

Stop All the Clocks (This Is the Last Time I'm Leaving Without You)

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by [firethesound](#)

Summary

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Notes

Prompt: [#31](#) by Writcraft.

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Author: ???

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Author Notes: Thank you to R for the beta, for your enthusiasm and encouragement and endless patience, and for always being here when I need you most. Thank you to B for the feedback and the britpick, for educating me on the proper way to make tea, and for all of your kind words. , when I saw W.H. Auden's poem as one of the prompts, I had to take it. I tried my best to take the raw emotion of the poem and spin it out into a story for you. I'm so glad to have had the chance to write for you, and I hope you'll enjoy this.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Getting through the second of May wouldn't be nearly so hard if everyone would just leave him the fuck alone. But they didn't, and so Harry had learned that the next best way to get through it was to spend it thoroughly plastered. Every year he was forced to attend this ridiculous gala in remembrance of the Battle of Hogwarts, as if standing around in stuffy robes and sipping champagne out of crystal flutes and nibbling at tiny and entirely unidentifiable fingerfoods was somehow beneficial to those who'd lost their lives that awful night. So he skipped straight to the hard stuff, because at least that dulled the mind-numbing torment of the endless rounds of speeches, as well as made it easier for him to resist when they inevitably tried to pressure him for 'just a few words, Harry, please!' And it was entirely worth the front page article that would show up in the *Prophet* tomorrow, detailing how the Boy Who Lived was still so affected by the war that he had to drink just to get through the night.

Which, bloody hell, of course he was still *affected* by it, and there'd be something seriously wrong with him if he wasn't.

He stopped by the bar for another whisky and then pushed his way through the crowded ballroom and stumbled out through the door onto the balcony only to find it already occupied by Malfoy, of all people, leaning against the railing, staring up at the night sky with a glass of champagne dangling from one hand and a cigarette pinched neatly between the index and middle fingers of his other. He looked over at Harry and his expression shuttered.

"Malfoy," Harry snapped.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Potter."

"What the fuck are you doing out here?" he demanded.

Malfoy looked him up and down. "I needed some air."

Harry glanced pointedly at the cigarette in his hand. "Clearly," he said.

"Fuck off," Malfoy muttered. He drained the last small swallow of champagne from his glass and set it on the railing beside him.

He really should, Harry thought. He should turn around and fuck right off back inside. Instead, he took a swallow from his own glass and said, "Never would've suspected you of picking up a filthy Muggle habit."

Eyeing him, Malfoy took a quick drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke defiantly skyward. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "I've finally found the one thing Muggles have got right." His lip curled faintly as he said it, his expression edging toward a sneer, and Harry wanted to hit him.

He didn't exactly hate Malfoy, not anymore, but Harry still didn't like him. They'd been through three years of Auror training together and got along fairly well through a careful combination of mutual avoidance when they could manage it and frosty professionalism

when they couldn't. But that didn't mean that Malfoy wasn't still a wonderful release for Harry's temper. That certainly hadn't changed over the years. There was something about fighting with Malfoy that always lit his blood, got him riled up and breathless and made him feel wonderfully, terribly alive.

Harry stepped closer. "I don't think you've changed a bit."

Malfoy crushed out his cigarette on the railing before he flicked it away over the edge. "And I don't think that's any of your fucking business." He punctuated his sentence with a light shove to Harry's chest that sent him stumbling back an unexpected step and sparked his rising temper to something dangerous.

His control, already worn tenuously thin by the day and the gala, snapped. With a low growl, he threw himself at Malfoy, one fist lashing out. But he'd really had quite a lot to drink, and his fist flew past Malfoy's face, over his shoulder, and Harry's momentum carried him stumbling forward. He fell against Malfoy, their chests thudding together, knocking Malfoy back against the railing of the balcony, and his breath whooshed out in a warm huff over Harry's mouth just before their lips smashed awkwardly together. They both froze, Harry with one arm thrust over Malfoy's shoulder, Malfoy with one of his arms trapped between their chests, and their lips pressed together in the entirely accidental kiss. Then Malfoy's body relaxed a fraction and he sighed against Harry's mouth, and the tip of his tongue traced along Harry's bottom lip.

Harry jerked away, staring at Malfoy. Malfoy had just licked his mouth, and now was staring at him with his eyes big and dark, and Harry thought, 'what the fuck, why the fuck not,' and leaned back in. This time, the kiss was intentional. He touched his lips to Malfoy's, and again Malfoy's mouth moved, warm and slow and deliberate against his own. One of his arms slid around Harry's waist, and Harry looped his arm around the back of Malfoy's neck. Malfoy opened his mouth and Harry curled his tongue inside, and then they were snogging, properly snogging, with lips and teeth and tongues and groping, clutching hands. Malfoy groaned and pressed his thigh between Harry's legs. Harry's glass shattered as it hit the ground, and Harry didn't even *care* because he now had both hands free for groping Malfoy.

It was absolutely insane, because this was Malfoy and they didn't even like each other, but here they were on a balcony where anyone could just walk out and see them, snogging each other breathless, and Harry liked it so much that he pulled away and blurted out, "Come home with me."

And Malfoy hissed, "Yes," before darting back in and nipping at Harry's lower lip.

Harry hauled Malfoy close against him and twisted in place, and then the world whirled and rushed and they were standing in Harry's bedroom. They attacked each other's robes, still trying to kiss while fumbling each other out of their clothing. Malfoy's body was just as angular as his face, all harsh planes and sharp angles and hard bone, and Harry touched everything he could reach, hipbones and collarbones, his ribs and shoulder blades and vertebrae, every inch of him covered in unbelievably smooth skin. And Malfoy touched him back, his long fingers splayed to span as much of Harry as they could with each stroke.

They kissed and kissed until Malfoy wrapped a hand around Harry's cock and tugged, and Harry hauled him over to the bed and flopped back onto it, bringing Malfoy down on top of him. He wriggled, scooting up the mattress and dragging Malfoy along with him, and then rocked his hips up, rubbing his hard cock over Malfoy's, and Malfoy's breath caught. He worked a hand between them, down between Harry's legs and back between his thighs, and dragged the pad of his finger over Harry's hole. It took Harry a moment to recognize the gesture for the question it was, and answered by spreading his legs a little more and arching against Malfoy's hand.

Malfoy pressed forward, his fingertip pushing slowly in, and Harry clenched his arse around it as Malfoy curled it inside him. God, it just wasn't *enough*.

"Lube," he gasped as Malfoy crooked his fingertip again. "Bedside table, top drawer."

Malfoy wasn't slow or tender about it. He dipped his fingers in the jar of lube and jammed two of them into Harry at once. It burned but *god* it felt good. Harry whined deep in his throat and clutched at Malfoy as those fingers twisted deeper inside him, and he rocked his hips up. Fuck, it was good, it was so good, until Harry looked up and saw Malfoy's face, Malfoy's thin mouth curled up into a small satisfied smile, Malfoy's unnervingly pale eyes watching him. It felt good, but Harry thought it'd feel even better if he didn't have to see Malfoy staring at him like that.

"Let me turn over," Harry panted. "So I can't see you."

He felt Malfoy go still above him, and the fact that he might have just ruined his chances of getting fucked tonight slowly seeped into his alcohol-soaked brain. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to make Malfoy get on with the shagging, but he shut his mouth again when Malfoy leaned down and put his face very close to Harry's.

"Don't pretend with me," Malfoy snarled at him. "No matter what else, don't *ever* pretend with me." His fingers tightened around Harry's arms. "You're not getting fucked by some nameless, faceless bloke. You're getting fucked by *me*. And if you don't want that then you need to tell me right the fuck now so I can leave."

He glared down at Harry, and Harry swallowed. "Stay," he said. It came out barely louder than a whisper. "Stay," he said again louder. "Fuck me. Please." He spread his legs a little more. "I want you to fuck me."

Malfoy studied him for a long moment, eyes narrowed, mouth taut. "You're an arsehole, you know."

"I know," Harry said, pressing up against him, desperate for some friction against his aching cock. "I'm horrible."

"And I hate you," Malfoy added, wrapping his hand around Harry's cock and squeezing.

"I know," Harry said again as his eyes rolled back in his head and he rocked his hips up, trying to get closer. "And I hate you, too. Fuck me, please?"

It hurt when Malfoy pushed inside him, and he didn't pause to ask whether Harry was all right before he pulled out and thrust in again. Harry groaned, low and ragged, and clutched at Malfoy, his fingertips digging into Malfoy's back. The pain dissipated into pleasure a little more with each stroke until it blossomed into a dull burn that felt every bit as good as Malfoy's hand stroking his cock.

Harry arched his back and cried out as Malfoy leaned closer and bit at his neck. He could feel the tension coiling inside him, tighter and tighter with each thrust. He dug his heels into the mattress and pushed up, meeting each stroke halfway, fucking him back and forcing Malfoy's cock harder and deeper inside him with each thrust. Malfoy moaned, a soft and deep sound that Harry felt vibrate through him, his breath hot against Harry's neck, his hand squeezing hard around Harry's cock, and then Harry felt every nerve in his body pull tense for a few long and blissful seconds, and then release in an exquisite backlash so intense it stole his breath. A few seconds later, Malfoy went still as his own climax hit, his muscles strained and trembling, his hips twitching helplessly as he tried to press himself impossibly closer to Harry as he came.

Harry drifted, warm and pliant in the afterglow of his orgasm, with Malfoy draped across him. He didn't resist as Malfoy disentangled himself a few minutes later. He just rolled over and dragged his blankets over him, watching sleepily as Malfoy stumbled around his bedroom, gathering up his clothes from where Harry had thrown them as they'd undressed, watching as Malfoy dragged them back on with clumsy fingers. Harry's eyes were so heavy, his head still spinning from the alcohol and from the utter insanity of the fact that he'd just had sex with Draco bloody Malfoy. Harry let his eyes drift closed, and he fell asleep to the quiet jangle of Malfoy's belt buckle and the soft whisper of cloth over skin as he pulled on his trousers.

Harry wakes alone. For a long moment he stares blankly at the stretch of empty sheets beside him and strains his ears for the muted rush of the shower running or the clatter of the kettle on the stovetop in the kitchen or the soft rustle of newspaper from the living room. But there's only silence, and then he remembers.

He reaches out, picks up the bottle of Dreamless Sleep that Hermione had insisted he take ("Draco would want you to sleep, Harry.") and hurls it at the wall. It explodes, splattering the final few doses across the paint, and the glass flies everywhere. Fuck that. Draco wouldn't want him to forget, not even for a second.

Harry rolls over, closer to Draco's side of the bed, his palm sliding over cool cotton, his nose brushing Draco's pillow. He inhales, and it smells like him, like the lavender they wash all their clothes with and the faintly spicy scent of expensive cologne and the faintest trace of tobacco smoke and something warmer that Harry's never quite been able to put his finger on in all the years they've been together.

He lets his eyes slide shut and pretends that his world hasn't just fallen apart, shattered like the shards of glass now sparkling between the plies of his carpet. In a moment, Draco will

reach for him and they'll wake together the same way they wake together every morning. Draco will start with his fingertips gentle at Harry's throat and slide down to trace his collarbone, then lower, skimming his palm over Harry's chest, the soft pads of his fingertips swiping down his sternum, down his belly, and beneath the waistband of his pyjamas. Draco's fingers will curl around his length and loosely stroke him.

Inhale.

And the last warm layers of sleep will flake away, replaced by a different sort of warmth, and Draco will say, "Morning, Potter," with his voice all low and rough with sleep, and Harry will say, "Good morning," back because of course it is, how can it not be a good morning with Draco's hand on his cock and Draco smiling down at him like this?

Inhale.

Draco will roll over then and kiss him, slow and deep, his hand still moving on Harry's cock. Harry always responds eagerly, pressing his tongue against Draco's, sliding his arms around Draco and feeling his skin so warm and soft. He holds Draco close, feels Draco's heart pounding behind his ribs, and Harry will let his eyes drift shut as Draco kisses him and kisses him, like he could just keep on doing it forever and never get tired of it.

Inhale.

They do it the same way every time, Draco inside Harry. It's certainly not fucking, and it's not quite making love. In fact, Harry barely thinks of it as sex at all. It's just *good morning*, slow and warm and sleepy, rocking together, orgasm almost an afterthought. And while it's not new or fresh or exciting, it's comfortable and familiar. Like a cup of tea on a cold day, or Harry's old Weasley jumper that Draco's constantly threatening to throw out. And somehow that's even better.

Inhale.

And when they finish, every time, every single time, Draco says, "I could get used to waking up like this," like he hasn't been waking up like this for five years now. And a smile spreads over his face, as slow and warm as a pat of butter melting on a hot slice of toast. And Harry kisses him then, and knows that whatever else this day might bring, it will be all right because tomorrow he'll be right back here with Draco in his arms.

Inhale.

Harry opens his eyes.

Malfoy was right where Harry expected to find him. Harry had arrived at the Ministry a little early this morning, hoping to catch him before their lecture began. Malfoy always came in early, long before even their instructor, and always claimed the same seat at the front of the

room. He looked up from leafing through his notes as Harry walked over, his expression blank and his grey eyes guarded.

“Hi,” Harry said, sliding into the seat next to Malfoy’s.

Malfoy watched him warily for a moment, then said, “Potter,” in a carefully polite voice and turned back to his notes.

“Look, I think we need to talk,” Harry said, when it became clear that Malfoy didn’t intend to say anything else. “About, er, you know...”

“About how you let me fuck you on Friday night?” Malfoy asked without looking up from his notes. His voice was still carefully polite, contrasting with his crude phrasing, and Harry didn’t quite know what to do with that.

Harry felt his cheeks grow warm. “Uh, yeah. That.”

Malfoy turned a page, the crisp rustle of parchment loud in the empty room. “I don’t see that there’s anything to discuss.”

Harry frowned at him. “But...” He trailed off. Malfoy wasn’t even looking at him. He tried again. “Don’t you think that after what we did, maybe we should...”

“We should *what*?” Malfoy asked, looking sharply over at Harry. “We should date? Be boyfriends? Fall in love and get married and live happily ever after? Because I don’t think either of us is capable of that.”

Harry’s fingers found a loose thread at his cuff, and he tugged at it until it snapped free. “Well, no, but. I mean. I just think things should be... different, now.”

Malfoy snorted. “We were drunk, Potter. We had sex. Stop trying to make it into anything more.”

Harry was starting to get annoyed. “You told me not to pretend with you—”

“Exactly. So quit trying to hide from the truth of it. I suppose all you Gryffindors are like this, believing that you should only spread your legs for your one true love. But the world doesn’t work like that, and neither do I.” Malfoy turned his attention back to his notes. “We were both very drunk. It didn’t mean anything. Let it go.”

“But—”

“Let it go,” Malfoy said again without looking at him. “You’ll just have to find your happy ending somewhere else, I’m afraid.”

Harry wanted to argue with him and he didn’t really understand why. It wasn’t like he wanted Malfoy like that, with hearts and flowers or any kind of happily-ever-after shit. It wasn’t that he thought he should only be intimate with people he cared for, and he’d had his share of one-night stands over the past few years. He didn’t even like Malfoy, and Malfoy certainly didn’t like him. All he knew was that fucking Malfoy had somehow changed everything in

some deeply fundamental way that Harry didn't quite understand yet, and Harry hated the idea of Malfoy treating him with the same slightly chilly professionalism that he extended to Harry and Harry alone out of all their classmates. But he didn't think he could convince Malfoy of something he didn't even understand himself. So after a few more moments of silence, Harry sighed to himself and left. Lecture started in twenty minutes, and he thought he'd have plenty of time for a cuppa.

Harry cradles a mug of tea in both hands, his second favourite mug because his first favourite, the one with the blue stripes and the chip in the handle, is still sitting on the dining room table, right across from the black one with his face on it and the words 'I Choose the Chosen One!' emblazoned around the rim in bright green. Draco bought it as a joke, and the more Harry complains about it, the more Draco uses it just to irritate him. Now he never uses anything else, not even the green mug with the ceramic snake for a handle that had been his previous favourite, and it's been a presence in their household for so long that even Harry reaches for it automatically when he makes Draco tea. He grips his mug a little tighter and shifts slightly where he sits. He's perched up on the kitchen counter, the sharply-cornered edge digging painfully into the backs of his thighs, the bottom corner of the cabinets forcing him to hunch over a little. But he can't bring himself to move because the alternative is to go sit in the dining room, and Harry's pretty sure he can't handle that.

He drums his heels against the cabinet door, then leans forward a bit more to see the table, and there are the mugs, steam still curling up from them, hovering motionless in midair. Draco's warming and stasis charms are both still holding strong, but then he's always been exceptionally good at charmwork. The sound of toast being ejected from the toaster catches Harry's attention and he pushes his brooding thoughts away as he slides off the counter and pads across the chilly tile floor to the toaster. Draco wouldn't want him to mope around contemplating mugs. Draco would want him to man up and get on with his fucking life. And for now, getting on with his fucking life means making breakfast.

That's a small enough goal. Reasonable. Harry can do this.

He takes out the toast and sets it on a plate, then cuts it in half corner to corner. Before Draco, Harry had always cut his toast in half right down the middle, but Draco always says that if you love someone, you cut their toast into triangles. It makes absolutely no sense, but every time Draco hands him a plate of toast triangles, Harry knows that Draco's really saying, 'I love you.' Harry stares down at his plate and waits for the sadness to hit him, but nothing comes so after a few moments he butters the triangles and opens the cabinet. Today feels like an orange marmalade sort of day.

But the orange marmalade is still on the table, left over from breakfast the day before, trapped under the stasis charm along with the teapot and the two mugs, and he thinks about getting it but he's afraid that if he does he might disturb Draco's spells. They'll be fragile now, maybe already starting to fade. His stomach twists at the thought, a frisson of nausea shooting through him, and Harry tips his toast into the rubbish bin, along with the plate and the knife and, after a moment's hesitation, the butter dish. He picks up his mug of tea and

takes a sip, but it's gone cold, so he dumps it down the sink, doesn't look at the dining room table as he passes by, and goes to get dressed.

He pulls on a pair of jeans and a shirt and his warmest Weasley jumper, because it's unseasonably chilly for late spring. He takes his keys and his wallet, and after a moment's thought to where he'd like to end up, Harry Apparates out into the bright sunshine of a beautiful May morning.

Nothing good ever happened in May. Not much good ever happened in June, either. That long stretch of weeks between the second of May and the thirtieth of June was Harry's least favourite time of year, starting off with a Commemorative Gala for the Anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts and ending with an event in remembrance of Dumbledore's death. And all those long weeks in the middle were crammed with ceremonies and speeches, galas and gatherings, memorials and observances and the unveiling of monuments and on and on and on until Harry wanted to tear at his hair and just *scream* because hadn't going through all those events the first time around been enough for them? Why would they make him relive those losses year after year?

It was like slogging through all the post-war funerals all over again. Not that Harry resented those who'd given their lives in the war being commemorated. He just resented being forced to put on stuffy formal robes and give speeches his heart wasn't in, and listen to more speeches by people who hadn't even been involved in the fighting. This wasn't the way he wanted to remember those he'd lost, and he didn't think this was what they'd have wanted, either.

He remembered Tonks when he caught sight of a little girl with a bright pink ribbon in her hair. He remembered Remus every time he cast a Patronus Charm. He remembered Sirius every time he saw a shaggy black dog. And every time Harry remembered, he smiled. *That* was how he wanted to remember, and how he thought they'd want to be remembered by him. In pleasant little flashes of memory that put a smile on his face, not bored to tears by some stuffy politician talking out of his arse.

This was dull and fake and as lifeless and depressing all those funerals after the war, too much black and too many speeches filled with fancy words that didn't actually mean anything. After attending so many of them, Harry had come to hate funerals, and could only hope that the next one he was forced to attend would be his own. At least that way no one could expect him to give a speech.

"All right, mate?" Ron muttered to him as the room broke into polite applause and some witch who hadn't even *been there* that horrible night four years ago stepped down from the podium set up at one end of the grand ballroom.

Harry nodded and drained the last of the whisky from his glass. "Yeah. Just going to get another one. Want one?"

Ron shook his head. "No thanks."

As Harry moved forward and the room spun slightly with each step, he thought maybe he should slow down. But when the next speaker started up, blathering on about duty and sacrifice and how noble it all was, Harry decided he needed to stay more or less trashed to get through the night, because it wasn't noble at all. The war was chaos and panic and blood and screams and gut-churning terror. Everyone talked about how honourable those deaths were, but death wasn't honourable. It was messy and complicated and undignified, and Harry resented anyone who told him otherwise.

He made it to the bar without incident and the bartender poured him another whisky without being told. Harry took it, nodded his thanks, and turned to go. He'd just taken a few steps toward where Ron was waiting on the other side of the room when he caught sight of a flash of blond vanishing through the doorway leading out to the balcony, and he followed along without thinking.

Harry shoved the back door open and tripped over the threshold. He caught himself awkwardly against the doorframe, and carefully stepped forward. He turned to find Malfoy leaning against the wall a little way down, just tugging a fresh cigarette free from the silver cigarette case he held, a ridiculously ostentatious thing etched with an intricate letter M.

He watched Harry carefully, tapping the end of the cigarette against the case, then slid it back inside and shut the case with a snap. He slipped it into a pocket of his robes. "Going to try to hit me again?" Malfoy asked as casually as if he were asking about the weather.

For a moment, Harry was tempted, because he was always tempted to hit Malfoy. But he was so tired, exhausted from event after event and the empty spaces left by so many people he never should have had to lose dragging at him. He wanted to forget about all of it, just for a while, and he didn't want to have to go through the pretence of fighting with Malfoy to get there. They'd gone home together four times so far, but it was always after an argument and usually after Harry tried to hit Malfoy. But tonight he just shook his head, then leaned in and pressed his mouth against Malfoy's, and hoped Malfoy wouldn't try to hit him instead.

Malfoy went rigid for a moment, then he fisted his hands in the front of Harry's robes and yanked him close.

Harry let his head drop back against the stone wall behind him as Malfoy bit his way down Harry's neck. "Come home with me," he said.

"Mmph," Malfoy replied against Harry's skin, and fuck it, Harry took that as assent.

He gripped Malfoy hard and twisted in place, and then they were in his bedroom, and with Malfoy's hot mouth on his and Malfoy's hot skin against his own and Malfoy's fingers pushing into his arse and Malfoy's cock hard and heavy against his leg, Harry took a deep breath and for the first time all week he felt himself relax.

Harry hadn't thought he'd be able to relax this quickly, but the tension that had crept into his shoulders during breakfast fades quickly in the bright sunshine, and he goes on to have a remarkably ordinary morning. He walks around Muggle London for a while, watching men and women in business clothing go to work, and tourists with their cameras in hand and children in tow, and a thousand other people whose purposes he can't even guess at. Around him, the world feels too sharp, too bright and not quite real, like a stage setting, and Harry wanders aimlessly, awash in detail. A crack in the pavement. A woman laughing loudly at something her companion's just said. The sun reflecting off the window of a passing automobile in a quick flash. The sound of a coin striking the ground, someone coughing, a dog's bark. His stomach growls around ten, so he goes into the first coffee shop he passes and orders a large cup of tea and a croissant, and makes polite chit-chat about the weather with the barista as she hands him his drink.

He leaves, holding the door for a woman with a baby, nods politely when she thanks him, and goes back into the sunshine, nibbling on his croissant. For a moment, he feels a sudden flare of anger that today of all days has dawned perfectly blue and sunny. It should be grey and dark, there should be rain. The sun should hide and the clouds should weep and the wind should wail, because what good is the world if it doesn't have Draco in it? But the moment passes quickly, because if Harry's learned one thing from the war, it's that there are a lot of lives in the world and when one blinks out, all the rest go right on living.

His wanderings eventually carry him onto Blackfriar's Bridge, and Harry pauses in the middle of it, forearms leaned against the railing, to gaze out over the Thames. He watches the tourist boats trundling up and down the river, the tour guide's voice a distant squawking as it passes beneath him. At his back, cars rumble by. Pedestrians pass behind him, and he catches snippets of conversation. Harry finishes his tea and Vanishes the cup.

He's handling this well, he thinks as he stares down at the sunshine sparkling off the water like a thousand shards of glass. He remembers what a wreck he was when Sirius died. The initial disbelief swallowed up by the raging firestorm of his grief. How he'd shouted until his voice grew hoarse and how he'd smashed things, and then that long and painful summer at the Dursley's, locked up in his room, just him and Hedwig and that bone-deep sense of loss. But here, now, he doesn't feel any of that. He's become better at grieving, he thinks. Somewhere along the way, amid all the loss of the war and during all those interminable funerals afterward, he must have grown used to death. He feels sort of awful to admit that, even to himself, but mostly he just feels relief that he won't have to go through that sort of devastating pain ever again. Draco's gone, but Harry's still okay.

It isn't until later that afternoon, until the shadows have lengthened along the pavement and the streets have grown crowded with people on their way home, that he realises what's happening. He isn't better at mourning, he just hasn't started. What happened to Draco hasn't sunk in yet, and this isn't the worst part. He's still balanced on the knife-edge of grief, and when he finally falls, it's going to hurt.

Harry walks for another few blocks as he ponders this, but in the end he decides there's nothing he can do about it. Hermione will probably have a lot to say on the subject, but she's not here. At the thought of her, Harry feels vaguely guilty. She probably came by to check on

him this morning, and she's probably spent the day in a tizzy because he wasn't home. He'll have to call her later and reassure her that he's all right.

Later that evening, after the lengthening shadows have swelled into night, Harry finds a deserted alleyway and Apparates to his favourite place for takeaway curry, because it's Sunday evening and that's what they always do on Sunday evenings. He pulls open the door and he's announced by the dull jangle of a string of bells tied to the handle by a black silk cord. The man behind the counter smiles warmly at him and greets him by name, and Harry smiles back, and for a little while there's only the comforting familiarity of a weekly routine.

