth, back and forth, and around the worktables. He throws off his coat, rakes his fingers through his hair, retrieves Misu, who has been flung onto the nearest table along with his coat, just about resists the urge to smash all the glass he can see.

And then stops.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” he bellows, coming to a halt in the middle of the floor. He rubs his eyes behind his glasses and arches the tension out of his back, releasing a long, messy breath and forcing the frustration to drain away.

“Do not believe you are not angry,” Misu insists, more strident than Harry has ever heard her. “Can feel it. Can feel it on you. Listen!”

“I’m listening. I’m sorry. And yes... I am—I was angry.” Harry pauses, blinking in the soft green light. “I’m still a bit angry. He’s such a fucking wanker sometimes.”

“Do not know much of the other,” Misu admits, twining herself around Harry’s wrist. “But suspect you will think better if you feel calm.”

“Easier said than done,” Harry says, but Misu merely flicks her tongue and settles down to sleep.

Harry sighs, heaving himself up onto a worktable. He leans back on his elbows to stare up at the stars that glitter on the other side of the skylight. Of course he’s being an idiot. That much is obvious. Of course Draco is a defensive, intractable pain in the arse; he always has been. Harry knows that. He was spiteful and angry, but when Harry allows himself to consider it, he knows that Draco had every reason to be. The spectre of the man who used to be Lucius Malfoy swims in front of Harry’s eyes and he suppresses a shiver. Draco had never wanted him to see that. And, alright, so he’s stubborn and far too proud for his own good, but Harry knows he cannot claim to be any better, and
something in his chest squirms with the knowledge that he is the one in the wrong.

“It was a stupid argument, anyway,” he sighs to the room, and suddenly the pounding music is making his head hurt. With a flick of his wrist, he silences the record player and sits up straight, wrapping his fingers around the hard edges of the table. He knows what he has to do, and he needs to act before he changes his mind.

“Sorry, Misu,” he sighs, gently prying her from his wrist and installing her on her favourite shelf—the one with the little heat lamp and the collection of wooden tubes he has made for her to hide inside. “I think it’s best for you to keep out of the way for now.”

“What will we make?” she asks, shaking off her weariness and hanging over the edge of the shelf. Harry rolls up his sleeves, lights his furnaces and extracts his most delicate copper pipe. “An apology,” he says, and the admission soothes him.

“What does an apology look like?” Misu wants to know, tiny black eyes fixed on Harry.

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “Let’s find out.”

As the furnaces heat up, Harry dispatches the angry music and drops the needle onto a record that always makes him smile; right now, he doesn’t care what anyone thinks, and besides, the only witness is Misu, and she isn’t picky; she just likes to feel the vibrations through her shelf, and is happy with anything from Mozart to the Weird Sisters.

‘Veelas, Nymphs, and Squibs’ it is, then, and as ‘Curse-breakin’ Man’ crackles into life, he whacks up the volume as far as it will go. Misu wriggles delightedly on her shelf, and Harry sets to work on melting down pots of green, blue, and smoky grey glass.

He isn’t sure what he’s doing, but he very rarely is, and that’s fine. All he can do is concentrate on the smoke, the changing shape of the glass, the turn of the pipe, as he pours everything he feels for Draco—the love, the exasperation, desire, confusion, remorse—into his work and hope that when he steps back from the befuddling heat, he will be left with something beautiful, or at least something interesting.

It quickly becomes obvious that this isn’t like the other Draco sculptures. The angles are softer, more delicate, and he has no idea how he achieved those thin, ribbon-like strands of blue and green glass, but combined with the paper thin shimmer of the twisted bulb of grey that is almost hidden within, the whole thing has the effect of a gentle, cleansing wave, a flicker of seafoam, and the fragile warmth of most, if not all, of the sorrys that Harry owes.

Singing along to one of Celestina’s most theatrical numbers, Harry carefully shovels his almost-finished piece into the green flames of the final furnace, slams the heavy door with a flourish and sets about sweeping up the debris from the floor. As he shakes a large brown spider out of his broom’s bristles, someone raps at the door. Startled, Harry watches the spider scuttle away under the worktable and out of sight, before calling out the name of the only person who ever knocks at that door. Even as he does, he knows it’s far too late in the evening for her to be hanging around.

“Kari?”

There’s a soft cough and then: “Er, no.”
Harry’s heart leaps. Still clutching his broom, he hurries to the door and opens it. “Draco.”

“Yes.” Draco gazes back at him, mouth tight and eyes uncertain. “May I speak to you?”

Harry nods, a little unnerved by the formality. “Yeah,” he says softly, stepping back to allow Draco into the workshop.

He walks slowly into the centre of the room, glancing around at the shimmering pieces stacked around the walls, the licking flames of the furnace and the gleam of the copper pipes and pots in the lamplight.

“Dark, dark magic, flowing through my veins; dark, dark, magic, I’ll never be the same!” Celestina warbles. Harry can’t see Draco’s face now, but he can imagine it. He wonders if he should jump in, get his apology in first, but something about the set of Draco’s shoulders compels him to stay quiet for now. Taking a deep breath, he joins Draco at the workbench, leans on the solid surface and waits.

“I was very rude to you,” Draco says at last, still with his back to Harry.

“I understand, you didn’t—”

“Good grief, let me say it, won’t you?” Draco snaps, turning to him with arms crossed and expression aggrieved. “I don’t do it very often, believe me.”

“Sorry,” Harry murmurs, holding up an acquiescent hand.

“Thank you. I was very rude to you; it was unnecessary, and I apologise,” Draco says stiffly. Frowns, and then: “Are you listening to Celestina Warbeck?”

“Er,” Harry manages, unsure where to start. “Yeah, I’m afraid I am,” he admits, wrinkling his nose in embarrassment. And it’s all your father’s fault, he thinks. Your other father, he corrects himself with an inward wince, and, with some effort, pulls himself together. “For some reason, she makes good working music. I’m sorry, too,” he adds. “I really didn’t mean to intrude.”

Draco sighs. “I know you didn’t, and you’re really going to have to let me finish or I’ll have to leave and start all over again.”

Trying hard to temper a smile, Harry nods. “Okay. Please continue.”

“Where was I? Ah, yes. I apologise. Mostly. You shouldn’t creep around in people’s houses, and you can be terribly tactless at times, but I am sorry for what I said about your family. That was unnecessary, and I’d like you to forgive me, because... because, against my better judgement, I think you’re a rather good friend,” he finishes, expression grim and eyes narrowed as though he’s expecting to be mocked or even attacked.

Startled but moved, Harry nods slowly. “Finished now?” he asks, almost in a whisper.

“Yes,” Draco says, folding his arms.

“Okay. Good. I accept your—slightly odd, let’s be honest—apology, and I’m sorry for what I said, and what I saw, and for... er, storming out of your house like an idiot.” Harry levers himself back onto the worktable and shifts in place, playing for time. “It’s not easy to watch someone you actually
give a fuck about being spoken to like that, and you know that impulse control has never been my strong point.”

Draco snorts. “I suppose you did rather well, considering,” he admits. He gazes at Harry, eyes glowing in the green lamplight. “This is a very civil conversation,” he says, sounding puzzled.

“It is,” Harry agrees, letting the smile out just a little. “Is that bad?”

Draco takes off his coat, lays it inside out on the worktable opposite Harry’s, and then pulls himself up to sit on the hard surface in one characteristically graceful movement.

“No. But when I imagined the conversation we would have if we ever spoke again after the war, it was never anything like this.”

Harry’s heart stutters and for a moment, all he can do is stare back across the stone flags that separate them. “I didn’t realise you’d imagined it.”

“Once or twice over the years,” Draco says, fingers twitching defensively. “I sometimes had the impression that we missed out on saying things to one another.”

Harry closes his eyes, just for a moment. “Yeah?” he says at last, voice rough. “Do you think they’d have been apologies or ‘what the fuck did you do that to me for’-s?”

Draco laughs softly. “Plenty of both, I’m sure.”

“You’re probably right,” Harry says, head full of hushed voices in the hospital wing, bright eyes and invisibility cloaks and take the unknown road now. Amid the tangled memories of apologies never made, something tugs at Harry’s brain, and when it clears, he jumps to the floor with a muffled profanity.

“What’s the matter?”

“Forgot something,” Harry says, throwing up a heat-shield charm before opening the furnace and extracting his blue and green piece with a long-handled shovel.

Draco slithers to the floor and approaches the table where the glass sits cooling on a miniature rack. He presses his fingertips against the edge of the table and leans forward as though propriety and the possibility of injury are the only things preventing him from reaching out and touching.

“What is it?”

“It’s... well, it’s sorry for behaving like a cock,” Harry admits, stowing away his shovel and facing Draco across the table.

“You made this? Just now? Tonight?”

“Yes.”

Draco glances between Harry and the cooling glass, eyebrows knitting together. “I had no idea.”

“What’s that you’re eating?” Misu murmurs in her sleep.
Harry frowns. “You had no idea about what?”

“I had no idea that you were... talented,” he says, struggling to get the word out.

Harry snorts, using a spell to rotate the piece so that he can examine it from all angles. “Thanks, Draco,” he says drily, though secretly he’s thrilled by the backhanded compliment. “Did you really think I’d pack everything in for this if I was completely useless?”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “I’ve seen you do stranger things.”

“Shut up.”

Draco smiles. “Well, much as it pains me to admit it; it’s beautiful. It looks like water.”

“In that case,” Harry says slowly, hoping he’s not making a colossal mistake, “it’s yours.”

“Are you quite certain?”

“Yes, Draco, I’m quite certain,” Harry says, unable to stop himself from mocking Draco just a little bit.

“You’re infuriating. Thank you,” he adds, tone turning gracious. “I’ll put it in my study where my father can’t use it for target practice.”

Harry grimaces but says nothing; he’s still unsure how he should deal with the subject of Lucius Malfoy, even now that he and Draco have resolved their argument. Draco himself seems to swing between defensiveness, fierce loyalty and dark glittering humour without warning, so he hasn’t a hope of keeping up.

“You don’t have to look so worried,” Draco says at last with an odd little smile. “I’m not going to bite your head off if you laugh.”

“You’ll forgive me for being cautious,” Harry mutters, picking at his sleeves and gazing at the rotating glass in order to avoid looking at Draco.

Draco taps his fingers against the worktop. “Yes. It’s complicated, I’ll admit that. But sometimes the only thing I can do is make light of it. Perhaps it doesn’t make sense to do so... perhaps it’s callous of me, heartless... but otherwise, I think I might...”

“Drown?” Harry murmurs into the silence.

“Yes. Exactly,” Draco says quietly, and now Harry looks at him—has to look at him—and despite his stiff posture, hard shoulders and mouth pressed thin, the barriers have dropped away and Harry can see him so clearly that his breath is stolen and his chest aches.

He drags in a painful breath. “I don’t think you’re heartless.”

“No?”

“Not any more,” Harry admits, mouth tugging into a half-smile. “Maybe I did once, a long time ago.”
“I thought a lot of things about you a long time ago,” Draco says, eyes glinting with amusement.

“I’m sure you did,” Harry says, intrigue sparking inside him as he slows the glass piece to a stop with a sweep of his hand and grins at Draco. “And now I’m sure you regret it terribly.”

Draco snorts, and then glances down at his stomach, which has begun emitting an impressive growling sound. “I don’t know about that, but I regret missing dinner... which was completely your fault, by the way,” he advises, arching an accusing eyebrow.

“I think you need a lesson in how responsibility works—I’m sure Lily could help you out with it... or her cat; I’m pretty sure he understands it better than you do,” Harry says, reflecting Draco’s disdainful expression back to him, but he still leaves the worktable and goes in search of sustenance, rifling around in boxes and on shelves until he finds the tub of leftovers he knew he had somewhere.

“There you go,” he says, opening the box and plonking it down in front of Draco.

Grey eyes narrow in bewilderment and pale fingers come up to pull gently at the cardboard flaps of the box. “What is it?”

“Food,” Harry advises, but relents at Draco’s expression. “Nice Greek things from next door. There’s a bit of orange cake there...” He points. “Some almond biscuits, and that’s a sort of fried dough thing with honey on it. It’s all good, just eat it.”

Draco hesitates before picking up a bit of pantespani and regarding it with suspicion. “How do I know you’re not trying to poison me?”

“Draco, if you really think I’d go to all this trouble to murder you, then feel free to go and find your own food,” Harry advises, reaching for a biscuit and biting into it with deliberate relish. “But,” he continues, through a mouthful of almondy crumbs, “if you would like to dice with danger and risk it, be my guest.”

“Fine. On your head be it,” Draco sighs, and takes a bite.

Harry applauds. Draco gives him the finger.

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“He’s not evil, you know,” Draco says, licking honey from his fingertips and gazing intensely at Harry, who nods and attempts to ignore the unhelpful flare of interest in the pit of his stomach. “He’s mad.”

“I don’t think very many people are truly evil,” Harry offers.

“Interesting that you of all people should say that,” Draco says. “You’ve grown up with evil.”

Harry shrugs, though he feels anything but nonchalant. “So have you, if you want to look at it that way.”

Draco makes a small sound of agreement and sweeps several stray pistachio bits into his mouth. Harry watches him, fascinated, from just inches away; they both sit cross-legged, facing each other atop the spare workbench, just as he and Maura and now he and Lily have done so many times before. Between them sits the box of treats, now almost empty, and though Harry has completely lost
track of time, the occasional shout and rowdy song from outside tell him all he needs to know about
the lateness of the hour.

The residual warmth from the furnaces and the blazing green lamps has persuaded Draco out of his
jacket and waistcoat, and now he bends over the cake box, eyes narrowed and hair gleaming, with
sleeves rolled up and top button undone. Mouth dry and heart racing like an idiot, Harry fiddles with
the sleeves of his thin sweater and tries not to think about what would happen if he were to lean
forward and just grab his collar, capture his mouth and swipe the honey from his lips.

“You’re not listening to a word I’m saying, are you?”

Harry blinks. Draco is staring at him, one eyebrow raised expectantly. “Er... sorry, think I zoned out
for a second. What were you saying?”

Draco shakes his head and sets down his half-eaten biscuit on a bit of greaseproof parchment torn
from the bottom of the box. “Never mind. There’s only so much moaning about my father that can
be healthy, anyway.”

“I don’t know,” Harry says, “Some people would say it’s better to just vent... get everything out.”

Draco laughs darkly. “Some people are terribly idealistic,” he says, eyes sharp, and then seems to
sag, resting his elbows on his knees and letting out a rueful sigh. “Listen... I wasn’t underplaying it as
much as you think when I said that it isn’t all that bad these days. You saw him at his worst, but he’s
only lucid for perhaps half an hour a day, and my mother really does bear the brunt of it. The rest of
the time, we just get on with our lives. She plants flowers and plays cards, and I provide sound
financial advice and... sit in outhouses with you, apparently.”

“It’s a workshop, not an outhouse,” Harry mumbles, still digesting the rest of Draco’s words.

“Semantics,” Draco shrugs, crunching the other half of his biscuit.

“I’m prepared to bet...” Harry twists uncomfortably and rummages in his pockets, slapping down the
contents on the tabletop, “seven Galleons, thirteen Sickles and a lovely pair of needlenose tweezers...
that you do more than just that.”

“Tempting,” Draco murmurs, picking up the delicate glasswork tweezers and examining them with
interest, “but I have no idea what I’d do with these if I won them. Why don’t you just tell me exactly
what it is you want to know before you decide to gamble your life savings on finding out what I do
at the weekends?”

“I’m not that interested, believe it or not,” Harry lies, reclaiming his tweezers. “Although I do have a
vague interest in what you keep in your big black folders, because whatever’s in there is far more
fascinating than accounting stuff.”

“I’m not an accountant,” Draco protests automatically.

“Yeah, because that’s the point I was making,” Harry mumbles, reaching for the last bit of cake.

“Why do you want to know?”

“What happened to ‘just ask me before you sell your children’, or whatever it was you said?” Harry
asks, sucking orange syrup from his bottom lip and gazing at Draco wearily.
“You really hear what you want to hear, don’t you?” Draco sighs. He picks up a Sickle from Harry’s pile and sets it spinning, watching its progress across the tabletop until it smacks into Harry’s knee and clatters to a stop.

“Come on,” Harry wheedles, shooting Draco his most appealing smile. “Do you actually think we have anything to hide from each other at this point? Look at us—it’s Friday night and we’re sitting in an outhouse, sharing leftover Greek food. What’ve you got to lose?”

Draco stares, and then, quite unexpectedly, smiles. “You’ve no idea.”

Harry’s stomach flips. “Tell me.”

“What’s it worth?”

Harry rolls his eyes; it won’t do to let Draco know he’s enjoying the game. He indicates the pile at his side: “How about seven Galleons, thirteen Sickles, and... that’s it, actually; I really like these,” he says, pocketing the tweezers again.

“I don’t want your money... how about the last bit of cake?” Draco suggests hopefully.

“I thought it was all gone!” Harry cries, leaning precariously on one hand to properly inspect the crumb-strewn interior of the box; sure enough, a small square of pantespani has been squished into one corner. He sighs, but suspects it’s a sacrifice he’s willing to make. “Go on, then.”

Draco’s mouth curves into a satisfied smile that makes the back of Harry’s neck tingle. He extracts the sticky piece of cake and Harry forces himself to look away, feigning interest in straightening his coins into neat piles and waiting for Draco to speak. He does, but not until he has devoured the entire piece with a low, soft sound of contentment that seems to slide out involuntarily but makes Harry want to groan out loud.

“Are you alright?” Draco asks solicitously, wiping his fingers on the scrap of parchment.

Harry looks up, face set. “I’m fine. Stop stalling. You’ve had your cake, now spill the beans.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re obsessed with food,” Draco says, before he catches Harry’s expression. “Oh, good grief. Alright. The folders are for my notes and my photographs. I’m interested in people and I like to record my findings—now aren’t you sorry it isn’t something more scandalous?”

Harry says nothing for a moment, taking in the slight flush to Draco’s pale skin and allowing himself to enjoy it. And alright, perhaps it’s a little unfair that he has information Draco doesn’t, but it won’t do either of them any good to worry about that.

“I wasn’t looking for a scandal. I’m just curious about you.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Oh, give me strength,” Draco mutters, bringing both hands to his face and gazing despairingly at Harry through the gaps in his fingers.
“So, you investigate people,” Harry says, chewing on a triumphant smile. “Which is interesting, because we were discussing that just the other day.”

Draco groans and drops his hands back into his lap. “You know, self-righteousness is terribly unattractive.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. So, how does this work? Is it like... accountant by day, private investigator by night?” Harry speculates, grinning and leaning forward until his face is only inches from Draco’s.

To Harry’s astonishment, Draco leans closer. Eyes fixed on Harry’s, he opens his mouth to speak.

“I am not an accountant.”

Harry grits his teeth and stares right back. “I know.”

“You are so many annoying things,” Draco murmurs, still far too close.

“Takes one to know one,” Harry shoots back childishly, pulling back before he does something he regrets. “Will it really kill you to tell me about your... sleuthing thing?”

Draco sighs. “It’s nothing as dramatic as that, I’m afraid. A few years ago, I started paying attention to the comings and goings of a few interesting public figures, that’s all. I take the odd photograph, scribble down a theory when the mood takes me... there’s nothing more to it.”

While Harry doubts that very much, he takes the bait anyway. “Maybe there should be.”

“More to it?” Draco scoffs. “No.” He retrieves the stray Sickle and sets it on its unsteady path once more. “Everything I said the other day still stands. It’s just a hobby, though I detest that word with a virulent passion,” he says, nose wrinkling in distaste.

“What did the word ‘hobby’ ever do to you?” Harry asks, amused.

“It’s nauseating. Haven’t you ever noticed the way that people who have ‘loads of hobbies’ are always disgustingly twee and terminally dull?”

Harry laughs. “I hadn’t, although now that you mention it... you really are a grumpy sod, aren’t you?”

“Nevertheless,” Draco murmurs, adjusting his cuffs and giving Harry a split-second flash of the faded Mark that somehow looks not-quite-right without the four small letters, T U R N.

“So, who do you watch?” Harry asks, tearing his eyes away from Draco’s inner forearm.

For a moment, Draco stares at him, struggle clear on his face. “Political figures, mainly,” he says at last, and Harry can’t control the fishleap of anticipation in his chest—when he thinks of the scathing article written by the Draco in the glimpse, he can’t help but hope that, with a bit of encouragement, this Draco could bring down his own Fitzwilliam.

“They’re usually the ones who need to be watched,” Harry agrees, opting not to push it for now.

“You do realise that, until recently, you were practically a political figure yourself?” Draco points
out, covering a yawn.

Catching it, Harry still manages to make a face at him. “Please tell me you weren’t following me.”

Draco smirks. “Not nearly interesting enough.”

“Charming.”

“There’s only so much charm one can muster at this hour,” Draco sighs, leaning back on his hands and stretching, tipping back his head and exposing an expanse of pale throat licked by soft green lamplight. Aching, Harry stares past him at Misu, who is stirring from her long sleep and flicking out her tongue to taste the air.

“Is it dinnertime?” she asks.

“Nearly,” Harry advises. “When we get home, okay?”

Misu coils languorously under her heat lamp and falls silent, no doubt contemplating her upcoming meal. Harry turns back to Draco, who has, thankfully, finished stretching and has begun to slither down to the floor.

“Leaving already?”

Draco smiles wearily. “You may not need sleep, but I certainly do. Can I Disapparate from here?”

Harry untangles his legs and lowers himself somewhat stiffly to the floor. “You’ll have to go outside, I’m afraid. I thought I’d have a go at being security conscious.”

Draco merely lifts an eyebrow as he gathers up his waistcoat and jacket and drapes his heavy black coat over one shoulder, somehow managing to look hopelessly stylish without making a scrap of effort. Harry grabs the watery glass piece and thrusts it into Draco’s hands before he can change his mind, then shrugs into his coat, grabs Misu, extinguishes the lamps, and follows Draco out into the cold night air.

After locking up the ’shop, Harry turns to Draco and wonders just what the fuck he’s supposed to do now. Draco says nothing, just stands there on the cobbles, staring back at him, and for what seems like a long time, there is silence; even the drunken revellers have gone home, and it feels as though he and Draco are the only people awake in the whole of Diagon Alley.

“Well...” Draco coughs and indicates the glass piece cradled in his pale fingers. “Thank you for this.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry mumbles, and for no sensible reason at all, he has never felt more nervous in his life.

“Do you have your daughter tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Harry says softly.

“I’m going to Sheffield on Sunday,” Draco says, shifting slightly in place.

“For Gringotts?” Harry asks, bewildered by the sudden awkwardness; it’s as though the warm familiarity created by apologies and sugar and lamplight has been all but washed away by the crisp
night, and he suddenly has no idea what to do with Draco.

“No, one of my own clients, fortunately,” Draco says, eyes bright in the darkness, voice seeming unfeasibly loud all of a sudden.

“Good... well... good.” Harry scrubs at his hair and uses all of his self-control to avoid smacking himself in the face.

“I’ll... er... see you at the Moody on Monday, then?” Draco says uncertainly.

Harry smiles, relief coursing through his veins. “Absolutely.”

Draco nods, turns to Disapparate, and hesitates. “Do you really not care?”

“How...”

“About what?”

“About what my father said... about me.”

“Oh,” Harry murmurs, understanding in a rush. “No. I don’t care at all.” He pauses, gathering the strands of his confidence and pulling them tight. “In fact, I...” he begins, but Draco has disappeared, leaving him staring at an empty patch of cobbles.

Prickling with frustration, Harry makes his way home. He deposits Misu in her bedside tank with a defrosted mouse and a promise of a proper conversation later and heads for the bathroom, shedding clothes as he goes and turning the bath taps onto full blast. As the hot water surges into the tub and the room fills with delicious, sage-scented steam, he strips down to nothing and leans against the cool tiles, abandoning his glasses and pressing one hand against his tired eyes, leaving the other to slide down his belly and wrap around his aching, half hard cock. He’s been wound up for most of the evening, and the gentle pressure now makes him groan and shiver.

He steps into the bath without checking the temperature and gasps as he lowers himself into the scalding water, watching his skin turn pink and glistening and staying perfectly still until he adjusts to the heat. Finally, he immerses himself up to his nostrils and sighs, sending tiny ripples across the surface of the water. The day has been interesting—not at all what he imagined when he woke to the squelching of the tomato this morning—and now he’s exhausted, restless, a little confused, and so fucking turned on that he’s ready to explode.

Resting his head against the cool porcelain, he shuts his eyes, clears his mind and sighs, allowing the rapidly-hardening flesh to slide in and out of his fist. He strokes himself slowly, lazily, knowing he doesn’t have to try too hard; he’s been building up to this release for hours, head full of Draco’s eyes bright with anger, fists clenched, fingers tapping, his stiff, formal apology, his smiles and teasing words and his licking of fingers sticky with honey and sugar... it’s all too much, almost painful, and as Harry tightens his grip and lifts his hips into each oil-slippery stroke, he knows it’s all but over, and all he can think about is Draco.

His Draco.

In his mind, he dissolves his restraint, leans across that table and tugs Draco to him, rising up on his knees and pulling them hard together, hip to hip with fingers in belt loops and maddening, beautiful friction, the taste of almonds and sharp sweetness as their tongues collide, hot, hungry, and threading his fingers through hair that feels like silk. What he remembers, he misses violently, and what is unfamiliar, he craves with every splinter of his being. Lemons and toothpaste and leather; stripes and
“Fuck,” he hisses, arching and stiffening as a sharp wave of pure relief crashes through him, whipping down his spine and swirling there as he comes in hot, powerful bursts under the water.

Breathless, he sinks back down into the bath, opening his eyes slowly and watching fuzzily as the water sluices into the overflow, taking with it the last of his tension. He exhales shakily, ignoring the fact that his eyes are stinging—he’s just tired—and reaches for the soap. Some twenty minutes later, he hauls himself out of the water, throws a towel around his waist, staggers into the bedroom and collapses on top of the sheets. He doesn’t move until the morning.

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“You’re late,” Ginny informs him as she opens the door at three minutes past ten on Saturday morning, but she doesn’t seem overly concerned and is still rubbing at her hair with a towel as she follows him along the hallway to the kitchen. “And so am I.”

“Where are you going?” Harry asks, eyeing her vibrant, teal-coloured shirt and smart jeans. “Have you had your hair cut?”

Ginny drops the towel over the back of a chair and waves the kettle in Harry’s direction. He nods.

“Yeah, just a little bit,” she says, picking up a section between her index and middle fingers and examining it critically. The change of style isn’t drastic, but it’s noticeable; Ginny’s hair now falls just a couple of inches below her shoulders and feathers slightly against her shirt fabric. “What do you think?”

“I like it,” Harry says, surprised to be asked, but apparently not as surprised as Ginny is by his approval.

She blinks and turns away, clanking around with spoon and milk and teabags. He accepts the proffered cup, listening to the thumping sounds issuing from the floor above as Lily scrambles to stuff as many of her possessions as possible into her overnight bag, just as she does every weekend.

“Thanks. Ron and I are going to watch a match,” she says, smiling at last. “Hermione’s trying to write some paper or other and she wants him out of her hair, so I volunteered—should be a good one: Harpies v Wasps.”

Something in her tone lifts Harry, and he smiles back as he sips his tea and waits for Lily to appear.

“How’s work?”

“Not as exciting as yours, I imagine,” she says, leaning against the counter and regarding him with interest over the top of her cup.

“No comment,” Harry says, absently stroking Misu as she pops her head out of his shirt pocket.

“I’ve had some interesting meetings with Blaise Zabini.”

Harry tempers a smirk. “Oh, really? What do you think of him?”

Ginny shrugs dispassionately, acting for all the world as though she hadn’t raised the subject in the
first place. “I don’t know yet, but he certainly seems to think he’s very charming.”

Harry laughs. “How so?” he asks, as if he doesn’t know exactly how so.

“Oh, you know, ever so polite but a bit cheeky, great big presence, ever so pleased with himself—you know the type,” Ginny says, rolling her eyes. “Lily!” she bellows at the ceiling.

Harry doesn’t jump, and is rather proud of himself. “Yeah, I know the type,” he mumbles, smiling to himself.

That afternoon, as he and Lily walk through the park and she attempts to teach him to dangle upside down from the monkey bars, Harry can’t quite shift Blaise Zabini and his exuberant personality from his mind. By the time they get back to the house, his mind is made up. The problem is, he’s not exactly sure where to find Blaise, and he’s buggered if he’s going to ask Draco.

“Dad, you need to water your plants!” Lily says sternly, picking up a potted fern from the kitchen windowsill and waving the slightly dry earth under his nose. She sits down at the table next to him with Frank on her lap and watches as the cat sniffs amiably at Misu’s tail before she disappears into a pile of old newspapers. “What sort of plant is this, anyway?”

“A fern, I think,” Harry says, tracing the soft fronds with his fingers and moistening the soil with a stream of water from his wand.

“What kind?”

“I don’t know. A green one?”

“Dad.”

“Lily.”

Lily grins and sticks out her tongue, and Harry has a rather good idea.

It’s been far too long since he saw Neville.

When Lily is settled in bed with Frank, her fish, and an ancient copy of Watership Down, Harry sits at the kitchen table and writes a letter. It’s a short note, a friendly, hopeful request, and he isn’t disappointed. Less than an hour later, his owl returns with a response.

Harry,

Great to hear from you. You’re right, it’s been far too long.

Come over tomorrow afternoon, it’ll be great to catch up. I thought I might bake a cake in your honour, but maybe it’s better if I just buy one...

See you soon,

Nev.

PS I’m still in the same house, the one on the end with the red door. Just in case you’ve forgotten.
Harry hasn’t. After sharing a mammoth cooked breakfast with Lily (and, despite his better efforts, Frank and Misu), he makes his way to the Hertfordshire village where Neville has lived for the best part of a decade. Having Apparated most of the distance, Harry opts to walk the last half mile or so, savouring the warm sunshine on his face and the fresh scents of the coming spring. Neville’s house makes up one end of a small terrace of charmingly ramshackle cottages, and had Harry not known in advance which house belonged to his friend, the front garden would have given it away instantly. Behind the painted wooden gate, the small patch of land is ablaze with colour and alive with gently-waving green leaves, and in the midst of it all sleeps a glossy chocolate Labrador, tail and ears twitching against the carpet of pebbles.

Harry strokes the dog’s silky head as he passes but it continues to snooze.

After what seems like a long time, the door flies open and Neville stands there, beaming and slightly out of breath, wearing a scuffed leather apron and a pair of gauntlets.

“Harry! Come in, come in,” he says, squashing his sturdy frame against the wall of the narrow passageway so that Harry can edge through. “Sorry to keep you waiting, I’m having a bit of trouble with a spider-eating cactus.”

Equal parts alarmed and amused, Harry nods, as though he knows exactly how bothersome spider-eating cacti can be.

“Should I be worried?” he asks, grinning.

“No, it’s in the back garden, although...” Neville’s dark eyebrows draw together. “Now I think about it, I might’ve left it a bit close to the fishpond. Can you just give me one minute?” he says, backing off down the hallway and pointing at the first door along. “Go and sit down, I’ll be right back. Hopefully.”

“Good luck,” Harry calls, watching him disappear around a corner and hoping that the fish haven’t come to any grief in Neville’s absence. Then, he walks into the living room and stops dead. Sitting in an armchair, casual as can be, with one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, apparently engrossed in a heavy, serious-looking book, is someone Harry hoped he might never run into again. “Goldstein?” he demands, blinking repeatedly, just in case.

The man in the chair looks up and the eyes behind the wire-rimmed reading glasses are genuinely surprised, as though noticing Harry for the first time.

“If you like, although I prefer to go by Anthony these days,” he says, and he smiles. And Harry doesn’t know what to think, because that smile uses the same lips and exposes the same perfect teeth that he has detested for several months now, but it’s not the same smile at all. It’s warm and slightly self-deprecating, and if Harry wasn’t so confused, he’d want to smile back.

“Right,” he says vaguely. “Sorry. I’m Harry.”

Goldstein closes his book and nods. “You don’t really think I don’t remember you?”

“I don’t like to presume,” Harry says.

“Aren’t you going to sit down?” Goldstein says mildly, indicating an armchair that is vacant but for a
snoring, overweight tabby cat. “You can move her; she can sleep anywhere.”

Harry hesitates, irked at being asked to sit down by not-quite Goldstein in Neville Longbottom’s house. When he takes a closer look at Goldstein, though, he notices that he’s not wearing shoes; he’s in shirtsleeves with no outer garments in sight; there’s a half finished cup of tea at his elbow, and Neville, quite obviously, knows that he’s here, even if he was too preoccupied with carnivorous plants to tell Harry.

Humming with confused irritation, Harry gently shoves the cat until she flops onto her side and allows him enough space to perch on the edge of the chair with his hands in his lap. Goldstein watches him calmly over the top of his reading glasses and Harry waits. Waits for the gaze to sharpen into something intense, lascivious. Waits for an obnoxious remark, an invasion of his personal space, but there’s nothing. If anything, Goldstein looks unnerved, and perhaps that’s because Harry’s staring.

Feeling awkward, Harry stares down at the cat instead. “So... erm... it’s warm outside today.”

“Yes,” Goldstein says evenly. “Apparently the warm weather makes the cacti... fractious.”

Harry looks up, catching Goldstein’s wry smile, and this time it gets him; his mouth tugs upwards at the corners and he hates himself. He has no idea what kind of madness this is, but he thinks he’d like to opt out now. He also can’t help wanting to blame the whole thing on Boris.

“Well... er... I’m sure Nev’s more than capable of putting them in their place,” he offers.

“Oh, I have every faith in him. He’s very talented when it comes to living things, especially the more difficult varieties,” Goldstein says, getting to his feet. “He could be a while. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I’d love one,” Nev says, shuffling into the room and dumping his gauntlets on the coffee table. Despite the protection, there are several fresh scratches on his arms and his dark hair is sticking to his forehead with sweat.

“I told you to order those full length gloves,” Goldstein says, catching Neville’s wrist and inspecting the cuts with narrowed eyes. “One of these days, I’m going to be sitting in here and you’ll be out there bleeding to death.”

“Don’t be so bloody dramatic,” Nev says, grinning and reclaiming his arm. He rubs briskly at the scratches with an earth-smeared hand. “It’ll be fine. I’ve got that big cactus re-potted, that’s the main thing.”

“Will you... oh, for goodness’ sake,” Goldstein sighs, drawing his wand and cleaning the scratches with a spell Harry has used hundreds of times. “Perhaps you can reason with him,” he says, turning exasperated eyes on Harry before stalking past both of them and into the kitchen.

“So,” Neville mumbles, dropping into Goldstein’s vacated chair and meeting Harry’s eyes. “You’ve met Anthony.”

“Yeah,” Harry says. “Bit of a surprise, that one.”

Neville’s face, already flushed with exertion, turns beetroot. “Hmm. It was, actually.”
“So,” Harry encourages, “what happened?” And what have you done to him? he wants to add, but manages to keep the unhelpful words inside his mouth, just about.

“Since when were you such a gossip?” Neville laughs, struggling with the string at the waist of his leather apron.

“Since I got divorced, probably,” Harry admits. “I obviously need a bit of excitement in my life.”

“I’m really sorry about that, Harry,” Nev says, looking up from his knot. “I meant to get in touch, but... it’s so hard to know what to say. I know it’s no excuse.”

“It’s fine. We’re both fine.” Harry pauses, resenting the insipidness of the word. “God, that sounds like a load of crap, but we really are doing alright, and the kids are okay.” He sighs, pulling the unprotesting cat onto his lap. “Life goes on, I suppose.”

Neville smiles. Finally, with a small sound of triumph, he frees the knot and releases himself from the apron, and with some effort, he folds it on his lap and gazes at Harry. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Thanks. Now tell me how you ended up with Goldstein... er, Anthony, before he comes back and we can’t talk about him.”

At the sounds of a tea tray being assembled, both Harry and Neville turn their heads toward the kitchen for a moment.

“It’s not very exciting,” Neville insists. “We were quite close at school during that last year—you know, when you and Ron and Hermione left... the DA was like a family. We had to stick together. We lost touch over the years, obviously, but they had one of those Ministry balls last August and I got talked into going...” Neville grimaces and Harry reflects the expression back to him.

“I managed to avoid that one.”

“You didn’t miss much. We got seated together and spent the whole night reminiscing.” Nev shrugs, failing to hide a smile despite his obvious embarrassment. “That’s sort of it, really.”

Harry doesn’t know what to say. His friend seems happy and comfortable, and the man in the kitchen—while unmistakeably Anthony Goldstein—is practically unrecognisable as the psychotic idiot who had caused him endless hassle in the glimpse. None of it makes any sense.

“Nev...” Harry hesitates. Bites his lip. “Is he... I mean... does he treat you well?”

Neville blinks wide dark eyes and nods slowly. “Yeah, of course. Why do you ask?”

“Just... checking,” Harry says brightly, forcing a smile and hoping it doesn’t look too deranged. “I worry about my friends, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Neville assures him. “You know, you and Anthony should compare notes—he worries about me all the time. It’s a bit maddening, actually.”

Harry lifts an eyebrow, trying not to think about the image invoked by Neville’s words. In the kitchen, the kettle is whistling furiously, so he throws out one more question, even as he does, knowing that nothing he says will negate the feeling of quiet madness that is settling in around him.
“Does he live here, then?”

Neville drops his voice. “Well... we’re sort of at that funny stage, you know. There’s an awful lot of his stuff here, but we haven’t made anything official.” He leans across his tangle of apron toward Harry, eyes wide. “I’ve got no idea what I’m doing.”

Harry smiles in spite of his reservations. “I don’t think any of us do, really.”

“It’d be nice if it wasn’t just me,” Nev sighs.

“It’s definitely not. And I’m pleased for you, seriously. There’s definitely nothing wrong with renewing old friendships.”

Neville laughs. “There’s been a lot of that recently, hasn’t there—I saw you and Draco Malfoy in the paper the other day.”

“Draco and I are just friends,” Harry says, forcing himself not to avoid Neville’s eyes.

Neville grins.

“I was at the match that day,” Goldstein offers, sidling into the room with a loaded tea tray and setting it down on the table. “It was miserable. We were steamrollered.”

“Er, thanks—one please,” Harry says, accepting a steaming cup from Goldstein and allowing him to drop a sugar cube into it, quietly amazed that he’s even thinking about drinking something that man has made for him. Made for him behind closed doors, at that. “I thought Ravenclaw played really well, actually. They just didn’t have a chance against Frances Mullender,” Harry offers, feeling rather pleased with himself.

Goldstein pauses in passing Neville his cup and turns to Harry with a surprised little smile. “I didn’t realise you actually kept up with Hogwarts Quidditch,” he says, sounding quite delighted.

“Not really,” Harry admits. “I’m trying to educate myself, though; my son’s playing now and Draco does seem to enjoy lecturing me.”

Goldstein arches a fine eyebrow and pulls up a chair next to Neville, reaching over and examining his grazed arm once again, hanging on grimly when Nev protests that it’s fine and he isn’t going to die from a cactus bite.

“I’d rather not take that chance, oddly enough,” he murmurs, Summoning a large book from the shelf behind Harry and disappearing behind it, reading glasses shoved up onto the bridge of his nose and brow wrinkled in concentration.

Nev shoots Harry a tolerant smile and shrugs, wrapping grimy-fingernailed hands around his teacup.

“Ah,” Harry says, remembering the inspiration for his visit. “Have you heard of a place called Zabology?”

Nev sighs. “Yep.”

“Do you know where it is?”
“Just off Oxford Street. It’s got some fantastic Muggle-repelling magic on it—just looks like a boarded up old curry house to them, apparently,” Neville says, sounding wistful. “I applied for a job there last week. Bet I won’t get it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Goldstein says, frowning and continuing to thumb through the book, which Harry now notices is called ‘Herbology and Health: how to ward off the worst’ and is at least four inches thick. “You are perfect for that job. Have some patience.”

“I’m sure they’d be lucky to have you, Nev,” Harry says, and Neville smiles gratefully.

“We’ll see. Why’d you want to know, anyway? You’re not planning another change of career, are you?”

“Not today,” Harry says cheerfully. “I’d just like to have a chat with someone who works there.”

“Sounds mysterious,” Nev says and leans back in his chair, wonderfully unconcerned.

“That second wound looks a lot like the start of insidious promontitis,” Goldstein says, lowering his book and pursing his lips. “I think we’re going to need some hellebore extract.”

“It’s just a scratch,” Nev says faintly, exchanging glances with Harry as Goldstein leaps to his feet, dumps the book on his chair and sweeps out of the room. Seconds later, they both raise their eyes to the ceiling to follow the creaking of the ancient floorboards above their heads. Neville shrugs and drinks his tea, unperturbed. “He’s... like that.”

Harry nods slowly and reaches for a piece of cake. “So he is.”

**~*~**

The next morning, as Harry heads through the chaotic, rain-slicked streets of central London on his way to Zabology, his head is still spinning with his visit to Neville and his altogether unexpected boyfriend. By the time he had left the house, several hours and countless cups of tea later, one thing had been abundantly clear: Anthony Goldstein adores Neville; he practically hero-worships him. He had been perfectly friendly to Harry for the duration of his visit, but had shown no interest beyond that; there hadn’t been even a sniff of the slimy little moves Harry had expected, and it’s just strange.

His obsessive personality seems to have translated itself into a somewhat fanatical fixation on Neville’s health, and, Harry surmises from a few cutting remarks later in the afternoon, anyone who might dare to upset Neville in any way. Harry can’t help but think that such neurotic behaviour would drive him insane, but Neville seems to be thriving on it, bearing his partner’s more challenging quirks with the cheerful good grace that has always made him a good friend and a good person. Somewhere in the back of Harry’s head, too, is the nagging feeling that there aren’t a million miles separating this Goldstein and Draco, and that just makes his head hurt.

He thinks he wants to like this man, this other Goldstein, and perhaps the only thing he can do in good conscience is to give him a chance. After all, Harry and his other self are not, were not, one and the same, though the difference between Goldstein and Anthony is not subtle, it is staggering. And, Harry muses reluctantly as his turns onto Oxford Street and stumbles over an old woman’s gargantuan shopping bag, the only real difference between this world and the glimpse is...

“Watch where you’re going,” she rasps in a harsh East-end accent, glaring at Harry and stumping off down the street, whacking men, women, children and dogs out of her way with the bag as she goes.
Harry sighs and steps out of the flow for a moment to extract Misu from his pocket and check her for injuries, ignoring the curious stares of his fellow pedestrians. Once satisfied that she is indeed unharmed, he lets her crawl into his sleeve and plunges back into the fray, reluctantly picking up his train of thought where he left it.

The difference is that he went back for Draco. That was what the whole thing had been about, hadn’t it? In the glimpse, he didn’t just think about saving Draco, he did it. Could that have been the one action that turned Goldstein’s head? Harry sighs, pushing on through the crowds and the drizzle. He supposes he’ll never know, not really, but still he can’t stop himself from wondering about every little thing: was it his fault that glimpse-Goldstein behaved the way he did? Was his attraction to Neville—presumed feigned—actually genuine after all?

“So many strange smells in this place,” Misu says. “So many of them from food. Many, many different types of food...”

Reluctantly amused, Harry says nothing until he turns onto a quieter side street and catches sight of the building. It isn’t easy to miss, unless one is a Muggle, he supposes. Blaise Zabini’s company occupies a tall structure covered in what looks like burnished copper with the letters ‘ZABOLOGY’ snaking down one side in elegant letters. He’s impressed and a little intimidated as he stands before a set of heavy doors, staring up at the towering building. It occurs to him with a familiar weary resignation that once again, he has completely failed to plan just what he’s going to do once he’s inside.

“I really need to start rehearsing for these things,” he sighs.

“Not sure what that means,” Misu admits, sliding out onto the back of Harry’s hand and taking in the imposing building. “You should go in there. It’s so shiny.”

“I’m not sure that’s the wisest way to make decisions,” Harry advises, but he lets himself into the building anyway.

The receptionist, a pretty young dark-haired woman, takes one look at him, flushes, and directs him to Blaise’s office without question. Relieved, though slightly concerned for their security, Harry thanks her, and he and Misu ride the sparkling glass lift all the way to the twenty-fifth floor. The carpets here are Head-of-MLE soft and the fragrance of plant life is everywhere as he walks the corridors, passing several doors until he finds the right one.

Harry smiles to himself. Not only does the door bear a copper nameplate that reads: ‘Blaise Zabini – CEO’ but beneath it someone has Spellotaped a sign that says:

‘Please knock loudly, occupant is elderly and deaf.’

He raps obediently on the panelled wood and waits. Seconds later he hears a crash and a familiar rich voice calls: “You’ll have to open it yourself; I’ve just knocked my entire tea tray on the bloody floor.”

Reminding himself that he’s essentially a stranger to this man, Harry sets his face into a neutral expression and lets himself into the office. The sight that greets him is an instant threat to his composure. Blaise is on all fours, muttering to himself as he retrieves the fallen contents of his tea tray with massive hands and short, irritable flicks of his wand. He looks just as Harry remembers him, beautifully dressed in a stiff black three-piece suit and shiny shoes, dark, velvety skin betraying
nothing of his advancing age but barrel-like abdomen and broad shoulders speaking volumes about his voracious appetite and strength.

He’s still not completely sure what he’s doing here even as he closes the door behind himself and steps onto the brightly-coloured rug, but whatever it is, he appears to be doing it anyway, and he doesn’t think he should really be surprised about that.

“Er, good morning,” he says uncertainly.

The muttering stops and Blaise withdraws himself from under the desk with surprising grace, dumping his empty sugar bowl back onto the tray and sitting back on his heels to regard Harry.

“Good morning indeed,” he rumbles, dark eyes flicking over Harry’s hair, his ripped-on-purpose t-shirt and silver-grey cardigan, his scruffy canvas shoes, and Misu, who has emerged from his sleeve to get a good look at the room, twisting this way and that like a multicoloured periscope. “I must admit, I thought my receptionist was having me on when she said Harry Potter was on his way up to see me.”

“I’m afraid not,” Harry says.

“I’m not disappointed,” Blaise assures him, flashing the familiar sparkling grin and getting to his feet. “Intrigued, certainly, but a bit of mystery can only liven up a dull Monday morning. What can I do for you?”

Harry takes a moment to enjoy the sensation of relief that, unlike Goldstein, Blaise Zabini is exactly as he remembers him. He supposes it’s only natural that the world seems to right itself eventually.

“It’s a bit complicated,” he admits.

“You’d better have a seat, then,” Blaise says, indicating a pair of leather chairs next to a huge window that takes up one whole wall of the office. “I’d offer you a cup of tea, but I think most of it’s in the carpet now.”

“Thanks, it’s fine,” Harry assures, settling himself in the nearest chair. Blaise seems to be more fascinated than wary and that’s more than good enough for him right now. Even as he drops into the chair opposite Harry’s, though, Blaise seems to have other ideas.

“Hang on.” He frowns and gets up, crossing the room and bellowing into the fire: “Kerensa! Can I have another tea tray, please?”

Harry doesn’t quite catch the response, but Blaise sighs and shoots him a pained look before replying: “There was nothing wrong with the other one. I quite arbitrarily decided to throw it on the floor. Now I need another one because Harry Potter is in my office.”

Amused but self-conscious, Harry chews his lip and stares down at Misu, who has slithered out onto his lap and appears to be curling herself into a little knot on his thigh.

“Really, it’s fine,” he mumbles, but Blaise either doesn’t hear him or opts to ignore his protests.

“I don’t know, Kerensa. Why didn’t you ask him yourself while you had the chance?” He sighs. “Just tea. No, I didn’t do it on purpose. Yes, sugar cubes all over the floor... the cups are all intact. I’m going now... yes. Just come in. Right. Marvellous.”
Shaking his head, Blaise withdraws from the fire and resumes his position opposite Harry. He rests his vast elbows on the chair arms and steeples his fingers over his chest.

“What brings you to Zabology, Harry Potter?”

**~*~**

Ten minutes and Kerensa’s replacement tea tray later, Harry still hasn’t answered that question.

He has made vague inquiries about the business (Blaise set it up fifteen years ago and ran it out of his own basement until it became the biggest plant and plant-based remedy company in the UK), compliments the furniture (some pieces from France and some from the same Diagon Alley stores as Harry used to fill his new house), and enters into a surprisingly easy reminiscence about some of the teachers from their Hogwarts days (Blaise, Harry is interested to discover, was and remains to this day terrified of Professor McGonagall). Blaise nods and gesticulates and drinks his tea, completely unperturbed by Harry’s evasiveness, and though this only serves to make Harry like him even more, guilt begins to get the better of him and he knows he will have to say something.

Why did he come here? That’s the important question, and he doesn’t have a sensible answer. All he knows is that he has been drawn here... by curiosity, by the desire to see someone familiar, and because he has missed Blaise. Now that he’s here, sitting in a fancy chair in a fancy office and staring into the big handsome face, the compulsion to tell him everything is overwhelming. This man knows Draco, and while they don’t seem to have the close relationship they had in the glimpse, they do see one another socially, and Blaise probably knows as much about the adult Draco as anyone beside Narcissa, and he’s not about to ask her for advice.

But he can’t, of course. He can’t tell him.

Why not? asks a fiendish little voice inside his head.

“The funny thing is, I wasn’t even very good at Herbology at school,” Blaise is saying, adding several cubes of sugar to his tea. “I only got an ‘A’ in my OWL.”

Because he’ll think I’m weird. Because he won’t believe me. Because I’m not allowed to tell anyone.

“Exam results aren’t everything,” Harry agrees. “You’ve obviously got a fairly impressive business sense.”

“I never knew you were such a flatterer,” Blaise says, grinning.

Harry smiles back and wonders when the prospect of breaking the rules has ever stopped him from doing anything.

He doesn’t see why he shouldn’t have someone to talk to about this surreal situation. Boris gave him a guide in the glimpse, and while he misses Maura enormously just because he misses her, he also misses having someone around who understands all this. Misu is impressively wise for a not-quite-three-month-old corn snake, but there are some things about the world that Harry just can’t expect her to comprehend.

“I think I’d be a terrible flatterer,” Harry says at last, gripping his cup, heart thumping, as he makes up his mind. “I’m a rubbish liar so I tend to just tell the truth.”
“You really can’t take the Gryffindor out of the boy, can you?” Blaise laughs.

“Not really.” Harry pauses, reaching for a fortifying breath. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I know Slytherins are supposed to be naturally suspicious, but I’m hoping you can hold on to what a crappy liar I am when I tell you this.”

Blaise gazes at him, dark eyes intense. “Tell me what?”

“A story,” Harry says quietly.
Chapter 12

For what feels like a long time, silence hangs between them. Finally, Blaise blinks and says, “Well, much as I love a good yarn, I can’t help wondering... why me?”

Harry’s lips curl in a weak half smile. “I’m hoping that’ll become clear.”

“How mysterious,” Blaise murmurs, lacing his huge fingers together. “Do press on, then.”

Harry pulls in a deep breath, knowing that the questioning the wisdom of his decision to spill the beans is futile now; it’s too late to turn back, much as a part of him would like to leap to his feet, barrel into the lift, dash past Kerensa the curious receptionist, and disappear into the drizzle and the crowds. Catching Blaise’s intense gaze once more, he gives himself a mental shake.

“Okay. Do you believe in parallel universes?”

Blaise purses his lips and regards Harry steadily. “I believe in the possibility of most things. After all, the things we do without even thinking would seem utterly unfeasible to a Muggle—I don’t believe for a moment that we know and understand everything that exists, either. It would be extremely arrogant to assume that a thing doesn’t exist unless I personally have seen it.” Blaise pauses, glancing pensively out of the window at the slashing rain. “Forgive me, I have been told that I do go on a bit.”

Harry laughs softly. “No, don’t apologise... I think you’re dead right.”

“Oh?” Blaise turns searching dark eyes back to him, and his surprise is clear to see.

Lifted, Harry continues. “Yeah. I’m also very relieved that you have such an open mind, because you’re probably going to need it.” Shifting in his chair, he finds a comfortable position and begins, without a better idea, at the beginning. “Well, here’s the thing. About a week before Christmas, I helped an old man across the road...” Harry pauses, noticing the raised eyebrow. “It was dark and the road was icy,” he says defensively. “Anyway, after a few too many drinks, I told him a few things about my life... started grumbling about things I wish I’d done differently in the past... like you do, I suppose. When we parted ways, he told me he was going to do me a favour. And... when I woke up the next morning, I was... somewhere else.”

“Where?” Blaise demands, leaning forward slightly in his chair.

The combination of his absorption and what Harry has to say next sends his stomach flipping.

“In the place I would’ve ended up if I’d made a different choice—if I had done that one thing I’ve always wondered about differently. That one decision changed everything.”

“This is pretty thrilling, you know,” Blaise advises, grinning. “What was the one thing? You must tell me before I explode.”

Harry chews his lip. Apparently, Blaise Zabini is just Blaise Zabini, wherever he might exist.

“You remember the night the Death Eaters got into Hogwarts? The night Draco Malfoy tried to kill Dumbledore?”
“Of course,” Blaise says, voice softer now. Harry swallows dryly. “The place he sent me... none of that happened. None of it happened because the night after Draco and I fought in the bathroom... when I used that horrible spell...” Harry hesitates, cut by the look of horror in Blaise’s eyes at the memory, and knowing he deserves it. “It was a terrible thing to do. I know that now. I didn’t know what the spell did, not that it’s any excuse.” Harry exhales slowly, determined not to become tangled up in guilt. “In the glimpse—that’s what the old man called it, a chance for me to see what could have been—I went back for Draco. I apologised to him. We talked all night. He went to Dumbledore and brought his family into protection.”

“Do you mean to say that Dumbledore lived... in this version of events?” Blaise asks quietly.

“No,” Harry almost whispers. “But others did... because of Draco. Because of what he did—because of what I did—because of what Boris did.”

“Good heavens,” Blaise says slowly. “I don’t know what to say. Draco has had a rather miserable life. I don’t see him as often as I should, but I sometimes get the impression that he only keeps going for his boy.” Blaise frowns and peers down at his fingers. “I probably shouldn’t have said that. Terribly indiscreet of me.”

“It’s alright, I won’t tell him,” Harry assures, finding a small, genuine smile for Blaise.

“Of course,” Blaise murmurs, eyes widening again. “The two of you are quite chummy these days, aren’t you? I’d almost forgotten. Age is a terrible thing, Harry.”

“You’re not old yet. You can blame the confusion on the sudden appearance of a strange man in your office, if you like?”

Blaise flashes Harry a bright smile. “That’s exceedingly charitable of you. I think I will.”

“Good decision. And yes, I suppose Draco and I are rather friendly at the moment,” he agrees.

“Hold on—is that what all this is about? This Boris character sent you to another universe so that you could make friends with someone you used to hate?” Blaise asks, puzzled.

“Not exactly,” Harry says faintly.

“Well, do get on with it,” Blaise urges. “All this suspense can’t be good for my health.”

“Probably not,” Harry concedes. “You’re being brilliantly calm about all this, though... can’t say I’d have been the same if the roles were reversed.”

Blaise lifts one broad shoulder in a characteristically graceful shrug. “A man I haven’t seen in nearly twenty years turns up at my place of work with a little snake and a tall tale. The way I see it, I have two options—I can throw him out, attempt to think no more of it and probably spend the rest of my days plagued by curiosity, or I can give him a drink and a seat and find out what he wants with me.”

“You’re a wise man,” Harry says at last, smiling despite the heaviness of his heart. “Here and in the glimpse.”

Blaise inclines his head. “Thank you.” When he meets Harry’s gaze again, his eyes are bright with
“In the glimpse, you and I were friends,” Harry says softly. “Really good friends. Draco and I saw you all the time. There were four of us... me and Draco and you and your wife.” Harry hesitates and then presses on, throat dry, wishing he could think of a better way to do this. “Two couples,” he adds.

Blaise stares, and Harry can see the expressions flashing across his face, far too rapidly to discern a single one. Finally, he pushes out a long, considered exhalation.

“You mean to tell me,” he murmurs, voice light with incredulity, “that you and Draco were some sort of item in this glimpse... thing?”

“Yeah... crazy, isn’t it?” Harry says, shaking his head and grinning, a note of hysteria entering his voice as he continues. “Together for seventeen years. Old married couple, practically. Who’d’ve thought it?”

“Well, certainly not me, although...” Blaise purses his lips and rubs absently at his face.

“Although what?”

“You always did have a rather intense relationship,” he concedes.

Harry gazes at him, astonished, as he leans forward to refresh his tea cup, shaking his head dully as Blaise holds out the pot to him. It’s unbelievable. Not only does he seem to believe Harry, but he barely seems surprised.

“Yes, but... not like that,” he says at last, gesturing significantly. Somewhere inside his sleeve, Misu flicks her tongue against his skin and he feels comforted.

Blaise’s mouth twists into an odd little smile just before it disappears behind his teacup. “I was expecting something a lot more outlandish, I have to admit.”

Harry snorts, almost offended. “Parallel universes and... and... sudden homosexuality aren’t outlandish enough for you?” he demands, deciding he wants that refill after all and grabbing up the teapot with a little more vigour than necessary.

Smirking, Blaise replaces his cup on his saucer. “There’s nothing outlandish or surprising about Draco Malfoy’s homosexuality,” he says with a rumble of laughter.

Startled, Harry sets down the pot and inhales the fragrant steam that spirals upward from the surface of his tea. Like so many of these ‘big’ conversations, this is not really going the way he planned. He can’t quite work out if he’s anxious, relieved, amused or something else completely different. He sighs.

“I thought it was a secret.”

This time Blaise really does laugh, tipping back his head and filling the office with the wonderfully familiar warm rumbling sound. “Oh, dear,” he mumbles with an uncontrolled giggle. “No. Well, to the world at large, perhaps, but not to those of us who shared a dormitory with him for six years.”

“Ah,” Harry says, understanding a little more than he really wants to. “Did you... er...?”
Blaise laughs again. “Absolutely not.”

“Right. Didn’t mean to cast any aspersions or anything...”

“Cast away,” Blaise shrugs. “It’s not as though I didn’t dabble; almost all of us did—sort of a Slytherin rite of passage, really. But Draco and I have known each other since before we could walk. It would have been, at the very least, vaguely incestuous.”

Harry laughs; he can’t help it.

“Apart from anything else,” Blaise continues thoughtfully, “it was the done thing in those days to seek partners outside of one’s own house.”

“Really?” Harry sighs and scrubs at his face. “I never knew Hogwarts was such a hotbed of gay... er... passion,” he mumbles, flushing. “I must’ve been completely clueless.”

“It was not a hotbed of gay passion,” Blaise insists, mouth flickering at the corners. “And anyway, you had other priorities at the time.”

Harry lifts an eyebrow and slumps back into his chair with his tea. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“You are a little more of a surprise, I will admit,” Blaise says, curious half-smile back in force.

Harry snorts. “It was a bit of a surprise for me, too.”

Understanding, Blaise leans toward Harry. “Tell me I’m not the first person to be hearing about this.”

“No. Not the gay thing, anyway.”

The dark features relax in obvious relief. “Of course... your divorce. I did wonder.”

Really? Harry thinks, but instead he says, “They don’t know about Draco, though. Only you know that.”

“Well, that’s quite a responsibility,” Blaise says seriously, draining his cup and pinning Harry to his seat with his eyes.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Harry sighs. “I realise what I’m dragging you into here, but I’ve been struggling with this for weeks and telling someone felt like the right thing to do. It’s selfish of me, I know, but... in the glimpse, I had someone to talk to about the whole mad situation. Boris gave me a guide... of sorts... and then he sent me back here and I was on my own. It’s a bit unnerving. And a bit lonely, actually,” he confesses, feeling like an idiot but forcing himself to hold the eye contact.

“I can imagine,” Blaise says. He frowns. “I can try to imagine. Was I... was I your guide in the glimpse? Is that why you came to me?” he asks, sounding almost excited by the idea.

The snarl of knots inside Harry’s stomach pulls painfully tight. “No,” he manages at last.

“Oh,” Blaise sighs, visibly disappointed. “Ah well.”

Harry chews on his lip. His heart pounds. Just say it, insists the voice inside his head, but he
hesitates, knowing that these words are without doubt the most powerful yet.

“Do you have children?” he asks eventually.

“Not yet,” Blaise says, brow creased in confusion. “Why do you ask?”

Harry takes a deep breath. “Because... in the glimpse, my guide was your daughter.”

Blaise inhales sharply, usual poise deserting him as he stares at Harry, one large hand flying up to cover his mouth, the other grasping his teacup so hard that a crack appears in the delicate china and tea begins to leak out onto his black trouser fabric. Remorseful, Harry lifts his hand and casts a silent, discreet charm to mend the cup. It’s probably best for Blaise to deal with his own damp trousers.

“My daughter?” he says finally, pulling his hand away from his face; the eyes that regard Harry now are bright with shock. “I have a daughter somewhere?”

Harry nods. “She’s beautiful. Seven years old. Her name was... is Maura.”

Blaise closes his eyes briefly. “After my grandmother,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t know that,” Harry admits.

“I can’t believe I have a daughter,” Blaise says, shaking his head slowly. “Somewhere, some version of me has a little girl. It’s incredible.” He looks up at Harry, and though his eyes are still shiny with sudden emotion, his grin is genuine and dazzling. “I can’t believe it,” he repeats. “Thank you.”

Harry’s heart twists. He hadn’t expected to be thanked, and for some reason he just feels worse.

“Don’t thank me... it’s unfair that I got to spend so much time with her and you didn’t.”

“Yes,” Blaise concedes, finally noticing the tea stain and drawing his wand to collect the spilled liquid. “It is unfair, but it isn’t your fault. Is she like me?”

Harry smiles. “Oh, yes, very much so. She’s very smart—smarter than me most of the time, and she’s kind and happy and full of energy... she likes really weird things to eat, like spinach cake and beetle bits, and her favourite colour is red... she’s brilliant. I miss her,” Harry admits with a sigh.

Blaise returns his smile. “How wonderful to think that I could produce such a clever, peculiar child.”

“It’s not much of a stretch,” Harry advises, and he means it. Maura is, in a lot of ways, just like her mother, but she is also very much her father’s daughter.

“What about her mother... my wife, you said?”

“What about her?” Harry says evasively, all at once struck by the feeling that he’s on dangerous ground.

Blaise’s eyes narrow and Harry knows at once that, as per bloody usual, his face has given him away.

“What is it? What are you not telling me?”
Startled by the abrupt change of tone and expression, Harry sucks in his breath and turns his traitorous eyes away from Blaise. Mind racing, he gazes down at the street below, at the tiny people rushing around with their tiny umbrellas and trying to avoid the downpour.

“Harry,” Blaise appeals. The edge has dropped away now, and Harry has no choice. He doesn’t know why it matters so much anyway, except that Ginny is the last piece of the puzzle. The last part of the story that belongs to no one but him. When he relinquishes it, Blaise will know everything, and now that he has become so accustomed to keeping secrets, the notion of full disclosure is an odd one.