Harry was a creature of habit, which he thought might explain why he went after Malfoy again on Monday morning, because that was just what he did after they went home together. He still didn't know exactly what he hoped to get from Malfoy, forcing these confrontations as he did. All he knew was it pissed him the fuck off to have Malfoy in his bed each weekend and then to have Malfoy hold him at arm's length during the week. He took what hope he could from the fact that he always found Malfoy alone in the lecture hall. Malfoy hadn't altered his routine to avoid Harry.

"Potter, we've been over this," Malfoy said, pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut when Harry walked in, all before Harry had the chance to say a word. "It didn't *mean* anything—"

"But it keeps happening," Harry jumped in. "If it doesn't mean anything, then why does it keep happening?" Once he could ignore, maybe even twice, but this was the fifth time. That had to mean *something*. And Harry wanted it to keep happening while he figured it out.

Malfoy sighed heavily. "Because apparently we both make exceedingly poor choices when we're drunk."

"Or maybe that's the only time we can admit we want it," Harry countered.

Malfoy blinked up at him, startled, and Harry swallowed hard but wouldn't let himself look away. This was the first time he'd said aloud that he wanted it to continue. The moment stretched between them, on and on, growing tenser with each second that ticked by.

Then Malfoy cleared his throat. "Please," he said. "Don't start up with that nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," Harry insisted. "Obviously there's something to it."

Malfoy gave an exasperated sigh. "Potter," he said slowly as if talking to a particularly dim child. "We were both drinking heavily. That's all it was, and I don't know why you insist on tracking me down afterward to convince me it wasn't."

"Fine," Harry snapped, then said again. "Fine. I'll just go, then."

“Glad to hear it. As always, it’s been a pleasure, Scarhead. If there’s anything else you need assistance with, please don’t hesitate to ask someone else.” He looked down and shuffled through some papers, summarily dismissing Harry, and Harry left before he did something he shouldn’t. Like hex the stupid tosser.

It wasn’t until he’d stomped out into the hall and slammed the door behind him that the implications of Malfoy’s words caught up with Harry. He called me Scarhead, he thought. He didn’t call me Potter, he called me Scarhead.

This was the first time that Malfoy hadn’t held his icy professionalism between them like a shield. This was the first crack he’d shown, and Harry fully intended to keep hammering on it until the whole thing fell away. He was getting through to Malfoy, finally getting through.

Smiling to himself, he tucked his hands into his pockets and started back down the hall to find himself a cup of tea before lecture began, the loose beginnings of a plan slowly unfurling in his mind. If words wouldn’t convince him? Well, maybe actions would instead.

Harry’s always been better with actions than with words. Maybe that’s why he couldn’t speak up when they filled his usual order at the restaurant. And now he’s got two portions of curry, one of which is completely inedible. Draco always orders his curry as spicy as the cook is willing to make it. Somehow he’d wandered under the impression that if his eyes and nose weren’t streaming halfway through his meal then he wasn’t doing it right, and nothing Harry’s said has convinced him otherwise. Harry finds the whole thing baffling and a little masochistic, but in the end he’d chalked it up as just one more of Draco’s little idiosyncrasies, like his fussiness about bacon, or his inexplicable affinity for Mug-Harry, or all his damned socks.

The paper bag crinkles as he balances it in the crook of his arm while he locks the door and toes off his shoes. He starts to walk to the dining room, but abruptly remembers the tea. So instead he goes to the coffee table and unpacks his bag there. And that’s fine, sometimes they eat in here if there’s a movie they’re particularly eager to watch. Sunday is always takeaway curry and movie night.

Harry sits on the sofa and turns on the television. An ad for toothpaste is playing and he mutes the sound, then takes up his curry and the plastic fork it came with and eats even though he’s not hungry. He skipped lunch and he thinks he should. He only manages about half of it, and he sets it on the coffee table beside the unopened container, then curls up on his side on the sofa cushions. There’s a grey jumper thrown carelessly over the arm. Draco’s. He’d tossed it there yesterday on his way to the bedroom to change into his uniform, and now Harry pulls it down and bunches it up and rests his head on it.

It smells like Draco, and Harry can almost pretend that this is any other Sunday night, that he’s calm and relaxed, his belly pleasantly full, and he’s dozing lightly with his head on Draco’s lap while a movie plays in the background. If he closes his eyes and really *concentrates*, he can almost just feel Draco’s fingers sliding through his hair, stroking gently,

pausing to idly toy with a dark lock, winding the glossy strands around a fingertip before carding through his hair again. Harry loves Draco's hands, the narrow palm and long fingers, even the slightly-too-large knobs of his knuckles. They're graceful and elegant and entirely aristocratic, and Harry's loved them since before they were even his to love.

Harry's eyes followed the quick curl and flick of his long fingers as Malfoy waved a hand to illustrate some point he was making, and the entire length of the pub wasn't enough to hide the careless elegance of the gesture. Malfoy half-turned in Harry's direction as someone called his name, and Harry quickly turned away even though Malfoy wasn't looking at him. He shoved a hand through his hair while he waited for the bartender to bring him another drink.

They'd just been promoted from trainees to Aurors, and their entire class had gone out to celebrate. Harry had watched his former classmates grow steadily drunker around him as he nursed one tumbler of sparkling water after another. Malfoy's words from the previous week had stuck with him and Harry was determined to prove that this ongoing thing with Malfoy wasn't just a string of drunken mistakes. He still didn't like Malfoy, but he'd been watching him more closely in recent weeks, and Harry thought there was a pretty good chance that maybe he could eventually grow to like Malfoy. If only Malfoy would let him.

The longer the night stretched on, the more nervous Harry became. He wished Ron were there with him, but Ron had decided to help George with his shop instead of going into Auror training, and Harry hadn't wanted to invite him along only to disappear on him partway through the evening. He had absolutely no desire to tell his friends that he was sleeping with Malfoy until there was no other choice about it.

Harry sighed and turned around again to watch Malfoy across the room, talking to another person and wavering slightly where he stood as he gestured grandly with his glass, then laughed at something his companion said. Something hot and aching squirmed through Harry's stomach. He hated that Draco was like that for everyone but him.

It was after midnight by the time Malfoy broke away from his little group and wove his way to the back of the pub, and Harry didn't miss the expectant look he tossed over his shoulder. He gulped down the last swallow of his sparkling water, put his glass on the bar, and hurried after Malfoy.

Harry caught up with him in the alleyway. Malfoy turned as Harry stepped out, the door falling shut behind him and cutting off the raucous noise of their classmates' celebration. Without his head clouded and spinning from a night of drinking, Harry felt hesitant. Unsure. But luckily Malfoy had been drinking enough for the both of them and hadn't even bothered with the pretence of a cigarette this time. He wobbled a bit as he flung his arms around Harry and kissed him without saying a word. Malfoy tasted like gin, and his fingertips were cold when he slid them up the back of Harry's neck and into his hair. Harry pulled away.

"Come home with me?"

In answer, Malfoy kissed him again, and Harry Apparated them both to his bedroom. And then Harry forgot all about his uncertainty because it happened the same as it always did, and he let himself get swept away by the comfort of routine. They wrenched each other out of their clothes, leaving them to mark out a haphazard trail to the bed. Harry let himself sprawl back across the mattress, and Malfoy shoved his legs apart to settle between them, and Harry leaned up to kiss him again.

Harry thought it was strange that he should like this as much as he did. As always, Malfoy wasn't gentle. He used his teeth too much as they snogged, and he prepared him roughly with two fingers at first, then three, and when he pushed his cock inside Harry he didn't pause for Harry to adjust to being stretched wide before Malfoy pulled nearly all the way out and slammed back in. He fucked Harry so hard that the bedsprings creaked and the headboard slammed against the wall, and Harry loved every fucking second of it.

It wasn't until after they'd both come that it changed, as it always did. Harry had always assumed Malfoy was just drunk and sated from his orgasm, but now, sober, he thought it might be something else. For a long minute they lay tangled together, still intimately connected, their limbs entwined. Malfoy's thumb rubbed over Harry's shoulder in small circles, his nose pressed against Harry's neck. And when he lifted himself up, there was a long, strange second where he carded his hand fondly through Harry's hair, swiping it back from his forehead, and for that one small moment they felt like lovers. Then the moment broke when Malfoy rolled off Harry and stood up to get ready to leave, and Harry suddenly didn't want him to go. He sat up.

"Stay with me," Harry said, catching Malfoy's elbow. "Stay here tonight."

"You don't mean that," Malfoy told him, looking down at him with a curious little frown pulling at his mouth. "You've been drinking... and you don't..."

"I haven't," Harry said. "Haven't had anything tonight." He meant to follow that up by pointing out that this couldn't be a drunken mistake if he hadn't had anything to drink, but Malfoy was staring at him with such a stricken look on his face that Harry abruptly changed tack. Proving his point to Malfoy wasn't worth it if it made Malfoy leave. "The best part of bringing someone home is the morning sex that comes after, and you always leave. Stay here tonight."

Malfoy shifted a little, his shock fading, leaving behind a faintly puzzled frown. "You just want sex in the morning? That's it?"

Harry nodded eagerly, because that was very much true. "Yeah. That's it."

"Oh." Another moment dragged by, then Malfoy shrugged a shoulder in a sharp jerking motion that Harry thought was probably meant to look casual. "All right. I probably shouldn't be Apparating, anyhow. Budge over, then."

He toppled into bed and was snoring before Harry finished untangling the blankets and draping them over Malfoy. Harry turned out the lights with a flick of his wand and turned away from Malfoy, then scooted closer so the length of his back pressed snugly against the

warmth of Malfoy's side. Warm and content with Malfoy beside him and the promise of more sex to come, Harry let himself tumble into sleep.

There are gentle fingers sliding through his hair as he wakes. Draco. Harry always falls asleep before the end of the movie, and Draco always touches his hair, gently stroking his fingers through the glossy black strands while Harry dozes, and then he prods Harry awake, and Harry goes stumbling off to bed while Draco clears up downstairs and joins him a few minutes later.

"Mm, Draco," he murmurs, and the fingers in his hair stop moving.

Harry shifts, stretches, and opens his eyes to find Hermione crouched beside the sofa. The last two days come rushing back and he blinks sleep from his eyes and stares up at the ceiling. By the angle of the light coming in through the window, he can tell it's early afternoon.

"I'm sorry," Hermione says. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's fine," Harry says, his sleep-rough voice coming out as more of a croak. He clears his throat. "I should be up." He sits up to reach for his glasses where they've fallen on the floor, and catches sight of Ron standing nearby. He's got a terrible look on his face, an anguished sort of pity that Harry knows all too well. It's the same look people are still giving George all these years later. Harry looks away. "Sorry, I meant to call last night."

"It's fine," Ron says. "You know we're here for you, right? Whatever you need."

Harry nods and adjusts his glasses. "Yeah, I know."

"How about some lunch?" Hermione asks briskly as she stands up. "I'll make you something to eat and then we can..." She trails off, her fingers twisting the hem of her jumper, then she nods to herself. "I'll make you some lunch."

"I'm not hungry," he tells her, and her hands fall away from her hem to dangle helplessly at her side, and he immediately feels bad. Hermione's worried about him, and if it'll make her feel better to take care of him, that's something he can do. He offers her a faint smile. "But I would like some tea, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course." She sounds relieved, and Harry lets the brightness of her smile warm him.

As she disappears into his kitchen, Ron comes over and settles beside Harry on the sofa. "Are you all right, mate?" he asks gently, even though they both know he's not.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, considering..." Harry swallows. "I will be," he says firmly. "I will."

"Harry?" Hermione calls from the kitchen. "I can't find your mug, do you know where—Oh, there it is."

For a moment it doesn't register what's happening, but then Harry throws himself up, knocking Ron aside, and races for the dining room. His socked feet slide on the hardwood floor and he skids around the corner just as Hermione's raising her wand, and she has just enough time for her mouth to round into a soundless little 'oh' of surprise before he grabs her. They both go crashing to the floor, Hermione's wand goes flying, and he's grasping her so tight that she cries out, but it doesn't matter, none of it matters because Draco's charms are still intact.

And then they're clinging to each other, and Harry's repeating over and over, "It's all I have left of him, it's all that's left," and Hermione is telling him again and again, "I'm sorry, I didn't realise, I didn't know, I'm so sorry," and then Ron comes up and kneels on Harry's other side and wraps his arms around both of them and holds them tight, and it's there, surrounded by their arms and their warmth and their love and the sharp scent of Ron's aftershave and the flowery smell of Hermione's shampoo, that the pain finally comes. It swells up in him, so vast that he thinks for one dizzying moment that his ribs will crack from the force of it. Harry struggles against it, but this isn't something he can fight. It's just there, as immutable and uncaring as the ocean, and as it breaks over him and pulls him under, Harry takes what little comfort he can from the knowledge that with Ron and Hermione here, they won't let him drown.

His last thought before he finally lets himself go, before he topples off that razored edge and sinks deep into his grief, before his eyes burn and his vision goes wavery and his nose stuffs up and runs slick and salty over his mouth and those awful wracking sobs come tearing up out of his throat and the pain in his chest explodes into something bitter and vibrant and *real*, is that he never wants to feel this way again, never again. Never never never never never—

"Fucking hell, not you again," Malfoy muttered without looking up from his paperwork, and Harry mentally chalked up a little tick in the success column, because getting Malfoy to swear at work was definitely a victory.

"I do work here, you know," Harry said, propping himself up against the wall of the temporary office Malfoy was assigned.

"Then may I assume you're approaching me for some work-related matter?" Malfoy asked, carefully setting his quill aside. He looked up at Harry then, his face smoothed into a bland expression and all Harry could think of was how Malfoy looked on Saturday morning, his hair sleep-rumpled and his cheeks flushed blotchy pink, his lips parted around gasping breaths as he fucked Harry with quick, sure strokes. Neither of them had lasted long, and then Malfoy had disappeared sometime during the few minutes Harry was in the bathroom cleaning himself up.

"Er, no. Not exactly," Harry admitted.

"Then I'll repeat my earlier sentiment," Malfoy said, looking away from Harry and shuffling through some papers. "Fucking hell, not you again."

Harry swallowed back a smile and ticked another mark into the success column. "I think we should talk."

"And I assume I won't be rid of you until you've said your piece?" Malfoy sighed. "Well, go on. Let's get this over with so I can get back to work."

Harry took a slow breath and tried to push away his sudden rush of nerves. "I was thinking maybe we could do this on a more permanent basis."

Malfoy frowned at him. "What, Scarhead, you want to be my boyfriend?"

"Hardly," Harry scoffed in what he hoped was a convincingly scathing tone. "But the sex is good. I just thought maybe we could keep doing that without having to wait for the next Ministry function we can both get pissed at."

"We don't even like each other," Malfoy said. "It probably won't work."

"So what if it doesn't work?" Harry asked with a careless shrug. "We don't like each other, as you pointed out. It's not like we've got a friendship to ruin over this."

Malfoy's frown deepened and turned contemplative. "So it would just be sex. Nothing else."

"Yeah. Just sex," Harry said, and his heart pounded while long seconds ticked past. Part of him wanted to come clean to Malfoy, to tell him that there was something between them and it could probably become something really good, if only they'd give it a chance. But he forced himself to keep silent. He didn't know how Malfoy would react if he suspected Harry might want more, and Harry still wasn't quite sure where he wanted this thing with Malfoy to go. But this was a starting point. From here, he could figure it out.

"Well," Malfoy said at last. "I suppose we could give it a try. This doesn't change anything between us, you know. I still hate you."

"Malfoy," Harry grinned, excitement and relief making him feel a bit giddy. "I don't think you'd be as great a fuck as you are if you *didn't* hate me."

"Hm, you do have a point," Malfoy told him with a slow smirk. "Why don't you come over tonight and we can work out the details of our arrangement?"

It's the details that Harry finds hardest to deal with. It's awful existing without Draco, but it's the thousand little remnants Draco left behind that Harry finds hardest to face. The empty stretch of bed beside him when he wakes up is a painful reminder of what he's lost, but it's nothing like the crippling heartache that seizes him when he comes across a pair of Draco's pants tossed carelessly beside the bath mat, or the latest catalogue for Quality Quidditch Supplies lying draped open over the arm of Draco's chair, or the half-empty jar of raspberry jam that Harry will never bring himself to finish because he hates all the little seeds in it.

Draco's blue toothbrush is still in the holder by the sink and his silk dressing gown is draped over the footboard of their bed and two pairs of his shoes are still by the door.

It feels like everywhere he looks, Harry's faced with another little bit of detritus from a life in progress, suddenly abandoned. Here, a prescription potion for allergies. There, a half-written grocery list. A pair of socks stuffed between the cushions of the sofa, a hairbrush with a few fine blond strands caught between the bristles, "lunch with Mum!" penned on the calendar for next Saturday. Another pair of socks under the coffee table, the bottle of stupidly expensive conditioner in the shower, a half-empty packet of cigarettes, and the silver-framed reading glasses Draco pretends he doesn't need.

It isn't until Harry searches for the box of Earl Grey that he finally breaks. He finds it shoved way to the back of the cabinet, and opens it up to discover a single teabag and a note reading "This one's mine, Potter, drink it without replacing it and I shall be forced to murder you. I am an Auror and that means I know where to hide the body!" and Draco, the ridiculous bastard, has dotted each letter I with a little heart.

That telltale hot prickling swells up behind his eyes and through his sinuses, but Harry manages to swallow it down. He stuffs the note back into the box, folds the lid closed, and shoves it back to the rear of the cabinet. He can't stay here anymore. If he stays here, he's going to go mad. He shoves his feet into his shoes, takes the Floo to the Ministry, and goes straight to the Head Auror's office. Taking a deep breath, he squares his shoulders, raises his fist, and knocks on the door.

In the long pause that followed the fading echo of his knock, Harry seriously considered forgetting all about this nonsense and Disapparating. Harry wasn't sure what exactly Malfoy expected of him. He'd chased Harry out of his office shortly after they'd come to their agreement and without saying exactly what was going to happen tonight. Well, what would happen was fairly obvious, and really didn't explain his nerves. He'd already let Malfoy fuck him before, and so he thought he shouldn't feel nearly this anxious about it. But the butterflies winging through his stomach just wouldn't settle, and in the end Harry had packed up a change of clothes and his toothbrush in a small bag, Shrunk it down and tucked it into his pocket, then Apparated to Malfoy's doorstep.

Then the door swung open and Malfoy stepped back without a word. He was wearing a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, casually displaying the faded scarring of his Dark Mark, and his feet were bare and impossibly pale against the dark wood of the floor. There was something strangely intimate about seeing Malfoy's bare feet. He'd always kept his socks on when they'd fucked.

"Well?" Malfoy asked, and Harry wrenched his eyes back up to Malfoy's face. "Are you coming in or are you just going to stand there all night?"

Harry stepped inside and toed off his shoes as Malfoy shut the door behind him. He looked around, at the Persian rugs spread over the polished floorboards, at the heavy mahogany

furniture and Tiffany lamps, at the tasteful art on the walls and the expensive knickknacks dotting shelves and tabletops, and Harry had never felt more out of place than he did right then. He wished he'd thought of putting on nicer trousers, at least.

"Nice place," he said, because it seemed like the sort of thing Malfoy expected him to say.

"Shut up," Malfoy told him, shoving him up against the wall. "You're not here to talk."

Before Harry could respond, Malfoy kissed him hard, all teeth and tongue, and Harry tipped his head back and let it happen. There was something vicious about this kiss, something desperate and determined, like Malfoy had something to prove. Harry wrapped his arms around Malfoy and hauled him close, his fingers crumpling the crisp cotton of his shirt, and he pushed one leg between Malfoy's. Malfoy groaned low in his throat and knotted his fingers in Harry's hair, and Harry rolled his hips, pressing the beginnings of his erection against Malfoy's thigh.

A moment later, Malfoy pulled away slowly, and Harry relaxed his grip on him. There was something in Malfoy's expression, in his pink cheeks or reddened mouth or in the depths of his grey eyes, that Harry couldn't quite place. It looked uncertain and a little vulnerable, and it struck Harry suddenly that this was the first time Malfoy had done anything with him sober. Even that morning after he'd stayed the night at Harry's, he'd been half-asleep and a little hungover and probably not quite in his right mind. But now, this, entirely clear-headed with the last warm rays of sunlight slanting through the windows, this was different.

He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss against Malfoy's mouth, and felt Malfoy sigh a little against him. Harry swept his tongue against the soft curve of Malfoy's lower lip, then licked into his mouth when it opened for him, and even though Harry was the one pressed up against the wall and held in place, he felt Malfoy submit to him.

"Where's your bedroom?" Harry murmured against Malfoy's mouth.

Malfoy just shook his head. "Sofa's closer." He gave Harry a little shove toward the living room. "Get on it."

Harry went, and as he made his way across the living room, he noticed the little lived-in touches around Malfoy's home. A half-empty cup of tea on the side table. A pair of socks half-hidden under a chair. A jumper tossed over the arm of the sofa. A coiled-up scarf on the sideboard beside the crystal decanter, even though it was June. Another pair of socks draped over the newel post. Apparently Malfoy shed his clothing like a snake shedding its skin and just left it wherever it happened to land. This little touch of humanity amid all the frigid extravagance of expensive furniture let the last bit of uncertainty drain from the back of Harry's mind.

Malfoy stopped him when he tried to sit. "Turn around," he said. His voice was hard and he seemed to have recovered himself. "On your knees."

Slowly, Harry knelt on the cushions, his hands braced against the frame. There were a few awkward seconds where nothing happened, and Harry's spine prickled in anticipation, and then Malfoy's hands went to his belt and worked it open. He wasn't rough, but neither was he

tender about it. Each movement of his fingers as he undid Harry's belt and unfastened the fly of his trousers was quick and efficient. He tugged Harry's trousers and pants down to his knees, leaving Harry to kick them off all the way. He pulled at Harry's shirt, and Harry obediently raised his arms to let Malfoy peel it off him before he settled back into position.

Another few seconds slipped by where nothing happened, and Harry shifted awkwardly on the cushions, acutely aware of Malfoy's eyes on him. He ached to turn around, but kept his eyes fastened firmly on where his hands grasped the back of the sofa and let Malfoy have this control.

Then Malfoy's warm palm slid over the small of his back and down to cup his arse cheek. His other hand came up and his thumbs dug in as he spread Harry open, and a quick exhale of warm breath was the only warning he got before Malfoy licked him firmly right over his arsehole. Harry yelped and jerked forward, but Malfoy's hands held him steady as he licked again.

"Oh fuck, Malfoy," he groaned. He spread his legs farther apart and arched his lower back, offering himself up. No one had ever done this to him before, and it felt so raw and dirty and intimate, and the knowledge that it was Malfoy behind him, curling the tip of his tongue against Harry's arsehole, perfect Malfoy with his posh accent and his pure blood and his tongue in Harry's arse. He shivered and groaned again, low and needy.

"I can't wait to fuck you like this," Malfoy murmured, then fastened his mouth over Harry's hole and sucked gently, and Harry nearly came undone.

He licked and sucked, then worked a finger into Harry's arse and stroked in and out while his teeth scraped at the slight bump of Harry's tailbone. He slid out with one finger and back in with two, using them to stretch Harry open while he licked his way back down and nibbled gently at where Harry's rim stretched around his fingers, until Harry was a trembling wreck and felt like he'd die if he didn't get more.

"Malfoy," he gasped. "Please. I need..."

Even though he wasn't able to finish the sentence, Malfoy understood. He drew back and removed his fingers, leaving Harry feeling empty and unfulfilled and desperate for more. His hips twitched in shallow little thrusts against the air as he heard the rustle of Malfoy quickly undressing and then a murmured 'Accio' from behind him, followed by the soft thud of Malfoy catching something. He heard the soft rattle of a metal lid unscrewing from a glass jar, then Malfoy's fingers returned, cool and wet with lube, and he quickly prepared Harry.

Malfoy's hand made the most deliciously dirty squelching sound around his cock as he slicked himself up, then the tip pressed against Harry's opening. Harry rocked back against him, and then Malfoy's hands curled around his hipbones, holding him in place as the tip of his cock pressed against Harry's entrance. The head slid in, and Harry let out a shuddering breath, caught in that long and endless moment between *too much* and *not enough*. He felt vulnerable, spread open, spread wide, and then Malfoy pushed his cock into Harry's body one agonizing inch at a time and the burn of his muscles stretching as they gave way consumed him from the inside out. He let his head drop forward, and Malfoy nipped at his shoulder blade.

“All right?” Malfoy said, his breath warm against Harry’s back, and Harry thought he’d imagined it until Malfoy nipped at him again and said, “Potter?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry said.

Malfoy curled his fingers around Harry’s hips and started up a quick, sharp rhythm that had Harry groaning and pushing back against him. Fuck, Malfoy felt good. He never wavered in his rhythm, but he couldn’t seem to figure out what to do with his hands. They grasped Harry’s hips, then slid up his ribs, then back down to spread his arse cheeks apart, then up his sides and around to his front to pluck at his nipples, then back down to his hips.

Harry twisted to look over his shoulder and found Malfoy with his eyes half-closed and his mouth half-open, cheeks flushed and head tipped slightly back to expose the slender column of his throat. He looked beautiful like this, caught up in his passion like an insect trapped in amber.

“Fuck,” Harry said.

Malfoy’s eyes opened all the way and his brow creased faintly. “Potter.” His rhythm faltered and he skimmed his fingertips lightly down Harry’s spine.

Harry had to look away. He reached behind himself and caught Malfoy by the wrist, tugging his arm around and forcing his hand to Harry’s cock. He rubbed against Malfoy’s palm, and Malfoy obediently curled his fingers around it, stroking in time with his thrusts. Harry pushed back against him, urging him to go harder and faster until Malfoy slammed into him with every stroke, and Harry moaned and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Oh fuck, Potter, Potter,” Malfoy panted, and the broken way he gasped Harry’s name sent him hurtling over the edge just as Malfoy’s cock pulsed deep inside him.