He also knows that secrets are dangerous, destructive things, and that familiarity does not always bring with it contentment. He sighs and drags his eyes back to Blaise.

“Take the unknown road now,” he mumbles, mostly to himself.

“What?”

“Sort of a personal mantra,” Harry admits. Hesitates, but only for a moment. “Your wife was Ginny Weasley. Or Ginny Potter. You’d’ve known her as Ginny Zabini,” he adds pointlessly, drawing a quiet, guilty sort of fascination from the absolute shock on Blaise’s face.

“You’re not serious,” he whispers.

“Deadly,” Harry whispers back, unable to help himself.

Blaise tugs at his collar with shaking fingers. “You seem—to borrow a phrase—brilliantly calm about all this.”

Harry smiles wryly. “I’ve had a lot longer than you to think about it.”

“I feel as though I should apologise to you,” Blaise says, tipping back his head to look at the ceiling.

Harry follows his gaze. It’s a rather nice ceiling, actually—pale green with silvery shoot-like ribbons snaking across it in every direction—but it doesn’t have any answers to offer.

“What for?” he says, staring at Blaise until he, too, looks away from the ceiling.

“She’s your wife,” he says simply.

“Not any more,” Harry points out. “And not there. We were never married. I was with Draco.”

“Oh, yes. Somehow I keep forgetting about that.” Suddenly, Blaise’s features crease into a cringe. “I have a meeting with her tomorrow—I’m not sure I’m going to be able to look her in the eye now.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, catching the cringe and reflecting it back to him. “For what it’s worth, you made a nice couple.”

“I can’t say I expected to hear that,” Blaise admits.

“I can’t say I expected to fall in love with Draco Malfoy,” Harry counters. As soon as the words are out, he knows that he was wrong before—Ginny wasn’t the last piece of the puzzle. This is.
For long seconds, he and Blaise stare at one another across the small distance. Then Blaise shakes his head and grins at Harry, lips drawing back slowly to reveal inch after inch of bright white teeth.

“You really are, aren’t you? You’re really in love with him. You strange little man,” he declares.

Harry flushes furiously but opts to brazen it out, hanging onto his chair arms and pasting on what he hopes is a serene smile. “Guilty on both counts.”

If it’s possible, Blaise’s grin stretches even wider. “Well. Tea’s no good for this,” he announces. “Do you want a gin?”

“It’s eleven in the morning,” Harry says faintly.

Blaise pauses, halfway out of his chair. “Well, as my mother used to say, it’s always five o’clock somewhere.”

It’s probably a coincidence, but all the same, Harry finds himself wondering if all gin drinkers inherit these odd little maxims from their deceased mothers.

Blaise, apparently taking his silence for disapproval, sighs and drops back into his chair, eyes large and appealing. “Don’t worry,” he murmurs. “You needn’t think I’m a compulsive drinker. It’s just that... certain situations are too odd to be handled with mere caffeine, don’t you think?”

“Well, that’s definitely true,” Harry admits. “Just a little one, then.”

Blaise grins and jumps up again, disappearing behind his desk and pulling open drawers with a cacophony of rattling, clinking and whirring noises.

“Hang on a minute... did you make it?” Harry asks, suspicion rising.

“How do you know I make my own gin?” Blaise demands, voice muffled by his noisy search.

“In the glimpse... you used to make it in the bath. I just wondered.”

Blaise grins. “The bath is a wonderful place, Harry.”

“So I’ve heard. Let’s make it a very small one, then,” Harry says. It’s Monday morning. Caution can only serve him well.

“If you insist,” Blaise sighs, emerging from behind the desk with a corked bottle. “Terribly uncouth of me, but I’ll be buggered if I can remember where I put the glasses,” he says, vanishing the dregs of the tea from both cups and sloshing an impressively moderate measure into each. Tucking himself back into his chair, he holds his cup aloft and proclaims: “To the interesting things in life.”

Harry smiles, allowing himself to relax as he touches his cup to Blaise’s. He feels immeasurably lighter already, and there’s still so much to talk about. Feeling Blaise’s eyes on him, he lifts his cup and takes an optimistic swallow.

Seconds later, he’s coughing and spluttering, holding onto his delicate cup for dear life as tears well painfully in his eyes. “Fuck me,” he winces.

Blaise laughs. “It’s a little bit rough around the edges, I know. Strongest batch I’ve made so far this
Harry blinks and regards the remaining clear liquid in his cup with deep mistrust. “There hasn’t been all that much of this year yet, though I have lived most of it twice.”

“Very true, very true. New year, new leaf, then,” Blaise says, beaming and throwing back the rest of his drink with barely a shudder.

“Absolutely,” Harry says, mind full of new years, both here and in the glimpse. “You know, we—”

“Mr Zabini, your eleven o’clock is here,” Kerensa announces, popping into the fire.

Harry falls silent and sits very still, hoping not to be noticed.

Blaise sighs dramatically. “Can’t you cancel it?”

“I can’t,” Kerensa hisses. “It’s Mr Wicklow.” Her voice is pressed thin and her eyes are significantly wide, giving Harry the impression that Mr Wicklow is not only very important, but is watching Kerensa as she places the fire-call.

“I’d forgotten about him,” Blaise groans. “Alright, give me five minutes. Tell him I’m... I don’t know. Tell him I’m having tea with the Queen. Tell him I’m making pancakes. Tell him something —you’re creative enough.”

With that, he turns his back on the fireplace and regards Harry. “I’m sorry, it seems that I have to do my job now.”

Harry smiles and gladly abandons his half-finished drink on the tea tray. “Don’t apologise, I’m the one who turned up unannounced and demanded an audience with you.”

“Yes, and it was getting ever so exciting,” Blaise sighs, rising and walking Harry to the door. “Much more exciting than Mr Wicklow, I assure you.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Harry says, smiling and holding out his hand.

Blaise envelops it in his, palm warm and smooth against Harry’s. “You’ve been most unexpected.”

“That’s always a nice thing to be,” Harry says as they finally break the handshake. “Shall I owl you?”

“I shall be most upset if you don’t,” Blaise says gravely.

As he and Misu travel down in the glass lift, past Kerensa and an admittedly very dull looking Mr Wicklow, Harry’s smile begins to grow. By the time he walks out into the rain, he’s grinning like an idiot.

**~*~**

Disinclined to rejoin the crowds on Oxford Street, Harry hangs back, allowing the vast copper building to shelter him from the downpour as he thinks. His mind is full, over-stimulated with the relief of sharing his bizarre burden—or, at least, beginning to—so he can only imagine what Blaise is feeling, up there in his office with the dreaded Mr Wicklow. Harry cranes his neck and seeks out his
twenty-fifth floor window, nose creased up guiltily. As he does, a large, cold raindrop relinquishes its hold on a windowsill some storeys above and splashes wetly across Harry’s forehead.

“Karma,” he says to Misu, sighing and scrubbing at his skin with the sleeve of his cardigan.

“Sounds delicious,” Misu says sleepily. She pokes her head out of the end of his cuff and regards him with interest.

“It’s always about food with you, isn’t it?”

“Food is very important,” Misu points out, flipping over and displaying her iridescent belly before withdrawing back into Harry’s cardigan at the scent of the rain.

“Don’t you like water?” he asks, remembering Frank’s love for baths.

“Very much,” she enthuses, poking the very tip of her snout out of Harry’s sleeve. “But not when it is falling on my head.”

“Fair enough,” Harry concedes. He can’t say he fancies the prospect of getting soaked any more than Misu does, but the rain shows no signs of letting up, and ever since Blaise triggered the memory of New Year’s Eve, he’s been unable to forget that there is someone else he needs to see. Someone who completes his glimpse party guest list. Someone who should never have been lost.

Harry takes a deep breath, holds Misu securely against his chest, and Disapparates, thinking vaguely as he does so that an Umbrella Charm would have been the work of a moment, at the same time thinking that it wouldn’t feel right somehow. He has no idea why, but in times of uncertainty, the best he can do is trust his instincts.

The cemetery gate creaks as he pushes it open, and his hand comes away smeared in rust and dirty water. He wipes it carelessly on his trousers, saddened as he notes the weed-strewn path and the long, unkempt grasses around many of the older graves. The damp air is heavy with neglect and the rain that flattens Harry’s hair to his head and snakes under his glasses, down his cheeks and into his mouth tastes like moss and salt. Some of the headstones are brightly polished and well-attended, decorated with fresh flowers and flickering candles, protected by charms against the rain, but many more are crumbling and forgotten, names and dates obscured by moss and lichen.

Harry doesn’t remember exactly when he last visited, which says it all, he supposes. Chest aching and fingers numb with cold, he makes his way along the path; he remembers the way, at least.

“This is a place for the dead,” Misu says, resting her head on the back of Harry’s hand.

“Yes,” he replies, casting an Impervius on his glasses so that he can see where he is going.

“It smells of sadness,” she says with uncharacteristic despondency. “Perhaps sadness for the dead, but perhaps sadness of the dead.”

Harry shivers, both at her words and the long, wet grasses that brush his calves as he leaves the path and heads for a gnarled yew tree in the distance.

“You think the dead are still here? And they’re sad?” he asks, trying to imagine what his former self—his straitlaced, bored, Head of the Auror Department self—would think about discussing death with a corn snake. He soon realises that he doesn’t remember how to think like that person any more,
and gives up.

“Where else would they go?” she asks, curiosity firmly back in place.

“I don’t know,” Harry admits, struggling through the tangle of wet grass. “What do snakes do with their dead?”

“No this,” Misu says after a moment, and then falls silent.

A coil of gloom tightens around Harry’s heart. His footsteps are slow and heavy as he approaches the yew and stops short; the sight that greets him wipes away his dread in one colourful, beautiful swoop. And as he stands there, eyes stinging and free hand balled into a fist, he feels ridiculous, idiotic and terrible for imagining even for a second that the Weasleys would have allowed Fred’s grave to fall into such heartbreaking disrepair.

“Sorry,” he whispers, staring down at the polished marble bearing Fred’s name, the dates marking his short life, and the words that always make Harry smile: Mischief Managed.

He smiles now as he crouches in the wet grass to examine the vast array of fresh flowers stuffed into little gold pots—he knows next to nothing about flowers, despite years of Herbology lessons, but all the flowers are red, and he thinks Fred would have liked that. Around the edges of the plot, many tiny candles flicker and sputter determinedly against the rain, one in particular sending up miniature fireballs every few seconds that temporarily light the grey sky. Harry doesn’t have much trouble guessing who left it there and he laughs, even though the sound is painful in his chest.

“I’m sorry it’s been such a long time,” he says, just in case Misu is right and some part of Fred is hanging around, waiting to hear his old friend’s terrible excuses. “My life has been... interesting lately, but I should have made time. You’re in all our thoughts, I hope you know that. Even now. You’re not... forgotten,” he manages, throat dry. Misu wraps tightly around his wrist, and Harry knows her well enough by now to recognise it as a gesture of solidarity.

“Good girl,” he whispers, and she flicks her tongue against his skin.

“You’ll have heard about Ron, I’m sure,” he continues, gazing at the flowers and guessing that someone—most likely Molly, and probably Arthur and George, too—has been here in the last few days. “Head of the Auror Department, no less.” Harry smiles. “Your mum is insanely proud, of course, and so she should be. I don’t think I was ever the right person for that job.”

Harry pauses, watching the dancing flames of the candles and trying to imagine Fred’s response.

“They gave the job to Ronniekins? Oh, bloody hell, we’ll all be dead within the week!”

Harry grins, closing his eyes for a moment and relishing the sound of Fred’s voice inside his head. Knowing that it would never matter what he said, he’d be as proud as anyone of his little brother.

“He’s doing really well. All of them are, actually. Even Ginny... I’m sure you’ll have heard all about that, too,” he sighs. It’s all too easy to call up the image of Molly, furiously rearranging flowers and pouring out her grief over Harry and Ginny’s divorce to someone who won’t attempt to reason with her. “The kids are good... they’ll be home for Easter soon. And Gin... she’s really okay. I think there’s someone better than me out there for her.”

Behind him, someone makes an odd sound that is half cough and half snort. Harry frowns and twists
around, but the graveyard is empty. Slowly, he turns back to Fred.

“Anyway, I really think she...”

This time, the sharp crack of a twig catches Harry’s attention. He is not alone.

“Excuse me,” he mutters to the gravestone, scrambling to his feet and stepping slowly through the unruly grasses, heart speeding, eyes darting, sweeping the grounds, searching for... “Boris?!”

Harry stops, crossing his arms and staring hard at the spot where the old man is attempting—unsuccessfully—to hide behind a tree. He is certainly skinny enough, but his oilskin coat is bulky, and his beard protrudes from behind the trunk like a bedraggled, bristly cloud. Even in the midst of his indignation, Harry finds himself wondering why someone who can, essentially, manipulate time and space, can’t more effectively disguise himself.

When Boris doesn’t move out from behind the tree, Harry loses his patience.

“I can see you, you disrespectful bugger!” he calls, taking a couple of awkward steps closer. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, skulking around graveyards, but you’d better come out and tell me right now.” He doesn’t care how he sounds; he feels as though a very private conversation has been interrupted, violated, and, to add insult to injury, he’s now having his intelligence slighted. And he’s wet. And cold. And just not having it. “Boris!” he shouts, much louder than he should.

“Alright, alright,” Boris grumbles, shuffling out from behind the tree and making unsteady progress through the grass toward Harry, who, in spite of everything, is ready to dash forward and catch him if he stumbles.

“You’re rubbish at hiding. What are you doing here?” he demands once Boris is safely within a few feet of him.

“I ’ave a small matter to discuss with you, and I thought I’d catch you on your way out of ’ere, you see,” the old man says, spreading his hands wide and squinting up at Harry. “I never meant to listen in on you, lad.”

In spite of himself, Harry finds himself convinced by the earnest expression on the whiskery face, and he sighs. “For some reason, I believe you. But you do have a habit of turning up at exactly the wrong moment.”

“It does tend to ’appen, when you do what I do,” Boris admits, wet oilskin creaking as he shrugs his acknowledgement. “And I ’pologise, lad, sincerely. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Harry says, wiping his dripping fringe out of his face, and asks the question even though he has a sinking feeling that he already knows the answer. “What’s the matter?”

Boris’ vast eyebrows twitch sceptically. “I think you already know that.”

Feeling slightly sick, Harry keeps his expression as neutral as he can. “Can’t say I do, no.”

Boris shifts on the uneven ground, apparently restless. “You broke the rules,” he rumbles.

“No, I didn’t,” Harry insists, folding his arms as sternly as he can without squashing Misu. He doesn’t know why he’s bothering, really, but he can’t quite believe that he’s about to be told off by a
Harry sags. A raindrop tracks unpleasantly down his back. “Of course you did. Where the hell were you?”

“Never you mind where I was,” Boris says mysteriously. “Your friend Mr Zabini “as the ’ole picture now, ’asn’t he? What ’appened to ‘tell no one’, lad? I thought you understood.”

“I did, but... the glimpse is over—I can do whatever I want,” Harry argues impulsively, even though he suspects it’s pointless.

Boris gazes at him in silence for several seconds, seeming not to notice the streams of water trickling through his beard. When he speaks, he seems smaller and even older than before.

“I know that, lad,” he says heavily.

Harry lets out a small sound of surprise. “Oh. Okay. So... I didn’t break the rules, then?”

Fixing him with exasperated milky eyes, Boris grunts. “Not technically, no,” he admits. “‘Owever. I do retain the power to modify the memories of any person or persons with unauthorised knowledge of the glimpse, should I feel that such knowledge is inappropriate, ‘azardous or ill-advised for the well-being of the company, its affiliates, or the client ‘im or ’erself.”

“Right,” Harry says faintly, gripped by the urge to laugh in spite of his anxiety. “Well, that sounds serious.”

“Of the utmost gravity, young man,” Boris assures him, puffing up slightly as though buoyed by his official-sounding words.

Harry nods, tasting the cold rain on his bottom lip and shivering. “I suppose it’s up to you, then. But you should know that Blaise wouldn’t do anything to harm the... er... glimpse industry... or any of its affiliates. Neither would I, for that matter. I just wanted someone to talk to—it’s not the easiest thing to deal with alone, all of this.”

“I know,” Boris says, and there’s a soft wistful note in his voice that makes Harry wonder.

He is quickly distracted by another more pressing thought. “Anyway, why are you still watching me?”

“Standard procedure.”

“Don’t you ever get tired of following procedures?”

Boris smiles crookedly and wraps his oilskin more tightly around his skinny body, but says nothing.

Harry sighs. Above them, the sky is darkening ever more ominously and he thinks it’s time to get away from this place while he still has time to dry or change his clothes before he’s supposed to be at the Moody.

“What are you going to do then?” he asks, feeling strangely resigned.
“What would you do in my position, lad?” Boris challenges, staring up at him expectantly.

Harry gazes calmly back at him. “What position?”

Boris laughs raucously, displaying all his gold teeth. The sound is much too loud for the cemetery, but Harry is so relieved that he can’t bring himself to care about the impropriety.

“Nice to see you again, young man,” he rasps, hoarse from laughter. “Be good.”

He turns away and makes unsteady but rapid progress across the grass. Harry watches him, chest filled with an odd sort of warmth, until he reaches the path and hobbles away behind the trees.

Be good. He supposes he can give it a go.

**~*~**

Being good is hard work.

Despite his better efforts, Harry arrives ten minutes late to the Moody, where Draco is sitting at their usual table, sipping tea and watching the sulky waitress with vague interest as she balances on a stool to write the new specials on the board.

“Raining, is it?” Draco murmurs, turning at the scrape of Harry’s chair.

Harry frowns, puzzled. The sky has cleared and he has dried his clothes quite effectively, he thinks. Lifting a hand to rake through his hair, he opens his mouth to ask Draco what he’s talking about, and then stops. He has somehow managed to neglect his hair, which now flops through his fingers and slaps soggily against his forehead. He sighs, gives himself a mental slap, and pushes it out of his face until it sticks in place, forming a wet, messy sort of quiff.

“Oh, very stylish,” Draco says, eyes playful.

Harry snorts. “That’s good coming from you,” he points out, eyeing Draco’s neat, flattened hair.

Both pale eyebrows shoot up. “Excuse me?”

Harry slumps against the table, resting his weight on his forearms. It’s too late to take the words back, and now Draco is staring at him, grey eyes caught between umbrage and curiosity.

When Harry says nothing, Draco sets down his cup, leans closer across the table and demands, in a soft but dangerous voice: “Are you insinuating that there is something wrong with my hair?”

“Erm...” Harry begins, but trails off, distracted by the unmistakeable sound of giggling from the waitress. She has her back to him, but her shoulders are shaking as she wipes her chalky hands on her apron, and when she turns to head back to the counter, her eyes are creased with amusement and one hand quickly flies up to cover her mouth, not quite in time to prevent a giggle from escaping.

A completely unhelpful smile steals across Harry’s face as he forces his attention back to Draco.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” Draco snaps, looking so put out that Harry has to grit his teeth with the effort of not reaching for him, ruffling his hair into submission and kissing away the hard line of
his mouth.

“Nothing,” Harry says carefully. “Maybe I have issues with neatness.”

Draco regards him with critical amusement. “Obviously.”

“Have you had your papers yet?” Harry asks, keen to change the subject before he gets himself into any more trouble.

Draco smiles. “Yes, they arrived on Sunday morning. I signed them and dispatched them immediately.”

“You won’t have had the final document, then?”

“No, but I did receive a very strange letter from Scorpius last night,” Draco says, picking up his cup and gazing at Harry over the top of it, eyes unreadable.

Harry chews on his lip, inexplicably anxious. Misu stirs sleepily in his pocket and he remembers to take a breath. “Oh?” he says airily. “What did he have to say for himself?”

“See for yourself,” Draco says, withdrawing a neatly folded letter from his jacket pocket and passing it to Harry without looking at him; his eyes are focused on the waitress as he mouths ‘coffee’ in her direction and indicates the spot of unoccupied tabletop in front of Harry.

Harry watches her nod and slope off into the back before turning his attention to the letter. It comes as no surprise that Scorpius’ handwriting is much neater than Al’s, but it’s also comforting to see that some of his spelling is equally creative.

Dear Dad,

I’m sorry I haven’t written to you for nearly a week! We have been very busy and you wouldn’t believe how much homework we have to do!

Harry snorts.

“Homework?” Draco asks.

“Yeah, but I remember thinking exactly the same in my first year,” Harry admits.

Rose showed me her Daily Prophet on Monday because you were in it, did you know? You always say the papers are full of rubbish so I wasn’t sure. Anyway, it was a picture of you and Harry Potter at the Quidditch game. It was nice, Dad, you looked quite happy. Is it true that Mr Potter has a snake? I didn’t get chance to see it.

Anyway, I need to ask you somthing. Did you know Mr Potter is GAY?

Harry freezes, heart dropping through his body and twitching horribly as he reads the last sentence again and again.

Did you know Mr Potter is GAY?

He swallows hard, forcing himself to think logically. Of course Al has told his best friends
everything about his parents’ divorce, and, since the very first day of Hogwarts, that number has included Scorpius Malfoy. That’s fine, he tells himself, and it really is. He has never told Al to keep the information to himself, after all, and he has lost count of the number of things he discussed with Ron and Hermione back in the day which he definitely shouldn’t have.

It’s not that. It’s the fact that his mouth has dried up, there’s a horrible flush creeping up the side of his neck, and he suspects he may never be able to look at Draco again. Instead, he just stares at the words until those three capital letters seem to leap from the page and dance accusingly in front of him.

**GAY GAY GAY GAY GAY.**

Though he has yet to read on, he can’t help feeling that the capitalisation is a bad sign. It’s not just ‘Mr Potter is gay’, it’s ‘Mr Potter is GAY!’ What does that even mean?

“Is he alright?” someone asks, and Harry hears the words as though they have come from far away, echoing down to him through a windy tunnel.

“He’s fine. He’s just had a little surprise, I think,” Draco says, and his voice is clearer somehow.

Harry shakes himself and looks up, still clutching the parchment. The scent of coffee drifts up to his nostrils and he is startled to find that a large steaming mug has been placed at his elbow. The sulky waitress is standing beside Draco’s chair, fiddling with her apron strings and staring at Harry with something suspiciously like concern on her face.

“Do you need a Healer?” she asks. “You look really terrible.”

The insult prods Harry out of his stupor and he looks up at her, smiling grimly. “I’m fine, thank you.”

She sighs. “Suit yourself. I’ll be over there you need me.”

Harry watches her all the way back to the counter in an effort to avoid Draco’s eyes.

“You should read the rest of it,” Draco advises, and Harry looks at him without thinking.

“What makes you think—”

“I can just tell,” Draco interrupts. “Finish the letter, drink your coffee, and stop looking so fucking worried.”

Harry wants to argue, but something in Draco’s tone and the steely set of his eyes compels him to keep his mouth shut and, for once, to do what he’s told.

He swallows a huge, scalding mouthful of coffee and returns to the parchment.

*Anyway, I need to ask you somthing. Did you know Mr Potter is GAY?*

*I wasn’t sure if you knew or not, but Al told me. That’s why his parents split up, well sort of. It’s a bit like you and Mum, isn’t it? I just wandered, anyway… have you thought of asking Mr Potter out, Dad?*
Harry pauses to choke slightly on his second gulp of coffee. Relieved as he is, he’s beginning to think that Rose Weasley, Albus Severus Potter, and Scorpius Malfoy are a very dangerous combination.

He’s also beginning to think that the horrible red flush is spreading rather than going away. That would be really cool. We are all ok with that, Scorpius writes, and Harry snorts, amused.

If not, you should probably stop getting your picture taken together. People will think you’re up to something when you’re not. Anyway, I hope you are well! I have to go now because it’s nearly time for chess club and Al is jumping up and down saying we’re going to be late.

I’ll be home soon! Looking forward to seeing you, Dad.

Lots of love,

Scorpius Volans Malfoy

Harry stares at the signature for some time, musing distractedly that if he had ever worried about the outlandishness of the name ‘Albus Severus’, then... he smiles, folding the letter back up and still determinedly not looking at Draco.

“He’s a strange boy, isn’t he?” Draco says at last.

“Not any stranger than I expected, considering his parentage,” Harry admits.

Draco sighs. “I will admit that I walked straight into that one if you stop being an idiot and actually look at me.”

Harry looks up, unable to stop himself from rising to the bait. Draco is watching him, chin propped up on one hand, eyebrow raised, mouth twisted in quiet amusement.

“Ah, there you are. I was beginning to worry.”

“No, you weren’t, you heartless bastard,” Harry rasps, still unsettled.

Draco laughs. “I did consider just telling you what he said, but I decided it would be more entertaining this way.”

Harry stares at him, anguished and overheated. “For you.”

“For me,” Draco concedes, and then his expression sharpens and Harry is casting an instinctive Muffliato before Draco can say another word. He looks around, arches an inquisitive eyebrow, and then continues. “First of all, I have to admit that I’m not all that surprised.”

“Why does everyone say that?” Harry demands. “Am I giving off some sort of gay vibes?”

Draco’s brow creases. “I have no idea how to answer that question.”

“That’s reassuring,” Harry mumbles, drawing his elbows up onto the table and dropping his face into his hands.

“I’m afraid that reassurance isn’t something at which I’m particularly gifted.”
“You don’t say,” Harry sighs into his hands, but he’s hiding a smile.

“So,” Draco continues, ignoring him. “I’d say that ‘we weren’t in love any more’ was something of an understatement.” He pushes his empty cup and saucer away and fixes Harry with a challenging stare.

Startled that Draco has bothered to remember his words of some weeks ago, Harry lowers his hands from his face and regards Draco in silence for several seconds. “I wasn’t lying when I said that,” he says at last.

Draco arches an eyebrow, apparently puzzled. “I know that. You’re an appalling liar.”

“I’m not sure how I should take that.”

“However you like; it’s just an observation,” Draco says lightly, and his unexpected smile sends warmth crashing into the pit of Harry’s stomach. “Why is everything either compliment or insult with you people? It’s maddening. The world isn’t divided neatly into black and white, you know.”

Harry blinks. Something in the sentiment rings dimly familiar in his mind, as though he has heard it before, but he can’t quite place it. It’s all too easy to needle Draco instead. “What exactly do you mean by ‘you people’?” he demands, crossing his arms.

Draco glances around furtively and then leans in, lowering his voice conspiratorially as though preparing to divulge some great secret. “Gryffindors,” he murmurs, eyes widening in a split second of theatrical horror.

Harry pulls a face and drops back against his chair before the warmth and the fucking fantastic scent of sharp citrus makes him do something he shouldn’t. Now, at least, he supposes that Draco wouldn’t be quite as surprised to be grabbed and kissed at any given moment, but a lack of surprise hardly indicates that the action would be welcomed. He sighs.

“You still think of me as a Gryffindor, don’t you?”

Draco’s mouth twitches. “Tell me you don’t.”

Harry hides his guilty expression in his coffee mug for as long as he can. He may well be bang to rights, but the fact that Draco seems to know him so well creates a thrill of satisfaction inside him that more than makes up for it.

He shrugs. “This isn’t about me.”

Draco laughs. “It’s as much about you as it is about anybody else. The strangest thing about this, in my opinion, is that you and I could share the same secret for so many years.”

“Yeah,” Harry says softly, pushing away a slew of unhelpful memories from the glimpse and attempting to ignore the ache in his chest that inevitably follows. “That said,” he says, brightening, “I didn’t really know I had a secret for... well, let’s just say an embarrassingly long time.”

Draco’s eyes glitter with interest. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, really,” Harry says, mimicking the low, refined pronunciation without meaning to. “According
to Ginny, she knew years before I did, and I’m inclined to believe her.”

“So am I,” Draco offers, tipping sugar cubes out onto the table and arranging them into a neat little pyramid. “She’s a smart woman.”

Harry watches him, struggling to muster even a sliver of offence. Instead, he merely murmurs his agreement and fashions a couple of tiny flags from toothpicks and a section of his paper napkin. When he offers them to Draco, he looks up, frowns, takes them with a polite nod and sighs heavily. After a moment or two, he rearranges his pyramid to form a little castle and installs Harry’s flags on top.

“You cannot put flags on a pyramid,” he says, wiping stray sugar crystals from his fingers and regarding Harry with such a stern expression that it’s all Harry can do to keep a straight face.

“Why not? It’s yours, you can do whatever you like with it,” he says, shrugging.

Draco’s eyes warm and his small smile tilts Harry’s world sideways. For long seconds, all they do is look, and it’s agonising. Reminding himself to breathe every now and then, Harry stares right back, fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of the table, and turns two words over and over in his head, hoping that the answer will come if he just hopes hard enough: What now?

This isn’t quite the relaxed, post-crisis camaraderie of Friday evening, but neither is it the sudden, unexpected awkwardness of the early hours; it’s something new and unfamiliar and it’s terrifying, because Harry no longer has any idea what Draco wants, or, indeed, if he wants anything at all.

A flash of movement in his peripheral vision catches Harry’s attention and he manages to drag his eyes away from Draco for long enough to notice the waitress, who has begun a slow circling of their table, lips pursed and eyebrows knitted. Realising she is being watched, she looks up, meets Harry’s eyes, and mouths, ‘What is this?’

‘Sorry,’ Harry mouths back, suddenly feeling very rude indeed. He dispels the charm and winces as the usual bustle and clatter of the cafe roars back into life around him.

The waitress shakes her head and rubs at her ears as though trying to dislodge a fly or a bit of unwanted water after swimming. She wrinkles her nose and taps lime green nails on her notepad as she stares accusingly at Harry. “Can you hear me now?” she calls, a little too loudly.

“Most definitely,” Draco mumbles under his breath, hiding his sugar cube castle from view with his forearm.

“I’m sorry,” Harry repeats, draining his cup and glancing at Draco, who is gazing at the waitress, expression inscrutable. The tension has dropped away, but the last remnants of it still tingle in his chest and wrists and fingertips. “It was just a privacy spell, I promise. Nothing to worry about.”

The waitress folds her arms, clearly dubious. “You don’t usually do that,” she accuses.

“No,” Harry concedes, startled to realise that they actually are regulars now. Regulars with usually. He supposes he can cope with that; he’s always been a strong believer in tradition. “We were just talking about something... personal.”

Draco makes an odd little sound but when Harry glances across the table at him, he is peering innocently at his sugar cube castle, straightening up the walls with alternate prods of each index
“If you’re going to gossip, you should at least do it loud enough for everyone to enjoy,” says the waitress, looking so disappointed that Harry has to smile.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly rude?” Draco says evenly, without looking up from his adjustments.

“Has anyone ever told you that big boys don’t play with their food?” snaps the waitress, stung.

Draco looks up, amusement flickering in his eyes. “My mother tells me frequently. And, if you’d let me finish, I was going to say that people who demand gossip should at least provide a decent biscuit.”

The waitress stares at him for several seconds, nonplussed, before turning to Harry in mute appeal.

“I... don’t bother,” Harry sighs and looks at Draco. “Have we got time for another coffee?”

Glancing at the clock, Draco grimaces. “No, I have to get back to work. I have some extremely exciting meetings lined up for this afternoon.”

“Have fun,” the waitress says faintly, accepting Harry’s tip and standing back as they rise, collect their things and make their way out onto the street.

The break in the weather seems to be holding, but the air is so heavy with moisture that Harry doubts he will make it back to the ’shop before the rain starts again. Out on the pavement, Draco shrugs into his coat and directs suspicious glances at the sky. The weak sunlight dapples his pale hair and filters onto the wet cobbles beneath Harry’s feet and he shuffles, discomfited, confused, and leaden with desire.

“So, what are you going to do?” Harry says, keeping his tone light. “Ask me out or stay away from me in case we have our picture taken together?”

Draco laughs and Disapparates.

When Harry takes a break some hours later, he emerges from his workshop to find an owl waiting patiently on next door’s sandwich board. Knowing instinctively that it is waiting for him, he takes the letter and opens it. Something small and light falls into his hand and he picks it up between sore, blistered fingers to examine it.

He smiles slowly, turning the toothpick flagpole and allowing the breeze to catch the tiny napkin flag.

On the parchment itself, Draco has merely written: NEITHER.

**~*~**

That night, Harry drifts easily into sleep to the comforting sounds of Misu’s nonsensical unconscious mumblings, eyes fixed on the tiny flag on his bedside until the very last. He floats in a haze of darkness, jumbled images from the day blurring together and slipping over one another until all he can see are wet cobbles and eyes, silver bright, and a whole field of tiny flags, flapping in the wind.
Serene, safe, weary, Harry allows himself to fall.

There’s a light at the top of the stairs.

Fingers press against carved wood. Warm, spicy air, careful footsteps and rustling sheets.

“Who’s there?” Sharp, caught breaths and harsh words. “I don’t want to talk to you. Fuck you.”


Frightened grey eyes, pale skin almost translucent in the moonlight. Stripes and challenges and beds abandoned for cold, hard floors. Black sky fading to pink and gold and blue.

A tense, pale hand scratching words onto a scrap of parchment with a tiny stub of pencil.

“Why me, Potter?”

Laughter, stifled and uncontrollable, shared for the first time, in this strange place and anywhere.

A whisper, heavy with amusement. “She’s gone.”

“You enjoyed that.” A not-really accusation and the flexing of cramped limbs under fabric.

Eyes wary but warm and curious. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Glances at the sky, racing heart. Knowing the risk and feeling it all over, leaping anyway.

“If we’re going to go, we need to go now. Before anyone gets up.”

Pale fingers clench at bed sheets; he drags in his breath, and Harry falls into rhythm with him.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I’m not—”

“Whatever it is, Draco, you are. And we have to go right now.”

Words fade into soundless feathers as they rise, crossing cold floors, walking silent corridors together. Side by side. Shoulders almost brushing, tension shared and uncertainty lashing them together.

Mumbled words, grating stone, and a spiral staircase.

“I must be losing my mind.”

Harry startles at the all-too-familiar thud of snake against glass. He prises open one eye, and, sure enough, Misu is stirring drowsily at the bottom of her tank, having fallen from her high shelf in her sleep, as she does almost every night. After a moment or two, she rests her head upon her coils, appearing to accept her new position, and drifts back into sleep.
“You shall sleep in a spoon,” she advises Harry.

“You shall sleep in the bathroom if you don’t behave yourself,” he mutters, turning over, punching his pillow and slipping easily back into unconsciousness with a small smile on his face.

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He sleeps late the next morning and is woken by an odd sort of thump-creak from the bedroom window. Stretching and frowning, Harry feels around for his glasses and pulls himself semi-upright to take in the surreal sight of a gargantuan owl with slightly off-kilter eyes attempting to squeeze itself through the tiny gap in his bedroom window.

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” he mumbles, not bothering to cover a yawn.

The owl turns at the sound of his voice, successfully fixing him with one of its orange eyes. Hooting softly, it struggles gamely for a few more seconds before giving up and setting up a disconsolate pecking of Harry’s window frame. Sensing the need for a rescue mission, Harry slides out of bed and crosses to the window, settling a steadying hand against the warm feathers as he pushes open the old, creaky window all the way. The owl hops down onto the back of a chair and Harry leans out for a moment, breathing in the warm, damp smells of the spring morning and relishing the feeling of the light, cool breeze on his face and bare shoulders.

The soft bump of the owl’s head against his hip makes him turn back to the matter at hand, and he’s amused to realise that the owl has settled on top of his chair, blinking slowly and making itself at home. He has the odd feeling that, given the opportunity, the owl would happily go to sleep and remain in his bedroom for the rest of the day. And, when he opens the letter and catches sight of the signature, all he can do is smile. Like owner, like owl, he supposes.

Dear Harry, he reads, absently petting the owl’s head and wandering into the bathroom to brush his teeth, letter held clear of potential toothpaste spray.

Please forgive my eagerness, old bean, but I find myself gripped by the need to see you again—to assure myself that yesterday’s conversation was not merely a hallucination, very strange daydream, or extremely dodgy batch of biscuits. I hope you understand.

Kerensa assures me that I did indeed have a visit from Harry Potter yesterday morning, but I’m sure you’ll understand if I’d rather not rely on the word of a person who tells me at least once a day that I’m ‘going senile’. Young people can be ever so cruel, can’t they?

Harry snorts his agreement and accidentally inhales his toothpaste foam. Once he has finished coughing and swearing, he continues, nasal passages minty fresh.

I’m sure you’re a very busy man, though I’m not sure we got around to discussing exactly what it is that you do these days, now that you have (quite wisely, in my opinion) given the Ministry the boot. I’m hoping, though, that you will have time to meet with me—I have rather a lot of questions, I’m afraid. If you come to Zabology at seven o’clock on Friday, I know a great little place for dinner nearby. Tremendous meatballs and a wonderful dearth of photographers and scribblers. If that’s not convenient for you, let me know, and I shall attempt to prise my diary from the hands of She Downstairs Who Must Be Obeyed.

I hope you are having a marvellous day. This really was supposed to be a short note.
Yours in anticipation,

Blaise Zabini.

Harry sets the letter down so that he can turn on the shower, and, as he washes, dresses, caffeinates and heads to work, he mulls over the words and decides that he has absolutely no reason—or excuse—not to meet with Blaise and answer his questions. He owes the man that, at the very least, for descending on him at his place of work and spilling out all his ridiculous problems. By the time he reaches Diagon Alley, his mind is made up, and he heads to the Post Office to dash off a quick, affirmative reply to Blaise before visiting the Dragondale for breakfast and, finally, unlocking his workshop for the morning.

Tempted though he is to dwell on the prospect of dinner with Blaise and all of the inevitable and difficult questions, Harry has far too much to do. He has yet to set a firm date for the opening of his shop to the public, but he has resigned himself to the fact that it has to be soon. He needs to just grit his teeth and get it over with, this messy, terrifying business of letting actual people inside his comfortable little space and hoping they will not only like the things he makes but be willing to hand over money for them. Not that he wants their money, but that’s an issue for another day—one when he doesn’t have a hundred lists to make or a swarm of children to collect or a motorway to negotiate. It’s not his turn, strictly speaking, but he can’t argue with the fact that it’s a lot easier for him to drive to King’s Cross and back in the middle of the day than it is for Ron, Hermione, or Ginny, and were that not the case, the residual guilt over the upending of his children’s lives would have him scrambling for the keys to Arthur’s sodding SUV quickly enough.

At three o’clock, he tunnels out of his parchment avalanche, picks up Misu, and Apparates to the Burrow, where he finds Molly, up to her elbows in a bowl of what looks like bread dough, and a high-spirited Lily and Hugo, who, having finished school for the Easter holidays, seem to be celebrating by making as much of a mess of each other’s hair, skin and clothing as possible. Lily is giggling as she gives Hugo a pair of sparkly purple spectacles, and he in turn seems to have turned her into some kind of cat/snake hybrid.

“Hello, Harry dear,” Molly calls over the sounds of childish delight from the kitchen floor.

He smiles and sketches a little wave, enjoying the sight of Lily, for once, forgetting to be grown up.

“The keys are on the table,” Molly says, apologetically indicating her floury hands. “I thought some face paints might keep them entertained for five minutes... don’t worry, that’ll come out of her blouse with an ordinary wash.”

“I’m not worried,” Harry admits, and Molly’s anxious expression softens. “Mess is something I can live with.” He scoops up the keys and sighs. “We’d better get going.”

Molly wrinkles her nose in sympathy. After all these years, she has never learned to drive, and Harry can’t say he blames her. If it wasn’t the most efficient way to transport four children and their accoutrements between home and King’s Cross, he wouldn’t have bothered to learn either. Steeling himself for the chaos of the roads ahead, he says goodbye to Molly, explains to a glittering and disappointed Hugo that he needs to stay with Grandma, and sets off down the country lane with Lily by his side. She takes Misu from Harry’s wrist and strokes her little head, sparkling face creased in thought.

“She’s getting bigger, Dad,” she says at last, smiling as Misu flicks out her tongue.
Harry shoves the gearstick forward and winces as the engine shudders for several seconds, but somehow he manages to avoid stalling and turns to glance at Lily, who has pulled her feet up onto her seat and is going slightly cross-eyed as she holds up Misu and tries to make eye contact with her. She’s looking remarkably like a young woman, albeit a young woman with blue whiskers and a forked tongue drawn onto her chin.

“So are you,” he says, and, with a deep breath, flicks on his indicator and turns onto the main road.

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Eventually, they make it into London in one piece and manage to negotiate the incomprehensible road markings and streams of frustrated drivers to find what seems to be the last remaining parking space in the entirety of the city. More impressively still, Harry manages not to swear, and only once does Lily feel the need to tell him to ‘untwist, Dad!’ All in all, Harry feels pretty successful as he and Lily step through the barrier and onto the steam-filled platform, where the Hogwarts Express has just arrived, spilling out children and trunks and assorted animals in a noisy, excitable cascade.

At his side, Lily inhales the scents of smoke and school with such a wistful expression on her painted face that Harry hugs her impulsively to his side and says, “It won’t be long.” She smiles and he smiles back, even though there’s an achy part of him that wishes she would stop dreaming her time away.

And then he feels old.

Al and Rose emerge first, and Harry finds himself looking around for Scorpius, even though he knows Draco has once again made special travel arrangements for him due to his work schedule and Astoria’s apparent withdrawal from parental duties. Harry frowns at the thought, and no amount of reminding himself that Scorpius will be spending most of the summer with his mother is able to shift his irritation, but then Al and Rose are hugging him enthusiastically and all he can do is smile and squeeze them back.

“Dad!” Al declares, leaning back to fix Harry with bright green eyes. “You smell like home!”

Harry grins and ruffles his hair. “Uncle Harry, what have you done to Lily?” Rose asks, giggling as she steps back from the embrace.

“I haven’t done anything to her,” he insists.

“It was your brother, actually,” Lily advises as she hugs Al with surprising force. He coughs.

“Goodness, I hope you got him back,” Rose says, smirking.

Lily just smirks back.

“Where’s James?” Harry asks, craning his neck and squinting in an attempt to catch sight of his son through the haze of steam and smoke.

Al and Rose trade glances. “Talking to his girlfriend,” they advise as one and then dissolve into laughter.

“James has a girlfriend now?” he demands, forcing a smile as he waves to a harassed but friendly Hannah Abbott as she passes with her chattering, pig-tailed daughter. When he turns back to Al and
Rose, it occurs to him that actually, he’s fine with James having a girlfriend. It might even cheer him up a bit. He’s just... a bit put out that James hasn’t told him about it.

“Not really,” Al says at last, nose wrinkling. “But he wishes she was.”

“They just flirt all the time,” Rose says helpfully.

“Flirt, flirt, flirt,” Al sings, resting his chin on Rose’s shoulder and pulling a face.

Feeling relieved, Harry pulls a face back, and, after a few moments, James saunters over to the group, leather jacket open over his school shirt despite the warmth of the day, expression carefully disinterested. Unsurprisingly, he doesn’t throw himself at Harry for a hug, but he does allow a small smile to crack his bored mask and affects a little nod as he greets his father.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hello, James,” Harry says, tempering his amusement for long enough to add, “Did you have a nice term?”

James shrugs. “It was okay.”

So, he hasn’t magically become more verbose over the last few weeks, but he seems happy enough, and he submits to Lily’s fierce hug with good grace, and that’s good enough for Harry.

“Come on,” he calls, leading them back through the barrier, “let’s get out of here before I get a parking ticket.”

“What’s a tarking picket?” Al asks, struggling with his trunk until Harry casts a subtle lightening charm.

“Parking ticket, silly,” Rose corrects, nudging him in the ribs. “It’s a bad ticket you get for leaving your car in the wrong place.”

“Oh,” Al says, chewing on his lip. “But why would you do that?”

Harry sighs and opts not to answer that question. “So, who wants to see the new house?”

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The answer to that question, as he should have predicted, is, apparently, everyone. He had vaguely planned to return Rose and the car to the Burrow before taking the others to his new place, but it soon becomes clear that she is just as keen to see the house as Al, and there’s no way he can exclude her. So, while Lily turns around in the front seat and tells the others all about parking in London, Harry plunges back into the traffic and relishes the fact that—just for once—there are no arguments in the back seat.

Unsurprisingly, he has to squeeze into a space several streets away from the house, and he lets Rose, Lily, and Al bound ahead while he walks beside James, fixing his eyes on the sun-dappled pavement as he picks his moment.
“So... er... have you got a girlfriend, then?”

There’s a pause, and Harry doesn’t need to look at James to know that he is scowling.

“No, Dad.”

“Oh, okay,” Harry says lightly, and then falls silent.

“She’s a Slytherin,” James offers after a moment, and Harry does look at him now.

“So?”

“So, it won’t work. Her friends don’t want her to be with me.”

Harry sighs, continuing to be baffled by the numerous and conflicting rules of teenage dating. In an attempt to ignore the stuff that doesn’t make sense, he focuses on the fact that his son is actually sort of asking for his advice—he can do that.

“Look... if she really likes you, it won’t matter what her friends think.”

“Dad, that’s bollocks and you know it.”

Harry laughs. He can’t find it in himself to call James out on his language, mostly because he’s right—from what he has seen, teenage girls are much more likely to listen to their friends than some idiotic boy who seems to have taken a fancy. Still, he supposes it’s his job to provide at least a glimmer of hope.

“Yeah, well, maybe it is, but that doesn’t mean you should give up. If she’s got any sense about her, she’ll see that you’re more than good enough for her,” he says stoutly.

“Dad,” James says, dark eyebrows knitted in consternation, “you’re being weird.”

“I love you, too, James.”

James sighs heavily. Harry smirks.

“Come on, Dad!” Al cries, voice carrying clearly from a good hundred yards away. “Rose needs a wee!”

“I do not!” Rose insists, hopping from one foot to the other.

Rolling his eyes, James picks up his pace along with Harry and before too long they are piling into the house, making assorted noises of approval as they look around the freshly-painted hallway. Lily directs Rose to the nearest bathroom and then takes it upon herself to give her brothers a tour of the ground floor, proudly pointing out all the bits of decorating she has assisted with and knick-knacks she has helped to choose.

“This house is massive!” Al declares.

“I chose it,” Lily advises brightly.
When Rose returns, they all clatter up the stairs so that Al can admire his huge windows and James can inspect his appearance in his new wall of mirrors whilst pretending not to be doing any such thing. While he takes care to avoid showing anywhere near an Al-level of enthusiasm, his affectedly casual questions about London and the house’s proximity to the goings-on of the city easily betray his true feelings to Harry, who is happy to know that the miserable bugger is interested in something besides Quidditch and girls. Though he can’t help but suspect that James will find plenty of the latter in London.

“Can this be Rose’s room, Dad, for when she comes to stay?” Al asks, hanging onto the doorframe of an as-yet-unoccupied bedroom and swinging into the hallway with a hopeful grin.

Harry follows him into the room, where he finds Rose leaning out of the ancient sash window, gazing down to the street below as the wind whips her hair around her face. He’s amazed that it has taken this long for someone to remind him about the necessity of a bedroom for his fourth child.

“Of course she can have a room,” he says at last, and Al and Rose exchange gleeful glances. “You might have to paint it yourselves, though, I’m pretty busy at the moment.”

“Brilliant,” Al says, turning in circles as he ponders. “You could have your house colours, Rose, or... or... a dragon!”

“Or a dragon in my house colours!” Rose suggests, climbing down from the windowsill and gazing up at the ceiling. “We could put stars on the ceiling.”

“That’s a great idea,” Lily puts in wistfully. “I wish I’d thought of that. Maybe we can do stars on my ceiling, too!”

“No one was listening to the part about me being busy, then,” Harry mumbles, trying and failing to summon a stern expression. He doesn’t care how many bedrooms he has to paint, not when he’s missed them all so much and he has them back for a little while.

“I don’t want any stars on my ceiling, if that helps,” James offers drily.

“He does really,” Lily whispers, and her soft words seem to echo in the empty room.

James pokes her gently in the side of the head. “If you put a single star on my ceiling, I’ll paint your whole room black,” he teases.

“Are you going to paint your room black?” Lily demands, freckled nose wrinkling. “Dad, tell him he’s not allowed!”

“It’s his room, he can do what he likes with it,” Harry says, not unreasonably, he thinks, hiding a smile at Lily’s dramatic sigh. “Who wants some tea and a bacon sandwich?” he offers, hoping to avert a pointless argument.

Despite the chorus of agreement, the squabble about bedroom colours continues all the way down to the kitchen. Harry lets them get on with it.

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Some hours later, Harry manages to persuade Rose that her own parents are probably keen to see her, too, and Apparates with her to Hollybrush while the others poke around their new territory,
carefully overseen by Lily, and generally amuse themselves. He leaves them cackling helplessly over
his record collection, opting to rise above the mocking and making a mental note to hide ‘Veelas,
Nymphs and Squibs’ before they start exploring the workshop the next day.

When he heads to bed that night, he finds a note stuck to Al’s new bedroom door.

_Dad - many hands make light work but many feet fall over each other_, he reads, smiling to himself as
he lets himself into his own room and adds the note to the ones he has collected over the years from
the family home. He can’t help thinking that it’s a good sign, and good advice, too.

By nine o’clock the next morning, though, Harry’s workshop is overrun with life and questions and
more people than the little room has ever held before. Kari and Darius manage to tame their curiosity
for just about ten minutes before they leave their father to man the deli counter and slip across the
cobbles with breakfast treats and fresh juices, all of which are gobbled down with vigour, despite all
three children having eaten before leaving the house, polishing off porridge and toast and the very
last of Harry’s bacon stash. It occurs to Harry that he’s going to have to step up his grocery shopping
if he’s to have a chance of keeping the little buggers full up while they’re home from school.

“Wow,” Al breathes, looking from his pastry to Kari, eyes wide and fingers sticky with honey. “Do
you make these yourself?”

“I can make them,” Kari says, offering him another one and looking pleased. “But my dad made
these ones. They’re sort of his speciality.”

“I made the savoury ones,” Darius says, shrugging his shoulders with such a familiar air of affected
nonchalance that James’ next words aren’t at all surprising.

“I know you,” he says, levering himself up from his slump against one of Harry’s worktables. “You
were at Hogwarts last year!”

“Yeah,” Darius says, suddenly sheepish. Kari glances at him sharply and he continues. “Didn’t get
my NEWTS, so I have to take them again by correspondence.”

“Yes,” Kari sighs, looking at James and then Al, who is wiping his sticky hand on his trousers.
“Study hard, boys. And you too, Lily.”

James says nothing, but Al nods seriously and Lily beams up at Kari, eyes shining.

“I’m going to get twelve NEWTS,” she announces.

“Don’t be an idiot, Lil, you can’t do twelve NEWTS,” James says wearily.

“She can do whatever she wants to do,” Harry says firmly, thinking of the intelligence Lily has
inherited from her mother and the stubbornness she has inherited from him, and knowing that if
anyone can do it, his little girl can.

“She’s going to be a Hufflepuff,” James murmurs, and it’s clear from his sly expression that he’s
dead set on winding up his sister.

Harry sighs.

“I was a Hufflepuff,” Kari offers, smiling brightly at Lily. “Nothing wrong with that.”
Lily shoots her a grateful smile and sticks out her tongue at her brother. By the time Kari declares that it’s time to get ready for the lunchtime rush and returns to the Dragondale with Darius trailing behind her, it’s mid-morning and the workshop is flooded with light. It’s warm and beautiful but also serves to illuminate the dust on Harry’s shelves, his floor, and clinging to some of his accumulated glass items. In the corners, the abandoned cobwebs are massing again, and he knows he has nowhere near enough pieces in stock for his open day.

He really hadn’t been exaggerating about being busy. Since he bought back his workshop, he has taken the opportunity of having no one breathing down his neck to properly develop his craft, to find his feet as an artist and to learn as much as he can about glass. What is becoming clear, though, is that while learning and developing are ongoing challenges, he needs to concentrate—at least for the moment—on what is saleable. It’s an unfamiliar concept to consider, but he has to force himself to think about his work from a different perspective.

He doesn’t expect anyone to splurge on a huge investment piece, but he likes to think that they might buy a little bowl or a light-filled sphere as a gift or for their home. With that in mind, as he gazes at his children and half-listens to their good-natured bickering, he decides not to waste another minute.

“Do you want to help me blow some glass?” he asks of the room, hoping that someone—probably Al—will answer him.

Sure enough, there is a scramble and an enthusiastic, “I do!” before Al appears at his side, practically vibrating with energy.

James says nothing, clearly caught between his natural curiosity and his desire to appear aloof. Lily sighs, gazing up at the conflict on his face for long seconds before appearing to lose her patience.

“James, just have a go. It’s really good.”

“Allright,” he concedes, taking off his leather jacket and searching for a suitable hanging place before finally draping it over a clean section of cooling rack with the utmost care.

Lily’s face lights up in a triumphant grin as she watches her brother wander over to inspect Harry’s shelves, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Harry watches her watching him, warmed by the realisation that Lily—the youngest and more times than not the odd one out—is finally the one with all the answers.

“Who made these, then?” James asks, turning to face Harry with a twisted, multicoloured vase in his hands.

Lily snorts. “Dad made them, silly.”

James’ eyes widen and then he frowns. “Yeah, but... I mean... you didn’t make all of them,” he insists, and thought it’s not quite a question, Harry can hear that it desperately wants to be, and he smiles.

“All of them, I’m afraid. And I need to make more.”

“You’ll run out of space,” Al says, bouncing along next to the shelves and hopping unsteadily around James when he refuses to move out of the way.
James sets down the vase and picks up a delicate little glass bulb. “Dad,” he murmurs, allowing Harry a split-second flash of startled amazement that twists his heart in the most wonderful way. He’s impressed, and there’s nothing he can say or do now that can persuade Harry otherwise.

“Thanks,” Harry says, and, turning to Al: “I’m hoping not to run out of space. I’m going to start selling them... hopefully.”

“Cool,” Al declares, stopping in front of the furnaces. “Are we going to use these oven-y things?” he asks hopefully, fingers tracing the lines of shiny knobs and buttons.

“I am going to use those oven-y things,” Harry corrects, prodding Al gently away from the furnaces. It’s true that he has become more relaxed with some aspects of safety since he returned from the glimpse, but there are limits, and Al is far too chaotic an entity to be allowed access to multiple boxes containing multiple flames burning at hundreds of degrees. “If you pull out that tray from under the bottom shelf, though, you can choose some pieces of glass to use. Any colours you want.”

Al’s disappointment evaporates as he and Lily drag out the tray of glass and strike up a hushed, serious sounding discussion, punctuated by the familiar clink and patter of the shiny pieces.

James walks slowly across the floor, shoes scuffing on the stone. He stands beside Harry, leaning against the nearest furnace and drawing in a short breath, as though uncertain of his next words. “Dad... can I ask you something?”

Unaccustomed to this softly-softly approach, Harry nods. “Of course.”

“I don’t know how else to say this... so... where the hell did all this come from?”

Harry laughs. “You mean this?” he clarifies, indicating the workshop.

“No, not that green one—the other one! Pointy... pointy... there!” Al cries from somewhere near their feet.

James wrinkles his nose. “Well, yeah, but... it’s not just this, is it? Everything’s changed.”

“I know,” Harry sighs softly. “I know it’s been difficult for you. I’m sorry.”

“Not difficult,” James frowns, poking the toe of his shoe into a crack in the floor. “Just a bit weird. I knew you and Mum weren’t happy together, but the other stuff was a bit of a surprise. I don’t really get why you want to do this instead of being Head Auror... I mean... no offence, Dad, but that’s a pretty cool job. But I want... like... good stuff for you, you know?” he finishes, flushing slightly and staring hard at the flagstones.

“I know,” Harry says faintly, rather astonished by this little speech, voluntarily offered. He’s not quite sure what to say, but the urge to hug James is almost overpowering. Instead, he reaches out and squeezes his shoulder, and, just for a moment, James allows himself to smile.

“So... what is it about glass, then? Glass is pretty boring, Dad,” James says, looking up. There’s a spark of humour in his eyes that makes Harry feel light.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I’ll be totally straight with you; this whole thing was done on impulse. But I don’t regret it. I know you think I’m really old and boring, but that doesn’t mean I want to
spend my days doing boring stuff. If it’s a choice between this and faffing about with paperwork... seriously, though, James—you’ve got to do what makes you happy. You only get one go at life, so if you need to change your mind... do it.” Harry smiles at his startled son and draws his wand. “Stand back a bit—I’ll get these lit and we’ll see if we can’t convert you.”

The workshop is soon full of the smell of hot glass and copper as Harry melts down the glass pieces chosen by Al and Lily and then allows everyone to take turns, under his careful instruction, at blowing into the slender pipe and turning it to create the slightly misshapen, twisted bulbs that very much resemble his and Arthur’s first attempts. As the furnaces heat the small room, scarves and cardigans and jumpers are discarded, and Misu basks happily in the extra warmth on her shelf.

Together, they make a whole collection of little objects, graduating by lunchtime from bulbs to little bowls, all three working as a surprisingly good team—James has a steadiness of hand that Harry envies, and Al takes to crouching at the end of the workbench—eye-level with the piece in progress—and calling, “One twist right!” “Full circle... go, go, go!” and “Blow now!” until James stops obeying and starts laughing. In an attempt not to encourage him, Harry looks at Lily, who is keeping a careful eye on the furnaces as she picks out the next set of colourful pieces. She seems to be fixated on cool colours—greens and green-blues and silvers—and he’s happy to go with that.

The work continues after lunch, and so do the questions. In fact, a cone of chips and a glass of pumpkin juice seem to revitalise Al’s curiosity. By the time Ginny arrives to pick the kids up after work, weary but happy and with the fresh, damp scent of the outdoors clinging to her robes, Harry has answered (or sidestepped) inquiries about his love life, Gobstones techniques, the people next door, his clothes, dragons, his love life, and ‘Mr Malfoy’, at which point Al does at least have the good grace to look slightly sheepish.

He follows Ginny and the children out of the workshop and heads home, too, grateful for the almost complete lack of awkwardness at this, the very first attempt at their strange new set-up, in which Harry will have James, Al, and Lily for roughly half of the holiday, and Ginny will have them for the other. Even as he steps into his hallway just minutes after leaving them, everything already seems far too quiet. Still, he knows he will see Draco tomorrow, and that fact kicks the dullness in the pit of his stomach into warm, liquid anticipation.

Tired and dirty-sticky, he heads into the kitchen and settles at the table with a large cup of tea, flipping through the strange magazine that James has left, while Misu swims happily in an oversized mug beside him.

“According this, I’m ‘seriously uncool’, ” Harry confides, picking up his drink and glancing down to Misu. Who appears to have turned into a cup of tea. Bewildered, he glances down into the cup at his lips, from which a water-shiny Misu is now emerging, tongue flicking and apparently unimpressed at Harry’s attempt to drink her.

“You are inattentive,” she chides. “Put me down. What is uncool?”

Harry sets her mug down and picks up the one containing his tea. “No idea.”

**~*~**

Preoccupied with all the things he has yet to do, Harry wakes early, and he and Misu arrive at the workshop just as the sun is coming up. He installs Misu on her shelf, lights the lamps and the furnaces and flings open the windows to let in the fresh morning air as he consults his myriad lists and tries to figure out what to do first. Perhaps, he thinks, standing in front of his tattered wall...
calendar and chewing on his pencil, what he needs is a deadline. Something to put an *Incendio* up his bum, so to speak.

He sighs, biting down so hard on his pencil that it splits between his teeth, filling his mouth with the evocative taste of wood and graphite. Two weeks? Three? All he knows is that he has to just do it, just jump, just throw down his hand and stop worrying about what everyone will think.

“Just get on with it, you tit,” he mutters sternly to himself, and before he can do anything sensible, he yanks the shattered pencil out of his mouth and circles the first date that catches his eye. It’s a Friday. Next Friday.

“Right then,” he says to no one in particular. Misu, dangling curiously from her shelf to inspect a large beetle, doesn’t even look up. That’s fine. He’s not talking to her anyway.

Sweeping his lists to the floor in exasperation, Harry immerses himself in his work until it calms the flickers of unease in his stomach and slows the racing in his head. He makes more tiny bowls, delicate glass spheres containing coloured flames, several sets of twisty candlesticks, a collection of little vases decorated with vines that appear to be growing slowly around them and a whole mess of other things that are consigned to the scrap pile, ready to be melted down and used again.

By mid-afternoon, he stretches, flicks off the furnaces, and rubs ineffectually at the burnt patches on his cuffs and fingertips, knowing that Draco will be horrified at the sight. When the familiar owl swoops in through the open door, his heart sinks.

*Harry,*

*I’m afraid I can’t make the Moody this afternoon. My mother has decided to take Scorpius out, so I’m covering my father until she comes back.*

“*Lucius-watch,*” Harry sighs, glancing up at Misu.

“*Is that a bad thing?*” Misu asks, lifting her head to regard him.

“*For all concerned,*” Harry says grimly.

“*That is a shame. It sounds like food.*”

“There’s a disturbing thought,” Harry murmurs, fishing out one of the tiny scraps of bacon he has saved from his lunch for her and holding it out between finger and thumb. It is yanked away within a fraction of a second, and Misu has no response to his remark; she is too busy arranging herself into a neat coil to relish her snack. Noticing at last that Draco’s owl is still waiting, perching atop the open door and wearing a judgemental expression, Harry returns to his letter.

*There must be some sort of devilish irony to be found in the situation, Draco writes. I take time away from work to look after my son, and instead find myself looking after my father.*

Harry grimaces, almost tasting Draco’s dark humour and resignation through his quill strokes.

*On the positive side (good grief) I now have in my possession my final, definitive, absolute divorce papers, and I plan to celebrate the expunging from my life of that rotten harpy of a lawyer by retrieving a bottle of Borteg’s from the vegetable basket and toasting a hearty good riddance.*
Harry laughs softly; the image of Draco’s miniature celebration seems to wash away much of his disappointment over their cancelled meeting, so much so that he almost misses the last line of the message.

You’re welcome to join me. Send back a reply with Artemis so that I know to have Bilby open the gates.

Grinning, Harry turns the parchment over and scrawls ‘Sounds like a plan—see you in a bit’ with his splinterly pencil. The owl bites him, as usual, but he’s flooded with such a sense of warm wellbeing that he barely feels it.

The clouds are beginning to gather as he and Misu arrive at the gates, but the air is still warm enough to make the stroll up the drive enjoyable. The anxiety of previous visits is confusingly absent until Harry realises, with a little prickle of shame, that this time he has actually been invited.

“Needs must,” he mumbles to himself, attempting to locate his inner Slytherin but instead coming up hard against a wall of pure conscience. He sighs, shaking it off with some effort and concentrating on the warm crunching of the gravel beneath his feet as the house comes into view.

What would Draco do? he muses, and his lips tug into a smirk. Anything he needed to.

“What are you doing?” he asks suddenly, feeling Misu threading herself through his hair, bumping her blunt head against his scalp at regular intervals as she seeks out her route.

Emerging from his messy fringe, she dangles in front of his eyes and flicks her tongue against his nose. “Exploring,” she offers. “Want to smell all the smells.”

Harry laughs. “Well, that’s fine, but I’m not sure I should turn up at the Manor with a snake on my head. It’s probably some dreadful breach of etiquette.”