Malfoy let go of Harry’s cock, wiped his sticky hand on Harry’s thigh, then pulled out of him with a long, slow exhale. Harry wanted nothing more than to let himself sink down in a boneless heap on the cushions, but he’d already splattered the sofa with his own come, no need to add Malfoy’s to it as well.

“Er,” he said. “Your toilet?”

“Down the hall,” Malfoy said, gesturing.

Harry cleaned up quickly and returned to the living room, suddenly awkward about his nakedness. But Malfoy hadn’t dressed yet and was lying sprawled on the sofa, and when he caught sight of Harry he wordlessly held out a hand. Harry went to him and settled on the cushions beside him, and found himself surprised when Malfoy wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close.

“Erm,” said Harry. He never would have taken Malfoy for a cuddler, not in a million years. He wasn’t at all sure what to make of this. As far as Harry knew, Malfoy still hated him, except he certainly wasn’t acting like it right now. He wondered if maybe there wasn’t

something more to the tenacity of Malfoy's protests that their nights together didn't mean anything.

"Shut it, Potter," Malfoy sighed, holding him a little closer. Then, "Are you staying the night?"

Harry glanced up at him, frowning. He didn't think he'd imagined the trace of hopefulness in Malfoy's voice, layered beneath the careful indifference. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Well," Malfoy said with a hint of a smile. "As a very wise bloke once told me, the best part of taking someone home is the morning sex that comes after."

"Well," Harry said with a small smile, and he shifted slightly, arranging himself more comfortably against Malfoy. "Who am I to argue with a very wise bloke?"

"I'm not going to argue with you," Robards says. "You're not ready to go back in the field."

"I am," Harry insists. "Really, I'm *fine*."

"You're not fine, Harry," Robards says slowly, and Harry can tell that his gentle, reasonable tone of voice is probably meant to be compassionate, but really it just sounds condescending. "Your partner died on Saturday. You need more than three days to heal from this."

Harry shakes his head, shrugging off the pain of Robards' words. He'll need more than three *lifetimes* to heal from this, but in the meantime the least he can do is try his best to reassemble his life. "Deskwork, then. There's got to be some paperwork you can give me, at least." His voice trembles alarmingly, and he can't keep himself from adding, "*Please*."

The pity on Robards' face is too much to bear. "Harry..."

But Harry's already fumbling for the doorknob. "Forget it. I was just, I thought... Just, forget it."

"Harry," Robards says again, but Harry's got the door open and he's fleeing down the hall. He can't stay here another minute.

He Apparates as soon as he's able and ends up back in Muggle London. For a while he loses himself in the crowds and it's nice to be no one for a couple of hours. Here, he's just one face among many, one more person going on about his business, and it's comfortable and anonymous. It's nice to pretend that he's a normal person, that his life is ordinary, that his entire world hasn't just shattered and sliced him to ribbons.

After a while, he's able to admit to himself that Robards was right to have turned him down. Harry's not ready to be out in the field again, and he's not ready to have a new partner. But he needs to do *something* and he doesn't understand why Robards won't let him at least do

research or sort through evidence or some other sort of paperwork. He could be helpful. He could be useful. He could be doing something worthwhile.

After two weeks, Harry had more than had his fill of paperwork and he was more than ready to get out in the field and do something worthwhile. He, along with the rest of his training class, had been stuck on desk duty since they'd been promoted to full Aurors, assisting on paperwork of active cases to get a feel for all the forms that had to be filled out and all the rules that had to be followed, while the higher-ups reviewed all their test scores and compared them to the other Aurors to see who would be matched up with whom as partners.

But all that was at an end now, and the day he'd been waiting for had finally arrived. He and the rest of his class sat anxiously in their old lecture room, waiting to find out which Auror they'd be partnered with. Harry scanned over the older Aurors milling around the front of the lecture hall while Head Auror Robards called name after name, and he wondered which one of them he'd be assigned to work with.

It wasn't until the numbers had really begun to dwindle that Harry realised there were two fewer experienced Aurors than there were newly promoted trainees. And it wasn't until Robards called the very last two names on his list – Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy – that Harry realised why.

Even then, as he turned to Malfoy and they exchanged identical looks of horror and disbelief, it didn't feel quite real. It was almost unheard of for two inexperienced Aurors to be paired with each other. But not impossible, apparently. He expected Malfoy to object to it, to speak up right then and there and say that he refused to work with Harry. But Malfoy said nothing and, too shocked to react with anything other than mute compliance, neither did Harry.

Malfoy collected the key to their new office from Robards, and Harry followed him through the hallways and into the small room, furnished only with a pair of desks and chairs and a few empty bookshelves. He closed the door behind him.

"We can't do this," he said, finding his tongue at last. "It's against about a thousand rules for us to be fucking if we're partners."

Malfoy folded his arms over his chest and regarded Harry calmly. "Agreed," he said. "The way I see it, we've got two options. Either we go to Robards right now and get reassigned, or we break off this thing we're doing and just be partners. Which would you prefer?"

Harry shoved a hand through his hair. Neither of those sounded like a good option. "I don't know. From the times we were paired up in training, I think we could really be great as partners. But the sex is also really bloody good."

Malfoy watched him for a long moment, mouth turned down into a small frown, eyes contemplative. "Then there's a third option."

Harry blinked at him. “Oh?”

“We have everything,” Malfoy said, staring hard at Harry.

“Everything?” Harry repeated, not following along.

“Yes. Partners in every sense of the word. Everything. And I do mean *everything*,” Malfoy continued, his voice growing sharp and intense, his eyes sparking the way they did right before a training duel. He moved close to Harry. “If we’re going to do this, we need to do it right. That means a proper relationship, not this not-quite-friends-with-fucking nonsense.”

“Oh, you’re... you’re asking me out?” Harry was entirely thrown off course. This wasn’t at all where he’d expected this conversation to go.

Malfoy’s mouth twisted up. “Is that what you want? Shall I get down on my knees and profess my undying love? Propose marriage and offer to bear you a dozen fat babies?”

“Er, no. That won’t be necessary,” Harry said, flustered. He coughed once. “Just. So, we’re boyfriends now?”

“We are indeed,” Malfoy said with a slow smirk that Harry didn’t like the look of at all. “Let’s go tell Robards.” He swept out into the hall and Harry had little choice but to follow.

“Erm,” Harry said. “Might I ask what exactly you’re going to say to him?”

Malfoy gave him another of those unsettling smirks. “Just leave all that to me, Scarhead.”

That smirk abruptly reminded Harry that this was *Malfoy*. And bloody hell, Harry couldn’t believe he’d just agreed to be boyfriends with him. Ron was absolutely going to shit himself when he found out. Oh fuck, and all the fucking papers. He was going to get Howlers for *weeks*. Maybe this was a bad idea. A really bad idea, and maybe it wasn’t too late to tell Malfoy he’d changed his mind

But the door to the Head Auror’s office was open, and Malfoy rapped lightly on the doorframe as he stepped inside before Harry had a chance to speak up, and Robards looked up from the file he was leafing through. Harry trailed in and closed the door after them.

The door had barely latched shut when Robards sighed, “I’ve been expecting this.” He closed his folder and pushed it aside.

“Sir,” Malfoy said, pulling himself up rigidly. “We’d like to discuss your decision to partner us.”

Robards frowned at Malfoy, frowned at Harry, then frowned at Malfoy again. “I assure you that I didn’t make the decision to partner the two of you lightly,” he said. “We’ve analysed all your exam scores and your ratings on practical tests. I’ve personally gone over every instance where you were paired with each other in training exercises and I am entirely convinced that, despite your turbulent history, I wouldn’t be able to find a more compatible partner for either of you.”

“That’s not—” Malfoy began.

“Furthermore,” Robards cut him off. “I personally oversaw the analysis of your magical signatures, and I’ve never seen another two that are so close to each other from two individuals who aren’t kin.” He continued on about magical signatures and test scores and innate compatibility, and it was clear to Harry that Robards had been rehearsing this speech for a while. Malfoy kept trying to break in, but Robards wouldn’t allow himself to be dissuaded, and Malfoy visibly grew more and more frustrated.

“I’m fucking him,” Malfoy burst out at last when Robards paused for breath.

“Malfoy!” Harry said while Robards choked on nothing.

“Quiet, Potter,” Malfoy said and looked back at Robards. “And I know it’s against regulations for two partnered Aurors to be in a relationship with each other, but you’re going to make an exception for us.”

Robards seemed to have recovered himself somewhat. “Am I?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

“Malfoy,” Harry warned, and received an elbow to his ribs for his trouble.

“Yes, you are,” Malfoy went on. “Because if you don’t, you’re going to lose both of us. We’re partnered with each other, or we’re not Aurors at all.”

Well. That was news to Harry. He shifted awkwardly as Robards and Malfoy engaged in a brief staring contest, then Robards looked at him.

“Auror Potter. Is this true?”

“Erm,” said Harry, and Malfoy elbowed him again. Harry coughed once. “Yes?” He fought the urge to squirm beneath Robards’ stern gaze. He held still rather than risk another jab from Malfoy’s elbow. Really, was there any part of the wanker that *wasn’t* pointy?

Robards turned his gaze on Malfoy again, and Malfoy’s chin came up a fraction as they stared each other down. Robards sighed. “Very well then, as it seems I have no choice in the matter,” he said wryly. “But I will be keeping a close eye on your performance, and if I notice that your personal life impedes your professional careers, I will reassign you in an instant, and if that means you choose to quit, so be it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And Auror Malfoy,” Robards said. “If you ever, *ever* dare speak to me again the way you have just spoken to me now, your threats of quitting will be utterly useless because I will have fired you on the spot. I do not appreciate being manipulated like this and I won’t tolerate it again. I’ve only allowed it this time because of your sheer fucking bollocks, and I believe that’ll make you one of our best. But a good Auror also knows his place, and I have no room in my department for an Auror who has no respect for the chain of command. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, sir. Thank you, sir,” Malfoy said, bowing his head.

They left, Harry trailing after Malfoy.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” he said, still a little stunned by the whole thing. “And bloody hell, I can’t believe it worked.”

Malfoy smirked at him. “I’ve got top scores and you’re the Prat Who Wouldn’t Die. I think you vastly underestimate how far they’d be willing to go to keep us.”

This whole thing feels like it’s gone too far, like a joke that’s run on so far past its punchline that it’s no longer funny. It might’ve been, at first. (Draco, gone? Forever? How absurd.) And every day Harry wakes up listening for the sound of the shower running or the whistle of the kettle in the kitchen or the rustle of newspaper. (And Harry will never see him again? Like, never ever? How ridiculous!) A part of him remains alert for the thud of footsteps coming up the hall or the sound of floorboards creaking overhead. In the back of his mind, he waits to be shouted at for leaving his wet towel on the bedroom floor or his used teabag in the sink. He still half-expects that someone from the Ministry will be contacting him *any minute now* to explain that there’s been a mistake. That this whole thing is a mix-up, a misunderstanding. That it’s all been a very cruel joke.

But today... today will make it real.

Harry needs to get dressed. He’s been putting it off for as long as he can, but he needs to. Ron and Hermione are going to be here in ten minutes and they’ll expect him to be ready. But every time Harry starts for his bedroom, he can’t make himself go inside. He hesitates outside the doorway, his hands grasping the doorframe, his toes curling against the wood floor. He bites his lip, hard, and the pain centers him.

Nine minutes. Fuck it. It’s just his bedroom. It’s just clothing. It’s just another funeral. God knows he’s been to enough of them over his lifetime that he should be used to them by now. This will be fine. He’ll have his friends at his side, and he can get through this. He’s been through this sort of thing before. It will be fine.

Determined, he marches into the bedroom and goes straight to the closet and sorts through his robes. He doesn’t own many, opting to wear Muggle clothing most of the time he’s not in uniform. He finds his nice set of black robes way at the back. They’d slid off their clothes hanger at some point and have been lying in crumpled heap on the floor for god knows how many years. Harry picks them up and gives them a half-hearted shake, but he’ll never be able to get the wrinkles out. Draco might be able to, he’s better with ironing charms than anyone Harry’s seen, but Draco’s not here. Harry flings the robes back onto the floor of the closet.

Draco’s robes hang in a neat row, taunting him. He owns several sets of black formal robes, and Harry touches them, reverently fingering each sleeve, the fine wool and slippery silk and crisp linen. There’s a set with a long row of silver buttons all the way up to the throat, and

another set with elaborate embroidery done in gold thread, and the set with the slightly lower neckline meant to be worn with an intricately-knotted cravat. Draco won't mind if he borrows a set. Part of the reason Harry doesn't own many sets of robes himself is because Draco always takes great pleasure in dressing Harry up in his own clothing. Which is more than fine for the formal functions he attends with Draco at his side, but there's something about showing up to the funeral wearing his dead boyfriend's clothes that strikes Harry as a little beyond the pale.

In the end, he dresses carefully in a vibrant green jumper and a pair of tailored grey trousers. Draco always loves when Harry wears this jumper because he says it brings out Harry's eyes, and even though Harry can't spot any sort of difference himself, he's more than willing to buy into it because wearing this always makes Draco kiss him more than usual. And Draco's never able to keep his hands off Harry's arse when he wears these trousers. Harry starts to attempt to fix his hair, then decides it doesn't really matter and probably won't do much good, anyhow. He goes into the living room to wait for his friends.

They arrive a few minutes later, both of them looking somber in unrelieved black.

For a moment they just look at him, then Hermione asks, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah," he says, and notices the way Ron's eyeing his jumper. Harry brushes a hand down his front and adds defensively, "This one's his favourite."

Ron and Hermione go to the Manor first. Harry scoops out his own handful of Floo Powder and tosses it in, calling out the name of his destination. Then he takes a deep breath and holds it as he steps into the leaping green flames.

Harry let his breath out on a long, contented sigh as he flopped back against the pillows and pulled Malfoy down with him. "Fuck," he sighed. "Taking up with you was the most brilliant idea I've ever had." Fucking hell, he felt good, every inch of his body warm and loose, his skin still tingling faintly from the force of his climax. Sex with Malfoy had started off brilliant and somehow it just kept getting better.

Malfoy laughed softly beside him and pressed closer, draping one arm over Harry's chest. "Of course it's a brilliant idea, but it was mine, if you'll recall. I was the one who suggested a relationship."

"Yeah, well I was the one who said we shouldn't wait to get drunk to fuck each other. *And* I'm the one who took you home the first time."

"And I was the one who let you," Malfoy said smugly, and Harry realised that no matter what he said, he wasn't going to win this.

They dozed for a while, draped over each other, then Harry woke up to his stomach grumbling. They took a shower together, which involved a lot of groping and another

orgasm, then made their way to Malfoy's kitchen where they stood at the counter to eat leftover pasta as they talked about work. After they finished, Harry washed the dishes while Draco dried them and put them away.

"I got something for your birthday," Malfoy said, reaching up into a cabinet as Harry finished drying his hands on a dishtowel.

"Really?" Harry asked, feeling vaguely guilty. Malfoy's birthday had come and gone without Harry even acknowledging it, but at that point they'd only been having drunken sex every couple of weeks so he hadn't really felt he owed Malfoy a gift. "Er, that's nice of you."

Malfoy just grinned at him over his shoulder, and something warm and fluttery expanded behind Harry's ribs. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to Malfoy grinning at him. It made him look younger, carefree and boyish, and Harry wasn't quite sure whether this was the person Malfoy had always been and kept hidden, or if this was the person he was becoming when he was with Harry. Either way, Harry wasn't sure what he'd done to suddenly earn this version of Malfoy, or what he should do to keep him.

"Here," Malfoy said, holding out a paper bag wrapped around something about half the size of a Bludger.

Harry took it, the paper crinkling, and opened it up to find—

"Oh bloody hell. You've *got* to be joking."

Malfoy just grinned again, the stupid tosser, and Harry no longer found that expression as charmingly boyish as he had just a minute ago as he lifted his gift free of its wrapping. It was a black mug with the words 'I Choose the Chosen One!' circling the rim in bright green lettering, and his own stupid face plastered across the side. As Harry stared down at it, Mug-Harry winked at him, *actually winked at him, what the fucking hell*. Malfoy laughed, the sound warm and bright as sunshine.

"Oh Merlin, the look on your face!" he gasped out and kept laughing so hard he doubled over.

Harry's fingers tightened around the handle of his new mug and he seriously considered clunking Malfoy over the head with it. "There's no way I'm using this. Where did you even find this thing?"

"There's a shop in Diagon Alley selling all sorts of Harry Potter-themed items," Malfoy said, finally regaining some control over himself, though he still had that brilliant grin on his face. "I almost got you a Harry Potter snow globe, because the little you inside it flails around in a panic if you shake it too hard. And I don't think I'll ever not find that funny, if you're ever looking for a gift for me. But I went with the mug because you're the practical sort and I thought you'd appreciate something you can use every single day."

Harry felt a bit faint at the thought of a little him trapped inside a snow globe, though Malfoy shaking it as hard as he could to see what would happen sounded about right. He'd probably started cackling madly right there in the middle of the shop. "And my face is on everything?"

“Absolutely,” Malfoy said as he stroked his finger down Mug-Harry’s face, and Mug-Harry licked his lips and fluttered his eyelashes.

“Why is he even doing that?” Harry asked, staring down in disbelief.

“I know,” Malfoy said, beaming down at the mug Harry held. “He’s a bit of a strumpet, isn’t he?”

“I’m never going to use this,” Harry said. Never in a thousand years. If this were the last mug on the planet, he’d sooner die of thirst than drink out of it.

“Well,” Malfoy said, plucking it from Harry’s hands. “That’s fine, then. Looks like I’ve got a new mug.”

“You’re not going to use it, either,” Harry told him as Malfoy made the most ridiculous kissing face at the mug, and Mug-Harry puckered up his lips and made it right back at him.

“You can’t stop me,” Malfoy said, and Harry knew he shouldn’t argue because the more he let on that the mug annoyed him, the more often Malfoy would use it because it did just that.

“I’ll break it,” Harry threatened.

Malfoy grinned at him. “Then it’s a good thing I cast a competent Reparo, isn’t it?” He touched his new mug, and Mug-Harry winked at him again. Malfoy smiled delightedly and winked back.

“I can’t take you seriously when you’re flirting with a mug,” Harry said. This ridiculous side of Malfoy was something that had been coming out more and more as they spent time together, and Harry still hadn’t quite figured out what to do with it.

Malfoy just laughed. “Jealous, Potter?”

“Why on earth would I be jealous of a mug?”

“I don’t know,” Malfoy said slowly, a wicked grin playing at his lips. “I’m going to be putting my mouth on him an awful lot.”

Harry snorted. “Be serious,” he said, though he couldn’t quite suppress a smile.

“Why?” Malfoy asked, still smiling. He set the mug aside. “Life’s not serious. It’s ridiculous and messy and complicated,” he said, sliding his arms around Harry’s waist and tipping his face up for a kiss. “And it’s far, far too short to take seriously.”

Harry can’t bring himself to take Draco’s funeral seriously. It starts with the casket. They weren’t able to recover Draco’s body, but for some reason his parents have bought a casket for him. Harry stares at it as some witch who’d barely known Draco rambles on about how

the world is a poorer place without him in it. Harry doesn't need some witch to tell him that, and that casket just doesn't make any goddamn sense. It's glossy black, the sort that looks as if it'll collect smudgy fingerprints if anyone touches it, and trimmed in gold. Obviously the best that money can buy, but what's the fucking *point* of it?

The witch comes to a rambling, tearful end and steps down from the podium they've wreathed in white gardenias and lilies. She brushes against the side of it and one of the lilies comes loose and falls to the floor. Harry stares at it, bland white against the pale marble. Draco has always loved the riotous color of springtime flowers best, the daffodils and poppies and snapdragons and tulips, and of course the heavy and fragrant roses that are just now beginning to bloom in the Manor's gardens, and Harry can't understand why they didn't pick any of those for him. Draco always looks best in colors; with his fair complexion and white-blond hair, he's always been especially suited to deep emerald greens and rich royal blues. The lining of the casket is probably white. White silk, Harry imagines, and he's suddenly glad that Draco's not trapped in there.

The witch gives him a long, pitying look as she goes back to her seat, and Harry looks away as the next person steps to the front of the room. They wanted him to speak, of course they did, but the absolute last thing he wants is to get up there in front of all these people he doesn't know and open himself up, baring his pain like a spectacle. It's not theirs to see, not when he doesn't even know what to do with it yet. His grief is still an unruly dog at this point, yanking him this way or that on a whim, while he's helpless to do anything but stumble along after it. In time, Harry thinks it will settle down and follow complacently behind him, but for now he can't trust himself to hold it together. He hates giving speeches, anyhow. Draco knows that. He'll understand.

So instead of Harry, they get Pansy Parkinson.

It's the sort of bitter irony Draco would have found terribly amusing, Harry thinks, that they're all gathered here crying over an empty box draped in drab wreaths of flowers Draco hates, while people he hasn't spoken to in years make great and lumbering speeches about how hard it is to live without him, when none of them had ever lived *with him* in the first place. They didn't wake up beside him each morning or make him breakfast or do his laundry or spend long and quiet evenings with their head in his lap and his fingers in their hair. Draco didn't make them tea in stupid mugs or dance with them to Muggle music or kiss them like he needed them as much as he needed air. Harry takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It feels ridiculous for him to be jealous of the grief of others and he tries his best to let go of it. Draco affected a lot of people, and it's not for Harry to say how justified they are in their loss.

But then there's Parkinson, saying how dearly she loved Draco and how much she'll miss him, and a lone tear trickles down her cheek, and Harry's anger comes rushing back. That stupid bitch. She hadn't even spoken to Draco since she found out he'd begun dating Harry. Draco never lets on how hurt he is by it, but Harry knows Parkinson's rejection has cut him deep. She's his oldest friend and she just turned her back on him after one little argument. Draco explained that it's because they'd planned to marry someday. Her blood was pure enough to beget a Malfoy heir, and Draco never planned to fall in love with anyone so they'd agreed to a marriage of convenience some years down the line when they were both ready to settle down and raise a family. But then Harry came along and Parkinson's never forgiven

him for it. "It's all right," Draco always says with a small shrug whenever the subject of Parkinson comes up. "She can't stay angry with me forever." And she didn't stay angry forever. Just five years. But now it's too late, and Harry sincerely hopes that she regrets the hell out of it for the rest of her life.

Parkinson doesn't mention that in her little speech. Instead she talks about her friendship with Draco. Childhood antics. Adventures they shared at Hogwarts. How much she'll miss him now that he's passed on, and a flash of irritation curls through Harry because that's *wrong*. Draco didn't pass anywhere. 'Passing on' makes it sound easy and peaceful, just slipping away from one place to the next, and Draco's death wasn't like that. It was sudden and painful and Harry wasn't ready for it, none of them were.

"He died," Harry says quietly, and there's a flash of movement from his right as Hermione turns to look at him. He doesn't care. "He fucking died. He was killed." Those words sound better, sharp and ugly words for a sharp and ugly thing.

"Harry," Hermione whispers, and he shakes his head.

"Draco is dead," Harry mutters to himself, and now other people are turning to look at him too. It's the first time he's said those three words aloud, and they hit him hard. They sound ridiculous and not quite real, so he tries them out again, "Draco is dead."

All of a sudden, it's too much for him. He can't be in here, he can't be staring at that empty box and those awful flowers and trapped in here with all these people who pretend they love Draco when they don't, they *don't*, and they'll never love him the way Harry does. He stands, ignores the attention he gets, the stares, the pitying looks, and the way Parkinson's words falter. He steps out into the aisle, fixes his eyes on the door at the far end of the room, and leaves as quickly as he can without actually running.

Though he's only been in this part of the Manor a handful of times, Harry knows it well enough to get out of it. The ballroom is at the rear of the house, and from there it's just a short walk down the hall to a set of French doors leading out to a broad porch overlooking the lawns. Harry goes through it, gulping in breath after breath of fresh damp air. At least the weather cooperated today. It's overcast and spitting down that hazy, misting sort of rain that gets into everything. It's the perfect weather for a funeral.

Harry crosses the porch and starts to go down the steps, intending to disappear into the gardens for a while. But he remembers Draco taking him out there after the first time Harry had dinner with his parents, how tense an affair it had been with Lucius and Harry both obviously hating each other over poached salmon and grilled asparagus. Somehow they'd managed to remain polite through the dessert course, and then Draco had taken him for a walk in the gardens and spent ages kissing him among the roses. On a whim, Harry had plucked one of the roses from where it grew, its petals heavy and red as blood, and tucked it behind Draco's ear. Draco had laughed and left it there as they'd gone back inside to say goodnight to his parents. Lucius had looked disapprovingly at Draco, but Narcissa had tugged Harry aside and said that she hadn't seen this side of Draco in years, and was so glad to see Harry bringing it back out in him. At that point in their relationship, Draco's casual ridiculousness was something Harry still found baffling and new, but it would eventually become one of the things he loved most. Draco had worn that ridiculous flower for the rest of

the evening, until it had fallen out later that night from the force of his thrusting into Harry's willing body, tumbling off the edge of the mattress. Harry never picked it up from where it'd fallen between the bed and the nightstand, and he vaguely wonders whether it's still there all this time later.

It's around the same time of year, a little earlier in June than that night, but Harry still doesn't want to see the roses blooming. There are a lot of things he doesn't want to see anymore. He sinks down until he's sitting on the middle step, heedless of the puddle seeping into the seat of his trousers. He pulls his knees up to his chest and clasps his arms around his shins, and thinks that maybe he can just disappear, if only he can curl up small enough.

Harry curled in on himself as much as he could as another curse slammed into the wall barely a foot over where he crouched below the crumbling remains of what was once the wall between the living room and the kitchen, sending more bits of plaster raining down onto him. The little girl in his arms shrieked and burrowed tighter against his chest, and Harry pressed himself tighter into his corner of the kitchen cabinets, one of the handles digging painfully into his spine.