“Etiquette is funny,” Misu opines, forming a multicoloured band across his forehead. “Making so much importance of things that are not important.”

“Snakes don’t go in for etiquette, then?” Harry asks, amused.

Misu just laughs, vibrating gently against his skin. “You are looking forward to seeing the other.”

“You could say that,” Harry admits, and Misu obligingly slithers down into his collar as they approach the house and Draco, who is sitting at a large marble table several yards from the portico. Beside him sit an almost-full coffee pot and cups and as he sits there, posture dangerously close to relaxed, the stubborn few rays of sunlight punching through the blanket of cloud sparkle on his hair and pristine shirt collar. Harry hesitates for a moment, reluctant to intrude on what feels like a rare moment of fragile calm, but then Draco looks up from his newspaper and smiles just enough to push Harry off balance.

“Coffee?” he offers, lifting the pot.

Harry nods, prodding his limbs back into action and crunching across to join Draco at the table.

“Living on the edge, aren’t you?”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “No more so than usual, why?”
Harry indicates the darkening sky and accepts a steaming cup of something black and rich and fragrant from Draco. “Thanks. It looks like it’s going to throw it down.”

“Ah, yes,” Draco says drily. “I’m terrified.”

Harry pulls a face at him and sips his coffee. “Oh... that’s good.”

“Of course it is. And I shan’t dissolve, you know.”

“Well, that’s a relief. You might mess up your hair, though,” Harry points out.

Draco’s brow creases in bewilderment. “What on earth is your fascination with my hair?”

Harry scrubs the rapidly-heating skin at the back of his neck. “You’re imagining it,” he says weakly. “So, what have you done with your father?”

Draco sets down his cup and stretches lightly, turning to look back at the house. “He’s sleeping at the moment, but I’ve set a movement sensing charm around his bed. If he gets up, I shall have to go and see what he’s up to.”

“Very sensible. And what are your mother and Scorpius up to?” Harry asks, feigning curiosity in an attempt to keep himself from saying something idiotic like, ‘It’s strange sitting outside with you in daylight’ or ‘How many black waistcoats does one person need?’ or ‘I’m starting to find them quite sexy and I’m not really sure what to do about it’. Harry swallows hard and manages to resist throwing coffee all over himself, but only because Misu is still looped around his neck and it’s not her fault that he’s awkward and useless and so fucking in love.

“... so I just let her get on with it, it’s the best way,” Draco is saying, and Harry realises that he has completely missed the answer to his question. He doesn’t suppose it matters—he wasn’t really asking it anyway.

He nods, trying for his best understanding smile. “Well, thanks for getting me out of the ’shop for a bit. I’m going mad trying to get everything sorted for the dreaded opening. The worrying thing is, I think it’s becoming more and more obvious with each day that passes that I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing.” Harry scrubs at his hair and leans back, pulling his front chair legs up off the ground.

“It’s never seemed to bother you before,” Draco says, and, before Harry can snap back, adds: “And please don’t do that. I don’t have the healing skills or the insurance to deal with a broken skull.”

“Alright, alright, untwist,” Harry mutters, letting the little iron feet connect once more with the gravel.

“Now you’re making less sense than usual,” Draco informs him gleefully, sitting back and crossing one ankle over the opposite knee and balancing his cup carelessly on top.

“Hey, at least I’m down with the kids,” Harry tries, wrinkling his nose in mortification as he hears himself.

Draco laughs delightedly, and just for a second or two, his walls are non-existent, and it’s all Harry can do not to reach across the table and touch him.
“Continue to tell yourself that,” Draco sighs, still grinning. “And I’ll continue to mock you mercilessly.”

“Sounds like a fair deal,” Harry says. “I think I’ve picked it up from Lily, the little horror.”

Draco’s face twists into a sympathetic grimace. “I don’t understand about half of what Scorpius says since he went away to Hogwarts. It makes me feel extremely old.”

“Me too. Maybe it’s best not to think about it at all,” Harry says darkly.

Draco pours himself a second cup of coffee and gazes into it thoughtfully. “That’s fine with me. What are you getting aerated about today, then? Glass fighting back? Ovens exploding?”

“No, not yet, but thank you for the nightmare fuel,” Harry says, watching Draco’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “I’m just not ready.”

“For what?”

“For opening the whole sodding thing to the public next Friday,” Harry admits.

Draco drums his fingers on the arms of his chair in careful rhythm and gazes at Harry with growing amusement. “Harry.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t think you have seen the plot for a very long time.”

Harry says nothing, just allowing his lips to tug into a smile as he tips back his head and inhales the heavy, charged scent of the gathering downpour.

“I know that,” he says eventually. “I accept it about myself.”

Draco snorts. “Does this venture have a name yet?”

Harry continues to stare at the sky, wondering just how much mocking he’s going to endure for this one. Not that it’ll make a difference. Two words from a dream within in a dream, so to speak, are the only option for an endeavour so brilliantly bizarre. Nothing Draco says will change his mind, so he might as well come out with it.

“Purple Fish.”

“Why?”

Harry looks at him at last. He smiles. “Why not?”

Draco smiles back slowly. “That’s a dangerous statement.”

Harry’s heart hammers. “It’s a question.”

“No, it’s not.”
“Draco?”

“What?”

“It’s raining.”

“No, it’s not.”

Harry just grins at him across the table as small, prickly raindrops begin to drop into his hair and splash against his skin. It’s a pleasantly warm rain, and he’s never really minded getting wet, so he’s able to fully enjoy the irritable expression on Draco’s face as a single raindrop hits him right between the eyes and rolls slowly down his sharp, patrician nose, dangles for a moment on the tip, and then falls neatly into his coffee cup.

He sighs, raises his eyes to the sky and opens his mouth to speak when an odd whirring sound draws both his and Harry’s attention to the wand that has been sitting beside the coffee pot, which is now vibrating furiously.

“That’ll be my father.” Draco hesitates for a fraction of a second, hands resting on thighs and eyes closed as though composing himself in preparation for a possible confrontation, and then he is up, out of his chair and striding across the gravel, straight-backed and impossibly dignified as the downpour begins to intensify, seeming to clatter and roar against rough stone and pebbles and marble.

“Do you want some help?” Harry calls, standing and holding on to the back of his chair, not quite daring to follow Draco to the front doors.

Draco turns, one hand wrapped around the doorknob. “Thanks.... but no. Feel free to get out of the rain, though,” he says, eyeing Harry’s increasingly soggy person.

Harry doesn’t need to be asked twice, and sprints across to the portico, where he stands, right on the edge, pushing dripping hair out of his face and quickly realising that the rain, now slanting from the sky at a strange oblique angle, is drenching his new position almost as effectively as his previous one.

“Oh, that can’t be good,” Draco mutters.

Harry turns. “What?”

“I think,” Draco says through gritted teeth as he pulls hard at the doorknob with both hands and then stands back and aims several unlocking charms at the doors in quick succession, “that he’s blocking the door.”

“To keep you out?” Harry asks, joining him at the door and attempting an unlocking spell of his own.

Draco shakes his head and crouches, squinting, attempting to see through the keyhole. “I doubt it. To keep someone or something out, though.” Warily, he glances up at Harry. “This isn’t the first time.”

“How did he get here so fast?” Harry wonders, watching Draco drop onto one hand and one knee, frowning and feeling carefully along the bottom of each door.
He sighs. “Dad!” he calls, raising his voice above the insistent roar of the rain. “Dad, it’s Draco. Can you please let me in?”

Harry doesn’t catch the mumbled response but it seems to exasperate Draco, who leans heavily against the door for a moment. He taps the fingers of his left hand against the carved wood and the fingers of his right against the stone beneath him. His frustration is on-the-surface obvious, but Harry can just about see the fear and the beginnings of panic bubbling beneath, and he bites his lip hard enough to hurt, powerless to help. At his side, his fingers graze the cool stone of the portico, and he presses his palm fully to the rough surface, hanging onto the reassuring solidity as he listens to Draco’s attempts to reason with his father.

“Last time, he pushed a great big chest up against the doors,” Draco confides, ear pressed to the keyhole. “But there’s nothing there now... it’s something else.”

“But not a locking spell,” Harry sighs.

“No. I didn’t think it was very likely—he doesn’t have his wand, for fairly obvious reasons—but it’s still always the first thing I try... just in case.”

“Is it worth trying a different door?” Harry suggests, feeling foolish but desperate to help.

“That did not end well last time,” Draco murmurs distractedly, levering himself upright and peering through the keyhole once more. “Listen, it’s alright, I promise,” he calls, voice calm but firm. “There’s nothing out here. It’s safe. You can just... Bilby, is that you?”

Intrigued, Harry creeps closer, and, when Draco doesn’t protest, crouches down beside him to look through the other keyhole. He can just about see the burgundy velvet of Lucius’ robe and the slightly crinkled pinstripe of his pyjamas, and sure enough, hiding behind his legs, is an anxious looking Bilby.

“Bilby is sorry, Master Draco, ever so sorry,” he whimpers.

Draco lets out a long, controlled sigh and drops his forehead against the door. “House-elf magic.”

“That’s... pretty clever of him, actually,” Harry says, thinking out loud and regretting it immediately, but Draco’s small, rueful smile reminds him that he actually has a strange, black sense of humour about all things Lucius-related. Around them, the rain continues to pound the ground, sending into the portico a cool mist and a wonderful earthy smell that inflames Harry’s senses and fills him with the uncomfortable knowledge that wanting this man has become a constant backdrop for every ridiculous event in his life, including the very real possibility of having to break into Malfoy Manor on a wet Thursday afternoon.

“He has his moments,” Draco murmurs. “Bilby, can you open the door, please?”

“Bilby cannot, Master Draco,” the elf squeaks.

“Of course Bilby cannot,” Draco mutters, turning harassed eyes to Harry, who can only shrug. “Bilby has been given a direct order. Sodding house-elf magic.”

Harry gazes at Bilby through the keyhole, metal edges pressing uncomfortably against his browbone. As he watches the elf wring his hands and cringe around Lucius’ feet, a thought occurs to him.
“Draco?”

“Yes?” Draco says after a moment.

“Isn’t he concerned that whatever is coming for him—”

“Dementors,” Draco supplies.

“Lovely.” Harry’s stomach tightens automatically, even though he knows the Dementors are purely in Lucius’ mind. “He isn’t at all concerned that the Dementors will harm us—well, you—if he keeps us out here?”

“No,” Draco says, half amused and half weary. “They don’t want me. Only him.”

“Ah,” Harry says softly, humbled by the reminder that this is far from a first for Draco.

“Please, Master Lucius, please do not be doing that,” wails Bilby, just as something heavy and metallic crashes to the floor of the entrance hall.

“Oh, fucking... bollocks,” Draco snaps, getting to his feet and drawing his wand. “My mother is going to be very upset.”

“Why?” Harry asks, nerves prickling as he jumps up, too.

“We’re going to have to take the doors down.”

Harry stares at him. “And these doors are...?”

“About a thousand years old,” Draco says with a grim little smile.

“Excellent.” Harry draws his wand, heart racing with an odd sort of exhilaration. “Together?”

Grey eyes flick to his and they share a conspiratorial glance. “Together. On three.”

“One, two...”

“Stand back, Dad—right now!”

“Reducto!” Harry yells, just as Draco casts a strong but controlled Diffindo, the combination of which reduces the heavy oak doors to a pile of smoking shards with such a horrendous racket that Harry’s ears are ringing for a good ten seconds afterwards. He stares through the haze at the startled figures of Lucius and Bilby, relieved to see that both are huddled by the staircase, a safe distance from what used to be the front doors.

“That was a little dramatic, don’t you think?” Draco murmurs, turning to Harry with a dry smile.

“No, just efficient,” Harry says defensively, shoving his wand into his back pocket. “Nothing like a Reductor Curse to get things done in one go.”

Draco snorts. “Aurors,” he sighs, keeping his wand at his side as he steps over the debris and into the entrance hall.
“I’m not an Auror any more,” Harry insists, but he doesn’t know why he’s bothering.

“There are no Dementors—look,” Draco is saying, touching his father gently on the shoulder and pointing out at the grounds, empty but for the lashing rain. “Everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” Lucius whispers, face creased with anxiety. “Have they gone? I saw them, Draco... I heard them...”

“Yes, Dad, they’ve gone,” Draco says softly, and something in Harry’s chest twists painfully as he stands back, fiddling with his sleeves and hoping not to be noticed. Draco, apparently, has other ideas. “Harry saw them off,” he lies blithely, indicating Harry whilst simultaneously making some sort of complicated hand signal in Bilby’s direction. The elf nods and bounces lightly up and down as he waits for further instructions.

“Harry?” Lucius says quietly, and for the first time in many years—at least in this reality—those cool grey eyes swivel to pin him to the spot. Somewhere amid the wasted face and dishevelled hair and aura of general confusion, a shred of the old razor-sharp Lucius Malfoy remains, and Harry drags in a harsh breath, filling his nostrils with the scents of wood and smoke and dissipating magic.

“Hello, Mr Malfoy,” he attempts, going for a mixture of deference and confidence. Suspecting he doesn’t quite get there.

“Harry Potter,” Lucius repeats, continuing to stare, eyebrows knitted. Suddenly, he turns to Draco, and in a stage-whisper, demands, “Why is Harry Potter in my house? What does he want?”

Amused, Harry lifts a hand to scratch his nose and conceal his smile.

Draco sighs. “It’s probably best if you don’t worry about that.”

“You should be careful,” Lucius whispers, turning briefly to stare daggers at Harry. “There is a distinct possibility that he is dangerous.”

“He’s fine, Dad. He’s my friend,” Draco assures, sounding so grave that Harry’s smile fades, only to be replaced by a slow, warm ache inside.

“Are you sure? If you would just hand me my wand... I seem to have misplaced it.” Lucius looks around at the entrance hall, the ruins of the front doors, and his son, utterly bewildered. “I could give him a quick once-over, just to ensure...”

“That’s not going to be necessary,” Draco says, taking his father’s elbow and guiding him toward one of the many doors leading off from the entrance hall whilst throwing Bilby another little hand gesture. “Go back to your rooms and Bilby will bring you some tea and cake.” The elf springs into action and follows them, leaving Harry alone.

“I do like cake...” Lucius’ voice drifts back toward him for a second or two, and then the door clicks shut behind them.

For a minute or two, the silence hangs heavily over Harry and he stands perfectly still, gazing out through the ruined doors at the soaking, wind-whipped grounds and urging down the last of his anxiety. There’s no doubt that he had been prepared for it this time—for Lucius—but he can’t imagine he’ll ever be truly used to the frenzied outbursts or the dishevelled, wide-eyed terror and confusion of a man who, while never his favourite person in the world, was at one time fearsome,
proud, and influential. Perhaps, in the balance of all things, this is his punishment for the choices he made, but Harry doesn’t see why it should also be Draco’s. Conflicted, he gives in to the chill of the wind and wraps his arms around himself, shivering at the icy breeze that bites through his damp shirt and stings his skin.

“Such a mess,” Misu says gleefully, poking her head from his shirt collar and inspecting the damage.

“It is a bit, isn’t it?” Harry agrees, walking slowly across the marble floor and examining the aftermath of his enthusiastic Reductor Curse with a little sting of guilt. Okay, so perhaps he was a little overzealous, but it’s a bit late to worry about that now.

Glancing around to check that he’s still alone in the entrance hall, he draws his wand and crouches by the doorframe, biting down hard on his lip as he pours his concentration and energy into a complex construction spell, one he has read about in numerous woodworking books but never actually needed to use. Hoping for the best, barely breathing, he draws his wand slowly over the ragged shards of wood that litter the floor, rising inch by inch to his feet and watching, fascinated, as the pieces float into the air and begin to slide back into place, anchoring themselves to the sparse splinters that have remained attached to the doorframe.

He holds steady, wand trembling slightly, and by the time the edges of both doors have knitted themselves into place—ornate keyholes intact, if slightly off-centre—he has forgotten all about the rain and his forehead is hot and damp with exertion. With a long, relieved exhalation, he steps back, lowering his wand, to assess his work.

“That was very clever,” Misu enthuses, twisting around in his hair with obvious delight.

“Thanks,” Harry offers, lifted despite the fact that he’s not really convinced. The doors, whilst now intact, do not look... quite the same as they did before. He frowns, rubbing at his heated face and stepping back to get a better look. Some of the joins are clearly visible, and he has a sneaking suspicion that a few of the pieces have managed to swap positions. Somehow. He steps back again, squinting, and smacks into something solid. Something solid and warm, and oh, god, something that smells fantastic.

“Fuck, sorry,” he mutters, heart jumping like an idiot as he spins around and steps back from Draco, more startled than he thinks he should be for someone attempting to do someone else a favour.

Draco grants him a wry half smile. “You should be. I had a marvellous excuse to get rid of those horrendous old doors and now you’ve put them back together again.” He sighs.

Relieved, Harry lets out a huge sigh. “They’re not quite...” He turns around gesturing vaguely with his wand, “... not quite perfect, let’s say.”

“A virtue most overrated,” Draco says softly, and when Harry turns back to meet his eyes, what he finds there—just for the briefest of moments—steals his breath away. “Come on. I’ve got something to show you.”
He turns on his heel and stalks away, shoes clicking on the marble. Harry stares after him for a moment and then hastens to follow, around corners and down familiar corridors until, before long, he is stepping into the study. Draco lights the fire with a careless slash of his wand and then ducks behind his desk, rifling through the bottom drawer and muttering under his breath. There, sitting on the corner of the vast piece of furniture and glittering softly in the firelight, is Harry’s apology. He smiles.

Finally, Draco pulls open a drawer and retrieves four leather-bound files, which he drops neatly onto the desk in front of Harry.

“I thought these might interest you.”

“What are they?” Harry asks evenly, reaching out to touch the topmost file. He has his suspicions about the contents, but he refuses to let his hopes rise before him.

Draco smiles crookedly. “My files of mendacity and corruption, of course.”

“Drama, drama,” Harry murmurs, grinning at him.

“It’s a very dramatic business,” Draco shrugs, rounding the desk and coming to stand just inches away from Harry. “Very much unlike the world of finance.”

“Mm,” Harry manages, adjusting with some effort to the sudden proximity. “Definitely.”

Draco merely lifts an eyebrow and picks up the folders without looking away from Harry. “Liars... utter liars... power-hungry idiots... and toxic bastards,” he explains, handing each one to Harry in turn. “It’s important to categorize,” he adds, noticing Harry’s bewildered expression.

“I see,” Harry admits, trying to keep the smile from his face. He doesn’t think it will be well received. “Couldn’t liars and utter liars have been sort of... squashed into one category?”

“Possibly.” Draco shrugs. “But it’s always better to have four of something than three.”

“Of course,” Harry mumbles before he can stop himself. Of course threes must be avoided at all costs. His little thrill of satisfaction quickly turns to panic when Draco fixes him with curious, slightly suspicious eyes. “I mean... of course... that makes sense... four is an even number... a balanced number, so... yeah. Anyway... shall I have a look?”

“I think that would be best,” Draco says, shooting him one more searching look before settling himself in a high-backed chair by the fire and gesturing silently for Harry to join him.

Biting down hard on his bottom lip in an attempt to keep in any further imbecilic comments, Harry drops into the other chair and opens the first folder on his lap. For several minutes, the only sounds in the study are those of the fire crackling and popping in the grate and the rain lashing determinedly against the window. Draco waits patiently, drying out his cuffs next to the fire, as Harry leafs through the pages and pages of photographs, newspaper clippings, and neat little notations put together with a meticulousness that calls to mind glimpse-Draco’s scrapbooks of their lives together.

At last, he sighs and looks up, fingers slipping on the corners of a shiny photograph of a smartly dressed and bearded wizard, a junior employee of the Ministry.

“There are a lot of people I know in here,” he says, both surprised and not at all surprised to have
come across so many ex-colleagues. And this is only the second folder of four.

“There’s a lot of corruption at the top, Harry,” Draco says, and though the words themselves are glib, his voice is soft and his expression conveys something very close to empathy.

“I know,” Harry sighs, already wondering when he’s going to come across Fitzwilliam. It certainly isn’t a question of ‘if’. He sets down the ‘Utter Liars’ folder and picks up ‘Power-Hungry Idiots’. “So,” he says, trying to distract himself from the nagging feeling of disappointment in the pit of his stomach, “what’s the plan? You figure out what everyone’s up to and then... what? Just let them get on with it?”

“What would you have me do?” Draco snaps, visibly bristling. “Turn my notes over to the MLE so that they can bury them... and probably me, too?”

Harry snorts. “No, of course not. Expose them yourself,” he says, knowing he’s over-simplifying things and refusing to care.

“I think we’ve been here before,” Draco sighs, lifting a hand to worry at his damp hair.

“What I can say?” Harry grins. “I’m persistent.”

“You’re insane.”

“You’re always saying that.”

“You are,” Draco insists, sitting forward in his chair and staring at Harry as though he’s something very strange. “I think you’re missing the Auror Department. I think you’re trying to catch the bad guy via me. In fact, yes...” Draco sits back, arms folded in triumph, “This is vicarious crime-solving. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a recognised psychological condition.”

“Have you finished?” Harry asks mildly.

Draco gazes at the fire and shrugs. “For the moment.”

“Alright then,” he says, staring at the flames too. If he’s honest, he’s all too happy to cling on to Draco’s bizarre theory; it’s not as though he can admit that he knows Draco would make an excellent investigator, and it’s probably a good idea to have some kind of excuse for his keen interest in Draco’s career. He sighs. “Maybe I just think that this is something you’re interested in... as opposed to your actual job.”

Grey eyes flick to his. “You really are determined to take me down with you, aren’t you?”

Harry says nothing, just looks back to the folder on his lap, lips pressed firmly together. Idly, he flicks through several pages, mind whirring too quickly to pay much attention to the words and pictures until a familiar pair of pale green eyes catch his attention. Harry stares, heart pounding, and Franz Fitzwilliam stares right back, surrounded by clippings and notes, just like all of the other members of Draco’s rogues’ gallery.

“Are you alright?” Draco asks suddenly, and Harry looks up, all at once filled, charged, with determination.

“I’m fine. This guy, though...” He turns the folder around and stabs a vicious finger at Fitzwilliam.
“This is exactly the sort of idiot that needs to get his fucking comeuppance.”

Draco scowls. “Yes, well. The only reason he escaped the Toxic Bastards file is because he isn’t nearly as clever as he thinks he is.”

“That I can believe,” Harry says. “What do you know about him?”

“Most of it is right in front of you.”

“My head hurts,” Harry says, and it’s more of an exaggeration than an outright lie. “Tell me.”

Draco gazes evenly at him for a moment, and then summons Bilby, who is pressed for a report on Lucius and then sent on a Borteg’s retrieval mission. Only once the glasses are filled and the elf has been dismissed does Draco reply to Harry’s request.

“Fitzwilliam is all about the money,” he explains, balancing his heavy glass on the palm of his hand. “It is, unequivocally, the only thing he cares about. As far as I’ve been able to ascertain, he is associated with several European... er... organisations—all underground, all violent, and all extremely slippery.”

“Požar Riba,” Harry murmurs.

If Draco is surprised by his words, he doesn’t show it. “Amongst others, yes.” He takes a drink and exhales a long plume of smoke. “These... links, if you like, allow him to broker shady little deals that make innocent amounts of money for the Ministry and enormous cuts for himself.”

“Is he dangerous?”

Draco shrugs. “That depends. Personally, no. I’ve followed him a few times and I don’t think he has it in him to inflict any kind of damage by himself, but I can only imagine the things his little friends are up to behind the Ministry’s back. They are dangerous.”

Harry swallows dryly. “How have you been following him?” he asks, already knowing the answer.

“Polyjuice,” Draco admits, eyes glittering. His mouth tugs into a proud little smile and Harry can’t help but reflect it back to him.

“Nice,” he approves.

“You know, I think I may be growing accustomed to your compliments,” Draco muses.

“Now I know anything’s possible,” Harry says, lifting his glass and savouring the warm sting of the firewhisky on his tongue, wondering as he does just how he can shore up Draco’s research without appearing to know too much. “There have been rumours about Fitzwilliam, you know.”

Draco taps his fingers against his glass, eyes narrowed in contemplation. “I’m fairly astonished to be hearing this from you of all people,” he says at last.

“What do you mean, me of all people?”

“His ex- acolyte,” Draco murmurs, one eyebrow arched.
I certainly was not his acolyte,” Harry says defensively. “I worked for him, but that’s all!”

Draco grins. “You’re wonderfully easy to wind up, you know.”

“Fuck you,” Harry mutters, draining his glass and, despite his irritation, fighting a smile. “Just for that, I’m going to spend at least the next half hour persuading you to do—something—about—this,” he says firmly, piling the folders onto Draco’s lap, one by one.

“Oh, good. I shall enjoy that,” Draco sighs. “Refill?”

**~*~**

“You never did tell me,” Harry finds himself saying an hour or so later, “how on earth he manages to move so quickly?”

Draco’s smile is slow and rueful. “Like I said, he doesn’t have his wand for obvious reasons, but he’s always had a terrific skill for Apparating. You wouldn’t believe the wards my mother and I had to put around the outside of the house when he first came home.”

“I can imagine,” Harry says, stretching a hand out toward the dying embers of the fire.

The rain has slowed to a lazy drizzle and the sun has once again begun to punch through the clouds, sending soft tendrils of light snaking into the study and shimmering gently on the rain-dappled window panes. Harry is comfortable, warm, and pleasantly effervescent with a mixture of firewhisky-from-the-spice-rack and Draco’s company, and he is beginning to think that he’d be quite content to remain in this chair for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, his plans are scuppered by the sound of footsteps in the corridor. He and Draco exchange glances, but the wand on the desk sits quietly, suggesting that Lucius is still safely in his rooms. One soft knock, a rustle of paper bags and a murmured exchange of words later, Narcissa lets herself into the study, followed closely by Scorpius. Both are pink cheeked and slightly ruffle-haired, wrapped in long, light cloaks and laden with shopping bags. Narcissa, once again, is wearing smart trousers and boots that coordinate perfectly with an expertly draped shawl, pinned at her shoulder with a sparkling brooch in the shape of a lizard. She smiles warmly, first at her son and then at Harry.

“Hello darling. Hello Harry.”

“Hello, Mother,” Draco says, setting down his glass and arching an eyebrow at Harry as though questioning the unexpected familiarity. Harry just smiles. She remembered.

“Hi, Mrs Malfoy,” Harry says, straightening his posture and finding a smile for Scorpius, who is watching him with interest from behind his grandmother. Something in his almost inscrutable expression sends the words of his letter searing back into Harry’s mind.

Gay, gay, gay. Mr Potter is gay. Did you know Mr Potter is GAY?

Fucking hell. “It only seems fitting that you were outed by my son... I was outed by my father,” Draco had said not twenty minutes ago. “It’s nice to keep things in the family.”

“Hi, Dad! Hi, Mr Potter!” Scorpius says brightly.

Harry manages a ‘hi’ and a weak smile, then scrubs awkwardly at his still-damp hair and looks at the
fire. It seems like the safest place right now.

“Grandma bought me a proper set of Gobstones and then we had our lunch at Rembrandt’s and we saw the captain of the Wimbourne Wasps buying new robes!” Scorpius announces, dumping his bags on Draco’s side table. “What have you been doing?” he adds, grinning.

Harry bites down hard on a smile.

“Nothing exciting, I assure you,” Draco says, rising and allowing Scorpius to hug him tightly around the middle, resting one pale hand on his son’s back and smoothing down his windswept hair with the other. “Just talking about boring grown up things. You certainly didn’t miss anything.”

“Mmph,” Scorpius mumbles against Draco’s waistcoat.

“What happened to the front doors?” Narcissa asks calmly, removing her leather gloves one finger at a time.

Draco pastes on a small seraphic smile. “We had a little incident, but it’s all fine now.”

Narcissa lifts a very familiar eyebrow and Harry has the feeling that she knows exactly what sort of incident has occurred in her absence. Lucius’ little moments are nothing new to her, after all.

“They’re different,” she says carefully.

Draco releases Scorpius and affects a graceful shrug. “I like them.”

“Me too,” Scorpius opines, unwittingly copying his father’s action.

Narcissa’s blue eyes sparkle with amusement, and, just for a second, she glances at Harry, instantly including him in the cryptic little discourse. Warmed, he sits forward in his seat and just listens, safe in the knowledge that no one is going to have a nervous breakdown because of the mangled doors. Malfoys, it seems, are more resilient than they appear.

“Have you seen my azaleas, Draco?”

“Yes, Mother,” Draco says, and Harry can feel the weariness in his voice. “I saw them last night.”

“Have you seen them today?” she presses.

Scorpius laughs and turns to Harry. “Grandma has a special relationship with her azaleas,” he confides, voice lowered. “They’re sort of like her children.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” Harry says, rising reluctantly and casting a wistful glance back at his chair. He slips a hand into his pocket to stroke a warm, sleeping Misu. She needs something to eat, and the grumbling in his stomach suggests that he does, too. “I’d better leave you all to it. I promise to have a look at the azaleas on my way down, Mrs Malfoy—you’re welcome to my not-very-expert opinion on them.”

“I will walk with you,” she says, setting down her bags with care and holding open the door for him.

“Oh... okay.” Startled, Harry nods. He smiles at Scorpius and says goodbye to Draco, feeling like something has been stolen away from him in a way he can’t quite explain. “I’ll owl you,” he calls as
he steps out into the corridor, and something in Narcissa’s expression makes him feel like the complete and utter idiot he knows he is.

They don’t talk as they make their way, side by side, through the corridors, across the entrance hall and out into the grounds. Narcissa doesn’t mention the doors again, and though his curiosity burns as to whether or not she knows how much he had to do with the change, he doesn’t quite dare to ask. The wind is wonderfully fresh and Harry relishes the sensation and the lift of his fringe from his forehead. Narcissa’s pale hair streams out behind her as she walks, and she tucks her ungloved hands under her arms for warmth, managing to look terribly regal and terribly ordinary all at once.

“I hope the incident, as Draco put it, did not make you think too badly of us, Harry,” she says at last.

“It didn’t occur to me to think badly of you,” Harry says truthfully.

Narcissa’s mouth twitches. She doesn’t look at him, instead remaining focused on the pink and white patch of flowers in the distance. “You are an interesting man.”

“When you say ‘interesting’, do you mean strange?” Harry asks.

Narcissa laughs softly. “We are all strange in our own way, Harry.”

“I agree completely,” Harry says, following her lead and abandoning the gravel path for the lawn. The grass is wet, quickly saturating the bottoms of his trousers as he approaches the flowerbed and gazes down at Narcissa’s beloved azaleas. “Strange and beautiful,” he mumbles, watching the odd little star-shaped flowers quivering in the breeze.

“They’ve come along since last time, don’t you think?”

Harry nods. She steps closer to him and leans down carefully to examine a particularly unusual specimen; the mingled scents of Diagon Alley drift from her clothes and hair and wrap comfortingly around him.

“It’s a matter of dignity, you understand,” she says, glancing up at him, eyes grave.

“Yes,” Harry says quietly, chest tight.

“For Lucius.” She draws her wand and gently clears the soil of the debris left by the rainstorm. “I do not intend to be dramatic, but I believe that the man I married would rather have died than suffer this. He would rather have died than have the outside world know of this.”

“I know,” he says, and as she makes eye contact once again, her fragility is so plain that Harry wants to crush her to him and tell her to let it all go, just for a little while. He keeps his hands by his sides. “I’m not going to tell anyone what I’ve seen. Draco is my friend now—I wouldn’t hurt him like that.”

Narcissa nods slowly, and all he can do is hope that she believes him. He knows very well that there is no use trying to force a woman like this to accept anything she doesn’t want to.

“I think you have been good for Draco,” she says at last.

Harry’s stomach twists pleasurably. “I hope so. We have quite a lot in common these days.”
Narcissa regards him steadily, lifting a hand to hold her wind-caught hair from her face. “I think you are good for each other,” she clarifies, words heavy with barely concealed significance.

Face heating, Harry fights to hold onto the eye contact. “Mrs Malfoy... there’s nothing between me and Draco... we’re just...” He trails into silence at the sudden steeliness in her expression.

“Harry... I know my son. I know him better than he knows himself. I want him to be happy, and he’s had precious little to be happy about over the last few years. You seem to be close, so I’m sure he has told you at least something about his marriage.” She pauses.


“She gave him a wonderful son,” Narcissa says, visibly softening as she mentions Scorpius. “I cannot deny that. But Draco needs a partner... an equal. He needs another person to encourage him, to be there for him where I cannot. I hope you understand?”

Harry understands. He understands so acutely that he feels as though Narcissa has cast a Stinging Hex right across his face, but he’s not quite sure he believes that any part of this conversation is actually taking place.

“I don’t think Draco’s the sort of person that needs anyone,” he says, granting Narcissa a wry smile.

“I don’t believe you mean that, Mr Potter.”

“Harry.”

“Forgive me. We all need people, Harry.”

“Even you?” Harry says boldly.

Narcissa says nothing for a long moment, just twists her rebellious rope of hair around her hand and wrist. “All of us,” she says firmly.

This time, Harry does touch her; he reaches out and grazes his fingertips against the back of her wand hand as it dangles at her side. She lets him. Her skin is smooth and paper thin, stretched tightly over knuckles more knotted than they appear to the eye, her rings cold and sharp-edged against his fingers. Her eyes flick away over the azaleas and then meet Harry’s in an almost-smile. He releases her and takes in a deep breath of damp air.

“Am I so obvious?” he asks, not for the first time recently.

“I do not need you to be obvious,” she says, turning back to the azaleas and releasing a gentle sigh. “Temperance... warmth... fragile passion,” she intones, as though the delicate meanings are the words of a spell. For the first time, Harry wonders at the flowers’ particular significance in her life, and a slow, sweet sadness creeps through his veins.

“Take care of yourself for me,” he adds absent-mindedly.

Narcissa closes her eyes, pale lashes against equally pale cheeks. She smiles. “You do that.”

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On Friday morning, Harry’s workshop is once again full of children. Ron, unsurprisingly, is stuck in back-to-back meetings, and Hermione has insisted on what she’s calling a ‘girls’ morning’ with Ginny, which, from what Harry has been able to ascertain, involves tea, cake, complaining, and possibly having some unnecessary and painful-sounding things done to their faces. As far as he’s concerned, they’re quite welcome to it, and not just because he knows that both of them deserve a break.

He doesn’t mind, anyway; he’s always been happy to watch Rose and Hugo as well as his own. They’re bright, happy, well-behaved kids, and, with the help of Al and Lily, they have suffused the atmosphere in the ‘shop with an energy and vigour that is absolutely infectious.

Harry wipes his dirty hands on his apron, slides the last of his latest batch of miniature bowls onto the cooling rack, and pauses for a moment to watch them. The four of them are deep in concentration, gathered on the floor around the large slab of beech that they have selected to form the basis of Harry’s new sign.

It has come as no surprise that Lily has taken the reins, appointing herself as some kind of creative director and giving out detailed instructions to the others, who don’t appear to mind at all. Hugo, already covered in paint, kneels at her side, eyes wide and brush in hand, while Rose and Al are taking turns with the largest hammer they could find, beating strips of soft metal into the shape of a slightly wobbly fish. Harry had hovered anxiously over them for the first few minutes, until Al had pointed out—quite accurately—that watching them wasn’t going to prevent blackened nails or broken fingertips, and besides, “you’re always whacking yourself with stuff, Dad!”

Still, he has kept an eye on them, and so has James, who is being his usual sunny self and slumping against the wall with his knees drawn up and his hair hanging over one eye.

“Everything alright?” Harry asks, leaning against the wall beside James and poking him with his foot.

“Yeah.”

Harry smiles to himself. “Good.”

“He doesn’t want to help,” Rose offers, taking the hammer from Al and thwapping gleefully at the metal fish.

“You didn’t ask me to do anything, genius,” James shoots back, making a face at his cousin.

“That’s not true!” Lily cries, sounding scandalised. She turns appealing eyes to Harry. “That’s not true, Dad.”

“It isn’t.” Al says helpfully, sitting back on his heels and watching Rose’s progress. “She asked you what you wanted to do right at the beginning. You can have a go with the hammer if you want,” he offers. “After Rose, I mean,” he amends at her sharp look.

“No thanks,” James sighs. He gazes up at Harry. “When’s Mum coming?”

“I don’t know. When she’s had all the wrinkles blasted off her face?” Harry suggests, hoping to get a smile out of his son.

James says nothing, but his expression is markedly less sour when Lily asks him to help carry the
sign outside a few minutes later. Once out on the cobbles, Harry hoists up one end of the sign—magically lightened for convenience but still unwieldy—and Rose elects to scramble onto the creaky stepladder and hold up the other end, allowing the others to stand back and cast judgement.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Harry calls.

“Very nice,” Kari says, leaning on the doorframe of the Dragondale with a stripy tea towel over her shoulder. “Dare I ask the significance of the purple fish?”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” James says drily.

“It’s from a dream,” Lily explains, wiggling her fingers mysteriously.

Kari laughs. “Well, I think it looks brilliant.”

“Here?” Harry asks, twisting to look at Al and Hugo, who are gazing at the sign with their heads cocked to one side. “Is it not straight?”

“Looks alright from here!” Al calls, shading his eyes from the midday sun.

James snorts. “Are you serious?”

Harry pins his side of the sign to the wall with one hand and looks at his son. “What’s the matter with it, James? Help me out, will you?”

“It’s just... all wrong,” James declares with a dramatic sigh. “For a start, it’s not straight.”

“You don’t want it straight—that’s boring,” Al puts in.

“Shall I pull it up a bit at this side?” Rose suggests, shifting her portion of the sign and causing Harry to almost lose his balance.

“Look,” James says crossly, folding his arms and stepping closer. “You can have it straight or you can have it skew-wiff, but you’ve got it so it’s neither—it just looks like you’ve done a half-arsed job of doing it straight... I mean... a half-bottomed... just, not a very good job, alright?”

“You should mind your language, James,” Rose advises over her shoulder. “Mum says Hugo’s like a sponge at the moment.”

“No, I’m not,” Hugo protests. “I’m like a crocodile.”

Harry laughs. It starts out small, just an amused little cackle, but then Rose picks it up, leaning against the wall and giggling helplessly, and then Al, and Lily, and Kari, and before long, the entire group are falling about, breathless. Soon, even Hugo is caught up in alternate bouts of tittering and insisting that, “it’s not funny; I really am a crocodile!”

With a reluctant grin tugging at his mouth, James directs the positioning of the sign with hand gestures and a fair bit of shouting until, finally, he is satisfied and gives Harry and Rose the thumbs-up. Harry draws his wand and fixes the bugger to the wall, and, with a sigh of relief, thanks Rose and gives her a hand down from the stepladder.

“Good work, everyone,” he says, standing well back and taking in the plaque of wood and metal that
somehow transforms his workshop into a shiny new place of business. The whole thing is a little rough around the edges; the hammered metal is uneven and the legend ‘PURPLE FISH’, rendered in a violent shade of plum, is a bit drippy and a bit chaotic, but he likes it. He likes it very much.

“I feel like I helped,” Kari grins, grabbing her tea towel and disappearing back into the deli just as Hermione and Ginny turn into the cobbled side street.

“Oh, very nice,” Hermione approves, smiling at Harry and gently restraining Hugo as he attempts to press his purple-splattered self all over her smart clothes. “I don’t need to ask who helped with the painting.”

“He did a very good job,” Lily says gravely.

Ginny ruffles her daughter’s hair and greets Harry with a relaxed smile. She smells lightly of flowers and her face is glowing with wellbeing. It’s so good to see, so good that, just for a moment, Harry can’t be sure how he’s keeping his feet underneath himself.

“Looks like you had a good morning,” he says at last.

“Oh, yes. The world has been completely put to rights now,” Ginny advises, and Hermione laughs.

“Yes, not a person left un-discussed. Not even you.”

Harry wrinkles his nose. “Wonderful. I feel... included.”

“Nothing bad,” Ginny assures him, almost in a whisper, as she pats his arm and walks away to greet Al and James, who are gathered around the new sign, examining it carefully from all angles. Nothing bad, she says, and he believes her.

Hermione smiles brightly. “Well, I think that seaweed facial’s washed away at least two weeks’ worth of ridiculous meetings.”

“Seaweed?” Harry repeats, bewildered.

“Oh, yes,” Hermione nods, rifling in her overstuffed shoulder bag and pulling out a leaflet. “You should try it, Harry, it’s ever so relaxing. Anthony is sick with jealousy, watching the Floos while I’m out enjoying myself.”

Of course. “Anthony... Anthony Goldstein?”

“Yes, that’s right. Why do you ask?”

Harry takes the proffered leaflet and folds it in his fingers. “Because Neville’s seeing him. Did you know?”

Hermione’s eyebrows shoot up. “No. But then I haven’t seen Neville in forever... we keep meaning to catch up, and then Hugo gets ill or work goes completely insane...”

Harry sighs, thinking of the close friendship they all shared in the glimpse.

“Yeah, I know. Don’t you think Nev can do better?” he whispers before he can stop himself.
Hermione laughs lightly. “You sound like my mother. I’m sure he can make his own decisions.”

*That’s good coming from you, Harry thinks. “Yeah, but is he... alright? Isn’t he a bit of a prick?”*

Hermione laughs again. “Anthony? He’s... no. He’s a little bit intense, but he’s alright.”

“I’ll take your word for it, then,” he says, looking into sincere dark eyes and letting go of the last of his pointless doubt. If Hermione says he’s okay, then he’s okay, and that’s all there is to it.

“You should,” she says with an odd little smirk. “I’m a very good judge of character.”

Harry says nothing but feels wonderfully relaxed as he says goodbye to James, Al, Ginny, Rose, Hugo and Hermione. The only thing marring his contentment is the prospect of his afternoon with Lily. Lily, her friend Jeanette, and an unforgiving slab of ice. He sighs, watching Lily as she sits on the wall and adjusts her plaits, wishing he had Misu to complain to. She’s at home in her tank, because, despite her pleas to be included, Harry doesn’t think the ice rink is the best place for a snake, especially a sleepy snake who’s just about to shed her skin.

Surely, though, it can’t be as bad as he’s been imagining.

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It’s exactly as bad as he’s been imagining.

His requests to watch from the sidelines fall upon deaf ears as the two girls lace him into blue plastic boots and drag him onto the ice. By the time he crashes onto his hands and knees for the third time, he’s beginning to question his decision to supervise the skating excursion instead of taking James and Al shopping for new school robes, but Jeanette—who is, if possible, even bossier than Lily—is having none of it.

“You just have to keep going, Mr Potter,” she insists, grabbing his gloved hand in hers and gliding effortlessly backwards; she drags him along at a terrifying speed, long ponytail whipping behind her. “If you keep stopping, you’ll never get better!”

Lily whoops with delight and grasps his other hand, skating along beside Jeanette and looking over her shoulder at him every few seconds. She can’t skate backwards yet, but is capable of spins and little jumps and—more importantly—staying on her feet, and Harry grins proudly between moments of blind panic and cold, crunching pain.

By the time they leave, he is shivering, damp, and limping slightly.

“I promise you,” he says to Misu as he sprawls out on his bed and rests his old bones, “you would not have liked that one bit.”

“Never mind,” Misu says brightly, poking her head out of the open tank and sliding sinuously onto Harry’s bedside table. “Never mind! Look! Have taken off my coat!”

Harry smiles, lifting her onto his chest and admiring the bright, shiny colours of her brand new scales.

“Look at you, all fancy,” he murmurs. “Want to come out for dinner with me?”
Blaise is still in his office at seven o’clock, leaving Harry and Misu to sit in the vast atrium of the building, under the unashamedly curious eye of Kerensa the receptionist. Aching all over now from his repeated contacts with the ice, he just smiles nicely and tries to remain as still as possible. When Blaise strides out of the lift some minutes later, he manages to drag himself to his feet without wincing and feels rather proud of his self control.

“Harry!” he booms, grinning and grasping Harry’s sore hand enthusiastically. “Good to see you.” He turns his head to regard his receptionist. “Kerensa, go home before your boyfriend forgets what you look like.” He adds, out of the side of his mouth, to Harry: “Workaholic.”

Harry grins. “I’m sure you’d know.”

Blaise laughs. “Yes, indeed. Come on, then—out into the fray,” he declares, steering Harry out into the cool evening, propelling him past shops and houses and finally down a gently-lit side street, where an ancient red canopy hangs over a window filled with climbing vines and proclaims: ‘Giuseppe’s – 1935 until you are full’. The pungent aroma of garlic and oregano hits Harry before the door is even fully open, and his mouth begins to water in anticipation. Misu pops her head out of his shirt pocket and flicks her tongue delightedly.

As they take their seats at a rickety little corner table, Blaise starts up a conversation in rapid-fire Italian with the silver-haired waiter, and Harry is both impressed and startled; somewhere in the back of his mind is the vague recollection that Blaise’s father is Italian, and now Harry finds himself wondering just how long he has been coming to this odd little place. He looks around, taking in the crackly frescoes, dripping candles, and forest of plants—some of which are waving curiously and peering over the shoulders of the diners—and wonders just how much has changed here since nineteen thirty-five. He suspects not much, and it’s wonderful.

“Sorry about that,” Blaise says as the waiter nods and retreats from the table. “They know me rather well here, and a lot of the older ones are on a bit of a mission to get me married off and siring lots of children. Antonio, there, wanted to know... well, whether you are the reason I don’t have a wife yet.”

Harry snorts, genuinely amused. “And what did you tell him?”

“I told him to mind his own business and bring me the wine list, the rotten old bugger.” Blaise grins.

Harry lifts an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really. But don’t worry, he’s used to me by now. They’ll have picked out a lady for me by the end of the night,” Blaise advises, taking the wine list from the returning Antonio and flashing him a warm, old-friends grin. “Everyone is always trying to pair me up. Even your subconscious.”

“It wasn’t my subconscious,” Harry mutters. “It was Boris the Glimpse Operative.”

Blaise laughs. “Are you alright with red?” he asks, waving the wine list.

“Fine. I’m a bit clueless when it comes to wine, to be honest,” Harry admits.

“No problem. They know what they’re doing and that’s the main thing. As for your glimpse man... I told my therapist a hypothetical, censored, ‘this happened to a friend’ sort of version of events and
she’s booked me in for an extra session this month,” Blaise sighs. “What do you think of that?”

Harry looks up from toying with the stem of his wineglass. “You have a therapist?”

“Everyone has a therapist these days, Harry,” Blaise says, as though it’s obvious.

Harry merely nods, wondering if that’s where he’s been going wrong.

“So, tell me about...” Blaise begins and breaks off, distracted by something in his peripheral vision. “Ah, here she comes.”

Puzzled, Harry follows his gaze to see a tiny, grey-haired woman bustling her way purposefully between tables toward them. Her pinched face is determined, little black eyes lit with joy as she squints at Blaise.

“Silvia!” he cries, rising from his seat and allowing the little woman to hug him fiercely, slapping his back so vigorously with raw red hands that she sways precariously from one side to the other, long silver plait swinging with her.

Out of politeness, Harry rises, too, watching with amusement as Blaise has his cheeks pinched and his suit jacket straightened. Silvia looks as though she weighs about a third as much as Blaise and is so fragile that she could almost snap at any moment, but as she chatters away, clasping his vast hands in hers, it’s clear who is in charge, and it isn’t Blaise. Harry has no idea what his new friend is being asked, but there’s something familiar about the style of interrogation, and he suddenly has a strange flash of just what Hermione will be like when she’s older.

“Silvia,” Blaise says as she takes a breath, turning her around gently. “Questo e’ il mio amico, Harry.”

“Harry Potter!” Silvia declares with a great crinkly smile, reaching out for his hands. “Harry Potter... lovely! Friend for Blaise, yes?”

“Yes,” Harry agrees. “Definitely. It’s lovely to meet you. Your place is fantastic.”

“Suo ristorante,” Blaise murmurs, catching her confusion.

“Ah!” She beams. “Grazie, grazie! Good boys!” She clonks Harry on the shoulder, and this time he’s not quite ready. He doesn’t manage to hold in his wince and Silvia laughs raucously as she trundles back toward the kitchen.

“She’ll be back,” Blaise advises. “Don’t tell me she actually managed to hurt you?”

“I was already injured,” Harry says defensively as they take their seats again.

Blaise gazes at him curiously as Antonio brings and pours the wine. “Do tell,” he says at last.

Harry sighs, feeling like an idiot. “I took Lily ice skating.”

“Well, that sounds like fun!” Blaise says brightly, and Harry snorts. He has the horrible suspicion that Blaise means it.

“Well, I thought it was better than the alternative—trying to persuade Al and James into twelve
“That sounds like fun, too,” Blaise admits, sniffing at his wine and letting out a satisfied sigh. “I rather like shopping.”

“For school robes?” Harry presses, dubious. “With two boys who would rather be anywhere else?”

“Well, that does rather sound as though it would suck some of the fun out of it,” Blaise concedes. “And yet you’d have me up to my eyes in sproglets, Silvia!” he accuses, and, Harry assumes, repeats his words in Italian as the little woman reappears at the table with a basket of wonderful-smelling bread.

She cackles delightedly. Harry manages to catch an “Ah, Blaise!” before the exchange spirals beyond him and he instead turns to Misu, who is dangling slowly toward the bread. Harry grabs her, very aware that now she’s shed her skin, she’ll be even more fixated on food than usual. Which is all well and good, but he doesn’t think snakes belong in bread baskets.

“You won’t like that,” he says quietly. “You can have some of my meat when it comes.”

“What kind of meat?” Misu enquires, gazing at the menu with him, even though she can’t read the words. At least... he doesn’t think she can.

“I don’t know yet,” Harry says, mentally picking out the meatballs on Blaise’s recommendation and trying to decide between a cannelloni verdi and a risotto with duck.

“Oh!” Silvia cries, and Harry looks up from the menu. “Serpente!” She takes a step back from the table, visibly unnerved, and clutches her hands to her chest.

“Oh... sorry,” Harry mumbles, grabbing up Misu and stuffing her into his trouser pocket and out of sight. Her constant companionship and sunny personality have made it easy to forget that not everyone thinks it’s wonderful to spend time with a snake.

Blaise catches the old woman’s attention and speaks softly and quickly to her, deep voice so soothing that Harry relaxes along with Silvia; his self-reproach loosens its grip until he’s thinking of nothing much but the beautiful cadence of words that make no sense to him at all.

“Yes,” she says at last, eyeing Harry’s pocket warily and nodding. “Oh, Harry Potter,” she sighs, patting him on the shoulder and trotting away, only to return within seconds with a little chunk of chicken in her gnarled fingers. She sets it down beside Harry’s fork and nods to Misu, who has poked out her head at the smell of the meat. “For snake... okay? Okay.” She walks away, only to be replaced by the waiter, who takes their orders in between sneaking amused glances at Harry.

“Go on, then,” Harry says when they are alone once more, and Misu snatches the chicken and drags it back into his pocket with her. He sips his wine, savouring the warm taste, and regards Blaise.

“What did you say to her?”

“I simply explained that the snake is friendly... safe. Your familiar, so to speak,” Blaise says.

“I hadn’t ever really thought about it that way,” Harry admits, shifting in his seat as Misu steadies her chunk of chicken against his hipbone in order to swallow it. It’s an odd sensation.

Blaise grants him a crooked smile. “You’re an odd chap, Harry Potter.”
Harry shrugs. “I’m coming to terms with it.”

“Indeed, it’s the only way. We must learn to co-exist with our eccentricities,” Blaise booms, folding his huge hands on the tablecloth. His expression turns inquisitive as he leans toward Harry. “Tell me what you’ve been up to since you gave up the Auror game—Kerensa is quite fixated on the idea that you’ve been writing a book, but she has some rather funny ideas about things.” Blaise’s handsome features crease into a frown and he sighs. “I really ought to expand my social circle... that girl is becoming worse than a wife.”

Harry grins. “I bet you’d be lost without her,” he says, thinking of Helga, and, just for a moment, missing her rather fiercely. At least she has Ron now; she probably doesn’t miss him at all, the miserable old bugger.

“I would,” Blaise says gravely. “She’s the only one who understands my filing system, if you could call it that. Anyway—stop avoiding the question.”

“I’m not,” Harry laughs. “I’m not writing a book, I’m afraid.”

“Ha!” Blaise hoots, looking as though he’s already preparing for his victory crow over Kerensa.

“Thanks,” Harry murmurs as plates of huge meatballs, rich sauce and salad are placed in front of them by Antonio, who proffers parmesan cheese, waves around a gigantic pepper pot and generally fusses around the table until Blaise waves him away, grinning, and picks up his knife and fork. If this is a starter, he thinks he ought to apologise to his digestive system in advance. “I’m working with glass,” he confesses before Blaise implodes with curiosity. “I’ve got a little workshop and I’m making... little... decorative things, I suppose. Bowls and lanterns and sculptures... what?”

Blaise, wide-eyed and grinning, is gazing at him across the table with a chunk of meatball paused halfway to his mouth. “Aren’t you full of surprises?”

“The universe is full of surprises,” Harry corrects, sliding a forkful of perfectly spiced beef into his mouth. “Oh... that’s good.”

Blaise’s answering beam is as proud as it could have been if he had made the dish himself.

“Ancient family recipe,” he advises, mopping up sauce with a bit of bread. “Very top secret. Do go on.”

“Well, my other self was something of an artist,” Harry admits. “Seriously talented, actually, a sort of master carpenter. I hadn’t a hope of keeping up with anything like that,” he says, thinking of the little table fiasco and resolving to share the story with Blaise later, perhaps after another glass of wine, when he’s not quite so worried about looking like an idiot. “He... well, I was starting to experiment with glassblowing, and I suppose I found my niche.”

“How glorious,” Blaise murmurs, eyes glowing with genuine delight. “And I had wondered about your fingers... now it all makes sense.”

Harry frowns and scrutinises his hands. “What about my fingers?”

“They’re covered in little burns,” Blaise laughs, grabbing Harry’s thumb and indicating the flurry of tiny scorch marks and patches of shiny new skin that litter the pad and outside edge. “Not usually
“Not at all... at least, not now that I’m not a bureaucrat anymore,” Harry admits, returning to his food when Blaise releases him.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Blaise declares, lifting his glass and then draining it with one flick of the wrist. “When can I come and see this intriguing enterprise for myself?”

“You’re making it sound far more impressive than it really is,” Harry says wryly. “It’s just me and a little room full of weird things made of glass.”

“You are going to have to learn some self-confidence if you’re going to run your own business,” Blaise shoots back, refilling the glasses and giving Harry a stern look.

“All in good time,” Harry assures, knowing that Blaise is right, and that if he’s going to listen to anyone’s advice, it should be the advice of the person who has built up his own successful business from nothing. “I’m having a bit of a celebration for my opening day next week—you’re welcome to come to that if you have time.”

Blaise beams. “I’d be chuffed to little mint balls, Harry. Would you like me to bring anything?”

Harry laughs. “Just yourself will be fine. And Kerensa, if you can spare her for a little while.”

“I don’t know,” Blaise muses, mock-seriously. “I wouldn’t want her to enjoy herself.”

“Well, no. That could set a dangerous precedent.”

Blaise nods, and then his grin twists into an anxious frown. “A week from today isn’t a terribly long time... do you have everything in place?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry lies, waving a dismissive piece of bread. “Everything’s sorted.” It’s not, of course, but he has much more interesting things to think of. “I’ll see you there, then?”

“Absolutely. Now...” Blaise pauses to let Antonio clear away their plates, and then folds his arms on the table, leaning eagerly toward Harry. “Tell me about Maura. Everything you can remember.”

Harry hesitates. He doesn’t know why, but the words seem to stick in his throat, caught in a tide of selfish grief, and all he can do is stare back at Blaise, eyes stinging. This is what he came here for—he knows that. To answer questions, to satisfy all those curiosities that he knows have surfaced for Blaise since Harry Potter marched into his office and started spilling his guts. He owes Blaise, and more than that, he likes him. He wants to be his friend, not just in the glimpse, but here, in this place where life is just starting to come together. He just needs to open his mouth.

“Harry, please,” Blaise says softly. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since you told me.”

The words are the impetus he needs to shake off his uncertainty and as they wait for their main courses to arrive, Harry talks and talks and talks about Maura. He tells Blaise every little thing that comes into his mind, about her love for Quidditch and food and all things shiny; about her bright eyes and freckles and cheeky smile, her hats and her wisdom and her wonderful tolerance of a man who wasn’t her Uncle Harry. He tells Blaise about his daughter’s intelligence and sparkling, kind spirit, about her dress with the snails on it that glimpse-Blaise had secretly bought from Twilfitt’s,
and that she had adored so much she had worn it to a photo-shoot with Harry.

He keeps talking as their food arrives, barely tasting his cannelloni yet feeling confident it is the best he has ever had. Blaise eats steadily but never takes his eyes away from Harry, drinking in every detail he has to offer, throwing out questions and comments and volleys of laughter that make the diners at other tables turn around in surprise. When Blaise asks to hear more about Ginny—both here and in the glimpse—and Draco and everyone else he can think of, Harry complies, now letting the words and confessions flow out of him like water. It’s easy, and he suspects it is only partially to do with the wine.

Of which there has been... plenty. By dessert, Harry is stuffed, drowsy, and starting to sweat, while Blaise, who apparently has the constitution of an ox, reclines happily in his seat, one hand resting on his curved belly, the other enveloping his wineglass, sloshing around the liquid inside with idle contentment.

“I’ve just taken on a friend of yours, actually—Neville Longbottom.”

“He got the job,” Harry sighs happily. He has to admit, he’s not all that surprised, despite Neville’s pessimism. “That’s great news.”

“He was by far the strongest candidate,” Blaise admits, tone conspiratorial. “I needed someone with a true, natural instinct for plants—I’m a businessman, not a Herbologist. I have a feeling we’re going to work rather nicely together.”

“I think you will,” Harry says, covering a yawn and pushing away the last of his tiramisu in defeat. Carefully, he peeks into his pocket to check on Misu and finds her fast asleep with Silvia’s bit of chicken forming a noticeable bulge in her abdomen. As usual, her eyes have been a lot larger than her belly, and he thinks he knows how she feels. As he looks back to the table, he blinks, puzzled, and it takes him a moment to realise that Blaise has swapped their plates around and is now enjoying the last few mouthfuls of Harry’s dessert.

“Didn’t want to let it go to waste, old bean,” he says, guilty-faced. “Silvia would be frightfully offended.”

Harry snorts. “Go for it. You know, you and Neville worked together in the glimpse, too.”

“Really?” Blaise sets his fork down with a clatter and leans back once more. “How wonderful. At Zabology?”

Harry nods. “Of course. My decisions didn’t make that much of an impact on your life.”

“I think they rather did, actually,” Blaise says softly, and Harry is humbled.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Perhaps you weren’t the only one who needed a taste of what could have been,” he muses.

“Maybe,” Harry says, finding a smile for Blaise. The idea that the glimpse could help so many others is appealing, even if he wasn’t really supposed to go about it quite like this. “I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, you know...”
Blaise lifts a dark eyebrow. “You did not share that particular piece of information with me,” he says, sounding remarkably unconcerned.


Blaise laughs and shakes his head. “Superb. Ah, Silvia, Silvia!” he cries, turning to chatter away to the old woman as she appears with the bill. Harry looks around fuzzily and is startled to realise that the little place is empty but for their table. He has no idea how long he and Blaise have been sitting here, tucked away in their corner, but he’s beginning to suspect that Blaise’s company has the power to distort the usual rules of time.

It takes them a few more minutes to actually leave, during which Harry is manhandled several more times by Silvia and Blaise absolutely refuses to let him put a single Knut toward the bill, insisting that he was the one to issue the dinner invitation, and he wasn’t going to hear of Harry putting his hand into his pocket.

“You can pay next time, if you want to ask me out,” Blaise says with a wicked grin as they step out into the night.

“I think a second date is in order,” Harry murmurs, swaying slightly in the cold wind. His insides feel warm and full and rather off-balance and the lack of equilibrium is not being helped by having to crane his neck to look up at Blaise.

“Marvellous, I shall look forward to that.” Blaise pauses in the middle of the deserted street, buttoning up his coat and looking, as far as Harry is concerned, far too composed and upright to be allowed. “Listen, I... I’ve rather been wondering... do you want me to help you with Draco? And if so... how?”

“I don’t know,” Harry mumbles, feeling like an awkward teenager, only a step or two from asking Blaise to say, ‘My mate fancies you!’ or whatever is the idiotic thirty-something equivalent.

Blaise sighs. “Do you know how much of a pain in the arse he is? Seriously, Harry, he’s a very difficult man. I’d know. Did you know he once didn’t speak to Astoria for three days because she tried to reorganise his office?”

“No, but I don’t have a hard time believing it,” Harry admits. “I’m not asking you to play matchmaker, but you know... if he asks you what you think about me, a good word would definitely be appreciated.”

“Well, if you really are determined, I have plenty of good words for you... starting with these: it’s been a marvellous evening, but I think you rather need to get to bed, sir,” Blaise declares, going to clap Harry on his sore shoulder and then pulling back at the last minute, laughing heartily.

Harry smiles, eyes already half closed. “Goodnight, Blaise,” he says faintly, watching the huge dark shape disappear into the night, bright white smile seeming to linger for a second or two until Harry is alone in the street.

There’s a rustle and a clank behind him and Harry turns to see Silvia at the window, waving and giving him a furious thumbs up as she draws the curtains. “Buonanotte, Harry Potter!” she calls, and he waves back.

“Come on Misu,” he murmurs, slipping his hand into his pocket and stroking her head gently.
“Blaise is right—we should get to bed. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.”

**~*~**

Saturday is not the only hectic day for Harry (and, to a lesser extent, Misu, whose main contribution seems to be providing a running commentary of his organisational attempts and ‘testing out’ his vases and candle holders by squeezing herself into each new one in turn). In fact, as the hours until his self-imposed deadline slip away, he seems to be busier than ever, discovering necessary and sometimes disturbing new tasks at an alarming rate.

Intent on making the workshop into a pleasant place for customers, Harry once again cleans his windows and scrubs his stone flags on hands and knees until one could eat off them (and Misu does, snapping up a bit of bacon dropped from Harry’s breakfast sandwich). He sweeps away any abandoned cobwebs and carefully relocates his spiders to safe places under window ledges and inside cupboards so that they won’t be squashed, then places strings of tiny lights along shelves and in dark corners until the whole workshop is illuminated and glowing, light glancing off the displayed glass pieces and creating an atmosphere that is, he thinks, ethereal and beautiful.

Despite his best efforts at avoiding the task of pricing, the job doesn’t miraculously disappear, and in the end, Harry grits his teeth and gets on with it as best he can, dashing off a price list just minutes before running out to meet Draco at the Moody.

“Remind me again why you have to do this in two days’ time?” he asks calmly, looking irritatingly serene as he stirs his tea and steals one of Harry’s biscuits.

Harry thinks it’s a testament to his high regard for the man that he doesn’t hex him right there and then, in the middle of the cafe, with the sulky waitress and her colleagues as witnesses.