"I fucking told you we should have waited for backup!" Harry snarled, blinking dust out of his eyes. He hugged the girl closer and belatedly added, "It's all right, Emily. It's going to be fine."

Malfoy didn't even glance at him as he added more Shield Charms to the chunk of wall and cabinets, strengthening it against further spell damage. Another curse hit it before he finished and blasted a chunk of marble countertop across the room. "You know why we couldn't," he snapped back, then aimed a couple of Blasting Curses over the top of their makeshift bunker. Out in the rest of the house, someone screamed.

Harry knew Malfoy was right. The kidnapping case had escalated too quickly for them to wait. They'd had no choice but to go in right then, woefully outnumbered as they were, or risk Emily's death. They'd cut it terrifyingly close, even so. Harry had caught sight of all five wizards they'd been investigating as he and Malfoy had dived through the kitchen doorway, the little girl cradled safely in Harry's arms. Then the curses had started up, the wall had come down, and they were trapped.

His arms tightened around Emily, his hand cradling the back of her neck, and she felt so small and fragile. Another curse slammed into the cabinets across from them and they exploded in a burst of wood splinters and porcelain shards. Emily screamed again. A chunk of shattered plate glanced off Harry's shoulder, snagging the fabric of his robes but not cutting through, and the broken handle of a mug skittered across the tile floor near Draco. He knocked it away from where he was kneeling.

"You need to get her out of here," Malfoy said. He flung another four spells over the ruined wall, one right after the other, rapidfire in a way that Harry had never quite been able to master.

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Harry snapped at him. The place had been layered in anti-Apparition wards and at least five wizards of highly dubious morality stood between them and the front door. “It’s not like we’ve got very many options!”

“No, but there’s one. You get her out of here. I’ll cover you,” Malfoy said, and Harry turned to stare at him. Malfoy’s eyes were dark and serious. “You’ll never make it to the front door, but there’s a large window to the left. I can make sure you get there. Run for it and leave the rest to me.”

Harry’s throat went dry. “Malfoy, that’s insane.” Even as he said it, he leaned around the wall, to catch a glimpse of the window. It was closer than he’d thought, and if anyone could make sure he reached it, it was Malfoy. The bastard was fucking *vicious* when it came to casting.

“It’s risky, but it’s better than waiting around for them to bring down the rest of the wall,” Malfoy snapped. As if to prove his point, a curse slammed into the Shield Charms and the cabinets trembled, pots and pans rattling inside them.

Harry knew he was right, the same way he was right about bursting in here without backup. A part of him wanted to insist that Malfoy be the one to take Emily while Harry stayed behind, but he didn’t even bother to voice that thought. Malfoy could cast far quicker than Harry could; of the two of them, he’d be the one best able to hold out until help arrived. But that didn’t mean Harry had to like it.

He inhaled sharply as his stomach twisted at the thought of leaving Malfoy here alone. “I won’t do this again, Malfoy,” Harry told him. He fought down a rising wave of nausea.

“We’ll discuss that later. Good luck, Auror Potter.” Malfoy’s voice was brisk and determined and entirely too professional.

Harry hauled Malfoy close and kissed him, hard and quick and desperate. “I mean it. This is the last time I’m leaving without you.”

Malfoy reached out with one hand and cupped his cheek, the supple black leather of his Auror glove cool and smooth against Harry’s heated skin. “We’ll discuss that later,” he said again, and Harry heard the promise in his words. They’d have that conversation because there *would* be a later.

Harry tightened his arms around Emily and leaned close to her ear. “I need you to be brave for me, sweetie. We’re going to get out of here but you need to be very brave. I need you to hold on as tight as you can, okay? Can you do that for me?” She nodded against his shoulder and Harry looked over at Malfoy. “Ready?”

Malfoy nodded back to him. “On three. One... Two... Three!”

Harry burst out from behind their cover at the same time Malfoy surged to his feet and fired off a Blasting Curse so strong it made the very air vibrate like the inside of a bass drum. Curses streaked past Harry in colored jets of light, bright and disorienting, and Harry squinted as he bolted across the room, his body hunched forward to give as much protection as he could to the small girl in his arms. Another Blasting Curse flew from the kitchen to hit

the broad window ahead of him and it exploded outward in sparkling shards of glass and splintered chunks of window frame. A curse from the kidnappers shot by, missing Harry by inches, and Malfoy's retaliation was swift and merciless. Harry flung himself through the ruined window, and his foot caught against the sill. He tumbled down into the shrubbery below, twigs scratching his face and neck, and he wrenched himself free and sprinted across the lawn, spells lighting the grass in strobe light flashes, Emily whimpering and clinging to him, her small arms around his neck almost strangling him. A curse shot past him and slammed into the ground just ahead, blowing a small crater of dirt and grass out of the earth. Harry swerved to one side, dodged it neatly, and kept running.

He felt a slight tingle over his skin as he passed through the wards and spun around without bothering to slow, and he caught a last glimpse of the house, windows lit up by staccato bursts of spells, then the world swirled and vanished around him as he Apparated to the Ministry.

Harry landed in the Atrium and looked wildly around for someone, anyone, to help him. From behind him, he heard someone shout his name.

At the sound of his name, Harry turns to look over his shoulder and finds Hermione lingering in the doorway. She steps out onto the broad back porch and eases the door shut behind her, then comes down the steps, aims a casual drying charm at the damp stair, and sits down beside Harry, tucking her black skirt demurely over her knees.

"Hey," she says. The misting rain is beading in her hair, little jewel-bright droplets clinging to the strands, reminding Harry of the strands of seed pearls threaded through her hair on her wedding day. He looks away.

"It's all fucked," Harry says hollowly, staring out over the grass. "This whole thing. It's all fucked."

Hermione doesn't say anything. She scoots closer to him on the step, until her leg presses against his, hip-thigh-knee, and she slides her arm through his and leans her head against his shoulder.

"I can't go back in there," Harry says. He rests his cheek briefly against her head. He forgot to shave this morning and his stubble catches at the strands of her hair when he pulls away.

"You don't have to," Hermione says. She scoots closer to him, pressing harder against his side, a warm and welcome weight. "You don't have to do anything you don't want. And if you change your mind later, Ron's staying through the whole thing and you've got your Pensieve."

"I won't."

For a long time, they sit in silence. Harry stares at a puddle, watching the tiny ripples on its surface where the raindrops fall.

“I don’t even know why I’m sad,” he says at last. “I’ve been dead. I know it doesn’t hurt. He’s safe where he is, and happy. And I’ll see him again, one day. But I’m still... It still *hurts*.”

“It’s all right,” Hermione says. “That’s normal.”

Harry laughs helplessly. “No, no it’s not. But then again, when has my life ever been normal?”

Normal isn’t something Harry’s ever known, and though it’s something that he’s mostly given up on by this point in his life, he sometimes can’t help but wish for it. Times like now, because he’s pretty sure that normal people don’t have to leave their boyfriends in life-or-death situations, and normal people don’t come back as soon as they can, but still too late, and find their boyfriends stretched out on the blood-slicked floor, cut open neck to navel. Normal people certainly don’t think to themselves, “At least I didn’t do it, this time.”

They’d given Draco a private room at St Mungo’s, as much in deference to his status as the Auror who’d rescued the daughter of a member of the Wizengamot as to his status as Harry Potter’s boyfriend. He’d been cleaned up and patched up and propped up on a fluffy pillow, his complexion gone so pale that Harry could see the faint blue tracing of veins at his temples. He stared, watching the slow rise and fall of Draco’s chest, the faint twitch of his eyelids, the steady pulse at his throat. He stared and stared because if he closed his eyes even for a moment all he could see was Draco sprawled across the tile floor of that kitchen, limp and still, his skin ashen, his blood shockingly red where it was splashed across the floor, the chest of his Auror uniform shredded beyond repair and soaked through.

Harry had thought he was dead at first. He’d stumbled into the kitchen and stopped short, gripped by shock and horror and a nauseating wave of déjà vu before he rushed across the room and dropped down beside Draco, the blood on the floor warm and sticky where it soaked into the knees of his trousers, his fingers smeared red as he groped for a pulse. If backup had arrived even one minute later... Harry shivered and couldn’t bring himself to finish the thought. It hadn’t. They’d been in time. Draco was alive. That was all that mattered.

Draco’s parents would be here soon. They’d been in France and had to catch an emergency Portkey back. So Harry took this time to enjoy the silence and the solitude and the freedom to watch Draco and memorise every detail of what he’d come frighteningly close to losing. He knew Draco’s mouth very well, along with his eyes and his hair and the exact way his eyebrows arched, so pale blond they were almost invisible. Harry had spent hours kissing his way up and down the slender column of Draco’s throat, and knew the way Draco’s hipbones fit perfectly into his palms. He’d spent hours with his hands curled and clutching at Draco’s

shoulders and biceps. He knew exactly how Draco's back felt beneath his fingers, the way his muscles tensed and shifted, and the shallow hill-valley-hills of his vertebrae.

But he'd never noticed how ridiculously perfect Draco's ears were, like the flawless line drawings in anatomy textbooks. Or the exact pattern his veins made over the backs of his hands, or how the tendons stretched up to the small knobs of his knuckles, or how neat and clean he kept his fingernails. Or how his skin stretched taut over the delicate bones of his wrist. Draco's wrists looked especially fragile. Harry had always known how breakable Draco was – he'd learned it years before with Draco's blood splashed over a different tiled floor – but he'd somehow managed to forget.

He'd never let himself forget again.

And just like that Harry knew he wanted Draco. Not just his body or occasional stretches of his time, but all the rest of him too. All the things that made him smile or scowl or laugh or sigh. Harry wanted each swallow, each breath, each blink of his eyes and each beat of his heart. Every word, every thought. Harry wanted *everything*. He'd been fine with their initial arrangement of casual sex, but now even boyfriends didn't feel like enough. He didn't think anything would ever be, but he could sure as hell try.

Sometimes Harry wondered what it'd be like to have a relationship that wasn't formed under duress, that wasn't accelerated and solidified by the threat of trolls or basilisks or Dark Lords or whatever arsehole was trying to kill him this week. He wondered what it would be like to grow close to someone slowly, naturally, like a vine twining through a trellis beneath the gentle encouragement of a long summer of warm sunshine, not slammed together and forged in the white-hot flames of mortal peril. Sometimes Harry wasn't sure he knew how to do anything else. And maybe Draco didn't know how, either.

All Harry knew was he had this now, and he couldn't let it go.

"Potter?"

Harry was out of his seat in an instant. "Draco." His voice caught on Draco's name, and he leaned over the bed. Draco's eyes were open but he hadn't moved, other than to turn his head slightly in Harry's direction.

Draco frowned at him. "Malfoy," he said, his voice rough and dry, then coughed. "You call me Malfoy." He coughed again.

Harry didn't answer as he helped him sit up, sliding one arm around his shoulders to support him, and helped him to take a drink from the glass of water a Mediwitch had left under a cooling charm on the bedside table. He coughed again, softer now, and Harry gently lowered him back to the bed.

"Emily?" Draco asked.

"She's fine," Harry said. "She's safe, she's with her family now."

Draco let out a sigh that turned into a small cough at the end. "Good. And the kidnappers?"

“Gone by the time we got there,” Harry said. “We’ve caught two of them, and it’s only a matter of time until we track down the others.”

“Good,” Draco said again. “That’s good.”

“Draco...” Harry began, but trailed off because he didn’t know how to put what he felt into words.

“There it is again,” Draco said, his mouth lifting into an exhausted smile. “You have no idea how bloody weird it is to hear you call me that.”

Harry felt his mouth tug up in an answering smile. “You’re my boyfriend. Shouldn’t I call you by your first name?”

Draco closed his eyes. “I don’t suppose I can stop you,” he said. “Just don’t expect me to call you Harry.”

Harry slipped his hand under Draco’s, palm up, and smiled when Draco laced their fingers together and gave a slight squeeze. “We’ll see about that,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of years to change your mind.”

The smile lingered faintly at the corner of Draco’s mouth, and he gave Harry’s fingers another squeeze. “You’re on, Potter.”

They sat in silence for another minute or so until a Healer came in. Harry stood quietly aside as the Healer poked and prodded at Draco, and asked whether this or that hurt. He watched Draco respond to each question and smile when the Healer made a small joke, and he tried to figure out what to do with the sudden intensifying of his feelings for Draco. It felt so overwhelming, desperate and eager all at once, that it scared him a little, and his first instinct was to push it back down and pretend it never happened. But he refused to hide from it. Life was too short to waste any of it hiding from something just because it scared him.

Harry spends the rest of the service hiding in Narcissa’s sitting room. He feels bad for avoiding everyone, but he just can’t face going back. Hermione had offered to sit with him, but he needs a little while by himself. The windows here face the rear of the property, and Harry watches as the assembled mourners troop across the lawns en masse, the empty casket Levitated between them. He knows they’re headed for the cemetery tucked away in the back corner of the grounds. Draco had taken Harry there, once, and they’d walked slowly up and down the rows of all the Malfoys who’d come before Draco, and Harry listened to story after story of Draco’s forebears, at least half of which put his ancestors in an unflattering light, and a few were tales of outright disaster and ruin. It was then that Harry had known how serious Draco was about their relationship. Draco was sharing his family secrets, telling him all the things that only Malfoy kin were allowed to know. Harry had taken his hand and although Draco was still talking about Eustace Malfoy’s ill-advised feud with Godfrey Urquart in the

mid-1600s, Harry heard the words that lay beneath it. “I love you, Harry,” he was really saying. And, “We’re a family.”

Harry swallows and looks away from the window, and tries not to think about about them digging a deep hole and lowering the empty casket into it. Draco always expected that he’d be laid to rest among his departed family, but he’s not. Draco burned up, and now he’s bits of ash scattered far and wide by the wind, spread all over London. Harry tries not to think of that either, and calls for a house-elf to bring him a cup of tea. He stays in the sitting room until after the mourners return to the Manor. He’s tempted to just leave, but he hasn’t spoken to Draco’s parents yet. He’s exchanged a few notes with Narcissa over the past few days, but he feels he should see her face-to-face before he goes.

When he finishes his tea, he leaves the sitting room and returns to the grand ballroom where the memorial service was held, and finds that the house-elves have cleared out the chairs and set up a long table of refreshments. Harry sees Ron and Hermione on the other end of the room, but he doesn’t go to them. He lingers at the edges of the room, shrugging off any condolences he’s offered until there’s a lull in the crowd around Draco’s parents. Taking a deep breath, Harry walks over. They look up as he approaches, and Harry’s surprised to see just how visibly shattered Lucius is, his expression helplessly blank, his eyes as flat and grey as damp pavement. He’s always been so proud, so strong and sure of himself, and seeing his pain laid bare like a shameful secret is more difficult than Harry thought it would be. Narcissa’s blue eyes well with tears even as her mouth curves into a trembling smile. She reaches out to pluck a bit of lint from the shoulder of Harry’s jumper, and suddenly he’s achingly aware of the bright color.

“Sorry, I... I know I should have worn black, but this one’s his favourite,” Harry says, unable to stand the thought that she might think he means disrespect. “And I just thought...”

“He’d have loved it that you’re so thoughtful,” Narcissa says, brushing her fingertips over Harry’s shoulder. “He loved you very much.”

“And I love him,” Harry says automatically.

“Loved,” Lucius corrects him, and his voice is rough and flat. His eyes jump to Harry and then flit away like sparrows darting from tree to tree. “My son is gone, and you loved him.”

“I love him,” Harry insists gently. “You don’t stop loving someone just because they’re dead.”

Lucius watches him silently for a moment, and Harry can see the cracks form, and grow, and then Lucius Malfoy breaks apart right before his eyes. Harry has no idea what to do, and a distant part of him is oddly fascinated to watch from the outside what he’s only been feeling from within. It’s a strangely intimate thing, for Harry to watch someone else shattered and crumbling beneath the very same grief he feels, but before he can reach out, Lucius turns away, his shoulders trembling, and walks off, each step slow and careful.

Narcissa watches him go, then dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief and sniffs once. “I love him, too,” she says, and Harry understands.

He reaches out and takes her hand to give her fingers a gentle squeeze just like Draco does for him, and he watches as the cracks form in her too, and spread, and then she's in his arms, sobbing into his shoulder, her slight body wracked with the force of her crying. And Harry doesn't know what else to do, so he holds her close and pats her back and sways very gently back and forth, back and forth. And he's so, so glad that Draco isn't here to see his mother devastated like this.

She recovers herself sooner than he thought she would. She pulls back, wiping at her eyes with her handkerchief and gives him a watery, self-deprecating laugh. "I'm sorry," she says. "I should... I should go find my husband." She starts to turn away and hesitates, then turns back and leans up on her toes to brush a soft kiss against his cheek. "He was lucky to have had you. The only thing I ever truly wanted for my son was for him to be happy, and you did. You did that," she says, and her voice catches but she swallows and forces herself to go on. "He was very, very happy with you."

Narcissa turns away again and Harry watches her go, weaving between people as she makes her way to Lucius. He can feel himself cracking and he's afraid he's going to fall apart, right here in the middle of the room, right here in front of everyone. And then Ron and Hermione are there, one either side of him.

"I want to go home," he says.

They leave the Manor with him and take him back to his house and offer to stay with him for as long as he'd like, and this time he doesn't argue with them even though a part of him really wants to be alone. They sit on the sofa with him, Harry in the middle, Ron on his right and Hermione curled up against his left. And for a while it's nice to not have to worry about being strong or holding himself together. He can let himself fall apart, just for a while, and know that his friends are right there, ready and willing to catch him and help to put him back together again when he's through.

And he does, and they do. And when he's finished and he feels that he can safely clamp the lid shut over his grief without it boiling over again, they're still there.

As far as stakeouts went, Harry thought this one might be his favourite. He and Draco were sitting at a small wrought iron table outside a café, sipping coffee from little white china cups and nibbling on almond biscotti while keeping an eye on the apothecary just across the street. The sun shone bright and warm in a cloudless blue sky, and a slight breeze ruffled Harry's hair. If Harry ignored the part where he was supposed to be keeping an eye on some stupid tosser who felt that trafficking in unicorn blood was a perfectly valid career choice, he could almost pretend this was a date.

They really ought to go on more dates, he thought. They mostly just stayed in, either fucking or fighting, sometimes both at once because apparently Draco was brilliant at multi-tasking. Even though they were in a relationship now, not much had changed. They'd just put a different label on what they were doing. And Harry wasn't quite sure how to take that. He

still wasn't sure what exactly Draco wanted from him. He'd said he wanted everything, but that didn't exactly narrow things down and Harry wasn't sure if Draco wanted *everything* in the same way he did. Harry sighed.

"What is it?" Draco asked suddenly, startling Harry out of his thoughts.

"What's what?" Harry asked. He darted a glance to the apothecary, but didn't see anything worth his attention.

"What is it with you?" Draco clarified. He stretched his legs out beneath the table and his foot bumped against Harry's ankle. He didn't move away. "I can practically hear those rusty gears in your brain turning over."

Harry let that go. Draco's foot against his ankle was a welcome weight and it gave him the nerve to say, "My lease is up next month."

Draco went imperceptibly rigid as he took a sip of his coffee and slid a casual glance toward the apothecary as a wizard paused to peer into the window, then relaxed again as the man passed by without going inside. "Oh? Are you thinking of moving?"

Harry nudged the handle of his cup, turning it slightly. "Er. Sort of," he said. "I mean, I'd like to." He drew in a deep breath. "If that's all right with you."

"All right with me?" Draco asked, and his pale brows drew together. "Why on earth would you need my approval for it?"

"Well," Harry said, looking at the apothecary across the street. "It's just that your place is bigger than mine. And since I'm there all the time anyhow, I was just thinking..."

Draco's chair scraped on the pavement as he sat up straighter and the gentle pressure of his foot on Harry's ankle disappeared. He carefully set his cup back onto the table and said, "Don't you think that's moving a bit fast?"

"Maybe," Harry said. "But like I said, I'm there all the time anyhow."

"Not *all* the time."

"Close enough," Harry said, finally looking back at Draco. He felt slightly relieved to find Draco watching him contemplatively, with no trace of the contempt in his expression Harry had been half-afraid he'd see.

For a long moment they just stared at each other, then Draco sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Harry Potter," he said. "You constantly inspire me to new heights of madness. We've only been dating for seven weeks—"

"But we've been shagging for over three months," Harry broke in.

Draco dropped his hand away from his face so he could scowl at Harry unimpeded. "Yes, but we've only been properly dating for seven weeks."

“We were dating before, we just didn’t put a name to it.”

“We were shagging before. There were no dates involved.”

“You don’t have to go on dates to be dating,” Harry said. “And anyhow, we don’t go on very many dates now.”

Draco heaved a deep sigh that Harry knew meant that Draco thought he was being ridiculous but wasn’t going to waste any more time arguing with him about it. “Regardless,” he said. “In April, I hated you—”

“You don’t hate me anymore,” Harry interrupted.

“No, but I—”

“And we really do get along better now.”

“For fuck’s sake, Potter,” Draco burst out. “Will you quit arguing with me? I’m trying to say yes!”

Harry froze. He hadn’t thought it’d be nearly this easy. He had to have misheard. “You... yes?”

“Yes,” Draco said and aimed another scowl across the table. “It’s completely irrational, but I’ve never been rational around you so why the fuck should I start now?”

And Harry could only laugh. He stood up and leaned across the little table, his thighs knocking against it and some of his coffee sloshed over the rim of his cup, and he kissed Draco, warm and lingering. Draco ducked his head away, looking both flustered and pleased by Harry’s reaction, and didn’t even chide Harry for kissing him while they were both working. Harry sat back down, still smiling.

He reached for the last biscotti that sat on the plate between them and Draco batted his hand away. “Don’t even think about it, Potter, that one’s mine.”

Harry snorted. “There’s a whole tray full of them in the café, you know.”

“Exactly,” Draco said, stretching his legs out under the table again, and this time Harry shifted his foot so they touched. “So if you’d like another, you can go buy one. This one is mine.”

Harry leaned back in his chair, debating. He’d already eaten two, but the last one sitting all by itself on the plate was making him crave another. Across the street, a wizard in a dark cloak glanced around, his eyes sliding over the Notice-Me-Not charm cast around their table, and slipped into the apothecary. Harry recognized him as the man they’d been waiting for.

“Ah, here we go,” Draco said, standing. He took a last sip of his coffee and set the cup aside, eyes and attention focused on the apothecary.

Harry's heart tripped. Draco always looked so alive right before he jumped into fieldwork, his eyes bright and eager, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Harry didn't bother telling Draco to be careful. He didn't tell him to watch his back, or assure him that Harry would be right outside if he needed him. Instead, he told Draco, "Hurry back or I'm eating your biscotti."

"Over my dead body, Scarhead," Draco said, finally glancing over at him. "Or rather, over *your* dead body, because I will absolutely murder you if it's gone when I come back. I'm an Auror and that means I know all the best places to hide a body."

Then he turned away and sauntered across the street, hands tucked casually into his pockets. He pushed open the door and disappeared inside, and the door slowly swung shut behind him. Harry took a long drink from his coffee and set his cup aside before he fixed his stare on the apothecary, alert for any sign of trouble. Not that he didn't think Draco could handle himself, or he expected anything to happen. But he'd been jumpy ever since Draco had been released from St Mungo's. It had only been a few weeks since he'd been cut open in that kitchen and Harry didn't think he could handle going through something like that again.

Harry sighed and stole a bite of Draco's biscotti, threats of murder be damned, and tried to relax. This was purely an information-gathering mission. Draco would go in and act as if he had every right to be there, what with his penchant for potions and his Death Eater background. At Robards' request, he'd been slowly tarnishing his reputation for months now, since even before he'd completed his training. He spent a chunk of his off hours skulking along Knockturn Alley or browsing through the shops of well-known purveyors of Dark Artifacts, and by now most people knew him as the Auror who'd be willing to look the other way, for the right price. Harry worried for him when he went out at night, but it was nearly over. If Draco could gather tangible evidence of the apothecarist accepting an order of unicorn blood, it'd all be over.

Harry sighed and watched the shop, and was just debating whether he should risk Draco's wrath by stealing another bite of biscotti when the windows of the apothecary exploded.

There's a sharp lance of pain through the bottom of Harry's foot. He swears and pulls his leg up to inspect the sole, and he finds a bright bead of blood welling around a tiny shard of glass. All these weeks later, he's still finding fragments of the flask he threw at the wall that first morning. Usually with the bottom of his fucking foot. He uses his wand to remove the glass and then heal the small cut. He tests it out, pressing his foot down against the carpet, and there's no pain. He continues out of his bedroom and goes downstairs.

He flops down on the sofa and pulls Draco's jumper onto his lap as he tries to figure out what to do with his evening. It's Friday night, and before Draco that meant going out and drinking with friends and maybe finding someone to go home with. After Draco, that meant date night, picking a restaurant at random in Muggle London and having dinner together. Neither of those options sound particularly appealing to Harry. He's not hungry and he doesn't want

company, but as always he feels a faint flash of bitter amusement at how he's taken to using Draco as a marker on his timeline.

Harry's life has always been divided into before and after. Before and after his parents were killed. Before and after he found out he was a wizard. Before and after the war. Like he's always been two different people, leading two different lives. Now it's before and after Draco, and Harry thinks he'd be amused to know that even gone, he's still the center of Harry's life. He's still the standard by which Harry measures everything else.

Harry couldn't stop himself from watching Draco and measuring each movement, the way his mouth went tight, or when his breathing deepened. He watched as Draco picked up a box of books and winced, wavering where he stood as his knee almost gave out. Three weeks after the apothecary incident, it still hadn't quite healed. The Healers had assured them it would be fine in another couple of weeks, but for now Draco was supposed to be taking it easy. So far, he'd done no such thing.

"Careful, there," Harry said before he could stop himself.

Draco dropped the heavy box and it landed with a thud that shook the floor as he glared at Harry. "I'm not an invalid. I don't need you clucking over me like a mother hen."

"I'm not *clucking*," Harry said, shoving his armload of clothing atop a teetering stack of cardboard boxes. "You're supposed to be resting—"

"So you're my nursemaid, now?" Draco snapped.

"I wouldn't have to be if you'd just do what you're supposed to," Harry told him, his temper flaring. "I wanted to delay the move until after you're healed, if you recall."

"And if you'll recall, I said I'm fine," Draco said and scowled at him. "You needn't worry over me. It's bloody annoying."

Harry scowled right back. "Well if you didn't want me to worry over you, then you shouldn't have agreed to move in together!"

Draco kicked one of the many half-unpacked boxes out of his way, winced again, and stalked up to Harry. "I didn't ask for you to move in here. You just invited yourself in like some sort of vampire."

"That's not what—That's not even how vampires work!" Harry exclaimed, momentarily thrown off the course of their argument.

"Yes, well, when have you ever played by the rules?" Draco folded his arms over his chest and glared at him, silently daring Harry to deny it.

And Harry couldn't deny it, not really, because when *had* he ever played by the rules? Not at Hogwarts, not in the few months he'd been an Auror, and certainly not now. This wasn't how moving in with someone was supposed to go at all. He was supposed to meet someone nice, maybe be friends with him for a bit, then date him – proper dates, not just sex – and then sometime later when he thought he could fall in love, *then* they'd do this whole moving-in-together business.

It hit him then just how absurd, how truly absurd this was. This was Malfoy, whom he'd hated and who'd hated him in return for *years*, and no amount of brilliant sex could make up for that, could it? And Harry honestly didn't know what he'd expected when he'd suggested this, that they'd move in together and, what? Pick out china patterns together? Quibble good-naturedly over what colour to paint the dining room or the appropriate thread count for bed sheets? That wasn't who they were, and this... He looked around at the unsteady stacks of half-unpacked boxes, at the shabby bureau he'd bought second-hand sitting next to Malfoy's mahogany dressing table, at the rolled-up Chudley Cannons poster he knew Malfoy would never let him hang, and finally at himself in his worn tee-shirt and threadbare jeans and ratty trainers. He didn't know what this even was.

"You're right," he said, still looking down. "I'm sorry. You're absolutely right."

Malfoy drew up short at that. He'd been visibly gearing up for a fight, the explosive sort with lots of shouting and the throwing of breakables – weeks of desk duty had made his temper unusually volatile – and Harry had just taken away all his momentum.

"I'm right?" he repeated like he expected he'd misheard.

Harry nodded. "You're right. This isn't... I don't know what I was thinking. This is... This won't work. This absolutely won't work. I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" Malfoy looked truly puzzled now.

Harry nodded again. "Yeah. Sorry. I'll just..."

He really had no idea what he'd been thinking. He loved Draco, but he wasn't sure that was enough. Ron and Hermione had been shocked when he'd told them what was going on. Draco's parents were in an uproar and Pansy Parkinson was still refusing to talk to him. They all saw how insane this was, why hadn't he figured it out sooner? Sighing, Harry picked up a shirt and put it in the nearest box, picked up second shirt and began to fold that one too. Malfoy put himself between Harry and the box.

"You're leaving?" he asked sharply.

Harry couldn't look him in the eye. "I'm sorry."

"For fuck's sake, Potter," he spat. "Will you quit apologizing? You haven't even *done* anything."

"Sorry," he said before he could stop himself, then, "Sorry, I... Fuck." The shirt fell from his fingers, and he stared helplessly at it crumpled up on the floor at his feet. "I really don't know

what I'm doing."

Malfoy exhaled slowly and sat down on the bed, and pulled Harry down to sit beside him. Harry leaned in close and pressed his face to Malfoy's neck. Malfoy draped one arm over his lap, one hand curled over his hip, and his other hand rubbed up and down Harry's spine in slow, soothing strokes.

"I don't really know what I'm doing either." Malfoy admitted with a little sigh. "This probably won't work out."

"That's what I said." Harry sounded defeated even to his own ears. He hadn't realised until that moment how much he was hoping Malfoy would try to convince him to stay.

"No, you said it absolutely won't. I'm saying it probably won't," Draco corrected, then hesitated. "And since you're here and all of your things are here, I think it'd be best to find out for sure. I mean, before you go through the trouble of moving it all out again. That makes sense, right?"

"I suppose," Harry said, relaxing against Draco. He sighed. "We're going to fight all the time, aren't we?"

"I prefer to look at it as we'll be creating lots of opportunities for make-up sex."

Harry chuckled and nudged his elbow against Draco's ribs. "Draco, I'm serious."

"So am I," Draco said, and his hand rubbed up and down Harry's back, up and down. "We probably will fight, but we wouldn't be us if we didn't. And we'll get through it." He pressed a kiss to Harry's forehead, right over the scar. "We'll get through anything."

"This is something you need to get through," Hermione tells him. "I'm sorry, but it is." She's standing in front of the sofa where he's curled up with Draco's jumper on his lap. It's been months since Draco tossed it over the arm of the sofa and it could use a wash, but Harry can't bring himself to do that, not when it still smells faintly of him.

"It's fine," Harry tries to reassure her.

"It's *not* fine," Hermione insists, and she sits next to him and takes his hand. "Harry, I love you. And I know how hard this is for you, and we've tried to give you time. But it's like you died that day, too, and you're still..." Her voice wavers and goes thick, and she swallows hard and blinks her eyes. "It's like you've given up. And I can't just sit by and watch."

"I..." he begins, and breaks off. He closes his mouth and looks down at the jumper in his lap.

"Harry," Hermione says, and her voice is terribly gentle. "This isn't healthy. It's been six months. And I'm not expecting that you should be completely past this, but you haven't even

moved any of his things. It's like you're living in a shrine to him, or a museum. And that can't be good for you."

Harry snatches his hand away from her and clutches Draco's jumper, his fingers twisting in the soft wool. "So, what, I should just box up all his things? Toss them out?"

"No, of course not," Hermione says quickly. "Not if you're not ready. I just think you should talk to someone. You're in here alone, day after day, you don't talk to anyone but me and Ron." She pulls a small rectangle of cardstock from her pocket. "I've looked into it, and Healer Dalton is supposed to be the best. I think you should make an appointment."

Harry tosses the card onto the coffee table without looking at it. "I'll think about it."

Hermione watches him carefully, and he knows that she knows that he won't. But she doesn't push him about it. "That's all I ask," she says. "Ron mentioned he might stop by after he finishes up at the shop. He'll probably bring over dinner. Is there anything you'd like me to ask him to get for you?"

"No, whatever's fine," Harry says, still staring down at the jumper.

After she leaves, Harry doesn't get up from the sofa. It's nice when Ron comes over in the evenings, bringing something deliciously greasy for dinner that Harry's usually tempted into eating even though he doesn't have much of an appetite these days. Sometimes Ron brings over some beer or a bottle of whisky and they have a few drinks and Harry listens about the latest gossip from George's shop, or what new Weasley family drama is happening this week, who's sleeping on the sofa or who's expecting. Which, as often as the former happens it's sort of amazing how often the latter happens as well.

Harry stuffs the jumper underneath his head as he curls up on the sofa cushions. He breathes in.

And when Ron steps out of his Floo later that night, it is nice. Ron doesn't push him to talk about his feelings or urge him to get help he doesn't want or need. He's just there, solid and dependable, and Harry loves him all the more for it. They eat on the sofa from foil containers and talk about Quidditch, and tonight's one of the nights Ron brings over some whisky and they each have a couple of glasses. And for just a little while, Harry's able to forget about Draco.

It had started as a stupid argument about Harry's taste in music, and had ended with Harry sitting on Ron's sofa, drinking whisky at two o'clock in the afternoon.

"I mean, who doesn't like the Beatles?" Harry went on, holding out his empty glass for a refill, and Ron obligingly topped him up. "So I told him he wouldn't know good music if it came up and bit him in his stupid inbred arse."

Ron winced as he set the bottle aside. "How'd he take that?"

"Threw a vase at my head," Harry said with a grimace. He took another gulp of whisky. "That blue one Molly gave us as a housewarming gift." He paused and scowled down into his glass. "Then the asshole hit it with a Reparo just so he could throw it at me again."

Harry had actually been grudgingly impressed with Draco's magical ability, there. He'd ducked and the vase had shattered against the wall behind him, and Draco had Summoned the shards of glass back across the room, struck them with a Reparo in midair, deftly caught the repaired vase and hurled it back across the room at Harry a second time, all without missing a beat in his rant about the deficiencies of Harry's Muggle upbringing. When he finally paused for breath, Harry had jumped right in with his own rant about the deficiencies of having an asshole Death Eater for a father, and by the time he'd gone storming out ten minutes later, they'd both said a lot of hurtful things to each other that they didn't really mean.

"Are you all right?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry sighed. "He missed me that time, too."

"No, I meant..." Ron hesitated. "I mean with Malfoy. You've been fighting with him a lot."

"When haven't I fought with him?" Harry countered and slid his fingertips up under his glasses to rub at his eyes. "Sometimes I think we only moved in together so we can fight more conveniently."

"Well, that's just my point. At first I thought that you two just needed some time to settle in with each other, but Harry, you've been living with him for a year now and the fights keep happening."

"I think I could live with Draco until we're a hundred and fifty and we'd still be fighting," Harry said and paused to drain the last of his whisky. "But I love him, Ron."

"I know you do," Ron said. "And if he ever hurts you I'll beat the shit out of him. I've got five older brothers so I definitely know how."

Harry laughed. "I'll let you know." He hesitated, turning his empty glass in his hands. "Ron, do you think I've made a mistake? With Draco, I mean. Like you said, the fights keep happening. And sometimes I worry that maybe this isn't right, only I just can't see it. I love him, I really do. More than anything in the world. But sometimes I'm afraid that it's not enough."

Ron thought it over for a long moment. "I think," he said finally, "that you and Malfoy are like electric-city."

"Electricity," Harry corrected automatically.

"Whatever," Ron said, waving a hand. "My point is that at a first glance you look like you shouldn't work, but you do, and you keep on working, even if no one can really explain how it all goes through the wires." He paused and frowned at Harry. "Am I making sense?"

“Yeah, you are. Malfoy and I are like electricity,” Harry said with a smile. He shoved a hand through his hair. “There’s always sparks with us, and we probably qualify as some sort of a fire hazard. So, yeah, I think your metaphor works. You’ll have to tell Hermione about it.”

The Floo chimed, and Ron crossed the room to answer it.

“Is Potter there?” Draco’s voice came floating up from the hearth.

Ron hesitated, and Harry stood up. “Yeah, I’m here. I’ll be home in a minute, okay?”

“All right,” Draco said. “Weasley, I’ll see you and Granger on Saturday for dinner with us. I won’t accept any excuses from you this time.” His head vanished from the flames.

“Should I leave the Floo open for you?” Ron asked, brushing a speck of ash from the knee of his trousers as he stood up.

“No, I don’t think there’ll be a round two,” Harry said, setting his tumbler on the coffee table and standing up. “We’ll probably just fuck and apologise, and then call it a night.”

Ron pulled a face. “Feel free to keep the details to yourself.”

Harry laughed and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Thanks for listening to me.”

Rolling his eyes, Ron gave him a light push toward the Floo. “Anytime, mate. Now go and jump on your boyfriend.”

When Harry stepped out of the Floo, he found Draco waiting for him. He’d barely cleared the hearth when Draco caught him up in a hug. “Sex first or apologies first?” he asked.

“Sex,” Harry said, nipping lightly at Draco’s neck so he didn’t have to see Draco, because when he looked at Draco’s face he felt a fresh rush of anger. He was sure this was one of the times he’d need the languorous haze that followed a really brilliant orgasm to be able to talk to him without it turning into another fight. “Definitely sex.”

They ended up on the sofa because the bedroom was just too far away, and after Draco Summoned the lube and slicked his fingers, he surprised Harry by reaching back behind himself. Harry’s breath caught as Draco carefully worked his fingers into his arse, forehead creased in concentration, his lower lip caught between his teeth. Draco rarely let Harry fuck him, usually only after they’d had a particularly vicious fight. He hadn’t thought today’s was that bad, especially compared to some of the ones they’d had in the past. Apparently Draco didn’t agree.

Harry leaned close to him, his hands slowly stroking up and down Draco’s sides, and he kissed him, swiping his tongue over Draco’s bottom lip until he released it from his teeth and kissed Harry back.

“All right,” he said at last, pulling his fingers free and stretching back on the sofa. He stroked Harry’s cock, slicking it from the lube coating his hand. “I’m ready.”

Harry kissed him again and positioned himself over Draco, lined up his cock, and slowly pushed inside. Draco winced and his breath came in soft huffs against Harry's shoulder, and Harry kissed him slowly until his face eased and his breath quieted. When Draco nodded to him to continue, Harry drew out and pushed back in, again, and again. Draco was so tight around him, almost unbearably so, and he knew he wouldn't last long. He didn't even try, because he knew Draco wouldn't come like this. Draco complained that this was too intense, edging toward overstimulation, the pleasure so sharp it felt almost painful. Harry felt his orgasm build quickly and let it break over him, his cock pulsing as he spilled himself deep into Draco's body.

After, they lay together for a minute or two, and Harry enjoyed the feel of being so intimately connected to Draco, and of Draco's warm body beneath his, and of Draco's fingers slowly combing through his hair. Draco winced as Harry pulled out, then Harry scooted down the sofa and took Draco's flagging erection into his mouth and sucked hard, running his tongue along the underside and letting the sensitive tip rub against the roof of his mouth with every bob of his head. Draco came quickly, and Harry swallowed down every drop, then moved up a little so his head was pillowed on Draco's belly, and Draco went back to running his fingers through Harry's hair.

"I shouldn't have said those things about your Muggle family," Draco said at last. "I'm an asshole."

"Well I guess you're just lucky it takes one to know one," Harry said and turned his head to kiss Draco's stomach. "I shouldn't have said those things about your father." As right as they both may have been, he added in his mind.

It was exhausting, rehashing their fight and apologising bit by bit for each terrible thing they'd said. But they knew from experience that it was best to clear the air like this. When they finally finished, they went upstairs without bothering to dress and slid into bed together for a short nap before dinner. The cotton sheets were chilly against Harry's heated skin and he reached for Draco, pressing himself as close as he could to the warmth of his body.

Harry shivers. The knock at the door had pulled him out from under the duvet piled on the sofa. He'd been napping there this afternoon, exhausted from too many nights unable to sleep in his empty bed. At least with the sofa he can put his back to the cushions and fall asleep that way, even if sometimes he wakes up sure that Draco's pressed against him from behind, and he spends a few long and lovely seconds feeling as though everything's all right again before the headache comes crashing back.

"You haven't answered any of my letters," Robards says, and Harry just wants him to leave so he can go back to sleep.

"I've been busy," he lies, even as his guilty gaze wanders over to the small table in the hall where a stack of unopened letters teeters nearly half as tall as the blue vase beside it.

He's pretty sure that Robards knows better. The way Harry's hair sticks up and the way he can't stop himself from blinking sleepily are probably something of a giveaway, along with the fact that he's in his pyjamas at two in the afternoon. "It's been almost half a year and you still haven't scheduled your grief counselling sessions," Robards says.

"Because I don't intend to go," Harry tells him.

"Forgive me, Potter, but I wasn't asking your opinion," Robards says, falling away from concerned friend and more into his position as Head Auror. "The sessions are mandatory."

"It's only mandatory if I'm working for you," Harry says.

"Which you are."

Harry turns away, shoving a hand through his hair. He paces away a few steps, then turns back. "Not anymore. Consider this my notice, effective immediately."

Robards frowns. "Don't be stubborn, Harry. You need to talk to someone about this. You're clearly not all right."

"You sound like Hermione," Harry grumbles. He doesn't understand why people keep pushing him about this. He's fine, he's handling this. They can't all expect him to get better overnight, can they? He's handling this *fine*. He just needs more time.

"She's not wrong," Robards points out, his voice gone gentle.

"I don't care."

Robards watches him for a moment, then takes a deep breath. "He wouldn't have wanted you to do this by yourself."

"Don't even..." Harry begins. His voice is shaking with sudden rage and he can't even finish the sentence.

But Robards, brave man or stupid man that he is, either doesn't catch it or ignores it altogether because he presses on gently, "He's gone, Harry, and he wouldn't want you to—"

The windows explode. Harry hasn't lost control of his magic like this in years, and he's sure he must look terrifying in that moment because Robards takes a quick step back, wand drawn. Harry's magic crackles through the air, making his skin buzz and the hair on his arms rise up in goosebumps.

"Get out," he says.

"Harry," Robards begins.

"GET OUT!" he screams, and the crystal decanter on the side table explodes, spraying shards of glass and droplets of hundred-year-old scotch over the room, and Robards Disapparates on the spot.

Caught up in his anger, Harry hurls a vase against the wall with a flick of his wrist. It shatters, shards flying up and out and away, raining back down over the floor. The anger drains away from Harry in an instant and his magic quiets as he stares at the shattered vase. It's the same blue one that Draco always throws when he and Harry get swept up into yet another volatile argument. It's been broken and Repaired so many times at this point that it's sort of lumpy, vaguely misshapen. Draco has always been capable of a perfectly flawless Reparo, but sometimes when he gets really worked up he'll fling one out mid-rant, carelessly fusing the vase back together just so he can throw it again.

For a long moment he just stands there, staring, then he takes out his wand and casts a Reparo on each of the windows and the decanter. A few cleaning charms take care of the scotch. Then he crosses the room, picking his way carefully between chunks of blue glass. The vase has left a small blue mark on the wall where Harry had thrown it, and he gets rid of it with a quick Scourgify. Then he casts a Reparo at the vase and picks it up. He smooths his hands over the bumpy, uneven surface and carefully, very carefully, sets it back on its table by the door.

The letters from Robards sit in a haphazard stack beside it, and Harry Vanishes the lot of them without a second thought.

"Letter for you," Draco said brightly and took a sip from his mug, that horrible black one with Harry's face on it. Mug-Harry winked at him, and Harry decided that he'd accidentally-on-purpose break the damn thing when he did the washing up later. Draco would fix it with a quick Reparo, of course, but watching it shatter against the tile floor of the kitchen always made Harry feel a little better, and it made the most deliciously wonderful smashing sound.

Harry paused for a moment to picture that sound, then shuffled into the dining room, still blinking sleep from his eyes. He'd rolled over after their usual round of morning sex and fallen asleep again. When he'd opened his eyes an hour later, he'd been alone. After two years of waking up beside Draco, waking up without him was always something of an unwelcome surprise, even if he was quickly reassured by the rustle of newspaper pages turning and the soft thunk of a porcelain mug connecting with a tabletop. Draco swished his wand to end the warming charm he'd put over Harry's mug of tea, his favourite one with the blue stripes on it.

Harry dropped into the chair beside Draco and took a grateful sip, his thumb catching on the new chip in the handle. Draco had broken it last week in retaliation for him smashing Mug-Harry across the kitchen floor again. They'd both tried to Accio the missing shard afterward to no avail, and they were both utterly baffled as to what had happened to it. Harry could only hope that someday the same thing would happen to Mug-Harry's face.

He took another sip of tea before he set the mug aside. "Mm. What'd it say?"

Draco didn't even bother to pretend he hadn't read it. "McGonagall wants you to teach at Hogwarts. Three guesses what subject."

“Oh,” Harry said, smothering a yawn with his fingertips. That again. She’d written him about it before, but this was the first time Draco had intercepted her letter. “Give it here. I’ll write her after breakfast.”

“Made up your mind already, have you?” Draco put his mug down and leaned back in his chair. Mug-Harry beamed up at him like the loon he was, like having tea drunk from his head was life’s greatest pleasure. Harry shuddered to think how many of these stupid things were loose in the world.

“Yeah, not much to make up my mind about.” Harry reached for a triangle of toast and spread it with strawberry jam. “Of course I’m not going to quit the Aurors.”

Draco stretched his legs out and his foot bumped into Harry’s under the table. His feet were bare and Harry knew he’d find another pair of socks squirrelled away somewhere around the house. Living with Draco and all his bloody socks was like participating in a scavenger hunt that just wouldn’t end. Recently, Harry had taken to casting a strong Accio on laundry days instead of searching for each pair individually.

“I think you should,” Draco said.

The triangle of toast slipped from his fingers and landed jam-side-down on the floor, and Harry blinked at Draco, startled. “What?”

“I think you should quit the Aurors. Take McGonagall up on her offer,” Draco said. He swished his wand and Vanished the toast and the sticky splotch of jam from the floor, then reached for another triangle. “You’d be brilliant at teaching. It’s a good opportunity for you.”

Harry knew he would be, and for a moment he was sorely tempted to consider the offer. Being an Auror was rough work, dangerous and exhausting and thankless by turns. Sometimes Harry thought about quitting, entertained brief fantasies about what it’d be like to have a job where he didn’t have to risk his life day after day, though before McGonagall had sent him that first letter he’d never thought about doing anything else. A part of him thought he’d only become an Auror because he didn’t know *how* to do anything else. But Draco was an Auror because he ate, slept, and breathed it. And when Harry thought about leaving someone else to guard Draco’s back, he just couldn’t do it. It didn’t matter what else he wanted. His place was at Draco’s side, for as long as Draco needed him there.

He shrugged. “There’ll be plenty of time for teaching when I’m too old for fieldwork,” he said.

“Potter,” Draco sighed. He finished spreading jam on the piece of toast and handed it to Harry, then licked a smudge of jam from between his thumb and index finger. “You know, when you love someone you should always cut their toast in triangles.”

Harry frowned at him. “Triangles? But what’s that got to do with...” He trailed off and looked down at the toast in his hand. “You... But you’ve always cut my toast in triangles.” He couldn’t remember a time when Draco hadn’t.

“And I’ve always loved you,” Draco said simply. “You’re it for me, Potter.”

Harry's mind spun. Something hot and fluttery prickled through his stomach. This seemed like far too important a conversation to be having across the breakfast table. "And you never thought to mention this to me before now?"

Draco shrugged. "I didn't think we were there yet. I didn't know if you were... ready for that."

"And now we are," Harry said helplessly. He'd been in love for years now, since he'd rushed back into that house and found Draco sprawled on the kitchen floor, bleeding out across the debris-strewn tiles. His heart had stopped in that moment, and when it had restarted a second later it had belonged entirely to Draco. He'd had no idea Draco felt the same. "You love me."

"I do. And that's why I want you to take that teaching position."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "No, I won't. The day you quit, I'll hand in my notice right along with yours. But until then, you're stuck with me."

Draco watched him for a few long moments, then sighed. "I don't suppose I can change your mind, can I? I really do think you'd be good at teaching. And I think you'd enjoy it more than you enjoy Aurorwork."

"I would," Harry admitted, then sucked in a deep breath. "But loving someone means you do what's best for them, even if it might not be the best for you."

Slowly, Draco came to his feet, took the two steps forward to Harry's chair and lowered himself down, straddling Harry's lap, and Harry slid his hands around Draco's waist to press against the small of his back. Draco leaned in and kissed him softly. "I love you too," he murmured against Harry's mouth.

Whoever said "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," was full of shit. Completely, absolutely, totally full of it. Right now Harry wishes he'd never even met Draco, much less fallen in love with him. He'd been content before. He'd had his friends and his Aurorwork, and there wasn't anything wrong with casual sex for his physical needs. He'd been fine, and continuing on like that would have been worlds better in the long run. Five years of happiness wasn't worth this much pain.

Autumn had finally faded into winter, and this morning Harry goes digging through his closet in search of where Draco had stored all their winter hats and scarves and gloves. And tucked away on the top shelf beneath a stack of old Hogwarts scarves, he finds a small box that's sealed tight with a few simple locking charms. Harry doesn't recognize it, and things inside it slide and roll and rattle enticingly. Even though Draco isn't here to be upset with him for snooping, Harry can't quite suppress a flicker of guilt as he takes it over to the bed and counters the charms locking it shut and lifts the lid.

And inside he finds dozens of mementos. There's a picture of Draco and Pansy from Hogwarts, arm in arm and laughing brightly, their hands loosely clasped. There's a newspaper clipping of Harry from 1999, the edges soft and ragged from excessive handling, the newsprint completely worn off the fold creases, and for a moment Harry can't breathe, and can't believe that Draco never got around to telling him that he'd wanted Harry all the way back then. There's a rough pink stone and a dried mint leaf and a bottle cap and a letter from his mum and a crumpled Chocolate Frog wrapper and a pencil and a paperclip and a small toy duck and a ticket stub from the first movie Harry had ever dragged him to and a little glass fish and a plastic spoon and a carefully preserved rose blossom and a cobalt blue bud vase and a braided leather bracelet worn butter-soft with use and a tidy little package wrapped in brown paper and hastily-tied string, and Harry opens it to find small box containing a beautiful pocket watch of highly polished silver with a deep indigo background that glittered with tiny stars. And it all leaves Harry teary and frustrated, because here's a whole pile of things that are important enough to Draco that he saved them and locked them away in a box in his closet, and Harry has no idea what most of them even mean.

He continues sorting through the box, taking more items out one by one and arranging them in neat rows across the bed sheets, until the box is empty and in the very bottom he finds a small slip of paper he recognizes as the fortune from the Christmas cracker Draco got during their first Christmas together: *Your life does not get better by chance, it gets better by change.*

Harry doesn't know how long he sits there with the fortune in his hands, but in the end he decides to take it as a sign. He's been sitting here, waiting to heal but not actually doing anything to make it happen. He needs to change.

He stands up and sweeps all of the mementos back into the box and leaves out it on the bureau, because he knows he'll probably end up sorting through it again later, puzzling over them and trying to work out the story behind each item. He dresses quickly, wraps an old Gryffindor scarf around his neck, and Apparates.