When he returns to the ’shop, Kari is sitting on the wall and eating a sandwich with one foot tucked up underneath her and her apron in a messy ball at her side.

“Hello, stranger,” she mumbles through a mouthful of bread. “Sorry,” she adds, swallowing hastily. “We’ve been so rushed this morning and I genuinely thought I might die of starvation.”

Harry grins. He stares at his door for a moment or two and then, in the middle of the cafe, with the sulky waitress and her colleagues as witnesses.

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Harry grins. He stares at his door for a moment or two and then, in the middle of the cafe, with the sulky waitress and her colleagues as witnesses.

“You’ve been busy, too. I’ve seen you through the window—you’re going to wear yourself out.”

“Too late,” Harry sighs, shooting her a weary smile.

“Is everything still on for Friday?” she asks, pulling the crust from her sandwich and gnawing on it thoughtfully. “You still want the same stuff we agreed?”

“Yes... but listen, you really have to let me give you some money for it,” Harry insists. “You feed me for free all the time already, and this is... well, it’s on a much bigger scale. Please, Kari,” he appeals, pulling what he hopes is a charming face.

She shakes her head. “Absolutely not, I won’t hear of it. Especially considering...” she sighs.

“Considering what?” Harry presses, her hesitation making him anxious.
“I wanted to tell you before you saw it for yourself,” she confides, setting down her sandwich on her lap and fixing Harry with apologetic dark eyes. “Remember that photograph you had taken with us when you bought this place?”

Harry glances at his workshop and smiles, remembering the fussiness of the old man as he had arranged everyone to his satisfaction for the picture, finally standing in front of Harry—Kari and Darius on either side—and grinning, pickled walnut face creased with pride.

“I remember. Why?”

Kari sighs. “Dad’s had it framed. He’s put it up over the counter with this gaudy little sign that says, ‘Famous Harry Potter loves the Dragondale Deli!’” Though clearly horrified, Kari can’t seem to stop herself from laughing. She looks at Harry and snorts. “I’m really sorry, Harry.”

Harry isn’t sure what to think, but he soon catches her giggles and it’s a wonderful stress reliever.

“Oh, god,” he manages, wrapping his fingers around the rough stone beneath him and catching his breath. “Why would he do that?”

Kari shrugs. “I wish I understood how his mind works. Apparently you’re good for business.”

“What a strange thought that is,” Harry muses. He can’t say he minds, not really. Kari’s family have done nothing but take care of him from the moment he turned up here, and if her father wants to capitalise on the notoriety of his neighbour, then... Harry supposes he can get on with it.

“Are you upset?” Kari asks, picking fitfully at the remains of her sandwich. “I can probably persuade him to take it down if you really want.”

“No, I’m not. A bit embarrassed, but... hey, what else is new?” Harry shrugs, mouth twitching into a self-deprecating smile.

Kari leans forward, dark hair falling across her face as she rests her elbows on her knees. “I’m so relieved... Darius had me half convinced that you were going to go mad and refuse to live next door to us any more.” She laughs. “I feel a bit daft now.”

“Don’t,” Harry says, nudging her with his elbow. “But... I don’t actually live in the workshop... have I actually been spending that much time here?”

Kari looks up. “Pretty much,” she says. “It’ll all be worth it when you sell your first Purple Fish original,” she offers, stuffing the rest of her sandwich into her mouth and getting to her feet. “V’gottago,” she mumbles, waving and shaking out her apron as she returns to work.

Harry slopes across the cobbles, back into his workshop, and looks around.

He hopes she’s right.

**~*~**

“Will you stop looking so worried? You’re making me nervous,” Ginny complains, glancing at Harry as she takes the top two boxes from the stack in Kari’s arms and starts helping her to arrange the mountains of little Greek snacks on one of his worktables, which has been covered with shiny silver platters in readiness for Harry’s guests.
“I’m not worried. I’m fine,” he mutters. It is, of course, a lie, but he’s not sure what he’s more unnerved by—the prospect of throwing open the doors of Purple Fish to the public, or spending an afternoon surrounded by all of the fiercest, most no-nonsense women in his life at the same time. Kari and Ginny have already formed an unexpected alliance which seems to be mostly based on their mutual suspicion that he doesn’t know how to take care of himself, and he’s having to tune out Hermione and Molly, who are peering out of the door and holding a none-too-quiet discussion about their husbands and children.

“I can’t get them to stop,” Ron whimpers, tacking the loose end of a string of lights to the wall with his wand and turning to Harry, blue eyes appealing.

“I thought your ears might be burning,” Harry laughs. “Just try and think about something else.”

Ron snorts. “They’re not exactly quiet, though, are they?”

“No,” Harry agrees, but he has to laugh at the anguish on his friend’s face. And, despite the embarrassment that just seems to be par for the course at any kind of family-and-friends gathering, he’s relieved and honoured to have them all here. Not a single person has even had to be asked to help; even Hugo has leapt into action, helping Darius—to whom he has taken an instant shine—to set out napkins and forks in neat little stacks. Arthur is bustling around somewhere, putting up anti-theft charms (Harry can’t see him, but he can hear the tuneless humming that means he is enjoying himself), and, as the hour of action approaches, there are children everywhere, dashing in and out of the workshop, picking things up, rearranging them to best advantage and calling instructions to one another.

“You’ve got an owl, Uncle Harry,” Rose advises, slipping past her mother and grandmother and crossing the workshop floor with her finger in her mouth. “I tried to get the letter for you but it bit me.”

“I told you not to,” Al points out, clattering across the flags behind her. “It’s Mr Malfoy’s owl. It’s a bit touchy—I should know; it tries to take a chunk out of me nearly every morning at the breakfast table.”

“Alright, know-it-all,” Rose sighs, turning and chasing Al back out into the street before Harry can say a word.

Harry follows them at a more sedate pace and manages to extract the letter from the owl without sustaining a serious injury. He knows what’s coming, but he still feels the twist of disappointment as he reads Draco’s apologetic note. Still, he feels sure that Draco wouldn’t let him down on purpose, and an enraged, chair-throwing Lucius definitely takes precedence over anything Harry is doing today. Fishing a pencil from his pocket, he scribbles a quick reply:

No worries—there are plenty of people here to get under my feet. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.

Harry.

Knowing it’s woefully inadequate but not knowing how to improve it, Harry sighs and watches the owl spiral up into the clear sky until it is nothing but a dot, then heads back inside. Chewing on his lip, he leans against a workbench and watches Lily as she plays with a shiny, overexcited Misu. He’d have loved to have had Draco here, of course he would, but perhaps it won’t be the worst thing
Lily makes a small sound of impatience and Harry realises that she is attempting to measure Misu with his metal measuring tape, but Misu—unsurprisingly—is refusing to keep still.

“Am not afraid of the metal snake!” she insists, squirming and weaving from side to side.

“Stay still,” Harry murmurs. “She’s only trying to see how big you’ve grown.”

“Am immense! Colossal! Gargantuan!” Misu declares, swaying dramatically and then flopping onto the workbench in a completely straight line.

“Of course you are,” Harry mumbles to himself, smiling as Lily turns around and flashes him a grateful grin.

“Thanks, Dad!” Carefully, she stretches the tape along the bench and picks it up to read off Misu’s measurements. “She’s a whole nineteen inches now,” she announces, holding up the tape. “Well, nineteen inches and a little bit. How big was she when you got her, Dad?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “I didn’t measure her. I know she’s grown a lot, though.”

Lily sighs. “You have to measure, like you do with me and Al.”

“Alright,” Harry gives in, smiling at his daughter’s stern face. “Hold up that tape and we’ll make a mark on this shelf here,” he says, scratching the wood with his pencil at nineteen and a bit inches. “When you measure her again, we can put another mark, like we did with you on the kitchen door. Okay?”

“Yeah, Dad.” Lily hugs him tightly. “It looks really pretty in here. I think you’re going to sell loads of things.”

Harry squeezes her. “Thanks. Love you, Lil.”

“That scary record shop lady is here,” Hermione calls from the door, lowering her voice as best she can.

Richenda. Of course she’s managed to find out about this. The woman knows everything about everything that everyone is doing, doesn’t she?

“All right,” Harry calls, releasing Lily and looking around anxiously. “Everyone... stop faffing around, grab a glass and look like you’re enjoying yourselves!”

The resulting barrage of laughter is a little confusing—he definitely hadn’t been trying to be funny—but it provides a fantastically warm atmosphere for Richenda to walk into. She beams, accepts a glass of sparkling wine and a couple of sticky little canapés, and makes a beeline for Harry.

“How wonderful,” she murmurs, huge earrings swaying and glittering as she looks around at the shelves full of glowing glass pieces. “Mr Potter, what a triumph. I hope Celestina helped you on your way,” she adds in a near-whisper, eyes alight with devilment.

Flushing slightly, Harry smiles and hopes no one is listening; the hope, of course, is pointless,
because everyone in the workshop is eavesdropping intently on Harry’s conversation with his first customer.

“Definitely,” he says, giving up his pride. “She was extremely inspirational.”

“Wonderful! To you, Mr Potter!” Richenda announces, lifting her glass, and when everyone follows her lead, a sense of festivity seems to creep into the proceedings.

“Nice one, Uncle Harry,” Hugo says solemnly, clinking his tumbler of ginger beer against Lily’s, and the last of Harry’s misgivings evaporate. He’s going to enjoy this if it kills him.

And he does, mostly. By mid-afternoon he’s played host to Neville and Anthony, Blaise and the long-suffering Kerensa, and more Weasley relatives than he can count. The owners and assistants from the surrounding shops and cafes have turned out in force, and several Diagon Alley shoppers pop in curious heads and are dragged in by Harry’s support crew and plied with drinks and cakes until they buy something. Even Helga makes an appearance, leaving with a set of emerald green candlesticks and the admission that perhaps he wasn’t destined to be Minister for Magic after all.

“What is he doing here?” Ginny demands in a whisper, finally making her way over to Harry’s side and indicating Blaise, who is chatting to Neville next to a stack of glass balls in autumnal colours.

Harry sighs. He’s been avoiding her for much of the afternoon—ever since Blaise arrived, in fact. Having noticed her startled expression and significant glances in his direction, Harry has managed to keep a good distance between them and struck up a conversation with the nearest person any time she has managed to get near him. Now, though... now he’s alone, he’s in a corner, and he has to come up with something.

“Who?” he hedges.

Ginny sighs heavily. “Blaise sodding Zabini. Did you know Neville’s gone to work for him?”

“I did, actually. And he’s here because... because I’m doing some work for his company,” Harry lies, avoiding her eyes. “I met him through Draco Malfoy,” he adds, which he supposes is true, one way or another.

“Oh,” Ginny says shortly, and something in her tone makes Harry glance at her. Her eyes are fixed on the back of Blaise’s head and she’s gripping the stem of her glass rather hard.

Harry gives her a gentle nudge with his elbow, amused despite the huge potential for weirdness that the situation involves. “What’s the matter?”

Ginny huffs, visibly flustered and irritated. “Nothing. Just seems like he’s everywhere I look at the moment.”

“Oh? And is he behaving himself?” Harry asks, sipping his drink.

“What do you mean by that?” she demands.

“I was just wondering if he’s a good client,” Harry says innocently. “If he turns up to meetings on time, that sort of thing.”

“Harry,” she murmurs, caught somewhere between amusement and exasperation, “if you don’t start
behaving like a normal ex-husband in the next ten seconds, I shall have to stand on your foot.”

Harry considers this, idly listening to Hugo as he chats to Kerensa about crocodiles. “I suppose I’ve got room in my schedule for fire-calling you late at night and boasting about my conquests,” he muses.

Ginny laughs and stands on his foot, and he knows they’re going to be alright. There’s still some way to go, but she’s here, with sense of humour intact and inconvenient feelings for Blaise Zabini, and Harry can’t help feeling he’s doing a lot better than he really deserves.

***~*~***

As darkness falls, Harry finally dispatches the last of his helpers with effusive thanks and promises of returned favours. He gazes at the crumb-strewn floor and table stacked with dirty glasses, starts wearily toward the broom, and stops. Feeling rather rebellious, Harry flicks out the lights, locks the door, and leaves it for tomorrow, heading home with Misu for victory tea and bacon.

Against all his expectations, everything has turned out absolutely fine. He has sold oodles of small, colourful pieces, and it feels wonderful, even though he knows that much of that is due to every Weasley and well-wisher taking home at least one item. It’s a good start, and he feels cautiously confident as he makes his way to the workshop on Saturday morning. When he rounds the corner and there’s no line of impatient customers at his door, he doesn’t mind too much. It’s only eight thirty in the morning, after all.

When, by noon, he’s only had three customers, each of them sent by ‘that marvellous lady in the record shop’, Harry is beginning to worry. Still, he continues to work, taking his mind off the silence by throwing himself into some big, bright statement pieces. The smell of hot glass is soothing, and it seems to draw in a couple more customers who look at everything and promise to tell their friends, but leave with nothing.

At two o’clock, Harry flips the fish-shaped sign on his door to ‘closed’ and buys a large coffee from a sleepy-looking Darius, then heads to the florist and chooses the brightest bouquet he can find to be sent to Richenda. Feeling a little more hopeful, he returns to the workshop and settles in for the afternoon. It is, unfortunately, much the same as the morning, and by the time he closes up for the night, his worry is turning to quiet, paralysing panic.

His doors are open; his hours are pinned up for all to see, and yet... he’s not sure what to think. He knows these things take time—in fact, he can almost hear Draco in his head, sighing and saying, ‘Where is your patience, Potter? Did you really expect to build up a thriving business in a single day? Good grief.’ He’s certain he’s being completely ridiculous, but, when the second and third days are just as slow as the first, he can’t quite shake the feeling that, actually, the problem is that no one likes his art. He isn’t a real artist—he’s just playing at being one—and everyone knows it.

All this time, he’s been fearing a negative reception. It hasn’t occurred to him that there might not be any reception at all, and somehow, it’s infinitely worse.

Furious with himself, he sits on his spare workbench and picks the splinters out of his fingers. He knows he’s being melodramatic, too—definitely too melodramatic for a Monday night, and he couldn’t give less of a fuck.

“Someone is coming,” Misu announces from somewhere near Harry’s feet.
Harry frowns. He’s certain he turned the sign to ‘closed’, but he trusts Misu’s acute sensitivity to vibrations over his very average hearing. He glances at the door, and, sure enough, seconds later, there’s a sharp knock. Sliding to the floor, he steps over Misu and opens the door. He’s not all that startled to see Draco, but the two steaming paper cups in his hands are a pleasant surprise, and oh....fucking hell, Harry’s dispirited senses aren’t ready for how good Draco looks as he stands there on the doorstep, eyes warm and hair slightly tousled, shirt collar undone to reveal an inch or two of pale skin. For once, he’s not wearing a coat, but the soft grey scarf around his neck is effortlessly stylish in a way that Harry—even with his new and improved wardrobe—could never hope to emulate.

Not that he would want to. On him, the stiff, formal tailoring and monochrome palette would look ridiculous, as though he’d escaped from one of those ancient black and white films Mrs Figg used to love; on Draco, though...

“Good grief, what’s the matter with you?”

Dry mouthed, blood racing in his veins, Harry blinks. “Er... nothing. Are you coming in?”

“You’re a very poor actor,” Draco advises, following him into the workshop and setting down the cups. “You look miserable. And a little like you’ve had a blow to the head.”

“I’m fine,” Harry mutters, scrubbing at his face and silently cursing whichever power is insisting that he turn into a blithering idiot every time Draco dares to look particularly attractive... which is often.

Draco lifts a dubious eyebrow. “Oh, really?”

“Business is a bit slow,” Harry admits, deciding that, as far as admissions go, it’s the lesser of two evils.

Draco frowns and looks into his coffee cup. “Well, I haven’t seen an article in the Prophet yet—or your advertisement for that matter. What’s taking them so long?”

Probably the fact that I haven’t submitted an advertisement, Harry thinks, dejection slowly turning to panic as he stares at the top of Draco’s head and realises that he may just have been rather remiss in promoting himself. And that that may just be the understatement of the year so far. And that once Draco realises that he’s been hanging around and waiting for customers to come to him, he is in for it, and not in the exciting messy way that keeps him awake at night.

Harry coughs, pushing away those unhelpful thoughts with difficulty. “I don’t know,” he says, attempting to think on his feet. Looking around for a distraction. “Did I show you these new candelabras?” he asks, turning to retrieve a set of new pieces from the nearest shelf, hoping that somehow the bright colours will distract Draco from the advertisement issue.

The thing is... self-promotion has never come naturally to him. It probably never will. Fine, he’s clueless. Appalling. Oblivious, and all those things. But, he can’t help wondering as he gathers up an armful of cold glass and carries it over to the spare worktable, his friends and acquaintances aren’t totally without business savvy; couldn’t one of them have just reminded him that... that what? That if one is starting up a business, it’s useful to advertise?

“And then, Harry, they could teach you how to put your pants on the right way around,” he mumbles under his breath. Draco is right, and he hasn’t even said anything yet. Still, he’s not about to abandon his attempt at diversion just yet. He looks up. “Draco?”
Draco turns, and Harry sees at once what has kept him quiet for so long.

He holds up a long sheet of parchment for Harry to see. “What’s this?” he asks, soft tone signalling danger.

Harry is fucked. He knows he is. He sighs. “My price list?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Draco demands.

Defensive, Harry crosses his arms. “Who do you think you are, McGonagall?”

“Harry.”

“Yes, it’s my price list. What’s the matter with it?” Harry asks wearily, even though he has a very good idea what is the matter with it already.

Draco stares at him, pale eyes sharp with disbelief. “What’s the matter with it? Have you any idea how horrifically underpriced these pieces are? You might as well be giving them away! Harry... what on earth is wrong with you?”

Draco’s dismay is almost comical, but the accusation of incompetence catches Harry somewhere a little too raw, and he scowls. “Oh, you’re an expert, are you?” he snaps.

“No, of course not, but I do have a scrap of knowledge about art, which is clearly more than you have,” Draco says acidly, raking critical eyes over the offending list. “I’m not even going to start on these big pieces that have obviously taken days to make—what about... what about those candlesticks?” he demands, stabbing a finger at the collection in front of Harry. “Handmade... quality glass... inbuilt charm-work... five fucking Galleons?”

“Yeah, well,” Harry mutters, conflicted by the backhanded compliment and the absolute ire on Draco’s face as he throws down the price list and glowers at him. “Before you actually explode... I was going to charge ten, but it seemed a bit obscene somehow.”

“Ten?” Draco repeats, incredulous. He lifts a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them, there’s a careful kind of patience in place that Harry has seen before, and, oh, good, it’s the expression Draco wears when he’s dealing with his insane father. “Either you’re an artist or you’re an ex-Auror who’s fiddling about with glass, Harry. Which is it?”

Harry glares, hurt and baffled and ashamed all at once. “What on earth is your problem?”

“My problem is you,” Draco says roughly, and his feigned patience dissolves into nothing, leaving only a burning, unsteady intensity that crackles through Harry’s body and sets his skin tingling. “Why do you insist on selling yourself short?”

“I don’t need the money, Draco. I don’t want it.”

Draco sighs, exasperation wrinkling his forehead. He leans against the workbench next to Harry’s and wraps his fingers around the pitted edges. “I know you don’t,” he says, startling Harry.

“Do you?”
“Of course. I know you, though sometimes I don’t understand you at all. The point is, though, you can’t undersell yourself. This isn’t a charity—it’s a business. If you ask for five Galleons for an original piece of art, you’re saying that it’s only worth five Galleons. And it’s not. Apart from the actual artistry involved, I can’t imagine you’re doing more than breaking even at that price—am I right?”

Harry shrugs absently. “I don’t know, really; I just sort of came up with a price.”

Draco groans. “I think I may actually cry. Why, in the name of all that is sacred, didn’t you ask me for help? I do have a certain amount of experience in financial matters,” he says, and the faint note of offence in his voice tugs at Harry’s chest.

“It didn’t really occur to me,” he says, and it’s the truth. He’s been so busy playing with glass and trying to make the place look nice that everything else has rather escaped his notice. “Sorry. Is it too late?” he asks, attempting a hopeful smile.

“I suppose not,” Draco says, tapping his fingers in a thoughtful rhythm. “There’s going to have to be a complete overhaul of your pricing structure, though.”

“I suppose I can deal with that,” Harry says, already imagining long evenings spent poring over columns of figures with Draco at his side, sleeves neatly rolled up and stern face in place. “I’m still not sure how I feel about charging... hang on a minute... what did you say about charities?”

“I said that this is not one,” Draco says drily, one corner of his mouth flickering.

“Right, but we could give the extra money away—what we’ve got left after we’ve paid for materials and stuff—we could give it to a good cause. Starving squirrels or something, I don’t know... what do you think?” Harry chews on his lip expectantly as he waits for Draco’s response.

For long seconds he gazes at Harry in silence. “How positively Hufflepuff of you,” he says at last. Harry snorts. “Shut up.”

“In all seriousness, if that would make you feel better about setting decent prices, then I’m all for it.”

“Good.”

“Starving squirrels?” Draco asks, smirking.

“I’ll think of something,” Harry assures. “Could be a very serious problem for all you know.”

“I have nothing to say to that,” Draco declares, pulling himself up to sit on the edge of the worktable.

Harry abandons his candelabras and does the same, facing Draco across several feet of stone floor, legs dangling and disenchantment flushed away, leaning back on his hands and revelling in the sense of warm relief and longing that hums through his body.

“You haven’t placed an advertisement, have you?” Draco says suddenly, shattering the comfortable silence.

“Not as such, no,” Harry admits.
Draco stares at him, appalled. “How do you get dressed in the morning without help?”

Harry laughs, deciding not to share with Draco the eerily similar thought he had had just minutes earlier. “It’s a mystery. Do you want to help me draft one, O Knowledgeable Being?”

“Not right now,” Draco admits. “Sounds like a task for the Moody.”

Harry nods and picks up his forgotten coffee. It’s lukewarm but he drinks it anyway, trying not to dwell on the prospect of appearing voluntarily in the *Prophet*. In theory, an advertisement that he and Draco have full control over should be trouble-free, but he doesn’t trust that rag or any of the buggers who work on it. In fact, the only article of theirs he’s ever been pleased with was the one published in the glimpse. Lars Clearwater and his faithful photographer Karlo were the most un-*Prophet*-like employees Harry had ever met.

Of course. They probably still are.

Harry straightens up, heart giving a resounding thump as the idea puts itself together. He needs Lars, he trusts him, and he thinks he may just know where to find him.

“So, where’s Scorpius?” Harry asks, shoving his hands into his coat pockets and shivering against a sudden chill wind. It’s not a long walk to Carnaby Street but he’s already looking forward to getting out of the cold and into the fragrant warmth of the Flailing Lizard.

“With your son and little madam Weasley,” Draco says, amused. “They’re conducting some kind of camping experiment in your ex-back garden. Didn’t you know?”

Harry nods. “Now that you mention it, Al was asking a lot of questions about tents at the weekend.”

“They’re insane. It’s freezing,” Draco says, scowling as strands of hair whip across his forehead.

“Not much further now,” Harry promises, quickening his pace. He hopes that Lars will frequent the Lizard in this universe, too, and there’s no good reason why he wouldn’t. If he’s there, Harry just hopes that his underused networking skills will hold up, and if not, they will at least get a good meal out of the experience.

When they arrive, Harry is delighted to see that everything is exactly as he remembers it—and of course it is, but, however irrational, it’s still a relief to see the dangling paper lanterns in shades of jade and turquoise, the tanks of vivid, darting fish and the trays of delicious-smelling food being ferried back and forth by waiters and waitresses in lizard-emblazoned aprons. Being back here with Draco feels right somehow, and it’s so easy to continue their pointless bickering that they have chosen a table, ordered their drinks and started picking at a plate of appetisers before Harry realises that he and Draco have never had dinner together before.
At least, not in this life.

“So, what are we doing here, exactly?” Draco asks, examining a tiny fish cake between his chopsticks.

“Having dinner,” Harry says lightly, taking advantage of his inattention to glance around for any sign of Lars. Nothing yet, but it’s still early.

Apparently finding no fault with the fishcake, Draco puts it in his mouth and wipes his fingers on a napkin. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

Harry shrugs. “I can live with that.”

Draco makes a small sound of frustration and gazes over Harry’s shoulder, eyes sweeping the other tables. He frowns. “Is this place Muggle or wizarding?”

“A bit of both, actually,” Harry says. “The owner is a witch, married to a Muggle. They sort of cater for everyone, in theory.”

“How on earth do you know that?” Draco asks, eyes flitting to Harry’s.

“I know things,” Harry says mysteriously, smile growing as he stretches out to spear a little crunchy parcel on his fork. “Why do you ask?”

“If you must know, I assumed it was all non-magic, and then I saw a couple of people from my folders of vice and iniquity.”

“Oh? Where?” Harry whispers, intrigued. He leans forward across the table and Draco leans in, too.

“Table between the bar and the little round fish tank,” Draco murmurs, pointing discreetly with his chopsticks. Harry drops his napkin and darts a glance at the table as he leans down to retrieve it. “Petty little scoundrels from the Professional Quidditch Association.”

Harry grins. “Not Quidditch, too!”

Draco snorts. “You wouldn’t be a bit surprised at how unscrupulous the whole thing actually is.”

“You know, I have this feeling you’d be really disappointed if there wasn’t any corruption in the world for you to poke at,” Harry says, grin widening at the sight of Draco’s expression of faux-offence. After a second or two, though, it changes into a mischievous smile.

“Well, it certainly makes life interesting,” he admits, eyes sparkling.

Harry’s stomach flips and he bites his tongue a little too hard. “So, am I to take it that you’re thinking about what I said about investigation?”

“I don’t know… am I to take it that you’re thinking about what I said about your dreadful business sense?” Draco shoots back, picking up his glass and smirking.

“I suppose I should have expected that.”
“You absolutely should.”

Harry pulls an extremely mature face at Draco and steals the last satay stick. Draco folds his napkin calmly and kicks Harry in the ankle with his stupid pointy boot.

When the main course arrives, Harry digs in, piling noodles, vegetables, meat and sauce onto his plate and inhaling the mingled spicy aromas with satisfaction. He’s so hungry that he doesn’t notice Draco’s plate for several minutes, but when he does, he realises that this isn’t only the first time he’s had dinner with Draco—it’s the first time he’s ever seen Draco eat anything apart from cakes or biscuits, and he seems to have a rather peculiar way of doing it.

In stark contrast to the happy jumble on Harry’s plate, Draco’s dinner is as precise as he is—each item, from rice to fish to green curry sauce, is kept completely separate in neat little puddles. More intriguingly still, he realises that Draco has abandoned his chopsticks in order to load his fork with a small amount of each item, eyes flitting around his plate as though to check that everything is in order before he can eat.

The combination of flavours must be much the same, Harry thinks, glancing down at his own plate, so, not for the first time, the only explanation is balance.

Harry smiles, feeling an odd sort of affection for the word that would have seemed nonsensical before the glimpse... before Draco. But not now.

“Have you always eaten like that?” he asks, hoping his boldness will be appreciated.

Draco pauses in spearing a tiny sliver of chicken on his fork. “Like what?” he asks quietly.

Harry hesitates. “Like you’re trying to make every single mouthful the same,” he says, pressing on. He’s already half opened the can of worms anyway.

“Yes.” Draco finishes compiling his mouthful and inspects it carefully. “Since I was a child,” he adds and slides the fork into his mouth.

Harry watches him for a moment before deciding that looking at Draco’s mouth is far from conducive to keeping logic in his brain and gazing down at his food instead. Pensive, he twirls noodles around his fork and realises that he’s not surprised by what he’s learned. He can all too easily imagine the tiny Draco rattling around in the huge manor, picking anxiously at his food in that imposing dining room while his parents argued and snapped and held whispered conversations about things he didn’t understand. Harry’s no expert, he knows that, but it’s far too easy to see where Draco’s pathological need for control comes from.

“Why?” he asks anyway, just to say something.


Harry laughs. “What?”

“A gannet. It’s a bird that eats a lot of food very quickly,” Draco advises, starting up another round of food-gathering.

“Yes, thank you,” Harry says. “I eat quickly because I’m a very busy person... at least, I used to be. Apparently, old habits die hard,” he sighs, looking at his half-empty plate and resolving to slow
down. “I thought maybe it was about balance,” he tries, meeting Draco’s eyes.

There is a long pause, during which Harry chews on a crunchy piece of carrot and listens to the chatter of the other diners and the soft hum emanating from the fish tanks. At last, Draco lets out a long breath and sets down his fork.

“Everything is about balance, Harry.”

Harry smiles. “Life is pretty unbalanced... how do you deal with that?”

“By creating it around myself. The fact that the world is essentially chaotic is what makes finding balance so important. We can only really control the little bit of it that exists directly around us, and not always that.” Draco picks up his wine and sips it slowly, regarding Harry over the rim of the glass.

“Don’t people notice the things you do... to find balance?” Harry whispers, heart racing.

“Not usually,” Draco says slowly, and his eyes pin Harry to his chair.

He swallows hard. “Sorry,” he says before he can stop himself, and he desperately wants the word back; he doesn’t want to say sorry, he wants to tell Draco that it’s okay, that he doesn’t have to suppress his rituals and superstitions and coping mechanisms, that, in another life, one where he didn’t have to wear his Malfoy straitjacket any more, everything was different. He wants to tell Draco that his glimpse self was picky at times, but nothing like this; Glimpse Draco ate out with his friends at least once a week; he had as many outlets for his neuroses as he needed; he was unashamed of his quirks; he loved his job. He loved Harry.

“You shouldn’t apologise for noticing things,” Draco says.

“Probably not, seeing as I manage it so rarely,” Harry agrees, attempting to lighten the atmosphere with a weak joke, but the cautious warmth in Draco’s eyes is too much and he is left feeling heavy and aching, one step away from madness.

Draco’s mouth twists into a rueful half-smile. “There are more interesting things to notice.”

“I don’t think that’s your decision to make,” Harry says, quietly horrified by the roughness of his voice. He suspects that what he needs to do to regain control is to look away from Draco, and it’s obvious to him that that isn’t going to happen any time soon.

“Oh? How do you arrive at that conclusion?” Draco presses.

“Because, Mr Control Issues, it’s up to me whether or not I find you interesting,” Harry throws out, face heating and arms crossing in front of him instinctively.

Draco blinks. He exhales slowly, features tight with charming uncertainty, and rakes a hand through his hair. He’s affected, thrown off balance, and even when, seconds later, he recovers his poise, picking up his fork and resuming his meal, Harry feels like performing an unsteady little victory dance in his chair. Draco is rattled, and it feels so ridiculously good.

Draco is silent for several minutes as he neatly clears his plate, but Harry doesn’t care. He just picks at his food, barely tasting it now, and looks. Draco’s pale skin is lightly flushed, his hands are noticeably less graceful as he wields fork and wine glass and napkin, and his hair, relaxed by the
wind and the fragrant steam and the nervous attentions of his fingers, flops against his forehead as he eats, softening his sharp features instantly and sending Harry’s heart into a rapid, approving rhythm as he remembers that hair, damp and heavy with sweat, brushing his face, neck, chest, thighs....

Harry groans inwardly and bites the inside of his mouth hard to stop the uncontrolled sound from escaping and alerting Draco to the direction of his thoughts. He doesn’t really know why he’s bothering, though; Draco would have to be painfully oblivious to have missed the fact that Harry is completely lost for him. He’s trapped and exposed and yet he’d do pretty much anything for this mixed up, irascible oddball.

“You’ve got a bit of ginger on your face,” Draco points out.

Of course he has. Harry sighs and peels it off, deliberately not looking at Draco’s smirk.

By the time the fortune cookies arrive, the conversation at the table has returned to its usual level. Harry is massively relieved to see the return of the pointless teasing, barbed humour, and good-natured bickering, and he throws himself into it, pushing away his discomfort and longing and attempting to lock them away in some remote part of his mind.

“Risk is a lot like a crocodile,” Draco reads, frowning. “Dangerous but ultimately rewarding.”

“That’s actually one of the more sensible fortunes I’ve heard here,” Harry tells him.

“What part of a crocodile is rewarding?” Draco demands, staring at the little piece of paper and turning it over and over as though it might somehow give away its secrets.

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “You should ask my nephew, he seems to have an affinity with them.”

He leans back in his chair to stretch and, there at the bar, seated on a tall stool and chattering away to one of the waiters, is the man he has been waiting for. Harry grins.

“Ready to go?” Draco asks, abandoning his fortune with a sigh.

“Hang on a minute—I just need to have a word with someone,” Harry says, getting to his feet. He points at the broken halves of Draco’s fortune cookie. “You need to eat at least some of that, or it won’t work.”

“What won’t work?”

“The fortune cookie magic,” Harry says, laughing as he turns away. “Obviously.”

As he approaches the bar, he can hear the dry sound of Lars’ laughter, and his bright, crisp tones are the same as ever.

“David, I haven’t the foggiest idea what I’m in the mood for—I’d rather like it if you chose for me.”

“At least give me a clue,” David the waiter says, with the tone of a person who knows the springy little reporter very well, and Harry finds himself wondering if Lars eats here every night now he’s not reviewing restaurants for a living.

“Well... it’s chilly out, isn’t it? How about something nice and spicy?” Lars suggests, consulting his pocket watch for no good reason that Harry can see.
“Right you are,” David says, nodding politely to Harry as he catches sight of him and then disappearing into the kitchens.

Harry seizes his moment. “Excuse me... Mr Clearwater?”

“Yes?” He turns on his stool, tanned, lined face open and friendly. When he recognises Harry, though, a smile of genuine delight blazes into life. “Goodness me, it’s Harry Potter!”

“Er, yes. Mr Clearwater, I’m a huge fan,” Harry says, reaching out to shake his hand.

“Are you? Are you really? How wonderful,” Lars enthuses, jumping lightly down from his stool and clasping Harry’s hand firmly before releasing him. “This is a terribly good restaurant, you know,” he advises, dropping his voice as if he’s giving away state secrets.

“I know,” Harry says. “My friend and I have just finished eating—” Lars turns to look at Draco, who is watching them with an odd smile on his face; he affects a little wave and Lars waves back with enthusiasm before turning back to Harry. “I saw you and just had to come over and have a word.”

“Marvellous! And how does it go these days, Mr Potter?” he asks, beaming up at Harry. “I was awfully surprised to hear the news that you’d left the Auror Department, I must admit,” he continues without waiting for a response. “But, of course, one must do what one must do! There was quite the furore when I moved on from Food and Drink, you know, so...”

“Actually, I’m really pleased you’ve gone over to Arts and Culture, even if it’s mostly for my own selfish reasons,” Harry admits, unable to control his smile when Lars’ eyes widen almost comically behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Do tell, Mr Potter.”

Harry takes a deep breath, thinking of Draco and that if he were standing at the bar right now, he’d be telling Harry to get the fuck on with fucking promoting himself. “Well... I’ve just opened a little shop selling glassware, and I’d be really honoured if you’d come and see me some time. I’m not usually very comfortable with interviews, but I trust you to... well, not embarrass me, really.”

“Goodness me,” Lars breathes, fishing about in his jacket pockets, seemingly at random. “I did hear a rumour, but nothing official... Mr Potter, it was on my to-do list, I assure you!”

Harry smiles. “Don’t worry... let’s just say that I haven’t been doing a very good job of advertising myself so far. Would you like to do it? It would really help me a lot.”

“Oh, there was never any question of not doing it!” Lars cries. “Karlo will be ever so excited,” he confides, rifling once more through his pockets and checking his watch again before coming up with a matching notepad and pencil. “When is good for you? I shall clear my schedule if need be!”

The idea of Karlo being excited about anything is enough to make Harry grin as he shakes his head and tells Lars that clearing his schedule definitely won’t be necessary. Between them, they work out a mutually convenient time for their meeting and part as old friends. Draco catches up with Harry at the door, winding his scarf around his neck and eyeing the cold, sparkling night with apprehension.

“You know the Arts and Culture man?” he asks in a whisper.
“I do now,” Harry says, enjoying his surprise. “I thought you might be proud of me—I was networking.”

“You don’t know how strange it is to hear you say that word,” Draco says, following him out into the street.

“Thanks, that’s so sweet,” Harry says, attempting a scowl, but Draco’s little smile sets him adrift, and it’s suddenly difficult to remember what he was trying to be annoyed about.

The streets are quiet as they walk side by side, talking idly and lapsing into comfortable, sated, full-of-food-and-just-a-couple-of-drinks silences. Once or twice Harry wonders just where they are walking to—he and Draco need to head in almost completely opposite directions to their respective homes, and all they seem to be doing is retracing their earlier journey from Harry’s workshop. He can’t say he cares, though, not if Draco’s fingers keep brushing against his as they walk, and not if he keeps laughing like that, rough and warm and glittering all over Harry’s skin.

Suddenly, there’s a rabble of young male voices and the thunder of running feet from somewhere behind them; Harry turns just in time to see a blur of brightly coloured sportswear and hairstyles that James would approve of, and to catch the smell of testosterone and cheap deodorant that wafts over him as several teenage boys swarm along the street.

“Oh, Callum, you dick! Give that back!” one of them yells.

“You’ll have to catch me first, dude!” laughs the boy called Callum, who streaks between Harry and Draco, clutching whatever it is that is causing the problem.

“Oh, god, my mum’s going to kill me,” groans the first as he picks up the pace.

“Not if we kill Callum first,” pants another, and he belts past Draco without even seeming to notice him, catching his shoulder at speed and sending him flying into Harry and Harry flying into a parked van with a hard whomp that knocks the breath from both of them. “Fuck, sorry, mate!” comes the yell from halfway down the street, and then there’s a scuffling of feet as the lad takes off in pursuit of Callum once more.

Harry groans, struggling for breath, and tries to move, but it’s not happening. One, because his back has been mashed against the side of an apparently very solid vehicle, and two, because most of Draco’s weight is pinning him there.

“Are you alright?” he asks, tightening his fingers around Draco’s shoulders and realising with a warm jolt that he had automatically thrown up his hands to steady Draco rather than protect himself.

Draco pushes himself a little more upright, hands pressed against the van, one at either side of Harry’s head. His whole body is no longer pressed against Harry’s, which is simultaneously a relief and a disappointment; he misses the contact, but at least he can breathe now.

“Well. That was just what I needed after a huge meal,” Draco sighs.

“You’re not going to throw up on me, are you?” Harry asks anxiously.

“No,” Draco says, pulling his hands away from the side of the van and straightening up, letting them rest on Harry’s upper arms as he scans Harry’s face. “Did you hurt yourself?”
“I’m fine,” Harry manages. “I imagine my back’s going to protest in the morning, but nothing serious. I wonder if I made a dent in the van,” he wonders aloud, distracting himself from the intensity of Draco’s examination.

“That is not really my concern,” Draco says, leaning closer to inspect a non-existent bump on the side of Harry’s head. Fuck, he smells good. Harry closes his eyes and bites down on a whimper. “Open your eyes, I want to see if you have a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” Harry insists, but obeys anyway. Immediately, he wishes he hadn’t, because Draco’s fingers are in his hair and Draco’s narrowed eyes are all over him, searching, and Draco’s breath, sweet with wine and spices and fortune cookie pieces, drifts warm-soft-shivery across his lips and cheeks, and it’s all too much.

“Are you sure?” Draco whispers, and Harry’s body pulls so tight with longing that he thinks it might shatter at any moment.

“I assure you I’ve had worse,” he insists, dry-mouthed.

“Harry,” Draco begins, and then falls silent, careful fingers stilling, eyes bright in the darkness.

And it’s insane. It’s insanely obvious now that they are attracted to each other, that Draco wants him, too. It’s all there in his eyes, in the way he can barely breathe, in the way that the world seems to fall away, and if Harry could move, he thinks he’d like to find that clumsy teenager and shake his hand.

“Yeah?” he manages at last, fingers slipping on the soft fabric of Draco’s scarf, longing to touch his skin. Just inches apart, all he has to do is lean that little bit closer...

“If you’re alright, I’d better go,” Draco says, stiffening up as he steps back onto the pavement and rearranges his scarf.

Dazed, Harry shakes himself and prises his body from the side of the van. “What?”

“I should go,” Draco repeats, and there’s no coldness in his voice—in fact, he’s almost smiling—but it’s as though the moment they just shared—the almost-moment—had been in Harry’s head. It’s just business as usual, and Harry doesn’t know whether he wants to hex him or fall at his feet or throw him up against the sodding transit van until he gets the idea.

“And any particular reason why you’re rushing off?”

“It’s getting late... I have files to study, don’t I?” Draco says lightly. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right,” Harry sighs, deciding that actually, what he wants to do right now is kick him. Hard.

Before he has the chance to add anything, though, Draco has Disapparated.

**~*~**

Harry doesn’t get much sleep that night.

As he lies awake and stares at his ceiling, listening to the thumps and mutters from Misu’s tank, he tries to imagine what the hell he’s going to do next. Pretending that everything’s fine and that nothing has changed might work for Draco, but Harry’s feelings only seem to intensify with the time they
spend together, and he doubts it will be long before it becomes impossible to concentrate on anything else. Any sensible person would tell him how unhealthy this whole thing is, and they’d be right, but then again, he doesn’t imagine many sensible people have been thrown around and put through the wringer in quite the way that he has this year.

Yes, he’s learned lessons—a whole mess of them, in fact, but how do the Borises of this world expect their victims to experience being ridiculously, completely in love and then hold it all in when they’re dropped back into a reality where those feelings are inconvenient, inappropriate, and, quite possibly, unwanted? Perhaps, he thinks, punching his pillow irritably and flopping onto his stomach, this whole thing is just a test of his patience. It’d be nice to have someone to ask. A support group, maybe.

“Hi, I’m Harry and I’m a glimpse survivor,” he mumbles into his pillow and almost cracks a smile, thinking of a circle of plastic chairs, a room full of people as confused as him, and tea and biscuits at the end.

Something’s got to give, he thinks, falling into a restless sleep as the sun begins to rise.

It’s no surprise to Harry when, the next day, Draco meets him at the Moody at the usual time, drinks his usual cup of tea, plays with the condiments in his usual fashion, and generally behaves like he always bloody does. Harry goes along with it—because what else is there to do?—all the while feeling as though something heavy and befuddling is hanging over him, making everything, every little smile and interaction, that bit more difficult.

He can’t seem to rid himself of the niggling idea that Draco is playing with him; even though the behaviour seems more suited to the spiteful schoolboy and not the man he knows, it sticks in his head and makes him want to just stand up and walk out of there. But he doesn’t; he’s weighed down, paralysed, and furious with himself.

Fortunately, Blaise is a fountain of wisdom on the subject. He’s become such a frequent visitor since the workshop opened to the public that Harry is considering buying a chair for him to sit in—he just seems far too large and majestic to perch on a workbench like everyone else, though the idea doesn’t seem to faze him one bit.

“Harry, he is not playing hard to get,” he says on the following Friday morning as he drinks soup from a cup and watches Harry work.

Harry squints through the smoke and turns his copper pipe slowly. “And how do you know that?” he asks without looking at Blaise.

“Because I know him. Because he’s a thirty-seven-year-old man.” Blaise sighs. “He’s just... actually hard to get.”

Harry snorts. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“He finds it very difficult to trust people. You must understand that,” Blaise says gently.

“Yeah.” Harry blows into his pipe as he thinks, watching the glass swell and change. “I thought he trusted me,” he says at last.

“Believe me, if he lets you into his life at all, that’s a huge leap of trust for Draco,” Blaise says. He fishes what looks like half a bay leaf out of his soup and sets it down with a grimace. “What you
have to remember is that this is all new for him—he hasn’t had a glimpse to show him what his future should have been.”

“Could have been,” Harry corrects quietly. “His glimpse would probably have been something completely different.”

“Someone really is in the doldrums today,” Blaise murmurs, apparently more to Misu than to Harry. She is coiled in his massive lap, basking in his warmth and the smell of food, and far too comfortable to move, even when addressed.

“My life is very strange at the moment,” Harry advises, turning the little green ball out onto the cooling rack and casting a spell to clean the end of the copper pipe.

“I know. Forgive me, but it’s better than a play or a good book... in fact, it’s even better than hearing about Kerensa’s romantic entanglements,” Blaise confesses, mouth twisted with guilt but dark eyes gleaming.

Harry laughs and shakes his head. “Cheers.”

“Have you ever tried... actually telling him how you feel?” Blaise says suddenly.

“Erm... well, not in so many words, no,” Harry admits, busying himself in flicking through the little book Draco has given him for his accounts.

“Maybe that would be a start, old bean.”

“You’re no expert, are you?” Harry snaps, even though he knows the words are harsh and, more importantly, he knows that Blaise is right.

“I know,” Blaise sighs. “It’s like the blind leading the blind. Shall I get Kerensa? She always has a lot of boyfriends—maybe she’ll know what to do.”

Harry’s mouth twitches into a reluctant smile. “Let’s see if we can manage without her.”

**~*~**

Despite Blaise’s best efforts, things remain much the same over the next week or so, and Harry opts to throw himself into anything that comes along, by way of distraction.

On a sunny Saturday morning, he welcomes Lars and Karlo into his workshop for the second time. Both men are just as he remembers them, working together with a warm, practised familiarity built up over years of collaboration. The whole thing makes him miss Maura terribly, but this time he has a team of helpers in the shape of Lily, Al, Rose, and Misu, who generally brighten up the place and contribute far more interesting answers to Lars’ questions than Harry could ever think of.

Even James, who has apparently suffered some kind of ‘hair disaster’ pops in, hat pulled right down to his eyes, and chats to the reporter for a few minutes, on the condition that no one takes his picture. Harry is extremely curious about the nature of this catastrophe, but James refuses to remove his hat, even after Lars and Karlo are safely out of the door.

Fortunately, he doesn’t have to wait too long. The following afternoon, everyone heads to the Burrow for Molly’s traditional Sunday lunch, Al and James with broomsticks slung over their
shoulders because Charlie is home for the weekend, and Uncle Charlie means Quidditch. Harry is
carrying his broomstick, too, already relishing the prospect of getting into the air and forgetting
everything else.

“Uncle Charlie was the best Seeker ever,” Al declares, bouncing along the path and narrowly
missing kneecapping everyone with his broomstick.

“Obviously,” James says, still pulling at the edges of his hat.

Harry sighs and smiles at Lily, who has grabbed his hand and squeezed it. He knows that Charlie is
extremely cool and that he can’t hope to compare, but there is a little part of him that wants to remind
Al and James that he was once a pretty nifty Seeker, too.

When they reach the field behind the Burrow, they find Charlie, Serghei, Rose, and Arthur, who is
balancing on a broomstick at treetop height and putting up charms to hide the imminent game.

“Look at Grandad!” Lily cries, shading her eyes from the sun and waving enthusiastically up at
Arthur. She bends to pick up her cat. “Look, Frank!”

“Very impressive,” Harry agrees and waves along with her, secretly wondering if a man of Arthur’s
age should balancing so precariously on a broomstick at thirty-something feet in the air

“Hello, Lily!” Arthur shouts, wrapping one hand around the broom handle to steady himself. “Harry,
can you give me a hand?”

Harry doesn’t need to be asked twice. He kicks off into the air and leaves Charlie, Serghei and the
kids to their animated discussion about the best brand of racing broom, speeding toward the trees and
trying not to look concerned as he pulls up beside Arthur.

“What can I do?”

“Oh, nothing much, really,” Arthur says, suddenly looking sheepish. “I just wanted to check that you
were alright. Ginny mentioned that... well, that you weren’t really yourself.”

Harry sighs, hair whipping across his forehead as he glances over at the Burrow, where Ginny is, no
doubt, chatting away to her mother and telling her that he isn’t eating properly or that he leaves his
washing up ’til the morning after.

“Did she now?” he mutters, turning back to Arthur. “I’m fine.”

Arthur tucks his wand into his cloak and rubs his face with a gloved hand. “Harry... I hope you don’t
think I’m interfering, but I just wondered if something had gone awry with... you know... the young
man,” he says, lowering his voice to such a level that Harry can barely hear him above the wind.

“No, no... look, it’s fine,” he assures, rather touched by Arthur’s concern and unorthodox attempt at
discretion. “I’m just a bit tired.” He attempts a smile but has a feeling that it comes out as more of a
hysterical grimace.

Unsurprisingly, Arthur doesn’t look convinced. “None of us want you to get hurt, Harry.”

“I know,” Harry says softly. I’m not hurt; I’m just mixed up and afraid that I might just be
completely in love with someone who doesn’t want me... in this universe. It’s not at all confusing.
“There’s been so much change recently—I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about you.”

Harry finds a smile—a real one this time. “I’m sorry. It hasn’t escaped my notice that I’ve been a bit difficult... a lot difficult.”

“Don’t apologise,” Arthur says, wobbling slightly on his broom as a particularly savage gust of wind rips around them. “It’s our job.”

“To worry?”

Arthur grins. “I know you feel the same about yours,” he says gently, and Harry smiles, looking over at the spot where he left Lily, Al, and James, but there’s no one there.

“Come on, Dad!” Al cries, swooping past them and laughing. “Are you playing, Grandad?”

Arthur doesn’t answer; he simply flies off after Al and leaves Harry to put up the rest of the protective charms. By the time he’s finished, the game has started around him and he watches for a minute or two, dragging cold air deep into his lungs, then shoots off to join them.

It comes as no surprise to find that Charlie is still a very good player, and Serghei proves to be a useful Keeper despite protesting that he has never played before.

“I think you are not wanting to put this ball past me,” he says to James, grinning, and Al laughs himself hoarse at his brother’s expense.

“We’ll see about that,” James calls, weaving from side to side with impressive speed, feinting this way and that with their makeshift Quaffle under his arm, looking rather slick until the wind that has been whisking at his clothes turns its attention to his hat; it is snatched away in an instant, and no amount of clawing at his hair can conceal the disaster beneath.

“What happened?” Harry asks, trying to keep at least some of the amusement out of his voice.

“Dad. Just don’t ask,” James snaps. He glares around at his relatives, none of whom are bothering to temper their laughter at all, and tightens his hold on the Quaffle.

Harry leans back on his broom, lifting one hand to perform a zipping motion across his lips, and watches as James pelts toward the goal and scores viciously, easily getting past Serghei now, possibly because he is doubled up with laughter.

Harry can’t say he blames him. He doesn’t know what has happened to James’ hair (though he’s pretty sure he will be able to persuade the story out of Al later) but what he can see is rather illustrative. The left side of James’ usually-floppy mop has been sheared close to his head, somewhat unevenly, at that, and the rest is streaked with an odd mixture of orange and faded turquoise. He looks like something from a bad dream, and Harry almost—almost—feels sorry for him.

By the time everyone has had their fill of mocking James, Rose has persuaded Lily onto a broom, too, and she secures Frank’s long silvery lead around a tree before joining them in the air.

“Good girl, Lil!” he calls, watching her as she flies in slow circles, building up confidence before she jumps into the game. “Pick up the tail a little bit—that’s it!”
One by one, Ron, George, and Ginny sneak out of the back door with their brooms and swoop into the air, calling out greetings and choosing teams until the sky is full of diving, spiralling red-haired blurs. As delicious savoury smells begin to pour out of the house, Hermione and Hugo wander out, too, clutching steaming cups and sitting at the base of a tree to watch. Hermione unties Frank and he curls on her knee, flicking his tail and wondering, Harry imagines, what on earth his human is doing whizzing around up there on a flying stick.

“Bugger,” Al mutters as Harry swings around on his broom and blocks him easily.

“Language,” Harry replies automatically, smirking at his son.

He has a feeling he’s going to miss them even more than usual when they go back to school this time, and, sure enough, when he and Molly drop them off three days later, he feels oddly bereft. With Lily already well into her summer term, the workshop is once again quiet... or, at least, it is child-free. Quietness is a pretty difficult state to achieve with frequent visits from Blaise, Kari, and Draco, and the ever-present hiss of Misu’s helpful commentary, but Harry doesn’t mind. In fact, he likes it; he’s always found total silence a little too oppressive.

Now all he needs is for business to pick up, and with Lars’ article imminent, Harry is feeling cautiously optimistic. When it appears on a Saturday morning, Harry and Lily dissect it carefully over breakfast, giggling over the photographs of Al and Rose and pointing out passages of interest with sticky marmalade fingers.

“Look, Misu, it’s you,” Lily says, picking up the Arts and Culture section so that Misu, who is dangling over her shoulder, can see the picture of herself wrapped around photo-Harry’s wrist as he shakes his head and laughs at some forgotten joke.

“You and I have our picture in the newspaper,” Harry translates, batting Misu away from his teacup.

“What for?” Misu asks brightly.

*Good question,* Harry thinks, but he opts for the sensible, grown-up answer. “*So that everyone sees us and comes to buy lots and lots of my glass things. In theory.*”

Draco is waiting for them when they arrive at the workshop, sitting cross-legged atop the wall and chewing on a toasted bagel with the Saturday *Prophet* in his lap.

“Hi, Mr Malfoy,” Lily says easily, and for a split second Harry finds himself wishing he was so used to Draco. In reality, though, he doubts he ever will be.

“Good morning, Lily,” Draco says. His eyes flick over to the Dragondale and then to Harry. “Have you been in there recently? It’s like a little shrine to you. Deeply disturbing.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Harry scolds, secretly hoping that Kari’s father has not, in fact, decided to add to his Harry Potter display. He doesn’t suppose there’s much he can do about it if he has. “What do you think of the article?”

“Reasonable,” he shrugs, unfolding himself from the wall. “The photography is rather nice.”

“That’s what I said!” Lily says delightedly. “I think people are going to see those pictures and run straight over here to buy something.”
“Aren’t you a little optimist?” Draco murmurs, eyes bright with amusement as he joins Harry and Lily at the door, newspaper tucked under his arm and expression expectant. When the door is unlocked, he follows them into the workshop as though it’s the most natural thing in the world, and Harry is, as ever, caught between flickering pleasure and frustration so deep-seated that it threatens to smash his self control and force him to yell at Draco and ask him exactly what the fuck is wrong with him.

“I like your waistcoat,” Lily says, drawing Harry’s attention to the quite miraculous dark green pinstripe running along the usual black fabric. Colour, indeed. He lifts an eyebrow.

“Thank you,” Draco says gravely. He glances at Harry. “So, you decided not to go for starving squirrels in the end, then?”

Harry snorts. “You’d be surprised to know how difficult it is to find a decent squirrel charity. I thought I’d have a go at helping people instead,” he says, smiling at Draco’s indulgent eye-roll. He’ll never know the significance of the helping-the-homeless charity Harry has chosen to receive the lion’s share of his profits, and that’s okay. Harry is content to know that the money will help to fill many, many canvas bags with care packages to be distributed by kind people like Julia with the slug hat and first-time Seela. It will help to warm up skinny young girls in doorways with hungry cats called Charlie.

It will be a start.

“If all else fails, that will draw them in,” Draco says.

Harry gazes at the door and sighs. “Do you think?”

“A watched door never... boils,” Draco says, mouth twitching at one corner. “You should put on some of your terrible music and do something else.”

Lily giggles and dives for the record player. “Come on, Dad, we can make some more of those funny little balls with the lights in them,” she says, and her tone brooks no argument.

“Has everyone quite finished bossing me about?” Harry grumbles, but he goes along with Draco’s and Lily’s suggestions, and before long, his first customer pushes open the door. He is followed by another, and another, and a little group of well-to-do ladies with shopping bags and sparkly jewellery, and though it’s more of a trickle than a flood, it’s enough to lift Harry’s spirits, and by the afternoon, he is beginning to enjoy himself.

Many of the new customers want to chat about the article and a few of them even have questions about Harry’s career change, but every single one is polite, warm, and genuinely interested in his glass, and, more than that, almost everyone makes a purchase. Harry isn’t only selling little bits and pieces any more, either; one of the wealthy ladies spends what he still thinks of as a sickness amount of money on a huge, multicoloured bowl, all the while quizzing Harry on his charity connections and insisting on leaving a card detailing the activities of her ladies’ fundraising club, which Draco picks up and examines with amused interest as soon as she and her friends have departed.

“You look ever so much more handsome in real life, dear,” says a blue-haired old lady, beaming up at Harry as he wraps a slender vase for her and Lily fishes about for her change.

“Er, thanks,” Harry says, returning her smile despite feeling as though there’s an insult buried in
there somewhere.

“The light in here is very poor,” Draco advises, grinning like a shark.

“And you look much better when you smile, young man,” says the old lady, fixing Draco with sharp little eyes.

This time it’s Draco’s turn to be startled, and it feels pretty damn good.

With the help and moral support of Draco and Lily, the rest of the day is steady, interesting, and to Harry’s massive relief, not at all quiet. Thanks to Lars’ article, Karlo’s photographs, and Draco’s financial advice, business continues to pick up, and as April arrives, warm and showery, the Purple Fish workshop is humming along rather nicely. The unexpected side effect of this success is that Harry doesn’t have nearly as much time to torture himself by mulling over what may or may not be going on inside Draco’s head.

For the most part.

As he sits at their now regular table at the Flailing Lizard, picking at rice crackers and idly sketching twisty vases on his napkin, he has plenty of time to wonder, not least because Draco should have been here twenty minutes ago. Heaving an irritable sigh, he glances once more at the door as two young women pelt inside, laughing and folding up their umbrellas.

An owl would have been nice, he thinks mutinously as twenty minutes slide into thirty and he’s forced to order a second drink. It isn’t the sitting alone that he minds; the Lizard is a warm, fantastic place to while away an hour or two. He’s hungry and tired, and the sooner Draco arrives, the sooner he can eat and grouse and start to feel better. Seeing Draco will no doubt improve his mood, too, but it’s best not to think too hard about that.

When Harry checks his watch and realises that he has been waiting for almost an hour, a cold ripple of anxiety begins to creep under his skin. Draco is usually pretty punctual, and this is straying beyond a fashionable level of lateness. It’s possible that Lucius has thrown some kind of fit, or that Narcissa has been taken ill, or even that Draco has simply forgotten that they arranged to meet, but the longer Harry sits there, the more another, more sinister idea slides into focus behind his eyes.

He tries to push it away, but it’s no good. He’s rising from the table, pushing a jumble of coins into the waiter’s hands and hurrying out into the rain. He glances around hastily for Muggle witnesses, but the downpour has swept the streets clean of people and he Disapparates without a second thought.

At the Manor gates, the rain is lashing down with such force that he almost drops his wand twice before successfully sending his glowing Patronus cantering up the driveway, damp, cold fingers clenched into fists as he waits. Misu, who has been sleeping peacefully in his shirt pocket, twists and flicks her tongue, likely sensing his tension.

“It’s alright,” he lies, pressing a comforting palm to his chest until she drifts back into sleep. It’s not, of course; he can’t remember the last time he was quite this not alright.

“Come on,” he whispers, breathing fast and shallow. “Come on, Draco.”

The figure that appears a minute or two later, sheltering beneath a hooded cloak and an Umbrella
Charm, is tall and blonde but unmistakeably feminine. Harry bites his lip hard.

“Is that you, Mr Potter? Harry?” Narcissa calls, lifting her lit wand to illuminate his face.

“Yes, Mrs Malfoy, it’s me. May I come in?”

“Of course,” she says, sounding puzzled. With a complicated flick of her wand, she opens the gates and stands back to let him pass. “Bilby has a cold,” she explains as Harry ducks under her dry little canopy and squeezes the water from his dripping fringe. “I couldn’t bring myself to send him out when it’s so wet.”

Harry barely hears her above the drumming of the rain and the pounding of panic inside his head.

“Mrs Malfoy—where’s Draco?” he asks, urgency roughening his manners.

She stops and turns to him, eyebrows knitted. “I have no idea. I assumed he was with you until a moment ago.”

“No. He was supposed to meet me for dinner about an hour ago,” Harry says quietly.

Narcissa stares, pale blue eyes bright with apprehension. “With me, Mr Potter,” she says after a moment, grasping Harry’s arm, and before he has time to respond, she is Apparating to the front of the house and pulling him along with her. He takes an unsteady step back, swallowing against the roll of his stomach set up by the unexpected jump.

“We should check his study,” she says, clicking up the stone steps with Harry in close pursuit.

“Right,” he mumbles, squelching along the carpeted corridors and trying to quiet the little voice in his head that is telling him something is badly wrong. It’s not helpful, and he definitely doesn’t need fear clouding his judgement right now; the horrifying suspicion that whatever has happened is his fault is quite enough to be going on with. “When did you last see him?” he asks, watching Narcissa as she tries to work out which unlocking charm to use on the study door.

After an impatient few seconds, he steps in and casts a fierce little spell that sends the door flying open on its hinges.

Narcissa gives him a tight smile as they step into the room. It’s empty.

“At lunchtime. He was working from home today, I think. We had a cup of tea together and he told me he was having dinner with you at somewhere called the thrashing lizard... or something like that.”

“The Flailing Lizard,” Harry says absently, sweeping the room for signs of a disturbance, but everything looks just as it always does. Pulse racing, he ducks behind the desk and what he sees makes him swear under his breath.

All four leather-bound files are present on the desk, but only one of them is open.

Harry stares at the pages and the cool eyes of Franz Fitzwilliam stare right back.

“What is it?” Narcissa asks, but he doesn’t respond. His eyes are caught on a scrap of parchment covered in Draco’s neat handwriting, and he picks it up.
“Harry,” she says sharply.

He looks up, hanging onto the piece of parchment so tightly that he almost rips it. “Sorry.”

“Tell me what’s going on. I am not stupid,” she says, refined face stiff with anxiety and Malfoy bravado.

“I know you’re not.” He takes a deep breath and forces himself to look her in the eye. “I think Draco has managed to get himself into a dangerous situation because of me, and I’m just trying to figure out what the hell I’m going to do about it.”

Four o’clock, he thinks, watching the emotions flit across Narcissa’s face. He meant to be back for dinner. Maybe to tell Harry all about what he got up to, what he found out, or maybe so that no one would be any the wiser about his attempt to spy on Fitzwilliam and his dodgy activities.

“What kind of situation?” Narcissa presses.

“Oh... just a bit of amateur espionage concerning a senior member of the Ministry who is almost certainly corrupt,” Harry says, scrubbing at his damp hair and attempting to control the hysterical part of him that wants to burst into laughter.

“Oh,” Narcissa says softly. “I see.”

“Good,” Harry says, which is pointless, but better, he thinks, than shaking Narcissa and yelling, ‘What the fuck am I fucking going to do now?!’

“Perhaps this is relevant,” Narcissa says, bending to pick up a little silver flask from the rug. She’s doing a remarkably good job of remaining calm, but Harry can see the fear in her posture and slightly quickened breaths, and he’s certain that he’s reflecting the same right back to her.

She unscrews the lid and sniffs at the liquid within. Her delicate nose wrinkles and she passes the flask to Harry, who has a sinking feeling he knows what is inside, and if it’s here, then Draco is in more trouble than he first thought.

“That is extremely unpleasant,” Narcissa says, stepping closer to the desk.

It is, too. Harry sniffs as cautiously as he can, but still cringes at the sour, putrid odour.