The street is nearly the same as the last time Harry was here, except the trees are now bare and all the broken glass is gone from the pavement. Slowly, Harry walks up to the warehouse and climbs the shallow steps leading to the door. The Auror wards are still holding, but Robards apparently hasn't banned his magical signature yet because they fall easily for him. He stands frozen for a long moment, unable to make himself cross the threshold, afraid of what he'll find.

When he finally steps inside, it's not as bad as he'd thought it'd be. He imagined soot-streaked walls, charred wreckage, and the acrid scent of smoke lingering like a nightmare. But it's neat and clean, and it only smells dry and disused. Harry lingers by the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light spilling in through the grimy skylights. He waits for the sadness to hit him, the anguish or pain or grief. But other than a vague sense of loss and even vaguer sense of regret, there's nothing.

Harry crosses the front room and makes his way into the warehouse. This has been cleaned as well, and the cinderblock walls and concrete floor show no sign of fire. The metal shelves and all the crates are gone, either burned up or removed. Here and there Harry can see the

glimmer of spells holding the building together. The explosion must have damaged it significantly, and Harry's not sure why they haven't torn the whole place down yet.

The scuff of his shoes on the floor echoes oddly in the large space as he wanders deeper in, looking around. This was the last place he saw Draco, and this is where Draco died. And Harry's okay. Maybe Hermione was right about trying to make him move on. Maybe this sort of closure is exactly what he needs. He turns, tipping his head back to look up at the ceiling, walking slowly backward.

A shiver crawls up his spine, and suddenly Harry gets the eeriest sensation that he's not alone.

"I was wondering when you'd show up."

Harry spins around and his heart leaps into his mouth because, impossibly, there is Draco. He looks over his shoulder and his mouth curls into a smirk, and Harry can't move, can't breathe, can't think, because *there is Draco* and it doesn't matter that he's shining in soft shades of grey and white, it's still him and he's *here*.

"Did you find them?"

"Sectumsempra!"

Harry threw himself aside, but not quite fast enough. The curse caught him across his left shoulder and upper arm, the bright rush of pain such a shock that he could only grunt. He staggered, slumped against the wall, and the wizard who'd cast the curse continued sprinting down the hallway.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Draco cried, but his spell went wide. The other two Aurors in pursuit raced by him as he turned back to Harry. "Fuck, he got you."

Harry pressed his right hand to the wound, blood flowing over his fingers. "Not as bad as it looks," he ground out. The fingers on his left hand had gone numb.

He held still while Draco cast a few healing charms on it, not enough to take away the pain entirely but the bleeding slowed to something a little more manageable. He stood shakily, and Draco steadied him.

"I've got to go," he said, flicking a glance down the empty hall. "They can't handle him."

Harry knew he was right. The Aurors had warded the place so there was no escape. Once the wizard figured it out, he'd turn nasty. Draco and Harry had the most Dark Arts experience and at least one of them needed to be there. He nodded, still gritting his teeth.

"Go," he said, and Draco hesitated, his eyes flickering back to Harry, and it struck Harry what he was waiting for. "I won't do this again, Malfoy. This is the last time I'm leaving

without you.”

Draco quirked a grin at him. “I bet you say that to all the boys, Scarhead. We’ll have this discussion later.”

And then he was racing down the hall, his robes billowing out behind him, and then he turned the corner and was gone. Harry turned away and hurried back the way he’d come. His wound throbbed with every step, and it was a welcome distraction from the old familiar worry for Draco that gnawed at his gut. He knew Draco could more than handle himself, but being an active Auror was a dangerous job and anything could happen.

This was exactly why he’d never take McGonagall’s offer. As much as Draco wanted him to take it and as good as Harry thought he’d be at teaching, he couldn’t stand to live with this worry day after day after day. It was bad enough on the few occasions they had to split up like this. Harry needed to be Draco’s partner because he didn’t trust anyone else to keep Draco safe. He pictured himself at home, trying to focus on marking essays while he waited for Draco to come back to him safely, dreading the chime of the Floo where an Auror wearing a carefully compassionate expression called him to St Mungo’s. No, he needed to be here at Draco’s side. He didn’t think their relationship would survive any other way.

He passed another four Aurors, pressing himself up against the wall as they rushed past, then hurried out of the warehouse and into the warm summer evening. The wards crackled menacingly as he passed through them and headed straight for the small triage station set up over to the side.

“Potter,” Robards said, jogging up and falling into step beside him. “Report.”

“Hopkins is holed up on the second floor. Aurors Cross and Hardy are dismantling the wards he’s cast, with Aurors Frost and Lambert assisting. I was injured in pursuit of Rowe. Aurors Malfoy, Ross, and Burkins are still after him. And...” Harry paused, dredging up the faces of the four Aurors who’d run by him. “Aurors Nelson, Barbs, Lynch, and... bloody hell, I can never remember her name. Lynch’s partner, blonde girl.”

“Auror Gibbs,” Robards filled in, eyeing Harry’s bleeding arm. “When we get Rowe, he’s going away for a very long time. Cursing an Auror carries a heavy sentence.”

Especially when said Auror was Harry Potter, but with his shoulder screaming in pain and his hand still frighteningly numb, Harry couldn’t quite bring himself to complain about preferential treatment. “Did we apprehend Morton?”

“As he was fleeing. He’s already been taken to the Ministry. Oi! You there!” Robards broke off, his attention caught by a young Auror strengthening the wards. “Excuse me, Potter.” He went rushing off, leaving Harry to the mercy of the Mediwitch.

She pushed him down onto a bench and cut his uniform away from his injury with a precise Diffindo. “What got you?”

“Sectumsempra,” Harry said. “Nearly missed me.”

“You’re lucky, then. Could’ve been a lot worse.”

“I know,” Harry said quietly.

She fell silent as she worked at him, and Harry watched the doorway of the warehouse and waited. Every so often he could catch the flash and flare of spells through a window and he tried to breathe evenly. Draco would be fine. He was a competent, capable wizard, and he had more than enough backup to take down one lawbreaking asshole. He’d be fine.

“Here,” the Mediwitch said, offering him a chipped pink mug.

“What?” Harry accepted it.

“Your injury is too severe for me to heal here, you’ll need to go to St Mungo’s to have it done right.”

Harry dropped the portkey and the mug shattered on the pavement. “No, I’m not leaving until this is over.”

“Auror Potter,” she scolded. “You could have long-lasting damage if this isn’t taken care of —”

“I know, I know. I’ll go straight after,” he said, standing and pulling the gaping hole in his robes shut as best he could. “Promise. I just can’t leave yet.”

He left her protesting behind him and hurried over to where Robards stood, instructing another pair of Aurors. They nodded and rushed off.

“We’ve got Hopkins,” Robards said.

“And Rowe?” Harry asked.

“We’re still working on that.”

Harry waited anxiously, watching as several Aurors hurried around, working to strengthen the wards. Auror Nelson came out a few minutes later, cradling his bleeding arm against his chest and Robards intercepted him with Harry close behind. Rowe had backed himself into a corner and put up a layer of Shield Charms and wards, and threw curses at the other Aurors as they worked to dismantle his defences. Nelson went off to the Mediwitch, while Robards and Harry returned to keeping watch.

A sudden explosion tore through the gentle evening air, and Harry threw himself forward before he could even think. Robards was too quick for him, and snagged him by the collar and jerked him back before he’d made it even three steps. Harry wrenched himself free, and Robards pulled his wand.

“Move again, Auror Potter, and I’ll Stun you where you stand.”

“Sir,” Harry said, desperate. “I need to go back in there.” He swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. “Draco’s in there.”

“You’re injured, Potter. I can’t let you go back in,” Robards said, his wand never wavering. “You will stay out here. That’s an order.” For a moment they stared at each other, then Robards added, “Don’t make me regret allowing you two to remain partners.”

Harry sucked in a deep breath and ground his teeth together. His right hand curled into a fist around the shredded edges of cloth; his left hand was still numb. “Yes, sir.”

The next few minutes dragging by seemed like the longest of Harry’s life. He shifted slightly, gripped the torn edges of his uniform tighter, and felt his wound throb with each beat of his heart.

A flurry of movement drew his eye to the door and he sucked in a quick breath as two Aurors hauled a third Auror between them, blonde head lolling, uniform spattered with blood. But it was Auror Gibbs, not Draco. Then came Aurors Ross and Burkins, dragging a Body-Bound Rowe between them, and Harry didn’t notice the rest because next came Draco.

Harry rushed forward and this time Robards didn’t try to stop him. Draco was hunched forward, one arm clasped protectively over his middle, he was bleeding from a small cut over his eye, and there was a smudge of dirt on one cheek. His face lit up when he saw Harry and he lengthened his stride. They met just inside the wards and Draco caught him up in a hug, heedless of their audience. Harry hugged him back with his good arm, his nose pressed to Draco’s neck and he dragged in a deep breath, smelling the lavender detergent he used to wash their clothes and the spicy scent of his cologne and the sharp smell of his sweat layered above the subtler, warmer scent that was all Draco. He inhaled again, and this time he caught a faint whiff of tobacco smoke, even though Draco claimed he was trying to quit again. Harry tightened his arm around Draco.

“Ouch, Potter. Ribs,” Draco said, and Harry reluctantly let him go. “I’m surprised you’re still here. Didn’t they need to take care of you at St Mungo’s?”

Harry smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, they wanted to. But I was waiting for you.”

Draco didn’t smile back. Instead he watched Harry solemnly, then reached out and cupped Harry’s cheek with one hand. “I don’t think I would have been able to leave either, if it had been you in there,” he admitted softly, then grinned at Harry. “But I’m here now, so let’s go to St Mungo’s. Maybe we can talk them into letting us share a room.”

Harry didn’t think that was bloody likely, not after what that Mediwizard had walked in on them doing the last time they’d ended up sharing a room at St Mungo’s. But if anyone could talk them into it, Draco would manage. He slid his arm through Draco’s, and let himself be Apparated away.

It feels like Apparating, the way the world spins and rushes around him, and for a moment Harry’s afraid he might fall. Somehow, his balance doesn’t desert him, and Draco is *still here*.

“Oh my god,” Harry says. “Draco. Draco.” He’s kicking himself because he hadn’t even entertained the possibility that Draco might have stayed behind, all this time he could have been, he could have, and Draco was waiting for him, and Harry didn’t. He didn’t know.

“Good,” says Draco. “Go on and tell Robards to call off the search party, then.” He pauses and loops his wand through the air as Harry’s stomach sinks. “I’ll be through in a minute...”

Because he’s heard this before. This is the exact conversation he had with Draco right before it happened. “Draco, it’s me. It’s Harry.” But Draco just keeps talking, repeating his lines perfectly. “Draco! Can you hear me?”

But it’s obvious that Draco can’t hear him. He’s trapped in his role, saying all the words Harry’s heard before, and then Harry sees the end. Draco casting and casting, and then nodding to himself and lowering his wand. Draco turning away and beginning to leave, then spinning back around as his expression shifts from satisfaction to terror and there’s a split-second scream that somehow contains more pain than Harry’s felt in the last half a year, and then he disappears.

The echo of Harry’s wild, panting breath is loud in the silence of the warehouse, and while he’s still reeling from what the fuck just happened, the air shifts, and that eerie feeling creeps up his spine again, and then Draco is there too, glancing back over his shoulder with that smirk on his face.

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” he says.

And Harry does the only thing he can. He takes one step back, then another, and another, and he Apparates straight to Hermione, the crack of his departure deafening.

Harry appeared on the doorstep with a soft bang, and was surprised to hear music coming from his home. Muggle music. Turned up so loud that it shook the windows. He let himself in, wand firmly in hand, because the explanation that someone had broken into his house and put the Rolling Stones on full-blast while they robbed the place seemed far more likely than the idea of Draco voluntarily listening to “that awful Muggle racket,” as he referred to it. Harry hadn’t realised Draco even knew how to work the stereo.

He crept through the living room and stopped dead because against all logic, there was Draco. Dancing. Bloody *dancing*, arms over his head, hips swaying, spine arched, shirt riding up to give Harry a tantalizing little glimpse of his lower back. Fucking hell, Harry was going to have to figure out just what the hell was going on here so he could make damn sure it happened again. He hadn’t quite ruled out Imperius or some sort of head injury. Multiple personalities. Demonic possession. Polyjuice.

For long moments, Harry was lost in watching him dance, so loose and uninhibited, each movement graceful and flowing. And then Draco spoiled it all the same way he usually spoiled things: by opening his mouth.

“Tiiiiime waits for no one!” Draco sang in the most appallingly off-key voice Harry had ever heard, and he couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. Draco whipped around to face him, his arms falling back to his sides. “Potter!”

Harry waved at him. “Hello.”

Draco twitched his wand at the stereo and the volume dropped to something less deafening. “You’re, ah. You’re home early.”

“And you can’t know how grateful I am for that. I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this for the world,” he said with a grin, walking up to Draco. “I had no idea you were such a rotten singer.”

“You can hardly expect me to be perfect at everything,” Draco said, and he sounded so absurdly sulky over it that Harry leaned in and stole a kiss from his pouting mouth.

“Hm,” Harry said. “I suppose that’s fair enough. Besides, what talent you lack in singing you certainly make up for in dancing.”

“Liked that, did you?” Draco said, his sulk fading. He backed away a couple of steps and shifted his hips, the motion a faint echo of his movements from just a minute earlier.

Harry flicked his wand at the stereo and the record started over with the first track. “Come here, you ridiculous arse.”

Draco came to him, and Harry slid his arms around Draco’s waist, leaving Draco to loop his arms around Harry’s neck. He let Draco take the lead, following along as best he could.

“You’re a terrible dancer, Potter,” Draco said.

“I know,” Harry told him, sliding his hands down to give Draco’s arse a squeeze. “This is mostly just an excuse to feel you up while you’re dancing. You’re so bloody hot when you dance.”

“And you’re wicked,” Draco said, but his mouth curled up in a small, pleased smile.

“Oh, Malfoy,” Harry said, hauling him close and rubbing against him. “I haven’t even begun to show you wicked.” He caught Draco’s mouth in a slow, deep kiss. With a flick of his wand, he turned the music higher.

The blast of sound catches Harry off-guard. Hermione doesn’t usually listen to music and he didn’t think that Ron would be home this time of day. But when he appears in their living room, the latest Weird Sisters album is playing full-blast.

“Hermione!” he yells. “HERMIONE!”

She comes tearing up the hallway a moment later, dressed in a loose tee-shirt and jeans, with her wet hair wrapped in a towel. She has her toothbrush in hand. “Harry?” She takes one look at his face and her eyes widen. “What’s wrong?”

“Hermione,” he says again. He feels jittery and sick. “Draco. I saw him. He’s here, he’s still here.”

“What?” she asks, but his throat closes up and he can’t say it again so he just shakes his head and twists his hands together. “Harry, you’re frightening me.”

In response, he grabs her and Apparates her back to the warehouse. They appear near the doorway to the front room, and Harry takes her by the arm and pulls her forward.

“Harry,” she says gently. “There’s no one here.”

“Watch,” he says. Earlier, Draco didn’t appear until he was halfway across the room. He slows as he approaches, easing forward a step at a time, until...

“What?” Hermione has time to say before Draco appears.

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” he says.

“Oh my god,” Hermione says, her eyes widening. “Draco?”

“He’s saying everything from my last conversation with him,” Harry tells her. “He won’t respond to anything else, he’s just repeating everything he said before.” He can’t take his eyes off Draco. God, it’s been so long, and he’s exactly as Harry remembers. Every expression, every movement, every inflection of his voice. When he says ‘Potter’ Harry nearly sobs aloud, because it’s *just as he remembers*, so crisply enunciated, Draco always spits out Harry’s name like a seed. Harry always loves how Draco says his name. It’s one of the reasons he’s never bothered trying to get Draco to call him Harry.

“He’s a shade,” Hermione says as the conversation ends and Draco turns his attention back to casting.

Harry frowns. “But, he’s a ghost.”

She shakes her head, and the towel starts to slide off her hair. She yanks it off and drapes it over her shoulders like a cape. “No, he’s a shade,” she repeats, her voice gaining strength now that she’s back on the familiar ground of educating someone else. “A ghost is what happens when someone doesn’t want to die so desperately that they refuse to move beyond the veil. A shade is what happens when someone doesn’t want to die, but their death happens so unexpectedly that they don’t have time to fully decide before they get pushed beyond the veil. Sometimes when that happens it leaves behind... well, it’s rather like an imprint. He’s not really here, Harry. This isn’t really *him*, it’s just an echo.”

“An echo,” he repeats, watching Draco cast. “So, he’s gone.”

Hermione comes up beside him and slides her arm around his waist. “He’s gone. And over time, this echo will fade as well. Most shades only last a decade or two, or until their haunt is

destroyed.” She glances around the warehouse and Harry knows she’s looking at the glimmer of spells holding the building together. She’s probably wondering why it hasn’t been torn down already. “I’m sorry, Harry. This must be so hard for you.”

“I don’t understand why they didn’t tell me,” he says, his eyes pinned to Draco again. “Obviously people were in here to clean it up, I don’t understand why they wouldn’t tell me he was here.”

“They might not have known,” Hermione says carefully. “Sometimes shades have very specific triggers. And since he’s caught having a conversation with you...”

“It’s me, you think?” Harry asks.

Draco turns away and Harry braces himself. Then there’s the too-late realization and the expression of terror, and that awful scream. Hermione flinches, and Draco disappears. Harry takes several big steps back and waits, and Draco doesn’t return even though Hermione walks over to where he was standing. Taking a deep breath, Harry creeps forward a little at a time. Draco appears, starts to turn to look over his shoulder, and Harry takes a quick step back. Draco disappears again.

It takes a bit of convincing, but Hermione persuades him to come home with her, and she and Ron cancel the date they had planned in favour of sitting up with him. Harry talks about Draco, and cries for a while, and talks some more, and they sit beside him and hug him and say all the right things. He stays in their guest room, and as Harry drifts off to sleep, the only thing he’s thinking of is who exactly he’d have to go and see in order to buy that warehouse.

“What’d you buy?” Harry called out when he heard the door open and shut. Mug-Harry winked at him as Harry scrubbed the sponge over his face, and Harry scowled and dropped him into the sink of sudsy water, and left him there as he dried his hands on a towel. If only mugs could drown.

“What do you *think* I bought, Scarhead?” Draco shouted back.

“Really, what did you buy?” Harry asked, emerging from the kitchen. He had no idea why Draco was being so stroppy about it, especially since he hadn’t exactly tried to keep it a secret, what with him loudly announcing ‘I’m going shopping now!’ just before he’d left the house that afternoon.

Draco threw him a sour look over his shoulder as he started up the stairs. “I honestly have no idea why I’m shocked that you don’t remember.”

Harry paused at the bottom, one hand over the newel post. There weren’t any holidays coming up, Draco birthday wasn’t for another few weeks, and their anniversary wasn’t until after that. “Can you give me a hint?” Harry asked, heading up the stairs. He found Draco in

their bedroom, rummaging through his sock drawer, and he stopped short. “What on earth are you doing?”

Draco sighed and sent Harry an exasperated look. “Getting socks? Really, what does it look like?”

“But you just came home,” Harry said, looking down. Sure enough, Draco’s feet were bare. “What about the ones you just took off?”

“I’m not sure where they are,” Draco said and continued to dig through his sock drawer until he unearthed a balled-up pair that looked entirely identical to the rest of the pairs he’d shoved aside.

Harry considered pointing out that Draco had only just come home, so the socks were likely somewhere along the path between the front door and their bedroom. He considered asking why Draco would take off his socks if he was just going to want to put them back on again two minutes later. He considered asking whether Draco remembered that he was a wizard and thus capable of finding his lost socks with one quick Accio. But in the end, Harry said none of it, partly because he didn’t want to rehash this pointless argument again with Draco right now and partly because he wasn’t entirely convinced that this whole sock thing wasn’t some long-range ploy meant to drive him slowly mad. If Harry let himself be bothered by it, he’d only be playing right into Draco’s hands.

“So?” he said instead. “Can I please have a hint what it is I forgot this time?”

Draco balanced on one foot as he pulled on a sock. “On the bed,” he sighed. “Honestly, sometimes I can’t believe you’re really an Auror.”

Harry looked over to the bed and his stomach sank. He recognized the bag, and Draco only bought things from Cartier once a year. “Oh fuck, your mum’s birthday.”

“Here,” Draco said. He finished with his socks, which Harry would bet anything would be off his feet again in five minutes, and pulled a jewelry box out of the bag. He tossed it to Harry.

Harry opened it to find a pair of diamond earrings. “Any chance these could be from both of us?” he asked. This happened every bloody year. Really, Harry had no idea why Draco didn’t just remind him about it and save them both a lot of bother. “I mean, there’s two of them, yeah? One for you, one for me?”

Draco snorted and reached into the bag again. He pulled out a second jewelry box and tossed the empty bag aside. “You’re lucky I love you,” Draco said. “Those are from you, this is from me.” He opened the box to show Harry a matching diamond necklace. He shut the box again with a snap and dropped it onto the bed. “Now hurry up. We need to be there soon, and you need a shower.”

“Shower with me?” Harry asked hopefully. He hated these formal meals. Four years of them and he still didn’t even know half of the ridiculous rules of etiquette he was expected to follow. A quick fuck in the shower would make the whole thing easier to deal with.

“Absolutely not,” Draco said, though he did give Harry an appreciative once-over. “I know you and your utter inability to keep your hands to yourself. We’ll be late.” He paused and grinned at Harry. “However, perhaps later tonight I’ll allow you to properly thank me for saving your arse, as much fun as last year was.”

Harry had no desire to repeat last year’s mistakes. “Anything you want,” he promised. And even though he was disappointed by the lack of shower sex in his immediate future, he thought that perhaps having something to look forward to might work just as well.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Draco said as he disappeared into their closet.

Harry went into the bathroom and took a quick shower, and when he came out he found that Draco had changed into that set of dark blue robes that made his skin look especially nice. Predictably, his feet were bare and his socks were nowhere to be seen. Harry wasn’t optimistic enough to believe that they’d ended up in the laundry basket. Dropping his towel, Harry went for the set of burgundy robes laid out on the bed for him and sighed. These were the ones with all the little fiddly buttons and ties on them. He liked how they looked once they were on him, but actually getting them there was a different story. He’d tried to fasten them by himself once, and would describe the experience as being sort of like trying to do origami while both blindfolded and blind drunk.

“Just get them on you and I’ll take care of the rest,” Draco said as he stalked across the room to snatch Harry’s towel up from the floor and went into the bathroom to hang it up. It drove him mad when Harry left his wet towel on the floor; Harry considered it payback for all the socks.

It took a minute, but Harry managed to struggle into them, and then Draco came back into the room to help him, and Harry looked down to watch those long, clever fingers of his working the buttons into their holes, tucking the voluminous fabric of the robes into neat folds and fastening all the little ties and clasps. Impulsively, Harry leaned forward and caught Draco’s mouth in a kiss. Draco’s hands went still as he exhaled slowly through his nose, his lips parting readily, letting Harry coax him into a sweet, unhurried kiss.

“What was that for?” he asked as they parted.

Harry smiled and brushed a lock of hair from Draco’s temple. “For taking care of me.”

Even gone, Draco’s still taking care of him. He doesn’t even have to do anything; just being here is enough. Harry tries to put off visiting him as long as he can, but he never seems to make it longer than a day or two. But it’s fine, he thinks. It’s fine. He steps in through the door of his warehouse and shuts it behind him, and already he feels calmer. Warmer. More relaxed than he feels in their home. Living there is beginning to wear on him, surrounded by the memories. Sometimes he’s able to forget, for a while, but then he’ll turn and he’ll catch sight of Draco’s dressing gown, Draco’s toothbrush, yet another pair of Draco’s socks. And

then it's too much, and the house feels too small, like all the memories are crowding in and pressing on his skin. It makes him itch. It makes him anxious.

So he shrugs into his coat and winds his scarf around his neck and Apparates to his warehouse. Spending time with Draco makes him feel better, and putting it off is a sweet torment. Even now, he resists as long as he's able. He crosses the room and stops just behind the line he's cut into the floor, marking where he has to be to make Draco appear, and as long as he's always careful to step back across it before Draco screams, being with him here is wonderfully comforting. Harry sits down on the concrete floor, casts a warming charm on his clothing, and settles in. Knowing that Draco is here, just inches away, somehow makes everything better, makes everything brighter. It still *hurts*, of course. But it's a bittersweet sort of pain, half joy and half terrible sadness. It's almost bearable.

Harry knows that what he's doing isn't good for him. He still hasn't told Ron and Hermione about the warehouse, because he doesn't think they'll understand and he knows they certainly won't approve. He sits for as long as he can, until the ache in him builds up to something fervent, almost desperate. And then he stands up.

Harry takes a deep breath

He takes the step.

And then Draco is there, too.

Bloody hell, Draco was *always* there. Most of the time Harry loved working and living with him, but sometimes spending every minute of every day with Draco made him a little crazy. It was their weekend off, but Harry had been snappish and surly. They'd already fought and made up twice and it was barely noon on Saturday. It didn't bode well for the rest of the weekend.

"It's because it's nearly May, isn't it?" Draco asked.

That was the other thing about spending nearly every minute of the last five years with Draco; he knew Harry far too well.

He wanted to disagree, to argue for the sake of arguing. But he wasn't sure if he could handle another go just yet, so he sighed, "Nothing good ever happens in May."

Draco rolled his eyes. "You always say that, Potter, but shitty things happen year-round. Yes, the worst of the war happened in May, but that's no reason—"

"And June," Harry added. "Not much good happens in June, either."

"My birthday's in June, you prat," Draco said. "And my mum's birthday is in May. And while we're eliminating birthdays, you were born in July, so I suppose that's out too. And I

was Marked in August, and then in September you refused to be friends with me and broke my tiny pre-adolescent heart to pieces, and then in October—”

“Okay, okay,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Enough already, you’ve made your point. And I did not break your tiny heart.”

“To *pieces*,” Draco said with a solemn nod.

Harry snorted. “Don’t even,” he said. “You didn’t have a heart back then. You were a terrible little shit.”

“Mm,” Draco agreed, advancing on Harry. “I was, wasn’t I?” He backed Harry up against the wall, took his hands, and pressed them over his head. “Go on, Potter. Tell me more.” He leaned in and leisurely mouthed his way up Harry’s neck from shoulder to ear.

“Um,” Harry said, because it was hard to think clearly with Draco’s mouth on him. “You were horrible. And mean. And, um... Oh yes, right there.”

Draco chuckled softly, his breath huffing warm against Harry’s neck. “Just imagine if your eleven-year-old self could see you now.”

“He’d be appalled,” Harry said. “Shocked and horrified. And probably very confused.”

“Hm. Well, my eleven-year-old self would probably die of sheer happiness right on the spot. I’ve finally got Harry Potter right where I want him.”

Before Harry could say anything to that, Draco kissed him. And for a little while, Harry was able to lose himself in the taste and feel of Draco’s body, of Draco’s mouth on his neck and his hands on his skin and his cock thrusting deep inside him. For a little while, Harry forgot all about the remembrance gala next week and the dark cloud that seemed to settle over him at the end of every April, chased away by the sound of Draco’s breath gone harsh and irregular, and the way his muscles tensed and shifted beneath Harry’s hands, and by how bloody good he made Harry feel.

Nothing good ever happens in May. He’s made it nearly a whole year without Draco. And he’s made it almost six months before Ron and Hermione find out about the warehouse. Harry’s still been spending time there. Not a lot, and not even as much as he did at first. He’s down to just a few hours every couple of days or so. Sometimes when he’s afraid he can’t quite remember the sound of Draco’s voice, or the way he laughs, or the precise curve of his smile. And it’s like the sweet rush of that first deep lungful of air after staying almost-too-long underwater. Ah yes, that’s his voice. That’s his laugh. That’s his smile.

His friends don’t understand. Hermione threw around all sorts of hurtful words, like ‘unhealthy’ and ‘obsessive’ while Ron stood by her side, nodding in agreement. They seem to think that because it’s been a year he should be making some sort of progress. That he

should be moving on or getting over it or something. But they don't understand what it's like, and how can they? They've still got each other. They don't know what it's like to lose someone who's a part of you. You don't suddenly get that part back when that person goes. That part of you goes too, and it's gone for good.

Hermione finished up her impassioned speech with, "We love you, Harry, and we're worried about you." As if that makes everything better.

In the end, he'd nodded and said he'd think about it, and then he went to spend an hour with Draco.

He feels a little better when he leaves, but he's still distracted, and when he's getting ready to do laundry, he casts an absentminded Accio for Draco's socks out of sheer force of habit. The drawer of Draco's bureau wrenches itself open and Harry's pelted with dozens of balled-up socks. Sighing and swearing under his breath, he kneels down to gather them up. He honestly has no idea why Draco owns so many bloody socks or why he's incapable of keeping them on his feet for more than ten minutes at a time. He's gathered up half of them when he picks up one bundle and feels something hard tucked inside it. Frowning, Harry sets his armload down and slowly unbundles the pair of socks he holds, and finds a small black velvet box. For a moment he just stares down at it, numb, then opens the lid with trembling fingers.

Inside, he finds a gold band, and Harry pries it loose from where it's nestled in a slot of black felt. He turns it over in his hands, and sees the engraving inside: *Yesterday, Today, Always*. His throat closes up as the familiar pain hits him like a Bludger to the ribs. And even though he knows he shouldn't, he slides the ring onto his left ring finger. It fits perfectly. He takes it off and puts it back in the box.

Harry doesn't sleep that night. He sits up on the sofa with the little black box clutched in his hand. He closes it. He opens it again. He puts the ring on. He takes the ring off. He's delirious with joy because Draco planned to marry him. He's angry because the stupid fucker never got around to asking him to and he should have asked Harry the very minute he bought the ring. Mostly he's just in pain, because he should have had this. *They* should have had this. He cries until his head aches fiercely and his eyes feel gritty and dry.

And then, with the first pale rays of dawn slanting through the window, he gets up. He goes upstairs and puts the socks away. He tucks the little box back inside the pair it came from and puts it in the back of the drawer. Then Harry takes one last look around the house before he steps outside. He can't stay here. Living here is like living with a hand around his throat, squeezing and squeezing and *squeezing* and Harry thinks if he stays here any longer he might actually die. He can't do this anymore. He can't. He just can't.

Harry woke up to warm fingertips gently tracing their way down his throat and across his collarbones, the hand warm against his skin as it skimmed down his chest and belly before it slipped beneath the waistband of his pyjama bottoms. He hummed sleepily and shifted his

hips, pressing up against Draco's palm. Draco curled his hand around Harry's cock and stroked him lightly as he shifted closer to press his own hard cock against Harry's thigh.

"Morning, Potter," he said, his voice low and still rough with sleep.

"Mmm," Harry said, finally cracking his eyes open. Draco smiled at him and stroked harder. "Good morning."

Draco let go of his cock, and Harry only had a scant instant to mourn the loss of that touch before Draco rolled atop him and rubbed his erection against Harry's. He leaned down and kissed Harry, his tongue sweeping lazily against Harry's, and Harry slid his arms around Draco and held him close as Draco carefully worked slick fingers into his arse without breaking the kiss. He leaned away to set the lube back on the bedside table, then rubbed his slippery fingers over his cock before guiding it to Harry's opening, and pushed inside in a series of small, shallow thrusts.

Harry closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Draco mouthed at his neck. He listened to Draco's deep, uneven breaths and stroked his hands up and down Draco's back, revelling in the smooth expanse of sleep-warmed skin, feeling the knobs of Draco's spine bumping beneath his fingertips, the muscles of Draco's back flexing beneath his palms. He moaned as Draco's lips found that sensitive spot just above his collarbone. He slid his hand between them and tugged at his cock.

Tension coiled in his belly, tighter, tighter, until it broke suddenly and he came with a soft cry. Draco nipped at his neck and sped up his rhythm as Harry relaxed against the mattress with a sigh. This was his favourite part of morning sex, basking in his afterglow and enjoying the sensation of Draco fucking him. It was always a little different after he climaxed. With the urgency of his own impending orgasm out of the way, he could take the time to notice all the little details of their coupling. The soft slick sounds of Draco's cock in his arse, the faint tickle of Draco's hair brushing against his cheek, the way his eyelids fluttered and his eyebrows drew together and the way his pink lips parted, his breath coming in warm puffs against Harry's neck.

"Harry," he said.

He only ever called Harry by his first name during sex. The rest of the time it was Potter this or Scarhead that, and hearing Draco sigh his given name never failed to make Harry's heart beat just the slightest bit faster. Harry loved when Draco said 'Potter,' how he spat it out like a seed. And he loved when Draco said 'Scarhead,' their own version of *sweetheart* or *darling*. But hearing him say 'Harry' was different. It was this, the shared warmth of their bed, the easy familiarity of their bodies moving together, it was a sigh that said 'I love you' in just two syllables.

"Draco," he said back, sliding his hands down to cup Draco's arse, and Draco whimpered deep in his throat, thrust once more, twice more, then went tense, his hips rocking in shallow little thrusts as he came.

They lay together for a few long minutes, until Draco's pounding heart slowed and his breathing returned to normal. Then he propped himself up on his forearms and slid free of

Harry before he flopped over onto his back. He glanced over at Harry, that warm buttered-toast smile spreading over his face.

“Mm,” he said. “I could get used to waking up like this.”

Harry laughed drowsily. “Five years, Draco. If it hasn’t happened by now, I don’t think it’s going to.”

“Well then,” Draco said, his smile warming further. “I suppose I’ll just have to live with that.” He rolled out of bed and stretched, then scratched idly at where Harry’s come was drying on his belly. He glanced down at Harry. “Getting up, or are you going to sleep a little more?”

Harry thought for a moment, but his stomach felt particularly empty this morning and a fry-up sounded wonderful. “Getting up,” he said, reaching out a hand and letting Draco tug him to his feet.

It took five years to really get his feet under him, but Harry feels like it’s finally happened.

He didn’t expect to love Pittsburgh nearly as much as he does. In the bitter aftermath of that first long and lonely year, he’d sleepwalked to the Portkey Station and picked it out from the short list of upcoming Portkeys. There’d been a list of exciting destinations, every one of them brimming with the promise of a new adventure, the lure of fresh chapters of a story yet untold: Tokyo, Toronto, Krakow, Reykjavik, Berlin, St Petersburg, Seattle, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, and then there, at the very end, Pittsburgh. Standing alone in the terminal with nothing but the clothes on his back and a Voucher for the contents of his Gringotts Vault tucked safely into one pocket, Harry said it aloud to himself and liked the way it sounded. Like a pebble. Like a seed. Like something smooth and hard and round he could spit out: *Pittsburgh*.

So he took it, and here he is five years later. And in that time he’s come to love it, in its own way. He’s settled here. He’s got his job and his routines, and he’s happy enough. He came here to make a fresh start but this city has enough of a history to sink into, enough that he could put down roots if he wanted, the same sort of history Harry feels steeped into every cobblestone of Diagon Alley, so heavy it’s almost tangible. It feels like he can reach out and touch it, the same way he can swipe a fingertip through the fine black grit that accumulates inside his windowscreens, the last legacy of a steel town, a fine black dusting of history delivered right to his windowsill along with his owl post.

But for all its industrial history and reputation, Pittsburgh is surprisingly green. There are sprawling parks tucked between the city streets, tree-covered hillsides overlooking blocks crammed with empty warehouses, and Harry doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the deer and wild turkeys that mingle with civilization. He’s grown used to the rest of it, though, to the long cold grey winters, to driving on the right, to their odd dialect, *jagger* and *yinz* and *gumband* and *n’at*. He no longer feels like he’s accidentally wandered into the Hufflepuff

section of the Quidditch stands during game days here when the whole city clothes itself in black and yellow. He hasn't had a cup of tea since he left England. These days, he exclusively drinks coffee.

And the best coffee comes from a small shop shaded by trees, hidden just beside an apartment building in Highland Park. It doesn't look like much at first glance, with its plate glass windows papered with homemade flyers and its dull tile floor and shabby chairs and scuffed tables. But the green glass lights and dark exposed beams and paintings from local artists lining the walls give it a comfortable, cozy feel. Harry has spent altogether too much time here, picking idly at a scone and drinking coffee from a plain white china cup at the small table tucked into the shallow alcove by the front window, first by himself, and now more recently with William even though the table's not really large enough for two people. Their feet bump each other, and William always says sorry and tucks his legs back underneath his own chair.

But Harry's alone today, and the cool autumn air that drew him out of his house now lures him out of Tazza D'Oro. He doesn't feel like going home just yet, so he steps outside, paper cup warming his palm, and turns left instead of right and climbs up the slight hill to the park that gives this neighbourhood its name. He passes through the grand entryway, walks past empty benches and dormant flowerbeds and climbs up the steep set of stairs to the reservoir. The leaves have turned, and the slight breeze makes them speak, gently hushed as they chatter to each other in shades of orange and gold. Harry loves it up here. It's quiet and isolated in the best sort of way. Harry likes to pace along the asphalt walkway that runs the perimeter of the reservoir. He always walks anti-clockwise, water on his left, trees on his right, the sky spanning above him like an upturned bowl, stretched endless blue or soft grey or pinpricked black above the sprawling reservoir. The water gently laps its sharply banked confines, and he can hear it murmuring softly to itself if he listens hard enough. Sometimes, there are ducks.

Today, Harry only walks around twice, and by the time he reaches the stairs again he's finished his coffee. He Vanishes the empty cup and jogs down them, passing by sleeping flowerbeds and abandoned benches and then through the entryway and back down the hill. The houses in this neighbourhood are enormous, and Harry gazes across the neat front lawns as he passes by, idly imagining what it would be like to live in each one. It'd be too big, he thinks, and can't quite imagine rattling around in one of them all by himself.

He thinks longingly of his cosy flat on Clyde Street, with its gleaming parquet floors and small bookshelves built right into the walls. There was an enclosed balcony there that he'd especially loved, and Harry had spent hours out there during that first interminable winter, staring out the wide windows, perched on a battered wood chair he'd rescued from the skip down in the garage, his feet pulled safely away from the chill of the concrete floor. The balcony faced northwest, the same direction the snow always blew in from, and he can't count how many afternoons he wasted there, idly watching soft puffs of snow commit soundless suicide against his windowpanes.

He'd only taken that flat because it was near the University where he'd accepted a teaching position in Dark Arts Repellence Theory and Strategy. The Americans are somewhat more progressive in their schooling than the British, offering University-level courses instead of

the more traditional apprenticeships or training programs, though apparently a love of acronyms is universal.

Harry turns onto his block, where the houses are still too large but in slightly worse repair. He lives in one of them, but it's been split into three flats of dubious legality. He and William share the one that takes up the top floor, and though he's been there for three months it still doesn't feel like home. He climbs up the long flights of stairs and turns his key in the lock. It smells odd here, old and a little musty, and Harry does his best to ignore it. A few minutes and he won't notice it anymore.

He thinks on that as he strips off his coat and gloves and hat and scarf and hangs them neatly on their hooks near the door. It's sort of amazing what people can get used to, if they're just around it long enough.

With the ease of long familiarity, Harry settled into his Saturday morning. It was chilly for early May, and Harry pulled on his favourite Weasley jumper and warm pair of wool socks while Draco finished up with whatever complicated rituals he performed each morning to get his hair so sleek and shiny. He went into the kitchen and began gathering up ingredients for their breakfast.

"One of these days, Potter, I really am going to get rid of that stupid jumper," Draco said from behind him.

"Tell you what," Harry said without looking up from his search for the orange marmalade amidst the other jars of jam. "I'll get rid of it the very same day you get rid of that stupid mug." He found the marmalade way in the back. Had it really been that long since they'd had an orange marmalade morning?

"My mug?" Draco repeated, his voice edging toward the shrill tones of exaggerated moral outrage, and Harry rolled his eyes. "But this mug is my favourite!" Draco stroked a fingertip along Mug-Harry's cheek, and Mug-Harry winked at him, the smarmy bastard. "Besides, he's much cuter than you are. You're so grumpy sometimes." He brandished the mug at Harry, and Mug-Harry gave him a wink too. "He's flirty *all the time*."

And even though Harry knew that Draco was just winding him up, he couldn't help responding, "He's a stupid git. And he's not flirty, he's *shameless*."

Draco grinned. "I'm a man in love. I can't help myself." He gave Mug-Harry a great big smacking kiss, and Mug-Harry closed his eyes and puckered up his lips.

Harry rolled his eyes again. "Going to leave me for a mug, are you? That's a shame. I'm in the mood for a fry-up this morning."

Draco perked up at that. "Oh?"

“Yeah. Good luck getting your flirty mug to cook for you, seeing as how he hasn’t got any hands.”

Laughing, Draco threw his mug to the floor and it smashed across the tiles, chunks of porcelain skittering away under the stove and clattering against the skirtingboards. He flung his arms around Harry’s neck and kissed him soundly. “You know you’re the only man for me, Potter. Can you make extra bacon?”

“Yeah, yeah. Get off me, now,” Harry said, pushing Draco away. “Why don’t you get the mail and sit in here with me?”

Draco snickered and pinched his bum, and darted away before Harry could retaliate. Smiling to himself, Harry crouched down and took out his wand and cast a *Reparo* on Draco’s mug. It reformed and he turned it over in his hands, checking for any lumps or chips before he set it back on the counter. Mug-Harry scowled at him and turned away, and Harry snorted. Mug-Harry always sulked for a while after he’d been broken.

Harry turned away and went to the other cabinet to get out his frying pan. These lazy Saturday mornings with Draco were his favourite time of week. In a minute, Draco would come back with the *Prophet* under his arm and the day’s mail in his hands. He’d perch up on the counter to go through the mail, and then read off the Quidditch scores in between critiquing Harry’s cooking methods, even though Draco couldn’t even boil water unless he had two pages of instructions and ten pages of theory to back it up. He’d never quite grasped the concept that cooking and potions weren’t even remotely the same thing. Harry found it all greatly amusing, and every time he made soup he always found an excuse to get Draco to help, just for the fun of watching him give the pot precise clockwise stirs.

Draco returned just then, paper tucked under his arm and a pile of letters in his hand. As Harry had predicted, he hopped up on the counter to finish sorting through the mail.

“Hey, you got a letter,” William calls from the living room.

Harry half-turns, and his elbow catches William’s coffee mug and knocks it off the edge of the kitchen counter. It’s entirely an accident, just as it is every time this has happened before, despite what William seems to think. If he’s quick he might be able to save it, but Harry’s never been overly fond of that mug so he doesn’t even try. It shatters on impact, shards of porcelain skittering away across the tile floor, hiding under the oven and refrigerator.

“Again, Harry, really?” William calls out, and a moment later he’s in the kitchen too. He crouches on the floor and casts a slow and careful *Reparo*, and the mug reforms itself perfectly, not one blue stripe out of place. Harry sighs and looks away. One of these days, the Repairs are bound to quit holding. “I don’t understand why you hate my mug so much.”

“I don’t hate it,” Harry says, as he says every time. It’s really not on purpose. It just keeps happening. And he really doesn’t want to have another argument about that stupid fucking

mug. "What's my letter say?"

"I don't read your mail," William says, holding it out. "Here."

Harry takes it and knows who it's from before he even cracks the seal. There's only one person left who can get the blob of sealing wax to form a circle that perfect. He cracks it and unfolds the crisp parchment. He scans the precise rows of neat handwriting and frowns.

"What's it say?" William asks after stowing his mug safely in the cabinet.

"It's Hermione. She wants me to come home."

Before Draco, home was just the place where Harry kept his things, but in the years since then it had become so much more. Now home meant takeaway curry and movies on Sunday nights and involuntary scavenger hunts every laundry day and Friday nights out. But Harry especially loved the weekend teas Draco insisted on them having. Weekdays had them grabbing a cup of the horrifyingly overbrewed rubbish the Ministry served in its break room whenever they could spare a few minutes, but each Saturday and Sunday Draco brought out his mother's tea service and spent twenty minutes in their kitchen, arranging everything just so. He warmed the silver teapot and filled the small jug with milk and the little bowl with sugar. He arranged a plate with his favourite little iced cakes and the miniature scones he bought at the bakery down the block every Friday after work. Harry let him have his fussy teatime ritual without complaint, and in return Draco allowed them to drink from their usual mugs instead of the dainty china cups he'd grown up using.

Harry loved their weekend teas, and in a way he thought it might represent the best parts of their relationship. Tea served from an expensive antique set, but drunk from mugs, one chipped and one ridiculous. At a glance it looked like it all didn't quite fit together, but it did, and it worked. Just like they did.

Draco carried the tray while Harry brought in the mugs. His thumb brushed against Mug-Harry's cheek, and Mug-Harry wagged his eyebrows suggestively. Harry set the mug down on the table with a little more force than necessary, but otherwise ignored Mug-Harry's antics. He stepped back and let Draco arrange things on the table to his liking, enjoying the way Draco's shirt stretched tight across his shoulders as he reached. They were just sitting down when the Floo chimed.

"That's probably Mum," Draco said, standing. "Aunt Andromeda's birthday is coming up and I know she was making plans. Go on and pour and I'll make it quick."

He padded out of the room, his bare feet almost soundless on the wood floor, and Harry poured their tea, adding a small splash of milk to Draco's mug before adding more to his own mug, along with a generous scoop of sugar. He sat back in his chair, listening to the low murmur of Draco's voice from the living room Floo. He discovered a small hole at the cuff of his jumper and frowned at where the stitches had started to run. If Draco saw it, he'd use it as

further fuel in his campaign to rid their home of Weasley jumpers. Harry made a mental note to ask Molly to fix it for him before Draco noticed it.

“Change of plans, Potter,” Draco said, leaning around the doorway to aim a few warming and stasis charms at the table. The steam curling from their mugs went motionless in midair. “We’ve been called in.”

“Really? On our bloody day off? We’re not even on weekend rotation this week,” Harry grumbled, his irritation at having to drag himself into work today furthered by the fact that Draco sounded thrilled, like being called into work on a Saturday afternoon was the best thing that could have happened to him. Sometimes Harry really hated how much Draco loved his job.

“Well, you know what they say.” Draco paused dramatically, then sang, “Crrrrime waits for no one!”

“You’re bloody awful, you are,” Harry groaned as Draco snickered. But he stood and followed him from the dining room.

“Come on, Auror Scarhead,” Draco called, and the smile he tossed over his shoulder at Harry was so brilliant and eager and alive that Harry couldn’t help but grin back at him. “It’s time to save the world.”

He’d saved them all, once upon a time, and Harry thinks that England shouldn’t feel nearly this different to him. He should feel the conquering hero, returning home. Instead, he just feels at loose ends, muddled and unsure. It’s familiar, yes, but at the same time it’s so strange. Like the whole of England has been knocked just a little bit sideways, just slightly off-kilter. Things aren’t quite the same as they were when he left and it’s taking him longer than he thought to get his feet under him again.

Of course, the fucking time change doesn’t help. Harry wakes from his nap muzzy and disoriented, his mouth thick and dry. He stumbles out of bed, uses the toilet, and heads for the kitchen. It’s early evening and he’s going to need a cup of coffee if he has any hope of making it through dinner. There’s a light on in the living room and he can hear the low murmur of conversation.

“I’m so glad you convinced Harry to come home,” Hermione says, and Harry freezes out in the hallway. “It felt really important that he be here when Rose is born.”

“It wasn’t easy,” William admits with a laugh. “I had to book the tickets and spring it on him last minute.” He doesn’t mention the screaming fight they’d had after that. Harry hadn’t screamed at someone like that in *years*, but it still lit his blood like it always did. He’d fucked William right there on the living room sofa, and then felt so nauseated about it that he’d spent half the night pacing around the reservoir.

“Well however you went about it, I’m glad,” Hermione says.

“You’re his best friend,” William says, and Harry can tell he’s smiling. William smiles a lot; it’s what drew Harry to him in the first place. “You and Ron. I told him that he shouldn’t let what happened with Draco keep you apart.”

“Oh, he told you about Draco?” Hermione asks, and even without seeing her, Harry can hear the surprise in her voice. “I assumed... well, he didn’t tell us about you... and I thought...”

“He hasn’t said very much,” William admits, and Harry wants to rush out there, run out and make them stop talking because he doesn’t talk about Draco for a reason, and all he wanted was a fucking cup of coffee and he doesn’t want this, he doesn’t want any part of this. But he can’t move, and it’s like watching an oncoming train, the light bearing down and he can’t make himself move clear of the tracks. “I know they were together for a long time, and I assume the break-up was pretty rough. I mean, he ran all the way to America to get away from it.”

“Break-up?” Hermione repeats, her voice as fragile as ceramic.

“Well, yeah, I assumed...” William trails off. “What?”

Harry’s tempted to peek out into the living room, to ease open the door enough to see what expression on Hermione’s face put that tone in William’s voice, faintly baffled dawning dread, but Harry still can’t move as the silence stretches out, interminable and thick as syrup.

“William,” Hermione says, her voice terribly gentle. “Draco’s dead.”

And even after all this time, the words hit him as hard as the explosion had all those years ago, rocking him to his very core and he’s caught in a sharp wave of heartache just as strong as the very first. He must have moved, must have made some sound, because the door swings open, warm firelight falling on him, and there’s Hermione, and the look on her face is just as awful as he thought it’d be. And he can’t take it, he can’t take any of this. He takes one step back, then another, then another, then turns sharply in place and disappears.

Harry doesn’t think about where he’s going, and he’s more surprised to find that he hasn’t Splinched himself than he is that he’s ended up in his warehouse. He’s just behind the line he’d marked on the floor years ago, the toes of his socks just inches from it. He’s just inches from seeing Draco again, but he can’t seem to make himself take that step. So instead he settles down on the cold concrete floor, knees drawn up to his chest, arms clasped loosely around his shins, and just sits and sits.

He’s been sitting for a long time, he doesn’t know how long but it’s been enough time that his arse is beginning to complain and his toes have grown numb with cold. And still he sits, staring at the empty air, unable to make himself cross that line. He doesn’t move as footsteps sound behind him, steadily drawing near.

“Harry?” William’s voice is as soft and hesitant as his footsteps. “Harry. There you are.”

“Here I am.” His voice falls flat.

There's a soft rustle of clothing from behind him and William drops Harry's coat over his shoulders. "Hermione said I'd probably find you here."

Harry shrugs, tugging the warm wool of his coat closer around himself and snuggling into it like a blanket. Hermione always did know him far too well.

William hesitates, then crouches down beside him. "She told me everything."

Harry shrugs again and doesn't look at William. Of course she did.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks.

"Because it's none of your fucking business," Harry tells him. He knows he's being unreasonable, but he doesn't care. He didn't want to come back here. He didn't want any of this.

"Harry," William says gently. "I understand that this is something that's been difficult for you."

"Don't pretend to understand," he snaps. *Difficult* is the biggest fucking understatement he's ever heard. *Difficult* was living with Draco; living without him is unbearable. Life without him is fine black grit, dust and ashes, soot-streaked and *wrong*. It's bleeding out by inches. It's spending every second of every day feeling like he's drowning. It's the sharp and bitter pain that still catches him unawares, provoked by something as trivial as a pair of socks, exploding through his lungs in a hot rush so that for one heart-stopping second he can't even breathe. It's knowing that for the rest of his life, he's never going to feel complete again. It's the constant bone-deep terror of forgetting even the smallest detail of their life together. *And it is endless.*

"But I do," William insists. He rests his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know what it's like to lose someone you love. My grandmother—"

Harry jerks away from him. "That's not the same," he says, because it's *not*. He was there when William's grandmother died. She was old and she was sick, and that's what's supposed to happen to people. They get old, they get sick, and then they die. Not what happened to Draco. That wasn't supposed to happen, and it's just not fair. For the first time in his life, Harry was happy. Really truly happy, and to have it taken away like that. "He's my, he's..." and he stumbles, because after all these years he still can't say exactly what Draco is to him. His lover, his soul-mate, his everything. All of those words are just words, and they're not enough. So he just says, "He's mine. He's mine and I'm his."