“I think it’s Polyjuice.” He screws one eye shut and tries to breathe through his mouth as he peers into the flask, washing the contents back and forth for a better view.

“Why would he leave his disguise at home?” Narcissa asks, not unreasonably.

Harry steadies himself against the desk as a wave of cold nausea sweeps over him. “He wouldn’t. This flask isn’t quite full.”

Pale blue eyes meet his in a flash of understanding. “He drank enough to transform... and then he dropped it?”

Harry nods. “I think so. Can you Apparate out of here? I mean, can Draco?”
“Only Lucius is restricted by the wards,” she says quietly.

“That’s what I thought,” Harry sighs. He closes the flask and grips it tightly, wrapping his fingers around the cold metal as his mind races ahead of him. There is absolutely no getting away from the fact that Draco is in danger and that Harry is responsible for encouraging... *plaguing* a perfectly safe financial advisor to throw himself into a mess like this.

“What are we going to do?” Narcissa whispers, knuckles turning white as she clutches the folds of her cloak around herself.

Harry takes a deep breath. “Get in touch with Ron Weasley from the Auror Department and tell him to meet me here as soon as he can,” he says, thrusting the scrap of parchment in Narcissa’s direction. “Stay here. I’m going to go after him.”
Harry sprints toward the corner of Marshall Street, breathing hard and ducking his head against the freezing rain; the downpour is so savage now that every contact is painful but he barely notices, focusing only on the pounding mantra of Draco’s note to himself.

Marshall Street Baths, Soho. 4pm. Goran. Marshall Street Baths, Soho. 4pm. Goran. Marshall Street Baths, Soho. 4pm. Goran. Marshall Street Baths, Soho. 4pm. Goran. Goran. One of Fitzwilliam’s nasty friends, no doubt. Harry doesn’t really want to think about the logistics of this whole mess, but as he stops, fingers pressed to the cold, wet stone of the wall, and peers down the street, he can’t seem to suppress the unhelpful racing of his mind. He’s going to fucking kill Draco when... Harry swallows hard. His drenched cardigan sleeves catch on the rough brickwork and he shivers. Shaking himself, he darts another glance around the corner and pulls himself together. This is all his fault anyway. He’s going to let Draco berate him for getting him into this situation in the first place, and then he’s going to kill Draco for scaring the shit out of him.

That’ll work.

“Okay,” he mutters to himself, tapping his fingers against the bricks. “Think like an Auror... if you remember how.”

And, despite his doubts, the instincts slide back into place as easily as pulling on an old, familiar coat. Within seconds, Harry has taken in the silent street, the parked cars, the couple walking their dog who pass behind him with quiet, meandering footsteps. Marshall Street is dimly lit, but illuminated enough for Harry to see the pale stone arches and the pavement signs that should have been taken inside by now. Though the tingle of malevolent magic is completely absent, Harry draws his wand and casts a series of detection charms, slightly saddened to realise that he no longer trusts his own intuition in times like these.

“Better safe than sorry,” he mumbles, concealing his wand in his sleeve and proceeding slowly around the corner. “Nobody heard me say that,” he adds, horrified with himself despite everything.

Swiping at his sopping fringe, he steps carefully up to the entrance and scans the foyer for movement, but all inside appears to be still. He tries the door, wrapping his fingers around the cold handle and tugging hard, but it doesn’t budge.

He bites his lip hard and refuses to allow panic to set in, even though he knows one thing for certain. This is definitely the place, and he doesn’t need to use any investigative skills to be sure of that fact. He knows Draco, and he knows that Draco is here somewhere. What state he might be in, Harry doesn’t know, and the thought speeds his heart into a nauseating rhythm. Opting not to think, he aims a simple unlocking spell on the door in front of him, idly reflecting that an insane old man was more effective at keeping him out of a building than a load of supposedly professional criminals.

He holds his breath as he steps inside, grateful that the door swings silently on its hinges. The smell of chlorine hits him at once and yanks him back to his primary school swimming lessons in an instant, bringing with it a slew of unhelpful memories of being dunked under the water until his nose burned and stung, yelping as his goggles were pinged against the back of his head, and scrubbing around the damp changing rooms to find clothes that had been hidden by Dudley and his minions.
Scowling, Harry forces himself to adjust to the warm, chemical-scented air. He knows he should wait for Ron, but there’s no harm in having a quick look. Clearing the scene, so to speak. It’s not as though he’s about to go bursting in on Fitzwilliam with his wand drawn—apart from anything else, reason tells him that if Draco is in here, he’s already in trouble, and anything Harry can do right now is unlikely to be helpful against fuck-knows-how-many curse-happy gang members.

Reason, though, is not something he is accustomed to obeying, and the temptation to go dashing through the corridors in the dark is one that he struggles to control. The thought of Draco’s disguise dissolving around him floods Harry with dread, and his fingers curl around his wand until they hurt. He has no idea what these people are capable of in a situation like this; he thinks he has a better grasp of Fitzwilliam, but there is no guarantee that the head of MLE is the one in charge here.

Harry edges past the old-fashioned ticket booth, the fingers of his free hand trailing over the relief of carved mahogany as he attempts to ground himself. As he approaches the doors to the pool, undulating shadows begin to flicker over his skin and draw his eyes to the strange, alien patterns sliding across the walls and floor. The water must be uncovered.

Harry frowns, caught up in the sensation that something isn’t quite right. Something other than the obvious. When the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, he turns back to the ticket booth. The narrow panelled door is slightly ajar and he pushes it gently, wand gripped tight in one hand as the other presses, palm flat, to the leaded glass.

The space is cramped and dark, but by the light of his wand he can make out three figures, each slumped against the wooden walls of the little box, rumpled and unconscious. Heart pounding, Harry steps inside, inhaling the evocative scent of rubber and chemicals and old paper as he crouches on the creaky boards to examine the Muggle staff team... fuck, he hopes they’ve just been stunned. Anything worse does not bode well for Draco, and there’s a point—where the hell is Ron?

Focus.

Shoving his wand into his waistband, Harry carefully checks the pulse of the young man beside him and lets out a ragged sigh of relief. The neat-haired girl wearing shorts and a polo shirt identical to her colleague’s is okay, too, and he moves onto the third victim, an older lady with dark skin and a smart suit jacket, clipped to which is a plastic ID card that identifies her as Caro Melia – Assistant Manager. It takes him a little longer to find her pulse and he is almost ready to cast a panicky _Enervate_ when the beat finally jumps under his fingers and he sits back, scrubbing at his face and trying to come to a sensible decision about what to do next.

It’s been a while, of course, but he used to do things like this all the time. He used to _manage_ things like this all the time. There’s certainly nothing new about sneaking around a strange building in the dark, looking for someone or something malevolent, and he remembers a time when it gave him a thrill to do so. Now, though, as he crouches here, cutting off the circulation to his feet, and stares dully at poor unconscious Caro and her two lifeguards, he suddenly isn’t feeling brave or exhilarated at all; he just wants to grab Draco, Apparate them both into his safe, warm kitchen, and forget that any of this ever happened.

He’s not sure if it’s just that he has changed, or if the difference is that the person in trouble here is Draco, not just another grateful stranger. It’s _Draco_. Draco is in trouble, and here he is, sitting in a little wooden box with three stunned Muggles and waiting for backup. He’s being ridiculous, of course. With a small sound of irritation, Harry grabs the counter and levers himself to his feet, shaking out each leg in turn until the blood flow prickles painfully into life.
“I think it’s probably best for you to stay here,” he says, wondering as he does who exactly he is talking to. Caro and her colleagues can’t hear him—at least, they certainly aren’t answering him. “Great,” he mutters, heading back out into the foyer, “I’m going mad. Fantastic timing.”

He starts across the tiles toward the door, planning to poke his head back out into the street and check for Ron before he does anything stupid, but a familiar voice stops him in his tracks.

“Well will you leave him alone, Vladimir?” Fitzwilliam snaps, voice reverberating around the cavernous room beyond the doors behind Harry. “We have not finished here.”

Harry turns, heart leaping unpleasantly. Gritting his teeth, he draws his wand, points it at the doors leading to the pool, and casts a one-way transparency charm. With a clear view into the space beyond, Harry looks around, eyes darting from the shimmering surface of the water to the elegantly arched ceiling and then to the group of black-clad men who are gathered at one end of the pool, some leaning against the walls, wands drawn with the sort of casual menace that Harry has seen many times before and that worries him very much; others, including Fitzwilliam himself, are lounging in dilapidated folding chairs, the sight of which seems incongruous amongst the sharply dressed gangsters and against this beautiful, bizarre backdrop.

Within seconds, he has assessed the situation and banished any remaining inclination to go dashing in there on his own, despite the disgusting wrenching in his chest when he sees Draco for the first time, and the sick feeling of horror that spreads right out to his fingertips as he continues to gaze at him, stretched out awkwardly, face down across the tiles at the feet of a stringy, hard-faced man who Harry supposes must be Vladimir. He’s been stunned—Harry hopes—and the black robes that presumably belong to Goran are at least three or four sizes too large for him. The heat, even where Harry is standing, is oppressive, and the humidity has added a sheen to Draco’s grey-pale skin. His hair is sticking to his forehead and Harry has the sudden and inexplicable urge to smooth it back into place for him.

Draco would hate his hair to be like that. It looks messy and... unbalanced.

And yes, that’s what he should be worrying about right now.

Harry groans inwardly, dragging up his non-wand hand to scrub through his own hair, finding it damp and warm and reassuringly scruffy. His heart is racing and his fingers are beginning to cramp from the continuous death grip on his wand, and the last thing he wants to do is remain still, but Draco looks okay (as long as he ignores the angry gash above one eyebrow, and Harry is choosing to do that for the time being) and Fitzwilliam’s goons seem to be doing little more than talking. He can’t hear their words now, but, interestingly, Fitzwilliam’s relaxed body language and the fact that he is occupying a chair when others are standing suggests to Harry that his ex-boss is indeed in a position of dominance here. Which is interesting, he supposes, chewing his lip and tapping his wand against his thigh with the effort of waiting.

“Harry,” comes the hissed voice of his best friend some minutes later. “Harry? Are we clear?”

Flooded with relief, Harry turns and nods to Ron, who is speaking through a crack in the main door. “Yeah—no suspects in this area. Three hostages, unconscious but stable, in there, and one in here,” he says, indicating the ticket booth and the shadowy pool room in turn. “Nine suspects in all, male, armed, evidence of violence; no wards, no fields, no spells cast in the last ten minutes,” he finishes, rattling off the list of observations without really thinking.

For the briefest of moments, Ron looks startled, and then he nods seriously and turns away from
Harry, leaning back out into the street to signal to someone else, and it’s Harry’s turn to be startled—he hasn’t paused to consider the idea of Ron bringing someone—perhaps another Auror—with him, and now he has no idea why; Ron is far too sensible to go harrying off into a dangerous situation without backup. Harry sighs and gazes back through the doors to check on Draco and Fitzwilliam. Everything looks much the same, but when he turns back to Ron, what he sees makes him inhale sharply.

Grouped around Ron, wands drawn and faces set, are four people in rust brown robes. Harry recognises them all, and knows them as experienced, dependable members of the Auror team. Suffused with a raw sort of affection for his old department, Harry nods to them and receives four deferential little jerks of the head in return.

“Where should we start, sir?” asks a woman with a raspy voice and bright blue eyes.

“Ears into this room, both ends, and then check on the hostages,” Ron directs, pointing and sending two of the Aurors sprinting over to the transparent doors behind Harry, where they crouch and whisper to one another as they work.

“This actually is a swimming pool,” one of them murmurs incredulously. “Has he gone mad?”

Harry frowns. He can only hope they’re not talking about him, but anything is possible at this point.

Ron turns to his remaining Aurors. “Fox, Coffey, see if you can get behind them—Harry, you don’t happen to know how this place is laid out, do you?”

“No,” Harry says, turning back to the pool, “but it looks as though there’s another entrance around the back, if you...” he trails off, feeling the air whip past him as the two Aurors take off in opposite directions. Beyond the doors, Fitzwilliam is leaning back in his chair and smiling, completely unbothered by the crumpled figure at his feet. Harry’s blood crackles at the sight.

“And what would you like me to do?” asks someone with an unmistakeable voice. Harry turns slowly. “I suggest you let me help, Auror Weasley.”

“Kingsley?” Harry says faintly, taking in the impressive and completely unexpected figure of the Minister for Magic as he steps out from the shadows and into the ghostly blue light, wand drawn and expression completely serene as though he hasn’t yet realised he is standing in the dark, humid foyer of a Muggle swimming baths, awaiting instructions from a subordinate.

“Don’t you start,” Kingsley says, dropping his rich voice almost to a whisper. “I already had to lie to four security guards to come here, and I don’t like lying to people.”

“I... yeah, I’m confused,” Harry admits, suddenly and uncomfortably aware of his heartbeat as he half-listens to the two Aurors working behind him and glances between Ron and Kingsley. It feels as though time is slipping away faster than it should, time to save Draco, while all of this plays out in maddening slow motion. All he wants to do is grab them both and demand to know what the fuck is going on, but he can’t seem to move from the spot and his throat is constricted with panic.

“Let’s put it this way,” Kingsley says, eyes narrowing. “If my head of MLE is a crook, I want to see it for myself. And then I want to take the bastard in.”

Harry stares. He has no idea how Kingsley would know that this had anything to do with Fitzwilliam. It doesn’t make sense. “How did you—”
“Ears are in place, sir, ready to pick up,” calls one of the Aurors at the door as both scramble to gather their equipment and disappear into the darkness.

Harry takes one last curious look at Kingsley and then lets his question fall away. He, Ron, and Kingsley pick up the long strings and gather around the transparent doors to listen, crouching and huddling together for the best view. As the voices of the black clad men separate out and become audible, Harry can’t quite squash the little spike of gratitude that he is actually being allowed to be a part of this. Kingsley and Ron would be absolutely within their rights to send him home and tell him to wait for news, and he can’t help wondering whether it’s about being Harry Potter, or whether it’s about the man lying bruised on the tiled floor. Whether Ron isn’t quite as blind as Harry always expects him to be.

Harry glances at his friend, at his rumpled hair and the casual weekend outfit of jeans and blue sweater that tells him Ron has leapt into action on receipt of his message without pausing to think about appearances. Ron glances back and then nudges Harry at the sound of Fitzwilliam’s voice.

“I don’t understand why you cannot explain this to me more clearly,” he says irritably.

“Goran is the expert for Gringotts,” says one of the standing men with the tone of someone who has said this many times before. “If you would just allow me to go and look for him...”

“Absolutely not,” Fitzwilliam says. “I want you here where I can see you. It’s not my problem that Goran went and got himself... incapacitated,” he says, voice heavy with contempt as he glances down at Draco’s prone form.

The man called Vladimir grunts and spits at the ground, the glob of saliva landing just inches away from Draco’s outstretched hand. Harry barely bites back a snarl. Beside him, Ron is staring through the door, mouth slightly open.

“She was right,” he mumbles, face caught between disbelief and utter horror.

“Who?” Harry asks.

“Hermione. She said Fitzwilliam was up to something, didn’t she?”

Surprised, Harry glances at him, still holding the string to his ear to keep tabs on the disagreement between Fitzwilliam and his men. “Yeah, she did. But I thought you didn’t believe her.”

“I didn’t at first,” Ron admits. “But... it kind of stuck in my head, what she said, and in the end I thought... well, it wouldn’t do any harm to stick a tracking spell on him. Just to see,” he says, managing a rather sheepish nose-wrinkle for an important man in a tense moment.

Harry rather unhelpfully wants to smile. “Does she know?”

“Not yet.”

“Perhaps your wife would like a job in the Auror department,” Kingsley murmurs from Ron’s other side.

Ron snorts. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. Anyway, she’d never leave her goblins.”
“That’s certainly true,” Harry says, though he doesn’t doubt for a moment that Hermione would have made a fantastic Auror, had she wanted to be one.

“That’s certainly true,” Harry says, though he doesn’t doubt for a moment that Hermione would have made a fantastic Auror, had she wanted to be one.

“Apparently he’s holding his meetings in some really weird places—Muggle places, right under their noses.”

Her words echo in his head as he watches Fitzwilliam read a stack of documents handed to him by another of the seated goons and hears Vladimir mutter to one of the others as he scowls at Draco. Harry hasn’t a clue what he’s saying, but the tone of his voice is illustrative enough and it chills him.

“What are we going to do?” he says before he can stop himself.

“Wait,” Ron says simply, and Harry knows, despite every fibre of his body insisting that he just jump in there and get Draco out, that this is Ron’s show now.

“Right,” he says softly, chewing on his lip and attempting to keep his anxiety in.

“I’m not stalling, mate, I promise you,” Ron says, continuing to stare ahead, eyes flicking over the scene on the poolside. “I realise it’s probably a bit of a clash of styles here, but... I just need to work out what they’re all going to do before I send my guys steaming in there, you know?”

“I know,” Harry says. Ron has always been the strategist of the two of them and, much as he hates to admit it, that’s exactly what they need right now.

“It would be helpful if we could catch him saying something really incriminating, too,” Kingsley says rather morosely. “That would make things easier for later.”

Harry sighs and shifts uncomfortably. His rain-damp clothes are now warm and sticking to his skin wherever they touch.

“Why can’t any of you write legibly?” Fitzwilliam complains, and the black-clad men glare sullenly at him but don’t say a word.

“The first mistake of a dishonest bureaucrat,” Kingsley murmurs, shoving the string more firmly into his ear for a clearer sound. “Expecting the real criminals to care about the details.”

“Well said,” Ron offers, mouth flickering for a second or two before his face turns serious again.

Harry turns at the sound of soft scuffling behind them, relaxing a fraction when he sees the first two Aurors returning. They nod to him again as they pass and then duck into the ticket booth, closing the door behind them.

“I didn’t expect so many people,” Harry says, thinking out loud.

Ron frowns. “It’s Fitzwilliam. Not exactly your usual rounding up of dodgy buggers exercise, is it?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call Požar Riba dodgy buggers, Auror Weasley,” Kingsley says, sounding almost amused.

“Why not?” Ron asks vaguely, frowning as he watches one of the men in black leaning down from his chair and swiping a hand through the water. “Do you think they’d be offended?”
“I expect so,” Kingsley says. “They like to imagine they’re much more dangerous than that.”

Harry’s insides squirm, twisted with fear for Draco and with the unreal, otherworldly feeling that is this place, this horrible waiting game.

“Are they?” he asks, throat dry.

In the ensuing silence that wraps around the three of them, the white-noise chatter of one Slovenian gangster to another seems deafening in Harry’s ears. Ron and Kingsley glance at him and turn back to their observation without a word, and Harry’s heart slams painfully in his chest. Draco does not stir.

I’m so sorry, he mouths, too softly to be heard. Please be okay. I love you.

“You alright?”

Harry looks at Ron and nods, pushing away his feelings with some effort and casting around for a distraction. “So... how did you know this was Fitzwilliam? Was it something Mrs Malfoy said to you?”

Ron’s mouth curves into a grim smile. “She told me Draco was missing and that you wanted to meet me here as soon as possible... the location was a bit of a clue, so I just cross-checked it with my tracker, called up some reinforcements and here we are.” Ron shrugs, blue eyes going momentarily wide. “I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw her head in the fire.”

“Sorry. I was sort of in a rush.”

“You don’t say,” Ron says faintly, and then, for what feels like a long time, there is silence, broken only by the whispers and rustles from the Aurors in the ticket booth and the sparse conversation of the men by the pool as Fitzwilliam continues to read. Harry watches, barely daring to blink, eyes sore and breathing rapid, focusing on Draco and Vladimir—fuck Fitzwilliam; he knows what’s important.

“Harry?” Ron says at last, voice determinedly casual.

“Yeah?”

“I was wondering... between me and you... well, me, you, and Kingsley... I know this probably isn’t the time, but... there’s something going on between you and Malfoy, isn’t there?”

Startled, Harry opens his mouth to respond but no sound comes out. When he tries again, he coughs lightly and manages a soft sound of bewilderment. “Hmm?”

“I’m not having a go,” Ron says, eyes suddenly anxious. He elbows Harry in the side. “I just thought I had to ask.”

“Now?” Harry says weakly, staring straight ahead just in case he accidentally meets Kingsley’s eyes and bursts into flames.

Ron shrugs. “I thought maybe you’d be less embarrassed to talk about it if you were a bit distracted,” he says, screwing up his nose in contemplation as he gazes at the gently rippling water. “And... to be honest, mate, I don’t think I’ve seen you look so worried since that time Lily fell in the river when she was little... actually... I’m starting to think that you should keep people you like away from water.
It doesn’t seem to be a good thing for them.”

“You finished?” Harry says, and Ron nods, pressing his lips together. “Are you sure?”

Ron nods again, and the foyer lapses once more into silence. Kingsley, quite wisely, says nothing, and Harry is grateful for that.

“You really don’t take the path of least resistance, do you?” Ron says after a minute or two.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... look at your track record. Cho—boyfriend just been murdered, Ginny—best mate’s sister, Malfoy... enough said, really,” Ron muses.

Harry scrubs at his face and tries desperately to ignore the suspicion that Kingsley is trying not to laugh. “Ron, is this really the time?”

“I don’t know. But silence makes me uncomfortable.”

Harry sighs. That certainly is true. Now that he thinks about it, any time he was paired with Ron for a stake-out exercise in Auror training, he had talked and talked and talked through the whole thing. Harry hasn’t worked with Ron in years but it looks like very little has changed.

“I’d forgotten about that,” Harry sighs, hanging on to his exasperation even though he wants to grin and perform a little dance in honour of Ron’s wonderfully unperturbed reaction to the whole thing. Partly because there’s no way he can celebrate anything to do with Draco when he’s lying there, out cold, being poked by the heavy boot of a Slovenian gangster, and partly because... well... there isn’t anything to celebrate yet, is there? Whatever Harry might feel, he and Draco are friends and nothing more. “Anyway,” he says at last, attempting to deflect attention away from himself, “if we’re talking about liking a challenge, how many years did you chase after Hermione? Six, was it? Seven?”

Ron makes a face. “Yeah, alright. It’s not my fault it took her so long to see how charming I am,” he whispers, and Kingsley makes a small, stifled sound of amusement.

“Some of us hide our charms better than others,” he says, and this time Harry’s mouth flickers at the corners quite without his permission.

“Muggle hostages secure and ready for transport and memory modification, sir,” says the female Auror as she and her partner emerge from the ticket booth and come up behind them.

Harry glances around to look at them and they nod to him yet again, eyes bright and breathing hard. He wonders how they must feel, taking on an operation with three men who have all, at one time or another, headed up the Auror department, one of whom is the current Minister for Magic. If they’re intimidated, they aren’t showing it, and he finds a smile for them.

“Good,” Ron murmurs. “Grab an ear and take up holding positions.”

As Harry turns back to the scene on the poolside, the two Aurors step smoothly into place behind him and tune in to the conversation Fitzwilliam is now having with the grizzled man in the chair next to his.

“Is what we agreed, Franz,” he insists.
“You must think I’m stupid,” Fitzwilliam snaps, waving a sheaf of papers at the old man. “It’s just not possible. I have a position to maintain. The public must trust me...”

Harry snorts softly and the old man waves a dismissive hand.

“I am not interested in that,” he says. “This what we agreed, so—”

“Will you knock that off?” Fitzwilliam explodes, turning in his chair to regard Vladimir, who is continuing to poke Draco with his foot.

Harry inhales sharply and he can feel Ron’s eyes on him.

Vladimir scowls but desists, mumbling under his breath.

“You people have no sense of loyalty,” the old man complains. “His brother is missing because of this man. In Slovenia we kill him by now.”

Harry’s heart drops unpleasantly. He holds his breath.

“Stand by,” Ron murmurs.

“Let’s just get one thing clear,” Fitzwilliam says, sounding more commanding than Harry has ever heard him. He looks around slowly at all of the black clad men. “We will not be murdering anyone, however thoroughly they might deserve it. Understood?”

A general murmur of assent filters through the ears and Harry allows himself to relax the tiniest amount, just enough to keep breathing.

“Hold,” Ron orders, and then, just loudly enough for Harry to hear: “Fucking hell. When all this is over I want to know exactly how you and Malfoy got mixed up with these bastards.”

“We’re not mixed up with them,” Harry whispers hotly. “Draco was investigating Fitzwilliam. He was... er... considering a career change.”

“It’s not a very good start, is it?” Ron says gloomily, and somehow Harry manages to control the urge to elbow him hard in the ribs.

“Yeah, thanks for that,” he mumbles instead, and then freezes.

Fitzwilliam and the old man have become embroiled in an argument once more, and Vladimir has taken the opportunity to start on Draco again. This time, though, he isn’t idly prodding Draco with the tip of his boot; he’s kicking him. He’s drawing back his foot and driving it into Draco’s ribs with hard, aggressive strikes, muttering to himself and sending Draco’s unconscious form sliding several inches across the tiles with each contact.

For several seconds, Harry stares, paralysed by a feeling of horror that makes his nerves and muscles scream in distress. And then something snaps. He is vaguely aware of Ron attempting to say something, but all his composure is gone, used up, and all he can do is hang on tight as he drops the ear, raises his wand and pushes through the doors into the humid, shadowy room. Something brushes against his arm as someone—probably Ron—tries to grab his arm and pull him back before the men at the other side of the pool can notice him, but he shakes it off, resolute, and allows the doors to
close quietly behind him.

Fitzwilliam’s argument rages on. Vladimir delivers a particularly vicious kick to Draco’s side, the force of it almost lifting him from the floor. Enraged, Harry grips his wand tightly and starts to walk slowly around the edge of the pool, inhaling rough, chlorine-scented air with each step.

“Come back,” hisses one of the Aurors, and then: “I’ll get him, sir?”

Harry almost pauses, knowing he’s being spectacularly stupid, but he can’t stop moving toward Draco any more than he can stop breathing.

“Leave him a minute,” Ron says softly, kicking up such a flare of confidence inside him that by the time the first of the men turns around and raises his wand, Harry has drawn himself to his full height, set his face into his best approximation of strong indifference, and feels just about ready for anything.

He trains his wand on Vladimir, who has stopped kicking Draco in order to stare at him and point his wand straight back. “Stop that. Right now.”

His voice reverberates impressively, bouncing off the tiled walls and arched ceiling, and within a second, all nine men are on their feet and pointing their wands in his direction. Oddly, Harry has never felt less concerned about being in such a vulnerable position. All he wants to do is knock Vladimir’s block off, but he doubts it’s a good idea to try right now. He’s already pushing his luck.

“What is this, Fitzwilliam?” demands the old man, gnarled fingers holding his wand with frightening steadiness. “You assured us we would not be disturbed!”

For a moment or two, Fitzwilliam’s pale eyes are anxious, and then he pastes on a mask of nonchalance, gazing contemptuously at Harry as he responds.

“This is nothing to worry about, Rudolf;” he murmurs, and though he points his wand almost lazily at a spot between Harry’s eyes, there’s a noticeable shake to his wrist. “It’s just Auror Potter, sticking his nose into things that do not concern him, as usual.”

“Potter?” repeats the old man, squinting at Harry with beady little eyes. “The Potter? Vladimir, take him out, we cannot be messing about here.”

“With pleasure,” Vladimir says, lip curling nastily, but Harry’s shield is up before the hex leaves his wand.

“Nobody is taking anybody out!” Fitzwilliam yells, and Harry doesn’t think he imagines the slightly hysterical note in his voice. “If you can all control your wands for five seconds, I shall find out what he wants. Alright?”

The men continue to glare at Harry in silence. Fitzwilliam continues.

“What are you doing here, Auror Potter?”

“I’m not an Auror any more,” Harry says calmly. “I resigned, if you remember.”

“Oh, yes. To go and make pretty little vases,” Fitzwilliam sneers. Behind him, Vladimir snorts and twitches his foot toward Draco, but doesn’t seem to dare to kick him again now that Harry’s wand is pointed directly at his forehead. “In which case, it makes even less sense for you to be here. This
isn’t a good place for you, Glassblower Potter... what do you want?”

Harry stares back at him, almost wanting to smile. He knows the words are designed to hurt, to intimidate, but they don’t even seem to touch him. Suddenly, despite the forest of wands being pointed at him, Fitzwilliam and his gang of criminals seem like nothing more than little boys playing at being dangerous. The real threat exists in the four men and women behind those double doors, and the two others who are lurking somewhere in the background, just waiting for a signal.

He exhales slowly and glances down at Draco. The cut on his brow bone is sticky and bleeding steadily but he’s breathing, and there seems to be more colour in his face than there was half an hour ago, though it’s difficult to be sure; the light in the pool room is patchy and distorted at best.

“Potter,” Fitzwilliam snaps. “I’m speaking to you.”

Harry looks up. “Right, sorry. I’m not here for you, Fitzwilliam. Much as you are a massive disappointment to me and everyone who has ever had to work under you, I don’t really give a fuck what dirty little scheme you’ve got going here. I’m just here for Draco.”

The old man makes an odd sound and asks a question that Harry cannot understand. To his astonishment, Fitzwilliam replies immediately, mouth working around the foreign words with relative ease. Harry knows he’s being talked about, and that can’t be good.

“You know where is Goran?” the old man asks suddenly.

“No.”

Vladimir growls. “You lie.”

“No,” Harry repeats with as much politeness as he can as they continue to point wands at each other. “But I’m sure he’s fine. Draco wouldn’t hurt him.”

“He is a sneak and a liar,” one of the others spits, staring daggers at Draco, and Harry wonders just how many of these men are related to one another.

“If you want to put it that way,” Harry concedes, “but it wouldn’t be very smart of him to hurt someone like Goran, and you can say what you want about Draco, but he’s too clever for that.”

“Not clever enough to keep his cover,” Fitzwilliam says, eyes alight with malicious pleasure.

Harry opens his mouth to respond, but something snags his peripheral vision and he hesitates. One of Draco’s eyelids twitches. Harry’s heart leaps and he makes a show of gazing despondently at his feet for another moment or two. Seconds later he is rewarded with a minute flicker of pale fingers on wet tiles, and yes, the Stunning Spell is wearing off. All he can do is pray silently to whomever may be listening that Draco remembers where he is and stays on the ground.

“If that’s how you want to look at it,” Harry blusters, forcing himself to focus on Fitzwilliam. “He has nothing to do with this. There’s no reason to keep him here.”

“Let me get this straight,” Fitzwilliam says, furrowed forehead glistening with sweat now. “You’re here, risking your life for all you know, for him?” He indicates Draco with a jerk of his head. The look he then turns on Harry is heavy with disgust.
“Yes.”

“Franz, I am becoming bored,” says the old man, wand twitching dangerously. “You, Potter—what is your interest in this man?”

Harry blinks. Rotates the aching shoulder of his wand arm as much as he can without causing a panic. He has no idea how to answer that question... and yet he does. He knows exactly why he’s here, and he doesn’t suppose there is any point worrying about the consequences when he has nine wands pointing at him and six Aurors waiting silently in the wings to back him up. The element of surprise is always worth a try, too.

He swallows dryly. “I love him, as it happens,” he says, the words coming out much louder than he had intended.

Vladimir’s face contorts into a grimace. Harry ignores him and continues to stare holes into Fitzwilliam, who looks gratifyingly startled.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m really, really serious,” Harry says calmly.

The old man mutters an unintelligible string of words and Fitzwilliam laughs nervously. “You’re serious. And you’ve come here alone?”

Harry frowns. Heart racing, he inches his free hand behind his back and flicks his fingers in a signal he only hopes Ron and Kingsley can see from their position. “Good grief, no.”

The next two seconds are the longest Harry has ever experienced. His eyes slide between Fitzwilliam, Vladimir, Draco, the old man and the others as he waits, breath caught and muscles tight with the effort of keeping his face inexpressive. Fitzwilliam’s eyes widen a split-second before Harry hears the first crash of doors, and then the second as Aurors Fox and Coffey dash into the room to join them.

Harry manages to catch a glimpse of Ron’s vivid hair and the rapidly advancing dark shape of Kingsley before the curses start to fly. He can’t be sure but instinct tells him that the old man, Rudolf, casts first, and his men are not far behind him. Keeping one eye on Fitzwilliam, Harry marks the position of each of the Aurors and throws up a shield around Draco just in time to deflect a nasty looking hex from Vladimir’s wand.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Harry hisses, blood roaring with protective rage. Vladimir smirks, and somewhere behind him there’s a cry of surprise as Ron’s powerful Incarcerous finds its target.

“You are a disgrace,” Vladimir spits, heavy brows drawn low. “To think we knew your name as children and now...”

As the struggle gains momentum around them, Harry listens to the vitriolic, hateful words, feeling tired and bewildered, until his frayed patience breaks. Dropping Draco’s shield for a sliver of a second, he lifts his wand and stuns Vladimir with a savage flick of his wrist.

“That’s enough of that, I think,” he mutters, watching with some satisfaction as the bastard drops to the tiles with a heavy thump.
“Harry!” Ron yells, and Harry turns to see him neatly ducking a jet of red light while the blue-eyed Auror moves in impressive formation with Kingsley to send two gangsters crashing to the floor at once. “To your left, look out!”

Harry spins around just in time to see Fitzwilliam striding toward him, wand raised, pebble-like eyes bright with fury and something slightly unhinged that makes Harry stall for a second too long. Fitzwilliam casts silently and vigorously, stepping over Draco’s prone body as he pulls back his wand arm, and then Draco opens his eyes and time seems to slow down almost to a standstill.

Face contorted with rage and pain, Draco kicks out violently, and Fitzwilliam, caught just below the knee, loses his balance, sails several feet through the air and lands heavily on his chest with a groan and a clatter, just inches from the edge of the water. His wand flies out of his hand and skitters into the pool, sending the curse meant for Harry into a section of wet tiles, which begin to smoke and crumble.

As Draco drags himself to his feet, Harry slashes his wand at Fitzwilliam, feeling a satisfying pull all the way to his shoulder as the ropes wrap themselves around the struggling man and yank tight. A splashing sound behind him grabs his attention and he makes to turn, fearing that Draco has stumbled into the water, but he doesn’t get the chance to find out, because suddenly the old man is right in front of him, wand raised and little eyes malevolent. Distracted by what might be going on behind him, Harry isn’t ready, and the jet of bright light is screaming toward him before he can even think of throwing up a shield.

Something squirms against his chest and, with a spike of cold horror, he realises that Misu is still in his pocket and right in the line of fire. Instinctively, he throws up his non-wand hand to protect her, and just in time; the curse hits as his fingers graze the fabric and the slicing, white-hot pain radiates through his body, stealing his breath and turning his stomach.

Without a shred of regret, Harry knocks the old man to the floor with a powerful Stunning Spell. As he slumps onto the tiles, his wrinkled face is oddly surprised.

“Are you alright, sir?” shouts the nearest Auror, subduing a man at least twice her size with an effortless series of spells.

“I’m fine,” Harry calls back, lifting his voice above the chaos. When he looks at her, she doesn’t seem convinced, but she nods anyway and continues trussing up her catch.

Harry glances down at his blood-soaked shirt and winces. There’s no time to deal with that right now. He takes a moment for Misu, though, cradling his hot, throbbing hand against his chest and peering down into his pocket.

“Are you okay?”

Misu doesn’t reply. When Harry pokes her gently, an odd, rough sound drifts to his ears, almost too soft to be audible. He feels sick, but it will have to do for now. She’s alive.

“Right!” Draco barks from the edge of the pool, and Harry doesn’t think he is the only one who turns at the pure fury in his voice. One side of his body is soaking wet and the unfamiliar wand he is brandishing is dripping, too. Suddenly the splashing makes sense, and despite everything, Harry is a little relieved. “Anyone else?” he challenges, battered and dangerous. “Seriously? You’ve no idea how unimpressed I am right now!”
His voice bounces around the walls and when it fades out, the silence stretches on. For the first time realising just how quiet it is, Harry looks around and realises that every last one of the black clad men has been brought down, stunned, or bound tightly in coils of magical rope. The Aurors are grazed and sweating and breathing hard, some clutching multiple wands and others patting out small smoking patches on their robes. The air is warm and heavy with exertion, chemicals and the aftermath of a storm of magic. Harry breathes it in gratefully and allows the fingers of his wand hand to relax, just a little.

“I’m fairly sure I can imagine how unimpressed you are, Malfoy, but... well, they’ve all pretty much been taken care of,” Ron says at last.

Draco, apparently astonished at being addressed so politely, says nothing. His eyes dart around the room, taking in the fallen gangsters and the team of Aurors through the haze of steam, widening almost comically when he catches sight of Kingsley.

“What the actual hell is going on here?” he asks, slowly lowering Fitzwilliam’s wand.

“Just a little rescue mission,” Ron says blithely, stepping over the unconscious man at his feet and making his way toward the edge of the pool. “Is everyone okay?”

Somewhere amid the ensuing chorus of ‘yes’-es, ‘yes, sir’-s and one ‘Fox has a bang on the head but he’s alright, sir’, Draco’s eyes find Harry’s for the first time.

“Are you okay?” Harry asks, voice rough with concern.

“Am I okay?” Draco lifts his cut brow and winces. “You’re the one covered in blood.”

“I’m fine,” Harry insists, even though his hand and forearm are soaked and sticking to his shirt, warm and wet and uncomfortable, and two of his fingers are pulsing with pain. Misu is still moving and still emitting that odd little sound, and as Harry glances down at her for a second time, he realises that she isn’t just making a noise. She’s crying.

“It’s alright,” he soothes, supporting her more carefully with his damaged hand. “It’s going to be okay.”

“You need to get that seen to,” Kingsley opines, stepping up behind Harry and peering over his shoulder. “Why don’t you and Mr Malfoy go to—”

“I want to stay,” Harry says firmly. “I’m not going to bleed to death and you’ll need a formal statement anyway.”

Kingsley sighs and Harry glances at Ron.

“It’s your call, mate,” Ron says, dropping his Head Auror front for a moment as he rubs a weary hand across his face. “If you stay, though, you have to promise you’ll stay put, and that you’ll let Coffey have a look at your hand—he’s got some basic Healer training. It would be useful to get your statements tonight...” he admits, shooting an apologetic glance at Kingsley, who shrugs and heads for Fitzwilliam.

“That’s fine,” Harry agrees. “Come on, Draco, let’s get out of the way... Draco?”

Draco blinks but doesn’t move. All the fight seems to have drained out of him, leaving nothing but a
pale, tired, irritable mask. Feeling as though he’s somehow taking his life in his hands, Harry crosses the tiles carefully, shoves his wand into his waistband and places his uninjured hand at Draco’s back, guiding him gently toward the exit. To his surprise, Draco allows himself to be propelled for several feet until he stops short in front of the blue eyed Auror.

“This isn’t mine,” he says, pushing Fitzwilliam’s wand into her hands. “I would like mine back.”

“It’ll be returned to you as soon as we recover it, Mr Malfoy,” she says, unperturbed.

“Thank you.” Draco frowns. “Aren’t you a little young to be an Auror?”

“Come on, Draco,” Harry sighs, increasing the pressure at his back, but she appears more amused than offended.

“I’m thirty-two, Mr Malfoy. Will that do?”

“I suppose it will have to. You know... I think I should sit down,” he says faintly, and this time there is no resistance as Harry pushes him along the wet tiles and through the double doors into the foyer, leaving the heat and noise and chaos behind and emerging into cool, quiet darkness. Just as the doors slide closed behind them, Harry catches the sound of a deep, unmistakeable voice.

“Hello, Franz,” booms Kingsley. “Didn’t you see me there?”

There’s a small but definite note of grim satisfaction in his voice and, as Harry propels Draco the last few feet toward the ticket booth, he finds himself trying to imagine the expression on Fitzwilliam’s face, confronted with the Minister for Magic as he reaches perhaps his lowest ebb. Harry smiles.

“I think we’re going to have to sit on the floor, actually... the ticket booth is full of unconscious Muggles,” Harry says, lowering himself to sit with his back against the carved wood of the ticket booth. He winces slightly at the shock of the cold tiles against his warm, sweat-damp thighs and Draco gazes down at him, somehow managing to look unimpressed despite the fact that he’s shivering and beginning to weave unsteadily.

“This is a ridiculous place to hold a meeting,” he says, folding his arms and tucking in the trailing sleeves of his oversized black suit. “There isn’t nearly enough proper seating.”

Harry laughs roughly. “As usual, Draco, you find the strangest things to complain about.”

“Well, if I think too hard about it, I think the pain in my head will become untenable,” Draco admits, stepping carefully across the tiles and dropping down delicately beside Harry.

Harry glances at him and chews on his lip. From somewhere within the tide of confusion and relief swirling inside him is the need to ask Draco exactly what the fuck he was thinking of, but something tells him now is not the time. Beside him, Draco rests his head against the solid support of the ticket booth and closes his eyes. Harry takes the opportunity to study him—because he’s beautiful, of course, and also because doing so takes his mind off the searing pain in his fingers and the plaintive, heart-wrenching cries coming from his pocket.

His face is still paler than usual but far from the horrible sickly grey of earlier; the gash on his forehead is ragged and raw-looking but will mend just fine with proper care and attention, and the pale hair hangs into his eyes in sad, limp strands. The elegant fingers that poke from the ends of Goran’s long sleeves are bruised and grazed as though someone has been stamping on them, and
Harry doesn’t have to think too hard to imagine who would do a thing like that.

“Fucking bastards,” he mutters under his breath, free hand picking savagely at the lines of grouting between the tiles.

“Are you talking to me, sir?”

Harry looks up. Auror Coffey is standing some feet away, carrying a black and silver briefcase, dark eyes uncertain.

“No, I was talking to myself, and you really don’t need to call me sir,” Harry says, beckoning the young man over and smiling apologetically.

“Oh... well... right. Shall I have a look at your hand, then?”

“I wonder if you could have a look at my snake first,” Harry says as Coffey kneels next to him and opens his briefcase with a click. Harry watches for a moment, distracted, as layer after layer springs out, displaying a bewildering array of bandages, salves, potions and powders.

“I’m sorry, did you say snake?” the man asks, looking alarmed.

“Yes—she got hit by the same curse as me and she’s in a lot of pain,” Harry explains, holding his breath as he carefully, carefully lifts Misu out of his pocket and cradles her in his hands.

“Hurts... hurts...” she manages, staring up at him helplessly and he stares back feeling equally helpless.

“It’s okay. This man will help you,” he soothes, but when he finally allows himself to get a good look at her, his stomach turns. Her brightly patterned body is streaked with blood but it’s the last couple of inches that fill him with dread. The end of Misu’s tail is hanging grotesquely, sliced through by the old man’s hex, and no wonder she’s crying. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, terrified for her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Er... okay, well, I’m not really trained in snake-healing, but I can give it a go,” Coffey offers, eyeing Misu carefully. “I’d really rather see to you first, sir.”

“I’m fine,” Harry lies. “Please... she doesn’t understand what’s happened. She’s frightened.”

“It’s just that I was ordered—”

“Give her to me,” Draco interrupts wearily, and both Harry and Coffey swing around to regard him.

“What?”

“Give Misu to me and I’ll have a look at her, and for fuck’s sake, Harry, let the man see to your hand. You’re dripping blood everywhere.”

“No I’m not,” Harry argues pointlessly, but he allows Draco to take Misu, watching to see what he will do as he grits his teeth and holds out his hand for Coffey to examine. He doesn’t know what, if any, experience Draco has with this sort of thing, but he trusts him all the same—Draco isn’t the kind of person who will just have a go regardless, and it’s as good a distraction as any from whatever Coffey is about to do to his fingers.
Draco strokes Misu gently, eyes narrowed in concentration, and then sighs.

“May I borrow your wand?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah, of course... sorry.” Harry reaches down at an awkward angle for his wand and hands it over without a second thought.

“You’ll need to find a vet for her tomorrow,” Draco murmurs, drawing the wand tip around Misu’s damaged tail, enveloping it in a bubble of glowing blue light. “This is the best I can do, I’m afraid.”

Harry nods, impressed. “What is it?”

“Just a stasis spell.” Draco’s eyes flick up to meet his. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

_Lucius_, Harry thinks. Aware that they aren’t alone, he merely nods again, allowing his mind to wander. He wonders how many different methods of subduing and calming a frenzied Lucius Draco and his mother have tried over the years.

And then a sickening pain is shooting down his arm and he isn’t thinking about much of anything at all.

“Sorry, sir,” Auror Coffey mumbles. “It’s a really nasty curse wound. I’m doing what I can.”

Finally, Harry looks down at his hand. “Fuck,” he whispers. Now that most of the blood has been cleaned away, he can see that the tips of his ring and little fingers are completely missing. The wounds are raw and the rough, torn edges of the nail shine grotesquely in the soft light.

“Well... yes,” Coffey agrees, dark eyes anxious. “But at least it’s not your wand hand.”

“There are other things in life,” Draco says acidly without looking up from Misu.

Harry’s heart clenches. “What he means is that I need both my hands for my work.”

“Right,” Coffey sighs, just as the doors fly open and the blue-eyed Auror emerges.

Wrapping a hand around the edge of one of the doors, she gazes at the three of them with interest for a moment before speaking.

“We found Goran,” she informs them, and she’s definitely looking at Draco now. “You did a very thorough job of restraining him, that’s all I can say.”

“Thank you,” he says, glancing up at her for a moment. “Tell him I’ll return his clothes... perhaps to his next of kin.”

The Auror snorts. “Will do. We’re going to be in and out quite a lot now, so I’m going to pin these doors back, alright?” she says, hunting for the metal catches for a few seconds before losing patience and sticking them back to the walls with a spell. “That looks nasty, sir,” she adds, wrinkling her nose and walking back toward the pool.

“Yes, thank you,” Harry mutters, exchanging glances with Coffey. Eyes caught by the soft light of Draco’s spellwork, he turns. “Misu? Are you okay?” The crying has stopped altogether, but he has
no idea if that’s a good thing or not. She doesn’t respond.

“I’ve put her to sleep,” Draco says. “We can find her a vet in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Harry murmurs. Somehow, amid all of this madness, the we is heartening.

Draco returns Misu without a word, and there is silence in the foyer. Coffey carefully wraps his hand in layer after layer of bandages, but Harry barely notices what he is doing. Drained, he leans back against the ticket booth and listens to the bewildering array of sounds drifting from the pool room and through the open doors: Ron’s familiar tones as he guides his team; every now and then a flurry of cursing in multiple languages as the restrained-but-conscious few protest at their situation; the scuffling of feet and the crackling of protective and transfer spells as the men are moved, one by one, into the foyer ready for transport.

Harry watches the Aurors work, knowing that he cannot be involved. And that’s just fine. It will take a lot more than a few Slovenian gangsters and a corrupt head of MLE to prise him away from Draco’s side, whether Draco wants him there or not. It’s difficult to tell with him at the best of times.

Finally, Auror Coffey stops fussing over Harry’s hand, packs up his case, and heads to join his team, casting several anxious glances over his shoulder as he goes. Two of his colleagues pass him in the doorway, carrying between them the massive, half naked form of Goran. The man is out cold, heavily restrained and clearly the subject of a lightening charm, but the two Aurors—neither of them undersized—still appear to be struggling with him.

“Why him?” Harry asks, drawing up his knees and resting his bandaged hand on top. “He’s huge.”

“I already had some of his hair,” Draco says, scowling. “I saw him coming out of here the other night...”

“You were here the other night?” Harry interrupts, startled.

“I don’t tell you everything, you know.”

Harry makes a face. “I know.”

“Anyway,” Draco says, “he came out and lit a cigarette, then started scratching at his hair like mad. I picked up several pieces when he went back in. Big mistake, really.” He sighs irritably.

Harry raises an eyebrow. “You think?”

“Yes. He had terrible dandruff. I’m still itching,” Draco says, missing Harry’s tone. He stares at the unconscious Goran, now just feet away from them, with utter distaste.

“And there’s me thinking that your biggest mistake tonight was losing your flask of Polyjuice,” Harry muses. He has no idea why he’s even going there, but there’s a small part of him that wants to prod Draco, to see where he is, what he’s thinking, maybe even what he wants.

Draco glares. “And you’ve never made a mistake, I suppose?”

“Plenty,” Harry says easily.

Draco finds a polite nod for the blue-eyed Auror when she returns with his wand. He examines it at
close range and then holds it tightly in his lap, pointing it discreetly in Goran’s direction.

“You came to rescue me,” he says at last. “I did not need to be rescued.”

Harry closes his eyes briefly and suppresses an odd little smile. The fact is, he knows Draco well enough by now to know that his snappiness, his frosty pride, is nothing but a defence, and it feels wonderful.

“I didn’t come to rescue you, idiot,” he lies shamelessly. “I came because I knew where you’d gone, and I knew you’d lead us to Fitzwilliam.”

Draco’s surprise is so acute that Harry can almost taste it. “Like fuck, Potter.”

“It’s Harry. And you stood me up at the Flailing Lizard. Everyone was looking at me like I didn’t have any friends.”

“That was very impolite of me,” Draco sighs, rolling his eyes. He lifts a hand, raking through his hair and pulling it into further disarray around his face, apparently without noticing.

Harry does smile this time. He’s not really sure what he’s doing, but he’s in no position to do anything but trust his instincts. “I forgive you.”

“Bugger off. I really didn’t need your help,” Draco says, but the eyes that stray to Harry’s betray him horribly.

“I told you, I wasn’t—”

Draco heaves a dramatic sigh. “Just tell me what all this is about so I can go home and forget about it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Harry hesitates. “Fine. I admit it. I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not a psychopath?” Harry grinds out, dropping his face onto his folded arms and wishing to disappear.

For what seems like a long time, there is silence. Finally, Draco says quietly: “I heard what you said.”

Face pressed against his forearms, Harry falls absolutely still. He draws in his breath as slowly and evenly as he can, trying to counteract the sudden slamming of his heart. Of course, Draco could be referring to any old thing he said, but Harry knows what he means, and kidding himself isn’t going to help anyone.

Feeling stupid and exposed, he takes a moment, allowing his breath to warm the damp sleeve of his cardigan and searching hopelessly inside his tired, woolly head for a response that won’t make him look like even more of an idiot than he already does. In the back of his mind, a little voice is screeching, scolding, demanding for him to find his courage, but Harry has never felt less like being brave.

Finally, swallowing hard, he lifts his head and forces himself to look at Draco. He hasn’t moved. His
eyes pin Harry, the emotion burning there strong but unreadable.

Behind Harry, someone clears their throat awkwardly. He twists around, relieved.

Ron is hovering next to the open door of the ticket booth, radiating discomfiture like a beacon.

“Erm... sorry... I’m ready to take your statements now, if that’s alright?” He pauses, clicking and unclicking a pen at his side. “Harry, do you want to do yours first? Thanks for waiting... Malfoy,” he adds, nodding at Draco and retreating quickly into the little box.

“Won’t be a minute,” Harry says, and it’s barely more than a whisper. With the dull knowledge that he is walking away from the opportunity that he has longed for, and for no more compelling reason than stupid, messy fear, he levers himself up from the cold floor and shakes out his numb legs.

For a moment, he looks through to the pool room, watching the blue-eyed Auror and her partner as they work together to repair the broken tiles, clear up the debris of the fight, and slowly return the beautiful old place to the way it was before the events of this evening. He knows that before long, it will be as though nothing untoward ever happened here, and while he doesn’t quite wish the same for himself, he can’t help but feel it would be simpler to go back to the way things were.

“Mate?”

“Coming,” Harry calls, squeezing into the booth and finding it almost full to capacity already. He lowers himself onto one of the two little stools Ron has either found or conjured and looks around at the three hostages. Caro and her colleagues are still propped against the wall but they are arranged more neatly now, all in a line, and he could almost believe that they were just taking an impromptu nap.

“They’ll be alright, won’t they?” he asks, turning back to Ron.

“They’ll be fine. We’ll have to modify their memories, obviously, but no doubt those buggers would’ve done it otherwise, and I can’t imagine they’d’ve taken quite as much care over it. You remember those cases a few years back—idiots making a hash of adjusting witnesses’ memories and leaving them not knowing their own names any more?” Ron says, scowling, and Harry notices how tired he looks.

He hopes Hermione isn’t sitting at home worrying about them... fuck.

“Ron—I need to get a message to Mrs Malfoy,” he says, horrified that he hasn’t thought of it sooner.

“Already done,” Ron assures, smiling wearily. “First thing I did when the scene was secure. I got hold of Hermione and asked her to firecall Malfoy Manor and let her know that Draco was okay. I don’t want her head in my bloody fireplace again, believe me.”

Harry sags, resting his elbows on the little wooden ledge containing tickets and pens and bits of paper.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. You look pretty shocking, mate,” Ron offers, scrutinising Harry’s face and bandaged arm. He wrinkles his nose in remorse. “I probably shouldn’t have let you hang around. You should get going as soon as we’ve sorted this... take Malfoy with you.”
Harry’s stomach flips unpleasantly. “I’m not sure that’ll be happening,” he admits.

Ron frowns. “I thought you two were... you know.” He gestures with his pen. “You said...”

“No,” Harry sighs. “I think it’s... well, just me, really.”

Ron stares, puzzled, and then his eyes widen. “Oh. Oh. Fucking hell, Harry.” Apparently lost for words, he scrubs at his heavy fringe with his sleeve and shakes his head slowly. For some reason, his utter confusion makes Harry feel a little better. Perhaps it’s just that Ron and general bewilderment when it comes to emotional matters are such a familiar combination, a constant in the middle of this maelstrom. “Hang on, though,” Ron says suddenly. “I wouldn’t say that. He might’ve saved your life in there—you saw what he did—we’re still not sure what sort of curse Fitzwilliam was using, no doubt something the Riba boys taught him, but you saw what it did to those tiles...” Ron falls silent and shrugs, as though he isn’t trying to persuade Harry that Draco Malfoy does, in fact, feel something for him beyond an uncomfortable level of sexual attraction.

“I suppose,” Harry says softly, head starting to pound now. “But I would have done that for you, or Hermione, or Kingsley, or...”

“Yeah, but this is Malfoy we’re talking about,” Ron interrupts, pointing his pen at Harry. “People like him are only interested in them and theirs. And that includes you. That’s got to be worth something, hasn’t it?”

Harry exhales slowly. Though he is definitely intrigued about the source of Ron’s insights, he lacks the energy to ask for and listen to an explanation. Knowing Ron, he’s probably been taking Hermione’s books into the toilet again.

“I don’t know, Ron,” he sighs. “I feel like I need to sleep for a year. Do you mind if we just do this so I can go home and feel sorry for myself somewhere comfortable?”

“Whatever you want, mate,” Ron says easily. He poises his pen and looks up conspiratorially at Harry. “Tell you what, the cover-up on this is going to be a nightmare. The press office are going to string me up when I tell them.”

“None of this is going to be reported?” Harry says. He can’t say he’s surprised. It wouldn’t do for the Ministry to have to admit that one of their senior staff has been running around with gangsters. Still, he can’t help thinking about Draco’s exposé in the glimpse and wishing he had the same journalistic clout in this universe to get the truth out to the public. Perhaps one day he will, if he doesn’t decide to give up on the investigating game as a bad job, and Harry couldn’t blame him if he did.

“No. Kingsley says it’ll be ruled as too damaging and I’ve got to agree with him,” Ron sighs. “Hopefully we’ll still find some way of explaining why Fitzwilliam’s been packed off to Azkaban with a flea in his ear that’ll still let people know what a colossal wanker he is.”

“Good,” Harry says with feeling.

Ron nods. “Right, let’s start at the beginning, shall we? Don’t mind Kingsley if he comes in—I said he could do the memory mods. Apparently he misses it,” Ron confides, eyes flickering with amusement. “I’ve never seen him so excited.”

In spite of himself, Harry begins his statement with a smile on his face. The whole thing takes a little...
over ten minutes, during which time he tries to supply Ron with every relevant detail he can remember, plus a few irrelevant ones for good measure. Ron scribbles away, nodding approvingly at Harry’s decision to call for back-up and shooting him admonishing glances as he runs through the minutes leading up to the confrontation in the pool room, as though hearing about the events for the very first time. Kingsley does not make an appearance during Harry’s time in the ticket booth, but shows up a minute or two after Harry has swapped places with Draco. Harry watches him squeeze his impressive bulk into the overcrowded wooden box and shifts uncomfortably on the tiled floor, resting his chin on his knees and moodily wondering if there’s any point waiting for Draco at all.

When he emerges, expression prickly, ill-fitting suit jacket wrapped tightly around his slender frame, he stalks across the tiles as elegantly as a man whose trousers are at least four inches too long for him can manage and stands in front of Harry, gazing down at him expectantly.

Harry gazes up at him, chest bursting with wriggling warmth for the stupid grumpy bastard.

Draco lifts his injured eyebrow and winces. Again.

“You need to stop doing that,” Harry advises.

Draco snorts. “You need to go home.”

“Yeah,” Harry says softly, and, with what feels like a massive effort, gets to his feet. Just inches away from Draco now, he’s lightheaded as the blood pounds and races in his veins. “Are you coming with me?” he asks all in a rush, and fuck, he wishes it had sounded more dignified, but he’s said it now.

Draco’s eyes burn in the near-darkness. Cool fingers wrap tightly around Harry’s wrist. “Yes.”

Terrified, Harry nods, and, taking in one last breath of chlorine-heavy air, he Disapparates.

**~*~**

In the silence of Harry’s hallway, there is, at last, stillness. As Draco finally releases his wrist, he feels certain that his ragged breathing and the hammer of his heart must be deafening. Still, Draco says nothing, and all they can do is stare at one another as though neither are sure what to do now that the noise and heat and drama are behind them.

At last, Draco speaks. “Er... may I use your bathroom?”

“Third door on your right,” Harry rasps, loathing himself. “I’m going down to put the kettle on.”

He turns away before he says anything stupid, listening as he goes to the click of Draco’s retreating footsteps. Once in the kitchen, he fumbles through the tea-making process without really noticing what his hands are doing. It’s his kitchen, that fact is in no doubt, but the whole place seems to have taken on a surreal, dreamlike quality; every scrape and splash and clank feels loud and jarring inside his head and yet he feels as though his skull has been stuffed full of cotton wool.

“What the fuck am I doing, Mi?” he asks of the unconscious snake curled semi-peacefully in his pocket. He doesn’t expect her to respond, but he thinks that perhaps giving a voice to his bewilderment will help to untangle some of it.

It doesn’t work. There is still a man in his bathroom, a man he is painfully in love with, a man who
knows it, and yet Harry has even less of an idea where he stands than before. He has absolutely no idea what is going on inside Draco’s head and, as usual, Draco is doing an excellent job of keeping his thoughts to himself.

Harry sighs and leans against the counter, pressing his hands against his face, palm damp and bandage rough against his skin. The fragrant tea steam drifts around him and he sighs, torn between the weary mess in his head that just wants him to forget all of this and curl up in bed, and the hot, aching crackle in his chest and stomach and groin that is demanding something else entirely. Draco is alive and safe and so is he, and that alone has to be worth celebrating.

“I’m sure my life used to be less complicated than this,” he mumbles.

“Are you talking to me?”

Harry drops his hands to his sides and pretends not to be surprised at the sight of Draco, standing next to his kitchen table and gazing at him with curiosity. “No. Just thinking out loud.”

Draco blinks. “Oh. Do you know that there is a ridiculously large spider on your staircase?”

“What did you do with him?” Harry asks, suddenly wary.


Horrified, Harry stares at him, heart plummeting. “What? Why would you do that?!?”

“I didn’t, you idiot. It’s here.” Draco mouth curves into an odd little smile and he holds out his hand, where Harry’s staircase spider is perching happily.

Harry says nothing, fearing for one terrible moment that Draco might squash him, and he can’t help feeling as though that will somehow be a very bad omen, but Draco merely pokes him lightly with his finger.

“Yes, you’re very impressive,” he murmurs when the spider waves its two front legs at him and scuttles to one side and then the other.

With some effort, Harry hides the huge wave of relief that sweeps over him. “Well, put him back, then.”

Draco frowns. “Why?”

“Because he lives on that staircase and it’ll take him ages to get back up there,” Harry says, feeling as though he’s rather pointing out the obvious.

A fleeting look of amusement passes across Draco’s face. “Alright. Mind if I drink my tea first?”

“Certainly,” Harry says, irritated by the formality that seems to have crept into his voice.

Equally stiff, Draco nods and walks slowly across the kitchen to claim his tea. He takes the stripy cup without asking, the one containing the strong tea with sugar that Harry made for him without thinking. He leans against the counter, mirroring Harry’s posture, drinking slowly and glancing every now and then at the spider as it walks cautiously over the back of his hand. Harry claims his own cup and sips his tea steadily, just for something to do. It doesn’t taste right and besides, he thinks he might
actually burst if he can’t soon find a way to release this insane tension.

“Ron got a message to your mother, by the way,” he says after several minutes of charged silence.

“I know. He told me.”

“Oh.” Harry shifts in place and nods to no one in particular. “Good.”

“Yes,” Draco says calmly. “He’s very efficient.”

Harry barely notices the first ever compliment passed from Malfoy to Weasley because he can’t think of anything beside the way the dim glow of the kitchen lamps highlights the sharp line of Draco’s jaw as he tips his head back and carefully stretches the kinks from his shoulders. Swallowing dryly, Harry looks away and concentrates instead on the glimmering surface of his tea.

One step forward and two steps back, he thinks. And then: ‘He is not playing hard to get... he’s just... actually hard to get.’ Blaise’s voice echoes in his head, rich and confident, almost seeming to mock him now. ‘If he lets you into his life at all, that’s a huge leap of trust for Draco. What you have to remember is that this is all new for him—he hasn’t had a glimpse to show him what his future should have been.’

Harry scowls. Across the kitchen, Draco is watching the spider make its way up the arm of his borrowed suit with interest.

‘Have you ever tried... actually telling him how you feel? Maybe that would be a start, old bean.’

Or maybe, he thinks mutinously, it will just be humiliating and do nothing but completely gum up the works of your friendship. He’s not going to think about the fact that maybe confessing one’s love isn’t best done with one party apparently unconscious, in front of an audience of Aurors, corrupt officials and Slovenian gang members. Because that isn’t going to help.

Harry gulps the last of his tea and sets down his cup with a clank beside him. Draco glances at the spider on his shoulder and lifts his hand to scratch uncomfortably at his stringy hair.

“Right! Why don’t you have a shower?” Harry says suddenly and with a little more volume than he had intended, relieved as he is to have finally struck inspiration.

Startled, Draco eyes him uncertainly. “What exactly are you saying?”

Harry hesitates. A little part of him is insisting that he should apply some sensitivity here, but he squashes it and presses on. “That you’ve got... stuff all over you and you’re wearing someone else’s clothes... and maybe someone else’s dandruff.”

“Thanks,” Draco says drily.

“Look, just get clean, you’ll feel better, and I’ll find you something of mine to wear. Something... tasteful,” he adds, catching the dubious look on Draco’s face.

After a moment’s consideration, Draco nods, and Harry follows him up both flights of stairs, watching him replace the spider on the staircase and then heading for his bedroom, where he gently places Misu in her tank and activates the charm that keeps her warm.
“First thing in the morning, I promise,” he whispers, stroking her patterned head and aching at her lack of response, even though he knows it’s for the best right now.