It's too much, suddenly it's too much. Harry needs him, he needs to see him and hear him and know that he's still here.

Harry stands up and steps across the line and then there he is, and it hits him like a punch to the gut, in a sharp sweet rush of pain and longing, because five years hasn't changed anything. Draco is still as beautiful as he was on that day, as beautiful as he ever was, tall and lean, pale and pointed and perfect. The fabric of his robes shifts and pulls tight across his shoulders as he casts, deftly pulling threads of magic as his wand cuts through the air. He

glances over his shoulder. "I was wondering when you'd show up," he says, just as he says every time.

William flinches, even though Hermione had to have warned him about this. Harry ignores him.

"I'm sorry," Harry says, stepping forward. "I was away."

"Did you find them?" Draco asks, and for a moment all Harry can do is close his eyes because Draco sounds just as he remembered, the posh accent and the brisk, businesslike tone he takes on when he's working. But as always, there's that underlying warmth in his voice when he speaks to Harry.

"Harry..." William begins, and Harry shushes him.

He moves forward as Draco speaks, and the conversation sounds halting and odd without his own lines. Sometimes he speaks back to Draco, saying the same things he did that day. Sometimes he just apologises over and over for leaving him. Sometimes he says all the things he wishes he'd had the chance to tell Draco that day. His biggest regret is that when Draco died, it had been three days since Harry had said 'I love you.' He should have said it that day. He should have said it every single fucking day they were together. It still wouldn't have been enough, but at least it would have been a start.

When Draco finishes talking, Harry turns away, walks back to the line as he counts to six in his head, and turns just in time to catch the affectionate smile Draco sends him. Harry smiles back. He steps over the line and Draco is gone. Harry's smile fades.

"Oh my god," William says into the silence that follows. "This is what you've been doing to yourself? Harry, this isn't..."

Harry ignores him. He steps over the line, and then Draco is there too.

He glances over his shoulder, eyes sparkling, lips quirking up. "I was wondering when you'd show up," he says.

"They can't expect us to show up in two seconds," Harry said, following Draco through the living room.

Draco pulled off his grey jumper, leaving his hair a ruffled and staticky mess, and tossed it over the arm of the sofa as he went by. "They did say it was urgent so I'd imagine they'll be expecting us at some point this week," he said. His shirt came off next and he draped it over the newel post as he started up the stairs. "Hurry up!"

Sighing, Harry collected the shirt as he started up the stairs after Draco, admiring the long line of his back and the way his arse shifted in his trousers as he climbed. Harry threw Draco's shirt into the laundry basket once they reached the bedroom before taking off his

own clothing. "What're we needed for?" he asked as Draco pulled off his socks and stuffed them down between the mattress and the footboard of their bed. Harry sighed again and made a mental note for the next laundry day.

Draco filled him in on the details of the case as they dressed in their Auror robes. They'd been assisting with the ongoing investigation of an illegal potions ring that had been flooding Knockturn Alley with cheap, and cheaply brewed, potions. About half of the people who'd taken them had ended up in St Mungo's for it, and two of them had died.

Now, an anonymous tip had led the Aurors to a small run-down warehouse just inside the border between Wizarding and Muggle London. They'd caught the lawbreakers by surprise, and a fight had broken out. Robards had quickly put out the call for anyone who could make it in.

"I knew it would break on our weekend off," Draco complained cheerfully as he buttoned up his robes.

Harry knew it was bad, but hadn't realised how bad until they Apparated to the scene. The warehouse squatted between two dingy buildings of flats, and even from the street Harry could see the firework flashes of a wand fight going on inside. Half the windows had blown out, and he thought he saw the flicker of a fire on the ground floor. The Aurors had enacted several strong wards around the warehouse, and more Aurors were working to evacuate the surrounding buildings, sprinting back and forth while Robards shouted orders at them. Harry and Draco hurried up to him.

"Potter, Malfoy, thank Merlin you're here. I need you inside," he snapped. "One of those arseholes has been studying the Dark Arts, and you two are my best." Draco and Harry turned away, and Robards caught Draco by his arm. "One more thing. My informant tells me they kept very careful records of sales and purchases of ingredients. I need those log books, they're the key to bringing down not just this whole operation but also their sources for illegal ingredients. Those log books are your priority, above everything else. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," Draco said and ran to the building with Harry at his heels, broken glass crunching beneath their shoes.

Inside, the air was hazy with smoke. Draco fired off a spell that siphoned off some of the smoke and sent it whirling away out a window to dissipate harmlessly in the chilly afternoon air. They passed through a front room, crept between long rows of metal shelves piled high with crates and boxes, and emerged into a small open area. In the rear of the warehouse, stacks of crates along the back wall had caught fire and a loose semi-circle of Aurors worked to keep the blaze under control. A wrought iron staircase spiraled up to a second level, where a balcony ran around the perimeter of the room, doors spaced evenly along its length. Harry heard casting, curses and counter-curses being shouted. He exchanged a look with Draco and as one they moved to the staircase.

When they reached the top level, they crept onto the balcony, and started as an Auror came stumbling out of a doorway two rooms ahead of them, bleeding heavily from a ragged slash across his chest.

“That way,” he gasped out, waving them off when they tried to assist. “Hurry.”

Draco hit him with a spell to help clot the blood, then he and Harry hurried on to join the fight. Up ahead, they found two Aurors engaged in a desperate duel with one of the potions brewers. Even with the man’s face screwed up with fear, Harry recognized him from the case files. When he and Malfoy joined the fight, it was over quickly.

“How many others are in here?” Harry demanded, hauling the wizard to his feet.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said with a cackle. “They’re gone by now. Left me behind to make sure the evidence got destroyed. Better run, Aurors, this whole place is about to come down.”

“What does that—” Draco broke off, his eyes going wide. “Fuck. The crates. That’s why there’s a fire.”

The wizard laughed, a high and unsettling sound that made Harry instantly suspect the man had been sampling his own wares. “Better run, better run. Gonna take the whole fucking block with it when it goes.”

Harry swore, and before he could say anything else, another Auror raced up to them.

“Malfoy! We need you downstairs!”

Draco whirled around. “What’s happened?”

“Fire,” came the answer. The young Auror rubbed at his face but only managed to smear a streak of soot over his cheek. “It’s not an ordinary fire and we’re losing control of it. Robards is pulling us out. We’re leaving the strongest wizards to control the fire until everyone else gets clear.”

“What about me?” Harry asked.

“You keep looking for the log books until the last minute,” the Auror told him. “You’re the only one powerful enough to Apparate through the containment wards if you need to leave in a hurry.”

“Potter, that’s...” Draco began, and Harry could see the worry in his eyes.

“I’ll be fine. Get downstairs, I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Harry told him, and still Draco hesitated. “This is the last time, Malfoy.”

“We’ll have that conversation later,” Draco replied with a tight smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

He rushed off, and Harry went back to searching as fast as he could.

As always, he can’t help searching Draco’s face for something, for some flicker of recognition, for some slight variance from last time, for anything. But there’s nothing. He’s

exactly the same. He's the same as he was five years ago, and the same as he's been for the last month.

Harry's been staying with Ron and Hermione the whole time, and it's been nice to be useful. Hermione is due any day now, and Harry's taken over much of the housework, and he keeps her company while Ron is at work. Evenings, he spends with Draco. It's fucked up, he knows that, and he doesn't blame William at all for fleeing straight back to America. At least he was kind enough to box up Harry's personal things and ship them over. He's a decent man, and he deserves better than what Harry could give him.

Sometimes Harry feels guilty for William. Like by being with him he's betrayed Draco, in a way. He knows that's not true. And he knows that Draco would understand. He went through the same war Harry did. He knows that shit happens and people die and those who get left behind have to find whatever happiness they can. Draco wouldn't begrudge Harry trying to move on; he'd encourage it.

It's something he's spent the entire month thinking about. Harry's been trying to move on, but he's come to realise that moving on is impossible with half of himself tied up here with Draco, maybe more. And he's going to need that part of himself back if he's ever going to heal. Because what he's doing now isn't working. He hasn't moved on or let go. He's just pushed it down, buried it deep and pretended the pain didn't exist whenever it got too much to handle. He hasn't fully accepted that Draco's really gone, even as he tried to tell himself he had. And that's not right, not for himself and not for Draco.

Tonight, Harry lets Draco speak almost all the way to the end. He watches carefully, taking the time to memorise every detail. The precise way his eyelashes curl. The shapes his mouth makes as he says Harry's name. The way he grips his wand. The cuff of his sleeve slides back as he casts, exposing one slender wrist. As always, Harry's struck by how delicate the bones are, how fragile.

"This is the last time," Harry says when Draco's said almost everything he's going to say. "This is it, I'm not going to see you again." Draco leans forward and Harry's standing in the right place. He closes his eyes, and for a moment it's like ice pressing against his nose and mouth and chin. "I'm letting go, for both of us." He takes a step back and opens his eyes just in time.

Draco smiles at him and pushes his arm through Harry's chest, right through his sternum, and Harry feels the chill down through the very bottom of his heart. "Be off with you," he says with a laugh. "And we'll have that conversation later."

Harry takes another step back, counts six seconds, and there it is. Draco glances back over his shoulder and his mouth tips up into that fond smile he only gets when he looks at Harry, then he turns around again, determined and focused, but with a hint of a smile still lingering on his lips. He loops his wand through the air.

"I mean it," Harry whispers. "This is goodbye. I love you, but you're gone." His throat feels scratchy and thick. He swallows past it. He needs to say this aloud. "I'll see you again someday, I think. And when I do, that's it. I'm never leaving you again." His eyes are tearing up and this time he can't stop it. He swipes across them with the back of his wrist. "So, I

mean it. This really is the last time I'm leaving without you. Never again, okay? This is the last time."

He nods to himself and squeezes his eyes shut as he turns away, because if he's looking at Draco he doesn't think he'll be able to leave. He hurries away, because he doesn't want to see the end. He's already seen it happen so many times before, but Harry wants this time to be different. He doesn't want the very last thing he sees on Draco's face to be that horrible fear and panic. He doesn't want the last thing he hears to be that terrible split-second scream. He wants to remember that fond smile aimed at Harry, and the fierce joy he took in doing his job, his bright laugh and the warmth in his voice. That's how Harry wants to remember him, determined and smiling and happy.

As he walks down the front stairs and steps out onto the pavement, he feels empty and dull, like someone scooped out his insides and lined the space with lead. It feels heavy but curiously smooth and painless. And though this isn't anything even resembling peace, it feels like a start, and Harry thinks he may have finally found what he's been looking for.

Two rooms later, he found a stack of leather-bound books, detailing all of the transactions. He took a moment to flip through them to make sure they were really what they needed, then took another moment to give thanks to whatever idiocy it was that had the leader of this potions ring essentially handing them an itemised confession, then clasped the stack of books to his chest and raced back downstairs.

He found Draco and two other Aurors tending to a much-diminished fire.

"Go on and get him out of here," Draco said to one of them. "I can finish up here. Tell Robards it's safe to send the search teams back in."

The Auror he'd spoken to broke off casting and slid an arm around the other's shoulders, and they made their way, badly limping, out of the warehouse.

"Draco," Harry said, and Draco half-turned to look over his shoulder.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," he said, the slight smirk tilting his mouth not dimming the relief in his eyes. He looped his wand in another arc and the bubble of charms surrounding the fire rippled and grew stronger. The fire dimmed a little more. "Did you find them?"

"Right here," Harry said, smiling himself. This case was over, aside from tying up the loose ends, and he felt slightly giddy as he always did in the aftermath of a dangerous job.

"Good. Go on and tell Robards to call off the search party, then." He paused and looped his wand again. "I'll be through in a minute, and then I'll be right behind you. I very much want to be at this clever bastard's interrogation. I've never seen a fire spell like this before." He sounded equal parts frustrated and admiring.

“But you’ve figured out how to put it out?” Harry shifted the heavy load of books in his arms.

“Smothering. Slow, but it does the job.” Another loop of his wand, and the fire dimmed further and shrank in on itself. Draco glanced at Harry and arched his eyebrows. “Well? Go on, Potter, what’re you waiting for?”

“Right, see you in a few minutes.” Harry turned away, then hesitated and turned back, closing the distance between himself and Draco in just a few steps. Because there was no one around to see, Harry gave in to temptation and tradition and the last remnants of adrenaline in his veins and kissed Draco. “This is the last time I’m leaving without you,” he murmured against Draco’s mouth.

Draco snorted and shoved him away with a hand to his chest, his wand never wavering. “Be off with you,” he said with a laugh. “And we’ll have that conversation later.”

Harry hurried out of the warehouse without looking back, and went over to where Robards was just organizing a group of Aurors, instructing them on how to split up the warehouse in their search. He broke off when he caught sight of the bundle of books in Harry’s arms.

“You found them.”

“Everything,” Harry said, glancing at the wizard who sat nearby, immobile from a powerful Incarcerous.

“Has Malfoy got the fire under control?” Robards asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It’s nearly out.”

The wizard let out a wild hoot of laughter. “Just wait til it’s gone!”

Frowning, Harry looked over at him as a shiver of unease crept up his spine. “What does that mean?”

“You know, Muggles are clever little things, aren’t they?” The wizard was grinning openly now, revealing a row of crooked teeth. His eyes were feverishly bright.

“What’s that got to do with—” Harry began, stepping closer.

“They’ve got these birthday candles, you see, that’s where the idea came from. Light them on fire, blow them out, and a moment later the flame comes right back.” His grin stretched further. “*Bang.*”

Harry’s breath froze in his lungs. “Draco.”

The next few seconds were the clearest of Harry’s life. The hazy evening sunlight slanted through the clouds in warm shades of gold. A crisp breeze ruffled his hair and caressed his skin. A songbird twittered out half a melody from the rooftop of the building next door. Grit crunched between the pavement and the sole of Harry’s shoe as he pivoted in place and

pushed off, Robards shouted his name, and the shock from ankle to knee with each stride he took, one, two, three, four—

And then the blast.

The few seconds after that are gone, a gaping blank in his memory. The next thing he knows, he's on the ground, struggling forward. Broken glass bites into his palms and knees, his fingernails breaking as he claws at the pavement, desperately trying to drag himself forward, fighting for every inch as clutching hands haul him back, away from the burning building, away from Draco. He's screaming, screaming, screaming, not even words, he's beyond words, his throat burning from the acrid smoke carried on the warm spring breeze, but they won't let him go, and then there's the gentle tickle of a spell bursting against his back and everything fades away into darkness and silence.

The house is dark and quiet when he gets back, and for a moment Harry thinks there's no one here at all. But then he hears the soft crackle of a fire going in the sitting room, and he makes his way there. He finds Ron and Hermione sitting on the sofa, and they look up as he enters.

"I'm selling the warehouse," Harry says without preamble.

Hermione struggles to sit up, and Ron guides her, his large hands careful on her back. "Harry," she begins. "You know that will...?"

"I know," Harry says. The building is half-destroyed. Whoever buys it won't be interested in rebuilding. They'll tear it down, and without the structure of stone and mortar, metal and cement, Draco won't be able to stay. He'll fade like fog in the morning sun. "I know," he says again. "He'll be forced to let go. But I think we both need that."

Ron comes to his feet, leaving Hermione on the sofa, and goes up to Harry. He folds him up in a warm embrace, his arms solid and strong, and Harry leans into it, closing his eyes and breathing in. Ron always smells sharply of aftershave with the milder scent of soap beneath, and lingering under that is the faintly spicy scent of cedar that always clings to his clothing. He sighs. It feels good to just be held.

There's a rustle of movement as Hermione levers herself to her feet, and then she's hugging him too, the rounded swell of her belly pressing against his side, her arm warm against his back. Harry sighs again.

"Are you all right?" she asks after a moment.

Harry takes a step back. "No," he says. "No, I'm not. But... I think that I might be. Not now, but someday." He rubs at his eyes. "I think I'm going to go to bed now, if you don't mind. It's been..." He breaks off and swallows. "It's been a day."

But he can't sleep. He lies awake in bed, wondering if he's made a mistake. Wondering if he's really strong enough to let the warehouse go. If he's strong enough to let Draco go. Slow footsteps come up the hall and there's a light tap on his door. A moment later, Hermione peeks her head in.

"It's okay," he says, propping himself up on his elbow. "I'm still awake."

"Oh," she says, opening the door a little wider and letting light from the hall spill inside. "I was just..."

"I know," he says gently, and he loves her for checking on him. She's going to be a wonderful mum. "And thank you."

She smiles. "We're off to bed, now. Just let us know if you need anything."

"I will," he says, and she turns away. "Hermione?" Harry calls as she's easing the door shut. It's something he's been thinking about here in the dark, and he'd meant to ask her in the morning. But he thinks they'll both sleep easier if he just says it now. "Do you, um. You wouldn't still happen to have the information for that Healer, would you? You know, the one you wanted me to talk to before?"

Hermione's smile is bright in the dim light. "Of course. I'll find it for you tomorrow."

"Good. Thanks," he says, settling back against his pillow. "Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Harry," she says, and shuts the door.

Harry snuggles a little deeper under the blankets with a slow sigh. He doesn't think he'll ever be completely all right again, but for a long time he's been afraid of healing, afraid that if he lets go of Draco it will be like losing him all over again. As long as Harry hurt, in a way it was like Draco was still with him. But that's not how it works. No one who touched him as deeply as Draco had could ever truly be gone, and the impression he left on Harry is so deep that nothing will ever be able to fill it, not even time. He'll never truly get over this. Draco is always going to own a part of Harry, and Harry will never stop loving him. But this constant, all-consuming pain needs to end. He's felt like this for too long, and he doesn't want to feel like this anymore.

It doesn't feel like it did when anyone else died. It wasn't like this for Remus, or Tonks. Not for Hedwig, not Fred, not Lavender, not Colin, not Cedric. And it wasn't like this for Sirius. Harry remembers pain, and anger, and a great gaping hole behind his ribs, like someone had reached in and yanked out a part of him and made it disappear like a magic trick. But this... this is nothing. He feels nothing.

"They've said you can go home now, Harry," Hermione tells him, and Harry half-turns his head in her direction. Everything feels murky, like a dream, like being underwater. He shakes

his head slightly. “Harry?” Her voice seems to be coming from very far away.

“I don’t...” he begins, but trails off because he doesn’t know. They made him take a Calming Draught and it’s made it very hard for him to think, and he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know.

Hermione sighs. “Come on, Harry. Let’s get you home.”

She takes him by the arm and tugs him to his feet, and he doesn’t resist. She leads him out of his small white room and out into the hallway and then Ron is there too.

“Did they find...?” Hermione starts, but leaves her question incomplete as she darts an uncertain glance at Harry.

Ron shakes his head curtly and puts his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “There’s reporters in the lobby, but I’ve talked one of the Senior Healers into letting us use her private Floo.”

Together they get him into the Healer’s office and she watches him with dark, solemn eyes but doesn’t say anything to him, for which he is grateful. Ron and Hermione bundle him into the Floo and he exits into his living room in a small cloud of black dust and ash. He turns on the lights with a swish of his wand.

The house feels strange. It shouldn’t feel strange, because it’s his house and it’s as familiar to him as his face in the mirror. It’s not even that it’s empty, because he’s been in the house alone before, but this time he knows that Draco isn’t coming home and somehow that makes it look different. Harry stares around the room. It all seems so strange, exactly the same and at the same time so *different*.

He’s still just standing there when Ron exits the Floo and stumbles right into him. “Sorry,” he says, and lets Ron tug him away from the hearth to make room for Hermione.

They try to talk to him, but he doesn’t want to talk about it. They want to stay the night, but he doesn’t want them here. There’s only one thing he wants, and he can’t have it. And if he can’t have that, then he just wants to be left alone.

Hermione insists on putting him to bed, and he feels faintly relieved for it. He feels lost and overwhelmed and still fuzzy and fumbling from the Calming Draught, and it’s nice to have someone tell him what to do. She turns down the bed for him while he disappears into the bathroom with instructions to brush his teeth and change into his pyjamas, and when he comes back out he finds her stationed by the bedside with a small flask in hand.

“Drink this,” she tells him. “Please. You need to sleep.” He starts to protest, but she continues, “Draco would want you to sleep, Harry.”

He takes two swallows without further complaint, and she pushes the cork back into the mouth of the flask and sets it next to his glasses on his bedside table for later, if he needs it. She arranges the blankets over him and smooths the hair back from his forehead as she leans down and kisses his cheek, and her own cheek is damp where it brushes against the corner of his mouth. He tastes salt. She strokes her hand through his hair one more time, then crosses the room and turns out the light.

“Hermione?” he calls just as she’s easing the door shut behind her, and she pauses, and the frizzy wisps of hair that have escaped from the confines of her ponytail form a faint halo around her head, backlit from the light in the hall. Harry’s reminded of the golden circles around the heads of saints in the stained glass windows of churches. Hermione, his own Saviour. He’d be so lost without her. “Will you sit with me?”

His voice sounds very small to his own ears and he’s almost ashamed to hear it, but he doesn’t want to fall asleep alone, and then Hermione comes back across the room and perches on the edge of the mattress beside him, the soft curve of her backside pressed warm against his hip. Her fingers go back to his hair and she combs through it. It feels nice. Harry lets his eyes close, and for a moment he can almost pretend that it’s a different set of fingers in his hair.

The Dreamless Sleep is spreading a pleasant warmth through his belly and he feels heavy and numb. It’s a siren’s call, an anchor that he gladly ties himself to and lets it drag him under to drown in the welcome black depths of sleep.

“It was true,” he murmurs.

“What?”

“This is the last time I’m leaving without you,” Harry says, soft and sleepy. “That’s the very last thing I said to him. It’s what I always told him when I had to leave him in danger, when we were in the field. Every time, I told him, and it never was. Until this time. Except... except this time, he left without me.”

“Oh, Harry,” she says, and her voice breaks.

For a moment, her hand in his hair falters, but then it moves again, stroking, stroking, stroking, soothing and familiar, and then he slips under and even that is gone too.

Epilogue~

The last eight months have gone by quickly, for all the change that’s been packed into them. He’s a godfather now, to the sweetest little girl he could imagine, all big brown eyes and bright copper curls. Rose is always more excited to see him than she is to see her other many and assorted relatives, and Harry likes to think it’s not just because she’s obsessed with trying to put his glasses into her mouth. Her single-minded determination reminds him a lot of her mother, and she’ll be a terror once she decides to focus it somewhere other than glasses-eating. He spends a lot of time with her, being the godparent he thinks Sirius would have wanted to be to him.

Harry’s also been speaking with the Healer that Hermione recommended, and he’s made enough progress to be able to admit that it’s something he should have done years ago. He sold his warehouse, and it was torn down shortly thereafter. He went back to the empty lot

with Hermione, just once, and been both disappointed and relieved when Draco didn't reappear. It'd taken ages to fall asleep that night, but when he finally had he'd slept better than he had in years.

And tomorrow he's leaving England again, this time for Scotland. He's finally accepted a teaching position at Hogwarts, and he's already packed up the sparse contents of his small flat in preparation of moving permanently to the only other place that's ever felt like home.

There's just one more thing he needs to do before he leaves.

He lingers on the doorstep of the home he hasn't visited in six long years. A part of him is afraid to set foot inside, but this is something he needs to do. This is the next step he needs to take. He opens the door and steps inside his house, and it smells musty and abandoned, and it's nothing like he remembered. When he remembers this house, he remembers it bright and airy and warm, and Draco's always in it. But this is nothing like that.

Grief clings to the corners like cobwebs. Loss and mourning and misery layer every surface like six years of dust. For a moment, memories threaten to overwhelm him, and they're not good ones. Memories of despair and hurt and anguish, where he'd floundered and nearly drowned. He'd shut out all the good memories one by one because they hurt, all the quiet cups of tea and movies in the evenings and the lazy morning sex. Draco dancing to the Stones and flirting with a mug and the thousand smiles he'd given Harry. Somewhere in the depths of his grief, Harry only looked at what he'd lost, and he forgot to look back on what he'd had. He'd let five years with Draco be outweighed by each and every day without him.

Seven years has been long enough.

He rolls up his sleeves and gets to work. He opens the windows and lets the sunshine come streaming in. He casts spells that send miniature cyclones of dust rising from the floor and all the furniture to deposit themselves neatly into the rubbish bin. Another spell sets the mop to polishing the floors. Yet another spell sends a soft cloth to dust off all the shelves. And in the midst of all the magic is Harry. He swishes and flicks, and scrubs and polishes and scours in a way he hasn't done since he was ten years old. He makes up the bed and fluffs up the pillows and shakes out the rugs. He throws out stacks of magazines and that old Quidditch catalogue. He clears up all the scattered clothing, the jumper from the sofa and all the scattered socks and the pants from the bathroom floor, and he starts a load of laundry. He fills the rubbish bin with the blue toothbrush and the stupidly expensive hair products that don't do shit for Harry's unruly hair and the prescription potion for allergies that Harry doesn't have and the half-full pack of cigarettes that he'll never smoke.

Finally, when he's cleaned everything he can possibly clean in the rest of the house, Harry goes into the dining room. The table is still set for tea, and Draco's warming and stasis charms are still weakly holding. The tea is barely lukewarm after all this time, impressive after seven long years, but then he had always been exceptionally good at charmwork. Harry stretches his hands over the mugs, straining for that lingering warmth, tasting the last faint wisps of Draco's magic and savouring it like the final glass of a rare wine. He lets out a long, slow breath.

Then, with a murmured Finite, Harry picks up the mugs and carries them into the kitchen for washing up.

End Notes

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