As he leaves the bedroom, he catches sight of a stack of clean towels and grabs one, remembering that he hasn’t yet had time to distribute his laundry and realising that Draco is unlikely to be impressed at having to stand there dripping after his shower. The bathroom door is half open, delicious steam just beginning to billow out into the hallway, and Harry knocks gently.

“Draco? I’ve brought you a towel,” he calls.

There’s no answer but the door swings easily on its hinges and Harry is left, exposed, in the doorway, arms full of towel and eyes drawn hopelessly to the scene laid out in front of him. Draco has removed Goran’s shirt and jacket and now stands, bare-chested, before the bathroom mirror, staring at his reflection in mute distress. His pale skin is littered with grazes, cuts, and bruises, the worst of which curve in a grotesque red-purple sash across his chest, ribs and waist. Nauseated, Harry forces away the memory of Vladimir’s vicious kicks and stares at Draco’s back, where the bruises continue, punctuated by the burn-like marks of malevolent curses applied at close range.

Harry’s heart wrenches with fury, empathy and the sort of pain that only comes from seeing something you love damaged senselessly. Biting the inside of his mouth hard, he grips the soft fibres of the towel tightly and tries to think of something to say, because his feet seem to be stuck to the floor, and Draco is sure to notice him before too long.

“I’m really sorry,” he says at last, fighting to control the roughness of his voice.

This time Draco turns, eyes bright and fierce as though he is battling tears. “I don’t remember how I got most of these,” he whispers, and lifts a hand to skate over the wound on his forehead. “Not even this one.”

“Good,” Harry says, taking a tentative step into the room, still clutching the towel to his chest. “I know you probably won’t believe me, but it’s better if you don’t remember.”

Draco wraps his hands around his upper arms and gazes at a point somewhere to Harry’s left.

“I don’t know if that’s true or not, but... I didn’t... it’s idiotic, but I didn’t realise how bad it was going to be when I took my clothes off.”

“It’s not idiotic,” Harry says softly. “A little optimistic for you, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing.” And fuck, he has no idea why he’s making a joke at a moment like this, but Draco makes a painful little sound and the corners of his mouth flicker and wobble, just for a moment.

Harry steps right into the room now. When he pushes the door closed behind him with a quiet click, he holds his breath, but Draco doesn’t react. Still uncertain, Harry watches him and listens to the hissing and pounding of the shower, holding onto the calming rhythm of the water and allowing it to soothe him. Draco is impossibly vulnerable, ready to shatter, and Harry has to be the strong one here.

And he can do that. Being big when someone else is small is something that comes naturally to him, and just with that realisation, he can feel the ground beneath his feet again.

“Right... are you going to let me clean that for you?” he asks, setting down the towel and indicating Draco’s head wound.
“If you must,” Draco says and lowers himself onto the edge of the bath, while Harry rifles through his cabinets for supplies.

“I can’t make it look pretty or anything—you’ll have to get a Healer to do that—but I can make a start,” Harry says, grabbing a pot of Professor B’s All Purpose Ointment and some cotton pads. He sits beside Draco on the edge of the bath. “Draco?”

Grey eyes lift to his, surprisingly intense, and then close. “Go on. I promise not to scream.”

Harry bites down on a smile and sets to work. The heavy, aromatic scent of the ointment is overpowering and Draco’s nose wrinkles as Harry dabs it carefully across the wound. He leans as close as he dares, holding his breath as his thigh presses against Draco’s and a swathe of damp blond hair brushes across his cheek. Only once does he wince, when Harry tapes a piece of waterproof gauze into place. Draco’s eyes fly open in surprise.

“Sorry,” Harry murmurs, and they’re just inches apart. Something warm and insistent flickers in the pit of his stomach. “I’m done now.”

“Are you sure?” Draco whispers. He shivers.

“Yeah,” Harry says, ointment jar clutched in both hands, keeping them safe.

“You want something from me,” Draco murmurs, almost sounding surprised. It’s not a question.

“Yes,” Harry admits easily, allowing himself to smile at last. “But only what you want to give.”

Draco exhales slowly, warm breath feathering across Harry’s cheek. “I want a shower,” he says, and the words are so decisive that Harry can’t control his shiver.

“Okay,” he whispers, letting the ointment jar slide into the bath and rattle to a stop at the bottom.

He can’t take his eyes off Draco as he gets to his feet and settles his hands at the waistband of those far-too-big trousers; all he can do is keep breathing, because this is actually happening. Hesitating for only the briefest of moments, Harry stands, too, ignoring the ache in his back and focusing on the intent in those grey eyes that never waver from his. The words ‘I want you to come with me’ are not and do not need to be exchanged—he’s never been more nervous, but he’s also never been more certain.

Hands unsteady, he slips his fingers under the hem of his shirt and cardigan and pulls both over his head at once, dropping them to the floor in a damp tangle, feeling Draco’s eyes on him, all over him. He’s never been particularly comfortable undressing in front of anyone, but there’s something in this brazen new vulnerability that thrills him, crackles over his skin and rips a breathless smile from him that Draco mirrors instantly. Heart hurting in the most wonderful way, Harry abandons his jeans and underwear in a matter of seconds and pulls open the glass door of the shower cubicle. The steam pours out and surrounds him, caressing his cold, damp skin, and he lets it, tipping back his head and relishing the heat before turning back to Draco.

And he’s right there, right behind him, and Harry lets himself stare, just for a second, because this Draco—his Draco—is so buttoned up that it’s almost shocking to see him naked. Shocking and beautiful, Harry amends silently, because behind the bruises and spell-burns are those same sharp angles and long, lean lines that demand to be touched, flat palm over cool skin, and Harry does, because it would take more than a few nerves to stop him now, gently, though, carefully, looking for
undamaged skin and catching his breath when Draco lets out a soft sigh and closes his eyes.

Lost in a haze of steam now, Harry steps backwards and under the hot water, catching Draco’s wrist and pulling him gently into the cubicle. As he shuts the door and seals them in, shutting out the cold air of the bathroom and the rest of the night up to this point, he realises that this probably isn’t the best thing for his bandaged hand—the dressings are already becoming damp and ragged—but he doesn’t care. He just doesn’t. All that matters is this, because this, at last, is real. This exists despite all of his stupid decisions and he wants every single second of it.

He wants Draco’s fingers wrapped around his hips, thumbs brushing over sensitive lines and making him gasp as he shudders and grows hot and hard under the water. He wants Draco pulled tight against him, chest to chest and mouths almost... almost sliding together. He wants and he takes and he has, watching the heat flare in Draco’s eyes before he leans in that last fraction of an inch and kisses him. It’s tentative at first, a question, a graze of lips with so much held back, but when Draco answers with the hot brush of his tongue against Harry’s and the bite of his fingernails into the small of Harry’s back, Harry’s hesitation is washed away and he throws himself into the kiss, relief bursting in his chest as he threads both hands into Draco’s wet hair and kisses him with deliberate, slow intensity. Their mouths fit together exactly as he knew they would, but still there is so much different about this that he cannot explain.

He doesn’t try. He doesn’t care, because Draco is sliding his fingers over Harry’s wet skin, up his back and over his shoulders and over the back of his neck, making him shiver, pulling him harder into the kiss and releasing rough little sighs into his mouth, every one of which seems to travel directly down his spine to his cock, now hard and aching against Draco’s stomach. Everything is hot and hazy and delicious-slippery and it feels fucking perfect.

As Draco pulls away, breathless, and starts to trail soft, hot, open-mouthed kisses down Harry’s neck, he groans and throws out a hand to the tiles for support, suddenly feeling unsteady and lightheaded as a memory from the glimpse flashes into life.

_He watches a shudder travel down from Draco’s shoulders. Watches him lift his hands and push his fingers through hair that is soaked golden blond. Watches._

“Are you coming in?”

_His stomach performs a little flip. “In... to... the shower? In there? With you?”_

Harry smiles, grateful for the cascade of hot water down his back as he shivers, remembering how he just stood there, watching, terrified of his feelings. Impulsively, he grabs Draco’s wrist in his uninjured hand and runs his fingers over the water-slicked black lines of the mark and the soft patch of skin near the crook of his elbow where he still almost expects to find the four familiar letters.

“What are you doing?” Draco murmurs, pulling away from his neck and allowing himself to be drawn into another painfully slow kiss.

“Just looking at you,” Harry whispers against his lips, letting his hand drop from Draco’s arm to his waist, his hip, and then, with a low groan, to press against his erection, hard and insistent against his palm.

Draco makes a low, rough sound and pulls back just far enough to stare at Harry, eyes darkened with need. “I was always taught that you look with your eyes,” he says with a tiny smile.
“I don’t think one more rule broken tonight will hurt, will it?” Harry asks, trying to hang on to that smile, and maybe to encourage the bright, dazzling one that has been so absent this evening.

Draco says nothing but his smile widens for a fraction of a second, and though it still looks rather weary, Harry’s heart thumps in approval. He feels brave as he closes his fingers around Draco’s cock; he looks into his eyes the whole time, knowing he has nothing to hide, finally, and needing to see his face as he’s being touched.

“Oh,” Draco whispers, tightening his hold on Harry as his hips jerk into the touch and his knees seem to weaken beneath him. “Oh, fuck yes.”

Already overwhelmed, Harry pulls him closer under the hot water, ignores the wet bandages that are starting to slip off on their own, and slides his fist over Draco’s erection in a slow, steady rhythm.

“Good,” he whispers, having no better reply, and Draco smiles, eyes closed, and wraps his fingers around Harry’s cock, dragging a gasp from him.

This is really happening, he repeats to himself as he reaches for Draco’s mouth once more, tasting his own toothpaste and wanting to smile, but then Draco’s fingers caress the slick, sensitive head of his cock and it’s all he can do not to forget what he’s doing and whimper helplessly. It’s been so long, and this... he’s spent more time thinking about this than he cares to admit. Now here it is, and fuck, it feels good.

Breathless and soaked under the relentless pulsing of the water, they move together, finding a rhythm and sinking into it, hands stroking firmly over hot, hard flesh, gripping at shoulders, hips and buttocks, straining for as much contact as possible, needing to touch, to feel, to share rapid breaths and messy kisses as they move inevitably, desperately toward release. Conscious of Draco’s injuries, Harry keeps his touches light and careful, sliding his own damaged hand through Draco’s hair, tracing his jaw and drawing him into kisses that effervesce through his body and urge him toward the edge.

He gasps as he finds himself pushed against the cold tiles but doesn’t stop for a moment; the feeling of being trapped as Draco rocks against him only spurs him on, and when Draco opens his eyes, groans and shudders and comes in his hand, Harry’s cock jumps and he loses himself, dropping his head to Draco’s shoulder and pressing his mouth to his clean skin as the heat floods him.

For some time, neither of them moves. Harry’s fine with that; the tiles are pleasantly warm against his back now, and his head is rather comfortable on Draco’s shoulder. He releases Draco’s cock and slides both arms around his waist, sighing contentedly. Yes, he would be perfectly happy to stay right here. Unfortunately, it seems that Draco has other ideas.

“I really need to wash my hair before I lose the use of my hands,” he sighs, pressing a kiss to the skin just below Harry’s earlobe.

“That likely?” Harry asks, wholly reluctant to move.

“No, but I’d rather not take the risk,” Draco says, extricating himself and hunting around for Harry’s shampoo. “You need a wash, anyway. You do know that just standing under the water isn’t really enough?”

“I didn’t just stand under the water,” Harry points out, giving up and handing Draco the right bottle. “I did loads of other stuff. And so did you.”
Draco snorts. “Yes. All of which are further reasons to get clean. Here.” He throws Harry a flannel.

Harry sighs, squeezes some spiced orange stuff onto the flannel and starts to very carefully wash Draco’s back. In reality, he’s not in the slightest reluctant or exasperated; he’s drifting in a delicious mist of satiation and warmth and love for this man who is examining his perfectly serviceable bottle of shampoo as though it might poison him.

“I meant for you to clean yourself with that,” he says, sounding amused.

“Who says romance is dead?” Harry wonders, finishing his task anyway and smiling when Draco leans against him to wash his hair with slow, languid strokes of his fingers.

“I don’t know,” Draco says, “but I imagine clean people have more opportunities for romance than dirty ones.”

Harry laughs. He soaps himself up with the orange stuff and gives his hair a cursory swill—he hasn’t been swapping bodies with dandruff-ridden gangsters—then pulls Draco back to him, kissing him with dedication as the hot water and fresh, warm-smelling bubbles wash away the last of the night.

They make their way into the bedroom without turning on the lamps and flop onto the bed, wrapped in towels, steam still spiralling from their hot skin.

“This mattress is lovely,” Draco says, curling on his side and only wincing a little from the pain of his bruises.

“Thanks,” Harry whispers, punching his pillow and resting a hand at Draco’s waist. In the dark, the question has begun to nag at him. He chews his lip. “Draco... about what you heard?”

There’s no answer, and Draco’s breathing is slow and even.

Harry sighs. Maybe tomorrow.

**~*~**

When Harry opens his eyes, the first thing he is aware of is the dull, throbbing ache in his fingers and the stiffness of his back. His head, though, is surprisingly clear, and the second his eyes fall on Draco, sprawled on his stomach, fast asleep and breathing steadily, Harry couldn’t care less about which parts of him are causing him pain. He smiles, smoothing a careful palm down Draco’s spine, and then he remembers Misu.

He levers himself up on one elbow and peers into her tank, panic curling rapidly inside him. She hasn’t moved from the spot where he left her the night before, but she seems to be stirring; her movements are slow and vague, just the slightest shift of her head against her coils and the tiniest twitch of her damaged tail. Relieved, Harry’s mind races; he has no idea where to take her and he feels all at once a colossal failure as a pet owner, but there isn’t time for that. Still thinking, he leans over and pokes the tomato clock.

“Nine sixteen,” it announces, staring up at him with one beady eye.

He stares back for a moment, startled that he has managed to sleep for so long, and then, reasoning that it’s definitely enough of a civilised hour for a vet’s surgery to be open, he scrambles out of bed, stretching in the cautious sunlight and attempting to shake off the strange sensation that only comes
from going to bed damp and half wrapped in a towel. He pauses, halfway to the wardrobe, and looks at Draco. He wonders whether to wake him but he looks so peaceful, despite the bruises and burns. He’s going to be alright, that’s the main thing; bruises fade. Wounds heal. Right now, though, he needs to sleep, and it’s with more than a little reluctance that Harry resumes his task.

After throwing on some clean jeans and a thin sweater, Harry scribbles a note and leaves it on the bedside table next to Draco:

*Going to find a vet for Misu. Shouldn’t be too long.*

*If you hang around, I might even make breakfast.*

*H*

Sighing, he scoops up Misu and retrieves a cardboard box from the bottom of the wardrobe, punching air holes into it with his wand and placing her carefully inside. As he quietly pulls open the door, he catches sight of his reflection—his hair is doing something very bizarre, but it’ll have to do.

“Where is this?” Misu asks faintly. “Am going back to the place with the other snakes?”

Harry stops on the landing, gazing down at the box. “Yes, as a matter of fact,” he says decisively; it’s as good a place to start as any. “But don’t worry, you’ll be coming home afterwards.”

“Coming home,” she repeats drowsily. Harry Disapparates.

Seconds later he is racing through Diagon Alley with the little box tucked under his good arm, heading for the Magical Menagerie. Once inside, hebreathes in the warm, musty smell of animals and glances around, hugely relieved to see the familiar bearded man behind the counter. The man doesn’t notice him until he actually sets the box down and clears his throat, involved as he is in shifting one of those immense green snails from his notepad. At the sound of Harry’s cough, the snail waves its antennae curiously and produces a passable imitation of the sound.

“Hello, Mr Potter,” the man says cheerfully. “How’s that corn snake doing? I saw her in the paper with you a few weeks ago, you know!”

Harry hesitates, hands wrapping around the edges of Misu’s box. “Great... she’s doing great, but she’s injured. I need a vet.”

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that—do you want me to have a look first?” he offers.

Harry grants him a grim smile and slides the box across the counter.

“Alright, little one,” he murmurs, fitting his thumbs underneath the lid and lifting it carefully. He pales.

Harry chews on his lip, anxious. “Is there anything you can do?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start. St Francis’ is your best bet.” The bearded man reseals Misu’s box and looks at Harry. “Do you know where St Mungo’s is?”

Harry nods, reclaiming the box.
“It’s right across the road. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks very much,” Harry says, so light with gratitude that it’s all he can do to head for the door without vaulting over the counter and giving the bearded man a hug.

**~*~**

St Francis’ Centre for Animals of All Kinds is clean. The walls and floors are spotless in brilliant white, and everything in sight seems to sparkle. The waiting room is almost full—a lady with a huge Irish Wolfhound, a pair of little girls with a bedraggled looking Puffskein, a teenage boy with a heavily bandaged cat, and a shrivelled old couple who are struggling to hold onto their Crup, which appears to be twice its usual size—but the animal smell is barely discernible above the all-pervading, clean-clean-clean scent of peppermint that seems to be wafting down from the ceiling.

Harry is told to take a seat and he obeys, choosing the one furthest away from the oversized Crup, who seems a little too loud and boisterous for the barely conscious Misu. He keeps an eye on her as he waits, slipping his hand into the box every now and then to stroke her but deciding not to start a conversation for fear of alarming the other occupants of the waiting room with an unexpected demonstration of Parseltongue. The little girls with the Puffskein glance over at him frequently and their failure to properly cover their whispers and giggles makes it abundantly clear to Harry that they are having quite the discussion about him.

The strange thing is, he really doesn’t mind. In fact, the next time they look at him, he smiles at them. They dissolve into helpless laughter and Harry, still smiling, turns to watch the goings-on at the reception desk. He amuses himself for a moment or two watching the reflections of the receptionist’s sparkly earrings spinning and flickering across the ceiling, then turns his attention to the small blonde-haired child who appears to be helping her. She looks to be eight or nine years old, dressed in untied canvas shoes and purple dungarees, and is clearly bursting with energy.

“Allie, can you find me the file for Murphy... ah... Baker, please?” the receptionist asks quietly, before turning to the waiting room and almost bellowing: “Mrs Baker and Murphy, please—the vet is ready to see you now.”

The little girl, who has jumped down from her perch on the edge of the desk to rummage for the file, pops up just as the lady and her huge dog approach reception. She hands it over with a bright smile and Harry is struck by a sudden prickle of recognition. He has seen that little girl before, but he’s buggered if he can remember where or when. As the waiting room slowly empties, he turns the image of her face over and over in his mind and gets absolutely nowhere.

By the time his name is called, the seats have once more begun to fill up, and Harry has no idea what time it is. No doubt Draco is awake by now, though; Harry hopes he has decided to investigate the kitchen instead of inferring that Harry has abandoned him.

He takes his file from the little girl and smiles to himself as the young receptionist looks up at him for a second too long, flushes, and pretends intense interest in her quill.

Finally, he pushes open the door of the vet’s surgery and all at once, everything makes sense. He holds his triumph in, though, because he has to, and just smiles at the woman standing in front of the clean, scrubbed table.

“Hi,” he says, setting down the box.
“Hello,” Jenny replies, taking the file and flipping through it. “Not much here—I take it this is your first visit?”

“Yeah,” Harry admits, feeling sheepish. “She didn’t really need anything before now, but I know I should’ve... registered her, or whatever.”

“No worries.” Jenny closes the file and smiles. “What can I do for you and Misu?”

Harry sighs, resting both hands on the edge of the table. “You’d better just have a look.”

“Alright,” Jenny says, eyes flicking to Harry’s mangled fingers, which have been hastily wrapped in an old (clean) handkerchief and bound with a rushed sticking spell. “Let’s have a look, then.”

She draws the drowsy Misu gently out of the box, holding her expertly behind the head and supporting her weight on one hand. She frowns, pursing her lips in concentration as she examines the ragged mess that had once been the end of Misu’s tail.

She glances at Harry. “This is a curse wound.”

“Yes,” he admits, and her eyes linger on him as though willing him to say more. He holds firm, thinking of Ron’s cover up nightmare and the simple fact that he really doesn’t want to talk about it. At last, Jenny’s sharp eyes slip back to Misu and she appears to let go of the subject.

“I’m afraid it won’t heal.”

Harry inhales sharply. “At all?”

“No. The end of her tail will have to come off... but she’ll be fine.” Jenny sets Misu down and strokes her gently with the back of a finger. “It might affect her balance for a while, and you’ll have to keep an eye on her shedding from now on—just to make sure the very end of the skin comes all the way off.”

“Right,” Harry says faintly. He stares down at Misu, who is now attempting to flip over onto her back, with limited success. “Her balance, did you say?”

Jenny nods. “Yes, but she’ll soon adapt, don’t worry.”

“What if her balance wasn’t much to write home about to start with?” Harry asks, thinking of the nightly slithers and thumps from the tank on his bedside.

Jenny smiles, apparently amused. “Well, then, maybe she won’t notice a difference.”

Harry grins. “Let’s hope not. She isn’t the most graceful creature in the world, bless her.”

“She’s a beautiful snake, though,” Jenny offers, gazing down at Misu with an appreciate eye. “Lovely unusual markings.”

Harry swells with pride. Now he knows that Misu is going to recover, everything seems lighter and more promising. “Thank you.”

Jenny draws her wand and taps it against her upper arm as she appears to wrestle with some internal dilemma. When she looks up, her features are set.
“It was you that night in Diagon Alley... before Christmas.”

“Er, yeah,” Harry agrees, heart pounding with the coincidence, wondering if he should be looking around for Boris. “Who did you think I was?”

“Well... I started to doubt it after a bit... and then Allie said...” she trails off into mumbles and fiddles with the silver clasp that holds her heavy blonde hair from her face.

“What?” Harry presses.

“Allie said, ‘no, Mum—Harry Potter’s taller than that’,” she admits, wrinkling her nose.

Harry draws himself up to his full five feet ten and a bit inches and then relaxes, smiling. “Afraid he isn’t, sorry.”

Jenny smiles back. “Sorry. Kids are always fantastically honest, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. My eldest is actually taller than me now and he likes to remind me that I’m practically miniature,” Harry says with a sigh. “And that I’m ancient, of course.”

Jenny’s eyes glow with amusement and empathy as she turns her attention back to Misu.

“Great work on the stasis charm,” she murmurs, stripping away the spell with long strokes of her wand and then drawing a shimmering blue field around Misu. “Did you do this yourself?”

“No,” Harry admits. “A friend.”

Jenny lifts a pale eyebrow. “Well, if your friend isn’t around next time, these are my after hours details,” she says, Summoning a card from a nearby stack into her hand and handing it to him without ever taking her eyes away from Misu.

“Thanks.”

“What is this? Feel... strange,” Misu whispers, trying to stretch up to Harry but flopping back to the table each time.

“It’s okay,” Harry soothes, crouching beside the table so that she can see him, fingers wrapped around the hard wooden edges so as not to disturb Jenny’s humming blue field. “You’re going to be fine, I promise.”

“What happened? Am... broken,” she says quietly, and Harry is awash with guilt. She should never have been there in the first place; if Harry had actually managed to think before acting for once in his life, she could have been safely at home in her tank instead of sitting in a pocket directly in the line of fire.

“I’m...” Harry sighs. He glances up at Jenny, who is watching their conversation, transfixed.

“I’d completely forgotten you could do that,” she says. “It’s brilliant. I wish I could talk to all my patients like that... let them know that they don’t need to be scared.”

“What should I tell her?” Harry asks, watching Misu’s attempts to squirm around and look at her
“Just tell her what’s going to happen,” she advises. “Tell her she was hit with a spell and now I need to use another spell to take away the damaged parts. Tell her that it won’t hurt and that she might feel a bit odd afterwards but she’ll quickly get used to it. Please tell her that she can trust me... if you think she can, obviously.”

Harry nods and begins to talk softly to Misu, drawing her attention away from her injury and translating Jenny’s words as best he can. When he’s done, he straightens up, back protesting all the way. “We both trust you completely,” he announces, and Jenny smiles.

“I’m glad. Would you mind holding her? Just reach into the box very slowly and it’ll be fine... that’s great,” Jenny says as Harry obeys, holding Misu firmly but carefully and remaining as still as he can while she cuts away the damaged flesh with her wand, eyes narrowed and escaped strands of pale hair flopping across her forehead.

The unfamiliar spell crackles and hisses and fills the small room with an odd, almost metallic scent. Misu doesn’t struggle against Harry’s hands but lies still, pain-free but definitely alarmed, and Harry finds it difficult to watch the precision slices of Jenny’s wand as they separate Misu from the last two inches of her tail and seal the wound with impressive neatness. By the time she withdraws, Harry could almost believe that he was looking at a snake that had been born with a slightly stubby tail, and Misu, now free to explore, seems to be relieved to be rid of the tangled mess that has been attached to her for the last twelve hours.

“So much better!” she declares, and the brightness in her voice lifts Harry’s heart. “Am smaller than before, though. Must continue to grow!”

Harry laughs.

Jenny dispels the blue field and runs her fingers carefully over the neat little stump. “What’s she saying?”

“She’s a little upset that she’s not as big as she was before,” Harry confesses.

Jenny grins and reaches for a stack of forms. “She’ll grow. She’s only a baby.”

“Try telling her that.”

“Snakes are as bad as children, then,” she muses, tucking her hair behind her ear and starting to scribble away at the topmost form. “You can pick her up now if you want; she’s good to go.”

Harry doesn’t need to be asked twice. Taking great care, he scoops up Misu—she’s cold, so he feeds her into the sleeve of his sweater until just the tip of her snout pokes out. The rush of relief brings with it sudden weariness, and he allows himself to lean against Jenny’s table as she writes up the details of the procedure and chats away to him.

“I didn’t go along with her straight away, you know,” she says, flicking an earnest glance up at Harry. “That it wasn’t you we saw, I mean.”

Harry frowns for a moment, puzzled. “Oh,” he says at last, understanding. “Don’t worry, I’m not offended.”
“That’s a relief. I did think maybe you recognised us from the joke shop—you know, Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes—we’re in there all the time, and I know you’re friends with George Weasley. It’s Allie’s favourite place in the world.”

“I don’t blame her,” Harry says. “My kids are the same.”

Jenny smiles. “I always wonder where all his strange ideas come from. I bet he’s fascinating,” she muses, dipping her quill and continuing to scribble furiously.

“He’s a pretty interesting guy,” Harry agrees, and as he gazes at her, a strange but rather brilliant idea flashes into life inside him. He thinks of the bright, happy Fred in the glimpse, the one who would’ve done anything for his brother, and the one who was engaged to a clever, laid back blonde called Jenny. He wonders. There’s a daughter in the waiting room, but there are no rings on her fingers; still, that’s far from conclusive proof that a person isn’t married.

“No, I’m divorced,” Jenny says, glancing up from her scribbling.

“Excuse me?”

“You asked me if I was married.” She starts writing again, looking amused. “I wondered if you’d meant to say it out loud.”

Cringing inwardly, Harry closes his eyes and hopes to disappear into a hole in the ground.

“No, I really didn’t mean to. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” she murmurs, and he can hear the smile in her voice along with the scratch of her quill.

Harry opens his eyes reluctantly. “You know, I really wasn’t trying to... er...”

Jenny grins. “I know.”

Harry closes his mouth and focuses on keeping it closed.

“All done,” she announces at last, turning around the stack for him to add his signature. “Except...”

“What?”

She wrinkles her nose again, regarding him apologetically before indicating his badly wrapped hand. “Do you want me to have a look at this?”

Harry hesitates. This cannot look good. A man and his snake come into her surgery with identical nasty curse wounds... she must be wondering what the hell he’s been up to. Still, he doesn’t suppose there’s any chance of rescuing her impression of him now.

“I know I’m not a Healer,” she continues, “but I just have this feeling that you aren’t going to get it seen to.”

“I’ve had it bandaged up...” he attempts. “By an Auror...”

“I’m not going to ask... well, except to say that I don’t really believe an Auror would bandage your hand in an old hankie.”
“Well, no... I... it’s really a long story,” Harry admits.

Jenny shrugs and holds out her hand for his, and Harry can’t help feeling that he doesn’t have much of a choice here. Her face is stern, reminiscent of Hermione’s or Molly Weasley’s or worse—Helga’s. He shudders and allows Jenny to take custody of his hand. If she can fix Misu so beautifully, he has nothing to worry about.

Frowning, she removes the makeshift bandage and cleans away the last of the dried blood that is clinging to the nail beds.

“I’m afraid it’s the same story here,” she says, indicating the raw surfaces of the two damaged fingers, each of which are almost half an inch shorter than they were before. “There’s no restoring those sections, but they’ll heal alright now. They’re nice clean cuts, unlike hers,” she adds, glancing at Misu, who now seems to have fallen asleep inside Harry’s sleeve.

“Yeah, I was lucky,” Harry rasps, watching Jenny as she wraps his fingers in a potion-soaked cloth, followed by layers of bandages on top. The whole thing smells spicy and surrounds his hand in a pleasant, pulsing warmth that he finds rather soothing.

“I’m going to suggest that you wear a sling for a couple of days at least, just so that you don’t keep accidentally knocking it,” Jenny says, releasing his hand but not softening her fierce expression. “I’d also advise you to stay away from that dirty workshop of yours, but—”

“My workshop is not dirty,” Harry says indignantly.

Jenny sighs. “I’m sure it’s very sanitary, as workshops go, but I’m also sure it’s full of smoke and splinters and people, all of which are potentially bad for your healing.”

Harry attempts to fold his arms, then remembers Misu and his bulky dressing and gives up, choosing instead to match Jenny’s severe stare with one of his own. “I can’t close the shop. Seriously.”

“Allright... well, in that case, I strongly suggest you don’t make anything new and you get someone to help you with lifting and carrying, cleaning, and taking money until this is no longer an open wound. Okay?”

Harry lets out his breath slowly, knowing he is defeated. He supposes he should be grateful that, despite apparently noticing everything, she hasn’t asked a single difficult question. Which is more than he can say of himself. “Fine.”

“Great. I don’t know whether to be horrified or impressed that you brought your snake to the vet before you even thought of yourself.”

Harry shrugs, smiling. “Self preservation isn’t my strongest instinct.”

Jenny’s mouth twitches at the corners. “Well, there are many of us who should be grateful for that.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harry mumbles.

“I do. Here’s your bill.”

“Right,” Harry says weakly, hoping he doesn’t look as startled as he feels.
“You’re lucky I only charged you for the snake,” Jenny says.

Harry looks up from the bill, taking in her calm eyes and her easy smile, both of which are reflected in the face of the little girl behind the reception desk, the one who loves Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.

“Alright. Let’s say I owe you a favour.”

**~*~**

Ten minutes later, Harry is clattering down the stairs into his kitchen. With Misu tucked securely into his sleeve, he sets the kettle to boil and retrieves two cups. He pulls open a drawer to fish for a teaspoon and that’s when he sees Draco’s note, sitting there on the counter with the sugar jar on top. Deflated, he pushes away the heavy jar and picks up the message. It’s short.

*I have to go and reassure my mother that I’m still alive. I am regretful about missing breakfast, believe me. I will owl you.*

*Draco.*

Harry sighs and leans back against the counter as his mood begins to freefall. He isn’t sure exactly what he expected to happen this morning, but he recognises a brush off when he sees one. Reads one.

“For fuck’s sake, Draco,” he mumbles, taking off his glasses and pressing his bandaged hand into his eye sockets, realising as he does so that even after everything that has passed between them, he’s right back to where he was last night.

Of course, he attempts to reason as he turns off the kettle and heads for the stairs, there is the possibility that Draco really didn’t want to leave, and that he’ll be back in touch by the afternoon, leaving Harry feeling relieved and like a bit of an idiot, but if he’s honest, he doesn’t believe that. People do strange things when they’re shaken and tired and startled to be alive. Things that are easy to regret once the world has settled back into place, and things that can be written off with a casual note and an ‘I shouldn’t have done that, I’m sorry’ as soon as possible. And no, Harry isn’t any kind of an expert in these things, but in the absence of actual experience, he’s seen enough films and read enough stupid magazines to understand what’s happening here.

When he walks into his bedroom and sees the immaculate bedclothes, he’s caught up in the surprisingly strong urge to fuck everything and draw the blinds, fling his clothes on the floor and collapse into bed for the rest of the day. It’s tempting, too, but he’s not going to do it. It’s fine and he’s fine and if he could drag himself into work the morning after ending his marriage, he can bloody well do it after this. Whatever this actually is.

“*Come on, let’s go,*” he says, drawing in a deep breath and pushing Draco out of his head.

“*Where?*” Misu asks, poking her head out of the end of his sleeve, eyes bright and curious once more.

“*To look for a distraction,*” he says, managing a half-smile at her quizzical expression. “*To my horrible dirty workshop.*”

When Harry arrives, it’s almost eleven, and he finds that he does at last have a queue of customers
waiting outside for him. Well, it’s more of an impatient little knot than a queue, but the sight of it makes him feel a little better nonetheless.

“He’s here!” announces a tall lady in a vast red hat, pointing excitedly at Harry with her rolled-up newspaper, and within a matter of seconds, all eyes are on him.

“Good morning, Mr Potter!” cries a little old man dressed entirely in purple.

“I’m so glad you’re here—it’s my mum’s birthday tomorrow and she really wants one of those twisty vases,” says an extremely relieved-looking woman with two small children in tow.

“Where have you been? Are you alright?” demands a sharp eyed lady with iron grey hair, pushing her way to the front of the group.

“Don’t crowd him,” chides a burly man in a surprisingly soft Celtic accent. “He’s hurt himself—look.”

Harry, who has up until this point been trying to fight his way over to the door to unlock it, freezes. At least ten pairs of eyes are now fastened upon his bandaged hand and the questions are coming thick and fast.

“What have you done?”

“Are you badly hurt, sir?”

“Were you attacked?”

“My brother’s a Healer, is there anything I can do to help?”

Harry takes a deep breath and lies as hard as he can. “I’m fine,” he calls, trying to make himself heard above the cacophony. “I had a... work-related accident and injured a couple of fingers, but there’s nothing to worry about, I assure you.”

For a moment or two, there is nothing but a soft murmuring from the group on the cobbles as they appear to consider his explanation, and then the door of the Dragondale swings open and Kari steps out into the street, stack of cups in one hand and steaming cauldron in the other.

“So,” she says loudly, attracting the attention of the group away from Harry with ease. “Who wants half price spiced pumpkin juice?”

Catching Harry’s eye, she smiles, and he smiles back, grateful for the rescue attempt.

“It’s April,” the lady in the red hat says sniffily, leaning in to inspect the contents of the cauldron anyway.

“Yeah,” Kari shrugs. “But it’s also freezing.”

“Indeed it is, young lady,” says the old man in purple, shuffling forward and pushing a coin into the bag slung around Kari’s waist. “I’ll take one.”

“Me too,” offers the mother of the two children. “In fact, I’ll have three.”
On the doorstep, Harry shivers and thinks that he’d rather like a mug of hot spiced pumpkin juice, too, but going without is a small price to pay under the circumstances. He watches the group for a moment as they crowd around Kari, clutching steaming cups and chatting away to her as though they have completely forgotten about Harry. They haven’t, of course, and he knows he doesn’t have long until the lot of them are crowding into the workshop, so he quickly lets himself inside and lights the lamps. With a twinge of regret, he leaves the furnaces unlit; he knows that Jenny is right, but the ’shop feels cold and lifeless without the flickering flames. Feeling rebellious, he points his wand at the nearest furnace and sends it roaring into life. He feels better immediately, and no one needs to know that he isn’t planning to use it.

He installs Misu on her favourite shelf and waits. Sure enough, the people from the not-quite-queue soon begin to trickle into the workshop in much more manageable twos and threes, and during a brief lull in serving customers, he glances out of the window just in time to see Kari dragging her cauldron back into the deli. He can’t imagine she made much money from the enterprise, but then he doesn’t really think it was about that—she’s still trying to offset what she sees as her father’s exploitation of him. As far as Harry is concerned, he owes them—all of them—but it’s always nice to have someone who’s willing to rescue you.

His heart thumps. *It’s always nice to have someone who’s willing to rescue you.*

*Even if you don’t need to be rescued?*

He startles at a touch to his arm and turns to see the sharp-eyed lady. “I’m sorry, yes?”

“You were somewhere else,” she advises, holding up a glass bowl. “Does this come in any other colours?”

Harry nods, smiles, and makes a grab for the errant strands of his professionalism. The time when his ’shop is full of customers is not a time for mooning over Draco, even if the only thing he wants to do is slide to the floor, close his eyes and relive the hot-water-slick-skin-careful-careful-oh-god-*yes* of last night. With a huge effort, he focuses his mind and finds a box full of similar bowls in every colour of the rainbow. The lady is thrilled and seems to forget all about his lack of attention, buying three in shades of rich, molten ruby, and Harry deals with each customer in turn (taking money with his good hand only) until the little queue has been dispersed and the flow of people in and out of the workshop returns to its usual steady level, staying there for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon.

By three o’clock, there has been no word from Draco, but he’s determinedly not thinking about that, because the last thing he wants to be is obsessive or needy, even in his own head. The thing is, though... it just isn’t quite that simple. This isn’t about a first time (sort of) encounter with a man who buggered off in the morning. This is about Draco, the man he has hated and watched and wanted and had and loved and missed and watched and wanted all over again. This is about a relationship so fucking complicated that trying to rationalise it makes his head hurt, and the part that is turning anxiety into cold fear is the fact that Draco has heard his confession—Draco has heard *I love him, as it happens*—and Harry has heard... nothing. He has no idea what is really going on in Draco’s head and it is a bleak, unnerving place to be.

But he’s fine. He’s fine with having to explain to several disappointed customers why he’s not blowing any glass today and he’s fine with their sympathetic winces as he not-quite-lies about having an accident with a spell. He’s fine with fashioning himself a sling out of a spare apron when, as Jenny had predicted, he whacks his injured fingers against one thing too many and decides that the uncontrollable swearing that results is probably bad for business.
As the door swings open just before four, he pastes on a smile. He hasn’t yet managed to attach the sodding thing to himself after several attempts, but he’s not about to take it out on a potential customer.

“Do you want some help with that?”

Harry sags, relieved, and lets his face fall back into a frustrated scowl. “Hi, Hermione. Yes, please.”

She drops her huge handbag onto his workbench and takes the piece of rough fabric from him.

“Is it very bad?” she asks, glancing down at his bandaged hand and then up at him, dark eyes bright with concern.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry,” he says, attempting a reassuring smile. “I just have to let it heal.”

Hermione folds the fabric expertly and guides his arm into position with gentle hands. “The way Ron was telling it, you’re missing a couple of fingers,” she says, frowning and securing the sling around his neck before stepping back to examine her work.

“No, just a couple of ends, I promise. I won’t be winning any best-looking hand competitions any time soon, but I don’t think it’s going to restrict me in any way once it stops hurting. This is much better, thank you,” he says, relieved for the support and protection of the sling and realising that he should have just listened to Jenny in the first place.

“You’re welcome. I just came to check on you, really—and Misu. Is she alright?” Hermione glances around, and Harry is oddly gratified to see that she looks just as worried for Misu as she did for him.

“Over there.” Harry points. “She’s been patched up very nicely.”

Hermione looks. “Oh, little one,” she murmurs, clicking over to the shelf and stroking Misu with the utmost care. When she turns to look at Harry, her expression has shifted from concern to ferocity, and as she comes back toward him he finds himself taking a step back to match every one of hers.

“What?” he demands, finding himself next to the one roaring furnace.

She shakes her head. “What? Are you serious? Can you tell me exactly what you thought you were doing last night, leaping into an unknown and volatile situation, outnumbered ten to one? Dashing off to some creepy old swimming pool because Draco Malfoy has managed to do something idiotic, as if it will be the last time? Is any of this sounding familiar to you, Harry, because it’s certainly etched quite clearly into my mind after hearing about it from Ron at two o’clock this morning!”

Harry blinks. “Yeah, it is, but... can you keep your voice down? Someone might hear you, and...”

“No, they won’t. I put a Silencing Charm on the door. And no, I won’t keep my voice down—I’m cross with you!” she snaps, folding her arms and staring at him fiercely.

Moved and a little bit scared, Harry thinks carefully about his next words. “I’m sorry, Hermione,” he says, and she relaxes ever so slightly. “It hasn’t escaped me that it was a stupid thing to do.”

She sighs and comes to lean against the furnaces beside him, face flushed and curls tumbling over one shoulder. She looks at the floor. “It was stupid. All those years in the field and you still managed
to forget every single protocol that was designed to protect you. This isn’t the war, Harry, and you’re not invincible. You also have way too many responsibilities these days to go taking ridiculous risks with your life.” The anger has left her tone now, leaving something that is calm, sobering and wrenches painfully at Harry’s heart.

“I know. You’re right,” he almost whispers, reaching out to grab her hand in his good one and squeeze it tightly. “I just panicked when I realised what was going on because... well... I suppose I had a responsibility to what was in there, too.”

She looks up. “You mean Draco Malfoy?”

Shaking away an uncomfortable flashback of the savage kicks raining down on Draco’s motionless body, Harry nods. “He was there because of me.”

Hermione frowns and releases his hand so that she can fold her arms across her chest once more.

“I hardly think he didn’t have a choice,” she points out.

“Of course he did, but he would never have put himself in a situation like that if I hadn’t encouraged him—harangued him—into actually—”

“That isn’t your fault,” she interrupts. “He’s a grown man and he can make his own decisions. And he did. Yes, you might’ve told him to get out of his boring job and do something exciting, but Harry... for one thing, you’re making a success out of doing just that—why wouldn’t you encourage other people to go after their own secret little ambitions? And for another... do you honestly think that everything that happened to Draco last night was because of you? He wanted to try something; you gave him a push; it went wrong... but think of it this way—between you, you exposed a lowlife of a senior Ministry official and sent a load of unpleasant mobsters to Azkaban. You and Draco are both fine, and I don’t think Ron’s had such an exciting night since... well, it’s probably better not to think about that. So,” she finishes, bright eyed and slightly breathless, “you can feel guilty if you want to, but I think it's a complete waste of your time.”

Harry stares at his friend, quite unsure what to say to all that. “You’re probably right,” he manages at last. With a deep breath he continues, because she deserves to know the truth, or, at least, as much of the truth as he can tell her without another visit from Boris: “The thing about Draco is... that I... well, it’s sort of complicated,” he finishes, trying and failing to find the right words. Grown up, mature, emotionally intelligent... man words. Whatever they might be.

“I know,” Hermione says, voice soft and careful.

Harry flushes and scrubs at his messy hair, feeling suddenly awkward. Of course. “Right. Ron told you what I said in there.”

There’s an odd little sound, and when Harry turns to Hermione, she is fighting valiantly against a smile.

“What?”

“He did mention it, yes, but...” Hermione shakes her head and the smile blooms warmly on her face. “Oh, Harry. I love you, but sometimes you can be so... oblivious. Did you really think that I didn’t already know about Draco?”
Astonished, Harry just stares at her, feeling as though his heart has escaped its position and is bouncing around inside his ribcage. “It really hadn’t occurred to me that you might,” he says faintly.

She laughs, but it’s a gentle sound rather than a mocking one. “I’ve known you long enough to know what you being in love looks like,” she offers. “From there, it’s just a case of figuring out the subject, and you didn’t exactly make it hard for me.”

Harry groans. “Why do you always know everything?”

“I don’t. I’m just observant. It’s a bit annoying sometimes, actually,” Hermione admits, face scrunching in irritation as she catches sight of the time. “I have to go, but listen—keep your head together; it’s all going to be fine. Come over tonight and then I’ll make us all some dinner after I’ve put Hugo to bed. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

She hugs him in an awkward sideways fashion in order to avoid his sling and he wraps his good arm around her, knowing that he needed a good talking to and also knowing that it has only just begun.

At the door she pauses, taking down her Silencing Charm. “By the way... Ron said he gave you some good advice last night. I’m a little curious.”

Harry frowns. “Oh. I’m not sure I’d call it advice... more of a critique of my ability to choose decent partners for myself. He definitely had some interesting... er... insights, though.”

Hermione grins. “That’s sort of a relief, actually. The day Ron starts giving out sensible relationship advice...” She shudders. “See you later, Harry.”

**~*~**

Still with no owl in sight, Harry Apparates to Ottery St Catchpole that evening and walks through the village as the sun is setting. The colours are shimmering and beautiful, and the light breeze wafts the smell of spring into his nostrils as he makes his way up the winding road toward Hollybrush. Hugo, who seems to have insisted on staying up just long enough to see his Uncle Harry, is waiting for him at the door and pelts into his arms at top speed. He fails to notice the sling and pain ricochets up and down Harry’s arm as he just about manages to hold onto the wriggling, pyjama-clad child with one hand, but he doesn’t really mind. It’s always nice to have someone so pleased to see him.

“Hugo, please be careful,” Hermione warns, meeting Harry’s eyes over her son’s tousled head. “I’m sorry, I did tell him.”

“It’s fine,” Harry assures. “Why don’t I read him a story while you make dinner?” He turns to Hugo, who is gazing up at him with huge round eyes. “Shall we read the one about crocodiles?”

Hugo heaves a dramatic sigh. “Uncle Harry, you’ll have to be more pacific. I have lots of books about crocodiles.”

“Specific,” Hermione murmurs automatically. She smiles. “Thank you.”

In Hugo’s multicoloured bedroom, Harry reads three stories before the little boy’s eyes begin to close—one about the crocodile king, one about the crocodile who went to Hogwarts, and one about a family of vegetarian crocodiles. He’s enjoying himself so much that he almost feels reluctant to
follow Hermione into the kitchen when she comes to retrieve him. It’s safe and quiet in this room, and no one is going to quiz him about his feelings or worse, what he may or may not have got up to last night. Still, the warm aroma of chicken pie is tempting and it draws him right out and to the table before he knows it. His stomach growls covetously, causing him to wonder if he remembered to eat today.

He thinks probably not, but he won’t tell Hermione that.

Ron slumps into a chair at the table and shoots a weary grin in Harry’s direction.

“Alright, mate? How’s the hand?”

Harry stares at his sling, hoping that Hermione has remembered he will have to eat his meal one-handed. “It’s alright, just a bit sore. Misu’s fine, too; I left her at home tonight. Did you get any sleep?”

Ron rubs at his face. “Not much.” He yawns widely. “Still, I’m young and vital and all that, eh?”

“Absolutely,” Harry mumbles, catching the yawn. When he opens his eyes, the table has been laid with three steaming plates and a gravy boat. He looks at his own and smiles. Hermione has seen fit to ensure that everything on his plate is arranged neatly in bite-sized chunks; the vegetables and potatoes are miniature, and she has even cut him six or seven little slices of pie instead of one large one, allowing him to eat comfortably without asking for help. He picks up his fork and digs in. “Thank you, Hermione.”

As they eat, there are no big questions, and Harry is grateful for the reprieve. He works his way through the generous plate of food as Ron and Hermione chat about their days, about the gold star Hugo received for his art project, about their latest letter from Rose, and Harry just basks in the warm, comfortable domesticity of it all, certainly not allowing a moment’s thought for what Draco and his parents are talking about at their own dinner table, if anything at all.

“Do you want a glass of wine, Harry?” Hermione says eventually, pushing away her plate with a contented sigh.

Harry smiles. “One won’t hurt.”

“Great. Ron, it’s your turn to get up—there’s a bottle of white something-or-other in the pantry,” Hermione instructs, waiting until Ron has heaved himself out of his chair with a mock salute and disappeared out of sight before turning to Harry. “I think the awkward questions are just around the corner,” she advises, dropping her voice.

“How do you know?” he whispers, even though he has been preparing himself, too.

“Because I know he’s been dying to ask you but he wouldn’t start a conversation like that too soon in case it interfered with his dinner,” she whispers back, and the smile that tugs at the corners of her mouth is completely infectious.

“Why are you whispering?” Ron demands, reappearing with the bottle and glasses.

“Erm... I thought I heard Hugo,” Hermione says quickly. “But I didn’t.”

Ron nods and pours them each a generous glass. He takes his seat and an appreciative sip of his wine
and then fixes Harry with a speculative eye. “So... you got home alright last night?”

Harry hesitates. All of a sudden, he wants to laugh. “Yes,” he says solemnly.

“That’s good.” Ron nods slowly. There’s an unusual air about him, almost as though he fancies himself as a member of the Wizengamot. Harry waits. “And I noticed that you and Malfoy left... the scene... at approximately the same time.”

“We left at exactly the same time,” Harry corrects, voice wobbling dangerously now.

“Is that so?” Ron booms, and Hermione loses it altogether. She abandons her wine, drops her face into her hands and descends into silent giggles. Harry snorts. Ron sighs, clearly exasperated, and when he speaks again, he sounds like himself once more. “What’s the matter with you?”

Hermione lifts her head. “Is that SO?” she mimics, lets out a little squeak and disappears back behind her hands.

Bewildered, Ron looks from his wife to Harry as though demanding to know exactly what is so funny.

“I think she’s just had a long day,” Harry attempts, still unable to temper his grin. “But if you wanted to ask me if Draco came home with me last night—yes, he did.”

Ron gazes across the table at him for several seconds, wide-eyed and startled, and then he, too, is grinning. “I told you so, didn’t I?”

Harry sips his wine, trying to remember such a moment. “Did you?”

“Yes,” Ron says, indignant. “You said that you didn’t think anything was going to happen between you, and I said that people like Malfoy don’t save someone’s life unless they mean something to them.”

“Ah, yeah.” All at once, Harry is back in the ticket booth, tired and battered and in no place to appreciate Ron’s rationalisation of Draco’s behaviour. “You did say that. I don’t know, though... he buggered off and left me a note this morning when I went out to take Misu to the vet. I haven’t heard from him since.”

Hermione, now back in control of herself, narrows her eyes. “Did the note say he would be in touch?”

“He said he had to go and see his mother and that he’d owl me,” Harry says.

“It’s probably a good thing he did, mate—she was absolutely frantic last night, wasn’t she?” he says, looking at Hermione.

She nods. “I wouldn’t read too much into it, Harry. And it’s nice when people are good to their mothers,” she says rather fiercely, smiling at Ron, who turns a deep red.

“Yeah,” Harry agrees, propping up his chin on his good hand. “I’m just... frustrated. Every time I feel like I’m getting somewhere, he backs off or does some weird little sidestep that just confuses the fuck out of me.” He glances at his friends. “Sorry... is this really weird for you?”
“Which part?” Hermione asks quietly, turning her wineglass in circles on the table.

“The... er... Draco Malfoy part,” Harry says, drowning his sudden anxiety in a huge gulp of wine, shivering as the dryness scrapes across his palate.

Hermione shakes her head. “Harry, we’ve watched you becoming friends over the last few months—why would we suddenly have an objection now that sex is involved?”

“I don’t know, but it’s pretty weird hearing you say sex,” Harry admits.

“I’m not a prude, Harry,” she scolds, drinking her wine and flipping back her hair in a decent impression of nonchalance. “How do you think Rose and Hugo got here?”

Ron laughs and leans over to press a kiss to her cheek. “I was there, too,” he says gravely.

Harry groans and covers his eyes, pretending disgust. “That, I really don’t want to think about.”

“It’s probably best if you don’t; I don’t want you becoming too intimidated to take your clothes off ever again,” Ron says, smirking and plying the wine bottle. “The point is... Malfoy’s not my favourite person in the world, but you are, so... wait, that didn’t come out right.” Ron’s freckled nose wrinkles in confusion as Harry laughs and Hermione flings herself onto her arms on the table, mock offended. “I mean... I mean that you’re my best friend and it’s not for me to judge what you want, and you know... by all accounts, he isn’t such a bad bloke these days; even Ginny says so,” Ron declares triumphantly.

Warm and a bit wobbly inside, Harry grins at his friends. Ron raises his glass to him and then swallows the contents in one, and Hermione lifts her head from her arms and gives him that smile he’s known since he was eleven years old, the one that tells him, even if he doesn’t believe it himself, that everything is going to be alright.

**~*~**

Despite leaving Ron and Hermione’s cottage feeling cautiously cheerful, Harry’s sleep is fractured and fitful, and when the tomato squelches him into consciousness, his first feeling is one of despondency. He is, of course, alone in his bedroom. Not that he thought he wouldn’t be. In fact, he can’t say he’d be too impressed if someone had managed to creep into his room during the night.

“You’re an idiot,” he says, staring up at the ceiling. It doesn’t contradict him.

For the want of something better to do, he rolls out of bed, showers and dresses, just about remembering to stuff his arm into his sling before he leaves the house, Misu stowed safely away in his pocket. Halfway through the morning, tired of sitting around and looking at all his glassblowing equipment, he stalks out into the warm, drizzly morning and heads for the Post Office, seeking out a second—or third, he supposes—opinion.

Back at the workshop, he lasts only minutes before his restraint breaks. He’s bored, but it’s not just that. He doesn’t just want to make something—he needs to. He’s startled by the revelation that, in a relatively short space of time, he has become completely reliant on his creative outlet for stress relief, for grounding himself, for dealing with the strange little things that life sends his way, and now that he has been not only incapacitated but told he cannot get out his pipes and light his furnaces and make something new, he is restless and inflamed by agitation.
Throwing down the book he has been pointlessly trying to read, he draws his wand and lights all three furnaces with a single slash of his wand. He’s alone, he can be as dramatic as he likes. With one hand and a good degree of stubbornness, he drags his box of grey glass and his slenderest copper pipe onto the workbench. Just about resisting the urge to hurl his sling across the room, he finds a tall stool and sets himself up at the bench, finding, after a few messy attempts, a position in which he can rest his bandaged arm on the surface and work with just his right hand, using his wand and the taut fabric of his sling to manoeuvre glass and pipe and tools around the table.

It’s difficult and awkward work; he’s soon sweat-sticky and gasping for breath on the smoke and fumes, but he doesn’t care. If it’s a choice between this and sitting around, drinking coffee and gnawing on baklava while he waits for customers and waits for Draco, then he’ll take a bit of discomfort. It does occur to him, as he’s transferring his fifth delicate, silvery grey piece to the cooling rack, that there’s nothing stopping him from owling Draco first. Hot on the heels of that thought, though, is the memory of his last attempt to ‘casually’ converse with an absent Draco, and, all things considered, he thinks he’d rather wait than die of embarrassment.

Sighing, Harry shoves his next batch of glass into the furnace and picks up Misu, draping her around his neck and dancing her around the ’shop floor with an astounding lack of coordination.

He’s getting too old for this.

Fortunately, Blaise, perhaps sensing the frustration behind his message, makes it to the ’shop by the very next afternoon.

“So, are you going to share the nature of the emergency?” he says, settling himself on his usual workbench and helping himself to Harry’s half-finished bag of crisps. “These are strange.”

“That’s why I didn’t finish them,” Harry advises. “And I didn’t say there was an emergency.”

Blaise grins. “I read between the lines,” he says, upending the bag and tipping the contents into his mouth.

Harry snorts. He can’t really argue with that. Instead, he levers himself up onto the bench beside Blaise, taking the empty packet back from him and wrapping it around his fingers.

“I just wondered if you’d seen Draco,” he says at last, folding the plastic and letting the jagged edges drag against his palm. “I realise I’m starting to sound like an overprotective mother or something but I’m sort of... worried.”

“Hide nor hair, my friend,” Blaise says. “Has something happened?”

In spite of himself, Harry laughs. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“I’m all ears,” Blaise declares, shifting his great bulk so that he can more easily make eye contact. “Well, for the next hour or so, and then Neville and I have to go and meet Mr Wicklow in Abergavenny.”

“The Mr Wicklow?”

Blaise’s eyes widen dramatically. “The very same.”

Harry chews on his lip. “Alright. I’ll try to give you the short version.”
The short version of events (which is, at the very least, what Blaise deserves, and Harry has no doubt that he can be trusted) still takes the best part of an hour, during which Blaise makes all the right noises and doesn’t look away from Harry once. Well, once, but only because they are interrupted by a customer, and he can deal with that.

“Harry,” Blaise says at last, “your life is truly without a dull moment.”

“Yeah, there is that.”

“If I know Draco, and I think I know him as well as he allows anyone to know him... except you, it appears,” he amends, wiggling an eyebrow at Harry.

“Not helping,” Harry says faintly.

“Forgive me. What I’m trying to say is that Draco is a very proud person.”

“I’d noticed,” Harry says, managing a dry smile this time.

“Well, that’s something. There are plenty who don’t,” Blaise says gravely. “He has to deal with the idea that he had to be rescued, and that you were the one to rescue him. If he feels for you as I suspect he does, it will be something of a challenge for him to accept.”

“He was pretty sore about the whole rescuing thing,” Harry sighs, remembering Draco’s utterly indignant expression as they had waited together on the cold floor outside the ticket booth.

“That sounds like the man I know and love,” Blaise says, filling the shop with his rumbling laughter. “Seriously, though, Harry—he isn’t the sort of man to... er... shower and run, if you know what I mean.”

Face heating, Harry pretends intense interest in his folded crisp packet. Why he had to mention that particular detail, he doesn’t know, but it’s too late now. Blaise just seems to have a talent for making him say the most ridiculous things.

“Well, I want to believe you, but there’s always the chance he’s... I don’t know, had a blow to the head and forgotten who he is, or caught vanishing sickness, or...”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, old bean,” Blaise interrupts.

Harry shrugs. “That’s all very well for you to say.”

“No, really,” Blaise insists, and suddenly he’s lowering himself to the floor and poking Harry in the side.

“Why not?”

Blaise grants him a seraphic smile. “Because he’s just walked past your window.”

Harry’s heart leaps. Instinctively he turns to look out into the street but the cobbles are bare.

“Trust me,” Blaise says, grinning, and as the sharp knock reverberates around the workshop, he Disapparates, leaving Harry alone and coiled tight with anticipation.
Seized with the desire to appear as industrious as possible, Harry throws himself across the room and starts picking through a box of glass as though his life depends on it.

“Come in,” he calls, loathing the scratchiness of his voice. “We’re open, you don’t need to knock.”

After a moment, the door swings open and Draco steps inside, pressing it carefully closed behind him.

“I thought perhaps caution was advisable under the circumstances,” he says, and Harry is gratified to be able to see right through his attempt at nonchalance.

“Which circumstances are those?” he asks, and he knows his own attempt is just as poor. Unable to take his eyes off Draco, his fingers slip among the glass pieces and the sharp edges scratch at his skin.

“It’s fairly complicated, but... you were there for most of it, Harry.”

Draco takes a couple of steps across the stone flags, smiling faintly and folding his arms across his chest. In shirtsleeves, unbuttoned waistcoat and dark trousers, he looks almost casual, but it takes Harry a moment or two to realise just what is so different about him. His hair, now clean and dry, is free of all strange unguents and has been allowed to fall across his forehead. Clearly unused to having it dangling into his eyes, Draco shakes his head and fiddles with the soft, pale strands, and Harry smiles, pulse racing.

“Yeah, I suppose I was. You look... good... healthy, I mean.”

Draco nods, tapping his fingers against his upper arms in careful sequence. “Thank you. I’m feeling much better.”

“Good. Bruises healing?”

“Yes. It won’t surprise you to hear that my mother and I know a couple of very good, very discreet Healers. You did a good job, by all accounts.”

Harry nods distractedly, glancing at his bandaged hand. “That’s something. Seems I didn’t do so well on my own injuries—Misu’s vet had to sort me out.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yep.” Harry lifts his hand and displays his bandaged fingers. He feels awkward and tongue-tied, caught between the urge to yell at Draco for leaving him hanging and the very real desire to back him up against the workbench, grab his wrists, inhale the warm smell of his skin, capture his mouth and make the last three days disappear into nothing. With a deep breath, he pulls himself under control. “The point is—you’re okay,” he says at last.

“Yes.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that,” Harry says calmly, managing to drag his fingers out of the glass box before they are slashed to ribbons. “Seeing as you’re fine, maybe you can tell me where the hell you’ve been since Monday morning?”
Draco exhales slowly, looks at the floor, and Harry has the impression that he has been expecting the question. Which is something, he supposes; it means that disappearing for days on end may not be his default position on difficult situations after all. There is hope for Draco Malfoy yet.

Draco looks up and meets Harry’s eyes. “I’ve been thinking.”

Harry frowns. “You’ve been thinking? For all this time?”

Draco’s dry laughter is unexpected and warming. “Yes, for all this time. Not all of us like to conduct our lives on the knife edge of a snap decision.”

“I take your point, but what exactly would you call Sunday night?” Harry asks, and he can’t control his smile because the hum of expectation is rife in his veins, pulling him upwards and dragging his fingers into fists at his sides.

The grey eyes flicker with humour. “Out of character?” he suggests.

Harry snorts. “Are we talking about the swimming pool thing or the thing after the... er... thing?”

“You aren’t making very much sense right now,” Draco says, stepping closer, arms still crossed, until he and Harry are just three or four feet apart. “Even for you.”

“Give me a break, I’m useless at stuff like this,” Harry complains, and Draco relents.

“I’m talking about all of it. I’ve been doing a lot of strange things since you and I became friends, actually,” he admits, voice curiously soft. “You have this peculiar effect on me.”

Harry bites his lip. “Oh?”

“Are you going to pretend you haven’t noticed?” Draco asks, fixing Harry with a weary expression and lifting a hand to rake through his hair yet again. This time, he is close enough for Harry to notice the slender silver scar tracking almost all the way from brow bone to hairline that is all that remains of the angry gash he had patched up three days ago. It’s barely noticeable, but he can certainly empathise with the desire to prevent others staring at one’s forehead, and as far as he’s concerned, Draco’s current hairstyle takes years off him.

At least, it has up until now. Now Draco is frowning and Harry realises that he cannot remember the question he is supposed to be answering.

“Sorry, what?”

Draco sighs. “You’re doing that thing again. It’s extremely frustrating.”

“What thing?”

“That thing you do—you stare at me aimlessly and don’t pay attention to a word I’m saying.”

Harry hopes the flush heating his face isn’t as violent as it feels, but either way, he’s going to hang onto the eye contact because this isn’t the time to be beaten by embarrassment. He finds himself wondering, as he fishes helplessly for a dignified response, why conversations like this never seem to go the way he imagines they will. That being said, he doesn’t know how he could ever have expected a conversation about feelings with Draco Malfoy to be anything but bewildering and
“You’re doing it again.” Draco’s voice is warm with amusement.

“No, I’m not,” Harry says pointlessly. “I’m thinking. And yes, I’d noticed. At least...” He takes a deep breath of glass-scented air and jumps. “At least I hoped I had.”

Draco’s mouth twists into a cautious half smile. “Did you mean what you said?”

Harry’s heart clenches and he hesitates, because this is it, but only for a moment. “Yes, absolutely.”

Draco doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t need to. He moves closer, eyes turned silver-green and opalescent in the light from the lamps; Harry can feel the heat from his body as he steps within touching distance and drops the barrier of his folded arms, wrapping one hand around the edge of the worktable and resting the other cautiously at Harry’s belt. Harry feels as though he might never breathe again but that doesn’t stop him from slipping the fingers of his good hand into Draco’s waistcoat, resting them against his soft shirt fabric, following the gentle rise and fall of his ribs and marvelling at the thrilling, casual ease of being allowed to do so.

“That was the first time anyone other than my mother has said that about me and I’ve wanted to say it back,” Draco says, tracing his fingertips over the sensitive skin at Harry’s waist and making him shiver. “And of course, I was pretending to be unconscious,” he sighs, features arranged into such an expression of disenchantment that Harry has to laugh.

“You’re laughing at me, you horrible bugger,” Draco reproves, but he doesn’t withdraw or stop stroking Harry’s skin for even a second.

“No... I’m just...” Harry hesitates. As words seem to have deserted him for the time being, he leans close and brushes his mouth over Draco’s, falling easily into a soft, unhesitant kiss that feels as though it’s been waiting for him forever. Eyes closing, he stops thinking and just slides into it, noticing nothing but the heat of Draco’s mouth, the achingly familiar taste of tea and sugar, the squeeze of strong, cool fingers as they twist around his wrist and grip hard. Draco kisses back and Harry knows this time, knows that he is wanted, desired, that this isn’t some impulsive response to trauma, this is real. This is considered. Draco has been thinking about this. About him. And here he is, kissing Harry with unhurried, skilful languor, as though neither of them are going anywhere.

Even if this is Harry’s workshop, and even if it is the middle of the afternoon.

“Were you going to say something?” Draco murmurs as they draw apart. He gazes at Harry for a moment and then picks up his bandaged hand, inspecting it with sharp, curious eyes.

Harry blinks. “Er... I don’t know.”

Draco smiles slowly. “Am I really that good?”

Harry snorts and reclaims his hand, drawing the smirking bastard closer. “Yeah, you’re so skilled at kissing that I immediately forget everything I want to say and can only talk about how wonderful you are,” he says, injecting a mocking tone into his voice even though he knows all too well that the statement is at least partially true.

“Oh, yes,” Draco says, eyebrows drawn down into a scowl even as he rests his chin on Harry’s shoulder, words hot and tickly against his ear. “You were laughing at me. I remember now.”
Harry remembers now, too. “I wasn’t laughing at you. Well, I was laughing at you a bit, but only because... on the rare occasion that I get exactly what I want, I sort of get the giggles,” he admits, brushing Draco’s hair aside and running his thumb along the faint scar. “I think there’s always a part of me that’s looking for the catch, and it gets a bit... hysterical.”

Draco pulls back and stares at him, eyes quizzical and slightly guarded. “You’re mad.”

Harry shrugs. “Aren’t we all?”

“Alright then,” Draco concedes, crossing his arms once more and stepping back, not so far that Harry is alarmed, but far enough for his hands and mouth and skin to tingle in protest. “The catch? The catch is me. The catch is you. The catch is that we both make ridiculous decisions sometimes. The catch is children and ex-wives and Weasleys who may or may not come around and my father, who definitely will not. The catch is seeing all of this splashed across the *Daily Prophet* when they find out—and they will find out. The catch is all the people who will tell you exactly how it will all go wrong, and the catch is having them all say ‘I told you so’ when it does.”

Feeling strangely serene, Harry waits until he’s sure that Draco has finished.

“If it all goes wrong,” he corrects calmly.

“If it all goes wrong,” Draco concedes, apparently as startled by Harry’s composure as Harry is. “So... are we doing this or not?”

Harry smiles. “You really have been thinking, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” Draco says, looking almost wounded.

Leaning against the workbench, Harry folds his arms, too. For once, he feels as though he’s in charge of himself; he knows what he wants, and it feels fantastic. “And in spite of all those catches?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Draco murmurs, eyes warming as caution fades into hope.

*Take the unknown road now,* Harry thinks, barely caring how much of an idiot he looks as he grins back at Draco, consumed and lifted by a surge of terror and euphoria that makes him feel seventeen again, but in the best way possible.

“I think I will, too,” he says, as though he hasn’t known it all along. And he supposes he hasn’t, not really.

Draco’s smile is bright and unguarded, and though it only lasts for a second or two, Harry feels it all over his body. Then the door swings open, admitting a pair of well-to-do ladies who greet him enthusiastically and find cautious ‘hello’-s for Draco, who, fortunately, isn’t pressed up against Harry any more but now appears to be casually inspecting a nearby shelf full of vases. The ladies, Agatha and Louisa, are regulars, and despite their unfortunate timing, Harry has no intention of being rude to them.

“What can I do for you today, ladies?” he asks, striding over to meet them and hoping it isn’t too obvious that they almost caught him in a very unprofessional position.

Agatha and Louisa beam up at him from under their pointed hats and ruffle their velvet cloaks
coquettishly as though their midweek flirt with the lovely young glassblower is the very highlight of their existence.

“I’ve come to buy something green,” Louisa informs him, eyes twinkling. “Spring has most definitely sprung and my house is looking terribly dreary.”

“You look full of the joys, Louisa,” Harry says gravely, admiring her new starling-shaped earrings. From somewhere behind him comes a stifled little snort of amusement. He forces himself to ignore it and instead shows Louisa a whole shelf full of spring-inspired pieces made in the week before his hand became useless.

“What have you been doing, Mr Potter?” Agatha demands, shooting out a wrinkled, jewel-decked hand to wrap around his wrist. She fixes him with glittering blue eyes. “My grandaughter seems to think you’ve been bitten by that snake of yours—is it true?”

Aghast, Harry shakes his head. “No, absolutely not. Misu would never bite me, she’s a really good girl,” he insists, widening his eyes and attempting to appeal to the part of Agatha that believes every word that comes out of his mouth. She’s a smart lady, that’s for sure, but Harry is pretty certain that she has a little soft spot for him.

“Oh,” she says, a little deflated, and once again Harry finds himself having to ignore a thinly-veiled sound of amusement from Draco’s corner of the ’shop. He thinks he might find the distraction irritating but he can’t quite seem to stop himself from grinning. Which, come to think of it, is also unhelpful.

“I had a bit of an accident with a spell, that’s all,” he explains, so comfortable in the lie by now that he can almost convince himself that none of the unpleasantness at Marshall Street ever happened. At least he can, until he looks at Misu, and then the whole thing reasserts itself with the sort of grim clarity that threatens nightmares. “It’ll be fine in a couple of weeks.”

“I see. Are you sure you should be working?” Agatha demands, hawk-like eyes flitting to the workbench next to which Draco is now standing, the one scattered with glass pieces and pipes and assorted paraphernalia.

“That’s what I said,” Draco offers as though he’s been part of the conversation all along.

Harry frowns. “No you didn’t!”

“It was implied,” Draco says, ignoring him and turning a startlingly charming smile on Agatha.

She lets go of Harry’s wrist immediately and smiles back. “Is this your friend, Mr Potter?”

“Is he good looking, Aggie? I haven’t my glasses on,” Louisa calls. She doesn’t turn from the shelf, where she is examining a little glass ball at close range.

Agatha cackles, glancing wickedly at Harry before she answers her friend. “Very handsome and very well turned out, Lou-Lou.”

Louisa turns, silver grey hair swinging around her eager face. She is clutching a huge leaf-patterned bowl to her chest with some difficulty, and Harry rushes to take it from her. She is clearly in need of assistance, and it’s as good a way as any to stop himself from saying something stupid.
“Would you like this?” he asks, bearing the unwieldy piece over to the spare workbench and setting it down.

“Yes, please,” she says, beaming. “I’m going to fill it with those little light balls I bought the other week and put it on my dining table. Do you think that’ll look nice?” she asks, suddenly anxious.

Harry gives it everything he’s got, but he can’t quite stop his eyes from drifting to Draco, whose delicately arched eyebrow is conveying, loud and clear, the message, ‘since when were you the last word on style?’

“I think it’ll look fantastic,” he says confidently, smiling at Louisa and sending Draco ‘fuck you, I’m an artist now’ across the room as he packs the glass bowl in heavy brown paper with his good hand and the help of a few spells.

“Do you want a hand with that?” Draco asks, placing an almost imperceptible emphasis on the word ‘hand’, just enough for Harry to notice and roll his eyes.

“You’re not funny.”

“He does have lovely eyes, though, doesn’t he, Aggie?” Louisa opines, scrutinising Draco with relative ease now that he has stepped up to the workbench to helpfully look over Harry’s shoulder.

“He does,” Agatha agrees, twitching fingers at the end of her long plait like a nervous schoolgirl. She gazes at Draco and seems to shake herself. “How rude of us, talking about you as though you aren’t there, dear. What we mean to say is that you have beautiful eyes.”

Amused, Draco lets out his breath in a warm huff and Harry suppresses a shiver as the sensation heats the back of his neck. He can’t be sure if Draco is doing this on purpose or not, but either way, there’s really no good reason for him to be standing so fucking close.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, and there’s no trace of his customary prickliness. It’s as though he let it slip from his fingers when he went to kiss Harry and has forgotten to look for it again, and while part of Harry thinks it would be nice if it remained misplaced, the bigger part of him that loves this man exactly as he is knows that a Draco without near-constant exasperation would be like a world without magic, or Rose without Al, or chips without beetle bits.

Smiling to himself, he finishes wrapping Louisa’s bowl. “That’ll be forty-five Galleons... for you,” he says, relishing the old lady’s delighted expression and Draco’s stifled sigh in equal measure. He knows he isn’t supposed to undercut Draco’s rigid pricing structure for anyone, but it’s only five Galleons and Louisa must have a houseful of his pieces already. If anyone deserves a discount, it’s her.

“Lovely, lovely,” she enthuses, stepping up to the worktable and fishing in her money bag for the right coins. “Here you are, Mr Potter...” She looks up and falls silent, eyes fixed on Draco. For a second or two, Harry is puzzled, and then he realises that the look on the refined old face is recognition; now that she is separated from Draco only by the table and Harry, she can see him clearly for the first time. “You’re a Malfoy,” she says quietly. Her tone is neither warm nor accusing but Harry feels himself tense and he has to fight the urge to step right out in front of Draco—she’s just a little old lady, after all... what’s she going to do? Stab him with a hatpin?

“Yes, that’s right,” Draco says without emotion.
Harry glances between the two ladies. Louisa continues to stare and continues to rummage absently in her money bag while her friend looks on, lined face creased into a mask of mortification.

“You’re Lucius Malfoy’s son,” Louisa continues.

“Yes,” Draco says, voice tight.

“I thought so. I was at school with his father, you know—your grandfather, of course. Dear Abraxas,” she sighs, looking up earnestly at Draco. Harry doesn’t know whether to be grateful or disappointed that he can’t see his expression. “It was ever so confusing for him—what happened during the war,” she says conversationally. In his peripheral vision, Harry sees Agatha wince and raise a hand to her eyes. “He didn’t ever expect another one in his lifetime... well, none of us did, but he was a quiet sort of man, really. Detested conflict. A lot of us thought that what Lucius did finished him off in the end.”

Louisa stops, blinks, and stares up at Draco as though realising her audience for the first time.

Harry has no words, and neither, apparently, does Agatha, who is now watching them through the gaps in her fingers. Fortunately, Draco has no such problem.

“Well, thank you for that,” he says, good manners pouring an astounding level of graciousness into the words until they barely sound sarcastic at all. “It is always a pleasure to meet a friend of the family, though I can assure you, my father has paid in full for his poor decisions.”

Louisa nods slowly, eyes bright with horror. “Please forgive me... I really don’t know where that came from. I’m terribly sorry. That wasn’t what I wanted to say at all! I think... I think you’re a wonderful example of how a life can be turned around—I think it’s marvellous that the two of you have forgotten your differences—I think your grandfather would be very proud of you.”

She stops, clamping her lips together as two bright spots of colour appear on her cheeks.

“Thank you,” Draco says with massive dignity. Harry allows himself to relax at last.

“Come on, Lou-Lou, let’s pay up and get going,” Agatha says.

Her friend nods. “Thank you, Mr Potter,” she says quietly, counting the remaining coins into his hand and shooting another apologetic glance up at Draco as she turns to leave. “I really am sorry, Mr Malfoy. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do,” Agatha mutters, ushering Louisa out into the street. She hesitates on the step. “Please don’t think badly of her, gentlemen, but this is the last time I let her go to the Leaky Cauldron on an empty stomach.”

Harry laughs; he can’t help himself. He turns cautiously to look at Draco as the voices of the two women carry through the open window.

“You know it isn’t done to mention... the unpleasantness,” Agatha scolds.

“I know, I know,” whimpers Louisa. “You know, I think that brandy might’ve loosened my tongue.”

“Really?” Agatha says acidly. “I can’t believe you didn’t recognise him straight away, either! I had
him pegged as Lucius’ son the moment I laid eyes on him.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I thought you’d noticed! I didn’t realise your eyesight was as bad as that, Lou-Lou...”

“Perhaps I’d better see a Healer,” Louisa sighs as they stump away across the cobbles, leaving Harry and Draco alone once more. “He did have lovely eyes, though...”

“I think I could do with a cup of tea,” Draco says faintly, gazing at the closed door as though he expects it to fly open again at any moment.

Glancing at the clock, Harry makes a snap decision. When Draco had arrived, he had been holding on to the half-arsed notion of keeping the ’shop open until the usual time, but somewhere between the kiss and the outspoken old ladies, he has managed to abandon it. It’s almost quarter to five—only an hour or so before closing time—and the prospect of a caffeine and sugar fix is so appealing that it’s all he can do to scoop up Misu and stick an apologetic note to the door before heading out into the late afternoon sun with Draco at his side.

They head, without the need for discussion, to the Moody. Harry feels it would be wrong somehow to go anywhere else—today feels significant in a way he cannot fully explain, and definitely not the time to be experimenting with new cafes. Misu winds languorously around his neck as he walks, stretching her head out into the golden sunlight that warms Harry’s back and bare forearms. He can’t think of a single word that seems important, but when he glances at Draco, stalking along beside him with an almost serene expression on his face, he knows that it doesn’t matter.

When they arrive, the sulky waitress pauses in her task of collecting cups to treat them to a terrifying almost-smile and ask them if they want ‘the usual, yeah?’ Her good mood doesn’t last long, though, especially when she notices the very necessary Silencing Charm Harry has put up around the table. It’s an odd sort of relief when she reappears, scowling, and sets down their cups with a little more attitude than is strictly necessary. Harry smiles at her and her scowl just darkens further.

Harry sips his too-hot coffee; it burns his tongue but he can’t bring himself to mind. He waits, idly watching one pigeon fight another for half a sausage roll on the street outside, until the level in Draco’s tea mug has dropped by a good couple of inches before he speaks again.

“So, what was the conclusion of all your thinking? I’m intrigued.”

Draco wraps his fingers around his cup and gazes evenly at Harry. “The conclusion?”

Harry nods, furrowing his brow in mock seriousness. “Yes. It’s the decision you reach at the end of trying to figure something out.”

“You’re hilarious,” Draco murmurs, but his eyes and his tone are a wonderful mismatch. Harry smiles. “Anyway, the conclusion is neither here nor there—I’m here. You already know it. I suspect that what you’re actually interested in is the analysis.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Harry groans, burying his face in his hands.

Draco’s laughter is genuine and rough with surprise, as though he hadn’t been expecting to be amused any time soon. Harry thinks it’s the best thing he’s heard in a very long time.
“This other is changing,” Misu offers, flicking her tongue thoughtfully against the skin of his neck. Harry shivers but says nothing, hoping she will take his silence as encouragement to continue. “He is lighter,” she says after a moment. “Lighter in his spirit.”

Harry looks at Draco, who is now watching him right back, grey eyes alight with warm interest. He doesn’t know how or even if snakes know about these things, but Misu is right. There’s something in the way Draco holds himself these days that is so far removed from the man on the railway platform seven months ago, or even the man at the Quidditch game less than four. He doesn’t frown nearly as much as he used to, and though the lines on his forehead are a permanent reminder of years of perpetual seriousness, they don’t deepen at the slightest thing as they once did.

He lifts an eyebrow and Harry scrabbles to recall his last statement.

“Right... so, what about the analysis, then, professor?”

Draco sighs, tapping his fingers against his cup in a rapid but rhythmic pattern. “It’s not very interesting, really. It mostly consisted of talking to my mother.” He looks at Harry, chin lifted slightly, as though challenging him to make something of it.

Harry wouldn’t dare. He’s oddly touched by the admission, and anyway, he’d give his right arm to have a mother who could offer guidance on bewildering things like complicated feelings for old enemies. He loves Molly completely, but he’d rather strip naked in the middle of the Flailing Lizard than ask her for advice about Draco.

“And what did she say?”

“She said that if I’m going to stop taking risks at my age, I might as well be dead.”

Harry snorts. He’s prepared to wager that just a few months ago he would not have believed such a blunt statement to have come out of Narcissa Malfoy’s mouth. For the more down-to-earth woman he has come to know, with her azaleas and razor-sharp insights, it is no stretch at all. This is, after all, her son’s second chance to take a risk, an unknown road, a leap of faith presented after the survival of some horror.

“She’s right,” Harry says. “A life without risk is a load of bollocks, and all that.”

“You really have a way with words, don’t you?” Draco says, fighting down a smile.

Harry grins. “I was hoping you might learn to appreciate my other abilities.”

“When I find out what they are, I shall endeavour to do so,” Draco says gravely.

For some reason, this just makes Harry’s grin even wider. “I’ll look forward to it,” he says, thrilled by the immediate darkening of Draco’s eyes. “Anyway, how is your mother?” he asks, steering the conversation onto safer ground as he spots the waitress hovering at the next empty table and trying to poke the edge of the silent field with her finger.

Draco drains his cup and sighs. “Oh, she’s in fine spirits now. She checked me for obvious injuries and then gave me a thorough dressing down for worrying her half to death.”

“What happened to take-risks-or-die?”
“I wondered the same thing, but I didn’t dare ask her. Apparently there is a limited scope for that particular theory,” Draco says with a wry smile that twists Harry’s insides into knots despite his silent assertion that, at his age, he shouldn’t be driven to distraction by the smile of an irascible aristocrat.

He reflects the smile back. There’s no use arguing with the way things are. “I got the same from Hermione, if it makes you feel any better.”

“A little bit, actually.”

Harry laughs and signals, as politely as he can, for two more drinks. Apparently, he isn’t polite enough, because the waitress positively glowers at him and when she returns with their hot cups, she splashes Harry’s trousers with coffee and ‘forgets’ Draco’s milk. After a couple of fruitless attempts to recapture her attention, Draco opts to drink his tea black.

“Remind me again why we come here?”

“It’s tradition,” Harry says firmly. “And because I’ve never had any idiots from the *Prophet* following me here.”

“There is that,” Draco sighs. “Have you been reading it this week? Not a single word about what happened on Sunday night.”

Harry nods, catching Misu against the palm of his hand as she loses her balance and almost falls into his coffee cup. He’s getting used to her impaired equilibrium a lot more quickly than she is.

“Ron did say that the Ministry would try to hush everything up. Apparently it’s not good for their public image to admit that their head of MLE has been running around with Slovenian gangsters for fuck knows how long.”

Draco’s mouth curls contemptuously. “No, I suppose not. There was that tiny little article, blink and you’d miss it, just saying that Fitzwilliam was taking time off for his health...”

“It won’t last,” Harry assures. His faith in the Ministry may be shaky, but he knows Ron and he knows Kingsley, and it’s only a matter of time before some version of the truth makes its way into the public eye. “They’re probably just deciding how to out him as a crooked bastard without implicating anyone else.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing,” Draco muses, looking wistful. “I did rather make an idiot of myself, but then again, it would’ve been nice to have my name mentioned along with the side of... you know, justice and integrity and such.”

Harry smiles. “Maybe next time.”

Draco says nothing. Harry watches him, smile fading as his expression shifts from chagrin to genuine regret. Heart faltering, he grips his mug tightly with the effort of not reaching across the table to thread his fingers through Draco’s and offer some kind of comfort, remorse, even. Suddenly every part of him hurts with it and he doesn’t know what to do except let it out.

“I’m sorry I didn’t do more to help you,” he rasps, willing Draco to look at him.

Startled, Draco turns to him. “When?”
“When we were at school,” Harry says roughly, driven on by the pain in his un-bandaged fingers as they stick to the hot ceramic. “In our sixth year. You had... you had a task and so did I, and I knew that something was happening to you and I did nothing. I didn’t...” I didn’t save you, his subconscious finishes, but the words won’t come out.

Draco swallows dryly. When he speaks, his voice is gentler than Harry deserves. “That was a long time ago, Harry. Twenty years.”


Draco sighs. His eyes burn into Harry’s and suddenly he can’t breathe. “Do you really think I would have let you help me? Do you think the person I was then would have let you?”

Harry stares back at him, heavy molten heat licking at his insides, hammering pulse a pent up river about to burst its banks. “Yeah,” he says. “I think you would.”

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Harry isn’t exactly sure what happens next, but he thinks Draco says, “Shall we go?” and he thinks the waitress gives them the strangest look they’ve had from her so far. He thinks he’s the one to make the jump back to his place but he can’t be sure; the important thing is that they get there, both in one piece, and crawl onto the bed, caught in a tide of heat and sadness and desperation so intense that it consumes them. He thinks that buttons are severed and skin scratched and lips caught in teeth; he thinks that Misu is captured in pale hands that shake a little and placed gently in her tank. He knows that Draco smells of salt and citrus and home, and that his mouth is hot-damp-insistent as it brushes over Harry’s neck, his mouth, his hips, his cock. He knows that he isn’t as careful as perhaps he should be as he runs his hands over Draco’s bare back, pulling him down into a heated, messy kiss as he demands what they both want, slicking and guiding and crying out with the sting and the stretch and the pure wave of relief that crashes inside him.

He thinks he’s loud and he knows Draco isn’t, but it doesn’t matter because everything Harry needs to see is there in his eyes, dark with lust-fever-terror as they burn down into Harry’s, the hot, ragged breaths, shared, the desperate push inside him and the knowledge that all the pieces are fitting together for real this time.

He thinks it’s a conflagration, sweeping through him and destroying every rational thought and feeling, over far too soon and maddening, quick-quick-slow, all at the same time. He thinks he abandons his dignity completely, knows he lifts his hips from the crumpled sheets, wanting more, more, touch-me-now because it feels so fucking good. He thinks Draco’s face as he comes, eyes hazy and half closed, lip bitten hard, is too beautiful to be allowed. Knows it.

He stays there for long seconds, weight on his hands, gazing down at Harry from under his heavy, sweat-damp fringe. Harry stares back, sticky and breathing hard, wondering if he, too, is waiting for the world and, perhaps, the concept of time to return to normal. Draco smiles wearily and pulls away at last, flopping down beside Harry with a soft, contented groan.

“My mother was right,” he offers, sounding amused. “You’re never too old.”

Harry wrinkles his nose. “I don’t think I even want to know.”

Draco says nothing but Harry can feel his delighted smirk. He sighs and gazes at the ceiling, and when Draco threads his fingers through Harry’s and squeezes tight, he does a very poor job of
concealing his smile.

Harry doesn’t lose any more time that evening; he is fully aware of what is happening at all times—there just isn’t very much of it to be aware of. As the sun sets, they lie tangled in the sheets and each other, idly watching the colours change outside the window, exchanging lazy insults, kisses, and the occasional almost-compliment. When Draco’s stomach rumbles, Harry ignores his protests and rummages around the bedroom until he finds a half-eaten packet of biscuits, which he lobs at Draco and heads into the bathroom, naked and shivering, to fill the empty mug from his bedside table with fresh, cold water. They share it, sheets pulled up around them, and Harry doesn’t say anything about the crumbs on his pillow. This time.

“That’s my flag,” Draco murmurs as he settles into a sleeping position some hours later, icy feet pressing against Harry’s thighs.

Harry rests his chin on Draco’s shoulder and regards the tiny object, smiling sleepily. “I think you’ll find it’s my flag. You gave it to me. And I made it.”

“That is true,” Draco concedes, yawning. “Never mind. I still have all the others at home.”

Harry laughs and flops down onto his pillow without bothering to pummel it. Wrapped in a blanket of warm satisfaction, he is asleep within seconds.

Thud, goes Misu.

Draco jerks awake. “What the fuck was that?” he hisses.

Between the two of them, they have thoroughly ruined Harry’s dream about playing in the Quidditch World Cup on a giant stick of rhubarb, and now he is awake, too. With a sigh, he opens one eye and props himself up on his elbow. He supposes that Draco is used to silence in his own bedroom. That’s not going to happen here, and Misu was here first...

“That was Misu.” With some effort, he reaches for his wand and lights the tank, revealing a tangle of corn snake in one corner, head poking out curiously as though she is trying to figure out what went wrong. “She also talks in her sleep. You might as well know that now.”

Draco blinks sleepily, watching the snake begin to uncoil herself. “Fine, okay,” he mutters, yawning and settling back down for sleep.

Impressed, Harry curls back up behind him and closes his eyes.

“Is anything to do with you even a little bit normal?” comes the whisper in the darkness.

Harry smiles and kisses his shoulder. “No, Draco.”

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When Harry wakes early the next morning, his first conscious thought is no more complicated than: is he still here?

He is. He’s here, he’s awake, and he’s lounging against the pillows with an indulgent expression and indecently dishevelled hair.
That Saturday finds Harry in the workshop with Lily as usual. They have yet to open the doors, partly because Harry is still a little slower and more awkward than usual with the day to day tasks because of his injured hand (which, Jenny had assured him when changing the dressing on Friday morning, is healing well and shouldn’t need to be strapped up for much longer), and partly because Lily has a lot of questions about how he managed to hurt himself.

He has been expecting it, especially with Lily, whose natural curiosity easily rivals his own, and while he has no desire to lie to her, he doubts that a ten-year-old with a good deal of innocence left needs to know the grim details. Instead, as they sweep up and light the furnaces and count out last night’s change into bags for Gringotts, he tells her that a good friend of his got into trouble with some bad people and he had to help out.

Lily seems to accept this explanation easily enough, but that doesn’t stop the questions, and Harry does his level best to answer every single one.

“Who was your friend?” she asks, running a soft cloth over a series of blue vases. “Was it someone I know?”

Harry hesitates, looking at the list in front of him instead of his daughter. He and Draco have decided to wait a little while before springing the news of their relationship on their children, and he absolutely stands by that decision. At the same time, though, the truth is so much easier to remember. (*At your age*, adds his subconscious, and he scowls at his piece of parchment.)

“Yeah. It was Mr Malfoy,” he says at last.

“Oh!” Lily exclaims. Harry turns. She has stopped dusting and her eyebrows are knitted.

“What’s the matter, Lil?”

“I really like Mr Malfoy—is he alright?”

Catching the little wobble of genuine concern in her voice, Harry can’t help but abandon his list and hug her tightly. “He’s absolutely fine. In fact, I’m sure he’ll be really flattered to know you were so worried about him.”

Lily wrinkles her nose. “Don’t tell him! He’ll think I’m an idiot.”

Harry grins, tweaking one coppery plait and releasing her. “I promise. As long as you promise not to worry—I think Misu and your old dad came out the worst of all this.”

“But you’ll be alright, won’t you?” she says anxiously, and, when he nods, she picks up Misu from her shelf and examines her stubby tail with a heavy sigh. “She’s always going to be like this.”

“I know, Lil. But she’s okay. She’s not in any pain at all,” he attempts, but his daughter’s eyes are huge and sad as she looks up at him.

“But... what if she doesn’t want to look different? What if she’s upset about it?”
“Well, I’d like to think she’d’ve told me, and she hasn’t. Anyway, there’s nothing wrong with being a bit different, Lil,” he reminds her gently.

She sighs. “Yeah... I know, Dad. But... it’s not very nice to be missing something. It’s like if my arm got chopped off. I’d know I was still me and everything, but I wouldn’t feel right.” Lily pauses to watch Misu sliding into her sleeve. ‘There’s a boy at school with a pretend hand. Once he took it off in the playground and one of the dinner ladies fainted.”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “What did you do?”

“Gave him half my Kitkat,” Lily says, shrugging. “I thought it was funny.”

Harry smiles, swollen with pride for his clever, kind daughter. “You’re a good girl, Lil,” he mumbles, casting around for a way to make her feel better. Eventually, he hits upon an idea. “Why don’t we make her a new tail?”

Lily frowns, puzzled. “How?”

“With this,” Harry says, reaching under the nearest workbench for a slender wooden box.

Lily leans forward, eyes bright with curiosity, as he opens it. Even Misu turns around inside Lily’s sleeve and doubles back, coming to rest her head upon her stumpy tail so she can watch.

“I haven’t used any of this yet,” he says, carefully drawing back the tissue paper to reveal a paper thin sheet of green glass. “It arrived just before I hurt my hand, so I haven’t had chance to play with it.”

“What’s it for?” Lily asks. “Are you going to melt it?”

“Not in the usual way,” Harry says. “It’s a special kind of glass that’s very, very strong but also very light. Here.” He picks up the little sheet of green glass and hands it to Lily, who takes it with the utmost care, holding it in her fingertips as though she’s handling an explosive device.

“Wow.” She holds it out to show Misu, who flicks her tongue curiously at the glass. “Can you really make something for Misu from this?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “But if you put her back on her shelf, you can help me try.”

Lily smiles and sets Misu down underneath her heat lamp, stroking her little head with a careful finger.

Over the next hour, Harry’s workshop becomes a laboratory as he and Lily work together on Misu’s new tail. Harry lights a series of small magical fires, just as he did in the glimpse, eschewing the heavy furnaces to bend and shape the delicate glass with precise little tools and the best efforts of his one good hand. Lily measures Misu over and over again, calling out the measurements to Harry and thrusting bits of equipment into his hands as he asks for them.

By the time the shop is due to open, he is slightly sticky and his eyes hurt from squinting at the little sodding thing, but he has produced a passable prosthesis for an injured snake.

“Now it’s been through all the fires, it should be really strong—even when she falls off her shelf in the tank, it won’t break,” Harry tells Lily as she waits, vibrating with excitement, to try the just-
cooled glass cone on its new owner.

“That’s great, Dad... and you can make her a new one whenever she grows!” Lily enthuses.

Harry sighs inwardly. He’d forgotten, somehow, about the growing thing.

“Go on, then, let’s see how she likes it.”

“Be a good girl, Misu,” he adds, hoping to persuade her to stop wriggling about on the workbench.
“Lily wants to... make you look even more beautiful.”

Eventually, Misu complies, and Lily gently pushes the glass tip over the stub of her tail. It’s a perfect fit. Startled, Misu coils around, flipping the glass-covered section of her body in front of her eyes with ease. She sways back and forth as she inspects her new accessory and Lily chews on her lower lip, clearly desperate to hear the verdict.

“Am whole,” she declares. “Shiny. You and the sparkling one have made me a hat!”

Harry laughs, delighted by this assessment. “Surely a hat goes on your head, though?”

“Surely, if one has two ends, a hat can belong on either?” she says, flicking her new tail playfully against Harry’s fingers.

Harry doesn’t know how to argue with that. “She loves it,” he tells Lily, and she beams.

“Shall I go and let the customers in now?” she asks, skipping over to the door.

“Please.” Harry glances out of the window to where a not-quite-queue is starting to gather.

Lily opens the door with a flourish, and within minutes, Harry’s workshop is once again abuzz with people and conversation. Above it all is the soft clink, clink, clink as Misu slithers around on her shelf, whole once more.

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The rest of the weekend is peacefully uneventful; Harry and Lily go to the park to eat ice creams and fling a frisbee around (occasionally at the same time), and spend much of a rainy evening on the hearthrug, eating their now-customary carpet picnic and watching Misu making her way onto the head of a snoozing Frank, finally settling down to sleep with her shiny green tail hat resting against one grey ear. There are no more difficult questions, at least for the moment, and Harry is relieved.

The next weekend is much the same, the one after that, too, and that’s just fine. Harry, Lily, Frank, and Misu travel all over London, examining places of interest, sampling all the food they can find and taking endless pictures for Lily’s geography project.

“Not a disease in sight,” Lily declares, snapping a photograph of Harry and Misu in front of Nelson’s Column. She’s right, and he finds he’s almost disappointed.

Every Sunday evening, he drops Lily off at home, exchanges brief but friendly greetings with Ginny, and then heads home to firecall Draco, who is—at least in this respect—reassuringly predictable, stepping out into Harry’s living room in a cloud of smoke some ten or fifteen minutes later, questing for tea and news.
On the fourth such night since their routine began, Harry gazes wearily into the bathroom mirror and sighs. Something has to change. His image is blurred around the edges—he thinks his glasses are somewhere in the bedclothes—but the guilt in the eyes that stare back at him is painfully clear. Yes, it’s his life, and yes, he can do whatever he wants, but he knows that this thing with Draco is much more than a flash in the pan and he feels terrible about keeping his children in the dark. After everything he has had to tell them in the last few months, he has no idea why this feels so difficult, but it does and it’s starting to eat away at him.

“Must you make a nest in my hair?”

The sound of Draco’s exasperated voice, drifting in from the bedroom, pulls a flicker of a smile from Harry. It’s somehow warming that he chooses to speak to Misu, even though he knows that she hasn’t a clue what he’s saying. Allowing that thought to lift away his discomfiture, he wanders, carelessly naked, back into the bedroom.

He sits on the edge of the bed. “I’m going to have to—”

“Tell them,” Draco murmurs, shifting onto his side under the sheets. “I know.”

Harry twists around to meet his eyes. “How did you know that was what I was going to say?”

Draco lifts one bare shoulder in an elegant shrug. “Sometimes you’re alarmingly easy to read.”

“Great, that’s reassuring,” he sighs, resting his elbows on his knees and raking his fingers through his hair.

“Stop being dramatic and come back to bed,” Draco says, poking a knee into his back. “Tell them whenever you want. I’m sure I’ll be no help at all, but I promise to be here to distract you if it all goes horribly wrong.”

“When it all goes horribly wrong,” Harry mutters, crawling under the sheets and retrieving Misu from the top of Draco’s head.

Draco sighs and says nothing. Harry is grateful. He closes his eyes.

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In the end, it’s Ginny who is the next to hear what Harry is starting to think of as his confession, and he doesn’t have to wait long for the opportunity. On Monday afternoon, as has become his habit, he gathers the weekend money bags and heads over to Gringotts to split the takings between his personal vault and the one he has opened for the Muggle homeless charity, which is collected, converted and sent off in paper form at the end of every month. It’s a neat little system, and Harry is fine with the fact that it has nothing to do with him and a lot to do with Draco. It’s just the way of things.

As he heads into the vast, echoey chamber, he’s almost certain that he sees Blaise, or at least someone who looks very much like him (and who does?) striding toward the marble steps and out into the afternoon sunshine, heavy coat swishing behind him as he goes. He’s too far away for Harry to call out without making a complete spectacle of himself, so he just watches him go, and wonders.

“Next,” calls the nearest goblin, and Harry approaches the counter with his bags.
“Good afternoon,” he says, determinedly polite to the goblins whether they appreciate it or not. He suspects not. “These for six-eight-seven and these for five-three-four, please.”

“Very good,” the goblin replies, stretching out long fingers to take the bags without making eye contact.

Harry waits, hands in pockets, and then:

“Excuse me, Wickstaffe, did I leave my report on your desk? I can’t find it anywhere.”

Harry turns at the familiar voice to see a frustrated looking Ginny, leaning on the counter just feet away from him and addressing the next goblin along, who stops poking a very large emerald with his fingernail to look at her.

“This one?” he croaks, withdrawing a sheaf of parchment from the shelf behind him.

Ginny smiles, visibly relieved. “Thanks very much—I had visions of writing the whole thing again.”

She takes the report and clutches it to her chest. Wickstaffe merely shakes his head and returns to his task, giving Harry the sneaking feeling that this is not an isolated incident. The goblin with the money bags waves him along and calls for the next customer, and Harry shuffles out of the way of a vast, hairy man who smells strongly of beetroot.

“Hi,” he says, tapping Ginny on the shoulder.

She looks up anxiously but her face clears at the sight of Harry. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

Harry indicates the goblin, who is having to lean right forward to hear the surprisingly soft voice of the huge man who is next in line. “Just making a couple of deposits.”

She nods and then brightens. “Do you want to see my new office?”

Struck by her enthusiasm, Harry agrees, following her away from the main floor and down a winding nest of corridors. He’s got time to spare, and anyway, he’s intrigued.

“Here we are,” she announces, ushering him through the door and waiting for his response.

Harry looks around. The room is small and windowless, a little box lit by the glow of the crackled orange lamp she bought from Purple Fish on its first day of business. Her desk, wedged into the corner, is organised chaos; pictures of the children seem to jostle for position with boxes of quills, stacks of reports identical to the one she is still holding, and the biggest mug Harry has ever seen, red and sparkly and bearing the legend: World’s Beast Mum.

He grins, remembering the day a six or seven-year-old Al had brought that thing home from school, and the accompanying apologetic note from his teacher, who had been sternly forbidden by Al to correct his mistake or alter his vision in any way. Ginny, of course, had loved it all the more.

“It’s nice,” he says, finding a bare patch of desk and perching on it. “Bit cold, though.”

Ginny sits next to him, still cradling the precious report to her chest. “I know. It never seems to get warm anywhere in the building, unfortunately. That’s why I have these.” She picks up a pair of thick
woollen gloves and smiles wryly.

“You should get Hermione in here—she’s got a frightening talent for warming spells,” he says, listening to the goblins clattering back and forth in the corridor beyond the office and wondering just what they think of his presence here. If, in fact, they are bothering to think anything of it at all.
“Anyway, a cold office is better than no office at all.”

Ginny snorts. “Yeah. Of course, I was the last of the four of us to get my own office, but... well, I am the youngest. That has to count for something,” she says, pretending melodrama.

Harry grins at her, suddenly feeling more comfortable with her than he has in years. “Of course. And anyway, I don’t have an office at all any more,” he points out.

She elbows him in the ribs. “Yeah. Don’t try that. You have your own business.”

“You know, I’m still not really sure how that happened,” he admits.

Ginny rolls her eyes. “You’re just annoyingly successful, that’s how.” She sets down her report at last, pushing her fingers through hair that seems, now Harry thinks about it, shorter yet again. She sighs, and when she looks up, her eyes are bright and solemn. “Seriously, though, Harry... I’m pleased for you. Everything seems to be... going the way you wanted at last. That’s good.” Her smile is small but genuine, and yet the sting of sadness it provokes is still keen enough to catch his breath.

“Are you sure?” he asks before he can stop himself.

“Yes, of course,” she says fiercely, and for the briefest of moments he almost thinks she is going to strike him for being such an idiot. “Am I sad about the way things turned out? Yes, of course I bloody am, but Harry... look around you—the world is changing for all of us. Look at where Ron is now—that’s partly because of you—he’s having the time of his life and Hermione—haven’t you noticed how much happier she looks now that she knows he isn’t out in the field chasing after criminals? She knows he’s going to come home every night and have his tea and isn’t going to turn up dead or maimed in St Mungo’s because some idiot threw a curse at him...”

“I didn’t really...”

“I know you didn’t, because you spend so much time worrying about weird stuff,” she sighs.

“Alright, I’ll give you that, but what about you?” he insists.

“I’m fine, Harry. Like I said, everything’s changing. James and Al are growing up, and by next year, Lily will be at Hogwarts, too, and it’ll just be me. It’s a strange thought, really, but I’ve got my friends—and I really hope that includes you...”

“Of course,” Harry says, throat dry.

“Well, there you are. I’ve got my family... our family... I’m getting somewhere in this place, even though it might not seem that way. Not everyone has an office, you know,” she says, looking around at her little room with grim satisfaction. “I want you to stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself pretty well. What about you?” She swivels around on the desk to face him, eyebrows raised in expectation. “You look really nervous. What’s the matter?”

Harry’s heart speeds as she looks at him, clever dark eyes searching his face. “Well, I...”
A sharp knock at the door is followed immediately by the entrance of an elderly looking goblin with tiny gold spectacles and a brocade waistcoat.

“A moment please?” he requests.

“Sorry, Harry,” she says, rising with a tight smile and following the goblin to the door. “Shouldn’t be a minute.”

Harry nods just as the door clicks shut behind them. Left alone in the office, he wonders exactly what he was about to say to her. Surely it wasn’t ‘oh, I’m fine, I just wanted to tell you that Draco and I are now seeing each other and you might as well know that it’s getting pretty serious pretty fast’?

*She did ask, old bean,* points out the part of him that now seems to speak in Blaise’s voice.

*Yes, and she’s also in the middle of her work day,* argues a more well-established part that sounds a lot like Hermione. *Surely you can think of a better time.*

Irritated, Harry shuts out all the voices and tries instead to focus on the conversation that he knows he must have, one way or another.

Everyone has been so patient, so accepting, so encouraging in the face of what must seem like the madness—or indeed, mid-life crisis-- he has been suffering since he returned from the glimpse; now he can’t quite squash the nagging feeling that this, surely, is that point at which that patience runs out.

*Then again,* prods yet another guilt-spiky little voice in his head, *these aren’t just any old people—these are your friends, your family, your own flesh and blood—how on earth do you expect them to react to the news that your life just became another little bit more complicated—with pitchforks and flaming torches?*

Anguished, Harry gazes at the gleaming bronze plate on the end of the desk. *Ginny Potter,* it reads. ‘*It’s better for the kids that way, Harry, and I don’t mind—there’s more than enough Weasleys to keep the family name going*.’ The memory of that conversation pulls Harry straight back to the kitchen at Willoughby Drive, to hot teacups gripped in cold fingers, wintry air and the wind howling around the house, battering at the windows and filling gaps in the conversation.

It seems like a very long time ago, but the point, he reminds himself, scrubbing at his hair with fingers that still feel strange without their bandage, the point is that Ginny isn’t just a member of his family, much as she feels like one these days. She’s the mother of his children; she’s his ex-wife, for fuck’s sake. Logic dictates that what he has to tell her will be upsetting, however understanding she may have been thus far. Up until now, the idea of Draco has been... well, just that, really—an idea. But now that things are... somewhat different, she has to know.

Harry exhales slowly and attempts to sit up straight, like a thirty-seven year old man who knows what he’s doing, in the vague hope that if he does it often enough, one day it may become a reality. And also for Ginny, who needs to know, and who needs to have confidence that he’s doing the right thing. He doesn’t care what the papers say, how they say it or when they say it, but he’d rather lose a couple more fingertips than have her hear it from them first.

When she returns, she takes one look at him and sits back down on the edge of the desk, wrapping her cold fingers around his wrist and forcing him to look at her.
“Harry... you look terrible. Come on, what is it?”

He stares into the face he has loved for two decades—continues to love, in fact, and always will—and knows that any attempt at subterfuge is pointless now.

“I’m okay, I really am... it’s just...” Harry sighs, suddenly missing Misu’s warm presence and wishing he hadn’t left her sleeping in the workshop. “Draco and I... we’re... oh, fuck, Gin, I hate this. I’m so sorry.”

He falls silent, biting down hard on his lip and scanning her face for some clue to what she is feeling. For long seconds, there is nothing, and then she takes a deep, hitching breath and nods slowly.

“You’re together?” she says softly.

Tied in knots, Harry’s reply is barely audible. “Yes.”

“How long?” she asks, and the lack of accusation in her voice makes Harry feel sick.

“Since the... er... Fitzwilliam incident,” he says, automatically lifting his damaged hand and dropping his voice—she is one of the few who know the truth about that night, but he doubts that her colleagues need to be in on the secret.

Ginny closes her eyes, smiling through an odd little sound that is half laugh and half sigh. “I wondered. I know you hate to hear this but you do have a thing for rescuing people, Harry.”

Harry flushes and looks at his hands, pretending to inspect the shiny new skin on his two stubby fingertips. “Yeah. Well, he needed rescuing, and it’s not about that, anyway.”

She does laugh this time, though it sounds like it hurts. “I know. I just... I don’t know what I’m trying to do. All of this is still a little strange for me,” she admits.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, forcing himself to look at her. Her eyes are open now, and shiny with tears.

“Don’t be. I’m pleased to see you happy, believe it or not.” She sniffs, wipes her eyes on her sleeve and shakes her head, apparently amused at her own display of emotion. She gazes at him, dark eyes huge. “Please be careful, Harry.”

“I promise I’m being as careful as I know how,” he says, wanting to make her smile.

“I suppose that will have to do,” she sighs, and the smile is wobbly, but it’s there. “What is it about him? Really?”

Harry frowns, knowing there isn’t a reply in the world that will help. “Gin...”

“Tell me,” she insists, teary eyes turning severe. “Tell me what he has that means he deserves you.”

Harry hesitates, but there’s no arguing with that expression and he knows it. “He fascinates me,” he says at last, because it’s the truth, and can’t think of a lie that would convince her.

She smiles sadly. “He always has.”
Stung, he looks away. She’s right, of course, but that doesn’t make him feel any better. “He’s a different person now, Gin. We all are.”

“I know. I’ve worked with him for enough years to realise that he did figure out how to be a human being in the end,” she offers.

Harry frowns. “You usually insist that you don’t work with him. You work for Gringotts, and he’s —”

“I know,” she interrupts. “I decided it’s high time I stop being petty about him. It’s not as though he and I are in competition any more.”

Startled, Harry stares at her. “You never were!”

Ginny shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter, Harry.” She rests her head on his shoulder and his arm comes up around her quite naturally. He presses his face to the top of her head, inhaling the familiar sweet scent of her hair and sighing gently against it.

“You’re brilliant,” he murmurs, and the tickle of her amusement against his neck is bittersweet.

“Don’t forget it,” she sighs.

Harry says nothing, just holds her against his side and stares at the intricate network of cracks that spreads across one of the office walls. He breathes, and she breathes, the goblins scuttle in the corridors beyond, and everything is peaceful.

Eventually, though, he has to ask. The question forces itself into his mouth and out into the room before he can even attempt to shove it back in.

“What am I going to tell the kids?”

Ginny’s sigh is warm against his skin. Apparently comfortable, she stays where she is to reply.

“The truth. Daddy’s got a new boyfriend.”

Harry snorts. “Thanks, I’ll use those exact words.”

Ginny pulls herself upright, taking a moment to free her hair from one of Harry’s shirt buttons. “It’ll be fine. James won’t care, Al will be delighted, and Lily... Lily will be fine. Stop panicking.”

“I’m not panicking,” Harry protests, but Ginny just looks at him, apparently having none of it, and slides down from her desk. As she walks around to sit behind it, she neatly shoves him onto his feet.

“You need to leave me alone now,” she advises, picking up her quill. “I’ve got loads to do and I can’t work late because I’m meeting George for dinner.”

Harry nods, watching her write and allowing himself to enjoy the rush of love for her that wraps briefly but warmly around him. “Okay. I’ll see you at the weekend,” he says, heading for the door. “And when you see George, tell him to get in touch with me—I think I may have met the woman of his dreams.”

***~*~***
Saturday morning is bright and clear with just a hint of a breeze—perfect Quidditch weather, Harry thinks as he and Draco make their way up to the top of their usual stand. At least he thinks he only thinks it.

“If you tell me that one more time, I’m going to strangle you with your own scarf,” Draco mutters, stalking to the front of the stand and gazing out over the empty pitch.

Harry makes a face at the back of his head and tugs at the scarf in question, trying to pull it away from his neck. It’s definitely not scarf weather any more, even in this part of the country, but as the match is Gryffindor v Hufflepuff, he thinks he ought to show his support. James will be playing, and afterwards... well, it’s probably better not to think about afterwards until he has to. Pushing the thought from his mind, he joins Draco at the barrier and leans out on his forearms, letting the breeze slide through his hair and waiting for the players to arrive.

“Is Frances playing today?”

Draco frowns. “I certainly hope so. I’d have heard if she had an injury.”

“Yeah,” Harry mumbles, screwing up his nose as Draco looks away. As far as he can see, the Mullender girl is the only real threat to the Gryffindor team, and... oh, yes, there she is, striding onto the pitch, dark hair and canary yellow robes gleaming in the sun.

“There she is,” Draco crows, pointing her out as she takes to the air and performs a few swoops and whirls for the crowd. “On top form, too, by the looks of it.”

“Our Seeker’s pretty good too, you know,” Harry points out.

“He’s indecisive,” Draco says with an impressive level of disdain.

“That’s good coming from you,” Harry mutters under his breath, unsure whether or not he wants Draco to hear him.

Naturally, Draco does. “What on earth are you talking about?” he demands, grey eyes narrowed.

Harry sighs. He turns around to face Draco, elbows resting behind him on the barrier. “I’m talking about the conversation you had with Ron... five days ago? The one where he expressed quite a keen interest in your folders of doom and destruction—”

“I have never called them that,” Draco points out.

Harry rolls his eyes but can’t quite suppress a smile. “Idiot. The point is, he said to you, and I was there, so don’t even try to deny it, that he’d be interested in consulting with you as long as you promise not to go flinging yourself into danger ever again.”

“At least without telling someone first,” Draco adds, as if this part is of vital importance.

“Exactly. So you were listening.”

“Yes. I just haven’t made up my mind.” At Harry’s look, he continues, frowning: “That does not make me indecisive. It makes me... considered.”
“Our Seeker is very considered,” Harry declares, turning around to watch the players being announced.

Draco snorts. “There is nothing wrong with thinking something over. Especially something as significant as agreeing to become a consultant for the Auror Department.”

As James’ name is announced, Harry applauds wildly. “That’s funny, because I thought I heard you say that the Ministry was full of self-important tosspots and you wouldn’t work for them in a million years.”

Draco’s shrug is affectedly casual. “Well, of course, that’s right, but all the same, it’s important to give these matters the proper amount of thought.”

Harry grins, resting his arm against Draco’s and turning his attention fully to the pitch as the whistle is blown and all fourteen players take to the air. He knows that Draco is pleased by the offer, whatever he might say, and though it’s not quite a clear way to a career in journalism, it’s certainly a step in the right direction, and there if he wants to take it.

The game is short and, for the Gryffindor players, disappointing. Frances catches the Snitch easily after twenty minutes and just four goals scored. James manages to get a few good hits in, at one point almost knocking one of the Hufflepuff Beaters off his broom, but he still looks dejected when the final whistle is blown and Harry feels for him. He wonders if perhaps this isn’t the best time to have a talk with his son, but he also knows that it’s better to get these things over with, and perhaps this way, James doesn’t need to have two perfectly good days ruined.

“That’s very optimistic, Harry,” he mumbles to himself.

“Are you talking to yourself?” Draco asks, still smiling triumphantly over ‘his’ win.

“Yes.”

Draco shrugs and continues to lean on the barrier. Harry watches him, his graceful lines and gently windswept hair, and god, those trousers look good on him. It’s going to be fine.

“Hi, Dad,” James says gloomily, pulling up beside the stand on his broom and hovering there. “Hi, Mr Malfoy.”

“Hello,” Draco says uncertainly, standing up straight now.

“Well, that was a disaster,” James sighs. His hair, Harry is now interested to note, is recovering. It is still shorter than usual, but the pink patches have been covered with a severe black dye job, and he does at least look more like himself again.

“No, it wasn’t,” Harry assures. “You didn’t win—that happens—but I was watching you and you played a really good game. I saw you nearly knock Hodgson off his broom.”

James continues to scowl but there’s almost a hopeful note in his voice when he says, “Yeah. I suppose so. We can’t win the cup now but we can come second, so...”

Harry smiles. “Well, exactly.”

“It’s your Seeker that’s the problem,” Draco offers.
James stares at him, astonished. “’Scuse me?”

“Your Seeker. He can’t make his mind up where to go. The best thing he could have done in this situation would have been to mark Mullender—follow her wherever she goes. That girl has eyes like a hawk, he isn’t going to beat her by floating around one set of goalposts and then the other.”

Bewildered, James glances from Draco to Harry, who shrugs and says, “You should listen to him. He was a good Seeker, too.”

Draco lifts an eyebrow. “I wasn’t the best. But I’ve learned a lot since then.”

“Er... right. Well, thanks, Mr Malfoy... I’ll just...” James goes to turn his broom back toward the pitch.

“Hang on,” Harry calls. “Can you grab Al and come back up here? I want to talk to you both.”

James nods and speeds away, scarlet robes billowing out behind him.

“Are you doing what I think you’re doing?” Draco asks.

“It’s about time.”

“In a Quidditch stand?” Draco says, sounding vaguely scandalised.

Harry shrugs. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Does it matter if I do?”

Harry doesn’t answer, because the sound of running feet on wooden stairs announces the arrival of James, who is accompanied not only by Al, but by Rose and Scorpius, too.

Draco blanches, but when Harry shoots him an inquiring look, he takes a deep breath and nods.

“They wouldn’t listen,” James sighs. “Apparently the three of them can’t go anywhere without each other.”

Harry smiles at the floor, knowing full well that Ron and Hermione would have refused to let him go to his potential doom alone, either. “It’s alright, they probably need to hear this as well.”

“Has someone died?” Al asks, and Rose gasps and grabs his arm.

“Why do you always think someone’s died?” James demands.

“I don’t know. But one day someone will have died and everyone will say, ‘how did you know, Al?’” he says triumphantly. Beside him, Scorpius manages to look amused and exasperated all at once.

“Right, okay,” Harry interrupts, before James can ask another question. “Nobody has died. I just wanted to let you know... er, we wanted to let you know, Mr Malfoy and I, that is, that... before you read anything in the paper, because you know what they’re like, we thought it should come from us that we’re... together,” he finishes, wondering exactly what happened to the smooth explanation he
has been practising since the night before.

“Dad,” Scorpius says, breaking the silence that has descended over the stand. He stares up at his father with wide eyes, mouth slightly open. “You’re going out with Mr Potter? Like... you and Mr Potter are boyfriends?”

Harry daren’t look at Draco, and he certainly isn’t close enough to touch him, but the discomfiture is rolling off him and hitting Harry in vast, burning waves. He feels terrible for Draco, he really does, but he can’t think of a way they could have done this without the embarrassment—as far as he’s ever been able to tell, humiliation is just par for the course when it comes to parents and children and relationships.

“If you want to put it that way, yes,” Draco says slowly.

“I told you,” Scorpius says, rounding on Rose with an odd little smile.

“I believed you!” Rose says indignantly. “That’s why we sent the letter!”

Harry knows exactly which letter she is talking about, and the memory of it sends a prickly flush down the back of his neck. Did you know Mr Potter is GAY?

“Oh, yes,” Scorpius concedes. “Sorry, Rose.”

“Hang on,” Al says at last, “Does this make me and Scorp brothers?”

“You’d be step-brothers if they got married,” Rose says knowledgably.

“No one’s getting married,” Harry points out, noticing the faint note of desperation in his voice. Draco, apparently, hears it too, because a little snort of amusement issues from somewhere to Harry’s right.

“Are you going to be living in sin, then?” Al asks, green eyes sparkling with delight. “That’s what our Muggle Studies teacher says they call it, you know when you’re not married but you’re having —”

“Stop,” James groans, cutting him off and staring at Harry with a look of abject horror on his face. “For fuck’s sake, Dad. I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“You’ll live,” Harry says, letting the swearing slide. James has had a difficult morning.

“I’d rather not think about your sex life,” James mutters, crossing one scarlet-clad arm over the other.

“No one’s forcing you,” Harry says mildly.

James’ expression darkens. “Not yet they’re not.”

“I was a little bit,” Al offers brightly. “Sorry, James.”

James snorts and looks away over the Quidditch pitch, apparently sulking. Harry sighs and turns back to the others, who seem far more receptive to the news. He’ll come around.

“Does Grandma know?” Scorpius asks. He looks terribly worried for an eleven-year-old, and only
relaxes when Draco assures him that yes, his grandmother knows, and that she’s quite alright about the whole thing.

“It’s funny, isn’t it...” Rose says to her two best friends. “Remember when that Alana Smith from third year said that your dad and your dad were... you know... that was ages ago, and she was right, wasn’t she?”

Al pulls a face. “Yeah, but she’s horrible. She was just saying it to be mean. Don’t tell her she was right, Rose.”

“I’m not going to,” Rose says stoutly. “I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“That would be appreciated for the time being, Miss Weasley,” Draco says gravely.

Rose nods eagerly. “I won’t tell anyone at all, I promise.”

“Neither will I, Dad,” says Scorpius, lifting his pointed Malfoy chin with immense dignity.

“Oh me,” Al declares. “Except Lily! Does Lily know?”

“Not yet,” Harry says. “I know you like to keep each other up to date but could you hold off on owling Lily until tomorrow? I’d like to speak to her about this myself.”

“Righto, Dad.” Al makes a dramatic zipping motion across his mouth, clamps his lips together and then pretends to be stuck, insisting that Rose unzip him with her fingers before he can speak again. “I solemnly swear.”

“Great,” Harry says, watching with amusement as the three of them fall about laughing. He turns to the sulky figure at the barrier. “What about you, James?”

James heaves a huge, heavy sigh and then spins around to face Harry. “No, I’m not going to tell Lily, alright?”

“Thank you.”

“Look, Dad, I don’t mind who you’re shagging, I really don’t. But people are talking about you and Mr Malfoy and they’re already asking me questions—imagine how bad it’s going to be when it’s all over the Prophet? I mean... really... thinking about my own father having it off? With you and Mum, I just tried not to think about it, but now... I’m being forced to consider the idea of my dad without any clothes on.” James draws himself up to his full height and scowls. “I hope you’ve got enough money for my therapy bills.”

Taken aback, Harry blinks and attempts to gather his thoughts. The trouble is, with James, it’s nearly impossible to tell how serious he is or how strongly he feels about a subject at any given moment; he swings between high drama and indifference with such terrifying ease that Harry very rarely has a clue how to respond. In this case, he can understand James’ frustration but at the same time, rather unhelpfully, he wants to laugh. It doesn’t help that Al, Rose, and Scorpius have now fallen silent and are hanging onto each other, eyes trained on James, looking utterly bewildered. Harry bites his lip.

“Okay. James, I’m sorry that you’re traumatised by the idea of your parents naked, but you know what? I think that’s pretty healthy. I think that’s fine. If it helps you, why don’t you imagine that Draco and I... drink tea... and play chess... because we’re old people...”
“Speak for yourself,” Draco says helpfully.

“And as for the rest. I really am sorry that you have to read anything about me in the newspaper—it’s a ridiculous state of affairs but there’s not a whole lot I can do about it. You can stop reading the *Prophet* if you want to, but that won’t stop anyone else, so... just ignore them. It’s all bollocks, James, you know it is. What’s real is what I’m telling you now. I love you—I love all of you—and that isn’t going to change because I’m with someone other than your mother.”

“You needn’t worry that I will try to be another parent to you, James,” Draco says gently after several seconds of near-silence. No one speaks in the stand and the whooshing of post-match broomstick races and the creaking of the floorboards under shifting feet seem very loud to Harry’s ears.

“Good. I don’t need one.”

“James, don’t be rude,” Al says quietly.

“Shut up,” James snaps. “You don’t get how weird this is.”

“He’s not stupid,” Rose says, glaring up at him.

“And it’s not weird,” Al insists, shooting her a grateful glance.

“I don’t think it’s weird, either,” Scorpius chimes in imperiously. “I think it’s fine.”

James rolls his eyes. “Dad, Mr Malfoy, I’m going now. I’m already late for my team debrief.” He turns and stalks out of sight; everyone still inside the stand listens to his rapid footsteps as he descends the stairs and no one seems to want to say a word.

Quietly, Scorpius extricates himself from Rose and Al and wraps his arms around his father in a tight hug. He then holds his hand out for Harry’s and shakes it firmly.

“Scorp, you’re so fancy,” Al whispers. Scorpius takes one look at his awed face and dissolves into decidedly un-fancy giggles. After a moment or two, even Draco is smiling, and with the tension broken, Harry feels the racing tangle inside him start to slow.

“You know that girl Alana Smith?” Al says, once he has recovered his composure.

“Not daughter of Zacharias Smith?” Harry mutters to Draco, and he nods, lip curling.

“What about her, Al?”

“She’s said quite a lot of mean things about you,” Al says quietly. “And about Mr Malfoy.”

“She’s horrid,” Rose says, scrunching up her nose.

“She is,” Al agrees. “When she said... she said...”

“She said some really, really bad things about the two of you being together, and she was making it all up, but it didn’t matter,” Scorpius fills in, exchanging glances with Al.
“Yeah. When she did that, James got into a fight with her...”

“We were there,” Rose supplies. “It was outside Potions.”

“And he did a hex on her that made slime come out of her mouth, and he got two weeks’ detention ‘cause he wouldn’t even tell McGonagall why he did it,” Al finishes grandly.

“It was disgusting,” Scorpius says, apparently torn between awe and repulsion.

“When was this?” Harry asks, not that it matters. Relief and pride and exasperation are surging through him as one, and though he wonders why James can never express his real feelings in a more direct manner, he supposes that James is just the way he is, and he wouldn’t change him, even if he could and even if it would be a hell of a lot easier that way.

“About two weeks ago,” Rose says. “I don’t think it was the first time, just the first time he got caught.”

“Don’t tell him we told, he’ll go mad,” Al says, grimacing.

“I won’t,” Harry assures his son, folding him into a rough hug and further ruffling his dishevelled hair. “Thank you.”

“What for?” Al mumbles against his shirt fabric, but Harry doesn’t answer.

***~*~***

Falling back on his tried-and-tested ‘get it all over with’ policy, Harry talks to Lily after dinner that night. Encouraged by his success with Al, Rose, and Scorpius, and simultaneously cautious after James’ sulking and ranting, it is with a good deal of uncertainty that he approaches the subject, waiting until Lily has eaten as many sausages, crackers and baked potatoes as she can manage, changed into her pyjamas, and has arranged herself cross-legged on the sofa with Frank on her lap, Misu on Frank’s back, and her stuffed fish clutched tightly to her chest.

Harry sits down opposite her, pulling his feet up onto the sofa cushions, too. Gripping his mug of hot chocolate tightly, he tells her everything, and when he has finished, he waits. And waits. Lily stares at him in silence, expression unreadable. And then, quite inexplicably, she starts to laugh.

Puzzled, Harry watches her. At least, he does, until he just has to ask what is so hilarious.

“What?”

Lily drops her head and presses her face into Frank’s fur, giggling helplessly. “Oh, Dad,” she manages, breathless.

“What?” Harry repeats, determined not to be offended. “What’s so funny?”

Lily looks up, face flushed and shoulders shaking. “I don’t know.”

“But you’re okay with it? With what I told you?”

“Of course, Dad... I think I’m just a bit relieved,” she admits, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.
“What about?”

Lily wrinkles her freckled nose. “It was just... your cupboards.”

“What about my cupboards?” Harry asks, more confused than ever.

“Haven’t you noticed? Everything in your kitchen cupboards—all your herbs and spices and packets and everything—it’s all been... sort of organised. Everything always faces the same way and it’s set out in little rows... all the packets on one side and the jars on the other... no?” Lily stares at him, apparently astounded by his ignorance.

“Er... no, not really,” he confesses, blowing on his hot chocolate and sipping it slowly. And he hasn’t noticed, but he certainly knows exactly who has been organising his kitchen cupboards. “And why were you worried about that, Lil?”

“You’re never that tidy,” she says, frowning. “I thought maybe you’d... gone a bit weird. Mrs Harbottle says that can happen to people when they get older.”

Harry snorts. He knows for a fact that Mrs Harbottle is much older than him, so she can bugger off.

“I promise you that I’m not any weirder than I was before,” he says gravely.

Lily smiles. “I know. It’s just Mr Malfoy tidying your things.”

“You’re right, but how did you know?” he asks.

“I can just tell. He’s a tidy sort of person,” she says, manoeuvring Misu’s glass tail out of Frank’s twitching ear.

“That certainly is true,” Harry agrees. “Your mum knows about all this, by the way. It’s okay if you want to talk to her about it.”

“I might,” Lily says, face contemplative as she rests her chin on her fish and regards Harry. “She’s not upset, is she?”

“She’s alright,” Harry assures her. “She’s strong.”

“I know,” Lily says, adding airily: “She’s had lunch with that Blaise Zabini man twice now.”

“Is that so?” Harry murmurs, smiling to himself.

He’s not looking forward to saying goodbye to Lily tomorrow, but when he does, he’s going to enjoy his conversation with her mother.

***~*~***

“So... Lily tells me you’ve been seeing a lot of Blaise Zabini,” Harry says casually, accepting a steaming cup from Ginny and grinning.

They both look automatically upwards as Lily stomps around in her bedroom, hopefully getting her school things ready for the morning, then Ginny’s eyes are back on his and she’s lowering herself
into a chair at the table, no-nonsense expression firmly in place.

“Oh, it’s not like that. Believe me, that’s the last sort of thing I need in my life right now.”

“Really? Sure you’re not protesting too much?” Harry presses, guiltily enjoying himself.

“No, Harry,” she says, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. “Just because you felt the need to leap into a relationship—”

“Hey!” Harry protests. “I didn’t leap.”

“You didn’t let the grass grow under your feet, either,” she points out, but her eyes are warm.

“I suppose not,” he admits. She’s never going to understand what really happened, and he’s never going to explain it to her, so he might as well agree. “I’m sorry.”

“No more apologies, for goodness’ sake!” Ginny rests her elbows on the table and grants him an almost regretful smile. “I will say, though... Blaise is a really decent guy when you get to know him.”

Harry’s smile bears no trace of regret. “I know.”

**~*~**

Darkness is falling fast by the time Ginny holds her hand out for his empty cup and tells him to bugger off home, and, on impulse, Harry decides to take a walk into the village before he Apparates back to London to call Draco. The night smells exciting, somehow, as though the trees and the wind and the scent of approaching summer have conspired to draw him along the lane, past the crouching cottages and onward.

The pub is ablaze with conversation, drifting out through the flung-open doors and windows, and the jewelled panes are lit from within by candles, flickering in invitation and pulling Harry in. He’s at the bar before he knows what he’s doing, and Eddie the barman nods to him politely.

“What can I get you?”

Harry glances along the taps. “I’ll just have a...” He pauses, catching sight of something very familiar indeed. “Sorry, I’ll be back in a minute.”

He finds he’s not at all surprised to see Boris in the corner, tucked into the snug with his boots up on the table. The night is warm and the fire remains unlit but the old man doesn’t seem to have noticed. Perhaps he just doesn’t care, but either way, it seems fitting somehow that they are both here in the place where everything started.

“Hello,” he says, and Boris startles. “Can I buy you a drink?”

The milky eyes lift to his and a smile opens up in his mass of beard. “Drop of gin wouldn’t go amiss, lad.”

“Right you are.” Harry heads back to the bar, exchanging friendly greetings with old Mrs Roth, who is perching on her usual stool. He orders a nice big gin for Boris and a pint of the local ale for himself, having decided some time ago that neat spirits are not his friend. “Here you are,” he says, pushing Boris’ glass into his gnarled hands and making himself comfortable on the settle.
“That’s kind of you, lad,” Boris grunts, squinting at the clock. “I reckon I’ve got a few minutes before I ’ave to go. Got a new client lined up, you see,” he says in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Here?” Harry asks, looking around. He glances out of the leaded window at the balmy May evening. “Surely it’s harder to pretend to fall over when there’s no ice on the ground.”

Boris laughs. “I ’ave other means of attracting a client’s interest, you know. In fact, I like to offer a specialised approach—different for each individual, so to speak.”

“Specialised?” Harry repeats faintly.

Boris gulps at his drink. Harry winces. “Yes, young man. In fact, ’cordin’ to my latest appraisal, it’s one of my strengths as an operative.”

“And you thought that playing the damsel in distress would work on me?” Harry asks, affronted.

Boris smiles slowly, displaying all his gold teeth. “It worked, didn’ it?”

Harry sips his drink, knowing he can’t deny the fact. “How did you know it would?” he asks, irritated by the idea that he’s so easy to know, to predict, even for someone who had, at the time, never spoken to him.

“Ah, don’t look like that, lad. I do my research, that’s all. I watched you for a good while before I decided the time was right to approach you—that’s what we do with all our DCs,” Boris explains, as though it should all be quite obvious.

Harry, however, is lost, and he doesn’t mind admitting it. “What’s a DC?”

“A deserving case,” Boris says, looking at Harry over the top of his glass with opalescent eyes. “The organisation, if you will, only provides glimpses—and consequently second chances—to those it considers deservin’.”

Taken with the scope of the whole thing, Harry slumps against the rigid wooden back of the settle and allows it to wash over him. He was chosen, and chosen because some... entity, somewhere, decided that he was deserving. The idea doesn’t sit comfortably and he turns it over and over in his head, wondering if his second chance should have gone to someone else, and if it had, mentally listing all of the things he would never have had. A fulfilling career. A craft. A friend in Ginny. A close relationship with his children. Draco.

“I’m not really convinced I fit that description,” he says at last.

“I’ve ’elped a lot of lads in my time, and none of them ’as ever thought they was deservin’,’” Boris advises, oilskin creaking as he shifts his old bones on the settle. “In all honesty, young man, I can’t say as any of ’em were as deservin’ as you.”

“Oh,” Harry says, and then he is lost for words. By mutual tacit consent, he and Boris work on their drinks in a rather comfortable silence, until Harry is struck by a pointless detail. “Don’t you ever help ladies?”

“Eh?”
“You said... you’d helped a lot of lads over the years. What about women?”

Boris nods, understanding. “Not me personally, young man. We 'ave more qualified people to deal with ladies’ things,” he says, speaking the words as though they have some mystical significance.

“Well, that’s... good,” Harry says, draining his glass and wondering, idly, about ‘ladies’ things’.

“That lady there, in fact,” Boris mumbles, gesturing with his glass and spotting Harry’s t-shirt with gin. “Been a colleague of mine for many a year.”

Harry looks across the pub and nearly drops his pint glass. “Mrs Roth?” he demands.

“That’s right, but I just call ’er Camille, unless she’s cross with me,” Boris says calmly.

Perhaps hearing her name, the old lady turns around on her barstool and winks at Harry.

He smiles weakly and she smiles back. He doesn’t think he imagines the slightly stern look she gives Boris as she swings back around and resumes her conversation with the barman.

Boris hasn’t missed it, either. “Time for me to get back to work,” he says, finishing the last of his gin and nodding to Harry. “It’s been good to see you, lad. A privilege, in fact.”

“Likewise,” Harry says, surprised to feel a rasp of affection for the old man creeping into his voice. “Thank you. I have to get going, too.”

“Back to your Mr Malfoy,” Boris says knowingly. He gets to his feet, and Harry rises, too.

“Yeah,” Harry says, setting down his empty glass and shaking the old man’s hand. He smiles. “Back to my Mr Malfoy.”
31st December 2018

The midday sun is warm on Harry's face as he leans against the kitchen counter, relishing the perfect drinking temperature of his cup of tea and forgetting about all the things he is supposed to be doing.

Basking in a little pool of contentment, he closes his eyes and inhales the fragrant steam, the scent of the beeswax Draco uses to polish the long oak table and the faint aroma of long-gone bacon sandwiches. Above him, the old floorboards creak as Draco wanders around upstairs doing things that Harry will never truly understand—checking, ordering, mumbling to himself. Harry smiles.

It doesn't seem to matter that Draco doesn't officially live here. The inevitable combination of Lucius Malfoy's ruined health and Draco's fierce family loyalty means that things are a little complicated to say the least, but they manage, all of them, and it's good. It's fine. He frequently recalls Neville's sheepish description of 'that funny stage' of a relationship and is torn between empathy and laughter, because really, there was never going to be anything straightforward about any of this. In truth, he hasn't any more of an idea of what he's doing than Neville, but he doesn't mind. Things haven't been nearly as awkward as he had feared; he and Draco are managing—tentatively and circuitously at times—to talk, something that he and Ginny never really got the hang of.

Harry gulps at his tea and sighs, opening his eyes and gazing at the tiled floor, where Misu is snoozing in a patch of sunlight. He has learned, one way or another, that keeping one's feelings to oneself rarely makes anything easier in the long run, and Draco... well, Draco is still Draco, still a Malfoy, and he's never going to be an open book, but he's also thirty-eight, divorced, a father, and, as he puts it, 'too bloody old for playing idiotic games'. He is, too, Harry thinks. They both are.

Draco stays most nights, travelling to work from Harry's still-not-quite-fully-renovated townhouse and Flooing over to the Manor at regular intervals to relieve his mother and catch up with her over tea and little sandwiches, a years-old ritual of which Harry remains quietly envious. Narcissa herself has remained stoic and utterly graceful, seemingly delighted by the continued presence of Harry in her son's life.

Perhaps more hopeful still has been the arrival of a friendly, curly-haired young man named Hamish, who has become a fixture in Lucius' wing of the Manor over the last few months. Narcissa, hesitant at first, has at last begun to enjoy some freedom, safe in the knowledge that her husband's secret will not be shared with the world. Hamish, a living advertisement for Hufflepuff house, if Harry has ever seen one, deals with Lucius' needy moments, confusion, pain and hissy fits with laid-back equanimity.

"He is coming," Misu advises, glass tail clinking against the tile as she stirs.

Harry listens for a moment, seeking out the creaking of the stairs. "So he is."

A second or two later, Draco steps into the kitchen, takes one look at Harry and raises his eyes to the ceiling.

"You're still here."

Harry blinks, puzzled by his exasperation, but only for the second or two it takes him to remember
that he promised to leave for Diagon Alley some time ago, to pick up the supplies for their New Year's Eve party. It's not his fault. Tea and sunshine are very distracting.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"I'll just go myself, shall I?" Draco says airily, tapping his fingers lightly on the counter.

"No, I'll go, I'm going now," Harry protests, setting down his cup and shaking himself out of his comfortable little reverie. "I promised I'd take the kids."

"I doubt your children want to be dragged around the shops with you," Draco says, opening the cupboard and poking around for his favourite tea mug.

Harry lifts an eyebrow. "There won't be any dragging, what kind of parent do you think I am? Anyway, Lily wants to come to Borteg's."

"Isn't it a bit early for her to have developed a taste for quality whisky?"

Harry sighs. "It's never too early for that," he mumbles, scooping up Misu from the floor and brushing a few crumbs from her scales. "He thinks he's funny."

"So do you," Misu says, looping around his neck. "You are both funny to me."

Harry smiles. He has the feeling that she doesn't mean the words as a compliment. "Lily... is drawn to unusual people."

"There's something wrong with that girl," Draco continues, ignoring him and examining a sugar cube for imperfections. "She must get it from you."

"Shut up," Harry murmurs, grinning warmly now. "It's not just Lily, anyway. Al wants to go to George's shop to look at some sort of exploding gunge and James wants to look at the racing brooms on sale..." he breaks off and goes to fish another money bag from the designated drawer. Racing brooms don't come cheap, even when they are on sale. James has earned a treat, though, his marks have improved dramatically over the last couple of terms, and he hasn't tried to curse Alana Smith in months. Which is almost a shame, Harry thinks secretly, but then she hasn't had many friends since the news broke and it turned out that no one was particularly upset about the Potter-Malfoy relationship, much less interested in her spiteful words or offensive opinions.

Seven bags, all neatly tied; he doesn't need to look to know that each contains precisely the same number of shining gold Galleons. Harry tucks the bag into his pocket and heads immediately for the 'overflow' cupboard, where many more identical bags are kept in stacks of larger, more acceptable numbers. He takes one and tucks it into the drawer, restoring the stock to the approved Draco-friendly level and, he thinks with an affectionate smile, restoring balance to the world in his own minute, nonsensical way.

The drawers and cupboards in the kitchen are not, of course, the limit of Draco's impact on Harry's house. His wardrobe has been organised according to colour, style, and purpose, and the items in his bathroom cabinets are arranged to within an inch of their lives via an inexplicable system that Harry stopped trying to understand some months ago. Even Misu's frozen mice are bagged and stacked in neat piles of sevens beside Harry's peas and ice cubes in the cold cabinet. There is a rule and a place for almost everything, and though it's a stark contrast to any way Harry has ever lived before, he doesn't mind at all.
"Doesn't it drive you mad?" Ron asks frequently, watching Draco from under knitted brows as he tap-tap-tap-tap-taps on the counters with his fingers or pokes at the jars in the cupboards.

Harry's response is always the same.

"No. It's just the way it has to be for him. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"I wonder if I ordered enough drinks," Draco muses, wrapping his hands around his stripy cup and leaning on the counter in the light-drenched spot Harry has just vacated.

"I think you ordered enough to seriously incapacitate everyone on our guest list if you really wanted to," Harry advises, closing the drawer and crossing the tiles to kiss the tiny curve at the corner of Draco's lips, persisting until it flickers into a genuine smile.

"Maybe that's my plan," he whispers, voice soft and eyes warm.

Harry leans against him, breathing in the familiar citrus smell of his hair. He sighs. "This isn't helping me get the shopping done."

Draco stares at him for a moment, expression torn, then pushes him away with a forefinger. "Think of it as an incentive, then. To improve your efficiency."

Harry snorts. "I'll incentive you in a minute," he mutters, any attempt at logic scuppered by the promise in Draco's eyes.

"That makes absolutely no..." Draco begins, but Harry has already Disapparated.

**~*~**

"Dad, you're late."

Harry smiles at his son, who is currently wearing his hair in a very nineteen-fifties quiff with very un-nineteen-fifties lime green stripes. He looks like some kind of exotic insect, but Harry knows better than to say so.

"I'm sorry. I got held up," he says instead.

"It's alright, Dad, we haven't been waiting long," Lily says, casting a reproachful glance at her brother.

Harry nods, turning up his coat collar against the deceptive chill in the air. "Good. Where's Al?"

"In there with Rose and Scorpius." James gestures negligently toward the window of Flourish and Blotts, where Harry can just make out Rose's wavy hair and Scorpius' shocking blond among the crowds of bargain-seeking customers.

"Why do I even bother to ask?" Harry mumbles, mostly to himself. If he's honest, he hasn't stopped to question the whereabouts of Rose and Scorpius this afternoon, but it's not the first time he has lost track of his extended brood, and it certainly won't be the last. "Alright, come on, you lot," he calls to Al and his two best friends as they emerge from the shop, giggling over some secret joke.
"Dad!" Al exclaims, bounding over and hugging Harry as though he hasn't seen him for weeks, rather than not-quite-two-days. Harry returns the hug, determined to enjoy his son's affection before he becomes an awkward teenager who would rather die than hug his dad in front of his friends. "You should see the book we got. Me and Rose and Scorp put our Christmas money together to get it."

"Al, you are a very sad individual," James pronounces, tone so heavy with disdain that Harry barely manages to conceal his laughter.

"There's nothing sad about books," Lily says stoutly, and Rose, who is hugging the shiny bag close to her chest, smiles at her cousin. "Please can I see it?"

Al, Rose and Scorpius exchange glances and then Rose nods, producing a vast hardcover volume with silver-edged pages and imposing punched letters proclaiming, 'Galthropp's Guide to Gobstones: Theory, Strategy, and History' – all you will EVER need to know'.

"Looks impressive," Harry says.

Scorpius beams. "It has a foreword written by Esther Carver-Guppick. She won the World Gobstones Championship five times," he adds anxiously, eyes urging Harry to agree that this is a very impressive thing indeed.

"Looks like you'll be top of the league in no time," Harry says gravely, and the three excited faces brighten impossibly.

"Between this and the new sets you made us for Christmas, I think we have a decent chance," Rose agrees, watching Lily carefully as she traces the embossed cover with her fingers.

Harry smiles, warmed by their enthusiasm. As far as he knows, all three of them still belong to the Chess Club, the Astronomy Club and the Charms Club, but it is Gobstones that has become the obsession. It had been Al who had convinced him to have a go at making his own sets.

"They're just like marbles, Dad," he'd pointed out. "I bet it wouldn't be that hard to put the spells and the liquid inside them."

As it had turned out, Al had—as usual—been a little optimistic, but after a good couple of weeks of research, testing, and mishaps that had left Harry smelling like death and sleeping alone for several days until Draco had found an effective deodorising charm, Harry had cracked it. Despite a difficult start, he has come to enjoy turning out unusual marbles and Gobstones in between creating bigger pieces, and the little sets have rapidly become a popular item at Purple Fish. For their trouble, the three little buggers are now the proud owners of their own unique sets—clear green glass for Al, smoky pink for Rose, and marbled grey for Scorpius.

Now they are ready to take on the Hogwarts Gobstones Club in earnest. Harry can't help but believe that world domination cannot be far away.

"Just think," Lily says, tucking her arm through Harry's and tugging him down the street after the others, "one more day and I'll be able to say I'm going to Hogwarts this year."

"It's not as good as you think, Lil," Al says, turning around to look at his sister. "They give you so much homework."
"Really?" Lily asks, stricken. She stops dead, causing Harry to stumble slightly. He directs an exasperated glance at Al, who grins.

"No. It's brilliant. You're going to love it."

Lily's eyes widen with relief and she kicks her brother in the ankle, smile firmly back in place.

"Al, you're rotten," Rose murmurs, hiding a smile in her windblown hair.

"It's true about the homework, though," James puts in, dragging his eyes away from his reflection in the window of Eeylops Owl Emporium.

"I don't care," Lily declares, fingers tightening around Harry's arm. "I want to learn everything!"

"Everything?" Harry repeats, amused.

"Yes. I haven't decided what I want to be when I grow up yet, so it's best to learn everything just in case."

James snorts and Al throws up his arms, weaving around Lily with his teeth bared. "I'm going to work with dragons like Uncle Charlie," he says, and Lily giggles. "Rar!" he adds, pretending to blow smoke from his nostrils.

"I think you'll probably unsettle the dragons if you go around like that," Scorpius offers, pale eyes alight with amusement as he watches his friend. Al sticks out his tongue. "I haven't decided either, Lily," he adds, just for a moment sounding so like his father that Harry's heart stutters with helpless love for them both.

"Neither have I," Rose says, hugging the big book tightly. "Mum says it's best to think carefully about big decisions, though."

"Rar!" Al growls, catching up to her and dropping his dragon impression to add the oft-repeated phrase, "Uncle Charlie's so cool, though."

"I'm sure Uncle Charlie will be very proud," Harry says faintly, not altogether surprised about any of it. "What about you, James? You'll be choosing your NEWTs before you know it."

James shrugs. "I dunno. I might not do my NEWTs. I might join a band instead."

Harry bites his lip for a moment, determined not to react to that first statement. "Oh, really?" he says at last. "I didn't know you could play a musical instrument."

"I can't yet," James admits moodily, kicking at a stray Knut with the tip of his shoe. "But Leoli can play the guitar and she said she'd teach me after the holidays."

"Who's Leoli?" Harry asks.

"His girlfriend," Al informs him before James even has chance to open his mouth.

"Oooo!" cry Rose, Scorpius and Al as one, dancing around James and picking up the dragon impression with relish. Lily watches them for a moment and then abandons Harry's arm to join in. James scowls.
"The Slytherin?" Harry asks carefully.

"Yes," James huffs. "But don't you start, it's taken me all this time to convince her that I'm... you know... cool. I don't want to mess it up."

Harry laughs. "What do you think I'm going to do, come up to Hogwarts and start telling her embarrassing stories about you?" He pauses, contemplative. "I suppose I could..."

James whips around to stare at him, eyes full of horror. "Dad, don't you dare!"

"No, don't worry," Harry assures, stepping around a slightly giddy Scorpius. "I wouldn't do that."

James visibly relaxes. "Rarrr!" says Rose, banging into Lily and almost dropping her book. Harry shakes his head and lets them get on with it. It's usually the best way; they're not hurting anyone, and the more energy they expend now, the less trouble Molly and Arthur will have tonight.

"Anyway," he continues, glancing at James. "Those things are far better saved for the first time she comes to dinner with the family."

James groans and Al cackles delightedly, wiggling his fingers atop his head. There's something in his expression that makes Harry wonder if he has forgotten that he is still pretending to be a dragon.

"Leoli is a pretty name," Lily says, slowing down to walk beside her brother. "Is she pretty?"

James flushes. "Yeah, I suppose," he mutters.

"She's very pretty," Scorpius offers, catching his balance on Al's shoulder. "She looks like a painting."

James nods stiffly at this assessment, but Al scowls, moving out from under Scorpius' arm to take the heavy book from Rose. "Let me carry that for a bit."

"Are you alright?" Harry asks quietly, leaving James alone and dropping back to walk beside Al.

Al hesitates and then looks up at him, eyes theatrically wide. "I'm starving."

Harry ruffles the messy hair, deciding not to push the subject. "I know exactly the place."

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After a visit to Borteg's, where Lily only further convinces Harry that her secret ambition is to sign on as the old man's apprentice, the group heads to the Dragondale for a late lunch.

"It's so beautiful and sparkly in there, Dad," she enthuses, skipping along the frosty cobbles beside him. "I bet Mr Borteg gets lonely sometimes, though. It's a shame... he has so many stories. All those places he's been to—I bet he could write a book."

"Maybe he will if you pester him about it for long enough," Harry says, mouth tugging into a smile.

He can't argue with her; he, too, always enjoys Mr Borteg's tales of distant lands and strange rituals; the old man has a way of making the dark shop disappear, weaving words with his low, melancholy
voice until the rows of gleaming bottles become the waterfalls of Venezuela or the shining palaces of Thailand. Today's yarn has left Harry thoughtful and with an intense craving for Italian food, which will have to wait, he supposes, because where they're going, it's Greek all the way.

"Hello," Kari says as they tumble into the deli, Scorpius and Al managing to shut the door on the wind with a massive combined effort. "I didn't expect to see you this afternoon—I was going to bring these with me." She indicates the trays of snacks and desserts stacked neatly on the table behind her, all shiny and golden and ready for tonight's party, for which Kari will be abandoning her father to his wireless and his grumbling, and Darius to his own noisy, drunken celebration.

Harry's stomach rumbles as he inhales the delicious jumble of sweet, savoury and spicy scents on the air."I know... we were just passing and I think Al's going to starve to death if he doesn't get a sandwich in him soon."

Amused, Kari looks down at Al, who stops gazing hungrily at the pastries on display and looks back at her with the saddest, most theatrical impression of malnutrition that he can muster.

"Oh dear," she murmurs, dark eyebrows drawn down in mock-concern. "Looks serious."

"You wouldn't say that if you saw what he ate for breakfast," James says darkly.

Harry doubts he'll be surprised, whatever it is. He fully believes that Al could devour a baby elephant if it were placed between two slices of bread, and the others aren't much better, even Scorpius, whose refined appearance Harry now knows is deceiving. He certainly hasn't inherited his father's pickiness when it comes to food.

"You did have five sausages, Al," Rose points out, giggling.

"I'm a growing boy," Al insists, eyes wide and innocent.

"How is anyone else supposed to grow if you eat all the sausages?" Lily grouses good-naturedly. "Please can I have a chicken gyro, Dad?"

Harry gazes around at his collection of chattering, arguing, face-pulling children and sighs. He reaches into his pocket, hands several coins to Kari, and stands back. "One at a time—tell the nice lady what you want... at least one vegetable, okay? Contrary to popular belief, they won't kill you."

Kari snorts and begins to assemble their orders, while Harry leans on the counter and hopes that this will fill up the ravenous little buggers for at least an hour or so.

"Here you are," Kari says at last, pushing a wrapped sandwich in Harry's direction. He doesn't remember ordering anything for himself.

"What's this?"

"Your usual, as if you need to ask," Kari sighs, regarding Harry as she often does, as though he's an object of some amusement. "And," she adds, reaching for the trays, "enough Greek snacks and desserts to sink the proverbial battleship."

"You are wonderful," Harry says, taking the trays with a grateful smile and renewed appreciation for a good friend he would never have found without the glimpse.
Kari grins. "Spread the word," she implores. "Maybe then I'll find a nice man before my father decides that I'm hopeless, and/or a lesbian."

"Are you?" Harry asks before he can stop himself.

Kari laughs. "No. Perhaps I should give it a go, what do you think?"

Harry says nothing, just grins at his friend and follows the children out into the street, bringing up the rear of a little sandwich-munching crocodile. He doesn't think he's in any position to be giving out relationship advice. Instead, he stuffs his mouth with marinated beef, feta, and salad and follows his children back into the crowds, chewing slowly and reflecting that, all things considered, it's still nice to be asked.

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"I'm back," he calls, misjudging the jump slightly and losing his balance on the living room rug, necessitating an odd little dance to secure Kari's trays, the box from Borteg's and the many string-handled bags that are flapping and swinging from his arms.

"Where have you been?" Draco demands, appearing in the doorway, hands on hips and a pheasant quill behind one ear. Harry's stomach twists pleasurably and he bites down on a smile.

"You know where I've been," he says pointlessly, indicating the bags, trays and boxes.

"Yes, well. You've been a long time," Draco says, voice oddly strained.

Suspicion prickling, Harry frowns. He's becoming somewhat skilled at reading the minute flickers of expressions that Draco often still tries to conceal, and all his instincts are now telling him that Draco has done something... a bit weird.

With a few contortions, Harry manages to safely stow his burden on the sofa; he gently presses his way past a barely-resisting Draco and heads, after a moment's consideration, down to the kitchen, following the warm, delicious smell that is drifting up the stairs.

When he steps onto the tiles and sees the proliferation of silver trays and miniature snacks, he wants to laugh. He knows exactly what Draco has done, and though he's somewhat irritated by the obvious lack of faith in his manly food-obtaining ability, the resounding echo of Draco's glimpse self assaults him from all sides and it's such a thrilling, stomach-wrenching, wonderful feeling that any trace of ire is vaporised before it has a chance to take hold.

"Draco..." he murmurs, hearing guilty footsteps behind him. Still fighting a smile, he doesn't turn to face him, instead continuing to gaze at the platters containing miniscule pork pies, pumpkin pasties, cupcakes and croissants and Yorkshire puddings.

From behind him comes a small sound of exasperation. "Well, you were taking so long that I thought it might be best to firecall the Manor and just ask Bilby to prepare a few bits and pieces."

Harry does laugh now; he can't help it. "A few bits and pieces? Draco, there's enough here for about fifty people! And that's not including all the stuff I brought home. What are we going to do with it all?"

"I don't know," Draco sighs. In the darkened windows, Harry watches him lift a pale hand to pinch
the bridge of his nose. After a moment, his expression brightens. "Blaise is coming," he says simply.

Harry looks at the profusion of minute snacks and grins. "Alright," he concedes, all too aware of the vast amount of food Blaise can put away, seemingly without effort. "At least he won't go hungry now."

"I have the distinct impression that you are mocking me," Draco says, managing to look slightly put out despite the wry note in his voice that tells Harry he is fully conscious of the absurdity of his actions.

"I promise I'm not," Harry lies, granting Draco a smile and crossing the kitchen as he turns away and folds his arms, embarrassed and haughty and just a little bit uncertain of himself. Harry's heart clenches with a now-familiar blend of love and exasperation.

"Yes, well... I... I haven't ever thrown a party by myself before," Draco mutters. "My mother always did them, until... we didn't have them any more."

"You're not by yourself," Harry says, resting his head on Draco's shoulder and wrapping his arms around his waist, pulling him close until he begins to relax. The tip of the quill brushes against his nose and he sneezes. "You've got me," he manages after a moment.

"Hmm," Draco murmurs noncommittally, hands lifting to tap against Harry's.

"And anyway, this isn't some fancy high society do—it's just a few of our friends coming over to celebrate the fact that we've all somehow survived another year."

Draco snorts. "I can't deny it's been an interesting one."

Warmed, Harry buries his smile in the back of Draco's neck, pressing his lips against soft hair and clean, warm skin. We've come a long way, Boris, he thinks, tightening his grip on Draco's hips and wondering if they have enough time to..."Don't even think about it," Draco sighs, sounding gratifyingly regretful. "We both have to shower and get changed and you know Hermione is always early."

"Bah," Harry complains, but he knows that Draco is right. Draco is always bloody right.

Upstairs, Harry flops onto the bed as the hiss of hot water and the clatter of bottles starts up in the bathroom. Stretching, he regards his cluttered bedside table. Draco has made numerous attempts to persuade him to tidy it, to bring it into line with the neat, clean aspect of the rest of the room, but Harry holds firm; everything on the table is there for a reason and there it will stay, a little island of chaos in a sea of order.

Misu's tank, much larger than her first home, takes up more than half of the available space, surrounded by a growing collection of multicoloured glass tail ends, arranged pointily in rows like an army of surreal little hats. On the top of the tank, the napkin flag flies proudly, flapping in the breeze from the open window and the draught that seeps in from the landing. The tomato clock sits on the edge of the table, flanked by a recent gift from Lily, a beautiful pencil drawing of Frank and Misu, and his now rather well-thumbed copy of The Glassblower's Guide. Strewn in between are various pencils and notebooks containing scores of the last-thing-at-night ideas that have lead to some of Harry's most unusual and successful pieces, and, right on the edge, next to an unusual pebble found by Draco on the beach at Edinburgh that summer, is Harry's Christmas card from Narcissa.
Reaching out, he picks it up and smiles to himself as he examines the inevitable picture of azaleas, somehow surviving a glittering winter frost. Thanks to Hamish, she has been able to visit the house several times over recent months; she has sipped tea at the wrought iron table, inspected Harry's roof garden, and delighted in passing on her secret little tips for keeping flowers bright and thriving in the harshest of conditions.

"It is more important than ever to have colour in one's life during the winter months, Harry," she says often, and he has to agree with her. Fortunately, his house is full of colour, and not just because Lily and Jeanette have managed to persuade him to paint each of the bathrooms in a different vibrant shade because "otherwise, bathrooms are just boring, aren't they?" Harry can't say he has any strong opinions about bathrooms either way, but he has come to enjoy the frequent visits of Lily's strident friend. It helps that Jeanette has taken quite a shine to Draco, who is clearly unaccustomed to such brazen admiration, providing both Harry and Lily with endless opportunities for giggles and conspiratorial glances.

Warm thoughts of Lily drift, as they often do, into the memories of Maura that Harry keeps carefully locked away in a safe place inside his head. Setting down the card, he scrambles onto the edge of the bed, reaches for the bottom drawer in the chest and lets them out, bittersweet and aching, as he pushes aside a pile of soft woollen sweaters and slides open the secret compartment that contains the only possession, the only secret, that he cannot share with Draco. The shower is still pounding away in the next room as he takes out his photograph of Maura, torn from the pages of a newspaper that never existed in this reality.

"Hey, Maura Fedora," he whispers, smiling at the brightly-coloured photograph. "I miss you. Hope you're keeping your real Uncle Harry in line." The little girl grins back at him from the picture and smooths out the skirt of the snail-patterned dress illicitly bought for her by her father.

Harry has often considered allowing Blaise to see the photograph of his daughter but always seems to come to the same conclusion—surely it would be too painful for his friend to see Maura, for her to become more than just a fuzzy picture in his imagination, for him to look at her bright smile and clever eyes, to see himself looking back and to be left with nothing but a photograph to prove she ever existed. He can't do it. He won't do it.

He glances at his own photograph album, full of pictures of his parents, and, as always, his conscience prickles and his resolve wavers, fingers tightening against smudged newsprint as the figures in the photograph continue to smile and wave to the camera, oblivious to the struggle in the room beyond. It's not the same, though; he knows that, and, glimpses aside, it's better not to dwell on what might have been. Besides, he thinks, hearing the water stop and replacing the photograph in its hiding place, if things keep going the way they have been, the idea of Blaise and Ginny having a child together isn't a completely outlandish one.

Harry smiles and closes the drawer. As the bathroom door swings open, filling the bedroom with fresh, lemony steam, he gazes down at the inside of his wrist, where four newly-inked letters serve as a permanent reminder of the importance of risk, change, growth, and courage.

T U R N.

Draco walks into the room, one towel slung around his waist while he uses another to rub at his wet hair. He stops, fixing Harry with a stern expression.

"Are you picking that?"
Harry, who had certainly been thinking about it, pulls his hand away from the tattoo as though he's been hit with a stinging hex. "Absolutely not," he says, trying to look offended.

"I hope not," Draco says darkly, resuming his hair-rubbing. "It'll get infected, and then what?"

"Then I'll use a healing spell to---"

"Then," Draco interrupts, "all those people who said you were going mad or having a midlife crisis will really have something to talk about, won't they?"

Harry flops back onto the bed, closing his eyes and smiling lazily. "Draco, why do you worry about such ridiculous things?"

"I don't know. So that you don't have to?" Draco suggests, crossing the room and starting up the characteristic tapping on the wardrobe doors that signals the beginning of his dressing ritual. "So, was your shopping expedition successful? Did James get his new broomstick?"

Harry stretches. "Mm. That new Nimbus Silver-Blue."

"You are such a pushover," Draco laughs above the rattle of coat hangers.

Opening one eye, Harry regards him "Oh, really? And what broom did you get for Scorpius this year?"

Draco mumbles unintelligibly and concentrates a little too hard on selecting and buttoning up a midnight blue shirt.

"Did you see this?" he says eventually, picking up this morning's Prophet from the dresser and flinging it over to Harry. "I thought it might amuse you for two minutes. Page sixteen."

Far too comfortable to move, Harry flicks to page sixteen and holds the newspaper above his face so that he can scan the article whilst continuing to sprawl on his back.

"Ah, I see it's more hard-hitting journalism from the Prophet," he observes, glancing at the full-page article which consists of photographs and little quotes from various public figures, explaining how they are planning to celebrate New Year's Eve. It's an interesting selection, he has to admit; everyone from the new head of MLE to Celestina herself is represented, and there, between the singer from the Weird Sisters and the captain of the Holyhead Harpies, is Harry.

"I remember them taking my picture for this," he says, recalling a bitterly cold morning just after Christmas when a spiky-haired young girl with a camera had bounced into the workshop and asked him a lot of strange questions about what 'people his age' did for fun in the holidays.

"You do look a bit startled," Draco says, holding a silver tie and an almost identical grey one against his shirt and frowning at his reflection in the mirror.

"I was," Harry admits, gazing critically at the blinking eyes and dishevelled hair of his photo-self. "I think she'd just asked me if I was planning on going to a rave."

"I don't think I even want to know what that is," Draco says faintly, doing up the silver tie and replacing the grey one carefully in its proper position.
'It's a quiet one for me,' reads the little bubble next to his photograph. 'Good food, good whisky, and good friends.'

Harry grins. "I think I make a good case."

"You'll make a show of yourself if you don't go and get ready before everyone arrives," Draco says, standing at the foot of the bed and folding his arms. "You have... what I can only assume is your lunch all down your jumper."

Harry sniffs at the stain near his collar. It smells spicy. And Greek.

He looks up cheerfully at Draco. "So I have."

The elegant nose wrinkles and Draco walks out of the bedroom, shaking his head.

Harry laughs and heads for the shower.

**~*~**

Hermione is, naturally, first to arrive. She steps out of the living room fireplace a good twenty minutes before the appointed hour, dressed in jeans and a pretty embroidered shirt, closely followed by Ron, who is muttering and flicking soot out of his hair. Ginny isn't far behind them, and when Harry returns from the kitchen with a tray of glasses, Blaise is making himself comfortable in a leather armchair and beaming at Hermione as she rather self-consciously turns around to show him the back of her shirt.

"Splendid," Blaise declares. "Ah, there you are, Harry—I fear it was only a matter of time before we all perished from dehydration." He turns his obscenely white smile on Harry and eyes the tray hopefully.

"Are you sure you want to stay, Blaise?" Draco offers from his spot, leaning against the fireplace.

Blaise frowns. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

Draco lifts one shoulder in an elegant, almost uninterested shrug. "I thought you might feel more at home in the theatre, that's all."

Blaise releases a loud bark of laughter. "Hell's teeth, Draco! I rather think it takes one to know one, don't you?"

Harry snorts and glances at Ron, who is grinning and shaking his head in apparent disbelief.

"Men," Hermione declares, taking a glass from Harry's tray and looking around. "Let's have a drink, shall we?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Kari says, stepping out of the fireplace at a slightly ungainly angle and pushing her long dark hair out of her face. "Am I late?"

Harry smiles and hands her a glass. "Nope."

"This lot are all appallingly early," Draco puts in, resting a hand on Harry's shoulder. It's warm,
steady, anchoring, and Harry feels more than ever that he is, at last, in exactly the right place at the right time.

"There is nothing appalling about enthusiasm, old bean," Blaise booms from his chair.

Draco says nothing but his expression is glorious; a struggle between cool derision for the sentiment and deep affection for his old friend. Harry kisses him. He can't help it.

"Put him down, you don't know where he's been," Kari calls, accompanied by an impressive wolf whistle that seems to come from Hermione.

As the first round of whisky is poured out—Flanagan's Flame, at Harry's insistence—Neville and Anthony join the party. Anthony solicitously helps Nev off with his coat and then gazes at him, exasperation and anxiety flowing from him in waves. The source of his concern, Harry quickly notices, is the latest in a series of work-related injuries. He doesn't quite dare to ask what happened this time, but Neville's entire left forearm is swathed in odd-smelling bandages. Instinctively, Harry curls his two damaged fingers against his palm, drawing a peculiar comfort from the sensation of the smooth, healed skin. No, he's not going to ask.

"What on earth have you done?" Ginny demands, apparently having no such qualms.

"And what is that smell?" Ron asks, freckled nose wrinkling.

Neville sighs. "I'm breeding a giant variety of Venus flytrap. It... er... seems to have taken exception to me."

"You're growing a plant that bites people... on purpose?" Kari asks, appearing beside Harry and regarding Neville with curiosity over the top of her smoking glass. Just in time, Harry remembers that she, Neville and Anthony haven't met before.

"Kari, this is my friend Neville—he works with Blaise at Zabology. This is Anthony, he's Nev's... er..." Harry falters, searching for the right word.

"Partner, nurse, disaster management," Anthony says smoothly, grasping Kari's hand and shaking it firmly. "Nice to meet you."

Kari grins. "You too."

Grateful for the rescue, Harry exhales slowly and attempts to resume his introduction. He has the sneaking feeling that Draco is watching him and despairing of his clumsy manners, but that's alright. That's just what Draco does.

"Kari runs the Dragondale Deli," he says. "And makes sure that I'm fed."

"Of course," Anthony exclaims, snapping his fingers. "I knew I recognised you. You make the most wonderful cake I've ever tasted."

Kari's dark eyes glow, and Harry almost thinks he sees her blush. "Thanks very much."

"What about the cake I made for you the other day?" Nev demands, pretending offence.

Anthony's delicate features crease anxiously. "Ah... well... what I meant was..."
"Seriously," Ron interrupts, saving Anthony from finishing his doomed sentence. "What is that smell?"

"It's me," Neville says apologetically, indicating his arm. "Sorry."

"It's a mixture of orris root and dragon's blood," Anthony says, removing his coat and exchanging it, and Neville's duffel, for heavy glasses of Flanagan's. "It promotes healing."

"It smells really weird," Ron opines. When Anthony turns away to resume his cake discussion with Kari, Nev catches Ron's eye and nods wearily.

"Is everyone here?" Blaise asks, creaking around in his chair. "I'm ravenous."

Hermione gets up from her perch on the arm of the sofa and inspects the vast array of little snacks, lips pursed in contemplation. She turns to Harry. "I think you may have gone a little mad with the food."

"Hey!" Kari cries, noticing Draco's extra platters. "You got a back-up caterer? Don't you trust me?"

Harry sighs. When the knock at the door comes, he abandons Draco without a shred of guilt.

"I'm going to let you deal with this," he announces, taking his drink and heading for the door to let in the last of his guests.

Jenny and George are huddled together on the doorstep, wrapped in heavy coats, scarves and gloves. Jenny's blonde hair is covered by a vivid emerald green hat and George's ginger mop is dotted with snowflakes. Both are grinning and expelling white plumes of breath into the night air.

"Good evening," Harry says, taking a moment to bask in the warm corona of affection that surrounds the two of them before stepping back and letting them into the house. "Cold out, is it?" he asks innocently as George shakes his head like a wet dog, lightly spraying Harry with bits of ice.

"Just a smidge, mate," George grins. "Nothing a good firewhisky won't fix."

"That I can do." Harry gathers their many layers of outdoor clothing and follows them into the living room, where they receive a chorus of greetings from the guests within.

"Alright, George... Jen," Ron says, eyes narrowing as he looks at his brother. "No one's seen you since Boxing Day—what've you been up to?"

"Ron, for crying out loud," Ginny reproves, just as George grins and says,

"Well, seeing as you asked, little bro...

"Alright, George... Jen," Ron says, eyes narrowing as he looks at his brother. "No one's seen you since Boxing Day—what've you been up to?"

"Ron, for crying out loud," Ginny reproves, just as George grins and says,

"Well, seeing as you asked, little bro...

"I don't think I've had enough to drink to hear this," Draco mumbles, sinking into a chair and running a hand through his wayward fringe.

"Actually, we do have some news," Jenny says, and suddenly all eyes are on her.

"Well, do go on... some of us aren't built for suspense," Blaise demands. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry catches Ginny gazing at Blaise with irritable, stretched-out longing. It's only a matter of time,
Harry repeats to himself. That's what everyone says.

"Don't rush me, Blaise," she says sternly. Blaise just beams. "Okay. Well, George and I are engaged," she says proudly, holding out her hand to display a ring on her third finger that gleams in the soft light.

Ginny's eyes widen. "Oh my goodness... George, I can't believe it!" she cries, leaping up from her seat and flinging herself at her brother. "I can't... congratulations!"

"That's fantastic news," Hermione says, hugging Jenny and George in turn. Blaise sets down his glass and levers himself out of his chair to congratulate the grinning couple, and by the time he has finished, the room has exploded into a mass of hugs, laughter, and excitement.

When he is pulled into a rib-crunching embrace by George, Harry doesn't know whether to celebrate or grieve—two people he cares a great deal about are happy, but another is painfully, starkly missing. Harry's eyes sting, so he closes them and allows his smile to ache against his friend's shirt fabric. He has no doubt that Fred, wherever he is, would want his brother to be happy.

"I'm really pleased for you," he mumbles, responding to George's resounding back slap with one of his own.

"Wouldn't have happened without you, Harry," George admits, releasing him.

Harry shrugs, suddenly feeling awkward. "No problem."

"Marriage," Draco says darkly, shaking George's hand with mischief in his eyes. "You must be mad."

George laughs. "Forty years of being called mad... I've pretty much made my peace with it."

"It's beautiful," Hermione says, admiring Jenny's sparkling ring. "Did you choose it yourself?"

"Give me some credit, Hermione," George complains before Jenny can answer.

"There's no way you chose that on your own," Ginny says, crossing her arms and fixing her brother with a dubious stare.

George holds out against it for an impressive few seconds before caving in. "Fine, I had a bit of help from Allie."

"Aha!" Ginny declares, looking pleased with herself. Beside her, Anthony's dark eyes flit between Jenny and George, taking in the exchange with a warm interest that just reinforces Harry's growing belief that Neville is onto a good thing.

"Apparently, Mummy wanted something glittery that wouldn't get in her way at work," George says, smile turning from sheepish to affectionate as he talks about the little girl who looks up to him so completely.

"The man did well, then," Draco says, warm at Harry's back.

"Yeah," he agrees. Jenny's ring is certainly glittery, made up of multiple small stones instead of a single large one, graduating in colour from shimmering turquoise to deepest green. He can't pretend
to be any kind of expert on engagement rings, but his ever-strengthening artist's sense flickers with approval.

"It's lovely," Kari sighs, gently taking Jenny's hand to better examine the ring. "I'm far too careless to have anything as nice as this. I'd probably lose those tiny little stones in the first batch of bread dough I made."

"So would I if I had to make bread," Jenny laughs.

"I don't see the problem," George puts in, wrapping an arm around Jenny's shoulders. "You could still sell the bread—pretend it's a promotion—people love getting free stuff."

"Do these people also enjoy breaking their teeth on unexpected precious stones?" Draco wonders, and something in his tone makes Harry think he is actually looking for a response.

"Better than an expected precious stone in your sandwich," Anthony says, exhaling a thoughtful wisp of smoke as he settles himself back on the sofa next to an amused-looking Neville. "If you know it's there and still break your teeth on it, you have bigger problems than a trip to St Mungo's."

"This is a very strange conversation," Ron says to no one in particular.

"It would suggest a certain... instability of mind," Hermione says faintly, smiling into her glass.

"I don't know," Blaise muses, drawing all the eyes in the room back to him effortlessly. "I like a bit of crunch in my sandwiches."

For a moment, there are no words. Then Harry feels Draco's intake of breath against the back of his neck as he prepares to make some mocking remark, but Ginny beats him to it.

"That's alright, Blaise," she says, patting him on the shoulder. "No one's accusing you of having a stable mind."

"Ginny, you wound me!" Blaise intones. "Do you have no kind words for an old man?"

Harry snorts softly. He knows, as well as everyone else in the room, that Ginny would have plenty of kind words for Blaise if she would only be honest. Perhaps it should be weird, but, as Blaise has advised him many times before, 'things are only weird if you make them weird, old bean'. And, should aside, it's really... fine, actually. He's happy now, happier than he ever thought possible, and he wants the same for Ginny. She and Blaise have been dancing around each other for months now, skirting maddeningly along the line between friendship and everything—they all know it's going to happen, but there's nothing to be done.

Draco, hardly the paragon of patience himself, has driven Harry to the edge of reason with his calm pronouncements about 'not rushing these things', to the point that he has mostly stopped listening, even though he knows that Draco is right, and even though he wouldn't dare interfere in Ginny's love life, however much he might want to. Apart from anything else, she'd kill him.

Harry blinks, realising that he has managed to tune out of the conversation for several seconds. Hermione and Ron are grinning at each other; Jenny, Kari and Neville seem to have come down with a fit of the giggles, and Draco appears to be exchanging arch glances with Anthony.

"Kindly bugger off, Blaise," Ginny snaps, flushing lightly. She sits down heavily on the creaking
Blaise beams, catching Harry's eye for a telling moment. "I'll do nothing of the sort. And I've no idea what you're laughing at," he says mildly, turning to the gigglers with massive dignity.

For some reason, this only makes them laugh even harder.

"I don't know, either," Kari admits, glancing at her co-conspirators.

Neville emits an odd squawking sound and begins to choke on his whisky. Jenny cackles and slaps him on the back with a Weasley-esque level of force.

"Thanks," he croaks, eyes watering. Inevitably, Anthony is soon leaning forward and checking him over, spelling a stream of clear water into his empty glass and pushing it into Nev's hands.

Neville sips the water obediently and grins up at Harry. Harry grins back.

"If you'd like to put the insanity on hold for a moment or two, we have an awful lot of food to get through," Draco says, tapping his fingers almost imperceptibly at Harry's belt and indicating the table in the corner, crammed with Kari's snacks and Bilby's illicit offerings.

"Oh, I think we can manage both at once," Blaise assures, heaving himself out of his chair and stretching. As he does, Ginny loses her balance on the arm and slithers to the floor in a heap.

"Thanks," she mumbles, holding out her glass carefully. She hasn't spilled a drop.

Jenny snorts. George grabs the Flanagan's bottle and tops up his sister's glass. She takes a gulp, blows out an impressive cloud of smoke and laughs, making herself comfortable on the hearthrug. Harry, who had been making his way over to help her up, heads instead in the direction of the food, flushed with warmth and wellbeing.

A strange sort of carnival atmosphere seems to have fallen over the room, snaring the occupants and pulling them together, turning a disparate group of friends, colleagues, and people Harry has collected along the course of his curious journey, into a bright, connected little family, just for tonight. In high spirits, Harry refills glasses, samples both Kari's and Bilby's food—just to be fair—and retrieves Misu from the table before she attempts to swallow an entire chicken leg in one go.

"Not a good idea," he tells her, setting her on the floor with a little chunk of honey-glazed ham. "Too big."

"Am surely big enough now to consume the entire bird, not just one part," she insists, wrapping around the ham anyway. Harry strokes her shiny head and she opens her mouth wide. Her sparkly red tail hat, made specially for the festive season, clinks joyfully against the polished floorboards as she drags the ham cube under the table to devour it.

Harry watches her for a moment, then fills a plate for Ginny and drops to the floor beside her.

"Thanks." She balances the plate on her lap and picks up a glistening piece of baklava.

"These pork pies are so small!" Ron marvels from a nearby sofa. Harry grins.

"So easily impressed, my brother," Ginny laughs. Her eyes are clear and bright as she looks up at
Harry. "I wonder how Mum and Dad are getting on with the kids."

"All of them," Harry agrees, though he's not really worried. The children are high-spirited but not badly-behaved; he can't see them giving Molly and Arthur any trouble beside a temporary headache.

Ginny frowns. "Yes. About that. Why is it that I now seem to have five children?"

"Hey, I had them all afternoon while I was out shopping," Harry points out, mock wounded, and fills her glass.

"My son is a delight," Draco says drily, reaching down to swipe the bottle from Harry as he passes. He heads for the record player, which has just begun blaring out a selection of Celestina Warbeck's greatest hits. "Unlike this music. I'm sure we have something better."

"Ah, leave her alone, Draco," Harry calls, leaning back on his hands and allowing the opening bars of 'Curse-breakin' Man' to wash over him.

"Turn it up!" Neville cries, somewhat unsteadily. "Let the woman sing!"

Harry twists around to see him raising his glass, expression vehement, thick hair flopping over one eye. From his side, Anthony watches him with a characteristic blend of anxiety and affection.

"Hear, hear!" bellows Blaise, making Ginny jump. She reaches up and flicks him in the arm. Draco sighs and holds his hands up in defeat, allowing Celestina to warble on.

The party, it seems, is now underway.

**(~*~)**

Somewhere around eleven-thirty, the group decamps to the roof terrace. It's a little cramped and bitterly cold, but Hermione soon takes charge of festooning the place with her fantastic warming charms, and no one seems to mind having to squash up close in order to stake out a good position for the end-of-year fireworks.

Harry tucks his cold-numbed nose into the soft folds of his scarf and watches his friends chatter and laugh and wave their arms about with the abandon and enthusiasm borne of pleasant intoxication. Neville, who has strayed beyond pleasant intoxication into slurring, giggling drunk, is sitting at the wrought iron table with Kari and Anthony, who are talking animatedly about restaurants they have visited while Nev titters to himself and chases an ice cube around his empty glass. Harry watches him, chewing on an affectionate smile for his old friend. He hadn't been nearly as sozzled at Harry's last—or other—New Year's Eve party, but then again, Harry supposes, he had been far too wracked with guilt over the Goldstein incident to really let himself go.

"Goldstein," Harry mumbles to himself, gazing at Anthony, the polite, handsome, friendly man he has come to know. His obnoxious glimpse counterpart now seems like nothing more than a bad dream.

At the railings, Blaise and Ginny stand, elbows touching, as they look out over the city in silence. They don't seem to notice the alcohol-fuelled intensity of Ron's gaze, or Hermione's footsteps as she pokes around in Harry's plant pots and makes adjustments that only she understands to the soil in the azalea tub.
Huddled together, Jenny and George are discussing their wedding plans with Draco, who is warm and solid at Harry's side; he glances at Harry every now and then, as though to include him in the conversation, even though he lapsed into contented silence several minutes ago. The wind whips up, buffeting Hermione's protective charms and whisking the familiar scent of sharp citrus into Harry’s nostrils.

"I had a thought," Jenny says cautiously.

Draco lifts an eyebrow, apparently resisting the urge to make a smart remark. "Oh?"

"I wondered if your mother would be interested in helping with the flowers. She seems to know a lot about what goes with what, from what I've heard."

Draco blinks, startled. His mouth curves slowly into a small smile. "I shall certainly ask her."

Jenny beams, clutching tightly onto her glass as she reaches up impulsively to kiss Draco on the cheek. "Thank you so much! You're lovely, aren't you?"

"I assure you I am not," Draco says, turning to Harry in mute appeal.

He's ruffled, embarrassed, and unbalanced in more ways than one. Quickly, Harry presses a kiss to his other cheek, grinning against his cool skin. "I'm afraid she's right," he murmurs, "you're disgustingly, irreparably lovely."

"Hang on a minute!" Neville interrupts, hanging over the back of his chair, expression wounded. Draco, Harry, Jenny and George turn to him. "You mean you aren't going to ask me and Blaise to do the flowers? We're repressionals, you know! I mean... parishioners... erm... professors...regurgitators. No..." he sighs. "I don't know what we are."

"Professionals?" Hermione suggests, tearing herself away from Harry's plants to pat Neville absently on the head.

"Yeah. That. Thanks 'Mione," Neville says smiling up at her beatifically.

Jenny disentangles herself from George and perches on the spare chair beside Neville, eyes anxious. "I'm sorry," she says quietly. "It's not that we don't think you're excellent at what you do, but... for the wedding we're going to need something pretty that will... you know, stay put... and be quiet."

Neville nods mournfully. "You don't like my hissing cactuses. I understand."

"Hissing cacti, surely?" Draco mumbles. Harry elbows him in the ribs.

"Come on, Nev, don't be like that," George weighs in, clapping Neville on the shoulder. "We love our hissing cactus. And our carnivorous fern."

"And our spiny dragon roses," Jenny adds.

Neville brightens. "Really? Have you got some?"

"You gave them to us last week, mate," George says, laughter creeping into his voice.

"Did I really?" Neville blinks owlishly. "Well, that's nice."
"Any chance of another drink, Harry?" Blaise booms, turning at the rail. "Not long to go now, I shouldn't think."

"Help yourself, I think there's another bottle of Goose we haven't opened yet," Harry offers, drawing his wand and casting a large, glowing Tempus. Blaise is right—only ten minutes of the old year remain.

He knows what he has to do.

"Grab your glasses and come over here," he calls, sketching out a circle of light with his wand. "Come on, let's do this properly. Everyone get up."

"Harry, I can't," Neville says flatly, squinting up at him.

"Of course you can." Harry grabs his arm and Blaise grabs the other. Together, they pull him to his feet and he leans against Anthony, giggly but determined.

"What are we doing?" Ginny asks, hovering on the edge of the circle.

"Oh, some sort of weird, dark magic, knowing Harry," George grins, taking up his place between Jenny and Ron without argument.

Draco glances at Harry, puzzled, but says nothing.

"The year is almost over," Harry says, indicating the glowing digits of the Tempus Charm. "Time to make a promise. Something you're going to do differently."

"Gosh, I haven't made a New Year's resolution in forever," Jenny says, pale brows knitted. "I'll have to think..."

"Don't think too hard," Harry advises. "It could be the first thing that comes into your head. It can be anything, as long as you mean it."

From the other side of the circle, Ginny smiles at him. It's a fragile, hopeful kind of smile and it tugs at Harry's heart, leaving just enough pain there to remind him how far they have come and the trials they have endured to be in this place now, on Harry's roof at midnight, separate but together.

He takes a deep breath. "I'll go first. This year, I will be more organised, and I will not lower my prices when Draco isn't looking," he declares, to a ripple of laughter around the circle.

"I am always looking," Draco advises.

At Harry's other side, Kari speaks up. "I will be nicer to Darius. It's not his fault he's a disgusting teenage boy."

"I will worry less." Anthony smiles ruefully and amends, "I will try to worry less."

Nev grabs his hand and squeezes it. "I will be careful," he says grandly. "The carefulllest."

"I will teach Allie to fly," George says decisively. "I've been promising her for weeks."
Jenny chews on her lip, clearly apprehensive about allowing her daughter to shoot off into the air on a broomstick for the first time. Astonishingly, it's Draco who speaks up to comfort her.

"He's an excellent flyer. Allie will have a wonderful time."

Startled, Jenny smiles. Harry catches the smile and turns to Draco, heart racing, who says nothing, simply lacing his fingers through Harry's and gazing ahead expectantly for the next promise.

It's Hermione's. "I will... learn a new skill this year." She shoots Harry a crooked smile. "Maybe glassblowing."

He grins and mouths, 'you're on'.

Jenny gazes across the circle at Hermione, expression pensive. Finally, she nods, as though coming to a decision. "Learning something new is a great idea. I think... I will learn to fly, too," she says stridently, pale hair flapping around her face in the high wind as though she has decided to start her resolution early. "I never really got the hang of it at school."

"That's my girl," George says, hugging her to his side.

Ron casts a sly look at Draco. "I will continue my campaign to persuade Draco that consulting for my department will be interesting and rewarding and not... what is it, Draco? Working for the enemy?"

Draco says nothing, merely granting Ron a withering look. Harry rolls his eyes heavenward. This argument has been going on for months now, with no sign of a resolution. Draco never says 'no', he never says 'don't ask me again'; he just snipes and throws out scathing remarks and generally ignores Ron's offers and pleas, despite the fact that he clearly finds his job in the world of finance extremely fucking dull. Perhaps it's just one of those frustrating things that cannot be rushed.

There is silence on the rooftop for several seconds as Draco appears to weigh up his response.

"Make of this what you will, Ron," he says carefully. "This year, I will truly consider my options when it comes to my career."

"Consider?" Ron complains. "Is that all?"

"I will consider," Draco continues, "the example I want to set for my son... in terms of taking chances and whether what is safe is also what is best. Will that do?"

Ron nods, pleased, and Harry's stomach flips over. He looks down at his wrist and smiles.

"You know what, Draco? I think you're right," Ginny says, gesturing with her glass. "To taking risks! This year, I will be strong and assertive and woe betide any goblin who gets in my way."

Amused, Harry lifts his glass to match hers and takes a sip of the warming liquid. No further resolutions are forthcoming as the last two minutes of the year slip away. "Are we all done?"

"Not quite."

Harry turns, as does everyone, to stare at Blaise. He has somehow gone unnoticed for the last few minutes, and it's only now that Harry really thinks about it that he realises that Blaise has been
completely silent since he joined the circle. He scrutinises Blaise anxiously, hoping that he's feeling alright. He seems fine, if a little more... serious than usual. When he speaks, his voice is low and a little rough.

"I gave a good friend a piece of advice some months ago," he begins, and when his eyes flick to Harry's for the briefest of moments, Harry suddenly knows exactly which piece of advice he is talking about. "It was a good piece of advice, so... as soon as this year begins, I will endeavour to follow it myself."

In the intrigued silence that follows, Ginny fiddles with her glass, Blaise gazes up at the sky, and Harry just watches them both.

_Tell her how you feel, old bean, he thinks. Maybe that would be a start._

"Ten seconds!" Kari calls, pointing at the shimmering numbers.

"Ready for another interesting year?" Harry asks, turning to Draco.

Draco's eyes gleam. His smile crinkles one corner of his mouth as he murmurs, "Absolutely."

"... five... four... three... two... one... Happy New Year!" the group cries as one, and then everything seems to be happening at once. All around them, the bangs and whirrs and crackles of fireworks, the showers of colour and glitter on every side, the sharp smells of winter and gunpowder and spilt firewhisky as everyone swaps hugs and kisses and joyful, jumbled words.

Draco is whisked away from him by an enthusiastic Neville but he doesn't mind; he has all the time in the world for that. Instead, he looks up at the sky, watching a majestic shower of golden sparks making their way over his little part of London. When he lowers his eyes to his friends once more, Ginny is leaning up on her tiptoes to kiss Blaise, and he is leaning down, huge dark hands cupping her face.

Harry watches them for a moment, quite unable to look away. Perhaps it should hurt, but all he feels is relief.

"I can't offer you an engagement ring—at least... not right now," Blaise says, as quietly as he knows how, "but..."

He breaks off, uncertain for once, and Ginny's warm laughter fills the space. "I don't need a ring, you idiot," she says, and kisses him again.

Harry smiles and turns away, leaning on the cold railings and thinking of those who are missing. Fred. Maura. Boris. "To absent friends," he murmurs, lifting his glass and hoping that, one way or another, they know that they aren't forgotten.

"Well, that took long enough, didn't it?" Ron says, coming to lean next to him.

Harry blinks. "What?"

"Ginny and Blaise," Ron says, and he doesn't need to vocalise the 'obviously' that's written all over his face.

Harry shrugs and looks away, hiding his smile. "Can't rush these things, mate."
He has no idea what time it is when he and Draco are alone in the house once more, but he is tired, cold, and slightly unsteady. Draco's weary expression and slightly weaving stance tell a similar story, but the sight of him, warm-eyed and dishevelled, still sends the heat pouring into the pit of Harry's stomach.

"Come here," he mumbles, pulling Draco close to him, breathing him in deeply, and Apparating them both upstairs.

"You are very late to bed," Misu says brightly, poking her head up out of her tank. "Have your friends gone away? They were so very exciting."

"Go to sleep, you naughty snake," Draco mumbles, focusing all his attention on unbuttoning his shirt.

Harry snorts and pets Misu, stumbling slightly over his own feet as he does so. "Yes, everyone has gone home. It's time to go to sleep now."

Misu laughs. "You are unsteady. Will there be food tomorrow?" she asks, curling neatly into a coil and gazing up at Harry.

Harry grins. If only everyone were so easy to please. "There'll be food, Mi. Goodnight."

When he crawls into bed and turns out the lights, Draco immediately drags him close, pressing their cold skin together.

"Freezing," Harry complains half-heartedly, running a hand down Draco's back anyway.

"Shh," Draco whispers, brushing his lips against Harry's.

Contented, Harry kisses back, threading his fingers through Draco's windblown hair and tangling their cold limbs together. Draco's mouth is hot and his fingers slippery and perfect; the blankets are heavy and warm, and Harry is aching and needy and indolent. Together, they slide and stroke and kiss, whispering and breathing and gasping until everything is fuzzy and delicious and over too soon.

Warm and sated, Draco stretches out and presses himself against Harry's back, draping one arm over his waist and breathing slowly against the back of his neck.

"I think my first party was rather successful," he mumbles.

"Our first party," Harry corrects, pressing his cold toes against Draco's shins.

"Mm," Draco concedes. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"If that godforsaken tomato wakes me up in the morning, I will have you killed."

Harry sighs, eyes falling closed. "I'll look forward to that."
"Why are you so... hmm, something," Draco mumbles, yawning.

Drifting now, Harry makes a noncommittal sound. "I love you."

"That's not really what I meant," Draco says crossly—as crossly as he can manage, anyway. "Go to sleep. I love you, too."

Seconds later, Harry is unconscious.

**~*~**

There's a light at the top of the stairs.

He heads toward it, reaching for the carved door and the spicy air.

"Who's there? Potter, is that you?"

In his sleep, Harry smiles.

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